

The Demon Cross

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AVALON The
& COMPANY Case Files
of Rennie
Avalon

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One

PROLOGUE:

The six men held six candles in a dark place, five tiny flames in a circle around the sixth, their combined light accentuating the inky blackness beyond their bounds. The wavering candlelight didn't dispel the ground-in labor of their worn jeans, of their workboots and plaid workshirts, of their leathered faces and careworn eyes which reflected no light.

But the light loved the man in the middle. It shone in his short blond hair, clung to his sunkissed skin, reflected from his clean white t-shirt and his firm eyes.

“Brethren,” the blond man said. “For our families. For our people. For the good of all we hold dear.”

The folding table at his side held a penknife, a small brass bowl, and an open book covered by a cloth. He set his candle down and unfolded the penknife. Without a pause, he drew the blade across his thumb. Blood ran into the bowl.

Each man in turn approached the table and offered his thumb to the blade of the knife. The blood of six men mingled in a dark pool at the bottom of the bowl.

The blond man dipped two fingers in the blood and daubed it on his forehead, one red streak over each eye. He dipped his

fingers again and anointed each of the other men in turn.

The men now surrounded the table, each setting his fingers on the edge of the bowl and holding the candle in the other hand. The blond man looked from man to man, meeting their eyes.

“One of us,” he said, “will be the host. One will be the sacrifice. To whoever that martyr turns out to be... I salute you. We all do.”

With his free hand, he pulled back the cloth and exposed the book, its archaic lettering faded against the yellowed paper.

“We begin.”

He read with practice, words in a language familiar to none. The syllables sounded like curses, threats, savage growls and challenges meant to be wrung from other throats.

And between his words, behind them, around them, a hissing started. A breathy murmuring like the approach of a swarm of locusts. The air moved. The candle flames wavered and danced.

“Now,” said the blond man, and all six pushed their fingers from the edge of the bowl to the blood at the bottom. The reading continued, louder now, as the droning whisper rose and whipped around them, tearing and clutching at their clothing.

And as the blond man’s voice caught and ground on the harsh sounds – something leapt from the bowl.

Candles flew as bodies instinctively pulled back. The room sank into darkness, as the voice of the wind filled the space left by the candlelight. Men screamed. And something speaking in the wind hissed a laugh. Then the wind died like the closing of a window.

Silence.

The hot wick of a single candle on the floor flared to life again and was lifted by a bloody hand. The blond man surveyed the dark place.

Four more men slowly drew themselves up from the floor. The sixth did not; his eyes were rolled back into his head, and blood crept slowly down his cheek from his open mouth. The survivors stood in a ring around the corpse.

One man found his voice. “Did it... we... did we...”

The blond man smiled slowly, illuminated by the candle he held.

“We did. The herald is here.”

By the time I swung into the parking lot, it was 8:20am and I was late for an appointment in my own office. Not a sure sign of professionalism.

I hustled through the foyer doors to where Amy answered phones for five of the businesses in the building, mine included. She hung up just as I got to the reception desk.

“Morning, sister,” she said. “You’re appointment’s waiting.”

“Missed the alarm,” I said. “Beth was up with nightmares.”

“What about?”

“Drowning,” I lied. “She’s afraid of the water.”

“Poor thing,” she said.

“How long’s he been here?”

“Walked it right when the clock said eight,” she said. “He didn’t want coffee or anything. Been sitting quietly on the chair outside your office ever since. Have you met him?”

“No,” I said. “First impressions?”

“Old. Damn old.”

I flipped my hair onto the outside of my jacket collar. “All right. Thanks for covering.”

“Just call me a private eye in training.”

I walked around the corner and down the hall to where my one-room office sat between those of a paralegal and a web designer. On the chair outside the door labelled “Avalon & Company, Investigations and Personal Security,” waiting patiently as if he had all the time in the world, sat Ernst Vielstich, my 8AM appointment. Amy was right; he was beyond old and well into damned old. He rose slowly as I walked up with my hand extended and my not-yet-hired smile on.

“Mr. Vielstich, I’m so sorry to keep you waiting.”

He was small, only just cresting five feet, and thin like the years had sucked the marrow out of him. His emaciated skull was topped with a surprisingly strong head of white hair. He grip was measured and firm, but he cocked his head to one side as I unlocked the office door and ushered him in toward the client chair facing my desk.

“Please, have a seat,” I said as I slid into my chair and nudged my purse under the drawers. “Can I have Amy get you some coffee?”

He lowered himself deliberately into the client chair and sat leaning forward on the edge, his eyes still crinkled with some confusion.

“I.. am sorry, but...” his voice was low and unassuming and bore the subtle stamp of a long-abandoned German accent.

I changed my expression from the “not-yet-hired smile” to “open-and-listening.”

“I had thought,” he said, “that I had an appointment with Mr. Rennie Avalon.”

“Almost, I said. “Rennie Avalon is not a mister. That’s me.”

The confusion was replaced with gentle concern. “I am sorry,” he said. “I did not realize that ‘Rennie’ was a woman’s name.”

“That’s okay, it’s not common for either sex. And have I pronounced your name correct—“

But Vielstich was raising himself to his feet. “I am sorry,” he repeated. “I did not mean to take your time.”

By the time he gained his footing, I had come around the desk to him. At five-foot-eight, I’m not used to towering above anybody. I stood a few feet off so that my chin wouldn’t rest on my chest.

“Mr. Vielstich, please don’t assume that I can’t do what you need because I am a woman. I’ve been in this business for seven years, and I’ve never run into a situation where my gender has been a problem.”

The side of his mouth cracked in a smile; his teeth looked strong and real. “Forgive me, Miss Avalon,” he said. “It’s not a question of unsuitability, but one of chivalry. I am old-fashioned; I do not wish to place a woman in danger.”

“I’m old-fashioned too,” I said, “and I don’t want to have to arm-wrestle you to prove how tough I am. Please sit down.”

His smile broke across to the other side of his mouth. He nodded and settled back into the chair. I took my own seat again.

“Let’s make a deal,” I said. “You tell me what it is that you need. I’ll tell you if I can handle it.”

“Very well,” he said. “It is this: I have lost a book.”

Two

“YOU’VE LOST A book?” I asked.

“It was taken from me,” said Mr. Vielstich.

“Stolen,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Valuable?”

“It has never been appraised,” he said, “but it is very old and, to the best of my knowledge, wholly unique.” He unfolded a sheet of carefully-creased notepaper before handing it to me. “Three inches thick by fourteen inches tall by nine-and-one-half inches wide,” he said, echoing the description he had written for me on the paper in a thin, meticulous hand. “Bound in embossed leather, with a brass clasp. It was printed in Dusseldorf in 1713.”

“An antique,” I said. “Have you talked to the police?”

“They regretfully were unable to help because I have no documents showing ownership, nor any proof of its worth. It cannot then be considered larceny.”

“And what,” I asked, “is it worth?”

“It is of great personal worth to me. As you say, it is an antique. It is also an heirloom, with great sentimental value to me.”

Which was absolute bullshit, but he lied well and without apparent malice, so I let it slide.

“Did you see it get stolen?”

“You are asking if I saw the person who took it,” Vielstich said. “No, but I have reason to believe it was this man.”

He handed me a second sheet of paper, this one ripped hastily from a notepad and jotted by a different hand. Above a phone number was a name: “Hans Mueller.”

“A fellow German?” I asked.

“An American of German descent,” he said. “Mr. Mueller visited me eleven days ago, having discovered that I possessed this book, and offered to buy it from me. When I refused, he was very clear that he intended to possess it. Two days ago, when I returned from a doctor’s visit, the book was very visibly absent from its customary location.”

I looked from Vielstich’s careful notations of the book’s vital statistics to the uneven handwriting of Hans Mueller.

“How did you come to find me, Mr. Vielstich?”

“You were recommended by the friend of a friend,” he said. “I do not know who. I am not being evasive. An acquaintance of mine knew your name from a friend who had been well served by hiring you, but I don’t know that other client personally, and if I was told his name, I have forgotten. I am getting old.”

I pictured this book in its timeworn leather cover, page edges greyed by hundreds of years and who knew how many hands.

“I don’t know what you know about private investigators,” I said, “but it’s not like they show on TV. I should easily be able to find Mr. Mueller, but if I attempt to recover your book without some proof that I am actually reclaiming stolen property, I could be seen as committing a felony.”

“I would not expect that, of course,” he said. “I would be most appreciative, however, if you could at least ascertain for me the whereabouts of the book. I may then be able to negotiate and persuade them to return it into my keeping.”

“And this is all for an heirloom.”

“Yes.”

I had to hand it to him, he lied with a sincerity that most

professional conmen can only dream of.

“I see no reason why I can’t work for you, Mr. Vielstich,” I said.

After we had settled the matter of the retainer, Mr. Vielstich excused himself and I got to work by booting up the computer.

Hans Mueller wasn’t listed in any phone directory in the state. However, the phone number he had left belonged to one Philip Castler, whose address put him in the heart of a lower middle-class neighborhood on the west side.

The name rang no bells for me, but a search through the online newspaper archives soon educated me. Philip Castler was one of the founding members of StormFront, which one article characterized as “the region’s most consistent white supremacy group” and one letter-to-the-editor characterized as “hatred walking undisguised among us.” Castler himself wasn’t characterized by anyone at all, and was only mentioned twice by name. The first was as an organizer of a pro-white recruiting rally which the city had found some reason to block four years ago. The second identified him as the plaintiff in an assault case in which four young “people of color” had taken exception to the fliers Castler had posted advertising that rally. Castler then withdrew the charges, claiming that it was a lost cause “in a world that bent over backwards to accommodate minorities.”

Ah, the wonders of modern technology. In the old days, it would have taken me an entire day of research to find out that I had just agreed to step into a giant dogturd of a case.

I spent the afternoon doing busywork on a marital infidelity investigation that had been going on longer than most marriages last, and made it back to the house just before Beth got home from school. Autumn weather hadn’t really struck yet, and the Gordell

sisters were on the porch swing, taking in the afternoon sunshine.

The Gordell sisters were Mrs. Janice Atlee (widowed) and the former Mrs. Nell Burkett (divorced). When I was pregnant with Beth and just setting up my business, I had bought a fair-sized duplex and had actively sought senior citizen tenants without much family to speak of. The deal I had offered was simple: They could live there rent-free, paying their own utilities, and in return they would be the permanent on-call babysitters when my erratic schedule kept me away from home. Being on a limited income and having no grandchildren of their own, the Gordell sisters had worked out perfectly, becoming Beth's surrogate grandmothers next door.

"You're home early," Nell said as I unlocked my front door. "Are you back to work this evening?"

"Yeah, I need to be somewhere by five," I said. "So I decided to have supper with Beth a little bit early."

Beth came up the sidewalk right then, all pigtails and missing teeth. She waved goodbye to the friends she'd walked home with, trotted over onto the Gordell sisters' side of the porch to give them both a hug, then followed me into the house.

"You have to work again tonight, huh?" she said, hanging her schoolbag on the hook inside the door.

"Fraid so," I said. "Mind if we have supper a little early?"

"Depends. What are we having?"

"I dunno. Squid, maybe. Something with tentacles."

"Sure," she said. Her tongue showed through the gaps in her smile. She was a perfect child, even-tempered and good-natured, and by daybreak she never remembered that she had screamed and sweated her way through some inarticulate terror in her mother's arms the night before.

We chose spaghetti with pesto sauce. It was the closest thing to tentacles we could find in the house.

Three

BY 4:30 WE were finished with dinner, the dishwasher was loaded, and Beth was over with the Gordell sisters with her homework. By 4:50, I was on Philip Castler's street on the west side. The houses in the neighborhood were at least sixty years old, and looked it. Almost all of them were two stories, but the postage stamp lots had kept the value down, and developments of cheap cookie-cutter homes in the immediate area over the following decades had attracted low income families of various ethnicities. Whenever you heard about a shooting or some other gang violence on the radio, you expected to hear "on the west side" by the end of the sentence.

Across the street and two lots up was a vacant house for sale. I backed the car into the driveway just far enough that I could watch the Castler home around the untended hedge. The front of the house was about a year past repainting, and the lawn, while mown and green, was spackled with dandelions and broadleaf. A minivan was parked in a rutted-out section of lawn beside the empty carport. The interior lights were on downstairs, and it was still early enough in September that only the screen door was closed in the front. I could hear a television, and occasionally children's voices.

I left the radio on NPR and kept an eye on the house.

At 5:35, a ten-year-old Ford half-ton pickup pulled in under the carport. I turned off the radio. The driver was a man with thick black hair and a full black beard, dressed in workboots, Levi's and a denim workshirt rolled up to his hairy elbows. From the fact that I heard a young voice call him "Dad" when he walked through the screen door, I deduced that this was likely Philip Castler himself.

I watched the house as other carports filled up and down the block. Shadows lengthened.

Just after six-twenty, Philip Castler stepped outside again, this time with a girl younger than Beth skipping around his heels. Behind him came a woman around Castler's age with shoulder-cut tawny hair, and a skinny boy about twelve in soccer shorts and cleats. While Castler unlocked the minivan's side door to let the kids in, his wife flipped on the porchlight and locked the front door. Castler got behind the wheel, and the Castler family went out for a night on the town.

I locked my cell phone, Palm, and anything else unnecessary in my car and crossed the street. I had changed into black denim pants and a charcoal turtleneck, and my hair was ponytailed back and gelled to dull the blonde glint.

I didn't even stop at the front door; I could see the brass lock for the deadbolt above the doorknob. The back door was at the far end of the carport, and the truck blocked any view from the street. The only lock on that door was the one in the knob.

I glanced in the curtained window of the door. The kitchen was small, lit by the light coming from the front room. I stood on tiptoe and put my ear against the glass. The house was still.

I crouched beside the doorknob and pulled my locksmith's tools from my back pocket, the one thing I hadn't left behind in the car. The door was original to the house, and the lock was original to the door, so in under a minute I was in the kitchen, shutting the door quietly behind me. The dinner dishes were in the sink. The only doorway led to the living room, so I took it.

There's a sameness to living rooms, especially among those on

subsistence budgets. Functional couch and chair, facing a TV newer than anything else in the room. A coffee table just the right distance from the couch for an adult male to prop his feet on it while resting his remote-holding hand on the arm of the couch. Carpet that held just a bit of everything ever spilled on it, no matter how well cleaned.

