

*The trains were bleeding.*

*As well they should be. The locomotives of carnage and cadavers stood high and superior apparently looking down on Raine. They were built out of cadavers, some whole bodies, but mostly pieces torn and twisted to devise the curves and angles of the locomotives. The trains went on for infinity behind the locomotives, while in front there was nothing. Raine tried to see something into the darkness but the tracks in front of the locomotives just dwindled into clouds of darkness. The trains seemed to be enveloped in a sheaf of darkness, giving the whole thing the appearance of a long black train . . . except upon closer inspection when you see the dead.*

*And they were bleeding. Blood poured softly but consistently from eyes, mouths, ears and from areas where body parts seemed forged together by whatever force was keeping them intact.*

*Both trains were dripping red and while bodies squirmed painfully in their sculptured prison. Raine could feel the slippery squishing of blood beneath her feet.*

*“This better be a dream.”*

Raine MacEnroe didn't spend enough time in her room or in her bed these days, Between school, work and taking care of her father, sleep had become a secondary pursuit for her. Thankfully, as one with the supernatural, Raine's body replenished itself without the need for sleep. However, nothing replaced getting up in the morning from a good sleep and relaxing in her pajamas.

Up until her slayerdom started, Raine was oblivious to there being anything special about her. She and her father Danny had finally adjusted to the loss of her mother Georgina and between school and working on her motorcycle, Raine's world had been limited and mostly happy. At school she did feel weird, strange and out of place, but that turned out to be mostly anxiety over discovering that she was gay. As if that wasn't enough, when the super strength started kicking in, Raine thought herself a total mutant.

Then she met Jacqueline, a language instructor at her school who just happened to move in the area about the time that Raine was hulking out. Jacqueline turned out to be what the slayer myth called a “Watcher”. Something of a trainer and tour guide to all things slayer. With Jacqueline's aid, Raine learned to accept her chosen status as a pointy teeth guy exterminator.

At the prompting of her father, she met Mercy Johnson, a tough as nails lesbian who helped Raine accept that she was not some sort of freak. Mercy quickly became Raine's confidant and in many ways, Raine looked up to Mercy as a mother. Between Mercy, Jacqueline, her father and her ghoulish fighting friends . . . Raine was feeling like life was something akin to normal.

Recently, Raine was almost killed by a vampire, then the same vampire stirred her father's brains in such a way that death would have been preferable. Mercy then became Raine's legal guardian, and life in general became very different. Mercy knew about the watchers and the slayers which made some things easier, and some harder.

Raine learned that her mother was a potential slayer, and then was a watcher. What little details she had of her mother's death caused Raine to be concerned over the lives of the people around her. Monsters took her mother away. Monsters took her father away. Monsters threatened to take her friends away.

The house was quiet. Raine took care not to make any noise as she climbed down the ladder from her attic room. Her father slept deeply in his room, and Mercy's bedroom door was closed, a sign that meant she was sleeping. Mercy was a fantastic and wonderful guardian, but she was also pretty strict and on the ball. Raine walked into the living room intent on reading a magazine and avoiding sleep altogether.

"Whoa?!"

A woman sat in the love seat across from the cold fireplace. She seemed to be looking at the fireplace as if it helped her envision a long time passed. A happier time. The woman's dark hair was similar to Raine's. Long dark and wavy hair flowed down and ended halfway down her back. She wore a long cape that flowed out of the way behind the chair. Underneath it Raine could see a loose red blouse with puffed up sleeves that ended in cuffs with a gold trim. A wide belt with similar gold trim circled her thin waist and accentuated long legs wrapped in black and anchored with dangerous looking black boots. Even sitting at ease the woman exerted strength, power and authority. In her hand she held a black walking stick, elaborately decorated with silver. When the woman turned toward her, it was like looking into a mirror to the future. The woman sitting in front of Raine was physically fit with beautiful if somewhat saddened features. She looked at Raine up and down. "Look at you, sweetness . . . you're all grown up."

"Mom? . . ."

"Good morning, dear. I take it you've seen the trains?"



## The Greater Good

1996.

“RRRRroooooooooooooovvvrrmmm” The two toy trains crashed headfirst and Raine made all the noises she felt were appropriate for the occasion, complete with people screaming for help. Danny watched his young daughter from the kitchen as he washed his hands. “Raine, take it easy on those toys!”

