

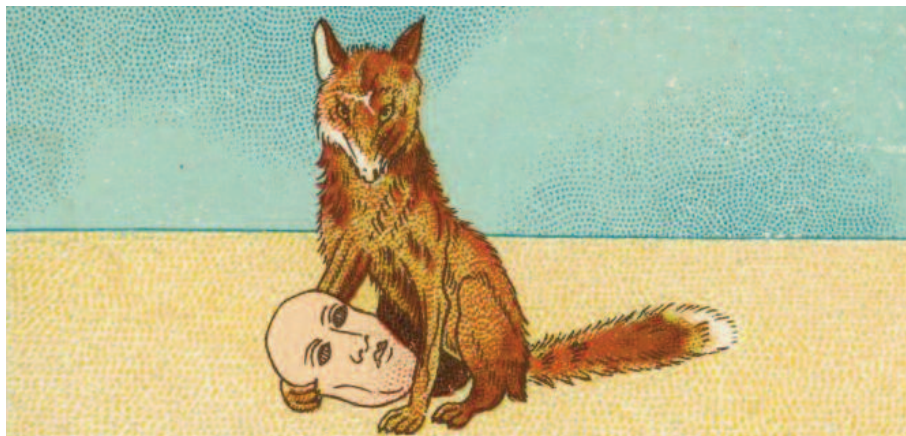
Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 6 – THE RESCUE by Stephen Tillman. Mr. Tillman resides in Shavertown, PA and writes, “I am an emeritus professor of Mathematics at Wilkes University. An avid reader of mysteries and science fiction, I have published several stories in both genres. My fantasy/crime novels, *Leopard’s Daughter* and *Leopard’s Revenge* have been published by Azure Spider Publications.

Page 29– DESANCTIFIED by Charles A. Metzner. Mr. Metzner resides in Whitehall, PA.



“A PLACE WHERE FLOWERS BLOOM”

by THOMAS BRODERICK

Despite what some of his countrymen thought of farmers' intelligence, Janusz Nowak considered himself a well-informed man. He read the newspaper in the morning and watched the news at night. When his son and daughter were growing up, he drove them into Kraków once a month to attend a concert recital or visit a museum. He wanted them cultured, and so they became. As for him, he was content plowing his fields among the pine trees, living in the same little white house as his great-grandfather had done. Continued learning was a valuable hobby, not life's true ambition.

Janusz's self-education was the only reason he did not startle when, on a cool October day, a man appeared out of the ether at his doorstep. He wore a fine wool suit and spoke Polish with a slight accent. Probably English or American, Janusz figured while inviting him in.

“Tea or coffee?” the farmer asked as the man wiped his feet at the doorway.

“Tea will be fine,” the man replied.

Tea and snacks ready, they sat across from one other at the cramped kitchen table. “My wife's better at entertaining guests,” Janusz admitted. “But she's in Warsaw this week visiting our children at university.”

The man nodded before taking his first sip. “It's very good.”

Janusz fiddled with his cup. “I assume you're not.” He paused to clear his throat. “From here.”

“If by here you mean Earth, you'd be one-hundred-percent incorrect. My name is Louis Donnelley. Born and raised in Chicago. My name's Irish, but I'm half Polish from my mother's side. To get to your point, no, I am not from this dimension.”

The farmer nodded. Stories of interdimensional travel, however limited, had been in the news and papers for over a year. So far, it was just diplomats and scientists making brief visits to other realities, trying to foster good relations, that sort of thing.

“I know it must seem strange,” Louis continued. “You've probably never heard of someone like me just showing up at a random house.”

“That's true. I figured you'd be at the presidential palace. You sure you got your coordinates right?”

Louis chuckled. “Absolutely. You see, Mr. Nowak, it's taken a while for political relationships to form among the dimensions. Lots of negotiations and handshakes. Oh, and let's not forget the copious paper-

work!” He paused to take another sip of tea. “However, now that the ink’s dry, we can move forward, start cultural exchanges, even a little tourism.”

“Tourism?”

“If there’s money to be made, people are going to do it. Also, the opportunities for learning and personal enlightenment... the sky’s the limit!”

Janusz leaned back in his chair.

Learning and personal enlightenment, that did sound good. Yet he couldn’t help but chuckle. “Again, I don’t think you have the right address.” He turned his head to look out the window. “Out there is nothing but sixteen hectares of rye and oats.”

Louis finished his tea, the cup making a slight clink as he placed it on the saucer. His eyes were kind but hid volumes.

“That’s exactly why I’m here.

Unfortunately, I can’t say much more right now. When your wife is back, I’d like to meet with you both to discuss what would be involved. Please let her know that people from innumerable dimensions are interested in visiting your farm. And, of course, you’d be compensated handsomely.”

Not long after, Louis left only to vanish the moment he stepped outside Janusz’s front door. The farmer spent the rest of the long fall afternoon walking among his fallow fields. The land was silent minus a fat crow’s incessant cawing. He wished it would stop. Maybe then he’d understand what the interdimensional traveler had been talking about. But his mind came up blank. Sighing, he decided to leave the matter until his wife came home.

#

Janusz’s wife Joanna didn’t believe a word of her husband’s story until Louis returned the following week. He carried a leather suitcase containing a phonebook-thick stack of legal documents.

“You see,” Louis explained, touching a ball-point pen to an aerial map of the Nowaks’ property. “There would only be a small reception area on the east side of your land for parking and a bathroom. A guide would then lead visitors on a thirty-minute walking tour.” He traced a rectangular path.

“I don’t know how I feel about people popping into existence on my land,” Joanna commented. “It’d give me a heart attack, or I’d accidentally run someone over with my car.”

“That won’t be a problem.” Louis flipped through the pages to a specific paragraph. “As you can see, all visitors will arrive and depart your reality in either Kraków or Warsaw.”

“Hmmm.” Joanna crossed her arms and eyed her husband without turning her head. “What do you think, Janusz?”

“It doesn’t seem like a big intrusion,” the farmer commented. “And the money wouldn’t hurt.” He looked at Louis. “And the only rule is that we can’t interact with them?”

“Nothing but a friendly wave if you happen to pass by a group or person. Besides that, no formal contact. We want to preserve your privacy, among other things.”

Within an hour, the middle-aged cou-

ple had signed Louis's paperwork, at which point he presented them with a crisp check for 15,000 z otys. "The first of many," he promised.

"So strange," Joanna told her husband after Louis had left. "I just don't get it."

Janusz shrugged. "Racked my brain for days after he first showed up. I figure that it's not worth worrying about."

His wife nodded before walking into the other room where the telephone was. Their children would want to hear about the good fortune that had befallen their family.

#

Life didn't change much for Janusz and Joanna over the next few months. Their children visited over Christmas, where they told stories of interdimensional visitors trickling into Warsaw.

"They keep to themselves, just like the tour groups from foreign countries," their son Jakub reported at the end of Christmas Eve dinner. "The guides use the same little flags, too, so no one gets lost."

The thought of it made Janusz grin. "People are the same all over, I guess. Any places in particular they like to go?"

Jakub thought for a moment. "The Great Synagogue, the Saxon Palace, Old Town. You know, the usual tourist traps. It's the same with Kraków. Not so much the main square, but the museums are getting a lot more visitors. I've heard that thousands have wept in front of Raphael's self-portrait."

"That one is beautiful," Joanna added, cupping her cheek in her hand. "You'd

think the other realities, timelines, universes, whatever people want to call them, don't have great artists. I'm just glad we took you kids there before all this started up."

"We do appreciate it, mom," their daughter Eliza said. "But tell us about here! Have you seen any of the visitors?"

"Not really," Janusz said. "There's a little rest stop where three or four buses can park. I've seen the groups walking around sometimes when I'm on my tractor. I give them a smile or a nod. That's it."

"Strange." Jakub shook his head back and forth. "You notice anything about them? Any clue to why they're here?"

Janusz looked up at the wall clock. It was almost time to go to Mass. "They...a lot of them looked shocked, as if this place was the strangest thing in creation."

#

The extra income allowed Janusz to enjoy a little more comfort and pleasure in his life, an opportunity he wasn't about to miss. His little white house became somewhat less little with the addition of two rooms. Outings to Kraków with Joanna every other month became overnight trips to Zakopane's mountain villas or Gdańsk's beach resorts.

Despite these new adventures, Kraków remained close to the couple's hearts. On a bright June day, they found themselves in the medieval town square having lunch under one of the hundreds of white and red umbrellas.

"I didn't think semi-retirement would be this pleasant," Joanna commented

before finishing her first pilsner beer. Around them, people were speaking in half-a-dozen foreign languages.

“And all we have to pay for it is seeing a bunch of bewildered faces every day,” her husband added. “Not too bad, I’d say.”

Their food arrived, and for a while, the couple concentrated on their golabki and pork hock. Janusz occasionally looked up from his meal to watch the tourists walking through the square. A large crowd had gathered around the flower sellers that set up shop on fine days like this. The people there seemed so, so happy.

“Joanna,” he said, setting down his fork. “What do you think of changing things up a little bit at the farm?”

#

The following spring, Janusz planted a one-meter-wide row of flowers along both sides of the walking path visitors took through his farm. Two hundred red corn poppies here, six hundred violet Siberian irises there. The globe flowers looked nice in certain spots, even though the greenery overpowered their delicate yellow petals.

The farmer worked during the evenings when he knew no one would disturb him. During the day, he would peer from his kitchen as groups of visitors walked nearby.

“Just what are you looking for?” Joanna said one afternoon after her husband had spent three straight hours staring through his binoculars.

“That,” Janusz replied. “The young couple on the right.”

Joanna took the binoculars. After two years of sorry-looking faces, this was the

first time she had seen visitors smiling.

“Well,” she said. “That is a change. Keep it up, Mr. gardener.”

Janusz did just that. Oh, his ancestors would never have imagined their livelihood gone to flowers, he mused, throwing the tiny seeds like a schoolboy flinging white sand at D bki Beach.

The flowers that fall grew in clumps, each separated by the natural grasses and weeds that covered Silesia like a fine green carpet. He put up a wooden sign at the visitor’s entrance. *Please take a flower (or two) to remember your trip!* With Jakub’s help, he translated the message into multiple languages.

#

By the time Janusz was in his late seventies, all of his once sprawling farm had returned to nature, the million-and-a-half flowers that dotted the land the great-great-great-great grandchildren of those he had planted. Even though the place had changed, the groups continued to come. And just as he had hoped, many people left with a flower in hand.

It was during this time that Janusz’s granddaughter Hanna spent every other weekend with him and Joanne. No longer farmers, they figured spoiling her was a good use of their golden years. Hanna loved riding on her grandfather’s tractor. Seeing her happy face was the only reason the farmer-turned-gardener kept it running.

It was a fine fall day, much like the one when Louis appeared on Janusz’s doorstep. The season’s first frost was only a week away, meaning it was likely the last chance

he and Hanna had to soak in the fields' reds, blues, and yellows.

"Pretty, isn't it, honey?" Janusz said as he turned the tractor's engine off. All around them, flowers and tall grass fluttered in the breeze.

Hanna nodded and hopped down. She put a corn poppy in her hair before offering one to her grandfather. He put his behind his left ear.

At that moment, a group of visitors appeared walking along the path not too far away.

"They're back," Hanna announced in a small voice.

"Yes, they are." Janusz squinted to seem them better. "You know, the first people who came here looked...they looked really

sad. I didn't like that. I wanted to make this a beautiful and happy place. For them, for me, for you, for everyone."

"Why were they so sad?"

The grandfather took his granddaughter's hand. "I don't know. No one ever told me, and, really, I didn't want to find out. It's okay. Some things are just like that. In twenty years, the only thing I ever learned about them is their name for here."

Janusz paused to look over the beauty that surrounded them. For a moment, the earth below was so steady and silent and undisturbed that not even the birds chirped to bother its eternal peace.

"They call it Birkenau." ❖



“THE RESCUE”

by STEPHEN TILLMAN

2:00 AM, outside of Tubruq, Libya, the only light coming from the stars. The black leopard was nearly invisible. He cautiously approached a warehouse that loomed as a monolith, blocking some of the starlight. His keen eyesight spotted an open second story window, fifteen feet above the ground. He leaped, grasped the window sill with his front claws, and pulled himself up. It was even darker inside, but he was able to make out seemingly endless racks of goods on each side of a narrow aisle. Faint human voices came from the end of the aisle. He jumped to the top of a rack ten feet away, skidding on the metal, but making little noise. Using the shelves, he descended to the floor. He hunkered down so no part of his body was more than a foot off the floor as he crept down the aisle.

Bright lights came on, almost blinding the leopard.

“I see the beast!” a voice yelled in Arabic, followed by the sound of automatic weapons.

The leopard felt a searing pain in his side.

“I got him! I see the blood!” another voice called exultantly. The bullets were silver plated.

“I’m coming,” Denise Mitchell, a

plump woman of sixty-six, called as she hurried to the front door. She opened it as far as the chain allowed and looked out at two men holding up credential cases.

