



## Free Preview

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### **Episode 1: Blood on the Tracks**

The dry wind of the arid expanse blew up tufts of dust against the stony hillsides. At a glance, most people would see a lifeless frontier, but scratching the surface, a larger ecosystem would be exposed. Tiny life scurried around amongst the underbrush—lizards and snakes that had adapted to survive in the harsh landscape; insects and worms that lurked in plain sight, too small to be easily spotted. All the while, old horse tracks revealed the presence of man. The desert is never as dead as one would assume.

A faint whistle blew in the distance, a sound of civilization. The train was several miles off, hauling passengers and cargo across southern Nevada to the various trading centers of the burgeoning west.

The creature crawled out of his cave, the thin, emaciated being in the rough form of a humanoid. While proportioned much like a human being, he was certainly not a man. Bony protrusions jutted out of every joint, forming a crusty exoskeleton over his slim body. The face was parched and flaking, akin to white sandstone, and the skin was sucked so tightly against the skull to appear ghastly. No hair could be found upon his scalp, but a few black tufts sat along his jaw line.

One might assume the creature to be native to the desert, and in recent years he had been, though that had not always been the case.

Hearing the train, the bony being moved to action, rushing across the dusty landscape like a jackrabbit. Speed increased with every lurching leap until the creature came to the top of a ridge and saw his quarry, the metal machine of man spewing black smoke from its stack, towing a dozen boxcars along the steel rails.

The train was picking up speed, going faster than any horse could run, though that did not deter the creature from continuing the pursuit. Racing down the hillside, the being rushed faster, darting along at remarkable velocity—soon matching, and then surpassing the rolling wheels of the locomotive. He was within striking distance of the

caboose before long, and made his move onto the back deck, reaching it in one leap.

The moment was approaching at last; the time of retribution!

Smashing through the back door, the creature found himself in the luggage compartment. Boxes and bags littered the walls as he trudged down the central hallway, snorting and growling all the while. He'd need all the rage he could muster if he wished to succeed. Strength was at his command, but only so long as he willed it.

There was nothing he wanted with the luggage, so the creature rushed through to the next compartment. It was a mail car, something totally unexpected. The three postal employees were busy sorting stacks of letters when the horrific being burst in through the rear door. They froze in place, envelopes in hand.

The creature hadn't anticipated this. He was planning to find sleeping compartments, not these paper pushers! The surprise added to his rage, and gave him further strength to continue. But these little men had to be dealt with. No one must have forewarning of his presence, not until he'd found what he was looking for. Jumping into action, he was upon the startled men in seconds, knocking them to the ground and crushing their bones one by one. They could hardly make a sound before their throats were flattened, and light faded from their eyes.

Three down, dozens more to go.

The next car was the sleeping compartment, though nobody was lying down at midday. That worked in the creature's favor. The more concentrated the people, the less chance of detection before he found his true quarry... and the easier it would be to kill everyone all at once!

Exiting the sleeping area, the creature stopped at the door to the next car, glancing into the small window. This next one was a dining car, and lunch was being served. The well-dressed passengers sat with their coffee and biscuits and other assorted dishes, being waited on hand and foot by red-suited porters. How civilized, yet it was revolting to this inhuman creature. It was something he could never enjoy—not since *they* had taken it all away from him!

Thoughts and memories collided within the wiry beast, rekindling his rage into an inferno of hatred. The passion pulsing through his veins overwhelmed any conscious morality as he continued on his mission. There was no stopping, no mercy to be shown to these pampered people. It didn't matter what they deserved, the creature could only act on what he desired. Such was his curse.

Crashing into the dining car, the creature went to his bloody work. Leaping from one table to the next, he put an end to every life he found, with fist and foot, arm and leg, crushing bones and pulverizing muscles. Death was swift but painful for those people who hardly had time to realize what was going on.

In the midst of the murdering, a crack of thunder sounded, and a stinging pain erupted in the creature's left shoulder. The beast glanced at his shoulder, and saw one of his bony protrusions had cracked, and a hunk of gray metal sat lodged there. The soft lead had been unable to penetrate his exoskeleton, though it still hurt.

The shooter wasn't a remarkable man, nor did he have any badge of authority. He was a plain businessman with a two-shot derringer and the fortitude to fight for his life. Too bad he was up against a force more overwhelming than his mini arsenal could overcome.

The wiry creature jumped at the assailant, and slammed a fist against the man's chest,

crushing the collar bone. Two more hits sent the man to his death.

The carnage continued for another minute, as people screamed and ran, seeking to flee from the hideous creature. A few managed to race into the next car, but that only delayed the inevitable, for the marauding beast came charging after them.

The next car was full of seats, a standard passenger car for daytime travel. The place was packed, and everyone was on alert, having heard the murderous rampage in the dining car and received advance warning from the few refugees who escaped the initial assault. Several passengers had rifles and pistols ready, and they didn't hesitate to use them. A slew of lead smacked against the creature's hide, causing a new surge of pain for the being. A few of the small caliber rounds managed to break his skin, but most just cracked exterior bones or bruised the leathery hide. In all, it accomplished nothing.

The creature repaid the bold passengers with killing blows as he cut through this new car like a scythe. He swept his arms around the room, slicing the panicked people with his hard extrusions. Blood sprayed as his fingernails and forearms cut their throats. Once he'd dealt with the armed men, the creature turned on those who cowered in their seats. He glanced at the fearful people, identifying each of their faces before killing them without remorse. One by one, they all fell until he reached the front of the car, where the final victim sat. It was a young woman, cowering against the wall, gripping a suitcase like a life preserver. The panic on her face could not diminish her beauty. Perhaps it was the lavish makeup that prevented fear wrinkles, or just good breeding. Either way, she was recognized.

"You," the creature said with a raspy whisper, like a rattlesnake choking on its own tail.

The terrified woman continued to shiver and cry, glancing at the horrible creature briefly, but unable to lock eyes with it.

"You... are Bettina Carter," the creature hissed.

The young woman squeezed her eyes closed, and nodded her head, too afraid to wonder why the creature would know her name. It was going to kill her anyway, so what was the point?

Though, a few seconds later, the creature proved her thoughts wrong. It grabbed her with one arm, even as she screamed in protest and struggled against the grip to no avail. Her squirming merely tore her blouse against the bony protrusions, and bruised her arms. There was no escape.

With Bettina in his grasp, the creature had what he'd come for and made a grand exit, punching out a window, and enlarging it with several swift punches. The hard steel of the railcar peeled back like foil to the creature's blows, and once the hole was of sufficient size, the being leapt out with his female cargo. Leaping from a moving train would stun the strongest human, but the bony creature took the fall gracefully, bounding off into the dusty hills as quickly as he had arrived.

Ten minutes later, the train crossed into Nye County, though nobody discovered the massacre until the scheduled stop at Yucca Junction.

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The streets of Selwood were usually bustling on a Tuesday afternoon, but people are bound to run for cover when they hear gunshots. Six loud blasts at uneven intervals cleared Main Street, as an inebriated elf came staggering through town. He was enraged, yet in his drunken state it was doubtful he could explain why. His motivations were not

the law's concern. The fact that he was threatening public safety warranted his arrest, though it was a job easier said than done.

Joella Grimes-Talus ducked behind a hay cart as a bullet came her way. The deputy badge pinned to her chest assigned her the responsibility to deal with this sort of unruly citizen, but it didn't mean she was prepared to die. The cemetery was full of bold fools who took their jobs too seriously. The survivors knew when to hide.

Another bullet sank into the cart's side with a disconcerting thump.

"I see you hiding there," the drunk said with slurred speech. "Come on out and face me like a man, human scum!"

"I'm neither human nor a man," Joella replied from behind the cart.

Truly, anyone with a clear view couldn't help but spot her feminine features and the pointed ears exposing her elvish heritage.

The drunken elf put a bullet into the ground beside the hay cart. "You sound girly enough, but ain't no woman gonna wear them britches I seen."

"Why don't you come over here and find out," Joella challenged.

"You think I'm stupid?" the drunk asked, letting off another shot down Main Street. "Expect me to walk into your range, coward?"

Joella peeked over the hay cart to spot her opponent, and ducked as he took aim. "No, I'm keeping you distracted until my husband can sneak up from behind."

As the words registered with the drunk, he turned around, only to get a rifle stock to the head. The hard walnut dazed the unsteady elf, and a second blow knocked him out cold. The public nuisance was subdued.

Boron Grimes adjusted his grip on the hefty 1873 Winchester musket and set the stock on the ground as he glared at the drunk. The weapon was almost as long as the dwarf was tall, which had aided him in his latest endeavor. Without the longer reach of the rifle, he wouldn't have been able to buffalo this vagabond. Shooting him dead was the alternative, but it was nicer to save killing for more deserving opponents.

"You okay, Joella?" Ron asked after kicking the drunk for good measure.

"Just fine, dear husband," Joella answered flamboyantly, rising from her hiding spot with vigor.