“Oh Danny, she’s fine. It’s just play. If she didn’t break some of her toys where would we keep them all.”

George MacEnroe stepped into the room wrapped in a towel and drying her hair with another. Danny noted how beautiful his wife looked, and thought regretfully what this particular day would bring.

“I stopped work early to make dinner. Thought I’d do something with the chili Pigpen brought over the other day. “

“Honey, why don’t you relax and let me make dinner. I bought some fish this afternoon. “

“I thought you might want to spend some time with Raine.”

“You make it sound as if I don’t. Who do you think is going to help me cook?”

Raine’s eyes lit up. She loved cooking with her mother. “When do we start!?” George heads to the bedroom to change. “As soon as I’m dressed. I have to get going soon after dinner.”

Raine suddenly looked sad. “Is it a long trip this time?”

Danny comes around from the kitchen and kneels at Raine's side. Her nine year old eyes looked deep and melancholy. This was a child that Danny found hard to hide anything from. "Mom has to go back to work in Boston. She'll be gone for a few days."

"But my birthday? . . ." Raine began to pout.

Danny put an arm around her shoulders and brought her to him. "No one's forgetting your birthday hon. "

George came out of the bedroom dressed in jeans, boots and a casual off-white blouse. Dinner went over well. Laughter and conversation filled the small dining room throughout the meal. At it's end, Raine returned to her toys while Danny and George picked up. Danny spoke in a concerned whisper. "Raine is really starting to hate you going off for weeks at a time. Couldn't you get a normal job? You can teach here at the high school."

George started doing dishes. Despite there being a dishwasher in the kitchen she enjoyed doing them by hand. "Been there and done that, Danny. This particular publisher allows me to set my own hours and you can't complain that I don't spend a lot of time at home. For goodness sakes Danny, I work a week and take two off. It's a decent schedule. "

"That's your schedule but the truth is that you are often away for weeks at a time. They send you all over the world. Meanwhile Raine and I spend our time looking at encyclopedias figuring out where you are off to next. You over compensate when you are here with the toys and gifts, then you're off again. "

"I'm a big city editor for a travel publisher, Danny. She'll learn to take pride in that. So, what does she want for her birthday?"

"Her mother."

The drive to Boston was longer than George ever remembered it to be. Her thoughts drifted from her family in Maine and her responsibilities in the city. The council didn't look well upon a Watcher having a family, . . . George wasn't very popular with the council.

George was convinced that her daughter Raine was a potential slayer. If it meant a few nights away from home, George intended for the madness to end before Raine would have to answer the call. It was easy, kill the vampires, kill the demons. Kill them all before Raine would get called.

The Woburn exit came up and George forced thoughts of her family into a safe little spot in her mind that she locked away while she was on the job. She drove her station wagon into the parking garage and drove her private spot where a black jaguar

awaited her . . . a car Danny would've killed to work on. He didn't even know she owned it. The less he knew the better it would be for Raine.

Watcher mode was coming on. In the rest room, Georgina dispatched with the jeans and shirt, and took on the garb that she was better recognized in when she walked the Boston night leading her entourage of slayers. Her cape, boots, staff and attitude was the calculated exact opposite of what the council wanted in a watcher, but Boston was her city, and she knew how to handle its excesses and its night breed. Subtlety didn't work here, hiding behind glasses and books was ineffective, Georgina MacEnroe had no time for delicacy.

Once in the car, she activated her car phone and dialed. This was going to be a busy week if she intended to be home for Raine's birthday.

She didn't wait for him to answer. "Gleason. "

"Georgina. Enjoy your holiday?"

"What do you have?"

"Another home invasion. A young girl was taken and from what we can tell the parents were vamped. "

"It's him. Vamps have to be invited in. . . he's messing with us. Call in Keira and the regulars. I'm twenty minutes away from the War Machine, have them ready for me in fifteen."

The deep base and piercing guitar riffs were as much a part of the War Machine as the neon sign outside. Georgina placed a down payment on the club and surrounding properties with a second mortgage and MacEnroe motors as collateral, the income from the club gave her her "editor's salary" while paying off the rest of the mortgage. This too she kept from Danny. The club stood on a city block accompanied by a parking garage, an abandoned factory building and a publishing house. All were owned by De La Vega Enterprises. The War Machine was Georgina's message to the underworld as to her intentions. From above, the buildings were configured in the shape of a cross. The watcher's hated it, the demons avoided it, and vampires . . . they feared it. Teenagers however thought the War Machine was best thing since recess and summer vacation.

