



Free Preview

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Prologue: A Dwarf at High Noon

It was raining in Selwood, a rare drizzle for the arid Nevada town. It was somehow fitting, Ron thought, as his horse trotted down Main Street beneath his stout form. The inclement weather mimicked his mood, and steadied his resolve. Such things he had on his mind, and none of them worthy of sunlight.

The foul climate didn't bother him, and it was a familiar scene from his childhood back east. *Such a strange place, this western expanse.* He wondered what his grandfather would have thought, had he known about this land called America. It was all a far cry from the dwarven subcities of Europe and Asia Minor, where his people had been forced to live underground for centuries. Here, in this brave new world, a dwarf could show his face up above, without fear of persecution—for the most part.

Despite the rain, there were people out and about. Businessmen, ranchers, craftsmen, and miners walked proudly, each distinct in their individual attire. A few ladies roamed the streets with stylish umbrellas, and Ron made sure to give them a wink in passing. They didn't seem to mind.

Most of the buildings were the same gray color, the shade of weathered wood, but one structure stood out, painted a distinct white. It was there that Ron was headed, the Lucca Saloon, which would determine his fate.

After hitching his horse to the rail outside, Ron sauntered inside the saloon, his chaps scuffing with each step. The swinging doors were no taller than his chest as he pushed through them and found the dingy atmosphere of the establishment. The kerosene lamps provided some illumination on a gloomy day, but not all of them were burning. The handful of midday patrons didn't warrant a waste of fuel.

With an undignified jolt, Ron threw himself onto a barstool near the taps. From the higher perch, he could look the bartender in the eye, and gauge his responses as only a dwarf could.

"Don't see many of your kind in here," the elf said with a snide inflection. He didn't match the profile of your average barkeep, looking more like a wealthy aristocrat with his silk shirt and neatly-styled hair. Most elves were like that; respectable to a fault.

"I'm looking for someone," Ron grumbled. "Fellow by the name of Vincent Lafayette. Maybe you've heard of him?"

The elf replied with a smile. "Oh, yes, I know Vint."

"Can you tell me where to find him?" Ron asked.

"Yes," the elf answered, but said no more.

"Well, tell me," Ron requested.

"No."

"What?"

"You asked if I could tell you, not if I would," the elf replied arrogantly.

"You dirty little sneak," Ron snapped, shoving a finger under the elf's nose. "If you know what's good for ya, you'll start talking."

The elf blinked nervously, as if he hadn't expected the outburst, and slid his left hand over an orb sitting beside the taps. A carefully practiced stroke of the glass ball produced a distinct glow, signaling the successful activation of the mystical device.

A bright flash of light appeared behind Ron, and he turned to see a new figure had arrived. The leather-clad individual with a long trench coat and badge pinned to his chest was easily identifiable.

"Sheriff Doliber," the elf greeted him.

"Solen," the sheriff replied, leaning an arm against the counter. "What's the matter?"

"This leprechaun spoke to me in a most threatening manner," Solen replied.

"Hey!" Ron exclaimed.

"See what I mean?" Solen added.

"Yeah, I see," Doliber replied. "You've been poking a bear, again."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You call the dwarf a Mick and wonder why he gets irate. Really, Solen, one of these days..."

The elf replied with a blank expression.

Doliber snapped his fingers, and the next thing Ron knew he was falling over, as the stool vanished from beneath him. Getting back on his feet, he realized it wasn't just the stool that was gone, but the entire saloon. He'd been teleported to the sheriff's office.

"Now we can talk," Doliber said, walking over to his desk.

"A mystic lawman?" Ron remarked as he found a chair.

"Journeyman Warlock, Delta Grade, at your service," Doliber replied as he lowered himself into a leather chair. "Cigar?" he asked, as he removed a pair of slender sticks from a box on his desk.

Ron declined, having never acquired a taste for tobacco.

"Yes, wizardry skills certainly help in this line of work," Doliber remarked as a mystic flame appeared in mid-air, lighting his cigar. "I've given most of the local businesses in this county a call-orb, so I can visit at a moment's notice. Now, what's your business here, dwarf?"

Ron sat in the creaky wooden chair in front of the desk as he replied. "Like I told the elf, I'm looking for Vincent Lafayette."

Doliber blew out a cloud of smoke and frowned beneath his mustache. "What for?"

"It's a personal matter," Ron said, reluctant to admit his reasons to the sheriff.

"Oh, I'm sure," Doliber said with a knowing nuance. "It's got to be personal when you want to kill a man."

"Who said anything about killing?"

"Empathy's another skill that comes in handy in my line of work. I can sense your hatred. You're looking for blood."

"You would, too, if Lafayette had killed your brother," Ron answered through his teeth.

"And you would be?"

"Boron Grimes."

"You're Darrell's brother?" Doliber asked with a scrutinizing stare. "You look similar, but that beard kinda hides it."

"You knew him?"

"Only in passing. He was an honest prospector, and while I wouldn't be surprised if Lafayette killed him, there's no proof."

"I've got all the proof I need, in here," Ron said, tapping the side of his head.

"Mind explaining?"

"Dwarf siblings share a psychic bond in some cases; nothing major, but when my brother died he sent his final thoughts through the ether, and I picked them up. I got a name and a face, and a whole load of pain along with it."

"What did you see?"

"Vincent Lafayette shot my brother in the back, twice, then rolled him over and put one between the eyes. I don't know why, but I intend to get an answer."

"That's going to be tough," Doliber said.

"Why? You intend to stop me, sheriff?" Ron asked.

"Actually, I'd like to help you. Lafayette's bad news. He's notorious for killing rivals in duels, and I'm sure he's left a few unmarked graves in the wild. If you want to challenge him, I won't stop you, but if you want to succeed you'll need my help."

"Why?"

"There's a reason he's such a lucky duelist, and it's more than just his shooting skills. Also, you should know he's half elf."

Ron groaned at the confirmation. He'd thought as much from the image in his brother's memory, but he'd been hoping it was just cosmetic. Going up against an elf complicated things, in so many ways.

"I guess that explains the bartender's attitude," Ron mentioned.

"Yes, they're a fiercely loyal race, and they have no qualms about bending the rules or breaking the law when it comes to protecting their own, even a half-breed like Lafayette. His outlaw gang—all of them elves—will support him to the bitter end. That's a dangerous thing, but with my help you could change all that, *Deputy* Grimes."

Doliber opened a desk drawer and retrieved a bright, silver badge from within. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed it at Ron, smacking the dwarf squarely in the chest. Instead of simply bounding off, the metal pinned itself to Ron's chest; all thanks to a little magic.

"I'm not interested in being one of your lackeys," Ron complained.

"You'd better be, if you intend to go against Lafayette. Shut up and listen to my plan, and maybe we'll stand a chance of delivering that justice you're after."

* * *

It was late afternoon on Friday before Vincent Lafayette rode into Selwood with his elvish gang. The rain was long gone, and dry air once more dominated the landscape, permitting a cloud of dust to drift in the wake of their Sand Mares. Looking more dragon than horse, the ghastly steeds thundered down Main Street, their clawed feet churning up bits of dirt with each step. They were far from graceful, but their speed was unmatched by any mammalian equine.

The saloon was fairly empty as the tall man with black stubble swaggered through the door, with enough sweat and stink on him to scare a starving vulture. The quiet room echoed his footsteps as he made his way to the bar and slid onto the stool in front of the taps.

"How's business, Solen?" Lafayette asked, reaching over to slap the bartender on the shoulder.

"Slow, Vint," Solen replied, pulling a bottle of aged whiskey out from under the counter. "Damned temperance movement's got too many folks abstaining. Curse those blasted Mormons!"

"Guess that leaves more for us, right, boys?" Lafayette cheered to his gang, who all grinned with mouths of stained and crooked teeth. These lawless elves hardly resembled their old-world brethren, but the ears gave them away.

Solen poured a double shot of fine Kentucky bourbon for Lafayette, then began filling mugs of ale for the others. He'd serviced these men for years, and knew their individual tastes.

"So, what's new?" Lafayette asked after downing his first double. "Anything interesting going on?"

"There was one thing," Solen remarked. "A dwarf stopped here looking for you the other day."

"Oh, really?" Lafayette asked, sounding less than surprised. "Bet we could guess what he was after."

"Hard time guessin' whose kin it'd be, seein' how we's kilt so many of them midgies," one of his snaggle-toothed comrades opined.

"So, what happened to him?" Lafayette asked the bartender.

"He was rude, so I had the sheriff haul him away," Solen said, pouring Lafayette another shot.

"Sorry I missed it," Lafayette replied. "Haven't had a good runt toss in months. You'd think they were avoiding me, or something."

The gang of elves laughed on cue.

"Speaking of avoidance," Solen mentioned, "your tab is getting heavy. With business the way it is, I hope you could make a partial payment... sometime."

