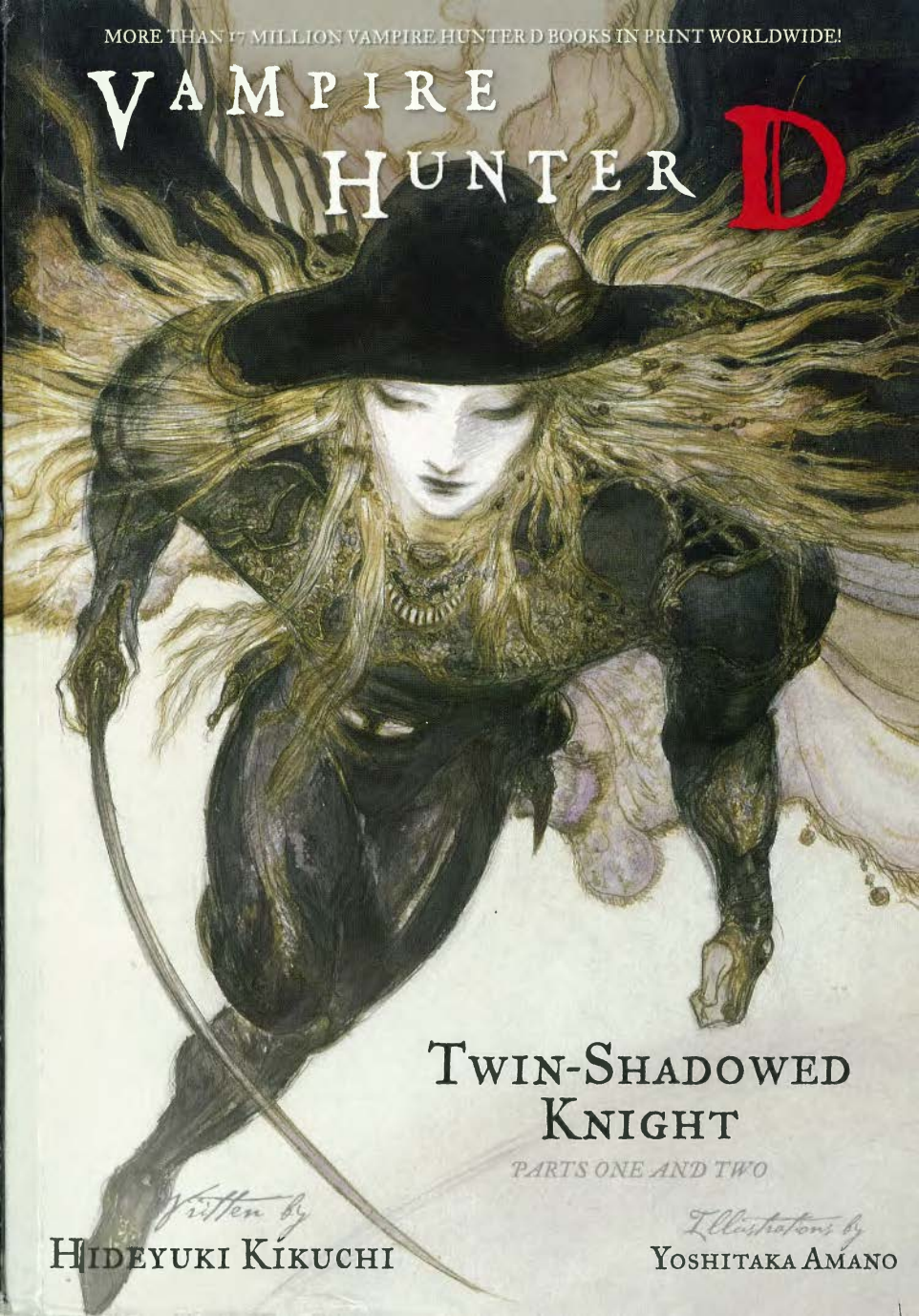
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VAMPIRE HUNTER D



TWIN-SHADOWED KNIGHT

PARTS ONE AND TWO

Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

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VOLUME 13

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Dark Horse Books®
Milwaukie



Digital Manga Publishing
Los Angeles

VAMPIRE HUNTER D 13: TWIN-SHADOWED KNIGHT
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Cover art by Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by Kevin Leahy

Book design by Krystal Hennes

Published by
Dark Horse Books
A division of Dark Horse Comics
10956 SE Main Street
Milwaukie OR 97222
darkhorse.com

Digital Manga Publishing
1487 West 178th Street, Suite 300
Gardena CA 90248
dmpbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kikuchi, Hideyuki, 1949-
[Di soei no kishi. English]
Twin-shadowed knight. Parts one and two / written by Hideyuki Kikuchi ; illustrated by Yoshitaka Amano ; English translation by Kevin Leahy. -- 1st Dark Horse Books ed.
p. cm. -- (Vampire Hunter D ; v. 13)
"Originally published in Japan in 1996 and 1997 by Asahi Sonorama Co."--T.p. verso.
ISBN 978-1-59307-930-7
I. Amano, Yoshitaka. II. Leahy, Kevin. III. Title.
PL832.I37D9713 2009
895.6'36--dc22

2009034016

ISBN 978-1-59307-930-7

First Dark Horse Books Edition: December 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

The Twin-Shadowed Knight

PART ONE

Mama

CHAPTER 1

I

A heavy wind raced by. It bore a weight because it carried the molecules of what was termed a killing lust.

Two shadowy figures squared off on a desolate patch of earth. Whenever the wind passed them, it grew furious.

The sky was as dark as the afterworld.

Suddenly, one of the shadowy figures pounced. As he rose ten feet straight up, he swung both arms down.

Two spiteful flames erupted from the black earth, shooting straight for the figure still on the ground. Like lines drawn by a talented artist, the fiery streaks came together on the figure.

Two silver flashes crossed.

If fire is a physical phenomenon, it has to have mass and substance. Thus, it is possible for a greater mass and harder substance to deflect it.

The light from the flames bouncing off the stark cutting edge became a sword rising into the air. A simple leap made the second figure a sparrow in flight.

Faster than the figure in midair could rise to greater heights, the sword came straight down on him, splitting him from the crown of his head to the base of his neck.

The wind was stained red. As it slapped bright blood against

the black earth, the two figures landed on their feet a dozen yards apart. One of them collapsed, while the other stalked across the ground.

Not even bothering to wipe his blade off, the victor returned it to the sheath on his back. There wasn't a speck of gore on it. There was nothing special about the blade, but its speed had prevailed over the cohesive powers of the blood.

The wind had a fawning glow, for it had blown across the shadowy figure's face. Deep, dark eyes gleaming beneath the wide-brimmed traveler's hat, the line of a nose that was sure to send tens of millions of artists into despair, lips that quietly brimmed with a will heavier than anyone would ever know—

The wind had a request. Tell me your name, it said.

"D . . ." a voice called out.

The figure with his head split in two had called to him. Though already a death mask, his face wore a smile.

"D . . . Listen to me," he said, even his voice that of the departed.

The heavens and earth roared, and the hem of the black coat hid D's face. As if to shield him from the words of the dead. As if to keep him from hearing.

There was a sharp slap. A hand in a black glove had knocked his coat out of the way.

"Oh . . . so you intend to hear me out . . . One word will say it all . . . Of course . . . for you . . . that one word . . . might send you to hell."

The figure on the ground was an old man with white hair and a white beard. His long robe was woven from metallic threads in a wide range of hues, and its distinctive color scheme declared that even among the Nobility, he was a necromancer of some stature.

The beautiful figure stood there without saying a word, as if he'd heard these words tens of thousands of times before.

The bisected and bloodied face split apart, and the old man raised his hands to hold it together again.

"Go to . . . Muma . . ." he said, his voice sounding like it came straight up from hell.

And as he finished speaking, he took his hands away, and something that might've been blood or brains oozed from the reopened skull.

A life that'd lasted who knew how long had ended.

Only the wind growled across the wilderness until a new voice was heard, saying, "Did he say, 'Muma'?"

It sounded like it came from D's left hand, which hung at ease by his side.

"What's that mean?" D asked.

Signs of surprise seemed to rise from his left hand for a second.

"Damned if I know," the dried, cracked voice responded. "Just the babbling of some guy about to die. A little memento to mess with you."

The voice then mixed with groans of pain. D had squeezed his left hand into a tight fist.

"D-don't . . . do . . . anything . . . stupid . . ."

The fist trembled. Finger and finger pressed together, and nails broke through skin and muscle. A thin red stream had begun to drip to the ground.

"Answer me," D said.

"About what? Ow! I don't know . . . anything at all . . ."

"What is 'Muma'? A person? The name of a place? Or is it—"

"I . . . don't . . . know . . ." the hoarse voice said, its manner changed so that it now sounded like it might throw up.

He gave his fist one more squeeze. Silence resulted. After maintaining the fearsome tension for several seconds, D opened his fingers. The blood that covered the palm of his hand was scattered by the wind.

D squinted his eyes. He had no memories of this word Muma. And yet, his body told him of subtle changes. His blood was coursing faster by a thousandth of a second. D instinctively knew when something that small had changed.

Was it in his heart or his genes? It was like he'd felt a mysterious excitement from the second he'd heard the word Muma.

D turned his gaze to the far reaches of the gloom-shrouded plain.

Something roiled like smoke all along the horizon: a mob of countless figures shaken by the wind. Their vile forms were evident to D's eyes alone. Arms like withered branches, fingers tapering into claws, skin that seemed born of corruption, cloudy eyes reminiscent of a dead fish, bodies covered with pustules—all of these creatures had been summoned from their graves deep in the earth by the necromancer who'd just been slain. Even D didn't know what they actually were. Nor did he know what they were supposed to accomplish. Their overlord had just been reduced to a blood-soaked cadaver.

D gave a brief whistle. The sound of iron-shod hooves approaching rang out. Before the white cyborg horse could come to a stop, D was in the saddle. As he took up the reins, the horse went right into a gallop—in the opposite direction from the mob of misbegotten dead. And most likely toward the hell the necromancer had mentioned.

It was after midnight when the white horse and black rider blew into the village of Gilhagen like a monochrome cyclone. Street lamps glowed through the weighty darkness of the wee hours.

Atop a hill that was rather high, even for a village in the rolling terrain at the foot of a mountain, a house with roof and walls painted black squatted in the darkness. It didn't have windows, either. It was impossible to tell if it had a door or not, but D stood in front of the house and brought his fist down just once.

A thin crack of light spread through the dark. The door that'd opened in response to that single knock couldn't even be seen.

Standing there with a soot-stained lamp in hand was a gray-haired crone. She had a face that looked like leather pasted on a

skull. The black leaf that covered her left eye must've served as an eye patch.

Opening a crack of a mouth, she said, "To be calling on the home of Origa, the greatest sorceress in the southern Frontier, at this hour, you must be prepared to sacrifice your life . . . if not your very soul."

Her voice was like a chill wind gusting from a dark grotto.

"I will, if that's your wish," D said.

The sorceress's eyes snapped wide open.

"That voice . . ." the crone said, blinking vigorously behind the light. "Yes, and that beautiful face . . . It can't be . . . You're—"

"I've come because there's something I'd like to ask Origa the Sorceress."

Before D had even finished speaking, the door opened wide.

A few minutes later, D sat at a heavy table, and the sorceress brought him a hot cup of tea. As she shot a mysterious look at a countenance so gorgeous it seemed to drink up darkness and light and even sound, she asked, "What can I do for you?"

"I've heard Origa the Sorceress specializes in memory regression."

"That's right. Humans, horses, birds, flame beasts, shadow eaters—hell, I can slip into the memories of any supernatural creature and make 'em recall the past. But—"

Origa stopped there, the expression wiped right off her face, as if she'd just committed some unpardonable sin. A face of unearthly beauty was right before her. The woman's next words would be a betrayal—a betrayal of a beauty that couldn't possibly be human.

"But . . ." the old woman sputtered, trying desperately to retain her pride. "But . . . I won't for you. Be on your way. I didn't meet anyone tonight. Didn't see anyone, no matter how gorgeous. I'll believe that to my dying day."

"Why are you afraid?" D asked from the other side of the little round table.

"I'm not afraid of anything, I'll have you know."

"I don't believe we've met before. Or have we—"

"Hell, I've never laid eyes on you before. At any rate, kindly be on your way now. Or if you won't leave, I will!"

"Please, restore my memory."

The crone quaked at D's words as if struck with palsy.

"I already told you . . . No more of this foolishness!"

"I'll pay you ten times your normal rate. And I'll do you a favor as well."

"A favor?"

"I'll give you a look into your own past."

"You're talking nonsense!" the crone said with a low laugh.

The laws of nature had decreed that sorcerers who could restore the memories of others couldn't go back through their own.

D wasn't smiling.

The crone stopped smiling, too. Licking her puckered mouth, she said in a parched, cracked voice, "You mean to tell me . . . you could do that? No, you could . . . I believe you could at that . . . you of all people. Nearly thirty bandits were cut down before my very eyes . . . back when I was five—and that's the only thing I remember from my past."

"How about it?"

As the question was put to her, the crone suddenly turned her gaze to the vicinity of D's left hip. She'd gotten the feeling the hoarse query she'd just heard had come from there.

After a bit of consideration, the crone nodded and said, "Okay, my beautiful demon. My normal fee will suffice. That . . . that and the return of my past. Not that I doubt you or anything, but would you be so kind as to show me a little proof you can really do it?"

D's left hand rose before the crone's eyes, which were rocked by puzzlement. There was no glove on it.

When he reached across the table and touched that hand to her right temple, the crone's body arched in her chair. Her expression changed. The fluctuations came at intervals of a fraction of a second. Anger, hatred, fear, joy, and finally sadness skimmed

ruthlessly across her deeply wrinkled face, hammering her, teasing her, and then leaving.

Somewhere, the lid of a pot rattled quietly. Apparently she was boiling medicinal herbs. Before it rattled a second time, the crone sat back in her chair normally. Her whole body was suffused by a mysterious kind of peace unconnected to the relaxation of her muscles, and tears rolled from her eyes.

What had she seen?

Blinking repeatedly to stem the flow of tears, the crone then focused her gaze on D.

"You pass muster, D," she said in a perfectly clear tone. "I remembered all manner of things. But instead of thanking you, I'll see to it I give you what you want for certain. Come this way."

Rising with the lamp in one hand, the crone began to walk toward the doorway, and then stumbled. Falling to the right before she could regain her balance, she was caught by the figure in black. D.

"You're a surprisingly good person at heart, D. Right this way."

After stepping through the doorway and walking down the dark corridor a bit, the crone opened the door at the end.

The room was a dreary affair, with nothing but a metal bed and a chair.

"Lie down," the crone told D, gesturing to the bed.

She then took a bamboo flute out of a niche in the wall.

"This is called the returning flute. It has a unique construction that allows it to extract memories from the brain. To date, I've used it on nearly twenty thousand people and supernatural critters, and not once has it failed."

And yet, she hadn't wanted to use it on D. The incredible swordsman the crone had seen when she was five must've been him after all. But what was it she feared she might glimpse in his past?

"Lie back," Origa said, pointing to the bed and readying the flute.

In no time at all, the thin strains of a melody echoed from the instrument, moving to the ceiling and walls as it flowed through the room.

"First layer of the subconscious—passed," Origa muttered in a low tone, although how she managed that with the flute still to her lips was a mystery.

The melody changed.

The secrets of the famed flute that could restore lost memories were its inner workings, mechanisms that made the memories replay, and this tune, which was known only to the sorceress's clan.

D didn't move. Was he sleeping? Was he even breathing, for that matter?

As if entranced by his handsome visage, the crone said, "Second layer—no, let's just dive straight down to the mystic layer."

There was a ghastly ring to the voice of Origa the Sorceress, like she was sick from the smell of blood.

The mystic layer—that was a mysterious zone of the human mind only those of her line could reach.

Adjusting her grip on the instrument, Origa began to pipe a short, strange rhythm wholly unlike what she'd played thus far. Accompanied by light, the arrows of sound slipped into the ears of the gorgeous Hunter—no, they battered his brain directly.

Origa's features grew indistinct—blurred by the sweat that had covered every inch of her in a split second.

Look what kind of misery had to be endured to call back lost memories! The body of the sorceress contorted and grew dehydrated, and she might have shed as much as a tenth of her weight. In exchange for that fearsome price, the notes produced by the magic flute seemed enough to make even a rock shudder, echoing in an eerie melody like the marching tune of a demonic army, orderly and awe inspiring.

At that moment, the first thing that could be called emotion suddenly raced across the face of the sleeping D. His right hand reached for the sword by his side.

"Don't!"

Whose shout was that?

The woman's screams, exploding from the little black house, were swallowed by a far deeper darkness. The sounds dragged long, long tails after them—then vanished unexpectedly.

Aside from that, this had been a particularly quiet evening.

Past noon on the following day—when the Hunter in black was more than 120 miles from the village—a villager who called on the home of Origa the Sorceress was left standing frozen and speechless upon discovering the crone's body in pieces in the blood-spattered room.

II

Surprisingly, there were many types of travelers that one could expect to see on the highway. Medicine peddlers dressed in white with drug cases of the same hue slung from their shoulders and tricolored pennants of red, white, and blue flying high off the poles on their backs. Contract fighters in old-fashioned armored cars that had heavy machine guns and the barrels of rivet guns protruding from them and the words Warriors Available written in large letters on their sides. Traveling performers who did flips on top of carriages, disgorging flowers from their mouths, then striking them down with knives or gouts of flame. And so on, and so forth. And the eyes of all of them bulged in their sockets.

What some saw from the front and others from the rear was a cyborg horse galloping at terrific speed. But even those who recognized it as a horse still didn't believe it. Cyborg horses couldn't keep that kind of pace, and what was more, as it was passing them, a number of people saw a figure of unearthly beauty . . . and to some it looked as if said figure was actually running right alongside

the horse. Whatever the case, by the time they could focus their eyes, both the cyborg horse and the human figure were dwindling in the distance.

Not even the bands of warriors astride their vaunted steeds or the riders of the Pony Express—who were said to have the fastest horses on the road—felt like challenging that pair, who had literally galloped along as if possessed by the dark lord of the winds.

It was D. However, the gorgeous young man had never raced like this in the past. Whenever he commanded his mount to run at full speed, the cyborg horse entered a mad gallop, as if in the grip of some unearthly spell. As a result, his horse moved as swiftly as a swallow in flight. But it couldn't continue like that forever. If he saw that his cyborg horse had grown exhausted, D dismounted and ran alongside it to lighten its load. Needless to say, those times were few. His horse slowed down a bit, but keeping pace with a wildly galloping horse was something no human—or even Noble, for that matter—could do.

Nevertheless, the horse had been ruined.

Near the towns and villages, there were rest stops along the highway where travelers might obtain cyborg horses or energy bikes. The proprietor of the shop D entered glanced at the cyborg horse that'd collapsed after it galloped in, but by the time he realized it had died of excessive exhaustion, D had already selected a new mount, left a pile of coins that would also cover the burial costs of the old horse, and then disappeared into the distance in a cloud of dust.

In the past three days, he'd ridden twelve hundred miles without a moment's rest, and he was on his third cyborg horse. He truly was riding at an insane pace. D's unearthly aura took hold of the steed. But what was the purpose of that aura, and at what was it directed? Where was he going? And what was waiting there?

The far end of the desolate night plains had begun to take on a watery hue.

Wherever this young man went, people always met their fate. But whose might it be this time? Would it be D's?

In the village of Sedoc—or to be precise, on the outskirts of the village—an incredible change took place on the twenty-sixth day of the third month of season A——. A group of elderly women on a pilgrimage from the east were staying at Sedoc House, the village inn, when all twenty of them suddenly suffered heart attacks in the night and died. After the sheriff's department wrote up a perfunctory report, they were carted off to the morgue.

In the middle of the night, the janitor from the morgue rode to the sheriff's office with bizarre news. One after another, the corpses in the morgue had gotten up, smashed through a stone wall, and begun to march off in single file toward "the red wasteland" on the village outskirts, by his account.

The sheriff railed about how they'd been bitten by a Noble and grilled the janitor on what the hell he'd been doing, but the poor janitor insisted there was absolutely no way a Noble could've gotten near them.

At any rate, talk soon turned to forming a search team and rounding up the corpses, but just then, the caretaker from a cemetery near the sheriff's office bolted in with a face as pale as a dead man's. He told them that every corpse in the entire cemetery had risen from its grave. After clawing up through ten feet of heavy dirt, they reached the surface and started walking.

The sheriff asked him where they were headed. But he already knew the answer.

"The red wasteland," the cemetery caretaker replied.

An urgent appeal went out, and more than thirty men responded immediately, taking up their inevitable task as residents of the Frontier. They came with sharpened stakes and spears and bows in hand, quickly proceeding toward the outskirts of the village.

They were a third of the way to their destination when the

massive earthquake struck. Heaven and earth rumbled. The ground undulated like waves across fabric, rapidly pitching from side to side. You could say it was a miracle that no one in the search party was harmed. Not even the horses had been able to flee, and they'd fallen to the ground and rolled around on their sides for what'd seemed like an eternity, though it was later learned that the trembling of the earth hadn't lasted five seconds.

Still, the sheriff and a number of other brave souls were to be lauded for the way they decided to press on less than five minutes after the great quake had passed. Driving their cyborg horses as fast as they could, they arrived at the edge of a red plain where the composition of the soil made it look like blood, and were struck by a terror that effaced all other thoughts of strangeness as they froze on their mounts—or rather, with their mounts.

The red ground was missing.

What they saw was an outer ring that seemed to go on forever, dropping at a sharp angle into a great mortar-shaped depression. From the standpoint of natural phenomena, such an occurrence wasn't inconceivable. What terrified the group was that along that vast brink—later the hole would be found to be a mile and a quarter in diameter—there was a mob of shadowy figures. Some clad in rags, others fairly well dressed, and still others nearly completely naked, they stood peering down at the bottom of that subsidence without moving a muscle, irrespective of age or sex. There was nothing about them that had the slightest semblance of human life—they had eyes as cloudy as those of dead fish, sunken cheeks with bones laid bare, and pale shapes wriggling in holes through their chests and bellies that could only be maggots.

All of the village's dead.

"No," the caretaker said in a flat tone. "That's not right. They aren't just from our village cemetery. There are too many of them."

At that point the sheriff sensed the presence of countless people behind him and heard their footsteps.

"Corpses," someone shouted. The moonlight drank up his voice.

Behind them, dead beyond numbering were coming down the highway. And although the sheriff and his men didn't notice it, they must've traveled quite some distance, since each was stark white with dust from the ankles down.

"What are they up to? What the hell are these things?"

Ignoring the sheriff's muttered remarks, the walking dead marched on, trudging right past the living. And then, as if they'd been given a push from behind, all the dead who stood at the brink of the mortarlike depression leapt in at once. The row behind them followed suit, as did the one after that, and another, and another.

Their brains assailed by rank horror and the foul stench, the entire search party passed out. They were brought back to the village by the remaining members of their group.

And for two full days after that, the sheriff watched the procession of the dead to their mass grave.

Were there really that many bodies buried around the area? How much longer would this go on?

These concerns ate at every brain, leaving the townsfolk on the edge of madness. The next thing they knew, the procession of the dead had ended, but the villagers were left in a state of shock, roaming the streets like the newly dead.

A young man in black with heavenly beauty and an exhausted horse came into town with the wind whirling in his wake. Halting his horse in front of Sedoc House, the rider grabbed one of the unsteady villagers and asked, "What happened?"

The young man's tone and his handsome features returned the stupefied villager to his senses. He told the young man everything he knew, from start to finish.

"Am I too late?" D muttered in a tone devoid of emotion—a voice of iron—and he prepared to get back on his horse.

"Wait!" someone called out to him. Though it was low, the voice had a faint tinge of something to it.

Not even looking, D put his heels to his horse's flanks.

As the gorgeous rider and his mount tore up the ground, the voice called out once more.

"Wait, D!"

III

The girl introduced herself as Mia. She said she was the daughter of a fortuneteller who lived about sixty miles to the north. Her smock and the skirt she wore below it were both embroidered with a mysterious crest representing where she came from, and her numerous necklaces and bracelets were set with stones with a deep luster that seemed to hold a dark history. She knew D's name because when her mother predicted a strange occurrence in this region, she'd told the girl that would be the name of the man who'd race there from afar.

"From what Mother says, the key to solving this mystery is held by a man who comes from far away," Mia said in a hard tone. "This case is something no one can handle. No one except the man named D. D—if that's the name that you go by—what in the world are you?"

"Can you see the future?" D asked.

"A little," Mia replied, her voice betraying restrained pride and self-confidence.

"In that case, do you know how this all ends?"

"No, not even Mother knows that. But it's not because she's not powerful enough to see it. Something interfered." After a short pause, the girl continued. "As far as what happened, I asked the villagers before you got here. Mother had pointed to a spot on the map and said that an incredibly evil power was at work. It was the same area where there was that massive subsidence. That's probably the center of it."

"What kind of power?"

"An evil one is all she said."

"It probably would've been better if your mother came."

"I think so too," Mia conceded, not seeming the least bit angry. "But unfortunately, she can't do that. Right after predicting this incident, Mother coughed up blood and collapsed. She's probably passed away by now."

"And you came here instead of tending to her?"

"Mother's orders were explicit," Mia replied, with her eyes focused straight ahead.

Her age had to be sixteen or seventeen. Some childlike innocence still remained on her face, but a strength of will that hardly suited her had also spread across it.

"She doesn't view this incident as merely another catastrophe. Mother said it's a major event that could have repercussions on a global scale. Ordinarily, she'd have gone herself. Even though going might not accomplish anything, as someone with the power to catch a glimpse of people's future—society's future—she has to try and do whatever she can. But since she couldn't possibly move, she told me to go."

A mother who sent her own daughter into an incident that might shake the very world.

A girl who'd raced here even though she knew her mother was fated to die.

D tugged back on the reins.

A split second before her face hit his back, Mia swiftly turned it away, so that only her right cheek took the impact. She could feel the swell of his muscles through the fabric. For just a second, she grew dizzy.

"We're there," D said.

"Okay."

Taking away the hands she'd wrapped around his waist, Mia put them on the saddle's cantle and braced her body. Before D could dismount, she flew into action.

Not bothering to call out to the girl who'd hit the ground before him, D began to walk.

Their entire conversation up to this point had taken place on the back of his horse.

His left arm rose naturally, and from the vicinity of his wrist a hoarse voice most humans couldn't hear squeaked, "She's a hell of a girl. For one thing, you've got a little slip of a lass like her racing into a place like this. For another, she didn't even bother to wait for you to offer her a hand getting down from the horse. She's been schooled in how to live on her own. If you ever take a wife, one like that'll—"

The voice broke off there. D had made his hand into a tight fist.

As he walked quietly but gravely, ahead of him yawned the great subsidence that'd swallowed so many dead.

"This place is incredible, isn't it?" Mia remarked pensively as she peered down from D's right side.

Compared to the diameter of the depression, its depth wasn't great at all—only about a thousand feet. Blending with the sloping sides, the bottom was a chaotic mix of boulders and sand, with the red soil filling in the spaces between them.

"It's like a sea of blood," Mia remarked as she rubbed her cheek with her right hand.

"You saying the dead can bleed, too?"

Mia looked at D's hip out of the corner of her eye, and then stared at his face. Perhaps aware of the rosy glow suffusing her cheeks, she swiftly averted her gaze, saying, "You do a weird little voice, don't you? Are you teasing me?"

Making no reply, D planted one foot at the edge of the incline.

"No, I'm serious," Mia continued. "And I'll thank you to answer me."

Saying nothing, D stared downward.

Piqued at being ignored, Mia undertook a reckless course of action. With unexpected speed she came up behind D and told him, "You're rude!"

She'd just aimed a kick at his ass. But it met with nothing but the empty space over the pit.

"Wha—"

As she reflexively put her strength into the leg that still supported her, the supposedly firm ground gave way.

The second she heard her own cry above her and felt the sensation of falling, her body suddenly stopped dead. Realizing that D's left hand had caught her by the collar, she madly reached around with her hands to latch on to him. Just as it dawned on her that she was floating through the air, her feet came down on solid ground. And no sooner had a feeling of relief flooded through her than the hand came away from her collar and Mia staggered.

As her eyes stared fixedly at D, they began to hold hints of a bottomless terror and rage—and a gleam of admiration.

"What do you think this depression's for?"

The voice that posed that question was tinged with trust—and even a bit of affection.

Once again there was no reply. But even though he didn't answer, no anger bubbled up in the girl.

"You said you were the daughter of a fortuneteller, didn't you?"

"Yeah," she said, feeling silly for getting so excited because he'd turned the conversation to her.

"The dead left every graveyard in the region to throw themselves from here. There would've been thousands of them. Why do you think that was?"

There was a short pause.

The next thing Mia knew, she had one hand to her chest. Her heart was racing. She had to do something to slow it down.

Pressing a finger gently to one part of the heart—the left ventricle—she made her breathing as shallow as possible. Her heartbeat returned to normal immediately. But then, she was a strong-willed and courageous individual to begin with.

"Is it okay if it's pure conjecture?"

D nodded.

"I think they were a sacrifice."

"That's it, all right."

The hoarse response definitely sounded like it'd come from the vicinity of D's left hand.

Though she looked, naturally she didn't see anything.

"That's right."

This time the reply came in a rusty, masculine tone—D's voice. So, was that other one just her ears playing tricks on her?

"Last time, corpses sufficed, but next time it'll probably be living people jumping in."

"Thousands of them . . ." Mia muttered, her remark a question at the same time.

There was no reply, of course. You could say that was his answer.

"But . . . why in the world?"

"It's the will of the one down below this."

"Down below?"

Mia couldn't help forgetting her present terror and peering down past the brink of the hole. But as she quickly recalled it again, she backed away, and then stared at D.

"You know what it is?" she asked.

Not answering her, D stood there like an exquisite statue, but then he told her, "Go home."

And then, without further ado, he dove head first from the rim of the hole into its interior.

"D!" Mia called out in spite of herself, and she was paused at the very brink of the hole, ready to go after him, when something white got in her eyes.

Gas.

Covering her mouth, the fortuneteller's daughter made a great leap back.

It looked like the white pillars of smoke rising from the brink of the depression numbered in the hundreds. All those geysers of gas couldn't have suddenly erupted from the ground in unison. They'd been triggered mechanically. And the one who'd set them off was—

"D . . ."

Still unsure just what was in the gas, Mia took a deep breath and raced back to the rim of the hole. She turned her gaze downward.

He'd probably been crushed. Why was she so determined to find this young man? Because his actions were so extreme. Like what he'd done just now. She couldn't help thinking that whatever he really was, it was tremendously unsettling and of great importance—just as he'd appeared in the fortunetelling. And the last thing that occurred to Mia was something the girl tried vehemently to ignore so it wouldn't rise to the fore of her consciousness. Because he's gorgeous. More than anyone has a right to be.

Mia couldn't see D anywhere, and she had to back away again. The gas had grown thicker and jetted out even harder. Luckily for her, it was only intended as a smoke screen.

She couldn't go after him. Should she wait, or should she go back to the village?

That decision wasn't Mia's to make. From behind her came the thunder of approaching hooves. There were also the echoes of what sounded like a motor.

Mia turned around.

The figures she could see down at the far end of the highway halted before her less than ten seconds later. It was the same group of village peacekeepers who'd discovered the depression. And they'd brought a rare item with them.

The source of the motor sounds was an armored car. With iron plates riveted to a car chassis, the strangely rough-looking vehicle was apparently an antiquated model, with the edges of some plates starting to pull free, and both the sturdy turret and the forty-millimeter cannon that jutted a foot and a half from it were flecked with rust. The scorches and countless bullet marks that covered its armor plates were undoubtedly shining proof it had been fighting off aggressors, in the form of bandits and supernatural creatures, for decades. And it looked as if it was still more than capable of serving as the little village's guardian angel.

Mia's eyes were drawn to the wagon that rode alongside it. She could read the words High Explosives branded onto the sides of the wooden boxes piled high on it. Some kinds of munitions were

often obtained from military installations and battlefields where the Nobility had fought their own kind, and it wasn't particularly unusual for towns and villages to have them on hand. Weapons that were especially easy to use, such as rifles and various kinds of grenades, could make an impressive show of force when the situation called for it. To the north of the village were wild plains and the ruins of what had once apparently been a testing ground for the Nobility, and no one normally dared set foot there.

The sheriff got down off his horse. As he moved toward Mia, he called over to the group forming around the wagon, "Get yourselves some explosives and line up along the drop-off. We'll be pitching them in soon."

"Wait just a minute," Mia called out as she dashed over to the sheriff instead of waiting for him to come to her. "What do you think you're doing? If you throw a bunch of bombs into this weird hole, there's no way of knowing what kind of reaction you'll get. Plus, someone just fell in there."

"Someone? And just who might that be?"

"A man named D. He's a Hunter."

Actually, Mia didn't know for a fact that D was a Vampire Hunter. But his good looks, the way he carried himself, and the way he called to mind ice and steel made her say it on impulse.

"Why'd he fall in the hole? No, before we get to that—who are you, anyway?" the sheriff asked, knitting his thick eyebrows suspiciously.

"Mia, isn't it? You're the daughter of a fortuneteller who lives up north. I had her tell my fortune before," called out a young man who'd been staring at the girl all along from the driver's seat of the wagon. He wore a heavy wool shirt and had a red scarf wound about his neck. And as befitted someone so dapper, he was a good deal more attractive than the rest of the men.

"This fortuneteller up north—would that be Noa Simon? I've heard the name before. Seems quite a few people are in her debt," the sheriff remarked, and, seeing a smile break on the lawman's

face, Mia was somewhat relieved. "This Hunter you mentioned, is he some friend of yours? What in the blazes brings him here?"

Suddenly, the sheriff held his tongue.

In fact, everyone froze right where they were. Though white smoke poured over the brink of the great subsidence, covering everything up to three feet from the ground, they could make out a human shape emerging from the pit. The hem of a coat swayed around the knees of the powerfully built form. Mia alone could tell whose silhouette it was by the longsword on its back.

"D?"

How many of them heard her say that?

As Mia reflexively started to step forward, someone behind her grabbed her right arm.

"Don't go," said the young man who'd been in the driver's seat.

"But—"

"When did he fall?"

"Not five minutes ago."

"You think after falling in there it'd be that easy to get back up again?"

"Maybe if he got hung up on something halfway down."

"Think that's what happened?"

"No."

"Stand back."

Pushing Mia out of the way, the young man put his hand to his waist. He had a gunpowder pistol in a special holster. After drawing it, he called out to the shadowy figure in the fog, "Hey, I'm from the village!"

At the same time, the color of the silhouette darkened—and a heartbeat later, it slipped out of the fog to stand face to face with the young man.

A rumble went through the crowd—murmured exclamations of rapture. The villagers had seen the face of the shadowy figure.

"D . . ."

Mia alone knew that name.

A Twin-Shadowed Figure

CHAPTER 2

I

Those clothes, and, more than anything, that inimitable beauty—it was D beyond a doubt. Mia felt relieved. The fortuneteller's daughter didn't notice that her joy over the safety of a young man she didn't even know had given way to feverish excitement.

"Hey, you . . ." one of the young men called out to him, taking a step closer.

The scene that unfolded a second later was an enormous and terrifying betrayal of everyone's expectations. A streak of light flowed out. Where it started and where it ended, none could say. It simply flowed.

"What the—" the young man cried, and judging by the way he jumped back, he alone must've discerned the path of that light. Or perhaps he merely acted on reflex.

A mellifluous, soothing sound came from D's back.

Jogging back, the young man halted in front of Mia. When Mia saw that his eyes were filled with tears, she was a bit surprised.

"I . . . I'm Zoah," he said somewhat uncomfortably. "Remember that . . . Zoah. Okay?"

Feeling something she couldn't fight, Mia nodded. "And I'm—" she was saying when the young man put both hands on top of his

head as if to hold it down. A thin red line zipped across the base of his neck.

Without even knowing why, Mia cried out, "Mia! I—I'm Mia!"

A single tear fell from the young man's eye. A smile formed on his lips, and then he reeled backward.

Once his head had fallen behind him, bright blood shot into the air from the stark stump of his neck, and the occasional gusts of wind carried it toward D as if at his bidding, covering every inch of him. Soaked in blood—an exquisite figure in vermilion.

But even that sight held Mia spellbound and drew sounds of admiration from the men—in truth, groans of pleasure. However, that only lasted a few heartbeats before the men returned to their senses and the sheriff rapped on the turret of the armored car, shouting, "Prepare to fire! Draw a bead on that bastard!"

Wait, Mia thought, but she couldn't move. The ghastly demise of the young man who'd introduced himself as Zoah had had an explosive impact on her brain, crushing all other thoughts.

That streak of light had undoubtedly cut through Zoah's neck. However, instead of being slain on the spot, he'd lived long enough to give Mia his name, knowing all the while he would die. Were there even words to describe such a bizarre and superhuman feat? But all that aside, why would D do such a horrible thing? The question numbed Mia's mind. The handsome features now being dyed crimson by the vivid rain of blood had a cold beauty that dulled the very sunlight. He could murder his own parents—she just knew it. Knew it all too well. But even knowing that, in her heart Mia had still held a fiery little ember of conviction that he would never slaughter an innocent person so horribly.

Mia's mind was pulled back to reality by the harsh music of a motor and gears. The armored car's turret was turning toward D. The barrel of its cannon took unerring aim right at his face—dead center on his handsome visage. The marksman inside the turret was coolly taking aim through a little glass sighting window set in the armor plate. Crosshairs had been

etched on the glass—and they came to a halt right between the eyes of their target.

Now! The index and middle fingers of his right hand pulled hard on the trigger. The rusty trigger was just about to pass the point of no return.

The gunner's field of view stained crimson. Or, to be more precise, the glass window did.

He'd seen D's upper body lean far back, and then snap forward again. But there was no way he could've imagined the blood that soaked every inch of D flying back at the armored car. It came with such speed, such force. The iron-plated vehicle shook when it struck.

However, its cannon belched fire. The forty-millimeter shell was true to its aim—then it flew wildly off course and made impact. Not with D's face, but with the ground at his feet. Sparks and black smoke mixed with a roar.

Mia stood entranced by the crimson D until the impact bowled her and the men over.

D was in the air. The bloody torrent had rocked the cannon just before it fired, and at the same time he had sailed into the sky. He drifted down and landed on the front of the armored vehicle, as if thirty-odd feet hadn't separated them in the first place. Without a second wasted, a silvery flash whisked through the turret. The armor plating could easily withstand forty-millimeter shells, but D's blade stabbed through it like it was paper, piercing the throat of the gunner within.

Pulling his blade back out, D looked down at Mia on the ground and grinned. Ah! He was like youth incarnate, gleaming with his own beauty and cruelty.

Mia was practically ready to faint.

Leaping easily through the air, D landed about fifteen feet from the group. Not a single drop of blood clung to his sword.

"Come," he said, speaking at last.

On confirming that it was D's voice, Mia could taste only despair.

"Come," he invited them once more.

The figures around Mia stalked forward. They were villagers. Each gripped a stake or spear in his hands. Full of fighting spirit—or so they looked, their expressions vacant as if some other force had possessed them.

"Don't go near him!" Mia cried, but that only served as a kind of cue to them.

Advancing a few steps, the villagers let out a cry that wasn't quite a word and charged at D en masse. Light streaked between them, becoming vermilion spray a second later. The lifeblood that then shot up from the decapitated men looked like the kind of entertainment one might find at a banquet in hell. There was a succession of dull thuds all around D—the sound of the severed heads landing. Stabbing one of them with his sword, D flung it toward Mia.

It fell about three feet shy of her. Mia looked down and gasped when it rolled to her feet. It was Zoah's head.

"That's the head of the man who loved you," D said softly.

Unable to look at it, Mia raised her face frantically. D was right in front of her. She couldn't say a word.

Between the speechless Mia and the Vampire Hunter, Zoah's head rose. D had skewered it with his sword.

"From the look on his face, I doubt you could say he's resting in peace. Why don't you give him a kiss?"

How cruel! But as he thrust the horrible head in the girl's pale face, a hint of surprise crept into D's expression.

He'd intended to make Mia kiss the severed head. Mia recoiled, yet she was unafraid as the severed head seemed to sink into her face. The second the man's and the woman's faces seemed to overlap, Mia's body had passed through D's and come to stand behind him.

Looking over his shoulder in astonishment, D swung his sword down behind him. Mia was well within reach of his blade. And the instant the sword became a streak of light that split her body like a piece of firewood, she gave off an iridescent gleam and vanished.

"Ah!" a voice gasped from the vicinity of the armored car.

Wasn't that also Mia by the back of the vehicle, steadying herself with one hand on its body while she pressed the other to her chest?

"A diversion, eh? Not bad for a punk kid," D remarked, coolly stepping forward. Astonishingly enough, the sword in his right hand still had Zoah's head on it.

With this beautiful fiend closing on her, Mia couldn't move. She couldn't recall ever having a decoy spell she'd put her heart and soul into broken that way. She'd learned from her mother that a spell could be broken only by another spell—and she had absolute confidence that things always followed that natural law. And yet, here it'd been broken by an ordinary swordsman and his blade. More than the physical trauma of having her illusion destroyed, it was despair that caused Mia to freeze up.

Once more the dead man's mouth was thrust toward her bloodless lips.

"Here, send him off to eternal peace," said D. His lips held a smile.

As Mia turned her face away, cold lips struck her cheek.

"Now, why are you trying to fight it?" D asked, his query every bit as still and cold as a winter night.

The lips slid right after Mia's.

Mia's back struck the car, informing her that escape was now impossible.

Just then, the heavens and earth rumbled. Caught off guard, D staggered, while Mia was thrown more than six feet to one side. As the ground suddenly quaked like it'd been transformed into muddy slop, the iron vehicle and the corpses danced a crazed jig across it.

Trying desperately to maintain his balance all the while, D prepared to dash toward the brink of the subsidence.

"Looks like I might've underestimated him," he muttered, although whom that comment was intended for was anybody's guess.

Suddenly, his shoulder split as if it'd met with some unseen blade. A bloody mist shot out.

Standing on the quaking earth, D twisted around and looked behind him.

Thirty feet away there stood a black horse.

"Aha," he exclaimed, forgetting to staunch the flow of blood.

It was a cyborg horse. However, even cyborg horses came in varying qualities. The one that now stood perfectly poised in the distance, ignoring the noisy quaking of the earth, had a magnificent frame, lustrous coat, and fine musculature—everything about it attested to its being a model of the very highest quality and ability. Such a mount wasn't easy to obtain out on the Frontier.

And D's eyes were riveted to the blue figure astride that steed. He wore an indigo robe, and his lengthy hair, which hung like threads from the top of his head down to his waist in such a way that even his face was obscured, also had a somewhat chilling and mysterious indigo hue.

"Who are you?" D asked as he continued to defy the motion of the restless earth.

"I disposed of Origa," the figure in blue told D, remaining completely motionless as he addressed the jostled swordsman. "Next, I'll take care of you."

II

Origa was the sorceress D had called on to solve the riddle of Muma. She'd been hacked to pieces the night D met with her, and it seemed that it'd been the work of this rider in blue.

"Who are you?" D asked once again.

Though he was confronted by an opponent skilled enough to remain utterly motionless through this savage quaking, and despite the fact that the flow of bright blood from his right shoulder was unabated, he didn't seem at all surprised.

"Why are you after me?"

A sudden gust of wind stirred the hem of his coat.

The hair of the figure in blue streamed off to one side like a swarm of countless insects. And yet, his face wasn't visible.

"You found out. That alone is the reason."

His words seemed to creep across the ground.

What had D learned, and how did the man in blue know about it? And why had he slain Origa?

"I suppose there's no point asking you anything else."

D swung the sword in his right hand and sent Zoah's head flying.

The black horse and blue rider approached. Although the animal was most definitely treading across the ground, its gait didn't seem the least bit affected by the quaking that continued even now.

The instant the horse and rider sauntered within reach of his sword, D made a horizontal swipe with his blade without saying a word. He intended to sever the horse's front legs, and as his foe was thrown from the tumbling animal, a second stroke would catch him without a moment's delay.

The blade sliced. The black horse tumbled forward. Just as expected. And the rider in blue went flying. Just as expected. Reversing direction, D's blade handily bisected his opponent's torso.

At that instant the whole world was sealed away in blue. Out of the carved body of the man, a bluish hue sailed into the air. No, not merely a hue, but hair. Just how much hair did that rider in blue have inside his body? Ten thousand, a hundred thousand, no, easily a million strands flew everywhere, and every last one of them stabbed into the ground or the rocks or even the armored car.

D managed to deflect each and every one in the first wave. However, the blue needles assailed him without end. One pierced his left shoulder. He deflected dozens more without pausing to extract that one, then another slipped through and stabbed into his solar plexus, and when he not surprisingly reeled from that for a second, another needle got him through the right eye, coming all the way out through the back of his head.

Another storm of blue was about to assail his reeling, staggering form, but then white smoke surged over him from one side like a wave. Smoke—smoke roiling up from the bottom of the subsidence. While the wind had indeed shifted in that direction, the way it moved to obscure him like a bodyguard made it seem as if it were imbued with a desire to protect him.

And within that cloud, what kind of explosion of thought and deed took place? The roiling of the white smoke grew ever more turbulent, swirling, painting everything with a solid and disturbing hue of white as it began to roll thickly over the road.

The rumbling of the earth continued.

Late that night . . .

Mia was in the village hospital. Though she was weary to the marrow of her bones, the events of midday were branded into her brain, refusing to leave her or even wane, so while she wanted to sleep, a sort of insomnia now troubled her. All she could remember was that D had been forcing her to kiss a severed head when the earth had quaked—and that was it. Her body was thrown against the ground once or twice, and the next thing she knew, she was receiving treatment from a new scouting party that'd come from the village. Based on what one member had told her, all that'd been left at the scene was the tipped-over armored car and the sheriff—who'd lost both legs when they were pinned under the vehicle. The remains of Zoah and all the other villagers had vanished completely.

Though the villagers wanted to get the story from Mia, she kept silent. She'd decided that the best thing to do would be to leave the entire matter to the sheriff's department. Simply keeping a dazed look on her face was sufficient to fool the villagers. As Mia kept up the act, countless questions sprang into her head and then faded again, and try as she might, she couldn't come up with a satisfactory answer to a single one of them before she sank wearily into a despairing conclusion.

Getting out of bed, Mia went over to the window. She could see the courtyard. White blossoms swayed in the flower beds. These were plants that bloomed by the light of the moon.

The moon hung in the middle of the sky. Its surface was like a silver platter, and onto it a gorgeous visage burned itself, sharper than the rest of its glow.

"D . . ." she murmured sadly, although Mia herself wasn't aware of the sadness. She'd witnessed his cruelty with her own two eyes. It'd been directed at her. She'd tasted terror and anger and hate. And yet his strikingly handsome face continued to hold the nubile fortuneteller captive.

"Damn, this is no good," Mia told herself sternly. "What did I come here to do, anyway? After leaving my mother for dead . . ."

The intense battle between will and emotion lasted only a second. Her chest, well developed for her age, rose and fell heavily as she let out a morose sigh.

"Come tomorrow, I'll be back to normal," Mia told herself. "Tomorrow."

But there was no evidence to support that claim, and she had no confidence in it.

Mia focused her gaze intently on the crystal-clear night as if seeking salvation. The darkness grew thicker. A cloud had hidden the moon, and there was no other light. The moon quickly reclaimed its starring role. But that wasn't what made the girl feel that the stillness had grown ever deeper.

A figure astride a white horse was in one corner of the garden. The moonlight cast sinful shadows on a face so handsome she had to wonder if the moon existed solely to praise him. D.

Fear bubbled up within her. Doubts eddied. Anger rose. Forgetting all that, Mia opened the windowpane.

The white horse and rider approached. There wasn't a sound. Although the path through the courtyard was paved with bricks, the hooves of the horse D controlled remained silent.

"You're okay . . ." Mia muttered to the handsome face that stopped

not three feet from her.

Though she had intended to ask D what had happened after he'd flown down into the subsidence, she remained oblivious to the fact she hadn't finished her question.

Still on horseback, D leaned toward her. No sooner had she noticed him placing one hand on the sill than a wind gusted in so quickly Mia didn't have time to get out of the way, and then the Vampire Hunter stood in her room.

"D . . ."

"I'd like to ask you something," D said in the voice of the night.

Before she even responded, D extended his right hand. Mia felt her back grow warm.

"What . . . what is it?" Embarrassment flooded through her. As if to push it away, she asked once more, "What is it?" She realized she'd forgotten to close the window.

"What happened up top?"

