CHAPTER 23 ZULU

It is Christmas evening in Chicago. The giant downtown Christmas tree is decorated and illuminated, but very few people are visiting it today. Most everybody wants to be home with family and friends. The Christkindlmarkt is deserted. The caroling in Millennium Park has been called off. It is a bitter night. The Hawk, the cutting wind off of the ice-sheathed Lake Michigan, is blowing the few pedestrians around helplessly on the ice-slick plazas above the river. The wind is merciless; it takes your breath away. The snow is coming down in sheets that seem almost solid if you try to walk into the wind. It is a cruel cold. No one wants to be out in it. Even the Sun wants to go home to a warm bed. An early bed. The Christmas lights, set out to hold back the longest nights of the year, flicker feebly through the blizzard. Darkness rules.

In the cavern of the Seam, the Night Bell tolls. It's time to go to work. In Helm's Deep, the First of the First look out of their fighting portals. Eyes scan the empty air in front of them, waiting for all Hell to break loose. Just another day on the job.

A few minutes go by. As usual, it starts with a dog barking, sensing the demon coming before it slithers through the Seam and becomes visible. But after that dog barks this night, there is nothing usual about anything.

Usual is five or ten demons coming through the seam to see if the Army of Night is ready for them. Minor demons. Stupid demons. Usually, when they encounter stiff resistance, they break off and slink back through the Seam to report the strength, position and readiness of the forces deployed. After that, there might be another attack if the demon lords think there is a weakness, but usually no such attack comes. Even if

an attack does come, it is usually a limited, probing strike by eight or ten demons at a possibly vulnerable point.

But tonight, nothing is usual. The initial bark is taken up by every dog in the cavern. They are barking madly now, yowling as if they are trying to warn the whole world with their racket.

Then something slips through the seam. A demon, yes. But not the usual demon. Everyone in the cavern, dog and human alike, can tell it is different, something they have never seen before. It *looks* like the demons they have faced before, but it does not *feel* like them. This is no weakling. Everyone can feel its power, a raging fire that gives no warmth. “Oh, shit!” says one of the Ripleys under his breath.

The dogs stop barking, start growling, deep and low, their heads low, tails stiff and straight, ears flat back, teeth bared, lips curled, fur standing on end.

The demon eyes the dogs and snarls back at them.

Minutes pass. Another demon slithers out of the Seam, reeking of power. Looking out of his portal as the second demon appears, Sergeant Binky Kolstad, the new Platoon Leader of the First of the First, checks his watch. Tenses. Thinks to himself, “*Damn! This is bad*.”

He clicks his comm to the command frequency. “Hammerhand, this is Alpha 1. Reporting two bogies. First at Night plus 1 minute. Second at Night plus 20. These are not ordinary orcs, Sir Thomas. These are Uruk Hai.”

“I see it too, Bink” said the Knight Militant Commander. “If they keep coming through this quick, we are going to have our hands very full tonight. At the present rate,

we could have 45 or more hostiles by sunrise. Keep your eye on things and keep me apprised. Brief all of the platoons. I'm going to call in the cavalry."

"Yes, sir! Kolstad out."

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Elise Palmerston was at her desk, an unfamiliar desk in an unfamiliar place, because Shadow had insisted that she move because her home was no longer safe. She couldn't really focus on her work for wondering where Timmy and Shadow and the embryonic dog army had gone. The only information she had was from a communique that Shadow had sent her last night, reading: "Arrived at Michigan property. De*barked* safely. If all goes well, we will vanish and be unfindable for a while. See you when the Dog Army is trained and ready. Hold the fort til then. We shall return."

Vintage Shadow, right down to the bad pun and paraphrasing General MacArthur. She had known that he would be using the Michigan property as a staging area. But what she didn't know was where the Dog Army was going or how it was going to vanish.

She hated that she didn't know. Hated it. But Shadow had told her early on, when she took over the Council from her mother, that everything was on a need-to-know basis, even for her. Operational security. She understood the necessity, but it was a bitter pill.

So she had tried to squelch her curiosity when she got the message from Shadow. Told herself that operational security was more important than her curiosity and her need to control everything. She went to bed, promising herself that she wouldn't

peek. But four sleepless hours later, she finally gave in and activated one of the remote-control drones she kept on the Michigan property to see what she could see.

The weather was clear and the moon was bright that night in northern Michigan. The drone cameras were very good. They clearly showed that huge numbers of dogs had gotten off the trains, and then promptly disappeared. Millions of pawprints in the snow led from the platform to the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, but not a single pawprint disturbed the ice and snow that covered the bay. The only hope of the world had vanished without a trace, and no way to contact them if . . .

