

## 1: SBS, MI6, & CSIS

*Chester Basin, Nova Scotia  
December 27th, 2021*

**M**ike Cameron came in the rear side entrance, into the laundry room. Directly across from him, through the doorway and adjacent to the powder room entry, an almost full-length mirror caused him to be confronted by someone he was still trying to get used to: himself in the uniform of the Royal Canadian Navy, though technically *RCN Reserve*. He shook the snow off his overcoat and hanged it the closet next to the entry, then doffed his uniform cap, giving his hair a brush with the flat of his palm. As if by magic, the groomed military coif fell about his shoulders, and he gathered it into a ponytail, confining it with a thick black elastic hair-tie.

His uniform epaulets displayed three bands of equal thickness, the top one displaying a loop, proclaiming him a Navy commander. He'd received a commendation earlier in the fall after he identified and arrested a disgruntled lieutenant on a warship who'd been selling secrets to a Chinese spy. The final promotion to full-commander had been issued a little over an hour ago, after some routine follow-up at Shearwater.

He frowned as he continued to focus on the face looking back at him from the mirror. His face had a slightly craggy look — age: somewhere past forty. The eyes were blue-grey, the colour they'd been most of his life — that is, his former life. Still looking in the mirror, he relaxed, allowing the glamour to dissipate until the

face reverted to looking less than thirty, with brilliant sapphire-blue eyes, the pupils vertical slits. In his job, the glamour was important.

With the onset of the COVID pandemic, he'd gone through the sham of appearing to be vaccinated, knowing that his system would metabolize the mRNA vaccine minutes after it entered his body, just as it destroyed Sars-Covi-2 or any other virus or bacteria he encountered. It made the 4-layer mask in his pocket unnecessary. The quasi N95 layers were just to keep his associates from wondering why he was different.

At one point *CSIS* had considered sending him to China to ascertain the cause of the outbreak, but Sam Larkin, Deputy Director of Operations for the *CIA* had been sending Mike reports — an innocent attempt to study the bat virus had resulted in exposure in the lab, which had then spread into the public via the live market, just blocks away, in the same part of Wuhan. The PRC Government had just fed conspiracy theorists further fodder by trying to put a lid on the truth, going so far as to detain a dying doctor. Now, three or four variants later, the world was dealing with Omicron, then Omicron+ or Omicron-2, mostly because the same right-wing mask-refusing, vaccine-denying hardliners had no idea that not being vaccinated, refusing masks, refusing to distance, all contributed to the spread, and it was this very spreading that led to mutations and new variants.

Mike knew all this from his years of Pre-Med at Acadia. Humans just weren't designed to replicate viral DNA — there were always errors. If lucky, the mutant didn't function. If unlucky, it made the virus worse — more deadly, or just more contagious.

Mike relied on vampire glamour to look older so his *RCN* rank was less suspicious — how do you explain to the enlisted crew of an *RCN* battleship that some wet-behind-the-ears shave-tail kid was so far above them in rank?

The longer hair he solved by a blend of glamour and sorcery, the strange magick that kept growing in him,

increasing in power, ever since he'd accepted the truth of his past: that in the 18th century, a direct ancestor had been fathered by his best friend, Lord Anthony Dewhurst, whose paramour had been Heather Cameron, a highland Scot, who'd also been a Wicca, in her case a healer-witch. And then he'd met Merlin, and so much had evolved since meeting Merlin, or Myrddin Emrys.

An abrupt yowl announced Kato's arrival in the doorway, followed by a more subdued almost bird-chirp mew from Teila as she, too, peaked around the doorway.

"Sorry, buddy," he said. "If I pick you up I'll be cleaning your fur off my uniform tunic for hours. Come on, I'll feed you two, though I'm sure Grant fed you plenty while I was gone." Grant was a neighbour and fellow cat-lover who made sure Kato and Teila were looked after whenever Mike and Carrie had to leave them home for more than a day.

Carrie was in Dartmouth with her grandchildren.

After putting a quarter of a small can of cat food into their respective dishes, he continued on to the master bedroom. He placed the cap on the shelf in his closet, then began stripping off his uniform, his mind racing back through more than five years — years of well-meaning manipulation by, primarily, Captain Mason of Britain's *MI6*, and his superior, *C*, jokingly referred to as *M*, whose real name was Sir John Sawers. Sawers had retired to be succeeded by Sir Alexander Younger. Mike liked Younger — he'd been an operative, not a collage geek. (*That thought made Mike almost laugh. Mike had been a college geek — BSc, majoring in Pre-Med Biology and minoring in Math, followed by a BEd, then, much later, an MA — that one, of all things, in creative writing.*)

*MI6* had coerced Mike onto the path that put him in uniform, but his own director, now replaced with a new guy, had joined the band-wagon. At first Mike had thought Mason (who'd retired soon after Mike rescued him from Moscow in 2014) had used his former position to finagle extra training for Mike with Britain's elite

*S.E.A.L.* service, the Royal Navy's *Special Boat Service*, or *SBS*. But events soon acquainted him with the motives of *C* of *MI6*, as well as those of both his former *CSIS* director, and his new replacement. Mike reacting out of innate curiosity thought, *What the heck — what can it hurt? Learning elite tactics might be an asset to my CSIS work...*

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***SBS Training Ground, Near Gibraltar  
Late-August, 2016***

Mike was positioned in the confining torpedo launch tube of a British submarine, arms out-stretched as if in the midst of a high-dive, the tips of his *SCUBA* fins touching the back of the tube. He breathed through a military re-breather: a device that scrubbed the *CO2* from his exhalations, allowing him a much more restricted time, but without the clunky bulk of a *SCUBA* tank on his back.

The preceding weeks had been dominated by a tedious training regimen, mostly specialized combat training at a black ops base near Swindon, Wiltshire. He'd found some of the weapons training mildly interesting, but he could have taught the unarmed combat better himself, a fact that the instructor eventually admitted after intolerable behaviour forced Mike to man-handled him with embarrassing ease.

This latter situation began with the instructor having Mike square-off against a huge muscle-bound brute half-again his size! When Mike evaded his strong-arm tactics, tossed him across the room, the instructor taunted: "So, now you leave him to run away and alert his mates to your presence?" So Mike immediately positioned himself in front of the giant and, with a brief blur of motion, dropped him unconscious.

The instructor's response was to send two, then three men against him, all-of-which he managed with similar

ease. The instructor now seemed determined to see Mike defeated. He stepped out onto the mats with a vicious sneer on his face and attacked with a barrage of usually deadly *Shotokan* techniques, only to have them miss or get slapped aside. In the same instant he got hurled across the room, where he fell to the floor, rolling eventually to a stop against the wall. He was still scowling when the standby medic revived him, but seemed much less determined. "Class dismissed," he growled as he hobbled away, assisted by the medic.

Mike recalled how annoyed he'd felt at the petty arrogance of the instructor, having been an instructor himself for much of his life.

Now, within the confines of a British *Astute* class submarine torpedo tube, Mike focused his attention on the launch door before him. A slight machine noise preceded the opening of the barrier, allowing the tube to flood with seawater, then there was another sound, and a blast of compressed air shot him forward out of the tube, into the sea, launching him toward shore. All he had to do was kick his feet and continue in a straight line, consulting his compass at intervals to maintain his heading. He'd removed the compass from his wrist, holding it instead in his left hand. He'd learned decades ago that an arm in a wetsuit (or drysuit) will want to straighten out, causing the person to naturally veer off-course in the direction of the arm.

He worked both fins as one, flexing from the abs, his entire body arching and undulating as he dolphin-kicked at a rate faster than any human. Moments later moonlight filtered through reasonably clear water to reveal a rapidly rising bottom under him. He was almost at the beach.

