

ERRANT GODS

BLOOD OF THE ISIR
BOOK ONE

ERIK HENRY VICK

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Cover by Erik Henry Vick

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For the real Supergirl: mother of my child,
wife of my dreams, love of my life, and the
lynch pin of my universe.

Go then; there are other worlds than these.

-STEPHEN KING

If you are not yet a member of my Readers
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ONE

*Thou art mad now, Loki, and reft of mind, —
Why, Loki, leav'st thou not off?
Frigg, methinks, is wise in all fates,
Though herself say them not!
—The Gylfaginning*

Hunger.

The woman who called herself Liz, despite being named something else, slammed the stainless-steel freezer door and glared at it. The freezer was empty, and she was hungry. Behind her on the worn futon,

Luka fidgeted like a small child waiting for punishment. It made her want to choke him.

"We are out of meat. Again." Liz ran her hand through her long blonde hair, trying to force it into some kind of order. She hated looking like a tatterdemalion in front of any man, but even more so in front of Luka. "How long do you expect me to go without? You promised to take care of me, Luka."

"I-I'm...I'm s-sorry, my Queen."

She sneered at the weakness in his voice. "Who sits before me? Surely this petulant child is not Luka *Oolfhyethidn*, feared by so many back home?"

"My Queen, I—"

She whirled to face him, biting back the words that danced on her tongue. Ire coursed through her veins like lava—hot and fierce—and a part of her wanted desperately to let those words fly. "Just stop it, Luka!" she screamed instead. "Stop sitting there acting like that puny little cop beat us! I can't stand to be in the same room as you!"

Luka looked her in the eye for the first time in what felt like an eon. "I wanted to kill him at the end. You forbade me."

Passion burned in his pale green eyes, and she reveled in waking him up again at last. The words she didn't want to say kicked at the back of her teeth like a child having a temper tantrum. She had to say something, or she knew those words in the *Gamla Toonkumowl*—the language of the old ones—would

worm their way out. “Who the fuck are you to question me?”

Luka smiled crookedly. “You have embraced cursing in this language, at last, my Queen.”

Her anger cooled at once. She had always been labile, but this was something else. Luka knew her so well after all these years in relative isolation. Part of her detested how well he knew her and that his arguments and tactics could sway her thinking. It was the same part of her that wanted to let those words fly—and she fought to suppress that part of herself. “Indeed, it seems I have,” she muttered.

Luka’s passion faded. As it did, he seemed to deflate, to become less of a man. Her expression hardened, and she sneered at him. “Do you think I asked you, out of all of my courtiers, to accompany me here because I like weak little boys?”

He grinned, but his expression was sour, bitter. He didn’t meet her gaze. “I never understood why, my Queen. I just delighted in it.”

“After everything you did for me back home? After going to war, even against your own brothers, for me? After killing with such ruthless abandon anyone who stood in my way or who threatened me? How can you not understand, my Luka? After all the things you did, my Champion, this was your reward.” She waved her hand down her tall, lean form. With a wide smile, she watched his eyes follow the course of her hand. Their present circumstances

had made her thin with brutal efficiency, but she was still beautiful.

The wind outside shrieked, flinging snow at the window of their tiny, one-room apartment. The blizzard had come at the worst possible time. He couldn't hunt in this. It wasn't his fault, she knew that.

But it is his fault, insisted a voice buried in the back of her mind.

Her neighbors in Ontario County would have called it a "white Christmas." She scoffed at the thought. She still didn't understand the point of the holiday—even after all the years she'd spent in this wretched country.

Luka reached into the large side pockets of his black cargo pants and pulled out a foil-wrapped parcel. "Take this, my Queen," he said, holding it out. "I was saving it in case you didn't have enough." He peeled back the foil to show her a piece of meat that was seared just enough to keep its juices inside.

She looked at his emaciated face. He had always put her needs before his own. "You eat it, Luka."

He shook his head. "No, my Queen. I'm not hungry."

"You are so thin, dear one."

"No, my Queen. I am fine. You need this more than I do."

Saliva sluiced into her mouth like spring runoff overflowing the banks of a creek. "The girl was very tasty, wasn't she?" Liz mused.

“Yes, my Queen. I was lucky to find someone so healthy in such a shitty little bar. Usually, they are drunks or worse, but she was young and fresh.”

She eyed the package and then tore her eyes away. “You are sure you’ve had enough?”

Luka swallowed and nodded. “Yes, my Queen. You eat it. I am full.”

He was lying, of course. It only took one look at him—bony, haggard, almost cadaverous, in truth—to see that he needed the meat. She understood his loyalty, his fealty; it was as it should be, after all. In her own way, she loved and honored him, too, and regretted that circumstance and his devotion to her made him look like a man ravaged by a wasting illness.

At the same time, she was hungry. She shrugged and reached for the meat. “If you are sure, my Champion.”

“I am sure, my Queen,” he said, avoiding her gaze.

“Thou art mad now, Luka, and reft of mind,” she whispered, and he winced.

As she ate, her eyes drifted around the little efficiency with forced indolence, lingering on all the things she detested about the place: the peeling, atrocious wallpaper; the stained carpeting; the unstable kitchen table; the broken television—all of it. She forced herself to swallow. “This place...” She pursed her lips, then lifted her arms out from her sides and let them fall, unable to find English words strong enough to express the depths of her hatred for

their present state of affairs. “*Thath tyerir mik lankar til ath tayia.*”

He looked at her, the small smile at hearing the ancient language dying stillborn on his lips as the meaning of the words sank in. “Please don’t say that, your Grace.” Luka’s eyes darted around the room. “This place is beneath you, I know. But it’s temporary, my Queen. We can pack and leave tonight. Or we can just leave. We can go somewhere else, another state maybe. Or back to Scandinavia. You pick the place, my Queen, and I’ll make it happen.” His voice rang with some of the confidence and competence she had come to expect from him.

Her eyes locked on his. “You’ll make it happen? You promised to take care of me.” She waved her hand at the room around them. “Is this taking care of me?”

He withered under her scrutiny, and his gaze slithered away from hers.

“Don’t you look away from me,” she snapped, mounting fury pounding its staccato rhythm in her temples.

He snapped his head up as if she had slapped him and met her gaze. “I’m...I’m sorry, my Queen. For all of it. This...this place...” He shook his head, looking lost and helpless. “I’ve allowed myself to grow soft. Everything is so easy here. It was—”

Like some wild beast, anger leapt into her mind, jaws snapping, saliva flying. “You’ve grown soft? It was too easy? For these...*reasons*...I go hungry?” Her

voice boomed, filling the small apartment with her fury. Her breath tore air from the room in ragged gasps. She had to clamp her teeth together to keep from spitting out the words that would scorch Luka like a blistering green fire.

After a single glance at her expression, Luka snapped his mouth shut. He leaned toward her, a seated bow. "No excuses, my Queen. I will go out. The storm isn't as bad as it sounds. Even if it is, what's the worst it can do to me? Make me shiver?"

She shook her head, fury singing its slippery, dangerous song in her blood.

"I can find someone doing some last-minute shopping. I can be quick. I'll be back inside an hour, and the freezer will be full."

The rage-monster departed in an instant. The struggle to keep those words inside had burned the temper out of her, leaving her exhausted and downtrodden. "No, Luka," she said, shaking her head. "We've hunted too much in this town built from dirty snow and rust. We can't risk further exposure. We are still too close to Ontario County. And despite what you did to him, despite the curse I laid on him, that damn cop survives."

"I should have killed him," said Luka with a trace of the bloodthirsty fire he was known for. "I would have killed him, but you said you wanted him to suffer."

She glowered at him. "I did, and I still do." Her tone was biting, glacial, and bitter. "He was impolite. He

demanded answers from me. He was so...familiar with me." Liz crossed her arms and suppressed a smile as Luka's eyes darted down for a peek at her breasts. "Too many hunts in one place will lead him to our door again. He still has friends. And seven years of running or not, we are still on his mind.

"Anyway, it's not as if you leave no marks." Her smile was fierce, almost savage, and she quirked her eyebrow at him.

He blushed and looked away like a school boy.

She loved the way he feigned such innocence around her.

Luka cleared his throat. "Then I can go back to the abattoir. I'm sure they didn't find everything."

"No. I just said we can't risk further exposure. That meat was lost to us the moment those two boys found the cave. We can only go back there once, and for one purpose only."

A panicked expression writhed across his face. "I can still take care of you if you'll give me another chance."

"No. This isn't working anymore." She took three long strides across the length of their home and stood in front of him, giving him no choice but to look up at her. She could see how much this conversation distressed him. He'd grown used to being her sole companion. He'd hate going home, and he'd hate sharing her with the others.

Luka gulped like a fish on a hook. His hands fiddled in his lap as if he were conjuring up some clever

argument. “Just...just don’t do anything rash, my Queen. Don’t give up on life. I couldn’t go on without you.” He touched her arm.

She lifted her hand and rested it on Luka’s tense shoulder. “It has been grand, this time we’ve shared,” she said, almost purring. “We’ve been here a long time, Luka. We have shared so much.”

She was surprised to find that she meant every word of it. They fit together, hand in glove. He knew how to please her. He knew how to calm her. He knew how to excite her. She stretched with unbridled lubriciousness, knowing he would resist what she had in mind. She’d always known she possessed the kind of power that made men want to do anything she asked of them, and she used every ounce of it now to twist his will to her own.

Luka’s mouth drew a brutal line over his chin, and his hands twitched to a slow stop in his lap.

“But...” she said. The word sounded flat and terrible in the small, ugly space.

Luka nodded, his mouth set in a grimace, his eyes downcast and wet.

“It is time to go home.” Her voice was firm but kind. Her fondness for Luka was evident in how she tried to manage her expression, her tone. It was evident in the fact that she hadn’t set him on fire, too.

His face collapsed, and he closed his eyes as if it were too much effort to look at her. He shrank in on himself. He opened his mouth, and she wondered if

he was going to stand up to her at last. She almost hoped he would.

Luka knew many things—about her, about this silly country they'd lived in for far too long. She mourned the loss of the brash, confident man he'd been before that damn cop stuck his nose in. But above all else, Luka had always known his proper place. "Why, Luka, lea'vst thou not off?" she asked in a whisper.

His gaze fell, and he slid off the futon to kneel with a formal precision at her feet. "As you command, my Queen."

"Take me home, Luka. Let's run the *Reknpokaprooin*, side by side, hand in hand."

A crafty expression stole across his face like a thief creeping through a window. "Before we go, my Queen, there is one more thing I think we should do."

"Kill that cop?" A small, vicious smile played on the edges of Liz's lips. "That could be fun."

"Better than that, my Queen." His grin was a master painter's study of mischief. "I think we should invite two guests to travel with us. A young boy and his mother, perhaps?"

Liz looked at him with quizzical eyes. "Would he follow, do you think?"

Luka nodded. "Oh, yes, my Queen, he will follow. He's already promised to chase me wherever I may go. Taking his family home with us will just make it more...fun." His eyes twinkled with a good humor

that was somehow savage. "What do you think, my Queen? Does it suit?"

Liz laughed. "Oh, excellent, Luka. Your wickedness inspires me." She looked at him for a long moment. "For the fun you suggest, I'm willing to put up with this wretched place a little while longer."

She offered him her hand with a smile and pulled him to his feet when he took it. Hand in hand, the two lovers walked to the futon couch and converted it into a bed. "Inspire me a bit more, my Champion," she said.



TWO

I pushed myself up from the extra-large recliner and grimaced at the streak of white-hot lightning that cascaded through my neck and shoulders. I'd spent way too much time in that damn chair over the past seven years. Sig thumped around upstairs, getting ready for the big night.

"Dad! Where are my teeth?"

I chuckled to myself. "In your mouth, I would hope!"

"Daaad! Not those teeth!"

The last time I felt good, really good, was more than seven years ago. I caught my last case with the New York State Police early that spring. The case wasn't a long one; it lasted about a week. But it ended with a bang that left me in the hospital.

They called me a hero in the papers, but that's all bullshit. The simple truth is that I failed, and people I cared about paid the ultimate price for my failure. To make things worse, I didn't even catch the pair of psychopaths the media nicknamed the "Bristol Butchers"—Liz Tutor and Chris Hatton.

"Look in your toy box? On the dresser? Up your nose?"

"I did. They aren't there. They aren't anywhere!"

"If I come up those stairs and they are right there in front of you, it'll be tickle-slams on the bed!" No doubt his vampire teeth would be somewhere so obvious it would take me all of two seconds to find them, but such is the life of a father.

I started up the stairs, expecting pain to lance through my legs and feet, but there wasn't any. I laughed at how surprised I was. Thanks to a new cocktail of chemo drugs and biologics—stuff with potential side-effects like cancer and sudden death—I hadn't had to take pain meds in almost three months.

That last case had left me a wreck of a man. For the past seven years, I had been in nearly constant pain. Sometimes it was a thousand bee stings inside my knuckles or an attack of fire ants that squirmed in my hips. Sometimes the pain was a bright, burning fire that raged in my ankles and feet, or a putrefying sick feeling that rotted in my knees and elbows. Sometimes it was all of them at the same time.

The doctors said it was rheumatoid arthritis. I wasn't so sure, since the pain had started after the hoodoo mumbo jumbo Tutor had shouted at me. I called it my Personal Monster™ (patent pending), and I still do.

