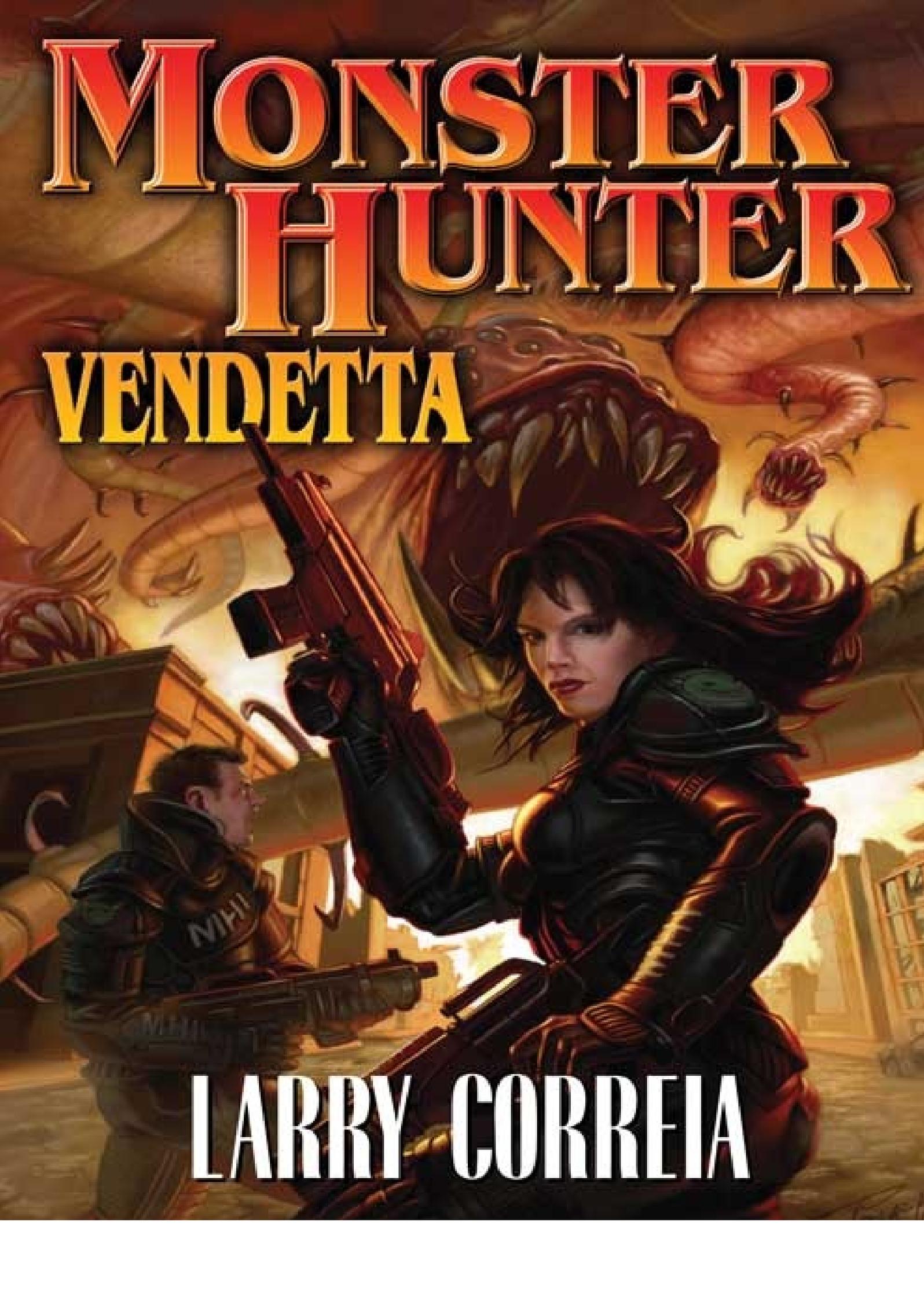


MONSTER HUNTER



VENDETTA

LARRY CORREIA

Monster Hunter Vendetta

By Larry Correia

Baen Books by Larry Correia

Monster Hunter International

Monster Hunter Vendetta

Hard Magic: The Grimnoir Chronicles (forthcoming)

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

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This novel is dedicated to Diamantine.

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"When monsters have nightmares,
they're dreaming about us."

—MHI Company Handbook

Chapter 1

It was less than a year ago that the illusion shattered and I got my welcome to the real world. Until that point I considered myself perfectly average, living a normal life, with a regular career. That all changed the night my accounting supervisor turned into a werewolf and tried to eat me. Now there are basically two ways to deal with such a problem. Most people confronted with something so hideously impossible tend to curl up into the fetal position and die. On the other hand, those of us destined to become Monster Hunters simply take care of business. He almost ended my life but I tossed him out a fourteenth-story window. He died, I didn't. That makes me the winner.

After that initial encounter I was approached with a job offer. Apparently survivors like me aren't that common, and as a result killing a monster is a real résumé builder. I was recruited by Monster Hunter International, the premier eradication company in the business. We protect mankind from the unnatural forces that come crawling out from our darkest nightmares, and in return, we get paid the big bucks.

It wasn't that long after I started my new job that MHI came up against an unfathomable evil from the past. It took everything we had to survive, but in the end, the Cursed One was defeated and I literally saved the world.

I was employee of the month.

The biggest chupacabra in the pack was only four feet tall, but what they lacked in mass, they made up for in sheer ferocity. Being unable to get to their dinner was making them even surlier than usual. The peasant girl had been futilely tinkering with the engine of her broken-down Chevy Vega when the first chupacabra had come sniffing onto the jungle road. Her screams at seeing the little demon-lizard-insect thing hop down the dirt lane like a demented miniature kangaroo had driven her into a frenzy, and she had barely managed to dive into the car ahead of its snapping jaws. Her continued cries from behind the locked doors of the old rust bucket had attracted the rest of the pack, and now there were a dozen of the creatures clambering on the car.

Chupacabras do not normally attack people. The puncture tubes that jut from their mouths could pierce a human skull like a screwdriver through a milk jug, but instinctively they stick to preying on small animals. Once a chupacabra pack has tasted human blood, however, they absolutely will not stop, and killings become more and more frequent. From what I have seen in this business, people must be either extremely tasty, or addictive, like monster crack.

The creatures were scratching and clawing at the car's windows and roof. The girl just kept screaming. She had a remarkably good set of lungs for this kind of thing, which is why we'd picked her. Her cries spurred the monsters on, and they all began to shriek as well, echoing across the dark jungle canopy for miles.

The four-footer jumping up and down on the hood of the Vega was pissed. It had to be the pack's alpha male, and it couldn't figure out why the glass wasn't breaking. I watched it carefully through the night-vision monocular.

"I think he suspects something," Trip Jones whispered.

I nodded. They might be clever for creatures with brains the size of tangerines, but the goat suckers had never run into bulletproof glass before. Finally the alpha hopped off the car and scurried over to the side of the road. I almost keyed my radio, but he hesitated there, looking for something and came up with a rock. He crawled back on the hood, raised the rock, and started banging away at the windshield. The others cheered and hooted him on.

