

Book V
Visits From Old Friends

Chapter I

Another Day's Work

She couldn't get away.

She had been running for...how long? She didn't know. It felt like hours.

Rounding a corner of the alley, she flung herself against the wall and listened. The only sound was a steady dripping of water somewhere nearby, runoff from the rain earlier that day. Dark clouds still hung in the heavens, veiling the stars and the two moons. The night was pitch black here in the twisting alleys of Ylelon's downtown, away from the crowds and the streetlights.

Streetlights, she thought. What she wouldn't give for some of those about now. She had left her apartment just after sundown to hit the club scene. All she had wanted was to get a bite to eat, maybe meet someone interesting. Instead, she had been snubbed at a local singles bar and left by herself. She had walked, sulking, down the crowded sidewalks for quite a while before she noticed someone following her.

She hadn't known what to do in a situation like this. She thought at first that she was just being paranoid, but as she weaved through the crowd, crossed streets and even doubled back once, her pursuer kept up with her, never getting too close and never dropping out of sight.

She thought now that she should have tried to get help, found a police officer, even stood in the street and screamed, "Rape!" Anything would have been better than winding up here. She had decided to take a shortcut through the alleys back to her apartment. If some wacko were following her around she'd just lose him in shortcuts that she knew and which he probably didn't.

Ducking into the alley entrance amidst a fairly large crowd, she hoped that she'd lose her pursuer by merging with the crowd and disappearing. She trotted through the side streets and alleys, never far from the main crowd. She'd begun to feel so confident that she'd even started whistling to herself. That was when she heard the footsteps behind her in the alley. She didn't turn around to look, but ran in almost blind panic away from the sound of pursuit. She twisted and turned through more and more remote and unsafe pathways in a desperate attempt to escape, but he was always behind her, keeping pace. She lost him once with a series of quick turns, but when she raced away again down a long alleyway back toward the open air and bustling crowds, he found her again. Racing footfalls followed close behind her and she knew she couldn't reach the safety of the crowds before he caught her. How could he be so *fast*?

In a last, desperate effort, she had run around a corner and hidden among some ancient trash cans. Her pursuer hurried past her in the dark, running on towards the open streets. She stayed hidden for what seemed like half the night, cringing among the pungent debris and the skittering rats. When she felt she could wait no longer, she stood carefully and looked around. There was no sign of him. Cautiously, she made her way out of the refuse and began a slow walk through the alley, back toward her safe, warm apartment. She decided that if she made it home she was going to close every lock and take a long bath to get the stench of this place out of her hair. Keeping quiet as she walked, hoping to avoid a repeat of her earlier mistake, she turned a corner and found herself almost within touching distance of her pursuer.

"Did you miss me?" he said as he stood cross-armed in the middle of the connecting alley. She turned on her heels and fled, running as fast as she could through the twisting alleys until even she was disoriented. She had been born and raised in this city and spent many years learning the convoluted street layout of the place, but now she was hopelessly lost. Even she didn't know which way the main streets were anymore and she was too afraid to think clearly.

So now here she was, leaning against a wall in an inky black alleyway with the moisture from the wall soaking the back of her shirt and an indescribable stink clinging to her hair. He found her no matter what she did and she couldn't find her way back to help now. She was going to have to confront him if she couldn't outrun him. She looked around and saw an old, rusty length of pipe lying on the alley floor, which she picked up and held against her leg as she leaned to look around the building's corner.

He wasn't behind her, and she couldn't see any sign of him. Maybe she'd lost him after all. If she could make her way back, she might be able to find some familiar ground and get back onto the street. Step by step she made her way back along the brick wall, still listening for any hint of whomever it was chasing her. There was no sound but the dripping of dampness from the rain, so she began to jog slowly,

hoping the water would cover the sound of her footsteps.

The place was a maze, and she eventually gave up hope of retracing her steps. She settled for taking random turns in the hope of finding something familiar. Finally she found it, as a narrow path opening into a much broader and brighter alley which she knew led directly back to the club district. She almost shouted with relief before she caught herself, and leaned into the alleyway to make sure it was safe.

She looked left and right. Both ways were clear and then she felt something land on the aged pavement just behind her. With a shriek she jumped forward and spun around to face her pursuer, brandishing her makeshift weapon as she backed away.

“What the hell do you want?” she demanded. Her voice was coarse with fear.

“Stupid question,” he said and flashed a winsome grin at her. Desperately she looked down the alley to gauge how far away the crowds were and saw him come at her out of the corner of her eye. She raised her pipe and brought it down as hard as she could, determined to show this interloper exactly what he was toying with.

He raised his forearm faster than she could follow as he ran at her. The pipe actually bent and wrapped around his wrist. She gasped in surprise just before he seized her throat with his cool, damp hands and lifted her clear of the alley floor.

“Who are you?” she struggled to say, but only chokes and gurgles came out.

“Again, stupid question,” he said. He sounded bored.

“*Just finish her off, Nails,*” a strangely mechanical voice said from somewhere nearby.

Does he have a cell phone on him? she wondered, then he swung her overhead and cracked her body against the nearby brick wall. She felt numerous bones break, then he let her fall to the alley floor. The world became a red haze she squinted through to see him towering over her, raising one foot.

“This is for your victims,” he growled as his foot came down on her head, ending her pain.

“That was entertaining,” Nails grumbled.

“*Dude, that took forever,*” a petulant baritone said over the miniature camera Nails had clipped to the right shoulder of his shirt.

“She was playing hard to get,” Nails quipped. “Am I hearing a note of jealousy, Marc? Did you want in on the action?”

A muted grunt came through the camera feed. “*Man, we just stood around for forty minutes while you played your little games. You shoulda just done her and moved on.*”

“What can I say? I had a heck of a time tracking her in this maze. Will? Can you hear me?”

“*I read you,*” said a tenor voice, restrained as though being kept low in a crowd.

“How are things there?”

“*That was the last contact we’ve had. I haven’t seen any more of them come or go. Jake?*”

“*Nothing here either,*” answered another tenor. “*Nails got to have all the fun tonight.*”

“You know me. I lead a charmed life,” Nails chuckled as he gripped the rusted pipe wrapped around his left wrist and twisted it off.

“*George? Any thoughts?*” Will asked through the network.

“*It’s late enough already. You boys can all head home,*” said a baritone voice that hinted at age and worldly wisdom.

“*All right! Beer time!*” Marc said triumphantly. “*Where do we meet?*”

“*Meet me here, in the Whistle’s parking lot,*” Will instructed.

“All right, just be patient with me,” Nails said, half-jokingly. “I still have to find my way back.”

A few minutes later Nails was walking briskly down the sidewalk, whistling to himself. To his distaste he wore plain black athletic shoes along with his simple black sweater and jeans. He hated footwear of any sort--they felt to him like straightjackets for his feet. He was too conspicuous as it was, though, being six-foot-three, built like a marble statue and wearing sunglasses at night. Walking through the city barefoot would only have drawn quite a bit more attention.

To get a better idea of how the team worked, Nails had agreed to come with Jake, Will, and Marc into the city this evening for a routine stakeout. It was a chance for him to see how they coordinated while in the “field.” It wasn’t long before he had made his way back to the front entrance of the Wet Whistle, the singles bar where Will had stationed himself tonight. Nails worked his way around the side of the building to the small parking lot, where he saw the trench-coat clad and blond figure of Will sitting in his sporty black car. Nails slipped up against the building in the shadows and waited for the others.

Marc was the first to return, Jake right behind, trotting into the parking lot and up to Will’s car. He was nearly invisible in his black outfit and bushy beard. He was carrying a black backpack that bulged and looked very heavy. Nails knew what that meant and thought with a smirk about all the things the team’s engineer, weapons expert and demolitions enthusiast was likely to be carrying. When it came to fighting monsters, Jake lived by the motto “There is no such thing as overkill.”

Still smirking, Nails emerged from the shadows and walked to join the others at Will’s car. “How are we doing?” he asked cordially.

“I think we’re in good shape,” Will replied as Nails climbed into the back seat with Marc. “Just the one contact tonight, and nothing else unusual.”

“That’s good. What happens when we finally drive all the monsters out of Ylelon?” asked Nails.

“Then the booze will flow like rivers!” Marc said triumphantly.

“It will never happen, Nails. The teeming forces of evil in the city continually replenish themselves, despite our best efforts,” George said through Nails’ camera.

“Yeah, yeah,” grumbled Marc.

“I’d think you’d be glad to hear that, guy,” Nails said to Marc and gave him a friendly punch in the shoulder. “Don’t you like the fighting part of this job?”

“Yeah, but it would be nice to get rid of all the freaks for a change. This country could sure do without all the unnatural stuff. No offense.”

“None taken. Are we headed home now?”

“That’s the plan,” Will answered.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I’m going to get some rest,” Jake said. “I’m working on another new project, and I want to get an early start on it tomorrow.”

“What, like the duck? Are you trying to drive George completely crazy?” Nails chuckled.

“Yeah, like I need to work at that,” snickered Jake. He switched on the radio and found some light alternative rock. The team listened to the lively rhythms as they sped down the lonely highway toward the unmarked dirt road that led to the Mansion.

George was waiting for them on the front steps. Tonight his clashing outfit of choice was a tropical print shirt, lime green slacks and blue leather sandals. Sullivan was with him, patient and silent as always.

Will swung around the circular drive and parked directly in front of the marble front steps. The four team members climbed out of the car, yawned and stretched.

“Well, that was another mostly uneventful evening,” Jake yawned.

“Be not afraid of moving slowly, Jake,” George recited. “The effort isn’t wasted, as long as you accomplished something.”

“You and your stolen quotes, George. Outta the way, so we can get some rest,” muttered Marc.

“Certainly. You four can put your reports together tomorrow,” George said generously. Marc, Will and Jake moaned.

“Oh good, paperwork,” Jake said derisively. “I miss the days when this job was just mortal danger and survival horror in an urban setting.”

“That’s a shame, Jake,” George retorted as he held the door open for the others. “With the down side of the job come the perks. For example, I have a couple of surprises for you all tomorrow.”

“Ok, George has surprises for us. I’m feeling the survival horror again,” quipped Will.

“Et tu, Will? The barbs come from all sides.”

“You should be used to it by now,” Marc snickered, and Will and Jake joined him.

"I don't know why I put up with such abuse," murmured George.

"Perhaps you're a glutton for punishment," suggested Nails.

"It would explain the fashion sense," Sullivan observed.

"And the décor," Nails added with a glance around the massive Foyer. The floor and walls were pockmarked and scarred by bullet holes and what looked like craters from small explosions. The front entryway was designed to fit a large set of double doors, but one of the doors was missing, leaving the Foyer open to the outside. All Nails knew was that a vampire called the Crown of Thorns had broken into the Mansion and the damage had been caused in the resulting battle. Nails didn't know why it would be necessary to do so much damage just to get rid of a single vampire.

"Yes, well, that should be taken care of in short order. I finally heard from my contractors earlier today. They should be calling sometime in the next week to arrange repair." George sounded very satisfied.

"I was beginning to wonder how long you were going to leave the front door hanging open," Will said softly. It was impossible to tell if he was being sarcastic or flippant.

"I keep a high standard of living conditions and surroundings, which requires a bit of patience," George retorted. "In this case, it just became necessary to apply a little pressure to convince the contractor to expedite his efforts."

"Anyone else no longer interested? Let's get something to drink," Nails said with a wide grin. The four monster hunters walked down the bottom floor east wing to the Mansion's ridiculously well appointed Kitchen talking and laughing.

"I am shirked again," George said woefully.

"Yet, you forebear," offered Sullivan.

"I suppose I do. I think I'll retire, Sullivan. Is there anything else worthy of note this evening?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Then, I shall see you in the morning," George said as he took off his glasses and rubbed his nose. "Hopefully, our charges will appreciate our collective efforts in orchestrating the trip."

"We can only hope."

The early fall sunlight of the next morning crept through the open front door, slowly brightening the colossal Foyer in the front and center of the house. Sullivan stood guard in the center of the Foyer, as she had since the door had been removed. She did so at George's request, recording everything that happened while the inhabitants of the Mansion slumbered.

As she stood, perfectly still and tireless, she noted the sound of footsteps behind her. Presently she was joined by Cynthia, who was wearing a brand new deep blue Lycra jogging suit that accentuated her hair very nicely.

"Good morning, Sullivan! Isn't it a lovely day?" she asked perkily.

"You're in a good mood," observed Sullivan.

Cynthia blushed slightly. "I'm waiting for Will so we can go jogging. He went walking with me the other night and yesterday."

"So I saw. I was wondering if your change to tights had anything to do with it." At that moment, unknown to Cynthia, Sullivan received a signal from the intercom at the front gate. She had a number of built-in features that tied her closely to the Mansion, such as being able to answer the phone internally and having control over certain doors and locks. She now used this ability to unlock the front gate and allow the Mansion's visitor to enter the grounds without making a sound herself.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cynthia was saying. "This looks good on me."

"If you say so."

"What kind of tacky tramp do you take me for?" Cynthia scoffed.

"I'm only teasing, dear. Speaking of which, here's our boy now."

Will was descending one of the Foyer's two great curving staircases. He was dressed in black jogging clothes and had a sleepy look in his eyes.

"Good morning," he drawled as he rubbed his eyes and yawned.

“Good morning, Will,” replied Sullivan.

“Morning,” Cynthia said brightly.

“Ready to go, Cynthia?” Will asked as he jogged down the last few steps.

“Actually, you may want to skip your workout,” Sullivan said. “George has a surprise coming.”

“Yeah, you warned us about that last night,” muttered Will.

“I think you’ll be pleased with this. I suggested it myself,” Sullivan said. A car could now be heard pulling up by the front steps and parking.

“What the heck?” exclaimed Will. Normally, no one ever came to the Mansion unbidden by George. Someone turning up unexpected usually meant trouble, which Will’s line of work had made him almost habitually ready for.

“It’s all right, Will,” Sullivan promised “This is the first part of the surprise. Allow me to present Adam Walker,” she finished with a flourish. Will’s eyebrows raised and Cynthia’s jaw hung slack as one of Ylelon’s living legends of rock and roll trotted up the front steps and through the open door.

“Mind if I come in? The door’s open,” he joked. He was as tall as Will, with large, deep brown eyes and dark hair. He was slender, his voice was a mellow tenor and his features were boyish.

“Hey, look who it is,” Will said. “How’re you, you rascal?” he said as he shook Adam’s hand.

“Can’t complain,” Adam replied. “Third album’s headed for platinum, Erin’s well and yesterday I get a call from George offering me a free sea cruise.”

“A cruise? Is that what’s going on?” asked Will.

“That’s the plan,” Sullivan said wryly. “While we’re here, perhaps introductions are in order?”

