

Banshee Screams



LOST COLONY

clay & susan griffith



Banshee Screams

A Novel for Deadlands: Lost Colony

By
Clay & Susan Griffith

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Banshee Screams

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Book I: The Horror Lords



Book I: The Horror Lords



Prelude

"Run! Now!"

Her command was lost in the blinding, choking smoke and the acrid reek of burning metal. The man beside her stared in bewilderment.

Debbi Dallas shoved the man down the murky hallway.

"The escape pod is down that corridor! Go!" Her voice was hoarse from shouting and coughing in a vain attempt to clear her lungs. She brushed damp auburn strands of hair off her soot-stained face.

The man finally got his feet moving in the right direction. Five more figures followed blindly after, clinging to each other for dear life.

The Cabal space station shuddered. The sound of grinding metal filled Debbi's ears. Screams followed as they were all thrown to the ground when the station violently shifted. Pressure conduits ripped and expelled hot steam and gases, making it even harder to breathe. Debbi scrambled to her feet, dodging the dangerous streams.

"Go! You don't have much time!" Debbi urged the small group. They disappeared into the steam.

She grabbed a railing along the wall, but immediately yanked her hand away. It was hot. The floor rumbled as a nearby escape pod blasted into space. The station continued to groan.

The warning lights strobing through the swirling smoke cast a surreal glint on the pewter walls. Debbi tried to shade her eyes against the piercing glare.

A scream echoed somewhere in front of her. It was not a scream of panic, but of terror. She pulled her gun and raced down the corridor.

Something was here. She could feel it. She waded through the smoke as if it were a gauze curtain.

"Colonial Ranger! Anyone here?"

The scream came again and then gurgled into silence. Something wet-sounding hit the floor just a few feet in front of her.

"Who's there?" she shouted.

She crept forward and stumbled over something. It was a body—a man. He had been shredded. She stepped back in horror, one hand fumbling against the scorching wall to support her. The man's chest was ripped open. Fighting down the bile in her throat, she heard the faint sound of something scratching against the metal deck. Her hand trembled as she shifted her gun around her, trying to keep it trained on every shadow. She couldn't see anything.

The air in the corridor was filled with a putrid, organic stench that cloyed her breathing even more. *Dear God*, she thought, *what could have done that?*

A control panel on the wall beside her was blown apart. That explosion could have been the cause of the man's violent death.

Debbi heard movement in front of her again. Her gun swung out, her heart slamming against her chest. "Show yourself!"

A group of bedraggled figures, mostly children, emerged from the smoke. A trim, petite woman wearing the stained scrubs of an over-worked doctor carried a small girl.

"Mom!" Debbi exclaimed.

"Debbi! I couldn't leave them!"

"I know! But we have to go. Right now!" Debbi dropped her jacket over the body at her feet to hide it from the children, and then helped her

Book I: The Horror Lords

mother herd them down the hall to an escape pod.

"Is it going to...?" Her mother broke off her sentence for the sake of the children. The station was slanting wildly now. They ran unsteadily, clinging to the railing despite its searing surface.

"Yeah, it is," Debbi replied. She reached down and picked up two struggling kids. She felt the telltale rumble of another escape pod firing.

A boy with brown tousled hair and ash-smudged cheeks asked in a quivering voice, "They'll wait for us, right?"

Debbi looked down at him and nodded. "Of course they will." She hurried their pace and met her mother's gaze for an instant. "Of course they will," she reiterated fervently as much for her own sake as for everyone else.

Their booted feet thudded dully against the metal floor. Debbi could just make out the last of a battery of escape pods at the far end of the corridor. If they didn't make this one, there would be no time to reach another in a different part of the station.

"Hold up!" she shouted.

Inside the crowded pod, a tall, bearded man with panic-filled eyes was about to hit the switch, but an elderly man well into his sixties slapped his hand away.

"We've got room," the older man yelled, waving to Debbi and the others. "Hurry!"

The bearded man glared icily.

Debbi sprinted forward and jammed herself into the doorway, making it impossible to close the hatch. She ignored the bearded man as he pushed against her. She angrily shoved back and stood her ground. The kids piled in. Her mother passed a child to the kind man who had held the door for them.

There was a shout from down the hall. "Help! Wait for me, please!"

Debbi's mother turned. "I'll get him!"

"Mom, no!" Debbi shouted. "I'll do it!" But in the few seconds it took for Debbi to deposit her two kids in the escape pod and once again push back the bearded man from the release button, her mother had gone into the swirling smoke. Debbi could feel the station losing its rotational axis as the floor tilted. People in the pod screamed and grabbed hold. They hurriedly strapped themselves and the children in.

"Launch it! Launch it!" a blonde woman shrieked, scrambling for the red button with torn crimson nails. Debbi couldn't tell if it was nail polish or blood.

Debbi blocked the woman's outstretched arms, but then was grabbed and shoved to the floor. The bearded man pinned her down. Fury boiled up inside her.

"Get off me!" She wrestled for leverage. A shrill scream reverberated in the hall outside. It was her mother's voice.

"Mom!" Debbi had a flash of the man she had found torn apart. The foul stench filled her nostrils again. She struggled wildly. An inhuman shriek resounded a second later and then silence. "No!"

The bearded man hit the side of Debbi's head with something solid and heavy. Bright spots flared as she labored to stay conscious.

The older man who had tried to help her was also pinned to the floor by panicked passengers. He tried to reason with them. "Don't do this!"

"Hit the release!" the bearded man shouted. The woman with the blonde hair complied. The hatch rumbled closed and a second later the

Clay & Susan Griffith

clamps blew free. The escaping pressure as the pod was jettisoned pinned them all to the floor and to their seats.

The lone window showed the universe spinning around them. Every ten seconds the distant violet dot that was the planet Banshee swung by, and then in another five seconds, the remains of the space station drifted past.

*Oh God, Debbi sobbed silently.
Mom!*

Debbi jerked up out of her nightmare, choking back her cry. She was drenched in sweat and gasping for breath. The dimness inside the room disoriented her and it took her a moment to realize that she wasn't on the station. She was in her own bed.

The night sounds of Banshee drifted through the open window. She was planetside. She was safe. It was over. She rubbed her face roughly and tried to quiet her ragged breathing.

A sharp knock on the door startled her.

"Dallas?" came a voice from in the hall.

"What?" She prayed the quaver in her voice wouldn't be noticeable.

"Ross wants to see you. You've got your first solo assignment. Ten minutes."

"Alright," she snapped, not mad at the messenger, but furious at herself for allowing the dreams to return. Hardly a day, hardly an hour passed that she didn't think of the last time she saw her mother. But she had believed she was through the worst of it.

A new posting. A new life. All that should have stopped the dreams these last few months.

She took a deep breath and answered more calmly, "I'll be there."

Footsteps retreated and she flung off the blankets. She padded to the window and pushed it wide open, letting the cold night winds of Banshee fill her lungs. Her drenched skin quickly cooled. The sun was just rising over the town walls and cast a beautiful, vibrant azure hue into the retreating night sky. She was grateful to have solid ground beneath her feet.

She shoved away the remnants of the nightmare and moved to the closet, clinging to the fact that she was no longer up in cold, dead space but instead on a living, breathing planet where life teemed and new hope was offered.

It should have been more than enough. Why wasn't it? Why couldn't she let go of the fear?

Chapter 1

Debbi had been riding for most of the day. She was exhausted from wrestling the speeder bike through sand drifts that meandered like giant, thoughtless snakes across the prairie. Now she slid through the dangerous, loose shale bottomland of a mountain valley.

The trip should've taken two hours. But the map she'd been given was as old as she was. It had been drawn twenty years ago for the UN during the Anouk Revolt. Twenty years ago there had been a creek running through this mountain pass that fed the distant Red River. Now there wasn't. The Worldstorm had seen to that. Many of the map's landmarks and topo features were gone.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Debbi's mission was to find a cabin. In all this vast territory, she had to find a single, solitary log cabin. The master of a caravan that passed through Temptation had reported to the Colonial Rangers that three miners were prospecting illegally and unwisely in mountains that were sacred to the anouks, the indigenous inhabitants of Banshee. If a native war party were to discover the miners, they would certainly kill the intruders and perhaps, more to the caravan master's concern, exercise their outrage on every human they found—including innocent caravans.

Therefore, the miners had to be rousted from the valley. Debbi's boss immediately passed the assignment to her. It was a nothing job, so naturally it was handed out to the new kid. And that made it even more important not to screw up.

"Just move them out," her boss had said. "And keep it quiet." He didn't want the miners arrested and brought back to Temptation where they could make a public stink about how the law protected anouks and persecuted humans.

She geared herself up for the heckling she expected from the prospectors. She'd seen their type many times before. They would focus on her looks and underestimate her. Even the big gun on her hip wouldn't hold their attention for long. Debbi was tall and fit with cascading red-brown hair and bright green eyes. She had a structured face set off by high cheekbones with naturally mischievous eyes and a knowing smile.

Debbi swerved the speeder bike around a tree that seemed to reach out for her, and in a clearing ahead, saw the prospectors' log cabin.

It had been torn apart.

Debbi brought the speeder to a sharp stop, the heavy bike skidding in the yellow sand. Leaping free, she scrambled behind a rock outcropping and pulled her sidearm, a heavy Colonial Ranger Dragoon.

She yanked the goggles off her eyes. It looked like the anouks had already struck. And they might still be here.

"In the cabin!" she shouted. "Colonial Rangers! Throw out your weapons and come out with your hands up!"

There was no response.

She waited fifteen seconds and fired into the air. When the echo died, she called again, "Colonial Rangers! This is your last warning! Come out!"

Debbi breathed out slowly between pursed lips. She didn't have any smokers to lob into the cabin. Weapons, like everything else, were scarce on Banshee. All the young Ranger had was her ingenuity and a few shots from her Dragoon. She scanned the area one last time and rolled out into the open. She fired two shots at the cabin, came up and ran for the decimated doorway. She slid in low and peered inside, her pistol trained for movement. A small flashlight attached to the barrel of her weapon cast a bright beam wildly around the dim interior of the cabin.

She wasn't prepared for what she saw.

The walls were awash in blood. Bodies were strewn around the floor. Debbi could see three corpses, all men. She could tell by the ghost-rock-stained clothes they were miners.

Then she realized there were only two men, not three. One of them was torn in half and his bottom portion was sitting in a chair at the table. A cold shiver enveloped her. Violent death was a natural occurrence around here, but this type of slaughter was beyond normal even on Banshee.

It didn't look to be the work of an anouk clan. More likely, she

Clay & Susan Griffith

thought, a group of human blackliners was responsible. That Reaper trash, when they were narked out on tannis or worse, ghost rock, was capable of the most animalistic behavior.

The scent of blood was still thick in the air and there was no sign that scavengers had been picking at the bodies. This murder scene couldn't be more than an hour old. Whoever the killers were, it was likely they were still in the vicinity.

And if they were close, they would've heard the speeder bike approaching and her gunshots. Debbi had lost any element of surprise. She slipped inside the cabin for cover; surprised she hadn't been shot in the back already. By the look of it, the killers hadn't looted the cabin yet, which meant that she had interrupted their spree.

She was in a bad situation and she knew it. But she was on her own. There was no calling for backup way out here. The signal probably wouldn't get through to Temptation, and even if it did, it would take close to an hour for anyone to reach her in the Rangers' fastest vehicle.

Fingering her weapon for comfort, she crouched at the door and glanced outside. She tried to control her breathing so she could listen.

She heard only a mass of thorny hedgerows encircling the cabin creak and moan in Banshee's constant wind.

She studied the dismal contents of the cabin—a few bedrolls and some cooking equipment. There were also bottles of algae and liquor. And there were a couple of relatively sophisticated, portable geo-pingers for locating ghost rock veins underground.

This isn't right, Debbi thought. Anouks and Reapers would've taken the pingers to trade. And if this raid was the work of lowly scavs, not only would the equipment be gone, the prospectors' bodies wouldn't have been mutilated because the scavs would have wanted their clothes.

She stood and felt a chill, her eyes noticing something they hadn't before. The dark wooden logs around her were covered with deep gouges, exposing streaks of lighter core wood. Debbi put her hand against one of the shredded logs.

Claw marks, she thought. Her head snapped up and she took another nervous look around.

She walked over to one of the bodies, the one still relatively intact. The prospector was gutted, his chest cavity pulled open. Her lips compressed into a thin grimace. Her breath quickened as the sight brought back a memory of the dead man on the space station. This grotesque mutilation looked the same. The room darkened for a moment as she focused on the body. She desperately tried to regain control of her fear. This wasn't the same at all, she argued to herself.

That really didn't make her feel any better.

It took some effort to turn her attention to the body that was ripped in half. The face that belonged to the upper half of the torso looked remarkably calm to be fifty feet away from its legs.

She saw a rifle clutched in his hand. It looked to be a standard semiautomatic. It had a length of cord tied for a makeshift shoulder strap. Beneath the barrel, however, there was an attachment she had never seen before. It was a long slender tube, about a foot long, with a four-inch cube at the base. A wire connected the cube to a small touch pad affixed near the top of the rifle's rear grip.

Debbi holstered her weapon and forcefully pulled the miner's rifle from his death grip, a scowl marring her face at the effort. Ignoring the previous owner, she hefted the rifle. The touch pad was placed for the

Book I: The Horror Lords

thumb; it was easily pressed while the rifle was held at the ready. She aimed the rifle out the door and pressed the pad. Nothing happened.

The tube was jury-rigged to the rifle, but the tube itself didn't appear to be something the miners could've built. People in the wastelands of Banshee learned to fend for themselves for the most part, and they created the most bizarre assortment of inventions. However, this new contraption seemed a little too refined. She assumed it had an off-world provenance.

The rifle was locked and loaded. And it had been recently fired. Unfortunately for these miners, whatever benefit they thought the attachment would provide had failed miserably. Their mutilated corpses testified to that. Regardless, this was unknown technology and it had to go back to Temptation with Debbi.

The deep scraping of claws against shale echoed for just a moment in the heavy wind.

Debbi spun around, hefting the rifle, her breath locked in her lungs. Perhaps her mind was playing tricks on her. The winds of Banshee were famous for their strange sounds. She eased herself against the back wall, straining to hear more. The cabin interior was now a shadowed tomb and the heavy stench of death clogged her nostrils.

The loud whump of something landing on the roof sent Debbi sliding to the floor, back set firmly against the wood, the rifle pointed up.

She could hear the nails of the thing cracking through the logs of the roof as if they were made of balsa. She fired at its position. Gaping holes appeared above her as her shots tore through the ceiling.

There was no scream of agony, no heavy thud from a body dropping. Only silence.

Damn it, Debbi cursed silently, her breath expelling in an adrenaline-powered rush. She scrambled to her feet and darted across the cabin floor, nearly falling over one of the dead miners. *Never stay in the same location. They'll draw a bead on you.* She hit the doorjamb with a shoulder and a grunt.

Then she listened, trying to pinpoint the creature's location. It probably hadn't gone far. There was still fresh meat from its kill inside and a tasty, live snack waiting to be dessert.

The back wall exploded in a wave of splinters and logs. With a shout, she ducked and fired, ignoring the splinters that sliced her neck and hands. A large blunt object struck her upper left chest and drove the breath from her lungs and her to the ground. She fought back to her knees, sucking in sweet air through the pulsing pain.

Something huge and black with teeth gleaming stared at her from outside the new hole in the wall. She fired at it and it barely moved. It only screamed into the maw of the cabin. Its fetid breath swept over Debbi. She gagged. The stench of decay brought back her nightmares in a rush. The smell automatically triggered the fear within her to swell out of her tenuous control.

Long arms reached inside and gnarled hands with claws as long as Debbi's hands clamped on the sides of the hole in the wall. It began to drag itself inside.

Debbi waited no longer, forcing herself to act. She fired repeatedly at the creature and back-pedaled out the door. Her only hope lay in the speeder several yards away. She couldn't see the creature any longer, but she could hear it. She could scarcely tell the difference between the sound of it destroying the cabin as it forced its entrance and the primal

Clay & Susan Griffith

scream that erupted from its throat.

She broke and ran, legs pumping, her heart barely able to keep up.

The speeder slowly loomed into view in the dusky air. Her long legs stretched out like a sprinter, she ate up ground, but it wasn't enough. A scream exploded from her mouth as the creature skidded to a stop between her and her speeder. It was massive and stooped, but its speed was undeniable. She slipped on the loose shale as she swiftly changed direction, firing her weapon from under her arm as she spun around. She got one clean hit and a possible second. The creature staggered, but she didn't break speed to scrutinize her victory.

She could hear it behind her, scrambling to gain its footing as it began its pursuit. The only option left was the thick hedgerow. She dove into the thinnest part, using her arms and rifle to bear the impact. A hundred thorns grabbed at her and her brain immediately flashed that it was nothing like what the claws on that monster would feel like. She rolled twice. A branch tore the miner's rifle from her hands but she didn't care.

Keep going!

She struggled up from her knees and pushed her way through to the next row. Emerging on the opposite side, she fell into the ditch between the hedges, sliding down on her left hip. She raised her head. The underbrush in front of her was slightly broken and she saw a scrap of cloth hanging from a thorn.

The third miner came this way.

She drew her sidearm and entered the next high thicket, slowly making her way through the grasping branches that tore at her own clothes, using the heavy pistol to fend off knife-sharp, four-inch thorns.

Suddenly the thicket vanished. She found herself on a rough, recently broken path that had been made by something large smashing the hearty thorn bushes to the ground.

A soft, muffled sobbing reached her ears. She quickened her steps and saw the third miner curled in a fetal position in the midst of the matted underbrush. His face bloody, his body torn. He also had a rifle with one of the bizarre attachments; it lay on the ground beside him. Somehow he had managed to elude the creature.

She knelt and reached out a hand to his shoulder. "H-hey, mister. You okay?"

The man screamed and rolled away from her. He scrambled to his knees and backed away frantically until he came up against the surrounding thorns. His eyes were bloodshot and wide. His lips continued to mutter incessantly, drool dripping from the corner of his mouth, his head rocking back and forth.

"I'm a Colonial Ranger." Debbi attempted to calm him. "I'm here to help. Are you okay?"

The man gave a strangled sob and hugged his knees. Debbi realized that she wasn't going to get much out of him. She stood. Getting him to safety was her first priority. She picked up his discarded weapon.

Then Debbi heard the sound of the large animal, breathing hard, with rough, leathery skin muscling its way through the thorns. The miner heard it too and began screaming in a distraught voice.

"Shut up!" Debbi hissed.

His loud cries stopped in a strangled gasp.

"We're dead!" he whispered wildly to her. "We're dead!"

Debbi tried to listen for the direction of the noise. The surrounding

Book I: The Horror Lords

growth was higher than her head; she couldn't see more than a foot or two into the thicket. The rustling came from deep in the brush. She looped the rifle over her shoulder and grabbed the prospector by the arm, yanking him to his feet. She began backing down the crushed path in the direction of the cabin and her speeder. As she played her weapon along the dark hedgerow, she pulled the miner with her. She felt him trembling almost as bad as she was.

The vanishing daylight wriggled through the deep thicket. With every step, Debbi saw movement around her. The sounds of snapping foliage were coming closer. She imagined a herd of clawed things, scuttling through the hedgerows on all sides, preparing to leap from the mottled background.

Debbi and the miner emerged from the thicket at the rear of the cabin. She pushed the miner ahead, backing away from the thicket, her eyes never leaving the dark brush.

She barked orders in a quick hard tone. "There's a speeder bike in front of the cabin. Go! I'll cover you."

"No!" He fell back in terror, his bloodshot eyes locked on the cabin. He twisted out of her grasp and mechanically veered toward the hedges.

"Don't be a fool!" she shouted.

The miner reached the boundary of the thorns. She heard a loud crashing. The miner heard it too and spun around with a scream. Two long, bony arms thrust their way through the knife-sharp growth and plunged yellow claws into the miner. His scream turned into a shriek.

Debbi whirled, steadied, and fired twice at a large shape half obscured in the brush. With a simple tug, the creature pulled the hapless prospector into the darkness with it. The man's frenzied howling lasted only a split second and then it was silenced. Blood sprayed from the bushes.

Debbi fired into the growth, praying that she was hitting something.

The light had faded fast in the mountain valley. It was a bad time of day for a gunfight with something weird and quick. She eyed the hedge where the creature vanished, but saw nothing.

She backed away, expecting the creature to burst forth and attack. But it didn't. What the hell was it waiting for?

Suddenly the thing shot up from behind some rocks nearly fifty yards away and arced through the air. It landed hard on the roof of the cabin and crouched down spider-like, the dead miner dangling from one long-fingered hand.

Debbi raced to the speeder a few yards away. She dropped down next to the bike and raised her gun. She aimed at the black shape on the roof and squeezed off two shots. Both hit. She huffed with triumph.

The thing barely flinched. It arched its back slightly and dug its free hand into the roof. Hundred pound logs flew aside like sticks and the thing dropped out of sight into the cabin. Debbi couldn't believe it; numerous hits with her Dagoon, a weapon that would stop a man in full body armor, and that thing was still moving.

It was time to go.

She manhandled the bike upright and straddled it. Her foot fumbled for the starter and she fired it up. She wheeled it around, placing her back to the cabin. Then Debbi pointed her weapon back over her shoulder and fired blind twice. She gunned the throttle and the speeder fishtailed. She risked a glance back.

The front of the cabin exploded outward. The creature roared out

Clay & Susan Griffith

amidst a rain of shattered logs and loped up the trail after Debbi. She turned forward, crouched low, and held on. The bike's front edge glanced off a rock and teetered. Debbi wrenched her shoulder to counterbalance and keep it upright.

The rock-strewn trail roared under her in the deepening twilight. The bike shuddered and bucked. She could feel the creature pounding close behind her. She swerved around the tree that nearly unhorsed her coming in. The ground evened out and she drove the engine hard, eating up the miles.

It was nearly fifteen minutes of breakneck speeding before she dared a second glance back. She saw nothing. She eased down on the throttle. Her arms and legs were drained, and she finally noticed her heart pounding in her ears.

Debbi slumped over the handlebars, weak and shaky, her breath a pathetic gulping sound. She mopped her damp brow with the sleeve of her shirt. She straightened and willed the tremors to cease. She wasn't prepared for the near hysterical laugh that erupted suddenly from her dry lips.

She had escaped! Her old fears tried to rise up and drag her down, but she beat them back.

Pulling out her canteen, Debbi took a long, cool draught of water, wishing it were something a hell of a lot stronger.

She shook her head and let out another loud, frenzied laugh. She yelled and spun the speeder. As she pointed the bike home to Temptation, she knew she had a couple of hours to ride through dangerous territory at night. All she could think about, however, was that she finally had her own story of Life and Death on Banshee to share with the other Rangers at *Mo's Saloon*.

Chapter 2

Debbi was relieved to see the inviting watchtower lights of Temptation after the long ride in the darkness. She roared through the gate to surprisingly lively salutes and waves from the Night Watch and she braked outside the Ranger headquarters.

She dismounted the bike and stretched. She pulled off her goggles and shook out her long red hair. The front doors swung open and an excited face greeted her. It was attached to a lanky, young man with tousled brown hair and a perpetual smirk.

"Hey ya, Ringo," Debbi said. "Ross inside?"

"Dallas! You're back! And just in time too!" He jumped off the wooden sidewalk and motioned her to follow him. "Come on!"

She obliged. "What's up?" It was then she heard the commotion down the street. It came from the saloon. From the sound of it, a dust-up was in full swing. She could hear the glass breaking and angry shouts from inside *Mo's*. She blew out a long sympathetic sigh. Ross wasn't going to like this.

As if on cue, her boss came striding down the boardwalk on the opposite side of the street. He wore his trademark cowboy hat and his long, black duster swirled behind him. Dave Ross was tall, dark, and substantial. He looked significant whether he was drinking, sleeping, or staring down a gun at a criminal. It was the middle of the night and he was fully dressed and wide-awake. He was always wide-awake. Debbi had never seen him sleep, or even rest for that matter.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Ross beelined for the saloon. Debbi and Ringo fell in behind him. He didn't even give them notice—just hit the saloon doors with an angry fist. They flew open before him. Debbi and Ringo immediately flanked his sides, stopping just inside the doorway as he strode in fearlessly. Ross halted a few feet in front of them, glaring around at the pandemonium. Apparently, no one noticed his entrance. If they had, they would have halted in their tracks.

A man went flying from a well-aimed blow and landed at Ross's feet in a heap, smelling of liquor and cheap hair tonic. Ross's hard eyes dipped down and stared at the man with a pencil thin moustache.

Ranger Ty Miller shook his head to clear it. He looked up with his fist raised. He was expecting to see another loudmouthed braggart miner claiming that Temptation's Rangers cheated at cards. What he saw was his superior towering over him. He swallowed convulsively.

"Sir!"

Silent, Ross's mouth fell into a tight line. He pulled his Colt Peace-maker and fired off two rounds into the air, taking care not to fire into the center of the room above him in case it was occupied. Tile and plaster fell just in front of Debbi. She blinked at the dust filtering down, but didn't move. Her hand rested on the butt of her sidearm.

There was sudden, enormous silence within the establishment. A head hesitatingly appeared from behind the counter. It was a disheveled Mo; thin, stooped, gray hair curling, wearing his customary snarl. When he saw Ross, he breathed with relief and stood up straight, pretending he was taking control of the saloon again.

Every face in the room now stared at Ross in alarm. He regarded them calmly, still not saying a word. Slowly, men started to pick themselves off the floor, uprighting chairs and tables, brushing broken glass from their shoulders. No one spoke; afraid of having his attention brought their way.

Order was again in effect.

Ross holstered his weapon.

Ty Miller made to rise, but found Ross's boot on his chest. Ross painstakingly brought his gaze down. Miller cursed his luck to have fallen at the feet of his commanding officer and waited for the inevitable.

Ross's voice was a cold monotone. "Rangers will pay the damages."

Miller immediately bucked, but Ross's boot pressed down harder. He would brook no argument on the matter. It didn't matter who started it or over what. Temptation's peace had been compromised. Rangers were at the heart of it.

Miller gasped at the force Ross was exerting, both physically and psychologically. He sagged back and nodded.

Ross stepped back.

Miller rubbed his sore chest. He wasn't hurt, just embarrassed. He clambered to his feet and straightened his jacket, refusing to meet the eyes of the others in the bar.

Ross turned on his heel and noticed Debbi for the first time. She dropped her hand away from her weapon and stared him in the eye.

"Evenin'," she said. Debbi was unconsciously adopting Ross's own drawl.

"You're late," he said.

"Sorry, Dad," she quipped.

He worked his jaw, as was his habit when he couldn't think of

Clay & Susan Griffith

anything to say. Or when he couldn't say what he wanted to.

Then he said, "Come on to the office. I wanna hear about it."

He strode past her out the doors. She seemed about half his height, although she was a healthy five foot seven inches. Debbi exchanged glances with Ringo and followed the boss.

Ranger headquarters was simple, clean, and uncluttered. There was an outer office, or squad room, and Ross had a private office where few ventured. Through a heavy metal door at the rear of the squad room was the five-cell lockup, Banshee's most commodious jail for several hundred miles. The second floor housed most of the high-tech equipment that was damaged in the Worldstorm and was awaiting spare parts that might never come. There were also a few bunks for catching sleep between duty shifts during rush times.

Ross stood waiting.

Debbi tossed the miner's rifle on the desk. Then she unhitched her gun belt. She laid her Ranger Dragoon down gently; her life depended too much on that weapon to toss it around. It was an all-purpose heavy automatic pistol with the capability of firing anything from normal loads to explosive-tipped shells, and it had a grenade launcher with a capacity of three. In the right hands, it was deadly accurate up to one hundred and fifty yards and had an effective range of nearly five hundred yards.

She slipped into a chair with a deep sigh.

"What's this?" Ross picked up the rifle and studied the underbarrel attachment.

"I don't know. Found it with the prospectors."

"They move on like you told 'em to?"

"In a way." She massaged her burning eyes. "They're dead." She could tell even through closed eyes that Ross was staring at her, waiting for more.

She added, "Not by me. There was something out there." She suppressed a shudder at the memory of it.

"Anouks?"

"No. Some kind of animal. I saw it, but I don't know what it was."

Ross exhaled. "Anything about this job you *do* know? Did you look around?"

Debbi's eyes snapped open and she glared at her boss. She considered saying something harsh, but decided against it, as usual. She straightened in her chair, all business now. She was under Ross's scrutiny and she didn't like it.

"Yes, I looked around. And I found that animal, like I said. Nothing I've ever seen before."

"Hmm," Ross said.

Debbi growled, "Look, I was born on Banshee and I'm telling you, I've never seen anything like it. I didn't get a good look, but it was big and it was strong. Biped. It killed three full-grown, armed men. Ripped one of them in half. I shot it at several times. No noticeable effect." She pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows, waiting for his retort. It had been a long day.

Ross studied her with a hardened brow. He returned his gaze to the rifle. "I'll lock this up. Go to bed." With that, the debriefing was over. He took the gun into his office and closed the door.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Debbi sat up and said in a deflated murmur, "Thanks."

She dragged herself to her feet, her eyes locked on Ross's door, disappointment flooding her face. She would have liked to blame Ty Miller for Ross's behavior, but she knew that was just an excuse. Ross was clearly dissatisfied with her performance and her lack of information on a job botched all to hell.

Whatever was left of the self-satisfaction Debbi had experienced after escaping that creature melted away. Ross hated disorder. He didn't expect things to go smoothly every time, but he did expect Colonial Rangers to perform at one hundred percent efficiency, keeping Temptation and its surrounding jurisdiction safe and sound, no matter what.

She knew she had never gained control of the situation at the prospectors' camp. Three men were dead. A dangerous animal was still at large. And she had brought in a new weapon, an enigma that only showed Ross even more that colonists were manufacturing their own brand of order.

Debbi forced her gaze away from Ross's office and slowly walked outside. She headed toward home, intent on getting out of her dust-covered clothes. A hot bath followed by a stiff shot of whiskey, that's what she wanted. The former to make her body forget the day, the latter to make her mind forget. She wondered if there would be enough water to spare at this late hour.

"Dallas!" Running footsteps coming her way made her look up. Ringo was approaching, his telltale smile plastered on his face. Ringo was really named Will Stuckey. But he didn't like that name so he insisted everyone call him Ringo, a name he felt spoke of daring and adventure. He stopped just ahead of her, hands on hips, and nodded his head toward headquarters. "How did it go?"

Debbi just shrugged.

Ringo laughed. "That good, huh?" He clapped a hand on her shoulder. "Come on, let me buy you a drink."

Debbi hesitated, thinking of her earlier plan. She wasn't ready to deal with the rest of the Rangers now. The lure of telling her adventure to them waned now that Ross had shot it full of holes. Now it seemed like a tale of failure. But Ringo's pleading face made her reconsider. He was her only true friend in Temptation. She sighed. It didn't matter which mode of forgetting she initiated first. A shot of whiskey was something she craved badly right now. She walked with Ringo, glancing toward *Mo's*. "It's still operational?"

"The boys just redecorated it slightly. Only a fool would blast a good saloon into oblivion."

Debbi chuckled. She was glad to see her fellow Rangers had their priorities straight.

The interior lights in *Mo's* were bright despite the fact that flying chairs and bodies had broken some bulbs. *Mo* had his broom out and was steadily sweeping the place of the glass shards. He acknowledged Debbi's entrance with a nod.

Ringo led her to the corner table that was usually the domain of the Colonial Rangers. Ty Miller was among the group. They were quiet and morose.

"Hiya, fellas." She tried not to let her weariness show.

"Debbi! Here, grab a chair!" A Ranger named Stew kicked over a chair from the nearest table. She grabbed it and sat down. Stew was an easygoing man, light in hair and fair in face. He was always pleasant

Clay & Susan Griffith

and didn't have an enemy in the world.

"You just get in?" asked Miller. He obviously had missed her standing next to Ross. That usually happened to just about anyone who stood in the boss' shadow.

"About half an hour ago."

Stew shook his head in amazement. There were few people, Rangers included, who were confident enough to wander the plains of Banshee alone after dark. Debbi was either mad or just too gutsy for him.

Mo deposited a drink in front of her and she offered her thanks. She downed it in one swallow and then hissed slowly through her teeth as the burn set in. She let it trace a path to her gut before calling for Mo to bring a bottle.

Ringo pointed to her badge. It had a deep dent with a single ragged scratch that went from dead center to a broken off point on the star.

"Geezus, Dallas. What happened out there? Those miners didn't give you any trouble did they?" His question had a touch of brotherly protectiveness that Debbi noted and appreciated.

Debbi leaned back in her chair and hooked a heel in the rung beneath it. "Let me tell you fellows, you better start packing your hollow points. There's something big and angry out there and my gun didn't even slow it down."

This brought everyone forward with interest. She realized with pleasure that the boys were hanging on her story, which she didn't show on the jaded, veteran face she had adopted. It was a front, but one she was willing to use. Maybe if she played it right, the Rangers would accept her.

"What was it?" Miller wanted to know.

"Don't know, but it ripped through those miners like they were made of cream cheese. I'm lucky I got away with only my badge dented and not my head."

"Sure it wasn't a garoul?" Miller offered. "Once when I was ..."

Debbi interrupted, "Trust me, it wasn't anything we've seen on Banshee before." She inclined her head for emphasis. "I heard it laughing at me all the way home."

"Going full throttle, were you?" Miller snickered.

Debbi stared at him coolly. "It was nine feet tall and had more teeth and claws than your sister. What would you do?" She straightened off the chair, her eyes quietly flashing a challenge.

"There's nothing wrong with my sister," he said hotly. He glowered at Debbi. "At least she's not named after an old skin flick."

"Hell, if I thought Miller's sister was behind me," Stew offered, grinning good-naturedly at Debbi, "I'd run like a damn fool sissy and be bloody ecstatic about doing it too." He had dated Miller's man-hungry sister. The memory still gave him night sweats.

Debbi chuckled, thankful to Stew. The men all laughed, except Miller. Stew's clean-cut face flashed a pure white grin as he poured Debbi another drink.

"Thanks, Stew," she said. "Last one though. I'm beat."

"Just what we need around here, another stinkin' creature," Miller grumbled in annoyance to change the subject. He really had no leg to stand on in defense of his sister. It was no secret she had gone through every Colonial Ranger in Temptation, all the men anyway.

Ringo slapped Miller's arm in mock surprise. "How could you talk about your sister that way?"

Book I: The Horror Lords

"Shut up, Stuckey," the man snarled back. "Don't you all think we spend more time doing animal control than arresting criminals?"

"That's life on Banshee, Miller. Someday things'll settle down again." Debbi relaxed, her drink held in her lap. "It's not as if we haven't dealt with this kind of thing before."

Miller scowled and rolled his eyes. "All I'm saying is that Banshee is a creepy enough planet with all those damn anouks running around. Not to mention those freaky Skinnies."

Debbi said, "You know, Miller, the anouks were here before us. If you ever got out of this saloon, you might see that there are ruins all over Banshee. They had a major civilization here. And they're not animals. They're people, just like you and me."

Miller huffed in disdain. "Like you maybe. You were born on this rock." He jerked a thumb at himself proudly. "I'm from Earth. And I plan on going back to Earth. Just because you're afraid to get back into space doesn't mean the rest of us want to spend our lives on this Godforsaken planet."

The barb stung and Debbi's mood collapsed. It brought back the fear of her nightmare and the pain of isolation. Miller didn't know about her mother's death on the Cabal station, but he knew she was the station's Colonial Ranger and she had to abandon it. People like Miller never forgot things like that. Any chance to use them to hurt someone and he would strike.

Ringo looked from Miller to Debbi with a look and tight-lipped anger, but he didn't feel it was his place to call out an older Ranger like Miller. Instead, he kept it light. "Keep dreaming, Miller. We're here for the duration. No one from Earth is coming to take you home to your mamma. If you ever had one, that is."

Dallas smirked. Leave it to Ringo to back her up. He was a good kid. She closed her eyes and let the rest of the conversation wash over her. Their steady voices, discussing Miller's heritage and Stew's dating habits, lulled her to a peaceful state as she cradled her whiskey.

Down time in Temptation was one of the few things she relished. Good people, bright sky, clean air and strong hooch. It was much different than being on the space station where life was always dark and metallic and stinking of recycled air, and the people were as cold as the steel that surrounded them in the dead of space.

She cracked open an eye and regarded Ringo as he and Miller bantered over the pros and cons of the newly modified speeders. They were constantly trying to eke more and more power out of the tired old machines, which was difficult since there were no new parts coming. Once the Tunnel between Earth and Banshee had closed and trapped them in the "Lost Colony," they could only work with what they had. And that wasn't much.

A small smile creased her lips as poor Stew got involved in the discussion against his wishes. Soon, the talk turned technical and Debbi suppressed a yawn. She rose with a liquid grace, despite the late hour, and planted her near-empty glass in the center of the group.

"Well, guys, it's been fun, but I'm outta here." She eyed Miller with an impish glint. "I expect Ross is gonna have some of us doing animal control tomorrow. So I suggest that we hit the hay." She gave a mock salute to the table and sauntered away, her dark red hair brushing the top of her hips.

The men watched her leave.

Clay & Susan Griffith

"You ever wonder if she's as tough as she thinks she is?" Miller growled.

Ringo groaned and rose too. "She'd take you out without blinking."

"Hey, as long as she took me out. Dinner, movie, my ten-by-ten room."

Stew stood to leave as well, adjusting his holster with a creak of leather as he stood. "You wouldn't stand a chance, Miller." The fair-haired Ranger motioned to Ringo and the two men departed.

Miller grumbled, "Yeah, well, you're the one running away from my sister." He glanced around and realized he was alone at the table. He caught sight of Mo standing at the bar with arms crossed, awaiting payment. Miller groaned. He was stuck with the check. Again.

Debbi stayed in a boarding house in a quiet part of Temptation. Despite the battering the town had taken in the Worldstorm, this neighborhood still held a certain charm. The storm hadn't completely killed the spirit of Temptation's residents. There were flower boxes in front of curtained windows. There were still picturesque front porches with swings swaying in the ceaseless breath of the wind.

Debbi stepped up on one of the porches and ran her hand down the heavy chain holding the empty wooden swing. It fought her as the wind continued to buffet it. Banshee's winds were legendary and constant. But it was a part of the planet and Debbi loved it. She released the chain and let the seat begin its frantic dance once more.

She entered the boarding house quietly so as not to disturb anyone. She sat on the worn paisley settee beside the door and removed her boots. Gathering them in one hand, she walked down the hall on the cushioned balls of her feet, soft and silent.

She heard a creak behind her and turned to see Miss Etta Watts entering the hall from the kitchen. The slim woman was dressed in a floral frock gathered tightly around her slight frame. Her gray hair was pulled back into a long, tight braid.

"Debbi, look at you, dear! Are you all right?"

Debbi couldn't help but smile at the elderly woman. "Yes, I'm fine Miss Etta. Just a rough day."

"Are you hungry? I have leftovers in the cooler."

Debbi suspected Etta of waiting up for her. The woman seemed to take great pains in looking after Debbi, for which the young Ranger was grateful. That soft, calming, maternal presence comforted her.

"No, thank you, Miss Etta. All I really want is a nice hot bath to wash off this dust. Would it be okay to do that this late?"

Etta patted Debbi's arm affectionately. "You go right ahead, dear. No one will mind and we can afford the water this time of the year. I'll go make sure the water heater is on." Etta strode back down the hall.

The young Ranger hurried to her room and gathered what she needed. She was going to enjoy this bath. It was a small luxury, but one that not even bone-numbing exhaustion was going to spoil.

The hot water felt good, dissipating the aches and pains as effectively as if she had swallowed a few aspirin. She knew it wouldn't last, but that didn't matter. Rinsing the desert dust from her hair, she watched the yellow sand muddy the water. She noted a few new bruises, especially the one high on her chest. Since coming to Temptation, she had acquired a regular collection. Before the old ones faded, new ones would arrive elsewhere to take their place. *Badges of honor*, she told herself.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Her stomach rumbled and she ignored it. *Too late now*, she chided silently. Besides she was too damn tired. She stepped dripping from the tub and grabbed the thin coarse towel from the metal rack beside the wash basin. She dried her hair quickly, sopping up as much of the excess water as she could. She threw on a robe and, clutching her few toiletries, stole out of the bathroom, leaving the door open to let the steam escape.

All the rooms along the hall were dark and quiet. Most people were already asleep in their beds, resting peacefully, content in the belief that the Colonial Rangers would protect them. Debbi sighed. It was a big order to fill.

Perhaps too big.

She rubbed her face harshly, thinking back to the miners. No matter how she played the scenario in her mind, there had been no way to save them. She took some comfort in the words of her mother, who had been a skilled doctor, that you just couldn't save everyone. She wondered if Ross understood that. His disappointment still bothered her. It made her doubt herself. Maybe she wasn't cut out to be a Colonial Ranger.

She entered her room and dropped her toiletries on the bed, plopping down beside them. An annoyed squeak at the headboard made Debbi turn. McDuff stared at her through slitted eyes, curled up and content between her pillows.

"How did you get in here?" She picked up the cat. He growled lightly at being disturbed further. "Oh, get over it. You shouldn't have come in if you didn't want to be bothered." The big, long-haired, tortoiseshell tomcat settled down as soon as he hit her lap. As a reward, Debbi began rubbing her fingers along his jawline. The purring started immediately.

It was then she noticed a tray of bread slices on her nightstand, smeared with rich, purple jam. A warm homey feeling rushed through her. Miss Etta always seemed to know just what Debbi truly needed despite her protests. Reaching over, she hungrily attacked the sweet, thick bread, and afterwards, let McDuff lick the excess jam from her fingers.

Stretching back on the bed, propped up against the pillows, the covers pulled around her loosely, her mind returned to Ross.

No matter what happened tomorrow, she had to be damn sure that she would handle whatever duty assigned her with a lot more skill than she had done today. Most likely he'd send her to track the creature.

Her stomach immediately bottomed out at the thought of the hulking thing.

Way to go, Debbi, she griped. *Scare yourself before you hit the hay*. Whatever that creature was, she knew somehow that it wasn't just a native animal. There was something else about it that continued to send shivers down her spine. There had been intelligence in its eyes.

She was chilled by thoughts of her recurring nightmare. The trip through the dark memory of the Cabal's destruction seemed too similar to what had happened at the miners' camp to be a coincidence. But in her heart, she knew that's what it was, a coincidence. One of those weird events that seemed to say the brain knew more about what was coming than you could consciously access, but it could help prepare you for it against your will.

She didn't think the creature she'd seen today had actually been on the space station. None of the other survivors from the station had seen

Clay & Susan Griffith

or heard anything, so her reports of strange sounds and smells had been written off as a stress reaction. And the worst thing was, Debbi couldn't contest it. It could have been her imagination, and the smell—just the combination of hazardous gases filling the corridor with the stench of death and gore on top of that. It was no different than what she had experienced this afternoon. The smell of death in both instances had triggered a natural reaction of terror.

No one knew what had hit the space station—pirates, a rival mining company. Not that it mattered. The station was nothing but a hunk of dead metal now. And her mother was gone with it.

With a barely repressed shudder, she switched off the light. She lay in the darkness, thankful that McDuff was there. She felt him settle down at the foot of the bed. Of course, in a couple of hours he'd want to roam the house, meaning she'd have to get out of bed to open the door. She didn't care. For right now, it was comforting to know she wasn't alone in the darkness.

Chapter 3

"Come here and look at this."

Debbi came into the office early the next afternoon and saw Ross squatting near the door to lockup, holding the rifle she had brought in the night before. He was staring at a round, metal dinner plate leaning against the wall. She dropped to one knee beside him as he picked up the plate.

Imbedded in the plate were numerous black, metal needles, about three inches long, almost threadlike in appearance.

Ross looked up at her expectantly. "What do you make of that?"

Not sure how to answer, she took the plate and studied the small circle of needles.

He went on. "Those fire out of this rifle attachment you brought back." He handed her the rifle and leaned the plate against the wall again. "Give it a shot."

Debbi stood and took a few steps back, aiming the rifle at the plate. She felt Ross watching her. She thumbed the touch pad and heard a very faint metallic ping against the plate.

"Needle gun." Ross picked up the plate. "I shot that damned gun fifty times this morning into the ground or against the wall before I hit something metal and heard a noise. I couldn't tell it was doing anything. Never saw any surface damage; never saw any needles sticking out. They penetrate anything this side of steel. But I can't see what damage they do." He drew a large knife out of his belt sheath and probed the needles. They didn't break.

Debbi said, "Maybe they're poisonous."

Ross pulled his knife away and put the plate on the desk. "I'll send a few to the Doc and see if he can test 'em."

She tapped the four-inch square cube at the base of the needle tube. "This must be the ammo reservoir. Maybe the power supply. This is pretty high tech stuff. It's got to be Hellstromme Industries. They're the only one with the resources nowadays. But they closed their facilities and bugged out during the Worldstorm. Why would they send contra-band guns down here?"

"That's what you're going to find out," Ross said.

Debbi looked up suddenly. "I was thinking I should go out and track

Book I: The Horror Lords

the animal that killed the miners.”

“I sent Miller and Ringo. They took a Hoss and went out early this morning.”

Debbi tightened her lips and nodded curtly. She thought that duty was hers. Obviously, Ross didn't think she could handle it. Then in that same instant she realized a part of her was secretly relieved. She was terrified of facing that kind of fear again.

Her feelings shamed her, but she remained impassive.

Ross carefully wiped his knife blade on a cloth. “This gun is more important than some animal. Animals that kill people, hell, I can't swing a stick without hitting one of those around here. But I don't like it when new weapons tech shows up out of the blue in my territory.”

“All right,” she said.

“Dallas, as long as you work for me, you got three jobs and only three. Keep the peace. Protect yourself. And protect the innocent. Those miners were in the wrong. Hate it for 'em, but that's the way it goes.”

Debbi watched her boss' face. That was almost a compliment. But he was just stating a fact. There was no trace of artifice in him. He said what he meant. He was concentrating on replacing his knife in the sheath and was a little startled when he looked up to see her staring at him.

He said quickly, “Look, you've only been here a few months. I don't doubt you knew your way around your old station, but you still need to establish yourself more in Temptation. Meet folks. Develop contacts. This town is different than when you arrived. And I want to know what this gun is all about.”

“I'll start with the local Hellstromme office.”

“Don't. I don't know how HI acted on your old station, but I don't trust them as far as I can throw them. You let them near that gun and whether they built it or not, they'll take it in for testing and we'll never see it again. No, I want you to start with a pilot by the name of Hickok. Know her?”

“No sir.”

“She flies for anybody—legit or otherwise. Traders, Reapers, whatever. If these guns are on the market, she'll know. Check the saloons; see if she's in town. She's Chinese, flies a small, space-worthy freighter she calls *Deadwood Two*.”

“Do you trust her?” she asked.

“No. You never know which way she'll jump.” He paused for a minute, then added, “Pretty woman.”

Debbi almost smiled at the brief glimpse of Ross as a man.

It was very brief.

“Something funny?” he asked stiffly.

Her eyes widened with surprise and she forced her mouth into a straight, emotionless slit. “No, sir.”

“Go to work.”

With the rifle over her shoulder, Debbi walked out into the blinding sun and squinted against the blowing dust. She put on her dark glasses in lieu of the bulky goggles that dangled around her neck.

The town of Temptation squatted in the high desert so it was constant prey to the savage winds that roared across Banshee. It was the largest human settlement for two hundred miles, with a population that could swell to 10,000 or more if the seasonal travelers, caravaners, and nomads were counted. It was a town whose identity was linked to

Clay & Susan Griffith

hardscrabble survival. It was not kind to the weak.

Temptation was an eclectic and eye-troubling mixture of the planned, unplanned, and sheer chaos. Some of it consisted of the patched remnants of the town as it had been before the devastating Worldstorm, a mixture of modern, modular, polymetal prefabs and Earth-inspired architecture. Most of the streets in the business district were bordered by covered sidewalks to protect pedestrians from the brutal sun and because of rains that, although infrequent, lasted for days and turned the dusty streets into mud rivers. Some of the town, however, was a makeshift jumble set on top of the ruins.

Temptation had once been a jewel in the crown of human colonization on Banshee. It was a boomtown, the thriving hub of trade routes where adventurers and prospectors set out to find the precious ghost rock that Earth so badly needed.

Ghost rock was a versatile and powerful mineral. Discovered on Earth in the mid-19th century, it became the fuel for the Modern Age. It was a mixed blessing though; it sparked the invention of wonderful machines and jump started a thriving, industrial 20th century. By the mid-21st century, however, Earth's natural stores of ghost rock were running out. Then the first deep space explorers found a system they called Faraway and a windswept planet they called Banshee. The planet was covered with towering mountains, sheer buttes, and massive outcroppings of a gleaming black rock called tannis; and in the tannis they found ghost rock.

As with all empires, the businessmen came first. Then they demanded an army to protect their goods and, in response to the call, the United Nations formed the UN Expeditionary Force, known as EXFOR. The army came to Banshee to suppress the native anouks so ghost rock could be safely mined. Debbi's father was an EXFOR sergeant, and he had seemed to relish the genocidal colonial campaigns against the anouks.

Debbi was a young girl of seven when the Tunnel malfunctioned in 2081, and the sole means of contact with Earth abruptly ended. She couldn't understand the panic it caused. Banshee was her home and she never felt the urge to go to Earth. The human colonists on Banshee were left to their own devices. They blustered on; fueled by the assumption that contact with Earth soon would be reestablished.

It was then that the repressed anouks emerged from hiding places in the frozen north and steaming jungles where EXFOR had deigned not to pursue them. With them came the Skinnies, weird and frightening witch doctors to whom the anouks gave unquestioning obedience. The Skinnies were the only thing that ever etched fear in the face of Debbi's father.

When Debbi came of age, she rejected her father's desires that she join EXFOR and take up the fight against the anouks. Instead, she signed on with the Colonial Rangers. Those independent lawmen had enthralled her since childhood with their lives of adventure and excitement. Her father hated them because they refused to serve under the direct UN authority.

Debbi used to watch the Rangers stride through frontier streets with an easy confidence she found deliriously attractive. She couldn't imagine anything more wonderful than pinning on that badge and basking in the admiration of colonists. And she knew the Rangers sometimes had contact with anouks on a level other than just killing them. This fed her

Book I: The Horror Lords

belief that the only hope Banshee had of surviving was to establish an orderly and peaceful society that would bring humans and anouks together. Then, ironically, after training, she was assigned to an isolated ore-processing space station from which Banshee was visible only as a tiny bluish dot in space. Her only salvation was that her mother got herself assigned there with the medical staff.

Then six months ago, her station was attacked and overrun. She fled to Banshee in the escape pod and her mother was left behind on the dying station. She quickly found a new home in Temptation among the Colonial Rangers and threw herself into duties that gave her something of substance to cling to during the dark months that followed her retreat from the space station and the loss of her mother.

Then the Skinnies created the Worldstorm in an effort to eradicate the human colonists.

When it hit, the Worldstorm scoured the surface of the planet for several long, terrifying weeks. Hurricane winds piled oceans of sand on mining camps, isolated settlements, and towns. Heavy rains drowned areas in devastating floods. EXFOR bugged out, moving all their remaining resources out of harm's way to a massive space flotilla that orbited Banshee. Frightened humans huddled together, fearing it would not end until they were all dead.

But it did end. And they weren't all dead.

It was 2094 and Temptation was a flawed and cracked jewel in the tarnished colonial crown, but it was also a bustling center of rebirth as human society struggled to rebuild on Banshee.

This time of year, the warm summer winds were just whipping up off the plains, replacing the frigid winter winds that tore down from the mountains. Debbi loved the wind and missed it during her years on the station where the stillness of space unnerved and frightened her. The intermittent spring rains hadn't begun and the insufferable summer heat would not set in for several months. This had always been the traditional beginning of caravan season. And it would take more than the destruction caused by the Worldstorm to keep the hardy caravaners from their business.

Gangs of teamsters stared at Debbi as she walked into *Mo's*. She knew they were sizing her up, as a Ranger and as a woman. They made suggestive comments to one another about her, but not to her. She noted this proudly as she strode into the bar and slipped off the dark glasses.

"Morning, Ranger!" Mo called out enthusiastically. "Coffee?" He liked the Rangers and treated them well. This was their unofficial saloon. It was the best way to insure protection when the many fights broke out, at least those that weren't started by Rangers themselves.

According to saloon time, early afternoon was still morning. *Mo's* was only half full. Much of the crowd was actually eating the food; it was cheap and filling. But it was godawful.

Mo handed Debbi a cup of something that wasn't really coffee, but it was dark and bitter. It was processed from some sort of mold.

"Thanks." Debbi smiled and drank. She poured in sugar. It wasn't really sugar, but it was white and granular. It was also processed from some sort of mold.

Debbi leaned back against the bar and scanned the patrons looking for Hickok, but she didn't see a Chinese woman in the crowd.

Mo grinned and said, "Your boss really kicked ass in here last night. You shoulda been here."

Clay & Susan Griffith

Debbi glanced over her shoulder at the bartender. "I was here. Standing right behind him."

"Oh yeah?" Mo stammered. "I guess I didn't see ya behind Ross. He's so...uh...broad-shouldered."

"Yeah, he's manly. Listen, Mo, I'm looking for a pilot named Hickok. Know her?"

"Hickok?" Mo muttered. "Oh, gee. I don't know. You know, I really cater to the miner and caravan crowd. That pilot clientele does their drinking at those dives on the other side of the Depot. Near the old spaceport."

Debbi sipped coffee. "I've just got a few questions for her. Trust me, I don't want to jam her up. And I'll make sure you're not part of it either way. Okay?"

Mo pretended to think. He snapped his fingers. "Oh. Hickok. Yeah, I know her." He shook his head in amazement. "Good lookin' woman."

"So I hear." Debbi fought the roll of her eyes at the comment. She drained the cup. "Know where I can find her?"

"I think she usually hangs at the LAX; it's a crappy saloon just outside the port. You go over—"

"Yeah, I know where it is." She patted his forearm and winked. "Thanks, Mo. Appreciate it. You have any more problems with those alga tariffs, let me know. I'll straighten it out."

"Thanks, Ranger."

She crossed the fringes of the Depot. It was a chaotic zone technically outside the city walls several hundred acres across where caravans loaded and unloaded. The Depot was always choked with dust, unless it was choked with mud. The rising, sun-scorched dust from the Depot made it look as if the western end of the town was a constant blaze.

The noise was deafening—yelling, screaming, and laughing, motors roaring, animals braying. Marketplaces rose and fell by the day. Shops and stands were set up in clumps and rows. Huge reams of colorful cloth, undulating wildly in the Banshee breezes, were stretched between the stalls offering partial shade. Roving merchants carried bags and trays and carts selling the weird and the peculiar. It was nothing compared to the pre-Worldstorm market, but it was amazing that it had recovered this much so quickly.

The "port" was the gate to the old Temptation spaceport. It was half demolished now and the remnants were rusted and sandblasted. The occasional spacecraft still landed at the port, but now it was primarily home to vessels that plied the airways of Banshee. They were an odd collection of old, patched-up ships that looked more likely to explode than lift off.

Debbi found the bar called the LAX and entered. It was open and brighter than Mo's. One wall must've been a large window at one time. Only a sliver of the glass remained; some of it was boarded up but the rest was draped in clear, plastic sheeting. The view beyond the window was the landing zones; no doubt pilots liked to keep a close eye on their ships while they drank.

Debbi studied the patrons and there, sitting in the corner, was a Chinese woman. She wore blousey canvas trousers with multiple pockets and a leather jacket over a tight jersey. Her jet-black hair was cut shoulder length and tied back. She was a pretty woman of indeterminate age. As Debbi crossed the bar, the woman looked up and watched her.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Debbi stopped at her table. "Are you Hickok?"

"Yep." The pilot eyed Debbi. "You Ross's new girl?"

Just the way Hickok said it made Debbi bristle. "Mind if I sit down?"

Hickok shrugged and took a drink of something green. Debbi laid the rifle on the table and sat. She noticed Hickok's eyes linger on the rifle before quickly rising to Debbi and then away. Debbi waved off the bartender who was coming near; bartenders always wanted to serve Rangers.

Hickok raised her eyebrows. "Ross send you to see me?"

"Let's just say your reputation precedes you." Debbi tapped the needle gun. "Have you ever seen one of these?"

"A rifle? Sure."

"This attachment. Have you encountered any of these in your travels? We like to keep tabs on weapons flooding the area."

"I see *one*. How's that a flood?" She took another drink and stared out the window, bored.

Debbi smiled and shook her head. The pilot wasn't taking this seriously. Debbi didn't have any reason to muscle her, but short of pistol-whipping her, she wasn't going to get any respect out of Hickok. Besides, Debbi wasn't really the pistol-whipping type. Nor was she interested in blustering. There was always a way to convince people to help you. Perhaps Hickok had gotten an inflated opinion of her importance and invulnerability from dealing only with Ross, and had little patience for underlings. Or maybe she was just a smart ass who had nothing to lose. But, Debbi thought, everybody has something to lose.

Ross expected answers this time. Debbi wasn't about to let him down. She jerked her thumb at the window wall. "Your ship out there?"

Hickok finished her drink and let out an exasperated sigh. "Sure. And my paperwork's all in order."

Debbi said, "The *Deadwood Two*. Right?"

Hickok sat silently.

Debbi leaned forward. "And as orderly as you may think your paperwork is, I'll find something, somewhere. And I'll lock you down. You may get out from under it. Maybe in a day, maybe a week. But then I'll find something else. And something else. This is what I do for a living. I've got nothing but time to follow up on it. Maybe I'll even get your ship commandeered for Ranger service. Permanently."

Hickok's jaw was set tight. She breathed hard through her nose, and then looked away.

Then she turned back, red-faced with anger. "I've seen a few of those things. Usually like that, rigged to older guns."

"What are they?"

"I don't know. I've heard them called black guns or black tech. They're just now showing up. They're not on any market; I've never seen one for sale. Whoever's making them is giving them away." Hickok shook her head in baffled amazement. "From what I hear, they show up mainly in settler encampments. Mining outposts in the wastelands."

"Have you seen anouks or Reapers with them?"

"Anouks don't make it on the colonial trade routes. But I'm sure they'll get hold of some eventually."

"Anything else?"

Hickok eyed Debbi. "Yeah, I don't appreciate being threatened for sport." Hickok's voice quivered with barely held anger. "And tell Ross next time not to send his little sister. Does that answer all your ques-

Clay & Susan Griffith

tions?"

Debbi stood up and coolly took the rifle. "Yes. Thank you for your cooperation. And keep your seat and both hands on the table until I get out."

Hickok rolled her drink glass between her fingers and watched Debbi leave. Without changing emotion in her face, she threw the glass into the window, shattering the last pane of glass. The bartender glared and got a broom.

Ty Miller and Ringo weren't as enamored of spring on Banshee as Debbi. Ringo spit grit from his mouth as he lay on his stomach. His shoulders were extended out over the edge of a sheer cliff. He used binoculars to peer through the dust straight down to the ground hundreds of yards below.

Kneeling beside him, Miller peered over the edge and whistled. "You think that monster went down there?"

"That's what I'm thinking." Ringo adjusted the focus and scanned the distant base of the cliff. It had been hard following the monster once it moved out of the protected mountain passes and into the flatlands. The wind decimated most of the tracks, but Ringo, although young, was a wastelander by birth and an exquisite tracker. His skill had brought them to this precipice.

He sat up. "I know it went off here. But it must've climbed down. There's no body down there, and nothing could've jumped that distance and walked away. So that makes it big, strong, fast, mean, and agile. Hell, maybe it flew or something. Damn monsters, you never know what they'll do."

"Hey, what's that?" Miller asked suddenly.

"What? Where?" Ringo's hand flashed to his sidearm.

"Out there, Ranger." Miller grinned and pointed out across the vast desert plain at the foot of the plateau where they sat.

Ringo rolled his eyes at Miller. Then he trained the binoculars out. "Where?"

Miller held his arm straight out. "About two o'clock."

"Yeah, I see them. Reapers."

Five figures rode across the wind-swept desert. Two were human, riding speeder bikes and heavily armed. Following them at thirty yards were three anouks of the Azeel clan, two males and one female. Tall and muscular, they wore very little, breechcloths and ornaments, their tough purple skin hardened against the cutting sand. Their faces were long and flat, noseless, with large, black eyes. Savage spikes protruded from their elbows, which they used for close quarter fighting. They were mounted on large chanouks, all fangs and claws, smooth-skinned, muscular and sinewy with manes and long, lizard-like tails. These creatures loped with a peculiar gait that most found strangely smooth and even, almost gyroscopic. The Azeel carried long black javelins carved from smooth, black, tannis rock.

Miller said, "Well, this is where we stop, Stuckey. That desert belongs to those blacklining psychos and their Azeel compadres."

Ringo considered not answering because Miller insisted on using his real name instead of his chosen handle. But he decided that would mean he was acting as immature as Miller.

Ringo asked, "What about the monster?"

Book I: The Horror Lords

Miller laughed. "Starting at this spot right here, it's not our problem. If we're lucky, it'll kill all the Reapers it can get its clawed fingers on."

"But Ross ..."

"Hey," Miller said sharply, "Ross may have a lifetime of dealing with anouks and Reapers behind him, but not me." Then Miller grinned, embarrassed at his outburst. He chucked the younger man on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Ringo. Even Ross doesn't ride into Reaper territory. Trust me on that one. Only two of us here. Those Reapers down there are so hyped up on blackline you'd have to shoot them fifty times before they'd feel it. And the anouks have weird powers, you know? Let the monster have them. Now, come on, let's get out of here."

They climbed back into the Stallion, the Rangers' all-purpose flying vehicle. It was forty feet long with a front cockpit that seated two and a separate bay in back for hauling goods or about ten Rangers or prisoners. Transport, assault vehicle, paddy wagon. It flew on the same principle as the army's hover tanks. It was, however, much faster and more maneuverable, which was good because it was seriously underarmed. This was actually an old model Stallion that the Temptation Rangers had to pull out of mothballs because all the newer, sleeker versions of the vehicle had been stored for protection during the Worldstorm and none had made their way back to this part of Banshee yet. Ross had taken to calling the Colonial Rangers' fleet of Stallions by the friendly nickname of "Hosses." Most of the other Rangers had picked up this habit.

Miller settled into his seat in the Stallion and tossed the radio to Ringo. "Here. I'm sure the damned thing won't work way out here; the radios on these Hosses stay busted half the time, but try to raise Temptation and tell them we're heading in. And we can't get there too soon for me." He brought the vehicle to a hover, and then kicked it forward.

Sure enough, the radio was useless. Ringo settled back to watch the wasteland roll by as Miller pushed the old Stallion back to Temptation.

Chapter 4

Jesse Coltrane used to be human.

He was the worst kind of human, tall and fierce, aching to conquer and be feared. He knew that power accrued to those who spilled the most blood. So a decade ago, he created a band of mercenaries he called the Reapers. He made his base at the Domburg Ruins. The Reapers killed thousands and Coltrane grew rich and powerful off the stolen wealth of colonial mines and towns.

The warlike Azeel clan of the anouks took Coltrane's attacks as a sign that he was on their side—so they joined him. Then idealistic human supporters of anouk rights swelled the Reapers' ranks, eager to follow Coltrane's unintentional example and pull triggers on unarmed miners and caravaneers. Many went native and lived with the anouks where they craved to replicate the anouks' magical rapport with their planet. So they injected themselves with preparations made from tannis laced with ghost rock, a practice called blacklining. Coltrane's storehouse of raided tannis gave him a limitless supply of blackline and therefore a limitless supply of drug-sodden Reapers prepared to kill whomever he asked. Coltrane found himself at the center of a political movement.

Clay & Susan Griffith

But he had still been human.

Coltrane became the most powerful and feared man on Banshee. But just as he had reached his dream, he realized it wasn't enough. He turned over control of the Reapers to his chief lieutenant, Nicolai, and walked out of the Reaper camp. There was something calling to him; something that promised him power beyond even his dreams.

In the hills above his base at Domburg, Coltrane found the haunted ruins of a black tannis city built long before the arrival of the humans on Banshee.

In those ruins, Coltrane became something no longer human.

Now he sat in a cavernous amphitheater carved out of living tannis rock. Although it was completely black, the rock shone with a thriving light. Row upon row of seats towered above him, surrounding him completely. Far above his head, lost in the echoing upper reaches of the chamber, the stars in the night sky were visible. Centuries ago, the floor was the site of rituals.

Now it was again.

Two men were on the floor of the amphitheater. One sat quietly, knees pulled up, rocking, praying for death but receiving only madness to blot out reality. The other silently writhed in agony.

Coltrane watched, sitting in the first row of seats and leaning forward on the short wall that encircled the floor of the coliseum. Two days before he shot both of the men with a projectile from a black gun and then sat to observe. The first man showed no ill effects from the gun. The second, however, collapsed immediately to the floor, apparently comatose. He lay motionless for a day. Then on the second day, he began to quiver and his skin slowly blackened and pustulated until now he was a mass of sores and cankers. He tried to scream, but he was incapable.

Across the expanse of black floor from Coltrane, another figure sat in darkness. Tall and gaunt, his bald head glinted in the weird light. His gray desert robes covered the tattered remnants of an old uniform. He too had been watching the two Reapers with unmoving interest for two days.

To Coltrane's left, around the semicircle of the amphitheater base, a third figure hovered. It wasn't a human being, but a cadaverous thing that mocked the form of the native anouks. Human colonists called it a Skinny. Like all of its mysterious and horrid kind, this lich-like creature didn't so much walk as float. As the Skinny moved back and forth impatiently in the shadows, his barbed feet scraped along the rock floor.

Finally the robed man spoke. "And so?"

Coltrane pulled his attention from the lurking Skinny. "The man who is dying is one of those who acquired mental powers through blacklining, power much like that of a syker. The other man is normal. He is not dead." Coltrane raised his eyes slowly from the two Reapers to his robed companion. He laid a scabrous hand on the small, black metal tube on the short wall in front of him. "Clearly this weapon is a danger to us. To you."

"Where did you get it?"

"My faithful pet retrieved it from a miners' camp."

"Are there more?"

Coltrane said, "A few. No doubt, they are being manufactured off-world. But we cannot wait until UN troops arrive armed with them. We must act now."

Book I: The Horror Lords

"Tekkeng!" The Skinny screeched in aggravated agreement. Skinnies could not speak, but each member of that peculiar race screeched only a single unique word—and was so named.

Both Coltrane and the robed man turned their heads as the Skinny stalked out onto the dimly lit floor of the amphitheater. He was tall, cadaverously thin, and gray-skinned with the same long, smooth face of the anouks. He fixed both of his companions in turn with his large black eyes. He wore a simple long breechcloth and a necklace of human finger bones.

With a clawed finger, Tekkeng pointed to the nearly dead Reaper on the floor in disgust. Then the ancient thing pointed to Coltrane.

Knowledge of the black gun's purpose flooded Coltrane's mind and he said, "This weapon uses tannis infected with the ghost rock. But it is unlike the raw blackline that my Reapers use in their quest for anouk magic. It has a power that kills the mind. Minds like Tekkeng's. And yours, Avernus." The Reaper leader looked at the robed man.

The Skinny cackled and his hateful thoughts washed over Coltrane like deadly radiation.

Coltrane reported, "Tekkeng would like us to strike now. Before more humans have these weapons."

"Where would you have us strike, Tekkeng?" the robed man asked the Skinny.

This time, the Skinny spoke directly through Coltrane. A shrill voice screeched out of Coltrane's mouth and reverberated in the still air of the cave. "Everywhere! Everything must be ours! Start with the Colonial Rangers! They hold the last human law on Banshee! They must be destroyed! These weapons are a danger to us." He emphasized the last word.

Coltrane shivered. The thoughts were Tekkeng's, but the voice was his. The creature was so alien it deigned not to phrase its wicked thoughts into human sentences. Surprising even himself, he said in his own voice, "I agree with Tekkeng."

Tekkeng turned and suspiciously eyed the altered human.

Coltrane continued, "The planet must be completely ours. The Colonial Rangers are the only law on Banshee to compete with mine. They must be destroyed. And we must insure no one is free to use these guns against us. Particularly the Colonial Rangers."

The robed man pointed at Coltrane. "Remember, your powers are not granted freely. Do not mistake my patience for disinterest. Everything you do must serve me."

Coltrane said, "Of course, Avernus. I don't take pleasure in conquest for conquest's sake, in the ruthless spilling of blood. Now the only pleasure is fear." He stood. Immediately, another shape moved in the darkness behind him, like a dog rising in response to its master stirring. The shape rose, long limbed and stooped, and moved languidly to be closer to Coltrane.

Glowering, Tekkeng instantly withdrew to the far side of the amphitheater.

Coltrane smiled and ran his tongue over his glistening sharp teeth. "Don't worry, Tekkeng. It won't harm you as long as I'm here. I'm shocked you aren't happier to see it. After all, it came from the ruins of your own civilization; locked away in a hidden chamber below. I thought all Skinnies are nostalgic for the ancient days when you were lords of your world. Surely you aren't saying that I found the one thing that you

Clay & Susan Griffith

past kings of Banshee fear? How ironic.”

Tekkeng snarled and turned his back.

Coltrane laughed and then spoke to everyone in the theater with a deep booming voice. “The time is now. We wait no longer.” His face cracked with the making of a mock smile. “And we can all sit at the same table. I will summon horrors to stoke the humans’ greatest fears. And when the humans have no more fear to give, I will send the Reapers to finish the work. With each victory, our powers will grow. These black guns will mean nothing to us then. We won’t stop until the surface of Banshee is a Deadland.” He regarded his master. “Does that meet with your approval, Avernus?”

The tall man’s robes rustled like dry dead leaves as he leaned forward. “What about your man, Nicolai? He isn’t likely to favor that goal. Not only does he refuse to meet with us because he is too human to consort with our like, but he truly thinks he is creating a worldly kingdom here on Banshee. What happens when he finds out the truth?”

“Nicolai will think what I tell him to think. He is my sword; and no warrior asks his sword’s opinion about where to cut.” Coltrane stepped out onto the floor of the amphitheater. He crossed quickly to the two prone Reapers. The afflicted man was now dead, his twisted face locked in the final throes of agony.

The other Reaper looked up pathetically. His eyes flashed some horrific recognition of the face that used to be the man who led him on so many bloody raids. That once familiar face of his old chief now undulated with parasites that burrowed beneath the cicatriced skin and the cold, blue eyes of old were now red. “Coltrane?”

Coltrane buried his nailed fingers into the man’s frightened face and lifted him to his feet while continuing his conversation with the robed man.

“Will that satisfy you?” he asked Avernus. Then he twisted the Reaper’s head around and snapped through the man’s neck with a single bite.

“It will suffice. For now. I will keep my eye on your activities.” Avernus rose and began to make his way up the steps of the amphitheater.

Coltrane pulled back his wet mouth. “Good. Let’s open the feast of fear. And start with Temptation.”

Coltrane ate the Reaper’s spinal cord.

Chapter 5

Debbi found out only a little more about the black gun. She kept her eyes open while tending to her normal duties and spent much of her time wandering the Depot, asking questions of the caravaners. Not surprisingly, nobody had anything to say. Either they didn’t know, or they just weren’t saying. Two days after her meeting with Hickok, she caught Ross as he was leaving the office and made her report.

He seemed satisfied. “All right. Keep your eyes and ears open.” He glanced down at Debbi, respect creasing his features. “Hell, I knew Hickok a year before she ever told me anything worthwhile. Mind though, she’s got a long memory and I’m sure you’re in it now. You don’t ever want to let her get the upper hand on you. But you’re going to have more pressing concerns than her.”

“How’s that?” Debbi asked.

Book I: The Horror Lords

They stood together on the wooden sidewalk in front of the Ranger office. The sun was setting, casting a rose red hue over the town, bathing them both in subtle tones. Ross leaned against a pole with his arms crossed and watched the street bustling with people, wagons, and vehicles. He seemed oddly content.

"Caravan season's cranking up. I wasn't sure how things would work after the Worldstorm. But there's money to be made, so it looks like all the nomad raiders in the world aren't gonna stop it.

"It's likely to be chaotic. And there's likely to be more trouble than usual. Everybody is walking extra rounds at the Depot and in the saloons. I want the lid kept on." Ross pushed himself off the pole and said, more to himself than to Debbi, "But it's good to see things at least trying to get back to normal." He made his way down the sidewalk, the folds of his black duster, caught by the wind, swirled about his body. The sound of his boots on the wooden planks disappeared into the roar of the town.

Debbi shook her head. That was the most Ross had said to her at one time since she came to Temptation. She went inside the office to find Miller sitting at a desk talking to a man. Or rather, listening to a man. She went to check the roster, but kept an ear cocked to what was transpiring behind her.

"I tell ya, there's no reasoning with her!" the man cried. He was hunched over. The backs of his hands were brown-specked. What was left of his hair was white and wispy. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "Can you help me?"

Miller was bored and annoyed. He leaned back in his chair and stroked his moustache while staring off into empty space. "Not much I can do, Mr. Womble."

Debbi bristled. She knew Miller was a coaster, a mediocre Ranger at best, and a frequent troublemaker, but direct callousness was inexcusable. She replaced the duty roster clipboard on the wall and turned to face Miller. If he knew she was watching him, perhaps he would at least pretend to care about his job.

He didn't. He swung his boots onto the desk. "Why don't you go back home? Everything'll be fine."

Mr. Womble reached out desperately and touched Miller's sleeve. Miller pulled his arm away.

"Oh no," Mr. Womble said. "It ain't fine. She's gonna kill me. She said so. And she always does everything she says. Everything! You gotta help me!"

Miller exhaled loudly. "Look, just go home. Nobody's going to kill you."

Debbi couldn't stop herself any longer. "What's the problem here?" She regarded the old man. "I'm Ranger Dallas. Can I help?"

Miller iced her with a glance. Mr. Womble latched onto the gleam of assistance.

"My wife!" The old man looked at Debbi with red-rimmed eyes. His hands were trembling. "My wife is gonna kill me."

Debbi sat on the edge of the desk, turning her back on Miller. "Has she tried to kill you?"

"No. Not yet. But she will. Could you come talk to her? She's so mad. You're a woman."

"Is she home?"

He craned his neck to look out the front window. "I expect she'll be

Clay & Susan Griffith

there directly. It's gettin' dark."

"All right, sir. Where do you live? I'll talk to your wife." Debbi stood up and gave Miller a disapproving glance.

Miller smiled in a manner that made her suddenly doubt herself.

Mr. Womble started to cry with relief. "I live over on Border Street. It used to be 18 Border Street. You can still see part of the eight on the front of the building. It used to be blue. My wife's name is Glenda. Glenda Womble."

Miller said, "That's a good idea, Debbi. You talk to Glenda Womble."

Debbi glanced between Miller and Mr. Womble several times. She took a hesitant step toward the door then said, "Well, you said she's not there now, right?"

Miller stood up. "But she'll be back directly." He put his hand against Debbi's back and led her to the door. "I'll wait here with Mr. Womble until you have a little talk with Mrs. Womble." He opened the office door. "Eighteen Border Street. It used to be blue."

Debbi stepped outside and the door shut on the sound of Miller's laughter. She stood on the sidewalk, unsure what to do. She had stepped into something and apparently it was going to be impossible not to look foolish now. But how could she minimize the foolishness?

She saw Lyle Cassian across the street. Cass was one of the old-time Colonial Rangers. He had been retired, but the Worldstorm forced his recall. He was more than twice Ross's age and showed it in his wrinkled skin and peppered gray hair. His uniform hung on his scarecrow frame and he walked with a ginger step. But he understood the power of the badge and the responsibility that went with it.

"Cass! Hey, Cass!" Debbi waved and darted into the street. She dodged wagons and trucks and hover flats.

The old Ranger stopped and waited for her. He reached down and took her hand lightly as she stepped up onto the boardwalk, a gesture of a gentler time.

"Evening, Debbi. What a pleasure to see you." He smiled. His voice was raspy and rich with experience. There was something about his voice and manner that immediately put one at ease. She felt like they had been friends for years instead of only a couple of months.

"Evening, Cass. How are you?"

"Can't complain. And yourself?"

"Fine, thanks."

"You look pretty this evening."

She smiled almost shyly. Coming from Cass, it was always meant as a compliment, never a proposition, which was refreshing when compared to the crap she usually had to put up with. "Thanks. Listen, I've got a question."

"Certainly. What can I do for you?" He looked at her, waiting. He didn't stare off into space or look at his watch. He looked into Debbi's eyes, listening for her question. He was a relic indeed.

She said, "You've been in Temptation for a while, right?"

"I'd say. Longer than a slip of a girl like yourself has been alive, I suspect. Came here in fifty-nine, nearly forty years ago. There was hardly anything here then. The ghost rock rush had only been going on a few years."

Debbi made a note to herself to sit down with Cass at some point and get some history and background, but she had more immediate concerns now, so she had to cut him off before he launched into an epic

Book I: The Horror Lords

tale of frontier Temptation.

"So, do you know a man named Womble? Lives over on Border Street?"

"Lee Womble. Sure. He's been here a while too. Lee must be near about old as I am."

"And his wife?"

"Glenda," Cass said immediately. "Good looking woman. Temper, though. Irish."

Debbi grinned. "Really? She has a temper?"

"Boy howdy. Redhead, like yourself."

Debbi relaxed. "Well, Cass, listen, Lee Womble's over in the office. He says his wife is threatening to kill him. You put any stock in that?"

Cass laughed. "Dear Lord, I hope not. Glenda's been dead five years now."

"Dead?" she repeated in bewilderment. Immediately, she realized what had just happened. Debbi closed her eyes in anticipation of what she had coming from Miller. Here comes the do-gooder muscling in on someone else's interview. She's a hotshot off a space station; no one can do the job like she can. A lonely, confused man is complaining his long dead wife is threatening him. No problem, Debbi will fix it. Old fashion law enforcement where you get your facts first be damned! She believes everybody deserves to be heard and believed. Even anouks.

"Oh God." Debbi rubbed her eyes and moaned.

Cass was taken aback by her reaction. "I'm sorry. Did you know her?"

She waved a dismissive hand. "No, no. I've done something stupid."

Debbi chuckled. "Miller was talking to Mr. Womble and I thought he was being too brusque to an old...uh...to a man that seemed to be in trouble. So I stuck my big nose into it and I told Mr. Womble I'd go have a chat with his wife and try to straighten everything out."

Cass smiled down at her in sympathy. "Don't worry, Debbi, if doing foolish things caused any harm, I would've been dead years ago. Tell you what, I'll go over to the office and talk to Lee. And I'll tell Miller you were just humoring an old man, and you came looking for me because you thought Lee needed to see an old friend."

Debbi stared wide-eyed at the old Ranger. "Cass! Thank you! That would save me a lot of headaches."

"No problem. I don't have much use for Miller." He patted her cheek.

"You know, good thing Glenda isn't trying to kill Lee; that'd mean we have bigger trouble in Temptation than I care to think about." He winked and started an oblivious, nerve-wracking shuffle across the busy street.

Debbi couldn't bear to watch after the second truck almost hit him.

And since it might affect public confidence for one Colonial Ranger to help another one across the street, she crossed her fingers and went off to make rounds. She was on night duty and she had a feeling it was going to be a wild one.

While she walked rounds, she nodded to townfolk. These little greetings gave her an increasing sense of familiarity with Temptation. It felt good. She stopped and chatted, answered questions, fielded complaints. While she was going about her nightly business, the incident with the creature at the miners' camp still haunted her mind. However, she sought to occupy her attention with less disturbing matters.

The mystery of the black gun wouldn't leave her; what were those black needles? She'd seen needle guns before, but they all fired spread pattern barrages. They were designed for close work like crowd control.

Clay & Susan Griffith

This new weapon was single shot and it had a remarkable range for so simple a mechanism with such a small projectile. It was deadly accurate at 250 yards. But she still didn't know if it was deadly in general. The Doctor had confirmed the needles weren't poisonous, although he never could determine exactly what they were made of.

She was passing a rubble pile that used to be a building when she heard a voice call for help. She stopped and listened. This was a relatively deserted part of town, close to a section of the town wall.

"Help me!" the voice called again. It came from inside the rubble field.

"Where are you?" Debbi called as she began to climb the jagged tangle of concrete and metal.

"Help me!"

The sharp edges of crumbled cement tore her gloves. The mounds of rubbish threatened to give way under her and collapse. She reached the pinnacle and stared down into a field of rock and concrete detritus about 150 feet across.

"I'm a Colonial Ranger!" Debbi scanned the darkening area. "Where are you?"

"Here! I've broken my leg!"

Debbi saw a figure moving down among the ruin. She started climbing down. It was getting darker and more dangerous. It wasn't going to be easy to carry someone out. When she reached the bottom, she hurried to the prone figure that lay near a large concrete block.

"Are you hurt?" She stopped almost as soon as the question was out of her mouth. Something wasn't right.

She reached for her sidearm. The figure on the ground lifted slightly and she saw a flash of metal in his hand. At the same moment, she heard the crack of a rifle and the concrete block in front of her sparked from a ricochet. The man on the ground had an automatic pistol in his hand and it was pointing at Debbi.

"Don't!" he yelled at her.

Debbi froze with her gun half cleared from the holster. She watched the man carefully and sensed he wanted something from her. It wasn't a murder; it was an ambush for some other reason.

The man said, "Your weapon on the ground, please, Madame Ranger. Careful too. You are watched from above."

Debbi lifted the gun clear and stooped to place it on the ground in front of her. She held her hands out, palms up. She turned her head slowly and looked up. She saw two figures in fluttering desert robes perched like vultures on the bare metal girders sticking out of the rubble, black blots against the twilight sky. They aimed rifles at her.

The man on the ground scrambled to his feet and approached Debbi. He carefully picked up her gun and glanced at it. He looked disappointed and stuffed it in his belt. He was a Reaper scav fresh off the desert.

"What do you want?" Debbi asked.

He leaned in and touched her hair. His eyes were blacklined, with dark veins twisting through what was left of the whites of his eyes, and he stank of tannis sludge. He jerked the comlink off her head and studied it. Then he hooked it in his belt too. Debbi pulled her head away and glared at him.

"What do you want?" Debbi repeated.

"The black gun."

Debbi tried not to react.

He grinned at her. "You have a black gun. I want it. You see, I'm

Book I: The Horror Lords

Borneo. Maybe you've heard of me. I collect things. Now, where do you have this black gun?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He frowned. "That's not true. Where is the black gun? I'll take it and go and prepare to bask in the praise of Nicolai."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Tell." The Reaper scav dropped the aim of his pistol to Debbi's left knee.

"Wait!" She shook her head, looking frightened. "All right. I'll tell you."

Borneo laughed and glanced up at his men aloft. It was the wrong thing to do. His arm flew to the side and a hard force pounded his shoulder. There was no pain, but a pressure clamped around his neck and his knees gave out. He felt himself dropping to the ground just as a rifle bullet zipped past his head.

He was lying on the ground staring up at the night sky. Actually, he was lying on the Ranger. She was on her back on the ground with one arm clamped around his throat, holding him on top of her like a shield. He felt a muzzle pressing into his temple.

"Call off your boys," she hissed in his ear, "or we'll see if your blackline keeps you from feeling pain when this bullet cuts your brain in half."

"This is bad," Borneo said. "I should've taken Hickok's ship. That was easy. This is hard."

Debbi angrily noted Hickok's name.

Borneo started to turn his head until Debbi dug in the pistol.

"Steady there, Mr. Borneo," she warned.

"You are mistaken," Borneo whined. "My men will kill me. They don't love me."

Another rifle shot snapped off the concrete block that just barely hid them from Borneo's companions.

Borneo continued, "They don't care about the black gun either. They have no vision. They will welcome me dead, and go back and raid on their own."

"Yeah, boo hoo, we've all got problems." Debbi looked around for a way out. She couldn't give up any leverage on this scav; blackliners were unnaturally strong and if she lost her head shot on him, he might be able to take a wound and still come after her. She took stock of her surroundings and saw her only chance for survival.

"Okay, here's the deal," she said. "I'm going to release my grip on your neck and take my gun out of your belt. Then you are going to get on your stomach. And through it all, I'm going to keep this pistol pressed to your ear so that, if you flinch funny, I can blast your stinking head off. Do you understand me very clearly?"

"Yes."

"All right. I'm not kidding. If you move, I'll kill you."

"Yes."

Debbi hoped the scav couldn't feel her heart pounding. She released the pressure of her left arm around his throat. He stayed still. Another bullet pinged nearby. She dug the pistol barrel into his scalp. She reached down and drew her Dragoon out of the Reaper's belt and put it against his rib cage.

"Move very slowly. Get on your face to the right."

"Yes." Borneo slowly moved to his right. He rolled off Debbi's body and settled onto his stomach.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Debbi repositioned the pistol against Borneo's head so she could get on her knees in a crouched position. She set her sidearm down and switched the Reaper pistol to her left hand.

"Now, very carefully," she warned, "put your hands behind your back, crossed at the wrists. Understand?"

"Yes."

He complied. From inside her belt, Debbi pulled out a metal strip about a foot long and two inches wide. She wrapped it around his wrists and fit one end of the strip through a slot in the other end. She pulled it tight until it clicked several times and gripped tight. With another strip, she repeated the process on his ankles.

She took a relieved breath and picked up her sidearm. Then she slipped the Reaper's pistol in her belt.

"Okay," she said quietly, "just lie here quietly and we'll both survive. If you do something stupid, you'll die."

"Yes."

She put an eye around the edge of the concrete block and spied out the scene. The two snipers were still on their girders about forty feet up. She picked up a large chip of concrete and threw it into the distance. When it rattled against a pile of rubble, the two Reapers swung around in tandem.

Debbi raised her weapon and fired at one of the snipers. The shot hit the girder. The Reaper began to turn back. The next shot hit home. The Reaper weaved and toppled to the rubble below. The other sniper shifted his aim and his shot hit close, spraying concrete dust into her eyes. She forced her eyes open despite the pain and fired. The sniper was taking an extra second to draw a bead on her. She squeezed off a shot just as he fired. She heard an insect zip past her ear. He clutched the girder and refused to fall. But he was dead.

Debbi closed her eyes and rubbed them. She felt something snatching at her jacket. She sprang away, trying to open her watering eyes. She pointed her gun at a blur moving in the darkness behind the concrete block. The blur suddenly grew. She fired and scrambled back to her feet. The blur rose up in front of her and she felt an explosive pain in her right wrist as it was jerked aside.

Her red, misty vision showed Borneo smiling in front of her. She parried his grasping right hand and kneed him in the groin. Little effect. He shook her arm like a dog with a toy, but she held onto her weapon. She kneed him in the groin again. He flinched. Now his right hand plunged past her block and grabbed her by the throat with such force she was afraid he might've crushed her windpipe. She noted that his wrists were bloody; he had broken the metal bands with sheer strength. She desperately kneed him in the groin a third time. This time, his blackened eyes rolled up. He twisted at the abdomen and relaxed the grip on her wrist.

She yanked her gun arm away, pressed the pistol against his shoulder, and shot him. The force of the blast spun him around. He turned back and glared at her. She couldn't believe he was still on his feet.

She shot him in the stomach. He grunted and released her throat. He took two steps back and doubled over like a man with a bellyache. Then he raised his head and looked at her again, eyes black and filled with a twisted, perverted gleam.

She kicked him in the face. He dropped onto his back. And started to get up.

Book I: The Horror Lords

"For Chrissakes." Debbi stomped on his stomach, grinding her boot heel into his bloody gut wound.

He moaned uncomfortably and tried to get up again.

She aimed her weapon at his head. "Just stop it."

Borneo looked at her. He considered his options. Then he showed real pain on his face for the first time and fell heavily back to the ground.

Debbi rubbed her sore throat and snatched her comlink from where it still dangled at Borneo's belt. She dropped to one knee out of Borneo's reach and called for assistance.

Then she asked Borneo, "So Hickok told you about the black gun?"

"Yes."

"Pilot? Pretty woman?"

"Yes."

"All right." Debbi shook her head grimly and muttered to herself, "Better find out if Hickok has any next of kin; so I can notify them when I'm finished with her."

Chapter 6

Debbi strode through Temptation's streets, shoulders forward into the wind, heading straight for the Depot. Her pace was murderous. She was on a mission.

She was coming straight from the scuffle with Borneo and his Reaper scav. Debbi had relinquished her prisoner to Stew, suggesting he wake the doctor and have him take a look at the Reaper's wound. She had other matters to attend to. Stew had nodded without argument.

She was covered in dust and her hair was pulled from its tie, splaying red wisps wildly about her head. Debbi never made much fuss about appearance. She didn't have to, being naturally attractive, but it simply didn't matter to her; she didn't care about people's opinions of her personal life.

Debbi marched into the LAX.

She didn't pause. She stalked unerringly to Hickok's table. All pilots had their favorite tables.

Then she was brought up short.

Ross was sitting at Hickok's table.

Hickok looked up. There was a glimmer of expectation in her face. She sat stiffly in her chair, a drink untouched beside her.

Seeing Ross there confused Debbi and fueled her anger. She slammed her hand down on the table with enough force to slosh the drink. Hickok flinched, but Debbi didn't catch it. Ross sat back in his chair with a mild look of interest.

Debbi ignored him and leaned in close to Hickok's face.

"You sold me out." Her voice was low and tight.

Hickok calmly regarded the Ranger. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play stupid. I heard you were better than that."

Hickok's face hardened. She stole a glance at Ross, and then turned her dark eyes to Debbi once more, taking in the Ranger's disheveled appearance. She cocked her head.

"You never said the gun was top secret," she remarked slyly.

Debbi immediately felt alarms go off in her head. "Put your hands on the table where I can see them."

Hickok hesitated just a second too long.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Debbi drew her sidearm in a blur of movement. "Now."

Hickok slowly raised her empty hands and placed them flat on the table, her left one resting in a puddle of her spilt drink, a slight tremor gripping it. Her mouth was twisted into a scowl, but her eyes never left Debbi.

Ross asked Debbi, "What's this all about, Dallas?" His tone was detached and casual.

"She sold me out to a bunch of Reaper scum," the Ranger ground out. She never took her eyes off Hickok.

The pilot replied, "I figured you could take care of yourself. Was I wrong?"

"You had some information and you hightailed it straight to the people you thought could pay the highest price." The barrel of the Dragoon rested almost on Hickok's chest. "You invited thieves and junkies into our town and you didn't care who got hurt, did you?"

"That's not exactly what happened. They weren't after anyone but you. And you seem to be just fine."

"So, how much did you get?"

Hickok stared up defiantly at the Ranger and then laughed humorlessly. She didn't care for being interrogated like a common criminal by Rangers, especially in her own haunt. She rose to leave.

Debbi was on Hickok in a second. She grabbed the pilot's left arm to prevent her from reaching her sidearm and shoved her up against the nearby wall. The chair overturned with a clatter. As Debbi's nails dug into flesh, Hickok choked back a cry and gritted her teeth.

"I should kill you now," Debbi whispered. "I should blow you all over this saloon. And then have a drink." She heard the scraping of Ross's chair behind her and the creak of leather as he stood. She said, "You ever spread private information again and I will kill you."

Hickok cast a look of appeal toward Ross. He just watched them, arms folded, a small smile playing about his lips. He shrugged when he felt Hickok's eyes on him. This was Debbi's fight. Hickok should have known better.

Debbi shoved Hickok violently and walked away. Ross stared at Hickok for a moment more, hard and stoic. Then he too left the bar.

Hickok straightened off the wall, her hand going instinctively to her aching arm. For just a split second, she allowed herself to show pain and then the mask slipped back into place. She glared at all the other patrons who studied her as if they were pack animals. If they smelled blood then her life and ship was forfeit.

She sat down at the table again, stiff spined and head held high. She ordered a refill and began to thank her lucky stars that she was still in one piece. Damn, that Ranger had a grip. She rubbed her arm, fully expecting bruises in the morning.

The two Rangers stalked back to town. Actually, Debbi stalked. Ross just kept pace, his dark duster flying out behind him like an ominous sail. Debbi's anger still hadn't dissipated. Now it was turning toward Ross.

She stopped dead in the street and faced him, hands curled into tight fists. "Why didn't you step in?" Once again, her actions were being questioned. It hurt. Self-doubts leapt up.

Ross didn't stop. "You were handling things just fine."

Book I: The Horror Lords

Debbi stared after him in surprise as he brushed past. Then she hurried to catch up, matching him stride for stride.

She asked, "What were you doing there anyway?" There was a slow burn of resentment in her. It had been a long, hard day, but she still had fight left in her.

Ross was taken aback to find her temper aimed at him and he bristled. "I beg your pardon?"

She immediately sensed the change in him. He was insulted that she dared to challenge the boss. That was a wrong response for him to make.

She spat out what was eating her. "Were you backtracking my work? Asking her about the black guns?" She was a raw nerve. She had no sense of propriety and wouldn't be backed down by his gruff voice.

He replied, "Last time I looked, Dallas, I don't check procedure with you. But yeah, I was gonna ask a few questions about the black guns. Didn't have a chance because you came in."

They walked on. Debbi's breath was hissing between clenched teeth.

Finally, she asked, "What'd she say?"

"I didn't get two words with her before you got there." He fought a scowl. "She seemed kinda strange."

"I'll bet. She was waiting to hear that I was dead."

"Maybe." Ross stopped walking and waited for Debbi to notice.

She stopped twenty feet ahead and turned. She put her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrows in a brash challenge.

Ross stepped slowly toward her. "There's not much more you can do to Hickok short of throwing her out of town or killing her."

Debbi narrowed her eyes and murmured, "Either sounds good."

"Sorry, can't just do what we want," Ross said. "We're the good guys. That's our burden. If you can't handle it, move on."

Debbi stared at him, wide-eyed with amazement that he was lecturing her after what she'd been through. She was almost killed thanks to Hickok, and there he was having drinks with her. And he had the nerve to get on his high horse about order and social contracts.

She spoke in an angry, strangled voice. "I was attacked by three Reapers because of her. Did you get that part? At the very least, I should arrest her right now for conspiracy."

"Then do it. Arrest her. Hold her for the circuit judge. He may be in town in a month or two. Or maybe never. The court system here isn't exactly up to speed. So like I said, short of killing her, you got nothing right now, Dallas. You did the right thing. You backed her down. That was your option and you played it." He jabbed his finger at her. "Just get past it and keep watching your back. Unfortunately, that's gonna be your job description until you die."

Debbi took a deep breath and said without harshness, "That stinks."

Ross quieted, his bluster gone. "Welcome to Temptation." He gave her the commiserating look of a fellow law officer who understood her problem. "Hickok's spent her life walking the edge. One day, she'll fall permanently off one side or the other. If it's the wrong side, we'll get her."

"Well, maybe now she's learned that Rangers won't stand for backstabbing."

Ross suppressed a laugh. "Doubt it." He looked like the words left a bad taste in his mouth.

They started off again and turned onto the main street, avoiding

Clay & Susan Griffith

traffic and easily skirting the various pitfalls. Stepping up onto the boardwalk, they aimed toward Ranger headquarters. Despite the late hour, the office was lit but locked. Upon entering, they discovered there was no one inside.

"Where's Miller?" Debbi glanced around. "Wasn't he on duty?"

Ross nodded, but said nothing. He checked out the cells in the back. Their Reaper prisoner sat in the cell staring at them through black eyes. With his hand hovering near his Peacemaker, Ross tested the cell door just in case. It was still locked. The Reaper grinned manically at him, rocking back and forth on the floor. Ross ignored him, emerging once more into the outer office.

From Ross's expression, Debbi suspected that all was in order, but that still didn't explain why headquarters was unattended. Ross disappeared into his office.

Debbi's eyes caught sight of a note in her pigeonhole. She relaxed. The note was probably from Miller with an explanation. She flipped it open with her index finger and her right eyebrow lifted in surprise.

It wasn't from Miller. It was from Hickok.

It was direct and to the point. *Reapers know about item. Watch your back. H.*

Debbi scowled. Why the hell hadn't Hickok said something about the note at the saloon? Arrogant little flyer. Debbi irately stuffed the note into her pocket. It sure as hell hadn't done her any good. When did Hickok write it? Five minutes before the Reapers attacked?

A note didn't fix matters. The bottom line was, Hickok was untrustworthy and dangerous. And Debbi would relish putting her away one day.

The front door opened and in walked Miller. He glanced up at Debbi from adjusting the front of his pants. He looked guilty.

"Where the hell have you been?" Debbi snapped angrily, still stewing about Hickok.

"Outhouse." Worse than disrupting the court system, the Worldstorm had done major damage to the sewage facilities. Not all of the facilities were back up and running yet.

"Is he in?" Miller glanced at Ross's door with a great deal of trepidation. He knew he was in big trouble.

Debbi cocked her head and smiled. "Of course, he's in."

Suddenly, her headset crackled to life.

"Base. This is Stew. You read me?"

"This is Dallas, Stew. Go ahead."

"Oh, Dallas. There's been a murder. Ross with you?"

"Yeah. He's in his office. Where are you?"

"South side of town. Border Street."

"Eighteen Border Street?" A feeling of dread crept over Debbi. Her eyes locked with Miller.

He wasn't wearing his com so he only heard Debbi's part of the conversation. The address brought a grin to Miller's face. He hadn't believed Cass's explanation of Debbi's actions; Miller maintained she'd been fooled by old Womble's story of his dead wife threatening to kill him.

There was a pause and then Stew asked, "Yeah. How did you know?"

Ross's door banged open. He had obviously been listening. "Stew, is Miller with you?" He caught sight of Miller standing in front of him and frowned. "Never mind." His eyes pinned Debbi with a curious look. She

Book I: The Horror Lords

could tell he wanted to know why she knew about the location. "We're comin' out."

"Okay," Stew said. "I'll meet you in front. Out."

Ross grabbed a scattergun off the rack and tossed it to Debbi. She caught it out of the air one-handed.

"Might be more of your Reaper buddies," he said to her.

"Uh, sir," Miller began hesitantly. "Might not have been Reapers."

Ross's steel visage swung on Miller and the subordinate Ranger cringed.

"And why do you think that, Miller?" Ross intoned.

Debbi stepped forward. "Lee Womble came in earlier today, claiming his life was in danger."

Ross stared hard at Debbi; surprised to see she had a part of this.

"And?"

Miller gave a nervous laugh. "Well, he claimed that his wife was after him."

Ross, still not understanding, waited with ever dissipating patience.

Miller stumbled over the words in a rush to get them out. Clarity was gone. Debbi finished for him.

"His wife's been dead near five years."

Ross exhaled slowly and made stiffly for the front door. Miller jumped out of his way. Ross paused only a moment to snarl in his direction. "Stay put this time. And monitor your com."

"Yes, sir!" Miller slunk back to the desk and slipped on his headset.

"Dallas. Let's go."

Chapter 7

Nights in Temptation were cold. Like most desert climates on Earth, temperatures dropped dramatically without the cloud cover to hold in the heat. Debbi's breath hung in the air before her as she hurried after Ross. She was beat. But still, she marched gamely on to the next emergency.

Stepping onto Border Street, Ross and Debbi immediately saw Stew standing on the boardwalk, one hand resting on a nearby post. She saw the faded number eight on the sand-scoured building behind him, the one Womble had mentioned to her in the office only a few hours ago.

"Whatcha got?" Ross commanded as he approached.

Stew stepped down with one foot and answered, "One dead male. Lee Womble. Neck's broken by the look of it." He hesitated and Ross frowned.

"What else?"

Stew shook his head, and then spoke the last. "It looks like he's been...gnawed on some too, sir."

Ross said nothing. He entered the house.

"He's in the back." Stew followed him. "In the kitchen."

Debbi trailed behind them.

The Womble kitchen was compact, cluttered, and filthy. Dishes encrusted with old food were stacked everywhere. The floors and tables were covered in piles of papers and junk. Debbi could see that it had once had a woman's touch. The dishes and towels were beautifully patterned and matching, but they were now all cracked and soiled. Fake flowers, once bright and colorful, were covered in a thick layer of cloying dust. The house had an awful stench too. Mr. Womble had

Clay & Susan Griffith

obviously not been much of a housekeeper after the death of his wife. If Mrs. Womble had been alive, she would've killed her husband for allowing her carefully planned house to become so disgusting.

Debbi stepped up to where Ross and Stew were examining Mr. Womble. The man's neck lay at a very odd angle and deep bruises were already formed on his neck. The attacker must have been incredibly strong. Her mind immediately flashed back to the blacklining scavs she fought before. Their drug-induced strength made them a definite possibility. She fought the instinct to massage her own aching throat. Perhaps they had come here first for some unknown reason.

While the other two Rangers investigated the body, she eased herself through the kitchen, side-stepping more clutter to search another part of the house for signs of a break-in or possibly the intruder himself.

Her sweep of the house turned up nothing. There was a heavy smear of dirt near the back entrance. That's probably where the intruder had entered.

She eased open the back door and peered out into the darkness. Her flashlight intruded into corners where things could hide, but she saw nothing. Unfortunately, her brain kept flashing on the large black shape with long limbs and sharp teeth. She half expected it to emerge from the shadows. Despite Ringo's insistence that the creature had disappeared into Reaper territory, Debbi still felt it was tracking her. She clamped down on that wild, irrational fear.

This was not the work of that beast. This attack was a little subtler. No separated torsos here, she reminded herself with a nervous chuckle. She tightened her grip on the shotgun and squatted down over the dirt in the doorway. Her nose wrinkled in disgust. Whatever it was stunk as if it had come from a compost heap or maybe an outhouse.

She heard a footfall behind her and she whirled, but lowered the weapon immediately at seeing Ross.

He raised an eyebrow at her reaction, but declined a response. "Stew took the body to Doc Dazy for an autopsy. What did you find?" He bobbed his chin toward the floor.

Debbi calmed herself and told him. Then he, too, hunched over the mud. He said nothing for a few minutes, playing over possibilities in his head.

Needing to break the silence, Debbi finally asked, "So was Womble, um, you know, gnawed on?"

Ross nodded.

"Has he been dead long?" she asked in confusion. "Rats and stuff don't normally go right at a corpse. It takes some time." Rats had come to Banshee on the transports and thrived.

"Less than an hour, I think," Ross replied. He looked her square in the eye. "It must've been a mighty big rat."

Debbi fought off her disgust. "I didn't see any signs of forced entry. If it was an animal ..." She offered with a shrug. "I don't know what to tell you."

They heard a loud thump from the kitchen. They both rose as one and glanced at each other, their weapons ready. Ross took the lead and they eased back toward the front of the house. They moved as quietly as possible, flanking each other.

Pausing just outside the kitchen, they listened. There was only silence again. Ross signaled to go in and keep to the left. Keeping low, Debbi scuttled inside and found a niche, her shotgun sweeping the area.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Nothing.

Ross entered and took the opposite side. He shook his head, indicating he didn't see anything. Debbi sank down slowly to the floor, dropping her gaze low to search the corners. If it was an animal of some sort, it might be hiding under something.

An overhead bulb in a yellow filtered shade dimly lighted the room, so she flicked on her flashlight and cast it around. Ross did likewise.

Debbi's beam fell to the floor once more and it was then she saw something. There were spaces between the warped floorboards. She hunched forward and shown her light straight down.

A milky white eye stared back at her.

"Geezus!" Debbi jumped up. She landed on her feet with her gun pointed down. "It's under the floor."

A dry, rasping cackle reached their ears accompanied by a scuffling sound as something moved beneath their feet.

Debbi searched the floor and found the handle to a trap door recessed into the floorboards. There was a basement under the kitchen.

Ross took up a position with his shotgun, and nodded curtly at Debbi. She flung the trap door open and stepped back.

It was pitch black inside. She hunted for and found a switch, hitting it. It did nothing.

"The power's been cut down there," Ross said, peering into the shadowy interior. There was a ladder leading down.

Good lord, he thought, had Mr. Womble lied about his wife's death and kept her locked up in the basement all these years? If it was Mrs. Womble down there, then who was buried out in the graveyard?

"Mrs. Womble," Ross called out. "It's Dave Ross, Colonial Ranger. Can you answer me?"

There was no response.

Ross sat on the floor and swung his legs onto the ladder rungs, easing himself down. The smell wafting up from below was overpowering. He suppressed a cough. The rungs of the ladder were coated with something, but he didn't bother to look at it. Instead he kept his mind on what was down there waiting for him.

"Cover me," he said.

Debbi's heart was thundering in her ears, relieved that he hadn't asked her to go first. She placed her shotgun on the table and pulled her Dragon. With such close quarters, the shotgun's spray would hit Ross too. Easing nearer the trap door, she aimed past Ross into the basement, her flashlight illuminating the way.

He climbed down quickly, moving his head to see beneath him as he went. His foot hit bottom and he stepped away from the base of the ladder. He could barely see into the darkness beyond the ring of light from above. He raised his scattergun and flicked on his own flashlight.

It was a typical basement, lined with shelving and rows of canned goods. Mrs. Womble must've been an avid canner. Some of the glass jars had been smashed open and the sweet pickle aroma mixing with some horrific odor almost made Ross gag.

"Show yourself now," Ross ordered in a stronger tone. There was still only silence. He stepped over a sticky mess and explored deeper.

It was bone-numbing cold down here and it seeped through Ross's duster and into his skin. He could feel it in his fingers.

Ross caught a glimpse of something out of his peripheral vision and swung his gun toward it. An impression of something thin and wiry

Clay & Susan Griffith

was all he got before it ploughed into him. His finger reflexively pulled the trigger and the shotgun boomed. The ground came up fast and he landed heavy and hard thanks to the extra weight on top of him. The back of his head cracked on the edge of one of the shelves and bright lights filled his eyes. The shotgun clattered into the dark. He felt rather than saw bony hands fumbling at his throat. One got a grip and pressed his Adam's apple down deep. His breath was cut off. He pulled at the hands on him, but couldn't move them.

Remembering the brutalized Mr. Womble, he desperately kicked the figure off him and struggled to a crouch. He pulled his Peacemaker and tried to find the attacker through watering eyes. What he saw was a projectile aiming for his head. He ducked and the jar of preserves crashed above him, splattering moist fruit and sticky juice all over him. Glass shards fell down inside his collar.

"Geett ouut!" rasped a woman's garbled voice.

At the initial gunshot, Debbi had leaped straight down into the basement, sans ladder. She hit hard and rolled, coming up against a stiff, wooden shelf. Her light beam immediately illuminated Ross crouched in a corner, his hand to his throat. He looked dazed but okay. She swung the light elsewhere and found a figure rushing toward Ross, ax in hand.

Debbi fired. The shot echoed in the small, stone-lined basement. The figure stumbled and then rose again, swerving now toward Debbi.

The Ranger's eyes widened. It was definitely a woman. Her dress was in near rags and she was covered in filth. The woman's skin was like dry leather, shrunken over bones that stuck out at sharp angles. The long hair clung to the tough skin only in clumps. Both eyes were milk white.

The woman staggered as another bullet hit her high in the right arm. Ross had recovered enough to fire. The woman screamed, but didn't seem fazed by the pain, just enraged. Her hand still clutched the ax even though half the upper flesh of the arm was gone. But there was no blood. It was then Debbi noted no breath either. There was no telltale cloud filling the air in front of the woman's mouth, only a deep blackness. Confused, the woman turned her head again toward Ross.

Debbi fired straight into the woman's chest.

The woman rocked back and stood swaying, guttural noises sounding loud in the still air.

The woman straightened and tried to speak. It came out unintelligible except for one word - "Mine."

The memory of the abused state of the house filled Debbi. Was Mrs. Womble so crazed that all she could think of was how her husband ruined her once beautiful home?

Debbi took a step forward, her weapon dropping slowing. "Mrs. Womble?"

The ax immediately switched hands and Mrs. Womble threw herself at Debbi. In midair, another blast hit the woman's side and she was knocked away by its impact. She dropped in a heap on the cold ground beside the shaking Ranger.

Ross took a step forward, gun smoking. He heard the cracking of the broken glass under his boots. "Dallas, you okay?"

"Yeah. You?" Debbi stepped nervously away from the still form.

Ross fingered the sore spot on the back of his head and nodded. He approached the body, shining his light on it to see if she was still alive.

Book I: The Horror Lords

But there was no rise or fall from her chest. The last shot killed her. He knelt down to look at her.

Debbi asked, "Is that really Mrs. Womble?"

"I'm not sure. She's so emaciated." His own stomach was churning at the thought that quiet Lee Womble was in reality a very, very sick man. He straightened, using a nearby support beam as leverage. "Let's get out of here."

Nodding, Debbi moved to leave.

The body on the ground twisted around, hand still clutching the ax.

"Look out!" Ross shoved Debbi aside frantically. The air whistled with the speed of the ax head.

It missed Debbi by less than an inch and thunked into the support beam next to Ross, firmly pinning his duster. He backpedaled and went down.

Immediately, Mrs. Womble screamed again and scrambled toward the trapped Ross, her lips curled back over black and rotting teeth.

Debbi brought her gun up and started firing repeatedly. The woman was so insane or so drugged that there was no hope of reasoning with her.

Each bullet that slammed into Mrs. Womble slowed her advance, but didn't stop her. She kept wailing in that horrible, strangled sound and reaching for Ross, who had dragged himself back as far as his pinned coat would allow. He was in the process of shucking it from his shoulders in a frantic attempt to get away.

Debbi was on her last few rounds and she knew it. The little blinking red light in the darkness told her so. "Die, damn you!"

Finally, her last bullet slammed into Mrs. Womble's head and the woman flopped on her side like a boneless animal. She didn't even twitch.

Debbi wasted no time in ejecting her empty clip and slapping home a new one. Her gun was down and back up again in record time, her harsh breathing echoed only by Ross's a few feet away.

He was crouched and his weapon trained unwaveringly on the woman's body.

It was a few long minutes before either of them made any move. Finally, Ross felt his legs steady enough to rise. He licked his dry lips and slowly took a step forward, his Peacemaker still aimed at the target.

"Sir?" Debbi warned. She still didn't trust it.

"Has to be done, Dallas." Ross took another step forward. The body made no movement. He came close enough to toe her with his boot. Still no reaction. His breathing became steadier. "I think that last shot did the trick."

The woman's skull was almost completely caved in by the blast from Debbi's Dragon.

Ross wrenched the ax free of the beam and reached warily down for his duster. He flipped it over his shoulder. "Let's get her over to Doc's. I want an autopsy done on her, too. I want to know what happened here."

The woman's flesh was flaking off everywhere he prodded at it with the ax handle. She looked like she was rotting.

Debbi looked Ross in the eye. "There's a tarp over there." Her gun was still pointed at the body and the determination in her face deemed it would remain so.

Ross got the tarp. The woman's body weighed hardly anything. It

Clay & Susan Griffith

wasn't hard for him to maneuver it onto the tarp and wrap it up.

Ross had to admit he was grateful to have Debbi's single-mindedness backing him up. He dragged the tarp toward the ladder and glanced upward. "Now comes the fun part."

Ross threw the tarp-covered bundle onto an empty table in the doctor's examination room.

Doctor Walter P. Dazy glanced up at them in surprise. He was a man in his fifties, hair thinning and gray, but his blue eyes were sharp and clear.

"Busy night, eh?" he noted.

Ross just grunted and pointed at the tarp. "I want an autopsy done on her right now."

"Now?"

"While we're here," Debbi added.

"Sure," Doc muttered. "Autopsies in fifteen minutes or they're free." He went to the tarp and methodically began to open the folds. It didn't miss his notice that both Ross and Debbi aimed shotguns while he did so. He paused and regarded them curiously. "Is there something I should know?"

"Just open it, Doc." Ross stood next to the table with his weapon leveled pointblank at the wrapped cadaver.

The Doctor did as he was ordered and flung back the tarp. The body of an emaciated woman with multiple gunshot wounds to her body and head lay before him. He glanced up at Ross with one raised eyebrow. "You're afraid of this?"

Ross just stared stone-faced at the body.

Doc shrugged and leaned over the body to study the remaining features. He frowned and pulled the tattered remnants of her clothing from her torso. He looked up puzzled.

"Uh, you want me to do *another* autopsy on her?"

"What?"

Doc chuckled and pointed to the signs of an incision running from the woman's thorax to groin, half of it decimated by bullet holes.

"This is Glenda Womble," he said and gestured to a covered body on another table. "His wife." He cocked his head at the two Rangers. "I performed an autopsy on her five years ago. I don't think she needs another one."

Ross scowled deeply. "Are you sure about her identity?"

"Look, she's not at her best right now, but I never forget a face, dead or otherwise. That's Glenda Womble. Trust me."

"And you swear it was really her that died five years ago?" Debbi asked.

"Um, yes." The confusion on his face was evident. "Why? Did someone dig her up and shoot holes in her?"

Debbi and Ross exchanged a look. The implications of what Doc was telling them just started to sink in.

Ross rubbed his jaw roughly. "What did you find out about Mr. Womble?"

Doc glanced back at his other patient. "Oh, he definitely died of a broken neck. Looks like it was snapped clean by someone's bare hands. That takes some strength, let me tell you."

"What about the bite marks?" Debbi asked.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Doc actually frowned. "That's the odd thing. They're human, not animal. Ripped off some good chunks too. Must have been a hell of a struggle."

Ross lowered his weapon. "Check Mrs. Womble's teeth. I bet you'll find a match." Without another word, he stormed from the examination room.

Debbi dragged her gaze away from Glenda Womble only to find a curious Doc waiting for an explanation.

"The Wombles had issues," was all she could offer. Then she followed Ross.

Chapter 8

Ghost Rock City was burning.

Reaper gunships hovered in the smoke-darkened sky. Armed men dragged goods out of buildings and fights ensued over the spoils. Mounted anouks scoured the town, pursuing those who tried to flee. The bodies of the dead littered the streets.

Nicolai perched atop an armored vehicle as it rolled slowly through town. Tall and grim, dressed entirely in black, he rested a hand on the .50 caliber machine gun on the open turret of the tank. He stroked his goatee and felt the sun beating down on his bald pate. His steely eyes darted about, watching his Reapers go about their well-practiced business. He viewed the carnage with a sense of accomplishment.

A contingent of twelve of Nicolai's personal bodyguards, his Vanguard, formed a ring around the tank. They were a quiet, stoic group, unlike the generally boisterous Reapers who roamed the streets. They were covered head-to-toe in heavy body armor, not a hint of flesh was visible. They were outfitted with the best electronics and carried the finest pulse rifles that Nicolai had been able to buy or steal, Hellstromme Industries Hellrazors. The Vanguard had once been Coltrane's bodyguards, and only Nicolai and Coltrane knew they were high-level Hellstromme Industries automatons.

A large group of heavily armed men gave Nicolai a leisurely salute, waving their mixed collection of firearms. They wore layers of looted clothing, carried silver plates under their arms, and were festooned in jewelry taken from the few female townsfolk. Each one had burlap sacks or wooden boxes filled with ringing metallic booty.

"Congratulations, Nicolai!" one of the men shouted. "Another victory for the Reapers!"

"We have liberated another town from the shackles of colonialism!" Nicolai smiled his broad, charismatic smile and applauded his fighters. Then he reached into the tank and pulled out a folded cloth. He took it by two corners and dramatically snapped it out. He climbed up onto the top of the turret and stood wide legged, letting the winds catch the flag and unfurl it from his hands. The flag was golden with a large violet sunburst in the center representing Banshee, and two smaller violet spheres near the sunburst symbolizing the two moons of Banshee.

"Listen to me, my brothers!" Nicolai shouted. "Let your triumph over the forces of colonial brutality in Ghost Rock City be remembered as the birth pangs of a new epoch!" The crowd of Reapers cheered. Passing Azeel tribesmen reined in their mounts to listen.

Nicolai stretched out one arm, fingers clenched. "My soldiers! You are the fists of a new order and the shields of a new world! No longer will

Clay & Susan Griffith

we toil under the burden of the illegitimate Earth government! No longer will we suffer their savage oppression! This planet is Banshee! We are Banshee! And it is we of Banshee who will determine the planet's fate! Not the genocidal forces from Earth!

"Today, I proclaim a new Order! The Banshee Free State! This is our flag! This flag represents free humans," he pointed dramatically at the Azeel warriors, "and free anouks working together to make a future of plenty and wonder! You are the ones who have made it possible, my brothers! You have forged this mighty future for our world! Hail to the Banshee Free State!"

Nicolai stretched wide his arms in great satisfaction and triumph. The flag fluttered in the wind.

The gathered Reapers cheered and fired their weapons into the air.

Nicolai tied the flag to the aerial of his tank. Then he reached into the turret again and, as if by a miracle, pulled out more flags. He threw them into the crowd. The Reapers reacted in paroxysms of patriotic fervor. They unfolded the flags, draping them over their shoulders and ran down the street flying them out behind them.

The mob chanted, "Nicolai! Nicolai! Nicolai!" He waved with both hands and instructed his driver to move on through the charred town.

The armored vehicle clanked to a halt in front of the mine offices. Ghost Rock City was a boomtown set beside the pits of a series of rich mines. It had existed for two decades and been quickly reoccupied after the Worldstorm because the shafts in the nearby tannis hills produced vast amounts of very pure ghost rock.

That was also why Nicolai set his sights on this town as the first step in constructing his ambitious designs for Banshee. Power required ownership of the means of production of wealth. On Banshee, wealth meant ghost rock. Nicolai needed lots of ghost rock to fund the expansion he planned. He used his men and weapons to get ghost rock and would use the ghost rock to buy more men and more weapons. Politics was an expensive business. And totalitarianism was more expensive still.

Nicolai dropped down from the tank and strode into the mine offices. The Vanguard spread out mechanically around the building, rifles at the ready.

Inside the dark lobby, one of Nicolai's lieutenants amused himself by spinning around in a swivel chair. His name was Baku and he was a bearded, fat man of enormous appetites, but limited attention span. Six men knelt on the floor at Baku's feet with their hands tied behind their backs. They were all half-dressed, having been dragged from their beds when the Reapers stormed into town with the morning sun. They all looked up at Nicolai's entrance with faces of terror. Nicolai smiled at the recognition.

Baku dug his heels into the floor and came to a halt. He grinned at his boss. His boss didn't smile back. The lieutenant pointed to one of the half-dressed men.

"That's the mine administrator," Baku said.

Nicolai stood in front of the administrator. "Your mines are now the property of the Banshee Free State."

"Go to Hell," the man said.

Nicolai pulled his pistol and shot the man. Then with the smoking pistol in hand, he turned to Baku and asked, "Who is the *assistant* mine administrator?"

Book I: The Horror Lords

Another prisoner, with his eyes glued on the dead man and the stream of rich, red blood flowing across the floor, screamed, "I'll sign anything you want! The mines are yours!"

Nicolai turned and shot him too. "I cannot abide a man without loyalty. I could never have trusted him to run my mines." He holstered his pistol, bringing sighs of relief from the other men. He pointed at one of the prisoners and said to Baku, "Kill everyone but him. He is my mine administrator."

Nicolai departed the office.

Baku picked up his rifle off the floor and laughed. "Good news! Only one of you has to go to work today!"

"A Colonial Ranger!"

Nicolai watched with suppressed delight as an approaching group of Reapers dragged a beaten and bloodied Ranger. The lawman was thrown to the ground at Nicolai's feet.

"Well," Nicolai announced, "here is one of the oppressors of the people."

Struggling to raise himself partially off the ground, the Ranger looked up defiantly. His face was swollen and bruised, his lips torn, blood streaming from his nose and mouth. He spit on Nicolai's boot.

Nicolai brutally kicked the Ranger in the face. Then he gently wiped his boot on the man's torn shirt.

"Tie him to the front of my tank."

The mob laid greedy hands on the Ranger. Rope was soon produced and the lawman was bound with arms outstretched to the front of Nicolai's armored vehicle. His feet hung loosely on the ground; he didn't have the strength to stand. Nicolai brought out another flag and tied the upper corners to the prisoner's wrists, draping the flag across his body. The Ranger's bloodied head lolled weakly above the golden cloth.

"I'll have to get more tanks," Nicolai said, "so I can have one for every Colonial Ranger in Temptation."

The Ranger's head bobbed weakly with a laugh. "Ross's boys'll grind you up."

Nicolai leaned closer to the prisoner. "I would prefer my prognostication from someone who isn't an utter failure. Your day is done. The people revile you and your kind."

The Ranger opened one swollen eye and said quietly, but with remarkable clarity, "Nice vocabulary. But you're still just a thief."

Nicolai was taken aback. He had hoped for begging. He expected profanity and mindless resistance. He glanced around. Apparently no one else had heard the Ranger's comment. He climbed up on the tank and signaled the driver to move.

As the tank roared to life and began to roll forward, the mob cheered. The Ranger's body bounced and shook from the vibrations of the vehicle and his booted feet dragged in the dirt between the grinding treads.

Nicolai made a triumphant parade through town, waving to the Reapers who celebrated the humiliation of the passing Ranger. He then left the mob behind and rode out of town to the nearest mineshaft, followed only by his Vanguard who jogged alongside the tank.

His mind was already off the Ranger's comment and back to the difficulties of constructing his new state. There would be a day of

Clay & Susan Griffith

looting to appease his men, then he would appoint several of his most idealistic and brutal underlings to get the mines operating again. He needed ghost rock to sell. The merchants and caravaneers of Banshee would trade guns, blackline, and food for ghost rock. Merchants feared the Reapers, as well they should, but business was business. Money was their god. And in another world, perhaps, that would have made them the strongest. But this was Banshee and wealth was a god of limited influence. Nicolai's god was power, and power came from force. The greedy bourgeoisie middlemen would eagerly buy and sell with Nicolai until the day he cut their throats. He smiled at the justice of the concept.

The tank approached a black cave dug into the black tannis hill. Nicolai saw a figure moving inside the opening of the mine. He signaled to his driver to halt. The Vanguard swept around in front of the tank and took up positions.

The figure stepped into partial sunlight. He was tall and robed, with a hood obscuring his face. The Vanguard immediately lowered their weapons. Nicolai's first thought was of betrayal and assassination. Alarm gripped him. He peered at the man.

"Coltrane?" Nicolai's hand rested on his pistol.

Coltrane kept his hands buried in the sleeves of his robe. "Nicolai! Congratulations on yet another splendid victory. And on one less Colonial Ranger. I waited here for you so we could have a quiet word. I thought you might come to view your new mines. I remember those heady days of conquest. Nothing makes a man feel more like he's had a good day than liberating new property."

Nicolai slid off the turret. He purposefully refused to look at the Ranger as he passed. He paused when he realized the Vanguard weren't moving with him. Not wanting to appear weak, he strode on. But he suddenly felt very vulnerable.

Coltrane had not appeared outside his black ruin for more than a year. Was he going to attempt to resume control of the Reapers? Nicolai wondered. How typical of the great opportunist, to return at the moment of Nicolai's greatest triumph.

"I see the Vanguard are still with you," Coltrane said.

"Yes. Their programming has held up. And, clearly, they are pleased to see you. As am I, comrade." Nicolai paused outside the cave.

Coltrane shuffled back into the shadows. "Feel free to stay where you are. I know ghost rock vapor sickens you."

"Thank you." Nicolai could barely see Coltrane's form in the darkness of the cave. He was startled when something very tall moved in the shadows beyond. Nicolai heard the sounds of an animal eating coming from inside the cave.

Coltrane took a deep breath. "I, on the other hand, have come to enjoy it. And I like the strange screaming sound that raw ghost rock makes when it burns. Have you ever heard it?"

"Yes. What brings you here, so far from your ruin?" Nicolai had more important things on his mind than chitchat. Plus, Coltrane and the thing behind him were unnerving.

"I wanted to be with you on the momentous day, the proclamation of your Banshee Free State."

"Our Banshee Free State."

Coltrane quivered and made a noise that sounded like a laugh. "Of course. It's a magnificent thing. You've made the Reapers into so much

Book I: The Horror Lords

more than I ever dreamed all those years ago."

"I am only completing what you began."

"What's your next step?"

"Temptation."

"Hmm."

"You disagree?" Nicolai regarded his mentor irritably.

"No. Temptation must fall. But taking it by storm will be expensive. We discussed this at the last gathering. Avernus was insulted by your absence. As was I."

"I'm busy."

Coltrane nodded with understanding. "Don't take our support for granted, Nicolai. Avernus and Tekkeng are powerful allies."

"Magic is all well and good," Nicolai responded with the bland superiority of an academic, "but only steel takes ground and holds it. They need the Reapers. And I command the Reapers now. I've sent word for all Reapers. They are gathering at Domburg. And they are ready to assault Temptation. That city is the natural target for so large a force."

Coltrane turned and paced thoughtfully. Nicolai stared at him with annoyance.

"It's impossible to overestimate your leadership qualities," Coltrane said, "but I beg you not to equate that with the quality of your forces. You haven't had real opposition for some time. In my foolish younger days, I took the Reapers into battle against EXFOR and the Hellstromme Marines. It was a mistake that I was lucky to live to regret. The Reapers are not an army. They are an armed mob. At best, there are cadres within it that constitute an excellent guerilla force. But at their heart, they are a collection of mercenaries and idealists and nomadic anouks. They are perfect for destroying a mining town such as this or raiding caravans. They strike and move. They are fast and versatile. They can melt before opposition only to reform and attack from another direction. Used properly, as you have always done, they are a supreme fighting force. But Temptation is well defended; it has walls and a large contingent of Colonial Rangers."

Nicolai felt rage growing in him. Coltrane had taught him most of what he knew about military tactics, but leadership was his own contribution. Coltrane could not possibly grasp the fact that properly motivated troops could do the impossible. Coltrane had never been a spiritual leader. He was not a firebrand who could use words to spark a fire in a man and bring out a spirit and fervor the man never knew was there. Nicolai was such a leader; he believed that his Reapers would follow him anywhere and do anything for him when Coltrane went off to "learn" from Avernus in the ancient anouk ruins in the hills above Domburg.

Still, Coltrane was an organizational genius. He had built the Reapers from a band of robber mercenaries into a formidable military force. And he had chosen Nicolai personally to succeed him. If Coltrane chose to reappear at this time, it must be for a reason.

Nicolai suppressed his anger. The stakes were too high to cloud his planning with a clash of personalities. He had to be objective and make sound judgments if his Free State was to flourish. If a power struggle for the Reapers was in his future, he could wield a dagger with the best of them. The early days of statehood were treacherous. One false step could doom a glorious future.

"What do you suggest?" Nicolai tried to keep his voice from sounding

Clay & Susan Griffith

stiff and uninterested.

"What is the key to power?" Coltrane questioned instead.

"Force," Nicolai responded quickly, irritated that the discussion had turned into a quiz.

"Fear," Coltrane intoned. "Force wanes. Fear, if properly tended, lasts forever. All authority, all power, stems from fear. Without it, there is nothing."

"And Temptation?"

"I would ask you to wait. My time among the tannis ruins has given me certain...abilities. Perhaps one day I will teach you. But for now, it's my pleasure to put my abilities at your service. Temptation fears you now, but it's a fear that will make them fight. While you probably could take the town, your losses would be great. There is a better way. I have put forces into motion in Temptation that will literally bring them to their knees with horror. I have the power to make it so they will no longer fear your coming; but rather, they will live in horror that you will *not* come. So wait. Use these mines to build your arsenal. When the time comes, Temptation will cower like a beaten child at your feet. Then, use them as you will."

Nicolai asked in surprise and concern, "You have your own agents inside Temptation?"

Coltrane laughed again. "You could say that."

"How long must I wait?"

"I don't know. The human mind is a fragile, but deliciously unpredictable thing. It shouldn't be long. But, after all, we have all the time in the world."

"Very well," Nicolai said hesitantly. "I await your word."

"Good," Coltrane said. "Oh, by the way, I found some people hiding here when I arrived. Common thieves mostly."

Nicolai started at the mention of thieves.

Coltrane continued, "I had to kill them. But they told me something interesting before they died. A caravan passed through here a few days ago. These thieves discovered it carried a supply of the black guns that have been appearing around Banshee recently."

Nicolai was staring at the ground, lost in thought.

"Did you hear me?" Coltrane asked loudly.

"What? Sorry, yes, a caravan. Black guns."

"This caravan was bound east to Makeshift and then turning north to Temptation. I want it intercepted. I want those guns."

"Very well. I'll send word to have it ambushed at the Bosphorus Straits." The feeling of taking direct orders again was offensive to Nicolai. He was laboring to construct a worldwide state and completely redesign society on Banshee, and Coltrane was obsessing over pirating a shipment of guns. Nicolai didn't have time to worry about caravans and guns.

"It's important, Nicolai," Coltrane interrupted Nicolai's reverie.

"I said it would be done!"

Coltrane froze in his tracks. Nicolai felt something strange and frightening surging in his old mentor. This was not the same guerilla leader and hardnosed politico he had known for many years. Seeing him outside the natural strangeness of the anouk ruins in the ghastly company of Avernus and the horrid Tekkeng only accentuated that fact. It was chilling. But Nicolai switched his mind to comfortable politics and immediately began to consider the possibility that the Reapers

Book I: The Horror Lords

would welcome this man back as their leader. How far gone was Coltrane? What exactly had he become? Nicolai found himself staring into the darkness of the hood, trying to see Coltrane's face. It was impossible; and Nicolai was grateful.

"Forgive me, Nicolai," Coltrane said quietly. "I don't mean to burden you at this momentous time. But, please, trust me and you will learn aspects to power you never imagined."

"No doubt." Nicolai glanced away. "It will all be done as you wish."

"Very good. Now, I would like to have that Colonial Ranger you have tied to your tank."

Nicolai stood opened-mouth for a second, unsure what to think or say.

"Unless," Coltrane said, "you have plans for him."

"No. I ..." Nicolai returned to his tank. He slipped a long knife from his boot sheath and cut the ropes holding the Ranger. The man fell heavily to the ground where he grunted and lay still. It was impressive that he was still alive. Nicolai turned back to the mine entrance.

"Leave him," Coltrane called from the shadows. "We'll fetch him when you've gone."

Nicolai climbed back into his tank. The machine reversed and he was gratified to see the Vanguard falling into their normal positions around it. Nicolai didn't look back; he didn't want to see what Coltrane might be doing to the Colonial Ranger. He began to feel more relieved the farther away he moved from Coltrane's dark place.

Chapter 9

"Grab your guns, boys! There's been a break out!"

Debbi and Stew looked up from their desks at Lyle Cassian who had just slammed open the office door. Hands flashed to pistols. They turned to the lockup behind them. Debbi expected the Reaper to come crashing through the door.

However, the door remained securely closed.

Stew was on his feet. He punched in the key code and pulled the door open. The five cells were all closed. There were only two prisoners—Borneo and a teamster who was sobering up.

Borneo immediately leaped to his feet and pressed his nose through the bars.

"Time for food?" he asked.

"Shut up." Stew closed the lockup and turned to face Cass. "What are you talking about? There's no break out."

"Not here," the old Ranger said in his graveled voice. "At the cemetery."

Temptation Cemetery was located on high ground several miles east of town. After the Worldstorm had left everything covered in sand, the cemetery was one of the first places excavated by general civic effort, an odd but necessary exercise in exhuming the memories of the dead.

Debbi skidded the speeder bike to a halt in front of the cemetery's wrought iron gate. Cass unclenched his hands from around her waist and peeled himself off the bike. He took a second to steady his nerves. Debbi's driving was a tad reckless to suit someone his age. Debbi just slapped up her goggles and pushed her way through the gate.

The cemetery covered more than six hundred sprawling acres. At one

Clay & Susan Griffith

time it was a beautiful piece of country with rolling hills and a picturesque stream, partially surrounded by a high iron fence. Now it was stark and harsh. The fence was largely gone. Trees planted decades ago for gentle landscaping were still standing, but they had been stripped clean of leaves and bark by the ferocious hurricane force winds. Their naked, barren limbs reached out like dead fingers.

Here by the gate, headstones were haphazardly placed, demonstrating the frontier urgency that was responsible for the cemetery's foundation. Deeper in, the higher level of civilization that developed in Temptation was reflected in the neat rows of gravestones that stretched out to the horizon. Around the fringes, however, the chaos of the last year was sadly seen. There were no headstones, only mounds of earth covering trenches hastily dug for mass graves.

Cass touched Debbi on the shoulder and she flinched.

"Sorry." He looked out over the desolate cemetery. "I'm thinking Glenda Womble wasn't some isolated aberration."

"That's good. I hate *isolated* aberrations. Now, what's going on out here? I don't see anything."

"Keep walking. You will."

Debbi cast an annoyed glance at Cass. They pulled their sidearms and moved into the gathering of gravestones. They walked for several minutes, their footsteps crunching in the dirt. The wind whistled through the monuments. Nothing moved except clouds of dust wandering aimlessly around the cracked and broken headstones.

"Watch your step!" Cass exclaimed.

Debbi stopped and looked down. A partially open grave yawned at her feet. The earth was collapsed and sucked down two feet below the surrounding ground. More dirt was spread out haphazardly around the grave. In the center was a sinkhole leading to the darkness below.

Debbi's eyes slid sideways and the next grave was in the same shape. And the next. And the next. All around her, graves were uprooted. She asked, "What is going on around here? Grave robbers?"

Cass said with mild incredulity, "Do those graves look dug up to you?"

Debbi understood what he meant, although she didn't want to. The graves had collapsed because the dirt was displaced from below. She felt a surge of nausea as she contemplated what appeared to be the horrible truth of what happened in this cemetery. The withering, violent figure of Mrs. Womble flashed in her memory.

She shook her head, trying to get her thoughts under control. "I don't...uh...so what happened to all the bodies?"

"Wandered off maybe."

Debbi didn't respond. She walked down the row of graves until she came to one that was undisturbed.

"What about this one?" she asked. "Why is it okay?"

"I don't know, darlin'." Cass shook his head and laid a calming hand on Debbi's shoulder. "Take a second and try to get your mind around this. Let me tell you, I've been around a long time and heard a lot of strange stories. Particularly in the years since the Skinnies showed up. I wasn't sure how much of it I believed. The stories always happened out there somewhere in the wastelands where it's hard to tell truth from fiction anyway. But it's hard to argue with your own eyes." He kicked a dirt clod back into an open grave.

