



COALITION OF THE DAMNED

A MONSTER SQUAD NOVEL



H E A T H S T A L L C U P

Coalition of the Damned
A Monster Squad Novel
Book 3

Heath Stallcup

Edited by TW Brown
Cover by Ronak Kothari

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For Mom

I wish you could have been here
to read them all...

Acknowledgements

Yeah, if you actually have read any of my previous acknowledgment pages, this sounds familiar but this entire series wouldn't have happened if not for my wife, Jessie. It was her patience and encouragement that made it all possible.

Of course, I can never repay Mark Tufo. His guidance in the beginning is the only reason the project has seen it as far as it has. And it is with his permission that a certain character that shares his name truly takes on a life of his own in this volume. Trust me, you'll see the character blossom more in the final installment.

Todd Brown (and his brilliant OCD) polished this rough work into what you see before you. His hard work and dedication to putting out the best work possible is the only reason I can hold my head high and call myself an author today.

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I'd also like to thank my sister Sheila who stepped up and became my proofreader. She offered me I'm sure, in order to read the stories before they were published, but she proved to be more than capable, if not a bit TOO aggressive in trying to catch me at something and trying to prove me wrong. Maybe one day, sis...

My heartfelt thanks and gratitude to each and every one of you for putting up with me through each step of this journey. And, my condolences to you all, because there's more to come!

-Heath

For those of you who have stumbled upon the Monster Squad series, you may have asked yourselves, where did this idea come from? What made me think I could possibly write a story that anybody would ever want to read?

Well, truth be told, I didn't start out thinking "I'm going to write a story that everyone will want to read and people may (or may not) like and..." No. Truth be told, it all started out rather foolishly. You see, my wife is an avid reader. Like, she goes through a TON of books. She started out with historical romance, then slowly over the decades, she made the switch to supernatural stories. Yes, stuff like Twilight and Eragon and...anyway. One night we're in bed and she's reading and giggling. I asked her what was so funny. She didn't want to tell me, but I made her. Afterward, sat dumbstruck. Why would some girl CARE if a vampire loved her? I made a comment about how she should break off the leg on the coffee table and ram it up his undead A\$\$\$. She gave me a rather droll look and flipped the page, muttering something about, 'well, that would be a rather short story, dontcha think?'

"Well it beats playing kissy face with the guy! He's a MONSTER! Hello!?" The same droll look. "They should have NAVY SEALs or ARMY Rangers out there hunting these things down!" I was practically jumping up and down in the bed by now...and no, at my age and the shape I'm in, that is NOT a pretty sight. "As it is, the only 'hunters' are on Supernatural, and who wants to watch a couple of Emo's cruising around in a POS Chevy, whining and crying about their daddy issues and spending more time fighting with each other than fighting with the monsters!"

She flips another page and without even looking, she mutters something about, 'Then why don't YOU write it...!'

So there I am, standing up in the bed, boxers hanging half off, covered in sweat, face all red from ranting and she tosses down the gauntlet. Well! What else could I do? I picked up! "Well, maybe I will!" I tell her. There. THAT will shut her up.

But, it didn't.

For the next three weeks, she walked around with a smirk, "How's my book coming?"

"What book?" I'm completely dumbfounded each time she asks, because I honestly have the attention span of a fruitfly. Unless something is nekkid. Then my attention span is SLIGHTLY longer...but not much.

"The monster killer...thingy one." Same damned smirk.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Man, these cheezy poofs taste REALLY good.

So, one day, I'm sitting at my computer and I'm thinking, 'why not?' So I lay down a few lines. I really have NO IDEA what I'm doing. But I made the mistake of *telling her*. Then like all of the other 75 or more projects I started in the past, I walked away from it.

Fast forward about 9 months. No...I wasn't pregnant, I just looked like it. I told you, those cheezy poofs really tasted good. But I'm cleaning out old files from my computer and I stumble across this Word document. "My Story"? WTF is this?? I open it and read it. Hmm. Has potential. And I seem to recall somebody that lives in the house giving me grief for having started, then walking away from a certain project. Grrr. So, I started back with it. And the dadgum thing took on a life of its own. What I thought MIGHT be a pretty long story, turned into two. Then three! Yay! A trilogy. Okay, a four book trilogy.

Then, the big test. I let HER read it.

Lo and Behold, she actually liked it.

What to do? I go out on a limb and email one of my favorite writers and ask him. Surely he's gonna tell me to go pound sand. ~~Who wants competition, right? Nope. He took me under his wing,~~ introduced me to good people, showed me what NOT to do and...well, now you're reading these words.

Poor you.

But, that is how this story ever became. It was a dare. From my wife. Because monsters should be hunted down and shot between the eyes, not chasing teenage girls and playing kissy face.

Hmm. I have twin thirteen year old girls. I wonder if Justin Bieber is a vampire?

Dominic DeGiacomo, United States Army Special Forces and Monster Squad operator, had been captured while on an operation in Ohio and spirited away on a trans-Atlantic flight to Rome. He thought he had made his escape when he spiked the vampire escorting him and befriended the pilot. However, the tables were turned on him when the pilot flying the aircraft turned out to be a vampire as well and knocked him silly. Imprisoned then befriended by another prisoner, he was fooled into escaping once more, only to have his fellow escapee turn his own weapon against him at the last possible moment and surrender him to the bloodsuckers once again.

Now he found himself being escorted through a series of passageways and standing in the remains of an old cathedral. Parts of the ceiling had collapsed, walls had crumbled inward and the floor was littered with pieces of blocks and broken bits of statues. He could still see what remained of an altar at the end of the cathedral and he wished that the old legends of vampires burning when they stepped on Holy ground still held true. He'd love to see these ass-hats go up in flames right about now.

He saw a dark figure all but float through what was once a window up and to his left, beyond and to his right was the courtyard he had spotted earlier during his attempted escape. The sun had just set and the last few licks of color were painted across the sky. Violet hues splattered with streaks of red indicated the final death throes of the day before night took over and somehow, he felt it would be his last day to walk this earth. Dom took a deep breath and rolled that thought around in his head in that moment. Yeah, he was okay with it. He could meet his maker knowing that he had done his part.

The dark figure stepped into the cathedral and a wave of energy came off of him that sent the other vampires in the room trembling. Dom didn't recognize the vampire, but he assumed he must be the leader from the way the others were reacting. He stood at attention, doing his best to defy the creature that stepped closer to him and assessed him from head to toe.

"Welcome to my city, Mr. DeGiacomo. You may call me Sicarii," the dark vampire said softly.

"DeGiacomo, Dominic, Staff Sergeant, Service Number 243-55-61—"

"Please, Mr. DeGiacomo, I think we are beyond that, are we not?" the dark one asked. "You are my guest here."

Dom gave the vampire a sarcastic stare. "Guest? Is that what you call your prisoners now?"

"I would not say 'prisoner'," the Sicarii answered softly.

"So I'm free to leave?" Dom asked, already knowing the answer.

"I'm afraid not," the vampire replied, a smile playing across his features.

"Then I'm your fucking prisoner," Dom shot back, his features hardening.

The vampire's face hardened in return as he turned his gaze upon him. "I do not take prisoners, Mr. DeGiacomo. Therefore, you are my *guest*. How you are treated from here out...will be determined by how forthcoming you are."