But the display of flags over the entertainment center wasn't typical: The stars and stripes, the Confederate flag, and the swastika surmounted by a stern-looking eagle. And most family rooms didn't have a framed portrait of Adolf Hitler bathed in a Christ-like aura, even in this neighborhood.

Well, it looked like I had the right address, anyway.

The living room opened onto the short hall that led to the front door. The other end of the hall went up a set of stairs. Opposite the living room was a catch-all room with a chest freezer; at the back of that, a doorway led into a laundry room, with a further door leading into a half-bath at the back of the house. From the layout, I judged that the functions of the rooms had been juggled several times since the house was first constructed.

The stairs creaked as I mounted them. At the top was a full bathroom with the only tub in the house. There were five towels on bars. I suppose the fifth could have been for Mrs. Castler's hair when she got out of the shower. Or not.

To either side of the staircase were two bedrooms. I decided to survey them first, then go back for a more thorough search. To the left, the first one was a little girl's room, complete with Barbie and her friends (though, I noted, none of her friends of color). The next was the master bedroom. His side of bed had a pair of beat-to-hell slippers on the floor and an ashtray on the bedside table; hers had a hairbrush and a Bible.

The first door to the right of the staircase smelled like the twelve-year-old boy. The walls were covered with posters of racecars and their drivers. It's the one sport that's predominantly and obviously white.

The fourth bedroom was the only one that was locked. Nothing attracts a curious private eye like a locked room, so I made quick work of the lock and went in.

From the looks of it, the last room was usually an unused guest room. There were no pictures on the wall, and boxes labeled “Christmas” were stacked in the open closet. But there was a half-full military-style duffel bag at the foot of the bed, there was a handful of receipts and pocket change on the dresser, and the bed was casually made. The unused guest room was being used.

I turned on the bedside lamp and started on the dresser. I didn’t need to go far. The top drawer contained nothing but half a pack of gum, and a large rectangular object wrapped in a black garbage bag. I could smell the old leather covers before I got it out of the bag.

The warm brown leather was worn soft, with designed around the corners and the hint of a title once embossed on the front, now rubbed off. From the cover and the edges of the yellowed paper came that smell of history that only books older than your grandparents have, a rich smell of dust and old wood pulp. And, like all big books, it was a heavy sonofabitch.

So. Now I had Vielstich’s book, right here in my hands. I was already committed a felony by coming in to take a look around. Should I commit another one by returning it to him? Even someone who breaks the law frequently should never get into the habit of doing so casually.

The debate suddenly became moot. The bedroom window faced the street, and just then I saw an old sedan pull up to the curb. A blond man in the passenger seat leapt out and looked straight up at the window.

Busted.

Four

THE BLOND MAN shouted and charged for the house. Two other men jumped from the driver's side and the back seat.

I only had a split second to decide, and the decision was to toss the book onto the bed. There was no way I was getting out the front door with it. If I made it out at all.

As I raced out of the room and around the head of the stairs, I heard a key shoved into the front door lock.

I swung into the little girl's room. Barbie's house was on a table that half-blocked the window. I shoved it to the side and flipped the window's latch. Up it went. I kicked out the screen, and it skittered down the slant of the carport roof.

I heard the front door bang open and the first pair of feet charge up the stairs. I squeezed myself out the window and, as cautiously as I dared, settled my weight onto the corrugated fiberglass roof. I guessed as well as I could where the supports were, and half-shuffled, half-slid to the edge. I turned myself to climb down onto the plastic garbage can below, and as I did, I caught sight of my pursuer leaning out the window after me. His face was hidden in silhouette, but I could see the severe crewcut of his blond hair, and the cords in his fit neck and athletic shoulders. This wasn't a beer-bellied halfwit who parroted racial epithets to cover for his own personal inadequacies; this was a fighter.

My feet hit the concrete drive already in motion, and I took off across the lawn, headed for my car. The man upstairs bellowed to his companions, who apparently hadn't gotten to the second floor yet. Just as I got off the Castler property, the first one barrelled back out the front door.

I'm a good runner, but I knew that I didn't have enough of a lead to get to my car, fish out my keys, unlock it, unlock the glove compartment, and pull out my gun before at least two of the three caught up. So I switched from sprint mode to distance mode, headed right past my car with an added surge of anxiety, and made for the corner of the block. If I could pull far enough ahead, maybe I'd lose them by jumping fences and hiding in backyards.

I could hear two sets of heavy footsteps after me, men unaccustomed to sudden exertion and already starting to fall behind. At this rate, I would be completely lost to them within two blocks.

I turned the corner easily and kept up the pace, feeling the sweat start to lubricate my limbs and cool my adrenaline rush in the evening air. Night had all but fallen, and the street lights were on at the intersections, but my clothing was dark, and if I could stretch my lead to a full block's length, losing the tiring men behind me would be a piece of cake.

Then I heard, drowning out their twin footsteps, a motor. The car that had pulled up at the house.

I lost half a second focusing back over my shoulder. The two men had just rounded the last corner, and the sedan almost hopped the curb as it braked beside them, the blond man at the wheel. The panting duo hopped in the two passenger-side doors, and the engine roared forward like it was in a drag race.

Two men of average fitness, I could outpace. Maybe even the athletic blond. But there was no way in hell I could outrun six cylinders from Detroit.

The city blocks were thin across the top and deeper going north-south. I sprinted across the top of another block as the car shifted gears. They were practically riding up my ponytail by the

next corner, and I swerved right down the sidewalk, hoping that they'd turn too slow and need an extra second to correct. Like an extra second was going to help much in the grand scheme of things.

A few houses down the block, a pickup truck was parked by a convertible in the driveway, with young men filling both vehicles, talking boisterously over the top of loud music. Mexican music.

Latinos.

With white supremacists behind me, it seemed like a match made in heaven.

I had enough breath to yell, "Hey! Help!" without slackening my pace. That got their attention, and all eyes were on me as I reached the truck.

"Those guys," I gasped as the car pulled abruptly to the curb behind me. "They're after me. They're Nazis. White power."

"Say what?"

I heard three doors on the sedan open behind me. None of the young men in front of me were looking at me now. I turned, my back to the truck.

The three members of my fan club stepped slowly onto the curb, like men trying to nonchalantly walk a minefield.

"Hey," said the Latino leaning against the driver's door of the truck.

"Hey," said the blond man. Everyone stopped moving. I could see the muscles working in the blond's neck.

"Can we, ah, help you wi' something?" said the Latino, whose superior vehicle apparently made him head dog.

One of the blond's companions, a shorter fellow with jowls crowding around a spotty goatee, raised his hands to waist height in a half-hearted conciliatory gesture.

"We don't want any trouble," he said. "She needs to go with us."

The third of my pursuers, long and bulky like a brown bear, stood slightly back and tried to flex his hands inconspicuously.

A long silence. I could feel several minds weighing the options around me. I was clearly Caucasian, but at least the gel slicking back my hair took the sheen off the blonde; I didn't quite look like Marilyn Monroe wandering into the barrio.

Finally, the Latino spoke. "She say you all Nazis. Like you all hate people ain't white."

"Not us," said the blond.

"Good," said the Latino. "'Cause here in America, we all get along, right?"

"Sure."

The Latino pointed to Goatee. "You feel that way, right?"

"You bet," he said in a voice that didn't invite friendship. The Latino caught it.

"'Cause you know, I love white girls. Take 'em out drinking, maybe back to her place, start feeling her up —"

Goatee roared and charged at him before the bear standing behind him could catch him. Immediately, two guys hopped out of the back of the truck, and two more vaulted out of the convertible. Blond and Bear dove forward to defend their friend even before the first blows had landed.

And all bloody hell broke loose.

Me, I was just the damsel in distress. No one paid attention as I edged around the cab of the truck. Could I make it back to my car, on the far side of two blocks away? I could feel a stitch lying in wait under my ribcage, ready to start if I tried running again. And I didn't trust this brawl to last long enough for me to walk leisurely back to my vehicle.

I glanced into the cab of the truck. On the front seat, on top of a denim jacket, was a cell phone. I reached in and grabbed it, but before I could even think of who to call, the faint but growing sound of a siren made itself heard over the scuffling and dull sound of bone hitting meat. Apparently someone in the neighborhood had already called the police.

"Hey, there's my ride," I said to no one in particular.

Five

TONY DRUMMED HIS fingers on his desk and looked at me. “We’ve got to stop meeting like this.”

Detective Antoine “Tony” Fleming was a slender, fit African-American who preferred to be called “black.” He and I had first met two years ago, when I was trying to find a missing woman for her parents, and he was trying to track the identity of a burned corpse found with smashed teeth and severed fingertips. We ran into each other practically on the suspect’s doorstep, and together came through a gunbattle and standoff that followed. The experience gave us a strong sense of camaraderie that lasted for about a week, until professional duties interfered. I hadn’t seen him since.

Now thanks to a ride back to the station with the Boys In Blue, I was sitting across his desk from him in the detective squadroom at ten PM.

“Stormfront’s not a group you want to poke around in alone,” he said.

“Somehow,” I said, “having a black man with me probably wouldn’t help.”

“I’m not volunteering,” he said. “I’ve got my own job, and I’d rather spend my time off with my kids than chasing neo-nazi punks.”

A framed picture on his desk showed two five-year-old boys in

lifejackets, smiling as wide as their faces would allow.

“Are these the twins?” I said. “They got big when I wasn’t looking. Everyone doing well? How’s Marcia?”

“Left me in March,” he said. “Got it finalized over the summer.”

“Oh.”

“This job doesn’t accommodate a real life very well,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Sorry,” I said.

He shifted his weight, changing the subject. “What about that big Samoan guy you sometimes hire for muscle?”

“Sammy Moapa? Same problem. Too Samoan, and too conspicuous.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He drummed his fingers further, a little riff that I almost recognized from some big band number. “So the Latinos didn’t start the fight.”

“Nope.”

“And you’re not going to identify the other players more specifically.”

“No, because to do so I’d have to tell you the whole story, which would entail admitting that I was somewhere that legally I shouldn’t have been.”

“Gotcha.” He pushed his chair back from the desk. “I’m getting some coffee. You?”

“I need to sleep when I get home.” I stood up. “Speaking of which, can one your boys deliver me back out to that neighborhood where they picked me up? I need to get my car.”

“We’re not a taxi service.” That meant yes.

He came around the desk, on his way for coffee.

“Listen,” he said. “You need any help on these Stormfront guys, uniformed help, or you have anything good on them, you pass it along. I’ve got some friends that have been hassled by them before. One ended up in the hospital. Not enough evidence to convict anyone, but they’re on my radar. Got it?”

“Got it,” I said, and shook his hand.

It was almost midnight when I got home. Both units were quiet. The light over my kitchen sink was on, and a note was propped against the salt and pepper shakers on the table:

Rennie,

Evening went well. Beth did her homework and was in bed by nine p.m. Hope the evening was productive for you.

Janice

I considered a late shower, then decided against it. After a quick bowl of bran flakes, I undressed and fell into bed.

I slept well for about three hours, until Beth’s screams from the other bedroom woke me. I stumbled in to where she was shrieking and thrashing, slipped into her bed, and held her thin seven-year-old body until the whimpering and tremors subsided, and her breathing slowed and deepened. Eventually I fell back into a sleep that wasn’t nearly as restful as it should have been.

In the morning, Beth tried to climb out of bed over my without waking me. It didn’t work.

“Did I have another bad dream?” she asked nonchalantly, as if asking about somebody else. She never remembered the terrors that had her thrashing in her bedclothes.

“Naw, I did. I came in here ‘cause I was scared.”

“Liar.” She shucked off her nightgown and started dressing for school.

After trundling Beth off to school, I called Ernst Vielstich.

“Mr. Vielstich,” I said, “I screwed up.”

I explained briefly about the events of the night before.

“So I had the book in my hands,” I said, “but I couldn’t carry it and get away. And now Castler and friends will know that someone’s trying to get it, and they’ll keep it somewhere else not so easy to find.”

“Hans Mueller will keep it,” said Vielstich. “The blond man who chased you was the same man who offered to buy the book from me. He will keep it with him.”

“Then he’ll probably move out of the Castler’s spare bedroom,” I said. “In fact, he’s probably already gone.”

“But he will stay close. He must.”

“Why?” I asked.

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“Mr. Vielstich,” I said, “I still want to retrieve your property for you. But to do that now, I need to understand more what exactly this book is, why Mueller and Stormfront want it, and what they intend to do with it.”

Vielstich cleared his throat. “I have remembered,” he said, “the friend of a friend who recommended your services. His name was Lindell Binns. Do you remember him?”

Lindell Binns had hired me the previous year to find out where his wife was spending occasional weekends “with her friends.” It turned out to be far more than simple infidelity; by the end, the case had involved goddess worship gone bad, several felonies, and attempted human sacrifice.

“I remember Mr. Binns,” I said.

“I feel, given your involvement there, that you are probably more sensitive than most to matters which fall outside of the mainstream. So I will tell you something more about this book. Let me find my bus schedule, and I will arrange to meet you at your office.”

“Tell you what,” I said. “I have a car, and I’m not at my office yet anyway. Give me your address and I’ll meet you there.”

He hemmed and hawed and almost told me it wasn’t “proper,” but eventually he relented and gave me his address.

“Please remember,” he said, “I am an old man who lives alone. My home is orderly enough for my needs, but I rarely entertain guests.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said.

Six

ERNST VIELSTICH LIVED not far from downtown, on the eighth floor of an older ten-story building. The first thing I saw when he opened the door was solid beams of sunlight hanging in the library-smelling air.

“You are speedy,” he said, shuffling the door closed and locking a brand-new brass deadbolt. “I am making some tea. Please take a seat while I finish.”

The apartment had the cozy silence of an old reading room. Wooden bookshelves had been installed in a parallel pattern through the main room, and each was full of old books, manuscripts, files and folios. The entire space was the warm color of saddle leather and time-yellowed paper. The dust of ages hanging in the air softened sound and gave an impression of summer afternoons. All it needed was a cat curled up under the desk beneath the window.

I took a padded armless chair beside the desk and waited until Vielstich shuffled back with a well-worn teacup which he set on a napkin instead of a saucer.

“It is herbal,” he said. “Ginger and mint. I have enough trouble sleeping that I need no caffeine.”

He settled into the leather chair in front of the desk with his own cup. I sipped and continued examining the room.

“This is very impressive,” I said.

“Thank you,” he said. “Space is the enemy of the archivist. I am too old to consider moving and reorganizing my collection, so I can only rearrange it further and further.”

“How did Mueller find the book he was after?”