Gleason Taylor looked at the video monitors in front of him and saw that Georgina was entering the club. He turned to the others, "She's on her way up. "

Keira Lincoln stood up and walked over to Gleason. He loved watching her walk. Her black leather, red hair and dangerous curves were always enough to make him forget all about computers and communications networks. The fact that they were able to have a relationship for the last two years stunned him more than anything. He never thought of

himself as a particularly good catch for any woman . . . and here, he he had the catch of the day. Sure, as a potential she might end up dead fighting George's war, but Kiera lived life as if she was immortal. She leaned over him to look in the monitor. "I wish we had more for her."

Gleason leaned back in his chair. "The War Machine has busted seven cabals, two cults and a brain eating demon in the last two weeks . . . and we've partied and done our homework. She'll be proud."

The door to the control room opens and Georgina strides in. She heads directly to their meeting table and places a leather bound notebook on it. The others, drop what they are doing and take their places around the table.

Keira Lincoln: A potential slayer who has probably clocked more dustings than most slayers before her.

Gleason Taylor: Computer whiz operator and programmer.

Nina Winter: Well versed teenage witch with a knack for creating her own spells.

Jay DeVolgo: Football jock who lost his sister to a vamp and joined the War Machine after impressing Georgina with his strength, agility and intellect.

Frankie Winter: Nina's brother and a MIT hotshot second only to Gleason when it came to computers. Hacking was his specialty.

Raphael Antonio: Raphael had a knack for acquisition. Especially toys of the high tech caliber that George liked to use in her war.

"Do we have anything new on the Highwayman?"

Nina moved a lock of her dark hair out of her eyes. "I tried to get his journal, it was gone. We've put word out that we have a jones for that book, but no one's come up with it yet."

Gleason slid a pile of papers toward Georgina. "These are printouts of all the recently suspect home invasions. They started while you were away. "

Raphael handed George a stack of photographs. "Unfortunately for me, I had to find pictures of the kids. Here they are. All of them between nine and eleven. All of them missing."

"We have reason to believe his next attack will be in Dorchester after that it looks like he will go north, maybe as far as Peabody. He's following a pattern." Jay was good with detecting patterns in even the most seemingly unrelated variables.

Keira suddenly sits up and looks toward the windows looking down into the club.  
“Vamp.”

Keira’s ability to sense vampires was unequaled and unique to her. This skill was a bonus and not a part of the “slayer package”. While most slayers could detect vampires, Keira’s sense was tuned to the point of being virtual radar. During her training, Georgina pushed Keira to improve her vampire sense beyond known limits. George was big into pushing limits.

George’s group moved as one toward the window. The idea of any vampire entering the War Machine was ludicrous, a death wish for the undead. Gleason pushed himself from the table and allowed his chair to roll him back to his monitoring station. Keira joined him. “There. Sitting alone. Should I dust him?”

George raises a hand up. “No, Keira. Keep an eye up here.” She looks down at their mysterious visitor. Her eyes harden, she knows this one. “I’ll see to it. Call in Mercy and prepare to patrol Dorchester.”

“You coming?” Keira asks.

“No. You handle it. Gleason and I have a few puzzle pieces to put together. Right after I deal with dark and creepy down there.”

The dark stranger watched the young crowd chatter and dance to the heavy metal pounding through the speakers. He didn’t care much for the music, but then, his experience in music was with true masters of the form. Unfortunately they all were dead long ago. He held his drink in his hand, nursing it but never drinking. Then he noted a brief hush in the crowd and from a back door he saw her walk in. The watcher was everything he remembered her to be. She approached like a predatory cat that had been caged too long. Raven black hair, green eyes, athletic build and an attitude that made the music playing pale in comparison. She walked right up to him and placed her walking staff on the table. He looked up at her, his own brooding dark attitude an equal challenge to her. “Georgina De La Vega. So it is you.”

Georgina sat down across from him.

“Liam.”

He corrects her. “Angel.”

She shoots daggers from unflinching eyes . . . “Angelus.”

Up above in the control room Gleason looked down through the windows. “What the hell is she doing? That’s a vamp!”

