

Reviews for Hell on \$5 A Day:

"A galloping, worlds-spanning adventure that Dante himself might have enjoyed... The story is a two-fisted odyssey full of bone-crushing blows and skull-spitting hammerlocks. Bulmash lavishly choreographs each explosive obstacle in painstaking detail and unabashed gusto... readers should be forewarned that the author also has a penchant for the grisly and isn't afraid of going for the throat and tearing out a larynx or two."

- Kirkus Reviews

"The locales of hell, purgatory and heaven are brought to life (afterlife?) with detailed and evocative descriptions, with the Divine Comedy providing helpful signposts along the way. After this debut, I'm looking forward to the next books in this series."

- Steven R. Nelson (Amazon Customer)

"I've read 97 books in the last year (don't judge...it's how I stay somewhat sane in this crazy world). This just made the top three."

- Matt (Amazon Customer)

"I was a little worried going in when it came to a novel with vampires, but I was happy to see the author skip through the trite cliches and move on to a very original work that was highly entertaining."

- PJ Hagerty (Amazon Customer)

"Highly recommended. This isn't your typical vampire story. A must for anyone who enjoys vampire novels."

- Jane (Amazon Customer)

Books in The New Heroes of Old™ Series:

(future titles are in italics and subject to change – dates are estimated)

The Alain Beaudreux Arc

- Hell on \$5 A Day
- *Sodom All Over Again* (2026)
- *New York, by Midnight* (2027)

The Danny Levine Arc

- *The Bow of Gilgamesh* (2028)
- *Flutes, Fairies, And FOMO* (2029)
- *A Wild Shiksa Appears* (2030)

The Kevin Twice Arc

- *If The Tower Will Not Come to Kevin* (2031)
- *It's 166 Miles to Chicago* (2032)
- *Those Whom the Gods Would Destroy* (2033)

The Kurt Gray Arc

- *Multiversal Health Care* (2034)
- *The Luckiest Guy Ever* (2035)
- *The Daughter of Fate* (2036)

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HELL ON \$5 A DAY

BY GREG BULMASH

BOOK ONE OF *THE NEW HEROES OF OLD™*



Disclaimers

THIS IS A REVISED EDITION

What does that mean? It means that some phrases that didn't read right for the audiobook got smoothed out, a few words got changed for accuracy, chapter titles were added, and some errors were corrected. There are no plot changes or retconning.

PERSONS LIVING OR DEAD

Please remember that this is a work of fantasy and fiction. Any appearance by persons living or dead is simply an accident or for pop-culture reference. They're imaginings, figments of the author's imagination. Do not believe anything they say or do (or is said about them) in this story.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Characters in this book fight, swear, smoke tobacco, and drink alcohol. There are also vivid depictions of murder, body horror, sex, rape, and torture. With vampires and humans traveling through Hell, there's going to be some weird stuff, especially in the gift shop. While *Kirkus Reviews* liked the book, the term "horrifically ghastly" was used to describe a violent scene.

THIS BOOK MAY UPSET YOU

Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory are locations in this book. Demons, angels, vampires, and even God show up as characters. And they might not be portrayed in ways that match your beliefs.

It wasn't written to challenge your beliefs or lead believers astray. It's *fiction*, make believe, a modern fairy tale. If you fear you might be offended, you're probably right and should put this down now.

Chapter 1: The Blood of a Virtuous Man

Undisclosed Location, Spring of 1942

Every guy in the room was giving their best-practiced cold stare. That was the extent of the hard body language because they were all in hospital gowns that tied in the back. Tough-pose options are limited when you're trying to keep a thin layer of cotton between your bare ass and a steel chair. Even more so when not putting your balls on display matters. But the cold stares were on display, maybe even intensified as compensation.

They were all tall, except Sampson. Alain found that ironic. Sampson was the fidget in the bunch, a street hustler. He'd been running a Three Card Monty game ever since he was tall enough to peer over the box. He was also the only black guy in the group.

Vinnie was Bronx-born. You could hear it in his voice. He sounded like every two-bit street hood Alain had seen in a gangster movie. He was smart too, but you'd never know it unless you caught him at it. Despite posing as a wisecracking tough guy, he was a few IQ points below genius level, based on the chart Alain had "accidentally" seen. Still, that only ranked him third in the group of five.

