

“...researchers have found a strong link between Protectors on the Keirsej temperament scale and instances of ulcers in...” <click>

Delia Hunter shut off her alarm droning yet another inane so-called news story. She'd started listening to the news more often of late in her curiosity about whether her friends' exploits would turn up on the morning news. So far, despite her concerns, no reporters had taken any undue interest in them. The only thing she had to show for falling asleep and waking up to the news was weird dreams. She reset the clock to the buzzer from radio, enough was enough.

Despite Farmingham's spanking new Hellmouth, the biggest thing she'd been thinking of for the last few days was exams and preparing herself for boot camp. This morning she had a few errands to make sure everything was set for the summer while she was gone.

Delia slipped into the early morning calm for her pre-workout run.

On the way back into the house, she noticed a light in the kitchen and the low buzz of voices from the television. She veered into the kitchen to say good morning. Amelia was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee and some toast.

“...we'll return to Boston P.D., Protectors of the Peace after these messages...” Amelia hit the T.V.s mute button.

“Good morning. Good run?” She asked Delia.

Delia shrugged and glanced over at the coffee maker. “It was okay. Dare ran with me for about two miles. Any more coffee?”

“Sorry, that was the last of it.” Amelia answered, her attention shifted to the newspaper in front of her.

“It's okay, I'll make some more after my shower.”

“I mean that was the last of it. I had that double-shift yesterday and didn't get to the store.” Amelia responded. “I'm on all day today too.”

Delia sighed. “Leave me a list of the necessities and some money. I'll pick them up this afternoon.” She turned on her heel and headed up the stairs.

Amelia nodded her agreement as she clicked off the mute.

Standing at the counter at the Double-R, Delia noticed a young boy on one of the stools reading a comic book.

“Uh...hey Delia...how's it going?” Matt asked as he came out of the kitchen his glance searching the diner, “Wylie around?”

Delia grinned, “sorry Matt, I don't expect to see her until later.” She watched as his expression saddened. “But I'll tell her you asked after her.”

“Oh...yeah...cool.” Matt smiled and started to walk away.

“Can I get a medium black coffee to go?” Delia asked before he'd gotten to the kitchen door.

“Oh...yeah.” He started towards the to-go cups. Picking up a large cup, he turned around.

Delia caught him and prompted, “medium please.”

“Oh” he put the large cup down and grabbed a medium. With his left hand he grabbed the pitcher of cream.

“Black” Delia reminded.

Nodding he started to grab the decaf pot.

“Regular, I like caffeine.” Delia sighed over the trouble just to get a cup of coffee.

As Matt poured her coffee, the boy beside her knocked over his milk. The comic book slipped off the counter as he brushed it quickly away from the running milk. Delia’s hand snaked out to grab the comic from the air. As she put it back on the counter away from the milk, it flipped open to a large splash page featuring the title “Protectors of the Innocent”. Delia frowned down at it for a moment until Matt grabbed her attention again by trying to pass her the coffee.

“Maybe I could have a cover for it?” Delia suggested slipping her money onto the counter next to the register.

“Oh yeah.” He handed one to her. “Thanks.” He took the money and walked back to the kitchen.

Delia shook her head as she pressed the cover onto the cup.

“Thanks for saving my comic.” The boy smiled at her. “It’s a special edition...they don’t make Heros like the Protectors in real life.”

Delia passed it back to him, “no, I guess they don’t” she grinned.



Protectors

By Jill Irving and Sue Clark

With Hector Diaz

Story Idea by Brad Lord

Standing in the doorway of MacEnroe Motors, Delia watched Raine and two mechanics crowd around the open hood of a truck. A lively discussion was ensuing

about the best procedure to fix the problem with the engine. Despite their greater age, and likely, experience, both men seemed to defer to Raine. Delia thought it was a sign of respect, not because she was the proprietor now. As she observed quietly, she found herself wishing that she had that kind of expertise in something. After nearly six months in town, Delia appeared to be eminently un-hirable, even as a dog-walker. Her personal pursuits had made her singularly unsuited to employment in a small town like Farmingham.

As Raine started walking away from the others, Delia noticed that Raine's left hand was bandaged. Raine saw Delia at the door.

"Hey, what's up?" she asked veering toward Delia.

"The jeep is running rough." She pointed her thumb over her shoulder. "I think its time for a tune-up and an oil change. I figured I might as well bring my business to you."

"With all the wear we put on your jeep, I'm sure we can do something..."

"I'm not looking for a break. I just would rather bring the money to you, as I'm sure your business can use it. I trust you to do a good job and be fair. Dad always said that finding a fair mechanic was one of the hardest things when moving around."

"Most of the guys here would lose sleep and say some extra prayers in church if they thought they led someone the wrong way." Raine was referring to the fact that most of the mechanics in her shop were Bikers for Jesus. "Okay, let's go take a listen." Raine swung around Delia outside.