"Hey, I didn't know suckers knew how to use tools," Milo Anderson said over the radio. He was positioned on the other side of the road. All of us were wearing ghillie suits over our body armor and had been lying in the underbrush being eaten by insects for hours. The foul-smelling grease that we had rubbed on ourselves earlier to hide our smell from the chupacabras' sensitive noses also served as seasoning for the region's bugs.

My radio crackled. "We'll have to update the database," Julie Shackelford replied, the roar of the chopper's engine could be heard behind her. "Tool use... That's fascinating."

Apparently our fake peasant, Holly Newcastle, didn't think it was nearly as fascinating from his position as bait in the front seat of the Vega. The theatrical screaming stopped for a moment. "Ugh, guys..." The rest of us could hear the glass cracking in the background. "Guys?"

We had three members of Monster Hunter International hiding in the brush, one in the decoy car and two more on the rapidly approaching attack helicopter, carefully positioned claymores along the roadside, piles of guns, thousands of rounds of ammo, state of the art night-vision and thermal imaging equipment, a lot of attitude, and a general dislike of evil beasties.

I keyed my microphone.

"Execute."

My name is Owen Zastava Pitt and I kill monsters for a living.

"This is Harbinger," the familiar voice said through the phone, sounding a little groggy. I must have woken him. "What time is it?"

"It's almost midnight here," I answered, which meant that it was like one or two in the morning in Alabama. I was never very good at remembering time zones.

There was a brief pause. "So somebody's either got eaten, or you completed the contract."

"Mission accomplished, chief. Julie's dropping the evidence off at the mayor's office and arranging the funds transfer." The evidence consisted of a burlap sack full of severed chupacabra heads. "It was a big pack. Smoked them all."

"Nice." This had been a lucrative job. The Mexican resort depended on tourism, so when people started getting their organs liquefied and drained, it was bad for business, especially since it was happening during their busy season. It was spring break, after all. "Everybody okay?"

"They're good." Loud music drifted in through the open window of my hotel room. There was a wild party going on around the Olympic-sized pool, populated mostly by American college students engaged in all manner of drunken debauchery. "Looking forward to payday I bet."

"Rush jobs always pay well. How'd the team do?" Earl asked. I knew what he really wanted to ask was how his team did without him. The timing of the mission had just not worked out, as there were very few places that were safe for him during the full moon.

"They were awesome. It was beautiful." Exploding chupacabras were not what most people would find artistic, but I knew Earl would understand. He was after all, the Director of Operations for a company whose mission statement actually read: Evil looms. Cowboy up. Kill it. Get paid.

"Wish I could've been there, but you know how it is. Good work, Z."

That comment made me swell with pride. My boss wasn't known for giving compliments. This had been the first operation that I had been allowed to plan entirely, and it had been a success. Well, not had the very experienced Julie and Milo there to make sure I didn't screw it up, but I had still done pretty damn good. "Thanks, Earl. See you tomorrow."

"Night, kid. Tell Julie I love her, and next time, call me in the morning."

I tossed the sat-phone on the bed next to my body armor and weapons. I still needed to clean my

guns before I packed them up for the return flight. It had been humid out in the forest, and rust was my enemy. But right now I didn't feel like doing the work, I just wanted to gloat. Picking up my heavy Kevlar suit, I paused to brush some chupacabra juice off the patch stuck on the arm. It was a little green Happy Face with devil horns. Just a simple logo, but for me it represented a lot of hard work. It was MHI's unofficial logo, and the only Hunters who got to wear it were the ones chosen for Harbinger's personal team. I grinned and dropped the armor back on the bed. I'd earned that patch a few times over.

The complimentary hotel room was extremely nice, way nicer than the roach motels that MHI usually seemed to stay in, but I was still too charged up from today's mission to relax. I opened the glass doors and stepped onto the balcony. The hip-hop music was louder now, and the cloud that drifted up from the pool area was strong enough to give a DEA dog a seizure. My room was on the second floor. There had to be a couple hundred people down there, most of them young Americans. An obnoxious crowd had gathered around the DJ table, and a film crew was doing an interview with some rapper who was about to host a wet tee shirt contest or something. An inebriated young woman screamed, lifted her shirt, and flashed me. I waved stupidly. Good old spring break.

Life was good. Monster Hunter International was the best private monster hunting company on the planet. I had not even been doing this for a year, but already I was planning and executing operations in foreign countries, and I had just been complimented by the most experienced Hunter in the world. Not bad for a guy who was basically just an accountant who happened to be handy with a gun.

The wood deck was cool under my bare feet. I leaned on the balcony, directly above the stenciled sign that stated in both English and Spanish that it was not safe to lean on the balcony, and did a quick search of the swim-suited, dancing throng. I could not see any of my team. That wasn't really a surprise though.

Milo and Skippy were probably checking the chopper for the trip home tomorrow. Neither of them would be into this scene, especially Skippy, because he wasn't human and was very uncomfortable around crowds. Milo's wife was pregnant and due any time now, so he just wanted to get home as fast as he could. Trip was definitely not the party type. He had picked up the only fantasy novel available in the hotel gift shop, some ridiculous L.H. Franzibald thing, and was probably squirreled away in his room reading like usual. He is such a nerd—and that's coming from an accountant. Holly definitely gave the impression of being a party girl, but with her, who knew? You could tell me that Holly was helping the nuns at the local orphanage or you could tell me that she was dancing on the bar for tips and either story would be equally plausible.

Julie would be coming straight back here when she finished harassing the local officials for our money. I had planned on going with her, but since I had been the one to saw off the goat-sucker heads, Julie had ordered me to return here and take a shower. Chupacabras are rather nasty little buggers. My girlfriend—correction, fiancée—would be back soon enough. I was still getting used to the idea of being engaged. We'd skip the party scene. For me personally, I had spent too many years bouncing rowdy drunks to ever want to be a rowdy drunk.

It was satisfying to know that it had been me and my friends who had kept any of the tourists below from being killed. Certainly some of them were going to be dead from alcohol poisoning by tomorrow morning, but that sounded like a personal problem to me. As long as none of them were eaten by chupacabras, it was out of my hands.

My back-patting was interrupted by a hard knock on the door. Julie had probably finished collecting our paycheck and returned. I was looking forward to having some alone time with her. If

had been thinking, I would have lit some candles and put on some romantic music or something to take advantage of our free pseudo-vacation, but I was never very good at thinking of those kinds of things beforehand. I left the balcony, closed the double doors, drew the thick curtains mostly shut, and started across the suite. The bass continued to thump through the glass. "Who is it?" I shouted.

"Is that Owen Zastava Pitt?" came the muffled response.

Shoot. Not Julie. The voice was unfamiliar. Frowning, I paused by the bed, picked up one of my STI pistols, the long-slide .45, and held it down by my leg. I was paranoid back when I was an accountant. As a Monster Hunter I took paranoia to whole new levels. We were registered here under the Shackelford name, and Julie was the one who had done the negotiating with the resort. I couldn't think of anyone other than my teammates here who would know my name. "Yeah? What do you want?"

