

LOST AND HOUND ACT 1

1949

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The nightmare was always the same, it started as a memory. A not so pleasant trip through the graveyard of his recollections. Those remembrances were filled with the screams of dying men as he and his squad, operating under multiple orders to achieve varying results fought long and hard over the ensuing battles of El-Alamein and Tobruk as well as several lesser battles that never made it to the history books. It was those that were the cause of Ted's escalating night-time ordeal. As the torment increased and the images flowed faster, drawing to their inevitable conclusion Ted thrashed restlessly in his sweat-soaked sheets. He was thankfully alone having taken to the spare room most nights so as to not to disturb Mary, his ever patient and permanently tired wife. Their two new-born daughters were proving quite the handful for the neophytic parents.

Ted's nocturnal thrashing grew more frenzied as people started dying – again – in his accursed dream until he snapped awake with a strangled scream. Instinctively he touched the scars that were the culmination of his torment, the ridges at his scalp and below his chin where the creature had tried to bite his face off and whose bite had led to Ted's hair turning the premature white it now was. He regained his composure and awareness and went downstairs into the kitchen.

'I clearly didn't drink enough last night to deaden this hellish nonsense.' Ted mutters to himself as he pours himself another large brandy from the bottle he kept in the pantry, high on a shelf behind the flour tin, just far enough back that Mary wouldn't reach it or find it. She didn't approve of his drinking. Sitting at the kitchen table, cooling down now Ted shivers and knows any sort of sleep would elude him so no point in going back to bed, checking his

watch, 4.47 he can't help but shake a feeling of foreboding for the day ahead, he finishes the brandy and sets about putting the coffee on for him and boiling the kettle ready for Mary's tea as well as preparing the few breakfast things she would need for the girls when they all rose.

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Ted was just stepping off the bottom stair after dressing when the letterbox flapped and almost startled him 'It's too early for postie, so who's shoving things through my door this time of day?' Ted picked up the nondescript envelope and after turning it over through his hands a few times, he opened it. The paper was expensive, he could tell by the feel but beyond that it was unremarkable. In flourished script it simply said

10 Downing Street

11am

Clement R Attlee

Prime Minister.

Ted was stunned. This was most unconventional and his furrowed brow was still evident several hours later as he stood at the entrance to Downing Street. It was 09.30 and Ted thought he would see if anyone turned up ahead of him. Nobody did so with five minutes to spare, Ted stubbed out the Camel cigarette he had made out he was smoking and with hands clasped behind him he strode up to the famous door. The police officer on guard saluted - to Ted's surprise – and stepped up to the door and opened it as though Ted was expected.

Two steps in and Ted was greeted not by the Prime Minister – who Ted had met – but by a suave looking man of seemingly middle years and of continental descent.

‘Good Morning Colonel Yorkbeard, prompt as ever. Though you needn’t have stood so long outside, we were expecting you after all. My name is Corben Aeneas and if you’d like to step this way please.’

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‘So we’re not meeting the PM then?’ Ted asked quite conversationally though his battle senses were firing up like a Spitfire engine. Corben just smiled and shook his head softly. ‘No, not today but I felt anyone less than Mr Attlee wouldn’t get you sufficiently motivated.’

‘Why do I need motivating?’ Ted asked, warier still. At this question, Corben stopped mid-way down the corridor ‘and where exactly are we going? The PM’s offices are that way.’ Ted pointed out and thumbed in the opposite direction.

‘Yes, I know where they are.’ Corben responded curtly ‘We however utilise private rooms here that are at our disposal and are secure in ways you can only begin to imagine because my friend, we need to talk privately.’

‘We?’ Corben gestured for Ted to step in front and as he did so, a door to the left opened.

‘If you will Ted...may I call you Ted or would you prefer Colonel or something else?’ Ted’s curiosity was getting the better of him even as his patience was leaving.

‘Ted will do until I decide otherwise.’ Corben acknowledged and followed Ted into the room. A series of clicks sounded and strange glyphs suddenly lit up upon the walls, flaring brightly for a few seconds before vanishing as though they were never there.

‘Neat trick,’ Ted pointed out ‘now what?’ Corben moved to a small sedan, one of three in the room which itself closely resembled a small library or a snug in an uptown solicitors, somewhere that business deals were conducted between gentlemen and away from

prying eyes and ears, lined with heavy wood and William Morris wallpaper. It did nothing for Ted's suspicious nature.

‘Please sit, Brandy? I believe that’s your preferred beverage or are we still too early? I sometimes forget the varying customs in different parts of the world.

‘Well, it is probably too early somewhere, but I’ll have one all the same then you can tell me why all this cloak and dagger routine.’ Corben poured them a glass and sat back before speaking as though he were formulating his approach.

‘The people I work for’ he eventually said ‘and who by the way you contract to more than you know are pleased with you and how you conduct business.’

‘Thanks? They could have put that in a letter or on a cheque if they’re that happy.’

‘And they will’ Corben stated, sitting forward ‘for we have need of your Securitas International for a little retrieval mission.’ Ted knew that covered a whole host of scenarios and he smiled as he sipped, letting Corben know how he thought, Corben for his part seemed oblivious.

‘Why us?’ Ted added eventually, probing for a bit more clarity ‘We’re private security, not some Labrador who fetches things for people.’

‘You have experience and the requisite skills we need and if I may add, by doing this it may put those nightmares of yours to bed once and for all.’ This got Ted’s attention.

‘How do you know about those? I’ve told no-one about them.’ Nor had he, for Ted was a private man bordering on neurotic. This time Corben smiled. ‘You saw the glyphs, you’ve seen them before back in the desert, or ones similar. You know more about what the world doesn’t than is probably good for you, your...encounter...’ Corben touched his own

hair by way of emphasis ‘...and its marks left upon you are rare. Few people ever survive an attack by one of the Hounds, very few indeed. They are ferocious and usually quite lethal.’

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‘It was a well-timed explosion, I’ll give it that’ Ted agreed as he recalled the event in the stark light of day ‘If that tank shell hadn’t have gone off when and where it did I’d be a head shorter right now.’

‘How did you know about the iron?’ Corben asked intrigued for details like a schoolboy hearing any other war story from a veteran

‘I didn’t. It was the first thing I saw when I came to, the thing was still groggy thank heavens and covered in rubble, I’d lost my gun, not that it was any bloody use on the creature. I unloaded a whole magazine into it and it still kept coming but the explosion had smashed some railing free and it looked sharp, I didn’t know it was iron until after, lucky me.’

‘It was indeed. Nothing much hurts them short of such catastrophic damage from which even that they will heal or as you discovered that day...iron.’ Ted didn’t like the memory lane trip and sloughed it along with his congenial manner.

‘Look...Corben, it’s not a memory I’m fond of, nor am I fond of you spying on my dreams or however you’re getting that knowledge but...’ Corben forestalled Ted’s rising anger.

‘Forgive me, it is my fault we digress. I hoped to understand you more but you are right, time is of the essence. Simply this then, those Hounds who survived that day had a master, one who corrupted them and created those foul monstrosities. We recently discovered who that was and even where he is. That alone should be reason enough to send in a team but it is what he has that has our archivists so excited.’ Ted just raised an eyebrow implying he go on. ‘It is a ring. One that has set many a precedent by all accounts and created a myriad

tales and stories about rings of power. It is...or should I say does, look like a large ruby signet except the stone is actually the petrified and highly enchanted blood of Fenris himself. Pure and unsullied and spell wrought into a gem. One scratch from this will turn anyone, not only into a Hound of Fenris but one...if the legend is true...one free from the curse that beset all hounds, that of lifelong agony, uncontrollable rage and incessant hunger. The inability to control their form and who all are the unwilling slaves of those who wield both this ring or of Hounds older and more powerful, like super alphas if you will. I assure you with no wish to add to your night terrors, but there are those loose in this world even now.'

'Telling me this is supposed to free me from my nightmare? Epic fail I'm afraid, thanks, I'll be lucky to sleep again.'

'Surely retrieving this item and bringing down the fiend who holds it will put your mind at ease? Preventing any further abominations to roam our world would bring peace, yes?' Ted wasn't so sure. Wasn't sure if it would or if he wanted another go at the things, the Hounds of Fenris that had come close to finishing him off once before. The idea of revenge seemed fine until it came with the actual opportunity. It wasn't that Ted was scared – far from it - it was more like sensible prudence having gotten away with it once and now he had Mary and the girls to consider.

'What if I say no?' Ted saw Corben's shoulders slump ever so slightly.

'You realize that it wasn't so much of an actual request?' Corben said in measured tones. 'One that has multiple choice answers? It falls at your feet because you are the most qualified, having actually encountered these creatures, so really...and I mean really know what to expect. No amount of description does justice to the genuine, three dimensional tactile thing yes?' Ted had to agree with that. He also knew in his heart that this was the sort of job his future was going to be filled with. It was what the Seraphim Collective were, what

he had signed up for years before and who for the most part now funded his post war business. He was very much their man.

