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Harry's Day Off

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The thief was examining another trapped doorway when I heard something—the tromp of approaching feet. The holy woman was in the middle of another sermon, about attentiveness or something, but I held up my hand for silence and she obliged. I could hear twenty sets of feet, maybe more.

I let out a low growl and reached for my sword. “Com pany.”

“Easy, my son,” the holy woman said. “We don’t even know who it is yet.”

The ruined mausoleum was far enough off the beaten path to make it unlikely that anyone had just wandered in on us. The holy woman was dreaming if she thought that the company might be friendly. A moment later they appeared—the local magistrate and two dozen of his thugs.

“Always with the corrupt government officials,” muttered the wizard from behind me. I glanced back at him and then looked for the thief. The nimble little minx was nowhere to be seen.

“You are trespassing!” boomed the magistrate. He had a big, boomy voice. “Leave this place immediately on pain of punishment by the Crown’s law!”

“Sir!” replied the holy woman. “Our mission here is of paramount importance. The writ we bear from your own liege requires you to render aid and assistance in this matter.”

“But not to violate the graves of my subjects!” he boomed some more. “Begone! Before I unleash the nine fires of Atarak upon—”

“Enough talk!” I growled and threw my heavy dagger at his chest.

Propelled by my massive thews, the dagger hit him two inches below his left nipple—a perfect heart shot. It struck with enough force to hurl him from his feet. His men howled with surprised fury.

I drew the huge sword from my back, let out a leonine roar, and charged the two dozen thugs.

“Enough talk!” I bellowed, and whipped the twenty-pound greatsword at the nearest target as if it were a wooden yardstick. He went down in a heap.

“Enough talk!” I howled, and kept swinging. I smashed through the next several thugs as if they were made of soft wax. Off to my left, the thief came out of nowhere and neatly sliced the Achilles tendons of another thug. The holy woman took a ready stance with her quarterstaff and chanted out a prayer to her deities at the top of her lungs.

The wizard shrieked, and a fireball whipped over my head, exploding

twenty-one feet in front of me, then spread out in a perfect circle, like the shockwave of a nuke, burning and roasting thugs as it went and stopping a bare twelve inches shy of my nose.

"Oh, come on!" I said. "It doesn't work like that!"

"What?" demanded the wizard.

"It doesn't *work* like that!" I insisted. "Even if you call up fire with magic, it's still *fire*. It acts like *fire*. It expands in a sphere. And under a ceiling, that means that it goes rushing much farther down hallways and tunnels. It *doesn't* just go twenty feet and then *stop*."

"Fireballs used to work like that," the wizard sighed. "But do you know what a chore it is to calculate exactly how far those things will spread? I mean, it slows everything down."

"It's simple math," I said. "And it's way better than the fire just spreading twenty feet regardless of what's around it. What, do fireballs carry tape measures or something?"

Billy the Werewolf sighed and put down his character sheet and his dice. "Harry," he protested gently. "Repeat after me: It's only a game."

I folded my arms and frowned at him across his dining room table. It was littered with snacks, empty cans of pop, pieces of paper, and tiny little model monsters and adventurers (including a massively thewed barbarian model for my character). Georgia, Billy's willowy brunette wife, sat at the table with us, as did the redheaded bombshell Andi, while lanky Kirby lurked behind several folding screens covered with fantasy art at the head of the table.

"I'm just saying," I said. "There's no reason the magic can't be portrayed at least a little more accurately, is there?"

"Again with *this* discussion." Andi sighed. "I mean, I know he's the actual wizard and all, but Christ."

Kirby nodded glumly. "It's like taking a physicist to a *Star Trek* movie."

"Harry," Georgia said firmly. "You're doing it again."

"Oh, no I'm not!" I protested. "All I'm saying is that—"

Georgia arched an eyebrow and gave me a steady look down her aquiline nose. "You know the law, Dresden."

"He who kills the cheer springs for beer," chanted the rest of the table.

"Oh, bite me!" I muttered at them, but a grin was diluting my scowl as I dug out my wallet and tossed a twenty on the table.

"Okay," Kirby said. "Roll your fireball damage, Will." Billy slung out a double handful of square dice and said, "Hah! One-point-two over median. Suck on that, henchmen!"

"They're all dead," Kirby confirmed. "We might as well break there until next week."

