



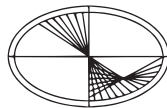
JULIUS A.M. BROWN

HOWL IN THE KNIGHT

HOWL IN THE KNIGHT



JULIUS A.M. BROWN



DIVERTIR
PUBLISHING

Salem, NH

HOWL IN THE KNIGHT

Julius A.M. Brown

Copyright © 2025 Julius A.M. Brown

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

Cover design by Kenneth Tupper

*Published by
Divertir Publishing LLC
PO Box 232
North Salem, NH 03073
<http://www.divertirpublishing.com/>*

ISBN-13: 978-1-938888-33-5

ISBN-10: 1-938888-33-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025940625

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

To my wife Adrienne, our son Julius, and our dog Disney. Thank you for putting up with me. You're also stuck with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	5
Chapter 3.....	13
Chapter 4.....	19
Chapter 5.....	23
Chapter 6.....	31
Chapter 7.....	37
Chapter 8.....	43
Chapter 9.....	53
Chapter 10.....	59
Chapter 11.....	69
Chapter 12.....	75
Chapter 13.....	81
Chapter 14.....	93
Chapter 15.....	101
Chapter 16.....	105
Chapter 17.....	113
Chapter 18.....	119
Chapter 19.....	127
Chapter 20.....	133
Chapter 21.....	137
Chapter 22.....	145
Chapter 23.....	149
Chapter 24.....	157
Chapter 25.....	167
Chapter 26.....	171
Chapter 27.....	179
Chapter 28.....	185
Chapter 29.....	197
Chapter 30.....	203
Chapter 31.....	207
Chapter 32.....	211
Chapter 33.....	217
Chapter 34.....	227
Chapter 35.....	233

Chapter 36.....237

Chapter 37.....249

Chapter 38.....257

Chapter 39.....261

Chapter 40.....267

Also by Julius A.M. Brown275

Also by Divertir Publishing277

CHAPTER 1

RUN RUN RUN,” I yelled as Larry and I dashed by Aaron, who was standing on the corner beneath a streetlight checking his phone. He was dressed in a skin tight white t-shirt, tight jeans, and a \$300 pair of casual athletic shoes. How did I know they cost that much? Because he told me when he called my \$20 sneakers cheap. Screw Aaron—forty bucks for a pair of shoes is highway robbery. Besides, the rain had probably ruined his shoes, while my sneakers were good to go.

Aaron looked up from his phone as we passed him. He didn’t seem to understand why we were running, not until he looked from us to the thing that was chasing us. Several hundred pounds of muscle in the form of an eight-foot tall and severely ticked-off cyclops in a cheap business suit came charging behind us.

“FOUR FUCKING ACES!” the one-eyed giant bellowed as he came at us with the grace and abandon of a runaway train.

“Fallen Night!” Aaron swore. One moment he was a dozen feet behind us, and the next he was a dozen feet ahead of us. Freaking vampire speed. “What the hell did you do?” he asked over his shoulder.

A mail box, the big blue kind that you see as often as phone booths, came flying through the rain. It hit the side of the building a few yards ahead of us and tumbled to the ground ahead of Larry and me. Larry stepped around it. I jumped over it just as the spot on the brick wall that it had struck gave way. A falling brick and some smaller debris hit me in the head, but I shook it off and kept running.

“It wasn’t me, it was Larry,” I yelled.

The guy running just a few feet ahead of me looked back at me like I had just told him his mother smelled of elderberries. Larry Lipowski was a foot shorter than my 6’2” frame, but his legs were pumping much faster than mine were. He had curly red hair, freckles for days, and was wearing a nice-looking green leisure suit. He had taken off the jacket and was currently using it to hold a pile of money to his chest. As fast as we were running, and with as many obstacles that we had to avoid, I figured he would just drop the cash gradually if not all at once. Larry never dropped a single coin, and he had quite a few dollars’ worth of them in the pile.

“It’s not my fault. I didn’t do anything wrong!” Larry protested.

“FOUR FUCKING ACES!” the cyclops yelled again.

“Why does he keep yelling that?” I asked Larry.

“I have no idea what he’s talking about.” Larry shrugged.

We rounded another corner and ran through the fence opening into the parking lot. There were only half a dozen cars in the lot. The Rust Bucket, my rusty old dodge truck, was parked right in the middle of the lot and facing the opposite direction. All we had to do was get in and haul out of here.

I looked over my shoulder and watched the cyclops leap over the fence. He flew through the air, over my head, and landed a few dozen feet in front of Larry. His wingtips slid across the ground as he spun to face Larry and me as we skidded to a stop.

“FOUR FUCKING ACES! I’M GONNA KILL YOU, LARRY,” roared the cyclops.

Larry turned to face me, and then as casually as if he were asking me to pass him the salt at dinner, he said, “Sir Michael White, Knight of Innocence, Defender of the land of Baltimore Maryland and its peoples. I, Larry Lipowski, ask that you defend me from this brute. I am an innocent and a citizen of the merry land of Baltimore, while Chester is a hired thug from out of town.” Then he walked behind me and addressed the cyclops. “Chester, any problem you have with me you can take up with the knight.”

I looked back at Larry and said, “You called me because you were too drunk to drive! You said you would buy me dinner.”

That’s when Chester took the front of my flannel shirt in one meaty hand and lifted me up to his face. His breath was surprisingly minty fresh when he said, “Four fucking aces.”

“Okay,” I said. “So, Larry had four aces?”

“Four aces and a king,” Larry said. “I won that pot fair and square!”

“So, what’s the problem...umm...Chester?” I asked.

“He wins every week. Every fucking week because he cheats,” Chester said.

“Preposterous!” Larry said.

“Chester, he’s half leprechaun you know. There is a word for that, but I can’t think of it. Anyway, he probably wins because of that whole ‘Luck of the Irish’ thing,” I said calmly.

“Exactly my boy. Luck of the Irish! If I could tattoo it on my nuts I would,” Larry said.

“He had four fucking aces!” Chester said. “He cheated!”

“A winning hand fair and square,” Larry said. “Four other players, and you single me out just because I’m smaller and weaker than you are.”

“Chester, having a good hand doesn’t mean he cheated,” I said. “You can’t just bully people into admitting to accusations.” I looked Chester hard in the eye. The cyclops may have been holding me two feet off the ground like a sack of potatoes, but I don’t back down from bullies on principle.

“We took the aces out of the deck before Larry arrived,” growled the cyclops.

I turned my head to look at Larry. The little cheat smiled and said, "Oh...well how was I supposed to know that?"

I turned back to Chester and huffed, "If he gives the money back, will you let him go?"

"I'm going to get the money back after I kill him," Chester said.

"Chester, you really should reconsider," I told him.

"I'm going to kill him," he said.

"Then I'm going to stop you," I said. Chester looked at me and laughed. He laughed so hard I bobbed up and down while he held me. Larry gulped so loudly that they could have heard it on the moon.

"You're gonna stop me? Humans really are stupid, but you sure are funny, too. Tell you what, how about I give you a free punch?" the cyclops said. Chester lifted his chin and tapped it with the fingers of his right hand. "Why don't you put one right here, Mr. Knight."

My eyes rolled as I cocked back my right arm for a punch. "Impact!" I snarled as I threw a straight right punch. Magic gathered to my call, and when my fist hit Chester he went down under the weight of my blow. I followed through with the punch breaking his jaw and sending him sprawling onto the ground. He dropped me as he fell. My feet touched the ground, and I jumped backwards with my hands up for a fight.

"Holy shit," Aaron said from beside my truck.

"Holy shit," Larry said.

"Holy shit," Chester said with what should have been a broken jaw.

I grabbed Larry, and we ran to my truck. Aaron climbed in on the passenger side as I shoved Larry into the middle from the driver's side. We took off into the Baltimore night and left Chester behind us on the ground in the rain. Aaron kept looking behind us as I drove. Larry started counting his ill-gotten gains. Once we were five blocks away, I couldn't hold back anymore.

"Larry Lipowski, you're half human and half leprechaun. You're Jewish, you have curly red hair, and you have freckles. Did you have to bring together every freaking stereotype about both of your heritages by cheating at poker?" I asked.

Aaron looked down at Larry and said, "Seriously man, the only joke you can dodge is being a soulless ginger."

Larry chuckled. "I lost that thing in a game of blackjack sixteen years ago."

Aaron, Larry, and I all broke into laughter. We couldn't help it. Larry Lipowski was a soulless, ginger, Jewish leprechaun that just cheated at poker and hid behind the city's knight. It was just too much.

"You know you're buying us both dinner for this, right?" Aaron asked.

Larry stopped laughing.

Howl in the Knight

CHAPTER 2

WE GOT A booth at Kate's Bar and dried off as best we could. It had been raining for a solid week, and I had yet to invest in an umbrella. We made sure Kate knew that our meal was on Larry's dime and took a booth in the back along the far wall. A pretty young waitress that couldn't have been more than twenty climbed into the booth to sit next to Aaron while she took our orders. Her breasts were basically spilling out of her low-cut top while she smiled at Aaron and leaned up against him. She had full pink lips and hair with enough bounce to star in the remake of *Flubber*. I watched as she flirted with Aaron, who paid her no attention. He was fixated on his phone. Then she leaned over the table and flirted with Larry while she took his order. Larry, for his part, reached over and pulled not one but four coins from behind her ear. I was sitting next to Larry with my back to the wall patiently waiting to order my food. When the waitress finished with Larry, she hopped up to leave.

"Excuse me, miss," I said.

"No," she said as she kept walking away.

"Beg your pardon, miss," Aaron said as he looked up from his phone.

The waitress, Stacey from what her name tag said, turned around with a smile on her face that could have lit up the city. "What can I do for you, sweetie?" she asked him.

"My friend would like to order," Aaron said sweetly.

"Sorry, sweetie, but we don't serve perverts," she said.

"I'm a pervert?" I asked.

"Don't act all innocent, asshole. You've been staring at me like I was your rightful property since you came in," Stacey said.

Aaron looked her over from head to toe, and she smiled while he did it. Her t-shirt was two sizes too small and cut low enough so that it was basically just cupping her breasts. Her shorts were the same size as her underwear. Even her apron was folded and tied so that it didn't obstruct her patrons' view of anything.

"Miss, my friend would have to buy you clothing and somehow manage to put them on you before anyone looking at you could be called a pervert," Aaron said. Stacey's mouth dropped. My best friend the vampire continued, "Two cheese steaks with extra mayo and onions, triple fries with no salt for each, a pitcher of Mountain Dew, and a pitcher of beer. And if I think you messed with it in any way, being fired will be the least of your problems."

Stacey stomped away screaming for the bouncer. Some people in the bar looked over at us. Others ignored the situation. Aaron went back to his phone. The bouncer, Bruce, came over to see us. Bruce was six feet tall and weighed in at two-hundred-fifty pounds of muscle. He was bald, sported a few tattoos, and oddly enough he was wearing a gun on his hip. That was new.

“Stacey says you threatened her, Aaron,” Bruce said.

“She called Michael a pervert,” Aaron replied. He liked Bruce, but tonight the big man was apparently not important enough for Aaron to look up from his phone.

Bruce looked at me and shook his head. “Sorry man, she’s human. She hasn’t exactly figured out this place is filled with preternatural creatures. Hard to believe that if shit goes fubar in here, she just called the one guy that is sworn to protect her a pervert,” the big man said.

“It’s all good man. What’s with the piece?” I asked.

“Kate said we had to bring heat or not come into work. I don’t ask questions. I just hope I won’t have to use it. I’ll put in your usual order, Michael. Enjoy your night, fellas,” Bruce said. He walked away just as someone else came to join us.

An old man in a trench coat and fedora walked over to us. He was dripping wet as he shrugged out of his coat to sit next to Aaron. Priest Gregory Greyshadow was wearing his clergy blacks and sporting a shoulder holster with a black revolver. He waved to a waitress that wasn’t Stacey, and she came over to take his order of beer, a burger, and fries with extra salt. Basically, a bunch of food a sixty-year-old man shouldn’t be eating.

“Larry, word on the street is that Bob’s poker crew is after your head. They hired some muscle to come after you,” Greyshadow said.

Larry went pale. I patted Larry on the shoulder and said, “Don’t worry, padre. I laid his muscle out in the street. He won’t be messing with Larry anymore.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. Chester isn’t Bob’s hired muscle. Chester is the guy that got first crack at the little cheat. He told Bob how you cold cocked him with a single punch, so Bob hired the Bridge Boys,” Greyshadow said.

“The Bridge Boys!” Larry screamed.

“The Bridge Boys?” I asked.

“The Bridge Boys! Because being a parrot helps move along conversation oh so well,” snapped Aaron, still not looking up from his texting.

“Yep. You ripped off the wrong poker game, Larry,” the priest said.

“I’m so fucked,” Larry said. “The Bridge Boys are crazy. They...they...”

“Always collect their toll,” Greyshadow said.

Larry sunk down into his seat. I heard Aaron say, “Larry is gonna die,” under his breath.

“Okay, so who are the Bridge Boys?” I asked.

“Kid, I thought you had learned at least some of the major players in the city’s underworld by now. How the hell do you call yourself a gum shoe?” Greycshadow asked.

“I don’t. I call myself a *part time* private investigator. Emphasis on the ‘*part time*.’ Now, who are the Bridge Boys?”

“The Bridge Boys are four big shots in the game here in Baltimore and in a lot of the surrounding states. They take out contracts every once in a while if someone offers them enough money,” Greycshadow said.

Our food arrived by way of another waitress that wasn’t Stacey. This waitress was named Georgia, and she wasn’t flaunting her body for tips. She could have, and she would have emptied a few wallets. Georgia was not human. I know this because human girls treat me like Stacey did. Georgia smiled at me and poured my first glass of beer from my pitcher. When she walked away, she winked at me over her shoulder.

We said grace, because it doesn’t hurt to be thankful for the little things in life.

“So, they’re human?” I asked.

Aaron laughed. “No, the Bridge Boys aren’t human. Think about it. The Bridge Boys always get their toll.”

As I pondered Aaron’s words, the door to the bar swung open, and two men in several layers of castoff clothing came inside. One limped while supporting himself with a wooden crutch. The crutch was held together with duct tape. The other man walked with a surprising spring in his step.

