

Chapter 1

I couldn't see Larry ahead of me anymore, and that was against the rules. Everybody kept the guy in front of him in view, always. Strange things that go bump in the night bump a lot harder when you're alone.

"Larry hold up," I called out. The message went across the radio from my lip microphone as well, but we never got so far apart that it was necessary when doing a sweep like this. If we did, we'd be breaking rule number one. See above. The lip mic was in case it got loud. You couldn't keep yelling "*what?*" in a firefight and expect to last long. A few clanks echoed back down the tunnel, if you could call it that. It was more of a cave than a tunnel. Larry had stopped. He had been thinking too much.

A few feet ahead I turned around an outcropping and saw Larry's back. He was peering off into the darkness, pike in hand. We had guns and power tools and things that went boom, but nothing beat good old-fashioned medieval weaponry. When you shot a bad guy, you weren't always sure you got him good. When you stuck him with a spear, or better yet, some big, jagged blade, you knew right away just how solid of a hit it was. You also got plenty of eye contact, which is an important thing in this business. Nobody is a good actor when they've got a hunk of metal shoved through their lungs.

"You got ahead of me Ler," I told him.

"You gettin' slow, Chief," he replied. I'm 35 years old. Screw him.

"Hey, you're older than me!"

"White folk don't age like the brothers," he flashed his pearly whites. Larry had about ten years on me and was built like a running back. He was a few inches shorter than me at around 5'9", but he could out lift, out run, out fight, and just about out-everything anybody else on my team. That's why he was running point.

People think point is the most dangerous position to take, but in reality, they all are. The things that creep and crawl around don't have a preference for how to attack a group of guys. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that half the time the creatures were sleeping when we walked by. They jumped guys in the middle just as often as they did the guy in back. That's why we kept that line of sight rule. If the guy in front of you got geeked, you could warn the team, and especially the guy just ahead of Mr. Unlucky. There's nothing worse than getting hit from behind because the guy watching your back has recently become some bad guy's leg of lamb. One of these days I'm going to buy or build something that can keep us all digitally posted on how everybody else is doing. I sure don't need to keep pressing my luck every time we go on a

mission, but then again, I sure do need a stiff drink every time we finish one, and first things first.

"What's up, Mr. O'Conn...?" the Professor started to ask from behind me.

"Larry's got ants in his pants," I said.

We waited for the other two guys to catch up. It didn't take more than a few moments. The space got tight, but tight was good. All my guys were scrappers in that they fought as well with their hands as with anything else. I'd put Pretty in a fight with a professional wrestler any day. Nobody would last long against a powerhouse, but Pretty was brutal. He didn't mind getting beaten ugly... hence his nickname.

"Do they always live in caves?" Professor asked.

"They live anywhere," replied Larry. "It's the dumb ones live in places like this."

"Dumb?" he asked back.

"They don't plan ahead," grumbled Pretty. "All heads up, Chief."

I nodded. Sluggo had just turned the corner, so we were all present and accounted for. "Roll out."

And just like that, we were moving again. No talking, just walking and looking, each man a little longer than a broomstick's length away. Any closer and there was a good chance that, in a scuffle, somebody I paid good money to hunt bad guys would end up on one of our expensive spears. Believe me, finding guys to lurk through caves yelling "Here, kitty kitty" to the dark forces of nature isn't an easy task. There's guts, and then there's flat-out crazy. My guys make psychotic look like a compliment.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't sometimes still wiggled out when the guys called me, "Chief." My dad was superhuman. No kidding. Hell, he was closer to seven feet than six, and he probably weighed over 300 pounds before he hit high school. He redefined the business of killing what most people would call "vampires." He was the Chief before I was. Every time the guys called me Chief my blood pressure spiked. I wasn't even remotely ready to become a chief, never mind The Chief, after my dad had died.

Our marching order was slightly modified; Larry had point, I went next, in the middle was the Professor on his first mission. Pretty took shotgun, and Sluggo brought up the rear. The Professor was new, and this was the first time we had used this marching order. The man that had previously filled his position was no longer with us.