"I have trouble coming a second time. Coming four times is simply beyond my ability," Dom spat. "I'm good, but I'd have to have Viagra to be *that* good." His remark earned him a quick kidney punch that dropped him to his knees, followed by a left cross to the jaw that rattled his molars. He grunted and felt his knees bite into the stone floor as he fell to all fours. "Like I said," he spat, "I'm a prisoner."

"Like I said, how well you are treated will depend on how forthcoming you are." The dark vampire waited for another smart remark and smiled when Dom didn't offer one. "Excellent. Perhaps now you realize that I only want a little...information." He stepped forward and knelt down beside Dom. "This doesn't need to get physical."

"I ripped the head off one of your underlings," Dom replied through gritted teeth. "You expect me

to believe that you're just going to let me waltz on out of here if I play ball with you?"

~~"A small price to pay to determine your worth."~~ The vampire's face creased into an evil smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Your death would do me more harm than good. I actually need you, Mr. DeGiacomo." The dark vampire noted the look of surprise on Dom's face. "Oh, it is true, I assure you. I need you to take my intentions back to your people."

"We already *know* your intentions, ass-hat. You're the shithead that keeps setting up the 'good guy' vampires so that we attack them, aren't ya?" Dom shot at him. The dark vampire's face registered a slight surprise. "Yeah, I thought so. See, we already got your number, asshole." Dom pulled himself up to a sitting position. He struggled to breathe. Between the concussion he suffered from the plane and the kidney punch, his whole body was a hurt factory. "Those other vampires already contacted my boss and they're having a sit-down meeting about how to deal with you." He chuckled. "So you just keep on trying to set them up and they'll figure out how to knock you down."

"So you've got this all figured out, do you?" the vampire asked mockingly.

"Oh, yeah." Dom struggled to his feet, the pain in his kidneys letting him know not to be surprised if he pissed blood for the next week or so. "Apparently the 'good guy' vampires only drink blood from livestock...or something like that. I wasn't really paying attention, to be honest." He caught his breath and worked at his jaw. "But my bosses? Yeah, they're probably going to enter into an agreement with them. The vamps will point out where you fuckers are hiding and then we go in and clean you shadow-dwelling blood suckers out." He laughed. "So go ahead. Do your worst. Fuck me up...kill me. It won't matter. Because it's just a matter of time before a whole team of specialists come here and rain down the very fires of hell on your ass." Dom leaned to the side and spit blood on the floor, hoping the smell would drive the other vamps crazy.

The dark vampire stepped back and addressed his minions. "Well, it would seem that our plans have been thwarted!" he announced. The other vampires chuckled or outright laughed. "These human hunters have an ally on their side. And it is US!"

He laughed. The others followed suit, giving Dom the distinct feeling that he was missing something. Something important.

"Go ahead. Laugh it up," he insisted. "But it won't be too much longer and you'll be laughing over another hole in your fucking head. One carved by a *silver bullet!*" Dom spat.

"Ooh! Silver bullets!" The dark vampire cringed mockingly. "Please, no! Not that!" He laughed again and the others laughed harder.

The dark vampire snapped his fingers and one of the minions handed him Dom's P90 carbine and his sidearm. He was still chuckling as he checked the weapons. He selected the Five-seveN handgun, pulled the magazine and held it up so Dom could see that it was still loaded. He used his thumb and extracted all but three bullets and put the magazine back.

Dom had no idea what the hell was going on. The dark vampire chambered the first round and set the safety on the weapon then tossed it to Dom and spread his arms wide. "Feel free to take your shots," he said, smiling.

Without hesitating Dom put two in his chest and one in the middle of his forehead. None of the minions so much as flinched. In fact, they were laughing harder. The dark vampire bent at the waist and held a hand over his wounds. Dom watched the holes smoke as his body simply pushed the silver rounds out of the entry holes and into his hands. He stepped over to Dom and dropped them at his feet. "You may keep them if you wish. Consider them a token of my esteem."

Dom stood there, still holding the weapon in his hand. He bent and retrieved the bullets, slightly deformed, but obviously made of silver. "How is this possible?" he muttered.

"I am the Sicarii," the dark vampire stated matter-of-factly. "It is not just a name." He stepped up to a pile of rubble and sat down. "Now, are you willing to listen to my terms?"

Rufus Thorn, leader of the *Lamia Beastia*, or non-human feeding vampires, had traveled from his island castle in the Gulf of Mexico to Tinker Air Force base in Oklahoma City to meet with Colonel Matt Mitchell, leader of the infamous Monster Squad. The squads, feared by monsters across the globe, had been misdirected by the *Lamia Humanus*, or human-feeding vampires, to inadvertently target the *Lamia Beastia* in the past. While attempting to negotiate a truce Thorn had been made aware of a larger threat, one that would affect mankind on a global level. Faced with this new threat, the *Lamia Beastia* and the human hunters entered into an alliance to face this impending attack together.

Thorn and Mitchell had been discussing tactics for some time in the training room with Laura Youngblood, the executive officer of the Monster Squads. Apollo Creed Williams, Darren Spalding and Jack Thompson, team leaders for the three different squads were also present. Jack had invited ex-Marine Gunnery Sergeant Mark Tufo along as a way to bring him up to speed on everything; much to Mitchell's chagrin. Tufo was one of the original Monster Squad team members when Mitchell ran the teams before it was decided to use the virus found in werewolves to 'augment' the team members in order to increase their reaction times, boost their speed, improve their hearing and sight and multiply their strength.

Thorn listened intently to Mitchell's proposal to use the Groom Lake base in Nevada and he liked the idea to bait the Sicarii to the desert. With wide open areas and few to no structures for the vampires to hide within when they unleashed the UV satellite on them, turning night into day and killing large numbers of vampires in one blast sounded like a wonderful plan to Thorn. He had made it clear to Mitchell that the *Lamia Beastia* revered all life as sacred and they would fight to defer human life above all else...even if it meant their own deaths. As a secondary option, he brought up the religious relics that the Vatican was holding and his plan to send Viktor, his second, to retrieve them.

The Vatican held pieces of the original cross of Christ. One piece was large enough that stakes could be made from it, the other two might be large enough to be made into stakes, but one stake contained a nail used to nail His holy body to the wood. Another relic was bloody rags used to clean Christ's body after his death. They were hermetically sealed in a jar, and Thorn thought that if some of the blood could be liquefied or vaporized, it could be used as a weapon against the Sicarii much like mustard gas or silver nitrate was used on lesser vampires. The third and most intriguing of the relics were three of the thirty pieces of silver that Judas Iscariot was paid to betray Christ. If any of the silver was somehow forged into a weapon, even a single bullet, Thorn felt it would be their best bet for affecting the father of all vampires.

Rufus explained what each relic was, its history and their hopes how each could possibly be used. Mitchell liked this approach and called for Dr. Evan Peters, the Monster Squad's resident vampire and techno-genius to take notes and begin devising applications for each of the three artifacts. It was the hope that perhaps Thorn and Evan could work together on the delivery systems while Viktor was gone to retrieve the items and Mitchell would travel to D.C. to gain support for their taking over the Groom Lake base as well as their borrowing the UV satellite for the Vampire Armageddon.