Minutes later he crawled up onto a pebbled shore where he doffed his fins and mask-rebreather combination, and headed for the scrub of bushes at the beach-head. Here he stowed his gear and stripped off the drysuit, leaving him in a thin black cotton turtleneck and black Royal-Marines-issue pants. From his backpack he

retrieved military issue brogues, an SBS commando knife, and the shoulder holster containing his .32-calibre Walther *PPK*, into which he quickly shrugged, adjusting the snapped tie-downs for the holster and clip holders to each side of his belt. From a tiny plastic canister in his pocket, he touched up the blackout grease on his face from where the mask would have worn some of it away.

A glance toward the sub showed even his keen vampire eyes just the barest hint of the conning tower a kilometer offshore. Preternatural hearing informed him his men were deploying the large, black inflatable boat, its electric motor nearly silent. He'd have to reconnoiter and make sure they could land safely.

He could smell the beach sentries on the night air — just two, the acrid stench of tobacco-laced sweat carried on the easterly breeze. They were close together, talking, in blatant violation of orders for sentries the world over.

*One-at-a-time's out*, Mike mused, shrugged, then pulled the *PPK*, retrieved the silencer from under his right arm, (just past the pockets for two spare clips), affixed it to the muzzle, then crept toward the source of the scent spoor and the sound of murmuring voices. At fifty-meters — kneel, sight on #1, then #2, back to #1. The Walther spat four times — two quick *double-taps* — and the two sentries dropped down onto the beach, red splotches staining their Kevlar.

Mike set off up the sloping terrain toward the stone edifice that loomed just beyond the narrow road that ran the coast. He moved in bursts of vampire-speed, transiting fifty-meters at a dash in a fraction of a second, then a brief pause before the next burst. His keen ears and even keener *Wiccan* sense gave him an intuitive image of everything within a half-mile radius in just a moment.

*Mason is to blame for this new SBS involvement*, he mused with a chagrinned half smile, though he knew he really had no one to blame but himself — he could have declined. After rescuing Mason, spending Christmas and the following two months at the *Scholomance* in

Anstruther, Scotland, he and Carrie had returned home. Then, after a few routine intelligence-gathering missions for *CSIS*, Mason had lured him back to England, persuading him to complete this training regimen with the UK's *Special Boat Service* — less publicized than the *SAS* or *Special Air Service*, and Navy-based rather than Army-based. Most of his colleagues in the course were burly members of the Royal Marines — all looking like professional wrestlers, and much taller than his five-foot-eight-inches (173 cm).

Sir John Sawers (C of MI6, though referred to as *M* behind his back) had also made an effort to talk Mike into this training, just as he'd talked Mike into taking (and passing) several tests on navigation, seamanship, ship deployment, naval regulations...

He smiled as he recalled the seamanship practical: Command a 50-foot two-masted schooner out through a series of islands several kilometers away, then back to the jetty. He'd acted as both captain and first mate, issuing commands to the crew to tack the vessel through the maze of islands and rocky shoals, then ordered the issuing of a rum ration and told the crew to stand-down.

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The *Cassandra* was an antique, dating back to before the First World War. She was all wood, even the masts — heavily varnished Norway spruce spars, iron mast-hoops carried her canvas aloft. Even the *Albatross* had sail glides and spreaders, Mike mused, but not *Cassandra*; she was authentic.

Locking the wheel, Mike doused the flying jibs and sprit jibs, leaving just the three primary sails of the schooner, then at one kilometer out he dropped the foresail, coming in under just the main. The wind had been brisk all afternoon, but the sunset lull was dropping it to barely a breeze blowing straight at the dock. Mike had seen to the securing of the halyards so that the mere pulling of a belaying pin from the fife rail would cause a

sail to fall. He eased wide to the south side of the dock, then rounded up into the wind, timing it to swing the schooner in against the jetty just as the sail luffed. As she drifted in against the concrete pier, he dashed to the starboard rail, kicked fenders over, then to the main fife, pulling the pin for the main halyard, dropping the main to the boom, where lazyjacks kept it from spilling. Dock lines were already being tossed.

“*Avast there!*” he called to the crew in a deep tone, smiling as the naval cadets scrambled, all a-grin, to snatch up and secure dock lines. He could have handled that, too, but bursts of vampire speed might have proved embarrassing, revealing his nature not just to his crew, but to the crowd assembled on the quay.

“I say, jolly good show, Commander.” A Royal Navy captain stepped out of the crowd and seized Mike’s hand. “Never seen such superb handling, and of such a grand old lass! But, Commander, it did seem a tad showy, bringing such an irreplaceable antique to port single-handed when you clearly had sufficient crew.” There was a hint of disapproval in the captain’s eyes.

Mike scanned the captain’s thoughts — there it was — Mike seemed to him almost too young to be a naval commander. He thought Mike reckless.

Mike flashed a brief smile. “I’m a lot older than I look,” he stated. “I’ve single-handed for decades, mostly ocean crossings between Bermuda and the Bahamas. I just haven’t been at the helm of a sailing vessel all season.”

The captain frowned, nodded slightly, congratulated Mike again, then walked along the pier. As he receded from view, Mike’s thoughts turned to the captain calling him *Commander*. Since the cadets were all in uniform, Mike had allowed his *SBS* handlers to put him in uniform as well, in this case a simple white shirt with shoulder epaulets. He hadn’t even registered the three bars on his shoulders, the middle bar thinner than the others, technically a lieutenant-commander. *Were they just making it easier for me to deal with subordinates or*



*is someone trying to push me into a real rank?* he pondered.

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### ***SBS Training Ground, Near Gibraltar***

Mike roused from his revery halfway up the slope to the base of the stone fortress, and brought his focus back to the mission at hand. He paused just long enough to note the arrival of the black Avon, it's six occupants debarking into the gentle incoming tide, catching the side ropes, and hauling the craft up onto the beach to deposit it where the bushes along the beachhead would hide it from the view of the fortress. The burly silhouettes of six Royal Marines then came lumbering across the road in a crouch, Heckler-Koch MP5s clutched in their meaty fists.

Their senior, a gruff master-chief named Baker, had emerged as a natural leader, and resented Mike being assigned over the six for this mission. Mike knew from Baker's file that he'd grown up in North London, yet he tried to effect a South London Cockney banter that didn't even come close to Nigel Worthington's.

*He's too cocky by a long shot,* Mike thought. *His quest for glory will get his men killed.*

Baker's best mate, a chief-petty-officer named Corbett, looked up, spotted Mike, and gestured .

Mike picked up Baker's disgruntled comment about the *scrawny Canuck-Porridge-Wog* (Scottish-Canadian), and how it must have been a miracle that he'd survived the sub's torpedo tube launch, and somehow made it in so far ahead of them.

Mike didn't linger to eavesdrop; he continued on up the slope. His vampire senses had already pinpointed the locations of twelve sentries on the top walkway of the fort: three on each of the four sides. Sure enough, two-thirds of the way up to the wall, he spotted three sentries within the battlements: one at each end, and one in the

middle, lips moving, presumably using standard-issue electronic communicators.

He knew he could reach and disable them without them becoming aware of him, but he was less sure of the Royal Marine commandoes' ability to do the same.

Using skills he'd learned from Tulku Anil, and augmented by vampire glamour, he projected a scene of the landscape, no sign of the commandoes or himself. Then, on a whim, he added an imaginary detail: a hawk that was indigenous to the area, alighting on the rock wall that bordered the road in lieu of a guardrail, a mangled rat in the hawk's talons. He even gave the scenario a bluish halo from the glow of the moon. One of the sentries grunted in disgust, but all three watched in rapt fascination as the non-existent raptor tore at its prey, swallowing portions with jerky motions of its head and neck, the way Mike had seen Osprey feed on fish.

Mike smiled when Baker pointed to the mental projection with a chuckled remark. The others seemed puzzled — they clearly didn't see it. Mike wasn't in the least surprised, because he'd been aiming the mental intrusion at the sentries atop the wall. He was more surprised that Baker had picked up on it. It warned him that Baker was too easily distracted and overly sensitive to mental suggestion.