"How many are we looking for?" Professor said. He obviously hadn't received the memo.

"Not now Professor," Pretty grumbled.

There are two types of people in the world. There are those who can't stop talking when they get nervous, and there are those who find it very hard to make any kind of noise. They both have their advantages. It doesn't affect us in a negative way. The guys on our team are plenty sharp, with and without noise. After all, if they can't stay sharp when there were distractions, how are they going to clear during a situation like, say, a dark and stormy night? No, they need to be completely focused all the time, so Professor's chatty mouth meant nothing. It also didn't tip our hand any, because the guys who play for the Bogeyman's team have the ability to sense us long before they hear us. Even when we are quiet we are sending out plenty of signals. I've always suspected the bad guys can hear ultra-high frequencies, meaning carrying our lip mics and radios is about as helpful for sneaking around as toting boom boxes.

No, when we go on the hunt, trying to be stealthy is never a consideration. We throw stealth out the window the moment we roll up to the scene. It still amazes me that we sometimes catch the bad guys sleeping. And let me tell you, they hate being woken up by us.

About thirty or so paces later Larry took another turn and stopped so that I could still see his back.

"Found a wrapper, Chief," he said. "Looks like we in, too."

Sure enough, I turned the corner and the cave opened up into a room. It was old and cut cleanly into the rock. The room was rectangular, probably ten feet across by twenty feet wide. The passage we had been in was connected to it a few feet away from one of the corners. Just next to this opening, and where Larry was standing, was a body. I didn't flip it over, though it looked like it had either been a young woman or some thin guy with long hair.

Walking into the room I panned my hose across lengthwise. The spotlight lit up another hallway, so I focused on that, strode over to the right of Larry, and waited for the others to scan our zone. Sure, something could have dropped right down on my head, but it wasn't my job to clear the top. It was my job to clear the horizon. Professor was right behind me. He did precisely what he was supposed to do. He walked in and panned up and down, looking in every nook and cranny. He didn't look twice at the wrapper, and I was happy. I figured he would have parked over it and had a billion questions. Instead, he scanned both the ceiling and the floor, and though there was nothing on either, he still held his focus on one bulge in the ceiling, even after Pretty had come in and cleared the room.

"Clear," said Pretty.

Nobody moved. Pretty held his spot in the free corner. Sluggo moved in and scanned everything again. He looked up at the bulge, walked by the hallway I was covering, and then walked over to the wrapper.

"Clear," he said finally. Double clear means we're good.

"Pretty, hold the back. Sluggo, you've got the front," I finished the process. That left me free to inspect the wrapper with Larry. I wanted Professor to get a good look at our discovery, more to learn from what we did less so to see if he had anything to contribute. Larry was already bending over the body, shining his flashlight around it for information.

"Is that one of them?" Professor asked.

"It ain't one nothin'," said Larry. "When there's pieces missin' like this, you say it's mos' of whatever it was."

He used his light to show how most of the right leg of the body was gone, and that the left arm ended near where the forearm began. I knew what the kid was going to ask before he did.

"So is it most of one?"

I smiled in spite of the gruesome situation. Maybe we were all more inured to the nasty aspects of the business. I mean, this used to be a live person at one time -- complete with friends and family. Maybe he or she had a dog and a nice house with a white picket fence. Maybe there were kids somewhere missing a parent. It's sad when you think that this has happened to somebody. Still, homicide detectives eventually learn to joke about their work life to numb the grim reality of what they face. It only makes sense we do the same thing.

Larry turned to look at the Professor.

"Kid, I ain't got no college degree. You got what, a million? Ever take a class in logic? If we established it used to be one, and that some pieces is missin', and it appears to be mostly here, why would you ask me the question you just asked me?"

I swear I knew what he was going to ask again.

"No," he stammered, "I didn't mean that. I meant, well, is it a vampire?"

I must have been coming down with some special mind reading powers. I felt like a psychic. Two for two.

