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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

NOBLE
FRONT

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VAMPIRE
HUNTER D

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VAMPIRE
HUNTER D

VOLUME 29
NOBLE FRONT

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VAMPIRE HUNTER D 29: NOBLE FRONT

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VAMPIRE
HUNTER D

Noble Front

Dark Accord

Chapter 1

I

The sixteenth, 11:06 AM 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 PM 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 PM 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 PM 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 PM 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 Bergency?”

“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 PM 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 PM 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 PM Eastern Frontier Time

The caller left.

The sixteenth, 6:19 PM 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 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 the 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 the Earth.

“Display everything currently moving within a thirty-mile radius of the eastern Frontier village of Schwartzen!” he said.

II

The sixteenth, 6:40 PM 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 rings eight inches wide and two inches thick that he had looped over his shoulders. They were wrapped around the man

as if to protect him, and they 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 Bergenzky 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 PM Eastern Frontier Time

Riding as hard as he could, Jacos arrived in the neighboring town—Velis.

The sixteenth, 11:12 PM 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 AM 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 AM 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 AM 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 Schwarzen? 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, "Gaaaaah! 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 Schwarzen 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 countenance 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 previously learned the house’s location from the boy, 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 Bergenzky 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—

Footsteps of “The Nameless”

Chapter 2

I

It was Jacos who took charge of the conversation.

“Just two days ago, someone calling himself Professor Chaney and claiming to be from the Noble Ruins Survey Office in the Capital showed up at the town hall without any previous notification. He was accompanied by four “nameless.” I only learned what brought them here after returning to the village from contacting you, when the mayor told me. From the way he was acting, I could tell he’d intended to keep it all bottled up inside, but he just couldn’t help but confide in someone.”

Professor Chaney had come there with one-sided demands. The human government in the Capital was focusing on the Nobility’s science and technology, and had decided to make humans’ using and applying them their first priority. And pushing their blind ambition was the Noble Ruins Survey Office, with Professor Chaney as its director.

The desire to make the Nobility’s science and technology their own had existed long before the human government was ever established, promoted by ambitious individuals and a subset of the revolutionaries. Talented people were put on the problem, and results were achieved. Indeed, a portion of their technology fell into human hands. According to scientists’ calculations, it only amounted to a ten-quadrillionth of the Nobles’ technology.

For a long time that horrifying statistic had flown above the collective head of the human race like a flag of surrender, but for those of indomitable spirit it became a source of incredible hope. If humanity could access ten percent—no, even one percent—of Noble technology, their civilization would grow by leaps and bounds. They dreamed not merely of controlling everything on their world but of conquering space as well, and were convinced this was possible.

However, the Nobility’s technology was such that something as simple as how to switch it on was beyond human comprehension. On seeing their enormous

facilities, humans would think, *This device apparently has something to do with energy, or I'm not sure whether it's powered by subterranean magma flows or galactic energy*, having nothing but conjecture to go on. The human race remained at the feet of the Nobility. When the people saw the gargantuan devices constructed in the center of the Capital, they heard the mocking laughter of the dying race.

There was only one way to remedy the situation—that was the conclusion the human government quickly reached. In order to master the Nobility's technology, they would need the guidance of a Noble.

“The mayor wasn't informed as to why our village had been selected,” Jacos continued. “Professor Chaney said that he'd been privately in negotiations with Grand Duke Bergenzy for some time and had obtained his consent. And in exchange for his technical guidance, Grand Duke Bergenzy demanded a human offering once a week from our village.”

Ever since the existence of the Nobility had come to light, their predations to quench their thirst for blood had to be taken into account. To protect themselves, people barred their doors and spent the night with wooden stakes, crossbows, and stake guns in hand. *Who'd meekly hand their friends and loved ones over to the fiends?* That thought alone kept them going. The demands the Capital was now making of them virtually trampled their pride and dignity into the mud.

“Any comment from the grand duke?” D inquired.

“Not a word.”

“The message from the mayor asked me to get rid of the grand duke for seeking human offerings. But it seems that this time, there are many in opposition to the mayor's cause. Is there anyone who's likely to bend to the Capital's will?”

“Deputy mayor Bezo and his supporters.”

“There's the folks in the Schwartzen Rejuvenation League, too,” said the boy, Puma. “For a good long time, they've been saying we should work with the grand duke to get the village booming. The bastards talked about doing the same stuff as the guys from the Capital. My dad quieted them down once he became mayor, but I can already picture them singing that tune again.”

“So you mean to tell me people here would offer up their fellow villagers as a sacrifice?”

“Afraid so,” the boy replied, looking down. More than anger, he felt fear that this would sour D’s impression of the village. He looked up again right away, though, and said, “But we can’t let that happen. It’s not right that somebody be sacrificed so that others can profit. This is just a little village, but there’s an inscription on the stone marker at the entrance. *Together, in life and in death*, it says. Those words are what’ve kept this village going. We’ve all gotta keep that in mind!”

D said nothing as he gazed at the boy. Once Puma had finished speaking, he was heard to say, “You really are your father’s son, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

Though the boy looked up at him, D continued on as if he hadn’t said anything, asking, “When does this Bezo person officially become mayor?”

“Officially, tomorrow—there’ll be an inauguration over at the town hall,” Jacos replied, heaving a sigh.

“And what are those from the Capital doing?”

“Lurking around town and gambling in the bar. I don’t know whether they’ve been to see the grand duke or not.”

“When the new mayor’s sworn in, what do you think he’ll do?”

“He’ll get right to negotiating with those fellows from the Capital, no doubt about it.”

Jacos bit his lip. Though the man had constantly butted heads with the mayor, he’d also been his most loyal subordinate.

“Then he’ll accede to all their demands, and probably use the remuneration to enrich no one but himself. And everyone knows it. The mayor’s wife insists she wants to avert further bloodshed, but there are good, strong people both inside and outside the town hall that hate the deputy mayor’s personality and his way of doing things. No one will be able to stop them. I can as much as guarantee you, lives will be lost. And when they are, my only hope is that their blood won’t be

spilled for nothing.”

The room was about to sink into heavy silence—but didn’t get the chance.

“Is there someplace for me to stay?” the traveler in black asked.

“You mustn’t do this,” the mayor’s wife said, shaking her head dumbfoundedly. She didn’t even seem to realize she was doing it.

“You’d be up against Nobility and the ‘nameless.’ You’ll be killed for certain.” Jacos’ eyes said he was looking at a dead man.

D replied softly, “I took the job. Short of a request that I stop from my employer himself, I stay at it.”

The three villagers exchanged looks. Astonishment spread through their eyes—and a look that they’d been deeply impressed. The gorgeous young man wasn’t called the greatest Hunter simply because he was the strongest.

“If you won’t tell me where I can stay, I’ll look for someplace myself,” D said, starting toward the door.

“Just a moment, please. I’ll show you the way,” Jacos said gravely. “The group from the Capital is staying at the inn. I’ll bring you somewhere else.”

As the two of them headed for the door, a voice called out, “Um . . .”

It was the boy, Puma.

D didn’t stop.

The boy stepped forward, as if to follow him. Seemingly no longer able to resist, Puma said, “Thank you, D.”

D turned his head. There was no smile on the face looking back over his shoulder. However, the boy grinned. And his grin didn’t fade until after the door had closed.

Jacos led D to a farmhouse near the northern forest. The secretary explained that the owner and his entire family had vanished about six months earlier and never returned again. Since all their furniture remained, there was nothing to keep anyone from living there. You could say it was an ideal hideout.

“I’ll bring some food and water by later. If there’s anything else you need, feel

free to let me know about it then.”

“I won’t need anything,” D replied.

“Don’t drink water, either,” he said, his voice suddenly hoarse.

But it wasn’t the tone that made Jacos freeze, but rather the import of those words. The gorgeous young man was a dhampir.

“Don’t tell anyone about this place,” D said, his voice back to normal.

“Of course I won’t,” Jacos replied, his voice quavering.

“That includes any of the mayor’s sympathizers. And especially his son.”

“Understood. I’ll be sure to tell the younger folks not to do anything.”

“Let them do as they like.”

Jacos was just about to nod in reply, but then his eyes went wide. For he’d grasped the terrifying import of what D was saying. The gorgeous young man was telling him they were free to do what they would, but if they got in his way, they’d be cut down. His job was to eliminate Grand Duke Bergenzy. Toward that end, he made no distinction between friend and foe. Whose blood would spurt beneath D’s blade remained to be seen.

“The sun will be down soon. Then they’ll be out,” D told the secretary, who then left the farmhouse.

When he was only two minutes’ ride from his house, Jacos halted his cyborg horse and let out a sigh of relief. The sky had turned to black, and houses had their doors and windows shut. There was no sign of anyone. Once he turned the corner, he’d be home.

Suddenly, figures charged around the corner, blocking his way.

“What do you want?”

Before he could reach for the multipurpose knife on his hip, the barrel of a gun had been thrust in his face. The size of its muzzle reminding him of the deputy mayor’s enormous nostrils, Jacos closed his eyes and sighed.

“We’ve got company,” a hoarse voice called out in a darkness devoid of even a scrap of light, a yawn accompanying its words.

Lying on an old leather sofa, D asked, “How many?” It was like a query from the dead. Even his voice was that of a gorgeous corpse.

“Three of ’em. Stride’s none too steady—they’re heavily armed.”

D didn’t move.

“Just so you know, they’re still freaking kids—”

“I’m aware of that,” D replied, returning to the calmness of the dead.

Its words fitting its grating tone, the hoarse voice continued, “Who the hell are they, though? They’ve got heartbeats, and warm blood running through their veins, but still, they gotta be a little weird coming out to a house of the dead like this.”

The darkness outside the window intensified, and that inside the house seemed to almost have a perfume to it. The intruders didn’t know that in a world like this, even a whisper was like a cacophony of destruction. They trod the earth lightly, the ground ringing as they pressed toward the house, where they kicked off the surface, moving like cats across the roof with sounds that were like explosions. The roof creaked in protest. It was a two-story house. They moved over the second-floor storeroom as quiet as thunder, and one of them pulled out a silvery object that seemed to be metal and began to cut through the roofing material at an intense pace. In less than three seconds, there was a hole three feet in diameter. His strength was far from that of an ordinary human.

Another one looked down at the front yard and waved his right hand. Each time he did, the air snarled. A pebble arcing from behind a tree struck the door. It made a sound like the roar of a cannon.

“They’re here!” the hoarse voice cracked wryly, and D got off the sofa and headed toward the front hall. He opened the door, looked around, and immediately closed it again.

“The one behind the tree was keeping an eye on us and sending signals. Oh, they’re coming down, but through the storeroom—sure ain’t making it easy for themselves!” the hoarse voice remarked, with special emphasis on “sure.”

D went back into the living room to lie down on the sofa.

It was a dozen seconds later that three shadowy figures came down the staircase without a sound—except for a creaking that was like a giant grinding his teeth. They wore grotesque devices that were like glasses. From what could be seen of them from the nose down, they were still young. Probably in their early twenties. One was clearly female.

The long-haired one at the fore indicated D with one hand and the woman—or girl—raised a pistol-like weapon. What the other two held were far more streamlined than the pistol or their goggles. Undoubtedly they were weapons of the Nobility.

“Sure is a casual one, isn’t he?” the girl said, sounding disappointed. Her tone also carried a relief born of what they’d confirmed. It looked to them as if D were sleeping.

“Stop,” the long-haired man said, halting them. “We’re dealing with the greatest Hunter of Nobility here. Don’t let your guard down.”

“We’ll be fine, so long as we’ve got *that*,” said a youth who stood a head taller than the man with the long hair, his eyes gleaming at the sight of the streamlined weapon. “Take aim from there, Elsa,” he continued. “Me and Habaki will do the rest.”

“Don’t move,” the long-haired youth called Habaki said, and then after a moment’s consideration he returned his pistol to its holster and drew the longsword from the scabbard he carried in his right hand. He probably wasn’t wearing it on his belt because it would be in the way going in through the roof, or because it’d make too much noise.

“What’s the deal?”

“I’m going to throw down with the Hunter now. Ranged weapons wouldn’t be very sporting. If it looks like I’m gonna lose, take off without me.”

The girl, Elsa, replied that she understood even before the taller youth could.

“I’m going, too,” he said.

“Stay back.”

“I’m not gonna touch him, okay?” the taller youth said, lining up beside

Habaki.

After closing to within six feet of D with silent footsteps, the two of them got a prickling sensation on the soles of their feet that told them something wasn't right.

“What should we do?” the taller one asked. “Wake him up?”

“Yeah. I can't just walk over and stab him out of the blue. Hey!” Habaki called out in a low voice, and he finally realized what was so incongruous.

D's position was strange. The whole sofa was sinking.

No, that's not it! he realized with amazement. *It's not that he's sinking. Are the two of us being raised up?!*

“Best you don't look down,” a hoarse voice said, but before that, Habaki had already turned that way.

II

The soles of his boots and those of his tall compatriot were supported by D's blade. And the sword wasn't lying on its side. They were resting on the cutting edge of the blade.

When in the world had that happened? And how did he do it? At present, D's arm was indeed extended at an angle with his sword in his grip. However, they'd never taken their eyes off D until they'd been lifted up. They could've sworn that the longsword the Hunter had clenched to his chest hadn't moved an inch.

“Make a move, and you'll be sliced in two from the feet up.”

Even without the hoarse voice telling them that, the cold, sharp sensation from the soles of their feet gave them the message. That, despite the fact that the sword's blade hadn't yet sliced into the soles of their boots.

“Come back when your balls drop.”

A second later, the two of them were flying through the air, crashing into the wall by a window that was across from the sofa.

Elsa didn't move a muscle. The next thing she knew, the two men were floating into the air, then a heartbeat later they'd been slammed against the wall.

Though she understood the phenomenon, she didn't know the cause. For she hadn't even seen the blade. There was only one thing she knew—that a tall figure was standing right in front of her. His lengthy sword was back in the scabbard draped across his back.

The weapon the girl held steady with both hands was still aimed at his original location. She had to raise it higher. But she couldn't move. Seemingly robbed of her nervous system, she'd become a stone statue.

“Better not fire that thing, missy,” a hoarse voice said. It sounded to her like it came from the vicinity of the figure in black's left hand. “*This guy* doesn't go easy on anybody who turns a weapon on him, woman or not. If you've got a family that'd be heartbroken to lose you, don't do it.”

Even without being told all that, she knew she couldn't do it. Just being near this Hunter drained all the strength from her—not only that, but an invisible net of eerie emanations seemed to bind her down to the very bone.

“Don't move, Elsa!” a voice called from behind the shadowy figure.

“Leiden?!”

It was the tall one.

“Hey, I'm the one you've gotta tangle with. Turn and face me.”

D responded.

The tall one—Leiden—stood there as bold as a guardian deity. From the neck down he was covered by a black suit of some sort of armor covered with bumps and pits.

“Oh my,” said the hoarse voice. “Got yourself one of the Nobility's powered suits, have you? Ain't exactly built for humans to wear, but have you learned how to work it?”

“I'd say so. This is the same sort of reinforced armor the Nobility used. It's more than a match for your average Hunter. See, we came here to see just how good you really are. On account of how there seems to be tons of Hunters around who are nothing but a lot of big talk. So first we've gotta see whether or not you might be of any use to us.”

“Of any use to you? Oh, that’s rich!” the hoarse voice cackled. “So, I don’t suppose I need to ask you how you heard about this place, do I? What’d you do with Jacos?”

“Relax. He wouldn’t tell us anything. We had no choice but to use drugs on him. A little something called ‘spill pills.’ We brought Jacos home high as a kite.”

“Those drugs from the Nobility, too?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Hell, we made the stuff. Got a buddy who’s real smart, you see. He whipped these night-vision goggles up based on something the Nobles used.”

“A regular genius languishing out in the boondocks, eh?” the hoarse voice said, its laughter becoming even shriller.

“You son of a bitch!” Leiden snarled, kicking off the floor.

“Don’t!” Habaki said, trying to stop him, but it only gave him an extra push.

The Noble combat suit could fly and leap at Mach 10, and dash at speeds up to Mach 8, and a shoulder hit from it would shatter a block of granite. If it got its fingers into a fire dragon, they could tear right through its armored hide. However, it was intended for a Noble’s muscles, and when used by a human it performed at much lower levels. But more to the point, merely operating it was difficult enough. If power was misapplied even slightly— Going straight into high-speed mode, Leiden intended to barrel into D. It didn’t go well. His left and right sides thrown out of balance, he pitched forward just in front of D, angling off to the right and slamming into a wall. Bursting through the plaster as if it were paper, he tumbled into the corridor beyond.

“Leiden?!” Elsa cried out, stiffening.

“Shit!” the young man growled, getting to his feet and bursting his way back through the same wall. A split second before he broke through, a helmet and face shield had emerged to cover his head, then returned to the spot in his armor that housed them.

This time he decided not to count on his speed, but to try to land a punch to D’s head.

“Don’t let that make you cocky,” Leiden growled menacingly. “Sure, I still make some mistakes, but scrapping I’ve got down to an art. I learned how to fight from a former warrior who was in the village.”

“Oh, nice stance. But I don’t care how hard you punch, it won’t knock anybody out if it doesn’t land!”

The hoarse voice fueled Leiden’s humiliation and his urge to fight. His punch came at Mach 10—ten times the speed of sound. But in the split second before it became an exquisite hook aimed at D’s jaw, no one saw the flash of light that sank into the man’s armpit.

His punch sliced through the air. D moved the slightest bit to the left.

“Damn it!”

His left whooshed around in an uppercut—or so he made it seem, and then he lashed out with another right hook. His upper body twisted around from the speed. His lower half managed to support him, quickly turning him back—at least, it should’ve, but Leiden did a remarkable full turn. Not just one turn, but two—and then yet another.

“Wh-what the hell is this?” he cried out in spite of himself. His body continued to spin. “Make it stop!” he screamed as he kept throwing the same perfect punch in exactly the same spot.

In a tone of disgust, the hoarse voice suggested, “What do you say we stop him? It’s not like you could sleep with him going like that. He’d twirl the rest of his life away.”

A steely voice replied, “You should worry less about learning what I can do and more about learning how to handle yourselves.”

Elsa and Habaki’s expressions changed. A kind of madness had occupied their minds. For the hoarse voice really hadn’t suited the gorgeous young man before them. That gap had pushed their minds out of whack, driving them toward the watery depths of insanity. Now, D stood before them as himself.

“I apologize for our rudeness,” said Habaki. “You’re clearly someone we could never handle. So I’m begging you. Please help Leiden out.” He bowed his head.

At the same time, D's right hand flashed out. The Hunter had known that the combat armor had a weakness in the armpit—where it met the shoulder joint. His earlier strike had not only hit the joint with matchless precision, but had also severed part of the mechanical nerve fibers that ran through it, forcing the mechanized armor to repeat the same action for all eternity.

What had his latest strike cut, or what had it connected?

Leiden was frozen in the midst of throwing a hook.

“What are you doing? Get out of there,” Habaki said, pantomiming the act of removing the armor.

There was the sound of switches being thrown repeatedly. Looking like he was about to cry, Leiden said, “It's gone haywire. I can't get outta it!”

“Couldn't be helped. That's what you get for trying to knock somebody's block off. We're gonna leave you there for the time being.”

Once the hoarse voice had finished saying that, D gave the other two a silent look. That was enough to extinguish the fire in their eyes.

“Did you say something about using me?”

Habaki shook his head frantically. “Don't be absurd. We were a bit full of ourselves. Please, forget we said that. But by all means, we'd like you to aid us.”

“I don't come cheap.”

“We know that. We'll reward you as best we can. But the fate of the village hangs on our actions.”

“So, you want me to do something like eliminating Grand Duke Bergenzky?”

“Exactly,” Habaki said, hope swelling in his voice.

“In that case, stop screwing things up,” D replied, crushing those hopes with his words. “I'll get rid of him. If the lot of you are hanging around, you'll only get in my way.”

“Don't say that,” Elsa interjected. “Our skills are nothing compared to yours, but I think we could cooperate on some of the finer points. The Noble's castle might look antiquated, but inside it's full of technology it'd take the human race

tens of thousands of years to comprehend. If we could get our hands on just the tiniest scraps of it and get it to work, the world of man would expand by leaps and bounds!”

“And I told you, you can’t understand it.”

“No, maybe not all of it. But we could manage with some of it.”

“The Nobles’ things were made for the Nobility. Not one of them is intended for human beings. You’re dreaming if you think you’ll manage to use them.”

“But just look at these,” Habaki said, thrusting a pair of night-vision goggles against D’s chest. “They were based on a broken pair from the Nobility. We all worked together to collect the parts for them. I don’t know what the old kind could do, but what we’ve got works fine for us.”

“This is something you made for yourselves, so it has nothing to do with the Nobility,” D said after just a glance at them. “Is this the first time you’ve used those suits?”

“Yeah. But we’ve tested ’em a few times.”

“If you’d screwed up when you did, the suit might’ve gone on destroying whatever was in front of you until the end of time. Like you saw it do just now. What do you think would happen if it got stuck like that while it was moving forward? You’d smash your way through forests and mountains on a path of endless destruction. And it’d still be going a hundred years later when you were nothing but bones.”

The three of them fell silent.

D said, “Go ahead and destroy the Nobility if you like. But for your own sake, don’t ever get it into your head to try and understand them. Not even their accessories.”

“But . . .” Habaki started to say, and then he relented.

“Get going. I’m heading out.”

After a moment’s pause, the three of them exchanged looks.

“Don’t tell me you’re headed off to Castle Bergenzky? You going there to get rid of the grand duke?” asked Leiden. Only his face was left exposed by the

combat suit. As he looked at D, his eyes were aglow with envy and worship. Not even waiting for the Hunter to answer, he continued, “Um, could you please get me outta this thing? I’ll go with you. I swear I won’t get in your way. Just to watch. C’mon, I’m begging you!”

“Get going.”

“No!” a voice countered sharply.

“Elsa?!”

Before the very eyes of her two compatriots, and D, the girl took the weapon she’d lowered and pointed it straight at the Hunter’s heart.

“D-don’t do it!” Leiden stammered, his face gone pale, but there was nothing he could do trapped in that armor.

“That little speech of yours didn’t leave me convinced,” said Elsa. “This is one of the Nobles’ weapons, isn’t it? And I can use it just fine.”

“There’s a difference between using something and understanding it.”

His cold tone only served to make the spirited girl’s blood boil.

“We can worry about how it’s made and what it does later. At any rate, a blast from this will destroy a Noble, too. See, I can use this weapon that was intended for Nobles. I think it all starts with this.”

“A weapon intended for Nobles,” D said softly.

“Overconfidence is a scary thing, missy,” the hoarse voice said, making the three of them flinch. “That weapon was intended for Nobles, eh? Ha ha ha. If that’s really the case, why don’t you try blasting *this guy* with it?”

A puzzled “Huh?” escaped Elsa’s lips.

“No need to be shy. We’ll see with one shot what that pea-sized brain of yours is good for. Go on, fire away.”

“One blast can burn right through eight inches of iron plating!” Elsa said, looking by turns at D and the weapon in her own hand. “It’ll melt an eighteen-inch-thick iron beam in ten seconds flat. There’s no way he could take that.”

“I don’t care—fire away.”

“No. Wha—?!” Elsa screamed because D had taken a step forward and grabbed hold of her right wrist. He pressed down on her index finger.

A crimson beam of light pierced D’s heart.

III

The six-thousand-degree beam fulfilled its purpose. The youthful trio saw it bore through the wall behind D.

It was the hoarse voice that freed Elsa from the tension. “How was that? Not even a full-blown Noble, and he can laugh off a weapon intended for Nobles. Or to put it another way, that weapon ain’t intended to be used on Nobles.”

“It was meant for shooting our kind?” Habaki asked, his expression growing bitter.

“Of course so. To keep the humans scared outta their wits, it’s a lot more effective to roast a hundred in one go instead of draining the blood from ’em one by one.”

“That’s it? Doesn’t it have any other uses? What about cutting iron or something?”

“Can you picture a Noble working as a blacksmith? If it were you, what would you use it for?”

Though the three of them looked at each other, no words were forthcoming.

“You’ve got nothing, do you? Well, considering what the weapon’s made for, murder, extortion, robbery, safecracking, knocking over stage coaches—that’s about the size of it. Think about something like digging a ditch for irrigation or burning down a forest to clear room for more farmland or houses. If you’re looking for a tool to do that, there are more options than you could shake a stick at, and they work about a thousand times better. If you wanna destroy Nobles, the old ways are the best. Namely, drive a stake of ash through their hearts.”

“What the hell?!” Elsa cried, sounding on the verge of tears. “I thought we had something that’d help us get rid of the Nobility, and it’s really just a toy that only works on humans? And I’ve been waving that thing around?”

“That’s it in a nutshell. And that’s why I say forget all that wasteful nonsense about understanding the Nobles’ civilization, and just go home and give your all to the real work at hand. For a girl, that might mean helping in the kitchen, sewing, baby-sitting, and having babies of your own when you’re older. For a boy, tending crops, chopping wood, hunting game—there’s a million things to do. You guys talk about destroying the Nobility—but that’s just a pipe dream. Live your lives in peace.”

D started to walk away. The trio cleared a path for him. Not that they’d accepted what the hoarse voice had said. Rather, the Hunter’s eerie aura had pushed them out of the way. Here was a man even one of the Nobles’ weapons couldn’t slay. And the fact that it’d been intended for use on humans all along robbed their hearts of something great they felt could never be replaced.

As the Hunter got on his cyborg horse and it began to walk away, his left hand jeered, “Snot-nosed little punks. Gonna have to find ourselves a new house. Well, I just hope I’ve straightened them out now.”

“Think that’s the case?”

“Eh?”

“You think the three of them will just go back to farm work?”

“Hmmm,” the hoarse voice replied, a laugh escaping. “More than a few people hate the Nobility and wanna see ’em destroyed. But those who stand up to do it personally are few and far between. And even then, most either can’t even find the Nobles’ resting place, or they’re so afraid of their vengeance they’ll go their separate ways the very same day. You think those guys are any different? You ain’t much of a judge of character, are you?”

Moonlight cast the shadow of the horse and rider on the ground. D’s shadow was terribly faint.

“Of course they harbor vulgar thoughts of catching the table scraps from their betters. Now that they understand they can’t handle anything more than a toy for the Nobility, they’ll settle down and be back to giving the farm work their all tomorrow. And that’s for the best.”

The Hunter didn’t respond, and his cyborg horse started to gallop. Castle

Bergenzky was at the edge of the wilderness that stretched from the northern edge of the village, sitting atop Glasden Hill.

Generally, the western and southern Frontier regions were considered picturesque lands with mild climates, while the eastern and northern regions were said to be desolate, ugly places. While that didn't hold for every single locale within them, the black plateau that spread before D at present was so wild and forbidding it would negate any opinions to the contrary. There was a road. There was a forest, too. The sound of running water could be heard. Moonlight made the dark green stand out starkly. However, devoid of so much as the chirping of insects, it was a world of death.

Knifing through the wind, the rider in black looked like a gorgeous Grim Reaper on his black steed.

Rising like the back of an enormous dragon, Glasden Hill came to fill D's field of view.

“Wow, the lights are on in every stinking window in the place. They throwing a ball tonight or something? Everybody's so focused on themselves, and screw whatever's become of the world. Oh, those punk kids would get a laugh out of this!”

Before long, the cyborg steed had ridden within range of the strains of an orchestra spilling from the castle.

They galloped straight up the hill, at which point the hoarse voice remarked, “Oh, some ruffians to deal with before there'll be any waltzing for us.”

A moat more than thirty feet wide flowed in front of the main gate, and naturally the drawbridge wasn't down. Three mounted figures were clustered on this side of the moat.

D didn't stop.

Turbulence swept through the shadowy figures. Not making a sound, their horses pulled away.

A heartbeat shy of passing through the newly made path, D pulled back on the reins. To the other riders, it probably looked as if he'd broken the very laws of inertia.

“Now this is a surprise. I’m surprised you could stop,” said a cheery voice. It was that of the man dressed most inappropriately in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. The strange objects he had looped over either shoulder continued to circle his body. They were iron rings.

“You the one they call D?” asked a low voice. Wearing a coat, the speaker was as thin as baling wire, and his fingers were long.

The third sat astride his horse saying nothing, but perhaps it should’ve come as no surprise that he didn’t speak. His entire face and head were hidden beneath a riveted iron mask.

As was the custom on the Frontier, they all had longswords and rifles in cases hanging from the sides of their saddles, but the only other weapons they wore were a pistol on the hip of the one with the rings and a longsword on the back of the masked one. The man with the long fingernails was unarmed.

“Damn, but you are one good-looking fella,” the man with the rings murmured in rapture.

Apparently the other two weren’t about to gainsay him, and at that moment something heavy left them. Murderous intent.

“You know who we are, right? You split our colleague’s belly open. Fella who goes by the name of Lascaux.”

“That fatty?” the hoarse voice laughed, stunning them all.

“You know, that don’t really suit your face. At any rate, allow us to introduce ourselves. I’m Ringard,” said the man with the rings. “The toothpick is Valen, and that’s Mask in the iron headgear. We’re working for Professor Chaney.”

“What do you want?” D inquired.

The three men looked at each other.

“Now that’s more like it. That’s what your voice sounds like!” Ringard said, breaking into a grin.

D fell as silent as an exquisite statue. Perhaps it was the work of the moonlight.

“See, we heard you’d come to town. And we figured we’d see about meeting you once—before we had to tussle, that is.”

“What, we ain’t gonna tussle now?” the hoarse voice asked.

Ringard’s eyes seemed to rattle in his head. “Nope. The Professor hasn’t given us the word yet. He said he’d pay, but taking on the man they call D for that price is plumb stupid. The only reason we’re out here tonight is because we wanted a look at your face.”

“You can’t get across here,” Valen said with a toss of his chin toward the moat. It was filled to the brim with black water.

Advancing on his horse, D stopped by the side of the road. The pendant he wore on his chest gave off a blue light.

Out in the darkness, there was a faint electronic sound from the vicinity of the drawbridge. The three warriors seemed astounded when the bridge slowly lowered.

“How’d you swing that, mister?” Ringard inquired, his eyes wide.

The bridge came all the way down. D immediately started across it. He acted as if the other three hadn’t been there from the very beginning.

Once he’d vanished into the castle, Ringard remarked, “That’s one hell of a pretty boy—just off the chart.”

“Just what I’d expect from D.”

“We’d better hurry back. I don’t wanna stay here too long and wind up getting some kind of weird proposition from the grand duke.”

The three of them wheeled their horses around and galloped off. Overhead, bats flitted.

The Thunderer's Ball

Chapter 3

I

About an hour had elapsed since the start of the ball. It had hit a lull.

Taking Duchess Elizabeth through the last turn, Grand Duke Bergenzy escorted her gracefully from the line of dancers and kissed the back of her hand before taking a glass of wine from a waiter who was passing by.

Suddenly, Baron Agrippa addressed him, asking, “Is something worrying you?” Possessed of a massive form and no less than five chins, the perpetually smirking baron endeavored to plumb the depths of his dear friend’s consciousness.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t be coy with me. How many millennia have we known each other? The very fact that you didn’t down that whole glass of wine in one go is proof that you have troubles.”

“Leave me be. It’s no concern of yours,” the grand duke replied, brushing back his golden mane with one hand.

The baron smirked again, saying, “Apparently this D person has come to town. Filthy half-breed. An eternal curse on anyone of Noble blood who culls the Nobility.”

The grand duke made no reply, gazing with apparent pleasure at the figures in tails and colorful gowns who continued to dance across the vast floor. Here and there bottles of champagne and wine from his private stock were being opened, and the laughter and chatter of men and women streamed continually through the night hall, “Or is it that other matter? Are you getting cold feet about offering technology to the lowly humans? Make up your mind quickly. The notion of Grand Duke Bergenzy, known across the eastern Frontier as the Thunderer, vacillating in a deal with humans is preposterous. What’s more, the request for blood from the village’s girls at regular intervals is laughable. If it’s human blood you desire, all you need do is force your way in through a window, hold

them down, and drink your fill. You need not plead for an offering from those whose very sustenance you make possible—”

There, the baron averted his gaze and drained the glass he held in his hand.

“Orange juice?” the grand duke said, lowering his glare, which became a look of disappointment trained on the glass in the baron’s hand.

“My apologies, but for generations those of the Agrippa line have had no tolerance for alcohol.”

“In that case, don’t lecture me, you weakling.”

“What are you saying? You may not have noticed, but this recent proposal by the humans presents very serious problems. Firstly, there’s the question of whether the lowly humans can even comprehend Noble science and technology. And if you do such a thing, the Nobility in other locales won’t sit still for it. You’ll be seen as a traitor who has besmirched the honor of the Nobility, and as likely as not you’ll be targeted by assassins until you’ve been reduced to dust.”

“If such is the case, it might well be at the Sacred Ancestor’s discretion.”

His tone, brimming with a strange tranquility, made the baron furrow his brow.

Just then, a girl in a dress of a metallic azure hue curtsyed gracefully in front of the grand duke.

“Would you do me the honor?” she asked, lifting her head ever so faintly.

“Your face seems familiar. Is this your first ball?” the grand duke inquired cordially.

“Indeed, your grace.”

“Françoise, I am a terrible dancer. You would do better with someone else. How about Lord Dudley over there?”

“For the last month, ever since I got this invitation, I’ve been telling myself my first waltz would be with the grand duke, your grace. I hope you’ll grant me this request.”

Beside them, the baron rubbed his mitt-like hands together and made catcalls. One glare from the grand duke put an end to that.

“I hope you shan’t regret this, Françoise. Shall we?”

With a smile and an elegant gesture, the grand duke escorted the girl to the center of the ring formed by the waltz.

Just as he was about to take the lead, a figure in electric blue walked over and whispered something in the grand duke’s ear.

“Oh, so he’s come?” the grand duke said with a nod. There was laughter in his voice. “Prepare a welcome for him. Glickenheim and Johnston should do nicely. And they’re to last at least four minutes.”

