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VAMPIRE HUNTER D



THE TIGER IN WINTER

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VAMPIRE
HUNTER D

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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 28

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Dark Horse Books
Milwaukee

VAMPIRE HUNTER D 28: THE TIGER IN WINTER

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Cover art by Yoshitaka Amano
English translation by Kevin Leahy
Book design by Sarah Terry

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

First Dark Horse Books edition: August 2019
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 Nick McWhorter Chief Business Development Officer Matt Parkinson Vice President of Marketing Dale LaFountain Vice President of Information Technology Cara Niece Vice President of Production and Scheduling Mark Bernardi Vice President of Book Trade and Digital Sales Ken Lizzi General Counsel Dave Marshall Editor in Chief Davey Estrada Editorial Director Chris Warner Senior Books Editor Cary Grazzini Director of Specialty Projects Lia Ribacchi Art Director Vanessa Todd-Holmes Director of Print Purchasing Matt Dryer Director of Digital Art and Prepress Michael Gombos Director of International Publishing and Licensing Karl Yadro Director of Custom Programs Sean Brice Director of Trade Sales

VAMPIRE
HUNTER D

The Tiger in Winter

DEATH TO AN ODD SORT OF NOBLE

Chapter 1

There was only the faintest of winds. It wasn't on account of the figure the hue of darkness, who entered through the main gate, that the blades of green grass filling either side of the marble road swayed. The boots the figure wore didn't make a sound. There was nothing at all to betray his presence. Even the cowardly insects that were like a blanket under the moonlight wouldn't move. Perhaps he was made of the very same stuff as the darkness.

The figure went into the ruins. The front garden was so vast it seemed it would take the wind days to sweep across it, though naught but weeds grew there, poking their faces from tumbled stone walls and mounds of rubble to give the place an air of desolation. It was clear that the ruined minarets and ramparts in the distance had suffered explosions. Even the paved stone road the figure traveled showed definite signs of damage from fire. The light of the crescent moon poured down like a white waterfall. As if to say, *This is a world of decay, and there are none of the living here.*

The shadowy figure halted.

The half-collapsed marble gate could be considered the main feature of the garden, and beneath it there glowed a silent woman in a white dress. Black hair that hung all the way down to her waist swayed incessantly. There was no wind. It had died out a short time ago.

The woman called out the shadowy figure's name. "D", she said. Her tone was low, like a sigh. A pale purple veil covered her mouth.

"Yes," the figure said. He had a cold, hard voice that seemed as if it could freeze the moonlight or the wind. "Are you Sirene?"

"Indeed, I am."

"I'd like to confirm the job—you wish me to do away with Duke Van Doren, administrator of the northern Frontier sectors?"

"You are correct, sir."

"A hundred thousand dalas."

"Here," the woman said, taking something small and glittering off her right

index finger. “Catch.”

It arced through the moonlight, as if drawn to D’s left hand.

“It’s moonstone,” said a hoarse voice that didn’t reach the woman’s ears. “Just a chunk of rock to the Nobility, but humans would pay a million dalas for it. If folks find out you’ve got it, everybody we meet’s gonna try and make like a thief!”

“I’ll give you your change,” D told the woman—Sirene.

She shook her head and replied, “You needn’t bother. I won’t be needing it anymore.”

“In that case, give it to your relatives.”

“Please do that for me. Give it to Myosha Lanaway in the village of Wihemin, Darigles County, the northern Frontier.”

“My job is doing away with Nobility.”

“I don’t have time to look for anyone else. I must be going soon.”

“Oh,” the hoarse voice responded.

Whether or not Sirene took that for D’s voice was unclear as she continued, “My real name is Cecilia Lanaway. A century ago I became the wife of Duke Van Doren. Myosha is the name of my former husband.”

D didn’t say anything. There was no way her former husband would still be alive. And she must’ve known that, too. But the young man in black had no interest in other people’s lives.

“Your request is accepted. Where is the duke?”

“In his primary castle, about forty miles northwest of here. He didn’t even flee when the people under his dominion rebelled.”

“I understand,” D said, turning his back to her. The hem of his coat sailed out like the wing of a supernatural bird.

“Please, wait,” the woman said to him, extending one hand. The voice suddenly sank.

D halted.

“I say this just so you’ll know. Both the citizens of his domain and bandit groups are after the duke. And in a few days, an armed ‘survey party’ from the Capital should be coming. Please don’t slay the duke until he has slain all of them.”

“Sounds like Mister Popularity,” the hoarse voice said mockingly. This time, it reached Sirene’s ears. “Everybody’s underestimating the Nobility. This Duke Van Doren guy seems like he’s incredibly lazy or just a coward. But even at his weakest, he’d probably have enough power to turn those under him to dust with one finger.”

“You’re exactly right,” Sirene said, a ring of surprise to her voice. She hadn’t taken those disparaging remarks just now as coming from D.

“So, you hire this guy to do away with your husband because you don’t want the greedy bastards to get to him first? Which means what? You want your husband destroyed at your bidding?”

“A very good question. I—I simply couldn’t let him go on that way.”

“Sometimes there are folks like that. As a human, you’re odd enough for wanting to serve the Nobility with all your heart. Love ’em too much, and you push yourself to the point where it can’t help but destroy you. Let’s get one thing straight; a Noble can’t love a human as a person. At best, they might love ’em about as much as people love cats or dogs, you—gyaaaaah?!”

His hand still clenched in a fist, D started to walk away.

“There is something I’d like to ask you about,” said Sirene. “Why didn’t you ride your horse all the way in here?”

There was no reply. The figure in black just kept dwindling in the light of the moon.

“Could it be that it was because the paving stones were simply too beautiful? These stones were chosen and their arrangement decided by my beloved.”

The figure had nearly vanished.

Sirene reached a hand around to her back for her dagger, tossed away the scabbard, and plunged the blade through her own heart without the slightest

hesitation.

“I hear that dhampirs have Noble blood in them,” she said. “I hope my beloved might, at the very least, be destroyed at the hands of one who understands the Noble mind before he’s swallowed up by tragedy. Death and destruction are the end.”

Bluish-gray dust flowed from the bottom of her dress. The white garment lost its shape as the body within it became something else.

“D . . . I beg of you . . . let my beloved . . . be buried . . . with my thoughts and memories,” said a girl who looked to be only sixteen or seventeen, barely squeezing out the words before she turned to dust.

“She’s gone,” the hoarse voice said wearily as the Hunter was up in the saddle, riding his cyborg horse away from the castle. “Suicide, eh? Been a while since I’ve seen one of those. A rare thing with the Nobility dying out, but leave it to a human to do that.”

“She was a servant of the Nobility.”

“Hey, now,” the hoarse voice started to say, but then it stopped. It had given up. No one had a harsher opinion of the Nobility and the humans they’d bitten than this young man.

“But the job itself is a problem,” the left hand continued. “From what I hear, Duke Julius Van Doren, administrator of the northern Frontier sectors, is a valiant leader and soldier. Even you couldn’t tackle this like you normally do. And the bandits prowling the area are the Pitch Black Gang. They’re a band of ruthless outlaws that’ve tamed monsters the Nobility created, and rumor has it they can even use some of their weapons. Plus, there’s that survey party from the Capital—‘survey’ has a nice ring to it, but they’re all just a bunch of jerks slobbering over a chance to swipe some of the Nobility’s inventions or technology and make themselves rich. And they ain’t above murder.”

And after saying that, the voice trembled a bit as it continued, “And now you can’t drop it. A curse on her for setting it up that way. She might want Duke Van Doren to have a peaceful death, but it sure ain’t gonna be easy.”

Not even the hoarse voice’s assertion could draw an answer from D.

Light like ice spread across the eastern sky, and the darkness around him was losing its hue moment by moment.

The northern Frontier was called a land of black forests and lakes. Paint a page completely black, add a few splashes of blue, and you'd have a map of the northern Frontier. Winds constantly roamed the plains, nimbus clouds relentlessly hung overhead to provide rain, but occasional sunlight was allowed to peek from between the clouds. When it did, the light gave the mountains, plains, and villages a golden glow, and children and animals alike raced outside to enjoy the sunlight to its fullest.

It was thirty minutes later that D arrived at the base of the hill overlooking Castle Van Doren. He'd covered forty miles at a gallop. For him, that was slow.

There was no rain, but the color of the heavens was far from blue, and there were occasional rumbles of thunder in the distance, investing the heavens with a dull light.

"Strange domain, ain't it?" remarked the hoarse voice from the vicinity of the Hunter's left hand, which gripped the reins. "Here's a land where the Nobility still has complete control over the folks in their domain. Through fear, namely."

"Can we get in?" D inquired. It was rare that he asked a question.

"Easy as pie. He ain't even got a force field up. Either he's a Nobleman who likes to leave himself wide open, he's incredibly self-confident—or he ain't even trying."

The reins shook, and then the cyborg horse started down the road to the castle. To either side of the road stood a row of enormous Legran cedars, with branches large and small intertwining to form a natural canopy about a hundred and fifty feet above the road. Even when the sun was at its highest, the road would likely remain in gloomy darkness.

Climbing a stone-paved road with a gentle incline that couldn't have even been ten degrees, the Hunter came to a square before the main gates. The stones that made up the road spread like wings there, paving the whole ground.

"What, no welcoming committee?" the hoarse voice jibed.

From dawn to dusk, the abodes of Nobles had impenetrable defenses for two

miles all around. Lasers and land mines and monsters for starters, dimensional cannons or orbital plasma cannons, systems for using asteroids from our own solar system as meteorite bombs, temporal vortex cannons and the like would be waiting for any invaders.

There was none of that here.

“On top of that, there ain’t any signs at all of fighting here in the square. I’d heard there hadn’t been any rebellions, and it looks like it’s true. Wonder if that outpost castle we were just at was destroyed after it was abandoned. I don’t care how mild-mannered a Noble is, humans would’ve left a mark or two on their castles back in the days of the Great Rebellion. Was this Nobleman really that good of an administrator for ‘em?”

As the voice spoke, D rode on.

Before the main gates was a moat about sixty feet wide. Its black waters reflected the cyborg horse and D where they halted at the brink.

“So, how are we getting across?” the hoarse voice asked, but then it immediately groaned, “What the hell?”

The distant gate was slowly falling. It doubled as a drawbridge.

“Strike that remark about the welcoming committee. This is a real warm welcome.”

Ignoring the hoarse voice, D rode onto the bridge. Perhaps he gave no thought to this being a trap, for he rode on in silence, crossing the bridge without saying a single word.

Within the gate was an inner courtyard. Ramparts that looked to be about a hundred fifty feet high surrounded it, and from atop those walls countless old-fashioned cannons were pointed in the Hunter’s direction. By the look of them, they used gunpowder and fired cannonballs. There were figures beside the cannons. Beneath that ash-gray sky, they gazed at D without moving a muscle.

“They’re androids. I don’t sense any human presence or vitality around the castle.”

If one were to look more closely, they might have spied figures in the

windows of the towers and minarets. They took the shape of young Noblewomen with golden hair, red-headed ladies-in-waiting, and black-haired servants. Those in uniform were probably guards.

When D reached the very center of the courtyard, a voice from the top of the castle walls to his right called down to him, “Halt!” It was youthful. The voice of a man in his thirties. However, it was that of an android.

Halting his steed, D turned toward the speaker.

“Someone will be out to meet you presently. Wait there,” the android said, rather unexpectedly. He wore a deep blue cape over his military garb. He was an officer.

“I’ll be damned. Not only are they gonna sit back and let you waltz in, but now they’re sending somebody to greet you? Watch yourself. No telling what they’re up to!”

D turned forward again, for the doors to the castle had opened.

A golden light had come into the dim world.

The trio of women had blonde hair that nearly touched the ground, and it swayed faintly in the breeze. Leaving the ones in the cerulean and indigo dresses behind, the woman in the azure dress came forward. She halted about a yard shy of the cyborg horse. She was so lovely the left hand let out an appreciative groan. And the instant she saw D, the woman brought her hands up to her cheeks. Pink quickly suffused her face. She wasn’t a human being. This was the reaction of a mechanical person—an android.

The left hand let out another gasp. This time it was for a different reason.

“I am known as Shyna. The master is waiting.”

If ever there was a voice like golden chimes, it was hers.

“Van Doren can remain awake in the morning?” asked D.

“For a short time. This way.”

Shyna turned, introducing the waiting Mysch in the cerulean dress and Najina in indigo. The cheeks of both had long since flushed. The two of them flanked the cyborg horse. They were not simply a reception committee. They also

doubled as guards. And they had another role—as assassins.

D got off his steed just in front of the door.

The castle was filled with the light of morning. There was no frosted glass, no curtains or shades drawn.

Letting in an abundance of natural light—though that hardly suited a vampire’s physiology, it was wholly in keeping with the “nostalgic taste” imprinted even more deeply into the DNA of the Nobility. The Nobles had taken no greater pains than to ensure so much sunlight got into their stone castles that it seemed like it would melt the place. It was this very abundance of light that always surprised scholars investigating the Nobles’ ruins.

On seeing the round stones paving the floor, the hoarse voice said, “Must be an old-timer.” It wouldn’t reach the ears of the three women. Fooling androids was quite an accomplishment. Naturally, there was a reason for its snide remark.

Even Nobles had their own personalities, and each of them had their own favorite “era.” Two styles of architecture from human history were favored by the Nobility. There were those who preferred the baroque architecture of the modern age, while others insisted on rococo style or nothing at all. Sixty percent of the Nobility fell into one of those two camps, twenty percent had varied tastes, and the remaining twenty percent liked the most ancient styles—to wit, the fortresses of medieval Europe, which were focused entirely on practical concerns and gave no thought at all to aesthetic matters.

While the main design naturally reflected the Nobility’s super science, the castle through which D strode had no walls or cathedral ceiling embellished with lavish murals, and illumination was provided by dishes of oil resting in recesses carved in the stone. There wasn’t even glass in the windows, but iron frames and heavy woven curtains kept the wind at bay. Instead of “simple,” “stark” might’ve been a better word to describe the place.

“Hurry,” Shyna said, raising her right hand when she came to the first corner. A crimson ring glittered on her third finger.

Though the stone pavement beneath his feet began to move, D showed no surprise.

The transportation system flowed along much like the waters of a canal would. The flow rose vertically up a wall. The force of gravity shifted accordingly, and D continued right up the wall. They were traveling at quite a good speed—over a hundred and twenty miles per hour.

In less than a minute's time, they came to a wooden door, the surface of which had been scorched black. Taking the brass communication tube from beside the door in hand, Shyna announced, "I have a guest with me."

"Enter," the voice of a man of advanced years replied without a moment's hesitation, sounding somewhat melancholy.

Shyna took hold of the brass door knob.

At that point, D was looking down at the blurry streaks of black that stretched from the sides of the door. There were two of them. Both of them seemed to reach all the way back down the corridor.

The door opened.

It was a large room. Some might even call it vast. Even D, with eyes that could see as well in pitch blackness as in broad daylight, took a little while to make out the figure who stood before an enormous stone desk that was set in the center of the room.



He was a towering figure, wearing a long, long cape of the fur of the sacred fire beast, and in his right hand he held a black cane with a golden handle. His crown was of the very simple spiked style, fashioned from a silvery, nearly indestructible metal and, oddly enough, devoid of so much as a single jewel. Though it was a tad comical in appearance, it didn't make him look like a jester at all.

"D, is it?" he said, his voice low but seeming to reverberate through the vast chamber. "So good of you to come. I am Duke Julius Van Doren. Sirene told me about you. She left a note relating exactly what she was thinking before she headed out to meet you."

"And you didn't stop her?"

"This is the act of a woman who stood by me for a century without once complaining. No one had a right to criticize her. Myself included."

"Then you must know what brings me here, right?"

"Of course. For your information, you need not heed Sirene's wishes. Worry not about the human invaders. I shall be happy to settle with you here and now."

"Sirene's stipulations were to the contrary."

"After I've eliminated those who are out to take my lands, my fortune, and my inventions, then?" Apparently she'd written about that, as well. "Although I don't fail to see what she was thinking, it still strikes me as a foolish human notion."

"If my aim were to slay you, I would cross swords with you here and now and be done with it," said D.

Why had Sirene hired him to do it only after those who threatened the duke had been dealt with? And why did they have to die by the duke's hand?

"I, too, see no reason why I should be quick to throw away a life I rather enjoy," the duke replied. "I shall do battle with you after I have rid myself of those greedy churls."

"I heard about a survey party from the Capital, a bandit gang, and a force of

rebellious villagers. When will they be here?"

"The survey party should arrive on the morrow, the bandits two or three days hence. The village ingrates should take just about as long, I warrant."

"Well informed, ain't you?" said the hoarse voice.

Not seeming particularly surprised, the duke replied, "This is my domain. The rustling winds, the wheeling birds, the creeping insects, even the lifeless stones themselves tell me things."

Was the duke trying to say he was privy to D's conversation with Sirene? Still, to happily allow an assassin like D into his abode, even knowing that the Hunter wouldn't slay him immediately, took an astonishing amount of nerve.

"Be that as it may, today is peaceful enough," the duke continued. That, too, was remarkable. "And you have been good enough to grace us with a visit. There are two or three sights here that might interest you. Shyna, show him the way."

When D had entered the room, the door had shut behind him, leaving the lady-in-waiting outside. Now it was open again.

D turned right around. Since he intended to honor his contract with Sirene, Duke Van Doren wasn't his prey at this very moment.

Just before he passed through the doorway, D turned and looked back. The duke had one hand resting on the back of a huge chair as he stared straight ahead. D didn't seem the type to have much interest in the art treasures of the world, but even this Tiger King, mightier than any beast, looked terribly weary to him.

"This is an image of the Sacred Ancestor," Shyna said, looking up at the colossal statue that towered before her.

She was about thirty feet from the statue's pedestal, which was about ten feet high, although to the viewer it would've looked practically flat. The statue that stood on the pedestal was so enormous it overwhelmed its surroundings. The right half of the figure was covered by a cape, and it vanished at a height of about a hundred feet, with his left arm looped around behind his back at waist level. It was as if the vast chamber were losing its darkness to the rays of dawn

stabbing in through scattered windows and skylights.

“In the distant past, statues such as this one towered in the manse of every Noble, bathed in the light of the moon. Though the doleful winds of ruin visited our world ere long, the statues could not be melted down, so they were carried off and cast into the depths of the sea or the bowels of the earth, but still the glory of the Sacred Ancestor didn’t fade in the least. And it probably won’t for all eternity.”

And then a voice said, “But then he knew winter.”

Though Shyna turned and looked, she could see no one who was likely to have said such a thing. No one in the world should’ve known the Sacred Ancestor well enough to speak that way. The android thought she must be imagining things.

“Must’ve heard that wrong,” said a completely different voice, confusing her electronic brain even further.

“Did you look upon him?” the woman asked.

There was no reply. The young man in black was as still as the darkness that remained at dawn.

Gazing at him in rapture, the android then looked up at the statue as if she would flee in terror, and that was when a terrific weight crashed down on her heart. It was troublesome having the same thoughts and emotions as human beings.

“No . . . You . . . It can’t be,” she said, her lovely pale countenance shifting between their two faces, studying them closely. It was only several seconds later that she remembered that the statue had no face.

The same was true for all images of the Sacred Ancestor. No sculptor could possibly render it. But not because the face of the Sacred Ancestor was unknown. Because it was known *too well*.

A second later, Shyna didn’t know why it was she’d been so afraid. It occurred to her that perhaps it hadn’t been fear but rather just extreme surprise, but she only had that thought for a moment. The statue of the Sacred Ancestor and the Hunter before her must’ve had some kind of connection. A faceless statue and a

gorgeous young man. What was it that she'd seen—or rather, felt?

He was too beautiful. So much so that he couldn't be of this world.

Giving a shake of her head, the female android started for the door that led out to the corridor.

From behind her, the hoarse voice said, "That's one big statue there. But it ain't just big. *He* wanted it to be thought of as him, so even though he was destroyed, he'll never be gone completely."

There was no reply to the hoarse voice, and the figure in black began closing the gap on Shyna without his feet making a sound on the marble floor.

On entering the next location, the hoarse voice let out another gasp.

It was a stone chamber without a single window, and gigantic cylinders stood in a row there. Masses of metal that stood as high as ten-story buildings, they seemed to stretch on forever in a sight that could only be described as magnificent.

"So the ceiling has a stone lid—do they turn moonlight into energy or something?" the hoarse voice asked, its words still ringing with the same excitement from its earlier gasp. "That might be the best sort of energy for the Nobility, but it's just the light of the sun reflected off the lunar surface. In other words, sunlight. The Nobility lived by the light of the moon, though. You might even say they lived by a concept called 'moonlight.' Nobody ever even tried to turn it into a physical form of energy. On account of that would've shaken the very existence of the Nobility. That, plus the fact that even if you turned the light of the moon into energy, it still ain't nothing compared to solar power. Hmm. Did that rascal Van Doren manage to make an unprecedented 'concept amplifier'? Looks like he had a hell of a scientist working for him. Hey, android lady, you happen to know that scientist's name?"

"I am unsure whose voice it is I hear," Shyna replied. "It was Professor Damien Krutz. He was still quite young."

Another voice—one like steel—said, "Is that the reason Duke Van Doren is called the Tiger? Physical and conceptual energy would've been sure to garner high praise from the Nobility. Enough that he could've taken on ten thousand

Nobles alone, or moved with some degree of freedom in the light of the sun.”

The female android kept her silence, as if to indicate just what a startling occurrence that was. The speaker knew these things.

When Duke Van Doren fought against twenty-three thousand Nobles of the anti–Sacred Ancestor faction in the northern Frontier’s Darnell Straits and on the Ragakiseha Plain, he had only two hundred men with him for his shocking victory in what became known as the Battle of D.R. Ordinarily, even the most valiant of commanders could hold out against no more than a hundred to one odds against his fellow Nobility. The only other exception to this was the Greater Nobleman Lord Greylancer’s victory alone against three thousand foes long ago, but that was now half the stuff of legend and the details of his battle were lost to time, while the details of the exploits of the “Tiger King” in the Battle of D.R. were still quite clear.

“What became of that scientist?” said a voice that was hoarse again, causing Shyna to furrow her brow.

“Word is that he was banished.”

“What?! The developer of moonlight energy? Are Nobles in the habit of showing their gratitude with spite?”

“Apparently the order came from the duke’s heir—his grace Leavis.”

“Oh, and daddy just sat back and let his boy call the shots? I find that hard to believe.”

Shyna turned around. As she gazed at D in rapture, there was a certain determination in her eyes.

“Until now, we believed his grace the duke alone was fit to control this power. However—now, there is one other . . .”

“And what became of sonny boy and the rest?”

“Leavis, the firstborn, died young; Kazel, the second son, was taken away; and the third son, Sebastian, left of his own accord.”

“Taken away?”

“Yes. Kindly ask his grace the duke for more details.” And after the woman

had given that acceptable response, her lovely visage flushed with pink.

With three sons, Van Doren was guaranteed an heir. Yet they were all gone, leaving the duke alone.

“There is something that has been on my mind since I first saw your face, sir. Are you—”

The woman had said that much when there were suddenly indications of someone coming up behind D. From the crunch of hobnailed boots, it was a soldier.

“General Kiniski,” Shyna said, putting one knee on the floor and spreading her hands as she bowed her head.

“You’re D, are you?” said a man of about fifty with a face and body built for battle. Beneath a light yellowish-green cape he wore a dark yellowish-green uniform. The decorations he wore on the left breast of his uniform were all gold and platinum—proof that he was a military man of the first order. His left arm was missing from the shoulder down, and a mechanical device was slung over his right shoulder like a handbag.

This wasn’t some sort of hologram, like the one where any one piece contained an image of the whole. He was the genuine article.

The girl didn’t conceal her anxiety, but he said to her, “The duke has told me about him. And that I am not to offend him. Much to my chagrin.”

Walking over to D, he raised his beefy right hand by the side of his boulder of a face and offered a salute.

D didn’t move.

“I am General Jelmin Kiniski. Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

No matter what the military man might’ve been feeling, neither his face nor his actions betrayed any hint of aggression toward this invader. That was quite an accomplishment.

“I’m D.”

“I’ve heard about you. They say you’re a Hunter who has hit us where it hurts more than any of your kind before. I am most pleased to meet you.”

“Be honest,” said D.

The general’s tone changed as he said, “I, Jelmin Kiniski, have seen no greater ignominy in life than having to meet a filthy ghoul like you face-to-face. I shall defend the duke, mark my words. Do not delude yourself that you’ll be leaving here alive!”

“That’s better,” the hoarse voice said, making the stern general look around sharply. “Humans and Nobles alike have gotta say what’s on their minds. Saves everybody a lot of needless stress. And that’s the secret to a long life.”

“Ventriloquism, I thought—but that’s not it, is it?” General Kiniski fairly groaned. “Not that it matters. No point in asking our level of perfection of lower creatures.”

“So, you’re an android?” D inquired.

Shyna covered her mouth, and the general got a glint in his eye.

“You were made too well. Your eyes have the same murderous intent as any man. Is that device a meteorological weapon?”

“Astonishing—I can see why you’ve lived this long,” said the general, not hiding his surprise. “For a filthy Hunter, you seem to have considerable abilities. I should like to freeze your very atoms, then burn you down to nothing, but that would only earn the wrath of the duke. However, keep in mind you will die by my hand one of these days.”

“Now would be fine.”

The general fell silent. The words he had to swallow had swollen with a certain emotion.

A number of figures spilled through the doorway. In no time at all, there were a dozen soldiers running over. But it was another voice that stopped the general.

“Will you not hold?”

The general turned around—and looked in the direction the words had come. There stood the duke.

“Why—your grace!”

“Go,” the duke commanded the soldiers in a low, weary tone, and then he stared at the general.

“If I might say something,” the general began, stretching his neck and looking up into empty space. The soldier was not allowed to look his superior—his commander—in the eye.

“I know. It was D who provoked your hostility. But you shouldn’t have given in to it.”

“Yes, your grace.”

“This time, I shall overlook it—go back.”

“Understood.”

And giving a splendid bow, the android general walked away.

“Please forgive his rudeness,” the duke said as he watched the gigantic soldier leave. “But for all that, he’s a loyal retainer. I shall never have another like him. So I can’t very well have you staining your blade with him just yet.”

“We weren’t done seeing the sights,” said D.

“I had forgotten that I’m to go inspect the farmland this afternoon. Would you accompany me?”

“I’ll wait here.”

“Not interested? Well, the rebellion has laid down roots among the residents of my domain. Do you not wish to see how I conduct myself against human combatants? It should prove most interesting.”

“Okay, then.”

What was it that changed D’s mind and made him give that response?

“Come to the airfield, then. Shyna will show you the way.”

The form of the duke grew hazy, then vanished. He’d been a hologram.

Perhaps D had understood as much, because he wasn’t at all surprised as he asked, “Does the duke see everything that happens here?”

“Everything in his entire domain,” Shyna replied. “Such is the duty of the liege.”

“Sounds like a big pain in the ass.”

Startled, Shyna turned her eyes in the direction of the voice—the left hand that hung by D’s side—but naturally she didn’t see anything.

On seeing the aircraft at the broad and dusty airfield, the hoarse voice said with disbelief, “What the hell is this? Is that your liege’s vehicle?”

Even in this day and age, when a Noble toured his domain, it was usually a regal affair—they would travel with android soldiers and simulacra troops, squads of beastmen, and colossal armaments for show, as well as a marching band and huge portraits of the Noble. Rural villages, towns, and cities would be notified of the visit beforehand and were required to prepare a proper greeting for their liege and his loyal Noble retainers. But at present many Nobles avoided the fanfare of those grand tours, preferring to call on parts of their domain by aircraft. This proved much less troublesome, and allowed for a more rapid response in case of attack by rebel forces. Even without a large body of troops to protect them, Nobles were capable of defending themselves without much effort at all.

Nevertheless, the aircraft had to make a certain impression. There was no way a Noble would use a jet-engine-driven derelict like the humans did for flying. There were ion engine types, aircraft driven by magnetic force, and gravity-propelled craft, while aircraft using the more advanced galaxy drive differed little from the ships used for interplanetary travel. If a massive ship over a thousand yards long set down, that would be more than enough to cow the residents of a Noble’s domain, but it was all a charade of sorts.

It was standard practice to travel around in magnetism-powered aircraft that could hold twenty or thirty people. However, the aircraft that was waiting at the airfield was a smaller one that didn’t look like it could even carry ten. The party had two android soldiers as an escort, two other androids to serve as a doctor and nurse, and yet another whose role was unclear. To all appearances, he was a fit fellow. Adding in D, Shyna, and the duke, that made eight people in total. That hardly seemed enough people to go out on patrol. The engine was

the kind that worked by gravity propulsion.

“Today we shall be visiting six sites,” the duke announced as soon as they’d lifted off.

“Sounds like a lot,” the hoarse voice said in amazement.

Even with ungodly travel speeds, making the rounds to every corner of a vast domain would take years. Normally, a tour would concentrate on just a few places to visit, and be on the move for ten days at most. Of course, the residents of neighboring communities would come pouring in, swelling the population to something more befitting a city. There were areas in the domain where Nobles had been left as chief administrators, but matters that they couldn’t settle had to wait for the liege to come and adjudicate.

“Where exactly shall we visit?” Shyna inquired. She was accompanying them in her role as D’s attendant and keeper.

“Murabak, Gorse, Toryatoo, Manook, Lilac, and Epic.”

“Those are all northern villages. And they are all far from the administrative district. It would take twenty days to tour them by horse,” Shyna whispered to D.

“This doubles as providing medical care to the remote areas, too?” the hoarse voice asked, sounding suspicious. “You do a lot of that?”

“Yes,” Shyna replied, her tone hard. Because she didn’t believe the voice belonged to D. “We spend half the year traveling around the remote communities. Naturally, we hear their appeals at that time, but recently medical service has become the greater responsibility.”

“Thought there were supposed to be a lot more hospitals staffed by medical androids out there than there were in your administrative district.”

“The rebel army keeps destroying them.”

“They as tough as all that?”

“In the old days, they couldn’t do anything more than dig up graves by day and hammer stakes into their occupants. However, more recently they’ve taken the Nobility’s weapons and copied them as well as developing armaments of

their own, making them a force not at all to be taken lightly.”

“Hmm. Heard talk like that in the south and west, and it’s the same here, too, eh? The rebel armies had competent leaders in both those places. How about here?”

“The best leader the rebellion’s had since its inception. His name is Gilshark, it seems.”

“Hmm.”

“Villages near the borders of our domain frequently come under attack by bandits. They used to take whatever they wanted, but since Gilshark came to power, I hear they haven’t come around much lately.”

“Must be a hell of an opponent. No doubt he runs a tight ship, too. And the duke doesn’t go out to mop ’em up?”

“He often did, until a decade ago. However, he never could catch their leader, and lately his heart really doesn’t seem to be in it.”

“But it ain’t as if they’ve suddenly started behaving themselves.”

“No, they seem on course to overrun the capital of the northern Frontier sectors.”

“And he’s just letting them do it? That doesn’t sound like a man they’d call the Tiger.”

The two were conversing in hushed tones. Because they were hardly the only ones on board.

“What about an heir?”

The voice had suddenly changed. A dark delight spread across Shyna’s face.

“If his three children are gone, ordinarily he’d bring someone else in and adopt him,” the Hunter continued. “But he hasn’t done so?”

“That is correct.”

On hearing her reply, D said something.

“Tigris Rex?” the hoarse voice inquired. “Oh, you mean the Tiger King? Well, this king seems awful tired to me!”

At that point, the voice of Duke Van Doren, who occupied the cockpit's single seat, rang through the airship. "We're beginning our descent," he said. "We shall be landing in a minute."

HIGH-LEVEL TALKS

Chapter 2

Scenery began to stream vertically past the windows. The aircraft was making its descent. There wasn't so much as the faintest shudder.

At that very moment, a mechanical voice that sounded perfectly human was heard to say, "We've spotted a flying object leaving the ground. It's confirmed as a missile. And it's closing on us."

To that, the duke appended, "If we shift the gravity field, the missile's course will be altered. Have no fear."

The android soldiers and doctors were implanted with Noble psyches, so they feared naught save sunlight and stakes. The duke's remark must've been directed toward D and Shyna.

"Ain't he the considerate one," the hoarse voice replied snidely.

"This isn't good," D said in return.

"What isn't?"

"It's changing direction."

Just then, the duke was heard closer at hand saying, "Damnation."

D looked out the window. To the northeast, black smoke and flames rose. Both were climbing toward the heavens.

"The missile got caught in our gravity field and fell in the village of Orret. Change of plans—we'll go there to offer medical assistance. After we've landed, you're still not to leave this ship."

The gravity propulsion system made the ship fly by creating a gravitational field in the direction they wanted to go. By shifting the gravity field, they could fly in any direction, so virtually any desired course change was possible. It would be a simple matter for the craft to go from flying horizontally to a vertical climb without ever turning. However, anything making contact with its exterior would bounce off, assailed by the gravitational shift, and fly off in another direction. That was what D meant when he said, "It's changing direction."

As soon as the aircraft touched down, it transformed into a swift surface

vehicle. The ship's body contracted to the size of a small truck, speeding along with its tightly packed occupants.

There was a plain nearby with a view of a forest.

"No rebel forces around?" the hoarse voice inquired. "Well, after a screw-up like this, I don't suppose they'd follow up with another attack right away. Blew the freaking people they're supposed to be protecting to bits. Another fiasco like this and they'll lose popular support. And making such a rank amateur mistake ain't inspiring me with much confidence in this great leader they're supposed to have."

"Perhaps they weren't trained very well," Shyna suggested.

"Whoever gave somebody like that a surface-to-air missile ain't been trained very well. Could be they hate the Nobility so bad they'll fire another one in for good measure! Best stay on our toes."

In about ten minutes' time, they reached the village of Orret. Apparently the missile had been the compact type fired from a portable launcher, so the damage wasn't as bad as a proton missile or a plasma warhead would've been, but a crater fifty yards in diameter spread from where it'd struck on the southern edge of the village, with much of the neighboring forest uprooted and the remaining trees engulfed in flames. The houses nearest the blast had been vaporized, a number of others were partially or completely destroyed, and villagers who'd rushed there to help could only stand there dumbfounded, powerless to do anything.

The first one out of the vehicle was a gigantic figure whose exact nature was unclear. On his back, he carried a metal case taken from the vehicle, which was almost two feet long, a foot high, and eight inches thick. Picking his way through burning branches and pillars, he came to the edge of the black crater, looked around, and then pointed straight ahead with his right hand.