Coming in a distant fifth was Granger. Granger was a Georgia farm boy. He gave Sampson and Vinnie the hairy eyeball pretty regularly; didn't like being grouped in with non-whites. Alain didn't know all the facts, but from what he'd heard, three cars of local cops had arrived at a barn dance after a disturbance call. They found 20 men lying on the floor and Granger the only one standing, holding a half-full jug of moonshine. He put a couple of cops down too, and he didn't spill a drop until one of them tapped him on the back of the head with a billy club.

The last of the group was Reese, number one on the IQ chart. Alain had no idea where he was from or what his story was. He was the quietest of the bunch and the tallest; not skinny, but wiry. When he spoke, it was slow and measured, not any kind of laconic drawl, but more a kind of precision to make sure you heard every word because he wasn't going to repeat any.

They were all in the Army for one reason. It was wartime and each had come before a judge who gave them a choice between the Army or jail: fight Hitler and Hirohito for freedom and democracy or fight your bunkmate for the last roll of toilet paper. You decide.

Alain got it when he tried to stop a couple of thugs from hassling a black kid. The kid, maybe 12, was coming out of one of the few stores in Alain's Louisiana town that allowed blacks inside. Even if the shopkeeper didn't mind the boy coming in, the two thugs did. He didn't hold any particular love for black folk, didn't hate them either. Most of the time he didn't give them much thought. But two full-grown men picking a fight with a child was just wrong.

By the time the cops were cuffing Alain, the child was gone and the two thugs were both unconscious. No one else saw or was willing to testify to what happened. As for the kid, Alain didn't blame him for not wanting to go to the cops and tell the story. He and his family probably would have been hurt pretty bad if they stood up for Alain.

The prosecutor portrayed him as a loner, a quiet, big-boned, bookworm weirdo, who had inexplicably attacked two upstanding citizens without provocation. It took the jury all of 30 minutes to come back with a conviction.

So, there he was, sitting in a surgical gown in an Army medical facility, four hardcases for company, going through a weeklong battery of physical exams and bunking down in an empty infirmary ward.

They'd been told they would find out today why they'd been yanked from their units and brought here to be poked and prodded. But everyone was too tough, too hard to gossip and speculate. They all sat silently, trying their best to look mean in their gowns.

"Gentlemen," a voice said through a speaker in the ceiling, "please proceed through the door to your left."

Being closest to the door, Alain led the group into a darkened room. The room seemed to have no windows and only the one door was visible. When it shut behind them, they were left in pitch black. None of them had been through any physical exertion recently, but Alain could hear a ragged breathing, almost a panting.

The light clicked on. The source of the breathing was a bedraggled man, his skin gray, his hair greasy and clumped, his features gaunt. He had been placed in a cage and he sat cross-legged, his back hunched and his head tilted up just enough to give them a hooded, baleful glare. He had perfected the look all of them had been trying to achieve just moments ago.

His clothing looked like it had been borrowed a long time ago from a movie studio, something off of Ronald Colman in *A Tale of Two Cities*, or better yet, Leslie Howard in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Velvet coat, lace cuffs, pants that ended at the calf... It might have been fine once, but now it was frayed and threadbare, as if the man had put it on in the 19th century and hadn't taken it off since.

The voice came from the speaker in the ceiling. "Gentlemen, this is a vampire."

The group snickered, muttering jokes and comments of disbelief under their breaths, even Alain. Vampires were Bela Lugosi. *I want to suck your blood*, he thought.

"He's real," the voice chided.

"So why are you showing him to us?" Vinnie shouted at the speaker.

"We're not," said the voice. "We're showing you to him."

"Huh?"

The lights went out and the sound of metal scraping against metal could be heard, as if the cage were opening. Sampson screamed.

The others started shouting. Alain remained quiet and moved slowly backwards, one hand groping behind him, one out in front of him to ward off any incoming bodies. When he finally reached a wall, he began sliding along it, trying to find the door. He found the door frame, but the inside of the door was smooth, knobless, and the space between it and the frame... maybe if he had a crowbar.

