

Chaos Unbound

Book 2 of the Metis Files

By

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It is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself,  
you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles;  
if you do not know your enemies but do know yourself,  
you will win one and lose one;  
if you do not know your enemies nor yourself,  
you will be imperiled in every single battle.

—**The Art of War**, Sun Tzu

## Chapter 1

San Diego, September 2011

*Selkies*. Thirty-five miles offshore in the Pacific Ocean, and I'm dodging freakin' selkies in my fishing boat. It's like they're seagulls, and I'm dropping French fries at the beach. Man do they screw up the fishing. Worse, when they appear, bad things tend to follow. *And it's just my luck*. Of all fae to show up randomly, it had to be *these* shapeshifters—the kind that could transform into seals and even into sea lions, which scare the crap out of the fish. Every pile of floating kelp we'd fished around so far had one of these fairies under it. Every kelp except the paddy right in front of the boat.

“Captain Dore, look! Another seal,” the woman said, reaching for her camera.

*And that selkie made it a perfect five for five.*

I couldn't help but hang my head. My clients—a simple Midwestern family of Mom, Dad, and Teenage Son—considered it endearing to see a seal poke its head up from inside the kelp, but *I* could see their true bulbous heads, seaweed-like hair, and pudgy gray-green humanoid forms. Their giant, shiny-black eyes fixed on me as if they knew exactly who I was.

The creepy shapeshifters were part of the Unseelie Court—fairies that are decidedly unfriendly to humans—and the fact that we kept encountering them was starting to unnerve me. Encountering one in the Pacific was rare. In fact, I couldn't recall one off Southern California since an entire tribe of them showed up around Catalina Island in the 1980s. That appearance had led to a spate of unidentified *submerged* object and alien sightings, not to mention a few mysterious plane crashes around the island and a heap of sunken boats.

“Hey what's that big fin?” the father asked, pointing at the rapidly approaching triangular object sticking out of the water and heading straight at the paddy from the opposite side.

“Shark,” I said with a sudden smile. “Damn big one, too. Great white, from the looks of it. Rare for us down here in San Diego.”

“Oh, swim, seal! Swim!” the mom said as all hell broke loose around the paddy.

“Wow, really,” the kid said. “It’s like a real *National Geographic* moment.” He whipped out his phone to video the event.

I was the only one on the boat rooting for the shark. If they’d known what that shark was really chasing, they probably would have thought it was more like a *National Enquirer* moment.

Knowing the selkie-shark conflict would ruin the fishing within a mile of that paddy, I pushed farther out, always on the lookout for signs of life *other* than selkies. As long as we could avoid them, we found lots of small football-sized yellowfin tuna while we trolled, and I’d even managed to convince the anglers to release the little guys, in hopes of finding bigger ones. The small fish kept me blissfully busy until we made it back to the dock at around four in the afternoon—so busy, in fact, that I forgot about how screwy the presence of selkies was until I realized my buddy Ned was storming down the dock toward my boat as I pulled in.

As usual, Ned was dressed in a Hawaiian shirt with colors usually reserved for Las Vegas neon. The fact that he resembled a derelict version of Santa Claus usually drew people’s attention. It was either that or the fact that he always smelled like beer-soaked seaweed washed up on a beach. *It could be worse given that Ned was in fact the Titan God of the Sea, Nereus, in self-imposed exile.*

As I secured the boat to the dock, my cellphone, stashed inside my captain’s bag within the console, chirped the unique ring my buddy Geek had helped me assign to Sarah Wright. I felt guilty for avoiding her over the past two weeks. Despite scrambling to reach the annoying device before the call went to voice mail, I wasn’t quick enough. I tossed the phone on the console,

thoroughly disgusted with my wishy-washy-ness regarding our relationship—or whatever we had. I was pretty sure we both wanted to take things to the next level, but I was conflicted about what that would mean for both of us since my situation wasn't exactly normal.

*I'll call her back as soon as I can.* I sighed, watching my three clients stumble off the boat, trying to adjust to sea legs on land after a full day on the water. They chatted excitedly about sharks and sea lions as they went. Ned stood down the dock, waiting, staring intently at me with his hands on his hips and one flip-flop-clad foot tapping away. The trio barely managed to get past him before he charged the boat.