The purpose of the case finally became evident. A small sphere rose from it, arcing over to where he'd pointed—a spot about twenty yards from the edge of the crater. It appeared to be propelled by magnetic force. The surprising part came next. The sphere split in two. A moment later, an aid station complete with medical equipment and dozens of beds suddenly took shape. And then a

second sphere split over the spot. The hitherto-exposed aid station was shielded by a ceiling and semi-cylindrical walls.

“The hospital is ready,” the duke informed the hoary-headed mayor who’d come over. “Bear the wounded over there. If less than an hour has elapsed, we can even bring your dead back to life.”

Android doctors and nurses were already headed toward the aid station.

“My liege, we thank you for your assistance. But what’s the meaning of all this?”

“A bomb intended for my person fell here by mistake.”

“Why, that’s—” the mayor began before words failed him, his wrinkled face twisting with bewilderment.

“How many dead?”

“We’re not entirely certain yet—but from a quick look around, the blast took out one, two, three . . . eight houses . . . I suppose about thirty people died.”

“Give the local magistrates a precise figure for the number of dead and the total damage before the day is out. And tell them this: I want the families of those who can’t be resuscitated to be amply compensated.”

The mayor bowed deeply. Behind him, villagers were visible. They were all staring. Though their eyes seemed to stab at the Nobleman, when they met the duke’s eyes, their gazes quickly lost their strength. With one notable exception.

A young farmer’s wife with her singed hair tied back. Her rustic countenance was smeared with blood and grease. She stepped forward. Her arms were raised, as if in offering. And what she proffered the duke was the headless body of an infant. Though it had no more blood to shed, the plump little body was still poised as if he were chasing chickens around in the yard.

“You’re a Noble, ain’t you?” the farmer’s wife said, shoving her burden against the duke’s chest. “Yeah, I thought as much. Well, if you are, then you oughta be able to make us like you. Bring my baby boy back to life. Please, bring him back to me. Do like your kind always does and drink his blood to make him one of you. It shouldn’t matter that he don’t have a head. I’m begging you!

Bring my boy back to life. He's only two and a half. I don't care if he comes looking to drink my blood when he's a Noble, just put him back the way he was."

"He has no head, you say?" the duke inquired. "If we had it, we might manage something."

"How's that?" the woman said, tears streaming from her eyes. "What did you say? If you had the head—?"

Suddenly the duke cupped his right hand to his ear and turned his gaze to the emergency aid station. Then looking back at the farmer's wife and her decapitated son, he said, "It seems a head landed over there. Check and see if it's your child's."

The farmer's wife froze, then after a short time, slowly turned her eyes toward where the aid station had sprung from the sphere.

A "doctor" was waving his right hand around. It was clear that a small lump swayed at the end of the hair he held it by.

"Check and see," the duke repeated. His words were for the benefit of the farmer's wife. Of that there could be no mistake.

The mother screamed. Her howl of madness actually made the duke furrow his brow. Even after she raised the corpse she carried high over her head, he still didn't understand what had happened.

She swung her arms down again, but before she could release her burden, someone gently took hold of both it and her. Maddened eyes wet with tears caught sight of Shyna.

"What do you think you're doing?" the farmer's wife asked, her mouth flapping angrily. "You're one of them, ain't you? Stay out of this!"

"I have a heart, just like the rest of you. That's why I stopped you. You mustn't do this."

"Ain't he the one who said he'd put my boy's head back on?"

No one tried to stop the sobbing mother. Her actions were sanctioned by an authority far higher than their feudal lord.

“That bastard over there’s got my boy’s head and he’s swinging it all over the place. And this one’s got the nerve to tell me to go check it out. I have to go see if that’s my son’s head, he tells me. If it’s his, they’ll put it back on, he says. If you’ve got a heart just like us, you know how I feel. What the hell else am I supposed to do?”

The farmer’s wife hugged her burden close. Tears fell like rain on the burnt, blistered remains. Holding it close, she squatted down and began to wail like a beast.

“What are you crying about?” the duke finally inquired. “If we reattach his head, we can bring him back to life. It’s as simple as that. Shyna, is that not what the woman wanted?”

“Yes.”

“Then why does she weep so? Why did she try to dash her child against the ground? I find her behavior incomprehensible.”

Shyna said nothing.

Two women who looked to be about the same age as the farmer’s wife hurried over to her and gently helped her to her feet.

At that point, the duke said to her, “The responsibility for your child’s death lies with the traitors who fired a missile at my person. I promise you they will be caught, and then drawn and quartered before your very eyes. Just wait and see.”

All who heard this looked down at the ground and sighed deeply.

Tearing free of the other two women, the farmer’s wife turned to face the Nobleman. Though her features were streaked with tears, sanity had returned to them.

“My lord, you’re wrong. You always think you’re doing what’s best for us, and this time’s no different. Hell, I know that. I’m sure there ain’t another lord in the world as good as you. But you’re dead wrong.”

After staring at the woman’s back for a while as she walked away, the duke turned to the mayor, who stood beside him, and said, “They’re all leaving. Even

the wounded are leaving the aid station. Mister Mayor, long have I had these thoughts. Which of us is mistaken? Is it my actions that are wrong, or the woman's words?"

"I'm sure I don't know," the mayor of the village replied, and though the old man kept his head bowed, the duke didn't even notice.

"That's what you always say. Every single time, without fail. Is that easy for you?"

The mayor made no reply.

"Very well," the duke said with a nod, not seeming bothered by it. "We shall leave you the aid station and its equipment. The doctors and nurses have work to do elsewhere, though. The sick or gravely wounded can come here later. The automated equipment will take care of them."

"Many thanks," the mayor said, taking the duke's hand firmly with both of his own. That was the best thing to do.

"Send me all your nonmedical concerns at a later date." And having said that, the duke turned to the doctors and nurses who'd come out of the aid station, gave a toss of his chin, and said, "We're off."

He walked at the fore of the group as they headed toward the vehicle. Though the duke's back was straight, it looked like it would buckle under the slightest load.

"Now there's something," the hoarse voice said, drawing a look from Shyna. "It ain't often you find a man who understands humans so little. Yeah, a real sight for sore eyes."

"All Nobles are like that," D replied.

Shyna grew even more confused. "Humans and Nobility—at what point do they intersect?" she asked.

"Maybe in a million years, maybe not," the hoarse voice responded in vain, and D started to walk away.

The rest of the duke's tour went according to plan. There were no further attacks by the rebels. Perhaps that was due to the tragic consequences of their first attempt.

In every village an instant hospital and a place for filing grievances were erected, with android doctors and treatment equipment in the former, and the duke himself serving in the latter.

"He's an odd one, ain't he?" the hoarse voice would say from time to time.

At present, they were in the aircraft as it made its way back to the castle.

"Nobody could possibly have enough time to listen to every little complaint from the folks in their domain, or usually have any interest in 'em in the first place. Normally, that's the kind of thing androids would get stuck with. But he meets 'em head-on. Hmm, that might be the secret to how he keeps 'em from fleeing his domain."

Since the heyday of the Nobility, serfs fleeing a domain had been a common occurrence, but when every attempt ended in failure, the number of attempts tended to peter out. That was because fleeing serfs would be pursued and captured, after which they faced a cruel and unusual punishment. For example, they would be skewered from anus to mouth and left lining both sides of the highway or standing in the village square. And they weren't allowed to die quickly. The Nobility impaled them in a way that was both the most painful and allowed the victim to survive the longest time. These highways lined with convulsing, screaming people were known as "staked roads," and every Frontier sector had dozens of them.

Even though their numbers dwindled, the bids for freedom never ceased entirely. The outer limits of the Frontier sectors were surrounded by haunted seas and steep mountain chains where even the Nobility and their monsters hesitated to set foot. No one was ever known to have crossed them, so passage to the outside world was impossible. Until a decade ago. And it was all thanks to a dozen groups united under a single leader. Granted, the Nobility's power was at its nadir, but the humans had still managed to fight off their pursuers with what little knowledge and the few weapons they possessed, then cross over mountains infested with demons and monsters to make good their escape. And

then they'd come back.

About five years ago, the resistance had boiled over in every sector of the Frontier. At that time, as a result of careful study of their activities, it was determined that this was the result of the efforts of a single leader, or else a group of leaders. The Nobles realized the rebels who'd disappeared beyond the blustery snow and ice of the mountain chains had come back again. Though the Nobility were said to be nearly extinct, their power remained overwhelming at present, and after consecutive rebellions met with heavy casualties and the "staked roads" were reinstituted, rebel activities were snuffed out. But the probing eyes of the Nobility were never able to locate their leader, and even now guerrillas who'd trained under him continued an unending chain of sporadic acts of rebellion.

The fact that this northern Frontier sector alone had essentially zero incidence of people fleeing from the domain was cause for suspicion and envy in Nobles administering the neighboring territories.

"Even if they could allay suspicions, they wouldn't do the same," said Shyna. "Medical services and hearing of grievances are the purview of the magistrates. No Noble save Duke Van Doren goes out personally to see them."

"Hmm. So he wants to score points with 'em. But they call Van Doren 'the Tiger,' don't they? The stories that reached our ears had him as being so cruel that whenever anyone displeased him, even a Greater Nobleman on the Privy Council, he'd have them torn apart just as he would a human being. When did he change?"

"That was after the coming of Lady Sirene."

Once she'd said that, Shyna was called by the Tiger, who was still seated in the cockpit. "Be mindful of what you say," he told her.

That was enough to silence Shyna.

On their return to the castle, D was immediately invited to the duke's chambers.

"We've received word that the ruin survey team of humans from the Archeology Bureau departed the Capital today. They shall arrive in two days'

time.”

“I’m surprised you let ‘em come,” said the hoarse voice.

“Well, the applications had been coming for some time. I don’t think the ruins of particular value, and they’ve promised not to stray from the area I’ve designated.”

“And you trust humans?”

The duke was confused. The voice had changed. But he gave his answer soon enough, saying, “This issue isn’t as overreaching as all that. They simply want to dig some holes. Something of that scale matters little to me.”

“Let them come once, and they’ll come again.”

“And I shall deal with that when the time comes.”

“Just when did you come to decide it matters so little to you?”

The softly spoken query gave the duke pause.

“That’s a good question.”

“Was it about the time Sirene started being disappointed in you?”

The duke let a wry grin creep to his lips.

“I should expect no less from a Noble Hunter of such repute. Would you make a stake of your words and drive them through my heart?” With a low chuckle, he continued, “She may well have thought so. She seriously believed herself to serve a role as an intermediary between us and the people of my domain. And I let her. There’s no point in getting angry with a woman over her little dreams. D, she was disappointed in the humans, too!”

Moonbeams streaming through the skylight gave a white glow to the chamber’s two occupants. One cast no shadow on the floor, while the other had one but faintly.

“What I can offer at her passing is a multitude of acts of charity for the people of my domain. Those were most certainly in response to her requests. Ah, yes, you might say this upcoming survey was another of her accomplishments.”

“I thought you were an odd Noble, but I think I’ll take that back,” D said, his

voice hoarse again. "You're a Noble right down to the marrow of your bones. I can see why Sirene would go and hire us. Seems the bandits will be on top of you soon, too. Get rid of 'em in short order so we can finish our job."

"It'll be over soon. Don't be impatient."

"Good enough, then."

And leaving him with those hoarse words, D exited the room.

Shyna was standing against the wall in a long corridor. Moonbeams falling from the high windows gave her a stark glow as if she were picked out by a spotlight.

Saying nothing, D walked right past her. He had no interest in her except as his guide.

"What did his grace have to say?" Shyna called out to him.

The moonlight trembled. A clearly defined shadow fell at her feet. The shadow of an android.

D halted.

"Does it interest you?"

Shyna didn't know what to say.

"Seems like you've been infected with a heap of human emotion, too," the hoarse voice continued. "Just like the duke. Compassion doesn't suit the Nobility."

"If his grace should perish, we shall be destroyed as well."

"The rest of you will live. Even without the Nobility, you could use the infinite energy of the castle. After the humans and Nobles are gone, it might be your kind that rules the world."

"We would never wish for such a thing," Shyna replied with a faint shake of her head. "Would you be so kind as to accompany me? I wish to take a walk in the garden."

Something astonishing happened. D gave his consent.

The stands of trees sent a verdant perfume to the very edge of the stone-

paved path, and the nocturnal flowers had all opened their buds. The flower of choice in the Nobility's gardens was the rose, of course, and the duke's garden was no exception. Modified to be nocturnally blooming, they were commonly known as "night roses." Glowing in white, red, blue, and even the black of night, they lay waiting for the man and woman who came.

"The place's been well cared for. He doesn't really seem like the type," the hoarse voice remarked.

"A century ago, the castle had no plant life other than the odd stand of trees. It was the Lady Sirene who put greenery and flowers everywhere."

"Who takes care of it all?"

"We ladies-in-waiting and the gardeners see to it."

"The gardeners alone aren't enough?"

"I'm not entirely certain about that."

When they came to an illuminated fountain where the water spread in silken fans, Shyna halted.

They were right below a cherry tree that towered at the southern end of the castle. From the first floor all the way to the top of the castle there was row upon row of windows, and on the highest level—the seventh—a light burned in one.

"That is his grace's room." Bowing to D, Shyna then looked up and said, "Listen, if you will."

It had already reached D's ears. A melody strummed on strings. The jewel-like sounds the player's fingers produced slipped out the window and scattered in the wind, with no more than mere scraps reaching those on the ground, yet his audience of two stood listening as if turned to stone.

"Such a sad sound," Shyna said, seeming to gnaw at the words.

"Is it the duke?"

"Yes. He plays quite well."

"Has he always?"

“No, just since a century ago.”

“That again?” D said, a flame dancing in his eyes.

How had the woman who’d come a century ago managed to change the Nobleman?

“Lady Sirene has passed away, hasn’t she?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s why.”

Shyna didn’t actually say who the melody was intended for, and D preserved the silence. For they and the moonlight were attending the smallest of funerals.

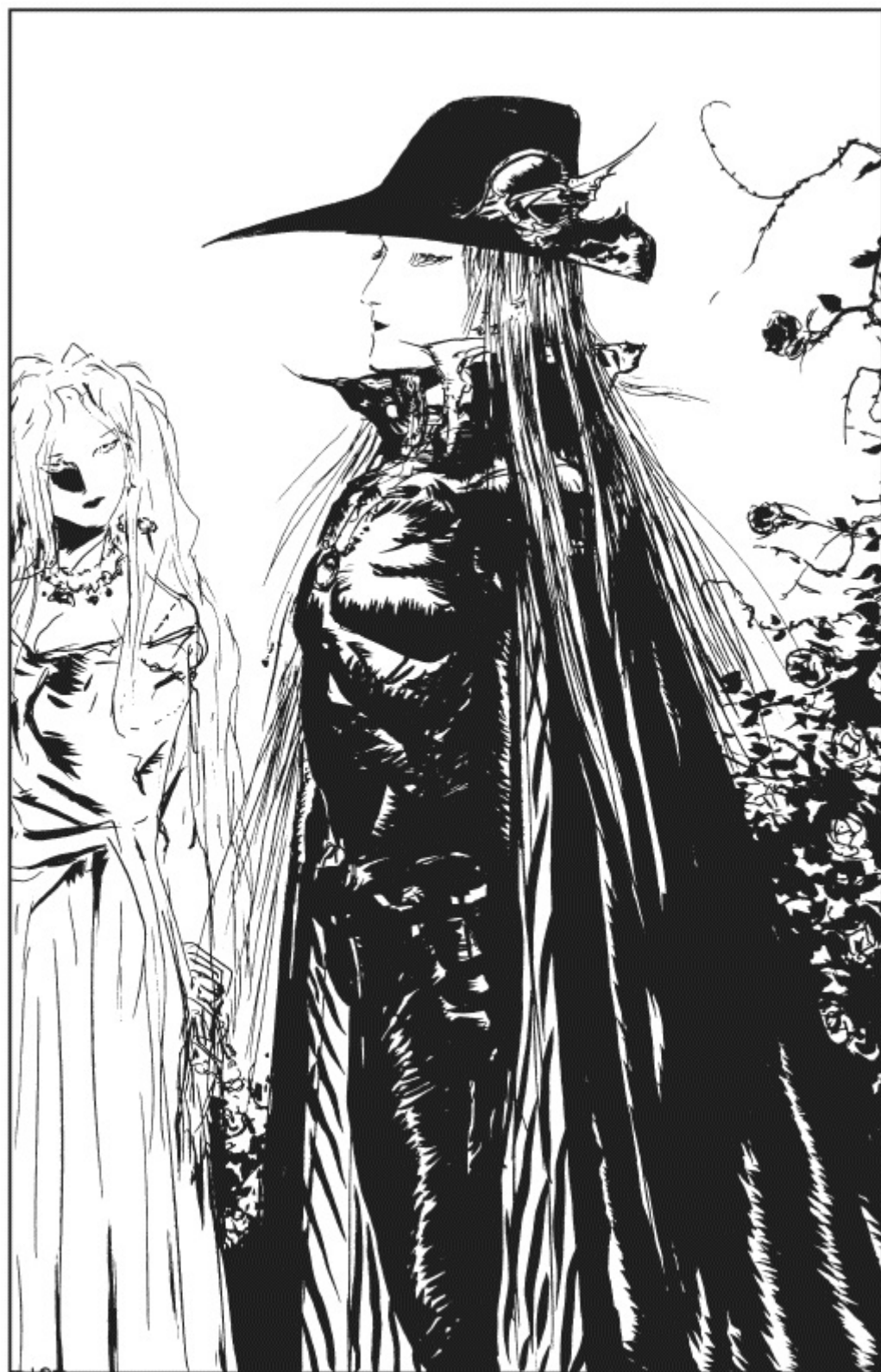
D’s right hand flashed out. Suddenly, an iron arrow appeared in his fist.

“Stay here,” he said.

D started walking in the direction the arrow had come. It was a stand of trees off the path. As soon as he reached it, a second shot whistled through the air. With a mellifluous sound, D used the arrow in his grip to deflect the other.

Black raiment sailed through the moonlight. Dodging a third shot in midair, D swung around his right hand at the same time. A hundred feet to the northeast, there was a cry of surprise and the sound of air escaping someone’s lungs. As soon as the Hunter came back to earth, he raced forward, the wind swirling in his wake.

Two figures stood on the grass surrounded by trees and roses. As D came through the trees, the one on the left collapsed into a tangle of shadows. A black arrow had pierced the figure’s throat.



“You must forgive us for the rude manner in which we’ve summoned you,” said the remaining shadowy figure.

“One’s dead already,” D replied. His hands had naturally drifted down by his sides. It was almost as if he hadn’t just slain one of his attackers. If you were to close your eyes, you could feel the darkness spreading from his location. “Let’s have your name,” he said.

“Gilshark. I lead the rebel army.”

“Around noon today, thirty or so villagers were injured instead of a Noble. An infant lost his head.”

“That went against my orders,” Gilshark replied. “The man with the missile launcher got impatient. But I bear responsibility for leaving him with the missiles. And someday I’ll pay for it.”

“And you’ve got another dead here.”

“He was the one who fired the missile. And he was here at his own request. He knew what the price would be to see what you could do up close.”

“Dying by my hand doesn’t repay anything. It’s the duke who footed the bill for your stupidity.”

“You have my sincerest apologies. I intend to do all that we can for that village and the bereaved families.”

“There’s no point in apologizing to me. Whether it’s true or not, you should resign as their leader. You’re not cut out for it.”

“I’m grooming a replacement. I’m sure they’ll all have forgotten what I even looked like soon enough.”

There was a stark flash over his head. D had drawn and struck in a single motion, his sword arcing the shortest possible distance to come down at the head of the shadowy figure.

The stark streak was repelled by a pale blue light.

III

“Sorry, but I can’t die just yet,” Gilshark said, rubbing the back of his head. He

had a force field up.

There was a faint sound.

“No, it can’t be—?!” the shadowy figure exclaimed as he leaped, coming back to earth a good ten feet away. Out in the moonlight.

His head was wrapped in yellow cloth, his face was stern, with heavy eyebrows and thin lips, and his narrow eyes were invested with a fierce will. His clothes consisted of a wrinkled coat and trousers—and somewhere under them he must’ve concealed the force field projector.

“Hear that? My force field’s screaming. If I don’t turn up the juice, you’ll cut right through it. And it’s already set high enough to make heavy machine gun fire bounce off it. You really are as special as we thought, aren’t you?”

“If you have no business with me, we’ll do this another time,” D said, his blade already back in its sheath.

“Oh, so you read me right?” Gilshark replied, eyes sparkling. “I’d planned on seeing what you could do before making you an offer, but now I really, really need you to say yes.”

“Yes?”

“Huh?” Gilshark said, furrowing his brow as he watched D squeeze his left hand into a fist. For the man had heard a hoarse voice. “I understand you’re here for Van Doren. But I can’t for the life of me figure out why you’re running around with him. He hire you or something?”

“Nope,” D replied in his own voice.

“Good. I don’t know your circumstances, but you’re going to get rid of him at some point, aren’t you?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Really? Well, that’s a big help—at least, that’s what I’d usually tell you, but could I get you to walk away from this one?”

“Oh my,” said the hoarse voice.

“Why?” asked D.

“Don’t ask. Please, just do it.”

“No,” D said, his reply as short and sweet as always. “Once I’ve slain the duke, I leave and that’s the end of this.”

“If you win, that’s it for you. Therein lies my problem. If we don’t finish him ourselves, we’ll never get the people behind us.” His face was stern, his lips pressed together tightly.

“In that case, go ahead of me. When I hired on, it was to take care of the duke after he was done getting rid of all of you.”

“Is that a fact?” Gilshark said, his face going slack. “That’s a big help.” He let out a sigh. Even shielded by an invisible wall, he’d felt as if the brawny arms of tension had him in their crushing grip. “Then I’ll be going. When we attack him, stick by his side. We won’t be in touch.”

D’s left hand rose from the wrist up. It was unclear whether that was supposed to be a wave good bye or a *bow*.

Just as Gilshark turned around, giants in silvery white landed all around him. A rumble went through the ground, and the pavement buckled. Ten feet tall, they were covered in armor. On their hips they wore longswords, while their hands gripped spears. Both weapons were of extraordinary size.

This was one of the things Nobles liked—giant soldiers. Beneath the armor were artificial life-forms or androids, generally seventy percent being the former and the remaining thirty the latter.

In the face of four spearheads, the leader of the rebel army looked like a scared little rabbit.

“Well, now, is he gonna show us what he can do?” the hoarse voice said with apparent relish. “What’ll the rebels do if they lose their boss here? Or could it be—”

Gilshark raised his hands. It was a sign of surrender.

It was as the giant directly in front of him stepped off to one side to steer the intruder toward the castle that the resistance came. Gilshark grabbed the head of the giant’s spear and shoved it off to the right. It moved easily enough.

Undoubtedly the man had taken into account the time it took the spear to become a particle cannon. Crimson particles of light struck his target. Which happened to be the giant to Gilshark's right.

Before his foe's form could be enveloped by crimson flames, Gilshark jerked free the spear he still held. The giant's arms were still attached to it. Blue fluid gushed from the wounds on the giant's shoulders, spattering the cobblestones. The giant was an artificial life-form.

Beams of blistering heat took Gilshark from the left and the rear. A crimson hemisphere formed, the path melted, and the grass started to disappear. Even the giant before him vanished into it.

Suddenly, the sphere had bounced back. From within it, a black sphere appeared. The instant it came into contact with the two giant soldiers, their bodies quickly twisted and were compacted. It wasn't all that different from the way fish might be crushed by the pressure at the bottom of the sea.

"They're crumpling up," the hoarse voice murmured beyond what remained of the blazing hemisphere. "It's a gravity-based force field. Your sword would be reduced to atoms the instant it touched it. The rebel army is just full of surprises."

By the time it'd finished saying that, there was no trace left of the two giants.

"I'm off, I guess. I'll be seeing you after we've gotten rid of the duke," said the man. "Try not to get caught in the crossfire."

Turning once again, Gilshark ran down the path across the grass.

"Humans got some scary characters, too. You've gotta be more than human to use the Nobility's weapons that well—hey?!" the hoarse voice said, its tone becoming suspicious. "What are you thinking about?"

There was no answer from D, of course, but instead Shyna and some guards raced over. A particularly stout giant looked at D, then twisted his lips into a wry grin.

"It seems we now face the possibility that you're in league with the rebel army." These words, dripping with malevolence and delight, came from General Kiniski.

After hearing what D had to say, the duke grunted and nodded his head. His form was more brimming with power than it'd been by midday.

"Does that story fit, General?"

"I think it's been well fabricated," the soldier said, still standing perfectly still at attention. "Even if everything we've heard up until now is correct, no one knows exactly what happened after he met with the rebel leader. If the rebel army's hired him to assassinate you—"

He broke off there. Even the guards that'd accompanied him didn't understand what had happened, but they instinctively reached for the swords on their hips.

A steely blade was pressed against the general's throat.

"I've already taken that job. From a woman you know," said D.

"It is as he says, Jelmin. Do you understand me?" the duke said, folding his hands together and looking at D. "From your track record, I know you're not the kind of man to take two contracts on the same target. If the general has a flaw, it's that he's too devoted to duty. Please pardon him."

"You clear on that?" the hoarse voice inquired.

The general nodded.

"Then it's settled. Okay, back to your roosts, everyone," the duke said with a wave of his right hand, and all save D did as he'd commanded. "And why do you not go?" the duke said, going over to a cabinet, taking out a golden cup and decanter, and pouring a drink on the spot. "Pardon me," he remarked, downing it in a single swig. In less than three seconds he'd drained about half a quart from it.

"You call that drinking?"

"Oh, no one's ever spoken to me like that," the duke said with a grin as he fought back a belch.

"Everybody plays the good little kiss-ass and pretends to share your interests, right? Maybe they say it's for your own good. Or maybe it isn't your grace they protect—but their own necks."

“Exactly,” the duke snorted. “But I think I will test whether you truly speak from the heart.”

He took the same cup and filled it well—actually, emptying the rest of the decanter’s contents into it—before offering it to D.

D took it without a word and brought it to his lips.

“Hey,” the hoarse voice groaned, but by that time the Hunter had already finished drinking it.

“My,” the Nobleman said, peering at the cup the Hunter had returned to him. “Most impressive. It seems I’ve found a pleasant drinking companion. Will you join me for another?”

“I believe I’ll pass,” D replied, and then he suddenly asked, “Have you hardened your defenses?”

“You mean because of that character who got in here earlier? All the force fields in my domain are down. And have been for the last century.”

Nothing from the Hunter.

Taking a fresh decanter from the shelf, the duke poured another drink.

“That was like living in a bird cage, and I never did care for it. And, to be honest, it was a relief to stop.”

“And what about the general?”

Kiniski must’ve been livid.

“I think he was basically of the same mind that I was. He agreed to it, grumbling some rationalization about how being shielded by invisible walls didn’t suit a military man. Before he became a general, he was quite the drinker, but since he started answering to me, he hasn’t had a drop. At least that is what he tells me, and I take him at his word.”

And then the Noble drained his cup.

D asked, “Do you want to be destroyed?”

Slowly lowering his cup, the duke said, “What?”

D didn’t reply.

“D, I don’t really understand this thing called life. Not even now, as I approach its end after more than ten millennia of living. We are immortal. So long as no one puts a stake through our hearts, we can live forever. But what is the point of that? D, I have never seen a Noble crying over life.”

He tilted the cup against his lips. When it came away again, he continued, “And yet, that farmer’s wife today blamed me for the death of her child, wailing about his head or some such business. Is a finite existence really so important? Surely you must know.”

“Did you ever ask Sirene?”

“Of course so. However—she only said she didn’t know. She told me that now she was just like me.”

“Did that make her happy?”

“I don’t know.”

The duke took another drink.

D quietly headed for the door. And the duke didn’t stop him.

Once he’d stepped out into the corridor, the hoarse voice said, “This clown—he’s worn a father’s face, right? All three of his sons have up and disappeared, haven’t they? That sort of piques my interest now.”

There was no reply. D walked on in silence, and didn’t stop until he was back at his own room.

AN ACCOUNT OF DAYS GONE BY

Chapter 3

It was around noon the next day that trouble broke out.

There was a tiny village called Machitez about three miles from Duke Van Doren's castle, and to the east of that village was a sparsely grassed plain that was about a dozen miles square. Once every five years or so a market was set up there, and aside from that it was used as an emergency landing strip. Though it lacked hangars or maintenance facilities, a dilapidated cargo plane from the Capital landed there, depositing a dozen humans and some fairly enormous earth-moving equipment before leaving again.

They got into a truck they had to assemble themselves from a resilient kind of paper and headed off for the castle home of the duke. And when there was only about a thousand yards left to go, they ran into General Kiniski's forces. In response to a soldier's challenge, a man and a woman got out of the truck, the latter a blonde who introduced herself as Valerie Cozuf. Explaining that they were a survey party from the Capital examining Noble ruins and that they had permission from the duke, she then produced a certificate from the Archeology Bureau.

"It says here you arrive tomorrow," the soldier said, eyeing them with suspicion.

"We were supposed to, but the Archeology Bureau screwed up and the Frontier-bound cargo plane we'd reserved opened up a day early, so we made use of it. And they'd moved everything up already, so tomorrow was booked by somebody else," Valerie replied.

Once the soldier had relayed this information, General Kiniski appeared before the couple.

"The agreed-upon plan stipulated tomorrow, so you must adhere to that. Today, you may rest in the village of Machitez. Your return will be according to schedule," he informed them.

"Can't you do anything? This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance," entreated the man—Professor Izumo Lovick—but the general wouldn't hear of it, and the group was forced stay a night in Machitez.

“This is a colossal headache,” the professor grumbled.

“Still, we got permission to dig from surviving Nobles, and that in itself should be enough,” Dr. Valerie told him soothingly. They were lovers.

“You’ve got a point there. I hear this Duke Van Doren is the man they called ‘the Tiger’ and feared until a century ago, when he suddenly settled down. One theory has it that a new maidservant reformed him, but a bold, tough Nobleman doesn’t become a sissy just like that. I’m almost tempted to make finding out what happened another goal of this survey.”

“The next time you call anyone a sissy, I’m leaving you,” Valerie said, the smile never leaving her face. “But the man we ran into earlier, the one they called the General—he’s going to be a tough one to deal with, isn’t he?” Her lovely brow crinkled.

Though they were lovers, Valerie addressed the professor with a certain deference, as she was only twenty-four while he was forty-six.

“Guys like him really can’t be bribed, but I suppose we could try pumping the soldiers for info and see where his soft spot is—”

“Unfortunately, he’s an android,” said a youthful voice from behind them, causing the pair to turn and look.

They were in the professor’s room.

“Pardon my intrusion. I’ve been watching your movements ever since you arrived in Machitez,” said a man with something daring about his smile, and he touched a finger to the cloth of his turban. “I am Glantan. I lead a certain religious group,” he continued with a bow.

“And what might you want with us?” Valerie asked. Both she and the professor wore guarded looks. “We’re tired after a long journey from the Capital. If you’ve got something to discuss with us, could we trouble you to come back again after the sun goes down?”

“I suppose that really would be for the best, wouldn’t it? Only, neither you folks nor we have much time. I’ll put this frankly. I’d like you to add some of my compatriots to the dig you’re starting in the ruins tomorrow.”

The two of them looked at each other, then the professor rose from his chair and said, “Pardon me, but I’m supposed to do this for people from some religious group I know nothing about? Doesn’t that seem a tad presumptuous, to say nothing of being most irregular?”

“I respectfully ask that you accommodate us,” Glantan insisted.

Even after it became clear that the reason his people wanted to join the survey was because they wished to obtain papers and a statue of the founder of their religious movement that were somewhere in the ruins, the couple didn’t nod in understanding. While the man seemed personable enough, he didn’t quite look like an upstanding human being.

Twice his request had been flatly rejected, but as Glantan asked a third time, he took a leather pouch from his hip and dumped its contents on the floor. When the other two looked down at it, it cast a golden light on their faces. They were all thousand-dala coins. One was enough to buy a house, two would get a stagecoach, and three were enough to purchase an aircraft.

“There are five hundred of them. I’d be honored if they could aid your excavation in some small way.”

“You seem keenly aware of our financial situation. The Capital doesn’t take an active interest in archeological pursuits. They say the Nobility’s past can’t be unearthed without dredging up memories of the dark days when we were under their control. To be honest, I’d take a little kid’s pocket change to help fund this.”

“In that case—” Glantan looked at the professor, his eyes agleam.

“I have to ask you to take your money and go. Every last coin, if you please,” the professor told him flatly.

Apparently Glantan hadn’t expected this kind of opposition.

“Now, just a minute, Izumo—I mean, Professor Lovick. Don’t you think we should give his offer some consideration?”

“Doctor Valerie, while I realize you’re more practical than anyone, this survey isn’t the end of anything. For we were able to get permission from the Nobility. Should it prove successful, or really, even if it’s not terribly fruitful, so long as it

concludes without incident, the next survey will be markedly easier. I can't turn a blind eye to the slightest misstep when it could sour Duke Van Doren's mood."

"But—"

"I'll remind you that a limit has been set on the number of personnel allowed. Each and every one of them is eager to see the history of the Nobility firsthand, and it's that enthusiasm alone that's brought our colleagues this far. You understand that for every person we added, we'd have to take someone else off. Would you like to be one of them?"

Valerie could only nod.

"And that's the way it stands, Mr. Glantan. Though I'm sorely tempted by your offer, I'm afraid I cannot take you up on it."

"That's truly unfortunate," the outsider said, a faint smile rising on his lips.

At that point, someone knocked at the door. Before Valerie could get up, the door opened. And before she had a chance to see that he, too, had a cloth wrapped around his head, Glantan was leaping for the window.

The crescent-shaped throwing knife the man had raised in his right hand had a bluish gleam. Limning a beautiful arc, it sank into the throat of the newest visitor, who fell to the floor without a struggle.

The windowpane shattered. As Glantan sailed through the air, a black sphere followed after him. His body twisted, and the stunned pair of scientists watched dumbfounded as he was crushed down to nothing in the blink of an eye.

"My apologies. I came as soon as a lookout told me he was in here, and luckily it seems I was in time."

"Who was he? And who are you?" Valerie asked, not yet able to organize her thoughts.