He moved a few feet away from the door, backing himself into a corner. It wasn't the best position, but it was the one that left the smallest part of him exposed and limited any vectors of attack. The shouting and screaming went on all around him. Granger was begging to be let out, Vinnie was shouting challenging obscenities, Reese was shouting for everyone to "shut the Hell up," and Sampson's screaming stopped. Granger's screaming began.

Vinnie's voice became more desperate; the challenging obscenities gave way to rapid repetitions of "holy Christ!" Granger kept screaming and Reese stopped calling for quiet. Vinnie, like Alain, seemed to have picked a single spot, and Alain didn't know where Reese was until Granger's screaming stopped. Alain heard the thud of two bodies

colliding and assumed Reese had tackled the vampire. This was quickly backed up by Reese's voice shouting "you goddamn cocksucker!"

Vinnie got back some of his bravado, cheering Reese on. "Get that goddamn vamp, Reese!" There was the sound of feet moving, but it seemed like just one pair, as if Reese was up and dancing around the vampire. Alain could hear the sound of flesh hitting flesh. Alain didn't much like Reese, but he had to give him credit for trying to box a vampire in the dark.

The vampire muttered "I tire of this" and it went quiet except for some feral-sounding grunting and slurping. Vinnie was now mumbling in a whimpering voice, "Hail Mary, full of grace..."

The grunting stopped. Vinnie continued praying and Alain listened with all his might to hear a footstep, a rustle of dilapidated velvet. Then Vinnie's whimpers gave way to a short-lived scream which cut off with a gurgle in his throat. There was more grunting and slurping for a couple of minutes, then it stopped.

Alain pressed back harder against the wall. There was no point in praying. If God was interested in helping him, God wouldn't have put him in this room in the first place. Even after minutes in the darkness, Alain's eyes hadn't adjusted. It was just too black. All he could do was listen. He slowly stretched one arm out in front of him, moving it side to side like a blind man's cane, his other arm pulled back and cocked to let a fist fly if the searching arm made contact with anything.

The searching arm was grabbed from the side, yanked to pull him away from the wall, then twisted up behind his back in a submission hold. Alain could feel the vampire's breath on his neck. "Do you know the best part about being a vampire?" a voice whispered in his ear.

Alain didn't reply. "Not a fucking thing," the vampire said. "The other four were pathetic. But you smell of... character. It's been a long time since I tasted the blood of a virtuous man." The vampire trailed off

in reverie, but his voice was quickly back in Alain's ear. "I am sorry for what will happen to you. I truly am."

The teeth sank into Alain's neck, a scream escaped his throat, and consciousness fled.

Chapter 2: Soul Surgery

Regaining consciousness in hard-fought steps, Alain came to realize that he could not move. He didn't open his eyes. He just lay there and breathed. The smell of the air was acrid, like he was downwind from a couple of factories with all smokestacks at full.

Wiggling his fingers, tensing his muscles, he found he wasn't paralyzed. He was restrained, strapped to whatever bed he was in. He opened his eyes by degrees, letting them adjust to the light without necessarily letting anyone who might be in the room know he was awake yet. He listened for the sound of someone else breathing, but there was nothing.

He was in a hospital room, but different than the infirmary rooms he and the hardcases had been in before... before... His head pounded as he tried to recall what had happened. He let go of that and inspected the room as best he could, considering his limitations.

At first glance, the windowless walls seemed to be cream colored, but the unevenness of it made Alain think it might be whitewash that had yellowed in more places than not. Above his bed hung a single bulb without a shade. Its meager glow gave the impression it was waging a valiant struggle to hold on.

There wasn't much else in the room and Alain wasn't sure what there should be. Aside from the infirmary accommodations over the last week, he'd never been in a hospital room and wasn't a big fan of the types of movies that gave you good looks at them. Best he could tell, the room's contents consisted of him, the bed, the light bulb, a sink, and those infernal straps.

What had happened after the lights went out? There was the metallic sound and the... was it a vampire? It ate the others. It apologized. And then...

To his right he heard the door open and the clunks of plodding footsteps approach. A woman's face hovered over his, a suppurating wound where her left eye should have been, a layer of dried pus around the empty socket. The smell was revolting and when a fly landed on the crust to take a walking tour around the socket, Alain nearly vomited. "Shettle down," she barked, her speech slurred, coming from a mouth that was missing half of its teeth and part of a lip. As her hand moved up, he saw a large syringe, the needle rusted and dull. "Jusht shtay shtill," she said, bringing it down toward his throat.