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‘Very well, as you clearly knew already, I’ll do it. Though when I say I, I mean we as I’ll need a team.’

‘How many?’ Corben asked nonchalantly as if he already knew that question was pending too but pretended not to.

‘Three, maybe four at the most.’ Corben nodded as if he was thinking about it but he smiled inwardly having guessed and even allowed for five. ‘How long do you need to get them up to speed?’

‘How long do I have?’

‘Two days.’ Corben answered, expecting the question. Ted ran his fingers through his white hair as was a habit he’d picked up since leaving the desert.

‘I’ll only need one, I know where they all are.’ Corben smiled the smile of a small victory and encouraged Ted to finish his brandy. Ted did as he pondered the fetching of his team but when he tried to recall the meeting and the man he had just spoken with he found he couldn’t recall his name and oddly enough nor how to describe him. Ted found this disturbingly odd but working for the Collective, he had seen and done stranger things, clearly this messenger wanted to retain his anonymity. Many a time he had been forced to either use or witness the effects of magical memory erasing. It did no good for the public to know what hunted them. He never thought it would be used on him though because try as he might, the man he had just spent the last hour talking to would not come to memory, not his name, nor his...anything. Angry at the violation, Ted sloughed the disturbing thought and as the memory of who he had just met faded into sunlight, he set about his plans to pull his team in and get everything up to speed. It didn’t pay to dwell on what he couldn’t change.

LOST AND HOUND ACT II

WE'LL MEET AGAIN.

It was a clear drive to Hastings. Ted had left the same day after checking in at his office and having Ginny, his new PA phone ahead to the hotel he knew the men he was after were staying at, it was the same one they always stayed at when hitting the coast. Since Tobias was planning his new family, he hoped to fill it with a son and a daughter to start, so for now, he felt his 'alone time' was precious and until that happened it allowed him to let off steam at a sufficiently safe distance from home and his increasingly religious wife, lovely lady but finding a need for solace from more ethereal sources. They had all met there at the Waylander Hotel when they were discharged and it had become their haunt ever since. Tobias Walker had served with Ted briefly in the desert and along with Sebastion Mortimer or Seb as he preferred and Harrison Gill or Harry for short enjoyed a spot of sea fishing and the use of the gun range between Hastings and Silverhill. Seb maintained it was good to stay sharp. By the time Ted arrived that evening, he knew they would be in the restaurant. And that was exactly where they were, a few rounds in and by the evidence upon the table, Ted has missed dinner.

'You know I've told you time and time again that it's not practical to be so predictable and all gathered together. What if I was the enemy?' Ted asked with a note of disappointment as he pulled up a chair, took Seb's beer and downed it.

‘Colonel Yorkbeard, you know very well any enemy of ours wouldn’t have made it down the street, let alone through the door and certainly not this far back into the establishment. You of all people know how seriously we take our security.’ Ted regarded the speaker. ‘Yes, Harrison I do, how many on your payroll out there?’ Ted asked more out of curiosity than any real need to know. ‘And has anyone seen Eric lately?’

‘47 at last count. This is probably the most fortified restaurant in the UK and no, not seen Eric for months, he’s not taking anybody’s calls it seems. But you didn’t come here for a sit rep on our weekend away did you?’ Ted shook his head solemnly, disappointed Eric wasn’t there as well, his analytical mind would be missed.

‘No Harry I didn’t. We have an SC directive. Uber sensitive and on the clock.’

‘Who.’ This time the speaker was Tobias Walker, long-time friend of Ted and closest to him in rank of the tetrad. ‘It’s not so much a who, but a what. The *who* is incidental and we are to exercise extreme prejudice as far as they’re concerned or worse if possible.’ Ted stated.

‘Worse?’ Seb asked, pouring himself another beer. ‘How worse?’

‘Hounds of Fenris worse.’ Was all Ted said and the men all sat back instantly lost in their own thoughts, each with sudden recollections of these creatures. For every man there had notched up at least one contact, the unlucky amongst them more than one.

‘The Collective paying danger money for these sons o bitches?’ Seb asked and Harrison nodded his concurrence as they all looked to Ted, even Tobias.

‘Don’t know. The package is being couriered to HQ as we speak, literally. If you’re all up for it...and I hope you are, then I’ll make a call, have a Sikorsky here in an hour.’

Fifty five minutes later, four men sat strapped into the Sikorsky as it powered in land to the Seraphim Collective HQ in London, known to the world as Securitas International. A

large building that had withstood the war that Ted had acquired with Collective help with a convenient roof to land a helo on. Securitas International, a PMC company set up by Ted as a working front for Collective operations. Ginny had met them on the roof and gave all four men a package each. As she did so, several uniformly dressed men loaded munitions and half a dozen large black ruck sacks into the chopper. Ted didn't open his package there and then, instead he asked Ginny what she had ascertained.

‘So what did they say to you? Where are we going?’ Ted asked as he saw Ginny smile, knowing little got past her.

‘Dorchester. Cerne Abbas to be precise.’ Ginny waved her own briefing pack ‘Though I suppose not so precise, as it is only the Collective’s best guess as to the destination of the men concerned there. One of them owns a large property out there, apparently there is a monastery out beyond the giant, dedicated to what they termed pagan cultists, it fell into disrepair and stood as ruins for centuries, set so far back from the road nobody even knew it was there until an anonymous buyer bought it and the land, repairing it and by all accounts rededicating it to Fenris. Nobody knew until recently as it was all on private land away from prying eyes. The whole village and church was once sacked and plundered by the Northman Cnut Sweynsson, 11th century I believe, him and his raiding Vikings. Though he went on to resurrect the abbey there after becoming king of England would you believe, the Collective analysts think he had pagan priests with him in his war party who stayed in Britain and subversively dedicated themselves to Fenris. So it followed, Fenris worshippers retained the place over the centuries and new followers eventually bought the old site, seems too bold to be a coincidence.’

‘Ginny, you are a marvel. A veritable font of information. Does my briefing contain floor plans and blueprints?’ Ginny confirmed it did, along with fake ID’s in case they were

confronted by any locals. ‘For Pete’s sake don’t get the two Abbey’s mixed up, Cerne Abbey is an innocent tourist spot and private residence, the Abbey house you’re going to is much more inconspicuous although the layouts are similar as both were monasteries, they are wholly different. Be careful you, I know what they did to you last time.’ Ted hugged his PA and thanked her for her concerns.

‘You’re too good to me Virginia,’ Ted whispered near her ear ‘I’d go as far to say you actually care what happens to me.’ Ginny pulled a disgruntled face as she shooed him off.

‘Don’t be silly, this is just the best job I’ve had, it pays well and I like the benefits as well as the fact you always bring me something nice from your trips.’

Ted waved as he climbed aboard the Sikorsky along with his three cohorts who were already aboard, strapped in and reading their mission briefings. Harrison was checking the remuneration package – as he always did - should he survive.

‘I wish they wouldn’t start with that.’ He said sourly as he read on.

‘Say what?’ Seb asked, busy reading his own and not bothering to look up.

‘Should you survive, you may expect to receive...blah blah blah. It’s almost as if they don’t expect you to half the time, but should you inconveniently live, we may as well pay you. It doesn’t do the moral any good at all.’ Tobias laughed and nudged Ted. ‘They’re off again.’ He spoke so only Ted could hear him above the choppers engine. ‘What? Arguing about money again?’

‘How did you guess?’ Tobias sighed having seen this byplay so many times from his two companions.

‘Anybody would think we didn’t pay them well for putting themselves in harm’s way every time we go out.’ Ted groaned ‘The Collective values operatives like us because you

simply can't train what we've seen and done. The wars did serve that purpose.' Tobias scoffed at the idea.

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'Those wars let loose more than was ever going to be running around in this day and age.' Ted agreed vehemently 'Idiots who were desperate did desperate things and delved into places and stuff that didn't need delving into. Take these bloody hounds for example, initially summoned or brought back or whatever they did just to use on the battle field; we killed plenty, they killed more but now the war is over, just how many were left free and wild out there? And then look at the where; Germany, Russia, Romania, France, Poland, here and even reports from the Sahara. It'll take the Collective centuries to track them all down if we ever do.' Ted felt his friend's frustration and wondered what sort of world they were both creating and subsequently leaving for their kids. Ted wondered what Hannah and Moira would do in the future and Ted knew that Tobias - or just Toby to his closest friends - worried about the son and daughter he hoped to have. Toby had a plan and heaven help anything that stood in his way of fulfilling it. If he had his way he would have enough kids to create his own round table, being a bit of an Arthurian buff on the side.

'So we're right in your favoured neck of the woods with this little jolly.' Ted announced to Toby. Seb and Harry were still picking over the briefing and frequently returning to the financial elements every time they saw something potentially hazardous in the briefing. 'We're dropping in at a little place known as Piddletrenthide, or in a field just outside anyway, a vehicle and our contact is waiting for us at the village pub...' at the mention of the word pub, both Harry and Seb's ears pricked right up.