"He was Glantan Doskis. He's a member of the bandits known as the Pitch Black Gang. As for me—"

The two scientists focused their eyes on his rough face and body.

"—I am Gilshark. I'm a member of the rebel army. And I've come here with a

request for the two of you.”

“A request?”

The two of them looked at each other.

Gilshark said, “I’d like you to let a member of the rebel army join your team.”

The recent visitors from outside, D included, couldn’t help but cause a storm of unrest in the castle ruled by the slumbering Tiger.

“I have nothing to say regarding the survey team. However, the bandits have closed to a day or two’s travel from here, and I can’t stand to sit back and do nothing,” said General Kiniski. “They have invaded this sacred domain effortlessly, assaulting the very residents we should be protecting and taking their valuables, then putting their villages to the torch before they go. I simply cannot stand idly by while impudent blackguards like these are allowed to close on us.”

To this, the Tiger responded, “In truth, this is the first time in ten millennia I’ve ever heard you speak with concern for the residents of this domain. I will not stop you. Have I even once allowed any trespass into my domain to go unpunished? General, I know full well that your anger isn’t directed at the bandits. However, you are mistaken. I believe I’ve entrusted you with sweeping away any and all invaders.”

The general ran his eyes over the portraits and assorted weapons that hung on the walls.

“I need not tell you to look at these. But they all hang here as a testimony to the pride, the glory, and the bravery of the one we call the Tiger. My soldiers and I take great pride in the days when we rode into battle with you to crush our enemies. The picture on the east wall is ‘Annihilation at the Veniston River.’ You smashed the dam and drowned an enemy force of ten thousand strong with a mere three hundred soldiers under you—time and again they assailed us, and just when we were ready to meet our end, you struck the enemy from behind and took them unaware, and after we caught them in our pincer movement, we managed to slay them all. Never have I seen such remarkable fighting. And you with but a hundred men in your command.”

His strong face turned.

“The painting on the north wall is you crossing the skies of Venus. At the time, we were locked in battle with the OSB, the outer space beings. They built outposts on one planet after another in our solar system, then launched an attack on Earth. Believing that merely fighting them off was a losing strategy, you proposed that we strike at them out among the stars. However, each and every ship we launched was shot down, and you were left with only five hundred survivors to stage an attack. Two armored vehicles are depicted—the one to the rear was yours, and with few officers and enlisted men to support you, you struck at the enemy space fortress, while the other was the cherished tank of Greylander, the ‘Noble among Nobles’ who battled in space all alone. Catching the OSB off guard, your sudden attack was a major success, and following it all of the enemy’s advanced outposts were destroyed in what was a turning point in the war.”

The man turned in another direction.

“Finally, the picture on the west wall—which remains down, even now. Though I realize this may draw your ire, it was a scene of serfs being executed some twenty-five hundred years ago.”

“Kiniski,” the duke called out to him, his tone dark and severe, and on hearing it the general’s expression grew even more doleful.

“What need you fear? What is there to regret? Is it not the duty of the liege to exterminate traitors? The fact that you personally swung the axe that chopped the heads from the traitors, that lopped off their arms and legs, that is what makes you the Tiger King. On that night when you executed a thousand miserable humans, I looked to you as I would to a god,” the general said, his eyes gleaming.

As soon as he shut his mouth, that glow swiftly faded, and he walked toward the north wall. It was decorated with spears, javelins, hatchets, and laser cannons, but he grabbed hold of a long axe and pulled it down.

“In keeping with your instructions, I shall use this to execute the bandit scum.”

“Do as you like.”

“Then we shall set off for the lake region to the east posthaste. You may relax here knowing all is well, my liege. I expect to be back two days hence.”

After the caped figure had disappeared through the doorway to the sound of sharp footfalls, the duke heaved a sigh and took a seat in an armchair.

He took a glass from the small table beside it. The bowl of it was made of crystal, while the stem was fashioned from gold. Filling it almost to the brim with alcohol, he was just about to drain the glass when a servant came in and informed him that the survey group was paying a visit.

“There’s no need to see me. I believe I’ve already granted them permission to conduct their survey.”

“They wish to discuss measures to prevent any interference with their work.”

“There shall be no such interference. Not after receiving my permission.”

“I was given another message in the event you should say that.”

Flames of rage and scorn billowed from the duke’s eyes. The silence’s voice seemed to say, *Damned humans*.

The servant continued, “They said they wished to discuss the matter of Master Sebastian. What is your will?”

Suddenly, the servant became the object of his rage. The duke raised his right hand and made a horizontal sweep with it. Though nothing could be seen in the space between the servant and the Nobleman, the servant’s head was cleanly taken off, with waves of pale blue electromagnetism snaking from either opening.

“See them in,” the duke commanded.

“Understood,” the servant’s head replied, and its body walked over and picked it up, leaving with it under one arm.

II

The duke wondered how pale his face was now. He would have no choice but to ask someone else to tell him. For the Nobility—as vampires—cast no reflection in mirrors or water.

He looked at the walls. East, north, west. Each was out of balance. The duke's eyes came to rest on the west one. Turning toward the wall, which was adorned with paintings and matchlock rifles, he murmured, "Sebastian . . . Why did you choose now to come back?"

His visitor was an archeologist who introduced herself as Valerie Cozuf. In the reception hall, the young woman told him of her unexpected encounter with General Kiniski, mentioned the possibility of further interference, and requested that the duke give orders that would put a stop to that.

"You may rest easy. If it had been Kiniski's intent, you'd all have been dead before you ever glimpsed his face."

The woman said that was a relief, putting her hand over her heart.

The duke waited.

Quickly noticing as much, the woman said, "The one I mentioned was your third son, wasn't he?"

The duke didn't answer at first, but after a few seconds had passed he took a golden bell from the little table and shook it to summon a servant.

"Send for D. If he won't come, tell him I'll leave the castle."

The instant the young man in black entered the room, the woman—Valerie—let out a low groan and shut her eyes.

Explaining her position, the duke said that he wanted the Hunter to hear his story along with her. "If you won't, I'll leave here. Would you let Sirene's plans be spoiled like that?"

"I'll finish the job if I have to follow you to the ends of the earth," D said, and more than the duke, it was Valerie, her eyes still closed, who felt ice running down her spine. However, D made no attempt to leave, but leaned back against the wall behind the duke. If he hadn't wanted to come, no power on earth could've brought the young man there in the first place.

"This woman says she has information pertaining to my third son. His name is Sebastian. Fifty years ago he left home, and I've not seen him since."

Valerie felt the gazes of the two of them prickling her from head to toe.

“Two years ago,” she began, “I was surveying some ruins in the eastern Frontier sectors from about three thousand years ago. At that time, I discovered what appeared to be the remnants of a bandit hideout within the ruins.”

Based on the state of preservation, the hideout was rather old—seemingly from thirty or forty years earlier—and it undoubtedly belonged to the Evil Slayers, who had assaulted scattered Frontier communities and perpetrated brutal crimes from those days down to the present.

“As you are probably well aware, there were rumors that this bandit gang was led by a Noble. A number of the prominent members took direct hits from the mortars and missiles the army used and were blown to pieces, only to regenerate back to perfect health in a matter of seconds. And because they were in the habit of identifying themselves as they perpetrated their slaughters, their names became known across a portion of the Frontier. Those names could be found etched into the stone walls of their hideout.”

And there—

“The name Sebastian Van Doren was among them.”

“And you mean to say those are the same bandits that will be attacking us two days hence?”

“After that, the Evil Slayers disbanded, splitting into a number of smaller gangs. The Pitch Black Gang that’s currently scheming to invade this region is said to have the largest concentration of core members from the Evil Slayers.”

“Hmm. Is Sebastian among them?” the duke asked, taking another drink.

The next words seemed to come from terribly far away. “If Sebastian was the leader of the Evil Slayers, then he’s already gone.”

The Nobleman’s focus shifted to D.

“I slayed them. Quite a while ago, in the eastern Frontier sectors.”

Valerie gasped, and the duke set his glass down on the little table. As soon as the bottom of it touched the table, there were a number of little sounds.

“You destroyed him?”

Valerie brought her fist up to her forehead, trying very hard not to look over

at the duke. “Your grace, I will have you know this man has no connection whatsoever with our group. I sincerely hope that this won’t change your mind about our survey.”

“I believe I promised you’d be able to do as you like. And that promise being made, no one is about to break it. Not even I myself.”

“That’s a relief,” she said with a smile that faded as soon as she looked at D. She was worried about a rift between the Hunter and the duke.

“Be at ease. This man is here because he’s supposed to slay me. Should I decide to fight him, it would be exactly what he desires. For he would no longer need to waste time tarrying here. And I am in no particular hurry to be destroyed, for that matter.”

“Again, that’s a relief to me,” the woman said, surveying her surroundings. “Pardon my asking, but are there any ladies in this castle?”

“If you wish to meet some, I’ll summon a hundred.”

“No, it’s just that in the Capital, there were rumors that Duke Van Doren was well served by a human lady-in-waiting. That the brave and decisive Nobleman known as the Tiger should have such a person in his employ comes as a true revelation.”

“She died,” said the duke. Because he said it so matter-of-factly, as if it were something that’d happened long ago, Valerie couldn’t really assess his reaction.

“And there you have it.”

The woman was stunned. She looked at D’s left hand while still trying not to see the Hunter. “I heard that hoarse voice,” she said. “But does that mean—you’re responsible for her death, too?”

“Nope. It was suicide,” the hoarse voice replied.

“That’s enough,” D said, and Valerie’s expression softened at the sound of his voice.

“I’ll be going, then,” she said. “Our survey will begin early tomorrow morning, as scheduled.” Looking out the window, she added, “Oh, it’s dark out already. D, would you be so kind as to accompany me? Please?”

It was a rash request.

“I didn’t think you’d actually come,” Valerie said to D, who galloped alongside her on the left.

The light truck made of heavy paper had pulled out of the castle grounds and was driving back toward the village of Machitez. The resilient cardboard varied in thickness from a fraction of an inch to more than an inch thick, and it was so tough and, more importantly, weighed so little that it was often used for collapsible trucks or aircraft. And this one had a gasoline engine.

Valerie was quite an accomplished driver.

“I owed you,” D replied from atop his saddle.

“Oh, that? I just saw a guy pointing a rifle at you and shouted to you. Even if you’d taken that lead slug, it wouldn’t have done much to you.”

“A debt is a debt.”

“That was like ten years ago. I’m just happy that you remembered me.”

The moon was halfway across the sky. It was a waxing crescent.

Little shapes frightened by the wheels and hooves scurried off to either side of them. The horse and the truck raced across a barren landscape of nothing but dirt. But the fact that they could still see lights in farmhouses was a testimony to how safe the night was. Humans who feared the Nobility were in fact being protected by a Noble.

“A spot like this is a treasure trove to us,” Valerie remarked, letting her eyes speed across the ground to either side. “Dig down a thousand yards and you’ll find all the Noble ruins you could ever want. And there’d be the kind of Noble tech and sorcery that humans still don’t understand, though we know if we get some of the stuff from their early days we can basically manage to figure it out.”

“So, you ain’t after proof of the wisdom of the antiquity, just some doo-dads that’ll make you stinkin’ rich?”

“Where are you hiding, you bastard?” Valerie snarled with a glare in the direction of D’s left hand, but she quickly gave up. “So I heard you were here to

slay the duke,” she said. “Is that true?”

“Yeah,” D replied in his own voice.

“I feel like I just got let into Heaven. In that case, you’d be willing to take on another job, wouldn’t you? Would you hire on with us as a guard?”

“I’m a Hunter,” the hoarse voice replied.

“And there I go, straight down to Hell!” Drawing a pistol from her belt, Valerie pointed it at the Hunter’s left hand.

“Shoot me and you’ll have all the little beasties down on you.”

“I don’t know who you are or where you’re hiding, but that’d be better than having to hear your voice again after D’s.”

“The hell it would, you wannabe scholar.”

“What’d you just call me?!”

“The fact that you’d come out here to a Noble’s domain without any real protection just proves you’re soft in the head. You’re supposed to be a scholar, lady? Surveying ruins? Oh, don’t make me laugh UGHH—?!”

“I’d tell you not to let it bother you, but it’s probably no use, so fire if it’ll make you feel better,” D said, taking his left hand off the reins, spreading the fingers, and turning the palm toward Valerie.

“Not a chance. Truth be told, I regret even having a gun pointed at you. It scares me.”

Nothing from the Hunter.

“Long ago, there was a massive war between Nobles in these parts, you know?”

“Hmph, any idiot knows that,” the hoarse voice snorted.

“I’ll shoot you.”

“What of it?” asked D.

“Well, this time we didn’t get permission for the site, but the duke had a battle out in this wasteland with some other Nobles who didn’t like the way he

was running things. The duke prevailed despite an inferior force. They didn't have the numbers. Now, if he'd been up against humans or weak Nobility, that would be one thing, but his foes were all formidable opponents. The duke used a certain weapon, though, and met them head-on, eliminating all of them. After deciding that the weapon should never be used again, he's said to have either burned it or buried it deep in the earth."

"A weapon a Noble used, but that should never be used? Ain't that a strange thing to bring up."

"You again?" Valerie said, cocking her pistol's hammer.

"Plus, I could see them saying he burned it, but why bury it deep in the earth? If you're getting rid of a weapon as bad as all that, why would you choose a way that took so much time and effort?"

"Some say the Sacred Ancestor was involved in it."

"That he gave the weapon to the duke?"

"That remains a mystery, D. However, according to data at the Capital's Bureau of Record Storage, there are indeed records of the Sacred Ancestor stepping in to end a dispute between rival Nobles. The part about rival Nobles more or less fits events, but it somehow seems off when it comes to the Sacred Ancestor coming out here. You know, I sometimes wonder if he wasn't all that concerned about the Nobility."

"What makes you think that?"

"Just a hunch."

"We'll be in Machitez soon," D said. He said it curtly, as if none of the previous conversation had taken place.

"I know, I know. Thank you for seeing me this far."

In less than a minute, they came to the curve in the road that led to the village.

"See you."

She slowed down so she could say thank you, but the black horse and rider raced right by her and down the road. The speed of his departure and the utter

rejection projected by his back as he dwindled in the moonlight let Valerie know that she'd been completely forgotten.

III

No one had any idea what the young man was thinking or feeling when he went into action like this. There was, in fact, only one thing on which everyone could agree. It was because he was too beautiful.

Now, as D galloped along, white fog assailed him from behind, becoming monstrosities with long nails and sharp fangs that pulled up alongside him. Yet for some reason, they were surprised. Why did they fall into a stupor and pull back? And why did they leave again?

From the road leading to Machitez, he galloped nearly sixty miles nonstop. Up ahead, there was the thunder of approaching hooves. And not just ten or twenty mounts. There had to be a hundred or even a thousand riders headed his way. When the forefront of that shadowy horde came into view, D pulled off to the left side of the road and halted his cyborg steed. A strange, unearthly miasma flowed down the night highway. It was a host of knights. Not only were there cyborg horses, but some of them also rode android steeds, and all of the riders were garbed in Noble armor or combat uniforms. As evidence that the battle was over, the spears they held upright were broken, their armor dented and warped, and both their chainmail and the bodies beneath it had been rent wide. The thorns sticking out of their necks and backs were actually iron arrows. By the look of it, it'd been a losing battle, as all of them were now headless. Nevertheless, they sat high in the saddle as if this were a triumphal parade, reins gripped back by their chests as they proceeded in perfect unison.

Before long the tail end of that lengthy, lengthy ghost procession had vanished into the darkness, at which point the hoarse voice flowed out over the plain, saying, "That looked like General Kiniski riding in the vanguard. Doesn't have a head, but you can tell by the outfit. What the hell were those guys doing out here at a time like this, though?"

"They finished a battle."

"Against who?"

“Bandits, probably.”

“Impossible—they beat Kiniski?”

“If he’d won, he’d still have a head.”

It was rare for D to make a joke, even a black one.

“Well, I suppose you’ve got something there.”

“That type of android isn’t just a machine serving in place of a person. The mind of a Noble is housed in its artificial brain, determining its actions. And now that they’ve lost their heads—”

“The real Kiniski’s destroyed, too?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Where are they going, then?” asked the hoarse voice.

“Home.”

“Van Doren’s castle? Why?”

“We’d have to ask the one who sent them there.”

For a moment, the source of the hoarse voice seemed taken aback. However, it soon said in a strangely forceful tone, “I suppose so. You’ve come all this way, after all.”

It wasn’t speaking to D.

The Hunter returned to the road. About ten yards ahead, a figure astride a bizarre horse was bathed in moonlight. He was completely shrouded by a gray hooded cape. And his face couldn’t be seen. He hadn’t just arrived. After the parade of the dead had gone, he’d waited there all this time for D.

“You one of the former Evil Slayers?” D asked.

“Leave it to the man known as D. I’m surprised you figured that out,” a voice responded from the darkness.

“You know me, do you?”

“A face as handsome as that I can see even with my eyes shut.”

“You’re a Noble, aren’t you?” said D. And then he added, “You part of

Sebastian Van Doren's clan?"

"I don't know who you're talking about," the hooded figure said with a faint laugh. "My name's Vulcan Lura. I'm in charge of the Pitch Black Gang."

"Why did you let the duke's soldiers return?"

"So that he'd know what we're capable of. The damned duke will be trembling tomorrow."

"He's the Tiger King," D said, his voice carrying a rare bit of emotion.

"I come out this way hoping to see the look of surprise on his face, but run into someone incredible. That's perfect. I know you're staying in his castle. I'd like you to walk away from the job."

"I'm not guarding the duke."

"Then what's your reason for being in the castle?"

"To slay the duke."

The hooded figure didn't know what to say.

"After the duke has disposed of the lot of you, that is."

Vulcan's body seemed to pull taut. "I'm not the one who's going to be disposed of."

Suddenly, Vulcan's horse started to walk. His horse? No, though equine in shape, its entire body was covered with black hair, and the arrow-like spiraling horn that grew a good six feet from its brow would've made anyone think of a legendary beast. It was a unicorn. Actually, a black unicorn. As it walked, the horn jutting from its head at a forty-five-degree angle made a strange grinding noise and took aim at D's heart.

"White unicorns may be the embodiment of peace, but black unicorns are battle personified. And nobody it aims for can escape its horn."

D wheeled his horse around to the right. The horn followed suit. He turned left—and the same thing happened. Not wavering in the slightest, the tip of it remained aimed straight at D's heart.

"You'll never escape now. And a death from a unicorn's horn prevents any

kind of resurrection. D, if you value your life at all, leave now.”

“Stab me, then.” The Hunter’s soft reply seemed to come from the very moonlight.

There was just over twenty feet remaining.

“What?!”

“There’s murderous intent radiating from every inch of you. Yet you don’t stab me, because you know the same thing I do. That is, if it stabs anyone, the unicorn’s horn falls off on the spot, and it takes a year to grow another one. Can you wait that long to attack the duke?”

There was no reply from the hooded rider.

“Quite a ghastly aura you’ve got there. But that alone won’t be enough to slay the duke—the Tiger. Or me, for that matter.”

The wind groaned. It was D who charged forward, kicking off the ground. Pale blue sparks flew as iron-shod hooves struck stones. Having pointed a weapon at the Hunter, that made him the enemy. That was the way it was with D. If you drew on him, he’d cut you down. That was also D’s way.



Closing five yards in no time, he swept by Vulcan's right flank, and in his hand he gripped his blade.

"Oh my," the hoarse voice groaned.

The blade definitely should've decapitated Vulcan. However, his head didn't fall off, nor was his hood even cut, and the bandit leader swayed impassively on the back of his unicorn.

"A unicorn rider is guaranteed immortality," said the hoarse voice.

Vulcan bent over. He'd pulled a rifle from a leather case attached to his saddle. Four barrels turned their black muzzles at D and belched fire. Paths of light seemed to link the weapon to D's head and eyes.

Estimating Vulcan's timing in pulling the trigger off the tension of his arm and the average trigger pull weight, as well as inferring the highest possible velocity for a range of projectiles, the Hunter had bent his upper half over a split second before the flash of light. The bullets singed his hair.

D was just about to pounce when a blistering pain made him groan. The four bullets that'd whizzed by had changed direction and buried themselves in the Hunter's back. Two of them went clean through him, while the other two remained in his body. Upper body shaking, D spat blood onto the back of his horse.

"You simply cannot evade an attack by a unicorn rider," Vulcan laughed loudly. He'd undoubtedly laughed like this many times before. As he sat high in the saddle, he seemed brimming with confidence.

What would each of them do next?

There was no answer to that. The air rang with the metallic buzz of something in flight. It was a compact missile with a conventional warhead that exploded.

Vulcan and his horse had taken a direct hit. The impact and flames tore them limb from limb and roasted their innards, respectively. To anyone, they would've looked like nothing but mangled corpses.

However, the hoarse voice said in an almost crushed tone, "Look."

By the light of the moon, something was moving on the ground. A finger. Part

of his head. His right arm from the elbow down. His heart and lungs. In unison, the parts began moving in the same direction as if drawn on strings.

“They—they’re coming back!”

Fingers rejoined hands, legs fused to torso, entrails were pulled back into the body, chunks of head stuck to other chunks, and eyes returned to sockets. And looming from the flames—a horn. The unicorn seemed to twist its pelvis as it got to its feet, on its back a saddle—and Vulcan. Flames burned in spots on the man’s chest and shoulders like will-o-the-wisps, making Vulcan look ghostly.

“They’re both immortal,” said the hoarse voice. “So long as they’re touching.”

A pair of glowing eyes were coming down the road toward them. The headlights of the light truck. Most likely the missile had been fired by its driver—Valerie.

“Stupid scholar. Well, the honeymoon’s over now.”

Groaning that, Vulcan wheeled his unicorn around completely.

“Let’s get together again when you’ve come up with a plan for killing me,” Vulcan spat. “And give the duke a message for me. Tell him I’m going to take everything from him.”

And then he galloped off down the road.

It was about two minutes later that Valerie raced over. “He got you pretty bad. Who was it?” she asked on seeing D’s condition, but her pained expression was soon to become a look of resentment.

“You’re more cut out for being a warrior than a bookworm!” the hoarse voice remarked.

“Shut up!” she shouted, her mouth going wide. But then she said, “There are medical facilities in Machitez. Hurry up and get in the truck.”

“No need,” the Hunter replied, his voice like chill night air.

“Huh?”

Raising his right hand, D brought his thumb and forefinger to a gash near his solar plexus and pressed their tips into the bloody opening.

“Hold it right there!” Valerie exclaimed, her eyes open wide.

As she watched, the Hunter’s fingers sank into his wound up to the knuckles, and from the way his arm moved she could tell he was looking for something. Inside of two seconds, he pulled his fingers out again. Between them he held a pair of bloody slugs.

“I think I might faint,” Valerie said, staggering. Her head really was spinning. Through a hazy world, she saw D turning his horse around. “What the hell are you dhampirs, anyway?”

There was no reply.

“Another debt I’ll repay,” the young man told her, but that was his way of saying thanks. Giving a kick to his cyborg steed, he disappeared down the road.

SONG OF LOSS

Chapter 4

When the Hunter returned to the castle, it was full of commotion. Dismounting from his cyborg horse in the front hall, D caught the screams of women and the crack of gunfire.

“We’re about twenty minutes late,” the hoarse voice said.

Though the Hunter had returned at a full gallop, apparently the enemy had spurred their steeds on as well. Those had been Vulcan’s orders, most likely.

D headed straight for the duke’s private chambers. He was just about to climb the stairs when a lady-in-waiting rushed over to him. It was one of the other two who’d met him when he first visited—Mysch. The cerulean hue of her dress was vivid to D’s eyes.

“You’re still safe?” she asked.

“What happened?”

“Headless soldiers attacked us. It was General Kiniski, I’m certain of it.”

“And the duke?”

“Given the situation, I believe he’d have moved from his chambers to the panic room.”

“Did he fight?”

Mysch’s breath caught in her throat. D’s voice had changed, becoming hoarse.

“No, he evacuated immediately.”

“The guards have taken up arms,” the hoarse voice continued. “And the soul of the Tiger is nowhere to be seen. I see you’re fine, but what about the other two?”

“Najina was cut down. As for Shyna—I don’t know.”

“Where’s the panic room?”

“It’s in the basement. And the enemy knows that, too. The entrance is this way.”

She started off on foot ahead of him. Android or not, human emotions had

been input into her electronic brain. And now, the lady-in-waiting must've been calling upon all her courage.

"You can get there from his grace's room, but to reach it from the outside this is the way to go."

From the depths of the corridor came the sound of steel being hammered. Though their civilization had reached the heights of scientific development, the Nobility chose the weapons of antiquity when they went to war. It was said that showed just how deeply nostalgia ran in the Nobility's DNA. And yet—

A crimson beam of light skimmed D's left shoulder. There was a second beam—this one making the wall to his right collapse in a steaming mess.

"They're using particle cannons, too," the hoarse voice noted. "End of the line for the woman."

D turned around. The lady-in-waiting wasn't there. On the floor was a grayish blob of clay that was giving off white smoke. He couldn't even make out the cerulean hue of her dress.

"Too late," said the hoarse voice.

D crouched down and ran. The pendant on his chest glowed with a blue light. No blistering particles assailed him.

Dashing a hundred yards in three seconds, he laid his blade into the foe who appeared around a corner. But it stopped dead right above his opponent's head.

The soldier clutched his chest. Though he was an android, his heart was equipped to feel fear. At his feet lay five bodies in uniform, some with heads and some without.

"How do you get to the panic room?" asked the Hunter.

"It's this way," the soldier said, and he began walking down the corridor ahead of D.

After going about ten yards, he halted.

There were sconces set in the walls. Corridors dotted with lines of flames were also to the Nobles' liking. The soldier took out one of the oil lamps. At the

same time, the wall right next to it turned, revealing a black interior. There was no stairway, no elevator, just a hole.

“Has the enemy gone on ahead?” asked D.

“They pursued his grace the duke through his room. General Kiniski knows everything.”

“If I go down, will it lead directly into the room?”

“No, the panic room is isolated. We androids can’t get near it.”

D sprang into action. Sailing straight down would be a nice way to say what he did, though what he did was plummet. Wind whistling in his ears, D held the brim of his traveler’s hat with his left hand.

“Well, how about that?” the left hand said in amazement. “There must be an elevator to get back up. We’ll be coming up on five hundred yards soon.”

He landed in a spot ten thousand feet below the surface. But he didn’t land so much as he slammed into the ground. It would’ve been enough to shatter not only a human being, but also an android. D quickly got to his feet, but his innards were still swirling madly from the shock of the impact. He spat out a wad of blood. That was it.

He advanced down the stone corridor at a rapid pace. He quickly discovered the door. It was open. Undoubtedly General Kiniski knew the password to open and close it.

D put his left hand against the wall by the entrance.

“We truly regret this, my liege,” General Kiniski could be heard to say. Apparently it had taken him and the others quite a while to get there. It seemed they’d just arrived.

“Though I find myself in this position—threatening you with death—I had hoped you would fight back. That’s what the one they call the Tiger would do. Though I’ve been given a new mission, if I should fall to the Tiger’s counterattack, that would be an admirable result. Such is my wish. But even with your would-be murderers before you, your grace doesn’t lift a finger to fight. Why do you not take up the staff that rests by your side? It may be naught

but a piece of oak with a gold grip, but if swung by Duke Van Doren it would be enough to smash the worthless clods behind me to pieces in less than a minute. So why is it you've remained seated in that chair since the moment we burst in here? Because standing would mean fighting? No matter how old he may be, the Tiger bares his fangs at his enemies. I thought surely you would do me that honor, my liege.

"But you have changed. Was it when you had to deal with Master Leavis? When Master Kazel was taken away? When Master Sebastian abandoned his home? So easily the Tiger's fangs were pulled, but I faithfully awaited the day they would grow in again. However, that day never came, and here we are now. My liege, are you not ready to take up arms? Cow us with a roar from the Tiger, bat us to the ends of the Earth with a swipe of your paw—will you not let us see you like that once more?"

"General—I'm sorry, Kiniski," the duke could be heard to say from not far away, "you conceal the most important point. Surely you must understand. It wasn't dealing with Leavis, or losing Kazel, or Sebastian leaving that changed me. The Tiger is not so fragile as to fly into a rage at his children's rebellion or caprice. Even now, I would cast them into the fires of Hell without a moment's hesitation if need be. My mistake, however, might have been in taking Sirene on as a maidservant."

A different feeling clung to that last remark.

"Kiniski, humans are weak things. I have never thought differently. And Sirene didn't teach me that they were strong. What I learned was that Nobles are also weak."

"My liege?"

"And when I did, I came to understand how I should've been. When I had to deal with Leavis, I should've felt pain. When Kazel was taken away, I should've known hate. And when Sebastian turned his back on his home, I should've felt loneliness. More than anything, I should've understood what they were feeling. And so I was left alone. I haven't lost the will to deal with the traitors. I do not fear my own destruction. However, what I should raise my hand to is the events of days gone by. And there is no way to undo them."

Silence descended. It was the sort of silence born of solitude and despair.

“Kiniski, who changed you?”

“It was the head of the bandits.”

“And his name?”

“Vulcan Lura, I believe.”

“I don’t know him,” the duke said, immediately adding, “but what is the purpose of slaying me?”

“To learn the location of the weapon your grace used in the Battle of the North.”

“I no longer remember.”

“My liege?”

“All I recall is that it was too terrible a weapon. I sealed it away, and the memories of all who knew of it were erased. As a result, no one knows of it. It has gone to its eternal rest. There’s nothing else to say. Kiniski, run your sword through me if you like.”

“But I—”

“You can’t, because your new master won’t allow it. Stab me.”

“You leave me no choice. Forgive me.”

D stepped through the doorway. Including General Kiniski, there were four invaders. On sensing the arrival of a new presence, two of them turned and were stabbed in rapid succession through the heart, while the spear stuck out by the third was pushed away by the Hunter’s left hand before he took a step forward and brought his sword down. Pale blue waves of electromagnetism snaking from him, the headless soldier fell, split right down the middle.

D squared off against General Kiniski. The room had a faint blue glow.

“What are you doing here?” the headless general asked. “I’d heard you were here to take my liege’s life. You need only sit back, and your wish will be granted without any effort!”

“I could say the same to you,” D replied.

“What?”

“Which of us gets the first crack? Shall we settle that?”

“That sounds intriguing,” the general said, his right hand already resting on the “weather weapon” slung over his shoulder.

D’s surroundings were suddenly bleached white.

II

“Fifty degrees below zero. Dhampir or not, that will keep you from moving.”

Glittering beads of white began to form all over D’s body. Even the chair and wall by him were tinged with frost.

“If I pierce your frozen heart, that should kill you. You made a mistake coming here, D,” the general said, using the same hand to reach for the hilt of the broadsword he wore on his left hip. The blade was long and thick and looked rather heavy.

Lowering the temperature to minus sixty degrees just to be safe, the general stood before D.

“You’re like a doll, your blood frozen solid—I’d love to hear why we’ve feared you so long.”

And as he said that, the tip of his blade sank toward D’s heart.

It was only a machine’s speed that allowed Kiniski to take a reflexive step back. The diagonal slash that he took from the base of his neck to his left flank sent tendrils of electromagnetism out in all directions as the general staggered wildly.

“Y-you bastard! How could you?!”

D suddenly stepped forward, leaving the frozen zone. His body was immediately enveloped by flames. The weather weapon had created a blistering zone of five thousand degrees. Furniture that’d been frozen and white swiftly melted away. Unable to withstand it, D was driven to his knees on the floor, but he hurled his sword as if it were a throwing knife. It took the general through the heart, and he ceased to function, falling to the floor.

D stuck his left hand out of the heat zone. A tiny mouth appeared on the palm of his hand, which was facing forward, and it began sucking in air with alarming force.

When the Hunter got to his feet and stepped out of the heat zone, his body and even his raiment had returned to normal. Using the discarded weather weapon to make it rain so as to check the spreading flames, D then shot a look over to where the duke remained seated in his chair.

“Greetings,” the duke said, raising one hand. His smile was free from worry.

Anyone other than D would’ve cursed the Nobleman for that and tried to cut him down.

“Thanks to you, I’m saved. You’re every bit as strong as I expected. That’s the Vampire Hunter ‘D’ for you. You’ll have to pardon me for asking you the same question as Kiniski. Why did you save me?”

“About that ultimate weapon—you say you’ve lost all memory of it, but is that the truth?”

“Indeed, it is.”

“What about where the Sacred Ancestor is concerned?”

The duke didn’t move. However, something else seemed to enter his body.

“Why would you ask that?”

“You used the ultimate weapon. But wasn’t he the bastard who built it?”

“D, my good man,” the duke began absentmindedly. His terror was that great. “Know you no fear? It is unforgivable to refer to the great one that way . . . to call him a bastard.”

“One other thing,” D said. “Your second son, the one you said was taken away—I don’t think the Tiger would just smile and nod at that. Was that the bastard’s doing, too?”

“D, what do you think this world is? It is not man’s, nor the Nobility’s, but it belongs to the great one alone. What makes you think it was the great one who took Kazel away?”

“I know of other cases.”

The duke said nothing to that.

“Did your son ever come back?”

Nothing.

“Any rumors about him, even?”

Still no reply.

“Come tomorrow, things are going to get busy around here. You might’ve lost your teeth, but that doesn’t mean the beast called greed is going to go easy on you.”

D started walking toward the door.

“Sirene hired me to get rid of you only after you’d slain your attackers. She said she wanted the Tiger to roar once more.”

Even after D had left, the duke didn’t move a muscle. Somewhere in the castle, the moonlight reactor was at work. So long as it ran, he would not perish. Time had shown him a road to eternity. One who could never know destruction need never feel longing or loneliness or even fear.

In no time his guards came, but before they did, the Nobleman murmured, “D, who in the world are you?” He then added, “And Vulcan Lura. Who gave you that name?”

The site where the survey party was given permission to dig was the remnants of an ancient castle out in a wasteland about a dozen miles north of Castle Van Doren. The Van Doren clan had been appointed administrators/feudal lords of this area three millennia ago, but these ruins predated that. Everyone in the survey party was brimming with expectations. Though they’d excavated Noble ruins here and there, ones from this era were few and far between.

Before an excavator so enormous the survey party had worried it might cause their transport plane to crash, the gantry crane, the atomic-powered drill, and other equipment could be put into operation, the group members first had to perform an assessment. They got results almost immediately. With just a little digging around columns and a domed ceiling that had been exposed at the

surface, they discovered an entrance to an underground cavern.