“Beer,” said the spring-stepping man. “Lots of beer!”

I went back to pondering and eating. I knew Aaron wasn’t going to give me any hints, and Priest Greycshadow was too deep into the sinful bliss of his meal to be bothered. Larry just looked at his food and muttered something about a last meal. Larry didn’t know it, but I wasn’t about to let anyone hurt him. Still, letting him sweat might teach him a lesson about cheating and using people.

I was halfway through my second cheese steak when the sound of glass breaking tore me from my food. The bum with the spring in his step was leaning over the counter and yelling at one of the female bartenders.

“I said beer! What is this piss you keep giving me?” he yelled.

“It’s beer,” she yelled back.

“I’ve had seven and don’t have a buzz. Give me something stronger!” he yelled.

“Cash first, asshole,” she yelled back defiantly.

“Calm down, Eddy. You got enough cash to keep us in booze for the rest of the night if you want,” said the bum with the crutch.

“Shut up, Johnny.” The first man leapt over the bar, shoved the bartender to the ground, and started grabbing bottles of liquor. He turned them up one after the other.

Bruce ran over to the bar and right up to the guy. He grabbed the old vagrant and started dragging him away. They had gone three steps when the old guy tensed up, and Bruce came to a sudden stop.

The big man looked down at the smaller man and said, "Come on, man, don't make me hurt you." The bum reached for another bottle, and Bruce snatched it from his hands. The bum snatched it back with such speed and force that when he pulled the bottle away from Bruce he flung it across the room. It hit a patron in the head and shattered against the poor guy's skull.

"Shit," Aaron said. He leapt over Priest Gregory and ran to tend to the injured man.

"Alright, buddy I tried to do this the easy way," Bruce said. He hit the guy with a right hook that would have knocked me for a loop.

The old man staggered back a step. Then he straightened. Bruce had a good hundred pounds on the old man and was almost a foot taller. None of that mattered to Eddy. He hit Bruce with a right hook of his own that sent the bouncer stumbling backward spinning like a top. He fell over behind the bar, and everyone went silent. I had seen Bruce throw out drunks before, and some of them were preternatural beings. I had never seen anyone just drop him like that.

The old vagrant grabbed another bottle of whisky and turned to his friend. "Drinks are free, Johnny boy!"

The sound of a shotgun chambering a round caught Eddy's attention. Kate may have weighed only 140 pounds, but she was a woman that would defend her bar and staff from a dragon if one came calling. Kate stood 5'8" tall, and while the rest of her staff wore black tee shirts she wore red. Her right arm was covered in tattoos from the back of her hand all the way to where her shirt sleeve ended. Possibly further, but she never wore tank tops. Her left eye had an eye patch over it, and she wore make up of dark colors on her sun-kissed skin. If you compared Kate to the female staff in the bar, it was like comparing a cover model to some little girls playing dress up. Kate was hot and she knew it. She was also dangerous, and everyone else knew it.

Eddy turned to face her and licked his lips. "Hey, Miss Kate," he said. "How about you and I have a little fun?"

"Eddy, are you drunk?" Kate asked.

"No!" he yelled.

"Come on, Eddy. We can go find some tail outside," Johnny said.

"No!" Eddy growled. "Not tonight. Tonight, I am going to drink as much as I want and fuck whoever I want. And I want her! Come here, little girl," he said as he took a step toward Kate.

Kate's shotgun roared in answer to his invitation. Eddy flew backward as buck shot emptied into his chest. Blood splattered on the floor, bar, ceiling, and

on Kate. She put her empty gun on the counter behind the bar and stepped over Eddy to check on Bruce. Her stride didn't slow when she stepped over the body she left on the ground. Kate was stone cold.

As Kate bent down to check on Bruce, Eddy stood up. He had holes all over his chest. He growled and then screamed in pain. He rounded on Bruce and Kate. I heard Kate swear, and then a gun barked several times. Eddy jerked back, but he did not go down.

Eddy wasn't human.

I jumped over Larry and sprinted over to the bar. When I leapt over the bar, I saw Kate holding an empty pistol that she had taken off Bruce. Eddy rounded on me when I landed, and he tried to hit me with a back hand swing from his right arm. I had already dropped too low for that to work. I hit him in the gut with my shoulder and hoisted him into the air. I grabbed him by the shoulder and groin and flung him back across the bar. He hit the ground hard, and I hurtled the bar to go after him.

Eddy got to his feet just as I got to him. He growled at me, and I got my first good look at Eddy. He was filthy. Dirt and grime were matted in his wild hair. He had to be at least fifty years old and the veteran of a few fights from the scars on his face. Then there was his beard. It was an epic grizzled beard that you would expect to see on a dwarf. Strangely, his beard was gray on the ends, but the closer you got to his face the more color the hair took on until his face was framed in a mane of dark brown hair.

Eddy charged me like a wild man. His hands came in at my throat, but I grabbed both of his wrists. Eddy kept coming, and I found myself being forced back. Eddy was not a big guy. I am. I stand 6'2" tall and weigh in at 275 pounds of mostly muscle. None of that seemed to matter to Eddy. My boots hit the bottom runner of the bar, and that was the only thing that kept me from being pushed through the whole building.

Eddy hauled back his right arm and sent a punch at my face. I ducked, grabbed that arm with my left hand, and stepped in with my right foot leading. I hit Eddy in the gut with my right and then in the chest with the same fist. He stepped back from the blows but didn't back down. So, I hit him in the throat, twisted his right arm under my left, and hit him in the face with a right hook.

Eddy growled and hoisted me up with his twisted right arm. The amount of strength it takes to do something like that just reaffirmed that Eddy was not human. His left arm came over his head in an arching blow that looked more like an exaggerated volleyball spike than a punch. I shoved off of his lifting arm and quickly stepped to my left to avoid the blow. Eddy's fist went through the bar top and halfway down to the floor.

Before he could recover, I grabbed Eddy and yanked him across the floor

in a spinning rush. We circled a few times, and I pushed him out toward the door of the bar before he could gather his wits. When he finally caught his footing he came back at me screaming. I took a step toward him and threw a straight right into his chest.

“Impact,” I said under my breath so that no one would hear. For the second time that night magic gathered to my call, and when I hit Eddy in the chest, I hit him with the strength of a giant. Eddy went flying out the swinging doors, over the porch, and out into the gravel parking lot. I heard shuffling behind me and spun to see Johnny hobbling past me.

“I’m sorry man. I’m real sorry. I won’t let him come back in. Please don’t call the cops,” Johnny said. He hurried out the door and into the rain.

I stood there for a few minutes just in case Eddy decided to come back inside. I was unarmed, so that punch was the best I could give, and I could only do it one more time today. When Eddy didn’t come back inside, I breathed a sigh of relief.

The bar was quiet. Slowly the sounds of forks touching plates came back into the room. The jukebox stopped sounding like white noise, I could hear people drinking, and conversations about what had just happened started up.

A strong hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me around violently. Kate stared at me without meeting my eyes. It was a strange thing. Kate was perhaps the only person in the world that would look at me without even glancing at my eyes. It felt like she knew what could happen, that she knew God had ‘blessed’ me with the ability to experience the trials and hardships a person had experience in their lifetime. It always relieved me that she did not look me in the eye, because Kate scared the living hell out of me.

“Sir Knight, you have my thanks,” she told me.

“It’s not a problem,” I said.

“No, Sir Knight, it is a problem. That man will want you dead. You hurt him, and you hurt his pride,” she said.

I looked back over her shoulder at the heavy bar that the man had broken through like it was made of off-brand Legos. “Comes with the territory,” I said coolly.

“No, Sir Knight. Not this territory. Trust me on this when I say people like him do not live here, and it is for the best,” Kate said. She turned to leave but said to me over her shoulder, “He will only get stronger.”

Aaron walked up to me while shaking his head. “Did you know he wasn’t human?” the vampire asked.

“I guessed. Vampire?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “I have to catch a flight tomorrow morning. I will be gone for two weeks. I’m taking Emory with me.”

I looked at my friend and narrowed my eyes. “Something to do with you being on your phone all night?”

“Yeah. I was texting with my father. He wants me home. He wants to talk to me about something important.” Aaron sighed.

“Wait, your dad? Your dad is a vampire, too?” I asked.

“No. My biological father is dead. The vampire that sired me sired me as his son. He had no idea I would be...well...a misfit. He checks up on me now and again. He offers me virgins sometimes to tempt me into eating people. I don’t, but he just shrugs and asks me to play the piano for him,” Aaron said.

“So, your sire has no problem with you being gay, but he does have a problem with you not wanting to eat humans?” I asked.

“Yeah. He’s fine with me being gay. He’s older than the term. Men having sex with men and women having sex with women doesn’t bother him. His problem is that I don’t eat people like a good little blood sucking immortal. He says we are the top of the food chain, and I shouldn’t stroke the ego of my food. You humans might get the idea that you aren’t cattle,” he said.

As I let the creepiness of that bit of knowledge seep into my brain, the rest of the bar gathered itself up. Kate was okay and Bruce was coming around. Aaron and I went back to our booth. Larry was paying the tab.

“How is your hand?” Aaron asked. I lifted my left palm to show him the long scar that ran down the center of my palm. The scab had recently fallen off, leaving me with a reddish-brown mark to show for my efforts saving the city. Aaron examined it and nodded in approval of my healing.

“Why are you taking Emory?” I asked. “And how are you catching a flight in the *morning*?”

“I will be in a titanium coffin with a magnetic locking system that only opens from the inside after being activated. Once I am on my father’s private jet I will be fine. I am taking Emory because the last time I refused to bring my lover to meet my father he took it as an insult. He killed an entire village in his frustration,” Aaron said.

I changed the subject. “The Bridge Boys are trolls, aren’t they?” I asked. I prayed that I was wrong. I needed to be wrong. I had never wanted to be right in my whole life as badly as I wanted to be wrong right now.

“Yep,” Aaron said.

Great. Homicidal hoboes and trolls. Fairy tale life for the win!

Howl in the Knight

CHAPTER 3

WE ALL HEADED out into the parking lot. It was still raining, and it was starting to get cold. Larry looked like he was going to fall over and die. I had let the poor guy suffer enough. “Come on, Larry, let’s go,” I said.

Larry looked up at me wide-eyed and skeptical. “Are you going to take me to the Bridge Boys?” he asked.

“No, Larry. I don’t turn people over to things that want to hurt them. I’m going to keep you safe until we figure things out. You can stay at my place tonight. I have work tomorrow, so Priest Gregory will keep you safe for a bit if it’s cool with him,” I said.

“Sure kid. Bring him by the church. He can help clean the pews.”

“Seriously? You’re going to keep the Bridge Boys from killing me?” Larry asked.

“It’s kind of my job Larry, and you kind of involved me anyway, so here we are,” I told the little man.

Larry grabbed me and hugged me. He came up to the top of my stomach, so it was awkward, but I hugged him too. Priest Greyshadow and Aaron got into Aaron’s Mercedes and took off into the night. I drove Larry back to my place. Larry wanted to stop by his place and get a few things. I told him it was better to do that tomorrow and that I would go alone. I live in a small apartment in a not too bad side of town. I have two neighbors above me and one beside me. My upstairs neighbors pretty much leave me alone unless they need something fixed. It pays to be a carpenter sometimes.

I set Larry up on the couch. I gave him a pillow, some blankets, and some shorts to sleep in. He had to pull the drawstring all the way out to get them to fit, but they would serve for the night. I was going to offer him something to drink, but he was out the moment his head touched the pillow. That was for the best because I was beat.

I walked over to my front door and ran my hand across the circle Eden had etched into the wood. I spoke the words she had taught me, and I felt the magic of my home come to life as the outside world was closed out. Eden said that before Kerri-Lynn had come to visit me it was impossible for my apartment to maintain a defensive ward. Kerri-Lynn had made my apartment a home. She and I had created love here. We had made memories. We had fought, we had

laughed, and we had loved so hard that it had transformed a rented space into a loving home. It had only taken a couple days.

I checked my watch and saw it was only a few minutes before 11p.m. I could get a few good hours of sleep in, so I stowed my gear, set my sword on the bed beside me, and closed my eyes.

Muffled sounds from my closet yanked me from the light sleep I had found. I looked over at the open door to my closet. There was a plastic storage bin on the floor. It was wrapped with duct tape and bungee cords. It rocked back and forward every few seconds. I had forgotten I had been sleeping with headphones on so that I could ignore the storage bin. I lived alone so I could just tune it out, but since I was supposed to be protecting Larry, I had to be able to hear if someone broke in.

The bin started rocking more frequently. Shaking my head, I got up, picked up the storage bin, and set it on my bed. I removed the four bungee cords that were the second layer of security for the bin. Then I grabbed my silver knife and cut away the duct tape that was the first layer of security. Before I opened the bin, I pulled my .50 caliber Desert Eagle from its holster at the head of my bed. Slowly, I lifted the lid of the storage bin and pointed my gun inside.

Inside the storage bin was a black and brown teddy bear. He had a button for a right eye and a purple and green marble as a left eye. The marble was the original. He had on overalls that had been fine looking a year ago. Now they had blood all over them. My blood. There was a plastic sword and shield next to the bear. Oh, and the bear was tied up with shoestrings. He also had duct tape over his mouth. I put my gun on the side of the bear's face and pulled back the hammer.

"If I untie you, are you going to try to kill me again?" I asked.

The bear's marble eye turned so that the green pupil looked directly at me. Then the little teddy bear turned its head from side to side.

"Can we have a conversation that isn't about how you want me dead?" I asked.

The teddy bear nodded.

"Good," I said. I pulled my gun from the bear's head and put it back in its holster. I undid the bindings on my old teddy bear, and he sat up.

I let him remove the tape from around his mouth on his own. He growled in pain as he pulled the tape off of his mouth. "Dammit, that shit hurts," he said. "Did you have to gag me?"

"Yeah. You wouldn't let me sleep," I reminded him.

"Oh? Well pardon *me* for disturbing *your* rest," he said.

He seemed kind of angry. This was the only conversation we'd had since he first tried to kill me a few months ago that didn't involve a stream of obscenities, death threats, and curses upon myself and my unborn children. So, this was going well.

"I have questions," I told him.