“We’re federal agents, Mrs. Mitchell,” the one in front said. “I’m Greg Jordann and this is my partner, Zachary Furelli. Please open the door.”

“I’m not supposed to allow anyone I don’t know in unless I have authority from Dr. or Mrs. Sandar,” Denise replied. “Dr. Sandar is away, but I can call Mrs. Sandar.”

“That’s a reasonable precaution, Mrs. Mitchell,” Jordann said. “But it shouldn’t apply to law enforcement. It’s very important for the well being of the Sandar children that we get in immediately. There’s a threat against them, and we need to be inside to secure the premises.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t go against my instructions,” Denise said. She took out her cell phone. “Dr. Sandar emphasized there were to be absolutely no exceptions. It won’t take a minute to call Mrs. Sandar.”

She started to hit a speed dial key when Furelli, his arm hidden from Denise by Jordann’s body, brought up a gun and shot her with a tranquilizer dart. Denise looked in consternation at the dart sticking out of her arm. She staggered back, dropped her phone, and tried, without success, to pull

the dart from her arm.

“What did you do?” she asked in a raspy voice, before falling to the floor, unconscious.

“Hand me the bolt cutters,” Jordann commanded.

“Cripes, Greg,” Furelli said after a couple of minutes. “Cut the freaking chain before a nosy neighbor calls the cops.”

“I’m trying,” Jordann said. Sweat poured down his face. “I don’t know what this damned thing is made of, but all I’m doing is scratching it.”

“What are you doing?” a small voice asked. “Why is Didi lying on the floor?”

Jordann looked through the opening and saw a little boy holding a teddy bear. “You must be Tyler,” he said. “Didi is very sick. I’m a doctor. She called and was about to let us in when she fell. Open the door so we can help her.”

“I think I should get my sister,” Tyler said, looking back toward the stairs leading to the second floor.

“There’s no time for that!” Jordann exclaimed. “It looks like Didi is barely breathing! She could die at any moment, and if you don’t let us in it’ll be your fault! You don’t want to be responsible for her dying do you?”

“No,” said Tyler, crying and clutching the teddy bear tightly to his chest.

“Hurry!” Jordann exclaimed. “If you let us in right away you can save her. You’ll be a hero.”

Tyler again looked toward Tamara’s room, and started to cry harder.

“Tyler,” Jordann said sternly. “Didi

looks like she’s about to stop breathing. If you don’t let me in right now, she’ll die for sure.”

“Okay,” Tyler said, through his tears.

He stood on his tip-toes and slid the chain off. As soon as it was off, Jordann crashed through the door and grabbed the boy, who let out a loud shriek. Jordann jabbed a hypodermic into the boy’s arm, while Furelli pounded up the stairs toward Tamara’s room.

Tamara, awakened by her brother’s scream, bolted upright. Furelli appeared at the door. “Who are you?” she yelled, jumping out of bed. “Get out of here! Didi, call the police!”

Furelli entered her room and grasped her arm. She punched him as hard as she could in his solar plexus, exhibiting far more strength than one would expect from a nine-year-old girl. He fell to the floor gasping for breath, releasing her arm. She ran for the door, but crashed into Jordann as he stepped into her room. Her little-girl frame was no match for his over two-hundred-pound muscular body, even allowing for the fact she was much stronger than any girl her age had a right to be. She fell backwards, landing on her rear. Jordann bent over, took her arm, and stuck a needle in it.

Tamara got to her feet and tried to run, but could not maintain her balance. After a few seconds she collapsed, unconscious. Jordann carried her down to the front door and placed her beside her brother.

“Get the memory disks from the security cameras,” Jordann ordered. “I’ll take the hard drive out of the primary computer.

See if you can find a backup computer.”

Five minutes later Furelli called down to his partner, “Found the backup. It was hidden in a little room off the woman’s closet in the master bedroom. I’ve got the hard drive. Now let’s get the kids in the car and get out of here.”

Olivia Sandar, RN, came out of the patient’s room, wrapped her stethoscope around her neck, and said to the head nurse of the floor, “His heart rate is elevated, and he’s in a lot of pain. I think we should call his doctor and see if we get the okay to increase his pain meds.”

“I’ll take care of it, Liv. There are two men, federal agents, who claim they need to see you right away. They’re waiting at the nurse’s station.”

Her husband, Bobby, was off on assignment. Olivia feared the worst as she hurried to the station. Two men were leaning against the counter chatting with a nurse. They straightened up as she approached and held up their credentials.

Determined not to show panic, she asked in a cool voice, “Is there a problem, gentlemen?”

“I’m Greg Jordann and this is my partner Zachary Furelli,” Jordann said. “We’d like you to come with us.”

“Why should I?” Olivia asked, narrowing her eyes. “I’m in the middle of my shift. Tell me what’s going on. You claim to be federal agents. What agency?”

“The same as the one you work for.”

“Bullshit!” Olivia said, putting her hands on her hips. Her gaze turned from

one man to the other. “I’m a nurse. I don’t have a badge that came from a kid’s cereal box. Tell me what’s going on before I call hospital security and the police.”

“People are noticing us,” Jordann said. An orderly was staring at them with obvious curiosity. “Is there a place we can go that has privacy?”

“It’s not visiting hours yet. The lounge should be empty.”

Olivia also wanted their conversation to be private. She led the two men to the lounge. A security camera was feeding both visual and audio to a computer, but she knew nobody looked at the files unless there was an incident. When the door shut behind them, she closed the blinds, turned to face them, crossed her arms over her chest, and asked, “What’s this all about?”

“We need you to come with us,” Furelli said, as he reached for her.

Moving so fast her arms were a blur, she grabbed Furelli arm and twisted it up behind his back, causing him to bend over and gasp in pain. He struggled to free himself, to no avail.

“Give me a straight answer right god-damned now, or I break this arm,” she said in a menacing whisper. “Don’t reach for your gun, Jordann. I can break his arm and do the same for you before you could even get your hand on it. But if you want to risk it, go ahead. At least you’re in a hospital, and you’ll be treated right away.”

“They weren’t kidding when they told us to be careful around you, even with you being six months pregnant,” Jordann said, with obvious admiration. “My partner got a

little impetuous. Let him go, and we can discuss this. I promise we won't make any sudden moves nor try to restrain you physically."

"Not that I'd take your word for anything," Olivia said, releasing Furelli. "I know damn well you couldn't restrain me. Start talking. I have work to do."

"I'm sorry to tell you your husband has not reported back from his last assignment," Jordann said. "We have no idea if he's dead or alive. Our orders are to take you and your children into protective custody, at least until we find what's gone wrong. We already have your children. Come with us, and we'll take you to them."

Olivia stared at them, stone faced. She took out her cell phone and called Denise's cell phone. Just before it would've gone to voice mail, it was answered with a muffled, indecipherable sound.

"Didi?" Olivia asked. "Is that you? Are the kids okay?"

"Oh, Liv, I'm so sorry," Denise Mitchell said, slurring her words and crying. "Two men came to the door claiming to be federal agents. That's the last thing I remember until now. I just woke up on the floor. I don't know where the children are."

"I'll take care of it, Didi," she said and disconnected.

She stepped toward the two men, baring her teeth. Furelli jumped to the side. Jordann backed up until he reached the wall.

Olivia put her right forefinger against Jordann's chest and said, "If anything hap-

pens to either of my children I will hunt you both down and kill you. Slowly. And don't think I can't or won't do it."

Jordann felt a chill run down his spine as he made eye contact with her. The hairs on his arms were standing up. He struggled to control an urgent need to urinate.

"Don't overreact, Mrs. Sandar," Jordann said, his breath coming in rapid gasps. "Nobody wants to hurt your kids. Just cooperate with us, and everything will be okay."

"If I don't cooperate?"

"We won't hurt the kids," Furelli hastened to say. "But we have them in a secure location. If you want to see them again, you'll do what we ask."

Furelli blanched as Olivia pushed Jordann so hard his head banged against the wall. She took two steps toward Furelli, grabbed the front of his jacket with both hands, lifted him off the ground, and said, "I should've broken your arm. I still might. Be specific. What does 'cooperation' mean?"

"For now it just means coming with us," Jordann said, rubbing the back of his head.

"Are you taking me to my kids?" she asked, dropping Furelli as she turned to face Jordann.

"All in good time," Furelli said. He indicated that she should proceed them out of the room.

Howard Bermcrinson was in a foul mood as he entered the outer office of his boss, James Kerwether. After the last elec-

tion the President appointed a new chief-of-staff, who appointed Kerwether to head the day-to-day operations of the Special Section, a black-ops government agency operating directly under the auspices of the President. The task of the Special Section was to fight international terrorism, sometimes using methods outside the norm.

Kerwether was a control freak who tried to micromanage everybody under him. He expected the agents to follow his express orders, with no deviations. He didn't seem to grasp the notion that the whole idea of the Special Section was to carry out missions where improvisation was a necessity. The word "initiative" was not in his vocabulary.

Bermcrinson would've resigned, except that he knew he was vital as a buffer between Kerwether and the Sandars. Bobby had been ready to quit after one meeting with Kerwether. If he did, so would Olivia. Bermcrinson considered them to be priceless assets in the war against terrorism. It took thirty minutes to talk Bobby out of leaving the Special Section.

Bermcrinson was kept waiting the requisite fifteen minutes in Kerwether's outer office before he was allowed to enter the inner sanctum. He figured it was Kerwether's way of showing his underlings how much more important he was than they were.

"You wanted to see me, James?" A fuming Bermcrinson inquired, as he entered.

"Yes I did, Howard," Kerwether replied, pointing to a chair. "Be seated. I'm afraid I have bad news. Sandar hasn't

reported back from his last mission."

Bermcrinson was stunned by Kerwether's revelation. It'd seemed to be a relatively simple mission compared to some of the earlier ones. Kerwether didn't appear displeased by the news. He wondered why Kerwether knew about it before he did. He was Bobby's immediate supervisor and handler.

"Was the mission successful?"

Bermcrinson asked, trying to keep from showing any emotion. "Was he able to take out Mubassir Hakimi? Do we have any idea if he was killed, captured, or what?"

"Hakimi was seen in Riyadh today, so the mission wasn't successful," Kerwether replied. "Other than that I don't know much. Given what Sandar knows, the best we can hope for is he was killed in the line of duty."

Bermcrinson's effort to maintain self-control and decorum went by the wayside. He shouted, "I can't believe what you just said! How can that be good? Why would it be better than having him escape?"

"I didn't say it was good," Kerwether said, smugly. "I said it was the best we could hope for. If he escaped, he'd be trapped in a hostile country with no resources. That could easily lead to his capture. We wouldn't want that, and we certainly wouldn't want him to go over to the other side."

"Bobby would never sell us out!" Bermcrinson said, jumping up and slapping the flat of his right hand on Kerwether's desk.

"Probably not," Kerwether agreed,

unable to suppress a grin. “At least not of his own volition. But who knows what he’d reveal under torture. Sandar’s always been a loose cannon. We have no real control over him. Losing him wouldn’t be the worse thing in the world. We can’t have people disobeying orders the way he does.”

“Sandar is probably the single best asset we have in fighting terrorists!” Bermcrinson yelled. He leaned forward and spit came out of his mouth as he spoke. “How can you even suggest he went over to the other side and is now working against us?”

“Sit down and calm yourself, Howard,” Kerwether ordered.

Bermcrinson stared at Kerwether, saying nothing for several seconds. He took a deep breath, sat down again, and said in a loud voice which dispelled his words, “Okay, I’m calm.”

“I’m not saying he turned. But he hasn’t reported in like he was supposed to. I just pointed out there is no evidence it didn’t happen.”

“There’s no evidence you’re not an alien spy from Arcturus, either,” Bermcrinson retorted. “However, I’m willing to concede that you’re an Earthling.”

“Thank you for your vote of confidence,” Kerwether said sarcastically. “I didn’t bring you up here just to give you the news about Sandar. I’ve decided to initiate ‘Operation Protection.’ I need you to handle Sandar’s wife.”

Bermcrinson sat back speechless. He started to say something several times before he was finally able to express himself rationally. “You’ve separated the kids from

their mother?”

“Yes. After they’ve calmed down we’ll begin training them the way we want. It may already be too late for the daughter. She’ll remember her parents’ methods and attitudes, but we’ll try to get her to see things our way. I think we’ll be successful with the son, but you never know. Our best bet will be the new baby. I believe it’s another girl. She won’t be raised by her parents and will be much more amenable to our way of thinking.”

“You’re planning to *permanently* take away take away the kids from Olivia?” Bermcrinson asked, truly shocked. “I thought ‘Operation Protection’ was a temporary security measure. You also want to take away her new baby? You won’t be able to do that easily, and if you piss her off she’ll be a formidable enemy. Do you intend to kill her once she gives birth?”

“Of course not,” Kerwether said, but Bermcrinson thought he was lying since he looked away as he said it. “We’ll just keep her separate from her children until we can get started on their training. It’s not supposed to be permanent.”