“He knew what he was looking for.” He gestured to the bookcase to the left of us. On a tall shelf at knee level was a conspicuous gap.

I got up and went over to look. The other books on the same shelf were in a variety of languages, only two of which were English. Both titles dealt with demonology. So did the ones I could read on the shelves above and below.

“Mr. Vielstich,” I said, “are you some kind of magical practitioner?”

“I am an archivist,” he said. “I preserve and protect information.”

“A very specific kind of information.”

“A very important kind.”

I returned to my seat and sipped my tea, tasting the hint of honey.

“Mr. Vielstich,” I asked, “why did Hans Mueller want this specific book?”

He took a mouthful of his tea, savoring it well before letting it slide down his throat.

“Do you know the history of the swastika?” he asked. “Before Hitler took it and made in a symbol of great evil.”

I nodded. “Some. It’s an old Indo-European symbol, I know. A sign of luck or good fortune, wasn’t it?”

He nodded. “That, and more. In its oldest, truest uses, it was a ward or protection, a shield against evil. Much like the Christian cross in modern vampire movies, the ancient cross of the swastika was used to ward off or protect from demons, even ones that the bearer of the swastika had summoned himself.”

He continued in his precise diction, the faint hint of his German

birth only asserting itself infrequently. “It was no accident that the Nazis adopted that symbol, you know. Many of those leaders were interested in the occult. Heinrich Himmler was obsessed with it. He appropriated a medieval castle called Wewelsburg, and he and his hand-picked lieutenants in the SS would retire there whenever opportunity allowed to conduct ceremonies based on mythology and half-forgotten folklore.”

Vielstich shook his head. “Himmler was a romantic and little more than a dilettante. But those are sometimes the most dangerous men in the world.

“He was in a position to amass a huge library of ceremonial and occult works at Wewelsburg, including the book in question. To the best of my research, he never attempted to act on any of the knowledge in it. Perhaps he was too wise, or timid, to attempt it. Perhaps he never realized what he had. In any event, this book was still on his shelf when the Third Reich fell, and Castle Wewelsburg was stormed and looted by the people of the nearby town of Paderborn.

“I am from Paderborn.”

Vielstich sipped his tea, made a face at the temperature, and set it aside.

“The Nazis were not fools. They were the embodiment of human evil almost beyond imagining, but they were not fools. They knew, most of them, that a weapon one cannot control is a weapon against one’s self. They were full of hate and mystical pretensions, but they also knew full well the strength of tactics, of stratagem, of conventional military might, and they desired the spoils of war that all men desire.

“But those who claim to be the Nazis’ modern successors – these ‘neo-Nazis’ like Hans Mueller – are motivated almost entirely by hate and rage. Whatever wisdom or fear it was that prevented Himmler from using the knowledge of this book, I do not believe that Mueller and his kind have it. They are indeed fools. They are angry children who have gotten a weapon they cannot control.”

I said, “If the contents of this book are so evil and dangerous, why preserve it? Why not destroy it sometime in the last six decades?”

“The book is a rock,” he said. “A rock can be used to build a wall. It can be used to crush the skull of an enemy. The evil is not within the rock, but its holder. Outlawing rocks would mean that no one can make a wall. This book tells of demons and dark gods, of beings who can be summoned at grave peril. But by the same token this book tells of how to protect against such beings, to prevent their encroachment into our world. It was preserved for this purpose.”

I set aside my own teacup. “And do you do this on your own? Preserving and keeping these old books – are you a one-man archivist?”

“I have several correspondents, in this country and several others. We are not a ‘secret society,’ but we do have common goals insofar as retaining and studying these books is concerned. We exchange research regularly through the mail.” He smiled lopsidedly. “I am afraid I am too old to learn to use the Internet.”

“Well,” I said, “it is a lot to swallow, but I’ve had... experience in extraordinary cases before. In fact, I seem to attract them. For now, I’m willing to proceed on the assumption that this book is fully as dangerous as you describe it. So. What can you tell me that will help me find it? You seem to think that Mueller is the kind of man who intends to use it, instead of keeping it for a rainy day. What are they going to have to do to use it? I need something that I can look for and track down.”

The smile faded from Vielstich’s face. “You realize, it has been many years since I last examined the book,” he said. “But I do know that, to begin the processes of summoning contained in its pages, there will be a sacrifice. A willing, human sacrifice.”

Seven

AS I LEFT the parking lot of Ernst Vielstich's apartment building and pulled out into traffic, I dialed AnneMarie Robinson's number on my cellphone.

"It's Rennie," I said. "Busy?"

"No, thank goodness," she said. "Joseph's off to preschool."

"Good," I said. "Grab a notepad. Here's what I need: Have any members or associates of the white supremacist group Stormfront died in the last three days? If so, I need to know exactly how."

I waited as she caught up.

"You know that people like that don't normally publish membership rosters," she said.

"I knew you'd appreciate the challenge," I said.

For normal information gathering, I know how to google as well as the next person. For hard-to-get stuff, there's AnneMarie Robinson. She's got four children, a husband in environmental science, a cosy split-level in the suburbs, and more hacking know-how than any five IT security firms, and she puts it to good use in her little work-from-home setup when the kids are in school and the laundry's caught up.

She assured me she'd get back to me by afternoon, and I hung up and merged onto the freeway.

According to what Mr. Vielstich could tell me, Hans Mueller

and crew would likely use the information in the book to summon a major, big-ass demonic entity. After all, why go halvesies on something as important as ridding the world of “mud races”? The problem, though, is that none of them were likely to have any sorcerous experience, and thus would be unable to handle such an invocation on their own.

The book, though, came complete with a helpful solution for neophytes who want to dive right into playing with fire. The group could summon a lower-level entity through a simple blood ritual, a herald of sorts who would then take up residence in the body of one of the summoners (Vielstich stopped short of calling it “possession”) and give him the magical fortitude and expertise to bring about the big, ol’-fashioned end-of-the-world invocation.

And all it would take is the life of one of those who helped summon the herald.

I didn’t feel like going back to the office and puttering. My gymbag was in the back seat, so I headed over to the club and changed into my sweats, then climbed aboard a treadmill and did my best to ignore the young twenty-something girls with their leotard thongs up their butts who looked and acted like the club was a very sweaty singles bar.

My mind kept pace with my feet, chewing on the case. Mr. Vielstich hadn’t mentioned changing the scope of my services, but it had changed just the same. Obviously, I was no longer just looking for a book. No, now, I was trying to make sure that something disastrous wasn’t brought into the world by men too blinded by habitual hate to understand the consequences of their actions.

Annoyance and frustration sped up my pace.

I had once met a drunk man in a bar who claimed that he wasn’t only a drunk man, he was a drunk Catholic priest. He told me that priests have an indelible mark put on their soul at ordination that branded them a priest forever, no matter whether the priest in question was a sinner or an unbeliever, whether he had been

censured or kicked out-of-doors by the Church, or left the life of the Priesthood on his own. He couldn't escape being a priest. He told me this to convince me that he could marry us, we could go find a motel room and knock knees, and then he could annul the marriage, so our sex wouldn't be a sin. He was very drunk and I was on a case, and I excused myself and let him practice celibacy for one more night. I often wondered how well that complicated explanation worked as a pick-up line for him.

Sometimes, I feel like there's an indelible mark on my soul, something branded there by who I was and what I did before I had Beth and tried to find normality again. Something about me, some permutation of the laws of probability, kept drawing me into cases and situations that harked back to my old days and pushed past the edges of rational judgment. The fact that I wanted no part of it apparently had very little bearing on things.

I realized that I had run the equivalent of two counties, and slowly brought my pace and heartrate down before hopping off the treadmill. I showered and changed, and went back out to my car knowing no better where to go next than I had when I went in.

I had left my cell phone in the car. There was a message from AnneMarie Robinson, and I called her back.

"I've got what you wanted," she said.

"That was fast."

"It was a slow work day. If you want to come over and get what I've got, you need to come before the kids get out of school at three."

"I'll be right there," I said.

AnneMarie Robinson had a matronly haircut and an even more matronly posterior. She ushered me into the house and down the hall to the spare bedroom she worked from. As we passed the family room, I could see the "slow computer" for the kids that could probably kick sand in the face of the one I had back in the office.

“Here’s what I did,” she said as she settled into her executive chair and I perched on the padded folding chair she let down. AnneMarie always filled me in on exactly how she had gotten the information before she let me know what she had gotten. Not that she was bragging, of course; she knew that the provenance of what she found was useful in determining how relevant and reliable the information was. Plus, she was bragging.

“The first part was easy,” she said. “I got into the files for the Medical Examiners for the metro and state police, and the various county coroner’s offices. I put together a list of names from that of the recently-deceased.”

Sifting through the confidential files of a dozen organizations was the easy part, then.

“Now, like I said, organizations like Stormfront don’t have public rosters, maybe not even private ones,” she said. “They don’t have a webpage, telephone listing, or any of that either. But I did manage to find a number of names associated with Stormfront through newspaper articles, letters to the editor, and discussions on some members-only messageboards dedicated to white power.

“The name that turned out to be what you wanted, though, was actually found in a mimeographed newsletter that published out of Idaho. Somebody from down here had sent in a donation to support the newsletter, along with a short note saying, ‘Keep up the good work.’ The newsletter had published it on their letters page, and the editor had noted that this individual was a member of Stormfront.

“Oddly enough, I found the newsletter not on a white supremacy site, but on a hate-group watchdog site where they had it archived in PDF format.

“All of which means that one Darren Piper, until recently a member of Stormfront, was found dead in his apartment two days ago.”

Eight

I FLIPPED THROUGH the file and saw the black-and-white police photos as rendered by AnneMarie's laser printer. Another flip showed me autopsy notes.

"You've read it?" I said. "Give me the Cliff Notes version."

AnneMarie said, "Piper lived in a little economy apartment in Montrose Park. One day, he didn't show up for work. His boss knew the apartment manager personally, so when he called and got no answer, he asked the manager to look in on him. Found the late Mr. Piper sitting in his chair, staring at a blank TV screen."

And – flip – there was the image, the balding, slightly portly man sitting in a chair that had once been overstuffed, head slumped to the side, eyes drifting off aimlessly.

"Coroner's report?"

"No sign of foul play," she said. "No signs of anything, really. Best guess is some kind of congenital ganglionic failure, by which they mean he just decided to up and die."

While she spoke, I skimmed through the report.

"You gave me a copy of all this on a floppy, right?"

Her face looked pained. "Please. I burned you a CD. It's in the pocket in the back of the folder."

Right. Silly me.

She handed me her invoice. I shook her hand, and we chit-

chatted about her kids as she led me back to the front door. Aside from reading the material I had had her hunt up, she showed no sign of curiosity into whatever I was working on. She's a professional.

I picked up a fast food salad on the way back to the office and sat at my desk, reading the autopsy report and crunching on croutons. Buried in the middle of the clipped, clinical text was what I was looking for:

"There is a 1 cm incision on the tip of the right index finger. Blood around incision and lack of inflammation indicate the injury took place within the hour previous to death."

Further on, toxicology reports showed that there were no poisons or other unexpected foreign substances present in Darren Piper generally, or in his thumb wound specifically, and the examiner ruled out any relationship between the injured digit and Mr. Piper's demise.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

According to Ernst Vielstich's recollection, the ritual for summoning the heralding spirit involved an offering of mingled blood from all participants in the course of the invocation. Of those who participated to summon the spirit, one would die. It looked like Darren Piper lost the lottery.

So. If the herald was already here, it would be inhabiting the body of one of the other men present for that ritual. Hans Mueller, I was sure, had been a part of it. Philip Castler was also a likely participant. I had no idea how many others might have been involved, much less any of their identities.

Which meant I should work from the assumption that either Castler or Mueller was the herald until proven otherwise. Unfortunately, Mr. Vielstich had been unable to enlighten me as to how a man pseudo-possessed by a minor demonic entity would differ significantly in demeanor from a garden-variety white supremacist.

** ** *

Having no other ideas, and being a glutton for thought-provoking boredom, I decided to go back and watch the Castler house further. I went back to that neighborhood and parked in the same vacant driveway. Since no one, presumably, had seen me pick up my car hours after my footrace through the neighborhood the night before, no one would recognize it as mine. I had left my hair loose and wavy, and the blonde that had been toned down by gel before was now in full evidence. I didn't think anyone would make the connection without giving me a good hard look, and I didn't intend to give anyone cause or opportunity to do so.

I watched through the afternoon. The mailman came. Mrs. Castler brought the mail in. The kids came home from school. The girl left again and went down the block to the neighbor's house. The boy took a bag of garbage out. The sun slowly drooped in the sky. As it got close to dinnertime, I called the Gordell sisters and asked them to feed Beth for me.

Philip Castler came home, and was greeted with normal good cheer. No indication that beneath his skin lurked some hellspawned entity. On the other hand, from here you also couldn't tell that he wholeheartedly advocated the forced deportation of all "mud races."

I stayed past seven o'clock, until it was apparent that no one was going anywhere that night. There was no sign of Hans Mueller.

My stomach was empty and my bladder was full. Another productive day for the investigative professional. I started the car and went home.

Beth's nightmare woke me a little after 3AM. Once I got her settled back to sleep, I had a brainstorm. Quietly I got up, dressed, left her a note on the kitchen table, and drove back over toward the Castler's neighborhood.

On the way, nothing appealed to me more than the idea of a 48oz. styrofoam cup of coffee, but I didn't relish another few hours of ignoring my bladder, so instead I picked up a small bottle of spring water and used it wash down a Vivarin from the glove compartment.

It was nearing 4:30AM when I arrived and settled in at what was becoming my usual spot. The Castler house was dark, and stayed that way until bedroom lights started shining from the master bedroom at 6am, followed closely by the bathroom. By quarter to seven, as the sky was lightening, all of the bedroom lights had turned on. All except the spare room.

By seven it was light enough for me to read without turning on the dome light. I browsed further through the file AnneMarie had given me, this time paying as much attention to the police report as to the coroner's play-by-play.

Philip Castler was the first to leave at 7:20AM, dressed in his work duds. I didn't have my binoculars out, so I couldn't be sure that I saw a Band-Aid wrapping his thumb.

The children trotted out the door with backpacks slung over their shoulders at 8:10AM.

I stayed until almost nine. There had been no light, movement, or other sign of Hans Mueller's presence in the spare bedroom. The most obvious conclusion was that Mueller had not only made the book scarce, but himself as well, leaving me with exactly one person to follow. I didn't relish the idea of taking up permanent residence on Castler's street until he decided to go meet with his compadres.