“Diomedes, dude, glad to see you made it back okay.” Ned’s shoulders dropped a bit as he exhaled heavily. “Now get yer ass off the damn boat and back onto land.” He dipped his head slightly and glared over his sunglasses at me, his brow deeply furrowed.

I stopped taking rods out of the rod racks under the gunwales and stared back at him. Something had him on edge, and *that* was saying something. Normally, he made people on Prozac appear edgy. In over a thousand years, I’d never seen him like this before.

“Now, dude. Now!” he said, raising his voice and gesticulating wildly.

The myriad of seagulls and pelicans gathered around the boat awaiting leftover bait and fish carcasses took off in a sudden deafening and chaotic commotion.

“Whoa. Relax, Ned. What’s got your panties in a bunch?” I said, getting back to my after-charter chores. “Sheesh. Besides, I think the dad left a few beers if you want them.”

Normally, Ned’s first question to me would have involved the possible presence of abandoned beer. Instead, he fixed me with a withering stare. His hands were back on his hips, and his foot again tapped on the dock. When we’d first met a few thousand years before, he’d

naturally emanated an aura of power. Though he'd since willingly given up most of his other-dimensional essence, the preternatural blue glow was now visible.

“Dude, which part of ‘now’ ain’t you understandin’?” He spoke through a clenched jaw and pointed at the dock forcefully, like a parent demanding a child’s immediate presence. Over his sunglasses, his eyes darted everywhere, keeping watch around us.

“Okay, okay,” I said, eyeing my fish-slimed gear and all the sardine scales and scuff marks marring the deck. “Who’s gonna clean all this up? You know if I let it sit, it’ll be even harder to clean later.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Ned replied. “Just get yer ass off the water. Right. Now.”

“Fine.” I kicked at my rods like a petulant child. “Let me get my damn gear bag, and I’ll leave.”

I grabbed my captain’s bag and stormed down the dock in a huff, glaring at Ned. I didn’t even bother to take off my grungy gray rubber fishing bibs. He avoided making eye contact as I passed him, which only pissed me off more. Instead, his eyes continued to dart around the marina. *Whatever.*

I got to my truck, threw my gear bag in the bed, then stripped off the rubber bibs. While hopping around on one leg like an idiot, trying to get the bibs off over my deck boots, I worked myself up from a huff to a tizzy. *Who the hell did he think he was ordering me around like that? Athena?* Throwing my bibs into the bed with the rest, I glanced over my shoulder, toward the dock.

Just as I was about to get into my truck, a more pressing question hit me: *Why?* Ned actually yelled at me. In over two millennia, I had never even witnessed him raise his voice. *What’d I do to him?*

I instantly felt like I owed him an apology, without even knowing what I'd done. I headed back down to the dock.

As I approached the top of the gangway, Ned was in a heated discussion with something in the water on the other side of the dock from my boat. I couldn't get a clear view of who or what Ned was talking with, or hear what was being said. The only things evident were the loud and freakish sea lion-like barks and Ned's wild and very uncharacteristic gesticulations. Instinctively, I searched for something to use as a weapon—a boat hook was leaning against the fence next to the gate down to the dock.

Then a putty-colored round female head covered in thick yellow-green hair popped up just above the dock and peered directly at me. Ned noticed me, as well, and all at once, the creature disappeared below the water's surface creating a wake that tossed the floating dock and rocked the boats tied up nearby. She was definitely one of the selkies I had encountered earlier offshore.

I stopped dead in my tracks. Ned shook his head and stomped toward me, which couldn't have been easy in flip-flops. His eyes were ablaze—literally. His awakened aura pulsed from white to blue like a lightning storm.

I shrugged and raised my eyebrows as his gaze fell on me. The temperature began to drop, and the water around the dock changed from a drab green to black and turned rough, as if it were about to boil. The disturbance bounced the moored boats against their bumpers and the dock, and the rigging on the sailboats began to clang. Even the remaining birds evacuated—only noiselessly.

“Boy, who did you piss off this time?” he said *at* me more than *to* me in a voice that reverberated through my skull. It wasn't loud, but it was insistent in its tone.

“I... um... I, ah... what?” I asked, vapor trailing from my mouth in the cool air.

I couldn't recall having done anything to anybody since chasing down that witch, Medea, a few months back, and as far as I knew, everyone I could have pissed off doing that was dead.