It took her a while to understand the question. "Up top? Don't joke around about that. That was you, wasn't it?"

As the girl barely managed to choke back a hail of invective, D quietly gazed at her face, finally asking, "What did I do?"

"What did you—are you out of your mind?"

"Unfortunately, it would seem not."

Mia's eyes were drawn to the vicinity of D's left hip, and the girl showed some bewilderment before she looked at the Hunter's face again.

"I only came back up just now. Up top, there was the smell of blood. Was that my doing?"

After a short time, Mia nodded. "You mean, that wasn't you?"

Nothing from the Hunter.

"Or is it that you don't remember?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know . . ."

"As soon as I reached the bottom, I lost consciousness. I don't know what happened after that."

Mia found it incredibly difficult to believe that this gorgeous Hunter could lose consciousness even for the briefest of times. Managing to fight through her surprise, she said, "Okay, I'll tell you all about it, then. In return, you have to tell me what happened underground."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?" she asked, her tone reproachful in spite of herself.

"You're better off not knowing."

In keeping with the darkness, his words were low and grave, but even as she felt their inescapable pressure, Mia shot back, "That's not fair. While you were gone, I went through hell. I'll have you know, you—"

Mia broke off as it dawned on her that the person who'd put her through hell was the same person who stood before her, and she was left speechless. Judging from that, it would seem that up until now, she hadn't considered that D to be the same as this one.

"I did what to you?"

"Y-you . . . That is . . ."

"Just as I suspected," a hoarse voice remarked.

Her nerves already stretched to the breaking point, Mia didn't even seem to notice it.

"What happened?" D asked again.

It's not fair, Mia thought to herself, but she couldn't fight him any longer.

There was nothing coercive about him. Well, actually there was, but in his soft query there was just the faintest bit of something terribly urgent—it had a ring of sadness to it wholly unsuited to a young man who seemed to be made of ice and steel.

"Fine," Mia sighed, dropping her shoulders. She gestured to the chair next to her. "Have a seat. I'll tell you everything."

Then she seated herself on the edge of the bed.

Time flowed like a river under the wintry moonlight.

"I see," D told her, rising unaffectedly and heading for the window.

"Wait!"

Her faint cry made him turn and look.

Mia's face was turned down, and she stared at her knees. "Is that all?" she said.

A puzzled silence from the Hunter.

He had been less than amiable, if not downright blunt.

"You heard my tale, and now you're just going to go? Without thanking me in any way?"

"She's got a point," the hoarse voice said. It seemed somewhat intrigued.

Squeezing his left hand into a tight fist, D said, "You have my thanks." Then he prepared to turn away again.

"That won't do."

When she spoke, it made him look at her again.

"I'd like to have it done properly."

"Oh la la," said the hoarse voice. This time it sounded rather surprised.

However, the most astonished of all was Mia herself. Even she didn't know why she'd said such a thing. Something warm had stirred in her chest and, unable to stand it, she expelled it from her mouth, where it became those preposterous words. What's more, it was the middle of the night, and she was alone in a hospital room with a young man of unearthly beauty. Conveniently enough, there was a bed right there, too. Mia didn't know what a proper expression of gratitude would be. But her heart was on fire.

D's hand reached for her knee. Feeling like her heart might stop, she closed her eyes. The hand quickly came away.

When her eyes opened, they found a few gold coins sitting in her lap.

"That's the only kind of gratitude I know how to show," said D.

"I meant—" the girl sputtered, beginning to rise in spite of herself. The gold coins tinkled merrily against the floor.

A black-gloved hand came to rest on her shoulder. Although that should've been what she wanted, Mia froze in place, and she couldn't even speak. There was a chance this young man was a cold and merciless murderer. What was she doing with him?

His hand came away again quickly. Thick, heavy, and cold it was—and yet, a quiet warmth unlike anything before seeped into Mia's heart. A chill struck her face.

The shape of the horse and rider dwindled in the moonlight without a sound.

For a long time, the young fortuneteller didn't move from the edge of the bed. Then, finally, she stood up and quietly shut the window.

III

The next morning, Mia awoke at dawn's first light. The hospital still slumbered peacefully. Gathering her things—which consisted of what she'd had on her when she was carried there—she left her hospital room without anyone around to challenge her. Walking to the stables on the edge of town, she bought a small cyborg horse and threw a simple saddle on its back. To any who saw her, she might've looked awfully tense.

"Where are you off to so early in the morning?" asked the old man who ran the stables. "You're that fortunetelling girl they brought back to the hospital yesterday, ain't you?"

It was a tiny village. Information was transmitted through it with the speed of a computer.

"That was a quick recovery. I get the feeling there's gonna be bad trouble. You'd best get out of here right away. Yesterday, the kinfolk of those who went missing were raising a ruckus about wanting a word with you."

"What a mess," was all Mia said in reply as she straddled her horse.

It wasn't out of the village she rode, but rather right through the middle of it. Though she passed a number of villagers who were apparently headed out to the fields, she galloped by them without taking notice.

Less than ten minutes later, she was at the western edge of the village. She'd cut across the entire community. The great subsidence



lay to the north of the village. In a spot that seemed unrelated to the pit, Mia dismounted.

What had she come out there to do?

A desolate plain spread before her. As the soil on this side of the village was fairly acid, it wasn't suited to farming. And though it was a plain, here and there massive boulders lay on the ground or jutted from the earth as if to add ghastliness to the existing desolation.

When viewed from above, the spot where Mia dismounted was near a rock that was essentially in the center of a group of boulders. Mia tied the reins lightly around a nearby outcropping of rock, and then began to climb that boulder. Due to the fact that since childhood she'd spent day and night practicing fortunetelling and related spells under her mother's tutelage, it was safe to say that outdoor activities weren't exactly her strongest suit. Her hands got scraped and her breathing grew ragged. By the time she'd reached the summit of forty-five or fifty feet, her shoulders heaved with every breath.

"This is the place, all right."

Still struggling to catch her breath, she had both determination and fear in her eyes as she peered down. The eyes of any human but Mia would've seen only a vast wasteland, but beneath the black earth, she could see a single red line. A thick one. By her estimate from her present position, it had to be more than three feet wide. Mia pictured a massive and endless serpent gouging its way through the earth.

How am I supposed to sever that?

A disappointed sigh escaped her, but the next thing Mia knew, she was tightening her grip on the shoulder strap of her backpack. That and her own judgment were all she had to rely on. As she stared a bit harder, Mia planted the soles of both shoes firmly against the rock's surface. The power of the rocks that stood in this region flowed into her body—and through her optic nerves.

Somewhere on the red line. She needed it to be there, somewhere. Her gaze needled its way along the great serpent stretching through the depths of the earth. The red blurred.

There!

Using a trick of her eyes to burn the location into her retinas, Mia began to climb down from the rock. On her horse, she reached her destination in under five minutes.

"The moment of truth."

Her heart pounded madly. This was the first big job for her without any assistance from her mother. And now she had to destroy the energy pipe running through the ground. It was down about thirty feet deep. Who could've imagined that a conduit for enough energy to destroy a quarter of the Frontier would be buried so close to the surface? Although she had no idea how many decades or centuries it'd been down there, she was amazed that it still survived. Now she was about to destroy it.

She hesitated for only an instant. Setting down her backpack, Mia pulled an egg-shaped lump of metal from it. Tugging on its red tip, she extended its telescopic, directional antenna. As she reached for the timer, her finger trembled. She switched it on. A red light began to flash. There would be no turning back now. It was simply a matter of getting as far away as possible within the next ten minutes. Through the antenna, the explosive force of the atomic charge would be channeled down some thirty feet underground—more than enough to destroy the energy conduit. But God only knew what that energy would do when it spilled out. There was a chance Mia might go down in history as the grim reaper responsible for killing every living creature in the region.

"Mom—here I go!" she said to herself, driving the atomic charge into the ground. Since the explosion would be underground, fifty yards away would've been safe, but there was no way of knowing how devastating the energy inside the pipe would be when it was unleashed. She'd have to get three-quarters of a mile away.

Looking for her mount, Mia turned and was stunned to see D right in front of her. A short distance away was a chestnut cyborg horse, so he must've come without Mia noticing him. As strange as it was that she hadn't heard even a footstep, she didn't find it strange at all where this young man was concerned.

"Are you—D?" Mia asked, though it sounded to her like the words were a million miles away.

"Do I look like anybody else?"

"No," she replied. As D approached, she told him, "I just set an atomic charge. The timer can't be disarmed. Get out of here."

"What an interesting thing to do."

D didn't stop walking but came over to Mia and gazed down at the bomb.

"Yeah. I have to exorcise this demon that'll spread over this village—no, the whole Frontier region."

Mia's right hand slipped into her blouse, but D didn't notice.

"I was—" he began to say and then turned around, having sensed Mia's murderous intent. Before D could even finish turning, Mia planted the dagger in her right hand in his heart with perfect precision.

Time stopped. All movement halted, and even the wind seemed to have died.

The next move came from Mia. Letting go of the dagger she'd stuck in him, she backed away a step or two.

D stood stock still. "Why?" he asked.

"You're a murderer! But thanks to you, I know the D I met last night was the real one. There really are two of you after all."

Rasping, D asked, "How . . . did you know?"

"Yesterday, you were riding a white horse."

"I see," he said, his voice carrying strength. Before Mia even had time to be shocked, D reached his left hand for the hilt of the dagger jutting from his chest and pulled it out without any trouble. "Care to try that again? Or should I skin you alive here and now and let the atomic flames cook you?"

A faint pain shot through the base of Mia's throat, calling attention to the fact that D had drawn his longsword and pressed it against her.

"With that model, we should have ten minutes till it explodes. Time enough for a little chat. So, I went to see you last night, did I?"

Mia furrowed her brow. She got the feeling that D knew more than he let on. Because he had a different horse, she'd thought he had to be a different person, but could it be that she was mistaken?

"And what did I talk with you about, then?"

The girl was at a loss for words.

"How I'd had a falling-out with you and the villagers?"

Again, silence from Mia.

"I went into the garden and slipped into your room through the window—right? And as I was leaving, I put my hand on your shoulder. Do you remember that?"

For Mia, it felt as if all the blood were draining from her body. So, this D was the same as the one the night before after all.

"Let's suppose for a minute that I just bought a change of horses. What did we talk about?"

"What you said just now. And that was it."

Gazing steadily into Mia's eyes, D said, "Okay, next matter. Why did you come out here?"

The blade pressed against her throat a little harder.

"I saw it in a dream . . ."

"In a dream?"

"My mother appeared to me and told me what to do. What I was supposed to do out here. Hey," Mia continued, her strength roused once more.

With apparent curiosity, D replied, "What?"

"Tell me something. Who are you? And what's this energy pipeline for?"

D's lips twisted into a grin. "You'll find out in hell. In no time there'll be more people than you can count joining you there. You'll have to ask one of them."

His tone was that of a judge delivering his verdict, and it made Mia close her eyes. She felt ready to meet her maker. Various thoughts came and went in her mind. Her mother had visited her in her dream—she was probably dead now, wasn't she? Once Mia was dead, too, who'd tell fortunes for those in the nearby village? Was old Kevin's granddaughter going to marry the younger Sawyer brother? Or would it be the postmaster's blockhead of a son?

Blistering heat came to her throat—then vanished unexpectedly. More than that pain, it was the lurid and malicious aura that'd buffeted her for some time that left Mia reeling. As her consciousness was slipping away, she heard someone say, "So, I finally meet up with myself."

Her eyes snapped open again. The sight that greeted them was something Mia never could've pictured, but at the same time exactly what she expected.

There they stood, not ten feet apart. Two Ds.

The Dark Abode

CHAPTER 3

I

Wide-brimmed traveler's hat, inky black long coat, sword across the back—and more than anything, those handsome features. No matter how she looked at them, both of them were D. However, the atmosphere that surrounded each was as different as shadow and light. Though the D with a longsword in hand had a viciousness that would crumble stone and steel, the aura drifting from the D who stood empty handed was the pure ghastliness of one prepared to battle to the death.

The two beautiful figures suddenly blurred. Mia had shed a tear.

Great, there really are two Ds. That other one—that bastard—wasn't him. And she wept with joy at the thought of that.

"Are you going to draw, D?" the other D asked, lowering his blade. "As I'm sure you probably know, our capabilities are perfectly matched like no two others in all the world. But I'm at a distinct advantage having drawn first."

One D referred to the other as D, but the other one didn't reply. The speaker's gorgeous form was pierced by an egregious, overwhelming killing lust.

"I could kill you now," he continued, "but that wouldn't be much fun. It'd be a waste. For me to disappear would be a great loss to the world. Join forces with me, D."

"D is your name," the other D said, speaking for the first time. The voice and tone were exactly the same—but somehow entirely different. "If you want to make this world your own, go ahead and do so. I only want to know where he has gone."

"So, you came in search of some clue to that? You don't have any interest in me at all then?" he laughed. "The other me is even scarier than I thought. I can well imagine how incredible the long years have been. However, fear not—they are at an end. I will ask you one last time: are you willing to join forces with me?"

The world froze. Time itself stopped, and in a space where the very color seemed to drain from the planet, the youth uttered a single word in a rusty yet inhumanly beautiful voice: "No."

The air whistled, and one D's sword stretched toward the chest of the other. It was so sharp and moved with such speed it would've seemed inescapable to anyone who saw it.

At that instant—

"What the hell?" one of the Ds groaned, but which one?

As D had thrust his blade, Mia had slammed into him. Instinctively D shoved her away and swung his blade around again, but it no longer moved with the same speed it had at first. A ching! rang out with a flash of light. D staggered backward—the resistance he'd met had been totally unexpected. Even without the original force behind his blade, he couldn't believe the other D could draw and parry his blade in a single movement.

Still poised for action as he leapt backward, D made a swipe with his right hand. The head of the girl who'd slammed into him went flying, and then popped like a soap bubble. However, it was fair to say that his action had been a grave mistake.

The D that he'd crossed blades with hadn't stood around waiting. As he leapt in pursuit of the first D, the speed and distance of his jump were exactly equal—a perfect match. On D's landing, a merciless slash from the high position came straight down on his head—and there was a horrific thud.

An explosion of gore was the only way to describe the way red was

unleashed on the world, and the thud came from the man's right arm, which had been severed at the shoulder. Still gripping its sword, the limb twitched feverishly but quickly turned a lifeless hue.

If what this D had said about them being "perfectly matched" was true, he might've died right then and there. Although he made another bound in an attempt to escape, his leap was clumsy, while the other D leapt gracefully.

However, at that point dust kicked up from the ground between the two of them, and the heavy crack of what seemed to be old-fashioned rifles resounded from the direction of the village. D and D turned that way simultaneously and saw horses and riders approaching. Though several of the riders held rifles at the ready, there was no telling which of them had fired.

His face pale, the D that'd lost an arm let out a low chuckle. "These clowns probably think they're seeing things. Guess I'll have to bring them back to their senses. So long, for the time being."

And grabbing his severed arm from the ground, he spun around.

One D fleeing, the other D in pursuit—and a number of bullets ripped through the body of each. True to their dhampir nature, they were jolted ever so slightly but didn't fall.

The fleeing D turned to the one in pursuit and told him, "There's less than two minutes left, you know."

And without another look back, he dashed over to the chestnut horse.

The remaining D appeared to hesitate just for a heartbeat, and then turned quickly to face Mia and the approaching villagers—and the atomic charge. As he walked toward them, he staggered a bit. Three red spots marked his chest and shoulder area. The slugs from the rifles were intended to take down armored beasts weighing nearly a ton. They were enough to instantly kill any ordinary human three times over.

Their mounts kicking up dust as they closed in, the marksmen held their rifles at the ready. A new volley of gunfire was already prepared for this gorgeous target.

"Stop!" someone shouted just then, rushing out between them. It was Mia. She was alive. The figure that had been cut down moments earlier was only an illusion. "This isn't who you think it is. Stop it!"

Her desperate appeal made them hold their deadly gunfire for a moment.

In the meantime, D swiftly closed on the atomic charge. As he bent down over it, bullets kicked up dust all around him. Not seeming the least bit concerned, D pulled up the atomic charge. He placed the palm of his left hand against the top of it. Scalding plasma enveloped his body. There was a flash that seemed liable to sear the optic nerves, but Mia's eyes shut automatically against it. The world was stained blue.

Startled, the horses in the fore of the advancing group halted. How long was it before shadows formed again in a world that'd been robbed of them? Suddenly, the blue glow was swallowed by the sunlight.

Putting the atomic charge—which had already finished discharging its energy—down at his feet, D stood there silently.

Seeing from his preternaturally beautiful appearance and the raucous orgy of light they'd just witnessed that this was no ordinary person they were dealing with, his pursuers and their steeds froze in their tracks. However, a hoarse shout of "There's the girl!" gave way to cries of encouragement and lashes to their mounts as the riders once more galloped closer. They halted at a spot more than thirty feet from D, and not one of them showed any signs of dismounting. The few riders who'd broken off must've gone after the D who'd fled.

"What's your business?" D inquired softly.

"The sheriff saw a certain man slaughter all those villagers. Seems it was a guy so good looking there'd be no mistaking him for anyone else in the world," said the portly old man with gray hair who was apparently their leader. On his chest was a sheriff's star.

Staring intently at D, he shook his head from side to side, saying, "Damn, you'd even make a man like me funny in the head. What's

your name, young fella? Oh, that's right—I'm Old Jal, third person to hold the post of sheriff in this town."

"D."

In the span of a second, the color drained from the old man's face. As he looked ready to keel over backward, two men hastened to support him, one on either side.

"I'm okay. Let go of me," Old Jal said, shaking his head from side to side. Pulling free of the men and returning to his original position, he continued, "The moment I saw your face, I suspected it might be you—never thought I'd actually meet you, though."

The words came out of him like a groan, and his face was slick with cold sweat.

"As sheriff, I'm giving you an order. Get out of town immediately. If not, we'll deal with you right here."

He raised his right hand. Once, he must've been a true force to reckon with, because the marksmen showed not a mote of uncertainty as they raised their weapons in unison. Then, they immediately became flustered, also in unison. For D had looked at the men.

"This just doesn't figure," a hoarse voice said.

D glanced at Mia, who was crouched down and covering her eyes. "Her eyes were damaged by the flames from that atomic charge," he said. "She needs treatment."

"I'd have taken her to a doctor even without you telling me to. You know, there are some families that are having a hard time accepting the sheriff's story. After she bolted from the hospital this morning, she passed one of those folks on the road. That's how we knew where to find her."

"You've got too many with you just to be looking for her," D said.

D's earlier remark about the group not figuring had left Old Jal stupefied at how that voice and face had differed as much as heaven and hell. Finally managing to quell his inner turbulence, the man replied, "That was my call. I figured she might've run off

to the freak that butchered all those villagers. And it looks like I was right on the money."

At that point D squatted down beside Mia and gently brushed her hand aside, laying his left hand over her eyes in its place.

"And you'd just let that freak leave?" D asked the lawman.

"Sure, so long as he swore he'd never come near our village again. Vampire Hunter D—that's a name more feared than the Red Death."

"Those are just rumors started by the Nobility!"

At that gloomy female voice, the men turned as one and looked at the ground between them and D—at Mia. As the girl got back up, her eyes had a soft glow.

"Vampire Hunters are real heroes, battling the Nobility to defend us. And out of them all, one man's name stands out as having the greatest character, skill, and looks in all their history—and that name is D. Shame on you for calling him fearful."

"There aren't any Nobility around our village!" a rider to the back shouted out in a voice that was close to a scream. "Yet here we have a Vampire Hunter. What the hell's he doing here?"

A number of people chimed in their agreement.

"Actually . . ." Mia began, but she was at a loss for a reply. In villages where peace prevailed, townspeople were loath to mention the Nobility or anyone connected to them in any way. Especially Vampire Hunters.

"You're right," D said, taking over for Mia. "My work is finished here. I'll leave now."

"Not yet you don't!" someone bellowed in anger from the last rank of riders. "The way the sheriff tells it, this has to be the son of a bitch that killed my boy. There's no way I'm just gonna sit here and let him go, Old Jal!"

The men turned in unison to look at the wrinkled face of the old man. The marksmen, however, never took their eyes off D. The eyes of every man there carried expectations of the slaughter to come.

Though those looks played across the old man's face like flames, it remained as steady as bedrock. "Swear to me you'll never come back," he said to D.

And D replied to the old man. "I can't do that."

The air solidified. Deep in their inner ears, every one of them heard a harsh metallic sound. Perhaps it was some sort of warning sign set off by their brains. Danger! This young man is simply too gorgeous. The marksmen's fingers had the triggers back as far as they could possibly go without firing. And those fingers trembled. In their heart of hearts, each of them screamed, Hurry up and decide already! We're gonna have no choice but to fire!

A shriveled voice drifted out across the wintry wastes. "Go."

Rifle barrels dropped as if they'd been snapped off. The marksmen felt relieved.

"I'm warning you," the old man said, trying desperately to sound as resolute as possible. "The next time we see the two of you anywhere near our village, we'll fire on you without a minute's hesitation. Don't you forget that."

Shooting a glance at Mia, who stood stock still, D said, "She doesn't have any connection to me."

"She don't have any connection to our village, either," Old Jal declared. "Both of you go on and get now. Luckily, your horses are still fine. And you'd do well to never come near our village again."

Turning his back on them without a word, D walked over to where his horse was tethered to some rocks a short distance away.

"Sheriff, please hear me out," Mia cried to the lawman. She sounded like she'd been backed into a corner. "At present, something incredibly bad is about to happen to the world. Nothing at all is clear about precisely what it is, but it's going to happen just the same. And right here is where it'll start."

"Go," Old Jal spat at her.

"Listen to me."

A gunshot rang out, and at the same time, a puff of dust went up, making Mia take a step back. One of the marksmen had fired a shot.

"Go."

Mia gave in. Gnawing her lip, she headed for the cyborg horse. Suddenly, she heard approaching hoofbeats to her rear. Turning, she tried to get away, but it was too late. The second she groaned from the shock of a thick arm wrapping around her waist, Mia was pulled off her feet and up onto the back of a horse.

"Hunter, turn and face me!" bellowed the rider behind Mia, resting a compact crossbow on one shoulder while, with his other hand, he gripped the reins and held a combat knife to the girl's jugular vein.

"Don't do it, Gully!" Old Jal shouted, but the man wouldn't listen.

"The matter of you killing my boy still ain't settled. Don't you move—you do, and I'll kill the girl," the powerfully built farmer shouted.

Saying nothing, D headed toward his horse.

"Hold it right there! She's gonna die!"

As those cries bombarded him, D straddled his horse, and then turned to face Gully the farmer. It looked as if he didn't have the slightest regard for Mia's safety. But then, that went without saying. He was D.

"I'll kill her, you bastard!"

And then D turned his back to them once more. His horse began to walk away.

"You son of a bitch!"

Who knew a human being was capable of such a cry of hatred and despair?

Before his cry had ended, Gully felt a sharp pain in both his left and right wrists. He looked down at them. Pieces of unfinished wood jutted from both. Rough wooden needles from D.

II

Screaming like a wild animal all the while, Gully raised both hands. Twisting around in the saddle, he tumbled right off his horse. And hitting the ground, he rolled from side to side.

A black lust for killing prickled through the bodies of the marksmen and they raised their barrels.

"Stop it!" Old Jal shouted.

His words were effaced by the crack of a gun.

A fiery pain shot through Mia's earlobe, and there was a metallic ching!

The shriek of agony came simultaneously with one of the marksmen toppling backward on his mount. A red stain seeped through his left hand when he pressed it to the opposite shoulder, and his rifle fell to the ground trailing purplish smoke.

What'd happened? Overcome now by shock and awe, the remaining marksmen froze in place, horses and all. A sword glittered in D's right hand, and he held it level right in front of his chest. Actually, they knew the answer. They simply didn't want to believe it.

How could he possibly deflect that deadly bullet and send it right back at the shooter? Before they could even question the rationality of it, the men's blood froze in the face of undeniable facts. Attacking him again would be impossible now.

Perhaps gleaning this, the gorgeous Hunter returned his sword to its sheath and quietly turned his back to them. Before long, the hoofbeats of his white steed were heard, but not one of the men made a move to stop him.

Though D heard the sound of hoofbeats behind him, he didn't turn to look. He was on the highway that ran west out of the village. The sounds quickly pulled up alongside him.

"You're a meanie, not even turning around," Mia said as she worked the reins.

D advanced without replying to her. Mia understood that he probably had no further use for the village or her. But if that was the case, what was he after?

"Um, there's something I'd like you to do for me," Mia said, leaning

her body out in D's direction. "I want you to go back to the village with me. Please."

There was no reply.

After advancing a bit, she said, "The least you could do is answer me."

"Not gonna happen," a hoarse voice said.

Her eyes flew from D to his left hand.

"I realize you're not interested in anything but yourself. But hear me out anyway. A major crisis is about to strike this village, just as I told the others. If nothing is done to avert it, it'll be the start of a disaster that will change the whole world as we know it. I came here because my mother told me about it. I might not be able to change things, but I still can't just sit back and do nothing. D, if anyone could do something, it's you. You could alter our destiny. That much I know. That's why I'm begging you. Please, stay here in the village."

"Why does it matter so much to you?"

Mia's eyes went round. The question had come in D's voice. She didn't notice that he had his left hand balled into a tight fist.

"They ran you out of town, too. You even got taken hostage. It shouldn't matter at all to you what happens to their village."

"The same thought occurred to me. But I can't let this happen. I—I'm a fortuneteller's daughter. I'm responsible for the futures I've seen."

"You needn't be."

"I'm sure that's what you think. But I—"

"The people in the village would tell you they don't need your concern, right?"

"Yes, I know that," Mia said, nodding her head after worrying her lip.

"Well, it seems they won't let it rest at that."

"What do you mean?"

"Behind us."

Mia twisted around. Back down the road, the shadowy form of riders wavered like a heat shimmer. There were around ten of them.

"Are they from the village?"

They were probably the families of the deceased. And it looked like they'd had all they could stand.

"C'mon, let's go," she called out to D, but he didn't move.

Looking from him to their pursuers and back again, Mia could eventually make out the shapes of horses and riders that caught up to them then rode past to form up lines about fifteen feet ahead. All of them were formidable in stature. Muscular or lean, graying or bald, there were all types, but they were united by the looks of fiery animosity they turned on the pair. The spears, swords, and bows they gripped shone in the sunlight.

D and Mia halted.

"We lost our son yesterday," said a giant of a man armed with a bow and arrow. "I can't just let the matter sit. We haven't even found our boy's remains. So you're gonna have to tell us again exactly what happened."

"I was with them. With your sons—I'll tell you about it," Mia interjected.

"We'll hear what you have to say later. From what the sheriff said in the hospital, this guy was the killer. Yet Old Jal let him go without doing a thing. And that don't sit quite right with us, you see."

"So you're going to take matters into your own hands? Don't. Even off at a distance, you must've seen the other guy who looked exactly like him. A couple of people went off after him—off that way. He's the one responsible!"

Judging from the way the men exchanged glances, a number of them seemed to know what she was talking about. However, it didn't last long, and the looks that were once more trained on the pair didn't soften in the least.

"You're the only one we see right now."

"And I keep trying to tell you—"

"I know," the bald farmer said, fighting desperately to keep his emotions under control. "And that's why we didn't want to pull



an ambush. We've seen how good he is, but we still don't feel like being underhanded. Because that's not the way we raised our boys, either. That's why we'll come at you one at a time. If you kill us all, you can go wherever you like."

After silently gazing at the imposing figure for so long, D remarked casually, "Come at me in force."

Amazed, Mia shouted, "D! You can't fight them!"

"We never asked you for an advantage in numbers."

"I'm the one who killed your boys," the Hunter replied.

The world froze. Even Mia's eyes snapped open wide, and the girl was left unable to speak.

To the men, who'd been reduced to stony statues, he said, "Here I come. Try to stop me."

Gorgeous movement came to be in the frozen world.

"Don't do this, D!" Mia shouted frantically as she followed after him. Not that she was concerned about his safety. No matter how skilled these powerful men might imagine themselves, there was no way they could defeat D with mere swords and spears. And yet, she wasn't worried for the villagers' sake either. She simply didn't want D to become a true butcher.

Fifteen feet. D advanced silently.

"Don't!"

Ten. Mia halted her horse.

Three. The world was lost beneath angry shouts and gleaming light. Silvery flashes closed in on D from all directions.

And a flash of light met them. Just one. Mia heard a protracted metallic sound.

In the direction in which the light had flowed, another sound reverberated from the ground—the sound of swords and spears, bows and arrows sticking into the earth. Each and every man on horseback cradled his right hand and moaned. Their wrists were dislocated. More than the pain of their injuries, it was the knowledge that they'd all been dealt with by a single stroke from the young man before them that made the men stiffen.

D moved forward. The ranks broke—not because the men told their mounts to do so, but rather because the horses themselves cleared a path out of sheer terror. D walked away, and Mia followed after him.

Once their shapes had disappeared down the road, the bald man finally muttered, "The damn freak is . . ." But he caught himself, adding, "No, that's not what he is."

"Yeah," another replied. "He got us all riled up and knocked us silly to take a load off our shoulders. That ain't the sort of thing no murderer would do. We were in the wrong."

"You know, he's probably a lot better man than we thought."

When the men looked down the road, it was like they were looking at a whole different person, but by that point there was no longer any sign of D and Mia.

An orderly and shimmering stripe across the black earth—that's what the Noble Road was, and no sooner had they got on it than D, who didn't seem to be listening no matter how Mia tried to reason with him, suddenly looked up at the sky and said, "Sure is strong, isn't it?"

He was talking about the sunlight.

"Yeah."

Mia herself had gotten pretty annoyed and hadn't spoken to him for quite some time, but she was sweating so badly she'd answered him without even thinking.

From time to time, the scenery ahead of them wavered as heat shimmers rose from the ground.

"Why don't we take a little break?" Mia asked. "It seems like the sun is out of whack or something. I can't take much more of this."

"Hold on for another thousand yards or so. There's a resting place up ahead."

"You mean a dark abode?" Mia said, scanning the glittering road before them.

Constructed of hexagonal pieces that could've been either stone or metal, the road was a good thirty feet wide, and it twisted and turned its way toward the oddly shaped rocks that were visible in the distance. Designed by the Nobility, after thousands of years this road didn't show even modest signs of wear as it raced off across the earth, to the bottom of the sea, and up into the sky.

The "dark abode" was the resting house D had mentioned. Even the Nobility had been powerless to stop the cosmic movements of the earth and sun. And with the coming of morning, even the Nobility's roads would be bathed in sunlight. Of course, by day they would take refuge in coffins safe within their carriages, but considering the potential danger if they were by some chance exposed to the rays of the sun, they had constructed emergency shelters every score or so of miles along the road. These were known as "resting places." In size they ranged from tiny ones that would accommodate only a pair of Nobles up to huge ones that could shelter a hundred people, but the dark abode Mia had mentioned referred to a structure designed to protect ten to twenty people from the deadly rays. Concomitant with the Nobility's millennia of decline, many of these had been weathered into ruin, taken out of service, or destroyed at the hands of mankind, but a large number of them still dotted the shimmering road, providing a place where the surviving Nobles or people who'd lost their way might find a brief respite from the travails of their journey. That not only Mia but also D would want to take a break was a natural-enough assumption given the nature of the blood that flowed through him. D was probably suffering far more than Mia at present.

"This is really strange," Mia said after about five minutes had passed, looking over at D beside her. Every time her lips moved, beads of sweat went flying. "The sun's just too hot. There's no way this is—"

"Hurry," D said as he delivered a kick to his horse's flanks.

Heat shimmers rose from the ground to obscure him. Even distorted like that, he was still gorgeous.

III

Less than two minutes later, a gray dome came into view to the right up ahead.

There it is, Mia thought fuzzily. Her heat-wracked body had been drained of emotion. Her skin ached as if it were on fire. Her field of view was bleached white. The sunlight was becoming a scorching implement of death.

Their horses side by side, they reached the dome. As the girl joyfully slipped out of the saddle, she looked at D. His gorgeous form was in the process of slowly falling over.

"D!"

While Mia raced over to where he'd fallen to the ground, she could feel her own consciousness slipping away. Collapsing on top of D, the fortuneteller's daughter fainted. Sunlight ruthlessly roasted her body.

A powerful chill spread from Mia's forehead, and she opened her eyes. D's left hand was resting on her brow.

"Can you . . . move?" D asked, still lying on his back.

"Yeah, sort of. You helped me, didn't you?"

"Right now, you're in a better condition to do something than me. Open the door."

He must've meant the dark abode.

"Okay," Mia said, nodding as she got up and turned around—only to be dumbfounded.

"It's not there!"

She couldn't have been unconscious for more than a few seconds. But even if she'd been out for an hour, it would've been impossible for such a thing to happen. The austere gray structure had vanished completely, and a valley strung with oddly shaped rocks filled Mia's view.

"That's impossible . . ."

"You're . . . hallucinating," D said.

"Hallucinating?" Mia rubbed her eyes, but the new scenery showed no signs of changing.

"If any creature but a Noble . . . comes near it . . . the defense systems come into play . . . The valley is an illusion."

"But a minute ago the dome was—"

"Because . . . you were . . . with me."

When D fell, it had recognized that Mia was a mere human.

"The dome is . . . right there. Try to touch it."

An incredulous look on her face, Mia extended her right hand. She didn't feel anything. The area was just empty space. Her senses told her so.

"Looks like the effect extends to her consciousness."

At the sound of a hoarse voice completely unlike D's, Mia looked in surprise in the direction from which it'd come, but D's left hand simply lay on the ground.

"There's no way a human could get one of the Nobility's buildings open, D!"

The voice seemed to be trying to rouse the Hunter, and it sounded for all the world as if it came from the palm of his left hand.

Before a powerful curiosity about confirming this could burst free, D ordered her, "Take my left hand off at the wrist."

"What?" Mia exclaimed, her eyes bugging quite understandably.

However, before her surprise could become a refusal, D said, "If we don't do something . . . both of us will bake out here. Unbutton my coat." His tone was overpowering and would brook no insubordination. And though that was part of the reason Mia complied, she was also listening to the words ringing in her ears.

"Both of us will bake out here." That can't happen. I won't let it. Have to do something. Must save D.

Once she'd undone the buttons, he told her, "My sword's to your left. Use that."

A glistening black hilt protruded from a well-worn scabbard. The hilt had a carving of coiled ivy wrapped around it. As she pulled it free, the steely blade let her know it had the weight of a man's weapon. How did the gorgeous youth swing such a hefty blade?

Her legs wobbled.

"Hurry up and make the cut . . . Don't have much time."

"But what good will cutting it off do?"

There was no answer.

D's eyes were closed. She was staring at him in spite of herself when a voice said, "He's gone comatose. Hurry up and make that cut!"

Mia stiffened.

"What . . . what in the world are you?"

"I'm his left hand. Now getting cracking. If you don't, he and you are both gonna die. Well, technically it's more accurate to say one of you will be destroyed—"

The girl was at a loss for words.

"Oh, I see the look on your face has changed. Ready to get to it, are you? Yeah, that's right; raise his sword just like that. Damn you, your legs are going all rubbery! Can't you stand up straight? Put more back into it! Yeah, that's more like it. Raise it—now!"

Mia swung the blade down.

Though she tried to pry her hands free of the sword, her fingers remained wrapped around it like a bit of ornamentation affixed to the hilt. The feeling of severing a human hand for the first time had left Mia in a state of shock.

Something tugged powerfully at her ankle. Her eyes dropped in alarm, and then she shrieked. The fingers around her ankle and the hand connected to them were all part of the limb she'd just lopped off D.

"I could go myself, but it'd be a hell of a lot quicker to have a real live human carry me over. Come on! Pick me up and bring me exactly where I tell you."

"No way."

"What do you mean, no way? If you don't—"

"I know, I know."

"We could do without all the sulking. Do you have any idea what your job here is?"

"It's not my job."

"Stop talking back and do it already, would you?"

A second later, an electric shock shot from Mia's ankle through her whole body, making her jump.

"What the heck was that for, you little—"

" 'Left Hand' will do. Sass me again and I'll raise the voltage next time."

"Don't you have a fork or something I could use instead?"

"You little snip of a girl!"

"Okay, already!"

In an exaggerated, contorted action, Mia picked up the left hand. If she hadn't formed a vision of D in her mind, she never would've been able to do it.

"So, what am I supposed to do with this thing?" she asked while averting her gaze. Not a single drop of blood spilled from the gaping wound on the wrist.

"I'm not a thing! That's 'Mr. Left Hand' to you."

"So, what should I do, O high and mighty Left Hand, sir?"

"Don't get smart with me. Okay, lift me up ever so gently and carry me over to where I say. Do that, and everything will go smooth as silk."

"I suppose you were the one who cooled me down earlier, were you?"

"Ah, ha, ha," the left hand laughed with apparent surprise. Mia tried to hide her disgust as she lifted the limb.

Her body was bleached white. The sunlight had grown blisteringly hot. Mia closed her eyes. While her body might be able to endure the light, her optic nerves were another matter.

"That bastard's even begun to control the sun, has he? I don't think we'll be able to let that slide. Hurry up, Mia baby!"

"What's this baby crap?" she snapped back, but she knew she had no choice but to do as the hand said. "What should I do now?"

"Take five normal-sized paces straight ahead. Next, take another two and a half to the right. Then raise me up to eye level."

"Okay, okay!"

"One 'okay' will suffice."

"Ooookay," she replied snidely, and then she moved to the spot as directed. Sweat poured from her, and the refreshing chill within her was dying. Her legs began to buckle.

"Don't move, damn you! This calls for an incredibly delicate touch," the left hand shouted.

"O-okay."

She held the hand up as best she could, but then she fell again.

This is grim, she thought. I think we're done for. Even my brain is sweltering.

No sooner did she start to open her eyes than sweat coursed into them. Her bangs drooped down over her eyes. As she gave her head a desperate shake, her eyes caught the exquisite face of the man lying on the ground.

"D . . ."

From nowhere at all, strength welled up in her. Strength intended not for her own salvation, but to save another.

"That's it! Good! Lift me up. Perfect!"

The left hand reached out into empty space, and then suddenly disappeared.

Vertigo assailed her.

"You did great, Mia," a hoarse but satisfied voice remarked, but the second it entered Mia's ears, she dropped to the ground.

Descending marble stairs, Mia came to a bath surrounded by bizarre stones. It was a natural hot spring that'd been modified for the Nobility's exclusive use. Dropping the towel that'd covered her from the chest to the crotch, she showered, and then got into

the water. It seemed to purify her sweat-soaked body. Letting out a deep breath, she looked all around as steam rose like clouds from the rocks beneath the domed ceiling.

Who would've thought this was the interior of an impregnable dome capable of withstanding a direct hit from a nuclear weapon?

More than thirty minutes had passed since Mia regained consciousness. According to the left hand, it'd gone inside and got D some of the Nobility's metabolism-stabilizing drugs, and the Hunter had brought Mia in. Although she didn't find it particularly strange that the limb had become part of D again somewhere along the line, she was delighted by the hitherto unheard calmness in its voice as it drew her attention to a map of the dome projected into thin air and suggested, "Why don't you have a hot soak?"

She melted away into a peaceful state of mind. But from deep in her heart, an anxiety rose that threatened to crush her sense of satisfaction and harmony. The other D—who or what was he? And what was this unprecedented crisis her mother was predicting that would change the whole world? What was she supposed to do, anyway? And how about D?

It came to her in a flash. The dashing Hunter was clearly the only person alive who could avert the disaster in that vision. However, from what Mia had seen, he was ready to depart this area, leaving her with his frosty rejection and indifference as her only mementos. And once he'd abandoned her, what could she do on her own?

A feeling of loneliness more painful than anyone should recall closed tightly around her heart.

"Mom, I'm scared," Mia said, cradling herself in the hot water. But its warmth felt as empty as an illusion. "I'm not like you, Mom. What am I supposed to do? I can't do anything!"

Her body trembled a bit. That hadn't happened in years. Tears slipped from beneath her closed lids and rolled down her cheeks.

Just then, she sensed someone standing over her. Arriving without warning, they had appeared all of a sudden. And this told her who it had to be.

"D?" she called out, only then sliding down in the warm water up to her chin. "I could just die! What are you doing in here?"

The one she sensed didn't reply. Wondering if he was looking at her, Mia felt as if her body was withering with shame. But at the same time, something about this—just the tiniest bit—made her heart race.

"For the love of all that's holy, get out of here already!"

"Come out of there."

The second Mia realized that remark wasn't aimed at her, her body no longer felt the warmth of the hot spring. A human shape rose from the bath ten feet ahead of her. Though droplets rained from him, they did nothing to hide his face or form. It was D. But which one?

The D in the bath grinned mischievously. The water came up to his waist. From the elbow down, both his arms were underwater.

"I'm here on business," he said.

But how had he slipped into the dark abode without D or his left hand noticing?

"Are you going to leave or not, D?" he asked. After a short time, he continued, "Not going to answer? It seems I'm not too talkative. To be perfectly honest, I would prefer that you weren't around. However, considering that I'd have no way of knowing when you might come back, it would seem best to dispose of you right now."

The D in the bath swiftly sank down. The water came up to his chest, and then a second later, fearful objects assailed the D on dry land. Mia's eyes snapped open painfully wide, because said objects were human heads. Apparently freshly severed, each sported a gory neck wound.

"These are the villagers that let you go earlier," D declared. "The useless buffoons. But at least now there's a use for them. They were actually grateful to you. Seeing them like this now, don't you feel anything?"

A white streak scorched through the air. A severed head shook. A wooden needle had just pierced it right between the eyes. The D

on dry land had hurled it, while the one in the bath had used the villager's head to shield himself. Sending up a spray, his body sank beneath the surface of the bath.

"Move, and the girl dies," said a voice that came from the water. "My blade is resting between her legs. Is the other me willing to strike if it'd mean a lovely young girl would get slashed in two?"

As Mia felt terror sink its talons into her heart, her senses focused on her groin. She couldn't feel a blade. However, she found it impossible to believe that this man with the appearance of D would be lying. And the source of her true terror was the thought that the D behind her would strike at his foe without any concern for her life.

Mom, Mia thought, closing her eyes and bracing herself for the agony that was sure to be visited on her. She felt lightheaded. Did it last for an instant, or was it an eternity?

"He's gone," the voice of the left hand said.

"Come out of there," D told her, sounding as if nothing at all had transpired.

Violent emotions tore through Mia's heart like a sudden gale. Just now, she'd been ready for him to cut her down. And along with her fear and resignation, there was the thought that if it were him doing it, it wouldn't be all that bad. And yet, how could he still be so cold to her? How could he not know how she felt?

Mia turned around. She intended to have a word with D. However, the gorgeous young man was nowhere to be seen in the steaming white bath.

Tell Me Thy Name

CHAPTER 4

I

When Mia had dressed and gone back to the parlor, D was standing by the window and staring out. In his black raiment, even as he took such a perfectly common pose, he looked horribly isolated from everything that surrounded him. It was probably the way he'd always lived—perhaps from the very second he was born. What kind of people had this young man had for parents? Inside, Mia quaked with an unusual curiosity.

D, she was about to call out to him when the figure in black turned in her direction. Instinctively Mia halted, unable to move.

Which D was this?

"Relax, he's the real one."

When she heard the left hand say that, the tension left her. The machinations of the other D had inspired that much fear in her.

"And that other D—has he gone already?"

"We did a thorough sweep of the dome. Most likely, he got away."

"We can't say that for sure."

Mia gazed at D in amazement. A single remark from the young man carried much more weight than what the left hand said.

"We didn't notice him slipping in here. The same would probably go for him leaving."

"Imagine someone coming and going in the Dark Abode without you noticing! I find that hard to believe."

"He's me. There's nothing strange about it."

"What are you?" she said, only realizing that the question was pointless after she'd asked it.

"I'm going to take a rest; then I'll be leaving. You can do as you like."

"Do you really have to go?"

"I'm finished here."

"Those people were murdered—by someone who looks just like you. He's trying to keep you in the area. At this rate, there could be a lot more deaths."

"The deaths of others have no bearing on me."

"He's waiting until you can't stand it anymore. One after another he'll kill anyone connected to you, waiting until you come to him."

"You're reading too much into this."

"No, I'm not!"

"If that's the case, then he's making a mistake. I'm leaving."

"Even knowing that death and destruction and slaughter will cover the earth? Even knowing that the only one who can possibly stop it is you?"

"If you won't leave, I will," D said, picking up the saddle that was sitting on the table and turning for the door.

Entirely unconsciously, Mia cried out, "Do something, Left Hand!"

"That's Mr. Left Hand to you," a hoarse voice said from the vicinity of D's hip as the Hunter walked away.

"Isn't there any way to keep him from going? It's like he doesn't even know how important he is."

"You're probably right."

"Stop!" Mia cried out wildly as she moved toward the door with him.

"Will you make it worth our while?" the left hand inquired, his voice suddenly dwindling.

"Yes, I will!" the girl shouted without a moment's thought.

"Very well. Do you have money? He's a Hunter. Arrrgh!" A cry of pain was heard from the Hunter's tightly balled fist.

D was about to go through the door, but the Left Hand's words had been enough for Mia.

"Wait. I want to hire you!" she said to him, her words nearly an angry bellow.

When D halted, Mia was confident of her victory.

D turned around, and then walked away.

"Wait a second. I—"

"I was told there are no Nobility in this region."

He was a Vampire Hunter—there was no point in his staying anywhere where he couldn't put his abilities to good use. So Mia broke off there.

D was about to go. To Mia, all eternity seemed to lie between them. Just then, a certain thought flashed through her brain, but it was unclear whether it could be termed a revelation or a plot.

"D," she called out to him, the expression on her face so hard and intense she seemed like a completely different person. "You said he's you, right? In which case, he's also a dhampir—he has Noble blood running through him."

Did the girl even know what it was she was saying?

On the other side of the door, D's form came to a sudden stop, as if he'd turned into a statue.

"I hear there's nothing the Nobility love more than the blood of a young girl—a virgin. If that's so, how about this, D?"

Suddenly raising her left hand, Mia flashed her clenched right hand across the opposite wrist. It was wrapped about the knife she carried for self-defense. Fresh blood dripped noisily to the floor.

"Genuine virgin's blood. Oh, doesn't that do anything for you, D? Please, say something."

Mia had cut the artery. If she didn't stop bleeding, she'd be dead of blood loss in under a minute.

D turned around. High on that figure the hue of darkness, a pair

of lights burned. Like blood-colored rubies, they were filled with a stark and brutal hunger. D's eyes.

"I'm sorry. That was a horrible, stupid thing to do. But I had no choice. D, those eyes are proof of your lineage. Proof of the Noble blood that flows in your veins. Hear my request, D. I want the other you to die—by your hand."

As soon as she finished saying that, Mia collapsed on the spot. Although this was due in part to a precipitous loss of blood, it was also because she'd eked out every ounce of desperate energy to make that outrageous request. Looking like a white blossom that'd fallen to the ground, she had a red stain spreading from her with a heavy scent.

Mia's eyes were open. He was coming closer, this figure of unearthly beauty. However, he had an air about him so ghastly she thought her blood would freeze. She didn't know this D.

Halting by her feet, the figure in black looked down on her with that crimson gaze.

"Yes, D—drink my blood," Mia said, raising her left hand as blood continued to stream down it. "I don't mind, so long as it's you. Then go and slay the other you. This is the only compensation I can give!"

Her hand fell limply to the floor, sending out a little splash of blood.

Peering down at the pale girl who'd completely lost consciousness, D slowly bent over. Within her pale throat, a blue line rose into prominence. The jugular vein.

That evening, the town's retired but now acting sheriff Old Jal received a visit from a black night wind. A door he was sure he'd locked opened, and the instant he realized that, the nocturnal wind that blew in snuffed his lamp. In the resulting darkness, he saw a figure in black who was like the night wind congealed. Beyond the window, the moon was out.



"Who is that—D?"

As Old Jal sat there with eyes bugging out, the figure lined up five severed heads on his desk, one after another.

"Bury these. But just so you know, I'm not the one who cut them off."

Old Jal got the feeling he was somewhere out in the solitude of outer space. "I know . . . but folks in town aren't gonna like this."

"Do whatever you like. I'll be coming and going a lot. Just tell them to stay out of my way."

"But why in blazes did you come back? Put yourself in my shoes, D."

"There's a Noble in the area as powerful as I am. Are you trying to tell me I should just let him be?"

"Got any proof? This is a peaceful village. Or it was, until you and that girl came along. Once I let them see these heads, everyone's gonna come gunning for the two of you. But even if we could get a hundred times as many people as there are in this town, we wouldn't stand a chance of beating you. That's what scares me. D, are you gonna raise your hand against innocent villagers?"