Their attention riveted on the grizzly scene, the sentries remained oblivious to Mike as he continued to the stone wall at the road's edge, slipped over it and onto the road. He spared a passing glance at the bodies of the two sentries lying against the roadside wall, that is until one of them flickered eyelids and glared at him. Mike launched a fierce glare at him, projecting into the opposing brain. The eyes glazed over and closed, then Mike blurred forward to the base of the fortress wall. He waited for the Royal Marines to reach the wall, then, with a cough into his communicator to get their attention, he used hand-signals to instruct them to position themselves at the southeast and center, while he moved left to the southwest corner.

“He finks he’s a bleedin’ team-leader,” Baker snarled.

“He *IS* the team-leader, *shit-for-brains*,” another commando hissed in a whisper. “That’s why *HE* got propelled out of the sub’s torpedo tube, in hopes of landing him well ahead of us, though how he swam in so fast is beyond me. Come to think of it, he is built like a swimmer.”

“Or a super-middle-weight fighter,” another added. “He did clean the combat instructor’s clock in hand-to-hand — No one even saw him move — Just *smack-smack-whackity-whack*, and the master-chief flew through the air, and landed where his three side-kicks had been groaning on the mat moments before.”

The other marines grunted their acknowledgment, then, with a glance in his direction, gave quick, snappy nods, and heeded Mike’s instructions.

While they were advancing to the foot of the wall, Mike focused his *chi* and hurled himself upward, catching the top of the battlements some twelve meters off the ground, then, after listening a moment, vaulted over the top and onto the parapet.

Still under Mike’s vampiric glamour, and focused on the imaginary hawk and its gruesome repast, the three guards were oblivious to the more dangerous predator approaching them from behind. Mike’s hand slipped over the mouth and nose of one, preventing outcry, while his other hand snapped a *cat’s-paw* knuckle punch up under the back of the commando helmet, into the lower occipital area, bringing instant loss of consciousness.

Pivoting, Mike blurred to the man nearest the southwest corner, and repeated the maneuver.

Another burst of vampire speed brought him to the final sentry on that side of the fortress. This time, Mike drew the black-bladed commando knife, clapped a hand over the man’s mouth, then reached around with his knife-hand and cut the red ribbon attached to the sentry’s flack vest, near the throat. Under the rules of the exercise, he was *hors de combat* and obliged to sit out the remainder of the exercise.

At the southeast corner, all hell was breaking loose. The trio coming over the southeast corner had caught the attention of sentries further along the eastern wall. There was a staccato sound of rapid-fire, and the three marines were splattered with paintball stains. Just as with Mike's sentry with the severed red ribbon, they had no recourse but to sit out the remainder of the exercise, leaving Mike's team down three men.

Mike took off in a blur. He knew the remaining trio, just now reaching the top of the parapet, would be in similar danger. He hurled himself to the roof and dashed across to the east side, dropping among the grouped sentries, quickly disabling all three. That left the three on the west side, and three more on the north side.

*If the western sentries heard the shots...* he thought, and blurred back across the roof in that direction.

A scattering of *pops* told him those sentries were already engaging his team.

As he dropped to the west parapet, he found one sentry sitting, paintball blotches decorating his Kevlar. The remaining two were using the corner as cover to shoot at Mike's team. Taking them from behind, Mike made short work of it — putting one out with an occipital punch, and taking the other by severing a ribbon mid-back, at heart level.

Of his team, however, only Baker and Corbett remained. He signed for Baker to stay against the wall and head north, while Corbett hugged the wall, heading around to the east side. Mike, meanwhile, blurred back to the roof to head north.

*"Crikey!"* he heard Baker whisper; "It's like workin' with bleedin' *Spider-Man*! Why does he even need *SBS* training?"

Mike located the three north sentries: two were nearing the northwest and northeast corners, while the third was watching toward the tree-line of the north slope. He dropped silently to the parapet, projecting *chi* to slow his descent so he touched down in silence, then took out that sentry by severing his throat ribbon.

Blurring to the northeast, he did the same to the third, then, hearing a barrage of *pops* behind him, wheeled to find the remaining sentry in kneeling position, firing around the corner.

*If they'd sent me by myself, instead of saddling me with a team...* he thought, then stifled the notion. Teams weren't a bad thing — he, Tony, and Nigel, for example... Then he realized that how he managed his team was as much a part of the test as accomplishing the mission.

A quick burst of vampire speed took him to and onto the remaining sentry. This one he immobilized, knife blade against his throat, and inquired: “Any more inside?”

True to his training, the sentry declined to answer, so Mike's black blade moved in a blur — three cut ribbons. Mike motioned for him to take a seat.

He found the entry door mid-wall on the north side. Baker joined him just in time to try the door and pronounce it locked, but, as he was extracting a lock-pick kit from a pocket, Mike's right hand made a subtle conjurer's gesture and he opened the door.

“*Crikey!*” Baker breathed. “*Now he's eff-in' Houdini!*”

Mike pulled his Walther, re-attached the silencer, and motioned for Baker to hold back at his rear, and not follow too closely.

*First Spider-Man, then Houdini, and now James bleedin' Bond,* he caught from Baker's thoughts, then: *I bet that's what he's doin' with SBS trainin'. He want's to qualify for bleedin' SIS — freakin' MI6!*

Mike frowned. Could that be Mason or C's plan?

The interior was in darkness, though it wasn't dark to Mike, who found sunlight excruciating and rarely encountered true darkness, so photo-sensitive were his eyes, with their vertical cat's-eye pupils, a fact he hid by coloured contact lenses, or using glamour when he tired of contacts. The light of the near-full-moon was filtering through from a window to the west, a glimmer of light

betraying the presence of a glass-paned office door. This was locked but, with exertion of *chi*, opened as easily as had the outer door.

The office was sparse — a basic desk, two chairs, and a safe. The safe was his target. He studied the dial, the logo, and recognized it as something Nigel had spoken of, making him smile in fond recollection. He knelt at the mechanism, then using his acute vampire hearing and touch, gently manipulated the combination dial with his right hand, his left applying gentle pressure to the lever handle that worked the latch.

He'd been told by Operations Command to use the small Semtex charge and detonator, but now that he was on site, he decided that would too easily alert any other occupants to his presence. In another twenty seconds he had the safe opened, and was removing a small black book, ignoring the bundles of wrapped hundred-Euro notes. *Thanks, Nigel*, he thought, recalling the times the former cracksman, now computer wizard, had coached him in the more commonly-used safe mechanisms and how to *crack* them.

He was just tucking the book into a cargo pocket on his pants-leg, when a second door opened, and an intruder snapped on a light.

Mike didn't bat an eye. His PPK spat three specially-designed .32 calibre paintballs at the intruder — one atop the other, dead-center of the heart. With a look of chagrin, the intruder raised his hands and sat down on the floor.

"*Crikey!* We're done 'ere!" Baker announced.

"We still have to make it back to the beach with five dead-weight bodies," Mike pointed out to Baker, wiping the smile from that man's face.

"Er... But..."

"No buts, Master-Chief Baker," Mike insisted. "We don't leave men behind to be interrogated by the enemy. I'm sure they taught you that in the Royal Marines."

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***Vauxhaul Cross (MI6 Headquarters), London  
September, 2016***

“Well, Samurai, I must say that I am impressed — very impressed!” This from Sir John Sawers, head of *MI6*. He sat behind his desk, leafing through page after page of reports.

“You’ve distinguished yourself with the *Special Boat Service* training tests. In fact, their leading candidate, Master-Chief Baker, insists it would have worked out better if you’d been sent in by yourself! *Good God, man*, you even personally carried two men back to the landing craft.”

Mike shrugged. “Can’t expect the dead to crawl back to the beach,” he commented with a smile. Then, “Besides, two had badly sprained ankles — No man left behind...” and he left it hanging.

“Yes, yes, quite right. The motto of the American *SEALs* is not unlike the mottos of the *SAS*, *SBS*, and the Royal Marines.”

He held up a page: “The hand-to-hand instructor at Swindon says you should be teaching the course.” He cracked a smile, adding *sotto voce*, “*of course, he never studied at a Shaolin temple*. Still, it’s uncharacteristic praise from what I’m told is usually an unforgiving, taciturn, I might even suggest, grouchy, man.”