"Crap," I said. "I barely got to hit anybody."

"I only got to hit *one*!" Andi said.

Georgia shook her head. "I didn't even get to finish casting my spell."

"Oh yes," Billy gloated. "Seven modules of identifying magic items and repairing things the stupid barbarian broke, but I've finally come into my own. Was it like that for you, Harry?"

"Let you know when I come into my own," I said, rising. "But my hopes are high. Why, this very morrow, I, Harry Dresden, have a day off."

"The devil you say!" Billy exclaimed, grinning at me as the group began cleaning up from the evening's gaming session.

I shrugged into my black leather duster. "No apprentice, no work, no errands for the council, no warden stuff, no trips out of town for Paranet business. My very own free time."

Georgia gave me a wide smile. "Tell me you aren't going to spend it puttering around that musty hole in the ground you call a lab." "Urn," I said.

"Look," Andi said. "He's blushing!" "I am not blushing," I said. I swept up the empty bottles and pizza boxes, and headed into Billy and Georgia's little kitchen to dump them into the trash.

Georgia followed me in, reaching around me to send several pieces of paper into the trash, too. "Hot date with Stacy?" she asked, her voice pitched to keep the conversation private.

"I think if I ever called her 'Stacy,' Anastasia might beat the snot out of me for being too lazy to speak her entire name," I replied.

"You seem a little tense about it." I shrugged a shoulder. "This is going to be the first time we spend a whole day together without something trying to rip us to pieces along the way. I... I want it to go right, you know?" I pushed my fingers back through my hair. "I mean, both of us could use a day off."

"Sure, sure," Georgia said, watching me with calm, knowing eyes. "Do you think it's going to go anywhere with her?" I shrugged. "Don't know."

She and I have very different ideas about... well, about basically everything except what to do with things that go around hurting people.”

The tall, willowy Georgia glanced back toward the dining room, where her short, heavily muscled husband was putting away models. “Opposites attract. There’s a song about it and everything.”

“One thing at a time,” I said. “Neither one of us is trying to inspire the poets for the ages. We like each other. We make each other laugh. God, that’s nice, these days...” I sighed and glanced up at Georgia, a little sheepishly. “I just want to show her a nice time tomorrow.”

Georgia had a gentle smile on her narrow, intelligent face. “I think that’s a very healthy attitude.”

I was just getting into my car, a battered old Volkswagen Bug I’ve dubbed the “Blue Beetle,” when Andi came hurrying over to me.

There’d been a dozen Alphas when I’d first met them, college kids who had banded together and learned just enough magic to turn themselves into wolves. They’d spent their time as werewolves protecting and defending the town, which needed all the help it could get. The conclusion of their college educations had seen most of them move on in life, but Andi was one of the few who had stuck around.

Most of the Alphas adopted clothing that was easily discarded—the better to swiftly change into a large wolf without getting tangled up in jeans and underwear. On this particular summer evening, Andi was wearing a flirty little purple sundress and nothing else. Between her hair, her build, and her long, strong legs, Andi’s picture belonged on the nose of a World War II bomber, and her hurried pace was intriguingly kinetic.

She noticed me noticing and gave me a wicked little smile and an extra jiggle the last few steps. She was the sort to appreciate being appreciated. “Harry,” she said. “I know you hate to mix business with pleasure, but there’s something I was hoping to talk to you about tomorrow.”

“Sorry, sweetheart,” I said in my best Bogey dialect. “Not tomorrow. Day off. Important things to do.”

“I know,” Andi said. “But I was hoping—”

“If it waited until after the Arcanos game it can wait until after my da... day off,” I said firmly.

Andi almost flinched at the tone, and nodded. “Okay.”

I felt myself arch an eyebrow. I hadn’t put *that* much harsh into it—

and Andi wasn't exactly the sort to be fazed by verbal salvos, regardless of their nature or volume. Socially speaking, the woman was armored like a battleship.

"Okay," I replied. "I'll call." Kirby approached her as I got into the car, put an arm around her from behind, and tugged her backside against his frontside, leaning down to sniff at her hair. She closed her eyes and pressed herself into him.

Yeah. I let myself feel a little smug as I pulled out of the lot and drove home. That one had just been a matter of time, despite everything Georgia had said. I totally called it.