"Mr. Pitt, I've traveled a long way to meet you." The voice had an English accent, not one of those prim and proper Masterpiece Theater ones, but more like someone who had grown up on the tough side of town. "May I come in?"

One thing that I had learned in this job, you never give an invitation to the unknown. "Look, dude, whatever you're selling, I don't want any." Moving as quietly as possible, I went to the peephole. The mystery man's face was distorted through the bubble glass. The hall lights must have gone out, and he was cloaked in shadow. I could only see eyes and the outline of a face. He did not look like the friendly type, but then again, neither was I.

He must have caught the darkening of the peephole, and automatically glanced up, scowling as he was thinking really hard about something. There was no way he could see me, but I felt shivers go down my spine as I just knew he was staring me down. "Ah, yes. You are the one."

The door shook in its frame.

Startled, I jumped back and raised my pistol. The shaking increased in intensity, threatening to vibrate the door to pieces. There was a crack as wood broke. I snapped the STI into position. "Back off. I'm warning you!"

Every light bulb in the room popped. Sparks flew from the wall sconces, plunging the room into darkness. There was a splintering noise as the doorframe cracked. Truly freaked out at this point, I jerked the trigger and fired two quick rounds through the center of the door. I knew that the sturdy hotel door would barely slow the 230-grain silver/lead bullets, and whoever was pulling my door off the hinges surely must have been hit. The door quit shaking.

Instinctively, I moved back. I had dealt with enough supernatural bullshit by this point of my life that it just seemed like the reasonable thing to do. Hunching down behind the bed, I wished that I was wearing my armor instead of a pair of shorts and a tee shirt. The music from the pool area continued cranked so absurdly loud that the other guests had probably not even heard the gunshots.

Blinking rapidly as my eyes adjusted to the sudden gloom, my pistol pointed at the door, I waited. There was an M3 flashlight mounted on the dust cover of my .45. I put my finger on the activation switch. Anything that came through that door was going to get lit up, both with blinding light and bullets, maybe even in that order. "Come on..." I muttered under my breath.

There was a terrible boom and the door flew from its hinges and crashed to the floor. A giant shadow flowed into the room, so vast and tall that it gave the impression of having to duck to clear the frame. It straightened up, towering above me, formless and terrifying, with the consistency of smoke and a blob of pitch-black intimidation. I had never seen anything like it before.

I activated the flashlight, flooding the room with brilliant white light. I blinked in surprise. The giant shadow was gone, and a normal man stood glaring at me. He was skinny, tough-looking,

probably in his mid-thirties, with a nearly shaved head, and a mean scowl. He was dressed in black jeans and a gray hooded sweatshirt, casual enough to fit in with the crowd outside. He held up one hand to protect his eyes.

"Don't move," I ordered, hunkered low behind the bed, my glowing tritium front sight centered in the middle of his chest.

"So this is the great Hunter," he said calmly. "For somebody who's supposed to be so extraordinarily important, you seem rather unimpressive." He swept his hand downward sharply. The bulb in my flashlight exploded.

"Neat trick," I said as I pulled the trigger.

But he was already gone. Giant hands wrapped around my biceps, jerked me to my feet and slung me into the wall. A brutal chill flowed up my arm as he yanked the gun from my hand, almost taking my trigger finger with it. I threw an elbow but touched nothing. He hit me again, low in my side, and I rocked me. The blow was cold as ice and hard as a hammer. I gasped in pain.

I'm not exaggerating when I say that I am a mean son of a bitch when it comes to fighting. I can throw down against the best of them, and I had done it in the dark before. There was no time for thought, only action. I came back quick, lashing out at where my opponent should have been. I stumbled into the bed. There was a swish of air as he moved around me. I threw a back fist and missed, and was rewarded with a mighty blow to my shoulders. I kicked out, only to have something cold and impossibly big latch onto my leg. He pulled hard. Off balance, I fell, grunting on impact. This hotel had some solid floors.

He grabbed me by the front of my shirt and lifted me with ease. I tried to grasp his hands to apply a wristlock, but there was nothing there. He crushed me against the wall with brute force, pushing me through a layer of drywall.

"I'm taking you with me, Hunter, whether you like it or not." The Englishman's voice seemed to radiate from all around me. There was a frigid weight pushing against my chest as I swung my forearm through it in vain. The darkness swirled around my arm like smoke, and the pressure increased on my lungs, making it impossible to breathe. My back slid up the wall and I left the ground. I panicked, lashed out with my feet, my knees, my elbows, my fists, but it was like moving through water. Whatever had me trapped was incorporeal, and I was blacking out.

"It's useless," he chuckled through my futile strikes. "I can't believe you're the one. This is pathetic. I was at least expecting a fight. Can you truly be the one who defeated Lord Machado?"

That name. Not again. No, not again. The bad chemical taste of fear was suddenly in my mouth.

My body was hoisted effortlessly into the air, and tossed casually across the room. I slammed into the wall near the bathroom and crumpled to the carpet. My head was swimming but I immediately began to crawl toward my stash of weapons on the bed. Now that I was a few feet away, I could see the giant shadow shape moving across the room, almost as if it were pacing, agitated. My assailant continued to speak. "You must be important though. It took some time for the message to reach me. I was shocked to receive something from the other side. You have no idea how rare it is for the Old Ones to take the time to communicate with this world. Oh, the Dread Overlord is going to be happy when I deliver you. I don't know how you managed to get on his bad books, but you're bloody well fucked."

As the big shadow moved, it passed in front of the sliver of light emanating from the balcony curtains. The shape was gone, and it was just the man again, but as he left the light, his body seemed to drift into smoke and the shadow returned.

Light. I need light. Whatever he was, he only seemed to have a body in the light. "The Old One

can kiss my ass... Stupid mollusks." I reached the bed, but the shadow was on me in an instant, freezing tendrils clamped around my wrist. He jerked me around and dragged me across the floor toward the exit.

"Time to go. The Overlord awaits."

I thrashed, fought, but only managed to give myself a nasty carpet burn.

There was a flicker of green light across the room. The black force around my wrist coalesced into normal human fingers. He was flesh again. The shadow man frowned.

Fireworks. They were setting off fireworks at the party.

My bare foot collided with his ribs. He stumbled back from the brutal kick, falling through the bathroom door. With no time to spare, I leapt up, reached the bed, and searched through the dark for a weapon. My hand closed around the leather-wrapped handle of my Ganga Ram, a Himalayan kukri. I jerked the massive knife from the scabbard.

A metallic screeching noise came from the shadows of the bathroom as something was torn free. The next firework blossomed red. The illumination was just enough for me to see the flash of a large white object hurtling at me. Flinging myself down, I could feel the wind as the toilet barely missed my head. It shattered the balcony door, tore through the curtains, and flew into the night.