Ned continued up the ramp from the dock toward me, somehow appearing larger than normal. His face, especially his eyes, darkened. “Don't play games with me. You got selkies chasin' yer ass all over the Pacific, and they had to travel around the world to get here to do it. Nytrocyon herself is here to find you.” He pointed back down toward my boat. “She says Mab wants you. Says you killed Lord Indronivay.”

“Nytrocyon, ruler of the selkies? Seriously?” My teeth started to chatter, and my jaw muscles clenched in the frigid air. “Wait... she said I killed *who*? Lord Indronivay, Mab's warmaster? Are you kidding me? Why the hell would I have killed that uptight belligerent asshole?”

I'd never even met him, but his reputation as a jerk was legendary. Even as a Guardian and protector of humanity, I knew him only through stories that suggested he was a giant at nearly eight feet tall and was about as friendly as a shark with a toothache. All I really knew about him was that he personally ran every major war and military campaign Queen Mab of the Unseelie Court had waged for tens of thousands of years. *Hell, the guy might have charged into battle against Queen Titania of the Seelie Court on the back of a triceratops.*

“You're sayin' Nytrocyon is lying?” Ned's voice boomed through my head, shaking me back to attention.

I shrugged again. “Now why the hell would I do something like that? Honestly?”

Ned's shoulders dropped slightly, and his pulsing aura faded. Though his face brightened and his bushy beard and mustache split, revealing his white teeth in a broad smile, the rest of him



remained rigid. “Good. I didn’t think you were dumb enough to attack a member of one of the fairy royal courts. That’d be grounds for war. Only problem is then, dude”—he slowly slipped back into his normal relaxed and carefree persona—“you gotta ask yerself one question: why does *she* think you did?”

## Chapter 2

I couldn't fathom why someone would think I'd killed one of Queen Mab's retinue. While no one in my world would doubt the action if I actually *had* killed the guy during a war, they also should know I would never do such a thing without clear reason or cause.

I finally realized I had been clenching my jaw so hard that my teeth hurt. I crossed my arms. "Did they say how I killed him?"

"Naw, man. Just that the Unseelie Court has offered a bounty on yer head for the death of Lord Indronivay. But if you didn't do it, someone tried to make it appear like you did."

"A bounty? How much?" I asked.

"If it came from Mab and Nytrocyon herself is here, it ain't money, boy. She's got to be offerin' a personal favor."

"A favor from Mab? Yikes. But why me?" I'd had plenty of run-ins with all kinds of fae from both courts, not to mention hundreds of other types of Parans and Old Ones. It's been my job to protect humanity from all kinds of creatures and beings for nearly three and a half thousand years. *But not once was I ever pre-emptive, let alone unprovoked. I only respond to threats.* Anything else would be interpreted as an act of war by most of the non-human races of our world—especially the fae and the Unseelie Court.

"You got bigger problems right now than figgerin' out why you, dude. You got Unseelie bounty hunters lookin' fer you. If I was you, I'd get rollin' and fast, man."

"No kidding. Look, I need your help—"

He threw his hands up, palms out. "Nah, man. No can do. You know I can't get involved here. I'm neutral—beyond neutral. I'm nobody anymore, and I wanna stay that way. I mean, I might nudge the ocean conditions a little here and there, maybe get some free suds from

fishermen and surfers, but you know I can't interfere with something like this. I've worked hard not to have any enemies anymore."

"You're kidding me, right? After all the crap we've been through? And now you can't get involved?" I said hoarsely, on the verge of shouting.

I'd known Ned since I saved him from a boatload of fishermen several thousand years ago. Sure, he'd never actually interceded in anything I did before, but he was always there to help a little if the situation called for it.

"I need to know more about the situation, and you can at least get information without getting involved, can't you, you—" I was about to throw in a nasty epithet, but thought better of it.

"Get to yer car now, dude. Move it. I'll do whatever I can," he said, ripping his sunglasses off his face. His eyes narrowed as they tracked past me, out toward the parking area at the top of the boat ramp off to his right.

A massive shaggy green-furred dog sniffed the air in the middle of the parking lot on the other side of the tackle shop about two hundred feet away. It was a Cu Sith, a barrow hound of the Unseelie Court, and it was nearly the size of my truck. Thankfully, it appeared to be overwhelmed by the scents of low tide, rotting fish, and bird crap.

