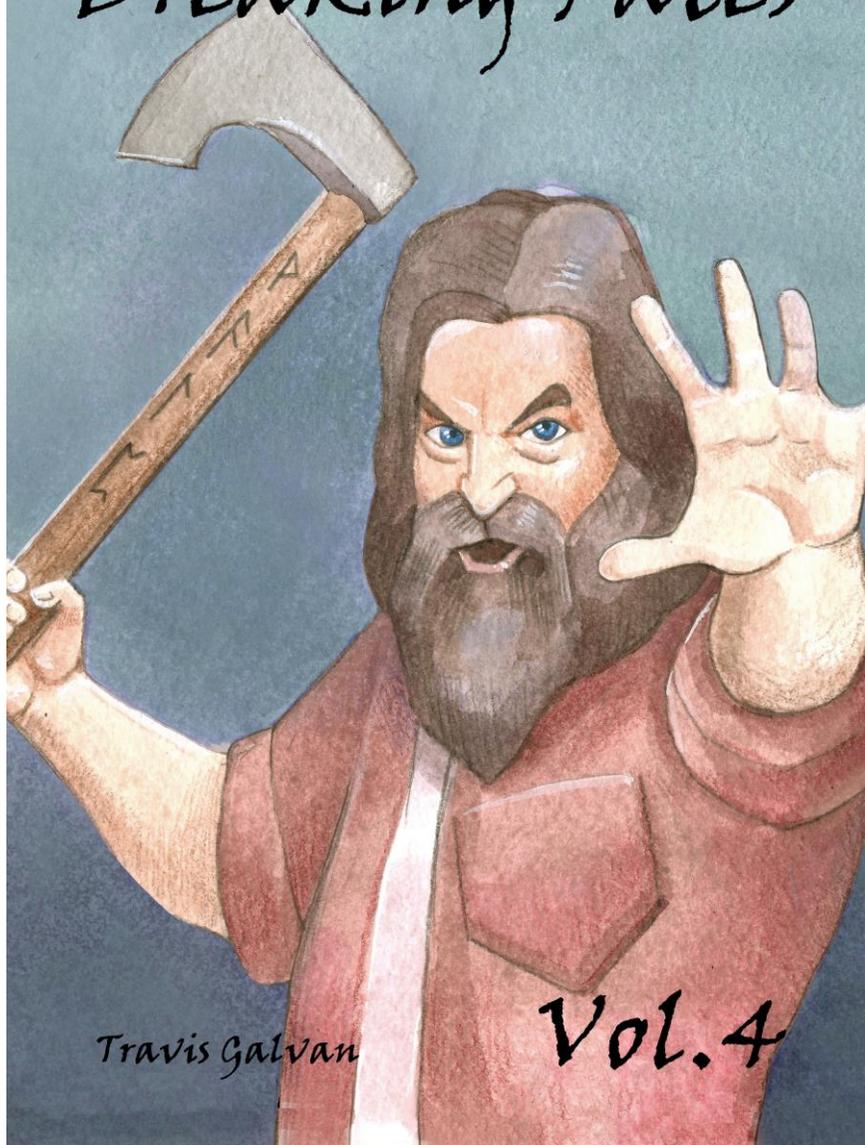


Breaking Fates



Travis Galvan

Vol. 4

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By Travis Galvan

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CHAPTER 1

HUGO

Twelve and a half minutes before the start of the invasion:

OCTOBER 31, 2016, 6:27PM

Hugo Ulvgud hit record on his camera and backed away into the shot. Behind him on the wall were dozens of ancient-looking weapons: spears, swords, shields, knives, etc. He was a very large man with a full beard and shaggy brown hair. Once he got into position, he looked into the camera, took a deep breath, and said, "Hello, historians."

He, himself, looked like a piece of history wearing a Viking era tunic with matching trousers. Around his neck, he wore a Viking rune on a thin red ribbon. "Lately I've been getting a lot of requests to talk more on the subject of hunting. As an avid hunter, I'm always ready to jump into the subject. Just ask my wife. She can hardly get me to shut up about it. Anyway, looking back several hundred years, of course, there were no rifles. If you wanted to bring home game, you needed to know how to trap, or how to use a trusty..."

"Hugo!" a woman's voice called out from far off camera.

Hugo grit his teeth and balled a fist before reigning in his anger enough to reply, "Yes my darling?!" in an

unexpectedly civil tone.

“Where’s the candy?!” the woman demanded.

“I didn’t buy candy! I told you, I’m done with feeding those ungrateful little brats every year! Half of them don’t even wear costumes anymore!”

“Aw, come on! I love handing out treats! Now, go to the store and buy the darn candy!”

“Hardly any kids even come anymore! It’s all trunk-or-treat these days! It’s ruining the Halloween spirit!”

“Then you’ll only need to get one bag of candy!”

Hugo balled his fists again and looked at the camera, recalling that it was still rolling. He flared his nostrils and strode across the room to turn it off before stomping upstairs.

“Why don’t you go to the store? You’re the one who wants to hand out the candy.”

“Because I’m lazy, now go!”

He balled his fists again, then grumbled, “You’re lucky I love you so darn much.”

“I know,” she said playfully and kissed him.

“Friggin’, let me get my shoes on.”

Hugo turned his truck to the right coming out of his subdivision on the way to the store. “Friggin’ no good ungrateful kids. And look at this little loser!” he grumbled, looking at a skinny teen walking down the sidewalk. He was wearing a hoodie, carrying a plastic grocery bag with candy in it, and obviously too old to be trick-or-treating. “He’s not even wearing a costume!” Hugo fumed, then rolled down his window to shout, “Get a costume, you loser!”

The teen looked up, flipped Hugo the bird, and kept on walking without missing a beat.

Hugo began to roll up his window but stopped when he heard emergency sirens begin to blast. Curious, he rolled his window back down and stuck his head out. There weren't any storm clouds, but he got the sense that something was wrong.

He pulled into the left lane, hoping to make a u-turn so he could go home to make sure Lauren was okay, but the light turned red before he got the chance. As he sat at the light, a sense of impending dread came over him. He could hear other drivers stopped at the light yelling into phones and people on the streets calling out for one another and shouting that they needed to get home.

After what felt like an eternity, the light finally changed and Hugo began to make his turn. Before he could get his truck all the way around, another driver from the cross street ran the light and smashed into him at high speed. His truck flipped and flew across the intersection where it came to rest on its side.

Hugo looked at his hands and moved his fingers to make sure they were still working. He unbuckled himself, slumped against the car door, and worked his legs and feet to make sure they were working as well. His ears were ringing and his face felt wet. He wiped it and found blood on his hands. He was furious.

He maneuvered in the cab of his truck so that he could stand, then kicked out his windshield and stepped out onto the road. Again, he worked his fingers as he scanned for the car that had hit him. He found it flipped onto its roof. He ran to it to check on the driver, not to help him, but to pummel him. The car was empty. He noticed the windshield had a big bloody hole in it, and when he looked around again, he saw the driver in a heap on the road ahead.

He began to walk toward him, then he remembered, "Lauren," and immediately began to run home. On the way,

he heard screams and saw people pointing into the sky. He kept running but looked up. He saw several large vessels in the sky. The sun was dipping on the horizon, but there was enough light to get a good idea of what they looked like. Their hulls were layered like scale armor, but rather than metal, the scales appeared to be massive wilting leaves. Most of the vessels took off in the direction of Saint Cloud and Minneapolis. One, however, looked like it was descending to a position not far away. *Lauren*, he thought and picked up his pace.

“Lauren!” Hugo shouted as he came in from the Garage.

“Back here!” she replied from the bedroom.

He ran to her to find her frantically attempting to pack four massive suitcases. “What the hell are you doing, woman?!”

“What does it look like I’m doing?! I’m packing! We have to get out of here,” she exclaimed. When she finally looked up from her bags, she saw he was covered in blood and screamed.

“Forget all that stuff! The truck is totaled and there’s no way we’re going to be able to carry that much stuff on foot. Get *one* backpack. Put two changes of rugged clothes in it with your wallet, phone, and several bottles of water.”

“But I need...”

“No! No, you don’t. You need to survive. That’s all. Pack your bag, then pack one just like it for me. Make it quick and meet me in the livingroom.”

Hugo ran down to his basement to arm himself. He’d seen the SpiffyMart emergency shelter commercials. He knew where he could take Lauren where she would be safe.

He just needed to get her there alive.

His eyes were drawn to his racks of medieval weaponry. He missed the ancient ways, but the fact of the matter was that his pistols and rifles were more effective than his melee weapons, so he made his way to the corner and unlocked his gun safe.

From within it, he grabbed his plate carrier and immediately strapped it on. Once dressed, he filled the open slots with loaded magazines and attached a holstered pistol to it. Next, he grabbed two AR-15s, checked the action, loaded a magazine into each, and turned back to the stairs. On the way, his eyes wandered again to his melee weapons where they came to rest on a hatchet. It had a sheath with a belt loop, so he thought, *why not?*

Hugo found Lauren in the livingroom with two backpacks and an overstuffed duffel. “What’s that?” he asked as he pointed to the duffel.

“Don’t be mad,” she cooed.

“I’m not mad. You’re not taking it.”

“I can carry it! It’s fine!”

“No! If you’re carrying that, you won’t be able to shoot this,” he said as he shoved her AR into her hands.

She looked panicked and screamed, “What’s this for?! What’s going on?! Why do I need my AR?!”

“Sweetie, I need you to breathe. Breathe. Okay, good. Now, you’re going to need this and you’re going to need to keep your head on straight. We’ve been practicing for years. We both know you’re a great shot. You just need to keep your head on straight.”

“What is it? What’s happening?!”

Hugo wrapped his large hand behind Lauren’s head,

looked her in the eye, and said, "I don't know. All I know is that we're probably going to need these if we're going to make it to the SpiffyMart alive."

The sound of gunshots and explosions suddenly rang out in the distance. Lauren screamed and backed away from her husband.

"Let's stay here! We can stay. It'll be safe!"

"No. It won't. I've got this feeling. I haven't felt it in a long time. Something is going on and it's not safe here. We have to get out and we have to get out now." He strapped on his backpack and handed the other to his wife. "Put it on. We're going. Now!"

Lauren fretted for a moment, then quickly slung the pack around her shoulders.

"Okay, we're going. You just watch me. Keep your muzzle down and your head up. If you see me bring up my barrel, you bring up yours in the same direction and look before you shoot. Keep your head on straight and look. Make a conscious choice to pull the trigger if you need to. You'll know when the time is right. We're headed out the back, let's go."

Hugo led Lauren to their back fence and instructed her to, "Make sure the safety's on."

Lauren looked down, saw her fire switch was set to safe, and said, "Check."

"Hold on tight," said Hugo. He spun his wife around, scooped her under one arm and leg, then picked her up over his head and dumped her over the back fence of their backyard as she grumbled curses under her breath. "I'm coming over!" he said as he hopped the fence after her. "We're taking the most direct route and we're going to stay off the streets as much as possible. We're going right through the center of the neighborhood hopping fences as we go. Ready?"

“Ready,” echoed Lauren in a whisper.

“Brent always keeps his side gate unlocked, so we’ll just slip through. Hopefully, I won’t have to drop you over too many fences.”

“Agreed!” huffed Lauren.

The latch was noisy, but the commotion from whatever was going on was still at least a block away, so they hurried through, pausing to look left and right before darting across the street.

As they crossed the blocks between themselves and the nearest SpiffyMart, they could hear the sounds of battle getting closer and closer. There were a lot of hunters in their community, so this area wasn’t going to be a pushover for an invading force.

At the end of the subdivision, there was a large city park with a wide-open field. In the middle of the field was a large vessel like the one Hugo had seen on the way home to get Lauren. It had a long ramp in the down position and smaller vehicles were exiting, carrying troops by the score in all directions. The vehicles and troops were all similarly armored with rotting leaves in lieu of metal. For some reason, the area smelled strongly of rotten seafood.