More light from the party flooded into the room. The black shape glided out of the bathroom toward me, but it shrunk into the form of the Englishman as he left the shadows. He charged with a roar. "Oh, it's on now," I grunted as I got back to my feet and drove my knife forward. His face registered the shock as the curved blade of the Ganga Ram slammed through his ribs and out his back. He looked down in surprise. I twisted the blade with all my might, cutting upward through his torso.

I've managed to hack a few things to death with this knife over the last year. I should have been splattered with blood, but there was nothing, no liquid at all; it was like I was sawing through a bone in ham. He glared back up, eyebrows creasing together in rage as more fireworks exploded outside and clamped a brutal hand around my throat. The air to my brain was choked off as he hoisted me off the floor.

With a foot of steel driven through his guts, he shouted in my face. "I tried to be polite, and now you have to make me do this the hard way. I wanted to deliver you to the Old Ones with your mind intact, one piece, but nooo, you have to be difficult..." I continued to saw the blade back and forth, searching for his heart, but he didn't seem to notice. "Fine then. We'll just devour your brain and give the Old Ones a vegetable. They don't respect humans enough to know the difference anyway." He paused and his neck suddenly ballooned up like a puffer fish. "Snack time, little friend..." He opened his mouth wide, tilting his head back, and some thing came up his throat, black claws pushing past his lips, tiny red eyes blinking into existence over a circular mouth filled with fishhook teeth, crawling, struggling upward, heading right for my face, and strangely enough, I somehow could tell it was hungry.

Screw that!

I yanked the kukri out of his chest, lifted it high overhead, and swung down, chopping his hand off at the wrist. I fell to the floor, gasping for air as the pressure was released from my throat. His running shoe collided with my stomach as he punted me across the room. I rolled painfully to a stop by the balcony, realized that his severed hand was still clawing at my neck, and tore it away. The little shadow monster crawling out of the Englishman's mouth shrieked in an insanely high pitch as he seemed to choke it back down, and with a hard swallow, it was gone. He raised the stump of his ruined arm. Writhing shadow leapt from the end, instantly twisting and re-forming into a new hand. He balled the fresh hand into a fist, lowered his head, and started toward me.

A man has to know his limitations, and I was way out of my league on this one. Instantly back

my feet, I ran for the balcony, bare feet crunching on a piece of broken glass. "Ouch! Ouch!" Heedless of the danger, I vaulted over the railing and plummeted into the party below.

Landing brutally hard, lightning cascading up my legs, I crashed through a rosebush and onto the porcelain shards of the broken toilet. I lay there, gasping for a moment. As a very large man, my gymnastic feats were not really my specialty. I struggled through the plants and tumbled onto the tile by the pool, scattering college students like bowling pins. My left ankle throbbed from the impact, but I stood, hobbling, and raised my kukri, which I had somehow managed not to impale myself on.

I roared up at my room, "Come and get me!" The shadow man was leaning on the railing, glowering down at me, fireworks exploding overhead. There was enough light down here that I somehow knew he wasn't going to follow. Several partygoers shrieked, spilled their beers, and ran as I shook my kukri with one hand and extended my middle finger with the other. "Yeah, I thought so, you pansy!"

"This isn't over," the Englishman shouted over the music. He turned his attention away from me for a moment, and nodded at someone on the far side of the party. I had no idea who or what he was signaling, but it probably wasn't the wet tee shirt contest. He returned his attention to me and smiled. "Well done. For now... but, dead or alive, I'll deliver you to the Dread Overlord eventually."

"Better things than you have tried."

"Farewell, Hunter. We will meet again... assuming you live through the next few minutes, that is." He faded back into the shadows and was gone.

If I could get to my radio, I could rouse the team and chase this puke down. I took a step forward, flinching violently as the pressure hit a piece of broken glass impaled in my heel. Swearing, I paused to yank the tiny shard out and toss it into the bushes.

"Oh, man, dude, are you okay?" one of the bystanders asked stupidly. "You totally like fell out the window!"

I snarled. He cringed back. The partiers gave me a wide berth. I glared at them angrily and anyone who was even vaguely contemplating saying anything retreated a few more feet. Turning my attention to gathering reinforcements, I started limping for the entrance, but there was a commotion on the far side of the pool. Some of the partygoers were screaming now, real cries of terror that could be heard even above the din of the dance music. I turned back toward them, dripping blood, holding my giant knife, and bellowed, "What now?"

Zombies. Lots of zombies.

The party was officially over.

Someone had backed a package truck up to the entrance of the pool area. The rear doors were open and corpses were tumbling out. These undead were in an advanced state of decomposition. The flesh was rotten and sloughing off. Many of them were missing eyes, noses, and ears. There were so many that they must have been literally stacked on top of each other inside the truck's hold.

There are many different variations of undead, with your basic zombie being the simplest of all. A zombie is just an animated corpse, wandering around in search of one thing: flesh. The big problem with zombies is that they multiply like rabbits. Their bites are always eventually fatal, and the bitten always rise as zombies themselves. Their poison travels instantly through the nervous system, and not even amputation of the bitten limb can stop the transformation. Basically, they're a major pain in the ass, the Monster Hunter's equivalent to cockroaches. Usually stupid, and normally slow, zombies are not much of a challenge for an experienced Hunter, provided that said Hunter has a decent gun and friends with guns. I was pretty much alone, had just gotten the crap kicked out of me, and was armed with only a knife. The kukri was a great big freaking knife, mind you, but still it was only a knife. N

a good recipe for success.

~~I could have run away. Even with one ankle already swelling, there was no way they could have caught me. I could rally my team and come back to the pool with some real armament. That would be the safe thing to do. But as I watched, one of the tourists, a guy just barely out of his teens, was pulled down by some of the corpses. They descended on him like a pack of dogs, and his screaming and kicking stopped in an instant. The zombies were falling out the back of the truck into a pile, but spurred on by the nearness of meat, they were driving themselves to their feet and lumbering into the mob. The tourists panicked as they saw their friends getting disemboweled right in front of them. Hundreds of people began to crash into each other, trying to shove their way to safety. The small and the weak were smashed underfoot, just more zombie fodder.~~

The smell of decay hit my nostrils.

MHI was a private company. We weren't cops. We weren't the Fed's Monster Control Bureau. We were contractors, mercenaries. We had no obligation to protect the innocent unless they were paying us to do it. To jump in was suicide.

"Aw... damn it." I raised my Ganga Ram and charged the truck of undead. I pushed past the fleeing partiers. There were lots of them, but I'm a big man, and when I pick a direction, I'm hard to stop. My bare feet slipped on the water that splashed onto the tile as the crowd knocked people in the pool. The patio was packed. You could feel the panic of the herd.

The mostly sober were able to flee, but those that had been in the water were sitting ducks. A young woman was trying to climb out, but one of the zombies had grabbed her by the hair and was tugging her toward its jagged mouth, maggots wriggling in its face. I lopped the creature's arm off at the elbow. The girl flew back with a splash. The zombie turned automatically toward me and removed the top of its head right above the eye sockets. It went limp. It pays to know your monster. With zombies, destroy the brain, and they go right down.