Dejectedly, I perused further the file on Darren Piper and discovered that, even though Piper's death was pretty much ruled attributable to natural causes (or at least, not blamed on foul play), the police file was still nominally open. Piper's truck, his sole means of transportation, had not been found in the parking area of his apartment complex. The report wondered if perhaps he had died at some other location and been brought back to his easy chair by person or persons unknown, which might possibly constitute a

crime on their part, especially if the truck was technically stolen.

This seemed little more than idle speculation to the investigating officer, who didn't see much in the way of heinous wrongdoing here. I, who know there was much more heinous wrongdoing going on than the police did, was much more interested. I don't know how many hidey-holes the members of StormFront had, but finding Piper's truck had at least a passing chance of helping me find Hans Mueller.

Nine

LATE MORNING FOUND me sitting across a desk from Tony Fleming again. The detective squadroom smelled of overcooked coffee, warring aftershaves, and old scuffed schoolroom floor tiles.

Tony sipped from a styrofoam coffee cup emblazoned with an insanely cheery convenience store mascot.

“You don’t drink the coffee here?” I asked.

He smiled over the lid. “I don’t think anyone does, not more than once. The pot’s just here for the smell. There’s a Seven-Eleven on the corner across the street. They love us. Not only do we buy a helluva lot of coffee, but there isn’t a safer mini-mart anywhere in the city.”

He set the coffee on his desk blotter and glanced at his watch.

“I can give you about ten minutes before I need to be somewhere,” he said. “What’s up?”

“Remember how you suggested I keep you informed on StormFront and the like? I’d like to trade some info with you.”

He looked me levelly in the eyes and started speaking in someone else’s voice. “You know that’s not how we do things around here.”

“Is that your lieutenant?”

“The captain.”

“I’ve never met him.”

“Too bad,” he said. “The guys say I do him dead-on. Anyway, even though that’s not how we do things around here, that’s how we do things around here. Whaddaya got?”

“Three days ago, your boys looked in on a semi-suspicious death in Montrose Park named Darren Piper. Looked like natural causes.”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t on it. What about him?”

“Piper was a member of StormFront.”

He cocked an eyebrow and looked as much like Jack Nicholson as a black man could.

“Is he related to what you’re working on?”

“Looks like it.”

“Of course, since you won’t say what you’re working on, that doesn’t help me.”

He waited.

“That’s it?” he asked.

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“That and a buck’ll get you hash browns. What are you looking for in exchange?”

“Piper’s truck wasn’t at his home. As soon as it’s found, I want to know where.”

Tony leaned forward. “The fact that you know so much about an open case is more than a little disturbing. You think it was stolen?”

“I doubt anyone went out of their way to jack a ten-year-old half-ton Silverado. I think it got left where Piper really died.”

“So. You want to come and investigate right alongside us.”

“I’m sure I’ll have a viewpoint that will shed some light on your investigation,” I said.

His eyebrow stayed arched as he watched me and thought.

“And if you run across the truck first you’ll of course tell us,” he said.

“Of course,” I replied. I didn’t say anything about how soon after finding it I’d call him. He knew that. Tony doesn’t miss a trick.

And right in the middle of these complex negotiations, my cell phone rang.

I intended merely to glance at the number and stow it away, but the caller was Ernst Vielstich.

“I need to take this,” I said, and turned ninety degrees in my seat in that gesture that we modern people believe somehow gives us greater privacy.

“This is Rennie,” I said.

“Miss Avalon,” said Vielstich, enunciating clearly into the phone. “There is a man here in my apartment to whom I think you should speak.”

“All right, put him on.”

“No, I misspoke. I believe you should come over here and visit with him.”

“And who would this be, Mr. Vielstich? One of your archival associates?”

“No, this is a man whom I have never met before. He says his name is Philip Castler.”

I don't even know what excuse I tossed Tony as I scrambled out of the police station and behind the wheel. From Vielstich's demeanor, Castler wasn't threatening him. That could mean he meant to break ranks with Mueller. I wanted to get there before he changed his mind. All the same, I made sure my holster was firmly clipped to my belt under my jacket before I left the car.

It took conscious effort to calm myself before I knocked on Vielstich's door and was ushered into the library-smelling living room. This time I didn't even notice the colors and the dust motes in the sunbeams. Castler dominated the room from where he stood.

Not because of size, or even any particular magnetism. He just looked so terribly out of place, and he knew it.

I had never seem Philip Castler up close before. He wasn't any taller than 5'11", and fairly slight for a blue-collar worker. But his

simply cut black hair and full untrimmed black beard gave an impression of bearishness, accentuated by the dark wiry body hair sprouting up from his workshirt collar and hanging down from his rolled-up sleeves. His awkward body language treated the books around him not as cozy furnishings, but as foreign and possibly dangerous items. Which they were, I guess, though I doubt he knew that.

I extended my hand. He took it, shook it, and ran his hand through his hair nervously.

“I have been asking Mr. Castler,” Vielstich said, “to please have a seat, but he seems to prefer to stand. No doubt the result of too much coffee this morning. Perhaps he will consent to sit for you, Miss Avalon, while I make some tea.”

“I can’t stay that long,” Castler protested. “I took an early lunch. I have to get back soon.”

“In that case,” I said, “perhaps we’d best cut to the chase. Can someone bring me up to speed on what’s already been discussed?”

“I know Hans Mueller,” Castler blurted. “Hans mentioned Mr. Vielstich’s name when he was showing us... when he was talking about...”

“Miss Avalon knows about the book,” Vielstich said.

“Yeah. That book.” Castler looked like he was about to start pacing, and sat abruptly. I sat opposite him, and Vielstich settled into his own chair.

“God, it seemed like such a good idea,” Castler said. “Hans came to us with this great idea. He said we could get this magic book that Himmler had but was too scared to use, and it would give us the power to get rid of the.. the non-whites, once and for all. You’d think we’d start laughing when he started talking about magic. I thought I would. But I didn’t. Hans was so intense. You just couldn’t disbelieve him, whatever he said. He had no home; he’d lost his job back east because his new boss was a nigger, and he just hitchhiked until he found us. But he was just so commanding in person. Like a king without a throne.”

Vielstich didn't go for the tea. We just sat there, listening, afraid that any movement on our part might shut him up.

"Then Darren died. When we did the ritual. And Hans... he changed. He was sincere before, and dedicated, but now he was more than that. Hard, and cruel, and cold. And he started doing things that normal people just couldn't do. Things like--"

But the sentence was never finished, and we got a firsthand demonstration of what he was talking about. Something impacted on Vielstich's front door twice, like a battering ram.

Then the door cracked and flew open, Vielstich's shiny new deadbolt splintering through the wood of the doorjamb.

And Hans Mueller stood there, jaw set in stone, eyes flashing like the chosen messenger of some dark god.

Ten

HANS MUELLER STOOD framed in the splintered ruins of the doorway, his muscles taut beneath his T-shirt and jeans, his eyes smouldering and flashing like a cat's. His breath heaved in and out of his chest – not with the exertion of kicking a solid wood door off its hinges, but with rage that steamed from his nostrils.

He pointed a poker-stiff finger at Philip Castler, who had leapt from his seat and now stood in a position of arrested flight, twitching like a panicked rabbit.

“You,” Mueller said with a meaty growl. It was a single syllable carrying hate and inhuman loathing and accusation.

For a half-second that seemed much longer, the scene was frozen, like a figure teetering on the edge of a wall, forestalling the irrepressible demands of gravity. I imagined I could smell the ozone presaging a lightning strike.

Then Mueller launched himself into the room.

Like a movie character finally released from a freeze-frame, I grabbed for my gun as I stepped into his path.

Without even focusing on me, Mueller swung his arm and backhanded me just below the sternum. His forearm hit like a telephone pole, and I was lifted off my feet by the impact. I crashed into the nearest bookcase and fell to the floor, my chest spasming as it tried to draw in oxygen, my vision swimming with tears. I felt

the bookcase tip slightly, then totter back onto its wide base.

Vielstich didn't try to match my heroics. He stepped back out of Mueller's path, and Mueller charged for Castler like a steam train. Castler pivoted and ran into the narrow space that ran around the room between the wall and the bookshelves that stood parallel lines in the center of the floorspace. Mueller followed him, out of my field of vision.

My lungs finally rebooted and remembered how to draw in air, and I gasped wetly, moisture running from my eyes and nose. I reached up and grasped a shelf and pulled myself up as quickly as I could without retching. My ribs felt like I had run full-tilt into a cattle gate or a Buick.

I heard Castler's footsteps as he reached the far corner of the room and turned, his path taking the outside perimeter of the room around the parallel bookshelves.

I pulled out my gun and clicked off the safety. Vielstich... Where was he? I had lost sight of him as my head turned to track the unseen pursuit, and now he was gone.

Castler came around again, having made a half-lap of the room, his shoulders brushing against the shelving. Mueller's hand caught up to him and grabbed his shirt collar. The workshirt ripped beside the seam, but the tug pulled Castler off-balance, and he stumbled almost on top of me.

I leveled my gun at Mueller.

"Freeze," I said, with only half of the volume and intensity that I intended.

Mueller focused his eyes on me for the first time, and I found myself looking into the blank murderous evil of a shark's stare, the implacable relentlessness of an organism or entity whose singular purpose is the destruction of others. The eyes were human, but what looked out through them was not.

I didn't know if a bullet would stop him.

Castler hung from Mueller's fist, trying to tear the rest of his shirt away and scramble across the floor. Mueller's other hand

swooped down and wrapped itself around Castler's neck, lifting him bodily off the floor.

Mueller's eyes left mine and turned to Castler's straining face. The arm holding Castler in the air was rock steady.

Suddenly, a fire alarm's harsh clamor filled the apartment. Mueller's grip didn't relax, but his eyes flicked around in a cold attempt to find the source of the noise.

I pulled the trigger.

The bullet tore through the front of his right thigh, the impact making his leg jerk. Castler's feet hit the floor, though the grip on his neck didn't release or relax. I could hear the wheezing squeak of Castler's breath as he tried desperately to suck in air through a windpipe constricted almost shut.

Mueller turned his glassy eyes on me again, and it was like a physical blow. My hands shuddered as with some vibratory impact, and my finger refused to find the trigger again.

Castler, his face and eyes red like raw meat, managed to steady himself on one foot, and with the last strength of his oxygen-deprived body, lashed out with the other foot. The heavy-toed leather workboot connected squarely with the one area that, apparently is still a weak spot for the demon-possessed:

His crotch.

Mueller's vise-like grip released as his body folded itself inward, too late to protect him. Castler flopped to the floor, air filling the vacuum of his chest.

My finger finally settled on the trigger again, and I held the muzzle pointed at Mueller's bowed head.

"Stay right where you are," I said in a loud whisper to keep my voice from trembling.

Ernst Vielstich appeared in the doorway to the corridor, and I realized who had pulled the fire alarm.

"I believe I hear sirens," he said calmly.

Mueller gave no warnings. He simply launched himself off the floor like a spring – not at Castler, or Vielstich, or me, but at the

window above Vielstich's desk. The glass exploded outward and tumbled downward with him.

I ran and leaned over the desk to see out. We were on the eighth floor, and there was no fire escape under the window.

I climbed up on the desk and stuck my head out through the jagged window frame.

The flat roof of the closest building was two stories lower, separated by at least twenty feet. The alley between was so far down, it gave me vertigo.

There was no sign of Mueller either on the roof or in the alley. "Where the hell is he?" I said.

Vielstich slowly came over and stood behind me, not trying to look out. Castler sat where he was on the floor, massaging his neck and trying to bring his breathing back to a normal cadence.

Vielstich said, "He is still alive."

I didn't want to believe it. The paved alley was eight stories down. He should have splattered like a watermelon.

Then I realized something from the last minute that had escaped my notice: The gunshot wound in his leg had not bled. The hole itself had been red and moist, but blood hadn't soaked the front of his denims.

He was possessed. He was supernaturally empowered. And wherever he was, he was still alive.

I climbed down off the desk and sat in the chair beside it. My rib cage burned. My pulse pounded in my ears, and I felt a peculiar cold tingle sweep down my face. I could feel the post-adrenal tremors in my hands, and hear it in my voice as I said, "Mr. Vielstich, please find me a bucket. I'm about to throw up."

Eleven

IT TOOK ABOUT thirty seconds sitting with my head lowered, breathing slow and easy, before the nausea subsided to a safe level. I crossed my hands across the network of pain lacing through my rib cage and gingerly felt for any cracked ribs. I could just barely hear the sirens outside the apartment building over the fire alarm in the hall.

“Philip,” I said. “You shouldn’t be here when the firemen and the police arrive. Too many questions.”

Philip Castler still sat on the floor where Hans Mueller had dropped him. He swallowed visibly. Angry, plum-colored bruises were sprouting around his neck where Mueller’s fingers had dug deep into his flesh. He swallowed again, started to speak, coughed weakly instead, and simply nodded.

Ernst Vielstich bent solicitously over me. It was weird, almost surreal, looking up into the short man’s face for the first time.

“Miss Avalon,” he said, “should you not do the same? I’m sure the questions they ask will not be easy.” He nudged his toe against the splintered door lying in the middle of the floor and the shattered window, as if in support for his argument.

“No offense, Ernst,” I said, “but I don’t think the police will ever believe that you fought off an intruder alone and got away to pull the fire alarm.”

“This is true.” He looked over at Castler. “Mr. Castler?”

Castler scraped himself up off the floor and stood unsteadily, leaning on one of the bookcases.

“We... how do we stop him?” he rasped.

I stood, feeling my ribs creak and complain like the rafters of an old house in a storm.

“Here.” I handed him my card. “Call me on my cell phone in about an hour. In the meantime, get ahold of your wife and tell her to take the kids to visit Grandma or something. Wherever she goes, she should get out soon. Your whole family is a potential target.”

He nodded and made his way toward the door.

“Take the stairs,” I said. “Go up to the top floor, then come all the way down in the elevator. Then you won’t look like you came from this floor.”

“Will the elevator work with the alarm system tripped?”

As if in answer, the alarm in the hallway suddenly shut off, leaving a silence that felt like my eardrums were straining outward against a pressure that was no longer there.

“They’ll be up here quick to find out why someone pulled a fire alarm when there’s no fire,” I said. “Go!”

He disappeared through the doorway.

“And what is our story, Miss Avalon?” asked Vielstich.

I looked around the room.

“Show me one of your least valuable books,” I said.