“Right, how rude of me,” Will admitted. “Cynthia, this is--”

“Pounce!” Cynthia shouted as she raced forward and threw her arms around Adam’s torso. She actually lifted him clear of the floor and held him at an angle over her shoulder.

“I take it you’re a fan,” Adam said with a raised eyebrow.

“Looks like the workouts have done her some good,” Will said, his eyes wide.

“That would be my guess,” Sullivan remarked. “Cynthia, sweetie, maybe you should put the Adam down before you break him.”

“No! My rock star!” Cynthia giggled as she trundled away from Will and Sullivan. “Is this the surprise? ‘Cause you guys can go on your cruise without us.”

“You didn’t know I was coming here?” Adam asked. Cynthia was holding him at an awkward angle over her shoulder and he had to tilt his head back to look at Will and Sullivan.

“We didn’t know anything until just before you got here,” sighed Will.

“I suggested this to George the day before yesterday,” Sullivan explained. “The team has been through some hard times in the last few weeks. I thought getting everyone together and taking a short vacation might help to calm some nerves.”

Cynthia finally set Adam down with a tired grunt. “That’s cool, I guess. But then why did you come here?” she asked Adam, then added quickly, “Not that I’m complaining or anything.”

She was answered by silence and blank stares. Finally, Sullivan said, “You don’t know?”

“Know *what*?”

“Adam used to be part of the team,” Will said. “He was our sharpshooter.”

Cynthia laughed out loud. “Yeah, the world’s greatest guitarist was your sharpshooter. I bet the drummer from Striplight was your field medic too, huh?”

“What he’s saying is true,” Adam said. “Up until my second album came out, I lived here. How long have you been here?”

“A month. I’ve been here a month and no one told me that my idol used to live here? How could you not tell me?” Cynthia asked Will accusingly.

“I assumed you knew!” Will snapped back. “How could you miss something like that? No one brought it up even with you talking about him all the time?”

“It hardly matters now,” Sullivan commented.

“I agree!” Cynthia said and tried to grab hold of Adam again. He caught her hands in his own and gently held her at arm’s length.

“Uh, Cynthia, is it? Not to be rude, but this is a little fast for me,” he said.

“You’ll get used to it. I’m *very* cuddly,” Cynthia said confidently.

“You should also know that he has a girlfriend,” Will said caustically.

Cynthia’s arms went limp in Adam’s grasp. “What?” she whimpered.

“It’s true,” Adam said, half-proudly and half-apologetically. “Her name’s Erin. She runs a little antique and curio shop on the north side. We spend a lot of time together when I’m not touring.”

“More like every waking moment,” Will interjected. Adam made a shooting motion at him with his fingers.

“But you’re single! Everyone knows that!” Cynthia protested.

“Everyone assumes it,” Adam said dryly. “Erin’s kind of reserved, so we’ve kept her out of the limelight.”

“The fact that people think he’s single hasn’t hurt his sales, either,” Will quipped. Adam mimed shooting him with a bazooka.

“Perhaps we should let George know that you’re here, before you kill Will with your imaginary onslaught,” Sullivan remarked.

“Not yet! I have an imaginary sniper rifle in my trunk!” Adam protested jovially.

“It’s good to have you back. For the most part,” Will said with rolled eyes.

“Glad to know I’m still loved!” laughed Adam. He and Will led Cynthia and Sullivan up the stairs to the Situation Room. Cynthia tried to make a show of pouting, but she was too busy smiling for it to be believable.

The sun shone bright and beautiful through the many tall windows of George’s Study, illuminating the antique furniture and numerous bookshelves. The light played over George’s journal, a colossal and ancient tome resting on a podium that faced out the windows, and crept to where George dozed in a timeworn easy chair in the center of the room. Normally he liked to greet the dawn awake, but he was otherwise occupied with something he preferred to avoid: dreaming.

George hummed an old folk tune to himself as he carried the tray of food out the front door to where the others sat on the front steps. The air was clean and warm and the long grass in the yard waved gently in the cool breeze. Will and Tina were huddled together on the lowest of the front steps, laughingly sharing the food on their paper plates. Marc was sprawled across the top step, systematically dismantling a six-pack and munching a three-meat hoagie. Jake was leaning back against the wall with a tall glass of lemonade. Adam was sitting near Will, picking at the strings of one of his many acoustic guitars.

“How’re we doing?” George asked as he walked among the team members, letting them pick what they wanted from the picnic spread on his tray. “Where are Hawk and Crow?”

“They went for a walk,” Will said. “It’s too nice a day to sit around the house.”

George grinned. “You don’t seem to be having much trouble with it.”

Tina turned to look up at him and her long blonde hair outshone the summer sun. “We are just taking a break for lunch. Which you might try doing. You’re going to an early grave, if you don’t learn to relax. Isn’t that right, honey?”

“I think it is,” Will said and kissed her gently. “George with his constant vigilance and his paranoia about the grounds. I think he’s going to have a heart attack before long.”

“I’m standing right here,” George groaned.

“You really should lighten up,” Adam put in. “It’s not as if we’re going to be ambushed here in broad daylight.”

“All I said was that we should be wary of anyone we see near the Mansion. See if I call for morning reviews anymore,” grumbled George.

“Right on! We’re free!” Marc chuckled and gave Jake a high five.

“Excellent! More time for us!” Tina giggled and kissed Will again.

“Ugh. Someone save us from the lovebirds,” Marc growled as he guzzled half of a can of beer.

“That’s my cue,” Sullivan said from the doorway. “George, I hate to interrupt this idyllic scene,

but Detective King is on the phone for you. He says he has a lead.”

“I’m on my way,” George said, handing his tray to Sullivan. “You know, my rules might seem strange sometimes, but I’m really trying to look out for you all.”

Tina turned and looked at him again. The sun shining on her hair and twinkling in her eyes made her look like an angel. “It’s ok, George, we’re just teasing. We know you wouldn’t let anything happen to us.” She smiled that sweet, innocent smile that made everyone love her.

George woke very subtly. An observer might have thought that he was still asleep, were it not that his eyes were open and full of tears. He wiped them away and sat forward in his chair. He *hated* dreaming.

With a grunt he lurched out of his chair and walked to his liquor cabinet. After a long, hard look and a better thought, he turned away from the rows of expensive drinks and went to an enormous wardrobe across the room. It was crammed full with articles of clothing in a myriad of styles, almost all extremes in colors and appearance. George rooted around and took out a multi-colored striped shirt, a pair of navy blue slacks and some tan penny loafers. He had just finished changing out of his pajamas when Sullivan’s voice rolled through the Mansion, carried on the power of the many speakers hidden in the building’s ceilings and walls.

“Everyone, please come to the Situation Room.”

George closed the wardrobe doors with a sigh. Now was the time for him to put on his happy face and pretend to be the chipper but harmless lunatic everyone thought he was. Sometimes he almost wished he could just be himself around the others, but he knew that doing that would likely scare them. Without any more delay he went to his Study door, unlocked and stepped through it and locked it again with an ornate key. Something rubbed up against his leg, and he looked down to see a large, gold-painted mechanical duck nuzzling him.

“Good morning, Eric.”

“Quack!”

“Shall we?”

“Quack, quack.”

George dropped his key back in his pocket and began to jog down the hall toward the Situation Room with Eric in hot pursuit. For only being the size of a loaf of bread and having legs the length of cigarettes, Eric made terrific time and ran into the room just behind George.

The Situation Room was modeled after the military control centers used by modern world leaders. A large table with an under-lit plastic top dominated the center of the room, with a shielded fluorescent light fixture hanging over it. The table was orbited by a number of deep blue office chairs. A plethora of video monitors were mounted on the walls around the room. Will, Adam, Cynthia and Sullivan were already in their seats, arrayed around the table. Sullivan sat to the left of George’s place at the head of the table. Cynthia, Will and Adam sat in a row on one side, waiting patiently. George made his way to his seat while Eric waddled into the room and rubbed up against Cynthia’s legs.

“Good morning, all!” George said jovially. “I trust you all slept well!”

“Uh, fine,” Will said, with a quizzical look at Adam, who shrugged.

“I, myself, did not rest well,” George continued absently, “in fact, I am so sleep deprived I am hallucinating former team members being here in the room with us.”

“Nice to see you again too, George,” Adam chuckled.

“Why, Adam Walker! As I live and breathe! To what does a humble homeowner owe this visit from an esteemed celebrity?”

“I see you haven’t changed,” said Adam.

“Don’t worry,” Sullivan said comfortingly. “I’ll shoot him full of Thorazine shortly, and that should make him easier to deal with. Or at least, marginally more interesting.”

“Et tu, Sullivan?” George whimpered as he rose from his seat and headed for Adam’s chair.

Adam stood and gave George a hug. “You do bring it on yourself, you know.”

“I know, I know. How are you, young ruffian? Keeping out of trouble? How is that little happy

thing you like so much?"

"She's fine," Adam said as he rolled his eyes.

"Little happy thing?" Cynthia asked with a raised eyebrow.

"That's his pet name for Erin. She's perky and cheerful," Will explained.

"We just chalk it up to him being completely bonkers," Adam said flatly.

"Getting back to the business at hand," George said as he shuffled back to his seat. "I trust everyone knows why we are here?"

"We all know," Sullivan replied. "We've not seen the others yet. They don't even know Adam has come back."

"They should be pleasantly surprised, then," George said. Cynthia caught Will suddenly look away from George, but she didn't say anything. They passed the next few moments making small talk, with Adam filling them in on the new changes in his life, peppered with glowing compliments from Cynthia.

Before long they were joined by Hawk and Crow, who came strolling into the room laughing and flirting with each other. When Crow saw Adam, her face lit up and she let out an enthusiastic "Hey!" but Hawk looked away and became very quiet.

Crow jogged around the side of the table and ran to Adam, who rose and gave her a hug. "How are you doing?" she asked him enthusiastically.

"God's been good to me," he answered jovially. "How are you?"

"Things are great! Hawk got a promotion! Tell him, honey," Crow said.

"Mm," Hawk mmed. There was a brief but very awkward pause in the conversation.

"That's ok, we can talk later," Adam said cheerfully, but it was clear that he was uncomfortable. "Have you seen the others?"

"I think Marc's coming. I heard a string of curse words from his room as we came past," Hawk said under his breath.

"Cool. I'm looking forward to meeting the new members, too," said Adam.

"You might want to only look forward to meeting Nails," Cynthia said. "G.R. is, um, kind of hard to like."

"That's not very nice, Cynthia!" George chided her.

"It's also true," Hawk grumbled. "That arrogant punk gets on my nerves."

"He does seem to be a little short on social graces," Sullivan added.

"Or redeeming qualities of any sort," Will said softly. Every eye in the room turned to him. "Did I say that out loud?"

"Mister Herald may be a little rough around the edges, but that is no cause for us to belittle him in his absence. He will only improve his conduct if he is given support and guidance from us," said George.

"Or we could drag him down to the Shore for a few months," Hawk said with a sadistic grin.

Adam shuddered a little at that suggestion. The Shore was the infamous training ground for the Harbor Storms, the elite military unit that Hawk was a part of. It consisted of miles and miles of raw natural landscape across which the Storms trained by running with heavy weights strapped to their bodies or were released to survive with nothing but their wits and the clothes on their backs for a number of days. Horror stories about the condition of the training grounds and what they did to the soldiers that failed (as well as those that passed!) their grueling regimen had risen almost to the point of urban legend in Ylelon.

It was then that Marc came shuffling into the room, scratching himself and smacking his lips. He thumped down into his seat and yawned and it was only then that he realized that Adam the rock legend was sitting two seats from him. His eyes widened for a quiet moment before he closed and rubbed them.

"Ah, *man*," he lamented, "I *knew* I shouldn't'a had that last round last night."

"You're not hallucinating, Marc," said George soothingly. "Adam has come to visit us. We're going on a sea cruise."

"What, you couldn't afford one on your own?" Marc growled at Adam, and Cynthia gasped.

"There is no need for hostility, Marc. We are all friends here," George said with a slightly more forceful tone.

“At least he didn’t throw a beer can at me when he came in the room,” Adam said sadly.

“I knew I forgot something,” snarled Marc.

“That’s quite enough!” George snapped. Cynthia held her breath. She’d only seen George upset a few times and it was not a pretty sight. She almost wondered if she should look for something to stop up her ears with before George started shouting.

“This is a happy occasion, and there is not one person in this room who is not here by my sufferance,” George continued fiercely. “Whatever unresolved issues you have, I suggest you put them away, before I make our vacation time a trip to the Shore instead.” Marc’s eyes widened again and he became uncharacteristically quiet. Hawk hid a smile over George’s picking up his suggestion.

“Now, if that’s dealt with, I believe we are only short Jake, Nails and G.R.?” George continued, back to his cheerful, slightly loopy tone of voice.

“You rang?” said Nails jovially as he strolled into the room with G.R. trailing behind him. Jake came just after them, tinkering with a circuit panel of some sort as he walked. He plopped into his seat and when he finally looked up from his project, he did a double take at seeing Adam. “Hey!” he said, and Adam returned the greeting.

“Ah, good, the gang’s all here. Now I can deliver the good news,” said George.

“Good news? What good news?” G.R. snorted. “Are you finally getting the front door replaced? The Foyer’s practically a desert with all the sand blowing inside.”

“Even better. Perhaps Sullivan should explain,” George said.

“There’s not much to explain, really. I recently suggested that George should sponsor some sort of a break from our usual activities, a trip to the mountains or the sea. Given that the team has recently visited the mountains and the trip wasn’t overly relaxing, we decided on a cruise.”

“Sullivan also suggested that I invite Adam to join us. Having the old and the new team members together at once, I hoped to create an atmosphere that would help all of us to relax,” added George.

“So, pack your things for a three day cruise. You are due on the *Pale Wave* early this evening,” Sullivan finished. The team as a whole seemed to like that. The *Pale Wave* was a one-of-a-kind luxury cruiser. It had been operating in excess of twenty years and was no less than an icon of the sea cruise industry itself.

“Now that I have your attention, I suggest we all get started packing,” George said with a wry smile. “Sullivan, if you will be so kind as to assist Mr. Walker with any luggage he may have brought?”

“I’ll help too!” Cynthia blurted happily and hopped to her feet. The others rose from their chairs and filed out of the room, except for Will, who stayed by Cynthia as she left at the tail end of the group.

“I hope you’re behaving yourself,” Will said with an unpleasant edge.

“Yes,” she said meekly.

“Good. Adam is a very respectable person and you should remember that,” Will said sharply.

“Excuse me!” Cynthia snapped as she wheeled around to face him. The others had moved on and were disappearing down the stairs or into their own rooms at the ends of the long hallway. “Who are you to lecture me? I’ve been very good since I moved in here.”

“Except for the few times you’ve run off on your own,” Will retorted.

“You mean the time I saved your life? Or the time I single-handedly took out a vampire?”

Will didn’t have an answer to that.