"I don't know," Debbi argued feebly. It was beyond her experience.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Cass nudged her and pointed down.

A hand pushed up through the dirt.

She froze, staring at the undeniable sight of a corpse wriggling free of its grave. A second arm protruded and then a head, shoving dirt haphazardly aside.

It was a man. The face was gaunt; skin stretched tight, teeth prominent. Its hair was black. Its eyes flashed about wildly. It used clawlike hands to shift dirt aside, digging itself out to its chest. Then it placed its hands flat against the ground and began to push, dragging itself inch-by-inch, free of the confining grave.

Cass just watched as the cadaver stood and shook the dirt from its decaying frame. Then the Ranger jerked up his Dragoon and shot the thing in the chest. It staggered back against its gravestone. Its gaze turned and locked on Cass. It surged at him with surprising speed. Cass fired again, blasting a hole through the thing's chest. It already had its bony fingers on Cass's throat and its teeth snapped inches from his face. The old man grimaced; he struggled to avoid the teeth and bring his gun to bear again.

Debbi placed her weapon against the rotting head of the zombie and pulled the trigger. Brain matter exploded out the other side of its skull. It quivered and fell in a heap. She aimed again and fired, blasting most of its head away.

Cass massaged his throat, his eyes wide with shock. "Did you know to do that? Or do you just shoot everybody in the head?"

"Seemed like the thing to do," Debbi answered. She wouldn't say that it was because a head shot had finally put down Glenda Womble. She didn't want to start drawing rational conclusions from this irrational situation. It would be the final step to believing it.

Cass stepped over the body and read the headstone. "Hm. I knew this fellow. Considering he's been dead for six years, he's getting around real well."

Debbi wiped her forehead with her sleeve. She was sweating. "How many people do you think are buried in here?"

Cass whistled. "Quite a few over the years. Four, five hundred maybe. Most people sent their loved ones back to Earth for proper burial, back when they could. There's also a section devoted to the fallen military. And, of course, that doesn't count the hundreds more planted out here after the Worldstorm."

The thought of all those in the mass graves undulating with new life under their feet made the sweat on Debbi's brow turn cold.

They continued walking, warily eyeing their surroundings. They came to one of mass graves of the Worldstorm dead. It was a low mound of earth that was about four feet wide, but well over forty feet long. She kicked at the dirt.

Debbi covered her eyes against the sun and peered back toward Temptation. She was looking for some sign that other Rangers were coming; she'd sent Stew to fetch Ross.

She felt something touch her foot. Fingers protruded from the mass grave and seized the toe of her left boot. When she tried to pull it away, she fell forward onto the mound. Another hand held her right ankle.

"Debbi!" Cass yelled. He rushed to her side as a third hand from below grabbed her arm.

She screamed, pulling against the strong hands. She felt something moving in the mound of dirt under her. Earth shifted, revealing a face

Clay & Susan Griffith

staring up at her, close enough to kiss her cheek. Its mouth worked soundlessly and one eye was missing. A second mouth appeared through the dirt near the gaping black eyehole. A head worked its way clear. But it wasn't one head; it was the grotesque fusion of two.

She pulled with all her strength and freed her wrist. Her efforts dislodged more dirt from the thing. Its shoulders and abdomen jerked clear with her as she tried to pull away. Flailing arms protruded from the wrong places. It seemed to have four arms and Debbi saw a leg twitching from the ribcage. Its horror-stricken face was a blend of a man and a woman, and perhaps a third person. And beneath it, deeper in the mass grave, more fused, mutated cadavers wriggled and thrashed, struggling up toward the air.

Debbi was aware of Cass's hands under her arms, pulling with all his strength. He tugged her to her feet, but a clutching hand still held her ankle. Cass pulled his large knife and slashed the heavy blade deep into the dead wrist. He sliced halfway and sawed through the rest. Just as Debbi came free, more fingers pushed out and grabbed for Cass's arm. Debbi pulled the old man out of their reach.

The two Rangers stood back and watched the mound quivering with grotesque life. Cadavers gasped and stretched, their misshapen limbs and heads forever tangled. Their movements were pathetic and horrific. Each arm and leg struggled to propel the torso in a different direction. They writhed and twisted, attempting to lift themselves to their feet, but never accomplishing more than a few halting steps before collapsing like a newborn calf.

"Those poor people," Debbi whispered.

"They're not people anymore," Cass said. He shook his head a second later. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

Debbi said, "Let's get back to the gate so we don't get cut off."

The two Rangers retraced their steps. Debbi saw several cadavers in the distance moving among the gravestones. They seemed to be gathering into small groups. They weren't walking with great purpose; they milled first in one direction and then another. They seemed confused.

Debbi shuddered. She could no longer cling to the hope that there was an explanation other than the obvious. The dead were getting out of their graves in Temptation.

A dust cloud roared toward Debbi and Cass. It was a Stallion. She saw Ross and Stew through the windshield. The Stallion hummed in near Debbi's speeder and lowered to the ground. The doors flew open, and Ross and Stew piled out either side of the cab. Stew scanned the distance. Ross approached Debbi and Cass. His ripped duster flapped in the wind and his hand rested on the butt of his six-shooter.

"What's the story?" he asked.

"It's not good," Debbi answered. "It's really not good."

"Are you all right? You look pale."

"I'm fine. It's just ..." She let her voice trail off.

Ross started to say more to her, but something behind her caught his sharp eye.

"Holy God," he said quietly.

Debbi turned. A dead woman was striding vigorously toward them from between the tombstones. Her black funeral dress was in tatters.

"It's Margaret Cowling!" Cass cried. "Kill her!"

Book I: The Horror Lords

Debbi raised her weapon, tried to steady her aim, and fired. She missed. Margaret Cowling pushed past the metal gate and broke into a lunatic run at the Rangers. Debbi again attempted to draw a bead on the dead woman. Her hand was shaking.

Ross stepped up beside her. He pulled his pistol, straightened his arm, and squeezed off a shot. Margaret Cowling's forehead blackened and she flopped to the ground.

Ross started to lower his pistol. Then he cast a sidelong glance at Cass with an eyebrow raised slightly. "Margaret Cowling was dead, wasn't she?"

"Three years."

He holstered his weapon. "Good."

Debbi wondered aloud, "First Mrs. Womble. Now all this. Why is this happening?"

Ross said, "Who the hell knows. But it doesn't matter why." He pointed at Stew. "Get on the horn and alert Temptation. Tell the militia to close the gates." He turned back to Debbi. "How many we got in there?"

"Only saw a few, but there are plenty of open graves."

"Damn it. All right, we've got about four hours of sun left. It's likely some of these things have gotten into Temptation already, so I'll head back and get some teams started sweeping the streets. I'll send a couple of guys out here to link up with you three." He paused to think and then pointed at Debbi. "First off, you, Stew, and Cass take this Hoss and circle the graveyard. See if these things are heading off in any particular direction. Then I want you sitting on the road to Temptation until I get some sharpshooters out here. Intercept any of these things you see making for town. Wherever you find them, I want 'em dead."

"Well, technically ..." Debbi began.

"Deader. When your relief gets here, Dallas, I want you and Stew back in town."

As Ross turned to the speeder, Debbi grabbed his arm. She looked into his face. "Ross, doesn't this bother you at all?" She indicated the late Margaret Cowling. "That woman died three years ago. Now she's walking. Just like Mrs. Womble. How can you act like it's a prison break?"

"Yeah, it bothers me. But as far as I'm concerned, it's just another crazy Skinny power. We don't have time to figure things out. We've got to protect those people." He waved his hand in the general direction of Temptation as he straddled the speeder bike. His words were clipped and sharp. "Dallas, we're surgeons, not doctors. We don't diagnose; we just cut where it hurts."

Ross was composed and sure of himself. His eyes didn't betray any confusion or fear. Everything he said was true for him, and the fact that he believed it so strongly gave Debbi a sense of purpose. She didn't always agree with his narrow view of their duty, but that wasn't important now. This was an unbelievable emergency and if she stopped to think about it, she might never start moving again. It was calming to have this horror turned into a series of manageable tasks. She suddenly appreciated the importance of leadership in a way she never had before. She gave him a single hard nod.

"Go to work," Ross told her. "Keep your comlink open." He fired up the speeder and roared off across the grim, windy landscape toward Temptation.

Stew stepped out of the back of the Stallion and tossed Debbi a

Clay & Susan Griffith

sniper rifle. It was a Cody .74, a superior long-range weapon, but far too automated for her. She had never trained on half the settings. She tossed it back to Stew.

"You use it," she said. "I'll slap a scope on a Hellrazor."

Stew shrugged and said, "Cass, take the wheel. Dallas and I will take the roof." He winked at the old Ranger. "Drive safe."

Cass regarded him with a smug grin.

Debbi and Stew climbed up onto the rear section of the Stallion. They faced opposite sides and secured themselves as well as possible. The Stallion started thrumming and lifted off the ground.

"Is Cass checked out on this Hoss?" Debbi asked.

Stew didn't answer. His bicep bulged under his jacket as he tightened his grip on the handhold.

The vehicle jerked forward, tilting wildly. Debbi suppressed a scream. Stew cursed under his breath. Cass got it relatively under control and the Stallion moved out.

Debbi was facing the cemetery. From her vantage point atop the Stallion, skimming about thirty feet off the ground, she saw a group of dead people milling around in the graveyard. She pounded on the roof of the vehicle with the butt of her rifle. Cass brought it to a wobbly stop and lowered it to the ground. The vehicle vibrated far too much to be a useful sniper platform when it was floating. Debbi and Stew stretched out on their stomachs and sighted carefully down the rifles.

"Try to take head shots, if you can," Debbi said. "That seems to put them down and keep them there."

"What? That's seventy-five yards easy. On moving targets."

Debbi said, "Don't worry. The Cody won't let you miss."

He shook his head. "Maybe it won't let *you* miss."

Debbi breathed out nervously. She placed her eye to the scope. She had trained, as had all Rangers, both with and without technological support. She actually preferred aiming with iron sights, but this was too important. There was no time to zero in the weapon. She needed kills with the first shot and the scope compensated for a lot of human slippage. She let her breath out and held it. Steady. Fire. Shift aim. Steady. Fire. Shift aim again. Steady. Fire.

At first, the zombies stood insensibly as the heads of their companions exploded. But soon they realized the danger. Some fell to the ground or dropped behind gravestones. Others scampered away, disappearing in the rolling hillocks. Debbi was terrified to see them move so fast.

With the killing zone now empty, the Stallion hovered on, setting down again when Debbi sighted more of the undead. Stew slipped next to her and they raised their rifles.

Debbi snapped off a shot that dropped a woman with one arm at one hundred yards.

"Male. Three o'clock," she said. "Near that mausoleum with the angel."

"Got him." Stew settled in behind his rifle. He pulled up, took a breath, and resettled. Then he set the rifle down and stared numbly at the figure.

Debbi watched him raise his binoculars. She didn't like the look that had come over his face.

"It's my father," Stew said softly.

"What?"

"It's my father." He lowered the binoculars and looked at Debbi. His

Book I: The Horror Lords

clear, blue eyes seemed lost. "You know, I didn't even think. He's buried here." He laughed humorlessly. "Or he used to be."

Debbi reached over and touched his arm. "Let him go."

Stew pursed his lips. "It'll have to be done eventually. Right?"

Debbi glanced at the distant figure. He was a small man with a palsied limp. He looked weak, small, and harmless.

Debbi said, "I'll take the shot."

Stew glared at her. She kept her face emotionless. He mechanically turned back to the Cody, took a sighting, and squeezed the trigger. Forty yards away, his father jerked slightly to one side. Stew immediately fired again and the target's head exploded. Stew closed his eyes. He lifted a fist and pounded the roof of the vehicle with one bone-rattling blow. The Stallion rose obediently and moved on. Stew's breath was harsh and strained as he turned his face away from Debbi.

They continued with this emotionless, rote procedure until they made the circuit around the cemetery. Debbi hit twenty-four and Stew seventeen, with most of those probable kills. It was disturbingly clear to Debbi that these dead things were aware and conscious of their surrounding. Oddly enough, the distance threatened to increase her sympathy for these creatures because they seemed confused and helpless, like hunted animals.

She forced herself to forget they had ever been human. They were just targets. And she was just a trigger.

The Stallion finally returned to the road that ran between the cemetery and Temptation. The vehicle settled down several hundred yards outside the gate. They hadn't seen any zombies outside the general confines of the cemetery, but had noticed footprints of small groups and individuals moving out into the desert, away from town. They were not at liberty to pursue; their priority was safeguarding Temptation. The Stallion provided them an excellent vantage point to watch the territory sweeping down from the cemetery plateau to the walls of the town visible in the distance.

Debbi and Stew crouched on the roof of the Stallion, cradling their rifles. Debbi looked at her partner. He was lost in thought, pretending to study the landscape through binoculars. She didn't want to talk either. They waited silently for their next target.

Chapter 10

"I want everybody working in pairs. First priority is to get people off the streets. Our cover story for now is that there's a danger of Reaper scavs in town. Second priority is to clean out the things from the cemetery wherever you find them. Investigate anything and everything that strikes you as suspicious. Don't worry about breaking down doors or ruffling feathers; we'll explain it tomorrow."

Ross paused and surveyed the group of six Rangers, four men and two women, gathered in the main office. Most of them looked shell-shocked by the news Ross had brought back from the cemetery a few hours before.

Debbi and Stew stood in the rear of the crowd having just returned to town after several militia members with sniper rifles joined Cass to watch the cemetery road. They were tired and nervous, already all too accepting of the unbelievable events of the evening.

There were currently sixteen Rangers in Temptation. Ross had turned

Clay & Susan Griffith

them all out for this. Six stood before him in the office. Eight Rangers, with information on how to deal with undead intruders, had been sent already to bolster the Night Watch and the militia. Even though the Night Watch was composed of the toughest members of the town militia who perversely welcomed the dangerous job of guarding the walls after dark, they weren't as skilled as Rangers.

Meanwhile, Ringo was manning the com shack, which was literally a shack on the roof of the Ranger headquarters. It contained a surprisingly sophisticated long-range broadcast system cannibalized from abandoned military equipment. And it actually managed, on occasion, to broadcast long range, depending on the weather and whether any of the relay stations set up many years ago by the colonial government were operating. For the most part, the shack tied together a makeshift network of radios laughingly called the Temptation Broadcast System. Most of the sets in the network were cobbled together from spare parts and junk, and were in the hands of various townfolk. They operated in times of emergency as a surprisingly effective alert system; provided the operators were sober.

The sun was nearly down. The streetlights that still worked were flickering on in a town that didn't realize the scope of the emergency they were in. Only the Rangers knew the truth. Nervous members of the town militia, a volunteer body with a limited store of courage and armaments, were stationed around the Depot with portable searchlights to sweep out the desert darkness. They were responding to rumors of a Reaper attack. Caravan bosses were hustling as many of their goods as possible inside the town gates.

Ross told the gathered Rangers, "It's highly likely a number of these things are inside the town. Dallas and I encountered one last night. We thought it was a unique event." He stared out over his people. "But it ain't."

"What are they exactly?" Ranger Patrick Ngoma asked. He was young and inexperienced. His black, strong-featured face held that touch of trepidation that all newbies had.

Ross tilted his head and worked his jaw for a second. "They're dead. That much we know. We don't know why they're here. We don't know how many. We don't know how long they've been...walking around."

Debbi considered asking 'Is there anything about this job you *do* know?' but it seemed out of place. Still, it brought an inappropriate smile to her face. Her eyes moved up to see Ross looking at her curiously. She covered her mouth and coughed, and shifted her gaze elsewhere.

He didn't alter his expression. "Like I said, Dallas and I met the late Mrs. Womble last night. She killed her husband with her bare hands and then ate part of him. Then she tried to kill Dallas and me with an ax."

Ty Miller shook his head. "That little woman's a real dynamo."

Ross didn't even bother to look at Miller. "Don't be fooled. These things are fast and mean. They are extremely aggressive. And they don't hurt easy." He put his index finger against his head. "When you can, take a head shot."

Several of the Rangers rolled their eyes and blew disturbed breaths. They were not all the crack shots the job's gunslinging reputation made them out to be. They looked at each other with mouths agape or nervous grins on their faces.

Miller laughed uncomfortably and elbowed Stew. "What'd I tell you?"

Book I: The Horror Lords

This job is nothing but animal control."

Stew didn't respond. He just stared at the floor.

Ross walked between his people. Every eye followed him. Debbi noticed that he cast a sharp glance at Stew. Then he actually put his hand on Stew's shoulder as he passed. The move startled the younger Ranger. They locked eyes briefly and Stew nodded almost imperceptibly.

Ross stepped to the front door and faced the assembled Rangers. "These things may not all be interested in killing, but they don't get the benefit of the doubt. Assume the worst. Your job is to protect the citizens of Temptation. And yourselves. If you see these things, don't hesitate. Destroy them."

He threw open the front door like he was releasing the hounds. "All right, pair up and go to work. Dallas, with me."

Debbi and Ross walked side by side down the dark street. They both carried shotguns.

They were in an older, residential part of town and many residents stared out of windows as the Rangers passed. They intended to sweep this densely populated area and end up at St. Calixtus, the ruined and abandoned Catholic cathedral over a mile away. The old Catholic burying ground at St. Calixtus was the only cemetery inside the town walls. Ross had dispatched several militiamen to the cathedral as soon as he arrived back in town from the main cemetery. He had heard no word from them about undead activity.

"What's with Stew?" Ross asked.

"Out at the cemetery, he had to kill his father. Or, um, shoot his father." The act still horrified her.

"Jesus." Silence filled the air for a moment before he asked, "How's he gonna hold up?"

Debbi was surprised Ross asked her. "He'll be fine. This whole thing's kind of a shocker to everyone. But that made it an extra shock for him."

"All right." Ross accepted her assessment without question.

They continued on. The wind howled through the jagged buildings. Ross's duster flapped noisily. Debbi found the sound comforting.

They had seen no sign of the walking dead so far.

The streets were quiet. Word of the general curfew had spread rapidly; the core of Temptation was small. No doubt, however, the Depot and the port and the saloons were still thronged with people eager to ignore the authorities or with no place to go. Perhaps there were even a few who had not heard about the curfew. Ross and Debbi would pass that way next and force the saloons to shut their doors for the night. Even a team of regular Rangers would have trouble clearing *Mo's*; it would take Ross to enforce it.

"Hold up," Ross said. "Lemme check this alley." He held out his scattergun and stepped into the dim, dead-end alleyway. Debbi tried to keep an eye on him and the street too. She could make him out in the darkness kicking aside boxes and rubbish.

Ahead of her, Debbi saw a small boy running down the street. He wasn't running toward her; he was just running. First one side of the street, then the other.

"Ross, something out here."

The boy was no more than seven years old. He was dirty and his clothes were disheveled. He climbed onto the porch of a refurbished

Clay & Susan Griffith

house and peered into a small window next to the front door.

As Debbi approached, the boy turned and stood staring at her. His face was blank.

She was about to step onto the porch. Ross grabbed her arm and pulled her back. He pointed his weapon at the child.

"Hold it!" he snarled. "That could be one of them."

Debbi shook off his grip and whispered, "Are you crazy! He's a scared little boy. Put down your gun. You want to shoot a child?"

"A zombie child, yes."

"He's not a zombie child." Though the statement was said with conviction, there was still a part of her that was unsure.

"He's dirty," Ross argued.

"All children are dirty. Don't you remember being a little boy?"

"No. Talk to him from here." Ross's eyes never left the child, nor did he lower his shotgun.

The boy was blonde and cherubic. He stood on the porch watching the Rangers, glancing at the gun with all the obliviousness of an innocent.

Drawing in a deep breath, Debbi purposefully shoved her uncertainties aside. It was just a lost child.

She leaned forward. "Are you all right? What's your name?"

The boy looked past her to Ross.

"Put your gun down," Debbi commanded over her shoulder. "You're scaring him."

"It's mutual." Ross lowered the riot gun and took a step to the side to better cover Debbi.

Debbi dropped to one knee and smiled. "What's your name?"

"Stephen." The boy's voice was quiet.

"Stephen? That's a nice name. What are you doing out here, Stephen?"

The boy rubbed his elbow. "Walking."

"Walking? Do you live around here?" She scrutinized him carefully for any signs of decay. A sense of horror fluttered momentarily at the concept. Thankfully, she didn't see any.

He raised his arm and pointed.

She looked in that direction. "That way? You live down that way?"

He kept pointing.

Ross said, "The cemetery's that way."

She glared back at him. Then to Stephen, she asked, "Are your Mom or Dad around here?"

"Church."

"They're at church?"

He nodded.

She asked, "Why aren't you at church with them?"

He didn't respond. He looked inside the window again.

"Stephen," Debbi said. "Why aren't you in church with your Mom and Dad? Stephen. Can you answer me, please?"

Stephen continued to stare into the house.

Debbi knew there were two churches in the vicinity. Aside from the ruined St. Calixtus, the First Temptation Ecumenical Church was a small, wood frame sanctuary that had been built after the storm to house a variety of worship services, many of which had little doctrinal relation to any of the old denominations of Earth, but were the products of survival mentality. The Worldstorm had been a boon for church attendance in Temptation.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Debbi asked, "Stephen, are they in a white church down the street?"

"Mm hmm." The boy turned back to her.

"Come on, let's go see your Mom and Dad." Debbi stretched out her hand to the boy. She heard the rattle of Ross's shotgun as it once again rose in her defense. Stephen seemed to give in and he grabbed Debbi's hand. She felt a quick surge of panic, waiting for the sweet little boy to leap at her in a flash of teeth and hands. Instead, he playfully leaped off the porch and started pulling her down the street.

She stumbled after, trying to slow him down. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a suspicious Ross following behind, keeping just off to the side.

A few blocks down, Stephen stopped across the street from the First Temptation Ecumenical Church. Debbi saw lights shining through the stained glass windows. Services were in session. The double front doors were ajar.

She asked the boy, "Your parents are in there now?"

"Yes." His expression hadn't changed since Debbi had first seen him.

"Don't you think they'll miss you?"

"They're busy."

"So they just let you run around outside while they're in church?" she asked suspiciously.

"Some people came in and it got noisy so I left."

"Some people came in? What people?"

"Smelly people." He held his nose and screwed up his face.

She heard Ross exhaling from behind her. He pressed his comlink and made a general call. "This is Ross. We need back up at the Ecumenical Church. Pronto."

Debbi knelt in front of the boy. "Stephen, what were these smelly people doing?"

"Walking around. People were yelling at them."

"Okay, Stephen, can you do me a favor?"

He shrugged.

"Good. I want you to stand here. Right here." Debbi tapped her knuckles on the ground. "A couple more Rangers will be here in a minute and your job is to tell them that I and the big, mean man here went into the church. Okay? That's a big job, but I know I can trust you. Okay?"

Stephen just stared at her.

"Here," Ross said gruffly. He yanked the badge off his shirt and handed it to the boy. Stephen stared at the shiny slice of metal and smiled for the first time. Ross pointed at him. "You're a deputy now. Understand? And I am tellin' you to stand here and wait for the other Rangers. You have to do it because you took the badge. You got it, kid?"

"Okay." Stephen was concentrating on pinning the badge to his shirt.

"Don't cut yourself," Ross muttered and started running toward the church.

Debbi followed, fighting a smile as she watched Ross stride ahead of her. They crouched at the foot of the portico. Ross listened for sounds, but none came from inside the church. That was a bad sign.

Debbi drew in the dirt with her finger. "Okay. Just inside is a vestibule. Straight ahead, double doors to the sanctuary. On the left, stairs to the balcony."

Ross narrowed his eyes at her. "I've been in the damn church before."

"Oh."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"I go first. You follow; take the balcony. Shoot anybody wearing a black suit with the back cut out of it."

Ross bounded up the steps and planted his back against one of the open front doors. He peered in. After a second, he signaled to Debbi. She immediately slipped through the front doors and darted to the left and up the stairs without looking. She paused at the landing and twisted her neck to see the top of the stairs. She saw no one. She inched up to the balcony and laid her shotgun over the top step.

The five rows of wooden pews in the balcony were empty.

She slipped forward and crouched behind the low wall at the front of the balcony. From below in the sanctuary, she heard faint sobs and the sounds of shuffling. But no voices.

She risked a glance.

The church was about half-full, probably forty people scattered around the sanctuary. People were gathered into small groups, clutching each other for solace and protection. Adults hugged children tight.

Debbi saw one rotting undead walking down the center aisle. It paused to jab a frightened parishioner with an offering plate. The parishioner shook with terror. He reached out his quivering hand and touched the inside of the offering plate, mimicking placing money in the plate. The zombie seemed satisfied by the motion and went on to the next row where it demanded the same rote offering from another terrified churchgoer.

Debbi saw five undead standing in the pews among the crowd. They held hymnals in front of them, some leaning over to look at the books held by neighbors. They were moving their mouths, emitting gurgling-strangling sounds.

Her eyes moved up to the altar where another zombie stood. It was gray green and decaying, but it looked out of place in this group. It was wearing the black robes of a Dominican friar. Debbi immediately thought of the nearby St. Calixtus burying ground and was chilled by visions of a massive outbreak of undead inside the town walls. Draped over its shoulders, the friar wore a fresh white surplice stained in blood. On the floor next to the altar lay Reverend Galloway in a growing pool of red.

The undead friar raised its hands and slowly brought them down. The hymn-mouthing zombies closed their hymnals and took their seats. The friar moved from behind the podium. It ceremoniously stepped down and shuffled to the first row of the sanctuary. With outstretched hands, the cankerous thing approached an elderly couple who held each other and cowered in fear.

Debbi pulled her sidearm and prepared to fire when the friar's head exploded accompanied by the Peacemaker's familiar crack. She heard Ross yell from below and more shots rang out. The crowd panicked, leaping to their feet, screaming, and racing for the exit. The undead reached out around them, grasping for fleeing humans. Ross's gunfire ceased—he would not risk the innocents—if he could avoid it. She heard him shouting for people to get out of his way.

Debbi had a better angle. She sighted carefully on the zombie who insistently held out the offering plate at the fleeing parishioners. She blasted the dead man, sending it toppling over and the offering plate glittering through the air to fall with an empty clang in the corner. She scanned right and fired again, knocking a dead woman to the ground with a chest shot. Debbi prepared to shoot again, but a zombie about

Book I: The Horror Lords

halfway up the sanctuary grabbed a woman and sank its teeth into her shoulder. They were too close together for a safe shot.

She holstered her Dragoon and picked up the riot gun. She climbed over the balcony wall and launched herself into the air. She caught hold of a light fixture that hung ten feet over the sanctuary, a simple, heavy chandelier designed to look like a mass of lit candles. Her inertia carried her forward and she released. She dropped to the ground and rolled up on her feet and running. The zombie released its toothy grip on the woman and looked up, as if surprised. Debbi smashed the butt of the shotgun into the zombie's face. It staggered back.

Debbi roughly shoved the bleeding woman to the floor between the pews. The undead thing roared forward, all hands and teeth. Debbi flipped the shotgun with one hand, fumbling her finger into the trigger guard and squeezing just as the shotgun barrel came to bear on the zombie's chest. The gun roared and the walking cadaver was slammed up the aisle.

The thing struggled to get to its feet. Debbi stepped quickly to its side, dropped the barrel of the shotgun against the zombie's head and pulled the trigger.

"Down!" She heard Ross's voice and she immediately dropped. A shotgun roared and she felt wet ooze drizzle over her. A heavy body dropped onto the carpeted aisle a foot away.

She twisted and came up with her gun ready. The last few parishioners scampered past Ross out into the street. Debbi saw a pile of four zombies near Ross and two immediately in front of her. The undead friar was a few feet to her right.

The wounded woman popped up between the pews. Ross aimed at her.

"Stop!" Debbi shouted. "She's human!"

Blood ran down the woman's shoulder. Debbi stepped over the two dead zombies to help her.

The woman glared at Debbi and shoved her. "I hit my head when you pushed me! I'll be complaining to your boss." Then she stormed out past Ross.

"Ma'am, you should really get that shoulder looked at," Debbi called after her. Then quietly, "Bitch."

Ross rested the riot gun on his shoulder and looked around at the carnage. He shook his head. "These Methodists put on a helluva a service, don't they?"

Chapter 11

Debbi and Ross moved quickly from the Ecumenical Church to St. Calixtus Cathedral. Ross attempted to contact the militiamen he dispatched there, but received no response.

St. Calixtus had been built thirty-five years ago. It was a startling architectural feat because much of the basic structure was hewn directly from an existing tannis outcropping. In its prime, the black cathedral had shone brightly in the sun and caused light to shatter in remarkably beautiful facets. Wind had slipped along the glassy sides and flowed through the arches in ways that made parishioners swear the church itself was singing.

Then the Worldstorm decapitated one of the facade bell towers and snapped many of the flying buttresses, causing part of the roof to

Clay & Susan Griffith

collapse. The Archbishop withdrew with EXFOR and established his bishopric on a space station. Now the cathedral crouched on its five acres with its abbey and burying ground surrounded by a ten-foot tannis wall, built before Temptation spread out to incorporate the cathedral. The black structure had taken on a sinister taint and locals now swore they could hear the church wailing.

Debbi and Ross rounded the street corner at a run with the high tannis wall on their right. Two hundred feet away, they saw several figures shambling out of the churchyard through a gate.

"Damn!" Ross cursed. "Church is out. Won't be able to get in any restaurant in town now."

"What?"

"Nothing." Ross clicked his comlink. "Hey, Ringo!"

"Ringo here."

"I need support at St. Calixtus. A Hoss and a militia company to the gate on Cathedral Road."

"But what about the backup you wanted at the Ecumenical Church? Should I ..."

"That was years ago, Ringo! Dammit, keep up!" Ross clicked off. He looked at Debbi and shucked his scattergun. "Let's go thin the herd."

"We're going in there? Just the two of us?" She regarded him with disbelief.

He grinned and pulled two metal prisoner restraints from his belt as he started forward. "We're gonna lock the gate before this town is lousy with zombies."

Debbi trotted to keep up. Six undead were just passing through the gate and at least five more were wandering up the street. All of them turned to look at the approaching Rangers with dead eyes.

"You *can* count, can't you?" Debbi asked.

Ross laughed. "Just keep them off me till I get the gate locked." He clamped the restraints between his teeth.

Debbi ran ahead and drew the undead to herself. When they came within range, she slowed and opened up on them. She aimed for the body; it was more important to knock them down than risk missing a head shot. The scattergun boomed and caught three in the midsection. Two flew off their feet. The third staggered, but kept coming. She fired again. That one fell and a fourth stumbled behind.

Ross cut around Debbi's right shoulder and raced for the gate. He passed two zombies who were staring at Debbi. They began to turn for him. He fired into them. Then again. And again. The blasts drove them to the ground; one had part of its head missing so it lay still.

Ross forgot about the surrounding undead as he approached the heavy, iron gates. He stepped around one of the thick masonry gateposts and fired several times into the churchyard. A zombie a few yards inside the grounds, who had been hurrying to the gate because of the gunshots, caught the rain of pellets and toppled. Ross dropped his shotgun and ran into the churchyard. He grabbed one side of the gate and swung it closed. Then he raced to the other side.

Ross caught sight of two zombies loping toward him with a palsied but frighteningly rapid pace. He drew his revolver as he pulled the gate closed and fired all six shots in quick succession at the closest of the rotting things. It staggered forward under the barrage until finally the fifth and sixth shots cut away vital musculature in the legs and it flopped to the ground only a few feet from Ross.

Book I: The Horror Lords

The veteran Ranger held the gates together with one hand and pulled a metal restraint from his mouth. The second strip tumbled out and fell to the ground. He slipped the restraint around the center bar of one side of the gate and dexterously fed it out around the other side. Suddenly, from inside the gate, broken nails and bone-tipped fingers clamped onto his hand. A zombie pulled vigorously, trying to yank the gate from Ross's grasp. He saw gnashing teeth just on the other side of the bars. The undead bit his hand. Ross glanced at the rotting teeth that sank into his flesh.

He heard the rhythmic firing of Debbi's gun behind him as he focused on the metal restraint strip. He had to fumble with one hand trying to use his fingers to guide the tapered end of the strip into the slot in the blunt end. He couldn't let go of the gate or he'd lose it. All he saw was the tapered end of the strip hovering near the slot. It was the only thing in the world. He subconsciously felt heavy hands falling on his shoulders and braced his feet to keep from being dragged away from the gate. But he kept his attention locked on the tab and the slot.

An inch away.

He felt something wet on his neck.

Half an inch.

The zombie inside the gate reached down and ripped the metal strip from Ross's hand. It cut through his hand like a razor and blood spurted.

"Son of a bitch!" Ross shoved the gate in suddenly, knocking the zombie backwards. The thing recovered and charged with mouth wide. In one fluid motion, Ross pulled his large knife and reached out with the other hand. He seized the zombie's jaw by jamming his fingers into its mouth and his thumb under the chin. He pulled down immediately and the undead man stumbled forward. Ross jammed the long-bladed knife into the top of its soft skull. The tempered steel punched through the zombie's head. Ross withdrew the blade and stabbed down again. The zombie's limbs buckled and Ross tossed the twice-dead thing aside.

He pulled the gates closed again, knelt, and picked up the fallen restraint strip with his bloody hand. He quickly looped it through, slipped the tab in place, and pulled it tight. Ross removed the third and last strip from his belt and attached that to the gate too.

He heard a gunshot. He turned while kneeling to retrieve his shotgun and nearly tripped over a dead zombie that lay on the ground behind him. Debbi was standing on a pile of undead, many of them flopping like fish on a pier. She was covered in dark goo. She held her scattergun by the barrel in her left hand. The stock was shattered from zombie pummeling. In her right hand smoked her Dragoon. She stumbled back off the pile and crouched next to Ross, catching her breath.

"Not bad. One riot, one Ranger." Ross reloaded his pistol. Then he reached up and pulled away a handful of black gore from the back of his neck. "You injured?"

Debbi shook her head. She was unable to speak, chest heaving.

Ross glanced over his shoulder. The gate clanged loudly as three zombies shook it, but the metal bands held fast.

"I'll handle the wounded." He thumbed back the hammer of the Colt. "Keep an eye on the gate and make sure they don't rip it off the hinges. I think we've got this under control."

They heard buzzing in their earpieces and through the static came a barely discernible human voice. "Can anyone hear me? For God's sake,

Clay & Susan Griffith

please help me.”

“Get ready.”

Debbi waited in the back of the Stallion as the vehicle dropped into the center of the quadrangle of the St. Calixtus abbey. She saw no lurking undead in the cloister. The ship touched down and the rear door lowered.

Debbi leaped out. “I’ll be back in a minute. Wait for me.”

“I’ll be here.” Ross’s voice sounded in her ear.

The certainty in his voice gave her bone-weary, unnerved body the strength it needed. She heard the door rumble closed as she sprinted across the dead grass in the cloister square and crossed between two arches into the lower gallery. She looked left and right.

No zombies.

She raced for the end of the gallery while trying to contact the missing militiaman again. They had lost contact shortly after his first plea for help.

“Tom? Tom? You read me?”

Her comlink crackled and the militiaman’s faint voice sounded. “Yes.”

“I’m inside the cloister. Stick tight. I’m on my way.” The thought of this guy stranded and alone ate at her. She had to reach him. She wouldn’t stand by and leave someone else behind.

“Thank God,” Tom murmured. “Thank God.”

Debbi reached a stone staircase at the corner of the courtyard. She took the steps two at a time. A dead militiaman was on the landing. He was partially devoured. She ran past him.

The upper galleries were dark and empty. The inner wall was arched latticework overlooking the center cloisters. On the outer wall were rooms behind heavy wooden doors.

To her right, two figures came up the stairs at the far end of the corridor. They wore the black robes of Dominican friars with the heavy hoods pushed back. Their faces were rotting masses of hanging flesh. When they reached the top of the stairs, they turned toward Debbi. They came on in a slow, measured pace. With habitual ease, she raised the Hellrazor pulse rifle and started for them. She was switching off full-auto when she saw the first friar draw an autopistol from his billowing sleeve. It fired a burst as Debbi scrambled back around the corner.

“Damn!” This was a new, nasty twist for the undead.

She stuck her pulse rifle back around the corner and squeezed off a burst before taking off up the left corridor.

“Tom. Which room are you in?”

“It’s blue. And there’s a painting of a guy with ...”

“No! Which wing are you in?”

“I’m on the side next to the church. Middle room.”

She looked out across the quadrangle and saw the church rising behind the abbey. She was on the opposite side.

Another friar appeared at the end of the corridor in front of her and raised an automatic pistol.

Debbi fired from the hip and stitched a pattern across its chest. Its shots skipped across the ceiling as it toppled back. She heard the telltale metallic sound behind her of the first friar working the action on its weapon. It obviously wasn’t familiar with weapons. Debbi took advantage of that fact.

Book I: The Horror Lords

In one bound, Debbi leaped up onto the elegantly carved three-foot high marble sills between the interior arches. The Stallion idled in the cloister below. She slung the rifle on her shoulder and jumped to the eaves of the abbey roof. Shells popped off the marble behind her. She chinned herself and struggled up. The friars leaned out under the latticework and aimed up at her. She rolled away from the flat roof's inner edge as shots cracked near her.

The Stallion rose. Several shots rang off its hull. Ross boosted it higher and swung it over the roof outside the quadrangle.

"What's wrong?" he asked in her ear.

She immediately struggled to her feet. She couldn't afford to lie still because it was too seductive to her exhausted body.

"There are a few armed zombies in there," Debbi explained. "They've got the militia's guns."

"I'm coming out."

"No. It's under control."

Suddenly, shots tore up through the roof.

Debbi ran, barely avoiding the barrage. She tightroped along the outside edge of the roof. Shells whizzed near her, fired by a friar hanging through an interior quadrangle arch watching the top of her head bobbing away. As she neared the far side, it withdrew inside the gallery, presumably to chase her inside the corridor.

She cut the corner again. The massive cathedral was on her left, the open cloister on her right. She crossed to the inner edge of the roof, knelt down, and grabbed the eaves. Without a thought, she threw her legs over and somersaulted down and under an open arch into the corridor. She fell to the stone floor, but quickly gained her feet again.

Debbi stepped back to the gallery overlooking the cloister and steadied her shoulder against a column. She saw a friar in the corridor across from her. The young Ranger smiled grimly and took aim at the blot of whitish color she took to be its face. The friar suddenly noticed her and raised its gun.

She squeezed the trigger and its head exploded.

Debbi tried to spot the second armed friar, but the shadows were too deep. She turned and threw open a door and moved into a room. A dead militiaman lay crumpled in the middle of the floor in a pool of thickened blood. She closed the door behind her, but couldn't lock it. There was another door to the right and a window straight ahead.

She opened the door and there sat Tom, the militiaman she knew only from the radio. He had his weapon raised. Debbi was so tired her reflexes didn't kick in; she just stood as Tom's finger twitched on the trigger. He took a breath and lowered the weapon. He sat awkwardly on the floor, holding an obviously broken leg.

"Ready?" she asked.

He nodded, his face slack with relief.

She moved to his side and slung his arm over her shoulder. Her legs nearly buckled as she lifted him. Leaning heavily on her, Tom got up on one foot. The other dragged uselessly behind him.

She clicked her com. "Ross? You read?"

"Go."

"The wing next to the cathedral. Third window from the northwest corner. We're coming out in ten seconds."

"That's a tight fit."

"That's your problem. Out."

Clay & Susan Griffith

Debbi hobbled with Tom into the outer room. They turned toward the window that had once had glass, but was now an empty frame.

The door to the corridor creaked.

Debbi spun around, dropping a screaming Tom to the floor, and opened fire. The doorway was empty. The door swung flat against the wall with a thud.

She heard the hum of the Stallion outside. Tom pulled himself up using the window frame. Debbi crouched, and with the barrel of her rifle still pointed at the door, placed a shoulder under Tom's rear and pushed him up.

He began to fight going through the window.

She snarled, "What are you doing? Get out! Now!"

"But there's just the top of the ship down there!"

Shadows moved in the corridor. Debbi fired again.

With one last shove, she pushed Tom through the window and heard him hit the top of the Stallion outside. She fired the rest of the clip as she put one leg through the window. When the gun clicked empty, she quickly switched over and pumped a grenade out the door. She slipped out the window.

The Stallion hovered six feet below, scraping the wall of the abbey on one side and the cathedral on the other. She landed heavily on top of Tom. He grunted in pain, but was too petrified to move, his fingers dug into a small seam in the ship's armor. She could see by his wide, frozen eyes that he was terrified and couldn't move. She just clamped onto his arm to hold him.

The grenade exploded inside and the building shook.

"Ross, go!"

The Stallion began to rise slowly to avoid ripping the hull on the stone walls. As they passed the window, Debbi saw a large flash of black. A friar sprang from the window. It stretched out and sank bony fingers into Tom's ribs. The young militiaman screamed and flailed. He would've fallen but for Debbi's grip on his arm.

Debbi pounded the friar with the butt of her pulse rifle. It thrashed and squealed with an animalistic rage. The ship rose above the abbey and banked over, sending Debbi sliding toward the friar. She dropped the rifle and hastily crammed her fingers into a niche on the roof to stop herself from slipping, almost yanking her shoulder out of joint. The pain sent stars to her eyes. The friar held fast to Tom and scabbled at Debbi's legs with its other hand. She kicked out desperately as the fetid fingers clawed at her.

She shoved the sole of her boot against the friar's face only to feel the zombie trying to bite her foot. Its hand tore at her knees. She pushed with all the strength she could manage. The friar began to slip, but Tom was going with it. Debbi was losing sensation in her strained arms. She could no longer feel her numb fingers jammed into the tight slot in the roof, nor could she tell if she was still clutching the militiaman's arm.

The undead friar slowly dropped off the ship. Tom's terrified face receded. Debbi's head swam, surrendering to exhaustion. She lost her sense of reality, feeling as if she was floating in space. Darkness welled up to surround her.

Debbi felt herself being grabbed and pulled. Strange faces surrounded her. She heard the sound of multiple gunshots, then reality melted away despite her struggle to hold it.

Ross jumped from the cockpit of the Stallion hovering a few feet

Book I: The Horror Lords

above the street.

A captain in the Night Watch, a brute of a man named Holt, pulled Debbi off the Stallion and held her gently in his arms. Other militiamen with smoking guns surrounded the newly lifeless friar.

Ross took Debbi from Holt with grumbled thanks. "See to your man, Captain. Get him to Doc Dazy."

The Night Watchman grudgingly turned to Tom.

Ross carried Debbi away from the melee and noise. He set her down against a wall, and then pushed back her matted hair with a hastily bandaged hand. Her eyelids fluttered.

"Ross?" she mumbled.

Miller knelt behind Ross. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah. She's exhausted."

"Man, I know. I'm beat too."

Ross glared quickly at Miller before turning to Debbi again. She still wasn't fully conscious.

"Sir?"

Ross looked up to see two militiamen standing behind him. "What?"

"Is there anything we can do for her?" one of them asked.

Ross recognized something in these militiamen that he'd rarely seen in members of that unit before. He knew Captain Holt for a hardnosed man with little interest in anything outside his own well-being. Yet, Ross had seen the concern in his eyes for Debbi and gratitude for her actions, for deeds that none of them would have dared. But more, there was a sense of pride based on the fact that a Colonial Ranger had risked her life for one of them. Perhaps the militiamen might dare such things themselves now.

Ross said, "Get her some water. Then make sure she gets home."

They both saluted. "Yes sir!"

Ross's hand lingered on Debbi's shoulder. Then he stood up slowly, reluctant to leave her. He forced himself away and lightly shoved Miller back toward the Stallion.

"C'mon, Miller. Let's get a chain out of the Hoss and lock that gate a little safer. Then we still have a lot to do tonight before we match Dallas's workload."

"Jesus. I've been on duty for ten straight hours. What do you expect me to do? Go till I drop dead from exhaustion?"

Ross retorted, "It'd do everybody good."

Chapter 12

Lester Atkinson was the head of the First Temptation Bank and he had no desire for trouble.

As with most men of wealth, he was concerned about maintaining the rule of law. Any disturbance in that firmament sent him into paralytic shock. On the other hand, there was always a concern about the abuse of the rule of law. Atkinson feared that a dictator could take advantage of the chaotic situation in Temptation. To that end, he viewed the Colonial Rangers with a jaundiced eye. They were the best-organized force on Banshee aside from the outlaw Reapers. And the Rangers' commander, Captain Dave Ross, seemed to hold Temptation's civilian leadership in limited esteem.

It made for a very distressing situation.

These were the civic terrors that populated Lester Atkinson's mind on

Clay & Susan Griffith

a constant basis. So the other day, when Ross had issued the curfew order on the pretense of Reaper infiltrators, Atkinson immediately grew frightened. Reaper infiltrators would hurt business. But what if Ross was using emergency measures to seize power? That would certainly hurt business too. Atkinson fretted over which would be worse.

Immediately after Ross's decree, Atkinson drafted a strongly worded, but tactfully groveling communique to Ross on behalf of the Town Council, of which Atkinson was chairman. After that, he then sent less strongly worded messages every few hours, asking and then begging for an explanation. Ross never replied. And that made the banker even more nervous.

Then, two days later, came a late night knock at the door. Atkinson opened it to find four nervous militiamen and a Colonial Ranger.

Good God, he thought immediately, *Ross is rounding up the Town Council*. He reared back in alarm.

That new Ranger stepped up, Something Dallas. Tall and attractive. She seemed competent, but there was something unsettling about her open, frank gaze and her unpretentious sense of command. She was a Banshee native and her father was career army. Atkinson hadn't exchanged more than two words with her since she arrived.

She said, "Ross would like you to come with me, if you will. He wants to explain the current situation."

Atkinson hesitated momentarily, then grabbed his coat and followed the Ranger and the militiamen. They stopped next at the home of Randolph Peck, the Caravan Administrator and another powerful member of the Town Council. Peck stood at the door with a glass of liquor in his hand glancing from the Ranger to Atkinson and back. He was always calm and collected. Atkinson had seen him with an office full of screaming caravan bosses and teamsters who seemed bound for violence, yet Peck always spoke in soft, modulated tones and steered the discussion back to his strong points: paperwork and regulations. Peck never lost an argument because he never argued issues he didn't control. The Ranger had barely asked him to come along before he set down his glass of liquor and followed.

Next came Donald Fairchild. He was a massive bear of a man who was always very well dressed, which was not an easy task in Temptation. He almost always wore a sidearm too. And as the representative of the mining interests on the Town Council, he was much more manly than a nerve-wracked banker or drunken bureaucrat. To prove it, when the Ranger asked him to come with her, he slapped his pistol and spit dismissively on the ground. He'd be along directly, he said; he didn't need a militia escort to walk the streets of his own town. She slowly turned her head to glance down at the spittle and then turned back to look Fairchild full in the face. There was a brief pause. With a monumental effort to remain polite, she told him where to meet and led her little group away. With incomplete satisfaction, Fairchild watched her red hair vanish into the darkness.

Debbi cruised through the night streets with the wedge of militia-contained Councilmen behind her. They marched up the steps of the old medical clinic where Doc Dazy maintained his offices and an infirmary. She ordered the militiamen to wait outside, which they did with some obvious trepidation, huddling near the door.

Debbi stepped quickly down the dark corridor, while Atkinson and Peck hurried to keep pace.

Book I: The Horror Lords

"So," Atkinson asked tentatively, "what does Ross want to tell us?"

"I'd prefer you hear it all at once, Councilman," Debbi said without looking back.

She paused at a door labeled "Surgery 2" and pushed it open. She held out her arm for the Councilmen to enter.

The room was vast. Most of the equipment had been long since removed for spare parts. There was an observation area above the operating floor consisting of several rows of benches behind now-missing glass. The electricity in this part of the old hospital had been shut off for economy. The surgery was lit by a collection of oil lamps that sent long, trembling shadows across the pale green walls and chrome fixtures.

Ross stood with Doc Dazy in the center of the room. They were both looking at something that lay on an operating table. At the sound of the door, Ross turned. The Doctor quickly reached up and pulled a ragged curtain in front of the table.

The room reeked of formaldehyde, putrid flesh, and ghost rock oil. Atkinson didn't show that he smelled the offensive odors. Peck sniffed the air and wrinkled his nose, but didn't say anything. Odd noises came from whatever was behind the curtain, though it wasn't intelligible and certainly wasn't identifiable.

"Mr. Atkinson, Mr. Peck, thanks for coming out." Ross stepped out of the shadows. The yellow light of a lantern illuminated the stark highlights of his chiseled face.

Atkinson said, "Oh yes! There must be something very...unique going on. Otherwise, why contact the Council, right?"

As Debbi closed the door, Ross asked, "Where's Fairchild?"

She rolled her eyes. "He said he'd be along."

"Donald was quite headstrong." Atkinson confirmed quickly. "Your Ranger was gracious and insistent. But you know Donald. Whereas Randolph and I have always been very supportive of the Colonial Rangers."

"Yeah, okay." Ross indicated a trio of straight back wooden chairs near the door. Atkinson and Peck sat down. He gave Debbi a pained glance.

She rolled her eyes in commiseration as she leaned against the wall, bone weary. Ross had sent her to round up the top three Councilmen so he could explain the situation to them once and for all. He had waited until he felt the streets were reasonably safe and he had a chance to talk to Doc Dazy about the situation.

Debbi wasn't sure why Ross felt it was important she be present for this meeting. She normally had no opportunity or reason to interact with the Town Council. But she was the new girl. It was probably something every Ranger had to go through. Lucky her.

Ross stood a few feet in front of Atkinson and Peck. He was clearly uncomfortable. Here was a man who could hear the news that the dead in his town's cemeteries were digging themselves out of their graves and then snap off a few orders without twitching an eye. But this forum didn't involve giving orders to Rangers about peacekeeping. Now he had to be diplomatic and make sure the Council understood the truth, but without setting them off in a panic. It was a fine line and one he hated walking. He took irritated breaths and worked his jaw back and forth.

"I'm gonna get started," Ross mumbled. "Fairchild can catch up when he gets here. We've got a...uh...situation in town that...um...isn't normal."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Reapers?" Atkinson volunteered.

"No. Well, yeah, there were a few Reaper scavs in town night before last. But Ranger Dallas there took care of that." He glanced up at Debbi. "In fact, I think I'd like to have Ranger Dallas take over now." He stepped back into the shadows.

Debbi didn't move for a moment, stunned. Then both Councilmen turned and looked at her. She could barely see Ross in the darkness. She hesitantly came forward.

She drew a deep breath and said, "Gentlemen, what is happening in Temptation may seem impossible to believe. But what you are about to hear is the truth."

Atkinson looked at Peck with growing alarm. Peck kept looking ahead, blank-faced.

"The dead are rising from their graves," Debbi said.

She paused to let the dramatic statement sink in. The Councilmen just stared at her.

"That's it," she added less melodramatically. "The dead are rising from their graves." She looked for Ross to help her. He sidled farther back in the shadows. She frowned in his direction.

Peck wet his lips and said with the steady, handpicked verbiage of a politically minded drunk, "Now, when you say *the dead*, you mean what exactly?"

"I mean the dead. That is to say, people who are dead. Dead people are getting out of their graves and walking around. And they are endangering the lives of our citizens. The Rangers have had a number of run-ins with the...uh...living dead over the last three days and nights. We've had a number of casualties. At least thirty people have been injured. To our knowledge, we've had nine fatalities. The first was Lee Womble who was killed by his wife, Glenda. Reverend Galloway of the Ecumenical Church was killed at his pulpit. Two members of the town militia were killed in the St. Calixtus abbey. And five others were killed in various incidents around town."

Peck asked, "So, Glenda Womble killed all these people?"

"No," Debbi said in exasperation. "I'm not sure you're grasping the essential fact here." She took a step toward the two Councilmen. "Mr. Womble, Reverend Galloway and all the others were killed by assailants who were already dead. Animated corpses who came from the town cemeteries. Zombies."

Atkinson crossed his legs and studiously rested his chin in his hand. Peck nodded without comprehension. Their eyes flicked to the curtain in response to another low, guttural rattle.

Throwing up her hands, Debbi told Ross, "I don't think they're getting it."

"Doc!" Ross called out.

Doc Dazy gathered himself from a chair in the far corner of the room. He wore a surgical gown that had been white once, but was now streaked with greasy, gray stains and flecks of matter. He possessed the same smile he had held since they arrived. He grabbed the curtain with just a tad too much relish.

"Gentlemen!" he announced like a circus ringmaster. "I'd like to show you the strangest patient I have ever had!"

He walked the curtain noisily aside to reveal the operating table. A naked man lay upon it, restrained at the wrists and ankles. The figure writhed and clenched its limbs, straining against the thick, leather

Book I: The Horror Lords

straps. It made wet, gurgling sounds as it fought.

"Dear Lord!" Atkinson exclaimed, half rising from his seat in horror. "What is wrong with that man?"

The man on the table raised its head. Most of the skin was gone from its face, revealing partially decayed musculature beneath. The tendons of its neck were visible, stretched taut with effort. Its eyes were white, round orbs twisting in their sockets. It gnashed its broken teeth.

"This man is dead." Doc Dazy leaned casually on the operating table.

Both Debbi and Ross placed their hands on their firearms.

"What do you mean?" Atkinson asked. "He's not dead! He's in agony! Can't you help him, Doctor?"

Dazy gave a solemn nod. He held up a finger, signaling for Atkinson to wait a moment. Then he reached for a scalpel in a steel tray that rested on a nearby stool. He studied the dead man's torso, tapping it with his fingers. He then plunged the scalpel into the man's chest and deftly slid it down through the abdomen to the groin as if he were slicing a pie for Sunday supper. Thin, colorless liquid dribbled out of the long gash. The zombie increased its thrashing and gurgling.

Atkinson gasped and jumped to his feet. Even Peck flinched.

"Good God!" Atkinson shouted. "What are you doing? Stop it!"

The Doctor removed the blade from the incision and held it up. He smiled again. Then he sliced the body across the stomach. Then, while humming, he proceeded to poke the scalpel randomly and repeatedly into the wriggling body.

Atkinson pointed at the Doctor. "Ranger! Stop him! He's killing that man!"

"Relax, Mr. Atkinson," Debbi said. She hoped she didn't look pale, but she felt as if she was about to faint. "That man is already dead. He was dead before the Doctor touched him."

"He's still moving!"

"Lester! Listen to me!" Doc Dazy said in a loud, firm voice. He placed his hand flat against the writhing zombie's chest. "This man died, I would say, eight months ago. The Rangers captured him outside the cemetery earlier today and brought him here at my request. Do you understand?"

Atkinson's face clouded with confusion. Peck's eyes swept thoughtfully to the floor.

Dazy grinned maliciously. "Lester, if you or Randolph have weak stomachs, you might want to look away."

He took the scalpel and set to work in earnest on the patient. He cut deeply into the chest and sternum. He peeled away the flesh and muscle and clamped it back. As the thing continued to thrash, the Doctor took a bone saw and began to cut through the ribs. He muttered to himself, as a man would while working on uncooperative plumbing or some household fixture.

Debbi looked at the floor, trying not to hear the grinding sound. Ross stood watching impassively. Atkinson turned in his chair, refusing to watch. Peck was blank again.

After a few minutes, the Doctor tossed the bone saw into the metal tray with a loud clang. His hands were not bloody; they were caked with a dark sludge. He wrapped his fingers around something inside the patient's chest and tugged hard. He came away with sections of two ribs. He threw them clattering to the floor.

He retrieved the scalpel and buried his hands in the open chest cavity.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Soon he pulled out a misshapen glob of flesh.

"Gentlemen, this is the patient's heart." The Doctor held up the gray blob in his left hand. "And, you will note, despite the fact he is without it, he seems quite fine."

The man still struggled against the bindings. Dark liquid splashed out of its open chest as it thrashed from side to side.

"For this, I have no explanation," Doc Dazy said, more to Ross. He tossed the heart up and down in his hand like a baseball. "I don't see any physiological reason for it. I've studied the fluids from the bodies and I haven't isolated any unique or peculiar microorganisms. Yet, here it is. It could be the result of a Skinny, but there's no evidence of such a being in the area."

Ross flexed his hand that now sported a clean, plastiskin bandage replacing the bloody, white gauze. "It's no Skinny. We'd have been attacked shortly after the dead rose if it was. So it's gotta be some kinda...virus or something."

The Doctor thought for a second. "I see no evidence of it. A number of people have suffered bites or cuts from these things. But, as of yet, they haven't contracted anything other than the odd staph infection. But time will tell. After all, these are dead bodies and, as such, they are germ factories. We really should be wearing masks."

Ross shot an irate glare at the Doctor. Debbi took an unconscious step back. Atkinson covered his mouth with his hand. Peck stared straight ahead practically stuporous.

"But it's too late for that, I guess." Doc Dazy laughed and dropped the heart back into the dead man's chest. "I have the bodies of the people killed by these things in isolation to see if they, you know ..." He placed his two folded hands next to his head as if asleep, then widened his eyes comically. "Wake up! But like I said, I haven't been able to isolate any bacteria or virus in the undead that might be responsible for their condition. So I can't see how it could be infectious; in the traditional sense of the word, anyway." He wiped his hands on his filthy gown.

Ross said to the Councilmen, "The good news is that the town is safe. Relatively speaking. We've disposed of all the zombies inside the walls and we're working on getting a cordon around the main cemetery. A day or two and you won't know there are any walking dead around here."

"That is good news," Atkinson muttered. He was now doubled over, his head in his hands. Peck stared into the darkness. Behind them, the door burst open and Donald Fairchild strode in.

"All right! I'm here!" he boomed. "Now, let's get this straight! The law says Ross has emergency powers for forty-eight hours before the Council has to vote on it. I don't see any reason why we should ..." His eyes flew wide and he came to an abrupt halt in the room. "What in the hell is going on in here?" His hand went to the gun on his hip.

Instinctively, Debbi drew her weapon.

Fairchild froze and glared at Debbi. "What is this? What are you up to?"

Ross moved out of the shadows. Debbi lowered her gun, but kept it in hand.

"Relax, Fairchild." Ross's jaw was set tight in anger.

"What's this all about?" Fairchild narrowed his gaze at Ross and flexed the fingers of his gun hand.

"Sit down and you'll find out."

Debbi watched the two men separate like fierce animals treading the

Book I: The Horror Lords

edge of a rival's territory. She took a quiet breath and put her gun away.

Doc Dazy waited, tapping the blade of the scalpel idly on the undead patient's arm. "Anyway, I'm through. I just don't know what to tell you, Ross. Except maybe, see you in church this Sunday."

Fairchild craned his neck to look at the thing on the table. "It looks like he's a zombie."

Debbi and Ross exchanged looks before staring at the mine owner.

"What do you know about it?" Ross asked.

Fairchild flashed a superior smile. "Hell, I've seen one of those things. Couple of years ago at one of my mines. Guy was killed in a cave-in. We dragged him out and my medic examined him. He was dead as a doornail. That night, though, he got up and killed a couple of my people before my guards got him. That's what this emergency was all about? Just kill him again. You might have to shoot him twenty or thirty times, but you can do it. I'm going to bed."

"Hold up," Ross said. "How many of these things have you seen?"

"Just the one," Fairchild replied. "I've been around, Ross. Seen a lot of strange things that most men can't even conceive of. So I guess I can understand why you Rangers are so panicked by it." He hooked a thumb in his gun belt, not bothering to hide his sardonic smile, and pointed at the thrashing patient. "He probably got some ghost rock fumes in him when he died. That's what my medic figured happened at my mine. Queer stuff that ghost rock. You want me to kill that thing for you?"

"C'mere." Ross snarled and crooked a finger at Fairchild.

Debbi accompanied the mine owner as he followed Ross across the operating room. Ross stopped at the far wall, which was curtained. He held an oil lamp in one hand. When Fairchild gave Ross a sarcastic glance, Ross pulled back the curtain and held up the lamp.

In the dark featureless room beyond a pane of heavy glass were five cadavers. Two men and three women in various stages of deterioration stalked from one side of the room to the other. Some of them were relatively well-preserved, only discolored or swollen, their skin slipping. Others were badly decayed, with bones showing through their rancid, torn flesh.

They all turned when the curtain was drawn back and approached the light in the window. The sounds of their open hands slamming against the window were accompanied by soft squishing noises and the clinking of white bone on glass.

Ross said, "Here, have at it."

He was many miles away from the cemetery by now. He had been walking for more than two days at a grueling pace, night and day. He needed no sleep and no food. He pushed across the rolling desert sand and into the darker, rockier soil of the mountain foothills to the north. He wasn't sure where he was going yet, but he knew how to get there.

He encountered few people as he trudged across the countryside. Bands of anouks rode past, warring and herding. He avoided them. A human caravan passed, but he hid until it was out of sight. Voices in his head urged him to attack and kill. But there were too many of them. Enemies were numerous.

Friends were few. A different voice urged him to keep walking. It told him there was a place he could go to set things right.

Finally after four days of constant walking, he saw the house. It was

Clay & Susan Griffith

large and sprawling, like old mansions he remembered on Earth. It sat on top of a hill. A high fence topped with razor wire surrounded the spacious, but dismal grounds.

He stopped at the main gate. It was locked with heavy chains. He straightened his uniform. At least they'd had the decency to bury him with honors, even if they hadn't treated him that way.

He reached up and seized a long rope that hung outside the gate. When he pulled it, a heavy bell rang with a deep, throaty peel. He remembered the sound from when he was brought here years before. They had thought he was medicated beyond his senses, but he remembered the helplessness of his arms bound about his waist. His eyes had been covered and his mouth had been tied shut.

A few inmates responded to the sound of the bell. They appeared around the corners of the mansion, heads bobbing as they peered at the gate. Some hesitantly wandered toward him, curious about any visitor.

The front door opened and a familiar figure appeared. He was tall and gaunt, pale and dark-eyed. He was dressed in black and white and red. His long legs were clad in black pants, but his shirt was white, as was his heavy apron stained with red. He removed the apron and handed it to a nearby inmate. Then he took a crisp, white lab coat from another inmate and slid it on. He brushed the sleeves of the coat as he came down the front steps and began walking to the gate. The inmates crowded him, seeking attention, or cowering behind him as he swept through them with his easy, lanky stride.

Soon his smiling face appeared through the gate. For an instant, the smiling visage seemed to change. He was still tall and gaunt, but suddenly bald with long desert robes covering a familiar uniform.

"Ah, General Quantrill," the man said as he was suddenly the image of a kindly doctor again. "What a delight to see you again. I was hoping you would come back." He pulled a large ring of keys from his belt and began to unlock the gate.

The General closed his eyes. He felt as if he was home.

Chapter 13

Debbi entered Miss Etta's dining room. She was exhausted from another long day patrolling for the undead. The zombies were still stalking around outside town and were particularly bold in their attacks on the Depot. Many caravaneers had responded to the unnatural threat by packing up and moving out. The word was already spreading that Temptation was a dangerous place to stop.

Debbi hoped to grab some food and catch a few hours of sleep before returning to duty. Sleep had become a precious commodity recently due to the burdens of the job, but also because of recurrent bad dreams and prodding cat paws.

Debbi entered the dining room with her gun belt draped over her shoulder. She smiled to see a plate of bread and a bowl of soup laid out on the candlelit table.

And Hickok was eating it.

Debbi stopped and stared. Hickok had a mouthful of bread and was hunched hungrily over the soup. She looked up and waved her spoon-filled hand.

Debbi's hand flashed to her weapon. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Book I: The Horror Lords

"Language!" Miss Etta reprimanded as she trundled into the dining room from the kitchen. "This isn't a warehouse." She carried a tray with more bread and soup, which she set on the table for Debbi across from Hickok. "Your friend stopped by to see you."

"Would you like more soup, dear?" Miss Etta patted Hickok's shoulder, raising a small cloud from the pilot's jacket. The older woman noted the dust with silent dismay.

Hickok picked up the bowl, drained it, and held it out. "Yeah. If you got any more."

Debbi looked from Hickok to Miss Etta as the landlady gave a wan smile and departed. She slammed her heavy gun belt on the table. Scraping back a chair, she sat down. She glared at Hickok who peeled crust off a piece of bread and popped it in her mouth.

Debbi asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Came to see you." Hickok looked around at the flowered wallpaper and polished silver tea set on the sideboard. "This is sweet. You really lucked into it."

"What do you want?" Debbi tapped her fingers on her pistol butt.

Miss Etta returned with a soup refill. Hickok plunged bread into it and ate. Then she looked up at Miss Etta and mumbled, "This is great. Thanks."

"Glad you're enjoying it. And you could use it; you're a rail. How about a glass of milk?"

"Milk? You don't mean real milk?"

"Real milk."

"From a cow milk?"

"Yes, dear." Miss Etta laughed. Then she eyed Debbi and her smile disappeared. "No guns on the table, please."

Debbi said, "Oh, I'm just showing my friend here something."

Miss Etta pursed her lips disapprovingly, not fooled for a second, and returned to the kitchen.

Debbi whispered, "I'm warning you, Hickok. Don't bring her into anything between us. Or else."

Hickok looked genuinely surprised. "What are you, crazy? I'd like to marry her!" She gestured at Debbi's food with a piece of bread. "Eat. It's gonna get cold. And it's great."

Debbi continued to stare at the pilot.

"Look," Hickok said, not bothering to cover her exasperated sigh. She reluctantly lowered her spoon. "I don't blame you for busting my chops the other day."

"Thanks," Debbi replied sarcastically.

Hickok took a nervous breath and looked uncomfortable. She quickly recovered her surface composure when Miss Etta returned with the milk. She gave the landlady a quick grin, grabbed the glass, and took a giant swallow. Her eyes widened with disbelief; it was real milk. She pulled the glass away from her mouth with a satisfied breath and a white moustache.

Hickok ate like a starving child. Debbi actually felt a pang of sympathy. It didn't last long, but it was enough to bring her attention to her own food. She took a spoonful of soup with her free hand and glanced away as the pilot greedily drained the glass.

Hickok dragged her sleeve across her mouth. "I didn't sell you out to the Reapers. I got caught in a trick and had to deal some information to get out alive. I know the Reapers are interested in those black guns.

Clay & Susan Griffith

They don't like weird new weapons showing up; makes 'em nervous. I knew you have some and I jumped the only way I could. You don't have to believe me, but that's how it was. Anyhow, I've got information to deal you. In return for which, you lay off my ship."

Debbi was taken aback. She hadn't even thought of trying to seize Hickok's ship.

Hickok saw it in the Ranger's face. "You weren't going after my ship?"

"No. I said what I had to say to you. And next time you crossed me I was going to drop you." Debbi saw the confusion in Hickok. The pilot lived in a world where you took every advantage you had. Failure to do so was a sign of weakness. And weakness was death in Hickok's world.

Debbi felt the smooth grip of her sidearm under her right hand and the pattern of the silverware spoon between the fingers of her left. Her world and Hickok's were not so different.

"Why didn't you come see me instead of leaving a note?"

Hickok shrugged. She ran a nervous hand through her straight black hair.

Debbi asked, "Were you hoping the Reapers would kill me?"

"No," Hickok said quickly. "I told you, I didn't do it for profit. I was protecting my ship from that Reaper scum. I'm sure that doesn't sound like a good enough reason to you, but it's all I have. It's *all* I have. When I got back here, I thought a note would do it. I figured you could handle a scav like Borneo here on your own turf. Is that stinking blackliner dead?"

"No. He's in lockup. But a couple of his pals bought it."

"No loss. They're all trash." Hickok pushed the empty bowl away. "I should've told you face-to-face. But to tell the truth, I was a little scared of you. A note was easier."

Debbi looked down at her soup to cover an unexpected smile. Someone was scared of her.

"But listen," Hickok said, "here's the payback. I know an inbound caravan that's about two days out, carrying a wad of those black guns you're interested in. The Reapers know it, and they're gonna hit it."

Debbi sat up straight. "When?"

"Sunrise. They'll catch it coming through the Bosphorus Straits."

"How do you know this?"

"I was out at a Reaper camp yesterday," Hickok said. "They got orders directly from Nicolai and were packing up to move, so I asked a few questions."

"How many Reapers are going to attack the caravan?"

"That I don't know for sure. About fifty, sixty. They're serious about taking the guns and they're well armed. But they aren't expecting heavy defense; just the usual freelance guards."

Debbi asked, "If they're after the black guns, you think they'll stick a little tougher than usual?" Reapers depended on surprise, speed, and shock. They hit fast and hard, hoping to break the will of their victims. And more often than not, they were successful. But they didn't usually stand in the face of stiff resistance.

Hickok shrugged again. "Maybe. But if the Rangers are out there with heavy ordnance, it should dissuade them."

"Who's transporting the black guns?"

"Oh, hell, I don't know." Hickok grinned. "I know more Reapers than I do caravaners. And frankly, I trust what the Reapers tell me a lot more than what the legit guys say anyway."

Book I: The Horror Lords

Debbi tapped her spoon against the soup bowl while she thought. She eyed Hickok while the pilot drained the last drop of milk from the glass.

Debbi said, "You know this better be on the level, don't you? The Reapers killed a Colonial Ranger in Ghost Rock City a few days ago."

Hickok looked up sharply. "I didn't know that. Friend of yours?"

"No. But he was a Colonial Ranger."

"I understand. This is completely on the level. I didn't know about Ghost Rock City. I hope you guys kick their asses."

"Okay. I'll go to Ross with it."

Hickok stood up. She seemed relieved. "I want you to know, this whole thing with Borneo, nothing against you. I'm just trying to survive. You know? Just trying to get by in this world."

"I understand."

She eyed the door. "So, how are things going here in, um, you know..." Hickok lifted her hands in an imitation of a creeping monster and gave a mock snarl. "In Zombie Town? Is it safe to walk around yet?"

Debbi lifted her hand from her gun and placed her elbows on the table, leaning over them casually. "You wanna keep it down? Once a place gets to be known as Zombie Town, it hurts the tourist trade."

Hickok laughed.

Debbi smiled a bit too. "We've cleaned out all the burying ground at St. Calixtus. We shouldn't have any more problems there. Plenty of undead popping up in the main cemetery outside town, but we've got militiamen manning the walls and walking perimeter to insure that no more get inside. As best as I can say, Zombie Town is under control."

"Good to know." Hickok's eyes lingered on Debbi as she stepped to the kitchen door and leaned in. "Hey, thanks for the chow. It was delicious."

"You're entirely welcome, dear." Miss Etta came out and put a motherly arm around Hickok's waist. "You come back anytime. Any friend of Debbi's is welcome here."

Hickok seemed wary of the physical affection. She walked stiffly as they crossed to the door.

"Hickok," Debbi called out. "Thanks."

"Sure."

Miss Etta returned to the dining room after closing the front door behind Hickok. She began clearing the dishes.

"I'm glad you're finally getting some friends for yourself," Miss Etta said. "She seems nice."

"Seems to be." Debbi wiped her mouth on a freshly pressed linen napkin and strapped on her gun belt.

Chapter 14

A small dust storm appeared on the open plains. The storm was raised by a caravan as it thundered out of the Bosphorus Straits. The Bosphorus was the exit point of a ten-mile long canyon that caravans used to descend and ascend the half-mile high plateau that rose abruptly seventy-five miles south of Temptation. It was a heavily trafficked route; avoiding it added five days to the trip between Temptation and Makeshift.

This caravan had been a third of the way through the Bosphorus Straits when Reapers roared down on it from both sides and cut the line. The head of the caravan spurted out into the plains with Reapers

Clay & Susan Griffith

on speeders in pursuit. The fleeing caravan began to stretch out and break apart. Vehicles scattered in hopes of escaping. Motorized transports pulled ahead, while the nonpowered vehicles and wagons hitched to oxen, horses and native beasts of burden fell desperately behind. Some broke down or stopped to make a last stand. Azeel warriors mounted on fierce chanouks quickly overwhelmed them.

The rear of the caravan was bottled up in the narrow Bosphorus and thrown into bloodied chaos. Caravaneers scrambled for safety. Children were hastily grabbed and pulled inside vehicles. Teamsters struggled to arrange the vehicles into some sort of defensive positions while shells ripped into them. The security force, a handful of freelance adventurers, produced firearms along with most of the drivers and returned fire. Heavily armed Reapers positioned high in the rocks hammered them. Mounted Azeel tribesmen were held in abeyance, waiting for the right moment to ride down on the demoralized caravan and destroy it.

"There they are, boys!" Ross called into his mike. "This is for Ghost Rock City! Let's open 'em up!"

The two Colonial Ranger Stallions roared over the plains out of the rising sun. The first ship, with Ross at the stick, streaked toward the Bosphorus. The second, under Stew's steady hand, veered off and made for the disintegrating caravan head that was under close pursuit. Three speeders with heavy machine guns mounted and multiple Reapers hanging off roll bars had swung out wide and were angling to intercept the lead caravan vehicles. Two others were chasing.

Stew brought his ship skimming down at rooftop level. It skipped on the hot air rising off the desert floor. Co-pilot Patrick Ngoma armed the fore and aft 20 mm autocannons. The targets quickly came to bear. The Stallion's forward cannons pounded and stitched the rocky ground across the path of the Reapers' chase speeders, tossing up chunks of debris. The raiders swerved wildly to avoid the incoming fire, throwing one off its pursuit track and rolling the other over in a shower of dirt.

Ngoma cursed at his miss as Stew brought the Stallion up into a steep climb. Ngoma eyed the gun sights carefully and fired a controlled burst from one aft cannon into the somersaulting speeder. It blew up in a ball of flame. He let out a grunt of satisfaction.

Stew stuck the Stallion around sharply and laid it over. Ngoma grabbed the control panel with one hand as he was slammed into the side.

"God Almighty, Stew! You can't pull this old Hoss around like that! This isn't a fighter craft!"

"Got to hit them fast," Stew responded, nonplussed and deadpan.

The cannons targeted the advance Reaper vehicles. Ngoma quickly took a sighting to avoid hitting any of the scattering caravan. He thumbed the fire button.

One of the speeders looked as if it hit a wall, shattering from the impact of the cannon shells, sending men airborne.

A ticking sound rippled across the Stallion's outer shell. Stew felt the stick jerk uncomfortably. They were hit, but still under power. Stew saw muzzle flashes from a Reaper vehicle below. He tapped on the side window with his finger and inched the Stallion over. He heard a comprehending sound from Ngoma followed by aft cannon fire. The Reaper vehicle exploded.

The Stallion streaked past the caravan and rose into another banking climb. It was throwing out a thin stream of oily smoke.

Book I: The Horror Lords

"Is that bad?" Ngoma peered out at the smoke.

Stew shrugged. It wasn't good, but it wasn't critical. Luckily, the other two Reaper vehicles were racing off in opposite directions across the plains. This was typical Reaper tactics; you couldn't chase all of them. And Stew wouldn't be chasing any of them today.

He turned back to the haphazard trail of scattered wagons surrounded by anouks. Taking their retreat cues from their motorized brothers, many of the Azeels were already riding away. But others had started looting.

Ngoma clicked his com unit to the four Rangers in the back of the Stallion. "Ready!"

Instantly, four windows in the back of the vehicle popped out and rifle barrels protruded. Stew slowed the ship to a crawl as it neared an overturned wagon. He angled the Stallion so the Rangers could pick off the Azeel below. He and Ngoma, unable to open the cockpit windows, watched for survivors. They spotted several unmoving human bodies amidst the wreckage. As the Rangers' rifles opened up on the anouks below, Stew was reminded sickeningly of the target shoot he and Debbi had at the cemetery. The tribesmen returned ragged fire as they staggered to their chanouks carrying loads of looted goods. Those who had not already escaped would not.

Ross climbed his Stallion to the level of the plateau top and made a long turn to aim the ship at the cliff where the Reapers were ensconced.

"Arm up!" he called to the five Rangers waiting in the rear compartment. Then he turned to Ringo sitting next to him. "Smoke 'em."

The kid nodded and pressed the fire button.

Ross dropped the Stallion into the ravine as a forward cannon launched a barrage of smoke grenades. They exploded across the far ravine wall, creating a thick smoke cloud that drifted between the Stallion and the Reapers. Ringo opened up with the other forward cannon, blasting the Reaper positions as the Stallion plummeted into the smoke-filled canyon like an elevator with a broken cable.

Debbi's stomach crowded her throat. She sat hunched in the back of the Stallion watching the jagged ravine wall flash upward just a few feet outside the window. She clutched her automatic rifle tightly to her chest. Miller sat on the opposite side with three other Rangers; Natalie Chennault, a fireplug of a woman with dyed blonde hair; Boston Fitzpatrick, a tall, muscular creature who sang in a good baritone voice; and Hiroshi Tsukino, darkly handsome and charmingly affable. All their faces were wide-eyed masks, fingers white around their weapons.

"Hold onto something!" Ross's voice crackled in their ears.

She reached down with one hand and seized the hard metal seat. The other Rangers did the same. The Stallion slammed to a jarring stop and the back door sprang open.

"Go!" Ross commanded.

Debbi was first to the door. The Stallion hovered three feet from a rock ledge. She threw a heavy ammo box across and jumped, landed, and rolled. She scrambled behind an outcropping as Miller landed nearby with a strangled huff. He carried a bulky personal rocket launcher. Debbi had her rifle out and was firing through the drifting smoke at the far wall of the canyon one hundred yards away. Miller slapped up his rifle and started firing too as the last three Rangers

Clay & Susan Griffith

made the leap from the Stallion. Chennault, Fitzpatrick, and Tsukino immediately fanned out along narrow footpaths leading off the outcropping to seek cover.

"We're clear!" Debbi radioed.

She cringed as Reaper shots pinged off the Stallion. The rear door closed. The forward cannon continued to punish the facing slope as the ship shot straight up.

The Rangers were locked into position now. They were stranded on the ravine wall, unsure even if there was a safe retreat route up or down. The mission was to save the caravan, not force a death struggle with a band of Reapers. If the enemy decided to stick, however, Debbi and the others were in a bad place.

The Reapers were suddenly in a tough position too. They had gone from having undisputed high ground over surprised opponents to being under attack from the caravaneers below, the Rangers across, and the Stallion hovering above.

Debbi heard Chennault and the others opening fire from their hidden positions nearby. She dragged the ammo box over to Miller and took the rocket launcher from him. He seemed briefly insulted. She hefted the heavy weapon and sighted through the lens. On the ravine wall opposite, she saw movement as Reapers scrambled for new cover. There were easily fifty of them. They looked like a nest of spiders scurrying in and out of sight. She saw Azeel on chanouks riding single-file deeper into the ravine along steep, winding paths.

Debbi smiled. It looked like the tribesmen were already beginning to make their escape.

Suddenly an object trailing flame streaked up from the far side and flew toward the Stallion hovering a quarter mile above.

"Ross!" Debbi shouted into her comlink, but the rocket had already reached the Ranger ship.

The Stallion disappeared briefly in a white hot flash. It was a high-temp phosphor shell, very high tech. The ear-piercing crack sounded a second later. When the flash cleared, the ship was still whole, but it had been pounded sideways. It tilted and began a heart-sickening drop into the ravine.

Debbi watched helplessly as the Stallion roared down past her position, bleeding smoke and fire. The nose of the ship pulled up slightly and it angled back into the canyon. She knew Ross was still at the stick trying to rein in the crippled Stallion.

Debbi forced herself to look away from the failing ship and bring up the rocket launcher. She had to keep the Reapers from firing another phosphor at the Stallion. She clicked the launcher's sighting key to IR, locked onto the phosphor's heat signature and located its general point of origin. She primed the load and fired. The rocket flashed out of the tube, slipped across the ravine, and exploded against the far wall. Debbi rolled another from the magazine into the breach and let it fly too. She saw several Reaper bodies torn apart in the explosion and felt harshly satisfied by the sight.

She took a second to search the ravine for a sign of the injured Stallion, but it was gone. She returned her eye to the launcher sight and scanned the far side of the ravine. When she saw telltale signals of living targets, she fired again and there was another shattering explosion.

More scurrying Reapers were visible now. They paused to fire at the

Book I: The Horror Lords

Ranger positions before continuing to scramble up and down the paths. Shots flicked off the rocks nearby. Debbi and Miller ducked behind cover. Maybe the Reapers weren't retreating. Maybe they were taking fresh positions.

"Ross, do you read? Ross. Come in." And she waited. "Ringo? Do you read?"

Her headset sounded. "Dallas. It's Stew. What's your situation? Do you need assistance?"

"Stew, Stallion One hit by a phosphor. Might be down. Approximately one mile up the canyon."

"Roger, Dallas. We are responding."

"Be careful," Debbi said. "Lot of Reapers moving that way."

"Thanks."

Debbi called, "Chennault, what's your situation?"

"Fitz is down," Chennault answered.

"Shut up," Boston Fitzpatrick said gruffly, followed by the sound of shooting. "My trigger finger still works."

Miller placed a new magazine in his rifle for the fourth time. Curls of smoke twisted from the barrel. He eyed the far slope.

"I think they're on the run," he said just as a shot clipped off a rock a few inches from his head. He dropped. "Jesus!" He glanced sourly at Debbi. "What the hell! Reapers usually take off as soon as they see Stallions. I mean, there'll be two more caravans past here before the sun goes down. Why're they so gung-ho over this one?"

Debbi looked up at the sound of Stallion Two passing over. It quickly disappeared from view leaving a thin trail of smoke.

"Oh great," Miller complained. "Stew's hit too. I'll be pissed if the Reapers take out both vehicles. I don't feel like climbing down off this cliff."

Debbi stared angrily at Miller. He looked back blankly.

"What?" he snapped. "I don't!" A few more shots hit nearby. "Damn caravaneers! We risk our lives so they can make money!"

Debbi said nothing. She reloaded the rocket launcher with a sick feeling.

Ross shook his head. His eyesight was blurred and he tasted metal. He wiped his mouth and the back of his hand came away bloody. As the cockpit of the Stallion began to swim into view, he reached over to Ringo. The kid was limp, slouched forward against his seat restraint. Ross shook him gently.

"Stuckey? Hey, Ringo."

The young man didn't move. Ross dug his fingers between Ringo's glove and sleeve and felt for a pulse. It was fairly steady.

Ross was startled by a hard thud beside him. He turned to see the purple face of a grim anouk warrior staring in the side window. The anouk slammed his black stone war ax against the window again. It bounced back. Another native appeared in front and bashed at the windshield.

Ross heard shouting in Azeel dialect from a figure he couldn't see. The warrior in front slid off. Immediately the windshield was stitched with automatic weapon fire. The plastic was scratched, but it didn't crack.

Ross unstrapped himself and reached under Ringo's seat for the first

Clay & Susan Griffith

aid kit. Throwing back the lid, he scrambled in it and then popped a small capsule under the kid's nose. Ringo flinched and jerked his head back wildly.

"Easy!" Ross put his hand against Ringo's chest.

Ringo blinked. Beneath his tangled hair his eyes weren't quite registering.

Ross asked, "Do you understand me?"

Ringo nodded instinctively. His eyes stared blankly.

Another line of bullets peppered the front window. This time they gouged out some heavy pockmarks.

Ross popped another capsule in Ringo's face. The young man jerked back again, restrained by the crash belts. His arms came up and flailed at Ross's hand.

"All right!" Ringo complained. "I'm here already!"

Ross asked, "What's your name?"

"Will Stu...Ringo."

"What are you doing here?"

He swallowed and squinted against the pain in his head. "You crashed the Hoss."

"Good enough." Ross pulled off his static-filled headset and grabbed Ringo's, but it was off-line too.

He switched fire control to his console. "We're surrounded by hostiles. Don't know how many." He held the targeting lens to his eye, but it wasn't working. He tossed it aside.

"Ah, screw it." He held down all the buttons. The ship's cannons roared front and rear, shaking the ship like it would break into pieces.

Several riderless chanouks started and ran. Anouks raced for safety. A few were hit and killed instantly.

Then the cannons clicked and whirred empty. Ringo pulled two Hellrazors off the rack behind their seats. He handed one and an ammo belt to Ross who pointed out his side window.

"See that rock outcropping over there? We get our backs to the wall and we hold them off till relief comes."

"Sounds like a plan," Ringo said quietly.

"Don't fret, kid. We're both here."

"Let's go then!" Ringo gave up a smile, determined not to show fear regardless of the overwhelming odds.

Ross threw the door open and fired a burst. He leaped to the ground. Ringo dropped behind him and they started across the open floor of the canyon toward a jagged stand of black tannis rock fifty yards away.

A black lance jabbed into the ground a few feet from Ross. Ringo whirled. Two Azeel tribesmen stood on the roof of the Stallion. One drew back his arm to hurl another javelin. Ringo stopped and raised his rifle, sighted down the barrel, and fired twice into the Azeel's chest. The anouk toppled backwards. The second tribesman had an atax ready to throw. It was a thick star-shaped discus that spun with purple energy as it was hurled. Properly charged, these weapons could even cut through the UN's fabled Wolverine power-armor. Ringo hurled himself to the ground, but too late. The atax flashed and slashed through his left thigh.

He screamed and held the trigger. The stream of bullets hit the Azeel, but the atax had already circled around back to its owner's hand. The anouk hurled it again instantly, but Ringo's bullet struck the warrior in the shoulder and sent the spiritually charged missile slightly off target.

Book I: The Horror Lords

It sliced through Ringo's jacket and narrowly missed his rib cage.

A strong hand grabbed the back of Ringo's coat and pulled him onward.

"C'mon, kid!" Ross yelled. "Run!" Ross shoved the hobbling young Ranger ahead of him while he swept out a pattern behind with his rifle. Then he saw three warriors astride their massive chanouks charging at them from up the canyon. Two of them wielded black lances and one had an atax at the ready. The Azeel screamed their war cry as they charged the two humans.

"Keep running!" Ross shouted and stopped.

Ringo limped forward, but turned and sprayed his rifle from the hip. The chanouks all reared, bred for centuries to protect their riders from danger, and took the shots. A few bullets rang off the armored breast-plates strapped under their necks. Other shells penetrated their rolling sinewy flesh, but without apparent effect. The beasts dropped to their heavily clawed front paws and continued charging.

Ross placed a head shot on the outside warrior, the one most likely to chase Ringo. He was also the one with the atax, the weapon with the longest range. The rider was slammed from the saddle, his weapon falling useless to the ground. Both of the remaining anouks turned their fearsome gazes on Ross.

The Ranger dropped to a knee and opened up on the tribesmen. The chanouks reared again, balancing on their hind legs, front paws clawing the air. They roared as Ross's shells plunged into them. This time he saw blood oozing from wounds. He emptied the magazine, giving Ringo time to stagger behind the rock outcropping.

When the rifle was empty, the chanouks dropped down and a lance flew. Ross had faced these weapons before and instinct took over. He rolled to his side, swatted out with his rifle, and knocked the javelin out of the air. Like the atax, anouks were able to charge any weapon made of tannis with some sort of energy. Whether it was magic or simply the property of the strange rock found throughout Banshee, no one yet knew.

The anouk who threw the lance yelled in surprise and admiration.

Ross saw that his rifle was damaged by the impact of the lance. He threw it aside, stood, and drew his Colt. The Azeel were only twenty yards away, coming hard. He raised his arm and thumbed back the hammer. He had two shots at most before the beasts were on him. And then he would be dead.

Suddenly, the two Azeel reined in their chanouks. Clawed feet gripped the sandy earth as they came to a skidding halt. Both warriors spun their mounts and galloped away up the canyon.

Ross was so surprised he didn't drop the hammer. Anouks were a ritualistic people, particularly in war. He had never seen a ritual charge and wheel to honor a brave enemy, but then he hadn't had much contact with the Azeel tribe; they were warlike and distant, and the only humans they trafficked with were the Reapers.

Still, he felt strangely honored by their display. And damn happy to be alive. He eased down the hammer of the Colt and gave the pistol a fancy spin to slip it in the holster. He smiled.

Then he felt something ruffling his duster. He spun and drew his pistol.

Stallion Two hovered behind him, twenty feet off the ground, cannons ready. Stew and Ngoma waved. Ross gave himself an embarrassed

Clay & Susan Griffith

laugh and returned the wave with the pistol before putting it away slowly. This time with no flourish.

Debbi knelt beside Ringo.

The young man grinned up at her. "There must've been ten of 'em, Dallas! Maybe twenty! I got three or four. Ross got the rest." He fingered his bandaged thigh. "Tsukino thinks there's no poison."

"I'm sure he's right," Debbi said.

"Those anouks are fast!" the kid went on. "I hardly blinked and he got off two throws."

Debbi patted his shoulder. "Rest. I've got to help with the civilian casualties."

Ringo started to get up. "Yeah. I can help too."

"Just rest." She shoved him down.

She stood and glanced at Boston Fitzpatrick. He had a nasty shoulder wound and was heavily sedated. He was resting as comfortably as possible. Hiro Tsukino was a first-class field medic and he had set up a triage area where he was doing his best to care for the wounded. Here in the Bosphorus, casualties among the caravaneers were fifteen dead and thirty wounded. Reports from out on the plains were worse.

As Debbi moved among the shocked and relieved caravaneers, her eyes unconsciously went to the figure of Ross as he strode through the condensing chaos barking orders and lending a hand. She had a brief flashback to the flood of relief she had felt when she boarded Stallion Two and saw Ross and Ringo, safe and relatively sound.

Numerous exhausted faces greeted Debbi. These were people who had seen too much. Caravans always carried a supply of sad-eyed, bone-weary refugees who had given up on lives of isolation and danger, and decided to seek safety in towns like Temptation. These refugees were largely single men and women, hardened by the frontier to a life of solitary existence.

There was, however, another type of traveler with caravans. It was a small group, but growing. These were humans who had been born on Banshee. They were young and vigorous. They were eager to build families and rebuild their world.

These men and women took Debbi's hand as she passed and thanked her. Some small children smiled up at her; others were too shell-shocked to do more than stare.

Debbi identified with these vigorous young natives. She understood that settlers must do their best to cooperate with the anouks. Human problems on Banshee could no longer be solved long-term through the barrel of a gun. Humans were outnumbered. Debbi wondered if early pioneers in the American West felt the same way toward the Indians. She prayed that things would work out better here than they had back on Earth.

Debbi saw Ross moving through the crowd toward her. He pointed at her and jerked his thumb back.

"Let's go. Just get a call from Curtiz out on the flats. Sounds like he found the black guns."

Ross commandeered a motor vehicle, and he and Debbi raced through the Bosphorus onto the plain. They covered the ten miles in a few minutes. They saw a Colonial Ranger standing near an overturned truck. Rumer Curtiz was a dark-skinned man with a heavy moustache and

Book I: The Horror Lords

thick, black hair. His hooded eyes looked as if he was on the verge of tears. Human and anouk bodies were scattered in the dust around him.

When Ross and Debbi approached, Curtiz pulled a tarp back from the flatbed of the truck with crates strapped to it. The crates were stenciled "Spare Parts." Several of them had been broken open and indeed they were spare parts, precious enough in this place. But one crate was smashed and it did not contain spare parts. From the crate, Curtiz pulled an old model automatic rifle with the black gun tube attached. He tossed it to Ross.

Ross held it up to show Debbi. Then he turned back to Curtiz. "Every vehicle of this caravan gets searched before getting into the Depot."

Curtiz went a little wide-eyed.

"Every single one," Ross reiterated. "And it's your job to make sure of it, Curtiz. I want all of these attachments seized. Got it?"

"Yes sir."

A speeder bike roared to a stop nearby and a tall man dismounted and pulled off his goggles. He wore the traditional flowing bluish black desert robes and curved sword at his waist of his Tuareg ancestors on Earth. Only his piercing eyes were visible through the slit in the ghutra wrapped around his head.

"Ross, thank you for the help." Sharif pulled the black cloth from his long, angular black face; his cheeks bore ritual scarification. He touched his hand to his heart, lips, and forehead. He then shook hands with Ross.

"Reapers really pounded you, Sharif. Sorry we didn't get here earlier. We didn't get word until a little earlier this morning." Ross extended his hand toward Debbi. "This is one of my new people, Debbi Dallas. She got the info on the raid. Dallas, this is Ahmed ibn Sharif, caravan master."

Sharif looked at Debbi curiously. "Debbi Dallas? That sounds just like an old..."

"Glad to know you," Debbi rushed before he could finish his thought.

Ross bobbed his chin at the truck. "This yours?"

"Oh no," Sharif answered. "It belongs to a trader. He joined us at a cutoff between here and Makeshift. Never seen him before."

Ross laughed hard. "Good. I've got a lot of questions for the man that's bringing contraband guns into my territory. Where is this trader?"

"That's him." Sharif pointed to a corpse on the ground.

Ross regarded the dead body and looked up at Debbi. "That really pisses me off."

Chapter 15

"When are you going to rebury all these bodies?"

Donald Fairchild asked the question as he stood petulantly with balled fists on his hips. Debbi stared at him, suppressing her anger. They were outside Doc Dazy's office where she'd been visiting Fitz, who was recovering from his wounds secured in the fight at the Bosphorus Straits the day before. Fairchild was there to demand the Doctor's support in demanding disposal of the newly killed bodies of the undead that were stacking up in the vacant lot behind the infirmary.

"The stench is disgusting," Fairchild stated. "It's distressing the citizens. And the bodies are a threat to public health because of disease,

Clay & Susan Griffith

not to mention the danger from all the carrion eaters they're attracting."

He pointed up into the clear afternoon sky where a flock of gray komodos circled; they were dark reptilian creatures about the size of a large eagle. They had a nasty reputation for swooping down and carrying away small children, but Debbi knew they were just scavengers.

"I understand your concerns, Mr. Fairchild," Debbi replied. "But there are the problems of identification and the fact that the cemetery isn't secured yet. There is still a lot of wandering undead out there. And our spotters say more dig out every day."

"Well, good God! Get out there and shoot everything that's moving! I've been in touch with some of my people near Makeshift; they don't have walking dead wandering the streets! None of these outlandish problems are occurring there, or anywhere else. Just here in Temptation! We need some law and order around here! First all this crap around here and now the Reapers are on the warpath! Maybe you didn't hear what they did to Ghost Rock City!"

"I heard," Debbi said evenly.

Fairchild ignored her warning tone and continued raving. "They'll be coming after my mines too. Thank God I've got my paramilitaries because I sure as hell don't expect any help from the Rangers! Why don't we just go ahead and give the damn planet to the Reapers? They're gonna end up taking it anyway! Hell, you Rangers can't even handle dead people. How do you expect to stop Nicolai? What are you doing to insure the safety of the people of Temptation? The people demand action!"

"You're going to want to stop shouting at me, Mr. Fairchild." Debbi stepped down into the street and pushed past him.

Fairchild grabbed her arm.

Debbi quickly clamped her thumb and two fingers onto his wrist and twisted, breaking his grip and bringing him to his knees in pain. Fairchild groaned through clenched teeth and tried to pull away. He was strong, but Debbi had a solid hold and dug her nails into his nerves. His arm went limp and he stopped struggling.

"And you're going to want to never put a hand on me again." She released his wrist and his arm flopped uselessly at his side. "The Rangers are doing the best they can to insure public safety. There were plans to rebury the undead in a mass grave outside town, but we received complaints from some members of the Town Council that a number of citizens were upset by this treatment of their dearly departed. The matter was forwarded to the Committee for Public Safety, so perhaps you should talk to your fellow committee members. At this time, we have no intention of sending men into the cemetery and taking a chance of more casualties. However, we are reevaluating that policy even now. We believe the zombies have been cleaned out of Temptation, and we're doing our best to keep more from getting in. That is our first priority. In addition, we are keenly aware of the increased Reaper activity. We'll deal with that if it comes to it. We appreciate your input and your concerns."

"You broke my arm!"

"Nah." She glibly touched a forefinger to her forehead and sashayed away.

Book I: The Horror Lords

High above Banshee, the Tunnel watched. This vast technological marvel had been built decades ago to facilitate travel to and from Earth. For years, ships, equipment, and people poured through the Tunnel to flood the new frontier of the Faraway System and Banshee in particular. Most, if not all, of the travelers were drawn by the lure of ghost rock or to support the ghost rock mining culture. They prospected the wind-racked surface of Banshee and the haunted asteroids of dark space. Or they sold things to those who did.

The Tunnel was built by Hellstromme Industries, maintained by Hellstromme Industries, and profited Hellstromme Industries. Not a nugget of ghost rock passed through the Tunnel back to Earth that didn't put money in HI's pocket. Although smugglers and pirates were a constant problem and there always was some leakage of profit, official competition was squelched, if possible, by Hellstromme's shrewd monopolistic action and, if necessary, by squads of HI Marines.

When the United Nations had sent their multinational Expeditionary Force to Faraway to crush the anouk revolt on Banshee and make the planet safe for human ambition, Hellstromme Industries viewed the military adventure with skepticism. They already had to deal with the annoyingly independent Colonial Rangers, who never felt as beholden to HI as they should. But Hellstromme was nothing if not flexible, and soon they were operating well with the seemingly permanent presence of EXFOR.

Oddly enough, the inexplicable and disastrous day when the Tunnel went dark and Faraway was cut off from Earth, only increased Hellstromme's power. Some colonists even suspected HI shut down the Tunnel on purpose. In the bold, new world of scarce resources that followed the Tunnel's failure, Hellstromme found itself the only institution in Faraway that was set up to design and build things. The UN had their warships and battalions of heavily armed troopers, but they didn't know how to make anything. Hellstromme had space stations and ground installations full of scientists and technicians for R&D as well as workers for the hard tasks of mining, processing, and manufacturing.

Unfortunately for them, when the suppressed and restive anouks realized that the human colonists were cut off from their far-off home, they rose up against the interlopers. The hellish Skinnies went to work creating a massive weapon. Hellstromme personnel evacuated their planetside stations for the Tunnel base in orbit. Ghost rock mines were abandoned and factories destroyed. The HI directors watched from above as the sorcerous storm devastated nearly everything they had taken the trouble of shipping from Earth and installing on Banshee.

The small-time prospector and miner continued to extract ghost rock to be processed in the few factories that remained. This noble frontier grit impressed the orbiting Hellstromme directors while they began to debate how and when to reassert their hegemony over Banshee's economy.

Both Hellstromme Industries and the UN Expeditionary Force were waiting for the proper moment to return to Banshee. The UN wouldn't go until they were assured of falling on the anouks and destroying them utterly, particularly their lich-like witchdoctors. Hellstromme went to work to make that possible because their own return to Banshee was predicated on the cover of UN firepower.

The person who fancied herself the linchpin at the center of this alliance was a woman named Lithia. She was a Hellstromme Industries

Clay & Susan Griffith

project manager and her project was directly linked to giving the UN the force needed to wipe out the Skinnies and the quasi-mystical anouks and their bastard relatives, the blacklining Reapers. She often stared at the prototype on her desk - a thin metal tube about two feet long and barely an inch thick. The black gun. Lithia was sure this technology would insure human superiority in Faraway. And it came from her lab.

Lithia had much in common with the black gun. She was thin and pale, like clean gunmetal. Her appearance was sharply attractive with clean lines and hard edges. She habitually wore a simple white shirt and black skirt. Her ink black hair was pulled tight against her scalp. In action, she preferred to do her damage with little fire and smoke, if possible without the victim knowing they were under attack until they were already dead. She was like a well-designed product with nothing to distract from the basic function - that of rising to the top of Hellstromme Industries by any means necessary.

And she was starting to feel that the man in front of her was in her way.

"The black guns went where?" she asked him.

"They're in Temptation as we expected," stammered Thomas, her executive assistant.

"However?"

"The Colonial Rangers have them." Thomas leaned forward to launch into a self-exempting explanation.

Lithia held up a silencing finger. "Your man lost them?"

Thomas winced at being unable to explain in his own way. "Yes. He was killed. He was with a caravan."

"They were unguarded?"

"Well, no not completely. But we were trying to maintain a low profile. The Reapers attacked at—"

She held up her finger again. "How many?"

"Reapers? There must've been—"

"Guns."

Thomas consulted a palmcorder, hoping for some miracle that would keep him from answering. Lithia waited quietly. He exhaled. "Um. One hundred units."

Lithia asked in a still voice. "What did the Rangers do with the guns?"

"We have no evidence they've done anything with them yet. I'm sure they don't know what they are."

"The entire run lost. No beta testing on site. We've now lost six months."

Thomas nodded sympathetically, trying to be a commiserator rather than the one responsible. "Absolutely. We could've gotten those guns to a lot of miners and settlers if not for those damned Rangers."

Lithia began tapping her keyboard. "You can go, Thomas. Thank you."

He hesitated, studying her face for any hints. There were none. He left the office slumping.

Thomas's incompetence already pushed aside for the moment, Lithia quickly computed production figures and resource allocation to her lab. It would be nearly impossible to replace those lost units without going to the directors for an amended budget line. And that was very undesirable. Not with other HI labs nearing roll-out on competitive projects.

Why did it have to be Colonial Rangers?

Lithia would rather work with the Reapers, and had, many times. Although she preferred Jesse Coltrane to the current leader. Coltrane

Book I: The Horror Lords

was an old-fashioned thug, a thief. He was easy to deal with as long as you didn't show weakness and kept your hand on your wallet. But Nicolai was a thinker. He fancied himself a political philosopher with a gun. And those types were unpredictable.

In their own way, the Colonial Rangers were worse. You couldn't manipulate their central command because they barely had one. They had never been well coordinated, but the Worldstorm had left them even more scattered and independent. One Ranger might be an anouk-hater with an itchy trigger finger while the next one was a colonist-baiter gone native. However, if you threatened any one of them, they pulled together.

The Colonial Rangers had a terrible inferiority complex. Despite their hard-eyed bluster, they realized they were outnumbered by the Reapers, outgunned by the UN, and out-organized by Hellstromme Industries. But when it came to Banshee, they knew the ground better than any group except the anouks themselves. That advantage was undeniable and had to be overcome in the coming battle for mastery the surface.

And now a mob of those quick-tempered, uncooperative gunslingers had her black guns.

Lithia contemplated dropping a squad of HI Marines into Temptation to take back the guns by force. But then there was the unpleasant possibility of a nasty, public firefight between her Marines and the Colonial Rangers. She'd prefer not to raise the static level on Banshee. She didn't want the HI Directors or her UN liaison to know the guns had been lost. Even though Thomas was a fault, it would come back on her. She was a firm believer in the maxim that you never fixed a problem by making it bigger.

Perhaps she could make this work. She could reach out for assets in Temptation. In a stagnant, backwater hole like that, she should be able to buy anything or anybody she wanted. And that included Colonial Rangers. Lithia straightened a stray hair. Maybe she could play these gunslingers after all.

Debbi approached Ranger headquarters.

There had been a constant crowd outside the office for the last few days, shouting questions and demanding answers. Given the circumstances, Debbi felt that the Rangers had done a remarkable job safeguarding citizens of Temptation from the undead, both physically and psychologically. Still, there had been enough incidents, such as the melee at the First Ecumenical Church, to create a growing wave of horrific eyewitness accounts and fear-based rumors. There were grains of truth circulating, but the truth was so unbelievable that it was easy for other elements to sink into the story. Most of the crowd surrounding the Ranger headquarters didn't know what was really going on, but they felt compelled to be a part of the panic because of what they imagined was going on. And they were almost all armed.

A woman yelled at Debbi as she tried to pass, "The Skinnies are in Temptation, aren't they!"

Debbi recognized the woman as the ungrateful lady from the Ecumenical Church that she had shoved to the floor while saving her from a zombie. Her name was Mrs. Cochrane, a widow, and she had become a familiar presence in the outraged crowds.

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Skinnies?" a man standing next to Mrs. Cochrane exclaimed. "You saw Skinnies? Here?"

"There are no Skinnies in Temptation," Debbi asserted calmly.

"You're just saying that!" Mrs. Cochrane retorted in near hysterics.

"You're just saying that so we don't panic! I saw Skinnies in the church! They are going to murder us in our beds!"

Debbi stared her straight in the eye. "There are no Skinnies in Temptation, Mrs. Cochrane. You did not see Skinnies in the church."

"You were there! You saw them!" She turned to a man next to her.

"She's lying to my face. You can see how scared she is."

The man demanded, "What are the Rangers doing to help us!"

He grabbed Debbi's jacket as she stepped toward the door. She tried to pull away, but Mrs. Cochrane seized her too.

"Why aren't you doing something about the Catholic church?" Mrs. Cochrane raved. "It's the center of all this evil!"

Debbi forcefully pulled her arm away. "The situation at the Catholic church is under control, Mrs. Cochrane."

"Oh really? Then who are those people running around there at night? Devil worshippers, that's who they are! What are you doing about it?"

"Ma'am, there are no people running around the Catholic church at night. Perhaps there were several days ago, but not now."

"I'm sure!" Mrs. Cochrane grabbed a stubby little man from nearby and pulled him forward. "This is Mr. Hale, a fine gentleman and credible witness. Tell her, Mr. Hale."

"My name is John Hale. Pleased to meet you." He extended a friendly hand to Debbi.

Debbi smiled in surprise and shook his hand. "Debbi Dallas. Glad to know you, Mr. Hale."

"Debbi Dallas? Well, that reminds me of some...oh well I..." His eyes strayed to her breasts.

Mrs. Cochrane glared at the man and loudly cleared her throat.

"Oh yes," Hale stammered under her baleful look. "I was walking past the church just last night. The haunted one, the cathedral. And I saw odd lights inside the church."

"And?" Mrs. Cochrane prompted.

"Oh. And chanting. A strange, otherworldly sort of chanting."

"Otherworldly?" Debbi inquired with mock seriousness.

"Yes. Quite otherworldly. And I noticed that the chain on the gate was unlocked."

Debbi looked hard at the man. "What? Are you sure?"

"He *said* the chain was unlocked," Mrs. Cochrane added in a shrill voice. "Devil worshippers have amazing powers. Unlocking chains being among them. So, are you going to do something about them, or are you going to stand by while we are all murdered in our beds?"

Only in my dreams would you be murdered in your bed, Debbi thought, with a faint smile.

Then she held up her hands. "We'll look into it."

"You've got to do more than that!" Mrs. Cochrane yelled. "There is evil in this town! Evil! Devil worshippers and Skinnies! They are going to murder us in our beds and the Rangers will just stand by!"

Debbi started for the door. "I said we'd look into it. Rest assured we will."

Hands grabbed Debbi again. She instinctively reached for her weapon.

"Now!" Mrs. Cochrane shouted. "You have to do something now! We

Book I: The Horror Lords

may not survive another night of this horror!"

The crowd began to rumble in a dangerous way.

The front door to the office flew back and Ross stomped out onto the wooden sidewalk. The crowd turned their eyes from Debbi to him. He reached out and pulled Debbi free of the clutching mob and dragged her behind him. He stepped to the edge of the crowd.

"Everybody listen to me!" Ross raised his hands. "I'm not having this kinda thing here!"

Mrs. Cochrane shouted, "If you don't take action, we will!"

Ross said, "The curfew's cancelled for tonight. That's the action I'm taking."

The crowd became silent. They exchanged glances and a few smiles broke across worried faces.

"The curfew's over?" Mr. Hale asked. "So everything is all right?"

"The curfew is cancelled," Ross repeated. "Go about your business."

With that he turned and virtually shoved Debbi inside the office and closed the door behind him.

"Don't ever stop and talk," he said before she could speak. "Just let 'em see you doing your job."

"But they're scared. They want information."

"They'll get it when we get it."

"So is the curfew cancelled?"

"That's what I said."

"Because of what just happened outside?"

"Hell no." He gave Debbi a look that made her feel embarrassed for her stupid question. "There hasn't been a zombie sighted in town for two nights. Time to let some of the pressure off."

Debbi glanced at Stew and Chennault who sat behind mounds of paperwork.

Debbi said to Ross, "Mrs. Cochrane did say something you should know."

Ross stood with arms crossed. "I doubt that. But go ahead."

"She said, or rather a Mr. Hale said, that he was passing St. Calixtus last night and heard some odd sounds."

"There's a shocker," Ross snapped. "People have heard weird noises there for a long time. Folks think St. Calixtus is haunted."

Debbi continued without comment, "He also said that the chain you put on the gate was unlocked."

Ross stood straighter with interest. He worked his jaw in thought. "Stew, anybody in the churchyard last night?"

"No. Patrols on the walls. Nobody inside."

"Well, far be it from me to ignore the complaints of concerned citizens." Ross chucked Debbi on the shoulder. "Stew, call Miller in to watch the house. Then arm up. We're all going to stake out a haunted church."

Chapter 16

It was an hour before sunset as Debbi, Ross, and Chennault approached the gate to St. Calixtus. Debbi scanned the interior area with binoculars and saw no undead lurking inside. There had been no zombies here for a day or two and the wall snipers had been shifted to more important duties. Debbi saw several bodies lying on the ground nearly obscured inside swarms of six-inch long black and green

Clay & Susan Griffith

blowflies. And not far from the abbey, a pair of gray komodos, squat and bloated under their wings, feasted on the flesh of a dead woman.

Being in the direct lee of the city wall, this area was often home to swirling and unpredictable winds. Or it could be abnormally still, as it was now. The stagnant air allowed the stench of decay to hang in the air like gobbets of flesh on a meat hook.

Debbi said, "It looks clear. Disgusting, but clear."

"All right. Let's go." Ross unlocked the heavy chain on the gate and led the Rangers into the churchyard. He looped the chain back through and locked them in. "Chennault, get on the roof of the abbey. We don't want any nasty surprises."

Debbi watched the short woman trot off. Chennault was an ex-Hellstromme Industries Marine and never talked much about her past or even her present. Debbi was under the impression she may have been an assassin of sorts, rather than a line trooper. She was an excellent shot with the standard pulse rifle and physically stronger than any other Ranger, save perhaps Boston Fitzpatrick whom, it was rumored, had once wrestled a young chanouk to the ground on a dare.

Debbi and Ross made their way to the front of the cathedral. The doorway was twenty feet high and fifteen wide. Sunlight streamed through the shattered roof and illuminated portions of the vast, empty interior. Debbi heard footsteps coming from around the side of the church and Stew appeared with his rifle cradled in his arms.

He bobbed his head toward the church. "It's clear. No sign of anybody or anything."

Ross said, "Let us pause a moment here while the Reverend Dallas gives us the layout of the interior of this, what do you call it again, church?" The barest glint of a challenge lit his expression as he sardonically regarded Debbi.

Debbi smiled sarcastically at Ross. "It's a cathedral. It's shaped like a cross. More than that and you'll have to consult your travel guide."

Ross's facial muscles tightened as he fought to remain stoic.

Confusion flicked briefly in Stew's eyes at the interplay between the two Rangers.

Slipping into their odd dialogue, Stew held out his forearm along the same axis at the main line of the cathedral as if pointing into the door. He crossed his wrist with his other arm. "This is the cathedral. It's a cross, like Dallas said. My forearm is the nave. The two branches of the cross are the transepts." He wiggled his fingers. "This is the choir."

Debbi and Ross stared at him.

Stew ran a hand through his close-cropped hair and looked up from under a down-turned brow. "I studied a few years with the Jesuits."

Ross shook his head in wonder and finally said, "Okay. I want you two up in the second story." He glanced questioningly at Stew.

Stew didn't look up, but said, "Triforium."

"The triforium. Is there a crypt?"

"There is," Stew added. "Entrance is in the floor of the north transept."

"Does it connect with any tunnels leading off the grounds?"

"Not so far as I know. At the time, it was assumed no one down there was going anywhere. Except up."

Ross nodded and said, "I'll stake out the rubble on the main floor. We don't know exactly what we're waiting for, but it wouldn't be the first time a bunch of freaks have used the place for rituals."

Stew asked, "Ross, you think it's possible some occultists are the

Book I: The Horror Lords

cause of all these problems?"

Ross paused and considered carefully what he was about to relate. "My grandfather was a Texas Ranger back on Earth. Like his grandfather before. And his grandfather." Ross brushed his hand over the Colt Peacemaker on his hip. "He gave me this old gun. He told me stories about his days as a Ranger and the days of Rangers gone by. Those stories talked about horrors in the Old West like we've been seeing in Temptation. Then on the day he died, he told me the worst yet. He said that he hadn't even talked about half the things he'd seen." Ross smiled quickly before resuming his grim countenance. "I used to think he was touched. But I'm starting to think he was the most well-balanced man I ever met because he didn't go flat-out crazy." He clicked his com so Chennault could hear. "People, we don't know what we're dealing with and the only rule that never changes is protect yourselves."

Debbi and Stew exchanged a look. From most anyone else, Ross's story would have been deemed pure foolishness and dismissed. But since it came from him, both of them took it dead serious. It didn't quell their apprehension by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, it only heightened it.

Ross led them inside through the portal. He pointed up to both sides of the church.

Stew went to the left aisle while Debbi immediately went right.

Debbi had the outer wall to her right and thick columns on her left. Along the wall were a series of stone sarcophagi, some made of tannis, some of marble imported from Earth. Some of the tombs were simple and others had exquisite statuary reclining on top. She heard a faint scraping noise. She stopped and listened. She could make out the sound of Ross and Stew moving stealthily up the cathedral.

She strained to pinpoint the origin of the scraping noise. She realized it was coming from inside a sarcophagus. The corpse inside was awake, but the stone lid was too heavy for it to escape. She crept forward and heard the same scraping from the next tomb. And the next too.

Stew's voice came across her com. "I hear undead moving inside the sarcophagi over here."

"Me too," Debbi said. "But I don't think they can get out."

"Then forget 'em," Ross said. "They can stay in there till hell freezes over."

At the crossing, Debbi and Stew found doorways leading to narrow, circular staircases rising to the triforium galleries twenty feet above the floor. They climbed up through the cobwebs and settled themselves diagonally across the center of the church from one another so they could spy out most of the cathedral through stone arches.

They watched as Ross strode down the center of the cathedral. His head turned side to side, carefully scoping the situation. He moved in and out of colored patterns on the floor cast by fading sunlight from the remaining stained glass. His boots rang off the tannis. His torn black duster flowed behind him like the robes of a flawed priest.

The cathedral's sturdy altar had been dragged from the collapsed choir at the rear of the church and set up in the crossing. It was a massive piece, seven feet long and intricately carved from a white stone to contrast with the black tannis church. It was now draped in a sheath of black wax. Ross played his flashlight over it. He rubbed a finger on the wax and it came away damp. He licked his finger and spit.

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Blood. Not too old." Ross left the altar and climbed over a pile of rubble in the rear of the church. He nestled behind some collapsed wooden pillars.

They all settled into immobility and waited. Colored stains slid across the floor with the setting sun and finally disappeared into night shadows. With no wind outside, the sounds of the church slowly began to filter into their wary ears. The air filled with the whisper of dead hands scratching on the insides of their tombs.

Debbi breathed harder through her nose to drown out the flinty noise.

"Ross," Chennault's voice came through her com, "I've got people out here. Three, no five. They're coming to the gate."

"Can you make them out?" Ross asked.

"Yes. Three men and two women. I don't recognize them. Wait. Here's three more coming down the street." Her voice dropped a few notches.

"They've got a key in the lock and they're coming in."

"Weapons?" Ross asked.

"One man is wearing a pistol. That's all I see. Hold." She paused for a moment. "They're coming my way."

Debbi heard shuffling sounds through her com, no doubt as Chennault moved to a better hiding place.

"They're somewhere on the first floor of the abbey," Chennault whispered.

There was another long pause.

"Talk to me, Chennault," Ross said.

"I think they're coming out. Yeah, I hear them. Christ."

"What?" Ross asked intensely.

Debbi gripped her weapon as the silence lengthened.

Chennault said, "They're wearing robes and hoods. It's like Halloween back home."

"This is no joke," Ross snapped. "Are they all there?"

Debbi heard Chennault counting quietly and envisioned her pointing at each robed figure with her finger.

"Yes," Chennault answered. "Eight. Coming to the main entrance of the church."

The sound of droning human voices began to drift into the cathedral. Debbi shifted into a slightly more comfortable position. Her heart pounded and she felt a delicious flutter of adrenaline. She wet her lips eagerly and allowed a smile to break.

The first robed figure appeared in the portal of the church carrying a large black candle. The chanting of the procession drowned out all other noises, including the sound of the restless dead inside their tombs. A row of small candle flames weaved through the darkness as a line of hooded people streamed in.

Debbi couldn't recognize what they were chanting. The sound echoed and created a strange, atonal hum throughout the cathedral. It grew louder and louder as if the chanting was trapped in the confines of the building.

She whispered, "Stew. Is that Latin?"

"No."

"It's an anouk dialect," Ross answered. "Now shut up."

The solemn procession moved slowly down the nave of the church. It reached the crossing and circled the altar. Then, as one, the group turned and faced the bloody stone. They all stepped forward and placed their large black candles on the edge of the altar. The chanting contin-

Book I: The Horror Lords

ued, but in a subdued tone.

Two of the robed figures moved away from the altar and walked into the transept beneath Stew's position. They squatted and lifted a heavy iron grate from the floor. They then descended a staircase into the crypt.

The chanting went on for several minutes before a hooded head reappeared in the crypt entrance. Behind that figure followed a man, not robed, but dirty and wearing ragged clothes. His type was a common sight on the streets of Temptation, particularly down by the Depot. He was glassy-eyed. He stumbled while stepping out of the crypt and fell hard on his face onto the slick rock floor. His hands were bound behind his back. The second hooded figure emerged from below with a pistol in his hand. The two occultists hauled the bloodied prisoner to his feet and shoved him to the altar.

The group lifted their candles from the altar and stepped back. With a pistol pointed at him, the bound man was lifted bodily onto the stone where he lay on his back staring up listlessly at the dome above him. Then the two that had fetched the prisoner took their candles and rejoined the circle.

A single, robed figure stepped to the altar and placed his black candle above the head of the prone man.

Ross's voice crackled over the Ranger's headsets. "Okay, this ain't happening. Debbi, move down. Stew, get ready."

Debbi scrambled low and fast past the gallery arches. She padded down the twisting stone staircase until she was just a quick turn away from the transept door. She put her back against the cool, stone wall, resting her head on the smooth surface.

"Ready," she announced quietly.

The presiding occultist reached into his robe and removed a long black dagger. It was carved from tannis and it shone brightly in the candlelight. The chanting grew louder.

Debbi felt the sound reverberating in her head. She began to grow dizzy, and a twisting, nauseated feeling crept up the back of her neck. She briefly squeezed her eyes shut. She pushed herself off the wall and took several deep breaths, her chin hanging to her chest. The sickening feeling began to subside.

"Now!" Ross called.

Debbi ignored her misery. She spun and stepped out onto the floor just as Stew appeared with his rifle in the arches above the north transept and Ross exploded out of the rubble in the choir.

Debbi shouted, "Colonial Rangers! Everybody on the floor! Now!" Her voice echoed about the chamber and only intensified the throbbing in her head.

Ross roared toward the altar and fired his scattergun into the air with a massive boom that shattered the web of vibrations that the chanting had weaved through the cathedral.

"On your faces!" he shouted. "Get down now or you die!"

The man with the pistol made a sudden move and a shot cracked from Stew's position above. The front of his robe blew out with the exit wound and he slammed against the altar and fell to the floor.

Two figures broke for the crypt. Stew fired, stitching a cracked pattern in the rock floor just in front of the crypt entrance. The two froze in their tracks and raised their hands.

The man with the dagger surged at the altar and brought the knife

Clay & Susan Griffith

down into the prisoner—who managed to twist to the side. Ross was on him a split second too late. He grabbed the back of the man's hood and dragged him down to the floor. As the man fell, the hood dropped off to reveal Randolph Peck, the Caravan Administrator. Ross stared at him in disbelief.

The tannis knife protruded from the prisoner's shoulder. He screamed and rolled off the front of the altar where he landed heavily on the floor and laid writhing, unable to help himself.

Some of the robed figures held up their hands. Others just stood. Ross snapped back to attention. He battered one with his scattergun and dropped him. Then he shoved another roughly to the ground. "I said get down! Now!"

Several of the occultists slowly began to kneel on the floor. Debbi shouted, her head finally clearing. She grabbed one by the neck and pushed him down while she placed the barrel of her gun against another's back. Ross kicked arms and legs apart.

Debbi stepped over a prone figure and knelt next to the thrashing prisoner.

"It's all right," she said to him. "You're going to be fine. We're here to help you."

He suppressed his screams through gritted teeth. His eyes were wide and dilated.

Debbi pressed her comlink to call Miller for assistance. Suddenly, one of the occultists turned and raced down the nave to the front. Debbi glanced at Ross.

"We got it here. Go!" he said.

Debbi jumped to her feet and sprinted after the fugitive. Outside, she saw the robed figure racing down the stone steps. She fired into the air. "Halt! Colonial Ranger! You are under arrest!"

The figure's mad dash had flung back the hood to reveal a middle-aged woman. She glanced quickly side-to-side and then ran back between the cathedral and the abbey.

Debbi groaned and took off in pursuit.

Behind the abbey, the old burying ground filled several acres up to the town wall. The robed woman ran into the cemetery.

Debbi shouted again, "Halt! You've got nowhere to go!"

When the woman reached the headstones, she suddenly stopped and looked at the ground. Debbi felt relieved. Then the cultist threw out her hands as if steadying her balance. Chunks of dirt flew up from around her feet. Several headstones tilted to the side as the ground under her feet bulged.

The female Ranger slowed to an uncertain trot.

From the ground beneath the robed woman's feet, three long tendrils uncoiled. They were mottled brown, rubbery and warty in texture, with an oily coating. They extended fifteen feet into the air on all sides of the woman as if she was standing among weird trees. The woman looked up at first with no comprehension. Then, to Debbi's surprise, she smiled and reached out. The heavy tentacles collapsed around her with a hard slapping sound and pulled her under the ground.

Debbi stopped dead.

The Ranger scrambled back as a furrow in the earth shot toward her. She turned and ran. She reached the passageway between the church and the abbey. She heard shots from above. Chennault was sniping at the thing from the roof of the abbey, but it seemed to do little good. The

Book I: The Horror Lords

furrow continued to overtake Debbi with feverish speed. The ground cracked under her every step. She felt something probing her calves. She stumbled, her hand coming down hard. Staggering to her feet, she kept going.

On her right, the sturdy cathedral portico was seventy-five feet away. A tentacle shot up in front of her. It was a glistening two feet thick at eye level. Debbi veered right over uneven ground and raised her pulse rifle. She squeezed the trigger and held it. Shells popped into the quivering tendril and it dropped into the earth with a loud squishing sound. Another tentacle roared up to Debbi's right. She twisted again and fired. Something slammed into her back. Still on her feet, she lurched forward, coming ever closer to the church.

A few yards in front of her, a tentacle ripped up and fell flat against the ground. It began to sweep toward her, plowing up a layer of earth as it came like a rolling log. She leaped into the air and the thing passed under her. She landed, tumbled, and crawled onto the bottom stone step of the cathedral portico.

A heavy tentacle slammed down next to her.

Debbi rolled away across the hard-edged steps, then scrambled to her feet as another tentacle slapped against her side. She fell hard, impacting on the mercilessly rigid surface. The tendril slid over her body like a giant slug, searching for a hold and leaving a wet film, but not sticking. She struggled again to her feet and climbed to the portico.

Three tentacles, each twenty feet in length, swept back and forth across the empty, stone steps. Their tips were only a few feet short of reaching the long-limbed Ranger. Then they slithered back into the ground and there was silence.

Debbi staggered to the church door and leaned heavily against the jamb. Warily, she looked inside.

The robed occultists were laid out spread-eagle on the floor near the altar. Ross stood over them. Stew tended the wounded man. He looked down at Debbi, who stood dripping slime.

Ross shouted, "Dallas? You get the runner?"

"Uh. No."

The veteran Ranger looked surprised and displeased. "You mean he got away from you?"

"I mean *she* got away from *me*. But she didn't get away."

"What the hell is all over you?"

"Slime, sir."

Ross muttered, "I don't think I'm gonna like what she has to say."

Chapter 17

Randolph Peck stared down at the St. Calixtus churchyard forty feet below his dangling shoes.

"This isn't right!" he cried. "Don't drop me, please! I'll tell you what you want to know!"

Ross pulled Peck back into the rear of the Stallion and threw him onto the bench. Peck cringed feebly, still wearing his gray robe. Debbi stood at the far end of the compartment, watching her boss manhandle the town leader.

Ross grabbed a handhold and stood in the open doorway. He had removed his duster, but his dark hair and clothes rippled in the wind. A spire of the cathedral and the top of the town wall were visible behind

Clay & Susan Griffith

him.

"Okay, Peck," Ross snarled, "let's start with you telling me what you were doing down there."

"We were summoning a *worhul*."

"A *worhul*? That's what you call that thing under the churchyard?"

"Yes. It's an anouk term. It's an ancient creature from the wastelands. Its kind was old when the Skinny cities were new."

"So why are you summoning it?"

Peck put his head in his hands. "We had to."

Ross surged at Peck and grabbed him. "You had to? That ain't good enough! Now you tell me what's going on or I'll feed you to your pet down there, so help me!"

Debbi asked calmly, "Mr. Peck, how many people did your group kill in the cathedral?"

"Sacrificed." Peck flinched from Ross's upraised fist. "The *worhul* requires sacrifices. The chanting summons them. You see, the church is a perfect resonator. It's made of tannis. It was built right out of a tannis outcropping, like the old Skinny cities. You know, the old Skinny cities are all part of the tannis bedrock. That's how they did their magic."

"Get back to the sacrifices," Debbi said.

"To call them requires a blood sacrifice as well as proper resonance. And once it's here, it has to be fed. Otherwise it starts to hunt."

"How many people did you sacrifice?" Debbi repeated deadpan. Disgust was slowly scorching her patience and she was struggling to keep from pummeling this loathsome man herself.

"Four. Not including tonight. Did he die?" Peck looked almost hopeful.

"You better hope not." Ross sat heavily across from Peck and placed his feet on both sides of the prisoner.

Debbi asked, "So there is only one of those things down there?"

"Yes. We were calling more, but...well." He indicated Ross.

Ross asked, "Once you had a bunch of 'em, what?"

"I don't know. We just knew we had to summon them."

"How'd you know that?"

"The voices told us."

Ross rubbed his face in frustration. "So one night you get up from the dinner table, but instead of having a drink, you hear a voice telling you to call a group of friends and go off to a deserted church to start murdering people and summoning monsters. Is that it?"

"No. The group has been together for years. We call ourselves the Gray Ones. We're interested in magic. Particularly anouk magic." Peck dared to glower at Ross. "That's not a crime."

Debbi stepped between the two men as Ross sat up, slamming his feet to the deck, preparing to attack Peck again.

She held up her hand to Ross, prompting him to calm down. He sat back and fumed.

"Was that the whole group tonight?" Debbi asked Peck.

"Yes," Peck said quickly. "That's everyone."

Clearly that wasn't everyone. The members of the group, once unhooded, had all proved to be otherwise peaceful and notable citizens, although none was so highly placed as Peck. Debbi recognized a few of them and Ross knew them all, which fed his mounting outrage. While Debbi shared those emotions, she had not spent years protecting these people, greeting them in shops, attending meetings or even eating meals with them as Ross had. It was bad enough that tonight's sacrificial

Book I: The Horror Lords

victim likely would not survive his knife wound; when the Rangers found three more prisoners bound in the crypt being held for future sacrifices, Ross looked as if he was going to kill Peck with his bare hands. Instead, he silently dragged the Caravan Administrator into the back of a Stallion that hovered over the church portico. Debbi instinctively leaped on board without invitation just as Ross ordered the pilot, Hiroshi Tsukino, to lift off.

Debbi asked, "How long have you been trying to summon the worhul?"

Peck answered, "Since the undead began to rise, or at least since it was safe to enter the churchyard. We started off discussing the undead, and what we could do to help. But then, we just seemed to know that we should summon the worhul. It was miraculous."

"These voices told you that?" Debbi asked. Peck's matter-of-fact manner made her physically ill.

"Yes."

Ross said, "And this voice told you to slaughter some innocent people so you could call these things to Temptation."

"Yes."

The veteran Ranger darkened. "So, what the hell, you had nothing better to do?"

Peck shook his head. "No, you don't understand. We were all about magic. It's what we do. The voice promised us knowledge, great knowledge that would help all of humanity here on Banshee. We were looking out for the future. And beside, those people weren't citizens. I was very careful about that."

Ross shifted in his seat and muttered violent things.

Peck was lost in thought. "The voice was anouk. But I still understood it. We all understood it." He huffed a brief laugh. "That must mean something."

Ross growled, "Yeah, you stupid son of a bitch, it means you're a tool for some Skinny."

"No. The voice wanted to help us. We could control the worhul."

"You can't control anything. Once a Skinny is in your head, you're finished. You and all your dilettante friends are his meat now."

"That's not true! We know spells that—"

"I could write what you know about anouk magic on the nail of my little finger and still have room for your death sentence. Did voices tell you to raise the dead too?"

"No!" Peck shouted. "We were trying to stop those abominations! We were trying to help! Don't you see? The worhul is our ally in the battle against evil!"

Debbi intervened. "If you want to help, tell us how to drive that thing away. Or kill it."

"I don't know," Peck said. "You stopped us before we learned everything. It burrows through the ground. It will probably stay around the churchyard for awhile because that's where it's been fed." He almost smiled. "But even so, most of Temptation sits on bedrock and I don't think it can move through rock. Otherwise, it would have burrowed under the church and eaten the other sacrifices we were storing there. But the crypt is cut out of tannis. Right? So that's good."

Ross jabbed a finger at him. "Yeah, that's great. You better pray it doesn't hurt anybody before we kill it. Because for every person it attacks, it's gonna be me and you. Alone. And believe me, there is

Clay & Susan Griffith

nothing any of your friends on the Town Council can do to help you. I'll kill you before you ever take a free breath again. Do you understand me?"

"I have rights," Peck stammered.

Ross surged out of his seat past Debbi and seized Peck by the robe. She grabbed Ross's arm, but he slammed Peck's head against the roof of the Stallion accompanied by an almost unintelligible stream of obscenities.

"Ross! Ross!" Debbi tried to pull Peck from her boss's grip. "We need him! He has information! Stop! We need him!"

Relenting, Ross threw Peck to the floor. He clicked on his comlink to Tsukino. "Down."

The Stallion dropped and Ross jumped out of the back door onto the cathedral portico.

Without turning, he said, "Take him in and lock him up. I'll finish here." He stalked into the church.

Debbi walked into *Mo's*. It was very late, or very early depending on your perspective. The Gray Ones had been put into the lockup. Several of them advertised their civic prominence and demanded to be released. Others seemed to comprehend the humanity they had sacrificed along with the vagrants. They sat cold-eyed and slumped. None of them were happy about the staring eyes of the sweating and shaking Borneo.

Debbi craved some decent human company. She needed to sleep, but she couldn't bear the thought of walking into the homey confines of Miss Etta's without a period of cleansing first. She didn't want to take the fresh dirt of work into her home. And *Mo's* was the best place in Temptation for wiping one's moral feet.

The saloon throbbed with life. She stopped just inside the door and drank it in for a moment. She was assaulted by the wonderful sound of voices talking, laughing, and shouting. Acrid smoke filled the place with the vaguely sweet smell of a popular, smokable algae used in lieu of tobacco. It was the most important commodity on Banshee besides ghost rock, alcohol, and food. And sometimes, it edged out food.

Debbi weaved through the crowd. Teamsters and miners nodded to her or ignored her. She paused to watch a card game, relishing the intensity of the players as they focused on the stakes on the table as the most important thing in their world. Then she reached the bar.

"Evening, Mo."

"Hey, Ranger. What'll you have?"

"Is the beer fresh?"

Mo gave her a sour look. "Of course it's fresh. I only got the best stuff in here." He smiled and winked. "It's real yeasty tonight."

"Oh. Give me one anyway."

He plunked the foaming glass on the bar and leaned behind it. "One of your compadres is over there." He pointed across the crowded saloon to where Stew sat alone at a corner table.

Debbi had wanted to talk to Stew about the incident with his father at the cemetery ever since it happened, but their paths never seemed to cross when there wasn't some kind of crisis or shoot-out. At his table, Stew was clearly lost in thought and she hesitated to interrupt him.

Mo said, "He's in here all the time. Just sits in the corner and drinks." She glanced at the bartender and he raised a knowing eyebrow

Book I: The Horror Lords

before going off to refill drinks.

Debbi moved across the saloon. Stew saw her coming and gathered himself. He shoved a chair out with his foot and drained his glass.

"Here you go, Dallas," he said. "You can have this table. I was just leaving."

Debbi sat. "How about sitting with me until I finish my beer?"

Stew blinked his eyes heavily. "Sure. Everything settle down at headquarters?"

"Pretty much. The lockup's jammed full."

"Yeah. Did you put Peck in with that Reaper like Ross wanted?"

"No." She sipped her beer. "It's been quite a week, huh?"

Stew nodded and said, "You're doing a helluva job, Dallas."

She stared at him in surprise. "No more than anyone else, but thanks."

"No, it's hard enough being new without being thrown into a mire like this. I know you're impressing Ross."

She wasn't sure how to respond. It was exciting to hear that Ross held her work in some esteem. She'd been trying very hard since she arrived in Temptation. But she always felt like she didn't know what she was doing and was making more mistakes than good impressions. She had no plan of action; she just responded to emergencies by the seat of her pants. She'd never had great confidence in her instincts, but maybe she was more competent than she, or her porn-loving father, had imagined.

She leaned forward. "How are you holding..."

"Hey, Dallas! Stew!" Ringo appeared out of the crowd and descended onto a chair next to Debbi.

Debbi smiled to cover her annoyance. She noted the relief that flooded Stew's face. He obviously preferred to hide from his problems in silence or glib conversation and Ringo was an excellent buffer against the possibility of serious discussion breaking out.

Well, she thought, she'd try to open him up later. Nobody would be served by Stew falling into a bottle. The Rangers couldn't spare him and she wasn't going to let even one slip away.

She turned to Ringo. "How's the leg?"

"Great."

"No pain?"

"Oh, yeah. Hurts like hell," Ringo shrugged. "But I don't want to be cut out of the action." He set his beer on the table. "So you two were both at St. Calixtus tonight? Man, I wish I'd been there!"