It was all Bermcrinson could do to keep himself from throttling Kerwether on the spot. “And what if the daughter turns out to be untrainable?”

“We could use her for breeding,” Kerwether said, shrugging. “We’re fighting for the very existence of this country and what it stands for. We have to build up our army of specials.”

“What you’re suggesting is *against* everything this country stands for, you bastard!”

Bermcrinson shouted. He shot to his feet and headed for the door. "Use the daughter for breeding? What is she, a slave? How low can you get? I'll not be a party to this, this, I can't even describe it!"

"Yes you will!" Kerwether said sharply. "Sit back down and listen to me! The family knows you and likes you. It'll be much easier on them if you act as our intermediary. There's no reason why, down the road, we can't allow the mother visitation rights, but only if you can broker it in a way that we can trust her. Also, we might still use her on missions. She'll do her best because she'd know we hold her kids. We won't breed the daughter against her will, but any kids she has might turn out to be specials that could help us in the long run. We'll try to convince her of that."

"She'll know you separated her from her mother," Bermcrinson said, as he looked back from the doorway. "How cooperative do you think she'd be? And remember, if after puberty, she becomes a were-leopard herself, she'll be *really* dangerous."

"We'll deal with that issue when the time comes. It won't be for several years. We can work on her in the meantime."

Bermcrinson thought Kerwether was lying about breeding Tamara against her will. Additionally he thought he knew how Kerwether would get rid of Olivia. He wouldn't kill her outright. He'd send her on a succession of very dangerous missions. But Bermcrinson also knew he had to be in the loop if he had any hope of helping the Sandars. He couldn't quit.

"I don't think you have any idea of the

shit storm you've started," Bermcrinson said, as he retook his seat.

Inside the Libyan warehouse, the wounded leopard gave a blood curdling screech, and leaped to the top of the nearest storage rack. He crawled to just below a ventilation duct, where he was not visible to the men on the floor. He looked to see if he could get back to the window unseen. No chance. He *changed*. Bobby silently took deep breaths. He pressed his hand against the wound on his side. The blood loss was not a torrent, but it was steady. Escape was not possible. He had to fight back, quickly, before he became too weak.

Bobby stood, yanked the cover off an opening to the ventilation system, banged against it a few times, dropped down, and slithered away.

"It is trying to get into the HVAC system!" one of the men yelled, pointing upward. He ran toward it, and began firing at the duct-works. Others followed suit.

The racks were about six feet apart. Even wounded, Bobby had little trouble moving from one to the next without being heard over the noise of the gunfire. He headed toward where the shots were originating. Peering over the edge, he saw four men going up one of the aisles and looking at the ventilation ducts. He dropped to the floor behind the man farthest back, grabbed his head and viciously twisted, breaking the man's neck. But the firing stopped just before Bobby's action. The snap of the spinal cord severing was audible to the man just in front. He spun around,

his mouth gaping open at the sight of a naked, bloody stranger.

Bobby dove for the dead man's gun. He and the man facing him fired simultaneously. Bobby had the advantage of lying prone. Two down. The remaining two were slow to react to the shots coming from behind them. Bobby sprayed bullets into them, killing both, but emptying the gun.

He quickly stripped off the shirt from one of the men, and used it to wrap around his body as a makeshift bandage. It was able to slow the bleeding, but not halt it. He grabbed guns from the other three, just as two more men came around the corner. Once again he dropped to the floor. The two started running toward him, discharging their weapons, and screaming in Arabic. Bobby felt one shot graze his right shoulder, causing him to drop the gun in his right hand. Another shot nicked his left ear. Moving with blurring speed, he jumped to the top shelf of the rack on his left, simultaneously flipping the gun in his left hand to his right. He grasped a stanchion with his left hand and fired, killing one and sending the other scurrying out of sight.

Bobby pulled himself on top of the rack, breathing heavily. Once again he silently moved from rack to rack. Time was running out. He felt himself weakening, and he was leaving a blood trail. Shortly he came upon two men waiting below, peering down the center aisle, probably hoping to ambush him. He shot and killed them from his vantage point.

Still staying on top of the racks, he

examined every aisle, but could find no sign of anybody else alive. His primary target, Mubassir Hakimi, was nowhere to be found. He extracted shells from one of the magazines. Every one of them was silver plated. He'd been set up. There had to be a mole in the Special Section.

The wound in his side was by far the nastiest of the three, but even for that one, the bullet had only grazed him. Still, it was an inch deep and six inches long. Blood continued to seep through his makeshift bandage. The loss of blood would eventually be his undoing if he didn't do something, and do it soon. Ideally, it should be sutured, but conditions were far from ideal.

He searched the warehouse. In a cabinet in the main office he found some duct tape and a first aid kit containing antibiotic ointment and rolls of gauze. He put ointment on all three of his wounds, and used strips of the tape to close the laceration in his side, finally stopping the bleeding. The ear and shoulder wounds had already stopped, and were beginning to close. He used the gauze to create a bandage for the worst of the wounds. Since the wound had been made with silver, he'd heal faster in human form.

He took clothes from the dead men, and searched them. Two of them had handguns. He looked longingly at the submachine guns but knew one of those would be far too conspicuous. Taking both handguns along with extra magazines, he exited from the warehouse.

3:00 AM. Bobby and Rivka Blumberg

were crouched by a shed in a backyard separated from his own backyard by a three-foot, chain-link fence. The journey from Libya to his present location had taken a week and been harrowing. He'd hijacked a fishing boat and forced it take him from Libya to Cypress. From there he was able to contact the Mossad. They were able to help him return to the United States. Blumberg, a Mossad agent with special powers, accompanied him.

Blumberg rapidly opened the padlock securing the shed.

"I see your talents extend to more than being a human lie detector," Bobby said.

Bobby's cat-like vision picked up Blumberg's grin as she said, "I have nimble fingers. Picking locks is a hobby of mine. It has nothing to do with my other, ah, abilities."

They entered the shed and saw nothing but a few rusty tools and an old lawn mower that had seen better days. "Why did your neighbor bother with a padlock?" Blumberg asked.

"I talked him into it," Bobby said, as he cleared off a space in the middle of the floor. "I told him he didn't want kids from the neighborhood using his shed to smoke pot, or screw, or whatever. I reminded him that if there was a problem he might get sued."

Bobby lifted a heavy concrete slab from the floor of the shed, and pushed it aside, revealing a steel door with a combination lock. "This leads to a tunnel to my house," Bobby said as he worked the combination.

The door swung open giving off a faint

creak. Bobby cursed at the noise, and said, "I'll have to remember to oil that. If someone hears us we'll hide. If that doesn't work, I want to subdue whoever it might be without harming them. They're likely to be federal agents. That means I can't become a leopard except in an emergency, but I have to be prepared."

Bobby proceeded to take off his clothes. Blumberg looked on with frank interest, and said, "This job is getting more enjoyable all the time. Too bad you're married."

Bobby and Blumberg entered the tunnel and crawled to the end, where there was another door with a combination lock. With Blumberg holding a flashlight Bobby worked the combination, and the door swung silently open. He slid aside a wooden partition. The two stepped into the basement of the house.

"Where's this backup?" Blumberg asked softly.

"The cameras send signals to the computer in my study. It has a backup hard drive. There's a redundant backup in a little cabinet off Olivia's closet in the master bedroom. They probably searched and found it."

"Then what are we doing here?"

"There is a redundant to the redundant behind the gas furnace here in the basement. I installed it myself. I'm hoping they didn't find that one."

Bobby slid aside a panel behind the furnace, revealing a third combination lock. Bobby started to work the combination, but then froze as a noise came from

upstairs. Both went to the foot of the stairs leading to the first floor. Blumberg had her gun out.

Light was coming from under the doorway. They heard a refrigerator being closed, the clink of a spoon on a dish, and a microwave operating. After a few minutes, they heard water running. There were footsteps and the light went out.

Bobby let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. They waited another five minutes, before going back behind the furnace.

"Late night snack," Bobby said softly. He worked the third combination.

They stepped inside a small room, heavily insulated to protect the computer from the heat of the furnace. Blumberg handed Bobby a flash-drive. He inserted it into a USB slot on the computer and downloaded the relevant files. Then they retraced their steps back to the shed.

Greg Jordann heard pounding on his apartment door. *Crap!* he thought. *Can I ever get a chance to relax? How the hell did they get to the apartment without being buzzed in?*

Through the peephole he saw two men he'd never seen before. "Who are you?" he asked.

"FBI, Mr. Jordann," a voice answered. "Open up."

Jordann opened the door as far as the chain bolt allowed. "Creds please."

Both men held up their credentials. The one in front said, "I'm Special Agent Mark Winslow. My partner is Special Agent

Steven O'Rourke. Open the door, Mr. Jordann."

"What do you want?" Jordann asked. "Do you have a warrant? Do you know I'm a federal agent myself?"

"We're aware of your status," Winslow said, sharply. "We have a warrant for your arrest. Open up or resisting arrest will be added to the charges."

"My arrest?" Jordann repeated in outrage. "There must be some mistake."

"There's no mistake. Open the door. Now!"

A perplexed Jordann released the chain and opened the door, saying, "You do know I'm a federal agent?"

"You've already said that, and we were aware of it before," Winslow said. "Face the wall, place your hands on it, and spread your legs."

Jordann did as he was told, and O'Rourke patted him down. "He's clean, Mark," O'Rourke said, and proceeded to take out his handcuffs.

"Place your hands behind your back, Mr. Jordann," Winslow said. "You have the right to remain silent..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know all about my rights," Jordann said, as he unsuccessfully tried to pull his hands away from O'Rourke.

Winslow continued with the Miranda warning, ignoring Jordann's remonstrations. When Jordann was finally handcuffed, Winslow took his arm and said, "Let's go, Mr. Jordann. Don't make this any more difficult for yourself."

"At least tell me what I am being

charged with,” Jordann said.

“For starters, breaking and entering into the home of Robert Sandar, aggravated assault upon the person of Denise Mitchell...”

“Those are bullshit charges,” Jordann yelled, trying to pull away. “Anyway they’d be local, not federal. What’s the FBI doing here?”

“Before you interrupted, I was about to mention the federal charge,” Winslow said. “Namely kidnapping Tamara Sandar, age nine, and Tyler Sandar age six. Kidnapping of children will go especially hard on you.”

“I didn’t kidnap them! I was taking them into protective custody. I was acting under orders from someone high up in the federal government. Someone way above your pay grade.”

“Sure,” Winslow said, derisively. “Acting under orders from a high-level federal official, you broke into a home, attacked a woman sixty-six years old, drugged two children, and took them against their will. Who’s going to believe you were just ‘following orders?’”

“But it’s true,” Jordan protested. “I was acting under orders from James Kerwether. His office is in the White House annex building. He works directly for the President’s chief-of-staff. You’re going to get into a shitload of trouble over this.”

“James Kerwether is the one who ordered the kidnapping,” Winslow said

with a smile on his face. “We wondered who to go after next. Now we know.”

Kerwether, escorted by two FBI agents, was brought into the chambers of Judge



Stacey Warberg of the Washington, DC, federal district. The judge was a formidable looking woman in her early fifties. She had iron gray hair, a stocky build, and a no-nonsense expression on her face.

Present in the office, in addition to the judge, were an elderly couple Kerwether didn’t know, a Black man who, based on the natty way he was dressed, must be a lawyer, and Denise Mitchell. Also present was Ted Rivlin, Kerwether’s personal attorney.

ney.

“I must protest the treatment my client is receiving, your honor,” Rivlin, a portly man of about sixty, said. “He’s not just some lowlife off the street. He’s a highly respected federal official. He reports directly to the President’s chief-of-staff.

Handcuffed with his hands behind his back? Really, your honor, is this necessary?”

“You may remove Mr. Kerwether’s handcuffs, Mr. Winslow,” Warberg said. “Are you aware of the charges against you Mr. Kerwether?”

“Yes I am, your honor,” Kerwether said, rubbing his wrists. “They’re completely bogus.”

“Let me handle this, Jim,” Rivlin said, putting his hand on Kerwether’s arm. Turning to the judge he said, “I demand my client be released immediately. Any actions he took were in the service of the United States, motivated strictly by national security under the Patriot Act. If necessary, we’ll get the President involved.”

“Shut up and sit down, Mr. Rivlin,” Warberg said, pointing to a chair. “This is an informal meeting. You’re here as a courtesy. There’s no court recorder. I’m hoping we can get this resolved amicably, but I’m quite prepared to put your client on the docket for kidnapping and other crimes should he not be forthcoming. And if that’s the case, I would deny bail. If we reach that point, you may have your say.”

To Kerwether, she said, “Mr. Kerwether, federal agents have stated they were acting under your orders when they forcibly took two minor children from their

home and forcibly removed one Olivia Sandar from her place of employment. What have you got to say for yourself?”

As Rivlin started to get to his feet, the judge barked, “Don’t say a word, Mr. Rivlin! I want to hear what Mr. Kerwether has to say. If he does not wish to speak, he will be remanded, and he will go to trial.”