"You gonna start usin' words like that, you may as well sit out in the truck and read yo' books," Larry grumbled angrily. "Callin' somethin' a vampire is like usin' the term 'vegetable' as the specific word meanin' 'carrot.' It ain't peas and vegetables. It's peas and carrots, dig?"

I thought it was going to take longer before Larry handed out his first lecture like this, but I was wrong. Two for three wasn't bad. Larry knew this business better than anybody.

"This is called a 'wrapper,'" he continued. "Though callous, we use that term 'cause it conveys a very specific meanin'. This used to be a live person who unfortunately was in the wrong place at the wrong time. This person, basically, was food fo' one of the bad things we huntin' tonight. We use the term 'wrapper' because what you have left here is the attractive packagin' that caught the attention of a creature, and was discarded after the meal was finished. Like the wrapper of a candy bar."

"B-but..." Professor rebooted, "Th-the..."

Everybody on the team took leadership positions at some point or another. Technically, I was the Chief. It had become both my unofficial name, but my definite role. I was in charge, and the company was mine. It was actually a family business that went back probably a lot further than my dad told anybody. At least a few centuries. My guys were some of the toughest bastards on the planet. Not all of the guys I had worked and trained with were still with us. Our business was dangerous, and the Professor was new because the guy who had previously been one of the five on my team was dead. Now we had to train another guy, which put us all in more danger, and this job was already dangerous enough.

The guys that had served as chief before me were competent. My dad, however, had taken it to a new level. He was completely unafraid of bugs. He was convinced he was immune to them. In every way he absolutely had no fear of vampires, and believed he was genetically superior to them. And until the day he died, that was never proven wrong.

Larry went back to work. He used a lobster gauge to measure the size of the bite marks around the face, neck, and shoulders. We had made a similar gauge for measuring fingernail widths for where the chest was ripped open. I hadn't seen the return on the investment for taking these measurements, but we had only been doing it about a year. Sluggo had insisted on it. I was the leader of this group, not the brains. No matter what you could say about my guys, they did have good ideas from time to time. I didn't think measuring bite marks was a good idea yet, but I'd been proven wrong plenty of times in the past, and every time I made a bad judgment, it was after one of the guys advised me to do otherwise. So until I felt it was a bad idea, or they proved it was a good idea, I'd allow it.

These days we all carried lobster gauges. I could just hear the Professor asking next, *And why are we fighting vampires with shellfish tools?* In actuality, the kid was much smarter than that. He'd been studying with us for some time and this was his first field trip. It didn't matter how much you read or how much you learned, you still didn't get some things until you

were out there up to your hips in it. So sure, he was asking some entry-level questions, but learning something on paper doesn't mean you're going to recognize it when you see it out in the field for the first time.

Larry flipped the body over onto its back. The arms and legs stayed in their same positions. The parts of the body that had been on the ground were darker. This body had been there a couple of days, probably. It was definitely male, though somewhat slight of build.

"Oh God," moaned Professor, right before he ran to the corner and began dry heaving. Seeing a corpse is one thing. Seeing a mutilated corpse that's been left in a room for a couple of days is another.

"Slug I need your Polaroid," Larry said.

"Back main pocket," Sluggo said back.

Larry got up and walked over to where Sluggo was. Though Larry was rummaging through his stuff, Sluggo didn't take his eyes, never mind his weapon, off his zone. The bad guys are really good about not making noise when they're sneaking up on you. Larry took the photos with Sluggo's digital camera, and put it in a bag on his own hip.

"Well?" I asked him. The paperwork was out of the way. It was time to start guessing.

"Let's just say he didn't lick the plate clean," replied Larry. Professor probably heard it too, because he let out a quiet moan and the retching picked up a bit.

"So we're looking at a few possibilities then," I said. I could think of a few things, but Larry had good instincts.

"I doubt it's because it's small, 'cause them bite and claw marks is pretty big. Besides, this dude is weak. He didn't offer much grub to begin with."

Larry was thinking out loud. I only wished the kid was feeling better so he could pay attention to what Larry was saying. Larry had been doing this longer than anyone who was alive and active, and his experience was invaluable.