“The place was destroyed by the OSB. There are records of it,” Valerie said at the entrance to the enormous cavern, her eyes agleam.

It was nearly noontime, and the sky was so blue it could cut right through you.

“Let’s go have a look,” one of the members urged. It was someone the others hadn’t seen before. The night before, Professor Lovick had fallen into a coma for reasons unknown, but luckily this local man had come by this morning and been hired to work in his stead.

Though the other archeologists gave him unpleasant looks, Valerie didn’t seem to mind, saying, “We’ll head in, at any rate, but there’s no telling what could happen. The rest of you’d better wait out here.”

“You sure you’ll be okay with just him along?” another member asked anxiously.

“This is the Frontier,” she replied. “Any danger too great for two to handle would be just as bad for ten of us.”

Wrapping the rope around their waists and carrying a video camera, lanterns, and enough food for two days, the two of them vanished into the blackness.

Using the rubble and the rock’s recesses and protrusions, they climbed down more than a hundred yards, taking a break at the bottom of the massive rock wall.

Valerie said to the new guy, “Pretty generous of the Nobles, eh? We can take as much as we want.”

“Yeah, it’s a hell of a thing. Noble stuff from this era doesn’t go for less than a thousand dalas, even if it’s just a handkerchief or a single glass. It’ll make a hell of a war chest.”

“Just a minute, there. The deal was that your share’s whatever we leave behind!”

“I know. Relax.” The new guy stuffed a cracker into his mouth, swallowed it after hardly chewing at all, and continued, “I’m surprised the others let you come down here alone, though. They were looking mighty greedy. Don’t they

think you might keep it all for yourself?”

“They know how honest I am! But I can’t really blame them for being greedy. Even now, the Frontier is so poor. Young folks leave their villages and head for Frontier cities or the Capital, and famines aren’t uncommon out here.”

“That’s what the Nobility are there for.”

“The Nobility’s support is slack all over. That’s why everyone’s getting out of the Frontier sectors. You should know that.”

Scratching at his head, the new guy replied, “That’s why our work’s gotten easier to do. One good drive, and we could put control of the northern Frontier sectors back in human hands. But the duke’s might is still nothing to scoff at, and his troops and weapons are so far ahead of us in both numbers and powers the difference is like night and day. We need a real ace up our sleeves.”

“There’s no guarantee digging up this place will find it for you. We don’t even know if the duke remembers where it is or not.”

“It existed, and even if they say it got disposed of, so long as there are legends that it survived, it’s worth checking out. Even if we only find part of it, that might lead to discovering the whole secret weapon.”

“What do you plan on using it for?” Valerie inquired, her tone changed.

“To fight the Nobility. What else would we use it for? They may say their kind looks to be going extinct, but out on the Frontier their power’s still great. Even in a fight we’re certain we could win, we’d be ready to have ourselves a party if our chances of victory were even thirty percent. To break them, we really need this weapon they say Nobles used to defeat other Nobles. How long do you think human beings have been ruled by vampires? A few tiny uprisings went down in history. But not one of them succeeded. This time, we’re going to score a victory, then turn that into an opportunity to keep on winning.”

To Valerie, it seemed as if the new guy’s eyes were blazing in the darkness. “Well, I hope you find what you’re looking for,” she said.

“See if I don’t. After all, this time I’ve got a great partner.”

“Spare me. I’m not about to take up a stake for the sake of mankind.”

“I’m not saying everybody has to. All you’ve gotta do is help us in your own way.”

“I’m not helping you at all. Basically, we’re doing this job because we got permission from the Nobility. If they ever found out I poisoned my boyfriend so you could be on the team, they’d exile me to the damned moon!”

“He was too stubborn. But I’m grateful to both of you. Is he gonna be okay?”

“Three days of bed rest and he’ll recover. If we find anything, I’ll bring him out to the site.”

“By all means, see that you do.” The new guy took a short sip of water from his canteen, but then he turned a stern look upward. “Another thing—are the others gonna be okay?”

“Okay how?”

“Well, I’m not gonna say I have an eye for people or anything, but I do notice things.”

Swallowing some jerky, Valerie then looked down at her feet and replied, “To be honest, I wouldn’t call it the best of all possible teams. Most of them aren’t so much interested in uncovering an accurate picture of Noble history through these artifacts as they are in finding some valuable loot.”

“Are they that hard up for help in the Capital?”

“Don’t get me wrong. They’re all really talented archeologists. It’s just that the greed can run even deeper. I don’t put my complete faith in them.”

“Want me to bring in some of my people for protection?”

“No way. We can’t thin the party any more than we have.”

“Looks like we really asked a lot of you. Don’t worry. I’d never forgive myself if anything were to happen to you.”

“Sure you’re not a little too soft for someone heading up a group that’s picking a fight with the Nobility? You’ve got to be ready to let a woman or two die along the way.”

“You know, I think the same thing. According to my father, I get that from my

granddad.”

“That’s destiny, then.”

The pair’s laughter reverberated from the bowels of the earth.

Just then, from up ahead there came a most distinct sound.

“You heard something, didn’t you?” Valerie said, drawing the pistol from her hip.

“Yeah. Something alive,” the new guy said, and he started putting his food away.

When they listened intently, the sounds were steadily drawing closer. And there were lots and lots of them.

III

Shortly before the two members of the survey team went underground, the duke and D had once again set out to make the rounds in an aircraft. This time they were going to mountain villages much further north than the previous day. As always, patients had come from all the surrounding villages, and they cried out in wonder at the speed with which the makeshift hospital and medical equipment were set up, their pain and despair turning to the hope of recovery before the visitors’ eyes.

“The rebel army also supplies human doctors, but they’d be hard pressed to make it all the way out here. Once I’m gone, treatment can continue, though they’ll probably destroy this equipment too.”

“That’s right,” the hoarse voice said, agreeing with the duke. “Frontier rebels are mostly sickos half out of their minds. You oughta catch ’em all and help ’em get—gaaaaah?! ”

The duke gazed at D’s left hand with interest, saying, “Do you collect rent from him?”

“Nope.”

“He’s the type to take advantage of the situation,” said the duke.

“I know.”

And saying that, D looked over at the hospital.

A sun-bronzed man was racing toward them from it, spurred by the sweeping gestures of a number of others. When he came to the duke, the man suddenly began to tremble.

“What is it?” the duke inquired with a thin smile. “If it’s an outbreak of the common cold, you shouldn’t come to me but head over there.”

“D-d-don’t think this makes up for all the things you’ve done!” the man shouted, terror squeezing the words from him in a shrill tone. “You come here like some kindly old man, but we all know you’re living off our lifeblood. How many have you killed so far? Everybody else might be blinded by your acts of generosity, but I ain’t fooled!”

Normally the fear would leave someone as they bellowed like that, but in this man’s case the trembling only grew all the more violent.

The duke was just staring at him in silence.

“One of these days, I’m gonna put a stake through your heart with my own two hands, you got that?!”

He wasn’t able to say any more than that. A number of villagers had jumped on the man, then dragged him away. The only one who stayed behind was the white-haired mayor of the village.

“My humblest apologies. I can’t say how sorry we are. Please, take this old gray head and let that be the end of it,” the old man said, bowing desperately.

The duke clapped the man on the shoulder and told him, “I’m accustomed to it.”

“Oh, thank you,” the village mayor said, clinging to the duke’s arm.

“Bysan and Lota, Trofall and Sengen—I believe patients from all the local villages have lined up here, but are there any other isolated individuals?”

“No, this is everyone,” the mayor said, shaking his head so hard it seemed it would tear free. “And they’re all so happy. Thanks to the medicine you gave us, there isn’t a single patient who can’t move any more. The ones who came are all there are.”

“Then that’s just fine,” the duke said with a nod. It was a practiced motion. “I shall see you again in a month’s time. Tell everyone I said as much.”

The Nobleman looked over at D. But the young man of unearthly beauty had vanished.

D was in the nearby forest. It was a spot about seven or eight minutes on foot from the hospital.

In the more northern parts of the northern Frontier sectors, stands of trees had to be able to weather temperatures as low as a hundred below zero. Species like white birch and acacia wouldn’t stand a chance. The Nobles who created the bitter cold had also made forms of life appropriate for it. These were species of trees that had hot sap circulating through them, keeping them warm enough to survive the severe cold.

D went over to one such tree. In a number of places its charred brown surface was sending out shoots that were nearly scarlet.

“Oh, would you look at that? If it ain’t a ‘Hell-and-back,’” the hoarse voice remarked with surprise. “I wonder if the locals even know about it. If they did, they’d dig it out quicker than—”

The voice died there. D had turned around.

A girl of about twelve or thirteen was just stepping out from behind a tree trunk roughly five yards to his right. Perhaps it was due to the sunlight in the north, but like the other villagers, her skin was nearly black. She was so tense, it gave her large eyes a certain hardness.

“You’re with our lord, aren’t you?” the girl asked. Her right hand clutched the handle of the knife she wore on her hip.

“Right you are, cutie.”

Her large eyes rattled back and forth. “That’s a horrible voice for a face like yours,” she said.

“Is it?”

The girl’s expression suddenly became tranquil. The last remark had been in D’s voice.

“That one’s much better.”

“You have business with the duke?”

“Yep. Now, everybody’s getting checked over. Will he be leaving when they’re done?”

“Yes, if there are no other patients.”

“There are,” the girl said, almost slapping him with the words. Her teeth were blindingly white.

“Where?”

“On the side of that mountain over there. Me and my big brother have a house up there. The villagers or doctor won’t come up. You think maybe our lord would go there?”

“What kinda shape’s your big brother in?”

The girl grew confused at the hoarse voice. The eyes she trained on D were reeling with rapture and puzzlement.

“How is he?” asked D.

“He’s been bedridden for the last four days or so. Mountain snake venom did it to him. And there’s nothing I can do for him.”

“Come with me,” D said, and he brought the girl to see the duke.

“Glia’s my name,” the girl said, introducing herself politely, but even then her eyes kept flitting somewhere else. The hospital.

On hearing the situation, the duke agreed without another word. “Just leave it to me. We’ll head up there right away.”

“But there are still villagers to see.”

“Never fear, the androids and their medical equipment will take care of them.”

“But, um—we won’t have a doctor.”

“There’s equipment in my airship. Rest assured.”

“Great,” Glia said, and she collapsed on the spot.

“That all she had in her?” the hoarse voice said in disbelief.

Just then, small voices reached them. Small but angry. And more than just one.

Glia got to her feet. Her right hand went for her knife—then stopped.

Three or four villagers were running toward them. And they were all pointing at Glia. Slamming on the brakes, they tried to shout something. But they couldn’t get it out at first. They’d run over at full speed.

Huffing for breath, one said, “What brings you around here?”

“Did Cotel kick the bucket or something?”

“My brother’s indestructible!” Glia shouted. And then, almost triumphantly, she added, “And the lot of you sure as hell know it.”

Sanity suddenly returned to the faces of the crazed villagers. The girl’s older brother was most certainly no average person.

“At any rate, you know what we said we’d do to you if you came down off the mountain, don’t you?”

“Come here. We’ll show you we mean business.”

“It’s just this once, and I won’t do it again!”

Once again a madness gripped the villagers.

“We’ll have no trouble here,” the duke said, stepping between them.

The strength immediately drained from the villagers.

“Is there some problem with me going to the girl’s home?”

“No, it’s just . . .”

“The two of ’em are outsiders,” another said, glaring at the girl with loathing. “So they ain’t got no right having you look at ’em, my lord. Please, just leave ’em be.”

“I’ll settle with them once and for all,” the slim girl said, standing poised to fight in the face of such intense hatred. She didn’t seem frightened. Every inch of her burned with the fires of battle. Such was the life she’d led.

“I have already promised to go,” the duke said, settling the matter. Looking at each of the four villagers, he continued, “And none of you intend to interfere with that, do you?”

Terror turned the four of them into statues.

“Very well, then. In that case—” The duke used the staff in his hand to point toward his aircraft. “D, what will you do?”

“I’ll go.”

“Well, what do you know. Child—does that please you?”

At the duke’s query, Glia looked at D. In an instant, she went soft all the way to her soul. Having served its purpose, her stony tension melted away.

“Well?” the duke asked again.

“Yep!” the girl replied with a hearty nod.

Glia’s house was a log cabin on the slopes of Mount Kaiser, which boasted a height of almost fifty thousand feet above sea level. Unlike those in the villages at the base of the mountain, it didn’t make any use of modern building materials. The gaps were filled with mud.

Since there wasn’t an open space large enough to land, the aircraft hovered about sixty feet above the house, and the three of them descended on a beam of magnetic force.

With one look at the house, the duke let out a gasp. The walls and roof were riddled with damage. The roof also showed large scorch marks.

“Marks left by more arrows, swords, and bullets than I can count,” the hoarse voice said, sounding impressed. “And fire arrows on the roof—no, looks more like Molotov cocktails. Just how old is this brother of yours?”

“How old is he?” D asked.

“Sixteen.”

“And you’re twelve—who’d come all the way up here in the mountains to start something with a couple of little kids living on their own?” the hoarse voice mused.

Glia went over to the door, put her mouth to a gap in the wall, and said, “You all right, Cotil? The lord of the land’s agreed to come to see you. We’re coming in now.”

She took out a little key and slipped it into the keyhole. There was the sound of a deadbolt sliding back.

Glia, the duke, and D went into the dark room in that order. A powerful scent struck their noses. About five hundred square feet in total, the space had shades drawn over all the windows and flowers sitting on tables large and small.

“I see,” the duke said purposefully, the words escaping in a murmur.

Three pairs of eyes were trained on the face of the young man sitting up in a bed at the far end of the room. A green scarf covered his mouth. And with that, they knew.

“No matter how you might try to mask it with the scent of flowers, nothing in the world is stronger than the stench of blood,” said the duke. “Remove that covering. I want to be sure.”

Groaning a little, Glia walked over to the bed. When the girl reached out her hand, her older brother stopped it, reaching for the scarf himself.

Even in the gloom his face would be termed pale, and his unusually red lips in particular stood out. Along with the pair of fangs that jutted from them.

“So, he’s an ‘incomplete’?” said the hoarse voice.

“Let me see your throat.”

The boy took off the scarf, exposing his throat for the duke. There was no mistaking that the two scars over his carotid artery were teeth marks.

“When and where did you come to be bitten?” the duke asked, covering his mouth with a handkerchief. But it wasn’t to shield himself from the smell. Nothing was more effective than the stench of blood at bringing out the true nature of a blood-starved Noble.

BLOODSUCKER

Chapter 5

When a Noble—that is, a vampire—drank someone’s blood and they died, the human returned as one of their kind. This was a principle immutable in both heaven and earth. Though there were humans who would die and not be revived due to the wishes of the Noble, the principle remained unchanged. However, in the rarest of cases, due to either some tiny variance in technique not even the Nobility themselves could quantify or else just the caprices of the universe—in other words, by sheer accident, or perhaps due to the capricious nature of the Noble in question—there were some victims who were left drained but didn’t die. “Incompletes” was the name they were given.

In one sense, there could be no more tragic creature in the world. Since they hadn’t been completely transformed into vampires, they still had a human psyche but, while human, had been given the inclinations of a vampire. Their human minds were plagued with guilt as they were unable to keep from attacking others in their lust for blood. Consequently, when the sun went down, they would creep into the bedrooms of their former friends and drive a Noble’s fangs into throats coursing with hot blood. When they did, half of the time their victims would become Nobles, while the other half would immediately die. Whether their fate was the former or the latter, it was always a great tragedy for the victims’ families.

From knowledge accumulated over ten millennia, almost all the surviving victims of an “incomplete” were left imbeciles, and since it’d been confirmed that not only was there was no danger of them attacking humans, but also that the survivors’ bite wouldn’t turn anyone into the Nobility, said victims would be confined to a secure building on the outskirts of town, where they would be given blood taken from their families. A kind of life support system would be established. Through it, someone would be safely kept in captivity for the rest of their life—or they could be, though in most cases their family ended up driving a stake through the heart of the victim. Because the family couldn’t escape the most negative association with the Nobility and the act of drinking blood—that *it was dirty*.

It began as a creeping suspicion that their neighbors no longer looked at them

the same way, growing into delusions that the rest of the village no longer even viewed their family as human. The only way to escape it was to destroy the source of it. And then, their father or mother, child or wife would head to the edge of town with hammer and stake in hand. And once they'd done what they had to do, they would seek an outlet for their anger—the “incomplete” who was the cause of it all.

Naturally, it was impossible for someone like that to live in a community or even near one. Their habitations had to be frozen wastes where humans never passed, mountains where no man had ever set foot, desert islands, and the like. However, the greatest misfortune for the “incompletes” was that they needed to drink the blood of human beings. Though one might live a thousand miles from human habitation, when night came he would seek someone's blood. For the craving was a thousand times stronger than the human hunger for food. No amount of self-restraint could curb it. As a result, the tragedy played out time and again, leaving them no choice but to wander eternally until they met their fate at human hands.

“How long have you been here?” the duke asked, his question carrying misgivings—and a modicum of admiration. Because after a bloodsucking incident, or after their hiding place was discovered, an “incomplete” had to immediately go on the run. No matter where they might hide, humans would track them down. They were given three months at best in any one place. Yet this log cabin showed all signs that the siblings had inhabited it for far longer than that.

“A little over three years,” Glia replied.

That was an unbelievable length of time.

“It isn't exactly someplace where they could never find you. So, have you gone without feeding on the blood of your neighbors?”

The young man in the bed—Cotil—nodded. Glia followed suit.

“I would compliment you on your incredible endurance, but *you* have served in their place, have you not?” the duke said, looking at Glia.

The girl must've known this would come out at some point. She nodded.

“You have no wounds on your neck, which would mean—” the duke began, walking over to her and taking her left hand. On turning it over, he found a pair of swollen and unmistakable wounds side by side near her wrist.

“Those who offer blood to an ‘incomplete’ fall into a stupor, though I hear there are exceptions. Who would’ve thought one of them would be in my domain.”

The duke let go of her.

Glia hid her hand behind her back. Her face was flushed red with humiliation.

“Though brother and sister, in this way he need not hunger, and she wouldn’t become one of our kind—and so long as you didn’t come down off the mountain, the villagers would probably tolerate you. Let me see your injury,” the duke said, raising his right hand.

The medical device that was at the door glided closer, then halted. A mechanical arm extended from its body, and the trauma scanner at the end of it was turned on Cotil.

“Please, wait just a minute,” the boy said in a composed voice, halting the machine. To the duke, who now wore a look of suspicion, he said, “The story about me being bit by a mountain snake was a bald-faced lie. I merely wanted you to see me without the damned villagers interfering, and I apologize from the bottom of my heart for misleading you.”

“What’s the meaning of this?”

“I’d like you to make me a real vampire.”

“Oh,” the duke said, not surprised. For an “incomplete,” seeking the power that would let him serve the Nobility rather than live life as a human was, in a sense, the natural choice.

Before the duke could answer him, D inquired, “And your little sister agrees with this?”

One look at Glia, who’d had her head lowered ever since her brother had confessed his plan, made her feelings plain. Nevertheless, D had asked.

“That’s right,” Cotil replied.

“A word of warning,” said the duke. “Our handsome friend here isn’t one of my vassals. He is the world’s greatest Hunter. And he is here with me because it wouldn’t do to have me escape before he can destroy me.”

“It can’t be,” the two of them groaned in unison. “Is that really him—D?”

“It is. Though not in his contract, I’m not sure he would stand idly by while I make you one of the Nobility. Your head would most certainly fly, and mine might as well. So, how about it, D? Will you turn a blind eye to all of this as having nothing to do with you? You would have my thanks for it.”

“Is his sister fine with it?” D asked once more.

Her older brother didn’t answer this time. D’s tone had carried something that made it clear no one else could speak for her. All eyes focused on her lithe frame.

“Well, I . . .” Glia—that tough little girl—began, sounding like she was ready to cry. Her right hand was wrapped around her left shoulder. No one would protect her. In which case, she’d have to protect herself.

“I . . . I hate the idea of it. What have I worked so hard for all this time, then? But you . . . you said you’re tired of drinking just my blood . . . You kept badgering me about what you’re supposed to do after I’m dead . . . and I couldn’t tell you.”

A glittering something fell to the floor.

“When were you bitten?” D asked, turning to her brother.

“I was . . . six when it happened.”

“And your parents?”

“Dead, both of them . . . in a train wreck a year before. I got bitten at an orphanage. The director was in with the Nobility.”

“If you were six years old, then your sister was two. And you’ve been feeding off her all this time?”

Cotil turned his face away. His teeth gnashed together with a sound like steel. When he looked back at them, he wore the face of the devil himself.

“You’re damned right I did. That’s right. I’ve been drinking my little sister’s blood since the time she was two. And she hated it. But I wouldn’t let her go. I needed her blood if I was going to live without people chasing after me all the time. She ran away time and again. But my eyes can see even at night, and my sense of smell is a hundred times stronger. Most importantly, I can run a hundred yards in less than five seconds. There’s no way she could ever give me the slip. All I ever did for her was make her live alone with me in a shack on this boring old mountain. But now all that’s at an end. Duke, your grace, I beg of you. Please, make me one of your vassals. I’ll serve you well. First of all, I’ll see to this Hunter—”

The boy’s eyes began to glow with the blood light.

“Stop it, Cotil!” Glia cried out, writhing. “Cotil, you never think about anybody but yourself—and what am I supposed to do now? Day in and day out you suck my blood. And that’s fine for you, but I still have to eat. But since you didn’t help me at all, Cotil, I had to go off alone and eat roots and berries and bugs and rabbits. Still, I thought I was fine with that, so long as the two of us could live together . . .”

Such was the confession of the twelve-year-old girl. She’d been giving blood to her brother from the time she was two, and now that same brother said he was tired of life with her so he wanted to become something else and leave her behind. And what of her future?

“This can’t be helped, Glia. I know you must’ve understood that. I just can’t drink your blood anymore,” Cotil said, a thin smile rising on his lips as he looked toward the window.

“How many people have you killed?” D asked.

“Wow, I’m surprised. Turns out you’ve got more going for you than just good looks. So, how could you tell?” Cotil asked, his eyes wide.

“The stench of blood was too heavy,” D replied.

The boy laughed. “Oh, hell, so you’re one of us, then? A dhampir? How can you stand to stay in such a half-assed state?”

“Are the bodies in the yard? Who were they?”

“It really couldn’t be helped,” Glia shouted, her body quaking. “Some folks from the village we used to live in managed to track us down here and attacked us. And that’s when my brother drank their blood by—”

“I tore open their throats, and it splashed all over my face. I knew it wasn’t right, but it was too late—no, that’s a lie. I was happy to drink it up!” the boy said, giving them a silent smile. “So, my lord, I think you can see that I have what it takes to become one of your kind. If you’d be so good as to give me the kiss right here, as soon as possible. And once you do, I’ll take out this Hunter first.”

Cotil suddenly furrowed his brow and turned toward the window, listening intently.

“Well now, I hear the racket of an old-fashioned transport plane! Hmm, are the folks from the village coming up here, too? They probably know what I want, and have come to beg you not to do it, my lord. So, please hurry, your grace.”

His youthful face was full of ambition as he turned his carotid artery toward the duke. A few seconds later, he bugged his eyes and glared at D and the duke.

“Why don’t you grant my wish? You’re afraid of this Hunter, is that it? Then I’ll deal with him first—”

“Don’t, Cotil!”

“Shut up!” Cotil snapped, leaping from the bed. In his right hand he gripped a dagger that he must’ve always kept close at hand. Hauling back with it, he let it fly at D.

A lovely *ching!* was heard, and Cotil stared down at the left side of his own chest. The dagger was sticking out of it. Drawing and striking in a single motion, D had batted it back, and the boy still couldn’t believe it had pierced him right through the heart.

“It can’t be . . . Why? I . . . I just . . .”

He fell back on the bed, face up. As his body swiftly turned to dust, both the duke and D watched without saying a word.

“No one, no matter who they are, gets any mercy after pulling a weapon on the man called D—that’s what I’ve heard,” said the duke.

Making no reply, D turned his eyes to the door.

II

A little more than twenty minutes later, there was a tentative knock at the door of the log cabin, and the men from the village below were shocked when the duke and D appeared.

“You didn’t go and make that punk a Noble, did you?”

“My lord, anything but that . . .”

“If you already have, please allow us to beat the life outta the both of ’em.”

“We’ve brought stakes and axes with us.”

As the villagers pleaded with their liege, they looked so wretched anyone would be likely to tell them, *I hear you, O powerless ones*, yet their fervor toward their mission more than made up for it.

“Be at ease. They’ve already been destroyed,” the duke said, his proclamation sending a buzz through the group. “Our friend D here was good enough to rid us of them. You may return to your village with confidence.”

“Oh, that’s great. Still, we’ve gotta see the two bodies to be sure.”

“Brother and sister alike were run through the heart, and the boy turned to dust. The girl’s remains are buried in the garden out back. She cursed the people of your village most vehemently as she breathed her last. Do not tempt fate,” the duke told them, flames beginning to blaze in his eyes.

The men stiffened, gave out shrieks, and turned around to sprint back to the transport plane that awaited them. They were dealing with the lord of their domain here. And they were no more than serfs he allowed to foster life.

After watching the transport borne away by old-fashioned propellers, the two men turned and looked back at the house.

“It’s okay now.”

Glia appeared.

As the girl stared straight ahead, the duke told her in a gentle voice, “They shouldn’t come up here again. You may live here or go elsewhere, whichever you prefer.” Taking a hefty purse from an inner pocket, he handed it to her. “On your own, this should be enough to live in luxury all your days. Be free.”

“You mean I can do as I like?”

“That’s correct.”

“In that case, drink my blood, your grace.”

D quietly turned toward the girl.

Wrinkles creased the duke’s brow as he asked, “Why?”

“I can’t live on my own. So please, make me one of the Nobility. If you do, I can live with you, and this man here will likely kill me before I drink anyone’s blood. As he did with my brother. Either way, I won’t have to live alone.”

Glia’s eyes were vacant. No tears streamed from them. For all her tears had long since dried up. She’d cried them all out over what had come so far, and what was yet to come. What was a girl of twelve supposed to do?

“Let’s go,” the duke said, turning right around.

The tiny figure slammed against his broad back, but immediately pulled away again. The handle of a dagger jutted from the duke’s back.

“Now the villagers will take me in as one of their own. Because all of ’em hate the Nobility in truth.”

The duke kept on walking. Before following after him, D looked at Glia. She just kept staring straight ahead.

There was a deep valley there. Anyone could tell that if she leapt into it, it would be the end of her.

Taking a scarlet seedling out of one of his coat’s inner pockets, D set it down at Glia’s feet.

“This grows on a lot of the trees around here. Its juice will heal most wounds, and it can be used for food too.”

What of it?

Glia didn't say anything.

And then D walked away.

"Whose fault is it things ended up this way?" the hoarse voice asked in the aircraft. "The Noble who drank the boy's blood, or the humans who drove him into a corner?"

Nobody answered.

When they arrived back at the castle, the duke was carried into a room for treatment.

"I have something to tell you," the duke said to D.

The room was swimming in blue light. Having been carried in on a stretcher, the duke lay at its center, while D stood by his side.

"What do you make of our moonlight energy? It doesn't seem too bad for you, either!"

"Let's hear what you have to tell me."

The duke let out a long breath. His mind apparently made up with that, he began, saying, "This energy was developed by a human researcher. At the time, he was already working as a scientist. I found him and personally requested that he join us at my castle. While remaining human. My vassals, Kiniski among them, didn't much care for that. They didn't like someone who was neither a true Noble nor a servant of the Nobility being treated as their equal."

Though General Kiniski appealed directly to the duke on several occasions, Van Doren would hear nothing of it. In no time, the scientist mastered moonlight energy, and after giving all his know-how to the duke, his vassals, and his scientists, the man left the castle. On his way home, the scientist was attacked. He had guards assigned to him, but they didn't do any good. His attacker was the greatest warrior in the northern Frontier sectors. He literally cut the scientist to pieces.

That was unforgivable to the duke. He ordered that the warrior, who had fled, was to be found even if they had to turn over every rock. Two days later the warrior was found walking down the highway in the central Frontier without a

care in the world, so General Kiniski's soldiers raced to the scene only to be promptly slain. On receiving word of this, the prince rushed there and killed the warrior.

"A hell of a man he was. Strong, but gentle. And that's only natural. After all, he was lord of this domain at the time. But he was no match for me. Naturally, the son cannot triumph over his father."

From the vicinity of D's left hand, someone let out a gasp.

The blue light remained unchanged, still coloring the old man on the table and the vision of beauty leaning against a stone wall not far away.

"After that incident, the role of my successor shifted to my second son—Kazel. For fifty years he defended our domain from traitors and bandits. Defended it with a physical and mental toughness beyond my ken. Though I knew him to be even more talented than Leavis, I had no idea just how much better he was—so for those fifty years, I lived without a care in the world. It was then that I took Sirene as my wife. But then, the great one suddenly appeared."

On a white night of insanely blowing snow, the duke had been in a chapel praying to a statue of the Sacred Ancestor. He never would've imagined that it would speak to him. *I must have one of your family*, the statue said. That was how it sounded to the duke. There was no point in asking, *Who shall it be?* He called for the lord of the land, and then he learned who it was.

"Do you think a man who worshiped the Sacred Ancestor could voice any objection to the Sacred Ancestor's actions? I could only accept it. However, such was not the case for my third son. Sacred Ancestor's will or not, he wouldn't allow his older brother to be taken away without even a reason given, and he cursed me for a coward as he left. We haven't met since."

Could that be the true source of the aged duke's melancholy?

"The Sacred Ancestor was here, too?" D murmured. His form was dissolving into the blue, as if the light had seeped into his pores to enter the blood in his veins.

"Where did Kazel go?" the duke groaned, moving a little. "If only he were here, I could've lived to this ripe old age without ever knowing such weariness."

Just then, a faint sound flowed through the air.

“What is it?” the duke inquired, and the face of a young man floated in space.

“Bandits have attacked the village of Melmecky.”

“Who’s in charge of peacekeeping?”

“That would be Colonel Picato.”

“Tell him all his energies are to be devoted to keeping the people of this domain safe. I will be heading out there soon, too.”

When the duke got up off the table, the caregiver android that was attending to him hastened to stop him, but the Nobleman wouldn’t listen, and ten minutes later he was aboard his aircraft. Even D himself didn’t know why he’d agreed to go along on the trip.

In the village of Melmecky, only horror remained. There were no survivors. All the buildings had been burnt down, and even Colonel Picato and his peacekeeping force had been brutally destroyed. In the evening there had been a harvest festival, and all of the villagers had been gathered in the public hall when the attack came.

“There must’ve been an informant. The timing was just too convenient,” said the duke, standing stiff as a board.

“It seems the attackers were armed with needle guns,” an android who’d been surveying the scene told the Nobleman less than five minutes later.

Capable of firing tens of thousands of tungsten needles in an instant, each only a few microns long and a fraction of a micron thick, the weapons could reduce a rock to sand with one blast, or turn steel into a sponge. No matter how resilient their armor, any living creature would be killed instantly by it, their nervous system destroyed. It was one of the most powerful weapons humans had devised for fighting the Nobility, so along with crosses and garlic, the weapon had been erased from the memory of all mankind.

“All existing ones should’ve been melted down by the Ministry of Public Affairs. Do you mean to tell me they found some?”

It was D who answered the duke’s question, saying, “Whether they found

them or not, they have the weapons. They just had to make them.”

“Make them?” the duke said, knitting his hoary eyebrows.

“It wouldn’t be all that strange. The needle gun was originally a human invention.”

“What happened to it being erased from their memories?”

“Even if they forgot how to make them, they can create anything if necessity dictates. You could take their memories again and they’d still build the same thing, and be applauded with the same fervor as the first time. That’s how humans are.” D then added, “Also,” but stopped there.

“Also what?” the duke asked him, and after receiving no answer he asked again. His tenacity was rare.

“It may be that this new model wasn’t made by humans.”

“You mean to say that Nobles built them?” Gazing at D, the duke insisted, “Nobles wouldn’t re-create a weapon they themselves had banned!”

D simply stared at him, saying nothing.

The duke’s expression changed. “I see, someone like you might . . .”

Just then, voices could be heard arguing violently off in the distance, and a soldier came rushing over. According to him, villagers who’d escaped the slaughter were trying to get through.

“Let them pass.”

Appearing before the duke were a half dozen bloodied people. One was a man in his thirties, the rest boys and girls around ten years old. The man was a schoolteacher. Since the attackers were relatively late in hitting the school, he’d taken all the children who were there for night school and evacuated them to a nearby cave.

“We heard gunshots and people screaming from all over the village. It lasted about an hour, though it seemed to go on for a century. When it got quiet, the kids all nodded off. Not that it was time for them to go to bed. They were so scared, they sought refuge in sleep. All of them lost their families.”

“Tell the children this: their families will be avenged if I have to chase those responsible to the ends of the earth.”

“Your kind always says that,” the teacher replied, his expression becoming almost demonic. “They will be avenged, we will have vengeance no matter how long it takes—but that’s because you’re immortal.”

He prodded the duke.

A soldier slammed the butt of his laser rifle into the teacher’s solar plexus and was about to deal a second blow to the man’s neck as he doubled over, but at that moment the harsh sound of something being cut rang out, and the rifle fell to the ground with both the soldier’s arms still attached to it.

“Hold!” the duke commanded, and if he hadn’t, the rest of the soldiers would’ve attacked D, which would’ve ended with every last one of them lying on the ground. “I’m so sorry for that,” the duke apologized. There could be no doubting that the words came from the bottom of his heart.

D went over to the motionless teacher, took hold of his arm, and helped him up.

Thanking the Hunter, the teacher got to his feet, aiming a finger at the duke again.

“Your kind doesn’t know how hard life is. Since you’ll presumably live forever, you can’t understand the weakness of humans, who have only a set span to live.”

The duke made a face that said, *Oh, this again?*

Grinding his teeth, the teacher continued, “I’m well aware that you’re much more benevolent than the lords of other Frontier sectors. But you only care for us to the extent that a human would an insect or a dog. Your kind doesn’t know the meaning of life, of living. And that’s why the resistance will never end.”

The duke, who said nothing and merely listened, stared at the teacher. Though the Nobleman’s expression was nearly blank, the teacher felt his own anger unexpectedly burn away like a fog.

“To be sure, dogs and humans are similar creatures to me,” the duke replied.

