

# Hand of Chaos

## Chaos Theology, Vol. 1

J. Hamlet

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To Bernadette Connor and John Crowley, for always  
being willing to read.

### **Author's Note:**

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## I. FIRST RESPONDERS

Reverberating guitars and hissing cymbals yawned in the early dawn. A hand fumbled across the bed and nightstand to grab the source of the sound: a slim smartphone etched with a mentalism ward. “Hello?” whispered Anna Wei, the thinking part not quite there. Vinegar-coffee taste, the kiss of several Guinnesses, caressed her breath as she checked her alarm clock. Five thirty a.m. Anna struggled to surface and drowned in sleep deprivation. Too many drinks ... she was unsure if she had a hangover. Any voice could be about to echo through that phone, but she had a good idea who it was. She checked her bed, fumbling her fingers through it for clothes. A loose robe covered her naked body. Last night she’d brought someone home with her from her night out in Dupont Circle, but she couldn’t exactly recall what happened next or his name or exactly what he’d looked like. He wasn’t there, so thankfully she’d at least followed her rule number one: never let them stay over. It was a

Tuesday, and even for someone in her mid-twenties, she was getting a little old to play this game on a weeknight. Not that weeknights or weekends made too much of a difference in her line of work.

“On my way over,” a gruff male voice said on the other end. “ETA about five minutes. We’ve got an emergency, the violent kind. I think we’ve got a big body count already, and it’s growing. You awake?”

“Definitely not awake,” Anna groaned. She rolled out of bed, grabbing a pair of jeans hung over a nearby chair. “For fuck’s sake, it’s five thirty, Roy. I don’t usually report for another three hours. Remember, some of us actually need sleep.”

“Right,” Roy said. “I forget sometimes.” He would, Anna thought. Roy’s otherworldly qualities were many, and not needing sleep was a big one. “Can you be ready anyway? This might be huge.” Anna stuck her palm to her forehead and rubbed the sleep out of the corners of her eyes. She exhaled in a deep breath and tried to feel whatever currents of magic she could.

“Yeah,” Anna mumbled irritably, pulling her jeans up and looking for a bra. “What do I need?” She fumbled with her keys, unlocking the jewelry box on her dresser with a few carved glyphs and finished with a veneer of obsidian and silver. The wards around it reacted to her special key with a hum. A collection of arcane rings, earrings, assorted other piercings, amulets, and bracelets shined back at her. Anna’s abilities were all about turning these enchanted trinkets into deadly weapons. A swirling orb in the center of her jewelry box recharged them.

“By the sound of it, you’ll need a lot, and

we're going to be first on the scene," Roy barked. "Looks like Flamers, by all indications. We have word of a hit apartment building, a bunch of strange 911 calls—police and firefighters coming to the scene in waves. The Churchies wouldn't do something like this. It's not their style." Flamers, Churchies. It didn't matter that much. To Anna, they were two sides of the same depraved coin.

"Fire?" Anna asked, her brain starting to regain higher functions. So many choices. The items below her were arranged by the type of enchantment they had. Certain gemstones, certain metals could channel different forces when enchanted properly. "Electricity? Death? Air?" She didn't like the idea of using the Air stuff. She couldn't control it too well—not enough practice.

"No on the Death, yes on the Electricity and the Fire," Roy said in the special distracted way that a person going about twice the speed he should be in a car did. "Light or Meta would be better, but I know you don't have any of that."

"Sorry," Anna said. "Like I told you, I scheduled a training on light next month, but I haven't been issued the stuff." She grabbed what she could, fast. She pulled garnet and brass jewelry out: two sets of rings. She checked herself in the mirror. The tiny studs piercing each of her eyebrows, one onyx and the other copper, would work. Her lip stud and nose ring were both white gold with dots of bone melted in. But the rest of her? She never knew if she'd have to brief the director or the Senate chair after whatever it was went down, or how many of her bosses might show up to this thing. Her short black hair, which went down to around her jawline, was barely presentable, but it would have to do. She still had a

tan from doing surveillance last weekend, so she could pass without makeup.

