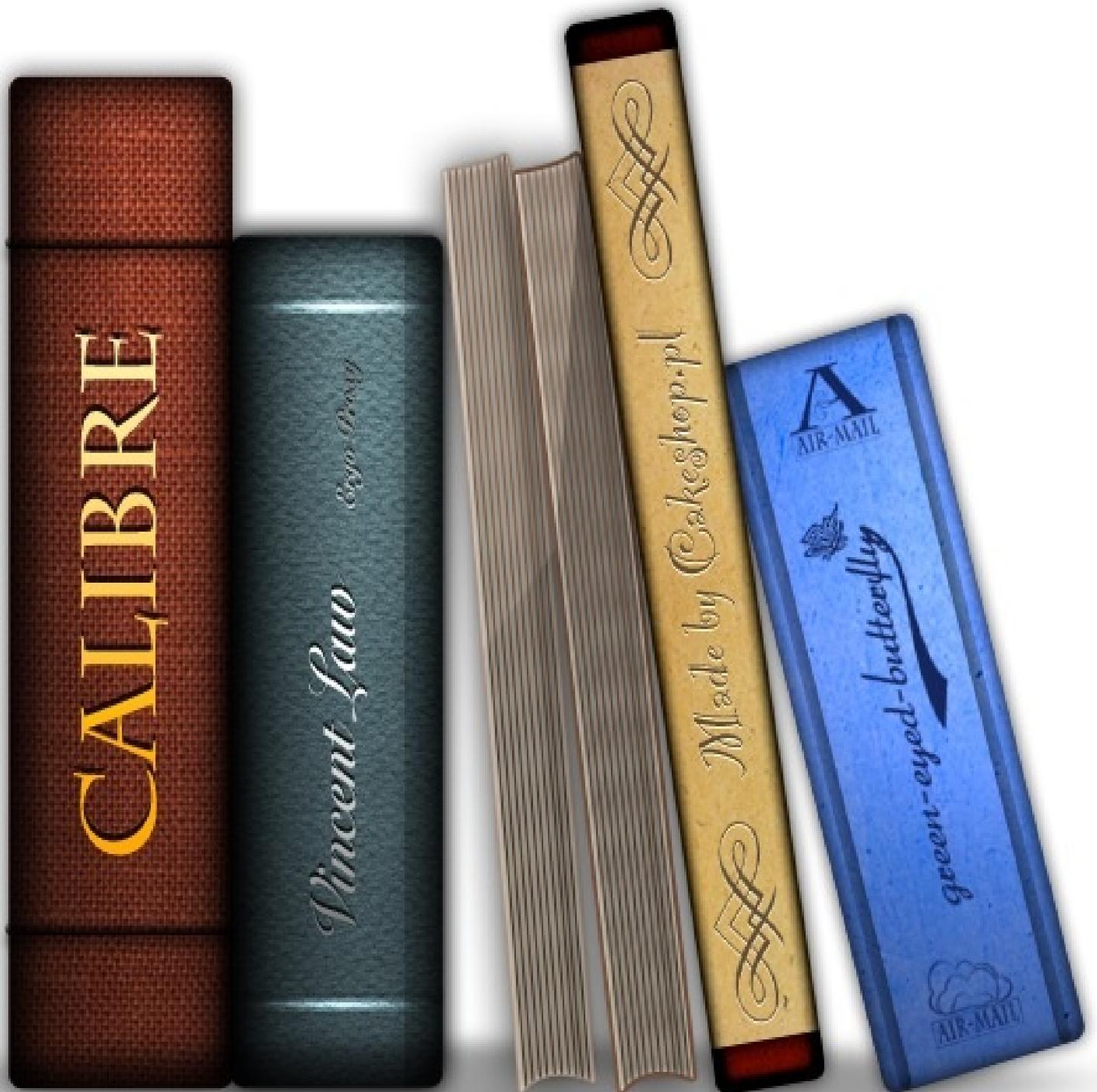


Demons and Druids

Patterson, James - Daniel X 03



calibre 0.7.31

Demons And Druids

James Patterson

And Adam Sadler

The Greatest Super Hero Ever..

Daniel X Is On An Impossible Mission: To Eliminate Every intergalactic criminal on the face of the Earth. Using his incredible superpower to create objects out of thin air, he's taken on some of the most fearsome and fiendish aliens in the universe, and now he's aiming to extinguish his next target: the explosive demon of fire, Phosphorius Beta, and his army of flame-weaving henchmen.

But it's going to take a whole new level of mojo to destroy this villain. Beta's strength has been growing since he arrived on Earth over a millennium ago, and he's finally ready to turn the blue planet into his own fiery wasteland. The only way to stop him is by jumping back in time to the Dark Ages to end Beta's blistering reign before it has a chance to begin. But can Daniel X take the heat? Or will the Alien Hunter finally get burned?