Her comm pinged, jolting her out of her reverie. “Mrs. Palmerston,” said David Kelly, “Sir Thomas is on the comm, from the Seam. He says it’s Priority 1.”

“Put him through, David, and stay on the line yourself.”

Sir Thomas appeared on her screen, a craggy-faced, iron-haired man. “There is a Priority 1 incursion at the Seam, ma’am,” he said, his usually unnoticeable French accent the only thing betraying his stress level. “First hostile came through at 4:45pm, second twenty minutes later. Both significantly higher-level demons than have ever come through the Seam before. I have committed the reserve company, and have scrambled the other two companies, but it will likely not be enough. I request that you execute Plan Zulu immediately.”

“Acknowledged, Sir Thomas. Initiating Plan Zulu now. Good luck and God bless all of you,” she said.

The screen went blank. She pinged Kelly. “Please contact the Council members and initiate Plan Zulu,” she said.

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Constance and Kenya were at a safe house on Shadow's orders. They were lying on the couch and talking after dinner in front of a roaring fire, when their comms pinged simultaneously. That was not unusual, but the message was. One word. ZULU. That message had never been sent before, except in drills. They looked at their screens, looked at each other, knowing that this night might be all the time they had left. Might be all the time that the world had left. Knowing that this would be a night of bloody death. A night of agony and loss. A night of horror.

"Time to go, Love," said Kenya. She was donning her fighting clothes, and had put Constance's on the armchair across from the couch. The gear bags containing their weapons and armor was by the front door. It was probably only twenty minutes from their building to the cavern of the Seam, but maybe longer tonight with the snow. Constance put on her gear, walked over to the picture window, looked out at the blizzard, at the icy streets, said a quick prayer for her friends and comrades, for the fragile snowglobe that is the Earth. Thought about her life, a life spent protecting everyone and everything that she loved from unspeakable evil. The last fifteen years of her life spent with Kenya, who fought at her side and whose love had transformed her. A good life. A life to be proud of. A life to be grateful for. She said a final prayer of thanks for the life she had been given. She hugged Kenya, hard. Kissed her, tenderly. Perhaps for the last time.

"Let's go, my love" she said. "We're ready."

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Rabbi Benjamin Levine and his wife Rachel had just finished dinner when lightning struck. When he saw the word ZULU on his screen, his face went white and

his chest and his throat constricted so he could barely breathe. Zulu meant that the demons had come in force and that they might break through. Even worse, these demons were probably orders of magnitude more powerful than the ones they had been barely holding back for years. He cringed. He had been fighting this endless war for most of his life, losing it no matter what he did. There were never enough magickers, and most of the ones they had were not very powerful. “More piss-ant than puissant,” as Ben had said to Rachel many times over the years. And over the years, there were fewer and fewer. He watched them die -- friends, colleagues and students – in what he knew in his heart was an unwinnable war. His only hope was that he would die before the end, that he would not be the chief of the magickers who had allowed the shedim to murder his world.

His wife saw his face go ashen, saw him age ten years when he saw the message. “What is it, Ben?” she asked.

“It’s Zulu, Rachel. I have to go.”

Rachel Levine knew what Zulu was, because Ben shared everything with her. Always had, since they had been students together at the Rabbinical College. She knew that this was the thing that he dreaded more than death. Knew that he thought this battle was hopeless, and that it was his fault. And for the sake of the earth and every living thing on it, she knew that she had to let him go to that battle even though he might die there. But she would be damned if she would let him die without hope. Far too many of her people had died without hope.

“I know you have to go, Ben. What would they do without you? After all, you are Benjamin Levine, the Master of the Mystic Arts.” She smiled, raised an eyebrow, got a small smile in return.

“You are, aren’t you?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Because you aren’t acting like it. You’re acting like a nebbish.”

“Rachel, listen . . .”

“No, Ben, you listen to me. Because with all your moping around, you have forgotten something really important.”

“What?”

“What God said to Moses on Mount Sinai. He said ‘you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.’ She leaned across the corner of the dining room table, cupped his face in her hands, looked into his eyes. The look that made him fall in love with her. “Ben, God knows *your* name. You have fought these Shedim most of your life, given everything you have, risked death over and over, sacrificed so much. If it weren’t for you, this war would have been over a long time ago. God knows what you have done, Ben. You have protected his people. Like Moses did. You have found favor in his eyes Ben. Of *this* I am sure. And I promise you, he knows you by name. because you have done his work.”