“I know,” Roy said. “I think we’ll manage, but this isn’t going to be clean. You ready? I’m on Columbia Pike now. One piece of good news, though. I brought coffee.”

“This early, you better have. I’ll be out in a sec,” Anna said. She slipped the rings on all of her fingers, running through two of her casting stances. The first stance was a jab, the garnets on her hands flaring with a violet hue. After, she broke into a wide one, placing her hands together to form a passable equilateral triangle. The brass crackled with Electricity, and the garnets burst again. Silver earrings, for amplifying her enchantments, slipped in her four ear-piercings easily enough. She clasped on an extra silver bracelet, the glyphs on it starting to glow as it linked with the ambient magic of her rings. She chose a set of hoodoo beads with a mixture of defensive blessings for her other bracelet.

Anna pulled on a gray button-up shirt she could live without. She covered both her jeans and the shirt with one of the many all-black jumpsuits in her closet. Not that it would protect the clothes all that much. There was a good chance blood, ectoplasm, or viscera of some miscellaneous mystical creature would splatter all over her. As she buckled on her tactical vest, emblazoned with defensive wards and “NSA” in huge yellow letters, her last grasp went to her weapons belt. On it was a Walther PPK handgun and two knives. The first knife was a Kris forged in holy water, its white metal glinting in the dull light of her apartment. The other was a German stiletto, whose origin was a little less wholesome. Its metal

didn't even shine, not at all, its edge and history sordid enough to scare Light.

Last thing: her badge. She grabbed it, its non-descript leather binding hiding the National Security Agency ID and chunk of metal certifying it as legitimate. Below, it had a special glyph labeling her as part of the NSA's Division of Unconventional Weaponry and Tactics, DUWAT, which everyone just pronounced like "Do What?" To its employees, it was the Division. Unlike most government acronyms, that one actually made sense, given that almost all of the government and even most of the intelligence community didn't even know they existed.

As she weighed around a buck fifteen last time she checked, she didn't make a lot of noise blazing down the steps of the dumpy low-rise she lived in. It was in the no man's land part of Arlington, the stretch of Columbia Pike no metro line came close to touching. It wasn't ideal, and it caused some strain on her social life, but she could afford a decent-sized place there.

She nearly had to jump to reach the side of the behemoth of a vehicle, pulling the passenger door open. Roy nodded to her, his neatly buzzed haircut not matching his mostly unshaven face and half-shut eyes. "Rough night?" she asked. The sound of late-period Coltrane hit her, a skipping saxophone mangling scales to the accompaniment of a determinedly off-rhythm piano. Roy loved jazz, the weirder the better. Something from his early Paladin days in Europe, fighting two World Wars.

"Yeah," Roy answered, shifting his angry, grizzled old features into a look of weary sympathy. Roy didn't socialize much. Because of his situation in life, he'd had two wives. Not due to selfishness or shallowness like most

people. Boredom. That was how most marriages ended. Roy's had gone a little differently. He'd outlived both of them, watching them grow old while he didn't. One had died of heart failure, a ripe eighty-two. The other one died in her forties of cancer. Roy had lived on, his aging process frozen by a curse. "You too?"

"Without a doubt," she said, taking her seat and slamming the door. Roy moved his bulky arm to the gearshift. At first glance, he looked to be in his early sixties. An unusually well-toned and in-shape early sixties. The buzzed white hair and crow's feet around his eyes weren't nearly as advanced as they should be in someone over a century old. He gunned it, flying down Columbia Pike, straight toward the Pentagon at his customary 80 mph, about as fast as the van could go without flipping on its side. "Where are we headed?"

"Crystal City," Roy said. Crystal City, the ugly bastard child of a neighborhood, a mall, and an office park. "Prophet had a dream about it and got a weird vibe. He called it in. Verified it with the Stones. It looks like active Hell magic. Started a few hours ago. The cops are there now, along with the firefighters. No one they've sent in has come back out."

"The usual. Find whatever it is and kill it, then?" Anna said. She noticed a tumbler of coffee in the cup holder, another one spent and dead, rolling around the van's floor. She picked it up. The aroma told her it was something halfway decent. Her massive caffeine addiction yawned and prepared to assume full control.