“However, you think that discrimination.”

Turbulence raced through the teacher’s eyes.

“There is this expression, ‘after all.’ ‘After all, they’re only human,’ we say. When you see a dog, don’t you say to yourself, ‘After all, it’s just a dog’?”

The teacher had no answer for that.

“To us, humans trying to construct a civilization are like insects crawling around on the ground. If necessary, we can save the life of a single insect. However, when it tries to suck the blood from us, we crush it ruthlessly. And the same goes for the humans in the rebellion. Would you not call that equitable?”

“The rulers can say what they like.”

“Are not your own village mayors rulers? What of the government leaders in the Capital? I know of this sort of rule, without sword or gun in hand. If you know a leader to be incompetent, do you not replace them immediately?”

The teacher stood there, rooted and without a thing to say. Darkness was beginning to envelop his body.

The duke ordered the officer by his side, “Dispatch all your peacekeepers to the neighboring villages. And manufacture more soldiers. Your sole duty is to seek out and destroy the bandit scum. Tonight I shall make the rounds of the nearest villages and say something to put their minds at ease. D, I have bodyguards with me this time. Go on back ahead of us.”

“I’m out here because I want to be.”

“So you don’t take orders from me, then? My apologies. Well, do as you wish. We’ll be heading out right away.”

Five minutes later, the aircraft flew away, and D began galloping down the road that led back to the duke’s castle on his cyborg horse.

III

The moon was out. There were grassy plains to either side of the Hunter. He was already at a different village. Lights twinkled up ahead and to the right. Red ones. D’s eyes could make out a sign with a liquor bottle painted on it.

Advancing in silence, he had only fifty yards of road left when a trio of figures spilled from the establishment. From the way they walked, they'd had quite a bit to drink. Laughter could be heard.

"Would you look at that," the left hand that gripped the reins sighed sadly. "The neighboring village was completely wiped out. Is this any time to be laughing?"

Once the trio reached the road, they turned their backs to the Hunter and started walking away. He soon caught up with them. The stink of alcohol assailed his nose. He passed right by them.

"Howdy!"

"Evening!"

The voices called from behind him.

The trio drew guns from their hips. The barrels were four inches in diameter.

Propelled by compressed gas, clouds of needles assailed D from three directions, only to disappear vainly into the air.

Hitting the ground as if he'd been dropped, D then executed a somersault, landing behind the men's backs. It must've looked to them as if part of the darkness had bounded.

They weren't given time enough to turn. D's sword flashed just twice in the moonlight, and two men's bodies fell to the road, cut in quarters.

The air whistled. For D had hurled a needle of rough wood.

Convulsing madly, the third man dove back into the bar.

Leaving his cyborg horse there, D sprinted.

On passing through the doorway, the Hunter was greeted by silence. The world was blue with cigarette smoke. The establishment seemed large enough to accommodate about fifty patrons. There was actually about half that number there. And all of them had their eyes on D—and the man on the floor—going back and forth between the two.

The man was sprawled there. He was dressed just like the villagers, the only

difference being that he had a wooden needle stuck through his throat.

“He a villager?” D asked.

Everyone exchanged glances, while the bartender said from behind the counter, “Nope, just a drifter who came in a little while ago. Probably changed clothes after he left. One of ’em brought the horse they came in on around back, which seemed a precaution of some sort. Maybe so that you wouldn’t notice, eh?”

On seeing the weapon the man held in his right hand, one of the patrons groaned, “What the blazes is that thing?”

“Hell, those were the guys who attacked Melmecky.”

“They ain’t getting away with it!”

With an assortment of shouts, they were about to rush the man, but then they stopped in their tracks. D had gone over and taken a knee beside the dying man. All of them realized the young man in black was no mere traveler.

Taking the needle gun from him and sliding it across the floor, D then pulled out the wooden needle. It was unclear what kind of ungodly skill he called upon, but not a drop of blood came from the wound.

A buzz spilled from the villagers’ mouths.

“You’re in league with the bandits, aren’t you?” asked the Hunter. “Seems there’s someone you were gunning for before me.”

Raising his right hand, the man gestured toward his throat. By that, he meant that he couldn’t speak.

“There’s no damage to your vocal cords,” D said, taking the needle he still held, pressing its point against the wound, and pushing it back in again.

Shuddering from head to toe, the man clawed at the floor. Boards pulled loose, and his fingers gushed blood.

“Talk.”

The man capitulated.

“It was the duke we were out to get. We knew he’d be coming. So we’d been

keeping watch from the top of a nearby pass all along. See, if he gave us an opening, we were gonna close in and nail him with some stake launchers. Problem is, he left right after he got here. So we decided to take a shot at you, since you were still here.”

“Did Vulcan authorize this?”

The man looked at D with the light of life failing in his eyes. “Hell no. But it was just too good to let slip by. He’d have stopped us for sure. You . . . you’re a dhampir?”

“That’s right.”

“Figured as much . . . The way you use that sword . . . like nothing human . . . Hell, even an android couldn’t do that . . . Just wish . . . the boss . . . had said . . . something . . .”

“Where’s Vulcan?”

“Damned if I know . . . Seriously . . . The boss . . . he always stays somewhere different from us . . . That monster horse of his . . . brings a note . . . with his orders.”

“When does he show up?”

“Just before . . . we put the orders he wrote . . . into action.”

“Then he ain’t coming this time, eh?” the hoarse voice said, the sudden sound of it freezing everyone there. “No point hanging around here. We moving out or what?”

D stood up. “He’s dead,” he said. Something gold flew like an arrow from his right hand, landing on the counter. “Sorry about the mess. I’d appreciate it if you’d take care of it.”

And saying that, D headed for the door.

“Hey, wait a sec.”

D didn’t turn around. His business was concluded. And there was no hostility in that voice.

The speaker was a giant of a man seated at the counter.

“This here’s a hundred dalas coin. Everybody here could drink themselves to death and you’d still have change coming. Plus, the damned thing’s *standing*.”

The patrons’ eyes focused on the small golden disk that stood on edge on the counter.

“Somebody take care of the stiff. Buddy, you care to try your luck against me?”

Rolling the right sleeve of his shirt all the way up to his shoulder with his left hand, the giant flexed his bicep for all he was worth. It was almost perfectly round. And it looked to be about a foot in diameter.

“Blade on blade I ain’t a match for you. Let’s go with arm wrestling, something I’d have a chance at. C’mon. I’ve always wanted to see how strong you dhampirs are. Hey, new guy, you try asking him!”

“Well, I don’t know,” the bartender said, scratching his head.

The giant put his right elbow on the counter and bent five fingers as thick as sausages, just raring to go. However, there was no way D would accommodate him—and yet, the Hunter shifted his feet and began walking toward the other man. Still standing, he took the same posture as the giant.

“All right! Best out of ten. And every time you lose, you gotta take a shot of Kalchiki. We clear?”

Kalchiki was a local expression that meant “would surprise even a dead man.” It was a kind of liquor with powerful poison herbs mixed in it, and even the strongest of men would be flat on his back after three shots, and probably be left an alcoholic as well.

The bartender set his hand on top of the pair of fists and their interlocked fingers. “All set? One, two—”

With “three,” the match was decided. One twist of D’s arm sent the giant flying, sailing over the heads of other patrons to strike the reinforced glass of one of the windows. The bar shook.

Forgetting all about the bottles and glass falling from the shelves, the bartender stared at the giant spread-eagled on a table by the wall. His

expression was terribly sad.

“Who’d have thought it—the brute strength of Bedmansch, mightiest man in the village, bested with a single twist. It’s like something out of a nightmare.”

The other patrons could only nod.

“Not too shabby,” said the first to speak, which happened to be the very man spread-eagled there. “That’s a hell of a thing. Actually, it’s kinda refreshing, being beaten so easily for a change!”

The giant got up from the table to stand on the floor—and then slumped back again.

“Don’t move. I’ll run you over to Doc Heggins right away,” the bartender called over from behind the counter.

Bedmansch clung to the table for support as he stood up and started after D, who was headed for the door.

“Hold on, would you? You can’t manage it on your own,” the bartender told him, wiping hands still wet from washing dishes, then slipping out from behind the counter.

“Just leave me be,” said the giant. “I just wanna go see off that fella who whipped me so easily.”

The three of them went outside.

“Mister, I’m—” Bedmansch began, but his voice was suddenly cut short.

Just below the solar plexus he had a silvery sword blade running through him. A cry of pain rang out behind Bedmansch. D had drawn and made a backward thrust along his left flank, his blade piercing not only Bedmansch but also going right through one of the bartender’s lungs.

It was unclear which was more surprising, the Hunter’s skill or the wooden stake that dropped from the right hand the bartender had raised to strike. The stake itself was the kind that could be found in any house in the village. But why was a bartender who’d just met D trying to put it into his back?

“How . . . did you know . . . I was out to get you?”

“All the patrons were afraid of me. You were the only one who wasn’t,” D said, extracting his blade.

The two men collapsed under an overhanging roof. The bartender had given up the ghost. He’d taken the job in the bar ahead of time so he could gather intelligence about the next spot that would be hit. Undoubtedly he was a spy for the Pitch Black Gang. It was probably someone else who’d informed the gang the villagers of Melmecky would be gathered in the public hall, but this must’ve been one of his colleagues.

As D got on his cyborg horse, behind him Bedmansch said, “It’s the damnedest thing, but it don’t hurt a bit, and I ain’t even bleeding.”

The giant was a captive of his own astonishment. With ungodly skill, D had managed to avoid striking any nerves or cutting any arteries.

“Hey, do me a favor and remember my name. It’s Bedmansch. Bedmansch of Apico Village!”

By the time the giant had hollered that, D and his cyborg horse had already been swallowed up by the darkness of the road.

GILSHARK'S PROPOSAL

Chapter 6

It was just after sunset that the man and his strange steed began circling the castle. Though there were guards posted, they didn't challenge him because he was outside the defensive perimeter. He passed some other soldiers and they were going to check his identity, but seemingly sensing something from the way he was dazedly taking in the castle and its sights made them not say anything and just keep going.

After a while, the man and his steed appeared in Machitez. That was at about the same time the duke and D were calling on the village of Melmecky. From the village, the rider headed out to the site of the dig. Three of the tents had just come into view when he sensed a heated conflict up ahead.

Valerie had never questioned the character of her colleagues so much as she did when she came out of the hole. Underground, she'd been attacked by a swarm of giant spiders, and with the help of the new guy she'd barely managed to make it out alive, but that wasn't anything they showed much interest in. However, the moment they heard the pair had later found a side tunnel and followed it to discover a small stone chamber, from which they'd brought back two or three items, the others' expressions changed, and they demanded to see what the pair had found. Anyone but Valerie might've tremblingly acceded to their demands, but she firmly refused, informing them she'd hand the items over once she was finished examining them. The looks on her colleagues' faces and in their eyes had truly deteriorated to an almost lethal degree.

Three centuries earlier, the worldwide anti-Nobility movement had begun, and in those days, ruins and discoveries long forgotten by the Nobles were destroyed without a second thought. Later, their artistic merit would be appreciated once more and the revolutionary movement itself viewed as outrageous, with the consensus being that such items would be treated as treasures in the future. In the Capital, museums of both fine arts and science as well as research institutes bought everything regardless of the cost, with faux evaluators putting prices of thousands of dalas on a single page of crumpled notes in an act of economic blasphemy against the art world that continued even now and soiled the hearts and souls of her fellow researchers.

Valerie regretted giving them an honest account of the results. What the pair had discovered was the head from a golden statue of the Sacred Ancestor, a solid gold bracelet, and one other item—or so she thought, but she couldn't be sure of the details.

Feeling herself in danger all the while, Valerie headed into Machitez nonetheless. She went to see Izumo in the hospital.

He was awake.

"Burning the midnight oil, eh?" she said.

"I've spent too long digging holes at night."

"I'm sorry. It's all my fault you're laid up like this."

"It doesn't matter what you find, just be careful of *those guys*."

"Isn't that the truth. They're all after the stuff we excavated. Before long, they'll be killing each other."

"Yeah, they're a bunch of greedy bastards to be sure, but did you find anything worth them throwing away all honor as scientists?"

"We got these!" Valerie said, pulling the items from her backpack and setting them out on his blanket.

"Three pieces?"

"Uh, yeah," Valerie replied with a somewhat dubious expression.

Noticing that, Izumo inquired, "What's wrong?"

"Well, I thought there were just two."

"There are three pieces here. But what's this one?"

It was the piece that up until that very moment Valerie had forgotten. Taking it in hand, Izumo scrutinized it closely. Though he searched his memories, there was nothing there to match the item.

"I really don't know," the professor continued. "All we could do is ask a Noble. Be gentle with it."

"How's it look?"

She was asking about their value.

“You’d know as well as I do. The two of them would fetch a half million dalas each, minimum. The idol’s definitely the Sacred Ancestor. That should bring it up to nine hundred thousand dalas by itself.”

“Wow. That’d feed an entire village for life!”

“It might be best to send them off to the Capital. Tell them we only found the bracelet, and split what we get for the idol.”

“It’s going to be hard to head back to camp now,” said the woman. “Mind if I leave this stuff here?”

“No, best you put it somewhere else.”

“Why?”

“Because when I looked at it, something suddenly popped into my head. I thought to myself, *I could kill her and take off and keep it all for myself.*”

Looking her lover right in the eye, Valerie said, “Okay, point taken.”

After that, she talked about what they’d do next at the excavation for a little while, then left the hospital.

When Valerie got back to her tent, five figures stepped out from behind it, blocking her way. Her colleagues.

“Well, if it isn’t Dokky, Jimemem, Pike, Sanda, and Giche—what’s wrong?” Valerie asked, intentionally playing dumb. Their aim was actually painfully clear.

“Hand it over. It’s not like we’re taking everything,” Giche said, sticking out his right hand.

“Hit pay dirt on the first day, right? Let’s have a taste of that,” said Jimemem.

“Sorry, but I can’t do that. Those are the Capital’s rules on excavations. Article five. ‘All excavated items shall be presented to the Bureau of Archeology, becoming property of the same.’”

“Hell, even the ones who made that rule don’t remember it,” Dokky remarked with a greedy laugh. It hardly seemed like the same man who’d been burning with enthusiasm for his scholarly mission on the way out to the Frontier.

“And what if I say no?” the woman asked, and the instant she did, her heart began beating harder. *Oh, if only the new guy were around*, she thought. *Him and that power he used to turn the giant spiders to dust in the blink of an eye—or maybe it’d be better to call it a weapon?*

“Come on, try to be flexible here,” Pike pleaded with her, sticking out both hands. “Every last one of us has devoted his life to archeology. And we’re all impoverished as a result. Come on, this is our big chance to turn our lives around. What’s so bad about us keeping a little? If every last thing that was excavated got turned in, the Capital itself would be buried in ruins inside of a decade!”

“That isn’t what we wanted, is it?”

“They were the Nobility, after all. They ruled humans until three centuries ago, so what’s so bad about swiping a few things left behind by somebody everyone considers monsters anyway?”

“No,” Valerie countered, “the Nobility still have control over us. But they’re living creatures, just like we are. The items I found show their feelings—their yearning for beauty, their pride and joy in creation. They should be used to better understand the Nobility’s true nature.”

“Knock it off, you’re wasting your breath,” Dokky said, a nasty ring to his voice. “‘Valerie fell into the hole and was never seen again’—that’ll have to be the story.”

“Hold on. Are you serious?” Valerie said, her right hand going for the pistol on her hip.

“You’re not the only one carrying!”

There was the sound of a hammer being cocked. And more than just one.

“All of you . . .” Valerie began, her words being swallowed by the sky.

What happened next was clearly beyond anything any of them had imagined. A shadowy horse and rider sailed down from above. Heaven and earth rumbled with the *thuddddd!*

“Who the hell are you?!”

“What the hell, that horse—it’s a unicorn?!”

Thunder boomed.

The five men were blown backward, their heads gone. After they hit the ground and the shaking from the impact stopped, they didn’t move another inch.

Valerie couldn’t immediately accept the sudden reversal of the life-or-death situation. She was the one about to lose her life, yet the five who’d threatened her had been snuffed. But who had done this, and how?

The answer to that wheeled his steed around. It wasn’t a horse. A single horn grew from its brow—it was, in fact, a unicorn.

“You—you’re with the Pitch Black Gang?”

“I’m Vulcan,” the rider said. His eyes gleamed within the hood of his cape.

Valerie tightened her grip on the straps of her backpack. He was undoubtedly after the items she’d excavated.

“Get on behind me.”

That unexpected request left Valerie bewildered.

“The others in the tents will be coming,” he told her. “You need some time and a place where you can calm down and think. I’ll take you there.”

“Huh? Take me where?”

“Get on,” he said, his low, trenchant voice leaving Valerie’s brain numb.

Thinking how his tone reminded her of someone else’s, Valerie got on behind the bandit leader and put her arms around his waist.

When the mount started to run, she was surprised. There were no vibrations at all from the ground. She could’ve ridden around like that for ninety days straight and barely even been tired. Unicorns were just that sort of creature.

“Lady—what’s your name?” Vulcan inquired.

“It’s Valerie.”

“You surprised, Valerie? This is a unicorn you’re on.”

“The Frontier’s just full of surprises, isn’t it?”

“It’s the land of the Nobility. You gonna tell them that back in the Capital?”

“It’s my job.”

“How will you tell them?”

“Just as it is!”

It suddenly occurred to her that this man might’ve overheard her earlier discussion with her colleagues.

After that, Vulcan said no more, but because the tension was now broken, Valerie rested her head against his broad back and fell asleep. The fact that Vulcan’s demeanor was terribly calm was a contributing factor.

“We’re there!”

When Valerie opened her eyes, she was on the ground. She couldn’t recall when she’d gotten down, or if she’d been taken down instead. To her right were Vulcan and his unicorn, and straight ahead loomed stony ramparts.

They were at the duke’s castle.

“Why come here?” she asked, looking up at Vulcan.

Wasn’t this the place he and his bandits were going to hit? Yet he brought Valerie there and said it would be safe. What exactly did he think of the castle and its master?

“Clear out of it before we hit the place.” And saying that, Vulcan wheeled his unicorn around, adding, “You’ve got two days.”

They dwindled in the distance with a sound that differed from that of a horse.

Presently, a steward came from the castle and courteously welcomed Valerie. Neither the duke nor D had returned. On receiving some communication, the steward said, “I’ve been instructed to ask that you kindly remain with us until the master returns.” He then led her to a room.

Perhaps it was out of the ordinary for someplace as simple and sturdy as this stone castle to have guest rooms, but after taking a shower, Valerie was left considering her next move in a room as luxurious as any in the Capital’s finest

hotels.

All she had to do was tell everyone the deaths of the other five were the work of a bandit. But what would the others do when they learned the true intent of those who'd died? Reflecting on it, she realized they'd all been colleagues for several years. Yet now she couldn't trust a single soul among them.

Actually, Valerie had heard of similar situations occurring at other digs a number of times, and the pilfering of excavated items had been an almost daily occurrence even at excavations she'd been involved with. Valerie had believed it to be the fault of the manual workers they'd hired, and her colleagues had thought the same. Now, however—

Too tired to think any more, Valerie suddenly felt like looking at the glittering items she'd excavated to get her mind off her troubles. Taking the idol and the bracelet from her bag, she set them side by side. That was all of them. It didn't even bother her that the third item wasn't there. In fact, she'd completely forgotten that there'd been one in the first place.

II

“Hey! Heeeeeeeey!”

The cries came from overhead, yet D didn't halt his cyborg horse. That in itself wasn't an unexpected turn of events.

He was on the road five hours out of the village of Melmecky and two hours shy of the duke's castle.

Suddenly, it appeared. From overhead, a humanoid moth with huge wings flitted down right in front of the cyborg horse, forcing it to stop. The face and form were those of Gilshark—head of the rebel army. The enormous wings must've been some sort of artificial flying device.

“Hey, don't carve me up!” he said to the Hunter, holding out both hands. “I followed you from that bar. Please, just hear me out.” His tone was deadly serious.

Nevertheless, D rode forward.

The leader of the rebel army adjusted his wings to keep pace.

After hearing of the Pitch Black Gang's attack on Melmecky he'd immediately raced there, but D and the duke had been a step ahead of him. Although he'd hoped to at least get rid of the duke, the Nobleman had left quickly, and Gilshark had ultimately decided to follow after D and kill him if luck was on his side. Up to that point, he was doing the very same thing as the Pitch Black Gang had planned.

However, adjusting his wings took time, and though Gilshark hastened to catch up, he lost track of his target. He didn't reach the bar until thirty minutes after D had left.

"After I heard what happened, I changed my mind about you. The duke may be our sworn enemy, but the Pitch Black Gang and other bandits are a much more immediate threat, and one we've got to put down first. I'd like your help in eradicating them."

"I thought you had people of your own," D replied softly.

"Well, to be honest, we'd be up against too damn many of them, and apparently they use some sort of power. I say "apparently" because everyone who's been hit by them has ended up dead, and we can't even figure out how they actually strike. Using regular bows and guns, they still wipe out their opponents without suffering any real losses, even though the ones they're attacking are firing right back at them."



“With your enhanced strength and the force field generator, you should be on an equal footing with them.”

“I wouldn’t mind that, but if I can’t say for sure that’ll be the case, I don’t wanna go pick a fight with them. What we really need here is a man with superhuman abilities.”

“It’s not a given that dhampirs will side with humans. Besides, you and I have nothing to do with each other.”

“I know that. But I’m asking you to make an exception. If somebody doesn’t do something, nobody in this whole area’s gonna be able to sleep nights.”

“Rounding up bandits is the job of the lord of the domain—the administrator.”

“The duke’s not even trying anymore. You know what I’m saying. But I can’t just sit idly by.”

“Oh, you won’t sit idly by?” D said, a certain memory putting a spark of light in his dark eyes.

“I’m not asking you to do it for free. You’ll be rewarded.” Gilshark tossed D a sack he’d had on his belt. When D caught it, he added, “Me and my people collected this from folks all over the country. There’s a little over a thousand dalas. I’m begging you, please help us out here.”

“My job is getting rid of Nobles.”

“I know. But the truth is, I’ve heard rumors some of the bandits are dhampirs, just like you. And if that’s the case, it’s an even higher hurdle for us.”

“We don’t act on just rumors, you know,” said the hoarse voice.

Just as that face of unearthly beauty shook lightly from side to side, Gilshark gasped and knit his brow.

Even D turned and looked.

A black colossus was straddling the distant mountain chain, running away. Once it was over, another shadowy figure straddled it, vanishing with a great quaking of the earth.

It was a famous northern Frontier attraction known as “Little Boy Over the Mountains.” That was what they called a phenomenon that happened at this time of year, where a man standing more than three miles tall appears, straddles the mountain chain, then runs off to who knows where. Said to be the work of a miasma over the region, the sun, and the moon, the true cause of it was still unclear. But to the northern Frontier, it was an important source of tourist dalas.

When the colossus’ foot touched the earth, the ground shook violently, and footsteps could be heard like a rumbling from deep in the earth. Yet the tremors didn’t register on any seismograph, and not a single footprint was left behind.

When the third shadowy colossus finished going over the mountain, something happened. He should’ve run off, but suddenly he turned in the direction of the two men.

“Whah?!” Gilshark cried out, but he couldn’t do anything.

Black hands latched onto the top of the mountain chain, tore it off, and hurled it at them. By the light of the moon, the mountain sailed through the air. It slammed into the earth about a hundred yards ahead of the pair. With a tremendous rumble and shock, it bounced toward them. The enormous chunk of rock rolled over their heads, and the mountaintop utterly filled their field of view.

A cry of pain rang out.

Suddenly, stillness returned.

The two men were on the road, where the moonlight seemed to have intensified. The distant mountains remained as they had been.

Taking a deep breath, Gilshark beat his wings. Like an enormous moth his body sailed over the grasslands to their left, and then about fifty yards away he called out, “Right here. Must be one of the bandits. Got a wooden needle driven through his forehead. That’d be your doing, I take it.”

Flying back without a sound, he continued, “I could feel the wind from that chunk of rock. I thought we were gonna be crushed.” The rebel leader sounded

completely exhausted.

When hypnotism was performed at the highest levels, it could work on the depths of a mind. Accordingly, if it were suggested to a person that a simple piece of wood was a branding iron and it then touched them, the person under the hypnotic spell would get a burn.

This hypnotist's plan was to use his willpower to hypnotize the two of them from afar, then crush the life from them with a hallucination. If D's needle hadn't shot out at the bandit, the two of them would've been crushed by the illusion of a mountain peak and left flat as a pancake on the road, lying there in the moonlight.

Still looking off toward the mountain chain, D said, "Seems I'm not the only one who picked up a tail." His gaze fell where waves of grass swayed in the breeze.

"I never really noticed before, but the rebel army's pretty half-assed."

In his amazement, Gilshark focused his gaze on D's left hand for a moment, then said, "You're right, that screw-up is on me. Guess I'd better make it up to you, eh?"

Once more the man/moth sailed into the air, with streaks of fire from the ground flying after him. They had more enemies out there than just the hypnotist.

A whine rang through the air. Or rather, the sound split space.

D saw the grassy plain below Gilshark shimmer like a mirage. And D alone could've seen the sixty-foot-diameter black dome that formed there. All the streaks of fire turned, twisted, and immediately vanished.

When Gilshark came back, D asked him, "Why didn't you erase them completely?"

The fearless man's mouth fell agape and he said, "Oh, you could tell?"

D didn't answer.

"Well, it's like this: I decided just to grind off their arms and legs. They're not gonna be able to rob anyone again like that. And it wasn't really worth killing

them over. Anyway, do me a favor and give some thought to what we talked about. See you later!”

Gilshark flew effortlessly into the air, rising straight for the moon. The form of the moth grew smaller, and it was quickly swallowed up by the moonlight.

When he’d taken to the air, D was already moving forward.

It was nearly dawn when the Hunter reached the castle. He immediately noticed something was wrong.

A soldier, apparently an officer, came over and said, “You have a message from his grace,” projecting a three-dimensional image of the duke in midair.

“D, I am in Chapes. It’s a village about six hundred miles east of there. The bandits sent what must’ve been a separate detachment to attack this place. Though it would be easy enough to return, I won’t be coming back soon. You see, some here are reassured by the sight of my face. I received word from the castle, and it seems Dr. Valerie came there. She said her colleagues attacked her. However, she has apparently gone missing while awaiting my return. From the bracelet that clearly belonged to Nobles and the idol of the Sacred Ancestor that were left in her room, we can be certain she plumbed the depths of the earth. Her disappearance came less than an hour after she arrived at the castle. My home is not a human habitation. Such a thing simply isn’t possible. Lookouts, three-dimensional sensors, and the like will detect an intrusion by so much as a mote of dust, capturing or attacking any invader if necessary.”

“Then there can be only one reason she’s disappeared,” the hoarse voice said, drawing a nod from the duke.

“An even greater power was at work,” Van Doren stated. “But I know of only one individual capable of such a feat.”

“Then *that bastard* must’ve come,” the hoarse voice said. It had a bold ring to it in such tense times.

That bastard, indeed. D, the image of the duke, and even the android soldiers seemed frozen.

“I’ll go look for her,” said D. He added the fact that he owed her a debt.

“Oh, would you do that for me? Many thanks! Give the order to everyone there. From this point on, they’re to consider D’s word as my own.”

Just as the Hunter was about to exit the castle gates, a figure in azure chased after him.

“Please, allow me to accompany you,” said the pursuer, who turned out to be Shyna. Though she’d vanished when General Kiniski rebelled, apparently she’d survived the attack.

“You’ll only be in the way,” D stated plainly from atop his cyborg steed.

“I believe I’m not as bad as a human being.”

“You were imprinted with a human personality. And as it was that of a woman, there’s no denying that you’re a woman. That’s what I meant when I said you’ll only be in the way.”

After that, D passed through the castle gates without another look back.

“What’s this?” the hoarse voice cried out in surprise on seeing Shyna standing in the road ahead of them. Not that she’d chased after them. Either she’d raced up a staircase within the castle gates, or else she’d bounded clear over the same to land there. Whichever the case, her speed was unbelievable.

“That’s right, she’s an android,” the hoarse voice remarked.

Shyna raised her right hand. It seemed to snatch something from her hair, and then a golden gleam shot right at D’s face. He caught it effortlessly in his right hand.

It was a long pin for holding her hair in place.

“That’d kill someone if it hit them,” D said. Probably nobody but him could’ve stopped it.

“My ‘original’ was the greatest warrior woman in the region,” Shyna told him with a modest bow.

“The duke gave you no orders to do this.”

“Correct. I am permitted full discretion in my actions until his grace the duke says otherwise. Please allow me to accompany you. I’m certain to be of use,”

Shyna said, her expression the very picture of earnestness.

“Why?”

“I can’t—” Shyna began, hanging her head.

“Until you’re ready to share your reasons, you’re not worthy of my trust. Your request is denied.”

Shyna gnawed at her lip. But she quickly raised her head and said, “In that case, I’ll just follow along after you.”

“Do as you like. But if you get in my way—you’ll get removed.”

Android though she was, that was a cruel pronouncement for a pretty girl who said she wanted to help. Still, Shyna smiled. Did even the angels have such grins? Hers glowed with joy at being with D.

“Very well,” she said, “you’re free to do that if you wish. I’ll follow you anywhere.”

III

When D reached the camp at the ruins excavation site, it was silence that greeted him. The eastern sky was beginning to gleam like ice.

“There’s the stench of blood,” the hoarse voice said.

Though there was no trace of the blood spilled by Vulcan several hours earlier when he saved Valerie from the five archeologists, it seemed the source of that hoarse voice could smell it distinctly.

“Yes,” Shyna agreed from off to the left of the cyborg horse. She hadn’t fallen so much as a step behind the galloping steed in coming there. “The ground’s been turned over in an attempt to conceal the bloodshed. And no report has been filed on Dr. Valerie’s disappearance. I believe they might be afraid any trouble could get their permission to excavate revoked.”

“Exactly,” D said with a nod, and Shyna’s face was suffused with joy.

“Your body might have a hundred thousand horsepower, but you’ve got the heart of a seventeen-year-old sweetie, don’t you? Simpleton,” said the hoarse voice.

“I don’t have to take that from a parasite.”

“Wh-wh-what did you call me?!”

“I’ll have no more quarrelling,” D commanded sternly.

Both of them fell silent.

D paid a call on the closest tent. A middle-aged man appeared and gave his name as Deed.

“Where’s Dr. Valerie?” the Hunter inquired, knowing there was no point in asking the man anything.

As if intoxicated, the enraptured man replied, “Oh—a little while ago, she was headed toward the hole.”

His answer came as a great surprise to D.

“Was she alone?”

“Yes.”

“No, she wasn’t!” said another member who’d appeared from the tent—a young man. “I’m Chidol. I’m a student. I saw her coming in from the road, and she had a big guy right beside her!”

“That’s a lie!” Deed countered, his eyes wide.

“It is not. But then I blinked my eyes and he was gone. Maybe it was a mirage, but I know what I saw.”

“When was this?”

“About forty minutes ago,” the two answered in unison.

D turned toward the excavation site. There was no sign of Valerie anywhere. Only the crane and giant drill crouched there like bizarre monstrosities.

D quickly found the hole leading underground.

“She went in here, no doubt about it,” the hoarse voice said.

But after going underground once and coming back again, why had the woman ventured once more into the pitch black depths of the earth? And who was the giant of a man young Chidol had seen?

Shyna gazed at D.

Not saying a word, D threw himself from the brink of the hole. Plummetering a hundred yards, he landed on the stone floor without a sound.

Undoubtedly this was the first floor of a devastated shrine. There were tilted, broken columns and a fallen ceiling. In the darkness scarcely touched by dawn's early light, it truly looked like the sprawling land of the dead.

"Oh, my, there are a bunch of subterranean spider legs lying over there. The ends of 'em look like they were taken off by a gravity field. Seems the rebel army's boss man—Gilshark, or whatever he said it was—has been down here, too."

Still looking down at the spider legs, D was silent, but he soon turned to the left and started walking. Apparently he'd been searching for a path.

Just then, a dull thud reverberated behind him.

"Oops. I slipped," Shyna said, holding the seat of her dress as she got to her feet.

"You clumsy oaf," the hoarse voice chortled until D squeezed his fist to end it.

Not even turning in Shyna's direction, D was swallowed up by the darkness ahead of him.

He came to a cramped space. Apparently it was a small room of some sort. There was a little table, and only three spots on it weren't covered in dust.

In a hushed tone, the left hand said, "That'd be the idol and the bracelet. But it seems there was one thing more, so where'd that get to? Think the girl ran off with just that one?"

"The one you're looking for came down here *again*," said Shyna. "Her scent, her heat, remnants of her very presence hang in the air. And she hasn't left yet."

"Ain't you the little smart aleck," the left hand said loathingly. Shyna had said all the things it should've. "So, where would you say she went?"

Shyna pointed to the right—and a wall that faced north. On seeing D go over to it, she got a look of excitement in her eyes. The Hunter had accepted her

opinion without question.

He put his left hand against the wall.

“There ain’t a door,” the left hand said. “No choice but to bust it down!”

“In that case, allow me.”

Giving Shyna a long, hard look, D asked, “Think you can handle it?”

Shyna wanted to shout, *YES! YES! YES!* but settled on simply “Yes.”

“Then I leave it to you.”

“Very well,” she said. “Stand back, please.”

“What’s it gonna be, missile or particle cannon? This is so trite.”

Having to listen to hoarsely voiced insults all the while, Shyna kicked off the floor. Her lithe form became a steely hammer as she raced forward. The part of the wall she crashed into buckled, and cracks shot out in all directions. It’d been a ferocious impact.

Quickly returning to her starting position, Shyna gave no particular consideration to the timing, slamming shoulder-first into the wall once again. The stone wall collapsed as if it were a cheap prop.

“Wow,” Shyna said appreciatively.

The left hand groaned, “Oh my.”

Beyond the wall lay the sprawling interior of a large shrine. The giant idol that loomed on the left-hand side was easily over a hundred yards high, its face hidden in the darkness by the ceiling.

“I’ve never seen such a large statue before,” Shyna murmured, dumbfounded. To her right was a row of buildings two or three stories tall, but seen from more than five hundred yards they looked more like toys. “Not even the castle has anything like this,” she continued. “Who on earth made it?”

“Some Noble from a long, long time ago,” the hoarse voice replied. “But forget that, it’s—huh?!”