Lafayette grinned and slapped the bartender on the shoulder again. "No worries, Solen. I'll have enough to square us up before I leave town."

"Are you sure? It's a very heavy tab."

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Lafayette said. "The claim we *acquired* from that Grimy midge a few months back, it's a literal gold mine. Soon as I visit the assayer's office, we'll be richer than a twenty dollar whore."

Solen raised his brows at the analogy, appreciating the full meaning. His ladies were only two dollars a visit, and they brought in a tidy sum for themselves and the house. He could only dream of the wealth one might acquire at ten times their current hourly rates.

"Speaking of which, is Tina available?" Lafayette asked.

"Indeed," Solen replied. "Like I said, business is slow... but I guess things'll be picking up."

* * *

Evening brought a modest crowd to the Lucca Saloon, as the working residents of Selwood came to eat, drink, and play games. Despite Solen's claims of poor business, things looked pretty hopping to Ron Grimes, as he walked in for the second time.

Every seat was filled, and the packed house concealed his movements as he walked to a corner table where quiet men played poker. Sheriff Doliber's mystic intel told him this was where he would find Lafayette.

"I'd shoot you in the back, but I don't do things your way," Ron said as he stood behind his quarry.

Lafayette tilted his head back, seeking the owner of the voice. "Oh, look, a midge," he said, turning around to face the man who stood neck high to the saloon chairs.

"You killed my brother," Ron said, trying to keep cool. Anger raged through him, enough to make him want a quick resolution, but he knew he had to do this a certain way.

"I've killed so many of you runts over the years," Lafayette bragged. "Which one was your brother?"

"Darrell Grimes."

"Sorry, I don't usually get their names."

"Two months ago, he was the prospector you shot."

"Oh, him. Yes, now I see the family resemblance. Though, all you midges look pretty much the same, don't you?"

"You killed him just for being a dwarf?" Ron asked, seeking an explanation.

"He was sitting on my claim, so me and the boys evicted him. But between you and me, I'd have killed him just for the fun of it."

"Your claim, indeed," Ron said dubiously. "You murdered him for his land, didn't you?"

"Now that's a damn lie," Lafayette growled. "You better watch yourself, midge." Seeking to end their conversation, he turned back to the card table.

"You're the liar here, Lafayette!" Ron shouted. "You killed my brother and stole his claim. I dare you to prove otherwise."

Lafayette jumped to his feet, knocking over his chair which nearly hit Ron. "You spit on my good name, you rot! You asked for it. Draw!" He set a hand on the Colt Peacemaker hanging from his hip.

"Hey!" a shout came from the bar. Solen rushed over, pushing past the apprehensive crowd. "You want to kill the midge, do it outside."

"Fine by me," Lafayette said.

One of Lafayette's henchmen tugged at his sleeve. "Say, boss, it's mighty dark out there."

Lafayette growled in frustration. "Alright, we'll settle it tomorrow, bright and early, assuming you've got the manhood!"

"At noon," Ron countered.

"Why wait?" Lafayette asked.

"I want to see you sweat," Ron said, walking backwards. He kept his face on Lafayette as he made his way out, fearing the bandit's bloodlust may outweigh his patience.

Once outside, Ron mounted his horse and rode down the street to the sheriff's office, where Doliber awaited.

"Everything's set," Ron said as he entered.

"I know," Doliber replied, having observed everything remotely on a magic mirror. He pointed a thumb at the sheet behind him, which displayed a real-time view of the saloon's interior.

"Nice trick," Ron said. "Are we ready?"

"I will be. Just make sure you don't miss tomorrow."

* * *

Dueling was currently legal in Nevada, but it was rare to have anything scheduled. Fights were usually spur of the moment, and concluded within minutes. In other circumstances, a good night's rest often sobered up rivals, allowing for a more peaceful resolution to disputes. This was not the case today, however, for both Vincent Lafayette and Boron Grimes were eager to see the other bleed.

The sun was high, and Ron looked at his large, bronze pocket watch, confirming the approaching hour. Two minutes shy of noon, and here he stood in the center of Main Street. A few riders trotted by, but most people were lined up on either side of the road, waiting to see the contest.

Lafayette sauntered out of the Lucca saloon and took his position, grinning all the while.

As the church bell rang noon, both men reached for their revolvers.

Ron yanked his old Remington out of its holster, cocked the hammer with the palm of his left hand and squeezed the trigger with his right forefinger, all in one swift motion. The thunderous crack of the shot filled the air, and a cloud of white smoke drifted out of the pistol's muzzle.

Lafayette didn't have a chance to fire before Ron's bullet sank into his flesh. Grabbing his chest in agony, he stumbled forward and fell over, planting his face in the parched earth. None of his gang came to his aid, but a lone doctor hurried over, took a look, and shook his head. With the medical opinion given, others from the crowd moved in to stare at the dying man and make their own assessments.

Ron walked over to his fallen opponent, hoping to confirm his accuracy. After pushing through the few dozen gawkers, he knelt down beside Lafayette and examined the half-elf's bloody shirt. It was hard to see where the bullet had entered, though the shot had obviously been on target.

"How'd you do that?" Lafayette uttered with his dying breath.

"Fair and square, that's how," Ron replied. He doubted the man was alive enough to hear him, but it felt good to say it. He had won. His brother was avenged, and this murderer would never kill again.

With the challenge over, Ron walked back to the sheriff's office, to see how Doliber had fared. He found the law man sitting behind his desk, smoking a cigar, grinning profusely as shouts of protest echoed out of the cells in the back room.

"Sounds like we have company," Ron mentioned as he sat down.

"If we didn't, you'd be dead," Doliber replied. "As I suspected, Lafayette's been rigging his duels, having his gang cast spells to deflect his opponents' bullets. I caught them dead to rights. Fixing duels like that makes it murder. They'll hang for it."

"Clearly, those amateurs were no match for a Warlock sheriff," Ron complimented.

"And their leader was no match for a real gunslinger," Doliber reciprocated.

"Lafayette was pretty lethargic out there," Ron mentioned. "Of course, knowing he could actually get shot might have sped him up a bit."

"I guess we'll never know," Doliber said as he snuffed out his cigar in a brass ashtray. "So, what are your plans now?"

"I figure I'll ride out to my brother's claim, see if I can find his body. After that, I might go prospecting."

"You do that, but keep yourself handy," Doliber said, putting his feet up on his desk. He leaned back and grinned at the dwarf. "You're still a deputy, remember?"

"Hey, that's not fair," Ron protested. "I never signed up for anything like that."

"You're the one who wanted justice. Accept the consequences," Doliber dug a silver dollar out of his shirt pocket and tossed it to Ron. "Here's your first paycheck. I'll call when I need you again."

"You do that," Ron said as he turned to leave.

Episode One: The Stagecoach Heist

The dust of the hills rolled up in great plumes behind the stagecoach, as it thundered down the well-traveled road. The blued steel plates glistened in the late-afternoon sun, an armored behemoth among parched sagebrush. It was the pride of the fleet, owned and operated by Ferguson and Finney Limited. The mining consortium had a dozen coaches that made trips between Sacramento and Selwood, but this one was special, for transporting the most valuable cargoes.

The beasts hauling the coach were not horses, but sand mares. The cold-blooded reptilians looked more akin to dragons than equines, with scales and thorny protrusions covering them from head to tail. Six of the bulky creatures were attached to the yokes, and even with the heavy load they could outrun the fastest racehorse. The wild version native to the southern Rockies and Sierra Nevadas could turn you into a tasty snack with ease, though the domesticated variety were gentle enough, and could gallop in a smooth fashion.

Atop the armored coach sat a round cylinder of menacing armaments; the famed Gatling gun, the greatest machine gun of the day. With a few turns of the crank, it could fend off a pack of angry Indians, or slaughter the most ruthless elven bandits. Additional backup lurked inside the coach, as a pair of well-armed men waited with rifles and pistols, prepared to defend the cargo with their lives.

None could stand against the combined strength of these defenses which sought to safeguard this special transport, or so the stockholders hoped.

The man smiled. He's seen it all before. Similar weapons had done no good last week for a band of disagreeable elves. The pointies really thought that a few hunks of metal and a few guns could stand up to his might, but he'd shown them. The rowdy claim-jumpers who'd wanted to hoard a mother load of antimony had tasted his wrath, and not one had lived to tell of it.

That had merely been a warm up. Today, the warlock in black would prove his true mettle.

Rubbing at his chin, the warlock felt the start of stubble growing there, and his thoughts momentarily shifted to his personal hygiene. He was never one for beards, and he'd be damned if he'd grow one like the old stuffed shirts at the academy. How careless he was being, forgetting to shave over the excitement of a heist. That could not be tolerated.

With a thought and a rolling of his eyes, the man activated the magic at his command,

and a ripple of red rolled down his face, removing the tiny stubble growing on his cheeks and chin. The end result was a perfect shave, smoother than the best barber could provide. He stroked himself appreciatively, and decided he was ready.

