MORE THAN 17 MILLION VAMPIRE HUNTER D BOOKS IN PRINT WORLDWIDE!

VAMPIRE HUNTER D



BEDEVILED STAGECOACH

Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by
YOSHITAKA AMANO

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

Other Vampire Hunter D books published by Dark Horse Books and Digital Manga Publishing vol. 1: Vampire Hunter D

vol. 2: Raiser of Gales

vol. 3: Demon Deathchase

vol. 4: Tale of the Dead Town vol. 5: The Stuff of Dreams vol. 6: Pilgrimage of the Sacred and the Profane vol. 7: Mysterious Journey to the North Sea Part One vol. 8: Mysterious Journey to the North Sea Part Two vol. 9: The Rose Princess

vol. 10: Dark Nocturne

vol. 11: Pale Fallen Angel Parts One and Two vol. 12: Pale Fallen Angel Parts Three and Four vol. 13: Twin-Shadowed Knight Parts One and Two vol. 14: Dark Road Parts One and Two vol. 15: Dark Road Part Three vol. 16: Tyrant's Stars Parts One and Two vol. 17: Tyrant's Stars Parts Three and Four vol. 18: Fortress of the Elder God vol. 19: Mercenary Road

vol. 20: Scenes from an Unholy War vol. 21: Record of the Blood Battle vol. 22: White Devil Mountain Parts One and Two vol. 23: Iriya the Berserker vol. 24: Throng of Heretics vol. 25: Undead Island

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 26

BEDEVILED STAGECOACH

Written by

HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by

YOSHITAKA AMANO

English translation by

KEVIN LEAHY

Dark Horse Books
Milwaukie

VAMPIRE HUNTER D 26: BEDEVILED STAGECOACH

© Hideyuki Kikuchi, 2017. Originally published in Japan in 2009 by ASAHI SONORAMA Co. English translation copyright © 2017 by Dark Horse Books.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the express written permission of the copyright holders. Names, characters, places, and incidents featured in this publication either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), events, institutions, or locales, without satiric intent, is coincidental. Dark Horse Books® and the Dark Horse logo are registered trademarks of Dark Horse Comics, Inc. All rights reserved.

Cover art by Yoshitaka Amano English translation by Kevin Leahy

Book design by Brennan Thome

Published by

Dark Horse Books

A division of Dark Horse Comics, Inc.

10956 SE Main Street

Milwaukie, OR 97222

DarkHorse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Kikuchi, Hideyuki, 1949-author. | Amano, Yoshitaka, illustrator. |

Leahy, Kevin (Translator) translator.

Title: Bedeviled stagecoach / written by Hideyuki Kikuchi ; illustrated by Yoshitaka Amano ; English translation by Kevin Leahy.

Other titles: D--Mashō Basha. English Description: First Dark Horse Books edition. | Milwaukie, OR : Dark Horse Books, 2017.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017018316 (print) | LCCN 2017018786 (ebook) | ISBN

9781630081621 () | ISBN 9781506701998 (paperback) Subjects: LCSH: Vampires--Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Horror. | FICTION /

Fantasy / Paranormal.

Classification: LCC PL832.I37 (ebook) | LCC PL832.I37 D28713 2017 (print) |

DDC 895.6/36--dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017018316

First Dark Horse Books edition: August 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America Mike Richardson President and Publisher Neil Hankerson Executive Vice President Tom Weddle Chief Financial Officer Randy Stradley Vice President of Publishing Matt Parkinson Vice President of Marketing David Scroggy Vice President of Product Development Dale LaFountain Vice President of Information Technology Cara Niece Vice President of Production and Scheduling Nick McWhorter Vice President of Media Licensing Mark Bernardi Vice President of Digital and Book Trade Sales Ken Lizzi General Counsel Dave Marshall Editor in Chief Davey Estrada Editorial Director Scott Allie Executive Senior Editor Chris Warner Senior Books Editor Cary Grazzini Director of Print and Development Lia Ribacchi Art Director Vanessa Todd Director of Print Purchasing Matt Dryer Director of Digital Art and Prepress Sarah Robertson Director of Product Sales Michael Gombos Director of International Publishing and Licensing

VAMPIRE HUNTER D


Bedevilled
Stagecoach

ALONG FOR THE RIDE

Chapter 1

I

Though the midday sunlight on this late autumn day was relatively tranquil for the Frontier as it colored the homes and people, the face of every single person staring at the stagecoach parked in the station lot showed the most horrible loathing. They didn't even make such faces on seeing the most evil villain who was sure to hang. It resembled the look someone got when they saw a dead body. Indeed, they seemed even more horrified, as if they looked upon the living dead.

Though the black coach parked in the lot already had a team of six cyborg horses hitched to it and the folks in the office had finished selling tickets, the travelers were in no hurry to board the cramped vehicle, so they remained sitting in the break room in the station enjoying cigarettes, consulting maps, or bidding a farewell to the peace and safety of their daily lives.

A commotion, carrying a tinge of horror, rolled down the street.

The sheriff's office was only about thirty feet from the station, and beside it was a vacant lot that measured about twenty feet square, but when the door facing that lot opened, what was shoved outside was something all too common on the Frontier. Locked within the ten-by-ten-foot iron cage was a young man dressed in a black servant's outfit, seated on an iron chair bolted to the floor.

As the people saw his face, the expressions of loathing swiftly faded from their own. It was as if, for the first time in a thousand years, a gust of fresh air pushed its way through a miasma. Anyone among the spectators would have just sighed and accepted the inevitability of the change. The face of the young captive was that beautiful.

"He's Duke Sinistre's valet."

“His name’s Dorleac.”

“Can you imagine devoting yourself to the Nobility body and soul for more than a decade when you’ve got a face like that?”

The station quickly became the spot for townspeople to swap information.

“For whatever reason,” one woman began, “he was wandering around outside the castle two days back when a security patrol passed by and nabbed him—but aren’t they supposed to execute any human who’s been with the Nobility that long, whether they’ve been bitten or not?”

“It’s like this, lady: since there hasn’t been a servant of the Nobility who could walk in broad daylight for decades, they got orders directly from the government in the Capital that they really wanted to examine him, and that they were to have him transported.”

“Oh, that lucky bastard,” the woman remarked.

“Sure is good-looking, though, ain’t he? You think maybe the muckety-mucks in the Capital used the cameras in their surveillance satellites to sneak a look at him?”

“Damn near sure of it. You’re right on the button. But I don’t care how much anyone goes on about him being able to walk in the light of day; he’s a servant of the Nobility. No telling what kind of dark power he might have. That goes with the territory for the sheriff and her deputies, but it’s a real headache for the other passengers. They’ll be risking their lives on this trip. A real ride into hell.”

Laughter continued for a little while, but then it stopped as if cut short. A black cage, gleaming in the sunlight, had just passed right in front of the gossip swappers. The cage had small wheels attached to the bottom, rolling as it was pushed by a pair of sheriff’s deputies. The sheriff went ahead of the cage, entering the station building—the office of the stagecoach company. When the employees glimpsed her face and the sheriff’s badge pinned to her ample chest, their expressions were a sight to see. The sheriff was a beautiful woman with brunette hair spilling from her wide-brimmed hat.

“Well, Louise—I mean, Sheriff, we’ve got the coach all ready to go,” said a

man in a suit and bow tie, standing behind his desk, extending his hand to shake. He was the manager.

“No passengers but us, right, Mr. Platt?” Sheriff Louise said rather insistently.

The manager shifted his eyes and replied, “I’m sorry, but there are three customers who positively insisted on going.”

“Did I or did I not absolutely forbid you from selling any tickets?!” the sheriff snarled, her eyes flashing angrily. Their trip was going to take roughly a week, during which they would be risking not only their lives but their very souls. They were truly journeying into death.

“Yes, I know you did,” the manager replied, “but consider our situation. The trail from here to the airfield runs right through Duke Sinistre’s domain. Do you think that fiend’s just going to sit idly by and let his servant be whisked away right under his nose? Even if you were to return this Dorleac person to him now, we wouldn’t be able to run our coaches until his anger subsided. How long do you reckon that’ll be? A month? Six? A year? No, let’s say half a century at the very least! For fifty years we’d be shit out of luck. This is a serious impediment to travel. And, it’s safe to say, a fatal blow to our business. At this point, we need every last passenger we can get. Hell, we’d sell tickets to monsters, or even the duke himself. The fare to the Capital for ten people puts this company in the black for a month.”

The manager’s expression and tone were part of a technique he’d mastered during two straight decades running an office for the stagecoach company. Over the last twenty years, everyone who’d ever heard a similar explanation had envisioned the company’s imminent bankruptcy, as well as the employees and their families taking their own lives in the aftermath.

The sheriff sighed and said, “You’ve explained the situation to your customers, I take it?”

“Of course. And even knowing the danger that awaits, they’re all okay with it. I find their courage exemplary.”

“I think you’re less interested in courage than revenue,” the sheriff remarked. After drawing a breath, she continued, “Give me some background on them.”

Out of the corner of her eye she glanced over at the lounge. If she could always get this information on short notice, there'd be no need to worry about trouble. Perhaps the sheriff had a hunch about how things would go, because she'd asked the coach service manager to check people's identities despite having told him not to let anyone else ride with them.

"This way," the manager said, leading the sheriff to his private room at the end of the hall, where he explained about the passengers.

Claire Scherzen (twenty-seven years old, saloon girl)

Harman Briggs (fifty-one years old, blacksmith)

JJ (thirty-six years old, Hunter of Nobility)

The manager continued, "Add to that the lunkhead you brought along."

"Al Zemeckis—twenty-one years old, a farmer. And if I ever hear you call him a lunkhead again, there'll be hell to pay. Plus there's me and my two deputies—so, a total of seven, right?"

"And what business brought you to our stagecoach company, Sheriff?" the manager ventured.

Suddenly reminded, Louise corrected herself, saying, "Eight,including Dorleac."

"Our coach, the Belvedere, normally seats twenty, and with the additional fold-down seating can accommodate up to thirty. Yes, you'd be hard pressed to find such a comfortable ride these days."

"That's great to hear—now, could you let everybody onboard?"

The manager looked at the clock on the wall, then compared that to the time on his pocket watch before nodding. "Two minutes and four seconds difference—and I don't know which of them is the correct one. Well, then, you'd best let everyone know."

Without a backward glance at the employee hollering, "Everybody, the coach is heading out!" the sheriff left the office.

Looking over at the stagecoach, Louise found two of her deputies looking back at her, apparently having finished loading the cage onboard. The

passengers filed between the two men as they boarded the coach. The saloon girl, the blacksmith, the Hunter—but the fourth one halted and gave the sheriff a look as if he were trying to read her mood.

In a heavy flannel shirt and jeans, the man wore a leather vest in typical farmer fashion. Though his shirt was wrinkled now, it'd once been well laundered and ironed. He probably had a woman looking out for him. The repeating rifle he carried in his right hand was unusual, even for a lawman. An ordinary handgun was about a thousand dalas, a bolt-action rifle two thousand, and a repeater more than five thousand. Considering that living expenses out on the Frontier were said to average about a thousand dalas a month, it was a rather extravagant weapon for a farmer to have. Given the age of the rifle, it'd probably been purchased quite some time ago for keeping monsters in line.

"What should I do?" the man asked in the tone of a lost traveler.

You're really not cut out for this work, Al, Louise thought to herself. *I know your situation, but you never should've taken this job.*

"Work with us," the sheriff replied. "You've got to follow my orders to the letter, Al, but everything else I'm leaving to your judgment as a deputy. Raise your right hand."

"Sure."

The farmer raised a heavy right hand, and the sheriff followed suit, saying, "Al Zemeckis, do you swear to discharge your duties as a deputy of the town of Happy Gringo's sheriff's department, western Frontier district, until discharged from that position?"

No matter how many times Louise did this, she never could get used to the ceremony, but she couldn't very well let him onto the coach without deputizing him and releasing him from personal liability.

"I do," the farmer replied, his tone and expression equally serious.

"Good. Climb onboard. For the time being, it's your job to watch our friend the valet."

Following Al, the sheriff was just about to plant a foot on the coach steps when she turned and looked around. In addition to the station manager and his

staff, nearly a dozen townspeople were staring at her. They gave doleful looks to the stagecoach and its passengers.

Though the sheriff had made no announcements, the speed with which rumors spread in a rustic town was frightening. Someone had been apprehended near a Noble's castle—with that much to go on, it'd take less than two days to learn who it was and what they'd been doing. No doubt the gossips could clearly see the purpose of this journey, the hopes of Louise and her men, and a denouement quite at odds with those hopes.

When Louise turned right around, only the manager offered a stiff smile, only to have the door slammed in his face.

Though stagecoach drivers were employees of the coachcompany, this time one after another had declined the job, so a sheriff's deputy named Lantz who'd had some experience in that field ended up climbing into the driver's seat. A coach employee on the sidewalk rang a tin bell and shouted, "Moving out!" With a single crack of the whip, the cyborg horse–drawn coach rolled forward, wheels creaking. If not for a buffering device, the wheels of the coach would have left ruts in the ground three timesas deep.

Even after the coach had faded from sight, those who had seen it off showed no signs of moving on for the longest time. The sun was high and clouds dotted the blue sky that autumn day—and the townspeople had just watched a stagecoach ride off toward aterrible fate.

II

Seating in the coach consisted of five rows of forward-facing benches to either side of a narrow aisle, with each bench seating two passengers. To the aft were shelves for baggage and a space that could hold up to a thousand pounds of cargo, as this type of coach also doubled as a shipping service. Currently, that space was occupied by the prisoner and his iron cage. Al and a deputy named Belbo, the latter armed with a buckshot bow, were sitting on the floor to either side of the cage and well out of arm's reach, while Louise was seated in the very last row. Immediately after boarding the coach, the sheriff and Belbo had donned sunglasses.

As the coach left town and was entering the surrounding farmlands, the sheriff stood up and called out for everyone's attention. All seated separately, the three passengers twisted around for a look. They all wore the same annoyed expressions. People on the Frontier had a fundamental dislike of authority, after all.

"My name is Louise Kirk, and I'm sheriff of Happy Gringo. Although you're probably already aware of what I'm going to tell you, I must give you fair warning."

Before she'd even finished speaking, all but Harman the blacksmith—who was in the second row from the back on the right-hand side—turned away in disgust.

"From here on out," the sheriff continued, "we're going to be crossing some extremely dangerous territory. Without a doubt, your lives will be in jeopardy. In such a situation, my three deputies and I will endeavor to do our best to keep all of you safe, but our real mission is transporting the prisoner locked up in back. If there's any concern that rescuing you might jeopardize our mission, we'll have no choice but to give the completion of our mission primary attention. We ask for your understanding in that regard."

"Yeah, we know!" someone promptly responded. It was the saloon girl, Claire Scherzen, seated in the second row from the front on the right side. Raising her right hand, gripping a bottle of booze, she continued, "Normally, you'd die to keep the peace for us. But when the time rolls around, the job comes first—hell, every public official is the same way. Okay, okay. We're used to it by now."

"Another thing—" Louise said, putting strength into her stomach muscles. "In the course of dispatching our duty, there may be some need to restrict your actions. I hope you'll understand."

She was fully prepared for someone to jump down her throat over that.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding!" Claire exploded, and her reaction was natural enough.

Even Harman's mouth went wide as he bellowed, "What exactly is that supposed to mean? First you tell us you'll leave us for dead if the situation calls for it, and now you're asking for our help with your work? Hey, just because

you're wearing that badge, don't go thinking that makes you Nobility or something!"

Louise's interest was focused on the third passenger—the man seated in the middle row on the left-hand side. The Hunter. She'd never met him before. He elected to remain silent. That irritated Louise.

"The floor's open for grievances," she said to him. "Something eating you? I'd like to hear about it now."

After the span of a breath, he replied in a gloomy tone, "Not particularly. I wasn't counting on anyone else from the get-go. This is the Frontier."

"You're exactly right," she said, and she was relieved to hear that.

Louise was relatively satisfied with the results. A war of words with drifters could easily escalate into an exchange of bullets or blades. Things had gone pretty well.

"At any rate, we've stated our position. We'd appreciate your cooperation," said the sheriff.

"Like hell I'm helping you," Claire replied spitefully.

All Harman did was spit loudly.

Louise, on the other hand, had a weight off her chest. If she did have to leave the two of them to fend for themselves, now it wouldn't bother her conscience any. Besides, what she really needed to focus on was what was behind her.

The young man seated on the chair in the cage had a weary look on his face as it was turned toward the floor. Whatever had happened when he was with the Nobility, it seemed that slipping the yoke of fate had left him drained of both strength and will.

However, Louise turned to Al and said sternly, "I thought I gave you a pair of sunglasses yesterday. Put them on."

"Oh, is it a problem that I haven't got 'em on yet?" the young farmer asked, frantically reaching for the chest pocket of his shirt.

"They might not seem any different than us, but that's no reason to underestimate a human who's lived with the Nobility a long time," Louise said

firmly. “The Nobility took a liking to him. Such being the case, it’d only be natural to want to reward him for his long and loyal service. In his case, that might’ve been by not feeding on him. But what if the reward was magic powers? What if he could pass right through the wall and escape if we took our eyes off him for a minute? We’ve had reports from the northern Frontier of cases where someone turned into mist or bats, just like the legends. Even if it wasn’t something as big as all that, even you must know what happens to people when they look into a Noble’s eyes. There are more cases than you could shake a stick at of people like that turning their own parents over to the Nobility so they could feed.”

“I see. Sorry ’bout that,” Al said, donning the protective charm with stiff, nervous motions.

But there was still someone else who should feel Louise’s wrath.

“Belbo,” she said, “you’re the one with seniority here! What are we supposed to do if you won’t even tell him the basics?”

“Hey, that one was just plain ol’ common sense. Why do I gotta hold his hand for everything?”

“And what’ll you say when he goes and gets possessed?”

The sturdy deputy fell silent.

“How about an answer?”

“Point taken, ma’am.”

If this gig didn’t pay so well and give me the right to push folks around, I’d quit here and now and kill you dead, bitch, before I skipped town, Belbo thought to himself venomously, but he saluted the woman. He thought about giving the shitty little dirt farmer a piece of his mind, but since the prospect of getting chewed out by the sheriff didn’t appeal to him, he decided to hold his tongue.

In a manner of speaking, the servants of the Nobility who were found from time to time could be more trouble to deal with than victims who’d been bitten. Their appearance didn’t differ at all from that of regular people, nor did their daily routine. They could walk around in the light of day or cross running water without any difficulty. When they ate, they washed their meals down with

water. After a year or two of this, even those who had suspicions about them would grow complacent. And the next thing anyone knew, they were using the magic powers their masters had granted them to lead innocent victims off to their employers.

While there were almost no written records of these magic powers, from the compiled eyewitness accounts they seemed to be a sort of powerful gaze—hypnotism, which was probably the easiest power for the Nobility to grant. In the southern Frontier, when one of these "servants" was found, there were cases of them having both eyes burned out without a moment's discussion, though in many cases it was said the accused was killed before they could say a word in their own defense.

In this case, Dorleac's safety was guaranteed by the fact that the security patrol that captured him happened to be accompanied by a roving reporter from a regional news outlet. His report was delivered at Mach speed by a mutant pigeon, and it took less than two days for the regional news outlet to make the situation clear to the Capital. The Noble Research Committee in the Capital received no more information about the servants than common rumors and the details of their deaths, but another group—in other words, the government—ordered the Autonomous Frontier Government to ensure Dorleac was kept safe and in custody, and requested that he be escorted to the Capital posthaste.

However, there was one factor the Capital didn't comprehend. The Nobility were quite attached to their servants. A renowned poet who traveled the southern Frontier several millennia earlier had declared, "It can be nothing save love." This was juxtaposed with the deluded desires humans who wished to be ageless and indestructible felt toward the Nobility, which were taken up in regional folk songs, ballads, and poems.

The Nobility felt what could only be termed a partiality toward a certain kind of human (though at present the criteria for that had yet to be established). And when Nobles lost such an individual or had one snatched away, their feelings changed to a crazed desire to get them back. Needless to say, their madness included a wish for vengeance on those who'd snatched their favorite.

When the Nobility's power was at its gleaming zenith, it was perfectly normal

for the entire hometown of an abductee to be banished to another dimension or targeted for a meteorite strike. Now, even with their hegemony far in decline, it didn't stand to reason that a human stagecoach would be able to pass unharmed through Noble territory immediately after an incident such as this. Especially when the servant that'd been taken from them was riding in that coach. Nevertheless, while there had been an urgent request from the Capital, it was said the stagecoach had set out mainly due to fears that the Noble—Duke Sinistre—might strike against the town of Happy Gringo.

Before noon on the third day, they would reach the relay station and inn in Gasburke, where an escort brigade dispatched by the Capital would join up with them. The brigade was armed with the very latest weapons based on the Nobility's own technology, and they would guide the coach to the town of Canaluda, where the airfield was located. Their lives would be on the line for only two days of the journey. That thought was all the stagecoach's passengers had to cling to, as if it were the very hands of God.

"I'm going to go up with Lantz for a while. I'm counting on you guys down here," the sheriff told her deputies about an hour after they'd left town.

After Louise mounted the forward staircase and disappeared outside through the hatch, the atmosphere in the vehicle became much more tranquil.

"Hey, Al, from here on out we'll be in the Nobility's domain. If you don't pull your head outta your ass, you'll be the first one killed!" Belbo teased, as if he'd been waiting for this moment.

When Al ignored him, he just redoubled his efforts, as if that were what anyone would do. "I hear tell you took this gig on account of your wife and kids wanting to buy one of them automatic cleaning machines from the Capital. It's a nice thought, but it ain't gonna do you much good if you lose your life in the bargain. Hell, if something happens, we've gotta be more concerned with protecting this piece of shit than saving our own skins!"

Belbo rapped his heavy bow against the iron bars of the cage. A shrill sound reverberated, and the young man—who'd been looking down at the floor—suddenly raised his head in surprise.

"Oh, did I wake the Noble's precious little page? Okay, you take a good look at

my buddy and me. Until they cut you up and study you in the Capital, we get to play nursemaid to you. So tell me, did the Nobility feed on you, fucker?"

The air congealed. This was a reasonable enough question on the Frontier—but because of the effect it might have, asking it in front of other people was taboo. A horrible insult, it often escalated into an infringement of human rights that led to blood being spilled—it was said that such cases were on the order of a hundred thousand at the very least.

"No, I . . . I never . . ." the young man babbled after a while. Though he sounded exhausted, his voice was just as lovely as his face.

"You're trying to tell me you lived with the Nobility for more than a decade, and they didn't do nothing to you? Who'd buy that? Well, you *are* a looker. Bet there's a pretty good chance that instead of blood, they were sucking *something else*."

"Please, just stop," the young man said, shaking his head violently. "I don't want to think about it anymore. I escaped from the duke. I couldn't stand it any longer."

"Sure, that's what all you 'servants' say," Belbo replied with a mocking grin. He'd finally found someone on whom he could take out all his fear, tension, and irritation. "But then, after a couple of years playing it safe, you spring out them fangs you've been hiding once everybody around you lets their guard down. I know what you're plotting, you little bastard!"

Belbo raised his bow. He was going to bang the cage again.

"Don't, Belbo," Al said, getting to his feet. At six foot two, he was pretty much on par with Belbo in the height department, but he looked to weigh about three times as much. His naturally big bones had been sheathed in an armor of muscles through strenuous physical labor.

Belbo found a sole means of escape in his seniority, saying, "What the hell, shit-kicker? You presuming to tell an ol' hand how to dohis job?"

"That wasn't my aim. It's just, you're probably gonna rattle the passengers."

"You've got a smart mouth for a goddamn rookie," Belbo said, and he also got to his feet.

There was no turning back now.

But another voice came between them.

III

“Stop screwing around, Deputy. That badge give you the right to bully anyone weaker than you? The other deputy’s setting a lot better example than you,” Claire said, giving Belbo a sharp look.

“What’s that, slut?” Belbo snapped, twice as set on looking tough now that he had a new foe—actually, just an ally for Al. “Who the hell you think’s gonna defend the lot of you on this trip when—”

“Earlier, the sheriff said you *wouldn’t* be defending us, remember? That sure is a lot of tough talk from a guy who takes orders from a woman.”

Belbo fell silent. He was just about to explode. But it was Al who stopped him.

“Belbo, remember this,” the farmer said, tapping a finger against the tin star that gleamed on his own chest.



For a while, Belbo was frozen in place. He knew that no matter what he did, he couldn't win. It felt as if an eternity passed before he let out a sharp little breath, then went back to his original location and sat back down.

"Oh, don't have anything to say now?" Claire said to him, needling him with laughter.

"Knock it off already," Harman the blacksmith told her. "What are we supposed to do when we're not out of town for more than an hour, and already everybody's at each other's throat? We've got two days through Noble territory ahead of us. If we don't cooperate, then everybody who needs saving might not get saved if anything happens. I wanna get where I'm going safe and sound. So do the rest of you, right? If so, let's show a little more consideration for the other folks."

"Yeah, yeah, you're right about that," Claire said, backing down easily. Perhaps it was just her nature to be surprisingly quick to take advantage of a situation.

Al grinned and said, "Thanks, Mr., er—"

"Harman. I'm a blacksmith."

"I'm Al. This is Belbo. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Let's hope we both live to a ripe old age."

The plain-faced blacksmith gave the deputies a little nod, and then faced forward again. Pulling a pint bottle of whiskey out of his bag, Harman asked the taciturn passenger across the aisle, "Care for a drink, bud?"

"No, thanks," the man replied, his low voice trembling with absolute refusal.

"Pardon me. So, you a Hunter?" Harman continued, his voice also dropping to a murmur. It wasn't that he was trying to match the other man's tone, but rather that this was another question it was practically forbidden to ask in front of others.

"What makes you think that?" the man replied with unexpected speed.

"Well, in more than fifty years of living, I've run into all types. I can tell from the atmosphere. Just by being there, you make your surroundings sort of quiet

—I don’t know, like this.”

“You mean I give you the creeps?”

Deep in Harman’s chest, his ticker thumped hard.

“Ha ha!” the blacksmith said, trying to laugh it off, but apparently the other man wasn’t buying it.

“Do I give you the creeps?”

The blacksmith felt as if a tremendous weight were driving him back against the wall. “No, not at all. Just forget I mentioned it.”

Turning forward, Harman focused his attention on the woman two rows ahead of him, saying, “How about a drink, missy? You’re young, but I bet you can hold your liquor, eh?”

Mindful of those behind him, he took the red bandanna from around his neck and wiped the mouth of the bottle, then leaned forward over one row of seats and reached his arm over a second to offer it to the woman.

“Thanks. Don’t mind if I do,” Claire replied, turning around and reaching back to take the liquor bottle. She clutched her own bottle close to herself.

Taking a swig, she remarked, “This is good stuff. You blacksmiths make pretty good money, do you?”

“Spare me. God might just get so disgusted by that question he’ll shut the gates of Heaven on me. I barely squeak by, but I figure the least I can do is spring for decent booze for myself.”

“You don’t say.”

On seeing the woman down about three mouthfuls with the next swig, Harman bugged his eyes.

“Really can handle your liquor, can’t you? Missy, you wouldn’t happen to be —”

“I work in watering holes. Only I went a little too far and got run out of Happy Gringo. They had the nerve to tell me they’d put me on trial if I wasn’t out of town by the end of today. What’s a dinky little burg like that doing with a public

morals committee anyway?” she grumbled, taking another belt from the bottle.

“You said it. I was just thinking the same—”

“You look like a nice, respectable blacksmith, so what are you doing riding on this dangerous coach?”

“Just because I’m a blacksmith, that doesn’t mean I’ve got a set residence. See, I’m a traveling smith. It was just time to move on from that town.”

“Really? You know, now that you mention traveling smiths, I hear you guys do more than just make horseshoes and fix farm equipment. I’ve heard talk about iron dolls that can move on their own and wagons that run without engines, but is that stuff really true?” the woman inquired, then took another swig.

“Hey—I mean, yeah, I’ve heard those stories, too, but that stuff’s beyond me. That’s the kind of stuff the Nobility’s gotta teachyou.”

“Oh, now that’s disappointing.”

“Sorry. By the way, could I have my—”

“Oh, this? Gee, I’m sorry—I seem to have drunk the whole thing, haven’t I?”

“‘Seem to,’ my ass! You went and drank the whole thing,” Harman said, but he managed to rein in his anger. After all,he was the one who’d said they had to work together. Taking the bottle without another word, he held it upside down and sighedsadly.

“This is good booze, but it’s pretty strong,” he said. “You could light your breath on fire about now. Downing half a bottle of that—you sure your stomach and liver can take it?”

“From the time I was seven, I’ve been going from bar to bar, so I’ve got twenty years’ experience at this. If I couldn’t handle it, I’d have checked out of this life a long time ago. God must have a pretty good sense of humor.”

Claire’s cheeks were flushed, but then they’d been that way when she climbed onboard. And she’d been drinking ever since—more to the point, there hadn’t been a single day in the last two decades that she hadn’t had a drink. God have pity on her.

As soon as the sun went down, foot traffic died out in the town of Happy

Gringo. Due to being just outside Duke Sinistre's domain, the town hadn't suffered any significant damage since its inception, yet fear of the beings who'd ruled over them for ten millennia remained indelibly imprinted not only on the townspeople but on the subconscious of every human being.

Funeral services for the late Fredrick Nahathela had been concluded that day without incident, but his wife Verik's anger only continued to swell. Yes, it certainly could be said that her husband was wrong to get involved with that woman. But if that tramp hadn't been around to begin with, Verik knew her husband wouldn't have had those strange urges and wouldn't have ended up meeting the fate he did.

What a horrible way to die.

Verik had intended to cut the woman in two with a razor-sharp sword from the Nobility that'd been handed down in the family for centuries. She'd been stopped by the woman's employer—the saloonkeeper.

When the saloonkeeper delivered her husband's lifeless remains, Verik lost her mind and was about to leave the house with the keen blade in one hand, but he told the woman her husband Fredrick had tried to have his way with one of the saloon's employees. He conceded that it was, indeed, terrible the way she'd done it, but his girl had acted in self-defense. Therefore, the widow was asked to let bygones be bygones if the girl left town that very day. What's more, he informed her that her Fredrick had been in the habit of sharing the details of some very unsavory dealings with the girl at his saloon. Were those facts to become public knowledge, Verik and the rest of her family would be the next ones forced to leave town. He mentioned how people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. And after the saloonkeeper gave her a small sampling of the contents of her husband's stories, Verik accepted his deal without further debate.

However, as much as Verik's head could accept it, her heart only burned hotter with malice with each passing minute.

I'll go out to Duke Sinistre's castle and offer him my blood in exchange for ripping that girl limb from limb, she thought. *No, I'll have him do it the same way she did my husband, so it takes a good, long time—*

The woman's hate-addled brain clearly made out the sound of footsteps.

Someone's coming down the street in the residential district. A traveler, perhaps? No, the gates would already be closed by now, so they'd have no choice but to wait outside the walls until dawn. And none of the townspeople would be prowling around outside all alone at this hour. Who, then?

Mixed with the footfalls, she could hear voices. Exactly the kind of voices you didn't want to hear at night. Screams. Though her hearing was by no means exceptional, Verik could tell that the cries were coming from the same direction the footsteps had come. So many voices. And such weird screams. They came from behind the footsteps—and were spreading across the town. Anyone and everyone was screaming.

What happened?

Clearly it was the work of whomever the footfalls belonged to. But where were those footsteps taking them? If they went clear across town, there was nothing beyond that but Joseph Gashuk's ranch and Stefan Hubuff's fields. Not them too! Destroying the town and killing everyone—and for what?

A feeling of desperation won out over her fear. Verik ran to the window.

Where were those footsteps?

The door opened. Darkness choked the doorway.

The footsteps were directly in front of her house.

The darkness came inside.

BOARDING ALONG THE WAY

Chapter 2

I

The fact that they reached the Mihal way station without incident was a joyous event worthy of special note. Dinner was the customary spread of salt pork, a salad of chopped vegetables, bean soup, and plum brandy, and after, when there was nothing left to do but go up to their rooms and get some sleep, Al stepped outside in order to have a cigarette.

Even at home, the farmer preferred smoking in the great outdoors instead of in the cramped confines of a room. The air wasn't filled with so many other scents as it was indoors, but rather it was the clean breeze of the wilderness that caught his smoke. This man who never thought of anything save his family disregarded their protests that he shouldn't go outside, where something might spot the smoke or glow of his cigarette and come after him.

I've done it a hundred times before without any problems, Katie, Al called to his wife across the miles. *Just pray I make it safely through one more day.*

Slowly letting out a deep drag, Al then looked down at the ground at his feet. He could clearly make out his own shadow and that of the stand of trees in front of the station building. It was bright out. He looked up to find the sky filled with stars. Half of his cigarette vanished just like that, and he got the feeling that was the stars' way of telling him something.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Holy shit!" Al exclaimed, reaching for the rifle across his knees, but the second he realized it was only Claire he halted.

"Don't go shooting me, now!"

"Don't scare me like that. I'm about as jumpy as they come."

After a long gaze at his stiffened features, Claire twisted her lips into a smile. "You're not even joking, are you? You're an interesting fella."

“I ain’t interesting at all. People been telling me as much since the day I was born. I’m strait-laced. I know how to till my fields and sow seeds, but I couldn’t sing a single damn song if I had to.”

“That’s all a man really needs to be able to do.” Claire let out a deep breath. Holding out the bottle of liquor in her hand, she said, “Have some? Though I must say, it’s cheaper stuff than the blacksmith’s.”

Al declined.

“Why not?”

“If I drank that, I wouldn’t be good for anything after. Out here, getting sloppy could be serious business.”

“What about that servant fella?”

“He’s in the stable. We’re all taking turns watching him round the clock. Belbo and Lantz are up now. Three hours from now, it’ll be me and the sheriff.”

“So—does he have the powers of a Noble?” she inquired, her voice instinctively hushed.

Though only the two of them were there, the question concerned the very fate of their journey. What if, somewhere along the line, the servant demonstrated some inhuman power even he himself didn’t know about?

“I don’t know. But let’s pray like hell he don’t. Just gotta hold out for one more day.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“What do you mean by that?” the man asked, and it felt like his heart was being squeezed in a fist.

“I’ve got no basis for saying so. It’s just, when you’ve been living the way I have long enough, you stop believing in rosy pictures.I traveled six hundred miles to a pleasure district with a good reputation only to find the local laws regarding ‘entertainment’ had changed and wiped the whole place out. I also sped off to meet a farmer who said he’d have me for his wife only to find he’d dropped dead of a heart attack the day before I got there. My whole life’s been one thing after another like that. You actually believe someone could spend

better than ten years with the Nobility and not have them do anything?”

“I don’t know. Not much point in stewing over it. We don’t know what’s gonna happen tomorrow until tomorrow gets here. That’s the way I look at it. I’ve got no way of knowing if it’s gonna rain, or if a drought’s gonna keep going. That being the case, my time’s probably better spent thinking about something else.”

“You’re a lot more of a realist than me. So, at times like that, what do you think about?”

“Well, all kinds of stuff.”

“Your family?”