'Time for a swift one before the SHTF Ted?' Harry asked and Ted considered the briefing, he didn't like anything hitting the fan, what with their timescale and the fact they were ahead of the curve and shrugged at the possibility. 'Why not, we can go over the details

there as well as anywhere else and I doubt there will be hounds there drinking, unless they left a bowl outside for them.’ Toby frowned as he began over thinking their plight.

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‘They might you know, if they bought some abbey in Cerne Abbas, the pubs there aren’t a million miles away for something that can run faster than a Jaguar XK 120.’ Seb laughed at Toby ‘Ha, you’ve always got to be a damp towel Toby. If there is one there, it’ll be one less we have to worry about. Have you seen the iron jacketed rounds we’ve been given? What we didn’t bloody well have last time I hasten to add. They’ll stop one of those bastards dead.’ Seb opened his jacket to show the two pistols he already had slung and holstered. ‘I’d advise doing the same before we land as you know me and trusting plans going like clockwork...’

‘Broken clockwork more like it.’ Harry chipped in ‘Seb draws bad luck like a bloody magnet, don’t know why I hang around him so much.’ Seb laughed riotously, elbowed Harry in the ribs, eliciting a satisfactory Ooof and answered ‘Because Harry old bean, you love trouble. You’re not happy unless you’re shooting something, being shot at or fighting the first thing that gets in your way.’ Harry pondered this assessment then shrugged resignedly.

‘Guess that’ll be why then. So pub still has my vote, hound or not. If we catch one of the beasties maybe we can get some more detailed info either out of it or from it another way. Didn’t the brief say they weren’t all psychotic creatures? Someone had to buy the property and that would have taken a semblance of human rational intervention.’

‘You’re all right.’ Ted agreed ‘For all the reasons stated. These aren’t just killing machines though I don’t doubt there are some on a leash somewhere, but anything we get beforehand is a bonus, if we don’t encounter anything we go over the insertion one more time, get a couple of hours shut eye and be mission ready for 03.00. Happy with that?’ All agreed.

The Sikorsky found its empty field and landed just long enough for the four men to disembark, each with a large black duffel. Last boots to hit the ground were Seb's and the chopper was up and off. Going out as it came in, from the opposite direction of the target monastery.

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'Let's get a yomp on, I want that first pint at 19.00 and it's now 18.10.' The men shouldered their bags and began the march to their beer. 18.55 They stopped in front of the pub. A big old building, clearly having been around a few centuries it oozed charm and old world comfort. Before it, leaning against a blackened Mercedes 170S was their apparent contact because the moment he clapped eyes on the quartet he waved and took a few steps towards them.

'Right on time,' he almost yelled with barely suppressed excitement 'but of course I should expect no less from legendary war heroes like you lot.' Harry and Seb exchanged curious glances and Toby stepped forward to intercept the little man before he got too close just as Ted's hand steadily reached for his revolver. The over keen contact spotted the move and realised he was addressing lions who were suspicious of everything and he raised both hands quickly in a gesture of peace and submission.

'My apologies good sirs, no need to get all dangerous like, I meant no offence or harm. Just a bit eager I suppose, I don't really do field work but they said all I had to do was drive this here and make my way back to Dorchester where I'd catch my lift back.'

'Keys.' Was all Harry said and the little man fumbled them out and tossed them to Harry. 'Always wanted a spin in one of these since they came out earlier in the year. Didn't go a bundle on their army but Jerry makes a damn fine automobile.' Ted shook his head at Harry's misplaced enthusiasm.

‘Well, job done...?’ Ted was fishing for the couriers name and it took him a few seconds to figure that out. ‘Oh, sorry my name is Alisdair Talbot and... if you or one of you could sign here please? Somebody has to keep the budget straight, you know how it is.’ As Alisdair whips out a sheaf of papers with the SC motif stamped upon it.

Ted signed for the vehicle as the car rumbled into life. ‘Harry, take it round the back out of sight, we’ll load up there.’ Ted commanded with natural authority. Without the need for telling twice, Harry sped off and almost took the corner on two wheels as he sought the rear entrance to the pub.

‘We’re not letting him drive the op are we?’ Seb asked plaintively.

‘Why not?’ Toby asked curious about Seb’s reticence. ‘He is the best qualified for the exfil, nobody drives the way Harry does.’ Seb held out his hands in supplication. ‘That’s my point, we don’t want to die in a car crash before we even get paid do we? You did see how that loon took off?’ Toby and Ted laughed, ‘you worry too much Seb, you’ll be fine. We trust him and we out vote you two to one. Harry doesn’t get a vote so get your gear, get inside and the first round is on you.’ Seb picked up his duffel and Harry’s and wandered away muttering about burning death in the twisted metal of a car he hadn’t even driven himself.

‘So then Talbot, job done. You need Harry to give you a lift somewhere? Dorchester is a bit of a hike even on a nice evening like this.’ Talbot held up both hands and wagged them in the negative. ‘No no sirs I’ll be fine. My cousin did say if I started the walk, he would meet me along the way in his car as he leaves off work so I’ll be good.’ With that Talbot pocketed the receipt and waved his farewell and trotted off the opposite direction.

Ted and Toby shouldered their own bags and went inside to check in and make a show of being visiting historians, performing archaeological research, hence their kit bags full of trowels and brushes etc. They were to perform investigations upon the Nine Stones,

Maiden Castle and the Cerne giant. This appeased the landlord who signed the four men in, assigned their rooms and passed the keys to Ted. Toby had gone through the back ahead with the kit bags and with Harry and Seb, loaded what they weren't carrying with them into the spacious boot of the Mercedes.

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Two rounds down and the quartet had, from a quiet booth towards the back of the pub managed to both eat and formulate their working plan to get in, retrieve and get out.

‘This seems like so much overkill for a trinket.’ Seb casually said as they sat back to ponder before retiring for a few hours. ‘I mean what’s so special about this? My brief was as usual vague on details, you know anymore Ted?’ Ted did and told them what he learnt, for now was the best time to bring them up to speed. Ted knew how their minds worked and this close to the op they were like sponges for details and their senses were on high alert, even after several, let alone just a few pints of Guinness.

‘So this ring is something of a top notch hound converter then?’ Harry added after Ted had finished ‘I can see why they wouldn’t this falling into the wrong hands, something turned by this would make pretty powerful enemies, far too cognizant and dangerous doesn’t even come close. So, how did this ring stay in the wind for so many centuries without the SC getting their grubby mitts on it? Seems the sort of thing they’d have a right hard on for.’

‘Seems they did’ Ted answered from the bits and pieces he gleaned from the briefing after asking the same sort of question. The answer was equally as brief. ‘It has to do with this place...well not this place but the Cerne monastery we’re hitting later. This ring was last heard of in Scotland at the turn of the last century before it vanished once more. If it had been utilised, then there would be a lot more of these creatures roaming loose but apparently there was some alpha scuffle and quite suddenly it vanished off everyone’s radar never to be heard from again...until recently.’ Toby pondered and finished his Guinness, planning to take first

watch – for even though they were in covert pre op status, you didn't get to live long lives by being trusting and complacent, or so Toby regularly told anyone who would listen. 'So it is still on this landmass,' Toby summarised 'last seen in Scotland and now popping up here, that's an odd line to draw.' Ted nodded initial agreement, but stood up and paced a bit before the open and wood popping fire that was nearby and Harry and Seb groaned, recognizing Ted's imminent lecture pose.

'You'd be right to think that normally, but Ginny put some detail in my briefing about Cnut.'

'The old barmy king who tried to hold back the water or tide or some such?' Seb asked. 'One and the same.' Ted responded 'You see Cnut was a wary man by all accounts and he surrounded himself with not the regular warriors and advisors but cousins; thinking relatives more loyal. His great grandfather Gorm the old was a proper pagan. Odin worshipper, Thor and Freya and the whole nine yards...'

'Realms.' Harry chirped in.

'What?' Ted asked a little thrown. 'Nine realms.' Harry repeated 'That's the Norse belief cosmos isn't it?' Ted scowled at the flippant interruption. 'Who made you an expert?' Ted asked waspily.

'I read you know.' Harry defended himself with mock indignation as he considered the implication implicit in Ted's comment. 'In fact I'll have you know they are Niflheim, Asgard, Midgard, Muspleheim, Jotunheim, Vanaheim, Alfheim, Svartalfheim and Helheim.' Ted regarded Harry with scrunched eyes and chewed his lip before speaking again. He wanted to bite back at Harry for being a smart arse, but inwardly he was impressed Harry knew such details and Ted hated being conflicted. He was also the boss and it didn't do moral

any good to put down your fellow workers. Positive reinforcement was the way forward, or so he was told.