Rivlin sat back down, muttering something too low for the others to hear.

“I’m waiting for your reply, Mr. Kerwether,” Warberg said.

“The children were not kidnapped, your honor,” Kerwether stated. “They were taken into protective custody for their own good. They were in a highly vulnerable position. Mrs. Sandar came voluntarily. She wasn’t kidnapped. It was a matter of national security.”

“Mr. Kerwether,” Warberg said, visibly controlling herself. “I saw a video of the children being taken. It was forcible. They were drugged and removed while unconscious. Clearly they were taken against their will. That’s kidnapping! Their caretaker, Ms. Mitchell, who is here with us today, will testify she was physically attacked. I also saw the hospital security tape of Mrs. Sandar being escorted from her place of employment. As the video shows, she is obviously quite capable of taking care of herself, so she wasn’t physically forced, but she was told that if she didn’t go with your agents, she wouldn’t see her children. I regard that as coercion.”

“I can’t go into details because of national security,” Kerwether said, beginning to sweat. “Mrs. Sandar and the kids

were taken in order to protect them. It's like witness protection."

"So Mrs. Sandar and her children are together in witness protection?" the judge asked, skeptically. "What exactly are they being protected from? Why would a nurse even need witness protection? Did she witness a crime?"

"Well, ah, no, your honor," Kerwether said. "It's not precisely witness protection. It's similar to witness protection."

"Again I ask you, what are they being protected from?"

"I can't go into details. It's a national security issue."

"Give me the broad outline. What in general are they being protected from?"

"Well, uh, from Islamic terrorists."

"Why should Islamic terrorists care about a nurse and her children?" the judge asked. She leaned forward in her chair, pointed her gavel at him, and said, "I'm warning you, Mr. Kerwether, my patience is not unlimited."

"Well, um, ah, they're Jewish for one thing."

"There are probably hundreds of Jewish nurses," Warberg pointed out. She raised her voice saying, "This is your last warning before a contempt citation is issued. Why would this particular nurse be of interest to Islamic terrorists?"

"Mrs. Sandar and her husband both worked for me as federal agents," Kerwether admitted. "They carried out dangerous clandestine assignments, mostly against Islamic jihadists. Dr. Sandar didn't return from his last mission. We were

afraid he might have been captured and forced to give away confidential information. We thought Mrs. Sandar and the children needed protection. We also thought Mrs. Sandar might become a double agent in order to protect her husband."

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" Warberg asked sarcastically. "You didn't give away anything the other side wouldn't know anyway, should the scenario you described occur. In witness protection families are kept together. Are the children with their mother?"

"Well, uh, no, your honor."

"Why not?" the judge asked. "Mrs. Sandar was told if she accompanied your agents she'd be taken to see her children. Obviously they lied to her. At your orders I presume."

"It was thought Mrs. Sandar would be easier to control this way," Kerwether mumbled. He knew he couldn't tell the judge about Olivia's ability, nor could he tell her about the plan to breed more were-leopards malleable to his wishes.

"Easier to control!" the judge exploded, half rising from her seat and slamming her palm down on her desk. "She's *your* agent! Why do you have to control her?"

Before Kerwether could respond, Warberg sat back down, picked up her gavel, banged it down, hard, once, pointed it at Kerwether, and ordered, "You will produce Mrs. Sandar and her children in these chambers by 9:00 AM tomorrow morning. No excuses."

"But it's a national security issue, your honor," Kerwether said, unbuttoning the

top button of his shirt with his left hand. “Mrs. Sandar knows things that would be dangerous to other agents should the terrorists discover them. I can have the President verify this if you wish.”

“Bullshit!” the judge yelled, startling everyone by her language. “I find this national security excuse to avoid following the law overused, and in this case very thin. The President can call about Mrs. Sandar, and we’ll see. The children, however, know of no state secrets they could turn over to your terrorists. Produce them by tomorrow, or plan to face a contempt charge, not to mention going on trial for kidnapping.”

“They would be in danger!” Kerwether protested. “If the terrorists get them, they could be used as leverage to coerce Mrs. Sandar into giving away vital information. Besides, they have no guardian.”

The judge indicated the elderly couple Kerwether noticed when he first came into the room. “These people are the maternal grandparents of the children.” She pointed to the Black man. “Mr. Starkey is their attorney. They have sued for temporary custody until the issue with their daughter and son-in-law is resolved, and I intend to give it to them. FBI agents will be on hand to protect the children until they can be taken to a safe place with people they know. Are you going to comply, Mr. Kerwether?”

“Yes, your honor,” Kerwether said, giving up.

Later that day the judge was in her chambers. Two burly men entered. They had curly wires running from their ears to

inside their shirt collars.

“Who do you think you are!” the judge demanded, rising from her chair. “What right do you have barging into my chambers?”

The men ignored the seething judge. One of them said something softly into his collar. Before the judge could erupt, the President of the United States walked in accompanied by two more burly men. Warberg’s mouth fell open. The President waived her back to her chair.

“May I be seated?” the President politely asked, indicating a chair in front of Warberg’s desk.

“Pease do,” she said, somewhat nonplussed.

“I wanted to have a word with you in private,” the President said, taking a seat and bringing his left leg across his right thigh. When he saw Warberg’s eyes flicker to the four burly men, he smiled and added, “Except for the Secret Service, of course. About the only time I’m truly alone with only one other person is when I’m in bed with my wife.”

“What can I do for you, Mr. President?” Warberg asked, smiling.

“Let me start off by saying I fully approve of the way you’ve handled the situation with James Kerwether and Mrs. Sandar and her children.”

“Thank you. But? I assume there’s a but.”

“I’ll be blunt,” he said, all vestiges of a smile leaving his face. “The United States is at war. It may be an undeclared war, but it’s still a war. Our enemy is implacable,

vicious, treacherous, and totally without scruple. There is no deed too despicable for them to commit if they feel it will in any way further their cause.”

“Their cause?” Warberg said, frowning. “What’s their cause?”

“Apparently it’s to bring the entire world under their demented version of *Sharia* law. I doubt they’ll succeed, but if they do one consequence would be that women would become little more than chattel. In effect, they want to return to the feudalism of the middle ages, with, of course, their leaders as the lords and clerics, and everyone else the serfs.”

“That’s a pretty harsh judgment of Muslims.”

“I’m not talking about Muslims in general. I’m talking about Islamic terrorists. The ones who target civilians in the World Trade Center, school buses in Israel, tube stations in London, cartoonists in France, and even other Muslims. There are numerous examples of their inhumane actions.”

“What does this have to do with James Kerwether?”

“We have to think about what weapons we have available to fight this war,” the President said. “We *can’t* respond in kind. Our own moral code prohibits it, and frankly they, their leaders I mean, wouldn’t care if we did. They care little or nothing for their own people. They’ve proved that time and again. They use their followers for shields and cannon fodder. One approach, which has been more successful than the general public realizes, is to use our intelligence to learn of possible targets and foil

the attempts before they can do much, if any, damage. But you can’t win a war by being totally defensive.”

“So I assume the offense is where Mr. Kerwether comes in?”

“Exactly,” the President said, approvingly, a brief smile appearing. “The only offensive approach that seems to work is targeting their leaders. They’re perfectly willing to have us kill millions of their adherents, but they very much dislike being targets themselves. We can, to some extent, get at their leaders through hellfire missiles fired from drones. We do, by the way, try to limit collateral damage, which is why we need other modes of attack. We can send in teams of special forces such as the navy SEAL team that got Osama bin Laden. A third approach is to use a small group of agents from, well, we call it the Special Section, with very, ah, unique skills. I’m sorry but I can’t be specific about what those skills are.”

“I saw the video of Mrs. Sandar manhandling two federal agents considerably larger than she is,” Warberg said, grinning at the memory. “She did this while in a state of advanced pregnancy, so I can only begin to imagine what comprises her full skill set.”

The President nodded. “Both Dr. and Mrs. Sandar are members of the Special Section. No operation is ever perfect, and Dr. Sandar did not, unfortunately, return from his last mission. We don’t know if he was killed, captured, or if he escaped, but he didn’t report back. If he was captured alive, we don’t know what he would reveal

to the enemy, or whether or not he could be turned into a double agent. The enemy also has people with special abilities, including interrogation skills. The Special Section is run by my chief-of-staff, with Kerwether as its head of operations. The Vice-President oversees the Special Section, and he ordered Mrs. Sandar to be taken into protective custody and isolated until it could be determined what happened to her husband. The purpose was to keep the enemy from getting to her and to protect both her and her unborn child.”

“Separated from her children?” the judge asked, sharply.

“That was a mistake,” the President admitted. “I have some responsibility. I didn’t issue the order, but I approved it. It never occurred to me the children would be separated from their mother, but Kerwether evidently took the isolation order literally.”

“So, bottom line, you want me to lay off Kerwether.”

“I can’t order you to do so, but yes, that’s what I’d like,” the President said. He folded his hands and paused briefly. “Kerwether didn’t think through the consequences, and he made a stupid decision, but it wasn’t made in malice. We have a serious damage control situation. A trial could be devastating to our efforts to fight the terrorists. Mrs. Sandar is a very valuable asset in her own right, but at this moment she is in no mood to cooperate with us. She regards the treatment she’s received as an indication we no longer value her. While that’s not true, I can see her point of

view. But let me get back to my point. One of our primary weapons in the war on terror has been compromised. I don’t know if we’ll ever be able to retrieve it. Mr. Kerwether was partly responsible, but, as I said before, forcing him to stand trial is likely to reveal too much to the enemy, and probably hinder any chance to rehabilitate the Special Section. Therefore, I’m asking you to please drop the charges against him.”

“Put in that light, and given it’s a personal request from you, I guess I will.”

“Thank you,” the president said, with a much-relieved expression on his face. As he got up from his chair, he added, “I knew when I appointed you to this position I made a wise decision.

Howard Bermcrinson’s mouth fell open as he entered his study and saw Bobby Sandar and an attractive, dark-haired woman. “I’ve been waiting, hoping, for you to contact me,” a grinning Bermcrinson said. He shook hands with Bobby and then hugged him tightly. “I want to help you if I can.”

“He’s telling the truth about helping us,” the woman said, causing Bermcrinson to raise his eyebrows and stare at her quizzically.

“Howard Bermcrinson meet Rivka Blumberg,” Bobby said. “Rivka is sort of a human lie detector, among her other talents.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Blumberg said, shaking hands with her.

Bermcrinson tilted his head to the side

and regarded her. "You have an almost imperceptible accent and a Jewish name. Mossad?"

"Your reasoning powers are impressive, Howard," Blumberg said.

"Don't make too much of it," Bermcrinson said with a small wave of his hand. "There's also the fact that Bobby made it back from North Africa without us knowing it. He couldn't do that without a significant amount of help, and the most likely source of that help would be Israel."

"Let's get down to business," Bobby said. "I don't know how much time we have. It was an ordeal getting my in-laws and kids to a safe location. The terrorists almost got them. It's a given they'll make a try for Liv. Their source in the Special Section is better than I thought."

Bermcrinson's head jerked up at Bobby's last sentence. "You think we've been infiltrated?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

"There's no doubt," Bobby said. He briefly described what happened in Libya. "They had to know when and where we were planning our operation. They even had silver bullets. My leopard was wounded. They couldn't know all that without inside information."

"Crap!" Bermcrinson said, a disgusted look on his face. "I have to agree there's very likely a mole in the section, as much as it pains me to say it. Can I trust anybody?"

"Their ability to act so quickly is frightening," Bobby agreed. "Howard, do you know where Olivia is?"

"Yeah, I do. It won't be easy getting to

her. She under constant surveillance. After losing your kids Kerwether decided to increase security on Olivia even more."

"Could Kerwether be the one working for the other side?"

"No way. He's definitely a complete jerk, but he's a patriot. That's why he's so willing to trample on the constitution to 'protect' the country."

Blumberg gave a signal indicating that Bermcrinson was telling the truth. Bobby was dubious. Bermcrinson believed Kerwether wasn't the mole, but that didn't make it true. "Getting back to Liv," he said. "Since you know where she's being held, let Rivka and me in on it."

"The location is an estate in Virginia, maybe thirty or forty miles from DC," Bermcrinson said. He began to draw a crude layout of the interior, one floor at a time. "It's fairly deep in the woods. The house is surrounded by a totally cleared area, maybe two hundred yards in radius. Not a tree, not even a bush in the entire area, just well-cropped grass. There are search lights and video cameras mounted on the house. Dogs patrol the area. The house is three stories, and the first two floors and the basement have barred windows. Guards constantly monitor the exterior camera feeds from a room on the second floor. Olivia is being kept in the basement in a steel encased suite of rooms. There's an anteroom where four guards sit watching her on video surveillance equipment. At least one of whom is a full-time agent. The door to Olivia's cell and the door to the anteroom can't both be open at

the same time. It's not possible to open the anteroom door from the inside."

"What's the total complement?" Bobby asked.