“For the most part, yeah.” Al’s reply seemed somewhat bashful. He wanted to change the topic. “Earlier today when you laid into Belbo, didn’t you say something about not bullying the weak? You’re the only person I’ve ever met who’d consider one of *their* servants weak.”

“I didn’t really mean anything by it,” Claire replied, smiling and fanning herself with one hand. “But to take a looker like him, put him in chains, and lock him in a cage . . . That’s no way to treat a human being. You could hardly call him strong or even normal, am I right?”

“It might not be the greatest example, but we can think of him like a mad dog or some kind of supernatural beast.”

“You’re probably right.” Claire tilted the liquor bottle way back. That was the way someone drank when it was part of their daily life. After finishing a swig, she continued, “So, if we make it through this trip safe and sound, you heading back home?”

“I sure am. Everybody’s waiting for me, after all.”

“Your wife, and you have kids, too?”

“Yeah, five and three. All three of ’em always complain about me going outside to smoke.”

Claire said nothing.

“But enough about me. Where are you headed? To the Capital?”

“Damned if I know. I only got on this coach because I was being run out of town. The next town’ll probably be more of the same. Not that I envy you or anything, but every once in a while I wish I had a man around to ask me to stop drinking.”

“Oh, you’ll find one someday.” Al’s tone was gentle.

The woman chuckled a little. “I hope you’re right.”

Al put what remained of his cigarette in his pocket. “It’s starting to get chilly,” he said. “Should probably call it a night.”

“I’m gonna drink a little longer. You go on ahead.”

“Okay,” said Al. For some reason, it wasn’t easy to say. And then, he suddenly added, “You really shouldn’t drink too much.”

After the farmer had gone, Claire didn’t lift the liquor bottle again, but rather gazed out over the plains spreading like a sea beyond the fence.

“I wonder how far I’ll go.”

As she muttered that, a shadowy figure slipped by her side. After he’d gone a few paces more, she finally realized it was the Hunter. Claire had overheard his exchange with Harman the blacksmith. On a still night without even the cries of supernatural creatures, this man had walked up and then away with silent footfalls—after Al had left. Claire felt as if she were being drawn into another world.

The man advanced ten yards as if he hadn’t even seen Claire, then halted and gazed straight ahead. As if something lurked out in the wilderness.

The man swiveled ninety degrees to the right. When Claire saw that his right hand gripped a sword, the wind was knocked right out of her. She hadn’t even noticed that he wore one.

And then—

Claire was reduced to a spectator of his blade dance. The sword moved in the man’s hand. He struck a pose so elegant it could only be called dancing, but then transformed into a movement so rough it no longer deserved the name. The man moved, and the sword moved. Though it was supposedly under his

control, the blade flashed out as if possessing a will of its own, glinting in the moonlight. The light it reflected seemed to put the moon itself to shame, Claire thought, the very idea turning her entire body to ice.

The bar girl quickly noticed that the man was scribing a diagram with the tip of his blade. It wasn't a shape that mere words could define, but it was clearly a lethal one—an orbit that would end with a life taken. Every time he finished scribing it, Claire could see a figure reel backward in a bloody mist while clutching at empty air. Another diagram was traced in empty space.

No, she thought. *This one's entirely different than all the others, isn't it?*

There was bright blood—and a figure thudded to the ground.

The air trickled out of her. She couldn't exhale. It wasn't that she was in pain, but because she thought she was going to die.

Suddenly Claire could breathe easy again.

The man had sheathed his sword.

Numb from head to toe, Claire fell over onto the ground. Her eyes never left the man. He melted into the darkness. This man whose form stood out in the darkness was becoming one with the world—that was the thought that fuzzily coalesced in the void that'd just formed in her head.

"Did you see me?" someone suddenly asked her.

A man stood right in front of her, in the very place the voice had originated.

"Yes, I did," she replied, unable to think of anything but telling him the truth.

"Go take a shower."

It was the same voice she'd heard in the coach. Claire finally realized she was soaked with sweat. Her hair was plastered to her brow.

"Thanks for the suggestion," she managed to reply. "I've seen my share of swordsmanship, but I've never seen anybody like you before. Doesn't seem like the sort of thing you'd need against human beings. You really are a Hunter, aren't you? And a Vampire Hunter, at that."

"That was a long time ago."

“What? You’re retired? But you’re still—”

She was going to tell him he was still fantastically skilled. The sweat that’d poured from her testified to the uncanny skill of his swordplay, as his blade seemed to dance. It seemed impossible that anyone who’d ever attained such impressive skill could ever settle down in an honest job.

“No, I can’t.” The words came from his heart.

“But to me, you still look like . . .”

“I can’t do it anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Could you see me?”

“Yeah.”

“Right up until I swung my sword, you could make me out clearly in the dark, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“But as soon as I sheathed my sword, I melted into the darkness.”

Claire nodded.

“That’s why I can’t work as a Hunter. You always have to get the better of the darkness—that’s a requirement for Hunters.”

The woman couldn’t answer him at first. It seemed so terrible. To Claire, it felt like a knife to the heart. How hard had he trained to get to that point?

“And now?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“Good question.”

“So, you’re traveling around in search of an answer?”

There was no reply.

She was just about to call out to him when suddenly there was something overhead. Falling without a sound, it thudded loudly at Claire’s feet. The breeze from it struck her face on both sides.

Claire held her right hand out in front of her. There was the sound of stone on

stone, and a flame sprang into being. Within the circle of light lay a creature that'd been bisected lengthwise. Each half had a wing nearly three feet in length growing out of its back. It was these that'd stirred the breeze that struck Claire's face. But the strangest phenomenon made the woman's eyes go wide.

That thing's not bleeding! she thought. Not only that, but all its innards remained in their original locations.

"A winged beast-man. They're lapdogs of the Nobility. Probably sent to keep an eye on us. Won't be long now before they come for us," said the former Hunter.

"Why would a lookout attack us?"

The instant the woman asked, she realized the answer. His swordplay had drawn it in. The otherworldly creature had no doubt been lured by his unearthly skill.

"Go inform the sheriff." That was all the man said before walking off.

"Um, I'm Claire, by the way. And you are?"

"JJ."

Once the darkness had swallowed his voice, Claire pulled herself up. Somehow she made it to her feet. She was just about to follow after the man when she turned and looked back at the corpse on the ground.

"What in the—?!" the woman exclaimed.

The bloodless carcass that'd seemed like a piece of taxidermy had dumped its organs and bones on the ground, which was now damp and black with its fresh blood.

II

After getting word from Claire, Sheriff Louise raced to the scene, where she had the monster's remains carried into the barn so she could conduct an autopsy with a medical kit from the inn. She ordered her two deputies to assist her, but in the course of her two-hour medical foray both of them threw up and were left trembling, so they weren't even good for guard duty any longer. She promptly sent them back to their rooms, and was having a smoke beside the

bed that was serving as her dissection table when Al showed up.

“How’d it go, Sheriff?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be keeping watch over the servant?”

With Louise glaring at him, Al falteringly replied, “He’s sleeping now. I was worried about you, Sheriff.”

What point is there in telling him anything? Louise thought, but even though his appointment was temporary, he was a deputy all the same. She had to tell him what she knew.

“This creature is a human/bat combination. It combines the cunning and intellect of a human with the flying ability of a bat, plus the bloodsucking abilities of a Noble. One look at its fangs and you’ll see. We’re being followed already, and being watched.”

“Duke Sinistre, is it?”

“Who else would it be?”

“Well, if we don’t roll our sleeves up and get a move on, we won’t last another day,” Al said, adjusting his grip on the rifle he carried. Though he couldn’t hide his fright, his eyes burned with a fighting spirit that would overcome it. He might not be much of a deep thinker, but he was probably a hell of a lot more dependable than the other two deputies.

“We’ve got to be on our toes tonight, too. Night is when the Nobles have their greatest power, and this one’s not over yet.”

“I follow. I’ll get right back to him.”

At the man’s low, powerful reply, Louise clapped him lightly on the shoulder and told him, “Go get some rest. I’ll keep an eye on him.”

Leaving the barn with a certain something in one hand, the sheriff immediately headed for the stable. Actually, the stable had long ago been replaced by a much larger building and left to decay, but it was still more than large enough to secure the servant.

Dorleac was staring out through his cage. His skin was more lustrous than in daytime, and both his eyes and his expression carried power. Even with her

sunglasses on, Louise could clearly make out a vivid, lovely shade of rose—his lips.

“Just as I thought. You really have been bitten, haven’t you?”

“No, you’re wrong,” Dorleac said, swinging his lovely countenance from side to side and gazing at Louise. “I swear I’ve never been bitten. However, after spending so long among the Nobility, one gradually absorbs their atmosphere.”

“How so?”

“If you’d be so kind as to look down at my feet. Never fear, I won’t cast a spell over you or anything. Because I don’t know how to do anything of the sort.”

“What about hypnotism?”

“It’s no use. Even if I knew how to do it, it wouldn’t work with you wearing those sunglasses.”

Saying nothing, Louise lowered her gaze. She soon realized what the servant had been driving at. His shadow was faint. Louise’s shadow, those of the shelves or the ropes hanging from the ceiling—all were as black as ink, while Dorleac’s shadow was like muddied water. This gorgeous young man ran contrary to the laws of nature that applied to everything else in the universe.

“It’s not always that way. Sometimes it’s that way for just a second, and other times it takes a whole day for it to go back to normal. Aside from that—ah, yes, sometimes I don’t cast a reflection in mirrors or windowpanes. Oddly enough, there have been times when I had no reflection in large mirrors but did in small ones. I don’t know if the reverse is also true.”

“It’s getting harder and harder to trust you. You might even believe what you’re saying, but it could still all be a pack of lies.”

“If you’re that suspicious of me, nothing I can say will make any difference. I’m simply telling you the truth, though.”

“And in my line of work, I’m not allowed to believe that.”

“What do I have to do to get you to believe me?”

Louise took a seat in the rough chair beside her. She made sure her hands were resting on the pistol and stake launcher she wore on her gun belt.

“I want information,” she told him. “Everything you know about Duke Sinistre.”

“But I already told you when I was brought into town. I can’t remember anything more than fragments. At times, memories suddenly come back, but they quickly fade. I can’t even remember why it was I left the duke’s castle in the first place.”

“There must’ve been some trouble, eh?”

“I don’t know. While the duke’s castle was quite luxurious, parts of it were like an old, old dungeon. I recall working in the duke’s flower beds, and that I fed some huge beast whose growls alone are still with me.”

“There have been reports of others who’ve had similar experiences,” Louise said without emotion. “What they have in common matches with what we know about you: taken before the age of ten, made to serve as a Noble’s manservant for years—and that should be the case with you, too.”

“And I keep telling you—I don’t remember!” Dorleac shouted, wringing the words from his throat. “Duke Sinistre—I may not remember his face or his build, but he kept me close at hand for more than a decade and saved me from starvation. I can tell you anything you like about my life before the duke made off with me. I was lured to the duke’s carriage because my parents had abandoned me in the forest to make their own food go further when a famine struck the area where we lived. And so I went off to the Noble’s castle—and what do you think I could do there? I know what you, the scholars, the higher-ups in the government, or even everyday people think. I saw the lascivious looks in the eyes of those who captured me. As I explained, Sinistre’s castle contained more lovely women and strapping men than I could count. However, as I grew older their numbers dwindled, until ultimately there was only the duke and his robotic servants. That much you also heard, did you not?”

Louise got the impression the young man was a sort of pet in need of protection. *Look how weak I am*, he seemed to say. *Treat me more gently, please. Feed me tasty victuals, give me warm clothing, and ask me nothing that might be difficult to answer, all the while doing everything in your power to spare me any pain.*

“To be honest, while I’m interested in what happened while you were a captive, no matter what it was, it doesn’t change my responsibility for you or my attitude. There’s no point in trying to make someone answer if he insists he can’t. I want to know about Duke Sinistre because it’s my duty to escort you safely, and I won’t have even the slightest obstacle getting in our way. The duke’s character, his strength, the powers he controls, the monsters he commands—these are all things I guarantee will be brought to bear on us when he attacks tomorrow. You know, you’d do well not to delude yourself with dreams of all of us being slaughtered and you alone saved so you can go back to the duke. There’s a good chance the duke’s trying to get at you so you’ll keep your mouth shut. After all, you’re a human who lived with him day in and day out for over a decade. You know everything about the duke—his weaknesses, his routines, his secret hiding places. That being the case, it’d be a lot easier to just finish you off instead of bringing you back alive—and I recall reading somewhere that the Nobility are surprisingly practical.”

Louise was expecting one of three reactions. He’d laugh it off, insist that such wasn’t the case, or sneer at her.

“Instead of asking about the duke, I believe it might be easier to come to a solution if you were to ask me what I think of myself,” Dorleac said, allowing his body to sink into the languor that followed excitement. “I’ve never entertained the thought that someone who’d spent more than a decade among the Nobility would be accepted back into the human world. If I were you, I’d want someone like that wiped from the face of the earth as soon as possible. And I can accept that. Is there no drug that could dissolve me down to my bones before the night is through?”

“I see. In that case, how about—this!” Louise said, slamming something she’d kept hidden behind her back all the way from the barn against his cage.

There was a soft impact, and Dorleac stared at the bloody chunks that were slowly falling. Beads of blood adorned his face like jewels. Dorleac peered down at *half* a creature with a human face and a bat body, looking as if he were about to faint.

“Half human, half beast. The handiwork of the same Duke Sinistre who treated you so kindly. Take a good look at that face. It’s an infant’s, wouldn’t

you say?”

A long time passed.

When his lips finally parted, the young man’s voice sounded like it’d been forced through some malignancy in his throat. “And what are you saying I should do?”

“Nothing. I just wanted you to see this side of your kind old duke. I had no choice but to dissect this kid. Can’t let the creep who’d make something like this get the better of me.”

“You’re a brave one, aren’t you?” Dorleac said with a grin. It was the doleful smile of an herbivore. “Still, I can’t be of any help to you.”

“I’m well aware of that. However, the next day will determine your fate. And if, at the very end, you should recall the Nobility didn’t give you eternal life, well, it’ll be too late then. You’ll just have to accept a quick death.”

Just as the sheriff finished saying that, Al came back.

“Be sure and stay on your toes. I’ll send Belbo and Lantz right over.”

And with that, Louise left.

Al looked at the handsome visage of the young man seated in the cage and said to him, “Why, you’re covered in blood!” His eyes then stopped on the remains lying at the base of the cage. “That sheriff sure does make a mess. Here, use this to wipe yourself off,” he said, passing the servant his own handkerchief.

“Thank you.”

Dorleac looked overjoyed to be able to wipe his face, but naturally Al didn’t notice how the drops of blood that’d clung to the young man’s lips a moment earlier had somehow now vanished.

III

One last day. And that wasn’t all. *He’s sure to come.* That was the premonition each of them carried in their head as the stagecoach pulled away from the station with daybreak the following morning, racing across the wilderness until

just past noon, when that became reality.

Both sides of the road were now filled with enormous statues staring across at each other. At a glance it was clear the individuals they depicted were Nobility. Though they were dressed in the full gamut of raiment, with everything from medieval court fashions to capes, tuxedos, and morning coats, their cold refinement and chilling stares froze even the hearts and bodies of those who glimpsed them from the stagecoach.

There were women, too. Garbed in cruel elegance in everything from old-fashioned dresses to the latest styles, the sixty-foot-tall ladies were ready to attend some ball, with glittering necklaces of stone about their necks and bracelets on their wrists.

Not all of the statues were complete; some lay at length with lower halves still rough-hewn stone, and there were piles of wreckage apparently abandoned after only a face or arm had been sculpted that seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see. Advancing down the road that ran right through the middle of them, the stagecoach looked like some pitiful humans who'd accidentally strayed into a land of giants.

"It's called the Gallery of the Nobility," Claire said. "They sure are big. And they look like they could start moving at any second."

But there was something about them that made those viewing them for the first time recall a question they'd harbored since childhood.

"Why aren't *their images* showing their fangs?"

A cry of astonishment precluded the answer to that question.

"What's that lying over there? A hammer and chisel? Look at the size of them!"

"Long, long ago, when the Outer Space Beings attacked from beyond the stars, it seems the Nobility breathed life into sculptures that were under construction and used 'em as soldiers on the front lines," Harman explained. "Look. See that square over there? It's empty. Really, it should've been full of statues."



“So, what was the outcome?” inquired Claire.

“Well, it seems the Nobility won. They say the OSB had planned on killing every living thing on the planet, so hurray for us, I guess. Of course, even ten thousand years later, seeds sown by the OSB, or stragglers, or holdouts—call ’em what you will, it seems they’re still lying low somewhere and plotting their conquest of the planet.”

Just then—someone stood bolt upright in the middle row of seats. It was the Hunter—JJ. With all eyes upon him, he ascended the stairs leading to the driver’s seat and exited to the roof of the stagecoach. When he told the men in the driver’s seat he’d take someone’s place, the two deputies turned around.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Belbo said with a shake of his head from where he rode shotgun. “It’s dusty as hell, and you’ll be a sitting duck. Your life’s at risk just sitting there.”

“In that case, wouldn’t it be best to change with me?” JJ asked. “Just leave it to me until we get out of this valley.”

The two men looked at each other, and then told him to hold on a second. They then did rock-paper-scissors, and Belbo won. After deftly swapping places with JJ, he vanished into the carriage.

“You were a Hunter, isn’t that right?” Lantz asked, sounding a little unnerved. Louise had filled him in on the passengers the night before. “You sense something strange or something?”

“Yeah, a little.”

“Hey, don’t give me that. I’m the most skittish deputy in the whole western Frontier. If something’s gonna happen, do me a favor and don’t tell me about it.”

“That’s odd.”

“What is?”

“Here, there are indications of all kinds of creatures moving around. Nobles, OSB, humans—but *this thing* . . .”

“What do you mean, ‘this thing’?” said Lantz, his voice nearly cracking.

JJ fell silent.

“Come on!” the deputy said, looking like he was about to cry.

“There!” the former Hunter snapped, his finger jabbing off to the upper right. Sheer cliffs left craggy where the rock had been carved away continued on and on—and he pointed to the precipice.

Lantz looked over that way, too, and exclaimed softly, “It’s a person!”

He craned his neck just about as far as he could to the right—and then turned forward again. The figure had left his field of view. However, Lantz was still looking. And as they worked the reins, his hands seemed less than reliable.

“Did you see that? That face?” the deputy murmured as if in a trance. He hadn’t been wearing his sunglasses. “It was so far away, and I only got a little glimpse, but I saw it clear enough. I’ve got good eyes. If only my vision were about one-tenth weaker, I wouldn’t have had to see it—a man like that in this world of ours . . . Sorry, but you’ll have to take over for me on the horses. The way I’m feeling, I can’t do anything right.”

The former Hunter assumed the reins without incident.

“Him, way out here.”

The half-dazed deputy responded to JJ’s muttering, saying, “*Him*? You know that guy?”

“That unearthly aura of his . . . I was the only one to sense it . . . Still do. But I didn’t wanna run into him.”

Lantz shook the man by the shoulders, pressing him for more. “C’mon, spill it already. You know him, right? What’s his deal? Is he one of your kind—a Hunter?”

Without waiting for his response, the world around them opened wide.

“What the hell is this? A monster banquet?!” a bug-eyed Claire exclaimed inside the vehicle.

There were no longer any Nobility who would glitter in the darkness. Watching the stagecoach from either side of the road, poised for action, were enormous spiders and monsters that were nothing but claws. As they passed by

one with tentacles like an octopus, Claire thought it moved, freezing her in place.

The human imagination had its limits. It simply couldn't picture something that was beyond those bounds. However, while the statues now surrounding the speeding stagecoach had clearly been crafted by a human hand, they originated from somewhere outside human imagination.

"First time seeing 'em?" Harman asked, wiping his face with the scarf from around his neck.

"Of course so. What, have you seen them once or twice?"

"Nope. Only seen a picture of 'em in a guidebook. From what it said, seems these things were dreamed up to use against the OSB. The Nobles used their technology to get 'em up into space and make 'em fight. Now, a human being wouldn't wanna mess with monsters like these, and they seem to have had even more effect on the OSB. Must've been a sensitive bunch," the blacksmith laughed.

Making a disgusted face in such a way that the guffawing blacksmith wouldn't see it, the woman said, "You're not really tied down in your line of work, right? With that in mind, why don't you give this some thought? How about you quit smithing and become a sculptor?"

Harman buttoned his lip. The woman thought he might've been rubbed the wrong way, but he made a low humming noise to himself. Apparently he was seriously considering it.

Claire stuck out her tongue.

"That settles it," he declared gravely some three minutes later—by which time Claire's hard drinking had left her slightly buzzed. "Missy, I'm gonna take your advice. I'm through with being a blacksmith. I'm gonna cut stone."

The woman didn't know what to say to that.

"Just you wait and see. I'll sculpt the stone into statues so real, they'll come to life and start moving around!"

Claire wasn't looking at Harman. Her focus was on something beyond the

window.

“What is it?”

No sooner had Harman posed that question than the hatch in the ceiling opened and Lantz could be heard shouting, “The damned things started moving!”

Harman’s eyes shifted. All the passengers were drawn to the windows.

Movement had suddenly come to a world that’d been frozen for dozens of centuries. See how the spiders rub their legs together and hoist themselves up? Creatures with faces that can’t even be seen scratch at the ground with claws the size of buildings. However, more than those they’d already passed, it was those blocking the way up ahead who drew the attention of the passengers.

Some five hundred yards up ahead, towering statues of half-naked gods had risen, with the one on the right carrying a hammer that looked to be thirty feet long, and the one on the left with a pair of bellows. At the feet of the statue on the right was a heap of melted metal. The stone god on the right then put his hand into the sack beside him and pulled out a black lump. He laid it atop the smallest of the sculptures, a stone carving of a forge ten feet across. The stone god spread it all over the melted metal at his feet, and on the surrounding area. The sound of it became a roar that made the earth tremble and rocked the stagecoach.

What frightened the passengers most was the sight that followed. The stone god from the left side crossed the road, aimed his bellows at the forge, and began working it. A wind was whipped up. It was powerful enough to make JJ and Lantz up in the driver’s seat turn their faces away. However, the forge was also made of stone. Though the wind was almost two hundred knots, it should have had little to no effect on the forge. The people saw the forge glow red hot. A scalding wind slapped JJ and Lantz’s faces.

Look! The mass of stone blazes up with each blast of wind!

A hundred yards to go. What would be waiting there?

“Could we change direction?” asked the pale Lantz.

“No, it’s too late for that. Not even changing direction would get us out of

this. Run straight at it!” JJ ordered in a low, hard tone.

The wind had become a blistering gale. And it was red with sparks. The stone god on the right stuck one hand into where the stone bar of iron met the coals and scooped up the forge. Was the red-hot liquid that spilled between his fingers and rained to the ground metal or stone?!

“No!” Lantz, Harman, and Al all groaned.

Just as they’d envisioned, the stone god had hurled the blazing forge at the stagecoach. It didn’t need to burn them. The way it was thrown, the shock just before it landed would be enough to toss the stagecoach like a tin toy.

Perhaps that god hadn’t been cut out for manual labor. The stone forge hit the ground thirty feet shy of the stagecoach, sinking into the earth to a depth of about six feet and sending up a plume of dust. Dirt and rocks rained down, and the horses—didn’t go crazy. Only at the very moment of impact was their gait broken, but in a heartbeat they were back at it, and the stagecoach made a huge turn that took it off the highway, but barreling straight toward the pair of murderous statues.

“The horses aren’t scared,” Sheriff Louise murmured absent-mindedly within the vehicle. “Who the hell is at the reins . . . ?”

A scream rang out from Claire. She was hiding her eyes now, but outside the window and off to the right, the stone god was preparing for a second throw.

Once again, a stone sphere sketched a straight line in flame. This time, it was well aimed.

Could a human being hear a silent scream? That was precisely what the people heard in that instant.

A cry went up from something that had no voice. From the giant spider that had closed to within thirty feet of the stagecoach’s rear and made a carefully aimed leap! The blistering chunk of rock had smashed its face in. Not only that, but it kept up a full head of steam, rolling like a ball and scoring a direct hit on the titanic claw that was behind the spider!

Whatever had brought the statues back to life, it didn’t appear that power extended to a mastery of their will. The spider with the crushed head and the

claw creature that'd had its weapon half destroyed charged with renewed hate at the sculptor and the blacksmith, the bodies of each threatening to sink into the earth under their hundreds of tons of mass. The colossal hammer crushed the thorax of the pouncing spider, and as if waiting for that, the titanic claw dug into the statue's neck, taking its head off with one swift motion.

The shock of that head impacting on the ground shook the stagecoach violently. The chunk of stone was easily in excess of a hundred tons, and had dropped from a height of over sixty feet. If not for the power of its stabilizers, the vehicle would've rolled two or three times across the ground like a ball.

"Now! Make a break for it!"

JJ's whip cracked, and two dozen hooves tore into the earth.

The titans battling high above the stagecoach drew closer. The stone god's foot came down. And, moving like a shooting star, the stagecoach narrowly sped out from under it.

"We did it!" the passengers shouted within the vehicle.

Up where he was riding shotgun, Lantz dropped his shoulders. A streak of gray had fallen right in front of him.

"What the—?"

The deputy tried to brush it off with his hand, but he only stuck to it. Or rather, it was the thread that had stuck to him. Gripped not so much by surprise as by a disquieting feeling, he had another thread flutter by his squinting eyes. Another, then another. And every last one of them stuck to the body of the stagecoach or to Lantz's shoulder.

"What the hell is this? Hey, it's stone!" Lantz groaned, sounding close to madness.

It was stone. Threads of stone were raining down from the heavens. What's more, despite the fact that they were stone, they had all the elasticity and adhesion of actual spider silk.

JJ turned around.

One of the enormous stone gods had toppled, there was no sign of the claw

creature, and the hammer-wielding statue that remained had been transformed into a lumpy chrysalis. The giant spider perched on its head had expelled threads from its abdomen. The threads now pursuing the stagecoach were the last remnants of that, borne on the wind. And, demonstrating the strength that had bound a stone statue weighing thousands of tons, the threads tore away iron plating where they made contact with the vehicle, and even ripped some of the flesh from Lantz's shoulder.

The horses whinnied. Threads had fallen across the backs and rumps of a number of them, taking with them chunks of the animals' flesh and hides.

"This ain't good—take the reins!"

Handing the reins to Lantz, who groaned as bright blood seeped from his shoulder, JJ leapt up from the driver's seat to the roof of the stagecoach. Even on the roof of the wildly rocking vehicle he showed not the slightest signs of anxiety. The instant he saw the strands of webbing that continued to pursue them, the former Hunter sprinted to the very end of the roof and reached for the longsword on his hip. Just as the dangerous threads were about to touch him, the man drew his blade.

The indescribable figures JJ scribed in empty space tossed and baffled the threads. Though none of them seemed to be within the borders of the shapes he scribed, all of them were drawn toward the center. There was the sharp sound of something being cut, and the severed threads scattered to the winds.

Lantz let out a scream of pain as a number of pieces struck him in the face, and the vehicle sang in release. A thin piece of webbing just a foot in length draped Lantz's knees. But even the victim couldn't believe this sinuous fragment of thread was the same thing that'd torn a chunk of flesh out of his shoulder.

In the distance, the expanse of the plains rose into view. A minute after outrunning the threads that still obsessively pursued it, the stagecoach escaped the valley of death and sped off across the vast plains, the wind eddying in its wake.

THE BEAUTIFUL SHADOW WALKER

Chapter 3

I

After speeding another dozen miles, JJ stopped the stagecoach to see to Lantz and the horses. Belbo and the sheriff examined the wounds, and in their final diagnosis the injuries were nothing serious.However, just to be safe, they would hurry to the next stop—Coolia—where the station building had medical facilities they could use.

“That sure was something else you did there.”

Drawing not only the sheriff’s praise but looks of wonder from everyone, JJ replied that it wasn’t his doing.

“Come on, don’t be modest, now.”

“Sure, I cut the webbing, but it was someone else that recited the spell that brought ’em to life.”

Lantz, who was slumped back in his seat, suddenly looked up in surprise. “What do you mean by that?”

“If that second stone the statue threw hadn’t hit the spider, it would’ve struck the stagecoach dead on. Don’t you find the timing of that a little too convenient?” Not so much as glancing at the others, who were shocked to hear that, JJ continued gravely, “When the spider pounced, I thought it was of its own volition, too. But that’s too pat.”

“You’re telling me somebody ordered it to take that missile? I mean, it’s a stone statue!” said Claire.

JJ swung his head from side to side. “No—it’s not quite the same thing as being ordered. And it attacked that other statue not so much of its own will as out of pure anger. But when it did, there was a rough wooden needle stuck in the spider’s back. *That* was what drove the spider crazy and made it jump.”

“A wooden needle, you say?” Belbo’s face twisted. Wearing a look of bald-faced suspicion, he said, “Hey, we’re talking about a creature made of stone here. How in the hell would a piece of wood—”

“Well, the flesh was torn from his shoulder by a stone web.”

JJ’s remark shut Belbo up.

To no one in particular the former Hunter continued, “But I don’t think *he* came out here after us out of concern for our safety. Even if he got softhearted, the distance from where I saw him to the spider was . . . But then, so what if it’s a skinny needle of wood? No, that guy could probably do it. Hell, I’m sure he could.”

Giving the others no chance to ask him any questions, JJ walked over to the cage in the rear. Grabbing hold of one of the bars, he called out, “Hey, you.”

Dorleac had been sitting there on his stool with his eyes closed, so it was unclear whether or not he’d been following their conversation, but now he looked up.

“Pretend you’ve got a tree branch here,” the former Hunter said to the prisoner. “A foot long, and weighing less than three-quarters of an ounce. Could you throw something like that five hundred yards and make it stick in a stone wall?”

“Not for the life of me,” he replied in a heartbeat.

But that wasn’t the end of it. JJ didn’t take his eyes off the handsome young man. Filled with powerful, eerie light, they bored down on the Noble’s manservant.

“However,” Dorleac continued in a voice like a wind creeping in through the tiniest of cracks, “I believe the duke could do so.”

Though they didn’t grasp the meaning of that, a calming acceptance flowed through the group. At last someone had said something that made sense. And that seemed to snap JJ’s investigation off at the ankles.

“Yeah, I suppose he could,” was all the former Hunter said as he returned to his seat.

“Let’s get this stagecoach going. This time, Belbo and I will be up in the driver’s seat.”

Shortly after Sheriff Louise’s pronouncement, the stagecoach slowly rolled out. For the moment, everything had been tidily wrapped up. However, even in the languid safety of the rocking vehicle, there was still one who voiced his objections.

“*He* could do it . . . A gorgeous man like that . . . He could drive wood through stone . . .” Lantz murmured as his bandaged body lay across several empty seats.

Perhaps the deputy had dreamed that unearthly beauty. The look on his face was torpid, as if his body burned with yearning for a loved one.

It was almost two hundred miles to Coolia—they could be there in four hours if they hurried.

They were about an hour shy of their destination when disquieting portents appeared in the sky.

“Here comes the rain!” Belbo shouted into the vehicle, but even before his voice reached them lightning was bleaching the far reaches of the plains.

“Better hurry.”

Everyone was thinking the same thing, but by that point rain had already begun to pelt the stagecoach. The rebounding spray gave the entire vehicle a whitish glow with the light of each lightning strike. Now all they could rely on were the lights their stagecoach was shining on the road.

“We’re gonna wind up going around in circles!”

“Don’t give me any of that. If we can just make it through tonight, tomorrow we’ll hook up with the escort brigade.”

Belbo and Louise’s conversation sounded like a shouting match.

“How much further have we gotta go?”

“At this rate, better count on it being another five, maybe six hours. Worst-case scenario, we stop and wait for the rain to pass us by,” said the sheriff.

“Oh, that’s just perfect!”

Even inside the vehicle, anxiety eddied like a heavy fog. In their present state of mind, they were all ready to attribute even the slightest change to the workings of the Nobleman known asSinistre.

It had all started with something from Lantz, who was supposed to be lying down. At some point he’d gotten out of his seat, gone over to the cage, and said to Dorleac in a menacing tone, “You think this is funny?”

“Excuse me?” the young man replied torpidly.

“For a while now, you’ve been grinning over how everybody’s looking out the windows. Why is that? Is it ’cause Sinistre’s making it rain?”

“You’ve got the wrong idea.”

“Liar. You can’t fool me. You were smiling, sure enough. Isn’t that right, Al?”

“Actually, I—” the farmer began, being in something of a bind. Like the other passengers, he’d been so focused on looking out the windows he’d neglected to keep an eye on their prisoner.

“He was more concerned with what everyone else was doing. So he doesn’t know whether I was smiling or not.”

The farmer could only nod at what Dorleac had said. From the passenger seats, two pairs of eyes focused on him. JJ alone remained indifferent.

“No, you were smiling. Yeah, grinning like the cat that ate the canary.”

Lantz’s face was pale and covered with sweat. He’d been given first aid, so he wouldn’t be bleeding or in pain, but the psychological shock had devastated his parasympathetic nervous system.

“Where’s Sinistre? He’s gotta be able to do more than just make it rain. Is he coming soon? If so, he’d better hurry up and show his damn hide!”

Lantz drew his pistol and faced the door. “Or are you already right outside? If you are, come on out—or are you gonna stay in hiding some more and get us on pins and needles? Okay, then, I’ll make it so you have to show yourself!”

The muzzle of his weapon whipped around. When it stopped, Dorleac was

right in front of it.

“Don’t do it, Lantz,” Al said, trying to stop him as anyone would expect.

“Out of my way. This is what we’ve gotta do, or the Noble won’t show himself. They mean to toy with us, kill us by inches.”

“Simmer down. You’re tired. For the love of God, go back to your seat and get yourself some rest.”

Stripping the concern alone from what Al had said, Lantz flew into a rage, saying, “Oh, so that’s how it is, eh? You’re in with ’em, you bastard? Sinistre’s already gotten to us? Okay, you piece of shit Nobleman—watch this. You love your little plaything so bad you’re chasing after us. Well, if he’s dead, you won’t have to do that anymore. Now get back to that ratty old castle of yours!”

He seriously intended to pull the trigger—and the fear of that colored Al’s face.

Just then, the hatch opened. A shout of “Al!” in a female voice drew Lantz’s attention, and in that instant he took a heavy blow to the scruff of his neck that numbed his very brain before he collapsed.

II

“What the hell’s going on?!”

The sheriff jumped down through the hatch, pointing her gun at the person who’d leveled her deputy.

“You’ve got it all wrong, Sheriff—let me explain what happened.”

Until Al had explained the situation, JJ stood in front of the barrel of Louise’s gun.

“I see. Sorry,” she told the former Hunter, “but give us some help getting Lantz up.”

Apparently the deputy was still conscious, and groaned with pain as they returned him to his seat and stripped him of his gun belt.

“I suppose I ought to thank you, huh?” Louise said, though it sounded like she wasn’t quite finished.

“Forget that. This is exactly what the enemy wants. The rain puts us on edge, and everyone starts acting crazy. Sheriff, shoot that kid in the cage with a tranq dart and put him to sleep. Having somebody around connected to the Nobility only makes everyone all the more nervous.”