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‘Well done Harry, you clearly have been spending your time wisely, however it doesn’t relate to the reason the ring ended up here. Long story real short Cnut did good things and he sought the approval of the old kings, including the ones in Scotland. It seems his equally ex Viking advisors were also Fenris priests for whatever reason brought the ring to light whilst in Scotland but for all his good deeds and ambitions, Cnut died here in Dorset. Would you believe the Fenris Ring was actually used as his royal signet and when he died in Shaftsbury sometime around 1035...’

‘Poor old Cnut, didn’t even get a whole day out of it.’ Seb spoke almost sadly. Ted stopped again ‘What?’

‘10.35 barely had time for breakfast.’ Seb clarified and Ted shook his head forlornly and ran his fingers through his short cropped white hair in some despair. ‘I don’t know why I bother...’

‘We were thinking much the same.’ Seb smirked back and Harry chuckled as he too finished his drink. ‘The year 1035 you bell end’ Ted knew he’d bitten ‘and after he was buried in... Winchester I believe his effects were whisked away to their newly appointed Fenris Monastery, which we believe is where the Alpha fight took place and the ring was never seen again.’

‘Until now.’ Toby rounded off. ‘So how did it stay hidden so long there with nobody coming across it?’ Ted smiled cruelly now as he looked straight at Seb. ‘Catacombs.’

‘You shitting me? They have a bloody corpse filled rabbit warren up there?’ Seb groaned.

‘Oh yes.’ Ted answered cheerily, the words dripping sadistic pleasure knowing Seb pretty much hated underground confined spaces, one too many bad experiences had left a permanent psychological scar.

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‘You think the new owners discovered them and opened them up? Finding all sorts of goodies down there no doubt and the ring being one of them?’ Harry finished the summation.

‘Exactly that. It was part of their legend so they recognised it straight off. Wolves have been summoned from all over Great Britain and much of Europe but not just the killing beasts we all fought, but the top brass, many of the old guard true bloods who have all the control the packs do not. The SC analysts think they’re hatching a plan...’

‘Of course they are’ Harry said as he stood and popped his back sufficient to make Seb wince. ‘Evil villain 101, be evil, hatch nefarious plan, be beaten by the good guys.’

Ted and Toby smiled, they liked the sometimes simplistic way Harry saw things.

‘Let’s hope it’s that easy then.’ Ted responded as he bade them good night and reminded Toby his watch was in two hours. It was now 23.00 and Ted wanted to make sure they were all up and firing on all cylinders for 03.00. That was when the fun was going to start. What none of them knew there and then that the ‘fun’ was going to start a lot sooner than any of them expected.

ACT III

I'll Huff and I'll Puff.

Seb and Harry had barely made it upstairs when the door to the pub violently opened wide, bringing with it an almost clichéd breeze and sense of foreboding. Ted and Toby turned as one, eyes going flinty and with both men's hands dropping to their pistols, Toby's slung left and right the same as Seb but Ted's was at his hip officer style where he was very familiar with it. The two figures who entered moments later were tall and garbed in dark clerical robes and both carried a sack in one hand, whereupon a first assumption might be the sack contains vegetables brought to the pub from a monastic garden, though it was a bit late for such a venture, a longer look spoke of something far more sinister. Ted's mind was racing as the men crossed the space and deposited their burdens upon the counter with a decidedly and disturbingly crunchy smack. Not one that sounded like a bag of cabbage and spuds. Both cowed heads then turned unerringly to fix upon Ted and Toby who were standing, poised just watching the tableaux unfold before deciding if action was required. The two pairs of eyes that fixed on them however as the cowls were thrown back made up their minds for them for no human stared with glowing golden eyes.

'I think these are yours.' Monk number one declared as he re grabbed the two sacks and tossed them with some force at Ted and Toby forcing the men to step smartly aside as the sacks hit the wall and fell to the ground disgorging their contents...the heads of Talbot and

undoubtedly his cousin. Toby and Ted drew and fired but the two monks moved with incredible speed as the rounds splintered off the ancient beams of the pub.

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‘You’ll have to be quicker than that Collective scum.’ Monk one snarled so Toby rolled then rolled again firing ahead of the left hand monk who spoke and both saw and heard the shot take him in the shoulder. ‘Graagh!’ the monk screamed as Toby rolled smoothly to his feet ‘Like that?’ The man thing part growled part screamed as the iron jacketed round caught it mid transformation, a sight which galvanised the few remaining pub goers who had been frozen in fear as the first shots rang out. Shot monk crashed into the bay window area where a couple huddled in fear and taking out his pain and rage upon them, the monk hound slashed at the doomed couple with ever growing talons sending blood and viscera everywhere. Ted knew it was too late for them so he let rip into the alcove and several shots hit the creature and blasted it out of the window in a cascade of blood, shattered glass and curtains. Mere seconds had elapsed when Harry and Seb appeared at the top of the stair case and assessed what was happening.

‘Shoot the monk!’ Toby yelled and with less time between the order and processing the words, both Harry and Seb opened fire on the unsuspecting monk who maybe thought that these men would be using regular bullets and that in his arrogance they would have little effect upon him, but he did not expect the iron that smashed into him from several directions and put a bloody end to his cursed existence once and for all.

‘There is one outside’ Ted shouted ‘make sure it’s dead but keep your eyes open in case these goons had friends, they like to travel in packs after all.’ Toby jumped then ‘Harry with me.’ Both men moved cautiously towards the door, weapons ready and stepped outside.

‘What the hell just happened?’ Seb asked as he scanned the room for any more. Ted just pointed down to where the heads were. ‘Ah, I see.’ Seb felt the penny drop ‘Not such a good plan walking back then.’

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‘I’d say we were expected and they were watching all along.’ Ted reasoned and Seb nodded as he bent down to put the heads back in the sack.

‘Well that pretty much pisses on our chips if we thought the element of surprise was on our side. Do we abort?’ Seb asked and Ted had already considered that, but knew leaving the ring in the wind was going to be a worse option and told Seb so.

‘So what now boss?’ Seb asked as Toby and Harry stepped back in, Harry walking backwards and closing the door behind him and throwing the bolt.

‘I couldn’t see any more which doesn’t mean there aren’t any more, the one you put down stayed down at least. There are several people running away though, think they’ll get far?’ Ted had already written off the few pub goers who had managed to slip out the door as the carnage broke out, Hounds were not known for leaving things alive and the fact these humans were running, they were as good as sport, the way a dog chases a rabbit.

‘Maybe, maybe not. Do a quick perimeter check, I want to know if we are expecting a siege here or if we can get out, remember the bulk of our ordnance is in the Merc outside. If clear we proceed as planned, surprise or not. They might know we are here but may not expect us to still attack them. We can’t leave this now.’ Toby knew he was right and started off on a ground floor recce, Seb loped off back upstairs to check all the windows and to ensure any other guests who might have come out when the noise stopped stayed in their room.

‘Bold as bloody brass, I see it but I can’t believe these bastards just walked in here cool as cucumbers and tossed heads at us. Un bloody believable.’ Harry was annoyed but

thinking, when he thought he bemoaned and went over matters aloud. ‘We need somewhere better defensively than this place, its got more holes and incursion points than a kids play fort. Too many windows, too much square footage to cover. There was a church a mile or so back, I saw it when we came down. Old, not too many doors and they’d be thick I’m guessing. We should decamp there, get kitted up and go before sun up.’

‘Good assessment Captain Harrison.’ Ted agreed ‘Think you can get to the car and get it fired up?’ Harry beamed a wide, toothy smile that presaged violence should anything prevent that. ‘No probs boss, I’ll take Seb as back up.’

‘Someone call?’ Seb’s voice wafted across the pub. Harry, using long practised familiar hand signage had Seb at his back in seconds as they headed for the back of the building, equally familiar battle senses heightened as they left Toby and Ted in the lounge area.

‘Do we call in for back up?’ Ted pulled a troubled expression as he pondered that very fact before answering Toby. ‘No. It wouldn’t get here in time anyway. It bothers me they even knew we were coming to know to watch. Did they follow Talbot here? How did they know we would even RV here in this out of the way location? Either we have a leak or they have a seer, a shaman at best.’

‘Well this cluster fuck just keeps getting better. There has to be more at stake here then than just a simple artefact retrieval. If their plan to use it coincides with a larger scheme, a prophecy even? We could be in deep shit then as they’ll be super wired and suspicious of anything, it’ll make getting in even harder.’ Ted snarled his answer. ‘Not as bloody hard as getting back out will be.’ The silence dropped between them like cannonball.

‘Are we getting back out Ted?’ Toby asked with that self-same cannonball settling in the pit of his stomach. Ted took long moments to give his answer, the one that Toby dreaded.

‘One of us has to.’ Toby nodded slowly. ‘One of us has to get the ring to the SC archivists at all costs. If it is a prophecy, it has to be thwarted.’ Toby was seeing his dream of kids, a wife and nice house vaporise like morning mist at the prospect of what they were about to do. It didn’t feel very nice but Toby knew it was the job, what he had signed for.

