

Chapter 9: Breakthrough

The next few days passed uneventfully. I honestly thought the window of opportunity had passed and that the reported threat really was a feint, after all. These things generally resolve themselves within three days; more on that later. Mike had three full days off, and then three more days on the twelve-hour night shift.

He was conducting a foot patrol through the Old South Yard, checking physical security of the boxcars and shipping containers. Just another routine night in the life of a railroad special agent. It was coming up on three of a quiet Sunday morning, and he needed a cup of coffee. There was a Thermos of it in his Jeep.

The Houston Police officers had noted his Jeep earlier while driving through the area patrolling their own beat, but a marked railroad police vehicle parked in a railroad yard is hardly suspicious. They saw Mike stepping out of the shadows and opening the passenger door to retrieve his coffee as they drove past again, and he saw them as well and toasted them with the Thermos. They waved back and continued on their way.

Mike refreshed himself with a sip of coffee, then called in to the railroad dispatcher making his hourly roll call report. He picked up his clipboard, locked the door of the Jeep, and headed out to check the last two tracks' worth of rail cars.

It was a fine night, clear and cold, and all the stars in the sky were out. But no moon. A "blue norther" ...the local name for a winter cold front...had recently blown through town, and the temperature was just above freezing. All the rain had dried up, though, and you couldn't have asked for a prettier introduction to the wee hours of the day. I was looking up, actually, refreshing my acquaintance with your constellations as seen from the surface of this world. Vega and Arcturus were especially

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prominent. There really wasn't much else to look at other than old boxcars and hopper cars covered with graffiti.

Perhaps I should have been paying closer attention. Dawn was. "Ariel," she said presently, "do you sense anything?"

"Nothing, Chief."

"Too nothing. I think we're being blocked!"

Alarmed, I turned up my senses. I felt...it felt like mush! "You could be right," I reluctantly agreed.

"I know I'm right. Mike, get out of here!"

A hint of it got through. Mike froze, and looked around as though sensing something. But he only got the barest hint. When nothing was obvious to his own senses, and knowing that this boring task was nearly complete, he tapped his clipboard for a second and then resumed his walk to check car seals and integrity.

"That tears it. Ariel, get us some backup, now!"

I tried to call in some of our friends. Nothing! "I can't reach anybody!"

Dawn drew her sword. I hadn't seen it unsheathed for action in over a century. She looked around dangerously. "Go. Get help. Anyone you can find. Get back here, right away!"

"What?!" I cried. "Leave you here by yourself?"

"Just do it!"

I know a military order when I hear one. But carrying it out wasn't quite so easy. This empty rail yard was *packed*, I realized as I tried to penetrate the enemy perimeter. Some of them converged on me. I'm no Warrior, but I do know a few moves myself. Dawn has trained me better than whoever was managing them. It took some doing, but I got through. And then I got away fast.

Unfortunately, now the other side knew that we knew. And numbers do count for something in combat. They pressed in around my solitary friend.

"I can't see!" she cried out as she attempted to fight her way through the static and keep watch on her charge.

There was motion down towards the end of the line of cars. With the slight hint of Dawn's warning still in the back of his mind, Mike drew his sidearm and approached quietly and carefully. It's a .45 caliber Colt M1911A1 Government Model semiautomatic which once belonged to his father...and his grandfather, and his great-grandfather to whom it was issued during World War II (Amazing, how such items tend to find their way home in duffel bags!). Then, as he came close enough to recognize the activity, he relaxed. Just a 'tagger'...a graffiti vandal with a spray can. He holstered his sidearm and exchanged it for his torch...er, flashlight. The flashlight came on.

The tagger froze. Mike could see him clearly now. It was a boy, maybe twelve years old. He acted positively terrified. Perhaps he was; it's not easy being bait. More on that later.

The body language was convincing, though. Mike relaxed. "I hope you're as handy with a bucket and sponge as you are with a spray can, son!" The kid dropped his spray can and looked petrified. Coming closer, Mike continued, "Do you know how much it costs us to keep these things clean? You

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need to try washing one of these....”

Dawn was still fighting her way through the static. But then she got a glimpse, only a glimpse, of what was hiding. “MICHAEL! DUCK!” she cried at the top of her voice.

Once again, only the barest hint of it got through. But enough to where Michael flinched. And the crowbar which swung down from between the boxcars caught him on the side of the head, instead of a crushing blow squarely on the skull.

I’ve mentioned previously that the rail yard was packed with demons. Now every one of them was on top of Dawn.

Except for the two which were pursuing me. But I shook them, after a bit of a merry chase, and then made contact with Nathan. His rapid response team was well trained; I must give them that. It was still short odds on our side, but they were up for a pitched battle no matter what.

In the interim, the twelve-year-old bait looked down at his catch with a swelling of pride. He was now “in”, he knew!

“Nice work, Frankie,” said the gang leader as he stepped out from between the boxcars.

“I think you got him,” said another. “Yeah, let’s get out of here,” said the third.

But theirs were not the only voices. From the invisible audience, Dawn heard several more egging them on. Words such as “Kill the pig!” and “Get rid of him!” were prominent. The dominant theme was, “Finish him off!”