During the whole meeting, both Laura and Apollo tossed in ideas of how they could utilize the Predator drones and high altitude C-130s to both keep an eye on things and to 'bring the rain' when the shit hits the fan. Spalding suggested contacting some of the other supernatural beings they had met to see if they could join in the fray. It was a long shot, but the facts remained, if this Sicarii was intent on taking over the world, odds were he wouldn't rest at simply destroying mankind. He would also seek to it that all other creatures were enslaved as well. That included the Leprechaun, the Elves, and the Faeries. They were the three most intelligent and least hostile of the supernatural that the squad had

met, yet they had the capability to wage war. Not all were exactly on speaking terms, and they weren't exactly the easiest to reach, but if this was a war to save the planet from a marauding vampire goblin loco, they would need all the help they could get.

During the entire meeting, Tufo sat quietly in the back of the room, taking it all in. As the meeting seemed to wind down, he stood up and cleared his throat. "I have a question."

"Of course you do." Mitchell groaned.

"What is it, Gunny?" Jack asked.

"Well, I realize that I'm coming into this a little late in the game, but if I'm gathering this correctly, this vampire that we're about to go head-to-head with...he's like the granddaddy of all vamps, right?"

"*Oui*," Thorn replied. "He is the progenitor of us all."

"Okay. And you say that he was created the day he tried to kill himself when he betrayed Christ, correct?" Tufo asked. "That he is Judas Iscariot."

"*Oui*. This is true," Thorn stated.

"Okay...so I'm following everything right," he reiterated and slowly began to pace. "And he can basically 'call up and control' all the vampires in the world somehow, right? Theoretically through the blood or something, correct?"

"*Oui*. As far as we know," Thorn continued. "But since I did not break the seal on the inscription, and I represent the *Lamia Beastia*—"

"Right, you may be able to fight him off, I follow you on that," Tufo finished for him. "But, back to when this guy was made, okay? At the same time...or about the same time, this Roman guard stabbed Christ with the spear of destiny... Claudius Maximus Veranus? He would be the granddaddy of all werewolves, correct?" Thorn nodded in agreement. "So...wouldn't he be able to call up *all* the werewolves in the world if he wanted to? Through the blood, or through the howling or some good, goody supernatural bullshit like that?" Tufo asked.

Jack turned to Mitchell who raised his eyebrows. Jack shrugged.

"If this Roman guy could somehow call up all the werewolves, we might be able to add some serious muscle to this army of ours," Tufo stated the obvious. "And we might just be able to offer a surprise knock-out punch to this Sicarii...you know, just in case Plan A and Plan B happen to shit the bed."

Thorn stepped over to Tufo and embraced him. "*Exactement!*" He kissed Tufo on each cheek then turned to Mitchell leaving the Gunny wide-eyed and in shock. "This is a most *excellent* of ideas!"

Jack leaned over to Mitchell. "Maybe this is what Nadia was talking about, eh, Skipper? Maybe me bringing Tufo in with us IS what saves our asses and the world?"

Mitchell rolled his eyes. "Don't go there. Even a blind squirrel finds a nut once in a while."

"Okay then. How do we find this ancient Roman dude?" Apollo asked.

Thorn stepped forward. "I think I know a way."

"I don't think I like this idea," Jack said as Nadia repacked her bags. "You just got here."

Nadia was packing a small travel bag and left the larger part of her luggage stacked away. "It's only for a few days, Jack. I will be back very soon."

Jack looked away to keep from getting upset. "But why you? Surely someone else could go," he stated more than asked.

"My father asked me to do this, Jack. It must be for a reason," she said without looking at him. She searched the room and finally found her hiking boots. Stuffing them into the side of her bag, she

finally turned to address him. “Mother will be going with me as well. Father would not send the both of us anyplace dangerous,” she said softly, her mouth slowly curving into a smile. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled herself to him tightly.

“Your dad doesn’t like me,” Jack muttered. “I can’t help but think he’s sending you off just to keep us apart.”

“That is nonsense, Jack,” Nadia clucked, kissing him on his chin. “Father accepts you. We are mated.”

Jack looked down at her, one eyebrow raised. “Something tells me that if we weren’t mated, he would gladly eviscerate me.”

She inhaled sharply in shock, “Jack! You shouldn’t say such things. Father is many things, but he’s not a murderer.”

“Yes, he is, my dear,” her mother corrected, walking through her door unannounced. “He is a Lycan of the First Order and he has killed many, many times in his long lifetime.”

“Mother!” Nadia exclaimed. “There is a difference in killing to defend and murdering.”

“Killing is killing, my love. You know that,” Natasha purred as she stretched out on Nadia’s bed. Jack couldn’t help but notice that her mother still had a seductive look in her eye. “Your father, believe, *enjoys* killing,” she added absently. “Perhaps that’s what makes him such an efficient Lycan?”

“You are horrible to say such a thing, mother.” Nadia grabbed the last of her things and unceremoniously shoved them into her bag. “Father would be appalled.”

“Not if it’s true,” Natasha said absently. “So, Jack, where are you and your people scampering off to while we traverse Europe?”

Jack gave Natasha a withering look and stiffened when she sucked on her lower lip in a most seductive manner. He gathered himself and informed her, “I believe that Viktor is heading to Vatican City, Colonel Mitchell is going to D.C. and my team is headed to Canada and then to Newfoundland.”

“Newfoundland? Good heavens! Whatever for?” she asked sarcastically.

“We need to have a talk with the wee folk,” Jack said. “Find out if they’ll assist us in our fight against the Sicarii. And, maybe they can help us reach the New World Elves.”

“Oh, for the love of...” She trailed off. “You might as well ask them to just show up and kill themselves,” she spat.

Now it was Jack’s turn to be shocked. “Why would you say that, Natasha?”

“The wee folk? They’re the peace people!” She laughed. “They’d no sooner fight than...we do anything!” She laughed again. Suddenly she sobered. “But the elves. Now that’s a good idea. They are mean wee beasties. And if you can get the New World Greater Elves into the fight?” She shook her head. “Bloodthirsty savages...they are worse than gnomes because they are crafty...and very *large*.”

Jack gave her a sideways stare. “Sounds like you’ve got a bit of experience dealing with them.”

“More than a bit, my dear boy,” she answered him, coming to her feet. “Much more than just a bit.” She turned her attention to Nadia. “Are you ready, my dear?”

Nadia shouldered her bag and nodded. “I am. Just...give me a moment to say goodbye to Jack.”

“Don’t take too long. We have a grandpappy werewolf to find,” she practically sang as she slipped out the door.

“She seems so flippant about this,” Jack said. “I don’t like it.”

“She will be fine,” Nadia assured him.

She pulled him close to her and inhaled his manly scent. She could smell his aftershave with a hint of sandalwood and pine. She had always loved the smell and had given some to Rufus for his birthday many years ago to help hide the scent of death on him, but on Jack, it took on a whole new

life of its own. She loved the smell of him and wrapped her arms tightly around him. "I will watch h
closely, I promise."

Jack held her tightly. "Who is going to watch out for you?"

"Mother, of course."

Jack laughed. "That's what I was afraid you'd say."

Dominic stood in awe with the silver slugs still biting into the flesh of his hands. The da
vampire sitting across from him on the pile of rubble was at least patient. Dom holstered his pistol an
none of the minions tried to stop him. What would be the use? It held no more ammunition. It may
well have been a plastic hammer.

"So? Are you ready to discuss a few things, Mr. DeGiacomo?" the dark vampire asked softly.