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The sound of a large German engine pulling up to an abrupt stop outside told both men Seb and Harry had made it, though how uninterrupted they were they were about to find out.

‘Let’s go, we have a mission to carry through and lets do that before any more of those buggers show up.’ Ted grabbed what he had and both men made a bolt for the door and the waiting car. They made the back seat unmolested and the big black Mercedes sped off into the night.

Screeching into the church carpark with a spray of gravel several minutes later. The Mercedes shuddered to a halt scant yards from the narthex and almost as if it had been timed, just as the four men broke cover from the car and ran to the church, spine chilling howls could be heard off in the distance.

‘How many do you think there are out there?’ Harry asked as he and Seb ran in for the second time after fetching the weapons and bags from the trunk. Toby had taken a high vantage point in the tower with a sniper sight and high powered rifle and was scanning the surrounding countryside for unnatural movement, so far though all was still.

‘Who knows,’ Ted responded, knowing the concerns they would have ‘they have allegedly been filtering in for ages, there could be a dozen or there could be hundreds...’

‘I’m opting for the dozen.’ Seb said glibly more through hope than reality ‘sadly though, I don’t have that kind of luck so expect hundreds.’ Harry just stared at Seb flatly

‘Thanks for that, so it’ll be your fault if there are in fact hundreds and we all die being eaten by poxy werewolves.’ Seb gave a look that said ‘What? How is it my fault?’

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‘Pack it in you two. Get kitted up, we need to be out of here and on the road again in thirty. Our surprise is going to be the fact we stay mobile, not to give them time to surround us, trap us anywhere and gain any advantage. We don’t want to turn this village into a slaughterhouse or killing zone, keep the public as safe and blissfully unaware as possible, take the fight out to them.’ Harry and Seb both looked at Ted.

‘That’s assuming the public, namely the village aren’t all in on it. I mean, if the Hounds and their priests have had this place hereabouts for centuries, wouldn’t they have ingratiated themselves over time?’ Ted gave that idea he had been trying not to give head room a bit more consideration and dragged it out into the light.

‘I didn’t want to think that dark but you’re probably on to something there. Trust no-one but us then. Toby has the co-ordinates for the monastery, we’ll leave the car a mile down the road and as concealed as we can make it, though what with their sense of smell being what it is, concealing anything is going to be nigh on impossible.’

‘Actually, funny you should say that.’ Seb piped up ‘I was chatting to a particularly friendly druidess one weekend and she showed me this cantrip, basically for hiding something you don’t want seen or found. She used it on the tent we were sharing and...’

‘Thank you Seb we don’t need details.’ Ted interrupted but Harry snorted ‘Speak for yourself, spill the beans you scrawny blonde cad. That was the week we couldn’t get hold of you last spring?’ Seb shrugged noncommittally but grinned like a Cheshire cat full of mischief.

‘Does it work? Can you remember it and do you need any ingredients?’ Ted asked pleased that they might at least have a way out for whoever made it back.

‘I do and I don’t, it’s all in the wording and I’ve used it once or twice since to keep particularly sensitive things hidden from some really nosy people.’ Seb looked hard at Harry.

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‘I never went through your place,’ Harry whined ‘no matter how long you think it was me. I just dumped you off unconscious...again and made myself comfortable on the couch as it was too late for the train. I can’t be held responsible if you lose stuff.’ Harry was genuinely indignant but just how genuine was open to interpretation with Harry, he could lie for England...and had successfully on many an occasion.

‘I don’t know if you two need to get or room or get married and be done with it.’ Toby commented dryly as he came down from the tower. ‘All clear so far, a couple of deer one fox and few bats, oddly no people at all moving out there.’

‘How is that odd? We’re in the frickin realm of the fairies and goblins out here, all the people are probably indoors, or underground or wherever they go when there are murderous hounds out on the prowl.’ The four men exchanged glances knowing speculation was wasting time, so taking advantage of the stillness, they geared up. Stuffing their webbing with as many iron jacketed rounds as their mags would hold, sensing they would get through all of them. Iron filing grenades, daggers of enchanted iron, all rune inscribed to prevent removal once rammed home, it was a Collective speciality for although they had been around several thousand years, the previously elusive Hounds of Fenris hadn’t been a major problem for many of those early centuries, they had appeared steadily over the last couple of thousand only. Revenants were their main problem, certainly at Ted’s level and that of Toby, Harry and Seb who were part of Ted’s Securitas Internationale, a blossoming PMC company who were basically a front for the Seraphim Collective. A Revenant was a human who had become possessed by a rogue deminion and they took several forms. A deminion was a lesser creature from another world, Nescaria or the Domain but was in real sense the place humans

came to call Hell. It was a very real place and the bridges between this realm and that of Nescaria were increasing in defiance of the Covenant, an ancient agreement that prevented incursions by the Nescarians back onto Earth who they know as Erithia, long before humans called it Terra or subsequently, Earth. The Collective had gotten good at dealing with Revenants and a variety of other creatures that made regular mischief upon this world but some point this century, there had been a shift and no-one had yet put their finger on what that shift was, only that creatures were appearing more frequently, more diverse and many of them infinitely more dangerous. These Hounds were in that bracket well and truly. One hypothesis is that they are god born, and by that it is meant they were turned from the deity that was Fenris directly. The dread wolf Fenris, spawn of Loki and who the Collective were assured was no longer a threat to the cosmos. It seemed, or so Ted thought more of late, that the Collective needed to bring their intel firmly up to date as a lot was going down that simply wasn't in the Collective playbook anymore. He sat currently in one of those scenarios as Toby, Seb and Harry did. A last recon around the building before they made once more for the Mercedes. They made it without being hassled and sped away to the smell of burning rubber, now relying on Toby for directions as he checked the OS against the Collective analysts coordinates.

‘Hang a left up ahead,’ Toby instructed Harry who was driving ‘that should put us on an old Roman road, follow that for a couple of miles until we start to see trees, there is a wood at the other end of the road and this monastery supposedly hangs a right into it about a mile after, keep your eyes peeled as the turning is likely to be pretty elusive.’ It was as they missed it twice before finding it and then finding a suitable off road spot for the big Mercedes. Seb spoke a few words and it was like a vanishing liquid was poured over the car, it just melted away into total invisibility.

‘Astonishing.’ Both Toby and Harry said simultaneously then looked at each other with that miffed expression implying one was copying the other.

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‘How do we reveal it again Seb?’ Ted asked impressed at the charm. ‘That could be pretty important when one of us is running for our very life and need the car. Just in case it isn’t you...for whatever reason...’ It was hard for Ted to add much more as they all knew they might not all make it back. Seb knew this and nodded, his mood turned suddenly sober. ‘Repeat this a few times, the car might come back but I’ll hide it again. *A BHITH FOLLAISEACH.*’ They all tried it individually, watching the car appear and disappear again as each man got the hang of the charm. ‘Good, hiding it requires a bit more than a Gaelic phrase but it’s all it takes to unhide it. You just have to know where whatever you’re unhiding is, and focus on that like you have done. The phrase doesn’t just work randomly you understand.’

‘Good to know, now it’s time to get to work, Harry you’re point, Seb rear. Toby and I will take left and right, move out and don’t lose the night vision goggles. They’re a prototype apparently. Aeneas Industries dropped them off for our exclusive use.’

‘Cool, how do they work?’ Harry asked as he dropped his head over his eyes.

‘You know very well.’ Ted chided Harry as he flipped the switch at the side and the world turned green. ‘They were a miniaturised and reverse engineered version of the Nazi infra-red version they had tried to use back during the War. They started developing them during the 30’s but our chaps figured it out. HQ says the yanks are trying to do something similar so as I said, don’t lose these, we want to keep our edge as long as possible.’ Ted told them.

‘Look out hounds, the *Nachtjäger*s are coming to get you.’ Harry sang out derisively and Seb laughed. ‘Yep, you’re a proper *night hunter* Harry, just don’t get yourself eaten.’ The

moment of levity passed and with Seb's warning about being eaten echoing in each of their minds, they raised their modified AK 47's and as one, moved off towards the entrance driveway to the monastery. The AKs had been modified uniquely by Aeneas Industries to fit a suppressor, a necessity for more stealthy work when you didn't want to attract attention.

'I like these.' Seb over whispered, rolling the weapon over in his hands 'I can see why the Ruskies have adopted them. Gonna give us trouble in the future though when these end up in the wrong hands as they no doubt will, some bloody arms dealer will make a mint flogging these.'

'Seb! Shut up and focus. What did you say about not being eaten?' Ted over whispered back. Ted watched then as Seb and Harry finally dropped into the efficient tracking team that they were and they began moving through the trees with expert precision. Leaving Ted and Toby either side of the driveway to keep their shapes indistinct but Ted checking forward whilst Toby made sure nothing crept up upon them.