Ron still wanted to cringe every time she called him that. Their marriage was nothing more than a sham, designed to keep Joella from becoming an unwilling bride to her late-husband's cousin. Ron had been dragged to the altar at gunpoint, though since then he'd gained a certain level of respect for this unconventional lady. Still, the bias of his upbringing precluded them from being anything more than friends.

With the drunken shootist subdued, life returned to normal, and the residents of Selwood began roaming the streets again. By the time Ron and Joella had their prisoner to the Sheriff's Office, you could hardly tell there'd been a disturbance.

Ron opened the door as Joella dragged the unconscious body of the drunkard into the office. It was a small area without decoration; just a desk with a few chairs and a gun rack behind it. An open archway led to the jail cells in back, and a narrow staircase on the left wall led up to the living quarters on the second floor.

"Well, that was enough excitement for one day," Joella said, dropping the drunk in the cell. "Any idea when the sheriff will be back?"

"Doliber said he had some personal stuff to handle, that he'd be back when he was done," Ron replied, locking the cell door. "That was three days ago."

"It's nice to see he trusts us to handle things," Joella replied.

"Me. He trusts *me* to handle things," Ron corrected. "I'm the senior deputy around here."

"Of course you are, little man," Joella said, mildly amused. "Just don't let that ego outgrow your britches." Kneeling down, she gave him a peck on his bearded cheek.

Ron turned to the sheriff's desk and tossed himself into the padded chair behind it. "Not possible," he replied.

With a little effort, he set his feet on the desk and leaned back to get comfortable. Joella shook her head and walked out the door.

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The tall grass swayed as a stiff wind came in off the ocean. The small patch of lawn hadn't been cut all spring, and the rugged Maine climate didn't stunt its progress in the least. Hay was one of the few things that truly flourished down east.

James Doliber turned his coat up as the first drops of rain came flying his way. The storm was blowing in off the bay, and it was chilly for late June, even in northern New England. The miserable weather reminded the warlock sheriff of his days at the Guild Academy in San Francisco. It seemed fitting, considering his current objective.

Doliber walked up to the weathered farm house up on the hill. As he approached, he noticed there wasn't a spot of paint on the old building; just the natural gray of age. The walls were sided with cedar shingles, so rot hadn't set in, and a wisp of smoke trickled out of the brick chimney top, revealing the place to be inhabited.

Stepping up to the door, Doliber rapped his knuckles against the boards, hoping his leads were correct. The last few days had given him a headache as he sought to find the one man who might be both capable and willing to give him some answers.

A minute passed, and Doliber knocked again. Nothing. He feared the occupant was giving him the cold shoulder, and was about to walk off when the door finally opened.

Doliber turned around to greet the home-owner, only to see a double-barreled shotgun stuck in his face.

"Is that the stench of a Guild Warden I smell on you, or are you just a federal thug?" the old man holding the shotgun asked. His white hair and stubble revealed his years, but his voice was as smooth as his peachy skin.

"I'm not here to cause trouble," Doliber replied, keeping his hands up and carefully eyeing the shotgun. Both hammers were cocked and waiting for an itchy finger to pull one of the double triggers. The right spell could deflect a load of the heaviest shot, but that was assuming the shells weren't enchanted, themselves. Doliber wasn't in a hurry to find out the hard way.

"Well, you can go back to whatever taskmaster sent you," the old man grumbled. "I've paid my penance, and have kept true to my word. No magic, no meddling. Not that I care for either, anymore."

"Sir, I didn't come as anyone's agent, though my visit does concern the Guild. If you'd allow me to explain... without a gun stuffed in my face."

The old man studied Doliber's face, and eventually decided to lower his aim. He uncocked the hammers and set the shotgun at his side, but he still looked annoyed.

"Based on your words and demeanor, I guess it's safe to assume you're Harold Paxton," Doliber said.

"Never assume anything," the old man warned, "but, yes, I'm Paxton. Now, who are

you and why are you here?"

"My name's James Doliber. Could we continue this inside?" he asked, feeling his hair getting damp. "The rain's picking up."

"The rain won't dampen your voice," Paxton said, leaning against his front door. The roof's slight overhang was keeping him dry.

"I'm a Journeyman Warlock, Delta Grade. I came for your counsel on a personal matter."

"What, you don't have a lady friend to tell your troubles to?" Paxton mocked

"The Guild has offered me the Master's Exams," Doliber snapped abruptly. "I need to know more about them; what they entail, how they affect the mind. I can only get that information from someone who's been through the process."

Paxton made an indignant snort. "It's forbidden for anyone other than a Master to know what the trials entail. Wash-outs have their memories purged, and no active member would ever betray their oath."

"Which is why I've sought you out," Doliber admitted. "You're one of the few Guild Masters who has ever been excommunicated, and the only one currently alive."

"So, you figure I'd be willing to betray the promise I gave to never reveal the secrets of the Guild?"

"They betrayed you first, and we both know it," Doliber said, keeping his cool. "You were the only Master of the Guild who dared to actually fight in the War Between the States, and they nailed you for it."

"The Guild had its reasons," Paxton replied solemnly, lowering his gaze.

"So did you. So did the dozens of Med-locks who challenged the Guild's non-interference edict and chose to heal the wounded soldiers on both sides. But you were the only one with the wherewithal to enter combat. The way I see it, the Guild disowned you for doing the right thing."

"It's more complicated than that." Without taking his eyes off of Doliber, Paxton opened his front door. The older gentleman was finally warming up to his uninvited guest. "Come in, if you want to hear the truth."

Doliber accepted the late invitation and stepped inside, trying not to trip over the wide assortment of tools and junk cluttering up the entryway. It seemed to be booby trapped with all the farm implements stuffed into such a tight space, but a narrow path wove through it all, leading to the kitchen door.

"So, you want to know what really happened in Atlanta?" Paxton asked as he stepped into the sweltering kitchen. The cook stove was putting off a lot of heat, far too much for Doliber's comfort.

"I'm certainly curious," Doliber replied, anxious to get to the more pertinent subject of the Master Examinations, though he knew it would take time to coax those answers from the old man. Best to have a few mild curiosities revealed, and hopefully gain his trust during the exchange.

"I drew the short stick," Paxton said.

Doliber waited patiently for him to elaborate.

"I'm sure you've read about the siege of Atlanta and that final day; how my paralytic spell put down the defenders in mere moments without bloodshed. It would have taken the Union forces weeks to kill their way to victory, assuming they broke through at all. Tell me, Journeyman Doliber, do you think our boys in blue would have succeeded

without mystical intervention?"

"I believe it's as you said. There'd have been more bloodshed, but we'd have won out in the end."

"We?" Paxton asked, seeming offended by the terminology, and then began to pace a little as he continued. "Well, why do you think *we* would have won the siege?"

Doliber sensed a trick question, but had no choice other than to play along.

"I'm not a military expert, but the Union troops held most of the advantage. More men, more supplies..."

"Ah, but there's the key. What if I told you we didn't have more men? At least, not on that last day."

"You say the news reports were inaccurate?"

"Not inaccurate, but incomplete," Paxton corrected. "They don't account for the rebel sorceress who was turning the tide for the Confederacy."

Doliber's attention picked up at the mention of a "sorceress." While ignorant laymen might use such a word as a synonym for a lady warlock, no Guild member would ever make such a mistake. The two were completely incongruous, and held far different meanings. A sorceress was a practitioner of demonic magic, something strictly forbidden by the Guild.

"So you see, the secessionists weren't playing by the rules—not that there really are any in war—but they crossed the line, recruiting the aid of a demonic congruent. Somebody had to stop them—stop her—before it was too late."

"What was she doing, exactly?" Doliber asked.

"She was turning our best men against us, using a frightening form of enchantment to rewrite our soldiers' thoughts and memories, making them believe they were fighting for the Confederacy!"

The very concept was frightening. The power to manipulate minds was a difficult and limited ability by Guild standards. Not even Guildmaster Silvestri had the power to create false memories—at least, not to the best of Doliber's knowledge.

Paxton continued.

"The sorceress had been picking our boys off for weeks, slowly swelling the Confederate ranks and depleting ours. A few of us med-locks figured out what was going on and resolved to stop it. Only, to do that, one of us would have to defy the Guild, knowing full well what that would mean. There were six volunteers for the job, and I won the draw.

"The rest, you know. I used my spell-casting abilities to paralyze the Confederate troops, and allowed the Union forces to capture Atlanta. When the dust settled, there was no sign of the sorceress, and I was held accountable by the Guild for violating their edicts."

"I see," Doliber said, finally understanding the particulars.

"Indeed," Paxton said. "The Guild's punishment was twofold. To spare my life, I was commanded to never use my mystical abilities in any way, and I was further condemned to never have any significant impact on human events. I was assigned this homestead in this small farming community, and here I'm forced to remain for the rest of my life, never to leave town. On occasion, I get a visitor from the Guild who wants to check up on me, and sometimes they pose as a government representative, who tries to convince me to work for the greater good again. It's all a game to entrap me, just to make

sure I'm still committed to our *'bargain,'* such as it is."