If you're ready to play with fire, join Daniel X on a wickedly wild ride--through space and time--for his most -sizzling adventure yet!

PROLOGUE:

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME

I BET I can see London from here, *I was thinking.*

I was literally 150 feet in the air above a grassy field, outside a charming little village called Whaddon. I'd been in England only a couple of days, and I still had some of that excitement that hits you when you go to a new place-- until it turns dangerous and deadly. Which was about to happen in a millisecond.

Because before I had time to take a good look around, I started to fall.

Fast.

Whipping around end over end, I saw the early twilight stars above blurring and the ground rushing up at me like it was about to swallow me whole.

I could hear voices shouting, but it was impossible to tell what they were saying over the blistering wind surrounding me.

Maybe I should have been worried, but I'll admit it--I was enjoying myself. That is, until my good friend Willy kicked me hard in the face.

Willy, Joe, Dana, Emma, and I were playing soccer. Our own version, *in which I was the ball That's correct. I, Daniel X, had transformed myself into a soccer ball. Usually you'll find me in human form, but occasionally I morph. It's just one of my interesting, sometimes flabbergasting powers.*

Luckily, soccer balls don't have nerve endings, I thought as I flew back into the air, reaching new heights this time.

"And Willy controls the centered ball beautifully, shooting a deft pass to Joe. He takes it up the line. But-- no! Dana sweeps in with a well-executed slide tackle and steals it!" Joe always liked to deliver the play-by-play for our games. And just about anything else we did.

"Pay attention, Joe," said Willy, grimacing. "We're getting creamed by girls."

Dana, in the middle of passing me to the other end of the field, cracked up. Lanky Joe is the least athletic of my four friends, but when he shuts up even he can play soccer better than most of the guys in the World Cup.

Dana kicked me hard, and I once again savored the rush of flying through the night sky--until I saw Emma's pale, round face rushing right toward me. She caught me easily on her forehead, and juggled me there for a moment as she turned to the "goalposts," two towering oak trees at the end of the field.

Then Em bent her small, nimble body back and "headed" me straight up in the air. Way up. I relaxed into free fall. Below me, Dana and superjock Willy were racing toward the goalposts.

Dana got there first. As I came down, her blond hair twisted around her as she jumped and spun like a top, fell backward, and aimed a scorching scissor kick right at the goal. The teeth-rattling power of her kick took me by surprise.

"GOOOOOAAAAAAL!" screamed Joe from the other end of the field in his best super-stoked announcer's voice.

I had already overshot the goalposts by at least a hundred feet when I realized I was headed straight into the tree-lined gorge that bordered the field.

I focused for a secondhand--without even a "pop" or "zap"--I was back to being myself--a teenage kid--again. I grabbed on to an overhanging tree branch as I flew past. -

Hanging one-handed over the gorge, I frowned at Dana. "You did that on purpose, didn't you?" I called to her. "Tried to launch me into the briar patch."

She laughed in the way only she can. "Daniel, you look like a hopelessly depressed orangutan." ' Before I could come up with a snappy reply, Joe's voice rang across the field. "Okay, you two, now can we get going? London's not going to walk to us! We have a monster to catch."

PART ONE

BLOOD AND SUCKERS

Chapter 1

I JUMPED DOWN from the tree and dusted myself off. You think *playing* soccer is dirty?

Try being the ball.

A couple of minutes later, the five of us were strolling down an English country road that was cuter than a postcard. Our pickup soccer match had been a good distraction, but now it was almost eight and night was starting to fall.

"Well, let's hoof it, guys," I suggested. "In a couple of hours we can find somewhere safe to camp out."

"A couple of hours?" Dana complained. "Can't you materialize a car for us or something? Teleport us?"

"Too tired," I replied. "Takes a lot of focus. Which I don't have much of after you guys kicked the bejeezus out of me."

A light from behind made us turn around. A large vehicle was approaching and appeared to be slowing down. My friends moved back toward the shadows, ready to disappear if need be.

Fortunately, they didn't have to. As the vehicle pulled up alongside me, I saw that it was a beat-up van, probably large enough to hold ten or eleven. A tiny woman with short gray hair was behind the wheel, wearing a tweed suit that was at least two sizes too big for her.

She rolled down her window and peered with careworn eyes into the darkness behind me. I thought she would ask directions, but instead she asked, "Are you lost, dearies?" I liked the nice smile lines around her mouth. I liked her spacious van even more.