'If I survive this Ted, I'm re-joining when we get back, take up my old command, I should make Major General in what...three years?' Ted considered what that meant, both to Toby and to his team, it would be a loss.

'I suppose you're looking for a little less hazard if you're looking for that family?'

'I am truth be told. My knee isn't what it was and before too long I'll be a liability out here but my tactical mind can be fully utilised by the battalion.' Toby had clearly thought this through before telling Ted. Ted suspected that was hard enough for Toby to do, as it was Ted who recruited Toby to the Collective and to Securitas International after the war ended.

'It'll suit you Toby, you don't need to justify it to me. You need to do what's right for you and it isn't like our paths won't cross, not with what we do and what you know. Good luck to you Tobias, now let's make sure it's you then who gets back in one piece.'

‘I didn’t mean it like th...’ Ted laughed quietly. ‘Shss man I know you didn’t, I’m only making you feel bad for dropping the team in it, but joking apart, we’ll survive.’

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‘Let’s hope so.’ Toby muttered gloomily. That thought quietened both men down as they made their way up the overly long driveway. The trees broke and they were faced with several dwellings, none of which had any lights on. Ted spotted Seb and Harry a few hundred yards left and right respectively just as they broke cover. Ted signalled ahead to the main building. He knew these creatures probably didn’t need light, their eyes naturally functioned like the devices they wore, Ted and the squad needed the luck of the other gods just to get in, let alone find the ring in what stood to be a labyrinth with who knew how many Hounds in residence, less two that was.

Ted had spent as much time as he could memorizing the layout on the blueprints and was fairly sure he knew where they needed to go. The main dwelling, what was the main hall had four new attachments branching off them but the fifth was the original older annexe, it was there that the blueprint showed the entrance to the catacombs and it was in those tunnels Ted believed the ring chamber would be. Seb would not be happy.

‘One circuit of this building, meet back here, if everything winds up FUBAR and there are more than we can handle, you three make a break for it and regroup back at the church. It’ll serve as a diversionary retreat and I’ll slip in which they hopefully won’t be expecting. If on the other hand we have a clear perimeter, we all go in clear the four new builds and focus on the annexe. If we all make the catacomb unmolested then it gets really hard as we’ll have limited...well, one way in and one way out basically.’

‘What a cheery picture you’re painting here Ted.’ Harry mumbled as he committed everything Ted said to memory. ‘It’s why you’ll be leaving as many C4 presents all around the new builds.’ Ted added ‘Carnage is our friend chaps and if it comes to it...and I rather

think it will, we'll level this place. Hit every flammable, volatile and structural point they have here, make them think there are more of us than just us, they know we're coming after all just hopefully not in what numbers.'

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'How long?' Harry asked. Ted raised his watch and turned the dial, 'be back here in 10. Toby and I will secure and choose the infil point, you've got the triggers?' Seb and Harry confirmed their state of the art wireless triggers from Aeneas Industries were a go. 'Good, and I've got the master trigger if it all goes tits up.' Ted patted the device at his hip. Aeneas Industries provided much, if not all of the tech and ordnance for the Collective. For Corben, who was Aeneas Industries had accumulated vast wealth over the many centuries, which he in turn supported the Seraphim Collective with and kept it free from fiscal oversight and unnecessary governmental interference when it came to R and D as well as larger acquisitions. Protecting the world was a costly business it seemed. Ted of course as yet knew none of this and still held his watch as he waited for a hand to move 'And mark.' On that word both Seb and Harry vanished into the darkness.

'Okay then, let's see what way in suits us best.' Ted whispered to Toby who put a hand on Ted's shoulder forestalling him a moment. 'You didn't tell them?'

'They don't need to know that right now, it'll only distract them. We all get out of this, you can tell them. We don't... then it won't matter.' Toby just nodded, silent with the gravity of what Ted said.

'You take those windows, I'll take these ones, check for bars and I'll meet you at the door. 5 minutes later at the door. 'What did you find?' Ted asked. And Toby thumbed back the way he had come. 'There are some new all glass doors back there, designed to open into a courtyard by the looks of it, didn't look like a complicated lock.'

'Should be easy to pick then?' Ted asked reaching for his lock picks.

‘It was.’ Toby smiled patting his own picks. Just waiting for us, nobody inside that I could see. Ted frowned, he didn’t like the fact they had been cover blown by two hounds and yet at their base of operations there were none evident, where were they all?

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‘Any of this seem fishy to you?’ Ted asked Toby as they cautiously made their way to the door Toby had unlocked. ‘All of it, the hackles on my hackles are up if I’m honest. It feels like something big is holding its breath just waiting for us to do...something.’

‘Yep, that’s how I’d describe it too. Plant a couple of explosives here, in case they follow someone out this door in a hurry that’ll hopefully slow them.’ Toby noted that Ted was avoiding saying a name for who was leaving although Toby knew – reluctantly – it was likely to be him, if Ted’s plan went as expected at least. He knew though that plans had a tendency to go sideways when least expected so it wasn’t set in stone. He knew it and clearly Ted knew it.

‘Good, still seems quiet. Wait here, keep out of sight and wait for the three of us to RV back here before we go in.’ Ted nipped off to RV with Seb and Harry then minutes later, after confirming all their charges were set, as one being they all raised their rifles to shoulder and silently entered the room Toby had opened up.

‘Clear!’ Toby called as did Seb and Harry after checking the new build interiors.

‘Shit, I’m liking this less and less.’ Ted growled at the lack of hound resistance. But the moment they had closed the door and stepped inside two dozen pairs of baleful golden eyes silently moved and the hulking bodies of the Hounds of Fenris that they belonged to stepped into view from the tree line where they had been secreted, silently watching as the four men, believing they were quiet and alone loudly crunched past them.

‘They are inside my lord Cenn Mòr.’ A large greying hound spoke to a much larger, reddish hued Hound who answered in a Scottish rumble. ‘Aye they are, just as the assassin said they would be.’ The slightly smaller grey spoke with a hint of Scandinavian.

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‘I do not trust Stryfe my lord, he is Drakul and as such is treacherous.’

‘You are not wrong Lars. Has Stryfe left yet?’ The big red growled, contempt masking his words ‘He has my Lord,’ Lars answered keenly ‘citing unfinished business in London to do with the one they call General Yorkbeard.’ The big, barrel chested hound took a deep breath and inhaled every scent on the early morning breeze before grunting a sound that passed for laughter.

‘Yes, the white haired warrior here. Apparently he and Stryfe conflicted back in Africa during the human’s war and Stryfe swore vengeance.’

‘What could a mere human do to earn such enmity from a Drakul after all these years?’ Lars asked

‘I do not know but I suspect it involved Stryfe’s woman.’

‘I never knew he had one.’ Lars shrugged growing disinterested. ‘No, apparently neither did the white hair.’ Red growled ‘He destroyed much during that conflict and apparently Stryfe’s woman was a casualty of that, collateral damage they call it.’

‘So he seeks white hairs woman?’ Lars asked and big red sighed at the linear way his lieutenant thought, even having been gifted with increased control and power, his intellect hadn’t really benefitted.

‘That would be my guess’ Red answered derisively ‘now summon the warriors. We have them where we want them and none are to escape. White hair is mine as it will fulfil a

blood debt for the many brothers and sisters he has taken, Stryfe wants the head of the other, the one they called Tobias...’

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Lars asked ‘Why?’ the back handed swat delivered by Red caught Lars fully across the muzzle and sent the big wolf staggering.

‘Because I said so you insolent pup! Do not question my orders. You were raised to carry them out. The old guard will be arriving soon, unlike the misinformation we provided that they already had, only you and I remain sentient here, the warriors we have are nothing more than savages and that is all we need. But I will have my revenge for Cinaed and Donnchad too, they were complacent and underestimated them but they were mine to kill, not theirs.’

‘My apologies my Lord, I overstepped. It was only my curiosity getting the better of me. Yes, retribution for Kenneth and Duncan is fitting.’ Seeing that Lars once more knew his place, Red felt more controlled. An alpha must assert its position after all and frequent displays of power are required. Red felt then comfortable to explain to Lars some of the reasoning.

‘My lord and your god, the Dread Lord Fenris has personally asked for this human’s head as he is part of a larger prophecy and supposedly a part of the Covenants hated guardians.’

‘He’s a guardian? I’ve never met one before.’ Red laughed at the greys simplicity.

‘No, he is not technically a guardian himself, although his ancestors were believed to be but a recent thread in The Adversary’s plan highlights this man as a threat and the seers come up blank with him. Maybe it is him or maybe it is to prevent him having any cubs who might be a threat, either way he dies.’

‘Your command sire, I will see it done.’ Red threw back his head then and howled, long and deep and it was heard for many miles around. It was also heard inside the monastery.