“Rachel, we can’t win. I can’t protect them. I’m not strong enough.”

“Maybe that’s true, Ben. Maybe we’ll lose. Maybe you aren’t strong enough. But here’s the thing. Nobody’s strong enough. Nobody. Moses wasn’t. David wasn’t. Not on their own. But they won anyway. They won because God was with them. And I think that

tonight, he will make you strong enough, and give you the help you need. Ben, evil has tried to wipe us out. Again and again. But we are still here. We are his chosen people, and you are his chosen warrior. Like David. Like Moses. He didn't let them fail, and he won't let you fail either. You are not alone, Ben. God knows ***your name***, Rabbi Levine***.*** So have some damn FAITH!!"

"Okay, okay, I surrender" he said, throwing his hands up in the air. But he had a crooked little smile on his face now, and a gleam in his still-teary eyes. The look that had made her fall in love with him. The look she had not seen in far too long. "You're right, Rabba Levine! I should be ashamed of myself."

She removed her hands from his cheeks, grabbed his shoulders, shook them gently. "Screw shame, Ben. It won't win the battle. Try anger. Try rage. Cold rage. Rage against the dying of the light. I want you to win, Ben. And then I want you to come home to me. Come *home* to me, Ben."

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The Road Warrior woke up at home, a Walmart parking lot in Southern Wisconsin, Molly next to him, still sleeping soundly. The coffee was already brewing, the aroma dragging him out of bed. He sipped the Kona, thinking about the night before -- the train vanishing in the tunnel, carrying all the hope of the world. He didn't know where they were going, how long they would be gone, or what exactly they were going to do, but that was okay. They were no longer his responsibility. He and his road warriors had done their job. They had kept Timmy alive and out of the clutches of the authorities, the homicidal Groomer woman and the Grey World. They had taken Timmy to meet tens of thousands of dogs, the cadre of the Dog Army. They had taught Timmy many of the

things that he needed to learn. But most of all, they had given Timmy a family. And to a kid who had never had a family, that was maybe the most important thing of all.

It was a job well done, and he was immensely proud of his road warriors. But that job *was* done, and now he and they had other responsibilities. The road warriors who had not gone with Timmy and Shadow would return to their primary duty – acting as a strategic reserve for the Ripleys at the Seam and providing logistical support. Holding the fort until Shadow and Timmy came back with the Dog Army. However long that took.

Last night, he and Molly had met up with his Chosen Few – the road warriors that he usually traveled with. When Molly pulled in and closed the laager, he saw his beloved Diego at the other end. His home. He and Molly got out of the Security Bago and walked over to Diego. He did a visual inspection of his vehicle, as he always did. “Lookin’ gooood, Diego!” he said, patting the front fender. He smiled at Molly. “It’s good to be home,” he said.

The Road Warrior was back in his element. His natural habitat. He was on The Road, the place he would always rather be. The hum of the tires on the highway, the vibration of the motor, the feel of the steering wheel in his hands, the ribbon of highway stretching out ahead of him while the countryside zipped by him in his peripheral vision, these were all he really needed to be happy.

An hour later, he was in the driver’s seat, with Molly back in the co-pilot’s seat. Molly had Willie Nelson on the stereo, twanging out “On the Road Again”. Molly knew what he liked. She gave him a big smile, then leaned across and gave him a big kiss,

both of which he returned in kind. He had enjoyed having Shadow and Timmy on board for the last months, but it was nice to be back to normal.

Today they were headed for the Rondyvoo, which promised to be a bona fide blowout. All of the road warriors who had been involved in hiding and transporting Timmy would be there. Everybody would drink and party too much, and that was fine. They deserved it after the past few months, when the slightest stumble, the tiniest break in operational security, could have doomed the world. But there had been no stumble, no break. The road warriors had completed the most dangerous, the most important mission in their history. The stress had been almost unbearable at times. It felt like he had been holding his breath for months, and could only now exhale and take in some fresh air. But now it was over. Back to business as usual.

"Is everybody at the Rondyvoo?" he asked Molly.

"All present and raring to go," she said. It's gonna be a hell of a party."

They had all gotten up late this morning. No morning Tai Chi. No work. It was a day of rest. And now he was driving through southern Wisconsin with Molly, enjoying the wintry scenery, headed for another boondock. Willy was singing. "A fine day to be on The Road again," he thought to himself.