“What are you afraid of, Will? Do you honestly think I would do anything to hurt Adam?”

“I’m really not sure,” Will said blankly. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d have behaved the way you did today when he first arrived. That was very embarrassing.”

“Oh, come on,” Cynthia groaned, but she was turning pink again. “There’s not a straight woman in Ylelon that wouldn’t have done that given the chance. Anyway, I was just teasing. I let him go, didn’t I?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You want points for not hypnotizing him to be your love slave?”

“You know what, Will, I’m done having this conversation,” Cynthia said, sounding hurt. “I thought you were beginning to have some real respect for me, what with talking and working out together. But if you don’t trust me not to rape the mind of someone as kind and respectable as Adam, then I guess I

shouldn't be wasting your time talking to you." She turned and stormed off down the hall toward her room. Will was left standing alone in the corridor, wishing he hadn't made his last remark.

The truth was that he worried about Cynthia. She may have been very powerful and capable, but she was also too confident in her abilities. Will didn't know all she was capable of, but he did know that on more than one occasion she had gotten into serious trouble because she trusted in nothing more than the power of her own will to get her of it. That combined with her tendency to read others' minds simply out of boredom or curiosity made him worry that she would wind up seriously hurt someday. He knew he was being too harsh with her, but he didn't know how else to act. She had some kind of painfully obvious schoolgirl crush that was terribly embarrassing for him. On the other hand, he knew that George had, for some inexplicable reason, decided she was trustworthy enough to have around, and Will knew that even for all of George's eccentricities he was rarely wrong. George was right about another thing, too--Cynthia had remarkable potential as a team member. The Lonely Winds were used to fighting monsters in back alleys with side arms and knives. Having someone around that could probe a creature's mind and hold it in place with telekinesis would be rather handy. So Will tried to be patient with her, but it was displays like the one earlier that made him overreact sometimes.

That and, though he would never admit it to anyone, Cynthia *had* looked really cute in her jogging outfit.

Chapter II

Aboard the *Pale Wave*

It didn't take long for the team to be packed and ready to go. Sullivan and Nails did most of the carrying and everyone filed out into their various vehicles. George left strict instructions with Sullivan not to admit anyone to the Mansion in his absence, including former team members, and then they were off. Jake and Cynthia rode with Will, Nails and G.R. with Marc in his battered pickup truck and Crow with Hawk in their sparkling new black heavy pickup, while George led the way in his nova blue luxury sedan.

The team's trip to the docks was uneventful. Their convoy parked in a row in the designated area and they followed George like baby ducks as he led them into the central offices. After a brief security check, George handed several wads of bills to the baggage carriers to take the team's luggage, as was his custom. While Will certainly appreciated George's generosity, he often found himself wondering how many service people made rent or bought new televisions after George tipped them.

George had arranged for their rooms to be close together in the same section, all first class. He, Nails, G.R., Adam, Will, Jake, Cynthia and Marc all had rooms to themselves. George had also suggested that Hawk and Crow should have separate quarters, at which Hawk threatened to toss George overboard.

The team had arrived quite early before the ship was set to disembark, so the decks were mostly deserted when they arrived. The really interesting stuff didn't begin until Adam emerged from his room after unpacking.

A shrill scream split the air just as he stepped out of his room. Adam flinched and began to look around for someone who had been seriously hurt. He didn't know whether to be relieved or dismayed when the source of the sound turned out to be a pair of young women who came running toward him down the hallway.

"Oh wow! Oh *wow!* It's Adam Walker! Look, it's Adam Walker!" one of them squealed as they came to a stop well within Adam's personal space.

"I know, I know!" her companion giggled enthusiastically. "We're your biggest fans! Can we have your autograph?"

"Sure, sure," Adam said as he fumbled in his pockets for a pen. "Always happy to please my fans."

"I can't believe it's you! We're on a cruise with Adam Walker!" the first woman blurted in an almost incomprehensible barrage of syllables.

"Where are you eating tonight? Can we come with you?" the second woman asked quickly.

"I don't think so, ladies. I'm here with some old friends and I'll be spending time with them. Sorry." The two women looked crestfallen, but they consented to take back the brochures that Adam signed for them and trotted away giggling.

"Let me guess. More of your friggin' groupies?" a course voice startled Adam from behind. He knew who it was even before he turned around.

"Hello, Marc."

"Yeah, big friggin' hello to you too," Marc growled as he walked to stand next to Adam and watch the laughing fans disappear around a corner hall's end. "Wrangling up some extra action already, huh?"

Adam sighed and rubbed his temple. "You know something, Marc? I'm tired of trying to be nice to you. I have tried and tried to make peace between us, and you won't let it happen."

"Keep your damn charity, pretty boy. None of us need it." Marc stormed off down the hall, spouting a string of unkind words. Adam took a breath to steady himself, then headed down the hall in the opposite direction.

"So, when do we get underway?" Nails asked between mouthfuls of shrimp. He was wearing his sunglasses again to avoid attracting too much attention, but that still hadn't stopped him from dressing in his customary worn t-shirt and denim shorts. He was helping himself to the recreation deck buffet while George stood nearby, quietly marveling at the big fellow's capacity to drink and eat.

“Later this afternoon,” George said bemusedly. “I preferred to arrive early rather than risk any entanglements we might have arriving late. Good heavens, man, how much beer can you drink?”

“Sorry,” Nails said after gulping down a mouthful of shrimp. “I get carried away sometimes. I can’t get drunk, you know, so I don’t really have a set stopping point.”

“You don’t get full? Out of curiosity,” asked George.

“Not really. I’m not even sure how I’m able to eat and drink, man. Near as I can tell, I’m pretty solid all the way through.”

“That must be interesting.”

“Not as much as you’d think.”

“Fair enough,” George admitted. “At any rate, we’re just waiting for the others to join us. Would you care to partake of a game of shuffleboard while we wait?”

“Heck, why not?” They sauntered outside and laid out a game, whiling away the few minutes it took for the other members of the team to join them. George beat Nails soundly, then spoke to the team while Nails’ jaw was still hanging open.

“There’s only one rule here, folks. Relax and enjoy yourselves. We’re going to be far away from the…” he eyed some nearby vacationers, “interesting problems we normally deal with. Let your guard down, along with anything else that suits you, and have fun.”

With that, the team split up and went about their business.

The setting of the sun that evening found the *Pale Wave* well under way, having left Ylelon Bay and ventured into the greater ocean beyond. The team made the most of their time in their own ways, relaxing and forgetting the bizarre problems that plagued them in their everyday lives.

Nails and G.R. lounged by the starboard railing, watching the setting sun and occasionally stealing a glance at a passing beauty in a bathing suit.

Will, Adam and Cynthia wandered about as their whimsy guided them, talking about team events past and present as they were able to between Adam being mobbed by adoring fans.

Hawk and Crow had spent the last couple of hours by the pool. True to form, Hawk had repeatedly tried to go swimming, despite the numerous stitches he sported from his injuries two days ago, and Crow continually had to put him in his place. Eventually, she tired of Hawk’s insistence and took to wading and wrestling with him.

Jake and George parked themselves at the buffet, and had a lively discussion about the state of new technologies being developed around the globe. Marc sat with them, sampling various beverages and waiting for Jake to finish so they could play some cards.

About two hours after the sun finally vanished beneath the horizon, Adam, Will, and Cynthia had made their way to the bow and now stood by the railing watching the stars appear. “So, I wait in the booth for like, fifteen minutes,” Adam was saying, “and the tech guys just can’t seem to get the microphone working. The whole time Bob is sitting in the back of the sound room, making snide remarks.”

“Bob?” asked Will.

“Kelly Roberts, his drummer? Cynthia said.

“Oh, right.” Will kept an askance view of Cynthia. She had a distant and distracted look about her, the way he knew she did sometimes when she was wandering around inside other people’s heads. She looked worried too, but Will decided to let it go for now.

“So, anyway, Bob keeps saying things like, I sound better singing with the static and it might be time to try an instrumental album. Finally the guys start clearing up the static, but then my voice feed starts fading out, and they can’t hear me in the booth. So Bob points out the door of the sound room and says, ‘I think Adam’s losing his voice. See, there it goes!’”

“Quite a joker, huh?” Will asked through a smirk.

“You don’t know the half of it. So, I turn to the glass and say, ‘I’m sorry Bob, I might have a better time if your drumming were a little more in time. Oh, wait, that was the static. It’s hard to tell the difference.’ Bob says, ‘I’m tired of this abuse! I’m gonna go drum for Highly Trained Daffodils!’”

“Sounds like you have a lot of fun doing what you do,” Cynthia said with open admiration.

“I’m very blessed. I love my music and I love the folks I’m able to work with. I don’t think I could be any happier.”

“Do you ever miss the team?” Cynthia asked brightly. Adam and Will exchanged glances, then looked out to sea. “Sorry,” Cynthia said softly.

“It’s all right,” Will said. “You didn’t know.”

“Why don’t we head to the buffet?” Adam suggested gently. The three of them walked in awkward silence toward the heart of the ship. They were midway between the bow and the buffet when Adam was stopped again, this time by three young women. Two of them were the same pair that had asked for his autograph earlier in the day.

“I told you! I told you!” the first one said as the three of them came on a collision course for Adam. “I told you it was him!”

“All right, I see him,” the new woman said irritably. She was clearly less effervescent than her companions.

“Good evening, ladies,” said Adam amiably. “How are you tonight?”

“We’re great!” Fan Number Two said. “Can we have your autograph again? It’s for Jill, here,” she asked as she thrust a page of cabin stationary and a pen at Adam.

“Certainly,” Adam said and scribbled out a signature. He handed it to Jill and asked, “Anything else I can do for you?”

Fan Two didn’t answer right away. She was giving Cynthia a very unpleasant look. “No, that’s fine,” she said at last, “we’ll go now. Hopefully we’ll see you later, without the crowd.”

She stormed off, followed by Fan One. Jill turned to Adam and said, “I’m very sorry, they’re normally not like that,” and hurried after them.

“Wow, that sucked,” Cynthia muttered. “What was that about? We weren’t doing anything.”

“My fans can get kind of jealous sometimes,” Adam said through a bit of a blush. “That’s why the public doesn’t know about Erin. I don’t want her to have to go through all that every day.”

“I can understand that. Erin’s very lucky, to have a nice guy like you,” Cynthia said.

“Thank you.”

The three of them headed together into the buffet and were greeted by waves from Jake and George. When Marc saw them, he turned in his seat to face away from them as they approached.

“What’s the word, cool one?” Jake asked.

“Just taking it easy,” Adam said. “How about you three?”

“Jake has been telling me about some of the recent developments in micro-circuitry and hydraulics being used over in Attenz,” George said. “Apparently, the military has been testing a high-grade version of the prototypes that Jake’s own armor is based on. They’re hoping to start mass-producing them soon.”

“That’s interesting,” Adam said as he took a seat next to George. “I wonder what a country like Attenz needs so much firepower for, though.”

“They do share the same mountain borders with us, you know,” said George. “So to a lesser extent than Ylelon, they have an interest in protecting their mineral assets.”

“Besides, they’re a much larger country than we are,” added Jake through a sip of lemonade. “They aren’t lucky enough to have high mountains shielding them on two sides and a shallow bay on the third. There’s something to be said for covering your borders.”

“I heard that. I wonder if the labs in Shu-La--” Will began, but he was cut off by a scream from somewhere nearby. The buffet became eerily quiet as all the people in the room froze and listened for the sound to come again, but none did.

“Was that...was that a scream? Where did it come from?” asked Cynthia as she looked around.

“It came from below us,” Jake said, pointing at a nearby air vent. “We heard it through the ventilation system.”

“It came from the cabins?” Adam asked.

“Everyone stay put,” Will commanded and was out of his seat and moving toward the exit before anyone could react.

“George?” Cynthia asked.

“Let him go, dear. He’ll find out what’s happening and come back to us.”

Will moved at a brisk pace to a stairwell he knew would take him to the next deck. He wasn’t familiar with this part of the vessel, but he had good enough senses of direction and proportion to know about how far he would have to go to be near where the scream had come from. He went quickly down the hallway until he judged himself to be under the buffet and slowed to a walk.

Here and there in the hall doors were open and people could be heard murmuring inside, confused, frightened or speculating. No one seemed to know what was happening. He heard more than one suggestion that someone call ship security.

He was still moving down the hall and taking everything in when he heard soft sobbing coming from behind a door that was slightly ajar on his right. He cautiously stepped up to it, pushed it open a little more and said, “Hello? Is someone here?”

As the door crept open under his touch he saw someone half-sitting, half laying on the floor just inside the room. It was one of the women that had been visiting Adam earlier, choked with sobs. Will began to ask what was wrong, but as the door opened a little more his voice died in his throat.

One of her two friends was laid out on one of the cabin’s two beds. She might have seemed to be taking a nap were it not that her eyes were open and staring at the ceiling. Several deep and bloody gashes ran across her body. The other woman lay on the floor in front of the bed, face down in a pool of blood.

Will’s head swam. He began to flash back to a time when he had found someone else in a similar manner, someone that had been very dear to him. He almost lost his balance, but he pulled himself together through force of will and straightened up. Gently, he laid a hand on the woman’s shoulder and asked, “Jill? That’s your name, isn’t it? Are you all right? What happened here?”

She turned her head and looked up at him. Tears flowed freely down her face as she looked at him. “I don’t know!” she said. “I don’t know! How could this have happened?”

“Easy,” Will soothed. “Tell me what happened. Are you hurt?”

“No, no. No, I’m not hurt,” Jill said and she took his hand and stood. She was shaking as he led her out of the room. “I don’t know what happened. I was just coming to find them.”

“Weren’t you with them?”

“No. No, I wasn’t. They stormed off and I went to catch up to them. I thought they were very rude to Mister Walker and his friends--you--so I put my autograph away in my room and then I was going to come convince them to apologize to you.”

“How long were you separated from them?”

“Only for a couple of minutes. My room is just down the hall. All I did was put my autograph on my TV. I don’t understand how this could have happened! I only lost sight of them for a minute!”

“Do you know anyone who’d want to hurt your friends?” Will asked gently. He hated having to press the poor woman for information, but he was as baffled by this as she was.

“No, nobody! We don’t know anybody here! I don’t know why anyone would hurt them. They were good people...” She broke down into sobs.

Will looked up and down the hallway. Several people had heard them talking and were beginning to step out of their rooms, looking curiously at the crying woman and the man wearing black. Will grabbed the door and pulled it shut. He was trying to console Jill when a sharp shout from down the hall startled him. He turned to see two security team members headed toward them at a run.

“What happened here?” one of them demanded as they came upon Will and Jill.

“It looks like the two residents in this cabin have been attacked,” Will said. “I arrived here after the fact. This is Jill. From what she told me she didn’t witness the attack itself.” He was trying to be frank and helpful, but at the same time not say anything that might cause a panic among the eavesdropping guests in the nearby rooms.