It had the desired effect. The gang leader told his motley crew, “Wait. Let’s finish him off!”

He reached down and extracted Mike's sidearm from its holster. He started to take aim at Mike's bleeding form...then suddenly thought better of it. He handed the pistol to the young initiate. "Frankie, you do it!"

Once again, the young boy swelled with pride. Now he was a man!

The enemy's attention was focused on the drama taking place with the gang members. I can't say that we blindsided them, but we came close. But there were still more of them than there were of us. We had our hands full.

Below us, young Frankie was preparing to make his first kill. But the boy had absolutely no conception of how to handle a firearm! Events were proceeding as Dravang had hoped, but...it was quite possible that this young man would miss from only six feet away! He reached in through the intervening layers to steady the young boy's hand.

Nobody was trying to block Dawn's view any more. She saw it all clearly. She was being restrained, but she was no longer the prime object of their concern. That was a mistake on their part.

Warriors have moves. And they know how to execute them. Dawn broke free of her captors. But instead of escaping, as expected, she aimed herself squarely into the midst of the drama.

Her attention was focused on the weapon. Knock it away, deflect it, do something. Clear the immediate threat. Then, get the attention of the dispatcher. The police. Somebody. The medical facilities in general and the trauma centers in particular in this city were world-class; more on that later. If she could arrange to get him there with no further delay he stood a fighting chance.

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And so to explain what happened next requires a bit of amplification. You see, you are unitary beings. You are in one place and only one place at any given time. For us, not quite so. Now, we can't be *everywhere* at once...that is reserved for Deity...but we can so extend our beings as to be functionally present in quite a few different places at the same time.

Now it shouldn't be hard to grasp that, when we are so extended, our strength and power is stretched and divided as well. We have enough power and might...quite a bit, thank you very much!...that this seldom if ever becomes an issue. Except in combat.

One place that, virtually without exception, you will find us present at continually is around the Throne. Guardians, especially; we have a front row seat. Even as a lowly assistant, I am always welcomed to look upon the face of the Father. And when our being is stretched, there is a connection...think of it as a kind of a cord...between our various facets.

Again, so far so good. The fall down comes when we attempt to enter and engage directly in your world. The "cord" extending through the Border stands out like a neon beacon to the enemy. And so you will find that, whenever there is a credible story of we angels interacting in your world, either there is a pitched Mother Of All Battles going on behind the scenes or else, occasionally, it is the result of a negotiated settlement which usually (i.e., always!) means that the enemy benefits from a tit-for-tat in some other time or place. Either way the incursion does not last long, and then it's back to business as usual.

While theoretically it would be possible to penetrate the Border without such a "cord" behind us, no angel in his or her right mind would do so. That cord is our safety line, our recourse of last resort. Through it we always maintain a connection to Heaven; we can be retrieved with it in most cases or at the very least a specialized team of Warriors can trace it and follow it if we are unfortunate

enough to be captured. Crossing the Border without that safety line would be as foolish as climbing a two-thousand-foot sheer rock wall without equivalent precautions. Even more so; no one seriously tries to shoot at climbers scaling El Capitán!

And so at this instant in space and time, a number of factors all converged at once. Dravang was reaching through the Border, steadying young Frankie's aim. It created a weak spot, and as he himself was making the penetration the alarms which would normally alert those on the enemy's side were ignored. Dawn was focused completely on that very spot, as well. And I do mean completely. She poured every last bit of her being and her strength into that charge, forsaking even the barest hint of concern for her own safety and welfare. Everyone else around...and I must say that this includes me...was focused on the drama at hand; were we about to welcome a saint Home?

Young Frankie's finger tightened on the trigger.

Suddenly there was a flash! It was as much a surprise as if a grenade had gone off in his face...and it resembled that possibility by more than just a little bit!

The gang members were all knocked backwards by the force of the report. It caught them completely off guard. "What was that?" said one.

"The gun blew!" cried Frankie.

Really, now; is it very likely that a quality firearm which has been properly maintained and practiced with regularly will suddenly "just blow" when fired a single time? Looking back, I don't see how I didn't recognize that at the moment. But Frankie's conclusion made sense to me, and not only me but all the rest of the assembled audience, visible and invisible.

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The youngsters were struck with confusion. “Let’s get out of here,” one cried. Now they were no longer a gang, but a bunch of frightened children. They turned tail and fled. With no human pawns left to manipulate, the enemy forces melted away just as quickly. Nathan and his troops roused themselves back into action.

“Keep them moving! Set up a perimeter! Everybody report in! Muster up! Do we have any casualties? Sweep the area; make sure it’s clear!” A few seconds while he digested the reports of his teammates, and then he turned to me to report. “Area secure. We have them on the run. No serious casualties...wait! Dawn! Where’s Dawn?”

I barely heard him. My attention was captivated by the underside of a boxcar. I must admit that rather a bit of a predatory gleam was coming across my face. Nathan turned to follow my gaze, and much the same look came across his face as well. “I don’t believe it,” he said in a hushed voice.

For from under the boxcar, there came a visible glow.