He thought about his Road, the Road that only he could walk. The one that the man in black, Simon, had told him about. That Road had led him to the Ripleys, made him who he was. Unlike most Ripleys, he was not recruited because he was a noted Chi wielder. Far from it. Growing up in Casper, Wyoming, Clint Volker had never heard the word "chi" in his entire life, as far as he could recall. Like a lot of young men in Casper, he thought that his path in life would be the Rodeo. But unlike most boys, he had a rare

talent and a rare willingness to sacrifice whatever it took to attain his dream. Pretty much everybody in Casper thought that he was destined for great things as a rodeo cowboy.

But The Road had other ideas, and it called Clint Volker in his eighteenth summer. People started disappearing in the Casper area. One, then another, then another. People started to wonder whether there was a serial killer on the loose. A few people even reported seeing a monster in town. Then the bodies were found, wedged up under an overpass on I 25. The rumor was that none of them had a mark on them, and all of them looked like they were scared to death. The citizens of Casper were scared to death too. People even started locking their doors, and many took to carrying weapons wherever they went. It did no good. More people disappeared.

And then one day, it stopped. Nobody seemed to know why. The police didn't have a clue. Everybody remained on edge for a while, but after a month or two, everybody forgot about it, except the ones who had lost someone. Life went on.

But a few months down the road, Clint Volker's life took a U-turn. He was having breakfast at the truck stop before work, when a woman and a man came over to his table. "Clint Volker?" asked the woman. She was in her forties or so, he thought. Definitely not from Casper. She was Big City all the way.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"You can come and work for me, Clint. My name is Elise Palmerston, and I have need of someone with your unique skills."

“Are you talking about sponsoring me on the Rodeo tour, ma’am? Because I’m not ready for it yet. I’ve accepted a rodeo scholarship at U.W. and in four years, if I’m good enough I might take a crack at the tour.”

She smiled. “It’s not your rodeo skills I’m talking about, Clint.”

Clint took a sip of coffee, confused, then turned his palms over, face up. “Well, ma’am,” he said, “I’m afraid that cowboying skills are about all I’ve got. Ask anybody.”

“I’m sure that they would agree with you, Clint. But then, they don’t know what I know. And what you know.”

“No offense, ma’am, but I don’t know what you’re talking about. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to be getting to work.” He started to rise from his seat.

“Clint, what I’m talking about is this: You killed a demon singlehanded, and we have it on video. She set a machine on the table in front of Clint, with the video already playing on the screen. He watched it, looked at the woman, and shrugged.

“With all due respect, ma’am, all this video shows is me, play acting a pretend fight. There’s no demon on the video, only me. This doesn’t prove anything.”

“It does to me, Clint, and that’s all that matters. There’s never a demon on the videos, because they just don’t show up on video. But the man who took this video saw the demon. And the fight. Do you want me to describe the demon to you? I can. In detail.”

“No, ma’am,” he said.

“Clint, you and I both know that that’s not you playing make-believe. You were fighting for your life. And you won, against a magical being that you should never in a

thousand years have been able to hurt, much less kill. That is truly remarkable, Clint. How did you do it?"

Clint was about to deny it again and say a polite goodbye, get up, and leave, and then he met her eyes, because that's what he was brought up to do when he was talking to someone. But something in her eyes caught him – the intelligence, the pride, the power, the depth of her care, but most of all her almost unbearable weariness. Clint looked at her for probably fifteen seconds. That's a long time to look somebody right in the eyes. "Okay," he said. "Okay. You saw it, ma'am. He came after me, and I pulled my Buck," he said. "I ducked under when he tried to grab me, and I stuck him, right in the belly. And he died, then he bubbled away to nothing. And that's all there was to it."

She smiled again, shaking her head no. "What you did was one of the most extraordinary things I have ever seen. And I have seen things you literally wouldn't believe. Clint, you have a special gift. An incredibly rare gift. You are a born demon fighter. Let me ask you a question: How would you like to help me save the world?"

Clint immediately thought of the man in black – Simon. He took a deep breath, exhaled for a long time. He felt like he'd been holding his breath since that moondark/moonbright night at White Sands. Now he breathed out his old rodeo dreams and breathed in his new life. His new Road. The one between the dawn and the dark of night. He wondered if Simon had known this was coming, reckoned that he probably had.

"As it happens, ma'am, I believe that I do want to help you save the world," he said. And that was that. He was a Ripley within a matter of months. Unlike most recruits, Clint was a blooded, bona fide demon fighter before he ever became a Ripley. Unlike

most Ripleys, he was not a martial artist. He was just a natural born demon slayer. And he saved the world for twenty years. Truth to tell, he was still doing it. Would do it until the day he died, because that was The Road he had chosen.