"You didn't miss anything," Stew said.

"Did you see that big worm-thing?"

"No."

Ringo signaled for a drink. "Can you believe Peck and all those others in that group? The Gray Ones. Killing all those vagrants. I just saw Ross. He's wound up fit to bust. Between the zombies and Peck's group and that thing in the churchyard and those weird guns. What's next around here?"

Stew asked, "Any progress on those guns, Dallas?"

"Not really. All our sources for information are dead. The miners. And the trader with the caravan. We're not even sure what the guns do." She pulled out her Dragoon to reveal that she had attached a black tube to the underside of her gun. "But I'm a walking beta test."

Stew said with a faraway look, "Ross must be spitting blood. He hates mysteries. And he can't stand problems he can't fix by putting his

Clay & Susan Griffith

hands on them. You know, he's turned down more promotions than we're likely to see put together because he can't deal with the politics. If it doesn't involve enforcing the law, he's not interested."

Debbi smiled at the thought and then turned to Ringo. "Where'd you see Ross?"

"Outside the office." He looked at his watch. "I've got duty at St. Calixtus in an hour. Sniper duty. Keeping watch for the worm-thing."

Debbi suppressed a yawn. "Be careful. It's big and fast."

"Dallas, get some rest," Stew said. "You've been pushing yourself too hard."

"What about you?"

Stew answered, "I'm going back on duty in an hour or so."

"Have you gotten any sleep in the last few days?" Debbi asked.

"I can sleep when I'm dead." Stew abruptly laughed without humor.

"On the other hand, maybe not."

Ringo laughed at the joke. He didn't know about Stew shooting his own father at the cemetery. Stew glared at him quickly, and then resumed his normal inward facade. He slapped the kid on the shoulder and stood.

"I'll see you guys later. Be careful at church, kid." Stew drifted through the crowd and out the door into the night.

Debbi stared after him and contemplated following.

"Stew's a funny guy," Ringo said. "You want another beer? I'm buying."

"No thanks. Rain check." She left the kid nursing his drink and went outside. She had a stray hope that Stew might be lingering, waiting for her, willing to talk about his problems.

He was nowhere to be seen.

The streets were full of people trying to be unaware of the dangers that surrounded them. They all went about their business or slept behind locked doors trying not to worry that their world might be spinning apart. But in a way, those sorts of fears were daily bread for Temptation. They even served as a perverse source of pride for the townsfolk in normal times.

These fears weren't just the property of the townsfolk, Debbi thought as she started off down the street. She ignored the clenching pain in her stomach and thought about the tension she saw constantly in the faces of her colleagues. It wasn't just Stew; all the Rangers were feeling the pressure. They had been hammered by one crisis after another; first the unexplainable horror of the undead, then the sacking of Ghost Rock City and the rising threat from the Reapers, and now this unknown creature brought into town by some of their own. They were body blows, every one. If the damage didn't let up soon, some of them, herself included, might bust wide open. She sensed that many of the Rangers, as they stood with guns in hand waiting for the next horror to appear, were questioning their desire to continue at their duties.

Just the thought of Ross, the stone man himself, feeling the strain, was disturbing. She hated to think what Ross might have done to Peck if she hadn't been in that Stallion. Peck deserved whatever he got, but she'd hate it if the pressure drove Ross to abandon the values he'd laid out for her the night she wanted to kill Hickok.

She wanted to shove these thoughts aside. Her stop at *Mo's* hadn't made her feel better. In fact, she felt worse. She needed sleep; her body was one massive ache. Once she arrived at Miss Etta's Boarding House,

Book I: The Horror Lords

she went quietly and quickly to her room. She didn't want to eat or bathe. She sat cross-legged on the floor beside her bed in dirty clothes and took deep breaths.

McDuff the cat nudged the door open and settled himself in the crook of her knee. She stroked his soft fur and felt worry-free purring under her hand.

Her last thought before exhaustion overtook her was, *What more can I do?*

Chapter 18

Early the next morning, Debbi passed through *Mo's* on her way to headquarters. She was looking for Stew, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Mo's was bustling despite the early hour. Caravan bosses and teamsters gathered within, some eating the Spartan breakfast *Mo* offered, others discussing lesser-used trade routes that might take them away from Reaper strikes.

She grabbed a cup of coffee off the bar, tossing down a coin on the counter for the privilege and continued her wandering. A heated discussion in the back corner of the saloon caught her attention.

Ahmed ibn Sharif was still decked out in dark robes and turban. He had struggled into town with his battered caravan late the previous night. He was currently arguing with an algae farmer. Debbi inched closer, sipping her hot coffee. Snatches of the conversation drifted to her.

"...imagining things. There is nothing out there," Sharif insisted.

"I'm telling you there is," shouted the algae farmer. His name was Charlie Newcomb, if Debbi remembered right. He was only forty years old, but he looked like he was well over sixty, his face pitted and marred by long hours in the harsh wind and extreme heat.

"You have been sniffing your algae again, Newcomb." Sharif rose to leave, dismissing the man.

The farmer's hand slammed down onto the table. "Damn you, Sharif! Listen to reason."

Debbi stepped forward into the small, excited circle. "Is there some problem here?" Sharif and Newcomb both looked up sharply.

"No, Ranger," the caravan master insisted. "There's no problem." He folded his arms in annoyance that Newcomb's outburst had attracted unwanted attention.

Newcomb glared back at him and then shifted his gaze to Debbi. "There are strange things going on in the Red River Valley."

Debbi raised her eyebrow, but it was Sharif who was quick to voice the obvious.

"That valley is long dead. EXFOR and the Legion saw to that!"

Sharif was right. The Red River Campaign broke the great anouk revolt in '76. It was the bloodiest battle in colonial history for natives and humans both. The last great anouk warlord, a female named Kreech, had holed up in a massive tannis fortress called Castle Rock deep in the vast Red River canyon system with a collection of rebellious anouk clans, a few Skinnies, and even some Reapers. The Syker Legion led the way for the UN army as they pushed their way foot by blood-soaked foot into the deep canyons. The Legion spearheaded the attack that breached the walls of Castle Rock. The hardship and slaughter were indescribable, but in the end Kreech was killed along with hundreds of thousands of her supporters. However, her body disappeared

Clay & Susan Griffith

and has since become a mythical relic sparking occasional millennial movements among anouks intent on driving the humans off their planet.

Now the Red River valley was a desolate, haunted region and a place avoided by most people, even anouks and Skinnies. Only desperate squatters, like algae farmers, dared inhabit the region within a hundred miles of Castle Rock, and only because there was profit involved.

Debbi took the seat opposite Newcomb. She had an interest in local legends, moreso because her father was a UN marine during the Red River campaign and had a part of making this one. "So, what was it you saw out there?"

Sharif threw up his hands in frustration. "You're only encouraging him further, Ranger! He wants me to divert my caravan miles past his farm just so I don't disturb his algae. This is but a ploy!" The caravan master bent down to snarl at Newcomb. "It won't work, my friend. I've lost too much time already. I will be fording my caravan at Derleth Crossing in three days whether your algae is harvested or not."

"You have no right!"

"I have every right! It's not my fault you're so greedy you spread your damn algae up the trade route. I will not detour!"

Debbi shouted, "Gentlemen! Please!" She turned to Sharif. "I want to hear what Newcomb saw out there, then we'll discuss land rights."

Newcomb's broad smile did nothing to ease the situation, but the Tuareg did fall back.

Debbi gestured to the farmer. "Now answer my question."

"There's some sort of bizarre work going on out there! Men and vehicles. Digging. I think."

"Digging?" Debbi knew that even the most foolhardy miners preferred to avoid the Red River Valley. The other possibility was a scientific expedition, but scientists from Hellstromme Industries' orbital lab were rarely if ever on Banshee these days. The world was in such chaos that surviving was the rule of the day. No one on Banshee had time for science outside of what it could do to provide more food and water. And the Red River Valley was no place to acquire either of those things.

Even so, Debbi asked, "Is it Hellstromme Industries?"

Newcomb shook his head. "Didn't see their insignias. But it might be geologists or archeologists or something."

"Are they near your farm?"

"No. They're back up towards where EXFOR kicked the snot out of the damn anouks. About fifty miles up river from my farm. Don't know what they want in that area. Nothing but death and wasteland. But they're out there all day and night. And I can hear this horrible wailing at times and the stench is godawful. I can barely stand to work out in the fields. Two of my hired hands are missing too."

Debbi asked, "Sure they didn't just take off?"

Newcomb gave her a hard, indignant stare. "Not these two. They were my best workers. And besides, they had pay coming."

Debbi had to believe that. Money was such a scarce commodity these days, and no matter the situation, farm hands weren't going to leave before they got paid.

"I'm in town to hire some new hands to replace them," Newcomb added. "If someone would just give me the time." He cast angry eyes to Sharif.

Debbi rose. "We'll check it out." She turned immediately to Sharif before he could butt in. "And we'll see about the trade route dispute as

Book I: The Horror Lords

well. If Newcomb has infringed on the caravan routes, you can bring it before the Caravan Administrator." Then she remembered the Caravan Administrator was in the lockup. Well, they didn't need to know that.

Sharif announced, "My caravan leaves on tomorrow morning's rise. You have three days to move Newcomb. Otherwise, I'll move him myself." With a quick turn on his heel, the Tuareg left in a swirl of flowing robes.

Debbi fixed an irate eye on the farmer. "You haven't encroached on the trade route have you, Newcomb?"

Newcomb swallowed nervously. "Trade routes! Who can tell? These damned caravaneers think they own the planet! I'm telling you, the algae just sort of got away from us. It wasn't really my fault it drifted further upriver than normal, but there's no sense wasting it. All I wanted was another week to finish harvesting. If Sharif and his caravan come in before then, they'll ruin it." Newcomb's mouth spread into a glossy smile. "It's extra food on everyone's plate, Ranger. I'm only thinking of the hungry children of Temptation."

Debbi scowled. The extra food was always welcome, but she knew Newcomb too. She could feel his slick oiliness from here. If he saw an opportunity to expand his spread and get away with it, he'd do it.

She shook her head. "I'll talk to Ross."

Newcomb nodded. "Thank you! Thank you!"

Debbi smiled in a very unfriendly way. "Don't. You know Ross. Anything to keep the peace. And you're way out of our jurisdiction." She patted his shoulder. "If I were you, Newcomb, I'd hurry back to your farm and start working double shifts to get that algae in. Come the morning, trouble's coming to trample more than your crop and you won't have a leg to stand on."

That wiped the smile from the farmer's face. Satisfied, Debbi strode out of the saloon and straight to headquarters.

As if they didn't have enough problem.

The Stallion blasted up waves of dust as it hovered. The Red River was half a mile distant. Its slow, crimson waters drifted between flat shores. Ross brought binoculars to his eyes.

"There's Newcomb's farm." Ross gave a small grunt. "He's got a lot of gall."

Ross had wanted to accompany Debbi on this mission. As soon as she had related Newcomb's story to him, he put Stew in charge and the two Rangers departed. He told her that it was more than just a land rights issue; it might have something to do with all the strange happenings in Temptation. He just felt it; and when an old lawdog like Ross had a hunch, it was wise to follow it.

Debbi saw a gleam in his eye as they tore over the open plains in the Stallion. He looked ten years younger and she saw a glimpse of the stirring frontiersman who had helped tame this planet. Time in the saddle, away from the multiplying crises in town, was a tonic to him. It brought him alive. He actually sang an off-key version of an old Earth song "Red River Valley." It was a terribly sad song, but Ross seemed to enjoy it for some reason. She sat back and relished the aura of carefree adventure that washed off him. He personified that image of a wild Colonial Ranger that attracted her to the service as a young girl.

The region around Newcomb's farm was relatively flat with widely

Clay & Susan Griffith

scattered buttes and cliffs. The river here was wide, slow, and meandering. Vegetation was slowly reviving from the Worldstorm. Stunted trees and stands of high grass clutched precariously to life along the river bank. A hundred yards from the water, however, the landscape abruptly changed to dry, desert scrub.

The river flowed south out of the harsh, broken plateau land where its red waters cut the awesome natural phenomena known as the Red River Valley. With every mile northward, the canyon grew deeper and darker until it reached the region around Castle Rock where it was several miles wide, with savage gorges miles deep that remain unexplored. It was a place that frightened grown men and terrified all those that remembered that ungodly battle. Strange sounds and horrible things seemed to emanate from there.

Today, however, something else was moving around in the valley. And Ross wanted to know what.

Taking the glasses from Ross and raising them to her eyes, Debbi saw what he was talking about. Newcomb had indeed encroached upon the trade route. This slow, shallow section of the river had been a caravan ford for decades, but now both banks were pockmarked with huge, shallow pans dug to trap water and grow algae.

"Newcomb's got a problem." She handed the glasses back to Ross.

"It's his own doing."

"Well, he might have gotten away with it if he hadn't lost his farm hands. They might have been able to get in the harvest before Sharif left Temptation."

"Life's a gamble," Ross retorted. "Newcomb lost." He turned his attention up river. "But at least it gave us a heads-up that something's going on up there." He turned the craft toward the canyon land in a swirl of dust. "Geologists my ass. I bet we'll dig up something a whole lot more interesting."

Two hours later, with the Stallion ditched in a canyon crevasse, the Rangers stealthily worked their way through dry gullies and rocky crevices. They approached an overlook where they hoped to have a good vantage point to see the river. Debbi scuttled along after Ross. She noticed that the vegetation was already waning, although it wasn't as barren as it was reported to be further up where the fighting had been the heaviest. There were no animal sounds, not even the buzzing of insects.

But Debbi heard distant voices echoing against the canyon walls.

Ross signaled to her to keep near to the ground and stay close together. They inched forward on their bellies over a small rise and looked down onto a bizarre sight.

The river was 150 feet below them. Long stretches of sandy ground lined both banks, dotted by an occasional tree or small patches of weeds. The river was much wilder here than near Newcomb's farm. It roiled and spit over hidden rocks, but it was still only a shadow of the monster it would become miles up river nearer the ruins of Castle Rock.

At least twenty figures moved along the valley floor. They were hunched over and shambled with odd, shuffling gaits. It appeared as if their clothes were too large for them. Debbi's eyes narrowed as she maneuvered her binoculars up. She gasped quietly. They were in straightjackets, the arms unbound, their sleeves dragging the ground. Their faces were either slack or wild. Some wore bite masks.

Ross touched her arm and she couldn't help but start. She looked

Book I: The Horror Lords

quickly over at him. He pointed out a lone figure below in the distance. The figure was ramrod straight and gazing out over the river. There was one thing that stuck out immediately about him.

He was dead.

He wasn't as decayed as some of the walking dead they had recently encountered. In fact, he looked fairly well off, by comparison. His flesh was a mottled gray in color, flecked with darkening patches of decay, almost like liver spots. The hair was all gone, not a clinging tendril to be seen on the skullcap.

The uniform he wore was wrinkled and possessed a few holes as if something had eaten through it. The clothes hung large on the cadaver's frame; obviously the flesh had shrunken slightly during his incarceration in a casket.

Debbi heard Ross mutter something. She tore her gaze away from the disturbing scene. "What was that?"

"Quantrill," Ross whispered softly, more to himself than to Debbi.

"Quantrill? *General* Quantrill? The guy that commanded the Syker Legion? It can't be General Quantrill. He's dead, isn't he?"

Ross raised his eyebrows, reminding her of how impotent that excuse was these days.

"Oh," she said. "Never mind."

Ross said, "Not only is he . . . was he dead. He was buried right outside Temptation. And we know that cemetery ain't exactly escape proof these days. No, that's Quantrill, all right. Even half rotted, I'd know him anywhere."

She heard a trace of admiration in Ross's voice. She asked uncertainly, "You knew him?"

Ross shifted slightly to look at Debbi face to face. "As much as anyone can know a syker."

Sykers! Debbi had never really known one. There were few sykers left on Banshee. Back when the war started on Earth, before the Tunnel collapsed, most of the Legion went home to fight there. But she certainly knew of General Garrett Quantrill. He was a black footnote at the end of the Red River Campaign. He was the main author of the Syker Legion's final assault on the anouk rebels inside the fortress of Castle Rock. His Legionnaires were an uncaring fist of humanity shoved into the gears of an anouk meat grinder. Debbi's father, who also fought at Red River, always considered Quantrill to be an inhuman savage, which was a charge of enormous proportions from someone as injured to brutality as her father. But then, her father hated sykers almost as much as he hated anouks.

Glancing at Quantrill with a slight scowl, Debbi was grateful she hadn't met a syker. And she didn't want to start with a dead one.

Noting her expression, Ross scuttled closer and whispered in her ear. "I don't think Quantrill was really what they made him out to be. After the Red River campaign, he was drummed out of the army and lived near Temptation for a few years before they sent him off to die in Lupinz's booby hatch. Everybody said he was a monster, but I thought he seemed like he really cared about his men." His warm breath brushed against Debbi's cheek. "I don't think he deserved the bloody reputation he got at Red River."

Debbi didn't answer, her eyes locked on the figures moving down in the basin. It was becoming hard to focus on the situation with Ross so close, their bodies touching.

Clay & Susan Griffith

She coughed quietly in an attempt to find her voice. "So what are they doing?" She brought her glasses back up. Her peripheral vision showed her that Ross had done the same. She breathed easier even though his right leg was jammed next to hers. She could feel the heat of it even coming through his duster.

"I'm not sure." He removed his hat and wiped his sleeve across his forehead.

He didn't seem fazed at all by their contact. The bastard.

Quantrill was walking along the edge of the river. He stopped suddenly. Bending his knees, he lowered himself to the ground and put out a hand to the dirt as if seeking for something beneath the loam.

The asylum figures crowded around behind him, swaying and grunting. One held a device clumsily in mittened hands, but didn't move until Quantrill rose to his feet.

With a nod from the General, the inmate rushed forward and placed the device into the spot indicated. They then repeated the process several times.

"A beacon?" Debbi suggested. Ross grunted his agreement. "For what?" she wondered in frustration. She shifted slightly, intending to move to a different position, convinced it was merely to get a better visual and not to inch away from Ross.

Ross grabbed her shoulder and she froze. Her eyes swung back to Ross, but instead noticed the distant Quantrill staring straight at their location.

"Damn," Ross whispered.

"Sorry," she hissed through clenched teeth, cursing herself for being so stupid. Her movement must have given them away. But she couldn't see how Quantrill could have spotted them. They were too far away.

Ross just shook his head in absolution. Debbi's small movement hadn't given them away. They were dealing with a powerful syker, dead or not.

Quantrill turned sharply to an inmate beside him. The inmate bounced up and down, swinging his arms wildly back and forth against his chest, the metal buckles on the sleeves slapping harshly against him. Quantrill lifted a hand toward the ridge where the Rangers were hidden. His eyes showed white as they rolled back.

"We're leaving. Now." Ross wrenched his hat on his head and inched back off the ridge, pulling Debbi with him.

Debbi followed, keeping her movements deliberate and quiet. When they were sure they were out of Quantrill's line of sight, they stood and hurried down the slope. Ross was mumbling, berating himself for being so foolish.

"Should have known he could sense us."

"I guess being dead didn't lessen his power," Debbi said bitterly.

They were several miles from the Stallion. The fact that their backs were to a reputedly bloodthirsty syker and a mob of the insane that might be coming after them made Debbi's spine itch. Her feet fairly flew over the rocks as they climbed up another slope.

At the top, they trudged along the edge as it swerved in the direction of the Stallion. Ross looked down the jagged hill to his left and swallowed hard. It would be tough going there, scrubby needle trees and cactus-like bushes. To their right was a sandier slope with the occasional rock and bush, stretching away from the river to the desert.

Halfway to where the ridge flattened out, something waited for them.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Ross stopped abruptly, his arm snapping out to halt Debbi's advance behind him. She peered around him. The blood drained from her face.

A large dark shape stepped onto the ridge.

Debbi immediately flashed back to the miners' camp. Her fingers tightened on her weapon even though it wouldn't put a dent in that thing. Then she realized that this wasn't the same creature. It wasn't as tall or as loose-limbed.

This thing was catlike in nature, lithe and sinewy, covered in black and orange fur. Its tail switched angrily behind it. Its teeth and claws were huge and glistened in the sunlight.

From within its dark shadow emerged a second creature. Both cat creatures eyed the Rangers and dropped their ears against their heads. They crouched at the shoulder. Their tails switched back and forth.

Ross took a step back. Then another. His hand dropped immediately to his holster and came up with his Dragon, which he brought specifically for this mission. Debbi followed suit.

"Is this what you fought at the miners' camp?" Ross asked, keeping his attention on the creatures in front of him.

"No," she quickly answered, continuing her backward gait. "But they look just as bad."

The creatures prowled after them on all fours. Shale and debris skittered off the sides of the ridge as they passed.

Debbi and Ross were now cut off from the ship. She glanced behind her, expecting to see the shuffling inmates appear over the rise at any moment and trap them on this precarious ridge.

Ross leveled his weapon at the snarling cat-things. Debbi grabbed his arm.

"Wait. We might have a back door."

"What's wrong with making a front door?"

"Gun fire will give our position away. I've got another idea." She tugged on his duster. On the way to the river they had passed another ridge, which meandered along a cliff wall deeper into the valley. It would be dangerous. They would have to head deeper into Red River Valley before doubling back toward the ship.

Debbi pulled a phosphor grenade from her belt. Ross caught a glimpse of it and his eyes immediately locked with hers. He nodded. Debbi took the liberty of packing extra ordnance on this trip thanks to clear memories of her last field mission and the monster at the miners' camp. She handed the grenade to Ross who was in a better position to use it. He quickly thumbed the code without taking his gaze from Debbi's. The grenade was now armed. He kept his index finger firmly on the release, preventing it from starting its countdown.

Debbi smirked in a cocky, devil-may-care grin and Ross eagerly returned it.

They turned and ran back the way they had come along the ridge. After a minute of scrambling over the uneven ground, Debbi indicated a narrow ledge leading off the ridge.

Ross turned back to the creatures. They were closing the gap and began a high-pitched mewling, almost like laughter. It gave Ross chills to hear it.

Debbi's sharp eye caught some movement from the direction of the river. The inmates.

"Great. We got company."

The treacherous ridge was their only escape now. A sudden screech

Clay & Susan Griffith

sounded behind her and she turned back to Ross and the creatures. They had finally realized that they might lose their prey. The beasts leaped forward as one, their claws scrambling against the loose shale.

Ross waved frantically at her. "Go! Go!"

She ran out onto the narrow ridge.

He released the switch on the grenade and counted to three as he rapidly backpedaled. Then he stopped and heaved the grenade at the beasts bearing down on him. Not wasting time, he immediately spun and ran for the same path Debbi had taken. From this vantage point, he could see the inmates scrambling up after them from the river's edge. He knew they were being flanked, but the cliff shelf offered a good position from which two people might be able to hold out.

He saw Debbi sprinting ahead. The trail was angling down. He counted in his head and hunched his shoulders as he hit zero. A second later, the air exploded behind him. A superheated punch slammed him between the shoulders and pushed him to the ground.

An inhuman screech echoed behind him. Phosphor grenades were designed to melt through polymetal armors, so they could easily fry flesh in microseconds. He felt no remorse for the screaming things engulfed in the fiery substance. He scrambled on, ignoring the sharp stones digging into his hands. He matched Debbi's pace a few yards ahead of him.

The cliff wall was craggy and peeling. The narrow shelf along which the two Rangers ran was less than four feet across and dotted with fallen detritus.

Ross risked a glance behind him.

The inmates, chittering and yelling, lurched onto the shelf, not fazed by the dizzying height as they scrambled high above the surging river.

Just behind them one of the monsters shambled into view. Smoke rose off its burnt flesh. The hair was scorched in areas, revealing blackened charred flesh. The skin on half of its face was gone, showing white bone beneath. Its one eye was fixed on Ross.

The Ranger knew hatred when he saw it.

The monster shoved its way through the inmates in its rush to get its prey. Two inmates fell screaming off the cliff, their useless covered hands scrabbling futilely for branches and rock outcrops. The rest tried to get out of the creature's way. Furious, it ripped its way through one, a swash of crimson soaking the straightjacket as the figure fell limp to the ground and rolled bonelessly into the ravine.

Ross ran, but he knew he would never be fast enough. He felt rather than saw the cat-thing roaring up behind him. His gun was halfway around when it swiped at him and its long reach connected with his side.

Thankfully it struck with its right forepaw and Ross was bounced against the cliff wall. He fell onto the shelf, feeling a warm rush of blood soak his side. He quickly tried to turn over, intending to get to his feet.

Debbi was ten yards ahead. She must have realized Ross was in trouble. To his horror, she stopped dead and turned back for him.

"Keep going!" she shouted at her.

Either she ignored him or didn't hear him. He suspected that she would claim the latter regardless.

Debbi lifted her Dragoon in one smooth motion and sighted down the barrel. It was a tight shot. Ross was directly in front of the monster that was lifting its claw to land the final blow. She let out her breath to

Book I: The Horror Lords

steady her aim and sent a quiet, desperate prayer. She pulled the trigger.

The bullet pounded the monster's breastbone and threw it upright, screaming. She thumbed the black gun and sent two needles into it for good measure. Ross scrambled to his feet and fled unsteadily onward, not looking back. He kept his gaze focused on Debbi as he ran.

Debbi met his eyes briefly, silently urging him to hurry. Then she shifted her attention again to the beast. It surged forward, more enraged than ever. Debbi took aim again just as it leaped for Ross.

Oh God! No!

She fired and saw the spray of red on the cliff wall as the beast went limp.

But there was no way for Ross to avoid its falling body. It landed heavily on the Ranger and slammed him to the ground. Together they slid wildly toward the edge of the cliff in a tangle of limbs and bodies.

Debbi screamed and started running for them, ignoring the pain that seared her tired muscles.

Ross wasn't even trying to slow himself down; he looked unconscious. Debbi was still just out of reach when he and the creature tumbled over the edge.

"Nooooo!"

She skidded to a stop and fell to her knees, her breath a mere sob.

"Ross!" she howled. The name echoed through the canyon.

It was soon replaced with the loud chattering of inmates as they rushed Debbi.

Through blurry, tear-filled eyes, Debbi scrambled to her feet, bringing the gun up. With a hoarse shout, she fired into the inmates with both regular shells and the black gun, stepping forward to meet them.

Three dropped before her onslaught. The remaining dozen came on, swarming over their fallen brethren and onto her. She struck one with the butt of her weapon and sent him careening over the edge. Two grabbed her arms while another one wrestled the gun from her grip. Two more leaped on her and bore her to the ground. She kicked out at those grabbing for her legs. She connected again and the inmate lost his balance and slipped over the edge, holding by sheer will to a small rock protrusion. He screamed for help. None came. The rock crumbled and the inmate fell away, his shriek following after.

Then came the blows. The inmates pounded her with their wild arms; their shouts and inane guttural noises filled her hearing. They were strong. A few blows found her head and her vision blackened. Another slammed onto her chest and she felt bones give way under it.

She heard a dim rumbling sound and then a scream. It wasn't her; at least she didn't think it was.

Suddenly the weights were gone. She breathed deep and her vision swam back in a semblance of clarity. Her chest felt like it was filled with shards of glass. She pulled an arm over to brace it, gasping. She looked up and purple filled her view. It took a second to realize why.

An anouk.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, her scattered thoughts rambled. She instinctively took a swing at the native. It connected with barely enough force to knock a kitten from a tree. She cursed as her arm was grabbed and immobilized.

Her last thought before the darkness took her was that she had failed Ross.

Chapter 19

Sensations swarmed over Debbi, some good, some bad. The good sensation surrounded her chest, filled with warmth and a slight tingling. The bad filled her head and radiated down into her neck and shoulders. Her eyes fluttered open and a blurry shape loomed over her. She blinked in a vain attempt to clear her vision and tried to rise, but a hand to her chest pushed her back far too easily.

"Rest," said a voice. "You are safe."

It was English. Debbi relaxed and lifted a hand to her aching head, shutting her eyes. They snapped open again as the battle on the cliff came back in a flood of images.

She couldn't believe he was gone.

"I'm sorry, Ross," she whispered. She had failed him. All she could see was Ross slipping over the edge, limp and lifeless. She prayed that he had been unconscious all the way to the bottom.

"Ross..." Debbi tried to rise again.

The hand pushed her down once more. Debbi turned her head and fought to focus her eyes. When they finally did, she started.

A female anouk sat beside her. She was lean, long-limbed, and purple-skinned. Her large black eyes clinically studied the Ranger. Noting her guest's fear, she drew back her hand.

Debbi's hand immediately dropped to her side to a weapon that was no longer there. She shrank defensively against the wall. Her bed was a rock shelf extending from a black tannis wall.

"We took your weapon," the anouk woman said.

Realizing she didn't have much chance of escaping at the moment, Debbi regained her composure. Her vision kept going in and out on her. She shook her head angrily at its betrayal. That action sent a stabbing pain in retaliation.

The anouk watched her. "If I wanted you dead, the deed would have been done long ago."

"How long have I been here?" Debbi asked.

The anouk shrugged. "Many hours. You were very badly hurt."

Debbi straightened with a scowl. "I don't feel that bad."

The anouk actually smiled. It took Debbi by surprise. She had never seen an anouk smile before.

"Your ribs were broken."

"They don't feel broken," Debbi countered. Her mind dimly remembered a chest filled with blinding pain. Her hand gently probed her ribs. They were whole and free of pain.

"They were," the woman stated matter-of-factly.

Debbi took in her surroundings. The room was shiny and black, carved from the tannis that made up much of this canyon. If she even was still in the Red River Valley. The air was cool and damp.

The anouk woman said, "If you would permit, I could also heal your head injury."

She stretched out her large hand and placed it gently on Debbi's forehead. The pain eased somewhat with just her touch.

Debbi's hand snapped up to grab her wrist. The strength in the anouk was evident, but she allowed Debbi to push her away. Debbi's head quickly began to ache again. Her eyes squeezed shut in pain. She let out a small groan.

Book I: The Horror Lords

"You're being very difficult," the anouk told her. Her tone sounded very reminiscent of Miss Etta's.

Debbi looked up. She had never been alone with an anouk before.

"Sorry," she said with a touch of sarcasm, which she quickly regretted for some reason.

The anouk chuckled. "I think perhaps you are not." She inclined her head. "In another moment, I will be finished. Will you permit me?"

Debbi swallowed, unsure. For all she knew, the anouk could be stealing information from her head, not healing it. But, damn it, her head hurt. Eventually, the injury would incapacitate her again and the anouk woman could do as she pleased.

She nodded.

The anouk smiled and lifted her hand over Debbi's brow. The warmth returned and the pain instantly vanished. Debbi breathed a sigh of relief.

Debbi didn't sense any attempt to brainwash or extract information. Not that she knew what such a thing felt like anyway. But the relief from the injury was such that she would almost grant the devil a wish just for a split second of that respite.

When the hand lifted, the pain lifted with it. Debbi breathed slowly, afraid that with any sudden movement it would return. But it didn't. The anouk woman retreated to the nearby chair as Debbi sat up.

Debbi leaned back on the bed against the numerous animal skins that served as cushioning. The fur came from barkas, the anouks' main herd animals. She braced herself for the worst. The prisoner was awake and well enough to talk. Obviously her captor was preparing to get some answers.

"I'm not going to tell you anything," Debbi snarled.

The anouk woman frowned with annoyance. "There is little you can tell me which I don't already know."

"Why did you help me then?" Debbi asked.

The anouk woman had a strange expression on her face. "I haven't yet decided."

"There was someone else with me. I don't suppose you found..." Debbi faltered.

The anouk shook her head. "There was no one."

Debbi caught her trembling lip in her teeth before it was noticed. She nodded curtly and turned away. She breathed deeply and then asked in distraction, "What is your name?"

The anouk woman studied Debbi, as if trying to gauge something, but then said. "I am called Martool."

"My name's Debbi Dallas." Martool nodded in acknowledgment. It was a relief not to get the usual Earth reaction. "Thank you for helping me."

It was a moment before Martool finally answered, "You're welcome. Perhaps now we may talk."

Debbi felt an internal alarm, but she tried to quiet it. This anouk had been nothing but kind. Of course, that might be her plot to gain information. While the two halves of her brain argued, Debbi went ahead and struck up a conversation with Martool. There was something about the stately native that put her at ease.

"Talk about what?" Debbi asked cautiously. "I won't tell you anything that will compromise the safety of Temptation."

Martool held up a hand. "I do not expect you to. However, I am interested in why Rangers have added this to their arsenal." She held up

Clay & Susan Griffith

the black gun attachment off Debbi's Dragon.

That the anouk even recognized it as something significant didn't bode well.

Martool cocked her head at the young Ranger. "I gather you do not know what it is. Otherwise, you wouldn't have bothered using it on the *richos*—the crazies."

Debbi stayed silent.

Martool popped open the cube chamber and spilled some of the needles into her hand. "These are made of tannis. But they are infected with what you humans call ghost rock."

That took Debbi by surprise. "Ghost rock? How can you tell?"

"Anouks are...sensitive to these things."

Debbi swung her legs off the bed so that she was facing Martool. She pointed at the needles. "Those are for use against anouks?"

Martool frowned as if debating her next words. "They can be. Or against anyone with certain magics of the mind."

"Why are you telling me this?" Martool's actions didn't make sense. They were enemies, weren't they? It was clear to Martool that Debbi hadn't known the purpose of the weapon. Why would the anouk offer this kind of damaging information against her own kind?

"It is akin to an assassin's weapon," Martool said. "Rangers, despite their ferocity in battle, are not assassins. Am I right?"

"No, we keep the peace. Hell, nobody wants to kill anybody. We're just trying to protect what's ours."

"As are we," Martool was quick to reply.

Debbi couldn't argue with that. She felt sorry for the anouk. Humans had just plowed in and started taking over, no different than the white men and the Native Americans of Earth's Old West. It was too bad no one had learned from that mistake. Now everything had spiraled so far out of control on Banshee that the planet was an armed camp.

"Look, we honestly didn't know anything about those guns," Debbi offered quickly. She felt it important to be truthful with Martool.

"Then why do you carry it?"

Debbi shrugged. "To test it. We couldn't figure out what it was, but some miners thought it was pretty handy. Now I understand why. They get raided regularly by Azeel and blacklining Reapers, some of whom have a form of anouk psychic powers."

Martool's face betrayed her critical opinion of Reapers and the Azeel.

"What tribe are you from?" Debbi asked, curious to find an anouk that didn't think much of her own people who sided with the Reapers.

"I am of the Asai clan."

"I never heard of them."

"It is old," she stated cryptically. Martool's proud expression faded. She reached down to the floor and brought up a covered bowl. She removed the lid and the wonderful aroma of hot soup instantly filled the air. Debbi hadn't even noticed the bowl sitting there. Martool held it out to her.

Debbi hesitated. She knew she should be suspicious of all that Martool had said, but she wasn't. She couldn't explain why, but she didn't fear the anouk woman any longer either. Her rational mind cried out *brainwashing*. It was known that anouks had weird powers, almost like sykers, although exactly what no one was sure. However, there was something in the way Martool looked at her. It wasn't the look of a jailer. It was more...maternal.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Besides, Martool hadn't done anything to harm her. In fact, the anouk had only helped her. Why would she bother poisoning her now? Hopefully, now that Debbi was recovered, they would let her go home to Temptation so she could give a report.

Ross was never going to believe a story like this.

She was unprepared for the ache that struck her when she realized her blunder. Her mouth twisted painfully and she raised a hand to cover her expression. Damn him for getting under her skin like this.

Martool let her arms drop to her lap. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

Martool studied her with the fathomless orbs that functioned as eyes. Debbi almost swore she could see her own reflection in them.

Martool put the bowl in her hands and told her, "Then eat."

Debbi accepted the bowl and cautiously sipped. It was delicious, whatever it was. She hadn't realized how hungry she was. There were big hefty chunks of meat and fresh algae in the broth. She devoured it, not saying another word until the meal was done. Martool merely sat and watched her eat.

Two more natives, big burly males, entered the open doorway. One was tall and possessed a vivid scar from temple to chin, his visage grim. Debbi didn't like the look he gave her. His partner was shorter and his tannis breastplate was cracked in three places. He didn't seem at all happy to see a Ranger either. It was then she noticed the strange markings inlaid on their chest armor. It was unlike anything she had ever seen on known anouk tribes.

The anouk warrior with the fierce scar spoke harshly to Martool. Debbi noted his sharp teeth. Martool responded in a quiet voice to the warrior who straightened abruptly as if he had just been rebuked. Martool glanced at Debbi.

"Fareel believes I am in some danger from you."

Debbi regarded the grim anouk and fed him back just as cold a glare as she could muster, which was pretty damn good considering. But she was too tired to hold it for long.

Softening, she turned to Martool. "Do you believe that?"

Martool grinned. "If I did we would not be having this conversation."

Fareel's glare only deepened. Obviously, Martool's trusting nature was an oddity amongst her people. That surprised Debbi even more. Why did Martool trust her? A Ranger of all people. Was it the fact that she was a woman? No, over a third of the Rangers were women. But there had to be some rational reason for this odd event.

Fareel spoke again to Martool and she glanced sharply at Debbi. The Ranger knew something had happened. A hollow pit filled her stomach. It was something bad.

"What is it?" she asked, hoping that whatever it was she could perhaps put it right and still get away with her skin intact. Had the Rangers come looking for her already? Were they beating down the doors to rescue her? Had they killed any of Martool's people? If they had, all hope of getting out peacefully was destroyed. The big question though was how the hell they knew where to look. But she wouldn't have put it past the Temptation Rangers. They were the best. Well, except for Miller.

Martool's quiet voice broke through her musing. "A Ranger has been spotted. Perhaps it is the one you traveled with."

"Ross?" Debbi's voice almost choked. "But he fell —" Debbi stopped

Clay & Susan Griffith

herself. If anyone could survive a fall off a steep cliff into a raging river, it would be Dave Ross. Debbi clambered to her feet. "Where? Is he alive? Show me!"

Martool's eye-ridge rose slowly. Debbi's fierce reaction concerning the discovered Ranger obviously surprised her. "He has barricaded himself against some creature's attack. He will not last long." Martool rose. "Come."

They ran down the corridor. Solid walls of black rock slid aside to reveal hidden passageways. Debbi noticed no apparent mechanisms physically manipulated by Martool or the others. It was amazing and she knew she should be fascinated enough to ask questions, but she didn't.

Instead one thought kept ringing in her mind—*he's alive!*

Chapter 20

The bright sun pierced Debbi's eyes and she quickly brought up a shading hand to her brow. The blindfold applied to Debbi midway through their journey had just been removed. She blinked against the light and noticed that they were near the top of the canyon. Far below, the wild Red River boiled and surged.

Debbi, Martool, and Fareel stood on a rock shelf perched on the sheer canyon wall. Several yards away, the narrow shelf widened into a path and four chanouks waited, saddled and ready to go. Standing beside them was the warrior with the cracked breastplate. Debbi noticed that he carried her weapon, now without the black gun attachment, as if it was a prize won in battle.

"Martool?" Debbi spoke. "I'm not going to be much help without a weapon." Not to mention that Ross would be furious if she let a Colonial Ranger Dragoon fall into anouk hands.

They started to jog up the slope toward the waiting mounts.

Martool grinned wryly and nodded. She spoke to the warrior with the cracked breastplate. He gripped the weapon tighter and barked something at Martool. She frowned and spoke again. Glaring with absolute distrust and resentment, the anouk shoved the weapon at Debbi. She took it; she had more to worry about than an annoyed anouk.

Martool regarded Debbi. "Sahrin is proud, one of our best. He had hoped for something to commemorate his bravery in saving you from the *richos*."

Debbi glanced at her sharply as Martool took the reins of her chanouk and mounted with a fluid leap.

"Sahrin saved me?" the Ranger asked. "I thought you did it, Martool."

"I did not do it alone." Martool clucked her tongue and her chanouk started off along the rock shelf.

Debbi approached her own waiting mount with trepidation. Chanouks were even more impressive up close. Their scaly skin, long manes, and massive shoulders looked something like a cross between a bull and a lion. She heard its breath huffing out through broad nostrils. Debbi's chanouk yawned, revealing rows of massive, daggerlike teeth. It smacked its mouth and eyed Debbi with something more than suspicion—possibly hunger.

Fareel made a comment to Sahrin who gestured at Debbi. Fareel laughed and Debbi's irritation blossomed.

She put a determined foot in the large stirrup and mounted. She felt

Book I: The Horror Lords

dwarfed in the massive saddle, but the chanouk stayed steady beneath her. Trying to keep a smirk of satisfaction from her face, she obstinately kneed the beast closer to Martool. The chanouk growled, but complied.

The two warriors were silent now and grim-faced once more. Their dark eyes watched Debbi intently as they rode off single file behind Martool.

Her mind tumbled over some way to repay Sahrin. She fingered her jacket and felt a hard piece of metal. She scowled, and then lifted her badge with the telltale crack from its place. She had had it a long time and it was more to her than just a symbol of her office. It now carried with it a mystical shielding that meant the world to Debbi. Hoping that Sahrin understood, she held out her hand to the warrior riding behind her. In her open palm, the badge glistened in the blazing sun. Its crack was clearly evident.

Sahrin looked at it with a hard, defiant stare, but then he cocked his head. Leaning forward over the thick neck of his mount, his bulky middle finger reached out and touched the crack. He looked up at Debbi and then grinned. He said something to Fareel and the two men laughed again. Debbi angered and closed her fist.

Sahrin reached out and seized Debbi's hand in a firm grip. His smile was gone, replaced with a solemn expression. Slowly Debbi's fingers uncurled, once more revealing the badge. Sahrin picked it up. He held it out with contented grunt.

Sahrin pinned the badge to his tunic, just below his own cracked talisman. He straightened in the saddle and regarded her regally. Debbi turned forward with a sense of pride and accomplishment for reaching out to the fierce anouk warrior.

Martool shouted something and immediately the chanouks halted and fell into a crouch. Debbi followed suit, bending low over the shoulders of her mount, its coarse mane standing stiff between her fingers as she gripped it for security. Over the howl of the wind in the canyon, she made out a distant inhuman cry and then a gunshot.

Debbi rose in her stirrups, but Martool didn't move. Debbi became agitated. That was definitely Ross's Peacemaker. She was about to kick her mount forward and try to squeeze past Martool when Sahrin called out to her, using her name though poorly pronounced. She glanced back over her shoulder in astonishment. Sahrin shook his head. He turned his gaze to Martool, who appeared to be listening. Debbi sank back down against her chanouk. Her heart hammered in her ribs; the delay seemed forever. Didn't Martool say Ross didn't have much time? What was she waiting for?

Martool spoke to Fareel and Sahrin. They reached down for small leather straps that hung from their belts and hooked them to tannis rings embedded in their saddle horns. Then they kneed their mounts, which reared back on their haunches and dug their fore claws deep into the canyon wall.

Debbi stared in amazement as the beasts climbed straight up the rock face with Fareel and Sahrin clinging to their backs like burrs. She scooted closer to Martool and looked expectantly at her.

After a moment, Martool said, "The creature attacking your friend is unknown to us. But it appears quite fierce. We will attack it simultaneously from multiple fronts."

Martool urged her mount up the path and Debbi's chanouk followed. They reached the top of the cliff and Debbi recognized the terrain. She

Clay & Susan Griffith

and Ross had crossed this area while fleeing from the weird feline creatures.

Martool pulled her mount sharply to the right, away from the crevasse, and galloped out into the desert. Another gunshot sounded ahead of them. Now Debbi heard a loud growling and the hairs on her forearms rose. She recognized the sound. It was one of the cat creatures.

She kicked the chanouk in the ribs and it bounded ahead of Martool with a throaty growl. In the distance she could just make out a rock outcrop jutting up like a black rib out of the desert. Midway up the rock, a flash of metal caught her eye, possibly the sun reflecting off Ross's gun. There was a large, dark shape clawing its way up the rock and again a shot rang out. Debbi saw the muzzle flash as a weapon discharged from the top of the outcrop and the black shape leaped back from the rock. It prowled below, mewling angrily.

Debbi pulled her gun and stood in the stirrups, drawing in her knees tight to steady herself. The chanouk's gait was smooth and steady, a marvelous firing platform. She lined up the cat-thing in her sights and pulled the trigger.

Taken unaware, the beast was hit in the right rear hip and spun around. It screamed and quickly launched itself toward Debbi. It came in a fury of jaws and sinew with a speed that Debbi hadn't counted on. Before she could shoot again, another chanouk filled her vision and raced between her and the creature.

It was Fareel, tannis spear crackling with purple energy and at the ready. He threw the spear at the beast in midair. It roared when the shaft penetrated its left shoulder, but it didn't stop its leap. At the last second, Fareel's chanouk turned to meet the charge and the two beasts collided amid a ferocious clash of teeth and claws. Debbi could hear the scrape of claws against the chanouk's breastplate. Fareel still must have been hooked onto the saddle; he didn't even slide. He clung to his chanouk as if they were one creature. The cat-creature fell beneath the chanouk's fearsome claws, but leaped away from the large jaws that easily could have snapped its spine in half.

Debbi veered off to the side, trying for a clear shot. Sahrin came barreling up out of a wadi on his chanouk and attacked the monster from behind. His war whoop was loud and clear in the hot desert air. The cat-beast whipped around and was about to leap on Sahrin, but Debbi's shot shoved it violently aside, hitting it cleanly in the ribs. Wasting no time, Sahrin heaved a massive battle-ax at the creature. Incredibly, the cat-thing leaped aside and scrambled up a sandy slope.

Debbi thought it was escaping, but then it turned suddenly and pounced at Fareel who just barely wheeled his chanouk at the last second and slipped under the attack. Immediately, Sahrin was on the creature, jamming a spear through its ribcage.

Martool laid a heavy hand on Debbi's shoulder and pointed out a lone bedraggled figure wedged into a crevice high in the tannis outcropping. His weapon was out and aiming down at them.

Debbi's chanouk raced forward at her urging. She waved her arm and shouted Ross's name. She didn't want him to shoot the anouks, not realizing they were friends.

That last thought surprised Debbi. She would have never thought that such a thing would be possible in her lifetime. But she did think of Martool as a friend. Hell, Fareel and Sahrin had risked their lives to save a Ranger. If that wasn't friendship, she didn't know what was.

Book I: The Horror Lords

"Ross!" she shouted. "It's me, Debbi! Don't shoot!"

Debbi counted the seconds as the barrel of his gun held its aim at Martool. It took longer than it should have for Ross to recognize her. Finally the weapon dropped. Debbi cried out in alarm as the figure slumped over.

"Ross!" She dismounted even before the chanouk was fully to a halt, feet flying from the stirrups.

She scrambled up the steep, rocky outcrop, oblivious to the tannis cutting into her hands and knees. Ross's limp hand dangled beside her as she pulled herself up. She reached out and touched it, desperate for a pulse. A thready beat greeted her stiff fingers. She sent a silent prayer of thanks and heaved herself up the rest of the way.

She let out a gasp. Ross was a mess. His right side was drenched in blood, most of it dried and flaking. His duster and the clothes beneath it were torn with long gashes. The flesh underneath was no better. He had his bandana wadded up against the torn flesh and held in place by his belt. The gashes were still leaking and the makeshift bandage was saturated.

His right arm was scarlet. The sleeve of his shirt was torn off and used as a bandage around the cut. That wound at least had ceased bleeding. There was a nasty gash just above his left knee and he had tied a makeshift tourniquet around his upper thigh. How had he survived for this long all alone?

"You're a pig-headed man, David Ross," she whispered to him. "Thank God."

He needed medical attention and the nearest first aid supplies were in the Stallion. Then her brain clamored for her to remember something. Her head jerked up and she looked for Martool. The anouk had healed her injuries with only a touch of her hand.

But the desert plain beneath her was empty.

The three anouks were gone. All that remained was the carcass of the bleeding cat-thing and Debbi's chanouk. It stood placidly, but it stared in the direction of the canyon after its missing companions.

Debbi couldn't believe Martool would leave. Damn it! She needed her more than ever. Why would she leave now? Why help only her and not Ross?

Debbi cursed. She needed to get Ross home to Temptation and medical care. Thankfully, the chanouk was still there. She could use it to bring Ross to the ship. Hopefully, those damn inmates hadn't gotten to it.

She tapped Ross's cheek lightly. "Ross? You still with me?"

A muscle twitched in his jaw and a moan escaped from between his cracked lips.

"That's it," she encouraged him. "We have to get out of here and I need your help."

Ross's eyelids fluttered and then slipped open. His pupils performed the required contraction as the light poured in. She felt an extraordinary sense of relief. That meant no head injury. Thank heaven for big favors.

"D-Debbi?"

Her face broke out into a wide grin. "Yeah."

"You're alive?" His face skewed with confusion. He reached out and touched her to verify she was solid. Then he grabbed her forearm in a grip that was surprisingly tight, and held on.

"I think that's my line." Debbi laughed, her elation at finding Ross safe making her almost giddy. She tried to lift him up into a sitting position.

Clay & Susan Griffith

"You think you can sit up?"

"Yeah," he mumbled, but it was more Debbi's muscle that got him upright than his own. She set him against a rock and watched him carefully for a moment. She could tell he was still struggling to come back to her, to make sense of what was happening around him. She saw his jaw muscles begin to work in frustration as torn and aching flesh refused to obey his most basic commands.

"How did you...?" He paused to take a deep breath and lost his focus.

Debbi understood. "I had some help. Seems like anouks are a whole lot friendlier out here than around Temptation."

That cleared his head. "Anouks?" He huffed slightly and wished he hadn't. Pain blossomed with the movement.

His grip on her arm tightened painfully, but she didn't show it.

"I know it sounds strange, but they saved me from those inmates." She touched her head lightly. "They packed a wallop. If it wasn't for Martool..." She let her voice drift off.

The thought of Martool's abandonment angered her. Ross needed medical attention as badly as she had when Martool had found her. Why play timid now? What was so different between her and Ross? But now was not the time to debate Martool's irrational actions.

"We've got to move. The Hoss is over that rise." She pointed to a distant hill that was at least four miles away.

Ross laughed weakly. "I'm not going to make it that far. You go and bring the Hoss back here."

Debbi smiled, realizing that Ross probably believed they were walking the distance. "I'm not leaving you alone again. We have transportation. Just trust me. We're going to get out of this."

He regarded her skeptically, but Debbi merely grinned.

"I'll be right back." She scampered away down the rock face.

Ross watched as her red head disappeared. It wasn't long before he heard soft murmuring from below. He couldn't tell to whom she was talking. Was she serious about these friendly anouks? A minute later, Debbie reappeared with a rope coiled over her shoulder.

Red-faced and puffing slightly, she dropped beside him. "I'll lower you down."

"I can get down myself," was Ross's manly retort.

Debbi cocked her head at him in annoyance. "You couldn't crawl off a bar stool right about now, and the bottom line is, I'm not letting you crawl down this rock, slip, fall, and suddenly I have another injury to patch up." She threw one end of the rope at him. "Tie that around yourself."

He stared down at the rope in his lap and then back up to Debbi.

"You're damn bossy." He picked up the rope and began making a loop.

"My mother made it clear never to give in to a man's pig-headedness."

"Figures."

Within minutes, they were ready to go. Debbi helped Ross scoot closer to the edge of the rock face. He looked down and, for the first time, saw the chanouk waiting patiently below them. His hands darted out to grab the nearest rock, refusing to go any further.

"Sweet mother, that's a chanouk!" He quickly looked around for its rider.

"Very observant." Debbi tried to nudge him a bit closer to the edge, but he was steadfast. She sighed and rocked back on her heels. "It's mine, for now at least. It'll take us to the Hoss." At least she hoped it

Book I: The Horror Lords

would. It might also take them back to Martool, but that was fine too. Either way, Ross would receive help.

"Come on," she urged. "It's a hell of a lot faster than walking."

The beast was looking up at them with black, predatory eyes. Its long tongue chose a poor moment to lick its lips.

Ross looked at Debbi. "Give me my gun."

"Ross, it's okay. Trust me. I told it not to eat you."

"Just give me my gun. I'm not going to be lowered down like some giant cat toy."

The beast's thick tail swished back and forth in anticipation.

Ross's expression confirmed his resolution.

Debbi sighed and handed him his pistol. "Just don't point it at him and make him angry, will you? He seems to be quiet enough, but no sense tempting fate, you know."

Ross clutched his gun with deadly earnest. "Let's just do it."

Debbi slowly lowered Ross, all the while praying she was right about the chanouk. Her short, calming conversation with it didn't really allay her fears, but she had little choice. This was the only way down. It would be bad form for her mount to eat her commanding officer; especially after all they had been through.

The chanouk's gaze followed Ross all the way to the bottom.

When he touched down, Ross managed to keep his feet under him instead of collapsing to the ground like he wanted to. Showing weakness would make him look too irresistible to a hungry chanouk. He was exhausted and experiencing pain in every limb, but he'd be damned if he would go out as a snack for some stupid animal. He gave the beast his best withering glare and hoped it was enough. If not, he'd make it see reason with a little bit of lead.

Well, it would probably take a lot of lead.

The sheer size of the chanouk, up close and personal, was daunting. He could feel the animal's warm breath across the ten feet separating them. Its ears were flat against its head. Its mane bristled, making it seem twice its normal size. Its huge teeth gleamed white against the dark rock.

The two of them shifted their gazes simultaneously as Debbi slid down the cliff to land beside them, then their eyes immediately locked back on one another.

Debbi swiped the dirt and stone fragments from her pants and rose. She approached the chanouk fearlessly. At least, she hoped it appeared that way. Debbi had learned enough about animals to know that they knew when you were afraid. Sometimes, those vibes were all that was needed to get a relationship off to a bad start.

The chanouk swung its huge head to Debbi, mouth open and teeth visible. Ross held his breath as the massive creature brushed up close to Debbi. She seemed almost petite next to the behemoth. His fingers tightened on the butt of his pistol, his index finger curling around the trigger. To his amazement, the chanouk only took a deep sniff of Debbi and then looked out over the desert to the distant skyline. Ross saw its nostrils flare as it read the air for anything abnormal.

Debbi breathed a sigh of relief and laid a hand on the chanouk, giving it a quick scratch. She felt its muscles ripple. One final pat and she turned her attention to Ross, who was held in place against the wall only by sheer determination. His face was approaching ashen and she knew he was rapidly running out of strength.

Clay & Susan Griffith

She slipped his uninjured arm over her shoulder and heaved him up onto the chanouk. She had to take most of his weight, which was no small feat, but he kept it together until he had climbed onto the back of the beast, half-hanging over the saddle in a near stupor. Debbi quickly mounted behind him.

"Ross," she called gently, pulling him back so that he leaned into her shoulder. His damp head lolled there, his eyes shut tight.

"Get us home, Dallas." His voice was a mere whisper.

Debbi clenched her jaw as the weight of responsibility fell heavily onto her shoulders. With one hand gripping Ross and the other the reins of the chanouk, she urged the animal toward the Stallion. She was surprised that it complied. A part of her wished that it would take them to Martool, but she supposed the anouk woman had her reasons for disappearing. Right now, Debbi was just obliged for the use of the animal.

Four miles sped by under the chanouk's ground-eating stride. Debbi was grateful because she could feel the heat of a fever starting to emanate from Ross. He hadn't said much since they had started the ride to the ship and that worried her.

She readjusted her grip on him and was comforted by the gentle rise and fall of his chest beneath her hand. She urged the chanouk faster and it complied.

Debbi had to give credit to the anouks. Their mounts were superbly trained. She wondered how and why this one in particular was so responsive to her commands. She was a human after all. The only time she had ever seen one of these creatures was on the battlefield, and she had always been intimidated by their ferocity and immense build, all mayhem and muscle and trained for war.

She dropped one hand to give it a reassuring pat. It grunted. Debbi wasn't sure if it was a good grunt or a bad grunt. She wondered what she was going to do with it. Would it come with her? She could name it Little Joe or something. She would be the only Colonial Ranger with her own chanouk. It would be a tight squeeze getting it in the Stallion. Not that Ross was going to allow such a thing. She glanced down at her boss. Of course, he was so out of it, he probably wouldn't notice until it was too late anyway.

Her small joke didn't bolster her spirits as much as she would have liked. She mentally began preparing all the things she needed to do once they arrived at their destination. The Stallion would have plenty of bandages, antibiotics, and antiseptics. She needed to get Ross hydrated and warm as quickly as possible, which meant a drip and lots of blankets. Then she would pump him full of antibiotics for infection. It would have to be enough to keep him alive until she could get back to Temptation.

She let out a gasp of relief when they topped a rise and the sun glinting off their vehicle nearly blinded her. Blinking back the moisture, she was reassured to see that the Stallion was still intact. She kept the rein tight on Little Joe and let him sniff the air. He didn't seem to be nervous and the Stallion was upwind. If the chanouk was satisfied, then so was she. She gave him free rein and he trotted down the slope toward the craft.

Debbi dropped her reins and yanked out her gun, just in case. Little Joe pulled up in front of the Stallion and blew the dust out of its nose with a snort. Everything else was quiet. Debbi gently shook Ross.

Book I: The Horror Lords

"Ross."

There was a groan and his eyes opened, narrowed against the sun. He licked cracked lips. "We home?"

"Not quite. We're at the Hoss." She eased him off her and dismounted; using one hand to make sure he stayed in the saddle, but to no avail. He began to slide toward her. She planted her feet and tried to take his weight as he toppled. She couldn't.

They fell to the ground with Debbi doing her best to cushion him. His grunt of pain was plain in her ear. He struggled to stand and Debbi helped him. She palmed the panel on the craft and heard the locking mechanism disengage as it read her print.

Inside, it took nearly thirty minutes before she sat back from Ross who lay stretched out in the undersized berth behind the seats in the cab. It was almost too small for him, but he didn't seem to mind. He was out of the sun. He had lost his hat in the fall over the cliff and now had the makings of a beautiful sunburn on his face. She clipped the IV to the nearby wall.

She had done everything she could for him. His vitals were already improving. "Rest easy, Ross. We're almost out of here. One last thing to do."

He grabbed her arm. It surprised her since she thought he was unconscious. Turning around, she found him looking at her with an exhausted eye that seemed to be finally free of pain.

"Don't even...think about it."

Her mouth fell partially open and then she frowned. He couldn't possibly know what she was thinking.

"You're not...taking that chanouk," he murmured.

Then again, maybe he could.

Debbi gave him an irritated look. She checked his drip. She had put in enough painkillers to stop a chanouk. Why wasn't he asleep yet?

"I wasn't..." she began.

"Stow it. Just get...this tub...moving."

She rose to her feet. "Go to sleep, Ross. You're gonna need all the strength you can muster once Doc Dazy has a go at you."

She wouldn't have believed it possible, but Ross actually managed to pale a bit beneath his sun burnt cheeks. Okay, that was cruel, she thought, but it did have the desired affect. Ross laid his head back and closed his eyes.

"You play dirty, Dallas. I like it," he spoke softly, letting the drugs finally do their work. His breath evened out and his features relaxed as he fell asleep.

"I learned from the best." Debbi rested a hand briefly on his shoulder and let a relieved smile play across her lips.

She rose and settled herself into the pilot's seat, her hands quickly going through the barest of pre-checks before firing up the Stallion. She saw Little Joe standing outside the front window, watching her curiously. She regarded the chanouk sadly.

"Sorry, old boy. Orders."

The chanouk gave a snort, turned around, and padded back the way it came.

It was probably for the best, Debbi thought. Miss Etta would have had a fit.

For that matter, so would McDuff.

She fired the engines and gave the Stallion its head, pushing as much

Clay & Susan Griffith

speed out of it as she could as she barreled for home.

Chapter 21

"You failed me, Nicolai."

Coltrane sat in the shadows on his black tannis throne. He wore a long robe with the hood that obscured his face.

"The Colonial Rangers intervened," Nicolai said. "The Reapers were outgunned."

Coltrane made a deep, unhappy rumbling sound. "Didn't I tell you it was important I have those guns? There should have been no chance of being outgunned. You should have sent our best troops. You should have seen to it personally!"

Nicolai was distracted by the strange sculpture behind Coltrane's throne. It was a column of skulls, both human and anouk. But the skulls moved. They twisted, their mouths slowly opening and closing, giving the impression of great anguish.

"Well?" Coltrane boomed. "Explain yourself!"

Nicolai's full attention snapped back. "I have other uses for my best troops!" he shouted in response. "I *am* trying to conquer a planet! It keeps me relatively busy."

Coltrane rose, full of menace. His words grew increasingly loud. "You need to do exactly what I say and you will have your precious state! Your vision is so small, Nicolai! You can't conceive of the odds I'm playing for!"

Nicolai took a wary step back and moved his hand near his holstered gun.

A large shape leaped from behind the throne and landed heavily in the empty floor between Coltrane and Nicolai. It was tall, loose-limbed, and hunched. It was smooth-skinned, dark gray with black streaks. Its skin was covered in short, stiff bristles that moved in waves like wind through a field of wheat when its muscles quivered. Its head was large and arched forward, with a snarling snout full of jagged teeth and large ears that flicked forward and back. Its eyes were large, piercing, and black as pitch. They fixed on Nicolai with hungry fury. It crouched and prepared to strike.

"No!" Coltrane yelled.

The thing regarded Coltrane over its shoulder. He motioned it aside. It turned back to Nicolai briefly with a snarl, and then it stalked off into the shadows where it squatted and breathed loudly.

Coltrane said, "I should've warned you about my pet. It's very protective."

Nicolai said nothing. He was frozen in place.

Coltrane returned to his throne. His tone was suddenly light. "Well, what's done is done. The black guns are no doubt in Temptation. We will get them when you seize the town."

"I will use our best troops for that."

"Oh no. You won't need troops at all. Take a few bodyguards just to insure the Rangers don't try to capture you."

Nicolai stared wide-eyed at his former mentor. "I beg your pardon?"

"I told you, Temptation will welcome you. Just as other towns are beginning to welcome you. I have one more card to play and then you will appear outside the gates and offer yourself as their savior. It should be a few days. Go and conquer some other towns in the meantime. To

Book I: The Horror Lords

amuse yourself. I'll call you when I'm ready."

Coltrane raised misshapen, webbed fingers that used to belong to a human hand and motioned Nicolai out. Even the sight of Coltrane's horrible transformation couldn't override the young revolutionary's rage at being summarily dismissed. He glared openly at Coltrane. He was spoiling for a bitter debate over leadership of the Reapers. But that panting creature in the corner reminded Nicolai that he couldn't win an argument played out here. It would be better to make use of whatever powers Coltrane might have in order to seize Temptation and then quickly turn against that rotting revenant on the throne and destroy him.

Nicolai turned and left the throne room. He fled the disturbing, ancient anouk city where Coltrane lived and returned to the comforting political debauchery of the Bunker, his headquarters at nearby Domburg Ruins.

"Your plan is faltering, Coltrane."

"Not at all, Avernus. If any aspect of it has been a failure, it was Tekkeng's part. And even that sad contribution has borne some fruit."

Coltrane leaned back on his throne and threw one leg casually over the arm. He sensed impatience in his mentor that he had never seen before. It was troubling, not because he cared for Avernus in a personal way, but because Coltrane had always taken him to be a figure of great power. And figures of great power shouldn't worry.

Perhaps, Coltrane suddenly thought with glee, Avernus's power was not that much greater than my own.

Avernus didn't even pause in his stride. "I could smash you like an insect and make another just like you without missing a meal. I am one of the thirteen Fallen who hold the fate of this reality in our hands. You continue to live only at my pleasure. Do not tax my good will."

Coltrane was startled by his mentor's awareness, but quickly recovered. He used techniques that he had been taught by this very master to cloud his mind to outsiders. Then he allowed himself the luxury of cursing his sloppiness.

"I was afraid you weren't ready," Avernus said. "Your transformation is premature. You have fallen into old human habits of inelegant directness. It's making you careless. We can't afford missteps."

Coltrane waved a flippant hand. "You chose me as your weapon. You must have some belief that I know what I'm doing."

"Your confidence is misplaced. You attracted me because you did well as a Reaper thug. But now you are playing with the power to make and unmake worlds. Do you remember the Earth?"

"Yes," Coltrane answered warily.

"It is now a smoking hulk."

"The Earth destroyed? You never told me..." Coltrane was stunned. He was so distant from his home world he no longer had strong memories of it. In fact, as he became less human, Earth meant nothing to him but a potential source of power in the future, once Banshee was under his control. But he was staggered by the thought that he was associated with beings powerful enough to destroy the enormous civilizations of Earth. Immediately, he began to consider the potential advantage of double-crossing the Fallen who stood in front of him. He quickly suppressed the thoughts for fear of discovery.

Coltrane regained his bravado. "I'm not afraid. With me at your side,

Clay & Susan Griffith

you and I will corrupt this planet. Then the intrigues of the other Fallen will no longer matter.”

Avernus said, “Let me worry about the machinations of the Fallen. Your attention must be on more immediate concerns.”

Coltrane grinned. “My thoughts exactly. A final plague for the people of Temptation. A particularly nasty little item that should drive them into a pit of horror that only silver-tongued Nicolai can pull them out of. Temptation will be ours for the taking.”

“Beware, Coltrane. Your increasing distance from the human condition is forcing you to underestimate them. Particularly the Colonial Rangers. They have a sense of purpose that you don’t fully appreciate. And they have the black guns now, again thanks to your failure.”

“They don’t even know what the guns do. Everything is working perfectly. You felt the fear pouring out of Temptation when their dead began to rise. It was delicious, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Indeed it was. But there must be more.”

“You’ll have it. We wasted time with Tekkeng’s ridiculous scheme with the worhul. And that failed because he worked through pathetic, unpredictable humans. Mental domination creates weak tools because only the weak can be dominated. So now Tekkeng’s painstakingly crafted mind grafts only allow him to see the inside of a Temptation jail cell.” Coltrane laughed out loud.

“I have mental powers,” the Fallen said flatly.

“Yes. But you didn’t use them to forge me. That is why you have a strong weapon.” Coltrane watched his mentor’s face for signs of insult, but it was hard to read the blank stare of a syker.

“Tekkeng is unhappy,” Avernus said. “He is unsatisfied with his role in our triumvirate.”

“Tekkeng is always unhappy. It’s inbred to his wretched species.”

“Give him something.”

Coltrane snorted with contempt. “I already allow him to speak through me. Do you know how disgusting that is? What more do I need to give to him? Let him earn his rewards like the rest of us.”

“Don’t take him for granted,” Avernus warned. “Tekkeng is a great resource for me. He will be invaluable in helping avoid conflict with the other Skinnies until the time comes when I can eliminate them all. So do as I say and keep him happy. Placate him.”

“Very well. I’ll find some bauble for him to play with.”

The tall man walked to the door. His receding steps made no sound. “Sitting on a throne doesn’t make you a king. If you fail me, I will descend on you with a ferocity you can’t imagine.”

Coltrane sank back onto his throne and watched Avernus melt away into the darkness.

Coltrane stretched out his legs. He relished the feeling of his throne despite Avernus’s warning. He imagined the chamber crowded with supplicants seeking his merciless justice. His creature scuttled across the floor on all fours, all bony knees and elbows. It crouched next to Coltrane who reached out and laid his hand on the beast’s broad head. At least he had one subject who lived and died by his word.

Soon he would have a world full of them.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Chapter 22

A stroll through the streets of Temptation in the late afternoon sunshine was particularly satisfying to Debbi on this day. Only twelve hours had passed since she and Ross had returned from the Red River Valley. Yet the young Ranger felt incredibly alive after such a wild adventure.

She had to admit to a small trace of guilt at feeling so fit when her commanding officer had not come through the escapade nearly as well. Of course, he didn't have the benefit of anouk healing.

She found herself whistling a small little tune that her mother used to sing to her when she was a child, one she hadn't thought about for years. It spoke of home and family. In a way, it spoke of her feelings toward Temptation. She was beginning to belong. Debbi's spirit was soaring this afternoon and her body language shouted it to the world.

The bedraggled people of Temptation didn't feel quite so carefree, and their annoyed glares made that perfectly clear. But Debbi didn't care, not right now anyway. She had gotten a message from Doc Dazy that Ross was awake and asking for her.

It took her less time than usual to get to the infirmary. She pushed through the door, rearranging the paperwork bundled in her arms, and made her way to where the Doctor had stashed Ross. She met the Doctor in the hall. He had his nose buried in an old medical journal and wasn't really paying attention to where he was going.

"Hiya, Doc. How is he?"

Stopping short, Dazy reluctantly raised his head and lifted a single exasperated eyebrow. "According to him, he's perfectly fine, ignoring the fact that he has two cracked ribs and eighty-five stitches. He continues to curse my impeccable bedside manner, my intricate needlework, and my noble heritage."

Debbi smiled. "So you asked me here to run interference. Gee, thanks."

"Well, I was hoping you could distract him while I slip a mickey in his IV."

The scary thing was, Debbi knew he was serious. She listened while Dazy continued ranting.

"He actually brandished his gun at me when I offered him a painkiller. Why did you leave it with him?" He scowled at Debbi, tucking the book beneath his arm.

Debbi shrugged. "He seemed to be resting easier with it in his hand."

"Good God! Are you mad?"

Debbi flashed the devil's own smile. "It's not loaded, Doc."

Dazy pulled back in surprise and then adopted an infuriated frown. "Why that no good, scheming excuse for a lawman!" Dazy shoved up the sleeves of his lab coat and made to move past Debbi, but she stopped him with a gentle hand.

"Now, now. He's harmless." She lied. Ross was never harmless, laid up or otherwise.

Dazy backed down, blowing more bluff than bluster anyway. He poked a finger in Debbi's shoulder. "He's all yours then. If he tries to get out of bed again, you can deal with him."

"Sure, Doc. Where is he?"

"Room ten. I isolated him from the other patients. I didn't want him getting them riled too."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Well, I doubt he'd be the one to tell them that you are keeping numerous, bloodthirsty zombies just down the hall."

The Doctor's face flushed with eager anticipation. "True, true. Speaking of which, I need to get back to my experiments. Stay as long as you like. Keep him occupied."

"No problem. Have fun."

"Oh, I will."

The scary thing was, he was serious about that too.

Suppressing a shudder, she backtracked to room ten. Knocking once, she entered. Ross was lying in bed. His chest was swathed in white bandages and a matching one was wrapped thickly around his upper arm. His face glowed pink and glistened under a layer of translucent lubrication designed to keep the sunburned skin from drying out.

"Dallas!" Ross struggled to sit up in bed, his face grimacing with the effort. His injured arm braced his chest, the other strained to hoist him higher.

"You're looking better." Debbi settled herself in a metal chair beside the bed.

He gave up on his futile efforts and sank back onto his pillow. A veil of sweat already bathed his face. He hurt all over and it pissed him off. He raked her with a steely glare.

"You look fit," he snarled, unable to keep his frustration from leaking out.

Debbi fought a smile. "I do, don't I? Go figure." She crossed her legs and leaned casually back in the chair, holding the paperwork in her lap with a hand.

A grunt was the response.

"How's Doc treating you?" she asked.

"Like one of his damn zombie toys. He needs a refresher course in social etiquette."

Debbi wisely refrained from mentioning that it wouldn't hurt Ross to take the same class. There was no sense setting him off further.

"I want you to send someone out to the Asylum," Ross said. "See if they're missing any inmates."

Debbi sighed. It didn't take long for him to get down to business. "I'll send Tsukino."

Ross nodded. "Those people in the straightjackets had to come from somewhere. Lupinz Sanitarium is the only institution around here." He closed his eyes wearily and then opened them again, fighting his body's demand for rest. There was too much to do. Lying helplessly around in bed wasn't going to get it done. "Who's the director out there?"

"Um, I believe that would be Dr. Lupinz." Debbi couldn't help the smile that spread over her face.

Ross glowered. "It's the medication. Just go talk to him."

Debbi decided to distract Ross away from work. "You still haven't told me how you managed to survive falling off a cliff when you were out cold."

Ross carefully drew in a deep breath and scratched at his beard. "Maybe cause I wasn't out cold. I was dazed, but not unconscious. My brain finally kicked in as me and that big cat went over the edge and I reached out. I was damn lucky to have gotten snagged in some vines on the way down. The creature wasn't so lucky." He rubbed gingerly at his thigh. Debbi could see the swell of a thick bandage around that as well. He shifted ever so slightly in a vain attempt to get comfortable before he

Book I: The Horror Lords

continued. "I hung there for a while, but by the time my senses returned, it was quiet. It took hours just to crawl back up to the ledge. When I did, you were gone. Vanished." He looked at the ceiling with dark-rimmed, haunted eyes.

Debbi was silent, surprised at Ross's reaction. She thought the only thing he cared about was Temptation.

"I tried to get back to..." she began, but Ross held up a hand.

"I know you did, Dallas. I don't question that." He pinned her with a sincere stare. "I'm just glad...I'm just glad it worked out, for both of us." His face abruptly hardened. "And now, I want you to get me the hell out of here before that lunatic returns."

Debbi was caught unawares at the sudden change in track, and she laughed at the desperation clearly present in a man who had stared down a hungry chanouk.

"I don't like being laughed at," was his annoyed response.

Debbi shook her head. "No, sir, of course not. But truth be told, I can't help you on that front."

"Why the hell not?" He raised his shoulders off the bed to glare at her again.

Undaunted, Debbi straightened in the chair and started ticking off her fingers. "First, you're weaker than a kitten right now and we certainly don't need you underfoot. Second, Doc enjoys your company too much and I wouldn't want to deprive the man, and third..." She let her expression devolve into something akin to evil. "You didn't let me keep Little Joe."

"Who?"

"My chanouk."

"Oh merciful heaven, you named it." His head collapsed back on his pillow in dismay.

She just grinned, relishing her upper hand.

Debbi gathered her files and scooted the chair closer to the bed.

"Stew and I did some brainstorming and I think we came up with a damn good idea on how to get rid of that monster under the churchyard. The creature is definitely attuned to vibrations in the ground. They weren't able to keep it contained in the churchyard. It went through all the dead in the St. Calixtus cemetery, and without any more sacrificial snacks, it got hungry and went hunting. Just like Peck said it would. Aside from those who died in the churchyard, we've lost three people so far. And had a helluva lot of near misses. The way I figure it, in order to get the worm out into the open, we need bait."

Ross regarded her sharply. "You're not thinking of...?"

"Hell no! Not me!" Debbi retorted quickly. "We're going to use a Stallion and a rigged geo-pinger."

"What?"

"Think about it. We'll set the pinger on the ground. It'll be attached by a cable to a Stallion. The pinger will give off vibrations and attract the thing. Once the monster grabs it, the Hoss will pull it out of the ground so our boys can have a go at it. It's perfect."

"It's not perfect. There's too many unknowns. We've only seen a few tentacles from this thing. Who knows how big this monster really is. We don't know if the Hoss has enough horsepower for the job. We don't even know if it'll go after the pinger. That equipment is pretty big. Maybe it has a small stomach."

"Not the way that thing has been eating."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"It's also dangerous as hell," Ross said finally. He was feeling flushed again and he wasn't sure if it was the fever Doc claimed he had or a result of the sunburn. He fought down rising nausea.

"Yeah, well, there is that. But that's what being a Colonial Ranger is all about." Debbi refrained from winking along with that load of propaganda.

"Who's driving the Hoss?" But Ross knew the answer already.

"I am."

"Damn it, Dallas!" He half rose off the bed and then hissed when a sharp stab of pain struck his chest. His arm immediately dropped to support his ribs. He swallowed and took a few shallow breaths before continuing. "You've been through enough already. Let Stew handle it. He's a better pilot."

She considered him defensively. "What's with the wet blanket routine all of a sudden? Doc declared me fit. Besides, this job doesn't call for fancy flying. I'd rather have Stew watching my back. He's a hell of a lot better shot with a rocket launcher. We're talking close range and within city limits. I want that missile fired as accurately as possible. And all we need on the ship is a competent flier, not some hotdog."

The bottom line was Debbi wasn't willing to send anyone to do a dangerous job that she wouldn't handle herself. Ross knew damn well that Stew's fighter-type flying skills were too valuable to take a chance of losing him on a grunt job—after all, you don't need a race car driver in a pickup to yank a stump out of the ground.

Ross scowled at her, but he couldn't fault her logic. Damn it. If he hadn't been so distracted in jumping to protect her, he'd have come to the same conclusion. She was making rational judgments, unlike him. And whether he liked them or not, he respected her for it. He lay back down and tried to concentrate on controlling his pain, the only thing he seemed capable of at the moment. He rolled his head to look at her.

"We're running out of Stallions, Dallas. Don't lose another one."

"I won't." She met his eyes. A moment of silence stretched between them.

The exhaustion she saw in his face, highlighted by the darkness around his eyes, made her ache. She wasn't used to seeing Ross like this. Just how close a call it had been at the Red River engulfed her again in a rush. She thought of life in Temptation without his presence and she didn't like it at all.

The door suddenly opened and Doc Dazy walked in, holding up a new IV bag. "Time to change the oil." He asked Debbi. "Has he been behaving?"

Ross stared angrily at the man. "Go away or I'll shoot you."

Dazy snorted boldly. "That will be hard to do without any bullets." He reached up to swap the medication.

Ross's cold glare immediately swung on Debbi who tucked her lip under her teeth and glanced away innocently. Thankfully, her comlink crackled and Cass's voice spewed through her headset.

"Debbi, a Ranger from New Hope just strolled in. He has some interesting news from that part of the country."

"On my way, Dallas out." She rose from the chair.

Ross hadn't taken his eyes off her, but now his irritation had switched to curiosity. "What's up?"

"A Ranger from New Hope is here."

"Reuben Olivares? He's not a man to leave his post. What happened?"

Book I: The Horror Lords

His eyes were blinking owlishly as the medication kicked in.

"Don't know. I'll see you later." Debbi headed for the door.

"Get me a comlink, Dallas," Ross said. "I want to be kept informed."

"You will not," yelled Doc Dazy. "He's supposed to be resting, not working."

"Dallas, that's an order!" Ross grunted and arched forward as his ribs issued more warning signs. He panted angrily, directing daggers at the Doctor, fighting the heavy drag of his eyelids.

Debbi waved over her shoulder. "Don't worry, Ross. I'll bring it just as soon as I bring you some bullets."

"Dallas," Ross warned in a voice half his normal bellow. Then as she left the room, she heard his final complaint.

"Damn it, Doc, keep that thing away from me!"

Dallas entered headquarters to find a weary, bedraggled Ranger sitting in the office. Miller and a bunch of the others were gathered around him with awestruck expressions. Reuben Olivares was a tall man, graying at the temples and a hard weathered face to go with it. He was from the old school and his numerous years as a Ranger were evidence of his tenacity. He rose when Debbi walked into the room.

"You must be Dallas." He offered her a hand. "Heard from Stew here that you were in charge."

Debbi glanced quickly at Stew who smiled. No one had officially assumed charge after Ross's incarceration at the infirmary. Both she and Stew had been handling the emergencies jointly. She scanned the other Rangers for reactions to this news, but there were no signs of animosity.

She grasped the waiting Ranger's outstretched hand. "Reuben Olivares?"

He grinned, wide and endearing. "Yes, ma'am. Out of New Hope."

New Hope wasn't much of a town, more a pit stop for caravans. It was located near extensive salt flats and that valuable commodity kept the small town in good business.

"What brings you to Temptation?" Debbi indicated he should resume his seat while she circled the desk and took a chair behind it.

"Momentary lapse of sanity most likely," Miller interjected. "Guess news of our troubles hasn't hit New Hope yet. Only fools come here now. What with the zombies and monsters and all."

Debbi shot Miller a cold glare and then motioned to Olivares to continue. "You were saying."

Cass slipped through the crowd of young Rangers and handed Olivares an amber glass poured from the office bottle. "Reuben, have a shot of this. It's good for what ails you."

"Thanks, Cass. Appreciate it." Olivares tipped his glass and took a long swallow. He turned to Debbi. His mouth drew to a tight line. "Reapers are why I'm here. They showed up outside the gate at New Hope offering peace and good will." His sarcasm practically dripped.

"Those bastards have looted New Hope now?" Miller scrutinized Olivares. "You look pretty good for someone who took on a load of Reapers."

Debbi thought Olivares seemed burdened by shame and sadness. He took a tired breath and suddenly looked old rather than experienced. It was sickening to watch the strength slip out of him. She wasn't sure if

Clay & Susan Griffith

any of the other Rangers noticed it because it only lasted a split second.

Olivares iced Miller from under a down-turned brow. "Well, I'll tell ya, son, you're right. I didn't get to take on the Reapers at New Hope. But when the day comes I'm facing hopeless odds against a whole army of those blacklining, bloodthirsty bastards, I sure hope you're right there with me."

The older Ranger addressed Debbi. "The mayor made the decision to join this ridiculous Banshee Free State. Stupid son of a bitch. He gave me two hours to clear out before he let the Reaper scum in. I packed it in. I know when my ass is beat."

Debbi nodded. "Well, we're grateful to have you here, and I hope you'll stay till you get reassigned."

"Thanks." Olivares appreciated Debbi's simple absolution; Ross always had good people with him. Still it didn't calm the bitterness he felt. Twenty years on the job and he gets kicked out of his own town. No fight. No discussion. Just get out. And for the people of New Hope to choose the Reapers over him made him sick to his stomach. Twenty years fighting those monsters and they just open the gates and let them in while he slips out the back like a criminal.

He realized the young female Ranger was looking at him. He quickly said, "By the way, how's Ross? I hear he's laid up."

"Yeah, he's at the infirmary. He's in pretty rough shape. Falling off a cliff will do that to you. Must be doing better though; he keeps trying to escape."

"Wouldn't be Ross if he didn't try," Olivares said.

"You know him well?" Stew asked.

"Yeah, me and Ross've been through it a time or two." The crevices alongside his dark eyes deepened with good memories.

"Feel free to visit him," Debbi coaxed. "Distract him, if you know what I mean."

"Don't want him underfoot, eh?"

"Not till he's less cranky."

Olivares laughed a little too loudly. "That's a tall order. I'll do what I can then."

"Appreciate it." Debbi turned to Tsukino who was to her left. "I need you to go out to the Lupinz Sanitarium. Find out if they're missing any of their patients. Those inmates that attacked Ross and me came from somewhere."

Tsukino straightened off the wall. He departed silently as was his way.

Debbi stood and addressed the others. "Miller, you and Ringo go get a geo-pinger from Donald Fairchild. Barter, steal, I don't care how you do it. The rest of you know your assignments. Arm up and let's go to work." As the room broke up, she glanced at Stew. "Get what you need from the armory."

"Ross approved the plan then?"

Debbi put on her best innocent face. "Let's just say, he couldn't come up with anything better."

"Sounds like we're on then. Do or die." He turned quietly and departed out the door, his footsteps echoing down the boardwalk.

Debbi eyed his cryptic passing and then shook her head. She realized that Olivares was still in the office with her.

"Something up?" he asked.

Debbi appraised him with a wicked glint. "How are you at fishing?"

Book I: The Horror Lords

Olivares looked wary.

Debbi crooked a finger at him. "Come with me."

Chapter 23

Downtown Temptation was quiet. Debbi had seen to that. All businesses were closed. Residents in the area had been sent elsewhere. It was late afternoon and the town square was shut down for a very important reason.

The Colonial Rangers were going fishing.

Under the watchful eye of a half a dozen Rangers perched on rooftops around the square, Miller and Ringo quietly tiptoed away from the geo-pinger. Their eyes scanned the ground carefully for shifting dirt or an unexpected swell. They wiped the sweat from their eyes and let out a relieved sigh as soon as they climbed onto a rooftop.

Ringo fingered his mike. "It's done, Dallas." He paused a moment to catch his breath. "The pingers set and the cable is attached."

Debbi leaned back in the Stallion's pilot seat and checked the restraints, then hit the comlink. "Stew, you ready?"

Stew's voice came low in her ear. "Ready."

"Okay, then, let's do it. Ringo, set it off." Flicking down her shades against the sinking sun, Debbi started the engine on the Stallion and eased her up into the air, keeping some slack in the cable.

The geo-pinger was a large piece of equipment, more industrial than the portable models used by small-time prospectors. It had to be powerful to entice the worhul away from its usual food source—terrified humans. From the air, Debbi could see a light blinking on the pinger each time it sent a pulse into the ground. She knew that all the other Rangers on the ground could feel it. It was a deep, throbbing beat that pounded in your chest, and it could resonate for miles.

She had no doubt that the worhul could sense it too. The question was, would it take the bait? They had smeared the pinger with pig's blood in the hope that it would smell more appetizing, if the worhul could even smell. They also welded large hooks to the machine's sides so the creature would impale itself when it struck and be held fast until Debbi could draw it up.

She spun the ship in a slow circle, scanning the area. She had the best vantage point, but this thing never betrayed its presence until the last second.

Debbi could see where the militia had cordoned off the area. She had declared a curfew to deprive the beast of food and make it hungry. This time, the curfew had been easy to enforce. Most everyone was willing to stay at home. The worhul had attacked numerous times in plain sight over the last few days. People were more inclined to believe a dangerous situation existed if folks were being sucked underground in broad daylight. A segment of the population had been in hiding since the coming of the zombies anyway.

"Heads up, Dallas!" Stew's voice shouted in her ear. She could plainly hear the tension in his tone.

"Your bobber's movin'!" Miller shouted right after. "It's takin' the bait!"

Debbi took up a bit of slack with the winch controls and then tightened her hand on the stick. When the beast took the pinger, the ship was going to rock.

"Holee Mother of Pearl!" someone shouted in her ear, loud enough to

Clay & Susan Griffith

make her wince. That was all she had time for as the Stallion took a sudden lurch. Her restraints prevented her from flying against the dash. She applied a bit more throttle to keep the nose up. The winch screamed beneath her as the cable played out in a rush. The behemoth was dragging the pinger underground. She adjusted the drag and then hit the accelerator. The ship rose, bucking against the strain.

"Hold onto it, Dallas," she heard Miller cry. "It's a whopper!"

She was going to kill Miller when this was over

Stew hefted the missile launcher on his shoulder, feeling the anxiety building up inside him. He adjusted the targeting sight and saw his fingers trembling. Clenching his fist, he exhaled a curse at his sudden weakness.

What he really wanted was a drink to steady his nerves. He'd wanted that a lot since shooting his father.

His eyes were glued on the scene playing out before him. The ground writhed as the tentacles enveloping the pinger became visible and snaked up and around the thick cable attached to Debbi's ship. The dirt poured away from the monster as the Stallion rose higher into the air.

"Here it comes!" Olivares shouted. "She's doing it!"

Indeed she was, Stew silently cheered. Debbi's slow, erratic climb was pulling the beast free of Banshee soil.

It was huge!

And it wasn't a worm. Multiple brownish tendrils stretched out fifty feet from a gigantic bulbous head. A rubbery, gaping mouth with hundreds of rows of teeth worked constantly beneath three bulging obsidian eyes. A sticky slime trail stretched from the ground to the creature as it became airborne, its last tenuous hold to the earth it held so dear.

"It's clear, Dallas! It's clear!" Ringo erupted over the com.

"Well, then shoot it!" Debbi ordered. The whine of the straining engines nearly drowned out her voice. The Stallion shook violently as it struggled to comply with Debbi's command to stay in the air.

Stew's hands continued to tremble no matter how hard he tried to still them. He gritted his teeth and flicked on the targeting device. Red crosshairs emerged onto his field of vision, but he had trouble keeping them centered on the creature. He blamed it on the swinging pendulum effect caused by the creature's frenzied wiggling on the end of the cable, but he knew in his heart it wasn't. The fault lay with him.

"Stew! Take the shot!" Debbi ordered again.

"I—I can't...!"

Stew felt a presence beside him and a firm steady hand on his shoulder. "Breathe out and hold it. Then squeeze the trigger."

Stew shoved off Olivares's hand roughly. "I know my damn job!"

Olivares gave him a hard look. "Then do it. A Ranger's life is on the line."

Stew jerked the launcher back up to his shoulder. He shook so badly he couldn't get the target to lock. The young Ranger panted in an effort to calm himself.

"Stew!" Debbi's voice pleaded. "Now!"

The creature climbed upwards to the Stallion, curling and twisting around the cable, causing the ship to swerve wildly

Stew couldn't wait any longer. He held his breath and pulled the

Book I: The Horror Lords

trigger. The missile fired and he rocked with its departure, enveloped in a stream of smoke.

To his horror, it missed.

"No!" he shouted.

The side of Temptation's sole feed shop erupted into a fireball. Rangers positioned on the rooftops on either side of that building ducked and covered. Thankfully no one had been stationed on the store itself.

"Geezus, Stew! What's the problem over there?" Miller screamed.

"Nothing! Shut up!" He adjusted the sight once again. Another voice beside him made him face a desperate fact.

"You've got one more chance before it reaches the ship."

Olivares's stone face held no recrimination, but Stew could sense that it was there. He had failed.

One long tentacle already had a grip on the Stallion's left side, wrapping over the top of the hull. The ship was keeling over from the strain. Debbi couldn't release the creature now. She didn't have it; it had her. They were both going to go down.

Stew shoved his eye back onto the sight, but his vision blurred. Thoughts of his father's head bursting in a gray spray in the late afternoon sun filled him. Debbi was about to share that fate. She would die too if he pulled the trigger. The fates of those he cared for, dead by his own hand. His guts churned with panic as the monster coiled tighter around the ship.

They were too close together! There was no clear shot! They were too close!

He lowered the launcher, gasping for air that wasn't there.

"She's losing it!" Ringo shouted in his ear.

The high-pitched whine of the ship's engine was shattering as it rolled.

How the hell was the ship still in the air? Stew thought.

The rest of the Rangers, realizing that no rescuing shot was coming, opened fire with pistols and rifles. The blasts penetrated the thick hide of the wurhul, but the damage was minuscule. They only irritated the beast, making it twist and squirm even more, tangling itself further around Debbi. The Stallion was partially obscured by writhing tentacles.

Overheating and out of control, the ship began to lose altitude. Debbi's angry scream roared in Stew's ears as she lost the last shred of tenuous control over her craft.

Olivares grabbed the rocket launcher and shoved Stew aside. He heaved up the weapon and barely finished sighting before squeezing the trigger. The margin was too fine. He knew that. He could hardly tell where the monster ended and the Stallion began. He had merely aimed for the monster's bulging head.

There was no choice. If the creature hit the ground again, it would be gone and their chance would be lost. And Temptation would be down another Ranger.

They might be down one Ranger anyway.

The missile was true and the explosion filled the sky. There was an unholy shriek that pierced eardrums and brought everyone's hands up to muffle it out. Olivares and Stew could no longer see the ship or the monster in the confusing, smoky blackness.

Then something fell. Stew could just make out the cable snaking down after it. The Rangers were on their feet and running for the edge of

Clay & Susan Griffith

the roof.

"Oh God," Stew sobbed, white-knuckled and hunched forward.

"Debbi!"

The mass impacted the ground, throwing up another cloud of dust. When it began to clear, the limp form of the creature lay sprawled over the town square. A single cheer went up as ecstatic Rangers relished their victory, but then immediately quieted as they all searched the sky for their missing comrade.

Out of the smoke cloud above came a high rumble of thunder as the Stallion erupted up and out. Debbi had somehow righted the ship and hit the accelerator. The ship skyrocketed, heeling hard over to the right. Damage was evident on the left side. Plating was ripped off and broken wires sparked.

"She's gonna crash!" Ringo shouted.

"Come on, Debbi!" Stew yelled as the Stallion bucked and shuddered.

"Hold onto it!"

Debbi knew she was in a bad way. The ship barely responded to commands. Everything was sluggish and the pedals felt like mush beneath her feet. She knew that there wasn't enough control left to attempt a landing in the heart of town.

She was already in a steep bank and she let it go, aiming the Stallion for the town walls. If she could make the sandy flats beyond, there was some hope of walking away.

She let guts and instincts take over, pushing all she could out of the laboring Stallion. She gave it encouragement and as much power as she could eke out of the failing engines. The readouts in front of her were blinking on and off, signaling catastrophic damage to the electrical systems. If they failed before she landed, she was dead. She struggled with the stick to straighten out the ship.

A yellowish slime coated the main window where a gigantic tentacle had flopped over it. She could barely see through it. The dark outline of the town vanished beneath her, signaling she was over the desert.

It would have to be enough. She couldn't tell which direction she was heading, but it didn't look like there was anything living below her. Hell, she'd be happy as long as she didn't land on the infirmary.

Damn, Ross was going to be pissed.

She let up on the throttle and allowed the ship to begin its descent, keeping the nose up for as long as she could. Once it dipped she'd lose speed rapidly and plummet to the ground like a stone. She had to keep wind resistance on the bottom hull. She wound her arms around the stick and pulled back on it with all her might.

"Come on!" she screamed at the ship. "Keep your damn head up!"

The ground was rushing up too fast. She cut the throttle entirely and heaved back, firing the hover-nodes beneath the ship to cushion the impact. She couldn't tell if they were working, but she prayed they were. It might mean the difference between living and dying.

"Don't fail me now, Hoss! One more inch! Get your big fat head up!" Her last word was an angry bellow.

The nose rose a bit more and then she was down, slamming into the sand in a flurry of dust that made the Worldstorm look like a sneeze. Her head snapped forward and then back, the light dimming and stars erupting. She felt the ship sliding sideways, but there was no way to

Book I: The Horror Lords

stop it. All controls were dead. She was just along for the ride now.

"Don't roll on me, baby," she pleaded, clutching the arm rails for dear life.

Suddenly the forward motion slowed and then ceased all together.

"Holy c-crap!" Debbi shook so badly her teeth were chattering. She laid her aching skull back against the seat's headrest.

"I'm alive," she whispered in amazement.

She sat there for a while. There was no strength in her limbs at the moment. She sucked in great gulps of stale, arid air. It finally dawned on her she smelled smoke. She fumbled for the release on her seat restraints. Successfully performing that simple function gave her the motivation she needed to get moving. She reached for the door. It wouldn't open.

Damn it.

Debbi tried the explosive bolts, but they didn't fire.

She searched for the manual override, flipped open the panel and began to crank the metal handle. It took what seemed like hours.

Good thing the ship isn't engulfed in flames, was her morbid thought, or I'd be toast.

Sweet air filled the cabin as the door slowly rumbled open. Her muscles burned from their furious strain, but she continued to crank until the hatch was open wide enough to crawl through. She landed in a pitiful heap on the hot dust, slumping to the ground.

Shoving herself to her feet, she stumbled away from the craft in no particular direction.

She heard a rumble to her left. A cadre of Rangers was zipping toward her on their speeders. She waved at them, signaling that she was all right. They surrounded her in a flurry of sand and excited shouts.

Ringo leaped off from behind Miller and reached her first. He grabbed her arm. "Dallas, you okay?"

"I'm fine, Ringo." His thrilled cry stabbed into Debbi's throbbing skull, but it wasn't enough to wipe the cockeyed smile from her face.

Miller was suddenly on her other side. "You had us going there for a bit, Dallas, you crazy woman!" He had a hand under her other arm to make sure she remained upright.

"I'm all right." His concern took Debbi by surprise. She squeezed his shoulder. "Thanks."

Her eyes scanned the group for Stew. She saw him at the back of the crowd. She lifted her hand and shouted his name, but he turned his speeder bike and headed back to Temptation's gates.

Olivares approached her. "That was some pretty fancy flying."

She grinned briefly at the praise. "Seat-of-the-pants. I don't recommend it." Debbi's eyes remained on Stew's departing form. "Is Stew okay? You know, the Ranger with you on the roof?"

Olivares nodded. "He's in one piece, if that's what you mean. But I get the feeling you might want to have a talk with him and soon."

Debbi regarded him curiously, but she was distracted as the rest of the Rangers swarmed around her.

"So, did we get it?" she asked them.

"I think so," Miller answered. "It looked dead to me."

"What do you mean you think so? Didn't any of you go down and check?"

Ringo looked at her incredulously. "You're kidding, right?"

Miller retorted, "How the hell did you want us to check it? Poke it

Clay & Susan Griffith

with a stick? Look, it was dead. It wasn't moving."

"Maybe it's just stunned," she said. "Ever think of that?"

Miller threw up a dismissive hand. "Even with Stew's piss-poor shooting, we kicked its slimy ass. It ain't getting back up again, trust me."

Debbi snorted, rubbing the back of her stiffening neck. "Let's head back and see if it's still there. It damn well better be. I'm not going through that again."

Olivares folded his arms. "Don't worry, it's dead. It didn't have a head anymore, and most things, xeno or otherwise, have a hard time getting around without one."

"I'll give you a ride back." He gestured with his thumb to the speeder he rode in on. The rest of the Rangers were already breaking up and moving off to their vehicles.

Olivares was about to head for his bike when his gaze shifted off Debbi and toward the horizon. His hand went up to shade his eyes. "What the hell is that?"

Debbi turned around and felt her stomach bottom out. A large dark cloud was approaching. It was moving far too fast to be a natural weather pattern. Debbi took a step back and came abreast of Olivares.

"Oh, what is it this time?" Miller groaned, more angry than afraid. He threw his hat down in the dirt in frustration. "Sweet Josiah, can't we get a break around here?"

"Let's go." Debbi pulled on Olivares's arm. "Everyone, back to Temptation. Now!"

The cloud undulated oddly, like it was alive.

Olivares quickly straddled the speeder and made room for Debbi on the back. The rest of the Rangers were already mounted and gone in a swirl of sand. Debbi and Olivares were hot on their heels, racing the cloud.

It quickly swept past them and cast its dark shadow over the town. The flapping of wings could be heard, hundreds of them.

A new plague had arrived.

Chapter 24

The sky darkened as the Rangers raced for Temptation. Debbi yanked out the binoculars and craned her head upward, ignoring the sharp stab of pain it caused. She trained the glasses on the black mass above her. Thumbing the zoom, it jumped into clarity.

She wished it hadn't.

She saw a carpet of batlike creatures, moving as one, all red eyes and yellow teeth. They screeched and lunged at each other in a wild but controlled flight. She had never seen anything like them before.

She looked down and watched as the ground ahead of them turned black as night as the mass blotted out the fading sun. Praying they would just keep moving, Debbi dropped the glasses down and hung onto Olivares's back. Maybe they were migrating.

Please let them be migrating, she intoned in a silent mantra.

The pack of speeders swept through the open gates. They were promptly ditched as soon as they made headquarters and the Rangers pulled their guns and trained them upward, watching with wary expressions.

There were still a few people wandering the streets in defiance of the

Book I: The Horror Lords

curfew. They too were gazing upward at the strange sight, pointing.

"Is it going to rain?" a young girl asked her boyfriend as they strolled down the street.

"I don't think so." The young man shook his head and looked up with confusion. "What is that?"

Debbi waved frantically at them. "Get off the streets." She had a very bad feeling about this.

Suddenly, Ringo shouted and she jerked her gaze back up. The cloud fell apart. With the zeal of a hailstorm, the creatures dove straight down toward them. Their shrill screeching filled the air.

Gunfire sounded as Rangers opened fire. Townspeople screamed and ran. Swarms of the creatures plummeted to the earth and swooped down on Rangers and citizen alike.

The young man with the girlfriend screamed as several bat-creatures clutched onto his head and back. The girl ran in terror as two more chased her.

Olivares tackled the girl and rolled with her across the street until he was close to a door. One creature swooped past, just missing them both. Olivares pulled her up and shoved her inside, quickly slamming the door behind them.

Debbi ran to the boyfriend and used the butt of her gun to sweep the black things off him. They hit the dirt where they crawled on wing-bound claws, hissing through blood-drenched teeth. Debbi spun her gun up and fired. They blew apart.

"Inside!" she yelled. "Everybody inside!"

People ran. She grabbed the young man and pulled him under the sidewalk awning outside headquarters. He was sluggish and in obvious pain. She heard a sound above and pushed the boy over to Stew as she whirled her weapon up.

A bat-thing jumped at her from its hiding spot in the rafters. Her stream of fire took it out and it flopped against her. She kicked its decimated body aside and turned back to the boy. Stew was dragging him inside. Debbi followed.

She slammed the door just as more of the creatures whizzed past outside. Through the window, she saw Fitzpatrick running toward the office with blood streaming from his left forearm. She swung open the door. He barreled past her and she shut the door again. Fitzpatrick fell to the floor. Cass, who had been on office duty, came from behind the desk and helped Debbi prop Fitz against the nearest wall.

"Damn! I just got this thing fixed!" he snarled through clenched teeth, a hand clamped over the gushing wound in his arm. He stared at Debbi with glassy eyes. "What are those things?"

"I don't know." She tied a tourniquet around his arm and then wrapped the gaping quarter-inch hole just above his wrist. She turned to Ringo, who also had taken refuge in the office. "Get on the radio up top. Alert the emergency network. Tell people to stay in their homes."

Ringo's terrified face pained her. She was about to rescind the order and go herself when Ringo shook his head.

"It's okay. I'll go." He swallowed a few times and gulped in more air.

"I'll go with him," Cass offered.

Ringo's color came back a little at that and he looked up at the old Ranger with gratitude.

Debbi nodded her thanks. Her muscles felt like mush suddenly and she had to put a hand out to the wall to steady herself. She moved back

Clay & Susan Griffith

to the window and looked out. Hundreds of the bat-things were still airborne, but she also saw some crawling on the outside of buildings and hanging beneath the sidewalk awnings. There were two just outside the office door, clinging to beams in the overhang. They were about a foot long and reddish green in color. On the surface, they resembled bats with their membranous wings and grasping clawed hands and feet. They had large eyes. Their mouths were frequently agape and strange tubular tongues flashed in and out. They had long, fleshy ratlike tails that whipped like snakes and thin, pliable fans of bone spreading up from the backs of their heads.

Stew stood beside her, pale and grim. He pointed across the street. "Look over there."

Just visible in the rapidly fading light, one of the creatures wiggled into a small hole in the side of the mercantile. Then it was gone. She saw Ngoma inside the front window of that same building, but he wasn't looking her way.

She fingered her comlink. "Ngoma, you read? Ngoma!" There was nothing but silence. "Damn, his com must be out." She waved her arms to attract him to no avail.

"He doesn't see you, Dallas," Stew said in small voice, fear all too evident in his tone as he watched more of the creatures disappear into the same hole.

"Yeah." She stepped to the door.

Stew whirled, grabbing her arm and pulling her back. "You can't seriously be thinking of going over there?"

"Someone has to warn him."

Stew shook his head vehemently. "I'll go."

"Look, maybe we don't have to go outside. Let's just see if we can get his attention. Cover me."

Wiping the sweat from his face, he lifted his Dagoon in trembling hands, clenched so tightly they were numb. He tried to quiet the pounding of his heart, but he couldn't. It roared in his ears. Suddenly, Debbi was shaking him.

"Stew!"

He looked at her with wide eyes, his mouth moving but forming no words.

"Stew, you okay?"

He offered a rough nod. He knew in his heart he should shake his head and tell her the truth. He couldn't take it anymore. It was too much. It never stopped.

Debbi's eyes narrowed in confusion and then squeezed his arm. "Stew, just make sure none of those things get in here, okay? I'm going to attract Ngoma's attention." She held up her pistol. "If this doesn't work, nothing will." She moved to the door. "Now get ready."

He stepped up behind her and trained his weapon at the top of the door, willing his limbs to stop shaking for just a moment. He wasn't going to let Debbi down again. She must not know he almost got her killed. Otherwise, why would she allow him to watch her back?

Debbi crouched and eased the door open. She aimed and fired off a shot that struck the boardwalk right in front of Ngoma.

The Ranger flinched and looked down and then up to lock eyes with Debbi. She closed the door quickly and motioned through the window with quick hand signals about the danger surrounding him.

He nodded and gestured back to those inside with him. They disap-

Book I: The Horror Lords

peared from view.

A loud boom rent the air and the lights inside the office went out. The room plunged into murky shadows.

"Transformer must have blown," Stew said.

Debbi spat out a curse. "Some of those things must have flown into the relay station."

"Intentional?"

"I doubt it. Get the lanterns."

There was a scream behind Debbi and she spun around. Fitzpatrick held his left arm and stared at it with wide terrified eyes.

"Oh God, oh God," he babbled. "My arm!"

Debbi ran to him, trying to comfort him in the darkness. "Easy, Fitz. It's okay. We'll get you to the Doc soon as we can."

Stew returned with glowing lanterns and set them about the room.

Debbi's eyes dropped to Fitz's arm. It hung down like a limp rag, bent backwards at the elbow. It hadn't seemed broken before when Debbi tied the tourniquet on it. Her mouth twisted into a sickened grimace.

Fitzpatrick's scream became a shriek. Debbi touched his arm to try and ease it back into its proper place, but it collapsed over her hand like warm rubber, barely holding its form. There was no bone inside the flesh. Debbi's throat filled with bile and she struggled not to vomit.

Fitzpatrick's eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped over, mercifully unconscious from the pain and shock.

"Oh dear God," she mumbled and sat back for a moment, gasping with revulsion. Her eyes traveled to the young man she had rescued. He had been bitten on the head, shoulders, and back. He had been oddly silent since he had been brought inside.

He lay on his stomach with his face turned toward her. His eyes stared with the remnants of unabashed terror. His skull sagged like a tired balloon. The upper part of his shoulders and neck collapsed like melted wax. His mouth gaped reflexively in an imitation of a dying fish.

Debbi struggled over to him and tried to help, but there was little she could do. There were bite holes all over him. His upper body was like putty in her hands. Without the top of his spinal cord and ribcage, the weight of his own flesh was crushing his windpipe; he was slowly suffocating. That didn't matter though. The mounting pressure on his brain sealed his fate.

Cold and shaking, Debbi was quietly sick in the dark corner. She was both grateful for its obscuring shroud, but also petrified at what lay in its murky ceiling. She hunched there trembling until she felt a hand on her shoulder. She jerked.

It was Stew.

"Oh God, Stew, what are these things?" She wiped her mouth.

His face didn't look much better than hers, as if he had just experienced the same reaction. Stew shook his head, his face locked into stiff mortification, as if it was the only way to keep his terror under control.

"I don't know," he whispered.

Weapons fire from across the street startled both of them. They turned to the front window.

Across the street, the door to the mercantile flew open. Someone emerged screaming, covered with the creatures. Debbi couldn't tell who it was. She and Stew struggled to their feet, using each other for leverage. They ran for the door.

Ngoma raced out into the street and tried to help the hapless soul

Clay & Susan Griffith

who fell to the ground in front of headquarters. The figure shrieked in pain and terror. Ngoma couldn't risk a shot, so he used his bare hands to pry the creatures off.

Debbi flung open the door and dashed out to help him. Stew lifted his sidearm and didn't wait to find out if the two creatures lurking under the sidewalk overhang would strike. He shot them both straight away.

"Don't let any of them bite you!" Debbi shouted to Ngoma as she used the butt of her pistol to knock off some of the creatures.

He looked sharply at her and then continued to pry them off, switching to his rifle stock as a means of dislodging the bat-things.

Stew stood under the awning and fired in the air, hopefully discouraging any airborne creatures from pouncing. He heard the beating of their leather wings in the darkness above him.

Curtiz appeared in the street and was shooting the creatures that Debbi and Ngoma flung aside. They writhed in the dust for a moment as bullets ripped into them. Then they were still.

As the last one made its final shrill and expired three feet from Debbi, she and Ngoma wasted no time. They heaved up the blood-soaked man and dragged him into Ranger headquarters, followed by Curtiz. Stew covered them and then slammed the door.

Ngoma and Debbi deposited the wounded man on the floor beside the unconscious Fitzpatrick. There were numerous drill holes amongst the bite marks that covered the new victim. Blood seeped out of him like a sieve. There was little they could do; his skin was sinking already before their eyes as he flopped and twitched uselessly, his voice only a gargling sound.

"Christ." She wiped her mouth with her sleeve, her hand gripped by tremors.

"They're poisonous?" Ngoma uttered, his tone flat. His eyes were locked on the man he thought they had saved.

"Yeah, you could say that." She was fighting the tears in her eyes. It was then she saw the smear of blood on Ngoma's leg. "Damn it!"

Debbi turned to Stew. "Quick, get me a tourniquet!"

She pushed Ngoma to a sitting position with his back against the wall. Ngoma complied emotionlessly. He wasn't panicking nor was there a hint of fear in his face. He was numb.

"It's all right, Debbi." He regarded her calmly.

"No, it's not!" she snapped out in a near sob. Her eyes flashed up hard and angry with him; her hands fumbled with the tourniquet.

He grabbed her shoulders and repeated gently, "It's all right." He reached down and helped her tie the strap around his thigh.

It was done. For all the good it would do.

Debbi slammed a hand down hard onto the floor in abject frustration.

"We need to get a handle on this, Dallas," Ngoma said with remarkable clarity.

"How?" she shouted. "There are too many of them!" She raked a shaking hand through her hair, feeling the grit of sand that still lay between the strands. She took several deep breaths, desperate to think straight.

She regarded Stew, who crouched beside her. "Okay! Okay. Let's think. First we need to get medical help. Stew, get on the horn to Doc Dazy. Maybe some victims have made it to him already. We need to know what to do to help these people. Second, ask Doc if he knows what the

Book I: The Horror Lords

hell these things are!"

She glanced at her people, praying that she was on the right track. Grateful for a direction, Stew tried to click his com onto the Doctor's frequency. Hopefully, Doc Dazy was wearing his comlink. Ngoma was lost in his agony, panting now as pain surged through his leg. He put his head back against the wall. Debbi gently probed the leg. He grunted, but didn't beg her to stop. The bite wound was bad, the flesh torn. It was still seeping blood. She looked up at Ngoma with dread.

"It burns," he gasped. There were beads of sweat dotting his features. His teeth clamped together against the waves of agony.

She closed her eyes as a wave of despair flooded her. She forced them open again and hardened her face, grabbing his shoulder and squeezing. "We'll come up with something. Doc will know what to do."

Ngoma gave a very small laugh. "Yeah, just like he did with the zombies."

There was a flurry of gunshots from above.

Ringo and Cass! They were up in the radio shack on the roof. Debbi grabbed her pistol and ran for the stairs.

Ringo tossed the headphones back on the table. He had broadcast the warning to anyone who had his or her radio on. This time of the day, hopefully people were at home eating a late supper and checking the local bandwidth for occasional news, people with generators at any rate. The lights had gone out as he and Cass arrived. Most likely the creatures had run into the relay station and blew out something. Thankfully, the radio's battery backup had kicked in so they still had the power to broadcast the warning.

Ringo's nerves were still on edge. The thought of those things flying around out in the dark made his skin crawl. He was glad to be inside away from them.

He looked up at Cass who was standing next to him behind the glow of a flashlight beam. The elderly man, usually laid back and light-hearted, was now grim and morose.

With the equipment now turned off and its deep hum silent, other sounds crept in. Distant screaming and intermittent, frantic gunfire filled the night air. The flapping of wings was still audible outside like dead leaves rustling in a dry wind.

A shiver gripped Ringo as he stood.

Cass hefted the flashlight in one hand and his sidearm in the other. "Let's get back to the others."

"Do we have to?" Ringo asked. He really didn't want to go back outside. Cass was about to respond with a sharp answer, but Ringo held up a hand. "I know. I know. It's a Ranger's duty." Ringo gave a half-hearted smile. "It was just wishful thinking was all."

Cass offered one of his trademark grins and laughed. "I don't remember it ever saying that we had to be vermin exterminators. Maybe we should stay in here."

Ringo looked almost hopeful, and then he realized Cass was jesting. His expression fell.

"Come on, kid." Cass clapped him around the shoulders. "There's more work to be done." He was about to head for the door when his flashlight flickered, dipping the room into blackness. It immediately brightened again.

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Great! That's all we need." Ringo pulled his weapon in closer.

"Don't worry!"

The light faded again. Cass cursed and shook the light, trying to bring it back to life. It did, barely. The dissipating beam cast wildly around the room.

Ringo looked up, following the beam of light and he felt his heart seize in terror. Through the darting light he saw a nightmare. The ceiling was filled with the writhing bodies of the bat-things. They were wall-to-wall, clinging to the tiles with their hands and feet. They began to shrill when the light hit them. Their gaping mouths opened, sharp tongues darted out and quivered like rattlers' tails.

Ringo couldn't help it. He screamed. The flashlight finally went out and the room plunged into darkness.

The bat-things swarmed.

"Move!" Cass opened fire and shoved Ringo to the door.

Ringo fumbled for the latch. He felt the creatures all around him. Wings beat around his head. Clawed hands gripped his hair and screeching filled his ears. He yanked the door open.

"Cass!"

"Keep going, son!"

Ringo fired out ahead of him to clear a path, but as fast as the creatures swerved away, more would drop down to take their place. A stiff hand shoved Ringo out the open door of the com shack and almost sent him sprawling to the rooftop.

Then the door slammed behind him.

"No!" Ringo shouted. He reached back for the door handle and struggled to open it. It turned, but he couldn't move the door more than an inch inward. Something was blocking it. "Cass! Get away from the door. Cass!"

The rustle of wings behind him made him duck and roll. The night sky was abruptly peppered with muzzle blasts and flying lead as he pulled the trigger of his Dragoon.

He scrambled to his feet and ran back to the radio shack, shoving his shoulder hard against the jammed door. It wouldn't budge. He could just see inside through the slit. By the pale green glow of the transmitter panels, he saw a mass lying at the foot of the door. It was Cass. He was covered with roiling, black furred bodies. There was a sound from inside that Ringo couldn't identify. He thought maybe it was Cass whimpering, but then he realized what it was.

It was the sound something makes when it's suckling.

Ringo's limbs went weak and he slumped against the wooden door. He was going to be sick.

He felt the rustle of wings behind him, but he couldn't move.

Suddenly the air shattered and bits of blood and gore drizzled on him. Debbi stepped out of the shadows onto the roof.

"Ringo! Get inside!"

He turned to her, his face ashen in the pale light of the lamp she held, dripping with flecks of black fur and blood. He tried to speak.

"C-Cass."

"Where?" She stepped forward. "Inside the shack?"

Ringo nodded. "He's dead. They...they ..."

Debbi's stomach rolled. *Oh God, not Cass*, she cried silently. She pulled on Ringo's arm, maneuvering him out of the way to look inside with the bright glare of her lamp.

Book I: The Horror Lords

"They were in the ceiling, hundreds of them. All over. They fell on us, on Cass..."

Only half-listening to Ringo, she held the lamp up high to the slightly open door. The creatures were still swarming over Cass's body. As the lamp light fell over them, they squirmed back hissing, blood soaked lips curling back.

Cass laid there, his body sunken, soaked in blood. A lot of blood.

Ringo screamed as more rustling was heard above them.

With tears streaking her face, Debbi grabbed Ringo and dragged him to the roof access door. She put the lamp in her gun-hand and turned the handle. "Get ready to run in. I'm not keeping this thing open for long. You got it?" She was yelling; she couldn't help it.

Ringo nodded, his gun trained upward. He fired a few rounds for effect into the darkness. Debbi yanked the door open and Ringo darted inside. She followed, slamming it shut.

Ringo swung his gun wildly around at the ceiling. Debbi was shaking again and fell face forward against the door. It took a few seconds, but she gathered herself, thinking more of helping Ringo than of her own misery. The poor kid must be terrified. She pulled back and found him sunk to the floor, clutching his gun to his chest and staring at the high ceiling of the supply room.

Debbi looked up in panic, but saw nothing. It was empty.

She sank to her knees beside him. "It's okay, Ringo. You're safe."

He turned huge, tear-filled eyes on her. "He saved me, Debbi. Pushed me out. But then...they got him. They were all over him. He made a noise. I couldn't get to him. I couldn't!"

Debbi struggled to hold in her own tears. Everything clamored for release, for panic, for hysteria. But she wouldn't give in. She couldn't. Emotions were running high for both of them. They needed to gear down.

"It's okay. Shhh now." She put her arms around the boy. She sometimes forgot just how young Ringo was. Barely eighteen. It was a miracle he had stayed steady this long. Even veteran Rangers were being affected by this horror. She squeezed her eyes shut at the sudden thought.

Cass was gone.

She shoved her grief away roughly. There was no time for it. Lives were at stake. She forced her mind to work. "You said, you said they reacted when they saw the light?"

Ringo nodded against her shoulder. "As soon as the light dimmed, I heard them. I looked up and when the flashlight beam went out, they attacked."

Debbi's mind latched onto a thought. When she held up her lamp, the creatures fell back.

Light! They didn't like the light.

"Come on!" She stood and heaved Ringo to his feet. "I've had enough of this. Time to start killing these little sons of bitches!"

Chapter 25

Small spheres of light moved through the ebony streets of Temptation like ghostly wraiths. Stew and Debbi comprised one of those circles. Stew lifted a lantern high while Debbi walked close beside him, shotgun held at the ready. The lantern light didn't penetrate far into the

Clay & Susan Griffith

darkness, but it was enough to deter the creatures from swarming. Occasionally one darted in for a wild attack, but the light would disrupt it and the creature would veer away, usually to be shot from the air.

Death was widespread in the town. Lumps of flesh lay sagging in the streets like giant slugs. Some were covered in grotesque furred blankets as the creatures fed on ill-fated victims. And there were some victims in the streets not yet dead.

Debbi had gathered the remaining Rangers, the militia, and the Night Watch. The militiamen and Night Watchmen were dispatched to find the injured and get them to the infirmary for the overworked Doc Dazy to attend.

Meanwhile, Debbi split the Rangers into squads, exterminator squads as Miller so aptly named them. They were to make a house-by-house sweep to search for injured, inform any people who hadn't heard the warning, and to kill as many of the creatures as they could. The trouble was, thanks to the Worldstorm, most buildings had more holes and cracks than people even knew about. The creatures could scuttle into countless homes without anyone being aware until it was too late.

Olivares had taken a militia squad and escorted a repair crew to the power relay station in hopes of getting the electricity back on. If they could get the lights, it would help immensely in diminishing the number of attacks.

There was a great deal to do. The sun was due to rise in two hours. They had to hold out until then.

Debbi was headed to the infirmary to talk to Doc Dazy, but she had to stop at home first. In the back of her mind, it troubled her that she was thinking about personal concerns. But, in the final analysis, it didn't matter. She had to make sure Miss Etta was safe; she couldn't abandon someone she loved.

Stew had volunteered to go with her, unwilling to leave her side for any reason. He hadn't been himself the last few hours. He seemed to be coming undone, but then he would rally for a time. Even now, Debbi could see the shakes grip him as the lantern light shimmered in his hands. She couldn't blame him. There was a side of her that begged to break down also.

She needed Ross. She had always been able to count on his strength under pressure no matter the situation. Fear was something he controlled as if it was nothing more than an irritation. Not once in all the months she had known him had his veneer broken. She needed that kind of resolve now.

A fluttering of wings interrupted her thoughts as Stew wildly swung the lantern to deter the attack. It swayed so badly that Debbi was afraid he would drop it and they'd be plunged into darkness, prey to the creatures swarming around them. She grabbed his arm and stabilized it.

"Stew, calm down." She could hear his harsh breathing in the oddly mild wind. A quiet sob was released and then silenced. The lantern steadied. "We'll get through this. You and I have to trust in each other."

Stew's eyes held something more than fear. She knew that look. She had once seen it in her own face. It was guilt, a terrible, soul-eating kind.

"You can't trust me." He stared unseeing into the gloom around them. "I'm going to get you killed."

She hadn't let go of his arm yet and squeezed hard on it. She gently urged him to keep walking.

Book I: The Horror Lords

"Jesus, Stew, don't fade on me now. I need you. Don't let me face this alone." The silence that followed that plea made Debbi nervous.

Finally, he answered. "I won't." But as he turned back to her, she could still see a lingering sense of shame. "I have to tell you something, Debbi."

"Stew, it doesn't matter right now." She hated the darkness that surrounded them. It created a sense of isolation that was false and deadly. "We're too vulnerable right now. It can wait."

"No, it can't!" he snapped. "I missed the shot! I almost got you killed!"

"What are you talking about? What shot?"

Stew dragged in a deep breath. "The worm or the octopus or whatever the hell that thing was."

"That's old news. Forget about it." She walked on.

Stew raised a trembling hand to his head. "No, you don't understand. It wasn't me. It was Olivares who killed the thing. I screwed up the shot. I choked and almost killed you!"

Debbi was stunned for a moment. She knew something had happened up on that rooftop, but there hadn't been time to find out what.

She shook her head gently. "It was a tough shot."

"Bull! I failed you! Plain and simple. You were counting on me and I cracked. You can't trust me. I failed you just like I failed my..."

As Stew's voice drifted off, Debbi at last understood. What she feared had come to pass. She had hoped that she would have time to deal with it in a quieter moment, one less strewn with strife and death. But life wasn't that kind. Stew's problem had chosen the worst time to manifest.

"Stew," she said emphatically, "you didn't fail anyone, least of all your father."

He didn't respond right away.

Eventually, he said, "You don't know what it's like. I killed him."

Clenching her teeth against the onrush of her own guilt, Debbi answered quietly. "I do know. Believe me, I do know." She gave the night sky a brief scan and saw all the little winged shapes darting across the faces of the moons. "Haven't you ever wondered how I came to Temptation?"

Stew's eyes drew down to center on her.

She continued, "I was running. The space station where I was posted, the Cabal, was attacked. I tried to get everyone off before it broke apart. That included my mother. She got herself stationed there so she could be closer to her little girl. She was funny like that." Debbi's eyes watered at the memory. Her jaw muscles tightened in an effort to regain her control. Anger did the trick. "My mother ran back to help someone else. The station began to roll and people panicked. They grabbed me and blasted the escape pod off. I left my mother behind to die. I couldn't stop it." She met Stew's gaze. "I wonder every day if she's forgiven me."

He had heard vague stories of Debbi's previous assignment. It was sketchy at best and rumors abounded. No one knew about her mother. Obviously, it was something she kept very close. He was honored that she shared it with him.

"It wasn't your fault," Stew said gently.

Debbi gave a ragged little sigh and lied. "I know that now. But for months, I wallowed in guilt. Everything suffered, my job, my life. I had to get past it, and I did. Otherwise, there would have been nothing left."

"The same goes for you. You did what you had to do to protect this town. Those things in the cemetery weren't people. They were shells,

Clay & Susan Griffith

mindless and abhorrent. That wasn't your father; he's somewhere else now. Trust me on this."

Debbi could see she was getting through. The man's pale, blue eyes were damp and cast heavenward. His throat bobbed reflexively as he swallowed back the pain and the guilt that had engulfed him.

"But I almost killed you too. All because..."

Debbi stopped him. "Stew, we all have our bad days. Lord knows we're having all ours in a rush lately. How do you think Ross ended up in the infirmary? My shot pushed him over a cliff."

"What?"

"I shot the monster that collided with Ross that shoved them both off the cliff that Jack built." She chuckled. "I'm sort of hoping that he doesn't remember any of that."

Stew's eyes widened and then he too smiled, genuinely smiled. That pure white, amazing smile that made many female hearts flutter. Debbi had worried she'd never see it again.

With a sigh, Debbi steered down her street. "It could have gone very badly, but hey, it all worked out in the end. Sound familiar?"

Her confidence in him astounded Stew. Of course, he knew he still had a long way to go. He could still feel the shame bubbling just below the surface.

Debbi bobbed her head. "Here's Miss Etta's."

The boarding house stood quiet and serene. In the months that Debbi had lived in Temptation, Stew had never visited her at home. He knew where she lived, of course, but most of their business was conducted either in headquarters or at *Mo's*. The brimming flower boxes, the white porch swing; this was a side of Debbi few people had seen.

Debbi indicated with a gesture that Stew should hold up the lantern under the eaves of the porch. To the relief of both Rangers, no creatures dangled there. Debbi stepped up onto the porch, her eyes keen for anything small and black. She paused.

"Oh, by the way, Miss Etta has a cat. It's sort of black and orange. Mostly black. Try not to confuse it with one of the batrat things and shoot it. Miss Etta is real fond of him." She shrugged. "So am I."

Stew hated to tell her, but if there was any doubt at all as to whether he was seeing a cat or a batrat thing coming at him, it was going down regardless. She could always get another cat.

Debbi hefted her shotgun and slowly opened the front door. The house was dark. She aimed upward, the flashlight on the barrel illuminating the ceiling. It was clean. The two Rangers slipped in quickly and shut the door.

Stew released the breath he had been holding while Debbi called out. "Miss Etta! It's Debbi!"

Stew noticed something in the sitting room and pointed it out. It was blast damage. A lavender paisley vase and the picture of Etta's great grandfather both lay shattered on the floor.

"Miss Etta!" Debbi's heart seized with dread and she stepped forward quickly.

Stew grabbed her shoulder in a vice grip. "Slow and easy."

Nodding curtly, Debbi inched forward, shifting her weapon constantly from one dark shadow to another.

The first door down the hall was ajar. She could see blood splattered on a green rug inside. Her mind rapidly attempted to recall the occupant. Mrs. Wilshire, she believed. The woman was a good friend of Etta's.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Debbi hugged the wall and then slipped around the doorjamb. Her beam cast an erratic light inside, sweeping first the ceiling and then the rest of the room. The second sweep revealed the decimated bodies of three batrats. The room was a mess. Whatever had happened here, it was over.

She eased out of the room and closed the door. They continued down the hall. The next door was closed. It was Mr. Pullido's room. Debbi knocked loudly. No one answered. She crouched down, put her ear to the door, and laid her gun on the floor so that it cast its light inside the room. A telltale flutter of wings and hissing gave her an answer. The room was definitely occupied. Peering under the door, she could just make out a pale shape on the floor, lying flat as a puddle. Grimacing, she stood up and pulled a thick marker from her jacket. She marked a red "X" on the door, indicating it needed an extermination squad.

Suddenly the quiet of the house was shattered by gunfire. Debbi and Stew moved down the hall. All the while, she kept watch above them. She kept the pace slow despite her desperate need to run.

"Miss Etta!"

Finally, an answering call. "Down here!" More gunfire.

Debbi and Stew ran the last few feet to the kitchen door and flung it open. Inside it was chaos. There were three bat-creatures. One was swooping down on Mrs. Wilshire who was jammed against the wall near Debbi.

Etta's shotgun followed the creature's dive. Debbi grabbed Mrs. Wilshire and pulled her down to the floor. Stew was behind her and hopefully out of range.

The shotgun blast chewed out a chunk of the wall. Debbi felt splinters. She rolled off Mrs. Wilshire and came up with her own gun primed. Stew shouted as a batrat flew past him and down the hall. He took a shot at it with his pistol but missed.

Debbi could see two more. One's wild erratic flight made it difficult to draw a bead in the close quarters of the kitchen. Another was on top of a screaming lodger in the far corner. Debbi didn't know his name. The batrat's teeth sunk deep into his chest and he swatted at it in futile terror. Debbi clambered to her feet and ran over, even though she knew that most likely he was already a dead man. She struck the batrat with the barrel of her shotgun.

The creature released its teeth from the man and turned toward her. She used the momentary distraction to wallop it. Its claws ripped the man's shirt as it slammed against the wall and fell stunned. Debbi shot it. The man rose unsteadily and charged out of the kitchen screaming like a madman.

Something struck Debbi in the back of the head and she stumbled forward. She immediately knew what it was and swiped frantically at it. She didn't feel anything.

"Above you!" Stew shouted. "Get down!"

Debbi dropped and heard the loud crack of Stew's weapon. Then falling plaster hit her shoulder, followed by a heavy wet form. Debbi scrambled away and kicked at the dead thing beside her. It slid up against the icebox with a thud.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw two more things darting in the shadows overhead. Where the hell were they coming from? Debbi shot one out of the air and Miss Etta blasted one too.

Three more leaped into the fray.

Clay & Susan Griffith

"The hole!" Etta shouted, pointing at a small crack in the plaster above the icebox.

Debbi bound to her feet. Flinging her shotgun over her shoulder by its strap, she ran for the corner where the icebox sat. She grabbed a coffee container and leaped onto the counter next to the icebox. One of the creatures was wriggling through the hole in the wall, red eyes blazing and yellow teeth dripping. Small, clawed hands scrabbled at the plaster as it fought to enter.

Debbi pulled her knife and rammed it home into the head of the batrat. It wiggled for a moment and then went still. Pulling out the knife, she shoved the can into the hole, pushing the dead thing back in with it. She could feel the resistance as more batrats tried to get in from outside. Using the hilt of the knife, she pounded the can in tight.

Something crawled into her peripheral vision and she fell back just as a batrat lunged at her. Pain lanced through her spine as she landed badly on the countertop amid clattering pots and pans. She rolled off with a crash as the air around her was peppered with gunfire. She covered her head.

A hand reached down and helped her up. Debbi found herself staring into the crinkled face of Miss Etta. The elderly woman held a smoking shotgun.

"Well done, dear," Miss Etta said as if she were congratulating her on a piano recital. "Now stand up. There're more of them."

Debbi struggled up and watched in amazement as the old woman whipped her gun around and blasted another batrat out of the air. It splattered against the gold wallpaper, smearing crimson across it like an inkblot design. Etta cursed, obviously annoyed at what was happening to her beloved home.

Debbi's bemused expression disappeared as a huge batrat crashed into Etta and slammed her into the wall.

"No!" Debbi rushed forward. Etta's hands were locked around the creature's throat, keeping it away from her exposed flesh. Its angry shriek rent the air and clawed wings beat harshly against Etta's weakening arms.

Debbi's shotgun was gone as was her knife, lost in the fall from the icebox. She did the only thing she could. She grabbed the creature with bare hands and pulled it back. One wing slammed into Etta's head and dazed her enough so that her grip failed. Debbi fell back with the creature in hand. It went berserk.

A clawed wing grabbed her and it pulled itself around to face her, teeth snapping. Only Debbi's sheer will and tenacity kept it at bay. The thing's bizarre tongue thrust forward, snapping mere millimeters from her face. She could see the vicious barb on the end of it. She was suddenly grateful for her long arms.

"Stew!" she cried out.

"Here!" He stepped back into the kitchen, his face shifting swiftly to horror. He raised the pistol, but the edges of his vision started to blur and cave in. He barely heard Debbi's terrified shout.

"Take the shot! I can't hold it!"

Fear bubbled up into his throat, choking him. She was too close to the creature. Its clawed hands raked Debbi's forearms drawing a scream and blood from her. The shame crept its way inside him again, and for the first time, he became angry at it.

His hand steadied and his vision cleared. He squeezed the trigger and

Book I: The Horror Lords

the bullet left the muzzle in a ring of gun smoke.

Debbi's sleeve fluttered as the shell plucked at it in its path to strike the creature. The batrat was wrenched from her hands and thrust against the wall in a wet smear.

She slumped back and watched morbidly as the thing slid slowly down the wallpaper. Sucking in a deep lungful of air, she lay on the floor, her limbs sapped of strength. She met Stew's eyes. He stood, his pistol slowly lowering, amazed at what he had just done. There was something present in his blue orbs. Debbi knew it well: relief at the first small victory on a long road back, all the previous failures fading, and the shroud of shame lifting.

"Good shooting," she said softly, managing the barest of exhausted smiles. He smiled back.

She caught a small movement to her left, eye level. Another black furred body loomed in her view with a hiss, but she couldn't move. She was utterly drained.

Then she glimpsed green slanted eyes.

"Damn you, McDuff," she whispered and burst into a frantic laugh at the cat crouching pitifully under a chair.

She reached out and grabbed the cat before he ran out and someone shot him for being small and furry. Stew helped her to her feet. He tried to steer her toward a chair. Instead, he found himself holding an irate cat while Debbi scrambled over to Etta who was sitting up and rubbing her head.

"Thank God, dawn is breaking," Stew announced, pulling back a curtain from the window.

There was a general sense of relief for most everyone present, but Debbi knew it was only temporary. Even the sun's rays couldn't penetrate the dark pall that had enveloped Temptation.

Doc Dazy sat staring at an old book. He was so exhausted he barely had the strength to turn the pages. His eyes drooped and his head bobbed toward the desk.

"Doc!" Debbi called.

He popped up. "Unpronounceable!"

"What?"

"Those things." He stifled a yawn and jabbed a finger onto the page. "Their anouk names are unpronounceable according to Henshaw's Banshee Naturalist." He turned the book on the desk so Debbi could see it.

The page had a sketch of an animal that resembled a batrat and a brief paragraph of text.

"Is this all that's known?" Debbi asked.

"All I've found so far. And frankly, Henshaws not reliable. But the basics are probably correct. They live in the Toxic Jungle. They're nocturnal. They hunt by swarming."

"What are they doing here? Have they ever been here before?"

"I've never seen one."

Debbi sat down opposite the Doctor. He was close to collapse. He had been working with the multitude of wounded for hours with little success. He wore a bloody surgical gown and still had a stained latex glove on his left hand. The novelty of the medical aberrations he had seen over the last few weeks was beginning to wear very thin. He had

Clay & Susan Griffith

lost his gleeful morbidity.

Debbi asked, "How many casualties do we have?"

"So far I've seen one hundred and fifty-six dead. And about two hundred, two hundred and fifty injured. And we can assume there are more out there, lying in their homes or in the streets undiscovered. The bodies have slowed down since sunrise, but the injured have started coming in on their own. They were afraid to go out last night. And then there's always tonight, when they start swarming again."

"We're trying to do something about keeping casualties down tonight. So, what's the story with these things?"

Doc Dazy said, "Well, you've seen most of it. Their tongues have a very sharp barb on the end that they use to drill through flesh down to the bone. Then they apparently inject a substance that dissolves bone in a matter of seconds. The good news..." He laughed. "The good news is that it doesn't appear to be systemic."

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't spread throughout the body. Meaning, for instance, Boston Fitzpatrick was hit down near the wrist. And he lost both long bones in his forearm and most of his wrist bones. Although, oddly enough, most of the bones in his hand and fingers are intact, although obviously useless."

Debbi sat back, feeling queasy at the memory of the big Ranger's arm flopping like a strip of meat hitting a butcher's block.

The Doctor continued, "But the damage didn't spread to his upper arm. Of course, to be sure, I amputated above the elbow. But subsequent patients bear that out. You will lose total bone mass in the contiguous area of injection, but it doesn't seem to spread beyond that bone or, at least, its immediate neighbors. Now, if they hit you in the head or get a couple of ribs or vertebrae, well..." He trailed off.