He paused, setting that report aside, then: “And your other test scores — Good Lord, man;” he held up a stapled sheaf of papers; “these are the *leftenant*–commander’s examination papers. You’ve equalled applicants who’ve studied and lived the naval life for years, and none have surpassed you.” He continued to stare at the pages, shaking his head in apparent amazement. Then he selected a hand stamp from a drawer, opened a pad of red ink, and stamped several key papers, pushing them toward Mike.

“If you want it, *Samurai*, you can walk into a *leftenant*–commander’s rank in Her Majesty’s Royal

Navy, preferably in Naval Intelligence, which would be barely a pause in the road to *MI6*. Please consider all of this *very* seriously, *Samurai*.”

Standing before *C*'s desk, almost like a student asked to report to the principal, Mike remained silent, thinking it all through.

“I’m not sure, sir,” he said at last. “The past several years I’ve spent almost as much time outside Canada as I have at home. That said, Canada is still my home. I’m honoured and gratified by your words, and I’m not saying *no*; I just can’t say *yes* right now. Most of my *CSIS* work this past year — these past five years, actually — has been mundane compared to previous years, but that could change, now that *CSIS* is focusing on the threat of home-grown terrorism.”

“*ISIS* is everywhere, *Samurai*,” *C* rebutted. “Here at *6*, we think stopping them in Spain, France and Belgium could be heading them off before they can plan anything here. Please think my offer over during the next few months.” He continued: “At the very least, I’ll be relaying all of this to my opposite number at *CSIS*. No doubt he’ll have something to say on the subject.”



Carrie was waiting for him in the hall. “Neither of my parents is in the best of health,” she reminded him as they were walking out of the Vauxhall Cross building, where a cab waited to take them to Tony’s flat.

Mike nodded and smiled. “You did note,” he said softly, “that I didn’t say *yes*, that, at best, I said *not right now*.”

“Not right now,” Carrie echoed, then broke into a grin, threw her arms about his neck, and kissed him hard on the mouth. “I’m so proud of you. I heard that big bear, Master-Chief Baker, muttering about you in the hallway — he was sitting on the bench across from me — about how badly you shamed him and his fellow marines, and after he and a few of the others had looked



down their nose at you, as 'little more than a jumped-up foreigner' I think was how he phrased it."

Mike smiled. "*Canuck-porridge-wog* is the one I'd never heard before," he added dryly.

"From how you described the attitude of that hand-to-hand combat instructor, I'm amazed he wrote such a complimentary report as he did," Carrie said.

Mike gave a small smile. "I bought him a scotch in the bar that evening — *Glenmorangie*. Nothing like a top-shelf single malt for cleaning the slate."



## 2: Commander Cameron

*CSIS Headquarters, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
Two weeks later... (Mid-September, 2016)*

“Welcome back, Commander,” Michel Coulombe, the Director of the *Canadian Security and Intelligence Service* greeted with a smile as Mike entered his office.

Mike let puzzlement show on his brow, then commented, “Former Director Fadden once snarled at me about having heard members of my son’s *JTF2* team call me that. *There are no commanders in CSIS!*” he growled in imitation of the former director.

The Director smiled at the vocal impression, gave his shoulders a shrug, then launched into a preamble in a Quebecois patois that made Charbonneau’s polished Parisienne seem almost like Oxford English in comparison. “I spent a few years in de field, overseas,” he commented. “From de paperwork Sir John sent me, you earned de title. I’m even bouncing aroun’ de idea wid a few key people at Defense about making it official over ’ere, as a rank in Naval Intelligence. Dere are one or two old guys lef’ oo remember a cantankerous senior *lieutenant* oo was de star o’ de boxing team.”

This forced a smile from Mike.

“Dad really only wanted me to follow his path as a detective, but I’m sure he’d have been proud to hear you say that.”

He took a step forward, extending his hand to Director Coulombe, adding: “We’ve never officially met,

sir, other than a few of phone calls, and during that first one, just before my loan-out to *MI6*, I hadn't even registered the fact that Director Fadden had stepped down — I was in and out of the country so much..."

Coulombe smiled, and flicked a hand as if to physically brush away the issue. "As I said, *Samurai*, I been in de field, so I respect and appreciate what you accomplished as our only (and *highly top-secret*) special agent. Field operatives learn quickly to be pragmatic, or they don' last long in de field."

*Like in the former Yugoslavia*, Mike pondered, remembering how Coulombe had spent time in Bosnia, Serbia, and, it was rumoured, even Chechnya during their unrest with Putin and Russia. *How had he managed over there with that accent?* he pondered, then shrugged it off. *He had; case closed.*

The Director glanced at Mike's hand, still waiting to be shaken, and seemed to hesitate, some of the colour draining from his face.

*He knows*, Mike thought, — *Of course Jean would have had to explain why my file is so redacted.*

Director Coulombe swallowed hard, his bony face paling even further, then he extended his own hand.

Mike channeled as much blood as he dared into his palm and fingers, as well as a significant amount of *chi*, forcing the skin temperature of his hand to rise to within a couple degrees of normal human body temperature.

He was surprised when Coulombe gripped his hand so tightly, then realized it must be nerves. He resisted the urge to squeeze back, keeping his grip normally firm.

The Director eased off on his grip, released Mike's hand, then said, "I'm sorry, *Samurai*. I guess I got wrapped up in old memories and imaginings of what you did to earn all dis paperwork from *SIS* and *SBS* over dere. Of course we never met. It's jus' dat I study every jot of intel I can muster about you — pestered Jean Charbonneau 'til 'e almos' blow a gasket. Now *dere's* one close-mouthed man if I ever know one, an' Jean and I spent our fair share of time togedder when Yugoslavia

was falling apart — rescuing trapped Canadian families, especially.”

He swallowed hard again. “I’ve read your new fiction series: about Canada’s vampire spy —” His eyes transfixed Mike’s as if trying to bore into his head. When Mike said nothing, he looked searchingly once more into Mike’s eyes, then eased back into his heavily-padded desk chair.

“De firs’ one reads like fiction,” Coulombe uttered in a low tone, “and yet it fills in much of de redactions of dat particular file: Stavros Soutzos, his former Russian mafia *tugs*, dat biker gang pushing crystal-meth — de vampire slasher murders in ‘Alifax.”

Mike remained silent, even when the Director’s eyes bored at him, as if searching for an answer.

Coulombe sighed. “You’re not going to answer me, are you?” he murmured.

“I’m waiting for a question,” Mike replied, stone-faced at first, then gave a hint of a smile.

Frowning, the director continued: “And de second book, de one involving Stan Michaels —”

“*Stanislaus Mihilache*,” Mike corrected.

Coulombe nodded. “Your description of Lord Dewhurst wi’ dat man in Tajikistan oo try to shoot you, and den your description of being trapped below ground, near dat underground river — tinkin your back was broken, passing out for hours, den coming-to after sunset and feeling like your back ’ad ’ealed —

“Den, dose first few chapters o’ de next book. Well, *Samurai*, it was eider de mos’ convincing fantasy fiction I ’ave ever read or — or —”

It was as if he couldn’t make the words come out; as if voicing them would make comic book fantasy become reality. Mike wondered if this former field agent, this former intelligence operative from the latter part of the Cold War, could face having his factual world shaken so utterly.

“Is it fiction?”

*Almost there*, Mike thought, with a sigh.

“Are you a —” Again, it was as if the word refused to come out.

Mike took a deep breath and eased it out slowly.

“There’s a certain amount of fiction to it,” he explained. “The genre sort of demands it.”

“Den dere are such ting as vampires — dey do exist?” He rolled his eyes. “Of course dey exist — I know dat from Charbonneau — it’s why he sought you out and brought you into *CSIS*. An all *dose* redacted areas of your files, well, de obvious conclusion is dat you actually are a...”

“Yes,” Mike said finally.

It was as if Coulombe didn’t hear him, or didn’t register the significance of the affirmation. “Yes?”

“Yes;” Mike confirmed, his voice pitched so the director could just hear it; “I’m a vampire.”