"Kona, black," Roy said. "Just like you like it. You've gotten me hooked on that stuff." Anna took a sip. It was good. That was one thing she had to be proud

of as Roy's partner. Roy loved his ass-tasting, gas-station coffee. Convincing a white man over a century old to change his ways was about as difficult as explaining why Jesus loved war and rich people. But, like a bunch of Bible-thumping charlatans, she'd managed. The coffee was a relief, the rings on her hands rising from a dull glow as she really did start to gain full consciousness. She ran through her emotional states, preparing for the inevitable castings she'd need to do.

"So any backup?" Anna asked. Going in with small numbers against a mass-murdering, metaphysical threat wasn't a good idea under any circumstances.

"Hess and Ilya are in transit," Roy said. "The Division thinks sending too many assets would be a bad idea given that the Churchies could make an appearance since we're so close to the Building. Too many of us on the field and they'll overreact. Maybe think we caused whatever it is."

"Enough people to survive but not enough to cause an interagency incident," Anna said. "Makes a grim kind of sense. What are we dealing with? Is this going to be worse than the vampires?"

"Vampires are a joke," Roy chuckled. Roy'd seen it all in his time, so he had an opinion on almost every arcane permutation that existed. Vampires were common in the grand scheme of it all. "All that moping about eternal darkness, loneliness, and turning people makes them soft. Between silver, wooden stakes, concentrated garlic, sunlight, and a few more obscure methods, they're fairly vulnerable. Not that I'm knocking what you did against that patriarch, but this will definitely

be worse than vampires. We should be so lucky.”

“What about that time with the unicorn?”

Anna asked, allowing a mischievous smile to cross her face. Roy looked sullen at the very mention of it.

“I thought we agreed we weren’t going to bring up the unicorn ever again,” Roy said. “Nothing—repeat, nothing—will be as bad as the unicorn.” Roy audibly ground his teeth thinking about it. Not that Anna blamed him. The unicorn had taken down three of their best field mages and more than that before they even got on the scene. It had been a rampage of pure, white, glittery jubilation. Deadly jubilation. Every time Anna saw them on kids’ stickers or backpacks, she nearly had a fit of post-traumatic stress disorder. “If this is what I think it is, it’s more in line with that cult of acolytes we dealt with during Red Dream.” The acolytes. She understood his comparison. The acolytes had all been fairly low-level, barely competent mages. The problem had been their numbers. Fighting one super-powerful sorcerer was hard, but taking out forty low-level magicians was much harder. “We might need to use the cage and bring a live sample back, so save enough to do a Void-jump.”

Anna slurped the last of her coffee, grimacing at the thought. Void-jumps gave her a stewing headache for hours, and half the time she vomited immediately. Since her manifesting hangover had her on the way to both, that wouldn’t be good. She panicked for a second, her hands going to where her Void-sights would be, but they weren’t there. “Shit,” she said, scrambling to find them, but she had tucked them into the side of her tactical vest. “Thought I’d forgotten these,” she clarified to Roy’s alarmed face as she took the Void-sights out, wiping

the obsidian lenses with her sleeve.

She checked the heavily modified back of the van. The cage was the most obvious addition her agency had made. It consisted of a large box and a securing door, mounted and chained into the cargo area of the lumbering Chevy Express that served as a metaphysical holding cell. Sets of containment glyphs, all nullifying Meta magic, adorned the top, bottom, and sides of the enclosure. All-purpose wards for both good and evil made up the securing door, glazed with salt, silver, grave dust, and planks of black locust wood dotted with sunstone and onyx. It mimicked what K-9 Police units carried in the back of their vans and trucks, but was person-sized. “I assume the priority is kill *then* capture, though?” Anna asked. Roy nodded wordlessly as he brought the van into a sea of blinking fire truck and cop car lights.