"What about Patrick Ngoma?" Debbi asked.

"He's fine. Well, relatively fine. The creature that hit him apparently didn't strike bone. The acid dissipates in muscle tissue, although Mr. Ngoma assures me that it hurts."

Debbi felt relieved.

Doc Dazy forced himself to his feet. "If you'll excuse me, I need to get back to the ward."

"I'll send Hiro Tsukino to help you out. He's a first-class field medic."

"Only if you can spare him. I've got a few people lending a hand. Some of them have some nursing experience, or even veterinary experience will do. There's not much fancy doctoring to do in there. Mainly administering medication for pain, sawing off limbs, and pulling sheets up over people's faces." He stepped toward the door and muttered, "What did we do to deserve this?"

After he left, Debbi glanced at the book. The door to the office opened and Olivares entered followed by a technician.

"Heard you were here," Olivares said.

Debbi saw the dour face of the technician and took a deep breath. "How bad is it?"

"Bad," Olivares said. He cocked his head at the tech. "You better tell her. I'm not well-versed in mechanical engineering."

"Single syllables," she ordered. Her head was pounding.

The tech squirmed, wishing there was some way he could have pulled off a miracle and impressed the Rangers, but there wasn't. It was a disaster.

Book I: The Horror Lords

He said, "Those things blew the main transformer. It's fried. No hope of repair. We don't have the spare parts on hand."

Debbi cursed.

"Wait," Olivares said blandly. "It gets better."

The tech said, "The generator went too. Explosion cracked it all to hell. And the nearest place that could machine out new parts is Ghost Rock City."

Debbi cursed again. So now there was no way in hell of getting the lights back up before tonight. She let her head fall into her hands, forcing her tired brain to think.

"How many portable generators do we have?" she asked.

"About thirty. All over town."

"Okay, we'll set up some safe houses. Get people in a couple of centralized locations so we can guard them better. Olivares, I need you on that." She lifted her head and regarded the technician. "Do what you can. Pillage from homes, ships, I don't care. MacGyver something."

"It won't be easy," he responded. "We weren't left with much after EXFOR bugged out. Anyone with that kind of equipment is gonna guard it jealously. Particularly now. It'll cost a lot to get them to part with it."

"Then commandeer the stuff!" she snapped. "We've got profiteering laws in this town. And if we don't...we should! Just do what you need to do. I'll take it from there."

The tech nodded. "Sure."

Debbi stood up and said to Olivares, "C'mon, you want to see Ross?"

"Sure. I've got a second."

She dangled a spare com unit from a finger. "I'm going to give him this and put him back to work."

Olivares held the door for her. "Think he's up to it?"

"Hope so," Debbi said. "I need him. I'm in over my head."

Chapter 26

The call came through Debbi's comlink around midday. She was in the Ranger headquarters.

"The Reapers are at the south gate," it said with crackling, horrible simplicity.

She felt a numbness seep through her limbs.

"How many?" she asked.

"I see six," came the militiaman's reply.

"Six? Six what? Six companies?"

"Six people. And a shuttle. They're flying a white flag."

Curtiz broke in that he was near the south gate and was in route.

After a few tense minutes, his voice came over the com.

"Dallas, I make six of them all right. Looks like they want to parley." He paused, and then Debbi heard him take in a sharp breath. "Dammit! That's Nicolai."

She sent out a general call. "I want all militia on the walls and every Stallion in the air. Keep your eyes open in all directions. Curtiz, try to make radio contact and find out what they want. I'm on my way."

She heard Ross on the com. "I'm right behind you."

Debbi stepped outside the office and went to a militiaman who stood guard. "Go round up as many of the Town Council as you can and escort them to the south gate." He saluted and hurried off.

She made her way through the nearly deserted streets of town.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Those people who were out scampered quickly, their eyes in all directions. Debbi kept her own eyes peeled for batrats. She did see a few black shadows dangling under the eaves of roofs or in the dark hollows of dilapidated structures, but none were on the wing.

In fifteen minutes, she arrived at the foot of the ladder leading to the makeshift watchtower at the south gate. The gate itself was closed and barred.

She saw Ross hobbling toward her. His face was grim and his powerful stride showed hints of returning, but it still hurt to watch him. He probably hadn't slept in the last two days since she'd enlisted him to help coordinate the exterminator squads from his hospital bed. The squads were working, slowly. Casualties were decreasing, slowly. Last night, only four people died and fifteen were wounded. A small, disgusting victory at best.

Ross was still buttoning his shirt as he neared. He had garnered a new hat and another black duster from somewhere.

She didn't even try to argue with him about straining himself as he reached the base of the ladder and started climbing. The skin on his face was peeling from the sunburn. He was breathing roughly, and sweat already dotted his brow.

She said, "I sent for the Town Council."

He looked down at her with narrowed eyes. "What? Why the hell didn't you check that with me? Dammit." He shook his head in dismay and climbed to the tower.

Bristling but silent, she followed. He wasn't a man who took forced inactivity well. She chalked up his reaction to that and let it go.

In the tower, he took binoculars from Curtiz and scanned the horizon.

Half a mile away stood six men. They seemed very small and insignificant standing out on the wide, flat, rocky plain amidst the funnels of dust ripped up by the wind.

Debbi joined Curtiz and Ross. Five militiamen were on the parapets outside the confines of the tower nervously waiting. Two Night Watchmen sat in the gunner seats of a pair of heavy autocannons mounted on either side of the gate. Their eyes were glued to the sights and the guns aimed at the distant Reapers.

Curtiz said, at first to Debbi and then with an apologetic glimmer at her, to Ross, "Haven't been able to raise them. Either they can't hear. Or they won't."

Ross kept staring. There was a shuttle behind them, a converted freighter with light armament. Temptation's fleet of ten Stallions rose into the air over the city. That distant group of six men appeared to be the extent of the Reapers' contingent. The landscape stretched out flat for many miles around; there was no place for an army to hide.

Ross handed the binoculars back to Curtiz. "If he wants to talk, let's talk. Dallas." He pointed at four militiamen. "All of you come with me." Then he grabbed another's arm. "You. Get a squad and stop any Town Councilmen from coming down here. Tell them there's been an outbreak of zombies. Or batrats. Whatever. Just keep them away." He cast a severe glance at Debbi as he said the last, and then climbed stiffly down.

Debbi worked her jaw, feeling smaller under his gaze, but refusing to let him see just how much that stung.

Once on the ground, Ross and Debbi went silently through a small door next to the gate. Outside, the wind blasted them, unimpeded by walls or buildings. It was full-force Banshee wind and it nearly drove

Book I: The Horror Lords

them off their feet. As the door slammed behind them and a militiaman locked it from inside, Debbi was overcome by an unusual sense of isolation. The two Rangers started walking, followed by the terrified clutch of militiamen. There was no hint of injury in Ross's stride now.

"I'll do the talking," Ross said over the sound of the wind and their crunching footsteps.

Debbi didn't answer.

"Don't be surprised if I decide to take this guy out."

Debbi again didn't answer. Her stomach knotted. Her eyes were locked on the distant figures that slowly grew larger as she plowed through the wind and dust.

A tall man in a long, black coat waited patiently in front of the group of armored soldiers. As the Rangers came within fifty yards, he slowly moved out from his coterie. The Rangers put their hands on their guns. The Reaper troopers lifted their rifles to a ready position against their chests.

When the Rangers were fifty feet away, Nicolai made a slow and deliberate motion with both hands to open his coat and show that he was not armed. He smiled.

Ross and Debbi stopped twenty feet away from him.

And they waited.

Nicolai spoke, "Thank you for coming out."

Ross was silent.

Debbi was fascinated to hear Nicolai's voice. It had a resonant power; it cut through the wind. She'd heard so much about him. To finally hear him speak made him a real person. A real person with so much blood on his hands.

"You're Captain Ross, aren't you?" Nicolai said. "I've heard a great deal about you. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"We've met."

"Really? Where?"

"Eighty-one. The Colonial Rangers came to arrest you at Carson."

Nicolai turned up his eyes, thinking back. Then his face lightened. "Oh. I remember." He shook his head with good-natured bonhomie. "That was a near thing. You nearly had me that day."

"I lost two friends."

Nicolai nodded and took a deep, empathetic breath. "I've lost friends in this war too. We're very much alike, you and I."

Ross cut him off. "What do you want?"

Nicolai's eyes flashed with anger. He looked down to cover it. When his head came back up, he was calm. He glanced at Debbi briefly, sizing her up, and then returned to Ross.

"Very well. Down to business. I would like to talk to your political leadership. I believe you have a Town Council."

"Talk to me," Ross said.

"I have an offer of a political nature."

"Not interested."

Nicolai smiled. "Your Town Council may have a different opinion."

"They're not here."

"Perhaps you've heard," Nicolai continued, "that I have declared a Banshee Free State. I want Temptation to join. You would profit immensely from it."

"Not interested."

"I think your Town Council would be. The advantages would be great.

Clay & Susan Griffith

The burdens of survival would be shared among many. The advantages of development would be equally shared. I've heard that Temptation has lately suffered enormous hardships that have your population confused and frightened. These hardships will be alleviated by an alliance with the Banshee Free State. I guarantee that."

"Like you alleviated Ghost Rock City's hardships?" Ross said.

Nicolai shot back, "We liberated the means of production of wealth from the fossilized remnants of the colonial war machine. Ghost Rock City is thriving and happy. Its mines produce more ore now than before it joined me. I would be happy to escort you there for a tour. You can interview my new mine administrator. And he will demonstrate the new, efficient, ore-processing regime we have instituted there."

"Slavery can be real efficient."

Nicolai turned to Debbi. "Surely you wish to save your beloved city?"

Debbi remained silent.

Nicolai raised his hands, growing impassioned. "We are taking control of our destiny! Banshee will not survive any other way. In fact, isn't that what the Colonial Rangers are all about? Keeping the peace? Maintaining order? Well, there is currently no order to maintain. Everything is chaos. But under the Banshee Free State, everyone will join hands, human and anouk, to forge a new reality. The anouk will no longer raid human settlements. There will be no more need for brutal reprisals against anouk villages. With freedom from fear comes the freedom to build and develop. Families. Businesses. Friendships. We will all be united! Together! A free people! A free planet!"

Debbi looked at the ground. Her hands clenched into fists. She could hardly breathe. The thought of the irreparable harm Nicolai and the Reapers would do to the cause of a free Banshee enraged her. Even rational people would reject the notion if it became associated with the Reapers.

"You finished?" Ross calmly asked Nicolai.

Nicolai said, "Do you understand how many people you are dooming to needless deaths by refusing to do the right thing? Do you have that authority?"

"You can leave first," Ross stated, indicating the parley was at an end. "Tell your pilot that if your shuttle comes even an inch closer to Temptation, our defense batteries are under orders to shoot you down."

"Very well." Nicolai let his hands slap loudly against his thighs in defeat. "This is a fateful decision you have made this terrible day. History will condemn you for what you will bring on the people of Temptation. You will become the villain of these dark times. The city's children's children will whisper about you like a boogey man, about how you nearly destroyed Temptation. But I will be remembered ultimately as their savior."

"You try to take Temptation and the only thing you'll have in common with our Savior is you'll be dead."

Nicolai stared at Ross. "I have no interest in storming Temptation. You've delivered your town to a fate so horrible, the people will soon realize that the Reapers are the only thing that can save them."

"Stop talking and go away."

Nicolai's expression made it clear he hadn't anticipated being turned away. It left a sour taste in his mouth. He had truly expected to be welcomed with open arms. His eyes smoldered for just a moment, but then he inclined his head in resignation. He backed up until he was

Book I: The Horror Lords

among his armored troopers. Then he turned imperiously and marched away. His troopers backed away, facing Ross and Debbi all the way to their shuttle.

The Reapers filed into the ship. The door closed and the craft lifted up and gracefully slipped away.

Ross watched the Reaper shuttle disappear in the cloudless sky.

He said in a quiet voice, "That's twice I missed putting a bullet in his head."

Debbi reminded him, "You're a lawman, not an assassin."

Ross grunted, wheeled around, and started back to town. Lost in thought, he watched his feet as he walked. His limp returned. The militiamen talked among themselves.

Debbi let the militia move ahead before she asked Ross, "So what happens now?"

"Business as usual."

"You know, it might've been nice to at least see if we could've worked out some sort of deal to get our power relays repaired. He controls Ghost Rock City. We could use the lights."

"We'll find another way."

Debbi asked, "What do you think he means about our horrible fate?"

"I think he likes to hear himself talk."

"You think he's behind the zombies and the batrats and everything else?"

"Doesn't matter."

"But what if he's got something worse in the wings?"

Ross glowered at her. "Then it gets worse. What do you want to do, join this Banshee Free State and open the gates to the Reapers?"

Debbi actually missed a step at his sudden assault. Then she ground her teeth and continued, "What the hell is your problem?"

Ross shook his head and kept walking.

Debbi said, "Look, I thought it was right to alert the Town Council. They are the government here, after all!"

Ross said nothing.

His silence annoyed her. She said, more to herself, "And, to tell the truth, something like a Banshee Free State is a good idea."

Ross exhaled sharply and pointed back toward the vanishing Reaper shuttle. "Well, damn, Dallas, you just missed your ride then."

"Oh shut up!" she snapped. "Damn you! Did it ever occur to you that the world isn't black and white? No, not Dave Ross. For him, public policy comes off a wanted poster. There are good guys and bad guys. Period."

"Yep. Worked so far."

"Life's not as simple as you want it to be."

"Oh really? I didn't realize. I'm sorry. I guess I should've listened to Nicolai. He's not a murdering psychopath; he's a political theorist. I'm just too simpleminded to understand the depths of his vision. Gosh. I should've called a special session of the Town Council so those spineless nothings could cozy up to that blood-soaked son of a bitch!"

"Oh, good eye, Ross. That's exactly what I'm saying. I think the planet ought to be a better place and that it's a complicated matter, so God knows that means I support the Reapers." Her tone was bitter and pained.

Ross screwed up his face. "I don't even know what the hell you're talking about anymore."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"I'm talking about you and how you see the world. This isn't about the Reapers and Temptation. We're on the same page there, and if you don't know that, I really don't know what to tell you. This is all about peace and order, and how badly people want them. Nicolai may be a blood-soaked son of a bitch, but he is not stupid. He wants power. If he can get it through a gun, he will; but if he can get it by offering peace, he'll do that. I'm worried you think that your will and a few overworked Rangers will always be able to hold this town on your side. Temptation is not your personal property. You ought to think about what happened to Olivares. When push comes to shove, the Town Council will make the decisions, unless you're going to hold a gun to their heads. If you've got the right answer, you better convince them. Maybe you should trust them once and a while."

"Maybe you're just too naive to carry a badge."

Debbi stopped. Her lip curled into a harsh sneer. "You've got a hell of a nerve saying that to me."

He turned and jabbed his finger at her. "Don't let your mouth run away with you, Dallas! And I'm telling you now, don't ever get up on your hind legs with me like this in front of anybody in town or I'll slap you down so hard you might not want to get up. And I don't want that to happen."

"Oh yeah. There it is. Pull rank. That's your answer to everything. Well, I got news for you, Ross. One day that won't work. One day you won't be able to win just because you say you're right. And then you're going to be in trouble. Because that's the only bullet you've got in your gun."

She stormed past him and back to town.

He stood alone on the windswept plain and watched her go. His leg hurt and his ribs ached. He looked at Temptation looming up in front. It was a sad sight. Broken and harried, the town was nothing like it had been in its heyday. It was held together with only spit and baling wire and sheer willpower. He had pledged his loyalty to it and thought that would be enough. Now, he wasn't sure.

He took a long, halting breath. In the sharp acrid dust, he could smell the faint odor of heavy rain in the distant mountains.

He loved this place. It had been his home for many years, along with the harsh prairies and mountains of Banshee. He'd do anything to protect it. Over the long years, his authority had been questioned frequently, and the questions were usually answered with a strong fist or a fast gun. But at least there had always been an underlying sense of rightful authority.

It was different now. Life teetered on the edge of becoming an endless cycle of violence that could only be contained by more violence. And that just wasn't good enough. Debbi was right; most everyone wanted peace. Humans and anouks. Ross had always taken pride in the idea that his job was providing peace. Now, he wasn't sure.

After the chaos and horror of the last few weeks, he was starting to have doubts about his ability to maintain basic order in his town. That was exactly why Ross knew he needed to keep the Town Council from hearing Nicolai's offer. As sure as he was breathing, if the politicians thought there was even a chance Nicolai could end the town's parade of misfortunes, they'd roll out the red carpet for him and their fate would be sealed. Debbi couldn't know them the way Ross did.

Ross smiled at the thought of Debbi's passionate temper. She was the

Book I: The Horror Lords

only Ranger that stood up to him like that. Ross had few real passions of his own and he normally found them annoying and destructive in others, but in her they had a fire and purity that broke through his staid outlook. She was smart and perceptive; he liked to watch her mind work, even when it was working against him. Of course, it also could have been the angry flare of her nostrils, the animated flash in her eyes, or the color that rushed to her cheeks when she argued. It was seductive to have the power to create such an intense reaction in a woman like her.

He knew Debbi had only the best intentions. She was young and ambitious with big dreams for Temptation and Banshee. And she was right that eventually something would have to be done to fill the political vacuum created by the UN's departure and to create a new future for Banshee. Dinosaurs like Ross would have little role to play in that future except as glorified traffic cops.

But that future wasn't today.

Ross pushed the door open and went back inside the walls. She'd see it his way when she calmed down.

Chapter 27

The door to the Ranger office opened and slammed shut. Ahmed ibn Sharif stood panting with his back pressed against the door. He carried a long, bloody sword in his hand.

Ross sat shuffling papers in annoyance. He stood up at the caravan master's entrance, hoping for something to take him away from the desk.

"I just came from the Depot." Sharif uncovered his face that was still draped in fear. "What is happening in this town? It's bad enough zombies are milling around outside the walls, but what are those flying things?" He held up the bloody sword.

"Sit down before you fall down." Ross slid an empty chair around in front of the desk. "They're from the Toxic Jungle. We're infested. Sun's going down, so they're coming out. You didn't get bitten, did you?"

"No. Why? Are they poisonous?"

"Yeah. Real poisonous."

"If they are from the Toxic Jungle, why are they here?"

"That's a good question. You remember how bad things were here when you left before? Well, they're worse."

"So I understand. The word on the trail is Temptation is quarantined. No caravan will stop here. I had to leave mine to come here."

"I know. We haven't had a caravan through here in nearly a week. We've been eking by with what we get from freelance freighter pilots. But even they're starting to avoid us now." Ross pulled a bottle and glass from the desk drawer and poured a drink. He made no offer to Sharif who didn't use alcoholic spirits. "We're rationing food. The power station is down so we're running on generators and ghost rock oil. But we're running out of fuel. So we're rationing that. The water treatment station is already running half-speed. So we're rationing water too."

Sharif said, "I have some goods I can slip to you. It won't be much. I can't bring my whole team in here or I will be barred elsewhere."

"I'd appreciate anything you can do, Sharif."

"Of course. I actually came to deliver news, but it seems superfluous now. Do you recall Charlie Newcomb?"

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Yeah. The algae farmer." Ross took a drink. "I am a little busy to mediate right of way squabbles."

Sharif leaned on his sword. "Newcomb's dead. His farm has been wiped out."

That got Ross's attention. "What happened?"

"I am not sure. We passed through two days ago heading south. His spread was torn apart."

"Did you find Newcomb?"

"Parts of him. I hate to say it, but it looked like a Skinny got them."

Ross purposefully kept his face blank despite the sense of dread that swept over him at the mention of a Skinny. He flipped a few papers on his desk. "That's just great."

Sharif continued, "I wanted to report it because of the history I've had with him. I want it known that I had nothing to do with it."

Ross shrugged. "I wouldn't suspect you, Sharif. Anything else?"

Sharif considered. "Yes. I saw some odd vehicles in the distance."

"What kind of vehicles?"

"Old-style wheeled trucks. They were moving southeast. Their tracks came out of the Red River Valley and through Newcomb's spread."

"Reapers?" Ross asked with new interest.

"They had no markings. But they were carrying a strange cargo." Sharif paused. "It appeared to be dead bodies."

Ross sat up straight. "Dead bodies?"

"Yes. Several truckloads of them." Sharif reached into his robes and brought out an object that he tossed on the desk. "And I found this."

A bite-guard facemask used on dangerous lunatics wobbled across Ross's desk.

The crimson waters of the Red River flowed without heed as Ross and Reuben Olivares looked down at the distant ruins of the algae farm. The shacks had been burned. Drying beds were wrecked and the wet pans were dry. The remains of several bodies were visible, already picked of flesh by Banshee's vigorous scavenger population.

Ross and Olivares were ensconced on a high butte a mile away from the wreckage of Newcomb's farm. They had been camped there for a day and a half and had watched a line of three trucks pass through the farm and roll into the valley over a day ago. Now the Rangers waited for the convoy to return so they could follow it in a Stallion.

Ross poured Olivares a cup of coffee as they settled around a small fire. The Ranger from New Hope was up to speed on what Ross and Debbi had experienced in the Red River Valley, at least as much as Debbi had told Ross. He had also imparted information on the black guns to Olivares. Both of them had black guns attached to their pulse rifles. Ross felt a little guilty about being out while Temptation was still having trouble. But the situation in town was coming under control. And this wasn't a pleasure trip; it may well hold the answer to Temptation's woes.

Olivares offered Ross a cigarette. He passed; he hadn't smoked in many years although nothing brought back the longing like a quiet evening around a campfire.

Olivares lit up and tossed the smoldering twig back into the fire. "So you think the Reapers are up to something out here? And it has to do with what's going on in Temptation?"

Book I: The Horror Lords

"Yeah, that's the best I can figure. Nicolai all but said he caused the troubles in Temptation. Now, he could've been lying. But I haven't heard any noise about anybody else making trouble on a large scale."

"How's it possible the Reapers are responsible for the kind of stuff you've been seeing? Undead. Weird creatures."

"Skinny magic probably. The Reapers have always had some working with them. The Skinnies are responsible for Peck calling that worhul. So I don't see why they couldn't infest us with batrats. And reanimate the dead."

"Really?"

"Hell, yes. What isn't *really* around here? We don't know everything those freaks can do. It would explain the late General Quantrill being out here." Ross sipped coffee. "I don't care where it leads. I just plan on getting some answers."

Olivares lay back against a rock and stared up at the dusk sky. "You know, Dave, if we'd have gotten Nicolai at Carson, all this might be different."

"Could be. Might be worse."

"I miss ol' Jesse Coltrane. You always knew where you stood with him. I mean, he always had some of those anouk lovers working for him, but basically you knew Coltrane was a thief and if you had what he wanted, he'd kill you for it. Nicolai's different. He seems to believe the crap he spews out about oppression and liberation. And he makes the Reapers believe it too. You never know which way he's going to jump."

Ross shrugged. "One's the same as the other. It doesn't matter what color a mad dog's coat is."

"I heard weird rumors about Coltrane going off to learn Skinny magic."

"Yeah. I heard that too. If it's true, I hope the Skinnies killed him and ate him."

Olivares chuckled. "This time next year you figure the Reapers'll be running this planet?"

Ross huffed. "I'm not sure they aren't running it now."

"What'll you do if Temptation joins up with Nicolai and this Banshee Free State?"

"I don't know." Ross stood up and tossed the remnants of his coffee on the fire. "Maybe I'll find some anouks that'll take me in and become a shepherd."

"That's easy for you." Olivares laughed. "You speak some anouk."

"Little bit."

Olivares blew out a long trail of smoke into the sky. "I'm thinking of joining EXFOR."

"Oh, come on, Reuben. You gonna live the rest of your life on a space station?" Ross found it hard to believe that a hardened Ranger like Olivares was talking about packing it. He had thought his old friend would be the last to cave in.

"Better than spending the rest of my life running from the Reapers." Olivares replied quietly. "Sometimes a man gets tired of running."

Ross studied his companion across the fire. In the orange glow, Olivares looked older, though they were practically the same age. Ross wondered if he appeared as beaten down to others.

He pulled out an algae bar and listlessly chewed on it. The surface of the distant, slow-running river was pockmarked with windblown white caps. A small herd of wild barkas paused to drink at the river's edge.

Clay & Susan Griffith

They were large creatures with bad eyes and short tempers. They reminded Ross of feral longhorns back home. Barkas also had long dangerous horns on their heads along with sharp, short horns on their snouts, and their knobby legs and hooved feet allowed them to run swiftly over rough desert terrain. Their meat was a little gamy, Ross remembered, but not too bad with enough booze.

The thought of food drifted together with the sight of a sunset over rugged buttes and the meandering sparkle of the river to remind Ross of home. He thought of picnics by the stream in the heat of summer. Chicken and potato salad and cold iced tea. The sound of ice on glass and her laugh and the burble of water and cicadas chirping in the sluggish air. Her red hair against the bluish wildflowers.

Ross felt the old pain that was so familiar it was like a friend. But he realized it had been a few days since he last felt it. A few days without thinking of her. That seemed impossible. She used to be the first thought every slow morning and the last every endless night.

Suddenly, the barkas' heads went up as one. They trumpeted as the herd turned and roared off into the desert.

Ross lifted binoculars to his eyes.

Olivares stared at the glowing ember of his cigarette. "Do you remember when you thought being a Colonial Ranger meant something?"

"Yep. This morning."

Olivares's moroseness was growing irksome. There was a time for moping, and there was a time for getting back to work. Ross wished he had brought Debbi along.

Ross caught sight of something moving in the distance. He drew into focus three heavy vehicles rolling alongside the Red River, moving out of the valley. Even in the dusk, Ross saw cadavers stacked like cordwood in the back of the trucks. Arms and legs were visible, protruding sickeningly from the tarp-covered truck beds. Patients in torn, stained whites drove the trucks.

"Holy God," Olivares murmured from beside Ross. He lowered his own binoculars. "You Temptation boys sure have some unique law enforcement problems."

"We've got some openings if you think you're up for it." Ross headed for the Stallion.

"Maybe."

"Let's saddle up and hit the trail."

"That's the Lupinz Sanitarium."

Ross and Olivares watched the distant trucks moving through the gates into the Sanitarium grounds. As the last truck rolled past, a tall man in black swung the gate closed and locked it. It was Dr. Lupinz.

The Lupinz Sanitarium was a sprawling mansion that crouched on the exposed crest of a lightly forested hilltop. Scraggly trees permanently bent by the wind vibrated in a pale silver starlight patina. The wind blasted the Victorian house and threatened to tear loose its wretched boards and inappropriate gingerbread trim.

The house, it was said, had been brought piece by piece from Earth by a senior executive of Hellstromme Industries who resented his assignment to this hellish planet. He therefore demanded that his new home be better than that of any other colonist and grander than

Book I: The Horror Lords

anything he would have had on Earth. His reconstructed mansion on the hill did little to comfort the displaced man's nerves. The executive spent his time wandering night after night through the empty corridors of his creaking house while the winds of Banshee screamed outside, rattling the windows, sliding under the poorly hung doors, and plunging down the many chimneys. He would crouch in the dim glow of an expensive subspace communications set listening to the tinny sounds of random Earth signals that drizzled into the Faraway System through the Tunnel. The executive eventually went mad and became the first patient when his own house was turned into an asylum for the insane.

The grounds surrounding the Sanitarium were several acres of rocky, bare earth enclosed by a fifteen-foot fence topped with razor wire. Powerful searchlights on the fence swept out the dim grounds, ostensibly to prevent inmates from escaping.

"Damn it," Ross said. "Dallas sent Tsukino out here and he came back and told us Lupinz was clean."

"You think Lupinz is in league with Nicolai?"

"I don't know."

Ross swung the Stallion down into a crevasse not far from the Sanitarium. He and Olivares armed up and grabbed some supplies. They hiked through scrubby forestland and approached the lunatic asylum from the rear. They hunkered down behind some rocks to study the sprawling mansion inside its fenced grounds.

They could make out at least twenty patients wandering aimlessly around the property. Many of them were straightjacketed like the people Debbi and Ross had encountered at Red River. They seemed to come and go as they pleased in the mansion. There were also veritable herds of stray cats wandering the grounds. The patients stayed well away from them.

The three trucks were parked behind the west wing of the asylum. Their cargo had already been unloaded. Beyond the vehicles, the Rangers could see open double-doors leading down into what would have been a cellar in a normal home. God knows what was in that place.

Olivares said, "There must've been a couple of hundred corpses in those trucks. What is Lupinz doing in there?"

"We'll find out when it gets dark." Ross looked at his watch. He nestled down against the rocks and closed his eyes as if taking a nap under a chestnut tree after a church picnic.

"We're going in there? After dark?"

"No. *I'm* going in there. You're staying out here in case I don't come back. Then you get the Rangers and rip this place apart. Now shut up so I can get a couple of hours sleep."

Precisely two hours later, Ross's eyes snapped open. The sky was dark; neither of Banshee's moons had risen yet. The wind was howling. Olivares had been on watch, but now he slid back down toward their camp. Ross scrambled through the supply kit he brought from the Stallion. He grabbed a powerful penlight and a small pair of wire cutters.

"This oughta do it." He and Olivares consulted their watches. "Give me an hour."

"Have fun. I'll be thinking of you."

Ross vaulted over the rocks and made for the fence in a running crouch. None of the searchlights were burning. Perhaps the generator

Clay & Susan Griffith

was down.

Ross saw movement inside the grounds and halted. He hugged the dirt as a yellow, glowing oil lamp bobbed into view around the corner of the asylum. A lone patient wandered the grounds swinging the lantern and whistling, which was barely audible in the wind. Ross bided his time impatiently as the man strolled around the trucks. The inmate stopped and peered into the open cellar doors. A faint light glowed from inside. Then he walked on, around the asylum and out of sight.

Ross was up and running for the perimeter. He slung his rifle and gently tossed the metal wire cutters against the chain fence. No spark. The voltage was off. He immediately climbed. At the top, he used the cutters to snip a break through the razor wire. He took his rifle and carefully pushed away the wire, then slipped through without getting cut. The tired Ranger climbed down a foot or two on the inside and dropped to the ground.

Pausing to catch his breath, he listened. Silence. A cat sat silently in the dark watching him through slitted eyes without apparent interest.

There was no cover to exploit inside the fence. He ran straight for the trucks two hundred feet away and came in low behind the outside truck. It smelled of death.

He crawled between the trucks and rolled under the middle one. From a position between the front wheels, he could see into the cellar doors and down the ceiling of a long stone hallway. There were dim electric lights spaced every twenty feet and they were burning, so the generator obviously was working. He crawled forward on his belly until he was at the doors. Fifteen steps led down to a corridor. The hallway stretched about fifty feet under the asylum with one heavy wooden door on each wall. At the far end, the corridor branched into a "T" with double doors directly ahead. Ross listened, but heard nothing. Another cat sat on the steps washing its belly. It paused to eye Ross, and then returned to bathing.

Ross scrambled to his feet and was off down the corridor. At the T-junction, he slid an eye to the corner and looked left. That corridor vanished into darkness. He looked right and saw a thick wood and steel door twenty feet away. The double doors straight ahead had small windows. He stepped across the intersection and looked through the windows.

Inside was a massive warehouse-sized chamber. He couldn't see the full size of the room because the only light came from the windows where he stood. He saw men and women standing with their backs to him, row after row vanishing into the darkness. Their clothes were torn and filthy. They stood as still as statues.

Ross heard a clatter from the heavy door to his right. He darted back down the main corridor. A heavy key turned in a distant lock and a massive door swung on its noisy hinges. Multiple footsteps emerged into the corridor.

Ross grabbed the door handle nearest him. The door swung open sending a cat scurrying, and he slipped into the dim room. He gently pulled the door closed behind him and was instantly overwhelmed by the stench. The room was pitch black. He pulled out the penlight and clicked it on. The circle of light played over a pile of cadavers. They were stacked in an orderly, efficient crosshatched fashion. The bottom layer of about twenty-five bodies was laid in one direction and the second, smaller layer in the other, and so on, up for at least ten layers.

Book I: The Horror Lords

Ross stared at the grotesque sight in amazement.

As he swung the light around him, he saw more stacks of corpses. They stretched out as far as his beam of light carried. The room was immense, taking in at least half the length of the foundation of the sprawling mansion above. And it was full of pyramids of dead bodies.

The door handle rattled just behind him.

He killed his light and dove behind the nearest stack of corpses. He held his breath. The door opened and the entranceway was flooded with wavering lamp light. Ross heard steps on the cold, stone floor. There was also a tinny, jingling noise that he recognized as the sound of loose buckles on straight jackets.

The jingling came closer.

Ross gripped his rifle and eased his finger into the trigger guard. The tinkling buckle was just on the other side of the pyramid of cadavers. He lifted the barrel of his gun to catch whoever stepped around the corner. The jingling stopped.

Something grabbed his neck from behind.

Ross surged up and swung his elbow roundhouse, catching somebody solid in the chest. The sudden movement caused him to lose his footing in a congealed puddle of ichor. His momentum propelled him and the other person into the pyramid of dead. The structure gave way and began a sloppy, rubbery collapse. The bodies were cold, wet, and pliable. Ross felt clammy flesh all over him as uncontrolled arms, legs, and torsos pummeled him to the ground. An avalanche of rotting bodies buried him.

Dave Ross couldn't move. He flexed his fingers, but didn't feel his rifle. He concentrated on shifting his leg. The pain from his recent injuries lanced through him. He took stiff, quick breaths. The air around him was fetid. Putrid flesh pressed against his face.

Suddenly, light appeared. Leering eyes peered down at him. The weight of the bodies shifted off. Just as he could move his arm, strong hands grabbed him. Two lunatics dragged him out of the pile of corpses. Before he was even set on his feet, he was reaching for his pistol.

A searing pain spiked the rear of his head. His eyes blurred and he wanted to throw up. His fingers stiffened with rigor. He couldn't do anything but breathe, and he could barely do that. He thought of Olivares taking the Stallion back to Temptation to tell Debbi that he was dead. It was an odd thought to have. His knees buckled and the lunatics let him drop to the hard floor.

Military boots caked in red mud appeared in front of his helpless eyes.

"Captain Ross," a voice said. "Dave Ross of the Colonial Rangers."

Ross agonizingly twisted his head to see.

A red haze filled his vision. General Quantrill looked down through it. His face was decayed with several molars showing through a gap in his cheek. A faithful lunatic stooped behind him holding a lantern near Ross's face.

Quantrill said, "Good thing I recognized you before I killed you." He waved an easy hand in Ross's direction.

Ross instantly felt the pain slacken. His body drooped flaccidly. The Ranger couldn't speak or move.

Quantrill regarded a nearby inmate. "Put him in a room. Restraints won't be necessary. But make sure you take his weapons. And then get

Clay & Susan Griffith

someone to clean up this mess.”

Amidst cackling laughter, rough hands grabbed Ross's arms and pulled him over the sprawled bodies out the door into the corridor. He saw Quantrill watching him curiously as the inmates dragged him away.

Chapter 28

“Help us. They're killing everyone.”

“That's all they said?”

Curtiz nodded. He fiddled with knobs on the radio console and pressed the headset earphones to one ear.

“Nothing but static now. It was low gain. I barely picked it up.” He shrugged. “I'm not as good with this equipment as Ringo.”

Debbi leaned against the table and looked at the Rangers' main transceiver. She and Curtiz were in the radio shack on the roof of the headquarters. The door was open. She heard the sound of the emergency generator humming outside. Bright sunshine poured in and the whipping wind kept down the stench of death. Her eyes wandered to the dark stain on the floor that marked the spot where Cass had fallen.

“And you're sure of the location?” Debbi asked abruptly.

“Well, I couldn't triangulate it. But I'm sure they said New Hope.”

Debbi bit her lower lip in concentration. She wished Ross were back from Newcomb's farm. Attempts to call his Stallion had failed, but that wasn't a reason for alarm yet given the distance and the temperamental state of those ships' systems.

A few days ago Stew told Olivares that she was in charge. And nobody argued about it. It was time to put up or shut up.

She took a nervous breath. “I'll head over to New Hope and check it out.”

Curtiz asked, “You want to partner up?”

“No. With Ross and Olivares gone, Fitz down, Ngoma hurt, and Cass gone, I need everybody in town to keep the exterminator squads going.”

“All right. I'll get a Hoss saddled up for you.”

“No. I want all the Stallions here too.” In case the Reapers return, she left unsaid. “I'll catch a ride.”

“So we're flying into a Reaper stronghold? Is that what you're telling me?” Hickok shook her head with a sour look. “Because I got to tell you, that doesn't sound good to me.”

Debbi studied the control panel of the *Deadwood*. Watching Hickok fly distracted her from thoughts of what she might find in New Hope. Hickok gripped the yoke with one hand while her other flashed over toggles and touch pads. The pilot wasn't even paying attention, but she flew the ship as soundly as a virtuoso pianist playing a familiar Mozart sonata.

“Are you listening to me, Dallas?” Hickok asked.

“Yeah, yeah. Reapers. New Hope joined the Banshee Free State, so we can assume the Reapers are there in force. What do you care? They're your pals.”

“I don't usually have a Colonial Ranger in my vessel when I drop by. What do you think you can do against a town full of Reapers anyway?”

“Beats me,” Debbi said. “They called for help. I'm going to help.” She

Book I: The Horror Lords

leaned on her fist and stared out into the dusk sky.

Hickok looked over at Debbi. She had known from the time Debbi had threatened her in the saloon that this Ranger had a toughness in her, more than Debbi even realized. The best never knew they were tough. It wasn't just an image; they didn't cultivate it. They just were. Ross was like that, although sometimes Hickok suspected he was playing up the strong, silent bit. But Debbi was a complete natural. Her fire was probably born of sadness or loss; there was something hard buried down there that she was trying to forget or to live with.

Even now, streaking headlong into an unknown and dangerous situation, her eyes didn't show fear. Hickok could see from the way Debbi unconsciously dug at her fingernails that she was nervous. But nothing showed in her face. Hickok admired that.

Hickok had been about Debbi's age when she came to Banshee and started flying UN Green Dragon dropships during the Anouk Wars. She flew a lot of heavily armed young EXFOR troopers into anouk villages and then picked them up again after the massacres. It got bad.

But the Skinnies were the worst. There was a line that even war shouldn't cross so that the combatants can at least retain their souls. When the Skinnies came and EXFOR answered with the Syker Legion, the war on Banshee moved so far beyond the line, it wasn't even a memory for those involved.

Debbi's voice broke her from her reverie. "You call this ship *Deadwood Two*?"

"Yeah."

"Was there a *Deadwood One*?"

"Yeah."

"What happened to it?"

"It's not important." Hickok paused. "But on moonless nights, you can still see the fireball in the northern sky." The pilot winked and went back to her business.

"What's that?" Debbi gestured to a blinking light on the console.

"New Hope coming up." Hickok tapped a readout panel. "Good. No fighters in the air. I'll take us down outside their scanner range. You ever been to New Hope?"

"No."

"Then how are you going to find your way around? Look, I'll take you to a place I know where you can scope the joint out. Give you the lay of the land. But that's it. You're on your own after that."

Hickok brought the *Deadwood* down on a wide, white, barren flat and she went out to secure a camo-net over the ship. They checked their packs, and then the Ranger and the pilot left the ship to hike across the salt flat. It was a stunningly bright night. Banshee's dual moons both glowed bright in the sky. The two women stood out in sharp relief against the white ground. Despite the fact that it was night, they both wore shaded goggles against the glare.

After two hours of hiking, Debbi scanned through binoculars and saw the faint outline of the adobe walls and buildings of New Hope a mile and a half away. New Hope was much smaller than Temptation, but it was a similar structural mishmash with a mixture of prefab polymetal buildings surrounded by squat homes and huts made of native adobe. It was basically a crossroads, a salt station, and a caravan stop. Gigantic silos full of salt took up a third of the space inside the walls.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Debbi saw no lights burning in the town. She could detect no activity of any kind. The town offered a sinister prospect squatting dark and silent in the middle of the desert.

She extended the aerial on a mobile transceiver and adjusted the frequency. Homing in on the beacon, she sent a click response and waited. After a minute, Debbi sent the click response again.

The reply was a weak voice. "Identify yourself."

"I am Colonial Ranger Debbi Dallas from Temptation. I am responding to a distress call sent on this frequency eight hours ago. Over."

There was a long static-filled silence.

Finally the voice came back. "Thank God. We're all that's left. The whole town is dead. There're only a few of us. Help us. Get us out before we're killed too."

"Are the Reapers still in New Hope? Over."

"I don't know. We've been hiding for two days since the killing started. I don't know what happened out there."

Debbi asked, "What is your location? Over."

"We're hiding in a storm-cellar under a saloon called the *Salt Pan*. Please hurry!"

"I'm on my way. Stick tight. Out." Debbi turned to Hickok. "Will you wait here and monitor the radio?"

Hickok impulsively said, "Or I could come with you. I know the *Salt Pan*. I've been in that stinking hole before. Plus, an extra gun wouldn't hurt."

That took Debbi by surprise. She hadn't expected Hickok to behave so selflessly. But she wasn't willing to contest it either. Another gun certainly would be welcome.

They started toward New Hope across the windy flats. As they came closer, they saw the gate standing open. The dark town waited inside.

Debbi hefted her Hellrazor. Hickok pulled her heavy autopistol. They entered the gate, one at a time, covering each other. A dust cloud blew out, revealing objects littering the town.

Dead bodies were everywhere.

Debbi held up her hand for Hickok to stay put. She slipped along the side of a building and knelt next to a dead woman. The body was completely intact; there was no blood, no apparent bullet or slashing wounds, and no sign of physical damage. The dead woman's eyes were open and her mouth was stretched wide in a scream of rigor.

Debbi suppressed a cry in her throat. A few feet from the woman was the body of a small girl, about twelve years old. The youngster's face was frozen just like the woman.

Debbi's eyes burned as she looked up to study her surroundings. She longed for a Reaper to kill, but she saw nothing moving. The town itself was untouched, nothing burned or blown apart. There were no signs of looting and pillaging. Vehicles sat undisturbed. She saw a man sprawled with one leg in the cab of a truck as if he'd been struck down while stepping from his vehicle. A dog lay still in the middle of the street, its fur ruffled by the wind.

She motioned Hickok forward. When the pilot's eyes locked on the little girl, she froze in place. Her mouth hung open and she slowly stood fully erect.

Debbi grabbed her and tried to pull her lower. Hickok fought; she didn't want to be any closer to the small body. Debbi relented and stood too, pushing Hickok away from the dead mother and daughter and into

Book I: The Horror Lords

an alley between adobe buildings.

"Where's the saloon?" Debbi asked immediately.

"What happened to them?" Hickok was still looking in the direction of the bodies, although they were no longer visible.

"I don't know. Where's the saloon?"

"They just killed a little girl." Hickok was flooded by images of human children killed in anouk raids and anouk children lying dead in smoldering villages as she dusted off Syker Legionnaires after another successful engagement. "This damn planet! Damn it!"

Debbi grabbed Hickok and shook her. "Yes, they killed a little girl. There's nothing we can do for her. But we can help those people in the saloon. I need your help to do it. We've got to go now. Now!"

Hickok gathered herself. "Uh...the *Salt Pan* is about two blocks down and over one. Down by the silos." She stuck out a thumb for direction. "That way."

"Can we get there through the alleys? So we can stay off the main streets?"

"I don't...yeah, probably."

Debbi took Hickok by the arm and led her farther up the alley. They came to the back edge of the building.

The sound of thunder rolled across the sky.

Debbi looked up. The night sky was clear. Both moons shone brightly, not a sign of a cloud. The last thing she needed was a sudden rainstorm. Flash floods on this desert were not common, but when they came they were savage.

She and Hickok cut across an open lot. To their left, they saw a lightning flash followed by a harsh crack. It hit close, just outside the walls.

Hickok stopped and stared. Debbi ran on a few steps before realizing she was alone. She came back to Hickok.

"What? Did you see something?" she asked.

The Chinese woman watched the distant skies. "That's not lightning."

"Come on, let's go." Debbi grabbed the pilot's arm. Perhaps it would've been better if she had stayed with her ship. Debbi had figured Hickok to be made of stronger stuff.

Finally, they came to an opening onto a main street littered with corpses. Behind the row of structures across the street rose a line of massive cylindrical salt tanks, gleaming in the moonlight.

Debbi saw a small, windowless, prefab dome across the street with a cheap, handmade sign over the door—"Salt Pan." She glanced left and right again.

"Cover me," she said to Hickok.

The pilot nodded and raised her gun. Debbi scrambled low across the street, leaped over a dead man, and hit with her back beside the saloon's double doors. She studied the street, saw nothing, and then waved Hickok across.

When Hickok was beside Debbi, the Ranger pointed to the door. Hickok nodded again. Debbi turned, checked the doors to the saloon, found them unlocked, and shoved them open. She rushed through, rolled, and came up with her rifle ready.

There was no movement. No sound. The saloon was empty, nothing but scattered tables and chairs and a makeshift bar at the rear of the dome.

Debbi returned to the door for Hickok. When she did, she saw some-

Clay & Susan Griffith

one moving in the street. A man staggered around the corner to her left. He wasn't armed; he didn't appear to be a Reaper. His face was turned upward as he stumbled down the center of the street.

Thunder shook the building.

Debbi made a move toward the man in the street. Hickok stopped her.

"Don't." Hickok's eyes were wide with fear. "Don't go out there."

"That man needs help."

Another peal of thunder rattled.

"Get inside!" Hickok pushed Debbi back into the saloon.

"What is wrong with you?" Debbi tried to get around the panicking woman.

"No! Stay here!"

Debbi fought her way back to the door just as a bolt of greenish lightning struck at the far end of the street to her right. It hit the ground with an ear-splitting snap and a bright flash that splattered whiteness in her eyes. Instead of dissipating, the lightning remained rooted to the ground like a living column of light. Then it moved. It slammed past the saloon, gouging a ragged canal in the street.

The man was briefly encased in the white-hot streak. The lightning vanished. The man was gone, obliterated from the spot as if he'd never been there.

Debbi stood stunned in the doorway.

Hickok pulled the Ranger inside and closed the doors. When she faced Debbi again, the pilot's face had settled into terrified acceptance.

"It's what I thought," Hickok said. "We're not getting out of here alive."

Chapter 29

"There's a Skinny here."

Hickok's statement didn't register on Debbi at first. She was still thinking about the man she had just seen incinerated by a bolt of lightning.

"I knew it when I saw the green lightning." Hickok's voice trembled. "They used it against us in the war. And all those dead people outside, they've had their brains fried by a Skinny."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Hickok recovered some of her calm. "I saw all of this on too many battlefields."

Debbi tried to remember everything she knew about Skinnies, anything that might help. They were thought to be weird forms of anouk that served as witchdoctors. They were said to be fantastically powerful. As the Anouk Wars dragged on, her father became almost afraid to talk about them out loud.

Debbi said, "Skinnies are like sykers, aren't they? They don't have the power to make lightning."

"They have the power to do anything. I once saw a single Skinny destroy two battalions of UN regulars."

"What can we do to stop them?"

"Nothing."

"Well, how about we try." Debbi's irritation was plain as she used the butt of her pulse rifle to pound a standard EXFOR all-clear code on the floor. She waited thirty seconds and then repeated the code.

Near the bar, a section of the seamless polysteel floor quivered. Then a square appeared and a trap door flew open. A man's head popped up.

Book I: The Horror Lords

He stared at Debbi like a stunned animal.

Debbi asked, "Are you all right? Do you have injured down there?"

"Are you the Colonial Ranger?" the man asked.

"Yes," she replied.

He climbed out of the trap door and then reached down to help a woman who carried an infant. Debbi groaned aloud before she could stop herself. Four more adults, three women and a man, and two adolescents, a boy and girl, emerged from the cellar.

Debbi approached the bar, placing her elbows on it, next to where Hickok poured a drink. She said with soft despair, "Nine people to save."

"Ten." Hickok met Debbi's inquiring eyes and bobbed her head forward.

Debbi looked over her shoulder and saw another man climbing from the trapdoor. He was black, very tall, and bald. He wore clothes that were little more than rags. He stared straight ahead, eyes wide and glazed with a hint of pain. The broken figure walked gingerly, his hands outstretched, as if he was blind and was trying to keep from bumping into the furniture.

"Syker," Hickok whispered.

The man who had been first out of the hatch stepped up to Debbi and stretched out his hand. "Name's Luke Bolley. I reckon we're all that's left of New Hope."

Debbi shook his hand. "We need to get moving, Mr. Bolley. Is everyone here fit to travel?"

"I think so. No one is injured. We made it to the storm cellar before the killing reached this side of town. This is my saloon." He glanced at Hickok as she let out a low sigh when the whiskey slid down smooth. "That drink's on the house."

"Appreciate it." Hickok stared evenly at Bolley. Then she poured another and sarcastically tipped the shot glass at him. "You can put this one on my tab."

"Is he blind?" Debbi indicated the syker.

"I'm not blind," the syker said. "I am hiding us. It takes a lot of concentration."

"Then you know what happened here?" Debbi asked.

"Yes." The syker stared straight ahead. His concentration was focused elsewhere. His face was covered with beads of sweat. "There's a Skinny out there. I am trying to protect these people by blocking his probes. So far, it's worked. But I sensed his presence nearby just a moment ago."

"He used his powers to kill a man on the street just outside."

"He must've felt you two, but interpreted your signals to be the man on the street. You were lucky. You won't be again."

Debbi asked, "Can you protect these people until I can get all of you out of town?"

"I'm getting weaker. He's getting stronger."

"Then let's go." Debbi gathered everyone together and announced they were leaving immediately. "Everyone stay quiet and stay together."

She crossed to the door and cracked it open. The street was empty of the living and still bathed in brilliant moonlight. She slipped outside and held the door. The townsfolk filed out, peering side to side. The syker followed with Bolley holding his arm and leading him. Hickok came last.

Debbi guarded the street in one direction and Hickok watched the other while the civilians crossed and moved into the alley. Their foot-

Clay & Susan Griffith

falls seemed frighteningly loud. Debbi took the lead as they threaded their way quickly through junk-strewn lanes.

Finally they reached an alley to the main street just fifty feet from the gate. Debbi halted the procession. She signaled them to stay quiet and slipped to the head of the alley. The wind was still kicking dust around the dead bodies; she saw the dead woman and child again.

A Skinny stood in the gateway.

Debbi ducked back instinctively and froze. Then she slowly inched one eye around the corner.

She had never seen a real Skinny before. It was impressive and horrifying at the same time.

The tall creature stood unmoving. His skull-like face was impassive; his eyes putrid green slits. The wind whistled around him, whipping his tunic frantically. She noted a species similarity to Martool and her brethren with his prominent clawed-toe and the bony spike protruding from each elbow. But this thing was not an anouk. Martool's people, even full of aggression and distrust, had a humanity about them. This creature had none.

The Skinny didn't seem to notice her. Or, if he did, he made no motion toward her.

She slipped back to the group and crouched in front of the syker.

"He's at the gate," Debbi said. "What can we do?"

The syker didn't hear her. He was lost in concentration. His lips were pressed together so tight they quivered. The muscles of his jaw vibrated from strain. The bald man's eyes flared with distant focus. The proximity of the Skinny threatened to overwhelm him.

Debbi knew scaling the walls was impossible with the children and a nearly comatose syker. The gate was the only option, and there was only the one.

She turned to Bolley. "I'm going to distract the Skinny and pull him away from the gate. When you get an opening, move! Hickok there can lead you to her ship."

"What about you?"

"Don't worry, I'll be along." She scuttled over to Hickok, whose eyes were distant. "Listen up. I'm counting on you to get these people back to your ship and safely to Temptation. It's up to you. Do you understand? They're all depending on you."

"Yes."

"Good. And...if I don't get out, keep an eye on Ross for me. Will you...?" Debbi hesitated and then continued quickly, disconcerted that these were her thoughts at the moment. "He has a lot of respect for you and he needs someone he respects to kick his ass every now and then."

That broke Hickok's funk. She bobbed her head slightly, stared at Debbi with sad eyes, and mumbled, "Yeah. No problem."

"See you at the *Deadwood*." Debbi moved past Hickok.

Running behind an adobe building, Debbi clambered over a fence and sidled back up to the main street. She didn't pause to let herself think about what she was doing. She counted to three and sprinted out into the open, staring only at the alley on the far side of the street. Slipping into it, she stopped and turned back to look at the gate.

The Skinny was gone.

Damn it, she thought. How fast is he?

Debbi warily stepped into the street, rifle up, searching. Out of the corner of her eye she suddenly glimpsed the Skinny on the move. He

Book I: The Horror Lords

extended his hand at her. In the same instant she fell back into the alley, the corner of the building exploded. She landed hard on her back as rubble rained down on her. She rolled, scrambled to her feet, and ran. Another blast ripped through the alley behind her.

She vaulted a low fence into an empty field. She glanced left and right, searching for the best direction to flee. As she moved, the ground erupted in a flash of lightning. She raced to her left, moving deeper into town, trying to keep the towering salt silos in sight as a landmark, drawing the Skinny as far from the gate as possible.

As she ran out onto a back street, one of the salt silos exploded. The shattering force turned Debbi's legs to elastic and drove her to the ground. She covered her head as a hard rain of salt pellets battered her.

The Ranger struggled to push herself up. Her vision wavered. She reached for the pulse rifle, but it flew away. She watched it skitter off as if pulled by a string.

"Tekkeng!" The Skinny appeared at the edge of the salt pile and slid toward her, almost as if levitating to avoid straining his bony legs. The thing's weird clawed feet dragged limply through the white granules.

Debbi was yanked up off her feet and hung suspended in the air. She couldn't help but stare at the alien creature as he neared. She no longer expected to defeat or avoid him, just keep him occupied.

The thing stopped. His large, gray head tilted as he watched her.

She suddenly thought of her childhood, her father and mother fighting and separating. Her father controlling her and dragging her around military bases all over Banshee. Joining the Colonial Rangers. Shipping out to the space station. The horrible memories of her mother's death. To Temptation and Ross. The Worldstorm. The monster at the miner's camp. She considered the monster for a moment, seeing it from all angles, before moving on to the undead. The chaos in Temptation. Her fear of failure. The worhul. Martool.

The face of Martool froze in her mind.

The Skinny stared at her with great intensity. Debbi realized he was running through her mind, rifling the catalogue of her memories. He stopped at Martool. The episode with the anouks began to replay in her head.

The remembrances rolled past almost independent of the workings of her brain. It was like someone controlled the replay and she was standing by helpless.

Not helpless, she realized, just not in control.

Her hand went to her holster. She saw the Skinny flinch with a sudden realization, but her Dragoon was already out and up. Her thumb grazed the touch pad. The tannis needle raced out of the black gun and hit the Skinny square in the chest.

Debbi fell to the ground in a heap.

The Skinny stood as if locked in a convulsion. His hand reached out for her, and then froze. His mouth stretched wide, "Tekkeng!"

She gathered herself and aimed at him again. His head wrenched in her direction as if on a rusted mechanism. Suddenly he was gone. But then he stood in front of her as before. She blinked to clear her eyes.

He was gone again.

She fired the black gun several more times into the spot where he'd been standing. Then she stumbled out of the salt pile and ran back to the main street.

She staggered out the gate and fell to the sand, sucking in the desert

Clay & Susan Griffith

air and slowly regaining her awareness. The thought of that thing tearing through her private memories sickened her. Her mind and body felt filthy. It didn't matter that the Skinny was probably so alien he had little concept of the personal images he saw.

She climbed to her feet and alternated between running and quick-marching out over the desert. She pushed herself mercilessly because she craved the exertion; she wanted to sweat the Skinny's stink out of her mind. After twenty minutes, she spotted the little group of refugees moving ahead of her in the moonlight.

She shouted and waved her hands. They stopped and turned. Hickok and another figure came running back to her. The second figure was the syker. As they came near, Debbi felt a presence tapping at the edges of her mind. It wasn't an aggressive probe, but the feeling enraged her. The presence quickly vanished.

"My God!" Hickok offered a shoulder for support.

Debbi was grateful. Her limbs burned like she had been through the first week of basic training. She regarded the syker furiously.

He said from a distance, "I apologize. I had to be sure it was you."

Debbi glared at him briefly. Then she relented. She understood, although it didn't make it feel any better.

Hickok said, "You beat a Skinny?" She had never known anyone to take on a Skinny and live. "Did you kill it?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

Behind them in the distance, the sky exploded with green lightning. The area around the dead town of New Hope lit up with a ferocious display of energy.

Debbi felt herself deflate. "I guess not."

Lightning poured down on all sides of Tekkeng. Structures exploded all around him. Craters blasted into the ground.

He didn't see any of it. Now that the shock had worn off, his powers of concentration were directed inward. Thanks to Coltrane's demonstration of the black gun's power, Tekkeng knew what the Ranger had used on him. A being of lesser power would have been incapacitated for considerably longer, but Tekkeng was strong. However, he knew there was a dangerous sliver of polluted tannis in him and he searched for it. When he finally sensed the minute black object inside his body, he began working to remove it. He contracted muscles and tendons with his mind, sliding the hateful needle along. He operated slowly and deliberately. It was agony, requiring a level of concentration he hadn't exerted in many years. Minute by painstaking minute, Tekkeng drew the object out until the insignificant needle fell into his hand.

"Tekkeng!" he screamed with relief.

Tekkeng smiled as best he could. Coltrane had given him this town for his own purposes, but he had been lulled into a false sense of superiority by the ease of the massacre. This embarrassment at the hands of a mere girl was a welcome warning to tread carefully. He was just glad Coltrane hadn't witnessed it.

He dropped the needle into the dirt. A human female had bested him. Tekkeng would enjoy hunting her down and flaying her mind. All things in due time, however.

He took a deep breath and welcomed the charred stench that filled his nostrils. If there was one consolation for such humiliation, it was the

Book I: The Horror Lords

acquisition of vital information. A lost adversary had been found.

He had seen Martool in the pathetic Ranger's mind. The anouk shaman was hiding in the wreckage of the Red River fortress. It would be fitting that he would destroy her there.

He was suddenly aware that the vicious backlash from his intense concentration had reduced New Hope to an expanse of smoking rubble. A psychic "sneeze" with the power of a UN gunship.

Tekkeng laughed.

Chapter 30

"Any word from Ross?"

"No, Dallas," Ringo said. "He hasn't called in. And we've tried to reach his Hoss a couple of times. No luck. But I wouldn't worry about it. Ross and Olivares are old hands. They might be halfway to the Toxic Jungle by now trailing some bad guys. You know Ross."

Debbi gave the kid a tired, lopsided grin. "Yeah, I know Ross."

She filed her report on the mission to New Hope on top of the pile of zombie incident reports and extermination squad figures that were mounting on Ross's desk. Ross had been gone for four days with no word; she'd been back from New Hope for two days. She longed to go look for him, but logically, she couldn't spare anyone from town now. And after all, like Ringo said, this was Ross and Olivares she was talking about. Between them they had as many years of Ranger experience as all the rest of the Temptation crew put together.

She closed the door to Ross's office and sat at one of the desks in the squad room where Stew and Ringo were working. Debbi closed her eyes.

She suddenly opened her eyes, disturbed and wary, a sense of urgency inexplicably filling her.

Ringo and Miller worked quietly. They looked over at her. Ringo smiled. Stew arched an eyebrow.

Debbi glanced at the clock. She'd lost an hour.

Stew said to her, "Why don't you take a few hours? You can be back before sundown when the batrats come out."

"No," Debbi responded. "I'm fine. I slept on the way back from New Hope." She rubbed her face. "And now here."

Stew muttered, "Yeah, if you don't get a good fifteen minutes, you're cranky the whole day."

Debbi rummaged through her cobwebbed mind for something sarcastic to say, but the front door opened.

A very angry Donald Fairchild, followed by a concerned Lester Atkinson, stormed into the office. Debbi stood immediately and met them to keep Stew and Ringo out of it.

"We'd like a word with you," Atkinson began.

"Word, hell!" Fairchild boomed. "We got a mind to start pulling badges right now!"

Stew rose slowly from his desk, his eyes glued on Fairchild, who was armed. Ringo stared at the scene from the back of the squad room, sliding over to place his back against the lockup door where Peck and his fellow dilettante occultists still resided.

Fairchild started past Debbi. "I want to see Ross. Now!"

Debbi stepped in front of him. "He's not here. He's out on a mission."

"Out?" Fairchild glared at Debbi. "How can he be out under these

Clay & Susan Griffith

circumstances? Where is he? Call him back in! Now!"

"What is the problem, Mr. Fairchild?" Debbi tried to keep her voice steady.

"The problem is Ross! We know about Nicolai's offer! We know that he can stop all these problems we've been having! And Ross turned him down without even listening! Without consulting us! He doesn't have that right! This isn't a police state!"

Fairchild grew red in the face, leaned forward, and jabbed his meaty finger at Debbi, though he didn't quite connect. He remembered all too well the last time he had laid a hand on this Ranger.

Watching Fairchild closely, she said, "We're in a dire emergency situation. Ross has authority over public safety."

"Hell no he doesn't!" Fairchild shouted. "We haven't voted any emergency measures! And Nicolai was here a week ago. Why didn't Ross come and tell us? We had to hear it from a couple of militiamen that the Reapers were outside our gates! You didn't think the Town Council needed to know? Of course not! Because we might try to carry out the law instead of the Rangers' whims! Lady, if Dave Ross thinks he's going to run this town out of his holster, he better think again!"

Debbi said, "Mr. Fairchild, Mr. Atkinson, I was there when Ross talked to Nicolai. The Reaper offer was a ridiculous ruse. Nicolai has no power over anything in Temptation. He was just playing on our fears, hoping we would just give him what he wanted, so he didn't have to pay the price of trying to take it. Ross called his bluff. Nicolai left. End of story."

"That's not the point!" Fairchild slammed his fist on a desk. "The point is Ross can't make decisions like that! He doesn't have the right! And you should've told us about it! It's your obligation as a Colonial Ranger to uphold the law."

Debbi paused. Her breath hissed loudly from her nostrils. She pressed her lips together, trying to form rational words in her head when all she really wanted to do was knock this man on his ass.

Stew said to Fairchild, "Why don't you two go do something useful for a change? The Rangers have organized daylight exterminator squads and we're happy to have qualified volunteers to root out the batrats."

Debbi waved Stew to silence and said in a low voice, "Listen to me, Fairchild. I shouldn't have to tell you this, but I am. One time only. Every Colonial Ranger in this command has put their life on the line for the people of this town countless times over the last few weeks. In the face of completely unknown threats, all of these brave men and women have responded with diligence and honor. We have one Ranger, Boston Fitzpatrick, over in the infirmary now with his arm amputated. And we have another Ranger, Lyle Cassian, who..."

She stopped. Her lips quivered. She refused to look away or give him the opportunity to interrupt. Her words came quick and sharp, reflecting the loathing she felt for Fairchild. "Lyle Cassian is dead. He was a man who gave more years to this town as a Colonial Ranger than either of you have been alive. So how *dare* you stand there and tell me about upholding the law! Dave Ross has held this town together by himself in the face of horrors none of us could have conceived of two months ago! And you have the nerve to come in here with your feeble quibbling about parliamentary procedure? I do not have time for this. Gentlemen, fair warning, leave this office now or I will arrest you for obstructing lawful Ranger operations and you can convene the Town Council in the lockup with your colleague, Mr. Peck. Do I make myself clear?"

Book I: The Horror Lords

Atkinson took a step toward the door. Fairchild stood his ground and narrowed his eyes at Debbi.

"So it's a coup?" the Mine Administrator said. "You're taking over the government. You understand the ramifications of your actions, don't you?"

Atkinson gasped audibly. "Oh no, Donald! That's not what she means at all! She's just busy. Isn't that right, Ranger?"

Fairchild looked up at Stew and Ringo. "The rest of you Rangers follow this? You with her?"

Stew and Ringo stood without a word, straight and high-headed.

Debbi stared at the burly man and worked her jaw from side to side. "Take it up with Ross when he gets back. If you want my badge, you can have it then. Until then, get out and stay out."

Fairchild went to the door without turning his back on the Rangers. Atkinson scrambled out ahead of him, watching the bright skies outside. Fairchild smiled sarcastically and nodded his head.

He said, "Yeah, give 'em a gun and a badge and they think they run the world."

He slammed the door and marched down the street with Atkinson ducking beside him.

Debbi exhaled heavily and slumped onto a desk. She shook her head and chewed on a thumbnail.

"You did the right thing," Stew settled back into his chair. "Don't worry about it. It'll get straightened out after all this is over."

Ringo spoke up. "That Fairchild's just a blow hard!"

Debbi saw Ringo's eyes were red. She had heard him sniffing in the background when she mentioned Cass's death.

"He is a blow hard," she agreed. "But he's also right in a lot of ways. I had a screaming match with Ross over the same thing, only I was on Fairchild's side. It was the last time I talked to him before he left for Newcomb's farm." That thought cut sharp pains in her chest. She took a deep breath. "I'll tell you, boys, I'm not sure I'm cut out for this job."

The door opened again. Debbi looked up with frustration to see the syker from New Hope enter.

Stew and Ringo both froze at the sight of the bald man. They looked at each other in amazement.

The syker looked nervously at Debbi.

She stood up, fighting a brusque attitude. "Hello. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you. Before I left, I wanted to thank you for what you did for the people of New Hope."

"You're leaving?"

"Yes. I value isolation. I lived in the desert outside New Hope; I only came to town because I sensed the Skinny approaching. I knew what he would do. I wanted to try to help, if I could."

She softened a little. "So where will you go?"

The syker shrugged. "Somewhere. Out there."

Debbi extended her hand. Then she felt self-conscious; perhaps sykers didn't like touching.

The syker stared at her hand for a moment and then took it. He hadn't expected it from her, not after what she had been through.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She knew what he meant. In the rush of her return to duty and her fatigue, she had actually managed to forget the Skinny's attack. She hadn't mentioned it to anyone; it wasn't even in her written report. The

Clay & Susan Griffith

syker's question brought it back in a sickening rush.

He suddenly looked ashamed and flustered.

Debbi felt Stew's eyes on her back, his concern aroused by Hallow's question.

She took Hallow's hand in both of hers. "I'm fine. Thanks for your help. None of those people would be alive without you." She thought of the wonderful sounds of a cooing baby and arguing children that had lulled her to sleep on the flight back.

He leaned close and whispered, "I could remove the memory of it."

She was startled. "No. I..no. Don't."

The syker swallowed and stepped back, pulling his hand away. "All right, I didn't mean anything. Well, I have to go."

"Wait. I don't know your name."

He hesitated and then said, "Hallow."

Debbi said, "Well, I hope you'll feel free to come back to Temptation."

"Thanks." He turned nervously and slipped out the door.

Ringo raced to the front window and stared at the syker until he was out of sight. He turned back, mouth agape.

"That was a syker!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know there were any left! I thought they all bugged out with the Legion after the war! What's he like? Did you see him do anything? You know, weird, with his head?"

Debbi chuckled. "No, he didn't do anything weird with his head. There are a few of them around, deserters from the war. Or discharged before the recall and forgotten."

And then there are the dead ones like Quantrill at Red River, Debbi thought with a flutter in her stomach, reminding herself of Ross being missing.

Stew watched her thoughtfully. When he opened his mouth, Debbi knew he was going to ask about New Hope.

She stood up instantly. "I'm going to see Doc Dazy. See if he's got anything new on the batrats."

Stew accepted her reluctance to talk, as she had his, and let it pass. Then he said, "Okay. I'll go try Ross again."

Ringo looked confused. "Um. Didn't you just do that an hour ago?"

"Well, I'm doing it again, okay?" Stew stated.

Ringo shrugged as Stew rose.

Debbi looked at Stew gratefully as she stepped to the door. They exchanged a silent glance before she left.

"The Colonial Rangers have the black guns," Avernus snarled at Coltrane. "And they know how to use them."

Coltrane peaked his fingers under his chin and lowered his head into a magisterial glower at Tekkeng.

"Perhaps," Coltrane offered, "that Ranger in New Hope was just lucky."

Tekkeng laughed a harsh snort and Coltrane felt himself mouthing the Skinny's thoughts. "I was in her head, human. She knew what she was doing."

"If you were in her head," Coltrane replied peevishly to his own voice, but staring at Tekkeng, "how did she get off a shot?"

With a snap of his robes, Avernus extended his arms and slammed a burst of energy into the tannis walls. The crack boomed through the chamber. Tekkeng involuntarily ducked. Coltrane cowered back in his throne.

Book I: The Horror Lords

"Be silent, Coltrane!" Avernus shouted. "This has gone too far. Temptation continues to resist! Tekkeng informs me that the female Ranger who stood against him in New Hope is the nexus of the resistance. I know the strength of Tekkeng's power, so I know his belief to be true. As long as she lives, there is no chance Temptation will fall. She must die."

The Fallen stalked toward his minion. He grabbed Coltrane's robe and pulled him off the throne.

Rage flashed in Coltrane's eyes.

Tekkeng grinned and rubbed his clawed hands in delight, pleased to see Avernus's anger directed in the proper direction.

Avernus held Coltrane a few inches from his face. "They have weathered all your storms. I tire of your games! You and your Reapers have accomplished exactly nothing for me. I had such high hopes for you, Coltrane. Perhaps I should explore new options." Avernus released Coltrane and the Reaper collapsed to the cold stone floor in an embarrassed heap.

The hulking gray shape of Coltrane's pet monster clambered around the throne and crouched next to its master. It snarled and exposed its dripping teeth. Tekkeng scuttled away in fear.

Avernus scowled down at the creature and took a step back despite himself. "Are you threatening me?"

Coltrane struggled to regain his dignity and his feet at the same time. He used the beast's bristling, muscular shoulder to push himself up. "Of course not. It's just that my pet is over concerned for my continued welfare."

Avernus snapped, "As well it should be." The Fallen backed away and then turned. He strode from the chamber with Tekkeng in his wake.

Coltrane settled back onto his throne, muttering and cursing under his breath. He waited and, in time, felt the presences of Avernus and Tekkeng vanish from the area. He laid a scabrous hand on his creature's fawning hand. It was time to act.

Nicolai sat at a vast conference table covered with maps and reports of ghost rock output and food stores housed in various parts of his fledgling Banshee Free State. Since the embarrassing and infuriating tableau outside Temptation, he had buried himself into the minutiae of governance, even though he longed for the blood of conquest. His head ached with the pressures of statistics and factory reports and warehousing information. Information of weaponry and ammunition stores tumbled through his head. He closed his aching eyes on the cascading numbers and thought back to the feeling of the wind as he stood atop his tank in Ghost Rock City, the feeling of the flag in his hand, the sound of his men's tumultuous cheers. He smiled.

"Nicolai."

The revolutionary started and looked up. Who could enter without the Vanguard stopping them?

Coltrane.

The former Reaper chieftain stood in the door to Nicolai's inner sanctum. His hood was back, revealing the full extent of his scabby, pustulant face.

Nicolai flinched at the sight, reminded of his disgusting alliance with this inhuman and his horrid colleagues. What was the price of ambition? It was bad enough to be summoned to Coltrane's pretentious

Clay & Susan Griffith

presence, but now the thing was coming here to his private place. Was there no place Nicolai could go to be away from this horror?

Coltrane stepped to the edge of the table and fingered several maps. "We have to talk now."

"What do you want now, Coltrane?" Nicolai asked abruptly.

Coltrane's head snapped around and his blood-red eyes fixed on the human. He growled. The parasites under his skin wriggled, creating moving trails in his face.

"You're risking your life mouthing off to me!" Coltrane extended a misshapen hand. "Do you think you're indispensable? Don't get too high an opinion of yourself, my old lieutenant, just because you've read a book or two. The Reapers are full of pseudo-intellectual thugs with messiah complexes. I could walk outside and swing your dead body and hit ten more just like you!"

Nicolai didn't respond. He stared openly at Coltrane, trying to keep from flinching at his disgusting appearance.

Coltrane snarled at Nicolai. "You have twenty-four hours to assemble the Reapers and march on Temptation."

Nicolai tilted his head in confusion. "March on Temptation? Are we going to fight? Or do we wait for an invitation to a party?"

The rotting man ignored the sarcasm. "Storm the walls. I want blood and suffering."

Nicolai straightened with resolve. "The flying columns can be ready to move in four hours. But it will be at least another thirty-six before the full army can be in position. And you realize we may take heavy casualties. The Colonial Rangers will resist."

"Just move your army and stand ready." Coltrane sneered. "I know their weak point now. I'm going to gut the Rangers from the inside."

A dark, hunched shape appeared in the doorway behind Coltrane and licked its lips.

Chapter 31

It's only been five days, Ross thought.

General Quantrill came and went at odd intervals. Sometimes he stayed for hours, other times for less than a minute. Sometimes he would come in to wake Ross from an exhausted sleep and then leave. Standard interrogation techniques.

There had been no physical attacks, no torture or even the threat of torture.

Of course, Quantrill was a syker and it was tempting for Ross to ponder if all these experiences were even real. Perhaps he *had* been tortured. Perhaps he was suspended in a fluid tank somewhere only thinking he was in a dank cell. Perhaps it had been longer than five days. Time could lose meaning in this room.

"No," he said aloud. "Five days. You can count. You spent a week under a damn rock in the Glass Wastes and never lost count. This is a helluva lot better than that was."

Five days. Plenty of time for Olivares to bring the Rangers from Temptation. But they hadn't come. So either Olivares had been captured too or the situation in Temptation had gotten worse.

Either way, Ross thought, I can't control that. I can only control me. And I'm the only one who controls me. Certainly not Quantrill.

He rubbed his hands over the damp floor stones. The walls and floor

Book I: The Horror Lords

were covered in a slime that kept them wet and cold. He had no bed or blanket. But he relished the hard touch of the stone against his fingers and his back; the reality of it kept him grounded. He was in a room in the Lupinz Sanitarium. Beyond the stone wall were the air, the scrub forest, the desert, and Temptation. This cell was a real place. It wasn't a good place, but it was real. And he was in it. No reason to lose perspective.

Ross looked at his cellmate, a thin, quiet man with unmoving eyes who sat hunched and staring in the corner. Shortly after being tossed into the room and recovering from Quantrill's brain blast, he had tried to talk to the quiet man, but with no success. Aside from the occasional blink, the quiet man hadn't moved in three days. He didn't eat. He didn't relieve himself. If nothing else, his stamina was impressive.

Ross rolled over and started doing push-ups. After fifty, the pain from his injuries seized him. He did ten more before he felt he had to stop, but he gutted out two more, no three more, two wasn't enough; that was like giving in.

He sat back against the wall and sucked in deep breaths. He felt perspiration slipping down his face. His arm was on fire and his ribcage hurt. He liked the pain. It came from his body and he knew it was real.

Ross smirked at the quiet man and, through heaving breaths, said, "You ought to give it a try. Little exercise would do you good. No? Maybe later."

A key jangled outside the door.

Ross sang in a loud voice, "*From this valley they say you are going.*"

The door opened and General Quantrill stepped in. The quiet man's eyes darted from Ross to Quantrill and back.

Ross stared at the floor between his knees and continued his off-key warbling, "*We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile.*"

Quantrill grinned with his dead mouth. "You can stop that ridiculous singing now. Your friend Olivares was smart. He talked."

"*For they say you are taking the sunshine.*"

"The black guns are very interesting. But I need to know more than he could tell us. I have only one question and then I will let you and your friend go. How many black guns do you have?" Quantrill's mental powers flicked into Ross's mind, seeking fissures to split open, watching for memories slipping unbidden through his thoughts.

"*That brightens our pathway a while.*" Ross closed his eyes against the intense pressure growing in his mind. He could hear the blood surging in his ears. "*Then come sit here a while 'ere you leave me. Do not hasten to bid me adieu.*"

Quantrill knelt in front of Ross, grabbed his head at the temples, and pushed it up. Ross smelled the scent of the grave. Other fingers probed his face and pulled his eyelids apart. He could see Quantrill's face a few inches away. He quickly plunged his eyes as low as possible. Quantrill moved his head in front of Ross's eyes again.

The General repeated, "How many black guns do you have?"

The pressure intensified. Ross sang louder, "*But remember the Red River Valley. And the girl that has loved you so true.*" He focused on the song. The roaring of his beating heart and his lungs filling and expelling air was replaced by the distant, tinny trill of a single violin. He heard the scuffling of boots and shoes against a pinewood floor. He was waltzing. With a red-haired woman.

Quantrill pressed his rotting fingers into Ross's head. "Give me what I

Clay & Susan Griffith

want to know! I will flay you alive like I did Olivares. He died cursing your name! How many black guns do you have?"

"I've been thinking a long time, my darling." He sang to his waltz partner. He felt her small hand wrapped in his and his sweaty palm against her waist. But his eyes were cast nervously downward on the tops of his feet sliding over a wood plank floor. He had to keep his boots away from his partner's delicate feet. He couldn't afford to look stupid in front of her, or worse, embarrass her. *"Of the sweet words you never would say."*

Quantrill let Ross's head drop. He dropped something to the floor, stood, and wordlessly left the cell.

Something hard brought Ross back to the present. He lifted his right hand and saw a glint of metal on the gray stone. It was Olivares's badge. It was bent and scored from searing heat. Quantrill must've left it there, although Ross couldn't remember anything the General had said. Ross picked it up and stared at it.

"Well damn, Reuben. I'm sure sorry about this. I guess you should've kept running." The veteran Ranger clutched the badge reverentially and then slipped it into his shirt pocket. "I'll beat the son of a bitch for you."

"It's an old trick," Quantrill said. "But it can be effective. And he is good at it. He goes very deep, very fast."

Avernus swiveled in a leather chair and regarded the undead soldier, "What about the other Ranger we captured outside the wall?"

"He's dead. He gave up easy."

"You think that this Ross fellow could be useful. Yes?"

The two men, the robed Fallen and the mouldy-uniformed syker, looked oddly out of place in the Earth-style doctor's office. It was dark and well-appointed. In the center was a large globe of Banshee. Bookshelves lined the walls. The former occupant of the office, Dr. Lupinz, probably owned more books than anyone else on the planet, as well as a variety of more common electronic data sources. Avernus found the books oddly comforting and he used them often; they usually lay open on his desk as he randomly flipped pages.

Quantrill parted the heavy drapes and stared out over the bleak landscape outside the asylum. "Captain Ross is an extraordinary Colonial Ranger. I knew him when I was alive. In seventy-six, after I broke the anouks at Red River, I spent time in Temptation. My own people saw me as a monster. It didn't matter that I had just followed orders, that I gave up my humanity to preserve their way of life. However, Ross was one of the few humans who didn't judge me based on rumors from the war; he treated me decently. That's the reason I didn't kill him outright when I found him in the cadaver storeroom."

Avernus nodded and smiled a toothy smile. A cat leaped onto his lap. He absently stroked its back with his long, knobby fingers.

Quantrill continued, "But then I realized he was likely one of the Colonial Rangers in the canyon spying on me during the early recovery phase. I had hoped your patients and your cats had disposed of him, but apparently not. So, there's a danger that the Colonial Rangers will come looking for him. Hopefully, they won't come here because of the images you implanted in that other Ranger who came asking questions last week. But his value to us if we can turn him is incalculable. I think we can use Ross to control the Rangers in Temptation and we won't need

Book I: The Horror Lords

Coltrane and his mercenaries."

"But you haven't been able to break Ross?" Avernus asked in a mild, non-accusatory manner.

"Not yet."

Avernus leaned forward, sending the cat skittering from his lap. His appearance changed. The molecules of his body and garments shifted into a new arrangement. His robe became a long, white lab coat and his uniform an almost quaintly old-fashioned Earth-style suit. His face became older, but still thin and with wispy hair on a speckled pate. He was now Dr. Lupinz, the proprietor of the asylum.

The sight disturbed Quantrill, not because he'd never seen shape-shifting before, indeed many sykers had that ability. Rather, he was unnerved by the vision of Dr. Lupinz. Quantrill had spent the last, terrible months of his life at the Lupinz Asylum, sent there by his own former commanders who feared and loathed him. The face of Dr. Lupinz was one of bland evil and the last face Quantrill remembered from life.

The undead general turned away. "Why do you insist on that masquerade?"

"It is helpful to move in human society as Dr. Lupinz. This facility is useful and a storehouse of resources for me. This appearance keeps the inmates calm. For some reason, they loved the dear Doctor." A large tabby cat leapt onto the desk and slid across Avernus's liver-spotted hand. The animal began to purr loudly.

Avernus opened a deep drawer in his desk and removed a small, wooden case. He opened the case and removed a flask of inky liquid and a syringe. The newly formed Dr. Lupinz displayed the items, which glinted in the lamp light. "And I enjoy the work here. Now I believe I'll see our patient."

Avernus was amused by the eruption of Ross's raucous voice at the first sound of the key in the lock. He paused to listen.

"I've been thinking a long time, my darling. Of the sweet words you never would say."

He pushed the door open. Two inmates surged in, grabbed Ross's arms, and pinned him down. The Ranger didn't resist. His eyes were closed.

Avernus strolled in and closed the door behind him. He pulled a syringe-full of black liquid from the pocket of his pristine lab coat. Without fanfare, he jabbed the needle into Ross's arm through the shirt sleeve and pushed down the plunger. He removed the syringe and dropped it back into his pocket.

Ross didn't seem to notice. *"Now alas, must my fond hopes all vanish? For they say you are going away."*

Ross was waltzing, still watching his feet carefully. He was getting better. His partner moved with a supple grace that made his awkward steps all the more noticeable to the man watching.

The man watching?

Someone else was there. For the first time since the dance began, someone stood in the shadows observing the dance floor. Don't look at him. Don't take your eyes off your feet. One misstep and something terrible will happen.

"Then come sit here a while 'ere you leave me. Do not hasten to bid me adieu."

Clay & Susan Griffith

The violin lost its crispness. The notes drew out longer and lazier. Ross's dry throat closed up. It was getting more difficult to sing. He felt feverish. He was having trouble catching his breath.

"But remember...the Red River Valley"

The dark figure in the corner shifted, waiting for the song to finish. Ross stepped on his own instep. He stumbled slightly. He gripped his partner's hand tighter. His other hand slipped off her waist. He caught himself with a nervous laugh and kept in step. He bobbed his head, trying to recapture the rhythm. Everything was fine. No need to panic.

"And the girl that has...loved you so true?"

It was so hot. He needed a breath of air. If he could only step outside for a second, he'd be fine.

"From this valley...they say...you are going"

A breath of air. That was all he needed. Then he could return to the dance floor. He blinked the sweat from his eyes. His boots scuffed the floor. The clomping of his footsteps was drowning out the music. He was losing the timing.

"When you go...may your...darling go too?"

He had to get some air or he couldn't go on. If he could only find a door. He looked up.

He caught the eye of Dr. Lupinz standing patiently in the corner. The mouth of the tall man in black turned up in a smile that seemed to take forever to form.

Ross's heart pounded. He stumbled. His hand fell from his partner's grip. He saw the curve of her hip as he tumbled to the floor. He hit hard on his shoulder. He felt the warm wood beneath his hands and face.

He twisted his neck and looked up. Darkly framed against the bright lights above he saw a face haloed in red hair.

It was Debbi.

A Ranger.

From Temptation.

He reached up for her, but his world split open like the smile of Dr. Lupinz.

Avernus backed away from Ross.

Breaking a man was easy enough if you have the power. And sometimes power came from knowing how to use the victim against himself. The deeper you took a fantasy, the better the chance that reality would be forced into it. And a little dose of reality was all that was needed to disrupt someone trying to hide in a fantasy.

Now that Ross was broken, Quantrill could take over to reshape him into whatever form was most useful. The General would never have been able to master someone like Ross. Quantrill was too direct and confrontational. But it was that same singularity of purpose that made him such a good servant.

Avernus turned to the quiet man huddled in the far corner and nodded. "Good day, Dr. Lupinz." He turned and left the cell with the inmates.

The quiet man moved his eyes from the door to Ross who lay with his head pressed against the floor. The Ranger's unseeing eyes were wide. His mouth moved and muddled words seeped out.

Would you leave her behind unprotected? When she loves no other but you?

Book I: The Horror Lords

Chapter 32

Debbi closed the door of her room and proceeded down the hall. She had the graveyard shift, which was fine since she couldn't sleep any more anyway. The constant anxiety of deciding what was best for Temptation wore heavy on her. She had begun to second-guess herself and that made her even angrier.

She needed Ross. He had been gone nearly two weeks with no word. She had sent Stew out to Newcomb's farm in a Stallion to look for him, but he found nothing. They were stretched so thin, with Cass gone and Fitz down and Ngoma recovering, Ross would scream bloody murder if she spared even one Ranger to track him further, if it could even be done. The fact that Stew found no sign of him at Newcomb's farm didn't mean that Ross hadn't been murdered by Reapers and buried out in the wilderness.

She distracted herself from thoughts of the terrible things that might have happened by thinking that most likely he went to scrounge the necessary equipment to repair the relay station. That's what she would have done.

Or she could occupy her mind by being mad at him for leaving her in charge.

She softly cursed Dave Ross. He could've taken her with him instead of Olivares. Was there no other Ranger besides her who could have taken over? She wasn't blind to his grooming her for command. It just seemed to be coming too fast. She wasn't ready.

Damn him.

The house was brightly lit. Lanterns and oil lamps were placed on every available space. Debbi began to sweat from the heat. She tied down her holster as Miss Etta appeared.

"Are you hungry?" the landlady asked, carrying a shotgun as if it was a kitchen utensil.

"Not really."

Miss Etta put an arm around Debbi's waist and walked her into the sitting room. She also fingered the Ranger-issue flak jacket with interest. The landlady was wearing close to ten layers of clothing as well as heavy gloves and boots and several scarves tied around her neck.

"Aren't you hot in all those clothes?" Debbi asked.

"Yes I am. But I still have all my bones, thank you very much. You should see me when I have to go out; I wear my heaviest cooking pot on my head."

"Have you seen any more batrats in the house?"

"No. I boarded up all the holes I could find, no matter how small. And I don't go outside except in daylight and even then I take ol' Bessy with me." Etta patted the shotgun affectionately. She lifted her head. "How are you holding up, dear?"

"Me?" Debbi snorted with amusement and regarded Etta. "This is my job. The question is, how are you holding up? This isn't quite normal even for Banshee."

Etta laughed. "Child, I've seen a great deal in my day, both on Earth and on Banshee. Nothing surprises me anymore, not even bone-sucking bats."

"You're not afraid?"

"This is a frontier. I don't expect things to be sweetness and light out

Clay & Susan Griffith

here.”

Debbi loved the old woman's grit. She was a tough old biddy.

“I wish I had your confidence, Miss Etta.”

“You do, dear. You just don't realize it.” She brushed imaginary dust off Debbi's sleeves. “Be careful out there tonight, Debbi. There's something in the wind.”

“How so?”

Etta lifted her thin shoulders helplessly. “Something just feels different.”

“Wind is wind.”

Etta grew suddenly serious. “Let me tell you about the winds. They carry with them the heart and soul of Banshee. I've seen their breath sweep down from the mountains, carrying energy unlike any Earth winds. They race across the desert sands feeding off the fiery heat, then barrel straight into town and whip through the streets, rattling folks and buildings to their cores. Their message is clear. Danger is coming.”

A chill raced up and down Debbi's spine as the old woman's voice lowered. She had never heard Etta talk this way.

“Just watch yourself.” Miss Etta's face fell back into its tender expression.

“I will. Don't worry. I have no intention of getting my bones sucked out.” She kissed Etta on her wrinkled cheek and then rose, allowing the mantle of command to fall back on her shoulders. “I have to go now.”

Etta curled her arms around her shotgun. “You listen to what the winds tell you, dear. They know.”

Debbi nodded.

Etta raised an eyebrow. “Now pardon me while I go hunt a certain cat who tore my drapes all to shreds. Bone-sucking bats or not, there's no call to exhibit poor manners in the face of adversity.”

Fighting a laugh and wishing McDuff a secure hiding spot, Debbi lifted a torch from the bucket of sand just inside the door and lit it. It flared to life. She cautiously eased herself outside, stomping out onto the porch, making noise to drive the more hesitant batrats away. She lifted the torch to illuminate the underside of the roof of the porch. Five of the creatures squealed and took to wing, fluttering out into the night.

It was just nearing midnight and the town was quiet. No one walked the torch-lit streets but Debbi. Despite the late hour, every house was illuminated brightly, casting muted light outside. Debbi was grateful for the burning torch held firmly in her grasp. The high-pitched cries of the batrats echoed close to her ear and then faded away into the night. She couldn't help but imagine that it was the fluttering of their wings that caused the breeze ruffling her hair.

Desperately trying not to think of what skittered just beyond the glow of her torch, she walked on into the night. The street was strewn with vehicles and gear that people had abandoned when the batrats first came. Few had the courage to go out and retrieve it afterward. Larger things, like a speeder bike and an open-air truck, had to be moved to the side to make way for Ranger vehicles. Other smaller things, like brooms and various tools, were left where they lay. Few people wanted to die with a broom in their hand.

She walked past a wagon loaded with someone's furniture and belongings. The gory stains where a family's remains puddled were still visible on the ground. The poor souls were caught in the midst of fleeing Temptation's plagues, no doubt. Debbi turned away sadly, not

Book I: The Horror Lords

really wanting to know their story.

The hot wind was stifling and afforded no relief as it rushed noisily through the side street. Debbi's skin was damp and grimy despite the fact that she had washed up this afternoon. She was sweating under her stifling helmet. The wind carried flecks of sand that struck her bare face and neck. It felt like a thousand tiny needles. She rubbed her neck vigorously to ease the prickly sensation.

A metal barrel tipped over suddenly and Debbi jumped, swinging her weapon to bear on it. All she saw through the smoky haze of her torch was a rat scurrying away along the edge of the wall. She let out a sigh and tried to ease her rattling nerves.

She was edgy. Etta was right. There was something different tonight. There was an eerie silence. The wind slowed to a moaning breath.

Ten minutes passed and she realized she hadn't seen or heard a batrat. Perhaps they had left Temptation and moved on to an easier and more plentiful food source. It didn't seem likely, not the way Temptation's luck was running lately. Debbi's skin prickled even more at that thought. What else could happen?

Her breath quickened and her gut tightened as the stiffening wind changed direction. It carried something odd; a smell that brought back every ounce of fear that Debbi had tried to forget these past months. The stench of death filled her nostrils and made her gag. It curdled the air around her. Her hand rose instinctively to cover her nose and mouth.

She cast quick panicked looks in all directions, but she saw nothing. Her rational mind reminded her that there were numerous dead bodies lying fresh or undiscovered in the streets and houses of Temptation. Naturally, that smell hung heavy in the air. It meant nothing.

Walk on, she told herself firmly. Don't give in to the fear.

Her gun remained locked in her hand, her finger tightening against the trigger guard. She reached up to engage the comlink in her helmet to inform Miller to send a clean-up crew out this way before the sun rose.

But she never made it.

A dark shape towered over her, hunched and hairy, a grin of teeth gleaming just outside the torch's glow. A long, loose-limbed arm struck at her.

The helmet was ripped from her head and sent crashing through the window of the dark building beside her. She crashed into the metal wall just under it. The night air around her suddenly teemed with bright stars not of Heaven's making.

Her addled mind yelled at her to move. *Rise up and take a shot. Damn it, move!*

Her fingers reflexively pulled the trigger as a deeper darkness filled her vision. The weapon was on automatic and a rush of explosive bullets poured out; she thumbed the black needle attachment and fired those too.

Debbi pushed herself to her feet using the wall to brace her back. She sensed rather than saw something swing at her from the shadows to her left so she dove right, rolling through soft garbage and coming to her feet. Sparks rained down to inflame the strewn papers as a massive claw ripped through the fabricated metal where she had just stood. An angry snarl of failure rent the air behind her as she ran back the way she had come.

She thought of the miners ripped in half and ran faster. The Thing had finally come for her. She had almost forgotten the fear. It had

Clay & Susan Griffith

waited to test her when she least expected it. Fear was insidious that way.

Her head pounded, but she ignored the pain. It just added to the headache she had carried since the worhul hunt. She forced her weary brain to think. This street was residential; she had to lead this monster away. Headquarters was her best bet, somewhere with help. She wasn't going to kill this thing on her own. She needed heavy ordnance to take it down. She knew that for a fact.

The scrape of claws tearing into wood was the first thing she heard when the beast leaped from a roof and landed a few feet in front of her. She skidded in the dirt and then used her momentum to veer toward the abandoned speeder she had passed earlier.

Praying that they had left the security key inside, she pulled it upright. She fumbled for it in the darkness and shouted with relief when she found it. The engine flared to life and she saw the monster throw back its head and shriek as it realized its prey was trying to escape. It leaped forward as Debbi spun the bike around and sailed in the other direction, kicking up a spray of dirt and dust. Sharp nails raked her flak jacket. She felt burning pain across her back.

She gunned the engine and surged forward, hearing the creature scrambling on her heels. She knew she could outpace it now that she had the speeder; she had done it once before.

The thing suddenly appeared in front of her as it rebounded off the side of a building. It rose up on its hinged legs. Its wide mouth opened in a roar and Debbi felt its spittle hit her face.

With a cry, she jerked the speeder aside and slipped into an alley, dodging crates and debris at a fanatical pace. She no longer wondered why the creature was here. The reasons were too numerous: Temptation's newest plague; it was drawn by the carnage; it was destiny. She didn't care any longer. One thing was clear; one of them wouldn't get away from this fight alive.

She turned left and sped beside a stone wall. With a flash of inspiration, she realized where she was. Behind the wall lay the ruins of St. Calixtus. It was big and it was empty. Debbi felt just the smallest shard of hope grow larger within her. If she could reach it, it might offer her a chance for survival.

A large crate fell abruptly from the sky and shattered in front of her, obviously lobbed there by the creature she was leaving behind. She had to swerve and she slammed up against the hard stone wall. The speeder and her left knee took the brunt. She shouted in pain and jerked the vehicle back again.

The gates of the churchyard loomed before her. She pulled out her Dragoon and shot at the chain. The gate sprang open with a crash. She roared into the churchyard.

Debbi glanced behind her and saw the thing stalk through the gate. Its massive head turned toward her and a howl shattered the air. She desperately tried to think of what she was going to do now that she was here. Her sidearm had already proven useless against this thing. She had to buy some time.

Only one idea came to mind, and she put it into play before she changed her mind. She hit the brakes and spun the vehicle around to face the beast. They stared at each other from across the churchyard, the wild eye of desperation and the cold eye of death. The creature stretched out its long legs and came on, long-clawed hands digging into

Book I: The Horror Lords

the ground to gain thrust. Debbi gritted her teeth and leaned hard on the throttle. The speeder bike took off straight at the monster.

The ground swept swiftly past. The monster was suddenly in front of her. She popped up the speeder's nose so that it was at a forty-five degree angle, shutting down the hover jets so it wouldn't slow its momentum. The bike hit a mound of dirt left over from the wurhul and suddenly it was airborne.

Debbi threw herself off. She landed hard on ground, at the last second remembering her training, and rolled. The bike careened into the creature and knocked it to the ground.

The flak jacket protected Debbi from broken bones in her chest, but her elbow struck a stone and it was on fire. Debbi staggered to her feet and raised her sidearm, pumping a grenade into the launcher. She fired it at the speeder lying atop the creature. She hit the fuel tank and it blew with a force that almost pushed her off her feet.

A scream of primeval rage erupted as flames enveloped the monster. She didn't wait to see if she had killed it, because in her heart she knew she hadn't. She ran unsteadily toward the cathedral.

Reaching the remains of the doors to the church, Debbi grabbed the jamb to hold herself up. She looked back. She watched in horror as a black, charred form stepped out of the flames. Its obsidian eyes locked on her. Its long, clawed hands seized the ground as it dropped to all fours and loped after her.

"Oh God!" She ran into the church, sending a prayer deep inside the tannis walls as a final plea for help and slapping a fresh clip into the Dragon. She sprinted for the south transept and the staircase to the triforium. If she could get to the roof and the beast followed her, maybe a fall would kill it. St. Calixtus was covered with long spires; with any luck, it would fall on one and impale itself.

Long legs pumping, she slipped up the aisle and was six feet from the stairs when the stench of the creature filled the air. It was already inside.

She ran faster.

It was too late for plans.

She felt vibrations in the floor as the thing stalked after her. As it neared the crossing, she turned and lobbed a grenade. The monster sprang high up over the pews and landed in front of her just as the grenade exploded, sending bone-jarring echoes through the rock edifice. She felt it thrumming up her legs. It filled her ears with an abnormal sound that penetrated deep and rang with a loud voice.

Debbi brought her weapon down and squeezed the trigger, sending a spew of bullets across the tannis wall and sweeping over the creature. The wall sang as the bullets struck the stone. The monster flung out a claw and slapped her weapon away. The Ranger's whole arm went numb at the impact. The ringing stopped abruptly.

Debbi heard the gun skitter across the floor. She backpedaled. The monster's mouth yawned open and a moist tongue flicked out over its dripping teeth.

The floor shuddered again as it took a step closer. Debbi placed a hand on the railing of a low chapel wall to steady herself.

The floor buckled beneath them. The beast fell past, its long hands scrabbling at the collapsing ground, barely missing her.

Debbi let out a shout as she started to fall. She was jerked to a halt, one hand clutching the railing, her legs dangling over the precipice. She

Clay & Susan Griffith

heard a creak and a groan. She looked up and saw the weakened railing come free of its mooring. Debbi fell into the catacombs with the creature.

The air was filled with dust as Debbi raised herself up on her elbow. She couldn't see a thing in the murky darkness. She looked up and saw the vague outline of the hole in the church floor fifteen feet over her head. She struggled to her feet, grasping the wall for support. Her hands felt a torch sconce. Grabbing the torch from its place, she paused just before lighting it. She knew the monster was down here with her. She knew it had probably survived the fall. Lighting the torch would pinpoint her location. Maybe it couldn't see in the dark.

She gave up the thought of having light and instead fumbled down the passageway, hopefully moving further away from the monster. With any luck, the heavy debris that collapsed on top of it had stunned it. She took the metal torch with her. It could serve as a weapon, pitiful as it was.

Once clear of the debris, she ran faster despite the agony radiating from her left knee. She rubbed it and her hand came away wet, an obvious sign of a deep laceration.

The catacombs smelled damp and musky. The tunnel was tight and confining, not even as wide as her outstretched arms. She thought again of the poor vagrants who had waited down here for death at the hands of Peck and his insane cronies.

This church wasn't going to have her as a sacrifice.

Debbi ran for what seemed like hours, though it was only seconds. There was no sound of pursuit. She put her back to the wall, chest heaving. She labored to control her breathing so she could listen, aching with the effort, but finally the creepy silence of the catacombs enveloped her.

She couldn't hear anything. Had the monster really been killed in the fall? Maybe she had done more damage with the bullets and the speeder than she'd thought. *Please*, she silently pleaded.

She had no idea where she was or how to get out of the catacombs. The exit Peck's people had used for their sacrificial victim should be ahead of her, although she was turned around from the fall. She might be heading in the wrong direction.

It didn't matter; she couldn't go back. She pushed herself off the wall and trudged on. After the tunnel had taken numerous twists and turns, she felt safe enough to light the torch. She had no choice. She was working in pitch darkness. She might miss the trap door.

With a flick of her lighter, the torch burst into flame. Debbi was blind for a split second, even though she had turned her face away. The phosphorus glare cut deep into her vision. She rode the wave of pain and then slowly opened her eyes.

The catacomb was more confining than she had thought. The ceiling was less than a foot above her head and filled with cobwebs. She saw things scatter away into the darkness. With a sickening thought, she realized that there might be batrats down here too. She began softly cursing a long blue streak as she set off down the tunnel.

The stairs appeared around the bend lit by soft moonlight through the iron grate.

She heard something. She froze, holding the crackling torch down so

Book I: The Horror Lords

that it wouldn't interfere with her hearing. The sound was all too familiar. It was the scraping of claws on stone. Fear surged up inside her throat from her gut. She was shaking. All her nightmares had come to life. Her eyes closed in a fit of despair. She opened them a second later and steadily turned her head to look behind her.

The beast was crawling on the ceiling, spiderlike, filling the cramped space. Its face was split into a toothy grin as it came on.

Swallowing a scream, Debbi sprinted for the stairs, leaping up three at a time, holding her pain at bay. She was grateful that her body was still numb in certain places. She heaved open the trap door and crawled out.

Long thin fingers grabbed her leg and hauled her back in. This time her scream shattered the sanctity of the church. Desperate, she whirled around and shoved the blazing torch straight into the face of the monster. The flame enveloped its face. She could smell burning flesh over the usual stench of the creature. It shrieked in agony, its claws digging into her tender flesh, refusing to let go. She pulled back the torch and slammed it with both hands into its fiery skull.

Its head snapped to the side and she felt its grip loosen on her leg. She jerked free and scrambled up the stairs again. She slammed the iron grate shut and shoved the torch through the iron rings to lock it in place. She lay there for a second, tears streaming down her face from the agony in her leg. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her gun on the floor four pews down.

She struggled to her feet and limped over as fast as she could, not able to hold back her cries of pain each time her injured leg supported her weight. A yell fell from her lips as the trap door smashed open and the creature roared out. Frantic, she dropped to the ground and reached for the pistol. It was just out of her grasp.

"Damn it!" she shouted hoarsely. Stretching herself as much as possible, she reached her arm toward her goal. Her fingers brushed against its barrel. She could hear the monster coming for her. Not turning to look at it, she concentrated solely on reaching her gun. Grunting at the pain, she shoved herself hard against the pew and at last her fingers closed round the weapon.

Sobbing in relief, she pulled it out, spun onto her back, and fired up. The monster was directly over her.

"Die, Goddamn you!" she screamed wildly. The last of her bullets flew out of the barrel. Their sheer number pounded the beast back. Debbi primed the launcher and fired her last grenade at it. She was too close to escape the blast and she knew it, but she had no choice. That would be a better way to die than in its clawed hands. The grenade roared past the creature's head.

She missed.

"No!" she yelled.

With a throaty snarl, the monster loomed over her again. She pressed back, kicking out with her feet. It was over. She had lost.

The thing reached for her.

Then the church sang.

The wayward grenade exploded high above them, and the resounding vibrations weaved their way through the tannis. The ensuing sound stabbed into the eardrums of both Debbi and the creature. The whole church shook with the power of its voice.

Debbi's eyes widened as she saw long, jagged cracks develop in the

Clay & Susan Griffith

walls. The din intensified and pieces of tannis began to fall around them. The monster looked up at the cataclysm over its head.

Debbi took advantage of its distraction. Dropping her hands from her ears, she scrambled to her feet and ran for the exit. Debris rained down all around her. The church was falling apart.

The monster shrieked, chasing its escaping prey.

It grabbed her. Its long clawed fingers neatly wrapped around her torso. It held her out at the length of its thin, bony arm and squeezed. Debbi howled in pain as her chest was slowly compressed. Her arms batted futilely at it. She had nothing left to fight with, but she wasn't giving up. The creature ignored her efforts and its head hunched forward. Its putrid breath washed over her. Its long tongue slapped wetly over her face.

Debbi's eyes rolled up in her head. She was helpless and dying in its brutally strong, skeletal hand. Her head flopped back, her tortured spine arching. The gun dropped from nerveless fingers. Maybe she would see her mother. Her vision suddenly filled with a huge black spire, the breadth and width of a tree, falling like a missile. She was mesmerized. She stopped struggling.

The beast never saw it coming. The spire entered at the base of its neck, drove through its chest and impaled it firmly to the floor. Debbi fell to the ground, still clutched in its grasp. It screamed and writhed and Debbi felt the flak jacket shred to nothing beneath its twitching claws. Her chest filled with a white-hot agony.

Rocks and shards of tannis fell everywhere, some striking her; she only dimly realized it.

Finally there was a silence so great that Debbi lay there immersed in it, numb and detached. She stared up into the darkness above her and didn't move. Slowly, one by one, stars began to appear above her, like hushed sentinels in the night. She blinked back at them. Debbi dragged in a ragged breath and tried to stand. She couldn't.

Her senses agonizingly returned and she looked down to see the beast at her feet. Her guts tightened and she kicked herself free, unwrapping the long, loose fingers from around her chest. She grunted at the pain, but relished it. She was alive.

Debbi pulled herself to her feet. The monster was dead, its chest gone, its head obliterated by the sheer size of the spire.

She sank down into a pew, her muscles too tired to hold her. She laughed, enjoying the sound of it as it echoed around the church walls. Her echo merged with the sound of the wind as it gently slipped through the tannis, and the church's voice, softer now, sang sweetly.

It was the most beautiful thing Debbi had ever heard.

Chapter 33

"Anybody found Dallas yet?" Ringo climbed into the watchtower at the south gate.

"No." Curtiz kept his eyes glued to his binoculars. He swept them over the horizon and saw nothing but Reapers. They had materialized out of the night, a lumbering war machine. Among the lights of their distant camp, he could make out thousands of ground troops and heavy armored vehicles. He also detected the vague shapes of several long-range howitzers moving into position.

"Stew's getting the Stallions in the air," Ringo said. "He wants you

Book I: The Horror Lords

back at headquarters to take one. I'll relieve you here." The young man leaned on the edge of the tower where lanterns and torches burned. He stared at the army forming two miles beyond the walls, visible in the moon-filled night. He could smell smoke from a fire that smoldered on the far side of town, set by the first strike that Reaper gunships made twenty minutes ago.

Curtiz climbed down.

The six Night Watchmen manning the gate tower exchanged glances and stared at Ringo. Captain Holt, the commander of the Night Watch, sneered at the young Ranger and tapped his comlink.

Ringo studied the Reapers as best he could. He had to use standard binoculars because the lights on the wall washed out starlite goggles. He saw lights blinking over the desert. Aircraft. He watched, trying to get a fix on their course. They were flying low and coming closer. The roar of their engines washed in.

"Ready on the guns!" he shouted.

The Watchmen wheeled the antiaircraft guns around and opened fire. The cannons pounded. Green tracers arced out into the crystal night sky, flailing like streams of water around the onrushing fighters. The Reaper craft unleashed their missiles and pulled up. One had its wing clipped by flak. It spun over and slammed into the desert floor.

Ringo let out a triumphant whoop until the yellow glow of the missiles reared up in his eyes. The walls shook, knocking him to his knees. A wave of heat engulfed him. He lay gasping on the floor of the tower. His lungs felt seared. Wreckage fell around him.

Holt pulled Ringo to his feet and mouthed something that Ringo couldn't hear because of the ringing in his ears.

Ringo said, "I'm fine. Everybody all right?" He couldn't hear the reply.

Holt had blood streaming down his copper-colored face. He immediately left Ringo to attend to another Watchman lying on the parapet holding his shoulder and writhing. He grabbed the first-aid kit and popped the injured trooper with a painkiller.

On the far side of town, more green tracers flew into the sky followed by the low thumping sound of the cannons. Ringo saw the lights of several Stallions as they rose into the air with their cannons sparking, aiming for the distant line of Reapers.

We're surrounded, Ringo thought with dismay. He'd never seen this many Reapers in one place. He'd never heard of them bringing their full army to bear for fear of losing it. This wasn't a raid. This was an invasion.

Where was Dallas? he anxiously wondered. *Why hadn't Ross come back yet?* He witnessed a smaller explosion near St. Calixtus. Its eerie voice could even be heard as smoke billowed above it. These Reapers had no respect. Taking out a church.

From two miles away came a deep rumbling boom. Ringo swung his binoculars, but saw nothing unusual. Then he glimpsed a flash from one of the long guns, followed seconds later by the same booming thud.

He heard the screaming of shells plunging down at supersonic speed. A fireball erupted in the center of town. A second explosion hit in the deserted Depot.

"Son of a bitch." Ringo stared at the dying glow of the blast that struck inside town. "With those big guns, they can sit out there all day and pound us to death." He clicked his comlink. "Base. Ringo at south gate. They're opening up the heavy guns."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Roger that," came the confirmation. And nothing more.

He knew Temptation couldn't hold out. They'd lost too many Rangers and militiamen over the last few days. He was guarding a gate with six men, five now, against an army of thousands. They'd be overrun for sure.

He pulled his Dragoon and examined it. It was fully loaded and he had five extra ammo clips. He slipped his weapon back.

He knew what was expected. There were more important things than living.

"Hello the tower!" came a call from below.

Ringo peered down through the access hatch. He saw Donald Fairchild staring up. Ten militiamen carrying torches surrounded him.

"What do you want, Fairchild?" Ringo shouted down.

"In the name of the Town Council, I am taking charge of this installation!"

"What?" Ringo shifted his head in confusion.

He felt something tug at his belt. He turned slowly and saw his Dragoon being drawn from the holster.

"Hey! What are you doing?" He stood up facing Holt who held his sidearm. Then he noticed the four other Watchmen pointing guns at him.

"What's going on?" he asked, dumfounded by the peculiar events. "We don't have time for this."

Fairchild emerged from the hatch. He had a satisfied grin on his face.

"You're relieved of duty, Ranger," he said. Then he reached out and pulled the comlink from Ringo's head. "You're under arrest for sedition."

Ringo just stood staring, with his hands out begging for an explanation.

Fairchild shook his head and turned back to the Night Watchmen. "Keep him here. Don't return any Ranger communications until you hear from me."

"Yes sir," Holt said.

"What are you doing?" Ringo asked Fairchild. "Are you crazy? Don't you know the Reaper army is out there?"

Fairchild grinned. "That's right, boy. Soon they'll be in here to support the legal government of Temptation. We're joining the Banshee Free State and there's nothing you Rangers can do about it."

Ringo gaped as Fairchild descended the ladder. Then he turned to Holt.

"This isn't right," Ringo pleaded. "You know it isn't right."

The Watchman remained silent.

"You can't go through with this. He's insane. You're not really going to let the Reapers in here!" Ringo started for the access hatch.

"Stop it!" Holt grabbed Ringo's arm and put the muzzle of the Dragoon against the Ranger's head. "Just shut up, kid. Somebody's got to do something. We can't go on like this! If we fight, they'll just kill us all and come in anyhow. I'd rather live."

Below, Fairchild conferred with his militiamen for nearly ten minutes; he gave orders and most of them scurried off into the night one by one. Then he took a large white flag from the last of them and walked to the door next to the gate.

"Get away from that door, Fairchild."

Fairchild turned to see Debbi standing in the middle of the street pointing her weapon at him. She was torn and beaten, her clothes ripped and blood stained. She looked at if she could barely stand. The hand holding the heavy Dragoon was trembling. But Fairchild noted

Book I: The Horror Lords

that the red laser dot was consistently on him.

The Night Watchmen shuffled their weapons in their hands and looked at each other. They aimed reluctantly in Debbi's general direction.

Fairchild could see the disassociated glaze in Debbi's eyes. He wisely raised his hands out to the sides, away from his sidearm. He inclined his head; graciously sympathetic to a hard-nosed opponent who just didn't yet realize she was outmaneuvered.

"You've lost, Ranger." Fairchild stepped away from the door. "I'm going out that door to the Reaper camp to accept Nicolai's offer to join the Banshee Free State. The Town Council has voted on this. It is the law of the land. Stand down."

Debbi smirked. Her gun stayed up.

Fairchild asked, "Are you shell-shocked? Do you understand me?"

Debbi slowly nodded.

He said, "The town has turned against the Rangers. But if you put the gun down, I will personally guarantee the safety of your people when the Reapers move into town."

"If you open that door, I'll shoot you," Debbi calmly stated.

Fairchild grinned. "You seem disoriented. There are five Night Watchmen pointing weapons at you. You're outgunned."

Debbi kept her shaky arm as stable as possible. The laser sight didn't move from Fairchild's chest.

Fairchild shouted, "Do you want to die here?"

"Do you?"

The Mine Administrator was flummoxed. He narrowed his eyes at Debbi. "Are you insane? All I have to do is give the word."

"Then give it."

He looked at the Watchmen. "Disarm her."

They shuffled their feet and looked nervous.

"Disarm her!" Fairchild screamed. Then he noticed a second red laser dot on his chest.

He looked up to see Holt aiming the Ranger Dragoon down at him. The Night Watchman's face was etched with resolved unhappiness.

"What the hell are you doing, Holt?" Fairchild demanded. "You know what will happen to all of you if the Reapers take this town by force. And you know they will."

"I know," Holt said with resignation. "She risked her life for one of us. I know it doesn't make sense, but there you are."

The Watchmen dropped their weapons to their sides.

Ringo snatched his Dragoon from Holt and raced down the ladder. He joined Debbi in the street, a grin plastered on his face and his weapon aimed at Fairchild.

"Dallas," he said, "that was the most amazing thing I ever saw!"

Debbi's voice was a soft whisper. "Thanks. Make sure your gun stays on him."

"Okay. Why?"

Debbi dropped her arm in exhaustion. "Because mine doesn't have any ammo in it."

"Are you sure?" Coltrane leaned forward on his throne.

Avernus responded, "Yes. She is still alive."

Coltrane sat back and allowed a smug grin to crack his necrotic face. "Still. The Reapers are already attacking Temptation. The town can't

Clay & Susan Griffith

withstand my full army. I've thought of everything. I own Temptation now. I think you will be treating me with more respect, Avernus."

Avernus slowly turned his head. Wisps of energy slipped from the edges of his eyes.

Coltrane felt something odd under his skin. The parasites beneath his flesh began to scurry about. They always moved, but now they had a frenzied pace.

"What's happening?" Coltrane pressed his scaly fingers against his trembling cheek.

Avernus continued to stare at his protege.

Coltrane felt a sharp pain in his right hand. He pulled back the sleeve of his robe. A blister rose and popped, revealing a grub-like creature wriggling to the surface. It slithered out onto his hand where wings uncoiled wetly from around its abdomen. With a few flutters, the wings became rigid and the insect flew away.

Coltrane watched the parasite flitter into the darkness over his head. He felt more sharp pops all over his body. He could sense the little creatures crawling across his skin. Many of them dropped to the floor where they unwrapped their wings and took to flight.

The stunning silence of the room was broken only by the dry clatter of insect wings beating the air and wet popping sounds as more grubs bored free of Coltrane's flesh. He scraped his hands across his face and came away with scores of the little things. He took a step toward Avernus. His knees wobbled and his vision wavered.

"What are you doing to me?" Coltrane snarled. He took another faltering step like a child learning to walk or an old man failing in health.

The parasites fled him in a swarm. Dark, black blood poured from the wounds they left in their wake and drizzled over Coltrane's unsteady feet. With the next step, his weakened foot slipped in the blood and he crashed to the hard floor.

"I'll kill you." Coltrane's words were slurred. He placed his pulpy hands against the floor and tried to push himself to his knees. "You won't take my power. I won't let you."

Coltrane fell back to the floor. His heaving breath created ripples in the pool of blood in which his face rested. He no longer felt the parasites wriggling in his body. Only an agonizing emptiness remained.

Avernus looked up into the darkness of the tannis chamber and opened his mouth wide. The insects swirled, coalescing into a single body in flight. Then they dove as a white mass into the mouth of the Fallen. For more than a minute, the stream of winged bugs swept inside Avernus until finally they had all vanished into his mouth. The Fallen closed his mouth and calmly regarded the bloody mess on the floor that had been his servant.

Coltrane felt one last tug of skin on his face. With surprising speed, he grasped the insect as it erupted from the churned flesh of his cheek.

Coltrane laughed and extended his fist containing the bug. "Hah! I've beaten you. I'm Jesse Coltrane and I take what I want."

He put the fist to his mouth and shoved the bug inside. He felt it wriggling. With great concentration, he bit down and felt it crunch between his sharp teeth. He grinned and swallowed.

Unimpressed, Avernus turned and departed the great tannis chamber.

Coltrane kept breathing. All things considered, he felt it was a victory. As long as Coltrane was breathing, he had a chance to counterattack.

Book I: The Horror Lords

He'd been in worse straits than this. Any of the other Fallen would no doubt welcome his alliance to strike at Avernus. He'd have his revenge yet.

He heard a soft clicking.

Two gray feet with sharp, prominent nails on the large toes stepped into his field of vision.

"Do you need help?" Coltrane heard from his mouth, but they were the words of Tekkeng who stood close by. And he knew there wasn't an ounce of sincerity in his speech.

Coltrane recovered his own voice and muttered, "Avernus...betrayed us."

Tekkeng squatted next to the bloody Coltrane. His large black eyes stared into the pale pink eyes of the wounded man.

With horror, Coltrane heard himself say, "Humans. I have never liked them."

Tekkeng reached out with clawed hands, energy swirling around his fingertips.

Coltrane screamed.

The walls of Temptation were visible in the distant night. Rumbling explosions and the distant chatter of small arms fire drifted across the desert.

Nicolai said, "History will remember this day."

Baku nodded perfunctorily, present but unheeded at this great moment.

Nicolai turned to his silent lieutenant. "Signal ready to First Battalion. And hold Kasaar's cavalry on our right flank." His tank roared to life, spewing blue smoke. The Banshee Free State flag was tied to the aerial and it fluttered in the desert wind. "Send the Crimson Raiders against the north gate."

Nicolai leapt onto the tank as Baku went to a nearby radio operator. The armored vehicle spun left and threw sand from its treads. The Vanguard ran along beside the tank as it roared along the forward face of the camp until it reached the formation of the gathering First Battalion. The finest soldiers in Nicolai's possession, they were his core weapon. They crowded around as the tank as it rocked to a stop and idled down.

Nicolai was handed a microphone attached to loudspeakers. "Reapers! The gates of Temptation are overripe and rotten! I have delivered the city to us and I will lead you, my finest troops, to capture our greatest prize! Follow me to glory!" He drew his saber and pointed at the city. "I have only one request of you - blood and more blood!"

The tank wheeled and started across the desert, leading the advance on the helpless city. The companies of the First Battalion streamed after on foot. In the distance to his right, Nicolai saw a horde of Azeel on chanouks break camp and begin the two-mile trot toward Temptation.

This was it, Nicolai thought. The beginning of the end.

Chapter 34

With each second, the Reaper army streamed across the desert and roared closer to Temptation.

Debbi limped to one of the heavy cannons mounted on the wall. She slipped into the gunner's chair and sighted Nicolai's tank. When she

Clay & Susan Griffith

pulled levers, mechanisms failed to respond.

"Damn it! They spiked the guns!" Debbi clicked her com unit and swore again. "They're jamming us."

She looked around. Ringo and Holt watched her expectantly. Ringo's eyes slipped from her to the approaching Reapers and back to her. The other militiamen had run away when the Reaper attack started.

Debbi grabbed Ringo's shoulder. "We've got no communication here so you've got to get word to the Rangers about the situation. We need air support to hold this gate. Holt, get whatever militia you can find and set up a perimeter at St. Calixtus because we won't hold them here for long."

Holt nodded and Ringo exclaimed, "What about you?"

"I'll stay and do what I can to hold them up."

The young man stared at her with a stupefied look. "That's an army, Dallas! Come on, you've got to come with me!"

"Just go! Hurry!" She shoved him to the ladder.

Ringo looked back at her. Holt tugged his arm impatiently. Debbi gave the kid a grim nod and motioned him away. With a face frozen in horror, Ringo descended the ladder and raced into town with the Night Watch captain at his side.

Debbi turned back to the wall. She had a couple of loaded pulse rifles and several grenades; she might be able to take out Nicolai's tank. But her main target had to be Nicolai. She watched the outline of his figure riding atop the tank. Obviously he thought Fairchild and his turncoats were on the wall and he was safe from fire. This allowed him to play the bold, fearless leader. In fact, he probably expected the gates to be open for him. Even so, his tank could blast through it easily enough.

Debbi smiled grimly. The Reaper chief was too far away for a sure shot. Yet. She propped her Hellrazor rifles against the wall and waited, easing the weight off her injured leg. She steadfastly ignored the pain it was sending. She had done some quick field care on it and pumped it with a local anesthetic. It was useable and the pain was manageable. She just needed to hold together for a little while longer.

Suddenly something in the distant darkness caught her eye. A strange mass moved in the darkness west of the advancing Reaper mob. Wave after wave of shapes reflected the moonlight. It was as if they appeared out of nowhere. Debbi snatched a pair of binoculars off the floor and trained them out into the night.

Barely a mile from the town walls a strange, well-ordered army had appeared in the night. It was quick marching to strike the Reapers' left flank. The mysterious army was completely afoot, organized into mobile infantry squares like a painting from Earth's Baroque era. Their movements were extraordinarily orderly, almost lockstep, but their uniforms were torn and tattered. Many of them wore little more than rags. The soldiers in the first three ranks were armed with pulse rifles and small arms, but Debbi saw that most of those behind were empty handed. They had no weapons at all. The front rank was at least one hundred across and she couldn't yet make out the depth of the formation in the darkness. In the distance, she could barely make out the vague shape of a second square moving to slam the Reapers' unprotected rear. This army was well over a mile from contact with the Reapers, but already they were charging full out in perfect unison.

The left flank of the Reapers became aware of the approaching

Book I: The Horror Lords

threat. Many of the Reaper army managed to wheel to confront the oncoming threat. Others carried on as before, either assuming the newcomers were their own forces or simply consumed by the bloodlust to reach Temptation. The Reaper formation, which was ragged to begin with, broke even further as men and vehicles turned haphazardly, creating confusion among the ranks.

Even Nicolai's tank, which had been out in front of his First Battalion, pivoted to face this new enemy. Nicolai studied this strange enemy through binoculars and then climbed down inside the turret and closed the hatch. The tank opened up with the long gun and blew holes in the forward ranks of the oncoming horde. But that did nothing to staunch the fearless charge.

When the two armies were half a mile apart, the shooting began in earnest. The assault on Temptation ground to a virtual halt. The Reapers were far better armed, including numerous small armored vehicles with cannons and heavy machine guns. They opened a merciless barrage on the encroaching enemy.

The front ranks of the dark army staggered under the withering fire. They fell to the ground. Others dropped to their knees. But then they got back onto their feet and rejoined the charge. Incredibly, some pressed forward even without arms, with gaping wounds in their chests, and sometimes without a leg or a piece of their leg. They continued firing from the hip while maintaining their headlong run into the Reapers' fusillade.

By a quarter mile separation, the Reapers showed serious problems with resolve. Their flank bowed inward. Men fell back in the face of the onrushing assault. The Reapers' fire began to go wild. The closer the enemy came, the fewer hits the Reapers scored. The chaotic situation inside the Reapers began to claim victims as friendly fire chewed up the unsuspecting. The mysterious attackers closed the gap rapidly despite many gruesome injuries. They had been charging for nearly two miles with no sign of fatigue.

Suddenly the main square of the dark army began to glow with a faint green phosphorescent hue. A streak of green light lashed out from the square, so fast it might have been a mirage except that there was a colossal explosion in the midst of the Reaper formations. Bodies flew. Vehicles spun and reversed. A second flash of light arced across the diminishing killing ground and slashed into the Reapers, tearing and ripping them into pieces.

On the wall of Temptation, Debbi almost doubted she'd seen it. But she could smell the sharp tinge of ozone in the air. Only sykers could fight like that. But there was no syker army left on Banshee. However, at the moment these questions did not disturb her. Instead, she felt a giddy thrill knowing that every minute of the slaughter insured the Reapers would not take Temptation.

When the two armies collided, the Reapers were already in ebb and the clash only propelled them into a broken retreat. But as the mercenaries and revolutionaries of the First Battalion started to stream back, they found nowhere to go because, amazingly, their own allied Azeel cavalry struck them from the rear. The chanouk-borne warriors lashed through their shocked Reaper brothers with lance, gun, and claw. It didn't seem as if the Azeel were caught in a bloodlust to close with the strange enemy and were willing to charge through their own troops to get at them. Rather, the Azeel were attacking the other Reapers as if

Clay & Susan Griffith

they had suddenly changed sides.

Debbi continued to watch the bloody melee with horrified fascination. Even the worst evaluation of Reapers as ragtag mercenaries with no staying power couldn't explain the savage breakdown they were undergoing on the plain outside Temptation unless the mysterious army were sykers and were using their powers to break the Reapers from the inside as well as attacking them in conventional ways. The dark soldiers began to arm themselves with weapons wrenched from dead and dying Reapers and they set on the Azeel, mowing the anouks down like ripe grain. The remnants of the Azeel cavalry fled the field, racing with the remaining Reapers for safety.

The hatch on Nicolai's tank swung open and the Reaper chieftain emerged with pistol in his hand. He stared back briefly into the turret and then scanned the surrounding melee. His forces were in chaos. A contingent of the enemy troopers broke from the main battle. They moved as one, like a school of fish, toward the tank. There were at least thirty of them, all armed, and they ran and fired from the hip, obviously trying to kill Nicolai. The Reaper lord yelled something as he leapt from the tank. Ten of his Vanguard moved to intercept the oncoming assassins. The remaining five automatons surrounded Nicolai as he sprinted for Temptation's gate.

Debbi smiled evilly as she watched the revolutionary coming in her way and she reflected how different it was from the last time he appeared outside the gates of Temptation. This time though, he would get in.

Nicolai hit the door next to the gate and found it unlocked as he expected. He and his Vanguard raced into the city. He glanced around hurriedly for signs of the reception he'd been led to expect from his secret communication with Fairchild. He was surprised that only one person was waiting for him.

"Throw up your hands or you're dead!" Debbi shouted with relish as she stepped from behind the door.

The Vanguard spun as one and aimed their weapons at the Ranger. Debbi was partially shielded by a wooden pillar.

"If it starts, you're first, Nicolai!" Debbi warned, letting a red laser sight play over his face.

Nicolai called out, "Cease!" and the Vanguard slowly lowered their rifles.

Nicolai looked around. He was clearly surprised by the reception, or the lack of a friendly reception by militiamen loyal to Fairchild.

"Sorry," Debbi said. "I'm the only one here to meet you. Tell your boys to drop their guns. And you too"

Nicolai complied, setting his pistol at his feet, and the Vanguard let their rifles clatter to the dusty ground.

"You are under arrest." Debbi actually smiled. "All of you back up ten feet and lay down on your faces."

Nicolai announced with admirably steady pretense despite his predicament, "I am president of the Banshee Free State. I'm entitled to treatment befitting a visiting head of state."

"Then back up and get on your face, Mr. President! Or I will shoot you dead."

Nicolai looked out through the doorway. His face showed very unpresidential alarm. "Very well. Then I formally request political asylum."

Book I: The Horror Lords

"Shut your mouth!" Debbi yelled. "My God, Ross was right. You do like to hear yourself talk. Back up and get on the ground! Now!"

"You must close that door," Nicolai said as he backed up. "This town is in great danger." He signaled his guards to lie on the ground and he went grudgingly to one knee with his hands raised.

She stooped and tossed the Vanguard weapons far out of reach. "If anybody even twitches, it's going to be ugly."

"Arrest me!" Nicolai shouted. "But take me now. Get me away from here! They're coming for me!"

The Reaper started to his feet. He froze, staring intently behind Debbi with a look of fear that was unnatural and unnerving on his usually confident face. She raised her pistol at him in warning, but then heard sounds behind her.

Debbi turned to see five soldiers slamming through the door at a run. As they barreled into the city, they kept pulling the triggers of their pulse rifles, but were out of ammunition. They wore tattered uniforms. She easily recognized them as zombies, but they weren't the locals. Undead soldiers wearing the remnants of old UN uniforms.

Debbi put a shot through one's forehead. It staggered, but continued toward her. She backed up and fired again. This time the shell tore off the side of its head. It paused, as if catching its breath. Then it kept coming.

The Ranger felt a pricking inside her brain. Unlike the battering, clawed fist of the Skinny or the deft manipulation of Hallow, this was an awkward, palsied probing. A surge of anger welled up in her and this rage blocked the tapping sensation.

Debbi popped the nearest zombie with her black gun attachment. It froze in its tracks. Pleased, she shot two more. They too halted in mid-step. One of those undead already had a gaping head wound and it crashed to the ground.

The remaining two were suddenly on her. Or rather, they were trying to claw past with no apparent interest in her. They were hardwired to get Nicolai. The two rotting things flailed at her and scrambled to pass. Debbi angrily kneed one of the stinking troopers in the gut and brought the butt of her weapon down on the back of its head. She heard a soft pop as the gun cracked skull. Fresh blood welled from her lacerated leg due to her exertions, but she wouldn't stop. The second zombie snapped its chipped, yellow teeth at her. She shoved it away and fired a black needle into its face. It fell. She needled the first one as it struggled to stand, even with its now lopsided head.

The first two she had needled suddenly surged back to life and rushed at her. She fired standard ammo into one's head. It dropped to the ground like a sack of rotten potatoes. The last zombie came at her without fear. She shakily backed up and fired again.

The slug hit the thing in the shoulder. It spun completely around and still lunged headlong at her. Debbi stumbled aside and it fell flat. The young Ranger stomped a booted heel down on its back and put a bullet through the back of its brain. All the undead soldiers lay still and finally dead.

"That's right!" she shouted. "You zombies are in my town now!" Her breath was nothing more than harsh, jagged heaves. Sweat poured off her despite the cool night air. She laughed uncontrollably out loud and then looked toward Nicolai.

He was gone. As were his bodyguards.

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Oh crap." Debbi staggered slightly from near exhaustion.

"Dallas!" she heard from behind.

She swung around. Ross was standing in the doorway, his tall form filling the gate, duster blowing out behind him, cool steel eyes watching her.

"Ross?" She took a step. Then she doubted it, all this time without him, left alone to face the horrors. He no longer seemed real to her, as if he was just a fragment of her imagination, a last minute plea for him to be fighting at her side.

"Yeah, it's me," he said simply as he came forward.

"You're alive!" She ran to Ross, her pain forgotten, her soul lifting. She impulsively threw her arms around him.

But his arms didn't enfold her. He just stood there. "Of course I'm alive. What'd you think?"

"I don't know. I just . . . what are you doing here? How did you get through the fighting?" She stepped back, her arms falling away to lay limp at her sides. She was confused and hurt. Partially embarrassed at her outburst, she looked down for a moment.

"I came with the fighting." Ross indicated the dead zombies on the ground. "You need to take it easy on our new allies. They just stomped the Reapers for us."

"What?" Debbi stepped back from the unresponsive Ross. Things were happening too fast. Her fatigued brain could barely hold a cohesive thought.

General Quantrill appeared behind Ross. Debbi instinctively raised her rifle. Ross swatted it down with enough force to knock it from her grip. It hurt.

"No!" Ross yelled.

She stared at Ross, stunned. The ache in her hand resurfaced, still sore from her fight with the monster. Her gaze shifted to the dead man standing beside Ross. It was the same dead man they had surveyed at the Red River. A dead syker with other dead sykers. What the hell was going on? And why was Ross with Quantrill?

The decaying General studied the dead troopers sprawled on the dusty street then glared at Debbi. "Did you kill my people?"

Debbi glared back, afraid to show fear or the confusion she felt.

"They attacked me. So they're dead."

"You allowed Nicolai to escape," Quantrill stated acidly.

"He got away," she retorted, finding it distasteful to respond to this thing's questions.

Quantrill snapped, "Without your interference, Ranger, I would've had him. And I could have crushed the Reapers once and for all. But now Nicolai is free to reform his army and endanger the planet again."

Debbi shook her head in disbelief over the while situation.

Ross asked Quantrill, "Can't you scan for him?"

"No. The Legionnaires who were fixed on him are gone now. Thanks to your Ranger. We can only search the town before he escapes."

Ross raised his hand. It trembled slightly. "I wouldn't do that right now, General. My people are still on edge. And they have black guns. We don't want to spark any costly firefights at this point."

Quantrill grunted with begrudging agreement. His eyes darted to Debbi's holstered Dragoon and up to her face.

Debbi croaked, her voice strained, "What the hell is going on? Where did all these . . . sykers come from?"

Book I: The Horror Lords

Ross ignored her question and extended his hand to Debbi. "General Quantrill, this is Debbi Dallas, one of my Colonial Rangers. Dallas, General Garrett Quantrill, commander-in-chief of the Reformed Syker Legion. And our new ally."

Quantrill nodded curtly to Debbi. She unconsciously focused on the gap in his rotting face where his teeth showed through. He noticed her gaze and angrily pulled back. At the same time, three more zombies in the tattered uniform of the old Syker Legion emerged from the smoke of battle that drifted through the door and over the wall.

One of the new arrivals, in a captain's uniform, presented Quantrill with a bundle of cloth. The General let it cascade from his hand to the ground. It was Nicolai's Banshee Free State flag ripped from the tank.

Quantrill grinned. "Thank you, Captain Marat. And so it ends. Captain Ross, I'm sure you're glad to see the end of the tyranny this flag represents."

Ross glanced the flag up and down, seemingly lost for a moment. Then he said, "Step in, General. I'll show you to my office. You can set up your command post there."

Debbi gaped as the zombie officers filed past her. Her nostrils clogged with their stench. She blocked Ross with her bleeding arm, but she could muster nothing more than a silent, dumfounded look as she pointing back at Quantrill.

Ross said, "They're here to help us."

"What are they? Where have you been?"

"I'll tell you everything later." He screwed up his face as if in pain. "Pull all the black guns from the Rangers. It's over, Dallas. It's a new day in Temptation."

She stared at Ross as he stepped past her and fell in line silently behind Quantrill and his undead staff.

A chill went up her spine.

The Legion waited motionless on the desert outside Temptation. They had not moved in two days as if they'd been turned off with a switch. Some squads had been sent to harry the Reaper retreat, but the vast majority of the undead army stood like statues on the windswept plain beyond the walls of the city. They were barely a quarter the size of the Reaper army that attacked Temptation, yet they had sliced through them without trouble. Undead sykers. It would have been an inhuman combination too horrible to contemplate if they were not here already.

It was night. Debbi stood alone in the south gate tower watching the motionless corpses below and pondering the many frightful possibilities. She switched her weight from one leg to the other in an effort to relieve the ache. The stench from below was overpowering even with the brisk wind.

The only noises Debbi heard were the sounds of the wind rippling through the Legionnaires' ragged uniforms and fluttering the torches set around the guard tower. The wind again held the same eerie sensation as the night she destroyed the monster. It pounded against her like incessant waves.