Dom set his jaw, ready to spit out yet another smart assed reply, but the silver bullets biting in
his hands reminded him that this was no ordinary vampire he was facing. "Maybe," he answered. "B
cooperation is a two way street."

The dark vampire raised an eyebrow. "Ah. I see. You wish to gather information as well, yes?" h
chuckled.

Dom noticed that the other vampires standing guard around them weren't laughing with him th
time. They seemed to slowly drop back into the shadows of the night. He knew they were still ther
watching the two of them, but they were giving the illusion that they were alone.

"Yeah, something like that," Dom said. "You want som ething from me, I want something fro
you."

"You want your freedom," the vampire stated.

"Fuck you," Dom shot back. "You don't get it, do you? I already wrote myself off as soon as th
little traitorous turd from the cell pointed my own fucking gun to my temple. I don't give two shi
about freedom."

"Yes you do. Your lies taste like acid in the back of my mouth," the vampire replied softly.

"Oh they do, do they? Well again, fuck you," Dom shot back. "If you plan to cut me loose t
deliver your message, then I plan to milk as much information from you as I can."

"There! Now that is an honest answer," Sicarii said with a touch of glee. "But how can you kno
if the answers I give to your questions are as honest?"

"Because vampires as old as you have egos bigger than your... pride," Dom stated, careful not
say what he really thought. "You're too proud to lie and you think that no matter what you tell me,
won't change anything anyway. You could spill the entire fucking pot of beans and little old m
couldn't do a damn thing about it."

The Sicarii thought about Dom's words a moment and then stood from the rubble. "You ar
absolutely correct," he said thoughtfully. "Not so much in your assumptions, but in the fact that n
matter what I tell you, you and your people can do nothing to stop me."

"See?" Dom replied. "Your arrogance is so big I'm surprised you aren't tripping over it."

The Sicarii stopped and looked at Dom with his smug grin and simply shook his head. "Perhap
once I reveal to you what I need for you to do, you will realize...it is not ego, not arrogance. It
power. Pure power." The dark vampire turned toward the open window and the silver moon in the sky
"When this world is mine and the humans that are left realize that they are nothing more than breedin
stock for food...then you can tell me again how big my ego is." He turned back to Dom. "Is th
acceptable to you, Mr. DeGiacomo?"

Dom stared at the crazy vampire and shook his head. "Okay, fine," he snapped back. "And wh

my team tears your ass into itty-bitty pieces and hands it back to you on a plate, you can tell me again how your Bulldog mouth didn't over-bark your Pekingese ass, okay?"

The dark vampire smiled, then chuckled and finally broke into heavy laughter. When the laughter slowed, he approached Dominic. "I think I like you, Mr. DeGiacomo. You have *heart!*"

"It's called *balls*, bloodsucker," Dom muttered.

The dark vampire glanced at him sideways. "Yes. That too!" He placed a hand on Dom's shoulder and directed him out to the courtyard where the table and benches were. "This way, please. We shall sit and discuss the future."

"Oh, you mean how my team and I are going to stop you from doing whatever the hell it is you're doing and make you wish you had stayed in the shadows?" Dom said. "Sure, let's do that."

"Yes, let us do that." The dark vampire directed Dom to the bench and waited while he gingerly sat. It was obvious that he was in great pain. "Would you like something to drink? A meal, perhaps? Some pain killers?" he offered. "Before we begin?"

"Naw, I'm fine. Let's get this show on the road," Dom said, trying hard to sound tough, but wishing like hell he had at least a bottle of water.

The dark vampire looked to the side, into the darkened shadows and snapped his fingers. Dom didn't turn his head to watch, but someone brought him a bottle of water and a can of soda along with a bowl of fruit. "In case you change your mind," the dark vampire explained. "Now, before we begin in earnest, I have a few questions for you, Mr. DeGiacomo."

"And I have a few for you." He opened the bottle of water.

"My pilot tells me that you have people working on a weapon. A weapon that targets *only* vampires?"

Dom stared at the dark vampire blankly, putting on his best poker face. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, Mr. DeGiacomo, your lies leave such an acidic taste in the back of my mouth. It is most *unsavory*," Sicarii winced.

"Sorry, bub. No idea what you're chattering about." Dom shrugged.

"My pilot claims that you were most *talkative* on the plane before you were knocked unconscious..." he trailed off.

Dom continued to stare at the vampire and finally sighed. "Fuck, Momma always said I talked too much when I was nervous."

"I'm sure she did." The vampire nodded. Dom lowered his head and stared at the table. "So, tell me more about this weapon."

Dom shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?" He looked up and met the vampire's gaze. "Seriously. I have no clue what it is or how it works. I just heard Doc talking about it. Said it targeted natural born vampires." He watched the dark vampire studying him in the silvery light, assessing his truthfulness. "It was just an offhand comment he made and before he could go into any detail, the boss told him to drop it."

The dark vampire nodded. "What other weaponry do your teams employ against our kind?"

"You mean besides silver bullets?" Dom asked. "That don't work anymore," he added. He took a deep breath and thought about it for a moment. "Well, let's see. We have UV phosphorus grenades. Those are lots of fun. Turns a vampire to ash and gives us a real nice tan all at the same time." He showed a toothy grin at the vampire for effect.

"What else?"

"What difference does it make?" Dom asked. "Who the fuck *are* you, anyway? And why do you care what armaments we have? Aren't you the asshole that was testing us? You should know what shit we use anyway."

“What else?” the vampire asked calmly.

Dom stared at him a moment longer. “Who are you?”

“I already told you, I am the Sicarii,” he said calmly. “What else?”

“What the fuck is the Sicarii? That tells me nothing!” Dom shouted. “Give me something substance!” He pounded the concrete table with such force that his own teeth rattled and his head ached. He could feel his kidney throb where he had been punched.

The dark vampire stood slowly and reached across the narrow table, grasping Dominic by the face and pulling him slowly toward him. Dom tried to pull back but it was like a fly trying to pull itself from a spider’s web. He had nothing to grasp but the table’s edge and he was already leaning too far forward to get any real leverage. The dark vampire pulled him close and stared into his eyes and for what seemed only a moment, images flashed through his mind, a lifetime’s worth of memories that weren’t his. He saw life and death, he saw murders and entire families butchered. He saw happiness for such a short period and then pain and suffering...so much suffering.

When the dark vampire released him, Dom found himself sprawled across the cold stone floor, gasping for air. Slowly he reached up and held his aching head and tried to unsee what had been seen but he knew he couldn’t. The vampire had implanted so many memories into his head...but now he knew. He knew *exactly* who he was. He knew *what* he was. He knew what he was capable of as a man and he knew what he was capable of as a monster. He felt his stomach curdle on him and bile bit the back of his throat before he retched.

Slowly, Dominic gained his composure and rolled to his knees. He sat up and stared up at the starry sky and he knew. He gulped the cold night air and shivered. He pulled himself up to his full height and did his best to square his shoulders when all he really wanted to do was curl up in a ball and hide. He turned and looked around the courtyard and found the dark vampire sitting atop the same pile of rubble, absently picking at his fingernails.

“I wondered how long it would take you to recover. I must admit, you are much stronger than I would have suspected. I honestly thought you were full of false bravado, but you truly are a strong soul,” he said softly.

Dom staggered toward the vampire and gathered himself as he approached him. “You’re mad,” he stated. “You showed me all of it...and you are one sick, twisted bastard.”