“Understood,” the verdigris-hued figure with the face of a handsome young man replied, nodding respectfully before leaving in due haste.

“Some problem, your grace?” the girl inquired anxiously.

“It’s nothing. Now, then,” the grand duke said, taking Françoise’s hand.

Just then, the music halted. The band’s conductor looked around at the crowd and announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, we are joined by the grand duke.”

The hall was filled with cheers and applause.

Turning the face of a philosopher toward the grand duke, he said, “Would you like to call the tune?”

“Fascination.”

As soon as they began to play, a new light made the hall appear hazy. The candles that’d been burning in moderation all along now blazed with new life.

As they finished the preparation and took the first step, Françoise kept repeating in her head, *Un, deux, trois . . .*



“Are you familiar with the city called Paris?” the grand duke asked, his youthful countenance still turned away from Françoise. The waltz was danced without looking your partner in the face. As a result, even sworn enemies could be paired together.

“Paris, you say?”

“Yes. In the oh-so-distant past, in the days when mankind still fancied themselves the center of the world, the city was said to be one of the beacons of culture.”

“But human culture . . .” Françoise began, her face twisting with scorn.

“Quite right. It was never anything great. But I visited that city just once. Shall I bring you along next time?”

“To a city that was never anything great?”

“Yes.”

“What could possibly be there?”

As the girl gazed intently at him, the grand duke responded with a smile.

“Let’s discuss it another time. This evening, you make your debut.”

Unfortunately, Françoise had picked the wrong night for her debut. It was halfway through the tune when there was a murmur and everyone turned their eyes in the same direction. Someone had noticed a figure coming in from the veranda.

“How gorgeous!” countless voices declared as one.

Entering through a pair of glass doors left wide open, the figure in black with a longsword across his back had come to stand in the center of the hall without making a sound. The lavishly attired ladies and gentlemen swallowed their words and backed away. The hall had been covered by tension, fear, and rage—and outweighing them all was rapture. That was why they couldn’t speak. That was why their steps were exquisite even as they retreated. That was why when the visitor asked, “Where is Grand Duke Bergenzky?” his voice drew sighs.

The grand duke looked down at his left arm. Françoise clung to it with a trembling hand. Gently placing his own hand atop it, the grand duke then

removed the girl's hand from his arm and stepped forward.

“I am Grand Duke Bergency. And I would have your name, O gorgeous philistine!”

“D.”

The clamor rose, and the people of the night retreated still further. In their place, stalwart attendants stepped to the fore. Guards.

“Stand back,” the grand duke commanded them.

The men disappeared.

“Seeing that the one known as the greatest Hunter of Nobility on the Frontier has come here, I take it it's my life you're after. I have no objection to that. Naturally, I will resist, though.”

The air froze. D's right hand had gone for the hilt over his shoulder.

“Patience. I'm not sure whether you realize this or not, but I have a great many of the villagers here in the castle. I have but to snap my fingers and the entire castle will be blown away. Of course, we wouldn't be harmed by that in the least by that, though.”

His distinguished face split lengthwise. Cries of terror and astonishment rippled through the room only after D had broken the stance from his downward stroke. Collapsing on the spot, the grand duke turned to dust before his very eyes.

“An illusion, eh?” the hoarse voice murmured.

“Right you are,” the grand duke laughed proudly, having appeared in exactly the same spot. “Not even the man called D could distinguish it from the real thing. You see, I supervised the design and manufacture of weapons for the Sacred Ancestor.”

The grand duke stepped forward. And his head went flying. No one had even seen the horizontal swipe D had made with his blade. Sailing in a massive arc, the grand duke's head struck a wall more than sixty feet away before falling to the floor.

“Someone, toss me back!” the severed head commanded.

One of the guards raced over, scooped it up, and lobbed it back to the body that stood there patiently.

Catching it with ease, the body returned the missing part to its rightful place. The grand duke's grinning visage suddenly took on a shocked look—and the Nobleman disappeared.

“Unbelievable,” said a third iteration of the grand duke, his eyes wide.

Indescribable groans rose on all sides of him.

“My illusions are composed of different particles than normal matter. They should be able to recover from any attack, yet you've destroyed two of them now. D, can your blade cut on a molecular level?”

“Where's the real you?”

“Good enough. Come for me if you like, but know this first—”

“I don't accept any conditions.”

“I see,” the grand duke said, shrugging his shoulders. Looking around at the group, he said, “Everyone, you have my deepest apologies, but you can see the situation that has developed. Until my return, I hope you'll forget all about this turn of events and enjoy yourselves—and now, you must excuse me for a while. No one is to follow after me.”

Just then, the performance ended. The band had continued playing “Fascination” without pausing for a second.

“Nicely done,” the grand duke said, raising one hand in greeting to the conductor, who bowed to the Nobleman as he moved toward the door. D followed after the Nobleman, and the crowd parted for them without a word.

The grand duke stopped in his tracks. The girl in the metallic azure dress was right in front of him.

“I'll be right back, Françoise—just as soon as I take care of this.”

The two men went out into a corridor.

They'd gone about three paces when they sensed someone behind them. Apparently they'd been followed.

A figure in an electric blue cape stood before them. Raven-haired and with features unlike those of the grand duke or his other guests, he seemed to be of foreign blood.

“Vyken—I ordered you not to come!”

“But that would prevent me from doing my job,” he replied, the looks he gave the grand duke and D as sharp as any bird of prey’s.

“Very well. And what of Glickenheim and Johnston?”

“Both slain. The battle was decided in the blink of an eye.”

“Those two? It would seem his title of the Frontier’s greatest Hunter of Nobility is more than just talk. Leave us.”

Though the grand duke’s tone was soft, his word was apparently iron, and his faithful guard bowed and watched the two of them go.

“You might not think it to look at me, but I’m quite a coward,” said Bergenzky. “No one else in the castle even knows where I stay. You will be an exception.”

“Why’s that?” asked the hoarse voice.

It was small wonder that the grand duke eyed D suspiciously before saying, “Because this seems likely to relieve my boredom.”

The hoarse voice laughed, “Well, you’ve got more than your fair share of confidence. You’d fight *this guy* to stave off boredom?”

The blue light from a cylinder at the end of the corridor tied the floor to the ceiling. The grand duke entered first, and D followed after him.

“Have at you!” the grand duke exclaimed, becoming a blue silhouette.

D felt every cell in his body burning. And he was aware of each and every one.

“We’re being disintegrated!”

His head split by the hoarse voice’s cry and the sensation of blistering heat, D still managed to remain conscious.

The light faded.

Apparently they were inside an enormous structure. Though D’s surroundings

were sealed in darkness, he could sense the tremendous mass that lurked there. Any creature accustomed to living in a hospitable environment would probably hyperventilate at the thought of being there.

Sticking his left hand out in front of himself, D slowly turned in a complete circle.

“Not a clue what’s going on outside. He ain’t there, and it may be he’s pulled a fast one on us,” the hoarse voice said, its tone composed despite the import of the words. It was probably accustomed to situations like this. “Let’s see what the closest thing is.” About three seconds later, the hoarse voice continued, “I’ll be damned. We’ve got some ridiculously big stone statues in front of us, to the rear, and to either side. Seems like Nobles really do admire the stupidest things.”

“What is this place?” D inquired.

“Not entirely sure, but my gut’s telling me it’s some kind of archives.”

Narrowing his eyes a bit, D peered through the darkness.

“We gonna wait and see what move Bergenzky makes, or will we—”

“Apologies for my abrupt departure, O lovely assassin,” the grand duke announced in a tone so substantial it seemed you could strike it and make it ring like a gong. D tried to determine where the voice emanated from, but was unable to ascertain the location.

“Just his voice,” the left hand groused.

The Nobleman had no physical presence there.

“Unfortunately, I can’t square off with you just yet. However, no matter how far I might run or whatever defensive measures I might employ, the man called D would undoubtedly tear the lid from my coffin. I led you here in order to prevent that very thing.”

A low groan escaped D’s lips. He’d just weathered the sensation of a cold metallic blade slicing through his brain.

There aren’t many things I must tell you. That’s what they had said.

D realized that the “voice” had come from the stone colossi on all four sides of him. Had the “voice” waited beneath an unknown stony fortress for untold

millennia for D?

One. And there, the “voice” faded away.

“There aren’t many things I must tell you,” the grand duke said. “‘One’— Those are all the words we’ve been able to make out thus far. Over the span of five millennia. Telepathy isn’t an easy power for a Noble to acquire, but there are some with a rudimentary ability to catch thoughts, and there are devices for such purposes as well. Yet it took us five thousand years to decipher a single thought from the Great One. Have you no wish to learn the rest of it, D?”

“Why do you think I’d want to know what he has to say?” asked D.

“Because in truth, there is one more word we were able to make out,” the grand duke replied. His words rang like a recited prayer in D’s ears. “The very last word of a ‘thought’ otherwise indecipherable to me. In point of fact, that word was ‘D.’ It’s been waiting for you for five thousand long years.”

II

The darkness squeezed tighter around D and the voice.

“What’d *he* come here for?” asked the hoarse voice.

The Nobleman replied, “That I don’t know. It was during my father’s reign, and I was still quite young. One day—as I recall, it was dark night, without a star in the sky and clouds piled all the way down to the horizon—I was in my room listening raptly to a performance by a band my father had summoned from the Capital when my father came in looking enraged and told me to get back in my coffin. Terrified by his demeanor, I went down into the underground crypt with the chamberlain. Though I had no intention of hiding in my coffin, the chamberlain told me to get in with an even sterner expression than my father’s. I had no choice but to comply. Once that lid was shut, I was in my own little world, beyond the reach of all light or sound. However, that night I heard something.”

“And what was that?” asked the hoarse voice.

“My father’s voice, his footsteps, his fear. My father had gone into the most

spacious of the living rooms. And, haughty man though he was, he seemed like a trembling bunny fleeing from a beast. After that, something came in. D, that living room is above ground, while I was in a grave nearly two miles beneath the surface. And yet, I sensed it. Something incredibly large. I speak not of physical size alone, but I sensed a being with such a presence the mere act of conversing with him would leave one feeling like they were about to be destroyed—was that the Sacred Ancestor, D?”

Nothing from the Hunter.

“I was ordered to live down in the crypt for the next year. Even now I’m not entirely sure what happened to my father and his retainers during that time. However, he was like an entirely different man, a gloomy, soulless husk, and a year after that he went missing. Even now, he hasn’t returned. On exiting the crypt, my eyes were greeted by a remarkable change. The living room my father had been in with something else had become a much vaster space shrouded in darkness. And four colossal statues towered there. *Right here.*”

D looked up into the crushing darkness before him. “It doesn’t have a face,” he remarked.

“That is one of the mysteries. All four have heads, but lack faces. Therefore, I knew what they were. They had to be statues of the Sacred Ancestor. The night I left the crypt, I sensed ‘the thought’ for the first time. However, I could make out nothing save the beginning and the very end. And that only after five millennia and bringing all our science to bear on it. Someday, a man called D would come here. All I could do was wait for that eventuality. D, what was it the Sacred Ancestor wished to tell you?”

There was no reply to that. Instead, the Hunter asked, “Where are you?”

“Right here.”

A palpable presence seemed to coalesce about ten yards to his right.

D bounded. Twisting his upper body in midair, he struck with his blade over one shoulder as if returning it to its sheath—and there was no sign of fleeing, just the savage thud of bone being cleaved.

Falling to the floor with a geyser of black blood was the grand duke’s right

arm, which had been severed at the shoulder.

“You bastard! Have you no desire to hear the Sacred Ancestor’s ‘thought’?!” the shadowy figure exclaimed in disbelief, he and his voice fading into the distance, but the figure of beauty gave chase.

“D!”

A diagonal slash cut right through the Nobleman’s cry. And his left arm.

In midair, D jerked his blade to the right. Was he preparing to make a thrust? He’d be aiming for the grand duke’s heart.

“Gaaah!”

The cry was a veritable death rattle.

A flash of purple ripped through D. Still poised for a thrust, he fell to the floor.

The grand duke had fled back beyond the light.

“Those are ‘black cosmic rays,’” the hoarse voice said with undisguised astonishment. “A millisecond’s exposure is enough to destroy DNA. They’ll screw up bones and nerves, brains and mind all down to the most basic level!”

Dhampir or not, if D was unable to prevent the mad rush of blood in his veins, it would be a poison that would paralyze him with fatal results. However, his fall became a graceful landing and a second later D went after the grand duke, true to form.

The light faded. Behind the grand duke, a blue cylinder came into view.

“That’s a transport tube! Don’t let ’im get in it!” the hoarse voice exclaimed, its words swinging around in an arc. For the Hunter’s left hand had just hurled a rough wooden needle.

The grand duke reeled backward, but then dashed a few paces and was swallowed up by the cylinder.

The very instant D poised to leap, the cylinder vanished.

“He got away?!” the hoarse voice shouted, but its tone quickly became one of surprise. “We nailed him with that needle. And before that, you put your blade right through his heart. Cut off both his arms, and got in another lick to boot.

You of all people. And yet, he managed to get away—so who or what the hell is this joker?”

“We’re going after him.”

“I figured. First things first, though—this was obviously some sort of living room in the castle that was converted into a shrine. Seeing where he used a transport tube to get outta here, I’m thinking it’s been moved somewhere else.”

“Can you get us back?”

“I can try,” the hoarse voice replied with complete confidence.

Taking a small leather pouch and a bundle of red string from his coat, D dumped the contents of the former into the palm of his left hand. Black soil. It was immediately sucked into the palm of his hand. Following that, a tiny mouth appeared in it.

Taking a foot-long section of string from the bundle, D held one end of it between his teeth. It had a silver cap on it. Pulling that off, the Hunter waited a second, and then a blinding light fought back the darkness. The string was made of gunpowder. Pushing it into the mouth on his palm, which sucked it up like a long noodle, D then put his left forefinger against his right wrist. His nail was as sharp as it was elegant. A blur of motion, and blood gushed from his wrist. The tiny mouth gulped down the dripping river of red with the bottomless gluttony of an anaconda. D rolled the ball of that same finger over the wound once, and the bleeding stopped.

“Last one, now. Leave this to me,” his left hand murmured, and then it pursed its lips.

D raised his left hand. The wind howled. With a *whoosh* the air was being sucked in by those lips.

The elements earth, wind, fire, and water had all been assembled.

“First, we’ve gotta find out just where *here* is.”

D pressed his left hand against the stone floor. And he kept it there for several seconds.

“I’ll be damned,” the hoarse voice remarked with amazement. “I’d heard that

bastard Grand Duke Bergenzky wasn't just in charge of weapons, but was at the top of the Ministry of Technology, and damned if that ain't the truth."

"Where are we?" D asked, and on hearing his left hand's reply, a coldly murmured "Oh" escaped him.

"There ain't a thing we can do until we find one of them transport tubes. I think I have it. It'll be a little bit dangerous, so you think you could feed me again?"

D got a gleam in his eye. He pulled out the leather bag of gunpowder fuses once more.

†

"You think D's gonna be okay?" Leiden asked Elsa with apprehension, having looked over at the castle—the only building beyond their windows that was lit up.

"The castle hasn't changed in the least bit," Elsa said, the resignation deep in her tone. "Think he failed?"

Habaki was sitting across the table from them. The trio was in an abandoned farmhouse they used as their hideout. It had an ample supply of food and weapons.

"It's a little too early to be jumping to any conclusions," Habaki told them. "Let's not write off the greatest Hunter on the Frontier until we've laid eyes on the grand duke again."

And then all three of them sighed deeply, each fueled by their own musings. *Start again from scratch.* That thought was overlaid with their real misgivings and fears, now sharper than ever. They couldn't close their eyes to this. And there'd be no backing down.

"The grand duke—you think he knows about us?" asked Elsa.

"Probably. I remember bats flying around over my house. And not just a night or two. I'm talking about for a month straight. It was tough for me to chitchat with my family like nothing was going on!" Habaki said, looking up. Even now, those symbols of the vampire apparently flitted overhead.

“Yeah, lately I’ve got the feeling somebody was prowling around outside my house at night, and it gives me the creeps,” Elsa replied. “My ma feels it too, and it’s made a nervous wreck of her.”

“Damn, we’re in real trouble now. Somebody probably tailed us out there tonight, too!”

Leiden scratched the back of his head, saying, “Screw that. We haven’t even done anything yet.”

“Then let’s get them before they get us.”

“Knock it off, Leiden!” Elsa exclaimed, her body trembling. But just then, she caught the faint but protracted buzz of an indicator.

Habaki boldly strode over to the south wall. An obviously handmade metal box had been set on a three-legged stool. Glancing at the screen, he said, “Got people coming. Eleven of ’em. All in hooded robes. ‘Murder monks’ from the castle. You two better get your combat suits on!”

New life flowed into the rough suits hanging on the wall by the door. Chunky steel fingers took up repeating bows and quivers.

“What the hell?” Leiden exclaimed as he was feeding one arrow at a time into the harmonica-like ammo cartridge.

Ordinarily, they’d pull arrows one at a time from a quiver and load them side by side in the harmonica-shaped cartridge, but Habaki loaded the entire quiver at once.

“Yeah, I forgot to tell you about this baby, didn’t I, Leiden? It’s Cornet’s latest and greatest. Same weight as the old one, but a helluva lot easier to carry.”

“Don’t suppose you’ve got another to spare, do you?”

“Sorry, but they’re handmade. Had him slap this one together as a special rush job.” As Leiden eyed him with envy, Habaki added teasingly, “If you want it all that badly, I’ll swap you, you big baby.”

“Shut up.”

The two of them were right up against the wall by the window. The sounds from the metal box—the radar—were becoming shorter. A sign the enemy was

closing.

They stopped.

“Five yards out. They’re hiding between the trees.”

Saying that, Habaki flipped a switch, wrapped the box up in the bag it’d been resting on, and put it into a wooden backpack covered with thin iron plates.

No sooner had he strapped that to his back than Leiden asked him, “What do you suppose they’ll try?”

“If it’s the murder monks, they’ll open with poison gas. Get your masks on,” he told the other two, his hand reaching for a rough-looking item on the table.

Cornet had explained that chemical filters inserted into the part that covered their nose and mouth would absorb poisons. However, they were as yet untested. This would be the trial by fire.

“Here they come!” Elsa cried, and that was followed shortly by the sound of the windows shattering.

A yellow canister rolled across the floor, belching gas of the same hue. It was followed by another canister, and another.

Quickly pulling off his mask, Habaki said, “The bastards are waiting for us to come running out. I think we’ll wait for ’em in here.”

Putting his mask back on, he coughed a little. Apparently he’d inhaled some of it. His lungs burned—but he soon got over it.

“What’s wrong?” Elsa asked, turning toward him.

“I’m fine,” he replied, flashing her the okay sign with one hand.

The world beyond his goggles was already yellow. But still in his twenties, that young man didn’t realize just how cruel that world could be.

III

A minute passed in silence. The yellow canisters had stopped fuming. Now the smoke was just blowing out the windows.

“Our enemies have missed their guess. They’ll be coming in now!” Habaki tried to tell the others through his mask, but he knew it was no use.

The ceiling creaked. All eyes and ears trained on it, the ceiling caved in with a crash.

The yellow-robed figures had long scythes in their hands.

When he was just a little kid, Habaki had seen the body of a decapitated farmer. He’d run afoul of the grand duke, or so the talk went. *That was their handiwork, eh?* he thought to himself.

One of them was muttering something. The interior of his hood was shrouded in darkness, and crimson eyes glittered there.

“Habaki Mejiba . . . Thou shalt be delivered . . . to the Sacred Ancestor . . .”

The man’s blood froze.

“The hell you will!”

He spun his short spear around. Up until that point, he’d been pretty confident he was quicker.

Not seeming to mind as the spear pierced his chest, the monk swung his scythe.

There wasn’t time enough to dodge it. Habaki blocked the blow with his left arm. A *ching!* rang out. Thin iron armor covered the man’s left arm from the back of his hand to the elbow.

“Oof!” he grunted.

Dropping his hips ever so slightly and steadying himself, Habaki made a horizontal swipe with the spear in his right hand.

The monk’s body arced across the room to slam against the far wall and drop to the floor—and he immediately got up again. The red sparks blazed once more in his darkened hood.

A hard *thunk* took his head off. With oily black blood spraying from the wound, his decapitated torso thudded to the floor. There was no time to even thank Leiden, who’d struck him down from behind with a machete, as one

murder monk after another dropped from the ceiling.

We will have thy head, Elsa Garry . . .

We will have thy head, Leiden Pomme . . .

These stammered, murmured prayers threw the two of them into mad action.



The repeating bow whined. A piston driven by compressed gas released an arrow a second, and they slammed into the murder monks with deadly accuracy. They struck them right through the heart with an accuracy that seemed like it would last forever.

From behind one stumbling monk another one pounced, swinging down with his scythe as he did so.

“What the hell?!” Leiden exclaimed, blocking it with his bow. Though his weapon was made of wood, key points had been reinforced with iron. It would have no trouble at all stopping the average scythe. This one cut right through it, though.

The blade that’d bisected Leiden’s bow struck his neck and stopped. He had the combat suit to thank for that.

“You sons of bitches!” Leiden growled, kicking off the ground powerfully. Catching one attacker in each arm, he slammed them into the wall, crashing into it himself in the process. He felt their skulls crack, and the murder monks spat up blood.

“There’s no end to them!” Elsa cried as she shot down the foes closing in rapid succession.

Leiden had spun around to go to her aid when three monks with shattered heads attacked him. That hadn’t been enough to kill them.

There was a streak of red light. A beam from Habaki’s ray gun. Their robes transformed into torches, his foes fell one after another.

Though the Nobility and their victims could only be destroyed by a sword or stake through the heart, apparently these monks were a different matter. Flames had begun to spring from some of the figures they’d mowed down.

“It’s working!” Leiden exclaimed, raising a fist.

But just then, Habaki clutched his right hand. His weapon fell to the floor. A robed figure who’d swung a great scythe at him had raised his weapon to strike again. He was less than three feet away. It was a guaranteed hit.

But he slashed through empty air.

Damn it! Leiden thought, the words flashing through his brain faster than they could spill from his lips, and at the same time he drew the machete from his belt and swung it down at the strangely posed foe.

“What the hell?!”

It wasn't so much that he was thrown off balance, but it felt more like something had pulled his attack off in another direction. His blade, too, sliced only air, leaving the wielder crawling on the floor. Before he could even get up again, cries of surprise from Habaki and Elsa let him know he wasn't the only victim of this bizarre phenomenon.

Swiftly getting to his feet again, Leiden found that the robed figure from a minute ago had stuck a familiar-looking weapon in his face. Habaki's ray gun. No doubt he'd picked up the weapon Leiden's friend had dropped.

Fear crushed the voice from him. Even his vaunted combat suit would be powerless before blistering rays that could melt solid iron. The barrel of the weapon had a steady bead on the left side of Leiden's chest.

Somewhere, he heard a sound like insects taking wing. The realization that he'd heard the same thing earlier skimmed through Leiden's mind, and at that very same instant the assassin before him fell flat on his face. At some point, the monk had pressed the weapon in his right hand against his own chest.

Suicide? It can't be!

This time, Leiden most definitely heard a protracted buzz.

A strange man was standing in the doorway that faced the road. He had metal rings looped over his shoulders. They rotated without touching his clothes—and the sound Leiden heard was that of them moving.

“Figured I'd swing by this way on my way home from a night out drinking—these are ‘murder monks,’ aren't they? All three of you better stand clear of them.”

The rings stopped turning.

“Now!”

Leiden jumped back. Habaki and Elsa both followed suit.

Great scythes gleamed. Black blood gushed out. It fell like rain on robed figures with blades stuck deep in their neck, who flopped noisily to the floor.

“What the hell is this?! They killed themselves with their own scythes?” Habaki said, staring at the latest intruder. It was a harsh look he gave the man, one most would call a glare. The rings had started moving around him again.

“See, I just went and changed the direction gravity was working on them,” the man sneered. “So no matter where they shot or slashed, they all went off in different directions. Like at themselves, for example. And if that wasn’t enough to stop ’em, I’d have crushed ’em flat.”

Though there was a certain refinement to his features, his laugh seemed more than just wild; it was positively savage. There was no way on earth this was just an ordinary traveler.

Habaki had a pretty good idea who he might be.

“You one of the fellas that came here from the Capital with that scientist?”

“Yeah, along with three others. They picked me up on the way here. Hired me in a village called Grunerhat.”

“Oh, so you’re an anti-Noble warrior.”

The village in question had a training center for anti-Noble warriors.

“More or less. When you come right down to it, I’m closer to you folks than I am to them.”

“Good,” Elsa said, slumping back against the wall. Her combat suit weighed over two hundred pounds. It had a feedback system that allowed the wearer to control it.

“I heard there were some young folks in the village who had some spine. That’s you guys, I take it? But if you’re gonna try and take a bite out of the Nobility, you’d best keep in mind their teeth are a thousand times sharper than yours.”

“We know,” Leiden replied, his tone polite.

“You here to confab about some Noble exterminating? No sudden moves, now.” And saying that, the man raised the liquor bottle he had in one hand and

took a swig. Gasping for breath, he wiped his lips and smiled at the trio.

“Will you help us?” Habaki ventured.

“Me? Sorry, but I’m already working for the Professor. Him and you are like fire and water. Forget we ever met, and what I did here today. Otherwise, I’ll have to slit your throats. This job pays damn well, you know, and I’m not about to lose it.”

Elsa stepped forward, saying, “As a warrior in Grunerhat, you must’ve trained long and hard toward slaying Nobles. If it’s money you want, we’ll manage something. Join up with us.”

“Spare me, sister,” the man said, bending backward with laughter. “It’s more money than you could earn in a decade of honest work. You’d better spend a little more time learning just how the world works. Then you can go play at being Hunters.”

The trio fell silent. If not for him, they were the ones who would’ve been slain. That much was certain.

“Well, guess I’ll be on my way. The monks have started to melt and everything.”

The other three surveyed their surroundings. White smoke poured from the robed figures as they and their clothes dissolved into a flesh-colored goo.

“Even their scythes . . .” Elsa murmured.

“Probably all made of the same stuff. Your enemies are a rank or two above you. So run on home and find decent jobs. There’s someone better suited to dealing with the Nobility you can leave this to, am I right?”

“D . . .”

“You got it. I ran into him in front of the castle. He’s not just scary, he’s freaking bottomless. None of us could do anything about it, but he just made the drawbridge come down and rode across it like it was no big deal. I know a couple of Nobility Hunters, but he’s a freak on a whole different level. Chances are—” the man began, his expression making the hearts of the youthful trio beat faster.

“Chances are what?” Elsa asked in a whisper.

“He could be even more of a freak than the Nobles. And I ain’t talking about your ordinary Nobles, either.”

“If you don’t mean ordinary Nobles, then what?” Habaki inquired, swallowing hard.

But the man turned his back to them. “See ya. Next time we meet, we’ll probably be on opposite sides—I hope it doesn’t come to that, though.”

“Wait. At least give us your name,” Elsa said, her voice trailing after him.

“It’s Ringard.”

“I’m Elsa Garry. And that’s Leiden Pomme.”

“I’m Habaki Mejiba. We’re fighting to destroy Grand Duke Bergenzky.”

“Yeah, you’re *fighting*,” he said in a sarcastic tone, his words hanging for ages in the darkness of the doorway.

Habaki coughed. It sounded terribly painful. And he couldn’t stop.

“Let’s get him to Doc Chavez,” Elsa said, running over and taking him by the shoulder.

Though they had to be dragged out of bed, the village’s sole physician, along with Tabana, his only nurse, quickly made preparations to deal with their patient. Chavez had two sons, neither of whom had followed in his footsteps.

After scanning the man from head to toe with a device that could diagnose ailments on a cellular level, Doc Chavez assured him, “You’ll be fine. You’re coughing from the gas you inhaled, but it’s nothing serious.”

“Do me a favor and spare me your lies.”

“What?!”

“Doc, I’ve known you all my life. Before I had my tonsils out two years ago, I was in here to see you every week. I know you better than you know yourself, Doc.”

Rolling over on the bed, Habaki faced Nurse Tabana, who stood gravely down by his feet.

“Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, you might at that,” the nurse replied, sounding pained.

Rubbing the back of his hoary head, the doctor said, “Okay. The gas turns the nuclei of your cells into those of a dead man. I call it ‘zombification,’ and without a doubt it’s what’s happening here.”

Habaki let his shoulders fall.

The doctor and nurse fell silent. It was said that these were the two most trying professions in the world they lived in. And that was on account of the sheer frequency with which they were left feeling powerless.

However, Habaki soon looked up at them. He did it so quickly, the two of them were left exchanging looks of surprise.

“How long do I have?” he asked.

“I can’t say for sure, but from the rate it’s going, I’d say about a week. It could be a little more or less, depending on how strong you are.”

“How long will I be able to move around?”

“Right up until the moment of your death, I’d say. Actually, you’ll probably die on your feet and be reanimated while you’re walking around.”

“Well, I’ve seen my fair share of zombies. I’ll end up wanting to eat my friends and family, too, won’t I?”

“That might well be, though I suppose that may depend on your strength of will.”

Tabana had to look away.

“How about keeping my wits about me?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem right up until death.”

“I see. Please, don’t say anything about this to my two friends in the waiting room—or anybody else.”

“Understood,” the doctor said with a purposeful nod before continuing, “I do have one request, though.”

“What might that be?”

“Come back here before sundown and let me explain your condition to you in detail. I’d like to read up on how best to treat it. Of course, I’m not forcing you to do it.”

“Okay, Doc. No guarantees, but I’ll try to make it.”

“Much obliged. It would mean a lot to me. Oh, you’ve got to have a glass of this milk. I can’t recommend it enough. Parson’s granddaughter does the milking and selling at her pa’s ranch. It’s divine!”

“No, thanks. Can’t taste anything anymore.”

At a loss for words, the doctor set his hand down on the young man’s shoulder. The palm of his hand felt hot—because the shoulder was cold.

In his heart of hearts, Habaki was crying out for a certain someone.

Hurry up and destroy the grand duke. Do that, and I might not have to go out this way. And wind up a slave to the vampires.

The Shape of Nobility, the Shape of Humanity

Chapter 4

I

Françoise was fast asleep in an opulent bed until, sensing a certain someone nearby, she awakened. An electronic lamp shaped like a gentian blossom was burning. She could see that a figure stood in the depths of the darkness.

“Vyken?” she inquired in a hushed tone.

In lieu of a reply, the shadowy figure came closer.

Sensing an unavoidable sadness in the face of the young man looking down lovingly at her from beside her bed, Françoise had all she could do to curb her own urge to reach out to him with both hands. All she could do now was shut her eyes tightly and draw her covers closer.

“Leave,” she told him. “If the grand duke finds you here, he’ll—”

“He’s sleeping now.”

“He came back?” she asked, her eyes going wide of their own accord.

“Yeah. Soaked in blood. To have left someone of his standing in such a state, that Hunter truly is the fearsome foe he’s reputed to be.”

“He was so beautiful. Is he dead?”

“No, apparently he’s been sealed away in the Shrine of Information. And that’s on a planet a hundred million light years from Earth. He won’t be coming back soon. Perhaps not ever.”

“Then it was no use after all, was it?”

“Françoise, the grand duke is one of the few fortunate enough to have been allowed to meet the Sacred Ancestor face to face.”

“I know that. And I’m not sure how I should feel, either. Should I be saddened by this or gladdened?”

“This is such a bizarre conversation. It’s one thing to hear about something,

and another thing entirely to see it. He's given us so much, hasn't he?"

"Serve him as best you can, Vyken. That way lies your reward as a human being."

"To be honest, I'm not sure what I should do. That's why I need at least one thing in this castle I know to be real and true."

Hunching down, he brought his face closer to the girl's.

"We can't, Vyken. I don't know where I stand, either. Do I belong to the grand duke, or am I still part of the human race?"

"Françoise!"

Powerful fingers held her delicate chin, turning her face toward his. His lips came closer—and then met hers.

"Stop it. I'll call the others in here!" Françoise told him, turning her face away. Tears rolled down her cheeks. In her right hand was a golden bell for summoning the help.

"I'll come back another time."

The young man left without making a sound. In this castle, even humans walked as stealthily as shadows.

A different voice drifted through the room, saying, "I have word about Jozen."

Françoise spun violently in that direction.

"I've heard that there's a young man creating weapons and other technology on par with that of the Nobility for a resistance group in the village. Apparently, they're to be disposed of in short order."

Without waiting for a response from her, the presence faded away. It was buried in the darkness.

"Vyken," the girl said, finally reaching out with her pale hands, but there was no longer anyone there. And not even the glow from the gentian blossom lamp could reach him.



You could say that evening was a succession of dangerous situations.

It was just about the same time the battle royal at the abandoned house was ending that somebody banged on the door of Marcella's house.

"Who's there?" someone asked, but it wasn't Marcella directing the question toward the door. Rather, it came from the back bedroom and was aimed at Marcella, who was in the kitchen.

Marcella's husband was gazing down at her from a picture on the mantel of the fireplace in the living room, as he had for the last five years.

Extinguishing the flame fed by chemical fuel and checking to make sure the hot water hadn't boiled yet, she went over to the bedroom door and replied, "I don't know." Her mood suddenly turning foul, she added, "It's probably your wife."

"Are you serious?!"

The man's tone of unparalleled fear drew a little snort of contempt from her, after which she said, "What should I do? Open it up and see who's there?"

"No, hold up—I'll slip out the back way in a sec."

"Seems like you were expecting this. Think she followed you here?"

"Shut up!"

The mad impatience of his reply was overlaid with another knock.

Marcella noticed something strange. The sound was coming from down too low. As if somebody had crawled over there.

Quickly returning to the kitchen, she got her gun off the shelf. No sooner did she think to herself, Here goes nothing, than the man called to her, "So long. But I'll be back."