Sig stood in the middle of his wreck of a room wearing his “vampire shirt” and holding the black cape lined in red satin. Jane had made it for him four years earlier, but it was still in fine shape. His face forlorn, he looked around at the heaps of sticky notes, toys, video-game cartridges and dirty clothes, any of which might hide his precious vampire teeth.

Of course, his vampire teeth were on top of his dresser, right in front of him. I pointed at them.

He smacked his palm into his forehead and then looked at me with a rueful expression on his face.

I couldn’t believe seven years had slipped by without my noticing and that he was already so big. The painkillers of the previous seven years and the simple effect of being on disability—of having nothing to mark the passage of time by—had played havoc with my sense of time. Time had lurched around me like a drunken sports fan after a big game.

“You know what’s coming, boy.”

“Not fair! I’m in my costume already!”

“All right, all right,” I said holding up my hands in mock surrender. “But, when you least expect it...”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I gave him The Eye and went back downstairs, grinning at this new-found freedom to navigate steps.

Sig would probably spend the evening traipsing through the neighborhood with his pals, ringing doorbells, scoring candy, laughing and scaring the littler kids. There was a pang in my heart. I’d missed the years in which fathers walk with their sons while they trick-or-treat. I hadn’t

been well enough to have made those trips around the neighborhood with him. I don't remember even answering the door to give out candy. Maybe I didn't.

The weather report was normal for October in Western New York: It was going to be chilly and raining during prime-time trick-or-treat hours. Sig had already worked out how his rain suit could fit under his costume.

He was dressing as a vampire for the fourth year in a row. His idea of vampires did not come from horror stories but from a kids' show he'd watched when he was younger—Max and Ruby. The show was about a brother and sister and their “epic” adventures—many of which involved the brother dressing up as a vampire for some reason only kids could understand.

Even so, when he talked about his costume and fake teeth that squirted cherry-flavored syrup into his mouth like blood, all I could think about was Chris Hatton and Liz Tutor. They weren't vampires, but they weren't quite human, either. The body count they racked up was absurd. They'd had this cave—an abattoir, more like—in which they'd stored bodies for later...consumption. I pushed all that out of my mind. I'd gotten good at it; I'd had a lot of practice.

As evening fell, the weather grew even fouler than expected. The temperature fell to the low forties, and visibility dropped to almost nothing.

“Remember when all he wanted to dress up as was Lightning McQueen?” Jane asked, walking up behind me.

“Sort of.” I could remember his birthday parties, bits and pieces of past Christmases and a few Thanksgivings. I guess

Halloweens didn't make enough of an impression to penetrate the fog.

"It looks like another miserable Halloween," Jane said.

This year was going to be different, though.

"Yeah. Should we make him stay in?"

"Nothing short of the end of the world could convince our little boy not to trick-or-treat—at least a little." She smiled and picked up the bottle of cherry syrup that was waiting on the counter. "Think he'll go through the entire bottle again this year?"

"Of sugar-infused yumminess? Of course he will," I said with a chuckle.

"If you can answer the door for a bit, I'll take the Sigster and his friends around for a while—at least until it gets too miserable."

"I could go," I said.

"Yes, you could, but then you'd be in bed, gorked to the gills on oxycodone by morning. You should have some real memories of Halloween this year."

"Think he'll have any good memories with me in them?"

Jane put her hand on the back of my neck, something that had not been possible until the previous July because of how much even such a simple gesture would have hurt. "He does have good memories with you in them. You make him laugh so hard Coke comes out his nose. That's got to count."

I grinned and nodded. "I suppose so."

"Hank," she said in her I-am-serious-and-I-will-brook-no-disagreements voice, "you are a great father, despite this stupid disease. What Siggy will remember about this

time is your courage in the face of all this bullshit and misery and your commitment to making the best of it."

"I hope so. I'm not sure I'll remember those particular things."

"Psssh! Like what you remember matters. I'm the boss of you, tomato-face, and what I say goes." She gave me a little pinch on the back of my neck and a kiss on the cheek. "Now, quit it before I bust you one in the chops."

"Yes, ma'am! I'll need a big bowl full of candy. Oh, and some candy to give to the kiddies, too."

She laughed and swatted my behind. "That candy is for those kids, Henry. I better not catch you eating any." She looked me right in the eye as she reached into the bowl and took a mini Hersey's dark chocolate bar and put it in her pocket.

I grinned. Jane always made me feel better when it counted. I didn't call her Supergirl for nothing. "Ma'am, I'm afraid I'll have to frisk you."

"Hah! I know what you want, you...you man!"

"For stolen merchandise! Don't worry, I was trained to frisk people."

She looked at me with a sly grin. "If you are good, trooper, I might let you frisk me later." She waggled her eyebrows à la Groucho Marx.

"Ma'am, I think you might be trying to bribe me."

"Give me a few hours, and I'll let you bribe *me*."

"Promise?"

She patted my cheek. "You know it, sailor."

“Eww! No gushy stuff in the kitchen!” said Sig. He was standing in the doorway to the front room, grinning to beat all.

“I’ll gushy-stuff you,” I growled.

Sig ran into the kitchen, his cape flaring behind him. Underneath it, he wore a black velvet brocade vest over a white shirt. If the splash of red from his favorite hoodie peeking out of his collar, the Nike running pants, and his sneakers spoiled the effect, he didn’t seem to notice. Or care.

“Are you really going to wear running pants?” I winked at Jane.

“Yes, Dad. No one cares if my costume is accurate to some horror movie. Anyway, this is what Max wore all the time.”

“Are you really going to throw Max and Ruby at me?” He had gotten so tall while I was “away.” He came up to Jane’s nose—and she was five feet eight inches tall. “If you don’t quit growing, you are going to grow out of that cape, O’ littlest Jensen.”

He shrugged. “Mom will make me a new one if I want.”

“That’s right,” Jane said. “But the next one will be pink and purple.”

He looked at her with mock scorn. “That would be silly, Mother. Vampires don’t wear pink.” He spotted the cherry syrup, and his eyes lit up like fireworks. “You remembered!”

“Of course,” said Jane. “I am literally the most awesome person you know.”

"You stole that line from that T-shirt Daddy bought me," said Sig as he dug his fake fangs out of his pants pocket. "Fill 'er up, please."

She poured cherry syrup into the fangs' reservoir. "There you go, Count Sigula. Now it is officially Halloween."

"Speaking of which, we'd better get moving, Momma. That candy won't trick-or-treat itself into my bag." He turned and dashed into the front room.

"You'll be okay?" Jane asked.

"Of course. I am married to Supergirl, after all."

She flashed a grin my direction and turned to leave. "Oh, make sure the kids don't take more than two pieces each—otherwise we'll run out."

"Two pieces, aye!" I snapped a salute at her back.

"I saw that, sailor." She gave me a saucy little grin over her shoulder.

I spent the next two hours getting up every minute and a half to answer the door. The candy seemed to be a big hit, especially getting two pieces of it. Princesses, zombies, ghosts, a few vampires, and a metric ton of superheroes—even the Silver Surfer—paid me a visit. The best costumes, however, were the twins dressed as Mario and Luigi.

The temperature dropped from chilly to miserable, and the rain stayed constant. Jane had said that Sig didn't usually stay out for that long but, as he was fond of telling me, he was twelve now, and everything was different. The frequency of trick-or-treaters fell toward nothing as the level of candy in the big black plastic bowl fell toward empty.

I can't say I was worried at that point, but I do remember thinking that it was strange for the Sigster to want to stay out so long.

As the temperature dipped into the thirties and they still hadn't come home, I went out onto our front porch and looked around the cul-de-sac. All the houses on the circle were lit up and full of excitement—except for the Timmens' house right across from us. It was like the missing tooth in a mouthful of shining white teeth. I could have sworn I'd seen them passing out candy earlier, but now it looked deserted. I stayed out on the porch until the cold started nipping at my finger joints. Except for a few cars, the neighborhood was quiet.

I still wasn't actively worried, though. Jane was a capable woman, and she had her cell with her. If something had happened, she would have called. They were probably warm and toasty inside the home of one of Sig's friends.

I stood outside wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and a pair of wool-lined slippers, and it was getting uncomfortable in a hurry—even for a “big, dumb Norwegian,” as my loving wife called me at times. I went back inside and sat down on the stairs to wait.

At nine o'clock, I could no longer claim not to be worried. There hadn't been a single pack of skeletons, zombies, or video-game characters ringing the bell for a half-hour, and yet there was still no sign of Sig or Jane. I called her mobile, but it went straight to voicemail.

I couldn't stand to wait any longer. I had to do something. I changed into warm boots and wrote a brief note asking Jane to call me immediately when she got in. I

considered going on foot, but one look at the ice-cold rain froze that thought. I got in the truck, cranked up the heat, and turned on all the seat heaters. They would be cold if they were out walking in the night's freezing soup.

I idled to the corner at the end of the street and scanned the road in both directions. Not a single soul moved outside. It looked like the set of an apocalypse movie, all drifting fog and flickering shadows. I turned right and crept around the neighborhood. Sig's closest friend lived on the street that cut our neighborhood into two parts. I stopped in front of his house and climbed out of the truck.

The porch lights were still on, but a single sheet of paper was taped to the door. "No candy," it said in crayon. I rang the bell and waited.

Evan, Sig's friend, opened the door and gaped up at me. He still had some of his Halloween makeup streaking his face.

"Uh...hi, Mr. Jensen. We don't have any more candy. Sorry."

"That's okay, Evan. Are Sig and his mom here?"

Evan shook his head. "They went home when we finished getting candy."

"What time was that?" I asked.

Evan frowned down at his arm where his watch would have been if he'd been wearing one. "No watch," he muttered. "That was stupid."

"It's okay, Evan, your best guess is fine."

"I think it was about an hour or two ago." Evan shook his head. "I don't know. I'm only twelve."

"I know, buddy," I said. "It's okay. That's close enough."

"Okay. Wanna talk to my mom or dad?"

"No thanks. I'd better get home and see if they've shown up yet."

Without a word, Evan turned and ran toward the back of his house, letting the door swing shut behind him.

I got back in the truck and drove toward home. My stomach ached like I'd been sucker punched and my knuckles creaked and snapped on the wheel. As I drove up the road toward our house at the end of the cul-de-sac, something caught my eye in the shrubs near the Timmens' front porch. I twisted the steering wheel, and the truck's headlights and fog lamps swept their front yard clean of shadows.

Something dark was wound around the trunk of the shrubs to the right of their front door. Something black. I got out and hobbled toward it, grimacing as the cold bit into my ankles and feet. I fell to my knees and wrestled with the black cloth at the base of the bush to unwind it. Cold ate into my knees like acid, making the position even more painful than normal. Finally, I worked the cloth free of the bush and held it up. It was Sig's vampire cape. The neck was torn.

I struggled back to my feet and limped to the front door. The house was dark, but I rapped my knuckles against the door's wooden frame. Maybe they'd turned off the lights to signal they had no more candy.

Bobby and Bobbie Timmens thought sharing the same first name was cute. I'd always thought it was kind of

stupid, but hell, what do I know? They also wore matching sweaters quite a bit. They were that couple. They referred to themselves as “the Two Bobbies,” and so the rest of us did, too.

After twenty seconds that felt like hours, I knocked again and pressed the doorbell several times. No lights came on, and nothing stirred. It felt like I was being watched, but there was no movement—no noise at all inside the house.

“Bobby! It’s Hank,” I called, ringing the bell again. The house remained silent. Not even Bobbie’s dogs barked.

I walked to the garage access door at the end of their porch and peered into the dark garage. Only one of their cars was there; their huge Ford Expedition was gone. Maybe they’d gone to dinner when they ran out of candy.

I tried to convince myself that the cape in my hand wasn’t Sig’s, but the red lining with its secret pockets said differently. Maybe the wind ripped it off Sig’s neck as they walked home. That was garbage, though, and I knew it. The wind was strong, but it wasn’t that strong.

I stared across the street, willing my eyes to pierce through the rain and the dark and see people moving inside my house. With a sigh, I got back in the truck, throwing Siggy’s cape into the passenger seat, and backed across the circle and into my own driveway.

I should have called the police right away, but I dithered next to the phone, picking up the handset and putting it back down several times. I didn’t want to admit that what I feared was a possibility. Finally, I picked it up, put it to my ear, and dialed the local trooper station.

By the time the doorbell rang a half-hour later, I was almost out of my mind with worry and impatience. I had wanted it to be a miscommunication. I had hoped Jane and Sig would stroll in so we could say it was all a mistake and send the troopers on their way.

I opened the door to a uniformed trooper and two cops in plain clothes. "Come in."

"Hello, Mr. Jensen. I'm Sergeant Kamphaus. We met a while back, if you remember. Detective Johnson and Detective Spaulding are with the Monroe County Sheriff's Department." He gave me a little one-shoulder shrug. "Jurisdiction." Johnson was short and heavyset. He had curly hair and bloodshot eyes. Spaulding was tall and rangy, with laugh lines etched into the skin around his eyes.

"Okay," I said. "We can sit in the kitchen."

"Mr. Jensen," said Spaulding after we'd taken our seats, "I understand you believe your wife and son to be missing?"

