



1

I LOOKED OVER MY shoulder, and fear hit me like a bolt of frozen lightning, because all I could see were teeth.

Hundreds and hundreds of shining white teeth, the smallest of them as long as my hand, the biggest as long as my whole arm, and all of them thin and needle sharp. The mouths holding those teeth were *much* too close.

Dusana and I were running at Dusana's top speed, and it didn't seem anywhere near fast enough. I made myself as small as I could on Dusana's back and tried to tell myself that I didn't actually feel the Drakken's hot, bitter breath on my neck.

Dusana could do more than run away from this horror chasing us; he could *bamph* both of us right out of there, leaving the Drakken frustrated and confused. But we didn't want the Drakken frustrated and confused, because the thing would just turn right back around to the agro-station and take out that frustration on

the station and the handful of people inside it. Their power was out because the Drakken had destroyed first the transformer linking the station to the main grid, then the backup solar panels and their wiring. Now the electrocution field that would have protected them was gone, and we were their last hope for getting out of the situation alive. Drakken can and *do* tear entire concrete or reinforced metal buildings apart. All they need is a little seam or crack to get their claws into, and they dig and claw until they pull the toughest wall down.

So we were playing bait. We were a bit of meat on a string, and we were pulling the Drakken toward a trap.

Dusana's run was a lot smoother than a horse, even as he jumped over obstacles in the agri-field we were running through. I looked back over my shoulder again. I'd never been this close to a Drakken before, not even when one had been ravening alongside the train I was in. I hadn't known they had three mouths: the mouth you *see*, then another mouth inside of that coming out on a stalk, then *another* mouth inside of that one coming out on another stalk, the whole thing darting at what it wants to catch like a frog tongue. A tongue that's about half as long as the Drakken. Except instead of being sticky like a frog tongue, the end, the middle, and the beginning are all razor-sharp teeth. No wonder they were top predators among the Othersiders. No wonder they were able to drag victims right out of any shelter they found.

The mouth-tongue darted straight at me just as I looked, and I couldn't help myself, I *meeped* with stark terror and made myself even smaller as the last mouth snapped a few feet behind Dusana's hindquarters. That's not a view anyone wants to see, ever. My

insides were so knotted up with panic that I felt sick, and I was shaking like I had a fever. But I was still thinking, still watching, still calculating, and still readying spells; that never goes away. I'm a Hunter: I can be throwing up with fear and still be ready to throw a dazzle spell or put up a Shield. I had both of those ready, just in case.

I *had* to be on Dusana's back, because while the Drakken *might* chase him, it would go over chasms and through buildings to get to *me*. Dusana was just another Othersider, probably something like the thing's normal prey, but Drakken on this side don't want normal prey—they want humans. Humans were the best things on the buffet to Drakken, and a magic wielder like me was a tightly packed, nutrient-dense bomb of manna.

We had to stay close, because if we got too far out ahead of it, the Drakken would start to lose interest and its attention would start to waver. I was only one tasty morsel. There were a dozen yummy bites back in the station. If we couldn't keep its focus on us, it'd remember that and go back for them.

Obviously, there was no way I was going to be able to take on a Drakken alone, not even with a pack of Hounds eleven strong. But I was heading right for some people who could do what I couldn't.

I spotted the markers they'd set out on the tops of two bushes at the same time Dusana did: two bandanas tied to branches. He somehow put on a burst of speed to get out of the smash zone, and I hung on for all I was worth, and just as we got past, right behind us I felt a blast of air shove us forward and heard a *huge*, concussive *thump*.

Dusana skidded to a halt and pivoted on his forelegs at the

same time so we could both see what was happening. The Drakken was frozen in midleap. I averted my eyes and opened up with the light-dazzling spells I'd had ready, hitting the Drakken right in the eyes with the brightest and most powerful ones in my arsenal.