"Just don't forget to bring your allowance," she said in a low tone.

In an even lower one he replied, "I know, I know."

The hinges of the back door creaked open, creaked again, and then fell silent.

"Piece of shit," she spat, and then she started thinking about what might happen to her now.

Who's outside? Who'd be crawling around out there at this hour, and why the

hell would they bother knocking? Hear that? There they go again.

Marcella made up her mind. Ignoring this didn't seem like it was going to be an option. And it might be somebody was hurt out there. Looking up at the photo over the fireplace, she said, "Keep me safe."

Approaching the door with leaden steps, she grabbed hold of the wooden doorknob. There were protective talismans attached to the door inside and out, and she couldn't complain about the job they'd done of keeping her safe up until now.

"Oh, hell," she exclaimed, opening the door and poking her gun out.

Only darkness spread before her. Just as she'd expected. Well, then—look a little lower.

"What the blazes?!" she cried.

A left hand from the wrist down lay there.

You mean to tell me that hand did the knocking?

Knowing this to be impossible all the while, Marcella was mesmerized by the beauty of the hand she should've found horrifying.

My gods, the fingers are so elegant. Why, they'd be too good to touch or hold ordinary stuff. I'd just like to leave them here as they are, untouched forever.

"Hey," said a hoarse voice, but it couldn't possibly have come from the gorgeous limb at her feet, could it?

Time and again Marcella told herself it was impossible, but eventually she had to accept it as an undeniable fact, and that threw her into a vertigo of despair.

"Steady, there," the hoarse voice said to her, and somehow that set her right again. "I want your help with something. Come with me."

"Wh-wh-what kind of demon are you?" Marcella inquired in a quavering tone.

"What you see is what you get. I'd tell you I'm no monster, but I don't expect you'd believe me. There's an injured guy just across the road. Carry him over here. All you've gotta do is give him a shoulder to lean on."

She wanted to bellow, Like hell I will! but her eyes were glued to the weird

hand. Somewhere out in the night, the owner of that beautiful hand was waiting for help.

I really wanna see him, Marcella thought.

“Okay,” she groaned with a manic enthusiasm. “Lead the way.”

“Much obliged.”

And with those unmistakable words of gratitude the hand deftly changed direction and skittered across the street.

The man in question was flat on his back in a thicket of chicharan bushes on the far side of the street. Despite the black traveler’s hat and coat, which even through the gloom of night were quite clearly stained with blood, and the pale face with a mind-numbingly haggard look on it, the instant Marcella saw him she lost the ability to think.

If I were to faint right now, I couldn’t awaken to a more wonderful sight as long as I live.

“He’s . . . so beautiful . . .”

“Enough about that. Make with the carrying already. He could die if we don’t do something. Damn it, pull yourself together, woman. Save his life, and I’ll have him give you a kiss as a reward for your cooperation.”

“You mean it?!” she asked, her tone as crisp as thunder.

The hoarse voice fell silent.

She forgot all about the blood. Marcella grabbed the man in black by one arm and pulled him up. She felt only the slightest resistance, and then the young man of unearthly beauty got up on his feet, still leaning on Marcella when the hoarse voice said, “This way. Over here.”

Following after the left hand, she took a heavy step forward. Marcella let out a sigh of relief. It occurred to her that she’d sell her very soul just to keep walking arm in arm with him like this.

Shortly after the two of them and the severed limb disappeared into the house, a diminutive figure slipped out from behind the building and moved into the forest with carefully muffled footsteps. Not long thereafter, there was the sound

of hoofbeats receding in the distance.

The young man's gait was unexpectedly sure, but as they went from the living room to the parlor it suddenly faltered. Slipping off Marcella's shoulder, he fell flat on his back on the floor, where he didn't budge an inch.

"It can't be," Marcella murmured, her words tinged not just with concern but with fear.

"Relax. He's just passed out, that's all," a voice told her from atop the young man's chest.

"What are you?" she asked, and at that point she noticed that the gorgeous young man she'd helped bring inside was missing his left hand from the wrist down.

"Falling from the heavens has left him drained. No use trying to bring him around with medicine. Just let him lay there a while. I'll handle the rest. By the way, don't tell anybody about this. Say one word about it, and you'll be cursed for all time!" the hoarse voice said in a menacing tone, and naturally Marcella could do nothing but nod in acknowledgment.

As soon as Marcella left the room, the left hand climbed down from D's chest, working its fingers skillfully to turn itself in a full circle. It had surveyed the room.

"Hmm. They're on the move," the hoarse voice murmured. Pointing a finger at D, it continued, "But you're not."

A man working for the deputy mayor brought an envelope containing a note to the inn where Professor Chaney was staying about a half hour after D was carried into Marcella's house. Tipping the man and sending him on his way, the Professor read the note, at which point his expression changed.

"So, that little Peeping Tom couldn't help hanging around her window, eh? Well, if this is true, we might slay him."

The Professor's orders were that his four henchmen were to set out. One of them was injured, and another was out drinking, however, so only two of them mounted up on their cyborg steeds.

“They’re closing in,” the left hand murmured. It had spent nearly ten minutes motionless, apparently trying to detect their presence. “Hey, can you hear me, or are you still asleep?” it asked D. “Shit. I’m in rough shape, too. Gonna take me a little longer to refuel. If they get here now, we’ll be in serious trouble. Guess I don’t have much choice. Hey, woman—come over here. Shit, are you asleep or something?”

Marcella was by no means asleep. She sat on the living room sofa staring into space. Though her eyes were trained on the wall of her house, her mind was wrapped around the image of that exquisite young man.

She came over in a sort of stupor.

“Finally decided to grace us with your presence, did you?” the left hand said petulantly from atop the young man’s chest.

“Who made you so high and mighty?”

“Gimme a little help here. I need you to put me on his face.”

“What are you going to do?” the woman inquired, feeling her heart beat faster in her chest.

“Never mind that, just put me there. He’ll do the rest.”

Marcella had no reason not to comply. Her brain wrapped in a feverish membrane, she placed the severed limb on that gorgeous face with a trembling hand. A split second later, a sharp pain shot through her pinky.

Shrieking with alarm, she pulled her hand back, fresh blood dripping from the ball of her finger.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” she bellowed, her rage directed at the left hand, which she’d seen scurrying off into one corner of the room. Its tiny mouth was lined with still tinier teeth.

“Damn it, just hold on,” it said.

Pressing down on the wound to stem the bleeding, Marcella was just about to stand up again. So she could get a broom to clobber that thing. But a cold hand reached up and caught her by the wrist.

“What in the—?!”

Rather than be shocked by the realization that the hand was that of the young man who hadn't even seemed to be breathing, Marcella was enraptured.

Just look at him, slowly getting to his feet. His pale, handsome face is right in front of me, and he just opened his eyes. But why are they red? How come he's got a pair of teeth poking from his lips? And why are they pointed? Oh, you . . . you're a Noble . . .

"They're here," the hoarse voice groaned sharply.

The door's hinges creaked.

II Marcella hurriedly took a place in front of the door.
"Who is it?" she asked.

There was only one visitor she ever got in the middle of the night. And she'd sent him packing nearly an hour ago.

A voice rougher and much younger than that individual's announced her visitor's name. "I've got a message to deliver. Open up!"

As she hesitated, there was a violent banging against the door, and its hinges squealed in protest.

Marcella was terrified by the explosion of anger she envisioned.

Just as she undid the bolt, a pair of shadowy figures piled in like an avalanche. One man was abnormally thin—and the other wore an iron mask. The skinny one put the nails of his right hand against Marcella's throat. They were strangely long and sharp. The one in the iron mask headed for the door to the back room. A bundle of fine chain gleamed in his right hand. Turning toward the other one, he gave a nod.

Skinny gave a nod in return, telling the woman, "Not a peep outta you," and taking up a position on one side of the doorframe, opposite the one in the iron mask. The two of them waited until they were in synch, and as soon as they were, the one in the iron mask hit the door with his shoulder.

Once they were done searching the house, the skinny one went back into the living room and reached for Marcella's throat with his right hand. The tips of his

strangely elongated nails pressed into her flawless, pale skin.

“We’ve been authorized by the deputy mayor. Tell us everything.”

“I . . . I don’t know anything,” Marcella replied. She would sooner die than be responsible for the young man falling into their hands.

“Is that a fact? Watch this,” the skinny one said, his other hand flashing into action.

A tiny form darting across the floor was split in two. A house rat. Its head and body twitched violently in separate locations. And they seemed to continue doing so for ages.

“When I cut something in two with my claws, they’re in a world of hellish pain forever. Until I kill ’em again, that is. Can’t even lose their minds. On account of the pain’s too bad. You think I’m shitting you?”

“Don’t . . .”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know . . . really.”

A shadowy fire sparked in the skinny one’s eyes.

Just then, the one in the iron mask said to him, “Give it a rest, Valen.”

“Stay outta my way.”

“Were we sent here to toy with women?”

“Don’t get in my way, Mask.”

“Oh, you think you want to throw down with me? You mentioned before how you were curious whether those claws of yours could cut through my mask, didn’t you? What do you say we find out right now?”

“You son of a bitch . . .”

“Let’s hit the road. I’ve heard about this happening. They say every woman who sees D’s face becomes his slave. Seems you can torture them all you like, but they’ll never give you anything that might put D at a disadvantage.”

“Interesting. Let’s see if that’s really true or not.”

“Push it too far and she’ll bite her own tongue off. We were told not to lay a hand on any of the villagers, or have you forgotten? The grand duke might not have a problem with losing the support of the villagers, but the same can’t be said for the Professor or the deputy mayor. That’d be the end of everything.”

“Like I give a damn.”

“I give a damn. The better this goes, the more we get paid!”

“Shit,” the skinny one said, taking his claws away from her.

In a tone that was ten times calmer than the skinny one’s but a hundred times more unsettling, the one in the iron mask said, “Lady, if you’d like to remain under the deputy mayor’s protection, you’d better not pull any more funny business.”

Marcella nodded.

Once she was certain the two of them had left, Marcella bolted the door again and stared at the center of her living room. The gorgeous young man lay there. Closing her eyes, Marcella then opened them again. There was nobody there.

All that—was it just a dream?

Somebody had come into the room earlier. Then the left hand had pressed against her brow, her head spun around and around—and the next thing she knew, she was standing by the front door. She’d known exactly what she was supposed to do.

“Yeah, it must’ve been,” Marcella said, convincing herself. There was no other way to accept the night’s events. “It was all just a dream.”

She had to catch a little sleep before dawn. After all, working at the bar in the village was pretty exhausting. Reaching around to massage the bottom of her aching back, she turned out the living room lamp and headed off toward her bedroom.

†

Looking up at the carefully stacked stones of the walls and ceiling, it was clear that the long subterranean road was man-made. The caverns that appeared along the way were probably entrances to side roads.

“Hell of a scale to it, isn’t there?” the left hand said, resting on D’s shoulder.

Perhaps feeling the strange flow of air, one of the tiny flames that were set in the walls at critical points wavered.

“And made quite a long time ago—more than five millennia. Most likely there was a gap formed by shifts in the earth’s crust that they excavated in spots to make their way, or else they reinforced it after leveling the place.”

The reply came from someone who’d given D a shoulder to lean on. He sounded young. A lot younger than those three rebels—you could say he was no more than a boy. The white lab coat suited his thin frame. Though he sounded like a man of science, whether or not he had the face of one was unclear. Purple cloth shrouded his head and shoulders, hiding them from prying eyes.

“Go to her house a lot, do you?” the hoarse voice asked.

“No. Nor had I intended to go there today. I just happened to hear you talking through the intercom tubes.”

“Hmm, an eavesdropper, eh?”

“Call it a most necessary return to service for the eavesdropping system put in during ancient times when the place was being carved out, if you don’t mind. I had absolutely nothing to do with their creation.”

“Which means, what, that whoever made this road is responsible for that, too? Even five thousand years ago, humans were all sick little busybodies.”

“I’ll reserve comment on that. I don’t know precisely why they dug these paths, but they’re ideal for moving about unobserved.”

“Just how far do they run?”

“By my measurements, a good forty miles. There’s a web of tunnels exiting in all the key structures in the village. Town hall, the school, the mayor’s home, the spiritualist center, the forests and swamps on all four sides of us, and more—there are more than twenty destinations, all told. They weren’t added later, but rather lead to points on subterranean energy lines, where our key facilities were built as a matter of course—you could say the choice of those locations was inevitable.”

“Still, I’m surprised no one’s found them in five thousand years.”

“The entrances are all concealed by both physical and psychological camouflage. Do you remember where I came out of?”

The youth had appeared from a wall through a wooden door that absolutely hadn’t been there a moment earlier, informing the people and the limb there that trouble was coming and taking D and his left hand away while Marcella remained behind.

“When I throw the bolt on this side—the passageways—no one on the outside would ever know it was there. You could destroy the whole wall and probably still not find anything.”

“Hmm. Humans might’ve been more advanced five thousand years ago than they are now.”

“It wasn’t necessarily human beings.”

“You saying Nobles dug this? If so, what for?”

“I don’t know. Was it humans or Nobles? What’s it for? I don’t know anything at all.”

“You gotta know something.”

“What’s that?”

“Who you really are.”

“Don’t pry into matters that don’t concern you—isn’t that the code for travelers on the Frontier? Especially one like the Hunter known as D. I hear that he’s particularly sticky on that matter.”

“Oh, so you know who he is, do you? I suppose you’ll tell me that was inevitable, too?”

“Precisely,” the youth said, a tinge of fatigue bleeding into his tone. He’d been carrying D ever since they’d left that house—and that had to weigh heavily on a slight frame like his.

Suddenly the walls to either side of them were much further back. The place overflowed with light. They were in a clearing of about eighteen hundred square

feet. A number of bare lightbulbs hung down from cords strung across the place, shining on the huge doors set in the wall. They were steel without so much as a fleck of rust on them.

“Finally getting to the main course, are we? What’s behind those doors?”

“Nothing special,” he said through his purple hood, striking a certain key on the control panel set in the steel doors.

The doors slid off to either side, exposing an unbelievable sight beyond.

“Well, I’ll be—” the hoarse voice said, the way it petered off a testimony to that.

Up until now, they’d been thirty feet below the surface at most. And they’d been moving across level ground. But at the end of that lay an enormous facility that could best be described as a factory or a research center.

“One of the Nobles’ factories?”

In that case, it wouldn’t be surprising for three-dimensional space to have been folded to accommodate it. However, it was so utterly at odds with the words and deeds of the youth who’d led them there—the apparent master of the place. After all, outside the door had been a chamber lit by bare lightbulbs.

“To the medical center,” the purple hood said, and at that same instant the floor began to move. There wasn’t a single crease in it. In fact, it might’ve only been the people on top of it that were actually moving.

Moving on to another corridor, they continued on a bit, at which point the floor—or at least they—halted in front of a white wall. The wall glowed, and the glow became an elliptical doorway. Off in the distance, a lump formed, took on human shape, and became a nurse dressed in white. A woman so beautiful she’d make you want to sigh.

“A liquid metal android?” said the left hand.

The beauty gave D a shoulder to lean on, leading him to a bed in the back.

Quickly moving over the shoulder of the purple-hooded youth, the left hand said, “Computers gotta be in control of all this machinery. So, you can make ’em do whatever you like, can you?”

“I suppose—or so I’d tell you, but even I don’t know for sure.”

“You don’t know?”

“I’m human. There’s no way I’d be able to comprehend every facet of the Nobility’s technology. I can operate perhaps one millionth of what’s in this facility.”

“Just how far back was this place built?”

“That I do know. According to the memory banks, it was roughly seven thousand years ago—which would make it about the time they were at war with the OSB, right?”

“Ah.”

“What do think drives scientific progress?”

“War.”

“You say it so easily. You’re right, though,” the purple hood said with a laugh. “This was a research facility for weapons. Not a manufacturing plant. It was used primarily to study OSB weapons and develop countermeasures.”

“I’ve heard about that. At the tail end of the OSB War, it seems the Nobility were using OSB weapons as their own.”

“That’s right. The OSB shape-change ability is an example of that,” the youth said, aiming a purple-gloved finger where the nurse stood.

“Hmm. The floor, too, eh?”

“Yes. I’m sure the Nobility’s science probably would’ve developed liquid metal at some point. However, I question whether they could’ve come up with something as complex as this. Françoise, I’m sorry, but would you be so kind as to bleed a bit for us?”

“Yes, sir,” the beauty replied in a voice like moonlight, perfectly suited to her resplendent features, and with that she extended her left index finger. It was immediately transformed into a keen scalpel, which then slid into her right wrist. A silvery liquid dripped out, becoming a bead that splattered against the floor. And there it turned red.

III “If you were to analyze it, you’d see that its composition doesn’t differ in the slightest from human blood.”

“You don’t say,” the left hand remarked, not sarcastically but with admiration. “Well, I don’t know about all that. You can’t play Nobles for a fool, you know. By the way, how’s he doing?”

“There’s no problem. Give him some blood and he’ll be back to normal in no time. But it must be human blood.”

“How about that metal blood?”

“There are still things about the Nobility, legends and facts, that aren’t completely understood. Though its components are exactly the same as human blood, drinking it wouldn’t help a dhampir recover. It’s not a matter of the composition, the problem is it must be human blood. A Noble can stand under an artificial light that creates rays exactly like the sun and he won’t be turned into dust. Because, ultimately, that is artificial light, not the light of the sun. These very issues are something the surviving Nobility investigate even now. And probably will until the end of time.”

“Hmm. Got any blood lying around?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“What about you?”

“I have none to offer one of Noble descent.”

“Then why’d you bother helping us?”

“Because it looked like he could help destroy the Nobility,” the purple hood replied, as if the answer was obvious. “That being the case, I can call someone in. I could get that woman from earlier, but she’s already linked to dangerous matters unbeknownst to herself.”

“Hmm, you know everything, do you? What are you doing down here, anyway?”

“Living. I have nowhere else to go.”

“Is that all there is to it?” the left hand said, its fingers closing on the edge of the purple hood.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” the youth replied, ready to knock the severed limb free.

“Make another move and I’ll tear this thing off!” the left hand threatened.

The youth froze.

“I have a pretty good idea what’s under this thing. And it’s on account of that that you’re down here hating the big man up in his castle.”

“What are you talking about?” the purple hood replied, trying to force a laugh.

“Have it your way,” the left hand continued. “This is your castle. Far be it from me, the lowly retainer, to complain about what the lord of the manor chooses to do. But let me make one thing clear: He owes that woman back there his life just as much as he does you.”

“I see,” the youth in the purple hood replied, looking over at the nurse—Françoise. “How’s the condition of that gorgeous individual?” he asked.

“Poor,” the beauty answered. “It wouldn’t be surprising if he were to expire at any moment. To the contrary, it’s amazing he made it here in this condition—where on earth was he and what did he do to wind up in a state like this?”

“He passed through an unbreakable wall, then shot across a hundred million light years in zero seconds flat.”

The purple hood was at a loss for words. He could tell the left hand spoke the truth. “Dhampir or not, D or not, I simply cannot believe that,” he finally said.

“There are a mountain of things in this world that are true but you’d never believe. But enough about that. Do something for him.”

“Leave it to me.”

The youth in the purple hood took a metal bar the general size and shape of a pencil from the breast pocket of his shirt, pressed a tiny switch, and held one end of the device up by his mouth, saying, “It’s me, Cornet. Are you up, Elsa?”

After a little while, a female voice that’d shaken off sleep replied, “Elsa here.

I'm up—actually, I wasn't, but I'm up now.”

“Sorry. I'd like some blood from you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your blood. There's someone in need of it.”

At that point the youth cocked his head and looked at the severed left hand.

“Long time no see, little missy,” said the hoarse voice.

“Is that you, D? No, it's not. I know it's not.”

The purple hood—Cornet—hurriedly switched off the stick, saying, “Don't go scaring her off. I'll do the talking.”

“Hmph!”

“Sorry about this, Elsa. A certain handsome man of your acquaintance suffers from a life-threatening lack of blood. Help us out. I suppose ten cc's will suffice.”

“Fine. But where do I have to go?”

“I'll send someone for it. A woman named Françoise. She'll take care of it. All you have to do is wait in your room.”

“Roger that. Hurry.”

“Thank you. See you later.”

“Er, yeah.”

“What? Was there something else?”

“The handsome man in question—is he gonna be okay?”

“That all depends on you.”

“I see. You can have a couple hundred gallons if you need it, then!”

“Thank you,” Cornet told her, putting the communication device away.

“Françoise, see to that, will you?”

“Anything for you,” the metallic beauty said with a smile, and putting a protective cover over D's body, she then left the room. Her smile was angelic.

“For somebody so young, you’ve sure got your irons in a lot of fires,” the left hand remarked, its tone of amazement speaking volumes. “But it looks to me like you’re cold to the ladies.”

†

The eastern sky was still dark. Elsa’s house stood in the center of the village, a modest “shield farm.” The shields, which could control the growing environment so that any and all vegetables could be grown year-round, were said to be a product of the Nobility. They were treasured across the Frontier sectors, but it was unknown how in five scant years these shields had fallen into human hands, their operation had been mastered, and their use had been promulgated.

By the time Françoise got there wrapped in a coat, Elsa was standing out by the gate to her house.

“This is for you.”

The bottle she held tight to her chest had over a hundred cc’s of blood in it.

“Thank you.”

When Françoise took the bottle, Elsa’s hand closed around her wrist. Françoise stiffened at the strange coldness of it.

“You’re welcome,” the girl said with a grin, her crimson lips revealing a pair of pearly fangs. “I’ll be going with you,” Elsa informed her with delight.

“I think not.”

Françoise tried to pull her hand back, but it wouldn’t move an inch. A vampire had the strength of fifty humans.

“It’s no use,” Elsa told her, an even more disturbing smile spreading across her face as she put more strength into her fingers. She intended to shatter the other woman’s bones. But her fingers sank into the nurse’s wrist, as if she’d dipped them into water.

Still clutching the bottle, Françoise spun right around.

“What in the—?!”

The nurse stopped in her tracks.

A young man was standing there. A foreign-looking face gazed at Françoise from beneath a mop of black hair. Oddly enough, there was no sense of hostility from him.

“Do you know me, Françoise?” the man asked. He had a calm way of speaking.

“How do you know my name?”

The man shut his eyes, then immediately opened them again.

“So, you don’t know my name?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“Good,” said the man, hostility radiating from every inch of him as if her response had been the signal to switch into combat mode. “My name is Vyken, and I’m the head of the grand duke’s guards. Remember that, you who look so much like one I know!”

“She’s not human,” Elsa cried out.

“Interesting,” Vyken remarked, stepping forward.

The coat-clad figure sailed over his head, easily landing on her feet on a road some five yards away. And the instant Françoise landed, she went into a sprint.

Vyken landed right in front of her without making a sound. Both of them had bounded to the very same location.

“The blood in that bottle is hers from before she became that way. I’ll deliver it for you. Where’s D?” he asked in a triumphant tone, but it became a grunt of surprise.

Françoise had suddenly charged right at him. The arms he instinctively spread to catch the nurse passed right through her, and she went on to run right through him. Looking over his shoulder, Vyken saw the woman more than thirty feet away, still running like the wind.

“Liquid metal? Who knew we had a woman like that in the village?”

As he said that, he shut his eyes. They quickly opened again.

“You really aren’t human, are you? My power doesn’t work on those who

don't dream."

And then, with a great yawn, he turned back in the direction of Elsa's house. Elsa was standing at the gate.

"I suppose it's no use, but let's see if it works on you."

And saying that, he closed his eyes again. The result was the same.

"Not very pleasant dreams you have, are they?" he spat. "When humans become vampires, are their dreams always such a bloody morass of savagery? Why would God make such a hopeless species?"

When Françoise came back and gave her report to Cornet, he got a bitter look in his eye.

"How did they know you were going to her house? Could it be they've been watching our exits?"

"If that were true, they'd have busted in on you long before now," the left hand replied. "No, they haven't found this place of yours yet."

"But they were lying in wait—"

"They must've been keeping an eye on Elsa's house for a long time. Young they might be, but she and her two buddies have drawn a lot of attention. If I were the grand duke, I'd have somebody watching 'em all day every day."

"Then you don't think my cover's blown yet?"

"Probably not."

"Good. There's a mountain of things down here purloined from the grand duke's castle. Were he to discover that, I'd be drawn and quartered for sure."

"Well, wonders never cease. Once you have *him* drink what's in that bottle, I'd like you to show me some of stolen merchandise."

"That's fine by me. But as I simply took whatever was close at hand, I haven't the faintest idea what they're actually used for. I offer no guarantees that I won't make some error operating them and blow us all to kingdom come."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

The left hand's devil-may-care reply drew applause from the youth in the

purple hood. The two of them seemed to get be getting along surprisingly well.

Turncoats

Chapter 5

I

Before the morning sun had risen, the farmers were at work. Headed down the village lanes toward their respective fields with plow and hoe, they shouted greetings to each other as their wagons passed. Elsa's house was silent once more, the front door shut tight and curtains drawn across the windows. A number of those who passed her place figured she must be taking the day off, and though they noticed that no smoke from cooking breakfast rose from the chimney, it didn't particularly stand out in their minds—in other words, this was like the better, peaceful times of antiquity.

The first of her farming neighbors to notice something was wrong galloped off for the sheriff's office on a cyborg horse, asking a friend he met along the way to go inform the town hall as well. When the sheriff arrived there at top speed at 5:43 AM Eastern Frontier Time, other farmers had already broken down the Garrys' door, exposing the tragedy of the night before to the light of day.

The gorgeous visitor halted his cyborg steed in front of the farmhouse strung with "Restricted Area" ropes just as the shimmering sun was reaching its highest point in the heavens. Having called in people from the town hall to assist, the sheriff had finished investigating the scene and was walking around questioning people, and onlookers, now convinced that the situation was in hand, drifted away, finally leaving only a few children there. They looked on dumbfoundedly as D ducked under the ropes and slipped onto the property, walking right into the farmhouse.

He came out again about ten minutes later. And someone was waiting for him.

"It's me—Habaki," said the young man, smiling stiffly. He added that he'd already looked around inside, too. "Did you find Elsa or her family?" he asked.

"They weren't inside," D replied.

"Figured as much," the resistance leader said, his shoulders falling.

"I owe her a debt," the Hunter told him. "That's what brought me here. I'm

going to tell you something that's only for your ears and Leiden's. Elsa was turned into a vampire.”

The young man was at a loss for words.

“The two of you are free to do as you like, but I'm going to put her at rest and dispose of the one who corrupted her.”

Cold sweat soaked Habaki from head to toe. “I'd like to help you if I can.”

“You'd just be in the way,” D said, his tone low but his words as sharp as the wind's edge.

Leaving Habaki there frozen in his tracks, D went back to the road. As soon as he wheeled his cyborg horse around toward the castle, the hoarse voice said, “Would it have killed you to explain the situation even a little to that kid? Leave him like that, and there's no telling what screwed-up thing he'll get it in his head to try! Probably ain't got the faintest idea what you're talking about when you say you owe Elsa.”

“All he has to do is ask Cornet.”

“Well, from the look of things, Cornet doesn't exactly seem to expect much out of 'em. Seems more like they just went and decided he was one of them.”

“Doesn't matter either way, so long as this gets taken care of.”

The cyborg horse broke into a gallop.

If he could break into the Nobles' crypt at this hour, it would be an absolute massacre. And D would doubtless be just as merciless in dealing with opponents who couldn't raise a hand to defend themselves.

When the dignified form of the castle came into view down the road, there was the sound of a bustling engine approaching from the Hunter's rear. It was accompanied by three sets of hoofbeats.

“The top banana finally shows himself—and the other three are the hired muscle we ran into out in front of the castle.”

Before the hoarse voice had even finished saying that, a startling vehicle pulled alongside D on the right. It had a body that looked like a number of oil drums welded end to end, with ten pistons relentlessly pumping up and down on top of

it and sputtering engine sounds scattering all across the area. It had six rubber tires. All of them were worn to the point the tread was now imperceptible.

D didn't so much as glance over at it.

Professor Chaney's head projected from the rearmost oil drum, wearing goggles and a steel helmet. "Such a handsome man," he remarked, peering through his deep green goggles and barely keeping his vehicle under control. "You're D, I take it? I'm Professor Chaney. No need to get into trivial details, but I'd like to speak with you a while."

"I'm working."

"A moment, if you will. This shan't take long. I know the location of the grand duke's hidden grave," the Professor added in a tone that said he was quite sure D would want to hear him out. However, not only did the Hunter not slow down in the slightest, he didn't even look at the man, which prompted him to say, "I also have something to tell you about the Sacred Ancestor. I've decoded the message he left for a certain someone." His expression swiftly becoming one of astonishment, Chaney asked, "How can that have no effect on you? Who are you?"

The Professor's surprise was inviting an accident, and the lengthy vehicle and its aged driver both screamed in unison. His desperate turn of the wheel had come when D's cyborg horse suddenly pulled away.

"Ha, what a load of tripe," the hoarse voice chortled. "Serves you right for running your mouth. Ran yourself right into the forest, you dolt!"

"Careful," D told his left hand. Did he sense something?

Smoke and flames rose from the right-hand side of the road. A miniature missile.

D galloped straight ahead. Whipping the right sleeve of his coat up for all he was worth, he used it to deflect the flames. When the Hunter returned to the darkened road, whitish smoke was rising from his traveler's hat and the hem of his coat. Reaching backward with his left hand, he spread his fingers.

"Something weird's sticking out of the front of that car," the hoarse voice said. "I think it's—Get down!"

A harsh wind ripped right over D's head. There was a sound like a fine blade hewing flesh and bone.

D raised his left hand, blocking the blood and oil being thrown his way. There was nothing wrong with the gait of his steed. Nevertheless, the horse's neck had been nearly cut through. A spinning blade had been launched at them. But such skill D had, making his steed press on without the reins ever going slack!

"Hell of a guy," the left hand groaned in a mix of resignation and admiration.

Another man said almost the exact same thing, forgetting to floor his car's accelerator or line up his next attack as he slumped back in his seat and sighed in despair, "You're a hell of a man, D."

Seen in broad daylight, the castle looked terribly worn. Much of the rock used in building the fortresses of the Nobility had been transported from quarries around the world. When the stone they desired couldn't be found there, there were cases where they'd leveled entire mountain ranges. All of this was done in service to the Nobles' sense of "nostalgia." Though there were those who'd synthesized stone, it was said they became the objects of derision, either replacing the offending material with the genuine article or else taking their own lives with wooden stakes. What's more, there were also Nobles who used elemental conversion technology to age freshly quarried stone so it looked weathered.

Massive stone fortifications had such an imposing presence on their surroundings it made them difficult to approach, but that may have been due less to the stones themselves and more to the tenacious architectural ambition they represented. And this castle was no different.

However, what D felt was an awfully different atmosphere. The coarseness of the walls exposed to the light of the sun, the shadows cast on the ground by stone pillars, the light itself stark yet languid. That's right. As the enormous castle loomed there in the light of midday, it was encircled not so much by an air of corruption as by one of absolute ruin.

"I was just thinking how funny this is. A castle of this scale should have defenses out the ass to deal with daytime intruders. Are you trying to tell me either they don't have any, period, or they do but haven't even bothered to turn

'em on?" the Hunter's left hand murmured as soon as the drawbridge had been lowered, just as it had the night before, and D had ridden into the square within the castle walls.

Needless to say, the Nobility's castles were their last redoubt. As a result, they focused more on defending against daylight threats than other attacks. These defenses included dimensional labyrinths where no amount of travel would bring you closer to the castle, old-fashioned force fields that could weather direct hits by nuclear warheads, amnesia generators that could wipe out any memory of the castle, swarms of monsters and supernatural creatures living around the stronghold, and so on, and so forth.

This castle made use of none of those things. It seemed not merely unguarded, but that the inhabitants had no intention of defending it.

"The way it's going, I figure it'll be a cakewalk inside, too!"

As the left hand had said, once the doors had been pushed open, the rooms and corridors that lay beyond were left utterly exposed.

When D halted, it was in the same dance hall he'd passed through the night before. There was nothing there. Only a sadly vacant expanse of floor lay exposed to the sunlight.

"Was that all just illusions?" said the hoarse voice.

Not replying, D surveyed their surroundings. "Not all of it, it seems," he said.

"Huh?"

The hoarse voice's puzzled grunt was overlaid with the thud of an impact.

With ferocious speed, D swung around the black arrow he gripped in his left fist.

Several iron arrows had been embedded in the floor. D's superhuman skill, however, had allowed him to catch the first of them in midair.

Five people were racing toward him from a door set in the west wall. All were clad in bulky suits of powered armor.

"These ain't androids or synthetic beings—they're real, live human beings!" the hoarse voice exclaimed.

Simultaneous attacks with sword and spear saw those weapons batted forcefully into the air, the attackers clutching their left wrists and squatting down on the spot. They'd suffered dislocations just being parried by D's blade.

"Are you in his employ?" D asked.

Tears in his eyes, the one who appeared the eldest of them managed to squeak out the words, "Yes, we work in the castle. But everyone has the wrong idea about the grand duke."

"That's right."

"Please, just leave him be," the others added, unanimous in their support. The look on their faces declared that they spoke in earnest.

"And just what sorta man is he?"

The sudden change in D's voice left the employees looking all around, but they quickly remembered the pain in their own wrists and stiffened.

"A good one. He gives us proper credit for the work we do."

"Not once has he ever asked us to do anything we didn't wanna do."

"And the wages he pays are more than fair."

"He even pays subsidies to the families we left behind in the village. If we'd stayed in the village, there's no way we'd be doing as well as all that."

"That very same village has struck a deal with the grand duke to provide human sacrifices at regular intervals in exchange for his technology," D said, his gaze penetrating the men.

Falling silent, they looked away.

"You admit it's true, then?" D asked, pressing them mercilessly.

"Well—it can't be helped," the first one replied. "Whether they're offered up on a set day or just taken out of the blue, it's all the same to the victim. And without 'em, the grand duke can't survive."