I shot Ned a quick wide-eyed glance and slowly but deliberately started toward my truck, fumbling for my keys. I briefly lost sight of the hound as I crossed behind the tackle shop, but the dog loosed three loud wails that had the intensity of sonic booms, shattering most of the windows around the showroom of the neighboring boat dealership.

His beard flowing over his shoulder, Ned walked with long strides in the direction of the Cu Sith. He waved me on without making eye contact, urging me to keep moving. Almost

instantly, the smell of rotting seaweed overwhelmed me. The fetid odor was rife with the watery smell of vegetation mixed with putrefying meat.

I gagged but continued walking quickly toward my truck while Ned distracted it. My primary concern was getting away from whatever might be controlling the fairy dog while I was unarmed and ill prepared. Once I reached my truck, I could see Ned standing at the top of the boat ramp. Hands on hips, he watched the barrow hound try to relocate my scent amid the rotting seaweed smell that Ned produced. Screams erupted from the tackle shop as well as the hotel across the marina, followed by the sounds of glass shattering and something tossing around heavy objects on cement. As the hound swung its enormous head along the ground, occasionally lifting its nose to sniff the air, a second Cu Sith, just as large, bounded into the lot through the hotel's outdoor restaurant as people scrambled in every direction.

I got to my truck and took off down Ingraham Street toward my house without paying attention to the traffic lights. My home was the safest place, but at least there, I had weapons and armor to defend myself. I wasn't worried about leaving Ned with those hounds. They weren't after him. I kept glancing in my rearview mirrors to see if I was being followed, but saw nothing other than cars behind me by the time I got to the bridge over the San Diego River less than a mile down the road.

That was when I hit sudden traffic. Nothing was moving. Traffic around three or four in the afternoon on Point Loma was bad, but I had never seen anything *this* bad before. People were starting to get out of their cars to see what was going on. The traffic lights up ahead were out, but I didn't see any accidents or hear any sirens. In fact, I wasn't hearing *any* noises other than the cars around me—not even jets at the downtown airport on the other side of Point Loma.

I switched on the radio and found out that the electricity had gone out in some parts of San Diego for some unknown reason, and, lucky me, I just happened to be in one of those parts.

*Of all freakin' days for the power to go out in San Diego.*

I opened my door and stood on the running board to get a better view, turning to check behind me in case the hounds had picked up my scent. The only smell was the riverbanks below me, during the falling tide. I still couldn't see the hounds, but it didn't appear as if I was going anywhere in my truck any time soon. I sat back in the cab and listened to the radio while trying to think up a plan. I kept getting hung up on why someone would think I killed Lord Indronivay, but I couldn't afford to dwell on it. I needed to be in motion. Somehow.

The radio began reporting that the blackouts covered a far larger area than originally estimated. Callers were reporting in from around San Diego County that they were also without power. *Holy crap. I got a bounty on my head from the Unseelie Court, and I'm stuck in traffic in the biggest blackout San Diego has ever seen.*

Three loud barks from someplace behind me shattered the relative silence like a barrage of artillery fire. I, along with hundreds of stranded motorists, was a sitting duck, and I was putting everybody around me in mortal danger with no way to defend them. Everyone I could see searched around to see what had caused the noise. People stuck in traffic near me asked if they were explosions, and that was followed quickly by the supposition that the whole blackout was probably the result of a terrorist attack. That led to people frantically honking their horns and shouting, while others began pulling out onto the road's shoulder in an attempt to move, gumming up the traffic even more. I reached for my cell phone, hoping to check the map for traffic, and it dawned on me that I had left it on the console of my boat. *Perfect.* Even so, I could only imagine that cell phone reception was crappy, too, as everyone in the entire city tried

desperately to contact someone else. The only thing I could think to do was keep moving so that the Cu Sith would focus on tracking me rather than all the innocent people stuck in their way.

*But how?*

Over the growing confusion, I heard a motorcycle making its way up the street through the stopped cars behind me. *Bingo*. I was going to feel really bad about what I was about to do for a while, but I figured being well adjusted and an otherwise reasonably upstanding guy, I would get over it.