"But why the leg?" chimed in Pretty. It was a good question.

Larry shook his head.

"The leg wasn't food, it was broke off durin' the struggle. Same thing with the hand. This ain't hunger. This was... different."

Whatever breath Professor had managed to catch was quickly leaving him again. I took out a bottle of water and gave it to him. He looked like he'd be all right once things calmed down. It was like seasickness in that anything can set it off as long as you've still got it. Once it's gone, it's gone. As much as this was bothering him I knew he'd be able to hold his own if and when we found what we were looking for. I'd spent way too much time screening this kid. In addition to studying he'd been in combat training with us for over half a year. I know how to pick the right guys. If the kid cracked under fire, I'd resign.

That is, if the other guys let me.

If you had asked me years ago what I'd be doing with my life, I sure wouldn't have said I'd be killing the monsters I used to watch on "Creature Double Feature" back at my dad's place in Massachusetts. I'd have laughed just thinking I'd be running my dad's company. He was superhuman when it came to work. Growing up, I felt my dad only had a son and a wife on paper; he was married to his job. Even when he took vacations with us, if his phone rang, he'd be gone within the hour, and was never back before vacation was over. We had satellites on the

roof and cell phones long before anybody else even knew about them. Like Clark Kent, the phone would ring and he'd be gone moments later.

I'd always thought my dad was a mercenary or a CIA agent. He taught me all about guns and fighting growing up. I take that back. My dad taught me how to run.

I was born in Quincy, Massachusetts, and was raised there until I was about ten. That's when we moved again and again for parts of the year, so much so that I moved more than my friends on the military bases on which we lived. My family had a permanent home in the Squantum neighborhood of Quincy, but I spent more time on military bases than most soldiers. It sucked. Even when we "vacationed" back at our home, my dad would leave when his office phone rang.

To better understand me, you have to understand my dad. He was a monster of a man, both physically and by demeanor. He was about 6'6" and as strong as an ox. He commanded every room. He was passionate about what he did, and since what he did was a mystery, he was hard to like and easy to hate.

And he taught me to run.

No, he *required* me to run. My earliest memories are of him drilling me in running. He taught me how to sprint, and how to feint. He taught me how to zig and juke. He enrolled me in the local youth track club as soon as possible, and even lied on my application for the youth football team to get me in early. He'd often wake me up to go for a run with him along the beach, or when he came home from a long job he'd get furious if I didn't run with him the moment he returned, no matter what time of day or night it was. Very often I'd get my bell rung on a tackle by a bigger and older kid on the football team, and my dad would make me run twice as hard after practice and lecture me how I had screwed up.

"If you hear anything you don't understand," he'd always say, "You run as fast as you can."

He got me so used to running when something scared me that I got in trouble many times at school for running away when the bell rang, or when someone touched my shoulder. Shell-shocked World War 2 vets looked like they were on Valium compared to me growing up.

My dad ran when the phone rang and got angry when I didn't run; and he could never talk about his job. It was as if he sold sneakers for the C.I.A.

Going into my teens my home life was a war zone. Dad and mom were always going at it. My dad had enrolled me into kung fu, boxing, shooting, and a bunch of other crazy classes. Government men would show up at school to make sure I went to practice. By the time I was twelve my full-time job was going from school to football to kung fu to something else. And whenever my dad was home there was never a day where we wouldn't go for a run from our house to the Boston Police shooting range. From our place in Squantum, the range was a mile down the road on Long Island (the one in Boston harbor, not the one in New York).

I also had to study Latin and Hebrew, which as you can imagine, gave me plenty of chances to learn how to fight. Being the kid in the schoolyard who ran and studied ancient languages was like having a target painted on your back.

I knew so much about guns and fighting and running that by the time I got to college I could avoid my government babysitters, and could work the social services system to keep my dad from contacting me, too. My folks got divorced just as I started high school. My mom would go ballistic when I spoke ill of my dad, and insisted I spent my court-ordered time with him. She

was worse than the many Department of Youth Services case managers I met over the years. She and my dad fought like banshees, but she would have killed me if I had skipped out on a weekend with him.