Through the van's speakers, Elvin Jones's voice raged over the back of the Wynton Kelly solo. The enchantments covering her body hummed with agitation, the free jazz helping Anna to get in the mood. Time to look through the gear and pick out what other spiritual knick-knacks she'd need. Usually she grabbed whatever looked scary. Assorted duffel bags of Roy's guns and relics were piled in front of the cage, each with different symbols. She began to go through them, seeing a set of Glockes with silencers and an H&K CAWS Roy had wrangled from the discontinued Department of Defense prototype program. Lots of Darkfire-type sHells were in the bag too, and an unwholesome burlap sack: the Hood, as the tool was named. A mask that would hold any magic, no matter how strong, was inside. It put anyone

and anything out of commission. The tough part was pulling it over your target's head without either you or them dying in the process. "I've got the Hood," Anna said, tucking it behind her tactical vest. She pulled out a bunch of rounds for her Walther, filling a few clips. Roy kept all sorts of ammo, playing the gun freak so she didn't have to.

"We're here," Roy said, pulling the van around in front of the looming apartment high-rise. Roy turned the ignition off and disembarked from the huge vehicle. Anna did the same. There was a zoo of cops, firemen, and paramedics scrambling around the outside of the building. Some people in pajamas, one or two of them caked in a scarlet stain that could only be blood, shouted at the cops in a panic. They'd arrived, all right. The apartment building was Crystal Tower. Anna shook her head. The names of high-rises were always embarrassing to all of humanity, especially in a place like Crystal City. Everything would be Crystal Whatever-the-Hell. "Tell me what you see," Roy said to Anna, turning to meet the onslaught of cops rushing toward them. Time to switch her vision. She put on her Void-sights, letting Roy sort the cops out.

"PoPos. Sometimes I really hate them. Why can't they stay out of the way," Anna sighed.

"We're cops, of a certain variety," Roy offered.

"Last time I checked, cops got overtime," Anna replied. She began to run her fingers over her Void-sights, trying to capture the minute strains of Meta needed to activate them. "And they actually get to use their vacation time."

"True," Roy smiled.

“And cops can’t expel jets of metaphysical fire from their hands, eyes, and mouth,” Anna added.

“Right on all counts,” Roy said. “Suggestion that you’re a cop withdrawn.”

“Who the Hell are you?” a middle-aged, balding cop shouted at Roy, his obvious beer gut about to win its perpetual war on his shirt-buttons. “This is ...” he paused, giving thought to what to say next. “A crime scene. You’re not allowed to be here.” Anna almost chuckled at the way he said “crime scene.”

“National Security Agency,” Roy said, flashing his open badge at the cops and gesturing at the “NSA” emblazoned on the tactical vests he and Anna both wore. “What, that van doesn’t say ‘Government Spook’ all over it?” Anna held in the laughs. Spook. Literally. “I’m Special Agent Iskanian; this is Special Agent Wei. We’re here to take over.”

“Lieutenant O’Hanlon,” the gruff cop growled, checking out Roy’s badge. “This is some crazy shit, but I didn’t know it was like *that*.”

“You have no idea, Detective,” Roy said with a broad smile.

Anna tried to ignore the conversation and get to business. She held her hands in a triangle, the rings on her fingers lined up with her eyebrow studs and her thumbs making contact with the stud on her nose. “*Aghash*,” Anna cast, activating the mystical Void-sights. The world washed away, the obsidian lenses showing her only essences. The Void wasn’t so much a different place as a different representation of the same world. Anna barely had enough knowledge of transcendental metaphysics to really understand, but those were the

basics. Only noumenal markers, souls, spells, or anything with an arcane quality were visible. Anything else was gone: buildings, grass, sidewalks, the ground itself. All of it dissolved. Anna adjusted to the empty space. A column of billowing, blinding light nearby arched skyward, like a mushroom cloud of virtue. That was, of course, the Pentagon.

The humanoid shape of neon green near her was Roy, arguing with the dull and glowing red blips of souls that were the cops. She shined in prismatic energy, her magic rings, bracelets, and piercings emitting mystical pulses. Once she had her bearings, she turned to the apartment building. There were clusters of red lights: people's souls. Many of them were fading and then blowing out in a shower of sparks and splotches of midnight black. Around them, barely distinguishable shapes, like dark matter, moved—slowly, ever so slowly. They advanced on whoever was living, crowding them. They were like smoke in the Void.