Even before he heard the words *It’s her!* D was racing to the foot of the idol.



Valerie lay there, stark naked.

Checking for a pulse and examining her pupils, D said, “She’s alive.”

“But why is she nude?” Shyna asked after running over, stripping off her own dress in the blink of an eye and using it to cover Valerie’s form.

“Hey, don’t go and spoil this,” the hoarse voice groused.

“What’s someone like you doing with Mister D anyway?” Shyna countered.

“Hmph!”

Though D shook the woman, there was no reaction. Even with his left hand resting on her brow, Valerie still didn’t move a muscle.

“This is a surprise. Sort of reaction you’d expect from a corpse!” said the hoarse voice.

“Apparently that was no illusion,” remarked the Hunter, referring to the gigantic figure Chidol had seen up on the surface.

“This some of *his* work?”

Not replying to the question from his left hand, D turned and looked at Shyna.

“What is it?”

“Stay here with the woman until I get back.”

“That’s ridiculous. I came here with you—I mean, I followed you here on my own. Kindly refrain from giving me orders.”

“I owe a debt to her,” D said, giving Shyna a cold look, “and my word is the duke’s. Wait here.”

“Very well,” Shyna replied, turning his eyes toward the floor.

“One thing more. You probably already know this, but if the woman should undergo any dangerous change, run her through the heart on the spot.”

“Understood.”

D started walking toward the stairs at the far end of the shrine.

Focusing a look invested with a certain emotion on his back as he went, Shyna

murmured, "The duke's word? No, it's your word."

Halfway down, the stairs had collapsed. Unbothered by that, D leapt off them. He landed two hundred yards below.

He was in a corridor where the ceiling and walls had collapsed. A doorway could be seen up ahead.

On passing through it, the left hand said, "You've noticed already, haven't you?"

D's gaze dropped down by his feet. Footprints had been left in the dust.

"They're recent," the hoarse voice said. "So, who'd have come down this close to Hell before us? And by a different route, too."

The room was every bit as large as the chamber that housed the idol. There was a faint light, though where it came from was unclear. In the darkness, rooms large and small were arrayed in the almost ghostly light. Unlike the idol chamber, this place had apparently taken a direct blast of some prodigious energy, leaving all the rooms twisted and broken, and reducing their occupants to corpses robbed of their true shapes. There were bodies of every shape and color, enormous pods with tentacles hanging out one end, dried and shriveled claws, rows of fangs exposed by gargantuan cruciform mouths, compound eyes reflecting only gloom, and so on, and so forth.

"A storehouse for biological weapons, eh?" the left hand said. Nearly a groan, its tone showed just how terrifying a place this had been.

Either to prove their own bravery or simply to intimidate humans out of resisting, Nobles had captured dangerous creatures with destructive abilities on planets under their control, transported them to Earth, and performed further operations on them so they might be used as weapons of war. Scattered here were the lifeless husks of their fearsome biological weapons.

"This just makes me all the more curious who came down here," the left hand said with something approaching amusement. "There's something funny about this, though. These weren't the kind of critters to sit around all peaceful-like when their cages were trashed. Some of these things could pretty much live forever. Yet in ten or twenty millennia, every one of 'em has kicked the bucket.

For example, the remains in that pod over there are from a living fireball. They can burn the nuclei of their own cells to produce the energy that keeps them alive. If the cooling cage broke, one of these things would've melted everything within a thousand yards and made its way to the surface. But I've never heard that anything like that happened."

"Because they were disposed of before everything collapsed. Probably by whoever owned the place."

When D said that, his eyes were invested with a strange light. From somewhere in the pale darkness, a terribly deep and impossibly vast darkness had spread.

"The female scientist saw him. She saw the giant in black. I was hoping to meet him, too," D asserted softly to the new darkness that filled his surroundings.

THE GREAT SHADOWY FIGURE

Chapter 7

A voice came to the Hunter. But whose voice, and from where? Actually, it wasn't clear that it even was a voice. Though D heard it distinctly, it was impossible to decide whether it came to him through his ears or crept directly into his brain.

How good of you to come.

"What are you scheming at?" D asked, his voice swallowed up by the darkness.

My thoughts are all played out. And they have been for a long, long time.

"What are you doing here?"

Nothing.

"What did you do to the woman who was up there?"

Nothing. If anything happened to her, it is because she desired it.

"You're the one who brought her here."

I didn't bring her here. She accompanied me.

"Is this where you dwell?"

I'm not anywhere. And at the same time, I'm everywhere.

"Why did you come here?"

I just told you. I am not here. And at the same time, I'm everywhere.

D's right hand flashed out. A number of stark wooden needles flew off to all points of the compass. A heartbeat later, D's blade streaked out. Sliced in two, a needle that'd been hurled back fell to the ground.

Is that it? the voice inquired, the epitome of tranquility.

D grabbed another needle in his left hand.

What will you do next?

Suddenly, the voice changed. To a cry of surprise.

You've learned that much, have you? Then perhaps you may actually make it

out of here alive.

D felt the darkness rapidly receding. At the same time, he sensed numerous presences spring into being around him.

“So, that bastard can even manipulate life?” the hoarse voice groaned. From a position over D’s heart. “Think you can take ‘em?” it continued.

Not answering, D pulled his left fist away from his chest. With it came the bloody needle. He’d actually driven that last needle through his own heart, and had now pulled it out again. But toward what end? Though he was a dhampir—actually, precisely because he was a dhampir—there was no blow more certain to be fatal than a wooden stake through the heart.

Moving as if nothing had changed, D advanced three paces. The footing was better there.

The withered tentacles that’d spilled from the tilted pod to his right were now like a nest of serpents, twisting and writhing hypnotically. Hairy legs slid from the end of one of the pods lined up to his left. Overhead, there was the sound of flapping wings.

“Here they come,” the hoarse voice said in the barest whisper.

There were countless gleams in the darkness. Eyes. From this side and that, growls and the sound of gnashing teeth pressed closer. Even the sound of something licking its chops could be heard distinctly. All of them were famished. They had hungered ever since their deaths.

Tentacles whistled forward on the attack. The tips split open in a cruciform manner, exposing the tiny mouths within. If even one of them latched onto its prey, it would suck up the flesh and organs in an instant. Only the empty skin would be left behind.

Not even looking, D swung his blade. At some point, he’d shifted the sword to his left hand. One blow—just a single swipe—left hundreds of those deadly mouths scattered across the floor.

D pivoted to the right. A pinwheel of light spun around.

The arachnoid creatures pouncing on him were decapitated with ease, spilling

a disturbingly colored ichor. It quickly corroded the floor where it landed, sending up white smoke as the stone evaporated. Untouched by the spraying ichor, D moved with the grace of a dancer. A stark flash described an elegant arc, with the spiders it touched being cut in two as if by a machine. D's blade had seized control of the airspace. Anything that entered that area was certain to be cut down.

Suddenly, the path of his blade was upset. The spiders' corrosive ichor had eaten through the floor. Then, there was the sound of flapping wings going on the attack.

D reeled. For the beating of the wings produced ultrasonic waves. Cracks shot through the walls and floor, and fragments that'd been reduced to dust fell like rain.

The attackers were pierced by an equal number of needles, each one impaled like a spit-roasted pig. Without another glance at the plummeting forms, D swung his sword at a new foe. The enemy had numbered in the hundreds, but those ranks were definitely thinning.

All of a sudden, his opponents were gone. They vanished as completely as if they'd all been caught in a massive explosion.

"They ran for it!" the hoarse voice remarked. "But what could make 'em take off so—"

D's face was bleached by stark illumination.

The dazzling ball of light ahead of him increased in brilliance as it pushed through the shadows. It was the living fireball.

D planted his foot lightly on the floor, and then his form sailed through the air. A stark gleam of light danced toward the delicate balance maintained by the walls and columns.

The thousands of tons of rubble coming down were met with light which instantly reduced it to ash.

"Is that bastard out of his mind?" the left hand said, squeezing the words out in a tone of amazement. "That critter's the biggest show-off in the galaxy. It'll keep burning until the whole world's a cinder!"

“Where’s the extradimensional portal generator?”

The stone wall in front of D collapsed. And then it turned red hot and started to melt.

“From the layout of the ruins, it’d be on the same floor.”

Was Earth fated to melt, then?

“There’s another,” the hoarse voice continued, “in the central control room.”

“Where’s that?” asked the Hunter.

“Judging from the devastation, it’d be on the floor where we found the lady.”

There was a door about five yards away. D ran.

“It’s no use,” said the hoarse voice.

Blistering heat caught D from behind. In about two seconds, he would burn up in that atomic furnace.

D’s surroundings all burst into flames.

Just then—the shadows grew deeper. The fireball’s light was dimmed in a heartbeat, making it one with the faint gloom.

D bounded, splitting the creature’s three-foot-diameter body both horizontally and vertically. The resurrected destroyer had been sent to join its compatriots.

“Looks like we won’t be needing the control room after all,” the left hand said wearily. “I know what it was that kept you going. The moonlight energy and my power. But what made that critter suddenly go out, now that—”

Not replying, D surveyed his surroundings. They were melted. Everything was.

“Let’s head back.”

“Going up ain’t gonna be easy!”

“Where’s the high-speed elevator?”

Thinking for a while, the left hand replied, “Oh, there’s one back the way we came. But no way is it still working.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Well, I can try.”

That didn't prove necessary. The Hunter went back down the corridor, and when he came to stand in front of the doors at the far end, they opened down the middle with a metallic squeal.

“What the hell's this?” asked the hoarse voice.

Remaining silent, D slipped through the doorway.

Less than a second after the doors closed, they opened once more. The Hunter knew he was on the floor with the idol when he saw the two women standing there.

The elevator brought the group back to the surface in less than a second's time.

As soon as they were out, Valerie put one hand against the rubble-shrouded doorway. The doors and the rest of the elevator were swallowed up by the earth. Only the hole remained.

D had already noticed the change in Valerie. “What happened?” he asked Shyna.

Valerie was vacantly staring straight ahead. It seemed as if she'd finished doing something.

“About half an hour after you set out, she suddenly got up.”

The archeologist had stuck both hands out in front of her without saying a word, then lowered them and walked to the back of the chamber. Sensing that the woman was being manipulated by some power beyond her comprehension, the android Shyna had done nothing to stop her. Following along after Valerie, she came to where the woman had halted in front of the high-speed elevator. The doors were warped and the roof of the whole facility had caved in, so it seemed utterly impossible that it would work, but when Valerie put the palm of her right hand against it, the power lamp lit up. What's more, the elevator worked. And then it had gone down where D was.

“The woman is infused with a power I don't understand. However, I'm at a loss as to how that connects to her actions up until now.”

“It’s his power,” the hoarse voice groaned. “Only, when *he* thought you were gonna get roasted to death, he used the girl to save you. When she put out her hands at first, that’d be when the living fireball’s energy was cut off. The timing matches up perfectly. And then there’s the elevator. Don’t know what the intent was there.”

Shyna countered, “We can’t say for certain that she was being manipulated. It may be that she subconsciously sensed you two were in danger and went into action. Though it was probably limited to *you* being in danger.”

Needless to say, by *you* Shyna was referring to D. It seemed the girl simply couldn’t get along with the left hand.

“Return her to her senses,” D said.

“I’ll give it a shot. But it’s gonna be an uphill battle!” the left hand grumbled as it touched Valerie’s brow.

At that instant, the archeologist dropped to the ground like a felled tree.

“It worked!” Shyna remarked with apparent admiration.

“Not my doing. It happened a split second before I could touch her.”

“Well, what happened, then?”

“You mean you can’t tell, you damned wind-up toy? She just fainted all of a sudden.”

“Mind how you speak to me!”

“I thought I told you two to knock it off.”

The left hand let out a scream. D had squeezed it into a fist.

“A thousand pardons,” Shyna apologized.

“We can’t leave her in the camp,” the Hunter told her. “I know it’s a bother, but kindly carry her back to the castle.”

“Your word is my command,” Shyna replied with a nod. It filled her with joy to the bottom of her heart that the gorgeous young man had made a request of her.

But just then, Valerie said, “There’s no need for that,” and got up as if on cue.

“Are you okay?” the stunned Shyna inquired.

Valerie thanked her, saying, “I’m fine now. I have a vague recollection of what happened. D—you owe me again!”

“I know.”

Eyeing the ruins—and the camp—Valerie said, “Everyone will be getting up soon, and the new guy will be coming by. I’ll go back to the camp. Otherwise I won’t be able to do my job.”

“It’s not going to be easy,” said D. His remark covered both the murders in the camp and the massive destruction in the ruins.

“I’ll manage somehow,” Valerie replied with a sigh.

Just then, an enormous image of the duke’s face appeared in the air about fifty yards above them.

Shyna was about to address him first, but the duke’s face announced, “I had intended to return, but have become embroiled in some trouble. The bandit scum struck three villages simultaneously. Either their numbers are greater than I thought, or those from other villages are aiding them. Though rather formidable, I should have them mopped up soon enough. Wait for me back at the castle.”

From the duke’s voice, it was evident he was struggling with his pain. Moonlight energy exposures or not, walking about in the midday sun was a Herculean task for a Noble.

“I’m at the excavation site. Send a transport for me. And have a cyborg horse on it, too,” D said, intending to go to the duke.

“Very well,” the duke replied, and his face vanished.

“Please, allow me to accompany you.”

D shook his head at the android’s earnest request, telling her, “You’re to stay with Valerie and guard her. Don’t leave her side unless it would endanger you to do otherwise.”

D’s orders were the duke’s orders.

“Understood.”

The area around the trio darkened. A stocky, transport-type gyrodyne hovered above them. Such promptness was to be expected from the duke.

Leaving the other two there on the ground, D flew off.

“Don’t you think we’d have been better off bringing the scholar lady with us, at least?” the left hand immediately inquired. “She might still be under *his* influence. Left to her own devices, there’s no telling what might happen!”

“She’s got a job to do. As do I. The duke’s the one I’ve got to watch.”

“No rest for the wicked.”

II

The Pitch Black Gang’s incursions came with lightning speed. Villages were burnt to the ground, and every last inhabitant was slaughtered. They struck at dawn, and there was nothing the villagers could do. The villages had guards. The duke had sent upgraded android soldiers to all three communities. However, the enemy was more powerful still.

Particle cannons upgraded to a level unthinkable for bandit weapons tore through the soldiers’ force fields and armor alike as if they were paper, while electronic scramblers caused the androids’ high-tech guns to run amok. In one village, the soldiers actually attacked the villagers.

On receiving an urgent communique, the duke was speeding toward the first village within five minutes. The bandits offered fierce resistance, destroying half the android soldiers who accompanied him before every last one of them was slain. And these were new soldiers that’d been customized in the aircraft in keeping with the urgent communique.

As there was no longer any response from the second village, the duke hurried on to the third. The entire village was already in flames, and there was no sign of any inhabitants trying to escape. The only figures to greet the duke’s eyes were the villagers lying in puddles of blood. Not one of them still had their limbs attached.

“This is madness,” the Nobleman groaned, and just then he heard laughter

from back in the flames where no one should've been. For whatever reason, the duke went after him without any reinforcements.

Passing through the flames, he entered the eastern forest. White smoke billowed from his cape and hair.

"So you came? Come on!" the voice called to the duke, egging him on.

In no time he came to an area surrounded by bizarre stones. They were ruins from a time that would have been ancient and unknown even to the duke. Said ruins were constructed by people called "the Wanderers," but even now no one knew where they'd come from, where they went to, or why they chose to build such a thing in this particular location.

The twisted columns were carved with the faces and forms of legendary beasts. When the duke stepped into the ring they formed, he felt the strength drain from his body.

"You can barely stand now, can you, Duke?"

The voice issued from about ten yards ahead, where someone had appeared atop a towering boulder. It was the boss of the Pitch Black Gang—Vulcan Lura.

"I figure you know this already, but this was a holy place for ancient people. It's a spot where an unknown energy from the planet flows up to the surface. Seems that through spells and dances, they were able to use it as they liked. To give themselves more power and make the Nobility weaker, or so I've heard. I said I'd destroy everything you had someday. Remember that?" Vulcan asked in a tone brimming with a ferocious self-confidence.

The duke looked up at his face in silence.

"First, I'll take your life. Your castle and treasure will come later."

Vulcan raised the item he carried in his right hand. A crossbow. It was one of the most hated weapons for the Nobility. The only possible reason they hadn't erased its existence from human memory was the Nobles' abiding love of nostalgia.

The *Thrummm!* of the string split the air.

The duke reeled. An iron arrow pierced his right lung.

“How’s that? See, I’m a lousy shot with this thing. I’ve never hit the bullseye with the first shot. I’ll take a couple more. What are you gonna do?” Vulcan asked threateningly, almost mad himself with the challenge.

Nocking a second arrow and taking aim, his eyes met those of the duke, who was still looking at him, prompting him to ask, “What the hell are you staring at?”

Once again the string twanged, putting an arrow through the duke’s left eye to jut from the back of his head.

Not even bothering to reach for the arrow, the duke asked him, “Why do you kill my people?” His was a quiet tone.

“Because they’re your people! We attack other places, too, but here it’s different. It’s just their bad luck to be living in your jurisdiction.”

“Who taught you how to tap the power of these ruins?”

“Last night, I went underground. And down there—I met *him*,” Vulcan replied, but the way he said it was strange. To an ordinary human, it would’ve sounded like there was a sense of respect. And it could be stated with all certainty that the words came from the very bottom of Vulcan’s heart.

“You learned from the great one, did you?”

“I wasn’t trying to learn anything. And *he* probably didn’t mean to teach me, either. But we met. I just picked up how to do it—that’s all.”

“Why did you go underground?”

“Because I’d heard something else was supposed to be hidden down there in the neighborhood of those ruins. The ultimate weapon you once used, that could destroy even you. Hell, I hear any Nobles would be turned to dust in the face of that weapon, and there isn’t a thing they could do about it!”

“That . . . I was going to destroy it. However . . . the great one stopped me.”

“Oh, why is that?”

“He found fault with me, a Noble, making use of something that would kill Nobility.”

“So, what was the point in keeping something like that around?”

“The great one told me something. The sun will set on immortals, too. And when it does, that may be of use to you once more, he said.”

“Oh. So people starting to dig up that area is supposed to mean that day’s finally rolled around?”

“You may believe what you like.”

“Doesn’t it bother you?”

“It takes strength to worry about something. And that has long since left me.”

“The Tiger King?” Vulcan murmured. He didn’t spit the words with disgust. Could it be—it saddened him?

“I’m gonna let you in on a secret. That bit about me meeting *him* was a lie. I never went down in the hole. It was my father that taught me how to control the power here.”

“Your father?”

“He was nothing like me, just an ordinary, sweet old dad. And look what’s become of his son! My father used to blame it on my having my granddaddy’s blood!”

A vicious gleam resided in Vulcan’s eyes.

“I suppose it’s just about that time. So long, Tiger King.”

The string twanged a third time.

There was a sound they never should’ve heard.

“Gaaah!”

It was Vulcan who groaned and staggered. And what was buried deep in the right side of his chest but the iron arrow he’d just now fired?

To the gorgeous figure who’d raced to his side, drawing his blade and batting away the deadly arrow in a single motion, the duke said, “D?”

Getting on the aircraft and racing out there, then following after the duke—there was no problem with that so far as the timing went.

“How did you know I was here?”

“The energy that clown tapped out here was easy for me to sense,” the hoarse voice replied. To Vulcan, who was writhing atop the boulder, it continued, “Where’s your unicorn? Getting a little too big for your britches. See how weak you are without your guardian angel?”

“No, I don’t see,” Vulcan said with a laugh, pressing down on his shoulder. Then his expression changed. For he’d looked into D’s eyes.

“Wait,” the duke said, grabbing D’s arm just as he was ready to pounce. “Leave him to me.”

Reaching for the iron arrow through his eye, the Nobleman pulled it out. The shattered eyeball and optic nerve came with it. The wound quickly closed, an eyeball rising from the depths of the blood-filled socket.

After removing the arrow from the right side of his chest as well, the duke stepped forward.

“I’ll wait until you’ve pulled that arrow out,” the Nobleman said. “Be quick about it.”

Clucking his tongue with disgust, Vulcan removed the arrow. He quaked from head to toe with the agony of tearing flesh, but he endured it.

Suddenly, the bandit stood as proud and tall as a guardian deity. “Die!” he shouted, hurling the arrow.

For the first time, the duke swept out with his staff.

The arrow changed direction, driving straight into the boulder Vulcan was standing on.

“What the hell?!” the hoarse voice exclaimed in surprise, its cry erased by a roar. For over a hundred tons of boulder had collapsed like so much sand.

Vulcan fell on the far side of the sand mound.

A cry of astonishment that fell shy of actual words flew from the duke’s mouth.

After the roar was over and the dust had settled, a black unicorn stood on the

far side of the expanse of sand. Vulcan was on its back and had already taken the reins in hand.

The staff flew from the duke's right hand. It impaled the unicorn through the throat and Vulcan through the chest, pinning them to the trunk of a tree behind them.

"It's my guardian angel, that's for sure," Vulcan said, glaring at the duke from high in the saddle. "I underestimated you today. Next time, we'll finish this."

The unicorn backed up and turned sharply, then ran off into the forest.

"He's gone," the duke said, wiping the sweat from his brow. It was a human affectation. Nobles didn't sweat.

Sheathing his blade, D asked, "Why did you stop me?"

"A whim."

"I'd have cut him down. You got in my way."

"I could've killed him, too. It was the unicorn that got in the way."

"I thought as much," said D.

"About what?"

"Go back to the castle," D said, and he started walking away, but after a while he looked back.

The Tiger King who'd reduced a boulder to dust with a single shot was silently headed off in pursuit of the fleeing unicorn. Sunlight filtered through the trees, dappling the Nobleman from head to toe. As he went, his was the loneliest-looking back D had ever seen.

III

Work began right on time. The crane hoisted up chunks of rock, and a spiderlike robot used extendable arms to pick through the rubble. In about two hours, a number of small doors had been found beneath a mountain of earth. The electronic cutter's laser sent blinding sparks flying as it opened a bore hole in the wall by one of the doors, and as a result of the images sent to a handheld viewer by the threadlike fiber optic camera pushed through, the party had

discovered a room filled with countless artifacts.

The door had a firm lock on it, which took more than an hour to burn through even with the laser cutter. Dressed in biohazard suits, the survey party members entered the room, where the gleam from golden plates and statues made it impossible to hide their avaricious expressions. Capturing the entire room on film, they numbered each item, then photographed them again individually. But as they did their work as archeologists, they spoke to each other with their eyes.

These plates will fetch a hundred thousand dalas each, easily!

Every last thing's made of gold. Looks like it. The ancient Nobility really did know how to transmute elements, eh?

An item apiece sound good to you?

Yeah, but freaking Valerie will never go for it.

They looked over their shoulders at the female archeologist they knew had to be watching them.

A day earlier, she'd stepped outside with five of their colleagues and hadn't come back until that very morning. Their colleagues had all been found dead, but the others in the tents had cleaned up the scene and kept quiet about it. Because it had been clear at a glance what had happened. The only problem was that the wrong people had wound up dead.

Having returned early that morning, Valerie didn't say anything about the incident either, and they didn't ask, so both sides had dived headlong into a cloud of suspicion. Only one thing was clear to them. *She's been possessed.*

There was something different about the air she had and the look in her eye—actually, anyone who got near her felt her giving off a vibration that threatened to make them pass out, so no one had been able to get any information out of her. Valerie didn't say a word about the events of the night before and had gone right to work as if nothing had ever happened. But something really was different. Just being beside her, or even the thought of being around her, made them feel like the blood was draining from them, their nerves were misfiring, and their organs were failing. *Sooner or later, we're*

gonna end up dead—that was the feeling that’d intensified.

The mood in camp changed when a survey member checking the three-dimensional radar in the tent shouted, “Hey, we’ve got something here! There’s something way underground. A spot twelve miles down. Can’t get a good image on it, which is no great surprise, but it’s there sure enough.”

“What’s there?”

“I don’t know. But it’s something really enormous. Just from the parts it’s bouncing off, it’s a hundred fifty feet long, a hundred fifty wide—and I don’t know how tall. Figuring in for the parts that are fuzzy, and this is something serious here!”

“A new set of ruins?”

A buzz went through the group.

“I don’t know. What should we do?”

“Let’s get the camera in closer. Get it strapped onto ‘the mole,’” said a cheery voice. It was brimming with strength from his high hopes for this new discovery.

“Oh no you don’t,” Valerie said, cutting them off right there.

“What are you talking about?!”

Everyone—even those who were in other tents and couldn’t see her—glared at the woman. This was a major discovery, something in a whole different dimension from some plates and idols. They’d probably go down in history. So what did she think she was doing?!

The eyes the men trained on Valerie were already bloodshot. She met them with a look that was cold—actually, it was an utter void.

“You’re not to touch what’s down there,” she informed them in a tone as flat as a machine’s.

“Have you lost your mind? This is the find of the century!”

“We’ll all be heroes of the academic world. So will you.”

“You’re not gonna get your way on this, Valerie!”

Her colleagues weren’t on her side any more.

“You know, Pike and Jimemem got the same sort of thinking into their heads,” she said.

Her colleagues’ expressions changed.

“So, you were the one who killed them after all?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then we’ll just have to make you pay for that crime!”

Apparently “greed,” the thickest component in human blood, allowed the others to forget their fear of Valerie.

They all pressed forward a step, but then, down at their feet, a white-hot beam of light arced around, and the men had to back away from the blaze on the stone floor. Before they could look up for the source of that beam, a supple shape landed on the stone floor, taking the form of a girl in an azure dress.

“Thank you, Shayna.”

“It’s Shyna.” Aiming her index finger at the men, the android girl asked, “What shall I do?”

“Huh?” said Valerie.

“Shall I get rid of them right here and now?”

“No, don’t do that. They’re my colleagues—after a fashion.”

“Very well,” Shyna replied, lowering her finger.

The men were so relieved, they started feeling lightheaded.

Time flowed along peacefully for a while.

“Say, Valerie,” one of the men began in the sort of voice a dying man used to address his physician. “Why are you against excavating that thing? It’s down a good sixty thousand feet. Digging it up sure won’t be easy. We’d need to get heavier equipment from the Capital out here.”

“In that case, better to just let it lie there, then. It’s—”

“It’s what?”

Glared at by reproachful eyes, Valerie found herself perplexed. Still, she

seemed to be searching for an answer. Her expression swiftly faded, and her eyes became a sandy void.

Shyna slowly raised her index finger. And pointed it at Valerie.

“It’s something *bad*.”

“What do you mean?” another man said, baring his teeth. “You supposed to know what it is or something?”

“It’s—the ultimate weapon.”

“The what?!”

Everyone bugged their eyes.

“It’s something Duke Van Doren used long, long ago to slay enemy Nobility. No one’s supposed to touch it.”

“Is this a joke? If it’s as dangerous as all that, why bury it in the ground instead of destroying it? That had to have been a hell of a lot more trouble than smashing it to bits.”

“Forget it,” Valerie said, her voice suddenly thin. “Forget all about it, and never speak of it again. Or else—”

“Or else what?”

The men were practically snarling at her. Murderous intent swirled at the bottom of that hole like the dust of antiquity. The sun was high.

It was almost noon when D and the duke returned to the castle. That was due to the duke’s making the rounds to encourage the villagers who’d survived the attacks.

“Thank you,” a certain boy said, taking the duke’s hand.

“Are you not afraid of me?” the Nobleman asked.

“No, not a bit. I see nothing to be scared of. Nothing unjust, nothing ugly, nothing detestable.”

The boy was blind.

“Come with me to my castle. I shall give you the use of your eyes before the

day is out.”

“No, I’m fine the way they are now. I may not have my sight, but everyone’s kind to me.”

“Very well, but if you should ever change your mind—I’ll be waiting!”

“Thank you for the offer,” the boy said, bowing his head, and a moment later he exploded. It was a heroic sort of suicide bombing made possible by the power of spontaneous human combustion.

Inside the aircraft, the hoarse voice ridiculed the duke, saying, “They don’t love you, do they?”

The duke didn’t reply, but on returning to the castle, he invited D to his chambers.

“Join me in a drink,” he said, taking a bottle of elaborately cut crystal from a cabinet of pure gold, then filling a pair of glasses to the rim with deep red liquid. “It’s an exceptional wine I inherited from my grandfather two millennia ago. Grandfather said he saved it for me instead of drinking it himself.”

“What about your father?” D inquired. That was a miracle.

“Grandfather intended to leave his title and position as administrator, this castle and these lands, and all his rights and privileges to me. Father was furious, of course, and he plotted with my elder brother to assassinate Grandfather.”

Nothing from the Hunter.

“Somehow I learned of their plot and destroyed them both. Even now I can feel most distinctly what it was like driving the stakes through their hearts, and lopping their heads off.”

“And what became of your grandfather? That was Duke Jackinesin Van Doren, if I’m not mistaken.”

The duke downed his drink. In one go he drained the contents of a rather large glass—nearly a half quart of liquor.

“I wish I could say that even now in the northern Frontier sectors his name retains the same eternal fame as Lord Greylancer’s, but it’s not nearly in the

same league. At any rate, while he may not have been the very greatest of Noblemen, Grand Duke Jackinesin was beyond a doubt a Greater Noble. I destroyed him, too.”

D’s left hand murmured, “Oh, my.”

“The reason for it I don’t recall very well. It may have involved a certain human songstress, or was it trouble over an attack satellite parked in orbit over the castle?”

“You had a younger brother as well, didn’t you?”

“He was in league with Grandfather, so they were destroyed together.”

“By your hand?”

“That’s correct. I drove my staff through my younger brother’s chest with this very hand. My cute little brother, who’d caught sprites with me in the forest so often in our youth.”

Holding his hands out, the duke spread his fingers.

“Why can’t I shake the way it felt? When I lopped off Father’s head, I felt the blade sink into his flesh. When I cut through my elder brother’s spine, so hard it felt. When I drove the stake through Grandfather’s heart, the blood he spat up on my hand was warm. The tip of the stake I drove into my little brother’s chest was stopped by one of his ribs. That feeling, as I smashed through it to pierce his heart—why will it not fade?”

The duke turned his palms toward D.

“See? Just as I said, their blood is on my hands.”

D’s eyes couldn’t detect a single stain on his palms.

“It was the height of winter when I killed Father and my elder brother. There was a raging snowstorm outside my windows. When the deed was done and Grandfather and I embraced, my hands were horribly frozen. It was as if they’d been thrust in the snow since the day I was born.”

The duke walked over to the cabinet. Taking out a fresh bottle, he set it down on the small table.

“It was summer when I destroyed Grandfather and my little brother. A terribly hot night, as I recall. And yet, when I lopped off their heads and pierced their hearts, my hands were frozen to the bone. Ever since, I’ve been ice to my very marrow.”

“Ever in winter?” said D.

“A Tiger in winter,” the hoarse voice added, the remark slipping out. “All alone—a true orphan king.”

The cork was pulled from the new bottle. A heavy aroma filled the chamber.

“I’m not feeling well today,” said the duke. “If you would be so kind as to leave me. Best that you see to what you need to do, D.”

The young man in black left.

With one gulp the duke drained the fragrant liquid he’d poured into the glass. There was more than his mouth could hold, the remainder running out and staining him from neck to chest. Viscous. And red. It was human blood.

“Leavis, Kazel, Sebastian,” the duke said, gazing at three unnatural spaces on the wall. Each would’ve perfectly accommodated a small portrait. “Leavis—I dispatched you myself. Why did I choose to support mere humans instead of siding with you?” he said. “Kazel—the great one took you away. Why didn’t I stop him? When you refused, why did I cut off your arms and legs and deliver you to the great one? Sebastian—you left after blaming me for letting Kazel go so shamelessly. I cut off your legs. And you dragged yourself out. Even now, the streaks of blood remain in these corridors. Should I have taken your arms off as well?”

The duke let out a deep breath. A pair of fangs protruded from a maw dyed crimson.

“And you, D—why do you resemble my sons so?!” the duke howled.

The sun was still high, and there was no one there to hear the voice of the Tiger King in winter.

Taking his left hand away from the door, D slowly started to walk down the corridor. For that day, he had three new incidents waiting for him.

FANGS OF THE TIGER KING

Chapter 8

I

It was just before the sun was at its highest that the rebel army attacked the Pitch Black Gang in the northern forest region where they'd assembled. Even to Vulcan, who was busy tending to the wound he'd received from one of his own arrows, this came as the proverbial bolt out of the blue.

While other bandit groups preyed on isolated humans beyond the Nobility's protection or bands of nomads, the Pitch Black Gang terrorized Nobles' domains to their hearts' content and fled with impunity entirely thanks to one of their leader's superhuman powers—a precognitive ability. But this time, their enemy seemed protected by a force that kept Vulcan's power from working. Perhaps it was that same force that allowed the rebels to neutralize the gang's defensive shields and kill their hand-picked lookouts, striking the battle-hardened villains before anyone could notice and raise the alarm. In less than five minutes' time, eighty percent of the Pitch Black Gang had been stabbed, shot, burned, or vaporized.

When Vulcan came out of the tent where he made his preparations, the enemy vanguard had closed to within fifty yards of him. He was already astride his unicorn. And every attack by the rebel army bounced off him, while his attacks proved effective. He had a weapon the Pitch Black Gang took great pride in—a rotary cannon. Fed by a belt from the hundred-thousand-round magazine that rested on the ground, the motor gun sprayed lead at a rate of six thousand rounds a minute, ripping horses and riders to shreds.

When a ring of over a hundred shredded men had taken shape, a man on a white horse came through the bluish smoke and halted right in front of the gun's muzzles. "I'm Gilshark. I lead the rebel army," he said by way of introduction.

Vulcan also introduced himself, and he added, "I'm surprised you made it this far."

"All thanks to a certain Noble," Gilshark replied.

“You’re human?”

The bandit leader easily had seven thousand rounds left. What’s more, his beloved steed was a unicorn, which rendered its rider indestructible.

Taking no particular care, Vulcan pulled the trigger. A fusillade of twenty-millimeter slugs should’ve reduced Gilshark’s upper body to bloody pulp, his flesh blasted into a fine mist. But no bullets flew from the weapon. The blisteringly hot motor merely spun its six barrels at incredible speed.

“Useless piece of shit!” Vulcan bellowed, raising the weapon with his right hand alone and swinging it down at Gilshark. The ammo belt trailed after it like a serpent’s tail.