"Tomorrow, have everyone gather in the main square," D said.

Training a gaze that could crush stone on the Hunter, Old Jal asked, "You planning on persuading them all? Or something else?"

"I suppose we can make it high noon. I'll be back."

Before Old Jal could open his mouth again, the figure melted into the darkness.

At the time D had appointed, the village square was filled with a noisy bustle that far outstripped the earlier rumblings in the earth. It was ragged breathing and chatter choked with malice, uncertainty, and murderous intent, all of which spilled from men and women armed to the teeth. The blue sky and sunlight burned deep shadows on the ground. Five pairs of vacant eyes reflected all the square's proceedings. That morning, Old Jal had asked the

carpenter to erect a wooden stage as quickly as he could—and on it sat the five severed heads.

The aged lawman had told the villagers everything at the community hall, and after they unanimously decided that D had to be disposed of, they'd all moved on to the square. They had decided to meet with him despite the terror D inspired in them. No matter how great D might be, he wouldn't go away unscathed. And that was the crux of Mia's fear and uncertainty—that he'd raise his hand against the villagers.

"Sheriff, you think he's really coming?" one of them asked Old Jal, who stood beside the stage.

"That's what he said."

"You don't think maybe he had us all gather here so he could go get whatever it is he wants—"

"He's a man among men. If he said he's coming, he'll come."

"Well, damned if you ain't the head of his fan club."

"Shut your hole," Old Jal snapped back, veins bulging at his temples.

"Someone's coming!" a voice cried out.

They all looked around in every conceivable direction.

"Over this way!" someone finally declared.

A shape was coming down the village street.

"Is it D?"

"No. And it's a group."

"Why, that's Gael!" an old woman—apparently the man's mother—exclaimed with delight.

"Sesto's there, too. And Coonan! Did they come out of that hole or something?"

"They're alive!"

These men had been among the first to go out to the great subsidence, only to go missing. There were three of them. The whole crowd became one massive tide that went rushing toward them—then stopped. The force of the retreating wave sent those in the rear reeling.

"Gael! Sesto! Coonan!"

There was something strange about the behavior of the men, all three of whom were young. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary about their appearance or they way they walked, and yet something wasn't quite right. It was almost as if they didn't belong there, walking in the light of the sun. As the group kept a silent watch over them, the trio walked into the square.

"Gael!" the old woman cried, her stone necklace swaying to and fro as she stepped forward. Her tears glistened. "So, you made it back alive, did you? Your old mother couldn't ask for any—"

Her son—Gael—grinned slyly. At that moment, something whistled angrily through the air.

The mother looked down on the villagers from a terribly high spot. As a severed head trailing a ribbon of blood.

"Gael? Sesto? Coonan?"

Cries of joy became screams of fear.

One of the villagers fired a round from an old-fashioned rifle. Gael's right shoulder jerked back. A split second later, he leapt, sailing more than twenty feet to land directly in front of the shooter, at whose neck he then swung his right hand. It was a vicious chop. Not only was the shooter beheaded, but two more villagers to his left were also caught by the same blow, their necks half severed and sending up fountains of blood as the men toppled.

"Sesto—what in the world's come over Gael?" a girl who couldn't have been twenty asked her older brother in an imploring tone.

Placing his hands gently to either side of her head, her brother made an equally gentle twist to the right. Her head turned precisely 180 degrees, and his little sister died instantly of a broken neck.

Not to be outdone by the first two, Coonan also went into action. When no one was looking, he'd taken up a dead tree branch. Less than five feet long, it still demonstrated impressive force in the hands of the young man who'd returned. One easy swing crushed the torso of a villager wearing an old suit of armor. Another thrust of the same strength impaled a trio of villagers. And that wasn't all.

"Hey!" he called out, swinging the branch toward Gael and Sesto when they turned.

The three impaled villagers sailed neatly into the air. While they were still in midair, the hands and feet of Gael and Sesto went up. The bodies of the villagers fell to the ground, their heads alone neatly removed.

"What are you doing? We're all friends here!"

And along with Old Jal's words, a crimson light shot from his right hand. The ruby laser bored through the right side of Sesto's chest, enveloping it in smoke and flames. Subjecting him to a ruthless fusillade, Old Jal had no sooner dropped the man than he saw Gael coming down at him from above. Oh, shit, he thought as he shut his eyes; only his ears caught the unearthly hewing sound that spelled his new fate.

But what thudded to the ground was Gael's right arm. With a limb lopped off at the shoulder, the young man landed a good fifteen feet ahead of Old Jal and glared off to the right another fifteen feet, where there stood an inhumanly handsome man in black.

Someone called out his name.

D!

II

Gael said something, and then surged forward like a storm wind, aiming blows at the solar plexus and chest of the rider in black with his left fist. Ten blows in the span of a second—the punches came at ungodly speed.

And D blocked them all. His body described an elegant arc. His sword flashed out. The blade ran in a straight line from the stump of Gael's right arm, slicing his accursed heart in twain.

Ignoring Gael as he fell, D spun around. A thin but deadly branch scythed a horizontal path toward his face.

Coonan poised himself for a second attack, but the branch had been severed by the same slash that took his arm off at the elbow.

Coonan stood stock still, unable to move, for jabbing against the base of his throat was D's blade.

"Did you come here to collect corpses for experimentation?" D inquired in a rusty tone. "Or was this slaughter itself the experiment? Answer me."

Coonan didn't reply. Though his eyes were tinged with fear, he wore the emotionless visage of an automaton. His left arm had fallen off as well, having been severed at the shoulder.

As his foe howled with pain and reeled back, D said to him, "I won't ask this twice. Where is the other me?" It was a soft query.

Wind struck the Hunter's handsome visage. Still facing backward, Coonan's body had taken to the air. Landing a good thirty feet away, he launched another intense jump that took him out of the square, and then raced away without a backward glance.

Saying nothing as he returned his sword to its sheath, D turned to face the villagers. A bell tolled off in the distance. High noon—the time D had promised he'd be there. And as they beheld D, another hue gradually began to suffuse their eyes and piteous expressions.

Approaching slowly, Old Jal said, "I'm . . . I'm glad you came." Looking down at the two who'd fallen, he asked, "What the hell happened here?"

"They've been changed. What ran amok here were others who'd taken on the form of your friends."

"Changed? By what?"

"By the man who looks just like me."

"Now that you mention it, I did get a report back from the guys who chased him yesterday morning. They said he was a perfect double for you."

"Do you intend to stay out of this?"

"Personally, I wouldn't have complained if you'd just run off."

Raising his right foot, D planted it lightly on the ground. "He's down there. Someone with Noble blood."

"That's because he's exactly like you, you bastard!" a mournful scream rose from D's flank. It came from a blood-soaked middle-aged

man carrying a girl who'd been impaled on Coonan's stick. Her father, no doubt. "We heard about you from the sheriff. You're a freaking dhampir, ain't you? A human/Noble half-breed. That guy's sure to be your brother. You got us all to gather here so they could attack us, didn't you?"

The air was transmuted. Countless streams of malice erupted in unison from all around D.

"Did you plan on butchering the lot of us? How about it?"

"Answer him!" others called out.

"He's collecting parts," D responded impassively.

"Parts? What kind of parts?"

"The kind that can be harvested from the flesh of the dead."

Silence descended. As bewilderment passed through the villagers, the face of one froze in horror. The same followed with other villagers and other faces, for the terrifying import of D's words was finally dawning on them.

"You bastard . . . Not only do you kill a man, but you'd steal what's inside him as well?" screeched a voice so shrill it made people want to cover their ears.

A woman covered with blood raced toward D with a knife in her right hand. A pair of arms closed around her from behind, stopping her.

"I know how you—how all of you feel, but this young fella isn't the culprit. If you need proof, just look—he settled their hash for us, didn't he?"

Two men lay flat on the ground—Gael and Sesto.

"Just another trap. The two of them had the others run wild so he could come to the rescue. To fool us into trusting him."

Others chimed in with their agreement.

Heaving a sigh, Old Jal said, "Look, D—I'm not gonna be able to keep a handle on this. In the end, I think hitting the road as soon as possible would be the—"

"I've been hired."

"What? By who?"

Not responding, D took a step forward. The malicious comments died immediately.

"Someone who knows their way around a weapon, step right here," D said, pointing to the ground in front of himself.

The appalled expressions of the villagers changed once more. Even gut-churning rage cooled in light of what they'd just seen D do.

"Step forward. Doesn't anyone want to have his revenge? I was the one who sent those three out here."

A silent, crushing wave rolled across the square. He was doing the exact same thing he'd done with the villagers who'd chased him on the highway.

"What, are you scared?" D prodded softly. "This is your chance to avenge your parents, your children, and you'd just let me go? I see. I was right to come here in the first place."

D turned on his heel. He wore a cool smile on his lips. One of scorn.

After he'd taken a few steps toward where his cyborg horse was tethered at the entrance to the square, a youthful voice howled, "Wait just a goddamned minute!"

D went right on walking.

"You sick son of a bitch! I'm gonna make you pay for what happened to my little sister," shouted a young man who looked to be under twenty. In his hand he clutched a massive sickle. "I'll show you there are real men in this village. All of you, watch this!"

Though someone shouted out at him not to do it, the young man kicked off the ground in a savage bound. The great sickle he had raised could not only take off a human head, but it'd have sufficient force to cut through two or three torsos at a time.

"Waaaah!"

What he intended as a battle cry came out as a desperate scream as he brought his weapon flashing down.

The sickle had sufficient force and was well within range, but D merely tilted his upper body to the right to avoid it. Without a second's pause, the blade of the sickle reversed direction in

an exquisitely timed attack, but it again met only thin air, and, ignoring the agitated young man now caught off balance, D kept walking the way he'd been headed.

Humiliated, the young man immediately flew into a rage, getting back up and charging forward once more.

Light flowed out. Two streaks. The blade of the great sickle flew over D's right shoulder and imbedded itself in the ground before the Hunter, while the tip of a sword was pressed against the young man's throat—D's blade, which had been thrust back over the Hunter's left shoulder. Not a single soul there had seen D draw his sword, nor did anyone understand how he could've known the exact distance of that thrust with his back still turned.

"What's your name?" D asked the paralyzed youth.

Nothing from the young man.

"Your name?"

"Uh . . . Frost."

"Well, at least there was one man here. Why don't you ask me to spare you?"

Such a question, and such cruelty—could this truly be the real D?

"If you do, I'll let you live. How about it?"

The young man's face was slick with sweat from fear—the fear of death. He opened his mouth. His lips trembled horribly.

"Kill me . . . you . . . freak!"

A heartbeat later, Frost was bowled over by a vicious leg sweep. Flat on his back, as he tried to rise again, he saw his own sickle being raised high by D.

"Still don't feel like saying it?"

"Kill me! I'll become a monster like you and come back to kill you, you bastard."

D artlessly swung the sickle down. It was met by a horizontal thrust from a longsword, and pale blue sparks shot from the blades.

"Here's another man for you," said a man with red hair, and from the way he adjusted his posture with his sword, he appeared to have substantial practice with a blade.

"Mr. Rush!" the man on the ground called out gratefully.

As if in response to that, three more figures surrounded D—men armed with swords and hatchets. They weren't going to gang up on him. As proof of that, they all nodded in turn when Rush told them, "One at a time, boys."

"That'll take too long," D said. And then he told them the same thing he'd told the villagers a day earlier. "Come at me in force."

The men waited silently until one of them called out in a voice like steel, and then they all rushed at D like horses given a taste of the spurs. A second later, every last one of them let a weapon fall from a hand with a dislocated wrist.

It wasn't the work of the great sickle. Rather, it was due to a single chop with the side of D's right hand.

"Now do you see the power of the opponent you'd be up against?" D said as if nothing had occurred, his words bowling over the villagers.

To the silently despairing crowd he said, "From now on, no more interfering with me. Your true foe is underground. Either I'll slay him, or I'll join those you mourn."

And telling them that, D walked off to his cyborg horse. Though the sound of hoofbeats dwindled in the distance, no one attempted to give chase, nor were there any disparaging remarks to be heard.

III

Mia stood in front of the dark abode. Needless to say, since the defense system was operational, she was as unable to see it with her own two eyes as she'd been a day earlier. D had forbidden her from going near it—as the other D had been able to get inside, it was a perfectly natural thing for him to do. And Mia hadn't intended to do it, either. At present, she called a dilapidated house on the outskirts of the village home. But she'd left that dwelling and come out here because, as the daughter of a fortuneteller, she was drawn to the Nobility's relics.

In addition to their scientific culture, the Nobility had simultaneously developed a mystical culture, and one had but to begin to pursue that path to realize how far the Nobles had succeeded in developing it. Even the sort of divination Mia and others did was a system that borrowed from the accomplishments of the vampire civilization. However, it was strictly taboo to peruse any of the spells the Nobility had left behind, with some of the material being burned and other examples being sealed away deep in the earth. It was probably unavoidable that, as time went by, a minute part of the banned information began to get out. And though in such cases human conjurers with malevolent intentions had discovered this forbidden knowledge, they were not to be condemned. They entered polar regions that were nearly at absolute zero, intruded into living forests where even the very Nobility that had spawned them hesitated to tread, and traveled more than thirty miles down into the depths of the sea in homemade bathyscaphes. A combination of painstaking care and magic helped recover burned writings, molecular archives that had been destroyed, and records sealed away in other dimensions. Time went by, and though all this effort that'd been directed for evil purposes didn't bear much fruit, the forbidden knowledge now scattered across the continents ignited the inquisitiveness of serious scholars and researchers. And Mia was one of them.

Perhaps there was a chance some hint about incantations or secret rituals was hidden in the Nobles' facility. As a fortuneteller's daughter, Mia's mind was viciously needled by curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. However, D had sealed the invisible dome when they left. And Mia couldn't possibly get in on her own.

That's why it's okay, she'd thought, so long as I only go as far as the entrance. I can't get in anyway, and there's nothing dangerous about it.

And now, halted before it and looking down from the back of her horse, her heart not surprisingly had recurring calls from relief—and disappointment.

Stroking the neck of her mount, she whispered, "Let's head back."

Just then, the scenery changed. Suddenly, the grayish black structure—the dome—appeared from nowhere. Mia pulled back on the reins in spite of herself, but in the span of a heartbeat she became its captive.

Why? That was the question she should have dwelled on, but the rectangular hole that took shape on the wall's outer surface smashed that thought to pieces. The entrance.

Who on earth could've done that?

Still up on her steed, she could think at least that far.

The invisible dome remained open. Reason commanded her, Don't go in there. And Mia was the sort of girl to comply. She tugged on the reins and was about to wheel her horse around when the hole—the door—began to shrink. Reflexively, Mia jumped down off her steed. Still, reason was working well enough to stop her just in front of the entrance.

Don't go in there. Something isn't right about this.

The entrance was closing. Once it'd shrunk to the size where a person would have to hunch over to squeeze through it, Mia did precisely that and plunged into the darkness of the hole.

The interior was just as she'd seen a day earlier. Though she'd heard the Nobility's buildings had devices that would check if a living creature was anything other than a Noble and dispose of any intruders, nothing like that happened. Why had it revealed itself and beckoned to her? On entering, that question became a more palpable terror that eddied in black clouds through her heart.

The first thing Mia did was consult the three-dimensional schematic of the dome that was right next to the entrance. It was easy enough to operate. Apparently the dome regarded her as a Noble.

There was a place called "the meditation chamber." It was a room in the lowest floor—three stories underground. Moving sidewalks

and elevators carried her all the way there. The room was a cube measuring roughly fifteen feet in each direction, and there were no suspicious drawings or hues to be seen.

Mia was looking around with a gaze that seemed to try to penetrate the very concrete when a voice abruptly commented, "Aren't you the dedicated one?"

The girl shrieked and turned around, saying, "D?"

The person who stood in front of the door was indeed D. And both his arms were still attached.

However—

"Which one are you?" she inquired in a tone that attempted to conceal her fear but didn't do a very good job of it.

"The D you don't know."

"The fake one?"

At her response, D cleared his throat and smiled.

"What's so funny?" Mia asked, her right hand racing to the pouch on her hip. One of the capsules secured in its loops held special powder for divination. Her fright was fading away.

"Your right arm—how'd you get it back on?"

"It's not like you don't know the powers Nobles possess. Reattaching a severed limb is child's play," D said, swinging one arm. "Oh, you must forgive me. So, I'm the fake one? You have no idea what a strange name that is for me."

"Well, a fake's a fake."

Even as anger filled her chest, Mia couldn't fight the strange sense of affinity building toward the beautiful young man before her.

"If you were to ask me, I'd say he's the fake, but never mind that. You're back in here because—"

"Because of you, right?"

"How self-serving. I was going to say because of your curiosity."

"No, I'm not," the girl retorted tentatively, but her response could only be taken to mean his assertion was right on the mark. Fortunately, he didn't pursue the matter any further.

"Ah, you are indeed a fortuneteller's daughter. It looked like you

were hell bent on exploring the secrets of the Nobility. That's why I was waiting for you."

Tension knifed into Mia's back. Was this fake trying to say he'd read her mind so well and invited her in?

"Why?" she asked, her right hand closing tightly around the most dangerous of the capsules—one of caustic powder.

"Don't get so up in arms. I merely wanted to tell you what you wish to know."

"What I wish to know?"

"Who I am."

"Huh?"

"And who he is. Although you would seem more interested in the latter."

The face that made a sly grin was D's surely enough, but it still chilled Mia to the core. At that moment, she became absolutely certain this young man wasn't D.

"Come with me. You could look around this room all you like but you'd never find anything."

And saying that, the figure in black did an about-face. Mia began following him after a moment's hesitation.

Advancing down a corridor on the same floor in the opposite direction from the elevator, they quickly came to a dead end. Nevertheless, the fake D didn't halt.

"Hey, watch out!"

Though taken aback when she shouted at him, the figure in black advanced without hesitation, colliding with the wall and unexpectedly being swallowed by it.

"Is this an illusion, too?"

Just to be sure, she reached out with one hand, but it was rebuffed by a cold surface. The wall seemed genuine enough.

As the girl stood there dumbfounded, a voice called through the wall, "This went undiscovered for all his checking. Which comes as no surprise. Until the day before yesterday, it was a regular wall, after all."

"Then, you mean to tell me you changed it?"

"You could say that."

The girl was speechless.

"There's nothing to be surprised about. You really are a rather forthright girl, aren't you? For a Noble, it's a simple matter."

"So, you're one of the surviving Nobility after all. In that case, why don't you stop fooling around and go back to your true appearance?" Mia said, flinging the words against the cold stone wall. She couldn't bear the thought of someone so cruel and inhuman taking D's shape.

"My true appearance?"

Surprisingly enough, the voice behind the wall sounded somewhat astonished. But as a certain disturbing turbulence that even Mia herself didn't comprehend swept through her heart, that voice gave way to a bizarre chuckle.

"Very well. I shall do so soon enough. But first—come with me."

An arm in black stretched from the stone wall. Before Mia had a chance to avoid it, it grabbed her by the front of her shirt and pulled her through. Most likely, something had been done to the molecular structure of the wall. The moment her skin registered the sensation of slipping through something that wasn't water but rather more like a dense fog, Mia found herself on the other side.

An oppressive heat struck Mia's face, but it wasn't because the temperature was high. The air was incredibly humid.

More than the fake D before her, it was her surroundings that caught her eye. She was in an enormous cavern—and one glance at the completely even walls, ceiling, and floor made it clear that it was artificial. It was a naturally occurring pocket, but it had obviously been worked by human hands. Or rather, by Noble hands. Apparently fifty or sixty yards in diameter, the vast cavern was visible all the way up to the ceiling. There were no light fixtures. The walls and ceiling themselves radiated light.

"Long ago, it was a bit brighter in here. The power supply was destroyed once, and now no amount of fiddling can get it any

better than this, despite the fact that the Sacred Ancestor himself shielded the self-repair systems in a zero space field. It must've been a fearsome foe who did such a thing."

"A foe? You mean the Nobility had enemies?"

"Even now I don't know exactly what it was. Come."

The pair started forward. Due to the humidity, Mia was winded before they'd walked for ten minutes.

"I've had it. Can't you do anything about this heat?" the girl panted.

"It's geothermal. The thermostat is irreparably damaged. Put up with it."

"I can't walk anymore," she said, turning her face to the floor, and just then, an arm like steel slid under her left arm.

"What—"

Before Mia could finish speaking, her body was lifted off the ground, turned, and loaded onto the fake D's back.

"What do you think you're doing? Put me down . . ."

She knew she could fight him all she wanted, but it still wouldn't do any good. The fake D had already started walking. Because of her exhaustion and the stifling heat, Mia quickly slumped against the black back.

And it was just then that the hair-raising screams resounded overhead. A vile-smelling wind seemed to strike her back, there was a shrill screech, and something brushed by her neck as it fell.

"Time to run," the fake D said, his voice beginning to slice into the wind.

"What in the world's going on?"

"After the great destruction, the surviving guard beasts that were kept here spread all through the place. At present, this is a highly dangerous environment."

"Then what are we doing here, pray tell?"

"You'll see soon enough."

"When you say soon—"

Mia's words were cut short by the flapping sound of approaching wings overhead. She had no idea what shape these creatures

took. But the unusual number of wings Mia heard beating terrified her.

The sound spread. They were all swooping down at once. The slicing noises that she heard one after another began to reverberate like one drawn-out sound. There was an echo of things falling around them. However, the sound of approaching wings hadn't dwindled in the least.

"It would seem we've got some of their blood on us. The scent is drawing them out."

"Do something!"

The pair raced on.

Mia didn't yet know what fate awaited them up ahead.

Assassin in Blue

CHAPTER 5

I

Pain shot through her back as though it were being shredded. Desperately fighting back an explosion of agony, Mia sank her fingers into the fake's shoulders. Her hand reached for the pouch on her waist.

"I've got some caustic powder," she whispered in a low voice. "When I give the word, hit the deck."

"Sure."

Mia, though somewhat dissatisfied with the fake D's amused tone, pulled the capsule of powder from her pouch. Once it spread through the air and the lighter at the top end of the capsule ignited it, it should melt anything, including rock, in a thirty-foot radius. But for Mia to remain safe, it was necessary to give due consideration to the timing of that ignition. Ordinarily, the powder wasn't really suited to a situation where she was moving so quickly. However, she didn't have time to be picky.

"Stop," she called out, but as she turned the emitter upward, the capsule slipped.

"Oh!"

The tiny container struck her wildly grasping fingers once or twice before falling right through them.

"What is it?"

"I dropped the capsule."

"What'll you do?"

There was the sound of demonic wings closing in on her from behind. A shriek rang out, and it sounded like a number of the creatures dove downward.

"I'm gonna look for it. Set me down."

"Is this it?" the fake asked, holding the capsule out under her nose.

"B-but how?"

She needn't have even asked that. He'd caught it before it hit the ground. Mia was laid low by a feeling of utter defeat.

"Hurry up. The enemy isn't about to wait around for you."

Once again she heard a strange flapping sound. It was followed by a slash, and what felt like wings fell onto Mia's back. She pressed the button as if she were spraying insecticide. It expelled the contents for two seconds—and then the sound faded. Holding her finger over the rough wheel of the lighter, she cried out, "Hit the dirt!"

And as she sank down, her finger rolled across it.

An iridescent sphere of light swelled into existence. A powerful acid tore into the creatures in the air, melting them.

"Good enough," the fake D said, but how much time had passed was unclear.

As a weight resting on her suddenly vanished, Mia realized that she'd been on the bottom—the fake D had narrowly managed to shield her from the caustic flames. For the longest time Mia couldn't take her eyes off the back now exposed by his ruined coat.

"What are you looking at?" the fake asked, his back still to the girl.

Somewhat flustered, Mia hurriedly replied, "The monsters' corpses. They're all melted. I didn't get to see what they looked like after all."

"Let's go."

"Okay. I'll be right—"

In the middle of her reply, the ceiling and floor seemed to switch places.

Swiftly catching Mia as she fell, the fake D could feel the warm wetness on her back with his fingers. Torn open by an attack from the monsters, Mia's back had lost about as much blood as it could.

"You mentioned my true appearance," the fake D said, his eyes beginning to gleam fiercely. "Okay, I'll show you. Now."

Telling her this in a voice that prickled like frost, he brought his handsome visage closer to Mia's pale throat.

The next thing she knew, she was lying in bed. On remembering everything that had happened up until that point, she looked around in shock at her ravaged surroundings, which bore some resemblance to a sickroom. The ceiling and walls were ruined, and by the barest of illumination she made out what seemed to be melted beds and medical equipment. Here lay death, heavy and dark.

"Are you awake?" Mia heard a voice above her head ask abruptly, and the girl thought the shock would snuff her breath. Was the D looking down at her the real one or the fake? After some consideration, she let out a disappointed sigh.

"If you're awake, I'll have you join me," the fake D told her.

"What is this place?"

"A hospital. Of course, it doesn't really resemble one much anymore."

That much Mia could understand. But what sort of being would go to such lengths to destroy one of the Nobility's facilities? This new puzzle occupied her brain.

Mia got up. Her back hurt terribly.

"I wouldn't jump around too much if I were you. I couldn't do any more than a makeshift treatment. You lost a lot of blood."

Terror drove a pillar of ice through Mia's spine. Bleeding in front of a man with the blood of the Nobility in him? In all her life, she'd never done anything with the same speed that she now used to bring her hands to either side of her neck.

Once her fingertips told her that the skin remained smooth, the fake said to her, "Feel relieved now?"

He seemed quite pleased with himself.

"Although it was a very alluring aroma, I have no intention of making you my servant at present. You see, without a body that can live in the odious light of day, I can't accomplish my aims."

Mia didn't hear these words. Her relief at not having fallen to the pernicious fangs of the Nobility had blotted out all other thoughts. And it was due to that that she failed to notice the fearsome meaning of his last remark.

A short time later, Mia brought up a different matter. "You took care of my back, didn't you?"

"Well, I couldn't have you dying on me."

"I'm fine now. So, what's next?"

The fake D's eyes gleamed.

"Down here—" he began to say, but just then, the darkness grew deeper.

Though Mia didn't notice it, the walls of this room also retained the same light-emitting properties. When she looked up at the fake D's face, Mia found the first traces of tension in his expression.

"He made it through the defense systems faster than I expected. He truly is . . ."

The words that went unsaid made Mia's heart race.

"What happened? D?"

"Stay here," the fake ordered her, and then he turned around. "There are strange things prowling around outside. Don't go out there."

The voice was swallowed by the depths of the darkness.

If this impostor called D "me," what manner of being could get him so agitated? Mia became more intrigued. Her curiosity had made her call on this dark abode, and it was safe to say it was now once more inviting her into pitch black danger.

Somehow keeping the pain in her back in check, Mia got out of bed and began to walk off toward where the fake D had disappeared.

She was still dressed. Her pouch remained safe and sound, too. Searching for anything else that might serve as a weapon, she picked up a foot-and-a-half-long piece of steel pipe off the floor. When she swung it with both hands, it seemed like it would suffice. But in return, a sharp pain shot through her back.

She could see only darkness ahead of her, but upon entering it, she found the door. Once she stood before it, it opened by itself.

Great, she thought, but as soon as she stepped out through it, it closed right behind her. Flustered, she tried stepping on the floor in front of it a few times, but now the door wouldn't budge at all. Which was why the fake D had told her not to go outside.

"This is bad," she told herself, but she quickly gave up on stewing over it. In studying divination, Mia had learned that if one method didn't give you the answer, you should switch to another right away. If astrology didn't work, try a reading from the winds—and that was exactly the philosophy that guided her now.

Mia was standing in a broad corridor. Although everything, including the doors set into the walls, was made of the same luminescent metal, the surfaces were melted, twisted, and smudged with oily smoke, speaking volumes about how a savage destroyer had torn through here mercilessly. Nevertheless, Mia couldn't do anything to stop the admiration and the fathomless fear spreading through her heart. Here was a facility beyond the imaginings of the humans up above—what on earth could've laid such waste to it?

I have to know—Mia's new curiosity flashed so brightly that even when she shut her eyes, it burned into her eyelids.

Where had the fake D gone? That was the first thing she should consider.

"It's been a while, but I suppose I should give it a try," Mia said, moving to the center of the corridor and standing the steel pipe on end. Chanting the spell for directional divination, she took a step backward. The pipe floated about four inches straight up in the air. This was the most important part of any divination—an impartial view.

"Now!"

With that, the pipe dropped, pointing off to the left when it landed. Picking it up, Mia started off to the right side without a moment's hesitation.

The air was terribly hot, but at least it didn't have an odd smell to it. As she walked for the next ten minutes, she came to a number of corners and stairways, and each time Mia used the same method to decide her path. She didn't run into any of the "strange things" the fake D had mentioned.

Though the degree of destruction in the underground facility grew greater the farther she went, Mia grew inured to it. She only realized that'd been shortsighted of her when she came to an area that reminded her of a factory. Ruined machines of staggeringly huge proportions towered to either side of her, all of them half melted and misshapen. Some had their inner workings exposed, and those had also melted away. While many of the massive machines were recognizable as cranes or furnaces, there were also amalgamations of spheres and cubes that seemed to suck her in as she looked at them, and the mere thought of the purpose they might serve formed ice on the nape of Mia's neck.

"Incredible—but they're all out of commission," she murmured.

The faint light never failed, throwing Mia's shadow across the floor.

When she came to a sixty-foot-high cylinder that called to mind a rectifier, Mia sensed the presence of someone behind her. She turned and looked. A shadowy figure swiftly hid itself behind an iron pillar. Although it was a human shape, it wasn't that of the fake D. For starters, he wouldn't be one to hide.

"Who's there?" Mia called out in a firm tone.

Stillness returned to the world.

"C'mon out. We're just spooking each other this way."

As Mia glared at the spot where the shape had vanished, her right hand slipped into her pouch. Groping blindly, she found the capsule of phosphorous powder and pulled it out. After spraying

it at her feet for a second or so, she opened the lid, spilling its contents out as she backed away.

When she'd gone about fifteen feet, the human figure reappeared in its original position. Leaning forward somewhat with both arms crossed in a disagreeable manner, it was headed toward her at a good clip. Apparently it wasn't about to let her get away. But when it came close enough that she could clearly discern its features even in the faint light, a cry of horror rang from Mia's lips.

"But you're—Zoah!"

Partly it was the gloom and partly it was her own reaction that left her aghast, but the youth with a complexion as pale as paraffin was indeed the same young man who'd been decapitated two days earlier. The proof was on his neck—black stitches ran all around the base of it.

"Zoah . . . Who in the world could've . . ." Mia said, tears spilling from her eyes. While they were tears of mourning at the pitiful sight of the young man who'd loved her, they were also tears of rage toward whoever would subject the dead to such a ghastly procedure.

However, the way the young man approached her devoid of expression was truly unsettling.

"Zoah, say something."

A pale face. And at its center, eyes as cloudy as those of a dead fish.

"Don't come near me, Zoah," Mia finally cried out.

But he was coming.

Fear dictated Mia's course of action. Crouched down, she struck the capsule's lighter. Defying the gloom, a blinding flash of light zipped over to Zoah's feet. At that instant, Zoah stepped onto the phosphorus powder she'd scattered seconds earlier. Though Mia's eyes were shut tight, she was assailed by images of the white seeping through her lids and used both hands to hide her face.

"I'm sorry!"

Opening her eyes a crack, she turned and ran for all she was worth. The sound of burning followed her for a brief period. The living corpse hadn't even let out a scream.

"Zoah . . . Zoah . . ." Mia cried, sobs spilling from her lips.

At that point, heaven and earth traded places. A tremendous jolt twisted the world, throwing Mia's body in a direction even she couldn't determine, where she was swallowed up.

II

She had the sensation of sliding downward. At the very least, she wasn't flying. Beneath her body she could feel an incline.

What's gonna happen? she wondered—and just then, a shock tossed her body up. Mia was just in the midst of a scream when she landed on her ass against hard ground.

"Oh, that hurt . . ."

And she wasn't just talking about her derrière. She could tell that the wound on her back had opened again. Warm dampness was sliding down toward her waist.

The quaking subsided. Though she knew it must've been caused by some tremendous force run amok, she couldn't begin to form a definite picture of what that might've been.

Getting the feeling she'd done something that couldn't be undone, Mia surveyed her surroundings with trepidation. And her breath caught in her throat. Not surprisingly, the glowing walls were behaving strangely, their dim illumination now alternating intervals of darkness and light that created a kind of strobe effect. And in these flashes of light, Mia was able to make out a vast expanse of dark soil and rows of gravestones. Originally, this place must've been located far below the floor Mia was on, but apparently it too had been struck directly by that massive quake, as the gravestones had all fallen and parts of coffins or even whole ones protruded from crevices in the earth.

"Who'd have thought there was a graveyard way down here . . ."

Who'd made it, and whom had they buried there?

Crawling over to the closest tombstone on all fours, Mia read the writing on it. It was inscribed solely with numbers. They'd

been burned into a metal plate with a laser or something similar.

"These numbers . . . This date is from more than five thousand years ago . . . This one's three thousand . . . And seven thousand . . . And this one . . ."

The numbers inscribed on five or six of the grave markers related the fact that all of them had been erected more than three millennia earlier. At the same time, they also spoke volumes about how long this subterranean facility had been in operation.

"Leave it to the Nobility. But so many of them wouldn't have died so easily. In which case . . ."

Were those interred there human? Or were they—

At that point, Mia should've left. To the rational mind, there was no way remains from more than three millennia earlier could have retained their original forms. However, curiosity burned once more in her bosom, and in a spot less than three feet from her, she saw a coffin that'd been completely exposed. A pain shot through her back and waist as if a knife had gone into them, but she didn't let that bother her. Inching over on her knees, Mia reached for the coffin's lid.

I wonder if it'll even open, she thought, but it slid off easily enough. It came as little surprise that even Mia didn't have enough nerve to peek in right away, but rather she lowered her eyes and regained control of her breathing.

"One, two . . ." she counted, "three!"

She raised her head. There was a face right in front of her. The shriveled, desiccated face of a mummy, its eyes alone glowing.

Not saying a thing, she pulled back. Something cold came to rest on her shoulder. Her hand reached up to touch it. Icy fingers. Mia's eyes stared straight ahead—at the figure about to leave its coffin. And it wasn't the only one.

Rapid shifts came between darkness and light.

Light—the figure in the coffin stood up in the box.

Darkness.

Light—the figure got out.

Darkness.

Light—the figure was coming closer.

Mia watched a coffin in the distance . . . another coffin, still buried . . . Lids were sliding off or pried open, hands stretching out, figures rising . . . figures, figures, and more shadowy figures.

"Noooo!" Mia exclaimed, twisting her body.

There was an impact on her shoulder, but she quickly pulled free. Taking five or six steps on her knees, she rose and turned. Trembling engulfed her whole body.

Zoah was standing there. Due to the dizzying switches between darkness and light, for a little while Mia didn't notice that there was something wrong with him. The shape of his face was strange. The right half of it remained shrouded in darkness.

"It's gone . . ."

Half of his face was missing. And Zoah, too, was closing in on her. There was nothing she could do but retreat. She wondered how, terrified beyond belief, she must appear to him and the others. Were the hands he extended seeking some expression of affection, or flesh and blood?

Her back bumped against something. A metal pole. There was no place to run anymore.

She called out his name. "Zoah . . ."

The forest of arms moved forward. Out of all those limbs like hard, dead branches, Zoah's hands alone still retained the semblance of a living person's.

Her breasts were seized roughly. By Zoah's hands. Mia let out an agonized scream. He was going to tear them off.

Suddenly, her pain subsided. Zoah's hands slowly pulled away, following the arc his falling body described. It wasn't clear whether or not Mia noticed the glittering needle that pierced his temple. The other walking dead also fell to the ground, one after another. Glistening needles were jabbed through their temples, their chests, their abdomens.

"It's my hair," said a voice off to the left. Just as before, the figure in blue astride the black steed had long hair that covered him to the waist.

"You're—"

That was the only word Mia got out.

How many times am I gonna have to ask that? she wondered, suddenly feeling stupid. Blood loss and the pain in her back were rapidly sapping her strength.

"My name is Yuma. Remember that."

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Mia asked, staring intently at his black mount.

"Because he should be here."

"By he, which D do you mean?"

"Either one."

To this man, they were both probably one and the same.

"You're an assassin, aren't you?"

The man said nothing.

"Why are you out to get D?"

"He learned too much."

"Like what?"

"If you knew that, you'd have to die as well."

"Why did you spare me alone?"

"Because if I take you away with me, he'll soon appear."

"You keep saying he, but there are two Ds, you know. The real one and a fake."

Behind the blue hair, something glimmered. Perhaps it was an eye.

"You don't know anything, do you?"

It took her a few seconds to respond to those words. "Know anything about what?"

"I can't say. When I slay him, have him tell you with his dying breath."

"Don't be so sure of yourself."

"Get on my horse."

The black steed came closer, and the pale figure in blue reached down from its back.

"Not a chance," Mia said, backing away.

"Oh, my. Why not?"

"I don't fancy being bait for you to lure D out."

"Nevertheless, you're coming with me."

"The hell I will!"

"In that case, I have no use for you. I'll have to do the same thing to you that I did to the others," he said, turning his head—or actually, his hair—to indicate the legions of dead.

"Why?" Mia asked, cold sweat beginning to run down her face.

"You were with them. Perhaps you learned the same thing."

"I don't know anything. But if you're going to kill me anyway, why don't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"Everything. Like what you are, for starters."

The rider said nothing.

"What a jerk you are!" Mia spat. "I give you whatever you want, but you won't tell me anything about yourself in return—that's despicable."

"Are you crying?"

When he asked her this, Mia finally realized that she was. Zoah lay at her feet. First his head had been cut off, and now he had a hairlike needle through him.

"Yeah, so I cry. Is that a crime? A fortuneteller's daughter is still a human being. When something sad happens, I cry. If something rubs me the wrong way, I get angry. What's the matter with that?" Glaring at the man in blue, who was surely an assassin, she continued, "If you're going to kill me, kill me already. But I'll be damned if I'll let a liar like you use me."

"That's interesting," the assassin said, smiling.

"What is?" Mia asked, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand.

"Are you so loath to serve as my bait? Are you that smitten with the man they call D?"

Mia jumped up.

"D-don't be absurd!" she stammered.

"Is it so absurd?"

"It—it sure is."

"Fair enough, I suppose. What else do you wish to know?"

What is the other D? The question started to rise in her throat, but Mia hesitated. Looking around at their surroundings, she asked, "What is this place?"

"A facility constructed by the Nobility in ancient times. Certain experiments were conducted here over the course of nearly ten millennia."

"What for?"

"The fusion of human and Noble blood."

He said it so casually; she couldn't comprehend it at first. Parsing the words one by one with her brain, she strung them back together to form some meaning. She still had to ask, "What did you just say?"

The figure in blue didn't answer her.

"Mixing human and Noble blood? Is that what you mean? They did those sorts of experiments here?"

"Correct."

Dizziness swept over Mia. She barely managed to keep herself upright by clinging to the pole, but the impact of that knowledge wasn't about to leave her.

Mia searched madly for her next question. "Well, then—who was it that destroyed this place? There's no way humans could've done it. Was it some falling-out between Nobles?"

"Not even a Noble could've done it."

"Why not?"

"This place was designed by the Sacred Ancestor. Nobility or not, no one save him could so much as put a scratch on its walls."

"Then who did it? I've heard there were extradimensional life forms and creatures from outer space who opposed the Nobility."

"Not them."

"Quit being coy and just tell me. You're going to kill me anyway, right? Who did it?"

"It was—"

Just as Mia strained her ears to catch the indigo assassin's reply, the ground quaked once more. It continued for several seconds.

Showing no signs of getting down off his horse, the assassin looked up at the ceiling and said, "That's the sort of fight I would expect. But for all that destruction, not a single chunk of debris falls—truly the work of the Sacred Ancestor."

Though the face he then turned toward Mia might've been devoid of emotion, his eyes gleamed with terror.

"All this quaking and destruction is because he's fighting. What's more, it's getting closer. You truly have become unnecessary."

His left hand, which had gripped the reins, slowly rose before his face, and then made a sudden jerk. Obviously he'd pulled out a hair. And like a lengthy needle, it would surely pierce Mia's body. In this world where even now darkness and light continued to flash, death closed in on Mia with certainty.

"A pity we didn't have more time together," the assassin in blue said.

And then he swung his left hand. Off to the left. Only empty space lay there.

Turning in that direction, Mia peered into the blackness. A shadowy figure stood there. Shut in darkness, struck by light. But solitary and imposing.

Mia heard her own voice like some distant call savagely ablaze with hope.

"D . . ."

III

The mounted figure twisted around without any sign of agitation.

Something shot out, scorching the air as it went. A flying needle of unfinished wood came to a halt about four inches shy of the

blue assassin's face. Mia gasped, for what should be wound about the missile but a few dozen strands of blue hair. The assassin's hair was able to act autonomously.

The first strike for each had proven ineffective. And the thought of what the second strike might bring left Mia immobilized. This wasn't a confrontation between two men—it was one between a pair of demons. As the two squared off with fifteen feet between them, the light shone on them, and then darkness swallowed them.

Which D are you? That was the question that filled Mia's head.

"You know who I am, don't you?" asked the assassin in blue.

"He told me about you."

At D's soft reply, Mia's heart swelled. Standing there was the real thing—the D she knew so well.

"How does it feel to battle yourself? And to knock this research center back to square one just when it was on the road to reconstruction? A battle between chosen ones must be something incredible."

"Did you kill Origa?"

"That's my job. Anyone who gains any knowledge of these experiments, regardless of how little that may be, is to be exterminated—that's the order I was given."

"By whom?"

"That goes without saying. If you don't know that, you'll never amount to anything more than a simple Hunter."

The figure in blue rustled as if he'd been caught in a breeze. Or rather, he stirred like a snake. Each of them was primed for battle.

The assassin's left hand reached for his hair. Taking hold of a fistful, he brought it to his lips. Fwooo! Mia's ears caught the sound of him blowing. Hundreds of needles flew at D without a sound. D's sword slashed through them, but the hairs weren't cut.

Look. D's blade was growing bluer and bluer by the instant. The hairs from the blue assassin were wrapping themselves around it.

"Your sword is useless now," the assassin said, laughter tingeing his words. "Think you'll be able to stop my hair next time?"



As he spoke, his blue arsenal rustled up like vipers rising to strike. D had been denied the use of the weapon that might ward off any fresh attacks.

"What?" rang a cry of surprise. The assassin twisted around in the saddle. From behind him, Mia had wrapped both hands around his neck.

"Hurry up, D! Make a run for it!"

Her sad cry became an agonized shriek a heartbeat later. A brightly gleaming needle pierced her through the chest and out the back.

However, the assassin in blue donned a puzzled expression. Mia had suddenly disappeared. Once again she'd called upon the same decoy spell she'd used on the brink of the great subsidence. Her true form was crouched next to the pole, where she had a hand pressed to her chest.

Would D flee, or was the assassin in blue going to make his move?

The result was unexpected. The assassin in blue suddenly wheeled his mount around and galloped toward Mia.

D bounded. In the intermittent light, his blade glittered. It no longer wore its sheath of hair. The sword he swung came down hard on the assassin's shoulder, shaking the rider badly in the saddle, but Yuma narrowly managed to stay up.

Listing heavily to the right, the assassin galloped off into the depths of the darkness.

Sensing someone approaching, Mia raised her head. The pain of being skewered by a needle was rapidly ebbing.

Her duplicate was formed by her will, particulates in the air, and proteins expelled through her own pores, and the more detailed it became, the more its reactions mirrored her own. And that was why, to a certain degree, Mia experienced the pain that her duplicate endured.

"Are you okay?" D asked. His sword still rested in his right hand.

"Do I look okay? I'm beat to hell!"

"We'll see to your wounds later."

Mia was caught off balance. That was all D had to say after she'd disobeyed his orders and entered the dark abode? She'd been braced for a vicious tongue-lashing.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?" Mia asked him jokingly, but then she noticed that his stare was focused not on herself but on the darkness to her rear. It couldn't be a new foe, could it? Was that the reason for the unexpected retreat by the assassin in blue?

As expected, the figure that approached from the depths of the darkness was also D. Needless to say, it was the impostor. The assassin had noticed him and fled. No matter how powerful Yuma might be, it would clearly be too dangerous to take on two Ds.

"No matter where you go, it's just one endless battle with you, isn't it?" the fake D said in a sarcastic tone.

While the voice was D's, Mia got the feeling she was seeing another side of him, and it put her in a foul mood.

Perhaps sensing something, the fake D raised one hand and said, "Hold on. There's no point in fighting any longer while we're so evenly matched. Let's take a rest. We've got this lovely spectator, too."

Turning to D, Mia said, "Let's do that." But she didn't even know why she did so.

The sword D lowered had blue hair wrapped around its blade. That was probably the reason he'd allowed the assassin to escape.

When it had appeared he'd be unable to defend himself from his opponent's attacks, Mia had used her decoy spell. However, D now gave a twist to his wrist, and the strands promptly snapped, fluttering down to the ground.

"Well, I'll be," Mia said, but her words quickly streaked away from her as she fell toward the ground.

Just before she hit, D's hands caught her and swiftly turned her over. And although she wasn't sure exactly how he did it, she felt like her back had just been laid bare.

"What are you—"

"Just some treatment," D said, and the pleasant coolness spreading across her back vouched for his words.

"She sure pushed her luck," a hoarse voice grumbled, and at that, Mia found tears welling in her eyes.

The pain flowed out like a tide.

Once she was completely lucid, a hoarse voice declared, "Good enough."

D stood up again. How it had happened was once again a mystery, but the girl's clothes were back in place.

"Even I can't do that," the fake D remarked with admiration after standing there speechless for so long. "That old dog gave you an edge. I guess it can't be helped. Apparently you were the first in your class."

Tossing his jaw at the two of them, the fake D said, "Come with me. I'll show you what this place is really all about."

And then he turned around and walked back into the darkness from which he'd come.

The trio was in a space reminiscent of a laboratory. Though the ceiling, walls, and floor were all melted as if they'd been assailed by the same high heat as everything else, the arrangement of what appeared to be deformed equipment and the atmosphere that still hung in the deathly gloom made the room's former purpose known. Some thirty feet away, a machine that retained a cylindrical shape gave off periodic flashes of pale blue light.

"This is the core of the facility. Though it was thoroughly devastated, it comes as little surprise that it survived."

Mia pressed her hands against her chest. It wasn't the cold. An atmosphere close to a chill had stolen into her. Experiments had been conducted here that no human should've ever known about.

"Do you remember this, D? It's the place where we were born."

There was no reply. What's more, it appeared the fake hadn't expected one from him.

Gazing at the melted lump of material just before him, the fake made a haphazard slice at it. Melted or not, it was still apparently metal, but the material offered no more resistance than water as he bisected it with a diagonal slash.

"This is where the birthing device was. Do you understand, D? We were born not in our mother's home or a delivery room, but in a room for experimentation."

D stood there like a black shadow.

It was quiet. The stillness was such that it seemed to have been ordained in ancient times and respected by all of creation.

And then it was broken by an insolent voice, echoing in a hair-raising manner, "'We were born.' D, that means the two of you . . ."

"That's right," the fake said, nodding. "Here, we were plucked from our mother's womb and cut apart. Apparently our backs were joined in a special fashion. It would seem that's why we're so similar, both in appearance and in ability. Which of us is the older brother and which the younger, D?"

Nothing from the Hunter.

"I'm not surprised. You can't answer that, can you? But I know. I, who was sealed away in the cold and weighty darkness for so, so long. Unlike you, who were given life right away. I know, you see."

Here, he caught his breath.

"It would seem he wanted to have everything exactly the same. But for what purpose? We grew in the same woman's womb under the exact same conditions and were delivered without even a millisecond's difference. From anyone's perspective, there would be no older brother or younger brother. In other words, you are me, and I am you."

Vertigo assailed Mia. Her body was terribly cold. These two couldn't possibly be brothers. Or, as the impostor put it, one and the same person.

"You called me a fake, didn't you?" the fake D said, and the girl now noticed that he was wearing a grin. "In a sense, you're not

mistaken. After all, I was sealed away here while D was given the world. I suppose that after being delayed for so long, it's only natural I'd be considered a fake."

"Why come back now?"

"As if you didn't know! To keep control of the world in the hands of the Nobility. That's what I'm programmed to do."

"Then you're the one who caused that huge depression?"

"That's right. It was part of the preparations for putting this facility back in operation."

"Back in operation?" Mia said, her eyes wide as she looked all around them. "It's completely destroyed—and you're saying it'll operate?"