She pulled her collar tight against the frigid air.

"Hey, Dallas."

She jerked around to see Stew climbing through the access hatch into the tower. Catching herself, she winced and put out a steady arm

Clay & Susan Griffith

on the wall. She nodded a greeting and went back to surveying the horrible scene below with a calming breath.

Stew leaned on the wall next to her. "Paying homage to our liberators?"

Debbi responded, but only to ask, "Everything go all right?"

"Fine." He slid his firearm from the holster. A black gun attachment gleamed along the barrel. "I doled out black guns to all Rangers and militiamen. Those militiamen who were left anyway." He looked at the black gun and asked, "How many of these things do we have?"

Debbi eyed him suspiciously.

"Just asking." Stew reholstered his weapon.

"It's better if only I know how many and where they are now."

"Okay." Stew watched her face from the side. It was stiff and unmoving, frozen into an emotionless mask, still bruised and scratched. He couldn't put his finger on it, but she had changed after Ross had returned. Battered, but not broken. She had taken on a terrible burden. He felt a surge of pride and sadness watching her. He would stand beside her, no matter what happened in the future.

The former Jesuit priest hesitated, but then said, "I saw Ross today." He saw her flinch just slightly. "He asked if you were on duty and I said no. Told him you were still recuperating."

"Thanks. I am." Debbi brushed back some hair with her hand. She hoped Stew didn't notice it was trembling. "I can't bear to be in the office right now. Was Quantrill there?"

Stew nodded bitterly. "Yeah. He and his staff were strutting around like they own the place."

"They do. But that doesn't mean they don't stink."

Stew glanced at his watch. "I'm on exterminator duty in an hour. Anything else I can do now?"

"No." Debbi reached over and patted his arm. "Thanks."

"No problem." He placed his warm hand over her cold one and held it there a moment, hoping she knew she wasn't alone in this darkness. He released her hand gently and departed with nothing further said.

She gripped the top of the wall, feeling as if she was tumbling. The corpses in the plains below and the corpses inside the walls surrounded her.

In the tumultuous months since she had abandoned the space station, there had been one constant in her life to fill the emptiness-Ross. After the death of her mother, she was devastated and lonely, but she had never felt alone. Ross's presence dominated her days. Throughout the time of the horrors in Temptation, she had found a heightened level of confidence within herself, at first because she feared Ross's rebuke and later because she craved his respect. She watched him react to unimaginable conditions with predictable calm. Whatever the situation, he made a plan and went to work. He made others believe in him, no matter the nature of the horror that stalked the streets of his town. Even when it seemed that he might be overwhelmed by events, his face glowed with a savage grace that made her believe he would inevitably prevail and the town would be safe.

Now there was a new thing stalking the streets of his town. And Ross was unaffected by it.

She felt as if she was alone among the dead.

Debbi released her hold on the wall. She turned and moved quickly for the access hatch, her pain no longer shackling her. She began to

Book I: The Horror Lords

break down the crisis into a set of accomplishable tasks.

Temptation was safe from the Reapers. One down. Now to deal with the Reformed Syker Legion which now occupied the city.

The situation was a desperate standoff, but at least it wasn't a defeat.

Debbi strode, torch in hand, through the streets. She didn't intend for Temptation to stay buried long under the dead. She would care for Temptation the way Ross once did.

Ross might be gone, but she reminded herself, he was still alive. And that would have to do for now too.

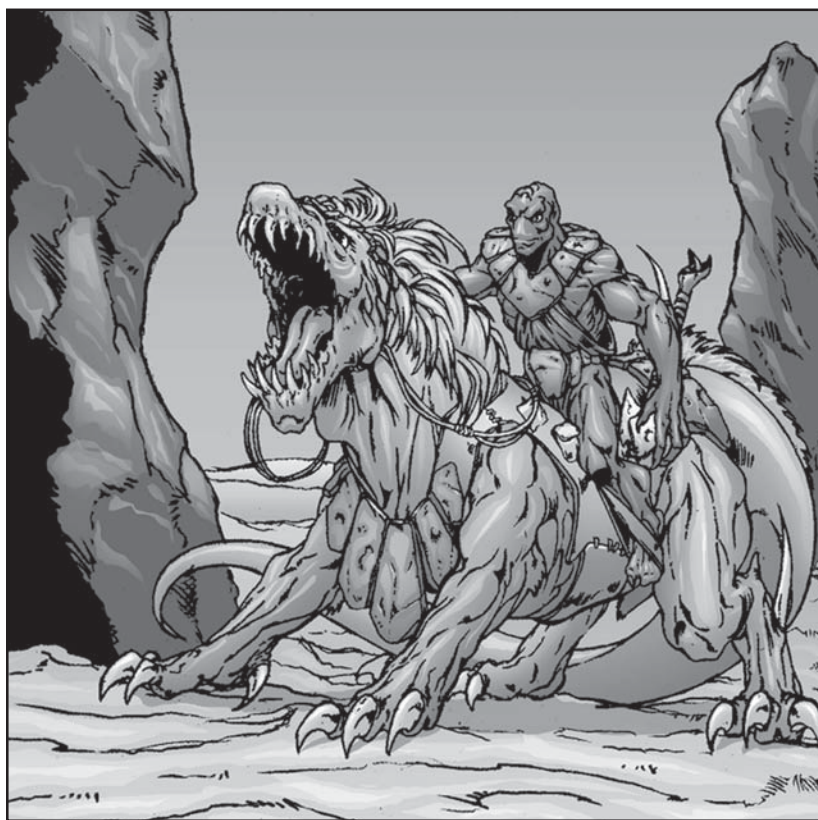
The wind suddenly changed direction.

Debbi heard the tannis singing; every stone inside the walls of Temptation began to vibrate with its voice.

It was time to go to work.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Book II: The Undead War





Clay & Susan Griffith

Chapter 1

The stench was horrific.

The smell of death was everywhere.

It permeated everything: clothes, hair, furniture. The very air dripped with it. The hallway reeked of it.

Colonial Ranger Debbi Dallas crouched in the dark and confining hall, sweating profusely, gun gripped tight. She saw movement and swung her gun to bear on it, teeth gritted and face grimaced against the smell.

Stew stepped out of the shadows and crouched beside her and shoved his wide-brimmed hat back behind him where it hung from the latigo around his neck.

Stew whispered, "The power's out."

Debbi cursed, taking the moment to shove her red hair away from her green eyes. She drew in a deep breath, which she instantly regretted, and straightened her long frame. "We don't have much time. They'll be here soon. We have to go now."

"Then let's do it. They're not getting their hands on another one." The venom in Stew's voice matched her own.

A burst of gunfire ripped out through the door Debbi and Stew crouched beside. The cadre of four Rangers in the hall flinched. Everyone's nerves were raw. But that was becoming passe. They were learning to live with the strain.

At least some of them were.

Debbi locked eyes with Patrick Ngoma and Ty Miller hunched on the opposite side of the door from her and Stew. Ngoma's black skin blended into the shadows while Miller's pale face hovered like some ghostly visage with a cheesy pencil-thin moustache.

Debbi clicked her comlink. "Fitz, you're on."

An explosive commotion immediately began in the empty room next door. Debbi didn't know exactly what Boston Fitzpatrick was doing in there, but it sounded like a militia squad was coming through the wall into the shooter's room. She heard the shooter shout in alarm before opening fire inside the room, no doubt spraying the wall that Fitz was battering.

Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, Miller stood and kicked in the door. It crashed open and Debbi flung herself through, rolling on the rug and not stopping until she was behind cover, in this case a couch. Stew rushed in behind her.

Debbi spied a man swinging an automatic rifle toward Stew.

"You're not gonna take me!" the crazed figure screamed. "You're dead! You're all dead!"

Debbi leaped at him. A blow with the butt of her rifle swept the shooter's legs out from under him. He fell back into a table with a crash. Stew was up and running. He kicked the rifle aside and pointed his own down at the writhing man on the floor.

"It's Ringo," Stew announced with disbelief.

Debbi climbed to her feet and looked down at the prone figure. She was stunned. Will "Ringo" Stuckey was one of their own. A Colonial Ranger. A lawman. He was their youngest. But even so, he didn't go around shooting like a crazy drunk.

She knelt beside him. "Hey, Ringo, it's me. It's Debbi. You're okay now. We're here to help."

Book II: The Undead War

Ringo's eyes were wide and dilated in terror. Spittle ran from the corner of his mouth. He babbled, "Are you dead? Don't touch me!"

Debbi grabbed his hands as they flailed at her.

Miller came forward with Ngoma and the massive, one-armed Boston Fitzpatrick who towered over the cowering young man.

Fitz said, "Jesus, what's wrong with him? He looks like he's gone nuts."

Miller responded quietly, "I don't blame him. That's the second person this week. There are times I want to do the same thing."

"Well don't!" Debbi snapped. "We can't afford it."

Heavy footfalls sounded on the stairs outside, a steady, rhythmic stomping. Ringo let out a piercing shriek and scrambled back. "They're here! Don't let them get me!" He grabbed Debbi's wrist.

Debbi extracted herself from his grip and rose, her eyes darting quickly to the door. She spoke aside to Ringo. "They won't. We'll take care of this."

Stew stepped up beside her, his gun at the ready. "I don't think we can, Debbi. This is more than just disturbing the peace. They'll take him."

"No they won't. Not this time."

"We gonna fight them now?" There was fear in Miller's voice, but Debbi knew he would follow her orders without question.

The smell of decaying flesh intensified. Debbi suppressed a cough as her nose and throat rebelled against the cloying odor. Brought on by the stench, memories of the past year battered her. The death of her mother, her friends – what used to terrify Debbi was now a permanent part of her life. The smell of Death was commonplace in Temptation.

There had been a time not so long ago when you could smell the dead coming. Now, however, you couldn't. Their stink permeated the air and hung there. It was everywhere and there was no place to hide.

All eyes were on the doorway, waiting. None of them wanted to see what would walk through. No one wanted to be reminded that the town of Temptation was merely a graveyard come to life.

The footsteps were loud and the floor shook with their coming. Miller inched back next to redheaded Fitzpatrick's broad frame. Ngoma lifted his rifle. The Rangers instinctively reached for their throats and pulled bandannas up over their noses and mouths. They waited, all looking like Old West outlaws.

A large, bald figure suddenly filled the doorway. Four more like him stood behind in the hallway. The figure's clothes were baggy and soiled; his flesh was gray and decaying. His left cheekbone sagged so heavily that a bare spot over his temple had begun to show, pulled apart by the weight of the flaccid skin. An old bullet hole showed prominently in his throat. A greenish fluid oozed from it. His body had numerous orifices from which liquid leaked. Wet stains dotted his uniform.

His garb was that of a captain in the Syker Legion. This particular syker had been killed by anouks twenty years ago in one of the most famous battles in Banshee history.

Now he was walking again.

He spoke. "Where is the assailant?" His gravel voice was punctuated by a distinct whistling as the air slipped through the hole in his throat.

"The situation is under Ranger control, Captain Marat," Debbi responded, her voice muffled by her bandanna. "We'll take care of it."

The zombie syker turned a dead eye on Debbi. "He's a dangerous criminal. We'll remove him so that he does not endanger anyone further."

"You can try," Fitzpatrick growled, his finger reflexively hovered over the

Clay & Susan Griffith

touchpad affixed near the trigger of his gun.

The zombie's eyes immediately dropped down to follow Fitz's motion. Two of the other zombies behind him moved closer and raised their weapons. The Captain waited. An insect scrambled out of his partially opened mouth and skittered down his chest.

Debbi swallowed hard against the bile that was pushing its way up her throat. "We'll escort the prisoner," she said firmly. "This is our arrest."

Marat said, "This man attacked a Legionary patrol. Then he fled here where he began shooting randomly, endangering innocent citizens. We will take him."

"Not this time," Stew said. He stood in front of the babbling Ringo who was lost in a realm of madness and fear.

"So be it." The Captain stepped farther into the room, flanked by two zombie thugs. His eyes began to crackle with energy.

When he saw Captain Marat's eyes change, Stew filled his mind quickly with mindless hatred, with visions of stomping the Captain's face into the dirt he crawled out of.

It brought a smile to Marat's face.

Debbi saw in an instant what was transpiring. Damn it! Marat was probing their minds. She felt the telltale probe, but easily deflected it. Since the Legion came to Temptation, Debbi had come to realize she had an unusual ability to resist syker probes and attacks. She didn't know why, but she was grateful for it. She had trained all the Colonial Rangers on a few basic mind block techniques, but there were too many sykers here to keep them all out. She needed to diffuse the situation fast.

Debbi shoved Stew back and held the other Rangers in place with a withering glare. She understood their anger and their frustration at letting the Legion dictate command, but force was on the enemy's side this time. They commanded an army of nearly a thousand while the Colonial Rangers in Temptation numbered barely a dozen. As much as she wanted to fight, she knew that starting something here and now would only lead to disaster.

She turned back to Marat. "We'll accompany you to the jail. Let Captain Ross make the call."

"If you wish." The Captain smiled, his gray lips pulling back over blackened teeth. Without a gesture or a nod of his head, two of the creatures behind him stepped forward to collect Ringo. A silent communication was passing among them all. Words were unnecessary.

Miller and Fitzpatrick wouldn't budge from their protective stances and had to be forcefully shoved aside by the two dead Legionnaires. They yanked Ringo to his feet. The young Ranger screamed.

"Oh God, don't let them take me! They're dead! They're dead! I'm begging you!"

"It's okay," Debbi insisted, trying to reassure him. "We're going with you, Ringo. Ross will set this straight. Don't worry." To the two zombies, she snarled, "Take it easy with him."

They ignored her and held the squirming, terrified man between them as they exited the room. Debbi and her squad fell in behind them.

Debbi's face was twisted tight against her anger. The Rangers had lost control over their town and it was a bitter pill to swallow. And it didn't matter that they didn't like it because there was a dead army shoving it down their throat. There was nothing that could be done to stop it. Not one damn thing.

Stew's voice was a hushed breath in her ear. "Ease down. They're not

Book II: The Undead War

going to have to be mind readers to know what you're thinking."

"Well, when they do read it, they're going to get more than they bargained for." The words emerged clipped and harsh, her jaw clenching as she fought for control.

"I'm glad I can't read your mind then." There was a half smile on his face.

Drawing in as deep as breath as she could, she struggled to return it. Her muscles relaxed a bit. "Get Fitz and Miller up in front. If nothing else, it will look like we're in charge. Maybe it will calm Ringo down."

"The only thing that will calm Ringo down is one of the Doctor's dreamland pills. But I'll tell them." Stew slipped back and soon two Colonial Rangers jogged up to take the lead, their feet kicking dust back onto the zombies.

Surprisingly, Captain Marat said nothing and made no move to displace them. Ringo quieted somewhat, or maybe it was just his mind finally shutting down from the horror of what was transpiring.

Debbi couldn't really blame the young Ranger. Temptation, once a jewel of human colonialism on Banshee, was now desolate and putrid. No one walked the streets that didn't have to. Shops were open, but there were few shoppers. Despite the good weather, all windows were closed to keep out the stench. Those few hearty souls that did venture out scurried to their destinations with fear emblazoned in their faces. Everyone prayed that they would slip unnoticed past the cold, lifeless eyes of the squads of Legionnaires roaming the streets. These squads of undead were supposed to be patrolling for criminals, helping the Rangers enforce the law. In reality, they were horrific Praetorians that served as a galling reminder to citizen and Ranger alike that the Syker Legion held power in Temptation.

The undead patrols in town weren't even the sum total of the loathsome things. The bulk of the Legion waited outside the town walls, standing stiff as boards in the Banshee wind.

The worst part of the whole hellish situation for Debbi was that the commander of the Colonial Rangers, Dave Ross, was responsible for it. He had escorted the Legion into the city past the shocked Rangers only a month ago. They all trusted him and he used that fact to lull them into an uneasy acceptance of the horrible things. By the time some of them began to realize that all was not as it seemed, Ross had already given the zombies the key to the city.

Getting it back would take a fight.

And a damn ugly one.

Chapter 2

"Stay out here," Debbi said to Stew and the other Rangers.

None of them wanted to hear that. They immediately began to argue, but Debbi silenced them with a hand.

The undead Legionnaires dragged Ringo into the Ranger headquarters and slammed the door on his frantic whimpering. The gathered Rangers stood outside in the dark, dusty street.

"If they take Ringo," Stew commented quietly, "any of us could be next."

Debbi nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I know. That's why I'm trying to keep their focus on me. I don't want them to associate any other Rangers with trouble. If they go after somebody, it needs to be me."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Ross won't let them take Ringo," Fitz said, still fired up. "That's one thing he won't stand. Neither will we. I'm not of afraid of them."

"I am," Debbi countered. "I know you all care about Ringo, but a show of force isn't going to buy us anything. Not yet. The less contact we all have with them or Ross right now, the better our chances in the long run."

She stepped up onto the wooden sidewalk outside headquarters and turned back to her companions. "All of you go make contact with the Night Watch and militia. Let them know what's happened and that Ringo has been arrested. I don't know how bad the stink's going to get, but we want everyone to be ready." She tapped her forehead. "And remember what I taught you. Be mindful. We don't want any mind-reading screwing up our plans now."

Stew watched her intently with his penetrating blue eyes, hesitating to leave her. He removed his hat and scrubbed at his close-cropped fair hair. Finally he nodded, replaced his hat, and walked away. The others quietly scattered into the chilled town.

Debbi took a breath. To buy a few calming seconds, she pulled down her bandanna, took a tube of camphor gel, and smeared some under her nose to fight the stench she knew would fill the office. She wasn't sure she was ready for this. Confronting Ross had never been high on her list of things to do; now it was lower than ever. Over the past few weeks, the few times they'd had contact had unnerved her. He would stare at her with someone else's eyes and her fragile, calm demeanor would shatter. Now, as she contemplated facing him, she felt her fear well up like black oil from the pit of her stomach.

She shoved it back down, allowing her anger to flare instead, and she clung to that. Temper would carry her past this moment. Quantrill would most likely be with Ross and she hated him most of all. Her rage flamed higher and it raced through her veins until she thought her skin was on fire.

She threw open the door.

Captain Marat was closing the door to the lock-up. Two undead troopers lounging against the wall stared dully at her as she entered.

As bad as the smell was on the street, here in an enclosed room it was nearly intolerable. Debbi pulled up the bandanna again. All Rangers made a show of putting them on around the zombies. They had taken refuge in such small acts of revolution to give them some solace against the creeping helplessness they felt.

Waving her hand in front of her face, she snarled, "God Almighty! Open a window! You people stink."

Debbi angrily slid up a window and stood taking deep breaths through the bandanna.

Captain Marat crossed the room and purposefully closed the window, nearly crushing her fingers. Debbi's eyes glared at the rotting face from over the edge of the green cloth.

Marat priggishly rubbed a cured, blackened finger over the surface of a desk and held it up for her to see. "Dust. Keep it closed."

Debbi looked at the dead man for a long second. Then she pulled her big Colonial Ranger Dragoon from its holster and slammed it against the windowpane, shattering the glass. The Captain started, but her weapon was back in its holster before he could react.

The wind rushed in carrying dust and blowing papers across the office. Debbi's red hair tousled wildly.

"I like the breeze," she said.

Book II: The Undead War

The door to Dave Ross's office opened.

"What the hell is going on out here?" Ross asked, grim-faced.

Debbi walked away from Captain Marat. "Nothing. Just a little discussion about the role of proper ventilation in everyday hygiene."

For just a second, she expected a conspiratorial gleam from Ross's eye. She had struck another minor blow in the continuing skirmish between the Rangers and the Undead Legion. Then she had a heart-deadening realization.

Ross wasn't on her side.

He looked at her with eyes that were barely his. The surface rippled with the illusion of personality; all seemed normal. But just beneath that surface glint was a dark hole that used to be his core. His gestures weren't quite fluid. His stance wasn't quite solid. His expressions weren't quite complete.

Some of the other Rangers were sure Ross was still the Old Man, the same commander because he still shouted orders when he needed to and stared hard at slackers when he had to. They felt he had just made a deal with the Legion, distasteful as that was, that saved Temptation from the greater horror of the Reapers.

Debbi knew differently.

This man in front of her wasn't Dave Ross.

Ross was under the influence of General Quantrill.

She looked at the floor as she squeezed past him into his office. "I need to talk to you." She pulled her bandanna off her face.

The office was a wreck. Ross was usually very organized. He didn't let work pile up and he was habitually tidy. It also didn't hurt that he owned little more than what he wore on his back. But now his formerly well-ordered sanctum was a morass of scattered papers and piled-up plates of spoiled food, something that Ross of old would never have allowed.

Noting the uneaten food, Debbi realized with a shock that Ross was twenty pounds lighter than he had been two months ago when he left Temptation to scout Newcomb's algae farm on the Red River and somehow had fallen in with Quantrill's Legion. In the month since he returned with the Legion, she hadn't spent more than a few minutes alone with him and hadn't noticed the alarming decay in his physical condition until now. Ross had always been tall and lean, but he had been the model of health, robust and powerful. Now he was gaunt. His cheeks were sallow and his eyes were sinking into dark hollows. His normally short black hair was long and greasy and his usually well-trimmed beard had grown unkempt and scruffy. His filthy clothes hung on him like a scarecrow.

She desperately wanted the old Ross back. The weathered leader of Temptation's Colonial Rangers had taken Debbi under his wing as soon as she appeared in town as a refugee from her previous disastrous posting on the Cabal ore processing space station. Ross had always judged her more harshly, often receiving her reports with grunts of indefinite opinion, but never praise. Slowly though, he brought out her natural skills and restructured her belief in herself almost without her noticing. Debbi had fewer years in the service than any other Ranger in Temptation, except perhaps Ringo. Yet, they had all accepted her leadership without question when Ross was lost. However, she had no interest in continuing her de facto command any longer than necessary.

Debbi found herself staring at Ross's haunted face. She couldn't imagine the horror he was experiencing now, trapped in his own mind. She hoped that when she did break him free, he wouldn't remember any

Clay & Susan Griffith

of it. Just seeing the constant pain on his face caused a dreadful, icy feeling to seep through her. She was sure that deep down he was fighting. He wouldn't know how to do anything else. But she didn't know what Quantrill had done to him. She would have thought if there was one man who couldn't be broken, it was Dave Ross.

It was a chilling lesson to her, and a reminder that she must be the only one to hold sensitive information so none of her friends would be the target of syker torture. If Quantrill came after her, she'd handle it, but she refused to put any of her colleagues in harm's way. It had only been months since Debbi had been psychically raped by a Skinny. She could go through it again if it meant protecting someone else from that terror.

"Sit down," Ross said.

Debbi saw that the wooden chair in front of his desk was caked with muck from the undead. The arms particularly were darkened from a month of dead flesh resting on them.

She remained standing.

Ross flopped carelessly into his chair behind the desk. He stared listlessly ahead and didn't speak.

Finally, Debbi said, "The Legion arrested Ringo."

Ross didn't move at first. Then he lifted his head with a puzzled look.

"Ringo," she repeated. "Will Stuckey? Ringo?"

Ross nodded with recognition. Then his head slumped down again.

Debbi felt a catch in her throat as she watched him. It was painful, like watching someone you loved in the final stages of a terminal illness. There was nothing she could do to help him. She couldn't even leave him in peace because the town had to be protected in his absence. And that was her job now.

She continued, "It's a ridiculous trumped up charge. We had the situation under control and the Legionnaires muscled their way in. They don't have the authority to arrest Rangers. They're here through a temporary invitation from the Town Council. Right? Aren't the Rangers still the supreme law enforcement authority here?"

Ross shrugged. "Technically."

"Then technically, I want Ringo released to the Rangers."

"He's in our lock-up, isn't he?"

"Yeah, but you know what's going to happen. The Legion will hold a tribunal and condemn him and take him out to the Bone Camp. I don't want that. We've got to put our foot down. It's got to stop *here!*" Debbi leaned over the desk. "Don't you see? If the Legion has the power to police the police, it's all over."

Ross still didn't look up. "It's already over, Dallas. The days of the Colonial Rangers havin' to go it alone to protect people on this planet are over. The Legion is here to help us. You need to cooperate with them. They want the same thing we do."

Debbi wanted to say his words were a merely a well-rehearsed script, but there was a level of passion in his voice that said otherwise. It was his seeming conviction that kept the rest of the Rangers doubting Debbi's belief that Ross was just the Legion's tool.

She stood straight. "I don't accept that. You tell Quantrill that!"

"Why don't you tell me yourself."

Debbi spun around as General Quantrill entered the office followed by his omnipresent undead adjutant, as well as Captain Marat and Lester Atkinson, the meek president of the Temptation Bank and head of the Town Council.

Book II: The Undead War

General Garrett Quantrill was a tall, imposing corpse of a man. He was less decayed than most of his troopers. He spent his brief death before his resurrection in a relatively decent casket rather than under the sand and loam of the Red River Valley where most of his troops fell in battle and were left behind to be covered by the Worldstorm. His skin had a sickening blackish, green hue and there was a noticeable tear in the skin of his cheek where his molars showed through. However, his jaw worked admirably well for speaking and his eyes were clear. His adjutant was less well preserved with one eye gone and most of his nose dropped away. His lips were drawn back to reveal cracked and yellow teeth.

Debbi didn't back down in front of the phalanx of rotting dead.

She pointed through the door into the outer office. "You don't have the authority to hold Will Stuckey."

Quantrill feigned confusion, although no doubt he knew the situation well, thanks to psychic messages from his toady Marat.

The Captain leaned forward helpfully. "Sir, one of the Colonial Rangers went berserk and became a menace to public safety. We took him into custody."

"A menace to public safety!" Debbi shouted. "He didn't do anything!"

Captain Marat retorted, "He was discharging a weapon indiscriminately within town limits. He is a danger to himself and others."

Debbi surged at the Captain. "You rotten son of a bitch!"

"Dallas!" Ross yelled.

The violence in his voice brought her to a halt.

Ross was standing now, but he was staring down at the top of the desk. "Stuckey will be treated like anybody else. If he's guilty, so be it. If not, then he'll walk."

"But Ross . . ." she began.

"That's it!" Ross slammed his fist on the desk. "The law applies to everybody. Even Rangers. Let it go and do your job."

Debbi stared wordlessly at Ross. Her lips quivered with rage and fear.

Quantrill said, "Captain Ross's words are reasonable, Ranger Dallas. No one is above the law."

Debbi turned to the other living human in the room. "Mr. Atkinson, has the Legion been granted official law enforcement powers in Temptation?"

Atkinson looked flustered and she instantly regretted pulling the Milquetoast bureaucrat into the conversation.

He stammered, "Well, I . . . uh . . . they are . . ."

Quantrill said evenly, "If we must get technical, the Syker Legion is a reconstituted unit of the defeated United Nations Expeditionary Force, the only such unit currently on the surface of Banshee. As such, it inherits all duties and missions lately exercised by United Nations forces on Banshee. EXFOR had the long-standing right to exercise supreme authority in any area of military operation or in case of civil emergency. Temptation clearly fit into both categories when we arrived last month. Civic functions had virtually ceased and you were in imminent danger of destruction from an invading Reaper army. Even so, when I entered Temptation, I refused to assume governmental authority, although I clearly was within my rights to do so. But since this town had an existing, albeit incapacitated, government, it was my desire to restore it to normal operation rather than distress it further by instituting a military regime. To that end, I made the resources of the Legion available to the civic authorities to whatever level they have desired to restore order in Temptation.

"We have assisted in destroying those flying creatures that had infested

Clay & Susan Griffith

your town. We assisted in reburying the mindless undead that had risen from your cemeteries. We have assisted in erecting field wind-generators to restore some electrical power. We have assisted in cleaning criminal elements off the street and prosecuting profiteers. We have secured badly needed supplies and, moreover, the Legion's presence has reassured caravaneers that Temptation is once again a safe place to trade. The Legion, so far as I can see, has been nothing but a boon for this town."

The General slowly turned his head to regard Atkinson. "I believe Mr. Atkinson, and the rest of the Town Council, approves of the Legion's record of service here. Yes, Mr. Atkinson?"

"Oh . . . yes. Of course. Things are much better. I enjoy the electricity. And those bat things were horrible. And, of course, all those horrible zombies wandering around . . ." Atkinson turned pale and froze, unsure how to undo the insult. His tongue darted out nervously between his lips. "I . . . didn't mean you, of course, General. I meant . . . the *undesirable* zombies. The horrible ones. You and your men are a credit to your . . . your . . . lifestyle."

"Thank you, Mr. Atkinson." Quantrill extended a decaying hand at Debbi. "I'm a soldier; I understand loyalty to a comrade. But like your captain said, the law has to apply to everyone. Even the lawmen. Otherwise, the social order could break down again."

Debbi had been uncomfortably quiet for too long. She said, "Understand this, General. If you harm one hair on Ranger Stuckey's head while he's in your custody, I'll show you just how far the social order can break down."

"Ranger Stuckey will be treated as all prisoners. Surely you aren't requesting special treatment for one of your own?"

Debbi shot a glance at Ross who had resumed his seat and was staring down, unengaged by the conversation. Then she shoved between Quantrill and Captain Marat, leaving this hive of insane dead bureaucracy. She instantly regretted it as patches of viscous mold adhered to her. As she stood in the squad room, the door to Ross's office closed behind her.

She keyed the touch pad to the lock-up door and pulled it open. Ringo sat huddled in a cell, his head between his knees.

"Hey, Ringo," Debbi called out.

The young man's head shot up, his wild brown hair flying. The look of wild expectation on his boyish face tore at her heart. He rose and grabbed the bars with white-knuckled fingers.

"Dallas! Are you here to get me out?"

"No, Ringo, not yet."

His jaw fell slack and his eyes began to water as he stepped away from the bars. The ragged edge of hysteria had been replaced by despair.

Debbi added, "But don't give up. Okay? I'm working on it. The Rangers aren't going to leave you in here. You're not alone."

He rubbed his eyes on his sleeve and nodded. "Yeah. Sure. I know. You guys won't forget me."

"You're damn right. You're one of us." She reached through the bars. The young man took her hand and she drew him closer. He was trembling.

She asked, "What happened to you back there?"

He shook his head. A tear ran down his cheek. "I don't know, Dallas. I was on rounds down by the south wall. I thought . . . I thought I heard something. So I went in to check it out." There was a steady gasping of air as Ringo tried to relate the rest. His skin had gone clammy and pale. "It was dark, but I heard . . . I heard. Oh God, I heard something." The young Ranger grabbed his head in frustration and fear, his hands wring-

Book II: The Undead War

ing his hair viciously in the process. "I can't remember, Dallas. Honest to God. I remember running. There was something behind me, all around. It was after me! *They* were after me!"

"Who was it? What was it? Help me, Ringo. I need some answers."

Placing his head against the cool bars, the youngest Ranger shivered. "I don't know! I just can't take it anymore, Debbi. I just went crazy or something. But I wouldn't have hurt anybody. You know that. I wouldn't hurt anybody."

"I know."

A part of her also knew that this young man had been through hell. Ringo had been alone with Lyle Cassian when the elderly Ranger was killed so gruesomely by batrats, and he hadn't been able to do anything to prevent it. Perhaps the young man was merely experiencing a delayed reaction to that horror. After all, Debbi still had nightmares about Cass's boneless, gelatinous body lying on the floor of the radio shack. They had all lost a good friend that day.

Ringo clutched her arm. "Are they gonna send me to the Bone Camp?"

"Not if I can help it, Ringo. You just sit tight. And if they mistreat you in any way, I want to know it so I can put my foot up their undead asses. Got it?"

"Got it." He smiled shakily.

"Okay. I've got to go talk to the guys. Is there anything I can bring you?"

"No."

She patted his cheek. "Try to get some sleep. Stay tough."

"Okay. Thanks, Dallas."

She didn't lock the door to the lock-up as she went out. She heard General Quantrill's loud voice coming from Ross's office. The two zombie troopers were preparing to nail several boards over the broken window.

She stopped, pulled her gun, and smashed the window on the other side of the front door.

"You missed one," she said to them and left.

* * *

Quantrill pointed at Ross. "I'm tired of these petty interruptions. You're here to control the Rangers. Control them!"

Ross stared blindly at him.

Quantrill lashed out and kicked a chair across the room. "The Legion is marching on Ghost Rock City tomorrow and I intend to keep the resources of Temptation safely to my rear. That is your job. I left some of your rational mind inside that skull so you could function much as you had in your previous life, so your people wouldn't suspect you were mine. Make no mistake, I will obliterate your Colonial Rangers before I allow them to endanger my plans! And it will be because you failed to protect them by getting your people to follow my orders!" Quantrill lifted a plate of abandoned food and tossed it down with a loud clatter. "And eat something! Or I'll make you eat every rotting plate of food in this room! I won't have you starving yourself to death!"

Quantrill spun and left the office with his adjutant and Captain Marat close behind. He slammed the door shut.

Quantrill said to the Captain, "I want that Ranger you arrested charged, convicted, and moved tonight. And make sure you arrange the

Clay & Susan Griffith

proper paperwork. It must be completely legal."

Marat smiled with corrupted, rotten teeth. "Yes sir. But might I suggest, we could manipulate this situation into an opportunity to destroy the Rangers outright."

Quantrill glared at his junior officer. "We can't afford a civil war in the streets of Temptation. You know what their black guns can do."

"But there are barely fifteen Colonial Rangers. Even if you include their pathetic militia, they barely have two hundred under arms. The Legion is over a thousand strong."

"Yes, but the whole structure depends on the fifteen of us who are psychically alive. If the Rangers kill my officers, such as yourself, the Legion is decapitated."

"We are sykers, General. We could take them easily. We must crush them while we have the chance. Then we can exploit the resources of Temptation as we see fit to conquer Banshee."

"I'm moving to engage the Reapers. They are our enemy. I won't risk the loss of a single Legionnaire here in Temptation fighting Rangers who should be our allies."

"Sir, if I may speak frankly, I believe that the loyalty you feel toward this Captain Ross is clouding your judgment. He isn't one of us. He's nothing but a tool to be used and disposed of! Our strategy should be . . ."

"Are you lecturing me, Captain?" Quantrill shouted with frightening fury. "Without my *clouded* judgment you would still be feeding Banshee's soilborne parasites at this very moment. And remember, I have the power to send you back into that black nothingness! I have reasons for everything I do here! Reasons that you need not understand or appreciate in order to obey without question! My opinion of Captain Ross is no concern of yours. The matter is closed! Do you understand me?"

Marat snapped to attention and saluted. "Yes sir!"

Quantrill left the Ranger headquarters and stalked down the center of the moon-bleached street. He was consumed by an overwhelming rage, a vicious desire to plunge his fingers into his Captain's dewy eyes. However, Quantrill privately took Marat's words to heart. The General had a peculiar sympathy for Dave Ross due to Ross's vague, perhaps even unintentional kindness, during the final year of Quantrill's life when he was a pariah among colonists on Banshee.

In addition, Captain Marat was understandably impatient after his time in the grave, ready for conflict. Quantrill felt the same; he was eager to come to grips with the Reapers at Ghost Rock City. He longed for battle and the sound of the well-deserved screams of his enemies. However, he was a commander and he had responsibilities for the safety of his men. Quantrill could not afford to waste any member of his new Legion. Dead sykers were not an endlessly renewable resource on Banshee and he would need every one of them to resurrect his reputation as a leader of men that had been unfairly tarnished in the Red River campaign nearly twenty years ago.

Even so, Quantrill felt confident that the odds were clearly in his Legion's favor. Even though the Rangers possessed the mysterious black guns, syker-stoppers, the lawmen were hesitant to start a war because of the Legion's sheer numbers. That hesitation would give Quantrill the time he needed to shore up his power. Once the Legion's successful campaign for the control of Banshee was underway, the situation would quickly progress beyond the Colonial Rangers' ability to interfere.

The reborn, undead Quantrill would demonstrate his own strategic

Book II: The Undead War

genius and balanced leadership to everyone on the planet as he brought Banshee under his fist. In the process, he would destroy all those who had a role in his downfall. And that included all the spineless colonists who demanded he be a monster for their sins, and then hated him for it.

Quantrill noticed a group of townsfolk slipping back into the shadows and hiding as he passed. Their fear washed over him in delicious psychic waves.

"After all I did for them, they still hate me," he thought and shook his head in anger.

They were right to be afraid. All of Banshee was.

Chapter 3

At the same time across town, Debbi stalked down the street. She had searched the area around the south wall for a clue as to what Ringo saw, or thought he saw, but she had come up empty. There was nothing there that hadn't always been there. Empty barrels and rotting garbage. There were still a few batrats in the area. Maybe they had swarmed some poor soul and Ringo witness it. Maybe that sparked a terrible memory of Cass's death and set him off. But hell, those nasty buggers had been around for a while. Why would Ringo react to them so violently now? If they had swarmed someone, where was the body?

There were too many questions without answers.

Dejectedly, Debbi noticed the sun was just rising. It chased away the shadows but could do little else. It couldn't cleanse the rotting smell and it couldn't lift her spirits. Too many friends lost, one right after another with no way to save any of them.

And most of all, she had lost Ross.

Everything she had come to rely on over the past few months had been ripped away. She almost wished Ross had been killed in action with the Reapers or the Legion. Even that would be better than the shell of a man he now was.

Debbi screwed her face tight against the onslaught of emotions that assailed her: fear, despair, anger. She was being buffeted from a hundred different directions.

All she knew for sure was that she was on her own. She told herself she was merely biding her time, waiting for the moment to strike. Eventually it would come. It was something that couldn't be rushed. Too much was at stake. The Rangers were too few in number even though they had the black guns. The black needles, composed of a ghost rock-tannis compound, had proven effective in blocking the psychic powers, whether in human sykers or anouks who had a natural psychic magic. The material in the needles somehow disrupted psychic powers and locked the victim in a mental rigor. This allowed the shooter time for a kill shot with normal ammunition, or in the case of the undead Legionnaires, allowed them to be destroyed like a "normal" zombie with a brain shot. Without the black needles, the Legionnaires were enormously resistant even to damage to their brains. The black guns were simple tubes that attached to the barrels of regular firearms. All the Rangers and militia in Temptation had them. But even the black guns might not enough to stop the Legion.

Ngoma's lanky form stepped up onto the sidewalk at the next intersection and beelined for Debbi. She steeled herself for another crisis. She

Clay & Susan Griffith

almost sighed with relief when there wasn't.

Ngoma fell into step beside her. "Hickok wants to see you at the LAX." Debbi's brow wrinkled. "Did she say what about?"

"Couldn't tell you. She hardly talks at all nowadays."

Debbi cast a look around the quiet town. On any normal day, Temptation would have been bustling with caravaneers and tradesmen. It was the height of the season, but there were less than half of the usual caravans present. Legitimate caravans largely avoided Temptation now. Most of the merchants present were opportunistic vultures who were willing, even eager, to brave the horrors of the City of the Dead to sell desperately needed goods at steeply elevated prices.

"Everything in town quiet?" she asked, not looking at Ngoma.

The young black man half smiled. "Quiet as a tomb."

Debbi inwardly groaned. Some of the Rangers had taken to making dead jokes to help ease the tension. Personally, they wore on her, but it seemed to make the others relax. If the jokes helped even in the slightest, she would tolerate them.

"Who knew being occupied by the undead would be so hilarious?" she quipped.

Ngoma's dark eyes glinted with mirth. Then he grew serious. "Do you need backup at the LAX?"

"We're spread too thin right now as it is. I'll be fine. I'll cut through the Depot. Marat's things tend to stick inside the walls so there shouldn't be too many of them out there."

Ngoma nodded. "Check in every few minutes or so though. Just to be sure."

"I will. See ya."

"Yeah."

Ngoma broke off and headed for his sleeping quarters. It had been a long night. Debbi was bushed too, but she veered toward the Depot regardless. She was curious as to why Hickok wanted to see her. She thought the pilot would have been long gone by now. Hickok hated sykers with a passion. Dead ones couldn't possibly make matters any better.

As much as Debbi was loathed to admit it, she had become sympathetic of Hickok. The woman was cocky and snide, but she had gone above and beyond. She had faced her fear in New Hope when she helped Debbi rescue the group of refugees from a Skinny, very much against the pilot's self-protective nature. Debbi admired that.

Of course, that didn't completely erase some of the bad blood that had passed between them. For now, they were tolerant acquaintances. But if Hickok ever reverted to her mercenary ways, Debbi would be more than happy to put her back in her place. Hickok knew that and thereby the line was drawn and respected.

The walk to the LAX took Debbi through the area around the Depot, what used to be the more rancid part of town. It was the caravan zone and had been frequented by beggars and hustlers. The Depot had once been lined with businesses, many shady and most lucrative. Almost any item or service could be had, given enough time and money. The frenzied shouting of vendors had once filled the air.

Now the area was somber. There were hardly any people moving about. The few sellers sat quietly in their booths, afraid to draw attention to themselves. Dark corners and shadowy nooks were empty of vagrants and hucksters.

Hell, it was a bad sign when not even the poor and homeless wanted

Book II: The Undead War

to stay in Temptation. A town couldn't get any lower than that.

The Depot looked almost clean and civil.

Debbi hated it. And she wasn't going to stand for it. Ross had sworn allegiance to this town years ago and, now that he had fallen, Debbi picked up the town's colors and brandished them proudly in the Banshee wind. She refused to allow all that she had worked for so hard to maintain to fall to ruin.

Debbi crossed into the old spaceport. There was no traffic. The skies were empty, nothing but clouds. All around her was the same; even the parking bays were vacant. Most of the ships were privately owned and, fearful that the Legion would confiscate them for their own purposes, pilots had fled Temptation in search of safer beds in which to lie.

The saloon called the LAX loomed ahead of Debbi and she set aside her laments and strode into what used to be the town's favorite pilot hangout. It was as derelict as the spaceport. The interior was dismal despite the rising sun. A huge window covered in a clear, plastic tarp let in the light, but there was no one around to enjoy it. Debbi counted five people in the place and half of them were running the joint. Thankfully, no sykers were in sight.

Debbi spied Hickok's thin frame in the corner. It was the same corner where she had found her the first time. The older woman's face lit up at seeing Debbi arrive. She waved the bartender over who immediately brought the Ranger a brew. Debbi took a seat in front of it and took a long drink. She didn't care it was so early. She wanted something to settle the rattle in her nerves. After the night's fiasco, she actually debated ordering something stronger, but she settled for the beer. It would do her no good to be drunk.

The preliminary ritual over, Debbi set the glass on the table and regarded the attractive Chinese woman across from her. Where once there had been an arrogant, almost regal, air about Hickok, today there was only weariness. Her oval face was shadowed and drawn.

"What's up, Hickok?"

Hickok drew in a heavy breath and ran a hand through her short black hair. "I'm leaving."

Debbi didn't move. She had expected this. She had expected it a long time ago actually, and she couldn't blame the pilot. If Debbi didn't have such a cockeyed view of loyalty, she'd be on the same ship heading out. A part of her wanted to, but it wasn't a side she listened to often. She had responsibilities that she couldn't shirk. Loyalties that she wouldn't abandon. She was jealous that Hickok had none of these things. It enabled the pilot to be as free as the wind.

"Can't blame you," Debbi finally admitted.

"I just can't stand it anymore. All this death, the stench . . . It reminds me of the war. It's time to get out of Dodge. Besides, they're friggin' sykers." The last word dripped with loathing. During the Anouk Wars, Hickok had witnessed firsthand the destruction sykers could create. It still haunted her to this day. Their being dead only compounded the disgust.

"I understand."

Hickok was relieved. She honestly was concerned what the Ranger thought about her. It was important that Debbi didn't think she was running out. Not only because of their past history, but because she genuinely liked Debbi. And that surprised the hell out of her.

Hickok and the law didn't usually mix all that well. The only law

Clay & Susan Griffith

officer she had had even the remotest thread of respect for was Dave Ross. And she had tossed that up to the fact that he was male and good looking. A lot of bad women liked Ross.

She regarded the overworked young woman in front of her. Yes, a lot of women liked Ross whether they admitted it or not.

"Any change in Ross?" Hickok asked.

Debbi merely shook her head. Both women fell silent. This thing with Ross was a blow to each in their own way. Debbi knew that Ross and Hickok had a history. How far back and how deep it went, she had no idea. But from the sadness on Hickok's face, Debbi knew it was not that far back and it had been pretty deep at one time.

Debbi was surprised to feel a small spark of jealousy. She smothered it quickly.

She locked eyes with Hickok. "Have you seen him?"

"Yeah, a week ago." Hickok's slight frame shuddered then stilled. "He's gone, you know."

A ripple in Debbi's jaw was all the indication of how harsh that statement cut her. "Are you sure? I mean absolutely sure?"

Hickok nodded curtly. "Once your brain is zapped by a syker, there's nothing left. He's a shell and that's all. What they had to do to break him . . . God." She regarded Debbi with despair. "You know he fought, but against sykers, no one can hold out for long, not without getting your brain fried in the process. He's gone, Debbi. I've seen anouks and Reapers wandering like goddamn vegetables after syker attacks. They never recovered." Hickok grabbed her drink and roughly threw it back, wiping the excess from her mouth with her sleeve. The memories of those horrible battlefields flared up and got her gut churning again at the carnage and waste.

Debbi stared out through the clear plastic window. Her mind struggled to ignore what Hickok was telling her. She desperately wanted to hold onto the fact that there was hope for Ross. Debbi couldn't just abandon Ross without trying. She had to know without a doubt that he was gone forever, one way or another.

The Ranger scrutinized the room noting all who were inside. When she was satisfied, she regarded the pilot once more. "I need to ask you for a favor, Hickok."

Hickok stiffened slightly. She knew that during times like these favors were usually dangerous. She asked cautiously, "What is it?"

"I want you to find Hallow."

That took Hickok aback. "You mean that crazy syker from New Hope?" Debbi nodded.

"What the hell for?" Hickok asked, but then immediately knew why. "Jesus, Dallas. He was a deserter. Can you really trust him with Ross?"

"He came through for us at New Hope."

"Yeah, because his neck was on the line too."

"Hallow came out of the desert to help those people. He didn't have to, you know."

Hickok picked up her glass and was irritated to find it empty. She dropped it back onto the table in frustration. "How do you expect me to find him? He's not exactly a guy that keeps a high profile."

"He's living out on the Musselman Breaks."

"He told you that?"

"No. I just . . . know." Debbi couldn't explain it. When she had thought of Hallow just now, an image of the rugged Breaks a hundred miles to the northeast had immediately snapped into view. The syker must have

Book II: The Undead War

implanted that tidbit of information in her head before he left Temptation.

Debbi should have been furious. It was a violation of her privacy. Hallow knew how strongly she felt about that in the wake of the abuse she suffered at the hands of the Skinny. But she was just grateful. He represented a lifeline and a shred of hope that she clung to tenaciously, for Ross's sake.

"You've got to be kidding," Hickok was saying heatedly. "That syker was in your head, wasn't he? Damn it, Dallas! What if it's a trap?"

"To what purpose? He saved our skins. I trust him. And he's Ross's last chance." Debbi leaned forward, her face firm. "I think it's worth the risk, don't you?"

Hickok huffed out a breath, scowling at the pigheaded Ranger. Debbi was playing on Hickok's recent acquisition of scruples. One day not so long past, Hickok would have flat out refused and not felt one whit of guilt in doing so. Suddenly, she was failing miserably in the art of remaining uninvolved. Debbi's desperate attempt to save Ross struck Hickok in a place she had long thought dead. When the hell had *that* changed?

"Alright, fine. I'll go look for him." Hickok raised a finger. "But if I get into trouble, I'm holding you personally responsible. You hear me?"

Debbi said, "I hear you."

"So what the hell do I do with him once I find him. He's not going to want to come back here, not with a bunch of zombie sykers running the place."

"They're not running the place," Debbi argued before she could stop herself.

"Yeah. Right. Whatever makes you feel better."

Debbi fought her rising ire, but she couldn't deny that the pilot was right. The Rangers had about as much control over the present situation as a field mouse in a catfight. She relented. "Just get Hallow to Sharif. You know him, right?"

Hickok bobbed her head. "Caravan master. Tall guy dressed all in black."

"That's him. When you find Hallow, hook up with Sharif in New Culloden. I know he stops there on the way across the eastern desert. Tell him I sent you."

"Then what?"

"Then wait. Stay with Sharif. I'll find you."

Hickok scrutinized the woman across from her. "You're planning something." It wasn't a question.

"From day one," Debbi admitted. "But now's not the time. I'm entrusting this to you, Hickok. Don't let me down."

Hickok's fists were clenched together tight under the table. Dread rose in steady increments. She shouldn't get involved. Instinct told her so. Everything about this operation cried disaster. Worse yet, the plan rested on her shoulders. Dear God in heaven.

"Why the hell did you choose me for this?" she bluntly asked.

Debbi smiled. "You're the only one leaving town at the moment."

"Bull." Hickok laughed away her fear and leaned back, studying Debbi with the old critical eye of a world-weary mercenary. "I'll find him for you and drop him off in New Culloden. Then you guys are on your own." She actually debated for a moment asking for a reward then stopped.

"Understood." Debbi stuck out her hand. "I owe you."

The pilot shook her head as she rose. *You are slipping*, she chastised

Clay & Susan Griffith

silently, but reached out to grasp Debbi's outstretched hand.

"Yes, you do," she told the Ranger. Hickok's lips curled upward in a knowing smirk. "And I never forget a debt."

"I'll remember that." Debbi glanced around. They'd been lucky. No sykers had wandered this way. It couldn't hold forever. "Now, let's get you into the air and out of Temptation."

Hickok nodded and grabbed her jacket from the back of the chair. "I couldn't agree more."

Chapter 4

"Where's Ringo?"

In the squad room, Captain Marat slowly raised his eyes from paperwork. Debbi stood in the entrance to the lock-up where the cell recently occupied by Ringo was now empty.

"He's not here," Marat said, his voice whistling slightly through the jagged hole in his throat.

"I know he's not here!" Debbi said loudly. "Where is he?"

The Captain purposefully closed a folder and placed a flaking hand on top of it. "He has been taken to the prison camp."

"What?" Debbi shouldn't have left him. She should have stayed here and fought until they gave in to her. She had failed Ringo; she'd left the poor kid to the mercy of the merciless.

"He was processed last night. Everything is in order if you would like to inspect the papers." Marat held up a folder.

Debbi took it from him with numb fingers and thumbed through the papers. There were several "eyewitness" depositions from citizens attesting that they had felt threatened by Ringo's wild behavior and that they feared for their lives if he returned. Each deposition was virtually identical. The depositions were all typed with scrawled signatures at the end. The file concluded with a guilty resolution against Ringo on the charge of public endangerment and an official sentence of six months incarceration. It was handed down by the Committee of Public Safety and signed by General Quandrill, Lester Atkinson, and Dave Ross.

Debbi threw the file back at Marat, scattering the papers across the room.

She shouted, "You moved him fast, didn't you! What were you afraid of?"

"Obviously, the General didn't want to take a chance that you Rangers would do something stupid to protect your friend."

"This won't stand!"

He gathered the papers together. "The law is the law." Then the Captain turned his oozing eyes on Debbi. "However, I for one would welcome a final resolution with you and your thugs. I didn't like your type when I was alive, and I don't like you now. So, if you want a fight with the Legion, please, by all means, start one. I want an excuse to crush your bones into the dirt!"

Debbi pictured herself putting a black needle through Marat's forehead and then blasting his putrid head off. She opened her mind so that he could see the image too. He reared back momentarily at the force of violent images, but then he smirked. She instantly felt the tentative proddings of his syker probe in her consciousness. She sensed his excitement at finding her mind unblocked. Just as he began to dig, she closed him out.

Book II: The Undead War

Debbi noticed with evil glee the look of frustration that came across his face.

"You want to settle this, Marat?" She took a step back and laid an easy hand on the butt of her Dragoon. "You're wearing a gun."

The Captain sat back in surprise. "You'd better reconsider. You're outnumbered. When you start shooting, your Rangers will all die."

"I'm just talking about you and me, Captain."

Marat's hands twitched where they rested on the desk.

Debbi smiled. "Go for your gun. You know you want to."

Marat kept his eyes glued to the Ranger. She stood a few yards away in a relaxed posture, hips swayed, hand lightly on her gun. She arched an expectant eyebrow.

The door to Ross's office opened. Ross crossed the floor and yanked Debbi's weapon from its holster.

Captain Marat's chair scraped back and his hand flashed to his side.

"Don't!" Ross shouted. A red dot appeared on the zombie's forehead.

Ross held the Dragoon out at arms length, his thumb hovering over the touch pad that fired the black needles and his finger on the trigger.

Marat hesitated. Debbi watched Ross. His face was drawn in pain and bright red from enormous exertion. He trembled and bit his lower lip hard enough to draw blood. The veins in his neck bulged.

"Don't," Ross repeated in a strangled voice.

Captain Marat slowly lifted his hands away from his sides. He watched Ross curiously, fascinated by this display of resistance. He knew what such an act was costing Ross. The pain of resisting Quantill's control must be deliciously excruciating. And was it all over this woman? Marat considered reaching for his weapon just to see if Ross could resist further or if the man's brain would liquefy from the effort. But that included the risk of dying again at the hands of the Ranger, and Marat wouldn't take that chance. He sat down and placed his hands on the desk as if in prayer.

Ross dropped his arm heavily and stumbled forward a step, catching himself on the corner of the desk. Ross shakily handed the Dragoon back to Debbi.

"Get out of here," he gasped to her.

"But what about Ringo?" Debbi watched her commander helplessly.

The pain of his movement and shuddering frame was horrible to witness. But if he had the strength to confront Marat than maybe he was coming back to them. Maybe he could help Ringo.

"I said go now!"

Debbi's face fell. She held the weapon down and sidled across the room, never turning away from Marat. She fumbled behind her for the doorknob, opened the door, and stepped outside.

She straddled a speeder bike and roared off in the direction of the temporary prison the Legion had set up several miles outside town - the Bone Camp.

* * *

Debbi was not far beyond the town walls when she gunned the speeder over a rise and down into the rows of unmoving Legionnaires. The bulk of the Legion stood like statues here on this plain. She noted that only their eyes moved, following her as she roared through them as if conducting a macabre review of troops.

Suddenly something moved. Debbi skidded abruptly to a halt. Out of her peripheral vision she caught movement as a stupefied Legionnaire

Clay & Susan Griffith

next to her jerked upright, as did all of them around her. Her hand flew from the handlebars to her sidearm. Apparently, Marat wasn't about to let her get to Ringo.

Debbi came to the stunned realization that the entire Legion was mobile. Men and women, who had once stood like decaying tree stumps on the desert plain, were now all moving.

The entire Legion had been reactivated!

Debbi watched their frightening revivification. They made no more noise than their rattling weapons and the wind rippling their tattered uniforms. The lines of undead troopers began to march in perfect lockstep away from Temptation. The Legion wasn't responding to Debbi's presence. The undead had no interest in her at all.

Cautiously, Debbi holstered her gun. Something big was happening, but if the Legion was leaving, what would they do with their prisoners? She kicked her bike forward and sped through the lines, not caring if she ran over a few of the undead troopers in her haste. To her ire, they made way for her and soon she was out of their ranks and racing toward the Bone Camp.

Fifteen minutes later, she saw the makeshift prison camp rise up over the horizon as she ripped across the stony, desert ground on the speeder bike. The camp consisted of twelve-foot poles with chain fencing stretched between. Inside the fence were several simple tents that offered the only chance of shade from the brutal Banshee sun and protection from the skin-stripping desert winds. Zombie troopers walked the perimeter both outside and inside the fence. She noticed the troopers didn't respond to the sound of her bike as she approached. Nor did they appear to be in the process of breaking camp.

She pulled to a stop just outside the gate and throttled the engine down. She left her goggles and bandanna in place. Only when the officer in charge approached the gate from the inside, did several troopers surround her.

As with all things associated with the Legion, the prison camp smelled like a charnel house.

"Open up!" Debbi shouted. "Colonial Ranger!"

The undead lieutenant peered at her through the fence. Its face was swarming with flies.

Debbi yelled again, "I said open up! I want to see one of the prisoners." She lifted herself on the footpegs and scanned the prison yard where she saw only a few Legionnaires.

The lieutenant shook its head and worked its jaw for a moment. Sounds came out, but she couldn't understand.

"What did you say?" she asked.

The zombie mumbled something else.

"For God's sake," Debbi snapped. "Is there anyone here without maggots in his tongue?" She looked at a nearby trooper. "What about you? Can you understand him?"

The trooper moved its head and one side of its jaw snapped loose.

Debbi actually laughed. "Look, Lieutenant, I can't understand what you're saying. But just open the gate. I want to talk to one of your prisoners. I know you can understand me."

The zombie officer muttered something harsh and sibilant. The troopers slowly raised their rifles.

Debbi was taken aback. She wasn't going to be allowed inside the prison. She shouldn't have been surprised though. The Legion had

Book II: The Undead War

established this prison without asking the Colonial Rangers' cooperation. At first they had said it was to handle the overflow in the Temptation lock-up or for Legionary military prisoners, but soon it was being used for anyone. In hindsight, it was inconceivable that the Legion could have usurped prison functions from the Rangers, but it was too late to fight it now. Now, it was a matter of force. They had the guns and she couldn't push the matter.

But Ringo was inside that sweltering hellhole and Debbi had to make sure he was all right.

"Okay, listen," she said, trying to contain her rage. "Don't let me in. But at least let me talk to one of the prisoners. He was brought in last night. A young man, about eighteen years old. A Colonial Ranger. Just let me talk to him. I won't approach the fence. I won't touch him."

The undead lieutenant turned and walked away.

The zombie officer disappeared inside one of the long tents. After several minutes when it didn't return, she realized she wasn't going to see Ringo. She muttered a nasty curse under her breath.

Debbi pulled down her bandanna and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Ringo! Ringo! Can you hear me?"

She waited again, but no prisoners appeared in the yard. "Ringo! Hang tough! We're doing everything we can for you! I'll be back and I'll get in to see you!"

Debbi replaced the bandanna. She pointed her finger at the nearest zombie trooper and cocked her thumb like a pistol hammer. She revved the bike and spun it around, ramming a trooper and knocking it to the ground.

She sped back to Temptation intent on getting answers, one way or another.

She wasn't surprised to find General Quantrill waiting for her on her return. He looked furious, standing at the gate with his hands clasped behind him. Two zombies troopers flanked him.

Quantrill was silent until she cut her motor. Then his voice rang clear with his anger. "I'm sick and tired of your actions, Ranger Dallas. You are pushing our sides closer to outright conflict."

Debbi snickered sarcastically. "Oh dear. What have I done now?"

"You made an unauthorized visit to the detention camp."

"Unauthorized? Since when do I need authorization to see a prisoner? I do work in law enforcement."

"The detention camp is under the administration of the Legion. You can't just appear at the gate unannounced and demand to examine a prisoner. There are proper channels. And will you please remove that kerchief from your face. I find it highly offensive."

"Yeah, sure." Debbi made no move to lower the bandanna. "It looks like you're skipping town. What's going on?" The road back to Temptation was already clear of Legionnaires.

"You'll be pleased to know that the Legion is moving south to attack the Reaper positions at Ghost Rock City. Once we have secured that city, you can have the parts you need to restore your nuclear generator."

The Legion was leaving? Debbi felt the light bubbles of hope struggling out of the pit of her stomach. She studied the General's face, but it was impossible to tell anything from the mass of slipping, flaccid skin. The dead simply didn't have the same range of expressions as the living.

Quantrill continued, "We will, of course, leave a small contingent of Legionnaires to assist here. As requested by your Town Council."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"No doubt." The hopeful bubbles burst as Debbi shook her head. That explained why the prison wasn't breaking camp. She regarded the zombie commander. "What if I suggest to Ross and Atkinson that the Colonial Rangers take over administration of the detention camp?"

"I'm afraid that's impossible. And unnecessary."

"Why?"

General Quantrill brought his arms around and folded them at his chest. "Most of the prisoners have already been moved. The detention camp was only a holding area until we found a more secure facility. Since the Worldstorm virtually destroyed the prison system, we have decided the best thing is to incarcerate the prisoners at the Lupinz Sanitarium."

"What?" These changes in policy were coming way too fast. She was beginning to realize just how far out of the loop of authority she had been thrown.

"Dr. Lupinz has secure facilities and, I'm sure even you would agree, the arrangements are more humane than tents in the broiling desert. Although I don't feel the elements any more, I am sensitive to you who do."

"That's sweet. So all the prisoners are at the Sanitarium?"

"Not yet. A few of the later arrivals are still in the camp. But they will be rotated out soon. That is why there is no sense in allowing you to visit the camp. Your friend will be shipped to the Sanitarium in a few days."

"Will I be allowed to see him then?"

"That depends on Dr. Lupinz. He's assuming complete administration of the prison system until we get this planet back on its feet and make other arrangements."

Debbi again began to feel some hope. She had met Dr. Lupinz before and, although he was a very peculiar fellow, he was a generally moral man. She might be able to work a deal with Lupinz; perhaps even bring Ringo from the Sanitarium back to Temptation. She would even bargain away his freedom if he could spend the six-month sentence in the lock-up.

She asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I'm about to embark on a hard campaign to completely destroy the Reapers. I don't want to worry about Temptation revolting against me."

"Then why don't you take all your troops with you."

"No. I don't have the time or patience to explain strategy to you. I intend to leave Temptation lightly fortified with a squad of Legionnaires."

Debbi began to consider how much easier it would be to throw off a single squad of the Legion. Then, with enough training, she could have the militia up to speed on the black guns and stand a chance of holding off the Legion should they return and descend on Temptation.

Quantrill said, "I don't need to be a syker to read your thoughts." He leaned down to Debbi, his rotting face a few inches away. She didn't flinch. "Make no mistake, Captain Marat will brook no resistance from you and your Rangers. Do I make myself clear?"

Debbi heard herself say yes, but that wasn't what she was really thinking. The City of the Dead was about to be liberated.

General Quantrill strode away and Debbi watched him with a smile. She barely noticed Stew come and stand beside her.

"Is it true?" he asked. "They're leaving?"

"Yeah." She turned to him with a grin. "Most of them anyway."

There was a rumble and both Rangers were galled to see one of their Stallions rise into the air and cruise after the departing Legion. They

Book II: The Undead War

watched the bus-shaped vehicle vanish into the distance, carrying General Quantrill and his adjutant. Debbi took some solace in the fact that the Legion had managed to commandeer just one of the Ranger's precious Stallions. She had sabotaged the rest of the fleet, as well as most of the Ranger's other vehicles, shortly after the Legion arrived in Temptation so they could not be easily repaired without access to the specialized parts she had removed and hidden.

"That's one Hoss we'll never see again," Stew said.

Debbi said, "That's all right. We'd never get the stink out anyway."

Chapter 5

The smoke from the ore processing plant made Ghost Rock City look as if it was blazing wreckage.

Far from it, however, as business was booming. Several months ago, the Reapers had seized the town to take control of the mineral wealth of the nearby mines and the industrial power of the ore processors. To insure production went uninterrupted, Nicolai garrisoned Ghost Rock City with a force of one thousand heavily armed men, five of his best VTOL gunships, and a platoon of five main battle tanks wrested from the UN years before. The Reapers were also in the process of setting up a variety of cannons and mobile rocket launchers around the town wall, or at least what was left of the wall after the Reapers had demolished it during their attack on the city.

Recently, the Reaper contingent in Ghost Rock City found themselves left to their own devices. There had been little contact with Nicolai after his defeat at Temptation. Defense preparations had suffered because local commanders didn't want to waste a lot of effort until everything shook out. Without Nicolai's supervision and with the heat of summer setting in, the Reapers in Ghost Rock City settled into the easy routine of managing their conquered town as little as possible. It was a routine that was quickly dulling their fighting edge.

The Reaper scouts were surprised, therefore, when they spotted an army marching on Ghost Rock City. They weren't able to identify the enemy through the wavering waves of heat rising off the desert except that it was composed of nearly one thousand lightly armed infantry. They reported that it was most likely an ill-advised attack from some colonial militia because the only visible vehicle was an older model Colonial Ranger Stallion that appeared to be the army's sole air component. However, the invaders were lightly armed and no match for the firepower of the Reapers in Ghost Rock City.

When the scouts sent word to the City, their commanders weren't worried. In fact, some treated the attack as a welcome diversion to break up the tedium of garrison duty. Others were angry with the attacking army for forcing them to stir in the miserable heat of the day.

The Reaper gunships lifted off and swung to the north where they targeted the enemy who was foolishly marching in broad daylight across the open desert with no fast attack capability, no artillery or air support. Exchanging sarcastic quips over the radio, the Reaper pilots dropped low to start their bombing run.

As the gunships streaked in, the Legionnaires in the forward division halted as one. Two hundred sykers looked skyward, focusing on the approaching aircraft. The other divisions easily altered their line of march to flow around their stationary comrades.

Clay & Susan Griffith

The fighters roared over the Legionnaires without the pilots firing a shot or dropping a bomb. The fighter craft began to pitch. Three of the ships touched and careened out of control. Wings crumpled and disintegrated. The gunships somersaulted through the air and slammed into the ground to become burning wreckage skipping across the desert floor. The members of the stationary Legion division then turned their heads to follow the paths of the last two fighters. The ships veered off suddenly and disappeared over low hills miles away. Moments later, balloons of greasy fire rose above the hills.

The entire Legion spread across the wide, flat desert outside Ghost Rock City. They were formed into five divisions resembling the squares of a Baroque army. Each square had a captain and a lieutenant in the center surrounded by rank after rank of Legionnaires.

On the left flank, the 3rd Division began to glow with a strange aura. The entire square was immersed in an energy field. Then suddenly a brilliant flash fired from the square and impacted the town wall where two hastily manned heavy guns were coming to bear on the Legionnaires. A two hundred foot span of the wall collapsed in a massive explosion and the guns went down with it. The 3rd Division advanced slowly, continuing to pour fire through the breach in the wall.

Amid the din, five tanks, long guns blasting, roared out onto the flats through other gaps in the wall. They wheeled into formation and sped forward across the barren ground firing again and again, intent on breaking the enemy quickly with a massive show of force. An over-aggressive commander unleashed his tank's full complement of rockets. Explosions erupted across the desert where the 4th Division marched. The air was thick with smoke and body parts.

If the tankers expected their barrage to break the enemy, however, they were disappointed. The shattered square continued its advance through the smoke and carnage. Confidence inside the tanks was even more shaken when gunners pressed their eyes to their scopes and saw many of the injured regaining their feet and falling back into formation. Others troopers who were incapable of standing because of lost limbs or massive damage lay writhing on the ground. Fellow Legionnaires seemed to assist the wounded by bringing them what was left of their limbs.

Once clear of the smoke, the battered 4th Division stopped in its tracks. The Legionnaires stared at one of the tanks. A flash of energy shot from the collected troopers and seared through the turret. Ammunition exploded and the vehicle broke in half like a toy.

The next closest tank began an escape maneuver, but it too drew the attention of the 4th Division. The vehicle suddenly ground to a halt and its motor revved down. The throaty engine continued to rumble, but the hatches sprang open. The crew clambered from the machine, screaming and holding their heads. They staggered blindly before falling under the gunfire of approaching Legionnaires.

The empty tank was left idling and a new, undead crew quickly occupied it.

One by one, the other tanks stopped moving too and crews emerged to be mercilessly gunned down in the sand.

The Legion had weathered the Reapers' heavy guns with fewer than fifty casualties. Energy boiled from all the divisions, obliterating the remnants of the wall and cutting through the first ranks of the Reaper infantry that emerged to meet them with screaming war cries. The Reapers, both humans and anouks, were surprised when their own tanks

Book II: The Undead War

started firing on them.

Slowly, the Reapers began to sense the horrendous power of what they were facing. Some of them were old enough to remember the old Syker Legion; they were the first to run. Others waited until they saw the decaying faces of their enemy before they ran. However, few could run fast enough or far enough to escape with their lives.

When the Legion breached the ruined walls of Ghost Rock City, the slaughter began.

Overcome by uncontrollable thoughts, Reapers turned their guns on each other. Others fell in the street with blood dripping from the eyes, noses, and ears, their brains bursting in their skulls. Some misguided Reapers thought they could save their lives by surrendering. When they emerged from hiding with their hands over their heads, it only made them easier targets.

Barely one hour elapsed from the moment the Reapers put their fighters in the air until the Legion was firmly in control of the town. Ghost Rock City's Reaper force was entirely dead.

The Stallion landed in the center of Ghost Rock City and General Quantrill climbed out. He surveyed the extensive damage and the satisfying body count among the enemy. He had been high above the battlefield coordinating the action, feeding information and commands to his captains on the ground with their divisions. He was gratified by his army's victory. His reorganization of the Legion to eliminate the old squad-based identities had created a cohesive unit. He was particularly buoyed by the success of the Legion's psychic mechanics which made every trooper in a division part of a local network and all the divisions together a wide network. It created a whole that was greater and more resilient than any individual. They could withstand damage that normally would have destroyed either a syker or a zombie. Those who were injured could knit their flesh with time and return to duty. Even troopers with parts of their brains destroyed still regained their feet and continued to do their duty, supported as part of the syker network. Only seven Legionnaires had suffered sufficient damage in the battle to effectively destroy them. Quantrill grieved for their loss; they were as close to being irreplaceable as any soldier could be.

Still, the Battle of Ghost Rock City was an enormous success. And it was a good omen for Quantrill's coming campaign to conquer the planet.

Quantrill saw a squad of Legionnaires approaching with a terrified man under guard. The man stared around him at the decaying troopers and the piles of bodies in the street. He seemed on the verge of a breakdown.

The Legionnaires halted and their captain saluted the General. "Sir, this man claims to be the leader of the town."

Quantrill fixed his eyes on the overwhelmed man. "Is this true?"

The man stammered wordlessly for a second, then said, "No. I . . . I'm the chief mine administrator. I only have that job because Nicolai killed all the other mine administrators." He stared at Quantrill with unbelieving horror. "I can keep the mines working for you too."

"We don't need ghost rock," the General said. "We need food. My troops are hungry. We came from Temptation and the food supply there was restricted for political reasons."

The man said, "I'm sure we can find something."

"Yes, I'm sure." Quantrill regarded his officer. "Captain, your division may feed now."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Thank you, sir. I'll inform them." The captain saluted and sent a mental command to all the Legionnaires in his division to stand down and begin foraging. He then turned to the troopers surrounding the frightened chief mine administrator. "Carry on."

The troopers fell on the man and began to eat him alive.

* * *

The *Deadwood II* settled through the upwelling dust. The sleek, converted freighter rested on the ground, engine whining at takeoff level while the pilot, Hickok, scanned the area for potential problems. The terrain was desolate. Bleak, rocky ground with a few scraggly shrub-like trees. A small, weather-battered hut rested in the lee of a high escarpment.

Hickok's trained eye saw no telltale signs of ambush. There was also no sign of recent habitation around the cabin, which was bad. She cut the ship's motors. The Chinese pilot strapped on a gun belt and ventured warily down the ramp. She pulled goggles over her eyes, but the wind piled grit into her exposed face.

Hickok made her way over the uneven ground to the adobe shack. The door was made of rough wood planks and the single window was covered with a nailed down piece of animal hide. The pilot pulled her weapon and, although it felt ludicrous, she knocked on the door.

"Hallow!" she yelled through the wind.

No answer.

She pushed the door open. The shadowy interior of the hovel was completely empty. A layer of sand coated the floor and piled up against the far wall. No footprints. No sign of anyone in this cabin for days, probably months or maybe years.

Hickok shook her head. Hallow had given Debbi this location out in the middle of the godforsaken Musselman Breaks as his residence. It was no surprise to Hickok that the renegade syker lied. After all, he was a deserter from the old Syker Legion and he'd been living the ascetic life of a hermit for years. Why would he let a Colonial Ranger know his true location?

Still, the pilot felt terribly disappointed. She had wanted to find the syker because Debbi believed Hallow was the key to saving Ross. No matter what the cynical Hickok might say, she wanted to believe it was possible.

Serves me right for buying into that stupidity, she berated herself. The only question now is whether I get back in my ship and go on my way, or whether I at least tried to tell Debbi what happened. But then that damn Ranger will pull me into some new suicidal scheme. And it would all be for Ross.

The pilot spit on the ground to clear her mouth. She didn't owe Ross anything. What happened between them was long over. It had been brief and meaningless to begin with. Why should she help Debbi save him? What was in it for her?

Someone touched Hickok on the shoulder.

She spun around, bringing her gun up. A firm hand grabbed her wrist and twisted hard. Her pistol flew away.

The dark eyes of Hallow stared out from the folds of a desert head-dress only a foot away from her face.

"Easy," the syker said, still grasping her hand.

Hickok drove her left fist into the syker's stomach. His breath

Book II: The Undead War

whooshed out of his surprised mouth as the pilot yanked her hand away.

Hallow held out his hands, palms up, and gasped, "Okay. Okay. It's all right!"

Hickok raced for her gun. She dug it out of the sand and spun to see the syker watching her, rubbing his stomach. She aimed at him.

Hallow kept one hand out. "Careful, Hickok. We don't want anyone hurt."

"Maybe *you* don't," the pilot retorted.

"I have no quarrel with you. I know now you're here to see me."

"How do you know—" Hickok stopped. She scowled angrily at the thought of the syker in her head.

"Sorry," Hallow said. "I can't be too careful when a ship shows up way out here. Let's go in out of the wind." The syker walked into the cabin.

Hickok kept her gun in hand and, with a deep breath to calm her nerves, followed to the doorway. She stepped in just far enough to be out of the gale. The shack was now furnished with a simple table and chair. A small fire sizzled in a blackened hearth on one wall filling the cabin with the faint, warm smell of burning dung. There was still a layer of sand on the floor, but it was heavily tracked.

Hickok said, "So is this real now?"

"Yes. I don't want people knowing I'm here until I know what they want. The deserted look was just a little vision I planted."

The pilot snarled, "Don't ever go in my head again. Or I'll kill you."

Hallow nodded seriously as he ladled greasy soup from a pot over the fire into a bowl. "Hungry?"

"No." Hickok's stomach rumbled greedily despite the rancid smell of the stew. "Who's in the pot?"

Hallow unwound his violet headdress, revealing his dark, weathered skin and a broad smile. He dished a second helping into a crude, mud-fired bowl. Then he sat down on the floor and sipped his gruel.

"Well?" Hickok inched toward the bowl on the table under pretense of looking around the cabin. "You read my mind. You know what I want. There's nothing more irritating than a coy syker. What's your answer?"

"It doesn't work quite that way." Hallow wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "I know you're looking for me. And I don't sense you're looking to do me harm. Or at least you weren't when you arrived. But I don't know what you want with me."

Hickok crossed her arms. "Dallas sent me from Temptation. She needs you."

"Why?"

"Temptation has been taken."

Hallow eyed the pilot curiously. "Reapers?"

"No. Remember General Quantrill?"

The syker's face went pallid. "Of course. He's dead. Been dead for years."

"Yeah, well, that isn't so much an issue these days. He's back."

"But he's dead."

"Temptation has been occupied by a new Syker Legion made up of a couple thousand syker zombies. And if you can believe it, it's actually more unpleasant than it sounds."

"Are you insane?"

"Yes, because I'm out here looking for you instead of looking for a place to hide. The Rangers' captain is being psychically controlled by Quantrill."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"But he's dead," Hallow interrupted.

"Okay, you're gonna need to get past that," Hickok said irritably. "Quantrill is dead, but he's undead now. He put together an army of dead sykers. They stomped the main Reaper army already and now they're sitting in Temptation planning their next move. Dallas needs to break Ross out of their control before she can make any move against the Legion."

Hallow looked far away, as if unable to process anything Hickok had said.

"Hey!" Hickok pounded the table, bringing the syker back to the present. "What is it with you? I thought you sykers were used to weird stuff.

C'mon, get up to speed here. The days when we all had the leisure to try to figure out *why* are over. Dallas needs your help, so grab your—" The pilot looked around the desolate shack. "Well, just come on and let's go."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Hickok paused in surprise. "How's that?"

The syker sipped soup. The bowl trembled slightly in his grip. "I'm not going anywhere with you. What does it have to do with me?"

"They're sykers. Or were at one time."

"So what? I don't know what's happening in Temptation, but I want nothing to do with it. I left the Syker Legion long ago."

Hickok pointed her pistol at the syker. "I don't have time for this crap. Get up! Now!"

Hallow laughed harshly. "Don't be silly. Put that away. I don't want to hurt you."

"You are going with me. I promised Dallas."

"I do have a lot of respect for that Ranger. But I don't see anything I can do to help her." He pretended to turn his attention to some loose thread on his stained robes.

"You're a coward."

Hallow blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"You're nothing but a coward and a deserter. I haven't met a syker, alive or dead, that was worth the bullet it would take to kill them."

"Maybe you forget I saved those people in New Hope."

"You didn't save anybody. We found you hiding in a cellar. Dallas saved those people! She beat a Skinny! You ever beat a Skinny?"

Hallow's face remained calm, but slivers of energy arced between his eyes. Hickok had to suppress a start and keep herself from taking a step back.

The syker said in a soft voice, "Maybe the problem is that you're afraid to do what you want to do, which is fly away. You're a deserter too, aren't you? You left EXFOR. And now, you live in fear of being exposed and losing your ship."

"Shut up. I warned you about getting in my head."

"I don't have to be a syker to know you and I are the same, Hickok."

"I don't think so, freak. I'm trying to do something to help. You hide out here like a hermit while the planet goes to hell."

"Don't play saint, Hickok. It doesn't suit you." The syker rose to his feet. He lifted the ladle out of the stew pot, but seemed to forget what he was doing and dropped it back again. "I've been doing someone else's work since I was a child. On Earth, if you show signs of being a syker, they put you in a home to train you. I was a government killer by the time I was seven. No one ever suspects a poor little lost boy, until it's too late for them. Then when I grew up and couldn't play cute anymore, they sent me

Book II: The Undead War

here to Banshee with the Legion to kill anouks. Well, I'm tired of killing people. And to tell the truth, I think the reason you're so mad at me isn't that I won't help. It's because you can't stand to think I can do what you can't. Run away."

Hickok lowered her weapon. "I never pretended to be a saint. I signed up to come to Faraway and fight. Flew over a hundred missions. I enjoyed watching those Marines pile out of my dropship and hit the enemy. I admit, I've got no love for anouks. Grapes killed a lot of my friends. But flying sykers into villages to kill women and children, even I have limits."

"Maybe you were my pilot on a mission," Hallow said bitterly, more to himself than to her. "I ran out of the back of enough dropships in my day. Quantrill believed that the best way to defeat the enemy was to use your strength against their strength. And he believed that one of the anouks' greatest strengths was their breeding capacity. So striking at females and children was a logical strategy if we wanted to hold onto Banshee long term. We used to call it degrading their future assets."

Hickok asked, "Don't you want to pay a little back against the sick bastard? Dallas needs you. And she's offering you a chance to do something right for a change. Just like New Hope."

Hallow stared into the fire.

Hickok said, "You're right. I am scared. I don't want to lose my ship. Brother, I'd love nothing more than to run and hide. But I can't. Not anymore. I've done that and it sucks at your soul. I'm a shade away from being nothing but a shadow. I can't live like that anymore. And if you really wanted to hide, you wouldn't have even gone to New Hope in the first place." She holstered her weapon. "Look around you. We're all trapped here. It either works out or we're dead anyway."

The wind tore across the shack, pushing more sand through the door. The window covering rustled. Hallow ran his hands over his completely hairless scalp and muttered, "Oh God. Quantrill."

Chapter 7

Mo's was nearly deserted. It was unnatural.

During the height of the Worldstorm people had come here to drink. *Mo* had miraculously stayed open even through the outbreak of marauding undead and the vicious batrat attacks a month before, and people still came to drink.

However, the undead Legionnaires that walked the streets, particularly at night, reduced in numbers though they were, drove even the heartiest drinkers underground. No one wanted to fall prey to the rumored zombie press gangs that supposedly seized people off the streets, under the noses of the Colonial Rangers, and turned them into the walking dead to fill the ranks of the Legion. The presence of Marat and his decaying cadre were enough to intimidate the populace. Regardless, there were those that felt a new sense of freedom this night.

A corner of *Mo's* held a small group of Colonial Rangers.

Mo wandered the floor with a broom in his hands, a clear sign he was bored. He swept lackadaisically at several piles of dust and a few random teeth that littered the saloon floor. He let out an exhausted sigh and leaned on his broom.

Debbi looked up at him from her drink. She sat with Stew, Ngoma, Fitz, Miller, and Chennault in the corner that the Rangers typically colonized. Debbi sat very still, but there was a light in her eyes that hadn't been

Clay & Susan Griffith

there since the Legion arrived.

No one but Stew noticed it. He wondered what it was that had her so animated. He knew without a doubt that something was about to break. Why else would she call the core Rangers for an evening drink? He was anxious to know, even though he suspected the reason. He kept it cool though, letting Debbi make the first move.

Miller managed a weary grin, his attention still on the bar's proprietor, and said, "Mo, all that sweeping is exhausting you. I guess that's why you only do it every couple of years."

Mo was too bored to retort.

Miller shook his head in disappointment at the lack of response. He downed his alcohol with a head-tossing flourish. He slammed his glass onto the table and ran a finger along his pencil thin moustache. Then he pushed loose strands of dark hair, slick with high-smelling tonic, back along his head.

Stew realized how tiresome it truly was in the saloon. He, Ngoma, Fitz, and Mo were all watching Miller's grooming with interest.

"Stinkin' zombies," Mo finally said. "If they're gonna keep everybody off the street, *they* could at least come in and buy a drink."

With a straight face, Stew said, "Why don't you hang a sign out front with walking dead specials?"

Mo appeared to consider it, then picked up his broom. "Nah. Them stinkin' zombies probably don't even drink." He paused. "Do they?" He wandered off lost in thoughts of new marketing schemes.

Debbi said to Stew, "Don't make suggestions like that to him. You want to share our saloon with guys who are carrying their own intestines?"

"Beats the stink of Miller's hair tonic," Fitz said.

Miller didn't take the bait. He sat lost in thought, shuffling a deck of cards. They had played a few idle hands of poker, but no one's heart was in it.

They were all thinking of Ringo. A mixture of sorrow and rage consumed Debbi as she pictured the poor kid out in that prison camp. But that was all going to change. That was the reason for this meeting. With most of the Legion gone, it was time to retake what was theirs. She had come up with a workable plan to free Temptation and Ringo along with it. And thanks to Hickok, Ross's salvation was already in the works.

There had been little chance of winning an outright fight against the entire army, but now it was a whole new deck of cards and Debbi felt lucky tonight. She knew that Marat and his Legionnaires feared the Rangers and their black guns, and with the Legion's numbers reduced, now was the time to strike.

She had taken the time to learn about her enemy. Through observation, she began to understand the structure of the Legion. In total, it consisted of nearly one thousand troopers. Of course, Quantrill was at the top. There were five "divisions" of approximately two hundred troopers each, each division commanded by a captain, like Marat, and a lieutenant. The officers moved freely at all times and were fairly conversant, except for the mumbler at the prison camp.

Debbi had never felt a psychic probe from a trooper, only from Quantrill or one of the officers. She was beginning to believe that the dead troopers were not a psychic threat of their own accord, and if the officers could be destroyed, the troopers might well be disabled. She had not shared this thought with any of the other Rangers because she suspected they all were being scanned constantly and, despite her best

Book II: The Undead War

efforts to train them in some simple resistance skills, she feared they could give away valuable secrets without intending to. And if she was right about the officer-trooper function, and the Legion discovered that the Rangers understood that weakness, it would have forced the Legion's hand.

Debbi had been surprised over the last month when she compared notes with the other Rangers and found that no one seemed to have the same ability as she did to resist syker probes. It was as if she had suddenly discovered she saw colors differently than everyone else. She assumed this natural proclivity was some peculiar by-product of the horrifying experience of being mentally violated by the Skinny in New Hope. And this special capability only compounded the burden of leadership that fell heavily on her shoulders.

A Legionnaire walked past the saloon window and Debbi watched it with hooded eyes, silently urging it to keep on walking.

"What are you thinking about?" Stew asked.

Debbi was startled. "What? Nothing. Ringo."

Stew smiled. "Easy. I was just asking. Tell me when you think it's right."

"No, it was Ringo." Unfortunately, sometimes it was better to lie to her friends in order to protect them.

"I can't believe that we couldn't get him sprung," Fitz muttered. "Legal channels my ass."

Miller poured another drink, dribbling it over the edge of the glass. "Stuckey'll be okay. The kid was born out in the wastelands. You think a little time in the desert is gonna hurt him? He'll probably think it's a vacation from city life. He loves the damn heat and the stinking wind." He downed the liquor in one swallow. "Hell, give him six months and he'll be running the joint."

Miller slammed his glass down again and lapsed into silence.

Debbi and Stew exchanged glances. They both noticed Miller's slightly slurred speech. Miller was a guy who could normally drink anyone under the table while playing poker all night with tolerable skill and underhanded dexterity. He was a loud mouth braggart, a cheat, a brawler, and frequently a drunk. But never a sloppy one.

Fitz scrubbed unnecessarily at his hair. "I just can't believe Captain Ross let this happen."

"He didn't *let* it happen, Fitz," Debbi said. "It's like I said, Ross is under their control. He has been from day one."

"But I never would have thought someone could have done that to Ross. I mean . . . he's Ross, nothing fazes him." Fitz slumped in his chair.

Chennault gave Fitz a quick glance and supportive nod.

"I think we all wanted to believe everything was normal," Debbi replied.

"You didn't." Stew observed Debbi though shuttered eyes. "You always knew Ross wasn't himself." Every individual had nuances of behavior and Stew knew that only people who had grown close to each other could really notice them. The fact that Debbi was so intimate with Ross immediately stung Stew, though he hid it well.

Debbi shrugged sadly. "Not that it made a difference."

Fitz brought up his Dragoon and lovingly fingered the black gun attached to it. "Oh, I say you made a difference. We've kept those undead creeps in line with just a hint of these. When the day comes, them all standing in a line will just make it easier to shoot 'em down." He sighted

Clay & Susan Griffith

down the barrel at another Legionnaire passing by the window.

"I just feel stupid," Miller groaned. "I trusted that turncoat Ross. He showed up with the Legion after they ran off the Reapers. He saved us from a fate worse than death. Oh no, wait. He *didn't*."

"What choice did he have?" Debbi snapped. "You think you could do any better against that many sykers pounding at your brain, Miller?" She felt Stew's hand fall gently on her arm and she swallowed her anger.

"His brain is probably fried," Fitz commented in a matter-of-fact way. "I've heard what sykers can do. As much as I hate to say it, he's the enemy now, plain and simple. This thing with Ringo is proof of that." He holstered his weapon.

"I say there's still a chance." Debbi had personally witnessed Ross stand up to Marat because of . . . She hesitated. It was because of her, but she didn't want to admit that to the others. However, it had reinforced her hope, something that had continued to build since that day. Things were finally beginning to move in the Rangers' favor.

Debbi leaned forward conspiratorially, her voice low. "We tried to do things legally and it got us squat." She pulled her own weapon and set it on the table, her hand rested over the trigger. "Now it's time to do things the Ranger way."

"Now that's more like it!" Miller shouted. His gaze was abruptly clear. "Let's start killing zombies!"

"Keep your voice down." Fitz slapped the back of Miller's greasy head.

Miller retorted, "Oh for crying out loud, I didn't say anything. Besides, it's not as if they don't know we're fed up with them and their rotten stench. Hell, I've been thinking of kicking their asses from here to the Toxic Jungle since day one. It ain't new news."

Suddenly footfalls sounded on the boardwalk outside. Everyone stiffened.

"Dammit, Miller," Chennault cursed.

"Easy, people," Debbi commanded.

They all immediately began running through the mental exercises they had practiced for weeks, thinking random thoughts and humming inane tunes that acted as deflectors from light psychic probes. Stew wondered briefly what things Ross had tried during his torture that obviously hadn't worked.

Captain Marat entered the saloon, followed by several Legionnaires. The six Rangers rose quickly, placing their hands on their sidearms. With their other hands, they pulled up their bandannas.

Miller looked nervously at Debbi, almost apologetic. He'd blown the gig before they even got on stage.

Mo hurried behind the bar and ducked out of sight.

There was a long moment of silence as the two groups faced each other.

Marat weaved between empty tables and approached the Rangers. He wore a pistol on his hip, but the flap of his military holster was snapped shut. Miller moved away from the table and Debbi heard the faint creak of leather as he loosened his Dragon in its holster. Stew stepped close beside Debbi. The others fanned out.

Marat said, "Ranger Dallas, I need a word with you."

"So talk."

"Alone." He indicated the other Rangers.

Miller snarled, "We're not going anywhere, you maggot-ridden pile of . . ."

."

Book II: The Undead War

"Miller." Debbi held up her hand. She worried the drunk Ranger would bluster too far to overcompensate for feeling like he gave the meeting away.

Marat turned to Mo. "You. Out."

Mo stood behind the bar with a bottle in his hand. "Ya sure ya don't want a drink or nothing there, Captain?"

Miller picked up the bottle off the table. "Wait a second. Lemme shoot some holes in you before you take a drink. I wanna see if that old joke really works."

The Captain stood ramrod straight. He said to Debbi, "My Legionnaires will depart with your men. I want to talk. You and me."

Debbi considered for a moment. Then she nodded at Stew.

He hesitated, but then reached over and grabbed Miller's arm. "Come on, Miller."

Miller fought. "We're not leaving her alone with this dirt pile, are we?"

"We'll be right outside." Stew pulled him along, followed by the other three Rangers.

Mo fell in close step behind them and went outside along with the Legionnaires. The front door closed. Stew and Miller appeared in the front window, closely watching Debbi inside.

Debbi asked Captain Marat, "What do you want?"

"You disappoint me, Ranger."

"Gosh, I'm sorry." Debbi kept her tone quiet, but it was a struggle since her heart was hammering in her ribs. She wanted to draw down on this smug bastard, but there was something etched on his face that stayed her hand. She felt her opportunity for freedom was slipping away like quicksilver and there was little she could do now to stop it.

Marat said, "You were to cooperate fully with my men."

Debbi nodded. "And I have. I've initiated proper legal action to free Ringo. Ask Atkinson."

"What you say and what you think or do are two completely separate matters."

"You have no idea what I'm thinking."

"Yes, but your Rangers are another matter." A sick sneer plastered itself on Marat's face.

Debbi's expression remained neutral. She wasn't sure if Marat knew anything or not. Like Miller had said, their bristling hatred wasn't exactly a sudden revelation. Tension had been high from the start. But regardless, Marat wasn't a fool. Something was up.

"My people are human, Captain," Debbi said in an effort to deflect Marat's suspicions. "If they harbor any thoughts against you, it's your doing. Rotting, tin-plated, would-be dictators have that effect. Sue us."

Marat's sneer didn't lessen. "Quantrill was wrong to believe that Temptation would be content under us. He let his partiality for your Captain Ross override his tactical sensibilities. But I'm not as blind. You are a danger." He took a step closer to her.

Debbi didn't back down and her hand shifted from her belt buckle to her holster in a deadly, silent manner.

Marat either didn't notice or didn't care. "Any move taken against my men will be looked upon as an act of aggression and you alone will be responsible. But it will not be you alone who pays the price. You *will* control your people. You *will* obey my rules."

"Or what?"

Marat's eyes were cold. "Or I will kill Captain Ross."

Clay & Susan Griffith

Debbi felt as if she'd been punched in the gut. Her mind whirled with responses, but none reached her lips.

Marat inclined his head slightly. "I will sacrifice him as the first stroke in my attack on the Rangers. No matter how much carnage results on either side, I assure you, he will be the first casualty."

Debbi croaked, "You need Ross."

"I do indeed," Marat agreed. "But thanks to your rebelliousness his presence gives me less and less assurance. Let's be clear, Ranger. We both know the situation here. Banshee is experiencing a revolution. And in a revolution, rightful authority springs from force. And whoever dares to use force wins. Eventually you will want a test of strength. I believe I will win. I'm sure you mistakenly believe you have a chance. My offer to you is that if you postpone your attempt to overthrow the Legion, perhaps Captain Ross will live. If you continue to interfere, he will die. And then I will make sure you and all your colleagues will die too. It's that simple. The choice is yours."

He turned immediately and strode to the door. It opened and he passed through into the night.

Stew, Fitz, and Miller raced back into the saloon. Chennault and Ngoma lingered outside, watching the zombies depart.

Stew asked, "What happened? What did Marat say?"

Debbi leaned against the table and picked up the deck of cards. She began to shuffle the cards without thinking about it. She let out a long breath.

"What's wrong?" Stew prodded.

"Marat just laid his cards on the table," she responded weakly.

"And?"

"And he's got a helluva hand. He's got us beat for now." She shot the cards in a shower across the room.

Debbi didn't reveal the faint glimmer of a hole card she hadn't played. That card required first that Hickok find Hallow. And second that Hallow would agree to help.

Debbi watched the last of the cards flutter to the floor and wondered if she had enough luck to make those two draws from the deck. If she was wrong, Ross was a dead man.

If he wasn't already.

Chapter 8

"*UNS Erebus* to Tunnel control. Request permission to come alongside."

"Permission granted, *Erebus*. Switching you to docking control."

"Thank you, Tunnel control."

Captain Jeremy Norton, United Nations Expeditionary Force began to pack away his work. His ship would be docking soon. Norton was a small-boned man who vigorously cultivated a gray manner. The common features of an everyman belied an uncommon intensity that lurked beneath sheltered eyes. The Captain was like a facade on a building that hordes of passersby saw and ignored everyday for their entire lives, unaware that the unremarkable stone face was really alive and watching their every move.

Norton glanced out the bubble window of his cabin and absently studied the Tunnel, which dwarfed his sleek frigate, *Erebus*, as it did every other ship in the UN flotilla. Hellstromme Industries built the impressive Tunnel and the sprawling facility that spread out around the ring many

Book II: The Undead War

years ago and even now shuttles and robot craft slid along the sprawling facility continuing to expand Hellstromme's home in space. Less experienced eyes wouldn't have noticed, but Norton saw turrets tracking his ship, ready to blast it out of space should it make a suspicious maneuver.

Captain Norton adjusted his uniform and placed his cap on his head as he felt *Erebus* jolt as it locked down against the Tunnel. He collected his materials and left his private cabin. At the far end of the docking tube, he felt a red flash of light snap into his eye to confirm his identity. Then he passed through the barrier into the Tunnel base.

Norton went quickly into the crowded passageways and made his way to the heart of the station. He threaded his way into the central command area. Heavily armed Hellstromme Industries marines waved him through with no words and barely a second glance.

Captain Norton loathed coming to the Tunnel. It disturbed him to be inside the black heart of Hellstromme Industries. It was so like his own United Nations military with its hierarchies and its chains of commands and its secrets. But it was unlike the military in its unpredictable personnel and sometimes unfathomable motivations. It particularly distressed him to deal with his Hellstromme liaison, Lithia. Norton was so used to dealing with pig-headed, direct, military types, and doing mental cart-wheels around them, that it bothered him whenever he encountered her. She was one of Hellstromme's best politico-reps and it made him uncomfortable that someone in the Faraway System might have the intellect to outmaneuver him.

He had to admit, however, as frustrating as Lithia was, she was also invigorating. She presented a mental challenge that none of the UN officer corps could match. The last mole he had placed in her R&D staff had died in an unexplained "lab accident." And then her last mole, who had been one of Norton's valets on the *Erebus*, had suffered an unfortunate slip in an airlock. Norton's relationship with Lithia was a chess match. The prize might well be control of the Faraway System. So far, luckily, only pawns had been bloodied.

Captain Norton passed into Lithia's antechamber where her personal assistant, Thomas the gatekeeper, greeted him. "Good day, Captain Norton," he said. "I hope your passage was smooth."

"Yes, very smooth, thank you." He nodded with a preoccupied purse of his lips.

Thomas leaned forward with a conspiratorial gleam. "She has quite a surprise for you today."

"Is that so?" Norton looked interested, because he was. Thomas craved attention and would talk to anyone who gave him the time of day.

With a grin, Thomas whispered, "I just returned from another fact-finding mission to Banshee."

"Another?" Norton replied. "You've been going down to Banshee regularly?"

"Several times. Making contacts. Setting up networks. Very important missions." Thomas grinned with pride. "I've been in Temptation. Dreadful place. The worst I've ever seen. But it has gotten quite interesting down there. The place is swarming with necros. In fact —"

The inner door whisked open and Thomas fell into instant, deep silence. Captain Norton's face resumed the usual noncommittal blandness as he breezed past Thomas into Lithia's private office. The darkly attractive woman looked up from her desk. Emotionless and serene, she had the look of a bored falcon waiting for a mouse to appear.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Norton said, "Lithia. Always a pleasure."

The woman replied, "Thank you for coming so promptly, Captain."

Norton stared without blinking. He refused to show any betraying emotion to this woman. "I was surprised to hear from you. I haven't received a progress report in weeks."

"We hadn't made any progress."

"Then this obviously isn't about black gun test results."

Lithia nodded. "Obviously not."

The Captain smirked. "Once the blood is washed off a product, you lose interest?"

"Something like that."

The entire wall behind Lithia's desk appeared to be a window through which could be seen the vast Tunnel facility and Hellstromme Industry's small space flotilla orbiting Banshee. The view briefly unnerved Norton, as it always did. He felt like he was suddenly stepping outside into the vacuum of space. And that jolt was the effect Lithia wanted.

Norton maintained his outer calm. "So, I understand you've picked up a little necro activity on Banshee."

Lithia's eyes flickered briefly, but she quickly hid her discomfiture by pointing to a holoviewer on her desk. She pressed a switch and the image of a man appeared in the air between the two officers. She stayed quiet as Norton glanced at the holo, at first with little interest, but then with sudden concern. The Captain's face clouded. Then he checked the time stamp on the image.

"Jesus Christ!" Norton exclaimed.

"Not quite," Lithia replied with quiet satisfaction. "Though they have something in common. They both rose from the dead."

"That's Garrett Quantrill."

"Absolutely. General Garrett Quantrill, the former commander of your Syker Legion on Banshee."

"Don't play games with me, Lithia," Norton snarled, abandoning his carefully constructed reserve. "Tell me what the hell's going on!"

"As you know, we have been sending additional spy drones to Banshee over the last few months to monitor Nicolai's activities organizing his so-called Banshee Free State. About a month ago, intel indicated that the Reapers were making an all-out assault on the town of Temptation. Fortunately, our assets were in good position because we were already monitoring some anomalous activity in and around Temptation."

Norton asked, "What sort of *anomalies* are you talking about?"

"There was some necromantic activity. Which ties into the reappearance of General Quantrill. If I may continue?"

Norton waved his hand dismissively, but continued to watch the image of Quantrill with a fuming glare.

Lithia continued in an even, boardroom voice, "As I said, the primary Temptation anomaly involved the reanimation of the dead from local cemeteries. It was similar in nature to some of the necro activity we've seen in darker regions of the Faraway spaceways. But this is the largest outbreak thus far observed. And it is troubling that it is on the surface of Banshee. As you may recall, General Quantrill was interred at Temptation. I suspect, therefore, that the anomaly drew him in and so he was reanimated. Whether he was the target of the necromancy, I don't know. But the result was the same. Quantrill rose from the dead.

"What we know for a fact is that just over a standard Earth month ago, the Reapers were on the verge of invading and likely destroying Tempta-

Book II: The Undead War

tion. At the same time, an unknown force appeared outside the walls of Temptation, a force vastly inferior in both size and armament to the Reapers. Still, this new force routed Nicolai's army."

"Nicolai is a coward," Norton said quietly.

"That's quite possible," Lithia automatically agreed. "Fortunately, Hellstromme Industries had some live assets in the region. And here's what we uncovered."

Lithia touched the holoviewer again and the scene altered to a panoramic view of the Undead Legion standing motionless outside the walls of Temptation. Then it changed again to show the Legionnaires moving and marching. They destroyed the walls of a town with psychic blasts. Then the scene changed again to show the bloody fighting in the streets of Ghost Rock City. Reapers fell before the Legion, screaming, clutching their heads, blood streaming from their eyes and ears.

"The Syker Legion," Norton muttered with a tone of dread.

"Quite. They appear to be the revived corpses of dead sykers your army left behind on countless battlefields across Banshee during the Anouk Wars twenty years ago. This new Legion is well organized and well led. And if they overrun many more large Reaper units as they did at Temptation and Ghost Rock City, they'll be well armed too."

"Any theories, Lithia?"

"No, Captain. No more than we can explain anything that happens in Faraway."

Lithia clicked the holoviewer again and displayed scenes of the Legionnaires devouring cadavers in Ghost Rock City. A fascinated Norton watched a zombie figure wavering in the air in front of him feeding on a dead Reaper.

The woman asked, "Do you notice anything odd in this scene?"

Norton replied, "Besides a dead guy chewing on someone's gluteus maximus? No."

"The Legionnaires do exhibit typical necro-homophagous behavior. But I was referring to the necro itself. It's head."

Norton then realized that half of the zombie's head was missing. "How is that thing still moving with that kind of damage?"

"Exactly. We don't know. As you know, necros are highly resistant to damage in every area except the head. Yet this Legionnaire, and others we observed, took what should have been killing damage to their brains and kept moving. We theorize it has something to do with the way the Legion is controlled, possibly through a sort of neural network. During the short-lived battle with the Reapers, we witnessed groups of Legionnaires acting as one, throwing brain blasts together with a power that far exceeded that of an individual syker. If accurate, this Legionnaire square is a potent tactical architecture and one that will be difficult to defeat."

"Don't call them Legionnaires. That thing isn't a soldier; it's a monster."

"Very well, Captain." Lithia lowered her head in disdain for Norton's emotionalism. She had thought he was better than this. But it was delicious to throw him off his game. "We don't know how General Quantrill acquired the reanimated sykers. The dangers of this are too obvious to point out to you."

"Skinnies," Norton suggested. "Only Skinnies have power on that scale."

"We considered that, but the Legion has also destroyed several anouk settlements and killed at least one Skinny. That doesn't sound like anything the Skinnies would condone."

"Speculating on the cause of this anomaly will no doubt be fruitless.

Clay & Susan Griffith

The point is what do we do about it, if anything?" Norton smiled as an idea latched onto his brain. "Maybe we don't need to do anything. What are the chances that this new Syker Legion is picking up where it left off? Maybe Quantrill just wants to fight Reapers and grapes."

Lithia assumed her most pretentious earnest face. "Captain, I would remind you that Quantrill is a reanimated corpse. We have no way of judging what his mental state is. I think it's highly unlikely that his ultimate intention is to be a part of your army again or to aid it in any way. I believe Quantrill is following an agenda that has nothing to do with remnant memories of his life as an EXFOR officer."

Norton paused a beat to allow her pomposity to diminish from the air. Then he said with a vicious calm, "You have assets on the ground already. I suggest you use them."

"What do you mean?" Lithia eyed the emotionless intelligence officer. *What was his game? Was this an opportunity or a trap?*

Norton said, "EXFOR is fully committed to space operations at the moment. We do not have Banshee on our view screen. General Warfield is quite adamant that he will not commit forces to Banshee until we can return to the surface with overwhelming force. Obviously, that depends on the completion of the black gun project. I suggest, therefore, that you get more personally involved in the project. Some of the Colonial Rangers have black guns, thanks to the failure of your distribution network. I think you should liaise with them. The Worldstorm is months past. I'm sure the Hellstromme Board would be eager to involve themselves in planetary affairs once more."

Lithia smiled disdainfully to cover her shock that Norton knew about the loss of the black guns. She pretended she couldn't care less whether he knew or not. "I'm a little busy for a trip to Banshee just now."

Norton raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure you are. I don't think a trip will be sufficient. I believe you would benefit by relocating to Banshee. I think General Warfield would approve and will speak to your Board about it."

Lithia went paler, which Norton had thought impossible. Lithia was a spacer. He knew that since she arrived in Faraway, she hadn't left the homey artificial gravity of the Tunnel base or Hellstromme ships. She was a natural denizen of offices and laboratories. She liked her food reconstituted and her air recirculated. He knew that the thought of Banshee nauseated her. She couldn't conceive of herself among the dirt, wind, and colonists. He could barely keep himself from grinning.

Norton pressed on. "An excellent idea, Lithia. I'll draft a memo to General Warfield as soon as our meeting is over." He lifted his eyes to her stern, slash-lipped face. "Is there anything else?" He stood. "Excellent. I'm very pleased with this meeting. Most productive. I'll be in touch. Provided communications to Banshee stay up."

Lithia watched the gray-uniformed bastard stride out of her office. There was no point in arguing. His intelligence was unexpectedly excellent and he had outmaneuvered her. She had pushed her planetary assets in his face to annoy him, and it blew up in her own face.

Now it was up to her to turn the situation to her benefit. Perhaps there could be a positive side to Banshee. Surely there was something she could do to prosper in this coming, disgusting new regime. She could accomplish something down there among the unwashed. There were assets on the surface; the Colonial Rangers, the Reapers, even the Syker Legion. She wasn't above dealing with any of them to get what she needed. And what she wanted more than anything at this moment was to destroy

Book II: The Undead War

Captain Norton on her way up the Hellstromme ladder.

She was, after all, still the head of the black gun project. That program was among the most prestigious at Hellstromme and, in some ways, it was logical that control should shift to Banshee now where the guns needed to go to work. The problem was that the Rangers were so uncontrollable and unpredictable. No, the Colonial Rangers could be a challenge. But Lithia loved a challenge.

She had already begun to put aside the distasteful side of the coming job and concentrate of the potential for conquering new ground when her office door opened and Thomas stepped inside.

Thomas said, "Captain Norton certainly looked pleased with himself. Did everything go all right?"

Lithia didn't deign to look at her assistant. She knew Thomas had spilled her secret to Norton about necros on Banshee. But that wasn't so important. It wasn't the facts that mattered to her, it was betrayal as a concept. Then she smiled.

"Thomas," she said officiously, "detail a shuttle. I have a very important mission for you."

Chapter 9

Debbi and Stew stood in the tower at the south gate watching the empty flats beyond the town walls. Only a few days ago the desert had been filled with the silent dead, standing like lifeless statues.

Stew walked to the access hatchway and climbed down the ladder to the street. Debbi saluted the militiamen on the wall and followed.

For the first time in a month, the cool morning winds freshened the air rather than spread the stench of decay. Neither Stew nor Debbi felt compelled to slather camphor gel under their noses or pull up their bandannas.

Debbi had begun to feel comfortable walking rounds with Stew although it was a different partnership than she had developed with Ross. She and Stew had an unshakable friendship created during the time she'd helped him out of a deep depression, much like Ross had done for her. She'd given Stew a start toward restoring self-confidence in his abilities. He was reliable and solid, second only to Ross as the person she'd want at her back in any fight. His presence was a comfort to Debbi as they walked. Marat's threat consumed her. She'd had to let go of all of the anticipation she had felt the other night and she was finding it very difficult. Debbi's hope for the future wasn't departing easily; it was only congealing in her gut.

They walked silently through the Depot. Only one caravan was unloading; it evidently had come in near dark the previous night. There were no overseers from the Caravan Administration office on site to inspect the loads and check for contraband. The Caravan Administrator's office was in disarray now because the former CA, Randolph Peck, had been arrested as a member of a dangerous cult of magic-loving dilettantes. Peck was now at the Bone Camp, or perhaps filling a cell at the Lupinz Sanitarium. Of all the people who had been taken by the Undead Legion, Debbi actually had the least sympathy for Peck, a self-satisfied little man who had allowed himself to be psychically corrupted by a Skinny. Debbi had successfully fought off a psychic attack from a Skinny and she judged Peck weak for succumbing. But with Peck out of office and no replacement chosen, the town was as close to being an unregu-

Clay & Susan Griffith

lated marketplace as Debbi had ever seen. The few caravans that came to Temptation were pleased to avoid official inspection anyway.

It was unusual that the master of the unloading caravan brightened when she saw the two Colonial Rangers passing. She tossed her clipboard to an assistant and strode toward Debbi with her arm raised.

"Hey, Ranger!"

Debbi and Stew stopped and waited. The short, sunburned caravan master jogged toward them.

She touched the brim of her cap. "How ya doin'? I got somethin' to tell ya."

"What's that?" Debbi asked.

"Two days ago, we stopped at the water station at Stryga Wells."

"Southeast of here," Debbi added.

"Yeah. About fifty miles out. Well, it was deserted."

Debbi glanced inquiringly at Stew; he'd been here longer than she. With her tacit permission, he said, "I remember someone named Roher running Stryga Wells."

The caravan master unwillingly turned to deal with Stew. "Yeah, that's right. Clancy Roher runs the station. He lives there with his family, wife and two kids. They were nowhere to be seen."

"Maybe they just moved on," Stew said. "There was a lot of Reaper activity in this region over the last couple of months."

The woman shook her head. "I don't think so. The place had been lived in. There was food around. It was a mess, which was unusual. But there was no sign of real trouble. I've seen places that the Reapers have been at, and this wasn't it. Even so, I didn't stay long to look around." She looked at Debbi. "It's gettin' to be the dry season. There's few enough caravans comin' into Temptation as it is; if the eastern route goes dry, you'll get even fewer. Just tellin' ya is all."

Debbi said, "Okay, thanks. We'll check it out."

* * *

Stryga Wells was named for an abundant artesian well fifty miles east of Temptation in the midst of a harsh stretch of desert. It was the only reliable water between the town and a small tributary of the Red River a further one hundred miles away. Stryga Wells had been fought over by various caravan corporations and freelancers, as well as the Reapers for many years. Finally, an independent operator took over and ran the wells without favoritism, which had seemed to satisfy most parties involved.

A field of windmills harnessed Banshee's constant winds to power the long rows of water derricks. Amidst the windmills sat a small, prefab polymetal dome that served as office and living quarters for the Roher family who staffed the wells.

Debbi and Stew approached the facility in a Ranger Prowler, a heavy duty six-wheeled ATV with a 20 mm cannon mounted on top, which they had "repaired" once the bulk of the Legion left Temptation. They had paused some distance away and studied the area through binoculars. Debbi had never seen Stryga Wells before, but it appeared to be operating normally. The blades of the forest of windmills rotated rapidly in weird disunison, a dizzying sight.

They pulled to a stop in front of the dome. It was twenty feet high and had a diameter of sixty feet. Stew climbed from the vehicle into the wind-driven sand. He put on his black hat and tightened the latigo under his

Book II: The Undead War

chin. He shrugged off his dark duster, throwing it back into the Prowler. He hefted a Hellstromme Industries Hellblazor assault rifle while Debbi tugged her desert hat onto her head. The hot wind washed over both Rangers and immediately set their skin to prickling. They could feel a sandstorm coming.

Stew pointed at the long troughs that ran under the rows of derricks. They were full; in fact water was overflowing onto muddy ground. Still, the derricks continued to pump.

He said, "That's not good. No station would waste water like that. Particularly this time of year."

Debbi pulled her Dragoon from its holster. She and Stew quickly took positions on either side of the dome's door.

Debbi banged on the polymetal door with her weapon. "Colonial Rangers! Mr. Roher! Are you in there, sir?"

The wind whistled loudly through the metal struts of the windmills and derricks.

The door to the dome was a roll-up. Debbi signaled to Stew as she put her toe under the bottom lip of the door. With a heave of her leg, she sent the metal barrier sliding up noisily.

Stew's rush into the dome was followed by a crashing sound.

Debbi wheeled and looked into the darkness with her weapon out. Stew had fallen into a table and chairs. He extricated himself quickly and put his back against the curving wall.

"Looks deserted," he called out.

Debbi stepped in and removed her dark glasses. The air was thick with heat and flies. The place smelled rank. Plates covered with half-eaten food littered the table. Several jars and cans of fruit and jam were scattered empty around the floor.

Stew stood with a wan smile of embarrassment for slamming into the furniture.

Politely refraining from commenting on Stew's furtiveness, Debbi lifted a plate from the table and sniffed it. "This food isn't rotten. And in this heat, it would rot fast."

They wandered around the dome searching for signs of violence. It was not uncommon for settlers to crack under the pressure of isolation; and they would sometimes murder their families and then themselves. But that didn't look to be the case here.

Debbi asked Stew, "Can you turn off the water supply so it doesn't just pour into the ground?"

"No. I don't know anything about this machinery," Stew shook his head. "This is bad. There was a lot of blood spilt over the years trying to control these wells. Everybody trusted Roher. Now, it'll all start up again."

"We don't know he's dead."

"True. But he's not here."

Debbi and Stew both heard a faint rattling sound from the far side of the dome. They raised their weapons. Stew shuffled several feet away from Debbi.

Debbi called, "Come out with your hands up! You've got three seconds or we start shooting!"

Silence.

"One," she counted.

Silence.

"Two."

Silence.

"Thr . . ."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Wait! Don't shoot! Wait Rangers!" A cabinet swung open to reveal a man crammed into a two-foot square space. Two bare palms were visible. "I am coming out without a gun of any kind."

The voice was familiar to Debbi. As the figure awkwardly unfolded itself from the cabinet, accompanied by grunts of pain, she recognized him. It was Borneo, the blacklining Reaper scav who had come to Temptation over a month ago to steal her black gun. He had been transported from the Temptation lock up to the Bone Camp when the Legion arrived.

Borneo lay sprawled on the floor. Debbi crossed the dome with her weapon aimed at him. He was in bad shape. He was thin and weather worn, his face was cracked and peeling from exposure. His eyes were black, which was normal for a hardcore blackliner, but there were veins of red mixed in. He had been nearly two months without a fix; it was amazing he was alive at all.

Debbi dropped a hard knee into Borneo's back. He grunted in pain.

"Put your wrists behind your back." She pulled a metal binder strip from her belt, wrapped it around his wrists, and slipped one end through a slot in the other and pulled until it clicked tight around his wrists. She patted him for weapons, but found none.

She stood up. "Borneo. I'm surprised to find you here."

"Yes. I am surprised you found me here too."

"Did you kill the Rohers?"

"What is that? I do not know that word."

"The people who lived here? What did you do to them?"

"No one was here. I came here from the camp. I wanted water. No one was here. There was food on the table. I stayed."

"You're a liar. You came here, found the Rohers, and killed them."

"No. I killed no one. I couldn't kill anyone."

"You tried to kill me," Debbi said.

"Oh. Yes. Sure. Then. I mean now. I am too weak to kill anyone now. The camp was bad. No blackline." He looked up at her with veiny, pleading eyes as if she might provide him with a fix.

"Did you escape from the camp or the Sanitarium?"

"I do not understand that choice. I left the camp. It was bad."

"So you never went to the Sanitarium?"

"I do not understand. I'm not lying. Don't shoot me."

"Lupinz Sanitarium. It's a big building. They took some of the prisoners there."

"No. They took us nowhere. We lived in the camp until we died."

Debbi kneeled next to the Reaper scav. "But some prisoners were rotated out of the camp, right?"

"No. No one left the camp. Except me. I escaped. Different rotters came in and others went out. The prisoners disappeared, but no one left."

"What do you mean the prisoners disappeared?" Debbi demanded. A shiver was building in the stifling heat.

Borneo rolled onto his side. "Prisoners kept coming. But we always had the same number. The rotters would come into the tents and take some. Those never came back."

"They took them to another prison," Debbi reiterated.

Borneo shook his head. "No. No one ever left the camp. But they disappeared all the same."

Debbi stood up and walked over to Stew. "What do you make of that?" She leaned her arms hard against the tabletop. "Oh God. You think we stood by and let Ringo walk into a death camp?"

Book II: The Undead War

"Settle down a minute," Stew responded. "I'm not sure we should make anything out of what he says. At best, he's confused. He's a blackliner who needs a hit. It's surprising he's coherent at all. Even if he wanted to tell the truth, he wouldn't know what it was. At worst, he escaped from the camp, made his way here, and killed the Rohers. Either way, I think he's lying."

"You're probably right." Debbi considered the situation. She rubbed her fear aside with a damp hand. "I'm going out to the prison camp just the same though."

"Okay. Let's go."

"No. You take the speeder in the back of the Prowler. Take Borneo back to Temptation. And take a look around here for the Rohers." She looked straight into Stew's eyes. "After I go to the camp, I'm leaving. And I won't be able to come back to Temptation right away. I've got somewhere to go, but I will be back."

"What are you talking about? Where are you going? Let me come with you."

"No. I can't tell you because I don't want you to have any information for the sykers to get out of you. All you need to know is I'm gone; you don't know where I am. But listen, I need you to keep things together in town. You have to protect Ross." Her eyes swirled with fear. "If trouble starts, Marat will go after Ross first. You have to prevent that until I get back."

Stew understood now what had stayed her hand at the bar after Marat had confronted her. Stew hadn't even considered that Marat was clever enough to hold Ross's well being over Debbi's head. Regarding her with a sympathetic look, he handed her the Hellblazor and his canteen. "Here."

"Thanks. I'm going to take on water and head out." She holstered her sidearm and hefted the rifle. "I'll pop a couple of zombies for you."

"Pop them all."

Debbi forced a hollow smile. "That's a promise."

Chapter 10

Debbi throttled back on the Prowler and cut the engines a half mile from the Bone Camp. The light from Banshee's brilliant sun was obscured by the growing sandstorm. She didn't think the rumble of the vehicle could be heard over the howl of the wind. The storm would allow her to get close to the prison undetected.

Borneo's words ate at her. Something bad was definitely going on at the prison camp. Quantrill and Marat had both lied about where the prisoners were. Why? To what purpose? She had to find out once and for all despite the consequences.

Debbi came alone because it offered some meager protection for the rest of the Rangers. Marat had made it perfectly clear that Ross would be the first to fall if any action was taken against the Legion. She prayed that if she alone broke Ringo out of jail and fled, Ross would be spared retribution and none of the other Rangers would be held responsible for her actions. It might be enough of a distinction for Marat to show mercy to the Rangers. And if it wasn't, and Ross paid the ultimate price.... The bottom line was that Ross would understand. Debbi knew Ross well enough that he would agree to sacrifice himself rather than leave a Ranger behind. She could hear his voice in her head even now, drilling

Clay & Susan Griffith

home the fact that he was already compromised. He was a casualty. Forget him. Protect the others.

Debbi scowled and shoved herself up from the seat. She yanked her goggles down over her eyes. As she opened the hatch, wind rushed over her in with the sharp sting of aggravated sand. She could see the edge of a distant rise bleeding into the dusky air, the particles swiftly joining the storm's incensed dance. Lifting her bandana over the lower part of her face, she stepped out and began her march to the prison.

She made good time. The thought of putting into action what she had wanted to do for days now gave her the stamina she needed. She crawled into a wadi and popped up over the bank, only a few feet from the prison wire.

The camp was quiet except for the incessant flapping of tents and the swaying of unlit lanterns. She could see two guards standing outside the main gate, seemingly unconcerned about the worsening weather conditions. There were two more troopers standing inside the compound. They weren't moving either. She didn't see Lieutenant Mumbler, as she thought of the uncooperative and incomprehensible officer she'd encountered on her last trip to the camp.

Why weren't the troopers patrolling?

In fact, none of the visible Legionnaires were doing anything but standing still. It seemed odd. Were they that cocky that they didn't need to make rounds to ensure no one escaped?

Luckily, both of the troopers inside the fence were facing away from Debbi. She slipped over the top of the wadi on her belly, leaving a small river of sand in her wake. She kept low, scurrying several yards to crouch behind a clump of brush. She studied the zombies. They remained in place. Her eyes swept the tent locations. The largest was surrounded by four smaller ones. She decided that the large one must hold the prisoners while the smaller ones held supplies and provided shelter for some of the Legion guards, though the stupefied Legionnaires standing in the open apparently didn't care that the wind was stripping more decaying flesh from their bones.

Debbi was now out of sight of the guards in the front. She slipped around the brush and came forward in a hunched run, wire cutters already clutched tight in her hand. The wire wasn't electrified; they were overconfident bastards. Hell, why hadn't Ringo tried to escape himself? Borneo managed it. She was going to have to have a talk with the kid about when to accept incarceration and when to escape from the enemy.

She cut through the wires and slipped inside, darting quickly for the side of the nearest small tent. She crouched on one knee, watching the area for movement.

She saw nothing.

Debbi couldn't hear anything over the roar of the wind. She pulled out her knife and slowly cut a hole in the tent, just enough to put an eye to and see in.

It was dark as pitch inside, but she triggered the starlite filter on her goggles and the interior lit up green. With her hands cupped around her eyes she could see the tent was largely empty except for a few crates and barrels.

Now she heard a faint rasping in the distance. It sounded as if there were patrols after all, probably coming from the other side of the big tent. She ripped up the bottom of the flap a few inches and rolled inside out of sight.

Book II: The Undead War

Her Dragoon was out and sweeping the interior. The green glow of her goggles showed that nothing was hiding. She stood and looked around. She heard the rasping sound outside move along the side of the tent and then past.

She breathed a small sigh of relief.

Moving to the front of the tent, she peered out. The Mumbler was outside finally. Debbi recognized some of Marat's squad with the officer. The small group of undead men entered one of the smaller tents on the right side of the compound. It must be the officer's tent.

Turning back inside, the Ranger approached the crates. She judged the wind's howl and felt it was loud enough to drown out a little snooping. She jammed her knife into the lip of the nearest barrel. Twisting it back and forth, she worked the edge up. It creaked open and she pulled the lid the rest of the way up.

It was salted meat. A lot of it.

She was about to shut the lid, when she saw something. She lifted the lid higher and stared in horror at a hand protruding from the meat packed in the barrel. A wave of bile rose in her throat and she stumbled back. The lid slapped into place with a loud thud. She caught herself on the edge of a crate, but then jerked her hand aside with revulsion of what might be inside it.

Merciful heaven, they were eating the prisoners!

She had condemned Ringo to a death sentence! She had condemned them all! Borneo had told her the truth; there were no prisoner transfers to the Sanitarium. That was why there were so few guards. There was no need; the prisoners were being harvested.

Debbi shoved aside her horror and dropped her mask of a Ranger into place; she stepped back to the front flap.

She would kill the zombies, every single one.

She crouched and lifted the flap almost wishing the patrol would swing back her way. Her fingers continued to curl around the butt of her gun in a reflexive twitch.

The sand bit into her face, but she kept her eyes centered on the main tent. She crawled out and stood. Her gaze never wandered despite the fact that the sand continued to writhe in fierce distortions. She strode forward boldly, not caring if anyone saw her. In fact, she wanted them to. She wanted them to see that the means of their true death walked among them. Let one show its rotting face. She'd blast it off with pleasure.

With her knife, Debbi split the side of the large tent and shoved it roughly aside. She stepped inside with her weapon up and ready.

As steeled as she thought she was for what was inside, it was no protection at all. The sight was beyond gruesome. Two zombie Legionnaires sat hunched over two bodies that were chained hand and foot to the ground. The troopers lifted bloody faces at her entrance, their jaws working incessantly as they continued to chew.

Her weapon swung on them and she fired.

"Bastards!" she screamed.

Bullets ripped into them and they fell back. It took only a second before they rose again. A rational thought finally emerged from her brain and her thumb brushed against the black gun trigger and she felt the subtle discharge. Two slivers of the black tannis sliced into the zombies and they immediately froze. The Rangers had never had the opportunity to field test the black guns after learning what they supposedly did. But Debbi didn't have time to be amazed that the needles actually worked so

Clay & Susan Griffith

well.

The vengeful Ranger fired again with standard ammo and both Legionnaire skulls exploded. Their once and again lifeless bodies flopped wetly to the ground.

A sound to her left was the only warning as a Legionnaire swung a rotting arm that slammed against her head.

Debbi fell to the ground. She immediately rolled and came up against a partially eaten corpse. Its eyes stared at her in undeniable, futile fear, pleading for a rescue that was coming far too late. Debbi's rage surged even higher. She slashed at the approaching figure with her large knife, cutting deep across the zombie's calf. It didn't even flinch, but it did drop to one knee as the tendons separated.

She shoved the barrel of her Dragoon against a bit of bare skull protruding white through its decaying skin and thumbed the black gun trigger. Its grasping hands froze agonizingly mere inches from her face. Without even blinking, Debbi immediately placed a bullet there as well.

Brain matter splattered across her face. The Legionnaire fell to the side. She kicked it away.

Debbi gathered her legs under her and stood. The surrounding carnage was horrendous. Six human bodies lay around her, three of which were almost completely consumed. Only a few limbs and gnawed bones remained of them. A foot with its chain still locked around the ankle lay on the bloody ground.

Debbi's hand trembled. She was too late.

She had failed Ringo.

Debbi turned away, prepared to face the remaining troopers who would be coming her way. They most likely had heard the gunfire and were fast approaching.

Let them come, she thought. She had a rage consuming her and it needed to be expelled in the most basic way. She methodically checked her weapon and made sure she had a shell and a needle in both chambers. She was ready.

A muffled groan reached her ears. She turned around, her weapon covering her back. She saw nothing. Only bodies.

Then one of them moved. The attached chains rattled in the muffled silence of the tent turned horrific tomb. One of the prisoners was still alive. A disoriented head lifted, and Debbi's face changed from dejection and hatred to absolute elation.

Ringo!

She scrambled over to the young man, dropping down to the blood-saturated ground.

"Ringo! You're alive!" Her voice held a tremor that she didn't bother trying to hide. She pulled off the filthy rag that gagged him. She guessed that the Legion didn't want their supper interrupted by annoying distractions. Also, it prevented any unlikely passersby from overhearing desperate screams.

It only made her even more enraged.

Recognition finally seeped into Ringo's eyes and he focused on his savior. "Debbi!" He was near hysterics, struggling ineffectually against the chains that bound him.

"Steady, Ringo. I'll get you out of here." She didn't waste precious time trying to pick the lock. She blasted the short lengths of chain binding each limb. She helped Ringo to sit up. In only the few days since Ringo had been incarcerated, he had already lost weight and strength.

Book II: The Undead War

"Think you can handle a gun?" Debbi asked. "We're getting out of here." Ringo nodded, his voice dry and rasping. "Give me anything. I'll crawl my ass out of here if it means missing the next mess call."

Debbi smiled slightly. "That's the spirit."

She scrambled to one of the dead Legionnaires and pulled an autopistol from its holster. Then she hauled Ringo to his feet and shoved the pistol into his hands.

The tent flap was flung open behind her and in surged four more Legionnaires.

Debbi spun around and fired her black gun. Needles found a home in the two forward zombies. Ringo's gunfire answered and shot the frozen Legionnaires. They blew back, crashing into the troopers behind them.

Debbi maneuvered Ringo to the slit through which she had come, hoping that the Legion patrols outside hadn't spotted it yet. She continued firing. Another Legionnaire froze, but this time Ringo didn't take it down with a follow up shot.

The young Ranger's face had gone slack and stared mutely at one of the sykers. Debbi scanned the group of zombies and noticed the one that was staring intently at Ringo. With a shout, Debbi shot it with a tannis needle and followed up with a .45 caliber hollowpoint. Its head shattered.

As the decapitated Legionnaire dropped, Ringo shook his head as if waking from a long sleep. Debbi shoved him through the flap as she continued to lay down cover fire behind them.

"Run straight between the tents!" she called to him. "The wire's cut!" The three remaining Legionnaires lifted their weapons. Bullets tore through the tent as she flung herself out after Ringo.

Debbi spun around and sprayed a suppressing fire behind her at three Legionnaires emerging from the mess tent. The heavy shells struck home and pushed them momentarily off their feet back into the tent and each other. But she knew it wouldn't be for long. The element of surprise was gone and the zombies were getting their range with their syker powers. The Rangers had to get out.

"Debbi! Come on!" Ringo shouted over the sandstorm.

She backpedaled toward the fence line. The zombies scrambled to their feet and rushed forward at Debbi. One lingered and she noted its concentration. It was about to do some sort of syker crap.

Her weapon lifted, but then shuddered to a halt in midair. Suddenly her chest felt like it was going to explode. She could feel her ribs shifting inside her body. A cry of agony was ripped from her and her hand trembled as she labored to hold onto her gun.

Ringo suddenly appeared next to her and grabbed the Dragoon from her. Before the syker could glance his way, he shot all of them with the tannis needles. They froze.

The pressure was released from Debbi's chest and she staggered, catching herself on Ringo's shoulder. He was screaming over the weapon's discharge, blindly firing the bullets, hoping for a head shot but knowing he was too weak and disoriented to shoot so accurately. They had only seconds before the troopers recovered.

Debbi knew it. She reached over and steadied Ringo's hand, helping him aim. Three shots. Three accurate shots. Three dead Legionnaires.

Ringo slumped against her for a moment as the last of the zombies fell onto the swirling sand. Then he grabbed her and pulled her toward the fence. Debbi noticed a movement to her right. Lieutenant Mumbler stepped into view and lifted a hand toward his fleeing, one time prisoner.

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Over here, you bastard!" Debbi screamed and fired the black gun. Two needles missed their target as the Lieutenant pulled back. However, it was enough to distract the undead syker from its intended target.

The Lieutenant's gaze zeroed in on her and its eyes burned as an energy blast was cast in her direction, passing dangerously close over her shoulder. She felt her skin burn from the proximity of the blast.

Debbi returned fire and this time a needle dug itself into the Lieutenant's right eye. There was silence as it froze in place, eyes wide, trapped with the knowledge that it would soon be truly dead once more. She took great pleasure in blowing its brains out. They splattered into the wind.

Debbi chased after Ringo and was soon helping him through the hole in the wire. She covered his back and then slipped through herself. There were no more syker zombies following them.

Her eyes burning against the sting of the swirling sand, she led Ringo toward the hidden Prowler. They leaned into the storm and fought their way up the rise and out of sight.

The trip to the Prowler was longer than she remembered, but it always was when something might be chasing you. Half the time she wasn't even sure which direction she was heading.

They practically bumped into the vehicle. Ringo was exhausted and operating on sheer willpower alone. She guided his disoriented body inside the Prowler and slammed her hand down on the hatch button. It rumbled closed and there was finally silence. Ringo dropped into the navigator's seat. Debbi threw herself into the driver's seat and started the engines.

She didn't see any wounds on him so she let him be for the time being. Right now, she wanted to put distance between them and the Bone Camp. Word of their attack would soon reach other Legionnaires in the area and she wanted to be long gone. She hit the accelerator and rumbled off into the desert. She cast one final plea for forgiveness toward Temptation. She hoped Ross could hear it over the cry of the storm.

Chapter 11

Through the diminishing sandstorm, Stew approached the east gate of Temptation on the speeder bike with Borneo tossed behind him like a bedroll. The sight of Miller, Fitz, and Chennault standing in the middle of the open gate heightened the uneasy feeling he'd had during the ride back from Stryga Wells. He came to a stop in front of his fellow Rangers.

"Where's Debbi?" Miller eyed Borneo. "And where'd you find *that*?"

"Stryga Wells," Stew answered. "Dallas is gone."

"What?" Fitz exclaimed in amazement.

"She's gone. I can't tell you anymore than that. She said she'd be back."

"That's just great!" Miller said with disgust. "Marat and his zombies have Ross. About an hour ago, Marat gathered his troops at headquarters and he's holed up in there with Ross."

"Dammit." Stew shoved his goggles up and rubbed his face. "Has Marat said anything? What does he want?"

"We don't know." Miller spat on the dusty ground. "There were ten or twenty of those stinking things lounging around outside headquarters. We didn't think it was too smart to stroll in and chitchat."

Chennault pulled her Dragoon and checked the load. "I say we bust Ross out of there and whatever we see that's dead, gets killed again."

Book II: The Undead War

Stew felt a thrill at Chennault's words. He was sick of walking on eggshells around the Legionnaires. The normally quiet Stew longed for a test of force, and he sensed the same desire in the other Rangers. Even Miller, who was far from the bravest man on Banshee, had that cold look in his eye that said he'd rather risk dying than keep living this way.

However, Stew couldn't let them press it. He promised Debbi that he'd do all he could to keep Ross out of harm's way and keep the peace in town until she came back. And he intended to do it; he trusted Debbi more than anyone he'd ever known.

"No," Stew said quietly.

Miller shouted, "What? Come on! How long are we going to keep on taking their crap? I say we kill them all tonight!"

Fitz added, "Miller's right. I can't believe I just said that. But we've got them surrounded. And outnumbered if you count the militia."

Stew looked Fitz in the eye. "They've got Ross. And nobody counts the militia."

"Ross is gone," Chennault said. "He's been gone for a month. Let's take them!"

"I promised Dallas."

"Dallas has a blind spot about Ross," Chennault countered.

Stew eyed the powerful ex-Marine.

Chennault's voice became oddly soft. "Dallas can't be trusted to make the right call here. I can see it in her eyes. She'll never give up on Ross, no matter what. Marat will always have that hold over her. But Marat also thinks that we won't pull the trigger, and that's *our* edge. But if we wait too long, he'll get into somebody's head and tumble to it. Stew, it's Temptation or Ross. It's not a good choice, but it's one we've got to make. And we've got to make it now."

Miller interjected, "I say what the hell would the old Ross do? You think he'd let those dead sons of bitches run *his* town? He'd blow Marat's head off and it's every man and zombie for himself."

Stew looked into the eyes of each Ranger in turn. "You're right, Miller. That's what Ross would do. But Ross isn't in charge, Dallas is. She's got a different plan. And I aim to see it done."

Miller, Fitz, and Chennault exchanged despairing glances.

Miller turned his back and stepped away, muttering, "Sure fine. What the hell, we're all dead anyway."

Fitz threw up his arm and shook his head.

Chennault holstered her Dragoon. Her voice was still quiet, but grim. "I think maybe you've got a blind spot too, Stew. You'd better be right about this."

* * *

As the setting sun cast long shadows through the town, the four Rangers walked up the street toward their headquarters. Wind drove clouds of dust before them. The whistling wind and their crunching footsteps seemed to be the only sounds in town. A gang of ten zombie troopers lounged outside the headquarters. When they spotted the approaching Rangers, they pushed themselves off their resting spots and stepped into the empty street with weapons at the ready.