"So as long as things are good for you, you're fine with him draining the villagers, are you?"

"Like hell we are!" the man shouted so hard his body quaked. His fists shook

violently. “But our village only survives thanks to the grand duke’s power. That being the case, it’s only sensible we offer him a little blood to show our gratitude, isn’t it?”

“Oh, this is a symbiotic relationship, eh?” the hoarse voice laughed.

“Those who are fed on become creatures like the Nobility,” D said in a terribly soft tone. “Then they attack their families and neighbors, until at some point they end up getting a stake hammered through their hearts—is *that* sensible?”

“Th-that can’t be helped,” a young man called out, the words emerging like a creak from a door. “It’s for the good of the village. A couple of folks will have to be sacrificed.”

“How old are you?”

The Hunter’s unexpected query gave the young man pause.

“Me? T-twenty-two,” he stammered.

“That’s the age of a grown man. In which case there’s only one thing to do. Protect the weak, even at the cost of your own life. Has all this time getting rewards from the Nobility and growing fat in their castle made that the most important thing to you instead? Seems like you’re trying to defend the wrong thing.”

Not only that young man but all the others as well went pale.

“It’s not the village that’s important to you. It’s your current lifestyle. A life where you have to flatter the Nobility and say what they’re doing is right. Try to defend that with this arrow.”

The wind whistled. On seeing the arrow that’d been embedded in the marble slab at his feet, the young man backed away with a squeal, then collapsed in a heap.

“Where’s the grand duke’s resting place?”

The question, in a low voice, made the turncoats freeze. They felt as if they were looking upon a gorgeous Grim Reaper. And if they didn’t answer, he’d have no qualms about lopping off their heads. There wasn’t a second to spare.

“In the subterranean crypts.”

The answer came from behind them—and the other side of the door.

II When a semitransparent globe glided in, the human servants all exclaimed in unison, “Vyken?!”

More than six feet in diameter, the globe hovered by magnetism—a fact attested to by the blue glow from its bottom. Seated in the bronze device that filled the lower half of the globe was a young man with black hair. His electric blue cape was a majestic sight.

“I believe we met last night, D,” the young man in the globe said to him. “I’m surprised you fought the grand duke and lived to tell the tale. Although from the look of the grand duke, it was abundantly clear you’re no ordinary individual.”

“Where’s the grand duke?”

“Allow me to show you the way.”

A buzz went through his colleagues. The glow of hope had been extinguished in less than ten seconds.

“Vyken, how can you say that?”

“Would you betray the grand duke?” they protested, their words falling from their mouths like gouts of blood.

But the young man silenced them with a single sentence.

“The grand duke instructed me to do so.”

He turned the globe around without a sound and glided out the door.

“Come with me.”

D wasn’t about to decline. Not giving the Nobleman’s servants another glance, he turned to walk off, the hem of his coat flying out around him.

Continuing down the corridor, the Hunter was greeted by a gigantic hole before he’d gone fifty yards. It was fifteen feet across, and the globe had stopped right on top of it.

“There are stairs, but they’re a bother,” said Vyken. “I’ll thank you to jump down.”

And with that, the sphere was swallowed up by the hole. D followed after it without a moment's hesitation.

Falling over five hundred yards, he came to a gentle stop as if he'd been caught by invisible hands. It was probably a gravity buffer.

"Go through this doorway and you'll find the grand duke's grave," the waiting globe said, and then it went through.

Without so much as a door, the grave was a simple, unassuming place surrounded by stone walls, floor, and ceiling. Unlike those of other Nobles, the walls weren't adorned with golden busts of the departed or paintings depicting things they might never look upon—the sun and its radiance. Nor was there a chorus to praise the dead the instant they set foot in here. All there was, was a stone coffin of the same frugal material as the walls.

"What'll you do, D?" Vyken asked after a deep bow to the coffin from within his globe. "You could probably pierce the grand duke's heart right through that ten-ton sarcophagus. But that would mean death for everyone in the village of Schwartzen and the surrounding area."

Still gazing at the coffin, D said, "A nuclear strike?"

"You can tell that at a glance? Well, that's D for you. Lay so much as a finger on the grand duke's coffin and the village will be engulfed by a ten-megaton blast. If you're fine with that, turn your blade on him."

"Are *you* fine with that?"

A turbulence that D alone would know flitted across Vyken's face.

"You haven't been made one of the Nobility. Are you fine with that?"

"All I do is in keeping with the wishes of the grand duke."

"Are you fine with it?"

"I am."

Before Vyken had finished saying that, the globe made a harsh sound. Though supported by a gravity field that could stabilize a million tons of mass, the globe leaned to one side. It was a blow from D's blade, brought low as he landed from his leap—but when had the Hunter leapt, or drawn, or struck?

Unable to right the globe, the man tried to put it into motion. And then there was another blow to the globe—and a white crack appeared in the semitransparent metal. Such strength the Hunter had, but even more amazing was his precision.

Vyken thought he must be having a nightmare, yet a grin still rose on his lips. *So, he credits me as an enemy, does he?* the man mused.

Steering the globe to the far side of the room, he then went on the offensive. He couldn't weather a third blow from D. The instant the figure of beauty in black passed overhead, Vyken struck a key.

A split second before D could bring his blade down he saw something that resembled a slim antenna shoot from the bottom half of the globe. The scenery around him changed.

D was at the center of blistering white light.

“A sealed dimension!” the hoarse voice said with amazement. “I can't believe they can transport things so easily. I knew teleportation itself had been perfected, but I didn't think it'd be possible to move at such close range.”

“Can you get us out?” D asked, not sounding the least bit upset. However, his left hand perceived something unusual in his tone. As a dhampir, D had the blood of the Nobility in his veins. And being in a flood of eye-searing light was affecting the normal operation of his body. For this wasn't just any light.

“Th-this is sunlight!” the hoarse voice cried in despair. “I ain't talking about just the composition of it. It's the real deal. This dimension is a magical space. Shit, this is just the kinda trap a Noble'd come up with!”

It was common knowledge that sunlight had a fatally destructive effect on the Nobility. Both the OSB and the human armies had spent considerable time fighting the Nobility, and both had analyzed sunlight and created rays mimicking its composition, blasting Nobles with them in the hopes of destroying them. Those using them learned, to their great horror, just how ineffective such tactics were. For the Nobles had bared their fangs in that sunlight, utterly unaffected.

At present, it was clear that both the legends and fact of Nobles' destruction by sunlight—what could be described as demons being defeated by a holy symbol

—conformed to religious principles. Vampires, as demons, could not prevail against holy symbols, and sunlight was one such emblem of divinity. From the time it rose in the east until it set over the western horizon, the sun could destroy Nobility with its light.

Nevertheless, the light that currently seared every inch of D's flesh was that of a sacred sun that'd sprung into being in the middle of the night. That being the case, the only explanation that came to mind was that he was being exposed to sunlight that ignored time through magical means. D was indeed being bathed in the sacred rays of the sun.

“How you holding up?” his left hand asked in a stiff tone.

“I'm managing. Destroy it,” the Hunter replied in a forceful tone. And by “it” he meant the sealed dimension.

“Gimme a sec—this is gonna be a little tricky.”

A tiny mouth opened in his left hand. And in it, a blue flame danced alluringly.

“Now then, as mayor, I'd like to announce the undertaking of a new venture,” Bezo Shakuri declared with such aplomb it was difficult to believe that a day earlier he'd been deputy mayor and fawned over the previous leader.

The staff of the town hall, who were arrayed in a straight line, bowed in unison. They had no choice but to do so. In accordance with the laws of the village, when the mayor died, he or she was succeeded by the deputy mayor. Sensing the tone of his announcement, the staff remained silent.

Hostilities had already begun between those who supported Bezo as mayor and those who opposed him.

Perhaps disheartened by their utter lack of response, Mayor Bezo coughed once, then continued, “Professor Logo Chaney has been sent here to our village by the Capital's Noble Ruins Survey Office to act as an intermediary with Grand Duke Bergenzy. It has been decided that in exchange for learning the secrets of the Nobility's devices in his grace's possession, we will grant him once sacrifice per week, four in total every month. No disobedience will be tolerated.”

“Isn't that tyranny?”

It wasn't unexpected that somebody would voice such an objection. In this case, it came from secretary Jacos.

The dam broken, others followed suit.

“Yeah!”

“We should call an assembly!”

“Human sacrifice? What the hell are you thinking?”

“Don't get too big for your britches, baldy!”

As the protests and insults continued to fly, the new mayor just leaned back and laughed heartily.

The chatter ceased.

“Excellent. It's clear to see who has no regard for the best interests of the village. Since you've turned your back on your mayor, you're prepared to pay the price, I take it?”

The catcalls instantly resumed.

“Yeah, we're willing to lose our jobs!”

“You'd better have eyes in the back of your head!”

“We're gonna look into all your dealings and have you brought up before the circuit court, you know.”

“Say what you like,” Bezo replied. “Everyone who just hurled abuse at me is to leave town hall immediately. Your salary will be paid through today.”

Nearly a third of them left.

As soon as they'd indignantly stomped out of the town hall, someone else said to them, “So, are we all going to take him down or what?”

Each member of the opposition group gave her a look that was a mix of distrust and appreciation. On account of they'd all thought of her as being neutral. There was no saying which side she'd end up on.

“I left with the rest of you,” the woman continued. “Trust me.”

Several of them nodded at her words.

“Could we get together somewhere today? Somebody said something about looking into his dealings, and I’ve got mounds of dirt on him. Did you know he’s got a woman on the side?”

“Who is she?” a man from General Affairs asked, the piqued curiosity keen in his voice.

“The one from the bar—Marcella.”

“Really?!” a number of them exclaimed, and the woman got a depressed look on her face. But the next voice was determined enough to wipe it off again.

“Okay, how about this: come to the former mayor’s house before sundown. We’ll hash out a plan there. His wife asked us to. I’m not about to let anybody so quick to throw around the word ‘human sacrifice’ call himself our mayor,” said Jacos.

The heads of the determined revolutionaries nodded in unison.

Suddenly, the light receded.

He could feel the coldness of the stone from where one knee made contact with it. D was in an area surrounded on all four sides by stone. The torments of more than an hour in that light were made manifest in the way he breathed raggedly and wasn’t able to immediately stand up straight.

A figure glided up behind him like a shadow.

“Are you okay?” asked a feminine voice.

Letting out a breath, D got to his feet.

The woman backed away.

“Incredible . . . You’re back on your feet after so much sunlight . . .”

“Françoise, wasn’t it?” asked the hoarse voice.

“Excuse me?”

“We met last night.” This time, it was D who spoke.

The woman became confused.

“The *you* I met last night—was an imitation.”

Eyes with a mysterious gleam locked onto the woman in the lavender dress, perplexing her still further.

“And where did that happen?”

“Where am I?” D inquired.

“Beneath the castle’s west tower.”



D's eyes focused on the area behind Françoise —and the doorway through which she'd entered. As he moved toward it with long strides, she ran after him, saying, "Please accompany me back to my quarters. I'd like to hear all about whoever made this imitation of me. It was—"

Halting, D heaved a heavy sigh. He hadn't recovered yet.

"The way things stand, you'll collapse in a couple of minutes' time," she told him. "You've taken enough damage to kill a normal dhampir a hundred times over. But I can heal you. What's more, I'd like to have a visitor."

"What?!" the hoarse voice exclaimed.

Steadying her breathing, Françoise said quite pointedly, "The only person who could've made an imitation me is my younger brother. Where did you happen to meet him?"

"What's his name?"

"Jozen."

"Then it was someone else."

Françoise drank down the puddle of despair that'd formed in her heart, just as she always did.

"That doesn't matter," she said. "Please, come with me. I may be able to serve you in some small capacity."

Traveling down one stone corridor after another, she led D to a desolate chamber in no time.

"This is one of our vacant rooms. No one would ever think of checking here. I'll go fetch some medicine now."

When Françoise returned as promised about five minutes later, she had a silver tray in one hand, and on it rested a glass full of blood and a thin tablet computer.

"This is my blood. I drew it about a year ago, but it should be just as fresh as the day it left me."

"I don't need blood. Let's hear what you have to say."

"Okay," Françoise replied with a nod, and then she began a tale that stretched

across the years.

III

“Fourteen humans are employed here in the castle. And I’m one of them. All of us have come into this service in the last five years. I don’t know much about how it all started. But apparently villagers have served here for as long as there’s been a village around the castle. Three years ago I was sent to work here by the aunt who’d raised me, who figured if I was going to be drained of blood anyway I might as well get a job as a servant. I was told the grand duke had a strange habit of never feeding on his human servants. Still, I was scared, but true to the rumors I’d heard, the grand duke never laid a finger on me or any of the others. Even now I still don’t know why not. But an old-timer in the castle who passed away last year told me that until that point, the grand duke hadn’t had any compunctions about draining the blood from his human servants. That had only come to an end three years before I came—back when my younger brother came along, he said.

“Granted, you’re hearing this from his sister, but my brother is a genius the likes of which the village has never seen, and at the age of three his teacher recommended that he undergo special education in the Capital. At the age of five he went to the Capital on a scholarship, but two weeks later he was expelled from school. He was such an excellent student, you see, that the other students’ parents complained to the school. But in his time there my brother acquired something that no regular student in the special school could learn in their classes.

“The day after my brother returned home, he pleaded with our aunt to bring him up to the castle so that he might have an audience with the grand duke. As our aunt was forced to wait in another chamber, we can’t begin to imagine what a five-year-old boy would’ve discussed with a five-thousand-year-old Greater Noble, but my brother came out again about an hour later, and every day thereafter he would go to the castle by day and return home again at night, a schedule he continued for the next ten years. He wouldn’t let anyone follow him. According to my brother, the grand duke forbade it. Still, some villagers

disregarded that and tried to tail him, and apparently none of them were ever seen again. I have no idea what he learned in the Nobleman's castle during that decade.

“When he was fifteen, my brother started working at the castle at the personal request of the grand duke. His position was that of director of the Science and Technology Department. It was a title that made everyone's jaws drop. What was a boy of fifteen supposed to do with the Nobility's devices? All we could do was watch him go and spend all day staring up at the castle. And through that whole time the Nobility's depredations continued, with the village's young women and men alike being drained of blood and transformed into their inhuman servants.

“It was at that point I came to the castle. Contrary to my expectations, the grand duke wasn't the cruel creature they'd whispered about in the village. The first time I met him, an old secretary or something introduced me as Jozen's sister, and his smile is still burned into my retinas.

“Needless to say, my brother's work in the castle consisted of operating, inspecting, and maintaining the machinery there, though no one had actually seen him at work. And I only encountered him twice. On both occasions he was terribly thin, but the second time he confided to me that the grand duke might kill him. Surprised as I was, I pressed him for more details but he would say no more, reassuring me that I would be safe since his grace was fond of me, and Jozen also asserted quite strongly that he'd taken measures to guarantee that no harm would come to our fellow villagers working there, and then he quickly left again. That was during my second year working in the castle. After that, I never saw him again.

“While it's true that the grand duke never laid a hand on the humans in his castle, it wasn't out of fondness for them. It'd be more correct to say that if he harmed them, he'd only be making things worse for himself. That's what my brother was talking about when he said he'd *taken measures*. I'm sure you'd probably like to know what they were, but I haven't the foggiest notion. The other villagers are content with their lives here in the castle, so it doesn't seem to really matter much. There are plenty of servants of the Nobility who were still human beings. Many of them guarded the graves or maintained the premises by

day, and so long as they performed those roles the Nobility would do them no harm. To the contrary, their lives were so much better than in the impoverished human world, most people ended up happy to do everything in their power for the Nobility. Myself included. My brother's probably the only one who wouldn't."

Her long tale at an end, Françoise looked at D and said, "How are you faring?"

A semitransparent cover clung to his face and hands. That was part of the medicine Françoise had mentioned before beginning her story, and it would neutralize the physical effects of the sunlight.

"Better."

"Great."

"Is there tech down here, too?" D asked, his eyes still closed. "A man's come from the Capital offering human sacrifices in exchange for Noble technology. Is there any particular reason why your brother and the grand duke parted ways?"

"I can't really—"

"And you don't know your brother's whereabouts?"

"No. But he's alive somewhere—I can feel it." As she gazed at D with infatuation, her features flooded with determination.

"You said you could cure my condition. Is that because both the teleporter and sunlight ray are devices of your brother's creation?"

"The teleporter was perfected by the Nobility. The other, according to my brother, was his own creation."

"So, as his sister, you can more or less manage them as well?"

Caught in D's line of sight, Françoise lowered her gaze. But then her eyes went wide with shock and joy as D murmured, "Then that was probably him."

"Excuse me?"

As if egging her on, the hoarse voice replied, "The guy calling himself Cornet or something like that. The same kid who made another you. Had a purple hood over his head, and he likes to make odd little devices for the young turks in the

village.”

“A hood . . . and odd little devices . . .” Françoise’s lips trembled faintly. As if she were afraid to say the next words, she continued, “Odd little devices . . . that would be my brother, all right!” Her tone was that of a wanderer suddenly spying a tiny light on a pitch-black night.

D didn’t move a muscle.

“Please, let me see him. Take me there.” She was about to shake D by the shoulder when she realized what she was doing. “I’m sorry—um, I’ll start your treatment right away. Perhaps when you’re better.”

“Do you hate the grand duke?”

“What?” the girl replied, her eyes as wide as they could go. Never in her life had she expected to be asked such a question.

“The mere mention of the Nobility fills people with hatred, with fear,” D continued a few seconds later. “The only ones who don’t loathe the Nobility are those who’ve been bitten and reaped the benefits. And the benefits are many. A higher position than other humans, wealth . . . and culture.”

“Culture?”

“Only a select few humans actually understand that, though—for example, a certain young man, and his sister.”

A full second passed before Françoise’s eyes went wide. “What? Me? I couldn’t possibly—”

“How long will it take to cure me?”

“It’ll be about four hours until the sacred power of the sunlight can be drained from you.”

“The sun will be down then,” said D. “And all sorts of things will be on the prowl. Even before that, things that shouldn’t be moving around will be out.”

Françoise gazed at the young man of unearthly beauty in the same way humans looked at Nobility. And in some ways, that was exactly as it should be.

A long, log-like car stopped just shy of the moat, and a human climbed out of

it. Cupping his hands to either side of his mouth, he shouted, “Vyken, are you there? I am Professor Chaney. Kindly open the gates!”

A moment later the young man appeared before him. “What do you want?” he inquired.

“I believe a Hunter by the name of D went into the castle. What happened?”

“I got rid of him.”

“What?! You couldn’t possibly have done so.”

“You have some problem with me getting rid of him?”

“I can’t believe it. What on earth did you use?”

“A weapon of human manufacture.”

“Impossible! Are you serious?!” the Professor exclaimed, the look on his face past mere surprise and into a daze. “It can’t be,” he said, over and over. “Then, D is—”

“—destroyed, so far as I know. To survive being sealed in that dimension, he’d have to be *human*.”

“And I can take your word about this?”

“If you like. Now, away with you.”

“No, wait.”

Vyken’s form, which had been about to dissolve into thin air, became bright and sharp once more. The Professor was conversing with a hologram.

“Away with you,” Vyken repeated.

“I met with the grand duke once,” the Professor said. “And on that occasion, I got the impression that his grace has a hatred of humans that goes straight to the bottom of his heart. He was particularly insistent that every last scientific and technological development had been the work of the Nobility. Go ahead and tell his grace there’s a device crafted by human hands anywhere in his castle. Rest assured, his rage would bring down the entire stronghold.”

“Professor . . .”

“Hear me out a little longer. This is as much for your benefit as mine. Perhaps it has already occurred to you, but depending on the circumstances, I’m prepared to tell the grand duke that you slew D with a human-crafted device. And I suppose you can deduce what shall happen if I do. Is that what you want? Oh, come now, don’t look at me that way. I’ll have you know that the grand duke seems to me to put great stock in promises and agreements. Were I to die and he learned that you were the culprit, a terrible fate would be visited on you and your kin! You see this metal button on my collar, I take it? It’s an ultra-miniaturized microphone and camera I acquired in the Capital. Our entire exchange is being broadcast with lasers to the earphones I’ve issued my subordinates. Impressive though you may be, you would find disposing of all of them before the grand duke awakens a Herculean task. What say you to working things out to our mutual benefit?”

Drilling the Professor with a dark and dangerous look that seemed like it could only come from the genuine article, the phantom Vyken nevertheless asked nonchalantly, “What is it you want?”

“Ah, I do love a reasonable young man. It’s a simple matter, really. I want you to show me the device in question. And then, would you be so kind as to introduce me to its inventor?”

“He’s dead.”

“Hmm. When you’ve had your nose stuck in Noble matters as long as I have, you’re not so quick to believe reports of who’s alive or dead. Nobles die but return to life. As do humans they’ve fed upon. In the days of antiquity, people refused to believe in the existence of the living dead, yet today there isn’t a single individual who doubts they exist. I’ll need you to tell me all about this inventor—right now, inside the castle.”

“Don’t push your luck, Professor.”

“All that really matters is what direction I’m pushing it. Now, if you’d be so kind as to lower the drawbridge,” the Professor said, his expression already one of victory.

Françoise

Chapter 6

I

D had said it. When the sun went down, all kinds of things began to move about. Things that weren't supposed to move around before that time.

When there was only about two hours remaining before sundown, a half dozen people called on the house of the former mayor en masse. Their nonchalant nature and the baskets of goodies the two women carried called to mind images of a casual afternoon tea party.

They were greeted by the former mayor's wife, who bade them, "Welcome."

All six of them were ushered into the living room where they sated themselves with cups of tea and cookies made with flour, sugar, and vanilla before everyone's expressions became severe.

"And you're sure you weren't followed?" the former mayor's wife inquired, wanting to be sure.

"Trust me," one of the women replied, thumping her ample bosom, and the other woman nodded her agreement.

"That's a relief, Pilica," the mayor's widow said with a smile. "And how are things at the town hall, Docia?" she continued, her gaze shifting to one of the men. He was young, still in his twenties.

"Not great, as you'd imagine, what with nobody to rally around," he said, his intrepid features distorting with pain. "Most of the folks who were on the mayor's side have decided not to rock the boat. Otherwise, everyone would've got canned automatically when that clown took over."

"That leaves that scholar from the Capital and the grand duke free to do as they like. Again, automatically," the secretary Jacos continued in a grave tone.

"Just how many human sacrifices are they looking for?" the second woman asked.

"Four a month," Jacos replied.

“Wow. There won’t be a single woman left in the village in less than a year, eh?”

“They’re looking for men, too.”

“They’re really set on having human blood, are they?” the mayor’s widow said with a sigh.

“That’s right. They perfected synthesized blood a long, long time ago. It’s a perfect match for the taste and smell of human blood—but apparently that’s not enough.”

“Well, there’s no way in blazes we can let them get away with this,” the widow said, gnawing her lip. “There’s nothing in the world lower than human beings offering up their own as a sacrifice to the Nobility. It would be to the eternal shame of our village.”

“Well, that bastard Bezo’s still hell-bent on doing it,” said another of the men—a gray-haired old-timer with angry undercurrents to his voice.

A different young man, this one powerfully built, stood up. All eyes turned to him in surprise, seeing in his face a fierce resolve some might take as a kind of emptiness.

“At this point, there’s only one thing left we can do,” said the big man. “We all—I mean, *I* think so.”

His words drew a special kind of angry stare from Jacos, but everyone else held their tongues. That meant they agreed with him.

“But, Leiden, Bezo and that Professor fella both have their own guards!” the second woman countered.

“Not to worry. We’ve got a powerful ally on our side. We’ve been waiting a long damn time for this day come. The day we destroy the Nobility!”

“How’ll you manage that?”

All eyes focused on the young man.

“Promise not to tell anybody?” Leiden said, playing his powerful gaze across the rest of the group.

Everyone nodded.

At the center of their fascinated looks, Leiden pulled a black and silver gauntlet out of his bag, and once he slid it on, it covered him from the fingertips up to the elbow.

“What’s that?” asked the first woman, Pilica, narrowing her gaze.

“Never mind that, just keep watching,” Leiden said, sounding like he enjoyed the attention, and then he raised his right hand. With the faint hum of a motor, he curled his fingers, then extended them. Repeating the actions several times, he used the same hand to reach into his bag and pull out a foot-long length of inch-thick iron bar, which he dropped on the table. The table shook, jarring the teacups and the plate of cookies into the air. It was the real thing.

“Sorry about that. You’d need a heavy press in a machine shop to bend this thing. But just watch.”

Picking the iron bar up again, Leiden put his thumb to one end of it. It bent like taffy.

An excited buzz ripped through the living room, bouncing off the walls and ceiling.

“Is—is that a piece of the Nobility’s armor you’ve got there?” sputtered the last of the visitors, a gray-haired and graybearded old-timer named Rust, eyeing Leiden’s right arm like he was looking at a ghost.

“It was probably based on that, originally. But this baby was perfected by Cor—er, a colleague of mine.”

“Habaki or Elsa?”

Everyone was exchanging doubtful glances with their nearest neighbors.

“C’mon, you can’t be serious,” Leiden replied. “No way in hell they’d be able to come up with something like this. This is a new colleague you folks don’t know about. I may not look it, but I’m a whiz at making new friends.”

“If you’ve got somebody like that on your side, we’d definitely appreciate their aid!” the mayor’s widow remarked with zeal.

“The problem is, even though he’s about the same age as us, he’s not a people

person at all. There's nothing he likes better than sitting off in a corner. Not exactly the type of person we could bring out in public."

"Can this colleague of yours make weapons? I'm not talking about garden-variety bows and swords, but the kind of stuff the Nobility used to slaughter the OSB."

"Hell, he made this. Sure, he based it off one of the Nobles', but the one he had was broken and didn't work at all. The solar batteries, power amplifier, and drive systems were all shot. And he fixed that crap all by himself. Given proper materials and a machine shop, he can do anything. Come to think of it, all the machines in his shop are things he put together, too."

"And where is this friend of yours?" the mayor's widow inquired, leaning forward. "I would most certainly like to make his acquaintance. He could provide a considerable booster to our firepower."

"I second that," Jacos said, raising his right hand. Then he narrowed his gaze.

"What is it?" Pilica asked.

Following the secretary's gaze, Leiden turned around.

There was a window.

Turning back toward Jacos, he gave the man an inquisitive look.

"Back behind the trees—I saw one of your pals out there, Leiden. Habaki."

"Not a chance," Leiden said, turning once again, and after staring intently, he got to his feet.

"Was it Habaki?" asked Jacos.

"I don't know," Leiden replied. "But I'm gonna go have a look-see."

"The sun ain't down yet, but watch yourself out there all the same," the graybeard called out to him.

Not bothering to reply, Leiden left the room. Though he knew that Habaki had gone to Doc Chavez, he'd been told his friend's treatment would take a while and that he should head home, which he'd done. He'd talked with Elsa, and it was clear to them at first glance that Habaki had a grim fate clawing away at

him. Even without any conclusive evidence, they knew. Frontier people just had that instinct.

But Habaki had been discharged. Either that, or he'd escaped the doctor's care. There could only be one reason for that—he'd been turned into a servant of the Nobility.

The day was growing ever darker. At this hour, it wouldn't be unusual for the lowest ranks of the creatures of the night to already be out and about.

Leiden tightened his grip on the iron bar he had in his right hand. He'd beat him senseless. A servant of the Nobility might have the strength of their maker, but they could still be killed with sheer brute strength. Plus, with this piece of armor, the man was sure he could deal with a lowly servant.

No, this is Habaki we're talking about! Leiden thought to himself, feeling a chill. *What the hell's going through my head?*

Circling around to the window Jacos had been facing, he focused his attention on the back yard.

The old mayor had often boasted to his coworkers at town hall about his garden, and those who'd seen it in the flesh would agree it was a sprawling affair. Designed by a landscape architect from the Capital, it stretched out in an endless quilt of orderliness and chaos, clumps of weeds poking from between orderly flower beds and stands of trees.

Leiden stepped into a heavy cluster of trees that shut out all sunlight. The trees and bushes were a unified family of shadow. With his fifth pace, a figure appeared from behind a tree up ahead of him.

“You?!” he exclaimed, swallowing hard.

“Yeah, me,” the lithe silhouette of Elsa replied. “Last night, the grand duke attacked me and drank my blood. My whole family was killed. I loaded 'em into the wagon and brought 'em out to the caves up north. When I woke up a little while ago, the worst hunger came over me. I wanted blood so badly I couldn't stand it. So I came back to the village, and that's when I happened to see Habaki.”

“Habaki?”

“Yeah. I tailed him, and he led me here. Don’t look at me that way, Leiden. Habaki’s in the same boat as me.”

“What?”

“On account of the poison gas he breathed in back with the monks. Maybe not the same as me, but he’s half dead.”

“Where is he?” Leiden asked, glancing to either side. He looked back over his shoulder, and when he faced forward again, Elsa was standing almost nose-to-nose with him.

“What the—?!” he exclaimed, and he was about to shove Elsa aside, but she shoved his shoulders first.

Leiden was aware that he’d been sent flying. A shock went through his body like he’d been kicked by a cyborg horse. The back of his head and his spine ended up against one tree in a stand of many. Sliding down to the bottom of it, he got up again, at which point Elsa pounced for his neck.

“Stop it!” Leiden bellowed, his right hook being blocked by Elsa’s left arm.

The blow shouldn’t have shaken her in the least, but it sent her flying more than five yards. Slamming against the ground, Elsa leapt back up. Her whole body hung a good three feet in the air. Her muscles were monstrously powerful.

“You’ve got some power armor on, don’t you?” she fairly groaned, the words spilling through vermilion lips. And with the words, a pair of fangs slipped out.

Elsa kicked off the ground. She’d bounded to the left. The instant Leiden turned in that direction, Elsa shot straight at his chest. And there wasn’t even the faintest hint of her trying to change direction.

His massive two-hundred-twenty-pound frame was sent flying once more. This time he snapped through the stand of trees and crashed to the ground.

“Looks like I win,” the girl said, mouth open wide to bare her fangs, her eyes giving off a murderous red glow—no, not murderous, but joyous at the prospect of adding a new member to their ranks.

The tips of her fangs made contact with Leiden’s throat—and then her body was jerked back. Spinning ineffectually, Elsa fell to the ground, then lifted her

head. Her look of demonic hatred became one of surprise.

“Habaki?!”

Giving a doleful look to his former compatriot, the figure who’d just hurled the woman away asked, “You okay, Leiden?”

“I’m fine.”

“Good, then go back inside. I’ll take care of Elsa.”

Leiden was left speechless.

“Oh, spare me. Just which of us do you think you’re closer to right now?” Elsa sneered, her words streaming through the world of gloom. “Your eyes are bright red. You might not have fangs, but your breath is awfully cold. Don’t have hot blood running in your veins, do you? How about staying out of my way? I’m hungry. I’m starving. Let me feed.”

“Elsa,” one of her compatriots murmured, but which one?

Habaki bounded for Elsa’s chest.

A cry of pain rang out.

II Elsa jumped away. A tree branch protruded from the left side of her chest. A deep red stain was spreading across the front of her blouse. Reaching for the branch but quickly taking her hand away again, Elsa got a somewhat pained smile on her face.

“Habaki—thank you. I’m saved at last.”

Though it seemed like Elsa was going to just thud to the ground, she first fell to her knees, then slowly slumped forward. Just as her chest was about to hit the ground, she arched her upper body back and struck her chest against the dirt. The bloodied tip of the branch poked out of her back. Elsa shuddered but once, and then she moved no more.

“What the hell is this?!” Leiden exclaimed in a tone choked with rage as he got

back to his feet. He didn't even know whom he was angry with. Was it with Elsa, for being turned into a vampire so easily and then just as easily destroyed by their friend? Was it with Habaki, for being so quick to drive a tree branch through the heart of their former comrade? Was it with himself, for being unable to do anything?

Habaki turned in his direction. "I'm halfway to being on their side," he said in a voice that seemed to echo from the depths of the earth. "I'm still half human, but I don't know what's gonna happen next. Take good care of Cornet, Leiden."

"Sure. But how'd you know to come here?"

"Because of the state I'm in, I get these strange hunches," Habaki replied. "Cornet's in danger. So I thought of you, and then I wound up coming out here."

"I see. Well, leave him to me. But what'll you—"

"I'll take care of myself. The same way I took care of Elsa."

"Hey!"

Leiden had been about to step forward, but Habaki stopped him, going over to Elsa and effortlessly throwing her over his shoulder. "See you," he told Leiden, and then he ran off, melting away into the darkness.

"Yeah, see you," Leiden replied as he got up again.

"What happened?" Jacos asked as he and Docia rushed over. Apparently the graybeard had stayed back in the house. Both of the other men were armed with short bows.

"Nothing. There's nobody out here," Leiden replied. He wasn't sure how they'd react if he'd told them the truth. "I'm gonna look around a little bit more. Do me a favor and go back inside with the others."

"All right. We'll be waiting there for you," Docia said, turning himself around to leave, and Jacos followed right behind him.

"That'll buy you some time. I hope you make good your escape, Habaki," the giant of a man said, and as he put his pained thoughts into words, tears streamed from his eyes.

Docia and Jacos stopped right in front of the former mayor's house. The door

was ajar. They were certain they'd shut it as they'd left. But the mayor's widow and their compatriots weren't outside.

"This ain't right," Docia said, taking the arrow he already had nocked and replacing it with another from his belt. The next thing he did was horrifying. He drove the sharp arrowhead into his left eye.

Jacos let out a little cry.

Docia soon pulled the arrow out again. His eyeball came with it.

"This is a 'seeker arrow,'" he stated proudly. Through black magic the eye-bearing arrow would fly in accordance with the wishes of the one who fired it, transmitting everything in its surroundings back to him.

"The eye's a prosthetic," he explained. "Whatever it sees I'll see through my right eye."

"You don't say," Jacos groaned, sweat spreading across his brow.