Johnson had his thumb on the little button that opened and closed his ballpoint pen. He clicked it while Spaulding talked.

"Yeah. They went trick-or-treating earlier in the evening, and they never came home. I was the primary on a case a few years ago...well, I guess it was a bit longer than that. The Chris Hatton serial case."

Johnson grimaced. "I remember. The Bristol Butchers." His pen went *click, click, click*.

"Yeah. Hatton and I spoke on a couple of occasions, and he threatened to 'take care' of my family and to 'take them away from me.' Maybe he's making good on that threat."

"Why would you think that?" asked Detective Spaulding, leaning forward. "After all these years?"

I raised my hands in a helpless shrug. "They're missing."

Spaulding shook his head. "We don't know that for sure, Mr. Jensen. It's only been a few hours."

"No, no," I said. "You don't know my wife like I do. She'd be here, or she would have called. At any rate, it's past my son's bedtime, and we are sticklers about that. Jane especially."

Spaulding glanced at Kamphaus, and the sergeant gave a short nod. "I understand that you were injured in the Hatton case? Some kind of explosion—"

"Yes. Seven years ago. But not by an explosion."

"—that left you concussed. You were in the hospital."

Frustration began to bubble through me, and I shifted position in the chair. "Yes."

"While you were recovering, there was...some kind of incident?" Spaulding acted like he was embarrassed, but he was watching me with sharp eyes that didn't miss a beat.

"Yes. I got my bell rung pretty good." I looked at Kamphaus, and the compact trooper returned my gaze with a bland expression.

"But it was more than that, right?" asked Johnson, still toying with his ballpoint pen, clicking it at random times.

I looked into his bloodshot eyes and scoffed. "If you already know the story, why ask me about it?"

"Come on, Hank," said Kamphaus. "You know they have to ask."

"I know," I said in a low tone of voice. "I don't have to like it, though. Yes, Detectives. I was injured badly that night. I blacked out and woke up in the hospital. I had a concussion and other injuries. I'm told I went off the deep end a bit."

Johnson clucked his tongue and clicked his pen. "Post-traumatic stress disorder, it says here."

I drummed my fingers on the table for a moment and then looked at each of them in turn. "It was a long time ago."

"You've been disabled in the years since?" asked Spaulding.

"Yes. The doctors say it's rheumatoid arthritis."

"My mother-in-law had that," said Spaulding. "It's a horrible disease."

"It's an absolute monster," I said.

"It didn't let my mother-in-law age gracefully." Spaulding looked down at my hands as he said it, but looked up, rabbit-quick and wolf-eyed to catch my reaction.

"Given what it's done to me, I can see how that could happen." To be honest, I was taken aback that he would say something so disheartening to someone suffering from the disease.

"How have you been doing with it?"

"Upright and breathing." I shrugged. "Better than the alternative."

"Have you been seeing a therapist?"

I shook my head. "What's the point of that? If a rheumatologist isn't enough to help me, I don't think talk therapy will be any better."

Spaulding nodded and sat back in his chair, glancing at Johnson.

"You know the statistics on this kind of thing as well as we do, Hank," said Johnson with a grim expression on his face. "You know what we have to do next."

I grimaced. "Yes, I know. Can you do me a favor, though?"

"What's that?"

"Can you start people investigating other avenues while you clear me?"

Johnson pursed his lips and looked at me for a moment. "I don't know that we can do that yet."

"I was a state trooper for a long time—a decade and a half," I said. "Doesn't that buy me some credibility here?" Again, I looked at each man in turn.

Kamphaus wouldn't meet my eye.

Johnson returned my gaze, slack-faced and empty-eyed. "You were, but you've also had a significant amount of stress in recent years. Stress can be tough on a marriage."

"If you knew my Jane, you wouldn't be thinking that."

"And there's also the PTSD business." Johnson was looking down at his little pad—one that was very much like the one I used to carry.

"And your career does buy you credibility," said Spaulding. "We wouldn't even be investigating this early if

not for your background. It's too soon, and you know that."

I drew a deep breath and let it out slow. "Okay. I know you have to rule me out."

Johnson pinched the bridge of his nose and then rubbed his temples. I was willing to bet it had more to do with the bloodshot eyes than the conversation.

"How can I help you do that as fast as possible?" I asked.

"Just be honest and have patience with the process," said Spaulding.

I shook my head. "I never knew how that sounded from this side of the table."

"Sorry," said Spaulding, "but it is the truth."

"I know, I know. Ask your questions."

They asked me all the expected questions—where I was earlier this evening, what time I saw them last, who might have seen me driving around, et cetera. I told them about my visit to Evan's house and gave them the phone number and address.

"Let me ask you this, Mr. Jensen. Where else did you drive to tonight?"

"I told you: I went and looked for them in the neighborhood."

"And you drove?" asked Johnson.

"Yes." I gestured impatiently toward the window. "The weather was bad, and I don't have much endurance these days."

After a pregnant pause, Johnson just nodded.

"Okay," Spaulding said. "Is there anything else you can tell us?"

"The Timmens are involved in this somehow."

"Your neighbors across the street? Where you found the cape?"

I nodded. "Call it a hunch."

Johnson glanced at his partner. "Okay."

"Roberta Timmens was a person of interest in the Hatton investigation."

"Suspect?" asked Johnson, lifting his eyebrows.

I hesitated and shook my head. "No. She was a potential witness, but we never got to interview her. She was out of town when it all came to a head. And after that, what was the point?"

"What makes you suspect her now?"

"She was a member of Elizabeth Tutor's bridge circle. She was the only one who wasn't murdered or abducted. I'd think that if the Butchers wanted her dead or gone, she would've disappeared long before now."

Johnson looked at Kamphaus.

"We'll look into that," said Kamphaus.

Johnson turned to look me in the eye. "You know what I have to ask you next."

"Did I kidnap my own family? The answer is no."



THREE

It was 4:30 in the afternoon and the spring air was crisp and bold. I drove my cruiser through the little town of Marion and beyond, enjoying the rural scenery and country bliss that was Thorndike Road. Yet something nagged at the back of my mind—something dark, violent, and hungry.

I was headed to the safe house. The meal Jane had cooked was bumping around in the back seat. If I knew my wife, there was enough for forty or fifty people. Jane said she wanted us to have a decent supper for once.

Jane wanted to be nice to Mrs. Layne, and I was okay with that. Melanie Layne was sweet. She was only a part of this because she liked to play bride. Ms. Layne knew

who the Bristol Butchers were, though. She'd played bridge with one of them every week: Liz Tutor, that whack-a-doo woman who lived west of Bristol. Chris Hatton's lover.

The thought of the two serial killers made my blood boil. We'd gotten too close and had tipped our hand. People died because of my mistakes.

I'd be damned if I let them kill Melanie Layne, too. We put her in one of our safe houses with troopers guarding her around the clock. My partner was with her, waiting for dinner.

I turned left into the drive of the safe house, lifting my hand to wave at the old codger sitting on his porch on the right. The man was Richie Duvall, a retired trooper who'd picked up a few shifts helping us guard witnesses by sitting on his porch, watching the road, and drinking coffee.

As my tires crunched the gravel of the drive, the sun dropped like a stone over the horizon. The sky went from late afternoon to full dark as if some mystical stage hand had thrown the breakers for all the lights. A moment later, the moon bounced from the eastern horizon and shot up into the center of the night sky.

The police radio of my cruiser vomited a dollop of static into the car at eardrum splitting volume. It felt like a warning, like someone screaming for me to turn around—to look behind me before it was too late. As the static faded, the radio made a sound like someone was tuning an old AM radio using the dial—a kind of sliding static intermixed with discontinuous voices and music. I reached out to snap the radio off and then jerked my hand back like it had been burned.

The radio was already off. "What the hell is going on here?" I muttered.

The headlights flickered a couple of times and then died, plunging me into the dark shadow the house drew in the moonlight. I hit the brakes and let the cruiser skid across the gravel to a stop. It sounded like a knife blade scraping against bone.

Nothing felt right. Nothing looked right.

Something in the backseat popped like a child's cap gun. I jumped, cracking my head against the driver's side window. I twisted around, grimacing at the pain in my neck and shoulders, right hand seeking the Glock on my hip.

It was nothing. One of the glass lids of Jane's Corelle casserole dishes had slid out of the groove meant to hold it in place. I tried to laugh it off, but I had developed a serious case of the hinkies. I eyed the house, overwhelmed by a feeling that a large predator was watching me—a bear or a lion.

The feeling intensified as I got out of the car. I glanced across the street toward Richie, but he had left the porch, though the lights were blazing inside.

Before I could close the cruiser door, the police radio blared the opening stanza of "The Wheels on the Bus." I slammed the door to shut out the sound, but I could still hear the words, plain as day. I backed away from the car, watching it as if it were alive. As suddenly as it had started, the song stopped, and an eerie stillness wrapped around me.

I stood very still, hand on the butt of my gun, eyes bouncing from shadow to shadow in the dark dooryard. Behind me, the house sat as quiet as a tomb. There was no sound of chatter, no television noise, nothing.

I turned and swept my eyes across the ground floor windows of the house. They were dark, empty. Dead. Something was wrong, but Richie had waved like everything was normal. I glanced across the street again. Now the lights were out at Duvall's house. It looked abandoned.

That couldn't be right. I'd just seen it all lit up a second ago.

I walked up the three stairs to the back door, trying to be as quiet as a big man could be. I pulled the handle of the screen door, wincing at the rusty shriek of its hinges, and propped it open. I pushed the back-door open, and the ominous feeling intensified. The air wafting out of the house was malignant—pregnant with violence.

There was a slimy, coppery smell in the air. It was a familiar smell. Blood.

"Jax?" I called, trying to keep my voice light. "Jane made dinner. Come help me get it in from the cruiser."

The only sound I heard was that of fluid dripping. I pulled my Glock out of its holster and held it ready. I stepped into the four-feet by four-feet mud room and froze, straining my ears to hear in the silence, my eyes to see into the gloom.

I slid into the cold darkness of the house and opened the inner door of the mud room. A dark shape lay on the

linoleum floor—a dark shape in the form of an elderly woman. Melanie Layne.

My hand scabbled near the door frame until I found the light switch. Something deep in my mind screamed that I should leave the light off, but I had to see if she was alive.

Soft yellow light washed across the room. She lay there unconscious and handcuffed to the rusty radiator. There was a small trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth. Her eyes were pinched closed, but her breathing was regular. I shook her gently by the shoulder, but I couldn't rouse her.

With my eyes glued to the gloom in the next room, I holstered the Glock and removed the handcuffs. I stooped and scooped Mrs. Layne up, cradling her like a newlywed bride. I backed out through the mud room, placing my feet with care, and then continued out onto the gravel drive.

The air outside was cool and sweet, and it was only then that I realized the safe house smelled like an animal's den—a meat eater's den.

"That our witness, Jensen?"

I jumped, almost dropping Mrs. Layne, her shoulder length gray hair dancing in the breeze. Richie Duvall stood at my elbow, peering at Mrs. Layne's face.

"She's a hottie," he said.

That wasn't like him. Richie had always been a straight shooter. "Jesus Christ, Richie. Give a guy a heart attack," I whispered.

"Gotta die sometime," he said.

Instead of his service pistol, Richie held a child's cap gun. "What the hell, Duvall? Where's your firearm?"

Duvall looked at me like I was a nutcase. "Right here in my hand, Jensen. You wiggling out on me?"

"I'm not the one acting like a kid, Richie." I shook my head. "Can you stand watch out here? I can't leave her alone, and I have to go back inside and find Jax."

"I don't know. I've got a TV dinner in the oven."

"Be serious, Richie! I think Chris Hatton is inside the house."

Duvall shrugged and reached out to caress Jane's cheek, her long black hair dancing in the cool breeze. "TV dinners are expensive on a cop's retirement, Jensen."

"TV dinners, Duvall?! I said I think Hatton's in there. What the hell is the matter with you?" This was off script—wrong in all the important details... Jane should be at home with Sig.

He sighed. "I guess I can watch your wife for you. She's a hottie, after all, but you shouldn't go back in there and get eaten. Wait for backup, man. Let them get eaten."

"What in the blue fuck are you talking about, Richie?" I asked, my voice incredulous. "Are you fucking drunk?" This is all wrong.

"Well, I've got a TV dinner to tend to."

"For fuck's sake, Duvall! I don't have time for your games. I've got to get inside!" I said with a cold disdain.

"Course y'do. You went inside the first night, too. Don't get me killed this time."

The first night? This time? None of it made sense. I stared into his soft blue eyes, struck dumb and paralyzed by the strangeness of it all. But there was something

familiar about all this. Something my mind wouldn't cough up.

"Well?" he groused. "You gonna stand here all night making eyes at me or are you gonna get on with it?"

"Stay with her," I said, putting Jane down on the gravel and twitching her bangs out of her face. "I've got to go inside and find Siggy." Jax was the one inside, not Sig. "I mean Jax."

"Yep, I'll watch your wife. She's a hottie. But you were right the first time. Siggy's in there with the beast. Jax is years dead."

The feeling of déjà vu gone astray surged through me like a bloated spring river breaking its banks. I couldn't shake the feeling that the only one in this farce who was sticking to the script was me.