“Wait here,” the officer ordered as he and his companion slipped into the room. Will sighed sadly and shook his head when the inevitable exclamations of shock were heard through the door. The two officers promptly came back out. The first man looked like he was about to vomit as he braced himself

against a wall and tried to catch his breath. His compatriot took a walkie-talkie off of his belt and spoke into it.

“Bridge, this is Jefferson. We, uh, we have a problem here. You might...send a doctor down, and some more security. Right away.”

“What happened?” Jake asked frantically as Will jogged back into the buffet.

“They kept me for questioning,” Will said in a hushed voice as he sat down at the table. The entire team had gathered in his absence and the intimate table was now very crowded. “What have you heard?”

“Nothing juicy,” G.R. snickered.

Will looked around to make sure no one nearby could overhear. “There have been a couple of murders,” he said somberly, to the horror of the others. “A couple of women. The ones we met earlier,” he said to Adam.

“What?” Adam said in disbelief. “You mean the young ladies we saw before we came here?”

“Just two of them. It was the third one, Jill, that we heard scream,” Will explained. “She got separated from them for just a moment and found them dead in their cabin. Someone killed them in the few minutes she lost track of them.”

“Do we have any idea who?” asked George.

“That’s what security was questioning me about for forty-five minutes. Once Jill had them convinced I didn’t have anything to do with it, they had to admit they’re clueless.”

“So what are they going to do?” Hawk asked.

“I’m not sure. I don’t think they really know themselves. I got the impression that they don’t deal with this sort of thing on a regular basis.”

“I should hope not,” George said solemnly. “I imagine they’ll be confining us to our cabins and returning to port.”

“Oh, that sucks. Just when we’re starting to have fun, we have to go home,” G.R. moaned.

Will rounded on him with a sharp look. “I can’t believe you said that! Two people have been murdered and you’re thinking about losing vacation time?!” He realized how loud he had become and reddened slightly.

“Hey, their worries are over,” G.R. snapped back. “There will be an investigation, and whoever was stupid enough to kill someone while isolated on a metal box in the middle of the ocean will be caught. Meanwhile, the rest of us are deprived of a much needed break from the routine.”

“Permission to slap him senseless?” Nails said.

“Granted,” George replied. Nails slapped G.R. sharply over the back of his head.

“Now that that’s been dealt with, I suggest we return to our rooms,” George said.

“No offence, Big G, but I’m gonna stick around,” said Nails. “Leastways, until they officially make me. I don’t want to seem unsympathetic, and I sure as heck don’t wanna agree with Captain Callous here,” (G.R. glared at him and made a rude gesture), “but I don’t see the need to call it quits until they tell us we have to. This has been a nice time and I don’t want to have to quit right off. Besides, doing anything out of the ordinary may just help to scare people.”

“You’re right, of course,” George said after a moment of pensiveness. “Don’t add to the inevitable disarray, but do not fail to heed the instructions you are given. We aren’t the self-appointed authorities here that we normally are in the city and the crew will have quite enough on their minds as it is.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll go, George,” Cynthia said. She had a strangely worried look. “I’d rather just be in my own cabin after something like this.”

“Of course, Cynthia. Would you like for one of us to chaperone you?” George asked soothingly.

“No, I think I’m ok. I’ll see you guys later. Let me know if anything new comes up.” She rose and quietly left. Will thought he caught hints of a deep sigh as she walked away from the table. Once upon a time he might have tried to follow her and see what was bothering her, but now he was a much more introverted and distant person. He was a little shocked to realize this about himself, but at the moment he had other things to worry about.

“Maybe I should go after her and see if she’s really all right,” Crow suggested. “I haven’t seen her

down like this. Has she been around things like this before?”

“A number of them, if I’m not mistaken. Don’t worry overly about it now, Crow. Keep an eye on her, but I suspect Cynthia will deal with this incident admirably, with or without our support,” said George.

“You have a lot of faith in her,” Hawk said dryly.

“I have a lot of faith in all of you. Can’t you tell?”

The hall was remarkably quiet as Cynthia walked back to her room, which was fine by her. The fewer distractions she had to deal with, the better.

The truth was that something had been bothering her ever since she’d set foot on the ship. It had become much worse while she was talking with Adam and Will outside. Her vague sense of foreboding had suddenly become a certainty that something terrible was about to happen. It wasn’t often that she had these little precognitive flashes, but experience had taught her better than to ignore them.

Then there had been the scream and Will had come back with the news that two people were dead. Cynthia couldn’t help but wonder if she had screwed up somehow. Was there a way for her to have been more tuned in to her senses? Should she have been able to stop the murders?

She finally resigned herself to the decision that it didn’t matter at this point. Maybe in the future she could prevent some other tragedy. Cynthia laughed to herself at that. The notion that a current failing didn’t matter as long as she learned from it--George and his philosophy were beginning to rub off on her.

She came to her cabin door and swiped her keycard through the lock. After a stop at her closet to collect some nightclothes, she was on her way to the shower when something on the room’s desk caught her eye. Her heart skipped a beat, she held her breath and her nightgown slipped from her fingers onto the floor. With eyes wide she walked to the desk, where the object lay unobtrusively in front of the chair. Cynthia looked all around the room and listened for any hint of anyone else, but the cabin was quiet. Hands trembling, she reached for it, then pulled back at the last moment. She looked around the cabin again, then quickly grabbed the object off of the desk and ran out the door as fast as she could go.

The hall was still empty, but Cynthia hardly noticed as she dashed to the staircase and climbed as fast as she could. Her long hair blew out behind her as she ran onto the deck and into the night wind. In seconds she was back at the entrance to the buffet, pausing only long enough to make certain that George was still at the table. Hawk, Crow, Will and Nails were still with him, having an animated discussion with their voices kept low. Cynthia ran to George’s side so fast she almost wasn’t able to stop before barreling into him.

“Cynthia? What in the world are--” George began. His voice simply died when he saw the object in Cynthia’s hands as she held it up before his eyes.

It was a crown of thorns.

Chapter III She's Here

George took the crown from Cynthia's hand and looked at it closely. "Where did you get this, Cynthia?" he asked soberly.

"It was in my room," Cynthia whispered.

"Is that--that isn't--?" Crow stammered.

George turned slowly in his seat and laid the crown in the center of the table. "It is," he said.

Crow leaped out of her seat and ran to Cynthia. "Are you all right? Did she hurt you?"

"No, I'm all right. I didn't see her," Cynthia said distantly.

"How is that possible?" Hawk growled. "She only leaves these with her victims."

"She's here," Crow whimpered, so softly it was barely audible.

"Easy, Crow. Cynthia? You're sure you didn't see her? She wasn't in your cabin?" asked George.

"No one was," was the quiet reply.

"So what should we do? We have to get everyone off this ship!" said Jake.

"How? We're several hours from port!" Will retorted.

"We have to do something! We can't stay on the ship with that--" Hawk snapped, his voice rising quickly. George stopped him with an upheld hand.

"Hawk, please. Panic will most certainly not help. The five of you, come with me. We are going to the bridge straight away."

"What?" Will protested. "We can't do that! We have to find the others and tell them what's happening!"

"That's what we are going to do. In a more efficient and effective way than scattering across the ship to find our companions, I might add. Follow me to the bridge and you will see what I have in mind."

"Is she going to get me next?" Cynthia asked absently. George froze in mid-stance as he rose from his chair. Cynthia's eyes rolled from the crown on the table to George. "Is that what this means?"

"Er, hey, you don't have to worry," Hawk began, but trailed off for lack of anything else to say.

George laid a hand on Cynthia's shoulder. "You'll be fine, Cynthia. We're all here as a team, and we're going to take care of this."

"But she only leaves these with people she kills," Cynthia said. "She left this in my room and not with the two girls. Does that mean she's going to come after me?" continued Cynthia.

"I honestly don't know, Cynthia. I don't have any answers. But I can tell you this: I will *not* let anything happen to you." George turned to look at the others. "Any of you."

The team members around the table were quiet, an eye of silence in a steadily rising din of rampant theorizing and rumor mongering among the crowd in the buffet. It was Nails who finally broke the silence.

"Shouldn't we get going? Whatever George has in mind, we can't do it from here."

"Quite right!" George said, grabbed the crown and hopped up from his chair. "Everyone with me. We go straight for the bridge and do not stop for *anything*, understand?"

Will, Hawk, and Nails rose from their seats and followed George and the others at a quick walk out of the room. Hawk and Crow went hand in hand. Nails noticed them both looking around nervously as they went. It was the first time he had ever seen Hawk look nervous about anything. Will was walking beside Cynthia, right behind Hawk and Crow, and Nails couldn't help but be aware of the fact that Will seemed very uncomfortable, while Cynthia was very quiet. Nails caught himself wishing that G.R. hadn't wandered off to sulk.

His mind whirled as they walked along the railing. The crown of thorns George carried brought to mind the name of the vampire the team only spoke of in hushed whispers. What Nails still didn't get was why they were so afraid of her, whoever she was. The team hadn't exactly been forthcoming with their reasons and unlike his cousin, Nails was too polite to pry.

He looked around at the other people onboard as he followed the others. The general mood had

soured since the news of murder had begun to circulate. The spirit of carefree vacationers had been replaced by an air of suspicion. Still, Nails hadn't seen anything that hinted at panic or mob mentality so far. He supposed that was the best that could be hoped for at the moment.

George didn't take long in leading the group indoors and through the halls to one of the bridge's doors. Without preamble he knocked on the door loudly enough that the sound echoed in the hall. Presently the door opened, revealing a confused looking yeoman on the other side.

"Thank you, son," George said and pushed past the startled young man.

"You can't come in here, sir!" the yeoman said desperately as the other team members filtered onto the bridge. A dozen officers throughout the bridge turned in place at the commotion, including a group of four standing around an irate-looking gentleman of advancing years whom Nails took for the captain.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded as he set a cup of tea and saucer down on the arm of his chair and rose to approach George.

"Ah, Captain Frost. We're here to assist you with your security problem," George said cordially.

"You're *what*? I should have you arrested! Get off my bridge!" the Captain thundered. In response George reached into a pocket and pulled out a folded slip of paper, which he handed to Captain Frost. The Captain grabbed and opened it. His eyes opened wider with each line he read. Finally he re-closed it and handed it back to George.

"Well then, Mr. Manor," he said sharply. "I suppose I can't throw you out, but you will remember as long as you are here that this is still my ship! Now if you'll excuse me, I have an investigation to conduct. While we're on the subject, I'll wait until later to ask you how you knew we were *having* an investigation." He stormed back to his group of attending officers, leaving George and company standing at the rear of the bridge.

"What was *that*?" Hawk exclaimed. "What did you show him?" Without a word George unfolded the mysterious slip of paper and handed it to Hawk. He read it with wide eyes that mirrored those of the Captain's, then passed the paper to Crow.

"George is a major stock owner of the cruise line, as well as partial owner of the *Pale Wave*," Crow said.

"Is that right? I always figured his money came from royalties for inventing neurosis," Hawk muttered.

"Sticks and stones, Hawk. Remember this is a serious situation," chided George. "I'm going to speak further with the Captain. Stay put until I return."

The team held back while George approached the Captain and his retainers. Will couldn't hear what was being said, but he kept a close eye on what was happening. George immediately launched into a short speech of some sort, which the Captain protested against in a very sharp manner. George replied with a quick statement and a sly smile, at which the Captain rolled his eyes, rubbed his forehead and held up a hand in a gesture of compliance. George made a series of remarks and gestures that appeared to be thanking each officer, then turned and came back to the group.

"So far, so good," he said evenly. "Here's what we're going to do. The Captain is going to have everyone on board gather on the forward deck for their safety. Nails and I are going to search the ship, while the rest of you join everyone else on deck."

"Ok, just a couple of things," said Hawk. "First, are you nuts? You want to go wandering around an empty ship looking for that monster? Secondly, you want us all to group together outside?"

"I have to agree," Will put in. "We should get the entire team together and go after her in force."

"With what, Will? We seem to be lacking our regular arsenal at the moment," George said dryly.

"I have these," Hawk said as he held up his paired heavy survival knives.

"*What*?! How do you have those?" Crow exclaimed as she pushed Hawk's hands down and moved to block the bridge crew's view of him. "How did you get those past the safety checks?"

"Hello! Harbor Storm here, remember? I could have snuck a bazooka on board if I'd wanted to," said Hawk proudly.

"I don't want to ask," quipped Will. "Are you sure about this, George? I can't help but think that

putting everyone together in one place makes us a lot of easy targets.”

“Not to assault your sense of security, Will, but anyone on this ship is an easy target for that beast. At least all together out in the open, you’ll see her coming. Meanwhile, Nails and I can confront her in the confines of the rest of the vessel.”

“See, that’s the other thing I’m not so sure about!” Hawk blurted. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, going chasing around after her? This is the Crown of Thorns, man! What are you going to do, chase her off with your lame jokes?”

“Hawk, have some confidence in me. I haven’t been training the lot of you all this time to not pick up a few tricks. Besides, I’ll have our resident dreadnought with me. Find the others, then wait on deck for us. We’ll report back when...we have something to report. Let’s go, Nails.” With that George led Nails off of the bridge and out of sight down the hall.

“He’s gonna get himself killed,” Crow whispered.

“I doubt it,” Will said simply.

“What makes you say that?” asked Cynthia.

“He can take care of himself,” Will answered distantly. Without another word, he led the others off of the bridge to look for Jake, Marc and G.R.. As they left the bridge, Captain Frost’s voice began to echo across the ship from the public address system:

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, this is the Captain speaking. I’m afraid I must ask everyone to gather on the front deck for an important announcement...”

“Ok, I have to ask,” Nails said as he headed down a hallway toward the engine room with George. “Who’s this Crown character everyone is so worried about, why is she here, and why are we looking for her by ourselves?”

George stopped in his tracks. Slowly he turned to look Nails in his eyes. Or in his sunglasses, rather.

“Do you trust me, Nails?” he said very seriously.

“Yes,” Nails said, after a moment’s hesitation.

“Then I will tell you what you need to know. The Crown of Thorns is a terror unlike anything else this team has ever encountered. Forget everything you know about vampires, my young friend. The Crown is vicious, crafty and capable on a level you likely have never encountered in your short span of years. If you see her, don’t doddle as you are given to do. Strike fast and hard and do not stop until one of you is utterly destroyed.” He turned and started back down the hall.

“Ok, you’re really beginning to weird me out,” Nails said as he jogged to catch up with George. “I’ve only seen you this uptight once, when you thought I was trying to kill the team.”

“That is perhaps because the two events have a related cause, Nails. Then, as now, I feared for the safety of the team. It is because of us that the Crown is here, you see.”

“Why? Was she in our luggage?” Nails laughed, then cringed at the wilting look George gave him.

