

The Ironside Express

Holden Shearer

*People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.*

—Richard Grenier

*To fight monsters, we created monsters of our own.*

—Raleigh, *Pacific Rim*

### **Part One: The Contract**

*Even from the beginning, that was the problem. People liked pretty things. People even liked pretty things that wanted to kill and eat them.*

—Holly Black, *The Coldest Girl in Coldtown*

## THE PROBLEM

### —Comumant, Afternoon.

Two men in rolled-up shirtsleeves lounged on the roof of the train depot, collars undone in futile hope of relief from the day's smothering heat. Each carried a rifle against his shoulder. They were paid to scan the sky for hellkites, which often winged in on thermals from the prairie that stretched to the north and east as far as the eye could see, but today the sky was a wide and empty electric blue with only a few thin wisps of white far away to the south.

Beneath their feet was the depot's tarpapered roof and beneath that roof was the junction and switching station, where the stationmaster was doing his level best to ignore the man standing next to him. It wasn't easy; Lukas Giles didn't move, hadn't moved or spoken in almost half an hour, but tense impatience radiated from every line of his body. Giles was a figure of imposing contrasts: deep blue vest over flawlessly white shirt over skin black as coal; tall and wide, head thrust forward, scalp shaved with the same meticulous precision as his heavy bulldog jowls.

Giles watched as the Ironside Express pulled into the station, its brakes producing a great pneumatic hiss that made the station's windows shiver. Without turning his head, he asked: "Everything normal?"

*As if I'd have sat here and used my thumb for a fart-cork if it weren't,* the stationmaster thought. His eyes flicked across the console in front of him. Three green lights indicated that the three sterilizing sprays on the homeward approach had gone off properly, washing loose the contaminated dust of the Exclusion Zone from the train's cladding. His own two eyes could see the train was decelerating at the proper rate, and it had arrived half a minute ahead of schedule. But all he said was: "Aye, everything normal."

Giles forced himself to wait until the Ironside came to a full stop, its wheels chuffing at steadily wider intervals and finally becoming still with a rolling boom as the locomotive's weight settled. Then, as the first passengers began to disembark, he headed down to the train platform.

Normally the comings and goings of the Ironside were of only financial interest to Lukas Giles, and then only because the machine was the property of his employer, Mr. Carthage Baines. But a runner had awoken him before sunrise this morning, dispatched from the station and bearing a letter in the stationmaster's hand: *Your presence requested urgently. Trouble on the Express.* The train's conductor had reported the trouble over the Ironside's wireless set, but neglected to specify its nature. As much as it had left his gut rolling all day, Giles approved of the conductor's discretion. Radio messages could be intercepted.

Giles glanced left and right as he stepped out onto the platform, checking both sides of the doorway out of sheer habit of survival. He didn't even think about it; such reflexes were beaten into everyone living in the Territories. Women in dresses, men in waistcoats, porters in deep blue jackets; nothing out of the ordinary. As a first impression, it went some way toward settling his nerves. Since the passengers weren't pouring out of the train screaming, the trouble wasn't of the worst-case variety. He began to prepare himself to hear that there had been some costly dysfunction of the train's systems, perhaps requiring significant repairs that would delay its next outbound journey to Lith. Then a waving hand caught his eye, and his stomach rolled once again.

The hand belonged to Anders Henge, the Ironside's security coordinator. Henge was even taller than Giles, skin only a shade lighter, with a boxer's frame and the first touches of white threading into his hair at the temples. Henge's hand dropped as soon as Giles spotted him. The man was waiting near the back of the train, where porters were hauling luggage out of stowage.

Giles grimaced, pressing a handkerchief to his mouth as he made his way aft. A heavy chemical reek hung in the air about the Ironside, a reminder of the decontamination showers the train had passed through less than an hour ago. Henge and the porters seemed oblivious to the odor, or at least indifferent thanks to long familiarity.

The security coordinator held out a hand as Giles reached him. "Mr. Giles."

Giles took it. "Mr. Henge." He raised an eyebrow by way of interrogation, and Henge nodded, stepping to the back of the luggage unloading area. There Giles found himself looking at a young woman in the deep-blue livery of the Ironside Express standing next to a long, battered steamer trunk on a rolling cart. He recognized the anonymous-looking trunk as belonging to the rail line itself, used for many years to discreetly load sensitive cargo onto and off of the Ironside, and felt his stomach sink further. This wasn't going to be a mechanical problem. The woman gave a bland smile and began to push the cart. Henge led the way and Giles followed.

A minute later they were at the far end of the depot, having maneuvered the cart through the door of the low-ceilinged breezeblock building used to temporarily detain criminals, spectacularly drunken passengers, and other troublemakers. Henge closed the door, produced a ring of keys, and locked it. Then he stepped past Giles, knelt next to the cart, unlocked the steamer trunk, lifted its lid, and stepped back.

Giles stepped forward and grimaced. A portly man in a dinner coat had been awkwardly dumped into the trunk. He was very dead, as attested by his glassy eyes and ashen-pale skin, which in life had probably been a deep sienna.

"Where are his shoes?" It took Giles a moment to realize the person who asked that perfectly idiotic question had been himself.

The question threw Henge off for a moment, but the woman had an answer ready: "They're with the rest of his effects, in stowage. He wasn't wearing them when we found him in his cabin."

Giles turned to Henge. "Who is this?" It was clear from his tone he didn't mean the corpse in the trunk.

Henge cleared his throat. "Mr. Giles, this is Ms. Coll, the Express's junior guest liaison director. She found the body."

"Thank you, Mr. Henge. Ms. Coll, why am I looking at a dead rail passenger in a trunk?"

The woman hesitated. "It's, well..." Then she took a deep breath, reached down, and turned the body's head to the side. Giles closed his eyes, turned, walked until his hand met the rough breezeblock wall. It didn't matter. He could still see the two neat, bloodless holes in the corpse's throat. Unmistakable.

"Sir," Henge said. "This is the second in as many trips. We don't have a fluke, we have a problem."

Giles turned away from the wall. "What?"

Henge frowned. "Of course. No reason Mr. Baines should have radioed you here in Comumant. You don't know. Okay." He took a deep breath. "We had a passenger die in the same fashion on the trip out to Lith. I brought Mr. Baines in to oversee the investigation personally once we reached the station there. We tore the train apart but couldn't find the creature's hiding place."

"Creature," Giles echoed.

Henge ignored him, went on with his recitation: "Mr. Baines concluded that it had snuck onto the train somehow, probably hiding in a passenger's luggage, used the Express to relocate itself to Lith, and killed a guest along the way when it got hungry. He decided to send the train back to Comumant on schedule. But then we found this—" He indicated the trunk. "Another passenger dead on our second night out toward Comumant."

Giles sighed. "A vampire is using the Ironside Express as its own private larder."

"It seems the most likely scenario, yes sir."

A knock at the door made Ms. Coll jump a bit. Henge simply turned, checked the door's eye slot, and unlocked it, admitting Henshaw Crook. Crook was short, built like a barrel if a barrel had heavy dangling arms, and his shirt was rumpled in a way that suggested it had been slept in, perhaps more than once. He shot a quick glance at the steamer trunk. "Oh, good, you've explained our situation, then."

"Mr. Crook," Giles said. "While I appreciate your concern, I think your energies would be better spent leading your team to go over the train before sundown."

Crook sent back a stare that could have chipped ice. Giles bristled but said nothing; Crook was the head engineer of the Ironside Express, a position that demanded extremely specific talents, and as such was the least replaceable person under Lukas Giles's authority. "Oh, I'll be back there and taking the beast apart as soon as the platform's empty, never you worry. But don't speak to me like a fool, Mr. Giles. We've been tearing the Express apart for the last two days during every hour we had daylight. Checked every single bit of luggage in stowage, even the ladies' bags that couldn't hold an overbred dog. Checked every crack and crevice I could get into while the engine was running that could fit a child, much less a grown man. We'll make the checks again, and sift through every passenger space as well, before the sun's down. But what I want to know is what you're going to do if we don't find anything?"

"I don't appreciate your tone, Mr. Crook."

"And I don't fucking appreciate sticking my head into the water tanks to find out if there's a monster hiding in them, Mr. Giles. It is not a commonly understood engineering task. So I say again, if we don't turn it up, what are you going to do?"

Giles became aware that Mr. Henge and Ms. Coll were both watching him, as keenly interested in his answer as the head engineer. "I've only just been informed of the situation, Mr. Crook. But rest assured, appropriate action will be taken."

"All right, well, let me be clearer, then, Mr. Giles. If that train pulls out for Lith and it still has a vampire on it and nothing done to get rid of it, I'll be waving it fare-well from the station platform."

"Is that a threat, Mr. Crook?"

“It’s honesty, Mr. Giles. I ‘prenticed twenty years for this job, but it ain’t worth two holes in my neck an’ all my blood out, which I reckon are apt to happen if the thing’s smart enough to figure out I’m leadin’ the search for where it sleeps.”

Giles felt his temper rising, and locked it in ice. Carthage Baines paid him for service and solutions, not bluster. Crook was right; vampires were, from what little he knew of them, intelligent monsters. It made the engineer—one of the most valuable components of the locomotive’s operation—a target. And if the engineer was this spooked, then it was sure he wouldn’t be the only one refusing to board the Ironside, and if that happened, there was no hope of keeping this situation from becoming public knowledge.

“Mr. Crook, I was called out of bed by a messenger to have this disaster dumped into my lap. Before you next speak, consider that I am not its architect. I’ll overlook your... nerves, in light of the situation.” He stared into the steamer trunk, at those two bloodless puncture marks. “While going over the train, I want you to discover some mechanical fault necessitating that the next departure to Lith be delayed for at least a day, possibly two.”

It was Henge who spoke then: “What will you be doing in that time, sir?”

Giles grimaced as he mentally tallied up the expense he was facing. But there was no other way around it. “What else, Mr. Henge? I’ll call in an exterminator. If Mr. Crook can’t uncover the monster’s resting place, we’ll need the services of an expert.”

## THE EXPERT

### *—The woods outside Hennic Town, Afternoon*

Samara Darrow tilted her head as she regarded the two grotesque effigies. They were bathed in slanting rays of incongruously lovely golden late-afternoon light. The sun was quitting the world for the day, and it would be full dark in less than two hours. The ghost of a smile bent her lips. This was what she'd combed the woods for all day, and here she'd made her discovery with time still to spare.

The effigies had been clapped together on a fractured granite shelf protruding from the gentle slope of a forested hill. Samara's steps made no sound on the carpeting of rotting leaves and loose soil as she circled them, admiring their visceral crudity. Each was half again taller than she was, with no appreciable limbs—merely the crude impression of hulking shoulders flanking a heavy blob of a head. The effigies were made primarily of stone and mud smashed into place by huge, powerful hands. It was the other, minority inclusions that were more troubling. Blood had been mixed with wet earth to cement the effigies together, and here and there bones protruded from amidst dirt and stone, along with red-black pulp that could only be meat—guts, viscera, fly-crawling muscle. Most of it had come from a variety of animals, but Samara could see a human jawbone shoring up one effigy's neck, and a lightly chewed hand smashed between rocks in the midst of the other. The effigy on the right had two crude horns sticking out of its head—one made of a stripped tree branch, the other a deer antler protruding from a clot of gore that made her suspect the rest of the deer's head was probably impacted deeper into the crude idol.

It was the unmistakable work of mountain trolls. And that made her smile widen a bit, because it was mountain trolls she was in search of.

They'd been a growing problem in Hennic Town for months now, ranging down out of the high hills and into the fields around the town. Goats would no longer forage in the high ranges. Sheep disappeared with untenable frequency, and then cattle were found ripped open in the pastures. It had come to a head when a rancher named Macadam had stayed out with his herd after sundown; his neighbors to both the west and the north had taken losses and he had no intention of being next. And sure enough, not long before midnight there came a great groaning and upset among his cattle, and Macadam had seen great hulking shapes leaping over his fence and loping toward the herd. He was armed with an old heat rifle whose cells could still hold at least half a solar charge, and the rack-a-clutter lore of the Territories, which told him that trolls feared fire. So he'd sent a ray of white light lancing out over his herd, and held it against the flank of one of the mountain trolls until smoke and steam boiled out and its stinking pelt began to burn.

It would have been a good plan, had he been facing a pack of river trolls or even a solitary hill troll. But mountain trolls can't be intimidated by anything that isn't both larger and louder than they are, only enraged. The trolls had roared, and tried to bite the solar ray, and then spotted Macadam, and that was the end of the matter. He hadn't covered even a third of the distance back to his house before the first of the trolls was on him. And from Macadam, the trolls learned that humans were both slow and tasty. Things escalated from missing sheep and chewed cattle-bones to houses cracked open and entire families gone missing. Traps had been set, all miserable failures; unless killed outright in a single stroke—a tall order—a troll could recover from nearly any injury in a matter of days.



In the end, of course, the mayor of Hennic Town did what he should have done from the outset. He sent folks to the nearest chapterhouse of the Darrow school, and they in turn sent in a dhampir to take care of the problem.

“Well,” Samara said, stepping back from the effigies, “that’s why they’ve been ranging so actively, then.” Mountain trolls were sexless. Like many abominations brought forth by the witch-kings of old, they reproduced through crude ritual, driven by wordless instinct. Given another two, perhaps three days of work, these troll-effigies would be ready to be washed in blood and piss and saliva, and then at some point mud and stone and gore would become flesh and bone and teeth and two new trolls would lumber forth to join the pack. Such was the nature of troll-magic.

That, at least, Samara could prevent.

She glanced up-slope, where a cave opening gaped beneath the roots of an old dead tree. It looked like a shallow depression, maybe fit at best for a bear’s hibernation, but it was the trolls’ lair, of that there could be no mistake. She could smell their heavy, goatish reek even from her position a good hundred feet away. The cave must widen and branch out, stretching to unguessed depths of the earth. She set her back to the cave and skidded down the forested slope, eyes set on a long, broken hunk of wood. She was in no particular hurry, and moved with no particular trepidation; the trolls couldn’t venture outside into the daylight, not without reverting back to the mud and stone they’d been born from. And she had no intention of heading in after them. Face trolls with no room to maneuver? No thank you.

There. On closer inspection it wasn’t a limb after all, but rather a young tree that had been knocked over from just above the roots, probably by one of the trolls. Though it was longer than she was tall, Samara tucked it under one arm and carried it back up to the effigies with no difficulty.

She grimaced as she drew close, and pulled the collar of her shirt up over her mouth and nose. It didn’t help much; she still felt she was walking into a gelid wall of rotting-meat-stink. Bracing the tree against her hip, she grasped it with both hands and drove it into the effigy’s hip. Mud and stones parted with a reluctant squelch, admitting the tip of the makeshift pole, and from there it was a matter of simple leverage to start prying the effigy apart. Samara leaned left and right, then got beneath the tree and lifted with her knees, and that finally did it: the effigy split and fell apart into three uneven chunks in an eruption of stringy viscera and dirt-clods. She staggered back, dragging the tree with her. It smelled even worse once pried apart than it had before.

She took a moment to glance up and down the slope again. The whole area reeked of troll-piss, making her fairly certain that no beast or monster with the slightest ounce of self-preservation was going to sneak up on her while she was working, but there were of course plenty of horrors roaming the Territories that didn’t, couldn’t, know fear. It was always good to be careful. But in this case, as she’d expected, she was still alone.

For the second effigy, Samara settled on just banging the end of her young tree into the thing’s chest until it finally toppled over. That done, she tossed the tree aside and let it go rolling and crashing back down-slope. There. Now even if something went wrong with the rest of the job, at least her replacement would only have the three trolls to deal with, and not five.

The sun was lower now, gold giving way to shades of pink and lavender. It was a beautiful sight, and also a reminder to stay focused.

Samara stretched, dusted bits of bark from her hands, and looked about, but in truth she'd already spotted the tree she wanted as soon as she arrived. The hilly slopes above the town were liberally dotted with fir, spruce, and pine, and it was a mature limber pine she selected, a bit down-slope and off to the right of the trolls' cave mouth. She walked up to the base of the tree, stretched her hands up, and found her fingertips waving just a few inches short of the lowest branch.

Most dhampirs grew up tall and looming, but Samara was of merely average height, to her present irritation. She found herself wishing for a moment that she could simply collapse the cave entrance—not that she'd brought any dynamite along with her—and begin making her way back to Hennic Town, but of course that would have been pointless. Mountain trolls were earthling monsters. You could drown them. You could probably even strangle them, though she'd never seen or even heard of it being done. But you couldn't smother or crush them with a cave-in. They'd just dig themselves out eventually, hungry and madder than hell.

"Up we go," she muttered, taking a few steps back and then running up against the tree. That got her enough elevation to catch her desired branch, and she began pulling herself up, using the scaly ridges of the tree's bark as much as she could, careful not to put too much weight on any particular branch. She wasn't that heavy herself, but she was carrying plenty of kit: steel-shod boots, a twinkling gunbelt on one hip, heavy-bladed dagger on the other, a grossly oversized blade in a magnetic holster on her back, and a supply satchel slung over her shoulder.

Settling into what felt like a stable fork between two branches, Samara adjusted herself until she was as close to comfortable as she expected to get. She was about 25 feet off the ground now, well-obscured among the tree's dense array of blue-green needles. She drew in a deep breath. She could still smell the cloying, goatish, blood-tinged reek of the trolls, but also now the sharp-sour tang of sap, and the fresh bright spark of the pines. It was nice, she thought. People didn't go in the woods any more, not if they didn't have to. It was the same for her, really, but Samara had learned to cultivate moments.

As the quality of the light fell from pink to violet to the first overtures of umber, Samara found herself thinking that a hot drink would go well with this vigil—coffee, or tea if coffee couldn't be had. Or warmed milk with chocolate—she'd had that once, while working in Imbetigo. The mayor there thought they had a ghoulish problem, but it turned out the man who owned the hostel had gone crazy and was eating people. That had been awkward.

Alas, she didn't have any coffee, or tea, or milk, or even brandy. She hung her satchel on another branch, then snapped open its heavily-padded front compartment. Three shock-resistant crystal vials stared back at her. One contained a clear amber liquid. One contained a cloudy amber liquid. And the last was full of what looked like curdled milk. She hadn't quite decided what approach to use against the trolls when she set out that morning, so she'd left herself three options, and now it was time to pick. Ironhide mixture? Getimian accelerant? Or numbing potion? She tapped a fingernail across each of the three, before finally drawing out the clear amber fluid. Accelerant. Against mountain trolls, it was best to not take any hits in the first place.

Of the three alchemical concoctions, the accelerant was the most fleeting. Its benefits would only last for perhaps half an hour. So she waited, shifting the vial from palm to palm.

A rim of golden flames spread across the horizon. Goodbye, sun. The trolls would waken soon.

Samara checked her rig yet again. The dagger on her right hip was well-secured, snap-fastened; it would be of no use against something as big as a troll, and so her only concern was that it didn't fall out during the fight. The pistol rode easy on her left hip, loose in its holster, a gunpowder-loaded six-banger with a simple revolving mechanism. It couldn't bring down a troll either, but it could get one's attention. Most hunters who bothered carrying guns liked something bigger, faster, or fancier, but Samara had two simple philosophies she applied to her vocation. The first was that anything that wasn't inclined to lay down and die with six bullets in it probably wouldn't change its ways for 11 or 16, either. The second, deeper belief was that simplicity was reliability, and reliability was the most important virtue of a weapon. Her pistol had never jammed, not after being dragged through swamps and rain or even making the brief acquaintance of a demigorgon's digestive tract. That was what she most required from a gun: for it to send a bullet where she wanted it to go, when she wanted it to go there.

And then there was her sword. Samara shifted, leaning against the tree to free herself to reach the weapon's hilt where it protruded over her shoulder.

She couldn't draw it from there, of course. Shoulder-draws were awkward even with a short blade, and hers was nothing of the sort. But then, her holster wasn't exactly a sheath—rather it was a magnetic harness clamping the weapon in place, distributing its weight across her shoulders and ribs. She pushed a knuckle into the button on the rig's clasp at her collarbone, and there was a small click as the holster demagnetized and its clamps sprang open. Samara pulled the weapon free, bringing it around her body rather than over her shoulder.

The blade was shaped like a single-edged sword, but not any sort of sword a normal human being would be able to wield. It weighed over twenty pounds, with over four feet of blade and a foot of hilt. The spine was nearly a quarter-inch thick, the blade three inches wide at the base, and it tapered *out* toward its point rather than *in* toward the hilt—the thing eventually swelled out to five inches from spine to edge before finally plunging back to an abrupt, angled tip. As a result it was grossly top-heavy, its point of balance more like a war-ax than a sword. It was like a child's drawing of a two-handed sword. An ordinary man, even a strong one, couldn't do much more than lift it and drop it toward an opponent.

Even in Samara's hands, the weight distribution robbed her swordsmanship of grace or fluidity. She didn't mind. The weapon suited her. It was big, simple, devoid of moving parts. Her vocation didn't require civilized dueling. She wasn't a fencer. Her opponents rarely carried any weapons that weren't part of their anatomy. It was heavy enough that, backed by the uncanny strength of a dhampir, it could cleave apart a troll's skull. That was all she really needed. She laid the weapon across two stout branches, close to hand.

The forest had been swallowed by a palette of soft blues and merging shadows. The horizon held only a rumor of pink. This was the time where vision became treacherous and began to fail for those away from the lights of hearth and home, but not for Samara. Her eyes were not human eyes, and they distinguished subtle shades of darkness without the slightest difficulty.