Another zombie saw me, locked on, and charged. This one had been an old woman once. "Whoa!" I jumped back as it swiped at me. These zombies were fast. I had dealt with regular zombies before, but I'd only heard rumors of faster ones. It kept coming, head bent, lipless mouth open and snapping. If those teeth broke my skin, I was worse than dead. I shattered one of its knees in a cloud of dust with my bloody heel and it toppled into the pool.

Hacking and slashing, zombies to the front, zombies to the side. Have to protect these kids. A ironic thought considering most of them were about my age. A man went down with one of the undead on his back, biting at his neck. They were too far away; I wouldn't make it in time. I spied a half-empty beer bottle lying on its side, scooped it up and threw it at the creature. The bottle shattered over the thing's skull, but it was far too distracted by food. The man screamed as the zombie latched on to his throat. The scream bubbled off into a gurgle.

I lowered my shoulder and dived, crashing into the undead, feeling its bones snap beneath paper skin. I rolled to my knees much faster than it did, and with a brutal chop sent the zombie's head spinning away from its neck. My blade came away coated in spider webs and blackened ooze with the consistency of mud. These zombies were far from fresh. I gagged on the stink.

The creatures were everywhere. There must have been fifty in that truck, and already they were multiplying, as some of the tourists' bodies began to convulse. The music was still playing. Fireworks were still erupting. The scene was utter chaos. If we didn't stop these things now, we were going to have a full-fledged outbreak, right in a population center, and that's a nightmare. A nearby girl obviously stoned out of her mind, began to giggle and point at the sillier looking zombies, oblivious to the other one that was heading right for her. Friggin' stoners. I started toward her.

A hand locked around my injured ankle with a grip like iron. Looking down, I saw the man who had been bitten. He pulled at me, his mouth open, hungry, his brain already dead, his system now overcome with only one impulse... food... me. That was near instantaneous reanimation after death, the sign of a bad strain. "Sorry, dude." I bent over and smashed open the top of his head. I was instantly splattered with brains. After two swings he quit moving. The fresh ones are harder to smash down. The distraction distracted me long enough that by the time I was done, stoner chick was missing her nose. "Damn it!"

There was a gunshot. A security guard had come out from the hotel to see what the commotion was. His eyes were wide, staring as the creatures soaked up bullets and kept coming. One of the shots missed and, thankfully, put the bleating stereo out of commission. The patio was now quiet except for the moaning of the recently deceased and the screams of the fleeing.

"Shoot them in the head! Cabeza!" I shouted, leaping over dead and twitching bodies, running for the hapless guard. "Despidalos en las cabezas!" I took the nearest zombie from behind, driving my blade through its dusty throat and wrenching the head aside. The security guard fell to his knees, his hands stretched in front of him as a zombie in a yellowed wedding dress bore down on him. Too fast. My Ganga Ram was not balanced for throwing, but I hurled it end over end to strike the zombie in the head.

Unfortunately it hit handle first. That got the creature's attention long enough. I reached it as it turned its attention back to the guard, grabbed it by the bottom of its rotting jaw and the top of its head and wrenched the skull until the spine broke and its open eye sockets were staring at me. The zombie flopped to the ground. Apparently that works too.

Breathing hard, I picked up my knife. The pool, which now had a definite pink tint to it, was cleared out except for a few zombies wandering around the bottom and a couple of torn bodies bobbing on the surface. Everything that was still alive had run. The remaining original zombies were venturing into the resort, chasing after the scattering crowds, spreading their curse. The recently deceased were just starting to rise and would be following shortly. The resort was right on the edge of town, and there were fifty thousand people sleeping down there. This could get real ugly, real fast.

The guard crossed himself as he surveyed the blood-soaked patio. "Madre de Dios!" I had to remind myself that regular people were always shocked by how fast the carnage happened. I guess I'm kind of gotten used to it.

"Yeah, okay, if you aren't going to use that..." I retrieved his gun. It was an ancient Smith & Wesson Military & Police revolver, in obviously neglected condition. I opened the rusty cylinder and ejected the empties. "Um... cartuchos?" The guard reached into his pocket with one shaking hand, and dropped six tarnished .38 specials cartridges onto the ground. He got up and ran for the exit. I can't say I blamed him. I knelt down and gathered up the cartridges.

"Z! Look out!" There was a sharp crack of a gunshot and something warm splattered all over my back. The fresh corpse fell onto the patio, skull smashed wide open. "Zombies? How the hell are the zombies?"

"Holly. I'm glad to see you," I answered as I snapped the cylinder shut on the old revolver. Holly Newcastle was running across the tile, rifle in hand, and about half of her armor flapping unbuckled around her torso. "We got a problem."

"Ya think?" she exclaimed, as she turned and mercilessly blasted the rising undead tourists. Holly had certainly become a better shot over the last year. I stuck my fingers in my ears to block out the deafening noise. She had put in her electronic earpieces, but mine were still up in my room. Her .3000 Vepr was a loud rifle. "I was down on the beach, saw a bunch of people come out screaming, so

grabbed my stuff. What the hell's going on? Where are the others?" I realized she was wearing nothing but a yellow bikini and flip-flops under her hastily donned vest.

"I don't know." I heard a chattering noise from the street on the other side of the parked truck, suppressed subgun. "Well, there's Trip. Looks like he's got that end covered." I surveyed the area. There were two other paths out of the pool area between the buildings. "You follow those, I'll go the other way. I don't have my radio, so try to raise the others. We've got to take them all before it spreads out of control."

"Got it," she said as she rocked a fresh magazine into her gun. "So how would you tell the locals? Go inside, lock your doors, there are zombies out... I knew I should have taken Spanish."

"Vaya adentro. Cierren sus puertas. Um... didn't exactly cover this in high school..." I speak five languages fluently—Spanish isn't one of them. "Hay muertos andandos afuera. And one more thing, watch out for an Englishman, blond guy, short hair, mean-looking, dark clothing," I ordered. "If you see him, shoot him a lot. And use your flashlight."

"Huh?" I knew that Holly had no moral compunctions about killing anybody, but even she usually needed a reason.

"I'll explain later, but these are his zombies."

"Got it." She turned and ran toward the latest screams.

I went in the other direction, up the stairs, and back into the hotel. The building was nice, new, modern, and up until a few minutes ago, very clean. There was a splattering of fluids, fresh blood, and discarded tissue from the undead staining the carpet. I held the Smith in my right and my kukri in my left as I followed the obvious trail. I kicked myself for not asking Holly if she had a spare gun. My pulse pounded in my head, and I tried to keep scanning every corner, waiting for something to pop out.

I heard a series of loud booms ahead of me, coming from the direction of the front desk. Somebody had a shotgun. I ran faster, pain throbbing in my twisted ankle with each step. I could hear the hungry moaning. They were right ahead of me.