"Don't get spotted," Docia whispered to the arrow, drawing the string tight and letting it fly into the house.

As instructed, the arrow would go quickly at times, slowly at others, creeping along the floor or skimming the ceiling to accomplish its mission.

"I've got a picture!" Docia cried out from where he sheltered to one side of the doorway. His tone was charged with self-confidence, but that suddenly changed to shock and fear. "The lady of the house, Pike, and Pilica are all dead. Shit, their heads are still barely connected to their bodies!"

"Who the hell did this? And when?" asked Jacos.

"Somebody who came in this way right after we left. No, I think it might've been through the window—at any rate, they got in somewhere."

"Someone on Bezo's side?"

"Who else? But I don't think anybody in the village would've killed 'em like that."

"Think it's them? The Professor's thugs?"

"Yeah," Docia replied with a nod, and then he started blinking his remaining

eye furiously. “My arrow got taken down. Run for it!”

Shooting him a glance as he nocked another arrow, Jacos ran off down the street. *So blue*, he thought to himself. It was already the time of monsters.

Once he was through the gate, the secretary turned and looked back. He saw Docia fire that second arrow. A streak of black shot to his windpipe. And then the archer’s throat split open and, with his vertebrae apparently severed already, his head flopped limply against his back. Deep red blood sprayed out as if from a faucet, recoloring the stepping stones and the walls of the doorway.

“Oh shit!” Jacos heard himself squeal as he raced down the street.

When he’d gone more than twenty yards, from behind a stand of trees a female voice beckoned to him, “Jacos—this way!”

Diving into the trees, the secretary was greeted by a red-haired woman.

“Ann?! You made it out okay?”

“Yes. Now, be quiet,” she told him, putting her index finger to somewhat plump lips. One of the two female co-conspirators, she threw a cautious glance out toward the street.

“What in the hell?!”

Four streaks of black went rushing by like streams of water in the same hue.

“*Those things* must be what cut everybody’s heads off. Docia said he saw something with his ‘seeker arrow.’ What are they?” asked Jacos.

“Claws!”

“Claws? Are you kidding me?!” the secretary exclaimed, his narrow eyes going wide, but then something suddenly dawned on him, and he continued, “That’s right—one of those guys had really long fingernails!”

“Valen!”

“Yeah, him! No question about it. But are those his nails? We’re more than twenty yards from the house! Can he make ’em grow?”

“Six hundred miles long, easily.”

“What?!” the accomplished secretary exclaimed, giving a piercing look to his

coworker, but just as he saw a disturbing smile rise on her lips, a red line zipped across his throat. Black blood gushed from it with terrible force, and the secretary's head fell against his spine like it was a backpack.

Looking down at Jacos's body as it dropped to the ground, she remarked, "Poor bastard. But I didn't really enjoy playing the traitor." Recalling the toys from the Capital she'd be able to buy her children with the money she'd received for playing that part, Ann Dadorin from Family Records in town hall immediately got a smile on her face.

As she left, a boy watched her go from the dark cover of the trees. Puma, the son of the former mayor. He'd also gone out looking for Habaki before his mother and her friends were murdered.

"That jerk killed my mother—I'll make her pay! Her, and the Professor's thugs, too!" the boy cried, his grip tightening on a rifle. But another hand grabbed him by the wrist.

"I wouldn't if I were you," Leiden told him sternly.

"Chaney here," the Professor said to the grayish figure who appeared on the communicator's screen. "This is my regularly scheduled report. Nothing out of the ordinary at present," he stated flatly.

"I see. Continue your negotiations with the grand duke. Our day of victory is close at hand!"

"I should think so. Ah, the Nobility's devices—it's said if we knew how to tap even a millionth of their potential, it would be power enough to make a toddler ruler of the world. I think perhaps today I might have an opportunity to see some of them."

"We'll be eagerly awaiting your next report. Don't let us down, Chaney. You know what fate awaits you if you bungle this, I take it?"

"I'm well aware of the consequences."

"Very well, then," the figure said, fading away.

Reflected in the black screen, Professor Chaney raised his head. Usually, he had a bitter look on his face. But tonight, a thin little smile took its place.

“You can eagerly await this—marking the day I become supreme ruler of the world.”

Slamming the screen shut, he went over to the closet, opened the door, and began primping himself with the aid of the mirror that hung inside.

Somewhere far off in the distance, Vyken sensed the lid opening. And then the approach of the grand duke. Unsettling footsteps echoing down long stone corridors, the Nobleman headed his way. And now, he was just outside. The knock at the door made the odd-looking young man rise from his chair. It couldn't be—he was much too early.

“Who is it?” Vyken asked.

The door replied, “Who do you think?”

“I'll be damned—Baron Agrippa?”

“Right you are!”

Lacking sufficient energy to respond, Vyken stood rooted in his tracks.

“May I come in?”

Sparks flew in the man's head, bringing him back to his senses.

“Kindly give me a moment, I'll get the door for you.”

Running over to the door, he opened it.

“Many thanks,” said the massive figure that entered, looking swollen as some anthropomorphic balloon. “Why do you live in such squalor?”

The grand duke's best friend, Baron Agrippa was a prominent member of the Greater Nobility in the eastern Frontier. Yet here he was, paying a visit on a lowly human guard.

“I don't have any particularly pressing business,” the baron continued. “But for some time now I've wondered if you realize your true worth.”

“My true worth?”

“Yes,” the Nobleman replied, hands clasped behind his back as he grinned and stared at the young man.

“To be honest, I have no idea. Though I like to think I’m of some small service to his grace, the grand duke.”

“And to the rest of your kind—the villagers?”

“I suppose I’m a traitor,” he stated, then turned away in a snit. As a result, he didn’t notice the wicked grin of amusement that spread across the baron’s meaty face.

“Hmm. Just as I thought, you really don’t realize how valuable you are, do you? What an uncommon breed of man you are.”

“Are you here to appraise me?”

“There’s no need for that. Such was already done by the time you came into Bergenzky’s service. And you still live.”

“Is that supposed to mean I made the grade?”

“To my way of thinking, at least. By the way—and this is the biggest question I have for you at this time—how do you feel about Bergenzky?”

“He’s a respected member of the Greater Nobility who—”

“Oh, please, spare me!” Baron Agrippa interrupted, his massive form suddenly executing a succession of backflips. His feet never touched the ground. Spinning around and around in midair, his prodigious stomach quickly became almost impossible to see, moving so fast it was nearly transparent, but then he gradually slowed, plopping to the ground.

“Oops,” the baron said, massaging his battered rump as he got to his feet. “A little more of that and I would’ve assimilated everything. I really must do something about this habit I have of getting overexcited too easily.”

Sensing something unsettling in the Nobleman’s leisurely tone, Vyken looked all around him. Having lost most of their color and shape, the stone walls were distorted, as if they were being viewed through water. The same was true of the floor and ceiling. If allowed to continue, the man wondered if they might not turn into thin air.

Is that what he means about assimilating them?

Feeling like his heart was caught in someone’s grip, Vyken raised his right

arm. He intended to wipe the sweat from his brow. But his hand stopped. Vyken had noticed that his right hand was half transparent.

“You’ll recover soon enough. Although it may not work exactly the same as it did before.”

Here the baron gave a mirthful laugh, but he quickly reverted to a serious face. Vyken was biting down on his right forearm. As a stream of red linked his arm to the floor, color and shape returned to his surroundings.

“So, that’s what you’re capable of,” Baron Agrippa said with amazement. “I can see why Bergenzy would keep you around. You may be able to give me what I want.”

“What you want?”

The baron sat down in a rustic chair. The chair was bent to its limits.

Looking concerned about it, Vyken continued, asking, “What might that be?”

“I want you to torpedo the agreement between Bergenzy and this ‘Professor’ individual.

Vyken nodded without a second thought. After realizing what he’d done, he hastily looked up to see the Nobleman’s roly-poly face beaming and nodding in agreement.

Now I’ve really gone and done it, Vyken decided.

“But why, my good baron?”

“Because he has forgotten the pride of the Nobility.” Planting the soles of his boots on the floor, the baron leaned back, chair and all. Looking up at the ceiling, he continued, “The humans will get our technology and the knowledge of its use, and in exchange we get regular offerings of blood from them. How is that any different than the basest peddler of vices? Why must we even enter into a give-and-take arrangement with human beings in the first place? The Nobility are an honored class that reigns over the human race. The great take from the small. Fly in the middle of the night to the home of some beautiful maiden. Kill her guards, kill her family, and burst into her bedroom. And let us not forget the sublime pleasure of sucking the blood from her pale throat after overcoming all her

resistance. That is what it means to be a Noble, that is what we are—and don't look at me that way, now. I believe you understand what I've left unsaid. Bergenzky must reclaim his pride in being a Noble. And in order to do that, I need you to die.”

Vyken had no reply for that.

“And no, it won't end there. I swear this to you, as sure as my name is Baron Agrippa. You have my promise that once you're dead, or even in the unlikely event you make it back alive, I shall make you one of our kind.”

“That's a very kind offer, but I'm afraid I have to clear up a misunderstanding here,” Vyken said, staring at the baron. “Not once have I ever wished to become a Noble. And the grand duke is well aware of this.”

“Why are you here, then? Humans who serve the Nobility do so with an aim toward being made Nobles—is that not the eternal truth?”

“There are exceptions. In my case—well, I suppose I wanted the sort of life of luxury I could never know in the village.”

“I see. So, you're a traitor, then?”

Smiling wryly at the baron's matter-of-fact remark, Vyken replied, “That's precisely why I don't want to lose his grace, the grand duke. I would do anything to keep him here forever.”

“Even take action against other human beings?”

“Yes.”

“That might include your fellow villagers.”

“I've been prepared for that ever since I came to the castle.”

“Very well,” the baron said with a satisfied nod. “Let us move on to the nuts and bolts of a more concrete plan of action.”

“Please, wait a moment,” Vyken said, stopping him. “I know this isn't a matter of life or death for his grace the grand duke. To the contrary, I believe the grand duke truly wishes to bargain with the humans.”

“Because he doesn't realize the road he treads leads to ruin. If this folly is

allowed to continue, the humans will see how easy this is and dangle even sweeter bait in front of the Nobility to learn their secrets. Bergenzky won't be able to prevent it."

"But that's—" Vyken began, but his words faltered.

"I know what you're trying to say. No matter how much we may compromise, when push comes to shove, we are still the Nobility. We can incinerate a million humans with a snap of our fingers. But will he still be able to do that once he learns how sweet it is to negotiate with the human race?"

"My good baron, you should say no more."

"Oh ho! I'll stop at that, then," the obese Nobleman chortled. "I didn't expect you'd immediately take me up on this impromptu offer. Take some time to mull it over. Let's get together again. But with or without you, I will take action."

The baron rose from his chair and left.

Not bothering to see him out, Vyken mused, "So, ultimately he's asking me to kill the grand duke, is that it? Damn you, baron, just what have you got up your sleeve?"

He looked out the window. It was dark. A deep blue hue.

III D's physical condition improved with the coming of darkness.

"I can't believe it!" That was all Françoise could say when D got to his feet. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"The grand duke's resting place."

There was no place else he'd want to go.

After some hesitation, she countered, "But no one knows where he sleeps."

"Only one place it could be. In a coffin underground," said the hoarse voice. "We're going. You'd better come along, too. Sooner or later it's gonna come to light that you helped us out. That's something only you or the grand duke could've done, right?"

Françoise quickly made up her mind, saying, “Okay, I’ll go.”

As D headed for the doorway, the woman followed after him without the slightest hesitation.

“Are you sure we’ll be okay?”

Françoise’s question wasn’t really a question at all. In a manner of speaking, it was just the sort of thing you said in a situation like this.

The real Françoise was entranced by the beauty of the young man walking ahead of her. He seemed to project an alluring glow as he pushed on in silence. Françoise felt like she was held by invisible bonds. And if D had willed her to die, there was no doubt she’d have complied in her throes of rapture.

There was no reply. D pressed on without even looking back at her.

“You’ve only been inside the castle twice, is that right? So how do you know your way around so well?”

“Instinct,” he replied in the hoarse voice.

“Instinct?”

“What’s got you so jumpy?” the hoarse voice jeered. “Any road my friend here’s taken once, no matter how complicated, he can retrace without ever getting lost. Not only that, but he can even follow a path that isn’t there, like he’s doing now.”

Françoise grew bewildered.

“What the—?” the hoarse voice groaned.

A glow like that of a fable ghost light had sparked in the corridor. It quickly took on the shape of crystal candelabra and large candles ensconced along either wall.

“The sun’s down at last. The creatures of the night will be on the move.”

D’s voice overlapped with the hoarse one, saying, “Let’s go,” as he wrapped an arm like steel around Françoise’s waist. An instant later the girl was moving like the wind past the glowing flames, flying toward the head of a staircase leading underground that had been visible a short distance away.

Nothing displayed the Nobility's nostalgic tastes more than their castles. Walls, ceilings, and floors were all carefully crafted of rough-hewn stone. Light in that era was provided by sconces. The corridors they traveled twisted and turned to make eternal prisoners of any invaders, and staircases stretched on forever. As a result, even the residents feared to set foot in areas outside the bounds of their daily activities. A single step could confuse their sense of spatial recognition and suspend the functions of the semicircular canals, which detect movement in three dimensions.

As D advanced into the depths of the castle without the slightest hesitation, stark bones began to appear down at his feet.

“Why—they're wearing servant garb!” Françoise exclaimed in horror.

“Butlers who took a wrong turn,” D told her by way of explanation.

Françoise was stunned. “Who—who are you?”

Finally, D stood before a massive iron door. Françoise saw him press the palm of his left hand against its black surface.

“We're too late,” the hoarse voice remarked at the same time D lowered his left hand.

“What's wrong?!” the girl inquired.

“The grand duke's not here.”

“What?”

“This is undoubtedly the crypt, though. It seems we were just a little too late.”

“What'll you do?”

“Search him out.”

D sped back the way he'd come, the wind churning in his wake. And it wasn't just from his change of direction. The wind had carried a voice. Even Françoise had heard it.

The grand duke is in the subterranean power room.

“It's a wind comm,” the girl said. “People in the castle use the wind to convey messages.”

“Whose was that just now?”

“They all end up sounding the same. But usually the speaker will give their name and location.”

“It’s probably a trap,” said the hoarse voice.

Françoise was gazing at D. *He’s the kind to say he’s going anyway*, she thought.

“Let’s go.”

That’s what I thought, Françoise told herself with satisfaction.

“This is where we part company,” said the hoarse voice.

“Huh?”

“Hunting Nobility is dangerous business. You’d only get in the way.”

“But where am I supposed to go?”

“To the village. You’ve gotta know somebody there—oh, yeah, there’s that guy underground.”

“Underground?” Françoise said, frowning her brow.

“Damn it,” the left hand said, and it was just about to cover its mouth when it was jerked away. D had given it a good shake.

“Underground—that’d be Sagan’s Kingdom!” the girl exclaimed.

“What the hell’s that?” asked the hoarse voice.

“About a hundred years ago, a little boy named Sagan accidentally discovered a series of crisscrossing tunnels under the village. But by the time I was a kid, people just said it was only a legend. Not a person alive had ever been in there.”

“Hmm. Well, that ain’t the case anymore,” the hoarse voice said, punctuating it with a chortle that was abruptly choked short.

His left hand balled tightly, D said, “I don’t know whether or not it’s your brother who’s down there. But he’ll probably help you out. And I’m not saying that you have to stay there until I get back.”

Françoise’s expression was one of bewilderment with the faintest touch of

anger, but it firmed into surprise. For she understood what D meant. *I could end up dead*—that’s what D was saying.

This is just a way of life for him! she thought, feeling like she’d been dunked headfirst into a cold, clear stream. “I see,” she said. “I’ll head back. And I won’t worry myself too much about you.”

A faint smile wafted across D’s lips—or so it appeared to her.

“Good-bye.”

What she really wanted to say was *See you later*. But Françoise choked back those words.

D turned his back to her. And he didn’t pause for even a second before walking off.

Taking a deep breath, Françoise set off on foot. She felt like there was a gaping hole in her chest.

After she’d gone about a hundred feet at a rapid clip, something odd happened to the wall to her right. A six-foot-square stone slid out of the wall and fell to the floor. There was no crash of it making impact. What were clearly metallic legs stretched out from all four sides of the stone to support it.

“A trans-forcer . . .”

Mechanical creatures with the ability to mimic anything, they were scattered throughout the castle. Although Françoise had seen them on a number of occasions, not once had one of these enforcers ever blocked her path. That was because they’d confirmed her identity with the main computer. Now, that computer viewed her as some unknown intruder. Undoubtedly *something* had seen her with D.

Françoise moved to the left. The trans-forcer also shifted to that side.

“I guess I don’t have much choice,” said the girl.

Realizing that this passageway led out of the castle, the trans-forcer commanded, “Halt. Resist and I will be forced to fire. Come with me.”

“Sure, whatever you say,” Françoise replied, raising her hands so the backs of them faced outward. The particle launcher concealed in the bracelet around her

left wrist sent a blinding band of emissions at the six-by-six cube. The cube raised an antenna-like paralyzer to strike, but it was swiftly reduced to a molten mass.

“Poor thing. This is some of my handiwork,” said Françoise.

Racing past the boiling mess of stone and machinery, the girl soon halted. A figure had appeared from around a corner about twenty yards distant. One glance at his black hair, and Françoise cried out to him, “Vyken?!”

Research in Hell

Chapter 7

I

“Shouldn’t you tell the grand duke you’re taking some time off?” Vyken asked, and though the query was calm, there was no laughter in his eyes.

“I’ll write him a letter later,” Françoise replied. “Or maybe I should contact him with a wind comm?”

Vyken responded to her impish remark soberly, saying, “Like the rest of us, you came here of your own free will. If you’re turning your back on us, your brother must be mixed up in it somehow, am I right?”

“I don’t know, are you?”

Vyken’s lips moved the tiniest bit. Perhaps he’d said *Françoise*.

“Don’t try to stop me,” she told him. “Just let me go.”

“Wait a moment.”

“Until that gorgeous specimen slays the grand duke? Who was it that used the wind comm, I wonder?”

Vyken could say nothing to that.

“If the grand duke is destroyed, he’ll leave, too. But those characters from the Capital and their ‘contract’ will still remain. Do you intend to serve in the grand duke’s stead, Vyken?”

There was no reply.

“Vyken, do you think humans can do anything with the Nobility’s technology? Are they supposed to make a maglev highway work when they can’t even comprehend the concept of hyperconductivity? If they use an antiproton reactor before they know how to stop antiproton generation, they’ll destroy the whole universe. With all that at risk, what would be the price for handing it over to the characters from the Capital? Surely not blood, right? Money, then?”

“That’ll be quite enough, Françoise.”

“Yes, it will. So let me pass.”

“I told you to wait,” Vyken said, a look of sadness skimming across his features. “Your clothes and mine were given to us by the grand duke. Take them off, and good old Vyken Lovelock and Françoise Rene will be left. A man and woman from the village. If we explain things to the villagers, they’ll understand.”

“They’d understand even without us explaining anything if we were our old selves,” Françoise said softly, gently. “But it’s too late now, Vyken. You and I both changed when we came to the castle. And knowing that full well, I still intend to leave here. With that in mind, do you intend to stay?”

“Will you go to Jozen?” Vyken asked in a low tone.

Françoise’s eyes had a piercing gleam to them.

“Then he does still live, just as I thought,” Vyken said, raising his right hand. The weapon secreted in his ring wasn’t a paralyzer. It was a destructive beam that reduced anything down to atoms in the blink of an eye.

“I’m so sorry,” Vyken said, shutting his eyes.

A light enveloped the woman’s body. Through eyes squinted down to the tiniest slit, Vyken saw the light scatter.

“A dimensional barrier?!” the Nobleman’s servant said, frozen in his tracks. Françoise’s pale and beautiful face smiled back at him.

“Science and technology don’t exist for your benefit alone, you know.”

A blistering beam stretched between the two of them. As the dimensional barrier sent that off into another world, Vyken felt despair burning away at his heart. But despair can give birth to power. Vyken charged forward.

Graceful limbs narrowly dodged the vicious shoulder he threw at her.

“What the—?!” Vyken exclaimed, crashing into the stone wall.

Françoise was sprinting away. Vyken took aim at her back.

“How do you think it feels not to have dreams, but to appear in the dreams of others, Françoise?”

Already more than a hundred yards away, the woman suddenly lurched. In less than a second, she'd vanished.

Vyken's expression wasn't one of victory. Rooted in place like a criminal facing reproach, all he felt was the wind blowing down the corridor.

"Too late, eh?" the hoarse voice said, snapping Vyken back to himself. The young man in black stood behind him.

Vyken gazed at D without saying a word. He wanted to say something, but his voice failed him.

D turned his back to the man. The way he did it, it was as if Vyken didn't even warrant a glance. As he watched the figure walking away, in his heart of hearts Vyken groaned to himself, *Give him hell. My future depends on whether or not you can slay the grand duke. Beneath the castle lies a treasure to give rise to a ruler of the world of man. I don't want it all. Even a millionth of it could make a ruler of me. I'm counting on you, D!*

There were two people there in addition to the grand duke. One look at the tableau before them froze the gray-haired, gray-bearded one in awe, while the bald, middle-aged one trembled like it was the end of the world.

The scene before them was beyond imagining. And there should be limits to just how far beyond that things could go. They were in pitch darkness. Unbreathing and freezing cold, they yet lived. Stars burned in reddish or bluish silver. A vast nebula spread before the two men. From one end of the universe to the other, the result of hundreds of millions—perhaps even trillions—of stars glimmering, wiping each other from existence, growing, squabbling, devouring each other, and embracing was emblazoned into the retinas of the trio. But there was no life there. No, there was no one there at all. Nothing there to touch, nothing to hear them, and they couldn't even move. All there was, was unspeakable solitude.

The bald one, Mayor Bezo, wept for the longest time. The gray-haired Professor struggled against falling into a similar state, but his knees quaked violently.

"This is the universe. A limitless space that's a vacuum and as close as possible to absolute zero," said the grand duke, a hint of contempt in his tone.

Just as I expected of these lowly humans. Here they fancied themselves on equal footing with us, but I warrant now they see.

“Of all the creatures born on Earth, we Nobility alone can live here,” Grand Duke Bergenzy continued. “And the two of you are like us at present—and by that I mean that you aren’t human.”

“To be honest, it’s frightening. Well, intellectually I realize that with your scientific might doing something like this is no problem, but seeing it with my own eyes is something else entirely,” the Professor declared with admiration. He was half serious, with the other half being lip service.

Your inferior race goes nowhere but toward its own extinction, Chaney thought to himself. Give us your accomplishments now and begone!

The Professor wondered if he’d have to continue putting on this front for much longer, but then there was an unexpected interruption.

“P-please . . . hurry up and . . . show us . . . the Noble technology . . . That’s why we came here . . . N-not to see this . . . this horrifying . . . lonely . . . *whatever!*”

Two pairs of eyes reflected the bumpkin authority figure balled up and cradling his knees. Both men resisted the urge to laugh in his face.

“There, there, of course we didn’t, Mister Mayor,” the Professor said, clapping the man on the shoulder. He then continued, “Your grace, if you would be so kind.”

“Very well. To do so, we must venture into that nebula.”



“What?”

“There’s nothing under *my* castle. All the castle’s systems are maintained by devices set up on yonder planet.”

“Energy from a planet in space?!” the Professor exclaimed, desperately swallowing the words *for a castle in the boondocks*. Fear had risen in his chest like icy waters. *Can it be I underestimated this Nobleman?* he thought.

“Off we go!”

They had no time to respond to the grand duke’s remark. The next thing the two humans knew, they’d reached their destination. An incredibly enormous power plant spread across the desolate ground. For they were looking down on it from the heavens.

“Do those pipes and clusters of domes cover the entire surface of the planet?”

The grand duke replied to the Professor’s question, saying, “Indeed. Roughly a hundred and fifty million square miles of them.”

“How many years did that take you?”

“Two and a half days, actually.”

“Excuse me?”

“Two and a half days.”

“Unbelievable!”

At that point, the world changed again. The trio was standing inside a dome. From one of the walkways crisscrossing the place they could see a collection of cylinders directly below.

“That is an antiproton reactor,” the Nobleman explained. “It produces nearly infinite energy.”

“Could you—”

“I shall teach you how it works. It has applications in other fields, as well. Science will make a ruler of you.”

“That’s not what I—” the Professor protested, the feeling that the Nobleman

had seen right through him leaving his mind a choppy mess.

“Energy controls everything. Not just here in our world, but out in the universe, at the bottom of the sea, and even off in other dimensions. All to grant your every wish.”

“You seem to have the wrong idea, and that simply won’t do. I’m merely an individual working for the human government in the Capital. My head reels with the sort of things you’re discussing,” the Professor said, donning a fake smile. “But all that aside, would you mind if I asked you something?”

“What is that?”

“Why did you accept our offer? When we received your reply, the Noble Ruins Survey Office was bowled over!”

“I’m getting up in years, you see,” the grand duke laughed. It was unsettling the way his fangs poked from the corners of his lips when he did so. “I have lost the desire to creep into the bedchambers of human girls. Countrified farmers or not, they have thought of a great variety of defenses. And why go through all that needless effort when I can sit back and get the same thing anyway? The warm blood tastes the same either way.”

Pretty crafty for a countrified Nobleman, the Professor thought, clucking his tongue in his heart of hearts. Is that all it takes to get the Nobility to hand their technology over to humans? Well, that’s just fine. No matter what he’s got planned, I want the proper means to control and harness that energy.

“Allow me to show you it in action,” the grand duke said, his voice shattering the Professor’s thoughts.

“W-why, yes—by all means,” Chaney replied, trembling with unmistakable delight from head to toe. The mayor got to his feet, too.

“Look at that red star.”

The grand duke raised his right hand, and sure enough, there it was.

“And now check the horizon.”

The Professor and the mayor peered off across the black wasteland. A single beam of red light split the darkness.

“Unfortunately, even at the speed of light it would take ninety thousand years to reach that star. So let me link them across space. Watch the star.”

In less than two seconds’ time, the red star flared blisteringly hot, blinding the two men, and then it was swallowed up by the darkness.

“An entire star, and one ninety thousand light years away, at that,” the Professor groaned. Though he knew what had happened, he still couldn’t believe it.

“I destroyed about thirty thousand of them before I’d reached the age of four. Although I desisted when my father ordered it.”

So, his father was reasonable, then? the Professor mused, able to accept that. Still, the effect had been nothing if not stunning.

“Grand duke . . . many thanks!”

From behind them came a hoarse voice, saying, “It really ain’t right for a Noble to be encouraging humans this way, you know.”

The trio turned in astonishment. They were out in the universe. Where had D come from, and how had he followed them there?

II

“How did you get here?” the grand duke inquired.

“By the same device you used. It was the only one that was on.”

The grand duke’s jaw dropped. His mouth then opened and closed repeatedly. *He was able to . . . to use that?* the grand duke thought, slipping toward a state of dementia.

Finally Bergenzy was able to speak, saying, “Just who are you?”

His voice split in two.

Bounding, the Nobleman dodged the blade that swung down at him as soon as he landed in a manner that was nothing shy of miraculous. Both the Professor and the mayor were frozen.

Putting ten paces between them, the grand duke braced himself for battle. D

had his sword lowered nonchalantly. The Professor and the mayor heard a faint sound from somewhere.

“Come,” the grand duke said, beckoning to the Hunter. It was an action that spoke of enormous self-confidence—and made one immediately think it was a trap. That much went without saying.

D raced over like a gust of wind, his blade bisecting the Nobleman’s body—at least, it went through the grand duke’s torso. However, the grand duke turned around unconcernedly. There wasn’t even a slash through his garb.

“Most unfortunate, is it not?” he said.

Once again D closed the distance. The blade he brought down on the Nobleman’s head rebounded with a strange sound.

“My person is protected by a reactor harnessing the power of an entire planet. No attack can penetrate it! Look at my arms—they’re artificial limbs, but are no different from the real thing. And then there’s my heart, which you skewered before. Shortly after my birth, it was replaced with an artificial one. As it’s an imitation, I can survive half a day after it’s been pierced. My heart is no longer a weak point.”

“Then I’ll have to see about breaking through your defenses,” said the Hunter.

“What?”

D’s lips were pressed together, but a dribble of vermilion spilled from one corner of them. Blood. He’d bitten open his own lip. And then—D’s throat bobbed up and down. As if he were swallowing something. His eyes gave off a red glow. The corners of his lips quickly turned up. And what spilled from them were the fangs of a vampire!

The Professor’s legs gave out beneath him. The mayor clawed at the left side of his chest. So great was his fear it was causing him heart problems.

“You—you son of a bitch,” the Greater Nobleman groaned in surprise, yet he still managed to back away thanks to the power of his station.

The grand duke opened his mouth. A crimson ball of light sank into D’s chest. The Hunter’s blade had parried it—and it had passed through the weapon

without leaving a mark on it. Doubling over, D lurched forward. He barely managed to catch himself after dropping to his left knee.

“That energy sphere had the power of an entire planet in it,” said the grand duke. His tone should’ve been one of complete confidence, yet it shook with fear. The chances of this happening were like finding a needle in a haystack.

The grand duke thrust his right hand into his cape. When he pulled it out again, it gripped a dagger.

“Any dhampir, no matter how great, will die from a stake of wood or steel through the heart. World-renowned Hunter that you are—I, Bergenzy, shall give you your Last Rites.”

He rushed at D, ready to drive the blade he’d raised through the Hunter’s back and out through his heart.

Who would’ve imagined the agonized man’s right hand would flash into action? The grand duke toppled backward. Both his legs had been severed just below the knee. After he thudded to the ground, a rain of blood spurted out.

Writhing, the grand duke cried out, “Drinking your own blood was enough to best the energy of an entire planet? Who are you, D? O energy, give me my legs back. Restore me!”

Buffeted by the Nobleman’s insane words, the vision of beauty slowly got to his feet. His entire weight was supported by the sword in his right hand.

“No, stay back. Don’t come near me,” the grand duke said, a succession of fireballs flying from his mouth. Three of them bounced off the Hunter’s blade, and another sank into D’s solar plexus.

Seeing the Hunter’s knees buckle, the grand duke rolled over and desperately pulled his legs closer, pressing them against the stumps.

“Energy . . . O energy . . . I beg of you . . . Help me. Why . . . can’t I heal . . . from his blow?”

From the corner of his eye Bergenzy saw a figure in black approaching.

“Oh, lend me your aid! Power! It’s power that shall save me. Move, legs! Move, damn you!”

His expression was by turns one of despair or resignation, but suddenly it became one of elation.

“They moved! Ha ha! I’m saved. The energy is still alive and well!”

The grand duke jumped up as if on springs.

D was standing right in front of him. Black smoke poured from his chest and solar plexus, yet every inch of him radiated murderous intent.

“Wha—?!” the grand duke squawked, running. He covered ten yards in the blink of an eye. But that was just his legs and his headless torso. His reeling body had a needle of rough wood stuck through its back and out through its heart.

Confirming that the torso and head of the fallen Noble had turned to dust, D used his sword to get to his feet, then walked off in the direction from which he’d come. When he passed by, the mayor screamed, while the Professor was frozen in place and couldn’t move a muscle. As far as they were concerned, he was a creature far more frightening than the Nobility. Even after D was swallowed up by thin air without giving them so much as a glance, the mayor continued to snivel for some time and the Professor remained just as stiff.

“We’re finished,” the mayor moaned. “It’s all over . . . And we . . . we’re going to die here.”

“What are you talking about? We were able to come out here. It must be possible to go back again,” the Professor countered, having returned to his senses.

“That’s because we had the grand duke with us! Hell, the Hunter was able to go back. But that’s because he’s a dhampir. But we’re just regular old human beings. We got brought all the way out here, and now there’s not a thing we can do!”

The Professor saw tears in the man’s eyes. Reflected in those tears, the look on the Professor’s face made the mayor turn and look.

All the gray dust on the floor was moving in the same direction. Toward the grand duke’s clothing. And look! Weren’t those hands growing from the sleeves and a head quickly taking shape above the collar? Were even D’s blade and

wooden needle not enough to slay this Nobleman?

Now the grand duke got to his feet. Not a mark remained on his neck or his chest or even his clothes, and at some point the needle that'd pierced him had fallen to the floor.

“Impossible,” the Professor murmured.

“You came back . . . You came back from the dead . . . Please, help us!” the mayor sobbed.

“You have my thanks, planetary energy!” the grand duke cried out to the heavens. “I have returned!”

A monstrous laugh rolled through the ether. A moment later, the Nobleman collapsed. His face and body were decaying once more. His revival had been incomplete. For the energy of that planet had been no match for D's blade.

“Grand duke?!” the Professor cried out, racing over.

“No, it's probably better this way,” the mayor said, folding his hands together and reciting a prayer.

And then they heard it.

“Come . . .”

It wasn't a human voice. It was a groan from the dead. The rickety, nearly decayed right hand rose and beckoned to the two of them.

“Come . . .”

The voice of the dead echoed darkly in the two men's heads, hindering their thinking.

The fallen grand duke turned his face and looked up at them. His face? It was that of a mummy, with his eye sockets hollowed out, and both his cheekbones and teeth left exposed. His mouth moved, though his fangs were about to fall out.

“The two of you . . . should . . . become me . . .”

“Huh?”

The Professor's lips twisted. The expression that graced his deathly pale face was beyond description.

“His sword . . . is fearsome . . . I must concede defeat . . . However . . . I will not be destroyed . . . like this . . . I still . . . have . . . energy . . . And I bequeath it . . . to the two of you . . . The power of the Nobility . . . Do with it . . . what you will.”

“The power of the Nobility—do you really mean it?”

“Yes . . . The two of you . . . will become me . . . Become . . . Noble.”

“And we’d be able to use all the technology here without any difficulty?”

“Of course . . . As far as the human world is concerned . . . you could make yourselves kings . . . without any trouble . . . at all . . .”