"Don't forget that it was built by the Sacred Ancestor."

"But still," Mia started to protest, but at that point the lighting began to flicker.

"What is it?"

"Ask your sweetheart."

Smartass, Mia thought, but she did want to get D's opinion. "D—what's going on?"

Despite its content, his soft reply set Mia at ease.

"It's trying to come back to life. The facility, that is."

Youthful Intruders

CHAPTER 6

I

"Could it actually do that?" Mia asked D, but he didn't reply.

In his place, the fake said, "These are preparations undertaken by the Sacred Ancestor. No doubt he furnished each and every molecule in the ceiling and walls with regenerative abilities. By my calculations, it should be fifty percent complete within three days."

"And what do you intend to do then?"

"Woman, you are sorely lacking in the imagination department," the fake said, his grinning countenance making Mia shudder. "This facility isn't merely for genetic research. It's equipped with an impressive level of defensive and offensive capabilities. Systems developed by the Sacred Ancestor, at that. If my memory serves, it has the power to reduce half a continent to dust with the single touch of a button. But no, it should prove quite interesting to expose the lowly humans to the strange shapes that the results of the original genetic research took."

"So, what do you hope to accomplish with that? What's your aim?"

"I myself don't know—at least, not fully."

Mia was left speechless.

The fake D's evil smirk grew even broader. "If there must be a reason for everything, I think it's due to my anger at being left alone for so long. That may not be it exactly, but it can't be far from the mark."

"I'm begging you, don't do this," Mia entreated. But for some reason, she couldn't bring herself to really hate this horrible mass murderer. "There has to be something else you could do. A great man like you would be able to do anything."

Even she knew what she was saying sounded absurd. Pointing at D, she said, "He's an outstanding Hunter, for example. If you're just like him, you should be able to do the same."

The fake's next words froze Mia to the core.

"That's parricide."

Silence descended. And it was far more daunting than any aura.

Mia was about to turn to D, but she paused.

"That may be," D said, and his words were a great help. However, was D admitting to what the other had said—that they were the legitimate offspring of the Sacred Ancestor?

"D!"

"Don't bother," D said, and those words from him brought an explosion of murderous intent from every inch of the fake D.

"Wait, D!"

"Step aside."

The figure in black strode forward. Mia had intended to block his way, but she ended up stepping to the side without putting up any resistance. A sword gleamed in D's right hand. At the same time, the fake D had drawn his blade.

"It's the same old song and dance, D," the fake said.

The instant Mia's heart rankled a bit at the hopelessness in those words, D kicked off the ground with tremendous force. Mia's eyes caught nothing more than a momentary explosion of light. Blue sparks spread over the fake D's head. Two streaks of light intertwined like serpents all the way down to the floor, shot back up again, and then there was a second scattering of sparks in front of D's chest. But that wasn't what made Mia cover her eyes. Every time the blades came together, a strange sensation filled the room. Two tremendous energies with wills of their own were slamming together, flying apart, growing even denser as they tried to shatter the field that contained

them from the inside. Destruction for destruction's sake, expansion for expansion's sake—all three brains were seared, and their bodies were left semitransparent and weighing only half as much as normal. It seemed as if neither of the pair's blades could injure the other. Steel clashed, and every time that mellifluous tone rang out, the atmosphere became chaotic, abusing Mia's body, spinning her and driving her up against the walls. She sank halfway into them.

This was the domain of the two Ds.

At that point, a greenish hue arose in the dim light. Blinking repeatedly, it went black, then blinked once more.

"That's a warning light," the fake D said. Or at least that's who Mia guessed it was, but she wasn't completely sure. The two of them had been switching positions so rapidly that each looked at times like the shadow of the other. "Do you know what's happening, D? I do. Intruders."

"Intruders?" Mia said, her eyes riveted to him.

The fake D stood there motionless, his eyes half closed. But he soon remarked, "Hmm, it would seem even that little hick village has someone with some backbone. They're coming down into the subsidence."

"What?"

"The fools. They'll see what a terrific stronghold this research center is when I strip the life and soul from them."

About three feet above the trio's heads, an image had formed of a number of figures descending a rope into the great subsidence. Men from the village. Mia counted four of them, of which three looked familiar. All wore backpacks and were armed with longswords or axes, bolt guns or tasers. Mia's eyes were drawn to the youngest and seemingly most intrepid of the bunch.

His name was Kuentz. The son of a village huntsman, he was a mere nineteen years of age, but there wasn't a man around who was any better in a bare-handed fight or in the use of arms. The

reason he hadn't been involved in any of the major incidents up until now was simply because business had sent him off to a neighboring village. This morning, he'd heard about the trouble before leaving said village, and as soon as he got home, he called the men together, gathered volunteers to explore the bottom of the great subsidence, and rode out there after making sufficient preparations. He was hardly a rash young man, which became evident when he ruled out any of the village volunteers who had a wife and children to look after, regardless of what special skills they had. The other men were also cool headed and composed, all brave men who weren't above sacrificing their lives for the safety of their families and their village.

Coming down the rope in almost a straight line, they'd gone about halfway when the rock face grew violent. The mere touch of their feet against it sent the four of them flying, rope and all, and once they'd twisted back around on the line, they found unsettling mummies leering back at them. This may have been an area where the ancients had performed mummification rites and burials, but the fact that the rocky walls had easily given way at that point to reveal exactly four of them seemed to be no mere coincidence. As the men stared dazedly at them, their desiccated flesh swiftly began a transformation. Blue blood vessels shot through their muscles, which ballooned and reclaimed their reddish hue before pink skin flowed up to cover them like a returning tide. And from the way their bountiful chests filled in, bare of even a stitch of clothing, they could tell the mummies were women. Then the women, with gold, red, black, and green tresses hanging down to their waists, got the most coquettishly alluring smiles as they reached out for the men with both arms. Ordinarily, anyone could've seen there was something strange about this. However, the situation was so incredibly abnormal it left the men dumbfounded, and they allowed the pale arms to wrap around their necks.

It was Kuentz who realized the danger. When he was hired to go to the eastern Frontier region and help out, he'd encountered a

tree that took on human form in the Forest of Cain. Thanks to her lovely countenance and tempting flesh, he had been just about to throw himself on her in spite of himself when a more experienced local saved him with a homemade flamethrower. Later he heard how the pistils of its blossoms secreted a powerfully hypnotic liquid, the scent of which halted human thought processes. After the victim had been enveloped by its hand-shaped petals, he would be digested and absorbed.

His limbs no longer responded. Quickly biting through his bottom lip to bring himself back to his senses, Kuentz fired away with the flamethrower an old huntsman had given him. Although three of the beauteous mummies were engulfed by flames in the blink of an eye, the fourth survived, for one of the villagers had already leapt into the arms of the lovely woman.

As he was being dragged into her body, their colleague exclaimed, "Save me!" When he turned to make that entreaty, half the flesh was gone from his face, leaving only a skull with eyeballs.

"Sorry, Garo."

As Kuentz prayed for his friend's swift passage into the afterlife, he let a golden jet of fire fly from his flamethrower. The beautiful woman instantly turned back into a shriveled mummy, and it was probably thanks to this that she burned so well.

"Now there's three of us—and I don't intend to lose anyone else. Be real careful now."

When Kuentz spoke, the rest of the group—actually, just the other two—seemed to get their bearings back as if they'd been dunked in an icy stream of winter meltwater, and they nodded in response.

"One of them's already been killed. Make it stop, D!" Mia cried, but neither of the two young men who wore D's face said a word.

"Oh, they've reached the bottom! Couldn't you switch off the fortress's defenses? Make it stop."

The girl showed no signs of relenting, but the fake merely shrugged his shoulders at her cries, saying, "At present, the facility has diverted nearly all of its energy to reconstructing itself. It's not in a position yet to hand complete control over to me."

"D, do something. I'm begging you."

"This isn't our problem," the gorgeous Hunter said coolly.

"Well, I still can't let this happen. If you don't want to do anything, then I'll go all by myself. You can—"

Grinning wryly, the fake D said something unexpected. "Slay me? Girlie, I suppose I can help you."

"What?"

"It would seem my blood runs a little redder than that other me. How does that sound?"

"Okay. You've got a deal."

"In that case, order that me not to touch this me. You're his employer, right?"

"D, you heard what he said. Keep your hands off him."

"Have it your way," D said, having nothing else to say on the matter for some reason. "However, we'll accompany him."

"Of course."

"Yes, of course," the fake said with a deep nod.

Whether or not he realized that strange developments were taking matters out of his hands, D stood there as silent as always.

"You must know where they are. Show us the way."

"Fine, but on one condition," said the fake D.

"What now?"

"If even one out of the three is saved, the two of you are to leave here today. And not return for three days."

Unable to decide immediately, Mia turned to D, but the gorgeous Hunter didn't say a word. Mia thought her last decision might've angered him and felt a little depressed. Also, the words of the fake telling them it would take three more days for the facility to function normally still rang in her ears. However, seeing the trio who'd reached the bottom of the great subsidence and stood stock

still in the eddying white steam without even knowing where they were, she knew she couldn't sit back and do nothing.

"Understood. We'll keep our end of the bargain. Now, lead the way."

"Good enough," the fake said, looking at D and Mia with smug satisfaction before he turned around.

II

After hearing from the sheriff in the hospital what'd happened out at the great subsidence two days earlier, Kuentz and the other members of his group had borrowed heat-resistant suits and gas masks from the fire department's storeroom. They'd already donned the suits, and as for the masks—well, they were pretty old, so the men were going to use them only if the gas was more than they could take, slipping them on just shortly before they reached the bottom. They certainly were swelteringly hot, and apparently a scant amount of air passed through the filters, forcing them to take shallow breaths. If they didn't finish their investigations as quickly as possible, the masks might suffocate them.

Kuentz was certain there was something, or someone, at the bottom of the subsidence. Therefore, he'd intended to take the time to do a thorough search—but his determination was rapidly waning in the heat. Still, what kept him from losing heart was his youth and sense of duty, plus the confidence that came from having experienced more grueling situations than most adults. His body bore over a hundred scars in various places, half of which had nearly been the death of him. While putting down a stone bear that weighed nearly fifty tons, he'd been gouged open down to the lungs, but he'd still managed to make it out of a germ-infested jungle in the midst of a downpour due to the knowledge of medicinal herbs he'd gained in the western Frontier. On a plateau called Ren, he'd been attacked by a weird tribe of pygmies and hit by five poison arrows, but he still managed to destroy the earth-quaker they called their god thanks to a protective spell

he'd learned in a certain library in the Capital. He would manage something this time. If not, he'd fight to the bitter end.

With all the drive and determination of youth, Kuentz had come more than prepared, even bringing along three compatriots—although one of them had already met his end. The youthful leader's heavy responsibilities were subtly affecting his mind and his judgment. He wasn't sure where, but there had to be a door someplace so the murderer known as D could come and go.

In a twilit world brimming with white steam, the trio began their desperate search. Five minutes . . . ten . . . twenty . . . The steam drew torrents of sweat through the heat-resistant suits, and their feet sank into the red clay.

Once they'd passed the thirty-minute mark, Kuentz used the microphone in his mask to call the other two. "Graff and Chang—let's pull out of the hole for a while. Then we'll take another run at it."

There was no reply.

"Graff? Chang?"

A feeble voice came through his receiver. "Chang . . . here. The heat's messing with my eyes. Don't know which way I'm headed."

"I'm coming to get you. Stay there."

Kuentz peered down at his feet. They glowed with the luminescent yellow paint he'd had the village painter fill the soles of his boots with. Chang's had green, and Graff's had blue. Once he'd gone back to where they'd touched down on the bottom, it would be easy enough to find them.

Calling out to Graff that he was going to look for Chang, Kuentz changed direction. His footprints remained. Just as he took a step forward to follow them, a human shape began to form in the steam.

"Chang?"

"Yeah," a deep voice replied.

"I thought you said the heat messed up your vision."

"Yeah, but now I can sorta see."

"You know where Graff is?"

"Nope. It's this steam."

"I called him, but he didn't answer. The heat might've been too much for him."

"Forget him for a minute—I found an entrance."

Kuentz was stunned. "Why didn't you say so sooner? Where is it?"

"Over this way. I'll show you."

As soon as Chang started walking, Kuentz made note of their direction and began counting his steps. Two hundred sixty-seven steps brought them to a sheer wall. An iron door was set in it. Ten feet wide and ten feet tall, it seemed more an entrance for wagons than people.

"Wonder if it'll open."

He gave it a push. At the mere touch of his fingertips, the hinges began a tortured squeak. As the opening grew, the area beyond it began to come into view. It appeared to be a corridor.

"What should we do?" Chang asked.

Although he was worried about Graff, Kuentz said, "I've got no choice but to go. Chang, you wait here for Graff."

"He's dead—don't you think?"

"No, I don't. Not until we see for sure, at least."

"Okay. I'll wait. Watch yourself in there."

Kuentz stepped through the open door alone. Inside, he was greeted by a dim world not so different from that outside. Though gusts of steam interrupted his vision, they vanished when he went in further. He soon saw that this was an incredibly huge facility.

Who the hell built this place, and when? We've been living right on top of it like dolts, never suspecting a thing, he thought, cold sweat pouring from him.

He soon came to a corner. As he was debating which way to go, he heard footsteps from the passage on the right. Someone was coming with a calm and steady gait. He strained his eyes. Approaching from the depths of the corridor was what looked like the outline of a man.

"Graff?" he called out, based on both instinct and the general shape of the figure. Wearing a backpack, with goggles over his eyes and a gas mask over his mouth and nose—it was definitely Graff. However, as if he was startled on seeing Kuentz bolt around the corner, the shadowy figure tore down the corridor in a mad dash.

"Wait up, Graff!"

The figure's right hand was swallowed by the wall.

As the dumbfounded Kuentz gave chase, he saw that there must be another passage behind the wall, and he dove through it without hesitating. The figure was running up ahead. After a number of twists and turns, they went down a broad flight of stone stairs. Spreading as far as the eye could see, the gray world brimmed with stillness.

Suddenly, Kuentz stopped in his tracks, his path blocked by an enormous set of doors. He wasn't sure whether Graff had gone through them. Getting a bad feeling, he instinctively considered turning back, but at that moment the doors began to open down the middle. The air on the other side was damper and it clung to his skin. Had he not glimpsed that humanoid shape in the dim light, he never would've gone in there. But, firming his resolve, he plunged in. The doors closed behind him, the force of their shutting driving him forward a few steps.

I was lured down here, he thought, growing more and more certain of his suspicions.

The dim light took on a bluish hue. Kuentz felt as if it was seeping into him through his skin, and his body stiffened with tension. Looking all around again, he found the place filled with an eerie aura that chilled his otherwise feverish determination.

Sandwiched between the vast stone floor and the great ceiling were towering stone statues, but as he gazed up at them, at some point the floor and ceiling grew oddly close, then swapped positions, leaving him on the floor but staring down at the ceiling. Though he could see staircases and platformlike decks here and there, the slightest change in perspective was enough that even

those shifted, twisting, the stairs breaking off in midair, swirling off in vortices. Here, geometry seemed to lose all meaning. The visual irregularities were transmitted to his flesh—and an intense nausea filled Kuentz.

It was at that point that the trembling of the earth became a noise he could hear. Up ahead—off in the dimly lit distance, but drawing closer. Kuentz could tell it was the sound of footsteps.

At long last, something befitting this bizarre facility was about to reveal itself to him.

Kuentz touched a protrusion on the leather case that sheathed his left arm from the wrist to the elbow. Spring loaded, a cylindrical launcher and iron arrows within the case sprang out. Driven by highly compressed oxygen, the arrows could penetrate the plated hide of a large armored beast at a range of fifty yards. The sound of excess oxygen spilling from the tube ignited Kuentz's will to fight.

Darkness formed in the dim light. It had a human shape. The footfalls became like thunder.

"It's . . ."

There was only one emotion he knew he couldn't let come over him, but it mixed with his voice anyway.

The shadowy figure that halted on the short flight of stairs ahead of him was a good ten feet tall. Armor in a leaden hue encased his body, while his entire head was covered by a helm with three vertical slits. In his right hand he held a spear at least fifteen feet long, and on his hip he wore a longsword.

"Who are you?" Kuentz inquired.

"I'm the caretaker for this place," a rusty voice replied.

"The caretaker? For how long?"

"Since before your ancestors even took shape."

"What's going on down here?"

"I could explain it to you, but you still wouldn't understand."

"A bunch of our friends have gone missing. Are they down here?"

"They are."

"Bring them to me."

"You can try to take them back by force if you wish. They are needed here."

"Where are they?"

"The same place you'll be going soon."

And as he said this, the gigantic form pounced. The giant cleared a distance of nearly thirty feet in a single bound as he closed on Kuentz, and as he looked up at his opponent, Kuentz was spellbound by his overwhelmingly massive proportions. His foe probably didn't feel like making any unnecessary movements in midair before thrusting the spear he had ready through Kuentz's chest. His landing was accompanied by a great thud.

"Over here," the giant heard Kuentz say off to his right.

His knees bent slightly, the giant went to turn in that direction, but his upper body fell. He fell to his knees, and then put down his left hand to steady himself. Iron arrows protruded from the joints of both knees. While Kuentz may have had the speed necessary for an attack, when had he managed to avoid the giant's falling body?

The gigantic figure could do nothing to hide his astonishment while Kuentz pointed his left arm straight at his foe and ordered him sternly, "Bring me to my friends."

"You wish to see them?" the giant asked. His voice trembled with a touch of something spine chilling.

"Of course I do."

"Then see them you shall. Come out!"

The last bit wasn't directed at Kuentz. As if in response to the call, objects whistled down from the air above. From the sound of them hitting and the height they bounced, Kuentz probably could've determined how far they'd fallen, but he didn't have time for that.

At his feet lay innumerable human arms and legs and torsos and heads—hacked apart in the most horrible fashion.

"Jin, Katsuma . . . Zorgo, Dulles—what's going on?"

As the stupefied Kuentz stared at them, his eyes also caught the giant rising, and his ears echoed with the sound of the extracted iron arrows hitting the floor.

"They gave their lives for this place. And you shall join them!"

The giant's cry was shredded by a harsh metallic clang! Kuentz's third arrow had pierced his temple. Staggering wildly, the giant swung his right arm in an arc. The head of the spear he waved was easily three feet long, with either side honed razor keen. If that swing landed, it could probably bisect the trunk of a greater dragon.

"Oh!" the giant exclaimed.

Kuentz was above his deadly swipe, at the same height as the giant's face. The terrific spring in his knees was the product of his inherent strength and the severe training he'd undergone as a huntsman. His right hand rose. As he brought it down again, it gripped the blade of the bastard sword that projected from his leather forearm protector. Putting his full weight behind it, Kuentz brought the blade down on the giant's head. The blade was made of a special steel forged by the most renowned blacksmith in the western Frontier. With an ease that shocked even an experienced hand like Kuentz, the blade slashed through the dragon helm and visor and sank halfway into his foe's torso. However, when Kuentz landed on the ground, it wasn't a smile of victory that spread across his face, but rather a perplexed shadow. Aside from the copper plate, he hadn't met any resistance at all.

Letting out a base laugh, the giant took his helmet between his hands and lifted it off. There was no head inside. All there was was an empty space.

"This isn't my true form. Until the reconstruction of this facility is complete, I need a body to deal with you and others like you. But I can see well enough even without a head," he chuckled.

This time unable to dodge the thrust of the spear, Kuentz stood there rooted like a tree. And then disappeared.

The giant turned around.

Kuentz had backed away as far as the door. However, when he turned around and looked, he froze in his tracks. A cold stone wall now occupied the exact spot where the door had been.

"You're a spry bastard," the headless giant said as he made a swing of his spear. What he'd impaled with his earlier thrust had merely been an afterimage of Kuentz. Not only could he jump, but the young man was also swift footed enough that he could move at speeds in excess of Mach 1.

"Now the tables are turned," the giant chortled.

III

He was at the end of his rope—that was the only expression that described the way Kuentz felt. For all his speed and skill with the iron arrows and concealed blade, slaying an opponent who lacked a physical body would be a Herculean task.

The giant donned his helmet once more. And then he did two incredible things. Raising the spear in his right hand, he slammed it down on the stone floor. It was unclear what the spearhead was made of, but the shattered bits of it went out like sea spray, forming glittering bands of waves at Kuentz's feet. Each and every shard was at least four inches long, with razor-sharp edges left exposed like thorns.

Kuentz's legs had been taken out of the picture. The fragments of the spear would easily pierce the soles of his shoes, immobilizing him.

As Kuentz gnawed his lips, the giant looked down at him coolly—although he didn't actually have eyes—and undertook another activity. Dragging himself with thudding footsteps over to where the dismembered corpses had fallen, he drew the longsword from his hip. He then made shallow cuts into the arms and legs and torsos. Once he was done, he kept his sword in hand as he counted, "One . . . Two . . ."

On the stone floor where death alone had lain, movement began.

"Three."

And the figures that struggled to their feet—

"Katsuma! Zorgo! Dulles!"

Though they didn't respond to Kuentz's stunned cries, five of the corpses began twitching their limbs in an unsettling fashion. Had the giant used some sort of resurrection spell on them, or had he merely pieced them back together and made them move? Whichever was the case, you would be hard pressed to say that the cadavers were satisfied with their present state.

Those were indeed human bodies that got up, but cobbled together based purely on proximity—the blond head of a young man sat on the torso of what was clearly a middle-aged man, and both the right and left arms didn't belong to him either. And while the legs were a matching set, they didn't belong to the owner of the head or the torso. However, that wasn't uncommon. At the very least it had one head and torso, and two arms and legs. Another body could only be described as a prank by some god of creation. Two right arms wrestled with each other for dominance, while both legs were left ones. And the face that gazed down stupidly was upside down.

"Stop it!" Kuentz ground his teeth. "Stop it, you goddamn monster! Put all of them back the way they were."

"All of them? Not one of them can remember who he was. They are empty vessels, just like this," the giant said, striking his chest. "But it would seem that, to you, they are still friends. Therefore, you can do them no harm."

He gestured with his arm to Kuentz.

The dead—in the horribly twisted forms they now possessed—began to advance on Kuentz with stiff steps. There was no way to describe the sight of them walking across the spearhead fragments other than to say they were like demons from the fires of hell.

Though he had his iron arrows and concealed blade ready, Kuentz still hesitated. No matter how grotesque their forms, their faces were still those of friends. Friends he'd studied with, played with, and squabbled with since he was little. A troubled sweat broke out on Kuentz's brow, and his hands shook badly.

"What's wrong? Simply think of them as corpses. Or if you raise your hand to them, will you be labeled a friend killer for the rest of your days?" the giant said, leaning back for a hearty laugh.

Dead friends reached for Kuentz's throat with both hands. Even if he were to break free of them, there were still those metallic thorns at his feet. And if he somehow managed to tramp across them to freedom, the giant's longsword would be waiting for him.

The circle closed in on him. However, as Kuentz glared at the giant, his eyes weren't filled with despair, but rather burned with the will to fight. This young man would surely choose to go down fighting.

The trembling of his left hand stopped dead. When he held his arm out straight, the iron arrow was aimed not at his dead friends, but at the giant behind them. He would retaliate. Even now, he still challenged his fate.

The giant's laughter stopped unexpectedly. Like a person awakening to learn their whole world was just a dream, he suddenly turned and looked behind him. Three figures stood in the same depths of the darkness from which the giant had come. One was a woman; the other two were inhumanly beautiful men in black who were identical in appearance.

"There's the ringleader," one of them said to the other. "And that brings my part to a close. I leave the rest to you. Now, don't forget about the three days we agreed on."

The woman stared at the gorgeous figure that'd been the target of that remark.

"D, I'm going down there. If I should die, it's up to you to—"

"It wouldn't do to have my employer die on me." Glaring intently at his other self, D then made a toss of his chin at the giant and said, "Call him off."

"I can't do that," the fake D said with a disagreeable expression as he, too, looked at the giant. "It's part of the recovery process after the research facility was completely destroyed. There are parts of it that recognize me as the master, but there are also systems that

haven't accepted that. Unfortunately, this character represents the latter. Although sooner or later he'll come under my command, at present, he would view me as a foe as well."

At what some might even describe as an embittered reply, D said softly, "In that case, you can dispose of him."

"I thought you might say that," the fake said, shrugging his shoulders. "But this is hardly the time or place to stand around debating. That young man's in danger."

"He's right, D," Mia agreed.

Never taking his eyes off the fake, D said, "Get out of here." He was concerned about Mia's safety while he was busy fighting.

"Fine. If you'd be so good as to destroy him, you'll just be doing me a favor. I'll be wishing you luck from afar."

And with that obtuse reply, the fake walked off toward the depths of the darkness, turning after he'd gone a few paces. When his eyes met Mia's, he said, "Pleasant journey to you, brave little miss."

He addressed her in a gentle tone that made him seem like a completely different person from who he'd been up until now, but before Mia could frame a reply, he vanished into the darkness.

It was less than a second later that Mia returned to her senses from the strange feeling that'd come over her. By the time she turned her eyes to where the lurid life-or-death battle would unfold, D had already finished descending the staircase. Less than sixty feet stood between him and the giant. Perhaps that was an appropriate distance for the boundary between the stillness that seemed to hang in the vicinity of the gorgeous Hunter and the sudden shift to cries of deadly battle, or perhaps not.

D advanced without concern. In response, the giant stood stock still. When the silently advancing D was finally below the blade the giant had raised, the giant made a horizontal swipe at the base of the Hunter's neck. Blue sparks shot out like glittering grains in the feeble light, and a crisp metallic clang rang out. D had parried the blade in the act of drawing his own.

Wasn't the giant staggering? If he was, it lasted only a second before he managed to maintain his balance and lift his sword above his head for a second blow.

D didn't parry it. He kicked off the floor lightly and slashed down with his blade in midair. At essentially the same time he sheathed his sword, the giant's upper body—from the right side of his neck to the bottom of his rib cage on the left—moved slightly out of alignment. Like it was going down a slide, it slipped off and fell to the floor with a booming thud.

The eyes of Mia, Kuentz, and even the reanimated dead bulged in their sockets.

After merely taking a glance at the portion of the giant that still stood on the floor and his sword, D walked over to Kuentz. Actually, in the whole course of the battle, the Hunter had never stopped moving for a second.

Behind him, what remained of the giant's lower body bent over slowly. Lifting the severed left portion, he tried to stick it back in place. After all, he had reanimated the villagers' corpses. He barely got it back in position.

Raising his longsword, the giant was about to bring it down once more on D.

As D walked, he tapped his right foot lightly against the floor. Once again the giant's upper body slid off, and by the time its echoes boomed, D had already dived into the thick of the living dead. Not at all concerned with the metal fragments on the floor, he flashed out with his blade and swiftly took apart the reanimated corpses. There wasn't a mote of humanity in his "dissection," so brutal even Kuentz—who was caught in the middle of it—couldn't bear to watch.

The Hunter went on to sweep the fragments from the floor, saying, "Come with me."

After slipping free of the net of fragments, Kuentz, dumbfounded, looked at D and Mia and asked, "Who the hell are you two?"

"Didn't you see us back in town?"

In response to Mia's question, Kuentz shook his head, saying, "No, I know. You're Miss Mia, right? And that's the Vampire Hunter 'D.' "

An intense glint filled the eyes that gazed at D. As far as Kuentz was concerned, he was still a murderer.

"What are you doing here?"

"We kinda wandered in," Mia lied. Even if she were to tell him the truth, he wouldn't understand. For Mia herself, comprehending all of this was only a distant dream.

"In that case, you'd better hurry up and get out of here."

"We'd better? What about you?"

"I've still got work to do. I've gotta find out for sure what's going on down here."

"Forget that and just get out, okay? No matter how long you stay, you'll never learn anything and you'll only get yourself killed. Like all of them."

But Kuentz had a fierce light in his eyes. "Then I have to avenge them. You two go on ahead."

"No, I can't just leave you. You'll die for nothing."

"I'm prepared to do that. I can't very well go dragging my tail back all alone."

"No, that's exactly what you should do. You must've seen how terrifying the things infesting this place are. They control the dead, for God's sake!"

"There was nothing inside that armor. All I heard was a voice," Kuentz muttered absentmindedly.

"You can't win against things like that. No one will blame you for going home."

"That's if he makes it home," D interjected.

The other two looked at him with bulging eyes.

"Your friends are all dead. The reason you alone made it in here is because the enemy invited you in. A foe like that won't let you go again easily. Whatever was in that suit of copper armor is probably watching us right now."

"What was he?" Kuentz asked, his face distorted.

When it came to various monsters and spirits, he knew quite a bit, and he'd encountered them on a number of occasions. That thing had been something entirely different, because Kuentz was wearing a charm against supernatural beings.

"We'll know soon enough."

Kuentz's eyes leapt to the vicinity of D's left hip. Although Mia knew that the hoarse voice had come from his left hand, she said nothing.

"But more importantly, now we simply can't afford to wait three days up on the surface. Those two aren't in league yet."

By that, the hoarse voice was referring to the fake D and the thing in the armor.

Mia swallowed hard.

"This place is coming back to life. If it's fully restored, it'll become a tremendous fortress we'll be powerless against. Needless to say, we can't stay here safe and sound. We've gotta get back up to the top as soon as possible."

Since D wasn't talking, Kuentz was completely bewildered. The hoarse voice definitely seemed to come from D's hip—where his hand hung easily by his side.

"Shall we go," D said, and he started walking.

"But that's—" Kuentz began, and then he was left breathless.

Before the figure in black loomed the same stone wall where the door had disappeared earlier. And then the wall in front of D fragmented like an electronic image, and what should suddenly appear again but the door.

In spite of himself, the boy looked over at Mia, and seeing in her profile the shock and fear and even adoration that rocked the girl's features, the young man felt a pang shoot through his chest.

The Escape from Hell

CHAPTER 7

I

"Where are we, anyway?" Mia fairly groaned a little over an hour after they'd left the ritual chamber. Traveling down the corridors and climbing stairs with D in the lead, the girl wasn't uneasy, but the relentless march was physically more than she could take.

"We haven't even gone halfway."

"I'm sorry, but I need a break. And I'm thirsty too," Mia said, sinking to the ground.

Before her lay another staircase. The top of it dissolved into the darkness. And that endless climb was enough to rob the girl of both her will and her strength.

"It's weird, though. We've been climbing all these steep stairs and we still haven't reached the surface yet," Kuentz said, his voice heavy with distrust for D, but not because he thought he was a murderer. Those suspicions had faded in the short time he'd spent with D. That was partly because he was working for Mia, but it was really because the girl had told him what D was. A dhampir—he didn't like that one bit.

Weren't they kin to the Nobility? In that case, he should be living in secret high in the mountains or deep in a valley where no one would ever find him, not walking around interacting with people

like everyone else. To make matters worse, he made his living as a Hunter, and a Vampire Hunter at that. Vampires—weren't they his kind? Although Kuentz didn't quite consider him a traitor, he most definitely didn't approve. Something wasn't right there. When Kuentz looked at D, his eyes were anything but amiable.

"Something's interfering," a voice grumbled in response.

"Interfering?" Eyes wide, the man looked over at D's hip and asked, "Are you into ventriloquism or something?"

"The thing in the armor we ran into earlier has distorted space. And as a result, the distance to the exit increased tenfold. As we press forward, I'm undoing it, so we're making some progress. If not, we'd just keep going and going till we died."

"So, when will we get there?"

"Well, I'd say in an hour and a half. But that's only if nothing else interferes."

"Nothing else?"

"If we keep going like this, we'll get out eventually."

"Yeah. That's just great," Kuentz said, slapping his hands together with a touch of desperation. "Well, whatever we're doing, we'd better do it fast. The air's got a dangerous feel to it."

Mia looked up. D had walked over and crouched down. "What?"

"He'll give you a piggyback," a hoarse voice told her.

"But—"

"It's okay. He's made of sterner stuff than the average customer."

"Okay," Mia said, standing up and climbing on without any further argument. Perhaps it was his black raiment, but while he appeared svelte at a distance, now that she was touching him, she found his back to be so broad and muscular it held her spellbound. Relief spread through her body.

"You sure that's a good idea?" Kuentz said snidely.

"What?"

"I have no problem with you wanting to show your best face for the lady. But worst comes to worst, you wouldn't be able to strike

back as quickly, and that's a problem. Don't come crying to me then, lover boy."

The young man was surprised at his own hostility, but his expression suddenly stiffened. For a hoarse voice had let out a low chuckle.

"Something funny?" Kuentz asked angrily. Mia was right beside him. It was a natural reaction.

"We'll see who comes crying to—gaaaah!"

The hoarse voice let out a cry of pain, and then was silenced.

"That's pretty big talk. What do you say we see for ourselves who's gonna do some crying?" Kuentz said, naturally going into a combat stance. He let all the power drain from his body and collect in the tips of his toes. Ten feet lay between him and D. While the concealed blade on his right arm might not be much good, the iron arrows from his left should prove effective at that range.

"Don't," D said. A thread-thin groan of pain escaped from his left fist as he balled it even tighter, but of course that didn't reach Kuentz's ears.

"C'mon. Knock it off," Mia told him from D's back. "This is no time to be doing this, is it? If we don't work together to get out of here—"

Kuentz stared at the girl and her fervent expression. Her crystal-clear eyes stripped away the damp fever that'd been spreading through his head, and in a heartbeat he was back to his senses. "You're right," he said, nodding.

Turning to D, he continued, "Sorry about that. I'm pretty bushed, too."

"No. You were right."

Mia was the first to grasp the meaning of D's icy reply. Her body stiffened with shock on his back, and all she managed to say by way of protest was, "D . . ."

"Hey," Kuentz said, unable to hide how shaken he was. "What did I do? I said I was sorry."

"Come on," D said quietly. He still had Mia on his back, tying up both his hands.

"Stop it, D. What are you trying to prove?"

"He wants a fight. So I should give him what he desires as soon as possible."

"I'm not in the mood for that anymore," Kuentz said with a shrug of his shoulders.

Something blistering hot skimmed by his right cheek. What jabbed viciously into the stone wall behind him was a needle of unfinished wood. But how had the Hunter managed to hurl it with both hands occupied?

"So that's how you want it?" Touching his right hand to his cheek, Kuentz then looked down at his fingertips. Blood stained them.

"I don't know what's bugging you, but I'll finish this fight you're starting," he told the Hunter, his mind and body already prepared for war. The will to fight now bubbling up in him was so pure, a grin even appeared on Kuentz's lips. "But set Mia down first."

Over his head, a flash of light limned a glittering semicircle.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed, only able to leap clear thanks to his incredible speed. When he landed, he saw that D was closing on him. With both hands around Mia's back, the Hunter didn't seem to be holding a weapon.

"Shit!"

Kuentz was about to launch an iron arrow when he noticed he hadn't raised his left arm yet. Lifting it, he brought it to bear on D's stomach. It seemed like it took a year to do so. He heard the rasp of compressed oxygen being released. But once he'd fired, his blood froze.

He's got Mia. What if it goes right through him?

However, rather than follow the path of the arrow, the boy took a more circuitous route. As he listened to the sound of D's attack splitting the air just a hair above his head, he drove the concealed blade on his right arm toward D's waist. Shocked at meeting nothing with it, he sprang away. And when he landed, there was something cold hanging directly over his head.

D was right in front of him. Kuentz was paralyzed by the realization of what the wind that'd whistled down on his forehead meant, but the Hunter asked him, "What will it be?"

"Kill me!" Kuentz shouted, eyes still shut, but just as he did, he felt the blade pull away from him. At his feet there was a hard metallic clatter. Lowering his eyes, the young huntsman found something to truly freeze his blood this time—the two arrows he'd launched. D had had both arms behind Mia's back, as always. He wasn't even holding his sword. If anyone had the skill to stop the second arrow Kuentz had launched at him at the speed of sound as he brought a blow down that would've split the boy's head like a piece of firewood, it was this gorgeous Hunter.

All the strength drained from Kuentz, and he slumped to the ground. Having seen the unbridgeable gulf between their respective abilities, he was mentally and physically burned out.

"Can you stand?" D asked.

"Yeah." Kuentz himself was surprised by how easily that reply came out and the way it carried no hard feelings. D's superior abilities had wiped away all the prejudice he felt toward the Hunter in one fell swoop. The freshness inherent in youth and the heroism attendant to the Hunter profession freed Kuentz from the weird atmosphere that'd been gnawing at his mind.

Getting back to his feet, he grinned sheepishly and said to D, "You're a psychologist, aren't you?"

The Hunter didn't even smile at that but told him, "Up we go." And saying that, he headed for the stairs.

After climbing about fifty steps, they reached the top and a broad corridor. D halted.

"What is it?" Kuentz asked, having been stopped just as he was about to press forward.

"Both of you need to shut your eyes and cover your ears," the Hunter said.

Though he knit his brow suspiciously, Kuentz was well aware of

the young man's almost limitless skill, so he was compliant, saying, "Okay. Is that all?"

"When we go down this corridor, something is certain to try to stop us," D explained. "I don't know what it'll be. But under no circumstances are you to turn around. If you look back, it'll be over then and there. You probably won't make it out of the fortress."

"Understood," Kuentz said with a nod, but then a question suddenly occurred to him. "So, how is it you know so much about this corridor anyway?"

D's answer was short. "I don't know." Then he added, "Let's go."

They started forward, but before he'd taken three steps, Kuentz sensed someone behind him.

"Kuentz!" a voice called out to him, and in his heart he let out a furtive gasp. Though he had both ears covered tightly, he could hear the voice with perfect clarity. And it belonged to—

"Graff?"

He was about to turn in spite of himself, but barely managed to stop when he recalled D's warning. What could the same friend who'd gone missing at the bottom of the great subsidence then lured him to that bizarre giant be doing here?

"Kuentz—can you hear me? I'm hurt. Some weird monster thing bit my leg, and I can't move. On top of that, it got me in the gut. I've lost so much blood. I'm in a bad way. You've gotta help me!" The shouts were strained, the words spat out like so much blood.

D and Mia kept right on going as if nothing had happened. Apparently Kuentz alone could hear Graff's voice.

And then his friend continued in a feeble, urgent tone, "Help me! Don't leave me down here, Kuentz. You're the leader, right? It's your job to save me. I'm begging you, do your duty. Get me out of here!"

"Graff!"

Unable to stand it any longer, he was just about to turn when a great force came to bear on his shoulder. Though it was unclear

when D had backed up, the Hunter remained facing forward while reaching back with one hand to grab the man's shoulder. He couldn't begin to imagine how D could've noticed the strain he was under. At that moment, a terrifically wrathful scream rang in his ears, fading just before it could drive Kuentz mad.

They advanced down the endless corridor for another hour. When they came to the next corner, D told them, "It's okay now."

And with that, the three of them took a rest right there.

II

Graff must be dead, Kuentz was thinking numbly when he was startled by Mia's sobs and turned to the girl.

"What's the matter?"

Having climbed down off D's back, Mia sat on the floor. There were a number of blotches on her knees. Stains from tears.

"What's the matter?" he asked once more.

Giving a feeble shake of her head, she said, "Nothing." But her voice belied her words.

"It can't be nothing. You're crying, aren't you?"

"Just leave me alone."

"Sure. For the next five minutes, at any rate."

Looking up, Mia asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"After you've cried for five minutes, you'll feel better. And then we can get down to some quality boy/girl talk."

"You dope!" Mia spat, but her tone was faint and not very cross at all.

Remaining silent for a while, she then said, "My mother called out to me. She must've passed by now, but she called to me again and again. And when I thought about her really being gone, I just couldn't help it."

"Did you turn around?"

"Nope," she said, looking at D. The exquisite youth was leaning against a wall a short distance away. "He took me by the hand. And then, all of a sudden, I didn't feel so bad."

"You don't say. That's just great," Kuentz said brusquely, leaving Mia's side and walking further down the hall. Planting his back against the wall, he looked sullen.

"What's wrong? Was it something I said?" Mia asked, looking dazed.

"It's just a seasonal malady. You only get it while you're young," a hoarse voice replied.

"What should I do?"

"You ever dated a fella before?"

"I've been too busy fortunetelling."

"What, are you saving yourself like some kind of natural monument?"

"Go to him."

The second voice was D's, and it startled Mia.

Go over there and do what? Still, she got the feeling that if she went over, everything would be all right.

Approaching Kuentz with steps she herself found oddly stiff, she asked him in an even stiffer tone, "Uh, what's the problem?"

The recipient of that query remained as sullen as ever, saying, "Nothing."

He left her no opening at all.

"What a pain."

She turned toward D, seeking aid, but his eyes were shut as if in contemplation. Almost mesmerized by the sight of him, Mia hastily turned back to Kuentz and said, "What a great guy."

"Excuse me?" the young man said, eyes popping. He saw Mia, head hung low and cheeks reddening with the realization she'd made a mistake. Giving a sudden cough, he fought desperately to keep his hard exterior from collapsing.

It was all just a misunderstanding. And that misunderstanding was the start of everything.

"Uh—it's nothing. I'll go now." Mia's face was still flushed.

"Um—wait a sec."

"Yes?" Mia asked as she turned.

"It's nothing," he said, looking sullen again.

D's left hand gurgled with laughter, but the two of them didn't notice. "These young folks don't need a go-between meddling in this. Though from what I've seen, the girl's smitten with you."

"How long till we reach the surface?"

"Well," the hoarse voice began, "my instincts tell me roughly thirty minutes. If nothing comes up, that is."

The blue pendant on D's chest gave off a piercing light.

At that point, Mia stalked back indignantly and grumbled, "That numbskull!"

"What is it?" D asked. And amazingly enough, there seemed to be just the tiniest bit of amusement in his tone.

"Damned if I know. No matter what I say to him, he just sits there sulking and won't say a peep. Calls himself a man, but he doesn't know when a woman—I mean, he's just rotten."

"What are you saying about me?" Kuentz complained from off in the distance. "You're the one acting like a hysterical old hag-to-be. One look at a guy who's kinda good looking and you're hot and bothered in a flash."

"What did you say?"

Mia was livid. Using both hands to form a symbol, she began to chant an unsettling spell.

"There!" she exclaimed, smacking her hands together.

"What the hell?" Kuentz screamed, falling backward.

Thunder resounded over his head.

As he staggered wildly, he groaned, "That hurts! What've you done?"

"Serves you right," Mia said, turning away indignantly. "That's what you get for insulting people. Consider yourself lucky your brain didn't explode."

"Why I oughta—" the man began, raising one hand, but perhaps the aftereffects of the blast to his brain still lingered, because his feet tangled and he toppled to one side.

"Oh, no!" Mia exclaimed, dashing over to him. Apparently she felt some responsibility for the effects of her spell.

D didn't even bother to look at them. Without making a sound, he crouched down.

From the darkness ahead of him a figure leapt and struck down at him. Narrowly dodging the blow, D swept out with his leg. The body's momentum carried it forward as it fell, bringing it skidding to Mia's and Kuentz's feet, where it stopped.

Taking one look at the man who quickly got back on his feet and held his short spear at the ready, Kuentz cried, "Chang? But you were—I left you outside."

"What've you been doing, Kuentz?" Chang asked, staring at D as if he were his sworn foe. "I was waiting for you the whole time. But you never came back, so finally I—"

"Sorry. But you've gotta listen to me. These folks aren't our enemies. Hey!"

"It's no use," said a voice that seemed to come from far off in the distance.

Turning, he saw D standing just three feet away.

"That isn't one of your friends. Stand back."

"You can't be serious. I'm sure it's Chang. Stop!"

"Don't let him trick you," Chang said, bloodshot eyes fixed on D. "I can tell. He's got the stink of the Nobility on him. He's the enemy."

"Stand back," D told Kuentz again.

The next instant, Chang made another thrust at D.

D dodged to the right. The thrust came at such a precise angle that it was the only thing he could do.

Chang's hands slid down to just below the head of the spear, and using that point as the fulcrum, he swung it at D's legs. With its core of lead, the shaft could bend an iron bar.

D's body flowed in the same direction as the short spear.

Mia gave a cry of surprise. Both of D's feet were resting on the shaft of the spear.

Releasing his spear in amazement, Chang went for the sword on his hip with his right hand. D's blade ripped into him, slicing

him from the top of his head all the way down through his ribs. A bloody fog filled the air like a sudden shower, covering the walls and floor—but not Mia or Kuentz.

Chang tumbled to the ground.

"Chang?" Kuentz raced over to him, and on seeing that his friend was beyond hope, he looked down at the floor. When he turned and looked at D a short time later, his face was a mask of malice and rage.

"Why'd you kill him? With all your skill, you could've finished it without taking his life. So why'd you do it?"

"He's not your friend."

"Don't make me laugh. How would you know that?"

"Have a look at his right ankle. When he came at me, I broke it. But even after that, he stood on it without any problem."

Checking his anger, Kuentz felt his friend's right foot. He soon gave a nod, saying, "It's just as you said. But that alone isn't enough for me to say this wasn't Chang. D, I'm not quite satisfied."

"We can talk about that once we're out of here."

Kuentz remained intransigent until Mia intervened, saying, "He's right. Knock it off."

"Okay. But in return, once we're safely back on the surface, you know what's coming, right?"

"Very well," D said, his eyes unusually calm as they reflected the person who'd just challenged him to a duel.

The trio started down the corridor again.

Ten minutes later, Mia brought her hand to her nose, asking, "Does something smell funny?"

"I was thinking the same thing," Kuentz said, pulling his collar and sleeve over and giving them a sniff.

D was silent.

Twenty minutes later, the smell" the two of them had mentioned could no longer be denied, and it surrounded the group.

"It's blood," Kuentz muttered, and Mia nodded her agreement.

D kept his silence.

After another thirty minutes, amid a stench so powerful they had to wonder if their exposed skin wasn't drenched in blood, the two of them concentrated anxious gazes on D as he walked ahead of them in deathly silence.

Presently, D halted. Ahead of them, stone steps were visible.

"The exit's at the top of them," a hoarse voice said. It was easy enough to sense the tension in its tone.

"D," Mia called out to him.

The figure in black seemed to grow heavy and motionless, as if he'd been transformed into a statue.

"Go on ahead," D said. His voice had the ring to it of someone fighting for control, and the pair involuntarily looked at each other.

"What's wrong, D?"

"Go."

Slapping Mia on the shoulder, Kuentz urged her, "Go on ahead now, okay?"

"But—"

"Don't worry about him. I'll take care of you."

Mia stared into his youthful face. "Thanks," she said, and then she kept on walking. Kuentz followed along right behind her.

As Mia was about to slip by D on his right-hand side, arms clad in black wrapped around her waist and shoulder, pulling her closer.

"What are you doing?"

"Knock it off, D!" Kuentz howled.

Before him and the wriggling Mia, D initiated a weird action. Sticking his left hand into his coat and pulling out a broad-bladed knife some sixteen inches long, he gripped it between his teeth. Twisting his exquisite countenance back as if knocked for a loop, when he swung it forward again, its target was his left arm—which was raised to the height of his chin. With a disturbing sound, his left hand fell to the floor. And then, much to Kuentz's surprise, the hand made a great bound for the right arm the Hunter had wrapped around Mia's waist. When the two hands touched, the fingers of the right one opened, releasing Mia.

Dashing over, Kuentz pulled Mia to himself, and then backed away.

"Why don't you . . . go ahead? You're going backward," D groaned in an eerie tone.

"He's right. Hurry up and go already!" said the hoarse voice from the left hand.

While the two of them had said the same thing, for some reason it sounded like they were bickering.

The left hand flew to D's neck, pressing his head against the opposite wall as it shouted, "Go!"

Driven by a cry that bordered on a bellow of rage, the two of them advanced down the corridor. They raced up the stairs—without looking at D. They got the feeling something unimaginably bad was happening. They must've climbed twenty or thirty steps, and after about that many more stairs, there loomed an iron door.

"There it is!"

The second they put more strength into their legs, a black cyclone blew past them from below, flying over the pair's heads and landing five or six stairs ahead of them. There stood D. But was this the same D they knew? With skin a shade paler than before, crimson light spilling from his eyes—and oh, the pair of fangs that peeked from his slender lips. Was this what their foe had arranged? Was this the purpose of the foul-smelling substance that'd been mixed in Chang's blood? Now, between the young man and woman and their way out, a fearsome Noble stood blocking the way—and it was none other than D.

Twin-Shadowed Knight

PART ONE

Fleeing Through the Snow

CHAPTER 1

I

"D," Mia said, standing in a paralyzed daze. A pair of fangs were reflected in her eyes. Fangs that weren't meant to be seen. Fangs she never wanted to see.

"This can't be happening," she muttered. "It can't be! It can't! It can't!"

"No, it is," Kuentz told her, climbing another step higher to shield Mia with his body. "We've gotta turn back, Mia."