The undead were clustered together, trying to force their way through the main doors and out into the crowded streets. There were at least a dozen of them, some old, some new, all ugly. A lone uniformed Federale stood in their way, blasting them with a pump shotgun. Their bodies were falling, creating a choke point at the entrance. His shotgun clicked empty, and too terrified to notice, he kept on pumping and dry-firing.

I charged the undead from behind. I had no idea how off the sights on the Smith were, so I used the contact as a weapon. Press muzzle into zombie's head. Pull trigger. Repeat. One of the six corroded cartridges failed to fire, but another pull of the trigger put my last bullet through the lucky monster's sinuses. Flinging the empty revolver at the head of another zombie, I stepped over the fallen body and started swinging away with my knife.

The rearmost creatures moved against me, reaching, chomping, eyes wide. They were new, and only minutes before had been guests of the resort, happy, carefree, normal kids, with normal lives. I shoved those thoughts aside and went about my gruesome business. My knife was heavy, curved, and was designed for taking off limbs, and I put it to work.

Teeth. Snapping closed inches from my arms. I reversed my blade and cleaved the jaw off of a zombie with a Chico State tee shirt. I realized I was screaming, bellowing something incomprehensible. The cop had regained his senses enough to reload his shotgun. He fired and I was concussively sprayed with brains. I stepped aside, hoping not to catch a stray piece of buckshot, and the final zombies followed me, having zeroed in on the scent of my flesh.

There were three of them, and they were piling on top of each other to reach me. I backed away

swinging at anything that presented itself, leaving fingers and the occasional hand on the ground. The zombies didn't seem to notice. My feet slipped on the now sodden carpet and I slid against the checkered desk. Lunging forward, I slammed the tip of my knife through a nasal cavity, and then jumped back as the final two grabbed at me. My knife handle, slick with gore, slipped from my fingers, still lodged in the falling zombie's skull. Now I was really hosed.

I grabbed the desk and vaulted over it, landing painfully on the other side. The zombies flung themselves at the counter and started to wiggle over, their fingers and stumps flailing at me. Lying on my back, I kicked one of the things in the face hard enough to put bone fragments through its brain, launching it back over the counter. I leaned forward, swatted aside the last zombie's arm, avoided the snapping teeth, grabbed it by the side of the head and twisted. The blood-soaked mess was too slippery for a solid grasp, so I shoved my thumbs through the squishy eye sockets for leverage and twisted violently to the side. There was a brutal crunch and the final undead flopped down, twitching.

"I... hate... zombies..." I lay on the floor in a rapidly spreading pool of blood as the last corpse was drained by gravity. The lobby was quiet. The clock on the wall read 12:21. I gradually pushed myself up and glanced over the counter. It looked clear. There was a pile of bodies heaped in the entryway, but none of them had made it to the street. Gunfire could be heard in multiple directions now, so hopefully my team had gotten on the outbreak quick enough to keep it contained. The suckiest part now was going to be isolating the bitten survivors. I had to get to my radio.

The Mexican cop stepped gingerly through the shattered window. His Mossberg was shaking and he was hyperventilating. I recognized the feeling, the feeling that a regular person gets when they find out that the world they live in was not really as it was supposed to be. It could be a real bummer. I walked slowly around the counter, my dripping hands open in front of me. I knew that I had to look terrible, covered in all manner of disgusting stuff, and I didn't want him to mistake me for another zombie.

"Hey, amigo. I'm a friend," I said calmly.

He looked at me in shock, leveled the muzzle at my chest and pulled the trigger. The click of the firing pin landing on the empty chamber was extremely loud. I jumped about two feet straight up.

"Whoa! I'm human! Easy!" I shouted, raising my hands high. "I'm one of the good guys. Soy un hombre bueno."

He nodded slowly, some comprehension dawning in his shocked eyes. I nodded back. Sirens approached. A green truck with Policia on the side screeched to a halt in front of the hotel and men with M-16s jumped out of the back. I looked back to the cop, ready to congratulate him on a job well done, but the last thing I saw was the butt of his shotgun sailing toward my forehead.

Chapter 2

"Do you know what the penalty for having illegal firearms in Mexico are, Señor Pitt?"

"Like a million years per bullet?" I responded. The police interrogator shook his head sadly, nodded at his subordinate, and my head snapped back as the junior policeman hit me. He was wearing some sort of weighted leather glove, and it hurt pretty bad. I leaned my head forward and spit blood on the plastic table. Somehow I had managed to cultivate a hobby of being beaten up by law enforcement officers. On the bright side, this guy was a featherweight compared to my old buddy Special Agent Franks. Now that guy knew how to beat a confession out of somebody.

"You are being held on suspicion of murder, Señor Pitt. I have over seventy bodies to explain, and somebody will be held accountable. I assure you that our justice system is not as lenient as your own." I didn't think that that many tourists had been bitten, so they must be charging me for the original zombies too. I suppose the fact that they had obviously been dead for months wasn't going to help me.

I had no idea where I was, or how long I had been out, having woken up in the back of a truck with a sack tied over my head. Since the air tasted like burning tires, I was guessing that I had been taken inland, and if I had been unconscious long enough, I might even be in Mexico City. The interrogator's English was excellent. He was short, pudgy, with a bad comb-over, but his manner indicated that he was not a man to be trifled with. "Now why did you have multiple firearms and illegal military equipment in your room?"

"About that, any chance I can get some of those guns back? The shotgun and the matching set of .45s? Those have sentimental value...." I went back to the question before he had the chance to sign the other cop to hit me again. "Really, like I already said, contact the consulate. We have written permission from your government. I'm here as an independent security consultant. Our weapons were allowed per the terms of the contract."

"And what exactly was your duty in Mexico?"

"I already told you I'm not at liberty to disclose that." The Mexican government had a policy similar to the United States' official position: Monsters Do Not Exist. The rules are idiotic, but for those of us who made our living cashing in on these governments' bounties for unnatural creatures, we always had to be careful to tiptoe around the truth with the general public. It may have been evil, it may have been stupid, but it was policy. And the people who enforced that policy had no problem shooting people like me if we talked too much. "Just call your superiors. This is all a misunderstanding."

He nodded at the other police officer, and I braced myself for the impact. This time he hit me above the kidney. I grunted. It hurt, but he didn't really drive the fist in there. When you're hitting somebody in the body, you need to punch through the target, not at it. Amateur.

"We already contacted them." The interrogator took out a pack of cigarettes, shook one out, and lit it with a gold-plated Zippo. "Sadly, they said that they had no knowledge of you, your organization, or why you are here."

It sounded like MHI had just been disavowed. Not good. "Well... there's been a mistake then."

"Certainly, merely just a, how would you say? Clerical error." He nodded, and this time I was pelted across the back of my head. At least the guy hitting me was getting some variety. This was bad, very bad. There was no way that the Mexican government had just forgotten about a team of American Monster Hunters. They were going to deny that they had ever contacted us. Better that than to admit there were supernatural creatures on their soil. They were probably already spinning some story

cover up the zombie outbreak and I was willing to bet that my team wasn't going to fit in with the official version of events.