Hugo grabbed Lauren and pulled her into a large prickly bush. She started to squeal, but he slapped his hand over her mouth and pulled her closer. “I know it hurts, but you have to keep quiet. There’s too many of them right now.”

Lauren winced and tried to adjust herself slowly to reduce the number of prickly bits biting into her skin. With tears pooling in her eyes, she grabbed Hugo’s hand and tugged on it to get him to release her.

He placed one large finger to his own lips and shushed her quietly as he slowly released his grip on her. “Look at what they’re doing. They’re distributing troops. Once most of them are out and into neighboring blocks,

we're going to sneak into the park and skirt around their ship in those woods over there."

"Okay," agreed Lauren and hunkered down as low as she could go, all the while trying not to get prickled any more than she already was.

After a couple of minutes, all of the troop-carriers were out of sight and the couple slowly extricated themselves from the bush. As they crept toward the road, Hugo looked left to see a dozen of the invaders coming down the block. *Dammit!*

"Go back, go back, go back!" he whispered and forced his wife back under the bush. "Get into a prone firing position."

She nodded and obeyed as quickly as she could.

"Safety off," he said and she again obeyed. "Eyes up. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. There's a dozen coming down the block."

Shots rang out as they heard a commotion from several houses down. Lauren's breath quickened.

"It's going to be fine. Breathe. Slow it down. Keep your eyes open."

She nodded and adjusted her grip on her AR.

"Just like we trained. Finger off the trigger until you're ready to fire. You're going to do great. Now I have to leave you..."

"No!" interrupted Lauren in a harsh whisper.

"Yes. I'm going to swing around to the other side of this house. It has a high stone foundation, so it's good cover for me. I'm going to draw their attention over there. They're going to come for me. You keep still. Keep quiet. Breathe. Once they've gone past you and you see their backs, you put two bullets in each of them, then come back and put two more in each to make sure."

"No! Don't go!"

“Honey, you’re going to do fine. I trust you. I believe in you. You’re the fastest in your division.”

“Those are paper targets!”

“That won’t matter. All that matters is that you’re the quickest, most accurate shot in your league. Now, eyes up. Breathe. Finger off the trigger until you’re ready to shoot. Two in their backs, then two more. You can do this,” he assured her again as he slipped away.

She started to scurry out after him but retreated when more shots rang out from down the block, closer this time.

Time crawled by for Lauren. Every second seemed to take an hour to pass. Her heart pumped so hard she could hear her pulse in her ears and feel it in her fingertips. Her senses were so sharp, she could hear every insect crawling under the bush with her.

Shots rang out again. This time it sounded very close. No more than two houses down. She noticed some very odd sounds this time: bizarre voices and other odd sounds she had never heard before. If asked to do so, she’d be hard-pressed to find a way to accurately describe them.

After a few moments, things went quiet again. The moment of silence seemed to stretch forever before she realized she’d stopped breathing. “Breathe,” she whispered to herself and began again to do so. Right as she began her third breath, she heard shots ring out again, this time from the direction her husband had said he was going. The shots were rapid and didn’t stop until she reckoned his magazine was empty.

The odd voices from down the block began to shout and she heard them running closer. As soon as she saw them, her husband’s words echoed in her head, “Eyes up.

Breathe. Finger off the trigger until you're ready to shoot. Two in their backs, then two more. You can do this!"

Hugo knew for sure he'd killed four of the invaders before he had to duck back behind the stone foundation of the house to reload. He'd been watching them from his position as they made their way down the block. By the time he was ready to open fire, the residents of the homes they'd invaded had already reduced their numbers down to nine. This left five for Lauren. He knew that if she could keep her head on straight, she could do it.

With his rifle now reloaded, he aimed at the corner of the house, ready to shoot anything that might make it that far. A few moments later, he began to hear gunfire from where he had left his wife. He counted as each shot rang out. It sounded like she was firing as quickly as she could pull the trigger.

When he had counted up to twenty, everything went silent. Another moment later and he peeked around the corner to see five invaders face down on the lawn. He looked around again in all directions to make sure no one else was coming, then ran out onto the lawn to make sure they were dead. He saw four bullet holes in each of their backs, perfectly placed, then he smelled the scent of rotten seafood, even more strongly, coming off of them.

Smiling, he turned to the bush where he could see the end of his wife's rifle sticking out. "Safety on!" he whispered as he ran to her with pride in his eyes.

"I — I — I —" she stammered.

"You did it! You did it! I knew you could!"

"I did it."

"Okay. We need to get out of here before

reinforcements come,” he said as he pulled her from the bush and led her to the woods across the street.

They managed to stay quiet and out of sight as they made their way through the woods and out the other side. Across the street and down the block they could see the SpiffyMart. It was being sieged by dozens of invaders.

Hugo could see two figures standing on the roof. One wove arcane symbols in the air to create a protective barrier while the other called down bolts of lightning from the clouds above to strike at the invaders. Additionally, there were several individuals, much like Hugo and Lauren, who had taken up arms and were shooting at them with rifles.

The invaders were using arcane magic of their own, throwing fireballs at the building and sending shockwaves through the ground to knock people off of their feet.

“What’s going on down there?! What is all that?! What are we going to do?!” demanded Lauren.

“That’s magic and we’re going to do what we did back there. We’re going to fight. Come on. We’ll go back into the woods until we get close enough to shoot comfortably, then we’ll find as good a position as we can manage and start taking those guys out.”

“That can’t be magic,” insisted Lauren.

“Why not?” asked Hugo.

“Because there’s no such thing as magic! You’re an atheist for crying out loud. You’re not allowed to believe in magic!”

“I’m not an atheist because I don’t believe in anything. I’m an atheist because I know Odin personally, and I say screw him and all his sycophants. All they’ve ever done is keep me down!” Hugo pulled the red ribbon from beneath his

shirt to reveal the metal rune pendant on the end of it, then spoke the word, “Avsløre.” The ribbon became thicker and shorter until it became a collar around his neck and the pendant became a lock. “This is Gleipnir. When I’m finally able to remove it, I’ll devour Odin, so how could I not believe in magic? Magic is what’s going to make me free.”

Lauren turned slowly and started to wander into the woods as if disoriented.

Hugo stopped her and pulled her around to face him. “There’s no time for this now. We have to clear the way so we can get you in. You’re not safe out here.”

“I don’t understand what’s happening. I don’t. I don’t understand.”

“Lauren!” he shouted and shook her by the shoulder. “Get your head on straight. You don’t need to understand. You only need to survive. Don’t think about what we’re fighting. All you need to think about is putting holes in them, and you’re the best at it. So, just do that. Just be that for now.”

“What?”

Hugo looked her in her eyes and told her to, “Be who you are. Do what you do. I’m going to get you into position, and you’re going to clear the field. Okay?”

She blinked a few times, finally regaining her bearings, then echoed, “Okay.”

More troops had arrived by the time Hugo and Lauren had taken their positions. They each had a full magazine loaded and two more on ready for reloads. As they prepped for their attack, they watched the SpiffyMart to see how they were doing on their end.

In addition to the two mages on the roof, they saw

what appeared to be a shapeshifter on the ground, doing everything it could to fight off the invaders. The building was surrounded by cars to create a little concealment for the defenders. The shapeshifter would dart out from below the cars as something small, furry, and impossibly nimble, probably a squirrel or a marten of some sort. It would dart between the invading troops, often causing them to hit each other. Occasionally it would transform into a grizzly bear for a single heartbeat, just long enough to claw through one of the troops, and then vanish in the chaos.

“Lauren, are you ready?”

“Ready.”

“Safety off.”

“Safety off,” she echoed.

“You start on the left and work your way right. I’ll start right and work my way left. In three, two, one.”

As the countdown hit zero the two began to fire, each claiming their share of targets. As their magazines ran out, they reloaded and immediately went back to shooting. They were down to their last magazine when they saw another troop-carrier coming from down the street. There were still some troops on their feet, but if they didn’t get to the SpiffyMart immediately, they’d run out of ammo and never be able to make it across the street once those reinforcements arrived.

“Run and fire!” Hugo shouted as he yanked Lauren to her feet. He held on to the top strap of her backpack with one hand and guided her along, slightly behind himself, so that his body would shield hers as much as possible. With the other hand, he held out his rifle and continued to shoot.

Lauren continued to shoot as well, screaming curses at the invaders with the proficiency of a well-seasoned sailor.

The mages on the roof dropped a high flaming wall between them and what remained of the troops.

As Hugo approached the barrier of cars, he tossed his rifle over, then grabbed Lauren and leapt over with her in his arms.

The battle at the SpiffyMart raged on hard for another hour before reinforcements for the invaders stopped coming. The employees at the Spiffy Mart recognized Hugo and Lauren's competency and offered them all the resupply they needed to keep fighting. When it was finally done, Hugo took Lauren aside to talk to her.

"I need you to stay here. I've got to take care of some stuff."

"What? No! You can't leave me. We can be safe here!"

Hugo shook his head and explained, "We'll never be safe so long as this invasion is going on. We may be safe for now, but they're going to send more troops, eventually. The only way we'll ever really be safe is if we end this invasion."

"What are you going to do?"

"More than I can do here. More than I can do if I have to worry about you. So, stay here. Be safe. I'm going to do everything I can."

Hugo claimed one of the now-abandoned troop-carriers in front of the store and took it north, out of the city, far beyond where most people lived. Once he got beyond the population centers, he no longer saw any invaders.

He was going to find help. If there was one person who might remove Gleipnir from his neck, it would be Tyr. Without Gleipnir restricting his power, he would be able to

destroy the invaders. Eager to get free, he found Tyr's compound sometime after midnight.

Hugo knew Tyr had become paranoid over the last hundred years and didn't trust him not to blow him up immediately if he didn't announce himself. He landed the carrier next to the front gate and stepped out into view of the security camera where he pressed the intercom button. "Hey! It's me. Let me in. In case you hadn't noticed, there's a war going on. I need your help."

There was a loud buzz and the gate began to roll open. The voice from the comm said, "Leave the vehicle. Walk straight ahead. If you step off the road, you will be killed."

Hugo waited for the gate to finish opening, then did as instructed, walking down the dark road toward a single light in the distance. There was a door under the light attached to a small cement building. It opened automatically as he approached. Beyond the door were stairs leading down. The way down took two right-angle turns and ended in another door. Next to the door was a table. Above the door were a camera and a speaker.

"Disrobe," said the voice.

Hugo showed the camera his middle finger.

"Disrobe," said the voice again.

Hugo grumbled and began to stack his equipment and clothes on the table. When he was down to his birthday suit, he turned back to the camera and opened his palms toward it.

The door opened and Hugo entered into a small antechamber with a closed door on the far side. The door behind him closed. A moment later, the door ahead of him opened.

Hugo found Tyr waiting for him on the other side of the door sitting at a control desk with dozens of monitors

covering the walls.

Tyr gestured with the stump at the end of his left forearm to indicate a spot next to the door where a pair of draw-string pants hung.

Hugo grabbed them off the hook and said, "It's time for you to remove Gleipnir."

Tyr laughed, held up his stump, and said, "After what it cost me to put it on you. No. I don't think so."

"But you can."

"Of course, I can. But that doesn't mean I'm going to."

"Why not?"

"Because that would signal Ragnarök and bring on the end of the world."

"It's already the end of the world, you fool! Look at your monitors! I just came from a shelter. The mages in charge of the place said these invaders are all over the world! This is it! It's time to remove Gleipnir!"

Tyr laughed, "You don't know that."

Hugo balled his fists tightly and demanded, "What else could it be?!"

"It could be anything. All I know for sure is that I'm not going to be the one to bring about Ragnarök."

"Dammit, Tyr! I can't fight them like this!"

"I tell you what. I'll give you a little something to help you out." He opened his hand and conjured the hatchet Hugo had placed on the table at the bottom of the stairs. With the tip of a finger, he traced runes down the handle of the hatchet, burning them into the wood. When he was done, he said, "Now, hold out your hand."

Hugo held out his hand and the hatchet vanished from Tyr's grasp to appear in his own.