“George can take care of herself.” Keira gave Gleason a kiss on the forehead. “He’s a cutie though, maybe George is human after all.”

At the table below, Angel pulls a book out of his jacket. The book has a leathery cover and a distinctively old look. “This is the Highwayman’s book. I heard you were looking for it. I’ll be needing it back.”

George takes the book. “I can read it while you wait. Then you get the hell out of Dodge.”

Angel smiled. It was hardly detectable, but clearly there. “Why are you here? It’s been what? . . . about 75 years. You still look good. I know what I am . . . what’s your excuse?”

“Good genes.”

She gets up. “Thank you for the book, Angelus. Where are you off to next?”

Angel sits back. “The Hellmouth, Sunnydale California. You know about it?”

“I was born there.”

“There’s a slayer there. What happened? You get passed up?”

“For their own reasons the council placed me as far from the Hellmouth as possible.”

“Politics?”

“Job security. If I had a slayer in Sunnydale, in due course hell will freeze over and I’d personally dust Satan before my Slayer got back her SAT scores. The council would then have to find other employment.”

“Whew, cocky.”

“Come with me, handsome. I want you in my sights.”

“**M**om? . . . I mean, I assume you’re a ghost and you kinda look like her and all, but lately life has been a David Cronenberg movie. Visually cool, but who the hell could understand it? Help me here.”

Georgina gave Raine her full attention. “Sweetness. Anything I tell you, you will be able to attribute to your own psyche playing games with you. All I have is this.”

Georgina stands up and Raine sees the whole package. Georgina De La Vega was a force to contend with. In her hand she held her staff. With a sleight of hand, she pulled the pommel of the staff and the result was a brilliant silver sword. In her other hand, the other part of the staff clearly was a second sword, a shorter blade used for parrying. The hilt of the shorter sword was a stake.

Cool. Raine thought. Of late she had been favoring a sword in her own patrols, but the staff she was looking at made everything she used look like toys.

Georgina puts the two swords back together than unscrews the ruby like decoration on the pommel. “In here, I keep a small supply of holy water. Quite useful.”

“If you start showing me Tupperware I’m bookin’.”

“I patched up your knee the first time you fell off your bike. For your tenth birthday your father bought you a moped, we used to spend weekends together when your dad went off to his motorcycle conventions, you hated when I had to work because I would be gone days at a time, and once you wanted to go to England with me until you found out that it rained a lot and you thought that it would be redundant for you to be there. I know all those things and more . . . but so do you. What you didn’t know is what I did for a living, this clothing, this sword. What you are looking at is a part of me that you never knew. So it can’t possibly come from your own mind, it can’t possibly be just a dream..”

“And if I never saw it, how would I know any different.”

Georgina points toward Mercy’s bedroom. “She does.”

**M**ercy Johnson thought that the coolest thing about the War Machine was that it had it’s own helicopter pad. Georgina used it primarily for staging transportation throughout the city. The club goers all thought it was a part of the whole scene to have a helicopter show up periodically, the roar of the motors added to the roar of the crowd and the music. Georgina even used the pad to have bands flown in and on occasion held promotions where couples would win helicopter rides to the War Machine on given nights. All in all, Mercy’s “slay ride” had a good cover.

Keira and the others piled into the helicopter. “Mercy, Mercy, Mercy! The War Machine Regulars are hot for action! Dorchester, James!”

“Franklin Park?”

“Nah, I don’t think this vamp is into lurking in zoo’s or cemeteries . . . this guy is into home invasions. Let’s buzz the locals.”

Mercy liked Keira, the redhead was hot and capable. Despite everyone fawning over Georgina's every command, While Georgina was off playing housewife, Keira was in charge and she kept things under control in a more subtle manner.

"Should I wait for her?"

"Not tonight. She's actually going to do the watcher thing. You ever wonder what she does on those long trips?"

Mercy never wondered as to who the real Georgina was. She knew Georgina most of her life and of all the War Machine ensemble, Mercy was the only one who knew about Raine and Danny. Everyone else thought that George's time outs were for research. "Her business. Radio's on, everyone is in . . . let's fly!"