"We can't. That's the only exit up there. We'd never last long enough to find another way out."

The two of them were already rooted to the ground like trees.

"I'll thank you to step aside, D," Kuentz said to the Hunter. "I know I don't have a prayer of winning if I go up against you. But even if I did, I still wouldn't want to."

Though the young man had abhorred D for being a dhampir, he'd since come to revere the Hunter. Even with the other half of D's nature revealed—and the fangs of a Noble bared—it did nothing at all to change the way Kuentz felt. He showed no signs of readying his iron arrows or concealed blade.

D smoothly strode forward. His blazing crimson eyes bored through the pair.

Kuentz resolved to defend Mia. His left arm rose. The air whistled

as he shot one of his iron arrows. Though he shouldn't have been able to stop it, D grabbed it right in front of his chest. At the same time, Kuentz leapt.

The instant he decided to fight, the only plan of attack that'd arisen in his brain was to keep D's hands occupied. In fact, the Hunter had cut off his own left hand. That left only the right one. If he was unable to use it, Kuentz would have a few seconds when the Hunter would be open to attack before he had use of the limb again. And that was Kuentz's only hope of victory.

D discarded the iron arrow.

From above, Kuentz drove his blade down at the nape of D's neck. For an instant, there was a choking cry of pain, and with it, the young man's body twisted in midair. When he thudded to the ground at D's feet, the young man had a black arrow jutting from his left shoulder—the very same arrow he himself had launched. D hadn't discarded the arrow he'd caught, but rather had hurled it at Kuentz.

There was no change to the beauty of the countenance that peered down at the writhing Kuentz, but the ripples of malice that rose in the Hunter's eyes and the terrific hunger there were a sight to see. Reaching out with his right hand, he seized Kuentz by the throat. A cry of agony flowed upward as D hoisted Kuentz into the air with one arm. The concealed blade dropped from Kuentz's hand, rattling loudly. The young man's neck was right in front of the Hunter's lips. They snapped open savagely.

Seeing the crimson interior of his mouth, Mia felt lightheaded. And because of this, she didn't remember shouting, "Stop it!" or snatching up the concealed blade and driving it into D's chest. The next thing she knew, she'd backed down a couple of stairs and was staring at the two men. Kuentz was crouched at D's feet, coughing, while the gorgeous Hunter trained his gaze on Mia without saying a word. More than Kuentz's blade, which she'd driven into his sternum, it was the look D gave her that shook Mia.

"Nicely done," he said in the voice of the beautiful Vampire Hunter she knew so well.

At Mia's feet, a hoarse voice remarked, "I'd say so," but she only understood D.

"D—you're better, aren't you?" the girl said, her voice choked with relief and tears.

D didn't reply to her, but instead grabbed Kuentz by the shoulder and pulled him to his feet, telling him to climb the staircase before him.

As Mia was just about to follow Kuentz up, a hand latched onto her ankle.

"Good lord!" Mia shouted, and looking down, she was left breathless.

Having been taken off at the shoulder, D's left arm was gripping her ankle tightly.

"W-what are you doing?"

"Don't worry about me. Just keep going. I'll stick with you," the left hand said.

Though she knew it could talk, the situation was somewhat uncanny.

"Can't you walk yourself?"

"Nope."

"Then I guess it can't be helped. So, you can stay alive for a long time after D cuts you off?"

"Well, I manage."

"I see," Mia said, oddly satisfied. Seeming overly conscious of her pants leg, she began climbing the stairs.

Sunlight enveloped the group. While they were fleeing through the subterranean facility, it appeared an entire day and night had passed.

Looking at the scene that surrounded them, Kuentz declared with surprise, "This—this is Mount Ziriilla!"

It was one in a cluster of mountains that rose to the west of the village, and it towered to five thousand feet above sea level. Snow capped its summit irrespective of season. Aside from the beautiful blue sky and scattered patches of black rock, the three of them were surrounded by a world of pure white.

The exit opened between boulders—most likely the underground facility spread not only beneath the "red wasteland," but also under the village and all its surroundings.

"It's cold," Mia said, hugging her own arms as she turned toward D.

The exquisite Hunter stood a short distance from the boulders, looking up. How beautiful his face and body appeared engulfed in the light. Her brain pleasantly numbed, Mia only thought of the danger inherent in that very same light a few seconds later. Due to the Noble blood that ran in a dhampir's veins, sunlight could have devastating effects. However, the gorgeous Hunter showed no signs of fear as he turned his face to the light, not even using his remaining arm to brace himself as he stood on his own two feet.

As the shadowy remnants of the madness that'd come over him on the way up the stairs melted away in the light, Mia was amazed. A conversation she'd had with her mother about the Nobility rang once more in her ears.

The light sears the Nobles' flesh, making them feel more pain than we would if burned by a flame. However, the light has a mysterious power. There's something about it the Nobility can't help but love. The proof of that is that of all the Nobles who've been destroyed by the rays of the sun, every last one of them was smiling. Perhaps something within the light burns away all the cruelty and evil that lurks in the blood of the Nobility.

"D," she muttered, but just then there was a tug at her ankle.

"What is it?"

"Bring me over to him."

"Go over there yourself. You're giving me the creeps."

"What are you talking about? You've got a left hand of your own, don't you? Now hurry up and bring me over there."

"I've had it with you!" Mia said, but nevertheless, she bent over and collected the left arm with visible distaste.

"Don't bother, Mia. I'll bring it over for you," Kuentz told her after grasping the situation.

"Don't stick your nose into this, punk," the left hand sneered threateningly.

"Shut your hole, freak," Kuentz said, extending his left arm—the one with the sights for the arrow launcher on it.

"Yipes!" the left arm exclaimed, flying out of Mia's hands and falling on the snow. Scattering powder everywhere, it rushed toward D.

"You lied to me, didn't you?" Mia said angrily, but Kuentz gave her a slap on the shoulder. He was smiling. A smile bloomed on Mia's face as well.

The scrambling left arm bounded when it reached D's feet, sticking to the wound on his left shoulder. The line between them faded, and the joint promptly went back to normal. Swimming in the sunlight, D didn't so much as glance down at the limb.

"Hey! That punk kid's some kinda homicidal maniac. Waste him!" the left hand cried as it rose quite naturally to level a finger at Kuentz.

Promptly lowering his hand again, D asked the pair, "Can you make it back down?"

"Yeah, we'll be okay," Kuentz replied, throwing out his chest. "I've climbed it a bunch of times in the past. Just leave it to me."

"In that case, get going."

"Hold on a minute. You mean you're not coming? So, you plan on going back down there, do you?"

"You'd better go."

Though D's words were soft, they had the knife edge of the wind to them.

The pair nodded.

"D, you'd better make it back," Mia said. D's figure grew hazy beyond her frozen, white breath. "We'll be waiting down below. We'd better see you there."

There was no reply.

"Let's go, Mia," Kuentz said, taking her by the arm.

Just then, each of them saw an iridescent light skim through the corner of their eye, but when they tried to focus on it, there was nothing there.

Looking back time and again, Mia made her way down the snowy slope. Beside the rocks, the form of the young man in black grew more and more distant until finally it was hidden by a gust of snow.

"So, how are we gonna get down from here anyway?"

Kuentz's words left Mia stunned.

"You mean you're not used to climbing this mountain?"

"Well—that was a lie."

"Why would you say that? These slopes are pretty steep. And the snow down below is probably hard. It'd be really easy to trigger an avalanche. There's no way anyone who doesn't know the route could do it. But you had to—"

Mia tried to cover her mouth, but she was too late. Before she could stop herself, a tremendous sneeze exploded from her. At least she managed to stifle the second and third.

Several seconds passed—and both of them listened intently.

Letting her shoulders drop, Mia said, "Looks like we're in the clear."

Kuentz shook his head. "No, it's coming."

As Mia knit her brow, a deep, distant rumble reached her ears. Even if it wasn't due to her sneeze just now, the snow certainly gave way readily enough.

"Just so you know, if we die out here, it'll be all your fault."

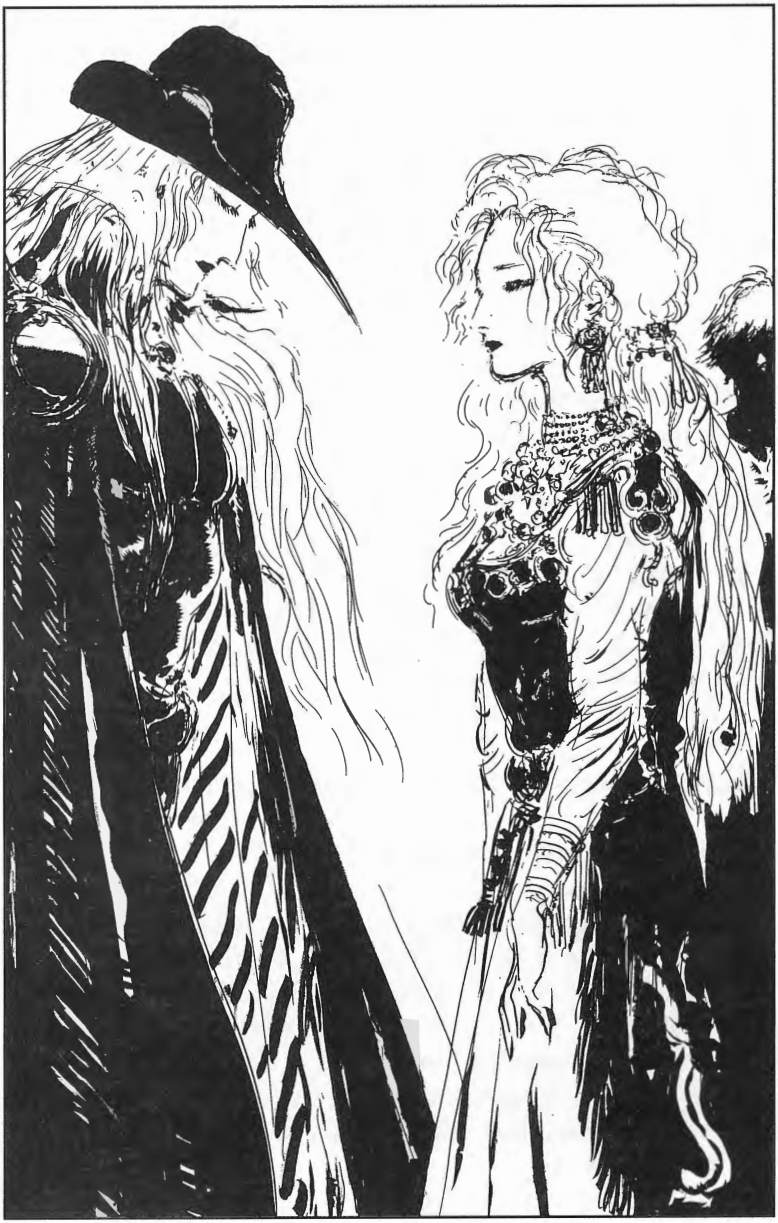
"If we do, you won't be around to complain about it," Kuentz retorted. "But forget that. Let's get down as quick as we can. Luckily, there's bare rock over there all the way down to the bottom. We'll follow that."

"Okay."

Mia turned her head to look up. The blue sky stretched on forever.

The sky and the sun will protect us, she told herself. Even if we have to return to the depths of the earth at some point, the sunlight and the blue sky will banish the darkness.

And then, in a voice so small no one would hear it, she said, Isn't that right, D?



"Well, we got them outside, at any rate," a hoarse voice said in the darkness. "So, what do you plan to do next?"

"Destroy it," D responded casually.

In fact, he said it so matter-of-factly, the other voice replied with a nonplussed, "Hmm, I see." But that was quickly followed by an agitated, "What? Y-you mean this joint?"

"Where else?"

"Forget I asked! How could you take out such an enormous complex, anyway? By my estimates, it goes down around twenty miles, and stretches at least that far in each direction."

"I'll reverse the flow of the energy line."

The hoarse voice fell silent. A short while later, it remarked, "Hmm. If you were to do that, the backflow of energy would definitely collect in the core, and once it ran over its capacity—boom! It's just—"

"Just what?" D said, asking a rare question.

"Honestly, it seems like an awful waste," the voice told him. "Even for him, setting up this place must've taken tons of time. Yeah, I'd say roughly a thousand years."

"Sixty days."

"What?"

"From the start of construction, it was completed in exactly sixty days."

"You are such a liar! Who said so?"

"This place."

"Is that so? Now that you mention it, he made it. It wouldn't be surprising for you to be able to tell that. The memories of all the years are imprinted on this place. But I was just thinking . . ."

"What?"

"Have you forgotten the promise you made to the other you? If even one of Kuentz's group made it out of here alive, you weren't supposed to go into the facility for three days."

"That's exactly right."

"But—" the voice began, and then it broke off.

The tone it took next carried such terror it would've frozen any who heard it. "Seriously, tell me you didn't do that . . ."

II

After traveling to a spot that was about three hundred feet from the mountain's summit as the crow flies, the pair halted. Footing was treacherous on the route along the exposed rock, and they were exhausted. More than anything, their feet ached. Their hands were also injured from where they'd grabbed the boulders every time they started to lose their balance.

"You're pretty tough," Kuentz said with admiration after watching Mia start to wrap a handkerchief around the palm and back of one hand. Blood instantly seeped into the white fabric.

"No, not really."

"Those shoes are for level ground. Yet you move like a bird in them anyway."

"I'm just used to mountain climbing from all the time I spent collecting plants and herbs to use in spells."

"Just the same—"

"Never mind about me. If you'd be so kind as to figure a way for us to safely reach the bottom, brave sir."

"Uh, sure," he replied, somewhat flustered by her "brave sir" remark. Whether or not that was Mia's intent, it'd had a special impact on Kuentz's heart and his head. As he gazed at Mia, his eyes were feverish and his cheeks flushed. Apparently this was the first time the stalwart young man had been in love.

However, despite how hotly his youthful ardor blazed, the one who'd ignited it extinguished it in no time with her next comment. "Somehow, I've got a strange feeling about this."

"Oh yeah, you're a fortuneteller, right?" he said, having heard about Mia from folks in the village.

"My mother's the fortuneteller. I'm more like the reserves."

"I bet she must've been beautiful."

Mia laughed unconcernedly, saying, "Thanks. I appreciate that, even if you don't mean it."

The only problem with that was she didn't look all that pleased, but Kuentz didn't seem to mind. He'd been under a great mental strain after seeing the demonic lair deep underground and he hadn't noticed much more about her other than that she was a cute girl, but looking at her out in the sunlight with a new sense of freedom, her lustrous hair and blushing cheeks, the dainty line of her nose, and her lips as red as roses seemed to cast a kind of golden glow over her that was like a breath of spring. For a second, Kuentz was lost in a fantasy that instead of fleeing with Mia from danger, the two of them had agreed to scale the silvery peak together.

A white wind struck his cheeks. It stabbed at him with a chill that seemed to slash at his skin. Turning to look in the direction from which the wind had blown, he saw a form that looked like an eerie statue standing in a stark white fog.

"We'd better hurry," he said, turning back toward Mia, but the fortuneteller's daughter was kneeling down on the black rock, in the process of pulling an iridescent bag out of her coat pocket.

"Hey!"

"Hold on. I'm trying to divine if there's anything blocking our way."

"You think you could do that?"

No sooner had he asked that than a loud whap! resounded from his cheek. He'd been slapped without a second's hesitation. The girl had been so close to him and the action was so beyond his imagining that he hadn't been able to avoid it. In part, it was because Mia hadn't broadcast her intention in any way, shape, or form.

"What was that for?" he shouted, and while his voice certainly had force to it, Mia's reply was even more commanding.

Glaring at Kuentz, her lovely cat eyes giving off a vicious gleam of light, she said, "You could've asked if it was possible, but don't make it seem like I don't know what I'm doing. That's so rude!"

Her words were thrust at him like a stake she'd drive into his heart.

"I see. Sorry," Kuentz said, backing down easily. Although he didn't completely understand, he got the feeling he was in the wrong.

Mia suddenly smiled again, saying, "It's okay. Look at this."

From her bag she pulled a black stone that'd been cut into a polyhedron and a number of iron needles. Sunlight reflected dazzlingly off the stone.

"What does it do?"

"This stone's been cut to have a total of sixty-two facets. They can show us just three of the main problems we might encounter next. If there are none, it'll show that too, of course. So I take a needle and jab it into the stone. I really shouldn't be able to do that, but it'll go through it just once. The position of the facet will give us the route we should take—we'll know which direction to go."

"Sounds interesting. Go to it," Kuentz told her, his expression filled with curiosity and expectation. The things this girl could do put a sweet, sad pounding in his chest. The magic of love.

Mia closed her eyes. Her body was shrouded in a kind of unseen force. Blindly but without hesitation, Mia took up a needle and raised it above the black jewel she'd placed on a rock. Feeling the kind of ceremonial solemnity only a true fortuneteller could inspire, Kuentz was left breathless. A second later, without uttering a sound, the girl stabbed down with the needle. Kuentz got the impression that below it, the black jewel shifted direction.

"You did it!" he gasped in spite of himself.

The needle had indeed pierced one of the facets clear through to the other side.

However, what should follow close on the heels of that but Mia's stunned cry of "It cracked?"

The entire surface of the black jewel was strung with white lines like a spider's web, with the part the needle had pierced at the very center of it all.

"How strange. That's not supposed to happen. According to this, we don't have any direction to go in."

Kuentz didn't respond to Mia's horrifying words. He couldn't. Because just then he felt a hellish agony, as if his torso had just been bisected below the nipples.

Due perhaps to amazement brought on by the jewel, Mia didn't even notice. Bringing the stone closer, she stared at it so intently her eyes seemed to bore into it.

"I see something. The obstacle—it's a face." Just a heartbeat later, she screamed like someone who'd caught a glimpse of hell, "D?"

The hard clangs that rolled from far off like waves broke in the vast space.

"Can you hear what's happening? The sound of bolts tightening, snapped laser cables weaving together again, electronic circuits flicking open again—this facility is trying to come back to life."

D remained staring into the darkness before him as he replied to the hoarse voice that issued from his left hand. "That's the way he built it. Surely the need for reconstruction was taken into account."

"Well, I'm sure the destruction of this facility must've come as quite a shock to him. Who wrecked it? Some opposition group within the Nobility?"

"Me."

"What?" the voice exclaimed with a tinge of astonishment, and then, in a lower tone, it fairly growled, "I didn't know that."

"And you knew something I didn't. That makes us even."

"Hold on. My memories of the very beginning are like those of a baby fresh from the womb. Is that the time you're talking about? No, wait just a second! When I joined up with you was right—"

A pale light tinged D and the voice. From somewhere high in the heavens broad streaks of light were being launched down into the subterranean darkness. At some point, D had started across a walkway that spanned an enormous pit.

"This is only one trunk off the energy line. And it carries only a tiny fraction of the energy," the hoarse voice said. "Roughly 4.5

terajoules. If released all at once, it'd probably be enough to blow up a planet or two. Really not much at all."

At just about the midpoint of the walkway, D halted.

"It's under here, isn't it?"

"Right you are. The reactor's online."

Saying nothing, D walked over to the handrail on the left side.

"Hey! What are you doing? You planning on heading down there from here? Even for you, that's just too—"

The way the Hunter vaulted over the handrail, it looked as though he was completely weightless. With the hem of his black coat spread like a pair of wings, the figure of unearthly beauty descended into the pitch black depths like some mystic bird. Even if hell itself awaited him, that young man would make its masters quake.

In a blue storm of light, with the wind howling by, the hoarse voice was heard to say, "I'm a little concerned about what'll become of that young couple."

There was no reply.

Laying Kuentz out in the shelter of a boulder after his sudden collapse, Mia slapped his cheeks repeatedly, but there was no response from him at all. When she hurriedly checked his pulse, there was none, and his pupils were fully dilated.

Was he dead? He couldn't be. Yet all Kuentz's signs suggested nothing else.

"Why this, all of a sudden?" Mia asked, and to be honest, she was completely at a loss.

As she looked out, windblown snow that might be mistaken for a dense fog was flowing down the slope to her left, while to her right, she couldn't be completely sure, but it looked like the snowpack was beginning to give way. Under these conditions, Mia wouldn't be able to climb down alone, and she had no intention of abandoning Kuentz either. That being the case, there was nothing she could

do but bivouac. She'd wait out the gusting snow. Although she couldn't be sure the billowing snow wasn't the harbinger of a blizzard, there was no point in dwelling on the matter.

Seeking an appropriate place to camp out, Mia ran her eyes over her surroundings. As far as snowy mountains went, she'd climbed them plenty of times with her mother, and she'd camped out before. Kuentz was sure to have tools for hollowing out an area in the snow. Mia hadn't given up yet.

Turning and looking over her left shoulder, she made out a structure with distinctly crafted lines atop a sheer rock wall quite some distance away.

"Excellent!" Mia said, snapping her fingers.

"C'mon, get up already!" she told Kuentz as she shook him, but she quickly stood up again.

"It's no use, as I might've guessed. No choice but to carry him myself. Lucky for me there's snow on the ground," she muttered.

The mistlike cloud of white slapped her cheeks.

"Here it comes!"

This was no time for standing about. However, she had no spell that would carry Kuentz, and she wasn't about to just leave him there. The billowing snow grew denser.

"What's that?" Mia exclaimed, focusing her gaze in the direction from which the demonic whiteness gusted at her. Off in the distance, where a haze hung like silky white gauze, she'd spotted humanoid shapes.

"We're—" she began to cry out with joy, but she stopped short of waving her arms when she saw that the cluster of shapes showed no signs of acting like a group of humans out in the snow. They had nothing in their possession that resembled mountain-climbing gear, and they didn't even raise a hand to wave to her as they silently made their way across the snowdrifts. Strangely stocky in build, they all looked as if their necks had sunk into their chests. They stooped over terribly.

Terror clawed at Mia's heart, for she had just recalled a legend that was told about the snow-covered mountains in this region. The

legend of the Caladoma—abominable creatures that found people and brought them back to their lair in the snow to be devoured.

I've gotta run, and quick. Gotta make it to that building! But how am I gonna get Kuentz there?

As Mia looked down at the fallen youth, fretfulness and despair tinged her eyes for the first time.

III

Fifty minutes later, Mia looked out at the windblown snow covering the base of the boulders and sighed. Kuentz was lying on a simple bed. There was no change in his condition.

As expected, the building was an emergency shelter from days of old. According to the plate on the door, it dated from more than a hundred years ago, but at present, its concrete outer walls easily kept the snowy gusts at bay, while its interior walls and ceiling were utterly spotless. More than anything, the girl was glad that the heating unit, which had seen more than its share of usage over a century earlier, went into action with a single flip of a switch. Filled to the brim with freeze-proof oil, its most breakable parts had been fully reinforced and repaired. That'd probably been seen to by the last people to use the place. And though she might never meet them, Mia was deeply grateful for their thoughtfulness. Thanks to them, she and Kuentz—whom she'd grabbed by the feet and dragged there—didn't have to freeze to death. Better still, the shelves in the back room were stocked with cold-weather gear and preserved rations. They would have everything they needed and more to get back down the mountain.

Going back over to the bed, Mia put her hand to Kuentz's brow, and then checked his pupils. His body had grown cold, his pulse was zero, his pupils were fully dilated—he was utterly dead. However, her instincts said otherwise.

When a person died, some essential part of them left the body. Some referred to it as the soul, and without it, the corpse was

nothing more than an empty husk. Because her mother the fortuneteller was often asked to officiate at funerals and Mia had helped her since she was a little girl, she had seen literally hundreds of corpses. There had never been an exception. A corpse was an empty husk.

But that wasn't the sense she got from Kuentz. Something that made a person a person maintained the life force within his body. That was the proof he lived. Mia was determined to somehow bring him back to the village. But her feverish determination was shaken by a certain wind as if it were a tower built on a foundation of sand. A wind that was black and pale, beautiful and mysterious beyond compare—and it wore the face of a certain young man. D.

What did it mean that he was the obstacle blocking their path? Although at first she thought it might have been the face of the fake D that she saw take shape in the jewel just before it crumbled, Mia had gotten the distinct impression that the image was that of the real D. Why him? The mere thought of it threatened to crush Mia's heart with anxiety and kill her courage to share the fate of the black jewel. What was that gorgeous Hunter?

Her field of view unexpectedly fell into shadow. Mia turned to look and was startled. While her attention was diverted, the demonic whiteness had piled up outside the window. The wind shifted direction.

If it weren't for this shelter—feeling relief, she brought her face closer to the windowpane.

A fiendish visage was pressed against the window. Eyes that turned up at the corners, eyeballs cold and dead, a crescent gash of a mouth exposing rows of yellowed teeth. Thick with bristling white fur, its face was more atrociously cruel and cunning than any monster known to Mia.

"What in the world?" she cried. At the same time she pulled away, the face vanished and was replaced by a white fist that hammered fiercely at the pane of glass.

It was them. Monsters that traveled with the gusting snow, the Caladoma had come there when the whipping wind changed direction. Or this might be another Caladoma, though it meant the same to Mia either way.

The door rattled. As she turned to look, there were noises up on the roof. The number of foes was unclear.

Dashing into the back storeroom, Mia grabbed the bolt gun that was leaning up against the wall. This wasn't a rifle that used bolt action to chamber a round, but rather it literally fired metal bolts propelled by highly pressurized air. There was every reason to fear that the thunderous report of a gunpowder rifle could cause an avalanche all too easily. Those who'd used this shelter—or more likely, those who'd designed it in the first place—had no doubt taken that knowledge to heart.

Taking a look at the tin bucket that sat next to it, she found that an even dozen ammo clips of fifty shots each and three gas cylinders remained. Grabbing the bucket by the handle, she returned to the combined living room/bedroom. As it was fairly heavy, Mia had trouble walking with it.

The instant she stepped into the room, the windowpane shattered. As the shock wave and the sounds of destruction struck her full on, Mia dropped the bucket and used one hand to shield her face. But she quickly opened her eyes.

The upper half of a Caladoma hung from the window—the hole it'd made was too small. It was trying to use the misshapen object in its right hand to smash the rest of the glass. Horrifying faces bared their fangs at the other three windows.

Mia raised the gas-powered rifle. "Stay back! I'll shoot!" she shouted.

Looking up at her, the creature she sought to stop let out a single beastly howl and brought up its right hand.

"Stop it!" Mia screamed, pulling the trigger.

Even before her finger felt the vain and hopeless click of the trigger, Mia realized the terrifying truth. The rifle wasn't loaded with an ammo clip or a gas cylinder!

"Hold it!"

Cursing herself for an idiot, she went down on one knee, flipped over the rifle, then pulled one of the cylinders from the bucket and slapped it in the bottom of the weapon's stock. Every girl on the Frontier was familiar with the use of a number of weapons.

The voice of the beast was near.

The gas cylinder was good to go. Scooping up a clip, she shoved it into place in front of the trigger. There could be no sweeter sound than the click of the ammo locking in place.

When she braced the weapon against her shoulder and rose again, a mass of white landed right in front of her. With a howl that split her eardrums, the beast hurled the same weapon that'd shattered the window at Mia. She thought she'd pulled the trigger before she felt a terrific impact on her left shoulder, but she couldn't be sure.

The thing's face caved in like a mortar, with the base of its nose at the very center of the damage. Its head alone snapped backward, splattering against the wall behind it.

Mia's body was slammed back against the storeroom door, where it halted. She planted her feet to stop herself from sliding down to the floor, but when she tried to raise the weapon with her left arm, the pain made an agonized groan slip from her.

Apparently they only had that one weapon for smashing windows. When the next one leapt in through the same window, Mia gripped the rifle with just her right hand. Her back was pressed against the door to steady her, and as she took a deep breath, she raised the gun. Including the clip of ammo it weighed over ten pounds, so holding it steady was next to impossible. She aimed by pure instinct. Due to the weight of the rifle, the gas had essentially no kick at all.

The bolt it spat out with a rasping whistle struck the chest of the second one at a speed of Mach 3. From the exit wound on the Caladoma's back a tremendous amount of meat and entrails shot out, but even as they exploded from the creature, Mia experienced such agony she lost consciousness.

The impact of the rifle had been minor, but it knocked her body against the door, and from there the force traveled back through her. And her left shoulder bone had been fractured.

An extraordinary cylinder towered just before D. The strange thing about it was that although the cylinder rose more than three hundred feet, the entire form was subtly twisted in a manner that seemed to ignore three-dimensional geometry.

"Never seen one of these before. So this is a sway reactor? I've heard they used freaking alien technology, but they sure built a hell of a thing here."

Even in the world of the Nobility, the energy that drove their civilization was of the utmost importance. Ironically, the nearly ideal form of energy to be had by conventional means was solar power run through an amplifier, but on ethical grounds they set about developing an energy source that was fundamentally different. Though the first approach to prove successful used mathematics and geometry to draw energy from another dimension, roughly a millennium later it was rendered useless by attacks by bizarre creatures on the other side.

At approximately the same time, the energy-development center under direct control of the Sacred Ancestor succeeded in developing a new source of energy—to be precise, the power of perpetual motion. The fact that nearly a hundred thousand ageless and immortal Nobles literally worked themselves to death during its development was a testament to the price that had to be paid to accomplish something the laws of physics vehemently declared an impossibility. So appalling were the conditions that the Sacred Ancestor himself ordered that all accounts of the great undertaking be purged, and five millennia passed before it produced any measure of success. Making something from nothing, this device made a reality of what was only a dream in physics, but even the Nobles' civilization didn't manage to construct more than three of

them, each of which was set up in a top-secret location. The secret to producing an essentially endless supply of energy lay in certain distortions and vibrations. Choosing the optimal pattern from the nearly infinite number of combinations required five millennia of scientific endeavor on the part of the Nobility.

But one such combination loomed before D now.

"So, another symbol of the Nobility vanishes, eh?" the left hand muttered—but what did D make of this?

As he walked toward it without evincing any particular emotion, a shower of gold poured down on him from above. A billion-degree heat ray that would instantly erase any living creature lost all its heat the second it touched D. The blue pendant on D's chest glowed softly.

The supercomputer acting as guardian recognized that the intruder wasn't just anyone. Canceling any further attacks, it set all its systems into defensive mode.

An invisible shield stretched before D. An antimatter field—anything that touched it would cease to exist. Only three steps away. Two. One.

D breezed right through it. All that remained was the last redoubt—the blood seal. A barrier that only those of the Sacred Ancestor's line would be allowed to pass.

Suddenly, a final directive locked away deep inside the computer activated. It overrode the will of the computer, taking precedence in virtually any situation. Circuits switched, and for a millisecond, all the energy in the sway reactor was channeled into the black box set in the bottom of the reactor. A dull thrum! shook the air.

"I'll be damned," the left hand said, its eyes bulging in their sockets.

Before them lay nothing save a vast black lake. The symbol of the Nobility that had loomed there, filling all that space, had vanished without warning.

"Teleportation? That's a dirty trick," the left hand grumbled.

"Where'd it go?"

D's query was met with silence.

"To Muma?" D then asked.

"Odds are."

"Where is that?"

"I—I don't know."

This was the point where D would've ordinarily squeezed his hand into a fist, but instead he let it go and turned around, saying, "Then I'll have to ask someone else. Someone who knows more about this place than me."

The Hunter's words drew an uncanny sense of alarm from his left hand.

Whither Yuma?

CHAPTER 2

I

When D reached the end of the dark corridor and slipped through the open door, he found another D leaning back against an enormous rectifier.

"You called?" the D who'd just come in said perfunctorily, and the other one nodded. He had summoned his other self using a communication system only the two of them knew about.

"I didn't think you'd be in here. Get out of here at once," the fake D snarled.

"Where's the assassin?" D asked. His comment didn't seem to have anything at all to do with the topic at hand, but anyone who guessed what he was driving at would've been terrified.

"Oh, him?" the fake D said, an implacable grin spreading across his lips. "What do you intend to do when you catch him?"

"Ask him the way to Muma."

"Muma?"

"You mean you don't know what it is either?"

"Nope. But the second I heard you say that word, it sent a chill down my spine. What's there?"

"A secret about me, it would seem."

"Then it's a secret about me, too," the fake D said, growing thoughtful. "I'd also like to know what the word means. The

assassin is still in the facility. No one's made it out except for that couple."

And then, peering at D, he continued, "I thought you promised to leave here if anyone else managed to escape. It would seem I am just a great big liar."

"If you're talking about the two of them, they'll be back," D said.

"Excuse me?"

"So, am I also adept at feigning innocence?"

After a short time, the fake D put one hand across his belly. Though it looked as if his body doubled over from a sudden stomachache, it was laughter that spilled from his mouth. "Ha ha ha . . . You've seen through me, have you? Indeed, I've had them brought back here. But it was you that made it necessary. Don't try to shift the blame."

"Where are they?"

"Well, there's no point in keeping up the act—come with me." Tossing his chin down the corridor, the fake D turned around and walked out.

After a walk of five or six minutes, a door opened. Lying on a bed set in the center of a room filled with light were Mia and Kuentz. A number of white shapes milled around the bed, growling in a base tone. Caladoma snowmen.

"The man will be out of it for some time, but the woman should soon be—"

Before the fake D could finish speaking, Mia began to stir, and she immediately opened her eyes. Bringing her hand to her left shoulder, she grimaced, and then donned a stunned expression.

"I healed the bone for you," the fake D called to her, at which point she finally noticed him and snapped up in bed.

"But this is—"

"That's right, you're back where you started."

"How . . ." Mia muttered, but then she noticed the snowmen all around her. "So these things do your . . ."

She turned a wrathful look on the fake D.

Extending his index finger, the fake D waved it in front of his face, saying, "Tsk, tsk, tsk. It isn't my doing. To be precise, it's the work of my father."

A puzzled silence from the girl.

"The man who built this place. Incredible, isn't it? These things were also created by my father and given a duty."

"A duty . . . You mean carrying people off?"

The fake D smiled wryly at her blunt question. "Yes, I suppose so."

"And what did you plan on doing to us now that we've been brought here?"

"What, indeed. However, it's not their fault the two of you are back here. If that young man was in proper shape, I'm sure you would've made it safely down the mountain."

That was certainly true. Even alone, Mia had managed to hurt the Caladoma badly.

"Then whose fault is it?"

"His." Grinning, he stuck a finger in D's direction.

"Why?" Mia cried out, her eyes going wide.

As the look she trained on him changed from one of anger to loathing, the fake D winced.

"You're trying to tell me D did something? Don't try to shift your blame off on him!"

That was exactly what the fake D had told the other D only a short time earlier.

The fake D's grin grew broader, but getting it back under control, he tossed his chin in Kuentz's direction and said, "Your boyfriend there wasn't overcome by pain on the way down by any chance, was he?"

Without waiting for Mia's reply, he said something astonishing: "That was his doing. I saw it all on the monitors. Without leaving a mark, without drawing even a drop of blood, he slashed clean through the guy's torso."

Mia gazed at D, dumbfounded. She couldn't even speak. D—was that young man honestly the real D? Mia got the feeling that both of them were impostors.

"Oh, don't give him that look," the fake D said with much pretense. "If he hadn't, he wouldn't have been able to get back in here. You two came back. In other words, you didn't make it out, so he gets to stay too. An unavoidable turn of events, if I do say so myself. However, it would seem that even that wasn't enough to satisfy him, was it now?"

"D, is what he just said true?" Mia asked, still clinging to her desperate thoughts. She knew the answer.

"It is," D said clearly.

"If only you'd told me, I never would've tried to leave."

"But he would've left. And he'd have taken you with him."

If D had tried to stop him at that point, Kuentz would've undoubtedly resisted him to the death. And all for Mia. That was the sort of young man he was.

"How horrible of you!"

"You can say that again," a hoarse voice remarked from the vicinity of D's left hand, but Mia ignored it.

"So tell me, what's going to happen to us now for your own convenience? I beg of you, don't ever tell me you're going to save us if it's just a lie that serves your purposes."

Her tone might well be described as icily stern, and it was met by what could only be termed the frozen beauty of D's handsome visage. As she glared at him, Mia got the feeling her fit of rage was clearing from her head.

"Someone will be coming soon. Once I've met with him, you can be on your way."

"What do you mean, someone?"

As she stared at D, out of the corner of her eye she caught the fake D pretending to pull a hair from his head.

"That guy. When's he coming?"

Somewhere in the wall there was a faint electronic sound. Essentially in unison the eyes of all three of them saw a picture form in a section of the wall they hadn't noticed up until now—a map of the facility. It couldn't possibly have been any more detailed. A red point of light was moving through it.

"Monitor," the fake D called out, and the antiseptic schematic faded to show them an image of a man on a horse silently making his way down a dark corridor. It was the assassin in blue—Yuma. A scaled-down version of the previous map showed in the upper right corner of the screen.

"That's the number two passageway in the northeast quadrant. Wonder where he thinks he's going?"

Mia gasped.

The point of light had just disappeared.

"I take it he noticed he was being monitored. Just the sort of thing you'd expect from someone sent to fight us, eh? Now there's no way of knowing where he's headed."

"Really?" D asked.

Grinning, the fake said, "No. There is a way. Care to join me?"

"I have business with him, but you don't. Why invite me along?"

"You just don't get it, do you? Because I'm you. If you want to see him, then I need to do the same. Baby—"

"The name is Mia."

"Pardon me. You'd better come with us too, Mia baby. You needn't worry about this young fella. All our friend here has to do is make the same cut in reverse and he'll be back to normal."

"Is that true, D?"

"Yes."

"Then fix him now."

"If he did that, I'd need him to leave," the fake interjected, drawing a glare from Mia.

"You'll have to wait a while," D told Mia, and then he turned to the fake.

"No, I'm going too. I've had it with being left in dangerous situations."

"But what are you going to do about him?"

"We'll bring him with us. He won't be your problem. I'll carry him on my back," the girl replied.

For a second, the two Ds looked at each other.

The fake one said, "Of all the nonsense. Oh, okay, you can come with us. And I will be so good as to carry that fellow on my back."

The I to whom he referred, the other D, remained emotionless.

"This really stinks. I'm supposed to be the leader here," the fake D grumbled several minutes later. On his back he bore Kuentz in his breathless sleep.

At Mia's suggestion, the three of them had settled matters via rock-paper-scissors. This was the result.

Perhaps tied to the massive installation by some sixth sense, the fake D walked on for ten minutes without losing his way, and then a huge black pit appeared before them. It was so wide they couldn't see to the far side. And their path cut straight across it.

"This part's a tad dangerous," the fake D said, halting. "The floor is damaged out in the middle. If things don't go right, we could fall. I suppose we could go the long way around, but that would take a lot of time. Of course, it's not like we're foaming at the mouth to get there, so let's do that."

"We'll go this way," D said.

"I thought you'd say that. But what about these other two?"

"That's your department."

"Hey!"

"We did rock-paper-scissors to determine who'd look after those two."

"I guess you're right."

"I can take care of myself," Mia said stoically.

"Since you've got a guardian angel, you might as well make the most of him," D countered, tossing his chin in the fake D's direction.

"Oh, shut up already. Fine. Let's go, then."

The instant they set foot on the span, their dangerous foreboding manifested in a slight creak. There was a noise like glass grinding on glass.

"The molecular bonds have been really weakened. The two of us might manage it, but there's no way baby here could pull it off."

"No, she'll be fine," D said, reaching out to take Mia's hand. The second he touched her, presumably to lead her across, Mia's body went sailing through the air and landed on Kuentz's back.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"You should be able to handle the two of them. After all, you're me."

"You're a bastard."

The floor creaked beneath the fake D's feet.

"Oh, my!"

"Watch your step."

Though the fake bared his teeth at that, he ultimately walked on without saying another word. Apparently he was the type who would at least honor an agreement. And in that, it came as little surprise he was just like D.

"I'm sorry," Mia apologized from behind him. "Uh, I'll walk on my own."

"Just try getting down now. Your feet would go right through the floor as soon as they touched it. Don't worry about it. Carrying the two of you isn't a big deal."

"Thank you," Mia said, bowing her head, and then she glared at the D behind her.

"Not a problem. Not a problem at all," the fake said, waving his right hand before his chest as he did so. In his fist he held a single strand of hair.

"He's here."

And saying that, he ducked, and a gentle wind passed over his head without a sound.

Catching the hair that came flying at him with his left hand, D then struck out with lightning speed. A new onslaught of hair was met by it, wrapping around the limb.

"He was just testing the waters with that one. He'll mean business with the next one," the fake D shouted. "If he shoots through this span, we'll be in trouble. Let's get across here quick!"

His words alone were left there as he sprinted. With two young people on his back—Kuentz and Mia—it was miraculous how he could move without even making the floor creak again.

Even though the fake might've been termed the master of this facility, no matter how he stared into the darkness before him, he couldn't make out anything. The pit was the better part of a mile wide.

Though he dodged or cut down two strands of hair that came flying at him, there was nothing he could do about the third strand that pierced the floor at his feet. A thirty-foot section crumbled away, and the fake D and the young couple were swallowed by pitch blackness without a sound.

As Mia looked up instinctively, the image of D leaping from the front edge of the collapsing walkway was burned into her retinas.

II

D cleared the thirty-foot gap in a single bound. When he landed, the walkway turned to silvery dust and fell away. As he launched himself into another leap, a flying strand of hair pierced the left side of his chest. Falling head over heels to hit the walkway, his body was enveloped in a death shroud of glittering fragments that drifted down wildly until they, too, were swallowed by the darkness.

It was about five minutes after that that the darkness at the far end of the walkway took human form. As for who the assassin astride the black mount was, it went without saying. Although the fake D had crossed the walkway fragile as a piece of spun glass in a normal stride with two people on his back, this rider had the added weight of his steed. Yet what kind of skill did he have that the path beneath the animal's hooves didn't let out so much as a single squeak?

Halting at the edge of the walkway, he peered down into the pitch black pit that had swallowed the two Ds and said in a doleful tone, "All who learn of Muma must die."

"Is that a fact?" replied a voice that most decidedly wasn't his.

Though it seemed like the voice of some malevolent deity echoing up from hell, Yuma merely backed his horse up a few steps and launched three more strands of hair at the point where the voice had originated. Fired off with ungodly skill in less than half a second's time, they met nothing before being swallowed by the darkness.

"You missed."

When that mocking remark reached him, he wheeled his steed around. Naturally, he hadn't been scared off. He simply realized that on this narrow, fragile walkway, he'd be at a disadvantage battling an unseen foe. It would be a complete reversal, putting him on the defensive.

However, just as the assassin was about to gallop into action, his horse got cold feet. It had caught sight of the figure of unearthly beauty standing on the walkway some sixty feet ahead. The way he stood there completely at ease, not even reaching for the longsword on his back, sent a gale of unspeakable horror tearing through Yuma's soul.

And then, to his rear, a voice called out, "There's no turning back."

Now he was surprised, turning to find the fake D standing there with one hand raised. The two young people who'd been on his back were nowhere to be seen.

"How did you survive?" Yuma asked from the back of his horse. He no longer seemed at all disturbed. With fearsome opponents blocking him on both sides, he was quite composed.

"It's a secret," the fake D said with a smirk. His eyes had begun to give off an intense light. "In my stead, those two kids fell. They were a heavy load, but they didn't deserve to go out like that. I'm not about to let you get out of here now."

"That wasn't my intent," Yuma laughed from horseback. He had the air of a king sneering down at his lackeys on the ground. "Since you didn't die, I'll simply have to kill you. I wasn't the one cornered here."



And saying that, he gave a kick to his horse's flanks. Just as the hooves struck the walkway it was reduced to powder, and the fake D went sailing through the air. In an instant, the assailant on horseback underwent a bizarre change. From the waist up he rotated 180 degrees as if he were some sort of automaton, and then he launched a wave of hair at the heart of the leaping fake D. That aerial assault was countered by the bird in flight. The way the fake D swung his blade around fresh from the draw and parried all the hair was nothing less than incredible, but his skill in deflecting one of those strands so it struck the galloping steed in its right flank was truly ungodly.

As the horse and rider seemed to collapse under their own weight, D charged at them. But an enormous form rose before him—the horse and Yuma. And as the steed rose, from its sides a gigantic pair of wings popped out noisily. His horse was a Pegasus.

D was a second too late getting out a wooden needle, and by the time he'd whirled around to throw it, the man and his flying horse had vanished into the depths of the darkness without any further response.

"You let him get away, you dolt," the fake D sneered as he landed behind D. "And to make matters worse, you let him nail you right through the chest. Where's that hair?"

"Right here," a hoarse voice said.

Turning his gaze toward its source—D's left hand—the fake D bugged his eyes. About half the hair was sticking out of the Hunter's palm. And under his watchful eye, that hair was neatly extracted from D's palm, and then dropped to the floor, where it curled up.

"So, it eats hair too? That's a strange palm you've got there."

When it'd looked like D had been pierced through the heart by the hair, he'd actually stopped it with his left hand.

"I leave the rest to you," D said.

"Hey!" the fake D shouted, but by that time, the Hunter was already dashing toward the far end of the corridor. His black raiment soon became one with the darkness.

After seeing this, the fake cursed, "Damn it all. He gets all the sweet jobs."

He then went back to the edge of the walkway, his right arm swinging out casually. The thousandth-of-a-micron thin, nigh-invisible steel wire from the launcher concealed in his sleeve shot straight off into the darkness. It found something. One flick of his wrist and the motor went into reverse, hauling back whatever the line had snagged. From the depths of the darkness rose Mia, and both her arms were wrapped around Kuentz. Though they looked to be floating in thin air, their bodies were actually supported by a steel wire the fake D had launched at the ceiling as they were plummeting from the walkway. Undoubtedly it had caught on a pipe or something else. After setting them back down on the walkway, the fake D undid the wire and stared into the darkness, saying, "He went on ahead."

"I figured as much," Mia replied, nodding. Peering at the fake's face, she then asked, "So, what are you doing then?"

"Excuse me?"

"You said you were the same as Mr. D, didn't you? In that case, why aren't you giving chase, too, and trying to help out?"

"Well, I was—"

"We'll be fine now. I'll wait here. Get going already."

"It's dangerous around here. The place is crawling with monsters who won't obey my commands."

"But—"

"I don't care if it was decided by rock-paper-scissors, I still have to protect you, you know," he said, his soft tone underpinned by an immovable will.

For a second, Mia imagined that he was the real D.

D had no idea how well Yuma knew the layout of the facility. From what Mia had told him, the assassin seemed quite well informed, knowing more about it than the Hunter at the very least. If so, it would be easy for the assassin to lay a trap.

Suddenly the walls to either side of him vanished. Feeling the space broaden, D halted. He was in an absolutely barren clearing. The circular floor was more than three hundred feet in diameter. Countless doors and windows riddled the surrounding walls, and lying here and there were what looked to be bones. The stains that spread like shadows on the floor were most likely remnants of blood. Before he could even consider what this place had been used for, he was given the answer.

"How good of you to come. You, the seeker of Muma. However, this is as far as you go." The voice seemed to reverberate from the heavens and the earth and the very walls.

"What is Muma?" D asked. "Is it the name of a place, or a person, or is it—"

"It can be whatever you want it to be. That is Muma."

"Who told you that, and who ordered you to kill all those who learned of it?"

"It would do no good to tell you that. My mission is one of death alone. And that, too, is Muma."

"I want to know where the sway reactor teleported off to. I suppose that's Muma, too."

"Indeed it is," Yuma said, his tone deepening the darkness. "Do you know what this place is called? Of course you don't. I shall give you its name as a parting gift from this life."

D surveyed his surroundings in silence. He then said, "It's the Battlefield of Shadows, isn't it?"

Signs of shock traveled through the air from behind the Hunter and to his right.

D didn't turn around, but his right hand shot out. The needle of rough wood that knifed through the gloom drew a low groan off in the distance. Though D turned in that direction, he wasn't able to advance—the doors on all sides of him had unexpectedly vanished, and from the elliptical black gaps they left, tall silhouettes had made an entrance.

One after another, the shadowy figures that'd stepped into the clearing fluttered through the air like mystic birds, their

black wings spread as they came down all around the Hunter. On closer inspection, all of these figures were similar in appearance. They wore wide-brimmed hats and long coats, and had elegantly curved longswords draped across their backs. Actually, they were exactly the same—to the point where any ordinary person would undoubtedly question first their eyesight, and then their sanity. They were identical. Every figure there was the exact same person. Their forms and handsome features seemed to shine through the gloom. They were D. Each and every one of them was D.

Those in the front never halted their advance, while those following behind them quickly came to stand shoulder to shoulder with them, making the mob of Ds into an army that advanced on the lone D standing in the center of the place.