“No can do. If the enemy attacks, I’ll have to take him and flee.”

“Mind if I try something?”

“What?” Louise suddenly realized that Lantz’s gun belt felt lighter. *His pistol?!* she thought, but at that very instant there was the crack of a shot, and Dorleac reeled backward.

“What the hell have you done?!”

Pulling the pistol from his hands, Louise pressed her own gun to JJ’s temple and called over to Al.

“Check his wounds from out here! You’re not to set foot inside there! Patch him up!”

“No need to get so worried,” JJ assured her. “I only grazed him. It didn’t even reach the bone. Didn’t have to, you see.”

“What’s this all about? The next time you pull something like that, I’ll throw you in the same cage with him, or toss your ass right off this stagecoach. You got that?”

JJ disregarded the woman’s bellowing, which only infuriated her more. “How is it?” the former Hunter asked Al, who’d been examining Dorleac’s wound through the bars.

“How is it? You’re right about just grazing him. He’s not even bleeding more than a little.”

“It stopped, then?”

“No, it’s still coming.”

“Then he’s a normal human. Get something to sterilize it and keep it from getting infected,” Louise told the farmer before turning.

“What’s the matter?!” Belbo asked in a feeble tone that was mixed with the

tapping of the rain. He'd heard the gunshot.

Going to the bottom of the stairs, Louise called up through the gaping hatch that it was nothing and they should keep going, then shut the hatch before going back.

"Care to explain yourself to us?"

"This means he's a normal human being. In other words, he'll die from the same amount of damage as any of us. If the Nobleman's fond of the kid, it means he can't hit us hard enough to kill us all when he attacks. Which is a hell of a lot better than things would be if he were indestructible, am I right?"

The sheriff was silent.

"You seem relieved. Well, don't let your guard down. It's fine while we're onboard the stagecoach, but once we reach the inn, we'll all be split up. If Sinistre and his bunch are gonna hit us, that's when it'll be. And it looks like we're not far off. Toward that end, what do you say to the lot of us staying in the stagecoach and not going outside until after daybreak?"

Once again ignoring the law enforcement officer, JJ had put his question to the other passengers. Though there were actually only two of them.

"Well, I'd be okay with that," Harman said, seeming to defer again to the sheriff. When you worked a respectable job, that was how you had to play it.

"I've just got one question," Claire said, raising a hand that still gripped a liquor bottle.

"And what would that be?"

"Well, if we all split up at the way station, wouldn't that actually be *safer*? After all, it's pretty boy there and the good sheriff they'd be gunning for. This never had anything to do with the rest of us."

"You really think so?"

"Sure, I do."

"Sheriff, you can take it from here."

And saying that, the former Hunter promptly returned to his seat, seeming as

unyielding as stone as he did so.

Having been “stood up,” Louise looked embarrassed, but she explained it this way.

“The Nobility finds it absolutely unforgivable when someone steals from them. In their world, you can’t just return something and have that be the neat little end of it. In the Nobility’s case, wholesale slaughter replaces our notions of incarceration or forced labor. Particularly in the case of body servants, who are the ones Nobles become most attached to. It may be pure legend, but it seems there have been Nobles so depressed after losing one they’ve committed suicide. Now, I don’t know if Sinistre is that invested in this, but there’s no way he’ll just let us off. And that includes you.”

The sound of the rain and the squeaking of the wheels filled the stagecoach.

“I leave the rest in your hands.”

And telling Al that, Louise headed back toward the hatch. Before climbing the stairs, she turned and said, “From the moment we got onboard this stagecoach, death has been riding our backs. You had to know that, right?”

Lightning bleached the window. Off in the distance, the sketchy outline of what looked to be a way station was revealed by the flash.

Lantz was turned over to the station employee who came to greet them, but Claire and Harman decided to stay in the stagecoach with the sheriff and her deputies until daybreak.

No matter how chaotic a sound might be, the human ear would try to find a rhythm to it.

After having supper in shifts in the station building, first Claire and Harman went to sleep, Al and Belbo were given a break, and Sheriff Louise took a seat in front of Dorleac’s cage with her stake launcher in one hand. If anything was coming, tonight would be the night. Tomorrow, they should reach the town of Gasburke just past noon, and the escort brigade would be waiting for them. From there, it would take a full day to reach Canaluda, but it wouldn’t be the same as traveling carrying full responsibility for everything. That alone buoyed Louise’s spirits.

Suddenly, she was shaken by the shoulder.

“Huh?!” Louise blurted out. Apparently she’d fallen asleep.

JJ was standing there.

“What’s wrong?”

“The way station caretaker is outside. Seems someone’s come.”

“Someone?”

Grabbing hold of his arm, she pulled herself upright. When she opened the rear door, a diminutive man in a hooded raincoat was standing outside.

“What’s wrong, Keel?” the sheriff asked, trying to keep things friendly.

“A weird lady’s come by.”

“When?”

“Just now. A real beauty she is, wearing a red dress and stacked like nobody’s business. It wouldn’t be strange if somebody took her for a Noble. But how’d she get out here in rain like this? She didn’t even have a carriage. Then again, she’s not wet at all, either.”

“What’d she come here for?”

“She said she wanted to see Mr. Lantz.”

Icy water coursed down Louise’s spine.

“Where is she?”

“The waiting room in the station building.”

“Belbo, Al—keep a sharp lookout!”

Never thinking they’d bowl him right over, the caretaker was knocked on his ass as two figures charged right by him, sending mud flying everywhere.

The waiting room was lit by a single naked bulb, and the pair was greeted from across the table by a station employee with a strange look in his eye.

“Where’s the woman who said she had business with Mr. Lantz?”

At Louise’s question, the station employee furrowed his brow and answered,

“Well, she was right there until a moment ago, but I turned my back for a bit, and then she was nowhere to be found.”

By the time Louise turned to face the stairs, JJ was already racing up them.

Amazingly enough, Lantz was in his room. Though he was still being worked on by the healing machine, he was doing much better and gave them a big smile. When asked, he said no one had come to see him. The employee who was with him just scratched at his head and said that he’d nodded off.

Stepping outside, the sheriff asked, “What do you think?”

“We can’t be too trusting,” JJ replied. “A woman comes here alone in rain like this without even getting wet, then asks for Lantz by name—I can’t see her being anything but an agent of the Nobility. Think she came all this way just to turn around and go home?”

“Nope. But there was nothing wrong with Lantz.”

“Maybe he just looks normal. Victims who get drained all in one go can skip all that pale, anemic, night-wandering stuff and go straight to dying and immediately rising again. That might be what this is.”

“What should we do, then?” asked the sheriff.

“I’ll keep an eye on him until daybreak,” JJ replied.

“No, I’ll have Belbo do it.”

“The rest of you should stick close to the kid. After all, he’s what the enemy’s really after. Don’t let your guard down.”

A woman’s screams echoed from the floor below.

The two of them galloped down the stairs.

In the main hall of the station building, the caretaker’s wife was frozen in place with her hands covering her mouth. Before her stood a soaking-wet woman. As the caretaker had said, she was a beauty with an ample bosom packed in her red dress.

“What did you come back for?” the sheriff murmured, holding her stake launcher at the ready.

The woman opened her mouth. As soon as her sharp fangs were revealed, bright blood gushed from her maw. At the same time, liquid redder than her raiment sprayed like a mist from the woman's chest, shrouding her. In less than a second the mist became a stain on the floor, and then it was gone. And with it, all sign of the woman.

"What's going on here?" Louise said, but JJ sped right by her and disappeared out the door. She put the same question to the caretaker's wife, but all she could say was that the woman had come in all of a sudden.

And then in came the caretaker. Surely he'd heard his wife's screams, yet he wore an expression like he was lost in a dream.

The sheriff asked him, "What in the world happened?"

The question, too, seemed to come to him through a dream. It didn't seem like he could even see his wife there.

At that point JJ returned, and on seeing the caretaker's face he asked, "Who'd you run into?"

"Just so—handsome!" the caretaker said as if reciting a magic incantation, gazing with infatuation into the distance—and a kingdom of dreams—and staggering on his feet as he stared at it.

"Where is he?"

"Damned if I know. I was headed home when I spotted a figure between the trees. The lightning flashed. Thanks to that, I got a clear look at him."

"Thank you. No matter who else comes, don't go outside, okay? Lock the place up and go to bed."

JJ's words were directed at the caretaker's wife. Her husband, to all appearances, still resided in a different world.

The former Hunter and the sheriff stepped out into the station's foyer before discussing the matter. It wouldn't do to get anyone else shaken up.

"The woman was stabbed as she was leaving here. The blood squirting from her heart was proof of that."

That she'd been an underling of the Nobility was clear from the way she'd

died—or rather, the way she'd been destroyed.

"She was stabbed by the handsome guy her husband saw, eh? You mean to tell me that's who you and Lantz saw back at the Nobles' quarry?"

JJ nodded. "No doubt. But did he come here on the woman's tail, following after us, or for some other reason? I'm gonna search one more time. Sorry, but could you stay with Lantz until I get back?"

And saying that, he once again leapt out into a world of rain and darkness.

III

Day broke, but the rain still didn't cease, or even show any signs of slowing. There was no indication anything was moving out on the plains, with the ground blurred by ricocheting rain and looking like a dream that went on forever.

After hearing the events of the previous night, the caretaker stated that they had a machine that could check for wounds from a Noble. From what he said, all someone had to do was walk through the machine naked and it would check every inch of them for wounds. An itinerant merchant had let Keel have it for whatever he felt was fair since the caretaker had said he'd never heard of such a machine, and it checked for normal wounds just fine. The caretaker insisted that it would probably be fine for detecting marks left by a Noble's fangs, too.

"I don't care if they came from a Noble or another human," Keel declared. "Wounds are wounds!"

They promptly told Lantz about it, and he agreed to it without any objections. It only turned up the wound to his shoulder and some old scars, but nothing out of the ordinary.

"Nothing to do but go on, eh?" Louise said to JJ when the two of them were alone in the station's dining room.

"The road's there, so we've got to take it. Look back, and the road behind you is gone," JJ said, his tone grave. It seemed as if the former Hunter was talking about the road he'd traveled.

Ultimately, they couldn't find anyone who'd fallen prey to the Noble's

underling. When asked if they had any idea who she might've been, everyone was as silent as stone. It didn't look like they didn't know, but rather that they were scared. One of the Noble's underlings had been hanging around, not doing anything, and then been slain—that's all that'd happened that night.

Rain or not, the world of daylight wouldn't allow the Nobility to run around. And the massed escort brigade wasn't far off.

Louise decided to get going.

It was after seven o'clock when the stagecoach pulled out. JJ and Belbo were sitting up in the driver's seat. With the caretaker, his wife, and their hired help looking on, the stagecoach raced off. The waving people were soon lost in the spray.

Once they hit the highway, lightning flashed off in the distance as if it'd been lying in wait for them. Beneath it, something resembling a mountain ridge was illuminated, but it immediately faded from view again. Though tension filled the air aboard the vehicle, it was tempered by a sense of security in having made it over the hump. The caretaker and his wife had been kept from saying anything about the matter of the strange woman.

"Say, you mind if I sit next to you?" Harman said to Claire.

"Very much so."

Though the woman's reply was as sharp as a needle, the blacksmith didn't seem to mind it at all, going on to say the strangest thing. "See, the sheriff's been eyeballing me all morning. You think maybe she's got the hots for me?"

"You sound as drunk as me. Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror? If she wasn't a sheriff, why would she even bother with a shabby dude like you?"

"Okay, now you've done gone and crossed a line," the blacksmith said, slipping into a heavy regional dialect. She'd caught him off guard. "For all that, I've traveled far and wide, and I actually do pretty well with the ladies. A lot of times they'll come over and start talking to me because they're involved with some creep."

"The term you're looking for is 'bodyguard.' There's a whole world of difference between being reliable and being a stud."

“Is that a fact? Truth be told, as tough as the sheriff is, I find her staring at me all intent like!”

“Sure you’re not a wanted man? I’ll thank you not to talk to me the rest of the way to Gasburke.”

“Oh, to hell with you.”

Though Louise overheard the pair’s exchange from the very back of the vehicle, she said nothing, never dreaming that the next would involve her.

“What’s to become of me?” the young man in the cage almost whispered to her. “I go to the Capital, get asked all manner of things, and then—”

Louise didn’t respond, and Al turned away. Because they knew the only thing waiting at the end of the young man’s sentence was a horrible medical procedure—vivisection.

“I swear, Duke Sinistre didn’t do anything to me. There wasn’t the kind of lascivious connection all of you are picturing. But no one will listen to me. Granted, sometimes I don’t have a reflection in the mirror or my shadow is fainter, but that’s no danger to anyone, is it?”

Louise wanted to tell him, *No, that’s no danger.* But that wasn’t true. Though at times they would tolerate someone dangerous, human beings found someone *different* to be absolutely unpardonable.

“I’m scared. Even though I haven’t done anything wrong. After I was rescued, I thought I could go home to my family. But I was stuck in a cage like a wild animal, no one will hear me out, and it seems I’m going to be used in some kind of experiment. Did you at least get in touch with my family?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“We had orders from the Capital that we’re not to heed anything at all you might say. The only thing I can do is to make every effort to see that you safely reach the Capital.”

“In that case, I would’ve been better off staying there—in Duke Sinistre’s castle.”

“Yeah,” Claire said, her voice rising over the seats. “You’re damn right. You never should’ve come back to our world. Hurry on back to your own. Ever since you were taken, your family’s pretended like you’d never even been born. The only one who’d be happy to see you now is the duke. I know it’s sad to say, but this world isn’t made for everyone. There are some who just won’t fit it. Like you—and me.”

“Same goes for me,” Harman said, raising his right hand.

“What the hell are you talking about? You wag your tail for the government watchdogs, and manhandle the women wherever you go, right? You couldn’t fit in any better if you tried! So don’t go and try to make yourself look good now!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harman replied, falling silent.

No one wanted to hear anything other than the sound of the rain.

Just then—

“I see it! Gasburke!” Belbo shouted an announcement into the vehicle in a tone lacquered over with delight.

At the same time, a strange squawk rang out far overhead, though no one in the stagecoach could hear it or knew that it was a laugh of victory.

The people out in front of the station to meet them were a blur in the rain. And sure enough, there was a swarm of horses and riders alongside the station building.

“Okay, pile off, everyone.”

At Louise’s command, they all disembarked from the stagecoach and dashed for the station building. Claire was at the fore.

The worried expressions of the people greeting them became smiles. And then changed again.

Into skulls.

Claire stopped in her tracks and let out a scream. It mingled with the cries of surprise from those behind her. All of them had witnessed the people who’d come out to greet them, the station building, horses and riders, and everything else dissolving in the rain like so much watered-down ink. Dead and twisted

trees, rectangular stones, and a scrubby growth of weeds had begun to fill their field of view.

“Oh, so this is where you find it,” Louise groaned, despair burning in her heart.

No one showed any signs of getting back in the stagecoach. The despair ran that deep. The last piece had been moved, and checkmate had been achieved not by them, but by Duke Sinistre.

“The hidden graveyard of the Sinistre clan . . . I’d heard it was located somewhere out in the wilderness . . . and we’ve been guided straight to it!”

“Back to the stagecoach,” JJ called out. “Some unseen hand pointed our noses in the wrong direction. If we don’t hurry up and get out of here, we’ll be in trouble—so get in the stagecoach!”

Seeing that they still didn’t move after that, the former Hunter grabbed the rifle propped up beside Belbo in the driver’s seat and fired a shot at the group’s feet. At the roar of the weapon and the flying mud, the people returned to their senses and charged toward the stagecoach.

Once the door was closed, Belbo cracked the whip and the half dozen horses showed even more distaste for the accursed place as they tore into its soil with their hooves.

As soon as he was back down in the vehicle, JJ asked, “What’s all this about Sinistre and a hidden graveyard?”

Still toweling off her hair, Louise replied, “Twice the Sinistre clan has come under attack by the citizens of their domain: eight thousand four hundred years ago, and then again nine hundred years ago. During the first attack, the rebel army was fairly successful. The duke’s wife and second son, his uncle, and a niece were all reduced to dust. In light of their respective power, I think you can see what a major victory that was.

“Properly chastised by this, the duke moved his own coffin plus that of his eldest son and his daughters from their ancestral graveyard in the castle to a secret location: the hidden graveyard of the Sinistre clan. And thanks to that, it’s said that during the citizens’ second attack, they couldn’t locate the coffin of

their despised feudal lord or those of his children in the castle's graveyard, and that the four of them returned with the setting of the sun and tore the rebels limb from limb.

"Time and again, survey parties from the Capital have come out and searched for the hidden graveyard, but they've always come away empty-handed. From oral tradition, written documents, and the like, there could be no question it exists, but this proves it beyond a shadow of a doubt."

"So, that's what we saw *back there*?"

The stagecoach was rapidly pulling away.

JJ furrowed his brow and continued, "But the graveyard was falling to pieces. With the power of the Nobility to draw on, it should've looked better than that even if a hundred thousand years had gone by. Or could it be that Sinistre isn't using it anymore?"

"Right you are," Louise said with a nod. "Now, this is also oral tradition, but it seems that while they were sealed away in the hidden graveyard, the son and daughters plotted treachery against their overbearing father. In his anger, Sinistre slaughtered his children, his own flesh and blood, then cursed them to wander the area for all eternity. So, even now it seems they're lurking somewhere in that huge graveyard."

Nothing from the former Hunter.

"But what I want to know is, how did we wind up there? Didn't you, Belbo, or the horses find anything strange about that?" asked Louise.

"I have no answer for that. Only, from my experience, someone nearby is casting a spell on us—probably."

"Give me a break. If that were the case, there's no way we could ever have got out of—"

The tail end of the sheriff's remark was interrupted by cries from Claire and Harman.

"Look at that!"

"It's the same boneyard again!"

Beyond the stagecoach’s front window was the darkening form of clustered gravestones, gloomy trees, and the same despair the group had fled from once.

THE BATTLE OF THE HIDDEN GRAVEYARD

Chapter 4

I

They didn't understand this at all. Though the stagecoach should've been moving straight ahead, it kept changing direction, which was mystifying to both Belbo at the reins and JJ. There was only one thing they did know—the fact that they were being pulled back into Sinistre's hidden graveyard. The wrathful spirits of Duke Sinistre's children, resting in the graveyard, steered the fresh sacrifices they desired toward themselves—even Louise realized that, and she told JJ to try to escape again.

The former Hunter shook his head. "It's no use. We'll only wear out the horses. Nothing to do but make our stand here."

"You can't be serious. The sun will be going down soon. There's no telling what'll happen then."

"I only know one thing—if we run, it's just gonna pull us right back."

"I'm with him," the coarse Belbo interjected.

He's full of fight, but that's just the flip side of his fear, Louise thought to herself, seeing right through her deputy.

"So long as we've got what's-his-name—Dorleac—they can't just blow the whole damn stagecoach away," Belbo continued. "So we all lock ourselves inside it, and use him to negotiate with the enemy. Tell 'em that if they don't want him killed, they'd better let us go. If they don't, we'll chop his fingers off one by one, and finish off by taking his head and—"

"Our job is getting him to the Capital unharmed!" Louise said, flatly rejecting her subordinate's savage proposal. "At any rate, let's see what kind of move the opposition makes. We'll only use him as a last resort!"

No one voiced any objection to that. From the look of things, that was because they knew this was the only thing they could do, but even knowing

that, there were some things that couldn't be avoided. Harman had just said he had to answer nature's call. And there was no bathroom on the stagecoach.

On stagecoaches traveling the highways of the Frontier, where there could be a full day's ride between stations and way stations, it was customary to use the facilities at the station first, but when unavoidable, passengers could get out and relieve themselves by the road.

"Can't you hold it?"

"No can do."

"Why didn't you go earlier?"

"Actually, I did, it's just I'm so nervous now . . ."

"Then there's no way around it. Just do your business close to the vehicle."

"Yes, ma'am. Although, I'm kinda sheepish about being on my own. Sheriff, would you mind tagging along?"

"What are you talking about, you deviant!"

Claire bugged her eyes, and Louise blushed in spite of herself.

"I'll go with you," Belbo suggested.

"No, I've got it."

All eyes turned to the second volunteer—Lantz.

"I'm due for a pit stop myself. Perfect timing. My shoulder isn't bothering me anymore, so leave this to me."

Louise made her decision quickly enough. "Okay," she said. "Watch yourselves."

Getting the stake launcher from her, Lantz stepped down from the stagecoach with Harman. As they circled around to the back of the vehicle and did their business, Lantz never took his eyes off the blacksmith. Less than five yards lay between them. If anything were to happen, the deputy could race to his aid. And their vinyl raincoats shielded them perfectly from the rain, at least.

The rain.

Suddenly, Harman's form grew hazy.

"Oh, shit!"

Lantz turned around. He was done answering nature's call. He went two paces before halting, then called out Harman's name repeatedly.

The blurry form had vanished, like a picture obliterated by the rain.

Louise and JJ barreled out. On hearing what had transpired, the sheriff sent Lantz back into the vehicle, called for Belbo, and they searched their immediate surroundings. But they didn't find any trace of the man, as if he'd melted in the rain.

Twenty minutes later, there was nothing more they could do but return to the stagecoach. JJ was the first to notice.

"Where's Claire?"

Only a liquor bottle remained in her seat.

Al's eyes went wide, and he replied, "What are you talking about? After you called for Belbo, you came right back in. Then you told Claire there was something you wanted her to see, so you led her outside. Didn't you?"

By "you," he meant Louise.

They checked with Lantz, and he agreed with the farmer. Even JJ was at a loss for words.

"So, while we were out searching . . ."

"A second one taken."

And saying that, JJ fell silent again.

Louise knew the rest that he hadn't said. Their side was holding one. This was about exchanging hostages.

"I'm going out to look for them!" the sheriff declared.

"It's no use."

"I can't just give up on them."

"Forget that, and start giving some thought to what you should do when the

enemy asks us to make a trade," JJ told her. "I'll go out and search."

"But—"

"It's an ugly situation, but don't look away from it. You've got to shoulder all of this. You can turn over the kid to save the other two, or decide to do like you stated right at the start. But don't put that burden on anyone else, okay? You and you alone have to make that call."

JJ exited the stagecoach.

No one said anything. They all knew the weight Louise carried.

But a voice rose in the silence.

"So, what will you do?"

As Dorleac looked up at her from where he sat on his stool, it appeared that a smile had risen on his lips. Even when the sheriff's bloodshot eyes were upon him, the servant didn't seem upset.

"Will you abandon me? Or will it be the two who vanished? Either will be fine with me."

"Shut your trap!" Belbo shouted, turning the stake launcher that way. "The next time you shoot your mouth off, I'll end you before we even get a chance to hand you over."

"If you do that, it'll be the end of you all. If the lot of you want to stay alive, you have to stay with me. Duke Sinistre really is incredible. This is his checkmate."

"You son of a bitch!"

Lantz had anticipated how long it would take Belbo to lose his temper. More than his finger going for the trigger, it was the man's expression that gave it away. That was the face a man wore only when he was about to murder someone. The gaze became fixed, the humanity drained from the expression in an instant, and—

Now.

Lantz's hand went for the barrel of the stake launcher. The stake of ash

launched by the pressurized gas was thrown far off course, rebounding down by Al's feet.

Cruel as it may seem, no one paid any attention to either Al or the errant stake. The shooter, the one who'd interfered with him, and the sheriff were both staring out the window on the left side of the vehicle. That was where the death rattle that'd thrown off Lantz's timing had come from.

"All of you, stay right here," Louise ordered them before disembarking from the stagecoach.

The door was shut immediately.

Clearly the scream had come from nothing human. And at present, anything nonhuman had to be considered the enemy. Who'd it been slain by? JJ?

Dark forms took shape between the gravestones up ahead of them. There were four of them. The one on the far right and the one on the far left ran all the way there. It was Claire and Harman.

"You're okay, right?"

The two of them bobbed their heads repeatedly. Their faces were tinged with fear, but also there was a definite excitement—and was that rapture?! Each of them looked as weak in the knees as if they'd just met the love of their life. While that was understandable in someone as emotional as Claire, Harman was moonstruck as well and looked ready to whisper professions of love to anyone, even the bar girl.

What had happened?

The other two figures would know the answer to that. One of them—on the right, from the sheriff's perspective—was JJ. On the left was a man in a wide-brimmed traveler's hat who wore a long coat blacker than the darkness and had a longsword across his back. But what was the *thing* that dangled from his right hand?

It fell at Louise's feet. The man on the left had tossed it there.

"Like the one the day before last?!"

Split in two lengthwise, it was the same sort of winged beast-man JJ had cut

down back at the Mihal station. The rain was washing away the fresh blood that still gushed from the wound.

“That’s what was manipulating the stagecoach,” said JJ. “It’d never occurred to me it was coming from the sky, but even if I’d known, there wasn’t anything I could’ve done. If not for him, we’d still be unable to escape this graveyard.”

“It’s true,” Claire said dazedly. “You came and called me, but the second I stepped out of the stagecoach, my head suddenly got fuzzy, so I just followed along after you. The next thing I knew, there were *two of you* standing in front of me, and Harman was there, too. I thought he must’ve been tricked, too, but I just couldn’t make myself fight it. Then those two versions of you suddenly turned into a young couple dressed like Nobility, and they were just about to bite our throats—and at that moment, a scream seemed to come from the sky, there was a spray of blood, and *that thing* fell to earth. With that scream, Harman and I snapped out of it, and those lousy Nobles took off!”

“And then, he came floating down from the sky,” Harman said, his voice lilting like he was reciting poetry. “The hem of his coat spread like a gigantic bat . . . Oh, it was beautiful . . .”

“And there you have it. By the time I raced over, the two of them were already with him. Said he had no business with us, so it would seem he was looking for the graveyard. That being the case, he said he was in our debt, and had brought them back to return the favor. Allow me to introduce him.”

JJ no doubt intended to tell them the new arrival’s name. However, the man gave it himself.

“D.”

His voice echoed in Louise’s ears. A name so cold, so beautiful, and so sad.

“I’m Louise. I serve as sheriff back in Happy Gringo.”

The sheriff caught herself trying to scrutinize the shadowy figure’s face. Its contours were a blur, the line of his nose—that was all she could see, yet it had a strange effect on her. Her heart was hot and racing. *Please*, she thought, *let me see it all*.

“They have problems with the rain, you see,” he said in a voice like steel. “So

they'll take off. I'd appreciate it if you could stay here a little longer."

"How long?"

"About half an hour."

"Roger that. It's the least we can do, what with you breaking that spell over us. Of course, even if I said no to you, the passengers would be sure to mutiny."

Louise shot a glance at Claire. The woman was so busy gazing at the new arrival, she forgot to show her displeasure at the sheriff's catty remark. The bar girl had her hands folded together over her chest.

"Thanks."

The shadowy figure turned right around. Louise had to fight a desperate urge to follow after him.

"Just thirty minutes," she said in an absent-minded tone that was swallowed by the sound of the rain.

While it was nonsense talk, it was also a vain spell from the bottom of the heart of a foolish woman who wanted to once more glimpse a gorgeous dream.

II

D returned to the spot where he'd cut down the winged beast-man. Four or five yards away there stood a false spring tree. It leaned to the right more than the other trees in a testimony to the magic D had worked. This species of tree was unusually elastic, and D had used his monstrous strength to bend it, then secure it with a wire wrapped around the trunk of another tree. After lying flat on his back against the bent tree, the Hunter had cut the wire and been launched into the air. Timed so that he'd intercept the winged beast-man flying overhead, his rough handiwork had miraculously succeeded.

Having lured D into the graveyard along with the stagecoach, the spell-casting scout had outlived its usefulness. All that remained now was to pinpoint the graves of the young Nobles and destroy them all.

D put his left hand to the ground and asked, "Can you track them?"

"The sound of the rain isn't helping, but yeah, more or less. Head east by

southeast.”

Following the hoarse voice’s directions for about five minutes, he came to an enormous gate of what looked to be marble. There was nothing beyond it, just the gate. Though it would’ve been simple enough to go around it, D knew very well that doing so wouldn’t allow him to meet with those he sought. He pushed the gate with his left hand.

A terrible chill coursed through his body. His left hand must’ve been doing everything it could to stem the flow. It was power leaking through there. It wasn’t a form of magic. Rather, it was a physical form of energy generated where two dimensions came in contact with each other. In D’s world, it would be a source of destruction.

All his functions froze, and the instant D came into contact with this death and destruction, he ceased all resistance. As his body headed toward death, his left hand sent out a single thread of regeneration to connect them to the real world, while D moved into another world.

Stars came into view on the other side of the gate. They were constantly changing, with a transient orphan star being swallowed by a nebula one moment only to be transformed the next into an enormous planet that filled his entire field of view. What’s more, they existed both without and within D. Various forms slipped past the Hunter, or else cut right through him. That was how they appeared in this world, but in D’s they would’ve taken the form of defensive systems, various weapons, or carbon-based constructs such as people and animals.

Through this extremely dangerous space D floated, reduced to a lifeless corpse. Length, width, and height didn’t exist there, nor did the flow of time, and D himself simultaneously existed and didn’t exist. Perhaps somewhere in the process of creation was the D JJ had glimpsed as a distant figure on a cliff, or the one who’d rescued Claire and Harman in the rain.

After a few hundred million years had passed in this world without time, D finally ascertained that a group of coffins existed at the heart of a defensive system in an enormous nebula. As he approached, the nebula glowed weirdly, its very light trying to destroy D, but all of its attacks were drawn down the

connection to the Hunter's world and expelled in the space between the two dimensions. It took another hundred million years to reach the center of the nebula, and there at the center of countless geometric patterns D finally saw three coffins.

"There they are!" the hoarse voice cheered. "That's Sinistre's oldest boy and his daughter. Hurry up and finish 'em off. Man, this has been one long trip."

Drawing still closer, he entered the heart of the geometric patterns. Though the bizarre shapes attacked him relentlessly for the next million years, D made contact with the coffins. The attacks were intended to kill him, but D was already dead.

The instant he made contact, D's return connection pulled him back into his own world.

As soon as he was revived, D got up. For the few seconds since he'd opened the gate he'd lain there, reduced to a corpse.

About fifteen feet ahead of him were three wooden coffins in a row. Each was faded, cracked, and covered with moss, making manifest the cruelty of the one who'd buried them, as well as the despair of those interred.

D drew the blade from his back and walked toward them. Pale hands burst through the lids. Rising from the boxes in luxurious garb were a boy and two girls. Their faces were so brimming with youth and joy, the hoarse voice actually murmured, "Kinda feel sorry for 'em."

The young man stepped to the fore, saying, "We knew you would come. D, I am Riyara, firstborn son of Duke Sinistre. I shall face you. Will you not spare my younger sisters?"

"The job was for the three of you," D said in a voice that was soft, but still carried a ring of iron to it.

"We were sealed in our graves by our father, yet we had to go on living. Is there something wrong with that? Human beings take the life of other creatures to stay alive, do they not?"

It was clear Riyara's heart held nothing but sincerity in his wish for his younger sisters. The young man, who could've been described as the

crystallized beauty of youth, was probably willing to take D's blade right through the heart at that moment.

"In another universe, I saw the trillion geometric patterns that surrounded the three of you. Or perhaps it was all just a dream. But of that trillion, a tenth of a tenth were the corpses of humans you'd drained of blood. And not just to live."

Riyara's eyes gave off blood light. His mouth snapped open, revealing horrid incisors that spoiled the elegance of the Nobility. Short swords slid from either sleeve to rest in his palms.

The horizontal swipe of D's blade clanged against one short sword, which Riyara then hurled through a strange twist of the wrist. The sword spiraled down D's blade, and then shot toward the Hunter's throat. Giving off a sound of unearthly beauty, a dagger in D's left hand intercepted it. The short sword continued to spin as it shot through empty air, embedding itself in a stand of trees towering to D's right. The trunk of the tree it hit twisted.

D bounded. Gambling life or death, there was no hesitation in him. When he had come within about ten yards of the young Nobleman, who'd kicked off the ground before him, the Hunter hurled his dagger. It pierced the young man's heart, and when he landed, D was right on top of him, lopping off his already decaying head.

While in midair, D saw indications that the younger sisters intended to flee. Before bisecting Riyara, he had thrown a pair of wooden needles. Once he'd confirmed Riyara's destruction, the Hunter ran over to the girls. All he found there were gorgeous dresses with stark wooden needles stuck in their backs.

"Decoys, eh? Can't have gone too—"

Before the hoarse voice could finish, D sank in muck up to his waist. Pale female hands had touched his right ankle and pulled him down. From the ground to his rear, the other girl appeared, a knife glinting in her hands. A blade poked from her back—and was drawn out again. It was a backward thrust of D's sword that he'd made along his left flank.

Disregarding the girl who slumped forward, D drove the sword into the ground before him. Bright blood spread across the rain-lashed earth.

The Hunter's body quavered slightly, and a heartbeat later D was standing on solid ground. The mud that caked him from the waist down was coming off in the rain.

"You put 'em down," the hoarse voice said pensively from the vicinity of the Hunter's left hip. "Sure was a long trip, though. A grand total of three hundred million and—"

D cut in there, saying, "It was a dream."

He looked down at the girl. Her old dress seemed as if it'd seen a mind-boggling number of years, the way the pounding of the rain quickly tore at it, unraveling it and turning it to dust just like her body. That, too, was immediately washed away in the rain.

D whistled for his cyborg horse.

JJ and the sheriff were standing out in front of the stagecoach. The spray of rain beating against their raincoats felt like a relentless fusillade of bullets.

"Seems like you wrapped things up, eh?"

D nodded at JJ's remark. That, and no more.

When the black rider and his steed spun around and started off, Louise barely managed to swallow what she was about to say. *Won't you come with us?* She knew he wasn't the kind to respond to such a plea. His work was already done, and the sheriff had to set out again. They probably had half a day's ride left. Still, at the moment Louise frightened herself, wishing with all her heart she could rely on somebody else.

Though the rain hadn't let up yet, the rapture and curiosity boiling within the vehicle made everyone forget all about the weather. In the rapture camp were Claire and Harman, who kept repeating his name and stared off into space with starry eyes. The curiosity focused on the sheriff and her deputies' attempts to milk JJ for information about D and his activities. JJ ignored all questions regarding D. The only information he imparted was when he told the sheriff and her men that they'd once worked together, but even regarding that job he would say nothing more. He behaved like a believer trying to defend some holy sacrament never meant to be shared.



True to form, Claire alone said, “What, have you got some special agreement between folks in your trade that you won’t spill each other’s secrets or something?”

The bar girl had intended to dispense further ridicule, but apparently she remembered a certain someone’s face, looking toward the heavens raptly with starry eyes. Even the sheriff and her men were so surprised they didn’t pursue the topic further.

At that point, it was Dorleac who asked rather abruptly, “You said ‘D,’ did you not?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Belbo replied, being sociable for a change. “You know him or something?”

“No. But that name . . . Duke Sinistre may have made mention of it . . . I can’t really recall.”