“Perhaps. But they *will* pay,” he replied.

“Oh, well that just makes all the sense in the world, now doesn’t it?” Dom shot back. “God piss you off so you make the rest of the world pay the price? What about the innocent people?”

“Aren’t they all innocent?” he asked. “And yet, He arranged that they would be my food. Tell me that isn’t ironic.”

“You’re shit-house rat crazy,” Dom wheezed. “You still haven’t thought this through.”

“How so?”

“Once you’ve destroyed the world and killed everybody, who will be left to feed you and your vampire horde?” he asked sarcastically.

The vampire laughed. “We’ll raise humans much like farmers raise cattle.” He stated matter-of-factly. “There is plenty of beef in the world, is there not? And yet, the cattle do not rise up and destroy the farmers.”

Dom sighed. “You won’t succeed.”

“And who will stop me?”

“We will,” he said softly. “We’ll find a way.”

“You have already seen it,” the vampire stated. “You cannot stop me. And you know it.”

Robert Mueller knocked on Colonel Mitchell's door and waited to hear him bark before he entered. Mueller stepped inside and stood at attention and waited to be acknowledged. Mitchell looked up from his paperwork long enough to realize that Mueller wasn't going to speak until spoken to and said, "At ease, son. Spill it."

Mueller stood at ease and cleared his throat. "Permission to speak freely, Colonel?"

"Of course, Mueller. What's wrong, boy?"

Mueller's eyes darted about the room as if he wasn't sure how to start. "Just spit it out, son. We'll figure it out once it's on the floor, okay?"

Mueller nodded. "Yes, sir. Um...I'd like to go home for a short bit, sir."

Matt gave the operator a sideways stare. "To what purpose, soldier?"

"To say good bye, sir." Matt saw his eyes start to mist and he fought it. "To my ex-wife, sir. We were talking about trying to get back together...and now we can't. Ever. I need to at least let her know that it won't happen."

Mitchell's eyes started to widen, when Mueller added, "I won't mention what's really going on here, sir. I just need to see my son and..." He glanced away for a moment, then faced his CO again. "I need closure, sir."

Mitchell sat back in his chair and studied the young operator standing in front of him. He nodded slightly then asked, "Have you discussed this with Apollo?"

"Before I came here, sir. He gave me the green light. Said that now that the full moon is over, things are usually quiet for a while."

Matt nodded again. "He's right about that." Mitchell glanced at the calendar. "You can have a few days. I can't spare any more than that though. There's just too much going on and the clock is ticking."

Mueller lit up with a grin. "More than I need, sir."

"That includes travel as well. I've got First Squad going to Labrador and Northern Canada, I'm going to be in D.C. and...well, hell, we're all going to be scattered. With you out, Second Squad will be a man short...sorry, son. I don't mean to discount Dominic."

"I understand what you mean, sir. Gus is filling in for him. I just need to do this. And Third Squad will be here, just in case."

Mitchell nodded. "Haul ass, soldier. You're burning leave time."

Mueller saluted Mitchell, "Thank you, sir!" all but running from his office.

Rufus Thorn stayed in the shadows while his friend and Second, Viktor repacked for Vatican City. He held an uneasy feeling about this mission and was hesitant about sending him. "I am uncertain about this, *mon ami*. I think we should rethink this decision."

Viktor continued to pack and spoke softly. He knew that Rufus could hear him if he whispered. "We both know what is at stake here. We also know where Tasha and Nadia are going and the odds of them succeeding." He finally stood straight and squared his broad shoulders, stretching his neck. When he turned, Rufus saw only sorrow in his eyes. "I like it no better than you, but we both know that this would be far easier if I do it alone."

"If I were to go with you, I think we could convince this Secretariat of State what exactly is at stake," Thorn stated. "And I could make good my threat to turn him if he didn't cooperate." F

grinned slyly.

~~Viktor sighed and placed his bag on the edge of the bed. “The man won’t be swayed by threats,”~~ Rufus,” he informed him softly. “Even threats that you would surely carry out. I don’t intend to relieve them of all of their artifacts, but if I can get *some* of them...” He explained, “One of the pieces of silver, one of the cross pieces, one of the bloody rags, or...any combination.” He averted his eyes, not wanting to disappoint his friend and master.

Rufus placed a hand on Viktor’s shoulder and squeezed gently. “I trust you will do your best, *mon ami*. You have never let me down before,” he said. “I just wish that I could be there for you as you have been there for me.”

Viktor nodded, still feeling that he had failed Rufus. He had searched for years for a cure to the vampirism that Thorn had been infected with to no avail. He had spent untold millions of Thorn’s money gaining access to the most secretive of vaults where information had been hidden away for centuries, spent years digging through archives all to come up empty.

He feared what Thorn feared: the only ‘cure’ was the true death.

Theologians who were in the know on vampirism had argued for centuries that there could be no cure for the condition. Those who were afflicted had to die to become the undead, and once they died their soul left the body. If the body were one day ‘cured’ of the disease of vampirism, the soul would be long gone, and the body would still be dead, therefore, only true death could be the result. Yet Viktor had vowed that as long as he were able, he would continue to search for a way to free Rufus of the curse that afflicted him. “I do have a plan. I will be making a stop before going to Vatican City,” Viktor announced. “It should not take me very long and will aid in our efforts.”

Rufus only nodded. He knew better than to question Viktor. If he felt that Rufus needed to know all of the intricacies of his plan, he would have laid them out for him. “Travel well, *mon ami*.” Rufus embraced the large man and patted his back. “May God bless your endeavors,” he whispered.

Viktor pulled back and stared at Rufus. “You must be worried to invoke His holy name.”

“I know what is at risk,” Rufus simply stated. “And I know that we will not be fruitful if it is not His will.”

“I never thought of you as a religious man.”

“Can one truly be religious if his soul has been ripped from him?” Rufus asked. “It does not mean that one cannot still try to serve, *non?*”

Viktor averted his eyes and simply nodded. “I don’t like thinking about it, Master.”

Rufus’ features screwed up and he tsk’d away Viktor’s words. “Enough with the ‘master’ and titles. We have been friends for far too long, *non?*” Rufus captured his gaze again. “You and your people have served me well for many long years. And I would have released you from your service if I could. You know this. You are as free as either of us can make you.”

“I know this,” Viktor replied softly, the subject still a sore matter.

“I still would release you completely if I could. But it is not up to me,” Thorn stated. “If it were entirely up to me...”

“I understand. We both know the circumstances and you know that I appreciate all that you have done.” Viktor hung his head and slowly shook it. “One day we will be released from our bonds and our honor restored.” Viktor stood erect again and squared his shoulders. “And when that day comes, I will leave our island home and have my revenge against the evil she-bitch that dishonored my family name.” A slow growl growing in the back of his throat.

“I still do not understand why you simply did not challenge her and take back your position—”

“I could not,” Viktor interrupted. “Not while she held her position within the pack-formal. It would be akin to treason.”

“Surely Maxwell could have cleared everything...”

“My father has nothing to do with me anymore, Rufus. You know this.” Viktor turned, his vision turning red at the mere mention of his father. “He disowned me centuries ago.”

“But he doesn’t even know about Nadia. Surely he would like to know his granddaughter,” Thor offered.