As I climbed the steps to the house, my senses kicked into overdrive. The smells of a New England spring evening were almost overwhelming, and the bees buzzed in the woods a couple of acres away. With one last look at Jane's face, I stepped back into the foul-smelling house. I had my gun out again, holding it ready in front of me.

My gaze was riveted on the black space defined by the open mudroom door. Part of me wanted to glance behind me, for at least one more look at Jane, but my head would not turn. As I put one hand out to grab the handle of the screen door, I saw that the utility room light was off again.

I heard the subtle scrape of an athletic shoe on a wooden floor, and my training took over. I snapped into the "move and shoot" stance that I had drilled to exhaustion. I peered into the laundry room, eyes straining to sift the shadows.

As I stepped inside, all sound ceased. It was like being thrust deep underwater, where the only noise was that of my own pulse beating in my ears. I slid forward on the balls of my feet, muscles as tight as high-tension power lines, nerves crackling. I tried to move like a wolf stalking a rabbit, smooth and quiet.

Something clicked, and the kitchen lights flared, momentarily blinding me.

Bloody tracks of athletic shoes trailed across the blue and gray linoleum and two bodies sprawled on the kitchen floor near the sink. The bodies were dressed in NYSP uniforms, and the faces of both troopers were gone. Blood pooled beneath them, dripping and running in tiny rivulets from bites marks and gashes all over them. The bites in their flesh were savage—not the kind of bite and release marks a human might make, but vicious tears and gouges like those made by a ravenous animal.

My shoulders and neck muscles were tight and burning as if they'd been set aflame. I tried to roll my shoulders, but that only increased the discomfort.

Two dark, gaping doors stood across the kitchen from the utility room, beckoning me.

“Don’t be timid, Hank,” a voice called from beyond the doors. “Come the hell in.” The voice sounded like my partner, Jax, but there was a strange quality to it—too gravelly, too full to be entirely human.

I crept toward the doors. After a brief hesitation, I slid my left foot into the darkness. My eyes struggled to adjust. It had been a smart tactic to turn the kitchen light on like that. My night vision was gone, and the darkness of the

room was as effective as a blindfold. With my left hand, I felt around the door frame, looking for a light switch.

“You know I’m armed, and you know how good I am with this pistol,” I said.

“Oh, Hank, you amuse me so. I would expect nothing less than perfection out of you with your preferred weapon.” This time, the voice sounded like my boss, Lieutenant Gruber.

Something shifted in the darkness across the room just as I flicked the light switch on. Bright white light splashed across the bloody carnage on the dining room table in front of me. There was a body on the oval table, broken and twisted, laid out to mimic the gentle curve of the oak. I couldn’t seem to stop my gaze from wandering back and forth across the gruesome mess.

The white of exposed bone, the ripped flesh, the partially congealed blood clothing the body on the table, the expression on the victim’s face—Jax’s face—all told of an agonizing and terrible death.

Chris Hatton was sitting on the opposite side of the table, grinning like he’d just surprised me with a birthday cake.

My gaze crawled back to Jax’s lifeless, staring eyes, and I fired my pistol.

Hatton jerked from the impact of the bullet, but he never stopped smiling, never flinched, even as my round ripped through his right shoulder. Fresh blood splattered on the wall behind him as the bullet exploded out of his back.

It wasn’t a killing shot—too high and too far off center—but even so, being shot hurts. Humans react to

being shot. They cry out, they clutch the wound, they fall down or slouch to the side. The man across the ruin of my partner's body didn't do any of those things.

He laughed.

My stomach felt like I'd swallowed three pounds of lead, and my blood ran cold. Numb from the neck up, I stood there, staring at him in bewilderment. My hands, however, were not confused. They did what I'd trained them to do.

The next bullet smashed into Hatton's torso, just above his solar plexus. That was a killing shot. Even if death was not instantaneous, it should have put him down in a hurry...but it didn't. Another bullet slammed into the base of Hatton's neck, just above the junction of his collarbones. And yet he was still laughing. He hadn't even paused when the bullets ripped into his flesh. He shouldn't have been able to breathe, let alone laugh with such abandon.

The Glock wavered in my hand like I'd never held it before.

"Ah, Hank," said Hatton, wiping at the tears on his cheeks. "This is why I like you so much." His voice sounded like his throat was full of blood. "You act. You don't dither, farting around like a little boy. You don't talk about it, you don't beg or question why things are the way they are. You just act. Where I come from, that is a trait to be prized."

My mouth opened, but I had no words. I just stared at him, feeling slow and stupid, both arms drifting down to my sides like balloons with slow leaks.

He held up a blood-speckled index finger as if asking me to pause for a moment so he could catch his breath.

The blood that had been pouring out of him a moment before slowed to a trickle. I shook my head to clear it. "That's... What in the hell?"

"Nothing so dramatic as that, Hank." As he said the words, the gunshot wounds closed. His voice already sounded better, strong and full, although he looked ghastly—gaunt and ashen, like a man half-dead from starvation. "But I do come from a place that is as beautiful as your heaven."

I stared at him, struck mute or stupid or both.

"You can't kill me, you know," he said. He held up his hands, palms toward me. "Not that I want to go on proving it to you. I do feel pain. You should be more compassionate."

My gaze drifted back to the body on the table. What I saw tore the air from my lungs. It was no longer Jax. Now Sig lay there, his face bloody and torn, flesh ripped, bones broken. "You bastard!" I was on the balls of my feet, and the gun snapped up as if I were controlled remotely.

Hatton looked at me and grinned. "He was delicious. Not as tasty as I expect your wife to be. She's a hottie."

This was all wrong. Sig wasn't dead. Hatton had killed and eaten Jax, not Sig. The woman outside was supposed to be Melanie Layne, not Jane! "What the hell is this, Hatton?"

"Just a little snack. I was hungry." He was gloating, goading me.

Violence boiled in my blood. Once again, I was surprised by the movement of the pistol in my hand. The gun was pointed between Hatton's eyes, and at this distance, it

would be impossible to miss. I wanted to pull the trigger. I wanted to shoot Hatton in the face like I've never wanted anything else. But I couldn't. It wasn't right. I had to bring him to justice, not impose my own. Killing him would make me like him.

"Ah, Hank, you disappoint me." His voice had changed. It was deeper, torn and abused. "The queen said you wouldn't have the guts."

"Tutor?" I asked in a tremulous voice.

Hatton nodded slowly. "My queen, yes. But you know that isn't her name." Hatton's face stretched, his eyes bulging against his eyelids. "She cursed you to suffer, and suffer you will."

Something was building inside me, something dark and terrible. At the same time, fear dragged icy fingers through my soul. "What in the hell are you, Hatton? What is she?"

"Come find us and find out. Don't take too long, though. We are hungry, as always, and your son looks delectable."

"Are you...are you two vampires, then?"

This wasn't how the conversation was supposed to go. He should have been in handcuffs by now. He should be telling me some delusional crap about being a god.

Instead, he laughed. "No. Not vampires. Gods."

Ah, there it is, I thought.

The darkness building inside me exploded, erasing coherent thought. The gun bucked again and again. When the slide locked back, my hands hurt like they'd been crushed under some heavy weight.

Hatton sat there like a statue, staring daggers at me. "I told you not to do that, Hank. I told you it was futile." Blood ran down his face and neck from bullet holes in his cheeks and forehead. His left eye was gone, and his left deltoid twitched. I knew what was coming, what he was about to become, and I didn't want to see it again.

He reached out with slow deliberation, his arm stretching, growing impossibly long, and took the Glock from my hands. Then, using just one hand, he squeezed the gun, muscles and tendons popping out on his forearms. The composite body of the pistol cracked like ice, and he tossed it to the floor in disgust.

"I told you not to do that," he said, staring at me. His voice was several registers deeper than it had been, like someone had piped it through a vocal synthesizer. "I told you both times we had this conversation." His tone took on a basso quality. "Why don't you ever listen?"

"Both times? Just what in the blue fuck is going on here, Hatton?" Terror pounded in my temples in time with my racing heartbeat. I looked down at the table, unsure if I would see Jax or Sig. It was Sig. I swept his broken body into my arms and turned to run.

Stars and light exploded from the left side of my head, and I was airborne. Hatton roared like a cornered predator. "You can't have him yet," he screamed as I slammed into the plaster and lath wall. "You have to come find me first!"

Then I was through the wall and flying across another room. I smashed through that wall, too, coming to a stop only after colliding with a cast-iron tub.

"Hatton!" I screamed. "You leave them alone!"

Then something in my head snapped, and everything changed.



FOUR

It was around 5:30 in the morning when the phone yanked me out of the nightmare, adrenaline shrieking in my bloodstream. With the dream still fresh in my mind, memories of the actual event flooded in—Hatton’s monstrous eyes as he scooped Melanie Layne up off the ground and ran toward the woods, the smell of Jax’s blood, the spent cordite, and plaster dust. It felt like I’d gone fifteen rounds with Mike Tyson.

After a few seconds of confusion, I scrambled for the phone, full of hope and dread. “Jane?”

The line fuzzed and fizzed.

“Hello? Jane, is that you?”

Static screeched, but a female voice cut through it: "...hear me? I wanted..."

The voice was female, but it wasn't Jane. Disappointment dragged me down like a concrete life preserver. "If you can hear me, the connection is terrible."

"Is that better?"

The static was still intense, but at least I could make out the words. "Who is this?"

"Well, hello again, Hank. I'm not surprised you don't recognize my voice; you spoke more to Bobby than to me back when we were still neighbors."

"Bobbie Timmens?" I stood and began to pace around the bedroom, shock robbing me of any rational thought.

"Yep, it's me. How are you, Hank?" asked Bobbie.

"I'm fine." The response was automatic—hardwired into my genetics. My mind was awl with sleep and the stuff of nightmares. "Are you at home? I found Sig's vampire cape in front—"

"Don't worry about that right now, Hank. Just listen to me. Our mutual friends, the Bristol Butchers, asked me to bring them something. Well, a couple of somethings."

"Bobbie, what are—"

"Just shut up and listen to me, Hank." Her voice was suddenly cold and distant. Something about it brought to mind the morning I interviewed Liz Tutor in front of her house like a hammer to the forehead.

"No, Bobbie, you listen to me for a second. Jane and Sig—"

"Our friends want me to give you a message. Are you ready to hear it? Because I am ready to hang up if you

aren't. I'd much rather be with them than standing here in the cold, yabbering at you."

"Who...who are these friends you keep talking about?" Of course she couldn't mean anyone but Hatton and Tutor.

"Last chance," said Bobbie.

There was a kind of promise, as hard and cold as steel, in her voice that caused a shiver to wiggle down my spine. "Don't hang up! I'll listen."

The line crackled—a perfect storm of static. Bobbie was silent, drawing the moment out. "Okay, but I'm warning you, Hank, any more interruptions, and Jane will suffer for it."

"Whatever you say, Bobbie."

"Good. Luka said to tell you hello."

I didn't know that name, but I knew exactly who she meant.

"He wanted me to remind you of a conversation you had with him at Jay's Diner. Remember when you said you'd chase him anywhere? Remember that he said that if you did, you'd have to leave everything behind—your life here, your job, your family, all of it?"

"I had that conversation with a serial killer—a man named Chris Hatton," I said. Now, it was my voice that had gone frosty. "Are you telling me you are...I don't know...in league with Hatton?"

She sighed as if I was the stupidest man she knew. "That's not his real name, Hank. I think you knew that already. Do you remember the conversation at the diner?"

"Of course," I snapped.

"We've made it easy for you. There's nothing left of your life here. The queen took your job when she cursed you. She says hello, by the way. And Bobby and I have taken your family. We're taking sweet Jane and precocious little Sig on a trip."

"Bobbie, why would you do that?" My voice shook with rage. "Why would you throw in with those two? Why would you drag Jane and Sig into this?"

"Because Luka *asked* us to. After the gifts he and the Midnight Queen bestowed on Bobby and me, it was the least we could do. If you were smart, you'd do whatever it takes to get off their shit list. If you only knew what they could do for you, you'd be thanking me."

I had no answer to that; I just sat there boiling and breathing hard.

After a short pause, Bobbie chuckled, low and sensuous. "Luka expects you to follow him. He'll take care of Jane and Sig until you come for them. As long as you chase after him, he will not touch them. Do you understand?"

"I'll kill him. If one hair on either of their heads is out of place, I'll kill him with my bare hands." My voice sounded strange—flat and distant, and at odds with the fist-shaking rage that I felt.

Bobbie laughed like a kid getting candy for lunch. "Luka said you could be quite funny. I see what he means now."

"We still are, you know," I muttered.

"What? We still are what?" she asked, sounding confused.

"We still are neighbors. I'm looking across the circle at your home as we speak."

She chuckled again. "Oh, Hank, you are a dear. That is just an empty building now. Bobby and I are *moving*." She tittered like a drunk. "We'll never go back there."

"Where will you go? If you go through with this, you'll be a fugitive for the rest of your life." I wished like hell the call was being traced.

"Hardly," she scoffed. "I'll have a place of honor where I'm going. Bobby and I will be valued retainers in the Court of the Dispossessed Queen."

"The Dispossessed Queen? Is that supposed to be Elizabeth Tutor?"

