

A dark chamber. The sound of a pen scratching across paper. Black eyes look up and stare through the great window out over the top of the world. A quiver of the hand, a moment of terror. Then clarity... "We are ready..."

The chirping of the cicadas filled the humid night air, occasionally punctuated by an odd growl, grunt, shriek, or rustle. The vast expanse of the Amazon rainforest was by no means asleep, and that also went for its more recent guest. Lying prone upon the rainforest floor, amongst the rotting leaves and insects, lay a man dressed entirely in black. So dark was this part of the rainforest that, to the naked eye, Michael Shaw seemed invisible. He lay on the edge of a large, circular, man-made clearing, in the middle of which stood an ancient tower. It rose up, mysterious and out of place, to just over the height of the canopy layer of the forest. Tiny windows dotted its walls, some gently illuminated by candles flickering within rooms. At the summit of the tower was a viewing platform encircled by commanding battlements. At the base, a vast oak door was guarded by a grim-faced sentinel.

Beads of sweat dripped freely from every pore on Shaw's body as he maintained his complete concentration on this strange and long-forgotten relic of an age unknown to most. The innocuous and reassuring sounds of the jungle juxtaposed the heavy thumping of his heart as he held his breath and watched. A scheme to gain access to this place preoccupied his already-crowded mind.

It had taken him five days of searching through almost impenetrable rainforest to find this clearing. During that time, he had come to realise that the rainforest was no place for humans. It had seemed that, at every turn, the vast, green labyrinth had thrust some deadly and perilous obstacle in his path. Shaw breathed slowly and glared up at the tower; very carefully, he adjusted his position on the uneven ground. Silence was crucial this close to the tower; there were eyes and ears everywhere, sharp and keen, and their owners were ready to kill.

The hairs on the back of his neck began to stand on end, and he felt that familiar feeling of his blood running cold. A weight that had not been there before was moving over the back of his legs, not moving, slithering. He fought to control his breathing; he knew that a bite from a snake in the depths of the rainforest would be lethal, regardless of the gifts he possessed. The snake paused on its journey across Shaw's legs, clearly now sensing the surface on which it travelled was living. His mind willed it to continue its slither, to decide against sinking its venomous fangs into one of his calves. It seemed that the rainforest was cheering this particular predator on as the background noise seemed to have doubled, or maybe this was his mind sharpening as the waves of adrenaline pumped around his body. Finally, slowly, the snake seemed to decide it had other plans and returned to its journey.

Shaw allowed himself to draw in deep, careful lungfuls of air to regulate his breathing. He knew that he could not wait long before attempting to access the tower; it was only a matter of time before the jungle made another attempt to consume him. He winced as something tiny bit painfully into his earlobe and then winced again as his incredible gift of self-healing took hold. This gift was one of the traits that made Michael Shaw extraordinary. At birth, he had somehow inherited the ability to heal any wound at an incredibly fast rate. This came at a cost, though, as the healing process would usually be as painful as the wound itself,

occasionally leaving a scar, depending upon the severity of the wound. Indeed, given the nature of Shaw's occupation, he had collected a great deal of these scars in his time.

The guard cleared his throat and coughed up phlegm, which he spat out onto the floor of the clearing. The man had been standing there for four solid hours and had barely moved in that time. An impressive feat of discipline for a human, but Shaw was certain this person was not human. In fact, he doubted if anyone within the tower was human. For millions of years, demons had occupied the world even before humans came to be. Now they lived alongside humans and, for the most part, lived relatively peacefully alongside them—usually in secret, hidden amongst the shadows. The demon who Shaw wanted to visit was part of a deeply ancient race known as the Capritas. A dark and dangerous breed of demon who followed the word of a mythical book, which apparently contained the spirit of their founder, some dark lord.

According to his sources, Shaw had discovered that the supposed Dark Lord was set to make a return. He sighed. Shaw had seen many strange things in his life, and there were always threats of Dark Lords appearing from the shadows. On the whole, he had found that these were usually the machinations of fanatics and enemies of the human race. But every case needed to be followed up and checked. Whilst demons mostly lived in hiding from the humans, many possessed great powers, and some had the potential and inclination to disrupt or destroy the human race. He had to find out what this Caprita knew, and he did not relish the idea of their meeting. Capritas could be very powerful and had no love for humans, particularly humans in Michael Shaw's line of work.