It was a sad affair, for certain. This man who had done what he knew to be right was being punished for it, but the Guild had reason to be so critical. The lessons of the past echoed in Doliber's head as he recalled the many abuses of power that had shaped the world at large. From ancient Rome to Medieval Europe, the bane of magical meddling had cost many lives and hindered man's progress more than it helped it.

Prominent among Doliber's memories was the tale of Edward the Longshanks using mystic knights to subjugate Scotland. The Guild had been perfectly fine with such action, considering it a warlock's duty to serve his king and country. That was all well and good until different Guild Chapters found their kingdoms in conflict, and it all came to a head in the fourteenth century, as war erupted between England and France. Both sides used warlocks as cannon fodder, and the most proficient spellcasters of the day slaughtered one another by the score. When it was all over, there were only a handful of Guild members left on either side.

Following the magical bloodbath of the Hundred Years War, the Guild imposed strict limits on their worldly influence. They denied their members from ever utilizing their talents to alter the natural course of human events. Thus, they prevented future abuses of power, but also tied the hands of well-intentioned warlocks.

"You know this is fair," Paxton said, as if he were reading Doliber's mind.

"No, it's not," Doliber said, "but I understand that it's necessary."

"Then you also understand why I can't tell you about the Master's Examinations. To violate my oath to the Guild, I would be signing my own death warrant, and I am not prepared to die yet."

Disappointed, Doliber stood up and headed for the door, feeling he had all the answers he could hope to receive. The visit hadn't clarified his options, as he would have hoped. Instead, the path ahead seemed more uncertain than ever before.

As he reached the cluttered entryway, Doliber heard Paxton's voice echoing from the kitchen. "I believe you should accept the Master's training."

"How so?" Doliber asked, turning his head, but keeping one hand on the door latch.

"Your concerns are understandable, but you have nothing to fear. The Master exams will merely focus your mind, and allow you the opportunity to perceive reality in ways you cannot fathom as a mere Journeyman."

"And what of my job? Would the Guild ever allow a full-fledged Master to serve as a sheriff?"

Silence lingered in the air, and Doliber clicked the door latch to make his exit. It was high time he got back to doing his job, even as he considered a path that might force him out of it. In the meantime, he would continue to serve to the best of his abilities. It was the least he could do.

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The train rolled into Yucca Junction at a quarter past two. A small crowd had gathered around the platform to meet and greet the passengers, and it was more than your average reception party. A brass band was standing up against the ticket booth, playing a cheery march as the steam locomotive chugged to a stop. It was all the fanfare you'd expect for an arriving dignitary, or someone very special.

Fletcher Atwood was rubbing his palms together with nervous distraction. His heart was racing and the sweat was rolling down his cheeks in the mid-afternoon sun. This

was a moment he'd been waiting for his whole life, the moment his bride-to-be would step off her train and into his arms. It had been several months since he'd last seen her, but it felt like only yesterday they had parted. He'd gone ahead, back to their hometown of Selwood, to prepare for their big day. Now, she was arriving, and they'd never be alone again.

A bald gentleman in a gray suit slapped Fletcher on the shoulder and grinned. "Never thought I'd see you shiver in the heat, son," the man said.

"Thank you, Father, that's such a compliment," Fletcher said sardonically.

"Oh, I didn't mean it like that, Fletcher," his father replied. "I know what you're feeling. I've been there, you know."

Fletcher couldn't imagine his father being young and fidgety. The old man was as tough as nails, the unmovable pillar of the community. The Mayor of Selwood, a town that partially bore his name.

As the train came to a complete stop, the crowd inched forward to greet the disembarking passengers. Yet, nobody emerged, not even a porter. It caused a slight stir, and a few bold souls ventured aboard to investigate. They didn't get far, and stopped as soon as they could peer through a window.

"Mayor Atwood!" one of the men shouted. He tried to say more, but only stuttered incomprehensibly.

Fletcher felt his heart sink, as his mind grew suspicious and worried. Imagination could sometimes be a dangerous thing, and as he stepped forward his mind was running through all the things that could be wrong. Whatever sad truth lay aboard the train, he knew it would change his life forever, and not for the better.

The mayor grew impatient with his son's sluggish movements and took the lead. He pushed his way up onto the train, and nudged past the two men who stood staring into the dining car. "Out of the way, man," he snapped, trying to get inside. He forced his aging form through to the car's door and had a look at the bloody devastation inside.

Fletcher came up beside his father, even as the old man waved for him to stay back. There was no avoiding the truth as he looked at the overturned tables and broken bodies strewn in plain sight. Dozens dead, and in such an inhuman manner. Their corpses were so tattered and broken, like a landslide had crushed them. What manner of assassin could wreak such havoc?

Fletcher had to find her; his bride to be. If she were among the dead, he needed to know. He ignored his father's protest, and ran deeper into the dining car, feeling his shoes squishing against the blood-soaked carpet. The stench of blood, bile, and excrement stung at his nostrils as he made his way through the entire length of the car, examining the broken faces of the dead. None looked familiar, and he continued to the passenger car, daring to hope he would find his fiancée alive.

He continued the search, looking upon every face he came across, feeling more and more detached with each dead person he saw. By the time he passed through all the cars, he no longer cared about the many bodies he encountered. All that mattered was the one that was missing.

Coming back to the dining car, he saw his father holding a sheaf of papers. "Bettina's not here," Fletcher said.

"I know," his father replied, handing over a crumpled hunk of yellow paper. "She's been kidnapped."

Fletcher looked at the paper, but failed to understand it. "What is this?" he asked.

"The mark of a man who ought to be dead," was all his father said as he walked out of the railcar.

Fletcher studied the strange symbol, and realized it was painted in blood. A figure eight with three horns sprouting out of each oval—not much to look at. Whatever it was, it had his father spooked, and nothing struck fear into the heart of Mayor Charles Atwood. Nothing, until today.

Fletcher tossed the note aside and ran after his father. The truth, he feared, would be worse than his imagination.

## Episode 2: A Few Good Men

The sheriff's office in Selwood wasn't the largest place, and when the dozen riders from Yucca station came charging in, the place felt packed. Ron Grimes was alone at dusk, as Joella had retired to her room at the boarding house for the night. That left one dwarf to stand before an armed and angry mob who demanded action.

"Where's Doliber?" Mayor Atwood asked, slamming his fists onto the desk.

Ron Grimes looked up at the bald man with disapproval. He'd never been the servile type, and he wasn't about to bend over backwards to please the local elites, no matter the circumstances.

"I don't know," he finally replied, setting his feet on the desk—quite a feat for someone of his stature.

"Don't take that tone with me, Deputy," Atwood snapped, narrowing his gaze in an attempt to look menacing. "Dozens have been murdered, my son's fiancée has been kidnapped, and all you can do is sit there doing nothing?"

Ron grumbled under his breath and bit his tongue. There was no sense provoking the mayor further, and the man was partially in the right. It was the deputy's job to investigate this crime, but with his boss on vacation it left him with little in the way of support. He wanted to explain the situation, but knew it would accomplish nothing. The mayor wanted action, not excuses.

"Look, it's getting late, and there's not a whole lot to be done at the moment," Ron said, hoping to get the man off his back. "Come morning, I'll round up a posse, and we'll go down the train tracks, see if we can't find this runaway bride of yours."

"Runaway? She's been abducted!" Fletcher protested from across the room. "And you want to wait until morning? That might be too late!"

Most of the crowd shouted affirmation, all sounding eager to get on with things.

"Look, Grimes, these men are fine, upstanding citizens of our fair town," Atwood continued, suddenly sounding more politician than angry bureaucrat. "They're prepared to ride out now, and track down Bettina's kidnapper; the same savage that likely killed that trainload of innocent people. All they need is legal sanction. Deputize them, so they can get the job done."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Ron said, remaining calmly detached.

"Can't? You're the law, aren't you? Sheriff Doliber left you in charge during his absence. That makes you interim sheriff."

Ron hadn't thought of it that way, and wondered about the full ramifications. "I

wasn't aware that gave me the right to deputize anyone," Ron mentioned.

"I say it does, and that's good enough," Mayor Atwood said. "Now, break out the badges, and let's get going! We've got a murderer to catch!"

"I think I'd better see the judge first," Ron said, disliking the sort of shady maneuvering the mayor had up his sleeve. He wasn't sure if he was within his rights to deputize anyone, and he didn't want to find himself indicted for empowering a lynch mob. At the very least, legal posturing could buy him time.

"Willis, go get Judge Raymond!" Atwood shouted, and one of his angry minions rushed to the door.

As Willis reached for the knob, the door opened, and a thin man in a rawhide trench coat clomped inside. "What's the rush there, kid?" the older gentleman asked.