"The hatchet will never break now, nor will it dull. You can conjure it to your hand. As well, the hatchet can summon you to it. You may call it Valp. Now, go and see

what you can do with that.”

Hugo gripped the hatchet tightly, then turned and made his way back the way he came.

By the time Hugo made it back, the sun was near the horizon. The large ship in the park at the end of his subdivision had been set up as a base of operations for the invaders on the ground. If he was going to keep his wife and his neighborhood safe, he was going to have to start with the base ship.

Hugo parked the troop-carrier in the woods, not far from the base ship, to plan out his attack. He still had his AR and several magazines of ammo, as well as Valp, but Valp was still mostly untested.

He exited the carrier with Valp in his hand and targeted a tree as far out as he thought he might be able to throw. As he made the motion to throw, he got the sense that it would hit true, no matter how far the target was.

He was right. The hatchet struck true. He held out his hand as he had before and the hatchet vanished from the tree to reappear in his hand. “Nice,” he whispered, then threw it again, this time at a tree twice as far away. Again, it landed true and he conjured it back to his hand. *Okay, I think I know how I’m going to do this.*

Hugo took aim with his AR at the troops at the base of the big ship. He waited until they were grouped close together then began to dump as many rounds into them as possible, changing magazines as necessary.

The invaders ran for the armored troop-carriers that

remained around the ship and took off toward Hugo's position.

Hugo set off in the opposite direction, running away from them as quickly as his feet would carry him. When he was sure they were too close to evade any longer, he held out his hand for Valp. This time, however, rather than conjuring it into his hand, Valp summoned him. Hugo vanished and appeared on the far side of the park, the other direction from where he had led the invaders.

He appeared with Valp in his hand, still stuck into the tree where he had left it. Rather than pulling Valp from the tree, Hugo left it and ran to the troop-carrier he had hidden in the woods earlier. Once inside, he hit the accelerator and headed directly for the main ship. Some of the invaders had started to come out from within, though the other troop-carriers were still in the distance, searching the trees for a Hugo who was long gone.

When Hugo reached the main ship, he drove his stolen troop-carrier directly up the ramp at full speed, crashing into it and blowing it to smithereens.

Again, Hugo appeared back at the tree with his hand around Valp. He felt a surge of energy as the sun broke the horizon and shone down on him. It was a sensation he hadn't felt in a millennium. It was — worship. It was — faith. Someone had seen what he did, and they were heartened by it.

He flexed his fingers and tightened the muscles of his chest and back. He felt his strength growing despite Gleipnir. *How many people saw me?!* he wondered, not understanding why he was gaining so much strength from a single act of heroism.

Now out of ammunition and with his current mission accomplished, he headed back toward the SpiffyMart where he had left Lauren. As he approached, he could hear cheering and chanting. It was his name! His true name! They were calling out his true name!

“Fenris! Fenris! Fenris! Fenris...!”

There were hoots and hollers and laughs. They were celebrating. But how did they know it was him, and how many of them had seen it?

Hugo approached the store, still covered in the blood of his car accident and all the other filth he'd picked up through the night. He looked like hell but felt like a hero! The people who stood guard around the store made way for him to pass, smiling and cheering and encouraging him to go in and get cleaned up.

This moment felt like a dream come true. For centuries he'd been the outcast they'd thrown away because they feared him. Today, the masses praised his name. He was beginning to feel delirious and euphoric. He saw Lauren in the lobby of the store, chanting and dancing and cheering with the crowd. He ran to her and spun her to face him.

Her face brightened even further, she screamed and jumped up onto him, kissing his bloody face, then squeezed him as hard as she could. When she finally released him, she pointed to the TV screen above the register and said, “Look! Fenris returned to fight the invaders! You were right! Magic is real!”

Confused, Hugo looked at the screen. It was a news feed. There was a skinny teenage boy with dirty blond hair. They showed images of him from all over the world, often paired up with and fighting alongside wolves, werewolves, and other supernatural creatures of a variety of types. The banner at the bottom of the screen read “FENRIS REBORN,” and listed city after city in which he had defeated

the invaders and protected the people.

It wasn't Hugo they were cheering for at all. It was this boy. It was this skinny boy who had stolen his name! In an instant, his delirious euphoria turned to boiling rage. He had to get out of there before he killed everybody, before he killed the one person in the world he actually cared about.

Hugo turned and started shoving people out of his way. Once he reached the door, he bolted. He didn't know where he was going. All he knew is that he had to kill that skinny boy.

CHAPTER 2

COLLEYVILLE

Twelve and a half hours after the start of the invasion:

NOVEMBER 1, 2016, 7:10AM

The library in the Colleyville estate had ceiling-high bookshelves and a large stone fireplace. It was a magical place, and not just because it was a library. The fireplace was a gateway to a pocket spirit world. Ren often referred to it as simply “The Pocket.” From within The Pocket, one could travel to dozens of similar estates all over the world. Ren had inherited The Pocket and all of the associated estates from her zombie grandpa, Brad. Since then, she’d often used the Colleyville estate and The Pocket as a staging area for numerous supernatural expeditions. This morning, however, it was being used as a fallback position so that she and her team could rest after battling invaders all night long.

Ren used one of her angelic abilities to transport herself and her friends from a rooftop in downtown Dallas to a place just out of sight within the library. They were within the veil, the place that separates Reality from the other parallel, perpendicular, or otherwise tangent dimensions. From within the veil, the room looked a shade off from normal with a few other notable differences.

On this side of the veil, the stones of the fireplace

glowed with magical runes that normally went unseen on the Reality side. Also, notably different were the appearance of Ren and her companions. The black infinity scarves they all wore appeared to be blowing in the wind, despite the fact that they were indoors and their hair didn't appear to be affected.

In addition to the scarf, Ren appeared to be wearing a full suit of articulated silver plate armor, engraved with swirling patterns and symbols. On her head, she wore a golden laurel that was attached to an armored visor that covered her eyes. She wore a large diamond ring on her right hand, a ruby on her left, and her armored boots each bore a yellow sapphire over the arch of each foot. The last thing of note was the sword sheathed at her hip.

Her boyfriend, Ramzi, looked like a pharaoh from ancient Egypt. He had a short, braided goatee, a ceremonial headdress, a mantle, golden armbands and bracers, as well as golden rings. His skin had a golden shimmer to it, and below that, his body appeared to be made of magical sparkles.

Ren's brother, Bo, appeared fairly normal, except for his scurvy-dog pirate costume and the fact that he had the head of a wolf.

Bo's girlfriend, Alyssa, wore a similar pirate costume. She was a pretty girl with long blonde hair. The first thing that stood out for her in the veil was the fact that she radiated a golden aura. In addition to that, she wore a choker with a hummingbird charm that flew in orbit around her neck.

Ren raised her right hand and allowed her diamond ring to spill out a little of its white glowing energy onto her fingers. She used that energy to slash a part into the veil for the group to pass through, back into Reality.

Bo was the first through the veil. As his foot came to rest on the Reality side, he said the word, "Rutabaga!" and

was immediately followed by Ramzi, “Rutabaga!” Alyssa, “Rutabaga!” and Ren, who also said the word, “Rutabaga!” to deactivate the magical security system of the house.

On this side of the veil, Ren and Ramzi wore fancy-lad pirate costumes with long coats and big hats. Ramzi also wore a fake goatee and mustache, and a see-through eyepatch.

Ren was the shortest of the group by several inches, standing at five-foot and a smidgen. She had inherited her father’s Hispanic skin, along with his dark hair and eyes.

Bo, on the other hand, got all the recessive genes from their mother’s side of the family. He was a skinny teen with dirty blond hair, fair skin, and hazel eyes. Unfortunately, he did get his height, or lack thereof, from his father. While he was taller than his sister, it wasn’t by much.

Alyssa stood just barely taller than Bo. On this side of the veil, the magical choker she wore had a hummingbird charm attached at the front.

Ramzi was the tallest of the group by more than a head. His face looked more like his Egyptian father’s, though he got his green eyes from his mother.

“Six hours, then we can check on the world,” insisted Ren.

“Go ahead and aim for eight. Alyssa and I only need an hour if we meditate. We’ll check the world after that, and if it needs you, we’ll let you know,” said Bo.

“Ugh! Thank you. You’re the best.”

He parted his hands humbly and acquiesced, “This is how you made me.”

Ren laughed and teased, “Well. I guess that means I’m the one that’s the best.”

“Bo! Your turn!” shouted Ren.

There were three showers in the house and Bo had suggested the others all go first. When Ren finished her shower, she looked for Bo to let him know he was up.

“Bo, are you in here?” she asked as she popped her head into the library. No Bo. Curious, she went to each of the downstairs bedrooms. No Bo. *Where did he go?*

She went upstairs and started to check the rooms. She was confused by the contents of the second room. There was a large chamber with a window, a door, and some sort of equipment with tubes connecting to it. *What the heck is this crap?!* she wondered.

Now, even more curious, she finished looking in the upstairs rooms, then made her way back down to the kitchen. She found the sink full of steaming hot water with a layer of suds floating on the surface. Sticking up from the suds was a long dachshund snout. He had fallen asleep while floating on his back.

“Bo!” shouted Ren into the sink.

The dachshund thrashed in the water, splashing all over the marble countertop. When he finally regained his bearings, he placed his front paws on the edge of the sink, coughing and hacking. He took a few seconds to get cleared out, then he mumbled at Ren in the demon-speak he had learned from his mustachioed poodle friend.

Ren folded her arms, raised her chin, and said, “Don’t take that tone with me, Mr.!”

Bo mumbled again and shook hard, causing his ears to flap loudly, shedding water all over his sister.

“Why you little!” she grumbled and turned to grab a kitchen towel to wipe off with.

Bo climbed out onto the counter and shook again.

When Ren was done drying herself, she grabbed a new towel and dried her little brother.

“What’s all that — apparatus in the second room upstairs?” she asked.

Bo moved back to his human form, naked as the day he was born save for the towel he pulled over his lower parts for his sister’s sake. “Oh, that’s the vacuum chamber I built. That’s where me and Ramzi learned to survive on the moon.”

“Now that you know, why don’t you go ahead and clear it out?”

Bo grunted and said, “I guess you’re right. I’ll take care of it when this invasion stuff is over.”

“That’s fair. Well, I guess you don’t need the shower anymore. I’m going to bed. Let me know if the world needs me.”

Bo sat next to Alyssa at the desk in the Library after their meditation. They each had a laptop and a ScryPod open to scour the net and the ScryNet for information about the invasion. Bo wore clothes from his stash. Alyssa wore clothes from Ren’s.

“So, martial law is a thing now,” muttered Alyssa.

“More like chaos with pockets of military control. My feed from Bosefus shows that we were able to save a lot of people last night all over the world.”

“Yeah. That Fenris thing is really taking off,” she teased.

“Ugh! Don’t remind me,” groaned Bo as he began to click his mouse a little harder than most would consider reasonable. “I should have planned ahead to cover my face or something. I guess I didn’t really think about that before. I was too preoccupied with saving people.”

Alyssa patted him on the hand and said, “That’s

because you're a good person. Don't worry. We'll figure out something to do about all that Fenris stuff when this is over."

"How does something like that even get started?! Who on Earth would think to call *me* Fenris, and how did it get all the way around the world in just a few hours?! I mean, seriously! As if my life wasn't hard enough without hoards of people thinking I'm the second coming of some long-forgotten Norse god."

"I'm a hundred percent with you on this one, Babe."

He breathed out hard through his nose and went back to scouring news feeds. After a few minutes, he said, "Here's some good news," and turned his laptop to face his girlfriend. "SpiffyMart is reporting they were able to take in seventy million people domestically just last night."

"What's the capacity on one of those SpiffyBunkers?"

"I don't know," Bo admitted. "They use magic for the lower levels, so there's really no telling."

"Have you considered letting people stay in the Pocket?"

Bo gave her an incredulous look and scoffed, "No! Are you kidding? With as many cursed items as Ren has stored down there, they'd be better off facing the elves."