The comm beeped. Molly picked it up, looked at it briefly, handed it to him.

It was ZULU. “No simple highway,” he thought to himself. But then, it never was, was it?

As if his music app had read his mind, his random playlist started to play Jerry Garcia’s guitar intro to Ripple. He looked over at Molly, who was smiling at him already, knowing how much this song meant to him. He held out his right hand to her, and she took it, grasped it to her cheek. Neither spoke. They wanted to listen. The Dead were kicking out, and Jerry was about to sing. “*Let there be songs to fill the air*,” thought the Road Warrior.

Ripple ended, and he brought Molly’s hand to his lips and kissed it softly. “Well, it looks like our plans have changed, Molls,” he said. “Initiate Zulu. Scramble *everybody*. Rendezvous at the rally point by the Seam.” He slowed down and turned Diego around at a crossroads, wondering what Blind Zeke might make of that. For his part, he was still on his Road. Driving in the opposite direction, but still on his Road. On his way to war, but still at peace.

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But there is no peace to be had in the cavern of the Seam this night. There can be no peace with the Gray World. It makes nothing. It creates nothing. Its only purpose is to consume *everything*. It is a barren womb that breeds only obscenities. Tonight, it will birth those obscenities into the world of man. Its birth canal is the infinite instant

between the Gray World and the Earth – the Seam. And it will birth only death. It will spew out abominations by the score, more than enough to overcome the humans and the handful of dogs defending the Seam. The Dukes of Hell are sure victory will be theirs.

Tonight, the Gray World launches a surprise attack. The Dukes of Hell know that the defenders time the arrivals of the demons and the intervals between in order to determine the number and potency of the demons that can enter the cavern of the Seam on any given night. For years, they have lulled the defenders of the Seam, sending only their weakest soldiers, at carefully timed, artificially long intervals, never as many or as powerful as could actually get through the Seam. After all, they have plenty of time, and they want to wait as long as possible. The longer they wait, weakening the Seam every day with their magical bombardment, the more overwhelming the force they can send through the Seam.

They never thought that they would have to put the plan into action. After all, there was no reason to. Time was on their side. Eventually, the Seam would weaken enough that the Dukes of Hell themselves and a host of their minions would be able to storm through the Seam and annihilate the defenders.

But then they heard rumors of a new Speaker and a new Dog Army. The Dukes of Hell are afraid. They remember the First Dog Army. They remember how fiercely it fought to protect the Speaker, decimating the demons and the black adepts who attacked. They remember how the demons and adepts that survived that battle were hunted down and killed without mercy.

“This new Speaker must die,” said the Dukes of Hell. They know that the Speaker is new to his power, so if the Dog Army exists at all, it must be as weak as a puppy. But only for *now*. They *cannot* allow it to become strong. They cannot allow it to join in the defense of the Seam. So they mobilized the foremost of their Black Adept allies – the Grandmaster himself – to eliminate the threat. And though he found the Speaker, he failed to kill him. When the Grandmaster failed to find either the Speaker or the Dog Army for months, they decided to strike, and set the date.

But last night, on the eve of the attack, they suddenly heard that the new Speaker was dead, from the mouth of the Scourge himself. But war plans generate their own momentum simply by being formulated, and the Dukes of Hell are caught in the undertow and swept away.

“Can we be *sure* that he is really dead, this new Speaker?” they ask each other. “Can we be sure that there is no Dog Army?” They *can’t* be sure. They are afraid. And their fear rules them, leaves them no choice but to go ahead with their plan. The conditions are favorable. In Chicago, the winter nights are long. Fifteen hours of darkness to spawn demons through the Seam, one every twenty minutes or so. Stronger demons. Smarter demons. More than enough to slaughter the defenders. Of course, it is *these* demons who will die in the battle, not the Dukes of Hell, so the possible losses are acceptable. Waiting is not an option. The time is now.

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“Time is not on our side,” thinks Sir Thomas, the Commander of Helm’s Deep. It’s only about an hour after nightfall, and there are already three Uruk Hai in the cavern. The first one who came through seems to be their leader. It surveys the defenses,

sniffing, tasting the Ripleys' scents as they peer out of their fighting portals. Its eyes, red as glowing coals, slowly scan the Deep from end to end. Its black tongue slithers in and out of its mouth, tasting their fear. It smiles.