“The Crown of Thorns is a very old foe of the team,” George began slowly. “Our members have encountered her many times and the results of her actions far more often. She created the gathering of vampires that murdered Tina, whom you have heard of. She has been taunting the police of Ylelon for hundreds of years with her antics. The last time we encountered her, she entered the Mansion itself, something no other foe of the team has ever succeeded in doing.”

“No offense, George, but it doesn’t seem like that would be so hard. The place isn’t exactly a sealed fortress.”

“Not at first glance. But the Mansion is much more secure than it appears. Most of the elements of the supernatural that we deal with know to stay away from it. In truth, the Crown was the first monster ever to enter the Mansion, because she is one of the very few that have dared to try.”

“All right. So the Crown came after you guys a few weeks ago? How do you know she’s not just wreaking havoc? The guys kind of hinted that she just wanders around, killing people at random.”

George looked at Nails with wide eyes as they walked. “Not at random, Nails! Everything the Crown does is a calculated act. When she kills someone, it is never just for sustenance or pleasure, as it is

with most vampires. She knows who to hurt to strike fear in her enemies.”

“So you think it’s deliberate that she turns up on the same ship as us?”

“That, and the timing. The Crown normally operates in cycles of several months. I’ve never been able to discern why, but her pattern follows the lines of slaughtering a high profile individual or group, then disappearing for several months before returning for another attack. It is very unlike her to happen to turn up on the same cruise ship as the only known adversary that has ever forced her to flee for her undeath only a few weeks after the last incident she was responsible for--the death of Stanley Derrick and several of his compatriots. The two factors combined hint that this cannot be a coincidence.”

“Hey, I remember that. *She* was the one that did that? The story in the paper was that it was some kind of conspiracy by crooked business partners!”

“Yes, the authorities invariably find themselves at a loss to explain the mayhem that the Crown of Thorns leaves in her wake.”

“So, now she’s here for revenge on you guys.”

“That is my fear, yes. Her being here, as I said, is not by chance: nor is the fact that she left her trademark in one of our rooms, rather than on the body of one of her victims, as has been her habit for centuries.”

“Ok, good. You guys sent her packing last time and now you have me,” Nails said with a wide grin. “So, we hunt her down and take her apart?”

“The team did not defeat her, Nails. The Mansion’s security system did. She was about to slaughter the team when I activated it. The robot sentries that are integral to the system are all that kept them alive.”

“Oh...that’s less good news. Hey, question: if you’re so afraid of this thing, then why are we down here looking for it alone?”

“Because, Nails, we are the most capable members of the team. You are stronger and more resilient than any of the others, and they are short their weapons. Not that they would help much in this situation.”

“Yeah? What about you? Why not just send me by myself?”

“Three reasons. One: you don’t know what you are getting into and require my guidance. Two: you know something none of the others do, aside from Crow, that I am a capable mage and thus have powers that may help us track and confront the Crown.”

“Crow knows that you know magic?” interrupted Nails.

“She should. I’m the one that taught her. She keeps my secret at my request, however, and even she has no idea how...extensive my abilities are.”

“I got it. So, what’s reason three?”

“Do you remember when we first met and I told you that there were forces that worked against me?”

“Are those the Ancient and Terrible Powers™ that you keep going on about?” laughed Nails.

“As such, yes. In short, one of my limitations is that I am unable to use the full extent of my abilities most of the time. The...Really Old and Quite Unpleasant Forces monitor the activities of many of the powerful individuals in Ylelon and unfortunately, I am no exception. If ever I were to perform more than the most rudimentary of magic, I and the people around me would be subject to...backlash. The bottom line is that I rarely have the opportunity to use my talents to hunt monsters like the Crown. Not even to save the team members could I resort to using my power to catch her. Now, away from Ylelon and the forces that monitor it, I can bring all of my power to bear.” Nails could hear George’s knuckles cracking as the old man made a fist. “She won’t get away this time. We’re going to get her.”

“Yeah, whatever you say,” Nails said guardedly. “Where are we headed now, anyway?”

“To engineering. I want to test a theory and it’s as good a place as any to start looking.”

“Right on. As much as I’d like to keep absorbing these vital facts, I feel the need to beat the crap out of something. An interlude, if you will.”

“Be careful what you wish for, my young friend.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

They reached the engineering section a few minutes later. The halls were almost completely deserted except for the occasional ship employee hurrying about the halls. George would cast sidelong glances at them as he and Nails passed, but he didn't dare say anything. He knew they were extremely vulnerable as they ran errands alone in the ship's confines, but the only thing he could do for them was attempt to remove the source of the danger.

Engineering itself was remarkably clean and organized for its size. The fore section was a series of chambers and cubicles mostly made up of bulkheads and control panels covered with a dizzying array of gauges, levers, wheels, buttons and digital displays. The aft section was a great open space in which colossal pistons and gears worked to drive the *Pale Wave's* screws. The engine crew was still present and several of them gave George and Nails coarse looks. One of them even approached the two monster hunters and ordered them out of the area. George handed him his slip of paper and explained that they were present with the Captain's leave, at which the engineer grunted and walked away.

"That was exciting," muttered Nails. "Why are we here, anyway?"

"I wanted to see for myself that the equipment and crew were still intact. If the Crown had a wholesale slaughter of everyone on board in mind, she would likely want to isolate us at sea. The best way to do that would be to cripple the engines."

"So if she's not here, that's good, right?"

"Not necessarily. She may not want a wholesale slaughter. She may intend to play cat-and-mouse games and kill the people on board a few at a time."

"Then what do we do? If she's not here, and everyone else is topside, then she only has two places to go where she can cause trouble, right?" Nails asked as he scrutinized the massive engine works.

"Don't be too certain," replied George warily. "I'm going to call the bridge. Wait here until I return."

"You got it."

George left Nails among the roaring machinery and went to consult an engineer about where to find the nearest means of communicating with the bridge. He was directed to an enclosed booth some distance from the great machinery that contained a phone with lines to various parts of the ship. In due course he was speaking to someone on the bridge, who summoned the Captain.

"*Frost here,*" he boomed over the line.

"Captain Frost, this is George Manor."

"*What do you want now, Mr. Manor?*" grumbled the Captain.

"Three things. First, please call me George. Next, I need to know where the victims' bodies are being kept."

"*What?! Why the hell do you need to know that?*"

"Captain Frost, it's clear that you feel put upon by my presence. Unfortunately, I am not at liberty to discuss the current situation with you. Instead, I must ask you to take it on faith that my presence here is to the benefit of everyone on board. If nothing else, consider my efforts an extension of your own."

"*All right,*" moaned Captain Frost. "*If it shuts you up, I'll help. The bodies are in the sick bay.*"

"The sick bay? They aren't under refrigeration?"

"*Of course. We have facilities for keeping the deceased, in case of heart attack, stroke, and so on.*"

"I see. Is there a medical officer on duty there now?"

"*Of course!*"

"Excellent. Then I must ask one final favor."

"*What's that?*"

"I need you to institute a mandatory cycle of reports for every employee on the ship. Everyone needs to report to the bridge at regular intervals, regardless of where they are or what they are doing."

"*Do you mind if I ask why?*" scoffed the Captain.

"For no other reason than the safety of your crew, Captain Frost. The killer, or killers, is still at large, and may feel no compunction about harming one of the crew members wandering the ship alone."

"*You have a point. On the other hand, I was way ahead of you on this one. My security team and I*

don't need you to baby-sit us, you know."

"Outstanding work. Captain, I will trouble you no longer. I will inform you if we find anything definite. Please do the same for us. George out."

He hung up the phone with a sigh and stepped out of the booth. Taking a moment to look around and make certain no one else was nearby, he focused his thoughts and began to reach out with his mind. The aft of the ship became an open book to George. His consciousness swept over the minds of the engineering crew and grazed over the thoughts of other crew members as they hurried about their tasks. George did not pry, but gleaned enough from the surface of each mind he touched to get an idea of what they were thinking.

It was always so much easier this way, he reminisced. Where are you, fiend? Show yourself!

He reached out again more forcefully, searching for the Crown of Thorns. As dire as the situation was, George had to admit that a part of him reveled in being able to use powers that had been kept in check for many years. He set the full force of his psychic and magical abilities to searching, rushing across the decks of the ship like a searing desert wind. He searched for any hint of magical energy, any taint of the supernatural. He felt a handful of hints of nascent psychic ability in others on board, most of whom were probably unaware of their own potential. What he didn't find was any hint of the Crown.

George sighed, very Will-like. He knew that the Crown of Thorns would never be so foolish as to place herself in close quarters with the team without having some means of concealing herself, but he had to try anyway. There was nothing left to do now but collect Nails and start searching the ship.

He laid out a plan of action as he walked slowly back to where he'd left the angel. First off was a trip to the sick bay-turned-morgue, to make certain that the Crown's two victims would not rise as vampires. After that, if no other clues presented themselves, George would have to resort to a thorough search of the entire ship. Sooner or later, he knew, they would find her.

He left his mind spread out across the ship as he walked, still looking for any hint of a mind that ran across the Crown. In a way, he would rather have found a consciousness that screamed in terror. At least then he would know where the beast he sought was. With another sigh George let the thought go and resigned himself to the reality at hand. Powerful as the Crown was, she had finally made a mistake. She couldn't hide for long and there was nowhere to run. Feeling slightly better, George rounded a corner and came into view of where he had left Nails.

Nails was gone.

Chapter IV Shall We Dance?

“They’ve been gone a long time,” Crow said wistfully. She was sitting huddled with Hawk in the shadow of the bridge near the fore of the ship. Jake, Marc, Will, Cynthia, Adam and G.R. all sat or stood nearby. The ship’s entire complement of passengers was spread out in clusters and groups across the promenade and sun decks. The gentle rhythm of the waves against the ship mixed with a steadily rising murmur of fear and discontent among the people. The Captain had summoned everyone on board topside under the auspices that something was wrong with the ship’s ventilation system, but by now word of the murders had gotten around.

“You know George. He likes to be thorough,” Will said softly.

“How thorough does he need to be?” G.R. scoffed. “He’s been gone long enough to search every room on the ship.”

“Maybe you should go help out,” snapped Marc.

“I still can’t believe it. I can’t believe she’s here,” Crow whispered.

“I can. George’s robots almost got her before,” said Jake. “This is a perfect opportunity to get to us without worrying about them.”

“You don’t think she’s here by coincidence?” Adam asked warily as he looked around the crowds.

“Not a chance,” answered Jake resolutely. “Out of all the people on board, she killed two who had contact with the team only a few minutes before, and then she leaves her calling card in Cynthia’s room. That was no coincidence, it was a message to us.”

“This sucks,” Marc grumbled and crossed the walkway to lean on the railing and gaze into the night.

“What if she comes up here? We don’t have enough weapons to fight her,” Adam said softly.

Will looked at Adam, then suddenly turned to Cynthia. “Come walk with me,” he said. Cynthia rose and followed him as he led her along the railing away from the group.

“Could you fight her?” he asked suddenly.

“I’m...not sure,” Cynthia answered weakly.

“You’re not sure? Can’t you hold her in place like you did the night we met?”

“Oh, that,” Cynthia said and blushed. Will was referring to a vampire that had leapt at her, and which she had held aloft with telekinesis. “The thing is, that’s kind of...hard to do. It’s harder to hold onto heavy things and it’s really hard to hold things that move around a lot.”

“What are you talking about? You flung that vampire around easily.”

“No, not easily. I can do it, but it takes a lot of effort. I’m not holding things physically, Will, I’m just making them float. I can catch people sometimes, but it helps if...it helps if I’m in their heads at the time, so I know right when they’re coming.”

“So it’s hard to hold things that move and jump around, but you do it to show off?”

“Yeah, kind of. I mean, think about it. What’s easier, to pick up a hundred and fifty pound weight, or to catch a hundred and fifty pound attack dog that jumps at you?”

Will sighed. “Perfect. Do you think you’ll at least be able to help? Without weapons, we don’t stand a chance.”

“Don’t give up on me, Will. I’m not saying I can’t help, just...don’t expect any miracles, ok? I’ve seen how the Crown of Thorns moves and I’d have a hard time catching her. But that doesn’t mean I can’t throw other things at her.” She looked at a nearby lifeboat, secured by cables to the bulkhead overhead. “Like that, for example.”

“All right. We stick to George’s rule about you keeping a low profile, but if the Crown turns up you throw everything you have at her.”

“Got it,” Cynthia said distantly. “Maybe we should go back to the others again.”

“We’ll be ok, Cynthia,” said Will, but he knew she could tell he wasn’t really certain of it.

Nails watched George meander away on his quest to find some means of contacting the bridge. He leaned against a bulkhead as he waited, listening to the continuous roar of the engines and watching the engineers bustle about. After a few moments he decided to move away from the noisy machinery to somewhere quieter but keep his spot in sight in case George returned. A short jog took him to an ideal place where he leaned against another bulkhead contentedly.

He took in every detail around himself as the moments crawled by, fascinated by the scale and complexity of the engineering section. As his gaze swept the walls he caught movement out of the corner of his eyes in a nearby corridor. Someone was walking a stone's throw away down the corridor, in light dim enough that Nails couldn't make out any features. The figure turned suddenly and walked to Nails' right and out of sight. A moment later his sharp hearing picked up a brief scream over the thrum of the engines.

Nails looked for George again. There was still no sign of him, so Nails shrugged to himself and ran for the corridor.

It was an access-way lined with numerous chambers and partitions, giving access to more instrument panels, gauges and networks of pipes. They all faded to a blur as Nails rushed past at breakneck speed. He came to a dead stop about where he guessed the person had been and looked around. The omnipresent rumble of the engines could be felt and heard everywhere, but there was no sign of the missing soul. Straining his hearing, Nails jogged up and down the corridor, still looking for anything out of the ordinary.

Seconds ticked by without Nails discovering anything unusual. His sense of urgency gradually faded to one of confusion. "Hello?" he finally called as he slowed his search and headed again for the first compartment.

As he leaned through the doorway something came swinging at his head out of his peripheral vision. He flinched aside just in time to avoid it. It smashed against the bulkhead and left an ugly dent. In the split-second it took Nails to collect his wits he was amazed to realize that it was nothing more or less than a small and delicate fist at the end of a slender arm.

Even more remarkable was that the arm belonged to a lovely young woman. She was very slender. Her black hair flowed in long locks down her back. Her eyes were a striking pale green and she wore what looked like an antique ball gown in royal purple.

"You're fast," she said bemusedly and withdrew her hand as though punching a dent in a steel bulkhead was as casual an act as blinking.

"I get by," Nails said warily.

"Modest as well. It's very rare to find that in a man these days."

"What can I say? I put on my best face for strangers."