All eyes followed the stranger as he sauntered up to the desk, sliding up beside Atwood. The gray-haired man with a weathered Stetson stood in front of the desk and stared down at the dwarf sitting there. "Well, you're not Doliber. Where's that shady spell-spinner, anyway?"

"He's not here," Ron said, putting his feet down. "What can I do for you?"

"Ned Rodgers, U.S. Marshal," the man said, tossing his badge on the table for the dwarf to see. "I hear you had a train robbed up by Yucca Junction today."

"Not quite," Atwood interrupted. "Nothing was stolen except my son's fiancée."

"Mayor Chuck, I wasn't aware you'd been elected sheriff as well," Marshal Rodgers said with mocking disdain. Turning back to Ron, he said, "I assume Doliber left you in charge, or you wouldn't be sitting there all cocky and full of yourself."

"That's right. Deputy Boron Grimes, at your service."

"Good, because that's what you'll be, *at my service*," Rodgers said authoritatively. "This is a case for the Marshal's Service, not some local good-old-boys network. While this case is being investigated, you, and any other deputy of Nye County, will be answering to me and my men. Understood?"

The crowd erupted in protest, angered by the sudden usurpation. Ron sat back and watched as the angry mob drowned out the Marshal's calls for order, looking almost ready to lynch the federal agent. It got heated enough that Rodgers felt the need to push his coat back to expose his Peacemaker. The great equalizer silenced the room quickly enough.

"Now, all of you men can go home, before I have Deputy Grimes lock you up for disturbing the peace," Rodgers said.

Most of the men followed the order, knowing when to call it quits. Atwood and his son weren't so easily persuaded, and remained.

"Damn you, Rodgers," Atwood cursed, clenching a fist under the Marshal's chin. "You think that badge gives you the right to come here and push my people around? You have no right!"

"I have every right when it comes to upholding the law," Rodgers rebutted. "Trust me, Charles, it'll be better for everyone if you don't send a bunch of undisciplined yahoos out into the desert to hunt whatever it is that killed those people. This is a job for the professionals."

Atwood stomped his foot and headed for the door, looking thoroughly flustered. "Just remember, this is my town. The voters didn't elect you to anything, not even to shovel horse crap."

"Then you'd best get back to it," Rodgers retorted.

Atwood stormed out the door with his son in tow. The windows rattled as the door slammed shut behind them.

Relieved to have the angry mob dispersed, Ron set his feet back up on the desk. "Thanks for the backup, Marshal," Ron said.

"Don't be thanking me just yet, Deputy," Marshal Rodgers replied, looking smug. "You might find that I'm a harder boss to deal with than your warlock compadre."

"You ain't my boss," Ron said, setting his feet down, sensing the other shoe was about to fall.

"Don't be so sure about that," Rodgers said, giving him a peculiar wink. The gray-haired lawman turned to leave, but kept talking as he headed for the door. "A massacre of this magnitude on the rails is Federal business. Don't expect they'll leave this in the hands of some backwater Sheriff's Department."

The Marshal disappeared out the door, and Ron gave his absent backside a rude gesture.

\* \* \*

The Lucca Saloon was packed to the brim with angry citizens eager to drink out of frustration. A good manhunt was what they were after, but in lieu of that a stiff shot of whiskey could soothe their rage, or inflame it. Either way, the would-be posse members were drowning their disappointment.

Fletcher Atwood didn't drink, but sat at the table as his father downed shots. It wasn't the most uplifting environment for the lovelorn groom. "Damn it, Father, what are we going to do about that no good Rodgers?"

"We wait," the mayor replied, downing a third shot. "You know Rodgers. He likes to flex his muscles, but when it comes down to it, he'll need our help if he wants to get his man."

"How do we even know it's a man?" Fletcher asked with a harsh whisper. "You saw the people on that train. What man is capable of that?"

Mayor Charles Atwood didn't reply, but stopped drinking. It could have been he'd had enough, but Fletcher doubted it.

A clean figure in colorful apparel slid up to the Atwoods' table, and the men instantly recognized the establishment's elven owner, Solen Lucca. "Mister Mayor, what a rare honor. To what do we owe the privilege of your presence?"

"Like you haven't heard," Mayor Atwood said, irritation flowing out with each word.

Solen brushed his long, blond hair back and sat down. "Well, I suppose it was bound to happen eventually," the elf said.

"What do you mean?" Fletcher asked.

"I take it your father hasn't told you about the curse of Selwood," Solen said knowingly.

"Hold your tongue, pointy," the mayor snapped. "Those old superstitions are nobody's business."

"What are you afraid of, Charles? That they might be true?"

"They'll do nothing but add fear to a bunch of already scared people."

"Seems to me that's what you're after," Solen said, standing up. Locking eyes with the mayor, he added, "Would you like anything else to eat or drink? Perhaps a date with one of the ladies upstairs?"

"Enough!" the mayor growled, slamming his fist against the table. "I'll tell you when I want something out of you, elf."

Solen shivered and headed back to the bar.

"What was he talking about?" Fletcher asked. "What curse?"

"It's nothing; just an old bandit's musings," Atwood said dismissively.

"Father, if this has anything to do with what happened—if it could in any way help us get Bettina back—you have to tell me!" Fletcher said, urgently grasping onto any inkling of hope.

"I suppose you won't stop bugging me until you hear it," Atwood said, shaking his head, "though I'm afraid it won't help much.

"You know the history of Selwood, how we started out as a way station for prospectors heading to California during the gold rush. You know how some of us stayed after the fact, fought roaming bandits and wild Indians to make our homes here. But there are certain things that aren't widely discussed, things only the earliest residents remember. One is the origin of the curse, as Solen calls it."

Atwood reached for the bottle to pour himself another drink, but Fletcher pulled it away. If the old man got too intoxicated, he wouldn't be telling much of anything.

"You want to know about the curse or not?" Atwood grumbled.

"Say it sober, or not at all," Fletcher ordered, keeping the bottle.

"Damn temperance movement. You and that preacher always deriding a man for an honest drink." Atwood shook his head.

"You were saying, about the curse?" Fletcher prompted.

"Oh, fine," Atwood said. "You remember what I told you growing up, about the bandit wars of fifty-three? How the town was beset upon by wave after wave of outlaws seeking to turn Selwood into their own little hideout? Well, there was this one group of banditos who almost did us in. Their leader was a mean old half-breed called Raethanon, learned the ways of the Shaman from his Paiute grandfather. They killed near half the town before we turned them back, but we managed it. Too bad for us, we ended up killing Raethanon's son in the melee. Afterwards, the grizzled half-breed laid a curse on *'the heartless leaders of the town,'* swearing that someday he'd get his revenge and we'd all pay in blood for our crimes. I never gave it much mind, until I saw that note."

Fletcher recalled the yellow hunk of paper drawn in blood. "The horned eight?"

"It was his mark, the only scratch he ever made. Seems pretty clear who killed those people, but it was no curse. It's just the actions of an evil man who needs to be hunted down once and for all."

Fletcher filtered through the telling with careful concern. A native shaman's powers were not to be trifled with, and the old man knew it. The only reason he'd make light of it would be to cover his own apprehensions.

Knowing the culprit and his motivation, Fletcher knew why Bettina had been kidnapped. To steal the bride of an Atwood, surely it was the theft of a birthright. Taking her was like abducting all the generations to follow and holding them hostage! Raethanon was sending a message, and it was only the beginning.

Sliding the bottle back over to his father, Fletcher stood up and turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" Mayor Atwood asked.

"To pray," Fletcher replied with all sincerity.

\* \* \*

Joella Grimes-Talus couldn't sleep. The sheets at the Bormans' boarding house were scratchy wool, not the ideal substance to rub up against bare skin. Of course, a good set of pajamas might detract from the discomfort, though Joella preferred to be bare at night. Other alternatives existed, such as buying her own bedding, or finding other accommodations altogether. Either would serve, and she swore to look into the matter first thing in the morning, just as she'd told herself every other night for the past month.

As Joella tossed and turned on the edge of sleep, a knock came to rouse her. She sat up suddenly, instantly alert and irritated by the disturbance. It was too late for anyone civilized to come calling, and she had her suspicions about who might be interested in disturbing her sleep. Still, best to make certain.

"Who is it?" she asked, grabbing her blouse off the floor.

"Ned Rodgers, U.S. Marshal," an unfamiliar voice replied.

Joella gathered up her clothing and got dressed in a hurry. This was wholly unexpected. What would a Marshal want with her at this hour? The possibility of a ruse did not escape her, and she made sure to attach her gun belt before answering the door.

"What can I do for you?" Joella asked, cracking the door open just a hair and shining lamp light onto the stranger's face.

"I need to speak to you. It's about your husband," Marshal Rodgers said.

Joella opened the door a little more. "Is Ron all right?" she asked, feeling genuine concern.

"For now," Rodgers said, setting his hand on the door and pushing it.

Joella resisted his attempt to force entry, and kept the slot narrow enough for comfort. "Then why do we need to talk about him?"