When I graduated college I had nothing tying me to the man who insisted I live his ghost of a life. I didn't have to run or shoot or kick somebody in the pants. I simply didn't have to return his phone calls.

That is, until he got really sick, and I found out what he had been doing all those years. When he died, I was put in charge.

I don't run anymore.

"I'll get a better guess when we look around a bit," Larry continued. "We don't know if this is the front door."

I turned around to the Professor.

"Okay kid, either swallow it or blow it out, but we're moving."

Larry grabbed his pike and went back to lead. I grabbed the kid on my way past him and put us back in our original order. If he weren't so new we wouldn't have gone back into our regular formation. Generally our order changes depending upon how we set up those temporary holding positions. Whoever's closest to our next exit takes point, and we file out in that order. Being fluid is important to us because we're often in small spaces, and there aren't many of us. We have to take up a lot of room without taking any of our buddies out. Also, we can't count on everybody still ticking in the middle of an operation. People get hurt and taken out while the fan is being lathered in shit. I openly admit we've stolen many combat practices from the Special Forces maniacs of the Red, White, and Blue – but they'd be lying if they didn't fess up that they borrowed some of ours, too.

Just as Larry walked out he switched on the lamp attached to his pike. It lit up the small hallway like an airport beacon. If you stood too close to that thing you'd get a tan.

"Lookin' plenty old," noted Pretty. "Like a castle."

What he meant to say was 'like the movies,' which we were all thinking. The predators we exterminate don't live in castles on scary hills. They never sleep in crypts or coffins, and they aren't from Transylvania or Romania or wherever it is they're supposed to come from. They don't invite you in during a rainstorm, then wine and dine you until they decide to drink your blood later on that night. They live in abandoned buildings and in sewers and wear tattered rags, if anything at all. Most of the time they're what we call Class One bugs, which means they're little more than killing and eating machines; and no, they don't bite you to make you one of them. They bite you to eat you.

The only strange thing about this place, at least to us, was finding such a well-hewn stone corridor attached to a natural cave system like this. One minute we were ducking under and worming around rough boulders, crevices, and stalagmites. Well, maybe stalactites. I don't know the difference, nor do I care. The next minute, we were in something that took thousands of hours and skilled hands to carve. That didn't sit right.

I stayed close to Larry, hose in hand. I was definitely thinking about switching weapons, because those stone walls were starting to look dangerously solid. The converted Mac-10 submachine gun "hose" I was carrying can throw about twelve hundred rounds a minute, which broke down to about twenty each second. This one is modified to fire from a special magazine we call a 'conch shell,' because it looks just like the shell of the ocean slug. It holds two hundred

rounds, which, when combined with the specially weighted shroud and fore stock we built for it, makes it about eight times as heavy as your off the shelf Mac-10 submachine gun. We do this so the thing doesn't jump out of your hands when you fire it. We even build on a silencer with an extra-long flash suppressor so all the flash goes to the bad guys so we don't get knocked deaf or blind when they go off.

Even with all the wonderful additions, the hose wouldn't be helpful to us if the bullets ricocheted off the walls back into us. Because of this, we use frangible rounds, which are basically bullets made out of shards of metal pressed together. When they tear into flesh they break apart, which makes the wound very, very nasty. Imagine twenty of them tearing into a bug in one second and you can imagine how the bugs don't get wounded so much as they disintegrate. When these bullets hit metal or rock though, they shatter into dust. But since we don't personally make these rounds, we always take precaution that one or two won't perform properly. The less room we leave for Mr. J.C. Murphy to join the party, the more we hope he'll stay away.

Larry stopped suddenly at the end of the hallway. There was another room just past it, and he was sniffing the air like he could smell something. I heard a faint click from inside the room.

"Send the kid to the back," he said without turning around. I kept the hose trained forward and reached back for the Professor. When I felt his shoulder, I pulled him closer to me.

"Professor, go to the very back of the line, and keep your gun pointed down the hallway in the other direction," I whispered quickly. "Whatever you do, and I mean *whatever* you do, do *not* turn around to look at us."

