

The League and the Legend

By Brian Wells

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CHAPTER 1
STEALTHY BLOODHOUNDS

Jake dove behind the bookcase just as the intruders surged through the massive library doors. He clung to the dusty wooden floor, jamming his face into the bottom shelf somewhere between *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He ventured a look up, scanning the cavernous room. There was no one in sight, but he could feel a presence. He carefully slid one of the heavy leather-bound books aside and glanced through the opening. An antique lamp dangling from the ceiling cast an amber glow on a figure huddled in the next aisle.

“I don’t see anyone,” Jake whispered.

“Shhh,” TJ hissed back, tightly clenching his eyes.

“You know that closing your eyes so they can’t see you doesn’t work, right?” Jake said in a hushed voice.

“*Night of the Panther*,” TJ replied.

“Daredevil?” Jake whispered. “Crucial difference. His other senses were mutated.” Jake rose slightly and peeked around the corner of the towering bookshelf. Still nothing. “It’s faulty logic at best. Now maybe if—”

Jake broke off speaking. *What was that, boots shuffling?* He held perfectly still... *Nothing*. “This is absolutely and completely toxic,” he continued. “How did they find us anyway?”

“Bloodhounds!” TJ hissed. “You were sloppy. You left tracks and they sniffed us out!”

Jake rose to his knees and slid more books aside. He took a good look across the room. Long rows of Greek statues gazed down from nooks in the dark paneled walls. Frosted globes, suspended from iron chains, mixed with the afternoon sun as it filtered through the soaring stained glass windows. Everything was bathed in a dim, golden glow. This was not your typical middle-school library, but then again, University Prep, on the edge of the University of Chicago campus, never pretended to be your typical middle school.

“What do you mean, ‘left tracks?’” Jake said. “I hardly—”

“Bread crumbs!” TJ snapped, reaching through the bookcase and trying to pull Jake back before giving up and scrunching his eyes shut again. He tapped the screen on his black rubber wristwatch. “Digital bread crumbs. You didn’t cloak your text and now the bloodhounds have locked onto our digital stink!”

Jake slid around the end of the bookcase and hunched down next to TJ. “The cloaking app’s all wonky.” He lifted his wrist, displaying his own matching wristwatch. “Your message this morning said, ‘Wussy whup’!”

TJ tapped his finger on the screen of his own watch a couple of times and frowned. “It was supposed to say, ‘What’s up?’ I’m still working out the bugs.”

“Well, until you—”

“Shh!” TJ slapped his hand over Jake’s mouth. “You hear that?”

Jake held perfectly still. “I don’t hear anything,” he mumbled through TJ’s hand.

“Exactly,” TJ hissed. “That’s how bloodhounds work.” Jake pulled TJ’s hand off his mouth. “You should check your research,” he protested. “Bloodhounds are crazy loud. They bark and go nuts when they’re tracking you.”

“Sure. That’s just what they want you to think,” TJ said. “Everyone knows the government’s been developing stealthy bloodhounds for years. You don’t even know they’re on you until *bam!* It’s all jaws and slobber!”

The library doors burst open. Light flooded the room and Jake and TJ hit the floor.

Footsteps. Boots. Was it just one person? More than one? Jake couldn’t tell. *Definitely boots.* The slow, deliberate steps echoed off the walls, inching closer. Jake lifted his chin to peek through the bookshelf. Something shifted two aisles over. He looked back to TJ who was slowly shaking his head and mouthing the words “stealthy bloodhounds.”

They clung to the floor, scrunching as close to the bottom shelf as possible. A dark shadow passed through the soft glow of the next aisle. There was a rustling. The books above Jake’s head slid apart. A shaft of light illuminated the boys’ hidden forms as the dark figure leaned in.

“Sad,” the voice said.

Jake squinted through the light. TJ remained still, clinching his eyes shut.

“I don’t know what’s worse. That you guys are so into this ridiculous game or that you’re so bad at it.”

Jake breathed a sigh of relief. “Wow, OK.” He scrambled to his feet and stepped around the bookcase, brushing the dust off his pants and sweeping a feisty curl of black hair out of his eyes. “So, hey, Lucy. We thought you were one of them.”

“You know if you guys spent half as much time on our group project as this geek tag competition, we’d be done by now.”

“The official name is Zombie Robot Invasion,” TJ said, stumbling out, while smoothing the wrinkles of his “Wookie of the Year” T-shirt. “And ZRI is proven to have many educational benefits.”

“Educational benefits?” Lucy said. “The eighth-graders chase you around campus and blast you with toy lasers?”