Stretching out his arm, the man formulated a magic spell in his head, and directed it toward the charging sand mares. A scarcely visible streak of light flashed through the air and shot into each of the animals, disrupting their central nervous systems. Paralyzed, they stopped dead in their tracks, and began to tumble from their remaining inertia.

Under ordinary circumstances, a stagecoach would flip over, or even end-for-end after such an abrupt stop, but the added weight of the armor plates prevented the thing from toppling. Its back wheels lurched up in the air a couple of feet, then came back down with a great crash, bringing everything to a halt.

With the coach motionless, it would be such a simple task for any parlor magician to teleport the wealth inside, or so the man in black believed until he tried. Clearly, the brains behind this armored wagon's design had anticipated the possibility of mystic assault, and laced the exterior with a neutralizing ward. Your typical warlock or elvish bandit would find it impossible to extract anything from within the vehicle, though there was nothing typical about this darkly clothed gentleman. If he wished, he could defeat the magic wards, and take what he desired with a thought, though encountering resistance made him bold, and eager to face his foes in person.

"Time to say hello," he mused to himself, pulling a revolver out from under his coat. He clambered down the hill, stirring up a visible cloud of dust in the process. As he reached the road in front of the crippled coach, his eyes quickly locked onto the Gatling gun being trained upon him. Slowing down, he smiled in amusement at the shiny new weapon that sought to stand in his way.

The first shots resounded, sending .45 caliber bullets flying out past the speed of sound, seeking to shred the man's flesh, but they never got the chance. As the lead projectiles neared, the man froze each of them in place with a single wave of his hand. More and more piled into the air, but none could penetrate the thickness of the air molecules in front of this mystic bandit.

In the mounting seconds of gunfire, the man's attention drifted for a nanosecond to the fabric of reality around him. He perceived the bullets beyond their outward appearance, saw the subatomic bonds holding the atoms together, and marveled at the simplicity of it all. But it wasn't a single atom that held his attention, but millions of millions, all at once, reflected within his mind's eye. So much data that so few men could comprehend, yet he could see it all!

In the blink of an eye, his attention returned to the matter at hand, and the gray patch of bullets floating in front of him. The rattle of the Gatling gun had stopped, but three hundred bullets remained in close proximity to one another, hovering in mid-air, waiting for orders. Utilizing the stored inertia within the projectiles, the man redirected them, sending the barrage back at their source. The hunks of lead pelted the sides of the stagecoach. Their soft material did little to harm the hefty steel plates, but made a raucous noise, enough to frighten those who lurked inside the vehicle.

The man in black stretched his consciousness to see those who stood against him. He sensed their fear, and savored it, much as a wine taster samples a fine vintage. So raw and pure, yet simple in texture. How he longed for that sort of emotion, a basic feeling undiluted by extraneous knowledge beyond human existence. The sort of feeling he'd

once shared not so long ago.

"They don't know how lucky they are," he thought, stepping up to the armored coach. "Ignorance is such bliss."

The metal was smooth as he slid a hand against a side plate. Closing his eyes, he sensed all the days and weeks that had transpired to craft this metal into its current form. He saw the miners extracting the raw ore, watched blacksmiths melt it in the crucible and shape it into sheets. He saw the machinists mill the sheets to the proper dimensions and rivet them into place. So much information from a simple touch. Sometimes, his power amazed even him.

Knowing the object so intimately had its advantages, for as he peered into its essence, he was able to manipulate the subatomic structure and reshape it at will. Setting his fingers at the edge of one plate, the metal gave way, allowing him a firm grip. With a yank of his arms, the inch of solid steel peeled and crumpled like a piece of thin foil, exposing the wooden framework of the coach and the men lurking inside.

There were two of them, and the warlock already knew all about them from his previous telepathic scans. Sampson Blascoe and Blaine McGruber, a couple of rough and tough Indian fighters who'd done a lot of slaughtering for the Union Army over the last decade. Now they were eking out a living in this cushy assignment, working security for Ferguson and Finney. They were about to meet their doom.

Blascoe was front and center, ready to do his job to the bitter end. He'd faced his fair share of native Shamans and Medicine Men and figured that experience could save his sorry backside today. Squeezing the trigger on his revolver and fanning the hammer with the heel of his hand, he sent six slugs in quick succession into his adversary's chest, confident that they'd do the job. The projectiles were no ordinary bullets. They'd been treated with a fine coating of Basilisk blood, giving them a strong resistance to mystic energy other than their own.

The bullets stung like fire as they punched through the warlock's flesh. The typical forcefield he'd summoned did nothing to halt their progress. He hadn't anticipated this turn of events, and marveled at the unexpected turnaround. It had been so long since anything had surprised him, it made for a neat change of pace.

Healing injuries was elementary, and for a fleeting moment the warlock felt certain it would be easy, but the same energy that had negated his protective magic was still at work, only on a far more invasive level. He felt the flesh around the holes hardening, as the trace of Basilisk blood worked its sinister task. If left unchecked, his body would be solid stone in a matter of minutes.

"Heh, gotcha!" Blascoe shouted in joy.

The warlock grimaced as the wounds continued to sting with icy pain, and he fought for the proper counteragent to repel the petrification. His mastery of magic was virtually unmatched. How could he be felled by this simpleton and a few drops of a lizard's blood?

Then, the answer came.

Peering into the subatomic yet again, the warlock saw the energies at work, saw them as colorful waves ripping and tearing at molecules within his body. He saw his own mystical energies intermingled there, unable to defeat the petrifying spell of the Basilisk. Drawn into this unique trance, the solution was delivered to him; a way to reshape his own spell and cancel the magic attacking his cells.

With the blink of an eye, the pain went away. The transmutation ceased, allowing the warlock to heal his injuries with ease. As the holes in his stomach disappeared, the smile on Blascoe's face vanished with them.

"Tough break, Sammy," the warlock said, regaining his own smirk. Ah, what a satisfying turnaround!

Blascoe was fighting to eject the spent cases from his revolver as quickly as possible. One by one, the ejector rod pushed the empty brass from the cylinder, but it was futile. His time had run out.

The warlock still had a revolver in his left hand. He'd been gripping it this whole time, waiting for the chance to use it. The simple mechanical device with its neatly polished parts and ornately-carved ivory grips was a marvel of modern machinery, and with this fine weapon the warlock put down his foe in a most material manner. Three shots were placed in slow succession, enough to grant him added satisfaction from the kill. Blascoe crumpled to the ground in a lifeless heap, leaving only one man standing between this warlock and the gold.

Blaine McGruber saw the futility in resistance, and threw up his hands. In response, the warlock put a bullet in his gut, unwilling to accept the man's obvious surrender.

Stepping into the armored coach, the warlock kept his pistol aimed at Blaine, who struggled against the pain. "Take it," the wounded guard said, staggering away from the locked safe.

"Oh, I intend to," the warlock said, sticking his pistol in McGruber's face, eager to finish the job. "I'm still going to kill you."

"But... why?" McGruber asked in agony, staring down the barrel pointed at his forehead.

"Because I can," the warlock said, cocking the hammer, "and because I must."

The shot rang out, sending McGruber to his maker, and leaving the warlock with his spoils.

The safe wasn't that large, a cubical block about two feet square, though there was only so much a team of beasts could haul. The warlock wasted no time dismantling the locks, and took special care to detect any mysticism afoot. As expected, there was a ward cast on the safe, which would have paralyzed any common lock-picker, but not a true master of magic. The ward was dispelled and the door creaked open to reveal the contents within.

Several dozen bags of gold dust sat inside the safe, close to a thousand pounds of precious metal. The small fortune was a pleasing sight, though it was only one of the warlock's objectives. Removing the bags with haste, he made his way to the bottom of the safe, which appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary at first glance. However, upon close inspection, faint lines could be seen in the metal plate near the back: a hidden compartment!

With careful attention, the warlock formulated the proper spell to pry up the plate without disturbing the contents underneath it. There, as the metal gave way, he saw what he was looking for, a slender pewter box scarcely smaller than the hole it was sitting in. He levitated it out of its hiding place and into his waiting hands, grinning profusely.

The contents of this little box could be the key to all his hopes and dreams. How funny, he wasn't even sure what it was. He'd killed these men and robbed this stage coach, all for something he'd never seen. How he longed to inspect the merchandise, but

he'd been instructed to keep the box shut, and deliver the contents undisturbed. Yet, considering the effort he'd expended and all the blood on his hands, he had to find out what this box held. What could be so powerful that it would warrant such wanton destruction in its retrieval?

His curiosity was too much to bear, and he found himself reaching a finger into the slender groove, eager to peek inside.