He arched a white eyebrow at that, but moved to a bookshelf and tugged on the black leather spine of a fair-sized volume. He handed it to me. It was a history of metallurgy in the nineteenth century.

“Thanks,” I said. I stood as close to the window as I could and hucked the book through the empty pane, wincing as my torso protested.

The book spun like a frisbee to land neatly on the rooftop of the building across the alley.

I said, “Let’s make our story sort of true in the broad outlines.

I was here, consulting with you on your stolen book. In burst another customer of yours, probably stoned, and upset about the purchase he made. When he became violent, I grappled with him while you went out to pull the alarm. He heard the bell, through the book through the window, and took off. Easy enough to remember?”

“Of course,” said Vielstich, deadpan. “That is, after all, exactly what happened.”

The firefighters were miffed at being called out for no reason, but as soon as the police arrived, the firemen were more than happy to leave it in their capable hands.

The police didn’t want to swallow it at first, not so much from a specific suspicion of our account as from an ingrained habit of disregarding the first explanation they’re given. But the door held a dent in the shape of Mueller’s footprint right below the apartment number, and the book was visible like a perfect piece of set dressing on the far roof, its pages fluttering accommodatingly in the breeze.

The officer who took charge, a tall and hefty fellow named Campbell whose athletic physique was starting to lose ground against the force of gravity, eyed the shiny deadbolt still firmly bolted to the detached door, splinters from the doorjamb hanging from it.

“A deadbolt’s not much good when the door itself’s made out of balsa wood,” he said. “The door’s probably original to the building, and the building was built back when people weren’t expecting much trouble in eighth floor apartments. Invest in something a little more heavy-duty, alright?”

“Certainly, Officer,” said Vielstich. “After all, I will be shopping for a new door anyway, yes?” He smiled his half-smile, and Campbell smiled back in a way that said that the investigation was effectively over.

The super had been out when the alarm went off, and got up to Vielstich's floor just as the police were dotting their i's. He nodded dutifully as the police routinely pointed out possible security upgrades, and promised Vielstich a new door and frame first thing in the morning.

When the officers had left, gently refusing Vielstich's offer of tea, he found his broom and began sweeping up what he could. The officers had helpfully tipped the door up against the wall beside the gaping doorway.

"Ernst," I said, "you can't stay here. Mueller could come back, and you have no door."

"He was not here for me."

"We don't know that. All we know is that he was angrier at Castler."

Vielstich leaned the broom against a bookshelf and thought a moment.

"Can we secure the door in some way?" he asked. "I would hate to leave my collection undefended."

We called the super, who agreed that an aged man simply couldn't stay in an apartment without a door overnight, and volunteered to bring up some plywood to nail over the doorway until the carpenters could get there in the morning. After all, they would have to replace the doorjamb anyway, and probably some drywall around it.

I hung up the phone. "Pack an overnight bag," I said.

"Yes," he said. "I believe that the hotel around the corner offers reasonable rates."

"Nothing doing," I said. "I need you somewhere I can keep an eye on you, and have you around to answer questions for me. You're staying at my place."

His protests were proper and dutiful, but it was a foregone conclusion that in the end he'd sigh and take it like a man. He vanished into his bedroom, returning in five minutes with a packed leather satchel.

“Let me get one or two books,” he said. “For reference.”

He browsed his shelves, humming tunelessly, and pulled a couple of volumes from different shelves. By the time he had them stowed in the outside pocket of his satchel, the super was outside with his plywood and hammer.

“This is turning into quite a little adventure,” said Ernst Vielstich with an amazing knack for understatement.

Twelve

IT WAS HALF past lunchtime when we got to my place. By the time I had my front door unlocked, both of the Gordell sisters were both on the front porch.

“Rennie?” said Mrs. Atlee. “This is an odd hour. Is everything all right?”

Before I could answer, Ernst Vielstich rounded the high hedge and started the deliberate climb up the two front steps. His eyes flicked up from watching his footing, and he saw the Gordell sisters just as they saw him.

Ernst tipped his head with a nod of acknowledgment that was both impeccably polite and absolutely debonair.

“Ladies,” he said, and turned his eyes to me. “Your charming neighbors, Miss Avalon?”

I nodded. “The Gordell sisters, Janice and Nell.” Somehow, I guessed that they’d be happier being introduced without their married names. “Ladies, this is Mr. Ernst Vielstich, a client of mine.”

Ernst reached the top step and set his overnight bag down before taking each woman by the hand in a chivalrous clasp that turned their wrists up, as if he meant to kiss them. Which he might as well have done. Janice Atlee’s mouth turned up in a delighted little grin, and I swear that Nell Burkett’s lined cheeks colored

almost imperceptibly.

“Mr. Vielstich,” said Mrs. Atlee, “you’re one of Rennie’s clients?”

“Yes. My apartment has unfortunately been rendered temporarily unliveable by some unsavory elements, and Miss Avalon was kind enough to offer – insist, really – that I stay here tonight. And please, call me Ernst.”

I went inside to find something for lunch while Ernst continued to exude sincere and natural charm on my front porch. My cell phone rang.

It was Philip Castler.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“At a pay phone,” he said. “Outside a Seven-Eleven right across from Centennial Park.”

“Stay there. I’ll come meet you.”

I popped back out onto the porch.

“Ernst,” I said, “that was Philip Castler. I need to go talk to him. I was just about to start some lunch, but –“

”Oh, that’s all right, Rennie,” said Janice. “We were just starting to prepare our own. Mr. Vi– Ernst, would you like to join us?”

He smiled. “Under the circumstances, I can only assume that I would be imposing.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’m their landlord.”

Philip Castler was waiting not far from a bus stop on the edge of Centennial Park. The grass was still green, salted here and there with the first leaves to fall from the trees. A couple of homeless hitchhikers were lounging with their backs to the trees farther from the street, napping with one eye open for the automatic sprinklers.

He walked a few steps closer to acknowledge my arrival, and stood fidgeting. I met him wordlessly on the grass and we started walking slowly and without direction. His hands were shoved deep into his pockets. Between his turned-up collar and his full black

beard I could see the livid marks where Hans Mueller's fingers had dug mercilessly into his flesh less than two hours before.

"My wife's going to meet the kids as they get out of school," he said. "They're going from there to her sister's place."

"What did you tell her?"

"I just said there was trouble with Hans. She filled in the blanks. She never did like him."

He was wound tight, his thoughts running on mousewheels caged inside him.

I sat on a park bench and watched him. He kicked at some of the leaves on the grass, then sat on the other end of the bench, his elbows propped on his knees, staring at the scuffed and beaten earth under his shoes.

"We weren't..."

He stopped, hunted for other words, rolled them around in his mouth, and began again.

"There are racists, and there are racists. That probably sounds strange to you. I've seen these kids running around, these neo-Nazi gangs. There are some of them here in the city, you know. They're exactly like the Latino gangs and the Black gangs and the Asian gangs. Just a bunch of punk kids looking for an excuse to beat somebody up for fun and sell some drugs, plus they get some shock value out of the swastika tattoos. And StormFront always got lumped in with them. Just another 'hate group,' as far as most people were concerned. Like we were all focused on nothing but hate. We aren't."

He rubbed his hands on the knees of his jeans.

"You know, we don't have a member of StormFront who's under twenty-seven. A few of us do have tattoos, from time in the military. We aren't obsessed with hate, dedicated to it. Really, we aren't. We just see... problems around us."

"Look at history. Every stable country, ever, has had a single culture, a single racial identity. Even today, most nationalities are defined by a single culture. The French. The Japanese. The Swedes.

Pick any one you like. And it's only when countries start bringing other groups inside, not to assimilate but to remain separate within the borders... that's when things break down. The Roman Empire, the British Empire, all of them. They all lost the identity that made them who they were. They said, 'We can be Many, and still be One,' and not a one of them is still around."

All this time, he had been looking at the ground, as if engaging me head-on would throw off his train of thought. Now, he looked up at me. His eyes weren't defiant or belligerent or self-righteous; he seemed to be searching my face for some sign of understanding or acknowledgment that he wasn't a monster.

"All of us in StormFront remembered the postwar America we grew up in, when the country regrouped and declared a national character. We had an identity, to the rest of the world, and to ourselves. America was a fantastic place where immigrants from a bunch of European countries had come together and taken the best parts of their roots and made something new that was better than all of them. They were Americans. Not English-Americans, or German-Americans, or Dutch-Americans. They came to America and became Americans.

"And then, somewhere along the way, that became bad. Becoming American was a terrible thing, they told us. We shouldn't have to become American to be Americans, they told us. Go ahead and put your allegiance to your old culture above your new homeland. Hell, with Blacks, they became 'African-Americans' even though they didn't have an African culture they remembered. They went and found one, or made one up.

"All these different cultures, all these competing Americas. And they told us that somehow it would make a better and stronger America. That being divided was a new kind of unity.

"They told us that. And StormFront was put together by a bunch of us who just couldn't swallow what they told us."

Philip Castler didn't look like a monster or a hatemonger. He looked like a sincere man who desperately wanted to find the

America he knew should be out there – or, if he couldn't find it, to build it.

And then I remembered the framed portrait of Hitler hanging over the TV set in his family room, bathed in the warm lighting that people usually reserve for paintings of Jesus.

“Tell me about Hans,” I said. “And the book.”

Thirteen

“THE BOOK.” PHILLIP Castler’s eyes tightened. “That God-damned book.”

He puts his hand to his face to scratch his bearded chin. Then almost of their own accord, his fingers strayed up, and he rubbed his eyes like a man trying to escape a bad dream.

“Tell me,” I prodded. “What’s Mueller going to do with it? Where? And when?”

“You don’t know how persuasive he was when he first showed up,” Castler said, answering questions from somewhere else. “He was a perfect salesman. No, that sounds shallow. Hans was wholly sincere. He had so much energy for what he was telling us, you could feel it coming off him, like heat from a sunburn. You know, they talked about Hitler that way. To us, he’s just a short stubby man spitting some other language in old black-and-white newsreels. But all the people who were in his presence said that you just couldn’t not do exactly what you thought he wanted. Hans Mueller was like Hitler reincarnated. He probably knew it, too.”

I knew Castler had a lot on his mind, a lot of cognitive dissonance to sort onto separate shelves to maintain his sanity. But Hans Mueller was out there somewhere, with murderous aims and unknown power, and I wanted to shut him down before something irrevocable happened so that I could get back to a life that involved

none of these people. And I wanted to derail Castler before he started heiling der Fuhrer right here on a park bench.

“Phillip,” I said in the slow, weighted tones that I use when Beth is too distracted to remember who the parent is. “Mueller’s plans. Tell me. What is he going to do?”

“He needs to make the gate.”

“Which is?”

“I don’t know. A doorway, something for the Great Whatever to come through. He mentioned it back before... before we did the first ritual. After that, he didn’t talk nearly as much. He just had us help him whenever he needed, and left us in the dark the rest of the time.”

“Was he building it? Out of what?”

He shrugged. “Some wood. Two-by-fours. Copper wire. Some other stuff he got through me or somebody else.”

“And where was he doing it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think anybody knew. He kept that to himself. He took the stuff away himself and came back when he needed more.”

This was getting me whole bunches of nowhere.

“Okay. What was his timetable? When was he planning to have the gate finished and use it? Did he need any of the rest of you to be involved?”

“I don’t know! I think, maybe, he was going to have some of the other guys help him – he didn’t tell me as much. He used to stay at my house, but somebody broke in and almost got the book, and I think he held that against me.”

Right. I decided not to comment on that one.

My cell phone rang. It was Tony Fleming.

“I got something, but it ain’t much,” he said. “A black-and-white saw that truck you were looking for, the one that belonged to the corpse. Not parked anywhere, though. It was driving into the Freeport Industrial Park. By the time they realized it was something they were looking for and went back to find it, it had gotten lost in

the warehouses.”

“You sure it’s the right truck?” I asked. “Doesn’t sound like they were checking plates.”

“The description we have says that there are two stickers on the back bumper. One’s from Yosemite Park, and the other one’s one of those John Birch Society ‘Get US Out of the UN’ deals. I guess there could be two identical red Silverados with the same combination of bumper stickers, but hey.”

“Right. Somewhere in the Freeport Center, huh?”

“They didn’t see it on the street, and they couldn’t very well go around opening warehouse doors on that kind of slim justification.”

“No, that helps. Thanks, Tony.” I hung up.

“Phillip,” I asked, “does Mueller have his own car?”

“No. He hitchhiked into town.”

“So how’s he been getting his supplies to wherever he’s making this doorway?”

“We...” He shifted on the park bench. “When we did our first ritual, one of us died. A guy named Darren Piper. He didn’t have any family or anything, so we let Hans borrow the keys.”

So. Mueller had Piper’s truck. Mueller’s been transporting materials somewhere to build his gateway. Piper’s truck was seen entering the Freeport Center.

“Phillip,” I said as I stood up, “I think I have what we investigative professionals refer to as a ‘clue.’ And it’s about damned time.”

I told Castler to check himself into a motel and call my cell phone with the room and phone numbers. I was headed back to my place, and I wasn’t about to take him back and introduce Beth to her first white supremacist.

What I arrived home to was a portrait worthy of Norman Rockwell. The Gordell sisters, Ernst Vielstich, and Beth were all sitting on the front porch, enjoying mulled apple cider. Ernst was regaling Beth with some amusing German folktale, and Beth was showing all

the gaps in her smile.

“Well, I see everyone’s met,” I said. “Beth, Mr. Vielstich will be staying over at our place tonight while his apartment door gets fixed.”

“Miss Avalon,” Vielstich said, “I have already instructed your daughter to call me ‘Ernst.’ If you insist that she address me formally, I may have to fire you.”

“Whatever,” I said, “although you seem to have a double standard when it comes to addressing me.”

“That is simply chivalry. A double standard with the best of intentions.”

“Ah hah. Let me talk to you inside for a bit.”

We left CiderFest and sat in the living room. I told him the useful information I had gotten during my time with Castler, skipping the lengthy all-American justification for racism.

“This is helpful... and ominous,” Vielstich said. “I have also put some of my time to good use. I excused myself from Mrs. Atlee and Mrs. Burkett for a short time before Beth arrived home and examined one of the reference volumes I brought with me.

“It was not chosen at random. Although my recollection of the rituals contained in the stolen book are unreliable, I do know that astrological conjunctions of a certain character do play a part in the timing of the invocation.”

“What, like five planets in a row?” I asked.