I pulled into the gravel parking lot beside the boarding-house where I live and knew right away that I had a problem. Perhaps it was my keenly developed intuition, honed by years of investigative work as the infamous Harry Dresden, Chicago's only professional wizard, shamus of the supernatural, gumshoe of the ghostly, wiseguy of the weird, my mystically honed, preternatural awareness of the shadow of Death passing nearby.

Or maybe it was the giant black van painted with flaming skulls, goat's head pentacles, and inverted crosses that was parked in front of my apartment door. Six-six-six of one, half a dozen of another.

The van's doors opened as I pulled in and people in black spilled out with neither the precision of a professional team of hitters nor the calm swagger of competent thugs. They looked like I'd caught them in the middle of eating sack lunches. One of them had what looked like taco sauce spilled down the front of his frothy white lace shirt. The other four... well, they looked like something.

They were all wearing mostly black, and mostly gothware, which meant a lot of velvet with a little leather, rubber, and PVC to spice things up. Three women, two men, all of them fairly young. All of them carried wands and staves and crystals dangling from chains, and all of them had deadly serious expressions on their faces.

I parked the car, never looking directly at them, and then got out of it, stuck my hands in my duster pockets, and stood there waiting.

"You're Harry Dresden," said the tallest one there, a young man with long black hair and a matching goatee.

I squinted at nothing, like Clint Eastwood would do, and said nothing, like Chow Yun-Fat would do.

"You're the one who came to New Orleans last week." He said it "Nawlins," even though the rest of his accent was Midwest standard. "You're the one who desecrated my works."

I blinked at him. "Whoa, wait a minute. There actually *was* a curse on that nice lady?"

He sneered at me. "She had earned my wrath."

"How about that," I said. "I figured it for some random bad feng shui."

His sneer vanished. "What?"

"To tell you the truth, it was so minor that I only did the ritual cleansing to make her feel better and show the Paranettters how to do it for themselves in the future." I shrugged. "Sorry about your wrath, there, Darth Wannabe."

He recovered his composure in seconds. "Apologies will do you no good, wizard. Now!"

He and his posse all raised their various accoutrements, sneering malevolently. "Defend yourself!"

"Okay," I said, and pulled my .44 out of my pocket.

Darth Wannabe and his posse lost their sneers.

"Wh-what?" said one of the girls, who had a nose ring that I was pretty sure was a clip-on. "What are you doing?"

"I'm a fixin' to defend myself," I drawled, Texas-style. I held the gun negligently, pointing down and to one side and not right at them. I didn't want to hurt anybody. "Look, kids. You really need to work on your image."

Darth opened his mouth. It just hung that way for a minute.

"I mean, the van's a bit overdone. But hell, I can't throw stones. My VW Bug has a big '53' inside a circle spray painted on the hood. You're sort of slipping elsewhere, though." I nodded at one of the girls, a brunette holding a wand with a crystal on the tip. "Honey, I liked the *Harry Potter* movies, too, but that doesn't mean I ran out and got a Dark Mark tattooed onto my left forearm like you did." I eyed the other male. "And you're wearing a freakin' Slytherin scarf. I mean, Christ. How's anyone supposed to take *that* seriously?"

"You would dare," Darth Wannabe began, obviously outraged.

"One more tip, kids. If you had any real talent, the air would practically have been on fire when you got ready to throw down. But you losers don't have enough magic between you to turn cereal into breakfast." "You would dare—"

"I can tell, because I actually *am* a wizard. I went to school for this stuff."
"You would—"

"I mean, I know you guys have probably thrown your talents at other people in your weight class, had your little duels, and maybe someone got a nosebleed and someone went home with a migraine and it gave your inner megalomaniac a boner. But this is different." I nodded at one of the other girls, who had shaved her head clean. "Excuse me, miss. What time is it?"

She blinked at me. "Um. It's after one...?"
"Thanks."

The Dim Lord tried for his dramatic dialogue again. "You would dare threaten us with mortal weapons?"

"It's after midnight," I told the idiot. "I'm off the clock."

That killed his momentum again. "What?"

"It's my day off, and I've got plans, so let's just skip ahead."

Darth floundered wordlessly. He was really out of his element—and he wasn't giving me anything to work with at all. If I waited around for him, this was going to take all night.

"All right, kid. You want some magic?" I pointed my gun at the van. "Howsabout I make your windows disappear."