* * *

The last clump of dirt fell from Ron Grimes' shovel, as he laid his brother to rest. This was the least he could do for his kin, even though the smell had been unbearable. The body had been left in a dark cave for the better part of three months before Ron had found it. Only the arid environment had preserved it enough for identification.

"I got 'em, Darrell," Ron said to his brother's spirit. "I shot your killer fair and square." He tossed his shovel aside and placed the wide-brimmed cowboy hat over his head. Closing his eyes, he said a little prayer in his head, wishing he could remember a divine scripture. He'd never been heavy on religion, despite his parents' insistence. Too old world, he'd always said.

The sun was hot in the Nevada desert, so Ron didn't leave his hat off for long. His thinning hair did little to protect his scalp from the elements. The signs of age were catching up with him, and he had little to show for the passing years. He'd found no fortune, owned little more than the clothes on his back, and what family he had left was sitting in the ground under his feet.

This was a sad state for a dwarf approaching middle-age.

Leaving his brother's grave, Ron climbed atop his horse and moved on, across the arid wastes. There was really no reason for him to hang around. This worthless hunk of land that had been his brother's claim didn't hold his interest. If there was gold here, he didn't see it, and mining had never been his forte.

He was twenty miles from Selwood, that populated crossroads in the center of this arid expanse. His horse was pointed in that direction, but did he really want to go back? His business there was done; his brother's murder avenged. The only reason he'd want to stick around would be to please the local sheriff, who sought to keep Ron as an indentured deputy.

A little voice in the back of Ron's mind told him to get out, make for the county line, and never look back. Hell, forget the county, get out of the entire state! There was nothing he wanted in Nevada, and there were plenty of other places out west where a dwarf could make his mark, and get a little peace. Maybe find a spread in Oregon or Idaho, where the hunting was good and there was plenty of water. Wherever he ended up, it would be better than here.

His mind was made. Spurring his horse with his heels and snapping the reins, Ron was off, heading northwest. It would be a long ride, but there were other towns and watering holes in his path... or, at least, there would have been if he'd been kept on course.

Suddenly, a flash of darkness appeared over Ron's eyes, and in the blink of an eye he found himself falling. The horse was gone from beneath him, along with the dusty hills. Wooden floorboards were coming up fast, and he tucked himself into a ball and rolled as he landed to avoid serious injury. After coming to a stop and jumping to his feet, he looked around the familiar room, and realized exactly what had happened.

"Blast you, Doliber!" Ron shouted as he turned toward the desk where the local sheriff was sitting.

"Sorry for the abrupt teleport, but I couldn't have you running off on me," Sheriff Doliber replied, picking a cigar out of the box on his desk. With a snap of his fingers, a mystic spark ignited the tip, and the embers glowed as he inhaled.

"You've been spying on me," Ron said with certainty. He'd feared as much, knowing the sheriff's mystic talents.

Doliber tapped the side of his right temple. "Empathic link, remember? I can sense what you're feeling, and your flight instincts blared out loud and clear a few minutes ago. You were trying to split."

"Damn it, Doliber, I told you I don't want anything more to do with you. Our business is finished."

"We're finished when I say we are," Doliber replied, tapping his cigar against his ornate, brass ashtray. There wasn't much ash in the receptacle, showing he had recently cleaned it.

"Why won't you just let me go?" Ron asked, feeling as caged as any prisoner.

"Because I need you," Doliber admitted. "You've seen the kind of characters who operate around here. I can't deal with them alone."

"I'm sure you can manage, considering all that warlock training of yours."

"Even I have my limits. Reliable help's hard to come by, and you're one of the sharpest gunslingers I've ever seen. Wouldn't you like to put those talents to good use?"

"No," Ron said defiantly.

Doliber sighed. "Why are you so resistant? You're not a wicked man, and you certainly aren't a coward. What's got you running scared?"

"That's my business," Ron said, knowing the sheriff was looking to guilt him. It wasn't going to work. He'd done his duty, and done enough killing for one lifetime. He wasn't about to get drafted again.

"All right, look, things are pretty calm right now, so why don't you take a load off, settle in for a few days. Think things over, and if you really can't bring yourself to do the right thing, I'll let you go."

"Waiting around a few days isn't going to change my mind," Ron replied. He'd already spent a week in the hills, thinking about the sheriff's offer, and he'd made his decision.

"Even so, it won't hurt you to get some rest before you trudge off to wherever it is you're going. The Bormans have a boarding house on the edge of town. I'll pay for your room."

"I don't need your charity," Ron grumbled.

"Consider it a signing bonus if you accept the job, or severance pay if you don't. Either way, the room is paid for."

"Thanks," Ron said, turning to leave. He'd been in Nevada almost a month already, so what was another few days? A free room was nothing to balk at, in any case. As he reached the door, another concern crossed his mind. "Say, what about my horse?"

"He's right outside," Doliber assured him. "I'll book him a stall at Kinney's livery stable while you check out the boarding house."

"You do that," Ron said, heading out the door.

Outside, the midday sun was beating down on the dusty streets of Selwood. The

town was pretty busy, serving as a central hub of travel in southern Nevada. Prospectors, gamblers, gunfighters, and freeholders could all be found browsing the shops and drinking at the saloon. The town itself didn't have that many full-time residents, but the countryside poured in for the amenities.

Ron found the Bormans' boarding house easily enough, and checked in. The elderly lady tending the place gave him a quick tour of his room, a ten by twelve box with a bed and a weathered washtub that a full-sized human would be cramped in. Though, a dwarf could find the half-barrel basin relaxing, assuming the thing didn't give him a splinter. He had two weeks of dust and sweat stuck to his skin, so a bath was most desired, and his first order of business.

It would take at least an hour for Mrs. Borman to heat enough water for the tub, but Ron was used to roughing it, so he took it cold. Using a complimentary bar of soap, he scrubbed himself down until the water was black. He regretted that he only had the one set of clothes, as he put the filthy garments on his clean skin. Perhaps that could be remedied.

The sheriff's offer was starting to interest him, even if he didn't want to admit it. He could certainly use the money, no doubt about it, though the thought of fighting for a living no longer appealed to him. He had enough blood on his hands already. Many jobs in his youth had been violent, whether it was fighting Rebs in the Civil War, or wild Indians in the Dakotas, or drunken cattle rustlers in Oklahoma; he'd seen more than his fair share of combat. He was tired of killing for a living.

But he was so good at it.

With the clothes on his back, he cycled the cylinder of his Remington revolver. The old cap-and-ball design was pretty antiquated in this era of cartridges, but it had seen him through many scrapes. It wasn't so much the tool, as the craftsman wielding it that mattered.

Strapping the six-shooter to his hip, Ron's hand brushed against his right pocket, and felt the hunk of metal protruding from within. He reached in and dug out the silver badge Doliber had pinned on him a while back, the shiny star of authority. The allure of power was not lost on him, though the duty and responsibility was a heavy counterweight.

Part of him wanted to fling the badge out a window, but the little voice in the back of his mind forced him to pocket the thing again.

"A few days, he says," Ron mumbled to himself. "Great."

Walking down Main Street, Ron decided to check on his horse. He knew where the livery stable was, so he took a quick detour and made sure the sheriff had stuck to his word. Sure enough, Ron found his trusted companion wedged in a stall, waiting patiently to revisit the trail. It set his mind at ease, as he continued his journey to the Lucca Saloon.

Reaching the town's primary drinking establishment, Ron pushed open the swinging doors and walked over to the counter, then heaved himself up onto a waiting stool. His approach had been observed by the prim and proper elf waiting by the taps. Ron remembered the bartender from his last visit to Selwood, and knew he was stirring up trouble by coming here.

"Well, if it isn't the Leprechaun again," Solen remarked arrogantly, brushing a hand over his neatly-combed blond hair.

"I ain't no Irishman, you pointy-eared dandy," Ron grumbled. "Now, gimme a

whiskey."

"I'm sorry, but we don't serve *your* kind in here," Solen replied with a smile.

"My kind?" Ron smiled back and dug the deputy badge out of his pocket. "What, you mean law men?" The badge rattled on the hardwood counter in front of Solen.

Solen sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Whiskey!" Ron growled.

"Are you on duty?" Solen asked.

"Does that matter?"

"I couldn't in good conscience serve you while you're on-duty."

"Fine, then I'm off duty," Ron answered, putting the badge away.

"Well, then I'm afraid we don't serve your kind in here," Solen replied.

The intentional slight burned on Ron's nerves, as his emotional state was already pretty raw from recent events. Grabbing the cocky elf by his broad lapels, he growled back, "Look here, pointy, I'm not playing your twisted little games. I ain't had a drink in six months, and I'm sure as hell gonna get that whiskey, one way or another. Now, you can either get paid for it, or I'll confiscate it in the name of the law. It's your choice."

"Who do you think you are?" Solen asked with a shrill voice. "This is America. I have rights!"