“Are you sure you really don’t remember?” Belbo asked, wearing his animosity on his face. “You’re not just clamming up when it’s convenient, now, are you? Hey, when you get to the Capital, they ain’t gonna be as gentle with you as we’ve been. It’d be a lot easier for you if you just spilled it now.” Lowering his voice, he continued, “C’mon, fess up. Were you Sinistre’s little butt buddy?”

Though Dorleac did no more than look away, everyone else around him reacted.

“Grow up, Deputy Dipshit!” Claire snarled. “What are you, some kind of sadist? You getting your kicks teasing the kid?!”

“I’m with her—knock it off, Belbo.”

“What the hell, Lantz?! Trying to make yourself look like the good guy here? You falling under that weird spell’s what made us half a day late for hooking up with the reinforcements. Sure, that Hunter seems to have taken out Sinistre’s play pals, but don’t go thinking Sinistre’s thrown in the towel. Until we know exactly what his connection is to this clown here, I don’t wanna spend another stinking minute bumping along in this buggy.”

In his own way, Belbo was trying to change the mood in the vehicle. The enemy still had them in checkmate. They couldn't afford to get soft now.

"Okay, okay. You and Al can get some rest up in the regular seats. I'll stand watch over him," Lantz said with a smile.

JJ and Louise were up in the driver's seat. Belbo looked up at his coworker, then spun around forcefully and headed for the door. Al followed after him, and Lantz squatted down by the cage.

Dorleac, who'd been looking down, suddenly opened his eyes.

Don't raise your head. Lantz mouthed the words to the young man, not making a sound.

And Dorleac got the message, loud and clear.

Duke Sinistre hired me, and he means to get you out of here. Just relax, and follow my instructions.

A certain light glowed in Dorleac's eyes.

III

D!

The call followed him across the wilderness.

D halted his cyborg horse.

A lone gyrodyne descended from the jet blackness of the rainy sky. Not making a sound, the purple conveyance hovered to D's right—not three feet away from him, and about the same distance off the ground. It operated by magnetism.

A door opened, and a steward in a tuxedo appeared, saying, "Master D, I presume?" It wasn't so much a question as a confirmation. "I am a servant of Duke Sergei V. Sinistre, administrator of the Ninth Sector of the western Frontier. Dorleac B is my name."

The steward's face and voice were both those of the dashing young man.

"It's an android," the hoarse voice said, its words mixing with the rain.

“I disposed of your master’s children not long ago. Is this about that?” D asked, his voice low but imbued with a far from gloomy edge that deflected the rain.

“No, my master himself stated that you have done well. Those children dragged the lofty name of the Sinistre clan through the mud. He said destruction was long past due.”

“I haven’t been asked to hunt your master. However—”

The machine shook. The rain bouncing off the android from head to toe had actually become like a mist due to its fear.

“I’ll thank you not to frighten my man any further. I shall converse with you.” The voice that was heard from the depths of the gyrodyne was clearly synthesized. “Although this is our first meeting, I have heard your name before. D, as a Vampire Hunter who makes no attempt to hide it, would you be so good as to accept an assignment from me?”

“Your grace?” said the android who wore Dorleac’s face, turning a look of astonishment toward the doorway.

“Never fear, B.”

If others had been there to hear that reply, it undoubtedly would’ve filled each and every one of them with wonder. The tone the duke directed toward the mechanical man was brimming with affection.

“When I accept a job from a Noble, there’s one condition,” said D.

The rain suddenly intensified.

“I accept that,” Duke Sinistre’s voice replied. Like D’s, it was low and murky.

“Let’s hear your request.”

“Many thanks, D.”

What sort of conversation then transpired in the rain?

By the time the gyrodyne took off without a sound, D was already galloping away through the rain.

“Three hours to Gasburke!” Louise announced from where she was riding

shotgun.

“No, three and a half,” JJ corrected her as he lashed the horses.

The rattle of the wagon wheels mixed with the sound of the rain, making it impossible to hold a conversation without really raising their voices.

“Details, details. Is it because you’re a Hunter?”

“That’s got nothing to do with it. Besides, I got out of that game years ago.”

“Why?”

“Didn’t anyone ever teach you there are some things folks just don’t wanna talk about?”

“I guess you’re right. Sorry.”

The world remained behind a fog, and evening was closing in. Sinistre would probably resume the chase shortly. Would they be able to reach Gasburke first? Anxiety cast a black shadow over Louise’s heart.

“I got scared.”

Just one remark—and to the sheriff, it seemed almost muttered.

“What’s that?” Louise asked.

“Starting out, I was so full of myself. I was born with an unusual constitution, and an expert from the Capital even gave me the seal of approval as being suited for work as a Hunter.”

Despite reflexes, strength, and bone resilience far above average, JJ still got hurt a lot, but according to him, even injuries that should’ve been life threatening healed in a day or so for the most part. Around the age of five or six he was doing hard manual labor like lumberjacking, going out on projects clearing forests. When it came to fighting, the toughest guys in camp had nothing on him. “You’ll wind up a Vampire Hunter!” they all declared with bloodied faces.

“And the next thing you know, that’s what happened.”

At the age of sixteen he’d left home in search of a Vampire Hunter, preferably a middle-aged one, and he was over twenty by the time he found one. The

Hunter wasn't exactly top class, but for three years they traveled all over the place. Ultimately his mentor fell victim to a Noble, but he had taught JJ the essentials of being a Hunter.

It took less than a year for JJ to distinguish himself.

"I thought I was top class all around—physically, mentally, my weapons skills. And the first time I put down a Noble in the eastern Frontier, I got messed up pretty bad, but I forgot about it soon enough. After that, I started having fun getting rid of them. But that was when I ran into *him*."

He was referring to the other Hunter. The one he said was called D.

The two of them had taken jobs to get rid of the same brutal Nobleman who was infamous in the western Frontier. With less than a week to accomplish this task, JJ found his pride and confidence crumbling by the day. The Nobleman was far more powerful than JJ, yet D had dispatched him with consummate ease. None of JJ's swordplay could reach the Nobleman, and at the moment when JJ felt fangs pressed against the nape of his neck for the first time in his life, D raced in. Deflecting the Nobleman's attacks, D's blade flashed out, and every time it did the Noble lost a piece of his anatomy.

"When that Noble put his fangs right here, I wet myself, no lie. All D's skill did was rob me of all my self-confidence."

And yet, JJ had found the other Hunter ten thousand times scarier than the Nobleman.

"He drove the Noble back, step by step. Now this was one cruel Nobleman, so that was really no surprise. He'd snatched over a thousand kids in that region. If he'd drained them of blood and killed them, or else turned them into fellow Nobility, well, that still would've been better. But all the kids had been locked in a chamber in his castle and kept alive to use in his medical experiments. On top of that, he was giving them some kind of special nutrient shots that kept them from dying. So when the sword went to work and his right hand was taken off, then his left arm, I was feeling pretty good about that.

"The point I started to think, '*Are you serious?*' was when this defenseless Nobleman who'd lost both hands got stabbed a bunch of times in the gut. When his legs got hacked off, every hair on my body was standing on end. The

Nobleman begged for his life. He cried out that he'd give him all the treasure in his castle if he'd just let him go. D shaved off his nose. He carved the mouth open from ear to ear, and then lopped those same ears off. And at that point he said, 'Didn't the children plead with you in just the same way?' I had to listen to the screams of that Nobleman dying by inches for another ten minutes or more.

"That's when I had this thought—maybe D was really a Noble in disguise. If not, I don't see how he could've killed that Nobleman so brutally, no matter how many kids had fallen victim to him. Compared to that, getting bit by a Noble would've been a walk in the park. I felt like even though I was in the same line of work as him, there was no way I could ever surpass D. Hell, I was scared just to be with him. I mean, what if I ended up having to fight him? And so I quit being a Hunter."

At some point the man had started trembling, and Louise noticed that the two of them were touching. Normally, she'd have left it at that. But out there on the plains with the lashing rain, Louise felt like they were the only two people in the whole world.

"We shouldn't."

The words just came out of her.

JJ looked at her strangely. By that point her body, which had been leaning toward him, was bolt upright again.

"Watch it," JJ said sharply.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so—"

"It's not that. Just now, I heard a cry from up above us of something not quite bird or beast. It's one of those things D and I cut down."

"Sinistre's lackeys, eh?"

"More like the perfect assassin. Take the reins. I'm gonna pop inside."

"That's my job!" Louise exclaimed, looking up at the ashen sky, then quickly heading for the hatch.

"Here it comes! Hit the deck!"

By the time JJ's cry rang out, a ferocious impact made the stagecoach tilt

wildly, and Louise was sent sailing through the air like a leaf off a tree.

THOUGHTS ON A FELLOW TRAVELER

Chapter 5

I

The incident occurred when Belbo looked over at the cage from his seat. The first thing his eyes should've found was Dorleac, but instead he saw a bizarre flesh-colored blob. Belbo recognized it. Once he'd visited a fishing village, and a fisherman there had been carrying one—a monster clam. Only this one had no shell. There were only the innards.

"Wh-what the hell is this? Where'd that punk-ass kid go?" Belbo said, rising from his seat in spite of himself and going over to the cage.

He removed the lock and was just sliding open the bolt when Lantz told him, "Don't do that." Of course, he said that to remain clear of suspicion. If anything were to happen to Dorleac now, he was sure to be blamed for it.

The prisoner's transformation into a shellfish was an illusion caused by the winged beast-man in the sky above. Belbo had the keys, and he'd been told not to use them no matter what happened, but under the circumstances he had no choice but to look into this.

As expected, Belbo opened the iron door and went inside. Neither deputy called for the sheriff.

The stagecoach rocked madly. Everyone was pitched to the left. Slamming against the bars, Belbo let out a scream.

It was Dorleac that slipped out the door. As arranged, he ran for the rear door. All he had to do was open it, and the winged beast that'd just slammed the vehicle with an evil gale should be waiting right outside.

As the young man grabbed the doorknob, beefy fingers latched onto his shoulder.

"Belbo?!"

“You’re damn right it is!” the giant of a man said, baring his teeth as he shook his head. “You think that was all it’d take to knock me out? I ain’t about to let you get away!”

Despair slid across Dorleac’s face.

“Okay, now, back in that—”

At that point, a spasm went through Belbo. His right arm reached around to his back, and he turned around. There was nothing but the cage. The brow he furrowed in consternation was pierced by a black speck that then punched through the back of his head. His enormous form crumpled, while behind it, the thing that’d slain him hit the wall with a strident clang. What rolled across the floor was one of the small screws that secured the cage.

The door opened. Rain and wind blew in. As if driven back by it, Dorleac stopped in his tracks.

In that rectangular slice of the dark gray world there loomed a face of unearthly beauty. The man carried a uniformed woman under one arm and had a sword in the other hand as he entered, and as he came, the younger man backed away.

“You’re . . .” the young man began, rapture on his face and in his voice. It would’ve happened to anyone. Human and inhuman alike.

“I saw D,” the young man murmured, as if in a dream.

D laid Louise on the floor. Although he did it so roughly, you could almost say he tossed her there.

Groaning with pain, Louise sat up. The violent gale had knocked her off the stagecoach. She’d blacked out for a moment, but the impact had awakened her. And she’d immediately been greeted by *this*.

“Belbo? What’s going on here? Who let you out?”

The last question, of course, was directed at Dorleac.

“Lantz, Al—kindly explain just what the hell the situation is!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lantz replied, rubbing a lump on his head as he got to his feet.

Louise also ordered Al to go get JJ.

The stagecoach stopped.

“Looks like you were saved by a beautiful god, eh?” JJ said with a strange look in his eye when he came down and saw Louise and D. He couldn’t believe it, but then with this man, he had to. JJ was like a rock, and a man like him would rather die than call something beautiful. But for those who looked upon D’s face, the word just came out naturally. There was no stopping it. For it was burned into the human subconscious.

Lantz and Al took turns explaining what had happened. Dorleac was back in his cage. Belbo’s corpse had been wrapped in one of the blankets the stagecoach carried and laid out next to the cage.

Looking at the cage, Louise said, “So, him looking like a clam was an illusion, eh? I suppose that was the work of the same bird monster thing that caused the wind. But that bugger took off after D carved up one of its wings. Which leaves the question of who killed Belbo.”

“Couldn’t that have been the bird’s fault, too?” Al suggested, squeezing the words out in a pitiful tone. Due to his naive nature, the third deputy had been struck by an even stronger sense of defeat than Louise.

“After it hit you with the wind, the bird went in the opposite direction—to the rear door. I was there,” said D. “From the sound of it, the deputy was killed after that.”

“Who’d have thought you’d be riding right alongside us, eh?” JJ said, sounding exhausted. “All without me, that bird, or anyone on board noticing you. Sure, the rain was bad, but you’re full of surprises, mister.”

Louise was just about to nod her agreement when she gave her head a good hard shake to try to rid herself of the gorgeous visage that’d burned itself into her retinas. The first time they’d met, she’d been wearing sunglasses. Now they were still stowed in her breast pocket, and she’d seen D’s face with the naked eye.

“Belbo’s killer is on this stagecoach,” said the sheriff. “This was the murder weapon.”

She held up a screw coated with dried blood. She'd picked it up when they were tending to Belbo's remains.

"But when this thing went flying, there wasn't anyone in or around the cage. I was knocked on my ass, and Al was in his seat," Lantz immediately asserted.

"That's right. In which case, we should be looking for someone with the strength to do such a thing. There are only two of them."

The eyes of all but the accused focused on Dorleac. And then—on Lantz.

"I don't have that sort of power," Dorleac protested. "I was just lying down, and then there was a commotion outside and he came in. Then, when the stagecoach pitched to one side, the door opened. I promptly got out of the cage and ran for the exit."

"And you opened the outside door, right? You knew that the stagecoach was still moving, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Did you plan on jumping? You could've been injured!"

"I wasn't really thinking clearly."

"You didn't seem all that intent on escaping before, you know."

"Actually . . . I think I was just sick of the cage."

Louise and the others could only nod agreement to that. Rules or not, Dorleac might still be a regular human being, but he was put in a cage like an animal. Though anyone could see that would be humiliating, none of them could fully appreciate the depths of it. No one had the right to blame him for following his instinctive wish to be free.

That only left Lantz.

"I don't know—but it wasn't me," the deputy insisted. "You probably won't believe me, but all I can tell you is you're wrong."

That made sense, too. After all, he'd been checked for a bite from the Nobility, while the true nature of the other suspect—Dorleac—was still unclear.

Lantz rubbed his lump.

“Everyone, get in your seats,” said a voice that called to mind lovely steel, if there was such a thing.

“D?”

“Let me try asking them,” said the Hunter. “Everyone, to your seats.”

Louise made up her mind, replying, “Good enough. Back to your seats, folks.”

When the two of them were left alone in the rear section, D stared at Lantz.

“I hear you were checked for fang marks.”

“That’s right. And they didn’t find anything!”

“Were you standing when you went through this device?”

“Yeah. Got myself scanned from the top of my head right down to my toes,” Lantz replied, trying to show the Hunter a confident grin, but it didn’t go too well.

“Show me the soles of your feet.”

“Huh?”

“The rest of them can see the top of your head. Show me the soles of your feet.”

“Hey, what the hell is this? You don’t seriously think I could’ve been bit down there—”

The face of unearthly beauty his eyes beheld intensified its glow. And its coldness. Lantz realized there was no way out. The young man before him wasn’t merely a Hunter; he was an all-knowing agent of fate. All that remained was for his hand to go for the hilt of his longsword.

The strange new blood he’d received the night before last suddenly changed the man. The wind whistled.

D’s right hand became a gleam of light. Canceling a number of threats, the blade knocked them to the floor—several screws.

It wasn’t until the last of his missiles had been batted down that Lantz made his leap. When he landed right in front of the stairs, he had Louise under one arm.

“You can’t get away. Give it up, Lantz!” Al shouted, a long gun braced against his shoulder.

“You’ll hit her!”

Al’s gun was loaded with buckshot. Even at point-blank range, there was a chance some of the spread would catch Louise.

D’s left hand made a sharp whistle. A screw propelled by a powerful jet of air shattered Lantz’s face.

At the same time, JJ stood up.

“Now!” Claire cried out.

She was calling for the unique swordplay she’d seen from the former Hunter the other night. However, when the gore-spattered face turned his way, JJ hesitated.

“Sheriff—get clear!”

Louise’s body spun, freeing her from Lantz’s grip.

A blast of double-aught buckshot came with only a faint report thanks to the gun’s silencer, and Lantz was slammed back against the stairs.

Louise pulled one of the stakes from her belt. Lantz would be getting back up again. Screws and buckshot weren’t enough to destroy a vampire.

When he stood up, a figure landed before him like a mystic bird, slashing him from the top of the head to the crotch with one swipe, then reversing his blade to pierce the enemy’s heart. The sound of the two halves hitting the floor overlapped, sounding like one.

“So it was Lantz after all,” Louise said, her chest and stomach stained red by the bloody spray from the man.

“Want a peek at the soles of his feet?”

“I’ll pass,” the sheriff responded, and then she did a double take.

D’s voice had been horribly hoarse.

“My horse broke a leg when I caught you. I’ll be joining you.”

And saying that, D started down the aisle. That statement had been made in his regular voice.

“D,” JJ said to him. “I was . . .”

Not stopping, D replied, “Next time.”

Was that supposed to mean he’d be counting on the man?

“Don’t sweat it,” Louise said, clapping him on the shoulder, but JJ just stayed frozen in place, unable to even sheathe the sword he had in his right hand. Once again, the passengers were reminded of the fact that he was a *former* Hunter.

Grabbing hold of the staircase’s banister, Louise said, “I’ve lost two of my deputies. There’s only an hour left to go, but do we have any volunteers?”

She was hoping for D, but there was little to no chance of him coming through. For a different reason, JJ’s prospects were also dim.

“Well, how about me?” the third man, Harman, suggested. “I’m not good with a gun, but if you wanna talk strength, our handsome friend here has nothing on me!”

“Spare us your pipe dreams,” Claire groaned. “Forget being on the same level as him; you’re not even in the same dimension. Yeah, a whole other dimension.”

“You think so?”

“We’ll be in Gasburke in an hour. I’ll let you hire on as a deputy just until then.”

“You can count on me,” the man replied, swinging an arm as thick as anyone’s to pound his massive chest.

Looking incredibly disgusted, Claire brought a whiskey bottle to her lips.

“In that case, go to the rear and keep an eye on *you-know-who* with Al. I’m heading up to the driver’s seat.”

Once Louise had vanished through the hatch, Claire gave JJ a reproachful look.

“Well, go help her out. A six-horse team is a lot for a woman to handle.”

JJ didn’t say a word.

“What, is it because you’re a grown man, but you were a little late to jump into the fight once or twice? You planning on spending the rest of your life somewhere nobody will see you? Get over it. You’ve got a pair of balls, right? Since the night before last right up until a few minutes ago, you were a man among men, weren’t you?”

“It’s no use,” said D. “He’s known true fear. He’ll never be the same again. For the rest of his days, he’ll avoid fighting.”

“That’s a lousy way for you to put it,” Claire countered. Avoiding looking at D, she continued, “I’ll admit that you’re strong, but he’s pretty great, too. Hell, the only reason we’ve all made it this far is on account of him. So don’t you suddenly come in here and try acting like a big shot. You wouldn’t happen to be in the same line of work, would you? If you are, why don’t you try saying something that might encourage him?!”

“Quit it already,” JJ said, setting his hand on her dainty shoulder. “It’s okay. But it’s like he said—I’m a coward.”

“Well, at least you’re not a cheat.”

Claire turned around, dumbfounded. The source of that moral support—Harman the blacksmith—winked at her.

“You hang in there, JJ. Who cares if you’re a little scared? You’re still a lot tougher than me.”

“Yeah,” said Al. “What’s one time? Farmers like me spend every day worrying about the weather or the way the wind’s blowing, so we can’t hardly sleep at night. And I’ll probably be that way my whole life. Your problems are small potatoes.”

“That’s right, JJ,” Claire said, raising high her liquor bottle. “One time doesn’t mean you’re ruined forever. There’s always next time.”

Suddenly, she stopped. She’d realized that what she was trying to say had been said shortly before by someone else. Her next words were, “Well, I just put my foot in my mouth.”

After sinking in her seat, Claire then slowly raised her head until she could peek over the backrests.

“Sorry about that, mister.”

However, the person she was addressing was lying with his back to the wall in the rear portion, his face hidden from Claire’s view as if to say, *Who cares what you have to say*.

“Thanks.”

That remark drew the eyes of the group just as JJ was raising the hatch.

“Sorry, everybody. I mean, thanks, all of you.”

And then the hatch closed.

“Let me take care of that,” the man said, taking the reins.

Gazing at his profile, Louise said to him, “You seem to be in a better frame of mind.”

“Yeah, for the time being, anyway.”

“It’d be a big help if you could stay that way for another hour.”

“Don’t know what the future holds. It only takes a heartbeat to die.”

“All the same, this is good.”

From where she was riding shotgun, Louise turned her eyes forward. That was the only way a person could go on. What was done was done, whether it was a second or a century ago. It was the future that was always reaching out for them.

About five hundred yards above the surface, a mortally wounded beast-man was beating its wings. A number of its kind had been dispatched to destroy the stagecoach below, but it didn’t know that. Its tiny manufactured brain was occupied solely by a tenacious devotion to the duty it’d been assigned. Presently, it mustered the last of its strength and focused all its ability on one given spot.

II

“You’re a Hunter, aren’t you?” Dorleac asked about thirty minutes after the stagecoach had started again. It was a question that wouldn’t go unsaid.

D didn’t reply. He simply remained sitting in the rear portion of the vehicle.

Not minding at all, Dorleac continued, “I get the feeling I heard Duke Sinistre mention the name D from time to time. He said if there were anyone in the world who could slay him, it would be you.”

The handsome young man’s expression dripped with infatuation. His tone was thick as honey. It was flattery.

“If we should happen to reach the airfield safely, would you be good enough to accompany us from there to the Capital?”

“What are you, soft in the head?” Harman spat venomously. “Airfield, my ass! We don’t even know if we’ll make it to where the escort brigade’s waiting in Gasburke in one piece or not. If you’ve got time to butter him up, you’d be better off asking your dear old duke to keep his damn paws off the stagecoach.”

“If I could do that, I wouldn’t have suffered such hardships. But I can’t do anything.”

“Years ago, we ran into exactly the same situation.”

Everyone looked at D. They had the feeling the young man’s every action and every word could decide their fate. But why the hoarse voice?

“The stagecoach we were riding in also carried a servant they said had run away from a certain Noble. And the Noble gave chase, too, same as here. Those guarding him had somehow managed to just about reach their destination. That was on account of the Noble wanting his servant back alive. But when he saw that wasn’t gonna be possible, the Noble turned to his last resort. See, his servant had had this atomic bomb implanted in his body.”

“Everyone was vaporized?” the hitherto silent Al murmured timidly. “Still, I’m surprised you managed to survive.”

The hoarse voice replied, “I’m a dhampir.”

Claire stopped dead, a liquor bottle still stuck in her mouth. Everyone else looked like the hearts had just been plucked from their chests, too.

Suddenly Dorleac laughed so hard he almost bent over backward.

“What a world! You’re a Hunter, you say? And you prey on the Nobility? You, a man with Noble blood in your veins? People, help me out here. You’re in far more danger from our attractive guest than you are from me, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’ll be damned.”

Al’s jaw dropped, and there was a wet pop from the seats. Claire had pulled the bottle out of her mouth.

“I’ve never seen a real live dhampir before!” Harman remarked, his excitement so great it left his eyes bloodshot.

It was safe to say this was a highly unusual reaction. The Noble blood coursing through dhampirs, who were said to be the very best Vampire Hunters, caused such horror in those who knew what they were that almost no one expressed any interest. On occasion, there were some humans who didn’t feel the fear they should toward the Nobility. This was the case where the two deputies were concerned. Either they lived in an area where education about the Nobility was sparse, or they just weren’t quite right in the head.

“Is it true what they say about dhampirs? Do they drink milk mixed with blood from the time they’re little, like you always hear?”

At Al’s question, it was Claire and Harman rather than D that bugged their eyes. They must’ve wanted to shout at him, *Shut up, you idiot!*

Al waited for an answer with bated breath, but Dorleac picked up where he’d left off. “I’d like to know, too. Which loves a dhampir, their mother or their father? The human one? The Noble? Or, unlike me, are they loved by both?”

Claire was frozen. Was the young captive taunting D?! Didn’t he know the fate that would await him?

Her thoughts were truncated by a voice like a knife.

“You lived with a Noble for a decade. Whether or not that was your fault, that doesn’t change the facts. Nor does what your parents thought of you.”

“That’s still not an answer,” Dorleac said despondently, looking up at D.

He immediately got an answer.

“You don’t seriously want to ask that. You only just now remembered your parents.”

“That’s not—”

“I have better things to do than listen to someone asking questions simply to kill time. Keep quiet.”

“You’re a cold one,” Dorleac replied, and then, still sitting on his stool, he changed his posture. Somewhere, one of his bones creaked. When he looked down at the floor again, something fell from his forehead onto his knee, leaving a small stain. The number of droplets quickly increased. He could try as he liked to stop them, but it would do no good; that’s what his trembling body was telling him. The prisoner had just been taught that while the gorgeous Hunter was quiet, he wasn’t necessarily placid.

Never pry into his affairs again—that thought had been branded into Dorleac’s living flesh.

In D’s mind, a panting sort of voice out of the past continued.

I love Dorleac as if he were my own child. I could not bear to live without him. I sent my “haunt birds” to bring him back, but all save one have been slain. Not only that, but my son and daughters were destroyed as well. D, I have already dispatched one last agent for his recovery. If it should decide it will be unable to bring Dorleac back, the agent will at that point activate an explosive device implanted in its body, vaporizing everything in a six-mile radius. It’s an antiproton bomb. And it cannot be stopped now. Out of fear that I might change my mind, I equipped it with an absolute trigger system. The only thing that can halt it is Dorleac’s safe return.

However, I would hardly call this perfect. D, you may laugh at me and call me pathetic if you like. You see, I changed my mind. And not ten minutes after sending off my final agent. I wish to see Dorleac alive once again. Would you not dispose of the retrieval agent for me?

With the passing of time, the atmosphere in the stagecoach became something beyond any of the passengers’ expectations.

Long ago, Al had done some work transporting monsters during the winter, when there was no farming to do. Harman had once stayed up a whole night watching a victim of the Nobility who was locked up. Claire's case had been even worse, with a kind of fire dragon known as a salamander hanging around all night outside the cheap hotel where she was staying. Each of them had experienced the chills, reasonless anxieties, and fits of sweating that resulted when humans or animals were exposed to the evil emanating from monsters. In Harman's case, one of the townsfolk whowas with them became deranged, and since he was spraying aflame thrower everywhere, another of the town's residents had to bayonet him.

Those who belonged to another world couldn't help but upset the physical and mental balance in humans. But the young man known as D was different. He was weird, and unsettling. His beauty in particular was beyond the pale. It was not of this world. And yet, as he rocked along in the stagecoach with them, they could feel a strange sense of relief and quiet seeping in through their pores to course through their bodies with their blood flow. At some point, everyone but D had fallen into a comfortable sleep.

D alone was another matter. His senses were superhuman, or perhaps inhuman, and the five of them—or a sixth, or a seventh—could see figures invisible to others, detect the odorless, and hear the silent. Naturally, that was the case while awake, but even when shrouded in the clouds of sleep it was unchanged. His senses were telling him that at present, he was in a dream.

"Have you *awakened*?" Dorleac asked him. "From your perspective, dreams are something you have, something you awaken from. But for me, dreams are the true reality—and as a result, when dreaming, you are awake."

"One who turns dreams into a battlefield—you're Sinistre's final retrieval unit," D said, finding this neither strange nor frightening. Land, sea, or air—this young man had fought his way through every conceivable arena, and this dream was simply another battlefield.

"Precisely. I have been dubbed LUI."

Dorleac stood up and walked right through the bars. For either he or the bars were a dream. Or perhaps both.

III

“Even the great D cannot defeat me in this world. In my world, you, too, must comply with its rules. As a mere part of the dream.”

“You’re free to inhabit that man and escape,” said the Hunter. “But he has to awaken from the dream at some point. If he doesn’t, Duke Sinistre won’t be happy.”

“Dream or reality—when asked to choose, everyone will choose the dream. No more than a short slumber in your world is an eternity in dreams.”

As soon as D got up, he bounded. Through the blade that split Dorleac’s head, the Hunter certainly felt the skull and brain being cleaved.

Dorleac grinned at him with an utterly unblemished face.

The Hunter’s sword swept out so naturally and swiftly and from such an angle it seemed as if it’d never returned, mowing through the man’s neck. His head went flying. D was unable to interrupt its path.

Claire was sleeping in her seat, and the head sank its teeth into her ample chest, biting down with vicious strength and tearing off chunks. The agonized Claire shuddered from head to toe, then died.

“This is a dream, of course,” Dorleac laughed. His face was the same as always, yet he also looked like another man. “If I allow you to return to reality, she will awaken exhausted. However, her life will be hell, meeting a painful death every time she dreams. And you can do nothing to stop it. Or to prevent your own death.”

While D could see that Dorleac’s head was flying straight at him, he was unable to move. The disembodied head sank its fangs into the nape of D’s neck and sucked his blood like a desert traveler gorging on water at an oasis. Against a backdrop of fresh blood, D grew pale and staggered, while the severed head of Dorleac/the retrieval unit LUI smiled pleasantly at him.

“D, I will not kill you. Nor shall I allow you to awaken. For the rest of time, you will live here in my dream world to be endlessly drained of blood.”

“That might actually be the best for him,” said a hoarse voice that echoed

through the stagecoach.

Astonished, Dorleac's head returned to his body.

"And who are you?"

Before the man had even finished the question, he grabbed his throat and started coughing. Air and spit flew from him—along with fresh blood.

"What . . . what is this? In my world . . . everything in the universe . . . is supposed to obey my rules. Oh, D . . . I shall come for you again!"

As soon as he awoke, D got to his feet and, after confirming that Dorleac was still in his cage, he went over to Claire's seat.

"What . . . do you want?" the waking woman asked dolefully, or rather, exhaustedly, but there wasn't a mark on her chest. Still, when she looked at D, her cheeks flushed and she said, "I had the strangest dream . . . Oh, I'm still half-asleep . . . Stay back . . . or you might catch my dreams."

"What sort of dream was it?"

"I was in this seat . . . and all of a sudden . . . this severed head flies over . . . And it bit into my tits . . . and . . . so—oh, that's right!"

Claire stood up forcefully. Turning toward the back, she pointed at the cage.

"It was that jerk's head! And it got cut off—by you!"

Her other hand pointed at D.

D's left hand pressed against her chest.

"Oh my god, what's the big idea?!" Claire exclaimed, and she was just about to knock it away, but she couldn't move.

The hand slowly rose to the nape of her neck.

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Just a dream story," said a hoarse voice that made Claire bug her eyes.

"Hey, what did you just check? And that voice just now—what was that?"

Ignoring Claire as she followed after him, D headed over to the iron cage.

Dorleac didn't move. He didn't even try to look at D. However, there could be

no doubting that he was awake. His body was shaking. Undoubtedly he, too, had been visited by nightmares.

“Did you leave the cage?” D asked.

After a few seconds had passed, Dorleac mumbled, “What are you talking about?”

“Did you leave the cage?”

Dorleac nodded dejectedly. “I got out. But that wasn’t me.”

Al, who’d just gotten up from the floor, pointed his gun at Dorleac.

“It’s the duke. He’s still after me . . . Oh, why me? I’ll never be free.”

“He hasn’t given up yet,” D stated coldly. “When he knows he can’t have you back, it seems everything within a six-mile radius of you will be vaporized.”

“What?!”

Al stared at D in amazement, and Harman pointed his stake launcher at Dorleac.

“Kid, try anything funny and I’ll shoot you dead!”

“Stop it. Kill him, and we’ll all be vaporized!” Al exclaimed, swinging the wide barrel of his gun around to face Harman.

“I know. I was just trying to scare him.”

“What’s all this talk about getting out of the cage?” Claire asked, having made her way to the back. She was still rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. “Now I remember,” she said. “You were in my dream, too.”

“Our enemy lives in a world of dreams. It seems he has the power to draw us there.”

“Is that supposed to mean we’re having the same dream he is?”

“That’s right,” said D.

“So, if he does that—what then?” Despite the fact Claire herself knew the answer, her question was rather ambiguous. “A dream is a dream, right? So even if he escapes that cage in his dream, it shouldn’t help him any in the real

world. A dream is just a dream.”

Claire put her hand against her chest and said, “My God . . . After getting killed like that . . . I can remember how it felt even now. I thought I’d die—well, actually I did die. And then I woke up. But if I had to go through that again . . . It hurt so bad. You’ve got to do something.” Her face a blank sheet of shock spattered with the inks of horror and fear, she looked first to D, then shifted to Al, and finally Harman. “It’ll happen again . . . to you . . . and to you. I’ll be damned if I’ll be dragged into a dream and murdered there. So, what are we supposed to do? How can we save ourselves? Somebody, save me. You think I can keep from going to sleep? Do you?”

“Do something, you little bastard!”

The eardrums of all present were savagely rocked by the sound of iron striking iron. Harman had banged the cage with the business end of the stake launcher.

Dorleac shrieked and curled up in a ball.

“Knock it off,” Al said, grabbing the end of the weapon when the blacksmith raised it for a second blow. “It ain’t his fault. If he knew that trick, he’d have used it long before now.”

“Yeah, but—” Harman began, his face contorting.

Just then, Louise came down. She’d heard the clang againstthe cage.

D explained the situation.

“This is a hell of a mess,” the sheriff said, the words escaping her like a squeak, but she managed to keep her cool. “So, it can’t work this spell on us if we’re awake? Or does it all depend on what the enemy wants?”

“I wasn’t asleep, but I went into its world.”

“In that case—nothing we do will help,” the sheriff said, bringing her fist up to her lips.

D said to her, “That’s true for us, but we don’t know if the same goes for the enemy.”

“Huh?”

The sheriff's expression made it plain she had no idea what the Hunter was driving at.

"What I mean is, it isn't necessarily dreaming all the time. People sleep at different times."

"Oh, right. Meaning we'd be okay while the enemy was awake, eh? Only, we have no way of knowing when that is, do we?"

"We'll keep an eye on each other. And if anyone falls asleep, we'll bind them hand and foot."

"If we do that, our manpower will just keep shrinking. That's exactly what the enemy wants!"

"No, it's the reverse. Its first goal is to eliminate me," D told her. "To do that, the best plan of attack is for it to get control of one of you, if not all of you, and look for an opening."

"But—"

"If we can wait until tomorrow morning, the escort brigade in Gasburke will come out to find us. We just need to be patient until then."

"But this creep could stick with us forever. Humans need to sleep—and so do you!"

"I'll have to find our enemy before then."

"You . . . you could do that?"

In lieu of an answer, D started down the aisle toward the front of the vehicle. His stride was so firm and stately while at the same time elegant that it took everyone's breath away.

It was at that instant that the sheriff, Louise, noticed something. The stagecoach was rapidly picking up speed.

"D—go check on JJ!" she shouted, and the sheriff herself was heading down the aisle when her body lurched to one side.

The stagecoach was racing out of control!