Silence. Then —

“An’ de novels?” the Director hesitated — “Of course — what we have in de sealed records corroborates much of deir plot, except, of course, for ’ow you changed almos’ all de names, and a few place names.”

“And left out the odd insignificant party — sometimes combined two people into one character,” Mike added.

“Of course,” Director Coulombe said, giving a slight nod, still looking shocked and out of his depth. “And your recent dismantling of de two Montreal-based, one Toronto-based, and two Winnipeg-based terrorist cells? Your intel for all dat came from interrogations?”

“I don’t need water-boarding,” Mike replied in the same quiet tone — His voice had been barely more than a low murmur since the interview began. “I won’t demonstrate on you, sir,” he added. “Depending on you’re resolve, there might not be enough Excedrin in the building for either of us — It does take a toll — on both myself and the subject, though it’s mostly worse for the subject.”

“Monahan,” Coulombe murmured. “He spent a considerable time in a psychiatric facility.”

Mike nodded: “Though much of his catatonia stemmed from inability to face his own culpability in the events following his succumbing to Dragomir Torok’s glamour. Events like slugging my wife into unconsciousness to keep her from saving my life, then trying to help an assassin frame me for said assassin’s murders, and let’s not forget trying to fry me in sunlight on the engine hood of a police car. And he shot me a time or two. He was too by-the-book not to be conflicted by all of that.”

Coulombe was silent a few moments, taking it all in, then he gave a sad, sober nod.

“So dis ting you do — it’s a sort of mind-reading? You forcibly ransack the subject’s thoughts and memories?”

Mike nodded. “Then I act on the intel.”

The director arched an eyebrow. “Your skills are certainly useful,” he conceded. “Pray the left-leaning critics never get wind of it.”

“Officially, I don’t exist,” Mike reminded him. “Nor do vampires, for that matter. It’s the general public’s inability to accept anything beyond their normal concrete, mundane existence that guarantees security to the vampire community — as long as they keep to the shadows and behave themselves.”

“Ow did Charbonneau phrase it! — Drink dere bottled blood an’ work de nightshift. An’ if dey don’t?” Coulombe flashed him a sharp look.

“*Then I deal with them.* That was my original job-description,” was Mike’s icy reply.

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***Chester Basin, Present,  
Late-December, 2021***

Mike frowned at the memories. He had liked Coulombe better than other directors of CSIS, and was disappointed to learn he was retiring after thirty-six years. And now

the recently-re-elected PM, whose most significant government experience was being the son of a former prime minister, had appointed what Mike considered little more than another bureaucrat to take his place. Mike tried to be fair and think well of the PM — after all, he was trying hard to manage the COVID situation, but he was out of his depth. With no science background, himself, at least he listened to his medical advisors. Still, with all his past embarrassing behaviors exposed in the press, Mike couldn't help think of him as a snowboard-teacher/drama coach. *Lets hope Charbonneau continues to shield me from Director Vineault the way he did with Coulombe's predecessors.*

Two weeks after Mike's meeting with Director Coulombe, it had become official: The Royal Canadian Navy Reserve accepted Mike as a Lieutenant-Commander.

And now, with Carrie gone for almost a week to help with grandchildren while their tenured professor Phd mother, Sandra, was conducting research in Labrador, and their father was busy with his *RCN* duties, Mike was just returning from a routine work-up cruise on a ship. Routine? He'd been aboard as a Naval Intelligence officer, doing follow-up after having caught a traitor passing on classified intel to a *PRC* asset. It had been a short run, just a few hours actually, and he'd been hoping to confirm that no one else from the crew had been aware of the traitor's actions, but he found a young able seaman who'd been an accomplice, on leave when Mike initially investigated.

The moment he met the man, everything flashed through his mind — he recognized Mike as the operative who'd caught the other spy. Now he was afraid of being caught. He'd never passed anything on to the *PRC* himself, but he'd always given the true spy a heads-up whenever sensitive material was spotted coming across the captain's desk.

Not only the People's Republic of China, but Putin had sent a few of his own people sniffing around, mostly



interested in High Arctic missions. Mike had caught one *SVR* operative in a bar, trying to ply a young officer with alcohol.

The *SVR* — the international spy service from where the former *KGB* had been broken up into the *SVR* and the *FSB* — for military secrets he would have expected it to have been the *GRU*, Russia's *Military Intelligence*. He'd thought the cold war was over, but the new Russia under Putin, by Mason's reckoning, was little different than the former Soviet Union. In fact, all evidence indicated that Vladimir Putin would like nothing better than to recreate *USSR 2.0*.

Mike frowned. While in Moscow in 2013, he'd developed a strong sense that Putin was on the verge of orchestrating some sort of take-over of parts in eastern Ukraine around Donetsk and Luhansk, and now it was all escalating. He knew Zelensky had approached a Dutch company about extracting the rich natural gas deposits in the Donbas area. *I guess Putin wants to control all the gas in the region*, he thought. He never would have pictured him taking Crimea, but one look at a map made it painfully obvious. Taking Crimea gave him control of the entrance between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.

When Mike left the *RCN* vessel with another able-seaman in handcuffs, his promotion to full commander was a done deal. He eyed his uniform tunic and the shirt next to it in his closet, displaying fresh new rank insignia issued to him by the Commodore at Shearwater just hours before.

With Christmas just over and Carrie in Dartmouth, helping her son, Jim, with the kids — the kids were no trouble at all — the older boy was obsessed with *MineCraft*, his younger sister with dressing as a Disney princess. Mike smiled at the thought — *with her mother's looks, she was is a Disney princess*, he thought. Mike had used the time to go out with the ship to finish off the last of his investigations before finalizing his report and recording video testimony for the courts-

martial. Now all that was finished, and he was officially on leave — at least from Naval Intelligence.

A few scattered photos on Carrie's dresser caught his eye — Henry standing near his wooden garage. Three years before, Carrie's father had died from cancer for which he'd refused surgery or treatment. Now her mother, lost in early stages of Alzheimers, was just a few kilometers away at an extended care facility in Chester.

Glancing again at the epaulets on both his shirt and uniform tunic, he cocked the corner of his mouth in a half-smile as he zipped up the garment bag. *I went out a lieutenant commander and came home a commander*, he mused, giving his head another shake. *Commander Cameron — Commander Samurai.*

Kato came in, hopped up on the bed, then leaped into Mike's arms, rubbing his head under Mike's chin, and purring very loudly. He gently worried Mike's thumb with his teeth, licked it a few times, then went quiet. He clearly felt like Mike had been gone far too long for his liking. Mike continued hold him until the Siamese calmed himself enough to hop back onto the bed and settle on a folded fleece blanket.

After changing into his black Levi jeans, black T-shirt, and his Durango boots, Mike detoured to the kitchen to warm and down a cup of O-positive before donning his Victorian greatcoat, with its ubiquitous overcape, and his broad-brimmed drover hat, then heading out into the cold night air for a walk.

He knew his mind was unsettled, hence all the memory flash-backs. They happened when his mind processed information, knowing that there was a hidden missing fact not coming to the fore. He'd been having recurring flashes all week of being somewhere out west among possible Moslem extremists, of him posing as a young man in his early twenties, and he had decided that over-indulging on blood to make himself look younger would be less exhausting than using glamour. It was hard enough using glamour to keep his eyes looking normal. He had *plano* lenses to disguise the cats-eye vertical-slit

pupils that marked him as a centuries-old vampire, or, at least, someone with the genetic makeup of a centuries-old vampire, but they became uncomfortable after a few hours; his eyes didn't produce tears as generously as they had when he was human. But what tears he did produce usually dissolved contact lenses in just a few hours. And *that* mess was no fun at all to deal with!



### 3: *The Hag & the Child*

*Chester Basin, Nova Scotia*  
*Late December, 2021*

**D**esultory — It seemed a strange term for describing the scatter of snowflakes that fluttered through the air about him as he walked out to the end of Demont Road, and headed east toward the village, but M.D. Cameron the writer decided it best suited how they swirled and danced, as if they had no concern about ever reaching the ground. Indeed, after more than fifteen minutes, there was barely two millimeters of fresh snow on the road.