Darth swallowed. Then he lowered his staff, a cheaply carved thing you can pick up at tourist traps in Acapulco, and said, "This is not over. We are your doom, Dresden."

"As long as you don't drag it out too much. Good night, children."

Darth sneered at me again, pulled the shreds of his dignity about him, and strode to the van. The rest of them followed him like good little darthlings. The van started up and tore away, throwing gravel spitefully into the Blue Beetle.

Could it sneer at them, the Beetle would have done so. Its dents had dents that were worse than what that van inflicted.

I spun the .44 once around my finger and put it back into my pocket.

Clint Yun-Fat. As if I didn't have enough to do without worrying about Darth Wannabe and his groupies. I went inside, greeted my pets in order of seniority—Mister, my oversized cat first, then Mouse, my undersized ankylosaurus—washed up, and went to bed.

The Mickey Mouse alarm clock told me that it was five in the morning

when my apartment's front door opened. The door gets stuck, because a ham-handed amateur installed it, and it makes a racket when it's finally forced open. I came out of the bedroom in my underwear, with my blasting rod in one hand and my .44 in the other, ready to do battle with whatever had come a-calling.

"Hi, boss!" Molly chirped, giving my blasting rod and gun a passing glance, but ignoring my mostly nudity.

I felt old.

My apprentice came in and set two Starbucks cups down on the coffee table, along with a bag that would be full of something expensive that Starbucks thought people should eat with coffee. Molly, who was young and tall and blonde and built like a brick supermodel, offered me one of the cups. "You want to wake up now or would you rather I kept it warm for you?"

"Molly," I said, trying to be polite. "I can't stand the sight of you. Go away."

She held up a hand. "I know, I know, Captain Grumpy-pants. Your day off and your big date with Luccio."

"Yes," I said. I put as much hostility into it as I could.

Molly had been overexposed to my menace. It bounced right off her. "I just thought it would be a good time for me to work out some of the kinks on my invisibility potion. You've said I'm ready to use the lab alone."

"I said 'unsupervised.' That isn't quite the same thing as alone." My glower deepened. "Much like having an apprentice puttering around the basement is not quite the same thing as being alone with Anastasia."

"You're going horseback riding," Molly said in a reasonable tone of voice. "You won't be here, and I'll be gone by the time you get back. And besides, I can make sure Mouse gets a walk or two while you're gone, so you won't have to come rushing back early. Isn't that thoughtful of me?"

Mouse's huge, gray doggy head came up off the floor and his tail twitched as she said "walk." He looked at me hopefully.

"Oh for crying out—" I shook my head wearily. "Lock up behind you before you go downstairs."

She turned back to the front door and started pushing.

"You got it, boss."

I staggered back to my bed to get whatever rest I could before my

apprentice died in a fit of sleep-deprivation-induced psychotic mania.

For the first time ever, Mickey Mouse let me down.

Granted, being a wizard means that technology and I don't get along very well. Things tend to break down a lot faster in the presence of mortal magic than they would otherwise—but that's mostly electronics. My wind-up Mickey Mouse clock was pure springs and gears, and it had given me years and years of loyal service. It never went off, and when I woke up, Mickey was cheerfully indicating that I had less than half an hour before Anastasia was supposed to arrive.

I got up and threw myself into the shower, bringing my razor with me. I was only partway through shaving when the explosion rattled the apartment, hard enough to make a film of water droplets leap up off the shower floor.

I stumbled out, wrapped a towel around my waist, seized my blasting rod—just in case what was needed was *more* explosions—and went running into the living room. The trap door leading down to the lab in my subbasement was open and pink and blue smoke was roiling up out of it in a thick, noxious plume.

"Hell's bells," I choked out, coughing. "Molly!?" "Here," she called back through her own thick coughing. "I'm fine, I'm fine."

I opened a couple of the sunken windows, on opposite sides of the room, and the breeze began to thin out the smoke. "What about my lab?"

"I had it contained when it blew," she responded more clearly now. "Um. Just... just let me clean up a bit." I eyed the trap door. "Molly," I said warningly. "Don't come down!" she said, her voice near panic. "I'll have it cleaned up in a second. Okay?"