Anna knew what this was. Unlife, Death essence. She'd even used it, being a minor adept in Death magic herself. This was the work of a serious necromancer, and a brilliant one by the scale of it. Judging by how slow it was moving, growing, lumping around and feeding, one answer was most likely. Corporeal undead. Zombies. Or ghouls, as the term of art had it. Luckily, they were slow and stupid. Unluckily, if they had a lot of the living to feed on, they didn't stay that way. They were the lowest rung on a ladder that got significantly worse the higher you went. Anna removed her Void-Sights, tucking them behind her tactical vest with the Hood.

“Jurisdiction, huh?” Roy barked. Someone else had

arrived who outranked O'Hanlon, and he was giving Roy all kinds of shit. This new guy wasn't having it. He was older, thinner, and considerably surlier. He'd clearly been dragged to work early by the unkempt look of his minimal hair and heavily wrinkled shirt. "Listen, Captain Hitchens, I'm not the FBI. This is a matter of national security. Maybe existential security. You don't get in our way. Not when this happens."

"I'm not letting some nut job who drives up here in a van claiming he's a Fed go in there," Hitchens said, apparently a captain. "I'm going to have to call headquarters and have them call your agency. Until we know how you're allowed to be involved, I can't let you in. Besides, we have everything under control."

She couldn't take another minute of this. Every time there was a metaphysical threat, there was a pissing contest between those out of their depth and those who understood. "You have this under control? Tell me then," Anna asked. "How many of your people have you sent in there who haven't come back? Has anyone come back bitten? Then they suddenly don't look so good? If you send them to the hospital or take them out of the building, you're going to have much worse on your hands than this high-rise. But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you? You're hearing the chatter on the radio, the screams, and then the silence. It's not going to get any better."

The detective started to open his mouth to shout something back; then he stopped. Anna felt a cool breeze pass through, along with some barely discernible whispers. The police nearby all fell silent, and Anna's hoodoo beads whirred. Mentalism. By the feel of

it, shamanic mentalism. Hess was here, and probably Ilya too. The whispers said nothing and everything, abstract murmurs of suggestion.

“Yes, ma'am,” Hitchens said, his voice broken and detached like he was speaking through a dream. He pulled out his radio. “All units on the scene, this is Captain Hitchens. Pull back to the lobby,” he droned. The other cops started to mellow out, acting vacant and confused. “Some NSA agents will be entering soon to take over. Help them any way you can.” A finger tapped Anna on her shoulder and she turned to see Ilya's lanky form. He was a year younger than Anna, with glasses and thick, curly brown hair. He wore the same tactical vest and jumpsuit Anna and Roy wore, and was carrying an M-16 to look extra intimidating. His control collar blinked haphazardly, almost in its inert state. Anna looked toward the breaking dawn. Too bad. It would've been nice to have the “other” Ilya in this situation. At least he was a decent shot.

Hess took point, the wizened Nigerian approaching them with a bemused look. He walked over to Hitchens, putting one hand on the man's shoulder and working a burned figurine with the other, whispering a chant into his ear. Ilya sat back, staring up at the high rise. Ilya's shock of curly brown hair and glasses, along with his emaciated body, worked well to hide the awe-inspiring curse lurking within him. “I think we have an understanding,” Hess said in his thick accent. The cops listlessly nodded in unison. Hess was one Hell of a shaman.

“Thanks, Hess,” Roy said. “No one respects the G-man anymore. It's sad, really. There were

days when an NSA badge would make a cop wet himself.”

“This is how it always starts,” Hess said. “Have to influence the locals for their own protection. Ignorance can be a real killer. Best for them to step out of the crossfire.”

“What’ve we got here?” Ilya asked. He was squinting at the police officers and barely holding his M-16 barrel down. Roy grabbed a random assortment of firepower in a duffle bag and led the way as they passed through the melee of first responders to the lobby of Crystal Tower.

“Ghouls,” Anna droned. “Lots of them. All infectious Plaguebringers. Serious necromancy.” She dropped her Void-Sights over her eyes again, searching the streets and marching toward the building. “None seem to have made it out yet, but they’re bringing a bunch of people down to the lobby in the emergency elevator. Some are bitten, souls stained. We could lose containment.”