"SURPRISE!!" it shouts, sounding as happy and excited as a kid at a birthday party. "Merry Christmas! That's right, boys and girls," it says, "tonight you're gonna have to play the Varsity. You are all SOOOO FUCKED! Oh, I wish you could see the looks on your faces," he said. And then he laughs, a deep, jolly laugh, that goes on and on and on.

"The lizard Santa Claus," thinks Sir Thomas. "Kind of Grinch-y."

Just then, another Uruk Hai slips through the Seam, taking his place beside his fellows. They have lined-up behind their leader, and all of them are laughing uproariously along with him.

Sir Thomas is having a very busy night. As soon as he saw the first two demons materialize, he had called in Ripley 5, the reserve unit, from the staging tunnel and ordered Ripley 2 and 4, the off-duty platoons, to report immediately. Ripley 5 should be marching down to the cavern soon. "It *better* be soon," Sir Thomas thought to himself.

But the rest will take time. Ripleys 2 and 4 are straggling in, in dribs and drabs. The head magicker in the cavern is also calling in reinforcements, and the Rabbi is on his way. The spellcrafters know better than anyone how vital they are to the defense, and they are trying to get to the Seam as fast as they can through the blizzard, desperate to protect their Ripleys. But only a few have arrived. Too few. On the bright side, the Knights Militants' Charterhouse is a stone's throw away, so all of them are present and ready for battle. But for now, Sir Thomas is going to have to hold the line

with what he has. For the first time in his career, he is not sure he will be able to do it. But he is a professional. He calmly issues his orders to his people and coordinates with the Rabbi's magickers.

Just as he gets off the phone after finishing his sitrep to Reverend Wright, a deep growly voice drawls from right behind him. "Well, it looks like we've got a situation, Sir Thomas. The Knight spins around, drawing his sword, resheathes it when he sees who it is. The Angel, in his robe of fluorescent blue-white, sword in hand.

"*That evens the odds a bit*," Sir Thomas thinks to himself, heaving a sigh of relief. "What can you tell me about these demons, Ezekiel?" he asks.

"Well, I'd say they are a fair bit stronger than what we've seen before here," says the Angel. "About middling in power, as demons go. That means they're going to be a lot smarter too. Not only that, but it seems that they're coming through the Seam a lot faster than they ever have before. I believe I would like to chat with our new guests, if you don't mind."

Without waiting for a reply, Ezekiel strides out of the Command Post and out past the front lines, where he stops, looking over the demons. The demons glare back at him, no longer laughing or high-fiving. Silent. He shakes his head ruefully. "Well, well, well," he says. "Well look who's here." He locks eyes with the leader, who can't help but look away from the burning gaze of those blue-white eyes. "If it isn't Ke'lek. Last time I saw you, you were part of Ba'alketh's clown college. These other clowns with you too." The Angel looked up and down and all around, as if to he were searching for something. "But what I don't understand is this. Some of the lesser lights of the clown college are

here, but Ba'alketh is nowhere to be seen. Which is a shame, because he and I have some unfinished business, and I have been hoping to run into him for quite some time."

"As for you Ke'lek, you and your boys here are *not* the varsity. Not even the junior varsity. You are the scrubs. Ba'alketh probably doesn't even know your names." He looked at the small group of demons. "You boys go on home, now, before you get hurt," he said, making a shooing motion with the back of the fingers of his right hand.

Ke'lek is no longer smiling. He stares pure hate at the Angel. No, not pure hate, there is fear as well, though he tries to hide it. These two have met before.

Ezekiel laughs, that molasses, coffee, whiskey and tobacco laugh, and the soldiers of the Army of Night stand a little straighter and fear a little less for hearing it. "Well, Ke'lek, it looks like you came spoiling for a fight tonight, talking real tough. How about I give you a chance to show all your little pals how tough you are? I mean, how tough you really are. I'll tell you what. How about you and I settle this thing tonight, just the two of us. If I win, your boys go home for the night and try again another day. If you win, you inherit the earth, and none of your boys get hurt doing it. What do you say?"

Ke'lek stares at the Angel, hate and fear warring on his face. "I say no, much as I would love to kill you myself. But that honor has been reserved by Ba'alketh."