“Nothing so dramatic, nor so rare. Just any number of patterns of star arrangements, moon phase, planetary position, and such.

“I am glad I took the time to peruse my sources. It appears that tonight would be a night especially well suited to Hans Mueller’s purposes. In fact, there won’t be an occasion similarly appropriate until mid to late December.”

I stared at him.

“So what you’re telling me,” I said, “is that Hans Mueller, along with whatever entity now lives inside him, will be invoking some incredibly powerful demonic being tonight.”

“Almost certainly.”

I let out a long breath and felt my shoulders sag with deflation.

“What the hell are we going to do?”

Fourteen

MY QUESTION HUNG in the air in my living room. What the hell are we going to do?

Ernst Vielstich watched me for a moment, then shrugged, as if the answer were obvious to him but he wouldn't hold my lack of understanding against me.

"We stop him," he said simply.

"Right," I said. And that was it. Seeing this brittle septuagenarian casually willing to face overwhelming odds woke me out of my momentary lapse into psychological helplessness. There were always options and always possibilities for the resourceful. And I had a resource I had yet to call on.

I picked up the phone and dialed Sammy Moapa.

Five minutes later, I had Sammy committed to being at my apartment in an hour and a half. Ernst and I went back out onto the porch with Beth and the Gordell sisters to enjoy one of the last temperate afternoons before autumn set in.

Sammy Moapa was a massive Pacific Islander -- half Tongan, half Samoan -- who had put his size to good and violent use throughout his high school days. After almost ending up in prison on his eighteenth birthday, he found Jesus, entered the Job Corps,

lost Jesus again, and ended up with enough training to pursue a career in electrical engineering. In between subcontractor jobs, he sometimes hired himself out to me as backup muscle; it gave him an opportunity to crack some heads like in the good old days, while normally staying on the side of Truth and Justice.

Beth had pretty much adopted Ernst Vielstich as “Grandpa Ernst” by the time Sammy showed up, but she immediately showed her love for “Uncle Sammy” by running to him and trying to shimmy up his massive leg as if there were a treehouse built on his shoulders.

Ernst arched an eyebrow and smiled his half smile before I even introduced them. My choice of backup obviously met with his approval.

While Beth continued to conquer Mount Moapa, I explained the situation in simple sketchy terms. Not that Sammy was stupid or slow; quite the opposite. But he just didn’t care. And he trusted me to be siding with the good guys, so that he wouldn’t have to worry about ethical qualms in the middle of the brawl.

“Nazi Satanists, building a gate to hell in the Freeport Center,” he said. “Stop them, wreck the gate. Got it.” He cracked his knuckles.

“Good,” I said. “We don’t know exactly where we’re going, so we better get going while we’ve got some daylight.”

Ernst was already leveraging himself out of his chair when I laid a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re sitting this one out, Ernst.”

He looked at me, confused, halfway out of the armchair.

“But... you need me along.”

“Not this time,” I said. “From here out, the game is mostly busting heads and picking up pieces.”

“You will need my help,” he insisted. “You still need to find where Mueller is constructing the gateway. He will have placed sigils around the area. I can recognize them for you.”

“So can someone else, I think.” I flipped open my cell phone.

There was a message from Philip Castler.

I left Beth inside with the Gordell sisters when Philip Castler arrived, and the four of us met on the front lawn: Ernst, Sammy, Castler, and me. I could feel, almost hear, the tension running down Castler's spine as he tried not to react to the presence of a huge, dark man nearby.

"Here's what we know," I said. "Hans Mueller is building his gateway somewhere in the Freeport Center. According to Mr. Vielstich, he will have drawn signs on the building, sigils and warning marks -- not big or flashy, but something we should be able to notice." I pointed at Castler. "That's why you're coming along. You've seen the book, at least, and should be able to help us tell special symbols apart from normal graffiti."

"I really don't know much," Castler protested. "Mr. Vielstich is really the expert."

"Yes, he is," I said. "He's also in his seventies and has trouble walking fast and negotiating stairs. No offense."

"The truth is never offensive," Ernst said.

I checked my watch. "It's already almost five. We've only got a couple of hours of daylight, and a lot of ground to cover. Let's take Sammy's truck."

I waited until Castler had turned stiffly toward Sammy's twincab, steeling himself for the ordeal of riding in a dark-skinned man's vehicle. Then I said lowly to Sammy, "You loaded?"

"Rennie, whenever you call, I always come loaded. For bear."

The Freeport Industrial Center started out, sixty years ago, as a military depot and worksite big enough to have its own ZIP code. Rows upon rows of identical warehouses were laid out in strict rows, with just enough space for worker parking between.

A few decades back, the whole thing was sold off to private

investors, who further parceled out the warehouses to entrepreneurs for manufacturing and storage. For years, it was a booming center for industrial startups looking for a ready-to-move-into facility.

But the last decade had been hard on the Center. Although the electrical wiring was robust, the phone systems were jury-rigged and wimpy, and no one entity had the resources and responsibility to get the whole Center brought up to modern standards. The sudden importance of Internet capabilities to business meant that start-ups usually looked past the Center instead of at it. That, and general entropy, had left fully half of the warehouses untenanted, a proportion that was building up speed as the private connecting roads and parking areas went unmaintained and the whole Center took on an air of shabbiness and desperation.

In other words, it was a perfect place to find a spacious, unused facility for surreptitious activities.

We arrived just as the five o'clock whistles all blew at once, and blue-collar workers flooded out the doors and into their vehicles. It was a mini traffic jam, and we stayed on the side of the road just outside the main gates for fifteen minutes as a steady stream of homeward-bound laborers each tried to jockey for a good position in the outgoing flow. It was Friday, and for reason left to be discovered by better minds than mine, the day of the week made the same number of cars and trucks that much more disorganized and harried.

The time spent in Sammy's truck was silent with the unspoken tension between Sammy behind the wheel on my left and Castler on my right, though more of it flowed from right to left than the other direction.

By five-twenty, traffic had tapered off to the point that we no longer felt like salmon swimming upstream when we entered the main gates and started slowing driving between the long lines of warehouses, constructed identically, now individualized by time and age.

“There’ll be some more going home at five-thirty,” said Castler, “and some more at six, but the main quitting time is at five. I used to work in here, about five years ago.”

“All right,” I said, “you be our guide. When you were here, what section was the most vacant?”

He craned his neck, then pointed ahead and to our right.

“Make for that corner,” he said. “There were a dozen empty buildings down there, and the roads were all going to hell. I bet it’s still the same.”

Sammy silently navigated through the square intersections until we found ourselves in the far corner of the Center. The vacant zone had, if anything, expanded since Castler worked here. Block after block of warehouses stood empty and unused, windblown debris collecting ignored in their doorways. Broken windows stared unboarded out into a street so pockmarked with potholes that we should have been driving a moon lander. The truck’s windows were rolled up, so I knew it was only my imagination that the wind whistled between the buildings as in an old Western.

“Hey,” said Sammy after we had crept along for another few minutes, not knowing what we were looking for. “I’m not an expert like you guys, but could that be something?”

We were driving north, so Sammy was facing the western side of the street. The low sun lingered just at the crest of the warehouses’ roofs. Castler and I craned our necks and squinted in the direction of Sammy’s finger.

The door of the warehouse beside us was corrugated metal, now zebra-striped with rainwater rust trails. In the center of it, in a scarlet tint only slightly brighter than the rust, was a spraypainted symbol. It was a variation on a swastika, with curved arms instead of square, and a dot of the same color inside the curve of each arm.

“That was in the book,” said Castler. “That’s where Hans is.”

Fifteen

WE DROVE AROUND the corner and down the next block until we found an alley between two abandoned warehouses, wide enough to park the truck in and small enough to hide it. Philip Castler and I got out the passenger side, me carrying the portable mini-duffle that keeps me supplied on outings like these while fulfilling that womanly craving for a purse.

Sammy Moapa got out the driver's side, then reached behind the seat for the red metal toolbox. He pulled out a .38 revolver that would have looked huge and bulky in my hand but fit into his meaty palm like a Derringer. He stuck that in his belt underneath his dark trenchcoat, then reached back in for a sawed-off double-barrelled shotgun that I knew from experience was loaded with rock salt.

He looked across to me. "You ready?"

I laid my duffle on the hood and unzipped it. Out came my 9mm in a clip-on holster, which fit snugly at my waist. Two extra clips went into my front pocket. My lockpicking kit went into one back pocket, and a mini Maglite fit into the other one. Tonight's jacket was dark and short enough not to get in the way. I felt a little bulky, but fairly well-equipped.

Castler looked from Sammy to me.

"Um... do I get something?"

"No," I said. "You're here because we need whatever you might

know about Mueller and his book, not because we need another trigger finger. If there's trouble, you hang back, make yourself as invisible as you can, and get the hell back here to the truck. Got it?"

"Yeah. I got it." From the look of him, his hands had never felt so empty in his life.

I motioned to Sammy and he took the lead, picking his way down the alley with more agility than one would assume from his size. Castler and I followed him to the other end of the alley, which looked across to the building with the curled swastika on the door.

"What does it mean?" I asked Castler.

"Huh?"

"The swastika. Why is it there?"

"It's some kind of protection. It keeps hostile forces at bay. Supernatural ones. I think."

That fit with what Ernst Vielstich had told me about the swastika being an amulet or symbol of protection. I didn't know if Mueller was trying to keep something out, or something in, but I suppose it was encouraging to see that he was taking at least minimal precautions when dealing with demonic forces from outside this world.

I leaned my head up to Sammy. "Think there's anyone inside?"

"I don't see anything, but I can't be sure."

"Then let's make sure."

I took the lead this time, walking at a casual but brisk pace across the road, my arms folded low on my chest so that my right hand could rest easily on the handle of my gun under my jacket. I crossed straight over and met the wall of the building, then walked along it to the marked door, ducking under the window set in the wall.

Castler and Sammy followed. I waited for them to catch up to me before I put my hand on the door handle and gently twisted. Locked.

There was a small wire-mesh window set in the door. I took a breath, then bobbed my head up like a seal to glance inside before

dropping back down.

“Nothing,” I said. “All dark.”

“Maybe no one’s here, then,” Castler said.

“Or maybe they just like it dark,” Sammy said with no apparent concern.

Beyond the door were two corrugated garage doors, locked at ground level. I got closer and saw line of something dark along the concrete at the bottom of each door, something that had been poured and had dried.

I dropped to one knee to look at it, then even lower to sniff it.

“Is it... blood?” said Castler.

“Wine,” I said. “I think it’s supposed to be another magical protection. Mueller’s setting this entire warehouse up as a safe area to conduct his rituals, the mystical version of having a sterile laboratory.”

I searched the garage door until I found the break between two loose metal slats that I had been looking for. I put my eye against it and waited until my vision/ adjusted to the gloom within.

The area just inside was a loading dock. It was empty, but tracks on the floor showed that someone, or several someones, had parked there since the time the warehouse was last legitimately tenanted.

“Well,” I said, “it looks like he brings the truck inside whenever he comes here. Which means he isn’t here now. Right?”

Castler didn’t look like he was ready to commit to my logic. Sammy just shrugged, with the calm assurance of a man who’s probably capable of taking on the entire Bolivian Army single-handed.

“All right,” I said. “I feel a little too exposed to pick the lock out here. Let’s find another window, somewhere not out front.”

We went back along the wall, listening for any motor vehicles in the blocks of silence around us.

On the side of the building, in an alley like the one in which we had parked, several windows were set into the wall about nine feet off the ground.

“Lift me up, big guy.”

Sammy hoisted me to his shoulders, where I knelt to peer in the windows.

“Damn, woman, you gotta start putting on some weight.”

The room inside had been a combination office and storage area, now filled with nothing but empty shelves and dusty desks.

“Hang on,” I said.

I struck the bottom edge of the window with the butt end of the mini Maglite a couple of times, until enough glass fell inward for me to wiggle my fingers inside and pull up on the catch. The window swung inward with a screech of metal on metal.

“You got something to land on?” Sammy asked.

“Yeah. But I don’t know how I’m going to get you two in here.”

“Howsabout you just go around and open the front door for us?”

“Good thinking.”

I pulled myself up on my elbows and tugged my stomach in over the sill until I could get one knee in. Then I slowly edged the rest of my body inside, holding my weight up until I could lower both legs and drop to the top of the counter surface below the window.

My foot skidded on a small piece of broken glass that cracked under my heel.

“You okay?” said Sammy from outside.

“Yeah,” I answered, and hopped down from the counter to the floor. The room held that sullenness that pervades places long-abandoned, as if they’ve gotten used to being without human occupancy and don’t look kindly on the reintroduction.

“Rennie,” Sammy said again. “Better get out to that front door. I think I hear someone coming this way.”

Sixteen

I RAN AROUND the corner out of the empty office to the front door. The inner side was also painted with a round-armed swastika that wasn't quite the same; as my fingers fumbled with the lock, the unoccupied portion of my mind noted that this symbol was "left-handed" – the arms ran counter-clockwise, the opposite of what was painted on the outside of the door.

Philip Castler dashed in first, followed by Sammy Moapa, who slammed the door shut and threw the bolt across with a satisfying clunk. He and I peered through the wired glass of the window as a beat-up red Silverado rolled around the corner a block distant. Behind it was another pickup, and behind that a VW van.

"Mueller's brought company," I said.

Castler immediately ducked into the office to hide.

"Not in there," I said. "The window's the only way out, and I don't think either of you guys could fit through. Come on."

The front door was in the corner of the loading area. Opposite the door were a half-dozen concrete steps, leading up to the wide floor of the warehouse space. I led the way up.

The smell of motor oil and pigeon droppings hung thick in the air. The main floor of the warehouse was mostly empty, except for something recently constructed in the dead center, illuminated by high-set windows and a skylight.

“Hang on a sec,” I said, and changed course.

What it was, very clearly, was a doorway. A frame of two-by-fours stood probably twelve feet high and eight across, buttressed for balance. The side joists were at irregular intervals with solid sections of copper wiring, and between the copper sections I could see symbols drawn on the wood with something black, probably a Magic Marker. Some of them were recognizable -- squared circles, many-pointed stars. Others looked like a fever-dream amalgam of Mayan and Egyptian hieroglyphs.

I stopped myself just before I stepped over the edge of a complex circle, or sequence of circles, spraypainted on the floor in several different colors and connected by other looping, curving lines. The floor for thirty feet around the doorway was being prepared for the invocation.

“Rennie,” said Sammy. “We gotta get hid.”