Alain tried to thrash, pinch his leg, avoid the approaching needle while he woke himself from this nightmare. The slow approach of the needle turned into a quick jab, darting down out of his field of vision. It caught him in the neck, just under his jaw, and he could feel the needle sink into his flesh, expelling its contents. He thrashed his head, jerking the needle out of the nurse's hand, and it waved from the point where it lodged in his neck, thrown side to side as he tried to fling it away.

A coldness moved out from his neck, a deep chill hitting each muscle in its path, taking control away from Alain. He raised his hips, throwing the weight of his body against the restraints, his shoulders and head shaking limply, already caught in the grip of the paralysis. The cold worked its way into his stomach and down his legs, each muscle losing its tension and going flaccid as it chilled. Alain couldn't work his jaw to

shout for help and eventually his toes gave up the fight, the coldness suffusing his entire body.

The nurse pulled the syringe from his neck, rolling his head to the side, his eyes staring at her midsection. At least from that viewpoint, she looked like a normal nurse - if you could ignore the blood spatters on her apron. "Don't worry," she said, "we'll be done with you soon and then we'll send you home."

Done with me?! Send me home now, his mind screamed as a dire sense of claustrophobia settled in. He was trapped in his body, unable to fight, unable to resist. All he could do was lay there and shout silently for release as the nurse walked to the door, opened it, and made a gesture to someone standing outside. She was followed in by two orderlies, pushing a gurney. The orderlies looked normal. There were no open wounds, major sores or rashes, but it was no comfort to Alain.

The fact that they released his restraints was of no comfort to him either. They did it because they didn't need them. He was helpless. No, he protested as they lifted him, limp as a boiled carrot and seeming to weigh as much as one, dumped him on the gurney, and wheeled him into the hallway. Let me go! Let me go! Let me go! He paused for a mental breath and pleaded as loud as he could think. Please!

The gurney was jarred momentarily as he passed through a set of swinging doors. And then it came to a halt. Two pairs of hands grabbed him again, hoisting him from the gurney onto another table, and a bright light was pulled into place over him. "Patient's name," he heard a male voice ask.

"Beaudreaux," the nurse replied. Alain could feel his soul shivering, as if the cold from the shot had not only worked its way through his muscles, but through every part of him. He had never wanted anything worse in his life than to be out of there, to be somewhere safe.

"Yes," the male voice said. "Vampire. Five in a day. Well, let's get cracking. I have to get back to torturing the wife." Two other voices laughed in response.

Alain concentrated all his effort on moving. He had to get up, get out of there. And as he felt the cold metallic touch of a knife against the skin of his upper abdomen, his panic kicked into overdrive. He could almost feel his brain hurt as he desperately tried to get some message from it to his muscles.

The knife bit into his flesh. Starting just at the very bottom of his rib cage, the knife dug deep and Alain felt it all, the intense pain leaving no doubt in his mind that this was absolutely real and there would be no waking up from it. Though he showed no outward sign, he redoubled the struggling within his mind, frantic to stop this.

Sawing through muscle, skin, and whatever else got in its way, the knife cut slowly downward. Alain couldn't scream, couldn't even grit his teeth as he looked up into the light. But through the haze of pain and fear, something screamed for his attention. What the doctor was sawing through had to contain some veins, some arteries. But, oddly enough, though Alain felt the pain, he didn't feel the blood. It should have pooled out onto his skin, run down the sides of his stomach, pooled under his back. But there was no dampness, just pain.

When the incision had been cut to about five inches long, the knife was withdrawn and metallic clamps were attached to the sides of the incision, stretching it open. Prayer was no use, he couldn't scream, he couldn't even cry in frustration. He could just lie there and be hurt.

The light dimmed for a moment and Alain felt a surge of relief. If he couldn't escape, the least his brain could do for him now was make him pass out. Sadly, the surgery continued, the pain continued, and the light came back.