Thanks to a crazy driver on my left trying to create a third lane down the middle of a two-lane street, the motorcyclist would have to pass my truck to the right, along the narrow shoulder. I scooted through my truck's cab to the passenger side and threw open the door as the motorcyclist approached. He was dressed in that bizarre computer-generated blue camouflage the Navy used and was driving a blue Aprilia RSV 1000 R motorcycle that cost as much as my truck—something I knew thanks to my vehicle-crazy friend, Duma. The rider slid to a stop, turning the bike almost completely sideways without dumping it.

As the driver began gesturing and reaching to take his helmet off so he could scream at me face-to-face, I grabbed the handrail above my passenger door and threw my legs out at the rider as hard as I could. The maneuver caught him square in the chest and totally off guard. The person went flying over the side of the bridge, and the bike fell to rest partially against my truck door. I hopped on it, backed it up, and reached out to close my door before glancing over the side of the bridge. It was only a few yards over the San Diego River, and the rider, probably on his way to report to duty down on Point Loma, had landed in the slow-moving water at low tide. He was already dragging himself ashore on the muddy banks. *Boy am I gonna feel bad. At some point. If I live long enough.*

I gunned the bike and took off up the shoulder, trying to put as much distance between me and the Cu Sith as I could. I was trying to formulate my next move and not crash at the same time, and I was only doing one with any real success. Weaving through stopped vehicles mostly by pushing the bike along with my legs, I made it to the Interstate 5/8 interchange without dumping the bike or hitting anyone. There was no way I would make it to my house through some of the most crowded streets and neighborhoods in San Diego. So my pathetic plan revolved around the fact that my only weapon was the fishermen's multi-tool I still happened to have in my pocket. I hoped I could draw the creatures and whatever controlled them away from the heavily populated areas. *At least if their handler has beer, I'll be able to open their bottles for them.*

Trying to head east to the less densely populated areas of San Diego, I followed the flow of traffic the best I could, eventually merging onto the 163 North. The only sign of the hounds was steady but distant barking.

Then everything completely bogged down. Three lanes of traffic had been expanded to anywhere between six and eight cars wide, and multiple cars were pulled onto both shoulders, blocking the road completely. One vehicle in the mess clearly had mechanical issues, and several other drivers had stopped to help the waylaid motorist. *Bully for good Samaritans. Didn't these people realize I need to move?*

I decided to take the next off-ramp and get onto surface streets. To avoid becoming further mired in the stalled traffic on the ramp, I tried to hop the median, but my attempt at Evel Knieveling the bump didn't work out too well. I hit the divider so squarely that I couldn't stop the front wheel from cutting hard to the left, jerking the handlebar and throttle from my grasp as the bike went one way and I went another.

### Chapter 3

The dump wasn't even spectacular. I flew up and off. The bike bounced over, then I landed hard on my butt. The bike wobbled off a short distance, where it fell under a brown delivery truck.

I picked myself up, trying to recover any dignity I might find scattered among the ice plants along the way, while the delivery guy jumped out to see what had happened.

"You okay?" he asked, eyes wide as he stared at the motorcycle under the back of his truck. I didn't know what was hanging him up more—me crashing a motorcycle into his truck while dressed as if I'd just walked off a boat or the blackout thing.

"Yeah, I'm fine, but the bike is shot," I said, brushing at the dirt on my rear.

Realizing that the only thing really injured was my pride, I quickly forgot about the delivery guy and the growing crowd of looky-loos and surveyed my surroundings to figure out where to go now that my daredevil days were behind me. Not only did I have some nasty members of the Unseelie Court on my ass, but my ass *actually* hurt, too.

Several of the gathered motorists began to approach me, asking questions while others examined the bike. I power walked toward an industrial area at the end of the off ramp while shouts erupted from the gawkers behind me. I needed to get out of there before somebody whipped out a camera phone if they hadn't already.

I crossed the street, darting around the stopped vehicles, and rounded a few the buildings, leaving the wrecked bike and gathered mob behind. I had to be careful not to run so fast that I drew any more attention to myself. As I reached the far side of the buildings, I could see the edge of a large construction site a bit farther up the street. It was a multi-story apartment complex still



in the early stages of framing. I headed directly toward the site, hoping to find a temporary hiding place and maybe a weapon or two.