"I can show you our copies of the contract, signed by your state governor. All I need is one phone call."

"I think not. My superiors and the governor's office have already confirmed that they have signed nothing. You are a liar and I'm tiring of this game."

Options were starting to run thin and I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in a Mexican jail. So I guess that meant it was time to see if the interrogator could handle the truth. "Okay, I'll talk."

"I'm waiting."

I gestured with my head at the other cop. It was the best I could do since my forearms and ankles had been zip-tied to the sturdy chair. "Does this guy speak English?"

The interrogator held up his thumb and forefinger. "Un poco, a little."

My whole body ached. At least if I could get rid of Cop #2 they'd quit hitting me for a while. "You might want him to wait outside. You don't want what I'm about to tell you to get out, if you know what I mean."

The interrogator slowly exhaled a thick cloud of smoke. The three of us were in a small, plain room. The only furniture was my chair, his chair, and a cheap plastic table. There was a bloodstained phonebook, a pair of needle-nose pliers, and a five-gallon bucket of water sitting in the corner. I didn't want to guess what those were for. Finally he gestured for the younger cop to leave. I heard the snap of a crisp salute, and then the opening and closing of the door behind me.

"Any chance we can settle this with some good old-fashioned bribery?" I asked. "My company is very generous."

"Mordida? Maybe if I only had one or two bodies. But this many? And half of them Americans? I'm afraid not. You see, someone must be executed for this. Tell me what I want to know, and it might not be you."

"Gotcha. Figured as much, but you never know until you ask. I didn't think you had the death penalty here."

He shrugged. "There is the unofficial death penalty. So let us continue, Señor Pitt. Who are you?"

"I work for a company called Monster Hunter International. We're based out of Alabama. We specialize in discreetly handling monster-related problems." He stared at me blankly. "Monsters... For example we were paid to come here to deal with a pack of goat-suckers."

"Chupacabras?" he asked slowly.

"Yes. A few weeks ago, some hikers were killed at the resort, and once those things taste people they don't go back. We were hired because it was thought more deaths would be detrimental to tourism." I suppose a massive zombie attack rendered that a moot point. "The company I work for is considered the best in the world when it comes to dealing with things like this."

"I see... and the reason that I have never heard of this is..." His voice betrayed no emotion.

"Government-mandated secrecy. Those of us who have monster experience are usually warned by the authorities to keep our mouths shut. That has been the policy for forever. If the regular population were to know that all of the stuff from the myths, and the fairy tales, and the bad movies was real, well, you can imagine the panic and the trouble it would cause."

"And you believe this?"

I paused. I didn't know if he asked if I believed in the government's policies, or if I believed in what I was just telling him. I decided to run with the first option. "No, I think the policy is stupid. People should know the truth. Instead, to keep the problem in check, most governments have some

sort of system to keep the unnatural populations down. In my country there is a bounty system administered by the Treasury Department. It's called PUFF."

"Puff?"

"Perpetual Unearthly Forces Fund. It pays money to any private citizen who kills a monster on the PUFF list. My company specializes in working the PUFF list, and also in private contracts from municipalities, companies, and private individuals, like your wealthy resort owners. See, lots of important people know about monsters, but they have to keep it on the down low, if you know what I mean. So they call people like us. Let's see, PUFF was started by Teddy Roosevelt, uh. . . he was our president back in—"

"I know who Theodore Roosevelt was. I attended UCLA."

"Go Trojans," I said.

"You're thinking of the wrong school." He sighed and rubbed his temple with his fingers. "Please continue..."

"I guess you don't want to hear the history of professional Monster Hunting..."

He casually examined the end of his burning cigarette. "No, I really want to know about last night." He glanced absently at his watch. "Fourteen hours ago. What happened at the hotel. There were many deaths, and I wish to know why."

"That was not our doing."

"I have witnesses who saw you chopping people up with a machete."

"Those weren't people. Those were zombies."

"Zombies..."

"Yes. The walking dead. The man who created them, the man you are looking for is an Englishman." I proceeded to give him a rough description of the real villain. I didn't know what the Englishman was, but he'd been there for me, which meant that the carnage at the hotel was partially my fault. "Bastard works for the Old Ones," I muttered under my breath.

"What is an Old One, Señor Pitt?" The interrogator casually reached under his chair and pulled out a manila file folder.

Screw it. It was obvious he thought I was nuts, might as well give him a good reason. I just needed to stay in one piece long enough for my team to find me. "They're a race of ancient creatures. Evil and ugly."

He pulled an ornate pen from his pocket and began to make notes in the folder. "And how will we know when we find these Old Ones?"

My father had always warned me that I didn't know when to shut up. "The real thing? They're hard to miss. The ones you have to worry about are their servants. Last summer..." I caught myself.

"Last summer what?"

I shrugged. He already thought I was a complete whackadoo, so what did I have to lose? Crazy prisoners probably got their own cells. I was guessing that you wouldn't stick them out with the regular population. "Remember last summer, with the missing five minutes?"

"Yes," he replied. Of course he did. Everybody on Earth had experienced it. Five minutes of time had been erased as if they had never existed. It had caused a global panic. People had instantly found themselves where they had been five minutes before, but with the memory of what had transpired during that missing time still intact. Pandemonium ensued. Thousands had been born twice, others had died twice, and others still, like myself, had died, only to have those moments erased to be given another chance.

"That was caused by the Old Ones. Last summer, one of their minions arranged for them to break

into this world."

~~"And did these... Old Ones... succeed?"~~

I snorted. "Of course not. If they had, you would have known it. But that rift in time, the missing five minutes, was caused by somebody screwing around with one of their ancient artifacts." I didn't mention that that had been me, or that apparently I was the only human in the world with the ability to do so. They had manipulated me in the hopes that I would open the door for them, and they had almost succeeded.

The interrogator leaned back heavily in his chair. "Scientists are now saying that it had something to do with solar radiation. Increased activity causing a distortion in the atmosphere, along with psychological delusions of missing time caused by imbalances in our brain chemistry."

"Yeah, I saw that on the Discovery Channel too, but I'm telling you, it was the Old Ones. There was no delusion. Those things are out there, and they are some bad mothers. This guy with the zombies, he works for them, and if he works for them, then we've got a serious problem on our hands."

"Do we?" He continued writing. From my zip-tied vantage point, I couldn't see what his notes said, but I was sure that it was something to the effect that I was totally screwed and was going to be enjoying a long stay in the Mexican penal system.

"Yes. They'll stop at nothing to get what they want. Those undead you had crawling all over the resort were a joke compared to what these things can whip up." He cocked his head to the side and studied me intently. I could tell that I had lost him, but at least they weren't hitting me with the phonebook. "Talk to a doctor, take a look at those bodies. They've been dead for a lot longer than a day, but they were moving around. I'm sure you have plenty of witnesses to that. You do a little looking, and you can probably find the cemetery where all those bodies were stolen from."