As Delia reached into the jeep and turned the ignition key, the radio announced "...*call Scorsace and McMann. They are the Protectors of the Rights of the injured...*"

Delia clicked the radio off but stood staring at it for a few moments. Raine came around the side of the jeep.

"Hey, you okay?" She asked.

"Huh...oh...I guess. I just had the weirdest Déjà vu."

"About what?" Raine asked.

"I don't know. I think it's the weird dreams I've been having."

"Jacqueline always gets real interested in my dreams."

Delia glanced around and spoke softly. "That's because you're the Slayer. My dreams are just induced by listening to too much News radio while falling asleep."

Raine shrugged, "if you say so. I think one way or another all our dreams mean something. Especially us. Okay, I should be able to get to it a little later this morning. Can you leave it?"

"Absolutely, I was planning on working out in the dojo anyway. Wylie is supposed to meet me." Delia glanced at the back of the vehicle. "I had another purpose when I came over here too..."

Raine's brow rose, but she waited.

"I was wondering if I could put some stuff back in the stall?"

"I never said you couldn't use it."

Delia nodded "And I never took my stuff away; that was your nosy neighbor's doing, but stuff happened..." Delia sighed. "Mom's calmer and I've got pretty exclusive use of Gram's library now, but I'd like to put back a couple changes of clothing and some weaponry."

"Whatever... feel free. "

"The weapons could prove useful to the rest of you while I'm gone." Delia continued starting to collect her stuff from the back.

"Gone?"

Delia looked back at Raine. "You haven't heard? I figured Wylie would spread it. I'm going to be at Camp again this summer, in California. I'll be gone most of the summer."

"Lucky you! Well at least about getting away."

"I figure myself lucky all the way around, but I realize that I'm odd." The items in Delia's arms started to bobble as she reached for more stuff.

Raine sighed. "Here, let me take some of that."

"I've got it." Delia argued.

"Do I have to smack you?"

Delia stepped back from the jeep and let Raine grab the rest. They walked together around back to the Dojo. "So what's with the bandage?"

"Burned it in a bad way, it's going to take a little time."

Delia decided to not pursue the matter. Raine generally healed so quickly that bandages were rarely needed; she figured that when she was ready Raine would talk about it. "Hey, do you mind if I put a lock on the stall to keep out the Kravitz's across the way? We both know there's not much that will keep you out if you want in."

"I don't think you really have to worry about the Delvecchio's any more. You really terrorized Martha. She won't come anywhere near here. It's been kinda nice really."

"Then my work here is done."

Raine opened the stall door and held it for Delia. "You really shouldn't make threats at innocent..."

Delia cut her off. "She stole my stuff; that hardly qualifies as innocent. The only threat I made was to tell the cops about her taking it out of your barn."

"You should have. You pretty much busted into their home, their theft and your illegal entry just spells trouble all around. Your presence alone can be intimidating...especially if you are glaring. "

Delia set down her load. "Trim would be intimidating to a busybody like her."

Raine moved into the stall and started to set down the rest of Delia's belongings.

"Actually, Zoe would spook her..."

"What's this?" Delia lifted an envelope with her name on it from one of the shelves.

Raine glanced at it. "Don't know."

Delia turned and lifted her eyebrows. "Really? It's in your barn..."

"Not my handwriting" Raine examined it. "I don't recognize it at all."

Delia frowned at the envelope; it was a heavy parchment style paper, impossible to see through. "No one knew I was bringing my stuff back. Who would...?"

"This is Farmingham, weird happens." Raine shrugged. "Open it and find out."

Delia examined the seal. "What if it's something bad? We've done a lot to thwart the bad guy's schemes. You hear about contaminants sent in the mail. Or a spell could be put inside; ripping it open might set it off, especially if someone with power..."

Raine took the envelope from Delia. "Paranoid much?" She stepped away from Delia a couple steps.

"Wait..." Delia watched in awe and terror as Raine ripped it open. Raine waited a moment and then looked inside. "Nothing happened." Spilling the contents out onto her hand, she found herself holding a note with a series of numbers, a fancy, little key and a medallion.

Delia stepped over to examine the items held out in Raine's hand. "No sender's name." She picked up the medallion. It was shaped like a shield and appeared to have some engraved image that was too tarnished to see clearly.

Raine was reading the note. "These numbers make no sense. I don't know what any of this is supposed to mean."

"I'm just as clueless," Delia admitted taking the rest of it from Raine, "but I guess I need to find out."

"You do that. Me, I've got a garage to run and tune-up to do." Raine turned and headed to the door. "When you get to the bottom of it, let me know if you need me." The slayer took a long look at her bandaged hand. "Delia, listen. I'm sorry for all the crap that went down between us. I freaked and I don't do social really well in the first place. Thanks for reaching out, that's better than I would have done."

"Thanks, Raine." Delia offered watching as her friend left. "I missed you," she continued softly. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out her cell phone. She hit the auto-dial and waited for the rings.