"It's for his own good, and yours," Rodgers said, removing his hand from the door. "May I come in?"

"Where's your badge, Marshal?" Joella asked, growing suspicious about this midnight caller.

Rodgers removed his hands from the door and slid his jacket away from his chest, exposing the silver badge for her to see. "Satisfied?" he asked.

It looked real enough, so Joella decided to let him enter. Rejecting his request seemed pointless, and she felt comfortable enough with the revolver strapped to her hip. Stepping back, she allowed the door to swing wide, and studied the Marshal as he entered. Despite his obvious age, he looked as rugged as an ox, and he held a glint in his eye that said you'd better not mess with him.

There wasn't much space in the room, barely enough for the bed and a small reading table with two chairs. Joella slid alongside the bed to reach the far chair, and sat down before she said, "Now, what's so important you have to harangue me in the middle of the night?"

"Pardon me," Rodgers said, pulling the second seat out from the tiny table. He reached over and fiddled with the lamp, seeking to maximize the light output. "I would have waited until the morning, but it's important we talk now, beforehand."

"Before what?" Joella asked, readjusting the lamp. She had to pay for oil, and wasn't the most affluent person at the moment.

"You've heard about the train massacre?" Rodgers asked.

"Yes," Joella replied. It had been a hot topic of conversation at dinner, as she'd braved another night in the company of the boarding house's regulars.

"Then you know I'm forming a posse, to hunt down the man or creature responsible."

"You?" Joella asked.

"That's right. There were over a hundred people murdered on that train. United States citizens, all of them, and damn few of them from Nevada, let alone Nye County. This is a case for the Marshal's Service, not some elected sheriff, even if he does have a twist of magic up his sleeve."

"Then why are you talking to me?" Joella asked.

"Because I'd like to do my job without that warlock sheriff and his pint-size deputy getting in my way. I figure you can help arrange that for me."

Joella felt like laughing at the suggestion, but contained herself. Emotion was never something she let slip if she could help it, but the comment had caught her off guard.

"You'll do it," Rodgers replied simply. It wasn't angry or pleading, but a flat statement of fact.

"Oh, will I?" Joella asked.

"Unless you'd like Mactus Sellius to hear that you and your husband sleep in separate rooms."

"That's not uncommon," Joella replied nervously. "Many couples sleep apart."

"Regardless, I doubt you'd like to explain that to Mactus, or your clan's High Minister. They'd be happy to see your sham marriage annulled."

"It isn't a sham," Joella said, refusing to give an inch.

Rodgers shook his head and smiled. "I knew you'd be stubborn, but I never thought you'd be stupid. Would you really risk the hassle of having your marriage picked apart by elvish bureaucrats rather than cooperate with me?"

"You manipulative scoundrel," Joella cursed bitterly, knowing she'd been made. He had her over a barrel, and they both knew it.

"What I propose is simple. You're going to make Doliber and that husband of yours work for me, whether they know it or not."

"How am I supposed to do that?" Joella asked.

"I'm sure you'll find a way. Elves always do," Rodgers said, standing up. "We'll talk again later. Good night, Missus Grimes."

As Rodgers stepped out of the room, Joella got to her feet and shouted at his back. "That's Grimes-Talus!" she boasted her proper, elvish married name, then slammed the door.

The strain of the short meeting made Joella eager for bed, even as adrenaline pulsed through her veins. She needed time to think, and the comfort of darkness was her ally in that respect. Blowing out the lamp and climbing out of her clothes, she slipped back under the uncomfortable covers, wondering what she would do to protect the life she was building.

Who would she have to betray to save herself?

\* \* \*

The cast iron skillet smoked atop the small cook stove. The melted lard was hot and ready, and a drop of spit crackled, announcing the temperature like a signal flare. A large, flat hunk of beef slid into the cooking implement, and a thin lid clanked down over it to keep the juices from splattering.

Ron hopped down off the little stool in front of the stove and took a seat by the window. It was still dark outside, and the handful of street lights were down to coals. In

another hour, the sun would come cresting over the dusty hills to the east, and then life would get interesting again.

The pre-dawn had always appealed to Ron; a great calm before the daily storm.

There would be a storm, Ron knew, as the memory of last night lingered in his thoughts. The people of Selwood weren't the sort to take things lying down, no matter who told them to back off. That posse would still be itching for a fight, never mind orders from any law official. He couldn't blame them. The citizens were angry and afraid, so they wanted blood to soothe their frayed emotions.

Ron went back to the stove and turned his steak over with a heavy, two-pronged fork. Spots of grease spit out at him as the moist side of the meat hit the heat. The hot liquid splattered against his shirt sleeve, but didn't burn his hand. A grease burn would've been the last thing he wanted, so he thanked God for small favors as he reset the lid.

"I hope you've got enough for both of us," a familiar voice sounded.

Ron jumped a little at the unexpected presence, and turned to see Sheriff Doliber looming in the archway leading to the sitting room. The warlock had a pesky habit of sneaking up on people, and his magic made him far too proficient in it.

"I reckon I can split the steak," Ron answered, returning to his seat by the window.

"Much obliged," Doliber replied. He walked over to the stove and kicked the small stool aside, then checked the vents and dampers. It was *his* stove, after all, and he had to make sure it was being used properly. "So, what's new?"

"Oh, you're gonna love this," Ron said sarcastically. "Some nut massacred a train load of passengers coming into Yucca Junction and made off with the mayor's daughter-in-law to be. I got half the town looking to form a lynch mob for whoever or whatever did it, and I've got some Marshal breathing down my neck, looking to flex his muscles."

"Rodgers, right?" Doliber remarked, lifting the skillet lid to examine the browning meat.

"You heard of him?" Ron asked.

"Yes, we've had dealings in the past," Doliber said. "I've never much cared for the old buzzard, but he's competent enough."

"Competent enough to head up this investigation?" Ron wondered.

"It depends. What really happened?" Doliber asked as he slid the skillet off to the cooler side of the stove. He grabbed the fork and placed the meat on a waiting plate, then headed for the small eating table in the corner.

After grabbing a plate to share the steak, Ron provided a thorough retelling of events. Over breakfast, he went over everything he'd personally witnessed and everything he'd heard, hoping his words would suffice. He'd rather not have the sheriff prying into his thoughts again, as the warlock was apt to do. A quick telepathic scan could show Doliber everything he needed to know, with all the accuracy of a firsthand memory, though Ron preferred to keep his private thoughts private.

As the explanation came to a conclusion, Doliber mentioned, "I can see why the townsfolk are in an uproar, and why Rodgers is eager to maintain order. I doubt this is the work of an ordinary man, though. Seems we'll have a busy morning ahead of us."

\* \* \*

Bettina Carter awoke to complete darkness. Not the faintest glimmer of light shone where she found herself, leaving her completely blind. Her mind was still lethargic from whatever supernatural force that creature had used to incapacitate her during the

kidnapping. She tried to remember what had happened on the train, but much of it was a blur. She recalled a lot of screaming, and falling into the arms of the bony beast, but little else.

Now, she was here, in the dark.

The ground was soft and moist, and the air was clammy. This had to be underground somewhere, deep in a cave or mineshaft, Bettina surmised. She had to learn more about her surroundings. Perhaps there was a way to escape?

Getting to her feet, she staggered forward on rubbery legs, stretching her arms out in front of her, seeking anything solid. After a few steps, she felt a hard, uneven surface. It felt like rock, all right, sandy with bits of smooth lumps stuck in it here and there. Composite stone of your typical cavern, nothing to get excited about. She followed her hands along the wall, finding it went on in a circular direction. After going around for a few minutes, she was certain she'd lapped the same spot at least twice, and to be certain she knelt down to the floor, feeling her repeated footsteps in the soft soil. She'd been pacing, and from the curvature of the wall she'd guessed her pit prison wasn't more than ten feet around.

Reaching her arms up, she began feeling for a handhold. Up had to be the only way in or out of this trap, though try as she might, there was nothing to grip. She was stuck in this infernal place.

Falling to her knees, Bettina began to cry. It seemed the appropriate thing to do under the circumstances. To be kidnapped by a monster on the eve of her wedding was a fate worse than anything she could have imagined, and being stuck in the dark—alone—why, it only compounded her emotions. The waiting and wondering made her tense, as imagination began to work on her psyche.

What would become of her here? Would she die a slow death, forgotten in the pit, or would that creature come back? What would the creature do to her if it did return? She shuddered to think, and cried some more.

As her whimpering abated, an echoed voice caught her attention. It was too distant and distorted to be recognized, but it was the first external sound she'd received since awaking. Someone was coming, and she stood up straight, desperate to understand a single word. Try as she might, the voice remained identifiable, as the echo of the cave continued to slur it.

What if that voice belonged to a search party? She had to let them know she was here! Screaming at the top of her lungs, she cried for help, letting anyone up above know she was alive and well.