I put on my best harmless-backpacking-tourist face. "I'm afraid we're stranded, ma'am. We're trying to get to London." *To catch some aliens--Number 3 on The List of Alien Outlaws on Terra Firma, to be exact.*

"Oh, Americans...!" She smiled. "Well, I'm heading that way. Hop aboard."

Chapter 2

IT DIDN'T TAKE MUCH to convince us. We gratefully piled in. Willy and Emma in the back, Dana and me in the middle row, and Joe sprawled out in the passenger seat next to the driver.

We drove in silence for about ten minutes or so. Joe had nodded off, and Willy and Emma, who are brother and sister, were chatting in hushed, lazy voices behind me.

I had almost dozed off when Dana moved her head in close, almost right against my ear.

"Have you noticed anything odd, Daniel?" she whispered.

"What?" I whispered back.

"The driver's seat--it's on the left side."

"So? That's where it's supposed to be."

"Not so. We're in *England*, remember? They drive on the other side."

That was a little unusual *I thought to myself*. Why would the van be American?

And there was something else, something that had been gnawing at me since we got in. Something about what the driver was wearing. Tweed is a rough grayish green material made of wool. It's most often used for the jackets of college professors, pipe-smoking stamp collectors, and-- now I remembered--hunters.

And how did I now guess that the little old lady was not a professor or stamp collector? Call me crazy, but it didn't fit with the profile of those folks to be driving a vehicle that had--I noticed with horror--what appeared to be dried bloodstains all over the backseat.

I tried to lean forward to get a better view into the front seat. That's when I realized I couldn't move a muscle. I couldn't even blink.

"So you've noticed, *dearie*." The driver's voice seemed to get deeper and rattle in her throat. Then an inhuman rasp twisted its way out. "I'm a hunter. *JUST LIKE. YOU.* And I do believe I've caught dinner!"

Chapter 3

JOE SNAPPED his head up. Or tried to, I should say. "Dinner? Who said something about dinner?" The guy had an appetite bigger than the British Isles.

"The person who's about to devour you," Emma said through gritted teeth.

"Hey! I can't move, guys," he reported. "Even my mouth feels like it's starting to freeze up."

"Thank God," muttered Dana, but I could hear the fear in her voice.

"Silence!" shouted the driver. It seemed all wrong: that grating, metallic voice coming out of that kindly-looking grandmother's face.

But it wasn't my imagination. In the next instant a gray, pulsating tentacle descended from the ceiling and wrapped itself around my mouth. It felt sticky, warm, and alive. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a dozen more tentacles *gagging* my friends. Dana's eyes were flooded with fear and confusion.

Not to be able to explain what was happening--to her, most of all--was excruciating. The problem was, I couldn't move, I couldn't create anything, I couldn't transform. I couldn't even talk, to tell my friends to break out, to run away.

If I could have activated my powers, there might have been any number of ways I could have gotten us out of this--by making my friends disappear ; for instance. (I'll have to explain that trick to you later.) Since I didn't hear another word from my friends, it looked like they were fully incapacitated at this point, too.

I tried to assess our very *sticky* situation. As my eyes scanned the walls of the van I could see them moving, pulsing, breathing. And the ceiling--it was a forest of waving tentacles.

Now I understood why we couldn't move our bodies. Strong tendrils that were no thicker than rubber bands had shot out from the van's seats and enveloped our arms and legs more effectively than steel manacles could.

The tentacles reminded me of the sea anemones I used to see in the tide pools on the Oregon coast. Unsuspecting fish who swam too close would be grabbed, stunned by the neurotoxins in the anemones' tentacles, and slowly digested.

That's what this van was, I realized suddenly. *A giant anemone.*

And then came another totally creepy thought: The driver wasn't actually driving. She was part of the alien, one of its organs. She was the bait.

Chapter 4

SHE--IT, I should say--saw my look of understanding and horror.

"By now you've noticed my tentacles are full of neurotoxins." *It* cackled nastily. "Just be thankful that you'll all be dead before you're digested. I'm told that the process is excruciating."

The old woman's body began to transform now, melting away into her seat. Meanwhile, a bulbous tentacle tightened around my mouth, and the interior of the van seemed to be shrinking.

I blinked, desperately trying to clear my mind and find a quick solution. Being squashed into mush and then digested? Not how I was planning to leave the earth.

Up in the front of the van, Joe's head was shuddering as he struggled against paralysis. Behind me I could hear Willy gurgling and Emma humming in a useless attempt to speak--or scream. And Dana... well, one of her hands had solidified around mine in a death grip of fear.

Hundreds of mouths had opened up *in the walls* around us and began to speak in unison, like a nightmare in surround sound.

"Alien Hunter," the mouths addressed me, "this is for my beloved brother. It's too bad he couldn't be here to see it. Do you remember Number 40? You disintegrated him in

Dallas, Texas!"