“Easy there,” Gilshark said, bending backward as he caught the mass of steel, then swinging the muzzles around toward Vulcan and pulling the trigger.

This wasn’t a gun; it was a cannon. A direct hit from its twenty-millimeter slugs would blow apart a human torso. The stand of trees behind Vulcan was mowed down, and rocks were pulverized. The soil was blown so far back there, the scars would remain in the ground for a lifetime.

“You’re protected? Well, at least I got it to fire,” the rebel army leader said, discarding the weapon after discharging only a thousand rounds.

“Where’d you get that power?” asked Vulcan.

“In the deep, dark bowels of the earth.”

“You went down there?” the bandit leader said with a thin smile. “Then let me test something. I wanna see what his power’s like.”

Suddenly, Vulcan drove his boots against the unicorn’s flanks.

Kicking off the ground, the unicorn bent in its legs, turning itself into a bullet. Pierced cleanly through the heart and out the back, Gilshark was easily taken out of the saddle. The unicorn tossed him high into the air. The rebel leader’s body went as high as the top of the towering tree beside him, where it snagged on a branch and didn’t come down.

“Finished already? You weren’t as tough as you claimed. Is the supposed ultimate weapon the duke used equally disappointing?” Vulcan mused, spitting

the words bitterly before pulling back on the reins.

The ground before him collapsed impressively. It wasn't merely a matter of the material giving way. The ground at the surface had ceased to exist.

A gravity field generator?!

Before the bandit could even look up into the tree in astonishment, Gilshark landed with a thud. Rubbing the small of his back with exaggerated groans, he got back to his feet and said, "I'm getting too old for this. So, what say we see whose protector is more powerful? Petty though it may seem."

The air rang with a sharp metallic sound. The bodies of the unicorn and Vulcan grew as blurry as a heat shimmer. A black sphere suddenly appeared in front of the steed and rider, and the instant the unicorn's horn touched it, it swiftly vanished.

"Did science trump legend?" Gilshark said, bending backward with a laugh. "I hate to tell you this, but that science is backed by *his* power."

As soon as he finished saying that, the harsh, grating noise stopped.

Gilshark squinted. There was no sign of the unicorn or its rider anywhere. They'd been sucked into someplace of nigh infinite mass and almost nonexistent volume.

"Seems the time's come for Tiger King Van Doren's reign of terror to end. I'm heading straight off to hit his castle now. Now it's his turn to wait in fear, as we've done for so long."

Astride his white steed, the rebel leader galloped off with his surviving compatriots.

Before long, there were signs of life and grunts from the forest that'd been filled by corpses and the stench of blood alone.

The forest's oldest inhabitants had come to feed on the carrion—ghouls. But their grunts, rather shrill sounds that rolled across the ground, stopped dead. In one spot the ground had been disturbed—a semicircular depression about thirty feet across—and something wavered indistinctly at its center like a heat shimmer. Until it resolved into a human shape, the ghouls held their breath,

and even the wind stopped.

In no time, what should come out of the depression with dusty earth crumbling from him but someone unmistakably human?

A mouth that hadn't yet formed lips spun a voice packed with emotion, grumbling, "So, that idiotic human doesn't know that the blood of Nobility flows in my veins? If he wants to know about the ultimate weapon, I'll show him just what it can do."

Less than an hour after the two leaders clashed, the duke received word that the rebel army was advancing. The duke in turn conveyed that information to D.

"It would seem they're coming down the road at considerable speed. As a result, they should be here in a day's time—about noon tomorrow."

"What about your androids?"

"They're being destroyed, one after another. To be honest, I didn't think the humans were that strong yet."

"The world keeps moving on," D said, his voice suddenly hoarse. "What do you plan on doing? Nobody'd blame you if you made a run for it!"

Grinning wryly, the duke clapped the Hunter on the right shoulder and said, "How often the thought has occurred to me—yes, about a hundred thousand times. But not once could I do it. And this time will be no different."

The Nobleman directed a nod to the air. What was projected there was the scene of a battle between android peacekeeping forces and the rebel army. All the peacekeepers' light-based weapons were blocked by force fields or shields incorporating lenses, so they'd been forced to initiate an aerial bombardment that'd left the rebel army on the brink of annihilation.

The rebels' salvation came when, following a heat shimmer like blur, a black sphere suddenly appeared. It was a void that sucked in everything within a thousand yards. That included laser beams and the flames left by the bombing.

The androids requested a strike from the plasma cannon on the surveillance *satellite*. When the duke authorized it, the rebel army moved into a nearby village. The duke then ordered a halt to the attack. The villagers were now

hostages.

“Here comes the gravity field!” said the hoarse voice, and at that moment the image faded. “Camera got taken out. What a catastrophe.”

Right hand cupped behind his ear, the duke said, “The satellite was taken out.”

The hoarse voice continued, “Looks like he got some power from *him* down in the depths of the earth, too. And on top of that—”

“He altered himself,” the duke said, picking up the thread. “There’s no way a human being could supersede the power of the great one. He may believe himself to be in control, but he’s being manipulated. The fact that fear of the plasma cannon caused him to flee into the very village he should be protecting is proof of that.”

“Is he too strong, or is the human too weak?”

No one answered the hoarse voice.

After a little while, the duke turned to D and said, “I’ll thank you to keep out of this.” He was referring to the final decisive battle with the rebel army.

“I’ll be the one to slay you,” D replied.

Just then, the face of a beautiful woman appeared in the air. There was only her head. And it was gazing up at the group from where it rested on the ground.

“Shyna?!”

“Dr. Valerie ran amok at the excavation site,” the lovely android informed them coolly, and then the image dispersed in the air.

“What’s going on over there?” asked the duke, eyes still trained on the now-empty space.

“I’ll go see,” D told him.

II

Even before dismounting from his cyborg horse, D noticed something strange about the silence. Stillness alone didn’t mean death. If there were people alive there, the place would’ve burned with their life force. It would be a palpable

presence. But here, there was nothing save unmistakable death.

Standing on the brink of the great subsidence, D looked down. And immediately leapt in.

Corpses were strewn there. The throats of all of them were rent. Each had been carved in a neat crescent, with deep red fluid still pooled in the wound.

Shyna's head lay down by the Hunter's feet. When D stooped down and reached for it, her lips moved faintly. Perhaps she was saying, *Don't . . . look . . . at . . . me . . .*

"Where's Valerie?" D said, asking only what was pertinent.

"She came . . . out of . . . the hole . . . Was possessed . . . by something . . . Can't . . . control . . . herself."

D looked all around.

"Can't detect her," said his left hand. "It's his power. Done a hell of a job of erasing her presence."

"What caused all this?" D asked, gazing at Shyna's head.

"Something . . . underground . . . Valerie . . . wouldn't let them . . . dig it up."

"What was it?"

"Don't . . . know," Shyna said, her voice suddenly sounding distant. Her energy had run out.

"Thank you, Shyna. You did an excellent job."

"Was I . . . of . . . service?"

"Very much so."

She might have tried to smile then. But every trace of emotion vanished from Shyna's face.

Taking her head in both hands, D stood up. Setting it at the edge of the subsidence, he backed away a step and tipped his traveler's hat. He then turned right around and exited the hole.

From the north, thunderheads were starting to build in the otherwise clear

sky.

“That’s the direction the rebel army’s coming from,” the hoarse voice remarked. “Looks like it’ll be a hell of a storm.”

D slowly started forward on his cyborg horse. Clouds and a storm—the story was beginning to set a fitting stage for the gorgeous young man.

When darkness fell, people always locked the doors to their homes, shut the windows, and drew the curtains. After that—all they could do was wait. But tonight would be different. The rebel army had just left. Though the tiny village hadn’t been turned into a battlefield, it still resembled one, with no less than fifty of the villagers shooting off fireworks to celebrate the army’s push forward.

“He was a good lord, though,” they would say. “But all that’s over now. There’s a world coming that’s ours alone.”

“Yeah, Captain Gilshark’s on the move. The rebel army’s going in. Our lord has had it. Let it all go up in flames,” others laughed.

We don’t have to fear the Nobility any more, they all thought. Therefore, every house in the village had its doors and windows open wide despite the distant rumbles of thunder and the wind rocking the tree branches, determined to be free of that which had held them for millennia. Now it was their turn to lick *their* chops, and an old protest song flowed from every house.

*It’s only the night breeze coming in,
Not a Noble’s breath, so stop worryin’.*

D.

The Hunter was certain someone had called his name. He turned toward the window.

The suite the duke had given him consisted of five rooms. It was so spacious, a hundred assassins could’ve snuck in and hidden there.

The voice he heard came from outside the window. D went over to it and looked down. His sword and sheath, taken from his back, were in his right hand.

He was on the fifth floor. At the base of the plunging walls lay a moonlit lawn. And there stood Valerie.

Come out, D.

Her voice couldn't reach that high. However, D's ears caught the words distinctly.

Opening the window, D inquired, "What do you want?"

Please, help me, the archeologist said, her voice colored by a mournfulness devoid of deception. *Something else is controlling me. A little while ago, I drank the blood of some people in a village somewhere.*

D threw himself out the window. Though he landed right beside Valerie, he still didn't make a sound. He'd dropped five floors. And each of those floors was easily twice as high as in an ordinary building. It'd been at least a hundred and sixty feet.

"I know why this is happening. Some power possessed me when I was down there, underground. An incredible power. A power so great, it can turn humans into Nobility without ever drinking their blood."

Valerie slowly opened her mouth. Captivating though they were, her canine teeth were plainly fangs.

"I haven't completely turned into a Noble yet," Valerie said, closing her mouth. There was a shadow at her feet. It was only half as dark as a normal person's—just like D's.

"I still have my own will. That's what makes this so painful. I just—it was his will that made me do it, but I remember everything. In other words, it wasn't my will, but it was still me that did it."

"I got a firsthand account from Shyna," D said.

Valerie covered her ears.

"It was his will that they not dig up the thing they found underground. You're being manipulated to enforce it."

Valerie nodded. "I came out tonight to get rid of *that thing*. But I was able to fight it and come to see you. The blood that I drank probably helped me. It

made me stronger.”

Valerie’s shoulders trembled, and she squeezed her hands into tight fists. Her head hung low.

“Can you keep it in check?” D asked flatly.

“I can manage, for the moment. But ten minutes from now, I really can’t say. D—kill me,” Valerie said, looking up at him. Her eyes gave off a red glow.

In a single, fluid motion, D drew and struck with the sword he carried. It definitely went right through Valerie’s neck. The Hunter felt it slice through her vertebrae. However, Valerie didn’t budge, and her head didn’t fall off. She just grinned at him.

“D, who are you, anyway?” Valerie asked, her hands up by her chest, the fingers curled like hooks. “I understand just a little—about him, I mean. What does it mean when he says that you alone are special?”

She was slowly moving closer.

“Tell me, D, was he trying to change the world? Was he trying to make a world without Nobility, even though he’s a Noble?”

Suddenly, Valerie raised her hands and clawed at her hair. A scream split her lips. Anyone who heard it wouldn’t be sleeping again for quite some time.

Before D could take a step forward, Valerie kicked off the ground. Leaping away a good ten yards, she turned around and vanished into the darkness.

D went straight into a run. And while running, he whistled. As he left the garden, his cyborg horse came galloping from the direction of the castle entrance. He leapt on and galloped away.

“We ain’t gonna catch up to her, you know,” the hoarse voice remarked, its words streaming in the wind. “So, her destination—think it’s the excavation site?”

“It couldn’t be anywhere else,” D replied, his words torn and scattered as soon as they left his lips. “How long can she last?”

“Don’t know, but she can’t have long. It’s too much to carry. For *him*, he’s possessing her with maybe all the power in his fingertip, but to a human—”

The Hunter galloped on—and reached his destination. Everyone from the camp was dead, leaving the place lying there like a graveyard beneath the night wind and the moonlight.

Going to the edge of the ruins, D got off his cyborg steed. He placed his left hand against the ground.

“She’s underground,” the hoarse voice told him. “Something’s rumbling.”

“Think she intends to destroy it?”

“That’s what she said—but I wouldn’t call this the sounds of destruction.”

“What, then?”

“What if her will’s winning out?”

“Then she’d put that *thing back* into operation?” D asked.

“Well, looks like that storm’s the least of anyone’s concerns now.”

“Let’s go!”

“What the—?!” the hoarse voice exclaimed.

D intended to go below. It was the roaring from the earth that stopped him. First, the wind had billowed out. It came with such a lack of force, it was as if the ground, in its death throes, had seemingly breathed its last. Suddenly, there was devastation. To D’s eyes, it looked as if everything had become some weird beast aiming for the sky. Pillars, canopy ceilings, roofs, bulwarks, foundations—all of them leaving noise and shock and destruction in their wake as they flew upward willfully and generously. Was it outer space they sought, or freedom?

Had all that been buried down there? A billion tons of masonry, a hundred million of machinery, a thousand tons of art, and a million of frozen blood. And then they would fall. Rising to the heavens, hands grasping but failing to catch the stars—

Once again the earth rumbled. It was as if every sound since the dawn of creation had been assembled in one place. Pillar collided with pillar, smashing each other, ceilings clashed against the enormous idol with the force of a nuclear weapon, everything plummeting back down into the depths of the earth—

As D was struck from head to toe by waves of sound from the destruction that still roared across heaven and earth, his left hand inquired, “Her doing?”

“Wish I could say it most certainly is, but I can’t,” the Hunter replied. “What’s going on with that thing underground?”

“World will probably come to an end before it could ever be dug up. Is that what *he* wanted?”

As D was passing through the foyer, he encountered the duke. When the Nobleman asked him what’d transpired, the Hunter told him, “You’re too late.”

“I was off in a nearby village, you see.”

D explained the situation.

“So she did it,” the duke lamented. “Then she lives no more. However, this may be for the best. *That thing* must never be brought to the surface.”

“So long as it’s out there somewhere, the desire to dig it up will take root. Can you assure me it won’t?”

“No one can offer such assurances. Such is the world we live in,” the duke replied, heaving a sigh. “According to reports from the front, the rebel army will arrive at break of day. Once the battle begins, you’re to evacuate to another location. I shall supply you with a guide.”

“No, I won’t,” D told him flatly. “I can’t have you getting away from me.”

“I would never do such a—” the duke began to say, a grin rising on his lips. He’d just realized the meaning of D’s words.

In order to escape, he would have to be alive. And D knew the old man they called the Tiger wasn’t the kind of man to run from his foes with his tail between his legs. If he lived, it would mean he’d crushed the enemy.

You’ll be fine—that’s what D was saying.

Not saying a word, the duke clapped D on the shoulder. There was something feeble about the way he did so.

III

D suddenly opened his eyes. A shadowy figure was standing by the same

window where he'd heard Valerie's voice.

You?!

There was no need to ask.

"Why are you here?"

To meet you, probably.

"Probably?"

Sometimes, I can't fathom why I do the things I do. Perhaps I'm not myself.

"That's no excuse for all the things you've done."

Take the long road. From what I've seen, it seems unlikely to change your fate. No matter where you go, the road leads to carnage.

The shadowy figure wavered.

When D got up, all his weight was focused on his left hand, which rested on the bed. Using the force of the springs, he took to the air. In midair, he drew his blade and struck at the shadowy figure's neck in a single motion. A heartbeat earlier, something the shadowy figure hurled had pierced the left side of D's chest.

"Your fate is an instantaneous death," the figure said.

And as he listened to those words, D swung his sword down. It made contact.

Opening his eyes, D gazed down by his feet. A black iron arrow had been cut right in two. The front half was embedded in the floor. The blade he'd swung at his foe in the dream had cut down an arrow that had flown in through the window in reality.

The sky was an ashen gray. The wind was strong. Night was already at an end.

"That apathetic bastard the Tiger seriously doesn't have any force fields up?" the left hand groused, its curses flowing through the faint gloom.

D went over by the window.

The far reaches of the grounds around the castle were swarming with countless people and weapons. The air whistled. Thousands of black streaks

were flying into every window in the castle. Catching one in his left hand, D used it to bat down a second, then a third.

“The rebel army’s here,” the hoarse voice noted. “But what the hell’s wrong with the defensive forces? How did an army that big get so close without anybody noticing?”

“It’s *his* power.”

“It can’t be. Then those footprints we saw?”

“Gilshark’s, apparently,” the Hunter replied.

“Wow,” the left hand groaned, a fresh arrow grazing the back of it.

More arrows flew in through other windows, sticking in the wall and ruthlessly laying waste to the furniture.

Suddenly, bursts of flame went up in scattered parts of the horde of humanity. Blobs of black and vermillion shot skyward. For the defenders had begun their counterattack. The bursts of flame spread with breathtaking speed, and where one patch met another the flames grew enormous, swallowing up people and weapons alike.

The hoarse voice said gravely, “When a Noble sets his mind to it, he can end a battle in seconds. So, what’s the rebel army’s next move?”

The rebel army called off its offensive. They’d lost half their number in this most recent counterattack.

Unexpectedly, several crane-like mechanical arms went up. At the end of each was a bucket the size of a small house. And in those buckets were tiny figures with weapons held at the ready.

“They’re freaking kids,” the left hand groaned. “That’s a hell of a thing. Has ol’ Gilshark finally lost even his soul to *the bastard* and his power?”

D was silent.

“So, what’ll the duke’s next move be?” the left hand murmured.

Just then, a loudspeaker called out, “Your grace, most merciful lord of our domain!” It was Gilshark. “Knowing it may bring an eternal curse upon us, we

have come to light the fires of resistance on your castle this very day. The children presently raised high in the sky are all valiant warriors prepared to give their lives, the equal of any normal soldier. Shoot them down. If for some reason you are unable to do so, then I request that you, O lord, come out of your castle alone to face me, the leader of the rebel army.”

His tone was bitingly polite. The deluded challenge came from his certainty that the duke couldn't refuse. However, using children as a shield while he issued his challenge, or even making warriors of children who were human like him, showed that Gilshark was no longer himself.

D headed to the duke's chambers. He wasn't there.

The Hunter went back down to the hall. He caught sight of the old man's back as he was trudging toward the foyer.

“You intend to go?” D asked.

Halting, the duke turned and said, “He's asking for a battle of champions. Naturally, I don't care that he's sent children out onto the field. In the old days, I would've burned them alive, and laughed while I did it.”

“Think you can win? He's—”

“I know. But long ago, they called me the Tiger! I intend to take him down with me, at the very least. D, swear to me you won't interfere.”

“My job is to slay you before anyone else has the privilege. And I won't have anyone getting in the way of that. Leave him to me.”

“I'm old, D. I don't mean my flesh, but rather my spirit. Perhaps it's what the humans would call a soul. But old as I am, I don't believe I'm decrepit. You're to remain on the sidelines.”

“You're supposed to meet a glorious death in battle against me. I can't let you go out there.”

“I thought you'd say that. Lord Greylander was right! That's why I've taken precautions.”

Regardless of what D might've sensed, he couldn't move faster than light. And it was moonlight that poured down on him. Beneath it, the young man of

unearthly beauty was driven down on one magnificent knee. All the power had left his body.

“That beam reverses the flow of the moonlight energy,” the Nobleman told him. “I’ll hold on to your strength for the time being. And on my return, I shall give it back to you.”

And then, with a gait that didn’t seem at all that of a man burning with an urge to fight, the aged duke exited through the foyer. There was no one there to stop him, nor was there anyone to rally behind him.

A black carriage was waiting. It was drawn by a team of six horses. Once the duke had climbed in, the android coachman cracked his whip, and the old-fashioned vehicle raced toward the main gates, its wooden wheels creaking all the while.

In about ten minutes, it reached the square before the main gates to the castle. The castle grounds were that vast. There wasn’t a single member of his defensive force out there.

Looking up at the dark sky, the duke murmured, “That will never do.”

His was a life meant to be spent battling in moonlight, but would he risk it by the light of the sun, gloomy though the day was?

He thrust the staff he held in his right hand toward the sun.

It was about ten minutes later that the Nobleman sensed someone bearing down on him in waves from three directions. The rebel army had arrived.

A terrific amount of murderous intent was focused on the duke. It was enough that it would’ve physically damaged the mind of the average human. If true isolation was having the whole world turned against you, then that was what Duke Van Doren now experienced.

The edges of the square were packed with people. Behind them, scattered tanks and mobile thermal ray cannons, old-fashioned trebuchets and siege towers were visible, while even further in the distance, flames and black smoke rose to the heavens. Scars left by the bombardment.

With all of that in his field of view, the duke was shrouded in a sort of

nothingness. Having been in battle thousands of times and witnessed tens of millions of deaths, the Noble, who'd died himself and returned to life, may have found it quite pointless the way these humans, teeming with vitality, waged war. Mountains of corpses would rot away, rivers of blood would run to the sea, and there they would combine with bacteria, giving rise to trillions of new forms of life. From them, only a few chosen by the hand of fate would advance on the path of evolution, and after receiving light from the goodness of the sun, they would leave the sea by the glow of the moon to walk the land. A long, long time—perhaps longer than even a Noble could wait.

As if plowing through the front rank of soldiers, a siege tower that looked at least ten stories tall appeared. Three sides of its long, trapezoidal shape were covered with boards, with the back alone still open. From behind, it was plain that it'd been divided with boards into ten floors or so of small rooms, which housed heavy machine guns, fiery arrow launchers, ballistae, and soldiers. Gilshark was standing atop it.

“Leave it to a Noble to know how to save face. How nice of you to come out here alone. As stated, I am the commander of our army—Gilshark, at your service.”

Shooting an emotionless look upward, the duke said, “You said ‘I’—but that hardly suits you!”

For some reason Gilshark's pale face was distorted by anger, and he sprang into action. When he landed about fifteen feet in front of the duke, he did so with movements that were captivatingly sharp and beyond human ability.

“You know how I've changed now, don't you?” the rebel leader said, his tone of voice, his expression, and even his bearing triumphant.

Perhaps the people packed in behind Gilshark saw it in the eyes of the giant who dominated the square.

“I know. And I know that you are a fool who's been given an expensive toy and mistakenly believes he makes it do his bidding, not realizing that *it* is toying with *him*.”

Gilshark alone knew how terribly accurate that assessment was. Baring his teeth, he switched on his gravity field controller.

The black globe that'd suddenly appeared between the two of them stretched toward the duke like taffy. The instant any object touched the outer edge of it, it would sink into the Dirac sea created by hydrogen atoms.

When the deadly black sphere had closed to a distance of three feet, the duke brought his black staff down on it. The end of the staff touched the edge of the gravity field, and both forces shot off in the direction they were meant to go. Even as half the duke's staff disappeared, Gilshark was thrown back thirty feet, slamming against the trunk of a colossal tree.

The rebel leader spat up blood. And he would again—but he choked it down before it could come out, opened his mouth as wide as it would go, and howled. Stark white teeth lined his crimson maw. Two of them were tapered like a beast's.

A roar like an explosion erupted right in front of Gilshark, spreading to either side of him like waves. As far as the people there were concerned, what they were witnessing had suddenly become a battle of Noble versus Noble.

"How does it look?" D asked softly in a hall without another single person.

"All we've got is wind," his left hand responded.

The voices of both were so weak and hoarse, they wouldn't have reached the ears of anything but an ant. D's vitality had been drained to the very limit.

The blue light seemed to carry a spell with it as it descended, but something quietly slipped into the light. A pale female hand. It touched D's left hand.

D looked up. That was proof he brimmed with power from head to toe.

"Just as I thought. This power suits you better than it does me." Valerie smiled feebly, showing her stark fangs. "You'll be back to normal soon," she said. "I'm going on ahead."

"Going where?"

"To where the duke and Gilshark are doing battle."

"Did *he* order you to?"

"I don't know. I get the feeling that's it, but also that it's not. My blood—thanks to *his* power, I seem to have remembered something. If I don't make it,

you have to help the duke.”

As the woman spun around swiftly, D fired a question at her back.

As soon as Valerie had answered him, soldiers came down through the ceiling. Undoubtedly they’d been watching the two of them via monitors.

“Leave this to me,” Valerie said, running for the door.

A particle beam struck her back, making a vibrantly colored flower bloom there. There was a second, and a third—and then she was gone, like a drop of paint dissolving in water.

Those who’d shot her didn’t notice that the vision of beauty in black had been set free and that he was closing on them. A flash of his silvery blade sent the heads of all five sailing through the air.

IV

Noble.

Vampire.

Every voice to be heard in the square was saying one of those two words. Everyone could tell. Their bubble had been burst. They wouldn’t see as excellent a leader as Gilshark for another five hundred years. Having him now meant, in a sense, that this was humanity’s last chance to triumph over the Nobility. However, the person before them wasn’t Gilshark, but rather a Noble who could walk in the light of day and who wore Gilshark’s form.

At that moment, the people were no longer concerned with the outcome of the battle, crying, falling silent, or even vomiting the instant they realized their laudable efforts had turned to despair. The gunshots that occasionally rang out were from people committing suicide.

“Die! Die! Die! Die! Die!” Gilshark repeated over and over again. He didn’t really understand that he’d been turned into something else.

I’m human—the leader of the proud rebel army. I can wipe that decrepit old vampire away with one hand! And once I do, the fame of being a slayer of Nobility and the vast fortune that lies somewhere in his castle will be mine. No, that’s not right. I have to leave the money to finance our anti-Nobility

movement in the future. I've already thought that far ahead. And yet, something's wrong. Why is everybody looking at me that way? Do they hold me to blame for some crime?

Power and an overwhelming self-confidence welled up in him. There was nothing here to fear.

Bellowing all the while, he charged the duke. The duke countered with his staff. What remained of the staff pierced Gilshark's face, and thanks to the impetus of the rebel leader's charge, it broke through the back of his head.

Gilshark didn't slow down at all. The staff sank even further into his face, his brain, only stopping when Gilshark seized the duke by both shoulders. Locked together, the two twisted to the right once or twice before Gilshark lifted the duke up, then kicked off the ground with the Nobleman still in his grip. The Noble's struggles meant nothing to his upgraded flesh.

A colossal tree towered about a hundred yards away. The rebel leader had spotted a sharp branch that jutted from it in a spot about three feet from the ground. A hundred yards wouldn't even take five seconds.

The duke had noticed it, too. Though he tried to plant his feet, they just skidded over the ground.

About ten yards shy of his goal, Gilshark halted. His lips, nearly split in two, almost seemed to tremble, yet they formed words clearly enough.

"I may no longer need it, but tell me the truth about this ultimate weapon they say you built—one that means death for any and all Nobles. I'll put it back into service, and eradicate the Nobility."

He stopped there. The duke had gouged his face with the staff he still gripped.

"Damn you, old man!"

Once more Gilshark zipped in a straight line without hesitation, but ahead of the pair, a figure came from the left at a seventy-degree angle to intercept them. No one watching would've noticed, but even if they had, the figure's speed was so insane no one could've stopped them. Their straight line swerved wildly, and the two of them went off in different directions.

“Val . . . erie . . . ?” Gilshark said, both his voice and his physical form shaky. A rough wooden stake was planted deep in his chest.

“I’m the only one who can kill you,” Valerie groaned, and she, too, was unsteady on her feet.

By that, did she mean that they were both being controlled by the same force?

Saving D and the blow against Gilshark had exhausted the archeologist’s power.

“But—I’m at the end of the line, too,” she continued. “It seems all my power is spent.”

Like perfectly matched dancing partners, the two of them fell to the ground simultaneously.

“I don’t understand,” Valerie murmured as her whole body began to break apart and scatter like dust. “He was told to dig it up, I was told to destroy it—in the end, humans and Nobles alike can only do his bidding . . . What’s the point of history . . . ?”

A gust of wind scattered the black dust, leaving behind something almost human in shape, but that, too, soon crumbled away.

There was nothing in the grass- and dirt-covered square but sunlight carrying an oppressive silence and wind bearing the stench of blood, filling the place with a languid air.

It’s all over. What should we do now? I don’t know. I don’t know anything at all. No, there’s one thing I do know—that humanity must ever wander.

The duke was about to say something. But he stopped, looking toward his castle.

The young man in black astride a cyborg horse stopped right beside him. Dismounting, he said, “Am I too late?”

“No, you’re just in time.”

The duke extended his right arm toward the carriage that’d carried him there. The coachman unfastened the fresh long spear that was secured on the

vehicle's roof before climbing down and running over.

The weapon whistled around in the Nobleman's grip.

"Just in time to fight me, that is."

"One thing you oughta know first," the hoarse voice said. It actually put a rather nostalgic look on the duke's face. "The rebel leader's name was—gaaah!"

Staring at D's left fist, the duke furrowed his brow.

D said nothing, heading toward the center of the square.

Just before Valerie had left the castle, her response to the Hunter's question had been Gilshark's last name. Gilshark Lanaway. Most likely the grandson of Sirene/Cecilia Lanaway. D had silenced his left hand out of concern that this knowledge might dampen the duke's enthusiasm to fight.

The two of them faced each other in the center of the square. There, with only the eyes of the dead focused on them, D drew his blade. Its gleam was reflected on a golden spearhead as the duke also held his long spear at the ready.

Would the Tiger King roar once more?

D's form became a blur. There was fifteen feet between them, and then D was at the duke's chest. The blade he swung was parried by the spear. The sharp clanging sounds pulled lengthy tails through the midday sun.

The instant blade locked with spearhead, both of them knew the next move would mean defeat. Any attempt to press forward or pull back would leave them open to a fatal blow. One shadowy form clung to another.

"This can't be . . ." the duke said, his voice quavering with shock. "I don't believe it. It's not possible. The source of your power—you had no need of the moonlight energy. Because this power comes from—"

A different force came into play. Before anyone could even shout *Earthquake!* fierce tremors created a great fissure in the ground. Enormous trees toppled, their far-reaching roots and all the soil they clutched pouring down into the crevasse like a great river. The duke and D were thrown apart. People and

tanks, siege towers and trebuchets all followed suit.

On seeing that even the ramparts of his distant castle were tilting, the duke shouted, "To the excavation site!"

A moment later, a silvery aircraft appeared above the duke, drawing him up.

D had already broken into a run. The earth beneath his feet subsided. His cyborg horse galloped alongside him. D bounded, and the instant he settled in the saddle, the ground below gave way. Throwing his weight toward the falling ground, D tugged on the reins. The cyborg horse galloped up a piece of turf that was almost vertical now. Just when its power was nearly spent and it was about to be thrown off balance, the steed kicked off the sheer chunk of ground decisively. Horse and rider climbed the last five yards, leaping up to level ground.



For a brief time, the collapse had stopped.

The cyborg horse galloped on. Part of a gigantic building loomed up ahead. The ruins were in their death throes.

The duke stood at the brink of the hole.

When D got off his horse, another shock hit the world. The ruins were sinking. However, that was of no interest to the two who stood there, side by side.

Behind all the dust shooting up from the earth, the ruins sank, and from the depths something else was lifted. It called to mind a plinth more than a hundred and fifty feet wide as it rose. Atop it stood a shadowy figure who was glaring down at the ground.

“That’s Vulcan, eh?” said the hoarse voice. “Seems like everybody and his brother heard voices from heaven telling ’em to go below.”

It was just cursing him as a power-hungry bastard when the bandit leader leapt into the air. He landed midway between the two—about ten yards away, where he straightened up impassively.

On seeing that, D said, “You’re a dhampir, aren’t you?”

“That’s right. A pale imitation who’s lost his guardian angel.”

“I’m surprised you were able to get that thing up from the depths of the earth,” the duke said, staring at Vulcan intently.

“Don’t play dumb with me, old man. You already know the story, don’t you? Does our handsome friend here know, too? The first time I laid eyes on you, old man, it struck me. There really is quite a resemblance. To me—and to my dad.”

Silence enveloped the three of them, though the quaking of the earth and its rumbling resisted. Behind them, the plinth rose blackly, now three hundred feet high, and boards had appeared that seemed to run through it horizontally.

“And it was my dad who taught me how to operate the weapon buried underground,” Vulcan continued. “Someone destroyed him when I was ten, but he hated you right up to the very end. Said your stupid pride made you kill one son, and you gave up another like a gutless coward. Dad and I swore to each other that one day we’d bust in on you and drive a stake through your heart.

You know, Granddad, you made a big mistake by not killing me. Look! The ultimate weapon you built is out in the open again, and that's not a good thing, is it? It's the ultimate weapon against all Nobility, isn't it?"

The crossbeams were out now. They were thirty feet wide and a hundred and fifty feet long. And the thing was still rising.

Vulcan charged forward. The sword he had braced by his side went right through his grandfather's heart. The duke didn't move. A small item Vulcan pointed at him with his right hand had immobilized the Nobleman. It was the same item Valerie had forgotten had been taken from her—a small cross.

"I . . . drank the villagers' blood . . . Granddad," he whispered, and something seemed to glitter in his eyes. "And then I came here to destroy you. You understand, right? That's the only way I could beat you. I had to become just like you . . ."

The old man patted him gently on one trembling shoulder. *I know, it's all right, you can rest at ease.*

"Granddad."

That was all Vulcan said, and then he shuddered. Fresh blood spilled from his mouth and nose, soaking both the duke's chest and his own. The duke had driven his long spear through his grandson's heart from behind, piercing himself as well, and letting out a breath, Van Doren then extracted it. First, Vulcan dropped to his knees, then the cross fell from his right hand. Next, his upper body fell away, his hands slid from the hilt of his sword, and he breathed his last while hugging the earth.

Looking down at him for a short while, the duke then turned back toward D. He no longer wore the expression of an exhausted old man. His was the face of a tiger ready to slay the enemy he faced and roar long and loud.

"You have my thanks, D," the duke said, smiling. Vulcan's sword jutted from his chest. "You were most kind to refrain from interfering as I did away with the traitors. However, now it's your turn."

"The Tiger has returned," D said softly. "But you're not the Tiger King, you're the Orphan King. Make your move."

The gleam off the blade the Hunter had just drawn caught the duke's eye as he said, "D, this morning I drank the blood of a girl in a nearby village."

The world glowed with white. Lightning. And then thunder followed it like a laughing sneer.

Something enormous was stretching up into the heavens. Its shadow was creeping toward the two of them.

"I have returned now. The Tiger is back in the northern Frontier. Everything shall be as it was. The benevolent lord charade was just nonsense done for Sirene's sake. The lowly humans will tremble before Julius Van Doren, and offer up their lovely daughters every night and every day."

D ran. His body glowed white. The aircraft overhead had irradiated him with moonlight energy.

The duke, who was about to start running at the same time D did, stopped and shouted something toward the sky. The light vanished.