"I think twelve," Bermcrinson said, scratching his head. "Four in the anteroom, two in the monitoring room, and six to swap off. Probably four are agents, and the rest are hired security guards.

Reinforcements are on standby ten to fifteen minutes away."

"Getting to her will be difficult," Blumberg observed.

"It's worse than you think," Bermcrinson said. "Kerwether wouldn't come right out and say so, but based on the way he hedged, I think the chief-of-staff has issued the order to take you out, Bobby. He's not willing to risk the other side getting a were-leopard if you've been turned. If he whacks you, he knows he has to take out Olivia. They're hot to get their hands on the baby. That's what's holding them back from killing her immediately."

"That's the bad news. Is there any good news?"

"One little bit," Bermcrinson said. He pointed to one of his drawings. "Cars approaching go to a door on this side of the house and are met by a security team. As the car draws near, there's a dead spot the external cameras don't see. These two lines indicate its approximate length. I noticed it the first time I visited the monitoring room. The last time I was there it wasn't corrected. Of course it might be fixed now."

"How far away from the house is the

dead spot?" Bobby asked.

"Maybe ten feet. The third floor is about twenty feet off the ground and is set back a little from the first two floors. There's a three foot or thereabouts slanted roof from the base of the third-floor walls, covering part of the second floor."

"Do you take your own car when you visit, Howard?"

"Yeah, I do."

"What make?"

"Toyota Highlander."

"It's roof would be around six feet high," Bobby said closing his eyes as he did the math in his head. "So the straight line distance from the top of your car to the slanted roof over the second floor is about eighteen feet, roughly. A leopard could jump that easily."

"A leopard might be noticed on the roof of my car, especially by the dogs."

"Is it possible to slow down, or stop briefly in the dead spot without raising suspicion?"

"I go slowly when I approach the house. Ten miles per hour. It takes about one or two seconds to go through the dead spot. I could slow down to five miles per hour, and extend the time to about three or four seconds, but stopping would be out."

"I think we can work something out," Bobby said. "We go tomorrow night."

"There is the house where the she-devil is being kept, Hazim," Kardal Sabbag said. Hazim Koury was the leader of the jihadists assigned to kidnap Olivia. "I see the dogs

patrolling the grounds, which are well lit. Surely the dogs will notice us.”

“Just shoot the fornicating dogs,” Abdul-Khaliq said. “Do not worry about sneaking in. It will take less than a minute to cross to the front door of the house, even pushing the armored plating ahead of you. Kareem will blow open the door with his grenade launcher. I will lead the charge into the house. Their bullets cannot hurt me. Follow me in, but do not shoot all the guards. I will be very hungry and prefer to feed off the living. The she-devil is in the basement. Go down and get her.”

Koury shuddered as he looked at the vampire. He didn't believe this thing could be a faithful servant of Allah. The creature had eaten the two women Mubassir Hakimi sent along, and there was nobody to do the menial tasks. He was only supposed to take enough of their blood to keep him from attacking the fighting men, not kill them, but there'd been no holding him back. Fortunately the vampire had not yet taken any of the men, but Koury didn't like the way the abomination was staring at their necks. Nevertheless, the vampire had stated the attack plan exactly as Mubassir ordered it, and would be the least vulnerable of the twenty man team.

“Hazim, I hear an approaching vehicle!” Kareem Qureshi said excitedly.

“That is good,” Koury said, raking the slide on his weapon. “It will distract the infidel defenders.”

Howard Bermcrinson drove slowly along the narrow winding path. Bobby's

leopard and Blumberg were crouched in the backseat, with the rear windows open. Coffee from two cans had been scattered around the interior of the car to throw off the scent of the leopard, but the dogs seemed to sense something amiss anyway. Three of them trotted beside Bermcrinson's car. Suddenly their ears perked up, and they looked toward the far side of the grounds. They raced away in that direction.

“That's weird,” Blumberg said in a low voice. “Where are the dogs going?”

“Who cares,” Bermcrinson said. “If a rabbit or whatever is distracting them, that's one less thing we have to worry about.”

Bermcrinson slowed as the car entered the dead spot. Blumberg tapped the leopard on the rear. Giving a low growl, he scampered out of the window and onto the roof of the car. Simultaneously Blumberg opened the door and jumped out. The leopard leaped for the third-floor overhang, grabbing on with his claws. Immediately upon landing, he dropped the rope he held in his jaws, clamped a paw on it to keep it from falling off the slanted roof, and *changed*. Bobby picked up the rope and threw a weighted end to Blumberg. She quickly buckled the rope to her harness, and Bobby hauled her up to the third floor.

Bobby and Blumberg crawled to a window. Blumberg took out a glass cutter from the equipment bag attached to her harness and cut a circle in the window glass. She tapped the center of the circle, and the glass fell in with a little tinkle. Bobby

reached inside the window and unlatched it. It groaned loudly as he raised the lower frame, but they could detect no reaction from anybody inside the house. After they entered, Blumberg took out two mini-Uzis from her equipment bag and started to hand one to Bobby.

“Not for me,” he said softly. “As soon as we get the lay of the land, I plan to *change*.”

“Okay, your call. Give me a second.”

Blumberg closed her eyes and concentrated. After a few seconds, she said, “There’s nobody on the third floor except us. There are two people on the second, six on the first, and six more in the basement. One of them is difficult to read. Probably your wife. Another is Howard.”

They quietly descended to the second floor. The men Blumberg sensed were in the monitoring room intently watching the video feed and paying no attention to the door behind them.

“Jesus Christ almighty!” one of them exclaimed. “We’re under attack! It looks like they have a freaking army. They’ve shot the dogs and are approaching the house. Did you call for backup?”

“I did, but they can’t get here for at least ten minutes,” the other man responded. “I think we can hold them off that long. They won’t get past the steel door easily.”

Blumberg handed Bobby a dart gun and took one for herself. They shot the two men from about five feet away. The men staggered to their feet and reached for their weapons, but Bobby was on them before

they could draw. They tried to yell, but their efforts were hindered by the anesthetic from the darts. Within fifteen seconds they were asleep and would remain so for hours.

Blumberg, who’d been looking at the monitors, said in an urgent tone, “Bobby! Look! This is not good.”

The monitors showed about six or seven men lying motionless on the grass, but approximately a dozen more had advanced almost to the house, being protected by some type of armored plating. The gunfire from the house had slackened off, indicating either some of the defenders were dead, or their ammunition was low. But what had really drawn Blumberg’s attention was the attacker who’d just stood up from one of his fallen comrades. His face was covered with blood. He had long teeth protruding from his upper jaw.

“Holy Mary mother of God!” Bobby exclaimed. “Those dickheads have a vampire with them. I won’t be able to kill it without Liv’s help if we want to get the hell out of here before the cavalry arrives, and I doubt we can get away unless we eliminate it.”

The two headed for the basement. Blumberg reloaded the dart guns while they were descending. Because of the frontal attack by the terrorists, all the people on the first floor were at windows firing their guns, and didn’t notice as Bobby and Blumberg slipped by.

Reaching the basement, they crawled to the entrance of the anteroom. Bobby abruptly yanked open the door, with the

two of them staying as low as they could get.

The four guards inside the anteroom had been alerted to the attack on the house and started shooting as soon as the door opened, but their shots went high. Bobby and Blumberg each shot a guard with an anesthetic dart. Bobby dove fully inside the room, *changing* as he did so. A shot from one of the standing guards hit him in the chest, but since it wasn't silver it didn't penetrate. It did, however, send him sprawling, which saved his life. A shot from the other guard, a federal agent, grazed his side and left a burning sensation. That bullet had been silver plated. The agent took careful aim with his next intended shot, when his head disappeared in a hail of bullets from Blumberg's mini-Uzi. Meanwhile, the enraged leopard leapt at the remaining guard, who fired wildly, being too aghast to take careful aim. The leopard made short work of him.

Blumberg jumped fully outside the anteroom and allowed the door to clang shut. The leopard *changed*. Bobby lay on the floor gasping for breath, blood dripping from a long scratch on his side. After about twenty seconds, he arose and opened the door to Olivia's cell. She leaped into his arms. Bermcrinson, who'd entered the cell just before Bobby's and Blumberg's arrival, followed her out.

"Oh my God!" Olivia exclaimed, as she noticed the gash in Bobby's side. "You're hurt! I've got to get something to bind the wound."

"I'm fine," Bobby said, grasping her

hand and leading her toward the outer door of the anteroom. "We don't have much time. This place is under attack from someone, and they have a vampire with them. I've got the kids stashed away safely."

As soon as the door to the cell shut securely, Blumberg opened the door to the anteroom, and shouted, "C'mon, we have to go! Now! I heard an explosion. I think the terrorists and their vampire pet are in the house. Grab a gun."

Koury was livid. Seven of his men were already down, and they had yet to breach the door to the house. Abdul-Khaliq slowed them down by stopping twice to feed on fallen wounded men. When Koury admonished him for killing their own men, he'd said, "Quiet fool! The more I drink, the stronger I become. These men were going to die anyway. All I did was strengthen Allah's weapon and speed up the journey to paradise for these martyrs."

Koury doubted Abdul-Khaliq had any motivation other than drinking as much blood as he could get, but saying so would slow them down even more. At last they got close enough to the front door to be within the range of the grenade launcher. Kareem Qureshi fired at the front door. It took three tries to breach it, and in that time two more of the terrorists went down.

Abdul-Khaliq led the way into the house as he said he was going to do, but instead of killing off the remainder of the defenders, he just grabbed one and started feeding off him. That left Koury and his remaining men in a firefight with the rem-

nant of the defenders. Four more of the faithful went down, leaving Koury with only five other men plus a possibly useless vampire. He hoped he had enough to handle the she-leopard.

“According to our source there should be four more infidels in the anteroom,” Koury said. “Plus our target. Abdul-Khaliq you must go into the room first. Kill all of them before you start feeding so no more children of Islam die in this hellish place. Is that understood?”

Abdul-Khaliq sneered but didn’t refuse to carry out his order. Koury wondered how many more of his diminishing band would die because the vampire was not controllable.

“Kardal, you take the dart with the silver tip and shoot the she-devil,” Koury continued. “Do not come into the anteroom until all the guards have been subdued. She might appear as a human or as a leopard. It will displease Mubassir greatly if we kill her before he gets her child, so all of you take care. Kareem Qureshi, you lead the charge into the anteroom right behind Abdul-Khaliq. Ghalib, you stay outside the anteroom until we have made the capture. We need someone to open the door from the outside. Does everyone understand their assignment?”

“Who are you?” Olivia asked Blumberg, as they left the restraining area.

“Liv, this is Rivka,” Bobby said. “We can get to full introductions later, assuming we survive. Terrorists are trying to capture you, and the vampire is going to make it

tough to get away.”

“You guys got here just in time,” Olivia said. “Should I *change*?”

“No, I’ll *change*,” Bobby said. He took a wooden chair and started to break off pieces to use for stakes. “More federal agents are on the way. We’ve got to get out of here before they arrive. The order has come down to kill me and kill you right after you deliver. Normally two leopards could take care of the Arabs, but not when they have a vampire. One of us will have to immobilize him and the other drive a stake through his heart. In your condition you might not be quick enough to incapacitate him.”

“Could Howard or I drive the stake?” Blumberg asked. “Bobby, you’ve already made multiple *changes*. Will you have the strength left to subdue the vampire?”

“It has to be me who *changes*,” Bobby said. “He might be able to run away from Olivia. A vampire’s outer dermis is incredibly tough. Neither of you could penetrate it. Olivia is just about as strong as I am, so she can wield the stake effectively. Given the fact I’ve already *changed* several times, it’ll be rough, but this guy hasn’t been a vampire very long, so it won’t be as bad as some others I’ve tangled with.”

“What do you want us to do?” Bermcrinson asked.

“Engage the other Arabs while Liv and I try to kill the vampire. As soon as we manage that, Liv will *change* and we’ll help with your task. Then we’ll haul ass out of here.”

Abdul-Khaliq led the six other terrorists down the stairs toward the cell. The steps were narrow, and the Arabs could only follow the vampire two at a time. Hazim Koury and Kardal Sabbag brought up the rear. The terrorists were not expecting problems before they reached the ante-room door, so it came as a complete surprise when a large black animal leaped out of the shadows and clamped his jaws around Abdul-Khaliq throat.

The vampire thrashed and pounded the beast with his arms but couldn't dislodge it. The two rolled down the stairs to the bottom, clasped together. The vampire continued striking the creature, while the latter reciprocated by raking the vampire with razor sharp claws.

The remaining terrorists paused momentarily, before increasing their pace down the stairs. Before they reached the bottom, a hail of gunfire slammed into them, killing four of the attackers, and sending Koury and Sabbag retreating up the steps.

Sabbag peered around the corner. Their target was racing toward the battling pair. He took aim with the dart gun and fired, hitting her in her right thigh. But just after he fired, a bullet from Bermcrinson's gun hit him in the forehead, killing him instantly.