D went up to the driver's seat. His movements were free from hesitation. No

matter how bad the jolting, it never upset the young man's sense of equilibrium in the slightest.

He could immediately tell that JJ, slumped backward, was sleeping. Quickly shifting the man over to the shotgun seat and taking his place in the driver's seat, D put his left hand against JJ's brow.

"How is he?"

"Not good," the hoarse voice responded. "The final retrieval unit is powered by galactic motion. That's a wee bit beyond my reach."

Immediately taking his left hand away, D asked, "What's its influence on reality?"

"At the moment, there's none. But its energy is nearly infinite. It could probably engineer something."

The Hunter's right hand was working the reins, and the horses were slowing from their mad gallop.

"But this is no time to worry about that. Right now, the enemy's probably wringing out info on how to take care of you. Who knows what a creature from another world's thinking? There's no telling what kind of play it'll make for you. Better be—"

The hoarse voice flew through the air.

Thrown from the driver's seat and leaving himself to the mercy of the shock waves, D could see exactly what must've happened. The horses had suddenly fallen asleep. Plowing into their fallen bodies, the vehicle flipped violently. Rain whipped wildly, and mud went flying. The stagecoach flipped a second time, and then a third—and though the plight of the vehicle alone looked like the end of the world, the team of six cyborg horses was dragged along, still harnessed to it and whipped around in a nightmarish scene that beggared description. And through the chaos, a figure in black sailed.

As soon as he landed, D broke into a run. The vehicle came crashing down like a black tsunami, but the six horses had fallen first.

A stark light flashed. Cutting through the straps that bound the horses to the

stagecoach as if they were paper, D dodged the falling animals and took an easy step forward, where he put his left hand against the bottom of the falling stagecoach.

Supporting several tons, D's hitherto straight left arm bent like a spring. However, it was a spring made of steel. The spot where his left hand made contact maintained what might've been the best balance in the universe, stopping the stagecoach. With just one hand, D righted the vehicle before getting out of the way.

LUI, THE RETRIEVAL UNIT

Chapter 6

I

Astonishingly enough, all of the passengers except one were only slightly injured. Dorleac was holding his left shoulder and groaning, and on examining him Harman immediately declared, “Yeah, it’s broken, all right.”

The whole group was in the vehicle, which D had righted.

“All the cyborg horses got pinned under the stagecoach and killed. What are we gonna do?” Al asked, gazing at the sheriff anxiously.

Each face wore a few bruises, and any scrapes that were bleeding had been treated with the first-aid kit. It was a miracle they’d gotten off so lightly, being in a stagecoach that’d rolled three times.

For the time being, Harman and Claire had stabilized Dorleac’s arm and shoulder with bandages.

“Timewise, we should be about an hour from Gasburke. Nothing to do but wait for the rain to let up, then walk it,” Louise said, making her decision clear. “There’s just one problem.”

Without even needing to follow her gaze, the attention of all was focused on JJ where he lay on the floor in front of the cage. He was sleeping.

JJ could no longer remember just how long it’d been raining. It’d been two days since he’d entered the forest. For a second time, JJ was heading into twilight.

It was back in the village of Sacrell that he’d learned he wasn’t the only one after this quarry. Another rival calling themselves the Wolfman gang got too big for their britches and made a move against his main competitor, who’d then buried every last one of them; that was all well and good, but next it would be JJ’s turn. At the very least, he wanted to avoid running into the other guy in front of their quarry—that was one thought he had, but on the other hand, JJ

couldn’t stop the hot red thrill of battle no Hunter could hide as it rose up through him from his ankles.

I’d like to try fighting him.

JJ shook his head to change his train of thought. He had to find his quarry as soon as he could—before sundown, if at all possible.

Apparently his luck hadn’t run out yet, something JJ knew the second he saw that the moon-watching tree growing on the slope twisted to the right, true to the map he’d memorized.

Thirty feet up ahead lay the vast stone ruins. There were stone walls and watchtowers that’d had their crystal facings pried off, while the arrow slit–riddled stone parapets had all crumbled and were beaten with rain. More than the hollowness of millennia of decay, they left themselves open to the brutal elements. Easily covering more than ten acres, this sprawling expanse of rubble also did nothing to dampen JJ’s joy at arriving there. It was all just like the map. So the rest should be, too.

Passing through a bulkhead where moss and weeds were king, he'd advanced on his steed for about five minutes when he came to a great pair of gates adorned with a crest at what had to be the graveyard. The set of gates opened down the middle, but the one on his right had fallen, while the one on the left was barely still attached to the frame. Beyond the gates, a crystal path ran straight for about a hundred feet, and at the end of it there towered an exquisite mausoleum that had proudly weathered five thousand years.

JJ’s eyes were drawn to the marble door. Beyond it, his quarry’s coffin should’ve lain, weathering the ages.

“Sorry, I know you’ve been sleeping here peacefully for forty-seven centuries, but so long as your grave’s here, the village says the Capital won’t grant them an expansion budget. I don’t know if you Nobles have a heaven or not, but head off to your reward in peace.”

When JJ finished saying that, he got off his steed at the door to the resting place. Taking his protection canceler off his saddle, he set it to disarm any kind of mechanical defenses and waited for the OK light to flash. Though it usually finished with even high-ranking Nobility in ten seconds, this time it was over

thirty seconds before the blue light lit up. That was proof the grave and its occupant had been safeguarded by a terribly advanced defense system.

JJ let out a deep breath and switched his head into battle mode. Somewhere in his mind, his long string of victories always inspired overconfidence and inattentiveness, and he had to wait until those were gone again completely.

And while he was doing that, his opponent attacked. He was dressed in the resplendent garb of the typical Nobleman. However, he had dozens of tiny spheres circling him at a dizzying pace. As the energy to drive any machinery should've been cut, the spheres were undoubtedly operating on some unknown power source that wasn't bound by the natural laws of our world.

JJ suddenly stoked the rapidly dwindling urge to fight within himself. *This will be over in a moment*, instinct told him.

Before his foe could be engulfed in murderous intent, JJ kicked off the ground. Pulling out his sword, sheath and all, in midair, he held it lengthwise up by his eyes, his hands grasping both the hilt and the end of the sheath. Just as his right hand drew the blade, his left swung around. The blade that sped at his foe's heart was one that'd been concealed at the bottom of the sheath.

One of the spheres circling his foe intercepted JJ's blade in midair. The instant the two made contact, the blade was vaporized in a flash of light, and three more spheres went after JJ.

A split second before they could hit him, JJ made his landing. A visor covered his face, and he used his left hand to shield his chest and his right to cover his abdomen. He wasn't in a position where he could dodge. All he could do now was trust in the merchant who'd sold him this armor.

Blistering heat scalded his arm. Making a great leap backward, JJ desperately tore off the gauntlets. Throwing them to the ground with flames still spouting from them, he poised himself for action. His will to fight wasn't shaken, but his thoughts settled on escape. He wasn't at all confident he could elude the spheres, however.

As if he'd just read the Hunter's mind, the enemy's lips twisted into a smile. The spheres raced forward. But they halted midway between JJ and his foe.

His opponent turned to the right.

In a stand of trees that'd been reduced to shadows, there stood a figure in a black coat. More than the eldritch aura that billowed from him, it might've been his evident beauty despite all the shadows that'd frozen the Nobleman.

"D," JJ murmured.

The shadowy figure stepped forward. The spheres glided into action.

D swung his right arm. Undoubtedly it was the hem of his coat that'd whipped up the wind. JJ bent backward from it, and his foe reeled as well.

A flash of light bleached the Noble's form white. Spheres blown into confusion by the wind had collided. The ring of light spread everywhere. And from its center leapt the figure in black. Trailing smoke, D landed right in front of the Nobleman, and then carved him from the top of his head all the way to his crotch with a single stroke.

Having picked himself up again, JJ opened his eyes just in time to see D pull his blade out of his opponent's chest and return it to its scabbard. Though he turned in JJ's direction, it was unclear whether or not his eyes even registered the man.

The figure of unearthly beauty returned in silence to the spot where he'd first appeared, and there he mounted the waiting cyborg horse. Darkness began to cover the forest. While horse and rider melted into that darkness as if returning to their lair, JJ said nothing but merely watched them go.

There goes a whole other form of life, he thought. Something was leaving that had the same shape as him, but was something else entirely. A sense of loss he'd never once felt on encountering any enemy, no matter how great, now filled the man from head to toe. Shaking his head, he crouched down and retrieved the gauntlets for his arms.

"You look to be in pain," a clearly mocking voice said, rising from the ground. The location was that of his foe—who was only dust. Before JJ's astonished eyes, his foe slowly got up. He was back in his original state.

"Nothing is so painful as learning that confidence and pride as tough as iron are but castles built on sand. How will you live now? No matter how you spend

your days, you shall carry the feeling of defeat now branded on your heart until the day you die!”

“Who . . . who are you?”

“I am the master of this world. This is a dream that comes to me,” said his foe, not a single wound or speck of blood on him.

“A dream?”

“I see. This is a blow severe enough to make you want to quit being a Hunter.”

“Shut up,” JJ said, his right hand tightening its grip on his sword.

“I believe I just told you this is *my* dream—if you don’t believe me, try throwing that here.” His foe tapped the left side of his chest with one hand.

An intense hatred rose in the man’s throat. JJ’s blade flew with peerless accuracy, piercing his foe’s heart. Grabbing the hilt that protruded from his chest, the enemy threw the weapon back at JJ. His body wouldn’t move. A blistering-hot pain passed through his chest and out his back.

“Does it hurt?”

The question left JJ astonished. Looking down, he saw that the hilt had stopped against his chest. The tip of the blade was jutting from his back. And yet, there was no pain.

When his foe waved his right hand, the blade vanished.

“In dreams, we can disregard all the laws of the world. Like so.”

The enemy walked toward him. With his first stride, his form became that of D.

“Emotions, however—hatred and anger—they are no different than normal. Set yourself free. You have a sword in your hand!”

Even before being told that, JJ had felt the weapon in his right hand.

“How about it? This man has taken everything from you. Are you going to say some empty compliment, like ‘I’m no match for you,’ and run off with your tail between your legs? Then again, that might suit a loser just fine.”

“Shut up.”

“Why don’t you try to make me? Do it yourself.”

“Shut up!”

He was already within striking distance. JJ’s blade slashed D from the base of the neck down through the right lung, and the rival Hunter toppled, gushing bright blood.

“How was that? How does it feel to have a dream within a dream?”

The source of the voice had returned to dust, and JJ stood alone in the resting place without a sign of another living creature. Only the voice could be heard. In JJ’s ears, it wasn’t the voice of a dream; it was one of reality.

“In dreams, it’s easy for one to open the heavy doors to their heart. You have what it takes to live here. What do you say? Will you try slaying D here?”

Before the voice urged him, JJ had found his heart whirling in a terrible conflict.

Slay D? How could I do such a thing? I should be ashamed.

However, the conflict was short lived. It only went on until the moment JJ realized, *This is a dream. I’m just dreaming, after all. No matter what I do, or what happens, it has no bearing on reality. I have a right to dream. Or to live in a dream.*

“I’ll slay D,” JJ murmured.

Laughter could be heard somewhere.

“I’ll be coming to your world again. Lead me back here, dream master!”

And then he woke up in the stagecoach.

II

It came as no surprise at all that JJ was subjected to a barrage of questions.

“What sort of dream did you have?” Louise asked, leading the assault.

“I don’t remember.”

“Is that always the case?”

“Generally, yeah.”

“What do you think, D?”

“Hey, don’t you trust me?”

“Sorry, but from what D’s said, I don’t think Sinistre’s about to leave us be.”

Eyes carrying malice reflected D, but the former Hunter quickly averted his gaze.

“If he says he doesn’t remember, we have no choice but to believe him.”

D’s answer was exactly right.

“In that case, untie me.”

Before JJ woke up, his hands and feet had been bound with a thin cord.

“We can’t do that, for the reason I explained. All that aside, is there any problem with staying here for the night?”

“Not really, if it’s on this road,” Al replied. “But the Frontier is still the Frontier. There are bound to be some strange things prowling around. A long time ago, I drove a wagon right through the night, and I saw a bunch of little fires moving along the horizon.”

“There is one problem.”

Everyone looked at D’s handsome visage, turning that way even as they tried not to look directly at him.

“What’s that?” Claire asked, taking a belt from her liquor bottle.

“Subterranean creatures called underworms. A little over a month ago, they wreaked havoc in the eastern Frontier. Given their migration patterns, it’ll be the western Frontier next.”

“It fits the timing, too,” Louise conceded with a nod.

“Could we maybe not have everything working together to drive us crazy?!” Harman shouted, looking like he was about to burst into tears.

At that point, JJ, who was sitting in the rearmost row of seats, looked out the windows to either side, then suddenly pointed toward the front window and said, “They’re gone.”

Everyone but Dorleac focused their attention in that direction.

“What’s gone?” Claire asked, furrowing her brow. “The cyborg horses?!” she then exclaimed.

The corpses of the six animals were nowhere to be seen.

Harman looked around on either side, finally pointing to the left window and saying, “Nope, there’s two of them over yonder!”

All eyes focused on them.

“What the hell—they’re moving?!” Claire exclaimed, the finger she’d aimed so forcefully bending back against the glass.

Though the darkness was like a hardened coat of black lacquer, by the light from the windows the passengers could manage to see some fifteen to twenty feet. At the very periphery of that area, the bodies of the white horses were indeed jolting out into the dark’s domain.

“What’s dragging ’em?” Al asked, completely riveted.

“An underworm,” Harman replied, his grip on the stake launcher tightening.

Someone let out a gasp.

The pair of corpses had been swallowed up by the ground in less than a blink of an eye. It seemed the work of nothing shy of a sudden cave-in.

“The underworm—that’s its supper,” Harman said, sweat rolling down his forehead.

“A half dozen horses—but then, each of them is half mechanical innards. I doubt they’ll fill it up very much,” Louise remarked. Turning to D, she continued, “Underworms are tremendous food hoarders. One can take ten tons of meat one day, eat it over the next week and a half, and then go to sleep for six months. I hope it’s got today’s ten tons now.”

Only stillness hung beyond the windows. A minute passed. No doubt that seemed like an eternity to those in the stagecoach.

Suddenly there was a terrific crash, and a crack shot across the windowpane. It was the half-dissolved remains of a cyborg horse. It seemed to have been

partially digested, as the polymer-alloy skeleton and artificial organs gave off wisps of white smoke, while there wasn't a trace of any sinew left. Though the remains dropped to the ground soon enough, they must've left some digestive acid as a parting gift, and the windowpane had begun to dissolve.

"What are we gonna do, D?"

It wasn't the sheriff's help Al sought. When the shit hits the fan, people choose the ones they can really count on over the chain of command.

"Do we just stay here like this and wait to get dragged under? Wouldn't we be better off making a run for it?"

"Running would just get us the same," Claire said in a low voice. "Underworms are said to be more than a mile long. They can move through the ground at speeds of sixty miles per hour. You'd be caught before you got five paces."

"What'll we do, then?" Al shoved his fist into his mouth. His chattering teeth broke the skin. Blood began to trickle out. "I've got a wife and kids. I only signed on for guard duty because I wanted the money to buy 'em one of those cleaning machines. I heard that even if I died they'd still get paid, so I was at peace with that. But now I'm real scared. Say, Sheriff, if I get killed by something that's got nothing to do with Duke Sinistre, do they still pay out?"

"There's no stipulation as such, but I'll see to it they do. If I make it back alive, that is."

Al groaned and dropped weakly to his knees on the floor. It was a reasonable reaction to impending death.

"D, you know how to slay an underworm?" JJ inquired.

"I've heard of a way. Though the body can be thousands of feet underground, apparently it keeps part of itself exposed on the surface as an observation sensor. If I can take care of that, the worm will die deep in the earth. However, its skill at camouflaging the sensor is said to border on the miraculous."

"That's right. The sensor might only be a foot to a foot and a quarter high, but supposedly they can even make it look like a mountain chain. But if you don't find it, all of us will wind up crapped out by an underworm!"

D started walking—or so it appeared for the briefest of moments to eyes viewing the world through a haze—and then he reached for the lever to open the vehicle's rear door.

"I'm going, too," said JJ.

"I don't trust you."

Leaving those words like a powerful shove against the other man's chest, the vision of beauty in black climbed down from the stagecoach. The light from the windows made the rain glisten like silvery needles.

"This is crazy. It'll spot him with the first step!" Harman murmured.

"That's why he's gone out there. To get its attention on himself," Claire said, hugging her bottle close.

D immediately crouched down and pressed his left hand to the ground.

"Hmm, can't find it," the hoarse voice said, its words mixing with the sound of the rain. "The bastard's dug down more than fifteen hundred feet. Still, it can move around free as you please. Must use acid or something to bore its tunnels."

"What about cave-ins?"

"Looks like it also secretes a hardening agent. It might even be mixed in with the acid. So the cloud has a silver lining, as they say."

"Where's the sensor?"

"That I don't know. Probably got itself disguised real good. We'll have to trick it into revealing itself!"

D advanced about twenty yards in silence. Somewhere on the surface, the sensor would be watching him and relaying that information to its body underground. But out on the barren plain, how was he supposed to defend himself from a fiend that could drag him down from the surface, and how was he to slay it?

D stuck his right hand into his coat. Rain bounced off him from head to foot. What he pulled out he then launched straight into the air. What sort of trick was this? Dozens of rough wooden needles flew straight up, forgetting entirely

about coming back down again.

Once again D crouched down and pressed his left hand against the muddy ground. The enemy was coming. Coming to sate its hunger to devour everything that walked the earth. Rain lashed every inch of the Hunter.

“Here it comes!”

Even before the hoarse voice spoke, the ground beneath the Hunter’s feet gave way.

“I don’t see him. I wonder—” Claire murmured, her face pressed against the glass. From the neighboring row of seats Louise heard her. “What happened to D?”

Louise hastily pulled her face away from the windowpane. She was just about to rub her eyes, but on realizing that, she halted.

Just for a moment, she thought. *That’s all.*

Nearly an hour had passed since she’d entered the rocky region. Louise felt her body had reached its limits. The moment she’d first stepped among the boulders she’d been shot in the side, and now the wound was hot as fire, and she’d long since finished the water in her cooler box. Every step her cyborg horse took was like a thumb in her wound.

There was no way she could turn back. Her opponent was a killer who’d slaughtered four entire peace-loving families, seventeen people all told. She was going to bring him in if it killed her—or shoot him dead.

The gait of her cyborg steed became uncertain. Apparently it was unable to deal with all the sudden ups and downs of this mountainous path. As Louise slouched forward with a low groan, something buzzed right over her head. It was after that she heard the gunshot. Louise practically rolled out of the saddle and to the ground. And she let out another cry.

Pulling her rifle from its case, she drove away her horse, then dashed behind a boulder to her rear. Twice puffs of dust erupted down at her feet, but that didn’t concern her. Atop a pile of rocks to her right, she could see the head and shoulders of a man armed with a pneumatic gun. He looked surprisingly close, and surprisingly large.

Louise braced her rifle against her shoulder. She peered through its high-powered scope. Her opponent had no way of knowing about her secret weapon.

It was easy enough to get the man's head centered in the crosshairs. Due to the pain in her side, she couldn't aim for anyplace else. The weapon's kick traveled all the way down to her wound. Confirming that the man's head had snapped backward, Louise then curled up where she was.

Her rest was over in a few seconds. Somehow making it back to her feet, she looked up at the pile of rocks. There was no sign of the man. He must've fallen down the other side.

Louise started walking. Only when a figure appeared from behind the rocks did her pain leave her. Before the man could raise his weapon, Louise quickly fired from the hip. She put three rounds into him before he dropped, then after checking that he wasn't moving, she moved closer with her rifle over her shoulder. She couldn't let her guard down yet.

Crouching beside the supine body to grab him by the hair and raise his head, she forgot her pain again in that instant.

It was somebody else.

Going around the rocks, Louise found his horse there. Just beyond it was another—the killer's steed. His corpse lay beside it with a bullet hole right between the eyes.

A traveler who just happened to be passing by had heard the gunshot and dismounted just as the corpse dropped there. The traveler had gotten off his horse—when he really should've fled—because he wanted to find out who'd shot that man dead. And he'd been slain by the sheriff's gunfire, since her pain had left her without enough time or presence of mind to check his face or build.

Louise remembered well the actions she'd taken next. Removing all the baggage and tack from the traveler's horse, she'd buried them along with the man's corpse—which had been a painful endeavor that made hell pale by comparison—set the horse free, and pretended none of it had ever happened. Fortunately, she could tell at a glance that the traveler was a drifter, and in his medical kit there'd been a painkiller so powerful it bordered on recreational.

When her work was finished and she'd patted the ground flat, the ground asked her, "Are you sure this is for the best, Sheriff?" The voice she heard was coming from the depths of the earth.

She watched as six feet of freshly dug dirt slowly rose. First a hand poked out, then a shoulder, the head, and finally the traveler crawled out with three bloodstains spread across his shirt. Louise stared until the very end.

"My name is LUI. I'm the final recovery unit dispatched by Duke Sinistre. And I most certainly saw what you did. Now that you've destroyed all your pride and honor as a sheriff, what do you have left? To live life as a recluse someplace where nobody knows you? You may pull the wool over other people's eyes, but you can't fool your own heart. You're a killer, a murderer. If someday you have a child who asks you about your past, how will you answer?"

"Stop it!"

Louise wanted to cover her ears. Instead, her finger pulled the trigger.

The traveler bent backward, falling flat on his back.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!"

Every time Louise said the word, she squeezed her finger.

III

As soon as she stopped shooting, the traveler immediately got back up. His mouth opened, and he said, "What did I do to you? I'd never even seen you before, so why gun me down? You're a murderer."

"It was an accident, just a mistake!"

"Then why did you bury me? Why dig a hole six feet deep? I saw it all!"

Louise felt like her eyes had turned to stone.

The traveler vanished, and in his place—

"D?!"

"The heavens saw it, too. And so did I. Louise, you'll be a killer all your days."

"It's not supposed to be like this. This—this is a dream!"

“You’re right,” D said coldly. “You’re in a dream being dreamt by Sinistre’s servant. But that doesn’t change the truthfulness of what was just replayed here. I won’t forget this, Sheriff.”

“Stop it, D . . . Nothing happened. I didn’t do anything. You—you didn’t see anything.”

“No, I saw. Saw it with my own two eyes. I won’t tell anyone. But you should keep in mind that I saw it.”

D started walking. He went right past Louise, who was stiff as a board, and got on his cyborg horse. Even after the hoofbeats had faded into the distance, Louise still couldn’t move a muscle. She felt like she’d been branded a killer and driven into the ground here like a stake, there to remain for all time.

“D . . . stop it . . . Please . . . forget . . . everything . . .”

“He sure is a cold one, isn’t he?” an unfamiliar voice said from behind her, but Louise didn’t turn around. She understood that this was a dream world. But for those who lived in this world—the dreams—everything was entirely real.

“As long as he lives, you can never hold your head up high. You can’t live with that kind of humiliation. What do you think you should do to make it easy on yourself?”

The voice of the device that called itself LUI, like directionsfrom a hypnotist, began to resound with alluring heat in Louise’sbrain.

“What do you think you should do to make it easy on yourself?”

Nothing from Louise.

“What do you think you should do . . .”

If this is a dream, it doesn’t matter what you do or what you say, Louise rationalized to herself. *You’re just going to wake up anyway. Forget all this foolishness back in the real world, and live in reality.*

“I just need to . . . kill him.” Though it was her own voice, it had a weird ring to it, like it was somebody else’s. “Kill D.”

A moment later, Louise awoke.

“Here it comes!”

With that hoarse cry, the mud shot up, with two lumps of it flying at D. One of the two was cut apart by his blade, and D dodged the other and closed his eyes. He was searching for any sign of the enemy. The ground beneath his feet dropped away. D didn’t fall. He stood there impassively right over a pit ten feet in diameter.

“It’s probably upset with you because of your red herrings,” the hoarse voice remarked.

His two “red herrings” had been swallowed by the pit without a trace. They had been a pair of well-digested cyborg horses.

“It might pull down the whole stagecoach next. How about giving top priority to finding that sensor?”

As if in response to the hoarse voice, D walked to the edge of the pit, and then took one step forward. The ground was about four inches below him. He’d stepped down from midair.

After he’d continued on for another fifteen or twenty feet, the ground opened its maw once again. This time the pit was more than thirty feet across. And D was above it. From the bottom of the pit it was a good sixty feet to the surface, and D was another four inches higher than that.

The underworm’s sensor still hadn’t discovered the secret to how D hovered in the air—that he had strung extremely thin wires in all directions just four inches off the ground. Metallic threads a thousandth of a micron thick had been wrapped around the needles D threw—and they had stuck in the ground hundreds of yards away, leaving D able to move through the air as he pleased.

“Here it comes again!” his left hand exclaimed.

D turned around.

Before his eyes, a humanoid shape erupted from the earth about six feet away, landing on the ground with a metallic clang.

“Oooh,” the hoarse voice said from the vicinity of D’s hip. “It’s one of them gladiators the Nobility used to amuse themselves. That’s a hell of a thing for it

to have swallowed.”

Showered with rain, the figure was about seven feet tall. Its body could be described as slight of build, and from it came eight mechanical arms, each clutching a longsword in its five fingers. Its head was essentially just a cranium, and it rotated, stopping when it came to face D. Both its eyes gave off a red glow. That was the signal it had acquired a target.

The gladiators were fighting slaves who had existed in ancient times, an institution created, not surprisingly, by those who’d dubbed themselves nobility. Apparently they had originated simply as a diversion for the nobles, and the future Nobles recreated these battles for their own amusement. It was a game for them. The only thing elevating the new iteration from the cruel sport of the past was that the modern combatants were automatons—androids who would spill electronic components and electromagnetic waves instead of flesh and blood. However, as their inner workings were exquisitely arcane, from time to time they would deviate from their programming and turn their weapons on the Noble spectators. It was historical fact, just as those ancient gladiators had turned their swords on their masters.

It was said that in the Frontier sectors alone hundreds of thousands of gladiators had been manufactured, but after about a century had passed they had vanished like bubbles on a stream thanks to their malfunctions, though several thousand even now wandered the mountains and wilderness. Undoubtedly the underworm had preyed on one such unit.

The gladiator kicked mightily off the ground. As its enormous, nearly five-ton frame landed with earthshaking force, it simultaneously swept out with all eight arms. As eight streaks of light twisted and turned and sparks flew, the figure of beauty in black sailed through it all without a sound. It was on the heels of this that a frightening thing occurred. The giant attacker’s right leg was sliced off four inches from the ground as if it were so much paper. Two of its arms were thrust toward the ground to support its toppling form, the first being sliced cleanly through the back of the hand, the other losing all five fingers. Still, the machine tried to rise again, but D was standing right behind it.

Three of its arms made backward thrusts. The trio of blades could’ve split stone, but D parried them head on, one handed. His left hand drew a dagger,

which he plunged into the base of the gladiator's neck. The blade went in hilt deep as if it were sinking into flesh, and pale blue waves of electromagnetism played across the metallic body. It took less than two seconds for the gladiator to fall. Before its head could touch the ground, it came off its body, four inches off the surface.

"Did you use the you-know-what?" the hoarse voice inquired with amusement. It sounded as if it had all but forgotten the current battle. By "you-know-what," did it mean the wire?

D nodded.

"You know, I forget just where and when we picked that stuff up."

Both the hoarse voice and D's face were tinged momentarily with an atypical emotion—and then it vanished. It might have been nostalgia.

D's crisis came at that very instant. The gladiator on the ground had gotten up again thanks to its auxiliary systems. D barely managed to parry the horizontal swipe of its sword it made as soon as it stood, and the Hunter was greatly thrown off balance. Four blades assailed him from overhead. When he parried them, he was driven down on one knee. The gladiator let out an impossible, bloody laugh as it drove the remaining sword at D.

A dull explosion bounced off the automaton's chest. Taking a blast of double-aught buckshot head on didn't faze the five-ton machine, but it did turn its attention that way. Its momentary puzzlement also halted the powerful thrust of its sword. The enormous form bent backward, and D's blade came down on its chest, spraying sparks as it cleaved the gladiator in two. This time the machine fell over, stilled forever, but D didn't even spare it a backward glance, turning instead toward the stagecoach. There was a red streak across his left cheek. A little buckshot had grazed him.

The ground subsided with a roar. The stagecoach tilted wildly. For the underworm had changed its prey.

"We ain't gonna make it in time!" the hoarse voice cried.

It had been born and raised underground. The light didn't belong to it, but it had intelligence. Other subterranean creatures alone weren't enough to

maintain its colossal form, so it had no choice but to prey on what lived on the surface. For that very purpose it was born with an “eye” for observing the surface world. Stretching up to ten miles long, it was a collection of a trillion sensory cells, and it, along with the worm’s powerful acid for digesting prey and dissolving earth, could be called the key to its continued existence.



Now its “eye” was trained on the rain-lashed ground and the warrior engaged in deadly combat there, relaying that information to its brain where it lay fifteen hundred feet underground. Its foe was surprisingly formidable, and had foiled all its schemes. Changing tack, it decided that rather than confront him directly, it would target bigger game. In its “eye,” the foe turned to face it.

“This is a dream,” its foe in black whispered to it in a language it could understand.

For an instant, the stagecoach stopped tilting. That was all D needed. Bounding to the slope below the vehicle, he used his left hand to support its weight. Just as his legs were about to sink into the damp earth, he put all his might into his arm. It was said that, to human beings, the most frightening part about the Nobility wasn’t their hypnotic gaze, but rather their monstrous strength. However, if even the Nobles were to see this, their eyes would’ve bugged in disbelief. Literally one handed, D was pushing several tons of listing vehicle back from the brink of a pit. As a result of his efforts, he and the muddy earth beneath him were being drawn into the pit. However, as if entrusting his body to invisible wires, he sailed in a wide arc and landed on the roof of the stagecoach. His dark eyes, clear and deep, peered coolly down into the pit.

“That just leaves the sensor. Where’s it at?” the hoarse voice inquired.

“Right here,” D said, stepping lightly across the roof.

“You can’t seriously mean the stagecoach?!”

Not answering, D flew into the air.

“This!” he said, though it was unclear whose ears would catch it.

His blade struck right next to the stagecoach—stabbing through a certain *something* buried in the sloping edge of the pit: the corpse of the first cyborg horse that had hit the stagecoach.

The earth howled. Everyone in the stagecoach covered their ears, and even people hundreds of miles away looked up at the sky anxiously. In no time, the cries had been swallowed up by the ground.

As D stood there in the rain, the remains of the cyborg horse had vanished

without a trace.

“Who’d have thought it was *that*, eh? The answer was right under our noses the whole time.” As the Hunter’s left hand went casually down by his side, from its vicinity the hoarse voice continued in a pensive tone, “But for all your speed, you shouldn’t have been fast enough to keep the stagecoach from getting sucked underground. Yet the underworm delayed—why is that?”

“It had a dream,” said D.

“A dream? It was the final retrieval unit’s doing? Why would it help us?”

“For Dorleac.”

“Oh, you mean it still intends to get him back alive. And one other thing—how’d you know that horse was the sensor?”

D put his left hand to his cheek.

“Ah, I see. You mean to tell me the buckshot that bounced off the gladiator hit the sensor, too? I can see where that’d get a scream out of it.”

On D’s back, his sword rasped as it returned to its sheath. Not even bothering to look at the enormous pits—scars of his deadly battle—D returned to the stagecoach.

A lithe form was in front of the door being pelted with rain.

“Welcome back, D,” Sheriff Louise said in a tone that carried flattery as she stood there to meet the Hunter with a smile.

WRITHING FORMS

Chapter 7

I

Exhausted faces greeted D. Unsecured baggage was strewn everywhere. No one could muster enough energy to straighten it up. Even Dorleac lay face down on the floor of his cage, making no attempt to so much as look at D. Al was sitting right in front of the cage, and it was at him that D halted. When Al looked up absent-mindedly, his expression glowed like that of a farmer seeing the sun break through the clouds after a long spell of rain.

“My thanks for the courage you showed,” said a visage pale and lovely enough to rival the moon.

The man had *gone outside* to fire the shotgun blasts that had distracted the gladiator.

“I wasn’t so sure of you at first, but you sure are dependable, mister,” Louise said, but rather than gushing praise, her tone was one of pleasant surprise.

The other passengers nodded at that. They’d witnessed D pushing the stagecoach back one handed.

“We’ll wait here until daybreak,” D said, looking around at the rest of the group.

Every one of them shut their eyes. As if to keep his good looks from stealing their very souls.

“Be careful not to fall asleep. If someone starts to nod off, tie them up.”

After telling them that, D swiftly went back to the door and opened it.

“Well, somebody sure is thoughtful,” the left hand murmured in a voice no one else could hear.

It wasn’t until a good deal later that the rest of them heard the sound of hoofbeats coming from the direction of the highway. They halted in front of the

stagecoach, a group of uniformed men in the light thrown by a part of the vehicle that'd miraculously remained intact. The one at the vanguard greeted them, saying, "Seeing where you were a half day overdue for your scheduled arrival, we came out to get you. I'm Labama Chauvet, captain of the Returnee Armed Guards."

Louise introduced herself, then explained at length about their circumstances.

Surprise spread across Captain Chauvet's face as well as those of several men behind him.

"I'll be damned. You were attacked by an underworm, and not only did you survive, but you even drove the thing off? Pardon me, but I just can't swallow that. It's not even possible to fight one." When he finished saying that, his face had *Don't try to bullshit me* written all over it.

Now it was Claire's turn. "What are you giving us that look for? You think we're lying, do you?" Gesticulating with her beloved liquor bottle, she continued, "Every last word of what the sheriff said is the truth. We've got a strong bodyguard on our side, you know."

"Oh, I see," Chauvet replied, covering his mouth. He was concealing a sneer. "And just who is this bodyguard who easily sends an underworm packing without losing anyone in the process? I would sincerely enjoy the honor of making his acquaintance."

"It's D!"

The expression on Chauvet and his men's faces changed as suddenly as a rough splice in a film.

"D? Er . . . You mean the Hunter of Nobility? Is it . . . *that* D?"

"Yeah, he's here with us. Come on in and see."

Chauvet and the others were massed just outside the door to the stagecoach.

"No . . . that's all right," the captain said absent-mindedly. "Get some horses hitched to this rig pronto. Rom, Elvin, Sacos, Beyond, Shakshoukas, Daquiri—you men, dismount. Hitch your horses to the stagecoach, then ride double with the others. We're setting off for Canaluda immediately. Oh, if only he'd been

there, Happy Gringo wouldn't have wound up like that . . ."

"Huh?" Louise murmured. "Did something happen back in town?"

Chauvet's features twisted horribly. "Truth be told, I was going to tell you when you reached Gasburke, but—in Happy Gringo, all the townsfolk were slaughtered."

The sheriff was speechless.

"One of the locals used a Mach pigeon to send word to the sheriff's office in Canaluda. He's no longer alive, either. Another pigeon was sent to the nearest sheriff, in Toel, requesting that he go investigate. Just three hours ago we had communication saying that the first message had been correct."

The duke, Louise told herself.