Ron grunted in amusement, and released his grip on the elf's jacket. "Yeah, even a pointy-eared bugger like you has 'em, and so do I. Now, sell me a damn drink."

Solen brushed his jacket, as if shaking off dirt. "Well, since you asked so nicely..." He turned and grabbed a brown bottle from the rack behind him, and proceeded to fill a shot glass with the tan liquid. "Two bits."

Ron dug into his pocket and found a few pieces of silver. Besides the silver dollar, he had a couple of twenty-cent pieces. He'd won the odd things at a Faro table in Kansas City a few months back, and for a while there he'd suspected a fraud. *Who'd ever heard of a twenty cent piece?* It had only been since hitting Nevada that he'd seen the things in regular use, though even here they weren't that popular.

The silver coins jingled against the hardwood counter. "How about two shots for forty?" Ron asked.

Solen grabbed the coins and smirked. "Don't press your luck, midge." He promptly produced three nickels in change, which Ron glared at before pocketing.

With the money paid, Ron finally got around to downing the shot. The rot-gut burned down his throat. It wasn't the nicest feeling, but after a few seconds, the warm buzz enveloped him, taking the edge off recent aches of his body and soul. One was enough, so he didn't regret the failed haggling. Still, he'd have felt bad if he hadn't at least tried to chisel the annoying bartender.

As the warmth of the drink took hold of him, he noticed a conspicuous figure clomping into the saloon.

Ron turned around slowly, and looked to see a woman stomping towards him. What he saw surprised him in many ways. The heavy leather attire looked wholly unsuited to a lady, though it couldn't hide her ample bosom, or the soft elegance of her face. Yes, there was something very alluring about this lady, even if she were a lousy elf.

"Are you Boron Grimes," the lady asked, staying a few steps away from the dwarf. She was shooting daggers with her eyes as he remained silent. "Well?"

There was no telling what this woman wanted, though Ron felt comfortable enough to

finally answer. "I am, and you would be?"

"My name is Joella Lafayette-Talus. You shot my husband."

A surge of adrenaline pulsed through Ron's head, disrupting the pleasant buzz. His hand instinctually reached for the revolver tucked under his long jacket.

"Don't even try it," Joella snapped, pointing her own weapon in his face. She could have fired and ended his short existence then and there. The fact that she kept her finger off the trigger said that wasn't her immediate intent.

"Excuse me," Solen interrupted. "Do you two mind..."

"Stay out of this, barkeeper," Joella ordered with a shout. "You know Elvish Clan Law. Would you deny the rights of a widow?"

Solen rolled his eyes and stepped away from the counter, leaving Ron to face the angry woman on his own.

"What do you want with me?" Ron asked, staring down the barrel of her sleek Smith & Wesson.

"You killed my husband. What do you think I want?" Joella asked incredulously.

"Then shoot, and get it over with," Ron challenged, feeling his number was up. There was nothing he could do if she was intent on firing, so he turned back to his empty shot glass, showing it more interest than the pistol aimed at his head.

Joella narrowed her eyes in irritation. "Oh, I can't believe I'm doing this," she complained, grabbing at a small pouch tied to her belt. It took her a minute to get the knot untied with a single hand, but once the satin bag was released she dug two fingers inside and tossed a pinch of red dust in Ron's face.

The substance tingled like the whiskey, but it was far more powerful than simple drink. As Ron tried to speak, he found his throat paralyzed, and noticed the rest of his body going numb. What was this mad woman doing to him?

"You're going to pay, Grimes," Joella said as his eyes went dark and his limp body slid off the bar stool. "Just not how you might expect."

* * *

The call came in shortly after Ron Grimes left the sheriff's office; a mystic message from a summoning orb that Doliber had given to most every businessman in the county. If something came up, he could be contacted in a moment's notice, and respond instantly via a magic teleport. Having a warlock for a sheriff certainly had its advantages.

There was something different about this summons. The call wasn't from any of the populated towns, as usual, but from thirty miles northwest of Selwood, a patch of parched dust near the county line. That spelled trouble, for sure, so Doliber wasted no time with his reply. With a ceremonial flick of his wrist, he activated a mental command which sent him instantly to the source of the signal. A mild tingling sensation lingered as his body adjusted to its new surroundings.

Hills of dirt and rock, with a bit of scrub brush mixed in for character, greeted Doliber as the midday sun beat down overhead. Someone had called him to this?

"Hey, Jimmy," a voice grabbed Doliber's attention. He turned around to see a tall man in a beige trench coat smiling back. "Good of you to show up."

"Marshal Rodgers," Doliber greeted the man with suspicion. He'd met this federal law man on a few occasions, always in an official capacity. There was no love between the two of them, and their working relationship was tenuous, at best. The Marshal wouldn't have contacted the sheriff unless it was important.

The larger question remained. How had he summoned Doliber in the first place?

"Here, I think this is one of yours," Rodgers said, tossing a round, glass ball at Doliber.

"Where'd you get this?" Doliber asked, staring at the mystic orb. It was about the size of a billiard ball.

"On the other side of this ridge," Rodgers said, leading the way. The two men climbed the slight slope and peered over the other side at the mutilated stagecoach and the dead men within.

The familiar scent of death greeted Doliber as he stood before the wreckage. The foul odor of blood and entrails told that the kills were relatively fresh, no more than a few hours old. An ordinary man couldn't cross much territory in that time, but from the wrinkled steel plates and the dead mares without a scratch on them, it was obviously no ordinary man who'd done this.

"You can see why I called you," Marshal Rodgers said, rubbing his hands together nervously. "Looks like something in your league."

"Indeed," Doliber said, squeezing his eyes shut. The gesture was not a sign of irritation, but part of a trigger that activated a unique spell. As he opened his eyelids, a flash of blue light flickered over his vision and left his eyeballs aglow. The result gave him the ability to perceive the lingering traces of mystic energy lurking on the crime scene. Magnificent splotches of color coated all places that magic had touched, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt what Doliber had feared since first seeing the mangled coach.

This was not the work of a desert troll, or some elvish bandit. These were clearly human magic traces, which could mean only one thing. A fellow warlock was to blame; someone with real training, not just a parlor magician. Likely, a member of the Guild itself!

"So, whatcha got?" Rodgers asked, stroking his neatly trimmed mustache.

"A headache," Doliber replied.

EpisodeTwo: Unintended Consequences

Ron woke up to shooting pain in his eyes. The sting was like shards of glass tearing at his corneas, and the glare he witnessed blinded him completely, like a hot desert sun. He began to tear up from the agony, even as he tried to move his body. Nothing. Something was restraining him so completely, he couldn't move from the neck down.

What had that elf strumpet done to him?

Blinking furiously, Ron sought to clear his sight, and found slight relief as the pain faded. Even as the blinding light disappeared, he remained unable to see, for there was darkness all around. The cold breeze on his face confirmed the presence of night, even as the twinkling stars became visible to his recovering eyes.

"I wouldn't thrash too much if I were you," Joella's voice called. "Essence of Red Moon can do a number on your muscles, even when you can't feel them."

"Release me now!" Ron ordered, jerking his neck in an attempt to gain some control over his torso. There was a tingling in his shoulders, which told him he was getting better. Impatience was spurred by apprehension, as he wondered what evil machinations this elvish widow had in store for him.

"You're not going anywhere," Joella answered. "Not until I get what I need."

Her enigmatic answer provided little comfort to Ron, as he ceased his struggling. There was no point fighting with unresponsive muscles. Though he couldn't fathom what Joella's true intentions were, it was clear she wasn't about to kill him; at least, not yet.

"Get some sleep," Joella advised. "We've got a long ride tomorrow."

"The sheriff's not going to take kindly to you kidnapping his deputy," Ron said, hoping to use his new status as persuasion.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about Doliber too much," Joella said, sounding smug. "He's a bit preoccupied at the moment."

"What did you do to him?" Ron grumbled.

"Nothing," Joella answered. "Fate was simply kind enough to provide me with the perfect cover, so I took advantage of it. Now, save your strength for tomorrow. You'll need it."

Seeing no alternative, Ron lay back and wondered what fate had in store for him. It had never been terribly kind, though he was still alive, and that was something. Then again, maybe death was too good for him in the eyes of the creator?

Night passed quickly, with brief aches and pains preventing him from getting any real rest. By the time dawn came, he was grateful to be fully awake and have a look at his

current surroundings.

Things weren't as desolate as he'd last recalled. The green bushes and pine trees told him he was a long way from Selwood, likely out of Nevada altogether. How long had he been unconscious? It would have taken days to ride this far—more likely Joella had used some form of teleportation magic to expedite their journey.

Well, it looked like he'd gotten his wish. He was beyond Doliber's control. Too bad he'd merely traded one master for another.

"Where are we?" Ron asked as Joella led him to the horse. Despite the resemblance, it wasn't his own, as was evident by the Elvish brand on the right hip and the lack of his custom double stirrup.