I thought about storming down there with a good hard lecture about the importance of not busting up your mentor's irreplaceable collection of gear, but took a deep breath instead. If anything had been destroyed, the lecture wouldn't fix it. And I only had fifteen minutes to make myself look like a human being and find some way to get rid of the smell of Molly's alchemical misadventure. So I decided to go finish shaving.

Am I easygoing or what?

No sooner had I gotten bits of paper stuck to the spots on my face where I'd been in a hurry than someone began hammering on the front door.

"For crying out *loud*," I muttered. "It's my day *off*." I stomped out to the

living room and found the smoke mostly gone, if not the smell. Mouse paced along beside me on the way to the door. I unlocked it and wrenched it open, careful only to open it an inch or three, then peered outside.

Andi and Kirby crouched on the other side of my door. Both of them were dirty, haggard, and entirely covered with scratches. I could tell, because both were also entirely naked.

Kirby lowered his arm and stared warily at me. Then he let out a low growling sound, which I realized a second later had been meant to be my name. "Harry."

"You have got to be kidding me," I said. "*Today?*"

"Harry," Andi said, her eyes brimming. "Please. I don't know who else we can turn to."

"Dammit!" I snarled. "Dammit, dammit, dammit!" I wrenched the door the rest of the way open and muttered my wards down. "Come in. Hurry up, before someone sees you."

Kirby's nostrils flared as he entered, and his face twisted up in revulsion.

"Oh," Andi said as I shut the door. "That smells terrible."

"Tell me about it," I said. "You two look..." Well. I would have used different adjectives for Kirby than for Andi. "... a little thrashed. What's up? You two get in a fight with a barbed-wire golem or something?" "N-no," Andi said. "Nothing like that. We've had... Kirby and I have... fleas." I blinked.

Kirby nodded somber agreement and growled something unintelligible.

I checked the fireplace, which Molly had lit and which was crackling quietly. My coffeepot hung on a swinging arm near the fire, close enough to stay warm without boiling. I went to the pot and checked. She'd put my cup of expensive Starbucks elixir in there to stay warm. If I'd been preparing to murder her, that single act of compassion would have been reason enough to spare her life.

I poured the coffee into the mug Molly had left on the mantel and slugged some of it back. "Okay, okay," I said. "Start from the top. Fleas?"

"I don't know what else to call them," Andi said. "When we shift, they're there, in our fur. Biting and itching. It was just annoying at first, but now... it's just awful." She shuddered and began running her fingertips over her shoulders and ribs. "I can feel them right now. Chewing at me. Biting and digging into me." She shook her head and with an almost visible

effort forced her hands to be still. "It's getting hard to th-think straight. To talk. Every time we ch-change it gets worse."

I gulped down a bit of coffee, frowning. That *did* sound serious. I glanced down at the towel around my waist, and noted, idly, that I was the most heavily clothed person in the room. "All right, let me get dressed," I said. "I guess at least one of us should have his clothes on." Andi looked at me blankly. "What?" "Clothes. You're naked, Andi."

She looked down at herself, and then back up at me. "Oh." A smile spread over her lips, and the angle of her hips shifted slightly and very noticeably. "Maybe you should do something about that."

Kirby looked up from where he'd settled down by the fireplace, pure murder in his eyes.

"Uh," I said, looking back and forth between them. No question about it—the kids were definitely operating under the influence of something. "I'll be right back."

I threw on some clothes, including my shield bracelet, in case the murderous look on Kirby's face got upgraded to a murderous lunge, and went back out into the living room. Kirby and Andi were both in front of the fireplace. They were... well. "Nuzzling" is both polite and generally accurate, even if it doesn't quite convey the blush factor the two were inspiring. I mean, they'd have been asked to leave any halfway reputable club for that kind of thing.

I lifted my hand to my eyes for a moment, concentrated, and opened up my Third Eye, my wizard's Sight. That was always a dicey move. The Sight showed you what truly was, all the patterns of magic and life that existed in the universe, as they truly were—but you got them in permanent ink. You didn't ever get to forget what you saw, no matter how bad it was. Still, if something was chewing up my friends, I needed to know about it. They were worth the risk.

I opened my eyes and immediately saw the thick bands of power that I'd laid into the very walls of my apartment, when I'd built up its magical defenses. Further layers of power surrounded my lab in a second shell of insulating magic, beneath my feet. From his perch atop one of my bookshelves, Mister the cat appeared exactly as he always did, evidently beyond the reach of such petty concerns as the mere forces that created the

universe, though my dog Mouse was surrounded by a calm, steady aurora of silver and blue light.