I looked back up as soon as the light show was over. The Drakken, with the front part of it looking strangely thinner and oddly flatter, seemed to be hanging in midair, its forefeet dangling, the claws as long as I was tall just brushing the ground. To people who could see magic, like me, it looked like it'd been flattened in a giant tortilla press, two huge disks of magic slammed together. Then one of the disks evaporated, and it started to slide down on the stationary one, when another disk came out of nowhere and slammed into the first again. I hit it in the front of the head with a hammerblow myself, but what I did was just icing on a devastation cake. This happened three more times, and then the two Elite that were responsible for this phenomena decided the thing was good and dead, and the stationary disk evaporated too.

The Drakken dropped bonelessly down into the blueberry bushes. Bonelessly, because at this point whatever it had that passed for bones had been shattered, at least in the front half.

An avalanche of meat, tons and tons and tons of it, crashed down onto the ground in front of me and Dusana, crushing the bushes underneath it. A shock wave carrying dust and leaves smacked us. Dusana jumped back in reaction, even though we both knew we were too far away for the dead Drakken to hit us. The earth shook, and the sound . . . like the time I'd been way too close when lightning hit a tree near me. It struck Dusana and me with a physical blow that left us both trembling.

And Hammer and Steel came out of the rows of thick blueberry

bushes where they'd been lying in wait, and walked over to examine their target.

It oozed greenish liquids from all its orifices. That horrible three-sectioned mouth-tongue lolled on the ground, limp, in two loops of flesh, and the flattened head looked somehow worse than when it had been alive. All those teeth . . . they still looked terrifying. Something inside me was waiting for that tongue thing to suddenly leap to life and lash out at me. It was going to take a while to get my jumpy nerves calmed down.

I'd expected it to stink, but it didn't. It just smelled like hot valerian tea: a bit bitter but not intolerable.

My two partners snagged their bandanas, then leaned on each other, breathing hard. They were sweat drenched and exhausted, as you'd expect, from doing a feat of magic that impressive. Both of them had fumbled out energy squares and were chewing on them, and even the movements of their jaws looked tired.

Hammer and Steel were brothers. Both had perfectly sculpted faces, like amazing statues, and deep-mahogany skin, darker than what I was used to seeing on the Mountain, where people with ancestors from all over had been partnering up ever since the Diseray. At Anston's Well, Safehaven, and the Monastery, we're all sort of tan with brown-to-black hair, and only rarely do you see a blond or ginger. In fact, I was pretty sure that the influx of Mark Knight's people into the area was the biggest concentration of blonds in forever. Both brothers kept their hair at little more than a fuzz on their skulls. Most Hunters either keep their hair very short or get it all tied up and pinned down for Hunting because you don't want to give any Othersider something to grab for. Hammer was a bit shorter than Steel, and a bit broader in the

muscular sense. Both of them smiled a lot when they weren't in the middle of a Hunt. They were smiling very broadly now, as they certainly should, for a job well done. As tired as they were, the mere fact of such a tremendous accomplishment was giving them back energy. They were the first two Elite I had ever met, outside of Armorer Kent. That had been back when I first got out of my probation period. They'd come as fast as they could when the "Hunter down" call went out for my friend Karly, though I got there first because Dusana *bamphed* me there, and . . . well, they were just really, really kind and did what they could for me while I was falling apart. Now that I was an Elite and worked with them, I knew that was just how they were: kindhearted, solid, and steady.

Hammer was the implacable force, and Steel was the immovable object, and whatever got between them was going to end up very dead. They only had the one offensive trick, which was a manipulation of their Walls, but really, when you could use that to squash a Drakken, what else did you need?

Their colors were gold and brown, and they were the only Hunters in or out of the Elite who shared colors. Their outfits were exactly the same pattern and cut, but with the colors reversed from Hammer to Steel. Today, for instance, they both wore sleeveless tunics and trousers tucked into boots. Hammer had a brown tunic, gold pants, and brown boots. Steel had a gold tunic, brown pants, and gold boots.