Emotions flickered across the Professor’s face with dizzying speed. Fear and anxiety, expectation and joy. All of them still clung to it as he said, “This offer of yours—I’ll take you up on it.”

“Good enough . . . And what of you, man? What will you do?”

Giving a look of scorn to the mayor, who did naught but tremble, the Professor said, “Grant me the power of Nobility. Me alone.”

“Very well . . . Show me your throat.”

The Professor let out a croak of apprehension and his body stiffened. It was hammered into the DNA of every member of the human race what would happen to someone who did that. He trembled from head to toe with inescapable fear and broke out in a cold sweat. His shirt and underwear were soaked.

A mummified hand took hold of his throat.

“Quickly . . .”

The mummy’s face was right in front of him. Red eyes burned from the depths of sockets that were like black grottos. Before the grand duke could even pull him closer he slumped forward, his keen fangs coming straight down on the man’s throat—and piercing the carotid artery directly below.

Bezo, the newly minted mayor, didn’t have a clue what he should do. The very act of journeying out here had been an act unbecoming of a human being. He was the sort of man suited for wielding a modicum of power in a tiny human village and no more.

I just want to go home, he thought, like a mantra. I want to go back to the village. I want to go home and take a bath.

A shadow fell from overhead, covering him entirely. A cold hand touched his shoulder. It wasn't just cold, but sent a chill right into his bones. He'd heard things from people who knew about the Nobility. They possessed monstrous strength, but their skin was cold like that. Numbed to the bone, he wouldn't be able to move a muscle.

"Mayor Bezo," said a voice he recognized. "It is I, Chaney. Let's go home."

The mayor shook his head. Not that he didn't want to go home. Rather, he didn't think that this man with the Professor's voice was the Professor.

"Relax. My mind is that of the old me. Our relationship is in no way changed, and I'll honor every bit of our agreement."

No, don't come near. Stay back.

"However, thanks to this, I may no longer move about by day. I find it highly doubtful the four who accompanied me will still obey me. So, I'd like to ask you to fill their role."

"Their role?" said Bezo.

"Yes, as my new protector and taking care of daily matters for me. After all, I'll need to master everything about the machinery the grand duke left behind, from the principles behind them to their operation. I'll require several days' time. You'll need to manage until then."

"What'll you do after that?"

"A good question. The plan was for me to bring a few pieces of technology back to the Capital, but that was *the old me*. I suppose I'll give the government in the Capital a nice little surprise."

The mayor didn't know what to say.

"The simplest weapon I learned about from the grand duke is a drug that increases the growth of bugs inside the human body. Intended to massacre OSB who had taken on the shape of humans or Nobility, the drug causes organisms that live in everything but Nobles to grow to enormous size and run amok,

chewing the flesh to bits. If I were to release a milligram of it into the air, the Capital would be reduced to a lifeless wasteland in a minute. Were I to demonstrate it on a town of, say, a thousand people, the government would instantly transfer power to me, I imagine. After that, I can do as I like—what?”

The mayor was looking up at the Professor. “Will you have a place for me in all that?” he asked.

“Of course. But I won’t be able to raise you to the same station as myself. I’ll need servants who’ll be able to walk around in the light of day.”

“Anything will be fine. I’ll make your wishes come true. Please, make me one of you.”

“I believe I will,” the Professor said, his voice brimming more with confidence now.

The mayor felt his surroundings growing brighter. On noticing that, he gasped with grief. The shadow of the Professor, which had enveloped him, had vanished at some point.

“I just became one. I’m a Noble now,” the Professor said gravely. It was a declaration from an immortal. “Now I realize what the grand duke’s goal was. The thought of him being satisfied with four human sacrifices a month in his boondock fiefdom is preposterous. His aim was to become ruler of the Noble world. By giving technology to humans, he’d give rise to a king of the human world who was loyal to him. He could control that king, making him send humans out to conquer the universe. And the moment they did, he intended to personally slay the humans and become supreme ruler of the universe. Oh, I see it all. How well I understand it. But the grand duke is dead. And I, Professor Chaney, will fulfill his wish.”

Grabbing the mayor by the wrist, the Professor forced him to stand, leading him deeper into the structure.

The village is going to change real soon, the mayor told himself. The world really does belong to the Nobility. No way the human race would ever beat them. And that being the case, I’ve got to grab what crumbs I can.

Each wrapped in his own thoughts, the new Nobleman and his servant melted

away into the darkness, just as D had done. All that remained on the floor was the grand duke's dissolving head. The last power maintaining it must've fled, and the instant it turned to dust, lips that now housed only a single fang grinned quite plainly.

III

He was conscious of the fact that he'd dozed off. And he also realized this was a dream. Yet it was set in his usual underground research center, which was far from sexy. That dissatisfaction had firmly taken root when he heard, *Jo . . . zeee* — *I've heard that name before*, he thought.

A woman was standing in front of the door. Even on seeing her white dress he didn't think of her as being a resident of the castle. After all, he'd always thought she looked good in that color.

The woman drew nearer.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, adding, "Who are you?"

"Have you forgotten my face? Is it because of the dress?"

He didn't know what to say.

"If not, then say my name. I haven't heard it in such a long time!"

A pale hand touched his cheek. It was warm. Just like in the old days. He didn't have the hood on. After all, this was a dream.

"My face—is it still the same?" he asked.

"Yes, but a little bigger and stronger looking, I suppose," the woman replied, her tone gentle. Not once had she ever scolded him.

"Françoise," he called out to her.

"That's right. That's my name."

The woman brought her face closer, rubbing her cheek against his. Her next words were unexpected.

"Be careful. Everyone's out to get you!"

Her tone was so urgent it made him anxious.

“Why?”

“The grand duke was destroyed. But the government official from the Capital got bitten by him and will carry on his wishes.”

“That’s odd. The grand duke bit him, but he’s dead now, right? In that case, the people he bit should’ve turned back . . .”

“Just one bite made him just like the Nobility! He’ll never be human again.”

“Why’s he after me?”

“You’re an obstacle for the Nobility. A human who speaks out against their rule. You’re one of them.”

“But he used to be human, too, right?”

“Yes. He was human. Now he’s a Noble—at least, so he thinks.”

“Will he come here?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Françoise, how can you know these things?”

“Because I’m a dream.”

“A dream?”

“Vyken used his power on me. He can turn anything into a dream. Probably a natural talent that the grand duke amplified. And dreams fade away. But I didn’t vanish so quickly. I wanted to hold on until I could see you.”

“Then this is the last I’ll see of you?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t leave you in danger like this. But to be honest, I don’t know. Run for it, Jozen.”

She said the name quite clearly. And he remembered. That was his real name. His current name—Cornet—he’d taken when he got his new face.

That’s right—what about this face? Surprise and shame rose about him like a hazy mist, perhaps because this was a dream.

“In dreams I can help you,” she said, “but in reality I can’t. Hurry up and run

away.”

“No. If that’s the case, I’ll have to turn dreams into reality,” Cornet said, shaking his head decisively. “Françoise, thanks for telling me this. In dreams or in reality, I’ll put something together.”

“Put what together?”

“A device to swap dreams and reality, of course. If I do that, I can keep you from fading away, Françoise.”

“But—”

“Oh, I’ll do it. I’ve always pushed the limits. If it doesn’t work, we’re no worse off.”

He turned his gaze down to his hands. All the parts he needed were there. He assembled them without a single misstep. It took no time at all. They were in a dream, after all.

“I did it, Françoise!” he shouted.

A pale flower bloomed before his very eyes. Françoise had smiled.

“Great,” she said, her voice gradually becoming louder and louder.

Great!

Great!

Great!

It echoed through his head, becoming a maniacal scream.

“Please, stop!”

The cry had been his.

Cornet looked all around. There was no one there. This was reality.

“And the swapper?”

There was nothing in his hands.

I can do it, right?

He was solid on the principle behind it. He’d just been thinking about it in his

dream. There was nothing wrong with the basic concept. However, he was short on parts and other materials.

“What’ll I do?”

And then it suddenly came to him. *I can't do this in reality. But in a dream, I'm sure I could—* **Did I complete it?!**

At some point, Cornet had begun squeezing his hand into a fist. He turned around.

Françoise was standing there.

“You—you’re the one I built, aren’t you?” he asked.

“That is correct, sir.”

“Okay. I need you to go to Doc Chavez and—”

He proceeded to give her a list of things he wanted.

“Understood,” Françoise said with a bow, and then she started to walk away.

“Wait.”

“Huh?”

When she turned to look back, an iron screw struck her forehead, making a long noise. Swiftly catching it before it could fall, the android inquired, “What is it, sir?”

“Nothing. I’m counting on you.” And saying that, Cornet sent her on her way.

“Pretty screwed up, isn’t it?” Valen murmured sadly as he looked up at the moon.

“You can say that again. Getting called out to this godforsaken place at this hour,” Lascaux replied. His bandages were so thick that through his coat it looked like he was wearing a stomach band. Rubbing his belly wound, he continued, “Think maybe that son of a bitch is a little full of himself because he’s one of the intelligentsia? Bastard looks down on us, thinking all we’re good for is fighting.”

Another man, Mask, was quietly slumped back in the saddle, but out of the blue he asked, “What’s the story with Ringard?”

“Probably still in the bar hitting on some woman,” Lascaux spat. “He’ll have no one to blame but himself if they dock his pay. But what the hell’s the Professor playing at—or more to the point, what the hell’s he gone and done?”

What Lascaux was driving at was this: it was around noontime that they’d set out, having gotten an urgent message that their employer was headed up to the grand duke’s castle to stop D and that they should come as soon as they could. But the drawbridge wasn’t even down over the moat. As confused as that left them, they were contacted once again and told that he had business with the grand duke, and their orders were to wait there. The sun had set but still the Professor hadn’t returned, and before long, lights sparked in the castle windows, accompanied by the kind of commotion that suggested a ball. Once more word came from the Professor, telling them to head back to the hotel for a while and await further instructions. It was over an hour ago that he’d last made contact—telling them to come to a desolate area just southeast of the village.

“That’s one screwy castle, eh?” Lascaux said, looking to his two compatriots for agreement. “It’s bustling with music. I can hear laughter, too. The party’s in full swing. And still I don’t sense a single goddamned living thing.”

“That’s the Nobility for you. What are you gonna do about it?” Valen replied as he gazed down lovingly at his nails.

“Yeah, but still. I’ve seen Noble parties from a good distance off before, and ones with a hell of a lot fewer guests than that, but they seemed a lot more lively. They might be the living dead, but even that’s still got ‘living’ in it!”

“What the hell would we know about the Nobility? They look pretty much just like human beings. So they probably come in all kinds, just like human beings,” Valen clucked. “But all that aside, there’s something funny about the Professor. Didn’t you guys feel it? First when he told us to go back to the hotel, then again when he called us out here—the voice I heard through the communicator had a strength to it, like he was a completely different person from before!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Lascaux. His voice was soft and low, and his eyes had a strange glint to them as he stared at Valen.

“Do I have to spell it out for you? The Professor was off with the grand duke!”

An unsettling wind moved through the group, shrouding them in silence.

That was the moment. Mask sat up straight on his horse. The other two also turned to look in the direction his iron mask was pointed.

Blinding lights and a piercing engine roar were drawing nearer on the same road that'd brought them there.

Had the night breeze become an evil gale?

Repressing the killing lust that radiated from every inch of them, the trio faced their employer.

Labyrinth of Lies and Truths

Chapter 8

I

On returning to Earth after slaying the grand duke, D rested his weary body in a dilapidated house near the center of the village. The effort of twice returning from space had dealt serious damage to his steely physique, and he fell into an almost deathlike sleep. Any quack who might exam him now would probably remark with admiration, “What a lovely corpse.”

That deathlike slumber had already lasted an hour—and it seemed as if it would never end. So when D did move, the world undoubtedly cried out, *Can this be right?!* He had a daunting gleam in his eyes. This young man would never appear groggy.

“What is it?” asked his left hand. “That was an oddly quick recovery—no, you just woke up early. I wouldn’t say you’re back to normal yet. I don’t know what you’re planning to do, but show some restraint—hey, are you listening to me?!”

D had already exited the dilapidated house. The hoarse voice asked if he’d had a dream or something, but the Hunter vanished into a stand of trees.

Shaken hard by the shoulders, Ringard woke up. The first thing he felt was a pounding headache. It was your typical hangover. He let out a low groan as his body burned with anger at being dragged out of Utopia.

“You bastard . . .” His eyes shot over, catching sight of an iron mask. “Oh, it’s you, Mask? You’ve got . . . nerve. I suppose . . . you’re ready . . . for a pounding, eh?”

“You’re the one who’d better get ready.”

“Whaaat?!” Ringard said, his hitherto sluggish tongue now back to normal. “Mask, you’re pretty shaken up. That’s not like you.”

“Yeah. Well, things have taken a pretty nasty turn. You’d better hear me out, Ringard.”

And having said that, he turned his gaze to the woman who was looking at

them with a frightened expression. The woman retreated to the back room. As did the bartender who was behind the counter.

“The Professor’s become one of the Nobility.”

Ringard swiftly came back to life. “I don’t know about Lascaux or Valen, but you wouldn’t lie to me. So, what happened? Wait a minute—didn’t we all get called together or something?”

“Yeah, and you’re the only one who didn’t show. That’s why you’re still alive. Everyone else got nailed—those Nobles are no joke.”

“Those guys got taken down? What, did you get ambushed or something?”

“No,” Mask replied, “it was a straight-up fight, fair and square.”

“No way. Damn.”

“I managed to make it back here, though. Let’s hurry up and blow this place.”

“I can’t do that. Our boss turned into a vampire. So, we get scared and run off—and you think I could keep doing this for a living when that gets out? You oughta know better, you lousy coward. Where are the other three?” Ringard asked.

“They said they were coming after us. They’re probably not far off by now.”

“Then that suits me just fine. Take ’em out in the counterattack, and then I’ll take over the Professor’s old gig!”

“You’ll have to let me in on that action!”

Clucking his tongue, Ringard replied, “I suppose I’ll have to, at that. But just letting you know up front, the split’s gonna be eighty/twenty.”

“You heartless bastard. Sixty/forty.”

“Seventy/thirty.”

“I can do that,” Mask said, nodding. Due to the mask covering his face, the action seemed particularly grave.

“Okay, ready to go face them?”

Getting to his feet, Ringard called out toward the back room asking how much

he owed. The bartender responded. Leaving payment, including a tip, on the table, he headed outside. The iron rings around him started revolving again the second he stepped away from the table.

“We’ve got a good three hours till sunup. One way or another, this thing’s getting settled,” Mask said in a low voice.

The two men headed for the fence where their cyborg horses were tethered. Once they were on the road, Ringard halted his steed and turned his eyes to the sky.

“What is it?” asked Mask.

“Perfect timing—for them, that is.”

“Oh.”

“Run for it!”

As he said that, Ringard turned his horse east. Getting a kick to its flanks, the cyborg steed tore into the ground.

Before they’d gone five hundred yards, his horse’s gallop came to an end. Both his cyborg steed’s front legs had suddenly been severed.

As his mount went down spurting blood and oil, Ringard leapt off it in midair. He leapt—but didn’t fall.

“What the hell?!”

The cry that rang out to his right was in a low voice, but it carried a hint of surprise. For Ringard was floating in midair about fifteen feet off the ground.

Looking to either side, his eyes paused on some woods to the east of the road. Pointing, he shouted, “Perfect. In there, Mask!”

One sailing through the air, the other racing across the ground, the two of them went into the woods. Towering to the heavens, the titanic trees there were twice as big around as a man’s arms would fit, yet there was quite a bit of space between them. More than enough for a ground fight. Or an aerial battle.

There wasn’t long to wait before a car and a cyborg horse came down the road headed toward the village. On seeing Mask, who’d dismounted, the others

dismounted and got out of their vehicle, respectively. In his hand the Professor had a walking stick with a golden grip while Lascaux was empty-handed, though he wore a loaded automatic short bow on his hip. The moonlight gave a stark glow to their mouths. Their fangs.

“What about Valen?” Ringard inquired from midair.

“Seems he’s kinda shy by nature. So he’ll be watching over us from a distance,” Lascaux replied.

“Well, that’s pretty creepy. Call him out here and I’ll put down the lot of you!”

“Leave Lascaux to me,” Mask called up from the ground below.

“You would take the easy one, you bastard,” Ringard replied. “Yeah, leave him to you my ass!”

“Oh, don’t be that way.”

“Professor, just what were you planning on doing next? It was the grand duke that bit you, right?” said Ringard.

“That’s right. Although I let him bite me, to be precise.”

“So you just said, ‘Help yourself to my blood’?”

“Something like that. And then I received the power of a Noble. What’s more, I obtained access to the Nobility’s technology and all its fruits.”

“Oh, I see. So now it’s just too good to bring it all back to the Capital? Don’t tell me that was your plan all along.”

“I didn’t think it would go so far as seeing me turned into a Noble, but if given the chance I was willing to take it. I believe I’ll try out the Nobility’s technology on this village first. Join us, Ringard.”

“No way in hell. For starters, I really can’t stomach any human who’d be that happy about being turned into a Noble. I’m gonna put you, fatty, and fingernails all down for the count. And I’ll do it with these here gravity-projecting rings. Watch this.”

Already revolving around him, the iron rings became a blur. They’d shifted into ultrahigh speed.

Mask gasped. All the scenery in front of him and Ringard had become distorted. And it wasn't just a simple change of direction or a melting of matter. It was a distortion of atomic structure brought about by extreme gravity.

“They say the universe formed from super-dense gas. And that's what I'm gonna turn you bastards into.”

“You son of a bitch,” Lascaux groaned. His words burned with fight.

His balloonlike body quickly enlarged, stretching to the bursting point. The distortion faded. The massive, ballooning form had begun crushing the colossal trees. A number of them bent over Ringard's head, crushing down on him. However, the enormous trunks all changed direction just shy of the top of his head, falling to one side, blurring, contracting, and then they were reduced to nothing.

“Die, fatty!”

The iron rings became a blur—and as soon as Lascaux saw that happen, his massive, looming form warped as well, running like watercolors, eddying, and the instant his whole body blurred he flowed away in a rush and was gone.

“You can crush a Noble with a gravity field, but that won't destroy him!” the Professor laughed.

“I'm well aware of that,” Ringard laughed back. “But I sent that fatty Lascaux into a black hole linked to these iron rings. Noble or not, he'll be squished down to jelly by the extreme gravity and he'll never get out again. Your turn next, Professor!”

Before the man had even finished saying that, the Professor was swallowed up by empty space.

“Take that!” Ringard exclaimed, landing without a sound and flexing his right arm.

“That sure was something,” Mask said, his voice having a genuine ring of admiration to it. “But don't let your guard down. There's still that creep Valen. It was his nails that cut your horse's legs off.”

“That long-nailed little chimp,” Ringard spat. His iron rings had returned to

their ordinary rotation. “I’ll send him to hell-in-space soon enough. It’ll be easy as pie, just one left to go, Mask.”

“Just one left, eh?” the man in the mask murmured. “No, more like two.”

“What?!”

As Ringard turned in amazement, a streak of black lightning sank into his chest. Ordinarily, the iron rings’ gravitational field could even deflect a laser beam. However, this attack had reached his chest, shattering ribs.

Reeling, Ringard had bloody foam spilling from his mouth as he stammered, “Y-you little bastard. It can’t be!”

“I got bitten, too. By the Professor.”

Mask raised his right hand and showed his inner wrist. The pair of fang marks were clearly visible through the dark of night.

“While I’m at it, I have something else to share with you. About how I got this mask. See, when I was a kid, everybody in the area knew how handsome I was, and I was beating the girls off with a stick. Man, I loved that. As a result, four or five girls in the neighborhood went and killed themselves. Just my luck, one of ’em had a father who was a hex man, and he decided to make it so a stud like me could never trick a girl ever again by giving me a face nobody’d want to see twice—the face of a demon.

“I was just about out of my mind from it when a hex woman who was sweet on me came along and cast a spell to save me. One of the advantages of being a stud. Only she told me she couldn’t fix my face. She made me this here mask instead, and fastened it on with ten screws. And this is what she told me. *The spell you’re under is too powerful for me to remove it completely. This mask is tied together with ten screws, and they should protect you. Given your situation, you should consider living out the rest of your days in peace. If you ignore my advice and follow the path of danger, at some point you’ll lose all ten screws. Once you do, your face will be exposed to the light of day and death will come for you. But maybe that’d be the best thing for you, eh?*

“Unfortunately, just as she’d feared, I took the warrior path, which led me here. It’s been twenty years, and only half the ten screws remain, but to be

honest, I still curse this mask. Oh, in the beginning I was overjoyed. I could go out without anybody seeing how my face had changed. But day by day, it started to feel like I was locked in a dungeon. I wanna take this mask off and feel the morning sun and the moonlight and a gentle breeze on my face. I just used one of my screws on you. That leaves four. When I run out, my face will be exposed to the world. I used to want to die, but now it's ironic I want this thing off so bad it's killing me. Hey!"

"Done flapping your gums?" Ringard groaned.

"Wow, you must be something special to take a direct hit from one of my screws and still be around. You should thank those iron rings of yours. But now you're finished."

Mask looked over his shoulder. A figure was closing on him from behind. And with a sharp dagger in one hand. Drawing an iron stake from his belt, Mask hurled it at the figure's abdomen. A foot long, it pierced the figure through the solar plexus and out the back, making him stiffen.

"What the hell is this?" Mask asked with suspicion, but a terrific impact sent him flying backward. Run through with an iron stake, the young man had still hurled his dagger. It had struck Mask in the face, and while it hadn't pierced his covering, it had proved equally effective.

Confirming that his target had slammed back against an enormous tree some ten yards behind him, the figure went over to Ringard and threw his arm around the man's shoulder.

"You?!" he exclaimed, shock distorting his face.

To that, a pale face awkwardly replied, "I owed you from before."

The half-dead individual had given him his name—Habaki.

II

"But you're—?!"

"Hurry up," Habaki told him. "They'll be back soon."

Ringard fought the arm's effort to lift him. Lascaux and the Professor had been

sealed away in a black hole. A fate they would share for eternity. Ringard had every confidence in his own skill and the devices.

“Not yet. I’m not leaving till I’ve gotten rid of Valen and that bastard Mask.”

“They’re as good as Nobles now. And I don’t know about the fat one, but the Professor is definitely coming back—what the hell?!”

Ringard looked over his shoulder at the same thing Habaki had seen.

Mask had gotten back up. There was no trace of any damage from the dagger.

Ringard groaned angrily, “I’m gonna beat the life out of you, you son of a bitch!” With his words, something black sprayed out. Blood. A broken rib had punctured his lung.

Supporting the reeling warrior, the young man ran away, practically dragging the other man.

“Are—are you a Noble?” Ringard asked him.

“Nope,” Habaki replied, “but I breathed in some poison gas that turns humans into slaves for heavy labor. That’s why I’ve still got strength going for me, at least.”

“Don’t you drink blood?”

“Not a problem.”

The upper part of the young man’s face—the right half—vanished.

“Was that one of Mask’s screws?!” Ringard exclaimed. “What the hell?!”

“Not a problem, either,” Habaki said, looking at him and smiling. It was a daunting smile.

I’ll be lucky if the sight of that doesn’t kill me! Ringard thought to himself.

There was no follow-up shot by Mask. The two of them were obviously in a blind spot for him.

“Three screws left. Guess he knows how to count. I’ll get him for this someday,” Ringard coughed. Blood went flying. “So, I suppose we’re headed for the hospital, then?”

“You know where it is?” the disfigured young man asked.

“Sure do.”

“Then they know, too. I’ll take you someplace else—someplace safer.”

Once again his face, missing a quarter, made a smile, and Ringard sank into despair.

Cornet was certain something had possessed him. For the first time in a long time, his brain and body were working in perfect harmony. The Françoise he’d created had completed another task for him. Doc Chavez’s son was the village electrician. Adding to Cornet’s good fortune was the fact that the doctor’s grandson ran an ironworks. Though the community was a remnant of the feudal system, thanks to some convincing from the doctor they could go to the electrician shop or the foundry in the middle of the night, pull them out of bed to get the things they needed, and nobody would even complain. The disease scanners and automated surgery devices the young inventor had given the doctor really paid off now.

Although less than ten minutes had passed since he’d started fidgeting with the parts Françoise had procured, Cornet had pretty much completed his work. When the sensor sounded, he was just about to sit back in his chair and relax.

The screen showed Habaki and a man with iron rings circling his body as they stood impatiently in front of one of the entrances. A quarter of Habaki’s face was missing, and the man had blood streaming from his chest and mouth.

“Quite a pair of visitors,” Cornet murmured. Grabbing the comm tube, he said, “Nobility aren’t welcome here, Habaki.”

Pointing to his wound, the young man replied, “I’m not a Noble. If I was, this’d already be back to normal.”

“Correct—so, who’s that you’ve got with you?”

“One of the warriors who came from the Capital, but all the others got turned into Nobles.” Lowering his voice, he continued, “Elsa got *turned*, too. I took care of her.”

Cornet fell silent, then sighed. “I’m sending Françoise that way now. Come

in.”

And with that, the hidden door opened.

As soon as they were in the research center, Habaki asked him to operate on Ringard.

“Not really my field of expertise.”

“But those operating machines at Doc Chavez’s—you gotta have ’em here, too. From the way he looked on the way over here, he seems hurt pretty bad, but I bet you can do something for him. Your machines should be more than able to handle it.”

Despite his disfigured friend’s assurance, Cornet didn’t seem completely on board with the idea, but he agreed to do it.

“Françoise.”

Having carried Ringard in, the female android tossed him none too gently into a bed that was fused with a machine.

“Ow! I’m hurt here, you know,” the warrior groused. “What’s your problem?”

“I’m sorry. I’m an android.”

“Oh, I see,” he replied with acceptance, blood spurting out again.

A thick cover was lowered over Ringard.

“What’s this thing?”

“Inside the cover is a surgical computer and related devices,” Cornet explained. “We can sit back and let them diagnose, prep, operate, and finish treatment.”

“What are you doing with something like that down in this hole in the ground?! But then, look at this room—hey, what the hell are you doing?!”

It was unclear whether Ringard ever got an answer to his query. They heard something else instead. The wail of a warning sensor.

“Oh, and just when we were so close,” Cornet said. Furrowing his brow, he looked at his two visitors and said, “You were followed here, Habaki.”

“I thought they might come. Anyway, do what you can for him—”

“Are you in his debt or something?”

“Yeah. He saved my life.”

“Still . . .”

“Don’t worry yourself on my account,” Ringard called over to them. “Just get this cover off of me. You two should make a run for it. I’ll hold ’em off.”

Cornet gazed at him.

“Your operation’s just about to begin,” he told the warrior. “I’ll keep the invaders at bay until it’s finished.”

“Thank you,” Habaki said, laying his left hand on the hooded man’s shoulder.

“What are you talking about?” said Ringard. “A couple of kids like you can’t handle the likes of them. Hurry up and get this damned cover off me, then make tracks!”

Ignoring his request, Cornet took a seat behind his desk. His eyes were keen as they watched the screen.

A pair of figures stood by the same entrance Habaki and Ringard had used. A man in an iron mask and another—one with unusually long fingers. Mask and Valen. The secret entrance was disguised as a tombstone in the village graveyard.

“That’s a two-inch-thick slab of steel.”

No sooner had Cornet said that than Valen raised his right hand and swung it low again. The instant his nails touched the door, a profusion of sparks shot out, picking the two figures out with a bluish light.

“It also has fifty thousand volts running through it,” Cornet said, but still he shook his head. “That won’t do anything against a Noble, though.”

Raising his claws, Valen struck with them once more.

A red lamp flashed to one side of the screen, and a warning bell sounded.

“What’s the story with those fingernails?” Cornet asked. “From the look of it, they cut better than an electron knife. It doesn’t even leave fragments behind.”

The image on the screen shifted to a view of a corridor.

“I’m just getting started. Wonder how long I can hold them,” Cornet said, and then he turned and looked at Ringard.

“He’s asleep,” Habaki said with apparent relief.

“The operation started, eh—should take approximately ten minutes.”

“That’s pretty quick, isn’t it?”

“The problem is whether my defensive systems can hold them that long or not,” said Cornet in an impassive bit of self-deprecation. Habaki seemed more rattled.

“Shutters coming down!”

A steel shutter fell right in front of Valen and Mask. Valen’s nails tore through it like it was made of paper.

“Next comes the cave-in.”

The rocks and earth that dropped on the pair’s heads would be enough to immobilize them, Noble or not. But the rubble was sent flying. Some terrible power had deflected it forward.

“One of the masked man’s screws. This guy told me about ’em,” Habaki said, pointing over at the slumbering Ringard. “Two more and he’ll be all out of ’em—and now we come to the pitfall.”

A hole instantly opened at their feet, and the pair was slammed against a stone floor fifty yards below. True to form, Cornet even had cameras inside the pit.

The pair quickly got to their feet and Valen reached out his right hand, the nails stretching up like smoke to latch onto the lip of the pit. Carrying Mask, it took him less than three seconds to get out again.

“Not bad for a couple of half-baked Nobles,” Cornet said, yet there was no fluster in his voice.

“What’s next?” asked Habaki.

“We’re finally getting to the main course. A rain of stakes.”

“Got everything but the kitchen sink down here, don’t you?”

“You have a problem with that?”

“Not at all,” Habaki replied.

“This is the only way to destroy Nobles and their cheap imposters. All the defenses up until now were intended for humans. This is the main event.”

“How’s it work?”

“Well, just keep watching.”

A white room was depicted on the screen. It was a thirty-foot cube. When the iron door to the north side opened, in they came, first Mask, then Valen. Perhaps due to what they’d already experienced, there was confidence in their strides. Still, they looked around as they came to the dead center of the room.

“Good night,” Cornet said, flicking a lever.

From the walls, ceiling, and floor gleaming streaks of black skewered the pair. Powerless to do anything, with stakes sticking out of them in all directions, the two of them collapsed on the spot.

“You did it!” Habaki exclaimed, clapping his hands as he listened to the sound of the stakes that’d missed ricocheting off the iron floor.

On the screen, the two bodies moved no more. As no real time had passed since they’d been turned into faux Nobility, there was no disintegration.

“That’s what we needed, eh?” Cornet said, switching off the screen.

“Just a sec. Turn it back on,” Habaki told him.

Once again an image filled the screen. Pointing at one spot, Habaki tilted his head to one side. “That’s weird,” he said. “I was sure I saw black streaks across the floor—yeah, look! And his mask—it’s about to fall off.”

“So, what about it?”

“Ringard told me about it. The screws that hold his mask on—”

A split second later, the wall to their right exploded. At least, the destruction was so great that was the only conceivable explanation.

“What in the name of hell was that?” Cornet asked dumbfoundedly from beneath some rubble.

Habaki got to his feet first, then helped Cornet up, saying, “A screw from the mask. I hear they’ve got incredible power!”

“But their master’s already breathed his last—”

“Part of me thought this might be coming,” Habaki told his hooded friend. “Imitation Nobles had to have more to ’em than that. C’mon, let’s get outta here.”

“Okay, we’ll move to the next hideout!”

“That’s not gonna work. I’ve got a feeling they’re sure to follow us. We’ve gotta get out of the village as fast as we can.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am. And those black streaks are bothering me. They might be—”

Having got that far, Habaki went up into the air. Actually, just his head did.

“—his nails!” Cornet exclaimed, having deduced the rest in a split second.

His friend’s head had been sent flying in an instant. But what of the murder weapon? There was no one in the air, to his left or his right, in front of him or behind. And at his feet? Long streaks of black crept across the floor.

“Those nails!”

They rose to the level of Cornet’s eyes. The nails looked like five flat black fingers. And the lingering resentment of the deceased had transformed them into demons that sought only slaughter. They made a diagonal slash toward Cornet’s neck.

III

Cornet closed his eyes. He felt the wind whipped up by the nails brush against his neck. And just before it, he got the feeling he’d heard a strident sound. No matter how much time passed, his head remained just where it was. It took no small amount of courage for him to open his eyes.

The black nails had stopped at the base of his throat. Their progress and the owner’s murderous intent had been foiled by the stark blade they were locked against.

Cornet let his gaze slowly glide down the blade to the hilt, then to a black glove and powerful arm, followed by a body shrouded in black clothes, until they were finally drawn to the face that capped it all. A face of incredible beauty. Cornet sensed the power running down that black sleeve. An instant later the claws were cut like paper where they'd locked with the sword, falling to the floor.

Cornet was so disappointed by the end of that fearful assassin that a powerful languor suddenly swept over him. This on account of how his expectations of impending death had fallen away. Shaking his head to drive the listlessness off, he looked up once more at the savior who loomed before him.

“D—what brings you here?”

There was no reply. D was gazing in the direction of the collapsed wall. Cornet was convinced that to come through that opening would mean death. The only things that merited reflection in the gorgeous young man's eyes were death and destruction—and those alone.

Something flew at him. D didn't try to dodge it. His blade flashed out, deflecting the thing.

A hole opened in the ceiling, and stone and earth poured down through it.

“He's finished.” That's all that was said to close the attack. For Mask was out of screws.

D turned and looked at the source of the voice. Ringard grinned wryly at him from his place in the surgical machine.

“Heya. So, yesterday's foe is today's friend. Do me a favor and don't kill me.”

The cover of the device soon opened. The patient slowly clambered off the operating table. Resting a hand on his chest, Ringard said, “I'm cured. You do good work, my young hooded friend!”

“Well, of course I do. I made that machine, you know,” Cornet replied in a somewhat absent-minded tone before once again asking D, “What brings you here?”

“A dream.”

More than the Hunter's icy tone, it was his beauty that caused the hooded man to tremble as he asked, "Did this dream happen to concern a woman?"

"Françoise. She was working in the grand duke's castle."

Cornet said nothing at that.

"Seems she got turned into a dream," the Hunter continued.

"That's right. And it was a human servant named Vyken that did it."