"Yeah?" She heard fuzzily from the other end of the phone.

"It's Delia. Would you like to help me solve a mystery?"

Zoe arrived at the barn as Wylie was leaving.

"If I'm bruised still for this party tonight..."

"...the world as we know it will end." Delia finished Wylie's threat.

Wylie stomped her foot. "Just because you don't care that you look like a..."

"Yes?" Delia glared.

Wylie shook her head. “Just because you don’t care what you look like, doesn’t mean that those of us who want to make an effort for that special someone are idiots. Tonight is my first official outing with Dare. I want to look good for it. For him.”

“Fine. Just don’t blame me because you failed to block my punch. My side is going to be black and blue for the next five days because of you, but you don’t hear me complaining. Remember the point was ‘full out’ for some real practice?”

Wylie turned and walked out muttering “you’d worry a lot more about that if you wore clothes that showed any skin...”

Zoe stood back and watched Wylie storm off. “So how’re those Dale-Carnegie classes paying off?”

Delia frowned, “Huh?”

“You know ‘How to make friends and influence people’?”

Delia chuckled, ‘clearly I failed.’”

“Good to know. So you need help solving a mystery?”

Delia picked up the contents of her mysterious envelope and brought them to Zoe. “This was sitting in my empty stall this morning when I came to bring back my stuff.”

“Who knew...?”

“No one knew I was going start using it again.” Delia answered the incomplete question. “Raine knew nothing about the envelope or contents.”

“Do the numbers mean anything to you?” Zoe examined the sequence of numbers forming a kind of code. “03801-1-2607-B260-32-42-50” she read aloud.

“Nothing. None of it does.” She thumbed over the tarnished shield. “I need to clean this up to see what it is, but I don’t know many shield designs.”

“A small key like this couldn’t have many purposes.” Zoe observed turning it over in her hands. “It looks old. It’s nothing like a safe-deposit or locker key. It’s bigger than a diary key. Curious.”

“Like a said, a mystery. Why was it left here for me? Why now? Who left it?”

“That’s a lot of questions. I guess we ought to start the research. This doesn’t look like Jacqueline’s dusty library research...we need the internet.”

“Exactly why I called you” Delia commented.

Zoe grinned, “almost makes us like the real Scoobies, huh?”

“Almost!” Delia patted Zoe on the shoulder. “My car won’t be ready for a while so we’re hoofing it. I’ll buy you a coffee. I could use some more.”

Delia walked into Zoe's room. She took a moment to look around. It was surprising how little there was on her walls. Aside from that her room was pretty typical for a teenager; the bed was unmade and there were clothes on the floor. But strikingly, the area around her desk was immaculate.

"Interesting room" Delia remarked.

"It's someplace to house my computer." Zoe responded slipping into her desk chair.

Delia stepped up behind Zoe "where do we begin?"

Zoe pulled out the envelope that Delia had given her. She glanced briefly at the key, but quickly put aside in favor of the medallion. "The symbol on this could be of some clue, although it is awfully hard to see."

"I suppose I can try some silver cleaner on it." Delia suggested taking the medallion from Zoe.

Zoe picked up the note card. "While you're doing that I'll start working on this code. It's awfully strange. I'm not sure where to begin with it. I think I'll do some standard searching."

Delia nodded. "Don't suppose you parents have any silver polish around?"

"Try under the sink in the kitchen." Zoe stated as her attention drifted into her computer. Delia watched her friend a moment. She was amazed how quickly Zoe dissolved into her project. It was as if Zoe had left the building. Despite her own powers of concentration, she could not remember ever fading away quite so quickly. Delia patted Zoe's shoulder and headed downstairs.

Delia looked down at the newly cleaned medallion. It was still hard to make out, but appeared to be formed like a shield, with fist and arm crossed over some faint lines, there appeared to be some words at the bottom which were completely illegible. Something about the image struck a memory. Slipping it into her pocket, she headed back to Zoe's room. Peeking her head into the room, she saw Zoe was lost in her work. Delia scribbled a quick note and left it sitting on the bed. "Had an idea. Be back soon."

A quick run later, Delia found herself in her grandmother's study. Pulling open her father's footlocker, she searched through until she found several hard cover volumes. She took them to the desk and sat down. Delia stroked her hand across the covers letting her memory drift.

Jack and Delia sat at the kitchen table pouring over some of Jack's books.

"Bravo company frequently got tattoos with this symbol" Jack explained as he pointed to one of the shields in the pictures. He turned the page and pointed to another shield. "My Squadron modified this one."

"You don't have a tattoo" Delia observed.

Jack laughed "no, your mother didn't like them. Besides, a lot of the places that I've been weren't the most sterile environments."

"I understand" Delia said "I can't decide whether I would want to get a tattoo or not. Of course, I have a few more years to make that decision."

"Just a few?" Jack teased his 12-year-old daughter. He turned the page of the book and pointed to another shield. "This has always been one of my favorites; it's about honor and duty."