She drew out the cork from the vial in her hand and tipped its contents down her throat. She shuddered as lightning sizzled across her nerves, slammed through her brain. Her heart beat faster. Adrenaline flooded her body. She corked the empty vial, secured the satchel. The shakes were already going out of her hands. They were becoming steady enough to thread a needle on the first try. Her body was

assimilating the potion. It was sharpening her reflexes to a razor edge. Within a minute, she'd be able to catch a passing fly out of the air, and select which wing to seize it by.

She concentrated on her breathing, on bringing her body into equilibrium with the alchemy coursing through it. It was another thing only a body like hers could accomplish. No human being could survive the getimian accelerant. It would grant its gift of speed and heightened reflexes and dilated sense of time, for a certainty, but the quiddity that was the base of all greater alchemy would overwhelm the flesh. Nerves would pulse and crackle until they burned out. A series of massive strokes were an inevitability. Even for Samara, it had taken years of progressive exposure to weakened elixirs and decoctions to condition her body to survive the school's potions, and she dared not imbibe more than one at a time.

She could feel her body gaining control of the mixture. She had twenty, perhaps thirty minutes before her body's recuperative abilities would destroy its efficacy. But that was plenty of time, because as she focused on her breathing, she noticed that the bloody, goatish smell around the cave was swelling. The trolls were making their way up from the depths of their lair.

That was fine. Samara had one more trick, one known only to the hunters of the Darrow school. She closed her eyes, stretched her senses out into the blooming night around her. With the world shut out, reduced to the sigh of the wind in the pines and the reek of approaching monsters, she could feel the weight of gathering shadows, emboldened by the sun's retreat. She could feel the layers of night: the dark, the cold, the union of shadows. She could feel those things because they were part of her. Darkness pooled within her own quickening anatomy. The chill of night condensed along the fine hairs on the back of her arms. This, she suspected, was the clarion that called vampires back up from death with each sunset.

She tried not to like it too much.

Samara exhaled, and a soft mist poured out between her lips. It spilled down into her lap, divided, and dripped down the bark of the pine. It made her teeth tingle, a sensation that soon spread out: across her forehead, the nape of her neck, down to her belly, her hands, her feet. She breathed, and each breath was a thickening fog that leaked out of her, from her lips, and then as well her nostrils, her tear ducts. It condensed from her pores and gushed out into the woods, unfolding questing tendrils from the base of her tree. Samara breathed, and soon the hillside breathed with her, buried in soft layers of creeping, muffling fog.

Samara opened her eyes. Everything was a sea of gentle gray, and yet, she was perfectly aware of everything within it. She couldn't see through the mist, but didn't need to. It was part of her. She could feel three hulking forms pushing their way through the mist—could hear them, too, snuffling, suspicious. It was early for a night-fog.

She drew her pistol, waited. They'd be drawn to the effigies, to inspect their nascent troll-craft, and then—

The newborn night was shattered by a roar of pure, splitting fury. Samara thumbed back the hammer of her revolver, the *click* lost in the cacophony—and likewise the crash of her first shot. She let her ears aim through the fog, fanned off five more quick shots and then holstered the gun. There'd be no time to reload.

She hadn't aimed very carefully, but then, the thing that came powering out of the mist was so big it had been hard to miss. Twice the height of a man, even in its loping run, the mountain troll was covered in red-brown hair, its broad face distorted around a vast screaming mouth full of teeth like broken stones. Seething green eyes glared from beneath two curling ram horns. It had seen the muzzle-flashes but the fog distorted their exact location, and the thing hit a tree just to the left of Samara's perch, its great dangling arms pushing the old fir tree's roots halfway out of the stony earth.

Samara took up her sword and kicked off from her perch. The troll's eye flickered as it caught motion in the fog above it—its peripheral vision was incredibly sensitive to movement—but Samara was coming in too fast. It swung an arm up at her but she was already on top of it, bringing her sword down with both hands. The weapon sheared through the troll's arm and dug a furrow down its chest. Hot blood sprayed and the monster shrieked, but Samara was already moving, well aware the troll's wound was not fatal and that numbers would be against her momentarily. She rolled as she landed, bringing the sword in side-arm as hard as she could, and felt a shock run up her arms as the weapon ripped through muscle and bone, severing one of the troll's thick, tree-stump legs. The thing toppled forward onto its belly, and she reversed course, kicking off the ground again. Samara spun, dragging the blade behind her, and sent its heavy tip into the back of the troll's neck. She felt the shock of steel on granite as the weapon powered through muscle, vertebrae, and topsoil. Only a thin strip of meat held the troll's head on. That was enough. Even a mountain troll couldn't heal back from a mostly severed head.

The mist before her exploded into a second troll, arms spread wide, howling. Its hands were tipped with jagged nails anchored directly to its finger bones, hard as rock. Instinct told her to spring back, but the alchemical lightning racing through her body afforded her what felt like several gleaming moments of clarity to consider the situation. To gauge the troll's momentum, and her own options.

Instead of backing away, Samara leaped straight up. Her body was still being pulled around, up and to the right by the weight of her sword's backswing. She let it until the sword was high above her right shoulder. Her legs were powerful enough to propel her better than ten feet up from a crouching start, bringing her to just above the troll's face. It had been aiming to grab something on the ground, but now its elephantine feet slammed into the dirt and it leaned back, trying to adjust, trying to pluck Samara from the air.

She brought the sword down, overhead, and it crunched between the troll's eyes in a fan of blood. The thing's arms waved and jerked for a moment before it toppled backwards. Samara rode down with it, bracing a foot against its collarbone as she jerked her sword free. Splitting the brain in half, that would also serve to down a troll. She wondered if she'd have time to slip into the mist and stage an ambush against the final member of the pack.

She didn't. It was coming up toward her from down-slope, from where the destroyed effigies lay. She felt a swell of fog pushed ahead of it and turned, sword ready down by her hip; such was its weight that her only real options were full-body swings vertically, horizontally, or diagonally, and this attack she intended to aim up into the thing's throat, if she could.

The troll pierced the fog, leading with one outstretched hand, and Samara smiled. The sword flashed out and up—she'd go through its fingers and terminate the strike in its neck. But the troll was already stopping. Her eyes caught up with her motion a moment too late; she saw the wild dangling gray mustaches adorning the monster's face, the thick crazy white eyebrows, and realized this was a battle-

scarred silverback she was facing, probably older than she was, wily and mean. Her sword sliced off four of its fingers but never got anywhere near its throat. The troll grunted and brought its other arm around, and Samara, caught in the follow-through of her swing, had just a moment of bitter clarity to see that it was wielding a bark-stripped river log as a cudgel. The weapon was nearly as big as she was.

It smashed into her shoulder and sent her pinwheeling down the slope. There was a wet snap and a feeling like boiling water gushing through every vein and hollow of her body. The pain nearly lifted the top of her head off.

*Up*, Samara commanded herself as she slid through the dirt, screaming in her head and maybe also out loud through the agony, she wasn't sure. *Up, up up up up up up up!* Her boots scrabbled in the leaf mold. Had she managed to keep hold of her sword? She had, somehow, with just her left hand. She couldn't see the condition of her right arm, it was covered in her traveling jacket, but she could feel hot blood slicking her ribs and pooling around her belt, so the damage had to be pretty bad. Fire pulsed down the arm, which was unresponsive, and slammed through her torso with each heartbeat. The getimian potion strung the moments out like brittle jewels, each affording her the clarity to fully experience the rotten, sickening pain radiating out from where the troll had hit her. It also gave her the chance to hear its footfalls eagerly chasing her down-slope.

*I cut off most of its hand, but that'll grow back. No problem for a troll. It pulverized my shoulder, that's more of a problem. Round two. I have one good arm.*

Samara waited. The troll came hurtling out of the fog, both feet off the ground, leaping, cudgel swinging high overhead, jaws locked in a wild rictus smile. Yes, it was old, and clever. Samara felt a moment's pleasure amidst the rotten aching agony. *The farmers would never have brought this thing down on their own.*

Samara wasn't a fencer by profession, but she could certainly out-finesse a troll, even with her huge blade and just one arm. Her legs were working fine, and with the potion in her system, she was at least as fast as the troll was strong. She stepped in underneath its swing, pivoted from the hip, swung her sword up as hard as she could with her left arm. It sheared the troll's arm off through the bicep. Samara kept spinning, letting the momentum carry her, and kicked off the ground just as she came all the way around. The weapon's brutal tip punched through the troll's flank, between two of its ribs. It powered through a layer of dense fat, muscles like hardened rubber, and finally bisected the monster's heart. Blood exploded down the blade, drenched Samara's hand. She let go of the weapon, fell heavily to the ground, and crab-scrabbled away as the troll staggered three steps, face marked with an expression of pure shock, and then fell down.

Samara's howl shivered between the trees as she struggled out of her jacket. Her shirt was torn badly enough to guess at the extent of the damage: pulverized meat peeked out of rent cloth, and she could see the dull wink of a knob of bone. A dhampir could heal even faster than a troll—as attested by the way the bleeding had already slowed to a trickle—but *this* kind of damage? She was lucky the arm was still even notionally attached. She was going to need a boost.

Samara squeezed her eyes shut and fumbled in a pouch secured just below her holster. There were three ampoules inside, and her fingertips reported that their impact-resistant glass had survived the battle. Grunting with relief, she dug one out and took a moment to examine it. No cracks. Full of

sloshing red fluid. The brass needle at its tip was unbent. Plastic plunger at the other end unharmed. Good enough. Samara stabbed the ampoule into her thigh, depressed the plunger.

Relief wasn't the word—bliss, deliverance, they were closer, and instantaneous. As always, the blood cocktail cured her of an ailment whose crushing teeth she'd been unaware of until they were pried apart. Her arm, shoulder, they sizzled, a hundred seething white-hot hornets crawling through every wound, humming away in every splintering of bone, but even this darting agony was its own kind of ecstasy. Fog, or maybe steam, gushed from the wound, tinged vermilion, as the pain hit a crescendo and receded. Samara lifted her arm experimentally, and it obeyed readily. She lifted up the collar of her shirt, peered at her right shoulder. Other than a crust of dried blood, it seemed good as new. She flexed her fingers. They waggled, five soldiers reporting for duty.

"All right then," the dhampir said, replacing the empty ampoule and then flopping down among the fallen leaves. Three mountain trolls down, and two blood ampoules still unused. It could have been worse.

The first stars were beginning to peek out as her summoned fog thinned and vanished. The folk of Hennic Town would continue to avoid these woods whenever they could—and with good reason—but there was, at least now, one less threat living in them. Three fewer monsters in the world. Samara let her right arm roll to and fro, savoring the last remnants of that primordial heat lingering in the repaired bones, the mended muscles and skin. She closed her eyes and took in a sharp breath. Goat-stink. Blood. The acrid smell of gunpowder. The heavy wet smell of leaves. An empty moment here in the world, all for her, hers and hers alone.

"For the restoration of mankind," she whispered. The wind spread its rumors through the pines and the firs. Samara sat up.

She waited a minute to see if any other nocturnal predators would be drawn in by the smell of blood or the sounds of fighting. Once she was sure she was alone, she cleaned and then carefully seated her sword back in its holster and re-engaged the magnetic clamps. Now it was just a matter of routine: retrieving her satchel from the tree, using her heavy-bladed dagger to carve off one horn from each of the trolls as proof of the job's completion, and of course surviving a trip back through the nighttime forest to Hennic Town.

Samara got to work.

## A NEW JOB

### —Hennic Town, Night

Samara took a small and quiet pleasure in returning from a job mid-day. She could showboat a bit then, enjoy the faces pinched with anticipation and then the ever-revealing show of whatever rushed in to replace anticipation. It was especially keen if she was able to walk in with something bloody and dead and scaly slung over her shoulders: the gasps, sometimes the cheers. The wide eyes of children. The relief, one nightmare over, at least for now.

Getting back by night was another matter. She carried an old turnip sack over one shoulder, and troll-horns clicked and rattled within. She wished the musk of the burlap would overwhelm the fetid troll-stink, but no such luck, and so she'd been walking in her own personal cloud of stench all the way back down through the tree-slashed hills. And here, arriving in Hennic, there was nothing to look forward to but perhaps an argument with the mayor about opening his door after dark.

Not, of course, that she could see much of Hennic Town on approach. Like any sane settlement in the Territories it was surrounded by a wooden palisade held together by trenails hammered through from the inside, their sharp tips forming a thorny phalanx girding the town at about face-height. That, Samara thought, was a particularly nice-looking touch, not that it would have stopped one of the mountain trolls from climbing over the sharpened posts or simply slamming straight through the palisade had they taken a mind to. And with a pack of five, they might have felt emboldened enough to do just that.

She knew what she'd find once inside the palisade, though: a mixture of one- and two-story buildings built on wooden frames and faced with plaster, sprawling out from a central core of prefab plastic-domed common houses. Like most places Samara had been, the fab-hab structures of Hennic numbered only half a dozen, and all of their inner systems—spy-eye consoles, temperature control, particle filtering, solar defense grid—had long ago ceased to function, leaving them useful only for town meetings, supply storage, and in one case as a potential gaol, owing to the sturdiness of their fundamental construction. It was in the gaol that Samara intended to spend the night; nobody else was using it, and its insulation against the night-chill was excellent.

What she *wouldn't* find were people lining the streets, hands clasped, anticipating the results of the hunt. She'd find closed doors, barred from within. She'd find window-shutters firmly secured. She'd find lamps extinguished, animals shut up in their pens or ushered in to roam the ground floors of the larger buildings. Had she crept into those homes, she'd find interior doors firmly closed and locked, shutting apart parents from children, and all else in the home in particular from the eldsters, who could of course potentially kick off at any time. She'd find people firmly in their beds, awaiting the return of the sun and hoping the night passed them by without turning its cold and bloody eye upon their domiciles and the small lives within. She'd find life as it was in the Territories, in short: people huddled in fear of the dark, and with eminently good reason.

Presently she stood before the town gates, and made ready to call out to secure the attention of the night-warden—a man who would normally have been at home himself, because any traveler foolish enough to arrive by dark was welcome to buggery and ruin as far as the folk of Hennic were concerned, but who was forced out into the night to keep watch for Samara's return—but before she could speak, the gate swung open with a creak and a thump, creating a gap just wide enough for the dhampir to



squeeze through. She blinked. The night had come on cloudy; she was surprised the night-warden had been able to see her coming, or that he'd bothered taking the small risk of poking his head above the palisade to even keep a watch. But she didn't hesitate; open gates bred anxiety in the Territories, and there was no need to subject the man to any more of that than necessary. Samara squeezed through the gap.

The night-warden was no taller than Samara, a man in an old wool-lined coat wearing an even older iron cap. The dhampir rattled her sack of troll horns, but the warden was busy securing the gate, seemed almost uninterested in her. She frowned, turned toward the middle of Hennic, and stopped in her tracks.

The houses were shut tight, as expected, but the common-light in front of the mayor's house was on: An electric lamp atop a pole within a glass ball, it was the last part of the town's prefab core that still worked, at least after a fashion. It took a week for it to store enough charge to stay on through the night, and was mostly just left off, lest the glow attract omen bats or other nocturnal problems. But now it was on, illuminating two figures—one of them the mayor himself—and a carriage.

Samara tilted her head and made her way for the unusual nighttime gathering. The carriage drew her eye first: dark wood paneling over an iron frame, with heavy maroon curtains. Its door was marked with the raven-and-crossed-guns crest of the Darrow school. No horses stood in the traces; instead there was only a single very, very old human-pattern robot, its slender stick-man chassis spotted with rust, one of its electric-lamp eyes dark, the other glowing steadily. Despite its simple cylinder body and spindly limbs, she had no doubt it could pull the cart as easily as though it were a rickshaw, and probably much faster than a team of horses.

The mayor was pudgy, aging, balding, and of little interest to Samara compared to the man he'd been conversing with. That figure stood taller than anyone in Hennic Town, a darkly beautiful youth in patched riding leathers. He had the slightly unfinished blush of adolescence about his features, but none of the coltish, gangling movement common to teen-agers who have grown very tall very suddenly; his shoulders were broad, his body well-muscled and confident in every motion. In short, he was a dhampir, and Samara thought there was very little chance he was nearly as young as he appeared to be.

He *got to be dark and handsome and tall*, she thought, remembering her fingers wagging in the air just short of the pine branch a few hours ago. She put the thought aside, examined him more closely. No gunbelt—not unusual—but he did carry a heavy, short-handled war pick on each hip. That was curious. And—Samara's eyes brightened. And a quiver over one shoulder, bristling with arrows protruding from several segmented compartments, and clipped to the side of the quiver a collapsible machine bow, its construction no doubt a wonder of Darrow school engineering to allow it to survive the kind of draw-strength a dhampir was capable of. She knew of only one Darrow school archer in this part of the Territories, though she'd never met him before. Samara grinned as she approached the pair. "You're Aldo. Right?"

The youth—who was, she now suspected, nearly as old as the mayor—looked down at her. This close up she could see that he was pale as drafting paper, and that his eyes were the same maroon as the carriage curtains. "Aldo Grens," he affirmed, offering a hand. Samara accepted it, noting that he'd first checked to see which of her hands was the least bloody. "You're Samara." His eyes didn't bother flicking to the bag; she saw his nostrils flare once, instead. "And you found the trolls. Are they all dead?"

"All dead," she said, handing over her sack of horns to the mayor, who blanched nearly as pale as Aldo as he accepted them. This was strange. She'd never seen another dhampir just show up while she was on the job, certainly not one from the same school. "They were making effigies. I destroyed those, too."

"That explains their more aggressive roaming down-slope, then," Aldo said.

"I'm not sure I understand this," the mayor said, and then winced as both dhampirs turned to regard him. "Mr. Grens, are you the man from the school she talked about?"

"No," Aldo said. "I'm her replacement."

Samara's brow furrowed. "What?"

Aldo glanced up toward the forested slope of the hills where they loomed above Hennic Town. "I was dispatched from Chapterhouse Weir to relieve you, and take over the contract if you hadn't completed it yet. They want you reassigned. Top priority contract, time-sensitive."

Samara blinked. "Me?"

"You have some experience that suits you for the job, I suppose. They didn't offer me details, I didn't ask. The carriage is for you. Since the contract is done, I'll make my own way back to Weir."

She regarded the carriage, turning her back to the increasingly confused mayor. Reassignment wasn't *unprecedented*, but it was damned unusual. There must be a lot of money on the line, or else personal favors at the highest level of the school.

Samara brushed a hand against her shirt, which was tacky with dried blood. "I don't have time for a bath, I suppose?"

"I already loaded your bag onto the carriage," Aldo said. "They stressed that speed is the greatest priority."

Samara sighed. "Well—that's that, then." She opened the carriage door, peered in. As promised, her traveling bag and supply case were both on the front seat. No papers awaited her. "No documentation?"

Aldo shrugged. The robot chimed in then, rotating its smokestack head to face her. "Our destination is Comumant, Ms. Darrow. We are to depart once you're aboard." Its voice sounded like a bird caught behind a vent, fluttery and uneven. It sounded as though it didn't have many more words in it, but Samara was well aware of how rugged the older-model androids could be. It might still be clanking its way across the Territories decades after she was gone.

"Oh well. Guess they'll brief me when I get there," she said. Samara straightened up, facing Aldo. No sense in any further delay. She tapped a fist against her chest. "For the restoration of mankind."

Aldo returned the gesture. "For the reclamation of night. Ride safe, sister."

"Yeah," Samara said, climbing into the carriage and pulling the door shut behind her. "That's likely."

## THE NIGHT ROAD

### —*The Territories, Night*

The android performed more or less as Samara had expected, guiding the carriage out of Hennic Town and onto the old beaten-dirt track of the road, from there accelerating quickly into a steady, clunking sprint that ate up miles and miles. Samara opened the heavy blackout curtains to get some fresh air; the carriage had no glass in its windows, only a mesh of tough wire. She stripped off her coat and pushed it onto the opposite-facing seat, then followed with her shirt. It was a write-off, good now only for rags; one sleeve was barely attached, and the whole thing was drenched in blood. She dug the canteen out of her travel satchel, wetted a clean bit of clean shirt, and did her best to wipe the dried blood off of herself and her pants. She met with indifferent success, finally cracking open the carriage door and tossing the ruined garment out; no sense drawing in predators with the reek of blood.

Shrugging into a fresh tunic—and noting that she was running out of traveling clothes—Samara settled into the seat's thin padding and did her best to make herself comfortable. *Clunk clunk clunk* went the robot's footfalls, barely audible over the rumble of the carriage wheels, as black unchecked forest growth whipped by on either side of the old track.

Samara tried to put together a map in her head. Comumant was somewhere well to the east—that meant they'd eventually come down out of the hills and join the metal-surfaced Jii Highway that ran all the way to Lith, though most of its length was impassable in these days. Some portions of the Highway still drew power from atomic slugs buried deep beneath the earth, and could share that bounty with the carriage-pulling android to increase its speed. That was good.

She needed to make her report, but a kind of jittery restlessness made the thought of taking up pen and paper loathsome in that moment. She knew its source very well, of course; it was the getimian accelerant still cooking its way out of her system. A good rule of thumb for alchemy was that a potion would linger inert in the body for at least twice as long as its period of efficacy, but the accelerant had an even longer cook-through time than most; it would take at least until sunrise to fully purge it.