Ordinarily, this would be a nightmare. A dozen people dressed like you, with the same face as you but devoid of expression, closing in all around, would make you desperate with terror, driving you over the brink. If there had been any bystanders, it wouldn't have been surprising if they'd fainted away from fear and confusion. A mob made up entirely of people who were the same was simply that disturbing. Only at a time like this did a person realize the truth that one's value comes from being a unique being. However, this time was different. What a beautiful sight, to have one glittering star in the center, and all around it more stars of the same hue and shape! Even the air of nihilism that filled the distance between them and its severity seemed likely to leave the spirit of anyone else in their presence frozen in rapture. This must've been what beauty was. It was death itself.

When they came within ten paces of the true D, the figures that'd formed a ring of Ds around him drew their swords in unison. Streaks of light arced off their backs, some going into the high position, some to the center, still others flowing down to a low position, taking up stances both flawless and utterly still.

And then, like gorgeous petals closing on the blossom's center, they stabbed a multitude of gleaming stamens right at D.

Descending light, light, and more light—and at its center, the figure in black made a graceful flash that snapped off a number of the glittering stamens raised in this flower, while the petals in human form swiftly fell to the ground, stabbed through the neck or shoulder or chest.

They mirrored D not merely in form alone. Their skill with a blade, their strength and speed should all have been the same as his. In truth, a number of the blades bit through the black cloth into his shoulder and belly, and bright blood spouted from him. And yet, this didn't even slow D down, his coat whirling out madly like something from a nightmare, not only blinding his beautiful assailants but also deflecting their vicious attacks, while the glittering weapon in his right hand slew his identical brothers one after another. In the gloomy clearing, which seemed to lie at the border between darkness and light, a bloody mist danced out.

"What's this?"

That cry, tinged not only with anguish but also with amazement, rang out not five seconds after the deadly battle had begun.

"The shadows are fading!" the assassin in blue shouted, showing an interesting choice of words.

Those five seconds of life-or-death battle had changed the Ds who challenged D. The corners of their eyes slid downward, their noses twisted, and their lips swelled sickeningly so that they no longer retained the slightest resemblance to the D who was their prototype. Now it had become a battle between beauty and hideousness, with the dance of beauty's cold steel laying all the hideous ones low. The beautiful and the hideous were no longer equals. Not their faces alone but their very limbs were strangely out of balance, and when the last of the misshapen figures hit the ground, D whipped his sword around and raced toward where he'd heard the voice.

III

It had come from three stories above—a door looming in a spot more than thirty feet up.

Bending his knees only a bit, D made a great leap. Like a black and mystic bird he whistled more than twenty feet up in the air, clinging to the wall, a moving shadow whose speed rivaled that of the light as he slipped into an opening.

D expected to find the assassin in blue, Yuma, lying on the floor. But there was no sign of him. Well, actually there was. In a horrible puddle of blood on the floor there lay a single eyeball that'd been skewered by a rough wooden needle. Retrieving it from the middle of that ghastly smelling ring of gore, D said, "The left one, I take it."

His words were disturbingly comical.

The wall across from him had an exit in it. Spots of blood trailed from the puddle of gore, ending about three feet away. At that point, Yuma had undoubtedly done something to stanch the bleeding. He had to have prodigious presence of mind.

"He can't have gone far yet," his left hand called out in a hoarse voice. "You could go after him. Your opponent's wounded, and seriously at that."

D, who was of the same opinion, had begun to walk toward the exit before the voice had finished speaking. But a cry that reached him from far below stopped him. Looking down, he found his other self standing there. The fake D.

Quickly noticing him, he called up to the Hunter, "Let him get away, didn't you? You don't have to say a word. I can tell just by the look on your face. After all, you're me. But don't bother chasing him further. From here on out it's a danger zone even I don't know too well. It's crawling with monsters spawned by the twisted machinery underground here. Better come up with a new plan."

"That does sound like a good idea," the hoarse voice said, but before it could finish, D was sailing through the air.

When he landed, the fake D stood before him pensively surveying his surroundings.

"Well, I'm certainly surprised you could kill so many of yourselves," he remarked in an equally pensive tone. "They were clones. Data on you and me remains here somewhere. But your—I mean our good looks they just couldn't do anything about. It wouldn't do to have that copied so easily."

With that, he kicked the longsword out of the hands of one of the fallen.

"Still, there's something I don't get. Even when their faces went to hell, their skill shouldn't have changed, so how did you slaughter them so easily? If I had to fight this many of myself, I could wipe them out, but I don't think I'd be able to stand on my own two feet like you. See, I know my own limitations. What are you hiding?"

"What did you do with Mia?" D said, cutting off what was shaping up to be a lengthy discourse by the fake.

"I left her at the entrance to this clearing. Wait a second. Now that you mention it, I don't sense—" Turning, he squinted his eyes. "She's gone."

An overwhelming stench brought Mia back to her senses.

Having ridden the fake's back all the way to the clearing, she noticed what looked to be corpses lying all over the place. Telling her to wait there, the fake D had set her down, and then vanished into the gloom. As she watched him go, her consciousness had rapidly slipped away. When she came to, she was here, in a spacious chamber reminiscent of a warehouse. Filled with a stench powerful enough to wake her back up, it had a low ceiling and narrow, blocked-off corridors. Forty or fifty feet away glowed the light of what was apparently the exit, with a figure she'd never seen before standing in front of it. Though he was about the same height as Mia, the beard on his chin and the way his back was stooped made it clear he was quite advanced in years—a very, very old man.

"Excuse me," she called out, and he turned in her direction and came hobbling over. He was dragging his right leg.

"You've awakened, have you?" the old man said, standing in front of Mia and gazing at her face.

Although she couldn't tell in this darkness, his skin had a black luster to it. It hadn't been baked by the sun, but rather seemed to be simply filthy. As for his age—nothing could be gathered from his eyes, which were as intrepid as could be, but he had to be a lot more than seventy. He was completely covered in wrinkles.

"Hurry up and undo my bonds," the girl said, extending her arms.

"There are no bonds of any sort."

"There aren't?" Mia said, absolutely sure she'd been tied up.

"How clumsy you are. What've you come here to do? Oh, I suppose it doesn't really matter. Regardless, you're going to die."

"Die? What for?"

"I will make an offering of you to my god."

"Your god?"

"Yes."

"Thanks but no thanks."

"What an amusing girl you are," he chuckled. "Too precious to use as an offering. However, the situation is unavoidable. This underground prison is worse than any hell, but thanks to my offerings, I've survived here five thousand years past my allotted span."

"That's incredible!" Mia said, genuinely amazed. But she could see how living that long might make anyone superstitious and put the same look in their eyes. "Who in the world are you?"

"My name? I had one, but I've forgotten it. Oh, I know—long ago, I was called Neer, so let's make it that."

"Mr. Neer, is it?"

"Does that seem strange?" the old man asked, shooting her an intense look.

"No, not really," Mia replied, feigning a smile. His eyes had a gleam to them that was beyond the pale. Realizing there'd be no use

reasoning with him, Mia decided to escape under her own steam. Fortunately her hands and feet were unfettered, and her magical accouterments were still safe in her waist pouch. She had to run off as soon as possible to D, or the fake D, so they could ascertain where the sway reactor had gone. Under no circumstances did she want to hinder their actions.

Mia felt mildly surprised at her new resolve. At some point, she'd come to view D and the fake D in the same way. Though identical in appearance, inside they were as different as heaven and earth. Mia also felt a shudder closely resembling fear deep in her heart.

"Girl," Neer called to her. Without her realizing it, he'd moved back over by the exit.

"My name is Mia."

"Come here—Mia."

Checking the contents of her pouch with her fingers, Mia went over to him with an innocent expression on her face. The glow was increasing. On reaching Neer, she saw that what she'd taken to be an open exit was in fact filled by a massive plate of glass. It was a window.

"Five thousand years ago, this observation chamber was used exclusively by a certain being. Though no trace of them remains now, there were rows of the Nobility's mysterious devices, and pale Nobles and android servants scurried about in the service of said being. Here he stood, gazing at the god below. He probably didn't consider it a god, though. Because he himself had made it, you see."

She could tell that the light was coming from down below. Pressing her face to the glass—which actually seemed to be a material far more permeable to light—she turned narrowed eyes toward the glow. Within that intense light, which she could somehow withstand, something with color and shape squirmed.

What's going to come out of it?

But even as the essence of an ineffable terror stabbed into every inch of her, Mia couldn't look away. Chaos began to give way to

form. Just like when the universe was created. It was coming. Out of the light—and drawing closer. Heading toward Mia.

Now!

A scream gushed from the mouth of the fortuneteller's daughter. Steeped far too deeply in the colors of fear, it carried echoes of horror.

A sound rang out from the glass. Something had struck it—Mia's greatest fear.

Jumping in surprise without uttering another sound, Mia then began to slowly back away. She didn't even notice that she'd gone right past Neer. When the enormous window had shrunk to about the size of her face, her back struck something solid. Turning, she stared hard at it. An enormous thing towered blackly there. At first she thought it might be some kind of offertory shrine. But it wasn't.

I see.

But even though she understood what it was, she couldn't accept it. Its true nature had become clear, but the staggering size of it made the recognition of that fact impossible. A seat loomed over Mia's head, while to either side of it, much further up, armrests ran parallel to the floor like elegant avalanches, and to the rear the backrest rose high into the darkness of the air—it was a chair. Devoid of ornamentation, the pitch black throne couldn't help but convey the incredible dignity of its owner.

"That is the chair of the master of this chamber—the being of whom I spoke." Neer's tone was wan and shuddering, but at the same time full of pride. "He would sit in that chair and gaze through the window. Actually, from that position, there's no way he would be able to see down below. He did not look, but rather he must've sensed. Sensed what? You wouldn't understand. No one would. No one but me. His thoughts focused, working the blue nerve cells of the Nobility to their utmost to feel—and I alone know what he glimpsed with his mind's eye. Because I—"

There the old man broke off as if robbed of his voice.

"Oh—he comes!" he shouted, turning and looking at Mia as he extended a bony finger. "My word. He's coming. The great one comes. Can you hear the sound of his footsteps? Oh, there is but one—it is unquestionably the sound of the great one's footsteps. The squeak of the stone floors he treads, the echoes off the rock walls, the sound of footsteps that send cracks through the ceiling."

Mia didn't hear a single thing. She was looking not at Neer, but at the window behind him. The light was creeping higher. Coming up from below. The thing that she'd seen.

And from behind them came something that terrified Neer. His Adam's apple trembling, Neer shouted. The end of his finger twitched as if all the vitality in his body was crammed into it.

And Mia saw. Saw the nightmarish face plastered against the window.

"He's coming!"

"Aaaah!" the girl shrieked.

The windowpane shattered into a million scattering pieces.

The door swung open wide.

A suction-cup-covered tentacle in a horrifying shade wrapped smartly around Mia's waist. In a position that made resistance difficult, she was dragged toward the window.

Shapes rushed forward. Two figures. Both wore the same clothes. Closing on Mia with unbelievable speed, one wrapped an arm around the girl's neck. A second later a silvery gleam flashed in Mia's eyes, and she was thrown to the floor. Forgetting the pain in her derrière, she pulled back with a frightened squeal. The severed tentacle was flopping around by her feet.

"Who are you two?" Neer asked, stomping his foot with vexation as he faced them. "You're not him. But I was sure those were his footsteps. The great one came. Came alone. But you two aren't him. Who are you?"

The pair of figures—the two Ds—stared quietly at the old man.

"You were only talking about one person, right? You said that he had come," one of them said as if posing the question to himself.

"In which case, one of us would be a fake."

What the other D said froze not only Mia, but the wholly uninformed Neer as well.

Menda of the North

CHAPTER 3

I

"Good thing the motion detectors still work," that D continued. Not knowing which was which, Mia looked from one to the other. Not only did they look exactly the same, it seemed as if there was one D existing in two places simultaneously. Mia's cheeks flushed red. There was twice as much beauty.

"I knew there was someone else wandering around this underground facility besides me, but it looks like we've finally caught him now."

From that, she could tell it was the fake D.

"Who are you, old-timer?"

"Neer," the old man answered weakly. Like Mia, he was mad from the gorgeous features of the pair.

"Given your age, you've probably got seniority over me. How long have you been here?"

"Since about five thousand years ago."

"Five thousand years?" the fake D said. As he knit his brow, his right hand unleashed a flash of light.

The old man's shirt split open from the base of his throat to the solar plexus, revealing iron-brown skin. It was a flexible metallic epidermis that looked and moved like genuine skin. With it, he might well last another five millennia.

"So, old-timer, you're a cyborg?" the fake D said with a grin.

"I prefer to be called a demihuman!" Neer snapped.

Gazing at his bloodshot eyes and the foam that spilled from his lips, the fake D once again lashed out with his blade. This time the old man's helmet was split in two, falling to the floor. Once Neer's hairless pate was exposed, the fake D stared at him intently and pointed to his right temple.

"That scar—I don't know who gave you it, but it's from a sword. I see. So that's why your brain-support system malfunctioned. But the support systems the Nobility put into their cyborg servants are supposed to be made of an indestructible metal. Even I couldn't cut through it."

Touching one hand to his temple, the old man said, "I'm not funny in the head. Leave the girl with me and get right on out of here."

"What do you intend to do with her?"

Neer's eyes were drawn to the other D, who stood over by the throne. It was he who'd posed the question. Once she'd determined which was the fake D, Mia had gone to the other D's side.

"Make an offering of her to my god."

"No way," the girl said, clinging to D's arm. It felt like she was touching steel. She automatically let go of him not only due to her shock at that, but even more because the very act of latching onto D filled her with an almost religious feeling, like she was committing a sin. She was as shaken as a person who'd just heard the voice of the gods.

"There's something down there below the window—but it's no god," Mia said, pointing a trembling finger at the devastated glass, then at the tentacle that'd finally stopped moving.

Looking down at it, D asked Neer, "Is this your god?"

The breath caught in Mia's throat—the old man had bugged his eyes and shook his head vehemently. He was the picture of complete insanity.

"Don't be absurd. My god isn't a repulsive creature like this. It is a being of rare beauty. Because I myself created it."

"Created it? You made a god?"

For the first time, Mia truly felt how insane the old man was. All that was down at the bottom of that light was this monster.

"This god you say you created—I'd like to see it," D said softly.

Neer scoffed, "Surely you jest. My god belongs to me alone. It is a god precisely because only those who are worthy can see it. And that means me and him."

"Him?"

"The master of this chamber. The one for whom I built this place."

"This whole spread—you made it?" Mia said, her eyes wide.

"Indeed. I was an engineer who worked exclusively for him—that is, the great one."

"An engineer—so that's why you're called Neer."

"Look at us," the fake D said, grinning broadly as he gave a toss of his chin to Neer. "Take a good long look at this face. Doesn't it bring back anything?"

Not a word from the old man. Crazed though they were, his eyes managed to focus intently for a few seconds—and unexpectedly opened as wide as they'd go. Hues of fear and astonishment had taken hold of them.

"It . . . it can't be . . ." he mumbled, his lips barely letting the words out. "It can't be . . . It's simply not possible. He . . . The two of you . . . are his? Are you the great one's?"

"The light!" Mia exclaimed in a shrill voice, pointing toward the window. "The light's coming up!"

"Old-timer, what was this room for?" the fake D asked as he watched the window out of the corner of his eye.

"This one—this is where offerings are made . . ."

"You fool. That's just what you've been doing here. I mean originally. What was it in the beginning?"

"In the beginning?" Turbulent clouds closed in Neer's eyes. He knew. But terror rooted in some deep psychological level guarded him from understanding and confessing.

"Look—Look at it! That's—"

The color drained from Mia's face, leaving her pale as a waxwork.

Light filled the room. The source of the light shone beyond the window, and in its depths, a form familiar to them all flickered, trying to take shape.

"It's a face!"

Oh, how striking its features were, and how gorgeous.

"I've got it!" the fake D exclaimed, nodding. "What are you thinking about now, old-timer? That thing? Him?"

There was a succession of strident sounds. Neer's teeth were chattering out of fear. "I . . . I was . . ."

Seizing him by the chest, the fake asked, "You were what? Who were you thinking about? That—"

As he pointed toward the face beyond the window, his own expression was a ghastly sight.

"No, it was him, wasn't it? The master of this chamber, right? That is your god. A sick god created by a sick old man—yes, I do believe it was you who made that thing. In this room, the light beyond the window takes the form of your thoughts."

"That can't be," said Mia. "Then what I saw was—"

"It was whatever you were thinking about at that moment. Weren't you scared, utterly terrified, thinking that the thing in the light would be your worst fear? Well, that's what appeared."

Both D's form and his words were swallowed by the light.

"Stand back," D said, taking Mia by the shoulder and pulling her back by the throne. The light also enveloped the chair.

"D!"

The gorgeous form launched himself at the waves of light. His whole body quivered.

Light is made of particles and waves—photons and light waves. A single wave of that light or a single photon contained a ruinous amount of energy. Some passed through D's body; others sank into his muscles, his organs, his bones, discharging their fatal power. Imagine a human being exposed to a powerful dose of radiation.

"Are you all right?" the fake D said from nearby.

"Yeah, more or less." Perhaps D bothered to respond to each and every remark only from a sense of closeness from being the same.

"What'll we do?"

"Don't I know that without having to ask anyone else?"

"Oh, shut up," the fake D replied furiously, staggering. The intense energy load had overwhelmed his body's defenses. "Damn, it's gotten to my legs. Okay, I'm gonna kill the old-timer. It's his imagination that gave rise to this monstrosity."

Neer was laid out on the floor. As D turned in that direction, his legs buckled badly. Both knees hit the floor, and then his hands followed suit.

"D," Mia said, peeking out from behind the shelter of the throne.

"Stay where you are."

Rising to his feet, D staggered over to Neer.

The old man's eyes were wide open with fear. He realized D's intention.

Moving, D tried to say something, but no words came out. His body melted into the whiteness. The gigantic face had lined up with him and was blasting him with a concentration of light energy. D was expressionless as he bore the agony of being seared to the bone.

"Do it! Kill me. Do it in the name of Muma!" Neer shouted, his mouth open as far as it would go.

Right before his eyes, D drew his sword. The edge of it gleamed white.

"Aaaah!" the old man blathered as D took care that the edge didn't strike him, hitting him instead with the flat of the blade and knocking him out. As a product of Neer's imagination, the titanic face should vanish once the old man lost consciousness.

"I'll be damned," the fake D groaned from nearby.

The face didn't vanish, and the light within it only grew brighter.

"Time to move," D said. Whether he was addressing himself or the fake D was unclear.

As D kicked off the floor in a manner suggesting he didn't give even a thought to the ferocious attacks, the fake D sprinted after him. His hair fell out, and the skin on his face began to peel and fall off. At ten paces, D went through the face. Running another ten, he turned around. The face was closing on him.

"This thing's gone beyond its creator," a hoarse voice said. "It can maintain its existence through its own will, and it's out of its mind with a savage hatred of you."

"It's my job that it hates."

The enormous mouth opened as wide as it could go, and D jumped back fifteen feet. Right to the base of the throne.

White flames tinged the face's lips. It had gnashed its teeth together. A momentary delay resulted.

D flew into the air. Leaping up onto the throne, he looked like a blisteringly hot knight. The face continued to pursue him. Swirling white heat enveloped both the throne and D. Within it, there was a single blinding flash of light.

The colossal face suddenly donned an agonized expression and reeled back. Its closed eyelids were enveloped by flames, its screaming mouth split open, and muscle fell from jaws and cheeks that could take no more. White flames burst open, and from the cracks even hotter flames erupted, connecting with others and burning everything off the face. Just for a second, the face turned to the heavens and howled. It looked like a scream from a gigantic severed head that'd been set on the throne. A heartbeat later, this golden instant of death dissolved into flames. And when the last of the self-destructive flames melted into the air, all that remained standing on the throne was the young man in black.

"You did it!" the left hand said with genuine admiration to D as he silently sheathed his longsword. Perhaps it was amazed. "There was nothing you could do but counter a monster produced by a crazed mind with an even stronger force of will, though smashing it like that—wow, blood really will tell."



Was that the reason for his success?

But in return, D's face was horribly melted, and his coat and traveler's hat still had smoke and white flames coming from them. The blade of his sword was ruined.

"Even if I didn't do anything to help you, your own regenerative abilities could handle burns like these. But you'll have to replace your clothes and your sword, you know. So, what do you wanna do?"

"Don't worry about that," another D called up from the ground. Needless to say, it was the fake one. "Have you forgotten who this facility was built for? Come with me. No parent would want to leave his newborn child to lead a deprived existence, after all."

A few minutes later, the fake D had guided them through a door, and beyond it lay thousands or even tens of thousands of splendid garments—a gorgeous palette that filled the vast hall completely. In the next room, D chose a longsword from the weapons that covered all the walls. Its elegant curve, the sturdy workmanship of its hilt and sheath—everything was exactly the same as his accustomed blade.

II

The next thing they had to do was to pay a call on the medical center—the two Ds weren't the only ones who'd taken a direct hit from those high-energy waves. Mia and Neer both lay on beds with treatment systems that were barely operational. Though Mia had taken cover behind the throne, sticking her face out had given it a thorough exposure to the light energy, which left it with a condition resembling a sunburn.

"Looks like the system's not fully operational," the fake D said, giving the sputtering treatment equipment a kick. Its alloy body dented.

"So it won't be possible to treat them for the light energy. They'll need to be hospitalized in the Capital. To make matters worse,"

he continued, throwing a look that could be described as both cold and sympathetic to the groaning Neer on the distant bed, "he's too far gone. I looked at his scans, and both his organs and his brain are lousy with tumors. You know, if we'd put him down earlier, he might've been spared all this pain."

His remarks were directed at D.

In reply to that, D said merely, "It's Muma."

That silenced the fake D. Then he asked, "Does he know about it?"

"Back in the light, he mentioned it."

The eyes of the two Ds met. Astonishingly enough, the melted flesh on their faces had almost been fully repaired, and their hair was back to normal. The metabolic functions of these two must've had an almost infinite amount of energy to draw upon.

Putting his hands together, the fake D cried, "Yahoo! In that case, we'd better do this while he's still among the living. Let's hurry up and ask him."

But he knew that was impossible. Neer was rocked by spasms, and the words that came from his mouth were the senseless gibbering of a madman.

"His mental stabilizers are shot. This is hopeless."

As the fake D folded his arms, D extended his left hand in front of him. He put the palm of that hand against Neer's forehead. Five seconds passed . . . Ten . . . And then Neer's tightly shut lids opened wide. Seeing that a light of unmistakable sanity shone in them, the fake D groaned, "Well, I'll be damned."

"This . . . is the medical center . . . isn't it?" Neer inquired after looking all around.

"That's right," said D. He'd already taken his hand away.

"Come to mention it, I have this feeling . . . like I had a long dream . . . or something. Are you . . . treating me?"

"No, but listen to me. You're going to die soon."

"Hey!" the fake D exclaimed, his eyes bulging.

Mia sat up at that, too.

"Is that so? I suppose I am . . . I have lived . . . too long."

"Where is Muma?" D asked, cutting him off.

"Muma?" Neer said, something murky spreading through his eyes.

"Yes, Muma."

"Muma . . . Muma . . . What in the world . . ."

Suddenly an intense hue of terror took possession of the aged cyborg's face.

"Muma—ah, yes! Muma!" the old man exclaimed.

From the vicinity of his chest there came a little sound, like a motor spinning out of control.

"His artificial heart just went haywire," D's left hand muttered.

"What is Muma?" D continued.

"It's . . . It's . . . something I built."

"What?" the fake D cried, staring at the old man.

"The great one . . . had the initial idea . . . and I studied the feasibility of it. And then . . . I had complete authority . . . until it was built."

"What is it? Is it some kind of machine?" the fake D interrupted.

"No . . ."

"Is it a place, then?"

Neer shook his head from side to side. At the same time, spasms rattled through every inch of his body.

"This ain't good. He's almost in his death throes."

As the Hunter's left hand said, certain death was catching up with the cyborg after five thousand long years. His eyes lost their sparkle, and his expression became that of a puppet.

The two Ds turned around.

Mia stood there. Walking over to the aged cyborg as if she didn't even see the other two, she squatted down by the old man's head and took his half-melted hand between both of hers.

"Hey!" the fake D called to her, but his tone wasn't especially forceful.

"In addition to fortunetelling, my mother served as a priestess at funerals. Her job was to see the dying off," Mia said quietly. "She

taught me how to do the same. I couldn't help but hate the idea of watching people die for a living, but then I found this person who'd collapsed out in the woods and there wasn't time for me to go get anyone else. The person died in my arms. At that point, I finally got the feeling I understood what the job was all about. No one wants to die alone. I realized that being with someone when their time comes isn't a job, it's my duty as a human being."

White beads had formed on the brow of the aged cyborg. Circulatory fluid was probably seeping through his skin due to mechanical failures. Mia wiped them away.

"Go gently," she said as if addressing the old man. Or D. Or the fake D. Or something that wasn't here now, but which intently watched over everything. "No one is going to ask you anything. You needn't speak. Go gently."

Neer's closed eyelids twitched a little. Tears spilled from them.

"Muma . . . When you leave here . . . go north. My niece Menda . . . should be there . . ."

And having said that, he started to take a breath and stopped in the middle of it. The air caught in his throat, and he wheezed. He clutched at Mia's fingers. A hint of pain passed across the girl's face. But that was it. The ancient hand let go of Mia's fingers, and then rolled off the edge of the bed.

Mia slowly lowered her head.

After a short time, D asked, "Have you seen him off?"

"Yes."

"That old-timer was a lucky man," the fake D said enviously. "The way things were going, his rusted old body would've dropped somewhere in this underworld and been a meal for the monsters, but instead he got sent off to the next life by a sweet young thing."

"Don't put it that way!" Mia cried, glaring at him. Something glittered in her eyes.

"Oh, my apologies."

"You needn't apologize to me. I'd appreciate it if you'd show some respect for the feelings of the departed, however."

The fake D was at a loss for words.

"How are you feeling?" D asked.

"Huh?"

"How's your condition? Your face was burned."

"I'm okay, really. I took medicine that helps wards off energy, too."

"Isn't your finger broken?"

"It's—" Mia began, lightly taking hold of her right index finger. That alone made her groan. It seemed to be broken from the third joint up.

D took her finger gently in his left hand.

"Oh!" she gasped in surprise, but that soon gave way to fresh bewilderment. The pain had left her completely.

"Consider yourself lucky," the left hand said boastfully.

"Well, time to get down to the main event," the fake D said somewhat awkwardly. "Thanks to babycakes here—"

"The name is Mia."

"Thanks to Mia baby, it looks like the location of the treasure will finally be learned. North it is, my other self!" he called to D. He was positively buoyant. If that was his true character, D would have to be a huge liar putting on a great show.

"Menda to the north," D muttered.

"Is that enough for you to go on?" Mia asked.

"No problem. While you're headed there, you'll run into people coming this way. You can ask them. After all, we're talking about this old-timer's niece. Anyone would know about someone like that."

D turned around without saying a word.

"Hey! Wait a second. That was all my idea. I'm going with you!"

As the fake D started after the Hunter, he changed direction.

"No, you're not. I'm going with him," the girl said.

"Come with me back to the surface," D said, having halted but still facing forward. "Then you should go back to the village. And forget about everything else."

"Yeah, you do that," the fake chimed in. In this regard, the two Ds were in complete agreement.

"I don't want to."

"There's nothing more you can do. You'd only get in the way."

"I can divine things."

"This is no job for some penny-ante bone tosser from the sticks. Stay out of it. I don't know why your mother didn't teach you—"

Surely D had let this play out intentionally.

A sharp slap rang out, and Mia stared dazedly at the right hand she'd used to land the blow while the fake D held his cheek and grinned wryly.

"Sorry. But I won't have anyone insulting my mother," the girl declared flatly.

As the fake D looked at her, his eyes had a chillingly malevolent glow, but it swiftly faded and he said, "No, I was at fault. Well, you just leave the rest to me. You're a lot more likely to get results that way. But I'll tell you one thing, baby."

"It's Mia."

"Okay, Mia baby. As you can see, he and I are one and the same. Never forget that."

Mia turned to face D, looking head on at his handsome features. "Please take me with you."

"I told you to go back to the village."

"In that case, promise me something. That you'll avert the crisis the world faces even if I'm not there. Swear that the two of you won't go off and just fight for your own cause."

"I'm under no obligation to promise you anything."

"Then I'm going with you."

"You'll be going as a complete stranger."

Mia's breath was taken away—he'd accepted her instantly. It was the rule of the Frontier that everyone lived on their own.

"Understood. I won't be a nuisance to you at all. No matter what happens, just leave me be."

"No talking to me, either."

A stunned silence from the girl. Mia's blood froze and she wondered if the words hadn't come from an entirely different person.

"What did I tell you? I'm a hell of a lot kinder, aren't I?" the fake D said, his voice skimming vainly through her mind.

"Very well. But at least escort me as far as the exit."

"There's nothing stopping you from following along if you like."

"Okay," she replied, but how she had to muster the energy to say that one word! Mia desperately fought back what was rising within her.

When the three of them reached the surface, it was evening. A fourth person—Kuentz—was draped across the back of D's cyborg steed. Mia was stupefied that the pair's horses had been tethered outside the entrance at some point, but the apparent culprit—the fake D—didn't say anything to her.

Mia got on the horse behind the fake D.

"Put your arms tight around my waist," he told her.

"Okay."

The begrudging manner in which the girl complied was hardly in character for her, where a spiteful remark would've been more in order. But she knew it wouldn't do any good.

"Tighter," the fake D said, watching D out of the corner of his eye.

"Okay."

"Let's go," D said.

"Oh!" the fake D exclaimed as something went flying into the air from behind D and landed right in his lap. The slumbering Kuentz.

"Hey, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Entrusting him to the one who gets results," D said without even turning to look.

"Hey!"

"Catch up to me later."

And with that, the rider in black galloped away in a cloud of dust. To the north.

While he trailed the Hunter in a daze, the fake D bared his teeth and snarled, "The nerve of that guy. The next time I see him, he'll have to answer for this."

Behind him, Mia added, "I'll say. As soon as we get Kuentz to the hospital, let's head right out after him."

At that, the fake D laughed aloud.

III

Three days and three nights D kept his horse ceaselessly galloping down the road north, finally arriving at the first tiny community. There he left his exhausted cyborg steed, asking that the animal be serviced and its needs attended to. When he asked at the stables about a woman named Menda, the reply he got was, "Ah, you're too late, you are. She passed away three years back."

Though her home had also been demolished, he asked where it'd been located, heading out there on a horse borrowed from the stables. Sure enough, nothing but the house's foundation remained in the hilly region spreading to the west of the village. As he was looking at the surrounding area, a wagon came along. It stopped in front of D.

"You there, pretty boy—what are you up to?" a personable-looking farmer in a battered hat called out to him from the driver's seat. "There's nothing left there. A witch woman who was no-one-knows-how-many centuries old used to live there, you see. Caused all kinds of trouble, and on account of that, her house was burned to the ground. Even now, the will-o'-the-wisps light up the place come nighttime and strange, shadowy characters creep around. I don't mean to tell you your business, but you'd best be hurrying on your way."

"Does she have a grave?" D asked in return. Although he was over thirty feet away, his low voice reached the farmer's ears without the least bit of distortion.

"She does. The village holy man said a body with no one to see to it was just too pathetic, so he set up a grave for her. From where you're standing, you can see that hill off to the right, can't you? It's at the foot of that."

Giving the man his thanks, D got back on his horse.

It was less than five hundred yards to the hill. In a shallow depression that'd been dug in the slope there stood a tall, slim gravestone. On it was carved Menda's name and a date three years earlier. There was no date of birth.

Staring for some time at the humble grave, D then set his left hand on the top of the gravestone. To an observer, he might've looked like a dashing man wracked by deep emotion at the thought of the departed. And then, said observer would no doubt have imagined that the grave's occupant was a woman of peerless beauty now lost to him.

"Well?" D asked. His inquiry was directed not to the gravestone but rather, as illogical as it seemed, to his left hand.

"There's no hideout here. It's a grave all right. Except it's made of incredibly heavy stone."

Processed stone was renowned for being essentially as dense as iron, and it was used to bind ghosts and vengeful spirits that might harm the living.

"And inside it?"

"That much I can't tell." Perhaps noticing that D's right hand was reaching around to his back, the voice hurriedly added, "You—you can't seriously be thinking of stabbing your sword into that stone, can you?"

It was more of a desperate plea than a question, but before it had even finished, D's right hand flashed into action. Drawing the blade from his back, he made a thrust. Naturally, the sword should've limned an arc and then streaked straight forward in a piercing blow. But it merely looked as if D's blade had flown straight from the sheath to the gravestone.

Stabbing into the base of the gravestone at roughly a sixty-degree

angle, the blade appeared to stop for a second when it was a third of the way in, but it merely slowed a tiny bit before sinking in halfway.

"Oh, my—here it comes!" the left hand shouted.

For some reason, whenever a person referred to the arrival of something inhuman, they invariably said some variant of "It's coming!" And something certainly did come. At the same time D's blade was being pulled back out, a clearly visible miasma-like substance was rising from the gravestone, but it then dispersed in the air.

D turned around and looked.

There stood a woman in a white death shroud. The scenery behind her was visible through her transparent skin.

"Menda?" D asked as if he were addressing a living person.

"You're—D."

"You know me?"

"Surely you know the power of the soul. Everything that's been said about you reaches my ears."

"Where is Muma?" D asked. Though he'd confirmed who she was, he didn't seem the least bit surprised. Of course, he didn't seem at all frightened, either.

"Do you want to know? If so, you must grant me a favor."

"Name it."

Joy tinged the cheeks of the transparent woman. Her right hand rose to her chest. It stopped there for a moment, and then came away again. Within her blurry body, a black lump swelled and shrank by turns. It was obvious at a glance. That was her heart.

"The great one—oh, but then you must know of whom I speak. He put this into me. Even when I was killed, it beat on. And it prevents me from undertaking my eternal journey. If you wish to know the way to Muma, I want you to stop this."

D saw tears well up in the woman's eyes. Could a soul cry?

"You must've come from the subterranean realm where my uncle was. I am not uninformed as to what transpired there."

"Hmm," the left hand replied.

The woman smiled thinly.

"I was one of those who worked there. You see, the great one's experiments required not only the science of the Nobility, but also the primitive magics of every race. As it continued, it affected my mental state—in truth, it got to the point where even the minds of the pitiless Nobles working there could bear it no longer. Weird children born one after another—oh, I can still hear them! This heart carries the noise to me. The heartrending whimpers of the babies deemed failures. All of them were discarded in a bottomless pit. No one can know how the sight of that has tormented me. On the brink of losing my mind, I talked with a number of my associates, and then we set the subatomic reactor to overload and fled the subterranean realm. I galloped off on a horse then, riding a full year until I took up residence in a freezing village nestled between the glaciers."

One after another, the woman's words rang out with a despair that was denser than the dark of winter. And it was because of this that D remained silent and listened to her.

"But alas, as I feared, I wasn't safe there. Those who'd labored at forbidden tasks in the subterranean realm would never be allowed to escape the black arms of the great one. Every day and every night, I heard his voice in my dreams whispering to me, Come back. And after living there a hundred years, I turned my back on the glacier village. For the next three centuries I walked across the Frontier, looking like some wandering wraith, and then I settled on this village. All the bizarre experiments I conducted here were done at the great one's bidding. As a result, I wound up cursed and killed. Not that I'm resentful of that—I was painfully aware that the great one never forgave traitors when I chose to rebel. However, the fate the great one bestowed upon me was not the peace of death. My ears ring with the cries of desperately clinging babies who realized their fate just as they were about to be hurled into a dark hole. Babies who wrapped their arms around my neck. When I close my eyes, their faces appear, begging to be spared. I have been locked away with the very things I sought to flee. And for the rest of time I'll be unable to

escape them. Not so long as I have this heart—the heart the great one gave me in place of my own when he appeared to me in a dream the night before the villagers murdered me."

The woman covered her eyes. She plugged her ears. She wrapped her arms around herself. As overly dramatic as these gestures were, they laid the woman's misery bare.

"Stop this heart of mine," the woman said, her words growing slurred. She was desperate. It wasn't life she desired. The freedom of her soul hung in the balance. "No one can stop a heart made by the great one. Except for his one success, that is."

You were my only success.

"You know the way to Muma, don't you?" D asked, just to be sure.

"Oh, will you do it, then? Of course I know the way. I was a handmaiden to the great one."

D didn't move from that spot, but held his sword ready in his left hand, drawing it far back under his arm. Poised for a thrust. Could the same blow that'd pierced the superdense stone destroy the heart housed in her spirit—an artificial heart that'd been put into her in a dream?

D's eyes glowed with an intense light. His eyelids slid shut, and a second later, the sword blade pierced her black heart.

Menda screamed. Though the writhing figure clutching her heart was semitransparent, she was just like a real person of flesh and blood experiencing real agony.

D lowered his sword. He knew his blade had met no resistance—it was like stabbing into thin air.

There was no change in the evil beating of the black heart. An artificial heart made of the same material as a dream, and which, when damaged, put the soul into hellish agony—what in the world was it, and how on earth could it be destroyed?

"Stop this. You'll only torture her soul," a hoarse voice choked with distress called out to stay his hand.

"Looks like I failed," D said to the soul of Menda, which had finally finished twitching. "What do you want to do?"

"How about you? Do you pity me? Are you loath to make me feel the same pain again? Do you wish to run away with your tail between your legs?"

She looked up at D with tears in her eyes. That single blow had left her face gaunt, but a hopeful smile gradually spread across it.

"You're ready now, aren't you? You're going to do it. You really, truly intend to free me from this accursed existence. Thank you. Thank you so much."

"Stop this madness," the left hand urged them. "Her soul won't die. But every time you fail, she'll go into agonized convulsions. Unless you have some proof you'll succeed next time, this is just torture. Gaaaah!"

Opening his hand again from the tight fist he'd just made, the Hunter closed his eyes. He was focusing his mind.

Would the second thrust bring salvation, or would it give rise to tragedy?

A chill spread through the air—a paranormal phenomenon associated with D's intense concentration. Once more he held the sword by his side—and when it blistered through the air, it impaled the black organ again, snapping Menda backward.

At the same time, D clutched his chest and staggered forward. A steely arrow ran into him through the back and poked out of his heart. Someone had shot him from behind.

Ordinarily, the Hunter would've sensed the murderous intent before his opponent had even fired and gone on the offensive. However, his intense concentration hadn't allowed him to do so.

Reaching with his right hand for the part that protruded from his chest, D yanked it forward. Pulling eight inches of gory arrow out, he then fell forward as if in keeping with the speed and angle of that tug.

"Oh, D! D! D!" Menda cried, forgetting her own pain and clinging to him, but her face was heavily tinged with the hollowness of one who knew her own fate.

The wind blew across her grave. Aside from the fallen Vampire Hunter, there was no sign of anyone else there. For her soul wasn't permitted to exist in the ordinary world.

To D's rear—actually, on the road some fifty yards away—a wagon was stopped. In the driver's seat with a twelve-pound crossbow propped against one shoulder was the same personable farmer who'd told D about this place.

"You were just so good-looking I knew you had to be up to something, so I follow you out here and sure enough, you're getting into all kinds of weirdness. Trying to help the evil spirit of that witch after I went to all the trouble of sealing her up in that stone—that's patently offensive. Shooting you in the back might've been unsporting, but heaven's wrath shows no mercy. You can go straight to hell."

Lowering the crossbow, he took off his hat. There wasn't a single hair on his head. Then he took a folded-up monk's cap from his chest pocket and put it on. The holy man who'd erected Menda's grave was this very same man.

Fixing a cylindrical magazine of arrows to the crossbow, the monk got down from his wagon.

"The ghost of Menda is cursed. She'll never be able to pass on. But if she lingers long in this world, she's sure to cause harm. That's why she was confined to this grave, until you stuck your busy little nose into this!"

Walking over to D, he kicked the Hunter's face as hard as he could. D's lips split and blood went flying.

"Stop it!" Menda cried out, bending over D.

"Are you trying to get smart with me, you vile spirit?" the monk cursed at her. For he could see souls.

Pointing the end of his crossbow at Menda's heart, he pulled what looked like an earphone from one ear.

"I got this listening device from the Capital. I heard the entire conversation you two had. Now I'm going to see whether or not emptying every arrow I've got into your heart will send you to the hereafter," he declared with naked loathing.

Before the Gate

CHAPTER 4

I

"Don't!" Menda pleaded, but—wearing a look on his face that hardly befitted a holy man—the monk pulled the crossbow's trigger. Driven at speeds of six hundred feet per second by compressed air, the steel arrow pierced Menda's chest, leaving the lost soul writhing on the ground.

"Stop it . . . Just stop!"

Her sobs were like pouring gasoline on a fire for someone of a sadistic bent, and the monk ran his tongue over his lips. "Oh, does that hurt? Are you in pain? Do even lost souls feel? I believe I could write a paper about that to send back to the main temple in the Capital. Just let me make some more observations."

With a whuuut! a second shot scorched through the air, penetrating her heart and sticking into the ground far behind her. Menda rolled around, not even able to speak.

"How's that? Here's another," he said, bracing the crossbow against his shoulder again.

But just then someone called out from behind him, "Knock it off, you bald bastard."

The second he realized the voice was the same low tone the young man in black had used earlier, cold steel pressed against the base of the man's neck, and he froze before he could say a word.

"Got here quicker than I expected. Have a look at him," said the other D, who stood with his longsword at the ready. Mia was by his side, naturally, and as she rushed over to the Hunter she cried out, "D!"

"Looks like you lucked out, baldy," the fake D said.

Still standing where he was, the man asked, "How's that?"

But his eyes beheld a shadowy figure rising smoothly to its feet. A veritable spirit of the black earth—however, if that was the case, this spirit of the earth was undoubtedly an avatar of beauty.

"You—you're alive? Even a Noble dies if you shoot it through the heart!"

"You see, I am special," the fake D said, watching proudly as D effortlessly pulled out the arrow jutting from his chest.

The blackness that clung to the Hunter's lips was blood the monk himself had drawn. It was the source of the energy behind his revival.

"If I hadn't stopped you, you'd have been whacked in half before you got off that third shot. You see, that me isn't as nice as this me."

"Are you two twins?"

"No. We're one and same, only there's two of us."

On hearing this, the monk looked bewildered. But when he saw the other D approaching, his panic reached an all-time high. "He-help me," he stammered. "He'll kill me!"

"Well, that's to be expected, isn't it? You're the one who shot him in the back out of the blue."

"I—I only did it for the village—"

"And was it for the peace of your village that you shot not one but two arrows into a defenseless soul?"

"You—you mean you can see her?"

"Of course I can. After all, he's me and I'm me, too. Anything he can do, so can I. Anything he can't do—well, I suppose that'd be out of the question."

And while the fake was saying all that, D just kept getting closer.

"His power is at work in Menda's heart," the Hunter said. "Though she was killed by the villagers, that heart has kept her from moving on. Upon learning this, he went and sealed Menda's ghost away in superdense stone."

"I see. So, that's why he took a shot at you for busting her grave open? What a tricky bastard!"

"I—I only did it for the villagers—"

"By torturing a spirit in distress? What'll you do with him?" the fake D asked the other.

D turned to face the monk. His handsome features were unaltered. However, his mien had changed completely. His eyes gave off blood light, and it looked like sanguine tears might fall from them at any moment. The corners of his slender lips pulled up, and a pair of threatening incisors poked from the crescent his mouth formed. And those lips stained crimson could mean only one thing—

"N-No-Nobility . . ."

Saying only that, the monk slumped to the ground limply. He'd fainted dead away from surpassing fear.

"I'm sure he's telling the truth about doing it for the village," the fake D remarked with apparent amusement. "But this weasel is a sadist, through and through. Sooner or later, he'll accuse some gypsy or migrant girl of being a witch and drag her off to his temple under the pretext of saving her. I can just picture him poking her with needles, roasting her with flames, and even slapping her around. Oh, what's this now?"

His voice grew fainter. For he'd just seen D's right hand flash into action.

The monk was in a kneeling position, but fresh blood spurted from his throat and crotch. The crotch wasn't hard to figure, but why had D cut his throat?

Holding both places, the monk rolled around on the ground, but not a sound came from him.

"Did you cut his vocal cords? He won't be chanting any prayers now. And seeing where you also cut his manhood, he won't be

feeling too randy, either. He's finished as a monk and as a man. You know, you—I mean I—am looking crueler all the time."

Saying nothing, D sheathed his sword and walked off toward Mia. The fake D quickly followed after him, and the two of them stood by the fallen Menda.

"Could you do anything for her?" D asked. His expression had returned to normal—the madness of the Nobility had left him.

"I think I eased her pain a little," the nodding Mia replied.

"I'm fine now," Menda said, sitting up.

"You've been through quite a lot—will the next time be the same?"

"This time, let me try," the fake D called out, and that made Menda's eyes go wide. She'd finally noticed that there were two Ds.

"Sit back and relax. I'll take one swipe at it for starters."

"No," Menda cried, backing away.

"What's the matter? I'm just like him. Relax."

Given the results up to this point, there was no way she could relax.

"Why the long face? If the first shot doesn't work, I'll give it a second whack—"

"It hurts!" Menda exclaimed.

"Is that a fact? Then let's do this on the first shot."

"You're a reckless fool!"

"What?" the fake D shot back angrily at the woman, but D put a hand down on his shoulder. "Let go of me."

"I'll give it a try."

"You already blew it, didn't you?"

"This is the last time. If this doesn't work, I'll give up."

"Oh. Just so you know, your successes are my successes, and your failures are my failures. So don't embarrass me, okay?"

There was a hoarse laugh.

"What was that I just heard?" he said, looking down at D's left hand. "You've got something strange inside of you, do you? That's something I don't have. What is it?"

"It's a secret," the hoarse voice replied.

"Step back," D said.

Tension filled the air—even the fake D retreated a good distance. Menda was motionless, as if frozen solid.

D reached for the hilt of his sword. His eyes were closed again. When they opened, the sword flashed out.

Slowly getting to her feet, Mia tried to slip past D, but he caught her tightly by the wrist. Before she even had time to scream, she was pulled close as if her body weighed nothing, her pale throat laid bare before D's panting lips.

"Don't!" someone shouted, but whether it was the fake D or the left hand was unclear.

Red lips were closing on Mia's throat—but just before they did, D hoisted Mia high into the air. His fingers sank into her wrist, and Mia sensed that the skin had broken. A warm stream dripped down from her wrist. It spattered noisily against the ground. For some reason, Mia didn't look at D. The air snapped taut as a bowstring, making her body tremble, and just then she heard a groan in D's voice. Actually it'd come from the fake D, and when Mia raised her head again, D's blade was sliding back into the sheath on his back without a sound while the illusory Menda wavered before him.

"Ah . . . It's true . . . after all . . . You really are . . ." the fading woman said, tears spilling from her eyes. The tears vanished in midair.

"Muma—where is it?" D asked. His words rushed forward.

As D tumbled to the ground, Mia went right after him with a handkerchief still pressed to her wrist.

"I've told you now. Farewell, D. The great one's own—"

There was no longer any sign of Menda, but her voice flowed from somewhere that was neither the sky nor the earth.

"She's gone," the fake D said, sounding deeply moved. Beside him, Mia had rolled D onto his back and had one ear pressed to his chest. "But who'd she tell, and what?"

"It was the location of Muma. She gave it to D," Mia said.

"How?"

"I don't know. You're part of D, aren't you? Well then, hurry up and get him to wake up!"

Mia fairly flung the words at the fake D, but he had an unexpected reply for her.

"Look," he said.

On the spot on the ground he indicated with a toss of his chin, Mia saw that D was reaching out with one hand. When it stopped, the index finger was pointing toward the plains straight ahead.

"Looks like north it is," the fake D said.

"That's right," Mia said, adding her own opinion.

North again. Was that where Muma lay? And when was D going to wake up?

The two of them looked off into the distance. The twilit plains were darkening with a deep and endless blue.

"Ready?" the fake D asked, putting the other D over his shoulder and rising again.

"Yeah, let's go," Mia replied, having already started walking toward the wagon.

II

D was walking across a vast expanse of clouds in an unfamiliar place. He had passed out. This was the world he was seeing while unconscious—he knew it was a dream. He was walking. But where was he headed? He wasn't at all concerned about what might be happening to his physical self. He knew that this place, where Menda had brought him, was the entrance to Muma. It would have defenders. And they wouldn't stand idly by when someone reached the entrance. Menda had most likely been given this ability while in the service of the great one. Who that was, D must've surely known.

On the sea of clouds, a titanic lozenge-shaped structure could be seen. It seemed as if it might be reached in a few steps and at the same time as if he might never get there.