The night was cold, just at freezing, maybe a degree below. The village of Chester Basin looked deserted, just a few scattered strings of Christmas lights still aglow, their colours shimmering through the snowfall and spreading out across the snow, no doubt left on after the owners had gone to bed.

For Mike, walking on a winter night like this was almost like meditating. He could let his mind wander, thoughts and memories coming randomly. It all served to ease his almost hyperactive brain after the business of the week, with all its events and revelations. And this night was perfect for relaxation in its picturesque stillness.

He paused at a guardrail where he could view the old village dock and the basin beyond. Even the waters of the basin were calm, their blue-black hue reflecting a faint shimmer where the moon struggled to make its

presence known through the nimbostratus clouds high overhead. To the south he could just make out Seccombes Island, little more than a dark silhouette in the distance, framed by Shaw Island to the east and Borgels Point to the west. Ice was just beginning to form — little more than a fragile skin where the waters were calm and undisturbed within fifty meters of the shoreline.

Reflecting on how many times he and Carol had sailed past Seccombes, either to the north or the south, heading either east toward the back side of Chester or west back toward the entrance to Gold River, brought him back to the sailboat issues on his mind: *Windward*, his Hunter 30, had been replaced by *Phoenix*, a 20-ft Luger Southwind trailer-sailer that Mike had been restoring in what little spare time *CSIS* allowed him. Selling *Windward* had been hard for Mike, but he just couldn't spend the time on her that he'd once done. The cost of dockage and winter storage was prohibitive when one considered that there'd been summers when he'd only been able to get her off the dock once due to how busy *CSIS* kept him. Then, with COVID closures, people weren't even launching.

Tonight he was just enjoying the ambiance, the peace and quiet, of Chester Basin. He'd liked Dartmouth — one always retains a fondness for the place they'd considered home during high school and college years — but, with the passing of his mother, and then his father, not to mention the string of hitmen who'd come after him, one vampire attacking him in the middle of the night right in his own bedroom —. That particular vampire had been misinformed: He thought Mike was still human, instead of being a newly-changed vampire.

Newly-changed? Mike had been slowly changing for years, probably most of his life. Not just Tony's blood working away in him for forty years, with an influx of Jonathan's much older, much stronger vampire blood, but, as he later learned, a gene or series of genes Mike had inherited down through six generations from the

same two-hundred-plus-year-old vampire, Lord Anthony Dewhurst.

*And Tony's maker, Baroness Isobelle, had been made by Jonathan; and then there was Jonathan's maker — Now how farfetched is that?* And Myrddin, called Merlin in the King Arthur legends, Myrddin Emrys by the Romans and in classical literature, still kept popping up at the most unexpected times, usually appearing as a voice in Mike's mind before putting in a physical appearance. The point was, in every respect, Mike seemed more like a centuries-old vampire than a recent fledgling. He'd survived a day in the sun, giving him a tan that had lasted several years, and was just now fading to something closer to a human mid-winter-pallor.

From out over the water, the cry of a gull brought him back to awareness of the village of Chester Basin, just a fraction over seven kilometers (he thought of it as nine or ten minutes) west of Chester, now his and Carrie's home, and it was beginning to feel like he'd been here forever. No matter how busy CSIS tried to keep him — and now Naval Intelligence was starting to encroach on CSIS in demanding a share of his time — Chester Basin was still home, where he came to recharge before the next call to duty.

To his immediate right, dimly lit by the obscured moon, was the Sea Shanty Restaurant, barely more than a sandwich shop, now closed for the winter. Three years before there'd been a *For Sale* sign, but though the new owners had seemed to be making a go of it, there was now another FOR SALE sign out front.

Mike shook his head. *There'll soon be nothing left but the Post Office and the PetroCan*, he thought, though the pharmacy still did a fair business. When he and Carrie had first moved to the area, just over nine years ago, what was now a warehouse for the pharmacy had been a little grocery. But that had closed up within their first year as residents. Then the service station across the road had removed its pumps, offering nothing but routine maintenance service now.

Mike's walking meditation was suddenly disrupted by garbled jargon telepathically intruding on his thoughts.

*Foreign language — Eastern European?* Strange thoughts intruded on his musings — guttural mutterings, coarse, almost foul, disturbing — not close, but close enough to come through and interrupt his ruminations as he walked. He frowned and spun about, trying to pinpoint their source. Just ahead, Cornhill Road split off the shore road in a Y, that led up the hill to Trunk 12 which, in turn, led to Hwy 103, then on toward Kentville. Across #12, Croft Road did a wandering loop back around to the lighthouse Road (Hwy #3) at the Gold River Bridge, just a few hundred meters past the entrance to Demont Road.

Mike shook his head, continuing to frown. *No; not Croft Road — somewhere in the woods, just a little south of it.* But there were no other roads between Croft Road and #3, just the old railroad path — The Chester Connection Trail —

Wiccan intuition: An image flashed in his mind — a ramshackle cabin, little more than a shack — close to water, almost like a swamp — no, a wooded lake with swampy shore where the woods came down to the lake — *Croft Lake? Croft Lake is in there somewhere. Is some creepy old pervert type hanging out at an old abandoned shack?*

Suddenly the thoughts felt more female than male, and old — very old.

*Pokul — (more guttural mutterings) — Pokul* again — Mike knew from reading Bram Stoker's *Dracula* that the word meant *devil* in Romanian, or a similar regional dialect. Then — *Sang — Sange?* That was Latin for blood, though it might also be Romanian. *Devil? And Blood?*

A woman's shrill cry pierced the night air, though audible only to Mike's preternatural hearing.

*Oh, God, No! Please, God — Rachel! RACHEL!*



That was from somewhere on Croft Road. Mike took off at a dash up Cornhill Road. Mike's *dash* was a burst of vampire speed that blurred him to and across #12 and onto Croft Road in barely a second.

His ultra-sensitive hearing caught a fumbling crash, then punching of fingers against — phone buttons? *The base-unit knocked off a table or counter, and hitting the floor?* Then the hysterical outburst of a woman to a 911 operator — *My Rachel! My baby — gone — her bedroom window wide-open — I always make sure it's closed, especially now that it's cold — Oh, God; someone took my baby! ... No, she couldn't have climbed out on her own! She's only seven! And tiny for seven. Good God! She's my baby —*

It deteriorated into incoherent sobbing, while the 911 operator assured her that an *RCMP* officer would be dispatched immediately.

Mike knew that, if an officer had to be dispatched from the Chester detachment, it could be fifteen minutes before they found the house. He could be there long before. Even if there was a car out on patrol, just five-minutes away, Mike could be on scene in a few more seconds, especially now that he was locked in on the location, and had overheard the stuttered address.

*Carrie is better with hysterical women than I*, he thought. *But Carrie is in Dartmouth with her grandchildren, Matty and little Amy.* It took just a few seconds to reach out to her thoughts and apprise her of his situation. *Be careful*, her voice admonished in his mind. *I'll be home tomorrow, seven o'clock at the latest.*

Mike slowed to human speed, walking toward a white two-storey house — a box with a gabled roof — going quietly around the back until he spotted an upstairs window, still-open, — an old-fashioned wooden sash window. The sound of sobbing reached him, then the sound of a vehicle pulling into a gravel drive — the engine sounding like a V-8 sedan — a police cruiser.

A car door opened and closed. One set of footsteps went up to the front door, paused, then he heard the tread

of heavy soles making their way toward him over winter-dead grass and the thin dusting of fresh snow.

Squatting beneath the open window, a little to one side, his keen eyes scanning the ground for evidence of passage, he already had his ID out, held aloft in his left hand. He didn't even look up as the rich contralto tones of a female voice accosted him.

"Hold it right there; don't make a move."

Mike could see the image of him in the RCMP constable's mind, suspicious of his dark Victorian-style overcoat, with its over-cape about the shoulders. That, with his broad-brimmed, heavy felt drover hat and *Durango* boots with affected imitation spur harness, made him look like an O.K. Corral desperado.