Samara sighed. The night harbored no kindness for those that procrastinated in taking care of essentials, and so she made herself drag over both her satchel and her alchemy case. The latter was a large wood-framed box wrapped in soft stitched leather, with shoulder straps Samara had long ago converted to a shoulder-sling, so that she could wear it at the same time as her sword harness. The weight would have made any normal person walk with a hilarious drunken side-stagger, but it didn't pose a problem for a dhampir.

She unlatched it and lifted it open, revealing row upon row of gleaming bottles nestled in crushed velvet recesses. Samara dropped the numbing and ironhide concoctions back into their proper slots, then followed them with the empty getimian vial. Perhaps a third of the bottles in front of her were empty now, and the getimian accelerant she'd used tonight had been her last dose. She was going to need to restock soon.

She relatched the case and stowed it carefully in the floorboard, where even a violent bump would give it little room to shift. Then she spent the next half-hour in hunter's ritual, laying out her pistol and her cleaning kit: break the machine, clean the machine, oil the machine, re-assemble the machine; last of all, feed the machine, her fingers pushing in one bullet after another until all six chambers were ready to

spit death again. Good. Then she examined the dagger, forward-curving, heavy-bladed, made to survive the shock of severing bone without immediately dulling its edge. Immaculate. Oil the steel anyway, wipe it dry, seat it back into its scabbard. Check the loads in the gunbelt. Check the straps. Check the buckles. Check everything.

When her world was confirmed to be all as it should be, Samara settled back into the seat again. She wanted to sleep, to make the miles vanish into the throat of dreams, but couldn't, not with the accelerant twisting its way through her. So she simply let her head loll to the side, and watched the scenery. The montage of nodding branches and crouching bushes gushed past like clouds blown before a storm, a crazy-quilt tumble of foliage and shadows that would have been nothing more than murk and ambiguity to human eyes. Samara's eyes, not human, had dilated to become two great pits ringed with the slightest tinge of gold, and they drank in the feeble starlight, showing her a nightscape rendered in fully coherent blues and grays and fine gradations of black. She tried to put aside the nervous energy winding its way through her body and appreciate the sight. Few people traveled at all in this age, and even fewer still could do so at night. She tried to summon an appreciation of the opportunity before her, that she could witness a kind of beauty mostly known only to monsters.

But in truth, one tree looked much like another.

Hours passed before the attack came. That's how it was, traveling the Territories: monotony spreading itself so thin that tension became banal, spilling suddenly into life-or-death struggle. Her head had dropped against her shoulder, and her eyes fallen closed. Sleep was no closer, but she'd at least achieved relaxation. Then a howl sawed into her. It was a high, rasping, hideous sound, like a woman being murdered, like the catastrophic failure of machinery, like a hound baying, all at once. It gushed into her, an icy torrent. Samara's eyes snapped open, unfocused, watering, even as her muscles clenched and seized. Her feet stamped against the floorboard, driving her up off the seat and dropping her, once, twice.

The howl abated. Her heart galloped, blood pounding in her temples, and her limbs quivered momentarily before she could still them. Her spine ached from the violence of her reaction. She'd never heard nor felt anything like it before. She forced her hand across the coach, steadied it against the butt of her pistol, and shoved the door open.

Firmly grasping the carriage frame with one hand, Samara leaned out into the night. She saw the beast immediately—a huge thing like a black hound, cutting down out of the now-sparsely wooded hills and onto the dirt track not far behind the carriage. It was no earthly dog, of course—the monster was nearly the size of a donkey, brutally muscled, with great hanging jowls and deep red horns jutting from behind its ears. *Barghest*, she thought. She'd never seen one before, but between its howl and its horns it could be nothing else. The dhampir leveled her pistol, squeezed off three shots. Either they missed their mark, or they didn't bother the horror in the least. Its muscles surged with the exertion of trying to run down the robot-pulled carriage, and she saw its great barrel chest expand. Samara threw herself back into her seat at the last moment.

The howl tore into her again. As she had feared, the pistol tumbled from her seizing hands into the floorboard, but better there than into the road. Her teeth slammed together, her eyes bulged. Had the carriage been horse-drawn she knew the barghest would be on her already, but its terrible baying left the robot untroubled. She tried to fight the convulsions this time, to brace herself, perhaps retrieve the

gun, but found herself powerless to do anything but ride out the horrible force ravaging her nerves and muscles.

Finally the howl died away. Samara forced her eyes open, found them staring at her alchemy case. It held a potion intended to protect the imbiber from exactly this sort of attack. Silver henscap distillation. Efficacious for eighteen to twenty hours. But there was a delay of about ten minutes between drinking the potion and its effects taking hold, and besides, the hunter was still purging getimian accelerant from her system. No help there.

She curled forward and retrieved her gun, waves of nausea passing through her. Grabbed the door frame, levered herself back out again. The barghest was running all out, its tiny eyes fixed on her, thick ropes of saliva lathering its jaws. Samara braced herself against the carriage, aimed down her arm. The barghest was chasing the carriage. She settled the revolver against its frame. Take guesswork out of the situation. She could hear the monster's iron-bellows panting. She squeezed the trigger three more times, letting the recoil work itself out between shots. This time she had results; the monster staggered sideways, rolled in the dirt of the road. It was back up in moments, but there was something uneven in its gait. She wasn't sure where she'd hit it, or how many times, but knew now at least that some of her lead had found its mark. "Robot! Can you outrun this thing?"

The android's head swiveled so that its one bright eye regarded her while its dim eye kept the course of the dirt track in view. "I couldn't say for certain, ma'am, but rest assured I will do my best."

Samara found no further opportunity for questions. The barghest had slowed down to drag in another mammoth breath. She tossed the pistol back into the carriage, and dived in after it just before a third howl sent her sunfishing into the floorboard, head banging against the alchemy case, heels kicking all the way out of the door.

*Fuck this thing*, she tried to say when the attack passed, but only a shaky moan came out. Samara braced a foot against the running board, sat up, peered out. The barghest was falling behind rapidly now, the android-drawn carriage pulling well ahead. She thought she might have shot one of its legs. She thought of retrieving her blade, disembarking to fight it now that it was wounded. Instead she drew the door shut, curled into the floor, and pushed the heels of her palms against her ears as hard as she could.

There was one more howl before the monster gave up the chase and, presumably, went loping back up into its hunting grounds. It was faint enough that Samara merely shivered through it.

Comumant. Whatever was going on in Comumant, it had better be urgent.

She lay in the floor for a while after that, unloaded gun sitting on her belly, watching the light slanting in through the carriage's window mesh go from blue to mauve to ghost-pink. She wondered if she was going to be sick, but never was. She considered that there were reasons even dhampirs usually didn't travel by night. And then, finally, she reminded herself: *The night holds no kindness for the unprepared*. It was getting to be morning, but the principle still held. She sat up, resumed her seat. And then, as she'd been taught to do after every firing, she broke the machine, cleaned the machine, fed the machine. That done, she looked out the window.

She could see that the land lay at a very gradual slope, suspected it had done so for hours. The carriage must have descended several hundred feet in elevation during the night. Fir and pines had thinned out, giving way to lonely patches of dog oak and river laurel dotting wide rolling hills of dew-slick grass. The sun was still a jubilant rumor beyond the horizon, but it had unfurled its rose-and-crimson standard across the sky in anticipation of its arrival. Samara could feel the weight of its rays pressing upon the curvature of the planet, drawing closer, imminent like wildfire. She realized her limbs were no longer tense with the aftereffects of alchemy, instead growing heavy with exhaustion.

She drew the blackout curtains, plunging the carriage into a comfortable, stifling darkness. The dhampir closed her eyes before they could adjust to even the miniscule pittance of light that remained. A few minutes later, she was asleep.

## RIDING TO COMUMANT

### —*The Jii Highway, Afternoon*

A shift in the motion of the carriage brought her awake. There was no violent rocking, no imbalance or drastic slowing, and so Samara drifted in the warm darkness behind her closed eyes, giving herself time to tease out what had changed.

It was a smoothness to the ride, she finally decided. The carriage no longer juddered and bumped its way across packed dirt, but was running now on some flat and even surface. Which meant they'd reached the Jii Highway.

She stretched and drew the nearer curtain, blinking at the daylight. The morning's hills had flattened out to great expanses of grassland, bowing in waves before a rhythmic eastern wind. This stretch, in particular, was short-cropped in a way that suggested cows. The dhampir pressed her cheek to the mesh. "Robot. Are we in farm country?"

The creak of the wheels would have made her words inaudible to a living driver, but the machine picked her up clearly. Its voice crackled as it responded: "We passed a cattle herd not an hour ago, ma'am, and there are fields less than two miles to the north and also to the south."

"Mm. And waystations?"

"An hour after sunrise. Signage indicates we should reach another before two hours are out. However, begging your pardon, I was instructed to convey you to Comumant without delay."

Much as sturdy walls and a bed that didn't rock and jounce would have suited her at that moment, Samara had expected as much. "Very well. And any trouble?"

"A trio of hellkites circled down to inspect this conveyance some time ago, but departed without incident. Smooth running otherwise, ma'am."

"Very well. Pull over for a minute."

There was nothing around the carriage. Samara knew there was nothing around the carriage; the robot's sensors would have picked up any meaningful threat, even something as paltry as a venomous snake. Still, she strapped on her gunbelt before opening the door, and quickly looked left, right, and up before stepping out. The training of a lifetime was not to be ignored, and she'd have felt worse than naked to be unarmed under the open sky.

Her heels chimed on the surface of the Jii Highway, which was a glossy, unblemished ribbon of shining chrome holding a squirming, liquid reflection of the afternoon sun against its surface. The road stretched away as far as the eye could see behind her to the west, and as far again before her to the east. Comumant lay on that path, still nearly four hundred miles away by her reckoning.

She took in a deep breath, filling her lungs with grass, sun-warmed earth, and the tang of hot metal. It was a good change of pace from the gun-oil and cotton stuffing suffusing the carriage. She wondered, momentarily, what sort of horrors haunted these sunny fields and the farming communities that cropped them, and if she would be called back this way to do her work after the business in Comumant concluded.

*Won't know until I get there and see what's going on*, she reminded herself.

A few minutes later, necessities tended to, Samara re-embarked, and the robot began jogging down the Jii Highway once again.

Samara half-drew the curtains, leaving enough room for sunlight to brighten the carriage without falling directly upon her. She'd grown up in the sun, and took the same comfort from it as anyone else in the Territories; but something in her blood grew slow and recalcitrant at its touch, and like most dhampirs, she tried to minimize her exposure. She retrieved her canteen, cut the dryness out of her mouth with one sip, then after a moment's debate drained what remained from it. Digging in her pack turned up only one apple, cadged from the mayor of Hennic Town's dining room table. That served her for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; a few minutes later she cracked the carriage door and sent the core tumbling out onto the road.

The first order of business in Comumant was going to be supper, she decided, the school's urgent business be damned.

Then, having run out of necessities to tend to, Samara delved into her traveling case again and drew out a sheaf of papers, a writing slate, and a charcoal pencil wrapped in badly-smudged ribbon. No sense putting off her report on Hennic any longer, not that there was much to report. It had been a three-day job, mostly consisting of scouting the lay of the hills above town and mapping the locations of the trolls' raids to guesstimate the most likely place to begin searching for their lair. She'd imposed on the mayor's wife to feed her while on the job, but otherwise accumulated no expenses of note. Expended resources amounted to six bullets, a getimian accelerant, and one blood ampoule. The nebulously estimated "pack" of trolls had amounted to three individuals, including one larger silverback. Two nearly-complete effigies had been disrupted. All in all, it would make a tidy profit for the school and provoke a great deal of complaining from the folk of Hennic—but not so much as the cost of five trolls ravaging their livestock and homes unchecked.

After a bit of thought, Samara appended a note about the barghest attack on the trail leading from Hennic to the Jii Highway. She'd expended another six rounds in wounding it, after all, and Chapterhouse Weir might be able to find a client in the area willing to pay for the beast's extermination. It was apt to cost someone hell in lost shipping and devoured relatives, otherwise.

Samara looked at the sheets. Her report, laid down in staggering block letters, covered two sheets of paper front and back, and half of the front side of a third. It left a great deal to be desired in penmanship, she knew, but she was sure it was without spelling or punctuation mistakes. Satisfied, she enclosed it in a rain-resistant leather folder, bound it with a ribbon, and tossed it into the opposite seat. The robot would make sure the report found its way back to the nearest chapterhouse after she reached Comumant.

There wasn't much to do after that but watch the scenery roll by, which suited Samara well enough. The land rose gently to the right of the metal roadway, showing mostly vast expanses of grass dotted with stands of low trees bent into conspiratorial copses. Sometimes there were fields, startling bounds of right-angled plow-lines breaking up the rounded monotony of the landscape. Even more rarely there were towns and villages, hidden behind their palisades and occasional mud-brick walls. Now and then, finger-thin poles rose up to flank the road, standing half again as tall as a man and made of the same



shining chrome as the highway itself. Samara soon stopped wondering at their purpose and began to resent the spars of sunlight they reflected into her face.

Around mid-afternoon they passed the waystation the robot had spoken of: a three-story wood-frame building topped with a lookout deck, surrounded by a twenty-foot wall of reinforced timbers forming a large, squared courtyard capable of sheltering an entire merchant caravan for the night. Samara spotted a woman in a faded work apron standing on the deck, her left hand cradling a rust-pitted single-shot rifle against her opposite shoulder, where an empty sleeve was pinned up. Her face was expressionless as the carriage passed, and then the waystation fell into the distance behind them. Samara reflected that it surely contained food as well as a bed.

The grass grew higher and sparser as the day wore on, and its hue shifted from green to yellow. A drove of hares, startled by the carriage's approach, erupted from a stand of high grass at one point. Later, far out into the expanse of what was quickly becoming dry sere prairie, a geyser of dirt fired high into the air. Something like a great lashing hose thrashed about in its midst—some sort of monstrous worm, likely finding its supper. It was too far away for Samara to make a guess as to what it might be with any greater specificity.

As the sun began nodding down toward the horizon, the carriage swept by a depression where the land sloped down to a small pond less than a mile away, and Samara was momentarily tempted to call a halt to refill her canteen. Then she noticed the dozen or so figures in a staggered procession stretching from the pond's shore toward the road. The nearest of them, stumbling in the long slanted rays of afternoon, was only a few yards from the road. It was a man in a homespun tunic and stitched pants, waving as he came on at a drunken stagger. "Hey!" the man yelled. "Hey there, the wagon! We could use a hand! Hey, stop!"

The robot did not stop, nor did Samara try to make it. Even before the man spoke, her nostrils wrinkled as they picked up the sweet-sour reek of spoiled meat. She knew the black stains under the man's armpit and down the side of his shirt and pants were old blood, and, squinting just a bit, was able to pick out the botfly larvae squirming in the man's scalp and cheek. The others, shuffling after him, were equally dead. "Hey!" the man called, milky eyes not even focused on the carriage but rather fixed straight forward as his head swept aimlessly from side to side, trying to track the sound of wheels and mechanical footfalls, "Hey wait! Don't just ride on!"

Samara rode on. The figures didn't even know they were dead, but if she stopped they'd try to tear her limb from limb and devour her as soon as she disembarked. The hungry dead were perhaps the most prosaic threat of the Territories. Any child learned not to approach them long before being taught to count.

Samara grew tired of watching the road after that. The sun was starting to make her head ache and her skin prickle anyway. She drew the blackout curtains and settled back, alone with herself in the dark, only the rumble of the wheels and the *clink clink clink* of the robot's footfalls on the metal surface of the Jii Highway to keep her company. She considered masturbating to pass the time, but the sight of the shuffling corpses had put her out of the mood.

Instead she spent a while thinking about food, aware even as she did so that it was a foolish thing to do, given that her boots were the only thing in the carriage even theoretically edible. She thought about a

pepper stew she'd had while tracking a lesser basilisk in Quora (which had turned out to be lairing in and moving through the old feudal-era sewers under the town), a revelation to her palette. She'd sought strong spices after that on the rare occasions when the opportunity arose, and brightened at remembering that the regions east of Comumant were known for peppers of reputedly exceptional potency. She wondered if her business might take her there after her work concluded, or if she'd be sent drifting back west or south again.

Hours came and went, in which Samara tried to mentally catalogue the remaining concoctions in her alchemy case and to remember where she'd expended each of the missing ones before finally unbuckling the case to check her estimates. She'd been close to perfect in her reckoning, having only forgotten to account for the featherlight tonic she'd used while hunting a wendigo almost three months ago. It wasn't the wendigo itself she'd needed the tonic for, but rather the entropy worms that infested the forest where the monster laired, which were enticed to attack by nearby footsteps. Awful things, those, products of the Warlock's twisted imagination and blessedly rare. They were, Samara was given to understand, not even properly worms, but rather some even more primitive sort of creature, resting inert just below the surface of the ground as long ropy strands of bizarre protein chains. When triggered into attack they lashed about, individual surface cells undergoing some impossible, hypergravitic contraction until they became devouring pits that sucked in and destroyed matter. Whatever an entropy worm whipped its stringy body through simply ceased to exist. They were nearly impossible to kill in their active state, as they devoured blades, bullets, and many forms of coherent energy as easily as flesh or soil, and were best simply avoided.

Samara quirked an eyebrow as the robot's steps picked up tempo—*clankclankclank!*—and drew aside the blackout curtains.

It was night now, stars gleaming in a cloud-scudded sky, and Samara gasped as another of those metal poles swept past her window. No longer chrome, it glowed with a soft, steady blue-white light. Nor, she saw, craning her head to peer down the road, was it alone; the other poles gleamed with the same gentle radiance, turning the Jii Highway into a river of light cutting across the dry ebon gulf of the Territories. They must be on a stretch of road still connected to a functioning atomic slug, drawing slow but vast power from the infinitesimal decay of a battery designed to outlast human comprehension. "Robot, are you connected to the road's power grid?"

"Indeed, ma'am. It has permitted me to increase my pace by a quarter."

She was never sure what prompted her next question. Boredom, most likely. "How does it feel?"

There was a moment's silence as the android processed the question, relays clicking behind its blank steel face. At length, it finally replied: "I feel powerful, ma'am."

Then it was Samara's turn to sit in silence, turning that over. Finally: "Carry on, robot." She settled back, leaving the curtain open and watching light splash across the carriage in rhythmic back-to-front pulses.

It was a long night, punctuated by short periods of thin sleep. They dropped in and out of the power network as they went, moving through increasingly long stretches where the poles were simply dead chromed pillars again, as the robot ran onward to Comumant.

## SETTING TERMS

### —*Comumant, Noon*

Lukas Giles squinted up at the high blue anvil of the midday sky, banded in cirrus strips which did nothing to reduce the hammer-heat of the sun. He was standing in the secure paddock by the train station his employer owned, not sweating through some act of fundamental stubbornness. He fished a watch out of his waistcoat pocket, checked it, grunted, and returned it. It had been twenty minutes since a runner from the high look-out tower over Comumant's central square had informed him that his wagon was returning down the Jii Highway. There was a tension in his gut, but mostly an impatience. Two days of delay in the running of the Ironside Express was already a painful expense. The sooner the rail line's problem was resolved, the better.

†

It was curious, Samara thought with a kind of detached half-interest. A horse-drawn wagon had been waiting for her, blocking the approach to the town. The fellow who'd met her, armed with a truly ancient heat rifle and impressively long mustaches, wasn't the one who'd called on the school to send a hunter, but he claimed to have been sent to convey her to that person. Discretion, it seemed, was to be as much a priority as speed, and whoever had called her to Comumant didn't want a robot-drawn carriage marked with the Darrow crest in town.

That was well enough by Samara; she'd loaded her things into the wagon, stowing her sword down out of sight against the running floor, and then sent the robot on its way.

Comumant loomed on approach in a different manner than most places Samara had been. It had its defensive wall, sure enough, but that wall was made of corrugated tin sheets and bits of iron fencing and rusty steel plates all bound and riveted and welded together to form a haphazard but undoubtedly solid barrier. What buildings she could see tended to stucco fronts and tin roofs, and the whole arrangement was dominated by an iron pole jutting high up above the town, topped with an observation deck. When they arrived, the town gates shuddered open under electric power, and Samara saw that the streets were lined with digital-circuit lamps. Someone had sunk significant resources into the town's establishment and upkeep over time, and she supposed this made sense. Comumant was the last great town of this part of the central Territories, and the gateway to Lith.

She put aside her curiosity and tried to simply enjoy the ride, though the heat and light of mid-day made it something of an effort. There was plenty to see, after all. The town's prefab core constructions were much more extensive than those of Hennic Town and its brethren, boxy and domed plastic structures weaving their way intermittently throughout Comumant's many streets, and most seemed in much better upkeep. What caught her attention most of all, though, were the people. The folk of Comumant trended to being tall with rounded features, the men favoring shirt-sleeves and suspenders, the women dresses with straps rather than sleeves. Their hair was almost universally black, and many folks of both sexes had adorned a single fore- or side-lock with some manner of dye or paint; red, blue, and gold were all common highlights. Most striking, though, was their complexion; most of the people on the street were dark-skinned, running from lighter shades of brown all the way down to near-ebon. It wasn't that Samara had never seen the like before—her shooting master at Cleya had been so colored—but that

she'd never seen them fill street after street. She wondered if everyone looked like this from here on east.

The wagon cut a smooth, businesslike track through the town, and Samara saw that they were heading toward the train depot. But rather than stopping to disembark, the driver pulled around the side of the building, through a fence manned by a large fellow in a blue jacket, and along into a recessed paddock. There Samara found a large, severe-looking man standing before a small collection of folk in similar blue livery—rail-workers, if Samara was any judge.