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‘Then go my hounds, go do what you are best at, kill everything that moves.’ Over 40 hounds of Fenris burst from the undergrowth surrounding the property and loped on mighty thewed legs towards the dwelling, powerful arms swinging by their sides with vicious talons at the ends of massive paw like hands, moving at a terrifying speed towards the entrance where Ted, Toby, Seb and Harry had gone in and having reached the main hall, hearing the howl had little idea what was mercilessly heading straight for them.

ACT IV

Cry Havoc And Let Slip The Dogs Of War.

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‘You heard that, right? It wasn’t just my paranoia?’ Seb whispered, a hint of concern tainting his normal joviality. ‘Yep, I definitely heard it and it wasn’t from in here, it was from out there.’ Harry needlessly pointed out, but pointing it out made him feel better.

‘Ted, you ever get that feeling we’ve been set up?’ Ted scowled and weighed their options. ‘It’s not a feeling I like,’ he said ‘but it looks like we’ll have to do this in reverse. Gather close.’ All four men stepped towards each other and turned, all four spun, back to back and weapons facing out.

‘You’re going to do what I think you’re going to do aren’t you?’ Seb asked wearily

‘I am Seb now hold tight.’ Ted pulled an amulet from around his neck and repeated the words upon it, as he did so a turquoise nimbus formed around the quartet. As it sealed, Ted pulled the trigger from his belt and pushed the big red button.

Every explosive set by Toby, Seb and Harry detonated. The blast was deafening, though not inside the nimbus. Everything was muffled but seconds later as timbers and masonry was sent hurtling in fiery devastation nobody complained about a bit of muffling. Sections of wall and flaming woodwork was screaming around them as the C4 did its work but it all bounced harmlessly off the nimbus. ‘How long will this hold Ted?’ Toby spoke but it was warped, spongy like being spoken to underwater. ‘Long enough I hope.’ Was Ted’s reply to the question he thought he had heard. Many of the hounds outside however were not expecting it and ran full on into the explosive chaos. Normally they wouldn’t have been seriously injured but these Collective explosives were laced with iron and ferrous materials

and over twenty died instantaneously as a result, shredded in ways they didn't even see coming. Many of the others took wounds that probably would not heal but although it left more than enough alive to kill four humans, they were stopped momentarily by this

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unexpected turn of events, they sought fresh orders. This was Ted's hope too.

'That should stall them for a few minutes at least.' Ted dropped the nimbus with a word and the men automatically resumed their defensive alertness, weapons shouldered and sighted. A hound had made it through the carnage albeit ablaze and flailing. Two suppressed rounds from Seb put it down. Harry had to do the same as another came crashing in. The fight was on. Ted and Toby blew the door to the catacomb, there was no point in finesse now. Plus any hound on the other side got to wear a door and some masonry thus removing it from any ambush it might have had. Ted and Toby shouldered weapons and moved forward once more. 'Moving!' Ted hollered and the men followed, Seb and Harry maintained a rear defensive and took out several more hounds that were daring enough to follow them into the passage. Two smaller humans with superior firepower managed easily to hold the larger, cumbersome creatures at bay as their massive bodies soon began to fill the passage. A passage that was built for humans in the 11th century, where if they were five foot they were tall thus ruining the image of marauding Vikings who were probably no bigger than mid four to five feet themselves. Ted, Toby, Seb and Harry had to stoop as it was but it didn't stop Seb clouting himself more than once on the head as he kept forgetting how low the arches were. 'Ow!' Seb snapped through gritted teeth 'One more bloody time and I'm going to blow this lot up just on principle, my head is going to look like the surface of the moon at this rate.'

'Match your face then' Harry snapped back trying to lighten the increasingly dark mood that was settling upon them. 'How much further Ted? I'm worried we're not gonna have the ammo for the return trip at this rate.' That thought had crossed Ted's mind too.

‘Two more turns should bring us to the...ah there we go. Hound central.’

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‘Do you have to call it that boss? It’s bad enough we’re doing what only rabbits and moles should be doing but to add them vicious bastards into the mix really isn’t natural or sporting.’ Ted smiled despite the gravity of the situation. ‘Well as we took point and encountered nothing, we’ll swap here as we’ve more ammo than you now, we’ll cover your arse while you secure and scout this chamber. See if that damn ring is here somewhere.’ Ted and Toby swiftly swapped spots and just in time to take out two hounds that were making a dash for them, all teeth and claw. A truly unnerving sight, one that had unmanned many in their time but Ted and Toby were made of sterner stuff, forged in the fires of a global war and honed by the Collective into the hardened and seasoned warriors they were.

‘Hurry it up you two, there seems to be more of them coming than there was before.’ Ted barked over his shoulder as he slotted another hound. ‘There are definitely more of them Ted, what do they know we don’t?’ Toby asked, sensing an inevitability to proceedings.

‘Too much I grant you and I’m loathe to use the grenades in here, it’ll block our exfil. I’ve got six mags left you?’ Toby did a quick feel ‘Five.’ Ted sighed. It wasn’t going to be enough.

‘Think we’ve found it boss.’ Harry shouted back ‘But I don’t think you’re going to like it.’ Ted’s shoulders slumped, there was always something. Harry swapped with Ted while Seb explained what they’d found.

‘What is it?’ Ted asked with as much reluctance to hear the answer as he could muster.

‘Well it seems the thing is stuck in a glass bauble or something glass like anyway and that is held by several chains to the wall and that has two sleeves attached.’

‘Okay? Not seeing a problem yet, I have a charm to disenchant the sphere.’ Harry pulled a face that said it was coming.

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‘The sleeves have razors all the way through them and they are the only way to reach the annoyingly elusive thing. One has to reach right through, up to the shoulder slicing yourself to ribbons in the process while the other has to reach through theirs to detach the clasp the sphere is held in. It seems the blood collected is part of the key. The time that’ll take and the size of those blades, there is no way whoever does it will get the job done without bleeding out first.’ Ted was livid and his mind spun.

‘Can’t we shoot it out? Blow it out? Use anything we have without destroying it?’

Ted hoped and even sent a request to gods he no longer believed in that something could be done. ‘Fraid not boss.’ Seb added in, it’s suspended over a hole I’m not sure has a bottom.’

‘So we lose it down a deep hole, problem solved.’ Ted didn’t really believe that either even as he said it.

‘Don’t reckon so boss, they might know it has a bottom and those things could probably scoot up and down it and we’d be one step back from where we are now.’

‘Any chance we can speed things along?’ Toby shouted back as he was steadily firing as more hounds were invariably drawing inexorably closer, dragging their dead out of the way so they could move forward.

‘Don’t worry boss, we have a solution.’ Harry chimed up as Ted’s heart was sinking. ‘Leave it with us.’ Harry turned and ran back, Seb was seconds behind him. ‘A little help here Ted.’ Toby shouted as Ted was torn between watching Harry and Seb run off and Toby’s unusual call for help. Toby sounded a bit panicked and rightly so, when Ted made his choice and joined Toby he saw the stuff of nightmares bearing down on them. It took 4 of

Ted's six mags and all of Toby's five to drive them back but there were more filling the tunnel. Ted could see too many of their baleful glowing golden eyes.

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‘Where is Seb and Harry?’ Toby shouted and Ted sit repped that they were sorting it.

‘They’ve been too long for their usual kind of sorting and it’s gone very quiet back there.’ Ted’s heart dropped out of his chest right there and then as he knew then with an awful truth what Seb and Harry had meant. Tossing Toby his last mag, Ted turned and sprinted towards his two friends. Seconds later he found them. Ted wailed at the sight.

‘Nooo!’ They both hung limply from the insidious device, their blood free flowing down both their bodies and into the nefarious device but, in the free hand of Seb was the orb containing the ring. Ted had been forewarned it might be in one of these as they were popular at the time, Ted spoke a series of guttural words and the sphere shattered dropping the ring into Ted’s hand. He spared Seb and Harry one glance and knew both had lost consciousness if not their lives by the amount of claret they’d expended. Looking at the ring, there was only one thing for Ted to do.

ACT V

Every Dog Has It's Day.

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‘Where are they?’ Toby asked as Ted came jogging back, carrying Seb’s and Harry’s spare mags. ‘Have they got it?’ Ted knew they wouldn’t be needing them anymore.

‘This is a proper cluster...Ahh.’ Toby bemoaned as he fired into the stygian gloom of the catacomb ‘I hate it when jobs go sideways like this...wait, why aren’t they running at us anymore?’ Toby didn’t seem bothered by that fact.

‘They’ve just stopped. I don’t know what you just did but it’s brought us a moment. Still don’t know how we are getting out...’ a booming Scottish voice echoed down the corridor in answer to Toby’s question.

‘Nor shall you little human. But ah’ll be having your head to remind me of your efforts ya ken, brave but invariably pointless against us.’ Toby scowled as he was quite fond of his head where it was. Ignoring the fact that a disembodied voice was talking to them for the first time since the two monks had addressed them.