The copter rose over the Boston landscape looking every bit like a predator stalking its prey through the night. Keira leaned out of the copter holding onto a rail beside the cabin with her feet firmly on the landing skids. Keira was focused on detecting vampires. It was a big city, the War Machine didn't worry about single vamps trolling graveyards, they focused on big gatherings, victories that would cripple the underworld as a whole. George hated the idea of the slayer wasting her time patrolling the streets fighting a few vamps at a time. This was a war, not a truant patrol. The council looked down their noses at this too. It was their belief that slayers should spend as much time in the field as possible in order to be prepared for every variable unconceived in training. Obviously, the watchers were not privy to George's techniques.

Nina didn't like flying. She always sat as deep into the cabin as usual and pretended to not be in an aircraft at all. Jay sat in the passenger side and kept his eyes on the city lights, his mind calculating distances, points of egress and entry and every other facet of the city that would help him decipher where vamps may be. Frankie stood near the open door watching over Keira and Raphael sat calmly next to Nina. He always tried to keep her centered on the flights.

"What do you make of this Highwayman guy? Think he's a big bad or just another lieutenant?"

"Maybe not big bad, but ugly bad."

"We can take him."

Keira turns to the group. I got something. Mercy, head toward Washington Street, there is activity in the projects. "

Mercy turns the copter where Keira wants and reports back to home base their intentions.

"Keira has a mark. We're heading to the projects on Washington. "

Back at the War Machine, Georgina finishes reading the Highwayman's book. She closes it and slides it across the table back to Angel. "Okay, so this sick bastard got his jollies committing heinous crimes in the 1800's and getting away with it. Men, women and children were so much meat to him. Makes you wonder if saving humanity is a worthwhile career path."

"He's not human."

"He was."

Gleason joined them at the table. "I think Angel is theorizing that there is more to being human than simply being the fastest sperm in the pool. From what I gather, this guy was never human, even before he became a bloodsucking corpse . . . uh . . . no offense intended." Gleason picked up the book and started leafing through it.

Angel shrugged. "None taken. Besides you made my point. This guy came up against a bounty hunter named Ben Lawler. Lawler shot the highwayman and turned him into authorities for incarceration. He was given a death sentence and his last request was to have his journal bound in his own skin and given to Lawler. This is the journal."

Gleason dropped the book on the table. "Ewww. So he was a head case, where does his current state come in?"

George gets up and walks over to the view window to look down on the club floor. "The council documented a series of deathrow turnings in the 1800's. Prisoners were turned to vamps by other prisoners to escape the hangman's noose . . . permanently."

Angel stood beside George. She barely noticed him rise and walk over, he was good. "He has a special ability. When he drains a victim, he takes on their form. His spirit is strong, instead of just creating another vampire, he pushes out the soul of the new body and takes it over. He never sires, he just takes on new bodies. "

"We figured that out, Angelus. What we don't know is why he is on a rampage."

"He likes a challenge. Lawler's been dead a long time."

The radio clatters and as the static subsides they hear Mercy on the other end. "We're hot. Two kids are being dragged out by vamps, they look like they can't be more than ten or eleven. Keira is down there with Jay and Nina. We have them down by seven, but these last three are slippery. No highwayman."

The three vamps had the children well in hand and were maintaining a position on the roof of the thirty story building. Mercy flew over them and laid a spotlight on them, but seeing that it only irritated them she turned it off to not endanger the two kids. A young boy and his older sister. Keira and the War Machine were closing in on them anyway. Mercy hovered while waiting for Keira's signal.

Keira took the point and stood ten feet away from the three crouching vamps. "Let them go and I'll make it quick. Hurt them, and you'll be begging me to dust you five hours before I'm finished with you."

"It's a standoff!"

Keira raises her hand and wiggles her fingers. "We're the War Machine. It's never a standoff."

The vamps and the children look at her equally confused. Suddenly rain seems to sprinkle down on them. The vamps scream in pain and let the kids go as they rush to get out of the sudden drizzle. Keira walks calmly among them, the falling water glistening on her pale skin. She stakes two of the vamps, already in pain from the down pour, then she turns to the last one.

"Holy water from a goddess named Mercy, Mercy. Mercy. You will die. So why not make your last act a good one and tell me where the highwayman is?"

The vampire desperately crawled on the floor away from slayer. Despite his pain, he giggles and sings. "The itsy bitsy spider crawled up the water spout . . . down came the rain and washed the spider out . . ."

Gleason listened to the transmission. "What the hell?"