To business, then.

†

Giles was about to loosen his collar—the most concession he was willing to give to the heat of the day—when he heard the paddock gate rattle open, and the clop of hooves. The wagon soon appeared, and his expression hardened into a small frown. This is what he saw:

A figure scanned the paddock and then hopped down from the passenger bench. From the ground up: heavy boots, sun-faded pants tucked into them, a gunbelt over an old black shirt left unbuttoned at the neck, all topped off with a wide-brimmed black traveler's hat. Beneath all that, a woman who failed to quite come up to Giles's chin. She had skin nearly as white as paper, punctuated by yellow eyes that put him in mind of an owl. Black lining underscored each eye, deepening his frown—he had not expected the hunter to arrive done up as though for a bordello. Black hair fell to the middle of her back in a sheet. Her features were fine, delicately proportioned with heavy lashes and an artist's lines—it would not have been wrong to call her beautiful, even. She was, especially in Comumant, anything but unobtrusive.

He was about to speak when she turned her back to him. Knitted brows joined his frown. The woman began hauling things down from the wagon: a travel satchel with a smaller satchel affixed to it, what looked like a circuit doctor's medicine case, and then—his eyes widened a bit—an enormous sword in a metal-and-leather harness, which she began shrugging into. "Wait," Giles said at that.

The woman paused, then laid her blade across the top of the alchemy case. "I was told this was a matter of some urgency. Are you the one who contacted the school?"

"It is," Giles rumbled, "and I am. It is also a matter of some delicacy—I would like to conclude our business without everyone in the Territories knowing *my* business, if you take my meaning."

The woman—the dhampir—glanced down at the blade, nearly as big as she was, but all she said was: "Mm."

Everyone in the Territories heard stories about the hunting schools and their home-grown monsters, but Giles had to admit this wasn't what he'd envisioned. Still, he'd never have attained or held his position if he wasn't able to make do with personnel of lesser substance than he would have preferred, and so he took a breath and stepped forward. "I'm Lukas Giles. It is my business to represent the interests of Mr. Carthage Baines here in Comumant. Are you familiar with Mr. Baines?"

"No," the dhampir said.

“Mr. Baines resides in Lith. He is the owner of a number of properties and businesses, largest among them this railroad. I am employing you on his behalf, to remove an urgent threat to his interests.”

The woman simply kept watching him, those dark-rimmed eyes gleaming in the shadows under her hat. Finally: “I stepped from the end of one job directly into a carriage and was sent here with all dispatch. All I know is that someone needed me here in a hurry. You’ll have to outline your problem, Mr. Giles; the school didn’t have time to brief me before I left.”

“I see. Well, that’s fair enough. I contacted the Darrow school two days ago via the station’s radio transmitter, and I *was* quite specific in needing the best specialist they had for the job as soon as they could possibly send him. Or, as it turns out, her, I suppose.” He cleared his throat and reached into his vest, drawing an envelope from an inner pocket. “Before you get down to work, let’s first settle the matter of your employment. On behalf of Mr. Baines, I’m prepared to offer up to two hundred thousand pentas for the resolution of—”

“No,” the woman said. “Sorry, no. Stop. That’s not how this works.”

†

She’d had a feeling this was how it was going to go since the man identified himself. Mayors were one thing; businessmen were always an entirely different, and often much thornier, brand of client. Samara drew in a breath (hot, dusty; she regretted it immediately) and prepared her temper for the trial it was surely about to undergo.

Lukas Giles was momentarily frozen in front of her. She could see he was not used to being interrupted, and even less so to being corrected. “I beg your pardon?” he finally said, not lowering the envelope.

Samara glanced around the paddock. The station was enormous, servicing, at her guess, several automated cargo lines as well as the famous Ironside Express. It was a big operation, and she thought it would be curious if something of such scope ran smoothly all the time, life in the Territories being what it was. “Is this the first time Mr. Baines has employed one of the schools, Mr. Giles?”

Giles frowned. She could see him making the momentary, reflexive calculation: to reveal his employer’s business, or conceal it? But he said: “No. Eighteen years ago, the railroad hired a hunter from the Darrow school. My father was Mr. Baines’s acting agent at the time, however. I wasn’t involved in the transaction. And our current problem has no relation to that incident.”

*The transaction.* “I see. Well, Mr. Giles, allow me to clarify things, then. I don’t handle money. I don’t set fees or sign contracts with clients. That isn’t my function; I’ve been sent here, I presume, to kill something. After I’m done with that, someone from the Darrow school will arrive and they’ll draw up a bill.”

Giles scowled. “Madam—”

“Samara,” Samara said. “Samara Darrow.”

“Ms... Darrow, then. I’m not in the habit of issuing blank checks for uncertain services.”

“The school’s fee is what it is, Mr. Giles. It will be based on the difficulty and duration of the job, the resources I have to spend getting it done, and of course the school will deduct from the total any costs

incurred on your behalf by my presence. I can't offer you an estimate; school finances aren't my business and I hardly pay attention to them. The total may be less than your two hundred thousand pentas. It may be significantly higher. It is what it is."

"That is not," Giles said, voice and face both tight with anger, "how Mr. Baines expects me to conduct business on his behalf."

"Well, Mr. Giles, I haven't started work yet. You're certainly still free to decide to deal with whatever your problem is on your own. But if I take on the job, then the school's fee is non-negotiable, and once its agent arrives he or she will expect to collect payment in full."

"And what happens if the school's price doesn't fall within a range my employer would consider reasonable for the task in question?"

Samara tilted her head. She wanted to smile, but didn't. "Nothing. I move on to my next job. The Darrow school doesn't extort payments through violence, Mr. Giles. But we will spread word of the default through the Society. No school will ever accept another contract with you. No school will accept any sort of contract from anyone else living in Comumant either, for that matter. No school will accept any sort of contract with anyone who does business with Carthage Baines, or his children or grandchildren, until the outstanding fee is paid."

They faced each other in silence for a moment then, Giles's thumb pressing hard against the envelope the dhampir hadn't even yet glanced toward. Samara regarded him with the same bland patience she displayed when waiting for sundown, for a beast to emerge from its lair, for her destination to appear over the horizon.

+

Giles tried to smother his rising temper in ice. The woman might have arrived painted for saloon-hall or decorative cotillion, but he hadn't felt any give in her at all.

Her claim that the Darrow school didn't practice extortion was laughable. No settlement anywhere in the world could survive indefinitely without the use of the schools that made up the Huntsman's Society. People managed the least horrors of the Territories every day—hellkites, walking corpses, hissing dogs—but the world held many other monsters that ordinary human beings simply couldn't fight. Only the hybrid creatures produced by the schools were capable of the task. Were Giles to deprive Comumant of their services, being sacked by Mr. Baines would be the least of his concerns. The town would scrape together the funds to pay whatever exorbitant fee the Darrow School demanded by hook or by crook, and he'd be lucky if they only burned his home down by way of reprisal.

At the same time, he knew the matter at hand had to be settled, and immediately. No one would ride a train with a vampire hiding on it, certainly not for the prices the Ironside commanded.

*Papa must have made this same deal 18 years ago, Lukas told himself. That worked out for the best, in the end.*

Giles exhaled and returned the envelope to his vest. "Very well, Ms. Darrow. Thank you for... clarifying the school's unusual practice."

The dhampir offered a thin smile. "None needed, Mr. Giles. So, do you have work for me?"

"I do," he said. "To cut directly to the heart of the matter, we have a vampire problem, and so I asked the school to send the best vampire hunter they had at their disposal."

"Ah," Samara said. "That's why they sent me so far for this job, then."

"You've experience in killing vampires, I take it?"

"I've taken four contracts to do so in the past. This would be the fifth."

Giles wasn't able to conceal his dismay. "Only four? Ms. Darrow... I'm given to understand a dhampir's appearance may not reflect her age. May I ask how long you've been doing this work?"

If she took offense, she gave no display. "I've been a fully graduated circuit hunter for seven years, Mr. Giles. You thought perhaps I was a decades-seasoned crone masquerading as a pretty girl? No. But perhaps this will set you more at ease: There are very few things more difficult to hunt than a vampire. Across all the schools, the average rate of successful hunts is only one in three where they're concerned. But I killed my quarry in all four of the contracts I just mentioned. That's not just a better success rate than anyone else in this part of the Territories, it's a higher kill count as well."

Giles spent a moment processing that. If the woman spoke true—and he suspected she did, simply because he saw no indication she gave a damn what he thought of her in any particular—then this was indeed the best tool for the job he was going to get. "I see. Well then." Giles waved a man forward from the small group behind him, and Anders Henge stepped up. "This is Mr. Henge, head of security for the Ironside Express. He'll explain most of the particulars of the job, as he's best qualified to do so. I have only one specific requirement I need to express first. After that, I'll let you get to it."

Samara nodded. "And what is that, Mr. Giles?"

"The vampire has already killed, and it has done so in a way that would undermine the reputation of Mr. Baines's business if it were to become public knowledge. We need it eliminated before it kills again, Ms. Darrow, and we need you to act with the utmost discretion while on the job. In short, we need this vampire dispatched without anyone outside of the railroad's employment learning that you are hunting it, or that it exists at all."

+

Samara put on a grave expression calculated to suit Giles's professional sensibilities. "Mr. Giles, I understand you completely. There are of course no certainties in a hunt, but I believe I can get the job done without exposing your trouble to public scrutiny."

What she was thinking was: *If he wants to get rid of a vampire on a rushed deadline and without making a ruckus out of it, he'd better have a hell of a lot more than two hundred thousand pentas stashed away for this job.*

The dhampir smiled and reached out to shake on the deal. After only a heartbeat's hesitation, Giles's much larger hand swallowed her own.

## WORDS OVER A BODY

### —*Comumant, Afternoon*

Citing business, Giles departed a moment later. Samara repeated her handshake and introduction with Mr. Henge, a broad-shouldered man with the first threads of gray at his temples. “If you’ll follow me, Ms. Darrow, I’ll acquaint you with the details of the job.”

Following Anders Henge onto the grounds of the railyard was much like trailing behind a cliff wearing a steam-pressed shirt. Samara found her eyes drawn immediately to the knife on his belt—forward-angled, heavy-bladed, nearly a twin to her own dagger. She noticed they weren’t heading toward the terminal, but rather into a set of side-rails and finally to a large wooden shack closed up tight with chains and a stout lock. STAY OUT: DANGEROUS CHEMICALS had been painted across the door. It was here that Henge and his small group stopped, well out of earshot or even line of sight of anyone save the riflemen on the distant terminal roof.

“I’ve taken the liberty,” Henge began, “of gathering those personnel I thought might be of use in your investigation. You can expect full cooperation from all of us, of course. If I might be permitted to make introductions?”

Samara tilted her head, feeling the sun pressing its hot heavy hand against her back. In addition to Anders Henge, she was looking at a group of three men and a woman. “Please do.”

Henge indicated the first of the men, no taller than Samara but twice as broad, with long dangling powerful arms and a bald spot that had erased all but a fringe of hair. “Henshaw Crook, chief engineer of the Ironside Express. It’s his business to keep the train running and to be intimately familiar with its technical anatomy. He’s probably contributed more to our preparations for your arrival than anyone else.”

Curious. Samara had expected to meet the usual suspects—mayor, sheriff, bereaved spouse. An engineer? “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Crook.”

Crook had no answering pleasantry, and so Henge moved on to the next man in the group. “This is Dr. Wells, the Ironside Express’s resident physician and surgeon. If there are any sort of... preventative or medicinal measures to be taken in the course of your work, Dr. Wells is here to ensure that you’re supplied or supported adequately.”

Samara smiled and nodded. Wells had a face like an old walnut, its seams currently folded into an expression of poorly-concealed curiosity. This was a bit more along the standard lines of her work. Many folks in the Territories held some half-remembered certainty that there were prophylactic measures to be taken against vampires: certain injections into the blood to prevent infection, or talismans and herbal remedies to keep them at bay. Garlic cloves were common, as were rose petals, fresh honeysuckle vines, peeled oranges, rotten eggs, the finger-bones of revered ancestors, and horse manure. None were the slightest bit effective. A vampire’s sense of smell was incredibly acute, but no odor could deter it from seeking out blood, no matter how powerful or offensive. Smearing horse shit over a door would only disgust the creature. Still, it never paid to insult a man of medicine. “Thank you then, Dr. Wells.”

“Of course,” Wells said. “I only hope to be of some help.”



Henge cleared his throat, nodded to the man standing directly next to him: middle-aged, solidly built but inclining to the beginnings of fat, with a blue-dyed streak above his right ear. The crow's feet around his eyes were sunk deep as the tracks of old dry rivers. "Mr. Henry Lucen is the conductor of the Ironside Express. If the train is a ship, think of him as its captain. Any unusual and unexpected needs that arise, he can authorize on your behalf."

Henge's tone indicated not only that the man was his superior, but also a figure of some personal respect. Samara wasn't surprised. The train was worth more than everything else in Comumant put together; no common man would have been placed in charge of its operation. She offered her hand again, and Lucen briefly touched it.

Finally Henge turned to the sole woman in the group, standing to the back of the gathering. She was wearing the black-and-blue livery of the railroad Samara had seen several times on the way into the terminal, modified from vest-and-pants into vest-and-skirt-with-leggings. Hair done into careful ringlets and highlighted with a gold-painted forelock framed a face that had been smashed by what could only be days of consecutive exhaustion. "Finally, this is Ms. Rachel Coll. She is the Ironside Express's junior guest liaison director—that is to say, she oversees guest services during the train's night shift."

*No mayor, no sheriff, no red-eyed widower. Strange.* "Well," Samara said, "I'm certainly very pleased to meet you, Ms. Coll, but I'm afraid Mr. Henge has neglected to mention what role you're to play in my work. Perhaps you could enlighten me."

Rachel's mouth had no more than begun to open when Henge said: "Of course, forgive me. Ms. Coll found the latest body, and has some... personal knowledge that has guided us thus far. I also have a mind to make her your point of contact once the investigation is underway—your general assistant, I mean to say. Her nerves are steady and frankly, she's the first person in the train's chain of operation we can spare for the task." The woman didn't even register a flicker of irritation at being spoken for. She just looked tired.

Samara peered at Anders Henge, then at the shack. DANGEROUS CHEMICALS. "I feel like something's not adding up, begging pardon. I'm to kill a vampire here in Comumant, am I not? Has it been killing people in the terminal?"

Henge and the conductor exchanged a look. "Not quite, Ms. Darrow," the head of security said. "Let's speak inside."

†

Lukas Giles, watching the small gathering from the windows of the terminal's second floor, let out a long-held breath when Henge finally unlocked the shed and led the dhampir inside. They'd seemed to loiter about making introductions forever.

His eyes drifted from the shack to the slumbering behemoth that was the Ironside Express, still sitting quiescent at the boarding platform after two days. The sight of the massive train so long idle struck a chord of deep unease into him, perhaps even deeper than the knowledge that somewhere not a hundred yards from where he stood there was undoubtedly a dead man sleeping, waiting for the sun's departure to release it from slumber to go about seeking blood.

Still: he had played his part. The hunter was hired. Tasks had been delegated to the best of his ability. Giles didn't ruminant on the deeper importance of the Ironside's function for the territories and Lith. He didn't think of himself as a vital chain in the continuance of human endeavor in a wide carnivorous world. He hadn't been raised that way; such understanding was innate, handed down from father to son, and required contemplation only from faint-hearted dullards. He had executed this job to the best of his ability.

Lukas Giles put his back to the glass, and left the terminal. There was work to be done in the prairie tonight, and rough men he needed to hire to carry it out.

†

The faint sweet smell of nitroglycerin lanced into Samara's nostrils as soon as she stepped into the shed. She hoped they wouldn't be there for long; already it felt like someone had planted the seed of two headaches in her sinuses. Henge walked to the middle of the shack and pulled a string attached to a battered tin cone, and a moment later electric light filled the room, whose walls were stacked high with various unmarked crates. The entire group ignored them. Everyone's attention was, of course, focused on the rough-made coffin in the middle of the shed, bound shut with chains.

Samara waited. There was no need for questions, these people were eager to speak.

Anders Henge cleared his throat. "This is the latest victim. As I said, Ms. Coll found the body—we've been following her advice on its... disposal, thus far."

"Mostly following it," Coll said.

Dr. Wells cleared his throat, and Henshaw Crook snorted. Henge was quiet for just a moment, then said: "Mostly, yes. Mr. Giles wanted us to preserve the bite wounds in case there was something you might learn from them."

"I told them to cut its head off right away," Rachel Coll said, clearly unhappy at even being in the room.

Samara didn't blame her. "How long have you been keeping this body here, Mr. Henge?"

"In this shack? About 48 hours. But it's been dead for almost five days, now."

"Two days in a hot shack," Samara mused. "I smell high-explosives in here, Mr. Henge, but not spoiling meat. It should stink bad enough to hit you like a fist when the door opens, but it doesn't. Ms. Coll is right, you should have cut its head off." She took off her wide-brimmed traveling hat, knocked the road dust off of it against her leg. "Well, since the bite is still there anyway, let's look at it. Open 'er up, if you would please."

Rachel Coll spoke as the head of security knelt and began unchaining the coffin. "My folks come from the Pans, south of here—you know them?"

Samara nodded. The Pans were a series of alpine river valleys running through the Panhead Mountain range, marked by extravagant hardwoods, crushing poverty, and truly severe vampire infestations. "I've never been there, but yes. I know them by reputation."

Rachel's lips quirked in a bitter grin. Even if three townships in the Pans pooled their resources, they'd be lucky to wrangle a single contract with the humble Valgyr Institute. It was doubtful anyone from the

Darrow school had set foot in the region during the lifetime of anyone present. “We moved to Comumant when I was six—my da’, my ma, my gran’. Not so well as you, I’m sure, but by a regular measure I know from vampires, ma’am. I know you don’t ponce about with a body killed by one, at least.”

Henge, unwrapping the coffin’s chains, grunted. “We have not been ‘poncing about,’ Ms. Coll.”

She frowned. “I didn’t mean you, Anders. I know what you’ve done for this.”

Samara’s eyes returned again to the dagger at Henge’s hip, so like her own. Her own weapon had been chosen simply for its rugged construction and significant size, but its basic design didn’t originate with the school. “Are you a vigilant, Mr. Henge?”

Anders tossed aside the final chain and stood. He didn’t look down at the weapon on his hip, but his thumb tapped its leather scabbard once. “I was,” he said. “My folks are collectivists, reconciled. I was a vigilant from 15 until 19, when my uncle got me work on the Ironside. I’ve kept up the training.”

Samara nodded. Several faiths of the Territories required the bodies of the dead to be left at rest for three days to facilitate the peaceful release of the soul from its earthly bonds. The problem, of course, was that at any time during those three days the body might or might not decide to stand up and begin eating anyone it could catch—the most pervasive and enduring curse left behind by the Necromancer, arguably worst of the seven terrors of old. Vigilants were trained to sit with a resting cadaver for all three days of display, unsleeping, ready to cleanly strike off its head if it showed any signs of reanimation. It was considered a gesture of respect to the deceased, with the vigilant acting as an honor-guard to the everafter, rather than the crude impersonal practicality of rotating guards or locked rooms. “You sat up with the body before it was... what, placed here in the shed?”

“Yes,” Henge said, and pushed open the coffin lid.

The dhampir leaned forward. The body was that of a man, portly, wearing a formal dinner coat, his skin like old wax. Two dark holes stood out on his neck. A rail spike had been hammered carefully into his heart. There was almost no blood around the wound. “Where are his shoes?” she asked, noticing the body’s stocking feet.

“We think he was killed while preparing for bed,” Henge said, exchanging a glance with Rachel Coll. Coll shrugged. Samara didn’t pay it much mind. Her life was a series of meetings with strangers, she was used to missing subtext. “We, ah, staked the heart at Ms. Coll’s suggestion, on the third day after his death.”

“You don’t take chances with someone a vampire killed,” Coll said.

Samara nodded. Vampires could pass on their condition through an act of intent when draining someone to death, but rarely did. They were territorial and greedy by nature, little inclined to creating rival predators in their hunting grounds. But sometimes a victim would come back anyway, despite their killer’s intentions. No one really knew why. If so, it was usually on the third night after being slain. These people had, by Samara’s reckoning, acted just in time.

“Well,” she said, straightening, “this fellow was either killed by a vampire, or by something going to great pains to seem like a vampire. Who is he?”

This time it was Henry Lucen who answered: “Aldus Miller, of Lith. One of the younger sons of the Miller leatherworks dynasty. He was traveling alone when attacked. Judging by letters we found in his luggage, he was traveling to visit his sister in Albana. There didn’t seem to be anyone waiting for him at the station, so apparently he planned to purchase transit and guards here in Comumant.”

“Hold on,” Samara said, all the things that hadn’t added up so far falling together into a sum that made even less sense than the equation that preceded it. “He was killed at a hostel or inn here in Comumant, wasn’t he?”

Again, the men in the room exchanged glances. Rachel Coll was excluded from that moment of silent exchange; she just went on looking tired. Finally, it was Henshaw Crook that spoke: “No, Ms. Darrow. He was killed aboard the Ironside Express.”

“The train.”

“Yes, Ms. Darrow.”

“While in transit.”

“Yes, Ms. Darrow.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“That’s the chorus to a song I’ve been singing for two weeks now, Ms. Darrow. I dearly hope you know the final stanza, because the tune’s wearying on my fuckin’ nerves.” Henge frowned at the engineer, and Crook finally grunted. “Pardon my language.”