"California," Joella said, grabbing him by the britches and tossing him into his saddle. She did it with little effort, proving the strength of her muscles.

"Yeah, that's real helpful," Ron mentioned as he tried to get into a comfortable position. It was hard with his hands tied. "Exactly where in California are we going?"

"It's not far now," Joella said, remaining vague. "If we ride steady, we should be there before nightfall."

The foliage grew thicker as they traveled, turning into a full blown forest after a few hours. It slowed them down considerably, as the trails became less defined, though Joella seemed to know where she was heading.

Ron could only imagine what lurked in this country. He'd never been this far west, having come to Nevada less than a month ago in pursuit of his brother's killer. California had been a possible destination in the future, though it would have been a more defined route, for certain. These twisty woodland paths could lead anywhere, and it wasn't nice being whacked in the face by limbs at every turn.

They stopped to rest the horses shortly after noon, in a small clearing with green grass and a swampy patch where Joella dug a hole and refilled her canteens. She was kind enough to offer Ron a drink, which he gladly took, for he hadn't quenched his thirst since the kidnapping. The liquid soothed his parched throat and let him breathe a sight easier. All he needed now was a good meal, though he didn't feel there was a point in asking. His captor wasn't eating, so it was doubtful she'd waste rations on him.

Once Ron had drunk his fill, Joella refilled the canteens again and tied her captive to one of the grazing horses, after which she disappeared into the bushes.

Alone for the first time, Ron saw his opportunity to escape. The sturdy ropes around his wrists may have been tied securely, but this wasn't the first time he'd had to escape from captivity. His hands could be deceptive, for while they looked fat and chubby, they were scarcely wider than his wrists. With the right moves, he could be free!

While drinking, he'd been clever enough to leak a bit of the water down his hands and wrists, wetting the rope and lubricating his dry skin. Sliding his wrists back and forth inside the wet rope, he managed to loosen it the tiniest margin. Then, tucking his thumb and fingers together, he was able to pull one hand through, and released his second with a quick pick of the remaining knot.

Ron made a dash for the swampy edge of the clearing. He figured it was his best bet for escape, as Joella wasn't liable to be lurking in that area. She'd entered the bushes on the opposite side of the clearing, and even if she'd circled around a bit, it was doubtful she'd be wading around in the mud.

He didn't get past the hole Joella had dug when his legs went numb. Instantly, the

knees bent and Ron threw his arms out in front of him, barely able to stop from getting planted face-first in the muck. He sank almost to his elbows in the soft soil before the tingling hit his shoulders, causing him to collapse. As feeling left his arms, he managed to roll onto his side, and not get a mouthful of dirt when he fully collapsed.

He lay there for a few minutes before Joella finally returned.

"You can't get away from me that easily," Joella said as she approached the paralyzed dwarf.

"Think I wouldn't try?" Ron asked, his face half covered in crud.

"I was certain you would," Joella said, pulling his limp body out of the mossy muck. "It's good you've gotten it out of your system."

"Who says I have?" Ron said spitefully.

"The proximity tether I have latched onto you," Joella explained. "If you get too far away from me, it reactivates the dormant paralytic dust in your system. Don't try running again."

"You could've told me," Ron mentioned. "Would've saved you all the trouble of setting up this test of yours."

"It wasn't a test," Joella said, tossing him on the ground beside the horses. She untied the rope from the horse and began binding his wrists again.

"Then why duck off into the woods like that?"

"Why do you think? I had to refresh myself."

"Is that elf speak for taking a crap?"

"That's lady speak, you uncouth midge," Joella answered, tossing the dwarf onto the horse. "You've got a lot to learn, Boron Grimes."

"Says you," Ron answered bitterly.

With the afternoon sun lingering in the sky, their pace hastened as they came to better defined trails. Hour after hour, the signs of life grew more numerous. Several cabins came and went, and a few ploughed fields appeared as civilization returned. Near nightfall, a sizeable town could be seen in the distance, tucked into a valley surrounded by two streams that emptied into a small lake in the center.

"Welcome to Ravenna-West," Joella said as they crossed a log bridge at the edge of town.

Past the bridge, they rode straight down Main Street, a wide, dirt road with ruts full of gravel. Some of the locals were still out and about, and their physical features were plain to see, even in the gathering gloom. This was an elf town, for certain.

Most of the residents didn't pay them much mind, though Ron caught a few staring at him with dirty looks on their narrow faces. His stout form made him stand out like a sore thumb, even on horseback, and these people weren't much for outsiders.

Elves were a tricky lot to place, like any sentient race. Their customs and attitudes varied greatly by clan, though based on the location of Ravenna-West, Ron could make a guess about their proclivities. These were isolationists, seeking their own secluded life separate from the outside world. They might have dealings with the occasional trader, but it was doubtful they'd let any strangers set up shop in this neck of the woods.

Joella stopped their journey in front of a large, stone building in the center of town. The colorful stained glass windows revealed it to be an elvish temple, their central place of worship and governance. The building's circular shape and slate roofing made it stand out compared to the other buildings in town.

Joella dismounted and hastily untied the rope around Ron's wrists. "Follow me and do what I say, assuming you want to live," she commanded.

Ron said nothing, and continued to wonder about her current scheme as she led him into the round building.

Entering the small antechamber, Joella stopped in front of a large basin atop a pedestal and dipped two fingers into the clear liquid. She touched the damp fingers to her forehead and ordered Ron to do the same. Sticking his fingers into the bowl, he felt the oily substance soak into his skin, leaving a chilling nip. He didn't like the idea of rubbing the stuff on his sweaty brow, but felt he had no alternative, and did a quick swipe just as his captor had done. As the oil soaked in, it served to soothe his sun-burnt brow.

Joella stopped in front of two silvery, metal doors and pounded her fist against them. A few moments passed, and the doors creaked open, revealing the spacious chamber beyond. Curved pews were set in half rings, leading toward the back of the room, where a raised platform held a single occupant perched at a desk covered in books. His gaze was upon the two intruders as they walked toward him.

"High Minister," Joella greeted as she neared the elf on the platform.

"Widow Lafayette," the High Minister replied with an emotionless tone.

"I've returned with my husband's killer," Joella said.

"And I take it your intentions have not changed?" the High Minister asked, sounding hopeful to the contrary.

"They have not, High Minister."

The High Minister glanced at the ceiling and breathed a deep breath. "Very well, bring him to me."

Joella grabbed Ron's arm and dragged him onto the platform. Before releasing her grip, she whispered into his ear. "Be honest, and accept the consequences of your actions."

Ron felt a surge of apprehension pulse through his chest as he was pushed forward to face the High Minister.

"Confirm your name," the High Minister commanded.

"Boron Grimes," Ron replied nervously.

"Word has reached this court that a Boron Grimes did kill one of our clansmen, Vincent Lafayette. Are you that same man?"

"Yes," Ron said, unashamed.

"And this was done on the field of honor, in personal combat?"

"Yes."

"And it was done honorably, with no unnatural advantages or extraneous influences?"

"I killed him fair and square, if that's what you're asking," Ron replied.

"You swear to it?" the High Minister asked.

"I do," Ron said.

The High Minister sat silently, glaring at the short man in front of the desk. "My empathy reveals only truth to your words," he finally said, sounding disappointed. "Lafayette's death requires no retribution."

Ron felt relieved, assuming he was off the hook.

"High Minister," Joella interjected, stepping up to the desk. "You have confirmed that this man killed my husband on the field of honor. By Clan Law, I claim Widow's

Rights."

"Truly, Widow Lafayette, do you wish to be so brash?"

Grabbing Ron's hand and yanking it forward, she said, "I have no choice."

"As widow, you have the right to claim restitution from your husband's killer. Do you wish to exercise that right?"

"I do," Joella said, shooting Ron a nasty stare.

Turning to Ron, the High Minister lowered his tone. "As an outsider to our clan and our race, you are free to renounce the widow's claim, and be exempted from our laws in this matter. If you so choose..."

"He accepts my claim," Joella interrupted. "Don't you, Grimes?" She squeezed his hand, digging her fingernails into his knuckles.

"Uh, yes," Ron said, heeding her previous advice. She'd threatened to kill him if he didn't comply with her wishes, and he was in no mood to test her resolve. Besides, he was morbidly curious to learn what these Widow's Rights entailed.

"So be it," the High Minister said. "Then by my authority as anointed spiritual leader of this Clan of Talus, I hereby assign all marital responsibilities of Vincent Lafayette to you, Boron Grimes."

"What?" Ron said, wondering if he'd heard right.

"You are hereby married, Mister and Misses Grimes," the High Minister said coldly.

"That's it?" Ron asked. "No wedding? No *'for sicker or poorer.'* No *'if anybody objects let them speak now or forever hold their peace?'*"

"No," the High Minister replied. "Under these circumstances, Widow Lafayette was well within her rights to claim your hand in marriage, as restitution for the death of her husband. This is our Clan Law, as it has been practiced for thousands of years."