“He’s a pacifist now.” Viktor bit back the bile in the back of his throat. “The very man who laid down the rules for the Lycans, the wolf who laid out the requirements for becoming a warrior to defend the pack, disowns his own son for clinging to the very laws that he, himself created!” Viktor cried. “Do you really think he would give a tinker’s damn about my offspring?”

“But she’s his own flesh and blood...”

“Flesh and blood means nothing to him anymore.” Viktor whispered. “I wish you weren’t sending Tasha and Nadia to him.”

“He’s our best hope to finding this Roman guard Claudius Veranus,” Rufus explained.

Viktor’s eyes glazed over. “He is long since dead, my lord. Long since dead...”

Natashia and Nadia settled into the jet for the long trip across the Atlantic. Nadia had asked for and received a soda and some crackers to settle her stomach as the large plane’s acceleration had made her feel a bit nauseous. Natashia watched her daughter with a cautious eye and without warning pulled her arm close to her face and smelled deeply of her skin.

“Mother?! What are you doing?” Nadia asked, pulling her arm free.

Natashia smiled at her daughter and placed a hand to her cheek. The twinkle in her eye told Nadia that she knew something, but Nadia was afraid to ask. “Have you told Jack, yet?”

“Told Jack what, mother?” Nadia asked, suddenly worried. “Do not speak to me in riddles.”

“That you are with child, my love,” Natashia purred, a contented smile painted across her face.

Nadia could feel the blood drain from her face as her eyes widened. “What did you say?” she asked, unsure that she had heard correctly.

“You are with child, my dear. Surely you knew?” Worry suddenly crossing her features.

“How can you assume that I am with—”

“Darling,” Natashia cried out, “You are upset at the stomach without eating, your temperature high without sickness and your scent has changed.” She stated matter-of-factly, “You *are* with child.”

Nadia panicked for just a moment. She knew without a doubt that if her mother told her that she was pregnant, then she *was* most certainly pregnant. Her mother’s nose was more sensitive than any test, and she had been feeling queasy lately. She thought it was from all the excitement and the fear of the upcoming battle. She placed the back of her hand to her forehead and felt slightly warm. She placed her hand to her lower stomach, as if she might feel a presence...something that would indicate the life that grew within. She felt nothing there.

Natashia laughed softly beside her. “Do not panic little one. Wolves have whelped pups for many centuries before you became pregnant, I assure you.”

Nadia turned to her mother, a smile slowly creeping across her face, her eyes misting, “Mother, I’m pregnant!”

“Yes, you are!” Natashia laughed, holding her hand and kissing it. “Imagine that!”

“Yes! Imagine that,” Nadia laughed. “But...how?”

“Well, my dear, when a mommy wolf and a daddy wolf love each other very much, the mommy wolf backs up and lifts her tail...”

“Mother!” Nadia screeched, swatting at her mother’s hand.

“Oh, darling, how do you think? It had to be while you two were at the island. When you mated.”

Nadia reflected back to when she and Jack had spent their time at the island. It seemed almost lifetime ago, but it had only been a matter of weeks. She remembered every moment and she could almost smell his scent upon her again.

She sighed softly to herself and heard her mother huff next to her. "Oh, stop it. We're on a plane, Nadia." Nadia snapped out of her reverie and glanced at her mother again, blushing as she did so. Natasha leaned in close to her and whispered, "Just be happy that twins don't run in our family."

Nadia's eyes bugged at the thought. "Twins?"

Matt entered the outer offices of Dr. Tom Coburn, United States Senator and the newest member of the Monster Squad's Oversight Committee. Dr. Coburn had been chosen to replace Senator Franklin on the committee when Senator Franklin had taken his own life. The other committee members felt that, since Dr. Coburn was from Oklahoma and the squad was based out of Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City, he was a perfect choice. He often returned home and it would be much easier for him to 'drop in' from time to time and check in on their little black budget operation. Mitchell checked on Dr. Coburn and felt the man might not be so hard to work with. At least not nearly as difficult as Franklin had been. Franklin was certifiably insane, yet somehow he continued to get reelected every year.

The secretary checked Mitchell's ID and escorted him into the inner office where Dr. Coburn greeted him warmly. "It's nice to finally meet you, Colonel." He extended his hand. "I was hoping to get a trip home next month and stop by to see things firsthand."

"The pleasure is all mine, Senator," Matt returned the greeting. "Our doors are always open to you, sir." The Senator offered Matt a chair and pulled the squad's file from a locked drawer.

"I went over the briefing with the other committee members and I have to admit, I was a bit shocked when they first clued me in. It was bad enough to learn that we had active duty military operating on U.S. soil, but that they were actively hunting..." he paused, searching for the politically correct word.

"Monsters, Senator. We refer to them as monsters," Matt said straight-faced.

"Yes. Monsters." He shook his head, still disbelieving. "It's all so surreal."

"I can understand, sir. But I'm sure that they filled you in to the reality of the situation?"

"Oh, yes. Quite so." He sat back in his chair and eyed Matt. "Might I inquire as to your visit? No doubt you came all the way here just to welcome the new guy to your Oversight Committee?"

"Hardly, Senator," Matt said, sitting up straighter in his chair. "I came here to see if I could convince you and the rest of the OC to pull your political strings for me, sir." He cleared his throat. "I need a military base."

Dr. Coburn's eyes widened slightly. "You need an *entire* base, Colonel? What are we supposed to do with the rest of Tinker?" he asked.

"No, sir. Not Tinker." Matt averted his eyes. "This base will be much tougher to get."

Senator Coburn didn't like the sounds of this, but he was willing to listen. "Shall I try to get the rest of the Oversight Committee in here?"

"They're unavailable, sir." Matt slipped him a cheesy grin. "I already checked. You may be the newest member, but you're the only one who's actually at work today."

Dr. Coburn actually chuckled at that one and nodded at him. "Carry on then, soldier. Hit me with it. What do you need? I can't guarantee anything, but I can promise to do my best."

Matt laid out the situation to the good Doctor, explaining the threat from the Sicarii, the intelligence gathered and the proposed fighting force. He explained the plan to try to concentrate the

forces in the desert in hopes that it would draw the Sicarii and his forces there as well, rather than to coordinate numerous battles all across the globe, all in an effort to lower civilian casualties. The key was getting access to and control of the Groom Lake base.

To his credit, Senator Coburn listened intently and didn't interrupt. He didn't question the method to the madness, and in the end, he understood the gist of it all. "You do realize that the odds of your being able to get you that base is next to zero, right?" Dr. Coburn insisted. "To start with, that base doesn't officially exist. I mean, you and I both know that it's out there and they do all sorts of top secret projects there, but the kind of horsepower that it will take to get that base commander to simply hand over the keys?" He paused and let his question sink in. "Would you?"

Matt shook his head. "Not willingly, sir. That's why I came here. Whoever that base commander is, he'll have to be forced. But again, it doesn't have to be a complete takeover, Senator. We just need to borrow his base—"

"To wage a war, Colonel!" The Senator interrupted. "With *vampires*, no less!" He lowered his voice, but still stressed the unbelievable enemy they faced.

"Senator, we have a few aces up our sleeve."

"You'd better have a deck full of aces from what you've told me," he quipped. "Look, Colonel. I'll take your proposal to the Oversight Committee and run it up the flagpole and see who salutes it. If there is anybody on there that has that kind of pull with the Pentagon and can get it done, then it WILL be done." He sat back and pulled his glasses off, "But, Colonel, I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you. I'd be looking for a 'Plan B' and trying to figure out another strategy."