“It’s evade and capture. Last man standing. “It develops strategic thinking and problem-solving, not to mention, face-painting skills,” Jake explained. “All the basics. The problem is the eighth-grade team is subversive—”

“The Utmost Gentlemen of Noble Character,” TJ said, while pulling a small tube of hand sanitizer out of his pocket and smearing gel over his palms.

“Right, the Utmost Gentlemen of Noble Character,” Jake repeated. “They flat out cheat.”

“Blatent violations of the honor code!” TJ said.

“Total rogue action,” Jake agreed. “The library is a safe zone. No tagging. But they charge in, guns ablaze. And during study hall! Study hall is supposed to be sanctuary.”

“I have half a mind to report this to the game master!” TJ added indignantly.

“Is that the same half-mind you used at the Science Fair last night?” Lucy asked. “It was an accident!” TJ protested.

“Wait, what happened?” Jake said.

“These things happen!” TJ explained.

“These things happen?” Lucy said. “Your reckless drone almost killed those little—”

“It was a tiny cardboard box! I thought it was empty. We all did,” TJ said. “Filthy little rats!”

“They were baby lemurs!” Lucy said, turning to Jake. “His helicopter drone with that claw thing snatched them up in the air.”

“Someone should have warned me!” TJ said. “In my defense, I released them as soon as they started squealing!”

“Whoa,” Jake exclaimed. “Level Three debacle. Any aftermath?”

“Lunch detention and I have to write a paper on the endangered red-ruffed lemur,” TJ said.

“How did your mom react?” Jake asked. TJ’s mom was firmly in the “no excuses” parenting camp.

“Not good. I tried to explain, but she said, ‘I’ll give you a science experiment’ and made me clean all the toilets in the house.” A bell filled the air in the outside courtyard.

“We’re late for ‘Everjoy! Friday!’” Lucy said.

They hurried out of the library and pushed through the giant carved wooden doors.

“It was such a small box,” TJ mumbled as they crossed the courtyard. “We all thought it was empty.”

CHAPTER 2

A SUMMONING

Uni Prep's guidance counselor Mrs. Everjoy had recently added an exclamation point to her name. She was now legally "Mrs. Everjoy!" She said she hoped it would help her "connect with the kids" and "make learning fun," and that it would catch on. It didn't, it didn't, and it hadn't. Much to her disappointment everyone still called her Everjoy, with a conspicuous absence of the exclamation point or the energy she had hoped it would create.

Everjoy! Friday! (exclamation point intact) was her end-of-week assembly, packed full of school announcements, "personal affirmations," and a nutritious snack just before dismissal. You could get updates on the robotics team's latest victory, a motivational haiku, and organic, gluten-free tofu-tots. It was an embarrassment of middle-school riches.

As they entered the gym, Everjoy was wrapping up an awkward rap number with the school mascot, Alby, a kind of mash-up of Albert Einstein and the Tasmanian Devil.

"Howdy-hoo and what up, what up?" Mrs. Everjoy was constantly blazing new trails in the time-honored tradition of "trying too hard to be hip." She stepped back to the microphone, fighting to catch her breath.

"So that's just a few dope facts about our off-the-chain debate team." She removed her purple cat-eye glasses and mopped her forehead with a hand towel. "Alrighty, then! Just a few announcements. First, there have been a few questions surrounding yesterday's newspaper story about our school nickname. Even though we suspect it to be a smear campaign from a few shifty SMAC-DAB parents, we feel we need to respond."

Sisters of Mercy Academy of Chicago Day-School and Boarding was Uni Prep's cross-town rival in academic bowls and several obscure sports that most schools didn't bother with. In a "he-who-must-not-be-named" kind of way, no one at Uni Prep ever referred to them by their proper name. They were just SMAC-DAB.

"I've been asked to read the following statement which will be sent home to your parents today. Ahem." She cleared her throat. "University Prep's historic and beloved moniker 'The Fighting Einsteins' is in no way an endorsement of violence or hostility of any kind. Nor is it in conflict with the great Albert Einstein's pacifist views. Our use of the term *fighting* merely intends to convey our spirit and resolve, our desire to be the best we can be and to confront injustice in all its forms in deliberately nonviolent ways."

"Next, a big shout-out to our seventh-grade drone chess team for placing second in the Windy City tournament." An image appeared on the screen behind her of a small drone helicopter lifting a chess piece off a board with a claw-like arm. TJ was in the background, operating the remote control with Jake and two other students huddled next to him. "Way to go, Fighting Einsteins Drone Chess Masters!" Jake and TJ gave each other a quiet fist bump.

