

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 mike as well, but we never got that 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 mike was in case it got loud. You couldn't keep yelling "*what?*" in a firefight and expect to last long. A few clanks came back down the tunnel, if you could call it that. 'Cave' was more like it. 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. Plus, you 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 could out lift, out run, out fight, and just about out-everything anybody else on my team. That's why he ran 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 hit, 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 recently became 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 didn't need to keep pressing my luck every time we went on a mission, but then again, I sure *did* need a stiff drink every time we finished one, and first things first.

"What's up Chief?" asked Professor from behind me.

"Ler'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, and fought as well with their hands as with anything else. I'd put Pretty with his bare hands 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 the nickname. And I'd bet good money that he'd not only win, he'd make the guy eat a few words afterwards.

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

"Nah," replied Larry, "They live anywhere. 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 wasn't an easy task. There's guts, and then there's flat-out crazy. My guys made psychotic look like a compliment.

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 didn't get the memo.

"Not now Professor," Pretty grumbled.

There are two types of people in the world. There are those that 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, but Professor was the odd man out. In reality, it didn't affect us in any bad way. The guys on our team were plenty sharp, with and without noise. After all, if they couldn't stay sharp when there were distractions, how were they going to clear during a situation like, say, a dark and stormy night? No, they needed 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 played for the Bogeyman's team had the ability to sense us long before they heard us. Even when we were quiet we were sending out plenty of signals. I have always suspected the bad guys can hear ultra high frequencies, meaning carrying our lip mikes and radios were about as helpful for sneaking around as toting a boom box.

No, when we went on the hunt, trying to be stealthy was never a consideration. We threw stealth out the window the moment we rolled 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're 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 gun 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 most 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 was sad when you thought that this happened to somebody. Still, homicide detectives eventually learned to joke about their work life to numb the grim reality of what they faced. It only made sense we did the same thing.

Larry turned to look at the Professor.

"Kid, I ain't got no college degree. You've got what, a million? Ever take a class on 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 your 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 for one of the bad things we're huntin' tonight. We use the term 'wrapper' because what you have left here is the attractive packagin' that caught the attention of the creature, and was discarded after the meal was finished. Like the wrapper of a candy bar."

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

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 didn't see the return on the investment for taking these measurements, but it had only been about a year since we started doing it. Sluggo 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've 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 bad idea, I'd allow it.

These days we all carried lobster gauges. No matter how strange the world got, it always continued to get stranger for us first. 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. No matter how much you read and how much you learn, you still don't get some things until you're 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 it's 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 for 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 then left in a room for a couple of days is another thing.

"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 Slug's stuff, Sluggo didn't take his eyes, never mind his weapons, 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 the 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 was the only guy alive who had been doing this longer than me, and his experience was invaluable.

Well, it kept us alive, and I like to think of myself as pretty valuable, so there.

"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 almost 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.

"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 couldn't count on everybody still ticking in the middle of an operation. People got hurt and taken out while the fan was 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 like the ones we exterminated didn't live in castles on scary hills. They never slept in crypts or coffins, and they weren't from Transylvania or Romania or wherever it is they're supposed to come from. They didn't invite you in during a rainstorm, then wine and dine you until they decided to drink your blood later on that night. They lived in abandoned buildings and in sewers and wore tattered rags. Most of the time they were what we called Class One Bugs, which

meant they were little more than killing and eating machines; and no, they didn't bite you to make you one of them. They bit 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're 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 would throw about twelve hundred rounds a minute, which broke down to about twenty each second. This one was modified to fire from a special magazine we called a 'conch shell,' because it looked just like the shell of the ocean slug. It held two hundred rounds, which, when combined with the specially weighted shroud and fore stock we built for it, made it about eight times as heavy as your off the shelf Mac-10 submachine gun. We did this so the thing didn't jump out of your hands when you fired it. We even built on a silencer with an extra long flash suppressor so all the flash went to the bad guys so we didn't get knocked deaf or blind when they went 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.

We used frangible rounds, which were basically bullets made out of shards of metal pressed together. When they tore into flesh they'd break apart, which made the wound it caused very, very nasty. Imagine twenty of them tearing into a bug in one second and you can imagine how the bugs didn't get wounded, but more disintegrated. When these bullets hit metal or rock though, they shattered into dust. But since we didn't personally make these rounds, we always took precaution that one or two wouldn't perform properly. The less room we left for Mr. J.C. Murphy to join the party, the less we hoped to deal with him.

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 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 mike, and the less potential confusion we caused, the less chance Mr. J.C. Murphy was standing around the corner. I talk about Mr. J.C. Murphy a lot because he's a persistent asshole, and appears to follow us like a stalker.

"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, Ler," 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 had these specially made, too. With a good grip, you could ignite three of these with one hand. They were stowed upside-down, so when you pulled them out you exposed the igniters. You'd grab a flare by the body, bang the igniter against something hard, and the thing would light up a room. I pulled out the two with my left hand and got ready.

"One," said Larry.

We never said anything else. A moment later, the guys clicked on their spotlights. 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 because the bad guys almost always ran 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, which 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 usually made them. You see, the pike is this gigantic iron 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'd then pin them up against a wall, and they're stuck flailing on it until somebody else could 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, it seemed. I know Larry can 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 was that we never fired our weapons until we knew for sure our buddies were clear. You didn't shoot a bug on a stick unless the stick was 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 switching to 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're 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 the middle 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 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!" came the yell of 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 the shit hit the fan.

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. 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 hunted creatures that could cling to ceilings and sometimes hid 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, actually.

"Confirmed. Let's go!" and with that, we ran over to the other guys, yelling out 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 running 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 barbs on them, so it wasn't coming out as the bug pushed and pulled. When the bug ran back, Sluggo got dragged forward. The only way these pikes came out unintentionally was with some serious cutting, and even that took a little while. 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, but never used this setup for shooting out a bug's legs. 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'd probably still hit some hip, and due to biological 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 badly, 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 was 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 Chief 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 walked in through a finished hallway, but that 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?

"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 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.

"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."

This would be 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. 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?*