I checked my watch as I approached the massive dirt lot dominated by two separate cement and stick-frame structures. It was a little after five in the afternoon, which meant that what normally should have taken fifteen minutes had taken over an hour. Part of me was relieved that I hadn't seen or even heard the Cu Sith in a while, but that meant those things were running amok through San Diego somewhere. Thankfully, the construction site appeared entirely empty of people, most likely due to the blackout. A line of cars blocked the streets along both the north and south sides of the site, making it impossible to hop the fence from either street without being seen. Along the property's west side was a parking lot crowded with vehicles trying to merge onto the already-jammed streets, but the east side butted against several large condominium complexes.

I jogged down the sidewalk toward the condos to a walking entrance into the complex and found it much more secluded than the street and practically maze-like. I continued around several more buildings, running perpendicular to the fence line to make sure no one would see me jump it. The last thing I needed was police chasing me, too.

As I walked among the earthy green and tan condos, I could hear people chatting and laughing nearby, probably using the blackout as an excuse to gather with neighbors and empty their currently thawing freezers onto grills. While I didn't see any of the gatherings around the buildings I was between, as I continued farther along, the smells of barbequing meat carrying through the early evening air made my stomach growl. I made a habit of not eating while out on a charter, so I hadn't eaten anything since dinner last night.

Over the sounds of my now-awakened stomach, I heard a radio somewhere broadcasting the opening game of the football season. *Dammit. I completely forgot about that.* My original plans for the evening involved my being ensconced in my leather chair, with a bag of cheese puffs, watching the game. Clearly, that wasn't going to happen.

I fought through the disappointment and hunger like the warrior I am and made it to the six-foot-high chain-link fence that separated the construction from the complex. Some sort of heavy green cloth used to prevent construction debris from blowing off the site covered the fence. Since I couldn't see through it, I grabbed the top rail and pulled myself up to check if the coast was clear, then vaulted over. The soles of my stupid rubber deck boots landed hard and flat on the compacted dirt, and I crouched, cursing the pain in my feet under my breath. Grinding my teeth, I crept to the edge of the nearest building under construction.

The site was huge for Southern California, easily seven hundred feet long between the bordering streets and half as wide. It was dominated by a sea of concrete forming a massive, enclosed underground parking garage that spanned almost the entire length of the lot. The structure also formed the foundation for two distinct sets of wooden framework buildings. I had jumped the fence at a spot between the two skeletal buildings. The nearest entrance into the subterranean parking levels was less than ten yards to my left.

With only the occasional and faint sounds of barks from the Cu Sith, I figured I was safe in the structure for the moment. *Woefully unarmed, but safe.* I needed a weapon. Searching in the darkness for anything I could swing, I found a few stray pieces of rebar lying around—as good a weapon as any when you don't have a real one. Rebar in hand, I made my way across the skeletal structure and took in my surroundings. In the odd darkness of the blackout, the evening air was eerily still and quiet. There were no sounds of cars on the nearby highway or jet noise

from the Marine Corp Air Station to the north. Nothing. I knew the Cu Sith would still be searching for me, and not at least hearing them—at any distance—was unnerving.

In the failing light, I thought I noticed movement on the top of a fifty-foot-tall mound of fill dirt next to a big dump truck parked at the plateau a hundred fifty feet away. It could have easily been birds or rabbits, but I decided not to take any chances. Members of the Unseelie Court chasing me—they thrived in the cold, dark places of the world.

I tried to remind myself that not all fae were that bad and that some members of the Seelie, or Light Fae, had proven helpful to me over the years. When it came to the fae, though, I would have loved to have my Peri friend, Duma, and his brother, Abraxos, around to help. But I'd left my cell phone on my boat, and I didn't have any other way to contact them or anyone else, so I went back to staring at the area where I was sure I detected movement, pissed at my stupidity.

I watched so intently for the next few minutes, I thought my eyes would pop out of my head. But just before I gave up, ready to chalk my sighting up to what we call "happy eyes" in fishing, I saw it again. Something was definitely down there, only now it was *underneath* a front-end loader on the same hill of dirt. Then something else moved near the dump truck's wheel again. Whatever *they* were, they were human sized—too small to be the Cu Sith. Unfortunately, in the fairy world, size has no correlation to dangerousness. Something the size of a rat could rip my head off as easily as something the size of an elephant could.