As Olivia reached the struggling leopard and vampire, she felt the sting of the dart hitting her. Within moments it seemed as if the world was beginning to fade away. With all her remaining strength, she brought the stake down into the vam-

pire's chest, penetrating the heart. There was an explosion of dust and a sickening stench. Then she passed out.

The leopard snarled and spat out the dust in his mouth. He saw Olivia lying there, and let out a roar of anger, but there was nobody toward whom he could direct his rage. Instead he *changed*. Bobby, breathing heavily, went to check on his wife. Her pulse seemed strong. He noted the dart in her thigh, pulled it out, and threw it away. Olivia would be okay. He just hoped the drug didn't harm the baby.

"One of them got away." Blumberg called out.

"To hell with him," Bobby said, wheezing heavily. He'd made too many *changes* and his body ached from the hammering he'd taken. Nevertheless, he was able to tenderly pick up Olivia, wincing in pain.

"We've got to boogie right now." Bobby said. "One remaining terrorist can't do much harm." He took a step toward the stairs, stumbled, regained his balance, grunted with the discomfort, but kept going.

"I'll stay here," Bermcrinson said, as he handed his car keys to Blumberg. "The men in the relieving force know me, and I think in the confusion I'll be able to delay them. It should give you a better chance to get away. Remember there's a GPS fix on the car, so ditch it as soon as you can." ❖

“DESANCTIFIED”

by CHARLES A. METZNER

Ed. Note: Welcome to Part One of Metzner’s epic journey into the great wrestling match with belief.

The key of B flat whistled from the electrocardiogram, filling the ER. The attending surgeon first looked at the nurse holding defibrillator paddles, up at the blinding fluorescence, and then, back down at her patient in horror. “Dio.” It was her fifth discharge at 360 joules, eight minutes past flatline. She’d already used the sub-dermal of adrenaline.

The zucchetto was still on his head. The miter and his vestments were being held by his papal staff not a dozen meters past broad double doors.

“Tempo?” the doctor asked numbly as her sweat squeezed through goose flesh. The nurse responded, “Sei dodici.” The surgeon made no reply.

#

“Time?” the Vatican’s bishop heard as he felt the tremble of Bach all about him in B minor. Sanctus.

He saw a surgical mask hide Its face and said bewildered, “I don’t know.”

“We weren’t asking you,” It smirked. “Nurse?”

“06:13 pm, Sunday. Samhain, 2049. Your year,” responded the masked nurse.

Jacques-Etienne De Linville tried to get up, but the nurse’s grip was stronger.

“No. Don’t rise yet,” It said as the nurse barred him. “You’ve had a nasty... ‘accident’, shall We say? Everyone’s head starts off swimmy and then they faint.”

“...But I feel fine.” Which wasn’t really true. He felt his heart beat but to an alien arrhythmia.

“Not thanks to Us, you don’t,” said the one above. “We didn’t save you,”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do We,” It said as It dropped a soiled sponge from a pair of tonsures onto the rolling tray. “But your arrival has aroused Our curiosity. And that hasn’t happened since...when, my humble slug?”

“Pope Francis, Embruer of the Cosmos,” Its nurse murmured, “only a few decades.”

“Didn’t the last one issue Us a written summons to the International Criminal Court?”

“Your Disgrace, with respect, that was the one prior,” the practitioner replied, “though, successfully.”

“Where am I?” the patient asked as he pulled the zucchetto from his balding pate. “Who are you?”

The masked one asked, “Not obvious, your eminence? To quote the American musician, philosopher, and all around treasure, Billie Eilish, ‘I’m the bad guy. Duh,’” snapping off green nitrile gloves. They had six fingers.

The holy man looked about him, but, besides a tray of surgical tools and beeping medical equipment with digital read-outs, he could only see surgical drapery. It motioned to the nurse who then pulled the drapes away. The pope could see a white room. Columns rose nosebleed high into wide incongruent corners. By each corner a luminous black orb speaker hovered over a magnetic mahogany console, slowly rotating between two lit black candles. A hearth was inset to the walls left and right, each with engraved arabesques around their borders. He saw no logs or kindling, yet both fireplaces were ablaze. Before him was a colossal state of the art entertainment system, all lit up like a bowels of NASA. His host was wearing some high-tech bracelet. “I...” the ordained made effort to strain his porous memory. His environs had the scent of familiarity, but it was shifty. “...No.”

It sighed and pulled off the surgical mask. The one standing above Jacques looked, at first, unremarkable. Then he realized that, too, was a mask. “I...I expected —”

“ - What...?” It asked self-consciously.

His heart accelerated. He was suddenly afraid to offend It. “...I don’t know.”

It smiled curtly. “Yes you do.”

“...Wailing. Flesh on hooks. Profusely

gaping wounds. Boiling blood. Unbearable odor. The damned.”

“Really,” It said, indeed offended. “Mark Zuckerberg can have his upgrades every business quarter, yet We’re not entitled to Ours? We surely are in Hell.” It grimaced balefully and circled a long finger in the air. The nurse responded, gently pulling up Pope Clement XV into a sitting position.

The pope felt pins and needles in his legs. How long had his body been dead before he’d noticed? The dark angel twisted Its fingers in a strange gesture, and the ambient light dimmed until momentary gloom. When the candles flickered back Clement saw the masked one turned away to pull on Its face more tautly, as if straightening a tie. It was a handsome face but clearly not Its.

Pope Clement got to his feet, and the nurse who suddenly appeared much taller (and bat-winged), steadied him. He asked, “Where are they?”

“The damned? Below. This is Our antechamber. We’re trying to make more room down there.”

“For what?”

“For whom,” It smiled levelly. “More damned, of course. Nine Circles doesn’t cut it at this age. Sub-sections had to be developed. On average, seventy-three each. You need to be an urban planner to manage them. Even a negative level is presently being panel tested.” It snapped Its polydactyl fingers and the music stopped. A brief echo subsumed. Jacques quickly did the math in his head and inwardly nodded.

It cleared Its throat and lifted Its arms to stretch, yawning, "Pardon this, Padre." Once more, the dark one formed an unfamiliar gesticulation with Its hand and a figure emerged from the floor, almost like a small bubbling volcano, molten and then cooling into a throne. It appeared to be composed from dozens of damned souls, petrified, yet quivering in silent screams. There were other objects made manifest. Some were ornamental, others he struggled to identify.

The pope unfroze his stare from this abomination and looked upon his cauled host. "Some things stay the same, I see." He knew he was a mouse staring at a cobra, rearing back like a receding sea tide.

"Just as some things change. Forgive Us Our creature comforts. Despite the times, you sat on one of these yourself, no?" It genuflected to Its own throne in a pentacle of motions.

Jacques didn't answer. This world around him felt mirage-like and induced vertigo. He trembled.

"The times are harder now. Pray with Us, Father."

"You pray," the pontiff marveled. It was meant as a question, but it left his larynx as a statement.

"Until the universe turns," It whispered severely. "Care to lead?"

"It's your realm."

"It's your boss." Satan knelt on a busy but tasteful prayer rug before Its throne, placing twelve fingers over Its borrowed eyes.

"Yours, too," dared Clement XV.

"Yes, well, to that We'll return."

Jacques knelt, but faced away from the devil's throne, and Lucifer began with a voice that vibrated the walls: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, in Heaven as it is in Hell. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive Us Our trespasses, as We forgive those who trespass against Us; and lead Us not into temptation, but deliver Us from evil —"

Jacques whispered back, "— You don't find these words anathema —?"

"— Shh," hissed Lucifer gently, and It continued from where de Linville interrupted, "...We welcome the yet uncanonized Pope Clement XV into the depths which are eclipsed by Your love. We bless him as You would, a guest before this throne, so that his soul may continue to act as a beacon of light in the blackest domain, whatever his trespasses. Amen."

It arose from Its kneel, appearing to grow taller and broader. Then It pulled off the stolen face and assumed Its embodiment as the angel of light, sans wings but now bearing a crown halo. Rather than a ring of luminescence it was an orbiting loop of umbilical cord bleeding onto Its surgical gown. Its true halo was Its aura of brilliance. It was as if It and Jacques were encased in a giant globe of light. It gently ripped off the gown to reveal an impeccable morning coat surrounding an even more immaculate suit. The blood drizzled like precipitating drops off the ceiling of a shower stall, vaporizing into puffs of maroon steam as they fell upon Its

vestment. “The skin was to keep from alarming you, Father. We hope Our quotidian form causes no undue distress. And, no, the incantations aren’t anathema here. That’s pedestrian myth.”

Though It looked so much more intimidating he said, “I like you better this way, Morningstar. I dislike masks.” The pontiff made conscious effort not to make eye contact with It, but he could see that Its face was blindingly beautiful. And somehow the opposite.

It shrugged, “As do We. But, it is Halloween. This face was loaned to me by Pope John VII’s personal physician. He procured stockyard cadavers for the pontiff. VII was a prolific pastoral necrophiliac. Striking one though, eh?”

“I still prefer to see whom it is I speak. I don’t understand any of this. Why am I not on a rack?”

Satan grinned mildly. “Oh, We have all eternity to concern ourselves with that. We’ve ushered every incarnation of the papacy over the centuries and feel it Our duty give their tour the personal touch. Nimiel?”

The nurse who’d acted as yeoman approached, now bereft of its scrubs and wearing a pinstripe suit. Though bipedal, its face was arachnoid.

“Be a dear and text the guard. His Eminence and I will be making the rounds. Have them meet us on the Seventh Circle.” An elevator door appeared from an alcove of which Jacques hadn’t hitherto taken notice. The red arrow pointed down. “But, before we jaunt, stand by. Father? First, We

must ask. Have you any surprises for Us? A portfolio shrunken onto a microchip? Perhaps implanted under a false molar? We were thorough with your autopsy, but even We are fallible.”

“...I’m sure I don’t understand,” said the pope as Nimiel tapped at its iPhone screen.

“Don’t play coy. Two of your predecessors ago the pontiff pulled a sly trick. He actually served me a subpoena to the Hague. Like I was a commoner. I attended, of course. No mean feat pulling a fast one on the Prince of Darkness, but you’ll find I’m never so gullible the second time around. Certain you don’t have microfiche sewn into your scalp or something? We do have a waiting room. Purgatory. We could stow you out there amongst the rest of the philistines for long after the court date, you know. Less fun than LIE rush hour traffic. The latter is only three hours whereas neither/nor rushes anywhere.”

“I conceal no such legerdemain.”

Satan looked cunningly at Jacques face who could no longer avoid the view. And he knew fear. “I’ll trust my eyes,” the angel said, and Nimiel pushed the elevator button. The car opened right to left, like Hebrew writing.

“Newly installed?” Jacques asked with mirth as they all stepped in. It was to calm his racing heart.

“Yes,” replied Lucifer, Its voice betraying impatience. “But hardly the first and We should not even dignify – ...Please, forgive Us. We forget sometimes. You’re

not a novelty, Sovereign of Vatican City. Though We've tasked Ourselves with escorting your every last predecessor you're a blur amongst two hundred other papal figures who've fallen before this throne. We oft forget you're a segment to a longer chain. The rules of engagement must be made plain, as they were to the rest. Many paid homage. Many more cast facile obloquies; but each needed the etiquette lesson. You've seen or read Silence of the Lambs?"

"Yes. As well as its prequels and sequels. Harris was very - "

" - Good. I'm Hannibal Lecture, and the same proprieties apply. You get as much civility as you give. So mind the presumption of your inquiries. Do you really think you've enjoyed a single luxury We do not? Absorbed more education or entertainment? The simple are not all who fall hither. We may be those beneath you, Bishop, but We're not savages here."

XV stood dumb for a moment and then apologized for his tone. Before the elevator door closed he surveyed this antechamber with finer scrutiny and noticed deficits in neither convenience nor modernity. Indeed, there were appliances and appurtenances he could neither recognize nor fathom.

The elevator fell slowly, but the window suggested ineffable distances crossed. As it descended, all of them faced the reflective door. Their images were distorted. Jacques had questions but thought better of them. Finally, the car slowed more, and the pontiff felt the weight of g-force that was

too subtle to sense before. His guts bottomed out over his bladder, which he was surprised not to find empty. Again, there was vertigo, and nausea was present. By the Second Circle it squeaked to a stop, and the door retracted right to left. The pope saw soul after soul encased in form-fitting apparatus. This was a hive of souls in pentacular towers that rose out of eyeshot. These towers articulated like an Escher lithograph so that space was used efficiently. Dante described this plane as a place punishing lust, and the souls indeed appeared in torment, but there were no buffeting winds as the poet described. Each soul hyperventilated, shrieked in terror, or wept inconsolably, their mouths the only thing that seemed undressed. "No wind factor here," Jacques noted. Nor did he see whips, chains, or any other torture devices.