"Oh! Introductions--how silly of me," the woman said. She grasped the hems of her gown between her thumbs and fingertips and gave a flawless curtsy. "I am the Crown of Thorns, and you are...?"

"About to take your head off," Nails said fiercely.

"I would bet you say that to all the girls," the Crown mocked. Nails lunged at her with a straight right punch that she easily stepped away from. She backhanded him across the face as he turned toward her again, breaking his shades, then weaved away from another punch.

"You're tough, too," the Crown observed with a mixture of open admiration and mild annoyance. "Where *did* George find you?"

"I was the prize in a cereal box," Nails quipped as he swung an open hand at her in a chop. The Crown ducked the attack and twirled around him, bashing both fists against his torso as she went.

"The same cereal box you learned your technique from, I'm guessing," she chuckled.

"Would you just hold still?" Nails said with a smirk.

"Hmm, a lazy control freak. You're just an ordinary man after all."

"Look, are we gonna fight, or are you gonna stand there doing your two drink minimum routine?"

"Oh, very well," said the Crown as she swung at Nails' face. He dodged aside, but she caught him square in the cheek with a follow-up from the other hand. Shaking off the blow, he stepped closer to her as she came at him with a third punch and thrust the heel of his palm at her torso, forcing her to break off

the attack and step back several paces to avoid the blow. Nails rushed after her, but pulled back just in time as she spun around in a blur and slashed at his face with something in her hand. No, not in her hand, Nails realized as he fainted back another step, but on her fingers. Where before her right hand had sported a flawless manicure, it was now adorned with slender, gently-curved claws as long as her fingers were.

“That’s a neat trick,” said Nails. “What are you going to do next? Turn invisible and run away?”

“Silly, any competent mage can do that,” the Crown replied. “What I do takes finesse.”

“Killing unarmed vacationers? I don’t see how that would take much finesse.”

The Crown replied by slicing at Nails’ eyes with blinding speed. He faded back away from her, then stopped her following punch by catching her fist with two upheld fingers.

“Ah, ah, ah! A lady never punches!” Nails teased.

“All right then,” the Crown said and buried her claws in Nails’ stomach up to her fingertips.

Stunned, Nails tried to grab the Crown’s wrist, but she was too fast for him, twisting her hand and yanking her claws free with a sickening tearing sound. As Nails clutched at the wounds in his gut the Crown shoved him, sending him stumbling back a step as she leapt into the air and twisted into a spinning kick. Nails had time for a single thought--*Her technique is a thing of beauty*--before her kick connected dead in the center of his chest, sending him hurtling back against a bulkhead. The force of the impact left shallow impressions of his head and shoulders in the metal. He slid down into a kneeling position on the floor.

The Crown came walking toward him with her claws held high, but stopped short when he rocked backward onto the balls of his feet and began to stand again.

“Why won’t you *die*?” she snarled and thrust her claws into his chest where his heart would have been--if he’d had one.

“I guess I’m just stubborn that way,” gasped Nails as he grabbed her wrist with one hand and seized her shoulder with the other. He pivoted on his heels and swung her toward the bulkhead. She twisted in the air to catch herself by landing feet-first against the bulkhead, then pushed off lightly and landed gracefully on the floor again. Nails stared at her in amazement, then tore her claws free with a grunt of pain. The Crown retracted her talons and backed two steps away from him, watching him as he held his wounds. Her expression was more one of curiosity than anything else as he tested bloodless gashes that would have been lethal for a normal person.

“Is that...the best you can do?” Nails wheezed at last. That was when she held her hands out palm up and bright, vicious purple flames erupted from them. Nails leaned back against the bulkhead and steadied himself, ready to run if he had to, then began to circle her as he looked for an opening. The Crown circled with him, brandishing the fire in her hands as it cast everything in the chamber in an eldritch purple light. She smiled at him, the flames in her hands doubled in brightness, and Nails braced himself. He was glaring fiercely at the Crown when she suddenly looked towards the doorway he had come through. He reflexively followed her gaze and saw nothing. When he looked back she was gone.

“Damn!” he muttered, then followed it up with “Ow,” as he gingerly fingered his wounds.

“Nails!” a familiar voice called him from the hallway. Presently George came through the door at a run. A look of shock ran across his face when he saw the shredded remains of Nails’ shirt and the gaping slashes beneath.

“Are you all right, Nails?” he asked urgently.

“I’ve had better days,” was the irreverent answer.

“What happened?”

“Long story short: I saw someone come in here, and when I came by for a look I met a dainty meat grinder dressed up for a costume ball.”

“How bad are your injuries? Do you require aid?”

“I’m a little torn up, but it’s nothing a good vacation couldn’t take care of,” Nails said sarcastically. “No one told me she was so *fast*. That’s the first time I’ve ever met *anyone* I couldn’t keep up with.”

“The Crown of Thorns is centuries old. One does not survive that long without some degrees of resilience and cunning,” observed George.

“You don’t say. I think we should go back to the others straight away.”

“Why?”

“Because she mentioned you by name and she seemed a little annoyed that I wouldn’t keel over dead for her.”

“You’re right. Let’s go,” said George blankly as he turned and led Nails briskly out of engineering.

They stopped at Nails’ cabin long enough for him to exchange the tattered rags he wore for a new shirt and spare sunglasses, then they were off and running for the promenade.

They came out on deck amidships and hustled around the hastily assembled crowd control barriers. After a few minutes of frantic searching Nails spotted the other team members and led George to them.

“Is everyone all right?” George asked urgently the moment he was among them.

“We’re fine, George,” Crow replied with mild confusion etched on her face. “Is something wrong?”

“I ran into your friend. Snappy dresser, but not very personable,” said Nails dryly.

Crow looked like she’d had the wind knocked out of her. “You saw the Crown? What happened?”

“It turns out she’s a very aggressive dance partner,” Nails quipped as he absently placed a hand over his stomach.

“The Crown ambushed Nails. They appear to have ended in a standoff,” George added.

“You *fought* her?” Hawk asked stupidly.

“I sure did. I don’t think we’ll be having a second date, though,” Nails answered.

“This is not the time for levity, Nails,” George barked with rare fierceness and Nails actually flinched. “The Crown is still on board and has made it clear that we are her targets. She could attack at any time, so there is only one solution: I am going to find her myself.”

“Whoa, slow down there, champ. Just give me a few minutes to catch my breath and I’ll be right with you,” Nails said mellowly.

“No,” George answered firmly. “I need you to stay here in case the Crown comes above deck.”

“You can’t be serious!” Marc protested.

“He’s right. What you’re talking about is suicide,” added Crow.

“It is a superior alternative to waiting for her to come here. Everyone stay together. I am going to end this.” George spoke with a hardness the others had rarely heard in him. He turned and headed away, walking quickly toward the bridge.

“This is madness!” said Crow, her own voice laced with fear. “George can’t fight the Crown of Thorns by himself! She’ll rip him to shreds!”

“Don’t be too sure,” Will said somberly.

Inwardly, Cynthia wondered what he meant, but she remained as quiet as the others did while they watched George disappear in the crowds.

Captain Frost was sitting in his chair on the bridge, tensely sipping a cup of tea when a sharp knock at one of the hatches almost made him spill his drink. “What the *hell*?” he blurted angrily as he wheeled his chair around. “Yeoman, get that hatch!”

No sooner had the startled yeoman opened the portal than George slipped unceremoniously onto the bridge. “Captain, I’m afraid I must ask you to turn the ship around and return to port.”

“Are you *mad*?” Captain Frost snapped as he slammed his tea down on the arm of his chair, causing a sizable portion of it to slop out of the cup and splatter on his pant leg. “Are you completely out of your mind? You barge onto my ship, force your way into a murder investigation, instruct me to direct my high-paying patrons to stand outside in the middle of the night and now you very politely ask me to drop everything and return to port? *Do you have any idea what the shareholders will say about this?*”

“Lest you forget, Captain, I *am* your shareholder,” George said slowly. “I am not forcing you to disrupt a business practice out of whimsy. I *am* telling you that there is a murderer on board and that the

ship's crew and passengers will not be safe until they are back on land. You will set your course for Ylelon Bay, and you will do it *now*."

For an immensely long pause, Captain Frost and George locked eyes and stared at one another. Then the Captain said, "Take us home, Number One."

"Thank you, Captain Frost," said George evenly while the first officer barked orders to the helmsman. Captain Frost did not answer, but swiveled around in his chair to glare out the forward view port. George lingered for a moment while the ship turned laboriously in the dark ocean toward Ylelon Bay. Then he left the bridge without another word and headed toward the medical bay at a run.

"This is ridiculous," Hawk muttered. He was sitting with Crow and Adam against the superstructure, toying with one of his knives. It was now long into the night and George had been gone for several hours. There were many angry rumblings and murmurs among the passengers who were still awake. Many others were huddled in groups or laid out on deck chairs, shivering in the chilly sea air. A horde of stewards weaved among the masses, attending creature comforts as they could and providing the more irate patrons with constant assurances that everyone would soon be allowed to return to their cabins.

"Tell me about it. This is the worst vacation I've ever been on," grumbled G.R.. Nails raised a hand to smack him over the head, but he froze when he saw Marc lurch to his feet and tromp to where G.R. was leaning idly against the superstructure.

"You think this is funny, punk?" Marc snapped as he shoved G.R. with both hands, slamming him against the bulkhead. "You think this is a *game*?"

Will and Jake were already on either side of Marc, struggling to restrain him. Marc looked like he wanted to beat G.R. to a pulp. Adam, Hawk, Crow and Cynthia were watching with baited breath.

"What the hell's your problem, man?" G.R. exclaimed furiously. Though he tried to hold himself proudly his pudgy face was bright red with humiliation. Numerous other passengers had noticed the commotion and were watching anxiously.

"Maybe you think you're a clown," Marc continued as Jake and Will fought a losing battle to keep him from advancing. "It's not like you do anything *useful*. Maybe we oughta toss your fat ass to the Crown!"

"Marc, buddy, *stop*," Nails said and stepped between Marc and G.R..

"Stay out of this, Nails," warned Marc, but he stopped struggling. Though Jake and Will let him go, they kept wary eyes on him.

"Can't do that, pal. Sorry," Nails said flatly. "I know you want to beat the tobacco juice out of my cousin. Believe me, I know how tempting it is. But right now, we have got to stick together."

"Stick together? Man, don't you get it?" Marc blurted while gesticulating wildly. "The friggin' Crown of Thorns is here! She's gonna rip us all to pieces and there's nothin' we can do about it."

"Maybe we can think of something together," Adam offered. He rose from his place by Hawk and Crow and walked to stand next to Nails. "I mean, there's eight of us, plus George. Besides, there are almost three thousand people on board. Even the Crown can't like those odds."

Marc turned and jabbed a brutal finger into Adam's chest. "You stay out of this, rich boy! It's bad enough we gotta deal with this, without you sticking your nose into *our* business. Why don't you go crawl into a nightclub somewhere?"

"That's it!" Adam snapped back. "Do you have something to say, Marc? Is there something rattling around inside that big thick head of yours? Because if there is, I think you should just let it out!"

By now Jake and Will were both moving to stand between Adam and Marc and Hawk was on his way to join them. Nails watched impassively from behind his sunglasses, ready to step in if a fight began but also puzzled over what had led to this outburst.

"You know just what I think about you, Mr. '8 o'clock Saturday Night,'" snarled Marc.

"Yeah? Let's go over it again," shot Adam, his voice edged with hurt. "You say I left the team, why? To get rich and live it up, right?"

"I'm not gonna waste time with you, pencil neck," Marc snorted.

"Too damn bad, because I'm tired of suffering in silence for you. I left for the same reason Hawk

and Crow did, you big lout. Do you remember what that was?" Crow, Hawk and Will tensed and held their breaths. In that moment, Cynthia understood.

"Then let me lay it out for you," Adam continued fiercely when Marc remained silent. "I left because Tina *died*, Marc! Do you remember those days? Do you remember Crow sobbing for hours in the Library? Remember none of us being able to leave the Mansion for four days out of sheer depression? *Remember what Will went through?*"

Will bowed his head and closed his eyes with a soft sigh. Cynthia's heart ached for him.

"Remember Erin coming to the Mansion when she got the news, Marc?" Adam continued. "I held her for two hours while she cried. She cried because Tina was her friend and because she was afraid of losing me the same way. That's why I left, Marc. I left because I may have a family soon and I didn't want them to have to live with the fear that their husband and father might not come home someday."

Marc glared at Adam in the silence that followed. For a heartbeat it looked like he might actually start a fight, but he suddenly turned on his heels and stormed away through the crowd. Adam leaned against the superstructure to compose himself, Jake looked very relieved and Will gave another soft sigh.

Where are you, George? Cynthia thought plaintively. The night was quiet again but for the lapping of the waves and the whispers and soft snores of the passengers on the promenade.

George's footsteps thumped hollowly on the plush carpet as he stalked through one of the steerage passageways. After leaving the bridge he had gone on to the sickbay to check on the cadavers. The medical officers had objected to his presence in no uncertain terms. George had responded with his typical accommodating but firm courtesy. Any fears that the two victims might rise as vampires were allayed when it was revealed that the attending doctors were well into the autopsies of the unfortunate young women. George actually breathed a sigh of relief when he learned that the potential problem had been avoided. A vampire's victim could only rise as a vampire if the corpse itself was at least partially intact; it certainly could not happen if the body had been methodically segmented and its heart and brain removed.

Content that he needn't worry about the victims rising in unlife and attacking anyone, George excused himself and moved on. He took to searching patiently through every passageway on each deck, room by room, one at a time. He searched each room thoroughly, walking unobtrusively in cabins and steadily through service rooms while simultaneously sweeping every surface with his mind, magically and psychically. George had learned quite a few tricks for seeing what was hidden in his long years. He put them all to use now in a mental search every bit as complete as a forensic examination.

Hour after hour crawled by without any sign of his quarry. Were it not for the patience he had honed over his lifetime, George would have quickly become discouraged, but as it was he maintained the steadiness of mind to sweep through each section one by one. He knew that the Crown of Thorns was using her bevy of powers to hide from him. On the other hand, George had been chasing the Crown for a long time and knew better than anyone else, maybe even better than the Crown herself, how much she loved to play mind games with her victims. So he was only mildly surprised when, as night melted into early morning and he neared the end of his search, he came around a corner and found her standing in the middle of the hall a short jog away, grinning at him.

For a long moment they both stood fixed in place, motionless. The Crown grinned her fanged grin and George stared at her, expressionless but for the fire in his eyes. Finally, he broke the roaring silence.

"What's the matter? Looking for room service?"

"Oh, dear George, you wound me," the anachronistically garbed vampire said in a voice like silk. "You know I can't resist you. The power, the money, the bald pate--you're every girl's dream."

"You'll forgive me for not feeling flattered," said George. He started toward her.