The pair of shadowy figures creeping around the heavy machinery finally crossed into the open. After thirty-two hundred some odd years, I'd witnessed a lot of things, but I had no idea what I was seeing. They were around seven feet tall, solidly built, and covered in shaggy dark fur or hair. The first thing that popped into my head was Bigfoot, but these things were much more

compact, and their stubby arms ended in hands—for lack of a better term—that bore four massive claws that Wolverine would have envied.

It was a moonless night, and the lack of power to the area made it even darker, but as the creatures faced each other, I could see a massive set of tusks protruding upward from what I could only guess was a mouth. They paused for a second, then one took a few steps, bent over, and began burrowing at the edge of the dirt mound. It quickly disappeared into the ground. The other creature began to scabble down the side of the mound on two legs in a gangly loping manner that demonstrated dexterity but not grace. Whatever they were, they were apparently not completely comfortable walking upright.

My hands tightened around the piece of rebar as I scanned the area for an easy exit. The place was a warren rife with dead ends, pitfalls, and stacks of wood and sheetrock, while the fences were across open ground. Even if I made it out of there, I was still on foot. I was going to have to make a stand.

Sneaking through the unfinished interior, around piles of construction materials and debris within the superstructure, I made my way over to the base of an I-beam that connected the building to the one next to it. I tried to keep an eye on the one creature still above ground, but I lost sight of it once the furry thing made it to the cement foundation almost directly below me. I leaned out and noticed it was hunched over right under my position, its head tilted up in my direction. I jerked back, bumping into a pile of wood and cut sheetrock. The impact jarred a large box of nails on top of the pile and knocked it to the wooden subfloor with a hollow metallic clatter that echoed forever through the empty belly of the structure. A quick rasping growl emanated from below. *Good job, Mr. Stealthy.*

My concern for my clumsy mistake was short-lived. As I chided myself, it dawned on me that the shaggy beasts were likely fae, and no fairy, Unseelie or otherwise, could tolerate iron or even an alloy of iron, including steel. Nails are steel. Rebar is steel. And it would all burn them—not like acid, but instead like a base chemical: Their skin blisters and then sloughs off, causing intense, freezing pain. *I'm standing in what amounts to a fairy House of Horrors. Hot damn!*

I grabbed the remaining box of nails and my rebar and decided to go on the offensive.

“Hey, Shaggy!” I screamed. The sound echoed through the wooden structure. “You lookin’ for me? ’Cause I’m right here!”

Suddenly, the floor began to shake. Wood snapped below me like a rifle shot, then the floor began to tilt. The creature had to be using those massive claws to rip apart the wooden structure below me. *Sonofabitch.*

I jumped farther back into the construction to more stable footing, dropping the nails, but I managed to hang onto the heavy piece of rebar as I landed on my side. The floor that I’d occupied collapsed, bringing with it the floor above. Within the din, I could hear the nails and other metallic objects fall, raining down below, followed by an ear-splitting bellow of pure agony.

“Eat cold steel, furball!” I shouted as I got to my feet.

I could hear the thing shifting under the rubble, along with labored breathing mixed with an occasional gurgle. I carefully crept over to the edge of the structure that collapsed, rebar in hand, and peered over the edge. Not much was visible, but the plywood flooring formed a sort of slide down to the first floor, and I decided to risk the splinters. From the lower level, I jumped to

a clear spot on the cement and whirled around to face the woodpile and the creature I assumed was trapped within it.

There was no longer any movement coming from the pile, but I could still hear the wheezing and gurgling from under the debris. In the darkness, I couldn't see anything through the rubble. Part of me wanted to see what the hell the thing was up close, but the rational part wanted to get underway again since I had no idea where the other one was. I hopped down to the ground along the west side of the building. The site office trailer was about a hundred feet away, with a car parked in front of it. I waited silently for a moment, just in case the other creature was still around, but nothing moved.

Hunched over with the rebar at the ready, I loped over to the car, intending to steal it. The owner of the car was nowhere to be found. Something about that was wrong. I couldn't believe that the noise that thing made bringing down two floors of wood, metal, and who knew what else wouldn't have roused a security guard from the middle of even the deepest sleep.