In response to her cries, the talking stopped, leaving Bettina worried that she might have frightened away the only assistance she could receive. If those had been bandits or Indians, they might flee at the sound of a stranger, leaving her to die alone and forgotten. How could fate be so cruel?

As her hopes began to fade again, visual stimuli appeared. High above her, Bettina saw the faint flickering of torch light, giving her a slight view of the upper cave walls. There was a large room above her, but this deep pit was at least twenty feet below it. Whatever lay above was mostly concealed by the walls of her prison, but the light continued to dance around up there, letting her know there was someone there.

"Hello?" Bettina cried. "I know someone's up there. I can see the light. Please, help me!"

Just as Bettina's optimism was growing, the bony head of the creature peeked over the edge of the pit, sending her heart dropping back into despair. The horrifying being glared at her with that almost skeletal face, before its spindly arms reached out to grip the side of the enclosure. With slow and steady movements, it crept down into the pit, joining the terrified woman in her cramped prison.

The light up above was barely enough to provide illumination at the bottom of the pit, but it was enough to show the creature plainly as it crept forward. Bettina had nowhere to run, but tried to keep her distance, sliding along the wall of the cave, begging to be left alone. "Please, stay back!"

"Need," the creature grumbled with its deep guttural voice. It repeated the word several times, as it reached out its bony arms toward Bettina. Grabbing her by the shoulders, the creature opened its mouth and licked the side of her face with a fat, cylindrical tongue.

Bettina screamed.

### **Episode 3: Runaway Train**

Ron and Doliber showed up at the Yucca Junction train station at the crack of dawn. The sun was barely cresting over the dusty hills as the two men materialized on the platform, teleported by the sheriff's mystical abilities. At once, they noticed something was amiss at the station, and it didn't take long for them to realize what.

"Where the hell is the train?" Doliber asked.

"It goed on down the tracks," the station man replied with his folksy accent. The middle-aged man with broken teeth swaggered out of the wooden ticket booth as he continued. "Them cars is money, soes the comp'ny done ordered her on down the line."

"That train was a crime scene," Doliber said. "They had no business tampering with it."

"Tain't what the Marshal done said," the station man mentioned. "He done give the go ahead for them to clean 'er up and head 'er out."

"Clean it?" Doliber said, exasperated. "You're telling me they're already removed the evidence?"

"Don't rightly knows what yer gettin' at," the station man said. "Them men been dead closer'n a full day. Ain't no sense leavin' all uh that blood around."

"I needed to inspect those rail cars, unaltered!" Doliber shouted. "The clues I might have uncovered. Were there any magic traces? What type of magic? What sort of foot tracks? Was there any subtle pattern to the killer's methods? All little things you clearly couldn't see!"

The station man blinked a bit, then gave Doliber a blank stare.

Doliber knew it was useless talking to the slack-jawed attendant. The guy wasn't in charge of anything, and was just saying what he knew. The real culprits were the meddling money men at of the rail company, and the arrogant Marshal Rodgers. Even they were merely pushing the status quo.

Doliber was the only man interested in doing more, it seemed.

"So, what's our next step?" Ron asked, looking down at the empty tracks.

To any other sheriff, the options would be nil. The train was gone, racing fifty miles an hour off into the countryside. No horse could outrace it, yet one thing about a warlock was, you didn't always need a horse.

"When did the train leave?" Doliber asked the attendant, "and which spur did they take?"

The attendant got all thoughtful, rubbing his cheek nervously. "Oh, seems they got

out about an hour ago, maybe. She done flipped the nor'west switch, so they must be headin' to Tanner. That's the regular schedule, or thereabouts."

"Thank you. That's quite helpful," Doliber said. Turning from the attendant, he motioned Ron over to him. "Come on, Grimes. We have a train to catch."

In mid-step, Ron Grimes felt a cold tingle roll across him. One second, he was on the weathered platform, the next he was stumbling over a steel rail of a train track. The sudden dislocation left him disoriented enough to lose his balance, and he found himself planted face down in loose gravel and wooden ties of the rail bed. His diminutive height prevented the fall from hurting him all that much, and he hopped to his feet in short order, brushing the dust off as the ground rumbled beneath him.

"What the..." Ron asked, as his ears came back to life. A loud chugging of a steam locomotive caused him to turn around, and he saw what had to be his doom. Five feet away, the train was bearing down on top of him, racing along at full steam. There was no way he could get out of the way in time. In seconds, he'd be dead, a bloody speck on the front of the engine.

Yet, fate—and Sheriff Doliber—had other ideas.

As Ron was certain the train would hit him, time froze all around him. For several seconds, the train's speed slowed to a crawl, and he felt someone grab him by the collar and yank him out of the path of the steel beast. As he was planted on the ground beside the track, time returned to normal, and the train sped on by with unabated velocity. A gust of wind created by the speeding locomotive almost knocked him over, but he was safe.

Shaking off the shock, feeling adrenaline course through his veins, Ron looked over to the man who'd pulled him out of the train's deadly path. "Blast you, Doliber. You sure know how to throw me into harm's way."

"Sorry about that," Doliber said nonchalantly. "I miscalculated the train's position a hair, and cut our approach a little close. At least we have a visual bearing now; shouldn't be hard to teleport aboard."

"Wait!" Ron shouted, as he felt the familiar tinge of static coating him again. It was too late, and a second later he blinked his eyes to see the inside of a vacant dining car.

As Ron shook off the shock of a latest teleport, Doliber paced around the room, looking for whatever clues he could find. His eyes were wild as he studied layers of reality unseen by normal man.

Ron didn't have any magic tricks up his sleeve, and was left with only his keen eyes to examine his environment. Even so, he could notice the rush job that had been done on the compartment. Several windows were still missing, and some of the tables had damaged tops, deep scratches like claw marks dug into the wood, mostly on the edges. The floor had been scrubbed recently, as evidenced by the damp spots on the wooden inlay beside the wall. The eight-inch hardwood planks were set from the wall, leading inward about two feet and disappeared under a newly laid strip of red carpeting.

The clues were minor, and nothing Ron could figure out. What was the point of this exercise? Would Doliber find something to lead him to the killer, a magical trace to reveal the villain's identity? Not every case was based in the mystical, and rarely was a skilled magic user unlawful. No harm in ruling things out, though.

"That was a nifty trick back there, slowing time and all," Ron mentioned, still riled by the incident. Talking about it made him feel better.

"I didn't slow time so much as I sped us up. Everything else looked slow, because we were moving so fast. It's not something I'd recommend on a regular basis. It can be pretty rough on the metabolism."

Ron nodded his head, and realized he was hungry all of a sudden. Was it a side effect of the magical manipulation, or simply his oversized stomach playing tricks on him? Then again, they were in a dining car, a place reserved for fine cuisine. That might make anyone ravenous.

As Ron contemplated the source of his hunger, Doliber continued to scan the dining car with mystically enhanced senses. Peering beyond the ordinary layer of reality, he studied the energy being emitted by different objects in the room. Mostly, it was ordinary, cold, bleak things that held little or no magical potential. However, a few spots showed promise, spots on the floor and grooves in the wall that radiated gold and red colors; hot spots of magic.

Doliber knelt down to get a closer look at a few sparkling dots.

"See anything?" Ron asked.

Doliber shook his head, realizing what he was seeing. "No. It's just the blood of some parlor magician," he said. The spray retained a weak signature of the spellcaster that had shed it. From the looks of it, the victim might have had a few nifty illusionist tricks up his sleeve, but nothing comparable to Guild-grade ability. Clearly, his amateurish tricks hadn't spared him from the deadly assault.

The car was pretty clean, otherwise. The clean-up job had been hasty, but thorough. Other than the few drops of blood, there wasn't much left to show anything untoward had happened.

Turning around, Doliber was blinded by a painful light. The unnatural brightness burned into his skull like a million needles. The staggering effect left him stumbling backwards.

He hadn't been expecting a mystical assault, and his attention had been too focused on the floor to perceive the threat. His attempt to dig a needle out of a haystack had left him at the mercy of some unknown foe.

"Ron, where are you?" Doliber asked, vainly seeking assistance.

No reply came, and a second flash of light silenced the sheriff's mind. The soothing darkness of sleep claimed him before he hit the floor.

\* \* \*

Ron Grimes woke up to something hard jabbing his shoulder. Otherwise, he didn't feel all that bad. It was no worse than waking up after a dreamless night, only he wasn't lying down. He was sitting in a hard chair, and flexing his arm muscles he realized they were both tied down.

"Time to rise and shine, boyo," an accented voice said.

Ron's eyes felt heavy, though it wasn't impossible to lift them. Once the haze cleared, he found himself staring into the face of a short gentleman in a bowler hat and black spats. The diminutive fellow also carried a straight cane with ornately carved veins running down the wooden shaft.

"You... you're Irish," Ron said, swallowing profusely. His mouth was salivating in an inordinate fashion.

"Aye, but no' just any Irish. A Leprechaun, I be," the fellow said, sounding proud of himself.