"There's a gate," his left hand whispered, but was that just part of the dream? "Beyond it is Muma. But first, you've gotta unlock the gate."

D halted, but not because what his left hand said had alarmed him. Something stood between him and the gate. While it was a presence devoid of substance, D could still distinctly sense its weight, its density.

So, you made it this far? he heard a voice say. It wasn't a sound ringing out to tremble against his eardrums, but a voice nonetheless. I suspected you, of all people, might. Still, it is truly remarkable.

"I'm going. Don't try to stop me."

I'd never do anything of the sort. To begin with, I'm not even here. What you feel here is no more than an illusion spun by your own senses. You sense me because you want to, and now you'll try to slay me yourself. It's an exercise in futility, D.

D resumed his strange trek. Beneath his feet, the clouds swirled fiercely, surging up all around him.

This voice, too, is nothing save what you yourself wish to hear. In other words, it is nothingness. Muma might well be the same, D. And you, and the whole world too.

D felt the presence drawing nearer by the second. And yet, it too was probably no more than a product of his own will. The real question was whether or not he himself thought this was pointless.

This is all in vain. You should turn back.

D's right hand went for the hilt of his sword.

The horse bearing the fake D came over beside the driver's seat of the wagon.

"You notice that?" he asked casually.

Still holding the reins, Mia turned to him and replied with equal ease, "Yeah."

"When I give the word, jump over to me, okay? I'll catch you."

"I'm counting on it." While the girl smiled and seemed calm enough throughout the exchange, her spine iced up from the tension she felt. She sensed a strange, murderous intent emanating from the back seat.

Oh, D!

"Is he directing that at you?" she asked, her characteristically calm tone melting into the twilight, but the words conveyed a matter of deadly seriousness.

"Nope. It might sound strange, but the killing lust from that me is quickly being funneled away somewhere. My guess is that'd be wherever my consciousness is."

"And where is that?"

"In our head—or else in our subconscious. If it goes poorly, even I might not ever make it out again."

"Who's he fighting there?"

"Who indeed? Oh, he just grabbed the hilt!"

Disregarding his terrifying news flash, Mia asked, "How will he get back here?"

"One way would probably be to slay his opponent. The other—well, not to put a jinx on this or anything, but that me would have to die."

"Help him. You're him, aren't you? You must know what to do."

"This time, I'm afraid not."

"You know, I wonder about something," Mia began, spitting out the next fiendish thought that popped into her head. "Yes. This is just speculation, but if the D behind me—if the you behind me dies, won't you die, too? You're like one and same person, aren't you?"

The fake D was clearly shaken. Mia's words were more potent than she'd imagined, being right on the mark.

"Hmm, that may well be," he said after some consideration, and it almost sounded like he was directing the comment at himself. "In that case, I can't relax and think that I'm safe just because I'm out here. So, fortuneteller, got any bright ideas?"

The way he asked that with a completely straight face made Mia question if this man was truly D's other self. But she couldn't answer

that. The ghastly aura against her back was almost at its limit.

"How could I possibly know that if you don't?"

"Don't be that way," the grinning fake shot back, but his eyes gave off blood light.

"Now!"

It was miraculous how Mia acted without any pause or delay. Without a second to spare, she jumped from the driver's seat toward the fake D.

The sound of ripping fabric made her blood freeze. The hem of her jacket had snagged on a nail poking up from the edge of the seat.

The fake D reached out.

For a fraction of a second, she was frozen in midair.

There was a flash of white light behind Mia.

D drew and struck in a single motion.

Sparks flew, and the blade was deflected.

D changed his stance, holding his blade out at eye level, while above him a voice gravely intoned, It would seem I am not the only one who would interfere with you. You must triumph, D. Not over me, but over yourself.

As the young man stood there stock still, all around him the clouds eddied.

"That was close."

Having parried D's unconscious sword blow, the fake D looked down at his own blade. It was unclear whether he was talking about the matter of the sword or Mia. As for the girl, he'd caught her at first, and then returned her to the driver's seat.

"Thank you," she told him as she turned and looked back at D.

Still gripping his sword, the gorgeous Hunter had fallen back into that strange slumber. Had the fake one not narrowly managed to draw and swing his own blade, Mia would've undoubtedly been bisected from one shoulder down to the opposite armpit. For the fake, parrying the blade had been far faster and easier than grabbing Mia and reeling her in.

"Shouldn't we take away his sword?" Mia suggested, but the fake D shook his head.

"On the other side, I have to fight. We can't be sure that our meddling out here wouldn't have a negative impact. Let's just leave him like that."

"But he might—"

"If you're that worried, come ride with me. At any rate, I can't let my movements be constrained."

"I see," Mia replied, but then she giggled.

"What's so funny?"

"Well, I just don't get it."

"Get what?"

"The two of you—from what I've seen, you're enemies, but you help each other at the strangest times. Is that how it is with twins?"

"I don't know," the fake D said, looking off into empty space. Shrouded in bluish darkness, his profile showed the sorrowful traces of what looked like fatigue. However, he quickly reclaimed his intense expression and stared at the distant outline of mountains that lay before them.

"It could be a long trip, it could be short—at any rate, all we can do is get going."

"I know," Mia said, tightening her grip on the reins.

The gate drew nearer. And in the aura that surrounded him, the killing lust grew stronger and stronger. If what the voice said was true, the murderous intent came from D himself.

"Calm down, D," his left hand told him. "Something's not right in your head. The way you're secreting adrenaline—" The voice cut off.

A human figure had appeared before them.

"Oh—it's you," the left hand said with apparent distaste.

Though the approaching figure's face couldn't be discerned, anyone could've told who it was. The dashing silhouette, the elegant curve of the longsword on his back, that gait—all exactly like D.

"What in the—"

Suddenly besieged by a new wave of murder lust, Mia froze in the driver's seat. What an endless, deadly battle it must be! Feeling more threatened by the slumbering D, Mia turned to the fake D.

A little scream resounded in the back of her throat.

What she found there was his horse alone. The other D had unexpectedly vanished right out of the saddle.

The D that'd just appeared halted about fifteen feet ahead of him.

"Is that you, me?" D asked, apparently sensing that this D might be the fake D he knew.

"Yes, indeed," the new D replied, showing his pearly teeth. His cheery tone certainly sounded familiar. "I don't know how it happened, but it looks like you called me. What's more, it would seem we're gonna have to have it out, eh?"

D already had his weapon drawn. The fake D drew as well, menace emanating from every inch of his body.

"I don't know where we are, but it's not a very pleasant setting. There's all this pointless hostility blowing around."

"Apparently it's a product of my mind."

The fake D tilted his head back and groaned at that. "So, does this mean I was born to be a homicidal maniac? This is more

than I can handle. What we need is something to take the edge off, I'd say."

"Think there's anything like that here?"

Pondering this for a moment, the fake D then said, "Not really. It seems both of us are fated to travel troubled paths. I suppose it wouldn't be too bad if we were to settle things here."

Two blades rose smoothly into the air, and from them a transparent will to kill surpassing any malice rose in unseen flames.

If the two Ds crossed blades with all their lethal skill, what could possibly be the outcome? For anyone who lived on the Frontier, the answer to that was sure to be of interest—especially if what the fake said was to be believed, and that he was absolutely identical to the other D. Which would triumph? Which would be defeated? Though there was no one else there to see it, a deadly battle of the most staggering proportions was about to occur.

"Stay out of this, you hear?" D said, oddly enough. The remark had been addressed to his left hand.

It seemed for all the world as if they dug into the ground simultaneously. More than the steely war cry of sword meeting sword, it was the power in the legs they planted on the cloudlike ground that was astonishing, for the front foot of each sank in ankle deep.

The two shadowy figures stiffened. In power, they were equal. In accordance with the laws of physics, neither of them could move a muscle. Whichever one moved would be cut down. Both of them knew it.

But before they could sink into a motionless morass, both leapt away, one to either side. Flashes of white light intersected. They landed identically, each falling onto his left knee. A stark gleam protruded from the chest of each. Needles of unfinished wood.

"Knock it off!" the left hand shouted. "Keep fighting and you'll both die! You're perfectly matched in power."

Apparently the only effect this attempt to stop them had was to fan their animosity. Like fierce black jungle cats, the two charged

at each other. But this time was different. Choosing the shortest distance, D lunged from the right. The fake D used all of his weight to strike from the high position, as if splitting firewood. The result would be clear in a millisecond.

"Quit it!"

In a heartbeat, the two stayed their blades, flying back like ominous black birds. A slender figure had appeared in the path of their swords: the way they'd halted blades that'd been swung with all their might just before they made contact was a display of ungodly skill.

"Mia?" one of them groaned.

III

"How did you—" the fake D began to ask, but then he fell silent—having come there himself, there was nothing strange about Mia coming, too. If anything was mysterious about it, it was that at the very instant Mia appeared, the pair felt the raging storms of ill will within them fleeing like the tide. A second later, Mia had disappeared from view.

"Wow," said the left hand.

"Wow," said the fake D.

D's lips remained buttoned.

"If that doesn't beat all! All of a sudden, I'm all peaceful. I bet the same goes for the other me, too. Looks like we'll have to call it a tie, eh?"

"What did she come for?" D said accusingly, but his voice had lost its intensity.

"As if you didn't know," the left hand said.

The fake D stood there somewhat awkwardly. Noticing the sword he still gripped, he sluggishly returned it to its sheath.

"All appearances to the contrary, that girl's got a core of steel running through her. The fact she was able to get into your world so easily is proof of that. To be able to make two guys geared up

for a bloody battle lose the will to fight just by poking her head in—yep, that's one scary female."

Though the fake D was scratching his head, the other D quietly stared forward. There lay the gate.

"Let's go," the Hunter said. He was already walking.

"I'll leave the rest to you," the fake D said.

All sign of him faded away.

"He's gone back, has he?" the left hand remarked with some amusement.

"What is it?" the fake D asked from the back of his steed. "Don't give me that look."

"I'll kindly thank you not to give me any funny looks," the girl countered.

"It's just that, for a second there, it seemed like you'd vanished."

"Hey—that's what I thought, too. I didn't see you. But then, a second later, everything was back to normal—uh, was that what happened with me, too? I wonder what on earth went on there."

"Well, I get the feeling I did battle with that me over there," the fake D said, his gaze on where D lay.

"Well, if you did, it doesn't seem to have had any unfortunate results. Look. His face looks so peaceful in his sleep. I'm sure no one's ever seen that look on him before."

"Probably not."

"I wonder who in the world could've done that to him. It's remarkable!"

"I'll say. Come to think of it, I get the feeling I ran into you in that dream."

"You can't be serious."

"No, really," the fake D said with a nod. And then he stared at Mia as if looking on something of great importance.

The wagon and horse advanced through the darkness. All they could do now was wait for D.

Behind Mia, there was the sound of someone stirring.

"D?"

"So, is it the final battle at last?" the fake D said, his eyes shining.

As D got closer, the gate revealed itself in all its immensity. Its height must've been in excess of five hundred yards. There was a gigantic door, and the frame that supported it—and that was all. Though the door appeared to be made of wood, it had a horrible luster to it, and in that respect it was just like the apparent stonework of its frame. Its width was unknown. To either side, it melted away into walls of roiling cloud.

"Can you open it?" his left hand inquired.

"I've come this far. I'll have to open it."

"How?"

D quietly drew his sword. "If this world is of my mind's making, my will alone should be enough to do something."

Precisely, the voice remarked. You summoned me. Not to hinder you. To slay you on the spot. There is nothing more mysterious than the workings of the human mind, you know.

D advanced toward the door. His left hand pressed against it.

"So, its thickness is infinite? That's about what I'd expect from his mental defenses. D, how are you supposed to unlock it?"

"I'm not going to unlock it."

"What?"

D held his sword at the ready, poised for a thrust. Somewhere a cry of pain could be heard.

The clouds eddied. An almost imperceptible light played across their surface as they churned. It was unmistakably an energy current.

"What's this?" the left hand shouted. He'd just felt D's body absorbing the energy. "You really are something. Now you've finally learned how to control the very life of this world and make

it do your bidding. Hell, it's not even control, it's just simple concentration. With that alone you—"

Eyes shut and not moving a muscle, D looked to be a beautiful sculpture. And the silently raging energy cloud was being drawn into his body.

"Stop it—or you'll be killed!" the left hand cried excitedly.

The horse and the wagon stopped simultaneously. Before them, a black chain of mountains stood in their way. The top ridge had fused with the darkness.

"That's the North Lake Mountain Range, isn't it?" Mia said.

"Yeah. Orogenetic activity formed them about two hundred million years ago. So, Muma lies somewhere in them, then?"

"Probably. Don't you know?"

"I haven't a clue," the fake replied, being perfectly clear on that point. "What I do know is—"

Looking once more at D in the wagon, the fake stiffened. Mia did, too.

"Come here. You'd do well to keep your distance."

The fake D's breath was frozen and white. This was no atmospheric abnormality. His lungs, or actually all his organs, were freezing up.

Mia had started to get up and was frozen with one hand extended. White breath discharged from her mouth, and then stopped.

"Oh, this isn't good. Get over here."

Moving the frozen Mia back behind his saddle, he said, "This time, he plans on opening that gate, I'd say."

And having said this, the fake D scanned the wagon's surroundings. "Oh, looks like we've got some odd participants gathering to celebrate the opening."

Mia strained her ears, but she heard nothing. As the daughter of a fortuneteller, she'd received special training to sharpen all five of her senses. Even in a good-sized throng she'd be able to pick out

any sound within six hundred feet, and in a quiet setting she could even hear footsteps a quarter mile away.

She was just about to ask where on earth they could be coming from when she was startled to see the fake D dismount. Stroking the back of his steed, which was the ordinary sort of cyborg horse they sold in every village, he was the picture of kindness as he gave his beloved mount some condensed nutritional supplements. As the horse's muscles unknotted and its eyes watered, he turned his gaze to Mia and said, "They're here."

Mia had also noticed that, in the direction from which they came, a semicircular ball of spirit fire seemed to be bearing down on them. Standing out in the darkness like glowing wraiths were definite human forms on horseback. However, both the horses and the people were all bone. Bones pale as will-o'-the-wisps came into view in the darkness, swaying closer and closer in the kind of spectacle witnessed rarely even on the Frontier.

Coming to a halt some ten to fifteen feet from the pair, a skull attached to a particularly impressive skeletal frame asked them, "Are you the ones who hurt Barga?"

His tone was dark.

"Who's that?" said the fake D.

"The monk back in the last village. He got in touch with us and asked us to go out and avenge him. Said we'd be looking for two guys with the same face and a girl, don't you know."

"So, what's that depraved monk to you, a relative?"

"A colleague, by some stretch of the word. After travelers staying at his temple have left, he secretly sends us word of their destination. His cut is a bit high, but I guess that can't really be helped."

"You're highwaymen?" the fake D said. "Even at that, those outfits are too much. In these getups, you must be going after women and children, eh?"

Glancing at the ten-strong riders, he continued, "I don't owe it to anyone to take you guys out. Just make tracks. There's going to be some trouble here soon."

Needless to say, the trouble he was talking about involved D. His tone was derisive.

A malevolent air rose from the group of wraiths.

"We'll take your severed heads and hang them at the entrance to our village. And that monk can handle your funeral. Not that you'll be getting into heaven, mind you."

A bony hoof scratched at the soil. That was the signal for a charge.

"Hold up just a second," the fake D said, one hand raised. "What did you boys do to those travelers?"

Base laughter scuttled through the skeletal mob.

"What do you think, we apologized and sent them on their merry way? They're all planted in the ground around here. Including the women and children you mentioned."

"You don't say."

It may well have been that his foes only heard his voice.

The fake D leapt, coming down in front of the skeleton he'd been talking to and its horse, but no one even noticed him until he'd taken the heads off both the rider and the steed. His speed was incredible.

The booming shock wave when horse and rider fell roused the rest of the skeletons. Tightening their grips on glowing reins and kicking the flanks of horses with only bones visible, they made a mad rush at the fake D.

In the voids that had been the horses' eye sockets, fireballs glowed. They shot out at the fake D in rapid succession, and where his blade parried them, a dazzling sphere of fire quickly swelled. One fiery sphere became two, then three, engulfing the fake D in light and turning that whole area into glowing ground. Everything dissolved into the white light, and before long that grew fainter, but no sign remained of either the cyborg horse or the fake D.

"D?" Mia cried out from the driver's seat in spite of herself.

"One of our guys knows how to control the Nobility's nuclear

power. He showed us how to use that weapon you just saw there. Hardly puts out any radiation at all, so you can relax."

"How kind of you," Mia replied with all the sarcasm she could muster.

"Now that I've had a good look at you, I can see that even if you're a bit boyish, you've got a sexy mug on you. Instead of getting rid of you out here, we might be better off selling you to a traveling slave factory."

"No chance in hell," the girl snorted, turning her face away with distaste until bony white fingers sank into her shoulder.

"Get down from there," a skeleton with a dirk ordered her, but Mia vanished right before him, appearing without warning five or ten feet away at the nose of a different horse. The startled mount whinnied and reared up. This was repeated with all the horses, plunging the group into chaos.

There were those who somehow managed to control the animals rising on their hind legs, those who fell from the saddle, and those who were trampled by the horses after falling. Screams and whinnies shook the night air.

Suddenly a ghostly light formed in one spot, swelling into a little fireball about three feet in diameter. Though it didn't emit the radiation associated with nuclear fission or fusion, its core temperature still reached ten thousand degrees. When the fireball began to contract, the paralyzed Mia appeared right next to it. At the same time the glowing sphere of fire faded, she toppled forward. The left half of her body, which had been exposed to the light, was smoking.

"That did the trick. Half her face is burned, but what the hell, we'll still get good money for her," the one who'd unleashed the fireball guffawed from the back of his steed.

But then a voice whispered in his ear, "Go to hell."

"Wha—"

A peaceful sort of surprise was the last feeling the skeleton ever experienced.

Kicking the skeleton whose head had been so neatly severed right off his horse, the fake D gave an angelic smile from his place in the saddle to the badly shaken bandit group. The bony white steed beneath him seemed to suit him better than it did the skeleton rabble.

Highway of the Dead

CHAPTER 5

I

"What the hell?" the skeletons exclaimed, fearful cries spilling from their mouths along with the flames. The fake D already knew that the skeletal horses and riders were just spooky costumes covered in luminescent paint. There was one off to his right—and the fake leapt at him from the back of his horse. Although the guy went for the stake gun holstered on his hip, he didn't even manage to draw it before being run through the heart.

In midair, the fake D muttered, "Huh?" That wasn't the way he'd intended to slay the man. And the reason he was the tiniest bit off balance when he landed was because he hadn't come down in the pose he expected.

A rider shot a white-hot bolt at him, but it only grazed his left shoulder as he dashed forward and to the right—toward three men who'd been thrown from their horses. Unbelievably powerful to begin with, his legs kept any attacks from landing. The leftmost skeleton had an insect gun leveled.

He was braced to slash his opponent from one shoulder to the opposite armpit—but even though his arms shifted position without any thought on his part, he still pierced his foe with a remarkable thrust through the neck.

What the hell's going on? This thought flashed through his mind just for an instant while he executed a half turn and delivered a thrust to the middle skeleton that killed him instantly, leaving only the third.

Making a great leap, the fake had his sword in the high position as he came straight down at a guy armed with a double-barreled shotgun who'd grabbed onto a horse to get back on his feet—but for some reason, both his arms and his blade took up different positions. And that slowed him down.

The double-barreled shotgun belched fire.

"Hyaaaah!"

D heard his own voice, the shout sounding a million miles away. He was aware of the exquisite balance of tension in the muscles of his legs and abdomen, his back and chest. They were supporting his two arms and his sword.

As the blade glided forward, the thrust was perfect. The tip of the blade formed a right angle to the door as it slid in as smoothly as if he were stabbing a mirage. All of the energy in this world was channeled through D's body and into the blade in a split second.

The gate grew indistinct, losing its shape and allowing the scene beyond it to come into view. A vast wilderness stretching into the twilight. D realized that this was simultaneously the world that he presently occupied and the real world. Fact and fiction were in complete agreement.

D turned and looked.

In the moonlight, the fake D was crouched down, applying a white cloth to Mia's face. It was a radiation-removing stupe—something he'd found in the skeletons' saddle bags. It went without saying who all the corpses lying around him belonged to. There were no survivors. They had made an enemy of the young man who called himself D.

"Was she hurt?" D asked. His voice was like iron, utterly devoid of warmth. There stood the Hunter, as always beautiful and cold as ice.

"Got tagged with a little radiation. Her life's not in any danger, but her face got trashed. There's nothing that can be done for her out here. The Capital's the only place they could fix this."

"I believe I told you not to come with us," D asserted icily.

Mia hadn't passed out. She was intently gazing at D—not that she was blaming him for the pain she'd suffered. The look in her eyes was one of joy at D being safe. And this was how he rewarded her?

Not surprisingly, the fake D took exception to that, saying, "Hey, isn't that a little cold?"

"It's fine. Because he's right," Mia said, stopping him. Brave as her expression was, it was unavoidable that some hint of sadness hadn't left it.

"But I'm glad you made it back safely," she said, looking up.

D was in the back seat of the wagon.

"Who are these characters?" D asked, climbing down from the vehicle.

The fake D told him they were highwaymen and explained the situation.

"When did you get here?" D inquired as he looked far out across the desolate plain. From where they stood, a lone road stretched in a straight line through the middle of a boulder-strewn expanse.

"But this—"

"It's known as the Highway of the Dead," the Hunter's left hand said. "Now I remember. Seems my memory was wiped out, too. Till we found this place, that is."

"Who erased it?"

"Who, indeed."

"But if there's a road to the far north, we would've gotten there sooner or later. Why'd that woman Menda take such a roundabout way to explain it? All that business with the gate . . ."

"Hey, hold on there. This wasn't here from the start," the fake D remarked with amazement after exchanging looks with Mia. "In the beginning, there was a chain of mountains. It's called the North Lake Mountain Range, and it's on maps and everything. The highest peak is Mount North Lake at fifteen thousand feet above sea level. There were three more mountains over twelve thousand feet, and another seven in the ten-thousand-foot range. And all of it, just like that—well, I'd say it couldn't have taken two seconds for them to be laid flat."

"Laid flat?"

"That's right," Mia said, finally sitting up. One hand pressed the stupe against her left cheek. Her shirt and slacks were also charred on her left side, but fortunately the flesh beneath was unharmed. "It was just like a dream. That huge mountain range shook just like it was an illusion, its lines blurred, and in an instant it turned flat. Then after that, this plain formed."

What the power of Mother Nature had raised tens of millions of years earlier had now become this smooth expanse of earth and stones. Where had the other billions, nay, trillions of tons of rock and soil gone? Had the gate D stabbed into been the North Lake Mountain Range? The mystery had been transformed into a desolate plain slumbering in the light of the moon.

"The Highway of the Dead, eh?" D muttered.

"That's right," the fake D said.

The trio stood there, feeling the weight of the moonlight. D didn't ask why it'd been given that name—he knew his left hand wouldn't answer. And there were other matters to attend to.

"Let's go."

He began to walk toward his cyborg horse. That was all he could do. There could be no retreat for this young man, and the road that called him led to slaughter and strife.

The fake D also settled into the saddle, and Mia returned to the wagon. Two horses and a wagon advanced in the moonlight.

"By the way," the fake D said to the Hunter as he rode alongside

him. Not waiting for D to reply, he continued, "How did you get the gate open?"

"I stabbed it," D replied succinctly.

It was a few seconds before the fake D accepted this, saying, "I see. I guess that figures." For he hadn't forgotten how every last attack he'd launched against the skeletons had turned into a thrust.

The Highway of the Dead—they didn't know the reason it carried this disturbing appellation, but the plain and road that an entire mountain range had been used to conceal stretched out in the moonlight with no end in sight, just one craggy rock after another in a scene that would've transformed even pioneers aglow with hope and dreams of exploration into prisoners of madness and despair.

A great emptiness assailed Mia. If she'd been out in the sunlight, things might've been a little better. However, as dhampirs, the two men chose to travel by night. That couldn't be helped, and she realized she was only getting in the way, but there was no way for her to fight the mental devastation as they continued down the desolate road. Anyone who lived on the Frontier had surely had a similar experience. A road thick with monsters by night, a highway strewn with bones. Three days and three nights it had continued, over an interminable distance. And yet, she didn't understand why these feelings of fear and helplessness were creeping into her.

Without even realizing it, Mia had let go of the reins. No longer driven to hurry, the horse slowed to a stop, and the vehicle's speed dropped at the same rate until it soon halted.

The two Ds, who were riding ahead, quickly raced back to her. It was the fake D that asked her, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Somehow, this seems so—futile. After a little rest, I'm sure I'll be better."

"Been rough for you, has it?" the fake D said, scratching at one cheek.

"I'm sure that once the sun is up—" she started to say.

"If we waited for that, then we'd be having it rough."

"I'm sorry."

"Are you tired, or have you lost the urge to go?"

This frosty query came from the true D.

"Well—" Mia began, hemming and hawing. She couldn't give him an honest answer.

"Do you want to stay here like this? Do you simply not care what happens anymore?" D asked her, his words piercing her breast.

Unable to lie to him, Mia conceded, saying, "Yeah."

"I see," the fake D said, looking at D. "So, is this why it's called the Highway of the Dead? Why don't you ask your left hand?"

"Right you are," a hoarse voice replied, acknowledging the truth of his statement in a dejected tone. "Try going a little further. You'll soon see. Actually, you can do that even from here."

The trio surveyed their surroundings. A weird miasma blew against the napes of their necks like some unpleasantly warm wind.

"Look at that, would you," the fake D said, tossing his jaw to the east—the right-hand side of the highway.

Beyond the rocks and dirt stood human forms—an emaciated figure clad in rags, with another beside it, and still another beside that, and behind it . . .

"They're the folks who've followed this road," said the hoarse voice. "Headed toward Muma. As far as I know, this has gone on for more than five thousand years, and the road has been taken by more than twenty million people."

"How many people have reached it?"

"To the best of my knowledge—zero."

"Why would they do this? Is this Muma such a great place?"

"I don't know. But they didn't come here of their own free will."

"How's that?" said the fake.

"They were summoned. By the one known as 'the great one.' "

"All twenty million of them?"

"Seems he was doing some sort of experiment in Muma. And for it, he needed strong human beings—men and women not just physically but also mentally tougher than millions of others. This highway is, so to speak, a test course to evaluate the humans he selects."

Humans lacking drive—those without sufficient strength of mind—would lose everything out here, unable to advance or turn back until they shriveled into corpses by the roadside.

"They just keep staring at us. It's spooky," the fake D said in a tone that didn't sound spooked at all.

"They can't do anything," the hoarse voice replied. "If they could, they'd go on or turn back."

"Good point. But what'll we do about baby here?"

"Take her with you," D told the fake.

"Yeah, I suppose that's the only thing we can do. Okay, come here," the fake D said, slapping the back of his saddle.

Mia sluggishly leaned over and prepared to join him.

"Don't do that!" the left hand shouted, stopping them.

"What's the problem?"

"Here's the scary part about the Highway of the Dead. The strong ones carry those who are worn out. They bring them along. But they quickly see the grave error in their ways. In other words, they find out that apathy is contagious."

"Sorry," the fake D said, pulling back. Mia was left in the wagon. "If that's the case, baby here—"

"She'll have to be left behind. No matter what, sooner or later the highway's atmosphere's gonna gnaw its way into you, but at least this will buy you some added time. Especially since you two are special."

"Yeah, but—"

"After a little while has passed, she won't even want to be bothered with lamenting how she's been left behind. That's what true apathy is like. So relax."

"Is that right? In that case, I feel better about it," the fake D said with a nod. "Sorry about this, baby. Looks like this is as far as you go."



Mia nodded. She fully understood the import of the three-sided conversation and knew what she had to do. "It's all right. Please, go on . . . I'll stay here."

"When you say that, it only makes this harder. But I guess there's nothing we can do. So long," the fake D told her, wheeling his horse around.

Perhaps Mia had lost the will to watch him go, because she kept looking down, but a single tear fell from her eye and rolled down her cheek. A burned, twisted cheek.

But a black-gloved hand was extended even before Mia had shed that tear.

"Wha—" Mia said, looking up in a daze at D on his steed.

"You did great making it this far," D said in a cold, gentle voice to the girl with the burned face. "You can go the rest of the way, can't you?"

"Yeah," Mia replied, taking a firm hold of the well-formed fingers he offered.

II

The wind snarled across the wilderness. With her face pressed against D's back, Mia thought dazedly, I wonder where it blows from?

It wasn't Mia's hands that had bound her to D. At first she'd wrapped her arms around him, but that strength had left her, and now a thin rope tethered her to him. In all honesty, it was even too bothersome to think.

How's it going with D? she wondered. They said my apathy is contagious. Even if they'd done nothing they would've been affected, but if he catches it from me then dhampir or not, he's bound to feel the effects. How far have I gone swaying on this horse's back? Everything seems so melancholy now. I don't care if I die like this.

She was ready to throw in the towel, but then the last bit of will in her snapped back, A fortuneteller works for everyone's sake. You haven't completed your mission yet.

That was the code of the fortuneteller, which her mother had drilled into her since before she could remember.

D didn't say a word to her.

How many times had she lost consciousness, and how many times had she come around once more?

"What's that?"

The fake D's words shined a narrow beam of light into her dimming consciousness.

"Eh?" she grunted, putting her hands around D's waist and sticking her head out to one side. She wasn't even cognizant of how she managed to move her body. Her eyelids opened. The image her optic nerves conveyed to her brain was of a prickly form coming into view out in the moonlight. A building without a single soft line dominated the horizon.

"See it?" asked D.

"Uh, yeah," Mia replied, but at the same time she was speaking, she was surprised by D's question. Had the young man been keeping a silent watch over her condition?

"Oh, dear," she said. Tears had welled in her eyes.

As she madly wiped them away, D asked her, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing at all. What's that?"

"By the look of it, it's a factory."

"It's got to be Muma, right?"

D fell silent. Mia didn't know either.

"Well, I sure hope it's Muma," the fake D said by their side.

"Who cares what you think," Mia said, turning away indignantly. She harbored a bit of resentment toward him for refusing to take her on his horse.

Hoarse laughter rose from D's left hand.

"Looks like even pretty boys can fall out of favor. That's what you get when you make the mistake of treating a woman unkindly."

"Put a cork in it!"

"But you know, even though you and D are the very same person, you differ in some essential part. I wonder why there's

this difference? Hmm. Maybe we should ask whoever's in that factory?"

The road ran straight to the black building. It was three hours later that the trio passed through its massive and imposing entrance, which was more like a castle's gatehouse. The gates were off their hinges, and the impression of devastation they'd garnered from afar continued into the courtyard and to all the buildings and towers beyond.

"If this is Muma, then the sway reactor should be here," D said, looking around.

"Hold your horses. First we've gotta find the medical center. Baby here needs to have her cheek seen to, you know."

"You take her," D said curtly.

"Okay, I've got you. I'll do that," the fake D replied with a grin.

"No!" Mia cried raptly. "Instead of worrying about me, I want both of you to go look for the reactor."

The second they'd entered the factory's premises, her apathy had vanished without a trace.

"It's okay," the fake replied. "I'm not particularly interested in the reactor anyway. I just thought if I came here, I'd find out why I was born. I suppose we could poke around a bit, though."

"You think this is any time to be taking it easy?" the left hand snapped at him. "From what I've seen, this place isn't Muma."

"What?" the fake D exclaimed, and not only he and Mia, but D as well looked at the Hunter's left hand.

"You seem pretty full of yourself for a freaking hand. Show me your proof this isn't Muma," said the fake D.

"My proof is the Highway of the Dead. Look at it. As you can see, it runs straight in through the front gate and cuts right through the middle of this spread. It's paved and everything. In other words, this is a different factory that was built in the middle of the highway. Most likely the highway keeps going like that and goes out through a back gate. The longer we stay in this pointless place, the more time we'll be wasting. Once the girl's been patched up, the best idea would be to move out as soon as possible."

"Hmm, that's one theory," the fake D said, rolling his eyes. "But, you see, this isn't just some factory. The layout's the size of a major city. It's more remarkable than that underground facility. If this isn't Muma, what the hell is it?"

"I don't know. But from the look of the devastation, it certainly must've fallen out of use a long, long time ago—huh?"

The fake D had wheeled his horse around and stuck one arm out. Mia had been just about to fall from behind D, but he'd caught her firmly by the shoulder.

"I'll go try to find the medical center. You can play tourist in the ruins for all I care."

Once the fake D had departed indignantly with Mia, the left hand said to the Hunter, "Is he gonna be okay? He seemed pretty hot under the collar."

"He's me. What do you think?"

It was practically a miracle when this young man asked anyone that question.

"At least where that girl is concerned, he'll probably do whatever he has to do. Even if it puts him in harm's way. Like you, his own death means nothing to him. But if she becomes an obstacle to his aims, that's another story."

He had been willing to abandon Mia back on the highway.

"You remember what I said—that you and he are essentially the same being?"

D nodded faintly.

"Well, I've kinda lost my faith in that statement. He and you are—hell, I don't know."

D was already walking toward a building that towered especially high behind a front yard as if he didn't care at all about his own origin, which was probably true. The exquisite young man's callous eyes weren't focused on the past or the future.

In the dust-covered lobby of the ground floor there was a computer-generated map of the facility that was still operational. Apparently energy concealed somewhere kept this spot out in the

middle of the desolate wastes alive. That power was three thousand stories underground in the central research center, in an area that had no name. Surely that had to be the core of this facility.

D headed to it.

The fake D also found the medical center right away. He'd assumed that any facility this vast was bound to have humans working at it. The Nobility had no fundamental need for medical aid, and based on the heartless cruelty of their rule over the human race, it would be expected they wouldn't provide any kind of health care whatsoever, but on this point the pride of the Nobility might've come into play. Without exception, the medical institutions that greeted their human manual laborers were furnished with equipment incorporating the latest treatments and technology.

Having discovered a computer-generated map in another building, the fake D had brought Mia up to a hospital five hundred stories above the ground. Though it consisted of but a single floor, it was a hundred times better stocked than any of the great hospitals in the Capital. But for all that, it was incredible the way the equipment suggested it could hold only about a hundred patients—which had probably been the number of human laborers.

"With a place like this, you could bring the dead back to life," the fake D muttered with a wry smile.

The superscientific medical gear was indeed impressive. The problem was, there wasn't any power to operate the machinery. Since the elevator had worked, the place wasn't completely without power, and perhaps the relay system had malfunctioned, but even the fake D couldn't find and repair the problem. He thought about getting her medicine, but all the drugs were dispensed by a computer that wasn't operating. One of the pitfalls of a completely automated system.

"What a joke," he said. "I'll go find you some medicine, so wait here, okay?"

The fake D gained entry to the pharmaceutical storage vault. Since the access computer was dead, he pried the door open with brute force, somehow managed to find drugs for treating radiation, and then returned. Three hours had passed.

"What's all this?" he said.

There was no sign of Mia.

Maybe D came for her, he thought.

"It'd be just like him to be hiding somewhere, getting his kicks making a fool out of me. Come to think of it, my presence—isn't here!" he cried, twisting his upper body around.

As he struck right from the draw, streaks of blue wrapped around the blade of his sword only to be reduced to cut hairs that spread across the floor.

"Son of a bitch—is that you, Yuma?"

The man who stood in front of the door didn't seem to react to what the fake D said. But that build, those features, and the hair that'd just been cut down—he was definitely Yuma.

No—on further examination, the fake D corrected himself. This man was too short and seemed too heavy to be Yuma. His movements were slower, too.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked the man he now considered a completely different person.

Running low to the ground as another deadly wave of hair blew at him, the fake D came up on one side of Yuma and slammed the back of his blade against the nape of the man's neck. As he fell, he certainly had Yuma's face. However, there were subtle differences.

Bringing him around, the fake looked into dazed eyes as they opened and asked, "Where the hell did you take the girl?"

"Want to know?" sneered the fake Yuma—or rather, Yuma #2. He clearly had to be the culprit.

Pressing the tip of his blade right up against the base of the man's throat to wipe the smile off his face, the fake D asked him, "You're some sort of reject Yuma, aren't you?"

Yuma #2 turned away in a snit. Humiliation and anger darkened his face.

"If you're hanging around this spread, could it be you were born here?"

Suddenly, the fake D forgot he was the one in a position to make threats and froze. A certain thought had left him astonished.

"Hey!" he said, grabbing Yuma #2 by the chin and shaking him. "Don't tell me this whole layout was to make you guys . . ."

"Precisely," he heard a voice say behind him—or rather, from all sides. Yuma's voice. "He was just a decoy to put you at our center. No matter where you go or how fast you move, you won't be able to guard against our attacks."

"I'll be damned," the fake D said, pulling his blade away from the throat of Yuma #2.

A thin smirk grew on #2's face as he got back up, and the man suddenly pursed his lips. But he ended up swallowing the spit he had been about to launch at his foe. For the fake D had brought his blade up, and he cut the man open from the top of his head to his breastbone.

With murderous intent and a bloody wind howling at him, the fake D raised one cheek with a daunting grin and said, "Don't fuck with me, reject!"

III

"As we might've expected, the man named D is quite skilled."

There was one voice, but it came from more than a score of people in unison. For a second, the fake thought it might've been some kind of ventriloquism, but he could sense a great number of people there.

"So, is that what you guys are, a chorus?"

"Not exactly, but not far from the mark either," they laughed as one. "We've all been implanted with the same memories and the same mission, in order that we might dispose of those who learn

of Muma's existence. Ultimately, only one of us was chosen, but it looks as if those of us who were discarded have also been given a purpose in life."

"Yeah, if you call dying a purpose," the fake D said.

A second later his whole body was tinged with the color of twilight. Indigo hair had flown at him from all directions and wrapped around him. At the same time, several of the Yumas that surrounded him had fallen backward silently. Wooden needles jutted from their chests.

The fake D became a black cyclone, flying through a rent in the descending net formed by the hair of his attackers. Though he moved with such speed that they didn't even have time to launch another attack, the fake hadn't gone fifteen feet before he thudded loudly to the floor. Bright blood went flying. The thousands or tens of thousands of hairs that'd wrapped all around the fake D's body had pressed deep into his skin, splitting his flesh.

"Though you might call us rejects, we have power enough to slay you. There are twenty-five of us here. More than a sufficient number, we'd say."

Their voices in perfect harmony, they cried, "Kill him!"

A different hue danced out into the gloom. Day was about to break. The color was white—the hue of rough wooden stakes. Twenty-five hands gripped them, raising them high.

"We shall accomplish one of our missions!" they cried, all of them like blue moths swarming a black beetle as they surrounded the fake D. Now a stab from any one of them would prove a fatal blow.

"Meet your destruction, D. The Sacred Ancestor's own—"

The chorus lost its harmony there. The truncated sentence became a pained groan, and all of them turned their gaze in one direction. Their eyes filled with turbulence and rapture.

"D," someone whispered.

"Back off," D said.

Like flowing blue water, the figures moved around this new D. They were trying to surround him. A silvery flash cut down a

storm of hair, the blue wind falling limply to cover the floor until D alone stood there dejectedly. Every last one of the twenty-five Yumas was laid out around him.

D walked over to the fake D and sliced off the hair sinking into the fake's flesh with a single light stroke from his right hand. He didn't even leave a mark on the other man's skin.

Suddenly, a bloody fog erupted. And while it did, the fake D stood there as impassive as a temple guardian. The wounds left by the hair closed instantly. Not only his body, but also his wardrobe returned to its original state, which suggested that it made use of different materials than the real D's clothing.

"What you just did was totally unnecessary, you know," the fake griped as he rotated one shoulder. "Well, I'm sure you think you saved me, so I'll thank you anyway. This facility—"

"Was for making Yuma."

Pulling a sullen face, the fake D spat, "What, you already knew that?"

"We traveled down into the heart of the facility," D said in a hoarse voice.

"In that case, how about this piece of information: Mia is missing."

"What?" said the hoarse voice.

D himself didn't even arch an eyebrow.

"We'll put some life into one. Make 'im talk," the hoarse voice suggested, chortling until it was choked off in a cry of pain.

Left hand still clenched in a tight fist, D went over to one of the corpses piled around him, grabbed it by the collar, and hoisted it off the ground. Though the two Ds quickly breathed life back into him, the body said he knew nothing where Mia was concerned and turned away indignantly. Even after a merciless slash from the fake D lopped off both his ears, his reply remained the same. The two Ds decided he was telling the truth.

"If it wasn't these clowns, then who took her?" the fake D said with a faraway look in his eyes. "And where?"

Death and silence held dominion over the room.

"There's something funny on the floor," the hoarse voice said.

D turned toward it first, with the fake D following suit.

"It's the girl's location," the fake D said, snapping his fingers.

"It's a divining stick," the hoarse voice declared.

Engraved with colorful patterns, the long, thin object was made of metal and measured about eight inches. It was no thicker than a conductor's baton. D was just about to pick it up when he halted for a moment.

"What is it?" the fake D asked, for even he seemed to sense something.

Without really looking at the stick he held, D threw it down on the floor again.

Falling with a clang, the stick didn't roll the way it should've, but rather swept around in a clean arc and stopped itself again. It pointed in the very same direction as before it'd been picked up.

Two sets of eyes were focused on the end of the stick.

"I suppose it's telling us she's that way, eh? To be sure and go after her. When you picked it up a minute ago, it didn't move, did it?"

"That way's the highway," said the hoarse voice. "Muma is there."

Watery light struck D's face. Day was about to break.

"Let's go."

"Sure."

Shoulder to shoulder, the two figures headed toward the door. When they reached the road, they felt heavy shocks traveling up through the soles of their boots.

"You did something, didn't you?" the fake D said, looking askance at D.

"I unleashed the power of the proton reactor."

"Excuse me?"

D reached up and grasped his saddle, saying, "Only it seems that I slightly miscalculated. It's about ten minutes early."

"You're awfully calm about it," the fake D said as he urged his cyborg horse into a gallop.

Ten minutes later, the pair was racing down the highway when they were struck from behind by a terrific shock wave that bowled them over, mounts and all.

Mia was in the midst of chaos, but she hadn't noticed that this was the same chaos D had been in and which she herself had slipped into once before. As she walked through the mysteriously pervasive clouds, she sensed someone or something incredibly huge up ahead. An eerie feeling knifed through her. It was fear—the kind of terror so thick and intense that one misstep might mean she'd never recover from it. However, oddly enough, she wasn't afraid of that happening, and this frame of mind saved Mia. It was unimaginably deep and cold and, strangest of all, warm. Due to this, Mia didn't halt.

There's quite a resemblance, she thought. Although the scale differed so greatly, in some basic respects they were like two peas in a pod. This one and D.

You're right, echoed a voice from somewhere, but Mia was neither surprised nor frightened. To the contrary, she let a question slip right out.

You're a close relative of D's, aren't you?

The power of the imagination is a thing to be feared, the voice replied, seeming to laugh. However, that's one of the most beautiful things about humans. Because of that power, the human race hasn't died out, and you have come here.

Where exactly is "here"?

Wherever you'd like it to be. That is actually what this is.

Sounds just like one of those Zen riddles.

Mia's grumbling brought a chuckle from the other party.

It's been a long time since I've heard anyone mention those. I should've expected as much from the daughter of Noa Simon.

You know about my mother?

Yes, I do. And about the mole on your right buttock.

"Stop that!" Mia said aloud, speaking in spite of herself. And with that, she finally realized that up until now she'd merely been thinking the words.

What are you going to do with me?

Even I don't know that, said the voice in her head. Can you understand what it's like to wonder if the things you want to do are really what you want to do?

Now that really is Zen, Mia thought. If you don't know, then let me go back.

I can't do that. It would seem you don't yet grasp what it is you've done.

What I've done?

Anxiety spread through her like a black stain. Her heart began to pound madly. She'd have to use a spell to bring it back under control.

You came into this place for just an instant and brought him back out.

When you say "him," you mean D?

Who else?

The pressure of the air surrounding her increased sharply, causing Mia to flinch. At the very least, it could be said for certain that there was an intense mental link between D and the source of this voice. The possibilities boggled the mind.

If I pulled D back, what's the problem? she asked after gathering her courage.

The being up ahead had begun to bombard her with fierce and unearthly air. She thought she was going to black out—however, it wasn't an awful feeling.

Such a dignified spirit, Mia declared, surprised in the strangest way. It looked like she wasn't going to be tortured to death.

It may sound trite, but will you aid me?

Huh?

He came to Muma. A place he shouldn't have gone; nay, a place he had to go. Sooner or later, he'll probably learn a great many things. However, that is a mistake.

"A mistake?" she said, once more speaking by accident. She got the feeling that one phrase from this being was packed with tremendous import. It was almost as if a god were perfectly content to give someone on earth the order, "Die."

His arrival in Muma was supposed to come in the far-distant future. But due to unavoidable circumstances, it has happened much earlier. Though this isn't the problem, a small error has set off a chain reaction, spreading out to such an extent that now it can no longer be undone.

A certain thought popped quietly into Mia's head. Like a small, cold speck of light, it instantly ignored Mia's self-restraint, armed as it was with an overwhelming conviction.

Was this "error" the other D?

By the time she thought, Oh, dear, her question had been finished.

Precisely.

Mia closed her eyes. She didn't really know if she wanted to hear that answer. She'd been right; it had been an error. There was no way there were supposed to be two men that beautiful. It flew in the face of the natural order of the world.

Just then, the voice said, Taking one's own hole-riddled opinion as the truth based on the scantest of information is a human characteristic, but that doesn't serve a fortuneteller.

Opinion?

Which do you think is the real one?

It was like someone had landed a punch to the side of Mia's head. The drunken sensation of floating in midair even made her feel dizzy. The one she'd met first was the real one, the one that she liked.

The two aren't the same?

Yes. The voice was entirely correct.

Then . . . Then it's . . .

There were indications coming from the being that he had nodded.

Which is the real one? Or let me put it to you this way: What exactly is the real one?

It was the last question that made Mia clutch at her heart.

In Mama

CHAPTER 6

I

The two of them raced down the highway, their horses side by side. They weren't cantering. The cyborg horses galloped with all their might, their manes streaming in the wind as they gouged a path through the ash gray world.

It was overcast. Leaden clouds bunched overhead, their weight making the wind divert around them like pools of stagnant water as they crushed down on the weedy ground. Already it was past noon, and nothing could be seen at the end of the highway.

"So, just how far am I going?" the fake D called over to his other self.

There was no reply.

Clucking his tongue, the fake D glared at the Hunter out of the corner of his eye, but while he was doing so, he began to go into a daze and had to hurriedly face forward again. D's handsome features had captivated him—even though it was his own face. He could recall seeing it in the mirror hundreds of times before. And each time it had held him spellbound. Undoubtedly that D lacked the narcissism the fake D had in abundance.

"What the hell?" he spat, perhaps fearing the strange movements of his own heart, or maybe he was simply embarrassed.

They rode in silence for another ten minutes. Without warning, D's steed tumbled forward. Like a shot from a gun, D started to

pitch headlong—but by planting both feet firmly in the stirrups and using his knees to grip the barrel of the horse, he was able to lean back and maintain his balance. Dismounting, D examined his steed's front leg and determined that it was hopeless. There was a crack in its lightweight alloy framework. Even if it were welded, the animal couldn't possibly gallop along as it had until now.

"What'll you do?" the fake D called down to him from his own mount, having seen the situation and gotten a faint inkling of the troubled future.

"You'll have to let me ride behind you. Or the other way around, if you prefer."

"I thought you'd say that, but no way. I'll ride ahead. For starters, we haven't even seen a trace of Muma yet."

"You think so?" D asked.

"Excuse me? Can you see it?"

"I don't know."

"See! What did I tell you? You're always saying stuff like that. Poseur!"

"Then leave me here."

The fake D looked down from the saddle, gritting his teeth. "I can't do that. Common sense says you're not supposed to see yourself, because you see your own bad points a hundred times clearer in someone else. I hate this. This must be why they always say people who see their doppelgänger meet an earlier death. They aren't killed by their other self; they kill themselves. But when I look at you, it doesn't really bother me or anything. After a little while I get infatuated, actually. I wonder what the story is with that? Well, there's no way around it, I guess. Climb aboard."

D shook his head from side to side. "Go on ahead."

"What?"

"I changed my mind. I'll catch up to you later. Go on."

"Hey! Just what do you—" the fake was saying when a tinge of surprise skimmed across his countenance. "Aha! So, someone's following us, eh? Who is it?"

Though he focused his keen gaze back in the direction from which they'd come, he seemed to reconsider this almost immediately, tugging on the reins and driving his steed forward.