"An acquaintance of yours?" D asked.

"Yes, since I used to be up in the castle, too. They appreciated my skill at crafting devices."

"Françoise told me. She said your real name's Jozen."

"Yeah, I'm her brother."

"What are you doing here?"

The sudden change from a voice of iron to a hoarse one knocked the wind out of Cornet.

"Don't let it shake you," the hoarse voice continued, "Just got something wrong with my vocal cords. And with my character, come to thi—iugh!"

"My work is finished. Do as you like now."

In a manner of speaking, the Hunter's words were heartless. He'd fulfilled the request to slay the grand duke. What trick of the heart had inclined him to actually act on the request to save Cornet's life he'd received in a dream?

Instead of Cornet, who stood there frozen in his tracks looking like he didn't have a friend in the world, it was Ringard who spoke, saying, "So, you destroyed the grand duke, did you? Quite an accomplishment. But before you did, it seems he put the bite on my employer and colleagues!"

D had been about to walk out, but he stopped. He alone knew the biting hadn't been *before*.

"Seems I screwed up," he said. "Where's the Professor?"

"The Professor's with Lascaux—that fatty whose belly you sliced open. I

locked 'em both away in a black hole. I swear, they won't be back as long as they live. The other two—”

“I took care of them,” Cornet interjected. It sounded a little like a boast.

“How'd you take care of them?” D asked.

“Well, I pincushioned them with iron stakes. That did it for certain.”

“And yet those nails and screws still came after you,” D noted. “Even after they'd been destroyed. Is that right?”

“You underestimated him, you idiot!”

Cornet and Ringard got goosebumps. Who in the hell would dare reprimand that gorgeous youth? Take it in stride, D!

Perhaps seeing that it was safe, the hoarse voice continued diffidently, “Think about it. Your—er, I mean, the Sacred Ancestor let this guy meet him face to face, and chose him as director of the Ministry of Technology. Yeah, this really wasn't gonna be a cut-and-dried deal. And the freaking grand duke didn't put the regular bite on 'em. Not with the kind of power he had! It might be he fed on the Professor.” Pausing for a breath, the voice continued, “When a victim's bitten, the perpetrator's nature infects them. Did that make the freaking Professor more than the average Noble?”

D stared at the iron rings that encircled Ringard's body.

“Check to make sure the Professor's still trapped.”

“Who do you think you are, giving me orders?” Ringard replied, making no attempt to hide his animosity. Still, he touched his hand to the ring that'd begun rotating around him.

“What did I tell you? He's still in there!” he said with a smile.

“Get him out,” D told him.

“What?!”

Not only did Ringard bug his eyes at that, but Cornet did as well.

“Wh-where should he put him?” asked the latter.

“Right here. I have to slay everyone who continues the grand duke's line as

soon as possible.”

“B-but why go to all that trouble when I’ve already got him locked away?” the warrior protested. “Have a little faith in these rings of mine, will you?”

“My work’s not finished. You’ve got to get him out.”

“What the hell?!” Ringard exclaimed, his color draining. He’d just noticed D’s frame of mind. However, the fight soon boiled up in him as well, and he countered, “Oh, this should be good—you want a piece of me?” Apparently the turning of the iron rings brought back his immense self-confidence.

“Hold it! Just hold everything!” Cornet interjected. “Let’s not have a falling-out now. Look, friend, I’m sorry, but I agree it would be best to confirm that the Professor and anyone else are finished. If you won’t do it, I’ll open the black hole.”

“What’s that?” Ringard said, tinged from head to toe by flames of enmity. Cornet’s threat had only thrown gasoline on the fire.

Just then, there was another bit of input that even D hadn’t foreseen.

“Ringard . . . Please . . . leave it . . . to D.”

The eyes of all of the focused on the east wall. There was nothing there. And no one. Except for one thing—on the floor. The severed head of Habaki. Now as white as a sheet, even its lips devoid of color, the head of the young man opened its eyes weakly and stared at the trio.

“The Professor . . . probably changed . . . into the grand duke . . . Instead of letting him . . . live forever . . . better to end him . . . quick . . . Nobles gotta be . . . turned to dust . . . Nobles . . . Finally . . . our village . . . will be . . . at peace . . . Ringard . . . you’ve gotta know that . . . right?”

Ringard didn’t know what to say.

“No need . . . to be afraid . . . at night . . . No need . . . to worry ourselves . . . about the safety of our families . . . C’mon, Ringard . . . They wanted human sacrifices . . . from our village . . . and now we won’t have to do that . . . How great is that? . . . You’ve gotta have . . . some idea.”

Suddenly losing all expression, Habaki’s head fell silent.

Going over, D checked his pupils and said, “He was already dead.”

Habaki’s head had long since breathed its last.

“What’ll it be?” the hoarse voice asked, its question directed at Ringard, of course.

The man was still glaring at D. However, he’d lost the burning enmity that’d surrounded him. Looking down, he said, “What the hell, seeing it was his dying wish and all.”

“Okay, allow me,” said Cornet.

“Like hell you will, kid. I’ll do it.” Turning to the right, Ringard made a toss of his chin to a spot a short distance away saying, “I’ll pull him out right there,” and touching the left iron ring with his right hand.

A binary state. All or nothing. Black or white. This was another of those situations. All three of them realized the other possibility. But none of them expected that outcome.

Ringard’s expression changed. Making no effort to hide what an incredible loss he was at, he said, “Lascaux’s in there all squashed up, but the damned Professor’s vanished.”

“You all underestimated him, didn’t you?” the hoarse voice laughed before there was another choked scream and it fell silent.

“I don’t care if he’s the Professor or the grand duke, as long as he walks the earth again, the deal for the Nobility’s technology is still in effect,” the hoarse voice continued.

“And that includes the human sacrifices.”

The other two stiffened at D’s words.

“No reason for you to get so serious,” the hoarse voice said in a condescending tone. The remark was directed at Ringard.

“Yeah, I suppose not. But I only hired on as one of the Professor’s bodyguards. Can’t say I had much interest in what he was doing, or that it had any bearing on me. Plus, I happen to be from a village near here. Hell, I came here a bunch of times back when I was a squirt. To be honest, the whole bit about human

sacrifices didn't sit quite right with me.”

“So, now that the tables have turned you're gonna paint yourself as one of the good guys?” the hoarse voice teased. “In that case, you must be ready to do something to help the village out now, right? Head on up to the castle and give us a hand destroying the Professor.”

“Yeah, I think I'll do just that. No way I'm gonna let that bastard get his hands on Noble tech. No telling what he'd do with it, am I right? Hell, you guys gotta know what I'm talking about. What do you think'll happen if a human learns how to use the Nobles' toys?”

“They'd become ruler of the human world inside three days' time, including the initial period of threats, I suppose.”

“And I don't think he'll be heading back to the Capital,” Ringard mused. “A Noble's castle could get a message out to anywhere on Earth. So, D, what did you have planned?”

“There's only one thing to do.” Turning to Cornet, D said, “The Professor doesn't have any henchmen left, but the androids and mechanical people up in the castle will do his bidding. Hurry up and get out of here.”

Rubbing his hand against his pants, the young man wiped the sweat from his palms. “Okay. I'm not ready to die just yet,” he said with a nod. “I'll take off as soon as I finish my preparations. You two go on without me. I'd like to do a little more for Habaki. Don't worry. Françoise will help me.”

“Happy-go-lucky bastard, ain't you?” Ringard said, shaking the young man's hand and clapping him on the shoulder. “I'm still alive on account of you, no word of a lie. You have my thanks. Now, hurry up and get outta here.”

“Will do. The exit's that door right there.”

Walking over to it, D turned and looked back.

“Good-bye.”

Cornet raised his right hand.

Sticking his right hand into his coat, D then swung it in the young man's direction.

When Cornet saw the item that fell at his feet, his eyes went wide. It was a dagger in a steel sheath—though being more than a foot long, it was more like a short sword.

“Do what you like with it,” said the hoarse voice. “You could get a hundred thousand dalas for it, easy. That’d cover your traveling expenses, but if you decide to use it for its intended purpose, it’s got his spirit and mine in it.”

“A million thanks, friend,” Cornet said, picking up the dagger and turning toward the door again, but by that time the other two were nowhere to be seen.

Dark Battle in the Light of the Sun

Chapter 9

I

Somewhere in the castle, a motor whined on and on. It was a coarse sound that a Noble could easily eliminate. But they did not eliminate it precisely because they were Nobles. Their civilization flowed along on a river of retro taste. The Nobility loved machinery like steam-driven cranes with gigantic oily cogs, or having bunches of double and triple chains hanging down from the ceilings as far as the eye could see. It was beyond human comprehension how people who found it simple to make nuclear reactors small enough to rest on the tip of your little finger or elementary particle accelerators could eschew that energy for rough modes of transport that completely ignored aerodynamics, or devices covered with iron rivets.

The sound was another example of that. It had been going on for a long time, since the middle of the night—roughly ever since Ringard had murmured, “The damned Professor’s vanished,” in Cornet’s research center. The goal was a certain scientific phenomenon. And there was a case where the same phenomenon had been possible through a different approach. This device was trying to accomplish it in a roundabout fashion through scientific means. Toward that end, an enormous amount of energy had been expended for more than an hour. To put it in concrete terms, it was enough energy to destroy the entire Milky Way galaxy a hundred times over. Preparations had been completed a half hour ago, and the sound of the motor was proof that all that power was now being used to maintain the current state.

D entered the castle grounds. And Ringard followed after him. They hadn’t been colleagues to start with, so any teamwork was unlikely.

“Hey!” Ringard called out to the Hunter. “What’s the deal with this castle? They dance right on into morning or something?”

Lights burned in the castle windows, and the soft, elegant tune that flowed from them so clearly was undoubtedly a waltz. Coming to the moat and seeing that the drawbridge was already down, Ringard’s amazement was at high tide,

but the instant they entered the castle courtyard, he was rendered speechless.

Garbed in gorgeous raiment, pale-skinned men and women with crimson lips danced in pairs with light, graceful steps. Darkwing beetles weaved between them with prismatically glowing ends, burning out in midair only to be replaced by ever-growing numbers of new insects. The jovial Nobles held in their hands sloshing glasses of red wine or bubbly glasses of champagne they would never drink.

“What the hell’s going on here?”

Ringard got an answer to his question.

“It’s an illusion,” said the hoarse voice.

“An illusion?”

“Yeah, holograms. With these images, the molecular bonds have been strengthened to give ’em the same mass as the real thing.”

“Why would they do that?” Ringard asked.

“The castle’s been doing it since we came in the first time. The waltz, the dancers, the band, and the Nobles are all just solid projections!”

“I really don’t get it.”

“You don’t have to get it. Now, let’s get going.”

Entering the castle with the source of these questions was a young man with no use for small talk.

An alarm instantly began to wail, and guards raced to the scene. There were even a few indoor combat vehicles brandishing laser cannons like twitching antennae.

“Those an illusion, too?” asked the warrior.

“Nope,” the hoarse voice replied, “they’re the real deal.”

Ringard’s iron rings were ready to greet them—but just before they got the chance, the combat vehicles and security detail all vanished. Perhaps they’d been a dream.

New guards came from the end of the corridor.

“Don’t shoot! We’re human!” they shouted as one. “That Professor fella came to take the grand duke’s place. He set the ‘Night Fantasia’ into motion. So we decided to get while the getting’s good.”

“Yeah, do that,” Ringard said, and then he asked them where the Professor was.

“In his grace the grand duke’s resting place. But its location is unknown even to us.”

“Where’s Vyken?” D inquired.

“We looked for him but couldn’t find him,” one of the guards replied. “When the Professor got here, seems the two of them got to talking.”

Watching the fugitives flee, Ringard said, “What a pitiful bunch. Don’t give a rat’s ass about their lord’s safety. No wonder nobody takes humans seriously.”

“Not everybody’s like that,” the hoarse voice replied. “Those guys just aren’t the best examples.”

As the bickering continued, they advanced deeper into the castle.

“Gonna have to find his resting place,” said Ringard. “Or should I just go and make the whole castle disappear?”

The hoarse voice replied, “You’d just be making the same fool mistake all over again, you idiot!”

“What’d you say?” Ringard snarled.

Suddenly, their surroundings darkened.

“This—this is genuine darkness!” the hoarse voice exclaimed.

“Don’t tell me it’s Time-bewitching Incense,” D replied.

“Nope, it’s the same result but through different means. This is based on physics.”

“What the hell?! You mean to tell me the Nobility have other ways to make time go crazy?” Ringard asked.

“He wasn’t their top engineer for nothing,” D said, and his words shook. And the castle shook with them.

“That just now—was that a footstep?” asked Ringard, looking all around before fixing his eyes to the west. A grave rumbling in the earth was approaching from that direction. And with it came the tremendous weight that made those rumbles possible.

“It’s night.”

Ringard looked overhead. He could see only part of a row of stone columns so large a trio of men could link arms around one. The darkness above swallowed even the ceiling, and in the high reaches stars twinkled.

The rumbling of the ground ceased.

If we were gonna run, we missed our window, Ringard thought with regret.

It was too late now. The enemy was right in front of them.

“I saw your statue yesterday,” D said softly. “Only I couldn’t see the face. As the grand duke said, either no one could carve it, or it’d melded with the darkness.”

Something moved in the darkness. A huge arm came down from above the pair. The fingers were bent, and between the segments, glimpses of an iron core and wires were visible.

“You did well to make it here, D—and you, too, traitor,” said a voice that rained down from the ceiling. That of the Professor.

“You’re one to talk!” Ringard retorted. “You went and got yourself turned into one of the Nobility’s flunkies. And it’s your fault the same thing happened to the rest of the team, you bastard!”

“They all thanked me. They were grateful to be raised from a fragile human existence to a greater, immortal form of life.”

“And this tech—was it the grand duke’s?” the hoarse voice inquired.

“Oh, it would seem the man known as D has an unusual traveling companion. Yes, the machine that creates a false day or night was the grand duke’s prized invention. And now, I’ve inherited that and everything else from him. And with these devices, the world will be mine in three days’ time.”

“The miserable little human world, you mean,” Ringard said snidely.

“That’s right. But don’t forget that now, I’m on par with the Nobility. And like the grand duke, I have no intention of being satisfied merely with this village and the surrounding area. First, I shall negotiate with the Capital for half of the human-occupied lands, though eventually all of them will fall under my control. For the human race, it will simply be like a return to the not-so-distant past. And then there are the Nobles’ lands. Those, too, I will eventually make my own. It may take a century, it may take a millennium, but now I have an ally known as ‘eternity.’ And I possess something that the former rulers now sliding toward extinction lack—a desire for conquest. Those Noble fools once tried their hand at exploring the universe only to abandon it midway for whatever reason, but I shall make good on it. When my hands have reached to the ends of the ever-expanding universe I will be the first true ruler in human or Noble history.”

“Yeah, nice story,” the hoarse voice sneered. “Back in the day, there were a few screwy Nobles that had delusions like that and teamed up with the OSB. And all of ’em were destroyed before they could do anything to the human world. In short, nobody gets to rock the boat.”

“You speak of a time when the Nobility was still the Nobility! Now at their nadir, their race won’t have the strength to thwart my ambitions. See how my power turned day to night and brought a stone colossus across a hundred million light years in a mere instant to stand before you. Based on that technology, I shall tap the blood of the grand duke that runs through my veins to master even newer technologies. And with them—oh, this you’ll want to hear. I shall accomplish things surpassing even the Sacred Ancestor.”

“Oh, my,” the hoarse voice groaned. Not with admiration. Out of ridicule. “Is that how far gone you are? I see. So, just what did you plan on doing?”

“Allow me to tell you the message the Sacred Ancestor left with the grand duke. I’ve decoded it, you see! But in exchange, D, aid me.”

The Professor’s words were swallowed by the darkness. In their place came a cold voice, saying, “How would I aid you?”

“I’m certain you could be of some use. You, the only man with human blood in him the Sacred Ancestor deigned to mention! To me, that alone makes it clear you hold the key to the possibilities of the future.”

“What did the bastard say?”

The voice from the heavens could be heard gasping. “Did you call the Sacred Ancestor a bastard? Who are you?”

Who knows how many people have put that question to D. At the very least, the number that have received an answer was well established. Zero.

“What did the bastard say?” asked a voice with a mysterious gleam to it.

The Professor fell silent.

After a short time, the Hunter repeated, “What did he say?”

Ringard realized that a battle was taking place between demonic forces beyond his comprehension. The young Hunter was driving the faux Noble into a corner. *What the hell is this guy*, the warrior thought, for the first time feeling not merely threatened by the young man in black but actual fear. And it seemed he wasn't alone.

“*Thou . . . shalt visit this place,*” the voice said. “. . . *visit this place . . .* Oh, I can't . . . I can't say it. My head burns . . . I can say no more . . .”

“Continue,” the Hunter told him, the word like an icicle being driven through the other man's cries of pain.

“. . . *visit this place . . . Ah . . . and . . . destroy . . . Bergenzy . . .*”

“No, that's not right,” D said, and there was the whine of his sword leaving the sheath on his back. Up until this point, the young man hadn't drawn his blade.

“What's not right? D, the Sacred Ancestor . . . he read Bergenzy's future. But that won't be mine. The statue of the Sacred Ancestor will slay you. Go!”

The colossal arm that'd stopped in midair came down. Drawing a needle of stark wood with his left hand, D hurled it at the darkness-shrouded chest of the gigantic statue. The arm stopped once more.

“Back.”

Kicking off the floor, D sailed back a good thirty feet. Several tons of stone rubble came crashing down on his former position, shaking both the building and the darkness.

II

Treading across billowy golden clouds, Françoise wandered. This was a dream. So long as someone somewhere in the world dreamed, Françoise's continued existence was guaranteed. Capitalizing on that principle and her unique condition, she had crept into D's dream to save Cornet's life. While they dreamed, the people she visited could converse with her or do battle with her. However, on awakening, it would all be just a dream. None of them would think that it might overlap with reality. The only exception to that was when Françoise made it that way. In a manner of speaking, they were prophetic dreams, dreams that would come true. In dreams, Françoise was immortal. She would never grow old and die. When humans died in the dream world, they would "return to life," in a manner of speaking, when they awoke to reality. However, if someone who lived in dreams were to die there— [Françoise](#).

Turning when her name was called, she saw Vyken treading across the golden clouds. The eerie glow that spilled from his eyes informed her that he was now something else inside.

"The grand duke do that?"

"The Professor, actually," the young man replied.

"What do you intend to do to me?"

"Make you one of us."

"Like hell you will!"

Vyken charged toward her. Jagged teeth jutted from his vermilion lips.

Was it fear from the look of him that kept Françoise from even trying to flee?

Regardless, when the two silhouettes overlapped, it was Vyken that howled like a beast and reeled backward. He clutched his forehead. Purplish smoke curled from between his fingers. Madness in his eyes, he glared at what the beauty held in her right hand. It had the same shape as the intersecting lines that'd been burned into his skin. A gold cross.

"Wha-what the hell is that, Françoise?"

"What the Nobility hate more than anything. Many of the world's people are

asleep now. And one of them has a memory of this—not a memory so much as an image engraved much deeper in their subconscious. When a Noble attacked them, they suddenly threw their arms out and crossed them to defend themselves. By making a cross. The person didn't know it, and it was wiped from their memory on top of that, but some deep part of their psyche didn't forget, you see."

"Damn you, Françoise . . . You'll pay for that!" Vyken growled, turning his still-smoking face toward his friend since childhood. It was the face of a demon. When Françoise thrust the cross at him, he backed away with a scream.

"Since you've got that, I get a weapon, too," he groaned. "See, Françoise? Children of the night!"

The beating of countless wings descended toward Françoise from above.

"Bats?!"

"Yes, indeed, but not just any bats. Vampire bats. Don't worry, though. They don't have the power to make anyone one of the Nobility."

The black-and-gray swarm covered Françoise from head to toe. Blood gushed from her face, her hands, and her feet. There was the pain of short fangs jabbing into her. The cross fell at her feet.

Suddenly, the vampire "children" flew upward.

Staggering, Françoise was a heart-wrenching sight. The small wounds they'd left all over her body must've numbered more than a thousand. Blood dripped from them across her skin, stains spreading through her clothing until the dress she wore was pure vermilion.

Grabbing her over the shoulder and pulling her close, Vyken bared his fangs with malice and delight. Without any further interference before he drove them into Françoise's carotid artery.

"Huh—?!" Vyken murmured, pulling his lips away. He'd drunk deeply of her blood. Now, Françoise would be one of them. And yet, he lacked confidence. An indescribable feeling of incongruity put a perplexed expression on his face.

Pressing down on the wound, Françoise backed away. She knew the reason for

that feeling of incongruity. It was almost as if this situation wasn't real.

“What's this?” Vyken groaned.

Their surroundings had suddenly begun to change. Old-fashioned generators, an antiproton reactor, an automated surgical system—all these hand-crafted devices lined the walls of the room haphazardly, giving it the feel of a fairly decent research center. On the far side of the room a figure in a purple hood was gazing at them. This was the research center in the real world.

To the other two, the real world was a dream. That was the feeling of incongruity both assailant and victim had felt the instant he drank her blood. The bite had taken place where reality wasn't the opposite of a dream but rather the equivalent of one, and since this was but a dream for them, it had no impact whatsoever on them in reality. The vampire's bite had been rendered null and void.

“How could this happen? Why are we here?” Vyken murmured in amazement, glaring at the hooded figure seated in front of a desk on the other side of the room. “Oh, you pulled something, didn't you, you bastard?”

The hooded figure—Cornet—gave a hearty slap to the cylindrical device sitting on the desk. “Yes, I've been working on this baby ever since I was attacked. Ever since I promised her, Françoise, in a dream. It's a device for swapping dreams and reality. And now I'll really show you what it can do.”

Growling curses, Vyken charged at Cornet.

For him and the girl, this was a dream. His body passed through the desk and a generator without any resistance at all.

Eyeing the bizarre contraption, Cornet grabbed a crossbow off the top of a table and braced it against his shoulder. It was already loaded with a bolt.

Vyken halted, smacking the left side of his chest and sneering, “You idiot. You might've dragged me here, but I'm still just a dream to you! How's reality supposed to destroy a dream?”

“I believe I just told you I was going to show you what it could *really* do,” Cornet said, his words invested with a quiet confidence. Beside him, a green light glowed.

Vyken pounced.

The figure in midair was linked to one on the ground by a whistling sound.

Cornet saw Vyken's smile. The bolt had been stopped, clutched in his fist.

“Die!” Vyken cried, swinging the bolt down toward Cornet's chest. The monstrous strength of a Noble drove it through liquid metal, destroying the one solid metal part.

“Françoise?!” Cornet cried out as he retreated. The crossbow fell at his feet.

Standing between the two men with arms extended, the android had pale blue sparks of electromagnetism spraying from her wound as she collapsed.

“That was my nerve core,” she said. “Farewell, Cornet.”

“You son of a bitch!” Cornet growled with rage.

When Vyken shifted his gaze from Françoise to him, Cornet didn't have a weapon in his hands. The formerly human guard jeered, “Saved by a machine, and a woman at that?”

Once more, Vyken sailed into the air. With the eyes of a triumphant devil he saw the human he'd cornered like a rat haul back with his right hand. When he realized it was a smallish sword that had arced around elegantly for a solid hit well wide of his heart, Vyken was just as full of confidence as ever.

The arc of his leap became a vertical drop, and Vyken fell to the floor. His heart had nearly stopped beating. Even though the blade had missed it. However, that was the dagger D had given Cornet. A blade imbued with the power of both D and his left hand.

Gazing down absent-mindedly at the simple handle protruding from the left side of his chest, Vyken groaned, “How? Out here . . . I'm just a dream . . . aren't I?”

Touching the device, Cornet said, “The real function of this gadget wasn't to pull the two of you out here. It was to change dreams into reality. Now, you and Françoise are part of reality. That's why my dagger could destroy you.”

“A hell . . . of a thing . . .”

Vyken spat up a clot of blood. The light was rapidly fading from eyes that'd glowed red as blood. When dreams and reality became one, he was fated to be destroyed.

“Jozen!” the girl in the dress cried out, but Cornet raced over to where the other woman had fallen. The electromagnetic waves had already ceased, and the android girl had stopped moving. The strength fled Cornet, and tears spilled from his eyes.

A pale hand reached from beside him to gently stroke the android's cheek.

“The other me. She saved your life, didn't she? Thank you,” the real Françoise said, the last remark directed at her doppelganger.

Cornet nodded for no particular reason.

“What are you doing here? I searched everywhere for you! What have you been doing?” Françoise asked, and these questions were perfectly natural from a big sister.

“I found out about the grand duke's master plan,” her brother replied. “He was going to use the human race to become ruler of the universe. That's why he was kind to humans—or at least why he didn't prey on them. And then he ordered me to research and develop a machine that could turn humans into Nobles without ever being bitten. The scary thing is, it'd already been perfected ages and ages ago by certain Noble and human scientists. Naturally, I refused to cooperate. At that point, the grand duke carved my face up with a knife, and he said he'd pull my tongue out next. For all the advances their civilization made, they still use tortures worse than the beasts of antiquity.

“Covered in blood and groaning, I was in utter despair. And then I offered him a condition that would protect me and the village. If he harmed me, I would disclose to the world something the Nobility feared besides sunlight. Actually, I was bluffing, but the grand duke believed me. And he made me swear to keep it an eternal secret in exchange for not going after you. I accepted.

“Given the situation, I couldn't leave the village. I knew perfectly well the grand duke would come after me. Fortunately, when I was a kid, I discovered there was this whole world down here. And piece by piece I brought in the devices I'd taken from the castle and started living here. And all the while, I

swore I'd get the grand duke someday for what he'd done to my face."

"You poor thing," Françoise said, gently cradling the head of Cornet—or Jozen—to her chest. They were brother and sister again. After some time, she asked, "So, will I be able to stay like this forever?"

Shaking his head from side to side, he replied, "The materials I had to work with weren't very strong. You'll last a little over ten minutes more."

"But I'll be okay until then?"

"Yeah."

"That's fine, then," said Françoise. "Okay, let's talk about what comes next."

"What comes next for you, sis?"

"Since Vyken's dead and he's the one who turned me into a dream, I'll fade away at some point. But let's talk about after that. Let me tell you about all the machines and instruments I saw in the Noble's castle. You can copy them and make yourself a fortune or use them for the good of the village, whichever you like."

"Yeah. You're right," Cornet replied, though by that point he was back to being Jozen. "I'll do that, Françoise. That's just what I'll do, sis."

III

"From time to time, you see things that are simply too much to believe," the Professor remarked, his voice trembling with unadulterated shock. "Who would have thought anyone of Noble blood, Hunter or not, could smash a statue of the Sacred Ancestor so easily? D, who or what are you?"

"Come," the Hunter in black invited him. "If you're going to hide in a coffin, there's no point swapping night and day."

"Oh, I believe I will come out," the voice replied.

"Watch yourself," said the hoarse voice. "Night'll change into day!"

"I'll help you," Ringard offered.

"Stay out of this," D replied.



At that moment, there was a terrible explosion of stark light and blistering heat. The light shining down from the ceiling illuminated D alone. D let out a low groan. His whole body was being charred right to the marrow. It was like the sunlight attack he'd experienced in Vyken's magical zone—only this assault was ten thousand times the agony.

“This is one of the grand duke's original creations,” the Professor's voice laughed. “He dubbed it the ‘spotlight effect,’ and I'm using it to focus all the sunlight in this entire region on you. Oh, your skin's started to melt. Not so handsome now, are you?”

“Come out here,” said the Hunter.

“Very well.”

Behind the light—in a time where night still held sway—a figure appeared.

“That bastard,” Ringard snarled. “D—you've really gotta let me do something.”

“Don't.”

“Ringard, you'll be next, you vile traitor,” a figure blacker than the darkness informed him.

Though a stark needle sank into the Professor's chest, D remained poised from the throw as he thrust his left hand forward.

“I've raised the beam's volume to an entire continent's worth of sunlight,” the Professor continued. “Next, I'll set it for a planet's worth. You can just rest your filthy bones there in the wholesome light of the morning sun.”

“This is the last part of the Sacred Ancestor's words,” said D.

“What?”

“Thou shalt slay not Bergenzy, but the one who succeeds him.”

His longsword danced out in the light. A blade of darkness challenging the light—backed as it was by the Noble power that mocked the very laws of physics, the Professor was slashed from the left side of his neck to his right hip, and then the blade turned like a swallow in flight to pierce him through the heart

and out the back. At the same time, both D and his blade fell flat against the floor.

“You bastard . . . I don’t believe it . . . Where did such power . . . ?”

As the Professor collapsed, beside him stood a weighty figure.

“You . . . you must help me . . . please,” the Professor said, extending his hands. They reached toward a figure with five chins and a face twisted by scorn.

“Help the Bergenzy pretender?”

Looking down on the twitching form with nothing save contempt, Baron Agrippa raised his right foot, then brought it down on the Professor’s face with all his might. It was smashed to pieces.

“And thus ends the grubby little peddler from the world of humanity. Which leaves only the filthy half-breed killer, if I’m correct. Ah, but what a gorgeous man. Your lovely countenance and agonizing death alone should earn you an introduction. I am Baron Agrippa. I am Bergenzy’s best friend. We were the only two real Nobles in this castle!”

He puffed out his chest. The buttons on his jacket popped off like shots from a gun.

“You must excuse me,” the baron continued. “Gluttony is a mainstay of the Nobility. In making a compact to drink human blood, Bergenzy plumbed the lowest depths of degeneracy, but I shall stand firm! Someday our end will likely come. But until that day, I shall assail the humans’ shacks with the coming of night, lure out their daughters, and drink to my heart’s contentment. That is how the Nobility were meant to be. But before any of that—it seems a planet’s worth won’t work on you. I shall train the daylight of the entire Milky Way on you.”

D’s shape dissolved in the light.

Françoise cried out in surprise. The young man in black stood before her. He was in a horrible state.

“But, you—you’re not even sleeping,” she murmured.

He started running.

Even when Baron Agrippa heard the voice of the man who clearly had one

hand braced against the floor whisper in his ear, “Looks like the dream wins,” the Nobleman couldn’t do anything. His bull neck easily severed, spine and all, and a steely tip driven into his back and out through his heart, he was powerless to do anything save collapse. A split second before the darkness swallowed his consciousness, he used his assimilation power, but ultimately all it assimilated was the black hole that’d suddenly appeared.

In the darkness, the Noble turned to dust, while in the light, the Hunter in black got to his feet. In no time at all the light dissolved into the darkness, and the darkness was swallowed up by the light.

“So, your business here wrapped up now?” asked Ringard.

Not replying to that, D said, “I suppose I should thank you.” For it was Ringard’s black hole that had stopped Baron Agrippa’s final attack.

“Oh, save it. It wasn’t you his whammy was aimed at, it was me. It was do-or-die time. Hell, I was just saving my own skin.”

Saying nothing, D walked past Ringard. He went out into the garden and had just straddled his cyborg horse when Ringard caught up to him.

Though the sun hadn’t fully risen yet, the skies were clear.

“Night coming and dreams coming on a fine day like this—there’s just no figuring this world of ours, is there?” said the warrior.

The two of them started riding across the drawbridge over the moat.

“So, what’ll you do next?” Ringard asked. “Well, I suppose wherever you go, you’ll be hunting Nobility, eh? I’m sure there’s quite a demand for your talents, am I right? To be honest, I’m plumb worn out. Think maybe I’ll get out of the game and become a farmer or something.”

“Good choice, there,” said the hoarse voice.

With a wry grin Ringard said, “Hey, if you’re gonna compliment me, at least do it in your own voice,” and then a bullet went right through his chest.

A pair of figures appeared from behind the stone columns on the far side of the moat, one tall, the other short. Leiden and Puma, the son of the former mayor. The boy had a rifle braced against his shoulder.

“His friend killed my mother!” Puma exclaimed in a tone of rage and satisfaction.

Ringard responded with a wry smile, “A long, long time ago, I heard somebody say, ‘Truth will out’ . . . which means you can’t get away with doing wrong, I guess . . . And it was me . . . that sent the heart of that kid’s father into another dimension.”

The man’s life ended before he could ever get to that farmhouse.

Reeling back wildly, Ringard leaned forward once more before falling shoulder-first into the black waters of the moat.

The taciturn rider passed the pair in silence.

“About an hour or so ago, we went by Bezo’s house,” Leiden said to him. “Son of a bitch was draining his kids dry. The two of us took care of him, though.”

Letting the words pass by like they were intended for someone else altogether, D slowly rode away. When he hit the road that continued on to the highway, a young man in a hood was standing beside an enormous tree in the distance.

“Look who popped out of his hole,” said the left hand. “Guess he decided to do something for the good of the village.”

There was no reply. D’s eyes were shut.

“Were you asleep?” asked the hoarse voice.

“Yes, a little while.”

“Well, aren’t you a carefree bugger.”

“I had a dream,” the Hunter remarked.

“What kind?”

“One I’ll never have again.”

“That’s you in a nutshell. So, what the hell was this dream, anyway?”

Good-bye, D, said a pale beauty with a soft smile. Perhaps her name was Françoise.

End

Postscript This volume was the last handled by Susumu Ishii, who oversaw my *Vampire Hunter D* series from the very start. Allow me, if you will, to talk a bit about my early days.

My professional debut as a novelist was in September of 1982. My first book, *Demon City Shinjuku*, was published by Asahi Sonorama. *Vampire Hunter D* was my second book. My third was *Alien Hihomachi* [*Alien Treasuretown*]. These, together with *Wicked City*, were all the beginning of continuing novel series.

So, the cover illustrations for the *Vampire Hunter D* series are done by the renowned artist Yoshitaka Amano. If you look at the covers of all the books, I believe you'll see a gradual change in D's features and accoutrements over the years. While of course it's true that creators can be greatly influenced by some stimulus or another, the same is true of their art. In the case of D, Mr. Amano's style of cover illustration changed greatly after he did set design for a kabuki play—this was around the time of *Mysterious Journey to the North Sea* [originally published in Japan in 1988—*ed.*] Seeing the fine art stylings of the current covers, the image on the front of my first *Vampire Hunter D* book really seems like straight illustration. It was pure, gorgeous fantasy.