Delia examined the shield which was two hands holding a sword and a cross over beams of a sun.

Delia opened the book and started to peruse the pictures. Holding the medallion in front of the book, she slowly compared each shield in the book to that on the medallion.

Delia had ordered pizza. Trim had brought it over. They both sat on the floor of Zoe's room watching her get more and more frustrated with her lack of results on the searches. The clicking of the keyboard set a counterpoint to irritated tapping of the foot.

"So, it took a while to find it, but I found a shield that was similar to the one on the medallion. During World War II, a group known as the Aces, assigned to protect important dignitaries and their children, were tattooed with a shield strikingly similar to the medallion's as a means of identifying each other. During Viet Nam, another group, called the mighty aces used a derivative of that shield as their symbol after a particularly harrowing rescue mission."

Trim glanced at the book "but they're not exactly the same."

"It's true" she agreed, "But over time things like this change. I think this medallion predates either of these shields used by Marines. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if somewhere along the way one of those Marines saw this shield and based their own upon it."

Trim nodded and took another bite of pizza. "It could be, but it makes you wonder where this shield came from originally."

"Well that's why we're here." She glanced back at the computer desk. "Hey Zoe, give it a rest! You've been at this for hours. Come have some pizza with us. You're working too hard. I never meant for you to spend all day on this." Delia admonished Zoe.

"Yeah, you don't want to miss out on this pizza" said Trim stuffing another slice into his mouth.

Zoe got up from her chair and stretched. "I know! It just annoys me when I am sure I should get something that is staring me in the face, but it seems just outside my grasp."

"I know what you mean. This isn't going anywhere. We might as well take a break and come at it fresh in the morning. In the meantime, enjoy some good food."

As Zoe left the computer desk, she flipped on her CD player, guitar music floated with the simple sweet lyrics... "You were the protector of the innocent and the guilty too those that couldn't stand on their own could come to you And you never said 'no'"

Trim swallowed the last of his slice. "So where are your parents anyway?"

"Well..." Zoe began.

She was sitting at a large round table alone, there were pennants and tapestries covering the walls of the room. Jack Hunter walked into the room wearing his dress

uniform. As he stepped closer, his clothes shifted to become armor. His livery had a sword and fist upon it. Then he shifted again, the man became shorter, with a more brawny build and blonde hair. The livery's color changed, but the crest remained.

Suddenly the seats around the table were full. She was surrounded by knights in battered armor. The table melted away and the knights were fighting others.

Then the blonde who had been her father shifted again, his body shrinking in both height and brawn. He pulled off the helm he hadn't been wearing to reveal a woman with shorn hair. Her livery was soiled and shredded, but still the crest remained intact.

Then flames came and burned the image away. All that was left was a man in tattered buckskins carrying an old-fashioned long rifle as the walls around him came down...and then there was darkness.

The next day, after her morning run, Delia showed up at Zoe's house again. Mrs. Zinni escorted Delia to Zoe's room. Zoe was slouched over the computer desk still wearing her clothes from yesterday. She seemed to have nodded off on her keyboard.

"Rise and shine Sleepyhead!" Delia announced as she walked in.

"Huh?" Zoe asked groggily.

Delia walked over and laid her hand on Zoe's shoulder. "Did you get any real sleep?"

"I slept, sort of " Zoe replied.

"It's the ' sort of ' that I am worried about" Delia commented.

Zoe stretched and slowly stood; her movements similar to those of the very old and very infirmed. "I do this all the time. It's just that this stupid code continues to elude me."

"Zoe, I didn't mean for you to get obsessed with this."

"Hey, I realize that. It's just a mystery that needs to be solved. I hate unsolved mysteries."

Delia sat down in the vacant chair at the desk. "I do to, and it really is weird that this showed up now. Still, there's no point stressing about it. Why don't you take a shower and get dressed? And then we'll get some coffee on the way to my place where I'll make us some lunch. Nothing like food for thought."

Zoe slowly nodded, "Yeah I guess that's a good idea."

Revitalized by the coffee and the walk that Delia insisted upon, Zoe contemplated the index card with the code on it. "Maybe I've been going about this the wrong way. Maybe if I use blocks of the code rather than the whole thing, I can figure out something." Zoe's fingers ached for her keyboard again.

Delia stopped to grab the mail as they entered her house. Silence reigned inside. As the girls walked through to the kitchen, Delia flipped through the mail. A flyer from Guardian Security caught her eye "Protectors of your home and family" they promised. Delia frowned at it before tossing it in the circular file in the hallway.

"Excellent!" She enthused "a letter from T. J." she announced as she ripped into it. Dropping the envelope on the table beside Zoe, Delia walked to the refrigerator reading her letter.

"Anything interesting?" Zoe asked.

Delia turned around and spoke "she graduated cum laude and ships off to boot camp, the real thing, late this summer. She is so excited. I'll have to go visit her before she leaves. It looks like the timing will be close to when I get back from camp."