He was right. I could hear tires crunching on the gravel out front.

Behind Sammy was another staircase that led to a second level, almost a mezzanine, built over the back portion of the office area. Castler was already at the top, and Sammy had joined him by the time I got to the stairs.

From the undisturbed dust, Mueller had apparently found no use for this space, which was lucky for us. There were a couple of empty cardboard boxes stacked against the rail around the edge. We all dropped to our stomachs on the grimy floor, and with no light above or around us, were practically invisible from the floor of the warehouse proper.

The lock clunked back and the front door opened, and there was Hans Mueller, disturbingly all-American in his white T-shirt and denims with a satchel over his shoulder, topped with his blond crewcut. He moved to each of the accordioning garage doors, unlocked them with his key ring, and shoved them up creaking on their runners. In drove all three vehicles, and the passengers got out.

Skinheads. A full dozen young neo-Nazis – pierced, tattooed, stubble-scalped and scowling. Just the kind of young punks that Philip Castler had decried earlier in the afternoon: Congenitally angry, using racism as a convenient way to put a face on a target that stood in for all of their own inadequacies and injustices. When the white supremacists with whom he had begun his conjurer’s journey had come to lines that even they wouldn’t cross, Mueller had found an even lower and less discriminating breed. And all came ready-tattooed with the very protective sigils that made them perfect assistants in Mueller’s intended summoning.

Some used the stairs to come up to the warehouse floor; the more spry among them simply vaulted up from the loading area. Mueller headed for a pile of extra lumber and tools, and didn’t bother to turn around as he spoke to them:

“We’ve got maybe four hours, tops. You’ve all got jobs to do. If you run out of things to do, I’ll give you something.”

It was the first time I’d heard his voice, aside from the single syllable hissed at Castler in Ernst Vielstich’s apartment before he’s attacked. Castler had told me how persuasive Mueller was, but I didn’t realize how well Nature had set him up for his calling; his voice was a commanding baritone, the kind envied by counselors and radio hosts, and it filled the airspace effortlessly as if the warehouse acoustics had been designed expressly for him.

The skinheads grabbed boards and other building materials, and as they scuttled around the construction like cockroaches, I saw something I hadn’t from floor level. The buttresses of the doorway were more than just that; they fanned out in very deliberate directions like stylized spider’s legs, interlocking with the pattern spraypainted on the concrete. It was a third dimension added to the circles on the floor, the doorway a perfect functional metaphor for something crossing from one plane to another.

As the skinheads added boards to complete the pattern, Mueller moved from one spot to another. He wrote glyphs on the wood as if it were his birth language. He wrapped sections in copper wiring,

leather thongs, and strips of white cloth. Every now and again, he got down at a joint where two boards had been thumbnailed or laminated together and spit on the seam. He was the spell caster, and the eager Nazi youth were his many hands.

“Um, Rennie,” Sammy breathed. “What exactly is the plan here?”

Suddenly I realized that I had been watching the goings-on as if it were all a fascinating documentary on a twisted version of the Discovery Channel. But what we were watching was the very thing we had come to stop: The construction of a ritual gate designed to summon something awful.

So, how were the three of us supposed to stop them?

The obvious answer was to draw a bead and shoot Mueller dead. But despite the clinical utility of that, I could easily see Mueller himself acting exactly that way. Somehow, the image didn’t make me want to follow that course. There was also the related probability that we would find ourselves outnumbered and outgunned at that point, and I had a client waiting at home to whom I wanted to report back at the end of the evening. And a daughter.

“Maybe we could start a fire,” I replied. “Burn the doorway and get everyone running. There’s all that lumber, and we’ve got these boxes here to start with... Anybody got a light? Philip, you smoke?”

Castler shook his head. “My wife made me give it up,” he said, his voice trembling.

I tried to see if there was any way off the mezzanine level. It looked like we had ended up someplace at least as escape-free as the office would have been. There was a plywood panel in the middle of our floor which probably covered a hatch leading down into the office, but that wouldn’t get us that much closer to the door; we’d be better off just standing up and running for the exit from where we were.

“Hey!” someone shouted. A skinhead we hadn’t been watching came out of the office.

“Hans!” he said. “I went in here looking for extra nails and shit,

and there's glass on the floor from the window. Somebody's broken in here, man!"

Hans watched the speaker impassively. He then turned slowly, as if tracking the sound of a voice.

His eyes, clear and merciless like a shark's, came and rested on us as if the shadow in which we hid weren't even there.

And then he pointed up at us.

Seventeen

HANS MUELLER'S EYES bored directly into us as his skinhead helpers stared up into the shadows that hid us, trying to see what their leader saw. Some took off for the stairs that led up to where we hid. They had guns.

Sammy Moapa and I pulled ourselves to our feet, out of the dust. Philip Castler tried to melt into the shadows behind us. I reached for my 9mm. Sammy brought up his sawed-off shotgun.

Mueller's eyes flashed. Not metaphorically. Not reflectively like a cat's. Sparks of actual light glinted in his eyes, and Sammy and I flew back into the wall behind us as if gravity had abruptly changed direction. The air flew from our lungs and the guns dropped from our hands.

Sammy pried himself off the wall and rolled his shoulders, limbering them up for the brawl ahead.

"Sammy," I coughed. "We're outgunned. And Mueller... we don't know what he can do. We can't fight our way out."

He looked at me as if he were trying to parse that last sentence in a foreign language.

Gun muzzles popped up the staircase, followed by shaven heads. There was silence for a few seconds. All except for the sound of Castler trying not to hyperventilate.

"Bring them down," Mueller said.

The guns motioned us down the stairs. We complied slowly, keeping our hands visible.

The skinheads formed a circle around us and drew us out in the center of the floor where Mueller met us. He glanced once at Castler quaking in his boots, and turned his head dismissively.

He took a longer look at Sammy, gazing him up and down as if assessing the destructive capabilities of a powerful inanimate object.

He saved me for last, and his lip twisted slightly in a humorless smile that seemed alien on his rigid face. Then he backhanded me with a blow that sent me sprawling.

I caught myself hard on the hands just before my forehead connected with the concrete warehouse floor.

“I’ve owed you that,” he said, “ever since you tried to steal the book. And sicced those Mexican bastards on us.”

“Great,” I said, hauling myself up and wiping the bloody corner of my mouth with my thumb. “Now that we’re settled up, I guess we’ll be on our way.”

He didn’t bother to answer that. “Ropes,” he said to his lackeys. “Electrical cords. Find something to tie them with.”

The skinheads scurried around to comply, finding packing twine and appliance cords to tie our wrists tight behind us. I could see their tension rise as they surrounded Sammy to restrain him, even though he showed no signs of resistance. Then they sat us on the floor and tied Castler’s right ankle to Sammy’s left, and Sammy’s right to my left. We were seated facing the doorway built in the center of the floor, a captive audience to the night’s festivities.

“Time for more light,” Mueller said. A couple of skinheads lit torches made from two-by-fours and set them in shoddy little holders placed around the circular design on the floor.

The construction work, I could see, was nearly done. Most of the skinheads puttered around, then retired against the nearest wall. A couple put some finishing touches to the doorway and the asymmetrical assemblage around it, straightening boards or touching up the pattern on the floor with spraypaint.

Mueller picked up the satchel he had brought into the warehouse with him, unzipped it, and brought out the huge leather-bound book that had started this whole colossal mess. He cradled in the elbow of one arm as he flipped the pages. When he found the one he wanted, he moved to a certain spot in the pattern on the floor, an eddy in the swirling lines that surrounded the doorframe. He pulled a straight razor from his back pocket, opened it one-handed, and laid it in the valley of the book's bound pages.

He said, "Most rituals – those of any real and binding power – require a sacrifice of life. A blood sacrifice. Thomas, come help me."

A young man with a blond buzzcut, smoker-skinny and dotted with amateurish tattoos, detached himself from the wall and came to stand by Mueller. He smiled at us with sunken, malicious eyes.

"You three came along just when we needed a blood sacrifice," Mueller said.

Thomas smiled wider, exposing thin yellowed teeth.

Mueller pointed at Castler, who tried to shrink back ineffectually. "You, especially, should spill your blood here. You betrayed the cause. You made a commitment for something you believed in, and you ran scared -- not because you didn't believe any more. Because you just didn't have the guts to follow through on what you started."

Mueller picked up the straight razor.

"But I want you to see it," He said. "I want you three to see what you tried to stop and couldn't. I want the last thing you see to be something that tears your sanity apart like maggots eating through a dead rat. I want you to be here when He comes through. So..."

And with a single smooth motion, he slashed the razor deep across Thomas' throat.

The smile didn't even have time to drop from his face before blood was spurting out between fingers that clutched to hold closed what all the pressure of a pounding heart was forcing open. He

gasped and gurgled, as some of the blood flowed back down his severed windpipe and into his lungs.

Mueller stepped back as Thomas collapsed to his knees and bled vigorously into the small whirl in the circular pattern framing the doorway.

Beyond Sammy, I could hear Castler retching. Against the wall, the tough and stringy skinheads were frozen wide-eyed, clutching each other like schoolgirls.

And then there was an electric tingle in my hair, like static electricity. The air was dry and alive, stinging my eyeballs. I could feel a wind in the enclosed airspace of the warehouse, and see the whirlwind pattern in the scuffed dust of the floor as it circled, slowly at first, around the doorway built in the center. A roaring began in my ears, greater than the wind alone could cause. The air pressure in the room was changing. I could feel it in my sinuses.

Mueller stood looking at the doorway, with a look on his face I had only seen in old footage of American teenagers waiting for the Beatles to step off the plane. It was an expression of pure worship.

And following his gaze, I looked to the doorway. I blinked, but the haze wasn't in my dry eyes. The empty air framed by the wooden posts of the doorway wasn't empty. Not exactly. It was becoming translucent like eyeglasses steaming up on cold night. Something was coalescing between the posts.

Something was going to come through.

Eighteen

THE ROARING IN my ears was like the ocean heard in the world's largest conch shell. Hans Mueller turned his worshipful eyes from the doorway in the center of the warehouse floor and smiled at the three of us, tied to each other and immobile.

He smiled and pointed up at the skylight, where the darkness of night had crept over the sky.

"The stars," he said triumphantly, "are right."

The blood pooling under the throat of the skinhead started to run, not following any slope in the floor, but crawling along the multicolored curves that grew from the assemblage in the center, like mice trying to reach the center of a maze. The skinhead didn't care. His open eyes stared lifelessly at the concrete.

Mueller turned toward the doorway in the center again and read from the book he held open in front of him. The sounds that came from his were harsh and wrenching and vowelless and bore less resemblance to a human voice than to a bulldozer splintering young trees.

"Sammy," I said. I had to say it again louder, trying to be audible to him but not to Mueller. "You still have your .38, right? They didn't frisk you when they tied us up."

"Uh-huh," he said, like he had been waiting for me to remember the revolver tucked in the back of his pants.

“All right,” I said. “How’re we going to do this?” My hands were tied behind me, as Sammy’s were behind him, and Phillip Castler’s were behind him. Our ankles were also tied to each other, ready for the world’s most difficult three-legged race. Could I wriggle up to Sammy’s back and get the gun out from under his coat? And could I do it without being seen?

I tried to scoot up closer to Sammy’s torso, but his legs were too much longer than mine; the rope at our ankles meant I could have sat on his thigh, but that wouldn’t help us.

I froze as Mueller moved, but he just turned a page and kept up his barrage of croaking pseudo-language. I didn’t look at the doorway. I could see enough out of the corner of my eye – a strange blurry grayness that sucked all the color from the light around it – to know that I didn’t want to focus directly on it if I could help myself. I didn’t want to risk seeing what was coming from the other side.

“We’ve got to get to your gun somehow!” I hissed.

“Working on it,” Sammy grunted, and I glanced over to see sweat starting on his upper lip. The muscles in his shoulders were taut and flexed. He was trying to burst the electrical cord that bound his wrists.

“Sammy,” I said, “you can’t pop that cord. You’ll break your wrists!”

“It’s stretching,” he said between clenched teeth. “If it gets loose enough, I can pull one wrist out –“

Mueller barked a staccato syllable loud enough to burst through my pressure-deadened eardrums, and before I could stop myself, I looked up.

The space between the two-by-fours of the doorway was neutral and gauzy, as if filled in with the work of a thousand spiders. But it didn’t stop at the edges of the doorway; the grayness was spreading its capillaries into the open air beyond, shimmering like a mirage.

But in the center, beyond the dimension-spanning haze, was something else. Something maddeningly indistinct, but still

staggering with the unexplainable impression of a being, an entity, alive and intelligent, but too unlike anything human to be a “somebody”. Simple personhood didn’t describe it. It was immense, in ways that simply couldn’t be expressed.

All this from a single glance through a merciful obscuring layer of haze. I had to drop my head and close my eyes until they stopped stinging and tearing.

I looked up at Sammy. The whites of his eyes were turning red from the breathless strain he was putting on the electric cord. His eyes were aimed in the direction of his shoes. On the other side of him, Castler was slumped forward dejectedly. He hadn’t raised his head since the invocation began.

Then there was something missing. Mueller’s voice. The rushing air was still swirling faster and faster around the portal, but the incantation was over, and Mueller came to stand in front of us.

“That’s all I need to do,” he said. “My Master is coming, and nothing can stop it. You have just enough time left to wish that you had never been born.” He looked at Sammy. “You can stop trying to free your hands.”

He kicked Sammy hard in the jaw, and Sammy’s head snapped back.

Mueller grabbed Castler by the hair and aimed his bleary eyes at the gateway.

“Look!” he snarled. “Look at what’s coming to eat your soul, Philip! Maybe you’ll be thanked personally for your help before your mind gets sucked into that!”

All that came from Castler’s lips was a sob. Mueller shoved his head back down in satisfied disgust.

Mueller looked over to the wall of the warehouse, where his helpers, a dozen skinheads, stood or sat, wide-eyed and frozen with fear. Not a one of them had moved since Mueller had slit the throat of one of their number for sacrificial blood. Blood which was working its way around the complex spiral to the portal at the center.

“Are you going to welcome your Master?” he jeered. “This is what you worked for, you know. You knew it! I told you! A great, expansive god for all your hate and rage! A power that could work all of the destruction you longed for! Now that it’s coming, aren’t you glad? Aren’t you eager? It’s just what you always wanted!”

He dropped the heavy book to the concrete floor, and the skinheads all jumped at the sharp thud that resounded even in the storming air. I saw dark stains spreading out across the front of a couple of pairs of pants.