Having penned that novel with the intention of some hard-boiled leanings, I was surprised when I saw his illustrations. For example, the longsword D's wearing on his back is fantasy-style, but I had a traditional Japanese sword in mind. Not unexpectedly, I said to Mr. Ishii, "It's a little too far afield of what I'd pictured . . ."

At that, he grinned wryly and replied, "This'll get you a lot of female readers."

Yeah, right, I thought, but it worked like a charm—I got fan letters saying things like: "[The artwork's wonderful.](#)"

"The illustrations are beautiful."

“The art really drew me in.”

“The illustrations really make it popular, don’t they?”

Almost all of those were from women. I wanted to tell them enough already about the art, but there could be no doubt the *Vampire Hunter D* novels sold well thanks to those illustrations. I chose to hold my tongue. Mr. Amano, thank you for all you do.

Speaking of *Vampire Hunter D*’s early days, let’s touch on the first time it got made into anime. To be honest, I wasn’t a huge fan of animation. Of Japanese animation, to be precise. Compared to the Disney features I was acquainted with from my childhood or Hanna-Barbera’s TV series, Japanese anime merely seemed crude. The project was okayed because I left the negotiations to Asahi Sonorama. Even after seeing the completed work, my impression didn’t change. However, something occurred that rocked me to my foundations. When the animated feature *Vampire Hunter D* opened in theaters in 1985, orders for the novel it was based on surged into Sonorama. I was stunned to get a phone call every week telling me they were going into a new printing. Ever since then, I’ve told myself not to be so hard on anime. Up to that point, the *Alien* series had been my top seller, but in no time at all, the tables had turned. And *Vampire Hunter D* remains on top even now.

Incidentally, the soundtrack to the anime was the first solo work of the world famous musician and producer Tetsuya Komuro; his band TM NETWORK did the theme, called “Your Song.” But because his composition is a bit highbrow, I still can’t sing it myself. Also, because I couldn’t carry any tune in a bucket.

Demon City Blues is a novel series spun off from the *Demon City Shinjuku* series mentioned earlier, and shares its setting in the real-life Shinjuku—except my version is full of monsters, magic, and assorted fiends. You can read some of those stories overseas in either hard copy or ebook form. Several volumes of *Demon City Blues* were released in English under the title *Yashakiden: The Demon Princess*. And my very first novel, *Demon City Shinjuku*, even has a translated version now available. As for *Vampire Hunter D*, the Hollywood film continues to be developed in secrecy. I hope you’re looking forward to it.

In the postscript to the next *Vampire Hunter D* novel, I’ll tell you all about the

other animated *D* film. But until then— [September 30, 2019](#)

While watching *The Return of Dracula* (1958) [Hideyuki Kikuchi](#)

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 30

GOLD FIEND

Written by

Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by

Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by

Kevin Leahy

Coming October 2020 from Dark Horse Books

An Odd Employer

Chapter 1

I

There was a knock. The darkness swallowed it. There was such a density to this darkness it was palpable. After ten more of the same, the sound became a voice.

“Hey, open up! A hell of a hotel you chose to hole up in. Are you gonna open up or what? If you don’t, I’ve got dynamite with me. And I’m ready to use it, too. Nobody makes a fool of Old El, the all-purpose financier!”

The darkness responded.

“What do you want?”

“Oh me, oh my. Now, that’s a step toward communicating. At any rate, do me a favor and open up this creepy old door. I’ve got a sweet deal waiting for you out here!”

“Tell me.”

“Wh-what? You wanna get me talking when you won’t even show yourself, you little bastard? Sheesh, you’re just a lousy dhampir—a half-baked failure of a vampire—so don’t go acting like you’re God or something. Ow! That hurts like a mother—”

Apparently he’d picked the wrong place to try and kick in the door.

Once his pained curses had expired, the man’s voice continued in a tone not of anger but of naked pleading, “Oh, I’m real sorry about that. Us humans get up in years and we don’t have much restraint anymore, and that ain’t good. I figure it can’t hurt to ask, but could I get you to protect me?”

“From whom?”

“Deadbeats trying to weasel out of paying their loans.”

A silence ensued. The whole proposition probably sounded ridiculous.

“Hey! C’mon, don’t fall asleep on me. This deadbeat I’ve got, well, it’s kinda

special.” Taking a breath, he continued, “It’s a Noble.”

This time, there was an immediate response.

“Fifty thousand dalas a day, and that ain’t including expenses,” a hoarse voice stated.

“Huh?” the speaker said, his eyes surely popping. The voice from the darkness had suddenly gone from a youthful ring to a hoarse croak. “What, you got your manager in there, do you? Well, no problem. So, will you take the job?”

“What’s the Noble’s name?”

“Marquis Verenis.”

“Oh, he’s a biggie,” remarked the hoarse voice.

“Don’t be daft. He’s a liar and a scumbag and a disgrace to the whole Nobility. After getting antimatter circuitry from me worth over three hundred million dalas, he sends assassin duplicates of himself for me when it was time to pay up.”

“Hmm. Was it due in a lump sum?” asked the hoarse voice.

“Nope. I was supposed to get it in twenty installments, each as a draft for sixteen and a half million dalas. And he stiffed me from the very first one.”

“Hmm, that’s definitely deadbeat behavior.”

“I know, right? And I figured he’d run off, but no, he’s still living in his castle, comfy as can be. Now that’s what you call brass balls. I ain’t about to let him get away with this.”

“Didn’t you have him put up any collateral?” the hoarse voice asked.

“His castle and his whole damned domain. But he’s so cantankerous, I can’t seize the lousy property. I’ve sent young fellas up there armed to the teeth to throw a scare into him, and not a one of ’em has made it back.”

“Hmm, that’s some blatantly premeditated action on his part. Which means he must’ve drawn up plans. And to have gone and gotten all aggressive with you, that’s one nasty Nobleman!”

“I knew that when we inked the contract. But that ship has sailed. What

bothers me is what comes next. That bastard Verenis figures I'm coming to demand payment, naturally, so he'll have all kinds of assassins waiting along the way like as not. If it was just your garden variety punks and warrior wannabes, I could handle that on my own, but when it comes to Noble-class killers, it puts me a tad on edge. Which is what brings me here to hire you. Now, I'd heard rumors, but you really do have a weird voice, don't you?"

"Keep your smart remarks to yourself. So, when are you headed out?"

"Right away."

"Good enough."

"What?" Old El said, his voice ringing hollow in his amazement. "You'll really do it?"

"You think I'm lying or something?" the hoarse voice said with a hint of menace.

"No, I'm all set to go. We'll set out straight away! Now hurry up and get outta that grave."

A few seconds passed.

A streak of light split the darkness vertically. Little by little it grew thicker, and the light increased.

Old El watched with loathing and trepidation as the bronze door opened right in front of him. For all the years he'd seen, his fear of the Nobility hadn't vanished. *I'm just your average human, I guess*, the old man thought to himself.

His right hand naturally tightened on the grip of his automatic stake gun. The safety was off, and the roller-bearing bolt was pulled back, leaving the first shot in firing position. A little more than a pound of pressure on the trigger, and compressed gas would propel a ten-ounce stake through a Noble's heart at a range of a hundred yards. If they didn't dodge it, that is.

Rust flaking from it here and there, the door finally finished opening. On the other side stood a figure in black. As the face beneath his wide-brimmed traveler's hat drew closer, Old El couldn't move a muscle.

"Hey," the hoarse voice called to the old man, snapping him back to his senses.

A feeling of vertigo swept over him. Reeling, he reached for the granite tombstone beside him just to keep from falling over. When he looked at the face of the man in black, Old El's expression melted in rapture, and he actually seemed to be fighting back tears.

“So . . . handsome . . . Who knew . . . there were guys like this . . .”

“You'd better get yourself some sunglasses right quick,” the hoarse voice told the old man, finally bringing him back to reality.

“So, you're D? I'm Old El. I work as an all-purpose financier.”

“So I heard.”

“Huh?!”

The old man got a shaft of steel down his spine. For the young man had finally answered in a voice befitting his appearance. Generally, the difference between that and the earlier voice was so great that most were left unable to respond for some time, so in that respect the old man was pretty resilient.

Madly scrutinizing their surroundings, Old El asked, “Do all you dhampirs rest in empty crypts?” The sun was still high in the sky. He continued, “I came running as soon as I heard you were in this here village, but then you weren't at the hotel. Weren't in any of the vacant houses, neither. When I heard you were out here, I didn't believe it at first.”

“Depends on how we feel,” the Hunter replied, his voice changing back once more, plunging the old man into confusion. “Graveyards echo with the voices of the dead. Their thoughts get woven into clumps of trees and pool between the tombstones. Apparently, they like to listen to them from time to time.”

I guess dhampirs really do lean more toward the dead side, Old El thought.

“But you can do the job okay, right? I can't have you off gossiping with ghosts when I need you the most!”

“First off, you'd best watch your step unless you want us talking with *your* ghost. Noble assassins are serious business!”

Old El was at a loss for words there.

The handsome figure casually walked right past the old man and down the dirt

path toward the exit from the graveyard.

Heading after him in a fluster, Old El said, “Oh, I almost forgot. I was hoping to see just how good you are. Cut something for me.”

“And if you don’t like what you see, you’ll reconsider hiring me? Just so you know, I never listen to the same job offer twice.”

“Uh-huh,” the hoarse voice concurred.

The two figures with three voices were approaching the graveyard’s exit. One section of the stone wall, which was strictly ornamental, had an iron gate that was also purely for show.

D halted. He looked straight ahead.

In the lazy afternoon sunlight, a clump of trees was moaning. It was the wind.

The village lay directly in front of them. With a population of about three hundred, it was the kind of village you’d find anywhere in the western Frontier. Still, the roofs were painted red, blue, orange, or green. Even on the Frontier, people were mindful of staying fashionable.

From somewhere among those roofs, a silvery object was headed their way.

“Take cover,” D commanded in a low voice. Soft and calm though it was, it had a power that would brook no debate.

Old El quickly assayed his surroundings, then made a dash for the largest tombstone.

D didn’t move. For this young man, anywhere could be a battlefield. And anytime was a good time to fight.

The thing had the shape of one of the oldest flying objects. The body of it was reminiscent of an oversized walnut, with two six-foot-long rectangular wings projecting from the bottom of it, one to either side. Seemingly set with glass, those wings, as well as the tail fins, made minor adjustments to their angles, which in turn seemed to change the direction of flight.

A bird flying into the wind, it halted at a spot about three feet in front of D. The front of it had been carefully painted with a pair of eyes and a mouth. The eyes had a hard gleam to them. That was probably due to the compact camera

lenses they contained.

The broadside of the wings turned to face D.

D's right hand made the faintest of movements.

Suddenly, the bird started a steep climb, as if it'd had a change of heart.

"Here we go!" said the hoarse voice.

The shape of the bird dissolved against the sun.

D dashed to the right.

The sun seemed to explode. Stark white light enveloped the world. Centered around the gate, the ground in a thirty-foot radius boiled and bubbled. Iron, stone, and soil all melted, eventually turning into a glassy substance.

At a spot about thirty feet from the outer edge of the blistering hellhole, D's eyes sought out Old El.

"Did they get him?" asked the Hunter.

"He hopped in the shower," the hoarse voice replied.

Eleven hundred feet above the surface, the murderous flying machine was preparing for its next assault. Exposing the energy-absorbing side of its heat beam panels to the sun, it waited five seconds. Since the cameras were in a fixed position, the machine had to be pointed nearly straight down to acquire a target.

Though the twin lenses detected an object rising from the ground at terrific speed, the person controlling the flying machine couldn't tell exactly what it was. And before the controller could grow concerned enough to move the machine, the object became a stark wooden stake that pierced the faux bird.

A blossom of electromagnetic waves flowered in midair. That, in turn, was swallowed up by an even more massive blossom of white.

"You did it!" the hoarse voice exclaimed without a trace of surprise. In light of the miraculous way a wooden stake weighing less than an ounce had fought its way through crosswinds and risen eleven hundred feet to penetrate a metallic target, foil or not, such a response might've been something of an outrage.

"Oh, nicely done. Very nice, indeed."

This pleasant praise from the old man sounded slightly distorted.

Beyond the heat shimmer, a vestige of the blistering flare, there stood something silvery and vaguely cylindrical. It resembled the kind of portable shower tents used by long-term expeditionary parties. The surface of it split vertically, and Old El appeared. Touching his hand to the cylinder's surface, he quickly pulled it back again with a yelp about the heat, adding, "I don't know just what it was you threw, but to score a bull's-eye on an enemy flying way up there with just one shot, damn, that's really something. That had to be a thousand feet!"

"That wasn't Marquis Verenis, was it?"

"Oh, you could tell, could you? There's only one person who'd use a rig like that. A killer who goes by the name of Machete. He was hired by Julas-Han Toba—another deadbeat bastard. I'd heard rumors he was gunning for me, but it looks like he's finally making his move."

"How many defaulters do you have?" D asked in his own voice.

"At the moment, four. That's including the marquis, just so you know."

"I can't cover the other three."

"Why not?" asked Old El.

"They've got nothing to do with the Nobility."

"You—you can't be serious. They're gunning for me while I go to collect from a Noble. That there's plenty to do with the Nobility!"

"The deal is off."

"H-hey! Wait just minute, please!" the old man plaintively pleaded with D from behind as the Hunter started to walk away, avoiding the gate still withering from the blast of heat.

It was a heartbeat later that his cries bore unexpected fruit.

He shouted, "I've met the Sacred Ancestor, you know!"

D halted and looked back.

The instant the old man saw his expression, he felt like he'd been stranded in a

wintery wasteland.

II “When and where?” D inquired.

And if I don't answer— That thought filled the old man's mind with terror.

“It was better than fifty years ago,” said Old El, “back when I first got into the business, and we met at this old castle in the eastern Frontier. Back then, who'd have ever thought I'd run into the man known as D someday?”

“What did you discuss?”

“That's a secret. I'll tell you if you finish this job out with me.”

“Fine. But it's four times the usual rate on account of all them humans to contend with,” said the hoarse voice.

“That your negotiating voice?” the old man cried out in rage. D ignored him.

“If you don't like it, call it off.”

“I could say the same to you. Don't you care what the Sacred Ancestor had to say about you?”

“Who's to say whether you ever even met him or not?” the hoarse voice protested.

“Oh, you still doubt me? Okay, I'll show you proof, then. I mean, I'll *tell* you it.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, speak away. Come on! What've you got?”

“*Success.*”

The air froze. The speaker fell flat on his ass. Cradling his own head, Old El bit down on his finger, trembling like he'd been in a major earthquake. He was certain that saying that one word was the worst mistake of his life.

“You've got a deal,” D said.

“Huh?” the old man replied, thinking, *I ain't sure my ticker can take this.* “And your wages?”

“My regular rate will be fine. But in return, you'd better not lie to me at all.”

“O-o-o-of course not,” he stammered. *How the hell could I? You’d probably rip me limb from limb*, Old El thought as he looked through a rain of fearful sweat drops at the young man of unearthly beauty before him. He wasn’t even sure whether his trembling was due to fear or how gorgeous the Hunter’s face was.

The old man’s wagon was parked a short way from the graveyard. It was a cargo wagon drawn by a team of four cyborg horses. The wagon was divided into a living compartment and a cargo compartment, and in total it was about fifty feet long and more than ten feet high. By its side, D whistled. A cyborg horse came galloping over like a black gale.

Once one man was up in the driver’s seat and the other in the saddle, the hoarse voice asked, “What was that cylinder thing earlier?”

“A ‘personal fortress,’” the old man replied. “They say it was developed using Noble technology. There was this broke scientist who couldn’t pay back the five hundred dalas he borrowed to cure his wife of a real bad ailment, but I tell you, he sure knew his stuff.”

Having cooled from the heat, the cylinder had been quickly folded up and stored on the back of Old El’s belt.

The old man swished the reins and the horses broke into a run, and soon after that he turned to D, riding right alongside the wagon, and said, “I’ve got something I’d like to ask you, too. What were the dead back in that crypt talking about?”

“The things you’d want to talk about.”

Old El didn’t know what to say to that.

“Living or dead, it makes no difference. Life ends, death comes around—they want to talk about things like that.”

The old man said nothing more. When he talked to the young man, everything he saw seemed to take on a new appearance. And that was a truly horrifying thought.

The two of them didn’t return to the village, but rather continued straight on to the highway that headed south.

Before long, the highway ushered the wagon and the cyborg horse onto the plains. The washed-out brown hue of the ground extended as far as the eye could see, and from time to time, semitransparent shapes resembling the sails of ships would form. They were clouds of dust.

There was a sound like a beast somewhere letting out a bass growl or echoes of a drum.

“There’s a storm getting close. Just like the weather bureau predicted. Better haul ass to the next way station,” Old El murmured, looking up at the heavens glumly. But he glanced over at D, galloping right alongside him to his immediate right and said, “You mean to tell me it don’t make no difference to you either way, storm or shine? Nothing matters to you except killing Nobles—no, strike that, you ain’t interested in the Nobility either. Just what is it you see?”

Still, the old man got no reply.

Flustered that he was ready to strike and no one to lash out at, the old man continued again, “We’re heading into a mess of killing, and you don’t even ask me about who we’ll be up against—though I reckon I should fill you in.”

He waited a bit for some response, but wasn’t prompted for more information. With a shake of his head, Old El said, “I’ll give ’em to you from oldest to most recent. First up, there’s Galkis Thomas. He’s the boss of a mob of flying bandits called Quetzalcoatl, and he came to borrow money for repairs on the airship they use as their main base of operations. Three million dalas. But when I went to collect, he took off right in front of me and flew away. So in return, I found out where Galkis’s mistress lived and started putting the screws to her for info. Hell, I started out with the light stuff, and she went and bugged her eyes and keeled over then and there! Had a bad ticker, don’t you know. That got the son of a bitch all pissed off at me in turn, meaning he sends killers after me wherever I go! And they’re a bugger to deal with, coming at me from above. Plus, they use these artificial wings, huge aircraft, long-range fighters, and a crew that’s the cream of the crop. I’ve got no problem with him sending ’em after me, but the least he could do is pay me back my damn money!” the old man said with a hint of rage, and then he shut his eyes. He was calming his mind.

Soon, Old El continued, saying, “The second one’s Julas-Han Toba, from

earlier. He's a beastmaster. Uses hypnotism to control monsters and supernatural critters. He was bringing ice beasts back from the Frozen Wastes beyond the northern Frontier sectors when an accident left him unable to use that hypnotism of his, so I sprung for his transport costs. And like the rest, he acted like he didn't owe me a thing. I hit the storage facility where he keeps his beasts out of the blue and moved 'em all somewhere else as collateral. In other words, he'd have to pay me to get 'em back. Well, apparently that hit the bastard where it hurt, and he sent word he'd pay back the money, but this murderous virus ran through the place I'd stashed his beasties, killing the lot of 'em. Seems he went to a hell of a lot of trouble training 'em, so the bastard tells me he's gonna get me and hires Machete. Now, Machete can't control beasts, but he uses a lot of gadgets. Like that flying machine earlier, or a runaway train, or a submersible craft that fires torpedoes from underwater. Almost did me in a couple of times. I was relaxing this one time with a smoke because the only thing around was a kid playing with a toy, and then the damn kid exploded. His stuffed bear had a bomb stuck in it. Thanks to that, I had the kid's parents and all his relatives after me, too, for a good stretch!"

"Sounds like real trouble," D said. It was probably enough to leave anyone stunned.

Old El went into overdrive. "The third one is a puppet master. His name's Langen Tupperman. He came to me saying his wife and kids were starving and he wanted to borrow fifty thousand dalas, but he paid me back on the due date, sure enough. Or rather, it *looked* like he paid me, but a month later I realized they were just leaves with drawings like real money on 'em. That sly old fox! I searched high and low for him, finally tracking him down to a show he was doing at a club called Jealousy in the eastern Frontier. As luck would have it, he used his powers to turn the hostesses into dolls, and the lot of 'em kept me from getting him. They were fixing to kill me, so I busted up every last one of 'em, I did. But it so happened one of 'em was Tupperman's girlfriend. And Tupperman swore he'd keep after me as long as I lived.

"They borrow money and default on their loans. Try to collect from 'em, and they hold a grudge without fail. These are the kind of scumbags you have to deal with in this job. They've started making my hair go gray, I tell you!"

“Bet they’d say the same,” the hoarse voice murmured.

“What’d you say?”

“The lightning’s getting closer,” D said, streaks of blue still reflected in his dark eyes. “It’s a thunder beast. Ground yourself.”

No sooner had the old man pulled back on the reins than D dismounted and got his horse to lie on its side. Taking a black protective cover out of one of his coat pockets, he placed it over the steed. As cyborg horses were electronic devices, there was some concern that electrical discharge could cause them to malfunction.

In addition to radar, there was a veritable forest of sensors and antennae on the roof of the wagon, but now it was time for the lightning rod to come into play. A cord was connected to the ground, and then the preparations for dissipating discharges from the electrical lifeform were complete.

Viewed dispassionately, it was no more than a black cloud floating a scant fifty yards off the ground. Every few seconds the entire thing was lit from within by a prismatic glow, and then nearly a hundred bolts of lightning would hammer the ground. Many were the poets who loved that glow to a fault.

“Here it comes!” the old man bellowed into a microphone, watching an image from the surveillance camera from beneath his shielding. His shout reached D through a speaker mounted outside.

Darkness and light covered the two of them. A high-voltage discharge of half a million volts scored direct hits on their respective shields.

The hoarse voice immediately remarked, “Persistent sucker.”

A normal thunder beast would discharge electricity over and over again as it moved along. There was no chance of it stopping anywhere. But over ten seconds had passed since D had come under fire. Fire spouted from the shields. D twitched from head to toe. He’d taken a direct hit to the head from one of the electrical blasts.

“What’s this—one of the assassins after the old man?” the hoarse voice mused.

Apparently D had the same thought. He raised his slightly twitching body from

the ground.

“Don’t be crazy! I don’t care who you are, you’ll be in real trouble if you keep getting electrocuted!”

D raised the shield before he’d heard everything the old man had to say. He stood there like a wrathful guardian deity, his body wrapped in rain and wind and light. Lightning lashed his form without pause.

But a different kind of flash shot out in the opposite direction. Though he’d drawn it from the sheath on his back and shifted it to the other hand faster than the eye could follow, the Hunter had hurled his blade in the blink of an eye. It had literally been with lightning speed.

Run through in a vital spot with remarkable skill, the monster quivered in midair. The foreign substance that’d been introduced into the thunder beast’s body ravaged its electrical nervous system, preventing the transmission of information. It no longer had control of its bodily functions. Its ability to discharge electricity destroyed, it released the charge into its own body.

D didn’t bother watching the black cloud as it headed in an unlikely direction, shooting lightning as it tore apart. Throwing off the flaming shield that covered it, he got his cyborg horse back up.

Just as the Hunter got in the saddle, Old El appeared in the driver’s seat of the wagon.

“Damnation, you’ve gone and done it again! I’m mighty impressed, I tell you. Who’d have thought you’d take down a thunder beast?!” he said, with more than a few sighs mixed in. When his gaze shifted from D, it was to the electrical monster on the plains about a hundred yards away, now reduced to a small black cloud. There were occasional flashes of light within it, and electromagnetic waves filled the air, but it was clear that its showy display would soon be at an end.

“You said something about being an all-purpose financier,” said the Hunter. “Taken any swords as collateral?”

“Oh, yeah. A whole bunch of ’em. I got more fine, classic swords than you can shake a stick at!” the old man replied, thumping his chest forcefully. That was

followed by a fit of coughing.

III Opening a door in the cargo wagon that had a scrap of paper scrawled with “Merchandise Storage” taped to it, D was greeted by an area about the size of a very small house, and indeed it was filled with merchandise. The first thing to catch his eye was a mountain of plastic containers with the word “clothes” written on the front. Stacked all the way to the ceiling, one near the middle had its cover askew, giving a peek at its contents.

“What the hell’s that?” the hoarse voice asked as the Hunter walked past it. D’s left hand had happened to pass right over the one with the cover partially open.

With a grin from ear to ear that said, *I’m glad you asked*, Old El thrust a meaty paw into the container and pulled out a fistful of tiny, flat vinyl packets. They were two inches square, and couldn’t have been even a tenth of an inch thick.

“Those supposed to be clothes?” the hoarse voice inquired.

“Yeah, the latest development from the Capital, a little something they call ‘compressed wear.’ Doesn’t matter whether it’s synthetic fibers or real silk, they can compress anything from ladies’ underthings to dresses down to this size. Man, the traveling show folks love this stuff. And since they basically take up no storage space at all, housewives living in cramped little places dream about something this size. Gets ’em damp no matter how it looks on ’em!”

Taking one of the packets, the old man pressed his finger down on one corner. There was the whistle of rushing air, and then a crimson evening dress filled his hand.

“As you can see, not a wrinkle on it. And the effect is guaranteed for a hundred years. There are more orders for women’s and children’s clothing and household supplies than anything else on the Frontier. They keep coming up with inventions like this, and it’ll revolutionize trade between the Capital and the

Frontier by leaps and bounds.”

“As I recall, the Nobility had a miniaturization method using molecular dynamics,” the hoarse voice remarked.

“You mean the one they came up with for the OSB War? They could take any cannon or missile or base, no matter how huge it was, and make it fit into a leather satchel—some folks say they could make things small enough to carry around in your breast pocket. Humans haven’t got as far as that yet.”

Returning the packets to the container, the old man led D further into the back. To the weapons corner.

Mixed in with the big stuff—things like atomic destructo-beams and laser cannons the Nobility had handed down to the humans—were a wide assortment of old-fashioned arms like gunpowder rifles and pistols, crossbows, and more. One corner was packed with nothing but swords.

“Choose any one you like. They’re all high-quality pieces from ancient times.”

Not giving so much as a glance to all the blades as straight as walking sticks, D took it upon himself to walk on a little further, grabbing one wrapped in gold brocade that rested on a gorgeous rack fashioned from animal horns. Untying the cords and taking off the dazzling fabric revealed the black sheath and black handle of a sword so impressive it would give most who saw it goosebumps. The Hunter grabbed the sheath and handle, drawing it just the tiniest bit, and that made the old man adjust the front of his coat without a word, his forehead covered with sweat.

The hoarse voice had let out a low groan. The alluring glint of the blade reflected a face of unearthly beauty, and that beauty drank up the glint.

Suddenly, the battle of the exquisite ended. Returning the blade to its sheath, D said, “A hundred thousand dalas.”

For that amount, you could purchase a small village, lock, stock, and barrel.

Old El made an expression somewhere between smiling and weeping. He wasn’t sure exactly how to react.

“S-s-s-sure. That little gem comes from an island country they say existed in

the far east long, long ago. Ordinarily, I'd ask for twice that price, but seeing how good you are with one of them things, I'll let you have it at half price."

"What are you talking about, you lousy con man? The bag's got a sticker on it right here that says it's ten grand!"

"Whaaaat?!"

"Ha ha ha! I'm just messing with you," the hoarse voice guffawed.

Glaring at D, the old man bared his teeth, saying, "That's a sick little hobby you've got there." He thought D was doing some kind of ventriloquism.

"That thunder beast was being manipulated," D said, taking the sword in hand. "I suppose you can imagine who was behind that. Your enemies are one step ahead of you. Better watch yourself."

And having said that, the Hunter left the storage area without a sound.

After midnight, the wind and the rain only grew fiercer.

"This is too much for me now," said Old El. "About six miles from here, there's the ruins of a Noble base from back during the OSB War. We can wait out the dawn there."

D only had one thing to say in regard to the old man's suggestion. "Give me the reins," he said, moving over to the driver's seat.

"Hey—what do you think you're doing?"

"Get some sleep. I'll keep them moving."

With that, it dawned on the old man that the worlds they lived in were reversed. As a dhampir with the blood of the Nobility in his veins, the Hunter was heading into the very best time to be active. That being the case, Old El was quick enough to change gears.

"Okay, it's all yours," he replied, promptly taking the passage down from the driver's seat to the interior, as that was sure to make things easier for D, too.

The whip snarled viciously through wind and rain, and the wagon picked up speed. D's cyborg horse followed along without complaint.

"Wow, this is incredible!" the old man practically screamed with joy, strapping

himself into his seat. “At the rate you’re going, forget about hitting the next way station tomorrow, you’ll get us there tonight! This is great—huh?!”

His body jerked forward. The restraints dug into his belly, nearly squeezing the life out the old man.

As soon as the jolt of forward momentum had passed, Old El popped his head up by the driver’s seat, still wheezing for breath.

“Wh-what’s going on?” he stammered.

“We’re going to the base,” D replied, staring straight ahead.

The old man’s eyes followed suit, but they saw nothing save darkness. Instead, he heard a sound, though. Water splashing. It continued endlessly.

“Is that what I think?” the old man asked.

“There’s a river about twenty yards away.”

“Th-there sure as hell shouldn’t be! There’s nothing but plains out here for the next sixty miles!”

“It’s probably a trap.”

“What? It’s an illusion, then?”

“No, it’s real. We’ll have to throw a bridge down to get across. But there’s probably something in the water.”

“Better to do it tomorrow, then, eh?” Old El suggested.

“Now’s best for me. But we don’t have any material for a bridge. The ruins of the fort had some building materials.”

“Er, okay,” the old man replied with a nod, thinking all the while, *This guy’s really scary. Them dhampirs are something else!*

During the OSB War, to defend from their foe’s old-fashioned aerial attacks, the Noble side had built an equally analog fort defended by anti-aircraft guns. Though there were as many theories as there were stars in the sky for why these two civilizations, which even among interstellar races probably ranked as the top two in the history of the universe, would choose to engage in such archaic warfare, not a single one of them was conclusive, but ultimately speculations

settled on the theory there was an almost inescapable longing for the days of yore coded in the DNA of both species.

“You know, I hear this plain once had a plant for manufacturing synthetic blood,” said Old El.

Now, little more than dusty remains were left on the wild plain, and despite the Nobility’s attempts to protect the place, no amount of scrutiny could uncover anything more than heaps of stone and concrete. One part remained that was reminiscent of a dome, and though the floors and stairways still held their shape, the machines of war that’d filled the place had either been disposed of on their destruction, or else carried off by humans who’d come through later. What was left stood in the driving rain, an empty husk that’d been stripped of its soul.

Parking the wagon behind the cover of the dome, D climbed onto the back of his cyborg horse and galloped off. Whoever made this river was undoubtedly a foe after Old El. If their plan was to throw up a roadblock and strike while the old man was still figuring out what to do, they’d probably be coming soon. If they were thinking of striking after daybreak, then the old man and D should get back out on the wasteland, where they’d have freedom to maneuver, before then.

Before he’d gone a hundred yards, D was greeted by a large cluster of trees. Branches bent and leaves cried out in tiny voices. From the rain’s bombardment.

Climbing down from his cyborg steed, D walked over to a trunk that was twice as large as his arms would fit around and made a casual swing of his sword. The blade went through the trunk like it was slicing butter, cutting clean through it. Before the crash from the toppling of the gigantic tree had even subsided, D had a second one lying at his feet. Walking exactly twenty yards from the end he’d cut, D lopped off the rest. Half of the branches he’d taken off on the way up there, and by the time he came back again the trunk was bare. Without a moment’s respite, D put his blade against the first cut he’d made and slowly walked the length of the trunk. What followed was a miracle born of an expertly crafted sword from that eastern country and D’s skill coming together flawlessly. For he’d split the twenty-yard-long trunk lengthwise without pausing for a second.

After repeating the procedure on the second tree, he loaded one split log on his

right shoulder and the other on his left, then left the woods. The wind assailed him, as if that were the very moment it'd been waiting for. Though the tree trunks swayed, D didn't.

Wood or not, each of those halves weighed more than three tons. Shouldering a total of twelve tons, he headed in the direction of the splashing sounds.

Four shadowy figures stood up, one to either side of him, one to the front, and one to the rear. All of them had been lying on the ground.

The sound of the running water echoed off freshly drawn blades.

“Who put you up to this?” the hoarse voice asked. D had either hand resting on the logs on his shoulders. And the voice had come from the vicinity of his left one.

“We don't know, either,” said the figure in front of the Hunter. “But we do know this—you've got your hands full, D!”

Swords came at him from all sides. At the center of the swings and thrusts, D had already drawn his sword, and still holding on to the wood, he brought his weapon into play. The trunk that rolled off his shoulder made the attacker on his right stop in his tracks, while the foes coming at him from the front and back slipped under the trunk on his left shoulder, though a half turn of his blade was enough to bisect them both horizontally and then impale the opponent to his left.

Not one of their blades had reached D.

Leaping over the tree trunk, the last one had his sword held high over his head. It sank into the flat side of the split trunk, while another blade came from below, piercing the trunk and attacker alike and jutting from the back of the latter.

“Oh, what do we have here? Golems?”

As the hoarse voice said that, the four attackers turned into eight-inch-tall dolls, and the way they dissolved in the pounding rain was a testimony to the fact that they were made of mud.

“Langen Tupperman,” said the hoarse voice. “But golems don't die when they're stabbed. Anybody who can put them down with one blow is a man to be feared.”

The voice flowed along with D as he crouched down to collect the second trunk from the ground and put it back on his shoulder, then continued on toward the riverbank.

When he arrived at the river's edge, D bent his knees slightly and straightened them again. The two split tree trunks were laid across the river, flat sides up. After another two were down, even the old man's merchandise-laden wagon would be able to cross them.

As the Hunter turned around to head back to the woods, a terrific explosion rang out from the direction of the ruins, and flames shot up toward the darkened sky. Anyone would've felt that the wind and rain had been peaceful by comparison.

To be continued in

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

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GOLD FIEND

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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.