

to act as a decoy—

"I don't much like that idea."

" and lead him away from me. If I can, I'll throw my portion at him, and then when he turns on me, you throw yours. If my calculations are correct, this should counter-act his adrenaline and body chemistry... and turn him into his former self."

"And if your hypothesis is wrong?" asked Ian.

"I don't know. I'm making this up as I go along."

As the screaming increased, Devon dashed into one of the two side alcoves to either side of the main doorway.

"What do I do now?" asked Ian.

"Don't move. You look very appetizing right now. He'll like that."

Ian cocked his eyebrow, and knelt behind a table.

A familiar shadow emerged from the staircase. Ian did not need to make out the dark features of the creature. He only needed to see the hairy outline of it, the bulging red eyes, and the gleaming fangs.

Ian crooked his head up higher. In his mind, the beast was looking right at him. It seemed to smile at him in a playful way.

He wondered what was taking Devon so long to throw his formula. Then he noticed the creature stood directly in front of Devon's hiding spot, but totally oblivious to the human presence. Devon had no free room to pitch.

With a full chest of air, the beast charged, claws outstretched. The dim light caught one of the bloody talons, and reflected off it. Ian saw what was charging, but his feet refused to move.

Within ten feet, the thing reared again, trying to pull some unknown object from its back. It pivoted around, and Ian saw broken shards of glass on the floor, and a bright liquid clinging to its fur.

Ian felt the flow of blood back in his legs again, and charged his attacker. His arm arched backwards, then forwards, and the flask caught the furry shape at the base of the neck.

Again it howled in pain. It reached out

at Ian, who dove out of the way. Its claws managed to grab onto his shirt, but the light material ripped effortlessly through its fingers. The beast buckled, and writhed on the floor, convulsing. After a moment, it gave up, and remained still, its right arm partially upheld.

Devon let a breath out, and leaned against the stone wall. Ian checked the tear in his clothing.

"I don't see Markwell anywhere," Ian said.

"No. But it's finished. Dead. I think I added too much chlorine."

Ian wandered closer to the thing, a grey rod in his hand. He aimed it at the shape.

"I don't think you should go near it, Ian."

"Not to worry. I've got my suppressor. And you're right. It's dead. Pity in a way. It would have made an exceptional study case."

He leaned closer to the red slits!

"Yes, too bad."

The arm struck out, clasp Ian's neck. The rod fell from his hand and he flailed about helplessly from the rising creature. It lifted its left hand, and prepared to slash the victim.

Devon hurled himself into the back of the thing. He bounced back onto the hard floor.

He looked up, and the shape wagged a finger at him.

Ian vainly tried to loosen its grip on him, but only succeeded in tightening it. He was beginning to turn a light shade of blue.

"Devon... I could use some help here..." he gasped.

Devon looked around. His only known weapon proved useless. Flames from the pit erupted, and the new light hit a metal frame from one of the lab desks. He recognized it, and leapt at it, nearly jumping over the table in the process. He drew the

sword back, and flung it at the tall muscular torso.

Ian felt breath flowing into his lungs again, and the ground on his backside. He clawed his way from the howling figure, and jumped at his small silver rod. Scooping it up in his hand, he turned to see the frenzied form digging at its rear. Ian aimed with one hand, and adjusted the force setting with another. He pushed down the trigger, and... nothing happened.

With a final jerk, the sword reappeared in the monster's hand. It flung the cutlass away to arch into the flames.

Ian felt the heat from the beast's eyes on him, and he increased his efforts to fix his weapon as the creature bore down on him.

"Neutron flow... Setting base one Connecting circuit three BLOODY HELL!" He slammed the rod onto the stone work. White light erupted from it, sending Ian back several feet. He grabbed it with both hands, and pointed it at the approaching death.

It was caught off guard. Although weakened, the force merely kept it at bay. It did not move back.

Ian increased the voltage, but nothing further happened. Quickly, he turned it off, then on, and off and on again. The machine gun effect began to take effect, and the tall, stocky build lost ground. It was driven farther back until its footing was just before the rim of the firewell.

The light faded from the rod.

"You're still on warranty !" Ian screamed, pounding the small wand on the ground.

Devon darted his eyes from Ian to the creature. It was beginning to recover from the onslaught, and if allowed to heal from the battle, there would be nothing left to fight it with. He looked down at the almost bare table, and picked up the only full container. The contents did not matter, anything was better than nothing.

The bottle smashed into hundreds of pieces as it collided between the things eyes.

Smoke and flames erupted from the wounds, and the beast took a step back into the pit. Its arms flailed in vain to reach out to something, but grasped air.

Devon heard it cry once more after it disappeared. He stayed still for a minute longer, waiting for it to surface from the fire. He felt a tap on his shoulder and looked at Ian. Remorse, not relief, was etched on his face.

"Your problem is you have too much morality. That's all fine and dandy but sometimes it can be a pain. Markwell brought this on himself. Right then, come on. Can't wait all day. It's just past midnight, and you never know, there just might be vampires out there."

Ian turned Devon away from the pit, and walked with him out the large door.

At the edge of the pit, charred black talons grabbed onto the floor, and began to pull themselves out.

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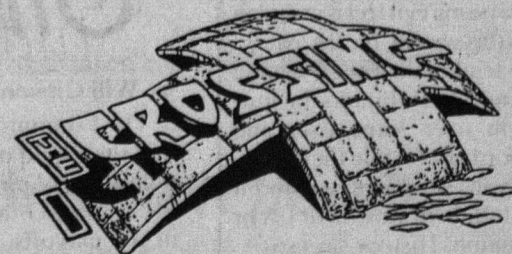
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