"Oh, I'm sure you do. But I don't care! I don't know how you summoned me back here, but when I figure it out I am going to get the hell away from you. But if I can't figure it out, I am going to kill you and be done with it," the teddy bear said as he climbed out of the storage bin. He was a little over a foot tall and threatening me like he wasn't all stuffed with fluff.

"Look, Horace," I said.

"That's not my name!" he yelled at me.

"Okay...Well, what is your name?"

He glared at me and folded his arms. "You'd love to get your filthy mitts on my true name, would you?"

Names are a big deal. Your true name is the name that resonates most with the core of your being. It is the very essence of who and what you are. To know your own true name was a sign of power. To possess the true name of another was to possess power over them. There were three people in the world that knew my true name: my mother, my grandmother, and Kerri-Lynn.

I shook my head no. "I don't want your true name. I want a name that I can call you. I have always called you Horace because I thought it was your name. What should I call you?"

The teddy bear narrowed his eye at me. "You don't want my true name?"

"No. I just want to know why you want to kill me. I thought...well...this sounds stupid, but I'm talking to a teddy bear so what the heck. I thought we were friends," I said with a shrug.

Horace, the bear that my grandpa had given me as a baby, looked up at me. His mouth hung open at my words. His arms uncrossed, and he lifted them up to me for a hug. My life has been a train wreck. Every person I met before I became a knight hated me with the exception of my family and Kerri-Lynn. Roughly ninety-two percent of the people I have met since becoming a knight have hated me. I have been accused of being a demon, a rapist, and Judas reborn. So, when an obviously magical stuffed animal from my childhood offers me a hug I am going to take it!

I knelt down to hug Horace, my long-forgotten friend. Horace jumped up to embrace me by wrapping his arms around my neck. Then he started to strangle me with a strength that no child's toy should possess. I fell back on the floor gagging and trying to pry the little bastard from my neck. I felt claws digging into my skin.

"Friends? You think we're fucking friends? A friend would have let me stay with my family. A friend would have let me have my fucking rest. I protected you for ten damned years and little snot buckets like you for more than a hundred years! I want to go home! Just die already and let me go!" he yelled.

I reached up onto my bed for my gun with my right hand, but I couldn't reach it. I fished around on the mattress for a second until my hand wrapped around the hilt of my sword. I drove the hilt of the sheathed blade down and drilled it into Horace's face. He fell away and rolled across the floor. I got my legs under me, swooned, and fell with my back against the bed. My left hand touched my neck, and I felt cuts along my throat. None were deep enough to outright kill me, but when I pulled my hand away it was covered in blood.

Horace was back on his feet, and he roared at me with a sound that would have made a grizzly bear turn tail and run. I couldn't run because I could barely keep my body upright. I took my sheath in my left hand and drew the blade with my right hand. The growling sneer on Horace's face fell away, and his one eye went wide.

"Is that one of the Twelve?" he asked. Then he fell over in a boneless heap as someone pounded on my front door. I just stared at him for a moment and shook my head. I sheathed my sword and went to answer my front door after I grabbed my gun.

I looked through the peephole and saw my upstairs neighbor Mr. Wilson in his wife's robe standing in the rain. I opened the door and tried to greet him cheerily. "Hi, Mr. Wilson," I said.

Mr. Wilson was a short and scrawny man. If it wasn't for his wife's satin mini robe, I was sure I would see his ribs under his pale skin. He was bald except for a ring of lush brown hair around his scalp. He was an angular man with a large hawkish nose. "Black, I am reporting you to the landlord. You know the rules, no loud parties!" he said. Mr. Wilson was not an evil man or a racist. He was just mean-spirited and not good with people.

"Mr. Wilson, my last name is White. I'm a black man, not that it matters. Also, I am not having a party." I opened my door so that he could see my sparsely furnished apartment. My couch where Larry was sleeping soundly. My weight bench sat with the chair propped up in case I had company over. My spool also had a nice tablecloth on it.

"Who's that on the couch?" he asked.

"My accountant. He fell asleep getting my taxes ready," I told him.

"What was that scream thingy that came from down here?" Wilson demanded.

"Mr. Wilson, I was asleep until you knocked on my door. I have no idea what you are talking about," I lied.

"Why is there blood on your neck?" the persistent man asked.

"Cut myself shaving," I said.

"In your sleep?"

"Yep...I sleepwalk...and shave. Sleep shaving."

Mr. Wilson narrowed his eyes. He took one last look around my apartment and said, "I'm watching you Bla...err...White!" Then he stomped off in his borrowed robe and blue bunny slippers.

I locked my door back up, spoke the words that would reset the wards Eden had placed on my threshold, and checked on Larry. He was out like a light. I guess he was either exhausted or the heaviest sleeper of all time.

I walked back to my room to find Horace on my bed. He was kneeling over my sword and rubbing his paws along the length of the unsheathed blade. I was going to raise my gun at him, but he spoke up before I could.

"This is one of the Twelve Swords of the Apostles," he said. "My charge is a knight?" He looked up at me and I nodded. "Michael White is a Knight of the Crucifixion, just like his grandfather. We have a lot to discuss."

He patted the bed next to himself. I closed the door and sat down to have a heart to heart with my teddy bear. He kept looking over my sword while I put away my gun.

"It's late, so I won't take long explaining this," he told me. "Ask me questions at the end, okay?"

I nodded.

"I am not a teddy bear, and my name is not Horace. I am an ursa, and my name is Texaferis. We are an ancient and powerful race long since removed from this world. Removed except for our duty to protect the young of humankind. Thus, idols were created as conduits for our souls and strength, the latest incarnation being what you call teddy bears. When a child is given a teddy bear by someone that truly loves them and wants to see them safe, that teddy bear becomes the conduit for an ursa. Until that child loses their innocence of the world the ursa protects them, in secret of course, from all of the supernatural foes that may try to harm them or spirit them away, from all the things they believe in but the adults around them have long shrugged off as fiction, and from all the things that the ignorance of the world ignores. Any questions?"

I had a lot, but he was right. It was late. I was tired, and I had a day full of work and trolls ahead of me. So, I asked a stupid question.

"Can I call you Horace?" I asked.

My teddy bear chuckled. "Gods, you haven't changed. Yeah kid, you can call me Horace."

"Let's talk in the morning. Cool?" I asked.

"Cool kid," he said.

Horace grabbed my pillow and slept at the foot of the bed. I set an alarm and laid my head down on the pillow that was Kerri-Lynn's. I wasn't so stupid that I hadn't washed it since she left. But I was love struck enough that I could imagine that it still smelled like her.

Howl in the Knight

CHAPTER 4

MY ALARM WENT off, so I rolled out of bed. It was 2:30 a.m. and I did not want to get up. I wanted to sleep until morning, but I had a personal issue that I had to work on.

I got dressed in a hoodie and sweatpants. I wrote a note for Larry and taped it to the front door. After checking my wards, I got into my truck and drove out to Druid Hill Park. I stretched and thought about the night before. Aaron had jogged past me while I ran at top speed. Larry had outpaced me from the moment we started running. Chester was in cheap dress shoes with no traction and still kept pace with me easily. It wasn't that I was slow, but I sure wasn't as fast as I could have been. So, I needed to fix that. I walked over to Druid Lake and started jogging. The lake was one and a half miles around. If I jogged for the first lap and sprinted the second lap, I could slowly build my speed and stamina.

It wouldn't be a quick fix, and it wasn't going to save my life today or tomorrow. Intelligence, power, strength, and wisdom were all things that a person needed time to gain. A person needed time to build and to understand. I needed to be faster, so I had to work at it. It wasn't just going to happen. So here I was, the only idiot in Baltimore awake at three in the morning, jogging in the rain.

The fog was thick as it rolled off of the lake. The rain added misery and weight to my run as it slowly soaked my clothing. It wasn't a cold morning, but it wasn't a warm one either. I decided I would bring a towel and a change of clothes tomorrow. It was going to be miserable driving home in soaking wet clothes.

I finished my first lap and was about to start sprinting when a black Lincoln Town Car drove past me. It did a U-turn and drove back toward me. The car slowed to a stop on the curb a good twenty yards ahead of me. A young man in a gray chauffeur's outfit, complete with cap and high boots, stepped out of the car with a black umbrella held delicately above his head.

The chauffeur haled me silently as he walked around to the back passenger side door. I slowed down as I approached. Cautiously I put my hands into my pockets so that I could feel the knives I was carrying. The young man opened the passenger side back door as I approached and held the umbrella out for his passenger. Once the man exited the car, the chauffeur closed the door and took up a position just behind his passenger. As they walked toward me, the Chauffeur held the umbrella so that the passenger was shielded from the rain while he was left to the elements. We stopped just short of each other, a few feet separating us

so that they wouldn't seem threatening, and I would feel more comfortable being approached by two strangers on a dark morning.

The passenger was a man of average height and build. He was older than me by at least two decades, with a full head of silver hair that he had combed back to look as professional as any old guy with money. He wore a tailored gray suit with a silver shirt and gray tie. His long black coat ended just under his knees, and his polished black shoes did not make a sound as he approached. When the chauffeur stepped beside him and bowed, he took the handle of the umbrella in his gray gloved left hand. The chauffeur relinquished the umbrella, folded his arms behind his back, and retreated several steps behind the older man. I guess this was supposed to give us the illusion of privacy.

"Hello young man," the older man said. "I know this is probably an odd situation. Here you are, a black man, minding his own business when some white man with his own chauffeur flags you down on a cold, foggy morning before the sun comes up."

I shrugged. "Nah, it happens all the time. The last time it was Ed McMahon with a check."

He chuckled at that. His smile was not perfectly bright white, but his teeth were an odd color similar to white but not quite there. His teeth were even, and his smile exuded a calm confidence in himself. He held out his right hand to show that he wasn't holding anything and said, "Well I don't have a check for you today. I just have a question, if you don't mind sparing a moment on a curious old man."

"Not at all, as long as you aren't asking for my wallet or if I know where to score drugs," I said.

"Young man, if I want drugs I will just go see my doctor. They may be more expensive, but a prescription means fewer headaches in the end. Get it? Prescription! Headaches!" he said as he laughed at his own joke.

I joined him a moment later because it was just that funny. We laughed for a bit before he held up his hand while trying to catch his breath. We both sobered before he started speaking again.

"I am curious to know why you are out here running in this weather. You could join a gym and use a treadmill. Why out here in the darkness, fog, and rain?"

It was an easy question to answer. "I can't afford a gym membership. Even if I could, I want to train my body to run when I need to. When you actually need to run, the ground won't always be dry and flat. The weather isn't always going to be seventy degrees, and the light won't always be favorable. If I want to train myself to run, then I need to actually run out here like I will need to in the future."

The older man shrugged and nodded. "Why so early? No one else is out here this early, but that could just be because of the rain."

“I read once that if you do something every day for thirty days it becomes second nature. If I get up this early and run, not only will I get better at running, but I can go home and sleep until it’s time to get up for work. I figure a little exertion and recovery will do me some good.”

“I drive by here every morning around this time, and I have never seen you out here. Is this the first of your thirty days?” he asked. I nodded. “I know this is forward, and feel free to say no, but could I run with you? Not today, of course, but for the rest of your thirty days at least?”

I started to say something, but he cut me off. “I’m sorry. It’s just that, well, I’m getting old. My family has me chauffeured around all the time, makes me watch every single thing I eat, and they are absolute hawks about it. They got me a personal trainer, but she barely lets me build up a sweat before she tells me to take a ‘cool down.’ I used to run all the time, but everyone in my family is too busy and would probably ruin it for me. All I am asking is to run with you so I can assure my family that I’m safe if they find out,” he said as he hitched his thumb over his shoulder at his chauffeur.

I thought about it for a minute. He was just an old guy that wanted to have someone to run with. It was harmless. Then again, he could have been a serial killer, or worse, a politician! In the end, I figured having someone to chat with would keep me from thinking about how my clothes were soaked, how I was broke, how my neighbor was constantly snooping on me, or any of the other problems I had.

“Okay, sure,” I said. “I plan to get here just before 3a.m. every morning. I’m going to jog the first lap around the lake and sprint the second one. If you think you can keep up then I will be glad to have you along.”

He pursed his lips as he thought it over. “I can keep up for the first lap, but maybe not the second. But I can call it quits after that if it’s okay with you.”

“That will be fine.”

He held out his hand and said, “It’s a deal.”

I shook his hand and said, “My name is Michael, by the way.”

“Thaddaeus,” he said. “I will see you tomorrow morning, Mr. Michael.”

He retreated to his car while his chauffeur and I exchanged numbers. The young man was quick to text me so that he could make it back to the car before Thaddaeus had to open the door for himself. I watched him drive off and just shrugged as I got back to finishing my run.

I was right about how miserable it was driving home in soaked clothing. I toweled off once I was back inside my apartment and collapsed on the bed to get a couple hours of shut eye.

Howl in the Knight

CHAPTER 5

MORNING CAME TOO soon. I woke up with a hundred questions for Horace. I could have woken him up, but I thought about all the things I wanted to know. If he answered a third of them I could have been there all day long, so I let him sleep. I had to get to work.

Larry was still passed out when I dropped sweatpants and a t-shirt on his head. Since that didn't wake him I shook him. That didn't work either. I let the poor guy sleep while I took a quick shower. My hot water was still broken, so the ice-cold shower woke me right up. By the time I was clean, Larry was up.

I forgot to warn him about the lack of hot water when he walked into the bathroom. When he opened the door steam bellowed out of the bathroom. I could feel the heat from his shower radiating into my living room.

"You might want to get your water heater looked at. I couldn't get the water to cool down. It wasn't bad but it left the bathroom a little toasty to get dressed in," Larry said.

I ran into the bathroom and turned on the shower. The water was ice cold. The same with the sink. I just shook my head and went back to the living room where Larry was getting dressed. My clothes were way too big for him, but they would do until I went by his place.

"Okay Larry, you asked for me to protect you and I will, but since you lied to me in the first place I am charging you. Its one-hundred bucks a day for me to keep the heat off of you," I said.

"One-hundred dollars?" he asked.

"A day. If you want to call it quits I understand, but that's the fee," I said.

"Aren't you sworn to protect me?" he asked.

"I am sworn to protect the innocent and those who are targeted by evil. You cheated some other gamblers, and they hired goons to come after you. You don't get a knight, you get a bodyguard," I told him.

"What's the difference?"