Deprived of his manservant, the Noble had bared his fangs in vengeance. Death had already begun to run amok. Fortunately, the only people with any connection to the town were her and Al. Since his farm was almost twenty miles outside town, there was essentially no chance it'd been attacked.

"Let's just keep that information between us," Louise said, the words bitter in her mouth.

Fifteen minutes later, the stagecoach and its fresh team of horses sped off on creaking wheels with D in the driver's seat.

It was two hours later that they arrived in Gasburke without incident.

Since Dorleac was in terrible pain, and the tiny way station had no physician, it was decided that the least they could do was to let him sleep in a bed until they set off the next day. It was Claire who made the suggestion. No one opposed it. While the law compelled them to keep him locked in a cage, human emotion told them it was wrong.

Just to be on the safe side, Louise asked, "What do you think, D?"

The gorgeous huntsman didn't say a word. It wasn't that he intended to respect the decision of the majority, nor was he apathetic.

Two members of the escort brigade were posted with Dorleac. Al and Harman were to get some rest.

“You cannot fall asleep. Give in to the sandman for even a second, and I’ll shit-can you that instant for dereliction of duty,” Chauvet told the two from his group, who were left with their eyes spinning.

“He could use a woman’s presence. I’ll stay with him, too,” Claire suggested. “And if I fall asleep, you can shoot me dead!”

And so it was decided, and the bar girl entered the second-floor bedroom.

“How about letting me go free for a while, too?” JJ asked, and his handcuffs were removed under the condition he not leave D’s side.

“I could really go for a smoke.”

The two of them went to the dining hall, where JJ sparked one of his cigarettes.

“Huh?”

At some point, D had gone over to stand in the doorway to the garden, where he was gazing outside. The sound of the rain was raucous. The former Hunter had been left to his own devices—or more to the point, it really didn’t seem to matter to D. Rather than being angry at his demeanor, JJ was astounded, and he took the tin ashtray in hand and headed over to D.

“Is that all you make of me?” JJ groused.

“What’s that?”

“I’m asking you if you regard me as a dangerous character. I won’t have you acting like I just don’t matter.”

D remained silent.

Having lost the opportunity to bring down his righteous anger, JJ had no choice but to keep digging.

“I know the reason why you weren’t opposed to Dorleac being let out of the cage. It’s because you’re confident that inside or outside of that cage, he can’t get away from you.”

“Get some rest,” D finally responded. “We’re leaving tomorrow afternoon. From then till we reach Canaluda, you’re going to be stuck in a pair of handcuffs

half the day.”

“You’ve got a point there,” JJ said, crushing out the rest of his cigarette in the ashtray. “Spare me the cuffs till we pull out of here. Night, then.”

He turned to walk away, but halted and looked back at D. There was no sign of the Hunter in the doorway. Running over, JJ saw the gorgeous huntsman white with the spray of rain. He couldn’t say a word. For he’d seen another figure standing before D. JJ blinked his eyes. Even through the silky gauze of rain, the other one looked just like D.

Their shouts and footfalls were erased by the sound of the rain. The next thing JJ saw was the two Ds with their blades locked together. The more distant D was bearing down, while the closer D held his ground. The instant the two met, the closer D angled off to the right, his blade mowing through the torso of the other. Blood gushed out, and the further D spun around once before hitting the ground.

Claire saw the whole thing from the bedroom window. From the time D had casually stepped through the doorway below, her eyes had been trained on him —because she’d already seen D standing in the rainy garden. On seeing the astounding sword fight intensify, and then one of the Ds fall in a cloud of blood, her interest was at its peak.

“What is it?” a clear voice asked Claire as she was backing away from the window. It was Dorleac, lying in bed.

The pair of guards gave sharp looks to him—and to Claire.

“Down there—” Claire began to say, but she decided against telling him. She had a feeling it wouldn’t be wise to give the young man any information that might overstimulate him. “Oh, it’s nothing.”

And saying that, she took a seat in an armchair. Her heart was thumping.

“How’s your shoulder? It hurt?” she asked in a tone devoid of the slightest feeling.

“Yes. A lot. Would you get me another compress?”

“Sure.”

Just as she gave the young man what he'd requested, he said to her, "I'm not going to get better, am I?"

His doleful tone made Claire a little sad.

"You'll be fine. Some great doctor in the Capital will have a look at it, and you'll be better in no time."

"I won't last that long."

"You're a man, aren't you? Don't get all wishy-washy over a little thing like an arm."

Just as Claire was really starting to get into the conversation, the door was thrown open roughly. Another member of the escort brigade poked his head in and said, "Hey, it looks like the pretty boy got himself killed downstairs!" Having said that, he left, and the other two guards followed after him.

"Oh my God, do they mean D? Just a minute—I think I should go, too."

She'd gotten up and had her back to Dorleac when he told her, "Please, don't go." He had the sad tone of a little boy who wanted his mother. "Don't leave me. I don't want to be alone in this condition."

Claire nodded and went back to her chair. It wouldn't do to have him escaping, but more than that, being needed wasn't an entirely unenjoyable sensation.

"Oh, aren't we the spoiled little boy. You're not about to die all alone from the likes of that. You really aren't the Frontier type, are you?"

"I never wanted to live out here," Dorleac replied, gazing at Claire with sparkling eyes from his bed. "From the time I was born, I knew this cold, untamed land wasn't the place for me. My world wasn't the wilderness territory inundated with fog, frosty winds, and clouds of dust, but rather one of crystal palaces, where flying machines soared across the distant sky on a beautiful evening."

"Like in the Capital?"

"That's right," the dashing young man said, but even as he nodded his head, his eyes never wandered from Claire. "However, I knew from the time I was a

child that was all just a daydream. I reconciled myself to living in a shanty out in the middle of the godforsaken wilderness, tilling and watering the soil until the end of my days. And that was when I met *him*."

"Duke Sinistre?"

Dorleac nodded. "That night, I'd been abandoned so there'd be one less mouth to feed, and I wandered about in the woods with every intention of killing myself. But then . . ."

"He wanted you to be his boy toy?" Claire said, and then she realized what a horrible person she'd become.

Looking away, the young man continued, "'I know of your dreams,' he said. 'Come with me.' And he took me by the hand. I only thought of my parents and my two little brothers for a moment. And then I was filled with thoughts of how now I was leaving home to enter a world that was my own. It was a time of unparalleled bliss. A decade passed—and not once did I curse my lot or wish to return home."

Oh my God, Claire murmured to herself in her heart of hearts. *I suppose a Noble would choose a person like this. Or does a person like this just attract Nobility?*

Was there something innate to human beings that would draw the Nobility to them?

Claire looked the young man straight in the eye. *Can't back down now*, she thought. *There's no way a Noble's boy toy can get the better of somebody who's lived an honest life in the real world.*

Her mind started to drift away. Her blood ran cold—no, actually it was a peaceful feeling.

I'm bushed. There's no way we can go without sleep, D.

II

Downstairs, an odd situation was unfolding. JJ had carried D in after the latter had collapsed in the garden. Some members of the escort brigade who'd just gone into the dining hall for a smoke saw them and started an uproar.

D had squared off against a phantom image of himself, slaying it but dropping at the same time—such was JJ's explanation, and they didn't understand it at all, but they made every effort to resuscitate D. Sadly, there was no doctor present, and though the man who ran the inn had a lot of experience with such emergencies, there was nothing he could do.

D's body didn't have a mark on it. Yet his breathing had stopped, and his body temperature was that of a dead man.

He cut himself down—that's what JJ thought.

Louise and Al raced to the scene, and they consulted Harman but didn't come up with anything. Of them all, only Claire was missing.

Placing D's body in a back room and setting Al and members of the escort group as guards, Louise went up to Dorleac's room with JJ. Claire was letting the young man tell her about himself.

On hearing about what had happened to D, Claire grew pale, while Dorleac murmured, "Was it one of *those*?"

"What do you mean?" Louise inquired, not missing what he'd said.

"Something I heard about from Duke Sinistre. A doppelgänger. Another you. It's said that if you see one, you'll die within a month's time. It's even worse if you cut it down."

"You die on the spot, eh? But D's not dead!"

"He must be different from normal human beings," Dorleac said in a tone of adulation.

"So, is there any way to save him?"

"The surest way is to dispose of whoever created the doppelgänger. However, that's difficult. Another way is to give them a certain medicine."

"And where do we find it?" Louise asked, the color draining from her. In her dreams, she'd resolved to do away with D, but in reality Louise wanted nothing more than for D to be saved.

"It's everywhere. But also nowhere."

“Are you trying to get smart with us?” JJ said with an incensed expression.

“I simply spoke the truth. There’s no other way to save someone who’s seen their doppelgänger and fallen into a coma except to have them drink the blood of the Sacred Ancestor.”

“The blood of the Sacred Ancestor?!”

That was enough to snatch away the souls of all of them, as if the stuff were flowing in their own veins.

“In that case,” Claire began, an eternity seeming to have passed before she began to speak, “there’s nothing more we can do. The freaking blood of the Sacred Ancestor—that’s fantasy talk!”

A leaden shadow of despair hung over the group.

Snapping his fingers, Dorleac said, “Oh, that’s right . . . I forgot something.”

“What now?!”

“Even if someone sees their doppelgänger, the original will be okay if they have another person kill it that very same day.”

“In other words, D would’ve been better off not cutting it down himself but letting JJ take care of it instead?”

“That’s right.”

“Just perfect,” Louise exclaimed, raising her hands and slapping them down on her thighs. She didn’t neglect to glare at JJ, either.

“There’s no point kicking ourselves over it anymore. Let’s just let D sleep. Claire, take care of the kid till I come back.”

And with that, Louise was just about to leave the room, but Claire called out to stop her.

“What did you plan on doing about D tomorrow?”

“We’ll take him with us. They might be able to do something for him in the Capital, or maybe we’ll run across whoever made the thing while we’re on the road.”

“You’ll defend him to the very end, won’t you?”

“Naturally. If he recovers along the way, we’ll definitely need him.”

Once they’d gone downstairs, Louise put the handcuffs on JJ and put him in his room, then she headed straight for Chauvet’s. But only after undoing the top two buttons on her blouse.

“What have we here?” the man inquired, his face plastered with lust. His gaze focused on Louise’s cleavage.

“I want you to leave the matters of Dorleac and D to me.”

“D’s fine, but the kid’s a problem,” Chauvet replied, making an undisguisedly wry face. “Your job is finished when you hand him over to us. You’ll have to leave the rest to me.”

“How many men do you have under you?”

“Fifty. I wouldn’t say they’re all the cream of the crop, but they’re more than enough to handle some Noble’s playmate. Speaking of which, is he human?”

“He has no problem being in the sunlight.”

“Then he’s human. Any strange powers?”

“I guess . . . if you count ‘fuck me’ eyes.”

“Well, now.” Chauvet rose from his chair and went over to Louise. There was a certain look of expectation both on his face and in the way he moved. “‘Fuck me’ eyes, eh? Well, from a handsome young lad like that, I can see how some would be taken in. Truth be told, if that D fella hadn’t been around, he might’ve won my heart, too. Well, if not for somebody else.”

Chauvet’s arms wrapped around Louise from behind, but she made no attempt to shake them off or escape.

“Speaking of ‘fuck me’ eyes, I was hoping you’d use some on me.”

Hot breath reeking of alcohol fell on the nape of her neck, and fingers squeezed around the swell of her breasts.

“I didn’t think you were that kind of girl.”

“Don’t put it all on me. I just thought we might get along.”

“I have no problem with D, but I can’t have you doing as you like with Dorleac.

I'd be out on my ass. And I don't feel like losing this job just yet."

Chauvet's hand slid into her blouse through the neckline.

"And how far does your job go?"

"Till we reach the Capital."

"Then if he goes missing after that, you won't take the blame, right?"

"That's about the size of it."

Still with her back to him, Louise reached around and wrapped a pale arm around the man's thick neck.

"In that case, you can have Dorleac until then. Promise."

"Sure thing," Chauvet said, leading the lady sheriff over to the bed.

JJ was constantly having changes of heart. Since watching D square off against his doppelgänger, the man had dreamt five times. Though to outward appearances he was just dozing, in his dreams he was back in that graveyard continuing that battle endlessly. Loathing himself for failing so close to victory, and hating D for swooping in and taking the prize. The retrieval unit fanned those feelings incessantly.

And as JJ went through this time and again, a bizarre transposition began to take place. In other words, the dream was reality, and reality was the dream. In reality, D was one of his traveling companions. He would never dream of assassinating someone who'd fought alongside him. However, in a dream, it was another matter.

His right hand wrapped tightly around his left from the wrist down. When he pulled in a certain direction, there was a nasty pop as his thumb was dislocated. His hand had become the same thickness as his wrist. Slipping off that handcuff, he repeated the procedure on his right hand.

His gear had been left on the stagecoach. JJ went over to the window and opened it. Rain and wind blew in. What faint blueness there was must've been from the eastern sky. Finding the head of a nail driven into the sill, he dug away at the wood around it with his fingernails. Once he'd exposed about a tenth of an inch, he grabbed the nail by the head and yanked it right out. It was over six

inches long. That would suffice.

Once he'd collected four of them, the door creaked. JJ's upper body pivoted on his hip, spinning around a hundred eighty degrees. His right hand whipped out like he was throwing a dart.

It was right in front of the ample bosom of his target that his missile halted, held tight in her right hand.

"Hey, look who you're throwing those at," Louise said, a wry grin rising on her lips.

"I'm surprised you caught that."

"Of course I did. This is a dream, after all."

JJ caught the nail when she threw it back, clenching it in his hand with the other three. "You don't say. You, too, huh?"

That was all JJ said. The fact that the sheriff was one of his compatriots was natural enough in a dream.

"How's D doing?" he asked.

"Still in a coma."

"So, we kill him?"

"Naturally!"

The eyes of both gave off a weird light. Even after they reached D's room, the gleam didn't fade.

From the room across the hall, there came a faint sound.

JJ burst through the door with lightning speed.

"Ah?!"

The muffled scream was that of a woman. Two figures were intertwined on the bed. The man and woman were naked, and left exposed from the waist up.

Quickly closing the door, Louise turned on the light.

"What's this—aren't you the stationmaster's wife?"

JJ's eyes were turned on Harman and his unusually hairy chest, and the

blacksmith gave him a sheepish grin.

“What the hell’s going on here?” Louise demanded.

As he hurriedly pulled on his underwear, the man replied, “Er, this lady here was looking kinda lonesome, so I came by to tell her all about the Capital.”

To Harman’s weak excuse, JJ added sarcastically, “In the nude.”

“Well, when two people meet for the first time and wanna talk in perfect honesty, this is the best way to do that, right?”

“I see. Just now it’s come back to me,” Louise said, nodding intently. “You were on one of the wanted posters sent over from Bilian quite a while back. The others were all photographs, but yours alone was an artist’s sketch. That’d be why it didn’t come to me right away.”

“For what?” JJ inquired, furrowing his brow.

“He cons women into thinking he’ll marry them. And he’s been a pretty busy little devil, too. As I recall, between the eastern and western Frontier sectors he’s tricked more than five hundred women out of their dowries.”

“This must be a mistake. I’m not a very handsome man.”

“Handsome men don’t run marriage cons. But why would you pick here of all places?”

“Well, now those jerks from the escort brigade have filled all the rooms. I thought that at least here, the two of us could have our own little world—”

“Get out of here right this minute,” Louise said irritably, tossing her chin in the direction of the door.

“He—he’s a con man?” the woman asked with an expression of disbelief, looking by turns at Harman and then Louise.

“Yeah. An old hand at it.”

“That’s a lie,” the woman countered.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re lying for certain. He really is going to come back and take me away from here.”

“Come back? He’s not going to take you with him now?”

The woman nodded. “First he’ll leave, and once he’s taken care of some business he’ll come back again. And then he’ll take me away from this way station out in the boondocks.”

“What’s his price?” JJ asked with disgust.

“His price?”

“In other words, what’s he get out of you?”

“Actually, I’m *giving* him something.”

“The same difference.”

“My wedding ring. It’s got a real diamond in it.”

Under the watchful eyes of JJ and Louise, Harman hastily grabbed his jacket and drove the woman toward the door.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret,” JJ said to her. “His only business is that diamond.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say!” Harman shouted.

“Yeah!” the woman exclaimed, and they left the room.

“He’s an odd one,” JJ said, shaking his head. His expression said he didn’t understand this at all. “Less than an hour after we get here, and he’s already put the moves on a woman. Worse yet, it worked.”

“I recall a memo that was written on that wanted poster. Seems he’s a genius at talking ladies out of their drawers. Apparently everyone from hundred-year-old grannies down to three-year-old girls wanted to be his bride.”

“That’s some genius.”

The two of them went to D’s room and told Al and the escort member that they’d take their places, so they could leave.

Al asked Louise, “You sure you shouldn’t be watching Dorleac?”

She replied that she’d be back soon, and sent him on his way.

Once the door had closed, JJ turned toward D. Louise did likewise. The faces

of the former Hunter and the sheriff had become those of murderers.

“I’m gonna kill him.”

“Me, too,” Louise said, holding the stake launcher at the ready.

In his comatose state, it didn’t seem likely even D could defend himself from the pair’s attacks.

The shadows of the two of them overlapped at the head, falling across D’s chest. JJ raised a nail to strike.

It was at that point heated shouts were exchanged and there were footfalls out in the hallway.

III

By the time the pair exchanged glances and headed for the hallway, an especially loud cry had rung out—a scream from someone in their death throes.

“It’s an attack!”

“Hide!”

“The back! Run out the back!”

Among the numerous shouts was one of “Y-you? You’re me?!” And then that became a scream.

There could be no mistaking that someone had launched an assault on the way station.

The commotion in the hallway had reached their door.

“What the—?!”

No sooner had the door opened than a group of sword-fighting figures leapt in. Three of them had their backs to JJ and Louise, and they were pitted against five others.

The trio turned and looked at the room’s occupants. The sheriff and former Hunter had never seen them before. All of them were covered with blood. They must’ve been members of the escort brigade. However, JJ and Louise had already noticed something bizarre about this group. Three of the attackers were

exact duplicates of the defenders, from their faces right down to their garb.

“Doppelgängers?!”

“Help us!” one of the three cried out to JJ.

Ordinarily, the original and the copy should’ve been evenly matched, but being caught off guard and the shock of seeing themselves as the enemy had stacked the odds against them. Add to that the two-man advantage the enemy had, and the trio quickly went down in a bloody mist.

Apparently not particular about who they fought, the five attackers raised their gory blades and charged JJ and Louise.

“*Ouf*!”

“*Gaah*!”

One of the two who reeled backward had a nail stuck right between his eyes, and the other had a wooden stake driven through his heart.

The third and fourth came at them. JJ and Louise both narrowly evaded their blades, and near their previous location there was the harsh sound of bone being severed. Though the pair, retreating from the trenchant sword tips of the enemy’s further attacks, didn’t have time to see it, the fifth attacker had noticed a bizarre occurrence. What he’d cleaved was the arm of the young man lying on the bed. He hadn’t intended to cut it. But it had suddenly gone up. Therefore, the killer had swung his blade at it. Everything from the elbow down fell to the floor, fresh blood sprayed from the stump of his arm, and the young man’s upper half was stained crimson.

At that point, the fighting was approaching its conclusion. Foes numbers three and four got nails through their foreheads, and JJ got his hands on one of the enemy’s longswords. Only one of them remained.

The fifth one didn’t try to flee. Doppelgängers had no emotions.

Dodging the swipe the enemy made at him, JJ ran number five through the heart. After confirming the doppelgänger had vanished, he asked Louise, “You all right?”

“More or less. Now, on to the next job!”

The two of them faced the bed. And the eyes of both went painfully wide.

D was standing beside the bed.

“You . . .” JJ started to say.

“How . . .” Louise began.

D inquired of the suddenly speechless pair, “What are you doing?” His tone and the air about him hadn’t changed in the least.

“Apparently we’re under attack by these damned doppelgängers. And we were worried about you, so—”

“You’re telling me *you* were worried about me?” D said to JJ.

“It was more like—”

JJ became tongue tied when D’s deep eyes were trained on him.

“Actually, *I* was worried,” Louise said, following up on JJ’s remarks. “We’re going to need you the rest of the way.”

In response to that, D asked the sheriff, “So you came here with him?”

“That’s right.”

“Your job is transporting Dorleac. No sheriff I know would’ve been thinking of anything but that.”

“That’s not—”

“This woman forgot all about Dorleac to come save me? And she brought a man she had to let out of handcuffs with her?”

“What are you trying to say, D?” JJ said, tightening his grip on the nail he had in his right hand. He knew it would do no good. Now that D had recovered, the former Hunter’s abilities would be no match for him.

“The two of you dreamed, didn’t you?”

That wasn’t reasoning; it was an assertion. It meant that the pair had fallen under the enemy’s spell—and the punishment would be death.

Oddly enough, JJ and Louise didn’t feel any fear. Now, D was the angel of death to them. However, this was the dream world.

“It’s no use, D,” Louise said. “You can’t kill us.”

D stepped forward.

JJ hauled back with the nail.

Gunshots could be heard, and the windowpane shattered.

“Is that the work of your co-conspirators?” D asked, spinning around. The hem of his coat spread like the wings of a supernatural bird, and he left the room without even looking again at the other two.

And then the bizarre battle was finished in no time.

Ninety percent of the escort brigade was killed in the surprise attack, with Chauvet being one of only four survivors. Most of the enemy had either died while killing their originals or met with Chauvet and his men’s counterattack, while the stragglers were slain by D.

Such one-sided battles must be rare. As strange as it would be to be killed by an attacker who was yourself, if the original struck down the doppelgänger, he too would die on the spot—resulting in a stalemate.

Al, Harman, and Claire were all fine. Their doppelgängers had all been dispatched by D. Those of Louise and JJ had been slain by the pair, who switched partners. As for Dorleac—no copy of him appeared. That was only natural.

“Letting D get revived was the enemy’s major mistake,” Louise was saying when D returned from outside and dropped the corpse of a winged beast-man on the floor.

“This is the same one that I cut outside the stagecoach,” D said.

Looking somewhat refreshed, JJ said, “Looks like it ran out of juice. Maybe it squeezed out its last bit of power making those doppelgängers?”

Raising one hand, he recited a brief prayer. It was a feeble eulogy for those who’d given everything in the losing battle.

Once daybreak came, the rain stopped.

“This is a good omen,” Louise told the group with a smile, her eyes shifting

from the dawn sky to them. She didn't know whether or not that was true, but saying it was part of her job.

"How many men do you have at the airfield?" D asked Chauvet.

"Twenty. I brought thirty here with me."

"The real test will be getting Dorleac to his flight. Send one of your men ahead to tell all twenty to head this way."

"Roger that."

Knowing the power of the enemy—and D—the captain of the escort brigade obeyed without any complaints.

The remains of the escort group's men and the staff of the way station were all put in the storehouse, and then the group returned to the stagecoach. Chauvet and his men were riding on all sides of the stagecoach as they sped off.

"You can't go to sleep, folks," Louise called out within the vehicle. "It's three hours to Canaluda—and the enemy's still hale and hearty. We've got to make one last push."

"Yes, ma'am," Al said, raising his right hand and yawning widely.

"He didn't sleep, did he, Harman?"

"Oh, no problem there. I kept my eyes big as saucers watching over him, and he didn't once nod off."

"How about Harman, Al?"

"He stayed awake, all right. No word of a lie."

Like I believe that, Louise thought to herself as she smiled and nodded. She herself had chosen the task of eliminating D.

D was in the vehicle. Sitting up in the driver's seat were two of Chauvet's men. Louise had stated that she wanted everyone keeping an eye on Dorleac for these final three hours, and Chauvet had consented.

"I'm surprised that pig would listen to what you have to say," Claire stated frankly, leaving Louise startled. With a knowing gaze, the bar girl continued, "The way he eyeballs your tits and ass, he seems just like one of my customers

—something happen last night?”

“Act your age. There’s three hours to go—you’ll have plenty of time later for that sort of talk.”

“Yes, ma’am. Whatever you say, ma’am,” Claire replied, sinking down in her seat.

A woman can sense these things, Louise was forced to remind herself.

In front of the cage were the sheriff, Al, and D. Claire, Harman, and JJ were in their seats.

“Almost to the end, eh?” Al said, looking strangely refreshed as he let out a breath. “Last night I had my doubts, but we’ve made it this far. And reinforcements will be coming for us along the way. I’m finally gonna get paid!”

“What will you use the money for?” Dorleac inquired with interest.

“To buy a cleaner from the Capital for my wife and kids. Farms in these parts get attacked by swarms of bloodsucking gnats all year round. When it’s real bad, they can turn a clear sky pitch black in nothing flat. It’s like a damned solar eclipse! Even if you manage to drive ’em off, any place where a gnat drew blood swells up like a burn and gets so itchy you’re rolling all over the floor. There was this farmer who went months without getting any better, and it finally drove him out of his mind. My kids had a close call, too. If I get one of them cleaners, the damned gnats won’t come anywhere near us. That’s why I’m doing this. Anything wrong with that?”

“Not at all. I’m just happy I was able to be of use,” Dorleac said with a smile.

On seeing that, Louise said to him, “You seem mighty composed.”

“Excuse me?”

“Once we reach Canaluda, you know what’s going to happen to you, right?”

Silence from the young man.

“Normally, I wouldn’t be surprised if you suffered a fit, or turned into a shellfish like before. So, where’s all this confidence coming from?”

“It’s not confidence. I’ve simply given up. Having come this far, there’s no

point in putting up any more of a fight.”

“That’s a good way of looking at it. I don’t believe you, though. After all, you told us we’d need the blood of the Sacred Ancestor to revive someone affected by a doppelgänger.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Dorleac asked, a dissatisfied look on his face. “I wasn’t lying to you. I heard it from Duke Sinistre.”

“Then your master was a liar.”

“Why on earth would anyone lie about that?”

“To throw us off track. D came around after he got doppelgänger blood on him.”

Louise believed that was what had revived D. She would never imagine there might be a link between a mere Hunter, no matter how incredible he might be, and the legendary Sacred Ancestor.

“What’s wrong?” the sheriff called to Dorleac in a tone of suspicion.

This was worse than turning into a shellfish. The face of the young man in the cage had become that of the living dead.

OFF TO THE DISTANT CAPITAL

Chapter 8

I

Hold it right there—" Louise told the young man. Though she said it in a low voice, Claire, Harman, and JJ all poked their heads from their seats.

"The duke doesn't lie," Dorleac said, his tone that of one drifting in the nothingness of the universe. A face of unearthly beauty shimmered in his blue eyes. *D*, he murmured. "D . . . Who . . . who are you? Could it be . . . you are someone . . . before whom even the duke need genuflect?"

No one was looking at his face. D was silent, leaning back against the wall. There was only the clattering of the wheels.

There was *something* tremendous here. And that something alone was going to make something happen. It would be without any consideration for the thoughts of these people or their fate.

Claire's mouth hung agape. Harman's eyes were open wide. JJ's expression could be described as painfully sad. Al was ready to faint.

"You misheard him," D said, gazing at Dorleac.

And then—the young man nodded. At that point, he was a prisoner of fear. Not just ordinary fear. Dorleac didn't go pale, and not a drop of sweat rolled from him. He wasn't even shaking. Just as someone tormented by hellish pain could be left unable to say a word, so he was bound from head to toe by a fear surpassing fear.

"I must've misheard. Just . . . as he says."

And as soon as Dorleac finished saying that, he collapsed on the spot. His sweaty face was completely drained of color, and his shivering body rattled the floor of the cage noisily.

All eyes focused on his body, which had finally returned to normal. And they

were all glad of that.

“Ah, fine weather we’re having,” Claire said over the back of her seat. “Wonder if we’ll be there soon.”

Harman pulled back into his seat.

There was no sign of JJ.

Letting out a yawn, Al adjusted his grip on his rifle.

Louise shrugged her shoulders and said, “That was quite a disturbance.” At that moment, she didn’t realize that she, along with everyone else, had experienced a fear so great it had erased itself from her memory.

It was a few minutes later that the hatch opened. One of the men from the driver’s seat poked his head in and said, “There’s a carriage coming the other way!”

For a second, the vehicle’s occupants seemed to bristle at the interruption, but the feeling was immediately quelled. Passing another carriage on the highway wasn’t an uncommon occurrence.

“Oh, dear,” a hoarse voice from the vicinity of D’s left hip said in a mocking manner.

When Louise and Al turned in that direction, D had already begun walking down the aisle toward the front of the vehicle. Louise followed after him.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I’ll handle the horses.”

“Why?”

“That carriage bothers me.”

“I’ll go, too,” said the sheriff.

“You’d better stick with Dorleac. He’s not all that he appears to be.”

“But . . .”

Who made the judgment then, the Louise in the dream or the one in reality?

Turning around, she called out to Al and tossed him the keys to the handcuffs.

As Al caught them, she told him, “Get those cuffs off JJ. JJ, kindly head up top with D.”

First, Louise poked her head out of the roof and informed the members of the escort brigade that D and JJ would be taking their place.

The switch was executed smoothly. By the time D and JJ were in the driver’s seat, the carriage up ahead had closed to a distance of about a thousand yards. Like their vehicle, it had a team of six horses. The point where they would pass each other was about thirty feet wide.

“Oh, what have we here? No driver and no one riding shotgun, either!” JJ declared, and once he’d cocked the hammer of his rifle, he stared at D’s left hand with a puzzled expression.

A hoarse voice had just stated its agreement with him.

“What was that just now? Ventriloquism?”

“That’s right,” the hoarse voice responded pompously. “Don’t worry about it. A man’s gotta keep a grip on himself.”

The former Hunter didn’t know what to say.

Fifty yards until they would pass each other—

Without warning, the other vehicle changed direction. Kicking up a cloud of dust, it came barreling straight at them.

“It’s a phantom carriage!” JJ exclaimed as he pulled the trigger.

It wasn’t the carriage he was aiming at. One of the cyborg horses staggered. To stop a car, you aimed for the engine. But the horse didn’t stop.

“They’re gonna hit us!” JJ cried, his body rising along with his scream. Not just that, but the horses and stagecoach rose, too.

D must’ve worked a miracle with the reins, because all six horses had kicked off the earth and the stagecoach jumped into the air, easily clearing the enemy trying to ram them and landing some thirty feet away.

The interior of the vehicle was thrown into chaos. No one had been properly secured, so they were all pitched out of their seats, slamming into the seat in

front of them or colliding with the person next to them before rolling to the floor.

The stagecoach continued forward. The unearthly, beautiful driver didn't seem to give any thought to returning to the highway.

"They're coming after us!" JJ shouted, shouldering the rifle. "It's the restless spirits of folks attacked and killed on the highway by Nobles or bandits. They sure are persistent."

A gunshot reverberated.

"Wow!" JJ exclaimed, ducking his head. "They've started shooting at us. That thing's got *passengers*!"

JJ's eyes had caught the pistols poking out of the carriage's windows and the shriveled hands that held them. The hands were those of men, women, and even children.

On the highways of the Frontier, monsters and bandit groups were a certainty. On the other hand, aside from someone riding shotgun next to the driver, stagecoach passengers had no choice but to defend themselves. In the face of overwhelming numbers, firepower, and cruelty, besieged passengers could be forced to surrender, but even after that they might be killed on the spot or left stranded there as food for monsters.

Restless spirits collected on the Frontier. The ghostly fires that burned by night across the vast plains were the pooled souls of those angered by their untimely deaths. That resentment could reanimate broken-down carriages and cyborg horses, with the dead becoming passengers once more and attacking those who traveled the plains in peace—which made sense in its own way.

"What'll we do, D? They're right on our tail—actually, they'll overtake us any minute! They're vengeful spirits, after all."

"We oughta have a funeral for 'em."

"Quit it with the ventriloquism!"

JJ's angry shout was erased by a bullet whizzing through the air.

"Son of a bitch!"

JJ fired another shot at them, and then all the hands pulled back into the carriage.

The former Hunter didn't think he'd had any effect. He wasn't that simple-minded.

A thick cylinder poked out of the window.

"It's a bazooka!"

A small amount of powder set in the bottom of the fat, high-explosive projectile would send it flying more than a hundred yards, where its shrapnel and shock waves would bowl over the cyborg horses.

"Hold on tight," D said, cracking the reins.

The ground swelled. With a roar, red-hot chunks of iron flew at the horses and stagecoach. All of them struck the bottom of the vehicle, which was tilted sharply to one side.

JJ had just about rolled out of the driver's seat before latching onto one of the handholds for moving about up top, and as he clung to it, inside he was shouting with surprise, *What the hell is this guy?! He's a freak!* It was almost a scream of heartfelt emotion.

Suddenly the stagecoach slowed down. Their fifty-yard lead was swiftly diminishing.

"Hey!" JJ called out.

Before the man could ask the reason for slowing, D told him, "Take the reins."

"Sure thing!"

As he accepted them, a black shape flew past him. D had bounded. His leap had taken into account the speed of the pursuing carriage.

Landing on the roof of the vengeful spirits' carriage, the Hunter drew his blade. Not a single motion was wasted.

"Watch yourself. We're dealing with ghosts here!" the hoarse voice said, its words mixing with the sounds of gunfire.

Shots from inside the vehicle were ripping through the ceiling. One bullet hole

after another gouged the roof, but every shot missed D. Though they'd seen D's leap, they didn't know exactly where he'd landed. His body had touched down without making a sound.



The shooting moved to the rear. Advancing to the bullet-riddled front portion, D used the tip of his sword to scribe a circle about three feet in diameter. It looked perfectly round. As soon as he'd finished tracing the figure, D planted one foot in the center of it. A round hole opened in the roof. And the figure of beauty leapt into the hole.

As JJ was straining to see, Louise came up beside him. The stagecoach was finally running normally again.

"You sure you should be doing this?" JJ asked, tossing his chin toward the rear of the vehicle. He was referring to Dorleac.

"It's fine. Everyone's okay. I asked Al to watch him. But we've got some injured folks. Stop the stage."

"No can do. D's—oh my God!"

The enemy carriage had halted its mad run. D appeared from its roof. His blade was back in its sheath. The deadly battle within the vehicle was at an end.

Working the reins, JJ drove the stagecoach over by the carriage. When it was within range of D's earlier jump, the black form once again leapt up and sailed down onto the roof of the stagecoach.

"Get below," the Hunter told the sheriff.

Louise got up to leave without putting up a fight. She'd confirmed that JJ was okay.

"The carriage is going."

JJ's words made Louise and D turn their heads.

The carriage spawned by restless spirits had slowly begun to roll off to the west.

"Where do you suppose it's headed?" the sheriff mused.

"Somewhere there's no people," JJ replied. "And there it'll wait, until some fresh hate becomes its passengers."

"It never ends, does it? The anger and hate. And yet the good memories never seem to last."

Raising a cloud of dust, the masterless carriage disappeared into the far reaches of the wilderness.

II

“Get everyone up.”

Having been left with those instructions by Louise, Al immediately got to his feet. In the seating area, Claire and Harman still seemed to be unconscious. Al wondered rather dubiously why Louise hadn’t bothered to wake anyone else up. Being unconscious was the same as being asleep. What if the enemy were to appear in their dreams?