Then it dimmed again. The dimming had come from a blink. His muscles were frozen, but Alain realized he was still breathing, he still

unconsciously blinked. That meant some signals were getting through from his brain. Concentrating, he tried to take control of those muscles.

A hand entered the hole in his stomach, going in at an angle up under his ribcage, near the diaphragm. Alain tried to tune out the pain and slow his breathing, exerting all his effort in taking a deep breath. Slowly he inhaled and when his body wanted to exhale, he applied his mind to making the lungs take in more air. His breathing paused and then a small gasp of air was added before his lungs pushed the air out.

His concentration was disrupted by the hand inside him. It had found what it was groping around for. The pain was intense as the hand gripped it and started pulling. It felt like Alain was being turned inside out. He wanted to grit his teeth against the pain, but he couldn't. All he could do was concentrate on taking in another slow, deep breath, trying to blink his eyes while he did. He achieved both.

Yeah, he shouted in his mind. It wasn't much, breathing and blinking when he wanted to, but it was a start.

Whatever the hand had gripped was slowly being pulled out of Alain, being forcibly uncoiled from within him and dragged into the open air. The progress was slow, a man's voice grunting slightly. Whatever it was inside him that they were trying to remove didn't want to come out.

Breathing deeply again, Alain could feel his muscles warming. Tentatively, he tried to move a finger. The finger jerked, then slowly curled up under his palm. He brought up two at once next, then made a fist, rotating it ever so slightly at the wrist.

The doctor lost his grip on whatever he'd been pulling and a length of it shot back inside Alain, making a shlorp noise. "Son of a bitch," the doctor cursed, catching it with a grunt.

Now that Alain had gained some control of his body, the pain was more intense, but he wasn't frightened and he was breathing deeply. That made all the difference, the cold in his muscles dissipating. He gradually gained control, concentrating on each major muscle, gently

clenching and unclenching it a couple times before moving onto the next. He left his mouth open, resisting the impulse to grit his teeth.

With a final grunt, the doctor yanked on whatever they had been pulling out of him. "Cut it," he said.

The strand was snipped near the incision and the remainder of it retracted into Alain's body like a rubber band that had been snapped. With all the energy and control Alain could muster, he brought his legs back quickly and kicked out against the operating table, sending himself sliding off backwards.

He didn't have as much control as he thought and an attempt to swing himself so he could land on his feet ended up with him rolling off and falling onto the floor with a body-quaking thud, but Alain was back on his feet quickly.

The operating room was staffed by a doctor, the nurse, and one of the two orderlies. On a gurney at the foot of the table lay what they'd taken out of him: a pink mass, almost like intestines, but it was melting and flowing, not off the gurney, but upward and outward, squirming and undulating as it began to take on a shape.

"What the hell is that?" Alain shouted.

The nurse went running out of the operating room as the orderly started advancing on Alain. The doctor, on the other hand, stood by the undulating pinkness. He had that sort of unflappable self-confidence, most often displayed by politicians and other fools who think that they are too important for someone to take a swing at them. "It's your soul, of course," the doctor said. "Or at least part of it."

As they circled, Alain saw two things: First, the pink mass was stretching and flowing into a vaguely humanoid shape, though it was still very blurry and child-size. Second, he was approaching the instrument tray.

"SOP," the doctor blathered on, oblivious to the explosive nature of the developing situation. "You think you'd get all that power without a little collateral?"

Closer to him than to the orderly lay a bone-handled knife he assumed had been used as a scalpel. Alain decided there was no time like the present to see how coordinated he could be. He leapt forward, grabbed it, and leapt back, holding it in front of him defensively. "Get back," he said to the orderly, taking up a fighting stance, holding the knife ready to strike.

The orderly stopped, but didn't back away. He looked at Alain, then at the knife, and chuckled. Meanwhile, the mass on the gurney was getting more distinct. Rather than sprout arms, the pink material flowed off of what could be a torso, defining the arms, slowly splitting them away. As they separated from the mass, they curled up over its chest and it rolled up into a fetal position, issuing a high-pitched moan from its forming mouth.

Noticing Alain's distraction, the orderly moved closer. "Get BACK", Alain yelled, taking a swipe at the orderly. But rather than jump back, the orderly stepped into the blade's arc, letting it draw a path across his stomach, tearing through his shirt and cutting a shallow wound in the flesh. He stopped and cringed, obviously feeling it, but he didn't bleed. Alain stepped back, panicked by what he'd just seen.