More to the point, Kirby and Andi were both engulfed in a number of different shimmering energies—the flame-colored tinges of lust and passion foremost among them, for obvious reason, but those weren't the only energies at play. Greenish energy that struck me as something primal and wild, that essence of the instinct of the wolf they'd been taught by the genuine article, maybe, remained strong all around them, as did an undercurrent of pink-purple fear. Whatever was happening to them, it was scaring the hell out of both of them, even if they weren't able to do anything about it, at the moment.

The golden lightning of a practitioner at work also flickered through their auras—which shouldn't have been happening. Oh, the Alphas all had a lot more talent than Darth Wannabe and his playmates. That went without saying. But they had become extremely focused upon a single use of their magic—shapeshifting into a wolf, which is a *lot* more complicated and difficult and useful than it looks or sounds. But that kind of activity should only have been working if they were actually in the process of changing shape—and they weren't.

I stepped closer, peering intently, and saw something I rather wouldn't have.

Creatures clung to both of them—tiny, tiny things, dozens of them. To my Sight, they looked something like tiny crabs, hard-shelled little things with oversized pincers that ripped and tore into their spiritual flesh—tearing out tiny pieces that each contained a single glowing mote of both green and gold energy.

"Ah!" I said. "Ah-hah! You've got psychophagic mites!"

Andi and Kirby both jumped in shock. I guess they hadn't noticed me coming closer, being fully occupied with... oh, wow. They'd sort of segued into NC-17 activities.

"Wh-what?" Andi managed to say. "Psychophagic..." I shook my head, dismissing my Sight with an effort of will. "Psychic parasites. They've latched onto you from the Nevernever. They're exerting an influence on you both, pushing you to indulge your, um, more basic and primitive behavior patterns, and feeding on the energy of them."

Andi dragged lust-glazed eyes from Kirby to me. "Primitive...?"

"Yeah," I said. I nodded to them. "Hence the two of you, um. And I imagine they make you want to change form."

Andi's eyelids fluttered. "Yes. Yes, that sounds lovely." She shook her head slightly and came to her feet, her eyes suddenly glimmering with tears. "Is it... can you make them go away?"

I put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "I can't figure out how they would have gotten there in the first place. I mean, these things are only attracted to very specific kinds of energy. And you'd only be vulnerable to them when you were actually drawing upon the matter of the Nevernever—when you were shifted. And—" I blinked and then rubbed at my forehead. "Andi. Please don't tell me that you and Kirby have been getting down while you were fuzzy."

The bombshell blushed, from the roots of her hair to the tips of her... toes.

"God, that's just... so wrong." I shook my head. "But to answer your question, yes, I think that—"

"Harry?" Molly called from the lab. "Um. Do you have a fire extinguisher?"
"What!?"

"I mean, if I needed one!" she amended, her voice quavering. "Hypothetically speaking!"

"Hypothetically speaking?" I half shouted. "Molly! Did you set my lab on fire?!"

Andi, a distracted expression on her face, idly lifted my hand from her shoulder and slid my index finger between her lips, suckling gently. A pleasant flicker of lightning shot up my arm, and I felt it all the way to the bottoms of my feet.

"Oh, hey, ho-ho-ho! Hold on there," I said, pulling my finger away. It came out of her mouth with another intriguing sensation and a soft popping sound. "Andi. Ahem. We really need to focus, here."

Kirby let out a raw snarl and hit me with a right cross that sent me tumbling back across the room and into one of my bookshelves. I rebounded off it, fell on my ass, and sat there stunned for a second as copies of the *Black Company* novels fell from the shelf and bounced off my head.

I looked up to see Kirby seize Andi by the wrist and jerk her back behind him, placing his body between her and me in a gesture of raw possession. Then he balled up his hands into fists, snarled, and took a step toward me.

Mouse loomed up beside me then, two hundred pounds of shaggy gray muscle. He didn't growl at Kirby, or so much as bare his teeth. He did, however, stand directly in Kirby's path and face him without backing down.

Without blinking, Kirby's body seemed to shimmer and flow, and suddenly a black wolf nearly Mouse's size, but leaner and swifter-looking, crouched across the apartment, white teeth bared, amber eyes glowing with rage.