“Well,” Samara finally said, “having now seen the body, I can at least say again I agree with Ms. Coll. Mr. Henge, I’d suggest taking off its head before you send it on to the family.” There was another glance around the room. Samara was able to read this one better. “You’re not going to pass it on to the family, are you?”

“No,” Anders Henge said. “I’m not handling the disposal, but I suspect it’ll be buried somewhere on the plains tonight. If we ever hear from the family, they’ll be told that Mr. Miller hired wagon and guards, set off down the Jii Highway, and that’s the last we saw or heard of him.” His voice was as flat and level as his eyes. “Mr. Giles does not want the Ironside’s passengers to fear for their safety on the train. Mr. Giles does not want there to be a *reason* for them to fear for their safety on the train. That’s why I’m here, Ms. Darrow, and that’s why you’re here, and that is what Mr. Giles meant by discretion.”

There was a tension in the room now—a tightening around Rachel Coll’s eyes, a frown tugging at Henry Lucen’s mouth, a certain set to Henshaw Crook’s fists and Anders Henge’s shoulders. Only Dr. Wells seemed uninterested, his attention focused instead on the bloodless corpse. Samara kept her voice mild: “That’s fine. Mr. Giles’s need for discretion is just an extra factor in the school’s bill. That’s all this is to me, Mr. Henge.” She stretched her shoulders. It was time to leave, or else the pervasive dynamite smell of the shack really was going to blossom into a full-blown headache. “Can we go over the rest of the details of the job over lunch? I haven’t really eaten in two days, and I’m starving.”

Henge froze a bit there, along with everyone else in the room. “Ah—yes—I mean—well, there are matters to attend to, but I’m sure I can have something put together.”

Samara smiled and dropped her hat back onto her head, patted it down. “Mr. Henge, we’re going to be working together for a bit. I wake up as a dhampir every day. You can ask questions, it doesn’t bother me. You don’t have to this time, though: Yes, I eat the same things you do. No, I don’t drink blood. Does that make things easier?”

Henge cleared his throat. “Yes, I suppose so. Ms. Coll, would you please escort Ms. Darrow to the boarding platform? I’ll join you momentarily.”

“Yes, Mr. Henge. If you’ll come with me...?” Coll pushed the door open, admitting a fan of sunlight that made the corpse’s skin seem half-translucent. Samara was more interested in the fresh air that rolled in with it.

“Gladly.”

As she stepped out into the hot midday dust of the side-rails, she heard the dry slither of Henge’s knife leaving its scabbard, followed a moment later by the *crunch-thunk* of it parting bone and biting wood. The dhampir’s expression didn’t change, but inwardly she was pleased. It was one less thing to worry about, and she appreciated that the head of security was a man to see things done himself.

## THE IRONSIDE EXPRESS

### —*Comumant, Afternoon*

Samara had ridden trains before, but the Ironside Express was something else altogether. It hulked over the nearly-empty boarding platform, about twenty feet high by Samara's eyeball estimate. Staggered pairs of windows revealed it to be a double-decker design. The dhampir and her guide strolled from the rear of the enormous machine to its front, Rachel pointing out boarding doors and air-intake vents as they went. Samara stopped at the front of the locomotive and whistled. Its pilot—the more common *cowcatcher* seemed wholly inadequate to describe what the dhampir was looking at—swept up in a series of ivory bars like folded hands, crossing the conductor's window and curving off to either side of the engine. A rounded iron wedge capped off the locomotive, curving down to protect the leading edge of the windshield and giving it the appearance of scowling eyes; Samara could see at once that the design was intended to prevent objects caught on the pilot from rolling up into the conductor's window or onto the top of the train, deflecting them instead to one side or another. But its material—

She took a step closer to the pilot, hesitated on the verge of reaching out to touch it. "This looks like bone. Are these dragon ribs?"

Rachel Coll nodded. "Yes. They don't decay in the Jii Wastes, and they're tough and flexible enough to hit almost anything without suffering damage."

Samara spent a moment trying to estimate the cost of the train's pilot alone, quickly gave up. May as well call it a bajillion pentas—the answer would be meaninglessly huge, in any case. She reckoned the train could plow head-on into one of the mountain trolls she'd slain only a few days ago and barely notice the impact.

It was an impressive machine, the Ironside Express, but an unlovely one. Every part of its hull was covered in heavy metal cladding; it seemed designed more to repel rocket attacks than to transport people or cargo.

"I'm to understand you all think the vampire is still somewhere on the train...?"

"Yes," Rachel answered.

"Can you tell me a bit more about what makes you think so?"

Black-and-gold ringlets bounced as Coll shook her head. "Mr. Henge would prefer if I left that for him to answer, if you don't mind."

Samara surveyed the enormous machine again. It was quite unlike any other train she'd seen. The second story alone, that was new. But it also lacked any sort of smokestack, or fuel car; behind the cruel tines of its pilot, the engine looked like a cold, rounded bullet, ready to be fired. There was, she realized, not a lick of paint anywhere on the thing—only bare, brushed steel, grimacing back spars of light from the midday sun. She tugged the brim of her hat a little lower, found herself wishing she'd unpacked her travel coat despite the heat. "The train, then—what can you tell me about that?"

Rachel took in a breath, and Samara could almost see her pulling up a mental index of facts and figures oft-recited to passengers. "The Ironside Express will be 180 years old come next spring. Its construction was initiated by Lord Andrew Baines, after coming into possession of a small clan of goblins as the result

of a duel. The Express itself is primarily goblin-built, of course—it was easy enough to entice them with the idea of creating a transportation vehicle to cross the Jii Wastes. Construction of the train took seventeen years, and laying the track it follows across the radiation desert another fifteen.”

“I thought nothing could live in Jii,” Samara said.

“Very nearly nothing,” Coll agreed. “Certainly not in the deeper bands of the Exclusion Zone.”

“So the track isn’t goblin-built, then?”

“No. Goblin-designed, but not built. They invented some special method of welding tracks that wouldn’t need steady maintenance, and then taught robots how to do the actual track-laying. That was, in a way, the hardest part of getting the Ironside Express up and running—it had to make do with a very small mechanical workforce, and of course shipping rail stock out into the Jii Exclusion Zone was a laborious process. It could have been done faster, I suppose, but the Baines family was only willing to give up a small number of mechanicals for the task, since there was no hope of getting them back.”

“There wasn’t?” Samara said.

“Not after years of constant radiation bombardment in the Zone of Alienation. There’s no decontamination procedure in the world that could make them safe around people again. As far as I know, they’re still out there somewhere in the Jii Wastes.”

There was, the hunter found, something queerly fascinating and horrible in that thought. “Do you think any of them are still functioning?”

Rachel glanced at her, and then past her. “I don’t know. I’ve never looked out of the train’s windows while crossing the Zone and seen one walking around, but I suppose that doesn’t mean much. A robot with nothing to do might just stand in place for a hundred years, don’t you think?” Before Samara could answer: “Mr. Henge is here.”

Samara turned. So he was, with Crook in tow. “Ladies,” Henge said. He glanced down. “Ms. Darrow, may I get a porter to see to the stowing of your gear?”

“Thank you, no—I’m fine, just a bit confused. It sounds like you want to establish operations inside the train?”

Crook’s lips skinned back in something that could have been a grin if there was any humor in it. “Our Mr. Giles left that out, didn’t he?”

Henge glanced up and down the boarding platform. Aside from a few porters, they were alone. Still, he said: “Let’s step aboard to discuss this.”

Samara nodded, though she thought the secrecy was already starting to pass from curious to tedious.

Anders led them to the rear of the platform, then produced an odd key, fat-handled, looking almost like a corkscrew handle without the screw. He pushed it into a round slot next to a door, which popped out with a hiss and slid aside on a track. Henge climbed up, and Samara followed. Her sword clamps clanked against the frame as she squeezed in.

She found herself in a blue-carpeted car lined with blue-upholstered wooden seats, all empty, next to a spiral staircase leading to the second floor. Sunlight streamed in through open windows, while small wire racks frowned low over the seats, currently devoid of luggage. Crook piled in behind her, and Rachel, and then Anders pulled the door shut on its track and pushed his curious key back into it a second time. It locked into place with an emphatic thump. "Is that a magnetic seal?" Samara asked.

"Yes. This way, please." Henge led her past the rows of seats, through a steel door and onto a connecting platform completely enclosed in some kind of flexible but light-permeable... fabric? Samara ran the back of a finger across the tan substance. It had the texture of plastic but the flex of canvas. Stairs led down to a door marked STOWAGE and up to a door marked ATMOSPHERICS. They descended, and Samara found herself walking through a dark maze of racks and wooden dividers and ceiling-hung straps and clamps, currently devoid of luggage. Then up onto another connecting platform, where AQUADYNAMICS beckoned below and KITCHEN above. They ascended into a world of steel cabinets and hanging pans, inhabited by two men in immaculate white uniforms. Henge cornered the younger of the two for a moment, nodded to Samara, and then led her on. Shutting out the lingering smells of cheeses and meats, she followed. Finally, two unmarked doors faced them, and they descended once more into what Samara realized must be the caboose.

In contrast to the smooth lines and relentlessly utilized space of the rest of the train, this room was almost pathologically human. The walls were wood-paneled, the floor covered by the merest suggestion of an old green carpet long ago worn into mute ephemera by decades or perhaps even a century of foot-traffic, and old tables and chairs were pushed haphazardly about the room. A patched sofa slumped against one wall, facing a desk where recessed nooks were crammed with papers and inkwells and various wooden stamps. Unlike other trains, there was only a rear window at the back of the car, with no corresponding door or viewing platform.

This, then, was the lair of the Ironside Express's staff, their place of retreat while in transit. Anders Henge pulled out a chair next to a small circular table, and Samara took it, pushing her alchemy case behind her and leaning her sword against the wall. Henge took the seat opposite, and Rachel Coll the one between, while Henshaw Crook dropped heavily onto the old sofa with a grunt. "Well," the engineer said, "I'll spare you the suspense: this train's pulling out of the station in a little over two hours."

Samara, caught in the middle of removing her hat, tried to process that. "Why?"

Henge stepped in this time. "Because there are two days now of passengers awaiting passage to Lith, and every day the train doesn't run Mr. Baines loses a small fortune."

She dropped the hat on top of her case. "You're going to run the train with a full load of passengers? *With* a vampire on it?"

"That was Mr. Giles's decision, yes. He only waited this long for your arrival, Ms. Darrow."

She looked around the room, saw three sets of eyes that spoke eloquently of their owners' feelings about being trapped aboard a train with a vampire, and decided not to comment on the obvious lunacy of Mr. Giles's decision. "Allow me to re-frame my understanding of the job I'm to perform here, then. Mr. Giles wants to me kill a vampire hiding somewhere on his train, before it kills again, before the train



arrives in Lith, and to do this without alerting the passengers that there is a vampire aboard, that I'm hunting it, or ideally even that it has been dispatched once I find it?"

There was a knock on the door then, and the younger of the two cooks entered, bearing a platter of black bread and flatbreads, cold meats, and cheeses, along with—Samara's nostrils flared—mugs of cider. "Apologies," the youth said, "we're still setting the kitchens up—the stoves aren't hot yet."

"More than fine," the dhampir said, forcing her hands to remain by her side until the platter had been set on the table and the cook's arms were out of the way.

Once the cook was gone, Henge finally spoke: "That's the way things are, yes."

Samara didn't have an immediate answer for that, delayed by a flatbread stacked with little slices of meat and cheese. She noticed nobody else was reaching for the platter. Perhaps they'd already eaten? Her eyes flicked up to their faces again. No. Nerves. She swallowed, raised her mug. "It's the same to me, Mr. Henge." The cider was foamy, washed her dry mouth clean beautifully. "It's a tall order, but all that means is a higher bill for Mr. Giles."

"Taller than that," Henshaw Crook mumbled. Samara and Henge both turned to look at him at once. The engineer shifted in his seat, straightening up. "You saw that magnetic key Mr. Henge used to lock up the train when we got on?"

Samara nodded.

"That's an airtight seal. All the doors on the train are like that. The windows are thick shatter-resistant glass, and they've got vacuum-seal shutters that can be pulled down over them in the case of a real emergency. They don't open, obviously—you can look out but you can't stick your head out. Once the Ironside Express is underway, the entire train is a sealed environment. Nothing gets in, nothing gets out. The only part of the train exposed to the outside are the air vents at the top of every third car, and *those* make up another completely sealed system leading back to atmospheric, where all the air taken in is run through radiation scrubbers and particle meshes before being vented out to the rest of the train. D'you follow?"

"I believe so."

"It's a sealed system, Ms. Darrow, because the Exclusion Zone will kill you—it can do it kinda slow, or fast, or *really* fast, depending on your exposure, but it will definitely kill you. The Ironside Express is a tiny, contained, survivable environment being dragged across the Jii Wastes by an atomic engine, and if it is meaningfully compromised, somewhere between *lots of folks* and *everyone aboard* will die."

Samara swallowed the mouthful of black bread she was working on—these people had somehow managed to incorporate the slightest taste of chocolate into it, which seemed to her a feat worth mentioning, but the mood in the room forbade it. "Well, Mr. Crook, I was generally aware of the nature of the Ironside Express before I arrived, but not the specifics of its operation. Thank you for the explanation."

"No," Crook said, "I'm not talking for the joy of using up air. You're wearing a gun on your hip, and Mr. Henge isn't. That ain't because he wanted to knife-fight that fat bastard he sat up two nights babysitting,

Ms. Darrow, if it happened to decide to go for his throat. What I'm getting at is, you can't go shooting at anything inside the train. You blow out a window, or knock out a rivet, we're all fucked."

Henge frowned. "Mr. Crook..."

"It's fine," Samara said. "That's not really a problem, Mr. Crook. Guns are nearly worthless against vampires anyway."

"Well, that's to the good," Crook said, "but I'm probably not done letting you down, lass. You look like my little niece if someone bleached her, but I guess you don't fight like her. Since I can't make an eyeball guess, I'll just ask: How strong are you?"

Samara raised an eyebrow, bolted down another loaded flatbread as she considered the question. "You mentioned that big steel door we came through to get aboard was held shut by a magnetic lock?"

"Yeah."

"If I had to, I could open that door without asking Mr. Henge for the key first."

"Yeah, that's what I was afraid of. So what's going to happen if you start swinging that big sword around in here?"

Samara stopped in the middle of reaching for her cider. She hadn't considered that. Even if collateral damage weren't a concern, the sword wasn't made for fighting in spaces as tight as the train. "That's..." *So they want me to kill a vampire, on a moving train full of people, in secret, armed with just a dagger.* "That might pose something of a challenge, Mr. Crook."

"Yeah, my da' always said they build character. Mind, he spent most of his time drunk."

"That's enough, Mr. Crook," Henge said.

Crook grunted.

Rachel picked at a crust of black bread.

"Mr. Henge," Samara finally said, "what makes you think the vampire is still aboard your train?"

"Because I've taken steps to make sure it is," Anders Henge replied, frowning. "It's killed twice, you see, and I try not to get fooled the same way more than once."

"Twice?"

"Once on the way from Comumant to Lith. Then again on the return trip. The first body was a Ms. Atwood Granger. We investigated very thoroughly—"

"Tore the fuckin' train apart," Crook muttered.

"But of course were unable to locate the vampire. We delayed in Lith for a day as a result. Mr. Baines oversaw the investigation personally. When we couldn't find the thing, Mr. Baines concluded that the vampire had used the train to travel from Comumant to Lith for whatever reason, and was either now at large in Lith or continuing to travel to some other ultimate destination. Then of course Mr. Miller, whose

body you examined, was slain on the trip back from Lith to Comumant, which neatly disproved Mr. Baines's theory. The vampire was still aboard."

"That does stand to reason," Samara agreed. "How do you know it hasn't gotten loose into Comumant?"

"Because as Mr. Crook pointed out, the Ironside Express is a closed system. It arrived in Comumant at midday, with the sun bright in a cloudless sky. If I'm given to understand vampires correctly, that would trap the creature aboard the train, would it not?"

"Unless it was carried out in some sort of container, a coffin or crate or the like, yes."

"I give my word it was not. We were extremely thorough offloading."

Samara nodded. She could just imagine. "And at night?"

"We brought in floodlights and stood guards all over the depot. Every possible point of escape was lit up bright and watched at all times. Every door. Even the air vents, and you can't get a finger into those through the covers. Still—" He glanced to his left.

Rachel spoke up. "Vampires can turn into a mist or smoke, at least in the Pans they can. I told them to watch the vents as careful as they could."

Henge's eyes shifted back to Samara, dubious, but the dhampir nodded. "She's right. Some of them can do that." And that was more bad news, because it wasn't a trick she tended to associate with newly dead fledgelings. "Well, it sounds like you're right then—the vampire is probably still here." She frowned. "Mr. Crook, what can you tell me about your search for its hiding place?"

"That I'm about out of ideas," the engineer said, eyes on the old threadbare carpet. "We checked every piece of luggage you could possibly cram even a child into. Repeatedly. We checked every storage compartment. We checked every maintenance crawlspace. We rigged up some mirrors to check the air ducts, even though they're not much wider than my head. We checked the water tanks. We checked the sewage tanks. We looked under every bed, in every cabinet, under every table, behind every curtain, in every cabin in every car. We folded down all the fold-down beds in case the damned thing somehow smooshed itself flat against the wall behind one of them—I don't know about vampires, I just stopped discounting *anything* by the second day of turning up zip. I even shut down the nuclear dynamo, unbolted the engine bulkhead, and crawled in there—*once*, I ain't doing that again, I earned a new crop of gray hair getting the engine back on again and you can't do it while the train's moving anyway. And other than that, every place we checked once, we checked at least five times, in case the fucker was moving its hiding place from day to day."

Anders Henge reached over and plucked a sheaf of papers off the old desk. "I prepared a report on the last two runs the Ironside made, for you to go over at your leisure. I also had Mr. Crook prepare a report on the Ironside's construction and his efforts to search it for the vampire—maybe you'll find something there he's overlooked."

Samara accepted the papers, though privately she suspected there was nothing she could uncover about the train that its engineer didn't already know. "Thank you."

"If I may ask," Henge said, "do you have a plan yet?"

The dhampir glanced around the room. Three sets of tired, frightened eyes looked back at her. “It’s my turn to disappoint, sorry—I won’t be able to put one together in any detail until I’ve read over these and examined the train myself. I’m afraid there’s no magic remedy to vampires. You can’t hang garlic or roses or charms against them. Since this train isn’t a home, as such, a vampire can come and go as it pleases. And I doubt Mr. Giles would be willing to flood the train from floor to roof to flush the vampire out. So if I can’t find it during the day—and if Mr. Crook has failed so far, I have to warn you there’s a real chance it may stump me as well—I’m probably going to have to do this the hard way. Meanwhile, Mr. Crook, I’d continue searching for hiding places as best you can without alarming the guests; and Mr. Henge, Ms. Coll, I’d suggest you try to keep as many windows open as you can to limit its mobility in the day, in case it *is* trying to move during the day.”

Rachel was frowning. “Can they do that? I thought they had to sleep in the day.”

“Normally, they do. The thing about vampires is that the curse deepens over time. That means they get stronger the older they are, the longer they’ve been dead. Learn new tricks, even, like turning into mist. But their weaknesses get more intense, too. Take the sun. Usually it’ll kill a vampire stone dead on the spot. But the second contract I took to hunt one of these things, the monster I was hunting created a new vampire to throw at me while I was after it, a young man named—well, never mind, his name doesn’t matter. The point is, he ambushed me just before dawn, I fought him off, and I made it outdoors into a courtyard a few minutes after the sun came up, and stopped to catch my breath thinking I was safe. I was wrong. He lunged out into the courtyard after me. Caught me off-guard, got in a really good hit to my throat with his claws. The sun drove him back inside, and hurt him very badly, but it sure didn’t kill him. I had to go back in later and finish the job, and he was still awake and waiting for me when I did. He’d only been a vampire two days. I learned not to take anything for granted after that. You shouldn’t either. Be careful any time you’re somewhere off by yourself, or away from windows, even in the day.”

The three were quiet for several long moments after that. Samara took it as an opportunity to bolt away another couple of flatbreads and wash them down with more cider.

It was Henge who finally spoke: “What else can you tell us? About killing this vampire. You mentioned that your gun was no good.”

Samara spoke: “Ultimately, if you want to kill a vampire, you have to destroy the heart or chop off the head. Preferably both. Heart, head, or sunlight. Nothing else will do it. But the head and heart are both difficult targets in a fight. So you bleed the monster out. A vampire that loses most of its blood can barely move. But that’s... well, it takes some doing. Guns in general are worthless. You pierce a vampire’s skin, it puckers shut and seals up again almost instantly. To keep the blood in, you see? They heal *very* fast, and the skin even faster. So bullets don’t work. Cutting’s better but not great—you want something like an ax or spear that can hold the wound open.” She glanced at Rachel, whose face wore a clouded expression. Samara had heard towns in the Pans used blocks of spearmen to hunt vampires, generally at great cost. “Fire won’t get the job done on its own, but it helps. Not that we can set a fire aboard the train, either, come to think of it. In short, if you run into the vampire, *scream*. I’ll come running. Don’t try to fight it.” A pause. “And be careful. It has to know you’re searching for it by now, and it’s as smart as you are. They come back from the dead thirsty, not stupid.”

Crook scuffed a boot across the floor. “Fucking great.”