I lifted the sports bag that I used to hide my sword when I am pretending to be an average citizen. I dropped my sword inside and zipped up the bag. "One carries a sword and the other carries..." I didn't finish the statement. I lifted my shirt so that he could see the black Desert Eagle in all of its .50 caliber glory on my right hip. Today it was loaded with iron shells. I had the chrome Desert Eagle that Kerri had given me in my bag just in case.

We got in the Rust Bucket and drove down to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, better known as the Baltimore Basilica. Priest Gregory was waiting for us and was ready to take Larry into his care for a few hours. Priest Gregory was a devout believer of the word of God. But he didn't like to sweat the small stuff like cleaning the church, so if I needed to stash someone for a while he was happy to put them to work. Priest Gregory was outside with another gentleman. I pulled up so that Larry could get out and the new gentleman could get in.

"Morning Drew," I said.

"Morning Michael," Drew said. Drew Thompson was in his early thirties, Caucasian, and built like he had once been very athletic. He had size to him but no substance, like the life had been drained from him. He was bald and his face was drawn. His beard was scraggly, and his teeth were bad. Drew weighed about one-hundred-forty pounds of fading muscle. His green and black flannel shirt hid his track marks and his most recent attempt at suicide.

Drew was homeless. He had been a college student when the market nearly tanked. With a college diploma and almost one-hundred thousand dollars in student loans, he had set out into the world to make his fortune. Sadly, like so many others in this day and age, the world crapped upon him and left him for dead. I had found him in an alley a few months ago trying to cut his wrist with a broken liquor bottle. I had my sword with me and used it to speak to him with the power of Truth. Now he was living between a homeless shelter and the church. He had even gotten a job with a small but up-and-coming construction company.

"What's for lunch, man?" I asked.

Drew held up his lunch pail. "PB&J. I have an extra for you."

I shook my head. "Nah, that's all you man. When lunch rolls around enjoy it," I said.

I drove across the city to Highlandtown Elementary School. It needed a new roof, and a lot of people needed jobs, so the contractor sub-contracted some workers including White Knight Construction. White Knight Construction had only two employees, but they are pretty hard working. When we pulled into the parking lot, I let Drew get out before I slipped my gun into the secret holster under the dashboard and hopped into the truck bed to gear up for the job. I opened the toolbox on the back of my truck and stowed my sword bag, pulled out my tool belt and hardhat, and then pulled out ones that I had bought for Drew. When I handed them to him, he immediately noticed his name and the company's name on a patch on the back of the belt.

"What're these," he asked.

"They're your tool belt and your hardhat. They came in through UPS yesterday while we were working," I said as I handed him his own tools to fill out

the belt. When I hopped down from the truck bed he wrapped me in a hug. I returned it. "Come on. Let's get to work."

I was excited to be working on improving a school. We had started yesterday, and I had pretty much stripped a quarter of the old roof myself. Today when we showed up to stand in line to clock in, I was looking forward to a hard day of work in the profession I loved. But I was held up because my time card was missing. I checked the slots twice and then a third time. I even looked behind all the other cards.

I looked over and saw the foreman walking over. He was a big guy in every visible way. Tall, heavy with muscle, and he walked like he had a purpose. "Hey Mr. Anderson," I called to him.

He didn't slow down when he saw me waving. He walked right up to me and stopped with his arms folded in front of him. "White, I need you off of my work site," he said.

Something vile ran down my spine. I looked around at the other workers. They were all different nationalities, representatives of many different religions, both genders, and they were all looking at me with hate in their eyes. I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach as I asked, "Why?"

"Look, White, let's not make a scene, okay. The crew watched you yesterday. They say you swung that pickaxe like a mad man, you kept leering at the females on site, and you kept picking fights," said Mr. Anderson.

I thought about the day before. I had worked on my own, which I didn't think about at the time. I probably did swing my pickaxe a little harder and more constantly than anyone else here. I was used to swinging a sword after all. It had gotten hot, so I had taken off my shirt. Several of the women had noticed that and moved away from me. I don't think I look good with my clothes off...or with them on for that matter. Several fights had been picked, but it was always another worker coming over and yelling at me. Some of them had taken offense to the speed at which I was working. Some had even gone so far as to threaten to push me off the roof. I had reported it, but I didn't give it a second thought. It was just how people reacted to me.

"Mr. Anderson, I didn't do anything wrong, and you know that. Heck, yesterday you said you wished you had ten more of me," I told him.

Mr. Anderson shook his head. "Get your shit and leave, White. You and your employee," he said.

Now I was worried. Drew needed this job. He had been rejected by every job he had taken in his adult life. Being rejected now could be the straw that kicked him off of his upward path and back into the gutter. I put up my hands as I waved them back and forth. "Hold on. Hold on. Hold on! Mr. Anderson, be reasonable. I will go, but don't let Drew go. He didn't do anything wrong."

Mr. Anderson looked at Drew over my shoulder. He knew Drew's situation because I had to disclose any potential problems my employees would have had with drug tests. I had paid a penalty to the hiring company so that my crew could take on the subcontract. I was in the hole because of it, and that was fine as long as I could help out Drew. If they kicked him off the job, then I would have failed all around. People don't like me. It's something I deal with on a daily basis, and I am fine with it. But Drew did not have to carry my burden.

Mr. Anderson took a long deep breath and puffed out a long sigh. "Fine White. He stays but you go. Got it?"

I nodded. I walked back over to Drew and said, "I have to go. You stay. Finish the workday, and I will pick you up at quitting time."

"I don't want to stay where we aren't wanted," he said.

"I'm not wanted. You stay. Its good honest work for good honest pay," I told him. "If you need anything just call my cell or the office. I am going to head over there and see about our next job."

Drew looked down at the floor and nodded. He seemed scared. I patted his shoulder and said, "I am counting on you Drew. Represent!" I retracted my hand and made a fist. Drew lifted his head, and he had a smile on his face. He made a fist, and we rapped our knuckles together. "Go see Mr. Anderson to get your time card. Quitting time is 6 P.M. so I will be here then. Work hard."

Drew went to get his time card, and I headed back out to the parking lot. There were three guys standing by my truck. Two of them were my height, and one was a foot shorter than me. The shorter guy was standing in the middle of the tall lean guy and the tall fat guy. I wasn't in the mood for what their eyes told me they wanted to happen.

"Excuse me, fellas, I am heading out," I said not too cheerfully.

The short guy stepped forward. "Yeah, man, you can leave. We just want to have a word with you first." It's always the short guy.

"You acted like hot shit yesterday," the lean guy said.

"You got some of our crew fired. Boss said they weren't pulling their weight," the fat guy said.

I thought about it. There had been a group that had been taking it too slow and too steady. When they went to lunch, I decided to help them out and did most of their section. I wasn't being mean or showing off. I just didn't have any food and had plenty of energy. So why not help out some guys that were falling behind? I had asked if they minded, and they said it was fine.

"Look guys, I didn't mean to get your friends fired. I just wanted to help out," I said.

"Oh, he just wanted to help! See guys, this is all a misunderstanding," the short guy said while looking back and forth between his friends. "Well, that's

cool man. Since you want to help, just give me all the money in your wallet. Our friends have bills to pay.”

I looked evenly at the shorter man and then at his nodding friends. I shook my head and sighed. “You guys do not want to do this.”

“Do what? We aren’t doing anything, man. Not unless you don’t give up your cash and those nice tools of yours,” the short guy said. The lean guy and the fat guy began to space themselves out. I looked over my shoulder and saw Mr. Anderson standing in the doorway. He shrugged, turned around, and walked back into the building. I shrugged, too, because I really did not want to fight these guys.

I heard work boots shuffling forward like they weren’t sure they should be moving. I turned back to face the three men just as the fat guy hit me in the face. Now I get into fist fights with supernatural beings on an almost daily basis. I can take a hit, and this one was nowhere near the top one hundred punches I have taken in my life, so I could shrug it off. The problem is that in the real world, in a real fight, shrugging it off doesn’t mean you stand there and act like nothing happened. Shrugging it off means that one hit isn’t going to do any lasting damage, but you still have to deal with the fact that something hit you. You have to deal with leverage, gravity, and luck. None of which were on my side.

The fat guy followed through with his punch, so I went stumbling backwards under the weight of his fist. It was still drizzling, and the moisture on the ground was just enough to cause the parking lot to be as slick as ice, so I slipped. Then my old nemesis showed up to take up cause with my three assailants. Gravity came out of nowhere and body slammed me into the parking lot.

I rolled over onto my stomach and got up to my knees. They started stomping on me. Heavy work boots slammed repeatedly against my back, legs, and head. If I was a normal man, they would have had me at a major disadvantage. As it stood they had me at just a rough disadvantage. I took their hits and pushed up to one knee. A work boot slammed into the left side of my face at the same time as a separate work boot slammed into the back of my head. Pain shot through my skull, and I started to fall. I gritted my rattling teeth and pushed off with my legs into a forward jog.

I got ahead of my attackers and turned to face them. I could feel blood flowing from my mouth where the boot had hit me, and my right eye was swollen from the punch. I watched them approach and said, “Last chance to walk away, guys.” They all laughed and came at me with violence in their eyes.

When I became a knight, I was a skinny guy that couldn’t fight his way out of an already opened wet paper bag. I couldn’t take a punch, I couldn’t give one, and I had no survival instincts in a fight. My grandpa, The Knight of Justice, fixed that right fast and in a hurry. He invited every uncle and male cousin I had over

the age of fifteen to our house and had me fight them five on one for three hours a day for a month. I learned how to fight, and I learned how to fight multiple people at once.

I let them get close, and when they did I exploded into action. The lean guy got to me first, so I came forward when he tried to punch me. I lifted my arm to block and stepped into the blow. It halted his attack, but my counter-attack hit perfectly. When I stepped into his punch, I grabbed him by the head and pulled down. At the same time, I raised my knee to meet his forehead. He screamed in pain then started to fall. I grabbed the arm he had used to punch at me with the arm I had used to block, grabbed the waist of his pants with my free right hand, and barreled ahead. We collided with the short man, and I bore down with my left shoulder, practically throwing myself at the ground. My momentum plus the additional weight of the lean guy was too much for the short guy, so we went down in a heap with the short guy on the bottom. I drilled in with my shoulder when we crashed down, and then I rolled over them and on to my feet.

The fat guy had just rounded on me. I turned to look him in the eyes to let him know that I would not hesitate to defend myself. He squared his shoulders and stepped up to me. His fist came up in a hard right hook. I knocked that punch away with a swing of my left arm and brought around my own right hook. He blocked it, but I saw the shock in his eyes when the weight of my blocked punch knocked him back a couple of steps. He came at me with the intent of wrapping me in a bear hug. I came forward fast with a straight left like I was a southpaw. I hit him in the face, and he staggered backward. That's when I hit him with an uppercut that I am sure rattled his teeth. His right eye, like mine, was swollen shut when he fell over.

I looked at my three attackers lying there on the ground. I could have laid into them even more, but I didn't. I got into my truck and peeled out of the parking lot. When I was a few blocks away I pulled over and killed the engine. I clenched my hands into fists and started pounding on the steering wheel and dashboard. I hated fighting people for no reason. Those guys were angry at me because they saw me as a problem. Why couldn't their lazy friends work harder, or why couldn't they help them out? Why did they have to come after me? Why? I ask that question every day of my life, and the answer is always the same. Silence.

I sat there for half an hour on the verge of something, but I don't know what it was. I started to sweat. My windows fogged, and I felt something welling up within me. Anger? Rage? Hatred? I couldn't pinpoint it. I couldn't focus. I pounded the steering wheel again with my hands and even my head. I scratched the palm of my left hand then slammed my fist into my door. Then, of course, with everything building up to a boil inside me, my phone had to ring. The theme

to *Cops* came blaring from my pocket. Without thinking about it I pulled out my cell phone and yelled into it.

“What do you want now?” I asked. Of course, I knew who was on the other end of the phone. I’m a simple guy. I match my ringtones to the people that they are for. When Aaron calls, the theme to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* plays. When Eden, my witch friend, calls, the tune of *Bewitched* hits my ears. So, when the theme from *Cops* played, it could only be one man on the other end.

“The same thing I always want White, answers,” Captain Garrett Clay said. Over the past year, Detective Clay had been promoted to Captain. The only blemish to his rise was that, despite the hefty lawsuit my lawyers had raised on the Baltimore Police Department, he insisted on having me as a consultant on any and all cases that showed the tell-tale signs of the supernatural.

“What is it now? Did you find a mailbox thrown against a brick wall—because I can explain that,” I said.

“We have three dead bodies with their guts ripped out,” he said.

I sat up straight and looked around me. The windows were completely fogged. I let the anger over what had happened earlier settle in the back of my mind and cracked my door. Some rain hit my arm and turned to steam. “Where do you need me?” I asked calmly.

“Duncan near Fayette in Butchers Hill. You know it?” he asked me.

“Yeah...I’m just down the street,” I said.

There was an awkward pause before Captain Clay said, “Get here now. This shit is bad, and the vultures are circling.”

By vultures Captain Clay was referring to the clean-up crews and throw-away divisions. They will never admit to it, but every police department in the world has divisions that they use just to bury undesirable cases. Those cases could be anything, such as a scandal with a city official that is popular among officers, a drug cartel that rats out other cartels, or a five-year old psychopath. Then there are the cases like the ones Captain Clay insisted on tackling—missing persons, mysterious deaths, and eyewitness accounts of impossible events. Most anyone would want such things swept under the rug. Then again, most people didn’t have a Knight of the Crucifixion on speed dial.

“There in five,” I said. I fired up the Rust Bucket and headed off to take a look at some dead bodies.

Howl in the Knight

CHAPTER 6

THERE WERE POLICE cruisers all around the vacant lot that took up a quarter of a city block. Most were from the vulture groups that would want to sweep whatever had happened under a rug. The rest, three cars, were from Captain Clay's Special Investigation unit. Of course, there were reporters everywhere and plenty of onlookers. Whatever this was, it wasn't going to be quietly removed from the public eye.