My legs were still feeling too shaky to get down off Dusana, so I asked my Hound to walk up to where they were. Even on Dusana's back, I was just barely as tall as Steel. He looked up from his examination of the dead Drakken, saw us coming, straightened,

and grinned. “Well, that worked out just fine. Maybe we oughta make your call sign ‘Bait,’ Joy.” He pulled his brown bandana out of the pocket he’d stuffed it into, and wiped his head and neck down with it.

I shuddered. “This isn’t something I really want to get into the habit of doing.”

“May not have a choice, kiddo,” said his brother gently, mopping his own head with his gold bandana. “You’re the only one of us with a Hound you can ride.”

I swallowed hard, but I could see his point.

“You said when we were in the chopper that this was a *small* Drakken!” I countered. We’d come up with this idea on the fly, on the helichopper ride in to the site. It was a very, very effective strategy, and unless we did it within sight of one of the Folk, not one that the Drakken would ever learn to avoid.

“It was,” Steel replied, his mouth quirking as he tried not to laugh at me. “We’ve never seen anything smaller than that.”

I had no good reply for that, so I got down off Dusana and let him join my pack. The Hounds—my pack of eleven, and the six belonging to Steel and Hammer—all clustered around the dead Drakken. It looked as if all they were doing was breathing hard, but what they were really doing was inhaling manna, which is a sort of magical energy, a force that they live on, and what puts the power behind Hunters’ magic. Everything alive has manna, but humans, even non-magic ones, have more of it than anything that comes from Otherside. Mind, something the size of a Drakken has loads and loads and loads, as much as all the Hounds together could “eat.”

Hammer was on his Perscom. “Drakken down. Need disposal crew,” he was saying.

“*Disposal crew dispatched, Elite Team HSJ. ETA fifteen minutes,*” came over all three of the radios on our Perscoms. He probably hadn’t needed to call that in, since the little ubiquitous cameras that hung around every Hunter were hovering discreetly in the background, but it was better to be sure. Something like a Drakken carcass might attract more Othersiders if it didn’t get disposed of quickly.

“What are they going to do with that thing?” I asked, a little queasy and a lot curious. Hammer looked at Steel, and they both shrugged, as a breeze blew the oddly mingled scents of crushed blueberries, crushed greenery, and valerian tea over all of us.

“Never asked. Probably goes into the soup for the vat farms, or gets made into fertilizer,” said Hammer. “There’s a market for things like skin, claws, teeth, horns, and tusks, though. Rich people have books bound in Drakken skin or make boots and shoes out of it. They get decorators to make display pieces out of bones, teeth, claws, and all. Sometimes have artists carve stuff out of them or make composite works.”

“I was at a reception at Premier Rayne’s palace once,” Steel offered. “There was a chair made out of teeth and bones. People were sitting in it and taking selfies.”

I shuddered again, this time revulsion mixing with fear. Hammer nodded. “I know, right? Sure, we have the Barriers, but . . . if anything ever comes through the Barriers, I’m thinking you might as well paint targets on all those fancy apartments with dead Othersider knickknacks in them.”

Our Hounds began drifting back toward us, now gleaming and

prosperous-looking with all the manna they'd taken in. Hammer and Steel's were pretty typical for Hounds; they looked like over-size mastiffs with heavy coats; Hammer's were ebony and Steel's were chocolate. Mine were a disparate bunch. There were the two that I "inherited" from Karly that looked like wolves, except wolves made out of shadow. That was Hold and Strike. Then there were the two that abandoned their previous Hunter, Ace, when he betrayed *everything* about being a Hunter by trying to murder me during my last Elite Trial. That was Myrrdhin and Gwalchmai. Their heads looked a bit like a cross between a wolf and a big cat, almost exactly like some of the French gargoyles I've seen pictures of. They were an all-over silvery gray.