"That isn't her real name, either. She has vast holdings on the other side. Her—"

"Other side? What does that even mean?"

"—empire was unrivaled in its time and soon will be once more. We're going with them to reclaim it."

"Don't tell me you buy into their twisted delusions. Bobbie, you have to know deep down that those two people—"

"That's what you don't understand, Hank. The queen and Luka are not *people*. They are *gods*."

"Bobby, it's not too late for—"

"Hank." Her voice was tight and clipped. "This call is dragging on, and I have more information to share. Do you want to hear it or not?"

I shut my mouth with an audible *click*. I recognized the utter futility of trying to talk sense to an insane person. I wondered what a delusion shared by four people would be called. *Folie à quatre?*

"You have to go deep into the abattoir. Find the end of it, down deep. There is a door there. You have to go through it to—"

"He's waiting for me in the cave?" I couldn't keep the astonishment from my voice.

She chuckled again. "No, silly. I just said you have to go through the door and—"

"Bobby, you aren't making—"

She sighed, sounding peeved. "I'm trying to *help* you, Hank. Well, I was. I'm not standing here in this damn cave and wasting any more time with you. Follow Luka, and your family will be safe. If you're smart, you will bring what you need to survive away from civilization. I don't care if you believe me or not. I'm going through now."

There was a noise on the line like she'd dropped the phone onto stone or concrete. "Let's go. Time for a swim, little Siggy," she said.

Faintly, I could hear Jane start to protest, and the sick lethargy that had been spreading through my veins like molasses was burned away in an instant. "Jane! I'm coming, Jane! I'm coming!" I yelled so hard it felt like my voice box was going to break into a thousand pieces, but the line was dead. "No!" I screamed, frustration beating in my temples.

Before I even knew what I was doing, I was outside my front door, limping as fast as I could toward the Timmens' house. Golden light had begun to break on the horizon, but everything looked gray to my eyes. The air was cold, and the ground was still wet from the rain. Stabbing pain ripped through my ankles with each step as if I were

walking on sharp rocks. My knees had that sick feeling I associated with my worst flares, and it seemed as if my hip sockets were grinding the balls of my femurs into sharp glass fragments, but I didn't slow down. Not one whit. Not one tittle.

The house looked the same as it had the night before. The front door was still locked, but my fifteen years in law enforcement had taught me many, many lessons. One of those lessons was how to kick in a door without falling on my ass.

The first impact sent a shockwave of pain slamming up my leg, and I understood at once that kicking a door open was no longer an option for me. So I grabbed the door handle with my left hand, rocked my body weight back like I was trying to pull the door open, and then rocketed forward. I slammed my shoulder into the door as hard as I could as close to the door jamb as possible. Through the haze of agony in my arm and shoulder, I heard a dry cracking noise, like tinder being readied for a campfire. Still, the door didn't budge.

I set my jaw and repeated the process and failed again. The pain making me nauseated to the extent that, on top of everything else, I had to battle a case of dry heaves before I could try again. On the third hit, the door buckled inward, shards of wood flying from the door frame like shrapnel from a bomb. I staggered into the foyer, sliding a bit on the slick marble tile (which made no sense in the Northeast or anywhere else that's buried in snow and ice for half the year).

The pain in my legs, back, and left arm made me want to curl up in a ball and cry for mercy, but I had to know for certain that Jane and Siggy were not somewhere in the house. I had to know if Bobbie Timmens was as insane as she sounded—or maybe just as insane as I must have sounded when I talked about what had happened the night Hatton put me in the hospital. That thought made my stomach churn. I *knew* what Hatton was capable of. What if the other things Bobbie had ranted about were true?

Lurching like Frankenstein's monster, I dragged myself around the first floor. The place was a disaster: cabinet doors hung open, their contents on the ground; closets exposed and cleaned out; furniture up-ended like so many forgotten toys. The Two Bobbies had cleared out in a hurry.

I set my mouth in a grim but determined frown and pulled myself up the stairs. I had to rest every couple of steps, teeth gritted against the pain. The irony of how easily I'd climbed the steps in my own house yesterday ate away at the back of my mind; the pain was the price of my night of stress.

The upper story was even more of a disaster area than the ground floor. Loose clothing was strewn on the carpet, even in the hallway. In the master bedroom was a half-packed suitcase full of men's jeans, T-shirts, and even a couple of ball caps—Bobby's "at home" wardrobe. On top of a pile of poorly folded T-shirts lay a pistol and several loose magazines. It was a blackened semi-automatic—a Heckler and Koch .40 caliber with a Picatinny rail mounted to the frame beneath the barrel.

Without thinking, I scooped up the pistol and shoved it in the back of my jeans. The magazines I rammed into my front left pocket. I rifled through the packed clothes, looking for anything interesting, but all I found was the smell of dryer sheets.

The master bath looked as if a madman had whirled through it, smashing everything that looked fragile. Pieces of the broken mirror reflected the morning sunlight in strange patterns on the ceiling and walls. Perfume from broken crystal vials made the place smell like a whorehouse.

There wasn't much of use on either of the two above-ground floors, but that was as I expected. Most sociopaths manage to keep up appearances for the neighbors, after all. Still, I wondered how long the Two Bobbies had been over the edge, right across the street from me.

I wondered how many victims had been brought to this house and butchered.

Our houses had been built in a similar fashion—both had basements consisting of large, open spaces with the house's physical plant tucked under the stairs. That was where the similarities ended. My basement smelled like any moist room that was kept shut up and closed away: moldy and disused. The Timmens' basement smelled more like a zoo. As I rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairs, I saw why.

Looking around the basement of the Bobbies' house, all my questions about them were answered. The Two Bobbies had finished their basement—although not like any finished basement I'd ever seen. This basement was more

like a medieval dungeon. Manacles hung from chains driven into the walls at shoulder height. Makeshift cells formed a small warren in the center of the floor. The most disturbing part, however, was the hundreds of pine-scented car air fresheners hanging from the floor joists. The sheer quantity of air fresheners could only mean one thing: the Timmens had kept decaying bodies here.

There was a sheetrock wall on the far end of the room with a door set in its center. I pulled Bobby's pistol out of my waistband and checked the magazine. It was loaded to capacity. I pulled the slide back a fraction and saw a round gleaming in the chamber. I felt the old confidence returning. Point shooting is like riding a bike—you never forget how to do it.

I flung the door open and took a step to the left of the opening, pointing the pistol at the darkened doorway. I was set for an ambush—ready for some screaming maniac to lurch out of the darkness at me, swinging a rusty knife like something in a horror movie. But the only thing that rushed out of the room was the foul stench of decomposition.

I heard a strange hissing noise from over my left shoulder, and I pivoted to that side, snapping the gun around and almost firing a shot. I didn't see the source of the noise until it hissed again: a small cream-colored box mounted in the left corner of the main space, up near the rafters. It was an industrial air freshener, one of those automatic jobs like you'd see at a hospital or nursing home. Instead of masking the stench from that little room,

though, it just mixed with it to make a noxiously sweet nauseating smell—rotten meat dipped in French perfume.

I felt around inside the door and flicked on the lights. Old brown bloodstains were everywhere. Bones were stacked against the walls, and a barrel of decomposing flesh and discarded organs sat in the far corner. In the center of the small floor space lay the bodies of the Bobbies' Welsh Corgis amidst puddles of day old blood.

It was an abattoir like the one Hatton kept—not as elaborate, and not as well concealed, but a slaughterhouse nonetheless. I felt sure they had been slaughtering people and animals here for years. I wondered if they were a part of Hatton's circle at the time of the investigation or if they were somehow converted to the cult of human meat in the time since.

I looked at the two Corgi corpses. The two little dogs that had earned Bobbie the nickname "Crazy Dog Lady" were dead, but at least they didn't look like they'd been used as meat for dinner. She'd always treated those dogs like her children, and the fact that they would kill them for Hatton and Tutor spoke to the depth of their loyalty. Or lunacy.

I backed out of the room and slowly closed the door with relief sweeping through me. Jane and Sig weren't in there, and they were the only people I cared about at that moment.

I went back to examine the makeshift cells. They were about three feet deep and six or seven feet long. Each cell had its own small four-feet by four-feet gate. The ceiling of each cell was made from rusting sheet metal. Old blankets and burlap sacks lay on the floors.

I stopped in front of one of the cells, my heart breaking. Inside, a set of vampire teeth lay on a piece of thick cream-colored vellum paper spotted with red drops. I flung the gate open so hard its hinges bent. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled into that little space, wincing every time I put my weight down.

I shoved Sig's teeth into my pocket. I put the pistol on the ground beside me and scrabbled at the piece of vellum until I could peel it off the floor.

The red spots were too bright to be dried blood—they were the color of maraschino cherries. I sniffed them, and a grim smile surfaced on my face. Those spots were drops of the cherry syrup that made Sig's vampire teeth look bloody. I could imagine Siggy getting tired of keeping the teeth in his mouth but not wanting to put them on the skeezy floor. Finding something to set them on was just something he would do. I let the paper drop.

As I turned to crawl back out of the cell, something about the paper caught my eye. It had fallen with the spotted side down. On the back was a message. It was written in a script that resembled Peter Jackson's vision of Tolkien's elvish, but I could make out the letters of the English alphabet. It said, "Chase me, Hank. I can show you so much."

I thought of the character Roland Deschain in Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series. Specifically, I thought of the opening line of the series: "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed." Then I thought about how the series ended and a cold sort of dread settled over me like mist.

I looked down at my hand, now a ball of shrieking pain. I had squeezed it into a shaking fist so tight my knuckles were white. Hatton's note was crushed inside that fist, crumpled into a ball. I wondered what was in store for me. I wondered if I was destined to follow my own man in black for the rest of eternity, never being able to savor the victory, winning every time, but losing everything in the process.

I opened my hand, letting the crumpled ball of vellum fall to the dirty floor. I no longer cared about questions of eternity. There wasn't anything to consider. I'd made my decision when I asked Jane to marry me.

I hoped Hatton was a man of his word because I intended to follow him forever if that's what it took to find Jane and Siggy. And if he wasn't, it was my sincere intention to give him a true test of his supposed godhood.

I left the Timmens' house for the last time. I left the front door swinging in the harsh November wind and strode across the circle—no longer allowing myself the luxury of limping. As I walked, I looked around, seeing all the Halloween decorations in the golden light of dawn. They all seemed defeated and dead and gray. They were insignificant, wretched things really, devoid of substance, devoid of meaning—like so much of the produce of a culture in which everything of unique significance was bleached into sempiternal inconsequence in the name of profit margins. Everything seemed different—achromatic, tattered and bedraggled, as if the part of me that saw beauty in sunrises and nature had been dimmed by what I'd found in the Timmens' basement. Maybe it was because

I'd decided to follow Jane and Sig to wherever they were, even if that place was the land of the dead.

There was nothing I wouldn't do for Jane or Sig. *Nothing*. Without them, nothing really mattered.

Standing in my kitchen, I scribbled a hasty note addressed to my old boss in the state police, Lieutenant Gruber. It read:

Lt. Gruber,

Don't worry about me. I'm sane and healthy. I didn't do anything to Jane or Sig. I'm going to save them.

I'm going after Chris Hatton and Elizabeth Tutor. They convinced my neighbors, Robert and Roberta Timmens, to kidnap Jane and Sig. I know this because Bobbie Timmens called me early this morning—you should be able to pull the number from my LUDs. Locate her cell if you can. She told me she was in that cave—the dump site for Hatton's victims.

I know this sounds crazy, and I know I shouldn't be going there alone, but if what she says is true, I really have no choice. I do believe her, just like I believe what I said about Hatton after the safe house fiasco. I know you don't believe my version of that night, but it is what it is. Not everything in this world can be explained or codified.

I hope you never read this—I hope I destroy this note later this morning when I come back home with my family. I don't have much conviction in that hope, however. I think the two most likely possibilities are that either I disappear like Jane and Siggy have, or you will find our bodies deep in the cave at the dump site.

I don't know if you read Stephen King or not, so I don't know if you will understand this. In one series of his books, there is this thing, this Dark Tower, that stands in the center of the multiverse and acts as the lynchpin for reality. I doubt that it really exists (but who's to say? It's no more fanciful than any of the world's religions to me), but I do know that Jane and Sig are the lynchpins of my universe. I'm going to get them back or die trying. You have kids, so I know you understand that part.

I don't think I can justify what I'm going to do if they are dead. I know it sounds insane to go chasing after four psychotic fucks by myself, but it isn't. Not really, given what I know Hatton can do and given the atrocities we all know Hatton is capable of. I can't prove to you that I am sane, but I promise you that I am. I saw what I saw that night. I hope you can believe me this time.

Yours, Hank

P.S. Bobbie Timmens said Hatton's real name is Luka. That's all she said—no last name. Maybe it will help. I don't think it's a common name in the States.

I packed in a rush, stuffing an old hiking backpack with a few changes of clothes and some basic foodstuffs. I filled two canteens with water. Then I tucked Bobby's Heckler and Koch pistol and its magazines into the outside pocket and added my backup weapon—a Kimber Tactical Ultra II in .45 ACP—and one hundred and fifty rounds of ammunition. I planned on stopping on the way to Honeoye Lake to buy more ammunition and a cleaning kit for the HK.