"Is that right?" asks Ezekiel, raising his eyebrows. "Seems like I heard that a time or two before. 'Oooh, better watch out, Ezekiel, Ba'alketh goin' to git you.' But every time I turn up for a shindig like this, there's no Ba'alketh to be found. Is he hiding behind the Seam tonight like the Wizard of Oz hiding behind his curtain? No? I didn't think so. I would've smelled that geezy stink even from this side of the Seam. No, you all on your own tonight, Ke'lek, other than your little pals here. And speaking of your little pals, do

they know how you turned tail and ran last time we met. How you left all your buddies to die beneath this sword? He raises the sword, and it bursts into blue flame, the hard flame of a welding torch. “Do they, Ke’lek?”

The demon has nothing to say to that.

“Just as I thought,” says the angel disgustedly, shaking his head. “You are wasting my time, Ke’lek! I came here for a fight and you’ve got no fight in you.” The Angel turns to the rest of the demons. “How about you, boys? Anybody want to fight?” He looked them in the eye one by one. “Anybody?” They looked away from that incandescent blue gaze, every one of them.

“Okay, boys, if any of you chickenshits decide you want to fight, I’ll be right up there,” he says, pointing to the Command Post. He smiles widely at them, then spins on his heel and strolls back to the Command Post. As he reaches it, he sees Ripley 5, the reserve company, taking up their positions at the rear.

Ezekiel enters the CP, walks up to Sir Thomas and his second in command, Sir James. “Well, Sir Thomas,” he says, Ke’lek always did talk too much. And now he’s jawed away enough time for your reserve company to get here. Hopefully, that will be enough, at least for now. But those demons are going to keep popping out of that Seam every twenty minutes or so all night long, so I suggest that you call in everybody you can find, soldiers and magickers. I have a feeling that we are going to have ourselves a battle tonight. I have to be going for now, but I will return shortly, and I will do what I can to get you some extra help as well.” And he vanishes into thin air.

Sir Thomas watches the demons from the CP. They had expected their surprise attack to make for easy pickings tonight, but they had been surprised in turn by the

Angel's unexpected appearance. It had turned all their plans topsy turvy. They're now huddled in a group, trying to figure out what to do about it, arguing and gesticulating and blaming each other.

"You know," says Sir James, "that Angel turning up tonight, tonight of all nights, is a godsend. Just dumb luck."

Sir Thomas shakes his head. "Dumb luck had nothing to do with it, James. That Angel turns up when and where he's needed." He looks Sir James in the eye. "The storm is breaking, my friend. Ezekiel can smell a battle a galaxy away, and he says we've got one coming tonight. So get Ripley 5 deployed as a tactical reserve to support Ripleys 1 and 3 as necessary. And James, we're going to get some additional resources tonight. Ripleys 2 and 4. Road warriors. Constance and Kenya. Rabbi Levine and every magicker he can scrape up. I want you up in the marshaling area getting everyone ready, organized, and down here as quickly as possible. It's Zulu, Sir James. The shit is about to hit the fan. Time to earn our princely pay."

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Sergeant Binky Kolstad, the new top kick of the First of the First, had enjoyed the show that Ezekiel had put on, had watched him taunt and delay the demons until the reserves showed up. Now, he gathers his squad leaders around him for final instructions, shaking his head, chuckling to himself. "What you laughing about, sarge?" asks his senior squad leader, Cynthia Jones. "With all these badass demons around? Hell, you're as loose as Lucy Goosey."

“Not *that* loose, Thia. But this was pretty damn funny. You know, I always heard that the more powerful demons were a lot smarter. But Christ, those fuckers were stupid. Did you see the way Ezekiel played them until the reserves arrived?”

“Is that what he was doing? I was too busy enjoying the Sergio Leone moment to notice. But good for him. We can use the help. They may be dumb, but they definitely got some mojo.”

“True dat, Thia. But it really doesn’t matter. Listen up, people!” he tells his squad leaders. “It doesn’t matter if the Dukes of Hell themselves show up tonight. We still have our job to do, and we do it just like we always do. Tell your guys to relax. We’ve got the center of the line, as usual, and we are going to hold, just like we always do. Stay cool, stay alive. Got it?”

“Got it, Sarge!”

“Dismissed!” says Kolstad, and his squad leaders return to their positions.

Binky looks out over the cavern, where the demons are still wrangling and finger-pointing. He knows it won’t last, though. Hard as he is trying not to show it to his platoon, he’s worried. These demons are like nothing he’s ever seen. The air stinks of magic. “*No way are they going home without a fight. I wish Lucy was here.*”

But Lucy isn’t here. As far as he can tell, she has dropped off the face of the Earth. No one has seen hide nor hair of her for months. No one has heard a peep from her. Some people think she’s dead. Some think she’s on a mission. But nobody *knows* anything.