And then there was my original pack: Bya, Dusana, Begtse, Chenresig, Shinje, Kalachakra, and Hevajra. They were . . . not like any Hounds anyone here at Apex City had ever seen before. In fact, the only other person I know of who had Hounds like mine was my mentor back on the Mountain, Master Kedo Patli.

For one thing, they could choose what they wanted to look like. Right now they were in their "normal" forms, which is to say, like something out of a psychedelic vision. They ranged in size from pack-alpha Bya, whose head was just about at my rib cage, to Dusana, who was big enough to ride on, to Begtse, who was about as big as the shed you'd put Dusana in. They were covered in multiple patterns picked out in multiple eye-watering colors, and sprouted horns, tusks, teeth, spikes, and ridges in ways that made no sense or logic. But when we weren't Hunting, they were generally a pack of black greyhounds with fiery eyes.

Their ability to change form was one big difference between them and the other Hounds around here. For another, they'd

accepted other peoples' Hounds into their pack. Nobody had ever heard of that happening before. Normally when a Hunter dies or somehow makes his Hounds desert him, they just go back to Other-side. But these four hadn't, giving me the biggest pack anyone had ever heard of, a pack of eleven. I think that huge pack was why Hammer, Steel, and I had been sent out after a Drakken, instead of a bigger team. My Hounds had been the safeguard; while Dusana and I had been leading the Drakken away, they had been coursing silently alongside, just in case something went wrong. And they had been prepared to jump in and start harrying the Drakken in case Hammer and Steel hadn't been able to kill it right away.

The last difference between my Hounds and every other Hunter's was that they were doing things with me and for me that I'd never even read about Hounds doing before. Like Dusana *bam-pling* me along with him.

That would most likely give me an edge over whoever was trying to kill me. Besides Ace, that is. Because although the former Hunter Ace was currently in army custody (and locked up when he wasn't out under guard to use his magic against the Othersiders the army deals with), Ace had been working with someone else, someone who had never been caught.

Steel cocked his head to the side; listening hard, I could hear the heavy *whomp whomp whomp* of a couple of cargo helicopters. "That's the disposal crew," he said. "We might want to move back to the station and the landing pad."

Since I had no particular wish to watch and maybe get splattered with yuck, I nodded, and we all backtracked along the path between the blueberry bushes I'd taken leading the Drakken away. The guys started helping themselves to berries as we walked, which

was all the invitation *I* needed to do the same. Sure, we get whatever we want to eat at HQ, and Hunters get fed really, really well, but working magic makes you hungry.

Fruit off the bush is always the best, anyway. The berries weren't the same as wild blueberries; they didn't have the same intense, slightly tart flavor, but they were bigger and sweeter than the ones back home, and I liked them better than the so-called "blueberry jam" they served at HQ.

The guys were slowly recovering as we walked. The bushes were as tall as Steel's head, and the ground between the rows had some sort of dense, small-leaved ground cover growing over it, to discourage weeds. The stuff was hardy; it didn't really even seem bruised by us walking on it.

"Good Hunt," Steel said, around a mouthful of berries. He was the strategist of the two brothers, as I'd learned on the chopper ride into the drop zone. This was the first time I'd worked with them alone, rather than being in a full six- or eight-man Elite team.

His brother grunt-laughed. "Any Hunt you can walk away from is a good Hunt." He and Steel fist-bumped. The helicopters must have landed, because there were no more sounds from their blades, but there were other noises behind us now. A breeze carried the sound of chain saws revving up, so the cleanup crew was already at work. Otherwise the only thing you could hear out here was the sound of wind in the bushes and the songs of birds and beneficial insects. That was part of the job of the ag-station—growing bugs that ate other bugs and releasing them at the proper time, and maintaining food stations that attracted bug-eating birds. There's a lot of farming stuff we don't do that they did before the Diseray, and spraying poison all over everything is one of them.