I stood in front of the kitchen cabinet we'd converted into my medicine cabinet, staring at the cornucopia of drugs I consumed to treat my RA on a daily basis. I took antihistamines, blood-pressure medicine, anti-inflammatory drugs, chemotherapy drugs, biologically derived drugs, pain meds, and several minerals and vitamins. It was a ludicrous number of pills. Some were supposed to work together to suppress my immune system, and some were just supposed to stop the others from killing me.

I didn't want to carry them all so I separated them into groups of what I had to take with me, what I should take with me, and what I thought I could leave behind. Only a few medications did much to alleviate my symptoms—a chemotherapy drug called methotrexate, pain medicine

(which I hated to take), and prednisone. Of these, the methotrexate was most critical. It was like a magic potion. The problem with it was that it either inflamed my liver or irritated my kidneys, and it required regular blood tests to determine if the dosage needed to be manipulated to keep it from killing me.

Methotrexate was a “black box” drug— strictest label warning the FDA used, the one reserved for drugs that could kill you, break something irreplaceable (like a kidney or two), cause birth defects, or burn the lungs right out of your body. I took it as a subcutaneous injection once a week. I’d have to take syringes and alcohol swabs in addition to the vials. I only had five syringes left. Then again, that was enough to last more than a month.

What would happen when I ran out of methotrexate was a problem for later. There was no way I could get more for another month because insurance companies ruled the world. Hopefully, I could get Jane and Sig back before that.

I tried to think of everything I would need to survive in the wilderness. Like most modern men, I really had no idea of what was important and what was a mere luxury, but I did the best I could. I was armed, of course, and took my cell phone, a flashlight, some batteries, a few cans of Sterno, clothes for all seasons, gloves, extra socks, and anything else that looked remotely useful.

When I finally arrived at the cave several hours later, that backpack felt like it weighed eighty pounds. Pushing it in front of me, I crawled into the tiny foyer-like space where the most recent victims of the Butchers had been found. It had lost the smell of forensic testing and had gone

back to smelling like an animal den, but the trestles to support the earth making up the roof were still there.

With my flashlight, I followed the marks that my partner, Jax, had spray-painted on the walls when we explored the labyrinth-like cave. We'd left marks at intersections and branches, going as deep into the earth as he and I had ever been. When I reached the last mark, at a four-way intersection of tunnels, I was at a loss of how to move forward. I peered down the dark tunnel leading to my left but couldn't see anything. The tunnel across from me was also as dark as a tomb, but I thought I could see a faint glimmer down the tunnel leading to my right.

It was then that it dawned on me: I hadn't brought any paint to mark my passage into the maze of natural caves and carved tunnels that Hatton and Tutor had adopted for their abattoir. At the same time, the idea that this was some elaborate hoax to get me lost deep in this cave flashed through my mind.

I shrugged. I'd either find the end of that cave or I'd be lost until someone found me—or, I supposed, until Hatton, Tutor, or one of the Timmens murdered me. I walked toward the light glimmering far down the tunnel. When I finally reached it, I saw that it was a glow stick, like you give kids on Halloween—one that had almost consumed its chemical charge. It was lying in the middle of a three-way intersection. I peered around until I saw another glimmer and then walked toward it.

I went on that way, stumbling through the inky darkness of that underground warren, straining my eyes to see half-dead glow sticks, for I don't know how long.

My thighs were burning when I finally came to the end. My stomach was in my throat, and my gun was locked and loaded in my hand as I approached the little room at the end of the tunnel.

The chamber was roughly circular and thirty yards or so in diameter. Across from the entrance was a bubbling body of water—a natural spring—and on its stony banks lay an abandoned cell phone. Other than that, there wasn't a single thing in the chamber. No doorway. No bodies. No psychotic neighbors, no raving lunatic vampire-wolfman thing.

I let the pack slide to the ground with a jingle and a thump. I felt deflated. Lost. I was where Bobbie Timmens had wanted to lead me. Why else would her cell be lying here next to the spring?

I walked over to look more closely at the cell phone. I hoped she'd left a message on it, but if she had, the phone's dead battery robbed me of any insight. Despair oozed from my glands and pores like a vile sweat.

My legs were shaking and burning with fatigue. I doubted I could walk all the way back to the entrance of the cave. I leaned against the chamber wall and left myself sink to the ground with a rattle and a bump. I closed my eyes and turned off the flashlight.

When I opened my eyes, I saw it. The walls of the chamber were lit with a strange, dim fluidic pattern—too dim to see with the flashlight turned on. The spring glowed with a silvery, multicolored light.

I crawled to the edge of the pool and looked down. About three feet below the surface was a submerged tunnel. I

glanced at the pack and then pulled it over. I set my phone, the flashlight, and my pistol on top of the backpack and, leaving it on dry land, rolled into the water to investigate.

The water was frigid. I gasped in the silence of the cave, the sound echoing away into the darkness. Then I took a deep breath and dove underwater. The submerged passage was ovoid with loose sand covering the floor. It opened into another chamber a short distance ahead; the light was coming from that chamber. The tunnel was wide enough for me, but I'd have to push the pack ahead of me.

I resurfaced and stuffed everything inside the pack, putting the pistols, ammunition, my electronic doodads, and my drugs in the waterproof pocket in the front. I pulled the pack into the water with me. I was starting to shiver. I had to make this swim in a hurry or hypothermia would pay a call.

I went under and pushed the pack ahead of me into the submerged tunnel. Halfway through, I realized it was longer than it looked. Maybe it was some trick of the water, or maybe it just seemed longer because of the temperature and the unwieldy weight of the pack. At the same time, it felt like something was pulling me forward—like some weird kind of magnetism that worked on crippled flesh instead of iron.

By the time I reached the lit chamber, my lungs burned like I'd breathed in fire. I shot up to the surface and gasped, slinging the pack onto the floor of the small, irregularly shaped room. I rolled over the edge of the pool, eyes closed and tried to breathe in slow, steady pulls.

The tugging sensation I had felt in the tunnel was much stronger in that second room. I opened my eyes and looked around. The light was coming from one of the strangest things I'd ever seen—and that's counting Hatton's metamorphosis at the safehouse. It looked like an oval standing mirror except there was no frame or legs. It just hung there in midair, shimmering with soft, silvery light. Taking a longer, closer look, what I had taken to be a mirror-like silver was, in fact, thousands of rainbow colors, swirling and intertwining about each other, reflecting various frequencies of light. It was mesmerizing; it made me want to get closer and take a better look.

The rainbow-filled oval was about seven feet tall and three and a half feet wide at its widest point. It was big enough to walk through without stooping or slouching. It looked like a movie special effect for a science-fiction epic. The more I looked at it, the more it drew me forward.

I fought my way to my feet, feeling the fatigue in every fiber of my being. I had to get closer to the oval, whatever it was. I took two steps forward before I remembered my pack. I took two steps back to retrieve it, and those two steps felt like I was walking against an outgoing tide. I bent with a groan and grabbed the pack, slinging it on my back through sheer force of will. I stepped closer to the shimmer and could see my own reflection in its rainbow-colored surface. Standing that close, the pull coming off those gleaming colors was beyond my capacity to resist.

"Jane, I'm coming," I croaked. I didn't want to think anymore; I didn't want to resist. I did what it wanted me to do—no, what it *demand*ed of me.

I stepped into the shimmer, feeling terrific heat and terrible cold wash over me as I touched its surface. The faint sensation of being pulled swelled into something that felt more powerful than gravity, and I lurched forward. I was submerged like I had been in the frigid water—and then I was out and into thin air, far above the ground and falling.



FIVE

For a split second, I was in midair, arms pinwheeling as if that could somehow stop me from falling. I sprawled on my face on a wide sheet of ice. With a terrible cracking sound, the ice shifted beneath me. The wind was howling and hurling snow around me in enraged eddies and sulky swirls. The temperature was arctic and biting, stiffening my water-soaked clothes.

The ice continued its relentless popping and cracking as my weight settled onto it. White lines shot away from me like lightning bolts trapped in the ice. The water beneath the gelid surface was black, making the lake look like it was covered in black marble shot through with white veins. I lifted my head, and the ice made a sound like a gunshot.

Ahead of me, a barren rock island jutted toward the sky like the dorsal fin of a gargantuan, hunting shark. Sharp, ragged chunks of ice surrounded the little island like fangs, cutting me off with nature's savage efficiency from the only land I could see. Not that I had any interest in being trapped on a barren island in the middle of an icy lake during a monstrous blizzard.

My pack was on my back, and if I were going to survive this without drowning in the freezing water below me, then I would have to roll toward shore because if I stood, I would plunge through the cracking ice. I tried to wiggle out of the shoulder straps of the pack and the ice crackled and snapped with every little move I made. My hands hurt like someone had dislocated all the joints of my fingers and then lit them on fire. Another gift from my personal monster.

I snaked my right arm through the shoulder strap of the pack—grunting at the pain that moving that way caused. I didn't want to lose it—never mind that the pack had dry, warm clothes and food, both of which were necessary for my immediate survival, it held all my medicine and all my weapons. I tried to sinuate my left arm through the strap, but my wrist locked as I tried to force my hand through. Intense burning pain shot up my arm, and I started trying to yank my hand out of the strap without conscious thought. The symphony of *pops* from the ice below me sent rimy fear shivering through my mind.

I made myself stop moving and lay very still, waiting for the ice to decide if I was going for a swim or not. I

endured the searing paroxysm of agony that had sunk its fangs into my wrist. Thick new cracks shot away from me like bullets and a foot or so away from me, creating a chilling sight—a jagged “step” in the ice about an inch high. That meant the ice I was on was tilting and separating from the rest of the sheet, and if I allowed that to happen while I lay there, I was sunk.

I pulled my arm out of the strap, groaning with relief, and without giving myself time to think about it, I rolled to the left, making a sound on the ice like a flat tire thumping on pavement every time the pack came around and slapped into the ice. The sheet of ice was banging and snapping in accompaniment, but I didn’t dare stop. Over it all, the wind shrieked and screeched, blowing snow and tiny shards of ice across the lake.

Powered by my fear, I rolled all the way to the shore and into the snow drifted up there. I was dizzy from all that spinning, and my hips and shoulders felt like so much broken glass, but I had solid ground beneath me.

With a twisted lip, I thought back to how much better I’d seemed back home after the new meds. I *was* better than I had been, but if nothing else, my little romp on the ice underscored how far away from “normal” I still was.

The blizzard was building in strength and fury, and the temperature was dropping at an alarming rate. The only plus side to how cold it was getting was that it would soon be too cold to snow. If only the wind would stop at the same time.

I started to shiver, teeth chattering like a typewriter. I needed a fire, dry clothes, and a coat, and I needed to get out of the blizzard before I froze to death. I had my coat (what man in New England would leave the house in early November without one?), but it was stuffed into the pack, and I didn't want to put it on over wet clothes anyway.

I forced myself to my feet and looked around. The storm was blowing enough snow around me that getting a glimpse of anything more than ten or twenty feet in any direction was impossible, and what I could see was disheartening. There was no shelter from the wind in my immediate vicinity—no rocks, no trees, no buildings. The cold was like a wet blanket around my head, smothering the air around me, forcing me to breathe harder and deeper than normal just to get the same amount of oxygen.

The outcropping of rock, that I was already calling Shark Fin Island in my head, and the silvery shimmering oval hanging in the air were both hidden by the whiteout. I stood there, searching the air above the patch of cracked ice, enraptured by swirling snow and the absence of silvery-rainbow light.

With a start, I shook myself and made myself turn away. Standing there in a raging blizzard and staring into the white out in hopes of seeing a magical door was not going to accomplish anything.

Walking around in an unknown place in the middle of a blizzard was dangerous, but if I stayed there on the shore of that frozen lake, I'd end up creating an ice sculpture from my frozen corpse. I had to get to shelter, or build one,

and even a copse of woods would help. I couldn't afford to go stumbling around in circles, however. Without a visual landmark, I wasn't sure how I could keep from doing just that.

I dug my cellphone and its built-in compass out of the waterproof pocket of the backpack. I started walking away from the lake, due north according to the phone. I couldn't remember (or never had known) if the phone relied on global positioning satellites to determine cardinal directions, but for now, it didn't really matter. I needed something that pointed in the same direction every time.

Within minutes, forcing my way through the snow and the harsh, frozen wind became impossible. My body sang with pain and cold. I had gone as far as I was going to be able to and there was nothing to help shelter me. I couldn't afford to push myself to exhaustion; I needed the energy to build a shelter, and I needed what little body warmth I still had to warm the shelter up. I had to get a quinzhee built before I turned into a flesh-colored popsicle.

I let the pack drop from my shoulders and started kicking snow into a pile, wincing with each impact of my foot. Darts of pain shrieked up my spine. I kept kicking and pushing snow to the pile, ignoring the agony of it, and using my body weight to pack the mound of snow as tight as I could get it. Each time I stepped up to stomp fresh snow into the mound I was building, I wanted to scream with pain or throw up, or maybe both at the same time. My hips were like hot coals buried in my groin, and my knees...my god, my knees felt like lumps of cancerous,

eviscerated flesh grinding and grinding and grinding against a sharpened rasp.