“That’s what I thought,” Roy grunted. “Any sign of a necromancer?”

“None that I can see,” Anna said. “Whoever did this looks to be gone.”

“We’re also going to need some grave dust.” Roy removed a spray can from the duffle bag. The smell was dank and ashy—ground-up tombstones and bones mixed with crematorium leftovers. Anna wouldn’t argue that it was unnecessary, though. They passed the can around, spraying it over their vests and legs. “It’ll confuse them, buy us a few seconds here and there. Ever dealt with ghouls?”

“I have,” Hess groaned. “Not too many at a time, though.”

“Afraid not,” Anna admitted. “I’ve read about them but never seen the real thing.”

“Same here,” Ilya commented, but more like he couldn't wait to see them in real life.

“Don’t sweat it. They’re rare,” Roy said. “Hard to make. Only a practiced necromancer can do it. The research wizards play with trying to animate them sometimes, but even then, it’s hard. You know a little Death magic. Did you do a necromancy rotation? I forget. Sorry, senior moment. ”

“Do you have anything but senior moments, Roy?” Anna jabbed. “When I was at Research, I did a rotation with the elementalists and the demonologists,” she said, thinking back to the long-ago days of her internship. She was only twenty-five, but facing and killing supernatural creatures aged you fast. “No necromancy. I had a training on Death thaumaturgy, basics. Nothing on the level of reanimation or soul-binding.”

“Wouldn’t really be any use, anyway,” Roy added. “If it’s only ghouls, we’ll be fine.”

“And if there’s more to it, we’re dicked, right?” Anna asked. If it was something more obscure, it might take expertise in necromancy or witch hunting to know how to put it down.

“Correct,” Roy deadpanned. They stayed silent as they passed through the lobby doors. Once inside, they were greeted by a whole lot of panicked firefighters, cops, and paramedics. It was a special kind of panic, that of people who made it their job not to panic. The sleek, abstract sculptures of the lobby mixed with its cheap paintings and expensive marble floors in a mish-mash of

bad taste and wasted rent money. Blood was pooling from victims laying on gurneys or leaning precariously on the walls. Anna's Void-Sights showed her that about ten of them had been bitten.

“We lost him,” one of the paramedics said, drawing his fingers back from a cop on a gurney, his body bloodied and motionless, chunks bitten out of his shoulder and rib cage. Upstairs, there would be groups of them. Big groups. Biting and grabbing.

“I can’t believe we just left them!” a deranged firefighter shouted. “To those ... things!”

“What could we do?” another cop answered him. “I shot one at least three times and it still kept coming. You want to go back up, go ahead. Get your ass killed! I didn’t sign up for this shit.”

“Quiet,” Hess shouted, the boom of his voice and whispering winds sweeping the lobby with mentalism, the air crystallizing in a million little “Shhhhh” whispers. The hoodoo bracelet on Anna’s wrists hummed in resistance and protection. “Those who aren’t bitten, leave,” he commanded. “The others must stay.” The untouched ones did as they were told, walking out in quiet confusion.

“All right, let's make with the bullets and blasphemy,” Roy said. Anna knew what that meant. Roy could be a charming guy, like a surly but lovable uncle. Then there was the other Roy. Without a blink, he pulled a silenced HK from his duffel bag and leveled it at the head of the recently deceased cop. The body had already begun to stir. Roy shot, the muffled bullet a dull thud as it splattered the awakened ghouls’ brain. Roy trained his gun on a petrified cop, sprawled out over a bench in the lobby

and bleeding out.

“Hold on,” Hess whispered. “Take it easy, Roy. I have a Death ritual, quiet and peaceful. It will put their body down before the unlife can reshape it. It’s perfect for a situation like this, when these men are doomed anyway. They won’t come back.” Hess had a set of Death totems in his hand that looked especially stark for his collection. Anna guessed that was on purpose. As a more standard field mage, she barely understood the oblique way a shaman approached magic.