He clicked his pen and dropped it back in his pocket. "I don't know how you dug up all of those corpses and spread them out like you did, but let me assure you, Señor Pitt, pretending to be insane will not get you off in this country. I have had enough of your nonsense. You disgust me, and your fairy tales will not save you. You are nothing but a filthy murderer, and you think that you can come here and spin these ridiculous lies? Do you think we are stupid?" He stood, adjusted his tie, and spit on my face. I could not move my arm to wipe it away, and I could feel it slowly drip down my forehead and into my eyes. The beating was one thing, but that was too much. If I hadn't been tied to the chair, I would have broken the interrogator in half. The door opened behind me and other policemen entered the room. The interrogator switched back to Spanish, but I could understand him relatively well.

"I've had enough for today. We'll work on him again in the morning. Put this piece of shit in Section Six with the other animals. Let them teach him some humility."

Section Six was one large room, subdivided into a bunch of ten-foot-square pens, each enclosed with thick iron bars and chain-link fencing. There was a path between the pens where the guards patrolled with truncheons ready. Small naked bulbs dangled in each alley. There were two sets of cot in each cell, with anywhere from five to seven prisoners shoved into each. My cell had all of the comforts of home, including a bucket, and not much else. You can guess what the bucket was for.

It was dark, and it stunk of sweat, and fear, and violence. I don't think that Amnesty International ever spent much time in this place. I sat cross-legged in the corner of one of the cells. The four other men who shared my tiny space sat across from me, glaring sullenly. Section Six seemed to be where they kept all of the badasses, lunatics, and that general selection of humanity that you just didn't invite to the church picnic. There were incoherent cries and shouts all across the large space. It was not exactly pleasant.

A stocky man with one milky eye, and missing an ear, whispered to his buddy in Spanish. "Yo think he understands us?"

"I don't know... he don't look too smart," answered the prettier of the two, an obese man with spider web tattooed across his face. "Look at him. He's got to be messed up in the head. He just keep staring at us."

The reason I was staring at them was because I had to really concentrate to understand what they were saying. I had practiced up on my Spanish before taking this trip. I have a gift for languages, but the gutter slang these guys spoke was terrible by any standard. I could keep up, barely. Strange enough, having magically learned archaic Portuguese last summer was really helping.

"They said he was an American."

"He ain't one of us, so I don't care," said the third, a skinny guy who sounded like he had tuberculosis. "Soon as he goes to sleep, I'm gonna shiv him good."

"Jorge, now why are you gonna go and do that?"

Jorge shrugged. "I like stabbing people."

"I don't know, man. He's one big dude. Look at him. That ain't no regular American who got drunk in some whorehouse and wound up here. That dude is gonna tear you up, man. He's got muscles like a luchador."

I just kept glaring. I figured my best bet was to appear as mean as possible. A wise old gunfighter had once told me that if you looked like food, you were going to get eaten, and I really didn't want to end up as prison food.

My body ached, and I was in a really foul mood. They had not even treated my cuts from when I had jumped off the balcony, and they were now big grisly scabs that I was sure were going to end up infected. My left ankle was badly swollen, the little puncture in my heel was driving me nuts, and most embarrassingly, after I had been squirted down with a fire hose and had lice poison dumped on me, the biggest set of prison clothes they had for me were about two sizes too small. Not a lot of 400 convicts in Mexico, apparently. The last thing you want to do when you are already in a bad mood is try to wear pants that are too tight.

"I'm telling you, man, I think he understands us. Look at those eyes. He's crazy pissed."

"See, that's why I need to hurry up and shiv him."

"Jorge, he's gonna rip your balls off."

"Shut up, Mateo, quit being such a wimp."

My options were rather limited. I was in jail. The Mexican government was denying that they had given me permission to be here with enough munitions to arm a small rebellion. I had no idea where my team was, or what shape they were in, or even if they had all survived the outbreak. There was some sort of crazy shadow freak out looking to snag me for the Old Ones. I hadn't been offered a lawyer or a phone call, so I doubted that MHI knew where I was either. And the lice powder really itched.

"What do you think, Esteban?" asked Spider Web Face.

The last man looked up from his bunk. He was older, and had obviously been through some rough times. He had scars all along his face and arms, his hair was gray and long, and his skin had the texture of leather. I knew that he had to be somebody special, since he got his own bunk, and none of this band of thugs messed with him. He studied me silently, and the others waited for him to pass judgment.

Finally he spoke, not to them, but rather to me, loud enough that everyone could hear. "I heard from one of the guards, you hacked up like a hundred people with a machete, arms and legs and head

everywhere, even ate some of them. Killed some cops too. Burned a hotel down. Took twenty Federales to take you out... You speak Spanish?"

"Un poco."

"I figured you did." He put his head back down.

"Oh shit, man," said Jorge. "I was just kidding about the shiv thing. You know, mess with the new guy and all that."

I gave Jorge my most menacing look. He cowered back into the corner. Now, most people would not react well to being put into the ultraviolent, dog-eat-dog world that was a prison full of murderers and psychopaths, but hey, I'd killed a werewolf with my bare hands. I figured that I would fit in just fine here.

"Say, Esteban," I asked over the shouting from the next cell. "Where are we?"

"You don't know?" His eyes peeked out from under his mane of hair. I could tell he was a sharp one.

"Nah... I was pretty worn out from chopping up all those people. You know how it is." If you have a rep, you might as well run with it.

"You're in Tijira Prison. This, my friend, is a very bad place."

"I've seen worse," I lied.

"I'm sure you have. Me personally, I'm here because I avenged my wife's honor against the filthy tyrants, but alas, I failed. May God rest her soul," he said solemnly. Some of the thugs crossed themselves.

"Sorry to hear that."

Without skipping a beat he switched to English. "Naw, just pulling your leg. I'm from San Diego. I was flying coke across the border, got back to TJ, didn't have enough to pay the right people, and they stuck me in here rather than just shooting me. Some days I wish they would have just killed me and got it over with. These morons here think I'm Zorro or something so they leave me alone. If a Yankee wants to survive in here, you need a reputation, so I'll back you up, you back me up."

"Good deal." I held out my hand. He reached over and shook it with a firm grip. "Owen Zastava. Pitt."

"Zapato? Like a shoe?"

"No, Zastava. It's Serbian."

"You don't look Serbian."

In other words, I was way too brown. "I'm a little bit of everything." That much was true. I always checked the Other box on any official type forms. "Look, Esteban..."

"You can call me Steve, the Esteban thing is for these guys." He nodded his head at the other criminals. "The story is that I shot it out with the cops and the army to avenge them burning my village or something. If you don't get respect in here, you don't last long."

"Okay, Steve, my company will get me out of here. We're worth a lot of money, and can get the best lawyers. I just need to survive long enough for that to happen, so I appreciate the help. You scratch my back, I scratch yours, know what I mean?"

"That's cool. I'm still waiting for trial myself. I haven't even been arraigned yet. I'm hoping I get my turn in front of the judge before too long."

"How long have you been here?"

He looked up at the ceiling as he gave it some thought.

"Three years come June."

A cold weight settled into the bottom of my stomach. "No kidding?"

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