“Look at it!” he commanded. And they looked. And I did too.

The gray translucence of the gate was stretching taut, like a bubble. Something was pushing, straining its way through from another world into ours. And I could see... eyes. Something I recognized as eyes, that simultaneously flashed and opened onto the deepest, darkest shadow I could imagine. The air in the room all sucked toward the doorway. The decompression made my ears pop.

Hans laughed, and it sounded like the rattle of chains. “It’s the end of everything you ever knew! It’s the very end of the world! It’s on the doorstep, and it’s coming in!”

“A little premature, don’t you think, Hans?” asked a clipped, precise voice. And for an instant I believed that it had been in my head, because there was no way that Ernst Vielstich was in that warehouse.

But he was. He stood at the top of the steps leading up to the warehouse floor from the loading area, his hands stuck casually in his pockets, looking smaller and more wizened than ever before.

For a moment, even the mighty demon-possessed Mueller was at a loss for words.

“You have intruded upon my home in the past,” Vielstich continued as calmly as if he were waiting at the bus stop. “I felt it appropriate to return the courtesy.”

“You’re too late, old man!” Mueller screamed, his fists balled. “Everything’s been set in motion! It’s inevitable from here on out!”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Vielstich. “It has been many years

since I read the book that you stole from me, but little by little, salient details have returned to my mind. For instance, I remember why the role of the herald is so important. Your role, Hans. The essence of the heralding spirit anchors itself to the human host, and then the greater demon anchors itself to the herald. Until it has broken through into this world, it has no purchase except for the herald.

“Which means that I can disrupt your grand scheme fairly simply.”

And at that, Vielstich pulled a gun from his pocket and fired.

Nineteen

THE BULLET CAUGHT Hans Mueller in the left shoulder and spun his torso halfway around. His feet remained firmly planted on the concrete floor.

He turned back slowly to face Ernst Vielstich, a shark-like grin on his face. His eyes flashed. No blood came from the wound.

“I told you, old fool!” he exulted. “You’re too late!”

Vielstich merely smiled his familiar half-smile through the smoke rising from the barrel of his automatic.

“No, I don’t think so.”

Mueller stared at him, the offense showing in his face that this little wizened man wasn’t acknowledging obvious defeat. He glared at him so intensely, he didn’t see something that I saw from my position on the floor.

Something was wisping out of the bullet hole in his shoulder.

Steam? Almost. But though it wavered in the wind that was swirling around the doorway in the center of the floor, it didn’t dissipate. It writhed, and stretched, like tentacles of mist. It groped.

It intruded on Mueller’s attention, and he stared down at it, his jaw falling to his chest.

“You see,” Vielstich continued conversationally, “the forces and powers of two existences are being drawn to the contact point. The doorway you made. There are very strong currents here, and the

herald must keep itself out of them or they will carry it back. And all it takes, at the right moment, is a puncture of the herald's shell."

The wisps of vapor leaking from Mueller's bullet wound were thicker now, flailing the air as the whirlwind drew them out. He clutched at his chest, trying to hold them in, but it was like trying to grab smoke. The tendrils of smoky ectoplasm were caught in the spinning air and spiraled in toward the doorway, mimicking in the air the path that the sacrificed skinhead's blood had taken on the floor. Despite all he could do, the essence of the herald spirit that had guided him this far was being sucked out of him.

My eyes followed the path of the ectoplasmic wisps to the doorway, where the gossamer barrier between our world and another was bulging inward under the weight of the dreaded and immense Something. Where the smokiness touched the barrier, sparks glittered, accompanied by snapping noises that sounded like far-off handclaps through the throb of the wind.

"No! Not now!" Mueller screamed. He tried to follow the vapor, to snatch at its tail like a boy chasing a kite, but he stumbled. The last of the ectoplasm leaked from the bullet hole, followed by a healthy, delayed spurt of blood. With a groan, he wrenched himself back to his feet and half-ran, half-fell toward the center of the circle, aided by the wind that was sucking itself into the doorway.

The last tail of the tendrils of the herald were swallowed up by the doorway, and suddenly the hazy gray barrier snapped flat like a sheet of rubber bouncing back. There was a roar, a deep subsonic bellow of frustration that vibrated the frame of the doorway and rumbled through the concrete floor; I sensed it more with my tailbone than my ears. The herald was no longer Its anchor.

The wind immediately started to die, centrifugal force maintaining the vortex as the power driving it died out. Hans Mueller stood in front of the doorway, clutching the wound that soaked his white T-shirt crimson. The hazy layer of spiderweb between the posts and lintel of the doorway started to fade; I could make out the far side

of the warehouse through the mirage-like shimmer. Mueller roared, spittle flying from his throat. He turned toward Vielstich. His eyes no longer possessed a supernatural glow, but the all-too-human rage there was terrible enough. With his blood-soaked good hand he pulled the straight razor from his back pocket. And he charged.

The side of my head exploded with the report from Sammy's .38, which he held in front of him with a swollen, rope-burned hand. A new wound blossomed in the center of Mueller's chest, and his forward momentum instantly reversed direction. His body involuntarily dove backward, directly into the doorway.

The remaining layer of haze grabbed him, pulled at him like pitch, and pulled him through the doorway – and out of our world. He faded instantly in the neutral shimmer.

There was another rumbling through the concrete floor, the sound of an unleashing of collected power.

Then the doorway exploded in a belch of charred lumber and blue-black smoke.

My ears popped. Bits of blackened wood hailed down on our heads.

In the sudden stillness, Ernst Vielstich made his brittle way across the floor to where the straight razor had fallen from Mueller's hand. He picked it up and brought it over to us.

“By the way,” he said to the skinheads who were huddled against the wall, almost forgotten, “you should go home now.”

They scrambled to their feet and skittered across the floor of the warehouse like startled cockroaches, giving a wide berth to the mystic circle spraypainted on the floor and the blackened patch in the center. In a few seconds, we heard the loading area doors go up, and several vehicles squeal out of their parking spaces.

Sammy wormed the other hand out of the now-loose electrical cord that had bound his hands and gingerly felt the livid spot on his jaw where Mueller had kicked him. I craned my head and looked across at Philip Castler on the other side of Sammy. He was staring

at the spot on the floor where the doorway had been. He looked like he'd never blink again.

Vielstich sliced through the twine that held my wrists, then I took over and sawed through the bonds at our ankles and those holding Castler's wrists together.

"How did you get here?" I asked Vielstich as I helped Castler to his unsteady feet.

"I borrowed the car of the Gordell sisters," he said. "It has been a number of years since I owned an automobile, so I drove very cautiously. I am afraid I was almost too late."

I finally focused on the 9mm in his hand. "Hey!" I said, almost dropping Castler. "That's my gun! My spare!"

"Yes," he said. "Beth knew where you kept it."

"And it had a combination trigger lock on it!"

Vielstich shrugged. "I asked Beth her birthday." He pulled the holster from his pocket and holstered the gun. "You may have it back."

"I've got my hands full right now," I said. "You hold onto it for a minute."

"As you wish," he said, sliding it back into his jacket pocket. "Now if you'll excuse me, I will regain possession of my book."

He walked across the floor to where Mueller had dropped the heavy volume earlier and picked it up with some strain and slow breathing.

"I'm glad you knew that book better than you thought," I said.

His half-smile returned. "To be absolutely truthful," he said, "I wasn't entirely sure that I was not remembering information from an unrelated part of the book, or from another book entirely. I am getting old."

And with that, he walked out ahead of us, jauntily humming something vaguely Teutonic.

Sammy drove Vielstich back to my place in his truck. I took

Castler back to his home in the Gordell sisters' car. The whole ride, he stared out the window at the darkness which, given what we had seen tonight, didn't seem so dark anymore.

His house was unlit when we arrived. He unlocked the door, and I stepped inside with him as he turned on the light and listened to the emptiness.

"You should call your wife," I said. "Tell her that she and the kid can come home now."

"Yeah," he said mechanically. "I should."

He collapsed into the chair beside the phone and stared at it. He made no move to pick it up.

I left him in that position, sitting beneath the beatific gaze of the portrait of Adolf Hitler on his wall.

Before Sammy left to go home and soak his arms in epsom salts, we discussed any lingering cleanup responsibilities. Reporting the murder of the sacrificial skinhead didn't seem like a priority right then, since his killer was beyond the reach of the legal system.

Ernst Vielstich spent the night at our house. He was the perfect guest, and in the morning claimed that he had not heard Beth screaming in her nightmares.

The super at his apartment building called just before noon to announce that the new door had been fitted on his apartment. I drove him home after he promised the imploring Gordell sisters that he would indeed accept an invitation to lunch in the near future.

On the way back home, I stopped at a payphone and called in an anonymous tip about the dead skinhead. A block farther, I tossed Mueller's straight razor in the dumpster behind an Italian sandwich shop.

Early the next week, I returned to Vielstich's apartment with my typed-up case notes and my final billing, and waited while he wrote out a check for the amount owing above the retainer in his thin,

precise handwriting.

It wasn't until I was back in my car and pulling out into traffic that I realized that I had never learned the title of the book.

The following is the first chapter of
 Brother's Keeper,
the next adventure available now at
<http://www.avalon-company.com>

One

THERE WAS SOMETHING vaguely, disconcertingly wrong about Joshua Blakely.

He was in his mid-thirties, a slightly tall, slightly thin man with bedhead at two in the afternoon. Not the carefully-cultivated bedhead that the kid are all wearing these days; his was an honest holdover from eight hours on the pillow. He wore a blue denim workshirt and pants, and a beige denim jacket with western yokes that was noticeably darker at the cuffs and collar from ground-in dirt.

His long face bore vertical creases to either side of his mouth that emphasized the thinness of his cheeks. He wore rimless glasses with a weak prescription, and his eyes seemed almost as transparent as the lenses in front of them; they were a crystalline blue, and gave the impression of an unfocused emptiness behind them.

And he was sitting in my client chair.

“I’m trying to find my brother,” he said.

“Where did you lose him?” I asked.

He paused just long enough to indicate that he didn’t know whether that was supposed to be funny, and didn’t care either way.

“In California,” he said. “He disappeared about four years ago. He was having some problems with the police. Drug charges. So he went away.”

“Why do you think he’s not still in California?”

“I looked there,” he said. “I couldn’t find him.”

“California’s a big place.”

“I couldn’t find him,” Blakely repeated. “When we were kids, we used to come out here to St. Anselm for family reunions. My grandparents lived here. Then when Weston was in high school he got into skiing, and came out to stay with Grandma and Grandpa over Christmas vacation to go skiing around here. So I thought he might have come here when he went away.”

“Do your grandparents still live around here?”

“They died a little before Weston disappeared.”

I looked past Blakely’s shoulder, out the office window. It was a lightly overcast October day; a couple of tenacious leaves still clung to the maple sapling outside the window.

“I doubt he’s skiing this early,” I said.

Blakely just looked at me without blinking. He rarely blinked. That added to the glassiness of his expression.

“I think he could have come out this way to live,” he said. “I want to find him.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why now? After four years?”

“My parents just died two months ago...”

“I’m sorry.”

“...And there are inheritance issues,” he said, unpunctuated by grief. “Weston and I are the next of kin. The only kin, actually.”

I watched Blakely watch me. My initial impression of unfocused emptiness was a little off. There was a certain quiet intensity to Joshua Blakely, but it was deep inside, and seemed otherwise occupied.

“It sounds to me,” I said, “like your brother doesn’t want to be found.”

“That’s my concern,” he said.

“What I mean is that people who are trying to hide are sometimes a lot harder than people we may have simply lost track of. I have no idea how much time it would take to find him. It could be

tomorrow. It could be never. Even if he is around St. Anselm, or somewhere else in the state.”

“I think we’re talking about a retainer,” Blakely said. He pulled a wad of carelessly folded hundred-dollar bills out of his front pants pocket and started unfolding bills and stacking them on my desk until they were standing as high as a deck of cards.

“I think that’s enough to get started,” he said, and returned the rest of the money to his pocket.

Once again, I watched Blakely watch me with those straightforward, blank eyes.

A private investigator is “self-employed,” but that’s a deceptive term. Nobody pays themselves. Self-employed people get a succession of temporary bosses, and I was debating whether I wanted to answer to Joshua Blakely for as much time as his stack of Ben Franklins bought.

“Mr. Blakely, how did you come to choose my agency? Were you referred by someone, or –“

”The phone book,” he said. “I started at the top. You were the first one I called this morning who could see me today.”

And that decided me. Because directly below me in the phone book was Barnetti Investigations. And Terry Barnetti was the kind of qualmless hireling who would do exactly what he was paid for, for exactly as long as he was paid, and never wonder what it was about Joshua Blakely that seemed just a little bit wrong.

“Let me get you a receipt for that retainer,” I said.

Weston Joseph Blakely. Five and a half years younger than his brother Joshua; he had been twenty-five when they had last seen each other. Medium-brown hair, hazel eyes, shorter but more athletic. I grilled Joshua Blakely for forty-five minutes and took notes about Weston’s interests, pastimes, distinguishing features, scholastic aptitudes, jobs, girlfriends, favorite foods, politics, and religion.

That last subject seemed to touch a chord, wherever Joshua Blakely was deep inside those eyes. Their family had not had much spiritual grounding; his parents, he said with a noticeable undercurrent of disapproval, had not been religious people.

“Do you think that Weston minded that?” I asked. “Did he feel he was missing something?”

Blakely blew air out his nose.

“Probably not,” he said.

When I had filled seven pages on a yellow pad with jotted notes, I flipped the pad shut and stood up.

“Well, I think I have enough to get started,” I said. “Enough to suggest some avenues of inquiry, anyway. I’ll most likely need to talk to you again in a couple of days, when I come up with questions I didn’t think to ask.”

“Actually,” he said, “I want you to check in with me every day and tell me what you’ve found.”

“Odds are,” I said, “there will be several days when I haven’t found anything.”

“Then you’ll let me know what you haven’t found. I insist.” He handed me a card from a local Motel 6. “This is where I’m staying.”

I shrugged and smiled a canned smile, and started ushering him gently toward the door.

“And one more thing,” he said. “When you find him, don’t talk to him or approach him. Tell me where he is, and let me be the one to contact him. I insist. I’m very serious.”

I agreed and got him out of my office. Then I went to the window and let the winding-down temperatures of autumn swirl around the office and invigorate the air a bit.

That last promise was one I had no intention of keeping.

Read the rest of this and other adventures at
<http://www.avalon-company.com>