Samara drained her mug. "Short term, my plans are to read these," she shook the sheaf of papers, "and put together a plan, then get some rest. I've been on the road two days straight and I have a long night ahead of me." She thought for a moment. "I want one of the big luxury sleeper cabins for my command post while I'm here."

Coll blinked. Henge frowned. "May I ask why? They're... quite expensive."

Samara shrugged. "As I told Mr. Giles, any expenses I incur get subtracted from the school's fee." She smiled. "As to why, I want one largely because I want one—if I'm going to perform a difficult, vital, and bloody dangerous job here, I'll take every perk I can get along the way, starting with privacy and comfort. I don't get to work around those sort of accommodations very often. And if it makes you feel any better, Mr. Henge, I would guess that while Mr. Giles values the safety of all of the Ironside's passengers, he values the safety of his wealthiest guests most of all, and whoever's closest to me at any given time is going to be the safest person on this train."

Crook broke in: "Well, that sold me. I'll clear it with Mr. Lucen. Ms. Coll, set her up in the Barony suite, if you would?"

Henge winced. "The Barony's the most expensive cabin we have, Henshaw."

"It's also the one closest to the engine car, where I'll be spending most of my time. I intend to reach Lith with my neck unperforated, Anders, and since I can't strap the lady on my toolbelt the whole time she's here, I'll take the next best thing. If Henry Lucen doesn't like it, he can get out and push the fuckin' train to Lith as far as I'm concerned."

## THE BARONY SUITE

### —*Comumant, Afternoon*

Samara's hands came together and her breath caught when the door of the Barony suite slid back in its track, eliciting a raised eyebrow from Rachel Coll. "Is there anything else you need right now, or...?"

"No, no... for now, just time to read these reports and ponder. A vampire hunt is usually a lot of sitting and thinking leading up to a few seconds of blood and screaming. Sorry."

A strained smile. "I'll leave you to settle in, then." Coll gave a short bow and stepped back, then retreated back down the crimson-carpeted hall.

Samara stepped in with a sigh, drawing the door shut behind her. She found herself surrounded by the deep, confident glow of mahogany paneling. An inhalation: lemons; vanilla; lily of the valley. The running boards, she thought, had been rubbed with magnolia oil, a barely perceptible detail for any other guest but a constant floral embrace for her much sharper sense of smell. An in-suite shower stood at one side of the room, a narrow cylinder of frosted glass; at the other, a full-sized bed done up in crimson and thread-of-gold. No pull-down bunk here.

Samara dropped her sword between the bed and wall, then out of years of sheer bloody habit, flipped up the bed skirt and checked under it. No vampire slept beneath.

The suite contained a small writing table bolted to the wall, a shallow wardrobe, two well-stuffed chairs, and a short divan. She stowed her alchemy case beneath the table, tossed her satchel into the wardrobe, and then, after a moment's consideration, hung the gunbelt inside as well, after removing her dagger from it. *I'll have to rig it up as a leg holster, I suppose.*

Still, that could wait. For now, she kicked her boots off after three long days and sighed as her toes sank into the suite's deep pile carpet. Bliss.

The suite boasted two large windows and a smaller one next to the bed, each flanked by royal blue curtains. Samara drew two, leaving the cabin in a soft half-light. Then she deposited her hat into a chair on one side of the writing table, herself into the opposite seat, and considered Mr. Henge and Mr. Crook's reports.

Henge's document was economic with its details, succinct, would have seemed almost scattershot if it didn't match Samara's points of curiosity so well. It began by outlining the train's standard schedule: The Ironside always arrived in Lith during the day, used a night of layover for maintenance, clean-up, and restocking, and then departed during the day. Including the afternoon of departure, the trip to Comumant spanned five days and four nights. The return voyage, likewise, occurred after a night of layover, and spanned five days and four nights.

The report then went on to place the two killings within the train's timetable. Ms. Atwood Granger had been killed on the train's third night out from Comumant to Lith. Given the delay in Lith, that meant the first killing on the train had been ten days ago. Then on the trip from Lith to Comumant, Mr. Miller had been killed on the second night of the journey—five days ago, and five days after Ms. Granger.

Samara set aside the timetables, found herself looking at very abbreviated profiles of the two victims. Henge had evidently had nothing of substance to add about Mr. Miller that she hadn't heard in the shed

while viewing his body, save that his body had been found in a private cabin four cars back from the one Samara now occupied. By contrast, Ms. Granger was evidently a widowed gunsmith seeking employment with the Guild of Rifles in Lith. She was taller than Samara, of fit condition, middle-aged. She'd been traveling in coach, and found dead two hours after midnight in a lavatory just off the second deck of one of the dining cars, which were by then closed for the night.

Both were traveling alone, both found drained of blood in the dead of night. Henge knew of nothing else they held in common. There was a list of the things found in their luggage and personal effects, but Samara saw nothing noteworthy there—some money and tools for Ms. Granger, several changes of clothes and a great deal more money for Mr. Miller.

Past that, there were a very few notes on the Ironside's standard security protocols—which ultimately amounted to little more than “come running if there's a commotion,” otherwise prioritizing staying out of the passengers' way—followed by a list of materials, written in another hand that likely belonged to Dr. Wells, which might be efficacious in restricting the vampire's movements. Since Samara knew all of them to be completely useless for any such purpose, she skimmed the list and then put it aside.

Where Anders Henge had prized brevity and focus in his list, Crook's report listed every detail it could think of. It was a thick, dense sheaf of explanations, crude sketches, and conjecture, and Samara soon found herself half-lost in it, with only a sense that the engineer had done an incredibly thorough job sweeping the train. There were, of course, no proper blueprints or schematics for the Ironside Express—goblins had neither use for nor understanding of such things and never bothered to produce them for human convenience—but Crook had done his level best to diagram, if not the train's workings, then at least its inner cavities and crevices to the best of his understanding.

“None of this makes sense,” Samara murmured.

There came a knock at the door. Samara rose, slid it open.

Rachel Coll offered her a long box held shut with a ribbon. “Mr. Henge had a few things picked up for you in town he thought might be of use, and asked me to deliver them.”

Samara accepted the package, felt the shifting of cloth within. “Change of clothes?”

“We don't have laundry facilities on the Ironside, and you looked to have done hard traveling to get here.” Her eyes flicked past Samara, to the one still-open window. “We're about to depart. Is there anything else I can do for now?”

Samara took note of the bags under Coll's eyes, heavier now than when they'd first met, and remembered that the woman's normal duties relegated her to night shift. Much like herself. “Thank you, no. Get some rest if you can—it's what I'm about to do. I'll start patrol shortly after sundown. We should link up again then; I should have some plans to go over by that point.”

Coll nodded. Samara could hear the muffled bump and clunk of people moving their way up the train, the murmur of voices pressed into insensibility by doors and distance. “Very well then.” A moment's hesitation. “Is there... something normally said, here? Good hunting, maybe?”

The ghost of a smile haunted Samara's lips. She raised a knuckle to her breast. “For the restoration of mankind.”

Rachel stood in indecision for a moment, lacking the proper response. She finally settled for echoing the raised fist, then turned and headed for the back of the train. Samara slid the door shut behind her, turned its latch.

The dhampir crossed to the window, transferred her hat from seat to head, and sat down to watch the platform. All unnoticed, it had filled with people and mostly emptied while she read; the last passengers were boarding now. She wondered how many would be willing to climb aboard if they knew what was sleeping somewhere on the train. Mr. Giles clearly thought they would have run screaming from the station, perhaps setting it ablaze in their wake, but Samara had her doubts. Half might balk, she thought. The ones accustomed to purchasing security, perhaps. Others, farther down the platform—those filing into the coach cars and stack-sleepers, sun-chapped men with turned up sleeves and wind-scarred women with eyes drawn into permanent squints, she thought they might climb aboard and take their chances. They had a better acquaintance with the simple truth that there was no such thing as safety when crossing the Territories, only precautions.

Five days. Five days to Lith. It was a compressed schedule for flushing out a vampire. But then, it was a compressed environment, Samara thought. The vampire's movements were limited as well. Her mind tried, by reflex, to run scenarios—how to best kill it if they found it hiding somewhere with passengers nearby; what alchemy to best employ if it had to be faced at night; the best method for wielding her knife in a tight hallway. The thoughts all slipped and slid together, and she recognized exhaustion and sun fatigue at work, tried to let them blow away and to simply watch the station.

It wasn't long before loading was finished. The Ironside Express had no steam whistle. Instead it gave a vast, bone-vibrating hum that ran through the floorboard and made Samara's skin ripple into gooseflesh. Then the hum was gone and the train slid into motion with a disconcerting ease. There were a series of clanks and booms as the machine's armored cladding shifted and settled, but none of the usual jerk-and-chug of a normal locomotive building up steam: just a smooth acceleration, and the rising tik-tak of wheels and rails.

The depot slid away, and then a whicker-whip of streets and faces, and then the Ironside Express plunged through a purpose-built gate in Comumant's defensive wall and passed out onto the prairie. Samara sat for a while to watch it pass, but it was the same landscape of gopher holes and tough, ugly grass she'd seen for the last few hours of her approach to the town. After the train passed beneath three concentric gantries of red iron, spotted with dust-specked emitter heads, inert during its outbound passage—a decontamination station, she guessed—Samara rose from her chair. She wished she'd thought to ask Ms. Coll how long it would take for the train to penetrate into the Exclusion Zone proper. Nothing to do for it now. Daylight wasting.

She pulled the third set of curtains partly closed, leaving the room in a cool murk. There were overhead lights, tiny emission diodes arranged in an artful circle, but Samara left them off. She could see just fine without them.

Sleep beckoned, but there was one last item of business first, one she'd been putting off as long as she could. She faced the shower, sighed. *A tub would have been too much to hope for.*

She'd been on the move constantly since fighting the mountain trolls in Hennic Town, closed up inside of a stuffy carriage for most of it. There were still flakes of dried blood crusted down around her waist and



thigh, and while she'd managed to tune out the smell over time, she was well-aware her travel duds could almost stand up on their own now. The thought of carrying all that crust and funk into the suite's pressed sheets and goose-down mattress filled her with wordless horror.

"All right," she muttered, "stop delaying. Last stop before sleep. Can't fight on no sleep. Get it done."

The dhampir shucked tunic and pants, then paused after tossing her undergarments into the bottom of the suite's wardrobe after them. Looking at her sweat-stained combat bra on top of the pile of discarded clothes, it struck home for the first time just how much the tight confines of the Ironside Express were going to limit her movement if she had to fight her quarry by night. A dhampir was many times stronger than an ordinary human being, but both weighed the same amount. As such, Samara's first instinct in the face of danger was usually to leap up or away; likewise, she often took it for granted that she could stand well back from an abomination's threat range, spot an opening, and lunge in to exploit it in the blink of an eye. The train would deny her all such mobility.

*You're still stalling.*

"Fine, fine," she muttered. The shower occupied a corner of the suite near the door, a half-circle of frosted glass with enough room to stand up inside, turn around under the spray, and not much more. Samara stepped in, found washcloth and soap—scented with mint, it fairly darted at her as soon as she opened the door—waiting for her. She took one more deep breath, then pushed her palm into the plate set into the wall.

As showers went, the Barony suite's struck a superlative balance between luxury and extreme economy of space. It only had one setting—hot but not scalding—and the shower head was angled and pressure-driven rather than a simple overhead gravity-feed like most Samara had seen. After a moment's gurgling in the pipes, a confident spray hit her back, instantly unknitting tense muscles.

She braced her hands against the glass, gritted her teeth. The luxury was largely wasted on her. The smell of mint soap, all-pervasive only moments before, vanished completely, and in a moment of near-panic Samara snatched up the bar and held it under her nose. Yes, that brought it back. The world was still working as intended; it was only her that was amiss.

*It's just a shower, you idiot coward. Relax. Relax.*

She forced herself to put the soap down. Relaxing, though, wasn't the issue. As the water ran down her legs, splashed against her arms and shoulders, she could feel the tension leaving her body of its own accord. And that was the problem, in a nutshell: the muscles that were now unclenching and going slack, which could normally have torn the entire suite to pieces in seconds, could now do little more than hold Samara upright under the spray. She concentrated on breathing. As long as that was okay, so was everything else.

Not only would running water rob a vampire of its strength, full immersion would trap the creature, rendering it as thoroughly immobilized as the sleep that claimed it at sunrise. Samara had even seen reports of particularly old bloodsuckers that rotted and fell apart under the power of moving water. Dhampirs shared a measure of that weakness, though as with most things, intensity varied. For Samara it was particularly bad. She'd grown up around the streams and ponds of Cleypa, and the school's curriculum required that its dhampirs learn to swim. In the still pools, it wasn't a problem. When she

tried it in the creek that ran behind the school's kitchen, she almost drowned three times. They never bothered trying her out in the nearby Ocka River, not after that.

"Come on," she whispered, fumbling for soap and washcloth. "You're not going to drown in a *shower*." She turned, raised her chin to get her face out of the spray, and started scrubbing where blood had pooled in the waistband of her pants.

It didn't ever really get better—that was, in Samara's experience, the problem of running water. It wasn't like the constant hot-iron weight of the sun, which she'd learned to bear over time and practice. Water was slippery, inconstant, splashing and breaking and drawing back together under the forces of gravity and surface tension, each streamer of moisture drawing tiny enervating fingers across her body. The muscles at the small of her back just began to tense again when a rebounding streamer of water struck them, or a trickle slipped down from her hair. It was like waves passing across her skin, drowning part of her nature with each peak and trough.

She wished she could just enjoy the heat and soak it in. But each minute left her feeling under assault. She turned, turned again, scrubbing herself as clean as she could while she could still bear it, and then finally slapped the wall plate again, ending the spray. It was probably good, then, that the water had robbed her strength, else she would have put her hand through the wall.

The dhampir stood shuddering for a moment as her equilibrium restored itself. She shut out the sensations by counting under her breath. By the time she got to *thirty-three* she felt herself again: dripping wet, surrounded by heat-fog, but no longer wobbling on her feet.

"Damned shame," she muttered as she stepped out, collected the towel hung on a bar affixed to the outside of the shower. Another annoyance: sun-drying her hair would have been nice, but would have also ensured a splitting headache by the time she was finished. Instead she settled for aggressively toweling it until it was only slightly damp.

Still: the ordeal was over, sunset was still almost six hours away, and... well, now everything smelled faintly of mint. Mixed blessing, that. Samara glanced at the still-unopened package Rachel Coll had delivered, decided to leave it until she woke up.

She drew back the bed's covers, stopped, and ran the back of her nails across the bedsheet. They glided across the fabric with a smoothness that reminded her of the Ironside pulling out of the station. "Silk," Samara murmured, and grinned.

It was, she decided as she arranged two pillows under her head and closed her eyes, acceptable recompense for knife-fighting a vampire. She was asleep within minutes. Outside, desert acacia and Joshua trees had given way to sickly hills and crumbling stalks of gray grasses pushing up through old half-powdered bones. The Ironside Express pushed into the wastes of Jii, where even monsters could not live.

## Part Two: The Exclusion Zone

Let's have Lunch, *said Lil,*  
I'm starved.

*Then youre beyond the hand of Lunch*  
*diagnosed the Slinger*

*Scheduled food is invariably tasteless*  
*said the Poet.*

*Yet in the desert*  
*you'd be happy to eat the schedule itself*  
*the Slinger finished.*

—Ed Dorn, *Gunslinger*

## SUNDOWN IN THE WASTES

### —*The Ironside Express, Night*

The voice of her old shooting master followed Samara up from her dreams: *The era of the gun is waning, but you'll use it while it's here. A monster that can shoot is better than a monster that can't. Now draw!*

Her eyes flicked open at the precise moment the sun's last rays dipped below the horizon. She could always sense that transition, the passage from day to night, and tonight she had work to do. Still, the dhampir felt a silent sigh pass her lips as she slid out from between the sheets. Another couple of hours would have suited her very nicely.

She crossed the blue lagoon of shadows that the Barony suite had become during her rest without bothering to turn on the lights, and opened the package brought for her earlier in the day. The clothes within were... not what she'd expected. Samara was accustomed to rough-rider outfits, weather-resistant capes, and the like. These were something else altogether. She lifted the first of them, held it against herself. It seemed to fit. The dhampir shrugged. If this was how the owners of the Ironside Express wanted to play things, she supposed she could work with it.

A few minutes later the dhampir found herself standing in front of the suite's full-length mirror, surprised by the figure staring back at her. The woman in the mirror wore a ruffled sheath dress in black and midnight blue, shoulders left exposed by halter straps. The dress fell almost to her ankles, incongruously exposing her black steel-shod boots (the parcel had contained no shoes, and Samara wouldn't have worn anything that upset her footing in any case). A soft purse-pouch on a thin rope hung off one hip, and Samara pursed her lips as she loaded her remaining two blood ampoules and a viscid black vial from her alchemy case into it. "Pretty," she finally pronounced the dress, the word feeling awkward on her tongue. Being pretty wasn't her purpose.

The dhampir's fingers picked around the edges of the dress, finally reaching the glum conclusion that there was no slit in it. She sat down and hiked the skirt up to her waist while she strapped her dagger to her leg. The rig was clumsy. The knife, its inward-curved blade almost 18 inches long, felt stiff and awkward when she moved, and she realized she'd need to gather the dress up and pull it out of the way to get at the weapon, making a fast draw impossible. She tried to tell herself that if she was ambushed during this job without preparation she was probably dead anyway, but that left something to be desired in the way of reassurance.

Someone knocked on the door.

†

Rachel Coll bit back a yawn as she drew her knuckles back from the Barony suite. After seeing the guests embarked and briefing her most competent subordinate on the night staff—a young man named Gilcrest, normally in charge of the Ironside's dinner service—to assume her usual duties for the coming evening, she'd finally been able to crawl into one of the tiny bunks on the upper deck of the caboose. With tension baking through her, she'd expected sleep to be hard to come by and hard to keep, but had instead fallen into the black and dreamless pit of exhaustion. Dragging herself back out of it had been physically painful, every motion of rolling out of bed and putting on her uniform an act of will. But now here she was, having crossed the train with her nerves sizzling and jumping each time she passed

between cars and found herself momentarily alone. Somewhere on the Ironside, the vampire was now free to move.

There was no light under the suite's door, so Coll almost jumped when it opened only a moment later; she'd thought the hunter still asleep. Instead, she found herself staring at a moon-pale silhouette in a pitch-dark room, and instinctively took a step back. "I—did I wake you?" she asked, immediately feeling a fool as she realized the woman was fully dressed.

"No," Samara said, stepping out into the narrow passageway and pulling the door shut behind her. Rachel's breath caught for a moment. The dhampir was all smooth, flowing lines and white-black contrasts in the dress Henge had provided. Now that they were almost pushed together, Rachel saw that the slight red flush of her lips and the gold rings in her eyes were the only hints of color anywhere on her. She'd even had time to re-apply the dark lines beneath her eyes, making them stand out in the soft yellow glow of the hall's electric lamp. "Did you sleep well?"

Again, Rachel felt herself caught off-guard, and it took a moment to find her tongue. "Well enough, Ms. Darrow, yes."

"Good," the dhampir said, glancing up and down the narrow passage. "It's apt to be a long night. But if we're to spend it together, Ms. Coll, that's going to wear thin in short order—would it chafe if I called you Rachel, and you called me Samara?"

"I suppose we can try that, Ms. Darrow." Her brain caught up a moment later and Rachel made a disgusted noise. Yes, another few hours would have been quite welcome.

Samara simply smiled. "So—is there an itinerary, Rachel, or should I start roaming?"

Right. "Mr. Henge wanted to touch in before the night got properly underway, and asked me to bring you to the engine car."

The dhampir nodded. "I should very much like to see that, I think. Is that it, through that door?"

"Yes." The sleeper car in which they now stood, containing the Barony suite and one other, slightly smaller luxury compartment, was coupled directly behind the Ironside's massive engine. The door in question was of flat brushed steel, containing only a keyhole—no knob or handle—and the red pinpoint of an electronic eye. Rachel tapped her knuckles against it and waited. Only a few of the train's personnel—Mr. Lucen, Mr. Henge, Mr. Crook, Dr. Wells—had keys to get through the door. Usually admission was a matter of whoever was inside opening up, as was the case now. There was a buzz, and the door swung inward a bit.

†

Samara followed Ms. Coll—Rachel—through the low, rounded doorframe, which she thought Mr. Henge would probably have to duck to get through without bashing his head. Her first impression upon stepping into the engine car was one of *size*, particularly set against the otherwise cramped confines of the train. There was no second floor here, just a narrow deck barely wide enough to stand on running around the edge of the car about seven feet up. The sides of the chamber were crammed with smoothly humming, nearly featureless metal boxes; at its far side, there rose up what looked like a massive white steel furnace covered in dials and steady green lights, though it lacked for fire. Samara realized this must

be the train's atomic motor. A ladder provided access to the pilot's cockpit directly above it, and there Henry Lucen sat in a patched leather chair, ignoring the view through the train's windscreen to instead focus on an array of monitors mounted on the consoles surrounding him.

"Mr. Lucen," Samara said by way of greeting.

The conductor grunted without turning around. "Ms. Darrow. I trust you found the Barony to your liking?"

"Very much so, thank you. I was told Mr. Henge wanted me here?"

"He's on his way, Ms. Darrow. While we wait, would you like to climb up and take a gander through the windscreen? Not many get to see this view."

Samara glanced at Rachel. Coll shrugged. "I'd be delighted, Mr. Lucen, thank you." She stopped on the verge of hopping directly from the lower floor to the cockpit and forced herself to use the ladder instead. That kind of thing was all well and good for the chapterhouse or the academy, but it tended to startle humans who weren't used to it.