A cold hand was placed on Al’s shoulder. He was going to pull away, but piercing pain in his neck and waist stopped him. The hand on his shoulder moved to his neck. A pleasant chill spread over his pain, astonishing Al.

The pain had vanished.

“Wh-what are you—?”

“Hold still, please. I learned this technique from Duke Sinistre. If I make contact long enough, it can cure even chronic conditions.”

“Isn’t your arm supposed to be broken or something?”

“It’s better already,” Dorleac said with a laugh.

“Are—are you serious?”

“Surely you must see by now. Oh, you’ve got a crack in one of your cervical vertebrae. Does it hurt?”

“No—I don’t feel a thing.”

The cold, magic touch dropped to his waist. Pain that went back half a decade quickly receded.

“Judging from your condition, I’d say you’ve been this way for about five years. I could fix it in an hour or so.”

“You—you could?”

“Yes. But a human doctor never could.”

“You mean nobody but you can do it? But you could fix me up?”

“Yes.”

“Can you do other illnesses, too? Like the wounds from the bite of a bloodsucking gnat?”

“Child’s play.”

Al fell silent.

The dashing young man read the chaos in the deputy’s heart.

“Your children’s ailment—I’ll make it better. It’s not just itchiness, is it? After you’ve been bitten, the skin dissolves, and no matter what medicine you put on it the skin just keeps oozing pus. The itching is so painful, most children last less than a year.”

“Stop it.”

“I’ll cure it for you,” Dorleac said, his voice blowing cool breath and fearful notions into Al’s ear. “If you get me out of here. Later, I promise I’ll call on your home.”

Ordinarily, these were words no one would ever believe. However, his healing touch had easily turned Al from harsh reality.

A lovely, sweet voice was whispering in his ear.

I wanna believe it, even if it’s a lie, Al thought.

“I can’t do it . . . I won’t betray the others . . . after we’ve come all this way together.”

“If I escape, it’ll only be a problem for the sheriff and the escort brigade. Yes, you’ll probably be punished, but it’s not as if they’ll execute you or anything. I won’t get you into much trouble. You’ll be thoroughly reprimanded, and you won’t get paid, but in return you’ll have treatment for any disease for the rest of your life. As well as for your children.”

Al was at a loss for words.

“What will it be?”

“What should I do?” Al said, his own voice sounding terribly distant.

The hand from Al's waist took hold of his.

"You have my thanks," Dorleac said. "Kindly unlock the cage. Then you need only feign ignorance, and I shall do the rest."

"But the key—"

"Look, it's right there."

Even without the young man pointing to it, the deputy knew the location just from his tone. It had fallen right beside the last row of seats. And Louise had gone up to the driver's seat without noticing.

"If she comes back, she'll spot it immediately. Hurry and unlock the cage, please."

"But . . ."

"I'll cause you no trouble. Once you've unlocked the door, simply put the key somewhere else out of sight and pretend you don't know anything about it."

Al became confused. And his consciousness suddenly drifted away.

It was dark beyond the windows. Pitch black. However, the entire family knew it was still midday. The flapping of countless wings was the cause of it.

"There's no cracks anywhere, are there?" Al asked his family, who were clustered in a corner of their living room.

"We're fine," his wife replied. "I checked it all the day before yesterday. Not one of them gnats can get in here."

The faint buzz of wings assailed the group's eardrums, skimming by the end of his wife's nose.

"They're inside! How'd they get in?!" the young farmer exclaimed. Though his body was frozen, apparently he hadn't forgotten how to turn his head.

His son looked over at the eastern window and said, "Yesterday, me and Daphne were fighting, and a book hit the wall over there. I looked, but didn't see anything—"

"You idiots!" Al bellowed, spinning around, but by that point a black gale was swirling through the living room.

A heartbeat later it had vanished, and Al looked down to see both his children on the floor scratching all over.

“Ow, it’s so itchy!”

Letting out screams of something far more terrible than pain, his children's skin was peeling away, and their bodies were quickly stained with red.

“A dream,” Al muttered. “This is just a dream. A nightmare.”

“That’s right,” a steely voice from behind him concurred.

When the farmer turned, his eyes met those of the young man in the cage.

“This is a dream,” Dorleac continued. “Therefore, I can save your children right away. Lend me your aid.”

“Can you really do it?”

Although this was a dream, Al knew of the young man’s ability.

“Will you accept my conditions in return?”

“I’ll do anything—just save them!”

“Kindly kill *him*,” the young man said, pointing toward the children.

Lying there was a young man in black far more lovely than the source of the voice.

“It was this man who allowed your children to be feasted upon by insects. Once he’s gone, I shall provide everything you will ever need for your little ones.”

Al knew his name. He was the man called D. However, he’d never seen him before. Could he weigh that man’s life against those of his son and daughter?

“Okay. I’ll kill him for sure. So, what should I do?”

“As a start, kindly get that for me.”

The young man pointed down by Al’s feet.

“The key?”

“Get it for me, please.”

For a fleeting moment, Al hesitated. Somewhere in his heart a voice was trying to tell him to stop.

“I can’t reach it,” Al said, looking at the young man.

“It’s all right. You can take hold of it. Pick it up and hand it to me, if you please. I can’t reach it myself.”

Al’s determination was as heavy as a stone. He reached out his hand.

The young man nodded.

The tension was so great, the farmer blacked out for a moment.

The first thing Al did was to turn his gaze to the floor in front of him.

The key was right where it’d been.

Good, he thought, relief flooding his chest.

Al went over to the key and picked it up. Turning, he said, “I didn’t give it to you!”

Son of a bitch, he thought, *what are you smiling about?*

“That’s too bad,” Dorleac said, sounding crestfallen.

Once Al had woken the others, Louise came back down.

“That carriage has taken off,” the sheriff announced. “How’s everyone?”

On hearing a chorus of replies to the effect that they were fine, Louise seemed satisfied, but when Al stealthily handed her the key, she stared at him with an ashen face.

“He’s the one who spotted it. It’s okay. He asked me to let him out, but naturally I refused.”

Planting a hand on one of his strong shoulders, Louise said, “That’s great.”

“But why didn’t you get everybody up before you headed up top? We weren’t supposed to fall asleep, right?”

“Being asleep and unconscious aren’t the same thing, you know.”

“They’re not?”

“I’ll thank you to remember that.”

“Understood,” Al replied, satisfied. He had a good enough head on his shoulders to know it wasn’t wise to question the sheriff any further. On the other hand, he suddenly thought of something. D had to have known that everyone had been knocked out. Yet since he hadn’t come down here, he probably didn’t suspect anything.

Once the stagecoach returned to the highway, Chauvet and two members of the escort party—who’d all been left behind—pulled up on either side of the vehicle. A man like Chauvet probably would’ve loved to chew somebody’s ass over starting a fight without his permission, but after seeing the deadly battle on the carriage and how the stagecoach had moved as if possessed, he couldn’t say boo about it.

“By the way, shouldn’t the rest of the escort brigade be along anytime now?” JJ said, squinting his eyes to scan the far reaches of the wilderness.

“That’s right. Soon enough—oh, here they come!”

At the very edge of JJ’s visibility, a number of figures came into view, shimmering like a heat mirage. It was an approaching group of horsemen.

Twenty elite riders halted in front of Chauvet. D even stopped the stagecoach. One of the men rode forward, saying, “Captain, here’s a special delivery hot from the Capital.”

He handed Chauvet a communiqué tube. There was only a single sheet of official correspondence inside it. Running his eyes across it, Chauvet banged on the stagecoach’s door. Harman opened it.

“The sheriff around?”

When Louise came out, Chauvet handed her the paper from the communiqué tube and grinned. Putting it back in the tube, Louise said, “I’ll hold on to this.”

“Do what you want. Just don’t forget that an hour from now, all responsibility for the prisoner goes to me.”

“Of course.”

Louise went back inside the stagecoach.

“What was all that?” Harman asked the sheriff.

“Seems there was a little bit of an uproar in the Capital.”

“Huh?”

As Louise went back to the cage, Harman and Claire trained odd looks on her.

“I wonder if something’s up.”

“Definitely,” the bar girl replied.

“Maybe the sheriff got her walking papers?”

“Oh, that would be perfect.”

The two of them purposely spoke loudly enough so that Louise would hear them.

The stagecoach rolled out.

In front of the cage, Louise said to the occupant, “It’ll be time for us to say goodbye soon.”

“Parting is such sweet sorrow.”

“Made arrangements for your escape?”

“More or less.”

“You’re just as composed as always,” Louise said, and leaning back against the wall, she began to plot how she could slay D.

III

On the distant plain an expanse of verdant green came into view. The town of Canaluda, with the airfield on its outskirts, was the intersection point of four highways and a key point on the Frontier. The District Control Center and many other administrative agencies were in this hub, which was nearly ten times the size of Happy Gringo, with a population to match. The manmade forests and lakes that surrounded it were a product of generous budgets and the tax revenues from the booming business in their enormous pleasure district.

The group arrived just as a somewhat deeper blue was staining the eastern sky.

“Al and I will be heading back to Happy Gringo from here. The flight to the Capital leaves at four o’clock—two hours from now. The carriage out to the airfield leaves in an hour. So, I guess this is goodbye,” Louise declared. “Thanks for bearing with us on the long haul. I’m glad we’re all here, safe and sound.”

“So long!” Harman exclaimed, raising his suitcase.

“Bye-bye,” Claire said with a wave of her right hand. “Don’t you have anything to say?”

JJ met Claire’s gaze with a shake of his head. “This is the end of the line for me, too. It’s been a pleasure, folks.”

“Take care.”

And their unexpected passenger had vanished as soon as the stagecoach had stopped at the station.

He’s not the kind of man I could picture in a flying machine. Those weren’t just the thoughts of Louise, but something the entire group pondered when the Hunter left them.

Some men wearing badges came over, stood right in front of Harman as he was about to veer away from them, and said, “You’re Harman Briggs, a.k.a. Norman Brave, aren’t you? There’s a complaint out on you for a fraudulent wedding proposal to a Ms. Akida of Katcharishaw. Actually, the little lady’s in town, having come all this way to personally spit in your face. You’re coming with me, sir.”

“I don’t know anything about this!” Harman Briggs/Norman Brave bellowed, foam flying from his mouth. “So, you got a warrant?”

“Right here!” Louise said, handing the tube she’d got from Chauvet to one of the men with a badge—the local sheriff.

“You tricked me, you bitch!” Harman snarled, baring his teeth.

“You must’ve been feeling pretty smug up until now. Goodbye.”

Shouting obscenities and demanding to be allowed to speak to the woman, Harman was led away.

Louise then turned to Dorleac in the cage and said, “I think you’re probably all

right now, but I can't say for sure Sinistre can't get to you here. I'm gonna have them take you straight out to the airfield. So this is where we go our separate ways."

"Are you sure?" Dorleac inquired meaningfully.

There was no one else around.

"Yeah," Louise said forcefully.

"In that case, I ask that you remain silent."

Dorleac touched a slim finger to the door of the cage. As Louise watched the door open without a sound, she drew the stake launcher from her belt. She couldn't believe it. When they'd reached town, she'd checked that the cage was locked.

"In reality, the door is still locked, but you can see that's not the case in the dream."

Standing right in front of her, Dorleac put his hands on her shoulders.

This is a dream, the sheriff told herself.

The handsome face drew nearer. When lips touched the nape of her neck, Louise shivered all over. After doing only that, Dorleac pulled away again.

"Goodbye," he said.

The dashing young man walked right past her and headed toward the front of the stagecoach, but Louise made no attempt to follow him.

Dorleac went outside. Had the mood struck him, he could've done this much sooner. If only that Hunter, ten thousand times more beautiful than himself, hadn't been there.

The escort brigade as well as a sheriff and his men were outside, but even after seeing Dorleac they didn't try to stop him. They were once again having a dream.

Now all the young man had to do was wait for Duke Sinistre to come and collect him. For the first time in a long while his heart buoyed with joy as he headed for the exit from the station building.

First of all, he had to find D. On that point, JJ believed he need not worry. Now, the dream was reality for him. That being the case, D, who'd been in LUI's dream once, would be unable to escape from this world.

The former Hunter had gone into a bar with a good view of the station building. He knew that D wouldn't go far from Dorleac's vicinity. The reason JJ had left the stagecoach was simply to avoid any trouble with the escort brigade.

However, just after the former Hunter finished downing the beer he'd ordered, Dorleac came out of the station. As the young man walked down the middle of a well-traveled street through the heart of town, he had a tremendous spring to his step.

Paying the bill, JJ began trailing after the man.

Five minutes later, the young man came to an area where the shops and their signs were gaudily colored. More than a few of the women standing out in front of the establishments were dressed in what might be mistaken for underthings, and the streets were so packed with pedestrians you'd think the town was being evacuated. Captivating and provocative music rose like smoke from a number of places. This was the entertainment district.

On seeing Dorleac's face, women called out to him, making the first move. While treating them courteously, the handsome young man went into a certain shop. Painted on the sign in virulent shades was the name "Illusions." This was a shop where patrons inhaled hallucinogens, then went on to enjoy their fantasy worlds.

JJ walked through the door. He wondered if he was already tripping.

The interior of the shop was shrouded in evening. Beneath the vast heavens was spread a land that called to mind a garden run wild, and before him a marble mausoleum loomed.

"But this is—?"

He recognized the place. Was LUI making him dream this? Or was it a dream of reality caused by the smoke filling this shop called Illusions? Whichever it was, now that the stage had been set, the actor's role was decided.

Going over to the mausoleum, he battled the Nobleman who appeared, and

just when things looked darkest D stormed in and slew the Noble with consummate ease before leaving again. That was just the same.

He had to change it.

“D,” JJ said, managing to wring out the sound.

The rider halted his steed, then turned.

“I’ve been waiting a long time. If I don’t do something about this humiliation, I’ll have to live the rest of my days as a coward.”

“Where is Dorleac?” D asked.

Is this really a dream after all?

“Fight me. He’s got nothing to do with this.”

D got off his horse without any hesitation.

“D, is this a dream or reality?” asked JJ.

“Can’t you tell?” D asked, drawing his blade.

JJ’s sword already glinted dully in his right hand.

“If you don’t know, then it makes no difference.”

D sprinted first. The instant the man parried D’s blade, his black-garbed foe loomed over him like a mountain. The overwhelming difference in power pushed JJ’s blade back, and the moment the man felt cold steel on the base of his neck, his opponent staggered.

There were two kinds of sounds stake launchers made. One was the hiss of compressed gas, the other the bang of gunpowder. The stake that took D through the back and out through his chest was accompanied by the former.

“Louise!”

Stake launcher at the ready, the female sheriff ran over to JJ as soon as she saw D drop.

“I let Dorleac get away,” she said. “I hurried after him as fast as I could.”

JJ set one hand on the shoulder of the raggedly breathing beauty.

“I don’t know if this is a dream or reality,” he said wearily. “Looks like our

work in this world is done. All we have to do now is track down Dorleac and dispose of him."

"Do you think we can get out of here?" the woman asked.

"We'll manage something—if we're together," JJ said, softly stroking Louise's hair. It smelled of sweat, but an awfully sweet scent also assailed his nose. Louise had pulled him close.

An instant later, JJ shoved away the woman he loved.

"Louise, you're—?!"

JJ gazed down at the hand he'd touched to the base of his neck—and his carotid artery. Bright arterial blood gushed from a pair of teeth marks, streaming down to his chest.

"That's what happens in this world. JJ, we're not going after Dorleac."

The fangs that poked from Louise's mouth were stained crimson. Winding a pale arm around JJ's neck, she whispered to him in a sweet voice, "Let's go, just the two of us. Out into our world. A world for just the two of us, different from both dreams and reality."

JJ nodded.

"You idiots," a hoarse voice cursed at them from off to one side. D was standing there. In his left hand he gripped a bloodstained stake.

With a low cry Louise leapt back. D slowly turned in her direction. The unearthly aura billowing from him as he stood there with his blade in his right hand turned Louise to ice. When he raised his sword high, the last light of evening slid down its blade.

Sparks flew.

"Run for it!" JJ shouted, his sword locked with the Hunter's.

Grabbing D's right arm and shoving it away, JJ made a horizontal sweep with his sword. That slash went through D's ribs, coat and all, and came out the other side.

Staggering badly, D swept his left arm around. The wooden stake took the

motionless Louise right through the heart.

The sheriff fell in a bloody mist.

Running over, JJ cradled her in his arms.

“You saved me, didn’t you? My wonderful coward . . .”

“But the world for just us two—no, hold on a minute.”

JJ turned to look at D.

Astride his cyborg horse, the Hunter in black already had his back to JJ.

“D!”

“I knew that she’d arrived,” D said from the back of his steed. “But your sword kept me tied up. Your *next time* is now.”

Not waiting for an answer from the man, D galloped off. Even after his form was swallowed up by the trees, JJ didn’t move. The former Hunter looked terribly ephemeral, like someone who wished he could fade away into the even chapter 9

ing along with the light.

FROM THE DEAD, TO THE DEAD

Chapter 9

I

On exiting the station building, Dorleac had immediately headed for the busiest part of town. The best place for a leaf to hide was in the forest. There he intended to await word from Duke Sinistre. Even without him contacting his master, the Nobleman would know the young man's situation. The only thing that worried him was the gorgeous Hunter, but he had no doubt the final retrieval unit would get rid of D for him.

He'd gone into the bar called Illusions because the name had tickled his fancy. Once Dorleac had taken a seat at the counter, a cry of surprise quickly rang out. Just three stools away sat Claire, her glass raised.

"Well, what do you know . . ."

This isn't good, he thought, but drunks got noisy when they were ignored. Particularly drunk women.

Claire quickly came over and said, "You mind?"

While he didn't say, "Be my guest," Dorleac let her know it was okay.

"Drinks are on me, my handsome friend—so, what'll it be?"

"A beer."

"Come on. You're being strangely reserved, considering I said I'm buying. Barkeep, your most expensive brandy!" Then she nudged Dorleac's elbow and whispered to him, "So, how'd you escape?"

"I didn't do anything. The door was unlocked, you see."

"Not on your life. She's just—well, as a sheriff, she's top notch. You had outside help, didn't you? Oh, so *this* is a dream. You, me, the bar. In which case, you can come and go as you please, right?"

"Come now, miss—let's have none of that crazy talk," the barkeep said with a

wry face, setting a glass down in front of Dorleac.

“Oh, I’m sorry. But everyone dreams, don’t they? Maybe that’s real, and the world when we think we’re awake is the dream. Can you say it isn’t so, barkeep?”

The man was at a loss for words.

“See? But then, it doesn’t really matter which it is. Just as long as you can live there.”

Turning to Dorleac, Claire said, “Wanna run away together?”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t sound so surprised. Why don’t you and me go someplace far away to live? No problem, right, since this is all a dream anyway? It’d be a nice dream for me, but probably one you wouldn’t care to have—but then, it’d only be until you woke up. What do you say?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I have to go back.”

“To Sinistre?”

Since she’d said that in a loud voice, first the barkeep and then patrons at the tables turned looks of shock in their direction.

“Please, stop it. I have to leave now.”

“Oh, aren’t we the cold one,” Claire said, pursing her lips. “I listened to your life story, but you don’t feel like hearing mine? I’ll be done in the time it takes you to finish your drink.”

“Very well—but I’ll thank you to keep your voice down.”

“Okay,” Claire said, draining her glass and then staring off into space. After a little while, she said, “Nope. Changed my mind.”

“Why’s that?” the barkeep asked.

“It’s not really my style,” Claire replied, shrugging her shoulders. “Come to

think of it, I've never told anybody my life story. I'll tell it to my future husband, whenever I should happen to meet him."

"What's your poison?" the barkeep inquired, a smile rising on his lips.

"Another of the same."

Pouring whiskey into a fresh glass, the barkeep set it down in front of Claire. "There you go—on the house."

"Huh?"

"I hate hearing people's life stories, but in this line of work I hear more of 'em than I'd like. Sad, sad stories, day in and day out. That's why your drink's on me."

"I'm not sure I follow you," Claire said, raising the glass in her right hand. "But since you were nice enough to offer me a drink, I'll take it. Bottoms up!"

Draining the glass in one go and putting it down again, she stared at Dorleac. Keeping her voice low, as promised, she said, "You really are human after all, aren't you?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Because of *that*." Claire tossed her chin in the direction of the barkeep.

On the other side of the counter was a shelf full of liquor bottles, but in just about the center of it there hung an elliptical mirror. Dorleac's handsome visage was reflected in it without a hint of cloudiness.

"Well, of course so. I'm a normal human being."

"Good. I may have strange tastes, but I couldn't go on the road with a pseudo-Noble. Okay, let's get going."

At that moment, Dorleac was gazing intently into the contents of his glass, but he pushed away from the counter with surprising ease.

On exiting the bar, he suddenly suggested, "Why don't we set out together?"

"What?"

"After further consideration, I think living like a human may suit me after all."

“Just a second—are you serious?”

“Yes,” Dorleac replied with a nod, looking Claire straight in the eye.

“Well, how will we do it? There isn’t a stagecoach leaving soon, and neither of us has enough money to buy a cyborg horse.”

“Let’s go to the airfield.”

“What?!”

“Everyone is well aware there’s nothing I’d hate more than to take that flight to the Capital. I think the security there will be thinnest, too.”

“But what if we’re found out?”

“We’ll have to see to it we’re not.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s go.”

Dorleac walked over to a family wagon that was parked by the sidewalk.

“Just a minute, there,” Claire said, blinking her eyes.

Taking her by the hand and helping her into the wagon, Dorleac then lashed the two-horse team. The wagon started off.

“Pulling something like this will have people after us before you know it! What in the world are you doing?!”

“Please, have no fear.”

The wagon rolled down the street and out to the edge of town.

The airport facility loomed up ahead.

Claire looked back in astonishment. Behind them was endless wilderness. The horses’ hoof prints and the ruts from the wagon wheels stretched back as far as the eye could see. The two of them had apparently been driving for more than an hour.

“Oh, that’s right. This is a dream.”

“That’s right. It was my reflection in the brandy who told me to go to the airfield. At that point, we were already in the dream.”

“But if that’s the case, you should be able to do anything in this world. You don’t need little ol’ me around.”

“Probe our situation, and the dream becomes reality, or reality becomes the dream. Which is how I was able to leave my cage without anyone interfering. But it’s difficult to make a complete shift. Reality pushes into the dream, and the dream mixes with reality. That’s why I needed the key in reality to unlock the cage door in the dream.”

“I really don’t follow at all,” Claire confessed.

“To wit, we may yet run into someone we’d rather not. If we do, I shall need your help.”

“Someone—you mean D?”

“*That one* . . .”

The expression was wiped off Dorleac’s face. It was miraculous, taking only a heartbeat. You could almost hear the color draining from him, and his expression changed so quickly—both telltale signs. What fear, however, could rob the young man of his composure in an instant?

“He’s the only one . . . who didn’t fall under the dream’s power. Even when he’s in the dream, he remains tethered to reality. If he were here, the dream world would turn back to reality. Or into his world. That’s what sort of man he is . . .”

Though frightened to a shocking degree, Claire didn’t feel it. The horror from the first time she’d seen the Hunter still prickled on the back of her neck. Most likely it would be with her for the rest of her life. Yet, strangely enough, she didn’t find it unpleasant. Were there fears in the world that helped you sleep soundly at night?

“Well, that—that I can understand,” the woman replied.

“In that case, kindly come with me. And if we should encounter him, don’t be upset.”

“Will I be any use?”

“Of course.”

Dorleac grabbed Claire by the shoulders and turned her so she was looking straight at him. Before the woman could even react, their lips met. For a long time, the two of them were fused together. Once they were apart again, Dorleac gave Claire a powerful hug. His warm body was quaking violently.

“I’m frightened. He’s the only thing that scares me. I am alone again. My parents abandoned me. Duke Sinistre won’t come. Everyone intends to make me their guinea pig. I beg you, please stay with me.”

Not a word of that was a lie—that was the impression Claire got. Putting all her strength into her arms, she hugged the young man as if he were a child seeking solace.

“Just leave it to me. I’ll stay with you forever. I won’t let anybody lay a finger on you.”

II

After getting out of the wagon, the two of them went into the airport waiting room.

The airport facility was more sprawling than those usually found in rustic locations, and its security checks were extremely strict. At regular local airports, no one had a problem with unticketed individuals boarding aircraft so long as there were empty seats, but here guard robots and human security personnel performed rigorous checks, allowing only those who’d been properly processed to pass. Not only didn’t these two have tickets, but also they were wanted by the authorities, so there was no way they’d be able to get through.

However—

As the two of them headed for the lobby, a man who’d been hiding behind one of the pillars leveled his weapon and told them to halt. He was armed with a long gun.

When the pair turned around, their eyes went wide.

“Al?!”

“I figured this is where you’d go. Soon as I heard you’d busted out of your cage, I raced right out here. But what’ve you been doing for the last hour and a

half?”

A small lump of surprise congealed in Claire’s heart. An hour and a half? Louise had said there was two hours until the flight left. After parting company with the sheriff at the station, she’d gone to the bar and met Dorleac, and it had taken less than thirty minutes to get out here. Was this a dream, too?

“I keep my promises,” the young man stated.

“I know. I ain’t happy about this, either. But I’ll be damned if I let you out of that cage. When I left the station, I noticed I was still wearing a badge. The second I saw it I got the feeling I’d turned into a real bad guy. I almost sold my soul to the devil out of love for my kids. Okay, now you’re gonna wait here with me until everybody gets out here.”

“They’re still in town. Dreaming,” said Dorleac. “Also, I never had any intention of calling on your children. We’re headed off on a journey.”

The instant Dorleac’s arm wrapped around her waist, Claire’s will vanished.

“Forget my kids,” the brave farmer shouted, readying his rifle again. “I’ve got another reason why I ain’t about to let you get away. The sheriff told me. Yeah, she said the townsfolk back in Happy Gringo were wiped out.”

Claire bugged her eyes.

“That’s right. Luckily, my farm’s so far away it was okay there, but it seems everybody else got their heads taken off their shoulders. Nobody but Sinistre could’ve done that. Your master. See what I’m getting at? Anybody who’s lived with somebody like that can’t rightly be called human. Okay, we’re heading back to town.”

Al cocked his gun.

“Miss Claire, step away from him.”

As if driven by the deputy’s words, the two of them started walking toward the lobby.

“Hold it. I’ll shoot!”

“It’s okay,” Dorleac whispered into Claire’s ear.

Claire's reply was a frightened one. "But from the sound of him, he really will shoot! I—I'm scared."

"It's okay."

"Freeze!" Al shouted, his tone now a hysteric cry.

Regret, self-pity, and despair moved the trigger a hair. The farmer's gun was loaded with double-aught buckshot, nine balls to a shell, and it concentrated fire in a ring eight inches in diameter. Al aimed for Dorleac's legs. The young man's slacks and the flesh within them were torn apart, spattering fresh blood.

Claire stiffened. Al bugged his eyes.

Giving the paralyzed Claire a pat on the back, Dorleac started walking again. His gait, unhurried but sure, was the work of legs without a mark on them.

The shotgun had an automatic feed. A second shell was already in the chamber. The muzzle of the weapon was pointed at Dorleac's back.

When the pair pushed through a glass door and into the lobby, Al finally lowered his gun. He realized no matter what he did, it wouldn't have any effect.

"What am I gonna do? If he gets away, I ain't gonna get paid. My kids will have to stay like they are. So—what the hell am I supposed to do now?"

A black form passed Al on one side. Right in front of him, there was a shrill sound and scattering flashes of gold. Ten gold coins, each worth a thousand dalas. The farmer wondered if he was dreaming. Things like that just didn't happen in reality. However, even after he'd gathered them up, he could feel the weight of the coins. And they didn't disappear.

Al went after the figure in black. The door was just closing. His ears caught the same hoarse voice that'd spoken to him before the coins scattered.

We'll be expecting big things from you next, it croaked. *And you'll be paying back that money. With interest.*

When they passed through the boarding gate without having to show any tickets, Claire realized, *This really is a dream!*

They came to the runway. Boarding was already underway for the aircraft.

The stocky, cylindrical body of the craft had three decks and was capable of transporting two hundred passengers and two tons of cargo. Its rocket engines were said to allow it to fly at more than sixty thousand feet at three times the speed of sound. The three wings didn't look much like a bird's, as they resembled keen triangular blades.

Though flying to regional airports where passengers were few was generally inefficient, it was said that recently the Capital was letting private airlines take over only those routes which were running in the red.

Up close, the peeling paint on its surface and burn marks on scattered places around the aircraft became noticeable. There were also a lot of dents, perhaps from hitting birds.

While this wasn't her first time flying, Claire was nervous.

A gangway lowered from the boarding door of the craft. On entering the aircraft, Dorleac just picked out a seat and sat down in it. Claire had the window seat, and Dorleac was on the aisle. Since this was all just a dream, they could do whatever they liked.

Across the aisle from them was a row of four more seats, the first of which was empty, but the following two were occupied by a middle-aged man and woman. The man had a blanket pulled all the way up to his shoulders and was sleeping with his back to them.

What kind of dreams do you have inside a dream? Claire suddenly thought to herself.

The woman was reading a shabbily bound book, presumably a novel. It was unclear whether or not they were a married couple.

There were less than ten passengers total on that deck, leaving the vast cabin feeling terribly chilly. They didn't know about the second or third decks, but there couldn't have been many more passengers on them.

Less than a minute after the pair boarded, the aircraft began to shudder. A woman's voice announced that they'd be taking off in a minute, and instructed everyone to buckle their seat belts.

The aircraft took off right on schedule. Once they'd leveled off at thirty

thousand feet, passengers hitherto rigid with anxiety finally began chatting.

“Dear me, the stress has been murder on my complexion,” the middle-aged woman across the aisle proclaimed loudly, pulling a compact from the coat draped across her knees and beginning to pat noisily at her face. In less than two seconds, the sound stopped.

Claire, who’d been lying back in her seat, sat up and looked over. Oddly enough, Dorleac was sitting bolt upright and utterly motionless. Across from him, the woman was staring into her compact—and anyone who saw her face at that moment would’ve remembered the look on it as long as they lived. Eyes bulging with fear were reflected in her compact.

The way the woman sat, she was leaning to the left, and on account of that, something other than her face had been reflected. The aisle—and Dorleac. No. There was no Dorleac. The tiny mirror reflected only an empty seat.

“But you . . .” Claire began, the words escaping from her mouth of their own accord. “. . . Nothing was done to you . . . You said so . . .”

Dorleac’s profile twisted slowly. What Claire’s eyes focused on were the stark fangs peeking from the corners of his mouth. They were keenly tapered.

“Y-you’re . . .” she stammered, but when she tried to rise, she was caught by the wrist. A chill to freeze her very blood flooded through her body.

“Not yet,” Dorleac said. “You yet have a role to play. See? He’s here.”

Remaining in his seat, the handsome young man indicated the area ahead with a toss of his chin.

Claire followed the gesture.

A young man in black was standing beside the door. Though she should’ve been accustomed to him after three days of traveling together, the bar girl once again melted in rapture. She felt as if she were dreaming again. A cold, hard, beautiful dream.

“How did you get here, D?” Dorleac inquired as he got to his feet.

“A tether,” D replied. “With it, I can come and go freely between the dream world and reality. And remain myself.”

“Well, sever it.”

When Dorleac stepped into the aisle, he had one arm around Claire’s waist and his right index finger pressed against her carotid artery. His nail had grown into a four-inch-long claw.

“It was a mistake luring you into the dream,” Dorleac said, chewing the words over. “You, a man who can come and go as he pleases in someone else’s dream. A man who was revived by drinking the blood of the Sacred Ancestor. Was that the work of the blood coursing through your own veins?”

“Let the woman go,” D said.

Claire felt slightly surprised as she gazed at the Hunter. Though she got the impression she’d just heard something incredible, her half-inebriated brain had lost the functionality to process it.

“Let the woman go,” repeated D.

“I respectfully decline,” Dorleac replied, his lips twisting into a grin. “I specifically brought her along to deal with *you*. It’s a shopworn trick, but if you want to save her life, lay down your weapons—not that I expect you will.”

Dorleac’s face turned the color of paraffin. That was due to the eerie aura billowing from D. He’d realized that the Hunter’s only concern was taking his life. Even if he had Claire for a shield, the tip of the Hunter’s blade would undoubtedly thrust through his heart without the slightest hesitation.

“Allow me to ask you one question, if I may,” the handsome young man said in a parched tone. “Who hired you to get rid of me?”

D moved forward. He was within striking distance with his sword.

Claire let out a low groan. Dorleac had his lips pressed to the nape of her neck.

“I won’t kill her, but I will drink her blood. Using a feeding technique Duke Sinistre imparted to me. In less than a second’s time, she will be made a servant of the Nobility. Now, are you still intent on turning your blade against me?”

“No . . . Dorleac . . . Don’t do it,” Claire pleaded. Her teeth were chattering. It wasn’t out of fear for her life. She was afraid of her very soul being despoiled.

“Help . . . D . . . Save me.”



What tableau was going to unfold? Would D lower his sword? No, his blade would probably go through Claire once she'd been bitten and pierce Dorleac straight through the heart.

However, no one got to see that.

The woman in the seat behind Dorleac had jumped on his back. After D's arrival, the man sitting one seat away from her had woken up and said something to the frightened woman, but no one could've imagined he'd persuaded her to take such a life-endangering action.

Claire dashed forward. On account of that, D's sword was delayed a moment. As the pouncing Hunter swung his blade, Dorleac shoved the woman away and retreated, galloping up the spiral staircase not far behind him to the second deck.

Just as D was about to charge down the aisle after him, he looked down at the man cradling the head of the middle-aged woman who'd collapsed back into her original seat and telling her she'd done great. The man smirked. It was Harman. For a man who'd managed to convince the very woman who'd come to see him get arrested that she should help him escape from the authorities, getting her to then distract Dorleac would've been a piece of cake.

D walked by without saying a word.

"Why didn't *you* do it, tough guy?" the hoarse voice said to Harman. It didn't approve of his using the woman that way.

And with that, D whipped up the staircase like a black whirlwind.

There was no one on the second deck.

On the third deck, D spotted a lone figure standing in the otherwise vacant chamber. The third deck was a lounge where travelers on long flights could go to relax.

"Why kill me?" the young man murmured. "I don't have anything to do with you . . . Someone hired you to do this, didn't they?"

Perhaps the aircraft had left the stratosphere, because stars twinkled in the purple sky that stretched outside the windows. Between light and darkness, day

and night—it was a twilight zone.

D advanced without a word.

“Who in the world . . . was it?”

The dazed look on Dorleac’s face suddenly reworked itself into one of understanding.

“It couldn’t be . . . Duke Sinistre? Did His Grace think I would tell them his secrets? Oh, so that’s it, isn’t it?”

In his despair, his face turned dark red and was carved with a horrible grin.

“Very well, then. I shall tell them everything. I won’t hold back a single detail on that shitty Nobleman’s account. How selfish he is! Kindly hear me out, D. He never tried to lay a finger on me. I was treated as if I were some treasured possession. However, he made no attempt to drink my blood. And these fangs, you ask? I *asked him* for these. Being around him, I knew *all too well* I would be better served being a Noble. So I whispered softly into his ear. *I want to be like you,* I told him. Oh, how happy he was. As was I. I thought that now, all that was his would be mine. What’s more, he had succeeded in some strange experiments. Thanks to that, I’m able to walk in the light of day.