"Finally, a reminder that the School Spirit Bus will leave promptly at 4:00 p.m. Monday for the big match against SMAC-DAB. This one is on their turf, so we need to pack the bus and show our Einstein pride! Be sure to wear your "Destroy Mercy" T-shirts. We'll show those Mercy brutes the meaning of the word *pickleball!*"

The bell rang and the room filled with the rumble of kids rising from the tables.

"One more thing," Everjoy! called out. "Boys, remember as we head into the warmer season, deodorant is your gift to your fellow classmates!" As the kids headed for the door,

Jake's watch began to vibrate. A message appeared on the screen. "Come home ASAP. Bring TJ and Lucy."

"A text!" TJ exclaimed. "Someone sent you a text on your Force10?"

"It's either Artie or Uncle Gabe," Jake said. "They're the only ones who have this new number. It says to come home as soon as possible and bring you guys."

The three kids stopped at their lockers, grabbed their backpacks, and began fighting their way through the crowded hallway toward the main doors.

"This is it!" TJ shouted as they emerged from the building. "A summoning!"

"What are you talking about?" Lucy said.

"Come on. Jake gets a 'come straight home and bring TJ and Lucy' message from Gabe? It's been six months since they gave us the full briefing on the League. I bet there's some sort of situation. They have a mission for us!"

"Relax, Captain Marvelous," Lucy said with a shrug. "Uncle Gabe was clear he wasn't going to get us involved in any missions. He said it's far too dangerous. And second, I don't think your toy spy watch would be his first choice for communication."

"OK," TJ said. "For the seventeenth time, and I know it's the seventeenth time because my hypermemory does not lie, it's not Captain Marvelous, it's Captain Marvel. And as for me, it's Captain America. You know, I'm starting to wonder if you do that on purpose. And second, the Force10 spy watch isn't a toy. It's a revolutionary next-gen communications device that I've upgraded with a custom hack."

They crossed the school courtyard with its bubbling stone fountain and passed through an ivy-covered arch onto a busy sidewalk, joining a stream of students from the nearby university rushing past rows of sidewalk cafés and bookstores.

“I don’t know,” Jake shouted over the traffic noise as they climbed to the train platform.

“A choice assignment would be stellar, but I think Lucy’s probably right.”

They reached the top of the steps just as the train pulled in.

“But why the need to rush home and bring us with you?” TJ whispered as they settled into seats in the back of the train car.

“Not sure,” Jake said. “Maybe it’s because you’re staying with me for the weekend while your parents are gone. Maybe it’s about that.”

“Lucy too?” TJ said. “Nope. My money’s on situation. There’s a situation and it’s a summoning. We’re being summoned!”

Their car quickly filled. The kids paused their conversation while people pressed in on all sides. When they reached the Van Buren stop, they got off and hurried along the sidewalk next to the clamor of afternoon traffic along Michigan Avenue. The rising spray of Buckingham Fountain split the bright blue sky as they cut through Grant Park, finally reaching the park’s edge across from the Greystone.

The grand old Greystone Hotel with its twin crimson and gold flags and imposing wood lobby with a massive crystal chandelier had been a legendary Chicago landmark for almost as long as anyone could remember. While it was a bit rundown now, for Jake it was home. Jake’s “Uncle Gabe” ran the building maintenance and had adopted Jake when he was just a baby. The hotel was also home to a centuries-old undercover group led by Gabe called the Union Defense League. The existence of the covert League, its work fighting evil, and its hidden command center in the Greystone attic were just three of the surprising discoveries Jake had made the previous fall. He’d also learned that he himself was the secret long-lost descendant of President Abraham Lincoln. It had been a wild weekend that started with Jake just hoping to avoid a

middle-school Level Three embarrassment but quickly became a fight for survival and a battle against a nasty organization called the Order of the Dark Lantern.

“No Artie,” TJ observed, scanning the front entrance.

Artie Cameron was the affable Greystone doorman. Even though he was in his thirties, he was like a big brother to Jake. He was also Gabe’s right-hand League agent.

At first sight, Jake, Lucy, and TJ seemed like an unlikely combination—Jake, the undersized wrestler with a wayward tangle of black curls that defied haircuts and an awkward knack for reciting Civil War trivia when trying to impress girls; TJ, the boisterous, pop-culture spouting genius who wanted you to know he had no interest in basketball even though he was tall (made him a better fencer), dark (he preferred ‘Chocolate Thunder’) and handsome (just ask him). And then there was Lucy. Thanks to her parents’ international medical jobs (Mexico, Kenya, Nepal) and her mom’s Mexican roots, she was already a world traveler at twelve years old, with the funky exotic wardrobe and mad Budokai-do martial arts skills to prove it. As different as they were, however, the adventure that started with an explosion at their seventh grade sleepover last fall had created an instant bond among the three.