When I pulled up, I stripped off anything that could be recognized by a vanilla mortal as a weapon. I have learned that cops and non-cops with guns do not mix. I fished around in my cab for the I.D. badge that Captain Clay had given me. I found it next to one of my hidden guns. I clipped it on and put on my best 'I'm here to help' smile. The cops that saw me coming were all in suits or plain clothes. I watched as their hands moved into position to draw their weapons and told myself to remain calm. I walked up to the nearest officer, a man who had seen me around at least fifteen crime scenes in the last seven months but had never given me his name even though I asked for it. I held up my plastic badge and said, "Michael White, White Knight Investigations. I'm here as a consultant." He scrutinized my badge for a few minutes before letting his partner do the same.

"Dammit, Phil, let him in," shouted Captain Clay. Phil and his partner stepped aside, but each gave me a quick once over. I walked past the police line and was waved over by Captain Clay.

When I first met Garrett Clay, he was the poster boy for a movie about the successful life of a bully after high school. He was tall, muscular, and dead set on having things his way. That's how I had seen him and judged him. I'm a knight, and it's not my job to judge people. Garrett Clay was all those things, but he was so much more. He was a man that was scared of what he felt was myth and legend. He was a man that wanted to honor his oath to serve and protect. Most importantly, he was a man that put others before himself.

I learned that first hand when he took a bullet that was meant for me. That bullet had bounced around inside his body so violently that it had injured his spine. Because of that, Captain Clay was now in a wheelchair.

"Thanks for coming, Michael," he said. He held out his hand when I reached him, and when we traded grips I was reminded that he was still the man I had met before. His hand had the strength of a man twice his size and half his age.

He could have crushed my hand, but he didn't because people who know how and when to use their strengths don't waste time with petty displays.

"Not a problem. It's not like I have a real job or anything," I said. I was still upset about being kicked off of the construction site, but I needed to move on.

"The way I see it, this is the only job that matters, so let's get to work," he told me.

Detective Clay didn't wait for me to respond. He rolled forward and I fell in next to him. He had gloves on, and I noticed that his wheelchair didn't have handles on the back. Clay had taken a bullet that was meant for me, and though he was temporarily confined to his wheelchair, he was determined to keep his independence. He drove this point home when we came to a curb and he rocked one of his front wheels up onto it then repeated the action until all four were on the higher ground.

"How's rehab coming?" I asked.

"Fucking perfect. I can walk a whole five damn steps before I fall over like my body is nothing but dead weight," he said.

"It's better than not having the possibility of walking again," I countered.

"It would be a hell of a lot better if I had those tattoos of yours," he said.

"I can arrange it if you have a solid \$50 million in gold nuggets and gems and a bottle of hundred-year-old whisky," I told him.

"Seriously?"

"Scotch might work too, but I'm not sure," I shrugged.

"Damn, that's not covered by my insurance or worker's comp," he said.

We came to the middle of the lot, and he stood...er...sat...next to something covered in a blue tarp. "When we got word of this, I thought it was on your side of the fence. It reminds me of that ghoul thing a few months ago, but I don't think it's exactly that." He reached down and pulled the tarp off of the ground.

I have fought demons and vampires. Magical creatures from our world and beyond the veil are a constant in my life. Death and destruction are nothing new to me. But when I looked down at the blood and gore that only vaguely resembled a human body I nearly lost my mind. My hands grabbed my mouth and swallowed back bile. The more I swallowed the more my throat kept forcing bile back up. It took a minute and a lot of mental discipline, but I managed to force my stomach under control. I wiped my hand on my jeans and looked down at the body.

The woman had not been young, but she had been beautiful like all women are. Her long red hair was matted with dirt and blood. Her face was worn and beaten from a hard life, but you could see a spark of hope in her lifeless orbs. Her intestines were on the outside of her body. They were mangled and chewed with bits and pieces scattered around. Her left leg was missing, and I could see where something savagely ripped it free of the body.

I pushed the blood and gore aside in my mind and forced myself to look for details. I couldn't tell her age, but she had sunken eyes. Her clothing was a hodgepodge of t-shirts, sweatpants, a jacket that was too big for her, and a coat that was too small. I could see burn marks around her lips, and her fingers were scraped and torn. She had been homeless.

Captain Clay had watched me taking it all in. "You know her?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, but I have seen her before. I volunteer at the soup kitchen every now and then. I have seen her there serving and eating. I think her name was Molly...or Mary...no Marcy! Marcy! Yeah, Marcy," I said.

"So, you did know her," Clay said.

"No. I knew her name. Knowing someone's name doesn't mean you know them. I have no idea what her last name was, if she liked cats or dogs, or if she had a family," I said. "I know she was homeless, spoke English, and didn't mind eating after everyone else was fed."

"Can you tell anything, you know, from the body?" asked Captain Clay.

By now most of his unit and a few vultures had gathered around. They didn't trust me, but they wanted answers. Everyone wants answers to the questions that have been in their minds since before they were potty trained. Are monsters real? Why are we inherently afraid of the dark? Why does something seem bigger than me when it scares me? They wanted to know, and believe it or not, like me or not, I am the guy that was stationed in Baltimore to answer them as best I can.

"You said there were three bodies," I said.

Captain Clay pointed to two more tarps on the ground. I visited them both and found similar scenes. One was of an aged homeless man that, if the dog tags were any indication, had served his country. Whether in war or general service I may never know, but he had fought here. His hands were bloody and clenched into fists. His chest was ripped open, and his ribs were broken. I could see them along with his lungs and heart, both of which were shredded. He too wore the uniform of the cast off and the unwanted. His military jacket with the patches marking him as a sergeant in the U.S. Army was worn and battered, but like those that wore it the jacket had held up to the weather and the world. The final body was of a young woman around my age. She was in the fetal position with her hands wrapped around her belly defensively. The left side of her body had been ripped open. Any of the several wounds on her body could have proved fatal, but I was sure it was the massive throat wound had killed her. Her eyes were closed, and her face was painted in a macabre grimace. The clothing she wore was newer in era than the other two victims but just as old and worn.

I found a place to stand centered among the three bodies. I stood still and lowered my head. I let the sound of the rain block out everything else. The chatter of nonbelieving officers and onlookers faded. The sickly feeling in my

stomach went away. The anger from my earlier fight drained from me. I opened my mind's eye and allowed the world, the real world, to come into view. I can't see magic. To me seeing magic is like seeing air. You can when it's actively carrying something like dirt or ashes, but then you are seeing what the air is moving, not the air. When magic is still it is invisible, and you have to feel it. So, when I open my mind's eye, I allow myself to feel the presence of magic. But all I felt was the rain. It was light and annoying, but that was all I felt. I had thought I would feel power or something tainted. Instead, all I felt was rain.

"Well?" Captain Clay asked.

"Nothing. There's nothing here," I said. I started looking around, but I couldn't find anything out of the ordinary.

The whispers started. I could hear officers complaining about the hack that the Captain kept hiring. I could hear them laughing and I could see the vultures getting ready to sweep these people under the rug. They wanted them to go away, to be invisible in death as in life. I looked around at the gathered people and could feel them writing this off as just another event that they need not be concerned with.

It pissed me off. My left hand started to itch. I gritted my teeth and clenched my hands into fists. "Idiots," I growled. "Uncaring, self-serving, ignorant children!" I felt the temperature rise and smelled burning pitch for some reason. Then none of that mattered, because I looked over at the body of the young woman. Something about her nagged at me, but I couldn't figure out what it was. I walked over to her and knelt.

"Hey, asshole, don't touch the evidence," one officer yelled.

I ignored him. She wasn't evidence, she was a person. A person that deserved respect in life and in death. Maybe that respect had been denied to her in life, but I would be damned if I was going to let that happen to her now. I looked upon her with my mind's eye and my ears perked up.

"Get an ambulance over here!" I screamed.

I jumped up and ran to my truck. I vaulted up into the bed and opened my toolbox. People were already murmuring and screaming at me. I pulled out my sports bag and pulled my sword from it. I didn't unsheathe the blade, but I did sprint back over to the girl. An officer tried to stop me from getting to her, but I politely shoved him out of my way. I dropped into a baseball slide and came to a stop at the woman's side. I drew my blade a few inches from its sheath and laid it across her still form.

"God it's me again," I said as my hands started working. "I know I am not your favorite person, but I need some guidance, please!"

I was peeling away layers of bloody cloth and fabric when the officer I shoved grabbed my shoulder and dragged me back. He had his gun out, not his cuffs.

Some officers were yelling for him to stand down. Others were yelling for him to “clock the bastard good.” Captain Clay was yelling for everyone to “calm the fuck down.” The officer hadn’t raised his gun from his side yet, and I didn’t have time for this crap. I gritted my teeth and swung my arm up into his nuts. He turned red, blue, and then purple all in the span of half a second. He fired his pistol once into the ground then fell over. I scrambled back over to the girl as officers swarmed me.

Guns were drawn, obscenities were yelled, and more than once I thought my life was at an end. As onlookers cried out for blood and patience, as rain blurred our vision, as fear and hatred started to win the day, a baby’s first cry shook everyone in the area to the core of their being. Faith, magic, power, or whatever you want to call it, because it is all the same, washed over us. I pulled a child into the world amidst lowering guns, lowering tempers, and rising hopes.

CHAPTER 7

I HATE THE rain. The ambulance took a whole twenty minutes to arrive. The storm opened up before they got to us, but I had a few emergency blankets in my truck. The baby girl was warm and dry if nothing else. I let the EMTs have their way with my truck's cab when they arrived. They didn't want to move her until they were sure she was stable and comfortable.

One of the EMTs came up to me when they were ready to take the baby and said, "You couldn't find any dirtier blankets?" He shoved past me, and they took the baby off to the hospital.

Captain Clay waved me over to his car when the ambulance left. He looked me in the eyes and said, "They want you arrested for assaulting an officer. I'm not letting anyone arrest you, though."

"Is that going to go over well with your squad?" I asked.

He looked at me with a sad expression on his face. "Every cop in Baltimore wants you behind bars. Did you know last month there was a crew on you 24/7?"

That rocked me back on my heels. Last month had been relatively quiet for me as far as being a knight, but I did have a few occasions to whip out my sword. Had the police seen me throwing down with magical folk?

Captain Clay continued, "A few hundred-man hours in surveillance of a guy that spent his days fixing stairs at nursing homes and taking his neighbors grocery shopping. I read the report. A few times they wanted to bring you in on possible drug charges, and one guy said you fit the description of a mugger. Tell me something kid. Why do people hate you?"

It was a blunt question that I had asked myself all of my life. The last twenty-four hours alone had reinforced it. I didn't have an answer. I just shrugged and said, "Guess I have one of those faces that only a mother can love."

Clay laughed. "That's for damned sure!" We both had a good laugh then. I liked Captain Clay, and it felt good to know that one of the good guys outside of The Church had my back.

"I still need answers kid. I'll be digging on my side of the fence. Keep me posted on your end," Captain Clay told me. I nodded and we shook hands again.

I got back in my truck and just sat there for a moment. The sound of the rain tapping against my truck relaxed me, and I may have nodded off for a bit. If I did it was because I had so much on my mind. I had to keep Larry safe, there was a magical teddy bear at my apartment, I had lost the first professional construction

job I had gotten in months, and now there was something out there ripping people apart in my city. I opened my eyes and stretched. Looking at my phone showed I had lost just an hour. There was still plenty of time to save the world before dinner.

First up was Larry. I had promised him I would get him some clothes and other stuff from his apartment. I drove a few miles down the road to some upscale luxury apartments near East Eutaw Street. Larry's place was called Chesapeake Commons. Taking one look at the three-story building with its fancy gate and its easy access to the light rail, I knew that I could never afford this place. It kind of irked me that I was struggling to afford the rent in my rinky-dink place, but Larry, who was a liar, a cheater, and a thief, was living here. I smelled something rotten burning again but didn't see anything when I looked around. I headed inside with the keys that Larry had given me. He lived in a third-floor loft, and when I opened the door to the place I instantly wanted to kill Larry.

The place had been furnished by someone with amazing taste. I am a do-it-yourself guy, but I don't know anything about furniture. All of Larry's stuff was a mix of brown and cherry wood furnishings. He had artwork that looked like it belonged in museums, there was a grand piano that looked older than this country, and his kitchen had every luxury appliance I had ever heard off.

I owned a spool.

Larry had told me where to find his luggage. I went about my business of gathering up some of Larry's clothes—mostly shirts and jeans, but two suits just in case. I grabbed some of his toiletries so he wouldn't feel completely out of sorts at my place. Then of course I grabbed his laptop. I don't have internet, but I am sure he had something he could entertain himself with offline. When I was done I had two suitcases, a computer bag, and two clothing travel bags to carry home.

I stepped out of the apartment and headed down to my truck. I had parked in the parking lot beside the apartment complex. There were plenty of cars there. I honestly don't know much about cars. I can't identify them just by the way they look, and I couldn't tell you the difference between an American made or a foreign model. What I could do was identify a car that would cost way more than any other car in the parking lot. Especially when it was parked right next to my truck.

There was a tall man in a tailored business suit looking my truck over. He was bald, thin, and completely unremarkable. He looked up at me as I approached, and I could see my own reflection in his sunglasses. He smiled as I neared, and I saw that his teeth were far too wide and far too even to be human. I acted like I didn't notice.

"Hello! Are you the owner of this truck?" the toothy stranger asked in an elegant and polite voice.

"Yep," I said. I was ready to toss everything at him and go for my gun if he tried anything. I kept approaching and angled myself for the door of the Rust Bucket.

"So, you are Michael White?" the stranger asked.

"That depends. Who's asking?"

He stepped toward me, and I stopped walking. When he reached into his suit I dropped everything and pulled my gun. My black Desert Eagle came up fast in my right, and I had the safety off as I balanced it with my left. I had iron shells in the magazine, and one was in the chamber. Iron and cold iron were usually an answer to supernatural beings being able to recover from just about anything. One squeeze of the trigger and this thing would be dead.

The stranger pulled out a business card and handed it over to me like I was a customer looking for a new car and not a guy with a huge gun pointed at his face. I eased my gun down, clicked on the safety, and took the card. I read it aloud. "Hung T. Roll, Investment Banker."

"At your service, Mr. White. Tell me, when was the last time you reevaluated your investment portfolio?" he asked me.

"When did I do what to who now?" I asked.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Mr. White. I have gotten a little ahead of myself. 'Don't make an enemy, make a client.' It's what my father always tells me," he said.