Holy crap. Kirby was about half a second from losing it, and he had the skill and experience to cause some real mayhem. I mean, taking on an animal is one thing. Taking on an animal directed by a human intelligence with years of experience in battling the supernatural is a challenge at least an order of magnitude greater. If it came down to a fight, a real fight, between me and Kirby, I was sure I could beat him, but to do it I'd have to hit him fast and hard, without pulling any punches.

I was not at all confident that I could beat him without killing him.

"Kirby," I said, trying to keep my voice as low and steady as I could. "Kirby, man, think about this for a minute. It's Harry. Listen, man, this is Harry, and you've just blown your willpower check, like, completely. You need to take a deep breath and get some perspective here. You're my friend, you're under the influence, and I'm trying to help you."

"Harry?" Molly called out, her voice higher-pitched than ever. "Acid doesn't eat through concrete, right?" I blinked at the trapdoor and screamed in frustration, "Hell's bells, what are you *doing* down there?!"

Kirby took another pace forward, wolf eyes bright, jaws slavering, head held low and ready for a fight. Behind him, Andi was watching the whole thing with a wide-eyed look that mixed terror, lust, excitement, and rage in equal parts, her impressive chest heaving. Her hands and lower arms had already begun to slowly change, sprouting curling russet fur, her nails lengthening into dark claws. Her eyes traveled to me and her mouth dropped open, revealing fangs that were already beginning *to* grow.

Super. In a fight against Kirby, I was worried about him not surviving. Against Kirby *and* Andi, in these quarters, it would be *me* who was running against long odds.

But I try to be an optimist: at least things weren't going to get any worse. Above and behind me, a window broke.

A length of lead pipe, maybe a foot long, capped at both ends with plastic, landed on a rug five feet away from me. Cheap, Mardi Gras-style beads were wrapped around it.

A lit fuse sparked and fizzed at one end of the pipe. It was maybe half an inch away from vanishing into the cap.

"But this is my day *off*!" I howled.

I know that things looked bad. But I honestly think that I could have handled it, if Mister hadn't picked that exact moment to leap down from his perch and go streaking across the room, acting upon some feline imperative unknown and unknowable to mere mortals.

Kirby, already on the edge of a feral frenzy, did what any canine would do—he let out a snarl and gave immediate chase.

Mouse let out a sudden bellow of rage—for crying out loud, he hadn't gotten that worked up over *me* being in danger—and launched himself after Kirby. Andi, upon seeing Mouse in pursuit of her fellow werewolf, shifted entirely to her own wolf shape and flung herself after Mouse.

Mister rocketed around my tiny apartment, with several hundred pounds of furious canine in pursuit. Kirby bounded over and around furniture almost as nimbly as Mister. Mouse didn't bother with nimble. He simply plowed through whatever was in the way, smashing my coffee table and one easy chair, knocking over another bookcase, and churning the throw rugs on the floor into hummocks of fabric and fiber.

I leapt for the pipe bomb and picked it up, only to have my legs scythed out from beneath me by Kirby as he went by. Mouse accidentally slammed a paw bearing his full weight down onto me as he rumbled past in pursuit, and got me right where the damned dog always gets a man. There was none of that delayed-reaction component to the pain, either. My testicles began reporting the damage instantly, loudly, and in nauseating intensity.

No time for pain. I lunged for the pipe bomb and nearly wet my pants as another explosion shook the floor—only this one was followed an instant later by an absolute flood of bright green smoke that billowed up from the lab.

I grabbed the pipe bomb and tried to pluck out the fuse, but it vanished into the cap and beyond the reach of my fingers. In a panic, I scrambled across the floor to the door and ripped it open with terrified strength. I hauled back to throw the thing out and— A sharp burst of sound. My

hand exploded into pins and needles. I fell limply to the floor, my head falling in such a way as to bring my gaze over to where my hand had been clutching the pipe bomb a few seconds before and—

And I was still holding it now, unharmed. Heavy jets of scarlet and purple smoke were billowing wildly from both ends of the pipe, scented heavily with a familiar odor. Smoke bombs.

The freaking thing had been loaded with something remarkably similar to Fourth of July smoke bombs, the kind kids play with. Bemused, I tugged one plastic cap off, and several little expended canisters fell out along with a note that read: *The next time you interfere with me, more than smoke will interfere with you.*

More than smoke will interfere with you? Who *talks* like that?