"But..."

"If they get through four of us, you're not making it down that hallway anyway, so get to the end of the line, turn around, and don't let anything sneak up on our backs. Now move. NOW!"

The other guys definitely heard me over the radio because they were already moving past him before he started walking back. We had no plans to baby the Professor like this, but when Larry uses that tone of voice, Larry's always right. I didn't have to say the Professor's name when I gave him that order, but I did anyway because the order was carried across the lip mic, and the less potential confusion we caused, the less chance Mr. J.C. Murphy was standing around the corner. I talk about the fictional Mr. J.C. Murphy a lot because he's a persistent asshole, and appears to follow us like a stalker. Everybody knows Murphy's Law – that if something can go wrong, it will. Well Mr. J.C. Murphy is like the Eveready Bunny version of Murphy's Law.

"It's just outta sight, Chief," Larry said. "I ain't got eyes on bug, but I'm going left, and I'm going to pin it up fast as I can. I think there's one to the right as well. Follow me, and Sluggo, you take him as he chase us down."

"Right on," Sluggo replied.

"Chief, I want you to light it up fast and bright. Somethin' don't feel right."

Larry hardly ever didn't know everything. I was going to trust his judgment. If it didn't feel right to him, it would feel wrong to all of us.

"Okay boys, spots on two, flares on three," I ordered the guys. "Slug, you heard him. You're on pike. Pretty, follow with a hose. Just in case there's more than two, you and I cover center to wings. Professor's back is open."

"Gotcha Chief," clicked Pretty.

I pulled out two flares from a harness on my left leg. We have these specially made, too. With a good grip, you can ignite three of these with one hand. They are stowed upside-down, so when you pull them out you expose the igniters. You grab a flare by the body, bang the igniter against something hard, and the thing will light up a room. I hefted the two in my left hand and got ready.

"One," said Larry.

We never said anything else. A moment later, the guys clicked their lights from regular setting to spotlight. Even before the sound of the switches had a chance to travel into the room, we were running. I slammed the flares against the wall, followed Larry to the left, and tossed the flares overhead to my right one at a time. If I threw them in front of me, Larry and I would have gone blind.

Oh shit, I thought. It was a big room, and Larry was about to get a workout.

Right in front of Larry was the biggest Class One bug I'd ever seen in my life. He looked like a people-eating professional wrestler. The only thing Larry had going for him was the bug didn't charge. The pike is a great weapon for taking out bugs, especially since the bad guys sometimes run at you in a wild charge. If you're carrying a gun, you don't stand a chance of knocking the bug back before he reaches you. I've heard FBI agents claim a drugged out crazy can travel something like twenty feet and still reach you with a knife. Imagine a creature that feels no pain, who can shred you with his nails and teeth - ten knives and an infected garbage disposal - looking to chew on your favorite face. I've seen them run through bullets a lot further than twenty feet. The pike helps fix that problem.

Larry caught the bug square in the chest and rushed him back as hard as he could. Off-balance, the bug staggered back, but didn't go flying like Larry often made them. You see, the pike is this gigantic steel spear, with a crossed t-bar about two feet from the tip. This setup allows the wielder to stick the bug on it, but stop him before he slides all the way up the shaft into your sniffer. We then pin them up against a wall, and they're stuck flailing on it until somebody else can step up and finish them off.

That plan works wonderfully when the guy sticking the bug only has to charge the bug back a few feet into a wall. As I shone my light at the bug and Larry, I didn't immediately see the back wall. We were in some kind of large hall. I knew Larry could run the forty-yard dash pretty quickly, but I wasn't so sure he was going to run it fast enough pushing that mother of all bugs. It was like pushing the sled back in high school football practice, only if the sled was trying to rip you in half while you were doing it.

"Fuck Chief! Paint 'im! PAINT 'IM!" Larry yelled. Part of our training is that we never fire our weapons until we know for sure our buddies are clear. You don't shoot a bug on a stick unless the stick is in the wall, bug pinned and buddy clear.