Just as the duke was poised to advance, his body was enveloped by shadow. The shadow of a huge cross.

D leapt at the chest of the Tiger, now frozen in his tracks. With a new stark blade running through his chest and out his back, the duke vented a cry of agony that was swallowed by the rumbling of the earth.

"I could withstand Vulcan's blade, but not yours. You truly are the great one's —"

The duke looked up. Bloody foam bubbled from his lips. He addressed someone who wasn't there, saying, "As you bade me . . . I have served you . . . O great one . . . and saved . . . your . . ."

Lying in the shadow of the cross, his face wore a terribly serene expression. Managing to maintain it, the duke said, "D, kindly tell the people of my domain something . . . Tell them the Tiger returned."

"You have a deal, Tiger King."

But those words were heard by dust scattering on the wind.

D sheathed his blade without saying anything.

“He’s gone. The Tiger,” the hoarse voice said, its tone carrying a rumble of thunder.

After looking up at the titanic cross that still towered there, D started walking toward his cyborg horse.

“They say the sight of it destroyed tens of thousands of Nobles.”

Pale people of the night reduced to dust, their bodies burned by the shadow of that colossal cross.

“Seems there are accounts on the human side that in death, they had real peaceful looks on their faces. But what would humans think when they saw that? You know, D, I have to wonder if that wasn’t what *he* really wanted to find out when he had it left there underground.”

Not replying, D got up in the saddle. Just before he galloped off, he turned his eyes to where the duke had fallen. Something small streamed out of his right hand, landing on the Nobleman’s cape and what little dust remained. Vulcan’s cross.

“He really was the Tiger King—that’s what I think.”

Only the hoarse voice’s words remained.

Three thousand feet tall, the gigantic cross towered over the region for the next six months, but because the people in surrounding villages said there was something about it they couldn’t fathom and children found it disturbing, part of it was carried home by villagers for use as firewood. It’s said that nearly a thousand homes in the area had no trouble keeping warm for an entire year. Even after that, the cross loomed in the air for a long time. One wintery night, lightning struck and it was engulfed by flames. Lighting up the darkness, the enormous flames from the cross continued to burn for six months, making people tremble with fear, but then it was quickly and completely forgotten.

END

POSTSCRIPT

Here's the next new VHD novel after "Nightmare Village." This time, I've dealt with the power the Nobility control. The fact of the matter is, up until now I've consciously avoided touching on the Nobles' life cycle. The reason for this is that, once I open that particular can of worms, there's no end to the new questions it'll bring.

D looks young, but how old is he? What determines how old a Noble appears to be? Won't artificial blood suffice? With their science being so advanced, why are they still fixated on horse-drawn carriages? And on and on it goes.

Some of these things I've prepared answers for, and some I haven't. Which isn't to say that I couldn't answer all of these questions. But if I did, I'm afraid it would greatly change the atmosphere of the VHD story. So I've elected to avoid it.

Director Yoshiaki Kawajiri made an exceptional anime film in "Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust," but it has one flaw. At the very end, it deals with the matter of D's age that I've kept secret for so long. From D's first appearance to the writing of this book, twenty-eight years have passed. However, in the series, perhaps only a few years have passed. On the other hand, it might span a millennium.

This time out, I handled the Nobility in a way that didn't delve too deeply into their way of life. You can look forward to reading more about their everyday life in the second Greylander novel planned for November, 2011. And I intentionally leave some mysteries unsolved. For example, why did D put a needle through his own heart? Someday that will be explained.

At any rate, I'll keep penning D's tale by the light of the moon but like the breeze in the deepest, darkest night.

July 6, 2011

While watching *The Insatiable* (2006)

Hideyuki Kikuchi

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 29

NOBLE FRONT

Written by
Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by
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English translation by
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Coming soon from Dark Horse Books

DARK ACCORD

Chapter 1

The sixteenth, 11:06 a.m. Eastern Frontier Time

Though the room was simple, it was here that the village's decisions were made. Nearly an hour had passed since his visitors had left. Behind a battered desk, the old man finally lifted his drooping head. He had a gray beard, and his wrinkled face wore a look of distress. Grabbing the intercom tube that hung from the ceiling over his head like a black-and-silver serpent and giving it a decisive tug, the old man commanded, "Jacos, come in here in fifteen minutes."

Immediately returning the intercom tube to its original position, he took care not to bump into it as he rose from his chair.

His little window gave a view of the village lying quietly in the sunlight.

"Though darkness may come, the light visits us. Why can't we be happy with that? No need to make a deal with the devil."

Returning to his chair, the mayor took some stationery from a drawer and began scratching away on it with a quill pen. When he'd finished writing, Jacos came in. Though tall, the secretary was thin as a toothpick.

"Take three days off, starting tomorrow," the mayor ordered in his usual mild tone.

His secretary, a competent veteran, nodded.

"Our visitors from the Capital said they're going to have a look around the village," the mayor continued. "Leave them to it."

"Understood," Jacos replied, but only after some time had passed.

"Be careful on your vacation."

"Thank you."

Once his secretary had left, the mayor leaned back in his chair and turned his eyes to the west end of his office. Darkness hung there. It was the one spot in the room the light from the window wouldn't reach.

"The light alone isn't everything," he said as if reciting a curse. "We need the darkness, too. But what this world really needs is—"

His voice broke off there. But though the mayor said no more, his eyes were tinged by the one spot of black in the light-filled room.

The sixteenth, 12:00 p.m. Eastern Frontier Time

At lunchtime, Jacos started eating his boxed lunch at his desk. All his coworkers at the town hall had left for the lounge that doubled as a cafeteria. There, they probably had plenty of bad things to say about the stubborn secretary, who was constantly fighting the mayor. Making sure that the two other employees who'd remained there on urgent business had dug into their lunches and weren't looking over at him, Jacos opened the folded stationery the mayor had handed him and began reading it as nonchalantly as if it were a letter he'd brought from home.

When he finished reading it, he let out a sigh, then returned to his lunch, finishing it in less than three minutes. And he didn't even forget to remark on how bad it tasted. Jacos then opened a drawer, took out a vacation request form, and after spending five minutes filling it out, he left it on the desk of Oohe in General Affairs.

The sixteenth, 1:03 p.m. Eastern Frontier Time

When Oohe came back and saw the paperwork on his desk, he muttered, "This is rather sudden," in a low voice, then stamped it as approved.

The sixteenth, 5:11 p.m. Eastern Frontier Time

With the chiming of the bell that marked the end of the workday, Jacos began his preparations to go home. He didn't seem in any particular hurry. Saying good-bye to those around him, he left the town hall at about the usual time. Circling around behind the town hall, he got on the cyborg horse tethered to the post and rode straight down the road home.

The sixteenth, 5:12 p.m. Eastern Frontier Time

Once Ann Dadorin from Family Records had made her own preparations to go home, she headed to the deputy mayor's office.

"What is it?" asked the deputy mayor, who was rumored to be twice as sharp as the mayor, staring at the forty-six-year-old widow with the eyes of a hawk.

Ann replied impassively, "It's nothing major. But earlier, you did say you wanted to be informed if there was anything out of the ordinary."

Having lost her husband in her thirties and raised four children all on her own, the woman didn't seem to fear anything.

"Indeed, that's what I said. So?"

"The mayor's secretary suddenly put in a request for three days' vacation. He's always given at least three days' notice."

"When did he put in for it?"

"At lunchtime. He and I both ate at our desks."

Before that, Jacos had been called into the mayor's office.

"And you confirmed this paperwork?"

"After folks in General Affairs went home, I saw it with my own two eyes." Meaning that she'd snooped around in their files. Such documents wouldn't reach the deputy mayor until the following day.

"The mayor gone home yet?" asked the deputy mayor.

"No."

After Ann left, confident in the knowledge that each piece of information earned her a dore (a tenth of a dala), the deputy mayor stopped checking petitions from villagers and made his own preparations to go home. Just as he stepped out the door, the mayor appeared from the office across from his. The light from the window was already blue.

"Hello there," the mayor said, raising a hand in greeting.

"Those folks from the Capital give you any trouble?" he asked.

"Yeah. It's a bit of a sticky situation. Had a feeling it would be as soon as they got here, but this is idiotic."

"It's not often I see you all worked up, Mister Mayor."

"You see, they don't realize that darkness and light mean different things out on the Frontier than they do back in the Capital. They were talking utter nonsense."

“Don’t tell me—was it about Castle Bergenzy?”

“That’s right. Seems they’ve decided to ignore us completely and strike a lousy bargain with the lord of the manor.”

“You mean human sacrifices?” the deputy mayor said, his expression stiff.

“We can talk about it tomorrow,” the mayor replied, clapping the deputy mayor on the shoulder before walking away.

The sixteenth, 5:43 p.m. Eastern Frontier Time

Once he’d checked that no one else was around, the deputy mayor circled around to the back of the town hall. From behind him, a voice asked, “Something happen?”

“The mayor had his secretary put in for three days’ vacation starting tomorrow.”

“That all?”

“That’s it. The two of them don’t get along very well. His secretary’s been known to give him grief, and been docked pay for it.”

“Where’s he intend to go?”

“I don’t know. He wasn’t required to put that on the form.”

“Where’s the secretary’s house?”

“Number four Zossa Street.”

“Good enough,” the voice said before fading.

Though the man turned and looked, there was nobody there.

“He might say he’s from the Capital, but the guys he’s using are a match for anything we’ve got on the Frontier,” the deputy mayor said to himself, cold sweat rolling down his cheeks.

The sixteenth, 5:59 p.m. Eastern Frontier Time

There was a knock at the door of number four, Zossa Street.

“Who is it?” a female voice cautiously inquired. For after the sun went down, it was “the Nobility’s time.”

“Valen is the name.”

“And just who are you, Mister Valen?”

“I work for the Noble Ruins Survey Office in the Capital, and I paid a visit to the town hall today. I should like to discuss today’s business a bit.”

“Is that so?” the woman said, her tone now relieved. “Well, unfortunately my husband’s not in now. He’s taken three days off, starting from tomorrow. And he didn’t tell me where he was going.”

The way the caller fell silent was proof of how disappointed he was at her reply. After a moment, he said, “How interesting—pardon the intrusion. I shall be on my way, then.”

The sixteenth, 6:07 p.m. Eastern Frontier Time

The caller left.

The sixteenth, 6:19 p.m. Eastern Frontier Time

In a room at the village’s sole lodging house, the Silver Lion Inn, a gray-haired and gray-bearded old man who was undoubtedly a scholar nodded. There were three men around him, and another stood before him.

“I see. This is probably a move to get out of this without accepting our demands. The mayor seemed amiable enough, but it seems he’s got some backbone to him.”

“What’ll we do, Professor? We can’t do anything till we know where the secretary’s gone.”

“Leave it to me. I’ll find out where he’s gone. Just sit tight until then.”

“What’ll we do about the mayor?”

“Find out what he’s up to, then we’ll decide how to handle him. Compared to deciding what to do with a student right at the pass/fail line, this is easy.”

The group exited the room.

Putting his ear to the door to listen to their footsteps and be sure that had they left, the old man then scurried from the living room to the bedroom. He knew he had to hurry.

The plastic case he pulled out from under his bed held a black box twenty inches square and two inches high, which he took out and placed on the desk. When he opened the lid, it became a screen. The blue sphere that hung between it and the lower panel was Earth. It was a three-dimensional image.

As tension turned his whole body to iron, the old man started running the fingers of both hands across the bottom section of the case. Part of a huge nebula appeared next to the earth.

“Oops, that’s Andromeda.”

Erasing the great nebula his overanxious fingers had called up, he spent a few minutes adjusting before finally getting the desired clarity to the image of Earth.

“Display everything currently moving within a thirty-mile radius of the eastern Frontier village of Schwartzen!” he said.

II

The sixteenth, 6:40 p.m. Eastern Frontier Time

The bartender/proprietor of the village saloon found it hard to believe the four patrons were actually from the Capital as they claimed, and he was on edge over the question of how he could possibly handle them if they acted up. Usually his sexy hostess would smooth things over, but she was off today.

The one seated at the counter was of medium height and build, and had closely cropped red hair. Though the other three were all wearing coats, he was lightly dressed, wearing a t-shirt and shorts. But that wasn’t what drew attention. The average temperature was almost eighty degrees, and even the slightest exertion was enough to work up a sweat. It was the other three that were strange. The problem with the redhead was the black ring, eight inches wide and two inches thick, that he had looped over his shoulder. It was wrapped around the man as if to protect him, and it slowly rotated without ever touching his body.

As the man on his left was as skinny as a knotweed plant and had a wild jungle of a beard, he looked as if he were trying to pass for a derelict, but it was his fingers that were sure to grab anyone’s attention. They were over a foot and a half long. Add the four-inch-long nails, and they came in around two feet long.

What's more, the nails were curved like talons. The bartender was clearly trying very hard not to look at them.

The other two were seated at a rustic-looking round table, where they were engaged in a game of cards.

"Two pair, queens up," said an obese giant of a man with thick lips, a pug nose, and round spectacles, spreading his cards on the table. The belly of the faux-leather jacket he wore beneath his coat rippled with confidence. It looked like you could've pushed any part of him and fat would've oozed from his pores.

"Three twos," his opponent countered, and it may have been that his voice alone was youthful. The face that was turned toward the obese giant was hidden by a rivet-studded mask of iron that covered his head all the way down to the chin. Holes had been roughly cut in it for his eyes and mouth alone, revealing blue irises and bloodless lips.

The old man came in with such force he nearly wrecked the batwing doors. The bartender just said, "Howdy, Professor," but no one else even turned to look.

"Go west on Vivant Road," the old man—the Professor—ordered, displeasure covering every inch of his face.

Two seconds of silence followed.

The most unlikely candidate —the obese giant—said, "Okay, then—that's me," and stood up.

"Wait just a second, Lascaux," the man in the iron mask told him irritably. "You're in for fifteen dalas. Lay your money down."

"I know, I know. I ain't about to embarrass myself over a lousy fifteen dalas!" Flinging two coins at the man in the iron mask before he left, he said, "I'll win it back from you next time, Mask."

Though he acknowledged the professor on the way out, there wasn't the tiniest bit of respect in it. It didn't look at all like an employer/employee relationship.

Clucking his tongue, the Professor walked over to the counter. He ordered a

whiskey.

“For humans? Or for Nobles?”

“Whaaat?” the Professor asked in an exaggerated manner, his expression shifting from one of surprise to delight. “Do you actually have anything like that?”

“Yes siree!”

“Then of course I’ll have the kind for Nobles.”

The bartender finally showed a genuine smile, opening an iron door on the shelf. The fearful manner in which he took out the precious commodity made it seem more like a bomb, but it was a cut crystal bottle in a vivid shade of green.

“I’d heard they had other kinds of spirits besides wine. Who knew whiskey would be one of them? Never thought I’d run into some in a saloon out in the sticks like this, that’s for sure. Is it the real deal?”

“Go ahead and ask anybody in town. Ask ’em if they’ve ever once been ripped off at Den’s Place. We’ve been playing it nothing but straight here for thirty-five years. Once every ten years, Grand Duke Bergenzy offers some stuff for sale, which is where this bottle came from. Only four bottles like this were mixed in with a thousand bottles of wine, and I bid a pretty sum to get it. That’s why I only offer it to special guests. Five hundred dalas a glass—but a scholar would pay a hundred times that for a drink of this!”

“You must be joking!” the Professor roared, his rage manifest. For less than a hundred dalas, he could have ten glasses of the very finest wine at any of the best bars in the Capital.

Though he pounded on a table, the bartender didn’t even flinch.

“If you’re not interested, forget I mentioned it. But I ain’t got all day.”

“Okay. Here.”

The flash and clatter of money on the counter made the bartender happy. Reaching for the bottle with an exaggerated motion, he gave it a powerful twist, all of which the Professor watched bitterly, but with eyes aglitter with expectation.

The sixteenth, 11:09 p.m. Eastern Frontier Time

Riding as hard as he could, Jacos arrived in the neighboring town—Velis.

The sixteenth, 11:12 p.m. Eastern Frontier Time

Jacos rushed into the wireless office. On the Frontier, there was one such office every sixty miles, on average. There, the various town halls and government offices in the Capital could send and receive messages. He'd been handed the text of this message by the mayor.

The wireless operator was expressionless as he read it, and expressionless as he sent it.

Once he'd finished, he turned to the customer and asked, "What happened?"

Jacos just nodded at him from the floor, slowly getting back into his chair. His relief had been so great, he'd fallen right out of it.

"Well, can't say as I'm surprised," the operator remarked knowingly. "Not after reading this. Could it be the grand duke's up to something?" the man asked, his face full of dark curiosity.

"Thank you kindly. Be seeing you," was all Jacos told him, paying him before he went back outside.

As the operator watched him go from his window, he couldn't stop trembling.

Poor bastards. Just because they happened to be near the castle, they were gonna end up with a village full of dead folks. But who'd have ever thought it? Who'd believe they'd send for him, of all people?

Though frozen to the core, the operator's body felt strangely feverish. *Gotta be coming down with something*, he thought.

All that just from seeing one name.

The seventeenth, 12:38 a.m. Eastern Frontier Time

The operator was just bringing his sandwich to his mouth when the door suddenly opened.

"Mmm, that looks tasty," said the person who'd come in, a giant so obese the man nearly spat his food out in surprise. The floorboards creaked as he

approached.

“The secretary from the next village over came in here, right? No need to try and hide it. There ain’t any reason he’d come all the way over to your town unless it was to use the wireless office. Everything else they’ve got back in Schwartzen. Let’s have a look at that message.”

“No can do, mister. I ain’t allowed to show other folks’ personal communication records to anyone. They’d have my head for that.”

“Wouldn’t that be better than having it cut off for real?”

The operator had decided he had no choice but to put up a fight. Even if he tried to cover it up, he’d wind up in the hangman’s noose or the guillotine for violating the privacy of their customers. For weapons, he had the sidearm on his hip or the knife strapped to his calf. Judging from his opponent’s physical condition, he’d have time enough to use either, but the fact that the giant was talking so tough while unarmed made the operator think he must’ve been pretty powerful. At a nearby village, for example, there was a school that taught martial arts for use against the Nobility. Most amazing of all was the fact that they also taught the Nobility’s martial arts—that is, the fighting techniques the Nobles had used. Such places took the good with the bad, training friend and foe alike.

“Okay, I’ll let you see it. Hold on a minute.”

The operator was just about to pull out the previous month’s list of messages when he noticed something strange about the obese giant.

“You sure are sweating up a storm. Came by horse, did you?”

“No.”

“You walked, then?”

“Something like that.”

“You’re breathing hard, too. But if you walked here—did that fella who was in here earlier outrun you or something?”

“Nope. And enough of the idle chitchat. Hurry up and show it to me.”

“All righty,” the operator replied easily enough, tossing the list to the

intruder.

Catching it less than elegantly, the obese giant glared over at the operator, then began flipping through the pages. The look in his eye quickly changed, and he snarled, “Son of a bitch, you trying to pull a fast one on me?!”

But by the time he slammed the list down on the floor, the operator had the barrel of his pistol pointed at the obese giant. Loudly cocking the hammer, he triumphantly declared, “Okay, what say you and me pay a call on the sheriff’s office?”

Not seeming the least bit frightened, the obese giant replied, “You’ve gotta be kidding me,” and leaned way back.

Apparently, the move wasn’t out of surprise. The proof of that was the way the giant’s stomach suddenly popped out. Over three hundred pounds to start, his body had just swollen to two or three times its former size.

The operator pulled the trigger.

A tiny hole opened in the wall of flesh that’d closed to within a foot and a half of the man. That was all.

The flabby, pink wall jiggled closer.

Early the next morning, the operator’s corpse would be discovered in the splintered remains of the building, a look of terror etched on his face. Examination by a doctor would reveal that he hadn’t suffocated, but rather that his heart and lungs were punctured by his ribs, all of which were broken, in addition to him succumbing to excessive fear.

The seventeenth, 1:18 a.m. Eastern Frontier Time

On hearing the obese giant’s news, the Professor leapt up.

“It can’t be . . . Not him . . . Is he in the vicinity?”

“The message should be posted at every sheriff’s office on the Frontier by now.”

“So it’s too late, then? You think he’ll see it?”

“He’ll see it, all right,” Lascaux assured the old man.

“If that’s the case, we’ll have to get rid of him . . .”

“A hundred thousand dalas.”

“Whaaat?!” the Professor exclaimed, giving the giant a look that could kill.

“That much, and I’ll do it.”

“But we’re talking about—”

“If he stands on two legs, that’s all that matters,” Lascaux replied. “Besides, I’ve always wanted to fight him. Got a plan and everything.”

“Really?”

The obese giant gave him a grave nod. His multiple chins jiggled.

“I see. We’ll have to put in to the Capital for it as a special expense. So you’ll have to wait until later to get paid. Our current funds are for negotiations with Grand Duke Bergenzy.”

“Sure,” Lascaux replied with a nod. Though from where the Professor was, he couldn’t see that because of the man’s enormous belly.

“Is that okay with you?” the old man asked, needing to know for certain. Having a lackey whose face he couldn’t see presented its own problems.

“It’ll be fine,” said the voice from the other side of the belly.

“This is an urgent matter! I’ll check on his location immediately. Get rid of him before he makes it here.”

“Just leave it to me,” the giant replied, slapping his belly with an arm as pale as a woman’s. Although the sound was normal, the Professor got the feeling he’d heard the striking of a big drum.

The eighteenth, 10:15 a.m. Eastern Frontier Time

After coming down from the Yogami Pass, the traveler in black halted his cyborg horse. He wore a wide-brimmed traveler’s hat, and a scarf as black as his coat covered his face from the nose down. Now all that remained was the road across the plains that would lead him to his destination. Beyond the flat expanses that spread to either side of him, chains of green mountains sat in solemn splendor. And beyond those were towering blue mountain peaks that

averaged more than thirty thousand feet above sea level. Their summits were hidden by clouds. It was said that if only they could be knocked flat, life in the eastern Frontier would be ten times easier.

Having been out in strong sunlight since dawn, the traveler seemed somewhat enervated. That was also partly due to the fact that the entire previous day had been spent in deadly battle with a formidable Noble.

What brought him to a standstill was the rest area that stood to the right of the road. There was a post for hitching cyborg horses, as well as parking spots for wagons or light vans. Apparently the shop had opened recently, as it looked brand new.

Tying the reins to the hitching post, the traveler passed through the doorway. Air-conditioning did nothing for the establishment, which looked large enough to accommodate around twenty, leaving the place even hotter than outside. There were three customers at the counter and another one at a table, and all were wiping at their sweat. Naturally, they were all enjoying some cold beer.

“Welcome, stranger.”

The traveler was greeted by an awfully fat shopkeeper and a slender but incredibly busty young lady, both behind the counter.

“How about a nice, cold beer?” the shopkeeper asked the new customer, who’d just taken a seat on a stool.

The answer was cold and steely. “Give me a big mug full of ice,” he said. “After that, anything will be fine.”

“Beer?”

“Whiskey.”

The buxom young lady was even more surprised than the shopkeeper, her eyes going wide. Because the hoarse voice just now had sounded like a completely different person.

Giving the traveler an indescribable look, the shopkeeper then told the young lady, who was giving him the very same look, “Get him that ice and some whiskey.”

Even the other patrons were looking in that direction, dumbfounded.

“What’s everyone gawking at? I ain’t on exhibit here!” the hoarse voice barked, and everyone faced forward again.

His order came. Taking a fistful of ice from the mug, the traveler put it against his brow. After about five seconds, he moved it around to the back of his head. And that was without removing his scarf.

“Got a little heatstroke, do you?” the shopkeeper asked somewhat dubiously.

“Close enough,” the hoarse voice replied. “That, plus I’m wounded. You can see all the way down to the bone!”

“Sounds serious. Jessica, go get the first-aid kit.”

“No need,” the traveler told the rattled shopkeeper in the first voice he’d used, pulling down his scarf.

There was a dull thud over by the door that led to the back room. The young lady—Jessica—had fallen flat on her ass. Her face was melting with rapture.

“What a . . . what a gorgeous man,” she managed to say, the words escaping like a moan, and no one there would contradict her. “You . . . you wouldn’t happen to be . . .”

“He’s D,” one of the patrons said in a quiet tone that carried a touch of fear.

III

It seemed as if all sound had been lost from the world. They had gazed upon a being that carried the weight of both the sacred and the profane.

“You’ll have to excuse him for that,” the shopkeeper said, unconsciously wiping his brow.

The patrons all got up at the same time.

“See you later.”

“Nice place you’ve got here. Be seeing you,” they told the shopkeeper, leaving payment and a tip on the table as they left.

“Whoa, you’re driving me outta business,” the shopkeeper said with a wry

grin, looking over at D and then averting his eyes time and again.

D's left hand took hold of the whiskey glass, seeming to press it against his palm. On seeing the amber-hued liquid disappear completely, the young lady bugged her eyes.

Grabbing another fistful of ice with the same hand, D got off his stool and said, "I'll get out of your hair."

A coin rattled against the counter.

"Hold up, there. We've precious little chance of any more customers coming by at this time of day. Instead of rushing off, sure you won't stick around and have another drink?"

"In that case, I'll take three more whiskeys."

The hoarse voice nearly made the eyes pop out of the heads of both the shopkeeper and the young lady. And the same thing happened again when the palm of D's hand downed the contents of those three glasses in rapid succession.

"Sure can handle your liquor," the shopkeeper said with a satisfied grunt. "How about it? Have another? Does my heart good to see somebody belting 'em back like that. Next one's on the house!"

"Only if this one doesn't have any paralytic drugs in it," said a voice of steel.

Huh? the young lady seemed to say, her eyes wide as she looked at D—and then at the awfully fat shopkeeper.

"Stuff's supposed to be colorless and odorless, but I guess that doesn't hold for the man known as D, eh?" the obese giant said in a voice that sounded like someone else's.

"No, it'd work. If you weren't wiping away nonexistent sweat, I wouldn't have been on my guard."

"Kinda overdid it with my performance, then?" the obese giant said, leaning way back.

The buttons popped from his shirt. His stomach spilled out. Rolling over the counter, it began to fill the establishment like a flesh-colored wave.

“Wh-what the hell’s this?! H-he’s—” the waitress Jessica stammered, frozen in her tracks.

“He’s a freak,” the hoarse voice said.

“Get out.”

As if driven by that steely voice, the young lady dashed for the door. But as soon as she caught hold of the doorknob, she cried, “Ah! It won’t open!”

“Sorry about this, Jessica. Here you’d just found a job, and now you’re outta work already!” the obese giant said, his existence now limited to simply his voice.

The counter splintered. The blob of flesh already reached the ceiling, and was crushing tables and chairs as it pressed forward.

“That’s one hell of a fatty,” the hoarse voice said, tension in its tone. “So, you threw this place together? Let’s have your name and your game.”

“Lascaux’s the name, and you’d do well to remember it,” the approaching wall of flesh told the traveler. The whole shop seemed to be speaking. “As for my game—you’ve gotta know what I’m here for, right?”

“To keep us from getting to Schwartzen? What are you, anyway?”

“You mean it didn’t say in that message from the mayor? Then you’ll die not knowing. There’s no way you can cut me. It ain’t like you can let the air outta me like a big balloon. This might hurt a little, but hell, you’ll be at peace soon enough.”

A wall of flesh stood blocking the girl—and D.

“Goddamned fatty,” the hoarse voice groaned.

“Wh-wh-what are we gonna do?” the young lady—Jessica—asked, her face the very picture of insanity.

“Leave it to us,” said a hoarse voice brimming with confidence.

The instant its words filled Jessica with surprise and relief, she saw a glint out of the corner of her eye. There was the sound of flesh being cleaved. Crimson stained her whole world.

The shop around them screamed, “Gaaaaaah! You cut me?! You lousy freak!”

An incredible force swept Jessica to the rear. She knew she was about to hit something, but she broke through it with only the slightest resistance and fell down on the ground outside.

The shop was collapsing before her very eyes. The roof and walls spread across the ground, reduced to dust that was then swept away by the wind. The place had been built from material that was supposed to do exactly that.

And beyond the dust, a strange—although “monstrous” might’ve been more appropriate—*thing* was writhing. It was the obese giant, his belly spread around his feet like a flesh-colored mountain. The enormous belly was split by a massive gash, and a waterfall of blood spilled out to soak the ground.

“I’ll get you for this!” Lascaux cried, grinding his teeth. Bloody foam ran from the corners of his mouth.

“Hmm, didn’t hit anything vital, eh? Being a fatty has its advantages,” the hoarse voice laughed.

“Shut up!”

Suddenly, the fleshy carpet took to the air. It happened with such ungodly speed it drew a cry of surprise from the hoarse voice. Quickly rising a hundred and fifty or two hundred feet, it sprinkled fresh blood like a crimson rain as the obese giant flew off to the east. But as the traveler watched, the giant plunged suddenly, then sprang up again. Repeating that over and over again, he vanished.

“Sure is good at making his escape. Weird freaking fatty. Think he’s gone back to Schwartzen to report in?”

D went over to his cyborg horse, stroked its neck once, then eased into the saddle. As he got back on the road, Jessica followed after him.

“Hold on, there,” the young lady said. “Give me a lift back to my house. My horse seems to have bolted.”

“A lot of people pass this way,” said the steely voice.

The cyborg horse had already begun to walk away.

“Hey, wait. So, you just intend to leave a woman alone out here? Give me a ride.”

Although Jessica ran after him, D didn’t even look back. His business there was finished. His only interest lay in his next destination.

The air had begun to take on a bluish tinge when the cyborg horse arrived. When the Hunter asked a gawking boy where the mayor might be found, the answer he got was, “In the graveyard.”

The old man had collapsed at noon the previous day and breathed his last then and there.

“We’re too late,” the hoarse voice said with regret. “Our employer’s gone and kicked the bucket. The enemy’s really using their head.”

“He didn’t die; he was killed,” a boy of twelve or thirteen said, looking D square in the face. His innocent young face was ablaze with fury.

They were at the mayor’s home. D had waited out in front of it for the family’s return, having learned the house’s location from the boy earlier, who hadn’t gone to the funeral. The graying widow and her son were accompanied by a man who identified himself as the mayor’s secretary.

“I read about the situation in the message,” D said.

“We received your reply from the town hall in the neighboring village,” the widow replied softly. The impression she made was just as tranquil as her tone, having supported her husband for five terms over the last decade. “My husband looked like he was in heaven when he got it. He couldn’t believe that you—D—had taken the job. He said now the village and the human sacrifices would be spared.”

“And now he got sent off to heaven, so there’s nothing we can do,” the boy spat.

“Don’t say that, Puma,” the widow said, glaring at her son, and the boy fell silent. “Your father had a heart condition, and Dr. Chavez told us that, didn’t he? So stop bringing up those baseless accusations.”

“But Pa was so healthy,” the boy replied. “I can’t believe his heart’d just give

out like that. There were no warning signs at all, were there? I can't say exactly what, but lately, something's gone out of whack. They were talking about offering human sacrifices, for pity's sake! Is that anything for a scholar from the Capital to say?!"

"Damn straight."

All of them turned stunned looks toward the voice—and D. He was standing near the door, his back to the wall. While that looked like the best position for responding to any attack by an enemy, that didn't seem to be the case here.

"Let's hear all the details."

The bereaved family members and the secretary exchanged looks.

"Before we get into that, there's something I'd like to tell you," the widow said, gazing at D with a determined look in her eyes. "I've heard what it was my husband hired you to do. Had I known ahead of time, I think I would've stopped him, but it's too late for that now. However, Grand Duke Bergenzy is a Noble to be feared. Should the mood strike him, he could make slaves not only of our village but of everyone in his domain in less than a night's time, poison the very earth, sow curses in the wind, or make rain fall from the sky until the end of time. And no one knows if that's the full extent of his power or not. Also, we've heard that the retainers who've been with him since ancient times are fearsome devils, and this time, you'll also be making an enemy of the scholar who's come from the Capital and his guards."

"To be honest, they're a creepy bunch," the secretary interjected. "I find it hard to believe he's an official from the Capital. And those others are Frontier warriors, no question about it. Just to be sure, I checked their names against all known lists, but they aren't listed in the 'warrior' section. Which leaves the 'brawler' section. But they don't show up there, either. In other words, they're either brand new to the game, or they're 'nameless,' who work without letting anyone know who they are."

"Not that," the boy groaned. A bead of sweat rolled down his cheek.

Out on the Frontier, any child over the age of three knew how terrible the "nameless" could be. They were fiends, and one of them might destroy an entire town singlehanded just so he could leave without anyone knowing his

name or what he looked like. There were no wanted posters put up for them because everyone they went after wound up dead.

“The grand duke won’t be your only foe. I discussed the matter with Mr. Jacos, and have decided to withdraw our request to you. We’ll have no more pointless bloodshed. Fortunately, you haven’t been paid yet. We’ll reimburse you for your travel expenses out here. Please, just move on. I beg of you.”

The widow got up from her chair, put her hands on her knees, and bowed deeply.

“What I want to know is the details of the situation.”

D’s reply made the mother and son look at each other.

Surely he doesn’t intend to—

To be continued in

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

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NOBLE FRONT

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in Chiba, Japan in 1949. He attended the prestigious Aoyama University and wrote his first novel, *Demon City Shinjuku*, in 1982. Over the past two decades, Kikuchi has written numerous horror novels, and is one of Japan's leading horror masters, working in the tradition of occidental horror writers like Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. Many live-action and anime works in 1980s and 1990s Japan were based on Kikuchi's novels.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Yoshitaka Amano was born in Shizuoka, Japan in 1952. Recruited as a character designer by the legendary anime studio Tatsunoko at age 15, he created the look of many notable anime, including *Gatchaman*, *Genesis Climber Mospeada* (which in the US became the third part of Robotech), and *The Angel's Egg*, an experimental film by future *Ghost in the Shell* director Mamoru Oshii. An independent commercial illustrator since the 1980s, Amano became world famous through his design of the first ten *Final Fantasy* games. Having entered the fine arts world in the preceding decade, in 1997 Amano had his first exhibition in New York, bringing him into contact with American comics through collaborations with Neil Gaiman (*Sandman: The Dream Hunters*) and Greg Rucka (*Elektra and Wolverine: The Redeemer*). Dark Horse has published over 40 books illustrated by Amano, including his first original novel *Deva Zan*, as well as the Eisner-nominated *Yoshitaka Amano: Beyond the Fantasy—The Illustrated Biography* by Florent Gorges.

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