"What?" Ron asked, caught off-guard by the man's admonition.

"How do ye think I wuz able ta get the drop on you an' yer warlock friend, eh? I used me own special talents, the kind only gained by the Guild itself!"

"Doliber? What did you do to him?" Ron asked, concerned for his boss.

"Nothing more than I did to ye," the Leprechaun replied. "Now, why'd you think I'd be offended by me rightful name? Have ye never met a Leprechaun before, lad?"

"Sure, I've met plenty of Irish dwarves. I just figured you'd want to be called something different," Ron admitted, "seeing how all of them I ever met took Leppercon to be some sort of insult."

"Bah, that's 'cause they're *Irish Dwarves*," the Leprechaun answered. "Not a spit o' magic in the lot of 'em. Those of us in tuh Guild, we be proud of our heritage, and take the name rightly."

Ron worked it all out in his head, and wondered why he'd been so ignorant. Leprechauns were dwarves capable of mastering magic? That was a new one on him. He'd never met a dwarf with any mystical skills, other than the occasional empathic talent. To think any of his people could wield the sorts of powers Doliber and his ilk displayed; it was something to be proud of.

Too bad the first magic dwarf he encountered had to take him prisoner.

"Why are you doing this?" Ron asked. "What are you after?"

"Don't worry, Grimey Boy," the Leprechaun said, keeping an amiable tone. "Ah've only been paid to keep ye tied as far as Tanner." He dug a large, gold watch out of his chest pocket and glanced at the dial. "That'll be within the hour."

The answer was wholly dissatisfying, the sort that merely incurred more questions. What was this all about? The Leprechaun was a paid henchman, obviously, but who was he working for? Marshal Rodgers, perhaps? No, the Marshal didn't seem the sort to play such an underhanded trick. Mayor Atwood? Possibly, though would he act before talking to Doliber, personally? Then again, there were any number of outlaws who might hold a grudge against the lawmen of Selwood.

Ron needed an answer. "Who's your boss?" he demanded.

"I'm me own boss!" the Leprechaun snapped. "If ye be meaning who it was that paid me to restrain ye, that you'll learn when we reach Tanner."

"You gonna deliver us into their waiting hands?" Ron asked.

"Somethin' of the sort," the Leprechaun assured him. "Like I said, I'm to hold ye only 'til then. Now, sit back and relax. We've not far to go."

\* \* \*

Tanner was a bustling mining town west of the Cactus Mountains, and right on the border between Nye and Esmerelda County. The desolate hills surrounding the settlement were bitter and foreboding, desirable only for the hoards of silver locked within their rocky faces. The massive quantities of ore had caused a population boom in recent years, enough to warrant a rail spur for the town. The line had caused quite a stir back in seventy-nine, as the county seat of Selwood remained without a connection, while this new town got preference thanks to corporate payoffs.

Spencer Davis was wearing out the platform at Tanner Station, but nobody noticed. There were dozens of other people standing around in differing states of excitement, as they waited for their train. Some of them had been waiting since last night for this ride, as the regular route had been interrupted by the unsightly slaughter. Word of the incident

was spreading fast, but it didn't deter anyone from riding the rails. What alternative was there? The age of the stagecoach was fading fast, and nobody wanted to waste time and energy on that antiquated form of travel; not if the train could take them to their destination.

Spencer wasn't here for a ride. He was waiting for someone to arrive.

The telegram had been brief, but specific. Spencer was to wait at the station for the eight o'clock from Yucca Junction, where he would take possession of two "special prisoners." The handler would be a short Irishman, but nothing was said of the captives, or what was to be done with them. Spencer expected the delivery man would have further instructions.

Such was the life of a hired gun.

Spencer hadn't been looking for this sort of job, but when you work for Albert Silcox, you do what you're told. The cattle baron had enough money and clout to command obedience, and half the men in Nevada would kill to be on his payroll. He paid twice what anyone else offered, and treated his help fairly, for the most part. The only downside was the occasional "odd job" you were asked to perform.

It wasn't such a bad thing, Spencer thought. He only wished he knew what the heck was going on.

The crowd got noisy, as the distant whistle of the train called out from a distance. Spencer was on the east side of the platform, and could see the black dot on the horizon, with a tuft of smoke streaming above it. In minutes, the small speck became the obvious front of the train, a large 19 sitting in the center of the round nose plate.

Time for the trade off.

As the train came to a stop, porters emerged from different compartments and began taking tickets. There weren't any passengers coming off initially, but Spencer knew to stand and wait for it. After the crowd flowed into the passenger compartments and the platform got empty, three figures made themselves apparent. Two dwarves and a leather-clad man came clomping out of the dining car near the front of the train, and they wasted no time hurrying over to Spencer, who waited at the appointed location.

"You be Spencer Davis?" the finely-attired dwarf asked with an Irish accent.

"And you're a short Irishman," Spencer replied.

"You might say that. Name's Michael James Flaherty, at yer service."

"Who are the prisoners?" Spencer asked.

"Prisoners? No, they're not prisoners. They're me new friends I just met on the train. Now they're your friends."

Spencer wasn't sure what to make of the fellow, or the job. "What should I do with our *friends*?" he asked, concerned he might be asked to do something he hadn't the stomach for.

"Take 'em to Byron, and ride wit' 'em back to Selwood," Flaherty said. "Yer boss ought to be waitin' there by then, an' should be able to square things up."

"That's it?" Spencer asked, feeling he was getting off light.

"Yes, sir, tha's the lot of it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've a train to catch," Flaherty said, turning back to the waiting locomotive. He hopped back aboard, tipping his hat to the porter on duty before ducking into a passenger car. No papers were exchanged, but it wasn't surprising. Mr. Silcox often liked his "guests" to ride in anonymity.

Spencer briefly examined his two captives, and felt a lump swell up in his throat. He

was nervous. He'd never done anything like this before, and he didn't like the idea of riding over a hundred miles with these strange men. Even with Byron Burch at his side, it would be a long, uncomfortable trip.

"All right, let's move out," Spencer said, waving the two to follow him.

"I think that's far enough," one of the men said.

Spencer froze in mid-step and began to turn around. He knew it wasn't going to be that easy. Looking back, he saw both the man and the dwarf still had their hands tied behind their backs, and neither one appeared armed. That was a relief.

"Do you have any idea what you're doing?" the man challenged with a cold, commanding voice.

Spencer didn't, but did he dare to admit it? "Now, Sir, if you'll just come along nice like, we'll get you some grub, and then we can get you on down to Selwood. Might take a couple of days, depending on the trails and all. I'm sure Mr. Silcox will square things up when we get there."

Straightening up, the dwarf said, "Free food? Well, who could argue with that? Lead on."

Spencer's concerns faded only slightly as he led the way off the platform. Once on the ground, he had his *friends* take the lead, so he could keep a careful eye on them, as they walked down the deeply-rutted road ringing the edge of town. It wouldn't be so bad once they met up with Byron. That man could handle any rustler or hustler in the West. Old man Silcox would have his meet and greet, sure thing.

\* \* \*

"Keep it up, Grimes," Doliber's voice echoed inside Ron's head.

"What?" Ron thought back, feeling creepy about the sheriff having a telepathic telegraph wire fixed to his mind. Privacy was a top concern for the dwarf, and he never appreciated telepathy's potential for voyeurism.

"Don't act too friendly in front of this thug," Doliber cautioned as they began walking down the street. They were steering clear of the bustling center of Tanner, following a lane on the outskirts of town.

"Maybe I wouldn't be so hungry if somebody hadn't eaten half my breakfast steak," Ron replied.

"It was for your own good," Doliber mentioned. "You could afford to skip a meal or two."

"Hey, I ain't fat. I'm just built stout!"

"I'm sure," Doliber said dubiously.

As they turned a corner, Ron asked, "So, how long are we gonna play along with this dude?"

"Until I've got enough information," Doliber answered.

Whatever that meant, Ron couldn't tell. It was anyone's guess what *enough* might be, though they were amassing quite a pile of answers. These kidnappers clearly worked for Silcox, so obviously he was behind their kidnapping, but a larger question remained. Why would one of the wealthiest man in Nye County want to kidnap the sheriff and his top deputy?

It was doubtful the two law men would uncover the whole truth before their ruse of submission was abandoned. Ron could tell Doliber was itching to break free and get down to business. A simple spell was all it would take, but every minute the sheriff held

back was another minute their foes might reveal something of vital importance.

They stopped in front of a run down flop house with an open porch. The place might have been part of an older settlement from the looks of it, though once you got inside things appeared more civilized. The entryway had a strip of gold carpet running toward the staircase in the back, and a doorway to the right revealed a dining room with enough room for two dozen guests. Tucked in one corner, sitting in a pillowed rocker, was a man taking a nap. A floppy black hat was covering his face, but it couldn't conceal the hissing snore.

Spencer walked over and prodded the man's foot gently. "Say, Byron, our guests done arrived," he said.