"Well, I guess that's a good thing, Mr. Roll," I said, slipping my gun away but not fastening the holster shut.

"Mr. Roll is my father. Please call me Hung," he laughed. "Alright, business before business, Mr. White, so let's get down to it. I am here for Mr. Larry Lipowski. If you would be so kind as to hand him over, I will kill him as expediently as possible, and we can get to reevaluating your investments. I can promise you that we can get your money working for you instead of for your bank."

I looked down at the business card. I looked back up to Hung. I looked down at the business card. "*Hung T. Roll.*" My eyes went wide in realization, and I yelled, "Holy crap, you're a troll!"

Hung's lips moved out wider than I could believe as he smiled at me. The edges of his smile literally touched his ears. I will admit that I was a little creeped out. My mind raced, and I tried to remember everything I could about trolls. Before I could even begin to recall any information, Hung spoke to me.

"Mr. White, I know that you wish to protect Mr. Lipowski, but in this matter I am afraid that protecting him is doing a disservice to your office," the troll investment banker said.

"A disservice to my office?" I asked.

"Mr. White, you are a Knight of the Order of the Crucifixion, sworn to protect the mortal and supernatural world from nefarious doings. Mr. Lipowski is not the

victim of some villainous plot. He is the perpetrator of a crime against other supernatural beings that wish to balance the scales so to speak. In that regard, I must say that you seem to be overstepping your authority. Now I am no lawyer, but this seems somewhat illegal to me, as you are interfering in an age-old form of justice in the supernatural world,” the troll said.

He had a point. Larry was half leprechaun which made him a supernatural being. The Knights of the Order and the Templars protected the mortal world as well as the supernatural. Both worlds had their own guardians, rules, and whatnot. If he was wholly supernatural, I would think about letting it stand. But Larry was also half human, which made him a card-carrying citizen of the human race. He was mortal...kind of...so he was privileged to my protection. There was a more important factor to this, however.

I handed Hung T. Roll his business card back. “Larry is my friend, Mr. Roll. If you want him then you are going to have to go through me,” I said. I had already put my right hand on my gun and clicked off the safety once more.

Hung T. Roll took his card back and frowned. He put it back in his pocket and let out a long sigh. “I would have loved to have you on my client list, Mr. White,” he said. He took off his sun glasses and tucked them away in his pocket. Yellow bloodshot eyes looked upon me with a resolve for violence.

I drew my gun faster than I had the first time. Before I had it leveled, Hung’s left arm came forward in a limp-wristed slap to my chest. His fingertips barely touched me, but I went flying sidelong into the windshield of the car that I was standing in front of. My upper body went through the glass, and I can only thank God himself that my throat wasn’t shredded then and there. The car alarm went off. I lay there with my head buried in the driver’s seat and my torso on the dashboard. The steering wheel was on the floor and my gun was still in my hand.

“Ow,” I said.

Something strong took hold of my ankle and pulled me up through the glass and debris. Hung held me upside down at the end of his left arm. He tossed me in the air the same way men do when they want to get a better grip on a broom or mop. He clutched the middle of my calf and lifted me higher. He lifted me until we were face to face. I looked up and saw that his arm had stretched out of the sleeve of his expensive suit to a length that was closer to my height than the length of an arm.

“Now, Mr. White,” the troll said. His voice was deeper and throatier. He didn’t sound like a human anymore. He was starting to show himself more as well. I looked up at his arm again and saw his muscles squirming beneath his skin suit. “I am a reasonable troll, and I can understand your concern for your friend. Let me explain something to you...”

I shot him in the face. Point blank. Iron and smoke discharged from the barrel

of my gun right into his forehead. Hung's entire head bent back to high five his spine. I grinned as I began to drop to the ground.

The grip on my leg tightened. Hung slowly lifted his head back up to look at me. There was a smoking hole the size of a baseball right through his forehead. But it was the absolute look of madness in his eyes that terrified me. I lifted my gun to fire again, but his right hand closed around mine and he crushed my hand. He didn't break it, he crushed it. The bones in my hand shattered. I heard my gun clank to the ground over the sound of my own screaming.

Hung lifted me into the air and slammed me down on the roof of the already damaged car. I felt metal crunch and fold all around me. He then ripped me free of the car and whipped me around to smash into the driver's side of the car. More glass rained down on me to cut up my face. Hung didn't stop there—he decided to ruin the passenger side the same way and finally the trunk. I had felt my ribs break somewhere between the roof and trunk. Blood was running freely from dozens of wounds along my entire body. I was in severe pain, and there was nothing I could do against the troll.

"I think it's time we brought our business to a conclusion, Mr. White," the troll said.

Hung the troll lifted me into the air above his head and began to swing me down toward the parking lot. I gritted my teeth in anticipation of my head smashing open like a melon. I felt the pull of gravity as my body stretched toward the ground. I opened my eyes to see that Hung had stopped his swing midway to the ground. There was a ringing in my ear that I couldn't quite place until Hung pulled a cell phone out of his pocket. He looked at the screen, sighed, and then dropped me to the ground. His arm shrunk back to a more human length and the hole that I put in his head closed up.

"I am sorry, Mr. White, but I have to cut our meeting short. You see, my ambition was to finish this up on my lunch hour. I am due back at the office for an important meeting in just ten minutes," the troll in human form said.

I blinked. A lot. Hung the troll just stared at me in blank patience. He was being awfully polite about not killing me. "Oh...ah...it's no problem. You can not kill me anytime you want?" I asked more than said.

Hung smiled as he pulled out his sunglasses. He walked over to me and slipped a business card into my uncrushed hand. Then he started away while saying, "Remember, Mr. White, I can get your money working for you better than anyone! Also, I suggest you give up Mr. Lipowski to my brother. He is more volatile than I am, and I would hate for him to kill a possible client like yourself over something so... mundane."

I watched him get into his yellow Lamborghini and drive off in a squeal of rubber. Hung T. Roll, one of the Bridge Boys, had beaten me bloody and spared

Howl in the Knight

me because he had a business meeting with an important client. I lay there on the ground letting the rain wash the blood off my body. Just when I thought the worst part had passed, a young black woman came outside screaming about her car. This was turning out to be one swell day.

CHAPTER 8

I SAW YOU wreck my car,” the angry woman yelled as I sat up. She had been yelling about her poor destroyed car for a few minutes now.

“If you saw what happened, then why aren’t you asking how it was possible for him to swing me around like that,” I grumbled.

“What?” she asked.

“You saw him use me like a hammer on your car, and you aren’t asking how that happened? You didn’t see anything, lady,” I said. I stood and started gathering Larry’s stuff.

“You wrecked my car mother fucker! Where are you going?” she yelled.

“To my truck. I have someone that will fix your car. Just let me pick up this stuff,” I said.

“It’s totaled asshole!” she screamed. She ran by me as I was limping over to my gun and grabbed it. Holding my gun in one hand, she aimed it at me with her finger on the trigger. Looking at her, she wasn’t a big woman as far as muscle or size. Heck, she was soaking wet and would probably weigh in at under one-hundred pounds. If she shot at me, it was likely she would kill herself trying to hold my gun in one hand.

“Now hold on, lady,” I said as I threw my hands up defensively.

“You wrecked my car!” she said.

“I told you I would get it fixed!”

“It’s totaled!” she yelled.

I pointed to my truck. “My cell phone is in there. My cousin is my mechanic. Let me gather up this stuff and call him. He will fix your car. If he can’t, I will pay for it,” I said.

She thought about it for what seemed like a long time. Finally, she said, “Give me your keys so you can’t drive off.”

I opened my truck and then gave her the keys. I gathered up all of Larry’s bags and got them out of the rain. Then I climbed into my truck and sent a text message. The message I got in reply said, “two hours.” I showed her the text and she nodded.

She took my gun and keys and went back inside her apartment. I kicked back while we waited and tried to let my body heal. The runic tattoos all over my body allow me to heal at an accelerated rate from just about anything that doesn’t kill me. All I have to do to maintain that superhuman ability is keep myself well-nourished

and in good physical condition. Too bad I am usually underfed. Lucky for me I had eaten enough to at least get my crushed hand and ribs repaired. I set an alarm on my phone and went to sleep.

My alarm went off just as the young woman came back outside to yell at me once more. Like clockwork, a black flatbed truck rolled into the parking lot. The side of the truck said “Frank’s Towing and Repair” in white letters trimmed in neon green and purple. The truck pulled right up so that the bed was in front of the wrecked car.

Out into the rain stepped a man in gray, greasy, and torn sleeveless coveralls. He was a little taller than me with the musculature of someone that had been fit all of his life. His light skin resembled mine but a little darker. His black hair was done into braids and pulled back into a ponytail that ran down to his waist. He was wearing mirrored sunglasses and carrying a tool belt that he was fitting to his waist as he walked. When I stepped out to shake his hand, he slapped my hand away and pulled me into a hug that would have made a bear’s ribs crack.

“Blood of my blood!” he said just before pushing me out to arm’s length. “What’s good with you, little cousin?”

“Hey, Drey! I’m good. Just had a little problem with a troll,” I said.

My cousin Drey looked back at the car then frowned at me. “You okay?” he asked. When I nodded he sucked his teeth and grunted. “Did you use the ring?”

I looked down at the ring on my right hand. “Didn’t get a chance to. It’s working great, though,” I told him.

“Just be careful with it. It will let you hit with the strength of a giant but only three times a day. Don’t try doing it any more than that. This isn’t like your shield. It doesn’t run out of power, it’s just going to malfunction, and I don’t know how badly,” he told me.

“Is this him?” the young woman asked as she waved around my gun and keys. I ducked back, but Drey just looked at her like he was bored. “Is this the man you called to fix my totaled car? It’s been hours! What did you do, drive from another state?”

“Virginia, ma’am,” my cousin said with a smile and a nod.

“Well as you can see my car is totaled. So, are you going to give me money to fix it, or do I need to call the cops?” she asked.

My cousin smiled at her. Drey turned and walked over to her car. He put his hand on the crushed hood and gently traced across the damage. He stopped in one spot and patted the car. Then he pressed down on the hood, clenched his fingers like he was grabbing something, and slowly pulled his hand up. The hood of the car groaned and popped, metal straightened with a screech, and the hood snapped into place.

The young woman stood with her mouth hanging open. My cousin turned

to her, smiled, and handed her a business card. "I have an associate in town that lets me use his garage. If you allow me, I can have your car ready for you no later than tomorrow afternoon," Drey said. As she took the business card he took my keys and gun from her.

She stammered. "Uh...ummm...sure. Thank—" She started to say 'thank you,' but I slapped my hand over her mouth. She screamed and shoved me away. "What the hell?"

"Sorry, it's just that you shouldn't thank him. It's not professional. He has to fix the car first," I said.

She gawked at me then threw her hands up. "Whatever. Just fix my car, and this asshole said he was paying for it," she said.

"Yes ma'am," my cousin said.

The young lady walked away, and Drey stopped smiling. He turned to me and said through clenched teeth, "Why didn't you let her thank me?"

"Because when you thank a fairy for their work they become hostile," I said.

My cousin Drey was the oldest of my cousins. He was nearly thirty and had always looked out for me. I had always thought that it was because he loved me, but after I learned the truth about faeries, I wondered if it was because he loved me or because I was *his*. Drey, short for Dreyalkain, is a gremlin. His mother, my aunt, is human, but his dad is a fae named Grizzalkain. I call him Uncle Grizz. He had worked for my grandpa for a time as a mechanic and had fallen in love with my aunt Sharon. Drey had inherited his dad's skill with all things metal or mechanical. He, like Larry, was half human and half fairy. I wish I could remember the name for them.

Drey pulled off his shades and looked at me with his cascading green and blue eyes. Those eyes reminded me that Drey was never entirely human. He was of the magical and of the mortal world. I did find it odd that he was showing me his real eyes though.

"You shouldn't let your glamour fall," I told him.

Drey grunted and handed me my gun and keys. Then he started hooking the car up to the lift. "I can't help it. It took a lot to fix that hood. I wouldn't have done much to the girl if she thanked me," he said.

"The last time someone thanked you, I remember gramps smacking you over the head and telling you to give back the guy's teeth," I said.

"They were gold with diamond studs on them! What the hell was I supposed to do? He said *thank you!* He owed me!" Drey snapped. I could see his teeth growing sharp, his dark hair was frizzing up, and he seemed taller.

"Drey, cuz! What the heck?" I asked.

Drey looked around. He touched his mouth and then looked at his hands. "Shit, it's the rain. I gotta get moving. Look cousin, if you need me call," he said.

Drey hoisted the car onto the wrecker, secured it, and took off. He left me standing in the rain wondering what the heck was going on. I looked up at the sky and wondered if the rain was ticking everyone off as much as it was ticking me off.

It was almost lunch time, and I was soaked. I drove home and found Horace reading through my book on monsters and supernatural beings. He had several other books on folklore and mythology sitting on my table opened to various chapters.

“Studying for finals?” I asked.

Horace looked up at me and shrugged. “I’m trying to find something that will tell me why I’m back here. I was dismissed when you outgrew your innocence. Almost five years ago I found myself back in your bear, and I have been trapped here ever since.”

I swallowed hard. “So, me losing my innocence set you free?”

“Yes.”

“Um...okay. So, what would happen if I became an innocent again?” I asked.

The teddy bear scrunched up his face. “How the hell would you do that? You can’t just hit your head and forget that you aren’t an innocent little boy anymore. It’s not like God granted you a second childhood or...” Horace stopped talking and turned to look at me. “Innocent doesn’t always mean young.”

“Nope. It could mean naïve or not guilty,” I said.

Horace looked at the bag I was carrying. “What sword do you have?”

I reached into my bag and pulled out my sword. I didn’t want to tell him, but lying wasn’t going to help. “The Sword of Innocence,” I said.

Horace looked at the sword with wide eyes. “Do you know who had that sword before you?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Judas Iscariot,” the old teddy bear said. “He was chosen by Jesus, trusted by him, loved by him. And he betrayed him.”

It was an old story. One that most people already knew. What they don’t know is that the Apostles were also the chosen Knights of Jesus. Judas was the first and only man to ever wield the Sword of Innocence before it found its way to me. It’s ironic that Jesus chose the greatest sinner in history to protect innocence.