Jake’s watch buzzed again. When he pressed his thumb to the screen, the words *USE GHOST* appeared.

“Ghost Entrance!” Jake called out over the traffic din. “They want us to use Ghost Entrance!”

“*Ba-bam!*” TJ said. “This is a summoning, my young Jedi! A sum-mon-ing!”

CHAPTER 3

GHOST ENTRANCE

Jake was silent as they strolled past the stone gargoyles and marble stairs of the hotel's front entrance. Casually, but purposefully, they turned down the back alley. The small lane was not much more than a loading dock, a few garbage dumpsters, and a rusty old van with "Greystone Maintenance" stenciled on the side. Jake looked to his left and then to his right before yanking open the van's creaky rear door and climbing in. Lucy and TJ followed, and Jake pulled the door shut behind them.

He pressed his thumb on the inside of the latch, triggering a small blue light. The van began to move. At least the inside did. The outside shell of the van remained in place while the inside slowly dropped like an elevator.

They came to a stop and Jake pulled the latch, sliding the door open. They stepped out into a large underground warehouse space. Crates labelled "ARCHIVES" were piled high on steel racks lining one side of the room. They walked past a musty delivery van sporting a faded Dangerous Delbert's Donuts logo. As they rounded the corner, they passed a small canal, not much wider than a car. An undersized speedboat bobbed in the water next to a makeshift dock. On their right was a steel door that slid open as they approached. They stepped into a small elevator and Jake pressed his thumb on a square plasma screen. The door zipped shut and they shot smoothly upward.

"Well, that confirms it," TJ said, looking at Jake.

"What confirms what?" Lucy asked.

“Something’s going on,” TJ said. “Gabe always programs the access panel with some kind of riddle or trivia that Jake has to solve before it will activate.”

“True,” Jake admitted. “But that’s the regular apartment elevator. I don’t think he would do that on the Ghost Elevator,” Jake said.

“My point exactly,” TJ said. “A sum-mon-ing.”

They were silent as they rose through the building’s many floors.

“Horse poop,” TJ said.

“What was that?” Lucy asked.

“The answer to last week’s riddle was the Civil War slang for horse poop.”

“Disgusting,” Lucy said, making a face. “I don’t want to know.”

“Hey, I didn’t choose it! You know how I feel about livestock,” TJ said, reapplying a liberal dose of hand gel.

They continued to rise.

“Yankee brains,” TJ said. “Confederate slang for horse poop. You’ll thank me if it shows up as an SAT question someday.”

The elevator slowed to a stop. When the door slid open, they were staring at darkness. Nothing but pitch-blackness. Jake stepped through the door and a blue light lit up. They were in a small room, barely big enough for the three of them, about the size of a closet. Actually, it *was* a closet. A row of hangers with coats and jackets dangled from a steel rod at eye level just in front of them.

Jake slid the coats aside and pushed open a wood-paneled door. Lucy and TJ dodged the hanging clothes and followed Jake out. They were in a space about the size of a hotel room. It was circular, anchored by a claw-footed desk that looked like it had been salvaged from a looted

castle centuries ago. A beat-up love seat and an armchair, both patched and reinforced with duct tape, were clustered in front of a stone fireplace. An old leather book sat on a small end table nestled in between the seats.

“I didn’t know Gabe’s office had a secret back entrance,” TJ said.

“Only Gabe, Artie, and few others know about it,” Jake said. “I’ve only used it once or twice.”

“And now us.” TJ gazed at the walls. Dark wooden bookshelves curved around the room, each one stuffed with a mix of well-worn books, antique weapons, and half-assembled electronic devices. “Kind of Merlin meets Batcave,” TJ said. “With a touch of Tony Stark.”

“A touch of what?” asked Lucy.

“Really?” TJ shook his head. “I’m almost positive I covered this in our Marvel 101 talk. Tony Stark is—”

“Maybe later,” Lucy said. “Jake, what is this?”

“Sometimes I think she doesn’t really *want* to learn,” TJ mumbled, half under his breath.

The only break in the bookshelves was a carved wooden door inlaid with a small stained-glass shield. The door stood open, offering a view into a cavernous room, the hidden attic space that had served as the command center for the Union Defense League for over a hundred years. Plasma screens suspended from the rafters were alive with images of the White House, the Capitol, and some public square in London. Old cast-iron work tables were covered with maps and electronic equipment. But something felt off to Jake. There was almost no one in the room. He had never seen the command center so empty. He finally spied two figures in the corner.