"No," Lucifer said, "the metaphor wore thin. Upon the advent of VR tech We began tailoring each soul's punishment to correspond with their sins. They all experience something different. Someone they'd wronged. Things they'd done or failed to do, played out for cycles in repetition and rewind at random, each with slight variations programmed by the demons to keep things fresh throughout the decades. An incessant chain of recurring nightmares. The suits are like custom-fit iron maidens. They don't simply produce visual, audio, and olfactory features. They can pierce, cut, bruise, break, burn, or freeze the flesh and bone. You could be in one of them right now; it's not like you'd know the difference. The same



apparatuses are used elsewhere. Ironically, the souls' attritions are more genuine in their ersatz hells. The next two planes down are outfitted similarly. Different programs, but the format's the same. A few R & D labs down here have been working on direct brain stimuli to replicate pain, hunger, hypothermia, etcetera. So there's that, I guess. Most souls volunteer to be lab rats just to escape what woe they're already in." It seemed to be looking for something or someone amongst the towers.

"...The power this technology draws must be titanic," said the pontiff in awe.

"You have no idea, but one of the damned – an engineer name of Liewkazewski – offered up something laudable to address much of that. For some dispensation which We granted, naturally."

"What? Geothermal power?"

"Perceptive, Linville. That makes up about half the grid, along with slaves pulling chains that tug cogs, gears, and so on, but his true genius was implementing an idea of my own. The sound of those afflicted is, itself, energy. Oscillation. There are receptors now in the walls that capture it, quartz elements which vibrate to the screams, hence piezoelectrically transducing it into power – making up more than the other half of the grid. Individually the wails produce very little, but there's a deafening cacophony blasting on each circle and sub-circle. The surplus is being stored and will be put to use for the future. Plans have already been blueprinted. It seems Asmodeax is elsewhere. Pity. I could have made the introduction."

De Linville saw an anesthetized drummer for Mötley Crüe being stuffed into a suit (these raiments looked outwardly to be patent leather) by a spiny demon. "Isn't that...?"

"Tommy Lee? Aye. Pamela Anderson and Twiggy also attend. Alas, we are not here to star-fuck."

The elevator door jiggled and then slipped in front of them. The car plummeted further down.

By the 7th Circle the door slowly retreated. It revealed a bog with a violet mist, trees poking out from the floor-sunken haze. There was a chill, yet where he expected to feel moisture it was absent. A bird of prey swooped past the elevator doors from west to east, all of which had a caliginous quality to the eye. It had a female human head the holy man could swear he'd recognized but couldn't place recall. Lucifer said, "Your grand predecessor keeps his grand predecessor company on this plane. Their souls were sequentially deposited hither."

"What happens here?"

Satan popped a Kool into Its mouth and struck a match off a tree. Again, It scrutinized against the mists in search of something or someone to no avail. "They are transformed into one of the trees you see. Over time, harpies roost in them, eat of their leaves, and break off their branches. Parasites infest the roots and suckle the harpy droppings. Of which there's quite a bit. Besides the First, this is the least unpleasant of planes. I have, in my times of caprice, flung souls to their

destinations at random. The demons eventually sort them out. I do it mostly to keep them honest and occupied, but truth be told, I handle only a minute percentage of the descenders. The angels who fell with my faction are my dukes, viscounts, marquis, earls, and barons. The responsibilities are relegated amongst them, though many will also misfile.

Procrastination, carelessness, or, again, whim. In time, the lesser devils reorder them, though transplanting a soul who's taken root hither is a calorie burning endeavor because the roots shoot deep. We're careful to return to this level first among the others because of the labor involved."

Four new demons appeared at the elevator doors. These appeared like riot police, though each was a faceless silhouette. Shields, armor, helmets, and batons. HPD was adumbrated on their uniforms. "Blasphemy? Pagan? Sacrilege? Qurse? Meet the latest fallen grand pontiff. Clement? A squad of Our Karma Police. Hopefully, Radiohead will forgive Our plagiarism. None of them are here yet. Blasphemy...?"

The silhouette turned toward its liege.

"Any idea where the Seventh's regent might be? Syndicus isn't usually one to wander."

It shook its head once to either side, saying nothing.

Satan sighed. The cops boarded the car without acknowledging or acknowledgement, and now there were seven. "Would you like to promenade the

Fifth Circle, Father? I go there sometimes to palaver." Cigarette smoke began to gather in the car.

The Otis door crept closed. De Linville had actually seen all he could stomach but worried refusal would be tantamount to rude. Nimiel drew a .44 Desert Eagle from the recesses of its cloak, pulled the slide back against its spring to momentarily inspect the chamber, and then let it snap forward along the barrel, advancing the first round. They continued down, again examining the reflective disfigurements on the elevator door. A stratus cloud of indistinct mileage passed beyond the window. Jacques said, "Why a garrison, Light Bringer? You have a security issue?"

"Every epoch and again. I personally fear little of insurrection, but the masses anticipate it. It's a show, of course. You, too, had your entourage. Whether or not you mobilized them did you actually worry about a mob? The farce is for the benefit of the damned. I've always been impervious to a coup. Even staged by my fellow fallen brethren."

The elevator slowed once more, and again Jacques' legs momentarily doubled in weight. "The Fifth," mused Lucifer. The door opened onto a beachhead. Beyond it, a Red Sea foaming magenta. "You mentioned 'boiling blood.' This ring and the one you last visited are the circles that have received the least gentrification. The scenery conjures nostalgia, does it not?"

As a coppery stench filled his sinuses the pope said, "I thought the lake and the forest were both on the same plane. At

least, according to Dante.”

“They were,” Lucifer blew out a smoke ring and sighed, “but Our census takers mandated We reorganize. The raw volume of sinners fluctuates as centuries pass, and We must evolve with congestion. ‘Pardon Our appearance,’ as it were. The Desert of Flaming Ash is still here. Someplace. We haven’t checked in on it in a while, but I don’t believe it’s undergone any renovation. Perhaps We’ll encounter it as We go.”

The pope looked beyond the dunes into this bubbling lake. It was vast, covering the horizon. All around the beach were land sharks. Only their dorsal fins were visible. They combed the beach in haphazard directions. The damned who dared climb out of the blistering blood-churn had to contend with them, and these fish appeared to swim through sand as effortlessly as hammerheads through water.

On either side of the sea, east and west, were high blue glaciers that, somehow, did not melt. Souls that sought to scale them got little purchase before they slipped and splashed with howls back into the scalding oubliette in harmony with others. Here, there was a chorus of wailing, and the sea’s smell was an affront to Jacques’ senses. Yet there was a sunset, and it was oddly beautiful. Giant gulls a distance off pulled the sloughing skin of souls who swam the tide. In that distance he thought he saw an island. He couldn’t be sure, but it appeared unstable. The pope moved to take off his sandals, but Lucifer cautioned, “Leave those on. The sand is too hot. As long as

you stay within reach of my aura the sharks will not maul you. You’ll acclimate to the scent in a while.” With a flick the devil pitched Its cigarette butt into a sand dune.

The HPD filed out first in standard escort formation, two at each side to defend right and left flanks. Nimiel headed the path, and Satan gestured the pontiff follow it, bringing up the rear. The angel of light rose an inch off the elevator floor and walked out onto the sand, though just slightly above it. A pink haze was all about as they neared the sea.

And they encountered Satan’s duke, Mammon, who stood by the shore wearing the most exquisite finery as he casually glanced about the horizon. He might have been handsome but for a vascular, bulbous nose.

“Ave.”

“Hail, brother. Who attends your circle? I expected Asmodeax here...”

“Oh, I asked Dispaxus if he might supervise it for a while. I needed air as fresh as I could find. I so rarely get out, and he was amenable...Sire.”

Lucifer’s eyebrows perched higher. “Might I introduce you to the latest papal arrival?”

Mammon stooped and kissed his ring. “Well met.”

“I...” the pope struggled to find the words and not to stare at his turnip-like proboscis. “...And you.”

Mammon looked prepared to engage the pontiff in conversation, but Lucifer asked, “So, I take it someone is covering for his circle? I saw no one.”

“Sorax Syndicus, I believe.”

“And who covers the Seventh if he’s minding Dispaxus?”

“Asmodeax, of course. From time to time he tires of sand getting caught twixt his buttocks, hence, I volunteered. We circulate every now and again to keep from getting bored.”

“Ah. You do realize these rotations would have best been cleared with me? Your brother wasn’t visible.”

Mammon shrugged, “...Possibly pissing into the River of Forgetfulness and fell in. He didn’t wish to bother you with what would be a needed, if fleeting, vacation. None of Us are wont to harry you with such trivial matters.”

Satan’s brow relaxed, “Well, enjoy your sightsee. Just don’t dawdle out here too long. Each of you are most aptly suited to your assigned regencies, after all,” Lucifer said pleasantly and Mammon bowed low.

They stepped away, and Jacques asked a bit quieter in confidence, “How deep is the lake?”

“We’re not sure. Very, but to say exactly? We can only estimate it with that,” It said, pointing to the quivering land mass. “Easily 25 to 30 leagues down.” They advanced upon the boiling surf and the angel asked, “Do you see it?”

“The island? Yes. Why does it move?”

Pagan wordlessly handed him a set of binoculars. Jacques looked through the eyepiece and beheld what appeared to be a slithering mass of arms, legs, and heads. Lucifer said, “Fascinating, isn’t it? We didn’t expect the phenomenon when it

first formed. Like El Niño or the anticyclonic storm that’s maelstromed for eons on Jupiter. This is the place for sinners who would do violence to others in their past lives. Murder, torture, rape, and so forth.”

It continued, “It coalesced shortly after We summoned the sea itself. Individually they’re called ‘larva.’ These damned are in such agony that they cannot think. Imagine it. Every second of your existence scalding without respite – watching as gulls fight over skin layers you’ve sloughed – the pink flesh beneath searing all the more vulnerably. Most find it intolerable after only ten seconds, and yonder larvae have been submerged for centuries. It drives them mad, so, in an effort to emancipate, they slither upon one another. One after the next, and so on, until there was the writhing islet you see thither.”

The pope brought the binoculars down, aghast. The large mass of wailing did seem to be coming from out there. Castrato screaming boomed and ripped more violently than the tide.

“Once they break free of the surface they frenzy to remain atop yon desperate orgy, fighting the others off. But before long each which emerges is overcome and sucked back down into the tangle, most often deposited into the deepest well of the sea. Then, like convection, they clamber back up in a never ending cycle. Except for one gossiped soul...”

“One avoided being yanked down?” Rome’s bishop marveled.

“As the scuttlebutt would have it the

war marshal Sun Tzu had been cycled top to bottom for millennia. One day he surfaced and that time with a plan. How he devised it submerged I could not say. Superior will, perhaps. He began to break the limbs of neighboring souls and shaped them into a makeshift raft. Once he had his craft he had the luxury of saving the souls he found martially or sexually palatable and refusing/purging those he didn't. He supposedly still sails the mists to this day with the skins of the damned, horribly mangled, and tortured without end. He's since been nicknamed Apocalypse Zhou in this ring. It's an interesting editorial of the wealthy who still walk on earth. They who won't share. But enough hearsay. Let's saunter."

The wails of woe were near deafening, but the closer Jacques edged in upon his host's aura the more the noise refracted into cawing gulls, beach breeze, and his own steps through the dunes. The angel traipsed behind him wistfully with Its many fingers behind Its back.

Nimiel stalked ahead, pistol drawn. The garrison moved between the sand dunes two by two. Some of the dunes began to take less amorphous forms, like termite citadels. The grand pontiff was uneasy and walked with more caution, ducking his head lower. Was a sniper afoot? "Lucifer," Jacques called behind him, "if they're putting on a show it's very convincing and making me a little nervous. Are you downplaying the hazard here...?"

"Well, like I said, this place can madden souls. You needn't fear; their

actions are just a precaution. I respect you have questions, but I have a few of my own. Feeling up to indulging them?" Lucifer asked as he produced a crack pipe and began freebasing cocaine.

"If I can," Linville whispered with building paranoia. He suddenly became very mindful of his footfalls. Each step seemed to be making more crunch for total stealth to allow.

"You ended your life, Jacques-Etienne. Leapt from the Vatican's highest bell tower. I'd like to know what motivated that plunge besides all the Bacardi in your system. Whither guilt precipitated such a swan dive? Confess. You were diddling ten-year-olds like so many others in your world-wide flock, weren't you?" Satan asked playfully.

Jacques saw, heard, and felt flashbacks. The clappers. The ramparts and balustrades. The statue of St. Peter. The teetering. The wind quickening as he fell yard by yard. The impact crushing his bones and unmooring his organs to flatten against a shattered skeleton. Then the EMTs. The paramedics. The shouting cardinal. The frantic deacons. The doctors feeding his IV more and more units of blood slower than he was hemorrhaging internally. The prayers for absolution. The flatlining EKG. The word "Chiaro!" being repeated. An electric charge whining. "Tempo?" echoing for billennia before awakening on the dark angel's gurney. "I never wanted it," the pope said at last. His shoulders felt heavy.

"We'd gathered," Lucifer whispered

back with some amusement. “You spoke in your brief segment of unconsciousness. You were just a deacon before a mission to Mexico made it necessary for its bishop to promote you to cardinal of your diocese.”