Of course I remembered! In fact, the oily-smooth interior of the van reminded me all too much of being *inside the stomach of Number 40 before he--well... that's another story, and I couldn't focus on past victories right now.*

The roof was pressing down hard against our heads now. The walls and ceiling constricted like a giant heart beating.

"Nice eating you..." The beast's final message trailed off in a sickening gurgle. "I'm Number 43, by the way. My brother's name was Jasper."

"May he rest in *pieces!*" I wanted to quip.

Another powerful contraction came. The walls closed in even tighter, pushing me and Dana together. It was something I might have enjoyed, if we weren't both about to become meat-and-bone Jell-O pudding.

The despair was overwhelming. It was as if all the terror my friends were feeling was being transmitted back to me times ten. I had never gotten them into a situation this bad before, one that I was powerless to get them out of.

The walls were closing in, bending me double. The tentacle around my throat was twisting too tight for me even to swallow. Everything was getting dim, and quiet, and distant.

It's over, I thought. My eyes were finally squeezed shut and I thought I might suddenly burst like an overripe zit.

And then behind the pain and the fear I heard words way in the back of my mind.

"*You still have time... You can take out Number 43. At least I think so.*"

I recognized the voice immediately. It was my father.

My *dead* father.

Chapter 5

EXCUSE ME while I digress. I was only three when my parents were killed, murdered by one of the most evil alien creatures ever to have set foot on Earth--The Prayer by name--who just happens to be Number 1 on The List. Even in those three short years, though, my parents had managed to fill my brain with all kinds of interesting and useful information, which surfaces from time to time-- anything from a fantastic recipe for barbecue sauce (the secret's in the sugar) to, say, the speed you need to travel to escape Earth's gravity (around 25,000 mph). It's usually really simple stuff like that-- but sometimes it's the bit of knowledge that could save your skin.

Right now I really, *really* hoped my dead father was about to offer survival tips instead of cooking tips.

"Dad... what? I'm kind of tied up right now," I answered him in my thoughts.

I could still feel the greasy tentacle choking me, feel the wall and ceiling pressing against me, but at least they weren't getting tighter. I wasn't gasping for breath either. Miraculously, I was able to open my eyes.

One at a time.

If I had been able to move the rest of my body I would have reeled in shock. Staring right into my eyes was Dana, her mouth twisted into a circle of horror. But here's the really strange thing: she was totally motionless.

I tried to speak, struggled to touch Dana, but my body, my head, my face, were immobilized. Not just paralyzed, but completely frozen.

That's when I realized something that was easily as fascinating as a meeting with the Dalai Lama. Not only wasn't I suffocating, but I wasn't breathing. Then it hit me.

Time had stopped.

My father's voice rang out again in my skull, stronger this time. "Very good, Daniel. I knew you hadn't forgotten. Even though you were only two when I taught you how to dive below the surface of the flow of time. Well, I'll see you later, champ."

Wait! I thought. *What do I do now?* But my dad's voice was gone.

I had no idea how I'd made time freeze, but my father's words had stirred something--a distant memory. *Rotating stars, spinning planets.*

I remembered Dad hanging a mobile over my crib. A model of Earth's solar system--spinning, slowing, stopping. And then it started to spin in the opposite direction-- in reverse. It was all coming back to me, the knowledge slowly trickling in like an Internet download.

Imagine that your brain is a spotlight that casts a sharp focus on whatever you're looking at, or thinking about, or feeling. I had to defocus, widen that beam until it shone on everything. It's even harder than it sounds, and I was out of practice.

Usually when I use my powers, I have to concentrate, but this time it was just the opposite. First I relaxed, let my mind go limp--not an easy feat when the girl you care about most is going to die right before your eyes.

Hold on, Dana.

I felt my brain detach itself from all my sensations right down to the taste of sweat in my mouth. And that's when I saw Dana's left eyelid flicker. Her expression was changing, becoming less terrified, but not in a way I'd ever seen a face change before.

I was turning back time.

Chapter 6

AS DANAS FEATURES lost their deer-in-the-headlights look, the walls that had been crushing us pulled back into their original shape. The tentacles withdrew from our necks, the poison from our bodies. The sensation in my ears was unexpected, like the twisted sounds of music playing backward. I could actually feel the vibrations of the van's motor, as well as my friends' and the little old homicidal lady's voices coming out of my ears.

Then everything started to speed up.

Joe's snores were returning, traveling back into his mouth. I felt Dana's breath near my ear and considered *pausing things there--you know, just for a second--but as the thought hit me, the moment was gone, and we were all traveling backward out of the van.*

Before I knew it we were standing in the road watching it drive away in reverse. Now I had to refocus my mind, to restart time flowing forward again.