Mouse roared, snapping my focus back to the here and now, as he pounced onto Kirby's back, smashing the werewolf to the floor by dint of sheer mass. Mister, sensing his opening, shot out the front door with a yowl of disapproval and vanished into the outdoors, seeking a safer environment, like maybe traffic.

Andi leapt onto Mouse's back, fangs ripping, but my dog held fast to Kirby—buying me a couple of precious seconds. I seized a bit of chalk from the basket by the door and, choking on smoke, ran in a circle around the embattled trio, drawing a line of chalk on the concrete floor. Then I willed the circle closed, and the magical construct snapped into existence, a silent and invisible field of energy which, among other things, completely severed the connection between the psychic parasites in the Never-never and the werewolves whaling on my dog.

The fight stopped abruptly. Kirby and Andi both blinked their eyes several times and hurriedly removed their fangs from Mouse's hide. A few seconds later, they shimmered and resumed their human forms.

"Don't move!" I snapped at them, infuriated to no end. "Any of you! Don't break the circle or you'll go nuts again! Sit! Stay!"

That last was for Mouse. Mostly.

I couldn't see what Molly had done to my lab, but the fumes down there were cloying and obviously dangerous. I hauled myself over to the trapdoor.

Molly hadn't made it up the folding staircase, and just lay sprawled semiconscious against it. I had to grab her and haul her up the stairs. She was undressed from the waist up. I spotted her shirt and bra on the floor

near the worktable, both of them riddled with acid-burned holes.

I got her laid out on her back, elevated her feet on a stray cushion from the smashed easy chair, and checked her breathing. It didn't take long, because she wasn't, though she did still have a faint pulse. I started rescue breathing for her—which is a *lot* more demanding than people think. Especially when the air is still thick with the smell of God only knows what chemical combinations.

I finally got her to cough, and my racing heartbeat subsided a little as she began breathing again, raggedly, and opened her eyes. I sat up slowly, breathing hard, and found Anastasia Luccio standing in the open doorway to my apartment, her arms folded over her chest, one eyebrow arched.

Anastasia was a pretty girl—not glamorously lovely, but believably, genuinely pleasant to look at, with a fantastic smile and killer dimples. She looked like someone in her twenties, for reasons too complex to go into right now, but she was an older woman. A much older woman.

And there I was, apparently sitting up from kissing a topless girl, with a naked couple a few feet away, and the air thick with a pall of smoke and the smell of noxious fumes. For crying out loud, my apartment looked like the set of some kind of bizarre porno.

“Urn,” I said, and swallowed. “This isn’t what it might appear to be.”

Anastasia just stared at me. I knew it had been a long time since she’d opened up to anyone. It might not take much to make her close herself off again.

She shook her head, very slowly, and the smile lines at the corners of her eyes deepened along with her dimples. Then she burst out into a hearty belly laugh. “*Madre di Dio*, Harry. I cannot for the life of me imagine what it *does* appear to be.”

I lifted my eyebrows in surprise. “You aren’t upset?” “By the time you get to be my age,” she replied, “you’ve either worked out your insecurities, or they’re there to stay.”

Besides. I simply *must* know how *this* happened.”

I shook my head and then smiled at her. “I... my friends needed help.”

She looked back and forth between the Alphas and Molly. “And still do,” she said, nodding sharply. She came in and, as the only one actually wearing shoes, began picking up pieces of fallen glass from the broken window, literally rolling up her sleeves as she went. “Shall we?”

It took most of the day to get Molly to the hospital, gather the materials needed to fumigate Kirby and Andi's auras, and actually perform the work to get the job done. By the time they left, all better and psychophage-free, it was after seven.

"So much for our day off," I said.

She turned to consider me. "Would you do it differently if you had it to do again?"

"No. Of course not."

She shrugged. "Then it was a day well spent. There will be others."

"You never can be sure of that, though, can you?"

Her cheeks dimpled again. "Today is not yet over. You mourn its death somewhat prematurely."

"I just wanted to show you a nice time for a day. Not get bogged down in more business."

Anastasia turned to me and put her fingers over my mouth. Then she replaced her fingers with her lips.

"Enough talk," she murmured.

I agreed.