"I guess congratulations are in order." Zoe commented unenthusiastically. She glanced around the tidy kitchen. The room had a warmth about it and yet it seemed unnaturally neat. She noticed the envelope sitting face up next to her. T. J.'s handwriting stood out boldly.

"Ah ha!" Zoe announced triumphantly.

"What?" Delia asked looking up from her letter.

"I knew it! Something about these numbers has been driving me crazy. It seemed so familiar, but I just couldn't get."

"What?"

Zoe picked up the envelope and waved it in front of Delia. "See this?"

Delia walked over to examine it. "It's from T. J. What's the big?"

"The zip code. Look at the return address zip code." Zoe pulled the coded index card from her pocket and laid it beside the envelope.

A smile of amazement spread across Delia's face. "So what is the rest of it?"

Zoe grinned "I don't know, but it's a start."

"Okay" Zoe said stretching her fingers as she sat at the keyboard "the first number appears to be the zip code 03801 which is in Portsmouth. In the U.S. we've pretty much standardized addresses as number street, city, state, zip code. But I don't believe it's always been like that, in fact in some places it could be different still. So what if this code is first in this?"

"It still doesn't look like an address. It doesn't have a street name." Delia stated looking over Zoe's shoulder.

Zoe clicked away on the computer for a minute and pointed to the screen. "While it doesn't list a specific street name if you look at it as an address, then the 2607 could become a street address and the 1 could actually be the street name. If you look at a map, you see route 1 runs straight through Portsmouth."

Delia looked at a map that Zoe pointed out "so you're saying that the address is on route 1 in Portsmouth."

"Exactly!" Zoe responded "So the address is 2607 Lafayette Road in Portsmouth."

"So what's the rest of it?"

"I haven't gotten that far yet" Zoe answered as she typed on the keyboard. "I can tell you that the address is... a self storage facility."

Delia picked up the index card with the code on it. "If we were to continue the analogy from there, then maybe B260 is storage locker number."

Zoe looked at her copy of the code "Right and then the next numbers could be a combination to a lock."

"So how do we find out who that locker belongs to?" Delia asked.

Zoe frowned "it looks like a small business. Their records may not be so easily accessed from the Web. Maybe we should just go take a look."

Delia frowned "I don't know if I like the idea of just going out there blind."

"It's just is storage bin, what could happen?"

"The mind boggles..."

Zoe grinned "hey at least it's not in Farmingham!"

Delia drove up to the storage facility. "Are you sure this is going to work?" She asked Zoe.

Zoe looked over at Delia who was wearing fatigues and her marines cap. "Of course it is. You look totally like a soldier. You tell them you just got called up and you need someplace to store your stuff."

"I don't look 18."

"Not when someone knows you're not, but you're tall and you look tough. In your regulation fatigues, they're not even gonna pay attention to the fact you don't look 18."

Delia shook her head as she stepped out of the jeep. "I think they're going to laugh their heads off."

"Just try to be convincing, you know glower at them little. That usually makes people nervous. Just look real serious, like you don't have time for any of this. Meanwhile I'll try to take a look at their system."

"Don't you think it will be just a little suspicious if you're with me?"

Zoe put on a bright smile "hey, I'm just your little sister."

Delia opened the door and reluctantly stepped through. When the girl at the counter turned her way, she began "hi, I'm curious about the size of your storage bins."

"I can't believe that actually worked." Delia stated as they drove through the security gate into the storage facility.

Zoe continued to grin enthusiastically. "I told you it would. You can be pretty scary looking and because of that people don't notice how young you are."

"Thanks, I think." Delia took a left turn and headed to building B. "I'm still not completely comfortable with just going inside of storage bin without knowing anything about it."

Zoe sighed. "Either you're obsessing about going into someone's stuff which you shouldn't be since they sent you the key. Or you are being overly cautious about the weird stuff we deal with, but remember we're not in Farmingham."

"So you're saying I'm being obsessive. I guess at least I'm not charging in..." Delia avoided some boys on skateboards as she pulled up in front of B260 and shut off the engine. "Well here we are. Maybe we'll get some real answers."

The two girls glanced at the 'boarders before stepping up to the lock. The combination lock on the storage door was a model neither girl had seen before. The brand-name was unfamiliar, and it looked fairly old. Delia reached into her pocket and pulled out the envelope with the original note, key, and medallion. She extracted the note and tucked the rest carefully into her pocket. With a last look at Zoe, Delia started to dial the combination. A moment later, the lock lay open in her hand. Delia grabbed the handle and forcefully slid the door open, clipping the lock on the door as it went up.

A shadowy figure appeared as light filtered into the dark room through the opening door. Delia immediately threw wide her arms in the universal sign of peace. "I'm sorry I didn't..." Delia's stopped, frowning, "How...?"

As she started to question how someone could be in the bin, the figure stepped forward menacingly. Delia once again tried to explain, "we mean you no harm..."