"What about divorce?" Ron asked, after which Joella slapped the back of his head.

"Again, it is at her sole discretion. You are married, Mr. Grimes, for better or worse, until death or until Mrs. Grimes-Talus chooses to release you."

"Which will not happen," Joella said, kneeling. Grabbing Ron by both cheeks, she kissed him briefly. "You are mine. Get used to it."

The High Minister pulled a form out of a desk drawer and began filling it out. The text of the document was in both English and Elavic, the ancient script of the Elvish Hierarchy. Once he had the empty slots filled, he handed it to Joella, who promptly signed it, then handed it to Ron, who reluctantly put his name to it.

"It is done," the High Minister said, adding his signature to the bottom. "I'll have this forwarded to Sacramento on our next mail run." After tucking the marriage license away, he removed another document and filled it out in haste. "Here's your proof, if anyone should ask."

"Thank you, High Minister," Joella said, taking the certificate from his grasp. "Come along, dear. Time for you to meet the in-laws."

Ron swallowed the growing lump in his throat, as the weight of the situation continued to fall. And he'd thought being indentured to Doliber would be a trial. How accursed to be shackled to an elf!

* * *

A cold drizzle was blowing in off the bay when Doliber arrived in San Francisco. He'd always hated it here, spending all those years at school, trying to hone his inherent mystic talents during the day, braving the bitter winds and bustling markets in his free

time, unable to find satisfaction in so many respects. Why the Guild had chosen to locate their West American chapter in this god-awful city continued to elude him.

The cold was an added shock to his system, as he'd just teleported from an eighty-degree hotspot. Suddenly hitting that fifty degree mist would send a chill down anyone's back. The thin, leather coat helped a little, but he wasted no time getting indoors.

The Guildmaster's home was a modest, unsuspecting house on Fulton Street, a few blocks from the campus of the Guild's western academy. The door knocker was the most impressive thing in sight, a solid brass lion without a spot of tarnish. Three hard raps of the knocker announced Doliber's presence, and the door opened soon after, all by itself.

Stepping inside, Doliber removed his hat and coat, setting them on a nearby bench before heading inside. As he moved to leave the entryway, a clear voice halted him. "Aren't we forgetting something?"

Doliber grumbled in frustration as he sat down to remove his dusty boots. He hadn't forgotten at all, but had tried to avoid the annoying practice. Nothing got past the Guildmaster, however, so he had to accommodate the elder.

Once in his stocking feet, Doliber continued down the hall, reaching the Guildmaster's home office after two dozen steps.

The small room was half library, half reliquary, littered with mystic antiquities. Among the carefully arranged items was a circular table with a globe in the center. It was there that the aging Guildmaster sat, flipping through the pages of a leather-bound reference book.

"So, Journeyman Doliber, what brings you to see me?" the Guildmaster asked, looking up from his text to stare at his guest.

"I suspect you know," Doliber replied, looking at the head of his mystic order. The gray-haired man with a neatly-trimmed beard was getting fat in his latter years, though there was no sign of infirmity. The bushy brow accentuated the fiery eyes that glared back, and the crow's-feet at the temples only added distinction.

Slapping the book shut, the Guildmaster replied, "I am aware of no such thing. Please, enlighten me."

Doliber stormed up to the table and slapped his palms on the smooth surface. "I'm investigating a robbery and a multiple homicide."

The Guildmaster sighed and shook his head. "Oh, how boorish. I thought you would have learned by now the folly of involving yourself in the affairs of the common people."

"I serve and protect society from those who would abuse and betray all that is good in this country."

"As a county sheriff? Please, don't elevate your position."

"Why do you rebuke me?" Doliber asked, frustrated.

"You were a prized pupil, once," the Guildmaster mentioned, reaching over and spinning the globe. "You were so talented, had such potential. It pains me to see your talents wasted."

"What would you have me do? Study in seclusion, ignoring the ills of this world? Shutting myself away like the rest of the Guild in pursuit of some spiritual truth? What would be the point of that?"

"The answer, former apprentice, is in the journey, or have you forgotten? Seeking truth is a purpose unto itself. Always learning, always expanding our understanding of

the universe, those are the principles upon which our organization was founded, and to those we must adhere."

"I did not come here to rehash old grievances," Doliber said, feeling he'd been lectured enough.

"Then what is your intent?"

"The crimes I'm investigating concern the Guild."

"How could such a material matter pertain to us?"

"The perpetrator was a human mystic of significant skill, the sort of skill only taught by this organization."

The Guildmaster flinched at the statement, unprepared for the implications.

"That's right. A member of your precious Guild is a thief and a murderer," Doliber said, feeling cocky. "How does that align with your vaunted principles?"

"This is wholly unfathomable!" the Guildmaster cursed, leaping from his seat in a bout of controlled rage. "To think a member of our order capable of wanton acts of destruction..." Freezing in mid-sentence, he let his expression grow blank and locked his gaze onto Doliber. "Show me everything."

In the blink of an eye, Doliber's mind replayed the events for the Guildmaster, showing him the scene of the crime, the mutilated stagecoach, and the bloody bodies. All memory of the experience was relayed; sight, sound, touch, scent. The aged master was able to witness all that the sheriff had witnessed, as if he'd been there, himself.

As the last sensory information was transferred, the Guildmaster blinked and sat down in silent contemplation.

Feeling a stinging aftershock from the experience, Doliber wiped his eyes and breathed a deep breath, fighting to clear his head. An ordinary mind reading would not have affected him so severely, but the invasive nature of the Guildmaster's scan staggered him. Even so, he refused to show weakness and remained on his feet as he recovered.

"This is most troubling," the Guildmaster said at last, rubbing his hairy chin. "The spell traces you perceived, they were certainly human, and not the work of any amateur. The skill required to harness such power requires very specialized training."

"The kind only the Guild can provide a man," Doliber stated.

"True, and power only a full master could possess."

Doliber saw a peculiar look in the Guildmaster's eye, and jumped on it. "You know who it is, don't you?"

"Nothing is certain," the Guildmaster rebutted. "I must confer with the other elders before saying more. You must go."

There was no point in arguing. Doliber had gotten all he would out of the man for the moment, as little as it was. He didn't like leaving empty handed, though.

"I'll see myself out," Doliber said as the Guildmaster stood to escort him.

Turning to leave, Doliber closed his eyes and sent his mind wandering. For a second that seemed like minutes, his consciousness floated outside his body, following the lingering ethereal trail left behind by the Guildmaster's previous intrusion. The magic tracks left the warlock with an opening into the master's mind, if he were strong enough to sneak through without detection. It was a trick few had ever attempted against such a powerful mystic, and one Doliber would never have dared to try, were the situation not so dire. Things were being concealed, and he had to know the truth!

His mind floated through the glowing realm of unseen magic, passing through the

waves and ripples of mental essence. There, among the flow of light was a large patch of glistening life, and a hoard of mental data waiting to be explored; the body and soul of the Guildmaster. Looking at the shielded lump, Doliber detected several slender cracks in the armor, the lingering holes where the Guildmaster had ventured beyond his own being mere moments ago. Those cracks could be used in reverse for a limited time, and Doliber wasted none. Throwing his discorporeal mind through the ether, he reached into the Guildmaster's mind, and gazed upon the surface.

The surge of information would prove overwhelming for your average human mind, and even Doliber found it troubling. The added thoughts and feelings of a second consciousness stunned him as he took it all in. The shock quickly severed his link, and left him staggering toward a wall.

Feeling the sting of the intrusion, the Guildmaster shook it off and growled. "Of all the insolent behavior!"

"I had to see your mind," Doliber defended, leaning against the doorframe. "Lives may depend on it."

The Guildmaster stormed over and stood in the doorway, so he could look at Doliber's face. "And what makes you the master of those lives?"

"The people who elected me to be their sheriff, that's who. It's my job."

"Yet you came to me for help, because you're out of your depth," the Guildmaster said. "Now you presume to take charge, steal my knowledge and venture into deeper water where you cannot swim!"

Doliber looked at the furious man, and felt the sting of his rebuke. This had been an underhanded path to take, and it hadn't been his intention to violate trust. There was genuine shame in his heart for behaving so brashly. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, again."

"Well, no real harm done," the Guildmaster said, regaining an amiable attitude. He walked back to his reading table and took a seat. "Still, I believe it is time you took your leave."

Feeling he'd done all he could, Doliber headed for the outside door. It was high time he got back to Selwood and continued his investigation. Pulling on his boots and grabbing his hat and coat, he reached for the knob, but before he could open the door to depart, the Guildmaster's voice called from down the hall.

"The knowledge you received from that ever so brief intrusion into my psyche is no doubt jumbled and fairly useless. If you'll take my advice, you'll leave it like that. Don't go picking through it to find bits of data that will only lead to confuse you further."