To Alain's right, another orderly burst into the room and approached from the other side. Amidst all this, the doctor hadn't left his spot, watching the proceedings with a detached amusement.

"If you two can hold him..." the doctor trailed off as he prepared a syringe. The two orderlies continued their advance.

Better than being caught between two of them, Alain knew he had to rush one. He chose the one to the right, between him and the door. Stutter-stepping forward, he stopped, pivoted on his right foot, and moved forward at a forty-five-degree angle to the path leading directly

toward the orderly, avoiding the orderly's grab for him. Raising his arm as he twirled, he put his weight behind the knife, slashing it across the orderly's throat, and came out of the twirl heading backward into the swinging doors. Dropping the knife, he grabbed the cart with the pink, moaning mass on it and dragged it with him as he burst through the doors into the hallway.

His hold on the cart kept him from falling over as he backpedaled through the doors, but the cost of that came quickly, the cart adding its weight to his as he slammed into the wall on the other side of the hall. Alain pushed off quickly and charged off to his right, the cart careening ahead of him.

As he ran down the hall, searching for an exit, he realized what kind of sight he must be. A naked man, running through a hospital, pushing a cart with what was now looking to be a moaning, naked boy on it. He knew if he didn't get out of there quickly, he could expect police at every exit, and if he didn't get some clothes, he couldn't expect to get very far even if he did get out.

Turning a corner, he slammed open the door of the first room he saw. It was empty. He turned and ran further down the hall. He would have expected to be challenged by this point, at least seen some other nurse or patients in the halls. Reaching another room, he threw the door open, but the room was empty. It seemed almost as if he was the only patient on the floor.

At the end of the hall, he found a stairwell entrance, but there was no way the cart was going down the stairs.

He looked at the figure on it. The pulsing and undulating had finished and a small boy lay there, maybe five or six years old given the size of him. He remained curled in the fetal position and was the reddish pink color of a newborn, but the moaning had subsided into a mild whimper. A closer look at the boy's face made Alain's legs go wobbly.

It was the face he saw every time his mother took out the photo album. It was the face in all the pictures his dad had taken with the Kodak Brownie when Alain was a boy. Now it was on this thing on the table, and somehow Alain had given birth to it... by cesarian section.

The thought of cesarian section made his legs go even more wobbly. They'd just cut a big hole under his ribcage, reached in, and tore something out of him, yet here he was on a dead run through the hallway with a cart careening ahead of him. He felt his abdomen, expecting to find a big bloody wound, but it was smooth and dry, no sign he'd ever been opened up.

His head felt like a rocket about to blast off from his body, and without its support, he was going to topple. He shook it hard and slapped himself twice to bring the world back into focus. He was losing sight of his goal... get the Hell out of this place.

Alain looked at the stairwell and then at the child. Whatever it was, whoever it was, he couldn't leave it. He picked it up and the child wrapped its arms around his neck. Its legs around his torso.

Alain tore down the stairs, taking flights at a canter, one hand on the safety rail, one holding the boy. As he progressed downward, the numbers beside the doors counted down... 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2... and Alain stopped.

The first floor and presumably the exit were just one floor down, but the problem of clothes hadn't been forgotten. He listened at the 2nd floor door, then opened it a crack and peeked out, getting views up and down the hallway. It was empty. Slowly, Alain crept out.

Three steps out the door, before he could even take in his surroundings, he was hit from the left by a flying tackle. He went down and the boy bounced out of his arms, skidding across the floor while Alain struggled with his attacker. But the struggle was in vain. A second orderly joined in, and within moments, Alain was laying on his stomach, a knee on his back, feet on both hands.

Straining to look to the far periphery of his vision, he could see the boy on the floor. Alain would have expected the boy to curl back up into a ball and begin moaning again, but the boy scrambled to his feet and launched himself at the men pressing Alain to the floor.

Another orderly grabbed the boy and pulled him off, the boy snarling and screaming unintelligibly. As the orderly carried the boy away, he reached out. "Alain," he screamed with the fear and rage of a child being torn from a parent. "Alain!!"