Stew stopped and his three companions halted beside him. In one motion, they pulled their bandannas over their faces. The wind whipped through Stew's long coat. He saw the dark shapes of other Rangers and militiamen scrambling into position on nearby rooftops.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Stew shouted toward the headquarters building, "Marat!"

The door opened. Captain Marat emerged into a dull shaft of fading sunlight and smiled. "No need to scream, Ranger. I know you're out here."

Stew took a step and the Legionnaires brought their rifles up in a clash of metal. The Rangers' hands flashed to weapons. Stew raised a quick hand to warn off his three partners.

"Your people seem touchy," Marat said. "Are you here to start a fight?"

"No," Stew answered.

"Then why are you here?"

"You know why. Where's Ross?"

The undead Captain feigned good-natured confusion. "He's in his office. As usual. Why do you ask?"

"We need to see him."

"He's busy."

Stew's voice was both soft and tense. "Marat, I don't want to lose any friends and I imagine you're not anxious to go back into the cold ground. So what can we do to prevent that?"

Marat sneered. "Can you draw faster than I can think?"

"I wouldn't try anything." Stew's icy, blue eyes didn't waver from the zombie's cold, milky eyes. "Because when it starts, it won't stop until all of you, or all of us, are dead."

"I think it will be you."

Stew arched an eyebrow in response.

Marat's laugh was a strange, gargling sound. "Your leader, the red head, she is the one to blame. She keeps pushing and pushing and pushing. She can't leave well enough alone, can she? Now she's finally gone too far. I warned her what I would do if she continued."

Stew said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Marat appeared genuinely taken aback, but only for a second. He recovered quickly. "I find that hard to believe."

"I said I don't know what you're talking about," Stew responded again.

Marat's voice was hard. "She attacked the prison camp and killed several of my men in the process of freeing your young companion. You didn't know?"

Miller laughed out loud and shouted, "Yeah! All right, Dallas! About freakin' time!"

Fitz and Chennault exchanged a few whispered words.

Stew stayed silent and kept his gaze fixed on Marat. He was elated to know Debbi had rescued Ringo, and killed a few Legionnaires in the process. Obviously, both she and Ringo were alive or Marat would be crowing about it.

Marat stepped to the edge of the sidewalk. He paid no attention to the other Rangers. Stew was in charge now.

Marat asked him, "Where is she?"

"I don't know," Stew answered.

"When is she coming back?"

"I don't know."

Marat's words were hard and deliberate. "I don't believe you."

Stew smiled and thumbed his hat off the back of his head. Then he raised his hands straight out. "Take a look."

"Stew! No!" Chennault shouted.

Marat's glance slid over the Rangers in the back. He then returned to Stew.

Stew felt the first light touches in his mind. They were almost physical,

Book II: The Undead War

as if fingers were probing his brain inside his skull. Memories began to seep unbidden into his awareness. He felt sensations again. He could feel the spray of water droplets on his face as the wind blew across the tanks at Stryga Wells. He tasted the salt in his mouth. He could smell Debbi as she talked and he watched the red tips of her hair toss in the wind. He listened to her again and felt the same fear as she drove away in the Prowler.

He recalled the thrill he felt just seconds before at the news of her success at the Bone Camp.

Stew's mind suddenly erupted in fire. He bit down hard and his eyes rolled up in his head. He didn't scream in pain. His knees quivered weakly, but he didn't drop. If he showed he was in pain, the Rangers would assume Marat was killing him, as perhaps he was, and they would instantly retaliate. The war would start and he would have failed Debbi. With great effort, the former priest brought his gaze back down to meet Marat's with sweat dripping off his chin.

The syker stared intently. His rotting face was set in concentration and effort, even pain. Using his powers was an enormous strain.

The vise around Stew's brain released. The Ranger exhaled heavily and took a step forward to steady himself.

Marat slowly recovered his indifferent visage, pretending he had expended no great effort in wracking Stew's mind. They both knew Stew had beaten him this time. Marat had not been able to force an issue. But there was still one card left to play.

Marat said, "You knew her intention to attack the camp. Yet you didn't alert us. You knew the price of treason as well as she."

Stew croaked in a strained voice, "General Quantrill doesn't want Ross dead. And he wants Temptation kept peaceful."

"I am the military governor of Temptation. General Quantrill isn't here. I have full authority to keep the peace as I see fit. If none of you will follow your Captain's orders, what good is he to me? Quantrill would rather I burn the town to the ground than see it revolt against him."

"We're willing to follow Ross's orders completely. You have my word."

"I don't believe you. You Colonial Rangers are inveterate liars and opportunists. You're not soldiers; you have no honor."

The wind roared along the street and the air grew colder as the twilight deepened. Lights winked on thanks to the limited electrical power restored by the Legion.

The sound of footsteps from inside the headquarters heralded Ross's arrival. The Ranger captain walked out onto the sidewalk and stood next to Captain Marat. Ross's face was gaunt and pale. His sunken eyes were almost lost in the dark rings around them.

Marat turned his head slightly as if talking to Ross, but really directing his words out for all the Colonial Rangers to hear. "Captain Ross, your man here has abjured the actions of the rebel Dallas. On behalf of his colleagues, he has sworn to follow your orders to the letter. I would like to believe him, but the last few weeks have been a legacy of lies and obstruction on the part of your Rangers. Therefore, I require a gesture of good faith to insure their earnestness."

Marat leaned close to Ross and hissed words into his ear. Ross's exhausted expression didn't change. He moved stiffly like a marionette on a string.

Ross announced with a strangled cry, "Surrender the black guns."

Miller, Fitz, and Chennault erupted in protest.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Stew tried to consider the situation instantly with the shouting from behind and the steely glare of Marat in front. He studied Ross, tried to see what Debbi thought was still there, but he couldn't see any hint of the commander he had known and respected. Still, Debbi was sure. He couldn't think of the light in her eyes and the timbre in her voice and not believe her. He couldn't bear to think of that light fading when he told her that he had failed to keep Ross safe.

Stew pulled his Dragoon from his holster. He methodically unsnapped the black gun attachment from the barrel and tossed it into the dirt a few feet in front of him.

"Stew, no!" Chennault yelled. "We can't do this! We might as well blow our own brains out!"

Miller growled, "That zombie's got him! He's mind-controlled too!"

Stew turned. "No. Give 'em up. We've got to."

"Maybe you've got to," Miller said with a sarcastic laugh. "Not me, brother. I don't even like Ross!"

"We've got to trust Dallas. Anything else is giving Marat the excuse he needs."

Fitz pulled his weapon and held it out to Chennault. "I've only got one arm here. Gimme a hand."

The woman hesitated. She glanced between the calm Stew and the agitated Miller. Then she made her decision. Chennault detached the black gun from Fitz's Dragoon, then removed her own. She threw both of them on top of Stew's.

"You're all crazy!" Miller yelled. "What are we going to use to fight these things?"

Chennault spun her sidearm on her finger. "We've still got cold steel and I'll take my chances with that any day. I just hope they're reading my mind as I pump some AP rounds through their skulls."

Fitz chuckled.

Miller wagged his head dismissively and yanked his pistol out. "Yeah, whatever. You people are all idiots." He fumbled awkwardly with the black gun before he finally wrenched it off. He threw it forcefully to the ground. "Dammit, Stew! I wish you'd stayed a priest. Cause only God Almighty can save us now."

"There," Stew announced to Marat.

The undead Captain nodded. "That's four. There are five more Rangers in town. Plus seventy-eight members of your militia. I want all their black guns within thirty minutes."

"I'll pass the word." Stew said flatly.

Ross stared at the small pile of weapons lying in the lamplit street. He slowly looked up and caught Stew's eye. Somewhere, deep down, Stew thought he saw a sign of disappointment and defeat. It shook Stew who whirled away quickly.

"You all right?" Chennault asked the icy-eyed Stew, but he moved past her without answering.

She followed and when they were out of Marat's sight, she grabbed Stew's arm and spun him around. "Don't second guess it now. You made the call. It's got to be the right one."

Stew clutched her shoulder with a slight but grateful smile. Taking back his resolve, he went to issue the order for the men and women now under his command to surrender the only weapon that gave them a fighting chance against their ruthless enemy. And it was all because he was willing to gamble their lives and the life of the town on a woman

Book II: The Undead War

who was missing with a plan he'd never heard.

With time to consider it, it didn't sound very rational to him.

General Quantrill had taken over the finest house in Ghost Rock City. It had once been the home of the town's wealthiest mine owner and then it was the headquarters of the Reaper commander. It was built in a Victorian style and furnished in a fine manner with Earth teak furniture, lush brocade drapery, fine art, Persian rugs, and a once polished wooden floor that was now scarred and blood stained.

The mansion had a great ballroom that had once hosted the finest gatherings of colonial society. It was paneled in mahogany and it had a magnificent and intricate inlaid marble floor. Above the fireplace was a large portrait. The man in the painting was the original owner of the house, standing boldly before a landscape of conquered Banshee including a family of peaceful anouks in the background, the very ideal of the noble savage overawed by a superior culture. The painting was torn and stained from months of mistreatment by the Reapers.

This great chamber that saw balls and receptions and debaucheries had become the Legionary war room. Fourteen officers of the Legion were gathered inside. Some sat at the long, teak table under the cracked silver and crystal chandelier while others consulted maps that had been liberated from the mine offices and were nailed to the walls.

The large, double doors at the far end of the room swung open and Quantrill swept inside with his adjutant in his wake. The assembled officers scrambled to attention in a tumult of boots and chairs that echoed in the vast room.

"As you were, gentlemen." Quantrill took a seat at the head of the table. His chair was considerably larger than the others. He raised his hands and motioned his officers to take their seats around the table. They all sat and attentively regarded Quantrill, despite many dangling or missing eyes among the group.

"I have told you all individually, but I want to repeat in your gathered presence just how proud and gratified I am by the Legion's performance. You led your men with honor and professionalism. And I thank you."

Captain De Klerk, commander of the 3rd Division, spoke up with nasal, slurred speech due to his missing nose. "What's our next target, General?"

"We've bloodied the Reapers." Quantrill sat back with satisfaction. "I have spies watching their main base at Domburg Ruins. But until Nicolai decides to challenge us or I feel we have the power to assault Domburg, I intend to consolidate our position in this area. Ghost Rock City is ours. Our hold on Temptation is secure. I have just been informed by Captain Marat that the Colonial Rangers have surrendered their black guns as a token of solidarity. Clearly, they realize the Legion is the only solution for Banshee's future."

Several of the officers exchanged surprised glances and jealous murmurs. Quantrill watched with annoyance as resentments seep out just like in the old, breathing days. Even his new unitary command structure had failed to completely suppress the old squad rivalries. But perhaps Marat's success would spur all of them to seek greater achievement in battle.

Quantrill silenced the grumbling with a vigorous knock on the table. "The Reapers already know our power. Now I intend to educate the anouks. We fired a few minor settlements on the way south, but that

Clay & Susan Griffith

doesn't deliver a strong enough message. The grapes need to know that the Legion will brook no rebellion. There are several sizeable native villages in the area and they must be reduced. I expect we'll encounter plenty of Skinnies as well. Are you gentlemen ready to take the fight to them?"

"Yes sir!"

"Excellent." Quantrill stood up. "We will have a war council at dawn tomorrow. For now, I would like to invite you all to enjoy a fine meal."

Taking his cue, the adjutant stepped out of the double doors behind the General and motioned up the corridor. Two troopers entered the ballroom carrying a heavy platter between them. The platter was three feet across covered with a silver dome. The troopers set their burden on the table and stepped back.

General Quantrill removed the platter's silver covering to reveal a man's naked body curled in the fetal position. The nude man was alive, his mouth was gagged and he was trussed wrist and ankle. His face contorted with terror.

"Tonight's main course comes courtesy of our old friends at Hellstromme Industries. It is a delicious dish that I believe goes by the name of Thomas." Quantrill stared into the bound man's panicked eyes and said to the struggling entree, "I fear I will be unable to return your gnawed bones to your supervisor because I intend to keep the shuttle you arrived in. But you can die content that you successfully ran your last errand. You delivered Hellstromme's message of alliance and friendship. I fear I will have to reject their proposal, however. Hellstromme Industries has nothing we need. And I personally have no respect for the greedy, self-absorbed technocrats who run it. And nothing will give me more pleasure than one day feasting on the entire board of directors of that heartless corporation."

Quantrill lifted a hatchet from the platter and held it out. "Captain De Klerk, would you care to carve?"

"Thank you, sir. It would be an honor." De Klerk took the shining, steel hatchet from his commander and examined the razor sharp edge of the blade before setting to work.

Chapter 12

Late at night, a week after the dark day the Rangers surrendered their black guns to Marat, five figures were seen making their way through the Depot in Temptation. One was a tall dark-skinned man wearing a simple dark robe and sporting a long scimitar at his belt. His face showed the ritual scarification of his Tuareg clan. Some of the caravaneers recognized the famed caravan master Sharif, but thought it odd to see him with his head uncovered, and without a caravan. In Temptation these days, however, it was best to mind one's own business. The other four people in his group were strangers. A lithe Chinese woman strode with him, her hand resting on her blaster. A thin, black man wearing a desert turban followed, his eyes darting quickly and suspiciously around him. A third man wore a heavy parka with the hood pulled up. In the lead was a medium-height figure whose head was swathed in black cloth that left only green eyes peering out, with a billowing black cloak that was too long.

As the group weaved their way through wagons and vehicles, they

Book II: The Undead War

spotted an undead trooper wandering along the closed stalls at the edge of the Depot. The merchants and caravaneers who also saw the rotting Legionnaire instantly vanished. They drifted into their draped stalls and scurried out of sight into vehicles.

One poor soul didn't see the trooper. He was tying down a load on a wagon when the zombie walked up behind him and laid a gray hand on his shoulder. The man turned quickly and screamed. He tried to flee, but the zombie seized him by the shirt. The awful screaming continued as the zombie tore the shirt open and bit into the struggling man's shoulder.

The figure in the too long, black robes broke from the group and raced between stalls toward the melee. Sharif loped after, accompanied by the singing of his sword as it slid from its sheath.

The zombie shoved the man to the ground as it chewed a mouthful of his flesh. The man tried to crawl away, his screaming reduced to painful sobs. The undead trooper didn't hurry; it knew it could resume its meal at its leisure.

A motion to its side caused its head to turn in that direction.

In a swirl of black, Debbi Dallas leaped over a cart. Her Dragoon was out and she launched three silent, black needles at the zombie. They penetrated its head and chest. The thing jerked to a sudden halt.

Debbi landed in a crouch with her gun aimed at the zombie. It remained unmoving. She scrambled to the bitten man on the ground and examined his wound. The man cried out and grabbed Debbi's arm.

The zombie came to, shook its head, and angrily looked down to target a brain blast at its attacker. Debbi seemed unconcerned.

The Tuareg swept in. The zombie had a foot slammed into its chest, and was thrown back against a wagon as an arc of steel parted its head from its shoulders. It actually saw its surroundings somersaulting as its head flew through the air. Sharif whirled, his foot kicking up dust, and swiped again. The head landed in two pieces on the ground.

Debbi looked up at Sharif as she tried to press the writing man down to the ground. "Thanks. I didn't want to fire my weapon."

Sharif nodded. He nonchalantly cleaned his sword and sheathed it.

A woman appeared out of the darkness and knelt beside the wounded man. Several other people emerged from the shadows to get a better look at those who had dared to kill one of the Legion. Some of them automatically began to pack up their stalls and load vehicles.

One greasy caravaneer spit angrily on the ground at Sharif's feet. "Dammit! You should've let the thing have him. If he was stupid enough to get caught, he deserved it. Now we're all going to get it."

Debbi said to the angry caravaneer, "Get that body out of sight. Bury it."

He sneered. "You bury it! I gotta pack up and get out before the rest of them come after us."

Debbi grabbed the man roughly. "I said bury it! The rest of them won't be coming after you."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm on my way to kill them all." She shoved the man aside.

Debbi and Sharif rejoined their group. With the confused crowd watching, they left the Depot and entered Temptation proper. They hurried along the deserted streets until they saw the lights of *Mo's*. Sharif threw the door open and entered. The smaller man waited outside, scanning the area around the saloon until the group was inside. He followed and closed the door behind him.

Clay & Susan Griffith

The saloon was empty except for Mo who was asleep at one of the tables. The sound of the door brought him to his feet.

"Heh? Who's that?" Mo peered across the dimly lit room. "Who is that? Sharif? That you?"

"Yes." Sharif glanced around the saloon. "You are empty?"

Mo rolled his eyes and then forced a smile. "Great. The only person who would brave the zombies to come in is a guy who doesn't even drink. Yeah, I'm empty. But I'm thinkin' it's gonna pick up. What can I get you and your friends? Hey, what are you doing?"

Debbi locked the front door while the thin man in the turban began to blow out the lamps. The area around the Depot gate was last in line for restoration of electrical power, so Mo's was still lit with oil lamps. The thin man then took a place at the front window to watch the street.

"Hey!" Mo shouted. "What's going on? I'm still open!"

"Sorry, Mo." Debbi pulled the black cloth away from her face. "We need your place for a while."

"Dallas?"

Ringo threw back the hood of the parka with a gasp and immediately shrugged off the coat. "I'm burning up!"

Hickok eyed the young man with annoyance and picked up the jacket from the floor. "Sorry, kid. I don't have a lot of clothes your size."

Mo stared at Debbi. "Hey, I heard you were missing. I think them zombies are waiting for you to come back."

"I figured," Debbi said. "So what's going on in town?"

Mo shook his head ruefully. "It ain't good. Your buddies had to give up them doo-hickeys because that zombie guy grabbed up your boss."

Debbi pulled her Dragoon and showed Mo the black gun attachment. "You mean this doo-hickey?"

"Yeah. All the Rangers and the militia handed 'em over to the Legion a couple of days ago. And ever since, them zombies been struttin' around like they own the joint. I mean, even more than they did before. They pretty much told the Rangers to stay off the streets at night. It's gettin' bad out there."

"What about Ross?" Debbi asked with trepidation.

"I ain't seen him. But your pal Stew was in here and he didn't say nothin' about nothin' happenin' or nothin'. So I assume he's still around."

"Mo, I need your help," Debbi said. "It could be dangerous. What do you say?"

"When you say *dangerous*, gimme some perspective."

"We're taking on Marat and his Legionnaires. We could all die." Debbi raised one eyebrow. "But if we win, people will start drinking again."

Mo pulled off his apron. "Yeah, okay. I'm in."

* * *

When Stew heard the knock, he cracked the door open and was surprised to see Mo in the hall.

"Mo? Is business so bad you're making deliveries now?"

"Hah hah." Mo shoved the door open and moved into the room.

"What are you doing here?" Stew shut the door and lowered his Dragoon.

The gray-haired saloon keeper glanced around. It was a single room in a boarding house with a thin bed and a dresser and a window. A gas lamp glowed in the corner. In the other corner was a stack of books.

"Are you alone?" Mo asked.

Book II: The Undead War

"Yeah." Stew gave a deadpan stare. "Why? What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, you *wish*! Listen, I got news from Dallas."

"What?" Stew took a hurried step forward. "Where is she?"

Mo held up cautioning hands. "She's at the saloon. She sent me to get you."

The Ranger grabbed his gun belt off the bed. "Let's go."

"Hold yer horsies. This is Hallow."

"What?" Stew buckled on the belt, looking around the room.

Suddenly a figure unblended from the wallpaper. It was a dark-skinned man with a desert headdress, the same syker Stew had seen with Debbi after her mission to New Hope.

Stew drew his weapon.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Mo stepped between them. "He came with Dallas. He's a good guy. He got me across town without any zombies seein' me. Especially that one across the street. Don't it creep you out havin' that thing out there all night?"

Stew eyed the syker and slowly holstered his weapon. "What are you talking about, Mo? What zombie across the street?"

Hallow stared at the floor. "There is an undead syker watching your room."

Stew pulled his gaze away from Hallow and went to the window. He inched the thin curtain aside and studied the dim street below his 2nd floor room.

"I don't see anything," he said. "It must be gone."

"Look at me," Hallow said.

Stew turned and felt a slight prodding in his brain that he'd come to recognize from the many probes of the Legionnaires.

"Now look." Hallow nodded toward the window.

Stew parted the curtain and now he saw a Legionnaire leaning against the wall across the street. It was in the shadows, but it was clearly visible. It was staring up at Stew's window.

The Ranger drew back quickly. "Now it knows I can see it."

"No," Hallow replied. "I'm heightening your resistance. He senses nothing. That thing has only a shadow of the power he had when he was alive."

Mo took a deep breath and rubbed his hands together. "Well, this is fun, but we better get going. Dallas is waitin'. I'll tell ya, this life of adventure ain't for me. I'm sweatin' like a big hog over here."

Stew blew out the lamp and opened the door. He checked the hallway. Then he signaled for Mo and Hallow to follow.

The three of them made a few stops before heading back to *Mo's*.

* * *

The saloon seemed crowded now. Debbi presided over a group of six Rangers, Stew, Ringo, Miller, Chennault, Fitz, and Ngoma. Sharif and Hickok sat at another table. Hallow stood by the window watching for Legionnaires.

The Rangers had all gathered around Ringo, grinning and back slapping. The attention was good for the young man; it instilled a sense of normality into him that he hadn't had since the night he was arrested. When they all heard the awful truth of the Bone Camp, they were shocked at first and then furious. Watching their faces draw up in anger, Debbi sensed steel forming in their spines. When they finally turned to her, they were primed to strike, eager to destroy the Legionnaires.

Clay & Susan Griffith

It was Miller, of course, who expressed reservations at the point of action. "How are we going to handle those things without our black guns? They'll just knock us down with that psychic hoodoo. And then they'll eat us."

A few of the Rangers told Miller to shut up. But Debbi went to the door of the storeroom next to the bar.

"Something I can get for ya back there?" Mo asked nervously. He was antsy having a Ranger snooping in his private storeroom.

"No thanks." Debbi went in and came out dragging a heavy, three-foot long case of liquor. Stew helped drag the crate into the middle of the saloon.

She held up her hand to Mo. "Toss me the pry bar."

Mo looked confused but complied. Debbi pried up the squeaking, nailed lid. Setting the bar aside, she reached between bottles of alcohol and pulled out a black gun attachment.

The Rangers surged forward. She handed out the weapons and they eagerly snapped them onto their Dragoons.

Mo exclaimed, "Hey! When did those get in here?"

Debbi said, "I put them there. I figured no zombie would come in a saloon."

"How'd you get in here?"

She smiled. "We've got keys."

Mo's eyebrows lowered. "You do?"

Miller looked up suddenly with excitement. "We do?"

Mo snarled at Miller. "Forget it! From now on, I'm marking all the liquor bottles with a grease pencil."

Fitz twirled his weapon and slid it in his holster. "All right. Now I'm ready to shoot some dead things!"

"Easy, Fitz," Debbi said. "It's not that easy. Our first target is rescuing Ross."

Ringo said, "Let's go get him."

"Hold up. This has got to be quiet. I'm going with Hallow. I took enough of a risk bringing you all here. I don't want any additional motion in town alerting Marat's patrols."

Sharif and Hickok stood up. "What about us?"

"Too dangerous," Debbi said. "The fewer people Hallow has to protect the better chance we have of getting to Ross undetected."

"What are we supposed to do? Play cards?" Fitz asked. "Why did you bring us here?"

"I need you to insure the town's safety," Debbi answered. "When we have Ross, you'll get the word. Then fan out and start killing Legionnaires as fast as you can. Don't stop until they're all dead."

"Technically, they're already dead," Miller said.

"Then make them deader," Debbi responded. She motioned to Hallow and they gathered at the door. "Everyone stay out of sight until you hear from me."

"Debbi," Stew called.

She looked at him, but he was silent for a moment, his face full of trepidation and uncertainty. She waited.

"Good luck," he finally offered, giving her a lame thumbs up. "We'll be waiting."

Out of all of them, Stew best understood what was at stake for Temptation and for Debbi. It was clear in his pale blue eyes. Ross would live or die this night.

Book II: The Undead War

Debbi steeled herself for the consequences of her actions, and prayed to God, she was doing the right thing. She returned Stew's gesture and went out into the dark with the syker.

Chapter 13

Debbi and Hallow left *Mo's* and slipped into the dark alleys. It was just over half a mile to the Rangers headquarters as the crow flies, and it would be considerably longer trying to avoid being seen by the undead patrols. As the strange pair slipped through the wrecked back alleys and tumbledown hovels, Debbi was shocked to see that even here, far from the main streets and the open grounds of the Depot, there were no homeless, no beggars struggling to survive on the fringes of society. It made her shudder to think they had all been culled by the Legion, taken to the Bone Camp and eaten.

Hallow held out his hand to block her. They waited behind a pile of rubbish while two Legionnaires walked past. The two zombies paused. Debbi's hand tightened on the butt of her weapon. Hallow stared at the two undead. They stood motionless, the wind whistling through the exposed ribcage of one. A minute passed. Debbi tried to quiet her anxious breathing. The two troopers moved off down the street into the lamplit darkness.

As Debbi watched them, she realized how bold and assured the Legion had grown. Judging from the horrific scene she'd witnessed in the Depot, troopers were attacking and consuming people in public and people were too frightened to do anything about it, even if they could. If Debbi didn't stop it, it wouldn't be long before the undead were pulling children out of homes and devouring them before the eyes of their parents.

Debbi and Hallow came to the end of an alley and looked out over a large vehicle yard behind the Ranger headquarters. It was dotted with several inoperable Stallions and two Prowlers.

"The window to Ross's office is on the far wall," Debbi said quietly. "How are we going to handle this?"

Hallow whispered, "We need him alone. From what you've told me about his behavior, I suspect this isn't a simple surface suggestive control. It has to be powerful to leave him functionally rational, yet completely dominated. The complexity of what has happened to Ross seems to be on a level I've never seen before. I can't guarantee that I can break him out."

Debbi stared into the syker's eyes watching for hints of underlying confidence that belied his cautious words.

Hallow continued, "It's going to be dangerous. For him and for me. And for you. I suspect Captain Marat will know as soon as I start to work."

"Will he be able to hurt Ross? Psychically?"

Hallow shook his head. "I doubt it. Not as long as I'm in there. I'm referring to physical danger to you. Marat will certainly come, or send troopers to stop us."

Debbi said, "You just do whatever it takes to free Ross. I'll hold off the Legionnaires."

Hallow was not surprised to find that Debbi's only concern was for Ross and not herself. The syker knew he could count on her ability; after all, she had held a Skinny at bay.

They raced in a crouch between the idle vehicles. Debbi had her Dragoon out and a supply belt looped over her left shoulder. Hallow kept

Clay & Susan Griffith

his eyes moving, searching for syker targets to intercept and interrupt. There were none. The lack of guards demonstrated with ugly assurance that the Legion felt very comfortable in their control of Temptation.

Debbi and Hallow reached the wall of the headquarters building. They inched under the window to Ross's office. Debbi rose slowly and peered over the bottom edge of the window.

She could see very little. It was dark inside. The office door was closed. In a shaft of moonlight, she could make out the figure of Ross slumped over his desk.

She dropped down. "He's in there. I think he's alone."

Hallow stood and stared in. After a moment, he signaled it was time to move.

Debbi pushed up on the window. It was locked.

Hallow said, "Break it. I can muffle the sound."

With a wince, she used her weapon to break a pane of glass with a crash. She looked at him with alarm.

He shook his head. "No one can hear it except us."

She reached in, unlocked the window, and shoved it up. She boosted Hallow inside. She climbed in afterwards and slowly lowered the window behind her.

Ross hadn't moved. Debbi felt her heart pounding. Was he already dead? She moved closer and, with relief, heard shallow breathing.

She took advantage of the imposed silence to open his desk drawer and remove his keys. She crossed the room and locked the door. Then she pulled the ratty shade down over the broken window.

The room was in near blackness. She took a penlight from the supply belt. In the narrow, intense beam of light, Hallow tried to lift Ross from where he rested on crossed arms on the desk. Ross didn't resist or wake. But Hallow couldn't budge him; Ross was dead weight and a much bigger man than the syker.

Debbi put the light between her teeth and took Ross by the ankles. She and Hallow carried him to the corner farthest away from the door or window.

"What's wrong with him?" Debbi asked. "This isn't how he was before. He at least seemed normal."

Hallow said, "I don't know. Perhaps they've just shut him down."

"Maybe he shut himself down."

Hallow didn't respond. He pried open one of Ross's eyelids and stared into the unresponsive eye. Hallow froze for a second. Then he quivered and let out a disturbed breath.

"What?" Debbi asked quickly. "What happened?"

"I don't like this." He looked sidelong at Debbi. "But I have an idea. It will be very dangerous."

"What is it?"

"I want to take you in with me."

"What happens when Marat comes?"

"Hopefully I can retain enough awareness to sense any Legionnaire approaching. But this man is so deep, he may not respond to me. I think you may be able to bring him out. He needs someone familiar."

"All right. Let's do it."

"You need to realize that you could die. You could be killed physically by a Legionnaire that I don't see coming or you could die psychically from . . ."

"I said let's do it."

Book II: The Undead War

Hallow held her gaze for a second then turned back to Ross.

Debbi found herself standing in a field of knee high prairie grass. She looked around, confused. The landscape was flat and covered as far as the eye can see with a bluish grass with petite white flowers that rolled like an ocean in the wind. The air was light and sweet. The sky was blue, and white clouds plowed across it.

She saw Hallow approaching through the prairie grass.

"What happened?" Debbi asked him.

"We're inside."

She looked around again. It was beautiful and serene. She felt the clean sun beating on her face. It didn't appear to be Banshee.

"Where are we?" Debbi inquired.

"This is Earth." Hallow stared off into the distance. "Somewhere in the American southwest, I think. Where is Ross from?"

"I don't know," Debbi admitted with surprise. "Texas, I think. What do we do now?"

"Not me. You." Hallow pointed.

Debbi followed his motion. In the distance, a small white house sat in a clearing in the vast high grass prairie. Clothes hung on a line, blowing in the wind. Behind the house, a split rail fence surrounded several acres of pasture where three horses quietly grazed. They were fine-looking animals, two grays and a paint.

Debbi walked toward the house. She felt the tall grass brushing softly against her legs. The paint lifted its head, ears up, and watched her with curiosity. When she reached the edge of the clearing, the horse whinnied. With a flip of their manes, the animals pounded to the far side of the pasture, scattering clods of mud behind them.

She passed the corner of the house and tried to look in a front window, but she couldn't see in. She climbed the two steps onto the porch. Her footsteps echoed off the wooden planks. To her right, two high back rocking chairs sat empty.

She knocked on the door. It creaked open.

Debbi caught the door with her hand and leaned in. Off a small entryway, the front room was compact and homey with a comfortable sofa and two chairs around a small table. A vase of flowers sat on the table. An oval hooked rug covered much of the wooden floor. She could also see straight down a short hall into the kitchen where white lace curtains billowed in the wind. The breeze made it cool inside.

"Hello? Anyone home?" Debbi heard nothing so she stepped inside. She felt like an intruder.

The house was clean and orderly. Everything was in place. It was much like Ross's office had been. It was efficient, but not sterile. However, the upholstery and the flowered wallpaper, although tasteful, didn't strike her as Ross.

On the mantel above the fireplace, she saw several framed photographs. One was Ross.

Debbi smiled when she saw it. He was so young in the picture. Not a boy, but a much younger man with a grin on his clean-shaven face, his hair a bit longer, and what must have been a stylish suit in that day. He looked tall and strong, as always, but more unguarded and open than the man she knew. He stared into the camera with a direct eye and welcoming frankness. This young man had nothing to hide and everything to look forward to.

Next to the picture of Ross was one of an older couple, standing close

Clay & Susan Griffith

together, shoulder to shoulder, with sedate smiles. They must've been his parents. She saw his eyes in the woman and the man was a heavier version of Ross's strength.

Then there was a picture of a woman. She was tall and beautiful, with long reddish auburn hair. She wore a simple white shirt tucked into jeans, but there was an unstudied elegance to her that transcended the simple clothing. She stood next to the paint horse Debbi saw outside. The woman had one sure hand under the muzzle, pressing her cheek against the horse's soft nose. Her smile was comfortable and delighted.

Debbi found herself staring at the woman, trying to imagine the sound of her voice. She pictured the arch of her eyebrow and wondered about the easiness of her manner with that younger Ross down the mantel-piece.

Debbi turned away and stood quietly for a moment. She was in the home of a stranger.

She forced herself to continue looking around. The kitchen was functional and ordered. She turned down the hall and leaned into the bedroom. The large, substantial bed was made of dark wood. The high mattress was covered with a quilt and crisp white sheets. Cut flowers rested on a bedside table. A warm, sweet wind blew in the open window.

Debbi withdrew into the hall, uncomfortable with the intimacy of the bedroom. She felt a tightness in her throat and her eyes began to burn with tears. She heard the thuds of her heavy boots on the polished wooden floors. Her mud-stained clothes and the leathery creak of her heavy gun belt seemed terribly inappropriate in this quiet, peaceful home. She was a trespasser here.

Debbi let the screen door slam behind her as she stepped out onto the porch. She caught her breath as, in the distance, she saw Ross walking through the high grass. Adrenaline flushed through her. Just from his posture, she sensed the health and carefree power he radiated. This was a Ross she had never known. The auburn-haired woman from the photograph stood beside him. Debbi could hear the woman's laugh rise over the prairie.

The two distant figures stopped at the hollow whack of the screen door. They turned and stared at Debbi.

Ross immediately came toward the house. The auburn-haired woman took a few steps to follow, but he turned and reached out to her. Ross took the woman's arm with a light grasp that Debbi could feel by looking at it. The woman nodded and waited. Ross sliced his way through the flowering field and out into the clearing.

As Ross approached the house, Debbi saw the brash, young man begin to fade away. The closer he came to her, the more emaciated and haunted he became. She felt a tinge of guilt.

Debbi felt a hand on her shoulder. She started. Hallow stood behind her.

"Trouble," he said.

"But . . ." She turned to look at the approaching Ross. And she looked beyond him to the woman who waited for him.

Suddenly, Debbi was standing in the dark office in Temptation. After the fresh, sweet scent of the prairie spring, she realized just how strong the stench of death was in this reality she shared with Ross. She saw him lying at her feet with Hallow kneeling next to him, lost in concentration.

The doorknob rattled. She dove behind Ross's desk as the center of the door disintegrated in machine gun fire. Splinters filled the air. The

Book II: The Undead War

remnants of the door were kicked open.

Debbi popped the leading figure with a black needle and immediately squeezed off several rounds from her Dragoon. The front zombie slammed back into a second one. The second figure kept its feet and a blast of energy flashed from its forehead, obliterating the desk.

Debbi covered her face and fell back hard into the rear wall. She held out her weapon and squeezed the trigger, punching the zombies back. At the same time, she heard a crash. The window shade flew aside amongst shattered glass and a hand reached in above her. Putrid fingers tangled themselves in her red hair.

She tried to pull away, but the grip was strong and yanked her back against the wall. She pointed the Dragoon back over her head and fired. The sound was deafening and hot shell casings rained down on her.

She tore away from the grasping hand and rolled over the wreckage of the desk. She struggled to one knee, swiping an overturned chair aside. There was no room to maneuver, but she had to hold them off. She risked a glance at Hallow and Ross. They hadn't moved.

The Ranger saw the two troopers at the door again. The first one was recovering already. She needled it again, but missed the second zombie. She took the split second she needed and sent a round through the first one's forehead, blowing brain matter over its companion.

The second trooper was unfazed by the carnage. It didn't try to physically force its way into the room over the collapsing body of its companion. From outside, it stared at Debbi and she felt herself consumed by heat. The effect was horrendously quick, as if she was instantaneously immersed in flames.

She screamed and convulsively squeezed the trigger. The gun opened up. A barrage of bullets shattered the wall and the doorway. The zombie quivered as shells tore into him. A hole opened in its chest and most of its right arm was blown away, but its gaze didn't shift from Debbi.

The gun clicked empty. Debbi felt as if her flesh was bubbling. Her vision wavered. On the edge of rational thought, she thumbed the black gun pad. She couldn't see the target, but she felt a cool rush as the heat vanished.

Without thinking, she ejected the empty clip and slammed home a fresh one. She noticed that her hands were bright red. Bringing the gun up, she fired at the stiff zombie in the doorway. She hit it in the shoulder. She paused, aimed, and fired again. Its head disintegrated.

A large shape roared through the window in a shower of glass and wood. It scrambled at her in a dark montage of bony claws and snapping teeth.

She whirled and needled the thing. It jerked to a stop and collapsed on the floor. She shot it. Then she dragged her battered body over to it and placed the muzzle of her Dragoon against its rotting head and shot it again.

The exhausted Ranger pressed her hands against the floor. She had to stand. There would be more of them coming.

Debbi felt a pressure in her hand. She thought about it for a second. Then the Dragoon tried to slide away from her. She tightened her grip on it. It pulled again. She yelled angrily and tried to clamp her left hand around the gun, but with one last powerful pull, it was torn from her aching hand.

She watched it fly across the office and slap into the hand of Captain Marat who stood at the door. He had one foot resting on the body of one

Clay & Susan Griffith

of his troopers.

Debbi reached for the knife in her boot.

She found herself pulled off the floor with a pressure that tore the breath from her. She slammed into the ceiling. And then she was rammed back down into the floor so hard the floorboards cracked under her.

Fighting for consciousness, Debbi looked up as Marat kicked his way past his dead trooper. He calmly pointed the Dragoon at the kneeling Hallow. Debbi heard the faint whoosh of the black gun and Hallow went rigid.

Marat grinned and regarded the weapon in his mottled hand. "That is magnificent. I may keep this for Quantrill."

The Captain reached down and pulled Hallow over onto his back. The syker's eyes were open and staring up, but Debbi didn't know if he was conscious. Marat stared down at him with disgust.

"I don't know you," the Captain said. "But you were no doubt a deserter from the Legion and deserve death. Don't worry, though, once you're dead, you can rejoin your unit." He fired several more needles into Hallow. He laughed like a child with a new toy.

"And you," Marat said as Debbi felt more weight drop onto her back pushing her deeper into the decimated floorboards. "I'm not sure what to do with you. I could wait until my men have rounded up your Rangers and provide them with a little show before I kill them too. Or I could just kill you now and avoid the risk. Yes, that seems smarter."

Marat knelt in front of her. He grabbed her by the face, wrenching her head up, and stared into her eyes. She didn't look away. She wouldn't give him the pleasure of seeing her afraid. He pointed the barrel of the Dragoon at her.

She heard a loud crack and she flinched. Part of Marat's head disappeared.

The zombie actually looked surprised. He shook his head, showering Debbi with droplets of viscous ooze. He released her face and turned at the same time. He moved slowly, as if the gaping head wound had only made him a little groggy. He raised Debbi's sidearm.

Ross stood in front of Marat. Debbi heard a metallic clank as Ross used the six-gun Peacemaker in his hand to slap the Dragoon aside. Then Ross raised his pistol and shot Marat between the eyes. The zombie slumped back, but he was still moving. He tried again to bring the heavy gun up. Ross stepped on the zombie's wrist and shot him again. And again.

With little brain left intact, Marat finally lay still.

Debbi looked up at Ross. He stood listlessly, his pistol dangling at the end of limp fingers.

She let out a small breath and smiled. "Hey, Ross."

He glanced wearily down at her with a short nod. "Hey. How's it going?"

Chapter 14

Absolute recognition rested in Ross's eyes and Debbi suddenly felt overwhelmed. Everything she had believed in, clung to, and fought so hard for had come to pass. She had won.

Ross was back.

She couldn't catch her breath. It was as if she had forgotten how to breathe.

Book II: The Undead War

He stood in front of her. Tall, dark, and above all, himself. There was no sense of outsider control, no trace of the terrible battle he had been waging internally for more than a month. He appeared worn, drained, and older, but the barest trace of a smile curved his lips as he looked down at her. It lifted Debbi's soul from its dark mooring.

"Helluva save, Dallas," Ross said in a strained whisper. He exhaled slowly as if getting to know his body once more. It had felt like there had been someone else living in his skin. It had talked like him, moved like him, but it had said all the wrong things, and then did nothing to stop the terrible consequences. He raised a trembling hand to touch his face. Deep hollows were etched there. He could feel them beneath his fingers. He was a stranger even to himself.

But he remembered everything. His captivity in the dank cell at the Sanitarium. Quantrill gloating about how he killed Reuben Olivares, Ross's old friend and fellow Ranger. The fantasy world he built to block the syker probes. Then Dr. Lupin slipping through those defenses. The days of merciless conditioning by Quantrill. Then the return to Temptation at the head of the Legion.

The Colonial Rangers had stepped aside and let the Legion into the city, just because he told them to. He tried to scream at them; couldn't they see he wasn't himself? Do something, he urged them uselessly as he watched them follow his orders and play into Quantrill's hands. Do something, he wanted to shout, even if it was just to kill him. Anything would have been better than the life he was living.

Ross barely held off a shudder of revulsion in front of Debbi. He couldn't let her see it. He *wouldn't* let her see how much it affected him.

Debbi had held this town together and never lost sight of her goal, no matter the cost. He could see that it left scars on her as well. Her red hair was a little duller, her green eyes marred now by profound creases at the corners. Now that he got a good look at her, she looked like she had been sucked up by a wurhul and then spit out again. Her skin was bright pink as if sunburned. There was blood dripping slowly from both nostrils and a rather large bump beginning to protrude on her forehead above her left eyebrow. But to Ross, she could have been a fierce angel with a fiery sword who had liberated him from a dark madness.

He reached down a hand to help her up.

Debbi hesitantly reached out to touch him, something she hadn't done in a very long time. Ross was solid and warm. She closed her eyes for a moment and just relished the fact that he was whole again. He was back among the living. She opened her eyes to find him staring at her.

He coughed, breaking the tension. "You look like hell." His throat was dry and rough.

A genuine laugh bubbled from Debbi's lips. "I could say the same of you."

"Yeah, but you won't." There was that gleam of mischievousness again, the one that was always present when situations seemed hopeless, or when insane battles had been fought and miraculously won. She cherished its reappearance.

Debbi glanced around and took in the devastation in the office. Decaying bodies were everywhere and the place reeked with splattered gore. Then she saw Hallow. He was beginning to come around. She went over to him and helped him sit up.

"You okay?" she asked.

He nodded and looked toward Ross. A grin split his dark features. "It

Clay & Susan Griffith

worked."

"Yes, it did," Debbi said. "Thank you."

Ross came and stood over them. He locked his attention on the syker. "I know you," he said matter-of-factly, bloodshot eyes narrowing.

"No, not really." Hallow stood and reached out a hand. "I'm Hallow."

Confused, Ross cautiously took the hand, his gaze centering on Debbi's beaming face. If she trusted this man then he was willing to go ahead with an act of camaraderie. But the bottom line was this man was a syker, and right about now, dead or alive, Ross had little acceptance of them.

However, he somehow sensed this man was responsible for freeing him. He had seen both of them in the secret place where he had locked himself away during Quantrill's reign over him. That fact disturbed him. Not so much that the syker had been there, but more because Debbi had been. That place was his alone, his memories, his dreams. No one should have been there, least of all her. He tried to dismiss it by believing it probably had been a figment of his tortured mind.

Ross released the syker's hand abruptly. His mouth worked around an emotion he found difficult to communicate, but he managed it finally in a quick, terse "Thank you." He tried to smile but it felt more like a grimace.

Hallow nodded. "I'm just surprised it worked." He jerked his head at Debbi. "On the other hand, she didn't doubt it for a second."

Ross's gaze slipped to engage hers again. He wanted to say how much he appreciated all she had done for him, but he felt he was walking on eggshells. Every sensation, every memory, every emotion was whirling inside him as if the long confinement of his mental prison gave rise to a sudden revolution of freedom. Feelings that weren't normally allowed free rein threatened to break through. The more he tried to clamp down on them, the worse it got. His control was tenuous and he knew it. He felt as if he would go mad with the effort of restraining it.

He gave Debbi a curt nod of thanks. Thankfully, she silently returned the gesture. She understood.

She said instead, "Ross, we need to get you to Doc Dazy. Let him check . . ."

Ross abruptly cut her off, turning away to the squad room. "There are still zombie sykers on the streets of my town. I want them off. None of them are leaving here alive or dead. Get a hold of the others. Set up teams. And someone get me a comlink!"

"But . . ." Debbi exchanged a quick look with Hallow. The syker shrugged. He didn't seem surprised.

Debbi shouldn't have been either. She shook her head.

Ross was back.

* * *

Six hours later and Ross was still at it, borrowing stamina from an unknown source. The last of the Legion had been dispatched. The militia was making a final sweep to make sure; the rest of the Rangers were crowded around Ross and Debbi inside *Mo's* where they had convened a temporary headquarters until they could clean up the gruesome mess in the real one.

There was new fire in the faces of all those around Ross. His liberated presence reignited dedication and resolve in everyone. To Debbi, it was a joy to see. But she could also tell it was wearing Ross down. His face was ghost white and lines of tension cut deeply into him. A thin sheen of

Book II: The Undead War

sweat covered his brow. His hand would occasionally release its death grip upon the table to press against his forehead, eyes squinting. It would quickly drop to gesture to the map laid out on the table before them. He lobbed orders as if they were hand grenades.

"I want the militia on the walls after the sweeps. Here, here and here. The rest of you shore up some of the smaller groups, particularly on the south gate." There was a pause as he rubbed his head again. "I want advance scouts down at the Bosphorus Straits to warn us if the Legion returns."

"You don't think they will, do you?" Miller asked.

"Hell, Miller, I don't know. What do you think?" Ross snapped. His head throbbed incessantly.

Miller rocked back at Ross's aggression, but then his gaze turned from anger to suspicion.

Ross noticed it and relented. "Trust me, he'll come back. Quantrill wants Temptation."

"Yeah, for a friggin' buffet table," Fitz mumbled, casting a glance at Ringo who stood sullenly outside the small ring of Rangers. The youngest Ranger hadn't said much since his return to town. He had fought willingly throughout the cleanup process, but he obviously wasn't the same boisterous youth he'd been only a few days ago.

"Well, the free meals are over," Stew said, responding quickly to Fitz's comment. "Temptation's ours again and no more stinking zombies are dining here."

"Thanks to Ross and Debbi," Miller said.

There was resounding cheer with guns upraised. Ross stared at his exultant outfit. No, not *his* outfit anymore. They were just as much Debbi's, if not more so. Her smiling face as she too watched their fellow Rangers seemed suddenly innocent again, but her carriage showed there was an air of command about her. She had come a long way from the young, shell-shocked woman who had arrived in Temptation fresh from a disastrous tour aboard the Cabal ore station.

Hearing the commotion, Mo quickly brought a bottle and a tray of shot glasses filled with the good hooch. Debbi held out some money, but Mo shook his head with a grin. It was on the house. A small price to pay for liberation since Mo expected customers to start arriving in droves any time now.

The Rangers eagerly fell upon the free booze, slamming back drinks. Ross himself took the glass nearest him and relished the burn as it traveled through his aching body. Unfortunately, the alcohol didn't make it anywhere near the true source of his pain. It only made his head pound harder for a moment, but then it passed.

Lord, he was tired. He needed to rest his eyes for a minute. Sit in the shade and watch the tranquil horses graze. Look at the clean laundry flutter in the soft breeze like ships' sails. He heard something behind him and he turned his head expectantly. A half-decayed figure lurched at him from the shadows and he started, quickly jerking back to reality.

He was still in the saloon and everyone looked at him curiously as he gasped for breath. He forced his face into a stern glower and brought his focus once again on the map.

In a voice that was none too steady, he said, "I—I want all the bodies placed outside the town walls. I want them . . . I want them burned."

"All of them?" Fitz asked, standing beside Ross.

Ross fixed him with a glare. "Yes, all of them. You got a problem with

Clay & Susan Griffith

that?"

"Doc Dazy said he wanted a few for autopsies."

"No! I want *all* of them burned. Every last one."

Stew stepped forward. "Maybe the Doc's experiments could help. Find a more efficient way to kill them. Long range maybe."

Ross swung toward Stew, his eyes glassy, his knuckles white as his fists clenched. "Are you questioning my orders? What, you don't trust me any more?"

Stew shook his head slowly, taken aback by Ross's outburst, but he refused to show it. "No, Ross. I'm just pointing out other options."

"There *are* no other options! My order stands. Anybody who doesn't like it can get the hell out!" Ross's voice sounded like poured gravel.

Debbi stepped forward close to Ross, but didn't touch him. "Ross, no one is standing against you. We're all with you on this, but getting to know our enemy isn't such a bad idea."

"I *know* the enemy, Dallas," he snarled. "I got their putrid footprints all over the inside my skull!" His grabbed the sides of his head and squeezed his eyes shut as memories cascaded over him. "I don't want to know any more about them!"

Debbi grabbed his arm as he swayed. It was a miracle he had stayed on his feet this long. The whiskey on top of his exhaustion was rapidly bringing the house down on him.

Ross pulled his arm free. "You're not in command anymore, Dallas. I am. Go sit in the jail with those zombies you want to coddle. You'll get to know all about them too." He glanced for a moment at Ringo and then visibly shook. He hadn't known what was happening out at the Bone Camp, but he should have known. It should have been obvious.

Ross heard everyone whispering around him. It sounded like the syker zombies when they were in his mind. His vision swimming, he jerked his head up and glared at Fitz and Stew. "Both of you can go too! And anyone else . . . who thinks the dead . . . deserve special treatment."

The room tilted abruptly for Ross. He staggered against the table making glasses jump. His thoughts muddled together and he couldn't focus his eyes. He vainly tried to keep it together, but the cost was too much.

Fitz grabbed Ross before he slid to the floor. He lifted him under his arms and clutched him tightly against his chest despite having only one arm. Ross weighed close to nothing nowadays. Fitz regarded Debbi sadly.

"About time," she muttered. "He's got the constitution of a mule." She glared at Mo. "Took you long enough to bring the whiskey over."

Mo pricked. "Hey, I was waiting for the right moment. Sick or not, Dave Ross can smell a setup a mile away."

"Should I bring him to Doc Dazy?" Fitz asked, holding the limp form of his captain as tenderly as a newborn babe.

Mo gestured to the stairs. "I got plenty of rooms. Some of 'em clean. Just use one of those."

Debbi considered it for a second and then nodded. "Thanks, Mo."

Fitz wasted no time bringing Ross upstairs.

Debbi turned to Stew. "Carry out the rest of the orders."

He glanced up at the ceiling as Fitz's heavy footfalls echoed above them. "Is he going to be okay?"

"I hope so. But God, I can't blame him for being rattled. The things he must have endured . . ." She couldn't even voice the horror. She had seen a glimpse of it with her own eyes and it still haunted her every time she

Book II: The Undead War

looked at Ringo.

"I'll send for Doc Dazy."

Stew's voice interrupted her dark thoughts and she brushed them away with a hand as if they were tangible things. She had business to take care of. There wasn't any time for remorse.

She cast a curt nod to Stew and the fair-haired man departed quietly, a squad of Rangers on his heels. In the ensuing silence, Debbi found herself sitting at the table with her hands clutched in front of her face. She closed her eyes and prayed for Ross.

It was fatigue and stress that had triggered his paranoia and sudden rage. She couldn't help but think of all the traumas he was going to try to suppress for the rest of his life. He would be able to keep several psychiatrists busy for their entire careers. Too bad psychiatrists weren't a dime a dozen these days on Banshee, and too bad that most of them were hucksters anyway. And besides, in the end, no Ranger would ever admit to needing one.

She mounted the stairs slowly. Another black thought entered. What if Ross's paranoia wasn't a result of his exhaustion? What if he wasn't back like she thought? What if there was permanent brain damage? Her stomach bottomed out. She had been prepared for that contingency before the rescue went down. But now, after having him whole for these last few hours, the thought that she might never really have had him at all was almost more than she could bear.

A door creaked open in the hall and Fitz emerged from a room. "Do you want me to stay?"

Debbi shook her head. "No, it's okay. Doc will be here soon enough. Go help Stew."

Fitz laid his remaining thick hand on her shoulder as she passed. She could feel the strength and willed some of it into her. She straightened; she hadn't realized she was hunched over.

"Thanks, Fitz," she whispered.

"You need me, you call."

She slipped inside the quiet room and stared down at Ross in the bed. He seemed small all of a sudden, his hair plastered to his scalp with sweat, his breathing quick and shallow, his body curled into a fetal position. There was a blanket tucked around him. Fitz's doing. The big bear of a man was a pillar of strength that she had come to rely on lately. He was always around and always solid.

She grabbed a wooden chair and placed it at the side of the bed and began her vigil.

* * *

Doc Dazy straightened from the bed and began to pack his things.

"Well?" Debbi roughly chewed on a fingernail. The Doctor hadn't said two words the entire examination. And Ross hadn't so much as twitched through it all.

Doc Dazy adjusted an IV drip that hung over the bed before looking over at the agitated Ranger. "You want it by the books? He's undernourished, dehydrated, and worn flat out."

"Is he going to be all right?"

"Physically?" Doc's gaze was sympathetic. He scrubbed at his gray hair and sighed. "He can recover from this easy. He's been through worse. Your last jaunt to the Red River comes to mind."

"And mentally?"

Clay & Susan Griffith

Dazy shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. I don't have the right equipment to determine neurological damage. All I know is his brain is intact under that thick skull of his. However, what was done to him by those Legionnaires and how deep that damage goes, I couldn't tell you. Only time will tell."

"How much time?" Debbi knew she was being curt but she couldn't help it. Her chest was in a vice and breathing was becoming a chore with the not knowing. She needed answers.

"It could be days; it could be years. You said he was acting fairly rational up until near the end, right? That's a good sign. Have faith, Dallas. Ross isn't the type to lie down and die because some damn zombie tells him to. He's been through a lot. He'll have his ups and downs for a bit. Ride it out with him. Give him support. He needs that more than anything else right now." He slipped on a threadbare suit coat and picked up his bag. "I've pumped him full of antibiotics, vitamins, and whatnot. The IV will hydrate him. Try to keep it in him if he wakes up and gets ornery. Get him to eat something too. Soup would be good. Nothing heavy. Your landlady, Miss Etta, makes a great chicken soup. That would be perfect. He won't eat much, not as emaciated as he is, but every little bit counts."

The Doctor made for the door.

Debbi stopped him. "That's it?"

Dazy's kind eyes regarded her. "I'm sorry if it's not enough, but for right now it will have to do. Call me when he wakes up." He glanced back towards his patient. "It won't be for a while yet." He smiled at Debbi. "I gave him a sedative to let him sleep. He needs that as much as anything right now."

He lifted her chin with his finger, eyeing the discolorations on her face. "You look like hell."

"Gee, thanks." Debbi pulled her head away and returned to Ross's side. "I'm fine. My skull's pretty hard too."

"Yes," he said. "I can see that." He opened the door. "Take care, Dallas. Call if you need me."

The room was silent again. Debbi eased herself down carefully into the chair to avoid any creaking noise even though she knew that Ross wouldn't wake up if a marching band of anouks came through the room.

She turned on her com again and listened to the chatter over the headset. It calmed her. Miller was complaining. Ngoma was overly calm and efficient. Fitz offered roughneck support to all. Stew had everything under control. She felt herself relaxing. Things might not be where she wanted them to be, but it was a hell of a better place than where they had been. It would do for now.

Chapter 14

It was just like the old days with the crackling sound of fire and the dense smoke filling the air over a devastated anouk village. Bodies of dead natives littered the ground, and amidst the carnage stalked triumphant Syker Legionnaires.

The battle, such as it was, was long over. The majority of the Legion already had withdrawn from the native village called Czimizir. They were drawn up in formation on the plain outside the settlement where they stood patiently without an apparent thought in their heads. Only the 3rd Division was still active, hunting stragglers and searching for weapons. They also collected the dead bodies of the natives because, after all, an

Book II: The Undead War

army traveled on its stomach.

Quantrill strode through the burning village, noting with pride the thorough job his men had done. It was a massive victory; complete enemy casualties and none among the Legion. Something on the order of four hundred anouks lay dead including the all-important women and children who served to replenish the enemy war machine.

Quantrill paused to examine the greatest battle trophy, the body of a dead Skinny. It had been nailed to the side of a native hut with a hastily scrawled note pinned to its homespun tunic reading "Courtesy of 1st SpecOps - Reformed Syker Legion. Kill Some More in '94!" Quantrill was somewhat surprised by the appearance of the note. He had not ordered it done. It demonstrated a level of independence that surprised him; his troopers had more autonomy than he had believed.

The dead Skinny was the product of intelligence, innovation, and execution, hallmarks of Quantrill's leadership. He had been forewarned of the presence of this evil thing in Czimizir thanks to information extracted from several natives which the Legion had found and tortured several miles from the village. Quantrill didn't want to risk a stand-up fight with the Skinny. Even though he had his own Skinny, Tekkeng refused to aid in the destruction of one of his own kind. He wouldn't do anything to prevent it, but he wouldn't help. So Quantrill called in his Special Operations unit. The General had been disappointed to find only found three troopers in his Legion who were skilled infiltrators. And he only had four TSAR rifles.

The TSAR had once been the standard weapon of the Syker Legionnaire, but only four had been recovered in working order from the soil of the Red River Valley with a small amount of ammo. The TSARs fired unique gyrojet ammunition that locked on and homed in on the brainwaves of the target. Normally, the rifleman himself acquired the target's brainwaves on the battlefield through line of sight and fed them to the weapon via a psionic cable that ran from the gun to a socket in the back of the soldier's brain. But thanks to the network that connected the Legion, Quantrill could take the TSARs to a new level.

Quantrill sent two of his infiltrators into the village under cover of night. They located the Skinny, tagged his brainwaves, and transmitted the information to Quantrill. The General passed the psygnature onto his four TSAR marksmen. When the SpecOp infiltrators scanned the Skinny, he rose in a murderous fury to seek out the offending troopers. Before he could lash out, however, three TSAR gyrojets zipped into the village and homed in on his brainwaves. To the Skinny's credit, he destroyed them. But the last shell, fired late to strike when the Skinny believed he was safe, penetrated his defenses and killed him.

With silent efficiency, the Skinny was dispatched and the battle became a matter of killing the sleeping anouks as quickly as possible to minimize the risk that one of the natives would get a lucky hit on a Legionnaire. This raid was not for spoils, and no prisoners were taken. The attack on Czimizir was the first paragraph in a bloody message that Quantrill intended to deliver to the savage aborigines of Banshee. It was all about killing.

Quantrill yanked the tannis necklace from the Skinny's neck. He hefted the heavy talisman in his hand with pleasure and made a mental note that the Skinny should be served at his next captains' conference.

The General then checked reports with his ever-present adjutant, some written, some verbal, some psychic. He waded patiently through the

Clay & Susan Griffith

standard post-battle checklist of friendly casualties, of which there were none, and the assessment of the achievement of tactical goals, which was total. He accepted the reports of his captains and stored them for later study. Finally his adjutant came to the last item, and the one that most interested and disturbed Quantrill.

The silence from Temptation was deafening. There had been no contact with Captain Marat for two days and it deeply disturbed the General. He suspected Marat had pushed the Colonial Rangers and the loss of contact would seem to be the proof that the Rangers were capable of killing Legionnaires quite handily. It was the very reason Quantrill had worked to avoid an open fight. He respected the Colonial Rangers as a skilled and cunning lot. They were forged and tempered by the fires of brutal warfare between the Reapers, the UN, and the anouks. If they hadn't evolved to be a little smarter than those other larger forces, they would have been crushed long ago. Now, Quantrill had likely lost fifteen precious Legionnaires needlessly, while two bloody battles at the front had only produced two killed.

Also, Quantrill could no longer sense Ross. Had the wily veteran Ranger somehow freed himself from the hold that Quantrill and Avernus had placed on him? Knowing the depth of the control they had exerted over Ross, however, the General found it difficult to believe a simple Ranger could've broken free. Sadly, this meant Ross was likely dead too.

Tomorrow, Quantrill would hold a war council to discuss the Temptation matter. The campaign, which had begun with two magnificent victories at Ghost Rock City and Czimizir, was already threatened with a dangerous crossroads thanks to Marat's failure. Quantrill had planned to spend the next month or two reducing anouk power bases in the south. Now he had to consider the possibility of returning north and attacking Temptation, expending men and resources on the conquest of what already had been his. He had no desire to contest the Colonial Rangers for that city, particularly with their black guns. Ultimately, he knew he had to take the blame for his decision to leave Marat in charge of Temptation; it had been bad generalship.

Quantrill continued his examination of the ruined village and took comfort in the sight of dead anouks. His Legion was efficient and powerful; if he had to fight for Temptation, he knew he could take it. Perhaps, in the end, it would be better to go ahead and erase the city from the map rather than depend on its loyalty or fear its antagonism.

Ahead of him, through the smoke, he saw a platoon of four Legionnaires carrying TSAR rifles. They were led by Captain De Klerk, commander 3rd Division and attached 1st SpecOp squad. De Klerk limped and much of the skin was gone from his head. The remnants of his right ear dangled just over his collar.

In their midst walked a Skinny and an anouk.

Quantrill froze, and then he realized the Skinny was his "ally," Tekkeng. The anouk next to the Skinny was a tribal shaman, easily distinguished by his elaborate headdress and mystical talismans. But there was something different about this particular anouk. Most of this irritating species had a misplaced sense of arrogance as if they owned this planet. This one did not. In fact, he was hunched over and his face slack. The shaman's garb was disheveled and dirty, but it hadn't been caused by his sykers.

Quantrill regarded Tekkeng expectantly. The tall, gray thing stared back with his large, black unblinking eyes.

Book II: The Undead War

"A glorious victory, Quantrill." The strained voice came from the shaman. His spine stiffened and he suddenly stood upright as if he was a marionette on strings. The Skinny was using the shaman as speaking vessel. It was not uncommon for Skinnies to use others in this way. While Skinnies could use their enormous psychic powers to transfer their thoughts directly to targets, the way he had used Coltrane before, this was known to cause damage. It was also a possible sign of deference for Skinnies to use mouthpieces rather than intrude on the mind of a perceived social equal. Quantrill preferred to assume this latter interpretation.

The shaman uttered more of Tekkeng's thoughts. "Your sykers are skilled at slaughtering women and children in their beds."

Quantrill bristled and sneered at the gray thing. The syker held up the tannis talisman he had pulled from the dead Skinny. "Not just women and children, Tekkeng. So watch your mouth." The General nodded at the bewitched shaman. "Or watch *his* mouth."

Tekkeng inclined his head slightly to the talisman and sniffed it. The shaman said, "Ah. I knew him. He was old and sick. No wonder you succeeded in killing him."

Quantrill snapped, "What are you doing here, Tekkeng? Surely Avernus's lap is getting cold."

Tekkeng lifted a clawed finger. "I have come with your next target."

"I will decide my next target. Not you."

"Avernus wishes it too."

The syker General exhaled. "What is it?"

"The Asai clan."

"Never heard of them. Where are they?"

"Castle Rock."

Quantrill took a step forward, fist clenched. "You liar! There is nothing at Castle Rock. I should know. I destroyed it!"

"You are wrong, Quantrill. It has been reclaimed by the Asai. They are a secret clan of shaman warriors taken from all other clans. The greatest fighters and the strongest shamans. They were created to destroy the humans. The Asai are preparing to kill every human on Banshee. They are dedicated to what your UN used to call genocide."

"That's impossible. Your people should've learned from the Worldstorm that you couldn't wipe humanity off this planet."

Tekkeng nodded with a toothy grin and the shaman intoned, "Yes. We tried. But the Asai are powerful too. Their shamans have powers even we Skinnies do not."

Quantrill considered for a second. "If we move against the Asai, I expect your support. Your *active* support. You know what that means, don't you?"

"Yes. All my power will be yours."

The syker rubbed his flaking, dead face. "Very well, I'll send scouts to survey. And I'll contact Avernus with my decision. If it checks out, we'll march on Castle Rock."

Tekkeng rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Yes. Yes."

Quantrill asked, "What's the name of the Asai war chief?"

"Martool. Her name is Martool."

Chapter 15

The bright morning sunshine glared down at Debbi as she crossed the street, her arms laden with a heavy tray. She enjoyed the sensation of the

Clay & Susan Griffith

early morning heat. Everything felt good for a change. The oppressive air of occupation was gone and the wind had been working hard at dispelling the stench from the streets. It almost smelled fresh again.

It had been six days since the liberation and slowly life was showing signs of returning to normal. Ross was even showing signs of improvement. He woke up yesterday more like his old self, prickly and irate, but definitely more rational. Debbi basked in it. His appetite had returned in a rush too.

Using a hipbone, she nudged open the door to *Mo's*, balancing the tray precariously. It nearly toppled, but a swift shift in stance brought it back under control as the door swung shut behind her. She had missed her calling as a waitress, thought Debbi.

Then she spied Miller standing at the bar yakking with Mo.

"Hey!" she yelled. "What the hell are you doing down here? I left you with Ross."

Miller spun around in shocked surprise. The glass in his hand splattered its drink about him. He daubed morosely at his liquor-saturated tunic with long, thin fingers. "Aw, shoot, Dallas! Look what you made me do?"

"You can't be trusted with the simplest things, can you?" She adjusted the tray and stormed up the stairs.

"He's fine, Dallas! Sound asleep." Miller stroked his thin moustache and regarded Mo who was drying a glass. "She's so damn bristly lately."

Mo was unsympathetic. "Your hide's as good as tanned, Ranger."

"Oh, what do you know? Me and her are best buds."

Mo snorted. "In your dreams."

Debbi marched up the stairs and then stopped dead. Ross was weaving down the hallway while attempting to stuff his shirttail into his rumpled pants, head bowed and deep in concentration at the simple act.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" she snapped.

Ross jumped like a frightened cat. "Jesus, Dallas! Scare another ten years offa me."

"I've got your breakfast. So back inside."

"I've got work to do. Now get outta my way." He made a move to slip past her.

Debbi was a tad faster and cut him off with a single step to the right. The tray was large enough to block the hall and bring him up short.

What little color was in Ross's cheeks faded as the room spun slightly at his sharp movement. Debbi felt no remorse.

"Knock it off, Dallas." He moved to go around her other side.

"Everything's under control out there." Debbi took a side step to the left and effectively stopped him again. She could see sweat breaking out on Ross's forehead. Then she noticed that his beard was neatly trimmed again. Given Ross's weakened state, such precision grooming must have taken him hours of enormous concentration. He was pushing himself too far, too fast. He was just too bullheaded to realize it.

"Quit dancing around and let me by," Ross snarled. He had to hold the wall with a steadying hand. He drew in a deep breath and pushed himself off only to find Debbi in his way again. It was too much for him. The hallway spun to a blur and he slumped to the floor, breathing heavily in short gasps.

Debbi shook her head in exasperation. "Miller!" she called out.

"Yo"

"Get up here." As Miller bounded up the stairs, Debbi stepped over Ross.

Book II: The Undead War

"Bring him back inside please."

Miller stared down at his slumped boss and then sharply up at Debbi as she strode down the hall to the room. "What the hell did you do?"

She glanced back over her shoulder with a wicked eye. "The same thing I'm going to do to you if you don't do your job. Got it?"

Numbly, Miller nodded and reached down to heft a stirring Ross to his feet. "This way, Ross."

"Damn it, Miller," Ross mumbled. "Show some backbone in front of her." The Ranger Captain's head was pounding so badly he could only stumble placidly along with Miller.

Miller snorted. "When I see it working for you, I'll try it." He deposited Ross back into bed and then slinked off to the side to hide from Debbi.

She waved a dismissing hand at him. "I'll take over now. Go help Ngoma on the south wall."

"Yes, sir...I mean, ma'am."

Debbi just rolled her eyes and Miller darted out of the room. She lifted the cover off the tray.

The smell of rich, thick soup stock wafted up into the air. Ross's belly immediately reacted with a hungry growl. It smelled that good. Debbi shoved a spoon at him.

Ross regarded her with a contrary eye. "Give you a little rein and look what happens to you."

"Yeah, I become just like you."

He scowled. "I don't need you here. I'm fine."

"So fine you can't even manage the two-step."

Ross was about to snap back with a retort when a memory flashed across his vision. He was waltzing with a slim, red-haired woman, his hand resting lightly on her hip as they danced across the floor. He didn't look up at her; he was engrossed with not stepping on her delicate feet. But there was something else outside of his vision. He could sense it watching, waiting.

A shudder wracked Ross. A tall, gaunt man was on the edge of the dance floor. Ross lifted his head and stared at him and that's when the pain struck. It was a deep, penetrating agony that ripped across his skull. A small moan slipped from his lips.

He felt the barest of feather touches on his forehead. He snapped open his eyes to find Debbi observing him worriedly. He exhaled slowly and reached for the soup, twisting his head away from her hand. Debbi sat back. He could tell she was hurt. He ate for a few moments in silence.

After a few mouthfuls, Ross glanced over at Debbi. "Is the office cleaned up yet?"

Debbi immediately balked. "You need to rest, Ross. It's only been a couple days since all this went down. You're pushing."

"There's too much to do, Dallas. Quantrell isn't going to let our little rebellion go without reciprocation. He's coming back."

"I know that, but there's nothing you can do that we haven't already started doing. We have some breathing room. Use it. We'll need you soon enough. Just be ready when we do. That's your job right now. One more man isn't going to make a difference today."

"It will for me," Ross said quietly.

His eyes took on a haunted look that Debbi couldn't turn away from. With deliberate care she pulled off her com unit and tossed it on his lap. "Listen in from here then."

Ross picked up the com and settled it on his head, flicking it on with

Clay & Susan Griffith

his thumb. There was a crackle of static first, but then it quieted down and he could hear the voices of his men going about their duties. He was able to distinguish each of his men's distinct voices and their banter calmed him. They brought back his past life, full of duties and responsibilities. His eyes slipped closed and his breathing evened out. Debbi observed Ross's passage into the depths of calm sleep.

When she finally left him a few hours later, she was content in the fact that he would stay where he was now. All he needed was to be a part of the network again, a living, breathing network of people he cared about and that cared about him. He wouldn't lose that again. She swore it.

* * *

Later in the afternoon, Debbi was refereeing an argument in the Depot that promised to become a fistfight. She stood with arms crossed watching the caravaner who had told her about conditions at Stryga Wells, a short, meaty woman named Corday, who was working herself up to assault an unfortunate, bleary-eyed minor official named Thomas Orton, who had been conned by the Town Council to replace Randolph Peck as the "interim" Caravan Administrator.

"Exit fee!" Corday screamed. "You're gonna need an exit fee to get my foot out of your ass!"

Orton's reply was red-faced and thick-necked from strain. "It's the law! I can and will seize your goods if you refuse to pay!"

"What goods?" the caravan boss yelled. "There's nothing here I want to take away! The only thing this stink hole of a town produces is cannibalistic lepers! And there ain't no market for that! I risked my life and my goods to bring my train in here when nobody else would. You wouldn't have food if it wasn't for me. And this is how you pay me back?"

"Look," the administrator began. "Plague aside, you're still liable to this town's rules and regulations."

It was fascinating to Debbi that people like Orton and Corday were already trying to rationalize away all the horror that had happened with the Legion. Many had just accepted the concept of the walking dead and went about their business. However, a story was circulating that the Legionnaires weren't undead, but rather suffering from some terrible wasting disease. Debbi supposed it was the mind's way of coping with the horrific. What the brain couldn't logically accept it altered. For some people, it was either that or go insane.

Corday jabbed a finger at Debbi. "And I gave *you* a heads up on Stryga Wells. What the hell does that count for?"

Debbi said to Orton with a conspiratorial smile, "Let's just give her a pass this time, okay?"

"Thank you," Corday said emphatically.

Orton opened his fishy mouth wide with mock realization. "Oh! I see! I'm sorry! I just didn't understand the finer points of this job. From now on, I'll check with the Colonial Rangers to find out who their friends are before I enforce the law." He made a show of clicking his pen and holding it poised over his clipboard. He stared at Debbi with a maniacal glare. "Are you my contact person, Ranger Dallas? Or should I poll *all* the Rangers before I make any rulings?"

Debbi calmly met his eyes. "If you're looking to get beaten to death with that clipboard, you're doing *just* the right thing."

Orton started to retort. Then he shut his mouth. He shook his head, turned on his heel, and walked away.

Book II: The Undead War

Corday laughed and adjusted her cloak.

"Come back soon," Debbi said to the caravaner. "And please tell your friends that Temptation is now one hundred percent cannibal free."

Debbi's com crackled and Ringo's voice said, "Dallas. Ringo."

"Go ahead, Ringo."

"Hallow's in bad shape. He's at Doc Dazy's." There was a pause. "You'd better come."

"On my way." Debbi was already running.

* * *

Debbi stood with Doc Dazy in a laboratory staring at an x-ray that the Doctor was holding up to a sunny window because he had no working light board.

"See that?" The Doctor pointed at an indistinct, dark blur on the x-ray image of a human head.

"Yeah."

"That is a lesion on his brain. And that is another one."

"Are they serious?"

"Very."

"What caused them?" Debbi looked at the spots.

"I don't know. Injury perhaps. Maybe some infectious agent."

Debbi asked, "Can you tell how long the lesions have been there?"

"Not with any authority. From the size of them I'd say he's had them awhile."

Debbi shook her head. "I can't believe it. He seemed fine just a few days ago."

"That's what I understood from Ringo when he brought this fellow in. But brain injuries can be odd things. It can be a slow decay or a sudden attack. His was sudden."

"What's his condition now?"

"His motor coordination and speech have been severely affected. Cognition seemed okay. When he came in he could understand me, but he couldn't speak. He is breathing on his own, which is good because after the batrat epidemic I don't have a working ventilator left."

"Is he in pain?" Debbi continued to stare at the film, just beginning to feel the dread that came with associating the ghostly white outline with the features of a friend.

"He was in a lot of pain, but I pumped him full of opiates and that helped some."

"Do you think he's going to die?"

Doc Dazy breathed out of his nose and paused, obviously trying to frame his response. "Let me say this to you, I am not that knowledgeable about syker neurology. I do know that the biochemistry and even physiology of their brains is not like yours or mine. If I were looking at an x-ray of you and saw lesions like these, I'd say it was taken six months ago because that's when these things would've killed you. But he's still alive."

Debbi looked at the Doctor and repeated, "Is he going to die?"

"Yeah, I'd say so."

"Soon?"

Doc Dazy nodded.

She asked, "Is there *anything* you can do for him?"

"Keep him comfortable."

Debbi ran her hands through her long, red hair. She stepped away

Clay & Susan Griffith

from the window. Doc Dazy laid the x-ray on a table and leaned against the wall, watching the Ranger. He understood she had been through a lot. She had made sacrifices for this town. She was bound to make a lot more too before it was all over.

Debbi said, "What the hell are those?" Her attention was elsewhere.

"How's that?" The Doctor arched his neck to see beyond her. "Oh, that's just a little science I'm working on."

On a long table on the shadowy far side of the laboratory, partially hidden by a curtain, were five large beakers containing human heads floating in a viscous fluid. The heads were in various stages of decay. Their eyes were open. Flesh was torn in places revealing bone beneath. Teeth were prominent. They all had severe head wounds and several were missing most of their craniums.

In the middle beaker Debbi saw Captain Marat's head. He looked almost alive even though his cranium was obliterated. He bobbed just slightly in the liquid.

"A little science?" Debbi said with alarm. "This is science? Where did you get them? Ross ordered them all burned."

"I have ways. I figured it'd be a good time to initiate a study of syker neural anatomy. I just wish you guys had left a little more brain for me to examine."

"Don't let Ross find out or he'll put your head in a jar."

Debbi found herself crossing the room and staring into Marat's eyes. She expected him to blink and smile. She waited for his strained voice to emerge from that misshapen mouth. She could still feel his presence as he stood over her with her Dragoon clutched in his hand ready to shoot her. If it hadn't been for Ross . . .

"What about the black needles?" Debbi said suddenly.

"What about the what?"

She pulled her Dragoon and unscrewed the needle reservoir from the base of the black gun. She shook needles out into her hand and held them up to Doc Dazy.

"These." She tapped Marat's beaker. "This guy shot several of them into Hallow. If these needles have such a powerful instant effect on sykers, isn't it logical they could have some long lasting effect too?"

The Doctor stepped to Debbi's side and poked at the needles in her hand. "It's possible I suppose. You told me they were made out of a mixture of tannis and ghost rock. Tannis is a key component in blackline and that drug *can* give normal people syker-like abilities. And ghost rock is just plain weird stuff from the get go."

"What if you removed them from his body? If they're poisoning him, that would work, right?"

"Well, maybe, but I'm afraid there's not a chance in hell of doing that. These things are tiny. We don't know how many are in him or where they are. It'd be like hunting needles in a haystack." Doc Dazy laughed.

Debbi glared at him and he instantly stopped.

He held up his hands, surprised by the emotion he saw on the Ranger's face. "Don't get me wrong. I want to help him, but I'm not a skilled surgeon; I just don't think I could go in and get these needles without killing him myself."

"My God!" Debbi exclaimed in frustration. "You can't say how he got the lesions. You don't know how long he's had them. You don't know anything about sykers. You're not qualified to be a surgeon. What the hell kind of doctor are you, anyway?" She pointed at the row of beakers. "And

Book II: The Undead War

I've got news for you, Doctor. Collecting heads in jars doesn't qualify as practicing medicine!"

Doc Dazy put his hands in the pockets of his worn out, baggy trousers. "Well, actually, in college I specialized in pathology. I wasn't very good at cutting *live* people. But then I found myself in the UN Medical Corps during the war. I mainly dealt with young men and women screaming for their mothers while they bled to death.

"I came to Temptation because I thought I'd get a chance to help some living people and see them get better. So now I'm the only doctor in a town of ten thousand. I spend my time trying to stretch nonexistent supplies and make do with equipment that's broken more often than not. That is, when I don't spend my time with a constant parade of emergencies that no one has ever encountered before. There aren't a heck of a lot of clinical studies on the walking dead or creatures whose bite dissolves bone." He pointed into the distance. "You know, I stood in that ward down the hall a couple of months ago when the batrats came and watched more than two hundred people die. I knew most of them. I'd treated them for colds or broken bones. I brought some of them into the world. But I had to look into the faces of their mothers or husbands and tell them there was nothing I could do. Now, I realize that I'm only trained to work with dead people and with wounded soldiers. I don't have a very good bedside manner, so sometimes I can come off glib because I get tired of telling people their loved ones are going to die. I wish I had the answer all the time. But I don't."

The Doctor broke off, but he didn't look away from the Ranger.

Debbi dropped her gaze to the floor. "Yeah. Look, I'm sorry, Doc. I was out of line. I know you're doing the best you can. I'm not mad at you; it's me."

Dazy was quiet a moment, but then he nodded. "I'll take a look at these needles and I'll try another scan to see if I can locate them in his body." He took a few of the needles and placed them in a petri dish. "But even if they are the cause of the lesions and I can remove them, I have my doubts about it reversing his condition."

"So you think he's going to die no matter what we do?"

"I think so. But remember the take-home message; I don't know always what I'm talking about." He offered a quirky grin.

Debbi was surprised to find herself returning it. Unfortunately, it didn't last. "Can I see him?"

"Sure. Just be prepared. His condition has probably deteriorated considerably since you last saw him."

* * *

Hallow lay in a bed in an isolated part of the ward with a curtain drawn around him. The Doctor felt it was better the other patients didn't see a syker lying next to them. They might assume he was one of the Legionnaires.

Debbi slipped inside the curtain and looked at the man she now considered to be her friend. His eyes were closed, but she could see his eyeballs twitching beneath the lids. His mouth gaped open and he breathed raggedly through his mouth. He looked drawn and ghostly.

It seemed that lately she spent most of her time flitting from one bedside to another. First Ross, now Hallow. She desperately craved a respite from the insanity that threatened to overwhelm her defenses.

Debbi knelt next to the bed and laid a hand on Hallow's arm. It felt

Clay & Susan Griffith

limp and frail. His dark skin was clammy. She waited for that familiar tapping at her mind.

The moments passed without attempted contact. The psychic space between them stretched out. Debbi got a dark, empty feeling. Hallow was not reaching out to her. She couldn't understand it. How could Hallow have come to this wretched state so quickly?

The black needles had to be the cause of his condition. And Debbi was to blame for that. She had brought him to Temptation and now he was dying because of it. Marat may have pulled the trigger, but she was the one who made Hallow a target

She had to help him.

* * *

Debbi flew the Stallion north from Temptation into the canyon lands. Her goal was the Red River Valley, that dark and haunted area where twenty years ago the United Nations Expeditionary Force and the anouks fought one of the great battles of the colonial wars. Although battles and massacres occurred everywhere on the windswept surface of Banshee, it was the Red River Valley that remained the greatest monument of sorrow for both humans and anouks.

Debbi's mind wasn't on the symbolism of the region, or even on the rumors of unspeakable, shambling horrors that inhabited it. She wanted to find Martool. Both Debbi and Ross would have died but for the help of that anouk shaman, who asked nothing in return. Martool had healing powers. Now Debbi intended to ask her, to beg her if necessary, to use those powers on Hallow.

The unconscious syker lay strapped to a stretcher behind the two seats in the Stallion's cab. His rapid eye movement had ceased. His hands were drawn up over his chest, wrists palsied at weird angles. His breathing was growing shallower.

He was clearly dying.

Ross had not been happy that Debbi was doing this. She had gone over maps with him to pinpoint the spot where she had first encountered Martool's people. Ross wanted to go with her, but she argued against it. Besides the fact that he wasn't up to such a trip yet, there was the whole anouk thing. Even when Martool had helped Debbi, the anouk woman had to deal with the smoldering antipathy of her warriors toward Colonial Rangers. When they had found Ross badly injured, Martool had not offered to heal him; she simply disappeared back into her caves. It would be hard enough to convince Martool to help a syker who had served in the old Legion. No doubt Martool had memories of the war or, at least, had grown up with members of her tribe or clan who had lived through Legionary bloodshed. And if Debbi arrived with more Rangers, Martool might refuse to open her doors at all.

Debbi checked the map against the landscape. Some of the landmarks looked familiar. She recalled suddenly that her last trip to the Red River ended with her flying back to Temptation over this same terrain in this same Stallion with a badly wounded Ross in the same place Hallow now occupied. It did little to ease her mind. She was taking a gamble. Debbi had to face the fact that she had possibly removed Hallow from the only chance he might have had back in Temptation. Even though Dazy didn't sound all that confident, he was at least willing to try. She prayed she had made the right choice on behalf of Hallow.

She flew to the lip of the magnificent Red River canyon. It was well

Book II: The Undead War

over three miles across at this point, a sea of jagged buttes and ravines towering over a crimson ribbon of water far below. She hovered the Stallion and lowered it onto a stable rock shelf. Barely one hundred yards away was the head of a narrow path into the canyon. That path was where she had encountered Martool's anouk warriors and where she hoped to find them again.

Debbi shut down the Stallion's engines. She twisted in her seat to check Hallow. He huffed light breaths through his open mouth. She lightly stroked the syker's rigged hand.

She climbed out of the Stallion and locked it. She walked across the rocky ground as the wind at the canyon rim battered her. She began to descend the path with only the barest idea of how to find Martool.

It was a nerve-wracking walk. The loneliness of the area oppressed her and brought all the horrific tales of the Red River to mind. The path was only a narrow ledge clinging to the rock face. The swirling winds buffeted her so hard she frequently had to place her right hand on the stone wall to assuage the feeling of being torn from the ledge. The wind also brought strange sounds. She whirled around several times, her hand flashing to her sidearm, imagining that Quantrill's lunatic servants or bloodthirsty feline monsters were stalking her.

She finally reached the general area that she thought resembled the place where she first saw the anouks of Martool's clan. However, fifty feet further along the path also looked very similar. And below her as she watched the path wind into the canyon, she saw many more areas that could have been the spot as well. Even so, she searched the rock face for one of the hidden doorways that the anouks used.

She found nothing.

She drew in her breath and shouted, "Martool!"

The name was nearly lost in the wind as soon as it left her lungs. She began to realize that this mission of mercy was in vain. Perhaps she had known it was hopeless from the beginning, but she had to try for her sake if not for Hallow's.

"Martool!" she yelled again.

She felt something small hit her head and shoulder. A pebble dropped to her feet, followed by another. She looked up.

An anouk was above her astride a chanouk. The great beast glared down from twenty feet above Debbi's head. It clung to the sheer rock face with its massive claws like a cat scaling its way headfirst down a tree. The native warrior was strapped into the saddle, holding a javelin made of shiny, black tannis rock.

Then she saw three anouks blocking the path behind her. Debbi knew they had not followed her down, so the entrance she sought must be nearby. Grim faced, they glared at her. Two of them, a male and female, carried automatic rifles and the third, a male, hefted a black tannis war ax. She took several steps back and held her hands out in front of her.

"I'm looking for Martool," she said. "Martool. I'm a friend."

The chanouk above her carefully scabbled its way over the rock face, lifting and re-affixing one clawed foot at a time like a rock climber, keeping itself directly over Debbi. If it leaped on her, she would be dead whether she could clear her holster for a shot or not. She had to show them she meant no harm.

She slowly reached her left hand to her belt.

The anouks tensed and raised their weapons.

"Whoa!" Debbi shook her head. In her best calming voice, she said, "I'm

Clay & Susan Griffith

removing my weapon. Friend.”

She continued the creeping motion with her hand. It took a little more fiddling with the buckle than she was comfortable with, but finally her heavy gun belt dropped to the ground.

“I need to see Martool,” Debbi said again. “Do you understand me?”

The warriors came at her. One of them kicked the gun belt away.

“Martool!” Debbi shouted at them. “Take me to Martool!”

The warrior with the ax shoved the Ranger hard against the cliff. He raised the weapon over his head and let out a war scream. Debbi tensed, ready to fight.

A muscular, purple-skinned arm appeared across Debbi’s line of vision and seized the shaft of the war ax. A large anouk stepped between her and the three warriors. They all began to argue violently. Debbi picked up very little of the language, but she heard the new arrival saying “Martool” several times. While the confrontation continued, she measured the distance to her gun belt on the path.

The three aggressive warriors backed up and hesitantly lowered their weapons in the face of the new anouk’s vigorous shouting. The new arrival turned to face Debbi.

The first thing she saw was a battered Colonial Ranger badge pinned to his tunic. She realized with a rush of excitement that it was her old badge.

“Sahrin,” she said with recognition.

Sahrin nodded and touched the badge. “Dallas.”

“That’s right!” she said eagerly. “Can you take me to Martool?”

He knelt and picked up her gun belt while giving the other warriors a savage glare. He motioned for Debbi to follow.

She took a deep breath. Now she’d have to find another gift to give this guy.

Chapter 15

Debbi was taken through a well-hidden door in the cliff wall and into a seemingly interminable series of passageways carved into the tannish rock leading ever downward. The air grew cooler as they descended. Sahrin stayed close to her, shielding her from prying eyes. He finally brought Debbi to a large chamber hollowed out of the rock where Martool sat wrapped in a heavy fur. The tall, stately anouk female seemed unsurprised to see the Ranger appear at her doorstep.

Despite being interrupted from meditation, Martool was happy to see Debbi, although she was careful not to be effusive in front of the other anouks who had followed the intruder. She took Debbi by the shoulders and stared into the human with those large, black eyes as if looking for something.

A sense of relief washed over Debbi at seeing the shaman. She clasped Martool’s long arms and smiled warmly.

“It is good to see you again, Debbi.” Martool’s soft-spoken voice was a welcome sound after her ordeal.

“Not as much as it does me good to see you, my friend,” Debbi returned. “I need your help desperately.”

“You have but to ask,” Martool replied openly.

However, when Debbi explained the purpose of her trip, the anouk woman’s face froze hard and she lapsed into thought. The hesitation made Debbi even more frantic. It already had been over an hour since she

Book II: The Undead War

left Hallow in the Stallion.

Martool said, "I will go with you and examine your friend. But he cannot be brought here."

"Thank you," Debbi said. "That's all I ask. Can you come now?"

"Yes." Martool pointed at several of the anouks and spoke in a low voice to Sahrin. She then put an arm around Debbi's shoulder, demonstrating open acceptance to the surprised and muttering crowd, and led the Ranger back the way they had come. Sahrin followed with a group of armed warriors, still carrying Debbi's gun belt over his shoulder.

As Debbi and Martool walked through the torch lit passages, the anouk leaned close and said, "You have been through much since we last met."

"Yeah. Few things here and there."

"You've encountered Tekkeng. And survived."

Debbi shook her head in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Tekkeng. He is a what humans call a Skinny."

"Oh." Debbi felt her face flush and she was overcome by hatred. The violence of the reaction surprised her. "How do you know?"

"I can always tell where Tekkeng has been. He leaves an unmistakable . . . mark. I can sense it in you."

Debbi hadn't felt Martool in her mind. She had come to feel confident in her inexplicably heightened psychic defenses; it was a shock that the anouk circumvented it so easily.

"Don't," Debbi said quietly. "Don't go in my head."

"I didn't," Martool replied. "I wouldn't do such a thing. But you and I have a connection now. I'm sorry if you feel it's an unjust invasion, but it's a natural remnant of my treating you when you were here last. Certain elements of your self are clear to me, and always will be. It requires nothing from me but opening my eyes. And I am always attuned to Tekkeng's sign."

Debbi didn't respond.

Martool continued, "You should be proud. There are few anouks and no humans who have faced Tekkeng and lived. I thought I sensed something special in you when you were here before, and this is clear proof."

Debbi didn't want anyone telling her how special she was. She didn't feel special. She felt as if she were hanging onto the life she once knew by her fingernails. All her vaunted exploits had been born out of sheer desperation, nothing else.

Martool sensed Debbi's discomfort and remained quiet for the rest of the trip through the passageways. Finally, they approached a blank wall.

Debbi felt a surge of panic. She was being led into a dead end. Ten heavily armed warriors followed them.

Martool waved her arm. An opening appeared in the wall and they passed out into the roaring wind. Debbi was disoriented to suddenly go from tight rock corridors out onto the edge of a wild cliff with the river far below. The hard wind and the expanse of horizon helped remind her of her mission and remove the pall she'd been under inside the tunnels.

Getting her bearings quickly, she immediately began trudging up the path toward the canyon rim several miles away, setting a hard pace that the anouks had little trouble following.

Soon they arrived at the Stallion. Debbi walked toward the vehicle, but she noticed Martool stopped at the head of the path. Her warriors flowed around her and spread out to surround the Stallion. Several of them carried automatic rifles and others more traditional weapons. They

Clay & Susan Griffith

searched the immediate area for hidden dangers. Sahrin and his partner that Debbi remembered from her last visit, the hard-featured Fareel, stood near. She couldn't tell if they felt protective or were preparing to strike her down should this be a trap as, no doubt, some of the anouks suspected it was. Fareel unhooked an atax, a star-shaped throwing weapon made of tannis, from his belt and held it at the ready. Sahrin motioned for Debbi to approach the Stallion.

Debbi unlocked the door and opened it. She turned to Martool. "He's inside."

Sahrin climbed into the cab of the Stallion with a tannis war ax in his hand. He investigated behind the seat and, apparently satisfied, withdrew and signaled to Martool that it was all clear.

The shaman swept forward, touched Debbi lightly on the shoulder as she passed, and lifted herself into the cab. Debbi followed. Martool situated herself in the narrow space between the seats and knelt over Hallow. She studied the syker for a moment before gently placing her hands on his forehead.

The shaman winced.

Martool pulled her hands away and looked back at Debbi. "This man is in very bad condition. What happened to him?"

"I'm not sure. He was recently shot by the black gun needles."

Martool continued to stare at the Ranger. "I remember the weapon. I told you it was a hideous weapon. It is destroying him."

"Can you help him?" Debbi looked at Hallow and for the first time noticed boils beginning to rise on his face. "Oh God. He's much worse."

Martool briefly considered the situation and said in a soft voice, "I can't help him here. We will take him in."

"Thank you. What can I do?"

From outside came a high-pitched scream. Both Debbi and Martool looked up as a heavy weight slammed against the passenger window. It was the body of an anouk and it slid down leaving a trail of blood on the window.

Debbi leaped out the door with Martool close on her heels. Several warriors raced past the Stallion responding to the scream. Debbi came around the front of the vehicle and saw Fareel attending the bloody warrior lying in a heap on the ground.

A group of warriors hastily fanned out beyond the Stallion. They crouched behind rocks and brush with weapons at the ready. They frantically searched the empty desert for signs of the enemy.

"What happened?" Debbi asked Fareel.

The anouk glared at the Ranger and stayed quiet.

A shot ricocheted off the Stallion.

Debbi threw herself on Martool who stood at the nose of the vehicle. They crashed to the ground. Debbi rolled the anouk woman to the canyon side of the Stallion.

"Stay here," Debbi commanded and climbed up into the Stallion. More shots pinged off the vehicle's shell. She grabbed a pair of binoculars and stood up in the doorway to see over the top of the cab to scan the distance.

She saw a glint of sun on metal approximately two hundred yards out in the jagged wasteland. The four anouk warriors who had modern weapons tried to return fire, holding their rifles up and pulling the triggers. It was useless though. Whoever was out there had the high ground. The Stallion and the surrounding anouks were situated in a low,

Book II: The Undead War

open patch with minimal cover.

She stooped below the roof of the Stallion and said to Martool, "I can't see how many. But your people are sitting ducks out here. We've got to get inside."

Debbi heard another anouk scream. She stood up again and saw an anouk warrior leap to his feet, shouting at the top of his lungs. He aimed his rifle at one of his companions and opened fire, virtually cutting the surprised warrior in half. His fellow warriors stared in shock. Then he swung around to shoot another. Debbi reached for her sidearm, but her hand slapped against her empty thigh.

Fareel was on his feet. His atax glowed with mystical energy. He flung the weapon and it spun in the sunlight. Before the screaming warrior could shoot a second anouk, the atax sliced his throat. He dropped to the ground.

Fareel turned and looked up at Debbi with an expression of rage and blame even as he caught the returning atax.

She aimed the binoculars out again. This time she saw a figure moving among the rocks. It wore ragged clothes and its skin was a discolored greenish gray. She saw several more figures scrambling across the harsh landscape. They moved a little closer to the Stallion before settling behind a tannis outcrop.

Legionnaires, Debbi thought with a start. *What are they doing here?* The Legion was last reported to be south of Temptation beyond Ghost Rock City.

The Ranger dropped down beside Martool.

"Sykers," Debbi said. "We've got to get Hallow inside."

Martool stared at her. "Sykers? Like him?" It was an accusation, made by someone who didn't want to believe it.

Debbi said, "No! Not like him. I don't have time to explain. They're moving in. We are nothing but targets out here. For all our sakes, we have to withdraw!"

Fareel came around the Stallion, murderous eyes locked on Debbi. He surged at her.

At the last second, Martool raised her arm and stopped him. He pulled up abruptly. His face was full of outrage. Martool pointed into the Stallion and barked an order.

The fierce warrior shouted at the shaman, his suspicion plain. Martool merely repeated the order. Fareel cursed and hooked his atax on his belt. He climbed into the Stallion and roughly lifted Hallow off the stretcher.

"Be gentle!" Debbi shouted. "He'll kill him like that!"

Martool spoke harshly to Fareel. He iced her with a glance, but backed out of the Stallion with Hallow cradled in his arms. He started for the canyon path at a trot.

Debbi climbed into the Stallion and pulled the single Hellrazor automatic assault rifle off its rack behind the seats along with the bag of extra ammo clips and grenades. She stood up in the door and braced the Hellrazor on the roof of the Stallion. Sahrin was shouting orders to his warriors, directing them back toward the path. As they scrambled in retreat, bullets whizzed through the air and puffs of dust rose from the ground accompanied by the distant cracks of rifle fire. Suddenly a bolt of energy flashed in from the desert and caught one of the anouks square in the back. He lit up briefly and fell to the ground with most of his body blackened.

Debbi opened up with the pulse rifle in the general direction of the

Clay & Susan Griffith

blast. The big gun bucked in her arms, spitting three-inch shell casings out the side. She had no targets in sight; she was just trying to provide cover. She fired a few needles from the black gun attached to the Hellrazor, but the slivers of black were impossible to follow with the naked eye so she had no idea of their effectiveness.

The remaining anouk warriors filed down the path, carrying their dead and wounded. After they were all out of sight, Sahrin stopped and shouted back in alarm.

Debbi glanced over her shoulder and saw Martool walking out into the open.

"Get back!" Debbi shouted at Martool. "I'll cover you! Get back!"

Spurts of dust kicked up around Martool's feet as distant Legionnaires took pot shots at her. Martool knelt slowly and placed both hands flat on the ground.

Debbi squeezed the trigger, trying to will her shells to find their well-hidden targets. Where was Sahrin? Why wasn't he pulling Martool out of harm's way?

The Ranger wasn't sure what she saw next. It looked like a heat shimmer on sun-baked earth. It spread from Martool out into the desert, distorting the view of the ground.

One hundred and fifty yards away, several low jagged peaks of black tannis blurred and cracked suddenly. They fell apart as if from an earthquake and tumbled down. The Legionnaires' gunfire ceased.

Debbi dropped off the Stallion and ran to Martool. She grabbed the shaman by the arm. Martool was shaking and barely able to stand. Sahrin was there too. He lifted Martool and helped her to the path.

Debbi ducked back into the Stallion and searched the various compartments. She grabbed the first aid kit and took maps and documents, any sort of manuals on operation of the vehicle and several on official Colonial Ranger procedures that she'd never even seen before. She popped out several fuses and circuit boards to disable the ship and keep its cannons out of enemy hands. She dumped everything into a canvas bag and crawled out dragging it. She locked the doors, which seemed an empty gesture at best, and hustled after Sahrin and Martool.

* * *

Martool stood over Hallow. The syker lay prone and naked on a tannis outcropping in the center of Martool's meditation chamber. The outcropping had not been there less than an hour ago, but it rose out of the floor as if carved from the living rock. Debbi stood in the corner of the chamber intently watching Martool. Sahrin and Fareel stood in the doorway, alternately keeping an eye on Martool and peering out into the corridor. Over the course of the time that Martool worked on Hallow, messengers came to the door several times and whispered fervent words to the two warriors.

Martool held her hands over Hallow's chest close to the surface of his skin. Her muscles were tense. She held that pose for what seemed hours. Then suddenly she released her hands and stepped to another part of the syker's body where she replicated the lengthy period of exertion.

The process was fascinating for Debbi to watch; there were no lights flashing, no energy fizzing from Martool's eyes. But still, it was amazing and invigorating. Martool showed an inspiring level of concentration that Debbi had rarely seen before.

After Martool had repeated the process over four sections of Hallow's

Book II: The Undead War

body, she dropped her lifeless arms to her side. The shaman turned and leaned heavily against the tannis table. She was covered in perspiration.

Sahrin asked her a question from the door and Martool motioned that she was fine.

Debbi crossed the room and looked down at Hallow. The large pustules that marred his skin began to break and ooze. Debbi glanced at Martool questioningly.

Martool said, "I have removed the needles." She slid a long nailed finger across the top of the slick black outcropping on which Hallow rested and came up with a black needle between her fingertips.

"So he'll be all right?" Debbi asked.

"No. He is still near death. I must do more. But you cannot be here. It would be dangerous for you."

"Do you think you can save him?"

"Go." Martool tiredly turned back to Hallow.

Debbi stepped away and joined Sahrin and Fareel at the door. When they entered the hallway, the door flowed closed as if the rock turned liquid and filled the hole before rehardening. Fareel snarled and moved off down the hall.

Sahrin said quietly beside her, "Martool help."

Debbi looked at the anouk with surprise. "You speak my language?"

"Little. Martool teach me."

She nodded at the distant Fareel. "What about him?"

Sahrin laughed out loud. "No. Not Fareel."

Debbi said, "I want you to know I had nothing to do with the attack up there." She shook her head vigorously, wondering if the gesture even meant anything to the anouk. "Do you understand? I respect Martool. I would never hurt her."

"Yes. I understand." He tapped the dented badge again and smiled. "Dallas."

Debbi and Sahrin spent a long period sharing language. They exchanged English and anouk words for various articles of clothing and body parts. Fareel stood glaring in the shadows, never moving a muscle. Messengers now came to him alone. He listened to their reports without response.

Finally, the door opened and Martool appeared. She looked drained and had to lean on the wall for support. Debbi couldn't read the emotion in the shaman's face.

Martool said, "I believe he will live."

Debbi felt the heavy steel grip that had clamped on her chest in Doc Dazy's office yesterday, or was it the day before, finally release. She exhaled and bent over, covering her face. She looked up.

"Thank you," she told Martool. "I don't know how to thank you."

The anouk woman responded, "I must do more before I am sure. But I must rest and eat first."

Martool called out to Fareel. He made a brief and brusque report.

The shaman asked Debbi, "Do you know the sykers who attacked us?"

"Yes. They're from a new Syker Legion." Debbi paused. "They appeared a month ago. They're actually the reanimated dead sykers who were killed in the wars. That may seem hard to believe but . . ."

Martool interrupted, seemingly unfazed by the peculiar origins of the Legion. "Will you tell me more about them?"

"Of course. I don't know much, but whatever information I have is yours."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Good. Come with me. I have a council waiting."

Debbi followed the unsteady Martool down the corridor. Fareel and Sahrin fell into step and exchanged sharp whispers behind her.

"Martool, shouldn't you rest?" Debbi asked. "Can't the council wait?"

"It's a war council. There are many hundreds of these dead sykers approaching from the south." Martool looked down at Debbi with weary fortitude. "We will soon be under siege."

Chapter 16

The War Council was gathered in a massive rock chamber. They all stared at Debbi intensely as she entered, but a few words from Martool brought the glares under control. The Ranger stood against the wall again with Sahrin and Fareel as Martool joined a group of seven other anouk, five male and two female. Except for Martool, they were all clad in unusually festive outfits festooned with patterned skins and feathered headdresses. They all carried elaborately carved staffs of tannis. Martool's clothes were as simple as any average tribesman. The rest of the council members bowed to her. They had the same atmosphere of reverence, but not the blind obedience that Sahrin and Fareel showed to Martool.

Events moved quickly and furiously. Debbi had no hope of following them. Council members talked over one another. Voices rose and tempers flared. Martool remained relatively cool amidst it all.

Martool issued an order that silenced them. The council turned their backs to Debbi and faced the far wall. They all raised their hands. They began to chant in a low tone. The sound resonated through the tannis walls and floor. Debbi could feel it vibrating up her legs. It reminded her of the vibratory chanting of the Gray Ones in the tannis cathedral in Temptation.

Then the far wall began to melt.

The rock turned liquid and flowed down into the floor where it seemed to disappear. Strange, jagged shapes were left behind as the rock melted away. All the way up the twenty-foot wall odd rocky angles and crevices, as well as smooth surfaces with small openings were revealed as the black quicksilver ran down over them.

Then Debbi realized what she was seeing. The council was somehow carving the wall of the chamber into a large, scale model of the canyon wall. The representation of the canyon showed it to be very rugged with hundreds of crevices and ravines running through it. Set against this natural ferocity of the landscape was a sprawling, multi-leveled complex of buildings and towers and courtyards, all protected by an intricate network of walls. This was a section of the canyon Debbi had not seen, but the walled city resembled pictures and vids she had seen of Castle Rock before EXFOR destroyed it.

The top of the complex was set deep into the canyon wall with several hundred yards of sheer rock face between its highest point and the canyon rim, which would help protect it from the elements as well as attack from above. The city sprawled down along the steeply sloping canyon wall, seeming to cling tenaciously to it, but actually most of it was carved right out of black tannis outcropping in the canyon. Large sections of the city appeared to be in ruins. Crumbled buildings and collapsed walls created great slides of detritus that stretched down the face of the canyon. The walls that were intact had a number of gates

Book II: The Undead War

leading to paths and roads that wound up and down the canyon.

Soon the entire wall of the council chamber was a gigantic and amazingly detailed representation of Castle Rock and the surrounding canyon wall. The council members lowered their arms and began to speak while consulting points on the model.

Then a warrior entered the chamber. His tunic and breechcloth were torn. Blood dripped from a wound on his arm, which he purposefully ignored. He made a fervent report to the council. For nearly an hour, he gave dramatic testimony during which he referred to places on the model.

At one point, Martool turned to Debbi and asked, "How do you kill these things?"

Debbi was startled by the attention. She saw all the eyes of the council members and the exhausted face of the bloody warrior staring at her.

"You have to destroy their brains," she answered and Martool translated. The council members nodded, appearing very excited. "Hold on. It's not quite that simple. The Legionnaires are very resistant to damage. Even if you shoot them in the head, they can keep coming unless you use the black guns first to disrupt their syker abilities."

Martool stopped speaking. The council members were confused, obviously unfamiliar with the black guns.

Debbi held up the Hellrazor and asked Martool, "Are they attacking now? Let me go out with your people. I'll show them how to use it." She pointed at Sahrin who still carried her gun belt. "There's another one on my Dragoon. I wish I had more. But short of causing them catastrophic damage, it's the only way to put them down for good."

Martool said a quick word to the bloodied warrior and he departed. Both Sahrin and Fareel watched him, obviously longing to go.

Debbi began, "Martool, you've got to . . ."

Martool held up her hand to silence the Ranger. Then she began to issue orders to the council members, pointing at various spots on the canyon model as she did. After each order, a member of the council would depart.

Finally, only Martool remained with her two retainers and Debbi.

Martool continued studying the stone model. "The Legionnaires who attacked us were apparently scouts probing one of the minor paths into the canyon. The main force of the Legion is moving on three lines of advance. Their largest force is at the rim blocking the main road. I suspect they want to prevent us from escaping, should we choose, or to intercept reinforcements. They surprised our sentries and were half way to the upper gate. We have pushed them back, but casualties were heavy." She turned to Debbi. "We may soon have to pull back and concede the road. That will put them at our gates. But our warriors' sacrifice won't be in vain. It has given us time to consolidate our defenses elsewhere."

"What about the other two columns?" Debbi asked. "Can you hold them?"

Martool said, "Those columns appear to be positioning themselves for a siege rather than trying the walls. One force is threatening one of our major water sources."

Debbi responded, "That's smart. They're dead. They can wait for years. Let me out there with the black guns. Or if you're worried about your people's reaction to me, I can show your soldiers how to use them."

"No."

Debbi wrinkled her brow in confusion. "What? Why not?"

Clay & Susan Griffith

"I won't allow my people to use the polluted tannis as a weapon."

"That doesn't make sense. It's the only . . ."

"I said *no!*" Martool yelled.

Debbi took a step back in shock. She'd never heard Martool raise her voice. The ferocity of it was frightening.

Sahrin and Fareel both jumped from their positions against the wall and came up next to Debbi, ready to strike her if Martool commanded. Debbi felt the powerful presences of the two warriors crowding her. She regarded Sahrin and found his face as rigid as Fareel's, his black eyes completely unreadable. There would be no quarter from either of them. It made her realize suddenly how far she was from home. Martool's common decency was a fragile shield. Debbi was the enemy here as much as the Legionnaires beyond the walls. She would be dead instantly and without question if Martool only nodded.

However, Martool immediately regained her composure. "I will not do anything just to survive. That is the difference between anouk and human."

A loud ringing sounded through the chamber. Debbi heard it in her ears, but also felt it through the soles of her boots. Sahrin and Fareel looked at each other in alarm.

Martool turned and studied the canyon model. "The sun gate. I've made a mistake. The third group of Legionnaires is not setting up for a siege. They are attacking." She turned to her two retainers. "Go."

Debbi stepped forward. "Let me go too!"

"Very well."

Debbi asked, "Do you have a problem with *me* using the black gun?" Martool stared silently for a moment. "You are human. I have no control over you."

"Great." Debbi hefted the Hellrazor toward Sahrin and nodded at her gun belt. "Trade you."

Sahrin's stone face broke into a grin and he took the assault rifle. He handed the Dragoon back to Debbi.

She buckled on her weapon and pointed to the black gun touch pad on the rifle. "That fires the black gun. Don't hit it. Let me show you how to operate that weapon."

Sahrin ejected the clip and checked it. Then he slammed it back in and worked the mechanism like an expert. "Point. Shoot."

"Okay," Debbi said with a smirk. She lifted the bag of extra ammo and grenades to her shoulder. "I'd say you're ready. Lead the way to the sun gate and let's go to work."

She followed the two anouks out into the corridor and they began to run. The complex was chaotic with warriors, both male and female, moving rapidly through the crowded passageways. Other anouks shepherded children in different directions.

Debbi and her companions burst out of the tunnels and into an open courtyard. The Ranger got a sense of the immensity of the complex that the model couldn't give her. Castle Rock took amazing advantage of the natural terracing and crevicing of the canyon to gain every inch of available space. Behind and above, Debbi saw more buildings on ledges and levels with bridges linking them, clinging tenuously to the rock face. Facades were intricately carved with figures and shapes. It was a confusing rush of geometric and chaotic contours. She caught glimpses of thick defensive walls in various places and then they were moving down a wide staircase back into the tunnels.

Book II: The Undead War

They paused at the bottom of the stairs as it opened onto a wide underground boulevard. A group of warriors on chanouks roared past at full gallop. Then Debbi and her companions raced across the avenue and into another smaller and steeper set of steps as more chanouks raced past in the opposite direction. Still moving at a run, they cut into a narrow passage that sloped down. Debbi was beginning to gasp for breath.

She was completely lost. She had no idea of where she was and didn't think she could find her way back to Martool's war room. It was no surprise that Castle Rock had become legendary for the grueling campaign to conquer it and the stories of battle terror that accompanied it.

Her father was here in '76, Debbi recalled with a jolt. Perhaps he moved through these very passageways, a hard young man on a mission. He was a UN Marine. His unit went over the walls in the second wave, right behind the sykers and the cyborgs. But even with the brainburners and the heavy cans punching first, the Marines' job was hardly a mop-up. The complex was huge and had countless places for the enemy to hide, regroup, and counterattack. And in '76, the defenders were composed of a powerful anticolonial coalition of anouks, Reapers, and Skinnies. It must have been a horrific fight. Debbi couldn't imagine leading soldiers through this place. She wondered if her father had been scared in the face of the savage, alien enemy.

Then she remembered she was now fighting on the side of that savage, alien enemy. It was Quantrill and his sykers who broke the back of the revolt here in '76. It was Quantrill and his dead sykers who were battering the walls again, the same Quantrill who had enslaved and degraded Ross. The same one who had allowed his soldiers to cannibalize innocent people.

Debbi felt a rush of adrenaline as she realized that this fight held no ambivalence for her. She didn't have to worry about morals or beliefs muddying the waters of her actions. This wasn't a war of humans versus anouks. This wasn't a fight about natural resources or political systems. This was about right and wrong. Her side was right. The other side was wrong. In fact, they weren't just wrong, they were evil.

She could pull the trigger and sleep like a baby afterwards.

Sahrin, Fareel, and Debbi emerged from the tunnel into another vast open-air courtyard that surged with chaos and dust. She noted off to her right a collection of stone monuments and slabs that appeared to be a graveyard. The courtyard was half a mile across, and a thirty-foot black tannis wall fronted it. Anouk warriors stood on the ramparts atop the wall, firing out with automatic weapons and hurling ataxes. More were racing up steps carved into the rear of the wall to reach the battlements. The interior of the wall resembled the side of a stepped pyramid, at least thirty feet thick at the base and narrowing to five feet at the top. The gate was reached from the courtyard through a thirty-foot wide avenue slicing through the tannis wall. On both sides of the entrance to this avenue were large stone capstans with wooden spokes. Anouks strained against the spokes, backs bent, calf muscles bulging as they turned the wheels inch-by-inch, drawing the gate closed through a mechanism hidden in the wall.

Debbi stuck close behind Sahrin and Fareel. The courtyard was crowded with barkas, thunderous herd animals that also were being driven in through the gate. They nudged one another with the horn on their snout. Sahrin and Fareel paid them little heed, swatting them aside with their hands and making hard, clucking sounds to urge the brutes out

Clay & Susan Griffith

of the way. Debbi collided with barkas several times and almost fell beneath the massive stamping hooves of the milling creatures.

They reached the double gate; each side was twenty feet high and made of tannis with heavy wood reinforcement. Bloody warriors streamed inside, helping the wounded and carrying the dead. The sound of gunfire was audible and through the retreating mob, Debbi saw muzzle flashes a couple hundred yards away where the ground dropped away steeply and separated into fissures. Undead Legionnaires were scrambling up over the rise and pouring out of ravines like insects crawling out of a freshly opened grave. Shells buzzed through the air and splintered off the massive gates.

Debbi and Sahrin opened up with their weapons. Fareel flung his atax as he continued running forward. He grabbed a wounded anouk under the arms and began to drag him back toward the walls. The atax arced in a magnificent crescent through the heads of three Legionnaires before it made for home in Fareel's hand.

Debbi saw several Legionnaires drop, but then stir and clamber to their feet again. She hit one in the head with a steel-jacketed bullet and watched it stagger. It kept coming.

She compensated the Dragoon's sights for the black gun. She picked a specific dead trooper. Steady. Breath out. Squeeze the trigger. The zombie kept coming. She had missed. She steadied again and squeezed.

It froze in its tracks.

"Hah!" she yelled and squeezed off several shots.

Half its head exploded and it dropped. This time it didn't rise thanks to the black gun.

She laughed out loud. Then she realized there were at least one hundred dead sykers charging past the one she had just killed. They didn't yell a terrifying war cry. They were silent. The sight of the decaying, virtually unkillable mob surging forward almost caused Debbi to break and flee. She took a careful step back toward the closing gate. Controlling her panic, the Ranger moved steadily back while firing. She took Fareel's arm and helped him with a wounded warrior.

The Legionnaires suddenly halted their headlong advance and began to form up orderly ranks in multiple lines.

Sahrin stepped forward and held the trigger on the Hellrazor. Several troopers staggered. Then a shimmering shield fell in front of them and shells ricocheted off.

"A force screen?" Debbi muttered. "What the hell *can't* they do?"

Debbi reached the gate with the last of the retreating anouks. The stone and wood walls were groaning shut. The force screen dropped from in front of the Legion ranks. Seconds later a roar of energy poured out of their ranks and engulfed the gate. A cracking sound filled the air and splinters like javelins flew.

Debbi was knocked off her feet. Chunks of wood plummeted around her. She struggled up. The front of the gate was badly scored with large gouges ripped out of the wood. But it was still intact and it was still closing.

And Debbi was on the outside.

She lurched forward as her view of the chaotic scene of anouks and barkas in the courtyard narrowed between the closing monolithic gates. She could hear the roaring of the massive stone hinges.

A purple hand grabbed Debbi's jacket and pulled her through the crevice. Both of her shoulders brushed stone and she heard a resounding

Book II: The Undead War

boom and rush of air as the gates shut behind her.

Sahrin released her coat and slapped Debbi hard on the shoulder. It almost brought her to her knees. The anouk grinned broadly.

The wall rumbled again from a second psychic blast. Debbi felt it in her bones, but the reinforced gate held.

Sahrin pointed up. Debbi nodded and followed him and Fareel up the steep steps of the wall. They reached the battlements and elbowed their way to a firing position just as another bolt of energy poured out of the Legion ranks and hit the gate. It tore out more wood, but Debbi sensed that the tannis was absorbing most of the force.

She joined in the barrage that was pouring down from the parapets onto the Legion. Again the shimmering field rose up as the zombies stood motionless in the field. Then the rear rank peeled off and retreated beneath the rise. One by one, the undead ranks turned under cover of the protective shield and departed the field. Soon all the troopers were gone.

The line of anouks on the wall let out a massive cheer, shaking their fists and weapons over their heads.

Sahrin laughed again and shouted to Debbi, "We win!"

Debbi backhanded Sahrin across the chest in a playful gesture she doubted he even felt.

Even Fareel was smiling. He shook his bloody atax with satisfaction.

As Debbi looked over the wall, she saw that the rocky ground was empty. There was not one motionless Legionnaire to testify to the anouk victory. She knew she had destroyed at least one, but it was gone now. Perhaps its retreating comrades had dragged it off. Or more likely, she thought with a tremble, she hadn't killed it at all and it simply got to its feet and walked away. It would come back to fight again, as would all the Legionnaires that were injured in battle, an unstoppable battalion of the dead.

Then she turned and viewed the vast courtyard below. In the acres of anarchy, the unruly barkas were being herded toward one side and hundreds of anouks raced back and forth, staggering in confusion and pain. Some were sitting in the dirt lost in shock, or lying dead.

The Legion had been driven from the gates. This was a victory for the anouks.

A few more like it and they might all be dead.

Chapter 17

In the day that followed the battle for the sun gate, Debbi stayed close to Sahrin; he was the only anouk warrior who exhibited anything other than disdain or open hatred for her. She had expected that after the fight she would be returned to Martool. But as time passed, it was increasingly clear that she had been lost in the whirlwind of war preparation. When darkness fell and the air grew cold, she and her companions settled down on the edge of a barka pen. The animals' warm, earthy scent was oddly comforting. Debbi chewed one of the algae bars she kept in her pocket and offered the remainder to Sahrin and Fareel. They both sniffed the bars curiously and bit into them. Sahrin actually enjoyed his. Fareel, however, spat the piece onto the ground and passed the bar to an anouk youth nearby. The youngster tore into the algae bar with gusto and was soon asking for more. Debbi felt bad she didn't have any more on her. Not that it mattered, for soon they all fell into a restless sleep.

They were up before the sun and Debbi spent another day helplessly

Clay & Susan Griffith

following Sahrin and Fareel around the Castle Rock complex. She tried to spend the time learning her way around the massive ruin, but realized that would take many months, not mere days.

She watched her guides as they conferred with warriors at gates and waited atop the walls as they collected reports on enemy movements. All around the city the previous day, the Legion had struck without warning, testing the walls at several points, and being repulsed at all locations. The speed and surprise of Quantrill's attacks kept the anouks on their heels and gave the Legion almost complete freedom in the territory surrounding Castle Rock. Through the night and into the day, spotters reported constant Legionnaire movement. Small groups of zombies worked their way up and down the canyon wall and clambered over ravines. They positioned themselves to block trails and roads leading away from the city. Sahrin told Debbi in his broken English that the anouks had contested the Legion several times for control of access to roads, but the results were brutal. The sykers inflicted enormous casualties on the anouks. Castle Rock was not completely cut off yet; several of the smaller trails were still open. But by the second night, the main roads were already too treacherous to risk. The Legion's opening gambit was skillfully planned and executed, which was not surprising given the fact that Quantrill and his Legion had fought here twenty years before.

Hardened warriors complained, and Fareel moodily agreed, that the tragic history of Castle Rock had hamstrung the tactical thinking of Martool and the War Council. Some of the warriors felt they should regroup and attack the small Legionary camps and columns and begin to destroy the enemy piecemeal. They hoped to draw the full Legion into a battle in the rugged canyon, which had been the anouks' home for many years, and where they felt they had the advantage. But the War Council refused to allow a full-scale offensive out of fear that the Legion might turn any sally, breach a gate, and a feared enemy would pour in to slaughter children.

Debbi wanted to see Martool. She wanted news of Hallow's condition, although she doubted Martool had had time to attend him further. She mentioned Martool several times, but Sahrin merely shrugged apologetically. Fareel glared angrily at her intrusion. Finally, as the sun set for the fourth time since the siege began, Sahrin left Debbi waiting near a large cook pot in a courtyard where warriors were gathered. He brought her a plate of some sort of meat stew, probably barka, and said, "Wait." Then he and Fareel took off at a run.

When night fell in the canyon, it grew cold. Anouks crowded around the cook fire, warming themselves, and sharing the comforting orange glow. They excluded Debbi. She sat apart, eating her food alone. She pulled her light jacket tighter around herself and began to shiver.

The anouks talked. Debbi listened to the sound of their language. It was hard and guttural, angry-sounding to her ears. But the more she listened, the more she picked up the rhythms and cadences. It had a beat to it that she found hypnotic. She began to recognize patterns and sounds she knew to be words. It was exciting to suddenly know that a group of alien beings were talking about their knee hurting or bad food. She could tell some of the anouks were telling war stories, reenacting events of daring and danger. Some laughed and told bawdy stories that elicited raucous laughter or snide comments. But others sat quietly with fear etched on their silent faces. This was a universal language of war.

The anouks' familiarity and camaraderie, and even their fears, re-

Book II: The Undead War

minded her of a gathering of Colonial Rangers at *Mo's*. She smiled at the melancholy memory and wondered if Stew and Ringo and the others were there right now, downing a few drinks and reliving recent adventures. She wondered if they were thinking about her.

The anouks around her, however, were not simply soldiers waiting for battle. Children scampered about. Anouk warriors, who were bloody and torn, lifted small ones and embraced them, bounced them on their knees, played games, and laughed. This wasn't a military base full of soldiers. This was a village full of families. The young anouks stared at Debbi. Some approached her hesitantly only to be yanked back by their elders and scolded or warned. As Debbi sat finishing the last of the stew, she tried to force herself to realize that she was looking at mothers and fathers. And they were mothers and fathers who were afraid for the lives of their children because of a terrible enemy outside the walls. This vision of anouks gave Debbi a different slant on these people. It bolstered her intellectual belief that humans and anouks had to cooperate for Banshee to have a peaceful future.

Still, Debbi was inside an anouk town far from friends, surrounded by a foreign language and angry glares. She sensed with depressing self-realization that even the most deeply held and well-meaning beliefs could fade under such stress. She had to admit that as she watched the natives with their tannis weapons sitting around a fire that cast shadowy flickers across their nonhuman faces, there was still an instinctive place deep in her mind that translated those images into terrifying pictures of savage aliens. It was the standard human gut reaction, one that she found hard to fight despite her best conscious intentions. Her species feared and reviled anouks. Her father had called them "grapes." A lot of Colonial Rangers used the same epithets, or worse. It was a culture of hatred learned in childhood. It seeped into the bones to some degree and never completely vanished.

This vast courtyard was far from Martool's war room and these tribesmen were not privy to their shaman's diplomatic desire to build bridges with this Colonial Ranger. They stared at Debbi with open contempt, the same contempt that the people of Temptation would have for an anouk who wandered into town. Clearly, she was not welcome among the common anouks, particularly during a time of crisis that required the clan to unite against outsiders.

Trying to avoid their dark eyes, Debbi began to realize how alone and isolated she really was. She was trapped here just like all these anouks around her. She had already heard the news that the Legion had swarmed over her Stallion and, unable to make it work, had burned it out. So even if she wanted to leave, she couldn't.

Debbi settled back to wait amidst the glares of her allies. For hours, warriors came and went from the fire, no doubt rotating watches on the walls. She dozed fitfully through most of it, trying to rest because she knew the time would come when sleep would be a luxury.

She saw Sahrin appear out of the darkness. It was as if she had spotted a long lost friend. She leapt to her feet. He was gnawing meat off a bone as he approached.

"You eat?" He tossed the bone aside and licked his fingers.

"Yes."

"You fight?"

"What? I don't understand."

Sahrin thought about what he was saying. "We go to fight. You fight?"

Clay & Susan Griffith

"You're attacking the Legion? And you want me to fight with you again?"

"Yes." He tapped the black gun attached to the Hellrazor that he carried. "Fight?"

"Yes! Yes, of course."

The smile that broke across Sahrin's face showed his fierce sharp teeth. He motioned her to follow.

They started across the courtyard. She noted the looks of suspicion and hatred from the crowd around the fire as she passed. There were harsh comments thrown out, but Sahrin paid them no mind. Debbi was just grateful to be with him again. It didn't occur to her that she was going into a dangerous battle. Any sign of friendship among these hostile strangers buoyed her.

* * *

Darkness was thick inside the canyon. There was no moonlight and no starlight. The sky was tannis black.

Debbi hid in high brush. She crouched low in the saddle, hugging the neck of her chanouk. She rubbed her hand along its sinewy shoulder and felt the great beast breathing beneath her, its chest rising and falling against the insides of her thighs. The chanouk was amazingly still. Except for its slight breathing, it didn't move a muscle. Its tail lay stiff stretched out behind it. Chanouks were fierce creatures that humans had never mastered, but Debbi trusted this one. He was the same chanouk she had ridden when she last visited Martool, the one she had jokingly named "Little Joe." The beast had acted as if he remembered her when she saw him in the stables. Debbi knew there were several other chanouks hidden in the wild darkness around her, but she could neither see nor hear them.

She heard a sound from up the path. It was the sound of shuffling feet. She switched her goggles to starlite view. A group of nine undead Legionnaires came around the bend in the path fifty yards away. They walked in a distended line without great order or concern, moving casually, some dragging palsied legs, a few carrying weapons which dangled carelessly from their slack fingers.

Debbi felt her chanouk's skin flutter as its muscles tightened. It made a low rumbling sound in its throat.

She slid her Dragoon from its holster and held it close.

Debbi saw Fareel a hundred feet away. He was flat over the back of his crouching chanouk on a rock ledge some fifteen feet above the rambling Legionnaires. He held a large war ax at the ready, his obsidian eyes ablaze with loathing.

The head of the line of Legionnaires staggered past Debbi's hidden position. Her goggles provided such a clear view of the situation she felt a surge of panic that she was in plain sight. But the zombies didn't notice her. They trudged past slowly and carelessly like typical soldiers moving from one position to another behind the lines, not expecting trouble.

Then trouble struck.

At the front and the rear of the line, chanouks leaped from the darkness and slammed into zombies. Five out of the nine undead went down under the claws of the chanouks. The remaining four in the center of the column turned wildly, brought weapons up or began to focus on targets for psychic attacks.

Debbi kicked her mount out of the brush and crashed into two

Book II: The Undead War

troopers. The massive beast slashed one across the chest, knocking it to the ground. Then he clamped his massive jaws onto the shoulder and arm of the second one, lifting it off the ground and shaking it like a toy.

Debbi was jarred violently by the motion of her mount. Luckily, she was strapped into the saddle. She couldn't control her chanouk's fighting moves, but she could try to control her own.

The Ranger aimed her Dragoon at a Legionnaire who was swinging its assault rifle toward Sahrin. She fired a needle, but missed because of the jarring ride. Her chanouk bucked and twirled as he tossed a trooper into the air. During the momentary lull at the bottom of Little Joe's leap, Debbi brought her sidearm up and down on the opposite side of her mount's neck and fired again.

The trooper with the assault rifle froze. Debbi pumped a shell into its head and it dropped. Her chanouk whirled again to strike another target as she shot the prone trooper a second time, just to be sure.

A flash of energy down the column caught her eye and she heard a scream. An anouk flopped lifelessly in the saddle. Debbi tried to draw a bead on the syker who had fired the psychic blast. Another flash passed by her and she smelled burning hair. Her chanouk roared and swung around yet again, sinking down on his forepaws. Debbi was tossed forward. Lying on the ground in front of her was the undead trooper that Little Joe had slashed on his first lunge. The chanouk slapped a heavy paw on its chest and clamped his large jaws around the trooper's head. The undead thing continued to thrash.

Debbi aimed her weapon along the chanouk's shoulder and fired two needles into the struggling zombie. It froze. Little Joe exerted more pressure and Debbi winced when she heard the trooper's rotted head pop.

Two Legionnaires tried to retreat, but Fareel blocked their path. The warrior raised his glowing war ax and eagerly charged. His bloody chanouk suddenly reared with a horrible screech. It flopped sickly onto its back and lay stone still.

Fareel struggled to free himself from beneath his heavy chanouk. Debbi spurred forward along the path, dodging between other anouks who were engaged in close combat with zombies. She lowered her Dragoon straight-armed and fired. A needle hit one trooper in the back and it faltered. The second scrambled over the dead chanouk and aimed its assault rifle point blank at Fareel. The anouk slapped out desperately with his ax and knocked the rifle aside.

Debbi fired at the attacker and missed. The zombie brought the rifle back down and prepared to fire. A lance sliced the air from behind Debbi and slammed into the Legionnaire's back. The trooper staggered to its knees and pulled the trigger. Shells stitched wildly across the ground, hitting the dead chanouk, and into Fareel. Fareel screeched a war cry and slashed at the zombie with his ax. Even wounded and trapped under the chanouk's body, his strength was such that he nearly sliced the trooper in half at the waist. The zombie's upper torso toppled back like a loaf of bread split in half, still firing as it fell.

Little Joe leapt onto the thrashing torso with both forepaws and bit into the shoulder and head. The beast growled and tore the upper torso free from the lower half, wrenching vertebrae like gristle.

Debbi suddenly felt herself being battered from the saddle. The leather straps held her fast, but she screamed from the pressure. A zombie behind her had recovered from the needles. She tried to twist and take a shot, but she was pounded in the back by a monstrous force. Her breath

Clay & Susan Griffith

escaped and the Dragoon flew from her hand. She desperately tried to turn her chanouk with her knees and hands, but Little Joe was frenzied by tearing at the cadaver in his mouth that still scrabbled at the chanouk's snout with its fingers. Another blast flashed past Debbi's head. Bright specks flew in her eyes.

Little Joe now sensed the danger and released its quivering prey. He spun around, slinging Debbi in the saddle like a rag doll. She saw the syker facing her, its eyes glowing for another strike. Little Joe reared up on his hind legs, bred to take a blow for his rider. She waited for the impact, hoping the chanouk could take it.

Then she saw the undead syker separate into several pieces that flew in different directions. Behind the spatter of black ichor stood Sahrin and his chanouk with ax, claws, and fangs bared.

Pushing herself up wearily, Debbi signaled her thanks and spun Little Joe around, looking for more targets. Through her goggles, she made out the green scene of carnage strewn up and down the path. Nine Legionnaires were either dead or quivering in conditions of severe dismemberment. She also saw that three out of six chanouks were down and two anouk warriors dead.

She unhooked herself from the saddle and slid to the ground. Little Joe nuzzled her in the back with a snout covered in black goo. She shoved his nose away and went to Fareel, retrieving her Dragoon on the way. The anouk snarled at her when she approached, but she ignored him and put her shoulder to the lifeless carcass of his chanouk. She dug her feet into the ground and shoved. Fareel strained, pushing against the saddle with his free leg. Sahrin appeared, grabbed his friend under the arms, and pulled.

Finally, Fareel's leg popped out from under the heavy animal. He snatched his war ax from the ground and attached it to his belt. Then he slapped Sahrin on the arm, ignoring Debbi. The Ranger walked back to Little Joe, too beat to even care. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Fareel kneel next to his dead chanouk and lay a hand tenderly on its massive neck. The savage warrior bowed his head in prayer.

Debbi lifted herself back into the saddle and strapped in. Sahrin placed the dead warriors across the backs of the remaining chanouks.

Debbi chucked her mount further up the path past the mournful Fareel while the other anouks finished policing their dead and mutilating the zombies so that the troopers could not possibly regenerate. Nine Legionnaires gone and only two anouks lost. The ratio was better than the sun gate battle, but this was just an ambush, not a war. The anouks worked the territory better than the Legionnaires, particularly with the rock climbing abilities of the chanouks. They could slip around the rough terrain and strike small squads of troopers. But soon the Legion would settle into their permanent positions for a siege, and the anouks would have to take the fight to an organized, dangerous, and remorseless enemy.

Debbi rode leisurely down to the bend in the path from which the squad of Legionnaires had come. She was proud of the way she sat her mount and was getting used to the chanouk's weird, prowling gait.

She felt a buzzing near her head and heard a clipping sound against a rock shelf behind her. Then another. She looked up the path and saw another group of Legionnaires approaching. They were not lackadaisical like the first group. They were moving with a purpose; they had weapons up and were shooting at her.

She tugged the reins and wheeled the chanouk. "Saddle up! They're

Book II: The Undead War

coming!"

The anouks all stared at her as she came pounding up the trail with bullets zinging after her. The unmistakable sound of gunfire sparked them to their mounts.

Fareel stood next to his dead chanouk. He pulled an atax from its place on the saddle and turned to face Debbi. She galloped past and without thinking or slowing she reached out her right arm. The anouk seized her forearm with iron fingers, took two steps, and swung up onto the chanouk's rump behind Debbi. Then remarkably, he twisted and flung his shuriken-like weapon back at the onrushing Legionnaires.

Sahrin and another warrior rode hard in front of her, both with dead comrades stretched out in front of their saddles. A few more yards and they would reach a tight fissure in the steep cliff face to their right that led up to a wider trail some fifty feet above. This trail would take them back to a waste sluice in the walls of Castle Rock that they had used to leave the city outside the watchful gaze of Legionnaire spies.

As they approached the fissure, however, they were surprised to see three Legionnaires step out of it into the path. These troopers sent an energy bolt smashing into Sahrin, knocking him unconscious.

"No!" Debbi shouted. She raised the Dragon and fired the black gun. She missed.

More energy slashed out and caught the anouk who rode next to Sahrin; Debbi didn't even know his name. The blast stuck so hard it tore him in half. His upper torso was ripped from the saddle, but his lower half remained strapped in. His chanouk tried to rear on his hind legs as he was trained, but it was too late to save the rider. The chanouk turned the aborted capriole into a leap and in two incredibly fast strides was pouncing on one of the zombies. With the grisly remains of his master still locked to the saddle, the chanouk tore into the trooper.

One of the other undead troopers turned to face the chanouk and pumped surges of energy into it. The chanouk screeched and fell back, clawing futilely at the attacking zombie. The third Legionnaire held up its hands toward Debbi and Fareel.

Debbi tried to steady her aim. She heard Fareel curse over the sound of gunfire from behind. The first Legion squad had no doubt sent distress calls to nearby patrols. Now Debbi and her ambushers were the ones being ambushed.

Debbi guided her chanouk with one hand while firing with the other. Her needles bounced off a force screen.

Fareel dropped from behind Debbi and raced to Sahrin's chanouk. At a dead run, he leapt up behind his stunned friend and grabbed the reins. He turned to Debbi and shouted something. Then he led Sahrin's mount toward the sheer cliff face on their right. The beast leaped onto the rocks and began to climb.

The chanouks could easily scale the rock wall, but they would be sitting ducks for the Legionnaires below. Still, it appeared to Debbi there was no other escape route. If they stayed where they were, they would be cut to pieces anyway.