I also had a more important rule: do what Larry says. I ran as fast as I could to catch up and aimed high. I didn't want bullets bouncing off the pike and hitting either of us. The hose lit up the room as good as one of those flares. I squeezed the trigger down, and it looked like an eight-foot flame was coming out of the gun. For a moment I used the flame to aim, dropping my

aim and firing bursts to concentrate on hitting that wonderfully ugly face of the bug. Hopefully I'd only need to connect with one.

The bug was swinging wildly. I could see that his arms were longer than we were used to. Larry was getting slapped and clawed and this was definitely going to be a losing race. We weren't going to reach the wall before the bug caught some serious Larry real estate with one of those claws. He was moving erratically and Larry couldn't control him. My bursts were flying left and right, always hitting where the bug's head had been moments before. It was time to improvise.

"Jump back Ler!" I screamed. He didn't hesitate. Larry put one hand behind the base of the pike, planted his feet, and shoved the thing for all he was worth. That was enough to topple the bug and put a few more precious feet between the two of them. I stepped up and held the trigger down for good. The bug was already getting his footing back. He was looking right at me. I didn't want to make a night out of it, so I walked my fire into his side and then stitched it up his chest to a nose that I couldn't have imagined ever being button cute. His face opened up like a zipper as I twisted the fire just a bit to the sides, like the sign of the cross, to blow the pieces into smaller pieces. No matter what they say in the movies, bugs without heads don't come after you. When you liberally apply their brain to the pavement they go to sleep for good.

"Fuuuuuuck!" yelled Sluggo behind me. "Fuck FUCK fuck fuck *fuuuuck* fuck!"

When he sang the word "fuck," things were bad. Unlike the rest of us, Sluggo didn't curse much, and was quiet when things were tense. He got quieter when things got rough. He sang the *Fuck Song* when he was screwed.

Pretty's hose was bursting over and over much like mine had. I didn't know how many shots I had left, and I wanted to help, but if I ran, that left Larry alone. Just like with fighter pilots, you never leave your wingman. Pretty had been in the Army, and had been a cop after that before joining us. Even with all his training, fighting bugs was deadly, and difficult for guys with years of experience.

As quickly as I could I panned my area with the spotlight on my gun. I saw clear wall, which was good. No doors. If I found one it was my job to cover it until somebody else took over doing so. I could see another light panning the ceiling, which meant Larry had pulled out his hose and was making our search three-dimensional. That's a very important thing to do when you hunt creatures that can cling to ceilings and sometimes hide under floorboards.

"Confirm one dead bug, Chief," he growled at me. Obviously he was as anxious as I was to run over to help the other guys. I turned and lit up the bug with my spotlight one more time. He was as dead as they got. He was in pieces.

"Confirmed. Let's go!" and with that, we ran over to the other guys, yelling out that we were coming along the way.

What we saw would have been funny had it not been so fucking scary. Sluggo was hopping up holding onto the end of his pike. The bug on the other end was alternating between charging at him and pulling away. As it charged, Sluggo would jump to keep from getting knocked over. The force of the charge would push him up as he jumped, and he'd go flying back. If he let go of the pike, he would have gotten some good distance. The pikes have retractable barbs on them, so it wasn't coming out as the bug pushed and pulled. When the bug ran back, Sluggo got dragged forward. Sluggo had light freckles and red hair, so he basically looked like somebody had tied a Howdy Doody doll to a pike. Dancing around these two was

Pretty, bursting away with his hose and having about as much luck as I did at first. He was doing a little better than I was because he was shooting at the thing's feet and legs. What he was doing was smart, but the bug was moving too quickly. As soon as Sluggo fell down once, it was going to be all over for him. The second bug was even bigger than the one we had just taken down.

"Pretty, step back!" Larry ordered. "Chief, take his three!"

Sure, I was in charge, but being in charge didn't mean being the only one who got to bark out commands. Larry had the first idea, and he shared it with the class first. On our team, that meant we were going to try his idea first. I ran up to Pretty's right and Larry ran up to his nine, which is our term for left.