Alyssa wrinkled her nose and conceded, "Ooh. Yeah. That would be a bad idea."

Bo heard his phone ding from within his shapeshifter's purse. He'd heard dozens of dings through the night while he was fighting. "Capto phone," he said and the tattoo of his phone from his arm vanished and physically appeared in his palm. He swiped at the screen a few times, then added, "Looks like my dad texted me fifty-seven times since last night."

"You should probably text him back. I just finished texting my folks right after I got out of the shower."

"You're probably right," said Bo as he began to type.

“Tell them I say ‘hi’ and I hope they’re okay,” insisted Alyssa.

“Will do.”

BO

Hey Dad

Guess who has two
thumbs and survived the
alien invasion
This guy!

DAD

Halleluja!

I’m adding Sue and Ren

BO

Don’t add Ren

She’s hard asleep after
fighting all night long
Let her rest

SUE

It’s about time!

We were so worried!

BO

We’re all fine

DAD

How does it look out there?

BO

Alyssa and Ramzi are
both OK too

It's not pretty
Lots of dead
Lots of destruction
Still much to do
Oh, Alyssa says hi
Hope you guys are ok

SUE

Tell her we're ok
Just worried half to death

BO

I'll tell her
We still have a lot to do
So I'll update you later

DAD

Take care of your sister
Tell her we love her

BO

What about me?!

DAD

You're alright, I guess.

SUE

Trey, you're such a
pasaway.

DAD

OK, fine
We love you too :P

BO
I love you guys
Give Gabby a squeeze
for me

Bo incanted, "Onero phone," and his phone again became a tattoo on his arm.

"So, what did they say?" asked Alyssa.

"They said they're fine. Just worried."

"Yeah. My folks were just about ready to lose it."

CHAPTER 3

THE AGENCY

Twelve and a half hours before the start of the invasion:

October 31, 2016, 6:10AM

Mr. Hartwood sat in a wide-backed wooden chair with reports spread out in front of him at his desk. There was a shallow metal bowl just beyond the reports. It was about ten inches across and filled with water nearly to the top. It was a magical device known as an iScry. It was sort of like a computer for magical people. He gave the bowl a gentle thump, causing a ring of glowing illusionary runes to appear above it. He flicked one and it vanished with a chirping sound. A moment later an illusion of his secretary's face appeared floating over the bowl.

"Yes, Mr. Hartwood?" she asked.

"Send in Von Flue from the media division."

"Right away, Mr. Hartwood," she said and her illusion winked out.

A minute later there was a knock at the door and Mr. Hartwood called out, "Enter!"

A lean man with a square jaw and expensive taste entered and immediately sat in the chair opposite Mr. Hartwood. "You wanted to see me, sir."

Mr. Hartwood pushed a piece of paper to the other

side of his desk and said, "I need your signature before we can have this conversation. This is a non-disclosure. Go ahead and give it a read." While Von Flue read, Mr. Hartwood fished out a prick-pen from his desk and slid it to the other side.

"This must be pretty serious," Von Flue mumbled, then picked up the pen, which pricked his finger to feed the tip with blood for his signature. "Okay. So, what's this about?" he asked as he signed his name.

"I need you to prep for a zeitgeist push. Have you heard the name: Bo Alonso?" Mr. Hartwood asked as he thumped the iScry again and flicked his way through several runes until images of Bo began to pop out into the space above the bowl.

"Last year there was some hubbub about him and his sister getting into a war with the Dallas vampires. Why?" asked Von Flue.

"Our scry team shows a lot of activity on the moon over the last twenty-four hours. We think they're mobilizing for an attack on the Earth. It could happen at any time now. We've had media reports about the moon and our secret weapon for weeks now. What we've been keeping hush-hush is that the secret weapon is Bo. He's up there right now fighting them."

Von Flue blew out a hard breath then asked, "So, what's my part in this? What are we going to push?"

Mr. Hartwood gestured to the reports on his desk and said, "We have a number of teams around the world who've been groomed to be the heroes in the coming war. To what extent they'll be able to step up, we don't really know, but we're hopeful. What we do know is that Bo is especially well suited for this purpose. I had a conversation with Mr. Kwok about a week ago. I didn't divulge anything to him regarding what I know, but he told me that based on some events he'd

witnessed, he'd come to believe with near certainty that Bo is the Norse god, Fenris, reborn."

Von Flue took out a small onyx cased mirror from his pocket. The device was known as a ScryPod. Sort of a tablet version of the iScry, which he placed on the desk and flicked gently on the edge. When he did, runes appeared and he selected one of them, which caused an illusionary keyboard to appear before him so he could take notes. "Is he Fenris reborn?" he asked.

"I honestly don't know. All I know is that Kwok believes it, and if Kwok believes it, anyone can believe it."

Von Flue smirked and continued that line of reasoning, "And if anyone can believe it, we can push it out into the zeitgeist."

Mr. Hartwood nodded and said, "Exactly. Once it's widely accepted that he's Fenris, it won't matter if he is or not. The collective belief will trigger apotheosis and he'll function as Fenris, regardless."

"Nice," whispered Von Flue as he continued to type.

"For now, I want you to focus on Bo. Don't name him other than to call him Fenris. This is who he is now. When the attack happens, I want you aggregating every image and video you can get of him from any outlet on the ScryNet or Internet. We need every outbound channel pushing this. Oh, and see if you can get someone from operations to put an obfuscation enchantment on the name Bo Alonso so that if normal humans see his name, they won't think to connect him to Fenris, or if they see his picture, they won't connect him to the name Bo Alonso.

"Day one of the attack is all about the aggregation of content. On day two, I need every available media agent doing interviews with anyone who can be identified as someone saved by Fenris. We need testimonials. Day three is iconography. Get your art department working on a

symbol. Make it simple enough that a child could doodle it but with a powerful sense of authenticity. We'll need to hire some top-level vandals to tag major monuments. See if you can get that Banksy guy. Once enough people see it, the tagging should self-perpetuate.

"Day four is where we kick it into high gear. I'm talking about toy-lines and trading cards. This is particularly potent because of the shrine effect. Every time a fanboy places his action figures in a specially designated spot for Fenris, he creates a worship node to collect faith."

"Genius," whispered Von Flue as he typed out his final line and scooped his ScryPod back into his pocket. "I'll get on this right away. As soon as we get anything in, it'll immediately go right back out on wide distribution with the appropriate tagging to get people talking about it."

"Go ahead and get your best sculptors working on the action figures. They have to be top quality or the kids'll just chuck them in the garbage. I need prototypes ASAP," insisted Mr. Hartwood.

CHAPTER 4

SO, WHAT NOW?

Current time:

NOVEMBER 1, 2016, 3 PM

Feeling well-rested, Ren made her way back to the Library where she found Bo and Alyssa sorting through internet and ScryNet feeds.

“Ugh!” she groaned. “Thanks for letting me sleep in. I take it the world is still in one piece?”

Alyssa nodded and replied, “One big messy piece.”

“And how’s the war effort going?” pressed Ren.

Bo admitted it was, “Better than expected. None of the world governments dropped nukes, so that’s good. As far as the elves are concerned, we’re seeing a lot of strongholds like we saw in Deep Ellum. Where they were able to survive the night, they warded themselves in. They’ve completely changed tactics at this point. They’re no longer killing everyone they can. Now they’re settling in. I’m seeing reports that they’ve already started moving underground. Since most of the places they landed already have sewers or tunnels of some sort, they have a head start. There’s no telling what they’re doing down there.”

“What did they do down in the tunnels on the moon?” asked Alyssa.

Bo shrugged and said, “I don’t really know. All I ever

saw them do was build more tunnels. I don't really know what their function was supposed to be."

Ren furrowed her brow and asked, "Now that they've left the moon, have you been back to the tunnels to see what's down there?"

"I'm actually reluctant to go down in there. I transported the Transit Queen down into the tunnels a couple of weeks ago. She's been down there feasting this whole time."

"Oh, that's right. Ramzi told me you took him up there for that."

"Yeah. When I grabbed her to take her up, we were out in the open. Plenty of space for me to escape and maneuver. Now that she's down in the tunnels, not so much. The last time I had to fight a giant demon in a confined space, I died. I'm not eager to go through that again," Bo assured her.

"I don't blame you," agreed Ren.

Alyssa clapped once and asked, "Okay, so now what?"

Bo opened his palms and said, "I'm open to suggestions, but at this point, it kind of seems like all that's left to do is root them out."

"It'll be like Pop Up Gopher come to life!" cheered Alyssa.

Ren and Bo laughed, and Ren acquiesced, "Yeah. It'll be just like that."

Von Flue had dispatched agents to interview survivors all over the world. He, himself, had gone to downtown Dallas to see what he might be able to find out about the battle that had happened there. Initial reports indicated that Fenris had

been seen fighting alongside an armored female companion he called Freyja. If this was found to be true, it would lend a lot of credence to the claim that he really was Fenris, given that Freyja was a goddess from within the same pantheon. They already had a surveillance video of the two of them together. If they could pair that with eye-witness testimony of her identity as Freyja, that would be incredibly powerful for the zeitgeist push and the apotheosis effect.

There were also reports and video evidence that he was fighting alongside the Bourbon Street Angel. People seemed to love her. If they could be definitively linked, that would bring in the hardcore Christian factions. That's a big demographic, and to have them participating would be huge for the cause.

He'd also heard reports of vampires and flying pirates. He would have to see how those pieces of the puzzle fit into the whole. He knew the local vampires and would have to see about getting them on board.

"You've hardly slept! You can't go back up there until you get some sleep. You're going to kill yourself!" insisted Mrs. Dunn.

Pete assured her, "Mom, I'm fine! How am I even supposed to fall asleep knowing what I know?! I just lay there imagining what's happening in the rest of the world, then I imagine it finds its way here and what might happen if I'm asleep when it comes!" Pete was one of Ren's friends from school. Technically, he was blind. He had a defect in his brain that prevented eyesight. However, that defect also allowed a certain elemental spirit to cohabit his brain. This gave him fantastic control over the air around him. He could connect with it and extend it all around him like

tendrils, which he used to perceive his environment. While he wore dark sunglasses, often getting Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles comparisons for it, he was actually very aware of the world around him.

Mrs. Dunn gave her son a grumbling hum, then said, “Ron, come tell your son he needs to get his skinny butt back in that bed and get some sleep.”

Pete reached out with several tendrils of air to form a sound-proof bubble around the window by the bed, then used more tendrils to slowly lift the window a fraction of an inch at a time.

Mr. Dunn confessed, “Honey, I’m with Pete on this one. He can’t sleep anyway and it’s only going to feed his anxiety if he’s stuck in a bed.”

“Yap!” agreed Angus.

“Angus!” shouted Mr. Dunn. “What are you doing in here you little sausage-dog. Git!” he commanded and pointed to the door.

Angus lowered his head and grumbled a long reply as he slowly made his way out the door.

“Ron, don’t be mean to Angus. He’s a good boy,” insisted Mrs. Dunn.

“I found him in the fridge yesterday eating the last of my award-winning gumbo. In the fridge! That is not a good boy!”

“While you two argue about Angus, I’m going on patrol,” said Pete, who dove out the window.

“Pete!” his parents cried out as they ran to the window to see him rocketing higher and higher into the airspace above the island.

Pete had been placed in charge of security for the small island. It was one of the many estates Ren owned and was attached to The Pocket. Ren left him there to guard over not only his own parents but hers as well. The island had a

very small population and it didn't seem likely the elves would bother to waste resources invading such a small spot in the middle of the Ocean. However, they didn't want to leave it completely undefended, so they brought in Pete.

Once Pete reached his desired altitude, he reached out with tendrils in all directions for many miles to sense for invading ships, or anything else out of the ordinary. It wasn't long before he started to sense something. The air itself felt wrong. It was coming from the southwest. From the direction of Cuba. He focused closely on the air and tried to sense it in smaller and smaller quantities until he was down to microscopic particles. The air was full of fantastically small antagonists. "What the heck?" he muttered and allowed himself to drop out of the air, back toward the island.