He breathed in deeply and silently pushed himself up so that he was squatting. He lowered his hand down to his belt and pulled from it a silver dagger. He could not mask the rasp as the metal slid along the sheath, but the feeling of comfort it gave him as he held it in his hand was immeasurable. He also had a silenced pistol in a holster, but he had decided a dagger would afford him more stealth.

Keeping to the shadows, Shaw crawled forwards into the clearing. Whilst the darkness was a blessing, owing to the lack of moonlight, he still felt incredibly exposed. He inched forward at a painfully slow pace, pausing and counting to ten every metre. The natural sounds of the forest helped cover much of the sound he created, but you could never be too careful. He was approaching the guard from his left, forcing him to use his peripheral vision, which might give him an edge of surprise. The guard needed to be dealt with quickly and silently. He was now so close to the guard that Shaw could reach out and touch his boots. The strain on his body and mind from moving at such a painfully slow pace was taking its toll, and Shaw fought to control his breathing as he gradually brought the knife up. He took one deep breath, let it out, and then slashed viciously across the backs of the guard's legs. The guard instantly collapsed—a direct cut to the Achilles' tendon would do that. Before he could make a sound, the blade cut deep into the carotid artery. Shaw's left hand moved instantly to the guard's mouth and pushed down hard, positioning his body on top of the dying man. Freezing cold blood poured freely from the deep gash on his neck. This man was not human but certainly seemed to be dying. A moment later, the body was still, and Shaw felt it safe to roll off him. He lay upon the rough grass that surrounded the tower and tried to catch his breath. Seconds later, he was on his feet, enjoying the sensation of standing upright for the first time in hours.

He stepped over the guard, wiping the dark blood from his blade, and studied the door. It was clearly heavy but not impossible to open; the worry was what lay behind it. There were no windows on the ground floor for Shaw to look through. He would have to enter blind and face whatever obstacles he met with speed and aggression.

Gently, he put his hand against the ancient oak and applied the smallest pressure. The door gave enough to tell Shaw it was not bolted; in fact, it was not even latched. The occupants clearly had a great deal of trust in their guard. Just as he was about to push the door a little harder, for the second time that night, the hairs on the back of his neck began to stand on end, and the blood pumping around his body turned to ice. A blade suddenly appeared and was pressing against his throat, the sound of someone's breathing filled his left ear. How had they managed that? His senses had been so in tune with his surroundings; he was sure he would have sensed the presence of another. Dropping his own knife, he tried to calm his breathing and accept that he now had a new problem to deal with.

His captor hissed something in a language he did not understand, but he got the gist after he was pushed roughly through the door. The lower floor of the tower was pitch black. The captor pushed him forwards into the blackness until his feet connected with steps leading upwards. They were spiralled, and Shaw guessed they were in the middle of the room. The staircase would most likely run all the way up the core of the tower. They climbed steadily; the man with the knife said nothing. He had removed the blade from Shaw's neck and was now pressing it painfully against his back. As they climbed what felt like an endless ascent, Shaw became aware of a dim light melting away the gloom. It became brighter and brighter until they emerged into a huge, circular room. It was lit by flames suspended in thin air all around its circumference. With the already intense tropical heat, the temperature in that room was nearly unbearable. He was shoved forward towards a chair and then pushed down onto it. His captor gave Shaw a very hard slap across the back of his head, nearly knocking him from his seat. This was obviously a way to beat the language barrier. Shaw assumed this was the universal language of "sit still! Don't speak."

He looked at his new surroundings. The floor was made from the same rough stone as the tower walls, and there was very little in the way of furnishings. A large table with five high-backed chairs was positioned to one side of the room. A large bowl sat in the middle, filled with fruits harvested from the forest. A hunk of some kind of meat sat beside the bowl with a large carving knife protruding from it. He became aware of a pitiful moan. He turned his head and wished he hadn't; his captor slapped him so hard this time it actually did knock Shaw off his chair. He rolled over and, as viciously as he could, kicked out his legs. His right foot caught the guard hard around the back of his legs. It was enough to buy Shaw time to jump to his feet and charge at the man, fists up, looking to attack as quickly and violently as he could. The two men clashed, both trying to rain as many punches down upon each other as they could. Shaw felt a sting as the blade of the knife slashed across his thigh. He felt his own blood pouring down his leg. For anyone else, this injury would have meant the end of the fight. A cut to the femoral artery would have been lethal. His attacker obviously knew this and stepped back to watch Shaw take his last breaths. Shaw could already feel the wound healing but allowed the man to believe that he was indeed dying. He fell backwards, hands clasped over the wound, grimacing at the pain which the healing process caused. The attacker stood over Shaw. He appeared completely composed, his breathing regular, and the knife was still in his hand.