Shots sounded from behind. Little Joe spun and reared, taking several shells in the midsection. Debbi tried to pull his reins toward the cliff, but he refused to come off his defensive stance. He roared, forepaws lashing the air at the Legionnaires who had stopped advancing and were settling in to open fire.

Suddenly one of them locked up. She recognized the telltale body rigor

Clay & Susan Griffith

and she actually stared at her Dragoon to see if she could have fired a needle by accident. Then another froze while the head of the first one shattered. A third locked. Another zombie was hit in the chest and slammed to the ground.

Debbi heard gunfire from above. She looked up the cliff face with her starlite goggles.

On a rock outcropping fifty feet above the path she saw three humans and muzzle flashes. Then she saw one figure move and recognized the hat and the long, flapping trail of a duster.

Ross!

She continued to stare, not believing her eyes.

The Legionnaires turned their attention to the snipers above. Sensing an opportunity, Little Joe dropped to all fours and charged. Debbi was taken by surprise and jerked back hard as her chanouk barreled into a zombie and clutched it between his two clawed forepaws. The enraged chanouk repeated his favorite maneuver and bit down on the syker's head.

Debbi twisted in the saddle and needled one of the two Legionnaires left standing. When it froze, she blasted it.

Ten feet away, the last zombie turned methodically toward her. Its chest opened up with a shot from above, but it continued to raise its weapon toward her.

The thing was hit by a shower of so many black needles that she could actually see them in flight. It locked up. She couldn't tell if it was her shot or the barrage that followed from above that disintegrated the body.

Then she remembered the zombies at the other end of the trail covering the escape path. She wheeled her chanouk away from its rending and raised her Dragoon. All three of those Legionnaires were down and the chanouk with the gruesome half rider sat amidst them plunging its fanged snout into a rib cage.

She scanned the cliff face and saw another group of humans. She couldn't make out features through the goggles, but she saw hats and coats that she recognized as belonging to Colonial Rangers.

"Ross!" She rode Little Joe to the base of the cliff. "Is that you?"

"Dallas," came Ross's booming voice, "are you all right?"

She laughed too loud with relief and kicked her chanouk onto the cliff. It began to climb. She felt excited that the Rangers were all watching her, no doubt with disbelief, as she performed a difficult feat astride a ferocious chanouk. She adopted her best blase face as Little Joe reached the outcropping where Ross and his group of Rangers stood. As she rose up over the edge of the rock shelf, she reined in. Little Joe clung to the rocks and turned to regard the humans, his snout dripping black gore. His lips rippled with a deep growl, revealing rows of sharp teeth.

"Howdy, boys." Debbi shifted in the saddle, drew up one leg in a casual manner, and said with a deadpan drawl, "What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

"Came to save you," Ross replied quietly.

"Appreciate it."

"Don't mention it."

Ross shouldered a Hellrazor. He stood impassively a mere three feet from the growling chanouk as the wind whipped his duster. On the other hand, Ringo and Ngoma crowded back as far away as they could get without toppling off the cliff. Ross ran his eyes up and down the strange sight in front of him. Debbi noted happily that his face was a little fuller

Book II: The Undead War

than it had been when she left.

"So," he said, "you ridin' monsters now?"

Debbi patted Little Joe on the neck. The chanouk chuffed and Ringo jumped. She smiled with a small shrug.

Ross nodded. "Suits you."

He turned and gave a sharp whistle to the other Rangers. They started climbing back to the trail above.

Debbi took a deep breath, comforted by the presence of her comrades. She grinned and followed them on her monster.

Chapter 18

"How many Colonial Rangers were in those two ships?" Quantrill received the hours-old images of the two Stallions, their hulls scored by brain blasts, streaking through the canyon toward Canyon Rock. The General had set up his command post in the rear compartment of the old Stallion that he had commandeered in Temptation.

Captain De Klerk willed himself to stare into his commanding officer's eyes. "Our scans indicated eight, perhaps nine."

"Was Captain Ross with them?" Quantrill demanded.

"I don't know." De Klerk pointed to a spot on a map. "Shortly after landing, they engaged in a firefight with a patrol here. We suspect they intervened to rescue one of their own who was fighting with the anouks. We lost thirteen destroyed. Three more are recovering."

"Thirteen?" Quantrill tapped his decaying fingers on a fold-down tabletop. "In one fight? Thirteen lost." He burrowed his gaze into De Klerk. "Now there are black guns inside Castle Rock. And Colonial Rangers who know how to use them. Allowing those Stallions to pass through our lines may cost us dearly, Captain."

"We tried to bring them down, sir. We scored several hits with brain blasts, but they made it to safety. Even so, nine Rangers? What can nine Rangers do against an army such as ours?"

Quantrill slammed his fist onto the table. "I don't know! Let's ask Captain Marat. Maybe he has an opinion."

De Klerk quickly offered, "General, I think it's safe to assume the Colonial Rangers have come to retrieve their comrade. They know we will take Castle Rock and obliterate every living soul inside. Rangers aren't going to risk their lives for anouks."

"That's your tactical evaluation, is it, Captain? Are you forgetting that these Rangers are from Temptation, a town that we occupied? Are you forgetting that we took citizens from their town and ate them? Are you forgetting that we embarrassed them in their own home? Do you not think they have ample reason to hate us?"

"Perhaps so, sir. But remember, even so, if this Asai clan is as anti-human as your Skinny claims, we certainly don't have to worry about the Rangers joining in the fight. I'd say they're probably dead at the hands of the anouks by now." De Klerk smiled. "Attempting to rescue their colleague from Castle Rock was a fool's errand of mercy. But that's something the Rangers specialize in."

Quantrill eyed the Captain as he contemplated his words. "Find Tekkeng and bring him here." Just as he finished the sentence, Quantrill saw the cadaverish face of the Skinny drift out of the shadows behind Captain De Klerk. The captain turned with a startled jerk and stepped out of the Skinny's way.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Quantrill asked, "Tekkeng, how will Martool react to the Colonial Rangers who flew into Castle Rock? Will she welcome them? Or kill them?"

Tekkeng twisted his head from side to side in thought. The gray-eyed, bedraggled shaman spoke the Skinny's words. "She will not kill them. She is cunning and will try to use any resource available in a futile attempt to save herself from our overwhelming power."

Quantrill flashed a quick reproach at De Klerk who glared angrily at the Skinny. The General stepped onto the ground outside the Stallion. "Are there other Skinnies inside Castle Rock?"

"No." Tekkeng backed away, preserving a distance from Quantrill, as if disdainful of the undead human and his stench. The "interpreter," however, just stood and continued talking even though he wasn't looking at Quantrill. "They banished us. Martool is jealous of the Skinnies and our rightful power over the people."

"Do you think she knows you're here with me?"

"Yes. She can sense me. She fears me."

"Is Martool more powerful than you?" Quantrill wasn't always sure where to direct his eyes when talking with the pale creature, at Tekkeng or his mouthpiece.

Tekkeng paused. For a brief second, his pallor of servitude seemed to wash off and he stared hard at Quantrill. But then he quickly recovered and turned his eyes to the ground. "No."

"Do you think that if I killed Martool, it would break the will of her clan to resist me?"

Tekkeng's eyes almost gleamed as the shaman quickly said, "Yes, indeed so. Castle Rock will crumble without Martool. She is the only thing holding the false Asai clan together." Tekkeng touched his scabrous fingertips together in expectation. "Do you have a plan to kill her?"

Quantrill sneered. "I have a plan to kill everybody. Including you."

Tekkeng quivered almost as if he was laughing.

Quantrill quickly turned to De Klerk to cover his discomfort at the Skinny's cavalier reaction to his threat. "Captain, have ready your SpecOp infiltrators. They can acquire Martool's brainwaves and we can assassinate her with the TSARs." Quantrill's eyes narrowed with tactical delight at the thought. He would repeat the successful action that had won him Czimizir so easily. He had only three SpecOp infiltrators, but that would be sufficient to catch the unsuspecting anouk witch.

Captain De Klerk attempted to clear his throat, but only got a grotesque bubbling noise. "Very good, sir."

The General shifted his gaze back to Tekkeng and waved his hand dismissively at the Skinny. "Go. I'll call you again when I need you."

Tekkeng regarded Quantrill with a severe stare, but turned and glided away with his mouthpiece stumbling behind. Once among the dark arroyos far from Quantrill's camp, the Skinny paused among the barren rocks and smiled in his own vicious way. He would accept the undead human's scornful treatment for now because he needed the sykers. They were a useful distraction to keep Martool off balance. When the time was right, Tekkeng would strike her and she would die. Then, as soon as the work was done, the Skinny intended to destroy Quantrill and his army. And then Avernus too. Once Martool was dead they were superfluous to Tekkeng, as well as dangerous. Quantrill's old Syker Legion had fought the anouks and Skinnies to a standstill many years ago. This new, undead Legion threatened to make itself into an even greater threat. Better

Book II: The Undead War

they were wiped off the face of the planet before they became too powerful.

It was exciting for Tekkeng to be so close to his life's goal. Plus, he sensed another presence in the canyon that delighted him. He had gotten a whiff of it just the other day. It was the female Colonial Ranger who had escaped him in New Hope. It was in this Ranger's mind he learned of Martool's secret base. However, she shot him with one of the black guns that Quantrill was so concerned about. And Quantrill had every reason to be alarmed; these black guns, in the proper hands, were startlingly powerful weapons. Tekkeng had promised himself that, after he destroyed Martool, he would find this female Ranger and flay her mind in a most exquisitely horrible way. And now both of his targets were in the same place, locked together inside Castle Rock.

Tekkeng allowed his mind to wander through the canyon. He felt the revenant horror that emanated from the rocks lapping all around him. This land was bathed in blood and trauma, and he drank it in. This was his land.

Tekkeng never thought Martool would return here, but it did make sense in her perverted logic. Unlike the rest of her kind whose goal was to obliterate the humans, her goal was to cleanse the planet. So, in fact, where better to begin than its most polluted spot? If Martool succeeded in her mad plan, she would destroy Tekkeng's kind. And that the Skinny simply couldn't allow.

The Skinny stared up at the sprawling complex of Castle Rock on the canyon face high above. Torchlights flickered along the many miles of tannis walls. The power he felt surging from the walls of Castle Rock was enormous. Martool was as much a warlord as her mother Kreech had been, and twice the witch in the bargain.

Despite Martool's magic, Tekkeng intended to enter the fortress and slaughter her with his own hands. He could already taste her fear, and soon he would make a banquet out of it.

* * *

Ross sat on the floor of the dark, tannis room. He stared straight ahead, shifting his legs, and clenching and unclenching his hands. He removed his hat and rubbed his head with a grimace. He exhaled in pain. He had suffered constant headaches since breaking free of Quantrill. As he fidgeted in the corner, it was clear he was eager to be out of the room and back to the fight.

Debbi stood next to Hallow. The syker was resting on his stone bed. His movements were tentative and weak, but his eyes were strong and sure. He was wrapped in a heavy barka rug to ward off frequent chills. He sipped at spoonfuls of light broth that Debbi held for him.

Martool paced the center of the room. Her purple skin was a mass of shadows as she moved through the flickering torchlight.

Martool said, "Hallow is well enough to travel. It is safe for you to go."

"We're not goin' anywhere," Ross growled.

Martool looked at him. "If you do not go now, you may not be able to escape later. Your vehicles almost didn't make it in through the Legion's attacks, am I right? And they will soon have us completely surrounded. Then you will have no air routes free of their control. At this time, I can help provide cover for your vehicles. But soon, I may not."

Hallow said to Debbi in a weak whisper, "Between Martool's power and mine, we should be able to get the Stallions back out through the

Clay & Susan Griffith

psychic flak. I was strong enough to contact Captain Ross and tell him that you were in danger. I'm nearly recovered."

"I'm not leaving," Ross repeated. "I flew in here to make sure Dallas was alive and to kill Quantrill. One down. One to go."

Martool argued, "This is not your fight."

"Wrong."

Martool replied in a slightly louder voice, "You *must* leave. I won't have your blood on my hands."

Ross rubbed his forehead. "You're not listening to me. I said I'm staying till Quantrill is dead. And I don't give a damn what you get on your hands."

The shaman regarded the Ranger captain with an intensity that frightened Debbi. Martool's voice was still deceptively calm. "This is not your land, pale one. If I say you go, you go."

Ross slowly raised his cold eyes and stared at Martool with a chilling stillness. Martool countered his glare without moving. Debbi and Hallow glanced at each other. The silence stretched on uncomfortably.

Debbi set down the broth and the clack of the bowl against the rock was like a gunshot in the silence. She spoke up to break the tension. "Martool, isn't there some way we can combine efforts? The Colonial Rangers have a stake in stopping Quantrill too. If we work together, we have a better chance of defeating him."

Martool turned to Debbi and her demeanor softened. "I don't think my people will allow it. You have to understand, a leader can only take their people where they want to go."

Debbi said, "You know as well as we do that we have to hold the line here. The Legion has to be stopped. Now. By all of us. You have the numbers. We have the weapons."

Martool considered Debbi's words despite obvious doubts.

Debbi continued, "Just give us a chance to prove ourselves to your people."

"I'm not sure," Martool said quietly. "My people see you and Quantrill as the same. He is a human."

Ross smiled a dark, sinister smile that Debbi had never seen before. "No. He ain't even close."

Debbi said to Martool, "The Legion would eat any of us in this room. That gives the Asai and the Rangers something very important and very disgusting in common. If being at the same spot on the food chain isn't enough to pull us together, I don't know what is. Somebody has to be the first to take a chance. *We're* willing."

Martool hung her head in thought. The crackling sound of the torches filled the room.

Finally, she gestured to the wall and a door opened. Fareel stepped in.

Martool said something to him in anouk. Ross stood up immediately and moved to the door with a Hellrazor over his shoulder, as if he understood her words. Martool was surprised.

She then said to Debbi, "Your Rangers will be allowed in the sun gate precinct. You will defend the wall there, under the eyes of Sahrin and Fareel. They will supervise your activities and see to your needs."

Ross was already at the door and staring up at grim Fareel. "C'mon, Stretch. Let's go to work." He slipped into the corridor.

Fareel watched the gritty Ranger go, looking from Ross to Martool and back with confusion. Martool signaled for the warrior to follow. Fareel left and the door closed behind him.

Book II: The Undead War

"I didn't know Captain Ross understood our language," Martool said, as if accusing Debbi of purposefully keeping her uninformed.

Debbi answered, "He knows a couple of dialects."

Martool glanced at the young Ranger. "But still, he's no diplomat, is he?"

"No. He's not."

"It's a shame." Martool laid a soft hand on Debbi's arm, conveying a sense of commiseration. "When you wish to return to the other Rangers, think of me and I will send Sahrin for you." She departed swiftly.

Debbi stared at the blank tannis wall, trying to comprehend. Then she turned to Hallow. He was asleep and breathing peacefully, swaddled in the furry blanket. She smiled with relief at the sight of the resting syker. She tucked the blanket around his shoulders. At least one of her charges was on the road to recovery.

Chapter 19

Ross's face was pale, his eyes only dark shadows. They blazed with determination, but also a hatred that Debbi had never seen in him.

"Still have a headache?" It was an innocent enough topic to broach with a man who looked eager to kill.

He shook his head, but the lie was evident. The corners of his eyes were creased tightly, his lips only a thin line as he intently watched the rocky terrain beyond the wall.

Debbi sighed and leaned on the wall. After all Ross had been through, he still hadn't talked about it. That was Ross, though, stoic through it all. Admit nothing and it never happened. But Debbi knew the truth from personal experience. The trauma wasn't going to fade away. The memories, the sense of violation would never leave him – not even after Quantrill was dead and buried yet again.

Ross was driving himself too hard. It had been several days since Martool had granted the Rangers control of the sun gate and Ross had been going nonstop all along. Here he was back atop the wall on watch barely an hour after returning from a raid on a small Legion outpost. His clothes were covered in dried flecks of black gore from slaughtered zombies. He rarely moved from this place atop the wall except to lead bloody attacks on Legion patrols or study aerial photos of enemy positions that he ordered taken from Stallions. He had tried to confer with Martool several times, but she refused to see him. There was little coordination between the Rangers and the rest of the clan war effort. It was clear that Martool had only given the Rangers a job to keep them quiet and out of the way.

"I'll finish this watch," Debbi offered without looking at Ross. "Why don't you get some rest? You haven't slept more than ten minutes since you've been here."

"I'll rest when I'm tired," Ross retorted. "Why don't you check on the other watch posts down the line?" He shifted the Hellrazor in the crook of his right arm and reached up over his left shoulder for a reassuring touch of the butt of the scattergun that he wore in a snap sheath outside his black duster.

"All right." Dejected, Debbi straightened off the wall, but she still didn't depart. She knew she wouldn't get him to budge. They'd had this same discussion numerous times. Although Ross slept little in the best of times, he usually didn't look like he was on the verge of death.

Clay & Susan Griffith

The Colonial Rangers had made camp in the sun gate courtyard. They had two Stallions surrounded by three camp tents set up a few yards from the base of the wall, as far as possible from the small anouk cemetery whose mere presence left all the humans unnerved.

The squat alien tombstones were actually the tops of tannis coffins. They were scattered haphazardly, some broken and shattered. It was traditional for the anouks to bury their dead vertically. Whole families for many generations were lined up one over the other in a line straight down into the dirt or tannis rock below. The coffin of the last to die protruded several feet above the ground to serve as the family marker till the next passed away. Then, amazingly, the whole column of deceased was dropped lower into the ground and the newest departed was placed on top to take on the honor. The anouks' control over the very rocks of Banshee was remarkable.

The courtyard was not nearly as crowded now as it had been days ago. Many of the anouks in this precinct had moved deeper into the city. There were still females and children around. They particularly tended the barka pens. The young anouk male who received the algae bar from Fareel liked to linger closer to the Rangers, until the warriors would shout at him and call him back to their side of the courtyard. The anouks whom the Rangers saw most of the time, however, were warriors assigned to watch them. Sahrin and Fareel led that group. These warriors fought from the battlements just like the Rangers, crowding the parapets and firing into attacking Legionnaires with rifles and ataxes. But even while the Rangers and the anouks shared the duties of defending the walls, they kept their distance. The anouks did not accompany the Rangers when the humans went outside the walls on the attack.

Sallies against Legion patrols were becoming more dangerous. Ross's attacks outside the walls amounted to little more than a bloody nose for the Legion. Quantrill's noose was tightening around Castle Rock. All major roads were cut and even most trails were too hazardous to attempt. Undead squads were coming closer to the wall every day. There were even rumors of several attacks by anouks on anouks inside the walls, clearly the result of syker manipulation.

Ross didn't know how the war effort was going in other parts of Castle Rock, but here at the sun gate it was poorly coordinated. Fareel's warriors were restive and the Ranger commander sensed their pent up desire to go out and fight with the Rangers. He heard them talking and understood their grumbings. They craved to be in the action, particularly the tall, fierce Fareel. But a warrior like Fareel would never approach Ross, and Ross wasn't yet ready to openly defy Martool's authority by subverting her troops. The time might come, however, when Ross would turn to the war chiefs like Fareel. If Martool wouldn't pursue this war in an aggressive manner, Ross would. He intended to make sure Quantrill never left this canyon alive.

"Debbi," sounded a strained voice behind her.

Ross started and then grew annoyed that Debbi was still with him on the ramparts. Hadn't he ordered her elsewhere? Debbi was shocked to see Hallow limping toward her up the stair-step of the great wall. The syker sweated profusely. He was clearly in great pain. She vaulted down several steps and took the injured man's arm.

"What are you doing out here?" Debbi asked. "You're not well."

"I'm fine. Just sore."

Without turning, Ross said, "I sent for him. We need to understand the

Book II: The Undead War

Legion better. What can you tell me?"

"First of all, their power level is enormous." Hallow leaned heavily on the top of the wall. His breath wheezed in and out with a sickly, hollow hiss.

Neither the Ranger nor the syker looked at each other, both watching instead the darkening canyonscape. Hallow reached out with his senses and detected small, distant groups of Legionnaires moving in and out of crevices, creeping into positions closer to the wall.

"They're more powerful than when they were alive?" Ross asked.

"How's that possible?"

"I don't know how any of *this* is possible. But to answer your question, no. Individually, they are nowhere near as powerful as when they were alive. But now they are somehow linked together in a psychic mesh. And that was impossible when they were alive."

"Why?"

"Because sykers are peculiar people, Captain Ross. They, above all others, understand the sanctity of the mind and they don't like others inside theirs."

The muscles of Ross's jaw line quivered. He couldn't stomach pious comments about how sykers cherished the sanctity of the mind. The Ranger captain glanced at Debbi who stood on the other side of Hallow. She maintained a steady visage, urging him to stay quiet. Ross just shook his head with a sarcastic snort.

Hallow continued without seeming to take notice. "The sykers I knew wouldn't have permitted the kind of mental linkage this Legion seems to have. Not that Quantrill wouldn't have liked to do it. But since the Legionnaires are dead now, I suppose Quantrill can do whatever he wants. The General has finally made them into the inhuman machine he always wanted them to be." Hallow clutched the top of the wall with white knuckles.

Debbi also noticed a pained look on Ross's face. She wanted to call this meeting to a halt, but that would be pointless. Ross wouldn't have it, and she sensed Hallow had a similar defensive stubbornness. But any discussion of syker powers, and Quantrill in particular, made Ross look as if he had a hot poker jammed into his gut. The cold fact was, however, that Ross was right. They needed to know everything they could about sykers, and they needed it fast. It couldn't matter what demons were dredged up in the process.

Debbi quickly said, "If they Legionnaires are linked together, is there any way to unlink them?"

Hallow seemed diverted for a moment. "Well, that's what your black guns do on a small scale. But on a larger level. Hm. That's an interesting concept."

Ross exhaled with annoyance. Despite having gratitude for Hallow's role in saving him, Ross wasn't able to help himself from treating Hallow with barely disguised suspicion born of his newfound hatred of all sykers.

The Ranger commander growled, "I'm not interested in concepts. Can it be done?"

"Not by me," Hallow said. "I don't have that kind of power. The network Quantrill is overseeing is very complex. Frankly, I'm amazed he can do it. I knew Quantrill when he was alive; he was a powerful syker, but not particularly dexterous. Apparently dying made him more intelligent." Hallow bit his lip thoughtfully. "And there's something else out there. I

Clay & Susan Griffith

don't know what it is, but I sense something odd and distant feeding into the maelstrom that's swirling inside the Legionnaires' minds. It can't be Quantrill. It can't be."

"Dr. Lupinz," Ross suggested.

Hallow didn't respond. He continued to gaze out, lost in thought.

"Do you know Dr. Lupinz?" Ross asked in a louder voice.

"Lupinz? No, I've never heard of him. Who is he?"

"He's a syker. He's the son of a bitch who got inside my head. Although, unlike the rest of you people, he's got some hair on his head."

"Then he's not a syker," Hallow said. "The baldness is a side-effect of the ability. What is this Doctor Lupinz a doctor of?"

Debbi stepped in because she could see Ross was bristling at Hallow's questions, interpreting them as intentional obtuseness. "Dr. Lupinz runs a sanitarium not too far from Temptation. The Rangers have always used it to house the men and women who suffer from the various mental disorders that Banshee breeds."

Ross shot Debbi a silencing look. "But he helped Quantrill create this Legion. Quantrill oversaw the retrieval of the bodies from the Red River valley and brought them back to the Sanitarium where he and Lupinz brought them back to life. Somehow. I was investigating the Sanitarium when I walked into a trap. Cost the life of a fellow Ranger and a good friend. But they weren't satisfied with just killing me. Quantrill *interrogated* me for a few days and got nowhere."

"That's not surprising," Hallow said dismissively.

Ross clenched his teeth. Both the interruption and the implication that Ross had withstood Quantrill only because the General was weak enraged the older Ranger.

"Anyway," Ross said curtly. "When Quantrill couldn't break me, Lupinz came in. He didn't have much problem, so I assume he's a syker. I don't mean to tell you your business, but when the UN brought you brain burners to Banshee to slaughter anouks, the Colonial Rangers started training in anti-syker techniques. And they're pretty good."

Hallow shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you, Captain Ross. I don't know anything about this Lupinz fellow."

"Yeah, well, thanks for your interest anyway." Ross turned his full attention to the landscape beyond the parapet. The talk was over.

Hallow glanced at Ross briefly and then shrugged to Debbi in exasperation. The syker began to climb shakily down the steps.

Debbi followed and when they were out of earshot she said, "Sorry about that. He's very frustrated and still feeling the effects of Quantrill's possession."

The syker replied, "You don't have to apologize for him. I understand completely. But he's not helping himself. He's heading for physical and mental breakdowns if he doesn't get hold of himself. You and I both know he's alienating Martool, who is your most powerful ally here. Your *only* ally. And despite my best efforts, he's alienating me as well. The fact that all of you Rangers follow him so instinctively shows that he's clearly a remarkable leader and a man of great resolution. But I'm afraid I can't stand him."

Debbi blew out a long breath. "He *is* an acquired taste. And you're not seeing him at his best right now. I know he has a lot of respect for you and your abilities."

Hallow held up an indifferent hand. "Please. I'm not searching for validation from him. I am only here because of you. If you weren't here, I

Book II: The Undead War

would leave."

Debbi asked, "Could you leave?"

"Of course. I could walk out straight through those Legionnaires and they would never see me." Then he suggested hopefully, "I could take you with me if you wish."

"I'm afraid I'm here for the duration. But you're not committed. I brought you here for Martool to heal you. If you're well and you can escape, you're under no obligation. There's absolutely nothing to hold you here."

"There is. I despise Quantrill. Captain Ross pretends he has a monopoly on outrage, but I served in the Legion during the Anouk Wars. I know what Quantrill and his ilk are all about. That's why I deserted. Trust me, I'd love nothing more than to wander back out into the desert and stay there, but when I think of that abomination out there, I know I have to destroy Quantrill and put all those poor men to rest."

Debbi nodded. "Try to get some sleep. Nothing personal, but you still look like hell."

"Thanks." Hallow smiled wanly. "I will after I go up with Stew on another recon flight."

"Are you sure you're up for that?"

"There's no stress involved. I just sit in a chair and protect Stew from psychic attack. He does the rest."

As Hallow limped painfully away, Debbi returned to the lone figure at the parapets. Ross remained silent, his eyes locked on the darkening sky. He even moved his shoulders away from her, a clear indication that he was through talking. He wanted to be left alone with his thoughts and ghosts. Debbi dug into her pocket and pulled out a small case. She set it on the wall in front of him. Then she turned and climbed down the steep steps and moved away across the courtyard.

Ross pulled his attention down to the small silver case and then tracked Debbi just as the night swallowed her. He turned back to the delicate case and thumbed it open. Inside were some aspirin tablets. His eyes closed tiredly.

He picked up four of the tablets and swallowed them dry, grimacing against the bitter taste and against the sharp ache that still pierced his skull. His temples were sore to the touch and it was difficult to keep his thoughts straight. At times, doing so made the pain flare so bad small pinpoints of light burned in his vision. But he refused to relent. He didn't want to sleep, that way only led to memories and nightmares. No, it was better to just keep going. He held onto the thought of ripping Quantrill's head from his decaying body and feeding it to Debbi's chanouk.

That eased the pain in his head somewhat and he even grinned at the mental image.

* * *

Hours later, Debbi strolled back toward the sun gate. Scanning the wall, she saw no sign of Ross's ever-present silhouette against the night sky. She felt a momentary stab of panic, not sure if the emotion was because she was afraid of losing him again or just that he might go off and do something irrational like taking on Quantrill all by himself.

She saw Sahrin huddled at the base of the wall with the group of anouks. All the warriors ignored her except for Sahrin.

"Have you seen Ross?" she asked the warrior.

Sahrin gestured to one of the Rangers' tents which was dimly lit from

Clay & Susan Griffith

inside.

Debbi entered through the flap, expecting Ross to be hip deep in strategy and reports. But instead, she found him slumped in a chair, head back and in the grips of Morpheus. She let out a sigh of relief. They needed Ross healthy and in control. Sleep was the way to get him there.

Debbi took a seat across the camp table and quietly watched him, relishing the steady rise and fall of his chest. Each line that had been held so tightly on his face, one by one had relaxed. His age and trauma fell away from him.

Ngoma entered the tent with a handful of data slugs. He pulled up when he saw Ross.

Debbi held up her hand. "Let him rest."

"Is he okay?" Ngoma asked in a whisper.

She nodded. "Are those the new reports?"

Ngoma handed her the data. "I haven't viewed these, but Stew said it didn't look good."

Debbi rubbed her eyes.

"Maybe you should get some sleep too," Ngoma suggested.

"I will. Later."

Frowning, Ngoma slipped out of the tent, leaving her quietly to her thoughts. She was cut from the same bolt of cloth as Ross.

Debbi slipped a data slug into a palmcorder that lay on the table. She muted the audio. The scene she viewed was something she hadn't expected. Stew and Hallow had been making fly-bys through the canyon, taking intel photos and videos of Legion positions. It was hazardous duty, but Stew handled it with typical low-key aplomb. It helped that Hallow volunteered to be strapped into the co-pilot's seat to protect him from psychic assault.

Debbi had flown most of the earlier recon flights since she seemed virtually immune to syker manipulation. But she was too important to relations with Martool so Ross grounded her, and Stew and Hallow offered to take her place.

Debbi studied the surveillance footage. Normally it was low altitude shots of Legionnaire positions. But this was different. The perspective was still, rather than sweeping. It had been taken late in the evening and the sun was fading. It took Debbi a moment to understand what she was seeing, but she knew instantly as the camera struggled to focus that it was unnatural.

Twenty living anouks were bound, either tied to poles made from gnarled trees or strapped to rocks. Some of the anouks held their heads high and refused to show emotion. Others screamed in terror. Legionnaires mingled nearby in an orderly fashion. Suddenly Tekkeng appeared amid the crowd. Debbi flinched.

The Skinny floated along the line of captured anouks. He paused to study one, then another. Finally, with a grin, he laid a gentle finger on one anouk. The prisoner silently screamed and began to melt. Flesh dripped like wax. Organs were exposed and they collapsed, oozing from the ribcage. Tekkeng withdrew his hand and licked his teeth with gustatory satisfaction. He turned and slowly withdrew out of sight.

Now the Legionnaires came forward again. One zombie stepped to the first captive and produced a long knife. The poor anouk was butchered alive. The undead soldier carved through the prisoner's flesh while he screamed in agony. Slicing off a generous portion of the anouk's bicep, the zombie served it to a waiting Legionnaire who took it and moved

Book II: The Undead War

away to begin feeding.

The Legionnaires were standing in line like soldiers at a mess hall.

Debbi wanted to turn away, but couldn't. Is this what it was like for Ringo at the Bone Camp? No wonder he was a mental recluse now. It was amazing the kid was operating on a rational level at all.

Mercifully, Stew swiveled the camera off the grisly scene. But, perhaps even worse, the lens then zeroed in on the wall of Castle Rock. The battlements were crowded with anouks. They were all speechless. Some were angry, their outraged faces contorted. Others cried or shielded their eyes. Others had fallen to their knees. Among the crowd, Debbi saw Martool watching the horrendous butchering of her clansmen. Stew zoomed in on her. The shaman seemed frozen except for the tears steaming down her otherwise impassive face.

Debbi ejected the data slug. She sat breathing heavily for a moment, unsure whether she felt fear or rage. She couldn't feel anything just yet.

A soft moan from across the table drew Debbi's attention. She straightened in the chair and looked toward the sound.

Ross's face was drenched in sweat and his head thrashed back and forth.

Debbi stood and came around the table. Ross just couldn't seem to find any peace. As he thrashed, words fell from his lips; they spoke of torture, hatred, and terror. It made Debbi pale to hear the suffering from his mouth. She knew it had been bad, but listening to him, she realized it was more horrible than even she had imagined.

She couldn't bear to hear Ross in agony. She laid a hand on his shoulder and gently shook him.

"Ross."

He wouldn't wake. He only thrashed more.

She tried again more insistently. "Ross, wake up. You're dreaming."

He jerked awake, his breathing deepening, his eyes wide and confused. He was disoriented, returning from a place that seemed more reality than nightmare.

She used her voice to lure him back. "It's okay, Ross. You're safe. It was just a dream."

It slowly worked. His eyes centered on her and eventually recognized her. "Debbi."

"Hey there. You okay?"

"What time is it?" He sat up in the chair, wincing against the ache that throbbed in his bones. His headache resurfaced also, but it wasn't as bad as before.

She checked her watch and suppressed a yawn. "Couple of hours before daybreak." She stretched her arms up, grimacing at the crack that move elicited. "You haven't been sleeping very long."

Ross scrubbed at his beard roughly. "Let's grab some chow and get back up on the wall."

Debbi picked up the palmcorder from the table. "I'm not hungry, but I'll sit with you. Got some new shots from Stew."

"The Legion didn't march away, did they?"

"No." She shook her head. "They're still out there."

"Bring 'em." He adjusted his gun belt and picked up the Hellrazor and the bandolier with the scattergun. "It just doesn't feel like breakfast without some bad news to read."

Ross threw back the tent flap, but then stopped and looked back at her. "You know how to dance?"

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Dance?" She tilted her head in confusion. "You want to dance?"

"No. Just asking."

"Sure. I can dance a little. You?"

He shook his head. "Nah. Not really."

"Well, it doesn't take any more coordination than riding a horse. You can do that, right?"

He stared curiously at her.

Debbi knew he was recalling the refuge he'd created in his mind against Quantrill. The prairie. The house. The horses. The woman. Ross suddenly seemed on the verge of saying something important. But then, just as quickly, it submerged.

"Yeah. I ride." His eyes went thoughtfully to the ground for a moment. Then he arched an eyebrow at Debbi. "Kinda like to try one of those chanouks one day."

Debbi nodded. "I'll show you. Dancing too, if you want."

He grunted and tugged on his hat. Then he went out and let the tent flap drop behind him.

A faint sense of hope sparked in Debbi. She'd just seen a glimpse of a man she recognized beneath the terror that controlled him. It was a very small thing, but it meant something, particularly given the horror that surrounded them. Every little bit helped preserve some sense of humanity.

Then she chuckled at the ludicrousness of it all. When had their lives turned so bizarre? Debbi mimicked Ross's gruff Texas twang, "Honey, once we save ourselves from this army of flesh-eating, psychic zombies, we'll do us a little dancing." She gathered the data slugs and maps with a sad, ironic smile. "Every girl's dream."

She followed Ross outside, muttering to herself about career choices.

Chapter 19

Chow for the Colonial Rangers in Castle Rock had become a relative concept. Food it was, but it was small in nature and simple in state. Rationing had been imposed at the beginning of the siege nearly two weeks ago. The anouks were conserving what they had since it might have to last them for a very long time.

The Rangers had only a small cache of rations. They had taken it upon themselves to eat sparingly from the anouk supplies, but they were grateful for anything the anouks provided them, particularly barka meat.

As always, Ross and his group sat apart from the anouks. Separated and segregated. The Rangers habitually gathered around a campfire even though the early evening was still quite warm.

Only Fitz was not present around the fire. The big Irishman was across the courtyard trading with a young male anouk, barely a teenager in human years. Debbi recognized him as the same kid who loved algae bars. Now the boy apparently had gained an inexplicable soft spot for the stale Colonial Ranger staple. Fitz willingly traded his store of the bars for an anouk breastplate made of flat pieces of tannis strung together. The adolescent anouk darted off with a victorious whoop and immediately found a quiet corner to consume his bounty.

"What are you going to do with that, Fitz?" Ngoma queried the burly Ranger about his newfound accessory when he returned.

Fitz answered by slipping the ring of interlocked stone plates over his head. It was a tight squeeze over a head as square as his, but he pulled it down onto his shoulders with a firm yank. "Any bit of added protection

Book II: The Undead War

is game in my book.”

“Protection against what?” Miller griped. “Hell, there’s been no action here since they told us to stay inside the walls last week.”

“Makes you look fierce, Fitz,” Debbi said from the other side of the campfire, ignoring Miller’s comment even though it was the truth.

“Looks like that kid took it off a chanouk,” Ngoma commented to Fitz. The sheer size of the armor plates made the young Ranger wonder how the anouk boy could’ve even carried it.

“And it still barely fits him.” Everyone joined Stew in his laughter.

“Laugh it up, folks, but it will be me, not you, still standing when the crap starts flying again.” Fitz sat up a little straighter in his new getup.

“If it ever does.” Miller stretched his feet out and reclined a bit.

“What are you griping about, Miller?” Debbi asked snidely. “Since when do you want a battle to start?”

Miller cradled his hands behind his head. “You’re right, Dallas, I’d sure as hell rather be home in my bed than babysitting these gutless anouks.”

“What is *that*?” Chennault groaned as she poked something unfamiliar in her bowl.

Miller sat up to peer in. He grimaced. “Cripes, it looks like a bug. Is that supposed to be in there?”

Chennault glared at him. “What do you think?”

“Who can tell with these anouks.”

“It’s not a bug,” Hallow commented from his place just outside the Ranger’s small circle. “It’s a plant called a *batim*.”

“It has legs,” Chaunnalt noted with a scowl.

Tsukino chuckled quietly from his seat.

“Those are roots,” Debbi said to the stocky ex-Marine.

Chennault offered Debbi a dubious look, but spooned the delicacy, shoved it in her mouth, and chewed deliberately.

Debbi waited, wondering if *batim* was something Chennault would actually like. *Batim* didn’t have that much flavor and its texture was rather odd. But Chennault swallowed and shrugged, continuing to shovel in the rest of her meal in quick and quiet order.

Miller huffed. “I still think it was a bug. A big nasty one too.”

“If it was, it probably came off you,” Stew remarked. “When was the last time you bathed, Miller? The one thing we do have is plenty of water. My God. Use some of it.” Stew’s face was screwed up even though he sat on the opposite side of the campfire.

Fitz took a big, theatrical sniff. “You do smell like a barka there, Miller. What did you do, mistake one for an anouk woman?” His deep, baritone voice held a friendly challenge.

Miller immediately bristled. “A barka would sure be a hell of a lot warmer than these anouk babes. They have about as much personality as my ammo clip.”

Fitz shrugged. “I don’t know. I think they have a lot of possibilities.” His eyes roamed to a cluster of nearby anouks, three of them were female. One was appraising Fitz and his new wardrobe accessory with a predatory eye. Fitz jerked his gaze back to Miller. “They’re spunky. I like my women spunky.”

“But an anouk woman?” Ringo asked with a tinge of disgust.

It was the first time Debbi had heard the young Ranger speak in days. It hurt her to hear the mistrust and hatred in his voice. Ringo had grown up in the Wastelands and he used to be very tolerant and liberal-minded. But that open, breezy young Ranger was turning hard and suspicious. It

Clay & Susan Griffith

was another thing to thank Quantrill and his Bone Camp for.

"Why the hell not?" Fitz countered. "I like my women like I like my liquor."

"Big and purple?" Debbi asked.

"No. Strong and brassy and with the muscle to snap you like a twig. What's not to like?"

"Uh, a broken spine?" offered Stew with a wide grin.

"Nothing like a little danger in a courtship, I say."

"Then why aren't you still dating Miller's sister?" Chennault mumbled while scraping the last bit of food from her bowl into her mouth.

"I said danger," Fitz replied, "not a living death."

Miller rolled his eyes. "You should be so lucky, Fitz. My sister wouldn't have a big, Irish goof like you."

Fitz silently crossed himself.

Miller sighed wistfully. "You know, speaking of anouk women. I remember an old Banshee Geographic magazine that had some pictures of anouk women. You know? *Pictures*." Stroking his thin mustache, Miller's face became a cross between a daydreaming schoolboy and a leering construction worker. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Debbi heard Ringo's voice beside her. "Is all this . . . um, talk bothering you, Dallas?"

She laughed. "Ringo, it takes more than a bunch of horny guys to throw me off my game. It's nothing I haven't heard a million times before. Good lord, you *do* know what my name is, don't you? Personally, there's an anouk male or two that bears a closer look-see on my part. Men in loincloths, there's just something about it." She offered up an exaggerated, dreamy exhale.

Ringo's shocked expression was worth the price of admission.

Debbi turned to hide her grin and found herself under Ross's curious eye. A blush immediately colored her cheeks and she reached for her canteen and a drink of cold water. Long seconds went by before she braved a raised head. Unfortunately, he was still watching her. His expression was bemused and she watched his left eyebrow rise slowly.

Hers rose in answer. "Everyone has a fetish," she told him.

"So I see," was his deadpan response.

"Hey, when are we going home?" Miller blurted out since Ross seemed willing to take part in their little campfire dialogue for the first time. Even three little words was a major breakthrough given Ross's steely demeanor of late.

"Yeah, we haven't done jackcrap for days now," stated Chennault. She picked up an anouk battle-ax that she had traded for several days ago and ran her thumb along the blade. "If they don't need us, I say we pull out."

Ngoma added, "We have the ability to make a dent in the enemy." He touched his sidearm with the black gun attachment. "And yet they don't seem to want our help. Strikes me as incredibly odd and foolish. Let's leave while we have the chance."

Ross remained silent, but his eyes were still locked on Debbi. This time she didn't flinch from his gaze. She certainly wanted the Rangers to stay and help, but she couldn't force them to remain. She had a personal obligation to Martool that they didn't share.

Debbi could see the resolve written on Ross's face also. He had his own reasons for staying. Quantrill was out there and Ross wouldn't leave without some sort of retribution. What did her father used to say?

Book II: The Undead War

Payback was a med-evac. In Quantrill's case, he'd be lucky to get a rotting pine box.

"Oh hell, we're not leaving," muttered Miller. "I can see it in their eyes. Dallas loves anouks. And Ross is . . ." He swallowed his opinion in a sudden cough, realizing Ross was just silent, not deaf.

"You're right," Chennault said. "But it was worth the try."

Debbi rose to her feet. "I'll see what I can find out. See how the battle is going elsewhere." She walked toward the main passageway off the courtyard. "At the very least," she shot back over her shoulder, "I'll find some dirty pictures for you all to look at."

"Promises, promises," Stew called after her.

* * *

Debbi meandered through the city. She had hoped she would remember her way around the massive complex, but she realized swiftly that it was fruitless. Every tannis wall looked pretty much like another. There were so many different levels that soon she had no idea at all where she was.

She asked a few anouks to direct her to Martool, but she either got a cold shoulder or, if she was lucky, an occasional finger point in an aimless direction. She doubted that she could even find her way back to the Rangers at this stage.

Frustrated, she began backtracking and bumped right into Sahrin. As she rebounded off the burly anouk, he reached out a thick arm to steady her. He must have been following her from the courtyard.

"What?" he asked in his thick, guttural English.

Debbi straightened. "I need to see Martool."

"A thing wrong?"

"No. Yes." She huffed with exasperation. "We came to help and Martool has us sitting on our hands out there." She gestured in what she hoped was the direction of the sun gate. "We can help you if only you'd let us." She pulled her Dragoon and angled up the black gun. "We're willing to use these for your defense and instead we're watching a gate that sees less action than my dead Aunt Bertha's antique rocking chair."

Sahrin's face furrowed with concern. "Who is dead?"

Debbi waved her hands. "Sahrin, forget that. Nobody's dead. Listen, the Rangers are going to leave if they don't feel they're needed. We can do some damage to the Legion. Just let us try. Martool must understand this."

Sahrin stood motionless, but finally nodded. He strode off down a passageway so quickly that Debbi just stood there a moment watching his departure. Then she darted after him, barely able to keep up. Twenty minutes later after an exhaustive tour of Castle Rock, he paused before a wall.

"Stay here," he commanded.

The wall melted in front of him and he walked through an open doorway. Debbi hadn't quite figured out the doors in Castle Rock. Some of them were slabs of stone that moved without apparent mechanisms, but other times solid tannis walls just melted away to reveal rooms behind them. Curiosity almost made Debbi peek inside this one, but she refrained.

Sahrin appeared again and waved her in. Then he quietly departed. As Debbi stepped through, the wall rose up again behind her. She watched it in fascination for a second, but then turned her attention to

Clay & Susan Griffith

the rest of the room.

It was a rough-hewn room filled with flickering torches and candles. Martool knelt before a wall covered with delicately carved symbols and images with her arms raised and her eyes closed. Debbi couldn't make much sense of what the carvings represented. She had never seen anything like it in all her years on Banshee. Then she realized with a start that every wall in the room was similarly ornately etched. In the dim lighting, the room suddenly appeared very sacred.

Martool was draped in a rich purple robe which gave her a regal look. She remained still, not acknowledging Debbi's presence. The Ranger stood quietly, passing the time by studying the wall nearest her. She recognized bits and fragments of anouk writing. There were also pictures of battles and ceremonies. One portion of the wall portrayed a myriad of beasts that Debbi had never seen before. Perhaps they were extinct now. Regardless, they were horrific and she wouldn't want to meet them anyway.

She reached out a hand to touch the carving and it abruptly melted away. She jerked her hand back in alarm. The whole wall shimmered like quicksilver before reshaping itself into a new image.

Over the course of the next few minutes, the wall performed the trick twice more before finally becoming a smooth blank surface. It was like pages turning in a book before finally closing to be placed once again on the shelf. Martool rose gracefully to her feet and turned toward Debbi.

"Th . . . that was amazing," the Ranger stuttered. "What was that?"

Martool adjusted the thick, massive cloak on her shoulders. She looked very weary, the angles of her face sharper than normal. "It is our history and future. All that we have been and will be is recorded here."

"I've never seen anything like it." Debbi regarded the stone wall one last time and then forced her attention back to Martool. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I have something I'd like to discuss."

Martool cocked her head expectantly. There was something different in the way she regarded Debbi. The anouk looked the Ranger up and down, as if appraising her in a new way.

Debbi continued, despite feeling uncomfortable with the odd scrutiny, "I'm not sure I understand our inactivity. The Rangers, I mean. We're sitting at the sun gate getting fat on your food. Surely we can be better used elsewhere. We're ready to fight."

The shaman sighed. "Not everything is solved through conflict, Debbi. I have ordered my people to stay within the walls throughout Castle Rock so no more will die."

"I hope you don't think you can parley your way out of this siege. Because you can't. The Legion isn't interested in talking. They're here to wipe you out. Surely your people learned that back in Seventy-six."

"What I learned in *Seventy-six*," Martool said evenly, "is that we can't beat evil with force. I have my ways and you don't as yet understand."

Debbi explained, "I've seen Quantrill at work. He's remorseless and has no respect for anything *except* force. You can't beat him by hiding. You've got to hurt him! Every Legionnaire you kill is one less weapon he has. Weapons he can't replace!"

"I know Quantrill too," Martool said. "Twenty years ago he and his troops, these same soldiers who are outside now, entered Castle Rock and slaughtered my people, including my mother."

A cold draught caressed Debbi's heart as she suddenly recalled the

Book II: The Undead War

last time she saw her own mother. She shivered as she again felt the rough hands of strangers restraining her and the sound of the escape pod blasting away, leaving her mother behind to die in the violently decompressing station.

"Your mother was at Castle Rock?" Debbi asked unsteadily. She couldn't help but reach out and touch Martool's smooth arm. The anouk regarded the Ranger kindly and with complete understanding.

"My mother was Castle Rock," Martool answered. "My mother was Kreech."

Debbi's mouth dropped open in amazement. "Kreech? *The* Kreech? The same Kreech that led the revolt?"

"Yes. She led the *revolt* against the invading human war machine that was trying to obliterate our people from the face of our own planet. My mother gathered many clans here at Castle Rock and some Reapers as well." Martool paused and then said, "And a Skinny. She *fought* the advancing humans. She fought in the canyons and on the city walls and in the corridors. She fought them to the end." Martool looked at Debbi. "And yet, despite the fact that she fought, she didn't win. She is dead. She sacrificed herself and her people and won nothing. That is why I know that force is not the answer."

"You know Tekkeng is out there too."

"Yes. I've seen him."

Debbi saw a flash of anger and then regret pass over Martool's features. She thought back to the gruesome footage of the butchering of the prisoners. "Tekkeng is one of your people. Why would he fight with Quantrill?"

"Tekkeng is not of my people. He is corruption afoot. He will go wherever he wishes to further his goal."

"What is his goal?"

Martool replied with fearful pride, "To kill me. He hates me and what I can do."

"Why?"

"My mother made a deal with Tekkeng. She believed the humans were responsible for the corruption that was destroying our planet, and she believed she needed the Skinny's power to defeat them. She was wrong in both beliefs. But she didn't realize it until it was too late for her. She had already made a bond with darkness. Even so, my mother was too clever for the Skinny. When she realized that her path was wrong, she conceived a child to walk the right path. Her magics insured that I would be born with certain powers. Powers that would help me to save this planet. I am a threat to Tekkeng, so when he found out about my existence, he turned his back on my mother. This place was overrun and Quantrill killed her. And thousands more. I was spirited away from the ruins of Castle Rock and hidden for many years. Since that day, Tekkeng has searched for me so he could kill me."

Debbi regarded the shaman again, remembering the vileness and the awesome breadth of Tekkeng's mental touch. Then something terrible flashed through her mind. "Oh God. He's here because of me, isn't he? He saw you in my mind. I led him to you."

Martool stood impassively. "That is possible. But it doesn't matter now."

"I'm sorry, Martool. I didn't realize—"

"There is nothing you could do to prevent it. Tekkeng is powerful."

"I can help you stop him. And Quantrill. I beat Tekkeng once, but

Clay & Susan Griffith

we've got to use the black guns. It worked in New Hope."

Martool stared back at the young human. "No, I will not. My mother made the mistake of allying herself with darkness for a greater good. And it cost her. I will not make that mistake. I have a plan. But it takes time. You must trust me, Debbi. Just because things aren't readily apparent does not mean there is nothing there. All is as it should be. We do not need to fight Tekkeng and the Legion, only hold them at bay."

"For how long? You can't outlast Quantrill's people. They can wait forever. They're dead."

"And that will be their undoing. This planet abhors their kind. They could not have survived here before the sickness came."

"Sickness?"

"The dead rock, the ghost rock. Most believe the humans brought it with them, but that is not true. It came on its own in search of innocence to taint. You humans foolishly followed it like decay follows infection. You think this rock holds great power, but it only holds death. You may allow it to kill your planet. I won't allow it to kill mine."

Debbi shook her head contentiously. The anouks were far too superstitious for their own good. "First of all, I'm not allowing it to kill *my* planet. I've never even been to Earth. Second of all, ghost rock is just a rock. Humans have mined it on Earth for centuries. It's volatile, but it can be controlled. I really don't think you should be focusing so much on ghost rock."

"It is unnatural, the spirits of evil made solid."

Debbi stared at the shaman. She couldn't think of a response. She and Martool were so extremely different in some ways.

Martool continued, "You can never control evil. It will only control you."

"All right, I don't understand what you're talking about. Quantrill isn't after ghost rock anyway."

"I intend to finish my mother's work and cleanse our world." Martool waved her arm and the walls shimmered around them. "And when the ghost rock is gone, abominations such as General Quantrill will vanish with it and our world will once again be at peace."

Images reappeared on the walls, eroding the stone before Debbi's eyes. Scenes of Castle Rock emerged, places Debbi actually recognized. The monstrous creatures she had seen in earlier carvings walked there. Debbi's eyes scanned the next scene and saw an anouk shaman standing before them, holding them at bay.

Martool pointed to the wall. "After the Great Massacre the ghost rock veins grew deeper into the tannis here. This place became home to abominations. The graves you have seen in the sun gate courtyard are empty now. As are all the graves in the valley. Our dead rose as monsters. They moved about freely and made Castle Rock and the entire canyon unlivable."

Debbi suppressed a small shiver. "Where are they now? These monsters. I haven't seen any . . ."

"I banished them from the upper precincts. They reside in the lower levels of Castle Rock below the sun gate."

"The sun gate?" Debbi swallowed reflexively. She glanced again at the picture on the wall, at the image of the shaman. "You mean *you* did this?"

Martool nodded. "There are binding rituals, a slow and torturous process that must be maintained daily. Level by level I pushed them

Book II: The Undead War

back. And there are cleansing rituals that force the evil from the ground. It is difficult magic, and a great strain on me, but if all goes well, one day all of this valley will be safe and my people will live here as they did in the old days."

"I don't understand what this has to do with Quantrill and Tekkeng. Do you think these cleansing rituals will drive them away?"

"It will make it more difficult for the undead to enter Castle Rock. And it diminishes Tekkeng's power should he be bold enough to attack me here." Martool laid her hand on Debbi's arm. The anouk's touch was warm and calming. "This war is merely an attempt to prevent me from continuing a procedure that I have started to save this planet. What I have started, they will not taint! Since humans arrived, my people's history has been one of defeat. We have tried fighting back and only soiled ourselves in the process. But no longer. My way will bring salvation to my planet."

"Maybe at the expense of your clan," Debbi responded quietly.

"No more will die!" Martool shouted. "Not if we stay within the walls!"

"Until your food supply runs out! Then it will be the young and the old that die first. Is that what you want instead?"

"That is only a possibility. To go out and fight, death is certain."

Martool was exasperated with defending her position to someone who couldn't possibly understand. Drawing in a deep breath, Martool continued, "Quantrill could outlast us, but he does not have the patience to do so. He is like an animal; eventually something else will tempt his appetites and we will be left alone. He will find far easier targets on Banshee. Soon he will tire of us, and my work cleansing this valley may continue in peace."

"What about Tekkeng?"

Martool inhaled tiredly and paused, lost in thought. She did not respond.

Debbi stared at the shaman. "You're willing to risk—"

"Everything. I know. But it is my decision, the decision of the Council."

Debbi was dismayed with her inability to make Martool see reason. "I can't keep the Rangers here indefinitely, you know."

"Then you should go," Martool said eagerly. "Please. It is better that you do."

Debbi flinched. That hurt. "I just want to help repay you for all that you've done for me."

"I know. And for that I thank you. You should have no guilt about Tekkeng. He would have found me eventually. He is resourceful and timeless. But I beseech you to go. It is important that you do not die here."

"We don't intend to die."

"Not them. *You*. It is important that *you* do not die here, in this place."

"Why? What do you mean?"

Martool cast a quick glance at the blank walls. "There is nothing more that I can say. There is nothing more that I know for sure. But I feel it is of great significance that Castle Rock's corruption does not claim you."

Debbi's brow furrowed and she offered a confused smile. "I appreciate the concern, but I know the risks. I live with the chance of death every day as a Ranger."

Martool sighed and wearily rubbed the side of her head. "You do not fully understand. There is no way you could. I wish I could explain it to

Clay & Susan Griffith

you, but I don't fully understand myself. There is much that needs to be done. Is there anything else, Debbi?"

"No," Debbi said quietly.

"Then I must continue with my rituals."

Part of the wall in back of Debbi fell like sand to the floor, revealing a door once more. She backed out and watched the door seal up again before her. She didn't know how long she stood there staring at it before she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked around to find Sahrin waiting patiently.

"Ready?"

"Yeah," she whispered. "I suppose I am."

The walk back to the sun gate with Sahrin was a blur to Debbi. She didn't even bother trying to remember the way. It felt like she wasn't ever going to pass this way again.

She agonized over what to tell Ross when she returned. He was going to be furious when he found out the anouks were no longer fighting back at all. If Martool was going to restrict his ability to fight Quantrill here, he might just leave and attack the Legion on his own elsewhere. Which, of course, was suicidal. But Ross wasn't completely rational these days.

The Rangers would want to leave. As well they should. There was nothing to be done here. Martool had all but tied their hands. It would be foolish to remain and take the chance that the anouks could hold out until Quantrill got bored.

Debbi looked at the families going about their business as she walked beside Sahrin. Life was relatively normal for them despite the fact that there were flesh-hungry zombies outside their door. She suppressed a mirthless laugh. Martool was wrong. Quantrill would never lose interest in the prospect of killing anouks. There was nothing he enjoyed more.

Stew shouted out her name and she looked up to find him approaching. She was back in the sun gate courtyard. Debbi skirted the corpseless cemetery, noticing again with a familiar chill that many of the tannis tombstones were uprooted.

"What's the word?" Stew asked as they converged and continued on to the base of the wall.

The rest of the Rangers crowded around her. Ross stood to the outside, his dour expression steadfast. He had shucked his duster and shirt, and was sweating through a sleeveless undershirt. In fact, all the Rangers were dusty and sweating.

Debbi told them most of what passed between her and Martool, except the shaman's fixation on ghost rock and its role in spreading evil forces. Martool's connection to Kreech surprised some of the Rangers, all of whom knew about the almost mythic Red River campaign against the rebel witch Kreech. She got a mixed response. Chennault, Miller, and Ringo were irate and ready to call it quits. Stew, Hallow, Fitz, Tsukino, and Ngoma seemed content, willing to follow wherever Ross or Debbi led them.

Ross stood there, his jaw muscles twitching, which was never a good sign.

Debbi expected an outburst, an angry retort, a command to pack it in, something. Instead, Ross turned on his heel and stomped back to the wall. Debbi could see that the Rangers had been busy in her absence. They were demolishing parts of the lower steps and moving the heavy

Book II: The Undead War

tannis stones to the end of the avenue that cut through the base of the wall to the gate.

"Come on, Rangers," Ross commanded. "Let's go back to work."

"What the hell, Ross?" Miller shouted. "Let's just leave!"

"I'm not leaving without a piece of Quantrill's hide. You can leave if you want, Miller. If you can convince Hallow there to go with you, then go, 'cause without him, Quantrill and his goons will have you crashing your Hoss into the side of the canyon."

They all knew Hallow would not leave without Debbi. Soon all eyes tracked to her.

Damn it! Debbi glared at Ross. This shouldn't be her call. But she could make only one choice. She shrugged helplessly.

With a collective sigh and some irritated grumblings, the Rangers picked up their tools and went back to digging. Debbi followed after them, picking up a shovel on the way.

Ross threw himself back into work like a man possessed. As he tore out chunks of tannis with a pickax, he knew he had made the right decision. Quantrill had to be taken out, and it had to be here and now. The bottom line was that nine Rangers weren't enough to do the job. An army of anouks, however, was another story. If Martool wasn't going to take the offensive, that was her business. She was a shaman, not a soldier. Ross hefted his pickax and paused to study a group of anouk warriors watching in the distance. There were enough warrior clans within the walls of Castle Rock who should be eager to get at the Legion and draw some blood. Those war chiefs might listen to reason. Ross had only to stoke the fires of their anger and frustration, feelings he well understood.

He slammed home the pickax into the hard stone sending chips flying everywhere. The impact resonated in his arms and shoulders, but the physical labor felt good.

Debbi stepped up to him, her green eyes hard. "I wouldn't strike too deep if I were you."

"Why the hell not?" Ross regarded her from under the sweat-stained brim of his hat. A ball of perspiration ran down along his cheekbone.

"I found out the sun gate is the lowest habitable level of the city. Right beneath us is the holding pen for a whole castle-load of monsters." She lifted her spade and shoveled the shards of stone. "Just thought you'd like to know."

Ross dropped his gaze and contemplated the ground for a second. Then he took up the pickax and drove it helve deep into the rock. "The more the merrier."

Chapter 20

Debbi and Ross walked together as they inspected the interior wall that the Rangers were constructing from the excavated tannis blocks which now obstructed the avenue that ran through the base of the wall into the courtyard from the sun gate. It was nearly complete after long days of labor.

Debbi said, "Sahrin told me that Martool wasn't happy with this wall we're building."

Ross snorted disdainfully. "Why? She afraid to inconvenience the Legion when they pour in here and kill us all?"

"No." Debbi rolled her eyes at his sarcastic edge. "It's my understand-

Clay & Susan Griffith

ing that the architecture here has a sacred purpose. It's not just functional. So I don't think she likes it when it's altered without her approval."

"God Almighty," Ross growled. "She's too damn much."

Debbi felt herself bristle at the comment. "Ross, you know a lot of anouks. Why are you so oblivious to their spiritual nature?"

The older Ranger eyed Debbi frostily. "I'm not *oblivious* to it, Dallas. It's just a pain in the ass when you're trying to fight a bunch of dead guys who ain't got the respect for anouk spirituality that a rock does. Plus, all the anouks I know were regular people, warriors and the like. Now, you take Fareel. *That* guy I get. But I don't have much truck with shamans." He took a deep, frustrated breath.

"After all your years in the field, you don't believe in anouk magic?"

"Oh hell, I believe in everything," Ross replied. "But magic doesn't make you smart. And Martool is being stupid."

Debbi then saw Hallow walking toward them across the courtyard. The syker waved. Ross exhaled in annoyance and kept moving while Debbi stopped to wait.

"Debbi, I need to ask you something." Hallow stared her in the eye as he came close.

"Sure, what's -"

The syker turned his head slightly to the left and a scorching flash of energy blasted from his forehead.

Debbi ducked, reaching for her sidearm. On the nearby steps of the wall, she saw a strange spray of blackish red ooze appear in the air surrounding a blank oval shape. As the ichor splattered against the steps, the blank oval filled in with the head of a Legionnaire who had the back of its rotting cranium blown out by Hallow's attack. Then the rest of the body appeared and it fell back dead against the tannis steps. The undead syker had been sitting invisible not five feet from where Debbi and Ross had been talking.

Ross ran back as Debbi spun to face Hallow. The syker's head was crackling with electricity. He turned slowly and deliberately, scanning the courtyard.

"What the hell's going on?" Ross shouted. He kept his Peacemaker trained on the dead Legionnaire. "Where'd that thing come from?"

"I don't know," Debbi answered. "Hallow? Hallow?"

The syker fired another brain blast out across the courtyard.

"Damn!" Hallow exclaimed, clearly shaken. "He can't do that. How can he move and chameleon at the same time?" The syker turned to Debbi. "Martool's in danger. Get to her and keep her inside. Captain Ross, bring some men and follow me."

The syker took off at a dead run across the courtyard.

Ross put two fingers to his lips and gave a piercing whistle. "Stew! Chennault! With me!"

Stew and Chennault stood near a Stallion. The commotion had drawn their attention, but it had happened so fast they had barely had time to react beyond staring open mouthed. They both grabbed Hellrazors and cut across to meet Ross as he legged it after Hallow through a tunnel off the courtyard.

A group of anouks raced toward the action. Debbi ran to meet them. She saw the ever-watchful Sahrin and Fareel among them.

"Sahrin!" Debbi shouted. "We have to get to Martool now! She's in danger!"

Book II: The Undead War

"What danger?" the anouk asked.

"I don't know. Please trust me."

Fareel grumbled a few words, but Sahrin ignored him and said to Debbi, "Come."

He led Debbi into the maze of corridors. Fareel followed closely. His hand clamped onto the atax at his belt and the weapon glowed with power.

* * *

Ross finally caught up to Hallow as the syker stood in the crossing of two inky corridors. Unlike the other passageways in Castle Rock where the Rangers had been, these walls were half-collapsed and the floors strewn with debris. Cobwebs dangled from the jagged roof. Lightly phosphorescing slime covered the surfaces.

"What is going on?" Ross demanded of the syker.

"Quiet!" Hallow snapped. He breathed through his nose and his eyes rolled up as he studied the three possible paths.

"What's he doing?" Stew asked from behind.

"Quiet!" Ross snapped. Then he shrugged.

Hallow turned and smiled. Ross had never seen the dour syker smile before and it was made all the more disturbing by the apparent coldness of the emotion. Hallow pointed straight ahead.

"This way," he said.

"Whoa, whoa." Ross shook his head. "How about some info?"

"There is an assassin loose."

"What? How'd it get inside the walls?"

"They're good. We have to hunt this one down before I lose track of it. So let's go."

"Lights." Ross pulled a small flashlight off his belt, as did the two other Rangers. "Everybody watch your step." The three Rangers followed along the dark, debris-filled corridor. Ross asked the syker, "So this place could be full of sykers that we can't see?"

"No. The skills are difficult to master. And most syker assassins returned to Earth on the Unity years ago before the Tunnel collapsed. Quantrill can't have too many *this* god."

"How do you know?"

"Because I was an assassin. And I was very good."

"Assassins," Chennault muttered to Stew, looking as if she tasted something foul. "I hate stinking murderers."

Stew glanced at the pulse rifle that the ex-HI Marine cradled like a baby and raised an eyebrow.

Chennault argued, "I don't have any qualms about killing my enemies in battle. But I do ask that everyone put on a uniform and declare their intentions."

"Shut up back there," Ross snarled over his shoulder. "We can debate morality after we frag this zombie. Hallow, this hallway is sloping down pretty steep."

"So? Are you afraid of falling?"

"Dallas tells me it ain't too smart to go below the sun gate level. Martool said there are dangerous things down here."

Hallow continued moving through the darkness. "If we don't follow the assassin now, I may not be able to locate him again. And he could kill Martool."

"How do you know it's after Martool?"

Clay & Susan Griffith

Hallow laughed. "Do you think *you're* the target?"

"No," Ross said. "I was thinking *you*."

Hallow's laugh caught in his throat.

Chennault spoke up. "Yeah, Hallow, maybe this killer is luring you down into the dark to kill you. And us along with you."

Without turning, Hallow hissed, "From here on everyone stay silent! I need to concentrate!"

Stew looked at Chennault with feigned severity and placed a reproachful finger to his pursed lips. The short Marine pursed her lips too, but showed Stew a different finger.

The farther they walked the worse the corridor broke apart until it was no longer a recognizable hallway. The air grew damp and stuffy. Ross had his scattergun in one hand and flashlight in the other. While the phosphorescent slime cast sufficient light to see by, he didn't trust it. Stew had goggles with starlite filters, but neither Ross nor Chennault had their goggles when they were pulled away to follow the syker.

Hallow stopped and looked around as if trying to pick up a scent.

Ross wanted to inch away from him. Watching the syker ply his trade made the Ranger uncomfortable. Phantom sensations of Quantrill burrowing into his brain made his skin burn. His head began to throb again and that made him angry. But he couldn't move away. Ross had to stick close because he had to protect Hallow. He constantly had to remind himself to separate the living syker from the dead ones. They needed Hallow.

The musty, cloying stench of the cavern made Ross long for the clean, wet smell of the blooming prairie or the warm, organic tickle in the nose that came from a horse barn or the sweet waft of cut flowers on a bedside table.

"Ross."

He felt a touch on his back. Stew nodded forward. Hallow had already moved off into the dimness ahead. Ross followed quickly, cursing his lax attention.

The tunnel was barely passable now. It was filled with rocks slick with glowing slime. Hallow and the Rangers had to scramble over piles of jagged stones and squeeze through narrow gaps in rock falls. Ross saw no evidence of a physical barrier holding back the monsters that supposedly inhabited these nether regions, but then he supposed the anouk's binding magic was probably strong enough.

After twenty minutes of clambering through the treacherous tunnel, it unexpectedly opened up into a natural rock cavern. Ross looked out on a vast, convoluted landscape of pillowy stalagmites that seemed to have been flash frozen from bubbling molten lava. The surrounding rock was multicolored ranging from vibrant red and yellow like the sun-blasted desert above to the darkly black, violet veins of tannis slipping like snakes through all the strata. His untrained eye picked out what he thought were traces of ghost rock. Streaks of glowing green slime covered the walls of the cavern.

The sound of running water filled the air. The Rangers felt a sheen of liquid spray covering their exposed faces and hands.

Hallow knelt just inside the tunnel and covered his eyes with his hands. "He's in here. And there's no other way out."

"How do you know?" Ross asked.

"Because he knows."

"Well, it's a big cave with lots of places to hide. If we move in, it

Book II: The Undead War

might slip around us.”

“Exactly,” Hallow answered in a soft voice. “That’s why I’m going to try to overload him so we can see him, if I can get a fix on him. It’s very difficult. If he senses what I’m doing, he might try to blast his way out. Be ready.”

Ross said, “The thing’s invisible. Appreciate a heads up if it starts coming our way.”

Deep inside the rock chamber, something moved.

“I see it.” Ross slipped in front of Hallow for a better view.

Hallow said, “That’s impossible. He’s chameleoned.”

There was another flash of motion deep among the chaotic rock formations.

Ross argued, “I’m telling you I see it in there.”

Stew said, “I see it too. About fifty feet to the left.”

“No,” Ross corrected. “Off to the right. Much farther back.”

Ross and Stew looked at each other. “Uh oh.”

The sound of Ross shucking the scattergun echoed through the cavern. “Heads up. We’re not alone.”

A face flitted out from beside a rock pillar, then disappeared. A second one appeared in a different part of the vast chamber. There was another flicker of movement high up in the shadowy roof.

Mixed with the sound of water, the Rangers heard a faint, rapid slapping sound as if from many bare feet padding over wet stones.

“Move up,” Ross ordered his Rangers. “Whatever’s in here might not be friendly and if the syker gets it, we’re all screwed. We won’t find that assassin on our own.”

“*Might* not be friendly?” Chennault said incredulously as she took a position off Ross’s right flank. “Has anything on this planet *ever* been friendly?”

The Rangers spread out with weapons at the ready to cover the meditative Hallow. Their furtive eyes darted around the underground cathedral and its dreamlike rock formations. The beams from their flashlights bounced off the undulating rocks and sparkled through the watery mist that filled the air.

Shadows slipped all around them.

Chennault felt water dripping on her head. She brushed a hand through her short hair and it came away green.

She looked up.

A jagged toothed face leered only five feet above her.

Chennault shouted involuntarily and dropped to the side as a clawed hand swiped across her face. She landed hard on one knee and brought up her Hellrazor.

A heavy weight fell on top of her and smashed her to her back. Chennault felt a sharp pain in her left shoulder. The ex-Marine flailed with her fists and tried to kick. Something seized her from behind and she felt herself being dragged.

The roar of a shotgun blasted in her ears and sparks flashed in front of her blurred eyes. The weight rolled away from her so she instinctively scrambled upright.

She heard Ross’s voice. “Chennault! You all right?”

The woman’s ears rang and she angrily answered, “I’m fine!” She realized her hands were empty so she instinctively drew her Dragon.

“Look at me!” Ross yelled with such force that she forgot what she’d been doing and turned toward him.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Ross's stern, bearded face reassured her. His scattergun smoked. He held up two fingers. "How many?"

"Two."

He pulled the bandanna from his neck and began to scrub at her face. She fought like a petulant child.

"Stop it!" he snapped. "You're bleeding and you're covered in goop."

Chennault took the kerchief from his hand and finished wiping her face. A mixture of glowing green mucous and red blood covered the cloth.

"What hit me?" She began to recover her wits.

Ross pointed behind her.

Chennault turned and on the stone floor was a sack of green goo. Then she saw it had two arms and a torso, and a head that was demolished thanks to Ross's scattergun.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know," Stew called out, "but there are more of them."

They slithered on the walls, moving around the bubbling rock columns and scrambling across the ceiling. They were hideous dark green, crawling shapes. Their upper torsos were anouk-like with long muscular arms and hands with clawed fingers. Their heads were a bit more elongated than anouks to accommodate a wide, snapping mouth filled with teeth. Below the waist they were sluglike and glistening. The slapping noise that sounded like bare feet was actually the sound of their hands against the rocks as they dragged their misshapen bodies with alarming speed. The creatures made no sounds aside from the wet pounding of their hands on stone and the slurping of their ooze-covered thoraxes that left green, phosphorescent slime trails behind them.

The three Rangers opened fire. Stew laid down a stream of AP shells across the ceiling. When shot, the anouk slugs lost their adhesion and dropped like sacks of wet cements to the floor where they lay floundering in apparent pain.

One dropped a few feet in front of Ross. He thought it was dead and turned to blast another that crawled nearby. Then something grabbed his pant leg. The thing that had fallen dragged itself close and bit him in the left thigh. Ross gritted his teeth to suppress a scream and fired into the creature. The bullet created an eruption of green fluid. The thing flailed at its oozing wound and fell quivering.

As more green claws groped for him, Ross saw a slug-thing slipping down the wall behind Chennault. He fired while shouting, "Chennault! Behind you!"

Before the stocky Ranger could turn, the creature dropped from the wall and tackled her around the shoulders. Chennault's feet slipped on the wet rocks and she went down again. In an instant, two more things switched direction and padded for the struggling woman.

Pushing aside the remains of his last attacker, Ross drew his Peacemaker and ran for Chennault. He slipped and stumbled, his left leg aching sharply. A glistening hand grabbed his right ankle and tried to pull him deeper into the cavern. Ross wheeled off balance and shot through the thing's snapping teeth. The Ranger kicked free and tried to stand just as another large shape plopped down beside him. He aimed and fired. Then yet another hand scabbled for Ross's head and shoulders, knocking off his hat.

Ross shot that one too.

They were all around. Clawing. Gnashing their teeth.

Book II: The Undead War

Ross felt a searing heat on his back. Slimy arms drew away. He took advantage of the pause in the attack and shot. The things were so thick on the wall and floor it wasn't a problem to hit one. But it was impossible to shoot them all.

Ross kicked past a dead thing and reached Chennault. The three creatures on top of her wriggled vigorously. Only her foot was visible under the quivering masses.

The Ranger Captain holstered his empty Peacemaker and pulled his long Bowie knife from its belt sheath. He plunged the blade into the back of one of the creatures and sliced along its slug-like thorax. A river of green slime boiled from the long gash.

Ross shoved it off the pile with his boot and proceeded to gut a second one.

The third and last creature lay over top of Chennault's chest, shoulders, and head. It twisted to look up at Ross and opened its mouth threateningly. Now that Chennault's arms were free, she awkwardly brought her Dragoon up and shoved the barrel into the creature's tail. She pulled the trigger several times and the thing jerked and fell flat.

Ross rolled the dead thing off Chennault. She sat up convulsively and gasped for air through a coating of green slime.

Another massive flash of heat hit Ross from behind and caused him to stagger to his knees. He smelled the tangy residue of a phosphor grenade. He whirled around to see the smoking remnants of multiple slug-things, some hanging blackened and crisp from the roof. The phosphors had singed the air of the cavern and sucked up the moisture. Ross found it hard to breathe in the acrid fumes.

Stew was nowhere to be seen.

Then the sound of a Hellrazor rang out and Stew emerged from a cleft in the rocks firing at the creatures that still moved. The things began to crawl slowly away. Ross fed shells into his scattergun as he took this in.

When the scattergun was reloaded, Ross stood up and dragged the ooze-soaked Chennault with him. The two of them joined Stew in slaughtering the dried-out, lethargic creatures before they could scuttle for cover. A few escaped into the recesses of the cavern, but not many. Soon, piles of bloated monster corpses surrounded the exhausted, battered Rangers. The cavern floor was several inches deep in gore.

When nothing else was moving around them, Ross stopped firing. He immediately reloaded, as did Stew and Chennault.

"Kinda close quarters for phosphor grenades, Stew," Ross commented. "You could've been killed."

Stew gave a half smile without looking up. "I was under cover. *You* could've been killed."

Ross grunted and reached down to pull his hat from the mire. He gave a futile attempt to scrape it clean, then gave up and slopped the dripping thing on his head. He noticed the hat didn't fit quite right, which he chalked up to ooze until his hand strayed to the back of his head where his hair was singed off.

He waded back toward Hallow and, as he passed Stew, muttered, "This better grow back."

Chennault followed, walking uncomfortably, soaked from head to toe in green ichor. She mumbled unhappily to herself.

Stew ran his finger along her chin and flicked away the goo. "I hear it's good for your skin."

Clay & Susan Griffith

She whispered, "Shut up or I'll pull out your rib cage."

Ross leaned against the rock wall next to the still-kneeling Hallow. The syker was unaffected by the battle, untouched by a drop of ooze or a hint of phosphor fire. Ross exhaled irritably through his nose and waited with the scattergun resting in the crook of his arm.

Hallow looked up. "I've lost him."

Tight-lipped and dripping with slime, Ross growled, "Beg pardon?"

The syker was mad and frustrated. "I almost had him. I was filtering out his chameleon signal. Now it's gone."

Stew watched Ross's face turn several shades of red even beyond the light flashburn from the grenades. He turned away and surveyed the oozing piles of creatures. They looked like mutated anouks, some sort of hellish abominations. Sticking out from under one of the draining slug torsos, Stew saw a blackened human foot. He used the butt of his Hellrazor to shove a dead slug-thing aside. Lying on the stone floor was a burned human cadaver.

"Hey, Ross!" Stew called out. "Over here!"

Hallow surged up screaming, "Get away from him! He's still alive!"

The burned corpse opened its eyes and grinned up with blackened teeth.

A geyser of energy threw Stew high into the air like a doll. The sudden violent eruption surprised Ross and Chennault. They raised their weapons as the smoldering zombie bounded to its feet. The Rangers' black needles pinged off a force screen. The undead Legionnaire's hand flashed to its belt in a blur and suddenly a long-bladed knife protruded from Hallow's shoulder. The syker fell back against the rock wall with a scream.

The zombie scrambled over slippery slug creatures and pulled the Hellrazor from Stew's limp grasp. He spun behind a rock column and brought the weapon up alongside the stalagmite.

"Take cover!" Ross shouted as he and Chennault both dropped.

The Hellrazor poured fire in their direction. The shells punctured the dead creatures' cadavers, ripping them to shreds. Ross rolled behind a rock pillar and returned fire while Chennault went as flat as possible in the ooze layer on the floor.

The zombie turned the pulse rifle toward Hallow. The syker's head snapped around to face the zombie and the Legionnaire froze. The two seemed locked together outside the reality of the cavern. Wisps of energy passed between them. Hallow began to quiver.

Ross stepped up and in rapid succession fired several black needles into the zombie whose force screen was down. The third time the Ranger fired, no needle emerged. He was empty.

When the two needles struck, the Legionnaire convulsed and then its head abruptly exploded.

The reaction startled Ross. Hallow dropped to his knees in exhaustion.

Ross called out, "Chennault? Talk to me."

The Ranger waved from the floor, her arm trailing slime. "Yeah, I'm fine. I've got Stew." She unsteadily pushed herself up.

Ross knelt next to Hallow who breathed heavily, clutching the shoulder where the knife protruded.

"You still with us?" Ross asked.

Hallow's mouth moved, but he couldn't speak.

"Take it easy. It's all over down here." Ross craned his head to check

Book II: The Undead War

Chennault who was leaning over Stew. "Chennault?"

"He's alive," she yelled back.

Hallow gasped, "He'll live. I shielded him."

"Good work," Ross regarded the syker with newfound respect. "Let's get you out of here."

"No. You've got to find Martool."

"Easy. We got the assassin; everything's okay."

"No. Tekkeng."

Ross leapt to his feet. "Tekkeng? The Skinny? What about him?"

"He's inside the city. I can sense him."

Martool was still in great danger.

And Dallas was with her.

Chapter 21

Debbi followed Martool across a narrow bridge. The walls and cliffside structures of Castle Rock towered above and plummeted below in a dizzying effect that had Debbi wishing the narrow footbridge had rails or ropes or something to prevent the blustery wind from threatening to shove her off into the precipice.

Debbi ignored her quaking stomach and shouted over the wind.

"Hallow said you were in danger. You should go inside where we can protect you and stay there until we get an all clear."

"I cannot," Martool responded. "I have duties."

At the far end of the bridge stood a short stone pillar that had a tannis sphere hovering several inches above it. The sphere was spinning. Debbi saw no mechanism holding or turning the stone globe. Martool paused and placed her hands around the sphere without touching it. It glowed brighter and spun faster. Satisfied, the anouk shaman started off again along the high terrace clinging to the side of a long, featureless wall.

Martool said to Debbi, "Sahrin can take you to my chambers. I will be there shortly."

"No." Debbi continued to follow with Sahrin and Fareel at her heels.

"This . . . whatever you're doing should really wait. You're in danger."

"If it waits, the whole city will be in danger. This magic helps to keep the cursed ones below out of the city. It has to be maintained."

"Can't someone else do it? You can't swing a stick without hitting a shaman around here."

Martool kept up her vigorous pace. "Castle Rock is my responsibility."

Debbi appealed to Sahrin. "Can you talk to her? Make her understand the danger."

"She knows."

Debbi rolled her eyes and jogged closer to Martool. "Please, for once, put the mystical duty aside and be a realist. Think like a human if you can."

Martool emitted a rumbling sound that could've been a laugh.

The Ranger continued breathlessly, "I'm just asking for a few hours at most. Ross and Hallow are after the Legion assassin. Give them time to find it and kill it. What could a few hours matter?"

"It matters," Martool said simply.

Debbi bit her lip and groaned with anger and frustration. Why was Martool so difficult? What could you say in the face of such irrational intransigence? How could you argue with it?

Clay & Susan Griffith

"No wonder you people never invented the wheel," Debbi muttered under her breath, drawing another crypto-laugh from Martool. "You know, Ross is right about . . ." She stopped talking abruptly and let out an exasperated breath.

Martool glanced back over her shoulder with a faint smile. "You're so human."

The shaman stopped to re-energize another spinning globe.

Debbi took advantage of the pause to click her comlink for Ross. She got nothing but static.

Martool suddenly clutched her stomach and doubled over in pain. Her face clenched in a mixture of anguish and terror. Debbi grabbed the shaman's arm. Fareel and Sahrin raised their weapons and searched for enemies.

"What's wrong?" Debbi asked the stricken anouk.

Martool dragged in a breath between clenched teeth and struggled to say, "Tekkeng."

Debbi drew her Dragoon and poised her thumb over the black gun trigger. "Where?"

"Council chamber." Martool pushed herself up with great effort.

"Stay here," Debbi ordered and turned to Sahrin. "Let's go. Council chamber."

Martool's pained eyes blazed. "No! He'll kill you! I'll stop him."

As the tall anouk shaman turned away, Debbi got a flash of her mother disappearing into the smoke and fire of Cabal station, never to emerge. The Ranger reached out and seized Martool's arm.

Everything went black. Debbi felt smooth, cold shapes rushing over her. It was completely dark. She had a sense of being suddenly deep underwater or buried alive. A loud hissing noise roared in her ears. She had a sense of others around her. She searched for the sliver of light that showed the way out.

Was this Tekkeng's work? Debbi wondered with surprising calm. Dammit! How did that thing get the drop on me? Why wasn't I more careful? What do I do now?

Then Debbi realized there was no air. She couldn't draw breath. And she couldn't move.

What now? Think!

Light exploded around her. Air too. Debbi collapsed to her knees and gasped in lungfuls.

"Breathe," she heard Martool's soothing voice over her and a calming hand on her shoulders. "You're lucky to be alive."

Debbi looked up at the shaman. Fareel and Sahrin stood behind her. They no longer stood high on the windswept ledge. They were in a black chamber.

Martool said, "I didn't expect you to seize me so impetuously, so I didn't prepare you as I did Fareel and Sahrin. You could have suffocated in the rock."

"I nearly did." Debbi rasped. "You mean you took us through the rock?"

Fareel snorted derisively and muttered something nasty to himself.

Debbi eyed the warrior as she climbed to her feet. "All right, let's go get Tekkeng."

"Not you," Martool pressed a hand on Debbi's shoulder. "I will take you back."

"Every second you waste is more time with Tekkeng loose in your

Book II: The Undead War

city.”

Martool blinked with bitter resignation. “Very well. Prepare for the worst.”

Fareel gripped his tannis atax in one hand and a war ax in the other. Sahrin hefted a broad-bladed sword. All their weapons glowed fiercely with violet energy fed into them by the wielders.

Debbi pointed to the Hellrazor pulse rifle strapped to Sahrin’s back. “You’ll do better with that. The black gun should stop Tekkeng long enough for us to put him down.”

Fareel snarled and Martool said firmly, “We will stop Tekkeng without it.”

Debbi bit her lip in frustration and readied her Dragoon. The Ranger intended to use her own black gun, no matter Martool’s personal preferences or superstitions. When facing a Skinny, you better bring it all.

Martool extended her hand and the stone wall shimmered like water in a wind. The black tannis pulled back from her touch and a gap formed. With amazing speed, Fareel and Sahrin raced through the opening.

Debbi followed. She took a position between the two massive and watchful anouk warriors. Her pistol flashed around the room, seeking a target. She recognized the room as the central Council chamber where she first learned of the siege. The vast room was silent but for the crackling of torches, the creaking of the warriors’ leather, the wet sounds of their feet on the stone floor.

Tekkeng was nowhere to be seen.

But what could be seen was horrible.

The chamber was littered with anouk corpses and pieces of corpses. The slaughtered members of the War Council were scattered about the shadowy and cavernous room. Fresh anouk blood dripped down the black walls and puddled on the floor.

Debbi dragged a rough sleeve under her nose in a vain attempt to wipe away the warm stench of death that filled her nostrils. Behind her, she heard Martool’s breath escaping in a gasp of disbelief. The grisly scene battered the normally staid shaman beyond her capacity to control her reaction. Both anouk warriors turned their fearsome heads to look at their chief, for orders and for support in the face of the horrible tableaux.

Martool moved into the slaughterhouse. Her footsteps made a sucking noise as she strode through the congealing blood. “He’s killed them all. The entire Council.” She reached down and pulled a sodden feather and tannis head piece from the red mire.

“Except you,” Debbi said. “Is there anyplace safe you can go while we hunt him down?”

Martool laid a gentle hand on the face of a murdered anouk who was wide-eyed with fear even in death. “No. The only path is to find him and destroy him. And only I can do it.”

Debbi heard a squelching sound behind her. She thought it was Fareel and Sahrin moving across the blood-covered floor. She turned to see blood rising. It moved up from the floor like a viscous pillar and formed into a shape. Then it moved.

“Tekkeng!”

Fareel and Sahrin reacted before her word was completed. Fareel’s arm flashed and his star-shaped atax, trailing its violet energy, flew at the lanky, gray creature that had appeared out of the fresh blood of his

Clay & Susan Griffith

victims. Tekkeng ignored the attack and fixed his malevolent gaze instead on Debbi as she tried to thumb the black gun. She felt her fingers wrenched apart so violently she thought they might be torn from their sockets. She was horrified to see her Dragoon catapult into the darkness.

The atax struck Tekkeng, but this weapon, capable of devastating damage, merely glanced off the Skinny's shoulder causing him to make a vague noise of discomfort. The atax immediately lost its purple glow and dropped to the floor.

Fareel rushed the Skinny brandishing his war ax and screaming with brutal fury. Tekkeng didn't react other than to shift his eyes from Debbi to the warrior. Fareel flew off his feet as if struck by a bomb. He hurtled through the air and smashed into the massive scale model of Castle Rock that covered one wall of the vast chamber. The representation of Castle Rock collapsed in an avalanche of tannis, burying Fareel under a mountain of smoking detritus.

Martool raised her arms. Two columns of shining, liquid tannis rose from the floor on either side of Tekkeng and smashed together like an earthquake, crushing the Skinny between them. The shaman gritted her teeth and clenched her fists. The tannis hardened and compacted with bone-smashing force, grinding the Skinny between them.

Without warning, the twisting tannis pillars exploded. Glassy razor shards filled the air. Debbi dove as shrapnel whizzed past. It tore through her hair. She felt several pieces pop through the cloth of her jacket. Others cracked against the walls.

Just as she raised her head from the wet floor, she saw Tekkeng flash across the chamber. His limbs were grotesquely stiff and unmovable as if he was a lifeless puppet propelled by a string. The Skinny's long, bony arms lifted and clawed fingers clutched Martool around the throat. The shaman screamed briefly before the sound was cut off. The room filled with palpable hate wafting off Tekkeng. The air ripened with the roiling stench of corruption.

Sahrin roared and raised his broadsword high over his head despite the savage shrapnel wounds clearly visible across his muscular body. He made two long, bounding steps and drove the sword down through Tekkeng's shoulder blades. Violet sparks showered the area as Sahrin gave a lung-wrenching howl and shoved the black blade into the Skinny's wretched body until the hilt wedged against the bony frame.

Tekkeng screeched. He arched his back, scrabbling with one hand for the pommel of the sword. Sahrin grabbed Tekkeng's other wrist and wrenched the palsied hand off Martool. As the clawed fingers dragged loose, they left raw gashes in the shaman's throat. Sahrin took the gasping Martool into his arms and hurried her away from the ghastly, writhing Tekkeng.

Debbi scrambled to her feet. Her Dragoon was lost. But Sahrin wore a black gun across his back. The anouk warrior concentrated only on carrying Martool to safety. Debbi couldn't call to him because of the ear-splitting keening of the Skinny that reverberated through the chamber. She ran after Sahrin, skidding and slipping with each bloody step, and caught him by the powerful forearm.

"Give me your gun!" the Ranger cried. "Quick!"

Sahrin clutched Martool tighter to his chest by way of refusal. Debbi wedged her hands under the shaman's limp form.

"I'll take her," Debbi explained. "I need that gun!"

Book II: The Undead War

Sahrin reluctantly let her take his burden. The Ranger's knees nearly buckled under the weight of the seven-foot female anouk. Sahrin's eyes remained locked on his wounded chief as he started to shrug the rifle strap off one shoulder. Then his eyes widened. His mouth gaped.

"What's wrong?" Debbi asked, struggling to stay on her feet.

A clawed gray hand burst out of Sahrin's chest with a wet, snapping sound. Debbi's felt hot blood slap against her cheek. Sahrin's face froze in shock and he slumped, already dead. He dropped heavily to the floor to reveal Tekkeng poised behind with his arm soaked in gore to his barbed elbow. The Skinny scornfully tossed the tannis great sword onto Sahrin's body.

Debbi instantly swung her back to Tekkeng in a futile attempt to protect Martool with her own body. Strong fingers seized her jacket. She tensed for the blow, but instead she was jerked back hard. Martool fell from her arms. Debbi smelled Tekkeng's vile stench as she had in New Hope, a musky smell with a weird spiciness underneath. The horrible creature spun her around and she stared into its rotten face. Tekkeng's toothsome mouth dribbled with mucus from his frothing screaming fit.

Images of fetid passions ripped through Debbi's mind. There was no language involved. It was pure, pounding hatred. She saw unwanted images of Banshee overcome with a living death. Debbi felt physically ill from the waves of sickening, debilitating fear and horror that lashed into her. It was an all-encompassing desire that knew no compromise short of complete humiliation and prostration of this world. And it would never stop short of death.

Debbi lifted her foot and gripped her dagger. She struck at Tekkeng's grotesque head. The blade deflected inches away as if it hit a steel shield. The Skinny grinned and drew in a sucking gurgle of delight at the Ranger's dismay.

Debbi's vision grew faint and distant. The horrible visage of Tekkeng faded into a fog. She would've welcomed the obscurity, but she knew it meant she was dying. The Skinny was killing her, feeding on her.

Debbi was failing. She failed her mother and now she was failing Martool. And the Rangers. They didn't even know Tekkeng was inside the city. Would her friends be killed too? And Ross? She had just gotten him back.

The fog lifted suddenly. She saw Tekkeng clearly and the Skinny's eyes were oddly still and lifeless. She realized in that instant that he was psychically locked. From a black needle. Debbi drove the dagger into his throat. Then again. And again. The blows made a dry, crackling sound like a sheath driven into ancient parchment.

She ripped herself free from his stiffened grip. The Ranger dropped to the floor and unceremoniously yanked the pulse rifle from Sahrin's limp, mutilated body. Resting on one knee, she popped the Skinny with several more black needles. Then she emptied the rifle's magazine into the cadaverous thing.

Tekkeng's body jerked with each shell. The Skinny refused to drop even though his clawed feet barely touched the floor, suspended by whatever weird force kept him upright. Still, the barrage shredded him. Pieces of his putrid flesh tore away from the bone. When the gun clicked empty, he was little more than a skeleton with stray gobbets of meat dangling from glistening bones. The skull-like mouth creaked open as if to speak. Then the Skinny clattered to the floor in a heap.

Debbi turned slowly, warily, toward Martool, fearful of what she was

Clay & Susan Griffith

might see. Surprisingly, the shaman was conscious and propped on one elbow with her eyes barely open. In one hand, she held Debbi's Dragon.

The Ranger scurried across the room and put an arm around Martool's trembling shoulder. She eased the exhausted anouk down. The Ranger asked, "Is that Skinny finally dead?"

Martool swallowed with painful difficulty and shook her head.

Debbi exclaimed, "What? Are you sure? He looks pretty damned dead to me."

Martool croaked, "He can't die as you know it. I can seal him away to prevent him reforming. But that is all I can do to him for now."

"Whatever it takes." The Ranger inspected the nasty gashes on Martool's throat. "I'm sorry, but he got Sahrin and Fareel."

Martool shook her head. "Sahrin is dead. But Fareel is alive."

Debbi felt a little ashamed for wishing the warriors' fates were reversed. She pulled a packet of plastiskin out of her jacket. "And you're alive too."

"That doesn't matter now. Only you." The anouk released her hold on the Dragon and lifted her hand as if it was something disgraceful and unclean. "Only you."

Chapter 22

Rumer Curtiz was the Colonial Ranger temporarily in charge of Temptation. Prior to the Worldstorm, when he came to Temptation for safety, Curtiz had served in an isolated line cabin on the banks of the slow, muddy Lancer River where he more often carried a clipboard than a gun. He had filled his days watching caravans cross on the ferry, breaking up fights in the one riverside saloon, and occasionally filing reports from the watermen about weird fish trying to eat their boats. He never even had trouble with Reapers or anouks. Lancer Crossing was too penny ante for them to make the effort to raid. It had been a great life.

Running Temptation was a different matter altogether. It was a confusing, frustrating headache. Ross had taken most of the Rangers with him to the Red River and the others were on long patrol in the surrounding countryside. The job was becoming so frustrating for Curtiz that any unusual sound he had heard over the last three weeks instantly transformed in his mind into the sound of Ross and the returning Hosses. He would run to the window like a child looking for Santa, expecting and hoping to see the old Stallions settling into the equipment yard behind headquarters. Needless to say, he had been disappointed many times every day.

Then, one day, he heard a sound that he swore was a Stallion landing out back. But he didn't rush any more. It was probably the wind. It was always the wind. He slowly stood up from the desk in the squad room and strolled into Ross's office. He lifted the shade over the still-broken window and peered out.

A shuttlecraft was landing in the equipment yard.

However, it was not a Colonial Ranger Stallion. It was a thin profile craft that made their old Hosses look like the rust-covered freighters they were. And this sleek vessel had Hellstromme Industries markings.

The raptor-like ship settled amidst a dust cloud. A side door slid up and a ramp rolled out. Two heavily armed men strode down with very heavy pulse rifles at the ready. They scanned the area as they waited at

Book II: The Undead War

the base of the ramp.

A woman stepped out of the ship. A beautiful woman, Curtiz thought, in a punishment sort of way. Even with the coverage of dark sunglasses, she looked slightly shaken beneath an aura of deadly calm and competence. He had seen it in newcomers to Banshee before. It was impossible to hide, even for the best actors. As she stepped down the ramp in a suit more stylish than anything seen in Temptation for quite some time, two more troopers rumbled out behind her.

When she reached the ground, she noticed Curtiz's head in the office window. She stared at him through black glasses. He suddenly realized that the first two soldiers had their weapons pointed at him.

Curtiz kept his hands in plain sight on the window frame. "Easy there, ma'am. Tell your boys I'm a Colonial Ranger. It wouldn't do to shoot me."

The woman paused for a long moment as if contemplating the idea. Then she tapped one of the soldiers on the arm and they both lowered their rifles.

"Are you Captain Dave Ross?" the woman called through the wind.

"No, ma'am. My name is Curtiz. What can I do for you?"

"You can call Captain Ross for me, Mr. Curtiz." She started toward the alley to the main street. "And preferably by the time I get in the front door. Thank you."

Curtiz came back into the squad room in time to see the front door swing open and the black haired woman sweep in with two of her guards. She tossed her briefcase on a desk and popped it open. She laid out a holo-reader and a palmcorder.

The olive-skinned Curtiz watched, stroking his thick moustache.

The woman didn't look up from tapping the palmcorder's keypad. "I don't see Captain Ross yet."

"Good eyes. What do you want?"

"It's obvious. I want to see Captain Ross. Could you get him, please?" She sniffed the air. "It smells terrible in here."

"You should've been here a couple of weeks ago. It's a freaking garden party now." Curtiz massaged his pounding temples. "Who are you?"

The woman finally glanced up, obviously annoyed at having her concentration interrupted and her requests ignored. She looked Curtiz up and down critically. Then she gave him a patronizing smile as if the Ranger was an unintentionally disobedient child. "My name is Lithia. I am the regional manager for Hellstromme Industries." She paused to let the information sink in.

Curtiz raised a questioning eyebrow when there was no further elaboration. "That's good. What are you doing here?"

Lithia typed on the keypad of her palmcorder and read the screen. "Rumer Curtiz? Prior to the Worldstorm, you were posted at Lancer Crossing."

Curtiz tilted his head in interest. "Yeah. How'd you know that? What do you have on that minicomputer there?"

Lithia assumed a patiently understanding air. "We at Hellstromme Industries know many things. Is Captain Ross coming or not?"

"He's gone."

"When will he be back?"

"I pray any second. But I wouldn't count on it."

Lithia's eyes darted from side to side. "Where has he gone?"

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Out to the Red River Valley."

The woman's face showed concern. "Why?"

"He got a distress call from one of our Rangers. He took a posse and went out."

"I see. Well, when did he leave?"

"Little over three weeks ago," Curtiz answered. "Haven't heard from him since."

"He's been gone for *three* weeks without communication? In the Red River Valley?"

"I'm not any happier about it than you are, Ms. Lithia. But if there's anybody who can take care of himself, it's Ross."

Lithia nodded faintly to a chair and one of her guards pulled it out for her. She regarded the dust on it and remained standing. She gazed up at Curtiz in deadly earnest. "I'm here as an official liaison to the Colonial Rangers."

"Okay."

Lithia busily tapped the palmcorder. "How many Rangers are in the area?"

Curtiz eyed the trooper next to the woman. His skin looked odd. "Um. Yeah. I don't think that's any of your business, ma'am. You need to talk to Ross."

"Ross isn't here, is he?"

"Nope."

"Who's in charge in Captain Ross's absence?"

Curtiz continued to study the guard. "That's a good question. Technically, it'd probably be Stew. But we're not much on technicality around here. I imagine it would be Dallas."

"Then is Dallas here?"

"No. She's the one Ross went to Red River to rescue. Is your man there a robot?"

"They are automatons. I would appreciate some cooperation, Ranger Curtiz. Since I am here as a Hellstromme Industries liaison to the Colonial Rangers, I would appreciate it if I could get someone in authority with whom to liaise."

Curtiz sat heavily on the desk and screwed up his face in confusion. "Ma'am, I'm not authorized to liaise with anybody. You'll have to wait for Ross. Or Dallas. Or Stew."

"So evidently, anybody *but* you." She shook his head ruefully. "What about your town council?"

"Yeah, well, that could be a problem. There were three men on the town council. We threw Fairchild out of town because he subverted the militia and tried to open the gates to the Reapers. And Peck was eaten by cannibalistic zombies. Or at least we think he was. Doc Dazy hasn't identified all the bones yet. There's still the other guy, Atkinson, but he hasn't been the same since the Undead Legion was here. He just sort of stares off into space most of the time these days." Curtiz thought for a second. "Man, our town council sucks."

Lithia eyed the Ranger over the top of her glasses. "Are you sure Ross is even coming back?"

Suddenly the office door flew open. A young boy with a Ranger badge pinned to his shirt stuck an excited face inside and shouted, "There's robots outside!"

Curtiz's head jerked up at young Stephen's entrance. The two troopers whirled on the boy with their guns up. The Ranger went for his Dragon

Book II: The Undead War

with impressive speed before Lithia could even react. Luckily the automatons didn't fire. Curtiz eased his finger off the trigger as Lithia ordered her men to stand down. Stephen didn't seem to notice that he was almost blasted out of existence. He stared at the two mechanical men with fascination.

"There's robots in here too!" he cried with delight.

Lithia ground her teeth and said to Curtiz, "You'll need to alert the locals not to make sudden moves around my guards."

Curtiz holstered his weapon with a derisive snort. "Yeah, well, you'll wanna turn their reaction knobs down just a touch before Ross gets back. He won't cotton to your robots drawing down on children."

Lithia smiled condescendingly. "Thank you for the tip. Will you alert me when Captain Ross returns? I will be setting up operations in the old Hellstromme offices. I assume they are still in the condition in which we left them?"

"Except for the big hole in the front where a Reaper missile hit it, yeah."

"Charming. I will need to reattach to the power grid."

Curtiz reached over and picked up an oil lantern. "Here you go."

"Does *anything* work in this town?"

"The saloons are open 24 hours."

"At last, something that sounds useful." With that, Lithia stalked from the office leaving one of her automatons to gather her briefcase and follow.

Stephen watched the departing Hellstromme Industries liaison and her bodyguard from the front window, pressing his excited face against the glass. "I never seen a real robot before! She looked almost real!"

Curtiz sank into a chair, his head pounding. "Yeah. She looked almost real."

Chapter 23

Debbi stood in the avenue that cut through the wall from the gate to the courtyard. Where she stood, the sides of the avenue were nearly fifteen feet high on both sides, and the Rangers' makeshift tannis wall blocked it. If the Legion breached the main gate, this wall would trap them, at least for a while, and allow the Rangers to fire down from the steps above and hopefully slaughter a few zombies. She watched as a group of anouks prowled around the wall, probing and stroking it. Their hands glowed with a weird purple energy that they directed into the loose stone to fuse it into a solid monolith. It had been finished in the three days since the battle with Tekkeng. The Legion had been unusually quiet. Some of the Rangers eagerly speculated Quantrill might retreat due to the loss of his pet Skinny.

Debbi wasn't so sure.

Fareel strode along the top of the barrier and directed the anouk gang to spots in the rock that still needed welding. He paused and wiped his face. Then he kicked the welded seams between the rocks and grunted with satisfaction.

Debbi said, "Looks great, Fareel. That oughta hold them for a while. But should you be out here? You were hurt pretty badly." She hoped that sharing the pain of Sahrin's death would draw them together in some way. Fareel had worked every minute since his friend's death.

The warrior glowered down at Debbi, his eyes locked on the battered

Clay & Susan Griffith

badge that she had given Sahrin and now wore again in tribute to his memory. Fareel pounded his chest with a fist to show he was sound.

"Yeah, all right," the Ranger said irritably at his display. "Take it easy. You don't have to prove anything."

Stew's voice crackled in her ear. "Dallas. Stew."

"Dallas here. What is it, Stew?"

"The Legion's on the move! Looks like half a division coming at the gate!"

Oh God, Debbi thought, grateful she didn't say it aloud. Immediately, she heard chatter in her ear as the Ranger comlinks started buzzing. Ross got busy tossing out orders.

"I'm on my way. Dallas out." She unslung the Hellrazor that Sahrin had worn and she now carried. The Ranger ignored the pain in her body as she shouted back at Fareel, "Finish up in a hurry! The Legion's coming!"

* * *

Hundreds of rotting Legionnaires swarmed over the edge of the crevice only three hundred yards from the great wall and moved across the uneven ground in good order. They were not in the large baroque square formations because the terrain prevented it. They gathered in smaller squads of ten to twenty troopers, a more standard operational structure for the Syker Legion. These squads fired savage blasts of psychic energy that smashed into the wall with terrifying force.

The Colonial Rangers mounted the parapets and began to rain black needles and small arms fire down on the advancing Legionnaires. Soon, though, they saw that Quantrill had altered his tactics yet again. Different Legionary squads had been given specific tasks. Certain squads were "artillery," gathering energy and firing blasts at the wall and the defenders atop it, while others were screeners, generating force shields to protect the offensive squads from black needles. They dropped the screens so a blast could be fired and then raise them again immediately. In addition, certain squads roamed the field retrieving the stunned or wounded and drawing them out of range. The Legion was doing an admirable job of conserving their limited resources while still delivering firepower.

Hallow was silently impressed. The undead squads operated with extraordinary coordination. This mental network, however it was fueled and controlled, worked very well.

Miller wasn't so enamored of syker tactics. He fired and complained. "Damn it! I know I've seen that guy there at least three times. They keep dragging the son of a bitch out of range and then sending him back again."

"Well then, shoot it again," Stew suggested. He rolled his shoulders quickly to relieve the ache that still nested there from the assassin's blast he'd taken beneath Castle Rock.

Fitz called out, "How come those guys don't get sick and die like Hallow here?" He turned to Hallow who was a few yards down the wall. "Nothing personal there, pal. But, holy cow, we've shot some of them so many times they ought to have brain lesions on their brain lesions. No offense."

"None taken," Hallow responded. "It's a good question. I suppose being dead has advantages all its own."

Chennault put two fingers to her mouth and whistled. "Power up!"

Book II: The Undead War

Two o'clock."

All the Rangers looked in the indicated direction and saw the weird green energy beginning to surround one squad. But they also saw the faint, telltale shimmer of a force screen generated by flanking Legionnaires. The sound of assault rifle bolts filled the air and multiple barrels swiveled to the two o'clock position.

They waited.

The force screen dropped and several Rangers shouted "Now!" and the parapet erupted like an old musket line with simultaneous needle and standard ammo fire. The energy blast slammed into the wall, sending tannis shrapnel whizzing through the air. At the same time, several Legionnaires dropped. The force shield slid back up and a retrieval squad began to pull the wounded from the field.

"I'm hit!" Fitz yelled and he slid down against the wall. "And guess where."

Hiroshi Tsukino scuttled to Fitz's side. He set down his medic bag and began to examine the big man's wound. Fitz's shirt sleeve was torn and blood ran down the upper portion of his right arm.

"For Heaven's sake!" Fitz stared at his bloody arm. "I'm a big, fat guy and all I do is take shots to the arm! I'd welcome a little shrapnel in my gut sometime so that when I'm old I won't have to eat out of a trough."

Tsukino laughed as he applied antiseptic spray. "I don't think you'll lose this one, Fitz. Try to keep your arm behind your head and maybe it'll stay pristine."

"Har har. Just slap a bandage on it, Hiro, and shut up."

Ross glanced at Fitz quickly and, satisfied the big Irishman was good to go, he turned back to the wall.

"This ain't gettin' it," Ross said to Debbi. "Quantrill's just wearing us out, wasting our ammo. When these needles are gone, they're gone. We can't get a resupply. Quantrill is one smart dead man."

"But we can't just stop shooting," Debbi said.

"No kiddin'. We can't let them get to the wall uncontested. He knows that too. And they're getting too many shots at us as it is. The wall's taking a beating and they're liable to blast that gate right off its hinges. A few hundred warriors! That's all I need. A few hundred warriors to flank 'em and we could roll them and wipe out half the Legion!" Ross scanned the courtyard and the parapets while muttering, "Where's Fareel? I'll bet he would get a war party together."

Debbi argued, "You can't go behind Martool's back!"

"The hell I can't. I'll do *whatever* it takes, Dallas. I'm tired of hiding. Martool is playing right into Quantrill's hands and she apparently doesn't know it. Or if she does know, she doesn't care. She may be hot with the spiritual mumbo jumbo, but that's no real feat; shamans are a dime a dozen on this planet. She knows nothing about fighting war. So now she's on the road to losing. And she's taking me with her. I don't intend for that to happen."

"Fareel won't defy Martool. Particularly not for you. You're a human. The only thing you're going to do is create problems for us."

"Fareel's a warrior. Trust me, I know his type. It doesn't matter what color he is. He wants to *win*."

Debbi felt her face flush with anger. The instant Martool discovered Ross was trying to undercut her power she was liable to abandon the Rangers to the more brutal whims of the warriors, like Fareel, who despised humans. The Rangers were guests, and not welcome ones.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Martool didn't care if any of them, with the apparent exception of Debbi, lived or died. And while Martool showed herself to be quiet and even passive at times, Debbi knew the iron that was in the shaman's fiber. Martool would react harshly to Ross's underhanded actions and her vengeance would be swift.

But even as all those thoughts passed through her mind, another explosion rocked the wall and she nearly fell. More tannis shards flew and cracks appeared in the wall.

"That's enough!" Ross shouted. "That is damn enough!" He pointed down the line. "Stew! We need air support. You and the syker, go!"

Without a word, Stew turned and vaulted down the steps. Hallow hesitated, but followed. They were both injured, but ran as best they could to one of the two Stallions in the courtyard below. There was no time for preflight check. The ship powered up and lifted off. It rose straight up into the dizzying heights of the complex until it was lost in the haze.

Ross strode along the parapets. Fifty yards away, a group of anouks fired down at the Legionnaires with both rifles and ataxes. Debbi couldn't help but watch with interest as Ross began to talk to the surprised warriors. There was much arm waving and angry shouting and pointing.

After a moment, several of the anouks shook their weapons at Ross, but Fareel raised his arm to block them. The anouk turned to his brothers and spoke; then the warriors descended the steps together and crossed the courtyard at a run, drawing more warriors as they went.

When Ross returned, he gave Debbi a smug thumbs up. She started to speak, but he interrupted her. "Dallas, you and Ringo bring up the last of the black guns from the Hoss. When Fareel flanks those Legionnaires, we should get our chance to pour it on 'em and I want the ammo to do it right."

Debbi signaled for Ringo to follow her. As they climbed down, she felt a cold fear spreading in her.

It felt like betrayal.

Chapter 24

Debbi and Ringo hustled the black guns out of the back of the Stallion and up to the parapets. When they cracked open the crate, they were distressed to see only ten of the guns remained. Thanks to the fighting outside the walls early in the siege and the constant sniping from the parapets, their stock had been severely depleted. Debbi and Ringo served them out to the Rangers so that everybody had at least one spare hanging from their belt.

The Rangers continued to spray fire down at the Legion to keep Quantrill's troops from suspecting anything was afoot. Ross waited, unconsciously watching a jagged outcropping from which he expected Fareel to lead his raiders. Fareel had promised that he could collect at least two hundred warriors eager to come to grips with the enemy after the weeks of enforced inaction behind the walls. The anouks' minds were still fresh with the memories of the screams of their clan members as they were flayed alive for food. The warriors could exit the fortress through another of the many hidden entrances and wend their way on their chanouks across impassable ravines until they were barely one hundred yards from the Legion on a theoretically unreachable quarter of

Book II: The Undead War

the enemy's flank. Then they would charge out and take the walking dead by surprise.

However, Fareel was waiting too. Ross promised that Stew would assault the Legion in a Hoss to soften them up and draw their fire. Over the patter of gunfire and the weird unnoise caused by the sykers' blasts, Ross heard the sound of the approaching Stallion. While the vehicles were relatively quiet, he was attuned to them.

The Stallion was an extremely maneuverable vehicle and Stew was the best pilot among the Temptation Rangers. But even Ross was amazed when he looked over his shoulder and saw the Hoss plummeted down the canyon wall at a desperately steep angle. It looked as if it was power-diving straight for the Rangers' location. It was, no doubt, the fastest way to bring the ship's guns to bear on the enemy, but in the hands of any but the surest or luckiest pilot, it was suicide. Any jiggling of the yoke and the Hoss would crash into the rocks jutting from the canyon or into the walls or bridges of Castle Rock.

The Stallion's forward cannons opened up on the Legionnaires. The ground shattered among the undead. Bodies flew, some in pieces. They were unprepared for air attack, but it only took them a moment to alter the angle of their shields.

The Stallion suddenly pulled up and roared just over the Rangers' position. Ross felt the wash. Hats flew. Ringo and Ngoma dived to the deck. The ship streaked over the Legionnaires and banked straight up, raking the zombies with rear cannons. Standing firm under the barrage, several Legionnaires shifted their gazes to the vehicle. Their energy blasts streaked out after the Hoss, burning along its side. The Stallion went hard over. Some of the Rangers shouted in alarm, afraid that Stew was losing control. But the Hoss righted and sailed up into the higher reaches of the canyon.

Fitz let out a loud whoop.

Debbi called out to Ross, "When Fareel's people show, don't shoot them with the black needles! The needles are dangerous to them!"

Ross shot her a look. "What? How do you know that?"

"Martool told me. I felt it was privileged information."

"We'll have to talk about whose side you're on later!" He turned to Ringo at his shoulder. "Pass it down, kid. Don't take any chances of hitting anouks with the needles."

Ringo yelled the warning to Ngoma who was fifty feet down the line. He nodded and turned to continue the call.

On the field below, retrieval squads pulled the wounded and their dismembered limbs from the field. Force shields covered the rescuers.

Suddenly, in the distance, a horde of chanouk-borne warriors poured from a cleft in a cliff, spreading like water surging from a fissure in a dam. Each chanouk and rider was a self-contained war machine. Fareel's charge of nearly seventy beasts rapidly crossed the uneven ground and fell with crushing force on the unprotected flank of a surprised Legionary squad. Unwary troopers were pummeled beneath muscular paws. Fareel didn't stop there. His savage attack pushed on, scattering or trampling the first squad he impacted and tearing into a second that was generating shields. This allowed the rear of the anouk unit to pounce on the troopers who had already been disrupted by the initial charge while Fareel continued on without losing the momentum of the assault.

A massive chanouk charge was an electrifying spectacle. The air

Clay & Susan Griffith

filled with war cries and screams of pain. Dust and dirt rose from the melee of feet and massive paws and partially obscured the battlefield. Despite being under fire, the Rangers on the wall found themselves cheering as they watched the leonine creatures shredding undead troopers while anouks hacked and slashed from the saddle with glowing swords and axes that left streaks of violet energy in the air.

Blood pounded in Ross's head and he felt delicious fear and excitement watching the carnage below. As a young Colonial Ranger at Perdition Ridge, he had experienced a full-scale chanouk charge from the combined war parties of five clans. Now he thrilled to the terror the Legionnaires must be feeling, if the dead felt anything at all. The Great Charge had become the storied event of colonial warfare and hardly a Colonial Ranger or UN trooper didn't lay claim to having stood the bloody line against a savage chanouk charge. Most were lying, or just remembering with exaggerated terror facing one or two chanouks.

Ross felt a shiver run up his spine and he actually laughed out loud. He wished he were out there with Fareel. The anouks were magnificent cavalymen. As he watched the power of the attack, he knew more than ever that he was right and Martool was wrong. The only way to win this war was to unleash these ferocious warriors on the Legion. Ross's mind began to race over long-range plans for beating back Quantrill's main advance on Castle Rock. Afterwards he would sift forces throughout the canyon to block the enemy retreat and mercilessly cut them into pieces, scattering them back into the ground from which Quantrill had pulled them.

Ross watched as Stew's ship veered away from Castle Rock heading deeper into zombie territory to harry the rear of the Legion and keep them distracted. The battle was too closely joined below the wall for Stew to do any more good on this front.

The Rangers kept up their barrage on the Legionnaires. The defense screens were weakening as the brutal fighting with the anouks drew the attention of many frontline troopers. Zombies hit by needles froze in their tracks, only to be dropped by fire from the wall.

Fareel's warriors were at close quarters with five squads of the undead. Psychic energy flashed, slashing through anouks. Bony hands pulled screaming warriors from their saddles. Fareel struck tirelessly, war axes in both hands, slashing down at surrounding zombies. He and his warriors spun their mounts, fighting on all sides. They were covered in gore. They bashed troopers to the ground, only to have many of them climb unsteadily to their feet. So they bashed them again. Soon, fewer and fewer zombies were able to return to the attack.

The Legion responded quickly. Reinforcements poured over the distant rise, racing to engage Fareel's cavalry before the anouks could complete their destruction of the five squads and wheel left to fall on the rear of the forward squads who were still attacking the wall. The advancing reinforcements fired psychic blasts into the roiling mob with amazing accuracy, slicing past zombies and into anouks and their mounts. The blasts pummeled warriors unconscious in their saddle. Chanouks roared, swiping at the unseen source of pain.

Just then a second wave of fifty chanouks charged from another ravine. They tore across the open field, yelling and waving war axes, javelins, and ataxes. The four fresh Legionary squads turned right to meet the charge, leaving their undead brothers to their bloody fate at Fareel's clawed hands. They opened fire on the new onrushing warriors

Book II: The Undead War

with automatic weapons. The front rank of chanouks reared up and took most of the shots in the tannis armor plating strung over their thick necks and massive chests. Charged ataxes flew into Legionnaires, ripping through soft chest cavities and tearing gashes in rotten heads.

Ross felt Debbi grab his arm. He looked at her and followed her worried glance behind them into the courtyard. The distant figure of Martool strode toward them. She was alone. She had no bodyguards with her. Although it wasn't always easy for humans to visually gauge the emotions of anouks, she was clearly enraged. With a set jaw, Ross immediately descended the steps to block Martool from approaching his people. Debbi slipped into pace behind him.

The two Rangers leaped to the bottom of the steps just as the anouk shaman reached them.

"How dare you!" Martool faced Ross with unconcealed fury.

"I don't have time right now," Ross responded. "Fareel and his boys are about to whipsaw a Legion division."

Martool brushed past Ross and set her foot on the bottom step. "I am going to recall my warriors. Then I will deal with you."

Ross grabbed Martool's arm and spun her around.

Debbi audibly gasped. There was a snap of energy and Ross sailed fifty feet through the air. He landed heavily in the dirt. The Ranger scrambled to his feet apparently unhurt. Debbi angled herself between Martool and Ross with arms raised.

"Stop it!" Debbi shouted. "Martool, Fareel went of his own accord; Ross had no way to force him. And he's winning!"

Ross towered over Debbi's shoulder, snarling. He clutched his numb right arm to his chest.

"At least Fareel is doing something!" the enraged veteran Ranger yelled at the anouk shaman. "You could learn something from him."

Martool stared at Ross. "It is none of your concern what I am doing to fight the Legion. I no longer have a War Council and the fact that I have to worry about you undermining my authority with my warriors is not making it any easier. You have endangered this entire city."

Ross was about to reply, but Martool suddenly turned her head and stared toward the massive sun gate. Her face was a mask of alarm that silenced the Ranger's retort before it was spoken.

"What is it?" Debbi asked.

"Something bad." Martool climbed the steps to the parapet of the wall.

Ross didn't try to stop her. He and Debbi followed her to the battlements. The wind slapped their faces as they peered over the wall at the still-raging battle.

Martool pointed down to the ground just outside the sun gate. It was a difficult angle to see clearly from the parapets because the gate was recessed two feet into the thick wall and the area in front of the gate was in deep shadow. It took several moments for human eyes to adjust. Finally Debbi saw the earth thirty feet below and she saw that it was churning.

"What the hell is that?" Ross growled from beside her.

Arms protruded from the earth and bodies rose up. Figures struggled out of the ground, dirt falling away. Five, then ten dead people shoved dirt aside and climbed out of holes in the ground. They carried tools, shovels particularly, which they dropped as they emerged from the earth. They all approached the gate and laid hands on it.

Clay & Susan Griffith

They began to glow with fierce energy.

"Sappers!" Ross exclaimed. "I don't believe it. Quantrill, you son of a bitch!" He leaned over the top of the wall and aimed awkwardly at the Legionnaires at the gate. He yelled back at the Rangers, "Open fire! At the gate!"

The Rangers all craned over the wall and tried to fire down on the figures at the gate. Miller, Fitz, and Chennault ran across the footbridge that spanned the top of the gate and took positions on the far side. It was hard to see the targets, but the telltale shimmering of a force screen over their heads made it clear the needles were not hitting.

"Grenades!" Ross shouted.

The line of Rangers pumped high explosive grenades into the Hellrazors and fired down at the Legionnaires. The ground blossomed red with multiple explosions. Debbi felt the hot backwash and her ears rang.

When the smoke cleared, the troopers were still standing. The screen had not been breached.

And the sun gate was beginning to glow.

"Again!" Ross pumped another grenade into his pulse rifle.

Down the line, Miller screamed and pulled his weapon back over the wall. His eyes were wide. He pulled the trigger and swung the barrel of the Hellrazor in an arc. Shells sprayed across the parapet. The sykers had him in a brainlock, a tough feat at this distance.

"Miller's lost it! Get down!" Debbi fell back against Ross. She felt his left arm encircle her and yank her down. With her free hand, she grabbed Martool's arm and pulled her with them. She felt the pinch of tannis shrapnel as bullets pockmarked the wall above her.

Debbi heard screams and shouts from behind as surprised Rangers stood transfixed or dived for cover. She struggled to bring her heavy Hellrazor up as Miller completed the deadly arc. She didn't want to shoot Miller, but she would.

Fitz lunged awkwardly at the mind-controlled Ranger, but missed. Chennault dropped her own pulse rifle and, in a blur, grabbed the barrel of Miller's Hellrazor just as it came to bear on her. The rifle continued to fire along the side of her ribcage until she gave it a vicious twist and pulled it from Miller's hands. She lifted the Hellrazor and rammed the butt back into Miller's face. His head snapped back and he stood stupidly for a second. Then he collapsed.

Chennault offered an exhausted smirk. "I've always wanted to do that." Then she reached down to help Fitz regain his feet.

Ross crawled out from under Debbi and checked Martool. The anouk shaman was unhurt. He shouted up and down the line, "Who's hit?"

"Ngoma's down!" Ringo knelt next to the unconscious Ranger.

Tsukino hurried over and checked him. He called back to Ross, "He's hurt bad."

"Take him to a tent," Ross said. "You and Ringo. Go!"

Martool held up her hand and went to Ngoma. "I will help him. Keep your men here."

Ross immediately commanded, "Ringo, Tsukino! Back on the line!"

Debbi ran across the narrow footbridge to the far side of the gate. Her legs tingled from the energy pouring up from the sappers.

Chennault was examining Miller whose face was covered in blood.

Debbi asked, "Did you kill him?"

Chennault said, "Nah. He'll be fine. That pretty boy nose'll never be the

Book II: The Undead War

same though."

Debbi pointed to the burns along Chennault's ribs. "Are you all right?"

The stocky, blonde, ex-Marine glanced down at the marks and probed them curiously with her finger. "Oh. Yeah."

"Can you get Miller down?"

"Sure." Chennault was only 5'3", but she had enormous strength. She lifted the deadweight Miller over her shoulder and started down. "I should roll you down these steps, you weak-minded bastard."

Debbi heard Stew's voice crackle in her ear. "Ross. Stew. Bad news."

Ross responded, "Go ahead."

"I make about half the Legion moving up toward your position."

Ross sensed a ripple of fear moving through all the Rangers. They paused and looked at each other. He forced himself to resume firing over the wall at the sappers below without a facial response to Stew's report.

"How long, Stew?" he asked flatly.

"First wave ought to be there any minute. The main body is backed up on the trails, but they're coming. I'll do what I can to hold them up."

Debbi ran back to the footbridge, but something caught her attention before she could cross. She looked down into the deep avenue. She felt heat pouring up and saw the unimaginable. The great tannish gate glowed with an odd violet sheen. The stone was sweating beads of molten rock.

The sun gate was melting.

Chapter 25

"Ross," Debbi shouted over the comlink. "The gate is melting!"

Ross looked at her from across the gap and then moved to the side of the avenue chasm. He stared at the bleeding gate without emotion.

Ross climbed to the battlements again and knelt beside Martool where she attended Ngoma. "Martool, you better pull Fareel's troops outta there. We've got half the Legion coming. And the gate's about to go. Take Ngoma and Miller and get to safety. The Rangers will cover here as long as we can and give you time to get your defenses up."

Martool eyed him impassively and returned to Ngoma.

Ross said louder, "Did you hear me?"

"I heard you, Captain Ross. It is being done."

Ngoma's eyes fluttered open and he appeared as if he'd just awakened from a sudden nap. He looked around with embarrassment. He reached quickly for his weapon and struggled to stand up.

"Sorry," he said to Ross. "I don't know what happened."

"Easy, Ngoma. You all right?"

Martool stood. "Your man is fit."

The young man studied his bloodied tunic with detached interest. "Back on the line?"

Ross jerked his head toward the wall and the Ranger scrambled eagerly up to the parapet.

"Thanks," Ross said to Martool. "But you better get outta here. It's gonna get pretty hairy in a few minutes."

"We must all leave here. The sun gate precinct is being evacuated. In a few moments this part of my city will become Legion territory."

Ross didn't note any open accusation in her tone. But her words were clear enough. He said, "We'll hold the gate and cover the evacuation."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"No! You must all leave now!"

"What is your problem? First you don't want us here. Then you don't want us fighting. Now you don't want us dying?"

Martool stepped closer to the querulous human, towering over the Ranger and glaring down at him. She pointed a long, nailed finger over his shoulder. "I don't want *her* to die. She cannot die in this unclean place. I do not care about you. But she does as you do, for reasons I cannot fathom."

Ross knew she was pointing at Debbi even without glancing over his shoulder.

Oblivious to the argument, Debbi stood at the battlements, firing into the Legionnaires. Fitz was at her side now. On the battlefield, Fareel's cavalry was disengaging. Their retreat was fleet, but still left them open to a withering fire from the battered Legion squads. The Rangers did what they could to keep the undead busy ducking and picking their bullet-riddled cadavers off the ground.

Debbi turned her head to the left to watch impatiently as Ross continued to argue with Martool. At least she assumed they were arguing even though there was no shouting and arm waving. Ross turned briefly and looked at Debbi before turning back to Martool. Whatever the discussion was about, this was no time for colliding egos. There should be no argument about what to do now; it was perfectly clear.

The gate was about to collapse.

Hectic movement filled the city behind the courtyard. Adult and young anouks scurried along the tops of walls, through corridors, over bridges, moving themselves and their possessions and animals away from the sun gate. Martool should be with them; there was nothing she could do here, and without her, Castle Rock would perish. The Rangers would hold the line for as long as they could, giving the anouks time to move their civilians to safety and shore up their defenses.

What else was there to talk about?

"You think this is it for us?" Fitz asked suddenly.

Debbi looked at him in surprise. She saw a placid, accepting grin on his face.

"I don't know," she replied.

"There's a Hoss sitting right there." Fitz stroked the tannis breastplate that he still wore. "But we wouldn't just bug out and leave these people open like that, would we? I mean, if those zombies get past us, it's all over for these anouks. Right?"

They both saw the Stallion sitting empty in the courtyard 200 yards away, in the middle of the Rangers' makeshift camp. The vehicle was certainly large enough to pack all the Rangers in for an escape.

Debbi nodded.

"It's like the Alamo back on Earth." Fitz looked thoughtful. "There's a couple of us. There's a bunch of them."

Debbi asked, "Everybody in the Alamo died, didn't they?"

"Well, sure. But they went down in history."

Debbi pondered silently. Then she said, "But the way history gets written, I just have a terrible feeling *Miller* will come out the hero of this whole thing."

"Yeah," Fitz muttered, "I hate to think of all those poor, little children reading about Miller in school."

Ross's voice came over the com. "Chennault. Load Miller in the back

Book II: The Undead War

of the Hoss. Then fire it up. We're getting out."

Debbi and Fitz exchanged shocked looks.

Martool left Ross's side and descended quickly toward the courtyard as he continued staring out over the battlefield. Fareel and his anouk warriors were nearly gone from the field. Twenty or thirty dead chanouks and a few dead warriors who had not been retrieved by their clansmen were scattered among the reforming units of the undead Legion. The Legionnaires were grouping themselves again into orderly squads. Unharried now, they turned their full force at the wall. The Rangers kept shooting, but it was next to useless as the undead sykers returned to their effective fire and screen rotation.

Debbi immediately raced across the footbridge that vibrated with energy. She felt as if the soles of her boots would melt from the heat. She ran to Ross on the battlements.

"What are we doing?" Debbi asked breathlessly. "This gate's coming down. The Legion will be inside the walls soon. We can't abandon these people. Not after everything Martool has done for us! She saved you and me. And she saved Hallow. And now Ngoma! I know you hate her, but we owe her! We've got to hold the line here. There are children beyond those walls and the Legion will kill them and eat them! Do you understand that? Are you listening to me?"

Ross had his face pressed against the stock of his Hellrazor, taking aim at the undead below. He squeezed the trigger and studied the futile result.

"You finished?" Ross asked her quietly.

Debbi didn't answer.

He said, "Then get your ass down to that Hoss and help Chennault. We're pulling out."

"No."

"What did you say?" Ross eyed her over the butt of the pulse rifle.

"I said *no*."

Debbi held Ross's gaze. Even through the din of battle, she heard his breath hissing in and out. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ringo watching them with his mouth open in shock.

Ross maintained an even voice. "This is Martool's idea. She wants us out of the way."

Debbi quickly glanced at the anouk shaman who was crossing the courtyard alone. It was Debbi's nature to believe Ross without question. But that surety had come under fire. She saw his eyebrows flinch the barest fraction of an inch. His eyes momentarily betrayed a subtle shock as he read the doubt in her face.

For Ross, the shock didn't come from the fact Debbi questioned his orders; she had done that many times. Rather it was because she doubted his truthfulness, and perhaps even his courage. It was a unique and alarming experience and what surprised him most in that split second he saw the shadow of suspicion cross her face, something he had never seen in her before, was that his reflection in her eyes mattered so much to him.

Ross's fleeting reaction caused Debbi's breath to catch. She instantly realized she had been wrong and he had caught her in it. She saw a glimmer of hurt and doubt in his demeanor. It was slight, but on someone as naturally guarded as Ross it stood out like a gaping wound.

"Ross, I . . ."

"Go help Chennault prep the Hoss." He resumed sighting down the

Clay & Susan Griffith

barrel of his rifle. "We don't have much time."

She ran down the steps to the courtyard. Chennault emerged from the rear compartment of the Stallion where she'd just deposited the still-unconscious Miller.

Chennault said, "You fly. I'll keep loading crap in the back."

Debbi didn't answer. She just opened the driver's door and climbed up. She paused to gaze over the roof of the vehicle at Martool as she passed through the graveyard and disappeared into a passageway nearly a quarter of a mile away. When the door closed behind anouk shaman, it seemed to vanish into the wall. The courtyard was deserted, but windows and gaps in the interior walls showed many anouks still scurrying to get clear of the area.

Debbi jammed her Hellrazor beside her seat and settled behind the controls. She fired up the engines and felt them thrumming through her body. The Ranger checked the loads in the cannons while slipping on the targeting headset and pulling the lens down over her eye.

"They're coming in!" she heard blared through her headset.

The area around the gate surged with violet energy that poured up from the avenue.

Ross pulled away from the parapet and shouted. "Get to the trench!"

The Colonial Rangers bounded down the steps and took positions along the stair-stepped edges overlooking the entryway. They aimed down, eyes squinting against the waves of heat.

The heavy wooden blocks of the gate burst into flame. The tannis reinforcements sweated and dripped like ice cubes in a furnace. The dribble of liquid tannis turned into a flow, pouring into the avenue. Blasts of energy finally slammed through the melting gate and punched gaping holes in it. Through those gaps, the Rangers saw Legionnaires forming up outside, preparing to surge in once the gate fell.

Ross said into his com, "Chennault, forget the equipment. We need your gun up here. Dallas, get that Hoss going."

"I'm ready when you are," Debbi replied.

Pieces of flaming wood crumbled and soft tannis sagged like putty. The front rank of Legionnaires used their telekinetic powers to shove the molten tannis aside, clearing paths for the undead troopers to sweep through.

The Rangers opened fire. Troopers could only squeeze through the demolished gate a few at a time. Their squad-based shield and fire scheme was useless here. It was every dead man for himself. Those Legionnaires who generated personal defense shields found their screens woefully inadequate to protect them against the slugging power of the Rangers' Hellrazors. The heavy shells often penetrated the troopers' shields completely or at least slammed them to the ground. With their shields shattered, the zombies were vulnerable to the black guns and the Rangers poured down a thick rain of needles on them. Legionnaires froze. Hellrazors spat lead, blowing holes in decayed torsos and scoring occasional head shots. Chennault joined the line and added her sharp eye and steady hand to the shooting gallery.

"Like fish in a barrel!" Ringo shouted without mirth while blasting away at zombies below him. "Die, you bastards! Die!"

Undead continued to advance, crawling over the twitching bodies of their comrades. They shot energy blasts up past the Rangers. They used their powers to seize pieces of burning wreckage and fling them at the defenders. The detritus smashed off the sides of the steps and splattered

Book II: The Undead War

the Rangers with splinters of burning wood and gobs of molten tannis.

Tsukino took a piece of the black lava against his shoulder. He spun and dropped to his knees, but didn't scream. He quickly shucked his burning jacket. Ross could see the man's raw, red flesh exposed beneath what was left of his shirt. But Tsukino silently picked up his rifle and returned to shooting, jamming the stock into his other shoulder.

Ross yelled to Tsukino and Fitz, who were highest on the steps, to pull back. The Legionnaires were pushing inexorably into the avenue; if Ross waited too long, the troopers might break through the makeshift wall inside the avenue and pour out into the courtyard, cutting the Rangers off from the Hoss. Ross knew that these men and women around him had followed him here on a battle that was largely his own. They had stayed out of loyalty in the face of enormous odds. The thought of giving ground to Quantrill sickened Ross, but there was more at stake than his personal demons. Martool's enigmatic words and nature had first made him think. But then, looking into Dallas's doubting eyes had made him realize that his need for revenge was endangering the people who had followed him, in some cases, for years because they trusted and believed in him, not because he was a captain in the Colonial Rangers. He wouldn't betray them now as part of his mad drive for vengeance and, even more, he kept replaying Martool's enigmatic warning about Debbi dying at Castle Rock. Despite his natural instinct for hard-headed rationality, the shaman's words echoed in his memory and he couldn't shake them.

Tsukino and Fitz made their way down the steps and took up new positions on either side of the gate avenue. They continued to fire into the Legionnaires who climbed over mounds of their rotting fellows.

Ross ordered, "Ngoma, Ringo, back to the Hoss."

Both young men complied without question. Ringo outpaced the other Ranger, racing for the idling Stallion like a drowning man swimming for a lifeboat.

Ross fired the last of his grenades and watched with grim delight as Legionnaires were blasted off their feet and detached limbs spiraled through the air. Several energy beams slashed close to his head. He felt the breeze.

They were getting the range.

"Chennault, time to go!" Ross and the powerful, ex-Marine moved slowly down the steps, firing all the way. "Fitz, Tsukino, get to the Hoss!"

The injured Ranger and his one-armed partner hesitated to leave Ross and Chennault alone. Their commander motioned again. They turned and legged it across the courtyard to join Ringo and Ngoma as they piled into the back of the Stallion.

An energy blast flashed down the length of the avenue and slammed into the makeshift wall. Tannis fragments flew. Ross jerked his head toward the courtyard and raced down with Chennault.