"You disappoint me," the Crown said in mock sorrow. "Normally you have such flawless manners. It makes me very nostalgic. Now we meet in person and you act so discourteously."

"Don't worry. You'll have plenty more to worry about very shortly." George came to within touching distance of the Crown and stopped, never taking his eyes off of her.

"So, what happens now?" the Crown asked innocently.

“Now, this ends,” George said savagely and swung his right hand upward. A fist-sized orb of blinding white light was clenched in his fingers and he aimed for her head.

The Crown was faster. She slapped his hand aside with ease and the orb flew from it and struck a nearby bulkhead where it exploded in a dazzling flare of color. It left behind an ugly pit of melted metal the size of a grapefruit.

“Try harder,” the Crown said smugly.

“Tell me something,” said George. “Why did you come here?”

“I came for you, George,” said the Crown. Her tone was very believably hurt, but she kept her toothy grin. “You never write or call, but you’d be easy to find even if the scent of your magic didn’t follow you like a summer storm. Imagine my delight when I sensed you had been near the docks. I was thrilled at the thought of seeing you again after our little tussle a few weeks back. The clerks at the travel agency were very accommodating.” She sucked a tooth absently.

“So what did you do? Murder some poor fisherman and chase us out here on his boat?” George’s voice shook with anger.

The Crown winked at him. “Give the man a cigar.”

“I try to avoid smoking anymore. It’s terribly unhealthy.”

“Ever the prude,” said the Crown dismissively as she boldly turned her back to him and wandered a few steps away. She turned back suddenly with a thoughtful expression. “Now you tell me something. Why are you always holding back?” Her gaze shifted to the crater left by George’s spell. “We both know you can do better than that.”

“You’re right,” George said. It was his turn to sound smug. “I’m not at liberty to play my best, so to speak, back home.”

The Crown grinned again. “Careless. You’re giving away secrets. Like the three robots in the Mansion. That was a nice touch, by the way. I never saw it coming.”

“Indeed. Which is where the subjects of my impromptu information exchange and my holding back come together.” George looked at the Crown over his glasses. “It doesn’t matter what I tell you now, because I don’t have the same restrictions here that I do in Ylelon.” As he spoke the air in the hall began to vibrate, almost to hum, with power.

“Is that how it is?” said the Crown. She looked genuinely surprised, but her grin melted back onto her face quite quickly. “Shall we dance?”

Chapter V Fool Me Twice

Nails was the only one still standing on the promenade. Most of the other passengers had long since drifted off to sleep in spite of the cool air. Even the Lonely Winds had finally let fatigue get the better of them. They were curled up under blankets by themselves, except for Crow and Cynthia, who were cuddled up with Hawk and leaning against Will's shoulder, respectively. Will was still awake and keeping an eye on things, but he was drifting more and more toward a dozing state. Only Nails, tireless and patient, kept completely alert as he awaited word from George.

"You can go to sleep if you need to," he said suddenly.

Will gave the tiniest of starts. "What?"

"I said, it's all right to go to sleep," Nails said softly. "I can keep watch until dawn. You should get some rest. You've been through a pretty tiring ordeal."

"It's ok, I've had worse," Will whispered. Cynthia shifted in her sleep, leaning her head against his chest and sighing contentedly. Will blushed.

"You don't need to be embarrassed," Nails chuckled. "She's a wonderful woman. You're very lucky."

"I'm not so sure," Will said, his eyes wandering.

Nails walked to stand in front of Will and crouched. "Let me tell you something, my friend," he said gently. "You have someone in your life with an open and honest interest in you. That's all some people want out of life." Will thought he caught Nails cast the briefest of glances toward G.R..

"I had that once before. It didn't work out so well," Will said sadly.

"Yeah, I've been meaning to talk to you about that." Nails sat cross-legged on the deck and took off his shades. "I wanted to ask you: are you afraid to be happy?"

"I'm not sure I follow you."

Nails sighed. "I know it's not any of my business, but it's pretty clear you still hurt over your loss. But if there's anything I know about, it's that you have to make the most of your time in this life. Has George told you about me?" Will shook his head.

"Keeping his promise. Good man. Let me just tell you this, then. I know what it's like to lose everything you care about. You might say that my loses have made me the man that I am."

Will didn't fully understand, but he nodded politely.

"My point, anyway, is that it's important to appreciate what you have, for as long as you're lucky enough to have it." Nails leaned back and looked thoughtfully up at the starry sky. "Because of who I am, I'll probably never be able to spend my life with anyone. You were lucky enough to find someone who loved you. Yes, it was tragic that you lost her. But you shouldn't waste the life you have now obsessing over her death, or you waste the love she felt for you while she was alive."

He looked Will in the eye and Will had to suppress a shudder. Nails was very amiable, but whenever he met anyone's gaze with his eerie black eyes, that person would get the chilling feeling that Nails was looking more through them than at them.

"I really don't want to sound preachy," he continued with a nod at Cynthia, "but whatever is haunting you, you might have a way to put it to rest now, if you give it a chance."

Will nodded and looked down at Cynthia. "That's assuming we live through this. Assuming George doesn't get himself killed."

"You didn't seem too worried about him before," Nails said quizzically.

"I was upset. I have my own issues with George. But the truth is--well, he's pretty capable. The last time we went looking for the Crown, he held his own very well in the field."

"Wait a second, he went out with you before?"

"Yeah, the last time the Crown was in Ylelon. George and I went looking for her. We thought she was at a brothel called The Dark Side."

"I thought George didn't go into the field," Nails said thoughtfully.

"Normally he doesn't, but the Crown...I guess the Crown kind of gets to him. She makes him

angry, and when George gets angry, he..." Will trailed off and stared out to sea. "When he's angry, he does some scary things."

"Scary things?" What do you mean by--" Nails started and snapped his head to look toward the stern. Inside of a heartbeat he was on his feet.

"What--?" Will began, but Nails silenced him with an upraised hand. Cynthia moaned and stirred and across the promenade Crow sat up out of Hawk's arms with a gasp.

"What's happening?" she asked, eyes wide with fright.

"You feel it too?" Nails asked somberly.

Crow nodded. "Power, magical power. Lots of it, too."

"That means that George found the Crown," Nails said. Cynthia was sitting up now, looking very confused.

"Or the Crown found George," said Will.

"Stay here," Nails said and was gone, running at amazing speed toward the aft of the ship. Will and Crow quickly lost sight of him as he raced into the night.

"What's going on?" asked Cynthia groggily.

"Help us wake the others," Will answered soberly. "I think we're about to have trouble."

George spat a curse as the Crown of Thorns ducked a jet of flame and raced around a corner. Trotting to the intersection, he turned and saw her standing at another junction, facing him. She smiled and blew him a kiss. George responded with a visceral cry of anger and flung an arc of electricity at her. In a blink she was gone down the hallway on George's right, leaving the miniature lightning bolt to hurl past and fizzle into nothing in the distance.

George swore again and set off down the hall as fast as he could go. The Crown had already vanished by the time he reached the intersection.

"Stand and fight, monster!" he raged. His voice echoed in the empty halls.

"Losing your composure, Mr. Manor?" The Crown's voice seemed to emanate from the air all around George. "That's so unseemly."

"Throwing your voice? Isn't that trick a little beneath you?"

"Fundamentals, George. I would have thought you'd appreciate that."

George felt a flickering presence of magic somewhere down the hall behind himself. Whatever the Crown was using to mask her presence, it was darned effective if it could keep her so well hidden from him. *On the other hand*, he mused as he watched the hall, *she's been practicing magic for hundreds of years. That ought to be worth something--*

A hand with a grip like a hydraulic press clamped onto his shoulder from behind and yanked him off of his feet. He was flung backward like a rag doll. He slammed against the bulkhead with a cry of surprise and flopped forward onto his hands and knees.

"I'm too old for this sort of nonsense," he croaked. Soft footfalls thumped on the carpet in front of him and the hem of a purple dress melted into view out of empty air.

"How very disappointing," the Crown berated him. "I had thought that after all this time you would put up more of a fight at the end."

George raised his eyebrows. "Is that what all of this is? You mean to kill me, rather than simply running away, as usual?"

"The game has grown tiresome, George," the Crown replied as casually as if she were remarking about the weather. "It was great fun in the beginning, when you sent your lackeys after me night after night. You are the only man who has ever been able to keep up with me." She began to pace back and forth in front of George.

"But the thrill is gone now. You can't stop me and we both know it." She stopped her pacing and met George's gaze with her pale, feral green eyes. "Anymore, you're just an annoyance."

"I suppose you'd prefer it if I caught you," George said icily.

The Crown flashed her chilling, fanged grin. "Defiant to the end. I'd expect nothing less from the man that has forced Ylelon's creatures of the night to dwell in fear for so many years." With a sharp *snap*

the fingernails on her right hand became claws.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” George said as he sat back on his haunches and rose to his feet. The Crown of Thorns brandished her claws a finger-span in front of his face.

“Greeting death on your feet, ancient one? Or are you going to ply your tricks a while longer?”

“I don’t have to,” George said as a wicked grin crawled across his face.

“What are--?” began the Crown, then cocked her head to listen. Her sharp hearing picked up a rapid whoosh of air just before Nails slammed into her like a freight train. The force of his charge carried them both a stone’s throw down the hall, where they landed in a violent, snarling heap. George was chasing after them before they landed. The Crown was faster than Nails and by far a more experienced fighter, but those advantages meant very little with Nails pinning her to the floor with one knee in her stomach and both of his fists hammering away. She struggled vainly and slashed at his face with her claws, now on both hands.

“Not this time, sister!” Nails snapped as he seized one of her hands, stood quickly and hauled the Crown to her feet by her arm. She set the claws on her free hand against his shoulder to rake down his arm, but before she could, Nails grabbed her upper arm and slammed her backward against the bulkhead with bone-jarring force. No sooner had she staggered forward from the impact than Nails spun on his heels and smashed her face-first against the opposite bulkhead, then hauled her above his head into the air and hurled her to the floor. She landed on her back with a gut-wrenching thud, but in a flash she had kicked up into a crouching position, whereupon Nails dealt her a thunderous kick to her heart. She crashed against the bulkhead again and fell forward onto the carpet, where she lay propped up on an elbow, defeated.

George warily approached the two of them. Nails stood threateningly over the Crown, but she lay still with her head held low and her long hair hanging down, obscuring her face.

“I admit, there have been times when even I did not believe I’d ever see the Crown of Thorns humbled.” He stopped a few steps away from her, half expecting her to lunge at him.

“If I felt like being sentimental, I could prattle on about the hundreds of years you have spent preying on Ylelon,” George continued harshly, with fire in his eyes. “Instead I will say only this: farewell.”

With that he cast a deceptively simple spell. Above his and Nails’ heads in the air, a circular portal of light winked into being. A physicist who saw it might conjecture that it was some sort of localized bending of space, bringing two separate and distant locations together. However it worked, its effect was simple: cool, bright sunlight streamed down out of the portal, as wide as Nails was tall, covering a perfectly round region of the hall directly beneath it in light like that of noon on a clear summer day. The Crown of Thorns was a powerful mage, a cunning warrior and heaven only knew what else. But she was also a vampire, and the touch of sunlight whether direct or piped through a magical window in the air would sear her flesh and char her bones as surely as the fires of a furnace.

Except, nothing happened.

For the first few seconds George hesitated. Were his eyes deceiving him? His confusion deepened when the Crown began to utter a soft, rhythmic sound like weeping. Slowly, she raised her head to peer up at George. Her dark hair fell away, revealing a once-beautiful face now battered bloody and mangled by Nails’ assault. It was then that George realized she wasn’t crying. She was laughing.

“Poor old George,” she giggled despite marred features that made her look like a victim of a mugging. “You always fall for the same trick. You must be very embarrassed.”

Eyes wide in horror, George understood. He turned and began to race down the hall toward the ship’s bow at a very impressive speed. Overhead the portal of light silently blinked shut.

“Uh, George?” Nails called after the rapidly retreating monster hunter. “Aren’t we in the middle of something here?”

“Save the others, Nails!” George shouted back.

Nails shrugged and grasped the Crown by the throat. Lifting her up to eye level, Nails drew back his free fist to crush her skull, but he stopped when her appearance...changed. Her entire countenance--skin, hair, clothing--suddenly shimmered and rippled like the waters of a moonlit pond disturbed by a

pebble. She disintegrated into a thousand tiny motes of light that sank to the carpet and vanished as if they had never been.

Nails was off after George like lightning. He understood now as well: what the two of them had faced was merely a magical simulacrum, a feint meant to distract George. When Nails had left the others to come fight that...that Clone of Thorns, he had thought that his apparent invisibility to magical and psychic senses would help him blindside her. In fact it had, but all doing so had done was leave the others without a protector.

He sped past George and kept going.

Will, Crow and Cynthia had awakened the others. The group now stood together in one of the top deck hallways, discussing their options. Will had instructed them to move inside, so they could freely discuss the situation away from the other passengers.

"I still think it would work," Marc was saying as he paced back and forth among the others. "We wake up everybody on board and get them to riot, or something. That would at least slow her down a little."

"It would only make a bad situation worse," replied Jake. "If a couple thousand people in a confined area succumbed to mob mentality..."

"That would just mean more people would get hurt," Adam said.

"Yeah, not to mention it would be like a buffet for her," added Hawk.

Marc snorted. "You guys got a better idea?"

"We're working on it," Adam said curtly. "Preferably, we'll come up with a plan that doesn't involve panicked vacationers trampling and clubbing each other with suitcases."

"If you ask my opinion, there's really not much that you can do," said the Crown of Thorns. She was standing just outside the circle the Lonely Winds had formed.

Crow gasped and Cynthia held her breath. Everyone backed away slowly as the Crown looked each of them over.

"I see you remember me. How very flattering," she said. Will instinctively reached at his sides for his pistols before he remembered he was unarmed. The others continued to back away slowly as the Crown began to walk forward. Out of the corner of his eye Will saw Hawk produce one of his combat knives from nowhere.

"I want you all to know I've enjoyed our time together," the Crown said as though she were parting with old friends. "The games and the chases through the years have been some of the best times I've ever had."

By now Hawk had slipped silently around behind the Crown. He flipped his knife into the air, caught it by the tip of the blade and flung it at the Crown's head. It spun through the air end over end--before the Crown whirled in place and caught it between her thumb and forefinger.

"But to tell the truth, lately the lot of you have just been irritating," the Crown said smoothly and hurled the knife back at Hawk.

Crow screamed. Hawk reflexively raised his hands in self-defense as the knife crossed the short distance to him before stopping, just in front of him, with an almost musical note and clattering to the floor.

"What--?" the Crown snapped. She looked about at the team, scrutinizing them carefully. Her eyes finally came to rest on Cynthia.

"Yeah, that's right, it was me," she said in answer to the Crown's accusing glare. "Wanna make something of it?"

