

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 guestimate 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.