I kept drifting away and suddenly waking up to find myself standing next to the mound, and just staring at it, or just standing next to a pile of fresh snow, staring at the wall of blown snow swirling around me. Each time I did, I wondered how long I'd been standing there freezing to death and fear would snap through me like a whip.

Somehow, I kept working at it until I had a mound four feet high and about eight feet in diameter. I didn't have the time to allow it to sinter, and that was a risk because it might collapse around me once I got inside, but compared to me staying out in the ever-decreasing temperatures and wind, it was an acceptable risk. I dropped to my knees on the lee side of the mound, thankful for any break from the biting wind. I began scooping snow out of a short tunnel. The tips of my fingers turned a bright shade of cherry red—a color I'd come to associate with flares of the old R.A.-monster, except the red would have been in my knuckles. I was even colder than before. I dug out a small room, just big enough for me to crouch in and long enough for me to lay flat. By the time I'd finished the basic excavation, my hands were raw, and my knuckles felt like someone had been at them with sand paper and a chisel. The tips of my fingers felt like hard pellets of ice.

I was very cold, perhaps colder than I'd ever felt in my life, Norwegian genes or no. My heart was beating at a syncopated, furious rate. I was shivering with a violence that scared me, but even so, I had to build one more thing.

I needed something to block the snow and wind from blowing through the open doorway and piling up inside the quinzhee.

I pushed more snow together in front of the door and made another small mound of packed snow. I dug out an L-shaped tunnel and ended up inside the quinzhee. My hands felt like they were frozen into claws, but my fingertips felt strangely warm.

With shaking hands, I managed to get a small can of Sterno out of the pack. I lit the jelly and held my hands over the flame—resisting the urge to put my fingers in the bluish flames. Even after years of coping with intense pain, it amazed me how extreme physical feelings made insane notions not only sound rational but desirable. As my fingertips began to warm up, they began to throb and sting.

I started fighting my frozen clothes off my body. Buttons that had been a problem for me since the R.A. bit into my fingers like they had teeth. It was even worse when it was cold, but fear and desperation were strong motivators. I pulled a spare set of clothes out of my pack and slipped into them. They were cold, but at least they were dry. At least they weren't sheathed in ice and melting snow.

I dug around in my pack until I found the inner shell for my coat that I so rarely used and then zipped it into the outer shell. I put the coat on and curled around the little can of Sterno trying to capture all the warmth it could give off. I stopped shivering with an agonizing slowness as the

small space got warmer and warmer. When I slid the lid on top of the little can, smothering the flame, I was almost sweating, and the fuel was almost depleted. I let my eyes close and soaked up the warmth.

Outside, the wind continued to howl and scream.

When I woke, the wind had fallen silent, and my mouth felt like a family of gophers had lived in it while I slept. I hadn't meant to sleep, but the physical exhaustion and heat trapped in the little room built of packed snow had had their way with me. I'd been sleeping curled into a ball, arms crossed over my chest with my right fist on the floor, and the left tucked under my right arm. I tried to open my right hand, but my fingers were too stiff to move. Morning stiffness was a thing I was accustomed to—another gift of the disease I lived with—but I'd never experienced it to the point I couldn't move my fingers at all.

I lay there, staring at my hands, trying to open my hand and fighting panic—both by sheer force of will. If I'd been thinking straight the previous night, I would have been wearing my gloves, instead of flopping around in the frigid wind and digging in the snow with bare fingers. I started blowing into my closed fists, alternating breaths between the right and the left. After ten minutes or so of that, I could loosen my fists and straighten my thumbs. It wasn't much, but it was a start, and the flood of terror in my system began to recede.

I pushed the lid off the can of Sterno and managed to work the lighter with both of my thumbs. I held my claws close to that blue flame and tried to take a physical

inventory. I felt like hammered shit that had been run over by a freight train. My hips were twin points of burning agony every time I moved my legs. Moving my feet caused pain to shoot through my ankles and up my shins to my knees. My knees...well, they were on a different continent of pain, maybe a different planet. After a few more minutes of "Sterno-therapy," I could force my fingers into an almost straight position.

It has been said that there should be more than one word to express the concept of love. The same was true for pain. It was silly to think one single four letter word could adequately express the myriad kinds of pain I had felt since I'd been sick.

I'd been lucky—lucky enough not to fall through the ice into the lake, lucky not to have been overcome by confusion and disorientation, lucky the quinzhee hadn't collapsed on my head.

I pulled on my boots, fighting waves of nauseating pain in my knuckles to tie the laces. I pulled on my gloves, wincing as my swollen finger joints rubbed against the lining. I had always loved winter, but there's nothing like having a personal monster to cure you of everything you love.

With one last breath of warmth, I kicked my way through the snow blocking the entrance of the tunnel and then turned back to get my pack. I crawled outside on my hands and knees, gritting my teeth against the fresh assault of pain and tottered my way to an upright position.

The snow around the quinzhee was waist deep. If the smooth white plane that stretched in every direction was all as deep as it was near the quinzhee, walking was going to be even more painful than I'd planned on. The forest was no more than a quarter of a mile away, but with the snow as deep as it was, it would feel like miles instead of a quarter of a mile.

Shark Fin Island was visible behind me—the snow cover on the lake making the illusion of a circling shark even more realistic. The temperature was brutal and disheartening. Not as cold as it had been the night before, but cold enough to kill me if I wasn't careful.

The quinzhee sat there taunting me with its warmth, and I longed for it in a way that seemed perverted and disgusting. It could be kept warm for a long time, and the idea of crawling back inside and waiting another day was very tempting. I looked back and forth between the cold woods and the warm quinzhee several times, but wherever they were, Jane and Sig *weren't* inside the quinzhee, so I turned toward the woods and started slogging through the snow. I needed food, shelter, and a way to find my family.

It took me most of the morning to cross the three hundred or so yards to the forest. The trees still had green leaves on them, but they were shriveling and turning brown and black from the cold. Snow was caked on the tops of the black branches and plastered on their west-facing side. It was beautiful in a strange sort of way. I found myself staring at the shriveling green leaves more

than once, wondering what kind of storm could flash freeze an entire forest with no warning.

I walked—or at least I shuffled and limped— all through the afternoon, refusing to let myself stop and stare at the strange beauty. At least the trees had blocked some of the snowfall, and it was easier going inside the forest. I kept to a northerly path, using the phone for a compass, because it was as good a direction as any, and because it was easier travelling.

As the afternoon stretched on, light started reflecting from the trunks of the trees and shadows stretched out to my right. I came across what would have been a pleasant babbling brook except for the fact that it was frozen solid. Ripples still showed on the surface of the ice. I'd never heard of any freeze happening so fast that ripples were frozen into the ice and again found myself wondering about the previous night's storm with the kind of awe reserved for things like hurricanes and earthquakes.

The brook ran northwest, and I turned to follow its bank. If I followed it far enough, the brook would lead to a river, and a river would lead me back to civilization. The bank was treacherous—slick with snow and ice and steep, and I had to pick my way along it carefully.

After trudging along for what seemed like an entire geological age, the brook led me to a small wooden bridge. A snow-covered path stretched away from either side of it.

The bridge had been handcrafted and was well-maintained. The carved hand rails depicted elaborate scenes, and I brushed the loose snow off for a better look at them.

It was like something out of Scandinavian history—trolls, Viking warriors, dragons, and ships. Lots of ships.

The sun dipped toward the horizon in the east as I was admiring the carvings, and I was surprised to see a flickering light coming from up the trail. Maybe the brook had led me back to civilization without the help of his big brother river.

I lumbered across the snow-covered footbridge and followed the buried path on the other side. It curved toward north, and as I followed the curve, more lights flickered ahead.

A gas lamp perched on top of a metal pole like a weird bird. Scrolled metal supported four glass panes that protected the gas flame from the wind. Civilization, of sorts, at least.

Ahead, the buried path became a tended, cleared path stretching away into the woods. Chest-high drifts on each side of it, and more gas lamps lit the way.

I floundered forward on legs that felt light but uncoordinated and ungainly. I longed to sit and rest, but if I did, my chances of getting up again were slim and none. The cleared path dipped into a valley up ahead, and that coupled with the growing darkness meant another drop in temperature. Barely distinguishable in the gloom, smoke swam from the snow-covered roof of a log cabin nestled inside the valley's protection.

The cold was drilling into my hands and cheeks. Despite the protection of the trees, the wind had picked up and was hurling frozen bits of ice into my face. I trudged down into

the valley, close to exhaustion. I had done more in the past two days than I had in the past seven years, and my body screamed for rest. I sighed with relief as I came abreast of the cabin, its roof peeking above the tall snow berm on my right.

"Help me!" The cry was just audible over the wind. It came from ahead of me.

Dark was coming on at a rapid pace. The temperature was about to plummet if last night was any predictor of the weather in this snow-bound place. The smoking chimney of the little cabin promised warmth, rest, and probably food. I longed to be warm, and more to the point, my aching joints demanded warmth, and soon.

"Help me! Please!"

I couldn't turn my back on a call for help. There was something hardwired into my soul that demanded better of me. "Here!" I called. "I'm here by the cabin. Where are you?"

"Oh, thank you, sir!" The voice was male and was watery with weakness.

"Keep talking. I'll follow your voice."

"I'm trapped by this gods-forsaken tree fall. Up the path around the bend."

With a last look at the cabin, I trudged on past it. The path curved to my left and around the bend was a mess of evergreen limbs, roots, and tree trunks up against the right-side bank.

"Is this you?" I asked.

"Yes! Here!"

Some of the branches began to rattle, and I set to work trying to clear the loose stuff out of the way. "You've made quite a mess here, mister. How'd you manage to bring a tree down on this side of the berm?"

"It flipped over."

There was something about the situation that was tickling my Cop Radar. No alarm bells, yet, but a definite tickle. "What are you doing out here, old timer?"

"Old, is it?" The man chuckled. "I'm going home. I finished clearing the path as far as I could, and now it's time for supper."

As I cleared the evergreen branches, an old man was revealed. He had flowing white hair and a long, but well-kept, white beard. He was wrapped in clothing made from cured animal skin. "There you are," I said.

"Yes, here I am. And there you are."

I grinned at him. "Now that we've established we are both where we are; maybe you can tell me what I need to shift to get you free."

The man grunted and slapped a thick trunk that lay at an oblique angle to his torso. "This bastard here," he muttered.

The trunk was thick. "You don't sound like you are in pain."

"No," he said. "The damn thing is just pinning my legs. The snow, is soft and comfortable, albeit a little chilly."

My Cop Radar twanged again. I scanned the woods around us, but nothing was moving. The forest had fallen silent.

I shook my head at the trunk. "Not sure I can move this, old timer. I'm not as strong as I once was."

"It doesn't need to move much," he said. "I can slide out if you can move it even a few inches."

"I'll try," I said. I bent over and wrapped my arms around the tree trunk. "Count of three," I grunted. I set my feet on the frozen path.

"Yes," said the man.

"One...two...three!" I grunted with effort and pulled as hard as I could. The weight of the tree trunk was immense, and a yell tore itself from my chest. Just when I thought I would have to give up, the tree shifted a little...and then a little more.

"Okay!" said the man as he rolled to the side.

I let the tree sag back to the ground with a loud thump. The muscles across my back were on fire, and the pain from my legs made me want to vomit.

"Thanks, friend," said the old man.

I nodded but stood there with my hands on my knees and a grimace on my face.

"Nasty curse, that," he said.

"Rheumatoid arthritis. It sucks."

The man shook his head and got to his feet. There was something in the easy way that he moved that set off alarm bells. He was short and skinny—maybe frail is a better word—but something about him felt like a threat. He dusted himself off, and I forced myself to stand up straight.

The pistols were tucked up nice and dry in the waterproof pocket of my pack. I hadn't wanted to risk

them in the snow, but as the hinky feeling about the little old man grew, I wished I had one in my hand.

He cocked his head at me. "I'm no threat to you, Hank Jensen," he said in quiet tones.

"How do you know my name?"

He shrugged. "It's a talent of mine. Nothing to be worried about, however."

"You know my name, how about telling me yours?"

He treated me to a vulpine grin. "My parents called me Tyarfer-Burisonur."

It wasn't the whole truth, and for some reason, the evasion felt like a test. "And what do *you* call yourself?"

His grin cracked into a smile. "Smart."

"Smart or smart-assed?"

He laughed. It was a booming, friendly sound, and some of the tension eased across my shoulders.

"Might as well ask if a brook can stop to take a rest." He looked me up and down and held out his hand as if to shake. "Meuhlnir," he said.

I took his hand and was amazed at the strength of his grip. "Hank, but you seem to know that already. Just Meuhlnir? No last name?"

He winked and gestured toward the path behind me. "My cabin's just there. Let's continue this by the fire."

I looked up the path. "How far to the next village?"

"Far enough to kill you in this weather. Come," he said, putting his hand on my arm. "You need my help, now, as I needed yours minutes ago. Let me repay the favor."

Again, I looked up the path. Each hour I spent resting was another hour's distance between my family and me. "Have you seen any other travelers?"

He applied firm pressure to my arm, turning me toward his cabin. "No. You are the only walk-in to come through."

My shoulders slumped. I had been afraid of a trap back there in the cave, and maybe it had been after all.

"What's troubling you, Hank?"

For some reason, it felt like Meuhlnir already knew the answer to the question, and it irked me. "Don't you know?"