Boy and orderly passed through a set of swinging doors which muffled the sound of the boy when they closed. The screams grew distant until Alain could not hear them at all.

All Alain could hear now was the cursing of the orderlies, the quiet hum of some nearby machinery, and the clop of a pair of sensible shoes approaching from directly ahead of him. The shoes moved around to his side and stopped by his head. "This ought to take care of things," a female voice said.

He felt the pain of a dull needle in the side of his neck and everything went dark.

Chapter 3: The First Raid

Alain tugged the pull-tab of the zipper, opening the extra-large duffel bag, and got out carefully, mindful he was 30 feet up and in a makeshift treehouse barely broader than he was. Classic vampires slept in coffins, but vampires in the modern army slept in duffel bags with double sided zippers. The thick green cloth of the outer bag was tough and durable, blocking out most sunlight. A thick interior lining of dark folded silk contributed a second layer of solar protection with the added benefit of being less like sandpaper than the interior of your average duffel.

Alain and his unit often hid themselves in branches of trees as they slept during the days, camouflaged from the ground by the dark foliage and their dark duffels. Alain could hear a symphony of zippers as his squad-mates awoke.

They had no official unit designation. Officially, they didn't exist. Officially, they were dead. Officially, Uncle Sam had regretted to inform their families and they'd all been given military funerals with honors.

Having their families told they were dead had rankled all of them but Reese. It turned out his "Army or prison" moment had come after he broke both his father's arms. He claimed it was self-defense, but the prosecution brought a doctor to the stand who testified that the nature of the breaks were consistent with taking a baseball bat to someone's arms... repeatedly.

The four of them disengaged their duffels and dropped to the ground, quickly folding them and stowing them on their packs. Alain took their bearings with a sextant and compass while Sampson broke out four bottles of blood.

Vinnie sipped at his gingerly. "If I gotta drink deer blood one more night, I'm gonna eat a civilian," he complained.

They'd all been fed bottled blood, "borrowed" from a Red Cross blood drive, and that was the best the Army was willing to do for them. The DI for their vampire training spelled it out: "You can eat all the nip, kraut, and wop soldiers you want once you complete your training and get shipped out. But you will NOT feed on Americans, and you will NOT feed on civilians."

Granger fed on Americans the night he rose, 2 soldiers to be precise, and was officially "decommissioned." He was staked, beheaded, wrapped in silver wire, and then cremated. They all had to watch... every step. When you wake up to find out you're a vampire, then watch a practical demonstration of how the Army can still kill you, if need be, that kind of thing stays with you.

Now they were in the Ardennes forest, near where it covered part of France's border with Germany, heading toward a remote base. They were about 15 miles away and it was late summer, giving them around 10 hours of usable night. If they double-timed it, they could hit the base and be safely away before dawn.

It wasn't that they had to be holed up at sunrise. That was a recent misconception, a lesser-known myth from German folklore that

got a big shot in the arm from a German named F.W. Murnau. His film *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror*, showed the demon-like vampire fearing the sun and it entered popular culture as a characteristic of vampires.

Alain and the rest of his unit knew that it wasn't. Sunlight didn't kill them, though it rendered them near powerless. They could not heal wounds as easily, their heightened senses dimmed to human levels, the sunlight caused mild discomfort in their eyes and on any exposed skin, and they got no benefit from drinking blood during the day. Daytime drinking neither satiated their hunger nor gave them the euphoric sense of power and well-being that nighttime drinking provided. Sleeping during the day merely allowed them to awake at the height of their powers, refreshed and ready to go. It wasn't a necessity, just a convenience.

If an operation ran into daytime, their packs would get heavy. Getting up into the trees and "duffeling up" would become difficult, if not impossible. If they encountered enemy soldiers, they'd have little or no advantage in speed or strength. And while they still couldn't be killed with bullets, they could be knocked out of commission, leaving them more vulnerable to a true killing blow.

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As a vampire, he didn't need a magnifying scope, which suited Vinnie just fine. The Army's version of a sniper rifle, a refitted Springfield M1903, was crap. The sights fogged up regularly and they blocked the magazine, so you had to load one cartridge at a time. The plain old Springfield with iron sights did the job as he tracked Reese, Sampson, and Beaudreaux, watching them prepare the base for attack.