I was fully prepared for a mental battle, but as soon as I stopped relaxing my thoughts, I felt a *jolt, like an elevator stopping too fast in the middle of a thousand-story building. When I turned around I saw Willy, Joe, Dana, and Emma staring at me expectantly from the shadows at the side of the road. They seemed oblivious to the fact that we'd nearly been the alien equivalent of goulash.*

I couldn't believe it. I'd actually gone *back in time*. On my first try!

"Is everything all right, Daniel?" asked Dana. "You look a little pale."

"Yeah, you look a little disoriented, you know, like you just saw an *alien*" Joe quipped. He wiggled his fingers beside his head and started singing the theme from The Twilight Zone in a high-pitched falsetto.

"Give him a break, Joe," said Emma. "It's still not too late for us to ditch you here. I hear Whaddon is famous for its delicious pork pies. You'll be in pig heaven."

"Hey, I think somebody's coming," Willy announced, pointing at a set of headlights.

And there it was: the vehicle of death. From here on out, things would be easier without having to worry about my friends--or explaining how I knew exactly what was going to happen next.

Chapter 7

I CUPPED my hands out in front of me and concentrated. I'm no chemistry major, but I've read some textbooks. A few hundred, actually. I quickly visualized the chemical compound I wanted. Two parts nitrogen, oxygen, and hydrogen, and one part carbon. A dash of dioctyl sebacate, a bit of polyisobutylene. *There.*

In my hands, I held a fist-sized lump of explosive.

Even my friends looked a little concerned.

"Uh, Danny Boy? What are you doing there, buddy?" asked Willy.

"I'll tell you guys later. Trust me, it'll be a real blast."

"Huh?" said Willy.

"Daniel--" Dana tried to protest as I made all four of them disappear. (I'll have to explain *that trick to yo u l ater.*) *It was all I could do not to conjure up a bazooka and simply wait for the van to get within range.*

As soon as the explosive was secure, I walked back to where we'd been standing before. The van slowed, and the window rolled down.

"*Here I am! Come and get me!*" I taunted in my most maniacal voice. "*Dinner's ready!*" I hooted as I tore down the road toward the tree.

The old hag must have floored it because the vehicle lurched forward and roared toward me. And right toward my trap.

Using my lightning-fast reflexes, I was able to slip out of the way right before the van smashed into the tree.

And then I half leapt, half fell backward, just out of range of the expanding fireball. '

For a moment, vivid geysers of oranges, reds, and yellows hung in the air--and at the center was the van, burning, vaporizing into atoms. There was a grating, scraping sound under the roar of the shock wave--the alien screaming. And then there was only smoke, and silence, like in a cemetery at three in the morning.

Leaves and ash rained down through the haze. All that was left of the tree was a charred stump a foot or two high. Of the van, nada. Well, almost nada. A hubcap rolled toward me, dissolving into a puddle of mush before it reached my feet.

Thanks, Dad, *I thought to myself.* You saved my life. And we got Number 43.

Chapter 8

AFTER the carpooling disaster, we got smart and took the train to London. I know it sounds anticlimactic, but when we finally arrived there, the big city looked pretty much how I expected.

Of course, before I left the States I'd speed-read through about twenty travel guides as well as a couple of history textbooks, plus the complete works of Shakespeare for good measure. Frankly, at this point I probably knew more about London than the prime minister or, certainly, the mayor.

But it was thrilling to see in person all the things I'd only read about, like the Tower of London (not *technically a tower, but, even better, it's more like a castle*). Let me debunk a few other common misconceptions for you. *Big Ben --actually the name of the clock's bell, not th e c lock itself. Hyde Park --London's version of Central Park (or, actually, vice versa) -- is not named after Dr. Jekyll's alter ego. Piccadilly Circus -*

-not nearly as fun as it sounds. Turns out it's just a big intersection. Which was where all five of us were currently cruising around on a double-decker bus.

Emma was kneeling on the seat behind me. "The driver says we'll be at Oxford Circus in a couple of minutes."

"And you've pretty much missed all of the sights since your nose is still buried in that laptop," Dana noted.

"So who's next on our hit list?" Willy asked.

"Not a Lapillajade, I hope," Emma commented, referring to the most intelligent species in the universe. "They're pretty tricky."

"Absolutely not. Most of them are good guys," I said. In fact, Lapillajades are often disguised on Earth as astronomers and scientists, including dudes like Copernicus, Galileo, and Sir Isaac Newton. Humankind would pretty much be in the Dark Ages without them.