George pushed Gleason aside and grabbed the transmitter. "Mercy! Get back here immediately, let Keira and the others make their way back on foot. I need you here NOW!"

Gleason gets up from the floor. "I missed something didn't I?"

Angel followed George as she went upstairs to the helipad. "So did I."

"No matter what happens sweetness, know that I'm with you and that nothing will keep me away from you, sweetness. Not Heaven or Earth."

"I'm dreaming and you're dead, Mom. Tomorrow I'll tell all this to Jacqueline and she'll get all Sigmund Freud on me. You'll boil down to my having a need for a parent."

George walks to the front door, opens it and steps outside into the darkness. “I was concerned you would become the chosen one. Now the war has taken a different turn, and you might be far more. Don’t risk those you trust needlessly, Trim, Delia, Willey, Kate, Zoe, all of them are good soldiers. Talk to Mercy. Tell her to look at the pictures carefully.”

Georgina De La Vega waved a hand toward Raine. Raine saw a light blue shimmer then . . .

She woke up again.

The Boston night was sharp and vivid. Darkness cut like a knife. Georgina stood on the roof of the War Machine like a gargoyle looking over those she had to protect. However, Angel noted that there was a pause to her breathing, an increase in heartbeat.

“What are you afraid of?”

She didn’t turn to him. “Liam, I once dreamed of two locomotives composed entirely of the souls of every life ever cut short by a vampire. This is how it works, a vampire drains a body, the soul that inhabited that body is forced out and the demon that is the vampire takes residence, all the while maintaining the lingering memories of the original host. That is why we tell slayers that vampires are no longer who they used to be. The original souls are trapped in purgatory. When the vampire is slayed . . . the soul is freed from its prison and allowed to finish its journey.”

Angel kept his distance. Talk of souls always made him uncomfortable.

“When I touch any of the souls in the dream, I go back to their last day on earth as a mortal. That’s how we first met. I can’t do anything to actually change the past, I can only watch. I’ve traveled often and learned a lot. While I can only affect the present, I know that every soul on the trains is a soul whose body is still walking out there as a vampire.”

“Why tell me?”

“Because your soul isn’t on the train. Because I believe that for some reason I am actually talking with Liam and not some demonic side effect. Because I choose at this time to trust you.”

“I . . . I’m honored. A little scared, but honored. You’re scary y’know.”

In the distance the sound of Mercy’s helicopter can be heard faintly as it approaches the rooftop.

“My daughter is in danger. The Highwayman isn’t after Keira . . . he wants me. I’m his challenge, his new Lawler. This weekend my girl turns ten. He has been sending me messages all along waiting for me to piece them together. He knows that I have a family, he knows where they are. “

“You have a family?”

“A beautiful girl, a wonderful husband and mommy makes three.”

Angel smiles. “You have a family.”

“Yes, only the watchers, Mercy and you know.”

Angel laughs. “Georgina De La Vega has a family. “

“And you have a soul. We all have our secrets. Will you do this for me?”

“A vampire helping a watcher? Stranger things have happened I guess.”

The helicopter arrives. Georgina goes to the cockpit window and talks to Mercy. “Mercy! This is Angel. I’m activating the ninth contingency . . . the Highwayman is going after Raine! He’s going to help.”

Mercy looked shocked. “The ninth . . . are you sure George?”

George gave Mercy a steel eyed look. Mercy retracted her question “Of course you are. We’re on our way.”

As the copter ascended into the night Mercy spoke to Angel. “George and her family mean everything to me pretty boy. Don’t screw this up or I’ll make sure you’re pissing out of your ass for eternity.”

“Yes ma’am.”

**R**aine tapped on Mercy’s door lightly then opened it. Mercy stirred softly in her bed. “Mercy?”

“Hmm . . . it’s late, honey, go to sleep. We like sleep. Sleep is good.” Mercy spoke without the benefit of being awake herself.

Raine steps into the room and sits on the bed beside Mercy. “I dreamed of Mom.”

“That’s good . . . pleasant I hope.”

“Well actually, first there were trains, then I spoke to her in the living room. It was weird, she looked nothing like I remembered. “

Raine leaned over and took a side on the bed. Mercy turned and cuddled her, putting a protective arm around her. “She was wearing a cape, and she had a really cool sword. Neat dream really.”

Mercy’s eyes opened wide. She sat up. “You’ve never seen her in that outfit.”

