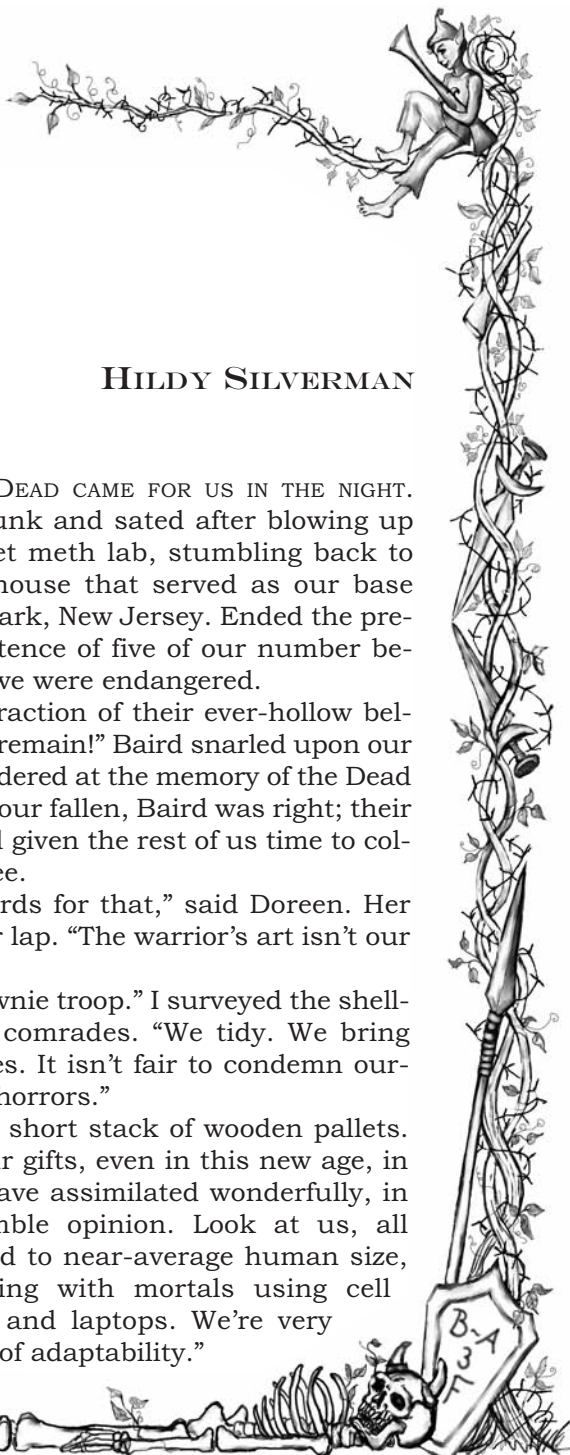


UDDEREK



HILDY SILVERMAN

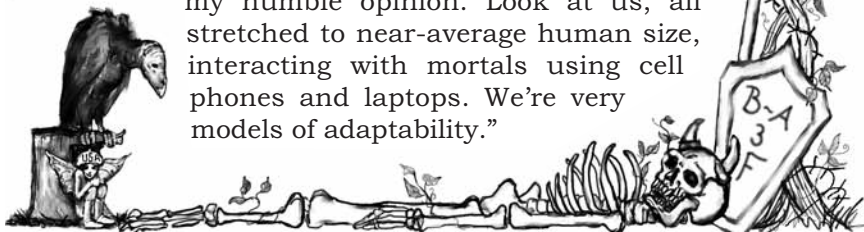
THE RESTLESS DEAD CAME FOR US IN THE NIGHT. Found us drunk and sated after blowing up the 17th Street meth lab, stumbling back to the abandoned warehouse that served as our base while deployed in Newark, New Jersey. Ended the previously immortal existence of five of our number before we even realized we were endangered.

“Save for the distraction of their ever-hollow bellies, none of us would remain!” Baird snarled upon our return. Though I shuddered at the memory of the Dead devouring the flesh of our fallen, Baird was right; their unnatural hunger had given the rest of us time to collect our senses and flee.

“We are not cowards for that,” said Doreen. Her hands trembled in her lap. “The warrior’s art isn’t our calling.”

“We are but a brownie troop.” I surveyed the shell-shocked faces of my comrades. “We tidy. We bring order to chaotic homes. It isn’t fair to condemn ourselves for last night’s horrors.”

I hopped up on a short stack of wooden pallets. “Sure and we have our gifts, even in this new age, in this new world. We have assimilated wonderfully, in my humble opinion. Look at us, all stretched to near-average human size, interacting with mortals using cell phones and laptops. We’re very models of adaptability.”



“Which does what for us exactly, Brynne?” Cylla demanded with a toss of her thick ponytail. “Now that we’ve diversified into scouring entire towns undone by the filth of poverty and corruption, we’ve become targets of the Morrigan.”

My troop automatically sketched symbols of protection in the air. I scowled. “We cannot be certain—”

Baird cut me off. “And who else has the power to sic the *Sluagh* against us, sister? We all know Gregory is well-connected, in the old ways as well as the new.”

I couldn’t argue the point. When it came to the city of Newark, the rot descended from the head, namely the ‘honorable’ Mayor Gregory who profited secretly and well from the drug trade and related gangland activities. Ever since the lovely Sisters of the True Faith, nuns dedicated to the care of the drug-sickened and lost, contracted with us out of desperation (and despite their vows to a newer God), we’d been on the mayor’s radar. If he got his wish and drove us out of town, even the meager dent in the drug trade the good Sisters’ assistance programs offered would disappear.

I pressed my hand against my belly, which churned from a combination of fear, guilt, and fury. “I cannot help but feel responsible for Gregory taking this conflict to the next level.”

In our dealings with drug pushers, gang bangers, and such-like, we oft employ bits of violent trickery. A mere week ago, I enchanted the golden chains looped about the neck of the mayor’s highest profit-generating employee, Fat Eddie. Made them sear their way deeper into his flesh every time he approached one of the local grade schoolyards with his acid-tainted stickers.

By the time an ambulance carted him off, his screams could be heard from Penn Station to the Performing Arts Center. Their echoes must have reached Gregory in his Kearney Street office, who then contracted with the Phantom Queen herself, the Morrigan, to clean out his town’s cleaners. She was already displeased by our modern activities. In successfully rehabilitating several degenerate cities around the globe, we’d removed many a playground for Unseelie activities.

Doreen looked upon me kindly. “Don’t shoulder all the blame, sister,” she said. “We’re a troop. The actions of one are the actions of all.”

Baird nodded, his brow furrowed. “Tis no matter who did what to bring on this extreme response. What matters is figuring out what we can do to save ourselves, yet fulfill our contract.”