Kolstad shakes his head. “*Waste of time wondering about her*,” he scolds himself. “*The only thing I know for sure about Loosey Goosey is that if she is alive, then*

wherever she is, she is doing her job. Staying loose and relaxed and doing it right. Which is exactly what I am going to do. She put me up for this job. She trusted me with the platoon. I'll be damned if I am going to let her down." He breathes in deeply, releasing the breath slowly, simply letting go of all the tension in him as Lucy has taught him, replacing it with the golden light that he draws into his body with every breath. And every breath is the whispered scrape of a whetstone over a blade, leaving him a little sharper and a little deadlier with each stroke. He feels his muscles relax and his mind focus, hones his chi to a razor-edge. Whatever might come, he is ready.

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It is the calm before the storm. Hours pass. Reverend Wright, Kenya always at her side like a second shadow, has taken over command. Sir Thomas now commands the elite knights militant, who will function as a tactical reserve to be deployed wherever the action is hottest, the situation most dire. The demons seem to be in no hurry to start the battle, but why should they be? The Seam disgorges a new Uruk Hai every twenty minutes, making them stronger, and they may be content to wait until night ends.

The defenders have reinforced too, and there are many familiar faces. Mr. Li is here, with a number of his fellow Chi masters, to fight beside his students. The road warriors have answered the call, fighting their way through the blizzard to succor their friends. The Road Warrior leads them, laconic as always, as loosey goosey as Lucy in his own way. His matter-of-fact confidence and courage are mirrored in his troops. For the Ripleys, it's just another day at the office. A stressful day, absolutely. Maybe their last day, sure. But still, business as usual.

The Reverend believes that the demons intend to wait for all of their comrades to arrive before they attack. She has ordered the Army of Night to sleep and eat in shifts to preserve their strength. It is as quiet as a battlefield gets before a battle. Even the dogs have stopped barking. The demons have been quiet since Ezekiel backed them down. They glare at Helm's Deep, but the only response now are snores that reverberate softly through the cavern. It's almost peaceful. The calm before the storm.

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Rabbi Levine has recruited all of the arcane firepower he could summon, and his eyes are blazing with his old fire. He knows that this battle will hinge on his spellcasters' ability to protect the defenders from sorcerous barrages. He says a prayer for strength, and swears to God and to himself that he will die before he lets the Gray World prevail.

"Okay, my friends," says Rabbi Levine to his arcanists, "Reverend Wright thinks that the demons aren't going to attack for a while, so we've got some time. Let's use it wisely. First thing, thank you all for answering my call. For *all* you have done over the years. If it weren't for you, we would have lost long ago. You know this as well as I do. You have given so much. Sacrificed so much. We have watched our brothers and sisters, our fellow spellcasters, die fighting these evil things. So many friends. So many. All to protect our Ripleys -- our brothers and sisters too." He gestures to the men and women manning the walls of the Deep. Heads nod all around.

"These Ripleys," he says. "These brave souls without any defenses of their own against the dark power of the Gray World, they come to this cavern every day and fight these Shedim. Face to face, with nothing but their courage and their chi. How do we explain people like these, my friends? How do we account for that kind of valor. People

who have saved our world again and again. Saved us, our families, our friends. Every single thing we love in this world. What don't we owe these warriors? But despite everything we do, we have seen them wounded, mutilated, killed. Before our eyes we have seen this. How do we thank them, my friends, for manning the wall between life and death for all these years? All we can do is protect them, as best we can. We owe them that." Every head nodded.

"Our job is hard, my friends. Sometimes too hard. We have watched too many of those brave warriors die because we couldn't protect them, hard as we tried. Sometimes I feel like I can't go on, coming back to this cavern day after day and watching your friends die because you aren't strong enough." He looked around, meeting every eye. That is that weight that we carry, every second, every day, every one of us. It's crippling." Every eye was locked onto him now. Every head was nodding.

"Today will be the fight of our lives, my friends. If we lose, we lose everything. And we can't win if we're crippled. So we are going to do something about it, if you will join me. I have prepared a spell that I think can help us be *strong* enough today. This spell will allow us to share consciousness, to share our burdens, and to share our powers, so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. I think that's our only shot at winning tonight. But the only way I know how to do it is if I am in control of the power that we share. I don't blame you if you say no, but I am asking you to say yes. The spell will not work without your willing consent. I *mean* that. If you are not one hundred percent in, then opt out, and you can fight separately, as we always have. Feel free to take a little time to think about it."

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