Delia thought she caught the weak gleam of light hitting metal as the stranger's arm came up in an arc aimed toward Zoe. Delia grabbed Zoe's arm and pushed her back toward the jeep yelling "get in the jeep, get it started, and get those boys away from here."

Delia turned her attention back to the man in the shadows. She was nearly certain now that he held a gun, and was now shifting its aim to her.

"This isn't necessary" Delia advised the stranger holding her hands out to her sides to indicate their emptiness.

The gun came to rest held head height facing Delia. She swung her left leg in a high kick which connected with the gun and sent in an arc through the air before skittering across the floor into the darkest corner of the room. Delia came to rest in a defensive stance.

"We really didn't mean to intrude, we were sent here." Delia once again tried to explain.

Her only response was a lightning fast punch to her face. She caught it a centimeter from her nose and twisted the hand away. The figure's other hand struck her in the belly. Spinning around quickly she shoved it away with another quick kick.

"Zoe, I don't hear that engine. Get it going." She yelled back over her shoulder as the shadow-man stood and threw himself at her.

While Delia was fighting back her attacker, Zoe was standing off to the side watching around the wall of the bin. She stared in fascination at Delia's fight against nothing. From the moment the door opened, Delia had been acting as if something was there

threatening them; effectively throwing punches and kicks at the air. And in true Delia fashion, she'd thrown herself into protecting everyone else. Problem was, as far as Zoe could tell, no one was there.

As Delia took a strong blow across her face, her head snapped to the left and blood burst from her nose. Although Zoe had been convinced it was something psychological up to that moment, the blood made her think otherwise. She turned to yell at the kid's to get away from there, then turned back and concentrated her "other" vision on the scene.

Meanwhile, Delia threw herself in the air kicking out both legs for two solid hits against her attacker. He went down hard on his back. Delia assumed a defensive posture as the shadow-man flipped back up to his feet. Delia fainted to the left, but her attacker raced across the room into the deepest, darkest corner.

Delia turned back to look for Zoe and the 'boarders when she realized he was heading for the gun. Zoe was standing still just outside the doorway staring into the corner in her eerie way. Confirming the boys were out of range now, Delia dove at the shadow-man as the sound a gunshot resonated in her ears.

Despite the searing pain from a bullet grazing her shoulder, Delia landed on him and wrestled the gun from her opponent, throwing it aside immediately. Flipping to a stand, Delia grabbed the KA-bar from her boot and held it down at her side. She stretched out her right leg and held her foot mobile an inch from his neck.

"Surrender," she ordered.

The shadow-man extended his arms out to his sides. Delia lowered her leg slowly away from him and allowed him to stand. As she watched, the shadow in front of her morphed into a knight in black armor with a rather familiar crest on his chest. The knight formally bowed to Delia, and then dissolved into a black mist that floated to the center of the room and coalesced into a leather bound tome.

Delia stared at it uncomprehendingly for a moment before cautiously approaching it. Meanwhile Zoe approached from the other side, her expression as confused as Delia's.

"What just happened here?" Zoe asked.

"It was some sort of guardian or something I think" Delia explained.

Zoe tugged at Delia's arm "no, I mean what just happened? I didn't see anything."

"You didn't see a cloaked figure with a gun? He shot me!" Delia exclaimed pointing to the spot where the bullet hit.

Zoe frowned at Delia's shoulder. "There's no bullet wound" Zoe pointed out.

Delia quickly examined her shoulder; she too could find no sign of the injury. She reached her hand up to check her nose, although there was still a bit of dried blood on the floor, the bridge did not feel broken, nor was there any pain. "My nose isn't broken."

"That, I saw" Zoe exclaimed pointing to the bloodstain. "That made me wonder. I tried to 'look' at what was going on and all I could see was this hazy magic hanging over the whole room most brightly in the places you were fighting. I didn't see anything with my eyes until the book appeared."

Delia continued her inspection of the damage she took during the fight. Although she had some minor aches and pains, no major damage appeared to be done. "This is so weird!" Delia remarked.

"Well I guess it didn't really want to hurt you, just test you." Zoe attempted to explain. "So what's this book?"

Delia turned her attention to the tome in front of her. It stood on a pedestal that was nearly waist high. She ran her hand across the finely tooled, ancient leather. There was no title that she could find unless it was buried within the markings. Her hand moved to the flap that kept the book from opening. A small locking mechanism rested in the middle of the flap. Delia examined it more closely. "Look at this, it's a lock."

Zoe studied it for a moment. "It appears the key you were sent will fit it."

Delia removed the envelope from her pocket and drew out the key from within. She noticed the envelope was empty and reached into her pocket to find the medallion. "It's gone" she announced starting to look around the room for where she might have dropped it. After a quick, useless search she returned her attention to the key and the book.

"Deal..." Zoe started, "you're wearing the medallion."

"I didn't put it on, it was in my pocket." Delia reached her hand to the point on her neck that Zoe was looking at. A little freaked, she took it off and put it back in the envelope. She looked up at Zoe and asked "do you think this is a good idea?"