When we got to the station, some of the techs were already outside, fixing the transformer and jury-rigging a link to the wind array, and the rest were looking at the deep scores in the concrete of the building. They kept glancing at us rather shyly, as if they wanted to thank us but were diffident about it. Steel solved that by walking up to them as casually, as if we had not just flattened a Drakken.

“Everyone all right?” he asked. They seemed to take that as the cue that it was okay for them to flock around us and ask for autographs. Crazy, right? But believe it or not, Steel and Hammer both reached into thigh pockets and pulled out little palm-size cards with their pictures on them. Right there, after just having killed a Drakken, they were signing their names, as if they weren’t ready to drop, as if they were in a club or a bar. I was hanging back, but Steel beckoned me forward and pulled out *another* set of cards from his other thigh-pocket. This lot had the whole Elite unit on it, including me. I didn’t remember posing for that, but I suppose that someone had pasted the picture together from our individual shots. So I signed those. And our Hounds milled around and accepted attention from anyone who’d give it to them. Mine reverted to greyhound shape as soon as they saw the crowd, maybe to keep from scaring anyone, although at this point you’d think all those people who’d watched my channel would know what they looked like.

So weird. So very, very surreal. Back home, Hunters were just not idolized like this. But then, back home, we weren’t entertainers. And I swear, even these people, who *should have known better* because they’d nearly become lunch for a Drakken, reverted to being fans as soon as they saw us.

But playing along was part of the job, as I kept being reminded at every turn. “Fan service” it was called, and it was another way to make the Cits believe they were safe, no matter what. So I signed cards and imitated Hammer and Steel. Eventually the supervisor realized they should actually be working, and chased everyone inside except the techs fixing the transformer, and we went over to the landing pad to wait for the helicopter that would pick us up. Hammer and Steel were still keeping up the façade of being indestructible, but I could tell they were fading.

“How long have you been Elite?” I asked, to keep their minds off how tired they were and not trying at all to keep the admiration out of my voice. I hadn’t had much chance to talk with them since I joined the Elite ranks. Actually, I hadn’t had much chance to talk with anyone. We worked really hard: when we weren’t drilling under Armorer Kent’s eye, we were either deployed against something big or running patrols in some places in and around Apex that I hadn’t even known existed.

“Maybe not as long as you’re thinking,” Hammer mused, with a raised eyebrow. “Just four years.”

“We became Hunters a lot later than you, kiddo,” said Steel. “Powers popped at eighteen, full Hunter at eighteen and a half, got sick of the posturing and went for Elite together at twenty-one, and we’re twenty-five now.” He glanced at his brother as if to suggest he should say something.

“We decided that we had to apply together. My trick doesn’t work without my brother,” Hammer said modestly. “We did the Trials separately, though. I guess we kind of cheated on the last one.”

Steel threw back his head and laughed. “It’s not cheating if it

works!” he retorted. “Our Walls are so strong, we actually never needed to go on the offensive. It was pretty funny, to tell you the truth. I got Kent; he tapped out and surrendered when he just ran out of energy after beating against my Wall to the point that he couldn’t even produce a light-flash.”

“I got Archer. I kind of hated to flatten him the way I did—he’s such a nice guy, but . . .” Hammer shrugged. “Playing nice doesn’t win the Trials. I just shoved, shoved his own Shield right up against him and squashed him against the big containment Shield. He was at the point of getting the air pushed out of his lungs when he tapped out.”

They both laughed. “Joy, you’ve got to look that up. The look on Archer’s face!” Steel chortled. I’d never heard a laugh I could have described as a *chortle* before. It surprised me into laughing too.

“I will,” I promised. And that was when the helicopter for our ride back came cruising in just above the berry bushes.

We opened the Way for our Hounds, who went back Other-side, looking sleek and contented. Then we loaded in, with me going last; there was a limited amount of room in the chopper, and the two big guys had to arrange themselves first because I could just squeeze in anywhere. They strapped in, leaned back in their seats, fastened chin straps to keep their heads from lolling about, and closed their eyes as the tough fight caught up with them. They were asleep within a minute; the chopper had just turned around and was starting back for home as they dozed off. They looked weirdly younger when asleep.