Meuhlnir nodded with a calm expression on his face. "Yes, but it's considered polite to use conversation."

I looked down at his smiling face. Something felt wrong about it, but I couldn't place what. "Who are you, Meuhlnir?"

He shrugged and swept a hand at the woods around us. "I am the keeper of this place. I am Meuhlnir."

"Are you supposed to be some kind of magician? A mind-reader or something? And where, exactly, is this place."

"This used to be called the Snyowrlant Province before the empire fell."

"What's it called now?"

He shrugged and showed me a wry smile. "Cold. Snyowrlant is a word from the *Gamla Toonkumowl* that translates to 'snow country.'"

"The game of what?"

His smile stayed on his face, but there had been a momentary twitch of impatience. "It's the language of my ancestors, the old tongue. *Gamla Toonkumowl*."

"Yeah? Winter sucks here in Snow Country."

Meuhlnir chuckled. "It does, indeed, but this is spring." He tugged on my arm, and reluctantly, I let him pull me back toward the cabin. "Too cold to stand around out here," he muttered.

"You have blizzards like the one that rolled through here last night in the spring?"

He laughed and shook his head. "That storm had nothing to do with the season. It was a *sterk task*."

"Starkblast? Like in the *Dark Tower* series by Stephen King?"

"I don't know of King Stephen or his dark tower, but I didn't say 'starkblast,' I said *sterk task*. It means 'strong slap' in the *Gamla Toonkumowl*. It's a special kind of storm."

"For being the language of your ancestors, it seems the *Gamla Toonkumowl* gets a lot of use."

He chuckled. "You don't know the half of it, Hank." He led me to a cut through the berm that I hadn't spotted on the way to him and motioned me through it.

"Okay, I give. What is a *sterk task*?"

Meuhlnir shrugged. "Well, you lived through one last night. It's a kind of super-blizzard. Cold enough to flash freeze moving water, fierce winds, yards of snow."

"Strange weather here in Snyowrlant, Meuhlnir."

“They aren’t limited to Snyowrlant. *Sterk tasks* appear all over the world. No one knows why, though there are more theories than stars in the sky.” He shrugged and made a motion like he was tossing something to the side. “End of the day, it doesn’t matter why. They happen. They are reality. Any fool can see that.” He pointed ahead of us. “Welcome to my home.”

Snow was plastered against the walls on the windward side of the cabin, covering it in white from the top of the drifted snow to its snow-covered roof. Long daggers of ice pointed at the ground from the eaves. Warm light shined through the leaded glass windows. Torches burned next to a pair of massive doors made from thick planks and studded with iron. Like the bridge, the doors showed scenes that would have made a Viking craftsman sick with jealousy.

Meuhlnir threw one of the doors open and invited me inside with a gesture. “Be welcome, Hank. Be at ease. Within these walls, you are under my protection, and in this land, that is saying a lot.”

The cabin looked smaller from outside. I thought it must have been some trick of the poor light and large drifts of snow surrounding the place. The thick wooden front doors were set into walls built from dry-stacked stone, tan and brown in color. The ground floor walls were built from large logs that had been stripped of their bark, but the second-floor walls were plastered up to the steeply-pitched plank roof. The floor of the cabin was made of six-inch-wide wooden planks, that matched the ceiling in color and

texture. I would have sworn it was a one-story affair when I was crawling over the berm, but across the room from the vestibule, were twin stair cases leading up to a semicircular balcony with several doors set in the far wall. The great room had a massive stone fireplace on one end, and a hallway leading to other parts of the cabin on the other.

"Why have you come to this *klith*, Hank?"

"This what?"

"*Klith*. This side. This place. Snyowrlant." He was busy unwrapping himself and getting the snow off his leggings so I couldn't see his face.

"I didn't have much choice," I said, stomping my feet in the tiny nook that held his front door to clear snow off my boots. "I was..." I was at a loss for how to tell him what had happened.

He favored me with a knowing smile. "You came through the *proo* and then..."

"*Proo*? That's the shimmery thing that dumped me out on the lake?"

Meuhlnir nodded. "Yes. It's the way between the other *klith* and here. Pretty, yes? Like a rainbow."

"Is there only the one then?"

"Oh no. There are potentially infinite numbers of them, I suppose. *Proo* means bridge in the *Gamla Toonkumowl*. The *proo* you travelled across was *Kyatlerproo*. In general, though, these things are called *Pilrust preer*. *Preer* is the plural of *proo*." He bent and began pulling at the laces of my boots. "Let's get you out of these and over to the fire."

"Are there other *preer* to... to my *klith*?"

Meuhlnir shrugged. "Yes, anything is possible, as it is possible to move *preer* and anchor them where you like. Like ten feet in the air over a frozen lake." He chuckled into his beard.

"So, it's not the normal place for Katterproo to end?"

"*Kyatlerproo*," said the old man. "No, I haven't seen that particular *proo* in a very long time. It popped into place two days ago. Maybe it spawned the *sterk task*."

"Why would it cause a storm like that?"

"Kick those off and come sit by the fire." Meuhlnir straightened, and I was again struck by how easily he moved—like he wasn't as old as he appeared. "*Preer* are things of great power, Hank. Unimaginable power, really. Think on it—they span vast distances of space. They can be made to ignore the constraints of time. Some think they may even breach the boundaries of the universe. I've certainly been to a few places where the natural laws of this universe don't seem to apply." He sank into a leather-bound chair and put his feet up on the hearth stones. He closed his eyes and smiled. "Ah... That's comfort. Come sit, Hank."

When I didn't move, he cracked open one eye and looked at me. "It's hard to believe things you've been taught aren't possible. Believe me, Hank, this is just the start of your awakening."

I shook my head, fighting the headache that was building behind my left eye. "This is...a different

dimension? Planet?" I sighed and sank into the chair at last. "I don't understand any of this. How can I be here?"

Meuhlnir chuckled. "Those are all very good questions. Questions I don't know the answers for. You're here because you ran the rainbow."

"Ran the rainbow?"

"Crossing *Kyatlerproo*." Meuhlnir sighed and wiggled his toes. "You were going to tell me why you've come here."

"My family... My family was kidnapped. I was a cop, and I investigated a serial murder case seven years ago. I found a note written by the primary suspect, a guy named Chris Hatton. He said that if I followed him, he wouldn't hurt my family. There was a cave, and down at the bottom, there was the *Kyatlerproo*. The damn thing dumped me on the lake, but they must have come this way, too. You say no other travelers have been through this way. How am I supposed to find them? How can I follow Hatton if I have no idea where the fuck I am, or where he is?"

"There are ways," said Meuhlnir. "A *vefari* of sufficient power could help you find them."

"A *vefari*?" Irritation was burning in my mind, making my headache worse and worse.

Meuhlnir nodded. "Yes. A *vefari* of the *strenkir af krafti*—a weaver of the strings of power."

I glared at him and sighed. "Magic."

He favored me with a small, knowing smile. "My ancestors were a curious people. They plumbed the depths

of the universe, stealing its secrets. One of those secrets is that there are strings of boundless power that underpin the universe. My people were given the power to manipulate those strings, to do things that would appear magical to the natives of your *klith*—”

“I don’t have time for this,” I said, lurching to my feet and ignoring the aches and shooting pains the abrupt motion caused. Frustration percolated in my veins.

“Hank,” said Meuhlnir in placating tones. “I’m just trying to explain things—”

“My family has been taken from me, Meuhlnir. I don’t have time for philosophical discussions. Or metaphysics, or whatever this is. I need help finding them. I don’t need a history lesson about your ancestors or your religion.” I took two jerking steps toward my boots and pack.

“Hank,” said Meuhlnir. “Leave now, and you will surely perish. How can you help anyone if you are dead?”

“So, I just sit here and spend the evening chattering away? Safe and comfortable in your cabin? Are they safe? Are they comfortable?”

“For the moment, the answer to all of those questions is ‘yes.’ If you run off half-cocked and die in the snow, those answers will no doubt change.”

“How do you *know* that?” I yelled. “How can you know these things? Are you a part of this?” I took a menacing step toward the frail looking old man, frustration and fury stampeding through me.

Meuhlnir stood and turned to face me. “Hank, I assure you that I am *not* part of this bad business. I would not

participate in such nefarious affairs, except to put a stop to them. The question is simply whether I can help you or not. Whether I *should* help you."

I couldn't think of anything to say. I just stood and stared at the man.

"There are things on this *klith* that you need to be prepared for, Hank. This *klith* is vastly different from where you come from. *Life* is different here."

"I'll learn what I need to learn as I go," I snapped.

"You will fail if you attempt this alone." Meuhlnir's voice was flat and matter-of-fact. "This place is beyond you. Things you will face here will beggar your imagination. They will make you question your sanity."

I scoffed. "As if I'm not already doing that! Magic *preer!* Wizards! Giant fucking magical snow storms!"

"Yes," said Meuhlnir. "Those are just the tip of the dog's nose, Hank."

"Look, Meuhlnir, I don't have time to swap histories and learn about this place. I have a family to rescue! I have to—"

"Hank," he said. "I won't help you unless you deserve to be helped."

That stopped me cold. "What does that mean?"

"It means exactly what I said. You must convince me that you are worthy of my help."

"Well, I don't have time for all this. I've got to go." I stomped to my boots and started to shove my foot into one of them. "Thanks for letting me warm up."

“Oh, sit down, you stubborn fool.” The little man’s voice snapped with authority. “You are alone. You don’t even know where you are. You will be lost within hours, and you have no provisions. You will die.”

I stood there looking down at him with blood throbbing in my temples. “I have some food,” I said.

“You *need* my help, Hank.”

Frustration beat against the inside of my head. I wanted to be moving, but he was right. If I went at this alone, in this strange place, I’d fail.

“Things are different here, Hank,” he said in a resigned tone. “There are far fewer people on this *klith*, and there is a rigid class structure. You exist outside that structure so it will be hard for you to find help from anyone, even if you are lucky enough to stumble through the wilderness to a village.

“If I help you, it will take planning. It will take provisioning. All of that will take time—not much, only a day or two, but there’s nothing to be done tonight.” He sank back into his chair. “I need to know what kind of man you are.” He put his feet up on the field stone hearth and turned his face to the fire. “But it’s your choice, you know. Leave now, or sit and tell me the tale of how you came to be here.”

All of a sudden, I felt too tired to stand, much less slog through miles and miles of snow in the dark. The knowledge that I couldn’t help my family without this little old man dragged like a millstone around my neck.

With a sigh, I kicked my boot off and stomped to the chair and sat down, trying not to look like an impatient teenager.

I glanced at him askance, sure I'd find him watching me, but he was only staring into the flames. His face was passive—no sign of anger or even interest. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm just so frustrated and scared—"

"It's nothing, Hank. I understand."

With a sigh, I put my feet back on the hearth next to his. It was like heaven—luxurious warmth from the fire and warm stones under my heels. I sighed and said, "I worked for the New York State Police—to be more specific, for the Bureau of Criminal Investigation. That's the detective branch. Part of the job was to assist local jurisdictions investigate major crimes.

"Seven years ago, two boys playing in the woods found the entrance to a small cave, and inside they'd seen a dead body. Their parents called the local sheriff's department, and when the deputies stuck *their* heads inside the little cave, they'd seen *six* bodies. That's when the sheriff put in a call to the Bureau of Criminal Investigation, and I was assigned to head up the case. That turned out to be my last case as a New York State Trooper."

"You were a *toemari*?"

"A what?"

"A judge. Someone who enforces the rules of law."

"Not a judge, no. I was a police officer. Someone who investigates crimes and builds a case for the prosecution of criminals in a court of law."

Meuhlnir stroked his beard. "That seems like a small distinction."

"No, it isn't. It wasn't up to me to judge anyone, just find out what they did and pass it on to the prosecutors. They took the case before the judge and the criminal was allowed to defend himself."

"But if you found out what they did, what defense is there?"

I shrugged. "I could be wrong."

"Strange system," grunted Meuhlnir. "Leave that for now. Tell me what happened in this investigation of yours."

"By the time I got called in, the media had already broken the story."

I hope you've enjoyed this preview of my novel, *Errant Gods*. If you'd like to continue reading, please visit [the book's Amazon page](#).

Also, if you are not yet a member of my Readers Group, I hope you will consider joining by [clicking here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Erik Henry Vick is an author who happens to be disabled by an autoimmune disease (also known as his Personal Monster™). He writes to hang on to the few remaining shreds of his sanity. His current favorite genres to write are dark fantasy and horror.

He lives in Western New York with his wife, Supergirl; their son; a Rottweiler named after a god of thunder; and two extremely psychotic cats. He fights his Personal

Monster™ daily with humor, pain medicine, and funny T-shirts.

Erik has a B.A. in Psychology, an M.S.C.S., and a Ph.D. in Artificial Intelligence. He has worked as a criminal investigator for a state agency, a college professor, a C.T.O. for an international software company, and a video game developer.

He'd love to hear from you on social media:

Blog: <https://erikhenryvick.com>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/BerserkErik>

Facebook: <https://fb.me/erikhenryvick>

Amazon author pages:

USA: <https://bit.ly/4ehvusa>

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Goodreads Author Page: <https://bit.ly/4ehvgr>