A grey-haired man in a dark suit with a Cubs hat bent over a map on a battered work table. He was consulting with a young woman. The man stood up when he saw Jake peering out from the office. He quickly broke off his conversation and the two walked over.

“Good afternoon, kids,” Gabe said. “You remember Agent Michaels.”

“Bridget works fine,” the young agent said, reaching out her hand. “Good to see you again.”

Gabe led the kids into his office and shut the door.

“We came as quickly as we could,” Jake said. “What’s up?”

Gabe motioned for the kids to take a seat on the sofa as he settled into the chair. “We have a bit of a situation.”

“I knew it,” TJ exclaimed, starting to smile, but catching himself.

Gabe’s fingers slowly drummed the small weathered book on the table next to him. “Earlier this week our tech team detected some unusual activity on our server. They found that a hacker had penetrated one of our databases. They shut it down immediately. Fortunately, everything is encrypted so whatever they accessed will all just be random letters and numbers to them. Just to be safe, however, we’ve gone total firewall while we investigate; complete radio silence, no electronic transmissions.”

“What do you think is going on?” Jake asked.

“We don’t exactly know,” Gabe continued. “We traced the hack as far as a shadow account identified as Grimm510. It first looked like it was an offshore account, but now we believe that it’s just a relay station. The source of the hack is actually within area code 312.”

“Right here in Chicago?” Lucy said.

“Correct. That’s why the lockdown. We’re on a skeleton crew, trusting only a select few. We could have a mole.”

“A mole? So, like a double agent?” TJ asked.

“Yes. Highly unlikely, but we can’t take any chances.”

“Mr. Herndon, you said no electronic communication,” Lucy said. “But you texted Jake on his phone.”

“His toy watch isn’t connected to the system,” Gabe said.

“Actually, the website described it as a revolutionary next-gen communications device,” TJ corrected.

“So, a text to his watch is one of the safest forms right now,” Gabe continued. “Same for the burner phone I sent it from.” He held up one of those prepaid cell phones for sale at convenience stores. “Not traceable. All League business has been radio silent for days. Only hand-delivered encrypted messages.”

“Encrypted?” TJ asked.

“Handwritten encoded notes delivered by couriers” Gabe said. “Takes me back to the old days. Lost twins, Isaiah ciphers, Caesar wheels.”

Jake could see the look of confusion on TJ and Lucy’s faces. “Those are types of secret codes. The League used to communicate through couriers that way.”

“Sweet,” TJ said. “So how can we help?”

“Well,” Gabe said, shifting in his chair, “One of our couriers was due back yesterday with an important update. He never showed up. I’m taking a little road trip to investigate. It should be quick, but we’re not taking any chances. Jakester, we’re contacting Lucy’s parents and I’m going to need you boys to stay at her house until I get back.”

“What?” Jake and TJ burst out simultaneously. “We can just stay here with Artie!” Jake said. “We won’t get in the way. Maybe we could even help find the missing agent.”

“Jakester,” Gabe said. He leaned over and put his hand on Jake’s shoulder. “Artie *is* our missing agent.”

CHAPTER 4

THE LEGEND

“Artie’s missing?” Jake shook his head, trying to process the thought.

“It could be nothing,” Gabe said. “He might have just needed to abort the drop and since we’re radio silent, we wouldn’t know it yet. We’ll have someone down at Ghost Entrance to take you to the Garcias in about fifteen minutes.”

“Sir.” Bridget popped her head into the office. “There’s more activity.”

“Thanks, Agent Michaels,” Gabe said. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Sir, it’s about the legend.”

The color drained from Gabe’s face. He quickly stood up.

“I’ve got to go.” He grabbed the book off the table. “Head down to Ghost Entrance. Agent Richards will be waiting. You remember Jason. He’ll take you from there.”

Gabe stepped through the door and moved quickly to Bridget’s desk.

Jake was staring intently at the floor, silently moving his lips. He glanced back out at Gabe, who was already engaged in an intense discussion.

“I’m going to appeal,” Jake said, standing up. “I think we could help. I just think, you know. Am I right? I mean, I know we’re not full-blown operatives, but we could contribute, somehow, you know, I think.”

He took one step through the doorway before a deafening explosion ripped across the outer room. Gabe and Bridget were thrown to the floor. A wall of hot air blasted Jake backward into the office. A second explosion shot across the outer room, shattering the video screens and sending splinters and plaster raining down like a hailstorm.