The slumbering man flinched to awareness, and slowly sat up, sliding his hat back on top of his head. His dark brown eyes glared out at the captive law men with knowing conviction. "So, good old Flaherty got the drop on Sheriff Doliber, did he?" Byron mentioned.

Spencer almost leapt out of his skin at the comment. "This is the sheriff?" he asked, looking terrified. "Of Nye County?"

"Nah, of Nottingham," Byron quipped, rising from his chair. Seeing the blank look on Spencer's face, he added, "Of course of Nye County!"

As Spencer panicked and Byron stood up, Ron felt the ropes slip off his wrists, and knew that ruse time was over.

With lightning speed, Doliber's arms came out from behind his back, and he grabbed Byron by the collar. "You'd better start explaining yourself if you want to keep off the gallows."

Byron burst out laughing, but calmed down after the sheriff shook him. "Hey, nobody's gonna hang for grabbing you. Not with Silcox signing the governor's paycheck."

"Nobody's above the law," Doliber challenged, shoving Byron backwards. The cattleman staggered and fell back into his chair.

"Seems to me the law isn't so lawful," Byron challenged, still looking smug. "Not when it lets deputies run roughshod over honest drovers."

"Somebody has to," Ron added, feeling the need to inject himself into the verbal combat. He'd felt the sting of rowdy ranch hands in recent weeks, and wasn't about to give them a free pass.

"Pipe down, midge," Byron said, losing his calm arrogance. "If tin horns like you'd learn to play nice, we wouldn't have to be teaching you a lesson."

Furious, Doliber activated his mystic abilities, lashing an invisible rope around Byron's waist. With a single yank of his right arm, he pulled the cattleman out of the chair to face him.

"What *are* you gonna to do?" Byron goaded.

Doliber reversed his spell and shoved Byron against the wall with a magic force. "I'm taking you in, both of you. Selwood's cells have been empty for too long."

Byron narrowed his gaze. "Good luck with that."

Answering the challenge, Doliber clenched his fist several times. He remained frozen in place for several seconds, after which a startled look flowed over his face.

"Satisfied?" Byron said, regaining his confidence.

"What's wrong?" Ron asked, feeling the other shoe was about to drop.

"I just tried to get a lock on Selwood, but nothing happened. I can't teleport," Doliber answered.

"Oh, we thought of that; needed to make sure you couldn't leave once you got here. That's why we hired Flaherty. The magic midges have a knack for neutralizing other mystics."

Doliber sent a magic lash around Byron's throat and began choking him. "I still have command of other spells, so you'd better start talking!" He relaxed his stranglehold enough so the cattleman could breathe. "Now, why are we here? This is a mining town. What interest does Silcox have here?" Doliber demanded.

"Nothing, which is *why* you're here. It's out of the way, so it'll take time to get back. That's all that matters."

"Why? What's so important that you have to get us out of the way?" Doliber asked, even as suspicions dawned upon him. "It wouldn't have anything to do with the train murders, would it?"

"What?" Byron asked, showing a moment of bewilderment. "Nah, we've got nothing to do with that. This is about justice being served, justice you and your crooked court won't deliver."

The talk was familiar, and Ron's mind harkened back to a scene not so long ago, where Joella had been confronted by a drunk at the bar. The surly cowpuncher had dared to mock her virtue, and had paid for his insolence with an ounce of flesh. Threats had been made, ones neither Ron nor the sheriff had taken seriously at the time. Obviously, things were more serious than either man had thought.

"Lockward!" Ron exclaimed.

Byron nodded and smiled.

Ron stomped over and punched the cattleman in the gut. "You nabbed us just to get to Joella, you rat bastard!"

"A man's bound to be cranky after having half an ear lopped off by an elf whore!" Byron said, cringing in pain from the hard hit. "You and that crooked judge made him cut a deal to let the hussy off, but she'll get what's coming to her. Now there's nothing either of you can do to stop it!"

Ron was about to punch the man again, but Doliber held him back. The dwarf knew better than to argue with the sheriff, and decided to stand down. There was no sense bludgeoning this hired hand, though it might feel good to give him a wallop.

With a flick of his wrist, Doliber cast another spell, and Byron collapsed. A simple sleep spell had hit the large man like a gallon of whiskey, and would keep him sedated for hours.

While Doliber was distracted with the unconscious man, Ron turned to Spencer Davis. The young man had been quaking in his boots during the whole verbal exchange, and looked ready to make a run for it. Ron wasn't going to let him. Rushing forward, Ron slammed his shoulder into Spencer's gut and tackled him to the ground. Three firm blows to the face did the trick. It may not have been as elegant as Doliber's magic spell, but Ron put his foe to sleep, just the same.

"Good work, Grimes," Doliber said, setting Byron's unconscious body in the chair. "Now, go find us some rope. We'll be taking these two back to Selwood, only not how they envisioned it."

Ron looked around the house, but found it was devoid of life. There were beds made

upstairs, and fresh vegetables in the kitchen, but whoever stayed here was out for the morning. Peculiar, but not unheard of. Perhaps Byron had sent them packing, or asked them nicely to vacate for a few hours.

There was some old twine in the bottom of a kitchen cupboard, and it seemed tough enough for a restraint. Ron hurried back with it and began tying the men up, as Doliber picked through the possessions of their would-be captors. Among the assorted trail gear were three pistols and two rifles that Doliber laid out on the dining room table. The rifles were a pair of beat up 1866 Winchesters, easily identified by their brass receivers, and the pistols consisted of a pair of nickel-plated Hopkins & Allen XL #8 Frontier revolvers, and a double-action Colt Lightning with factory fresh case-hardened finish. Several full bandoleers assured the guns all had sufficient ammunition.

"Think that Leprechaun has our guns?" Ron asked after firming up the line around Byron's wrists.

"Maybe," Doliber replied, sighting one of the H&A revolvers. "As things seem to stand, I suspect they'll be with Silcox by the time we hit Selwood. He'll want to return our hardware as part of smoothing things over."

"He'd better," Ron said. "I've had that Remington since the war, grown kinda partial to it."

"I'd never have guessed," Doliber replied, clicking the pilfered pistol's cylinder. Ron could see the case rims as they rolled into line with the opened loading gate.

There wasn't much advantage to sticking around, and as soon as Ron had both men restrained and Doliber had had a chance to pick through their gear, they headed out. The train would be leaving for Yucca Junction just as soon as the freight cars could be loaded with bullion. That was the driving force behind the speedy recommissioning of the locomotive; it had a fortune in silver to transport.

As Ron and Doliber stepped out on the front porch, they heard the chugging of the train, and saw the long line of cars rolling away from the nearby station. They were too late.

"Damn," Ron remarked, dropping Spencer's unconscious body on the porch steps. "How'd they load so fast?"

"They probably have a displacement charm," Doliber mentioned. "Expensive piece of equipment, but it saves on freight hands."

Displacement charms were a handy thing in society, specialized mystical devices that allowed non-magic-users to move freight short distances in an instant. Depending on the quality of the charm and the density of the material being moved, a person might load a stagecoach or an entire boxcar before draining the object's power. Generally, the expense of the charm would negate any cost savings incurred by reduction in time and manpower, so not everybody used them.

Clearly, the mining companies of Tanner favored efficiency.

"No sense running for it," Ron remarked, knowing how fast the train would be going. Even a dragon-like sandmare would be hard-pressed to catch up to the train, and an ordinary horse didn't stand a chance. There was no possible way they could reach it now.

"Looks like we'll be riding to Selwood, after all," Doliber said, sounding frustrated. He carried Byron's body along as he walked out into the street.

Ron followed the sheriff, doing his best to drag Spencer's body as he walked around the weathered boarding house. Around back, they found four horses hitched to a

watering trough, saddled and ready to go. All they needed were the saddle bags that Doliber had picked through inside. Silcox's men had been well equipped for the ride back to Selwood, so everyone would have decent food and shelter during the trip.

It was a simple enough thing to retrieve the saddlebags and tie the unconscious men to their horses. Once their prisoners were set, the lawmen mounted the remaining horses. Spurring the brown steeds to action, Ron and Doliber trotted out into the street, and followed it to the rail bed. A hard-packed trail followed beside the rails, all the way to Yucca Junction, over a hundred miles distant.

It was poor timing on the part of these cattlemen to pull a lousy stunt like this. If anyone else was hurt by the beast that had massacred the trainload of passengers, Doliber would be out for blood.

As urgent as the situation was, Ron's mind kept harping on Joella, wondering if she'd be safe. Men capable of getting the drop on a trained warlock like Doliber would most certainly pose a threat to an elvish woman with very limited magic at her disposal.

"There has to be something we can do," Ron mentioned as they rode along. "We can't leave Joella to fend for herself."

"Our options are limited," Doliber said, slowing his horse a little. He lowered his head in thought before adding, "There is one possibility. It's a long shot, but maybe he'll help us."

"Who?" Ron asked, eager to grab at any chance.

"A dead man," Doliber replied.

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