He found Ren's father, Trey, her stepmother, Sue, her baby sister, Gabby, and the copy of Bo they named Bovis sitting in a field atop the highest point on the island, which was surrounded on all sides by high stones in a unique but natural formation. Bo had the ability to spawn many copies of himself using his Shadow World abilities. There were a handful of copies who had been spawned so often for such specific purposes that they had developed individual personalities. These copies each had individual names as well. Bovis was the copy Ren had assigned to oversee her estate in the Bahamas.

The family was having a picnic next to the spot where Gabby's sister had been planted. Though they looked human, Sue and Gabby were plant-based creatures known as Kapatid Ng Puno, or in English: Tree Sisters. Tree Sisters were always born as twins. One who looked human, and one who was literally a tree. This was the place where Gabby's sister's seed-pod was planted. They were expecting her to break the surface next spring.

Pete landed not far from the picnic blanket to the

sound of friendly greetings.

“Hey, Pete. We’ve got extra sandwiches if you’re hungry,” insisted Sue.

“Maybe later. Right now, there’s something happening that could be dangerous for all of us. There’s been no sign of invading ships near us. I think the nearest attacks were in Cuba, but there’s something in the air now, coming from that way.”

“Spores,” interjected Bovis.

“Spores?” echoed Sue.

“Yeah. Spores. I captured one of the elves a couple of weeks ago. I don’t recall it myself because my memory of that day was reset, but I’ve had conversations about it with one of my friends who was there with me. The elf we caught had some sort of nasty alien fungal infection. They all have it. Even their ships and their armor have it. The one I captured, when I took off his helmet, there was a lumpy growth on the top of his head. It had an eyestalk and when it saw me, it tried to spray me with spores. They probably give them off when they’re dying, or when they think they’re about to die, which means every invader and every ship is going to be dumping spores into the atmosphere.”

“Well, crap! What are we supposed to do about that?!” asked Trey.

“We need to get everyone into the mansion. It has magical defenses. I think it should be able to keep out the spores,” reckoned Bovis.

“What about Gabby’s sister?!” asked Sue.

Bovis shook his head sadly and said, “I wish I knew. Thankfully she’s five feet underground at the moment, and if we’re lucky, the spores won’t be able to affect plants.”

Ren appeared within the veil atop the roof of the easternmost building in downtown Dallas with Ramzi, Bo, and Alyssa. They'd decided to wait for sunset to siege Deep Ellum, hoping to avoid police and media attention.

On the other side of the veil, lined up against the ledge and looking down at Deep Ellum, was a large group of police and media persons pointing cameras down on the elf stronghold.

"Son of a biscuit!" shouted Ren as she kicked at the gravel at her feet.

Several of the police and media persons turned to look when they heard the sound of the gravel being kicked, but seeing nothing, turned back to their cameras.

"It's fine," insisted Bo, speaking with a wolf's head. He wore only a pair of jeans, a leather belt, his scarf, and a golden bracelet on each wrist. Each of his arms was covered in a sleeve of tattoos of various objects, including glasses, clothing, grenades, and a variety of tools.

"It's not like we weren't on camera all last night," agreed Alyssa, who wore jeans, a canvas jacket, and her scarf as well. As before, she gave off a golden aura here in the veil. "Seriously, though. I have no idea how they got so many pictures and videos of us so quick!"

Ramzi fumbled with his spore-resistant infinity scarf. He was alternating between tucking it into his motorcycle jacket and pulling it out to rest atop of it, closer to his face. After the third time he had pulled it out, he looked over to the people at the ledge and said, "Hey, shouldn't they be wearing something to protect themselves from the spores so they don't turn into something like the elves?"

The other three stopped to look at each other, furrowed their brows, turned to the people along the ledge, then back to Ramzi to say, "I hadn't thought of that," "You make an excellent point," and "This could be really bad."

“Hang on, I have an idea,” beamed Ren, then vanished. She returned a minute later with a handwritten note on a post-it. “I’ll just slip this note through the veil onto one of their camera monitors. When they see it, they’ll be able to take precautions.”

Bo glanced at the note, then laughed, “Did you really sign the note ‘The Bourbon Street Angel’?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to sign it ‘Ren Alonso’ was I?! Besides, that’s a name that’s been in the media that they’ll probably know and hopefully trust.”

“Okay, BSA,” teased Bo.

“I’ll BSA you upside the head,” grumbled Ren as she turned to walk toward the media crew. She saw three of them watching one of the monitors and having a conversation. She used the energy of her diamond ring to cut a small opening in the veil, then stuck the note through it, and sealed it up again.

Two of the crew members who were watching gasped and froze in place. The third crewman, who wore a nametag that read Shawna, said, “That—just—happened!”

A fourth crewman, who was standing nearby, turned and asked, “What?! What happened?!”

Shawna pointed to the note, which read:

The invaders are sick with an infectious fungus. They release spores that could infect anyone who comes into contact with them. You should be wearing hazmat suits.

Take care,
The Bourbon Street Angel

“Who put that there?” asked the fourth crewman.

“It literally just appeared out of thin air!” insisted Shawna.

The other two crewmen remained silent but nodded in agreement as their eyes remained locked onto the note.

“Oh, my gosh!” shouted the fourth crewman as he pulled up his shirt to cover his nose. “Screw this! I’m out of here!” he added as he ran for the exit door.

Word spread to all the others on the roof due to the commotion. It took less than three minutes for everyone to pack up their equipment and flee the rooftop.

As the last of the police and media ran through the exit, Bo turned to his sister and said, “Problem solved! Nice work, BSA!”

“Why, you little — Can we please just focus on the elves?!”

“Fine,” acquiesced Bo.

Ren slashed a part in the veil and led everyone through. On the other side, her armor no longer hid the motorcycle gear she was wearing. “Okay, I’ve got my *countenance like lightning* ability to mask my face. Alyssa has Bambi. Bo, everyone already knows what you look like, so that’s not a bell we can unring. Ramzi, last night you had your costume disguising your face. You’re not a public figure, yet. Do you want to maybe wear your motorcycle helmet?”

Ramzi shook his head and said, “No. I thought about it earlier, but it gets hot enough in that thing just when we go riding. Then I remembered something you told me about that time we went to that club in London.”

“Yeah? What’s that?” asked Ren.

“I began to transform into the pharaoh form we normally only see in my temple or in the veil.”

“Ooh! That’s right! Do you think you can do that now?”

“I actually practiced it a few times in the shower earlier today. I think I’ve got it,” he said, then closed his eyes in concentration. After a moment, his skin took on a golden

shimmer and the Eye of Horus symbol appeared over his left eye. Another moment went by and he grew a three-inch braided goatee with golden wrappings. Another moment passed and his ceremonial head dressing appeared. Yet another moment passed as he took on the aspect of Sobek, causing him to become a bit taller, thicker, and with a broader jaw.

“Is it me, or is that kind of sexy?” teased Ren.

Bo nodded in agreement and said, “Dude, I’m not even gay and I have to admit that’s pretty darn sexy.”

Despite Ramzi’s golden shimmer, he still managed to blush.

“Alright! Let’s get this party started! Capto Bambi!” incanted Alyssa, which caused a tattoo of a deer-antler Bowie Knife on her right forearm to vanish and a real version of it to appear in that hand. “Capto Thumper!” she incanted again, this time causing a tomahawk tattoo on her left forearm to vanish, and a real version of it to appear in that hand. “Armis incipere!” she incanted one last time as she held the knife above her head.

As she did, the antler handle became liquid and poured down Alyssa’s arm onto her shoulders. From there, it spread up to her head where it created a full-face helmet that looked like it was grown from antler rather than made. Spikes all the way around her head created a crown effect. The liquid antler continued down her body as well, creating a full set of articulated plate armor with small antler spikes at the joints and down her spine.

Ren purred, “Talk about sexy! That never gets old, does it?”

“No. It does not,” agreed Bo.

Down at ground level, Ren and the team attempted to evaluate the warding the elves had set up on Highway Seventy-Five to keep people out of Deep Ellum. The police and media presence that had been on the ground was now gone.

“I still say I like the ramp that comes down on the north side of Main. It has the least amount of redundant warding,” explained Ren. She had already activated her *countenance like lightning* ability by using the energy of her ethereal diamond ring to disguise her face and voice. Her skin crackled with bright white energy, making it impossible to see what she really looked like, and her voice sounded like thunder rolling in the distance.

“I don’t know as much as you do about warding, but the wards I’m seeing on that ramp are no joke,” countered Ramzi.

“Well, yeah, they’re more powerful, but there’s less to do if we go that way. Less chance we’ll be surprised. Believe me, I’m way better at warding now. I’ll be able to take down all that stuff quick and easy.”

“Everyone, listen! Do you smell something?” asked Bo.

Ren huffed, “Seriously?”

Alyssa laughed and said, “I love the Ghost Busters! All things considered; I think it’s pretty appropriate in our current situation.”

“Thank you,” beamed Bo, who continued, “But seriously. I smell vampires.” He turned back toward downtown, scanned the buildings for a few seconds, then waved toward the florist’s shop.

Ren wrinkled her nose and asked, “How can you smell anything over the scent of rotten fish?”

“You should know by now that I can smell everything.”

A group of eight heavily armed vampires crept out of

the shadows around the florist's shop and approached.

Ren recognized the leader, Shay, from not only the previous night when she had helped fight but from homecoming the previous year. Shay had been spying on Ren's family at dinner before the vampire gang had attacked them on the road on the way home. She had alabaster skin and black hair with a single lock of red at her temple.

"Shay," said Ren flatly.

"Ren," replied Shay, echoing Ren's tone.

"Thanks for coming back. We're about to bust down their warding and see about clearing them out of Deep Ellum. You game?" asked Bo.

"We're in. You just clear the way, Fenris. We're here for you," she assured him, then shot Ren the stink-eye.

Bo winced and said, "Please, just call me Shadow Dog. That's my codename for these sorts of operations."

"Whatever you say — Shadow Dog."

"Awesome. Everyone on my team has code names. Ren goes by Seraph. This guy is Pharaoh, and she's Freyja."

Shay raised a brow and said, "Freyja, you say. And you're sure you're not Fenris."

Bo grit his teeth and said, "Dang it, no! It's Shadow Dog. I'm not Fenris."

"That's not what I heard," said one of Shay's companions.

"Friggin'," Bo grumbled and started moving toward the ramp at Main. "Let's just get going already. Ren — I mean — Seraph. Get to work on that warding already."

Seraph had drawn five glyphs that hung in the air between herself and Pharaoh. "You'll need to take on the

aspect of Apophis for this,” she told him.

Pharaoh nodded and closed his eyes. After a moment the shadows of his face seemed to be a little deeper than they were before, his shadow on the ground a little darker than everyone else’s. “Ready,” he said.

“Here we go!” she shouted and slammed the first glyph into the middle of the ramp. It flashed a bright light. As soon as it waned, Pharaoh ran up the ramp to the first pillar and slammed a glyph into it. When the accompanying flash waned, he ran to the last pillar under that particular segment of the bridge and slammed a glyph into that one as well.

This time, when the flash waned, it was Seraph who ran past and slammed two more glyphs into two more pillars. “That’s it! Everybody in!” she shouted and ushered everyone up the ramp where they were finally able to leap off to the other side.

There were no guards or sentries in sight. The elves seem to have entrusted their security entirely to the warding.

Shadow Dog approached Shay and her gang as they huddled up to talk strategy. “Hey, my team is headed all the way over to Hall. That’s where they landed the big ships they’re using as their base. That’s our goal. If you want to take your team down to The Bomb Factory, that big club on Canton, that should be a good target for you. We need to draw as much attention away from their base as possible. If you clear out The Bomb Factory, and you haven’t heard back from us, move on to The Curtain Club. We saw a bunch of activity there as well.”

“Whatever you say. You’re the boss.”