He looked up at her as he straightened to his full height — maybe an inch less than her five-foot-nine, but the heels of his *Durangos* made up the difference. He didn't bother to smile, but just waited while she donned a surgical mask and approached, while he did the same, a tad more awkward on his part, since holding his ID forced him to do it one-handed. It took a few seconds for her to read the details of his CSIS ID, Interpol credentials, and the more recent Royal Canadian Naval Intelligence ID.

There was a time when Interpol ID had labelled him a liaison, but Tony was high enough in the Interpol command chain to get him full Interpol status — something a prior director of CSIS had frowned upon, just as he'd snarled at Sean's *JTF2* buddies referring to him as *Commander Cameron*. But Coulombe had liked it. Then, unexpectedly, in one of his last acts before retiring, Director Coulombe had finagled Mike the rank of lieutenant-commander in the Naval Reserve, and had him assigned to Naval Intelligence for a handful of cases, all of which Mike resolved quickly.

He watched the constable's lips moving, repeating his name, as if trying to jog her memory, then she handed Mike back his ID, and gave a curt nod.

“Agent *Samurai* — or do I call you Commander Cameron? — Richards told me about you, some of it a bit far-fetched, I thought.” She scrutinized him, as if expecting some sort of comment. When he gave none, furrows wrinkled between her eyebrows, then smoothed again, a nervous sigh telling him she was reconsidering whatever Constable Kevin Richards had told her — no doubt about the time that Monahan had handcuffed him almost naked on the hood of a cruiser, hoping to watch him ignite and self-destruct in the bright sunlight. Mike’s psychic manipulations had altered those constables’ perceptions to include a gerry can of gasoline.

“The abductor entered and exited via that window,” Mike announced, pointing upward. “She headed off that way, toward the lake. There’s an old wreck of a shack in the woods somewhere close to the northeastern edge of Croft Lake.”

“She?” the constable asked.

Hands on hips, she was trying to look tough and competent, the ballistic vest making her look more burly than might be considered flattering. The regular features of her dark-skinned face hinted that she might look attractive in civilian attire.

“She’s barefoot and barely left a spoor.”

“*Barefoot? At this temperature?*” She made a disparaging *pouf* noise with her lips.

“Look, Constable Wilson, (He read the *D. Wilson* off her name plate), I could pull rank and have my supervisor call someone in Ottawa, who’d pass it down the chain, resulting in a text to you in the next ten minutes, but I don’t have time for delays — not if I’m going to find Rachel *alive* and return her to her mother, hopefully in the next fifteen to thirty minutes.”

He tried using glamour to influence her, and was surprised at her resistance. He sighed. *Great, another witch, just like Natasha Cherninova, with no idea of who she is or her potential.* Rather than push harder and give them each a headache and possibly panic the constable, he shrugged.

“I’d appreciate you waiting until I’ve spoken to the mother,” she said. “Perhaps knowing there’s a specialist from *CSIS* and Naval Intelligence on the case will give her enough hope — the relay from 911 implied possible hysteria on the mother’s part.”

Mike let energy glow in his glaring eyes, fixed her with a steely gaze, pushed past her pre-frontal-cortex sense of determination as much as he dared, and forced the command as he declared: “Tell her what you like. I intend to find Rachel *while she’s still breathing*.”

With that he took off to the south, across the backyard and into the woods, following a spoor detectible only to him. Behind him he heard a grunt of exasperation, then the sound of her going back to the front door to knock.

The woods were mostly pine, some fir, with scattered oak, maple, and birch — much like Mike and Carrie’s property, now barely a kilometer to the south. Mike had cut through parts of these woods after escaping Monahan’s attempt to incinerate him.

Tracking the spoor of the abductor — mostly a psychic trail, with residual sensations of the vampire’s energy — was difficult enough without dodging branches and boughs. The lower pine limbs were the worst: most were devoid of needles and twigs down to the hard and brittle core limb, many sharpened where the rest of the limb had broken away, no doubt from buildup of snow in prior winters, since wind couldn’t penetrate this far into the woods.

*This is an old vampire*, Mike realized, *old and crazy*. He got images of the archetypal hag popularized by the Brothers Grimm. Myrddin had counseled Mike on the dangers: how isolation over too many years — the monster within having no buffering connection to humanity — could lead to a complete psychotic break — something Tony and Jonathan had also mentioned.

*This one is completely delusional*, Mike mused. *She wants the child — to replace a child? — a grandchild? — lost centuries ago? No — to leach her powers? What*

*powers?* He had no idea what triggered the last notion. As he drew ever closer to the ramshackle shack, the thought-images came faster, more distinct. *She won't kill the child, but she might try to turn it, which is just as bad*, Mike decided. *No, she'll drain her of her energies, drain her blood, then eat certain ritual organs. Why does this remind me of ancient Druid rituals?* he thought.

He'd been expecting to exit the woods to find the shack along a swampy shore, but the shack was within the last verge of the trees before Croft Lake, obscured by red pines, their needles almost as long as Scotch pine. Indeed, it was the glut of fallen pine needles — pine quills some locals called them — that prevented all but the most stubborn of ferns from growing on the woods floor. It was the great black silhouette of a huge pine that surprised him. He had a similar tree in his yard — he and Carrie jokingly referred to it as the Keebler Elf Tree — it had a huge trunk and branched more like a deciduous tree than a conifer. The north side of the shack seemed almost buried into the south side of the tree.

A burst of speed took him to the east wall of the shack. There was no break in the wall, but the planking had spaces enough for him to see through the gaps into the interior, lit by one feeble candle. The door was in the west wall, the lake side.

Crude built-in bunks against the north wall obscured a weeping little girl, shadowed by the upper bunk. But even the shadows couldn't prevent Michael's preternatural infrared night vision from seeing how the little girl was secured against the wall by vines that seemed to literally grow out of the wall.

The ancient female vampire had torn open a can of soup with her claws, and was trying to heat it over the candle, stirring with a spoon as she did so. All the while she muttered to herself, reinforcing Mike's image of the fairytale *hag*. She was still muttering a second later when Mike blurred around to the door.

His sense of touch told him that the latch was crude and rusty, as were the hinges, though the sliding bolt was

more recent, and oiled. Yet even that had a *Dollar Store* cheapness about it. It would take only an energetic push from Mike to force the door, but he knew from experience that, in the heat of the moment, with a startled vampire in a confined space with her prey, a door flapping back and forth could be a major distraction.

He gathered and focused his energy, feeling the heat in his eyes that accompanied sorcerous glow, and saw the blue aura extending from his arms as he brought his chest against the door, and thrust his palms and forearms at the dilapidated portal.

It blew inward, crashing to the floor, all its hardware and planking shattered.

The child squirmed amid the vines, uttered a terrified scream, and pressed even harder against the wall.

The hag, startled, flung the soup can in Mike's direction, its contents splattering against what remained of the doorway, then wheeled and flew at Mike in a frenzied rage — all claws and fangs — huge catlike fangs.

Mike dodged, his hat falling off, and used his *chi* to hurl the hag out the doorway and into a tree.

She came back, surrounded by a feeble aura of *chi* and spiritual energy. She, too, was a witch or sorceress of some caliber, though the wave of energy she launched at him was didn't even reach Carrie's intermediate-novice power. Her eyes, lit by a fire of madness, were golden-amber, almost hawklike. Mike's mind flashed an image of Merlin's eyes.

Mike shook his head in disbelief. *It's bad enough I see her as a hag from a Grimm story, but a witch, too?*

As if that wasn't enough, to top it all off, the sound of blundering approach through the woods came to his ears, the grunting gasps he decided were the results of Constable Wilson's efforts to follow him. Then the semi-darkness was interrupted by the waving beam of a bright *LED* flashlight, like some absurd parody of a misplaced lighthouse.