"See you! I think I'll leave the rest to you after all," he called out, his mount taking five or six strides before he looked back, but D had already turned the other way.

Seeing that broad and solitary back, the fake D had a look in his eyes for a second that might best be described as sorrowful, but then he delivered a strong kick to his horse's flank.

Once the echoes of iron-shod hooves had vanished behind D, his left hand said, "He went? When he goes and does something like that, he's just like you. Sometimes I can't tell which of you is which. D, it might not be such a good idea bringing him to Muma."

"It's too late," he replied coldly, but was that in answer to his left hand or a remark relating to whoever was closing on him?

"How's your condition?" the left hand asked.

D didn't answer, so it continued, "White blood cells and red blood cells both show marked decreases. Your bone marrow's been ravaged. Typical radiation poisoning."

Earlier, he'd undoubtedly been exposed while destroying the proton reactor in the Yuma factory. Of course, D was nearly immortal. His Noble blood wouldn't allow him to die from such a thing. But short lived though the effects might be, they came right when he might need to stand against a foe closing on him.

"Well, hurry up and feed me some dirt. Then get me some water. You should still have some in your canteen. Your horse's piss would work, too. Gyaah!"

Closing his fist tightly, D squinted his eyes at the highway, which ran on and on and dwindled down to a thread. Though physically attractive beyond words, he was shrouded by a grimness as unchanging as a diamond. However, if anyone but D had sensed the nature of what was closing on him, they would've

undoubtedly run for all they were worth in an attempt to get as far away as they could.

Down at the far end of that lone ribbon of road, wasn't it sort of cloudy? Better yet, a sound could be made out clearly now. A rumbling of the earth. Beneath the gray sky, those advancing toward D weren't just a hundred or two strong. There were certainly more, on the order of several thousand of them. And they came, pounding across the ground. They were about five hundred yards distant.

Twenty seconds later, the cloud of dust engulfed D.

"What in the world?" the left hand asked.

"The living dead," D replied. It was a question he couldn't help but answer.

Just as they were about to run into him, he leapt to the side of the road, and before him passed countless men and women dressed in rags, shaking the earth as they marched on in silence. The faces of all were pale, lacking vitality. The eyes were those of dead fish. And yet, they were not dead. Their feeble gait was that of the living. More importantly, they were breathing. Their chests rose and fell. And on the nape of each, over the carotid artery, there were two black spots—fang marks.

"Where have they all come from? They're his victims," the left hand said, and even its voice had a gloomy ring to it.

Ah, a mob of living dead traveling down the Highway of the Dead. At one time, victims summoned for some sort of experiment had used this road. Tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of living dead had traveled this way toward Muma. After that, for reasons unknown, the highway had become a mountain range. Surely this had been an unforeseen turn of events for those who'd been summoned. Victims of the Nobility, they were driven out of towns and villages, wandering and waiting for thousands of years for the road to their destination to reopen. As proof of that, the rags they wore all had to be clothes from decades or centuries earlier.

"See his power?" the hoarse voice said. "All their faces are glowing with joy! No Noble, no matter how powerful, can leave an expression like that on the faces of people he's fed on."

But how did the people's faces look to D as they surged forward like pilgrims bound for some holy land?

Victims of the Nobility were captives of a kind of sensual rapture, and it was due to that that they waited for the vampire's second or third visit. It was common knowledge that under close scrutiny, they would kill the very family members who were trying to protect them just to get outside. However, on the faces of those who passed before D in silence was a kind of religious rapture far beyond the sensual level—an expression of supreme bliss that could even be called sublime. Such was his power.

"He must be in Muma," the left hand said. "Can you slay him?"

D didn't answer.

The left hand heaved a deep sigh. "That being said, I don't actually know. What I do know for sure is that if we follow them—"

D was already walking down the road. He had no horse. Among the sprinting living dead, some had been on horses, but they hadn't even glanced at D.

Without warning, a wagon raced toward him from the sullenly advancing mob. It halted in front of D, and muddied but well-shaped eyes stared down at him from the driver's seat.

"You're—" muttered a fair-skinned girl who was clad in rags like the rest of them. Even with the face of a corpse, she retained enough beauty to suggest she must've been stunning before.

"You're . . ." she muttered once more, shaking her head and adding sadly, "No, I'm mistaken . . . But why . . . Why do you look exactly like he does?"

"Who is he?" D inquired.

"He is . . . you." The girl blinked her eyes. "No . . . that's not right. He . . . is supposed to be up ahead . . . not out here . . ."

"That's right. You have to go there, too."

"Yes . . . I . . . must go . . ."

"And I'd like you to give me a lift," D suggested.

"I can't . . . You aren't like us . . . You weren't meant to travel this road . . ." she said, trying to get her team to turn.

Just then, D seemed to say, "Think this over, missy."

The words hadn't come from the mouth of the gorgeous young man, but from his left hand, although the girl didn't know that.

"As you can see, he and I are close," that voice continued. "Out of these tens of thousands of people, how many do you think he's gonna choose?"

"Well . . . I couldn't . . . say . . ."

"Look. The chances of you being selected are less than one in ten thousand. When the time comes, this guy—I mean, I—could put in a good word for you, right?"

"You . . . could help me . . . stand by his side?" the girl said, and from the way vigor seemed to return to the death mask that was her face, she looked to be quite happy.

"You bet your—aaaargh!"

D had made a fist again, but this time it wasn't as tight. You could tell because the scream managed to escape.

"In that case . . . sure. You do promise, don't you? That I'll really be able to be by his side . . . That you'll speak up for me . . ."

D unclenched his left hand.

"Uh . . . sure. You've got yourself a deal," said a barely passable imitation of D's voice.

"What?"

"I mean, I promise."

"In that case . . ." The girl gave a toss of her chin to the wagon bed behind her.

A second later, D was in the vehicle. On seeing his swiftness and the way he landed without making a sound, the girl said in an enraptured tone, "He . . . was that way, too . . . Walking as quick as the night wind . . . and as soundless as the light of the moon . . ."

"Let's go," D said.

The girl swung the reins, and the horses quickly dashed forward down the Highway of the Dead, now bustling with living-dead traffic.

II

"What kind of person was he?" D asked after they'd ridden for about an hour.

"You mean . . . him?" said the girl, who'd introduced herself as Savena, staring at D with glassy eyes.

"Yes."

Though a little gasp of surprise rose from his left hand, D didn't seem to pay any attention to it.

The girl thought for a moment. It was unclear what kind of memories might be packed in the brains of the dead, but her cloudy eyes gradually began to take on a mysterious light.

"He was . . . big. Really quite big . . . The first time I met him . . . I couldn't say anything . . . I just looked at him . . . And he looked at me . . . so intently . . . with crimson eyes like burning stones . . . Oh, such passion . . . Nothing in the world can take its place . . ."

D noticed that the girl's own eyes glowed with a fiery passion. The passions of the living dead should've been nothing save the drinking of human blood and the kiss of the Nobility, but what filled the girl's eyes was inconceivable: tenderness.

"He's the one who drank your blood—don't you hate him for forcing you into your present situation?" said a voice just like D's, only a little hoarse.

The girl knit her brow. It took some time for her to comprehend the meaning of the question.

"Hate? What's that? I have the feeling I felt that . . . long, long ago . . ."

"This is a surprise! Bitten or not, anyone with this much of their human consciousness left should still have some resentment toward the one who did it, but there doesn't seem to be any at all.

That's him in a nutshell. Ask no more, D. Want to know what kind of man he is? Look. The eyes of all the tens of thousands of people traveling the highway hold the same loving glow as the girl's. Could any other Noble earn the same?"

D didn't reply. His cool gaze was trained straight ahead. This was the way he'd lived up till now, and this was the way he'd live from here on out. If the glow in the eyes of the living dead was indeed due to their mockery of life, it was truly ironic that he—a dhampir—was the one whose eyes held the emotions of a living person.

Suddenly, the left hand groaned.

Savena had turned to face D. How powerful were the waves from his unearthly aura, and how swift! The proof of this was that the dead around them were turning one after another to look at him.

"Say," someone called out before long. "Isn't that him?"

"Yes," someone else replied. "Yes, it's him. Hey, everyone! He is here!"

That cry became a wave spreading out in all directions.

Savena's wagon halted. The throng to the fore and the rear, to the left and the right had brought it to a sudden stop.

"It's him."

"It's him."

"It's him."

They called out repeatedly, but mixed with those were other cries.

"Let me be by your side."

"Me!"

"Pick me!"

"I am the one for you!"

A chorus of voices rose in the weirdest pleas imaginable. And with both arms extended beseechingly, the speakers began to walk toward D. A march of those who were neither living nor dead. Pale, wraithlike faces, emaciated limbs, and eyes that held

death itself—could a more disturbing mob of people exist in all the world? However, their eyes were glazed with rapture at their love for D.

What would they do to D? Would they merely appeal to him, or would their surpassing love drive them to grab him in both arms, hug him tight, and suffocate him? Or would fingers with tenacious strength peel the skin from him, gouge his eyes out, and tear the flesh from his bones? Whatever the case, it didn't seem D would have any means to prevent it.

Beneath the ashen sky, an unimaginable scene was about to unfold—and at just that moment, a figure rose majestically to his feet. It was D. A sudden gust of wind spread his inky black coat, and the features that topped his tall and powerful form were so exquisite, so alluring, and so cold that the dead walking toward him froze in amazement.

"Oh!" somebody moaned.

That was it. None of the others said a word. They'd been blasted in the face by too much of that incredible aura.

D slashed his right hand through the empty air. "Back," he said. Just a single word.

As for the effect that it had—they did precisely as he said. Donning expressions of utter terror, hundreds of advancing dead winced and backed away.

"As I thought," the left hand groaned. Its tone was a mixture of pity, surprise, and heartfelt emotion. "They really are his victims—"

"You have the wrong man," D declared resolutely.

Was it the overwhelming dignity unsuited to one so young that made the living dead back away? No, it was undoubtedly because they'd been struck by his beauty. The young man in black standing so tall beneath the ashen sky was such a vision, he easily gave that impression.

After a period of silence, a voice echoed down the road, saying, "That's right."

The comment had come from Savena, who still gripped the reins.

"Look at him. There's a strong resemblance, but this man isn't him. Our beloved, the great one, was bigger, blacker, stronger."

A number of impotent shouts of agreement sailed on the wind.

"Yes . . ."

"Of course . . . That's not him."

"It's not him."

"Not him."

As the feeble voices of the dead spread over the group, the murmuring figures turned forward in succession, beginning to walk again without any signal from anyone, then quickly breaking into a run. Even Savena's wagon was caught up in the tide.

"What's this?" the left hand said in a tone that suggested it'd made some rare discovery.

But even before it spoke, D's eyes had turned toward the rough, arid land to the right of the highway. From up ahead, the fake D was galloping toward them. Though at first all that could be made out was a tiny speck, the horse and rider took shape before long, then the latter became the fake D and halted beside the wagon, all of which took less than a minute.

Having his horse walk alongside the wagon, he asked, "Is that what these characters are? The dead that give this highway its name?"

It came as little surprise his intuition was so good. He was the same as D, after all.

Those of the dead who noticed the arrival of this new D looked at him with surprise, but perhaps due to the earlier incident with D, they immediately looked forward again and made no move to approach him.

"What brings you back here?" D asked.

"Nothing special—but there's nothing at all up ahead," the fake D said, wrinkling his brow as he gazed forward. A shadowy fatigue or distress—or perhaps both—flowed across his features. "No

matter how far we rode, the highway just went on forever. I can tell no matter how far you go, there won't be anything. It's all in vain. Nevertheless, I intended to go on, but my horse dropped to the ground and wasn't having any of it. It wasn't exhausted. As you can see now, it's in perfectly good shape. It'd been caught in the nihilistic mood, you see. Now, cyborg horses are more intelligent and sensitive than ordinary horses, but they still don't turn into nihilists. It's just that it didn't want to go any further. It knows there's nothing out there. So I had no choice but to turn back. These characters have been gathering from all over since the highway was made, but there's no point. There's nothing out there. Of course, the dead don't get tired, so that's not a problem."

"They're only half dead, to be precise."

"Zip it," the fake D sneered, quickly pulling out of the column. "I don't care to make a pointless trip. I'm heading off. Good luck."

"Yeah, so long!" a hoarse voice called out in a rather relieved tone.

"Sheesh," the fake D snorted, and he was wheeling his mount around when it happened.

"What's that?" the left hand exclaimed, the very first to say anything.

Up ahead, even beyond the vanguard of the ominous horde—in a spot at least three miles away, there loomed an enormous citadel. Surrounded by ramparts over three hundred feet high and a trio of moats each sixty feet across, the structure that towered at the center bristled with hornlike radar and parabolic antennae, gravity cannons, destroyers, G-time curvature guns, and more, making it look as if the fortress itself were some vicious, loathsome creature.

D gave the fake D a long look. Naturally, the fake was staring forward in a daze. Then, noticing D's gaze, he shouted irritably, "Hey, what's that look supposed to mean? That's a lousy habit I have. That thing wasn't out there, not anywhere—I swear!"

Saying nothing, D gave a toss of his chin at the structure.

"It wasn't there, honestly!"

"It looks like he's right," the left hand said, oddly enough offering the fake his support. "That castle—there's something funny about it. It sure looks real enough, but it also kinda seems like an illusion, too."

"That wouldn't really be all that strange," D said.

Indeed, there was among all the monsters infesting the southern Frontier a creature that could read the thoughts of approaching human beings and give substance to whatever they most desired through the sheer power of its mind. The illusions were perfectly fitting given the creature's nonambulatory and cowardly nature, and the scale of them was simply incredible. For example, a traveler fondly remembering the seaside to the far north would find the vast expanse of icy waters spreading before them exactly as they pictured it, reproduced in just the same grand scale. It wasn't a hallucination. If they touched the ice, it would be cold and stick to the palm of their hand, and if they plunged their hand into the freezing waters, they'd soon be suffering from exposure. The more developed forms of hypnotism could transform an ordinary stick into a branding iron, with blisters forming on any hand that touched it; what this monster created was the real thing. The proof of this was provided by records that described a traveler who was swallowed by a monstrous fish that rose from the icy sea and was never seen again.

However, the eyes that surfaced in the palm of D's left hand turned a gaze that suggested rather philosophical musings toward the stronghold they were rapidly approaching. "But it's not an illusion," it remarked dolefully. "At least, I think it's not, but even I don't know for sure."

The fake D said it hadn't been out there. If they were to believe that, then this castle had just now suddenly appeared to occupy this three-dimensional space. All ten million tons of it. That wasn't to say that the Nobility couldn't produce something from nothing with their science. Especially not when it was a massive and mysterious gathering place for the throng of the half-dead who'd

been summoned from the surrounding area once the mountain range that'd sealed off the Highway of the Dead for thousands of years had been removed. To be perfectly honest, no matter what happened at this point, it should've come as no surprise.

Yet the left hand persisted, eyes spinning as it said, "Still, it's strange. From what I can see, it's real enough, but something's funny about the way it's built."

The opportunity to inspect its construction soon presented itself. Having caught sight of Muma, the group quickened its pace, finally breaking into a run, and in less than an hour they'd reached its outer borders. Unable to fight the impetus of those pressing from the rear, a few score of those in the front plunged straight into the moat—although it didn't actually have water in it, and was in fact a sheer drop into an abyss thousands of yards deep. The rest somehow managed to stay on their feet, and the mob swiftly fanned out along the moat, spilling off the highway.

Standing before it, they found the building truly vast. Both the moat and ramparts stretched endlessly to either side, eventually vanishing from sight. There was a veritable forest of structures within ranging from six hundred to a thousand feet high, and when it came to the towers, they seemed as if they must be at least three thousand feet tall with their tapering, rocketlike shapes challenging the heavens. But though this place seemed to have appeared solely for this throng, even after their arrival it remained entirely silent, and there was no sign of anyone there.

"Looks like we're not getting in," the fake D groused. But it came as little surprise that his eyes were filled with reckless laughter. "Actually, that stone wall over there doesn't seem to have any gates or doors in it anyway. How do they intend to let their visitors in?"

This was a perfectly reasonable query, and D and his left hand said nothing. At that point, cries of surprise suddenly went up.

The fake D was infected by them as well, saying, "Wow! This is incredible. The highway's stretching straight out across the moat!"

III

The highway crossed the outer, middle, and inner moats, then reached the castle wall. At this point, a hole with the same thirty-foot width as the highway unexpectedly appeared in the wall, which hadn't had a mark or line on it.

There was no way that couldn't be taken as an invitation. The mob of the half-dead became a torrent that surged off the highway and into the fortress. Even D in the wagon and the fake D on his horse were a part of it.

Darkness enveloped the group as they entered the castle.

"What's the story?" the fake D asked D's left hand.

There was no garden beyond the castle wall. Where the half-dead went there was nothing save a deep darkness. Even the light was cut off at the door through which they'd entered. Considering this castle belonged to the Nobility—to vampires—it was only natural.

"Now we're playing hide-and-seek, and we're all it," the fake D remarked with admiration. While he should have been able to see in the dark as clearly as at midday, this darkness alone he couldn't pierce. And the same went for D.

They knew they were in a vast room. Or perhaps it would be better to call it simply a space, for they couldn't sense so much as a single pillar. They couldn't even tell whether or not this place had walls and a ceiling.

But about this time a certain phenomenon began to occur that, on consideration, made perfect sense. More people were constantly flowing in, but the number in the space had decreased. In the darkness, one person here—or rather, a few dozen—and then more over there went off in all directions. But even though they dispersed, there was clearly some intention behind the way they left, and from the way they moved, that intent didn't seem to be their own.

"They're being selected, eh? Or perhaps I should make that being sorted?" the left hand muttered. Their destinations were being chosen based on some inscrutable criteria.

"So, where do you think we'll be made to go?"

After all, there were more than ten thousand people pouring into the place. Vast or not, the space should've been packed almost instantly, yet it didn't feel the least bit cramped. One after another, people and wagons alike disappeared. The speed and orderliness with which it happened was beyond the pale.

Less than ten minutes after entering the castle, the two Ds realized they were the only ones left. D was astride an unsaddled horse. He'd taken one of the animals that drew Savena's wagon.

The last footsteps and creaking wagon wheels went off in a certain direction, and then the room was silent.

"So, I wonder when we get our calling," the left hand said.

And that's when it happened. The air stirred to D's right. A cavern had formed.

"Is this it?" the fake D said excitedly as he brought his steed around. Then he threw a quick look over at D, but it was unclear whether or not D noticed the mysterious shadows that came and went in the fake's eyes.

"Hyah!" they cried, the two riders kicking their cyborg horses' flanks in unison as they began to gallop off into the depths of the darkness.

Perhaps it was only a few seconds. Or maybe it was for hours that they rode.

The two of them were in a blue room. When and where they'd dismounted they couldn't say. There was a blue light shining down, the source of which was unknown. Even the shadows of the pair were tinged blue.

"Seems to me we're being told to do whatever we like from here on out," the fake D muttered to himself as he surveyed their surroundings. "I think I'll be heading out now. See you."

Once his back had melded with the blue light, a hoarse voice remarked with relief, "He's finally gone, has he?"

"Were you worried about him?" D asked.

"Yeah, I had a bad feeling. You and him—even if the two of you have to have it out at some point, it's better to put some space between you for the time being."

"We have to have it out at some point, you say?"

D's tone made the tiny eyes in the palm of his left hand bug out as they looked up at him.

"Both of us are me. And both of us came to Muma." Breaking off there, D said, "What am I?"

It wasn't really a question. However, his steely tone carried an extreme sadness as thin as a piece of silk, and it would've taken Mia's breath away if the girl had been there.

"At any rate, let him go. If he's going that way, we should take this way."

Before the left hand had even made the suggestion, D had started off on foot. Up ahead, something shaped like a black box began to come into view. No one of Noble blood could mistake the sight of it. It was a coffin. Bending down, he reached for the lid and opened it. The desiccated corpse had vivid remnants of anguish left on its face.

Placing his left hand on it, D asked, "About how old is this?"

"Roughly five thousand years," the left hand replied. "The cause of death was rampant DNA damage brought about by abnormal hormonal secretions. See how almost all the skin has been mummified, but a spot on the right hand and the lungs alone are still normal? Look! The lungs are still functioning five thousand years later. In other words, just those two parts turned into Nobility."

"So, this is one outcome?"

"Sure enough—this is what he'd like to call a failure. Loan me your left hand."

The fingers of D's left hand tugged on the wooden stake that protruded from the corpse's chest.

"And that's why it was disposed of. Oh, my, there are rows and rows of 'em!"

D's eyes had beheld the same thing.

There wasn't just one coffin. Behind it was another, and another beyond that, wooden boxes beyond numbering laid in a crazy confusion like some sort of modern sculpture. Further and further still they stretched on, endless as the images in an infinite series of mirrors . . .

There was no need to open the lid of the next coffin. The hinges had rotted off, and from the gap that was left, a right hand that was also mummified could be seen. Surely the frilly white shirt cuff was that of a woman. A tiny glint of gold spilled from between her fingers. In the palm of her hand she clutched a small pendant. Had she intended to hand it to someone? Someone outside the coffin? The one who'd sealed her in it?

D opened the lid of the tiny shell-like locket. There was a little photograph inside. Though its hues had faded to sepia, the split second burned into it still captured a pleasant memory that'd resisted the flow of time. Backed by snow-capped mountains and rich fields of barley, a young man and woman smiled as if enchanted by a spell that would last for all time.

But the girl had been chosen and brought here.

Closing the locket, D wound its chain around the girl's wrist. There was nothing else to do.

"All of these were failures, then?" he muttered in a coffin-filled section of what could safely be called a cemetery.

That's right, someone replied. You are my only success.

Instinctively, the fake D looked all around.

There was a presence. He got the feeling it was at the ceiling, and beneath his feet, and right next to him as well. Endless rows of coffins spread all around him. He knew that each of them contained a corpse with a stake through its heart. When he'd muttered, "So, they were all failures?" that voice had heard him.

"There's something I want to ask you," he said to the voice. "When you say 'you,' is that singular or plural? Don't you mean 'you two'?"

My only success was you alone.

"Great!" the fake D exclaimed, thumping his chest. His eyes held a ghastly tinge that hadn't been seen until now. "So it's just me? In that case, that other me is in the way."

D moved silently through a sea of coffins. Did he have some goal? No. At least, it didn't seem that he did. He was as cold and beautiful as ever but shrouded in a terrific aura that seemed as if it could raise the dead. An aura of anger. Though the young man appeared to be an icy machine right to the marrow of his bones, his body now burned with the one emotion that seemed to suit him the least. Perhaps it was due to compassion for the innocent people who'd been summoned here to meet a horrible end, or maybe he saw something that had a direct bearing on his own fate. He shouldn't have had any set goal, yet his gait called to mind a ferocious tiger stalking its prey.

"I did some rough calculations," the hoarse voice said. "Based on the number of coffins we've passed and they way they're laid out, the total would be approximately—"

"One hundred and seven or eight thousand."

"Exactly," it said in a doleful tone.

So many called here only to have their life snuffed out with one thrust of a stake. For what purpose? For whose sake? Which was the success—D or the fake D?

Suddenly the color of the light changed. Gloom descended. The whole world was altered. The machinery that towered to either side of him seemed to be made of shadows. In order to conduct experiments impossible in this world, the very substance of the machines had been transformed. They lived.

The next thing D knew, he was looking down from a platform set partway up the wall. The walls dropped straight down for several

hundred yards, and countless black specks moved around at the bottom. D knew at a glance it was those who'd taken the Highway of the Dead.

Now I shall conduct the first sorting.

Even when the voice rang out, D didn't move.

There was a cacophony of flapping black wings near the ceiling. A cloud of bats. A few seconds later, it became clear they weren't just harmless creatures. The black mammals attached themselves to the necks of the survivors who stood motionless below, driving their fangs into the carotid arteries. The half-dead simply stood there, making no attempt to shoo them away, and one after another the people fell. Every last bit of color had drained from their pale faces. As the last one dropped, the bats rose en masse, flying to the upper reaches one after another and disappearing.

The thousands of human forms that lay at the bottom were reflected in D's cold eyes. It wasn't the sort of look he gave the dead.

These bodies had been drained of every last drop of blood by the bats—vampire bats. Now they were true corpses, but a number of them rose unsteadily to their feet. Half dead or truly dead, they were souls that'd returned from hell.

They aren't dead yet, the voice said. Even with the blood completely drained from their bodies, they live. Even if a person has received the kiss of the Nobility, so long as part of their human nature remains, indestructibility won't come into play in this situation. They should be one hundred percent completely and utterly dead. Since they survive, it means the power I gave them went to work just as they were about to die. In the other examination areas, surely other candidates survived in the same manner. Roughly one percent.

Of the twenty thousand half-dead people who'd entered the castle with D, that would leave approximately two hundred.

The scene changed again. Next for the survivors was an incredible baptism of death. Walking on wobbly legs, they were

blasted head on by high-powered laser cannons, machine guns, and ultrasonic projectors. Hearts shot through by crimson beams of light, bodies ripped open by steel slugs flying at the speed of sound, cells hammered by ultrasonic waves, every one of them dropped, and then a number of them got up again.

These physical attacks should also more than suffice to kill them in their present form. And so more wheat is separated from the chaff.

The unwatchable process of "sorting" continued. The elite were torn apart by the claws of ravenous beasts, devoured, or wrapped in powerful tentacles until every bone in their bodies was broken and they'd suffocated. At this point, they finally demonstrated the special Noble abilities they'd acquired. The shredded bodies of the dead mended themselves with unbelievable speed. While that wasn't such an amazing occurrence in this world, the way shattered bones re-formed, flesh that'd been ripped free reattached itself, and ruptured eyeballs grew new retinas and scleras from nothing was still a miraculous paranormal phenomenon.

Here a number of different groups were pooled, and though there were a dozen or so survivors, most of the dead had obvious madness in their eyes as they began to wander about.

Their minds don't come back, you see. Might it be due to fear or the pain of repeated deaths?

Five remained. Among them D spotted a face he recognized. It was Savena. Because she was in another group, she hadn't shown up here until now.

And now for the final sorting.

With that declaration ringing in his ears, D drew his sword and struck out in front of himself. He knew that before him lay an unseen wall that blocked his way. At first, his blade moved without meeting any resistance. But when D tried to advance, he was checked by the invisible wall.

Those who've received the kiss of the Nobility, while still human, have gained the characteristics of a Noble. However, there are

fundamental issues to be resolved. In the end, those people remain our subjects—the master/slave relationship persists. If even a single Noble were to appear in their midst, the shock would probably drive them half mad.

Was the voice—the master of Muma—trying to say he thought it best for humans and Nobility to be treated as equals?

This is not what I sought. I'm looking for something else. D, you must know what that is, the voice said, a crushing weight added to its tone.

Whither D?

CHAPTER 7

I

Did the quintet that included Savena realize their fate? All that could be discerned was the great contentment that colored their faces. For there stood five men and women who, for all the rapture and uncertainty of being the chosen ones, were melting, body and soul, in flames of love.

A gleam came down on them from above. Mechanical arms with metallic, syringelike cylinders attached. There was one for each of them.

I shall inject you with my DNA, the voice declared.

That was when D swung his sword once more. With eyes shut he carved the air with an imagined sword purely by will—and this time, too, it met nothing, but he felt the unseen wall had been slashed and crumbled away. D moved forward—and right before him, the five elite were assailed by a mad gale. Had it not been D, surely he would've covered his eyes and turned his face away.

All five of them were slammed against the floor as if they'd been struck by an invisible opponent, flying back up to do a crazed dance that crashed them into a wall, and from there they rammed into the opposite wall headfirst before once again falling to the floor. Ferocious death spasms tore through them from head to toe, and their paraffin-pale skin swiftly blackened and wrinkled.

They'd begun to turn into mummies.

"D . . ."

As D approached, a black hand reached for his leg. While he might've leapt away, he didn't. It caught hold of his ankle. From the mummy's face, it was no longer possible to tell its gender.

"D . . . Kill me . . ." it groaned between rasping breaths.

And as soon as it said that, a flash of white light sank into the mummy's chest in the blink of an eye.

"So, no one passed the test?" a hoarse voice croaked in the darkness.

The half-dead had been more than ten thousand strong, and every last one of them was gone now—the result of their smoldering love and millennia of waiting for the road to return.

"Come out," D said, looking up to a position that overlooked the five corpses.

There was no sign of anyone moving around. But there was only one person he could be addressing.

"Wow!" his left hand exclaimed. Perhaps it was trying to be funny. However, never had it sounded so dazed.

Very well, the voice replied.

"Here he comes!" said the left hand.

Very well, the voice replied.

The fake D was poised for action.

He lay before him. His presence was growing stronger by the second. It actually had mass.

I can cut him down, the fake D thought.

Terrific shock waves struck the faces of both of them from a point in thin air. Neither shut his eyes. And yet, neither of them was able to catch the instant he appeared. The next thing they knew, he was simply standing there. The hem of his black cape swayed

with an imperceptible breeze. He was over six and a half feet tall. Even colored by the gloom as he approached, his shoulders and powerful chest were evident. His face couldn't be seen.

"It's been quite some time now," D said quietly. His voice was grimness itself. It wasn't a tone of malice. There was a will to it—a cold, burning will. A will that declared that he must be destroyed. Yet he didn't raise the sword he held in his right hand.

He recalled an ancient text; a long-forgotten tome left in a corner of a musty library. If not for that thick volume, the library itself would've been without meaning. Were its yellowed pages paper or parchment? There was a good chance it'd existed since before there was anything called "books." Even if they found it, there was no one who would open its pages. They were afraid. It was too horrible. No one wanted to know the information recorded within. Ancient history not meant to be known, a history penned in the blood of the world of the night that'd since been driven from the world of light, one of cursed technology and of a truth straddling both worlds that invited madness.

D moved forward.

The fake D dashed.

Each made a leap of fifteen feet and entered the chest of the massive, shadowy form. Like a son being embraced by his father.

Waves of pain went out. Their blades had definitely pierced his heart.

D gouged at it.

The fake D gouged as well.

The voice reached their ears, saying, The two of you could slay me. But the one to succeed me must have my blessing.

D gouged more. Air rushed into the wound. The pain of the figure in black was relayed to him through the sword.

"You did it! You actually did it!" his left hand shouted.

Remarkable, I must admit, said the voice carried on those spasms. The two of you could slay me. Why do you not continue?

D felt the spasms suddenly stop. The instant he put additional strength into the hand around the hilt of his sword, the shadowy figure vanished without warning. It didn't fade away. Rather, it leapt back.

Ordinarily, D would've bounded with the same speed. His blade shouldn't have come back out. However, the shadowy figure was stained black by the far reaches of the gloom, and D wasn't poised to give pursuit. The second he kicked off the floor, the figure melted into the gloom.

"He's not there anymore," the left hand said. "He said something that's got me worried. When he talked about the two of you, he meant you and the other you, but did he mean that if one of you were to pull out, the other one could never slay him?"

"He stabbed into him, too. You sensed that, didn't you?" D said as he sheathed his blade.

"Yeah."

"Then we should've slain him."

"Hmm. I can't say I don't know how the other you might feel."

What the left hand implied was an important point to consider.

"We have to find the sway reactor," D said, looking all around.

"Aren't you gonna chase him?"

"That's not why I came here. My job concerns the safety of that village."

There was a brief pause. "Really? Yeah, I suppose it does at that," his left hand remarked, sounding rather relieved.

"Do you know where the reactor is?"

"Good question. I'll leave that up to you. We're good on water, and earth is out of the question. That leaves what, fire and wind? Seems kinda sacrilegious, but what else can we do?"

Taking out a pair of wooden stakes, D held one in each hand and rubbed them together as fast as he could. Flames rose from them—the heat of the friction had started a fire. From the standpoint of physics it was an all-too-common phenomenon, but only someone with the monstrous strength of Noble blood could do it so easily.

"That ain't enough."

D swept out with his hands. The flames flowed with them, shooting down into the coffin at his feet and igniting its contents, a five-thousand-year-old, desiccated mummy.

Whoooosh! Flames shot up more than ten feet. Scattering, the flames jumped from one coffin to another, cremating the remains. Tremendous heat struck D's cheeks, and fiery tongues licked at the hem of his coat.

D didn't move. He was cremating those who'd met such a horrible fate, but not in order to see them off—and perhaps he wished to atone for that.

"If you don't hurry up, you'll wind up a fireball!"

It was only when the flames burned the edge of his coat and sparks flew at his hair that D finally raised his left hand. The flames were sucked into the mouth on his palm, the force of the suction creating such a gale that even the flames that singed him were torn asunder.

After even the smoke had been consumed, a hoarse voice said, "Fire and wind we've got. Next up—water."

Raising his right arm, D pressed his left index finger to his wrist. One scratch and the skin broke open, letting bright blood flow out. And D caught it in the palm of his left hand. It was indeed water. Liquid. However, this was a shocking way to slake the hand's thirst.

The dripping lifeblood was sucked into the tiny mouth that'd opened in his palm, and once quick work had been made of it, a blue flame burned in the depths of that tiny mouth. At the same time, vitality returned to D's pale visage.

"So, can you tell? All your senses, not to mention your sixth sense, should be working better than mine."

D's eyes were shut. Several seconds later he opened them, and as he began walking, he said, "It's underground."

Not only could his left hand give him an infusion of the incredible power from the elements of earth, water, wind, and fire to bring his body back to life, but it could also sharpen his five normal senses and special sixth sense beyond the limits of any living creature. The answer D gave was nothing more than a feeling.

D ran, leaving the wind whipping in his wake. Through numerous corridors he passed, going down staircases and taking elevators along the way. Presently, he arrived at a spot deep underground where the bizarre reactor was going through its mysterious undulations.

"Now that we've found it, it should be simple to operate," the hoarse voice said. "Let me see."

There was no way to describe the deadly energy source except to say it was a colossal silver cylinder, and D took a few steps toward it before a voice called down from up above, "Hey!"

It was D's voice. And he ascertained it came from the top of the reactor.

Looking up, D saw two figures standing on top of the three-hundred-foot-tall reactor. The fake D and Mia.

"Hey, I'm coming down now, but first I want you to throw down your sword."

The fake's demand was conveyed in a cheerful tone.

Two black spots rose on the palm of D's left hand. Eyes. D raised his hand. The eyes in it stared up intently, and a hoarse voice remarked, "He backed out of helping you destroy him. What do you suppose he got in return?"

"Don't you know?" D asked.

"Nope."

"Hey, what's the holdup? If you don't lose the sword, the girl dies!"

The fake had Mia right by his side, and drawing the sword from his back, he put its blade against the base of her neck. He didn't seem to be joking. Though his expression and tone were both jovial, they only served to make him seem all the more dangerous.

D drew his longsword.

"Sheath and all! And I want the sword guard secured to the sheath, too."

The sheath already had a high-polymer line wound about it. This was to intimidate foes who ran around with a sheathed weapon or drawn sword in hand.

Threading the line through a hole in the sword guard, D ran it around to a loop on the scabbard and secured the blade in its sheath before dropping it at his feet.

"Kick it away."

Once the Hunter had complied, the fake finally said, "All right. I'm coming down now. Hey, stick out your left hand!"

"That son of a bitch," the left hand muttered in a lower tone than normal, probably guessing what the fake D had in mind.

Saying nothing, D put out his left hand.

"Perfect," the fake's voice rang out gaily from that great height.

His last remark trailing behind him, he came down headfirst—the fake D had taken a dive off the reactor. And the moment he landed on the floor not three feet from D, a flash of light shot out and D's left arm was taken off at the elbow. Watching with amusement as the limb bounced thirty feet across the floor, the fake D looked at D, who was clutching his dripping wound, and winked.

"Sorry about that. There's been a change of plans. You must know that by now, eh?"

"Did he put you up to this?"

"Bingo! I find it all pretty repulsive myself, but when I heard I was his sole heir, I had to make a move."

"So, you want to be him?"

"Hell yeah!" the fake D replied, scratching the tip of his nose bashfully. "You know who he is. I mean, he's the king of the whole world! And that's what I'll get to be."

"His kingdom has all but collapsed."

"Hell, it can be built back up again. There are still feudal lords doing well out on the Frontier. Band them all together, and I could make a drive for the Capital in short order. The humans' balls will shrivel up as soon as they see what Nobles can really do."

"Which are you? A Noble or a human?"

The fake D's expression twisted at D's query. "I refer the same question right back to you. Of course, I already know the answer. You were the top of your class."

D smiled thinly. "If I was the top of my class, you must be too."

Laughing, the fake replied, "Well, you've got me there. Since it never hurts to ask, wouldn't you like to join forces with me? The two of us could take on the Capital together! And the surviving Nobility would accompany us. Even if some of them resisted or other trouble came up, we'd be fine if there were two of us. We could solve any problem just by glaring at them. After all, we're his—"

The fake D was about to state a certain terrifying fact. However, just then an urgent voice called out, "D!"

It was Mia. The fake D had jumped down three hundred feet with her under one arm, and she'd come through without a scrape.

"There's something wrong with the reactor!" she continued.

"What?" the fake D exclaimed as he turned to look, but the sword he had leveled at D's chest didn't move in the slightest.

D also remained motionless. For the person pointing that sword at him was himself.

The gently swaying movements of the reactor were growing more violent.

"Well, I'll be—the core's going out of control!" the fake said. "You know, I thought something was wrong when I was up top earlier."

"And you're just going to let that happen?"

"Don't be ridiculous. If this thing blows, it'll leave a crater with a seven-hundred-mile radius and half the Frontier won't be fit for man or beast. Worse yet, it'd mean the end of us. I'm not so sure we could regenerate from being reduced to our constituent atoms. But not to worry. After all, I know how to control the reactor. There's one other person who can do it, too, but his fate depends on the question I just asked him. So, how about it?"

D replied, "Go to the Capital alone."

The fake D squinted and smiled sadly. "Really? That's how it's gonna be, eh? Then I'll be the only one left to control the reactor, I guess."

A second after he turned away with a hint of indignation, his face and body remained still—and his right arm alone limned an arc. As the fake's blade seared through the air, D backed away, dodging it by the proverbial hair's breadth. Amazingly enough, he'd only had to take a single step back to do so.

"I'm sure you already know this, but I was just sizing you up," the fake D said, grinning as he remained poised with his sword still fully extended.

Mia drew a ragged breath. She'd finally noticed what had happened. The fake D had been quick with his sword, and D's movement had been still quicker. But the attack hadn't been in earnest.

"He vanished quickly when you saw him, but with me he stayed and talked awhile. He told me all kinds of things. How he controlled the Nobility and the humans, and what he was able to get out of that."

"And then you started to want that?"

"Yeah, I guess I did. What's wrong with that? I have a right to it. So do you, but you turned it down."

"What did he promise you?"

"Nothing. He didn't even say I could succeed him. Nor did he tell me to cut you down. These are all things I decided to do on my own."

"Stop it!" Mia shouted. "Stop it, both of you. You said you're the same, didn't you? It'd be like killing yourself!"

"There's no way around it," the fake D replied, every inch of his body radiating a murderous intent that made Mia flinch. "Things have gone too far, and both of us being one and the same has become a problem. In the end, it's every man for himself."

D seized on that perfectly, saying, "You're human, then?"

The fake D's expression changed in a flash, and he howled with rage as he swung his blade. Although the Hunter ducked down to avoid it, the sword reversed and made a second stroke from an unbelievable angle that sent fresh blood gushing from D's left shoulder. D covered the wound as he backed away, while above him a shape rose like a black and ominous bird.

"Have at you!"

Confident of absolute victory, the fake brought his blade down with the crushing force of an angry wave.

D was still fifteen feet from the sword on the floor—he'd never make it in time.

Just then, vermilion spattered the fake D's face. Fresh blood had flown from the wound on D's left shoulder. Thanks to this, the Hunter would undoubtedly be using his right hand to cover the wound.

"What?" the fake D groaned hopelessly, amazement swimming in his eyes because the edge of his weapon had met nothing when coming down to split the Hunter like a piece of firewood, but a diagonal flash of silver shot up at his torso from below.

Cut open right between the floating ribs all the way to the spinal column, the fake D opened his eyes. In a world of vermilion, he saw D—who had delivered the one-handed stroke—and the sword in his right hand. Down at the Hunter's feet, the black scabbard stuck up at an angle. The line binding the blade to the sheath had been undone and coiled up again, and the end of the sheath was gripped by D's severed left hand.

"I didn't know . . . it could walk," the fake D said, bright blood spilling from his mouth. "Or that it'd be able . . . to untie that string.



So, this thing's the difference . . . between me and me?"

As he said that, the sword he held in his right hand flashed toward D's waist, but he no longer had any strength or speed, and D bounded to deliver a straight vertical slash that split the fake's skull all the way down to his chin.

D said nothing as he looked down at himself lying in a bloody mist. It was himself. Really, truly himself.

"Well made . . . Poorly made . . . Guess there was no way . . . around it," the fake D said, his bloodied lips trembling. "But he really did . . . want to make . . . equal love . . . his motto . . . In the end . . . was it you . . . he loved? Whatever you do . . . don't wind up . . . like me. Have the life . . . I . . . couldn't . . ."

The fake D expired.

"Why do this?" the left hand said, but no one replied to him.

Picking his left arm up off the floor, D reattached it to his elbow, and then walked over to the sway reactor.

"Well, all I can tell you is what I think happened," the left hand muttered, not speaking to anyone in particular. "A shift in the earth's crust or something set this thing back in motion down in that subterranean facility."

The thing to which he referred was the sway reactor.

"And that's when the other you woke up. But that was a mistake. Both he and the facility had been sealed away. And then he took notice. Now this is just my theory—I have to wonder if the complete devastation back in that facility wasn't something he himself had done. It wasn't that he was afraid someone would make use of the facility, or they got the results they were looking for and pulled out, or anything warm and fuzzy like that. I think he cursed the experiments he'd conducted there. And that's why he noticed before anyone else that the facility and your other half were active again, and he set things in motion to destroy them. It could be that the Noble who got you headed to Muma in the first place was sent by him."

"So I could take care of everything? Dispose of his failure?"

D entered the reactor's control compartment. As he adjusted its controls, Mia stood watching him.

"Now this reactor will never work again. I've sent along just enough energy so the underground facility will break down on its own. Go back to the village and tell them everything's safe again."

"Go with me," Mia said, running toward him.

Her body tumbled forward. D glimpsed the blue line jutting from her pale throat.

As soon as the girl's body hit the floor, a blue mist billowed toward D. A split second before it could sweep over the Hunter his sword flashed out, bisecting the blue cloud, but a new wave of hair wrapped around both his body and his blade.

"Those who learn the secret of Muma must die."

Needless to say, it was Yuma who appeared from the depths of the darkness.

"While you were laying waste to the rejects where I was created, I was underground being supercharged by a device the great one built. Even you can't cut this hair."

As he approached, he pulled a hair from the top of his head and brought it to his lips.

"I'll run you right through the heart with one breath. Farewell."

"Goodbye," said a voice that came from where Mia had fallen. He'd walked right past her.

As Yuma spun around for a look, a burning-hot thrust took him through the chest and out through the back, while above the reeling assassin, D had leapt up and was bringing his sword down. Even wrapped in blue hair, it was easy enough for the blade to split Yuma lengthwise.

Not even watching the assassin fall, D walked over to where Mia stood deathly still. One after another the hairs around him came free. With Yuma's death, the assassin's hair had lost its unholy power.

"You have my thanks."

"Don't mention it," Mia said, shaking her head. "I can't very well go back to the village like this, can I? But you knew that, didn't you?"

Mia pointed to the needle-like hair in her throat with the dagger sheath she held. Two of the teeth that poked from her lips came to sharp points.

"Was it him?"

She nodded in response to D's question. "I was given the task of protecting whichever of the two of you survived. But I have the feeling the great one knew it'd be you. He loves you, doesn't he?"

Mia hid her mouth behind her hand. She'd smiled.

"Okay, on your way now," she told him.

"What about you?"

"I'll stay here," the girl replied. "I wanted to go with you, but not with these fangs. If you can, set Kuentz right again. Goodbye. Soon, this will turn back into that mountain chain. Farewell, D. I'm glad I met you. And the other you, too."

Tears glistened in Mia's eyes.

In that murky world, they remained motionless as a pair of statues, simply staring at each other.

The morning sun colored the jagged horizon. No one who saw that grand collection of peaks would've ever thought they were an enormous facility. From the saddle of his cyborg horse D looked back at the mountain range.

"That was probably your home, you know," the hoarse voice remarked, but the Hunter's gorgeous countenance didn't betray a hint of emotion. "But even now, we don't know anything. So, shall we go?"

D wheeled his mount around.

"Hey, that's not the way to—" the hoarse voice began to protest, but it quickly added, "Oh, I get it."

It had realized that was the way to the village where Mia's mother lived.

END

Postscript

The setting of the Vampire Hunter D series sprang from my greatest love—movies. The wild Frontier through which D wanders isn't Transylvania, but rather the Great Plains of American westerns. The sheriffs of my westerns are the lawmen, the houses are connected by elevated plank sidewalks, and the towns' residents wear swords on their hips instead of guns. However, there is no Castle Dracula out on the Great Plains. Vampire Hunter D is a direct descendant of Hammer Films' horror movies, so the European castles, towns, and villages depicted in those films were incorporated into the backdrop of the D series.

I didn't intend to make D's story a horror tale set in the future. Well, at its core, the story isn't far from horror, but at that time, horror wasn't the kind of product to pull in readers. The target audience of the Asahi Sonorama Library line was teenagers. But the young have the instinctive ability to evade the true fear that horror brings. At the same time, they're interested in the future and the technology that will accompany it. The only field of literature to incorporate that is science fiction. In this manner, the Vampire Hunter D series became the half-breed child of horror and science fiction. Just as its protagonist is himself a half-breed.

The character of D came from a compilation of all the things that are commonly considered virtues in a man: he's taciturn and

strong, gentle beneath a cold exterior, handsome, and tall, plus he looks good in black. However, on further consideration, that doesn't seem like the sort of man who'd be very good company, does it? As far as fashion was concerned, I decided to have him in a double-breasted, long coat with high boots and long gloves. I never considered giving him a cape. Putting someone with vampire blood into a black cape would be too easy. Too expected. Therefore I had him in a coat, although in that respect he's like the handsome hero of one of my other series, Setsura Aki from "Makai Toshi." Though lacking a longsword, a wide-brimmed traveler's hat, and a cyborg horse, the man-searcher armed with a mysterious titanium wire that can slice through steel certainly has the same superhuman blood in his veins that D does. However, as readers are no doubt aware, D can't be mentioned without a black cape springing to mind. This is due to the power of Yoshitaka Amano's brush. The "coat" in the text was forever altered by one of Mr. Amano's cover illustrations. The strength of pictures is incredible. Incidentally, the most faithful illustration Mr. Amano has done is the cover to the fourth book, *Tale of the Dead Town*.

Thanks to the film *Twilight* being a big hit, the live-action version of Vampire Hunter D that's been stalled for some time looks like it's starting to move forward at last. As the creator of the series, my curiosity is boundless as to just how D will strike readers when he appears before them as a real actor and how those same readers will greet him. *Twin-Shadowed Knight* is a tale that was born from the simple speculation of what it'd be like if there were two such Ds. I hope you thoroughly enjoyed it.

Hideyuki Kikuchi
May 23, 2009
while watching Count Dracula

About the Author

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in Chiba, Japan, in 1949. He attended the prestigious Aoyama University and wrote his first novel, *Demon City Shinjuku*, in 1982. Over the past two decades, Kikuchi has written numerous horror novels, and is one of Japan's leading horror masters, working in the tradition of occidental horror writers like Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. As of 2004, there were seventeen novels in his hugely popular ongoing Vampire Hunter D series. Many live-action and anime movies of the 1980s and 1990s have been based on Kikuchi's novels.

About the Illustrator

Yoshitaka Amano was born in Shizuoka, Japan. He is well known as a manga and anime artist, and is the famed designer for the *Final Fantasy* game series. Amano took part in designing characters for many of Tatsunoko Productions' greatest cartoons, including *Gatchaman* (released in the U.S. as *G-Force* and *Battle of the Planets*). Amano became a freelancer at the age of thirty and has collaborated with numerous writers, creating nearly twenty illustrated books that have sold millions of copies. Since the late 1990s, Amano has worked with several American comics publishers, including DC Comics on the illustrated Sandman novel *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* with Neil Gaiman, and Marvel Comics on *Elektra and Wolverine: The Redeemer* with best-selling author Greg Rucka.

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an enemy when the enemy is you?

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by Vampire Hunter D designer Yoshitaka Amano.
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Science Fiction/Horror $14.99 U.S.

ISBN 978-1-59307-930-7
51499>
9 781593 079307