Seraph guided the group to the north side of Deep Ellum where the warding created a border. They waited a

few minutes for the vampires to start fighting. When the shots began, elves shambled out of the buildings and slowly made their way south, toward The Bomb Factory.

“Is it just me, or are those elves looking a little more worse-for-wear than they were last night?” asked Freyja.

“No, I think you’re right,” agreed Shadow Dog.

They gave the elves a few more minutes to come out and shamble off before continuing toward their target. There were two big ships parked in lots to either side of Hall Street along Elm. The guards around these ships weren’t as deteriorated as the ones from farther west.

Shadow Dog turned to Freyja and asked, “How’s Thumper?”

She looked at the tomahawk in her hand and replied, “Not fully charged yet, but it should still be more than enough to wreck one of those ships to the point that it’s unusable.”

“Which leaves the other for us to deal with,” said Pharaoh as he looked to Seraph.

“I’ll tell you what. I still have a few eldritch grenades in my shapeshifter’s purse,” said Shadow Dog.

Shadow Dog teleported through the Shadow World toward the ship on the east side of Hall. Once he was able to get in, he recalled all of the eldritch grenades from the sleeves of tattoos, pulled the pins, and teleported out as quickly as he could.

Freyja hovered in the air high above the ship on the west side of Hall in the form of a hummingbird. When she saw explosions coming from the loading ramp of the ship on

the other side of the street, she dove toward the ship directly below herself. When she got within twenty feet, she transformed herself back into a human wearing her armor and bearing her Bowie Knife and tomahawk. She aimed herself, head first, toward the ship and smashed it with the wicked hammer backside of the tomahawk blade. The hammer blew a ten-foot-wide hole through the ship from the top all the way to the bottom.

Seraph and Pharaoh each conjured an ethereal bow and a flaming arrow when they saw explosions come from the ship on the east side of Hall. Elves from both sides of the road began to run to it. Then, moments later, Freyja blew a massive hole through the center of the ship to the west. That was their signal. They loosed their arrows at the ship Shadow Dog had softened up with his grenades. Explosions rocked the ship again and it collapsed into a stinking heap, crushing a great number of elves.

When Seraph and Pharaoh saw the number of elves who'd survived both ships exploding, they realized it would be easy enough to take them out now with a barrage of flaming arrows, which they did.

With their objective thoroughly achieved they headed back west to rendezvous with Shadow Dog and Freyja.

The team circled back around and headed south to try to meet up with Shay and her gang at The Bomb Factory. They thought the lack of gunfire meant they had either died, run out of ammo, or moved on to The Curtain Club.

When they arrived, they found Shay sitting out front

while her gang stood guard. It looked like all the contents of the club had been dumped into the street.

Shadow Dog approached her to ask, “What’s going on?”

Shay shook her head and said, “Psht. I don’t even want to speculate. That is the craziest, creepiest situation I’ve ever seen in my life — and I’m a *vampire!*”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not even going to try to describe it. This is something you’re going to have to see for yourself,” she insisted and pointed to the front door.

Shadow Dog furrowed his brow and turned to his team to beckon them with a gesture. He led them to the door where they were nearly knocked over by the smell. The stench of rotting seafood was stronger here than even at their ships.

They shared sour faces, then forced themselves to step inside. They had to wade through a massive pile of what appeared to be rotting leaves. It was the remnants of hundreds of suits of elven armor.

Beyond the entrance, they found the walls coated in a thick pinkish film. Within the main concert hall, they found about twenty rows of pews, similar in setup to how you might find them in a church. The pews also seemed to be covered in the thick pinkish film they had found on the walls. On the stage were an altar and a shrine surrounded by statues of elves in various stages of madness, with the ones nearest the altar literally in the process of ripping their own faces from their skulls.

As they approached the pews, Freyja screamed, then scrambled backward several steps.

Shadow Dog looked frantically in all directions trying to find the threat.

“What is it?!” demanded Seraph.

Freyja remained silent but pointed to the closest pew with the tip of her Bowie knife.

Shadow Dog stepped closer to it and noticed it wasn't actually a pew. At least, not a pew like he'd ever seen before. It was made of the bodies of dozens of naked elves who'd contorted and interlocked themselves to take the shape of a pew. Over their bodies grew more of the thick pinkish film to make the pews seem more like pews and less like piles of rotting elf bodies. He noticed he could still make out some faces through the film. Faces with wide-open eyes staring at him from within the pew.

The altar on the stage was of the same construction. Further, the statues surrounding it weren't actually statues. They were elves, frozen in place, covered in fungus, and in the case of the ones closest to the altar, frozen while in the middle of ripping off their own faces.

"We have to burn this place and everywhere else this is happening," concluded Shadow Dog.

"Agreed," echoed everyone else.

"First, phones out. Everyone, take pictures and video so the Agency can see what's happening in here," added Seraph.

Once the group had collected all the pictures and videos they thought they needed, Seraph and Pharaoh used their abilities in tandem to cleanse the fungus from the building. Seraph used a special warding spell to protect the structure of the building from harm while Pharaoh cast a spell to burn away all traces of the elves and their fungus.

Upon further consideration, they decided they needed to wipe out the rest of the elves in Deep Ellum and check all the other buildings to see if they'd constructed more fleshy-

fungus-temples. They'd found and destroyed six temples by the end of the night, and as far as they could tell, wiped out all the elves in Deep Ellum.

CHAPTER 5

SYMBOLS

Ren appeared with her team within the veil in the backyard of the Colleyville estate. Before crossing back into Reality, Ren and Ramzi did everything they could to make sure they weren't carrying any infection back with them.

Once everyone was thoroughly disinfected, inside and out, they headed into the house, each saying, "Rutabaga," as they entered.

While Ren, Ramzi, and Alyssa took showers, Bo consolidated the images they'd collected, uploaded them to a ScryShare, and sent a link to the files, along with a detailed account of their siege of Deep Ellum, to his contact at the Agency, Ms. Marta. As far as Bo could tell, Ms. Marta had been entirely useless up to this point, but hers was the only ScryMail address he had at the Agency.

As Ren and Ramzi each finished their showers, they immediately went to bed in their respective rooms. Alyssa, on the other hand, swapped places with Bo in the library. He went to shower and she began to scour news feeds for information.

When Bo returned from the shower, he found Alyssa

still looking between her laptop and ScryPod. She had a devious grin on her face that he wasn't entirely sure he approved of.

"Uh-oh. What's all that smiling about over there?"

She grinned even wider and said, "You are *not* going to like this. Not one bit."

"Oh, no. What is it?"

"Hashtag saved by Fenris!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"No!" he repeated, this time shaking his fists at the ceiling.

"It's all over Twitter, Facebook, Insta, Socialnomicon, YouTube. There's hundreds of testimonials from all over the world crediting you."

Bo gritted his teeth and seethed, "Those overly-grateful son's-of-really-lovely-mothers! How dare they give me full credit for saving their lives?!"

Alyssa looked confused and asked, "Was that supposed to be a complaint?"

"Yes!"

Bo heard his phone ding and immediately dreaded having to respond to it. He spent a long moment contemplating the idea of simply not responding. In the end, he knew that would be wrong. His parents loved him and were probably going crazy with worry.

He conjured his phone from his shapeshifter's purse again and checked his texts. Only thirty-eight from his father this time.

BO
Hey
Still alive
How are things

with you?

DAD

Glad to hear it

We're okay too

They haven't attacked the
island

BO

That's a relief

DAD

What's all this Fenris stuff
we're seeing all over the
news?

BO

Ugh!

Dad, can we not?

I've had a pretty rotten last
36 hours

SUE

What's going on?

Are you alright?

BO

I've just seen things
The elves are doing things
I don't even know if I can
really describe them in text
Someone has to do this
though
Someone has to stop them

This is literally the reason
I was born.

DAD
I'm so proud of you.

SUE
Me and Gabby too!

BO
I love you guys
I'll txt again when
I get a good opportunity

Bo sent his phone back into storage and returned to scouring the web for updates.

Mr. Hartwood sat at his desk reviewing the morning's reports. He'd seen the 'hashtag saved by Fenris' campaign and was more than pleased with the results.

There was a knock at the door and Mr. Hartwood called out, "Enter!"

Von Flue entered with a confident grin and said, "I really think you're going to like what we came up with. Here, take a look". He set his ScryPod on the desk, flicked it, swiped a few times, and when an illusion came up, he said, "You see, it has the classic feel of a traditional Norse rune to generate that sense of authenticity you wanted. It's also simple enough that a child could doodle it, and I think it has the same sort of vibe as that stylized letter S kids used to doodle on everything back in junior high."



Mr. Hartwood stared long and hard at the image, then finally admitted, “I like it. Come sundown, I want that tagged on every major monument around the world.”

“Yessir, Mr. Hartwood.”

“Now, where are we on those action figure prototypes?”

“I’m glad you asked,” said Von Flue as he swiped at his ScryPod a few more times to bring up illusions of a dozen prototypes. “These are the Fenris models we have as of this moment.”

Mr. Hartwood set the illusions to rotate, then flicked five of them out of the image muttering, “Garbage, garbage, garbage, garbage, garbage. The rest are passable. Have your team pick the three best and focus on making them better.”

“Yessir.”

“Oh, and Fenris is supposed to be a giant wolf. See if you can make a wolf action figure. Size it so that scales to about the height of a moose. Kids love wolves. They get really excited about them. That should give us an extra boost when they start shricing them.”

“I’m all over it, Mr. Hartwood. Oh! Here. Let me show you these as well.” He swiped until a new set of prototypes had replaced the original. “We confirmed the identities of the party he was fighting with in Dallas and thought it would be a good idea to go ahead and prototype them so we can put them out as a collectible set. “I’m sure you recognize the Bourbon Street Angel. As of last night, they were calling the

big guy ‘Pharaoh,’ which you might have guessed since he has the face of a pharaoh. This last one is Freyja and if you don’t mind me saying so, that badass armor of hers is going to sell a metric crap-ton of action figures. We’re calling them ‘Team Fenris’.”

Mr. Hartwood nodded and smiled, showing all his teeth, then gushed, “Very nice, Von Flue. If we don’t all die, you’re definitely getting a promotion!”

“Thank you, sir!” said Von Flue, then began to swipe again at his ScryPod. “I have a few more prototypes for you to review. This set may take a little longer to produce because of all the modeling involved. It’s the magical mecha team Agent Drake’s been working with. As you can see, there’s a lot of moving parts. All of the little golems have to be able to get in and out of the hatches.”

“Get back to me when you’re closer to a final product on that one. Anything else?”

Von Flue nodded and swiped to a final set of prototypes, “We’re still working out our marketing on this one. We’re thinking something like ‘Team Good Boy’ or ‘The Fae Hero Squad’ or something like that.”

“Come up with a few more options and run them past a test audience to see which one they gravitate to. The name has to have the right zip if it’s going to go viral.”

“Yessir. Anyway, first we have the Fae Hero, Boy. I wasn’t sure how big you wanted his mustache, so we prototyped him with three sizes of magnetic mustaches that you can swap out.”

Mr. Hartwood furrowed his brow and asked, “Is the size of the mustache really that important? I mean — he’s a poodle for crying out loud!”

Von Flue nodded and said, “It’s all about branding, sir. Moving on we have Nancy, his pixie sidekick. She’s got one model in tiny pixie clothes, and another in her wasp armor.

The wasp armor version is actually a tiny drone that can fly around the room.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“The last three are Jason, Althea, and this eagle scout guy. Jason has a detachable metal forearm. We’re going with real metal because we’re designing it with bang-cap inserts to fire it off.”

“You might want to check with legal on that one. If we end up surviving, we don’t want a liability nightmare hanging over our heads. What about Althea?”

“We’ve captured her classic goth look. Since she’s omni-magical, we’re planning a wide selection of hand-held accessories like fireballs, bolts of lightning, ectoplasm, that sort of stuff.”

“Fair enough. Circle back when you’re closer to completion on those last two sets of heroes and we’ll see about adding them to the zeitgeist in a more full-scale push.”