"Now waste the legs!" he said. Immediately, the room lit up with a 3600 round-per-minute salute. We'd practiced similar tactics before. If one hose threw a lead stream, our three guns threw a deluge. Not only did the bug stumble and drop, it got chopped up as it fell. When aiming for the legs, you aim for the balls first and work your way down. If you miss the balls you'll probably still hit some hip, and due to physics, a person can't move all that well on broken hips. Before we started working down the three of us had pretty much turned the bug's hip region, balls, and thighs into gore and red vapor.

I ran out of ammo just as the bug stumbled. Pretty ran out even before that. We were both changing clips when Larry ran up to the bug for the "mug shot." With a textbook quick burst, he shot it right in the face... then opened it up to the left and right like making the sign of the cross. Who says all vampire myths aren't true?

Sluggo unslung his gun from his back, turned to our six, and lit up his spotlight. He was shaken pretty bad, but his training couldn't have been any keener. He started his perimeter sweep because he was no longer assigned to the bug. I'll explain this better later. The most important thing to know is that we have a system for covering each other both as we switch weapons, and reload.

I was reloaded first, so I stuck with Larry. Pretty walked over to Sluggo, scanning the ceiling and the floor along the way.

"I confirm one more dead bug, Chief," Larry said.

"Confirmed," I panted. Nobody gave me shit for being out of breath, which meant the others were either all dead, or still spooked. Either way, we had to clear the room.

Sluggo and Pretty walked the perimeter dropping flares. It didn't take long for the whole area to light up. It was easily sixty feet wide, and probably about eighty feet long. I would have called it a cavern had it not clearly been cut with some precision. The only exit was the hallway from which we entered.

"Clear the room," I ordered.

The guys swept up and down and in the corners. Three of them confirmed the room clear at the same time.

"No other exits," said Pretty.

You'd probably find it odd to be sitting in a car without doors. That's how I felt right about then. Sure, we'd walked in through a finished hallway, but that had led to another room without a separate finished exit. It looked like somebody had dug a hole into that room by accident. On a map, the place would have looked like a lopsided dumbbell. What were we missing? Two clean-cut rooms, separated by a clear hallway, with no clean way out?

I also haven't mentioned yet that this cave we went into was in the middle of a swamp near the south coast of Alabama. What was a place like this doing in the middle of nowhere?

"Check again. I'm getting Professor in here," I said. I walked back through the area to grab the Professor.

The rooms were bright enough that I could plainly see there were no other exits. It was just too strange, and there was nothing wrong with checking more than once.

The kid was standing exactly where we left him.

"Good work, kid," I said when I was a few feet away.

"Thanks," he replied without turning around.

"You can come in here with us if you'd like."

He followed me back into the big room. I turned and kept my gun pointed at the exit even though there was plenty of light and little chance of any more action. You just never knew.

"Wow," he said.

Wow was right. I didn't have an appreciation for architecture, culture, fine dining, or stuff you'd find being featured on television shows for women, and even I thought the room impressive. Except for a series of scratch marks on the wall across from the entryway, the walls were finely polished. It was like fine art, or what the walls in some Roman mansions must have looked like. And it looked very old.

"Okay guys, I've got the door," I chimed, totally out of ideas. "Pretty, you stay on patrol. Sluggo, take your measurements. Larry, why don't you and the Professor walk around and see what doesn't spark your fancy."

It was a great time for the Professor to see some real-time bugs up close, and how better to learn than by standing next to Larry? I couldn't stop thinking about these rooms. What was freaking me out was that we had started out in what appeared to be a natural cave. Then, it looked like it had been roughly hewn for a few yards, and only recently. No big deal, somebody found a natural little cave, and decided to make it a little longer. Then, it opened into a centuries-old anteroom, hallway, and great hall. That's where I was getting the willies. *How* did somebody know to dig from that cave to reach the finished rooms? The more I thought about it, the more I got freaked out. Never mind how they knew to look there, *how did somebody carve two huge rooms into solid rock without there being an exit?*