I looked back down at the open laptop I had balanced on my knees. If you didn't stare too closely, you might think it was the newest, slimmest iBook. It wasn't much thicker than a sheet of paper, but its technology housed information on every known extraterrestrial outlaw on the planet. Just for the heck of it, I'd even run a search on the van-emone and found out its real name: Ziquechyx Philbin. With a name like that, no wonder the beastie was so angry.

But the reason I'd come to London in the first place was to hunt a sinister alien force who was the polar opposite of a Lapillajade. Primitive, fierce, uncontrollable--and with no intellect whatsoever. And he was the number three most-wanted alien on Earth.

Name: Phosphorius Beta

Human Aliases: Bayswater Burnie, The Fleet Street Flamer, Jack the Zippo

Area of Infestation: London and surrounds, United Kingdom, Terra Firma

Arrived on Terra Firma: Unknown. At least half a century ago, but some speculate earlier. Without a witness to verify the presence of the "Dark Heart,"⁷ as its "soul" is legendarily known, it is often impossible to distinguish Phosphorius Beta from natural fire sources.

Illegal Activities: Arson, Smuggling, Vandalism, Homicide

Planet of Origin: **Cyndaris**

Alien Species: **Phosphorian**

Special Abilities: Possession of Human Bodies/Minds, Manipulation of Flame (see Phosphorians) The file photo that was up on the screen was indistinct, to say the least. In fact, it looked like a distant shot of a field, ablaze with red-tinged flames.

I guess that was to be expected; according to my notes, no human had ever come into close contact with Number 3 and survived--at least in human form.

But that was also to be expected, wasn't it? The List described Phosphorians as follows:

The Phosphorians are the dominant sentient life-form on the volcanic planet of Cyndaris, which orbits the red dwarf star Gliese 876. Not much is known about them, as Cyndaris is utterly inhospitable to organic life. Average surface temperature on the planet is approximately 2000 degrees Kelvin, hot enough to melt titanium.

Phosphorians who venture off-world invariably destroy nearly everything they come into contact with through the process of combustion. Current intelligence indicates that this is due to their physical makeup, which is suspected to consist solely of an exothermic and self-sustaining chemical reaction.

Translation? By The List's account, the Phosphorians were made out of pure flame.

The data went on to describe Beta's rap sheet here on Earth. Most of it, predictably, involved burning things: buildings, crops, vehicles, even people, even pets. The London newspapers had attributed his crimes to three or four different arsonists, but according to the information in front of me, Number 3 was Earth's worst firebug.

I was nervous about facing him, and not just because of my recent encounter with the Death Van. The last time I had a seriously close encounter with fire was when I was three, when the alien named The Prayer killed my parents and burned down our home.

Trust me, that tends to leave an impression that lasts.

Chapter 9

ON ACCOUNT of our house being burned to the ground, the only thing my mom and dad left me--besides The List of Alien Outlaws on Terra Firma--was my new day job: I am the Alien Hunter. Or, as Dana playfully refers to me, "Space Cop Numero Uno."

I guess that deserves an explanation.

Before their murders, my mother and father were Alien Hunters here on Earth, where alien outlaws have lived and created havoc for millions of years. The aliens have been responsible for a few minor mishaps--like one of the ice ages, the extinction of several animal species, and, more recently, the Great Chicago Fire, the fire that destroyed most of the Coney Island amusement park in the early 1900s, countless kidnappings and missing persons-- especially kids and, for some reason, dogs. I guess these creeps never read Marley and Me or watched any Lassie reruns or movies.

There are a couple of other things you need to know about me, too.

First, *my four best friends*: Willy, Joe, Emma, and Dana (who I'm kind of crazy about). Tragically, my friends died years ago on our home planet Alpar Nok as a result of a ruthless planetary annihilator known as Number 6.

Rewind, *you're saying*. Didn't they just star in the whole beginning of this story here in the present day?

Okay, brace yourself for this one: I can re-create them pretty much at will--for companionship, fun, safety, to help pry open sticky jars, and so on and so forth. And Mom and Dad show up sometimes too--along with a little sister (Brenda, affectionately known as Pork Chop) that I never truly had but always wanted.

You see, I happen to have the greatest superpower of them all: *the power to create*.

And no, I'm not God, or a god, or the son of a god.

At least I don't think so.

Chapter 10

"I'M TIRED of driving to all these circuses that aren't really circuses," complained Joe as we disembarked at Oxford Circus. "Let's find somewhere to crash and have a snack. I could eat a horse! Oh, I mean, 'Scuse me, guvnor; but Oi declare Oi could eat a 'orse!"

"Don't be disgusting, Joe," said Emma, giving him a look. Emma was fanatical about animals of all kinds, unless they were deadly alien life-forms.

"Yeah," I added. "And your cockney accent could use some work. Try watching *Mary Poppins again*."