“Sounds good, sir,” said Von Flue as he gathered his things and made a hasty exit.

As soon as the door closed behind him, the surface of the water in his iScry vibrated and generated a chirping noise. Mr. Hartwood tapped a rune and said, “Yes?”

His secretary’s face appeared above the bowl and replied, “Ms. Marta is here from Field Operations.”

“Send her in.”

Ms. Marta entered the room wearing an overly formal business skirt ensemble. She was tall with a full afro and no indication that she’d ever smiled in her life.

“Mistah Hartwood,” she began with a thick Jamaican accent, “I received correspondence from Bo Alonso earlier dis mornin...”

Mr. Hartwood cut her off with, “Fenris. Not Bo Alonso. He’s officially Fenris now in all official communications and conversations, and if you want to keep your year-end bonus,

in your personal communications and conversations as well.”

Ms. Marta pressed her lips together, then continued, “Fenris sent correspondence dis morning. You’re gonna want to see dis,” she insisted as she pulled out her ScryPod and started pulling up image files. “Da report he sent with da files tells how he and his team cleared out da elf stronghold in Deep Ellum. He partnered up wit some vampires. Dey were supposed to clear out Da Bomb Factory to create a distraction so *Fenris* could take out de main base off Hall Street. Dese images show what dey found in de building after dey cleared out da elves.”

Mr. Hartwood zoomed in on some of the better still images to get a better look. Saying nothing he continued on to the video files. He watched all of them all the way through before telling Ms. Marta, “Send his report and all of the files directly to me.”

“Is dere any particular reply I should send to *Fenris*? Any assistance I should offer?” asked Ms. Marta.

“No. He’s already doing everything we need him to do. Just let him be.”

A copy of Bo appeared in front of the fireplace in the library in the estate in the Bahamas.

Bovis was at the desk reading through news feeds. Without looking up, he held out a hand toward the copy, who crossed the distance with his own hand outstretched. When he was within a few inches of touching, the copy fell toward Bovis like a strong magnet being pulled toward metal. As the two collided in the chair, the copy vanished. Bovis looked into the middle distance blankly for a few seconds, then returned to reading the news.

When he finished the article he was reading, he

formed a portal to the Shadow World beneath the desk and slipped down into it. A few moments later he returned with another copy.

The copy returned to the fireplace, dialed The Pocket, and vanished.

A few minutes later, Bovis saw a slice open up in the fabric of Reality in the center of the room.

Ren stepped through and said, "Hey, Bro-face."

"Hey, Sis."

"I just had a copy tell me the island got coated in a massive cloud of spores."

"Yeah. We've had everyone on the island staying within the walls of the courtyard since then so they wouldn't get infected. We're doing alright for now, but I was concerned about Gabby's sister. She's out there in the open."

Ren thought about it for a moment, then looked as if a lightbulb had come on in her head, "I've got an idea, but we're going to need some stones."

"People are constantly accusing me of having stones," Bovis teased.

"Not those stones, you doof. Rocks. Big rocks. Something big enough to draw warding glyphs on," she explained.

Bovis smiled and said, "That whole meadow is surrounded by big vertical stones."

"Are you familiar with Oldman's Unfriendly Glyph?" asked Ren as she stood across from Bovis in the meadow near where Gabby's sister was planted.

"One moment," Bovis said, then scanned his memories of all the magical tomes he'd read. He had never

been able to use magic, but he still liked to read the books. “Got it. They call it the ‘get off my lawn’ glyph.”

Ren smiled and said, “That’s the one! Do you think you can carve that into the outside of all the rocks around this meadow? Just carve them. I’ll magic them when you’re done.”

“Sure thing,” he acquiesced and got to work.

Bovis, being a copy of the original Bo, shared all of Bo’s supernatural traits. Bo was actually an artificially created being. One of the abilities they engineered into him was something called the Awakening. It was a very rare gift among humans. His great grandfathers had it on both his mother’s and father’s side of the family. A fate spell had been used to refine the gift down from those generations so that when Bo got it, it would be even more potent. With the Awakening came many default abilities: enhanced strength and reflexes, enhanced mental capacity, and the ability to consciously control many autonomic bodily functions. More powerful Awakened individuals could unlock what they called advanced techniques. These techniques allowed an Awakened individual to perform feats far beyond what might otherwise be humanly possible. One of Bo’s advanced techniques was one that he named *hard body*. It literally made his body as hard as stone. Not quite as hard as metal.

Being a lycanthrope, a werewolf, gave him additional abilities, one of which was the ability to shapeshift. Because of his special breed line, he was able to transform into a Dachshund. Also because of his special breed line, his wolf form was abnormal. While his head and neck looked fairly standard, once he got to his shoulders, his body began to taper down to comically undersized legs and paws. Sort of a cross between a wolf and a Dachshund. He often avoided using this form because of the relentless teasing, especially from other werewolves. His final transformation was what

they called his transcended form. It was a monstrous combination of wolf and man in which he would grow eighteen inches in height, and his chest would roughly double in width. He'd gain about a hundred and fifty pounds of muscle with long powerful arms punctuated by sharp claws. His legs looked more like those of a wolf than of a man, but he would remain bipedal.

It would be this form he would take, in combination with his *hard body* technique, in order to carve the requested glyphs onto the outside of the standing stones around the meadow.

At one point he saw his sister carving a different glyph onto the meadow-side of one of the stones. He recognized it as Helena's Glyph of Purity. She was using her flaming angelic sword to do the carving. The sword moved effortlessly through the stone as she drew.

Bovis spoke in Vulgar Tongue, the demonic dialect of all lycanthropes, and said, "Hey, you're cheating!" He spoke Vulgar out of necessity since his mouth in transcended form could speak no other language.

"I'm cheating?!" she huffed. "That's rich, furball!"

"When did you learn to speak Vulgar?"

"It was when I had to rebuild the trap for Elvis. I had to go through the translation tables so many times, I just learned it."

"I guess that'll do it."

Once they had all the glyphs in place, Ren stood over Gabby's sister and unleashed the power of the ethereal diamond ring on her right hand. Bright white energy streamed out in every direction to fill in each of the glyphs Bovis had carved.

When the glyphs were fully quickened, she activated the power of the ethereal ruby ring on her left hand and poured it out across the whole of the meadow to sense for the corruption of the spores. She found it in patches here and there, but luckily it hadn't penetrated down far enough to affect Gabby's sister.

Ren took a long time to carefully isolate the spore and magically identify it. Then she activated the power of her flaming sword to add to the healing power of the ruby ring and the purifying power of her diamond ring. She swirled the three energies into a plenum around her body, then allowed them to ripple out like a tidal wave until they hit the stones at the edge of the meadow and quickened the glyphs she'd carved into them.

When it was done, she tested the meadow again with her ruby ring. It was clean.

"And we're done!" cheered Ren.

"Noice!" added Bovis, now back in his human form.

"Now the spores can't land here and nothing infected by the spores can enter."

CHAPTER 6

MARKETING

Ren arrived back at the Colleyville estate right as the sun was setting. She found Alyssa laughing and Bo furiously ranting in the library.

“What’s all this about?” she asked.

Alyssa spun her laptop to face Ren and said, “Fenris has a symbol now!”

“I don’t have anything to do with that!” insisted Bo, who continued, “Besides, that’s vandalism, and I’m not down with that!”

Ren stepped closer and saw a cluster of images of landmarks from all over the world, each with the same spray-painted symbol. The symbol looked sort of like a number eight made of parallelograms with some extra bits at the top and bottom. The caption read, “Fenris Symbol Found on Monuments Around the World.”

“Wow, Bo. That’s a pretty sweet symbol. Who’s your marketing team?” teased Ren.

“I do *not* have a marketing team and that’s *not* my symbol!”

“That’s not what I heard,” teased Ramzi as he came into the room.

Bo grit his teeth and asked, “Can we please just focus on what we’re going to do tonight?”

“What are we doing tonight?” asked Alyssa.

Ren shrugged and suggested, “I guess we’re doing more of what we did last night. The elves aren’t expanding anymore. They’re just digging in.”

“All in favor?” asked Alyssa with a raised hand.

“Aye,” everyone said in unison.

“Okay. Where are we going this time?” asked Ramzi.

“Since most of downtown Dallas is free at this point, why don’t we work on Fort Worth? I think that with the county seats liberated, the people in charge will have an easier time restoring order,” explained Bo.

“Any objections?” asked Alyssa. When she heard none, she concluded, “Fort Worth it is.”

Ren transported the team into the veil atop the Sheraton Hotel across from the Water Gardens in downtown Fort Worth. The plan was to start there and work their way to the courthouses on the north end.

As soon as Ren let the team through the veil, back to Reality, Alyssa made a sour face and exclaimed, “Ew, gross!” as she looked down at the Water Gardens.

Three oddly shaped domes of the same construction as the pews and altars from The Bomb Factory encased the three pool areas of the Water Gardens.

Bo walked to the edge of the building to stand next to his girlfriend and look down on the domes. He could see that the faces of some of the elves remained exposed around the doorways. These faces weren’t frozen like the statues in the temples they had found in Dallas. He could see their mouths

moving. He could hear them speaking. The language they used was like nothing he'd ever heard before.

The demonic voice in the back of Bo's head, The King in Yellow he called himself (though Bo and the others called him Elvis for short), snapped to full attention. He raged and cursed at Bo to, "Destroy them! Destroy them now! What are you waiting for, you worm?! You worthless scum! Destroy them!"

Bo could feel him attempting to take the reigns of control. Bo had enough willpower to keep him in check under most circumstances. This time, there was a struggle.

Ren could see something was wrong with Bo.

He bared his teeth, which began to elongate into vicious points.

She activated her spirit sight and immediately saw a struggle within his aura. Elvis was trying to take control again, like the time she'd found him in the communications building across from the abandoned Transit Queen station in Fort Sumner.

She was about to use her diamond ring to help Bo repress Elvis when he got the upper hand and banished himself.

Bo's teeth returned to their normal size and he relaxed again.

"Bo, are you okay?" asked Ren.

Bo nodded and replied in slow, measured tones, "Yeah. It's the elves from the building. They're singing some sort of unholy hymns in Elvis' native language."

"Alyssa! Get away from the edge!" shouted Ren and yanked her back. She grabbed Ramzi as well, then said, "Bo, get over here. We have to do something before we get

any closer so you guys don't go mad from hearing that. Just give me a minute here." She turned away and began to fidget and mumble to herself. After a moment she exclaimed, "Ooh!" but immediately shook her head and said, "No. That's not it." After a few more false starts, she finally said, "Okay, I think I've got it."

"Are you sure?" asked Ramzi.

"Yeah, yeah," she assured him as she stepped closer to her little brother and said, "Hold still." She carefully traced a glyph onto his left ear, examined it briefly, then made one more stroke and said, "Alright. Let me see the other."

Bo gave her a dubious look, then turned.

She gave his right the same treatment as his left. When she had finished, she patted him on the head and said, "All done. Next!"

Alyssa stepped up as Bo walked back to the ledge.

Ren was working on her ears when Bo shouted back, "The hymns sound like they're in Vulgar now!"

Ren smiled and shouted back, "That's because I used the same translation matrix from the Elvis trap. Now, any time you hear that language, it will automatically translate. It only causes madness if you hear the language in its raw form."

When she was done with Alyssa, she moved onto Ramzi.

Down at ground level, Seraph scanned the block for warding but found none. She had already activated her countenance like lightning ability to avoid any cameras that might be watching.

"I don't see any warding," said Pharaoh.

"Me either," admitted Seraph, then added, "I think the

reason there's no warding is because they want people to come here to hear the unholy hymns." She listened for a moment, for the first time paying attention to what was actually being said. It was some sort of rambling tale of the feats and greatness of some mysterious entity who was to come. There were references to the place of his origin. Some place called Carcosa. "Oh, crap! They wanted people to hear it!" she shouted and ran for the nearest doorway.