“If you say so,” Roy said. He peered down at the Skorpion machine pistol strapped to Hess’s waist. “I trust your instincts, but I hope you’ll be ready if it doesn’t work out.”

“Trust me, I will,” Hess said. “Besides, nothing I can do will work too well on these ghouls. I’ve forgotten all my life rituals and they certainly don’t respond to mentalism. Let me watch the perimeter. I’ll *persuade* anyone who wants to interfere and check any survivors. If they’re clean, I’ll let them pass.”

“Okay then,” Roy said. “Let’s get moving.” The two elements Anna’d chosen for this op, Fire and Electricity, required the same emotional orientation: anger. As she wasn’t a morning person and had a slight hangover, she didn’t have to dig deep. A flicker of fire formed in her hand with the garnet rings, a shower of sparks in the hand with the brass ones. She was ready.

“Headsets on,” Anna said, realizing they were all almost forgetting. Each of them put on a headset and clamped a radio on, tuning as far from police band as possible. Hess walked over the bitten, chanting a series of

words from a long-dead language from Africa. Each one slumped, closing their eyes. He went to the ones able to stand first, telling them he was there to help. Each one drifted off at ease. Anna couldn't watch. Returning the Void-sights to her eyes, she took another look, this time below them. The Void erased the concrete layers of flooring between them and the masses of undead in the lower levels. "There are a ton of them down there in the garage," Anna said. "Maybe twenty, more probably on the way since there're a lot of bodies too. It looks like people tried to take refuge down there, maybe in their cars."

"Car windows aren't going to stop a ghoul," Roy sighed. "Ilya, can you handle those and then back Hess up if more start coming down here? Anna, we can get the upstairs."

"On it," Ilya said, readying his M-16. "I'll make sure the garage doors stay closed too. Elevators?"

"I'll get them," Anna said. She marched toward the rear of the lobby, Roy and Ilya following her to the elevator banks and stairwells. Disabling any electrical system should be easy with the configuration of enchantments she'd selected.

"Ghouls," Roy reflected, addressing both Anna and Ilya and loading his automatic shotgun. "I'm warning both of you, this is going to be disgusting. I mean vile. Body parts, chewed-up people." He had a bandolier of Darkfire sHells over his shoulders, ready to reload. He checked out the shotgun carefully, the rejected CAWS prototype. "This thing's nice, but there's just something that feels so right about the pump action. Anyway, you've both read the survival guide, right?"

"Yeah," they answered. That was one of

the many mandatory things the Division issued people, along with assorted manuals on vampires, Asmodei, valkyries, and other such things. She'd read them all; the problem was, they ran together in one's head.

"Then you know. The brain. Stab it. Chop it. Shoot it. Whatever. You can burn the whole thing too," he said, turning to Anna. "Electricity can also work because that fries the brain and the nervous system. I ran into a lot of these things back in the Great War. If you see bodies that are even half intact, plug them in the head, or at least crush them, stomp them—something. Unlife can reanimate a dismembered corpse, no problem. They're stupid and they move slow, but they're very strong. Especially if they've been feeding. Don't let them group up on you. Always make sure you've got somewhere to run." Roy paused. "Am I missing anything?"

"What about revenants? The guide doesn't talk about those, but I've read about them," Ilya asked. He was that kind of ass. The one always raising his hand in class to remind the teacher she forgot to assign homework. "Shouldn't we be on the lookout for those?"

"Well, yeah," Roy said. "But if any of these things have killed and eaten enough to become a revenant, we're going to have an entirely different set of problems."

"It'll have some level of animal reasoning, is going to move faster, and is going to be really, really strong," Ilya said. "It will also regenerate if you don't get it in the head. Ghouls don't do that. Am I right?"

"Yes, Ilya, you're right," Roy murmured. "Let's focus on the task at hand, though."

"What about a draugir?" Ilya asked.

“Someone needs something better to do with his free time,” Anna mumbled.

“Ilya,” Roy growled, exasperated. “Listen to me very closely. There isn’t going to be a draugir. And if there is, it’s going to kill you. And me. And probably everyone in a five-mile radius, and move on to worse. Just shoot them in the head. Focus on that. You won the quiz, okay? I’ll make sure someone gives you a cookie later.”