What struck Shaw was the blackness of the eyes glaring down at him—no whites, no pupils, just blackness. The man smirked at him, his pale face registering some sort of victory. He took a step forward, raising his blood-stained knife. Unbeknown to his attacker, Shaw's leg had fully healed; all the bumps and scrapes from the fight had vanished. He was back to full strength. At an incredible speed, Shaw rolled to his right, bounding to his feet once more. He lashed out and caught the incredulous man across the side of his head. The blade went flying, and Shaw hit again, putting as much power into the punch as he could. The man remained on his feet but was clearly stunned. Lightning fast, Shaw drew the pistol and fired two rounds at the man. He finally fell to the ground as the plasma bullets ripped through him and embedded themselves into the curved wall behind. They continued to glow their neon blue for a few seconds and then extinguished themselves. The room was filled with the distinctive smell of burning flesh and phosphorus. Shaw once more began to try to steady his breathing as he peered down at his foe, who was still alive but clearly in a huge amount of pain. He wore a black cloak over black robes; a black tattoo in the form of flames trailed up his neck and ended somewhere under his greasy black hair.

Shaw's observations were suddenly interrupted by a low moan. He turned to study the sorry sight of a man, also in black, tattered robes, curled on the floor. A thick chain nailed to the wall trailed from a hoop around his neck. He was clearly in much discomfort as he writhed on the floor, claspng his abdomen. Suddenly he froze and sniffed the air; there was an urgency, a hunger in that sniff. Finally, he lifted his head and glared at Shaw, red eyes glowing faintly, filled with a crazed desperation. He watched as the vampire's eyes locked on to the drying puddle of Shaw's blood on the floor.

"Vermin, Mr Shaw. As I am sure you are well aware." An icy voice came from behind him. Shaw tore his eyes from the pitiful creature to face another figure dressed in black robes. The face was obscured in black shadow.

"Good evening, Mandrake." Shaw's courteous smile was empty, and it hid the rising fear which was beginning to chill his blood. His dark blue eyes locked onto the black pool of shadow, beneath which was a face that very few humans had cast eyes upon for countless years.

The robed figure studied Shaw for a long time. The room was still; even the cicadas outside had ceased their symphony.

"Why have you come to interrupt a rather pleasant dinner party with my guest, Mister Shaw? Was the blood of two of my men worthy of such a visit?"

Shaw, heart thumping, remained silent. His ever-busy mind was weighing up options, and he was fast beginning to realise that there were very few. The figure standing before him was one of the most powerful creatures that existed, and Shaw knew he stood little chance of fighting his way out.

"Always so calm and calculating, Mr Shaw, but great fear in you I sense. You find yourself in a situation where there is no chance of survival. My master will be most pleased that a great foe is to be destroyed even before we wage our great war. A fine bonus, I am sure you will agree." Mandrake took a step forward, and the light from one of the torches lifted the shadow, exposing a pale, sallow face, criss-crossed with deep scars, which wore a look of triumph. The black eyes glistened in the flickering flames. The creature writhing upon the

floor gave a whimper of pain. Shaw looked at the desperate face and realised, with a chill, that he recognised him.

Mandrake raised his white palm, almost in a giving gesture, and a bright, swirling, glowing red ball appeared above its surface. It lit the room further, and the suffering creature let out a howl of fear. Shaw heard the clink of chains as the creature tried to scurry away from the deadly red light.

“You speak of war, Mandrake, but these schemes never come to anything. You and I both know this. The demon world will never follow you,” Shaw looked briefly at the cowering creature, “I would certainly suggest kidnap is not the best way to win hearts and minds. Particularly as you have curiously seemed to have imprisoned the brother of a particularly powerful vampire.”

“You have no idea of what I speak or what I seek. That pathetic excuse for a vampire holds knowledge valuable to my master,” grinned Mandrake, swirling the index finger of his left hand in the glowing ball of red. Dangerous crackles and sparks flew from it.