Matt exhaled slowly and shook his head. "Senator, this all we have. We either bait these bloodsuckers out to the desert and toast their leader, or we *all* die as a Vampire Lunchable. There is no 'Plan B'."

Dr. Coburn studied Matt and realized that he, at least, believed every word that he was reporting. "There are no other options?"

"Senator, this Sicarii is the *first* vampire. He is so old that Mr. Thorn says even silver won't kill him. A stake through the heart won't slow him down. Hell, chopping his head off would probably just give him a slight headache. The *only* way to kill him will be with sunlight, and he isn't stupid enough to come at us in the daylight. We have to bait him out in the open and toast him with the satellite."

"What's to prevent this guy from just sending his army? He could stay wherever he is and watch from afar?"

"He fancies himself a leader. Leaders lead, they don't sit back and watch from a distance," Matt responded. "No, sir. He'll be at the head of the pack."

Dr. Coburn nodded and stood up. "I'll do whatever I can, Colonel. Again, I can't promise you anything, but I'll spur the Oversight Committee to twist whatever arms at the Pentagon to make it happen."

"You have no idea how much I appreciate it, Senator." Matt said standing and shaking his hand.

"I believe I have an idea, son."

First Squad touched down on the north end of Quebec near the Newfoundland border and dispersed into the woods surrounding Mount Caubvick. As the team worked their way into the foothills of the mountain, they looked for signs of the Elven People. The signs were hard to spot, and even to experienced hunters are often mistaken for animal markings. When Ing Jacobs reported clearing near a brook, Jack ordered the team to make camp and prepare to wait until dark.

Tufo set up a perimeter with infrared cameras and motion detectors and Lamb broke out the black

light gear. The Elven People would often mark their areas with a special dye made of lichen that would glow under black light and was invisible to humans. Somehow, it was always visible to the elves. The squad had reports that the Greater Elven People had taken up residence at the base of the mountain and he hoped to find them and recruit them to their cause. If he couldn't find the Greater Elves, then maybe he could find a lesser elf that could point him in the right direction.

As night slowly crept upon them the team began to notice sounds that didn't normally occur in the woods. Gunnery Sergeant Tufo fired up the infrared monitors and checked for movement. Other than a few small animals, the perimeter was clear. He glanced up at Chief Thompson and slowly shook his head. Jack stepped to the outer edge of the campsite where the glow of the campfire was lowest and stood on an outcropping of rock. He allowed his vision to grow accustomed to the low level of light and peered out into the edge of the woods. He thought he saw eyes staring back at him.

Chief Thompson fished in his shirt pocket and withdrew a small wooden whistle that resembled a reed flute. Most humans couldn't hear the high pitch that the whistle resonated at when blown, but the augmentation that the Monster Squad underwent allowed them to hear the high shrill as it cut through the thin, cold mountain air. Jack noted many more eyes appeared along the edge of the tree line at differing heights within the underbrush. He stood a moment longer on the top of the rock and stared out along the perimeter.

"They won't come to you, human," a rough, gravelly voice said from below the rock.

Jack was startled as he hadn't heard the visitor approach. He looked down in the decreasing light and saw a rock gnome sitting below him packing a small carved pipe. His clothes appeared tattered but intact and his heavy boots were covered in many layers of dried dirt and mud. Although he appeared as though the gnome had just dug his way from underground, his hair and skin appeared to be clean. His beard was trimmed short and almost white with grey whiskers.

"Do they fear us?" Jack asked calmly.

"They fear the scent of your wolf," the gnome replied. "Lesser Elves be these and the moon be high. They fear being munched as a late night snack." He grinned up at Jack, his blue eyes twinkling in the twilight. He pulled a wooden match across the seat of his pants and puffed at his long-stemmed pipe.

Jack stepped off of the rock and landed deftly next to the small gnome. He knew that gnomes weren't known for being forthcoming by nature and wondered why this one was willing to clue him in. "I'm Jack Thompson. My men and I are looking for the Greater Elves." He settled in next to the gnome. Jack was trying to find a seat that would put him more at eye level with the little gnome.

The gnome took his time puffing at his pipe, getting the bowl to glow cherry red before he pulled hard and inhaled. The breeze shifted and Jack smelled the sweet aroma of cherry, apple blossoms and tobacco. The little gnome sat next to Jack and scratched at his beard, as if in deep thought. "I'm not exactly sure where the Greats went," he said after a moment. The gnome kept staring out at the tree line and the growing number of eyes peering back at them. "But I'd bet they'd know." He pointed to the Lesser Elves in the scrub brush.

"But they won't speak with me because they can smell the wolf on us."

"Ah yup."

Jack sat there with the gnome for a long while, silently watching as more and more sets of eyes reflected the campfire light. After some time Jack's earpiece crackled and Tufo's voice whispered in it, "Chief, we have way too much small animal activity on the perimeter for it to be small game. I think we have Lesser Elves out there."

"That's affirmative, Gunny," Jack whispered into his lip mic.

The little gnome looked up at him questioningly. "One of yours?"

"Yes, sir." Then Jack's eyes lit up. "And he's not a wolf...do you think they would speak with

him?"

~~The little gnome sat quietly for a very long time. So long, in fact that Jack wondered if perhaps he had forgotten the question or might not have heard him. Finally, the little gnome pointed to the tree line with his pipe and poked toward the numerous sets of eyes. "It wouldn't hurt to try."~~

Jack sat up and keyed his mic. "Gunny, converge on my location. Solo."

"Copy that," came the reply.

Within a few moments Tufo was standing over Jack and the small gnome on the outcropping of rocks above. "Down here, Mark," Jack called.

Tufo looked down and saw the gnome next to Jack and acknowledged him with a, "Sir."

The little gnome waved his pipe in return, "Hunter."

Jack stood and waved Mark down to the ground with him. Tufo jumped down and they stepped away a moment. "I need you to go to the tree line and see if you can make contact with the Lesser Elves. See if they can tell you where the Greater Elves are."

"Me? You're the Team Leader. I thought that—"

"Mark," Jack interrupted, "they won't allow me or any of the other team members over there. You have to do it."

Tufo gave the chief a confused look and shrugged. "Okay..."

"Look, go find out what you can about the Greater Elves. See if they'll disclose their location. They need to know why...I guess tell them the truth. We have nothing to hide. Hopefully they'll understand. But I need you to do this. Act as our ambassador." Jack could tell that Tufo was totally confused. "When you get back, I'll explain everything. I promise."

Tufo acknowledged and took off across the clearing toward the tree line. Jack watched as some of the eyes withdrew into the scrub, but most stayed put. Tufo stopped part way and turned back toward Jack for a moment. He slung his rifle back over his shoulder and showed his hands empty to the eyes in the trees and advanced more slowly. Jack noticed that the remaining eyes didn't leave as Tufo continued forward. Jack strained his hearing as he listened for any sounds.

He heard Mark ask as he approached, "Who's in charge over here?" He stopped a few feet short of the tree line and waited. "We just have some questions that we really need answered." He waited a little longer, then added, "Please? We mean no harm."

Jack watched with the gnome still standing by his side and he felt a slight tug on his pant leg. "This may take a while," the gnome said. Jack looked down at the gnome and nodded.