Zoe considered for a moment "I think we've gone to a lot of trouble to get here, and it would be a waste to not find out what this is about."

"You don't think we're being reckless?" Delia questioned, her face intent.

"No, I think we're good."

"Okay." Delia inserted the key into the lock and attempted to turn it. Although she was sure that it fit properly, she could not force it to turn. "It doesn't work."

Zoe reached for the envelope and lifted the now shiny, bright medallion out of it. "It looks new now" she observed, "and it appeared on you somehow." She handed it back to Delia. "Put it back on."

Delia glared at the medallion for a moment before testing her friend's resolve; Zoe held her gaze for several moments. Taking the necklace back, she fastened it around her neck. Taking a deep breath, she tried the lock again. As the key finished turning, the flap released allowing Delia to open the tome. She reached up and pulled the medallion off again. The tome slammed closed, the lock engaged. Repeating the procedure, she reopened the book.

On the liner page, she saw the symbol from the medallion, a strong arm blocking a sword over the rays of a shining sun. The words at the bottom were clearly legible "Semper Patronus".

"Sounds Latin" Zoe observed, "which is not my subject."

"Semper is always like in the Marine's 'Semper Fidelus'. If I remember my Harry Potter correctly, Patronus is Protector. I guess it would translate roughly to Protector Forever."

“That’s kind of nice.” Zoe commented as Delia flipped the page.

“Ugh. I think it’s all in Latin. This could take a while.” Delia explained. “The title is apparently something like Age or Era of Protectors.”

“Maybe we should take it to Jacqueline, she’s good at the translating thing.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Delia agreed. “This still doesn’t answer all the questions though. I mean, I guess we know what the whole note was about, getting me to this book. But why? And Who? Those are still huge mysteries.”

“Well, I got a look at their computer system. I think I should be able to break in and we can find out who rented this bin. We can also see if there’s anything about the book on the Net.”

“Well, I guess that’s something. We should go.” After Delia had closed the book and lifted it, the stand it was on melted into nothingness.

Zoe shook her head, “weird”, she stated.

“Amazing we’re not in Farmingham” Delia mumbled, placing the book under her seat in the jeep. “Let’s go home.”

“I’m in” Zoe announced, once again in command in front of a keyboard. “B260 was rented only two weeks ago. The name was…weird…it’s D. Hunter.”

“What?!” Delia pounced to look over Zoe’s shoulder.

“The address is in Los Angeles. You got any relatives?”

“My father was the last of his line.” Delia’s brow was furrowed with concentration as she tried to think of possibilities. “He wouldn’t have lied about something like that. He didn’t lie at all.”

“I’m not disagreeing. I’m just reading what it says. Maybe it’s just another sign it is for you.”

“Yeah, maybe. Can you track the money? Don’t they always say follow the money?”

“Let’s see. Paid in cash.” Zoe read off after clicking a few keys.

“So someone must have come in…”

“Western Union. And before you ask, I’m not going to try to crack them…besides as long as you pay in cash, they’ll send it anywhere to anyone. They could have used the same name and number.”

“Still someone had to have put the book in there, right?”

Zoe tapped her keys again. “The access card was filed until D. Hunter arrived to pick it. To date, it’s still in their files. It was never used.” She shook her head. “Besides, you saw how the security door worked; someone could drive in right after another car and never have to check in.”

“True. Damn! What about the address given?” Delia probed.

“Already way ahead of you. It’s an address in Los Angeles, but the building was destroyed several years ago in an explosion. There’s nothing there now.” She picked up her cell phone and dialed a number. “Phone number’s not in use either.”

“Dead end!” Delia declared.

“Well, we’ve got the book, translating it could give some answers. And now that we have a title and full shield from the medallion, maybe it will give us some hints.” Zoe was closing down screens, when she stopped. “Maybe we have one more thing.”

“What’s that?” Delia questioned once again reading over Zoe’s shoulder.

“I said two weeks ago, but that wasn’t precise. The bin was rented first thing in the morning the day after the Hellmouth was formed.”

Delia sat down on the bed. “Do you suppose that is significant?”

“I think it’s an awfully strange coincidence.”

“But if they really wanted me to have it, why would they put the envelope in the stall I wasn’t using?”

“The best we can do is speculate. Either they didn’t need you to find it right away, they were worried about delivering it in a more direct way, or maybe they didn’t know you weren’t using the stall any more. You didn’t remove your stuff, the neighbors did. If someone was watching you, they may not have caught that.”

“The stall was empty.” Delia remarked, deep in thought. “Of course, if it was magically transported...?”

Zoe responded, “there you go!”

“Why me?”

“Maybe the answer is in there.” Zoe pointed to the tome resting on the bed beside Delia.

Delia sighed. “Okay, well, I suppose we should contact Jacqueline. And Raine. I’m sure she’d be interested in what we found. I suppose we could call everyone together, but I’m not sure it’s necessary.”