“She said you had.”

Mercy bolted out of the bedroom. Raine took her time to follow and when she reached the living room Mercy was standing in the middle of it in just her underwear looking up and down at everything.

“What’s wrong? I have these kinds of dreams all the time. If it meant anything Jacqueline will figure it out. I know you don’t like her, but . . .”

Raine had never seen Mercy this spooked. “Was there anything else?”

“She said that you should look at the pictures carefully. Mercy, you’re scaring me.”

Mercy zips past Raine. “Scaring you?!” She goes to the piano and picks up a pile of pictures sitting on top of them. She pours over them, selects two, goes to the desk and digs around in the drawer. She brings up a magnifying glass. “These must be the pictures she’s talking about. The ones I took at Eagle lake. Torry left them for me the other night. . .”

The magnifying glass scanned over the picture of an abandoned locomotive. The pictures were from different angles, but it was clear that the train had moved . . . two feet to the left. What Mercy had missed when she checked the photos, was that the ground beneath the trains had been shifted as well, given that they assumed the trains had moved she didn’t give it much attention. However it was clear to her now.

“Honey, those trains didn’t move.”

“But I thought . . .”

“The trains didn’t move at all. They stood still and everything else moved . . . two feet to the right. “

“Everything?”

“Everything. Someone used those trains to get our attention and they moved heaven and earth to do it. You have to tell me everything about your dream honey, every detail. “ Mercy noted that Raine was very quiet. “Raine? You okay honey?”

In her hands, Raine held a walking staff with decorative silver trimmings and a red ruby like gem at the pommel.

“**M**om! Mom! Mom!”

Raine ran up to Georgina and scrambled onto her for a huge hug. “Mom, you have to see what Dad got me!”

Georgina laughed. “Happy Birthday, Sweetness. You haven’t seen what I have in the station wagon for you yet.” As Raine dragged George out to the garage George glanced over at Danny who was fixing himself some orange juice in the kitchen. “Am I going to regret this Danny?”

In the garage stood a brand new purple moped, perfectly sized for Raine. “Danny! A moped?! She’s ten!”

Danny walks in. “Exactly why it’s not a Harley. I would have told you but when I tried to call your secretary said you were in some big meeting.”

“How have things been here?”

“Quiet. There was some sort of scuffle down the road a ways. We thought it was a police chase of some sort. We heard a helicopter and everything, but there was nothing about it in the news. Other than that, we played board games and messed around in the garage. It’s good that your were able to make it. I was honestly expecting a call and an excuse. What’s your new schedule?”

“Well hon, things are up in the air at the office. Right now, let’s have some cake.”

“Cake!”

“Yes, I brought some cake.”

**G**leason tapped out the final code in his computer. Once he set things in motion, the files would be duplicated and encrypted. One set would be secured in the War Machines hidden computers in the sublevels of the club, the other set would be the data that was accessible to all probing eyes. Especially the Watchers.

He looked on his screen at George’s instructions once more to make sure that her every request was taken care of. As frightening as it was in theory, he found himself

quite excited about the reality. Once he tapped the button, it would change how the War Machine did things from that moment forward.

“ . . . In the event that our war is compromised by the very organization that has perpetuated it throughout time . . . we are to act on this ninth and final contingency. The War Machine will continue the war on our terms until such time we feel the Watcher Council can be trusted again. If this contingency comes to be, it means that the watchers have lost sight of their objectives and have become an organization bent on power and control over the slayers. The War Machine will pretend to operate within the auspices of the council, but we will answer to a greater goal.

We will be those who watch the watchmen.

We will be the greater good.”

Gleason pressed the button.

Someone on the Watcher council compromised George’s secrets. Gleason didn’t know what those secrets were, but he knew that who ever it was that decided that George was too powerful as a watcher, just signed a death sentence. Not all demons were a part of Georgina’s war and Georgina had very powerful allies on every side. The Watcher Council tried to take down one of their own because she was too strong and probably not British enough.

The Watchers had been around for a long time. Through centuries they trained and suppressed slayers to do their bidding. They had their grip on every supernatural activity, artifact, monster, and prophecy in known history. The watchers thought that one way or another they knew everything they would ever need to know.

They were about to find out that they knew very little about Hell. Georgina De La Vega just declared war on the council.

War is Hell.

The watchers. . .

They better watch out.