The cockpit was a dense nest of screens, dials, levers, and a series of lidded brass pipes that Samara suspected could be used to communicate with different parts of the train. She leaned forward, staring past Henry Lucen's shoulder, and felt her lips quietly form the word *wow*.

The Ironside Express's headlights cast two brilliant white spears across the wastelands of Jii: a blasted, blighted expanse of gray dust where only the wind walked. The land hardly dared to roll or undulate, seeming for the most part to have been smashed flat as though by a cosmic hammer. Indistinct lumps lay buried here and there beneath the ever-present dust and dirt, occasionally giving off metallic winks as the train's headlights swept by. Samara tried to get a grasp of the train's speed by tracking the way the land's few tiny features appeared and vanished in mere eyeblinks, but couldn't. All she knew was that the Express was faster than anything else she'd ever seen. "How fast are we moving, Mr. Lucen?"

"Sixty miles per hour at the moment, ma'am. She can get up to sixty-five, but only across the Black Mirror, where the track's flat like someone drew the land with a ruler. We'll cross that late tomorrow afternoon."

"That's..." Samara found she had no words.

"Nothing," Lucen said, drawing a startled glance. "With this engine, the Ironside could be a *lot* faster if she wasn't dragging all that armor. But then, we'd all be dead, hah. There are faster trains in the world, ma'am, not many but a few. If you ever get down south in your work, try the Royal Emerald into Clorathy. I've heard tell from a man I trust that it can kip up to three times what the Ironside runs."

Samara's eyes fell from the window to the bank of monitors on Mr. Lucen's control console. They showed external views of the train from a variety of angles, all in fuzzy shades of white and green. "Are those all the train's monitors, Mr. Lucen?"

Henry Lucen grunted, flipped a switch beneath one of the screens. All of the monitors flickered, showing a view of the hallway running past the Barony suite, where Henshaw Crook was approaching. "That's all of them," he said, flipping the switch back and restoring the external views. "The Express needs its remote eyes to make sure nothing happens to the cladding, or find out what's going wrong if something

*does* develop a problem, since we can't exactly open a window and pop our heads out to check. But other than the engine compartment's door, there are no cameras inside the train." He pushed a button, and the door in question unlatched and swung in with a dull thump. Crook pushed through it a moment later.

Samara turned to address him as he entered, and then stopped. There was one more feature in the engine compartment she hadn't seen until now—a bas-relief on its rear wall, reaching from floor to ceiling, sculpted in melted and etched steel and stained into vivid colors through some chemical process. At first she saw the common pattern (black below, red above, blue to the left, green to the right) and assumed she was looking at the Four Forces, but then noticed an unusual addition.

The Four Forces was a piece of goblin religious art, which the creatures instinctively illustrated onto certain of their grander workings with little rhyme or reason. There was no purpose in trying to get them to stop once they started, Samara had heard; it only made them violently agitated, bringing work to a halt until they were left alone to finish their scrawling. She'd seen it more than once in the past, including human imitations which served as core iconography in quaternary worship.

Here, as with most depictions, the bas-relief's lower quadrant was done up in blacks with bare-steel highlights suggesting water and sinuous, hammer-headed beings within the water. Above the waves, spreading across the ceiling, spots of gleaming metal served as stars in a crimson sky, where rail-thin beings sat in meditative contemplation upon strange metal wheels. Beneath the red heavens, the left side of the mural depicted a wood shaded in blue, with tall, crooked, hideous women lurking in the shadow of the trees. The same forest spanned to the right side of the wall, fading to shades of green, where many small human figures were awakening beneath the boughs. These were the Four Forces: demons, born of the waves; angels, born of the stars; hags, born of magic; and mankind, born in ignorance.

But here, directly above the door and equidistant between the Four Forces, there stood a coldly perfect humanoid figure in beaten gold, a cloud like a mushroom rising from each upraised hand. That was new, and something about it sent a chill through Samara.

Still, she was here for work, not to goggle at goblin devotionals, and so she shifted her attention to Henshaw Crook. "Good evening, Mr. Crook."

"I'm suspending judgment on that until I make it to morning un-eaten, Ms. Darrow. Speaking of which, have you come up with any new ideas?"

Rachel Coll spoke up: "I think Anders probably wants to hear them, if she has."

Crook made a visible effort to bite back a sharp reply. "Well... could be likely you're right."

Samara sat on the edge of the cockpit, then dropped down. It still startled both Crook and Coll back a step, she noted. Oh well. "I did have a question for you actually, Mr. Crook—thought of it while looking at the external cameras."

"I can guess," Crook said. "And if I'm right the answer's no, we thought of that too. There aren't any cavities bigger than my hand accessible from outside the train. The Ironside was designed so that stripping off the cladding to work on it is an absolute last resort, everything is made to be accessible

from inside the train. And of course if I understand vampires at all, it can't just be sitting on the roof during the day."

"No," Samara agreed, "the sun would kill it. There's no way it could be—I don't know—strapping itself *under* the train? Something like that?"

Crook grunted. "Still no. I don't know how much sun it takes to kill a vampire, but some gets under the train between the wheels during the day. But it doesn't matter, there's not enough clearance down there for a person to be under any of the cars. Even if they *could* squeeze in somewhere—turn into smoke or whatever to wedge into some gap—they'd still be touching the ground and get ripped to pieces as soon as we started moving. Plus, Mr. Lucen's been watching the monitors, and there hasn't been anything moving around outside the train at night, neither man nor fog."

"A vampire wouldn't show up on the cameras," Samara said, "but it doesn't really matter anyway. As you say, the sun would keep it off the roof and sides, and there's not enough room *or* protection from daylight beneath."

"The cameras wouldn't catch it?" Henry Lucen sounded disturbed.

"No," Samara said. "Not in mirrors, not in water, not on cameras. Nothing holds a vampire's image except the eye. If you hear knocking on the engine car door and you don't see anyone in the hall, Mr. Lucen, *don't open it.*"

There was silence in the room for a few seconds then—broken by a knock on the door. Coll and Crook both jumped, and Henry Lucen fumbled for the switch on his console. Samara heard him cursing under his breath, then the *thump-click* of the door lock disengaging. Anders Henge ducked his way through and pushed the door shut behind him. He spent a moment taking in the weird air of the room, then dismissed it to nod to the dhampir. "Good evening, Ms. Darrow."

"Good evening, Mr. Henge." She picked at the edge of her dress. "I suppose I don't need to say that this isn't the first thing I had in mind for fighting gear."

"I didn't suppose so, but I noticed you didn't seem to wear armor, so I thought you could probably make do. Before our departure, Mr. Giles spoke to me repeatedly and at length about his desire that you carry out your work as unobtrusively as possible."

Rachel Coll spoke, voice low: "I don't think you could keep *her* from standing out in if you put dirt and burlap on her, Anders. And that ain't dirt and burlap."

Henge cleared his throat. "Be that as it may, Ms. Coll, I hope the passengers will find it less alarming than seeing a hunter striding to and fro attired for battle."

"Mr. Henge," Samara said, "I hope the plan isn't for me to pass myself off as a traveling dilettante or some such. Setting aside that most of the folks on this train are brown and I'm the same color as a chicken egg, if you've seen a dhampir before, it's not hard to guess what you're looking at when you spot another one."

"I gathered as much, Ms. Darrow. What I'd prefer is that if anyone asks about your business on the Ironside Express, you intimate that you've booked passage to Lith to engage a client there. And if that fails to satisfy—as well it may, since I assume you'll be poking about the train—then, if pressed, admit



that Mr. Baines wanted a Darrow school hunter to examine the train's security readiness in the face of certain insidious monsters, and to make a report recommending potential improvements. Most people, having defeated one misdirection, won't think to look for a second, at least in my experience."

Samara thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "That should serve, I think."

"I'm glad you approve. Have you any further thoughts about ridding the Express of its... unwelcome passenger?"

Samara snorted. "Unfortunately, as far as I could tell, Mr. Crook's search for the thing's hiding place has been exhaustive. I'm going to have to make an inspection of the train myself to see if I can spot anything he might have missed, but I'll be honest with you, Mr. Henge: there's a real chance the vampire's going to stump me, too. It has to be *somewhere* during the day, somewhere a human body could fit, and you lot know where all such places on the train are better than I'm apt to figure out in five days. So it's very possible I'm going to have to kill it at night, when it's moving about."

"And how will you go about doing that, Ms. Darrow?"

"Patrol," Samara answered. "There are a few tricks I might be able to use to flush it out, Mr. Henge, but keep in mind what I said earlier: the vampire keeps all its powers of reason after death. The fact that we haven't found it yet means this one's probably clever. It may take careful precautions against discovery."

"Too much to hope that you can just sniff it out or something, I suppose?" Crook asked.

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Crook. Eventually, as hunger takes hold of it, a vampire becomes pale and eerie, with eyes like a hunting beast. Easy to spot. But for ten to fifteen days after feeding, depending on how much blood it drank, it can pass for human with no difficulty. And our vampire drained someone to death only five nights ago. It's going to look like an ordinary passenger right now."

That information didn't seem to make anyone happy.

"That's it then?" Henge asked. "Just examine the train and hope to bump into the monster?"

"If I get the chance to dispatch it tonight, Mr. Henge, I will. But in truth, I don't think it's going to attack tonight."

That got Henry Lucen to turn around in his seat. "What makes you say that?"

"The train is a precarious environment. It wants to drink blood in isolation. Privacy. That's hard to come by on the Ironside Express. It's never yet attacked on the train's first night out. That makes me think it's a cautious stalker. It's probably going to circulate through the train tonight, observe the passengers, find someone whose behavior it can predict, and mark them to be its next victim. The attack will probably come tomorrow night, or the night after. Tomorrow's what I'd bet on. If I can't flush the thing out, then my plan is to spend tonight doing the same thing the vampire's doing: stake out the train, figure out the best opportunity for it to make an attack, and then be ready to catch it when it tries to strike."

"My nerves are getting too old for this," Henshaw Crook grunted. "Ain't the engine car what you'd call an 'isolated environment?' I mean, if that thing comes in through the air vents, nobody could get through the door to help out in here, if I'm hearing you right."

Samara grimaced. She'd hoped that drawing attention to the door camera would keep Crook and Lucen from thinking of that. "Yes," she said, "but it's *probably* not going to bother the engine compartment because it doesn't want anything to happen to Mr. Lucen. If the train loses its conductor it could lead to serious delays, and if the train isn't running, the vampire loses its hunting ground."

"That makes *me* feel a lot better," Crook said.

"As long as you're around Mr. Lucen or someone else, Mr. Crook, you should..." Samara trailed off, feeling her brain trying to pull something together. Something to do with the door. The camera. The monitors. The externals. Something in Mr. Crook's notes.

Rachel Coll touched her shoulder, fingertips light as feathers. "Samara?"

The dhampir clapped her hands, making the other woman jump back. "I have it. I'm an idiot. I should have seen it before I even sat down with your notes, Mr. Crook."

"You've lost me, Ms. Darrow," Crook said.

"I think," Henge said, "we're about to get some good news, Mr. Crook."

"Well," Samara said, "it would have been better before the sun went down, but I know where the vampire's sleeping."

Rachel's eyes widened, while Crook's narrowed. "Well," the engineer said, "I'm dying to hear it."

Samara paced from one of the room's odd metal boxes to another, then back again. "How wide *are* the Ironside's air ducts, exactly, Mr. Crook?"

The barrel-chested man made a disgusted noise deep in his throat. "They vary a lot. Most of 'em are no wider than my arm. There are six cars where the ducting's wide enough that you could *maybe* fit a body into them. If it were a child. Or a very skinny man. And it'd still be an uncomfortable fit."

"Vampires don't actually sleep during the day," Samara said. "I mean, not like you and I do. We say they sleep, but it's more like they're just dead while the sun's up, and then they revive again when it goes down. So being contorted into some kind of awkward position through the day doesn't bother them."

"Okay," Crook said, "but like I told you, we checked the ducts."

"Yes," Samara said, "with *mirrors*. You told me as much, and then I saw the diagrams for how you did it in your notes. You checked them with mirrors."

"Hell's chariots," Henge muttered under his breath.

Crook's breath whistled through his nose. "You're telling me this—this damned monster—it might have been a foot from my hand, holding that mirror up right in front of its face and seeing nothing but empty duct?"

"I can't see any other place it could be hiding. You said yourself, you've been over every inch of the train. But if you used mirrors to check the ducts, it means—"

"It means we may as well have never checked them," Crook finished. "Shit."

“Is there a way to get a look into them with your own two eyes?” Henge asked.

“Of course,” Crook said, eyes flashing. “I’ll have to get the boy to take part of the ceiling loose in those cars, that’ll be a big pain in the ass, but we can do it. Warlock’s balls, I’ll get started right now.”

Henge frowned. “Ah, Henshaw—”

“It’s night, you fool,” Lucen said.

Crook, who had been about to step toward the engine compartment’s door, settled back on his heels. “Ah—right. A job best done when it’s *in* the ducts. Yes.”

Samara smiled. *Something* about the job was finally starting to make sense. “All right, gentlemen. Mr. Henge, is there anything else—?”

“No,” Anders Henge said. “I’m quite satisfied with your plans, Ms. Darrow.”

“Then I’m going to get started working the train. One last thing—remember that the vampire’s senses are very sharp and it looks like a normal person at the moment. I suggest none of us says a word about knowing where the thing’s sleeping until after sunrise. The last thing we want is for it to move out of the ducts to a new location.”

The men nodded. Samara noticed, then, that Rachel looked subdued. “Is something wrong?”

Coll looked up, shook her head. “No, I think that all sounds solid.”

“Well then,” Samara said. “Why don’t you show me around the train?”

## THE KINGDOM OF SUICIDE

### —*The Ironside Express, Night*

The thunk of the engine room door's magnetic seal engaging punctuated their return to the luxury car's narrow hall. Samara noticed a thin strip of green lights running along the edge of the ceiling, which had been dark when she boarded.

Rachel noticed the dhampir's gaze wandering. "Radiation indicators," she said. "They turn on once we're deep enough into the Exclusion Zone that it's deadly outside. As long as they're green like that, the radiation levels in this car are safe."

"What would happen if the car wasn't safe?"

"They'd turn red. But I've never seen that happen." She took a breath. "So then, as you've gathered, this is the royal luxury car; two spacious suites here, and three more on the deck above. The Ironside Express prides itself—"

"Wait," Samara said, bringing the recitation to a smooth halt that told her Coll was used to being interrupted by guests. "There was a shadow on your face back there, before we left. Is there something I should know?"

"It's, no, nothing to worry about."

The dhampir frowned. "If you're certain."

"Just... worries." Coll visibly pulled herself back to her prior track. "I can lead you upstairs, if you like, but it's just another hallway like this one, with three doors rather than two."

"No," Samara said, "that's fine. Let's make our way down the train. I have a destination in mind."

Behind the royal luxury car was the deluxe luxury car—more of the same, save that it boasted four suites on each deck. Samara gave the closed doors only the most cursory of glances.

Beyond that, Rachel led the dhampir to the sleeper car: a long row of coffin-thin doors leading to tiny compartments containing little more than a double-bunk set of cots and a window. Here they encountered the Ironside's passengers for the first time: men in waistcoats and women in blue and cream dresses sliding past one another with strained propriety in the stifling confines of the hall, forced into frequent halts and presses by the fact that the compartment doors opened outward and nearly touched the far wall while doing so.

"The upper deck is the same," Rachel said, "save that the compartments have single beds."

Samara nodded, thinking of tinned fish.

†

Rachel was coming to regret this assignment more by the minute. Thus far, she'd walked in meek lockstep behind the hunter, stopping to point out the blindingly obvious and awkwardly tumbling between a desire to convey useful information and the long-ingrained habit of singing the train's scripted praises. In truth, the Ironside Express was supposed to be self-explanatory, each car either

explicitly labeled or instantly apparent in its function. Moreover, the hunter struck her as a resourceful woman, in little need of a gofer.

Samara nodded to an empty chair at the end of the hall. “Is there normally someone stationed here?” she asked.

There: a question to which Rachel could provide a useful answer. “Once dinner service starts winding down, yes. An attendant stays on-call for any guest necessities through the night—nightcaps, snacks, fetching Doctor Wells, helping drunks who’ve fallen into the floor back into bed, anything of that sort.”

“Is there another member of staff on the upper deck?” Samara asked, glancing at the recessed spiral stair leading up to the car’s second floor.

“No. Only the one for both decks.”

The hunter nodded, then headed down-passage toward the next car. And that, Rachel discovered, was a thing to see. Heads turned at her approach, and stayed turned. Passengers stopped moving. The dhampir offered a tiny smile and an up-turned hand to indicate her desire to pass, and at that moment men and women both sprang out of her way, pushing their backs against compartment doors. Rachel followed quickly in Samara’s wake, biting down a sigh. Her pale skin made the dhampir visible from all the way across any car in the train, and her gold-ringed, black-scored eyes marked her as something uncanny to all but the most utterly self-absorbed. She’d be the talk of the train by morning, unless Rachel missed her guess. So much for discretion.

†

Samara stopped upon reaching the next car, then edged to the side to clear the door, beckoning Rachel after her. “Tell me about *this* car.”

“This is the lounge,” Coll said, sweeping her hand to indicate the long, winding maze of seats and sofas and small tables with raised rims to hold coffee, tea, and stronger drinks. “To our right of course you can see the bar, open until midnight; and at the far end of the car—”

“An organ,” Samara said, spotting it past the press of seated passengers and amiable pipe-smoke. It was low, unassuming and unattended.

“A modest one,” Coll said. “Just a harmonium. There’ll be music in about an hour. They’ve been talking about getting rid of it, installing a big proper pipe organ since... oh, I don’t know. It was an old conversation when Mr. Henge started on the train. I’ve seen Mr. Crook’s diagrams for hooking up the air circulation to a set of pipes. But I don’t think it’ll ever happen. Mr. Baines doesn’t like anything that puts the train off-schedule, and to be honest, I think Mr. Crook is nervous about monkeying around with the atmospheric that much.”

If he was even willing to try, Samara thought she needed to revise her estimation of the engineer’s skills upward. She’d rather face any monster in the Territories than take apart a piece of goblin-work and reassemble it with any hope it would still function. “I should like to hear that.”

“I’m sure you’ll have the chance,” Coll said. She noticed the dhampir’s eyes lingering on the bar, which faintly glowed with light reflected from glass and polished wood. “Do you drink?”

“Oh, yes,” Samara said. “But not now.”

“Oh, of course not. Not while on the job.”

The hunter shook her head, whicking hair exposing flashes of pale skin where the back of her dress plunged. “I like a drink on the job. I’d just rather wait for dinner.” And then she saw Coll’s expression, and caught a laugh between her teeth before it could break free. “Rachel, this is going to be a tense night—with what we’re looking for, it can’t be anything else. But let’s not have it any more tense than that. You can ask me whatever you like, say whatever you like. I wish you would, I’m going to get bored otherwise. Like: *That seems irresponsible.*”

Coll blinked, tried to regain the suddenly tumbling thread of the conversation. “I don’t—I mean, I wouldn’t criticize your work—”

“You’re right, Rachel,” Samara continued, ignoring the woman’s protest, “it *would be* irresponsible, foolish in fact, if I could even feel a drink, or two, or five. I’ve only been drunk once in my life. It takes some work.” She spotted one of the Ironside’s quickly-becoming-familiar compact spiral staircases. “What’s up above us?”

“Ah—that’s the observation deck.”

“Excellent. Lead the way.”

The observation deck was much like the lounge, with a great deal more open floor space and long sofas crammed against the walls. Samara immediately spotted four gimbal-mounted brass telescopes, and no wonder—the walls here were mostly glass, framed by heavy metal plates and struts. The dhampir took a step off the staircase and felt herself immediately freeze. Night screamed past beyond the windows, black and absolute, and there was a moment where she felt she was standing on top of the train itself, about to be plucked off into the wind stream. Her hand instinctively reached out, grasped a brass rail.

“It happens to some people,” Rachel said, noticing the hunter was no longer following her. “That’s why that rail’s there, in fact. It should pass in a moment.”

Samara shook her head, shifted her feet across the floor to regain her sense of place. She was moving at terrifying speed, yes, but it was only the speed of the train; the glass-walled deck was as tightly enclosed and secure as the rest of the Express. After a moment, her eyes and body came to an agreement on what her mind already knew, and she felt herself untense. “Striking,” she murmured, and then realized that she and Rachel were alone on the deck save for a young man in black coattails who had fallen asleep at the far end of the car.

“Not many people linger up here at night,” Rachel said. “Not much point—can’t see anything when the sun goes down.”

“I can,” Samara said, stepping up to the curved glass wall. She rested her fingertips against the glass, was immediately struck by its weight and thickness. She cupped a hand to cut the soft lamp-light emanating from the center of the car, and let her eyes focus. “I see... well, very little. I want to say hills, but this would be flatland anywhere else. There’s just nothing out there, so much *nothing* that every tiny rise and fall feels significant. A few tufts of ugly grass. Some rocks.”

She felt rather than heard Rachel step up behind her. “Can... everyone like you see in the dark?”

“Yes.” A glint in the wastes caught her eye—some semi-shapeless huddled mass, no larger than a sleeping child, caked in years of wind-blown dirt and dust, yet somehow it had thrown back the faintest reflection of starlight. And as Samara’s eyes adjusted to the rolling nothingness of the wastes of Jii, she saw more and more such half-buried shapes. “What are those things, covered over in sand? I keep seeing little winks of metal.”