As she approached, she drew her flaming sword and dragged it through all the faces that formed the arch to silence them. This particular section of the Water Gardens was designed as a series of stone tiers, over which water would cascade until it finally reached the bottom. There was a dry stone path that led down through the spilling water so that visitors could surround themselves in waterfalls to relax and take photos. Now that this once tranquil place had been converted into a temple for this unknown entity, she saw nothing but horrors within.

Nearly three dozen humans stood along the stone path now chanting the unholy hymn. Their hands were bloody and their eyes appeared to have been ripped from their skulls. Black swirling voids now took the place of eyes as they all turned in unison to face Seraph. They raised their hands to her as if beckoning her to join them.

Seraph staggered backward, unsure what to do.

"What is it?!" Shadow Dog demanded and stepped past her to see for himself. When he saw, he stepped back as well and began again to struggle with Elvis.

Freyja looked confused and asked, "Are they still human? What do we do? Do we — attack?"

"Not yet," said Shadow Dog, now back in control. "We need to find out if they can be cured."

"Where can we take them to test them?" asked Pharaoh.

Shadow Dog looked northwest and said, "I know a guy."

"Mr. Kwok!" shouted Bo as he and the others stood in the alleyway looking up at the window above Mr. Kwok's shop. "I hope he was able to make it back okay. He was at that wedding I was telling you about Halloween night in Louisiana. The wedding got attacked right as they finished their vows. It was crazy."

"Man! And I really wanted to plunder that reception. Do you think these elves even know how inconsiderate they are?" asked Alyssa.

The window above the shop squeaked open and an elderly Asian man stuck his head out to say, "We gotta stop meeting like this!"

"I know, right?!" replied Bo. "Hey, can we come in?"

"Yeah. Gimme a minute," said Mr. Kwok, and pulled the window shut.

Bo turned to the others and said, "This place is warded out the wazoo, so I figured it was probably safe, which meant he might actually be here despite the invasion."

"What is this place," asked Ren as she dropped her *countenance like lightning* ability. "It looks like an Asian supermarket.

"That's the facade. This guy is my magic hookup," explained Bo.

"Ooh! I've been dying to meet this guy!" beamed Ren.

"Well, here's your opportunity," said Bo and pointed to the door as Mr. Kwok unlocked it.

"Finis armis," incanted Alyssa, causing her armor to turn liquid and pour back into the Bowie knife in her right hand. "Onero Bambi, onero Thumper," she incanted again to

send her weapons back into her shapeshifter's purses. They vanished from her hands and appeared as tattoos on her forearms.

Mr. Kwok smiled broadly when he saw Alyssa store her weapons and said, "I see you've been making use of the weapons I sold you."

She reflected his smile and replied, "For sure. You've got the best stuff. I'll definitely be doing a fair amount of Christmas shopping here from now on."

"Hopefully, this will all be done so I can get back to business by then."

"I'm sure it will," she assured him.

Bo gestured toward the others and said, "This is my sister, Ren, and the pharaoh looking guy is her boyfriend, Ramzi."

"Oh! I'm sorry," said Ramzi as he dropped his pharaoh's face illusion and continued, "Yeah, I'm Ramzi."

"Very nice to meet you all," said Mr. Kwok as he looked up and down the alley. "Why don't we take this inside?"

Once everyone was in, he locked the door again and led them to the back of his store. The front half looked like an aging market that could use a little TLC from the maintenance staff. At the back was a curtain, the other side of which was an entirely different story. Beyond the curtain were bright white lights and rows of immaculate shelves containing all sorts of herbs and other magical components.

"I have a box of eldritch grenades behind the counter for Bosefus. He ordered them a few days ago, but he's probably been a little too busy to come pick them up. Oh, I saw your symbol on the dome over the courthouse. Very nice work."

Bo gnashed his teeth and growled, "It's not my symbol!"

Mr. Kwok shrugged and said, “Your marketing team sure seems to think so.”

“I don’t have a marketing team!”

“Sure, you do. Who do you think’s been tagging your symbol—sorry—*that* symbol on everything?”

Bo paused, narrowed his eyes, and asked, “Is the Agency doing this?”

Mr. Kwok laughed and said, “Of course they are! Who else has the resources to tag your symbol all over the world like that?”

“Later, Bo,” said Alyssa in a soothing tone. “Deal with it later. Right now, we need to deal with — whatever that is at the Water Gardens.”

“What’s at the Water Gardens,” asked Mr. Kwok.

Ren pointed vaguely in the direction of the Garden and said, “The elves set up temples there. They used a sort of unholy siren song to lure in humans. There’s dozens of them down there now, probably infected with the fungus, definitely affected mentally and magically. They ripped out their own eyes. Somehow they’re able to see with these swirling black voids that sit in the empty sockets.”

“That sounds serious. What do you plan to do about it?” asked Mr. Kwok.

“You helped me before when I captured one of the elves. We were hoping to capture one of the humans. We need to determine if he can be cured. The last thing I want to do is kill a human if it can be avoided,” said Bo.

Mr. Kwok nodded thoughtfully, then asked, “Whatever happened to that interrogation chair I conjured to the old Transit Queen station in Fort Sumner?”

“That place burnt down. It was still smoldering when I went there to get Bo after his incident,” explained Ren.

“That’s good. The fire would have disinfected it. I should be able to conjure it again wherever you intend to

take your subject.”

“I guess that’s the question now. Where can we take a subject?” asked Bo.

“How about that roof at the Sheraton? I noticed the elves aren’t really interested in roofs. They like to be low,” noted Alyssa.

“I can transport us back there through the veil,” suggested Ren.

“We’ll probably have to step outside of my wards first. Bo, before we go, did you want to take those grenades?”

“I think I have room for about six in my purse. It’s ten to a box, right? Alyssa, you want to carry four?” asked Bo.

She smiled showing all her teeth and bounced while squeaking, “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!”

Mr. Kwok showed them to the box, then led everyone back to the front door.

“Alright, codenames and game faces,” said Ren as she reactivated her *countenance like lightning*.

“Mr. Kwok, do you have a codename?” asked Alyssa.

Mr. Kwok laughed and said, “No, ma’am. I’m far too old for such games. Just call me Mr. Kwok.”

“Roger that, Mr. Kwok,” she acquiesced and began to conjure her weapons.

“Oh, before we go, I’ll need to ward your hearing, Mr. Kwok.”

Seraph conjured her team plus Mr. Kwok to the roof of the Sheraton once again, then slashed an opening in the veil to let them back into Reality.

Shadow Dog started toward the ledge and said, “I’ll grab us a subject.”

“Hang on there! How about you sit this one out?”

You've been having a bad reaction to those guys," suggested Seraph. Her words seemed to hold more weight due to her *countenance like lightning*.

Shadow Dog looked at his feet for a moment, then nodded and said, "You're right. It's probably better for someone else to go in."

Seraph motioned toward the ledge and said, "Why don't you and Freyja get some more pictures and videos while Mr. Kwok sets up his chair?"

He nodded again and recalled his phone from his shapeshifter's purse, "Capto phone."

"Capto phone," echoed Alyssa, and conjured her phone as well.

Seraph motioned for Pharaoh to follow and dove off the ledge toward the Water Gardens.

Mr. Kwok moved to the center of the roof, marked an X with his toe, then backed away and flipped a quarter at it. When the quarter landed, it vanished and was immediately replaced by a large metal chair. It was similar to a dentist's chair but had leather straps laying open down the arms and legs. There were also straps for the chest and neck. Next to the head on both sides were sconces of a sort that held large conch shells.

A few seconds later, Seraph and Pharaoh dropped down from above and stuffed a woman, who might have in other circumstances been regarded as a soccer mom, into the chair. The straps immediately latched themselves around her arms, legs, torso, and neck. Her hands and face were still stained with the blood of ripping out her own eyes.

When Shadow Dog saw her, he bared his teeth for a moment, then seemed to put himself back in check.

The woman immediately began to speak, but her words turned into black vapor and were sucked into the conch shells to either side of her head. Thin wisps of black

vapor also streamed from her eyes into the shells.

Shadow Dog and Alyssa moved closer and focused their cameras on the woman in the chair.

Mr. Kwok saw Shadow Dog's ScryPod in his shapeshifter's purse in the form of a tattoo on his left arm and said, "Your ScryPod has a camera feature. You can set spiritual filters on it so you'll be able to get more useful information."

He stopped recording on his phone and trade it out for his ScryPod, "Onero phone. Capto ScryPod." He activated his device, found the camera option, and did a quick scan of the settings dialogue to determine which filters he wanted to use. In the end, he decided to simply turn on everything.

"Have a look," said Shadow Dog as he leaned toward Mr. Kwok to show him the display of the woman in the chair through his device. The display superimposed labels onto everything in the image. The make and model of the chair were indicated in the bottom corner. The woman herself was labeled, "Cursed Woman." Next to the streams of mist being sucked into the conch shells, the label read, "Curses." The swirling voids in her eyes were labeled, "Extra-Planar Perception + Extra-Planar Persuasion + ?????"

Seraph stepped forward and activated both her ethereal ruby and diamond rings. She poured the energy into the woman in the chair and probed around.

In the display, Seraph's label read "Human + Angel" and her armor was fully visible. The various parts of her armor bore labels as well, such as "Super Strength" and "Flight." The only thing the filter couldn't identify was the golden laurel. The attached visor was labeled "Sprit Sight + Remote View + Alternate View" but the laurel was labeled "????".

The energy from Seraph's diamond ring poured into the cursed woman's eye sockets and washed away the

swirling black voids. From there the energy was directed into the woman's mouth and all over her exterior. Once she was entirely enveloped in the energy, it flashed and winked out, leaving only the red healing energy from Seraph's ruby ring.

She sent it all over the woman in the same fashion as she had the energy of her diamond ring. "It's being stubborn," she said, then fed in some of the energy from the flaming sword at her hip. The woman was engulfed in a flash of ethereal fire, causing her to scream and thrash.

Seraph extinguished the fire and withdrew its energy from the mix, then doubled up on the healing energy. "I did this once before when I went to visit Israel. Let's see if we can get her eyes back," she continued.

The energy surrounded the woman's eyes but didn't flood them. Seraph fed it into the sockets in measured streams. The eye sockets began to ooze with blood. After a few seconds, new tissue began to form. A few seconds later and Seraph was wiping clear the woman's new eyes.

"I can feel her starting to regain consciousness," said Seraph, who again poured more of the energy of her ruby ring into the woman. "I'll see if I can calm her with my empathy effect. We don't want her flipping out."

After another moment the woman's eyes fluttered open. Though the swirling voids were gone, her eyes were still filled with madness and she began to babble incomprehensible words.

Seraph tried again with the healing energy of her ring, probing her mind, trying to set things right, but it was to no avail. She shook her head and said, "It's like when Shadow Dog was broken in his mind. There's just no way to put the pieces back together. Physically, she's fine. She's just—broken."

A wave of disappointment and despair washed over the group at the news.

“What are we going to do with her?” asked Pharaoh.

“We obviously can’t just kill her,” said Freyja.

“We have to turn her over to the Agency. They’re the only ones with the resources to deal with her and all the others like her,” said Mr. Kwok.

Shadow Dog held his ScryPod toward Mr. Kwok and asked, “Would you enter your ScryAddress for me? I want to send you these files so you can forward them to your contact at the Agency. My contact never takes my calls or replies to anything I send her. It’s really annoying. Maybe your contact will be able to do something with them.”

“Sure,” said Mr. Kwok and entered his address into the device.

“We wanted to clear out as much of downtown as we could tonight, but if we have to deal with all of these people, we’re not going to get much else done. There were dozens of them in that first dome and there are two more domes down there,” insisted Shadow Dog.

“I’ll get ahold of my guy at the Agency. We’ll see if we can get him to send down a team to deal with the humans down there. If they take the proper precautions, they shouldn’t be too much trouble, and with the video you took, they should be able to duplicate your results. Why don’t you go ahead and start at the courthouse on the north end? That should keep the Elves away from here so the agents have an easier time.”

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