They arrived at the elevators. “We have a lot of people still alive,” Anna said, remembering her initial look through the Void. “Most of them are in the upper floors, running. The ghouls are right behind them. They can sense them.”

“Anna, keep the Hood ready. It’s for Ghoul Zero. That’s the one we’re going to need to bring in. Whichever was the first one will give us a clue about the curse and who did this. It’ll probably have a glowing sigil on its body somewhere. Likely a Plague sigil. It shouldn’t be in the garages, but let me know if you see it, Ilya. Don’t shoot it if you can help, but if it’s about to bite you, by all means, kill the thing. If this Flamer curse is halfway as powerful as it looks, there’s no saving you if you’re bitten.”

“Naturally, that doesn’t apply to you,” Anna said. She regretted saying it almost as soon as it came out. Roy sighed, but didn’t react. Roy’s immortality was the result of a curse, not a blessing. And a curse from God outweighed anything a necromancer could create, no matter how skilled.

One of the elevators buzzed at them, the doors sliding open. Blood sloshed out, soaking into the carpet. Anna remembered a time when that much blood would’ve made her wince, but she hardly noted it. A ghoul

stuck its head out, staring vacantly at them. It stumbled out, a shirtless man in pajamas.

“Gruuuuuuuuh,” it gasped.

“Who wants the honors?” Anna asked. Ilya shrugged. Roy peered at the thing limping toward them, and rose to the occasion.

“Guess it’s me,” Roy announced, tapping the CAWS’s trigger. The Darkfire sHell filleted the zombie, brain matter and skull turning a nearby Thomas Kinkadee knockoff into something more like a Jackson Pollock. The Darkfire burned holes through the wall and most of the ghoul’s upper torso. Five more ghouls shambled out: two bloodied children with two women and a very naked man. Ilya and Roy let loose, the M16 and automatic shotgun erasing the ghouls in a pile of coagulated blood and necrotic skin. The mauled remains of a dismembered cop sat in the elevator, arms and legs torn off and chewed through and the head torn clear from the torso.

“Never have I been happier to be a vegetarian,” Anna said, imagining how she would think of this scene every time she saw a piece of meat for the next month.

“That one’s not coming back,” Roy referred to the cop’s body. The elevator door closed, heading up. “Anna, care to fry the elevators?”

“Done,” Anna said. She rubbed one hand over her silver earrings and raised her brass-ring-covered hands. “*Sij . . . Eshm,*” she invoked, picturing a crackling thunderstorm in her head. The anger rose, bubbling in her. She was casting a simple electric move, a modern spell called Cruel Circuit. She bathed in currents. Assuming a casting stance, she curled her fingers and

pointed at the elevator's console and released. The bolts of Electricity shot from her hands, a brownout flickering through the entire building. The sounds of the elevators stopped, her electrical surge blowing their fuses.

"Wow," Ilya said. "That was even freakier than last time. You practice that?"

"It's not fur and claws, but it'll do," Anna said, smirking. "Don't you have a garage of flesh-eating undead to take care of?"

Ilya pouted and then made for the stairwell. Roy and Anna climbed upward, leaving Ilya to his work. "He means well," Roy said. "He just doesn't have any friends and reads too many books."

"And he also can't get laid to save his life," Anna said. Ilya grated on her sometimes. She read a lot of books on arcane stuff too, but didn't feel the need to lecture people about it during a tactical op.

"True," Roy responded, the two of them continuing to climb. "Not all of us have it as easy as you."

"Are you trying to say I'm a woman of loose morals, Roy?" Anna quipped, the two of them ascending the stairwells. "I'm offended."

"You said that, I didn't," Roy said. Anna resumed checking the Void. The next chunk of ghouls clustered on the fifth floor. Doors opened and slammed above them. The souls of regular people were running toward them. They appeared unbitten. A ghoul barged through the second-floor door, howling and moaning at Anna. "Watch ..." Roy started to say, but she was on it. Anna stared down the ghoul, ready to call a mystical fire that would wipe it from the planet. On her list of metaphysical kills, she mentally added zombies.

J. Hamlet