"A psychic. I should have sensed it," the Crown said. Hawk, Crow, Adam, G.R., Marc, and Jake all stared at Cynthia in amazement.

"Should have, but didn't," Cynthia replied smugly.

"Of course George would have a safeguard to protect his precious children. He's not the fool I took him for after all." The Crown held her claws up before her face as if to admire them.

"Wanna see what else I can do?" said Cynthia. The Crown's head snapped backward suddenly as

if from a mighty blow. When she straightened an enormous bruise marred her forehead. For the first time she actually looked angry, with fangs bared and eyes full of hate.

"You guys might want to jump in. I can't do this all day," whimpered Cynthia.

Without missing a beat Hawk threw his other knife, trusting whatever invisible wall was protecting him to also let him fight back. It did, but it made little difference, for the Crown effortlessly slapped it aside. It spun to the bulkhead where it lodged with the blade buried a finger's width deep in the steel. The Crown dodged gracefully away from a jet of flame launched by Crow and stopped just out of range. "So you want to play with fire," she said as Crow's jacket burst into flame. As she shrieked and struggled to get it off the Crown looked at Cynthia and said, "Now you." Cynthia's sweater, which was tied around her waist after coming in from the cool night, also ignited.

"That should keep you warm," said the Crown through her fanged grin. As Will rushed to help Cynthia the Crown turned to face the nervous group that was Adam, Marc, Jake and G.R.

"Now that the annoyances have been dealt with, we should be able to have some fun," she said, then cocked her head as if listening to some distant sound. Slowly her grin faded and she slumped her shoulders in annoyance.

"Not again."

Nails hurled out of the distance in the hall to land next to the Crown with a resounding thud. "You're starting to bother me," the Crown told him as she grabbed him by the throat and hurled him against a bulkhead.

"What can I say?" quipped Nails as he pressed off from the steel and started back toward her. "I guess I just tend to get under people's skin."

The Crown brandished her claws as he came to meet her again, but she suddenly staggered forward. As she glanced around, Cynthia snapped, "That was my favorite sweater, you big grape!" With the Crown momentarily distracted Nails dashed forward and threw an arm around her neck.

"Oh, *please*," she muttered. She grabbed Nails' wrist, twisted his arm from around her neck and swung him around to send him flying against the bulkhead again.

"Now, if we can continue without any more foolishness," the Crown said, then was cut off as her face snapped around sharply. Very slowly, she turned to glare at Cynthia again.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't listening," quipped Cynthia.

"Yeah, me neither," snapped Crow, who had shed the scorched remains of her jacket. She cast the spell for a jet of flame again. The Crown stepped back to keep out of reach just as Nails pulled himself from the dented partition and came at her again. He threw a straight punch that would have dropped a charging rhinoceros, but the Crown parried it with graceful ease with one set of claws and jabbed the other set into his left flank. Nails' cry of pain was almost drowned out by a gut-wrenching sound, like canvas tearing, as the Crown of Thorns sheared his side under his arm.

"Let him go!" G.R. shouted frantically as he ran to aid his guardian. The Crown caught him under his jaw as he reached her and effortlessly lifted him clear of the deck, with her long talons framing his face.

"I love it when they come right to me," she said.

Nails yanked her claws from his side with a sickening tearing sound, grabbed her other wrist and twisted, forcing her to drop G.R. and face him.

"Listen, sister!" he growled. "You can carve into me like a trout, you can throw me against walls, hell, you can even beat me at a bout of pre-fight banter, but I draw the line at trying to kill my friends, and nobody throws my cousin around but me!"

He shoved against her arm to drive her out of clawing range. The Crown staggered back two steps and stopped. Slowly, she grinned again and looked at each of the team members in turn.

Hawk had recovered both of his knives and stood protectively near Crow, who now wore a look of sharp focus mixed with grim determination. Marc, Adam, and Jake kept together in a loose group, weaponless and wary but willing to help. G.R. was trying not to look too much like he was cowering behind Will and Cynthia. Will's expression was inscrutable, while Cynthia's was full of mischief. Nails was fixed in a fighting stance just out of reach of the Crown.

“There’s some fight left in you, after all,” the Crown chuckled.

“We’re glad you approve,” said Nails snidely.

The Crown looked the team over again. Her gaze lingered on Crow, Cynthia and Nails. “So, are we ready for round two?” she asked coyly.

“The question is if you are,” Cynthia said sharply. Over the last few moments she had begun to sense a new presence approaching. It had the same feel of magic that Crow did, but it was enormously powerful, like an oncoming freight train. Crow and the Crown of Thorns sensed it too, for they looked as one down the promenade in the general direction of the feeling. A heartbeat later Nails looked as well. Cynthia knew there was only one person it could be and was only slightly surprised to learn that the mysterious George was a powerful mage as well as a psychic.

“If that’s how you feel about it, I’ll just be moving on,” the Crown purred as she turned away from the approaching aura of power. Nails lunged at her again; she snarled like an enraged tigress and broke his charge by slashing at his eyes with her talons. Nails pulled back to avoid the injury, but the Crown came so close her claws actually brushed his eyelashes. Having distracted him, the Crown grabbed him by his shirt and flipped him over her shoulder at the anxiously watching group of Marc, Jake, and Adam, who had to scramble to avoid the big fellow.

“Not so fast!” said Cynthia as she hit the Crown with another mental blast. The Crown was thrown just enough off balance that she had to twist in place to stop a fall. Nails bounced off of the floor after being tossed and hurtled into her in a full body tackle that knocked them both prone.

“Knife!” he shouted. Hawk tossed a knife to Nails, who raised it above his head and drove it, with all his might, through the Crown’s skull and into the floor. He stood up quickly. The sudden silence after the battle was deafening.

“Did we just--is she really--?” Crow asked. The team stared disbelieving at the sight of the slender corpse, pinned through the head to the deck with the combat knife. A feeling of near elation fell across them just before the body seemed to ripple like pond water.

“Oh, son of a--!” Nails swore as the second clone’s body disintegrated into motes of magical energy that faded into nothing like campfire sparks.

“What the hell? What is she doing now?” demanded Hawk.

“Relax, it’s just a trick,” Nails explained. “She got me and George with the same thing. It’s some kind of copy made out of magic.”

Will turned to Cynthia. “You big grape?” She shrugged. An uneasy silence hung in the air as George finally arrived at a quick run.

“George? What exactly just happened?” Hawk asked.

“Everyone go to my cabin. I will be in shortly.”

“George, what--” began Will.

“My. Cabin. Now.”

Will glared bullets at George’s back as the others filed quickly down the hall. Nails was first, stoically holding the shreds of his shirt closed over the gaping wounds in his side. When everyone else was gone, Will left George alone. He stood there, looking at the spot on the rug where the Crown of Thorns’ second clone had been, for ten full minutes. Then he quietly left to join the others.

He found the others enjoying the comforts of his cabin, just as he wanted it. Marc, naturally, had found the liquor and had distributed it to the others.

“Is she gone?” Crow asked softly as George slipped into the room and pulled the door shut.

“Yes, she’s gone,” replied George soberly.

“You can’t be sure of that,” Jake began.

“Trust me, Jake,” George said calmly. “She is gone and will not return.”

For a long moment there was silence. Then it was Marc, of all people, who spoke up.

“Dude!” he said suddenly. “That was *awesome!*”

George crooked an eyebrow in confusion. “Beg pardon?”

“We just fought off the *Crown of Thorns*, dude!” was the almost ecstatic reply. “Ok, actually, it

was some sort of copy, and mostly Legs and Nails that did it. But still, this is the coolest thing that's ever happened!"

Hawk was sitting with Crow at the foot of George's bed, playing with his knives. "That *was* pretty amazing. 'Course, I probably only think that because I almost died," he said through a wide grin. "That was you, right, Red? How'd you do it?"

Every eye in the room fixed on Cynthia, who blushed as red as her hair. Marc clomped to stand in front of her in her chair so quickly the imported beer in his glass nearly sloshed over the side.

"Izzit true what the bitch said, Legs? Are you really psychic?" he asked bluntly.

This is it, George thought tensely. *He'll start raving about her being a freak, and then--*

"That is so *cool!*" blurted Marc.

Huh? thought George, his confusion plain on his face.

"Why didn't you tell us you were a superhero? We can take on anybody now!" Marc prattled on. An infectious smile ran around the room as the realization set in. Nails had managed to survive a fight with the Crown's clone, that much was clear. But were it not for Cynthia, likely several, if not all of them, would be dead now. The team's least prominent warrior had saved all of their lives.

"I asked her to keep her abilities a secret until the proper time," said George levelly.

"Well, you sure picked the 'proper time,' Red," Hawk said, flipping one of his knives over his fingers. "I wasn't looking forward to eating my own knife."

"I don't understand. None of you are concerned about this?" asked George.

"What's to be concerned about, George?" Crow replied. "So you and Cyn had an ace up your sleeves. This one saved our lives."

"Yeah, man. These three just drove off the *Crown of Thorns*. That's something to write home about!" put in Jake.

"You're the field commander, Will," George said. "How do you feel about this?"

Will calmly sipped his drink. "I have nothing to add. Even though most of us were unarmed, our members managed to stop the worst monster in Ylelon's history in her tracks."

Not the worst, George thought.

"I'm still confused. What the hell were we fighting?" Hawk said forcefully.

"A doppelganger of some sort, I believe," George replied with embarrassment in his voice. "I should have seen it before. The Crown of Thorns created a simulacrum that possessed muted copies of her own abilities. I doubt that she was ever even genuinely on the ship to begin with. We are very fortunate that she apparently did not see us as worth coming after herself. Nails? How are your wounds?"

"The way I look at it, I now have much less wind resistance," Nails moaned through a weak grin. "Give me a while, I'll be ok."

"Very well." George walked to the bar and poured himself a brandy. He took a long draught before returning to stand among the others. "We should put into port before midday today. When we are done here, I will have the captain let everyone return to their rooms. Everyone will receive a full refund as well as extra compensation for their discomfort. No one need know what happened here tonight. Since the Crown of Thorns apparently did not regard us as worth trying to kill in person, we shouldn't need to worry about her retaliating in the immediate future. That said, there is one other issue I'd like to address." George walked to stand by Cynthia. "When you first came to join us, Cynthia, I asked you to keep your abilities secret."

Cynthia looked at George but said nothing.

"Since that time you have kept to this creed--mostly. Tonight you revealed your power and in doing so, may have saved lives."

"Make that a definite," said Hawk.

George nodded soberly. "While tonight hardly represented ideal circumstances, it sounds as if you showed remarkable initiative in keeping the others safe." He turned to the rest of the team. "When Cynthia joined the team, I didn't ask for consensus as I normally do. Is there anyone here who laments this prerogative?"

"Huh?" said Marc.

“Leggy redhead on team good or bad?” Jake explained.

“Oh. Good!” Marc gave a thumb up.

George smiled. “Outstanding. We can speak more of this in the morning. In the meantime I suggest you all get some rest. You’ve been through quite an ordeal.”

“I’ll say. I’d forgotten how much fun you guys are to hang around,” Adam teased, then was pelted with pillows and friendly insults.

George excused himself and left the others to make peace with what they had been through. He did not let his concern show on his face until he had left the room.

The *Pale Wave* docked in Ylelon Bay just before noon. A great many of the passengers were outraged at the manner in which their vacation had been ruined, but many more were content with the very generous compensations that were quickly processed and given out by their travel agents. Various press agents leapt into action to blunt the edge of what could very easily become a public relations nightmare for *Pale Wave* and everyone associated with her. The families of the two victims were assured that an investigation seeking their killer was ongoing and most everyone else was quick to forget the ordeal.

The Lonely Winds returned to George Manor in the early afternoon. In spite of all that had happened they were for the most part in high spirits. George officially gave them the next day and a half off, then retired to his Study. Adam had promised to remain until the next day to catch up with the others. The last George saw, Adam was leading the team in singing some of his greatest hits in the Rec Room while Jake and Marc babbled excitedly about the events of the trip to an astonished Sullivan.

With a quick look around to be certain he was alone, George unlocked his Study and slipped inside. Once the door was locked again he went directly to his ancient, enormous journal and began to write.

Tuesday, October the Nineteenth, 2043 T.E.

As is often the case, my most recent attempt to add some sense of normalcy and comfort to the lives of my charges has backfired. The Crown of Thorns made her presence felt during our sabbatical and two innocent people paid for it with their lives. This is my fault, since for a second time in a row I was deceived by a simple feint.

Yet despite my failing, a new beacon of hope shines for the team. Cynthia saved the others’ lives when she revealed herself to them as a powerful psychic. My charges seem, to my great surprise, to be very encouraged by this. Apparently the fact that they faced the Crown of Thorns (or, at least, a pale imitation) without suffering even a single casualty has greatly increased their confidence and sense of camaraderie.

In the meantime, team unity seems to be the order of the day. To my astonishment none of the team members seem even the least bit unnerved to learn of Cynthia’s hidden power. I give them too little credit after all they have seen, I suspect. On that note, I will adjust their training and step up Cynthia’s regimen. With any luck she will be joining them in the field in a few short weeks, offering them better combat support than they have ever dreamed of having.

George laid his quill down and took a deep breath to steady himself. After a moment’s thought, he decided to go to the Kitchen for a glass of wine. When he stepped out of the Study he was startled to find Nails standing in the hall, waiting for him.

“That’s going to take some getting used to,” George said dryly.

“What is?” asked Nails.

“I keep an eye, so to speak, on the inhabitants of the Mansion. You are a blind spot in that eye, if you will.”

“I get it. Psychic humor. Hey, I wanted to ask you a question, if you don’t mind.”

“What’s that, Nails?” George asked as they walked toward the stairs.

“I was talking to Will earlier. He said you went with him once to fight the Crown.”

“I see. Your question?”

“You keep talking about these rules you can’t violate. If you fight or use magic, there will be consequences. If that’s true, why did you go after the Crown of Thorns?”

“That, my young friend, is a mark of shame for me. The Crown of Thorns...agitates me. She has a talent for pushing me to extremes of action I would not normally fall to.”

“Yeah, Will said something like that. You got so mad, you put everyone here at risk just because you lost your temper?”

“As I said, Nails, it is a mark of shame,” George said slowly. “Fortunately, I kept myself in check, and there have been no repercussions. It wasn’t the first time I acted out of line.”

Nails smiled. “That’s good to know. Anyway, I gotta get back. Adam promised he’d play ‘Then It Was.’ Want to join us?”

“I think I will. It’s been too long since I enjoyed an Adam Walker concert.”

They walked to the Kitchen where George poured them both glasses of a very fine wine before they went to the Rec Room. Eric found them as they went through the Foyer and tagged along, quacking happily. Everyone, even Marc, had gathered in the enormous recreational area to listen to Adam’s legendary crooning and guitar skills. For the first time in quite a while, George felt at home and peaceful among his charges.