“Nevertheless, you will hand over this creature to me. If Galtieri were to find out that you murdered his son, then you truly would find a war. The vampires will never accept the murder of their own kind at the hands of another race.” Mandrake chuckled and shook his head in mock pity.

“Fool, the vampires are already under my command. The third brother, Rufus, has already given us his loyalty. Galtieri is finished. His pathetic loyalty to your filthy human world has been his undoing. Besides, a vampire can only sustain The Thirst for so long. I am afraid your friend here has lost his mind. Even if you did manage to free him, you would never be able to control him.”

With that, Mandrake hissed some strange words into the glowing red sphere. Lethal sparks suddenly filled the room. Shaw fell to the ground, rolling this way and that, avoiding each spark with incredible speed. He bounded to his feet and jumped over the table, the contents of which exploded. He turned the table to its side and crouched behind it. He knew this wouldn't last. Another bout of red lightning filled the room, and one of the sparks hissed just over his head. The room was filled with the smell of molten rock and burning wood. The starved vampire was now screeching at the top of its lungs. Shaw pulled his gun from its holster. Taking deep, steadying breaths, he poked it above the edge of the table and fired off three blasts. He watched as Mandrake dodged the plasma bullets with impossible speed. There came a rumbling sound, and he realised that the tower was beginning to crumble. An idea, a desperate idea, suddenly came to him. It would be fifty-fifty, but he had experienced worse odds than those. He raised his gun over the top of the table and fired more blasts. He then leapt to his feet and ran as fast as he could, dodging bolts of lightning, one strike of which would have killed him.

“There is nowhere to run, Michael Shaw! Nowhere to hide. Accept that you have fallen at the first hurdle of this war and fall to your knees for a quick death. For once Pangea has reformed, the race of man shall become one of slavery and then extinction,” cackled Mandrake.

The tower was now beginning to lurch from one side to another. The rumble of ancient stones beginning to weaken was deafening. Shaw fell to one knee and took aim at the chains that held the cowering vampire. Streaks of black, burned flesh covered any exposed skin; it was a miracle the vampire still lived. It took only one shot, the chains fell apart, and Shaw jumped to his right as a lightning bolt scorched the very spot where he had just crouched. His plan was insane, but insanity was the only weapon he had. He loosed off more plasma at the dark figure, who was still flicking great forks of lightning around the room. The floor was now beginning to crack apart, and chunks of the wall had fallen. It would only be a matter of time before the tower fell. Would the insane, blood-starved vampire come to his rescue? In answer to his question, there came a roar of pain and rage. Seeing that he was finally free of the chains, the vampire's blood-red eyes had focussed upon the figure of Mandrake and pounced upon him. Mandrake tried to shake the creature off. This was the window Shaw needed. The lightning had ceased, and he jumped to his feet, running straight for what was left of the door to the spiral staircase. As he raced through the opening, there came a sickening crack and a yelp as Mandrake managed to wrench the beast from him and snap his neck. Shaw tore down the staircase. There were steps now missing, and he had to jump or slide down some of them. The descent felt endless. Falling dust and rock showered upon him, clouding his vision and filling his lungs. Over the top of all of this chaos, he could hear the screams of rage from above him. The doorway at the top must have finally collapsed, preventing Mandrake from following him. Mercifully, Shaw's feet met with flat ground. He charged through the door, out into the hot, sticky, moist air of the clearing in the rainforest. He knew he had only seconds. Mandrake may have been hindered by the blocked door, but that would not stop such a powerful being from giving chase. Shaw launched himself across the clearing and into what he hoped would be the protective cover of the dense vegetation. He ran, or rather scrambled, as fast as he could, ignoring the thorns, sharp-edged leaves and branches which tore at his skin. Behind him, lightning once again filled the night air. Flames sprouted from dead wood and old leaves all around him. Animals, woken by the chaos, began to panic and run for safety deeper into the forests. Something large collided with Shaw, and he was sent flying, landing roughly upon the ground. With rising horror, Shaw was suddenly aware that he had no idea where he was. He realised the lightning had stopped; Mandrake must have also realised Shaw's fears. To be lost in the rainforest was a death sentence.

"Leave him for the forest creatures," smiled Mandrake as he stared into the gloom. They would meet again... in Pangea...