“Kid, I thought you had some baggage before with that curse, but this is just ridiculous,” Horace said. “Well as long as you are the Knight of Innocence I guess my job isn’t done.” He started packing the books back up now that his mystery was solved.

“The curse of Ignorance is Bliss sucks, but everyone deals with it in their own way I guess,” I said.

Horace put another book on his stack and turned to look at me again. “Not

that one. The curse that's on you. You know, the one that..." Horace trailed off and bolted to his feet. "You don't know about the curse?" he yelled.

"What curse?" I asked.

Horace slumped back down. "You were cursed, kid. The day you were born. A very powerful demon cursed you when he couldn't kill your grandfather."

"Some demon cursed me instead of cursing my grandpa?"

"You were the youngest of your family. The most vulnerable. How do you hurt someone that has spent his life trying to protect people?"

I thought about that for a moment. I shrugged when I couldn't figure out an answer.

"You make it so that no matter how hard he tries, no matter how much he sacrifices, no matter how much faith he has, and no matter how much hope he has, he will never be able to keep the people he loves safe. You were meant to be a reminder of that. I didn't think you would live a year when you were cursed," Horace said.

"You thought I would die? I was cursed? How? When?" I slumped onto the couch next to my teddy bear with my sword across my lap.

"Your grandfather was coming to the hospital. He had bought me for you. A demon was there in the maternity ward. They fought, and with the demon's last breath he cursed you. You never thought it was strange that people instinctively don't like you or that people will break their own necks to hurt you?"

"I always thought I smelled bad or that I was just ugly," I said.

"Well, you do smell bad, and you are pretty ugly. But that's all you male humans," Horace said.

"That's kind of mean."

"Look, if all the cards are on the table, kid, I am a racist, a drunkard, and you can't leave me around Barbie dolls."

"What the heck, Horace?"

He shrugged. "I also steal stuff." He pulled open a seam on his chest and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He tapped the pack, pulled out a cigarette, and put it between his lips. Then I got to watch this beloved toy from my childhood light up a cigarette with an orange Bic lighter. "I also smoke."

"No!" I snatched the cigarette from him and tapped it out. "You're a freaking teddy bear! You can't smoke!"

Horace glared at me. "News flash kid—I smoke, I drink, and I fuck! I'm not just some stuffed teddy bear. I'm an ursa. You want cute and cuddly I can do that, but this is the real world, kid. It's an act. I have needs, and right now I need my smokes," he said. He held out his paw for the cigarette. I hesitated, but then I shook my head and handed it to him. He lit up again as I stood up. "Where are you going?"

"It's been a heck of a day and I'm hungry. You?"

"I can eat," Horace said as he dropped to the floor and followed me into the kitchen.

"Wait, I was asking to be polite. Can you actually eat?"

"Yes, I can eat, and before you ask, no I don't need to eat but I enjoy it."

"What about afterwards? Do you poop?"

"Do I shit? No kid, I don't shit. That would be weird."

"Then where does it all go?"

"Kid, I am a magical fucking teddy bear. Its fucking magic."

We made cold cut sandwiches while I told Horace about my day. He complained that I was a punk for not liking spicy mustard and expressed his distaste for vegetables on sandwiches. We ended up with four ham sandwiches with lettuce, spicy mustard, and tomato. I grabbed a Mountain Dew, Horace grabbed a beer, and we sat down at the table to eat.

"I'm gonna look up trolls in the monster manual after we eat," I said.

"You should pick up the other books and not just the overview manual." Horace told me.

"What?"

"Yeah. Your book is an overview of the Church's Paranormal Encyclopedia. Didn't you ever wonder why you only had one and your grandfather has almost thirty books?"

"I thought they were just encyclopedias that he kept in his den. I didn't know they went along with the monster manual!"

"No one told you?"

"Most of the Church hates me."

"That's the curse. Why aren't you asking me more about it?"

"Can you help me get rid of it?"

"Two of the most powerful wizards in the United States, a paladin, and an angel couldn't break it. I'm in the body of a child's toy. What do you think?"

"Then there's no point worrying about it. It makes people dislike me. I smell bad and I'm ugly. Moving on."

Horace nodded. "The bridge boys are bad news, kid. I'm surprised you survived meeting one of them."

"You know about them?"

"Yeah, big enforcers in the magical underworld. They work for a guy named Fraul."

"Who's he?"

Horace took a pull from his beer and mulled it over. "Think of the biggest, baddest crime boss out there. He has the brains, charisma, guts, drive, and purpose to do what he wants when he wants. Now make him a troll. Take Frank Lucas'

foresight, Al Capone's ruthlessness, and the charisma of Morgan Freeman. That's Fraul."

"Am I going to have to deal with him after I deal with his boys?"

"One step at a time, Michael. You should get the other books and then read up on trolls."

I began to nod in agreement when my phone rang to the tune of *Inspector Gadget*. The call was on the business line for White Knight Investigations. There was a private number on the screen. Normally when someone called that line it was to ask me if I could help find out if their significant other was cheating on them. It was good money, but it reminded me why I was only a part-time private investigator.

I answered, "White Knight Investigations, Michael White speaking."

A female voice came back across the phone. "Hello, Mr. White, my name is Lydia Black."

I could already hear her story. She would want me to find out if Mr. Black was cheating with Mrs. Green next door. "Hello, Mrs. Black. How can I help you?" I asked.

"Mr. White, I am calling on behalf of my husband. He would like to hire you for a job. He is driving at the moment and prefers not to talk on the phone. Could we meet you at your office at 3 p.m.?"

I looked at my watch. It was just past 1 p.m. so I had time. "Of course we can, Mrs. Black. May I ask you what this pertains to?"

"Some things are better discussed in person, Mr. White. But I do need something from you right now."

"What is it?"

Her voice came back to me as though the phone was further from her mouth. "Mr. White, I have you on speaker phone. I would like you to invite myself, my husband, and our companions into your territory under the Laws of Avalon."

The Laws of Avalon were no joke. They were written by several powerful beings, some of which could claim godhood from what I was told. The laws governed the civil interactions between beings and were recognized by most of the supernatural community. I knew the rules...mostly...I had a book on them. The Church recognized them, and as a Knight of the Crucifixion I was obligated to abide by them. Since this was my territory, by inviting someone into it I was offering them safe passage, my protection, and in some respects I would be taking responsibility for their actions under the Laws.

"Mrs. Black, I extend an invitation to you, your husband, and your companions to join me in my territory of the city of Baltimore, Maryland. You have my word that I will provide you with my aid and protection so long as you abide by the Laws of Avalon," I said.

The voice that came back over the line was male. It was calm and deep,

and each word carried a weight of authority. “We accept your invitation, Mr. White. We will arrive at 3 p.m. sharp. Goodbye.”

The line went dead. I shrugged and picked up another sandwich. Horace was staring at me. “What?” I asked.

“You just gave people that you don’t know free passage into your territory! What the hell is wrong with you?” screamed my teddy bear.

“Dude, if they are bad ass enough to come into town and cause trouble, they would do it whether I offered them safe passage or not. This way if they start trouble I can kick their butts without fear of retribution from any signatories of the Laws,” I said.

Horace started to argue but stopped himself. He opened his mouth again and closed it. Then he smiled and said, “You got your law degree.”

“Yep.”

“Did you pass the bar?”

“Never took it. I wanted to work with my hands. It just feels right to build, fix, and restore things.”

“Jesus was a carpenter, you know.”

I smiled about that old fact. Horace and I ate in silence after that. Jesus was a carpenter, but I wasn’t about to start comparing myself to him. It always bothered me that I probably had more in common with Judas than with Jesus. That was probably true for most people.

When we finished with lunch I made a phone call. When someone picked up on the other end I gave them an elaborate password, and they gave me another phone number. When I called that one and gave them another elaborate password the speaker put me on hold.

“My name is Priest Abernathy. Who is this?” came a stern male voice over the line.

“Sir Michael White, Knight of the Crucifixion, wielder of the Sword of Innocence,” I said.

There was a pause. “The sword of Judas,” the voice said.

I sighed. “Yeah, that one. I just need something brought to me in Baltimore.”

“What do you want, Judas?”

“Well first off my name is Michael, not Judas. Second, I need a full set of the Paranormal Encyclopedia that all knights are given.”

“What happened to yours?”

“I never received one. All I got was the overview book.”

There was another long pause. “My records don’t show you as having one, so we can issue you one without investigation or cost. I will have it to you in one month.”

“No. That doesn’t work. I need it now.”

There was another pause. This time I heard voices whispering to each other. "I can send you a set tonight, but they will have to be delivered by Templars."

I silently swore. The Templars were Knights like me, but they were a man-made order that served the Church exclusively. The Knights of the Crucifixion were Templars but with more range and freedom to act. We were part of The Church, but in the end we served God and all that he created. I was lucky enough to not have any Templars in my territory, and inviting them in was the last thing I wanted to do.

"Haven't you ever heard of FedEx?" I asked.

"Sir Michael, I am not about to send forty books filled with mystical spells, incantations, spiritual history, and demonic lore through FedEx, UPS, or the United States Postal Service. Now do you want them or not?"

"Yes! Yes I want them. Have the Templars contact me when they arrive. Remember that I need them ASAP."

"I will. Goodbye."

Abernathy hung up the phone, and I reflected on how much I hated contacting any member of the Church besides my grandpa or Priest Greysadow. I joined Horace on the couch and handed him a soda.

"There are forty books in the encyclopedia now," I told him.

He nodded. "After you get the books we can go over trolls. I will tell you this much though—they aren't Fairies. They are Folk of Lore."

"What?"

"Folk of Lore. It's just what it sounds like."

"Folklore? Like the normal word, folklore?"

"Not so normal. It's like fairy is a catch-all term for all of the magical creatures of Second Earth. Folk of Lore are beings who don't exactly fit neatly into the categories like dragon, god, fairy, or human."

I choked on part of my sandwich, but it went down after I coughed a bit. "Did you say dragon?"

"Focus. We are talking about Folk of Lore, specifically trolls. Tolkien is probably your most common reference for them. He wrote about them. Dwarves, elves, and the like. Trolls aren't fairies, but they share some traits. Cold iron might hurt them, but there is no guarantee. Magic will hurt them, but even then they can heal from anything that doesn't outright kill them," he said.

"Great. So, all those games that said fire was the weakness of trolls were wrong?" I asked.

"Fire might work. Well, maybe magical fire," Horace told me.

"Okay. I'm heading to the office. Want to tag along?" I asked him.

"The second you aren't alone I'll be nothing but a stuffed bear again. I can hear and see, but I won't be able to help you or talk to you."

“So, in other words, I’m on my own?”

“Yep.”

“Great. I get to be the superhero that walks around with his teddy bear,” I said with a shrug.

I changed into some clean clothes. I chose a red and white short sleeved flannel and a brand-new pair of blue jeans. Keri-Lynn had bought them for me before she left. I put on my Orioles baseball cap to finish off my look. Horace hopped into my bag, and we took off to my office.

CHAPTER 9

BEFORE I EVER rolled into town, Gregory Greycast had walked the beat of Mobtown's mystical streets. The priest had been Baltimore's paranormal gumshoe, but more than that he had defied the powers that be. Humans running roughshod over fairies, ghouls, and vampires tend to die at a young age. He hadn't. But even a man as tough as Priest Greycast has his limitations. A pacemaker, diabetes, and seeing more horrible things in a few years than most people see all of their lives will weigh on a man. So, when I walked into town and was introduced to him by no less than an actual angel he decided to clock out. Now I walk his beat, and he sits in the shadows offering me anything he can to help me.

The coolest gift I have ever gotten, outside of my sword, was a set of keys. I parked in my usual space outside of a standalone brick building in West Baltimore. The sign on the door said, "White Knight Construction and Investigations." This had been Greycast's office and his home. Now it was mine.

My office was on a corner with a laundromat next door, row houses as far as the eye can see across both streets, and a pizza place directly opposite the front door. When it was Greycast's place they delivered. They refuse to deliver to me because we are in a bad neighborhood, but they are open all night so I can always just walk across the street.

I walked in and hit the lights. The front of the building was a typical office setup. There were couches lining both of the side walls, a round table with stacked magazines and paperback novels in the center of the room, and a vending machine on each side of the door. One was for snacks and the other for drinks. A large, sturdy desk cut from a single piece of ancient redwood was in front of the back wall. In front of it there were two comfortable chairs. Behind it was a newish office chair on wheels. A bookshelf sat off to the left behind the desk against the wall. It was filled with old file boxes and a few novels. There were two coat racks, one next to the snack machine and one in the corner next to the desk.

In the opposite corner was a door leading to the back of the building. Back there was a room with a fully stocked bar, a loft, and a wall with fourteen big screen TVs. Greycast had put it all together. The only thing I could rightly say I added was the Dungeons and Dragons calendar on the wall. Well also the carpet in the office, but Greycast had paid for it.

I put my bag down on the desk. Horace unzipped it and climbed out. While he looked around I walked over to my coat rack and put my cap on a hook. Three

other garments were there. One was a black fedora which I put on. The second was a long black trench coat...or was it a duster? It had been a gift from Greyshadow when I got my private investigators license. The last thing on the coat rack was a jean jacket with white fur around the collar and cuffs. That had been a gift from Keri-Lynn, and I had not worn it since she left Baltimore...and me.

"Nice place," Horace said.

I touched the collar of the jacket and shrugged to wipe something from my eye. "Yeah," I said in reply.

"How do you want to play it, kid?" Horace asked.

I picked him up and set him strategically atop the bookshelf with *The Song of Fire and Ice* to prop him up. "You watch and keep track of everything that goes on. We'll compare notes afterward. Sound good?" I asked.

"Sounds good kid. Just remember that I can't help you out. You sure you've got this?" Horace asked.

I showed him my Desert Eagle in its holster on my waist. I opened my bag and pulled out its chrome twin before opening a drawer on my desk. Inside was a silver snub-nosed revolver with a dark brown grip loaded and ready. I set the chrome eagle in a special holster under the middle of the desk and then sat down to wait.

I propped my feet on the desk and tipped my fedora down, so I looked kind of cool. Then I fell asleep. I'm not ashamed to admit it. I woke up when one of my books hit me in the head. I looked up at Horace, and he nodded toward the door. I could see the lights from a large vehicle creeping up. I heard doors closing and grabbed my sports bag from the desk. I slid my sword out and set it against my desk in easy reach. If some supernatural being wanted to start a brawl with me, I would feel more confident in my chances with a magical sword powered by God's will than with any gun I owned.