*Good Lord!* Mike thought in exasperation. *She'll be trying to cover this deranged vampire with her Smith & Wesson, thinking a 9mm slug will solve everything if this hag turns on her!*

Mike met the hag's burst of energy — not much more than an expansion of air — with a burst of flame. Immediately, the hag erupted, screaming in agony and rage, and launched herself at Mike, as if to engulf him in the same flames that were consuming her.

Mike's aura protected him from flame — hers, as well as his own. Crane-wing blocks knocked her arms wide, and twin edge-of-palm thrusts hurled her backward against an ancient, dying, red pine. The surviving remnant of a broken limb was just high enough and long enough to pass completely through her chest from behind as her impact forced it to impale her.

The hag, her heart transfixed by the pine limb, went limp, her eyes glazed with fear and helplessness as she continued to burn. The paralyzing effect of the wood through her heart kept what would have been screams reduced to weak gasps, her mouth moving like a landed fish. Hearing Constable Wilson drawing ever closer, Mike focused his energies on the hag's failing heart, thinking *Tiene*, the Gaelic word for 'fire'. The conflagration raging about the hag intensified to double its heat as she began to combust from within.

Mike turned back to the door of the shack, picked up his hat, and, keeping it in his hands, smiled as he approached the little girl.

"It's okay, Rachel," he said in a soothing tone. "She can't harm you now. My name's Michael — my friends call me Mike. I'm a sort-of secret agent for the government. I sometimes help the police."

Grasping the vines, he ripped them asunder until Rachel was free. She launched herself forward, throwing her arms about his neck. Mike was prepared to comfort her, but not for her to crawl into his lap and cuddle against him. *Young children are like animals when it comes to instinctively judging who they can trust*, he

thought, and smiled, letting the child nestle in under his Victorian greatcoat.

“I’m cold,” she said in a small voice. “But I’m not as scared as I was. You’re a bit cold, too. You only have a T-shirt on. You should have worn a sweater.”

Mike could only smile at that. The little girl, Rachel, wore only a flannel nightgown that came past her knees, and had long sleeves. “Well, as soon as we get you back to your mommy, she can wrap you in a blanket, maybe even put you in a hot bath — that’s got to be my favourite way to warm up.”

Rachel smiled.

“We?” she asked. “Is Mommy with you?” She cast her eyes about, eager.

Mike noted with relief that, from her corner in the bunk, she’d had no line of sight out the door to see what had happened in Mike’s battle with the hag.

“Your mommy’s waiting at home,” Mike said. “I hear Constable Wilson coming through the woods — she’s the *RCMP* officer who came in response to you mother’s 911 call.”

“So how come you’re here?”

Mike looked at her pretty little face peaking out from under his coat.

“How old are you?” he asked, then remembered hearing her mother calling 911 — *She’s only seven, and tiny for seven.*

“I’m seven, but soon I’ll be eight,” Rachel announced with pride.

“And very precocious,” Mike suggested.

“What’s pre-goshe-us?” Rachel asked, making Mike’s smile broaden.

“*Precocious*,” he re-pronounced, “means that you’re very smart for your age.”

“Your eyes look almost black, now, with just a thin bit of bright blue around the black.” She looked up at him, her youthful face now devoid of any shadow of fear. “They were glowing bright blue, just like Elsa’s in *Frozen!* — before, when you broke the door — Why is



the black part so big? Mrs. Demont's cat's eyes look like that at night — she comes up to our steps looking for food. And the black part is tall like Mrs. Demont's cat's. I didn't know people could have eyes like that."

Mike just nodded, and said "My wife and I have two Siamese cats, and their eyes are the same colour as mine." He was hoping to distract her away from the awkward topic, and reinforced the glamour he usually exuded to hide his eyes. He was relieved when Constable D. Wilson appeared, huffing and gasping, in the doorway, her service pistol at the ready, waving both it and her blindingly bright light back and forth into the interior of the shack. Her glance kept returning to what was left of the partially incinerated hag.

"Rachel," Mike said to the little girl in his arms, "this is the Constable Wilson I was telling you about. She'll take you back to your mother."

"But I want you to come," Rachel insisted.

Doubled over and still fighting to catch her breath, the constable gasped: "*What did you —? That, out there — impaled on that tree —!*"

A quick scan of her thoughts told Mike that Constable Wilson was caught between feeling flustered and determined to not vocalize in front of a small child the more horrific aspects of the scene outside.

He composed himself, making sure his glamour masked how her light must have forced his pupils to stop-down to vertical slits.

"Your light is rather bright," — he sifted her thoughts and found what the *D* was for — "Dawnette. Could you aim it away from us, please?" He then added: "As to your many unfinished questions, I can't answer too many of them. Those of my *CSIS* files that my supervisor or the director are willing to show anyone are severely redacted. Let's just say that they like my results enough to leave out the details, and prefer not to know more than the minimal facts, especially when there's little or no collateral damage."

“Does that — that burning *thing* out there, against the tree — does that count as collateral damage?” she was clearly concerned by what she’d found outside.

“*Hardly collateral*,” Mike argued.

“Did you burn the wicked witch?” Rachel asked. “That’s what Hansel and Gretel had to do — They pushed her into her own oven.”

Mike nodded. “She was a bit crazy,” he said. “I doubt if she’d have allowed Constable Wilson to put handcuffs on her.”

“And she might have tried to bite the police lady with her fangs — she had awful fangs, just like a vampire! At first she didn’t, but they appeared when she hissed at me to keep quiet, then got even longer the minute you busted through the door.”

Mike just nodded. “She’s gone now, and you’re safe, so that’s all that matters. I think I’ll let Constable Wilson carry you home, while I finish cleaning up a few final details here.”

He stood, Rachel still in his arms and under his coat. Spotting a blanket on the bunk, he snatched it up — an old army-issue wool blanket, he decided — and wrapped it about her before passing her to Constable Wilson.

“*Owie!* It’s itchy!” Rachel declared, making a face.

Mike just smiled. “By the time you get home, you’ll have decided that itchy is better than freezing.”

Then to Wilson: “If you head back the way you came, it might be faster,” he suggested, “but the Chester Connection Trail — what’s left of the old railway line — is just south and east of here. It’s a longer distance to follow it to where it intersects Croft Road, but it’s a cleared path, like a one-lane road.”

The constable frowned. “I think I’ll brave the branches to get her home sooner,” she declared. Looking at the child in her arms, she said to Rachel: “Can you try to keep the blanket about your face? That’ll shield you from the tree boughs.”

Rachel made a face. “Okay; I’ll try — but it sure is itchy.”

Mike guided the pair out the door and around the southwest corner, making sure little Rachel saw nothing of the still-smoldering remains of the vampire hag. Indeed, the constable, child in her arms, had barely reached the trees beyond the southeast corner when the burning corpse fell into a heap of ash and bone fragments at the base of the pine.

As the sounds of Constable Wilson pushing through the woods receded, Mike gave the smoldering remains nudge with a booted foot, noting how there was almost no residual flesh, and even the bones were in pieces, crumbling to fragments.

*At least as old as Torok was, maybe even older*, Mike mused, *several centuries for certain*. He picked up the fangs from the crumbled maxilla bone and ash, pocketed them, then, tearing a low branch from a fir tree, swept the area clear of the mix of ash and bone particles, scattering it amid the litter of fallen needles, cones, and some dried oak and birch leaves. The adipocere smeared, making a gooey mess, though there'd been the bare minimum of body fat in the hag.

Among the many scents that had been evident about the shack were hints of vomit and carrion. Carrion near a vampire lair made sense, but vomit? He decided to scout the vicinity before leaving. It didn't take long — his amplified night-vision gave the surroundings the same lumen value as a cloudy afternoon.

About fifteen meters south-southeast of the shack, partly covered by leaf and needle debris, was a large area that had been ravaged by scavengers — a few crow feathers identified the principal culprits. As if to accentuate this, a crow cawed from a nearby tree branch. When Mike glanced in its direction, it nodded, blinked sleepily several times and almost seemed to wink at him. Above it in the upper branches were a whole murder of crows, all sleeping while this one apparently stood sentry duty.