At Oxford Circus we were near the center of town, and the heart of the action: just a few blocks from the West End, where the theaters are, and Soho, which is full of restaurants and nightclubs. I figured even an alien and his imaginary friends wouldn't seem too weird in the middle of a bunch of ravers, actors, and dancing fools. This, I had decided, was where we should set up our home base.

We split up in order to find our perfect abode. I told my buds to look for something empty but not derelict. Over the past couple of years we'd done this many times, so they knew what to look for.

The best part about doing things this way was that, even though we were scattered all over the area, we could talk to one another telepathically. It's like a chat room in your head, and everybody's invited.

Twenty minutes passed, and then I heard Willy's voice coming over my mental intercom. "How would you feel about staying in a youth hostel, Daniel? I hear they're supercheap."

"Stay with a bunch of grungy backpackers? No, thanks," Emma jumped in. "Those folks don't ever shower. Sorry. I'm a prude about cleanliness. You know me."

"Hey, I found a little office building that's condemned," said Joe. "Looks cozy."

Dana chimed in. "Yeah, Joseph, if you like floors that have more holes than Swiss

cheese. Listen, guys, meet me at the corner of D'Arblay and Berwick. I think I found something really interesting."

It took me a couple of minutes to get to the building Dana had found. It was a two-story town house covered top to bottom with tarps and scaffolding. One look at the place and I could tell that construction had been halted for quite some time.

"And this is better than my condemned office building because... ?" Joe scoffed.

"Because, let's face it, girls have a better sense of interior design," Dana shot back. "I'm not game to sleep in icky gray office cubicles if I don't have to. You'll see what I mean."

REFURBISHED 2-BEDROOM! CONTACT OWNER FOR DETAILS! screamed a faded sign in the window. Underneath it were the words ready for move-in on ... and a series of dates that had been crossed out. The last one was over three months ago.

I shut my eyes for a moment, concentrating, visualizing. Iron and carbon, beaten thin. When I opened them, I was holding two of my favorite tools, a lock pick and a tension wrench.

"Guys," I said, as I leaned under a tarp and popped the lock, "welcome to our humble abode."

Chapter 11

AS A SIDE DOOR swung open silently, I was hit with a blast of stale air. I've been in a lot of abandoned buildings, and with the help of my eight alien senses I can tell a lot by taking one whiff of a place.

"Hmm... atmosphere's dry. I guess we're mold-free," I said. "Overtones of wood polish. Slight bouquet of musty cotton stuffing. Can anyone tell me what that means?"

"Yeah, baby! We've got *furniture!*" cried Joe delightedly, running across the room and throwing himself sideways onto a richly upholstered couch that had gold claws for feet. "So, do I look like Rose from Titanic ? 'Oh, paint me, Jack, paint me--'"

Joe broke off into a laughing and coughing fit so violent that he rolled off the couch and onto the floor.

"I still don't see why we can't just rent a normal place, Daniel," said Willy, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. "That's what we did in LA, remember?"

I hesitated. I had told them about the van-enome and my discovery of time travel, but I hadn't mentioned just how close we'd all been to becoming alien hash.

"I just want to make sure we're off Number 3's radar. Totally off the radar," I replied with a little too much emphasis on the dangerous aspects of this gig.

"But--"

"Look," I continued, "call me paranoid if you want, but I'm talking complete stealth, okay? You guys gotta promise me," I added. "Seriously."

There was an awkward silence, finally broken by Dana. "Daniel, do you want to talk about it? Maybe you should..."

I didn't really, but I gave a nod anyway. I ignored the slight feeling of guilt creeping up on me as I made Emma, Joe, and Willy vanish from the scene. Where exactly do they go? I don't know; they won't tell me.

Then I followed Dana upstairs into one of the bedrooms.

Wow, I thought, we *hit the jackpot, didn't we?* In the center of the room was a gigantic four-poster bed, complete with lush red curtains. A wardrobe roomy enough to hold the clothes of a total shopaholic stood off to one side; next to it hung a luxuriously tall and wide mirror. On the other walls, a series of large sun-bleached tapestries depicted knights endlessly hunting a white stag.

The two of us sat down on the bed. Dana looked at me expectantly.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, what?" I said stupidly.

"Tell me what's going on."

"Um... how about alien hunting?" I offered. "Same old, same old?"

"It's different this time," Dana insisted. "I remember what happened in the van, Daniel. The walls were crushing us; I couldn't breathe. I was in pain, the worst I've ever felt. All I could do was stare at you, knowing we were going to die. We were all going to die. And then you saved us."

She lowered her voice a little, as if the rest of our friends were in the next room, listening. "I don't think the others know about the time travel. Or why you're a little shaky right now."