Jack keyed his mic and informed Tufo, "Be patient, Gunny. Our friend here said it may take a while for them to open up." Tufo simply keyed the mic in return. Jack turned to the gnome and asked, "Are you hungry? We don't have a very big selection, but the MREs aren't that bad."

"Any mutton?" he asked hopefully.

Jack chuckled. "I doubt there's any mutton, but I bet we can find something you like." He led the little fellow back to the campfire and a hot meal.

"And perhaps while we enjoy your fine fare, we might imbibe in some grog or mead?" he asked hopefully.

"Sorry, friend, but we didn't bring anything like that with us." Jack smiled.

"Ah, well. Probably for the best as I tend to break into song when I allow myself the joys of spirits," the gnome admitted. "However, I am curious in your interest in the Greater?"

"I'll tell you all about it as we eat," Jack said as he escorted him to the edge of the campsite.

Dominic felt drained as he sat at the foot of the altar in the abandoned cathedral. The dark vampire appeared to hover above him in the second story window staring out at the city of Rome waiting for the first lick of sunlight to appear over the horizon. Dom sifted through the rubble and found the arm to an ancient marble statue. The fingers were broken from the hand, but the musculature and veining in the sculpture still felt smooth and lifelike. He hefted the broken piece in his hand and enjoyed the feel of it, a makeshift weapon, but at least it was something. He turned again to check on the dark vampire and was startled to find him standing directly behind him. Had the vampire needed to breathe, his breath would have tickled the back of his neck.

“Tsk-tsk, Mr. DeGiacomo,” the vampire muttered, his eyebrows rising as he eyed the marble arm in his hands. “If silver bullets won’t stop me, do you really think that will do me harm?”

Dom considered taking a swing anyway, but then considered otherwise. His head and kidney were still throbbing and he really didn’t relish the idea of having any other parts of his body damaged. His jaw ticked as he reluctantly dropped the arm back into the rubble. “Can’t blame a guy for thinking, can you?”

“No, I cannot.” The dark vampire wrapped an arm around Dom’s shoulder and led him away from the cathedral and into the passageways leading to the labyrinth of rooms above and below them. “We still have much to discuss before I send you back to your people, Mr. DeGiacomo.”

“Oh, please. Call me Dominic,” Dom said with a sneer, feeling his skin crawl at the vampire’s touch. “I feel we’ve grown so *close* lately,” he added sarcastically.

The dark vampire nodded. “We have, haven’t we?” He slipped his arm away from Dom’s shoulders. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have unleashed so many memories upon you so quickly, but you demanded answers. Without context, none of the memories I gave you would mean much, wouldn’t you agree?”

Dom rubbed at his temples, his head still throbbing. “If you say so, man, but my head hurt like you wouldn’t believe before you did that. You can’t imagine what it feels like now.”

“Ah, yes. The pilot did strike you quite soundly.” The vampire stopped and turned Dom to face him. “Here, allow me to ease your pain.” Before Dom could protest, he placed a hand on either side of Dom’s face and peered deeply into his eyes. At first, Dom felt as though an ice pick was piercing him between his eyes; he inhaled deeply to scream when suddenly...the pain stopped. He panted a moment, trying to catch his breath as the sudden easing of pain caught him short.

“What did you do?” he gasped.

“I healed your concussion.”

“You can’t do that,” Dom stated. “Maybe you can make me think I don’t feel it, but you can’t heal it.”

The vampire stared at him blankly. “Why can’t I?”

Dom was dumbfounded. “I...well...uh...*because*.”

“That was certainly a scientific answer.” The vampire turned and slowly started down the hallway again. Dom fell into step behind him. “Just because I am vampire, does not mean that I cannot do good, Dominic.”

Dom was startled at him using his first name, but then remembered him telling him to do so. “Yeah, well, for someone intent on burning the world and eating everybody in it, let’s just say that I wouldn’t expect an act of kindness.”

The vampire at his side smiled softly in the darkness. “You know my past, yes? You saw those memories. You know who I am.”

“I saw it, but I’m not sure I understand it all,” he answered honestly.

“~~For a very short time, I understood that there is more power in kindness than in torment,~~” the vampire informed him. “One good act to a person in need can be multiplied a hundred fold. One kindness to someone who doesn’t *need* a kindness can be multiplied ten thousand times.”

“So why not kill the world with kindness?” Dom asked, knowing the answer before he asked it.

The dark vampire shook his head. “Because I was forsaken and turned to the darkness. This forever my lot in life.”

“You said yourself that there is more power in kindness. You could still—”

“No!” the vampire shouted. “I cannot.” He growled deep in his throat. “You have no idea what it is like. You *cannot* know what it is like. To have loved someone so dearly, to give them your life, to turn away from everything that you were and dedicate your life to protecting them from everything, and then be turned out as a traitor to the Word!” He ground his teeth together and Dom could hear them, his own teeth hurting from the sound. “I was his protection from any who would do him harm. I was his bodyguard. I was his right hand. His most trusted. He knew my sins, my faults, my deepest secrets and he forgave me. He loved me anyway.” Dom saw his eyes begin to tear up and the vampire turned away from him. Dom tried a new tactic and reached out to him. He gently placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

He pulled up close to the vampire’s ear and whispered. “Is this what he would want you to do?” The vampire stiffened next to him. “Ask yourself that as you scream at his father, ‘what would Jesus do?’” Dom whispered, instantly feeling corny.

The vampire turned to him with a sneer, “You did not know Yeshua!” he growled. “Do not pretend to know him. You are not worthy to—”

“Hey! Whoa! Easy there, big guy.” Dom backed up, his hands held up in surrender. “You were the one telling me all the warm and fuzzy stuff, remember?” The dark vampire’s eyes literally flashed in the darkness and Dom assumed a defensive stance preparing for an imminent attack. “If he taught you that kindness was truly where the power was, and he loved you unconditionally, then how could you turn from his teachings like this?” Dom asked softly. He watched the dark vampire’s chest heave as if he were breathing hard, and he realized he was sobbing, yet his face was stone. “I get it, man. He loved you and you would have done anything for him. Hell! You *did* everything for him.” Dom moved closer, cautiously closing the space between them. “You did what none of the others could, because it had to be done. I get it.”

The dark vampire stared at the space where Dom had been standing as Dom moved closer and placed a hand back on his shoulder. “You showed me, remember? You showed me your memories and I know how badly it hurt you to do what needed to be done.” He stood directly in front of the vampire but he wouldn’t meet Dom’s gaze. “You did what *he* asked you to do...maybe it wasn’t his father’s will...I don’t know. Neither of us ever will know the mind of God.”

“We know,” the vampire replied softly, finally lifting his eyes to meet Dom’s. “We know because he damned me for eternity.” He stepped back and stood to his full height, his shoulders squared, his jaw set, his eyes determined. “And that is exactly why I must do what I must.”

Dom groaned and lowered his eyes, his head shaking back and forth. “He would be so disappointed in what you’re about to do,” he muttered under his breath.

“Do not assume—” the vampire began with a growl.

“I don’t have to assume!” Dom shouted back forcefully. “You showed me exactly what he was like.” Dom pointed a finger in the vampire’s face. “You tell me not to assume, not to pretend that I knew him, not to act as though I *know*, but *you* gave me those memories, *remember*? You shot my brain full of somebody else’s memories, sights, sounds and feelings, and then you have the balls to tell me that I don’t have the right to use them?” The dark vampire actually took a step back at Dom’s

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