"Why?" Doliber asked, gripping the doorknob tightly. "What are you afraid I'll find?"

"Have patience, Journeyman Doliber. All will be revealed in due course. Return to your worldly duties, and I shall contact you shortly."

Doliber yanked the door open and went outside, back into the cold mist that had become a steady downpour. He didn't stick around to face the wet weather, and opted for a quick teleport back to Selwood, where a much greater storm was brewing.

The hot air greeted him like a kiss, as his body materialized on the porch in front of his office. This was where he belonged, in the arid world of prospectors and frontiersmen. Civilization was a bit too civilized for his liking, and his greatest concern was where he'd go next, if this wild corner of the world built up around him before he got old. He liked it here, and didn't want things to change.

Clomping up the steps to his office, twisted images continued to roll around inside his head, the jumbled memories of the Guildmaster. They were little more than phantoms, but Doliber knew the answers he sought had to be there. He needed time to meditate and rest before he could unlock the secrets he'd stolen.

Doliber stepped into his office, and listened to the silence. Things were pretty quiet around here for the moment. The holding cells in back were empty, and there weren't any rowdy cattlemen visiting town. Taking advantage of the peace, he turned to the slender flight of stairs near his desk, and headed for his bedroom on the second floor. It wasn't quite sunset, but near enough, and he had a lot of work to do.

As his head hit the pillow, Doliber wondered how his new deputy was settling in.

* * *

The warm afternoon sun was creeping toward the mountains on the western horizon as Ron Grimes followed his new wife out into the muddy street. He was still trying to wrap his head around the whole thing, and couldn't for the life of him explain it. He'd thought elves were bizarre before; now he thought them just plain nuts.

"Saddle up," Joella said, unhitching her horse. "It's time I introduced you to the rest of the family."

"I don't get you," Ron said, jumping to catch the stirrup. "You kidnap me, haul me all this way, just to get married?"

"I had no choice," Joella said, sounding ashamed. It was the first sign of gentler emotions she'd revealed in Ron's presence. "Ride. I'll explain along the way."

Getting onto the horse, Ron squirmed as he tried to position himself. The thing didn't feel right. The saddle was designed for someone with longer legs and broader hips, and as the steed began trotting along, the hard leather pounded his tail bone in a most sinister manner. He hadn't noticed it so much while he was a prisoner, but now that he was riding without ropes around his wrists, he had more attention to focus on minor discomforts. She could have at least kidnapped him with his own horse!

Joella led the way out of town, down a well traveled dirt road heading north. The muddy fields of hay and wheat stubble buttressed either side of the ruts, and further along cattle could be seen in fenced pastures. The hilly ground hid the farm houses that lurked amongst the agricultural lands. It was several miles before trees once again appeared, and Joella decided to speak.

"Tell me, Dwarf, how do your people court a mate?"

Ron scoffed at the direct question, thinking the answer to be pretty obvious. "How do you figure? If a guy likes a girl, he takes her out to a show or dinner, buys her pretty gifts; stuff like that. Why?"

Joella looked over her shoulder and gave him a funny look. "You clearly haven't been around elves before, at least none who adhere to clan traditions. In our society, courtship is a formality, practiced only by those men who choose to be chivalrous. You see, we don't choose our mates. Our parents do."

"Arranged marriages are nothing new," Ron mentioned.

"No, they're very old. Archaic, I'd say, but the clans have two thousand years of precedence on their side, and most elves like the way things are. So, we stick with a backwards system which treats women like property, and marriage to be a legal contract devoid of emotional considerations."

"What's all this got to do with you marrying me?" Ron asked, nudging his horse to

catch up with hers. Once they were side-by-side, he could get a good look at her face as she replied.

"It was my way out. When you killed my husband—a husband I was betrothed to at birth—you gave me the rare opportunity to get away from these legally-imposed marriages. Since you killed Vincent honorably in a duel, I had the Widow's Right to claim you for my husband."

"What would've happened if we hadn't gotten hitched?" Ron asked.

"Then I'd become the responsibility of Vincent's next of kin, who could then claim me as a wife, or marry me off to one of his cousins. I'd have no say in the matter, so you can understand why I had to do this."

Ron shook his head in disgust. It hadn't been so long ago, there'd been a war fought over slavery, and a Constitutional Amendment ratified to end it forever. Yet, out here, among the various clans and religious sects of the frontier, he'd seen far too much of the practice. Always veiled under another title and justified by tradition, but it was still slavery. He couldn't escape the belief that society would always be cursed with the scourge, in one form or another.

"Don't feel so bad, Mister Grimes. Play your cards right and you won't have to put up with me too long—just until we get your new in-laws off our collective backs."

It was a great relief to hear, and for the first time in days Ron was feeling optimistic about things. This little sham marriage was a minor inconvenience, one that had the unintended consequence of prying him from Sheriff Doliber's grip. This was well outside the Sheriff's jurisdiction, so when Joella's plans were complete, he'd be a free man. Selwood was no place he'd miss, and there was plenty of wilderness to explore.

Sliding a hand down his side instinctively, Ron recalled one important element that was missing. "Say, what'd you do with my Remington?" he asked his new wife.

"That clunky old cap and ball thing you had? I left it at the bar in Selwood. Why?"

Damn! Just when he'd thought he was free and clear, this pointy-eared broad had to go and leave the one thing he cared about back in that dust trap of a town. Would it even be there if he went back for it? There was no telling what that lousy barkeeper would do with it, but Ron was sure going to find out.

Of course, that would have to wait until his dear wife let him go. When that would be was anyone's guess.

A fork in the road appeared, and Joella led them to the right, up a slight slope. The gradual incline decreased after a few hundred yards, and turning a corner revealed a house with white clapboards surrounded by a modest lawn and spacious fields beyond. There was something well-to-do about the place, and it was obviously not your average ranch.

As Ron and Joella neared the lawn, the front door of the house opened, and a lady in white dress stepped out onto the porch.

"Who's that?" Ron asked as Joella climbed down off her horse.

"Mehitable Sellius-Vellinar, first wife of Mactus Sellius."

"And that means?"

"Mactus is Vincent Lafayette's first cousin, his closest blood relative and would-be inheritor. If I hadn't married you, I'd be his, to do with as he pleased. I'm a Talus, so he'd love nothing better than to marry me."

"Yeah, but he's already got a wife," Ron said, planting his feet on the grassy ground.

It was quite a drop from the horse for the dwarf, but his legs still had a good spring in them.

"He already has three," Joella corrected. "Two through marriages arranged before his fifth birthday, another through *other* means. I had no intention of being wife number four in his little harem. Understand?"

"I'm starting to," Ron said. It was finally clear why an elf would stoop so low as to marry a dreaded "midge."

With a spry and confident stride, Joella walked up onto the uncovered porch. Ron waited at the base of the steps, wondering how this was going to go down.

"Hello, Hittie," Joella greeted the elf woman standing by the door. "How have you been?"

"Why, just fine, Widow Lafayette," Hittie replied cordially. From her tone of voice and the youthful looks, Ron guessed her age at about twenty, though elves were notorious for their young appearances, even into old age, so she could be much older.

"I'm here to see Mactus," Joella said. "May I come in?"

"Of course. We've been expecting you," Hittie said sweetly. "I'm afraid Mactus isn't here right now, but he should be back soon. If you'd like to put your feet up for a spell, I'm sure he'll be along any time. Then we can get you all dressed up for the big day. We'll have to fit you with a new dress, and find you some decent jewelry. The other wives will no doubt want to donate an item or two. Will that be all right?"

"How kind of you," Joella said, placing a hand on Hittie's shoulder. "To think you and Mactus would go to all that trouble to celebrate my wedding."

"Well, of course we are, dear. You deserve your proper day."

"Yes, I suppose I do," Joella said, fighting back an amused smile. She clearly enjoyed toying with the woman, playing on her ignorance of the situation.

"Now, come on inside. I've got a fresh pot of that parsnip stew, just like your grandma used to make for Sunday socials."

Joella took a step inside the door and turned to Ron. "Coming, sweetie?"

Ron frowned at her playful demeanor but stepped forward. As he neared the door, Hittie finally acknowledged his existence.

"Excuse me, dear, what is this?" she asked rudely.

"This is my new husband," Joella said with a straight face. "I thought you knew."

"Boron Grimes, ma'am," Ron said, offering his hand.

"What?" Hittie exclaimed. "Surely, you can't be serious."

"He killed Vincent in an honorable duel, so I exercised my Widow's Rights accordingly. You do understand."

Hittie froze with a vacant look on her face. Her wide eyes followed Ron as he walked inside and caught up to Joella.

"Come along, husband," Joella said as she proceeded down the hall. "We don't want our stew to get cold."

Ron followed, shaking his head in disbelief.

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