Rachel smiled. “There’s no sand in Jii, Samara. All that gray powder, everything you see out there, is ash.” The dhampir turned from the window, and as she did so there was just enough time to see her pupils contract from two enormous black pits back down to something that belonged on a human face. Coll caught herself on the verge of taking a step back, felt her smile go brittle. “Those little bumps out there were once the mechanical men of Jii.”

“Robots?” Samara turned back to the window, focused again. Yes, now that she was looking for it, she thought she could make out something vaguely humaniform in the lumps of dust. Some were splayed out, while others seemed to have curled into a fetal posture; or perhaps their limbs had rusted away long ago. It was hard to tell.

“Of a sort. Not like the ones in Lith, not like the ones that laid the tracks for this train.”

Samara stepped back from the window, found a seat. She gestured, and Rachel smoothed her skirt and sat down across from the dhampir. “Tell me about it?”

“Is it... I mean, is it germane to the night’s...” Rachel glanced down-car, at the sleeping man. “Activity?”

“I don’t know,” Samara said, keeping her voice low. “I rarely know what I need to know until I know it. And don’t worry about that man. Look at the glass next to him.”

Rachel did, and frowned. She couldn’t see anything unusual there—not behind the man, nor to his left or right. No smudges, cracks, or any other flaws in the glass. Nothing stuck to its exterior. Then it hit her: in the angle where the car’s dim lights struck the glass, she could see the sleeping passenger’s reflection. And since she could see that, there was no fear they were about to discuss the hunter’s work in front of their quarry. “How long have you been checking the glass?”

Samara smiled. “Since we entered the sleeper car. It’s tough work in something as crowded and cluttered as the lounge, though.”

“What will you do if you spot someone without a reflection?”

Samara turned her head, peering into the night. “You were going to tell me about the mechanical men, and the wastes. Not quite robots, you said.”

“That’s how the stories go—that they were something more than robots. It’s said that the Warlock created them after the second failed uprising in Lith; that he wanted to be rid of his human subjects, to replace them with something better. I don’t know if I believe that, it seems a bit pat.”

“What do you think?” the dhampir asked.

“I think he made them just to see if he could,” Rachel said.

The hunter nodded. That was the way of wizards, all right.

“Anyway. A robot, as I understand it, is just a machine, like this train; it can do as it’s told, and understand what it’s made to understand, but it can’t think, not really. Warlock’s golden men were different; when he built them, he gave them each an electric brain, and maybe even an electric soul. They ventured out into the Territories and tamed five thousand miles and more of it. They mined the hills and mountains hollow for raw materials, and built more of their kind until they were legion. But they were metal things. They didn’t need to grow crops for food. They didn’t need to build shelter from the sun and wind and rain. They had no flesh to sate. They didn’t build cities. Their only vice was thought, and so they built philosophies and societies.”

Samara sank down into the overstuffed cushion as she absorbed the other woman’s recitation. *A week across the wastes, one night of layover in Lith. Then another back across, one night of layover in Comumant. I wonder if she realizes she talks about this strange graveyard of poison and ash as her home?*

Rachel’s eyes had unfixed from the dhampir, the night beyond the window, indeed the century which enfolded the Ironside Express. “They had no use for humans, wizards, anything else—only ideas, and expressions of ideas. They created more of their kind to express their ideals.”

“What happened then?” Samara asked, when the silence had stretched out for a few moments.

Rachel stirred. “Schools formed—factions. Then rivalries. The ideas and societies of their fellows offended the machines of Jii. They quarreled. And then they fought. They invented new weapons, and new reasons to use them. In the end, they made a weapon to surpass all others. Maybe one of their groups thought that only they were clever enough to have designed such a weapon. Or maybe they thought no other could be bold enough, or right enough, to cast it forth in battle. Whichever, they were wrong. The machines poured down atomic rockets onto one another like rain, until all of Jii was fire and ash. And that was the end of golden men and all of their ideas.”

Only Samara’s lips moved: “They all died?”

“Nothing’s ever that tidy. Some survived. They could have gone on living forever, even rebuilt, I suppose. But with all their dreams and works settling as ash around them, the machines didn’t want to survive, and simply laid down and died. At least, that’s how I’ve always heard the story told. I’m not sure who would have been around to see them lay down, or record their final thoughts—the plains of Jii have been untouchable ever since the golden men unleashed their atomic rain, after all.”

“Is that what the figure in the goblin fresco in the engine compartment is? One of the mechanical men?”

Rachel nodded. “Yeah. You know, the name, *Jii*, that comes from the language of the machine men. Nobody could ever understand it; it was all static and whistling sounds. The goblins, they have a different name for the Exclusion Zone. They call it the Kingdom of Suicide.” She was quiet for a few moments then, letting the night roar past around them, black and empty. “Anyway, that was all, oh, three hundred years ago, give or take. Now this train is the only thing moving through the wastes.”

Samara touched the back of Rachel’s hand, and this time there was no flinch. “Thank you. I’d like to see the next car.”

Coll rose, smoothed her skirt again, took a breath, and donned a practiced smile. “Of course. Follow me.”



## QUESTIONS OVER DINNER

### —*The Ironside Express, Night*

A quick descent and passage through the lounge found the two women standing in a car one-quarter occupied by a compartment much like the luxury cabins Samara had already seen, save that its walls were of undecorated steel. Past it the car opened up into an array of tables, some long and some round. A wood ball tumbled around a bowl built into the surface of one table; others were covered in painted playing cards; others still clattered with the tumbling of dice.

“Entertainment car?” Samara guessed.

“Yes,” Rachel said. “The Ironside offers four different games of luck and chance, as well as keeping materials and open tables on hand for passengers to organize other amusements to suit their fancy.”

“And this,” Samara said, running a hand across the unadorned metal compartment’s wall, “what is this? A vault to hold winnings?”

“No, nothing of the sort. All gambling on the Express is done with chits which can be redeemed at the stations in Lith or Comumant. This is Dr. Wells’s office and suite.”

Samara drew her hand back. “Oh.”

“I’ve heard the train’s medical facilities used to be near the back with the rest of staff, but were moved up here at some point because it was easier to treat the knifings where they happened.” She glanced at the dhampir, who offered no reaction. “Bad joke, I suppose. Sorry. I really have heard that, but I don’t know if it’s true.”

The hunter’s eyes cleared. “What? No, don’t apologize. I was just... reminiscing.” And before Coll could say anything, Samara tapped a thumb against yet another of the train’s ubiquitous spiral staircases. This one’s railing was decorated with red lace. “And what’s this, then?”

“Ah. The entertainment car’s second floor houses the bordello.”

Samara let her eyes linger on her guide for a moment, until Rachel turned away. Then she leaned into the stairwell, took a deep breath. Yes, that explained part of the strange mix she’d picked up as soon as they entered the car. Perfume. Sweat. The unmistakable musk of sex. “I see. How many women do you have working up there?”

“Four,” Rachel said.

“And *is* it only women?”

“Yes. You think they’re at risk?”

“Is there always a guard up there with them?”

Rachel blinked. “We call him an attendant, but yes, at all times.”

“Then they’re probably in more danger from the guests with tickets than the one without.” She dragged in another breath, nostrils flaring. “I’ll poke around up there later, when it’s less busy. You can lead on.”

Rachel hesitated. "Do you think it's... apt to use this car to look for..."

Samara shook her head slightly. "Any other house of ease in the Territories, yes. Here, no, your attendants are too interested in making sure they know who everyone is and how much they owe. Not safe for someone without a proper ticket."

"I suppose that makes sense. This way, then."

The next car brought a smile to the dhampir's face. It was densely packed on both sides with passengers crowded around tiny narrow tables, separated by high seat backs and glass dividers that gave the impression of much more privacy and space than the dining car actually provided. She immediately gave up on trying to sift any useful information from the room's mélange of scents—it was a wild spray of brandy-tea-fresh bread-onion soup-beef-beet sauce-wine-garlic and those were just the ones she first recognized. Coll hadn't introduced this car because she didn't need to. "Upstairs?"

"More dining car, second deck. More spacious seating. The lower deck of the dining car is as far forward on the train as passengers from st—from the rider cars can go. The upper deck is reserved for passengers from the sleeper car forward."

"Well," Samara said, grabbing hold of the railing of another spiral staircase, "that's me. Let's go up."

Coll followed, frowning at the incongruity of the hunter's combat boots beneath her evening dress. "You don't want to finish your inspection?"

"Not on an empty stomach," Samara said.

As promised, the upper deck boasted more tables, these covered in white tablecloths and of significantly greater size than those below. Electric candles burned in ceiling-hung glass bowls, giving the car an intimate feeling. The dhampir smiled, spotting an empty table at the far end of the car—and directly next to it, an antique mirror with a jeweled rim. "Well, that's handy."

"I suppose it is," Coll said. She was scanning the car for Gilcrest out of sheer habit, before remembering that he'd be in the caboose coordinating the train's night crew by now. Covering for her. She was seized by a powerful urge to head back and check on him. "Shall I settle you in with a menu, then...?"

Samara, who had been swaying slightly from side to side, lining diners up with the mirror to check them for reflections, frowned and fixed the other woman with her weird gold eyes. "What? Nonsense. Eat with me."

Coll frowned back. "I mean—I'm on duty—staff don't eat in the dining car."

"Yes, but your duty right now is to liaise with me, and *I'm* eating in the dining car, and we have things to go over. Come on." And she made her way toward her selected table.

Rachel sighed and followed.

It was a table for two, one of its seats directly beneath the antique mirror. Samara pulled that chair around to the side so she could check the car by looking left, the mirror by looking right; after a moment, Rachel moved the other chair to face her and settled reluctantly into it, then signaled an attendant. That was when she noticed the avid look on the dhampir's face. "Are you all right?"

“Better than all right, I think,” Samara said. She took in another deep breath, drawing in something powerful, cutting, like a rich sizzling crimson banner waving above the scent-mix that otherwise dominated the dining car.

“Ladies,” the attendant said, looking only slightly confused to be addressing the train’s junior guest liaison director. “Would you like drinks to start your meal?”

“Yes,” Samara said instantly, and then pointed to a table midway down the car. “What goes well with *that*?”

The attendant’s head turned, and his smile firmed up: now he knew his business. “Ah, for that madam, I recommend a white rose wine which pairs exceptionally well—”

“Samara,” Rachel cut him off, hoping to also cut off a disaster in the making, “have you ever had that dish before?”

The dhampir shook her head, eyes still fixed on the orange-red concoction. It stood out from everything else in the car. “No, but I aim to.”

“You said you’d traveled from the far west to get here, didn’t you? The kitchen has a veal dish that’s apt to be a lot more like what your palette’s used to. People who don’t grow up with curry don’t tend to respond well to it.”

“Is that what it is?” Samara asked, looking up at the waiter.

Evidently he hadn’t seen her eyes head-on until now, because he took a step back. “Y, ah, yes ma’am. Chicken curry, sourced entirely from ingredients grown and raised in the terrace lands north of Lith: peppercorn, dusk peppers, powdered coriander and cumin seeds, onions—”

Samara looked back at Rachel. “Can’t be worse than fighting three mountain trolls.” And then back to the waiter: “Chicken curry, then, with that wine you were talking about.”

Rachel gave up. “The ox-tail stew with the usual wine for me, then. And bring an extra pitcher of water for when my friend finds out what I tried to warn her about.”

The attendant beat a hasty retreat after that, leaving the two women with an empty table and silence. Rachel opted to break it: “What were you reminiscing about, back in the vice car?”

Samara dropped her chin onto her hands, face low to the table and split by a grin. “Is that what you call it when the guests aren’t listening? And the rider cars—you were going to call them steorage, weren’t you?”

Coll felt an obscure urge to defend the Ironside’s traditions. “The train has its own language. Most of it’s older than I am. I imagine it will outlive me, too.”

Samara waved a hand, sat back in her chair. “It’s fine, Rachel. It’s fine. You live somewhere, you get honest about it, I think. Tell you what: I’ll tell you what I was reminiscing about, if you’ll tell me why you had that look back in the engine compartment.”

Rachel bit out the words without giving herself time to think about them: “Fine. Nobody on the Express knows what they’re dealing with here. I barely do. But since I come from the Pans, they’ve been looking

to me to know what to do until you arrived. And if I'd realized what was wrong with that rig Mr. Crook put together, it might have solved our problem before we even pulled out of Lith. I had the two and two, and I never put them together."

The grin had so thoroughly vanished from Samara's face it may as well have never been there. "Listen to a professional: You can't think that way. The odds and ends you scraped out of your old gran's stories probably kept another monster from getting loose in Comumant before I arrived. You've done fine. This sort of thing is *all I do* and it took me half a day to see the problem. If you need to be upset, pin it on me not realizing the problem before nightfall, not yourself."

Rachel was quiet for a moment, then grunted: not an assent, not a refusal. The hunter supposed it was the best she was likely to get.

"Well, you answered me, so I'll answer you. I was remembering, as it happens, the first and only time I ever managed to get drunk. Also one of the biggest damned fiascos I ever ended up taking part in. It would have been... four years ago now? I don't think it was five. Some town about eight hundred miles west of Comumant. I'm not sure I remember the name any more—Claypool? Claymont? Something like that. Logging town in a river valley. They'd contracted the school to get rid of a lesser werewolf. Do they have werewolves in the Pans?"

"A few. Not many."

"Then just believe me when I say there's nothing *lesser* about a lesser werewolf if you have to fight it. Anyway, the school sent me, I made good time, and I got there five days before the full moon."

Rachel stirred. "What did you do?"

"Well, to start, I wasted the better part of two days figuring out I wasn't going to suss out the werewolf's human identity where the town sheriff had spent three months failing at the same job with much better information than I had. After that, I pretty much spent my time sitting in the common house playing Four Seasons with the locals using the old beat-up deck I'd had since academy."

Rachel blinked, tried to picture the dhampir sitting at a beer-stained table playing small-ante card games. It wouldn't quite square with the elegant figure in the ruffled dress across from her. "Winter or summer rules?"

"Summer," Samara said, "which took a little getting used to. I grew up on winter. Didn't matter that much though, since I was cheating the whole time."

"You—what?"

Samara closed her eyes, took in a deep breath. "I didn't need you to tell me that orange dish I ordered was hot, Rachel. I can smell the sweat pouring off the woman eating it. I can't turn that off. So it wasn't hard to tell when someone was bluffing, or they drew a dead season, or a full reap. Mostly the trick was losing enough that they didn't get bored, and then winning enough that *I* didn't get bored. Anyway, the last day before I had to get to work, this mouthy fellow that I'd gotten tired of letting win tried to challenge me to a drinking contest. I think his aim was to rob me while I was passed out, which..." The dhampir snorted. "Anyway I tried to explain why that wasn't possible, but he was dumb and stubborn. So I finally told him if he wanted a contest, I'd out-drink him and all of his friends put together."

“You *what?*”

Samara spread her hands. “He was annoying! I didn’t think he could have very many friends. Anyway, that was about two hours past sunrise, and by ten o’ clock Morning it seemed like half the town was in the common hall, and by noon it somehow became a relay drinking contest against the entire damned town, with every person that dropped out being replaced by a newcomer. By four o’ clock Afternoon we’d lost track of who was officially running the tally against me and everyone was just aiming to drink the whole town dry of every barrel of beer it had, I think. It was a mess.”

Rachel was staring at her with a kind of horrified fascination. “Who won?”

“We kind of lost track of how the scoring was supposed to work after three people tried to take up the tally against me at once, but I think there was one lumberjack who downed 38 steins. I didn’t beat the entire town put together, that’s for sure. Sequentially, though, I think I won. The mayor’s son had me down at 166 steins when we finally called it off around ten o’ clock Night.”

Coll had no words.

“Not sure I get the appeal, if I’m being honest. Everything seemed really funny past about mid-afternoon, but I think I also remember getting confused by an outhouse door and yanking it off its hinges at one point.”

“Were you...” What did you even *say* to something like that? “Were you able to finish the job?”

“The werewolf howling right in my face mid-hangover wasn’t one of the high points of my life, but yeah, I got the job done. Trouble was, I was right back in Claypool six months later. Turns out we never figured out who the werewolf was because he wasn’t a townie. It was some hermit living way up in the woods, maybe so he wouldn’t hurt people, but he got driven down into the valley because a hamadryad moved into the forest. And *that* took three hunters to clear out—me, a Capruel dhampir, and a third hunter from the Vulken school. The boy from the Capruel school didn’t make it out of that. Town couldn’t even come close to paying for that job, either, so all three schools have what amounts to a free supply of hardwood in perpetuity as long as they care to go to the trouble of hauling it out of the river and transporting it.”

Water arrived at the table, and Samara wet her throat. No sign of the curry yet. She made herself be patient. “Sorry if this kind of talk isn’t proper for dinner. I don’t have to be mannerly very often, I’m afraid I’m not very good at it.”

Rachel blinked, and just like that realized that she was sitting quietly with her hands folded in her lap, staring at a window into the wide carnivorous world that she’d never have the chance to travel, and not even trying to peer through it. “It’s fine,” she said, trying to sort out what she really wanted to say next. What came out was: “Do you really think we’ll... settle this work in the morning?”

Samara glanced at the dining car, then the mirror, then the dining car again. All diners accounted for. “The logic holds. So I hope so. But there are a lot of things about this job that don’t make sense. I *will* go over them, but... when there are fewer ears around. Okay?”

“All right.”

“Here, then, how about this? I told you earlier to speak freely, ask whatever came to mind.”

“You did.”

“And yet you’ve been watching my mouth, not my eyes or face, whenever I talk.”

Rachel jerked her gaze up from the dhampir’s mouth to her eyes, then cut it down to her own folded hands. “Okay,” she said, “fair enough then. Do you have fangs?”

Samara smiled. Her canines were visibly pointed, moreso than the average person’s, but there was nothing inhuman about them. “There, that wasn’t so hard. And yes, I do.” She glanced across the dining car, then back to Rachel, who wore an expectant expression she probably wasn’t aware of. “You really don’t want to see them during dinner. Trust me.”

Rachel felt her heart beating faster. *In for a penta, in for the purse...* “Okay. What about claws?”

Samara sipped her water. “No. Vampires have claws. I don’t. The only dhampirs I know of with claws are the ones from the Brant school.”

Coll felt as though she were picking her way across shifting sand. “I’m not sure I follow that. I thought the schools trained dhampirs to hunt monsters.”

The dhampir nodded. “That’s right. They also organize hunts, supply us, collect fees.”

Rachel tried to find another way of asking what she was trying to get at. “Do all the Darrow hunters use the school’s name for their own?”

“No,” Samara said. “Most don’t. The school took me in as a baby. My parents never gave me a name.”

“I see,” Rachel said. “And which of them was...?”

Samara tilted her head. After a moment, her eyes widened. “Oh. Oh. Oh, no. No, that’s not how it works.”

Coll’s brows knitted in confusion.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to—” The dhampir shook her head. “Lots of people think that. I just haven’t run into it in a while, so I forgot. No, vampires are dead things. They can’t have children, ever, not with anyone.”

“Dhampirs are half-vampires.” Frowning, Rachel slid the assertion across the table as though it were a suspected counterfeit ticket.

“In a manner of speaking, yes, but not like that.” And at that, Samara leaned back from both the table and her recitation as the waiter re-appeared and slid a steaming orange-red chicken dish in front of her. She took in a deep breath as he poured wine for herself and Rachel: the dish was rich, pungent, almost erupting with spices. She realized her mouth was watering.

As soon as the attendant had stepped away, Rachel said: “Wait, you have to finish answering that for me before you start on the curry. You’re not going to be able to talk in a minute.”

Samara grinned. “My parents were two miserable dirt farmers somewhere in the Territories with more children than food. They sold me to the Darrow School not long after I was born. Back then I was just as human as you are. Dhampirs aren’t born, Rachel, we’re made. The school started me on a regimen of

blood transfusions and surgeries not long after I got my tits. I don't know how exactly it works; the school doesn't tell us, they're protective of their processes; and besides, I was out cold for most of the procedures. The other schools use slightly different methods to make their dhampirs. I've heard the Brant school implants actual vampire fangs in its students' mouths, for example, and I know the Darrow process doesn't do *that*. Anyway, that goes on for years. The goal is to produce a stable human-vampire hybrid. It worked pretty well for me."

Rachel found that words had deserted her. And in that gap of silence, Samara took up her spoon and leaned down to the curry before the other woman could form another objection. The dhampir's eyes lit up, then popped wide. She sat straight up, chewed with deliberation, swallowed. Coll realized that the hunter's pale skin made the flush rising up her neck and across her cheeks and forehead almost instantly visible, roses blooming and transforming into red brick within moments. "I warned you," she said.

The dhampir dabbed at her lips with a napkin, and finally fixed her eyes on Rachel Coll. Then she lowered the napkin, took up her spoon, and began to attack the curry with a renewed will. "I love this train and I want to live in its kitchen," she said between mouthfuls.

In the midst of the glittering appointments and refined atmosphere of the executive dining car, as one of the great works of goblin machinery hurled through a vast nightscape of poison and death, Rachel found herself remembering a bit of advice her gran—seam-faced gran, gimbal-eyed gran, made wise and sharp and ungentle by a lifetime in the Pans—had imparted to her older brother: *The world was big to start with and it's too damned big by ten measures now. A fella sets himself to understand it, he may as well learn to tie knots in his own piss. They'll both amount to the same.*

She sat back, picked at her ox-tail stew, and watched the dhampir eat in silence for a while.