

Sneak Peek of Better the Demon You Know

Evil had a scent: lemon. It was bright and crisp and brought to mind colorful drinks with paper umbrellas savored in tropical climes after a successful drug lab bust in the jungle.

Well, at least the drug lab part was accurate when it came to today's mission. Shame about the rest.

In a sales pitch I'd since dubbed "Snow Job," I'd fallen prey to the lure of escaping Vancouver's December gloom and rain for a winter wonderland, with the added glory of stopping some Eisei Kodosh from producing a non-magic, yet illicit street drug called Crackle. And when Francesca, the level three leader on this gig, had shown me photos of the pools of steaming hot springs nestled beneath mountain peaks that was our reward once this mission was wrapped up, well, my temptation was complete.

Now, with the compound where we suspected the lab was housed within sight, I was also assaulted by the peppy citrus smell of the drug, taunting me with visions of a world with color rather than an endless sea of white whose glare in the moonlight was starting to induce blindness.

Interestingly, Francesca had left out several key details about this mission: how we'd be strapping on snowshoes (more like tiny torture contraptions than the lightweight paddles I'd envisioned) and trudging over uneven rural terrain, sinking into the snow with each footstep when we weren't skidding on frozen patches hidden under powdery drifts; the fact we'd be approaching the clandestine lab at night in subfreezing temperatures; and the double my body weight in outdoor fabrics that were slowly sous-videing me to death.

The only sounds had been the sharp crunch of our party breaking the crust on the snow with each step, my hot, damp breathing against the heavy scarf wrapped around my mouth and nose, and the wind that stung my eyes, groaning through the trees.

Francesca held up a gloved hand, her brown cheeks ruddy with cold. Edward, a buff Serbo Canadian and the first of our trio of level two Maccabees on this takedown immediately stopped, followed by me, and then Paul, an older operative who showed photos of his prize-winning Siamese with the same pride as a new dad.

I unsnapped the binding on my snowshoes with the manic relief generally reserved for getting through airport security and scoring coveted concert tickets and tossed them under the massive evergreen next to us with a sigh, rolling my ankles to stretch them out. Sweat ran between my shoulder blades, and my hamstrings and quads burned.

The last twenty feet between us and the barn was partially shoveled, partially tamped down from whoever worked here, and easily accessible.

Snow splatted off the tree branches, barely missing our party, but I didn't care, lost to a coiled excitement that flared up inside me. *Please let our quarries fight back.* This city girl was no match for Mother Nature, but most human opponents I could handle just fine, and I was raring for someone to look at me wrong.

Francesca indicated for Paul and me to head for the small barn, while she and Edward checked out the weather-beaten house on its left.

Paul and I bolted silently, keeping low.

Sadly, there was no cloud cover to hide us once we burst from the woods across the exposed ground. The sky was clear and the moon hung low in the sky, illuminating us like nature's searchlight.

Any chinks in the barn's siding had been patched from inside. They'd boarded up the windows and soundproofed it well since there was no faint murmur of voices or any sound of electric equipment like the condensers, evaporators, or heating mantles involved in the production of this synthetic drug. Not even the hum of a generator.

It was odd that they'd taken such care, given how remote this property was, and yet Crackle's lemon scent had managed to defy their other security precautions and ooze into the surrounding woods. I didn't have time to dwell on it, however, because Paul and I were too busy playing hopscotch through the blind spots of the security cameras.

He grasped the handle of the barn door and turned back to me with his eyebrows raised.

I stuffed my gloves into my jacket pockets, drew the weapon peeking out of the holster attached to my belt, and nodded.

The Zen Zapper was a new design combining electroshock technology with white flame magic. Not only would it physically incapacitate the target, it'd amp their level of calm into an almost compulsion-like desire to chill out and stay put.

I'd proposed the idea a couple of months ago after a case where a White Flame had relaxed a Prime vampire into remaining still long enough to be staked. This was the first working prototype, and if the magic failed, I'd still have its Taser-like capabilities.

After a late-night brainstorming session with the R&D crew generated a shortlist of names that included the Tranquilizer Thunderbolt, the Harmony Hammer, and the Mellow Magic Mallet, we went with Zen Zapper which we'd deemed the best of the bunch.

Paul flung the door open. "Maccabees! Freeze!"