“The days that followed were like a honeymoon. And because of that, I think he could never understand why it was that I left the castle. I don’t suppose you’ve ever heard of a bride whose honeymoon was so horrible she ran away, have you? What kind of brain damage would a thousand-year-old codger of a Noble need to think a gorgeous human like me would want to spend the rest of his life with him?”

Dorleac tilted his head back and laughed. And he kept laughing right until D’s sword pierced his heart.

Thirty seconds later, LUI determined that Dorleac’s retrieval was now impossible and sent atomic flames spreading through the stratosphere.

It was an hour later that evening dyed the plains on the outskirts of Canaluda crimson.

“You have my thanks,” D said, gazing at the distant gyrodyne and the copy of

Dorleac who stood before him.

“It is Duke Sinistre you should thank,” the android duplicate of Dorleac replied, his eyes never leaving the ground by his feet. The wind was blowing away the dust that spilled from the pile of luxurious clothes.

After returning the aircraft passengers—who’d been transferred to the gyrodyne—to the airport, Duke Sinistre had let D off out here, expressed his thanks, and taken the Hunter’s sword through the heart. D’s price for accepting employment from a Noble was the life of his employer.

“As you requested, we flew alongside the aircraft, and as we did so, we heard every word *I* said.” Gazing at D, Dorleac continued, “At that moment, the duke truly died. Was that what you expected when you gave us that flight plan?”

There was no reply.

“Such an unfortunate individual.”

That was the only eulogy for this Nobleman driven mad by his love for a human.

D spun around and walked off toward his cyborg horse. Up in the saddle, he was stained red by the setting sun. The color of blood.

“Take care,” said the android Dorleac.

The cyborg horse began to gallop off. The distant plains were endlessly red, and darkness would be falling shortly. Into that chaotic world, the pitch-black horse and rider raced at a manly pace, without the slightest hesitation.

the end

POSTSCRIPT

Although they're all but dead as a genre, western movies were loved almost as much in Japan as they were in America. Before and after World War II, from the 1930s through the end of the 1950s, a great many masterpieces were made, but being born in 1949, I didn't get to see them in the theater.

As the sixties began, westerns were losing steam. However, 1960s hits *The Alamo* and *The Magnificent Seven* showed that westerns could still bring in big money! Taking that into account, the movie companies rolled out their old masterpieces again. The first of these was director John Ford's 1939 film *Stagecoach,* the next 1946's *My Darling Clementine*, and finally there was 1953's *Shane*. Living out in the boondocks, I went all the way into Tokyo to see them in the theater, and after that I made a point of seeing every single western that was showing.

Horror movies are another film genre that I love, and thanks to advances in special effects they even now enjoy great popularity, but they lack a backbone in history. Since westerns are intimately linked to the history of the westward expansion, related books were published one after another, and I bought all of them I could find. As a result, I was lousy at world history and Japanese history, but I turned into this weird little student who was well versed in American history from 1830 to 1890—so long as it took place out West during the good old days of the westward expansion. In our rustic junior high and high school, I'd say things like "You could swap ammo back and forth between the Winchester Model 73 and the Colt Frontier" or "Some ridiculous books say that Wyatt Earp used a Buntline Special with an eighteen-inch barrel during the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, but it was really only twelve inches long." My equally rustic classmates would just give me puzzled looks.

So that's how I came to be a huge fan of westerns, and as a writer I've penned a few. This book, *Bedeviled Stagecoach*, is one of them. To be honest, the basic idea comes from the film *Stagecoach* I mentioned earlier. You can enjoy the book without knowing anything about the movie, but those who've seen *Stagecoach* should find this interesting. The Noble servant being transported,

the sheriff guarding him, the mysterious passengers, the unique Frontier threats that lay ahead, and the henchmen the Noble sends to retrieve his man —I think you'll be able to see at a glance that this is filled with the kind of excitement to be found not just in a western, but in *Stagecoach* in particular. The setting is the very same Frontier. But I wouldn't really call it a western novel. I hope, rather, that the reader will find it to be a western movie projected upon the screen of their heart.

Hideyuki Kikuchi February 23, 2017

While watching *Stagecoach* (1939)

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 27

Nightmare Village

Written by
Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by
Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by
Kevin Leahy

Coming 2018 from Dark Horse Books

THOSE CALLED BY THE RAIN

Chapter 1

I

From off somewhere in the urgent pattering of the rain there came a far deeper echo like a rumbling in the earth. The room began to quake a bit.

“Oh damn!”

Grabbing the traveling bag resting by his side, Bligh used it to hit the girl and the procurer lying to his right.

“What in the—?!”

“Just what do you think you’re doing?!”

Looking them in their irate but still sleepy eyes, the man told them, “The ground’s rumbling. There’s a massive landslide on its way!”

And with that he jumped down to the dirt floor ahead of them. As if from the force of his landing, the building shook quite clearly.

Exiting the hotel, Bligh ran off toward a hill to the west he’d noticed before checking in, and behind him was the sound of voices and footfalls. At the very least the other two from his room, plus another girl who’d been staying in the big room, had been saved. No matter what fate the future might hold for them, at the moment his heart was clearly carved with the words *Where there’s life, there’s hope*.

Bligh didn’t invite them to join him. The rest would depend on the luck of each individual.

Rain lashed him from head to toe. The wind was blowing in exactly from the west.

That figures, he thought to himself. First a landslide, then a downpour right in his face. That was still kid stuff. All he needed now was to be surrounded by an angry mob and some cannibals, and then he’d finally be ready to throw in the

towel.

After he'd run for about three minutes, two shadowy horses and their riders passed him on the right. Apparently there'd been customers willing to take a private room at that old spook house of a hotel. On passing the man in the hall, Bligh had gotten the impression he was a traveling warrior. The other one with him was probably his wife.

Bligh finally turned and looked back. Lightning flashed. He would've killed for an umbrella. All five of the other figures were using their arms to shield their faces and heads. Fortunately most seemed to subscribe to the Frontier traveler tradition of not changing into pajamas, and all either had their baggage on their back or in hand.

What about the hotel staff? Bligh wondered.

He squinted his eyes in that direction just as the lightning flashed once more, and by its light he saw the rickety form of the two-story building fold like a house of cards.

They've had it, I guess.

At the same time the ground beneath him rumbled and shook, and behind the figures who fell, one after another, something big and black that could've been either a wall or a wave was rolling right that way. Just a bit ahead of it, there towered a steep cliff. Since the sides and top of it were devoid of plant life, if it collapsed the heavy downpour would swiftly turn it into a ravenous mud monster, bearing down on them and devouring everything in its path.

"This way. Hurry up!" Bligh shouted, pointing with one hand and running like a man possessed. He could hear the rumbling of the earth much closer.

It was five minutes later that he reached the bottom of the hill. He climbed it without thought of anything else. Fortunately the slope wasn't very steep, but that also meant it would take some time to reach the summit.

Now that he was on the hill, he could finally let up a little bit. Trees were growing all over it, so it didn't seem likely to give way easily.

After about a minute's wait, the rest arrived one after another. There was a plump, oldish man in a jacket with a girl dressed in the inimitable fashion of a

traveling country bumpkin, a strangely sexy middle-aged woman whose profession was evident at a glance, and a young couple who each appeared to be about twenty years old, give or take a year. He immediately knew the story behind the oldish man and the country girl, but he wasn't sure about the young couple. From the way they were dressed, they were probably a pair of sweethearts headed back home from a big town, perhaps even engaged to be married.

Lightning flashed. Everyone was soaked to the skin. Still, the rain kept on pounding them mercilessly, and beating down on the hill.

"What the—" Bligh exclaimed, straining his eyes.

The people had been transformed into inhabitants of a stark white world, and behind them something came into view that seemed out of a dream. She wore a dress as white as snow, her arms and neck were adorned with bracelets and necklaces of gold and jewels—yet all that could be taken away, and still her youthful beauty and lithe form would've burned themselves into the retinas of any who saw her, even in a blinding world of brilliant colors.

Bligh stared at her in amazement, forgetting the rain, the rumbling of the ground, even his own fate. Stared at her? No, the world had already been enveloped once again by darkness. Had it just been a fleeting illusion?

The trembling that reached him through the soles of his shoes shook Bligh back to his senses.

"Climb the hill. The landslide's nearly on top of us!" he shouted, taking the middle-aged woman by the hand and digging the toes of his shoes into the slope.

By the time they'd climbed to the top, all of them had reached the limits of their strength. Three of them were women. It was incredible they'd all made it that far.

The rain didn't let up in the least.

As the shadowy figures huffed for breath like beasts in their death throes, Bligh said to them, "Okay, we should be fine now. I don't see any landslide coming up this far."

Bligh looked down at the base of the hill. He couldn't see very well.

Lightning flashed.

The man's blood froze. His field of view was filled with a sea of churning mud.

"A-all the way up here?!" he stammered.

Mud surged up to his ankles. When it then quickly receded again, Bligh nearly grew catatonic.

From off to his left, someone asked, "What's wrong?" While the speaker was still wheezing for breath, the voice was full of vitality.

"Didn't you just see that?"

"See what?"

A fresh flash of lightning picked out the round-faced old man neatly dressed in a suit and tie, but Bligh's interest focused at the bottom of the hill. The snarling sea of mud was retreating. And quite clearly *back the way it had come*.

"What are the chances of that happening?" he groaned in spite of himself, but he actually got a reply.

"None at all!" Framed by the rain bouncing off him, the plump man quivered.

"The god of the mountain must've ordered it back or something, eh?"

"Actually, it looked more like it was avoiding the hill."

"This hill here?" Bligh looked all around, but he couldn't see anything. He had to wait for the lightning.

"What's that?" the plump man grunted, cupping a hand behind his ear.

Bligh, too, listened intently.

From up ahead there was the sound of hoof-beats. Two horses were approaching. By the time the pair halted beside them, Bligh had guessed the riders' identities. It could only be the couple who'd left the rest of them in their dust.

"I'm surprised you got away," the man said to them from the back of his steed.

To Bligh, he sounded high handed. He wasn't at all concerned about their safety. Their continued survival surprised him only to the extent he questioned why they'd been spared. In other words, in his heart he believed they'd have been better off dead.

"Yeah, well, your horses were so fast, we had to speed up chasing you."

The man on the horse grinned. "Well, don't take it personally. We barely made it out alive ourselves. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Lyle Brennan—warrior."

"Sorry we ran off and left you to fend for yourselves," someone said in a sensuous voice, making Bligh recall there was a woman there, too. "I'm Josette—his wife."

"Both of you are warriors? Isn't that cozy."

"Not my wife. She's just an ordinary woman."

"Beg pardon. My confusion came from her being just as quick to run away."

At the tail end of his sarcastic remark, Bligh felt something cold run down his spine. A powerful thirst for blood.

The warrior moved forward on his horse.

"Now, dear . . ."

Josette's voice halted his advance.

"Watch that mouth of yours," the warrior said in an intimidating tone crushed free of emotion, but the rain needled his words.

"Come, come now," the plump man said, stepping between them. "I'm Bambi Arbuckle. Physician and procurer of women. A pleasure to meet you." Ignoring Bligh, whose eyes had gone wide, he continued, "Since we've all been fortunate enough to be saved, it would be a shame for us to go killing each other now. As for the two of you—have you found nowhere on this hill where we might take shelter from the rain?"

"Over that way, there was one big old tree. Lots of branches to it, so it should be enough to keep the rain off us. It'll probably let up by morning, anyway," the warrior's wife said in a tone that made it seem that she, at least, was sincere.

“Hear that, everybody?” Bligh called out in a tone that ceded nothing to the rain. He knew that the rest of them had gathered around him. “All we’ve gotta do is wait for sunup. Okay, just have to tough it out a little more. So, how far is it to this tree of yours?”

“Roughly five hundred yards.”

“Sheesh—is this hill as big as all that?”

“Bigger, probably. Even by the flashes of lightning, I couldn’t see all the way to the ends of it.”

“Wow.”

“At any rate, let’s get going. That girl and the lady I’ll take on my horse. The other one can ride with my husband.”

The girl Josette referred to was the one traveling with the plump man; the lady was the fairer half of the young couple. Who “the other one” was went without saying.

“Oh, that’ll be a great help!” the alluring woman said, gathering the hem of her nightgown and making a beeline for Brennan’s horse. Extending her hand, she said, “I’m Charlotte. Charmed to make your acquaintance.”

“Lyle Brennan.”

“You’re a warrior, didn’t you say? That’s marvelous!”

In the meantime, the girl and the young woman went over to Josette’s horse and introduced themselves.

“My name’s Beth.”

“I’m Emily.”

“Welcome. The trip’s only five hundred yards, but it’ll be a pleasure having you aboard.”

Just as the rider extended her hand and was about to take hold of the girl, the plump man grabbed his young charge by the collar and jerked her back.

“Just a minute—what do you think you’re doing?” Josette asked angrily.

“I believe I told you I’m a procurer of women. The girl’s merchandise I’m in

the midst of delivering to the town of Gillian.”

Bligh and the others could only stare at him in amazement. He had indeed said he was a procurer. However, the plump man had looked so much like a courteous physician, it’d made them forget that fact completely.

“As such,” he continued, “I can’t have the girl leaving my side. Take that young lady’s beau with you instead.”

“No. I’m fine,” the young man protested.

To which Arbuckle replied, “Go on and climb aboard. You should conserve your strength, since there’s no telling what could come next. As I recall—”

“Get on,” Bligh also advised him, and the young man did so without further reluctance.

“Sorry I didn’t introduce myself sooner. Jan Rollin is the name,” he then said.

“The rest of you, wait here. Once we’ve unloaded everybody, we’ll be right back.”

With Josette’s words as a parting gift, the two horses dashed off.

Using both hands to shield his head, Bligh said, “We’ll catch a cold in this for sure, eh?”

“Uh-huh,” the plump man said with a nod, while the girl just lowered her head.

“Miss, just hang in there a little longer,” Bligh told the girl. He then inquired in a calculatedly rude tone, “So, old-timer, what was it you were about to recall, anyway?”

As a doctor, he was accustomed to more deference. Glaring at him, Arbuckle said, “A long time ago, this area had one of the Nobles’ facilities. According to the stories, it was a top-secret laboratory built on direct orders from their Sacred Ancestor, no less.”

II

Though the eastern sky lightened, the rain didn’t abate. The tree was so massive it would’ve taken ten grown men just to link arms around its trunk, and

its great, leafy branches reached out in all directions like helping hands, granting sufficient shelter from the rain, though it could offer no aid in deciding what they should do next.

“I know it was a hard climb up the hill and all, but there’s really nothing to do but go back down again, head to the highway, and wait for a patrol wagon to come by.”

Brennan voiced his opposition to Bligh’s proposal, saying, “Look at this rain. First of all, wagons from the Capital won’t be running on time in this. Plus, I don’t quite think the landslide’s over completely. As a result, there’s a very good chance not just the road out to the highway but even the highway itself is buried in mud.”

“Yeah, but staying here’s not gonna solve anything, is it? If it’s like you say, rescue parties won’t be here for a week and a half or more. So we’ve got no choice but to go to them.”

As Bligh was refuting Brennan, he heard someone say, “Does it hurt?”

Arbuckle had noticed the girl was lying back against the tree trunk. She had a red handkerchief pressed to her right ankle, though the red dripping from it suggested that wasn’t the handkerchief’s true color.

“I cut it on a fallen branch,” the girl said, her lips twisting in pain. Apparently the sandals she wore hadn’t offered much protection.

“Let me have a look,” Arbuckle said, pushing the handkerchief aside and immediately smiling broadly. “It’s nothing serious. However, it wouldn’t do to have any strange germs get into the wound either. I’ll patch you right up.”

And with that, he opened a leather-bound suitcase and began rummaging through its contents.

“Look at that. The girl won’t be able to move. Which means he won’t be able to leave here, either. I guess we’ll just have to wait after all,” Brennan said triumphantly.

“I agree. I’ve had it with running here, there, and everywhere,” said Charlotte, her tone one of fatigue.

Each and every one of them was soaked from the rain and utterly exhausted. If rescue wasn't soon in coming, they would be sapped mentally even more quickly than they would be sapped physically.

"Well, then I guess this is it for me," Bligh said, standing up. "I leave the rest to you. Hang in there, everybody."

Taking his saddlebags off the horse's back and slinging them over his shoulder, he let out a single sigh before he began to walk away. No one tried to stop him, and Bligh had no qualms about leaving them.

Man, I sure am beat. That was his only thought.

It was at that moment that the hill shook. A scream rang out. The quaking didn't subside. The earth spun. The rain eddied, the dark clouds danced. The sky went around and around.

Bligh remembered letting out a cry of "Whoa!"

His footing was gone without warning, and after feeling like he'd fallen forever, Bligh finally passed out.

The man realized he'd just been slapped on the cheek.

Charlotte had her hand back to deliver another but relented, saying, "Well, good morning to you."

"What do you think you're doing?"

Bligh was cautious, but he quickly sat up and surveyed his surroundings.

He was still at the base of that tree. It continued to rain. What about the others? They were there. Every last one of them.

"Lucky bastards."

The fortunate individuals in question were all gazing straight ahead. Bligh followed their lead. Or rather, that had been the first thing to catch his eye when he woke up. You might say he was confirming it now.

Little by little, something astonishing had begun to take shape. The ambiguous mist became a solid fog, forming up like clouds, solidifying.

"Hey . . . What the hell is that?"

The others must've heard him. However, no one responded.

It wasn't a vast expanse of ground that spread before them. Filling their rain-hazed field of vision was a panoramic view of a soggy little village. Old-fashioned homes of sticks and mud, a type that could no longer be found even in the most far-flung corners of the Frontier, surrounded a central square, while the eastern edge of that square was bordered by a broad river running from north to south. On the flat land on the other side of the water were about twenty farmhouses and some other buildings that were probably storehouses for grain. About fifty yards north of there stood a sixty-foot-high tower that apparently served both as a lookout point and a sanctuary. Thick forests surrounded the village on all sides, and at its western edge was a rather high hill topped with solid-looking fortifications that challenged the heavens.

At first, Bligh thought it was an illusion. However, the damp walls of the houses glistening with the rain, the surface of the river pounded to a froth, and trees swaying from the rain's beating soon convinced him that he was mistaken.

"Where the hell are we?"

That got an answer.

"I don't know. Looks like a really old village," said Charlotte.

"How'd we all end up here?" Bligh asked.

At his reasonable question, the alluring middle-aged woman shot a quick glance to the heavens and said, "As soon as you started to leave, the ground shook and spun around. While we were all knocked off our feet, we fell here. Given that, this would have to be somewhere underground, though it doesn't really look that way at all, does it?"

Bligh nodded. His eyes flying from one place in the village to another, he said, "There's no one around, is there?"

"Yeah, now you mention it," Charlotte conceded with a nod.

There wasn't a soul to be seen in the village square or on the streets. It was like a ghost town, yet it didn't seem the least bit dilapidated. Put some people in it, and the village would soon look like it was ready to begin its day.

“Emily,” someone said in a clingy tone, causing the two of them to turn.

About ten feet away, the young man named Jan was shaking his slumping sweetheart—Emily—by the shoulders. Her labored breathing could be heard all the way over where they were.

Arbuckle was nearby, and he inched closer on his knees and put his hand to Emily’s forehead. “She’s got an awful fever,” the plump man said. “Must’ve caught a cold. Exhaustion might also have a hand in it. If it gets any worse, she’ll come down with pneumonia in no time!”

“Let’s go to the village,” Jan said, looking around at the group.

“I’m against it,” Brennan asserted coldly. “An ancient village just pops up right in front of us all of a sudden. I don’t think there’s anything right about the place. And take a look at those fortifications. What are we supposed to do if there are Nobles lurking up there?”

“Do what you like. I’m going!”

Arbuckle’s decision surprised the group, but they quickly understood it. In his former location, Beth was slumped back against the tree trunk. Her face was flushed, and her breathing ragged.

“She’s already got pneumonia. I’ve got to get her warmed up posthaste. What are the rest of you going to do?”

“I don’t want any part of it, either,” Bligh said, shaking his head. “No matter how you look at it, there’s something wrong with the place, and I’ve got no interest in heading over there. Best of luck to you all, okay? Soon as I’ve had a little rest, I’m getting out of here!”

“We’re leaving, too,” Brennan declared, looking at Bligh, who turned away in a snit. It seemed he didn’t like people copying him.

“Well, then off with the lot of you. Off you go. Happy trails,” Bligh told them, waving one hand as he leaned back against the tree trunk. Suddenly he noticed that Charlotte was beside him, and he said to her, “What’ll you do?”

“For starters, the same thing as you.”

“Huh?”

“After I’ve had some rest, then I’ll decide,” she said, sitting right down by his side.

Bligh sensed danger. *Is she plotting to make me her own personal bodyguard?*

“Well, I guess we’ll each go our own way, then,” Brennan said, surveying the group once he was high in the saddle. Giving a nod to Josette beside him, he delivered a kick to his steed’s flanks.

The two horses began to canter away. Rebounding spray from the rain outlined both riders and mounts in white.

The entrance to the village was to the east. There was no palisade, probably on account of the Nobles’ castle. The creatures humans feared most, ironically, were the greatest safeguard against monsters and bandits.

“I’m sorry. Goodbye,” Josette said in parting.

Seemingly ignoring that, Arbuckle went over to Bligh and asked, “Are you sure you won’t go to the village with us?”

“Damn sure.”

“Don’t be that way. Granted, there’s something strange about the village. Beyond a doubt. But knowing that, we’re going there anyway because otherwise, the lives of those two innocent girls are certain to be lost. We’d like you to act as our bodyguard.”

“That’s rich talk from a flesh peddler. What are you talking about, ‘innocent’? Aren’t you the same son of a bitch who’s gonna sell one of those *innocent* young girls to the underworld to line your stinking pocket?”

“I’m speaking now as Arbuckle the physician.”

“Don’t try to spin this, you two-faced bastard,” Bligh snapped back. “Are you reading me? As soon as I finish resting up—”

The world was bleached white. By lightning. But that wasn’t the entire extent of it. With a roar to shake both heaven and earth, the colossal tree was split in two.

“Holy shit!” Bligh exclaimed, jumping up.

The others also got to their feet, or else tried to crawl away from the tree. A hundred-fifty-foot-tall tree being split lengthwise was a sight more than sufficient to leave them dumbstruck.

There was but the single sound of a tree falling. Both halves of the trunk had hit the ground at precisely the same time.

Once the wind and quaking had subsided, Bligh called out, “Everybody all right?”

Fortunately, they were all okay. However, their guardian angel against the wind and rain was no more.

“Let’s go to the village,” Arbuckle said, laying a hand on Bligh’s shoulder.

The man shook it off, grabbed his things, and started to walk away. Since half of the tree trunk was blocking the road, he’d have to detour around it.

Once he’d gone as far as the still-smoking base of the tree, he turned and looked back. Everyone was looking in his direction. Charlotte was there, too.

If you’re waiting for an invitation, sorry to disappoint you.

Bligh turned around and started walking again. Something about this made him anxious. There was something important here that he was missing. The sudden appearance of a cyborg horse from behind the toppled tree proved it.

It was Brennan. Josette was behind him, her arms wrapped limply around his waist. Brennan also had the reins to Josette’s cyborg horse in his grip.

“We’re going to the village,” Brennan said with distaste. “My wife got hit by a falling branch, and you can see the shape she’s in. You should turn back, too. The village doesn’t seem to want to let us leave.”

“Now you’re talking nonsense, too?” Bligh said, giving the warrior a scornful look. “I’m leaving. And I don’t think there’ll be any more branches falling.”

He started walking around the horse. Suddenly, his legs sank—or so it appeared, but then his body was neck deep in the ground, which had been transformed into a morass. Though Bligh clawed at it wildly with hands and feet, he only succeeded in stirring the mud, and he was rapidly sinking. Soon, he couldn’t breathe.

Is this the end? despair whispered to him. *No, I've still got things to do. I'll be damned if I'll die in a place like this . . .*

His consciousness drifted away. He sought oxygen—and mud rushed into his lungs.

III

Something heavy was expelled from his mouth and nose, and oxygen came in. As Bligh coughed violently, flecks of mud flew from his stomach and chest.

"Are you okay? You sure are a lucky one, mister."

It was Charlotte again.

Less than tactfully, Bligh groaned, "You again?"

"Well, excuse me for living. But you should be happy, you know. It wasn't me that saved you."

"Huh?"

Before his stunned eyes, Charlotte's expression shifted strangely, and she replied, "By the time I ran over, you'd already been hauled out, you see."

"But who—"

"The one who did it was still right there. It was—"

Charlotte squinted her eyes. Her body was trembling, as if she'd just downed the dregs of fear. And it wasn't just because she was soaked to the skin like a drowned rat.

"It was a Noblewoman, no doubt about it."

"You can't be serious?!" Bligh exclaimed, eyes bulging, but *half of that* was an act. There really could be no doubt about it. Charlotte had seen the woman, too.

"She was wearing this pure white dress, with a necklace of gold and jewels hanging around her neck and down to her chest. And they were all the real thing, too. I didn't see any fangs, but those trinkets really seemed to suit her. That's the real proof of being Nobility!"

“Where is she?”

“While I watched, she laid you down right here, and then—poof, she vanished like smoke.”

Bligh didn’t know what to say.

“No, just kidding. A huge bat came down from the sky, and she rode off on its back.”

“That’s a lie.”

If it came to a question of which was less believable, it would definitely be the latter.

Charlotte threw her head back without another word and laughed. “Yeah, it’s a lie. Lies, lies, lies. The whole world is made up of one hundred percent bullshit.”

All Bligh could think was: *This is one strange woman.*

What was the true nature of the beauty who’d saved him—some manifestation of the will that didn’t want them to leave the village? His interest was focused on that alone.

“Can you walk?” Charlotte asked.

“I think I can manage.”

“Then go on and get walking in whatever direction suits you. I’m going to the village. Everyone else has already gone.”

As the woman stood up again, Bligh finally remembered something he should do.

“Thank you,” he said.

An odd expression flitted across the woman’s face, and she asked, “What’s that?”

“What—just, thank you.”

“Ah, an expression of gratitude. It’s been so long since I heard it, I’d forgotten what it sounded like,” the woman said, starting to walk away. “Whatever you’re aiming to do, you’d better be quick about it,” she told him, “or you and me both

are looking at pneumonia.”

And with rapid steps the woman vanished.

The rain continued to batter Bligh.

“Oh, hell.”

With that single complaint he got to his feet, and then he, too, started toward the village at a jog.

They had all assembled in a large building that seemed to be some sort of local meetinghouse. The stone ceiling, walls, and floor were impervious to the rain. Surprisingly enough, there were rows of wooden chairs set up in the main hall, and an electric heater made of steel was glowing red. A pair of synthetic-fiber mats had been laid out on the floor beside it, with Emily lying on one and Arbuckle’s charge Beth on the other. Both were in their underthings, but that was unavoidable. Their dripping-wet clothes were still where they’d been thrown on the floor. Josette or someone had probably put the girls in a dry change of underwear. There was no sign of Brennan or Jan—or Josette, for that matter. They’d no doubt gone off to search for necessary supplies.

“How’s the warrior’s wife doing?” Bligh asked Arbuckle.

Looking toward the windows, the procurer replied, “It was an incredibly superficial wound. After a little rest she was fine again, and went out with her husband to look for food and weapons.”

“I thought as much. How about those other two?”

“For the time being, an antifebrile is keeping the fever in check. Just getting them out of the rain was a great help.”

“And you had that fever medicine on you?”

“I am a doctor, after all.”

“Spare me, flesh peddler,” Bligh spat back.

As he was saying that, Charlotte walked past him and over to the plump man. “I’ll give you a hand once I get changed,” she told him.

“Most kind of you. This girl is one matter, but if I let the other one die, it may

cost me my life.”

“You’re a doctor, so how’d you wind up running girls, eh?”

“The workings of the world.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Traveling bag in hand, Charlotte opened the door to the adjoining room and, after checking that it was safe, stepped inside and closed the door again.

“By the look of it, this was built three thousand years ago,” Bligh said, surveying the room. “They just stacked stone on stone, and threw in an electric heater. That’s it. But I’m surprised anything this old is still around.”

“Indeed. And without a speck of rust. Plus, the village has working electricity.”

Arbuckle’s words sent a chill through Bligh. *This village—it’s alive*, he thought. *Only, there aren’t any villagers around. No—*

“I’d say there’s someone here,” Arbuckle stated with a grin. It was one that could’ve been taken as either ironic or nihilistic. “New villagers, that is.”

Us, Bligh realized, and then he recalled what Arbuckle had said earlier. “Hey, is this the Noble lab you were talking about?”

“Yes, most likely.”

Emily turned a shocked look their way.

“An entire village from three millennia ago has turned up in pristine condition. Can you think of any other reason for that?”

“Why’d it come back?”

Arbuckle remained silent.

“Don’t worry on my account,” Emily said in an emotionless tone.

“We’re their new lab rats, aren’t we?” Bligh continued.

“Now, I wouldn’t exactly—”

“Can you think of anything else?”

Arbuckle put his hand against Emily’s forehead.

“No, that’s just too . . .” the pretty young lady groaned, turning her face away.

“Her fever’s come down a lot, but we can’t let our guard down just yet. I wrote them a note with the drugs we’ll need, but do you suppose there’s a doctor’s house around?”

“Not to worry,” Bligh replied. “The Nobility will fix her right up. Hell, they’ll even throw in a little immortality in the bargain. Might not be so bad after all!”

“Stop it!” Emily cried, and though the doctor held her shoulders down, she shook her head forcefully. “You said something about being lab rats—what kind of experiments would they use us for?”

“That I don’t know. Only that they were top secret. But this was a facility built on direct orders from the legendary Sacred Ancestor. It wouldn’t be an ordinary blood-manufacturing plant.”

With Arbuckle’s words, a certain figure crept back into Bligh’s mind. *Is that Noblewoman in charge of the place or something?* It was strange that he didn’t actually speak these thoughts out loud. And he didn’t know why.

Bligh went over to the westward-facing windows and peered out through spotless glass. Beyond the rain and the swaying forest, he could see the fortifications. *The only way out of here is to go up there and talk to ’em, is that it?* the man thought. It felt as though all the blood were draining from his body.

After he’d been looking out the window for a while, Charlotte returned, saying, “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

When Bligh turned around, he was expecting her to be covered with mud, but she was now wearing a clean change of clothes. She’d been sexy even after the rain had washed off all her makeup, but now that she’d reapplied her cosmetics, she was alluring to a numbing degree. She gave off a deep aroma, like a lily whiter and more conspicuous than the moon.

“Why, whatever are you looking at?” she inquired in a tone that had confidence to spare.

“Nothing,” Bligh replied, playing dumb. No good could come of encouraging a woman like that.

Before long, the other three returned. At any rate, they had assembled all the essentials—dry clothes, blankets, flashlights and electric lamps, canned goods, jerky, a plastic tank of drinking water, cups and paper plates, forks, and spoons.

“We found medicine, too,” Josette said, handing Arbuckle a plastic bag containing several white packages.

Pulling out a few of the boxes and taking some tablets from them, he filled some cups with water from the tank and made the girls down both.

“That puts Emily in the clear,” said Arbuckle, “but the other one’s not so simple. We’ve got to move her to a well-equipped hospital as soon as possible. Where did you find these drugs?”

“In the general store,” Jan replied. “There wasn’t a soul around, but it sure was well stocked.”

Taking a look at the box the medicine was in, Arbuckle said, “It was manufactured—almost three thousand years ago.”

That sent a stir through the crowd.

“That’s in keeping with the style of the houses,” he continued. “It would seem this village has been awaiting our arrival for the last three millennia.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jan asked. When Arbuckle explained about the laboratory, the color quickly drained from the young man. “What kind of place have we wound up in? Why the hell is this village even here? Where’s it been all this time?”

“Probably in that hill,” Arbuckle said.

“What?” Jan exclaimed, and he wasn’t the only one who bugged his eyes. They all did.

“I can’t say for certain,” the plump man continued, “but from what I saw during flashes of lightning, the top of the hill was about the same size as this village. When you think about the timing of its appearance, and the way we felt like we’d fallen underground but the next thing we knew we were back where we started, it kind of makes sense. We’re still up on top of that hill.”

For a while, no one said anything.

“Okay, let’s get ourselves something to eat and think about our next move,” Bligh finally urged them.

“There are some tables and chairs in the prep room next door,” said Charlotte.

All of them got changed and, while it wasn’t quite a meal, they had something to eat. After that, the air of danger that’d been hanging over them dissipated and they settled down.

“I don’t think we can expect to be left alone like this for long,” Brennan stated in typical warrior fashion. “Until we destroy whatever it is that keeps interfering with any attempts to flee, we can’t get out of the village. And it’ll be night soon.”

While all of them were put off by his deep voice and somewhat nasty tone, they could also sense the ugly truth that his words carried: *When night came, the dead went into action.*

“I want no part of any of this. How can we just sit back and wait for the Nobility to drink our blood? Doctor, would it be all right for me to leave and take Emily with me?” Jan Rollin asked, rapidly sinking into a manic state. It was plain to see from his wardrobe that he hadn’t been born on the Frontier. His good fortune in not having to spend every day since childhood shoulder to shoulder with dread of the Nobility had now become his terrible misfortune.

“If you could find some way to keep her completely out of the wind and rain, I suppose it would be okay, but it’s just plain impossible. Something will get in your way.”

“We only came out to the Frontier on a sightseeing trip from the Capital. We didn’t want to come into direct contact with the Nobility. Now that it looks that way, we’d like to get out of the village, the sooner the better.”

“Why don’t you try telling that to whoever’s running the place,” Arbuckle said. Seeming to have suddenly thought of something, he asked the Brennans, “Weren’t there any weapons?”

“Nope, nothing. Not so much as a knife,” Josette replied, shaking her head.

“What’s the story with that? They wouldn’t even be able to fix dinner, would

they?” Bligh said in an incredulous tone.

“It probably means the Nobility had to take good care of their lab rats. Give them all the food and water they want. Protect them from external threats. They’d have no need for weapons.”

“In that case, I guess we’ve no choice but to cut some wood and sharpen it to a point, eh?”

“Right you are, *Doctor*,” Brennan concurred, though he seemed to append the title as a dig at the man. “All of you probably have at least a pocketknife on you. We brought back some wood for stakes. Now, let’s get whittling.”

And saying that, he took a paper bag he’d set down away from all the other supplies they’d laid out and dumped its contents on the floor. Out spilled several branches, all slightly more than two feet long.

To be continued in

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 27

Nightmare Village

Coming 2018

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 three 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. Many live-action and anime movies of the 1980s and 1990s were 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 US as G-Force and Battle of the Planets). Amano became a freelancer at the age of thirty and has collaborated with numerous writers, creating dozens of 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 novel Sandman: The Dream Hunters with Neil Gaiman, and for Marvel Comics on Elektra and Wolverine: The Redeemer with best-selling author Greg Rucka.