As I worked my way toward the driver's door of the beat-up old Chevette, something dark and shiny in the scant ambient light on the ground in front of it caught my eye. And that's when the smell hit me—a sweet metallic odor mixed with the slight tang of sewage. Unfortunately, I'd smelled it often enough in my long life to recognize it instantly—a disemboweled body.

I used my free hand to cover my mouth and nose in a pathetic attempt to stifle some of the smell. Once I got all the way around the car, I discovered the body—or bodies. There was simply too much carnage to belong to only one person. Finding the vehicle unlocked, I opened the door and switched on the car's headlights. The illuminated scene was straight out of a Hollywood slasher movie. The two security guards had been totally ripped to pieces. They were

little more than a big mound of ground beef with the random piece of gray or black cloth and bone sticking out of it. While I stared at the bloodbath, shaking my head, knowing that their deaths were partly my fault, one of the torsos began to wiggle a little.

My first reaction was that the guy was still alive, but that was *not* possible. I shifted the rebar in my hands then decided it might be more prudent to get in the car and get the hell out of there. I kept glancing at the quivering mass while I fumbled through the vehicle's interior, trying to find the keys. I checked the overstuffed glove box, above the visor, in the armrest, along the grungy disgusting floor, and anywhere else I could think of—because I had no earthly clue how to hotwire a vehicle. After a few moments, I realized the keys were more than likely on one of the two bodies. *Talk about a disgusting egg hunt.* The gruesome task made me think about heading back to the condos next door to ask for help, but the sight of the two mutilated guards reinforced my instincts to draw everything chasing me *away* from humanity.

So I started to poke around the horrific mess with the length of rebar. The first thing I jabbed was the quivering torso. Just as I touched it, an explosion of carnage burst from the ground underneath it. The surprise, more than the force, caused me to stagger back into the hood of the car. The car lights illuminated the other fur-covered clawed beast, its long black fur matted and caked with blood and gore.

“You’re coming with us,” the creature said in impossibly perfect diction through a mouth like an angry red gash flanked by two enormous tusks and cutter teeth that were big enough to come from a five-hundred-pound Russian boar. I couldn’t see any eyes on its shaggy stump of a head.

“Not a chance,” I replied, getting my feet back under me. I held the rebar in front of me with both hands like a staff rather than a sword. “Besides, if by ‘us,’ you mean you and that other

furball you came with, you probably ought to know that he might be a little flatter than you remember.” I jerked my head back in the direction of the collapse without taking my eyes off the creature.

“My Queen prefers you alive, Diomedes, but she will still reward me if you are dead.” The creature’s wide mouth became even wider, in a grotesque attempt at a grin. Stepping to its right, it started to circle, crouching as it progressed.

I turned to keep myself as square to the beast as I could. For some reason—maybe the rebar—it kept its distance, bobbing slightly from side to side as it hunched, its arms down at its sides. Its long curved claws dragged in the dirt.

“Back off and let me go, or this is gonna get ugly,” I said. “And tell Mab whatever she thinks I did, I didn’t. Um, why does she think *I* did it?”

The creature made a throaty gurgling laugh, then it lunged. I stepped backward and dodged to my left, narrowly avoiding its reach. I quickly sprang forward, driving the rebar hard across the monster’s chest, sending it staggering backward and eliciting a howl of pain as the steel touched its skin. Recoiling, the creature doubled over, hissing and drooling on the ground. I pressed the attack, swinging the rebar around overhead to my left, to bring it down in an arc like a club. Thanks to the combination of the awkward weapon and the creature’s incredible speed and agility, it landed a glancing blow, sending shockwaves through my arms and jarring my teeth as the rebar hit the ground.

The beast backhanded me while I was off balance, striking me across my right shoulder and upper back, knocking me to one knee. I used the momentum to tuck into a roll that brought me along the shaggy fae’s right side. As I got to my knees, I thrust the rebar upward into the creature’s gut. It screeched a piercing high-pitched shriek and brought one of its clawed hands



down sharply across the rod, cutting the rebar cleanly in half with another howl. The reduction in weight and length threw me off balance enough to cause me to tip forward.

I managed to catch myself with one hand before I pulled a full face-plant while the creature hobbled off into the darkness faster than I expected, groaning as it wrenched the steel bar from its abdomen. Honestly, using iron against a fairy was almost cheating, but I was in a pinch. *Besides, all's fair in war.*