"Well, frankly I'd rather they didn't."

Her voice was gentle. "Daniel, it's all right. It's all part of what you have to do. What you were born to do, I suppose. We're just along for the ride. Right?"

"Dana, there's something else... something else that's been getting to me." I was definitely in spilling-your-guts mode. I knew I would have to watch myself, or I might just get all gooey on her about how crazy I really was about her.

"You..." I swallowed nervously, unable to speak for a moment. Then I regained my voice. "You were real. Back on my--our--homeworld, Alpar Nok. You, Joe, Willy, Emma. You were all real."

Her expression went from surprised to baffled to horrified.

I went on. "When I visited there I saw images, like telepathic snapshots. My relatives showed me. We were all kids who hung out together, before I left for Earth. Then the Vermgypians came, invaded. They called it FirstStrike. You were all... killed at your school..

The silence seemed to fill up the room, till I thought we would both drown in it. Then Dana's voice, shaking a little, pulled me back to the surface. She spoke slowly, like she was trying to solve a tough math problem.

"So we were real, then we died. I don't remember any of it. What does that make us? *Ghosts?*"

"I don't know, Dana. All I do know is, I'll never, ever let any of you die again." I had to fight to keep my eyes from tearing up. "I swear, on the Bible, on The List, on the house where I grew up--except I can't because it's burned down. But never, never again will my friends be hurt." Then I looked up into her perfect blue eyes. "Especially not you, Dana."

She stared right back at me with the softest smile in the history of this planet.

"Thank you, Daniel. I'll try to do the same for you. I would die for you. *Again*"

Chapter 12

I LAY BY MYSELF on the bed for a while, staring like a zombie at the wood-beamed ceiling. A million thoughts raced through my head, way too fast for me to comprehend. I'd dropped a little bit of a bomb on Dana, and she'd needed some alone time, so I made her disappear.

But after that convo, I still needed someone to talk to, worse than ever.

Then I felt a reassuringly familiar hand on my shoulder. "Daniel?"

"Mom?"

I hadn't intentionally created her, but there she was. She was wearing a purple knit cardigan with yellow puppies on it, one of her favorites. Sometimes, when I needed her most, she would just appear. I'd created her and my father so many times that it had become reflexive.

"Feeling down? You shouldn't be. You know that you have friends and family who love you very much. Even if they are imaginary."

I couldn't help smiling. For people who had been killed almost thirteen years ago, my parents had a lighthearted view of the world.

"Thanks, Mom. Hey, did you know I can time-travel?"

"You were the last one to figure that one out, sweetie. It's okay. I always told your father you were a late bloomer." She gave a little giggle, and then suddenly got serious. "But that's not the reason I'm here, is it?"

She was my mother, all right. Her mind-reading abilities weren't really fair play, though--she was my creation, after all. I could never really know for sure, but I suspected she might have access to parts of my brain, my memory, my subconscious, that even I didn't know about.

"It's just... When Dana, and the others, almost died back there, things changed somehow. I'd never felt like that about my friends before. Losing them would be... almost as bad as losing you and Dad all over again."

"You could just conjure them up again, Daniel. They're already dead."

"No. You don't get it, Mom. It's about doing the wrong thing. It's about hurting them. It's just... I don't ever want to put them in danger again."

"You know I love your friends, Daniel. But you can't let yourself be distracted. Number 3, Beta, he's the real deal. You've never faced a power quite like his."

"Yeah, I've been studying him."

"Well, your father did too," she said. "He's been an infestation in this country and on this planet for far. too long."

I was intrigued. "But The List dates his history back only about fifty years. He came to Terra Firma before that?"

"You'll have to figure that one out yourself. Just remember, if you want to play with fire you have to accept the consequences. *You will get burned.* Trust me on that."

I nodded. I could take getting burned if it meant keeping my friends safe.

She gave a wry smile. "Daniel, you're quite the Alien Hunter already, but I don't know if you're ready for Beta. Your father and I met him once. Think of a million or so angry, hungry wolves--on fire. That's a pretty good approximation of Number 3."

And on that scary note--she was gone again.

Chapter 13

I BARELY SLEPT all night. I couldn't shake my mom's words. Instead, I went into an almost obsessive trance, reading links off Google News--anything that had to do with fire. I wondered just how often Beta was at the center of any and all destructive fires around the world.

And there were a lot of them Wildfires, worse than ever in recorded history. Factory fires, mine fires, apartment building fires, churches and clinics and homes set on fire by missing arsonists...

Feeling totally overwhelmed, I reread The List description again. It placed Beta in the British Isles only. So why would he *stay here*? *Most aliens I knew couldn't wait to get their slimy little hands all over the globe.*