The base backed up against the hill to cut off attacks from that direction. That didn't mean the Germans ignored the hillside, but they gave it less attention than the other camp borders, figuring the bare

hillside was too exposed and no one could abseil down fast enough to avoid the periodic searchlight sweeps. No one expected that assailants coming from that direction would drop like stones.

Two large tanks of processed fuel sat near the back fence, which abutted the hillside. These and the motor pool were the primary targets. Alain and Sampson each stood in the shadow of a different tank, holding large rods of metal that resembled railroad spikes. Reese had slipped into the barracks where the day crew slept. The signal to begin was when the screaming started.

At the first scream, Alain and Sampson drove their spikes into the fuel tanks, like stakes into the hearts of giant metal beasts, and ripped holes in the sides, sending fuel pouring onto the ground. Each dropped his spike and ran for a guard tower on the opposite end of the compound, scaling them in three leaps and taking out the lights. On that signal, with Alain and Sampson safely away, Vinnie fired.

His rifle was loaded with phosphorous incendiary rounds, similar to the ones used in fighter planes. They couldn't puncture the tanks, particularly not from a distance. But at that distance, even from a high angle, he could easily light the fuel coming out of the tanks, and that flame would ride the streams back up into the tanks... The blooms of flame that rose up along the hillside made Vinnie skitter back from the heat and blink purple spots from his vision.

There was no leaping down the hill now. Vinnie slung his rifle and ran down the back side, careening through the woods. Reese had started a panic, but now that Alain and Sampson had accomplished their primary objectives, eliminating the guards and the fuel, one would help him herd the nervous personnel and soldiers into the base mess while the other tore off pieces of the vehicles and used them to bust up the rest. If Vinnie took too long to get there, he'd have last pick.

Their instructions were clear. Leave no one alive or able to come back from the dead. They would each pick a victim, feed quickly, behead

the bodies, then burn the mess hall to the ground. Anyone they didn't have the time or hunger to feed on got a bullet. The tactic was tried and true. It worked for them.

As Vinnie leapt the 12-foot gate, the only sound came from the roaring fires. He headed straight for the mess where he found the selection process in progress. Sampson was walking around the twelve prisoners who were still alive, sniffing the air as he passed, while Reese seethed. Vinnie wasn't too happy about it either.

Alain had been promoted to sergeant before they left the States, giving him command of the unit. That meant he decided who got first pick of prisoners. As sergeant, he could have taken it for himself, but he always went last, and he tried to be even-handed with the three of them, making them take turns at going first. Fair as it was, Vinnie and Reese still had issues when Sampson got to go first. They both believed that honor should be for whites only.

It generally didn't matter who went first, though. They all had different tastes in victims. Sampson liked his Germans fat. He said the fat ones ate lots of sausage and it made their blood thicker. He'd sniff around to find the plumpest one who smelled most of pork.

Reese liked older ones who drank. Vinnie made a lot of jokes, but not about this. Reese had a hair-trigger temper and it had only taken a couple of beatdowns after a needling joke to convince Vinnie this topic was off limits.

Alain would let them pick one for him. It wasn't that he was too hoity toity to pick his own, he just couldn't. In the beginning, he'd stare at one, then another, precious time slipping away, until one of his unit would just grab one and throw it at Alain. And while the others would feed with vigor, enjoying the pleas and screams of their victims, Alain would usually knock his unconscious with a blow to the headfirst.

Reese had picked his, meaning Vinnie went third and had the responsibility of picking Alain's. Vinnie preferred females, when

possible, pretty-boys in a pinch. For Alain, he picked the oldest, scrawniest soldier he could find.

As Vinnie walked back with his picks, Sampson opened fire on the remaining prisoners with a German machine gun he'd picked up outside. Once he was assured all of them were either dead or dying, he gave a nod.

Reese flung Sampson's prisoner at him, then grabbed his own. Screams filled the air as Reese, Vinnie, and Sampson bit down on their prisoner's necks. Alain's prisoner shouted at the sight before he was turned to face Alain. "Entschuldigung," Alain said before he clouted the guy on the head, knocking the soldier out before he fed.