Through the tented windows of my office, I counted five figures. The door opened, and an older black man dressed in a black suit stepped in. He was followed by a black woman in a pants suit. She was a midget...dwarf...little person...crap baskets, I don't know how to say it correctly. She was under four feet tall. Her dark hair was styled in natural twists and curls. Next was a tall black man in his late twenties wearing dark jeans, a black tee shirt, and a dark brown cowboy hat. He also had a gun belt with a silver revolver on his right hip. The next man through the door was an older white guy with long steel and black hair pulled into a ponytail. He sported a nicely trimmed goatee and wore black slacks with a gray silk shirt. He had a shoulder rig with a semi-automatic pistol in the holster.

The last person to enter was a tall Caucasian woman with long red hair. She was wearing dark jeans, a stylish blue short sleeved button-down shirt, and spurred cowboy boots. A leather gun belt holstered a colt .45 revolver on her right hip. Her body wasn't skinny or fat but thick with muscles from head to toe. It was

like a super model had walked in with thick toned hips, a solid waste, and breasts that were bigger than my head. I had never seen her blue eyes look so sad.

“Faith?” I said as I bolted to my feet.

“Howdy, Michael,” the young woman said.

I looked around at the group once more. Each of them was in excellent physical condition, they all moved with athletic grace, and each one was scanning the room the way a predator does when it enters unknown territory. They had spread out, whether by design or instinct I could not be sure, but the first man that entered had taken point and was flanked by the short woman and the young black man on his right. Faith and the older white guy were on his left. Each was spread five feet from the other and five feet back. I knew of animals that hunted in that ‘V’ formation.

“Werewolves,” I said.

“Perceptive,” the short woman said.

“He knows the bitch,” said the older white man. “Every idiot knows werewolves travel in packs.”

“Faith, who are these people, and why are you here?” I asked.

“Mr. White,” the black man standing in the point position said. He walked around my table and up to my desk. He held out his hand to me and said, “My name is Kodiak Black.”

I shook his hand. His grip was strong. I glanced back over his friends and noticed something strange. Out of everyone in the room he was the least important to me. He was right in front of me, and I still hadn’t looked him over. I was shaking his hand and looking at everyone but him.

On a whim I opened my mind’s eye. I immediately felt the magic permeating the room. It felt primal, raw, and wild. Uncut power scraped against my body like claws against a tree. I focused on each of Kodiak’s companions and could feel the beast stirring within them. Each one gave off an aura of a different magnitude. Faith’s was the weakest. The two men were nearly equal, and it seemed to me the magic they were each giving off seethed toward one another. The little woman’s was the strongest. She was on par with Faith’s dad Jedidiah Kane, the alpha of the Virginia Pack. I was just about to close my mind’s eye when I realized that I still wasn’t looking at the man in front of me.

When I focused on Kodiak Black I found something I didn’t expect. I found absolutely nothing. All things give off a hint of magic because magic is in all things. In all things there is that spark of creation, the very essence of existence. In Kodiak Black I felt nothing. In fact, the more I tried to feel him the harder it was. I kept picking up on the other people around me, on my sword, and even on Horace behind me. But Kodiak Black was a wasteland of nonexistence. My head started hurting, so I closed my mind’s eye.

I met Kodiak's gray eyes and saw a cold void behind them. As unimposing as this man seemed, my instincts told me that he was the most dangerous person in the room. We both retracted our hands at the same time.

"How can I help you, Mr. Black," I asked.

"You spoke with my wife, Lydia, earlier today," he said as he motioned to the short woman. She smiled at me and nodded politely. "Mr. White, I have something of the utmost importance to discuss with you, but before I do that I need to know you can be trusted to be discreet."

"My clients have had me dig through their personal lives, finances, and..."

He cut me off. "How many clients have been of the supernatural world?"

"None. My supernatural cases are usually assigned by the Church," I said.

"Tell them how you fought my dad, Michael," Faith said.

The older white man turned to her and snarled, "Shut your mouth, bitch."

Faith, the headstrong daughter of the Alpha of the Virginia Pack, lowered her head and shut her mouth. I let my eyes focus on Mr. Ponytail, and when he turned his head back toward me I lifted my shirt so that he could plainly see my gun. The room was quiet as I calmly tucked my shirt into the hem of my pants so that it wouldn't be in the way of my draw. I felt the slight shift in the room as everyone except Faith and Kodiak got ready for a fight. Ponytail grinned at me.

"I don't know you. I don't care to know you. But if you snap at that girl one more time, call her out of her name one more time, or just make me think she doesn't like you, I'll put a bullet in your forehead," I promised.

The older werewolf growled at me and took a threatening step forward. I popped the security strap off of my holster. He cracked the joints in his neck.

"Marshal," Kodiak said. The older werewolf turned to look at him. "You are a guest here, as we all are. I am sure that Mr. White will not be offering us violence unless we invite it by insulting his friend, for example."

Marshal turned to face me once again and pointedly took a step back. I clipped the security strap back on my holster.

Lydia cleared her throat causing both Kodiak and me to turn our attention to her. "Perhaps we should observe proper etiquette," she said.

"Of course, even in times like this we should observe our manners," Kodiak said. "Mr. White, I have already introduced my wife, and you know Miss Kane. The gentleman to my left is Marshal Thatcher, third in my pack. The young man to my right is my son West Black, Alpha of the North Carolina Pack."

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. Thatcher, get the hell out of my office," I said. Thatcher growled at me. "Kodiak, I don't deal with bullies. You want my help, then you get this asshole out of my office."

"Kodiak," growled Thatcher, but Kodiak cut him off. Not with words or a look. He just lifted his left hand and turned the wedding band on it as though he

meant to take it off. Thatcher stopped growling. He took a long hard look at me and then lowered his gaze, turned on his heels, and walked out into the rain.

Kodiak lowered his hands to his sides and blew out a breath. “Mr. White, may I be direct with you?” he asked. I nodded. “Mr. White, I am not in any condition or mood to properly sit down for a discussion of business. In truth, I want to do nothing more than give my pack the order to descend upon your city and tear it apart from the ground up. But as I am a man of practicalities, I understand that such action would only benefit a small few. I am here, Mr. White, because I need help, and you are the only man in the world that can help me.”

I took in Kodiak’s words. It wasn’t often that anyone was this direct with me. But even in being direct, I could feel that he was hiding something. “What pack are you the alpha of, Mr. Black?” I asked.

Kodiak smiled at me. I don’t want to say it was wolfish, but darn it was. “A truth for a truth, Mr. White?”

It was an odd saying. It was an old saying. Truth for truth was a mutual exchange of power between two beings. If I agreed he would answer my question, but in return he could ask me one of equal importance, and I was bound to answer truthfully. There was no magic behind the deal that I knew of, so I could always just lie. But breaking your word had a power all its own. To lie, to welch on an ancient deal, would be inviting karma, fortune, chance, fate, or any number of cosmic balancing forces to take a shot at me. Anything could happen from stubbing my toe to my gun misfiring the next time I holstered it.

I stood straight and said, “Truth for truth Kodiak Black. What is your truth? What pack are you the alpha of?”

“I am the Alpha of the New York Pack,” Kodiak said. “Now what is your truth Michael White? What is the most important thing in this world to you?”

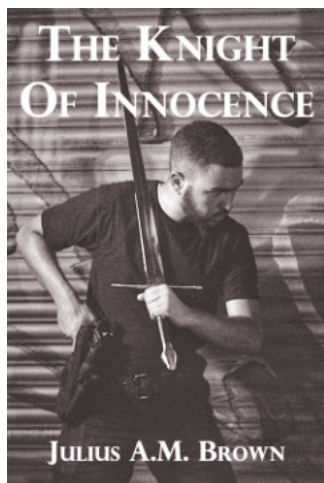
I was rocked back by his question. I had expected him to ask me a secret about the Church or something important. I reached down and pulled my sheathed sword up so that he could see it. Kodiak frowned at the blade. I set it on the table and opened a small pocket on the side of the sheath. There was a photo hidden there. I pulled it out and slid it to the end of the desk. Kodiak walked over and took up the photo. He looked at it and then up at me.

I met his puzzled expression and said, “That is a picture of my entire family at my grandmother’s birthday a few years back. Family is what is most important to me. That is my truth.”

Kodiak sat my photo down carefully. He motioned for West to come to him. West walked over as he pulled a manila folder from his vest. Kodiak took the folder and held it out to me. “Mr. White, eleven days ago someone kidnapped my brother, Everett Black. Will you help find him?”

To purchase this book, please visit
<http://www.divertirpublishing.com>

ALSO BY JULIUS A.M. BROWN

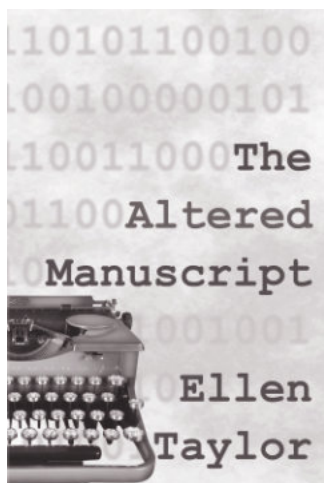


The Knight of Innocence

Julius Brown

Young people are being killed by the dozens. The police are baffled by the dismembered bodies and missing persons reports. With Baltimore about to become a playground for demons, the communities turn to the one man in the city sworn to defend them. Armed with a magical sword, a desert eagle—because he can't hit a target—and a network of friends better suited for the job, can Michael Franklin White prevent a wizard from opening a portal to Hell in his city?

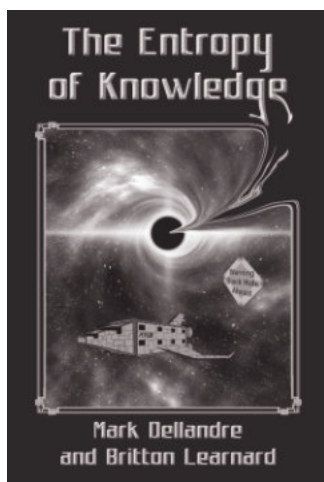
ALSO BY DIVERTIR PUBLISHING



The Altered Manuscript

Ellen Taylor

The accidental discovery of the narration device completely changed entertainment and proved too dangerous to use without strict laws in place. Junior understood the reason behind these laws, which is why Bree does not know she's a character in a story. When a rogue narrator hacks into the system and begins creating chaos in Junior's story, does Junior continue to follow the laws to keep herself safe, or does she risk it all to protect the characters she loves?



The Entropy of Knowledge

Mark Dellandre and Britton Learnard

We've all had moments when we felt like we were surrounded by idiots...

Babylon Briggs feels that pain every day because his town, his planet, even his galaxy, is jam-packed with the most thick-headed simpletons imaginable. So when his home world is invaded by a group of equally clueless conquerors, it's up to Babylon to save the day. The only question:

Is he smart enough?



Time Starts Now

Michael Walsh

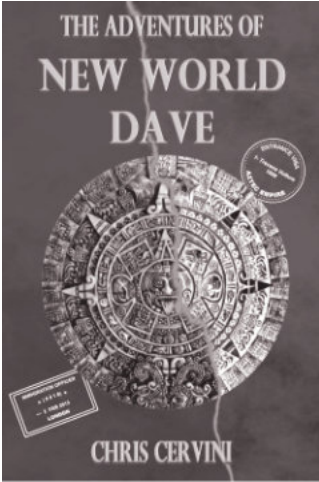
Professor Cal Sutherland's research on time travel elicits only snide remarks from fellow philosophers and rejection notices from journals. Even Cal would admit that time travelers probably aren't real—until he encounters one inside his neighbor's burning house. Cal soon learns that, while the past cannot be changed, there is much a time traveler can do in the past. Unfortunately for Cal, this includes the possibility of dying there...



A Third Kind

J. C. Campbell

He was to have been an immortal undead, to have power and strength like he'd never known in mortal life. The Vampyrs lied. When he awoke he was some- thing else, a creature so foul they abandoned him to die alone in a crypt. When the local ruling Vampyr clan realizes what is living in their midst, they come in force to destroy Kaleb and wipe every last trace of his existence from the face of the earth.



The Adventures of New World Dave

Chris Cervini

In the spring of 1519, Hernán Cortés arrived at the shores of Mexico to conquer the Aztec Empire and claim its gold for the glory of Spain. That's what the history books tell us. But sometimes, right in the middle of the history we know, somebody goes and does something to change one important detail, and the world is never the same...

"I have plenty of information, but what do you have to trade?"

I tossed Willy the plastic bag I was carrying. He caught it and pulled it open. He snatched the 18-inch sandwich out of the bag and started ripping the aluminum foil off of it. He bit into the cheese steak inside and closed his eyes as he experienced true bliss.

I let him get in a few more bites before I tried to strike a deal.

"So can you help me out, Willy?"

Willy's eyes popped open, and he shook his head in the negative. "A single sandwich, though surely crafted by one gifted by the gods, is not worth the information you seek," he told me.

"Willy, there are fries and a soda in that bag, too," I said.

Willy looked into the bag by sticking his head into it. He pulled his head out with a mouth full of fries and started chewing while he spoke. "A deal has been struck! For a combo meal is always a bargain. Is there ketchup?"

It's been raining for over a week in Baltimore as Michael gets caught up in his very own supernatural noir. Michael has bills to pay, a childhood teddy bear that wants him dead, and a half-leprechaun friend, Larry, with a price on his head for cheating in an underground poker game run by supernatural mobsters. With everything else, when a mysterious phone call asks Michael to get involved in a supernatural missing persons case, he could just walk away—but if he does there is a good chance that in three days the full moon will make Baltimore a hunting ground for supernatural predators. Can Michael save Baltimore from the latest threat while also preventing a supernatural war from starting up again and saving Larry from four preternatural hit men that notoriously always get their toll...



About the Author: Julius A.M. Brown is a lover of fiction with a degree in Criminal Justice. He lives in North Carolina with his wife, their son, and their dog. *Howl in the Knight* is the second Michael White book.



**DIVERTIR
PUBLISHING**

<http://www.divertirpublishing.com/>