It had been a grueling fight for them, no matter how easy it had looked. Doing things with magic isn’t effortless—far from

it. It takes energy to move magical energy, and that energy has to come from inside the Hunter. Those two had been working like champion weight lifters the entire time they'd been bashing that Drakken. I was amazed they had managed to stay on their feet and look perfectly normal for the station crew.

But that was part of the mythos we were trying to project, I guess. We can never do anything that might make the Cits lose confidence in us or think they were anything less than completely safe.

But although I'd done some to help, I was still at about 90 percent charge. I keyed my Perscom and called up HQ.

"Hunter Joy," I said when I got the handshake.

"Go, Hunter Joy."

"Put me back in rotation. I hardly did anything this run," I said. Because I hadn't, and if we got another callout, it could be that one more Hunter would make the difference between handling it ourselves, and having to call in the army. One thing I'd learned, the Elite hate having to call in the army. Calling in an artillery barrage or some of the attack choppers is one thing, but having to call in troops or army Mages or army Hunters makes everyone feel like they fell down on the job somehow. Right now, I was pretty sure most of us didn't want to get within a mile of an army group that had a Mage with it, because that Mage might be Ace. The army took him, and the army tends to want to use what it takes. So Ace was probably out there somewhere—supervised, sure, but *not* in a prison cell as long as he was "working."

It would be even worse if we had to call in Psimons from PsiCorps, the people with Powers that worked on the mind like

telepathy, psychokinesis, mind-control, and that sort of thing. But they never worked outside the Barriers unless they were working with the army. Hunters don't much like Psimons, but then, no one really does. How can you *like* someone who can rummage around inside your head anytime he pleases? Psimons, though, they have this cold arrogance every time they look at Hunters, like they're thinking, *I can do more than you can, and I don't need Hounds to do it.*

"Roger, Hunter Joy. Noted back in rotation." That was another change from being a plain old Hunter and being Elite. HQ assumed you knew your own strength, and if you figured you were good to go back on call, they didn't argue with you. Only the medics could override that, and the medics would know from my vitals that I was just fine.

So I watched the fields roll by about six feet below the skids of the chopper and change from blueberries to tomatoes, to corn, to things I didn't recognize. I thought about Hammer and Steel and their call signs; there was something about that combination of *Hammer* and *Steel* that was hitting a note of familiarity, but not strongly enough that I was getting the connection.

Oh, well. I'll just tuck it in my subconscious, and it'll wake me up in the middle of the night, probably.

We raced toward the huge, conical silver towers that created the Barrier; if I craned my neck, I could see them through the pilot's windshield. The helicopters, like the trains, have a field around them that cancels out some of the Barrier effects, but I braced myself anyway. Hitting the Barrier feels for a human a lot like breaking the surface of water, except you feel it all through you

instead of just at your skin. Of course, most Othersiders would be disintegrated if they tried to pass it.

But now that I knew what I did . . . I had to wonder just how many Othersiders had managed to learn how to pass Barriers somehow. Because an awful lot of them were getting on the city side these days. More than Apex admitted, except to the Hunters, from whom it could not be hidden.

As if in answer to my thoughts, my Perscom beeped. "*Hunter Joy, do you copy?*"

"I copy, HQ," I said instantly.

"You're to bounce when you hit the landing pad. Your old friend White Knight's turned up another Gazer nest. You and Archer are to rendezvous with him."

"Copy that, HQ," I replied. "Out."

I was already so focused on the Gazer nest that the jolts when we passed through the Secondary and Prime Barriers barely registered. I had one hand on my harness release as we came in hot to the landing pad, and the skids weren't even on the ground when I was out and sprinting for the second chopper, where I could see Archer beckoning to me from the door. Then we were in the air, and he and I were neck-deep in strategy as the chopper sped off.