Zoe grinned for a second. “Let’s send everyone an optional invitation.” She turned back to her computer and set up a text message to the gang. “Find out what works for Jacqueline and I’ll take care of it.”

Not everyone showed up, but those few who did, were intrigued by the mystery and the results. Raine, Trim and Jacqueline listened intently to the tale that Zoe and Delia took turns spinning.

Delia watched Raine’s expression as she explained about the mysterious guardian. When they explained about the tome, Jacqueline finally spoke up. “Let me see it.”

Delia handed over the medallion, key and book to Jacqueline. When she attempted to open it without the medallion, she failed. Carefully examining the medallion, she offered it to Zoe. “What do you see?” she asked.

Zoe took a few moments to focus and then concentrated on it. “A very slight enchantment, I think.”

“And the book?” Jacqueline queried.

A few minutes later, Zoe responded. “It also emanates an aura of protective magic. A stronger one, I think, than the medallion.”

Jacqueline nodded her head before putting the medallion around her neck. The key still would not turn. She held up a hand to silence the people who started to speak. “A moment...” she gazed at each face around the room, until she settled on Raine. “Raine, you will try.”

Raine took the medallion and key and made her attempt. Once again, it did not turn, even with Slayer force behind it. “What...?” She started to ask.

Once again Jacqueline held up her hand, “Trim, your turn.”

“It’s probably magic that requires power to work.” Trim announced smugly as he put the medallion around his neck. A moment later he sat trying to turn the lock unsuccessfully.

“Whatever is important, it is not about power.” Jacqueline observed. “At least among this group, it would seem it is about Delia. That would explain why it was sent to her, though not the ‘why now’ or ‘for what purpose part’. Delia, please open the book now.”

After Delia complied, Jacqueline sat in front of it and examined it. “Age of the Protectors” she read aloud and turned the page. It’s hand-written, very neatly, and ancient-looking. It looks like a history of ‘Protectors’. We could get it tested to validate the age, if you wish.”

“Maybe. Do you think you can translate?”

“Certainly, if I had enough time with it. But that’s the difficulty, I believe.”

“If you just leave it open...” Delia suggested hopefully.

Jacqueline shook her head and directed the girl. “Walk away, out the door.”

Delia stood and exited the house. As soon as she was out of the room, the tome slammed shut and locked. When she re-entered, the group was watching her.

“I believe it is your task to translate. It is fortunate that you take Latin, is it not?”

Delia sighed. “That could take a long time.”

“On the positive side, it should improve your Latin markedly.” Jacqueline smiled at her.

“I won’t have a lot of time at camp.” Delia explained.

“When you return, we can work on it together. In the mean time, I think you should take it with you, but keep it hidden.”

“Do you suppose this has anything to do with me being a demon?”

“I don’t believe so. I’ve not heard of a group called ‘Protectors’ before, but the word alone suggests that is not evil.” Jacqueline turned to Zoe. “I believe that while you are doing the translating, Zoe and I will be here researching these so-called ‘Protectors’. As

will anyone else who is interested in improving their research skills.” The last comment was directed at Raine.

“Well, as there doesn’t seem to be any butt in need of kicking here, I think I’ll go patrol.” Raine announced beating a hasty retreat.

“Do you think there is any danger in my reading this?” posed Delia to Jacqueline.

“I think it is unlikely. The magic is protective. It is likely what keeps it locked and closes it when people other than the intended have it. It is also, likely, what created the guardian you fought. However, it might be a good idea to send me regular progress reports while you are gone, just in case.”

“I will. I’ll send them along with my letters to the group.” Delia picked up the tome and turned back to Jacqueline and Zoe. “I don’t know why this is happening, but I appreciate all the help you are both giving me.”

“Some times even ‘Protectors’ need assistance.” Zoe offered smilingly.

“It just occurred to me that this could be related. I had these strange dreams the last couple nights; knights and fire and rifles and other weird stuff. My father was even in one of them. But so was this symbol” Delia tapped the medallion around her neck “or something awfully similar.”

“It could be that whatever forces have sent you the keys to the tome, also sent you some other clues.” Jacqueline was frowning as she offered the suggestion.

“Like the word ‘Protector’” Delia put it together, “I’ve been seeing and hearing it all over the place, but I never connected it.”

“Seeing and hearing it?” Jacqueline prompted.

“The radio would come on to ad that used it, a comic book opened to a page with the word on it...”

“Definitely seems like someone was trying to send you a message. We’ll need to figure out who.”

“Right, so now let’s get some tracing paper so I can copy out that shield to use for searching while you are gone.”

Jacqueline stepped over to her bookshelves and lifted a large tome. She waved the girls off, then stepped to her bookshelves and picked out a volume, her thoughts already absorbed in the task at hand.

***Lyrics from James Andrew Dragoni “In Memory of Anthony G Bateman” from Moonglow