‘Yeah, righto William Wallace,’ Toby shouted back ‘look how well that turned out for you last time, I’ll be leaving my head where it is thank you very much...yours on the other hand might look nice on my library wall. Stuffed. Or a rug maybe...’ Toby shouted back as Ted cast furtive glances behind him.

‘Aye well, we’ll be seeing then won’t we wee man. I’d love to stay and watch but I have an appointment elsewhere. Lars here will do the honours. Fare thee well little human, you fought hard and your ancestors will be canny proud of ya efforts, futile as they were.’ With that the big red wolf, growled something to a slightly smaller grey one and then the big

red vanished with uncanny speed. At which point the hounds all snarled and perked right up, somehow reinvigorated and repurposed, they began to make their way towards Ted and Toby once more.

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‘Don’t know what you keep looking back there for, have you seen what’s coming? I’m using the grenades and to bollocks with it, I’ll dig my way out.’ Toby yanked two grenades off his webbing and was about to pull the pins when Ted stopped him.

‘Wait.’ Was all Ted said; Toby was aghast and stared at Ted like he had lost his mind which was the next question Toby asked him.

‘I may very well have but for good reason.’ Ted grabbed Toby by the chin and turned his head to face the oncoming hounds who had, amazingly stopped moving once more. Toby could have sworn they looked confused. ‘Why do they look like they’ve been deactivated Ted?’ Toby asked through a scrunched up face. A voice answered him, a voice that was clearly not human for no human could vocalize the sound Toby heard.

‘That is because they have.’ Came Seb’s voice from behind him but there was something wrong with it, his voice was wrong. Toby turned and came very close to crapping himself as there was a giant pale wolf nose sniffing him over slavering fangs just inches from his face. Then it spoke again and Toby’s world spun.

‘Ted had no choice and nor did we. I prefer this to dead.’

‘We? But...’ Toby sputtered

‘The ring Toby.’ Ted stated flatly ‘They made the sacrifice to get it, I couldn’t let them die, not here, not like that. This seemed the only choice if all the legends about this ring were true, Seb and Harry would retain themselves and be in full control of their faculties and the change - certainly for a while. That means they have authority over lesser hounds...like

them’ Ted pointed to the immobile yet quivering pack just yards from them ‘at least to some extent. Depends on who they fear more, Seb and Harry here or that big grey thing waving its claws about frantically down there.’ At that moment it appeared the grey won out and the hounds charged.

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‘Get behind us you two.’ The wolf that was Harry growled as he bounded past, an almost black, gigantic creature. He was on par to Seb’s blonde, paler wolf, no lesser in stature though. The two former Collective warriors leapt into the tunnel and carnage ensued. Seconds later Ted and Toby were moving, using the last of their ammo to clear a path and Toby was even fortunate enough to clip the big grey who howled blood chillingly and grabbed his bleeding shoulder and ran from the catacomb.

The retreat was swift after that, clearing the tunnels and exiting what remained of the dwelling. Seb and Harry were a spectacle to behold as they savaged hounds left right and centre. Collective training in the form of a monstrous Hound of Fenris, the lesser hounds stood little chance even with their own innate savagery. Clear of the buildings Ted and Toby used their grenades to effect, careful to avoid Seb and Harry. Harry broke off the attack to lope up to Toby and Ted.

‘We’ll hold them here, none will follow. There is some clearing up to do and we have things to work out now. Take the ring, stay safe you two and enjoy our funerals. Seb and Harry as you knew them are gone. We are something...else now, someone else. Don’t worry though boys, our paths will cross again I’m sure.’ Then Harry spun and he and Seb were nothing more than black and gold blurs.

True to their word, Seb and Harry moved through the remaining hounds like a reapers scythe. Ted and Toby bolted for the driveway and headed straight for the car. Harry and Seb even managed a salute as Ted and Toby ran past... then they too were gone.

The drive was long and quiet as Ted and Toby were both lost in their own thoughts. Arriving back in London Ted took out the radio from the glove compartment and finding a secure channel he called HQ.

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‘Hi Ginny, Toby and I are back.’ Ted waited a few seconds letting the absence of Seb and Harry’s names sink in.

‘Glad you’re back sir, sorry about Seb and Harry.’ Ginny’s metallic voice on the radio sounded sad. ‘I’ll start proceedings but you’re needed right away at Downing Street Ted, PM’s request. We’ll get Toby set up for the debrief and let the archivists know you’re back...you do have it I presume?’ Ginny asked almost reluctantly, unsure considering their loss, but Ted wasn’t known for failure.

‘We do, I’ll give it to Toby and drop him off at the Westminster entrance; he’ll be in the Mercedes. I’ll make my way to the PM on foot. I need to change first. There is a Collective safe house enroute, I have some bits there. Thank you Ginny.’ An hour and a half later Ted was walking towards No.10, nodding to the policeman who met him and opened the door for him.

‘Evening General.’ Ted frowned at the designation, he should know it was Colonel and told the officer he had seen on many an occasion so.

‘Sorry sir, I may have jumped the gun there, I expect it’ll be made clear inside. They are waiting for you in the war room sir.’

‘Thank you Wilkins, a very enigmatic start to an equally mysterious meeting.’

‘Take your word for that sir, above my pay grade and all that. Best of luck then.’

Ted gave a wink of bravado then entered the famed building, letting the door shut behind him. Ted was met by a junior minister in a black suit who directed Ted to the war room, which was surprisingly full.

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‘Ah Yorkbeard, glad you were able to make it, your superiors weren’t sure you’d be back in time.’ Ted noted the voice in the gloom of the room and responded politely.

‘Thank you Prime Minister but if I may, what has brought us all here quite so fervently? Don’t tell me the War has kicked off again?’

‘No nothing that dramatic thankfully. There has been however some very disturbing reports and they have been followed up by several equally disturbing attacks, smacks of events like that Arch Duke Ferdinand and his good lady. We need to nip this in the bud before anything escalates like that did. I take it you’ve been off the radar to not have heard about them. So you’ll have missed the memo with your field promotion to General, I suspect the paperwork will catch up in due course.’

‘Yes Prime Minister and no, unfortunately I have been somewhat busy the last couple of days, what else did I miss?’ The PM turns to a figure who has been standing back in the shadows and he ushers him forward. A large man, standing over six foot six and sporting a very bushy and very red beard steps forward. ‘General, may I introduce you to Lord Conmore, he is assisting us with this investigation into the so called ‘Order of Ragnor’. Fanatics apparently who want to bring about chaos, disorder and the end of the world blah blah blah, much like that Austrian mad man we just defeated.

‘Well well, General Yorkbeard is it now?’ He asked in a drawling Scottish accent. ‘You look very familiar wee man, have we met?’ A hint of recognition found Ted’s ears.

‘I don’t think so Lord...Conmore? I have a thing for faces and animals, maybe that’s it? Do you have a dog perhaps? Maybe I’ve seen you walking it upon the many parks

hereabouts? Then again maybe not and as I like informality, you can call me Ted.’ Ted however scrutinised red beard and barely held his temper in check.

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‘Bonny, Ted it is and you may call me Sir Malcolm.’ Ted smiled up at the bearded giant and clasped his hands behind him in the at ease position just as Malcolm reached out a hand to Shake Ted’s. Ted looked at it and smiled a smile that said I think not and simply turned away.

‘So then Prime Minister, what do we know?’ Ted asked totally ignoring the big Scot and Conmore scowled in his beard but said nothing. Though they may have heard the grinding of his teeth in number 11. Three days solid passed as report after report was presented and intel was brought to them by every avenue at their disposal about this apocalyptic cult - Order of Ragnor. On the fourth day a junior minister stopped Ted in the corridor as they were taking tea and handed him a note. It was from the hospital, Ted’s wife had been taken mysteriously ill and was not expected to last the night so grave was this sudden turn. Ted excused himself and made all haste to the hospital but still arrived too late. She was gone. A massive haemorrhage apparently. The doctors were mystified but put it down to complications from what was a tumultuous childbirth a few years earlier. Ted wasn’t so sure and he ran a full spectrum of emotions. Spending a long time on suspicion. It was a familiar scene and something about it niggled Ted but he couldn’t put his finger on why. He had been made aware of dark and terrible spells that could accomplish this but didn’t know of anyone capable or with reason to do this. Suspicion gave way to grief and that swamped his senses, leaving him distraught and in that state, Ted spent the night there by Mary’s side crying himself dry. When he could cry no more he went up to the roof and taking the little silver crucifix she had given him to wear for her, off his neck and he held it in his hands for long minutes before hurling it from the rooftop in disgust. He really didn’t know what he was going to do now, two young daughters and no idea what to do with them. For now they were

with good people, too young to really know what had happened to their mum. He would address that after he had finished with the PM and his Collective duties. Duties that had increased exponentially hence his impromptu promotion to General.

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‘There’s always something.’ Ted growled ‘Always goddamn something.’ as he went back downstairs and headed forlornly back to No.10. Away in the distance Ted thought he heard a mournful howl echoing over the misty and labyrinthine streets of London.