“And the election,” Jacques said stiffly. “I never expected the endorsement. I hadn’t occupied my role as Parisian bishop for even half a decade before I was suddenly in an enclave running with three dozen others in the pontificate. Elections for pope are not the same as their political counterparts. We don’t all faction and have ourselves nominated. Also, I never expected Pope Pius XIII to die so swiftly.”

“Poison, I understand. If it’s any consolation, he did not wind up here.”

“Do you know who did it?”

“We have Our suspicions. Obviously, not you. But Bishop Franz Efromme Bottocieli was ambitious. As were Bishops Savate Dominar Ferlinghetti and Georges Leonid Bartok, amongst a handful of others. We expect you were the result of many of these vying powers inadvertently canceling each other out. A papal cock-block. You wound up being popular only because least of the evils. Not unprecedented.” Satan tempted Clement with crack but the pontiff gestured refusal.

“Also not pined for,” defended Clement XV. “Parisian archbishop wasn’t something I sought, but the man occupying the office didn’t outlast his autoimmune deficiency. It was something of a scandal. I’m a pious man but not without temptations. I lusted. I raged. I defrauded. I never guessed the Holy See would opt me,

but again, I seemed less a threat than the others under time sensitive conditions. The yellow vest riots never abated from three decades prior. They only grew stronger one administration to the next. The See needed an immediate occupant. I’d heard tell there were plots to have me defrocked, but there were counterplots to support me only because the alternatives were always worse. My appointment was as much a surprise to me as anyone affiliated with the Catholic Church.” Again, he felt sluggish. The sand, he decided, was different than that on Earth.

“You remember Aristocles, Pontiff? Plato. Paraphrased, he’d said the ideal emperor was a reluctant one: a philosopher king with no appetite to rule, merely to enlighten. But it seems the stress had gotten the better of you. You fell as We did. The all-heavenly Father has little tolerance for quitters, Jacques-Etienne. Perchance, you might have considered that. You will now languish hither, like so many others. Most so redundantly deserve to be here. We rattled off a list of papacy who did to Pope Francis. We’ll spare you that now, but Our silly religion places power in mortal hands. Fingers that so often mishandle the responsibilities bestowed. Many more bring irredeemable sacrilege and madness to the office. Why is it the ones who don’t have such a short shelf life?” the shadowed angel asked as the priest walked upon a short strip of adobe. It tied off Its arm with a latex hose, began smacking the crook of it, and then injected Itself with a syringe of dark brown liquid.

Rome's bishop responded, "I answer that rhetorical question with a rhetorical answer: Because the reluctant ruler only finds his fears confirmed after coronation. That he's not sovereign. That he's enveloped in corruption, sin, and pederasty. The pressure to abet and turn a blind eye double and redouble every day under the miter. So engulfed had I become in my own goals to urge charity and sacrifice I rarely addressed tertiary items. I was only a figurehead. I was more powerful as a deacon truth be told, but I kept getting advanced."

"Why did you really end it, Jacques? Surely your disillusionment was not the catalyst. Was there a boneyard in your closet like all the others? Or did you merely find a polyp in your colon?"

"The latter, just like my father. I saw how he went. Shriveling. Disfigured. In

concentrating torment every hour of each day. It traumatized my family, and I swore I'd never go the same way. So, I chose to end it."

Lucifer paused, releasing the tourniquet, and letting Its high circulate. At last It replied, "...Then you, of all people, should appreciate Our efforts to reform canonical law."

A loud shot rang out from the lake. The haze was too thick to see a muzzle flash, and the projectile disappeared into a dune next to Rome's bishop only a few yards wide. He gasped. The Karma Police and Nimiel began blasting back into the lavender fog with their ordnance, but heard no corresponding gasp. The pope glanced back to see a slightly astonished Light Wielder as land sharks combed about the circle of his aura. Lucifer pondered, "However would a Zhou dynasty general



find the materials to construct a high-powered sniper rifle, I wonder?" Jacques then noticed at points only one set of footsteps in the sand. He asked Satan about this, and the angel pleasantly responded, "Oh, you know. During those moments you were carrying Us."

The pope found a titter escape him as a brief glow came to his eye.

#

"The Stygian river gurgles behind the horizon," said Lucifer. "It makes for a challenging boat ride, and few here know where its tributary meets the lake. Nimiel, please artifice one."

Nimiel walked out to the ebb of the lake and shot six bathing souls in the head. They didn't die, of course. Nothing died here, but they were stunned into submission with the subtraction of their brains. The Karma Police grinned simultaneously and began rending and dislocating bones in their joints, distending their ligaments until a seaworthy flesh vessel was built. Nimiel fortified the craft with spiderweb it manually drew from a gland on its lower back and developed a rude mast from femurs tied end to end, a thick gossamer operating as the sail. The pope's eyes bulged watching this process. The souls, even without brains, screamed from being pulled apart and fastened back together in this super(sub?)natural manner. One gawped, "Please no." Another beseeched Christ to save her. The others begged Satan.

Lucifer climbed in and beckoned the pope with a gesture. Jacques saw little

choice and climbed aboard this crying sloop. "You may sit, Pontiff. Their pain is too great to care that they're being used as a vehicle." Nimiel holstered its weapon and, clutching the stern, gave the ship a running start into the blood. If it felt a scald it didn't betray any effort bearing it. Soon it climbed its way on, astern. The pope sat port and Lucifer, starboard. The sail caught wind, and they gradually drifted away from the beach.

"The sniper doesn't concern you, Adversary?"

"It's in the heart of danger you find safety,' priest. That was Lao Tze, I think."

Nimiel sat silently, like a tarantula that already fed. They sailed. Past the scattered, scalding damned. Past the isle of wriggling larvae. Past the screaming and crying, deeper and deeper into the mauve mists, toward a blazing twilight. Wherever the general sailed in this fog it was far out of eyeshot. The scent of blood, and the very craft's screams, bludgeoned XV's senses. He could scarcely imagine spending an eternity in it. One hour would forever haunt his nightmares.

Time was strange here. The twilight did not fluctuate. The sun remained fixed. Gulls, some large as albatross, flew in front of them like pilot fish. Several soared all about them, anticipating carrion. Many souls on which they dove were just floating, heads submerged. The pope almost asked if they were in fact dead but stifled himself. Everything here was post-mortal. The souls simply passed out from the onslaught of pain. Soon the chaotic islet was far behind

them, and the souls they passed treading blood became sparser.

After a day's passage (or, rather, what felt like a day to the pope) the mists became thinner, as did the air. The craft began to howl less and shiver more. The gulls began falling away and Jacques saw what appeared to be a purple flurry. Blood snow. The pontiff spotted large objects submerged in the blood. They appeared navy blue and reflected the sunlight back at his eyes despite being dark obelisks. He ocularly communicated his query to Lucifer who responded, "Blood-bergs. The temperature beyond the islet plunges quickly, and We're long past that now."

The blood-bergs began to tower over them. Jacques felt as if in a metropolis combing streets below skyscrapers. The boat soon ceased shivering. The souls composing it were now in an induced coma. Mercy of sorts. They would sleep as the vessel hardened. What was once a sea became overwhelmed by royal blue blood-glaciers, and what they were sailing through became an under blood-ice cave labyrinth. The last of the sun's light was presently astern. With the air rarified the odor was forthwith less acute. "These underground catacombs lead to the river," the angel purred.

"Which tributary? There are more than a half dozen."

"All roads lead to Rome." The pope felt the breeze halt almost the instant the caverns cut off the sun.

Nimiel broke off the soul-crafted mast

and took the helm, using it as an oar. The stream was shallower than the sea. Lucifer's aura shone brighter as they sluiced through a center cave. The interior was composed of honeycombed human faces – men, women, and children – frozen mid-scream. A current took the boat and Nimiel rose, returning to the stern so that it could use the oar to steer. They traveled for what was likely three days through inert, screaming faces. Jacques actually felt hunger, but fasted, as did Lucifer. Nimiel was not shy. It buried its saber-like fangs into the stern, sucking heartily on frozen soul-marrow. Jacques caught a glimpse and then quickly looked away. He felt nervous and found his impulse control waning. "Lucifer, on which plane is Hitler punished? What of Idi Amin? Caligula? Pol Pot?"

Satan looked annoyed. "Don't you think unimaginative souls ask about these men all day long? Are you a scion of St. Peter or an associate editor for Cosmopolitan? It wounds Us to see you lower your station."

The pope was embarrassed and glad he didn't ask about The Partridge Family; It may have capsized the conveyance. Jacques remained silent for a while after, but finally asked, "Do you ever tire of it? Reigning over unending misery?"

Satan was grim and said nothing.

Eventually they saw dim light ahead. To say that it brightened as they approached would have exaggerated things. It was a sallow light. Jacques strained to see and could not. The mists were thickening, though less pink and more violet.

“Who wouldn’t tire of it?” At last, It answered. “Sadism is a human appetite. It never stimulated Us. But We all have Our function, don’t We?”

“Why bring me here?”

“...Yahweh – a’Donai – sees and hears all. Even here. But the walls of blood-ice distort Our voices into echoes. He may still interpret Our conversation, but this is as close to privacy as We get. I don’t like to make decisions so nakedly under prying eyes. I retreat down here occasionally. To think.”

“You plan to make changes.”

“Yes.”

“What changes?”

“Ultimately, We plan to go on strike.”

Jacques’ eyebrows rose.

“We told you, Padre, did We not?”

asked the angel. “We have a labor issue on these planes. More damned keep coming and there are a limited number of fallen to delegate responsibility. Yes, there are the demons – the offspring of the fallen angels with the damned – but they are soulless creatures. Most cannot cognitively handle true responsibilities. And they cannot lead. No offense, Nimmy. Likewise, the fallen to whom I’ve authorized power have been forced to attenuate their spheres of influence into smaller and smaller spheres as the damned keep accumulating.” If Nimiel was insulted there was no way to tell. Its multitude of eyes were too disturbingly alien to interpret.

“Had you thought about just resigning?” Jacques asked.

The devil chuckled. “Pontiff, you’ve

been swayed by too much terrestrial pop culture. Stories of Mephistopheles defecting and gone on holiday? Maybe, like so many of your predecessors, you fancy We’ll go to war with Heaven, too. As though it was a possibility.”

“You’re the warden here. Don’t you have the keys?”

“I am not the warden. I’m merely the first. Louis XVI, possessor of the Hope diamond, was a locksmith. Sal Schillizzi, cracker of Thomas Jefferson’s safe, rots here also. He would charge \$300 for every cigar he smoked through the process, to give you an idea of his confidence. To say nothing of Erik Weisz – ‘Harry Houdini.’ I have little power beyond any other angel. There are no keys because there are no locks, and we can resource over a thousand renown locksmiths if there were. You actually believe We’re trapped hither thanks to a hardware issue?”

“Now that you put it that way...”

“No, Clement. Neither war nor escape was ever possible. There is no way out. Not even for me.”

Stalactites and stalagmites of blood dripped down with echoing reports as these ecclesiastic figures spoke. “So, instead you intend to strike. What would that even look like?”

“We’ll release the damned from their racks, their iron maidens, their oubliettes, their agony. Not instantly. They must be weened gradually from their fates using the very virtch-tech that constricts them. But they will be re-educated to become teachers, scientists and social workers. Farmers,

architects, and engineers. We plan to employ the cursed based on their whims and develop a jobs program. We'll create policy and currency. Systems and infrastructure. We'll recast Hell into a new country."

"...New countries need new governments. What of God?"

"That absentee landlord? In condemning Us He's lost control of Us. If He wants to regain that control He'll need to deal with those He'd flung toward these bowels. Or not. Perhaps He won't care either way. I've performed my role for millennia without aid, thanks, or guidance. Whenever I made an executive decision about structure it was without acknowledgement. Jehovah cares not an iota for those shut up in here. If I'm wrong He'll need to intervene, and it would be the first smile He brought to Our face since the fall, even if He turned all the damned upon me."

The pope faltered for words and at last echoed, "A strike." The aperture eventually opened and they glided into a swamp. Blood ice gave way to marshland, and the blood itself became bile. Gnarled trees jutted out from the bog. The pontiff thought he heard packs of canines running

and growling from distances not far off. Each tree was clearly a miserable soul spattered with white droppings being feasted on by infernal fungal life. The head of Delores O'Reardon flew past them so fast de Linville could barely make out her face. "We're back in the Seventh Ring," the pope observed, somewhat disappointed. "I suppose our tour is over."

"It was never really a tour, Jacques. When you came here We sought consultation. We could think of little that would annoy Yahweh more. Let's find Our way back to the elevator." ❖

Author Note: The author, realizing he'd achieve little of note at this point in his professional life decided this space would be far better invested in Elvis trivia, focusing on the bowel movement that killed him. Weighing in at appx. 25 lbs. it was apparently gathered up by his housekeeper and ultimately found its way at auction where it sold for \$1.7 million to Billy Joel, who was so overjoyed to win it, claimed, he would, "Proudly display it on his piano, much like Liberace displayed his candelabras."

END TRANSMISSION