Ross heard the pounding of psychic blasts on the stone wall as he leapt into the co-pilot's seat in the Stallion's cockpit. He strapped in and asked through his comlink, "Everybody in?"

"Go!" Chennault answered breathlessly.

Debbi flipped the rear door up and pulled back on the stick. The Hoss rose into the air. She felt the telltale tingles of syker probes in her head. She smiled, knowing she was the one Ranger they couldn't brainlock into crashing the Hoss.

As the Stallion soared above the empty courtyard, Ross fired the

Clay & Susan Griffith

cannons into the crowded avenue, ripping a swathe through the tangled Legionnaires. The energy slashes that had been fired at the inner wall were turned up at the Stallion. The vehicle already hovered at the effective blast range of individual sykers and Debbi narrowed the target angle by turning, and the beams washed past.

Debbi spun the Stallion, ready to ascend to a higher level of Canyon Rock. Then she saw a solitary figure enter the courtyard from the city precinct.

It was Martool.

The anouk shaman calmly strode to the center of the graveyard and dropped to her knees. Martool bowed and placed both hands flat against the ground. The air around her hands shimmered with a strange energy.

"Ross!" Debbi pointed.

"I see her. What the hell is she doing now?"

The Legionnaires had returned their aggression to the inner wall. It was only moments from shattering and the undead would be loose on the courtyard barely two hundred yards of flat, uncontested ground away from Martool.

Debbi brought the Hoss back down. She heard confused chatter from the rear.

Debbi said, "Here, take over. I'm going to cover her."

"The hell you are."

She shot Ross a fierce glare. He was busy unstrapping from the co-pilot's seat. He pulled his Peacemaker and checked the cylinder. Then he clicked his com to the crew in back.

"Arm up. We're getting out."

As he was turning around, he caught Debbi's softening gaze.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing." She set the Stallion down just outside the graveyard and dropped the rear gate.

Debbi and Ross met the Rangers as they dragged their exhausted carcasses out of the Hoss onto the windswept courtyard. Miller had recovered enough to join them, but he still looked disoriented. Tsukino was smearing salve on his burned shoulder. Although there was no open dissension among them, several of the Rangers' expressions showed confusion and anger and fear. They all heard the repetitive booming reverberating from the Legionnaires' attacks on the wall.

Ross stepped among his crew. "Debbi and I have to protect Martool!"

"Why?" Chennault asked sharply. "Where are *her* people?"

Debbi didn't respond. She shouldered her Hellrazor and walked into the cemetery to stand beside the chanting Martool.

Ross watched Debbi, but said to Chennault, "The anouks have all evacuated this part of the city. They're too far away to help now."

Chennault replied, "C'mon, Ross, let's just grab her and get outta here!"

Ross studied his Rangers with an understanding eye. "Anybody that wants to go can get on board that Hoss and go. Nothing said. I'd go myself and not look back, but . . . hell, I can't explain it." He shook his head and joined Debbi in the graveyard.

Fitz followed on Ross's heels.

The rest of the Rangers stood in a silent clutch. The weird sound of the syker brain blasts slamming against the inner wall vibrated through the courtyard.

Book II: The Undead War

Chennault took a deep, frustrated breath. "Anybody want to leave?"

Ringo's head swung back and forth in a silent panic intently watching the others. They had been airborne, flying away from the Legion. He had just allowed himself to relax, sure they would escape, when the Hoss dropped back to the ground. Now Ringo felt sick. Dallas and Ross were both staying. But they didn't know the Legion like he did. They weren't in the Bone Camp. They hadn't heard the screaming and the wet tearing of flesh and sharp snapping of bones. They'd never been bound and blindfolded and thrown in the dirt and forced to listen to the low grumbling sounds coming from a tent full of undead feeding off moaning victims who were still conscious enough to understand their fate.

Ringo stared at the downturned faces of the other Rangers. He desperately wanted someone else to say they were leaving so he could go too. But if no one else said it first, he would have to stay. He wasn't a coward.

Chennault worked the action of her pulse rifle. "Okay. I guess that's it."

Ringo's heart felt as if it would explode. He wanted to scream. Instead, he hefted his rifle and followed the others as they took their places for their last stand.

The eight Colonial Rangers weaved into the graveyard and stood with their backs to Martool, facing the distant tannis wall. The sounds of the Legionnaires' blasts were getting louder. With each bright glow, larger chunks of tannis flew up from deep inside the avenue. The Rangers checked their guns one last time and felt for extra magazines. Those that had spare black guns touched them to reassure themselves they were within easy reach.

Ringo said to Miller without looking, "Don't let them take me alive, Ty."

Miller grunted, well aware of the fact that the kid had used his first name for the first time. He felt the fear that filled the air between them.

"They won't, Ringo," Miller assured the young Ranger. "I promise."

A massive, rumbling explosion roared from inside the avenue. Smoke boiled up. And there was silence.

Just two hundred yards away, a Legionnaire appeared through the smoke into the courtyard.

"Here they are," Chennault said while she sighted down the barrel of her Hellrazor. In rapid succession, she needled the Legionnaire and then knocked it to the ground with a slug.

Several more rotting figures appeared through the haze.

Ross knelt and steadied his pulse rifle on top of a teetering, tannis tombstone. "Grab a grave and keep shootin' till it's over!"

The undead poured into Castle Rock.

Chapter 26

The Rangers fired into the hordes of Legionnaires with practiced efficiency. The mix of black needles and standard ammo had become routine by now. Because of the narrow passage the zombies had to squeeze through, they were fighting as individuals. They couldn't use the screen and fire, so they were still vulnerable to the Rangers' attack.

There were so many of them and they kept coming. With each second, the distance between the undead and the Rangers narrowed.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Targets were at one hundred and fifty yards. Then one hundred. The zombies spread their front. They tried to form into squads, but the Rangers' merciless fire prevented it. Force screens flickered and failed.

"I'm out!" Ngoma shouted as he fiddled with the black gun on his Hellrazor.

Miller yanked the spare off his belt and tossed it to the younger Ranger. Ngoma popped off the empty and snapped on the new weapon.

Shots from the Legionnaires rang off the tombstones. Flashes of psychic energy roared through the air, blasting holes in the ground around the cemetery. Ringo's gravestone shattered and shrapnel sliced through the kid's face. He merely sleeved the blood out of his eyes and scuttled behind another monument.

Debbi willed Martool to hurry with whatever she was doing. The air around the immobile shaman shimmered and the effect slowly expanded through the graveyard. But there was no real feeling of power building. There was no sense that the shaman was close to any sort of climax.

The air filled with the sound of the sykers' energy flashes and the deadly popping of automatic weapons. None of the Rangers spoke. They stood or knelt behind tombstones dedicated to anouk dead. They paused in their shooting only to eject spare clips and slam home fresh ones. They all knew the odds.

The undead kept coming. The killing ground crept ever closer.

A Stallion swooped in overhead and peppered the courtyard with cannon fire. It was Stew and Hallow. Some of the Rangers looked up briefly, but there was no cheering. The Stallion might buy them a few feet of ground for a few moments, but it wouldn't save them from the advancing enemy. Already the Legion was directing their psychic assaults upward. Even Hallow couldn't multitask enough to protect the ship from the intense attention. The Hoss roared off again, energy flashes burning black along the hull.

One by one, the Rangers' black guns ran out of needles. The undead came faster. Regular ammo knocked them down, but they kept getting up.

Then Tsukino threw his empty Hellrazor down and drew his Dragon. Chennault followed seconds later. Then Miller.

Debbi's pulse rifle clicked empty too. She tossed it aside and pulled her sidearm. With her left hand, she brought out her long knife for the hand-to-hand combat that would soon come. The undead were only fifty feet away. Their emotionless faces came closer, grinning without effort.

Ross drew his Peacemaker. He looked at Debbi. She smiled at him, grateful that he was here with her. Ross touched the barrel of his pistol to his hat brim in a brief salute.

The zombies surged through the edge of the shimmering air that surrounded the graveyard. The Rangers braced for a psychic onslaught. But none came. Some paused as if to hurl a brain blast, but no energy flare followed. The Legionnaires looked confused. Whatever magic Martool was performing, it seemed to rob the sykers of their powers when they stepped into the cemetery. Without their powers, they were nothing but stinking zombies. But there were hundreds of stinking zombies.

Dragoons roared and many of the undead dropped. There were always more and soon the dead encircled the small graveyard. Rangers

Book II: The Undead War

shuffled back toward the center of the cemetery. Debbi kept her back to Martool with one eye on the motionless shaman. The Ranger felt a buzzing sensation up her legs as if the ground was vibrating.

A rotting hand grabbed Chennault's jacket from behind. She spun and put a shell through the zombie's head. Tsukino felt fingers on his shoulder. Bone-tipped fingers clutched the tombstone in front of Ross.

Now Dragoons clicked empty. Rangers swung the heavy weapons like clubs, caving in soft heads. Long knives slashed through tattered uniforms and scabrous bellies. Black gore flew along with flesh, bone, and fingertips.

Miller went down under two zombies. Ringo leapt to his side, battering the back of one's head with his pistol.

Chennault's anouk battle-ax slammed through the ribcage of a Legionnaire, but stuck fast in the spinal cord. The undead trooper glanced at the ax and then at the exhausted Ranger. It grinned and reached for her.

Ngoma kicked a zombie away only to have another grasp him around the shoulders. Tsukino fired his last shot into a trooper's head. Then he was tackled by two zombies and fell hard into a tombstone.

Fitz swung a Hellrazor like a cudgel, smashing decayed faces all around him. As he wheeled to strike another, wounded zombies surged off the ground behind him and climbed his back. First two, then four, and finally five undead soldiers hung on the Irishman's massive frame until he went down.

Debbi and Ross stood back-to-back with the kneeling Martool between them. Debbi heard Ross's breath heaving in and out; he was near to dropping from exhaustion. Sweat poured down her face. Her limbs burned. All she saw were faces and hands. Dangling strands of gray-green flesh, rotted teeth, collapsed noses, empty eye sockets, protruding bones. She furiously swung her knife and Dagoon. She felt the resistance of flesh and bone, and victory was measured only by the ability to draw back her aching arms for another attack.

For Debbi, it had come down to protecting her piece of ground and Martool. That was all there was in the world. That was the extent of her duty and her purpose.

Three zombies attacked Ross. He twisted and fell. Ross lifted one dead trooper wearing a captain's bars with a loose ear off the ground with his knife thrust up through its torso. Then he kicked the second off and pistol-whipped the third across the face with his Peacemaker. As the bleeding Ranger struggled to his feet, a curtain of torn, moldy uniforms descended around him and he vanished from sight.

Debbi slashed out and something seized her arm. She tried to pull back, but recognized in some near-dormant, rational part of her brain that she just couldn't. Her strength was gone. She couldn't fight on. She had nothing more she could give.

It was then the courtyard collapsed.

All around the graveyard the sandy ground suddenly cracked. Slabs of black tannis slowly raised thirty, forty feet into the air and fell back to earth like giant whales breaching the surface of an ocean.

Legionnaires were thrown off their feet. They slid scabbling into smoking fissures, their rotting fingers snapping as they fought to stay above ground. Huge plates of tannis rolled and churned and smashed undead bodies to rotten bits. The stones began to liquefy, swallowing up the Legionnaires in large waves.

Clay & Susan Griffith

The outer wall around the courtyard trembled. Long cracks snaked from the base up the steps. The cracks widened and the wall began to collapse in jagged blocks. It made a strange sound. Instead of the roaring din of destruction, the stone sang a hard, penetrating note.

Debbi felt a peculiar elation race through her. The sound of destruction was similar to the resonance the tannis cathedral in Temptation had made when it collapsed around her, so long ago it seemed. With a renewed burst of energy, she pulled free of the zombie that held her and rammed her knife through its head. It quivered and fell.

She spun around and seized two of the troopers who struggled with Ross. The Legionnaires seemed palsied and unable to react. She struck down those two and saw Ross recover and destroy the third.

A storm of black tannis dust rolled over them. Debbi moved quickly through the choking, dark fog to find the other Rangers. Many of the zombies were trying to get up and fighting to escape. She dispatched several as they attempted to flee. Most of the Rangers were still conscious and, when they suddenly had the space to move, began to fight again. Chennault actually laughed as she scrambled to her feet and cleaved a quivering trooper in half with her ax. Ringo staggered up and helped Miller.

The tannis cloud blew past to unveil the cataclysm that had occurred all around them. The courtyard was destroyed. The ground was a seething ocean of fluid tannis raised from below the soil. Legionnaires drowned within its black grasp. The great black wall was gone, reduced to smoking rubble. Even sections of city structures had collapsed in the disaster. Martool had somehow smashed and uprooted the territory for nearly a mile around, burying much of the Legion under it. Only the cemetery was unaffected. It stood like a weird plateau surrounded by a storm-tossed tannis sea. The Rangers all clung to it like castaways.

Debbi and Ross grabbed the few disoriented troopers that remained and threw them off the edge of the graveyard island. They fell screaming into the hungry waters. Suddenly a loud crack rent the air and the black liquid began to solidify, freezing the zombies where they floundered. Arms and legs protruded from the wasteland around the graveyard. Some of them moved, trapped in living death. In the distance, beyond the zone of destruction, Legionnaires could be seen making their way off, limping, crawling away from Castle Rock.

Once the graveyard was free of zombies, Ross slumped to his knees to catch his breath. Debbi watched the other Rangers. Tsukino was down, but alive. Fitz was bleeding from his right arm. Every Ranger was bloody and covered in gore. But there was a sense of triumph, of victory over incredible odds. Chennault picked Miller up in the air and kissed him on the mouth. Miller gaped at her and then laughed devilishly. She promptly dropped the greasy-haired Ranger and groaned.

Martool stirred. The shaman who looked up from the clearing in the graveyard was very different than the one who had knelt there moments before. This anouk woman was old, her purple skin deeply wrinkled. Her once-strong hands were wizened. Her eyes showed deep exhaustion.

"Martool?" Debbi murmured. "Are you all right?"

The shaman nodded weakly and tried to stand. Her feeble legs gave out and she fell back to the ground. Debbi and Ross both helped Martool to her feet.

"*This* is cleansing an area?" Debbi asked in awe as she looked at the carnage around her.

Book II: The Undead War

"I added something special," Martool said in a voice whisper soft and broken. "Just cleansing didn't seem sufficient payment for the trouble these things have caused."

Ross grinned, "Knew I'd find something about you I liked."

Debbi stared at the shaman's altered face. "But what has it done to you?"

Martool touched her cheek, feeling the leathery skin. A sadly satisfied smile played over her lips. "Even magic is not free."

Chapter 27

General Quantrill studied the smoking, ruined courtyard of Castle Rock that he saw in his mind's eye. He felt the second deaths of many of his men as their undead consciousnesses winked out of the Legion network. He could sense many more still alive, but trapped in the tannis wreckage.

The picture was inconceivable. His troops had been entering Castle Rock. The Rangers had been retreating. The anouks had been scrambling for their lives. He had been on the verge of total victory.

All but Martool.

That witch had brought part of her own city down on his Legion. Even Kreech had not done such a desperate thing.

Yet, she would not have been able to wreak her savage witchcraft if the Colonial Rangers hadn't protected her. Quantrill had felt a touch of respect, even envy as he saw them struggle so bravely, but fall one by one. Then only Ross and Dallas remained. Then they fell too and Quantrill had been giddy with triumph.

Now it was in ashes.

The General clenched his teeth in rage. He had lost most of his army, and all of his officer corps including Captain De Klerk. Normally, he would return to the attack to show the enemy that their victory was fleeting at best, that the Legion was unstoppable. But most of the troopers who had escaped were badly damaged and they would be unable to regenerate without raw meat. He faced the same fate as so many generals in history. His army traveled on its stomach and he had to go to the food.

General Quantrill would have to retreat from Castle Rock. He had never retreated before. He stroked his chin, feeling the hardness of teeth against his thumb through the gap in his cheek. The worst part of this entire debacle was that he had to leave men behind. He had sworn to himself he would show the world he was not the inhuman meat grinder they had made him out to be when he was alive. Now he was leaving boys trapped near the ground where he had resurrected them just a few months ago.

All because of Captain Ross.

Quantrill could have simply killed that wretched Ranger at the sanitarium. But he had spared Ross's life because he remembered the Ranger had once treated him decently when no one else would. Quantrill had even deigned to make Ross an integral part of the Legion's conquest of Banshee. But the vile, ungrateful Ranger had fought at every turn. And now he had ruined Quantrill's dream.

Not ruined, Quantrill hastily corrected, merely delayed. But it was a costly and humiliating delay. Ross was going to pay.

The General turned from the map table in the rear of the Stallion to

Clay & Susan Griffith

see Avernus standing at the vehicle's rear door.

Quantrill was startled. "Avernus! What are you doing here?"

"I am not here," the Fallen said. "I am in my office."

Quantrill again felt stupid, but recovered his assured and collected visage. Avernus was a powerful syker; he was merely projecting his image into Quantrill's brain.

The Fallen was his usual calm self. "The campaign is not going well, I assume?"

"You could say that."

Avernus nodded in understanding. "I felt a burst from Castle Rock a moment ago. It was enormously powerful. Even I was impressed. Did you lose many men?"

"Yes."

Avernus's inhuman eyes clouded with doubt and disgust. "Hmm. I have located a new cadaver field at Colman's Bluff."

Quantrill looked up with interest. Colman's Bluff had been a sizable battle in the Anouk Wars and numerous sykers died there.

"I fear," Avernus continued, "the conditions there are not so fine as in the Red River Valley. But I'm hoping for perhaps a hundred serviceable troopers."

"Good." Quantrill stood, already contemplating his murderous return to Castle Rock. "How soon can they be ready?"

Avernus held up a cautionary hand. "Return to the Sanitarium and we will make plans."

"Soon," Quantrill growled.

Chapter 28

The battle was over. Those dead who were able had departed.

Ross stood on the decimated battlements and looked out over the carnage. Smoke wafted across the bloody field and around the remains of the sun gate in a pale attempt to cover the devastation. The dim light cast a dismal pallor over Ross.

He was so damn tired. The stabbing pain in his skull had faded, but he hurt everywhere else. The victory had brought a sense of peace inside him. Quantrill may not be dead again, but at least he, with the help of his Rangers and the anouks, had slapped the General down hard. Ross wanted the zombie syker to suffer as he had suffered and snatching looming triumph from Quantrill's hands was a good start.

There was a shout behind him.

Looking down the jagged slope, he saw Debbi astride her massive chanouk. A riderless beast stood beside her. She waved at Ross and then held up the reins of the extra mount.

"Today's the day!" Debbi called out.

Ross stared at her without comprehending.

"Riding lessons!" A grin split her face.

It was a decidedly evil grin, Ross decided after a moment, but he'd be damned if he let her see him nervous. He merely lifted a laconic eyebrow.

Debbi beamed broadly at him, clearly broadcasting her joy at being alive this day. "I figured we'd go out with the anouks and make sure all the sykers are well and truly dead. Cleanup duty, so to speak."

Ross climbed down the rubble toward her. "We'll get the squad to help out." The Rangers' black guns were empty, but they had scraped up

Book II: The Undead War

a little regular ammo and the zombies that were trapped in the rubble seemed to be almost powerless thanks, Ross assumed, to Martool's magic. He sent the call to Stew and told him to organize it.

Everyone one was riding on a high today. Even the anouks were smiling and chatting. Their own dead had been buried and mourned, and now the living began to feel that a lengthy future lay before them. Human and anouk walked the grounds together. It was odd to see a species that was normally so dour in front of humans laughing and trying to communicate.

Ross pulled his eyes away reluctantly from the activities around the courtyard area and brought them to center on the matter at hand. He approached *his* chanouk with a show of confidence he didn't feel. He still clung to the fact that a good glare would show the beast he wasn't to be trifled with.

The creature's head swiveled to follow Ross as the Ranger stepped to the beast's powerful shoulder. It leaned in close to sniff him. The Ranger stood quietly. It was just like a horse exploring a new rider. Slow and easy was the name of the game. He just hoped his many wounds wouldn't arouse the creature's bloodlust.

The chanouk's warm breath was intense. Ross could feel the moist heat through his shirt sleeve. Its long tongue darted out and ran up Ross's arm, slowly and deliberately, leaving a viscous trail.

"That's just his way of saying hello," Debbi offered encouragingly, still possessing an impish glint in her eye.

"Or maybe it's his way of seeing how I taste," Ross grumbled as he eyed the numerous, sharp teeth only a foot away from his face.

"Then he's probably thinking you need salt." Debbi laughed freely and loudly for the first time in many months. She leaned over the pommel of her own saddle and gazed down at Ross.

Ross didn't care that the laughter was at his expense. It was good to hear again. It was as if both of them were becoming alive once more. He relished it.

"I wouldn't worry," Debbi continued. "I'm sure he wants to save his appetite. He'll be eating zombies in a bit."

Ross grunted. Without removing his commanding stare from the chanouk, he took the reins from Debbi, hefted his leg up, and shoved his foot into the stirrup. He began murmuring to the chanouk in a voice so quiet that he doubted Debbi could even hear it. But Ross knew the chanouk could. Its ears were full forward, listening intently as it watched Ross. The Ranger eased himself the large saddle while staying alert in case the chanouk decided it didn't like its new rider. Ross tensed his thigh muscles around the creature's ribcage and tightened his grip on the reins.

The animal took a deep snuffle of the human and the expansion of the chanouk's girth made Ross's legs ache as they bowed with it. He waited pensively for the chanouk to make its decision.

He felt unexpected exhilaration creep into his gut. Very few humans could boast that they had ridden a great anouk warbeast. Thanks to Debbi, he was going to be counted among them.

Ross's mount finally released its breath in a deep sigh and yawned mightily. Relieved, Debbi clucked to her own chanouk, Little Joe, and they leapt over a low wall of rubble in one enormous lurch.

Ross's chanouk followed immediately after. He wasn't prepared for the power that surged beneath him as the beast's muscles bunched and

Clay & Susan Griffith

then propelled him swiftly after Debbi. He clutched at the anouk's version of a saddle horn, a ring of black tannis. It took a bit of concentration to command his body to move in rhythm with the odd gait of the chanouk. But soon he gained his coordination and the ride smoothed out. It wasn't an up and down motion like horseback, instead it was a side-to-side pelvic swing.

Debbi pulled her chanouk back beside his. "I found it responds better to leg pressure than the reins."

"How do I make it stop?" Ross called as his beast stalked rapidly past hers. Maybe he should've gotten the important information before he started.

"Then you need the reins," Debbi laughed as she came alongside. "Pull back on them, just like a horse."

Ross fingered the tannis ring embedded in the saddle. "What's this for?"

"That's for when we go rock climbing."

Ross eyed her sharply. "Keep it simple, Dallas."

"Don't I always?"

"Hell no."

Life hadn't been simple since Debbi came into his life. Not that he was complaining. The faintest hint of a smile broke over Ross's face.

As the chanouks pawed over the twisted ground together, their great nostrils huffing at the jagged rocks searching for hidden prey, Ross twisted in the saddle and looked back at Castle Rock. He saw Fareel standing on the remains of the decimated sun gate, watching them with folded arms. In fact, there were numerous anouks on the mound, all staring at the Rangers.

"That's Sahrin's chanouk you're riding," Debbi informed him. "Fareel wanted you to ride it."

Ross glanced at her in surprise. He looked back at Fareel and lifted a hand. The warrior returned the gesture.

"He's probably waitin' to see if I fall off the damn thing and kill myself," Ross mumbled. "They've probably placed bets on it."

"I've got a month's pay riding on you myself. And there are a lot of side bets on whether the chanouk eats you."

"You've got a hell of a sense of humor, Dallas, you know that?"

Debbi just grinned maniacally. Then she bobbed her head at him. "Well?"

"Well what?"

Sighing with exasperation, she gestured to his chanouk. "What do you think?"

"Oh," he said nodding. "It's all right."

"All right? That's it? Just all right? We're some of the first human beings to ever ride chanouks and all you have to say is *all right*?"

He shrugged. Why did women always want an overblown reaction to an enjoyable experience? Of course, riding the chanouk gave him a giddy thrill. His hands were clenched so tight around the reins that they were tingling. His heart was pounding a mile a minute in his chest, so much so he thought it would burst. But the bottom line was there was no need to go getting all emotional about it. It was *all right*. Didn't she know that description covered a wide range?

"You're impossible," Debbi huffed. But she could see that Ross was enjoying himself. He wasn't exactly smiling, but the air of pride and excitement was all she needed to know Ross was relishing this mo-

Book II: The Undead War

ment. They had been through so much and if she could do this one thing to try and bring their world closer to what it once was, it was worth every second.

She remembered the ranch in Ross's dream plane, the horses waiting in the corral, the open prairie beyond the small valley where he most likely rode them. She had seen the little house and its trim state. Was it the memory of that ranch house that gave Ross his desire for orderliness? Was it a connection to a life of freedom and tranquility that the grim Ranger no longer had?

And he had shared that life with someone, someone with red hair.

Debbi had wondered every day since then if that someone had been her. Was it a dream of the past or of the future? Was there more to Ross's past than she had ever guessed? Had there once been someone important in his life? And, if so, what happened to her?

One day she might find herself brave enough to ask Ross to tell her about it. She felt a bond between them now. Although unwittingly, Ross had given her a personal, private view of what the Earth was like, something she had never known before except through pictures and words. Though she hadn't told him, she treasured his memories almost as her own and would forever. Ross had given her a glimpse of her mother's home world.

Debbi and Ross paralleled the wrecked wall for a bit, getting an overview of the aftermath of Martool's powerful magic. They talked about little things that they hadn't had an opportunity to do in a long time. It felt good to speak of them. It provided, if only briefly, a sense of continuity and peace to their chaotic lives.

Eventually, Debbi rode ahead of Ross with a practiced grace. Her hips swung hypnotically in the saddle while her upper body was almost completely still.

Damn.

Ross wiped his mouth with a gloved hand and cast his gaze away, concentrating on his chanouk instead.

Debbi was right. It was very much like riding horses. Ross was immediately cast back to his childhood, to the days on Earth at his grandfather's ranch. The old man had taught Ross how to ride a horse. The sense of sheer exhilaration and unity that allowed two beings to work as one was a sensation that Ross would never tire of. It wasn't the same driving a machine, all cold and cooperative.

He remembered his grandfather's tales of the Weird West and imagined battling those fantastic creatures as his grandfather had once done. Ross's hand found the Peacemaker at his side and brushed his fingers along the handle.

It was those stories that had fired Ross's desire for adventure, a chance to prove his prowess against the raw elements and bring order to a planet that needed it desperately. He had had large designs for his future back then. Most of them had been realized.

Some had not.

He watched Debbi bounding ahead of him. She was so happy and boisterous. She loved being a Colonial Ranger, thrived on the danger and reveled in victory, much like himself. Protecting the innocent had been her goal from day one. And it was much more basic to her makeup even than Ross's. All she wanted to do was help those in need, guard them from harm, and maintain the right.

Ross had taken her desire and nurtured it. One day, Debbi would be

Clay & Susan Griffith

ten times the Ranger he was. Ross knew that. When she first came to Temptation she was untested, unsure, and full of simple, even naive, convictions.

Now Debbi was tempered, wielding an uncanny intuition, a powerful morality, and a drive to protect her charges with all the ferocity of a mothering chanouk. Ross was proud of her. He felt an odd sense of relief, knowing that Temptation had been safe in her hands during his absence. She had done the job better than he at times, but he had no jealousy or resentment. All he felt for her was admiration. Debbi had been not only Temptation's stability, but his own as well.

Ross was jerked from his reverie as his chanouk leapt upon the limp body of a undead syker partially encased in tannis and clamped on its head with powerful jaws. With little resistance, it crushed like a brittle eggshell. A deep trilling began and Ross realized with surprise that the great beast was purring.

Ross held the reins loosely allowing the chanouk to go about its grisly duty since it seemed to relish it so much. He leaned back in the saddle and saw groups of anouks and Colonial Rangers wandering the field. The Rangers were executing the squirming undead with well-placed shots. The anouks were smashing the skulls of the fallen zombies with their large, heavy war clubs. Other groups prepared a pyre for the disposition of the headless bodies.

It wouldn't take long to get the place cleaned up. The Rangers would be home in Temptation in another day or two. That thought alone made Ross relax a bit more. It seemed like they had been gone forever, Ross more so than the others.

Debbi's chanouk moved off to pounce on some syker cadaver protruding from a rocky outcrop. The thick, crunching sound the beast made carried over the valley and Ross cringed slightly.

Ross stared around at the fortress and its surrounding area. It reeked of the heavy, cloying odor of death. He felt as if he hadn't been free of the stench of decay since the Temptation graveyards had risen up in defiance of all that was natural and holy.

He was tired of the chaos. It had been a hard year in Temptation, from the Worldstorm to the walking dead and from the Reapers to the Legion. Ross felt a longing for the simple life that he hadn't known in a long time. Barely a month ago, he had told his old friend and comrade-in-arms, Reuben Olivares, that he was thinking about becoming a shepherd. He was only half kidding. Then he remembered with a stab that Olivares was dead now too. Ross spat on the ground to clear the foul taste in his mouth brought on by the memory. For the first time in a long time, he actually longed for a taste of the old days rather than pushing away the memory. He wanted to smell new life in the air—grass growing, trees blooming, the slippery scent of a newborn foal; he wanted a cool, clean breeze to carry such things along like a harbinger of birth.

It wasn't that Ross wanted to give up Rangering and settle down. He had done that once and it worked. Then. In that time. In that place. With that person. But he didn't think he could do it again, no matter the temptation.

Over to his right, Debbi's chanouk huffed in satisfaction and Ross looked. A wind was rising. Debbi's flame hair was spreading out around her head in a halo of red. Pushing a wad of it away from her face, she saw Ross's gaze and waved at him, grinning from ear to ear

Book II: The Undead War

with a smile that made Ross ache. She loved the Banshee wind.

Debbi was so alive and carefree, seemingly unmarred by the horrors of the last few months. She drew on a strength that Ross couldn't even fathom. There were times that he too clung to her strength. It had gotten him through a lot of hard times.

Despite her physical appearance, she was unlike—

A wall of wind slammed into Ross from behind. Even the powerful chanouk staggered under its force. The beast roared in shock and dug its claws into the ground to steady itself. The wind was all around them, hurling debris with it. Brush and thorny scrub flew wildly along with sharp rocks and tannis shards. A boulder missed Ross by inches. He clutched the saddle ring and realized with horror the direction it was taking.

"*Debbi!*" Ross's shout was whipped away by the wind. It never reached her.

The boulder rushed toward her and slammed into her mount. The roaring wind seemed to be centered on her. It swirled around her, filled with so much debris that she was almost obscured from his sight. The harsh wind seemed alive with energy, sparking great arcs of lightning.

Ross tried to open his eyes against the stinging sand and blinding glare. His hands fumbled to pull the reins on his chanouk and maneuver toward Debbi. The beast didn't want to go, but Ross wasn't about to let that stop him. He kicked it hard and heard it roar in pain.

"Move, damn you!" He saw Debbi struck by stone after stone. Her chanouk was slammed up against the side of the rock cliff and it collapsed to the ground where it lay limp and unmoving. Debbi struggled to her feet beside it, her arm flung up to protect her face as knife-like shards of stone whirled about her in an unnatural tornado. Her mouth was open in a scream, but Ross could hear nothing except the shriek of the wind.

Finally, Ross's chanouk moved in her direction. The force of the wind was so strong that it was physically shoving the huge animal to the side. Ross heard the scratch of its claws on the rocks as it fought to keep its feet on the ground.

Ross kept his head up, pulling the bandana over his nose and mouth. His hat was gone, torn off and adrift. His hand was above his eyes, shielding them as much as he could from the cutting sand that assaulted him.

Another large, jagged rock swirled within the maelstrom. It roared down ever nearer to Debbi. Ross tried to urge his mount faster, but he also knew the great beast was trying its hardest to comply. Every muscle was clenched so tightly that it felt like he was riding a beast made of stone instead of flesh.

Debbi was bleeding as her body was beaten and broken by countless wind-driven rocks that battered and twisted her like a puppet. Wave after wave of razor tannis shrapnel sliced into her. She didn't even seem to be conscious anymore, hanging limp in the tearing fist of the whirling tempest. It refused to let her fall.

Above Debbi, on the top of the cliff wall, a figure appeared.

General Quantrill stood on the precipice and glanced down at Ross. The syker's eyes were blazing with energy. It was obvious he was responsible for the telekinetic storm that engulfed Debbi.

Ross yanked his pistol from its holder and fired even though he felt there was no way the bullet could maintain a true path through the

Clay & Susan Griffith

wind. Quantrill only stood there laughing at Ross's feeble efforts. The Ranger fumbled for his comlink to alert the others, but the wind would not allow him to be heard.

A large rock spinning inside the psychic tornado slammed into Debbi's head. She spun from the force. Blood spattered into the wind. She dropped in a crumpled heap. The storm immediately fell apart and the air screeched into silence.

Ross's chanouk now tore across the rocks. Ross fired bullet after bullet at Quantrill. The General stumbled back, raising a hand out in front of him to ward off the barrage. The shots pinged harmlessly off a psychic shield.

However, Ross saw that Quantrill was weakening. The General couldn't hold up a shield for long. Ross let out a terrible shout as he barreled up the path toward Debbi and Quantrill. He clenched his hand tight around the tannis ring, knowing that the chanouk would have to climb to get to syker.

A loud rumble filled the air and a Ranger Stallion rose behind Quantrill. Ross yelled in triumph. Stew must have seen what was happening and gotten to a vehicle in record time. Quantrill was going to pay.

The rear door of the Stallion slid open and to Ross's horror he saw more zombie sykers inside reaching for their General. The vehicle was the commandeered Stallion the Legion had taken from Temptation.

Quantrill was going to get away!

The undead General slowly stepped into the waiting Stallion, his decrepit face smirking in triumph. The door slid shut and the engines flared with power. The ship lifted and roared away across the canyon.

Ross's chanouk slid to a halt.

"No!" Ross was still pulling the trigger, but the Peacemaker was clicking on empty. His arm dropped. He stood there numbly for a moment. Quantrill was gone.

Then Ross remembered.

Almost afraid, he turned his head toward Debbi.

She lay limp and bloody on the rocky ground. The dust caked on her face soaked up the blood. Ross slipped off his mount; his legs almost didn't hold him. She was so still; there wasn't even a shuddering rise or fall in her chest. He stood frozen, facing her, knowing she was gone and terrified to touch her and confirm it.

She couldn't be.

He heard sounds behind him in the distance. Others must have seen what had happened and were coming.

Finally, he moved, rushing toward her, dropping onto the hard rock. An unsteady hand reached for her, touched her shoulder. His glove immediately soaked up the blood. He couldn't feel anything. Ripping off the thick, saturated glove, he frantically searched for a pulse.

None.

He couldn't breathe. *Oh God, no.*

Gathering her slowly in his arms, he trembled, afraid of facing a future without her. She slipped away regardless of how tightly he held her. He stared unseeing out over the canyon, just clinging to her body. His eyes filled with moisture and after a time a lone drop succumbed to gravity and traced a wild streak down his dust-covered face. He was drenched in a layer of sand from the storm, giving him a harsh, yellow pallor.

Book II: The Undead War

"Not again," he whispered to no one. "Not again."

So many dreams, so many hopes, unfulfilled. Now they were lost to him. He hadn't realized he had been building anything, but he had. He hadn't thought he wanted another life, not until this very moment. Now he would give anything to have her back.

But she wasn't coming back.

Rage built up inside him. Rage at Quantrill. And rage at himself for not saving her.

The scream that erupted from him shattered the silence of the canyon walls and reverberated throughout the valley. When he was spent, he hunched over Debbi's lifeless form as the echo of his cry rolled away. He pressed his wet cheek against her torn one.

"I'm sorry," he whispered roughly.

He just held her, not moving, not saying anything more because there was nothing left to say that would change what happened.

He had failed her.

He heard a scrambling of footsteps and then Stew's voice.

"What happened? Oh God. Medic! We need a medic! Tsukino!"

Ross didn't move, didn't acknowledge any of them as they crowded around the two slumped figures.

There were hands pulling at Debbi and prying her out of Ross's arms. He didn't resist. His body felt drained of energy.

Placing her flat on the ground, Tsukino ran a medical scanner over Debbi's body. Slapping back his hat, Stew began CPR while Fitz initiated mouth-to-mouth, anything to buy them time and allow Tsukino to revive her. The medic scrambled through his first aid bag and pulled out an injector of Digilin; a mixture of digitalis and adrenaline. He pressed it against the bloody skin of her chest and squeezed the reservoir. He watched her eyes and placed his practiced fingers against the artery in her throat.

It was too late. Ross knew it. He was pushed back by the growing crowd, all desperate to help save Debbi. He rose and stumbled back stiffly. Ringo stood over Stew's shoulder, his face stricken at the sight of Debbi's torn and broken body.

Martool arrived at a dead run along with a well-armed Fareel. The look of horror on the anouk shaman's face was a terrible thing.

Tsukino finally sat back, defeated. "She's—she's dead."

"No!" Stew shouted at him. "She's not. Help her!" There was a desperation in Stew's voice that none had ever heard before. "Damn it, help her!" He grabbed at Tsukino's arm, furious at the man's indifference.

Fitz brushed aside Debbi's hair, pulling it from the bloody cuts that marred her once beautiful features. Then he looked over at Stew and laid a hand on his shoulder. "She's gone, Stew." There were tears in the big man's eyes.

"No! She's not!" He spun on Fitz. "Give her a chance. She's strong. She's fighting to come back and we're not helping her!" He began CPR again in wild, erratic jerks. Fitz let out a painful breath and then leaned down to help again, breathing for a body that would never do so again. Tsukino looked up at the faces around him and shook his head.

The last shred of hope that lay with the group shattered and fell. Martool's face twisted into outrage. Looking around, she found the person she sought. Striding over to where Ross stood off to the side, she confronted him.

Ross's eyes remained fixed on the body on the ground.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Martool delivered a forceful slap across his face to get his attention. His head rocked at the blow. He didn't try to defend himself, too numb with shock.

"This is your fault!" Martool shouted at him.

Ross straightened slowly, his eyes finally coming to rest on her. A wash of red seeped through his dark beard. Martool's nails had opened a gash from his cheekbone to his chin, but Ross didn't acknowledge it.

"So consumed with your revenge! You have damned her!" Martool's tone was sharp and scathing, enough so to draw the attention of the rest of the grieving Rangers. "This area isn't clean; she wasn't supposed to die here. How much plainer could I have been in that one simple fact. Now she is gone and you alone are responsible!"

The Rangers expected Ross to react, but he just stood staring at Martool with red-rimmed eyes that held only anguish and pain.

Martool deflated, her anger spent, her aged body still burdened by the signs of her struggle to repel the undead Legion. Wiping away the tears that had begun falling steadily, she shook her head. She waved a hand at the anouks behind her, gesturing to Debbi's inert form. "We will bury her here at Castle Rock in honor of her valiant efforts."

Fareel stepped forward to carry out Martool's order.

"No!" Ross's eyes flashed angrily and his voice shouted hoarsely. He became animated for the first time since Debbi had fallen, shoving an arm out to stop them.

The Rangers immediately took a defensive position around their deceased comrade. Their hands rested on their pistols, but they didn't draw them.

Fareel raised a glowing atax and drew closer to Martool, protecting his weakened shaman. The space between the two groups was volatile. Finally, Stew stepped back and gathered Debbi gently in his arms.

"I'm taking her home to Temptation," he told everyone. "Where she belongs." That said, he turned and strode away across the bleak, hellish landscape. Ringo and Fitz immediately flanked him, backing away while keeping their eyes on the crowd of angry anouks. The rest of the Rangers followed after. Only Ross remained standing in front of Martool.

The shaman wasn't willing to force the issue, though in her mind, the Rangers had lost the privilege of caring for Debbi's soul. She belonged now to Castle Rock.

"Her blood is on your hands," she whispered harshly to Ross.

Ross backed away, his eyes locked on Martool. They weren't defiant, only desperate and stricken. His face was stoic and betrayed nothing, but his eyes were windows to a soul that had lost the one thing that kept him sane.

Ngoma was waiting for them with the Stallion. They boarded silently. Stew still clutching Debbi. No one, not even Ross, tried to take her from him. Ross took a seat in the back and watched his crew tend to Debbi's torn body, laying her in the rear berth, wiping away the blood, and covering her with a blanket, her features prominent as the cloth draped over her face. It was tucked in around her like she was merely cold.

Ross was lost in his own head. Quantrill had found the one chink in his armor, the one thing that mattered to him. Ross was just starting to realize that maintaining order and achieving his personal revenge meant little in the face of this tragedy. Quantrill wanted to break Ross, and with a simple act of violence, he had finally accomplished it.

Book II: The Undead War

Time had ceased to move forward. Ross couldn't think beyond the still form opposite him. No one approached him though they all stole glances in his direction. Grief saturated the air as each Ranger tried to deal with their loss.

Fitz was weeping openly, his one hand touching Debbi's shoulder as if unable to let her go. Chennault sat with eyes cast to the floor. She had lost friends in battle before, but that didn't make this any easier to cope with. She was already thinking more of the people she would make pay for it.

Miller sat awkwardly consoling the sobbing Ringo. The young Ranger had endured so much only to be broken by this. Ngoma flew the Stallion with stiff precision, using the opportunity to distract himself from the pain as best he could.

Hallow sat off to the side, separate from all of them. His eyes were lost in a world that only he could see. He had come out of his self-imposed exile in the desert on a mission of mercy and stayed to fight for a lost cause because of a single woman. Now she was dead. The call of painless seclusion beckoned again.

Stew sat beside Debbi's body and just stared at it, tears falling of their own accord down his face. He was motionless, not even lifting a hand to wipe away the steady stream. He couldn't believe it. She was gone. One minute she was larger than life and now she looked so incredibly small. Stew reached out and gently drew the thin blanket slowly from her face.

He didn't know what he expected. Maybe he thought her eyes would open and she'd smile at him. The dead were rising all over Banshee, why couldn't she?

But her eyes remained closed, her mouth partially open, her torn blue lips. She was slowly losing color. Her cheeks were pale and the red blood was drying to a thick, dark film.

Ross watched Stew's tender ministrations and his rigid expression almost shattered with the ache of it. Rubbing his forehead, he found that the throbbing agony had returned and engulfed him like a black shroud. Small drops of crimson dotted the gunmetal floor beneath him as blood dripped slowly down his cheek like unholy tears.

He regarded all his Rangers. They all hung their heads with shoulders slumped. The only sounds in the Stallion were the muffled sobs of Ringo and the heedless mourning of Fitz.

They should have all been celebrating today. This was to have been a victory. Now it was hollow. Their one day of grace and Quantrill had destroyed it.

A surge of anger welled up in Ross; he choked on it. Quantrill was going to pay. Ross swore it. He would hunt down the bastard and twist the General's rotting head from his body with his bare hands.

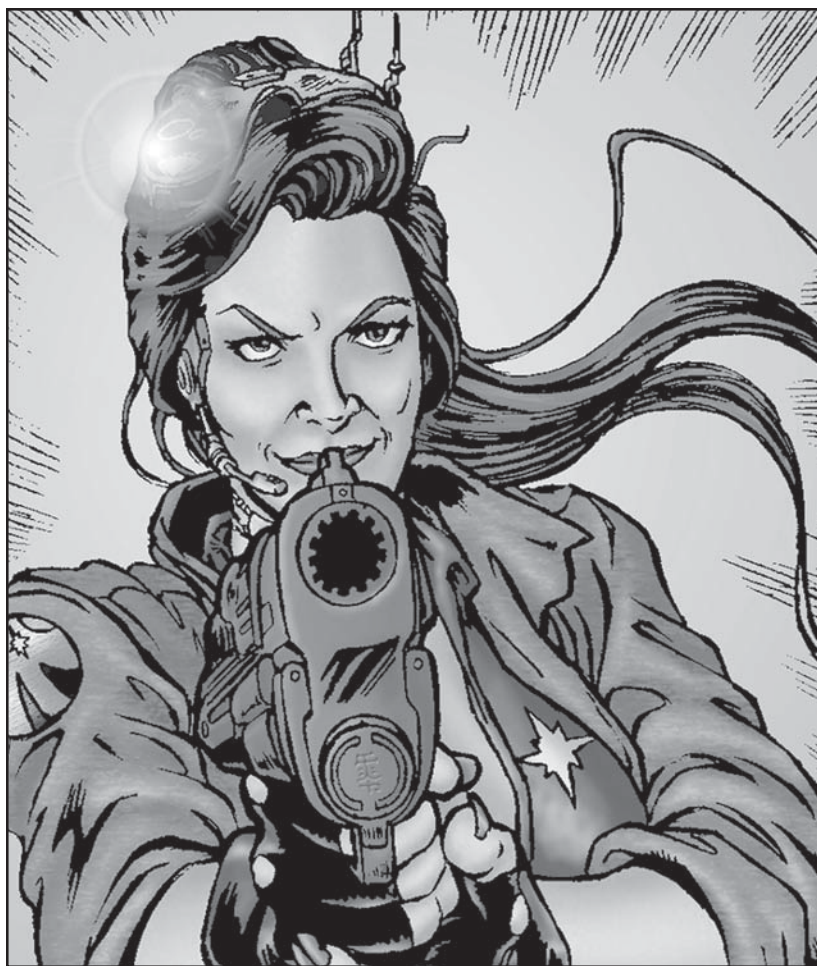
Temptation be damned. Banshee be damned. Nothing mattered to Ross anymore, only revenge. There was nothing left to stop him from tearing this planet apart and Quantrill along with it.

Ross's gaze fell on Debbi once more, still and serene in death.

Rest in peace, Debbi, because I sure as hell won't.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Book III: Fraternity of the Grave



Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave



Clay & Susan Griffith

Chapter 1

The Banshee winter was deathly cold. With winter's breath had come icy darkness that held no heat. There was no insulation from cloud cover, and any heat garnered in the daylight hours dissipated quickly into the starlit skies above.

Captain Holt of the Temptation Nightwatch stood on the wall and listened to Banshee moan. The wind always moaned and Holt was sick to death of hearing it. It was inhuman; Earth wind rarely shrieked so. Its incessant noise made his skin crawl. But still he held his ground. It would take more than that to make him run.

His eyes quickly caught a shape moving in the darkness. His heart leapt to his throat but then quickly sank again.

It was Captain Ross. Holt recognized his shape and paid little attention to it. Late at night, regardless of the weather, Ross wandered. It was downright creepy. But Holt understood what drove the man. They all lost a piece of their souls over the last few months, but for Dave Ross it was much worse.

Holt watched Ross's hunched shape disappear into the gloom like a lost soul in search of a body. The Ranger Captain was on the edge of deep precipice. It was only a matter of time before he fell in.

Debbi Dallas had been a breed apart. Her sense of duty didn't just entail watching over the citizens of Temptation, but everyone, including the Nightwatch and the town militia. The town militia wasn't looked upon too favorably at times. They had a terrible tendency to break and run at the first sign of serious trouble. The Nightwatch was a cut above them being the best and brightest of that militia. But still they weren't given the credit even when it was due.

Except by Dallas. She had risked her life for one of their own, brought him safely out of a zombie infested church at great risk to herself when everyone else had written the poor slob off as dead. And she did it for no other reason than he needed her help.

The Nightwatch hadn't forgotten that.

And if Debbi's death had affected the militia badly, then it was ten times that for the Rangers. Debbi had been all that stood between disaster and salvation at times when Temptation had been hit by plague after plague. Somehow, she had stood her ground and managed to keep the town together, bearing a united front against all comers, creatures, Reapers, and the Undead Legion.

But of course there had been no fanfare when Ross and the Rangers had returned carrying the body of Dallas. They had been all but forgotten by a town that was at least temporarily safe. What was one Ranger, more or less, to the people of Temptation, as long as they were there when needed?

Actually, Holt thought, this was Ross's first night home in a while. The Ranger had been out hunting.

Quantrill was still out there. Rumors filtered in from all over Banshee placing the undead General here or there, from the Glass Wastes to the Toxic Jungle. Temptation's Colonial Rangers jumped in their Hosses on a moment's notice and raced anywhere to pursue the chance of finding the man that killed their beloved colleague. Holt had volunteered to go several times himself, but the Rangers needed him in town to keep the militia in line.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

However, the Temptation Rangers searched the planet without their leader. Ross refused to go along. He spent day after day after week after week hunched alone in a small camp outside the Lupinz Sanitarium. He ignored the hot winds and the frigid winds, the blistering days and the icy nights. Soon the snows would come, but that wouldn't matter. Ross would stay there, squatting amid the brush, staring through binoculars at the creaking asylum behind its razor wire fence. He believed Quantrill was inside. And he knew eventually the General would come out.

And Ross would be there to kill him.

No one else believed. They all said that it would have been stupid for Quantrill to hole up in a place so obvious and indefensible. They didn't think the remnants of the Legion could be stashed in the Sanitarium.

Holt knew that Ross wouldn't rest till the monster had paid for what he had done. But Holt also knew there was no way an ordinary human was going to fight a legion of zombie sykers. No, Captain Dave Ross was fighting a losing battle on a great many fronts.

The poor, dumb bastard.

The ice cold wind blew hard against Ross as he walked through the darkness. His arms were crossed against it.

He hated the wind.

He hated the ache it brought to his weary bones; hated the way it caressed his body, not like a lover, but like death's cold hand; hated the way it never tarried but went along on its business as if nothing was wrong.

Debbi had loved the wind though, and so he tried to forgive it all its shortcomings. He tried to appreciate it as she had. She swore it spoke to her. Every so often Ross thought he could hear Debbi's mournful voice in the incessant wind. It eased his hate to hear it sometimes.

He walked on, not fully aware of what he was doing. His thoughts were elsewhere, but he knew where he would end up. The same place he always ended up.

Debbi's grave.

Ross never really knew why. At first, it was hope that Temptation's soil would revive her like it had every other damn thing. Then that hope turned to horror. What if it did resurrect her as one of the living dead? He couldn't let that happen. Debbi wouldn't want that, not under any circumstances.

He thought briefly of Stew who had once shot his own undead father when the Temptation cemetery had first risen in force. It had almost broken the younger man. Ross knew it would be tenfold to shoot Debbi that way.

But the months had passed since her death and Ross thanked God every day that Debbi had not risen from the ground. Now, he came to the cemetery out of sheer habit. Sometimes he would talk to her as if she stood beside him.

Tonight, the cemetery was still except for the Banshee wind rattling the ramshackle metal gate. Ross passed through their groaning wings and entered. He strode straight for Debbi's grave. The first thing he did, to his disgust, was look for disturbed soil. Much to his relief, the dark earth was firm and unblemished. There were only some fresh flowers that had toppled over in the breeze.

Ross knelt and straightened them. They were probably from Ringo.

Clay & Susan Griffith

The young Ranger always managed to collect wildflowers every few days and bring them out to the cemetery. Ross rarely saw him because Ringo never came to the cemetery at night.

Ross's fingers brushed lightly over her name on the tombstone, etched in simple block letters. Below it was the motto that Ross had attached to her. It was an old one but accurate nonetheless.

She maintained the right.

Ross took great pains to trace the engraving of each letter in her name and bowed his head to the stone. It was cold and rough, but he stayed there pressed against its surface. He felt the same way inside. His gut hadn't stopped hurting since that day. He had felt such despair once before and he had hoped he would never feel it again. He should have known better. It wasn't going to fade for a long time. It would stay with him and remind him of what he had had and then lost. Ross wasn't looking forward to the next few years.

There was only one thing that he wanted now. There was only one thing that would make the ache bearable and that was for the Legion to be wiped from the planet and Quantrill's bones to be scattered by Debbi's winds to the outer reaches of the atmosphere. Ross was determined that there would be nothing left of Quantrill's body to even bury in the sands of Banshee. The General would never rise again.

Stepping back, Ross sank against a gnarled old tree that stood before Debbi's marker. He had chosen the spot so Debbi could see her precious wind move and animate the limbs of the old tree. The wind whistling through the branches made a sweet sound that he knew she would love to hear.

The sun was just about to rise over the distant horizon and Ross stared at it dully. He would linger only another day in Temptation. He was eager to get back to his camp near the Sanitarium.

Ross's frustration at his inability to bring to justice Debbi's killer had driven the Ranger into a deeper depression. It had been Sharif's sanity and tranquility that kept Ross from trying a foolhardy maneuver like an outright attack on the Sanitarium. Looking back at it all now, Ross knew that Sharif was right to stop him. Without their black guns, it would likely have been a wasted effort and a lot more Colonial Rangers would have been killed. No, Quantrill was the key and his killing him was something Ross had to do without endangering anyone else.

The rush of the wind eased and gently ruffled Ross's duster, its soft breath caressing him for a change instead of battering him. His head slumped against the rough bark of the tree and his eyes slipped closed. He could almost feel the warm early rays of the sun creeping up his legs.

Exhaustion beckoned him deeper and he slipped without notice into a restless slumber.

Chapter 2

Mo's saloon was a sight of pandemonium at the noon hour. It hadn't seen this much business even during the entire previous caravan season because Temptation had been avoided like the plague. By comparison, the bar was jammed now, even though it was winter. The clamor was almost deafening. It didn't hurt that Hellstromme Industries was back in town and beginning to build, which attracted a lot of attention.

Mo worked behind the bar. He was exhausted, but he didn't care. He was making money.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

Yes, life was good again.

Then the door opened and in walked four Colonial Rangers. They looked bedraggled, unshaven, and were dusty from the trail. No doubt, just returning from running down another false lead on General Quantrill.

Mo's sense of success suddenly plummeted. He looked quickly to where the Rangers' attention was located. Their eyes were locked with irritation at the group of four caravaneers who had commandeered the corner table that Temptation's Rangers normally claimed. Those teamsters were a quarrelsome lot who had come in from the ravaged town of Ghost Rock City in the south looking for work. They had been hired by Hellstromme to run short loads and they were full of themselves thanks to steady work and steady pay. The boss was smart, but the others, a tall woman, a wild-eyed teenager, and a short slab of steel with a scar across his face were all as bitter as mandrake root. And just as dangerous.

Damn, Mo thought, why hadn't he made more of an effort to get the teamsters to sit elsewhere. Now all hell would break loose and all the money he had just made would go to repairing the place.

Mo threw his towel on the floor in disgust.

Miller, flanked by Ringo, with Fitz and Chennault crowding behind them, stood in the center of the room. He cast his gaze coldly across the room with disgust. *Mo's* had turned into a hangout for overwintering caravan grunts.

A cold, dark expression was slowly filling Ringo's face too. It was not one that normally belonged there. Whereas once the young man had been someone who relished life and all experiences, now they embittered him.

The Rangers had had enough of squatters in Temptation!

Miller, as if reading Ringo's mind, strode to the four teamsters at their table, the rest of the Rangers flying out behind him.

The teamster boss, a lean, black man, didn't bother glancing up, but continued his conversation with a willowy blonde woman who looked as much out of place in a teamster gang as Miller did in a Ranger outfit. The other two caravaneers at the table, a short hunk with a scar and a grimy teenager with a ponytail glanced up darkly from their drinks.

"You're sitting at our table," Fitz pointed out.

"I thought we talked about this," Chennault chided, arms folded and standing close to the teamster boss in an imposing way, despite her short stature.

The Boss slowly raised his head to regard the Rangers, his eyes calmly regarding Chennault's proximity with a bored expression. "Oh, is that what you were chattering on about the other day?"

"Oh yeah," offered the blonde woman, leaning forward over her thin but muscular arms, her loose hair falling over her cheeks. "We thought you meant the little checker game barrel outside on the boardwalk." She smiled falsely.

Ringo snarled, stepping forward. "Lucky for you, that game barrel is still free."

The teamsters made no effort to leave. Their boss reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette and lit it, blowing a lazy curl of smoke into the air. "We ain't moving."

"Maybe you boys should grab the barrel before some else does," said Scarface.

"Checkers seems to be more your speed. It's a quick game, just in case you panty-waisted girls need to run for it again like you did in Ghost

Clay & Susan Griffith

Rock City." Chennault sneered.

Scarface stood up so fast his chair clattered to the floor behind him. "Maybe we'd feel safer if you Rangers fought *against* anouks instead of *with* them."

The Boss reached in his pocket and pulled out a couple of Hellstromme coins. "Here ya go, buy yourself some drinks. It must be thirsty work protecting all those anouks so they can kill normal folk."

Fitz said evenly, "I'd shut up if I were you, mister."

"I ain't allowed to speak my mind in Temptation?" the Boss asked sarcastically. "Is it because I'm not purple?"

Miller's hands were shaking with rage as he pointed at the Boss. "Get out! And stay out!"

"I reckon we'll stay!"

Miller balled his fists. "Listen, you stupid dung eater—"

"Anouk lover!" shouted the Boss.

The place flew apart. Mo wailed as the fight broke out. Beer and glass rained down as the four Rangers collided with the four teamsters. One of his beautiful new chairs shattered over the back of Fitz, heaved at him by the massive Scarface. Fitz shook off the pieces like a big dog and slammed his meaty fist straight into the teamster's nose.

The blonde had Miller's head under her left arm and was pounding her dainty but extremely solid fist into his smarmy face. Miller flailed wildly.

Chennault battled with the Boss. All five foot of her was in his face and attacking mercilessly. There was power in every blow. She effectively blocked every street-fighting move he tried. Surprise was etched on his face right before Chennault's booted foot arched through the air beside him. The Boss turned aside at the last moment but the foot still caught a glancing blow that brought him to his knees. He barely had time for a thought much less anything else before he glimpsed her rushing forward to push her advantage.

Ringo had his hands full with the nasty little teenager with the ponytail. The kid was fast and had power despite a pallid complexion and cadaverous thinness. But Ringo was wiry and dodged most of the punk's attacks. Ringo darted in under a missed blow and laid one across the caravaner's jaw. It rocked him back and Ringo smiled. He relished a fight. It was chance to let go some of his pent up anger and he had plenty to spare. There was nothing wrong with a good, old-fashioned knuckle brawl. They were relatively non-life-threatening and yet still purely satisfying. He let another fist fly.

Stew had just come on watch after a long night of tossing and turning in his small room above the boarding house. Sleep was a thing of luxury these days. He gave up wishing for it a long time ago. Even though the sun was almost near its zenith, it held little warmth so Stew tightened his threadbare green jacket and lifted the collar higher against his bare neck.

He saw Ngoma trudging back to his quarters, silently relinquishing his command over to Stew for the day. Things were running smoothly for a change, despite the crowds of overwintering caravaners and laborers streaming in.

Stew had heard that Ross was back in Temptation. Even though he had not seen the man personally, Ngoma mentioned that their captain

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

had stopped by headquarters briefly yesterday to grab some ammunition.

It's nice to see the man retaining some interest in how this town is run, thought Stew bitterly as he stepped up onto the sidewalk outside Ranger headquarters. He was actually looking forward to a day of distractions. Any work was better than being left alone with his own depressing thoughts. He missed Debbi so much sometimes he felt physically sick. There was no doubt in his mind that he loved her. But she hadn't loved him. Not like he did at any rate. At least he had been beside her through most everything. Even the bad. Even at the end.

Although Stew thought he was prepared for the sharp ache of the memory of her, it still hurt like hell. Scowling against it, he pushed through the door of headquarters. He cast his gaze about, but only Tsukino was there to lift a hand to acknowledge him.

Stew lifted a silent hand back. Sighing, he moved to his desk. There was new glass in the windows that Debbi had broken, which Stew appreciated since winter was here. He sighed again. So much of this place held her stamp. There would be no escaping it so long as he remained here in Temptation. Maybe that was another reason Ross stayed out of town so much. In fact, Stew wouldn't be surprised if one day Ross just never returned.

Ross's office door was open, which wasn't unusual. It was clean, but totally empty except for the chair and the desk. Most of the paperwork was now routed through Stew as acting commander. A huge pile of it awaited him on his own desk. He stared at it in dismay.

Tsukino smiled at him. "I went through half of it already. That's what's left."

"Doesn't this ever end?" groaned Stew.

"There are a lot of requests from the Hellstromme rep for clearances. And she's a real stickler for paperwork."

"I'd be happy to show her where she can stick her paperwork." Stew slumped into his chair.

The outer door swung open and a small, blond boy darted inside.

"Hiya, Stephen," Stew greeted. "What's up?"

Stephen still proudly bore a Ranger badge on his dusty shirt, the same badge Ross had given him during the scuffle with the zombies at the Ecumenical Church. The kid had taken his honorary Ranger status to heart. His face scowled and he apocalyptically announced, "Trouble!"

Laying his elbows on the desk, Stew leaned on his clasped hands. "Where?" Stew wasn't overly concerned. Usually Stephen's pronouncements of doom weren't too critical.

"Ranger Miller's gettin' beat up by a girl!"

"What? Where?" Tsukino rose to his feet more excited than surprised.

"Mo's," the kid squeaked, bouncing on his toes in excitement. "There's a huge fight."

"Aw hell," Stew stood slowly and wearily grabbed his hat. To Tsukino, he added, "You stay here and hold the fort."

"No way. This I have to see." Tsukino followed him out.

Stew didn't bother trying to discourage him. "Well, I guess it's official. Mo's is open for business."

"Yeah, I bet he's ecstatic."

The two Rangers slipped out the door. Stew slapped his hat on his head as they ran down the street toward Mo's. He could hear the commotion. Glass breaking. People shouting. It sounded like a hell of a lot more than just Miller getting his clock cleaned. In fact, it sounded like the

Clay & Susan Griffith

whole town was involved. Suddenly he was grateful to have Tsukino by his side.

Stew's eyes caught sight of a long, black duster on the other side of the street walking in the opposite direction. He recognized it immediately.

"Hey, Ross! Trouble at Mo's!"

Ross would handle this dust up with ease, thought Stew. He had done so numerous times in the past, and he'd chastise Miller to boot for causing trouble. It would be worth the show.

Ross just looked at Stew with dark, hooded eyes. "Handle it," he said and kept on walking.

"Son of a bitch," Stew muttered in irritation. He exchanged a look with Tsukino who just shrugged.

Ross's disinterest in Ranger affairs was getting way out of hand. But this was no time to deal with it. Stew rushed on to the saloon, hoping he could quiet matters down. Most likely he was going to his clocked cleaned along with Miller.

Miller was seeing nothing but a red haze. That blonde chick had looked like easy pickings, but instead he had latched onto a wildcat. He wasn't even sure he'd managed to lay a hand on her, but he liked to imagine he had. His head felt like it was four sizes too big and was ringing with the fury of a big cathedral bell during mass. He lashed out with his arms and thought he connected, but the pressure around his neck only intensified while someone hammered his nose with a ball-peen hammer. As much as he hated to do it, he shouted for help.

Ringo heard Miller's pathetic cry and winced as he saw the female teamster holding his friend in a wrestler's headlock and mercilessly pummeling him. He wanted to help but he had his hands full. Bleeding and sore, he launched himself at his opponent. The caravan kid ducked low and met the Ranger's charge, encircling Ringo's ribs with solid arms and literally picked him up and carried him along into the wall. Ringo's breath vacated his lungs in a rush. He drew up his arms and brought them crashing down on the teenager's neck. The kid's grip eased and Ringo boxed his ears for good measure like Chennault had taught him. It was enough. He was free and the teenager was down.

Ringo glanced over to see how the others were doing.

Fitz, even though handicapped with one arm, was going toe to toe with the muscular Scarface. The floor shook with their battle, like two massive bulls struggling for dominance. Ringo didn't think anything short of an act of God would separate them. He wisely chose to keep out of that fight.

Chennault's opponent, the wiry teamster Boss, was wary as they circled each other, seeking openings. They were both bloodied, but their fight looked more like a dance. Feet, arms, and bodies moved so fast, it was hard to keep track of the movements.

Nope, Ringo decided. He would stay out of that one too. That left Miller. As much as Ringo knew that Miller would be furious to be rescued from a woman, Ringo also knew the Ranger needed some help. Better his griping than having to visit him in Doc Dazy's bizarro infirmary for the next couple of days.

Ringo leapt without further preamble onto the blonde. Where he thought he would hit soft, yielding flesh, he impacted on hard bone and muscle.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

Oh crap, he thought.

The blonde wasted no time. She dropped Miller like a sack of flour and reached around for the annoying new presence on her back.

Stew burst in through the heavy wooden front door, which replaced the summer batwings. One look around and all he saw was a disaster. Mo's was a mess. And the fight was totally out of control. It wasn't just the Rangers and the teamsters. Everyone in the bar had been swept into it, probably due to someone falling on the table or knocking over a beer. Some things were worth fighting over.

Stew shouted into the din. "Knock it off!"

The mayhem continued. In fact, no one even paused. No ripple in the flow of battle at all.

Thinking it was best to pull the Rangers out of this mess as quickly as possible, Stew waded over toward them. The Rangers would at least acknowledge him and ease down. Tsukino followed him, pushing combatants aside.

Stepping over Miller's prone form on the floor, Stew grabbed Ringo by the collar and pulled him from a female teamster's reach. He barely saw the fist that caught him just below the eye. Stars erupted and he rocked back.

Shaking his head, he saw the next punch coming and blocked it. "That's enough!" he shouted at the woman. He threw Ringo on the pile that was Miller. Thankfully, the kid stayed there.

The blonde just smirked at Stew. "Who the hell are you? You got a problem where the hell I sit too?"

Well, at least he knew what had started this fight. "I couldn't care less, lady. You can plop your can down in the middle of the street for all I care."

"Good." The blonde stepped back but then Fitz stumbled into her, shoved aside by Scarface; she turned angrily toward him, fists about to fly.

Tsukino broke in between the two of them, and nearly got crushed for his effort. He staggered aside and shouted at Stew. "This isn't getting it."

"I know," Stew shouted back. He realized his mistake in getting into the thick of the fight. This was no way to make the enraged grapplers see reason. He needed a distraction. He spied Mo's elaborate barka antler chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

With a silent apology to Mo, and praying the object wasn't a family heirloom, Stew jerked out his Dragon and took aim. The floor was clear directly beneath the fixture. He fired, hoping no one shifted position.

The blast from the gun made everyone pause and the shattering effect of the chandelier on the floor made all jump back. Silence finally fell over Mo's.

"That's better!" Stew shouted. "Now that I have everyone's attention, I'm officially calling this fight over. Fitz, Chennault, get over here."

The two Rangers backed slowly away from their opponents.

The teamster Boss watched them go cautiously, wiping his dripping bloody nose with the side of his hand. Scarface stepped forward after the retreating Rangers, eager to continue, but the Boss stopped him in an outstretched hand.

It was over.

Stew inclined his head at the Boss, grateful for the late assist in bringing this all to a halt. He could feel his right eye starting to swell. He didn't touch it, just blinked as rapidly as best he could.

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Take your people and go," Stew informed the Boss. "Now."

The Boss, Scarface, the blonde, as well as Fitz and Ringo immediately protested about who started what and who should be in jail and wasn't this a free town. The Boss glanced at silent Chennault. Then he raised his hands to silence his people. He nodded once in begrudging agreement to Stew. Then the teamsters gathered the unconscious teenager off the floor and they shuffled out of the saloon.

Mo came over to Stew. "Thanks." His eyes tracked to his shattered, personally handmade chandelier, and he added, "I think. You know Ross always seemed to settle these things down a lot faster and a whole lot less expensively."

Biting down the bitter taste of resentment, Stew scowled. "Take it up with him, if you can find the man." He turned to his bedraggled troops and lifted a hand to the door. "If you please, ladies..."

Chennault strode out sullenly while Ringo struggled to hold up the barely conscious Miller.

"How come you're not arresting those teamsters for disturbing the peace?" Ringo griped to Stew as he tried to heft Miller's limp arm around his shoulders.

"Because if I did, I'd have to arrest you too, you idiot," Stew snapped, clearly at the end of his patience. Then he whispered, "And maybe you haven't noticed this saloon is full of teamsters who don't like seeing their brothers hauled off to jail. For any reason. No one was killed. So let's just forget it."

Fitz reached over and grabbed Miller by the scruff of his jacket and heaved him up the rest of the way, allowing Ringo to get a better hold. "Don't matter, kid. We showed them. They ain't likely to intrude on our space again."

"You mean we won?" Ringo was confused. His jaw sure didn't feel like they won.

Fitz slapped the youngster on the shoulder so hard he almost dropped Miller. "We took what they tried to dish out. Went toe to toe for what's ours. It'll be different next time."

"We won't have to kill them, will we?" Ringo appeared slightly worried.

"Hell no, but we might have to buy them drinks though." Fitz laughed loudly, holding the door open for the others.

"Male bonding sucks," Ringo concluded.

Chapter 3

Ross drank alone in the corner. The LAX was quieter than *Mo's* now that the town had swung back toward a normal way of life. Freighters and smugglers had started trucking in again. The decrepit spaceport bar reflected the decrepit spaceport. Pilots and crew loitered inside, chattering about their flights and spreading tall tales.

The bar was noisy and crowded, but at least Ross didn't know many people here and very few souls bothered him. He didn't like being here, but he badly wanted a drink and *Mo's* was out of the question. The LAX was the only place besides the quiet cemetery that he could think.

He poured himself another shot of whiskey and slugged it back. He concentrated on the sensation as it burned its way slowly down his gullet. He wanted any respite from thinking about Debbi. While he was in town, only liquor numbed the pain. He was eager to get back into the wilds and keep vigil on the Sanitarium.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

A shadow fell over his table and Ross started, his hand dropping immediately to the Peacemaker at his side. He drew it quickly away though upon recognizing Sharif. Inclining his head to the chair opposite him, Ross leaned back.

The tall, imposing figure of the Tuareg decked out in dark robes sat silently with Ross. The black eyes normally so cool and detached held sorrow for the man across from him.

Sharif believed Ross was a ghost who was chasing a ghost. Twice since Dallas's death, the syker Hallow scouted the Lupinz Sanitarium and reported no evidence of Quantrill. Further, Hallow claimed he sensed no great psychic power at all in the area, which called into question Ross's story of torture at the hands of Dr. Lupinz. In the end, while the syker conceded that the traumatic interference around the Sanitarium was strong and that psychic powers were peculiar and unpredictable things and that he could be wrong, clearly he didn't believe he was. And neither did Stew and any of the other Rangers, nor Sharif himself.

The Tuareg could easily tell when someone was losing a battle and yet refused to accept it. Sharif didn't want to abandon his friend, but his business obligations and his common sense dictated that he must. It pained him greatly.

Ross read the man's face and waved a hand at him. "Don't worry about it, Sharif. I understand. You can't sit just outside Lupinz Sanitarium. You've got a life to get back to."

"As do you, my friend."

Ross laughed and refilled his glass. "My days are planned out."

Sharif sighed. "I regret certain duties require my attention elsewhere." He noticed the bartender approaching him and waved him aside. Bartenders never seemed to remember he did not drink alcohol.

"I'm not holding you to anything," Ross muttered. "I appreciate all the help."

"You will go again?"

Ross nodded. "Yeah, tomorrow."

"Perhaps you should seek out Hallow's assistance again."

Ross shook his head firmly. "If he can't sense Quantrill out there, he can't. Nothing more for him to do."

Sharif leaned forward. "My caravan rarely ranges farther than Scapula Springs this time of year. If you need me, send word there. I will come."

Ross gave a sharp nod. "Thanks." The whiskey was making his throat dry and rough.

"You are exhausting yourself. Don't let fatigue make foolish choices, my friend. Quantrill, though rotting, has a wicked brain."

"Yep."

The Tuareg stood. "Good luck to you then. May the hunting be fair." He stretched out a dark, weathered hand, rubbed harsh by the many years of traveling through the Banshee terrain.

Ross took it. He could feel the coarse ridge of calluses in the palm, hardened by years of fighting by the sword. "And may soft winds speed you on your journey."

"That they shall." Sharif gathered his robes and strode out of the LAX.

The veteran Ranger hunted alone once more. It was better this way, he thought. Less responsibility, less chance of losing another friend.

With a weary sigh, Ross poured another drink. He lost himself staring through the glass at the brown liquid. The table suddenly shook as a pair of laced, leather boots planted themselves in the middle. Ross looked up

Clay & Susan Griffith

angrily at their owner.

Hickok.

"Go away," the Ranger growled, debating whether he should push her feet aside roughly or just lop them off at the knees. Ross wasn't in the mood for games, and the cocky Chinese pilot was full of them, always had been.

Hickok reached a slim arm over to grab the whiskey bottle. She took great pains in examining the hand written label. "Only the best for you, eh Ross?" She took a swig anyway and slammed the bottle back on the table as her eyes watered. "Damn, this stuff will kill you." She laughed hollowly. "But maybe that's the point."

He didn't comment. He stared at the table, his eyes only black pits.

"What is it you want?"

Hickok's false smile remained plastered on her face. "I just came by to see the walking ghost for myself." She casually rubbed at a smudge on her boot top, appearing distracted. "You hear things. Tales of dark shadows haunting graveyards, looking for redheaded corpses."

Ross swept an arm and shoved her legs aside, his face twisted into a snarl. Hickok practically fell from the chair. There was no surprise in her expression though. She knew she had woken the sleeping tiger. She meant to. The pilot straightened and resumed her seat and her cocky smile, dismissing his aggression.

"You'd best mind your own business," Ross hissed.

"Oh, I am, believe it or not." She leaned over the table. "I just got back from the south. Looking for Quantrill."

Ross didn't respond.

The pilot continued, "I didn't find him, if you want to know. But Stew tells me there've been Legion sightings couple hundred miles northeast. I'm heading out in a few days." She stared at the downcast Ranger and waited. His only move was to reach for the bottle again. She placed her hand over his glass. "Come with me, Ross."

He swigged from the bottle. "Busy."

Hickok gave a disgusted sigh. "Busy? Sitting in the brush outside the Lupinz Sanitarium watching for something that won't happen? It's been three months and you got zip to show for it. You haven't seen any sign of Quantrill out there. Hallow says he isn't there. Why are you the only one who doesn't believe him? Why are *you* still there? Maybe you're just looking for payback for what you say happened to you out there." She rested her elbow on the table, her chin propped in her hand. She heard a low growl coming from Ross.

"When I need your snide opinion, I'll ask for it," he retorted.

"Like hell. You've never been one to ask for help of any kind."

"Because I don't need it."

"No, it's because you're pig-headed. Always were. Even *she* knew that. Guess she wasn't as naive as you thought she was."

"Shut up."

"Ross, you and I have known each other a long time now. I know all about you. I helped pick up the pieces last time this happened."

"Don't take credit where it isn't due," he lashed out.

Hickok scowled, stung. "We helped each other out of some bad times. I appreciated your help even if you didn't appreciate mine. We were both hurting back then. Burnt out as I was from the war, and you reeling from your wife's death on Earth. Both of us needed the other. It just didn't turn out to be forever. No big deal."

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

Ross knew he had hurt her, and that his last comment was unfair, but he didn't care. She was opening raw wounds. She'd have to pay the price. "If you're thinking you can waltz back in here again and start playing the savior of lost souls again, you're wrong. We're through. This isn't like before."

"What a bastard you are. Geez, Ross, I thought...hell, I don't know what I thought." She shoved back her needle straight, black hair behind her ears in frustration. She looked around the room, scrambling to regain her composure. Who'd have thought he could hurt her after all these years?

"You're right. This isn't like before," she started again, determined to show him something he refused to see for himself. "Debbi and Mary don't have one thing in common. Where Mary was porcelain and polish, Debbi was nothing but spit and fire. She was able to step into your life in a way that Mary never could have. You loved that. Loved having her at your side in battle. And then you lost her. But that was the price. She played with the big boys and now she's gone. Get over her."

"That's enough, Hickok! I've listened to your crap long enough. Get out of here." He was raging inside. All the pain and hurt from the past and the present were battering him mercilessly. He couldn't stand it.

Hickok's voice became soft and low. "I miss her too, Ross."

"Then act like it," he snapped.

"Why? So I can be a morose wretch like yourself. No thanks. Jesus, everyone's hurting, Ross. There's no reason to shout to the world that your pain is the worst. We all know that. You cared for her and now she's gone. You feel guilty and lost."

Ross's eyes hardened and his jaw flexed convulsively. "Don't, Hickok."

"Don't what? Tell the truth? Dear God, man, someone has too. It's my job, you see. She gave it to me. Watch out for Ross, she asked me. Kick his ass every now and then when you get crazy like you are now.

"She knew you so well. Knew you'd need looking after if something ever happened to her." Hickok shook her head in amazement. "She was a friggin' genius, you know that. So much so at times, I hate her." She reached over and took another long draught of the whiskey bottle. She breathed out roughly for a few seconds. Finally, she turned her attention back to Ross, who was sitting there frozen in the throes of agony, remembering. "Bottom line, Ross. Get over it. Live your life like she'd want you to. All you're doing right here is shaming her. She's looking down at you in disgust."

"That's enough!" Ross's voice shook the room, hate emblazoned on his features. He half lifted himself off the chair, his arms locked on the table. The bar quieted and people stared in their direction, waiting for blows to fall.

Hickok didn't flinch, but rose up to meet him. "Let her go and find some friggin' peace. We'll run down Quantrill one way or the other, but Temptation needs you now! It's the one thing you both cared about." She pointed a finger at Ross's chest. "You, go to work. Do her proud. You may not have noticed but Hellstromme Industries is trying to turn this into a company town. They're flashing a lot of money around. And it's attracting a lot of attention."

"So what?" was his sullen response. He sat back and reached for the bottle.

"You goddamn, pathetic son of a bitch!" She stared at him angrily, slapping the bottle away from him. It crashed against the wall. She stood there breathing heavily, staring at him. Then slowly, her anger abated,

Clay & Susan Griffith

leaving her miserable and weary. "You're already gone, aren't you? The Ross we knew would have never said that. You wouldn't let Hellstromme buy up this town without trying your damndest to stop it." She straightened, sadness filling her dark eyes. "Here's a little free help for old time's sake, Ross. Defend what you both loved instead of wasting your time battering at something you both hated."

Hickok strode away from the table and out the door. She held her head higher than Ross had ever seen. Her almost elegant posture struck him as odd for the mercenary pilot. Somewhere, somehow, she had gained a self-respect he'd never seen in her. Debbi most likely was the cause. She was always messing with folks' morals, molding them into better people, showing them that they could be more than what they were, sometimes against their will at first.

Ross rubbed his face roughly, feeling a stranger's features beneath his hands. He hardly recognized himself anymore. He didn't need a reflection to see that. He had changed. But damn it, wasn't he entitled? He had gone through hell because of Quantrill. Honor dictated he take revenge. For himself.

For Debbi.

He never once thought the cost was too high. He hadn't realized anyone else cared about what he did or didn't do with his life, particularly Debbi. He had always figured they were on the same page on that one.

Ross let out a harsh chuckle. Hell, he and Debbi had *never* been on the same page about anything - from anouk relations to Banshee's future. He scrubbed at his hair, holding his head in his weary arms. It hurt just to think. Maybe a few hours sleep would help him gather his wits. He was so incredibly tired.

Ross had every intention of sleeping, only he couldn't. As much as he prayed for exhaustion to take him into the folds of dreamless slumber, it didn't happen. Instead he tossed and turned and fumed and cursed until finally he left his room to wander again. He needed to talk to someone, rant a bit without interruption or preaching. He knew where he had to go. It was dark and he doubted he'd meet anyone. Folks didn't wander around outside town after dark.

Damn Hickok and her morality play. His head ached from the arguing and now he was too pent up to sleep. He ambled through the cemetery gates again, his scuffling feet stirring up small clouds of dust as he entered. The wind dragged them swiftly away, merging them with the sand-filled air as it rushed to a new location.

Ross's heavy duster tried to tug him back, its long folds captured by the wind, but the man was resolute, head bent into the force of the storm, ignoring its incessant demands. He almost sighed with relief as her grave marker came into sight. It gave Ross a slight chill to be out here among the dead, but at least they were silent. No one would criticize him. He placed a cold hand upon the tombstone, rubbing the smooth stone surface with a rough hand.

It took him a minute to find his voice. "I'm not sure what I'm doing anymore, Debbi, or even why I'm doing it." He leaned his hip against her monument and removed his hat, perhaps out of reverence or perhaps out of habit. His black hair, longer now from neglect, danced wildly in the wind.

"There was a time that I knew every step I took. Now it seems that

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

every move I make is the wrong one. If you were here, I'm sure you'd tell me what I should do." He allowed a small knowing smile to almost crease his lips. It faded quickly. "Nothing's the same, Debbi. Not Temptation, not Banshee. Hickok wants me to take up the mantle of responsibility for the town again. Says you told her to. Gee thanks. The last thing I needed was that viper on my tail yammering about loyalty. What the hell were you thinking?"

Silence answered him.

He sighed. "I know you're going to hate me for this but I'm leaving Temptation. For good. There's something inside me, something dark. It's going to bust wide open and hurt those I still care about. I can't let that happen. I know Hickok wants me to stay and I know you do to, but I can't. I can't let Quantrill get away with this. If I stay here, I'll go crazy, knowing he's still out there and I didn't do a damn thing to stop him. All I think about is Quantrill. He has to pay for what he did to you. Stew's handling things here. He's done it since we got back. He's a good man; you'd be proud of him. And when things are settled, I'll come back." He stopped. He knew himself too well. "Hell, who am I kidding? Jeez, lying to a dead person. How low can I stoop?"

Again, no answer.

He put his hat back on and unconsciously smoothed the brim like he always did. "Well, that's all I have to say. I know it wasn't what you wanted to hear, but that's the way of it." He straightened and then paused. His head dropped slightly. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

He walked away, letting the night close once more around him. The flickering lights of Temptation beckoned him, but he hesitated. A shuttle lifted off from the space port and veered to the north. Probably a Hellstromme ship. Where once he would have felt warmed by the sight of orderly activity, now he only felt edgy and constricted. Nothing seemed as it once was, and he longed now for the open desert and the sense of solitude it offered.

Ross veered away from the town and walked along the perimeter of the cemetery, not yet ready to go back inside the walls. The whole planet seemed in the throes of change. He knew the colonists would fight back from the Worldstorm devastation. He had expected it, but never in the way it played out. Debbi had been right about the world evolving into something beyond what he, as a Colonial Ranger had held important. What had he once told his old friend, Reuben Olivares, right before this world went to hell? That he would join the anouks and become a shepherd. It didn't sound so implausible suddenly. A part of him wanted to settle down and get away from all of this.

He finished his circuit of the cemetery and ended up back at the main gate. He could just spy Debbi's plot.

Ross drew up short. There was something there, hunched over her grave. Icy, cold fingers of dread gripped his chest. His breath came in panting gasps suddenly. He could see movement. The mound of dirt had shifted. Numb hands fumbled for the gun at his side.

Oh God, the time had come.

His rational mind cried out that is was just another mourner come to pay their respects. Stew maybe. With slow steps, he approached the grave, pleading with any deities that would listen to let it not be what he feared the most. Let her rest in peace, goddamn it!

As he neared the disturbed plot, his eyes narrowed. Whatever it was, it was too big to be human. Ross could hear its deep resonating breathing,

Clay & Susan Griffith

occasionally interrupted by grunting.

He drew his Peacemaker slowly, his gaze never wavering from the dark hulk before him. He labored to keep his steps steady and straight while his heart pounded in his head, teeth gritted against the pain that flared.

A large, bulbous head lifted from the ground and twisted in his direction. Ross drew up short. Long teeth gleamed in the wide jawbone and glowing eyes reflected the gathering moonlight.

It was a chanouk!

Ross looked around to find its rider. The Ranger scanned the surrounding tombstones, but only an empty graveyard stared back at him.

"Come out," he shouted in Azeel. "It's pretty damn obvious you're here."

No one stepped forward.

Ross kept his distance from the mighty beast in front of him. Chanouks were more formidable than their owners. But the animal seemed disinterested in Ross; instead it lowered its snout to the ground and sighed heavily.

Confused, Ross strained to peer through the gloom. The rigging on the animal was familiar.

Holy Christ, it's Asai gear! He glanced around wildly now. "Martool!" He also shouted for her bodyguard, the silent warrior Fareel. But there was no one.

Ross came closer, his suspicion rising. Only twenty feet separated the Ranger and the chanouk when it growled and eyed him, but still it remained firmly planted on top of Debbi's grave, huge forepaws and claws extended, refusing to give ground.

It was Little Joe, Debbi's chanouk. Ross could see the dents in the breastplate where the animal had taken some of the blows meant for Debbi when she had been killed. Scars crisscrossed its body. He was surprised the beast had survived Quantrill's attack. Debbi would be overjoyed to know her chanouk was well.

"What are you doing here? Go on home," Ross rebuked it, hoping to frighten it away. Just what he didn't need was for someone in town to see it and spread the hysteria that anouks were attacking. "Get out of here before someone sees you."

The chanouk only growled, dismissing Ross, and shoving its nose into the sand.

"Stop that," Ross commanded angrily. "Stupid beast. Go on, git!" He took his hat off and waved it.

The chanouk started at the sudden movement, half rising, its snarling face swiveling again toward Ross.

Ross backed away. He didn't really want to provoke the thing, but he wanted it off Debbi's grave. "You can't stay here, stupid. Someone will shoot you."

Probably me, thought Ross.

No, that wasn't so. Debbi had thought the world of this animal, so much so she once wanted to wedge it in the back of a Stallion and bring it home to Temptation. Ross smiled at the memory.

Well, if he didn't want to fire his weapon into the air and scare it away since that would certainly draw attention, he holstered his Peacemaker. And to be truthful, he hadn't really the heart. He recognized grief when he saw it. It was amazing. The beast had made its way hundreds of miles from Castle Rock to a place it had never seen, and pinpointed the resting place of his beloved rider.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

Ross let out a weary sigh. "Fine, stay there. But I'm not accountable if someone finds you and takes a shot at you. Just be gone by daybreak, will you."

The chanouk grunted and laid back down with its own heavy sigh.

"Yeah," Ross muttered, "I know how you feel." He walked slowly back toward town, idly wondering if the chanouk would actually fit in the back of the Stallion.

Chapter 4

"So then Miller called one of them a *dung eater*."

Stew threw back his head and roared with laughter. He laughed a little harder and longer than the comment warranted, but he needed it.

Ringo laughed too and cringed in pain, clutching an ice pack to his chin, and then he laughed some more.

Fitz smiled at the reaction his already embellished tale of the Great Ranger - Teamster Saloon Brawl was getting. Even normally dour Tsukino chuckled.

"So anyway," Fitz continued as Stew wiped tears from his face. "So Miller says *dung eater*, like that. And this teamster babe, the tall blonde, she kinda snarls at him like she's already counting the knots she's gonna jerk in him."

"You dung eater!" Ringo imitated Miller's voice and the room broke up again.

Fitz waved his hand to quiet the crowd. "So I started to sidle up near the mean looking one with the scar instead of a face because I figured he'd kill anybody but me. And maybe Chennault."

"Yeah," Ringo added. "His arms were bigger around than my thighs."

"Who threw the first punch? Miller?" Stew looked at the kid studiously laying his forearm on his thigh to compare widths. It was like a gentle glimpse of the old Ringo.

"Nah." Fitz shook his head with a sarcastic grimace. "Miller's never thrown a first punch in his life. He specializes in *taking* first punches."

Stew laughed again. Then he heard someone clearing their throat from the doorway. He swiveled in his chair with a big smile still on his face.

The smile vanished when he saw Lithia. Normally, a beautiful woman's entrance would've drawn the attention of the Rangers. But Lithia transcended and negated whatever physical attractiveness her confident, disciplinarian-like appearance provided. She had only been in Temptation for a few months, but most of the Rangers loathed her already.

Stew ran a quick, frustrated hand across his short hair. Just what he didn't need now, a visit from the Hellstromme Industries liaison.

"How you doing, Lithia?" Stew was angry at the interruption of the first bit of enjoyment the Rangers had in months.

"Well, thank you." She switched off her palmcorder to demonstrate that she was graciously putting aside her personal business and expected others to do the same. She unfastened a long, elaborate topcoat and slid it off. Underneath she wore a business suit with a short skirt that was woefully out of place in Temptation. With two fingers, she held her coat by the collar in the direction of the clutch of Rangers.

Fitz and Tsukino regarded the pale, black-haired woman with disinterest. They grunted greetings. Ringo couldn't help himself though. The young man's politeness got the better of him and he took Lithia's coat

Clay & Susan Griffith

and hung it up on a wall peg.

Lithia nodded at Ringo's swollen eye and bruised jaw with an unpracticed smile of awkward complicity. "So that's from the fight with the teamsters? I heard about that little incident. They were Hellstromme employees, you know."

Ringo shrugged. "So?"

Lithia turned quickly to Stew. "Is Captain Ross in?"

"Nope."

"Is he coming in?"

"Couldn't say."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Nope."

"So then you're in charge, Stew?"

Stew smiled coldly.

The liaison exhaled. "We need to talk. Shall we go into Ross's office?"

Stew looked at the open door in the rear corner of the squad room. He felt an odd flutter in his heart at the thought of invading Ross's sanctum. "Let's talk here. This is my desk."

Lithia said quietly, "This is confidential."

Fitz lumbered to his feet and slapped Ringo on the back. "C'mon, kid! Let's go down to the infirmary and check on Miller."

Tsukino joined them without prompting. As they went out, Ringo's Miller-voice peeped out, "Dung eater." Fitz and Tsukino doubled over as the door slammed shut. Through the window, Stew watched the three Rangers guffawing their way down the darkening, dusty street. He laughed too. Stew wanted to be with his friends, not here with the pompous Hellstromme rep. Dealing with her wasn't his job.

Lithia tried briefly to look like she was in on the gang's gag. But her over officious camaraderie came out as a sarcastic accusation. "My teamsters may lose a few days work thanks to your men."

"I've got a man in the infirmary. Want to compare downtime? And I expect Hellstromme to cough up half the damages." Stew felt his face redden with surprise at the outburst.

Lithia shook her head with overplayed dismay. "It was just a joke, Stew. Relax. I'll contribute to the charges, even though I believe your people started the fight. Over a table. But that's neither here nor there. It's over. Let's move on."

Stew tried to read the woman's eyes, but she was a blank page. He swallowed any further argument. "So what brings you here, Lithia? I haven't had time to process any of your permits yet."

"I'm not here about that, although I'd appreciate it if you could expedite them ASAP. We're eager to start on the additional reactors." Lithia leaned against the desk opposite Stew's. "But more to the point, I have several high level issues of Hellstromme-Ranger cooperation to discuss. But Captain Ross's constant absence isn't helping my timetable."

"Better take that up with him."

The woman stared at the handsome, blue-eyed Ranger, trying to figure him out. Why were these people so loyal to Dave Ross? The man was a dinosaur, and he obviously didn't care about them or he'd be on the job.

"Here's the thing, Stew," Lithia said succinctly as she crossed the floor to stand perfume-wafting close to the Ranger. "I think you'd agree that the Colonial Rangers need to modernize their operational capabilities. Hellstromme is eager to partner up on that effort. You've already seen how useful our black guns were to you. I'd say the difference between life

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

and death describes it. However, I know you are virtually out of ammunition for the black guns. Those units are highly specialized and difficult to manufacture, even if you knew how. But I want to set up a facility here in Temptation to fabricate the needles. In addition, Hellstromme is eager to supply the Colonial Rangers with more black guns and with additional equipment that will enhance your peacekeeping capabilities." She ran her finger over the dusty brim of Stew's hat which rested on his desk.

"Perhaps we can even manage some new hats for you fellas."

Stew removed his hat from her reach and hung it on the back of his chair. Then he raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "Ignoring the fact that Hellstromme sent those guns into the territory without the knowledge or approval of the Colonial Rangers. And that you distributed them to miners and settlers to use as your beta testers against anouks or whatever, without Ranger knowledge or approval. Even ignoring all that Hellstromme mischief, I still don't see what any of that has anything to do with me."

Lithia ignored the facts Stew laid out. She showed no sign of embarrassment or regret for her company's actions. They hadn't needed the Rangers' cooperation then. Now they did. "Obviously, I desire a working relationship with the captain of Rangers here in Temptation. You are the only law for a several hundred miles in all directions."

"Then talk to Ross," Stew reiterated for what seemed like the millionth time.

"That is very difficult since he's never here. I can't keep waiting for your elusive captain to put in an appearance. My directors want results and I can't keep putting them off. They're already pressing me to return to the Tunnel and suspend operations here. They want to leave Banshee to the anouks and Reapers. I'm arguing to them that the Rangers are prepared to act judiciously to insure the future of this planet for the sake of humanity. But I've got to have something concrete to take to them. I need someone who can make a decision on behalf of the Rangers, and make that decision stick." She eyed Stew as if picturing captain's bars on his lapel.

"Whoa, whoa," Stew stammered. "I'm telling you, you need to get with Ross. He's in charge here. I'm not going behind his back."

"I wouldn't want you to," Lithia shot back. "But ask yourself, when is the last time you saw him? Stew, it's clear. He's abandoned his responsibilities. For the sake of every human on Banshee, you've got to step up."

Stew thought back to the frustration he felt when Ross callously refused to help break up the saloon fight. And he looked at the stack of papers on his desk that was rightfully Ross's work. Now Stew spent more time filling out forms than walking the streets talking to the people of the town.

Lithia, sensing a seed of success, added smoothly and in a quiet voice, "And I would add that Hellstromme fully intends to supplement your pay with a generous consultant's fee."

Stew laughed. It was a deep laugh springing from the years of ludicrous, dangerous, impossible situations the Rangers had faced. Very little of it was done with the thought or the reality of a paycheck.

Stew howled, "Now that is fantastic! I can buy that new car I've had my eye on. No wait! I sure could use a new refrigerator."

Lithia bit her lower lip and smoldered. She didn't like being laughed at.

Stew rubbed his chin. "What the hell do I need more money for? I can only wear one shirt at a time. We loot our ammo from old EXFOR

Clay & Susan Griffith

dumps. And Mo gives me some of my food and all of my booze for free. Lithia, at the risk of forfeiting my consultant's fee by pissing you off, you better get your nose out of your quarterly reports and look around you. We live on a godforsaken, wind-ravaged rock."

Lithia kept her cool. "Point taken, Stew. So if money means nothing, think about your town and your fellow Colonial Rangers. The more we cooperate to create a dependable, efficient system here, the better for everyone. For a dependable system, we need dependable people. And do you really think Ross qualifies? In his day, I'm sure he was excellent. No doubt, he was the epitome of the old, two-fisted frontiersman. But times change.

"Hellstromme wants a renewed presence on the surface and, if we move forward, EXFOR won't be far behind us. And if that happens, the anouks can count their culture in months. The Worldstorm was their biggest shot. And it failed. At some point, the Tunnel will reopen and commerce with Earth will be reestablished. You've got to be ready, we've got to be ready, or the Colonial Rangers won't survive the coming transition. There won't be any room in a modern, colonial administration for a bunch of outdated gunslingers."

Stew said, "You're getting ahead of yourself. We still get little space traffic here and I haven't heard any hint that UN troops are considering coming back to Banshee. The odd Marine raid doesn't equal an invasion. Now, if the Tunnel does reopen, sure, the smart money would be on EXFOR, but without it, I just don't know.

"When UN forces bugged out during the Worldstorm, the Colonial Rangers stuck. It was this bunch of outdated gunslingers that held human society together. And despite what you imagine for the future, Temptation is not some sleeping metropolis waiting to explode with commerce. It's just a bunch of scared people huddling in the dark because they're afraid of monsters waiting to eat us. I'd say we need all the old frontiersmen like Ross we can get."

Lithia replied, "I respect loyalty, Stew. But you need to have loyalty to something other than a man. You need to be loyal to an idea. That's how you stop huddling in the dark and start building fires to drive away those monsters."

Stew huffed with a smile. "I imagine they made you an administrator because you can turn other people's metaphors back on them."

"No, I became an administrator because I want to build good things on a big scale. It's a contagious feeling. You should try it. Captain."

Stew lowered his head and stared at his hands. If Debbi was here, she'd take over without argument and there wouldn't be a problem. Of course, if Debbi was here, Ross would be on the job. He said softly, "Let me talk to Ross."

Lithia tapped some data into her palmcorder. "All right, Stew. But remember, if you wait too long, you won't just lose your favorite table at a saloon. You'll lose everything."

Stew tensed, preparing to lash out. Instead, he raised a cautionary hand and sank into thought.

The liaison took the hint. She'd pushed enough for now. Without further comment, she retrieved her own coat and left the office, already late for a teleconference with her directors. She had wanted to drop the bombshell that the local Rangers were in her pocket, without having to lie about it. She was, however, prepared to lie about it. And it wasn't really a lie. Lithia was confident that Stew would sign on. He was clearly out of his depth

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

trying to run this outfit. He might be a good soldier, but not a general. He didn't have his own vision of what the Rangers needed to be, so Lithia would supply one for him. She was actually glad that Captain Ross was out of the picture. From everything she'd heard about him, he was a difficult customer in the best of times with an unpredictable "go to hell" streak. Stew, on the other hand, was thoughtful and rational and he would realize that an alliance with Hellstromme was the only reasonable option for the future of the Rangers. And once she incorporated the Temptation Rangers, she would bring them in from all over Banshee and have a handy little company police force at her disposal. This would advance her long-range plan of Hellstromme making her the director of the entire planet of Banshee.

Lithia smiled as her automatons fell into step behind her on the horrendously dusty main street. Townsfolk watched her pass with blatant stares, without even the common courtesy to hide their small town curiosity behind furtive glances. *Gawking yokels*, she thought with venom. Soon, Hellstromme would own this town and everything and everyone in it. Then this herd would know who was boss.

Times were changing on Banshee. Cowboys like Ross were past and smart types like Stew would fall into line. If not, Lithia could find someone to replace him.

Chapter 5

It was a dark dismal day when Ross was prepared to say farewell to Temptation. He had spent the day making sure his transport was well supplied. Now he had one last thing to do.

He wanted to say goodbye to Debbi and be off.

The wind was blowing so hard it nearly drove him sideways. Ross tightened his hat's latigo around his throat in case the weather was strong enough to rip his hat off. He didn't want to worry about breaking in a new hat on top of everything else. It looked like any minute the heavens would bust wide open with a driving early winter rain. He wanted to get out of town before that happened.

As he approached the cemetery gate, his hands idly fumbled with a gold chain and locket. It held a picture of him. He was going to bury it under the soil in Debbi's grave. Just in case he didn't come back. He wanted her to have something to remember him by. He had never seen Debbi wear jewelry, but it was either this or a holster. She might have wanted the latter, but Ross sought to give her something different, something special.

A flash of movement caught his eye. At the top of the rise, dirt was flying into the air. Horrified, he ran.

The chanouk was still there and the damn thing was tearing up Debbi's grave like some stinking stray dog. Ross picked up a fist-sized rock and threw it at the beast. It impacted on its hindquarters and elicited a grunt. The behemoth's head emerged from the hole and growled at Ross, showing sharp teeth. Then it returned to what it was doing. The dumb thing had dug a huge hole and its upper half was down in the grave.

What the hell was the matter with the thing? Ross heard the scrape of the claws on the casket and it galvanized him into action. Furious at the sacrilege, he drew his weapon. He pointed at the chanouk, but got an image of Debbi playfully pounding the creature's shoulder from the

Clay & Susan Griffith

saddle. He fired into the air.

"Get out of there!" Ross shouted hoarsely.

Startled, the beast jumped up and out, spinning around to snarl at Ross, its tail swishing angrily back and forth like a bristling cat.

Ross aimed the Peacemaker at it, rock steady and clenched tight. The chanouk let out a loud huff and then eased back, casting its gaze back to the disturbed grave. The Ranger fought the fury that was churning inside him. He let his arm drop to his side. It was just an animal. It didn't know any better. It didn't even understand that Debbi was dead.

"You poor dim-witted thing," Ross conceded. He shook his head. "You better get it through your thick skull. She ain't coming back. She's dead."

He realized it was the first time he had said it aloud. It seemed so final. So real all of a sudden. He turned away and looked at the decimated ground, clenching his jaw.

He had to bury her again.

He sucked in a harsh, shaking breath. A string of curses issued forth from him, all directed at the dumb beast standing off to the side making odd, anxious noises.

"Goddamn your stinking hide!" Ross dropped to his knees in the loose mound of sand and soil. Trying not to look inside the grave, he started shoving the dirt back in with his bare hands. "I swear if I see you again, I'll shoot you. Now get out of here!"

The chanouk snarled and came forward so quickly that Ross didn't have time to react. It knocked him sprawling to the ground and then stood over the grave growling, its hair rising up on end, giving the impression of something even larger and more deadly.

Scrambling to his feet, Ross could barely hold in check his blazing hatred. He threw his hat at the animal in pure, uncontrollable fury. His gun was in his hand again and sighted the chanouk right between the eyes.

The wind whipped at his eyes, drawing them so tight that moisture leaked from the edges at the strain. He was going to shoot the wretched thing. He swore he was!

The animal just stared at him, its large dark eyes defiant and fixed. It had stopped growling and merely regarded the Ranger with detached insubordination.

A full minute passed with neither of them moving. Ross was trying desperately to regain his composure. Why the hell was this happening? He couldn't deal with this all right now. It was a stupid, goddamn thing to happen.

Then above the cry of the wind he heard it.

It was soft and low and it came from the grave.

The chanouk's ears perked forward and it trilled while Ross stepped back, his breath dragging in and out roughly.

Oh God.

It had happened! The soil of Temptation had finally reanimated her body.

The sob that tumbled from Ross's lips was soulless and lost. The chanouk had most likely heard writhing and groaning beneath the soil and out of curiosity had dug it up.

Ross forced himself to step forward. The chanouk moved aside even though its attention was still riveted on the coffin lying at the bottom of the grave. There were deep gashes on its lid from the chanouk's frantic digging, but it was still intact and sealed. Ross thanked God for small

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

things.

He heard it again. A small groan and something shifting inside the box.

Ross bit down hard on his revulsion. Jesus, why now after all these months? He wasn't ready. He couldn't do it. He thought he could at one time. But not now. Damn it! It was a sick joke!

The chanouk trilled and moved closer to the grave. Roughly, without thinking, Ross shoved it aside. He didn't realize how stupid that act was, and he didn't register the fact that the chanouk didn't seem to care. It sidestepped and merely continued to trill, staring expectantly at the coffin.

The dirt lying on the lid shifted slightly as something moved within.

Ross tightened his grip on his gun. He had to do it before she rose. He couldn't face her. It had been months. Her body would be... Oh God, it would be...

It was best just to kill it in the coffin. Otherwise, its decaying face would be the last thing he'd have to remember about her. A tremor coursed down his arm to the pistol aiming into the grave. He could barely control it.

A head shot. He needed a head shot.

His aim shifted and rose to the top of the coffin. She was right there. All he had to do was pull the trigger.

He could feel the sweat break out over his skin. Despite the wind, he couldn't find the air to breath. God, how had Stew done this with his father? He hated the man just for having more strength than he did when it counted.

Gritting his teeth, he willed his outstretched arm to steady and then grabbed it with his other hand.

Just pull the trigger. Pull the goddamn trigger!

But he couldn't.

Shooting her through the closed lid was too akin to murder. It was like shooting someone in the back. It didn't matter what she was now, she deserved better than that. It was still Debbi. He owed her body a quick, honorable peace.

Ross drew his knife from its sheath and jumped into the grave. He swiftly jammed the blade under the coffin lid before he had a chance to renege on his new conviction. His resolve was tenuous on this matter at best. He had to do it fast.

With frenzied jerks, he heaved on the lid. Finally it creaked open a bit. He braced himself for what was to come. She had been dead awhile, the decay and smell would be bad. Her beautiful features would be sunken and flaccid. Her hastily sewn wounds would be raw and unhealed.

He almost stopped. It was too much for him to bear. He could get someone else to do it. But he knew he wouldn't. It had to be him.

With one final heave, the lid opened. Ross flung it back making the coffin rock. His Peacemaker in his hand was a blur as he drew aim on the body.

Pull the trigger! Don't think! Pull the trigger!

But before he did, against all resolution, he looked.

He had imagined her eyes would be open, her mouth locked in a black, gurgling scream, flesh decaying, bones protruding, clawed hands rigid and poised to strike.

Yet they weren't.

Her eyes were closed as if in restful slumber. Her skin was whole, her face unmarred by the damage of her violent death. There was even a slight rose glow to her flesh.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Ross reared back at the sight, lost his footing and fell against the back of the grave, jamming his knee painfully between the coffin and the ground. His gun dropped from nerveless fingers. The contents of his pocket spilled into the moist dirt. He didn't care. His eyes were locked on the steady rise and fall of her chest.

She was breathing!

Blessed sweet air was flowing in and out of her in a regular manner that mocked his own desperate attempts to perform that same simple function. Instead, he felt the black edges of unconsciousness beat at him as his lungs refused to cooperate.

The chanouk stretched down and sniffed her. Ross watched with stupefied amazement, waiting for the animal to attack her like it attacked all zombies, taking the head in its powerful jaws and biting through with a moist crunch.

He was going to be sick.

Ross reached out a weak, disconnected hand to stop the chanouk. To his relief, the animal only trilled softly again and licked Debbi's face.

Debbi moaned and seemed to shift her face away.

Air filled Ross again as he gasped in absolute joy. She wasn't a zombie! He scrambled on top of the coffin and reached out to touch her face. His hand paused an inch away, almost fearfully. Trembling fingertips caressed her skin. Then his hand rushed forward to cup her cheek. It was warm! She leaned into it slightly.

"Debbi," he whispered in a near croak. She didn't stir. His hand trailed down to her neck and felt the steady pulse of life as her heart beat rhythmically.

She was alive! Somehow she was alive!

Grabbing her thin shoulder, he shook her gently. "D-Debbi, wake up." No response. She was being as stubborn as usual, lying there.

The sky rumbled above him and opened up with its promised rain. It came down suddenly in sheets. Ross shrugged off his coat and placed it over Debbi, gently wiping the water from her face as he shielded her head from the elements with his body. Even the icy rain didn't wake her. Ross didn't know why. She was breathing, alive. He tried to sort out what he should do. He couldn't just leave her here to go get help.

Bundling her up in his long, black duster, he picked her up in his arms. He shifted his hold on her limp body and then reached up to grab the chanouk's bridle. It seemed to understand what he wanted and pulled back, dragging Ross and Debbi up from the muddy grave.

The lightning cracked above them, splitting the dark sky. For a moment the light illuminated their mud-caked forms and then cast the sky back into its dismal state. It also reflected a small golden object lying unnoticed in the bottom of the hole, half sunk into the mud, its chain caught on the edge of the coffin.

Ross carried Debbi through the graveyard, heading for town. He wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he didn't want anyone to see them. The rain would take care of that if he stuck to the back wall around town.

They would think he was crazy, digging her up.

He decided to take her home, figure out what the hell was going on. Maybe this was all just a dream and he'd wake up soon. Or maybe he didn't want to wake up. She was alive. Or something. Hell, he had no idea what she was. She wasn't human anymore and yet she wasn't a zombie either. Or maybe she would be soon. Maybe there were stages to go

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

through.

Ross stumbled as he slipped through the mud. He had to regroup, collect his thoughts and figure out what to do. He was just rambling. He knew it was shock, but he didn't seem to be able to do anything about it. His only instinct was to get her home.

There was a place in the wall where he could slip in between the militia's watch. They wouldn't see him carrying a body in from the graveyard. He'd clean her up, see if he could rouse her and then from there make additional plans.

He could hear the something else on the wind, just barely. It was the howl of the chanouk. Ross glanced back, he could just see the silhouette of the beast still standing by the grave, its snout lifted into the air and joined the storm in its joyous song.

She was alive!

Chapter 6

Ross sat in his chair, his bone white hands gripping the wooden arms till he thought they would shatter beneath his fingers. His gut rolled in constant turmoil.

His gaze was mesmerized by the steady rise and fall of Debbi's chest as air was drawn in and out in a semblance of life. Still there was doubt in his heart that she was truly and unbelievably alive.

It didn't seem possible, even with all that was going on in and around Temptation. Yes, the dead were reanimating, but not like this. Not whole and fit.

My God, what if she opens her eyes?

Ross's gut clenched again. It had been three hours since he had found her alive in her satin-lined coffin. He didn't think anyone saw him as he carried Debbi through the streets. His clothes were still drenched in the graveyard mud, his hair still damp from the pouring rain, yet he didn't notice any of it. Even the bone numbing cold that encased his frame barely registered. His entire focus was on Debbi.

Her face, serene and unmarred, glowed with health despite the fact that she was only hours from the grave. A slight blush colored her cheeks like a subtle splash of rouge. Had the mortician applied any before her interment?

Ross sickened at the morbid thought. His Peacemaker lay in his lap, well within easy reach of his hand should she wake.

Exhaustion was beating at Ross and he was barely holding it off. Terror and uncertainty gave him the willpower, but they had been slowly waning now that dawn was breaking over the horizon. Life would once again begin in Temptation as it did every day. But today was like no other suddenly. Ross had no idea what to do.

He rubbed his face hard with his icy hand. He leaned his head back for a second wishing he could ease the throbbing inside his skull. The headaches had returned with a vengeance. Stress maybe, or the fact that being so close the undead was beginning to affect him once more. A legacy of that bastard Quantrill.

Ross's eyes slipped closed. His eyes were burning and he needed to rest them. Just for a second, he thought. His internal clock was as good as his word and damn lucky it was because Debbi stirred upon the mattress, her eyes flickering open, green and bright as if death had never clouded them. They stared at the ceiling as if surprised to find it so high above her. Her

Clay & Susan Griffith

slim hand reached up as if expecting to touch satin lining only inches from her face.

She turned her head and Ross held his breath as she looked at him. She smiled, breathtaking and animate. He had never seen anything so beautiful. He gained his feet shakily and approached her.

"It's all right," he assured her. "You're all right."

She nodded, trying to speak, but struggled with difficulty.

"Here," Ross offered, pouring her a glass of water from the night table. She reached for it eagerly as he bent down over her. Her hair was thick and full as the day she had died. His hand buried within it as he lifted her gently up to the glass.

She gulped at it eagerly, but it was as if it couldn't get past her throat. It spilled everywhere and she choked.

"Easy, easy," he told her, worry seeping in. He should have brought her to Doc Dazy, someone who could help her. He held her, bracing her as she coughed, stroking her hair and soothing her as best he could.

Suddenly a clump of her hair came out in his hand. He gasped and dropped the dusty, red strands on the bed. "D-Debbi," he faltered.

A cackle burst from her lips, a sound all too reminiscent of the one that came from Mrs. Womble that night long ago in the basement. Debbi reared back in his arms, and he got a glimpse of her face, now twisted and decaying like the true undead.

Ross fell back from her, falling hard onto the floor. His hand scrambled for his Peacemaker but it was gone. Maybe it had slid under the bed. He fumbled for it frantically, just as Debbi's now milk white eyes swiveled to him. She leapt for his throat.

"NO!"

He came up out of the nightmare with a rasping scream and jerked in the chair, his weapon falling to the floor at his feet with a heavy thud. He had fallen asleep, and the dream had come, unbidden and dark.

Ross moaned. The first time he had ever dreamed of Debbi and he woke up screaming. He bent forward, sick and chilled. His low sob still managed to echo within the small room.

Sweat drenched his face and he kept his head between his knees as he fought off the waves of nausea. His limbs trembled, but he continued to take in deep breaths. Slow and easy, he chanted, trying to curb his flailing emotions.

It took several minutes and finally he felt he had control once more. He eased back in the chair. And then Ross noticed her.

Debbi's eyes were wide open and staring at him.

Stew strode down the windy, rain-flecked street, watching only the tops of his boots. He knew where he was going and he didn't look up or to the side. He dare not let himself be distracted or he wouldn't make it.

He was on his way to have it out with Ross.

The larger than life image of his captain reared up in his head, threatening to dampen the fire he'd carefully stoked all night. The pressure-filled conversation with Lithia. Every form he filled out. Every complaint he fielded from townfolk. Every gripe he heard from his fellow Rangers as if he had inherited the power to fix problems just because he was suddenly in charge. With each small jab at his legendary patience, he stored the anger for his discussion with Ross.

Stew had spent all night and into the morning watching Ross's

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

Stallion in the equipment yard behind the office. On the one hand, he hoped to catch Ross loading it up for his return to the Sanitarium so he could get it over with. On the other hand, he wanted to put it off as long as possible. Ross never showed and as soon as Curtiz had stepped through the door for the shift change, Stew stood up without a word, slid on his long coat and put on his wide-brimmed black hat, cinching the latigo so tightly under his chin it pinched. He'd use that too. He stalked out into the pale, cold sunlight and steered toward Ross's room.

Stew felt the heavy Dragoon slapping against his thigh and the rustling of his coat in the wind. The chill had already begun to drain his resolve. He considered turning for home. Or for *Mo's*. Ross probably wasn't home. He was likely at the cemetery with Debbi.

Besides, it had only been a few months. Grief had a way of working itself out differently with every person. Give it time.

But Stew knew better. He knew Ross. The man would drive himself into the ground and the hell with everything else around him. No, it was now or never. Stew had to do this, make peace with his own anger and frustration, before he let Ross disappear into the void. His stride stiffened with resolve and his head bowed into the wind.

Ross froze in fear and surprise, pinned by Debbi's green brilliant eyes questing and pleading as they centered on him.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't tell if this was dream or reality anymore. Maybe it was all still some nightmarish, wonderful, hellish dream, from which his damaged psyche couldn't decide which reality suited him better. He had gone insane and he hadn't even noticed.

She sat up.

Ross flung himself out of the chair, away from her.

"Ross?"

Gasping, he crouched behind the chair. *She spoke!*

"Ross?" she repeated, swinging her legs easily over the edge of the cot.

Ross's hand fumbled for his holster only to find it missing, just like in the other dream. Any minute now she was going to attack, skin decaying, teeth flashing. He saw the gun on the floor, just out of reach. To get it he would have to move closer to her. His eyes snapped up to meet hers again. They held only confusion, not hunger, not hate.

Debbi turned away from him to take in the room. She didn't recognize it, nor should she since she had never been here. It only made her confusion more rampant as she turned again toward him.

Indecision tore through Ross like a knife. He had two choices; one he ran away from her, away from the person he just helped resurrect; or two he find his backbone, suck it up and speak to her. Take the risk. If she turned, oh God, if she turned, he'd shoot her then.

He stepped toward her and gingerly knelt to pick up the gun, his gaze never wavering from her.

Her head cocked slightly as she watched him, her red hair shifting off her shoulders. An eyebrow rose and Debbi crossed her arms. "You look like death warmed over."

Ross laughed; he couldn't help it. It was louder than necessary and far more desperate. He must look like a mad man. Maybe he was.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" She stood up.

His gun dangled at his fingertips. He knew he should raise it and aim it at her, just to be sure, but it was as if his muscles had lost all strength.

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Y-you...you're ..." He couldn't bring himself to say it. He stumbled a step towards her, his hand reaching out with hesitant fingers to touch her face.

Confusion still reigned on Debbi's angelic face, but there was also some anger building at his inability to talk. She wanted answers.

Ross had no idea how to tell her. How could he? What did she remember? Anything? How would she react if he told her the truth?

His hand merely cupped her cheek, the warmth of it surging through his skin. It drove away all his fears. She leaned into it, smiling at his sudden, unexpected tenderness. He grabbed her to him, crushing her against his chest, not caring what happened next. To feel her, touch her, alive once more even for just a few seconds was worth the price.

Her arms reflexively curled around him. "Ross, are you alright?"

"Y-yes," he stammered. "I'm fine. Just fine."

"Yeah, right." It was then that she felt the cold air hit her exposed back. Her left arm snaked behind her and she felt the long slit in the back of her jacket and shirt. A mortician's slit.

"R-Ross?" For the first time, her voice held a trace of fear. "What's going on?"

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"You ... you...?"

"I died." It hit her suddenly, like a wave crashing in on itself. The memories. The battle. Quantrill.

"But you're alive now. You're back with us..."

She pulled free from his embrace. "How long? How long has it been?"

"Just three months," he said softly.

She nodded, almost nonchalantly, though her eyes had widened to huge orbs. "How?" she demanded.

"I don't know. I don't know. Maybe Doc Dazy can explain it. Me? I couldn't tell you. Maybe the soil. Maybe that anouk shaman of yours had something to do with it. All I know is that you're alive, you're warm and whole. God, Debbi." He gathered her in his arms again, desperate to feel her touch once more.

She could feel the wet stains of his tears on her neck. It was so unlike Ross. It made this moment even more surreal.

"I'm all right, Ross." And it was true. Physically, she felt fine. There didn't seem to be any after effects of her ... internment. None that she could tell anyway. She felt as good as the day after the battle at Castle Rock. No, in fact, she felt better, better than she had ever felt, even better than when she had first come to Banshee. How strange.

Her nose crinkled and she finally realized that Ross was a mess. What the hell was covering him? Mud? It reeked. Some of it was even on her.

"Ross, what happened to you...to us?"

"Nothing, it's raining...was raining."

"Well, we need to clean up. Come on. Get this thing off."

At first, he didn't resist her as she pulled at his muddy shirt. Then he shook his head. "You go use the sink in the bathroom. I'll take care of this." There was a bowl and a pitcher on the nightstand. It would do for him.

She hesitated, but he steered her gently toward the bathroom. To his relief, she complied. Once he heard the water pounding into the sink in the noisy rattling way it did, he distracted himself by cleaning up his own sorry state, changing into fresh clothes, and removing as much of the cemetery mud as he could from his skin. It was enough for now. Per-

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

forming such mundane tasks seemed to settle him. He gathered some clothes that Debbi might be able to wear. They would be too big for her, but the shirt and jacket could be adjusted some. Pants were another matter. He set them just inside the doorway so she would find them when she finished scrubbing herself in the sink.

A knock on the door startled him. He jerked around toward it, angry and anxious. It wasn't time yet. He hadn't made a decision on how to handle the situation.

A knock came again, harder and more insistent. Any louder and Debbi would hear. Irritated, Ross strode to the door and snarled, "Who is it?"

"Ross, it's Stew. Open up. We have to talk."

"Not now."

Stew shouted uncharacteristically, "Ross, I'm not going away! We have to talk about Ranger business!"

Ross opened the door a few inches and peered out. The shock on Stew's face reflected how Ross must've looked: red-eyed and weary, hair greasy, matted, and slightly damp. "Stew, I don't give a damn about Ranger business. Just take care of it."

"That's the point. There are things I *can't* take care of! Let me in!"

When Ross began to close the door, Stew dropped his shoulder and slammed into it. Ross never expected the quiet former priest to act so recklessly. He was forced back as Stew muscled in.

Stew said in a sharp, but quiet tone, "I've had enough of your damn dismissive attitude. We're discussing business and we're going to do it right now."

Ross's irritation flared brighter for a second, but then subsided as he realized Stew was an excellent means to determine his sanity. "Fine. Get in here." He shoved the door closed.

Stew took in the chaotic room, complete with muddy clothes on the floor and the stained quilt on the bed. What the hell had Ross been doing in here?

It was then Stew saw the light and the steam drifting out of the bathroom. The sound of water running full blast from the faucet within indicated there was someone else in the room. It's not that he didn't begrudge Ross female companionship, but hell, he had thought Ross's grief over Debbi wouldn't permit it. Stew couldn't help it, he angered. After all, it was Ross who had finally won Debbi's affection.

Stew couldn't resist a bitter comment. "It hasn't even been four months yet, and you've already forgotten her."

Ross had the audacity to laugh, dark eyes bright and wild. "Forgotten her? Stew, she's here. In this room. I brought her back."

Horror seeped into the younger Ranger. *What was Ross saying?* He again regarded the dirt and mud strewn about the room. The barest impression of a muddy body could be seen on the bed. His gut rolled. *He dug her up?* The utterly inconceivable tableau before him overwhelmed what was left of his reason. His vision swam and in a rush all feelings were violently replaced by outrage.

He flew at Ross, seized his shirt collar, and rammed him back into the wall, his elbow jammed across Ross's throat. The veteran Ranger was again surprised by the action and his hurried, shocked words were lost in a rush of breath.

"My God!" Stew shouted at the older man who grimaced in pain. "You are insane!"

Ross struggled to break the grip. Stew's face turned purplish red with

Clay & Susan Griffith

rage. His words were a harsh string of guttural screams with a rain of spittle. "You dug her up! You dug her up! You crazy bastard!"

"Stew wait—" Ross's gasp was cut off as Stew's forearm clamped harder against his windpipe.

Stew watched Ross's eyes roll up. It would be so easy to kill him now.

"Please..." Ross mouthed, unsure if words emerged.

Stew had never heard that word from Ross before. The simple cry for understanding cut through the fury. The young Ranger relaxed the pressure on Ross's throat. He stepped away.

Ross coughed roughly, rubbing his throat. "It's not what you think."

Stew scowled. Just then he heard the sound of footsteps behind him and a door swing open slightly. A familiar voice sounded.

"What the hell is going on out here?"

Stew turned and froze at the sight of Debbi's form outlined in the doorway. She was in shadow, but unmistakable, even outfitted in a baggy shirt. No sound uttered from his lips though he knew they were moving. His throat had seized; his heart had seized.

Terror abruptly drilled at his chest. The image of his undead father shambling toward him with clawed hands outstretched and black mouth gaping surfaced again. He took a step back and bumped into Ross. The older Ranger gripped his arm so hard it hurt.

"She's alive, Stew!" Ross's voice was near breaking, barely a strained hiss, but still thick with emotion.

"Can't be," Stew gasped. "She's..."

Debbi came into the room, moving easily and fluidly, without the shuttering, jerking motion of a reanimated corpse. "Oh for Pete's sake! Knock it off! I'm not some freakin' zombie!" Caught in the rising sun, her damp hair flashed a brilliant red hue. It was not a color that could be emulated by a cadaver.

Stew swayed and almost slid to the ground, his knees unable to support him. Ross barely held him upright.

Debbi was having a hard time adjusting to the stunned faces of her friends. To her, no time had passed. Castle Rock seemed like only yesterday. Ross and Stew were creeping her out, looking at her as if she was some sort of stupid messiah, raised from the tomb.

"Look, both of you, I'm not going to eat you; I'm not going to pluck out your eyes with my nails; I'm just going to go home and get some decent clothes. Sorry, Ross, but this just won't do." She tugged at the oversized shirt that hardly covered her; the neck opening alone came down below her chest level. She had to use a hand to keep it closed, the buttons spaced too far apart to afford her any modesty. Her own pants were still drenched in foul smelling mud. However, the instant she took a step toward the door, both men blocked it bodily.

"No," they shouted in unison.

Her eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"D-Debbi, y-you can't just go strolling along the streets right now," Ross stuttered.

"Why not?"

"You were You were..." Stew couldn't get out the words.

"Dead," she finished for him. "Yeah, and now I'm alive. And starting to get in a really pissy mood if I don't get some decent clothes." She held up her other shirt, the one with the rip in the back. "This one is ruined." The thought of going home had become primary in her mind. She needed that sense of familiarity now more than ever. Nothing was going to stop her.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

"What if someone sees you?" Ross snapped. "Everyone knows you're dead."

"Was dead. And so what? It's not like there are gifts to return because I'm not dead."

"We need to do this easy," Stew insisted. "Jesus, Debbi. This is ...biblical. You just can't go wandering around. People wouldn't understand."

"I think the only people having trouble are you two." She stood now before them. Ross just leaned against the door as if it was the only thing keeping him vertical. Stew got his first good look at her. She was alive, beautiful and radiant. There wasn't a mark of death on her: no scars, no decay, nothing. She smelled...Lord, she smelled good. Freshly scrubbed and rosy skin rinsed clean. She couldn't be dead. It looked like she had never been dead.

Stew's hand reached out to touch her. She didn't flinch from his touch, only let loose a gentle, encouraging smile.

"It's not a dream," Ross whispered to the ex-priest. He finally believed it. No dream of his had ever been this vivid. Never would he have been able to get Debbi's cadence and rhythm down so perfectly. And if it was madness instead that gripped him, then he welcomed it and prayed he'd stay insane forever.

Stew bobbled slightly and Debbi quickly caught him with both arms. The man actually shook.

"Oh God," Stew whispered.

Her eyebrow rose. "I think we need to get the two of you to the Doc. You look whiter than sheets."

Ross nodded manically, rational thought finally making a play in his brain. "Doc Dazy. We should get you to Doc Dazy. Let him check you out."

"Later," she countered, slipping past the stupefied Stew. "I just want to get cleaned up and get things back to normal." She glared at Ross. "Now move it, you big lug. I'm breakin' out of here." She grinned at him and shook her head.

Ross didn't budge. Heaving a heavy defeated sigh, she feigned surrender, but then quickly turned and snapped at him playfully with her teeth. Ross fell back from the door, almost knocking the side table over in his haste. The door free, Debbi pulled it open, sauntered out into the hall, and out of the building.

"Dammit," Ross growled, scrambling after her, embarrassed and angry at her sick ploy. Stew was close on his heels.

"She plays dirty," the younger Ranger noted.

"If I had any doubt she was really back, it's gone now," Ross declared, trying to keep pace with the spunky redhead as she maneuvered through the near empty streets of Temptation. Lucky for them, most folk were still half asleep or too busy to give a whit who or what was walking around town. The small trio of Rangers steered unerringly toward Miss Etta's Boarding House.

Chapter 7

When the first brutal storm of the season roared into Temptation off the northern plateaus and the pounding, night winds drove ice pellets like bullets only the most hardy walked the dark streets. It was all folks could do to steel themselves to race out into the frigid weather wrapped in long barka fur coats and capes long enough to scurry from one saloon to another. These were the early days of the long winter in this

Clay & Susan Griffith

part of Banshee. Days were short. Nights were long. And alcohol flowed around the clock.

The screaming winds and the staccato ticking of ice off the windows made *Mo's* almost homey inside. The sweaty warmth of booze-soaked bodies inside the saloon was inviting when compared to the knife-edged cold outside. The most uninviting thing about *Mo's*, aside from the stench and the possibility of contracting lice, was *Mo*. The gray-haired bartender was quickly settling into his surly winter mode.

Mo leaned on the sticky bar and surveyed the teeming room with a glower. The door opened and a blast of freezing air lashed him. He turned to shout at the newcomers until he saw it was Miller and Ringo. The bartender immediately cast anxious eyes at the corner table and, to his relief, found it empty, thanks, in part, to a sign he had placed on it reading "Don't Sit Here Or Somebody Will Kill You."

Miller and Ringo pushed to the bar unbuttoning their heavy coats. The bruised and swollen Miller cradled a scattergun and surveyed the empty table across the crowded saloon with satisfaction. "Evening, *Mo*. How's business?"

"What's it look like?" *Mo* snarled. "My life is a room full of stinkin' drunks. What could be better?"

Ringo gave Miller an amused glance, but nothing much seemed to amuse Miller these days. The older Ranger signaled for two beers and slumped on the bar. Ringo leaned back against the rail in a position of uneasy authority, surveying the room.

The kid asked, "Hey, *Mo*, you seen *Stew*?"

"What am I, your social secretary? Don't you guys have an office?" *Mo* slammed down two mugs of frothy fungi brew. "Yer table is free there, Rangers."

Miller took a deep swig and carefully stroked the foam from his thin moustache. "We can't stay long. We're on duty."

"Oh?" *Mo* smiled darkly. "That's swell. I keep an empty table for you and you take up space at the bar too. Okay. Sure. That's just fine." He went to pour more liquor while muttering, "Maybe I should just move all the tables out so you Rangers can have a little dance floor or something."

Ringo looked concerned. "I think we made him mad."

Miller rolled his eyes. "Poor baby. Drink up, kid."

The door flew open again and a frantic man entered. He glanced around the saloon, holding the door open so the room filled with winter.

Mo screamed, "Shut the damn door or I'll stab you to death!"

The man hurriedly closed the door and zeroed in on the two Rangers at the bar. He was wide-eyed and his lips quivered from the cold. He seized Ringo's jacket with blue-knuckled fingers and tried to speak, but he couldn't get the words out. Ringo glanced at Miller who continued to drink and ignored the shivering man.

"A-a-anouks," the man stammered.

"Anouks?" Ringo asked. "Anouks what?"

Miller huffed. "Shove him away, Ringo."

Ringo said, "Easy, Miller. Something's wrong with this guy."

"Yeah, he's drunk. Or crazy. These days in Temptation, who can tell? And who cares?"

The young Ranger turned his back on his sarcastic partner and focused on the shivering man. Color was beginning to return to the man's lips. His hair dripped with melting ice. "Take your time. Relax. Tell me what's going on."

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

The man swallowed and caught his faltering breath. "I just saw two anouks."

Miller laughed and tipped his beer glass. "Another couple of these and I might too."

Ringo asked, "Saw two anouks? Where?"

"In the street." The man pointed toward the door. "Two anouks and one of their monsters."

Miller feigned fear. "Oh no! Monsters."

Ringo said, "Shut up, Miller."

The man went on to the sympathetic Ringo, "Yes, one of those things they ride. Chanouks. One of those things. There were two anouks, just walking down the street like they owned the place. One of them was a big guy, a warrior with all sorts of weapons hanging off him. The other was a female. Real tall. But she was old."

Ringo and Miller looked at each other with alarm.

The two Rangers approached the Ecumenical Church in the darkness. Their breath misted into the air and ice pellets peppered their faces. They were disturbed to see people milling about on the frigid street, many of them armed. The citizens noticed the Rangers and hefted their guns higher. Now something would happen, they seemed to be saying.

"Damn it." Miller checked the load in his scattergun. "Where're Fitz and Chennault? Get back on the COM and get an ETA. The whole neighborhood is out here with guns."

Ringo tapped his com unit and determined that Fitz and Chennault were only minutes away from the scene. They had not been able to raise Stew, but were still trying.

An armed citizen stepped in front of Miller, waving a rifle. "What's going on, Ranger? I heard we're being raided by anouks."

Miller slapped the rifle barrel down. "Nobody's being raided by anybody." Then he shouted futilely against the wind, "Everybody go home! Get off the streets!"

For the few who heard, that order only sparked more concern of imminent danger. The man with the rifle shouted back, "There's anouks inside the city! I seen 'em!"

Miller yelled, "Shut up about that or I'll arrest you! I'm telling you there are no anouks in this town!"

An anouk stepped into the street.

The native warrior emerged from the shadow of a partially collapsed alleyway, his eyes blazing at the two Colonial Rangers. He clutched a glowing atax in his right hand. He looked none too happy. Ringo noticed the tall, muscular, anouk before the crowd did. He recognized the scar. It was Fareel.

Suddenly, someone in the crowd spotted him too and shouted. People spun around. Some screamed and ran for cover. Rifles and shotguns rose.

Ringo ran out in front of Fareel as the warrior raised his atax. The Ranger faced his fellow citizens with his hands in the air, yelling for calm. "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" Then the kid remembered that they hadn't parted on pleasant terms with Fareel. The Rangers carried Debbi's body out of Castle Rock against Martool's wishes.

Still, Ringo's head moved left and right, trying to make calming eye contact with every armed member of the spooked crowd. He backed closer to the anouk expecting that any second a panicked trigger finger

Clay & Susan Griffith

could end Fareel's life and his own. Then the young Ranger felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and a guttural shout in some anouk tongue.

Miller raised his weapon when he saw Fareel grab Ringo, but the kid kept his head and motioned for his partner to hold his fire. Ringo looked back at the towering warrior. The anouk spoke to the kid again with an angry impatience.

Fareel wanted something. He wasn't here to fight. At least, not immediately. Ringo gave an exaggerated smile and said in clear, loud words, "I - don't - understand - you."

Miller called out, "Move away from him, kid!"

Ringo could sense the shuffling of nervous townfolk around him. Second story windows opened and gun barrels protruded into the night air. Only the confusion and hesitation created by the unusual sight of an anouk inside the city might give Ringo the minute or two he would need to get Fareel safely off the street. He grabbed the anouk's arm and tried to pull him forward.

Fareel roared and drew away. Violet energy flashed through the air as the warrior brandished his atax at the young Ranger.

Miller dropped his scattergun. It was useless with Ringo so close to the anouk. Damn fool kid was just standing there waiting to get his head separated from his torso. Miller fumbled inside his coat and pulled a Dragoon. As he raised the weapon, a strong hand pushed it down.

Miller pulled back his fist to slug the interfering citizen. But it was Ross.

The veteran Ranger narrowed his eyes at Miller, freezing him to the spot, and strode past him. He moved rapidly to Ringo's side and interposed his body between the kid and the enraged anouk. Ross rattled off a few sentences of pidgin anouk causing Fareel to lower the atax. The warrior and the captain started barking at each other.

Ringo realized he was out of the mix so he backed away and kept an eye on the restive citizenry with their bristling arsenal.

Miller stepped up beside him. "What's with you, kid? That grape was gonna bury his atax through your skull."

"I don't think so. I'm more worried one of these yahoos will shoot me by accident." He thrust a thumb at the crowd.

After a fast exchange between Ross and Fareel, the warrior returned to the collapsed alley. He emerged in a moment leading another figure from the shadows. Martool.

She looked even older than the Rangers remembered her. She was grayer, her skin wizened. She walked with a slight hunch and a shuffling gait as if the cold caused her discomfort. Even as Fareel supported the shaman, he scanned the street, watching the weapons.

Multiple gun barrels tracked them as they moved. People scuttled from cover to cover. The townfolk were clearly confused, particularly since Ross had arrived and seemed to be escorting the anouks from the scene.

Ross pointed at the two Rangers. "Ringo, come with us. Miller, get these people off the street before somebody gets shot."

As Ringo fell into step beside his boss, he gave Miller a look of surprise and eager anticipation. Miller met it with a sullen shake of his head.

Ross added, "Oh yeah. Miller, there's a chanouk back in that alley. How about bringing it to the office and tying it up in the equipment yard. Find it some food too. It hasn't eaten in a few days. So don't get your hand near its snout."

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

"What?" Miller stared after the departing group. Then he looked at his right hand and imagined it a bloody stump. "Dammit. Just like always. Animal control."

Chapter 8

The front door to Miss Etta's boarding house burst open. A rude and frigid wind slashed the polite company gathered before the fire in the front parlor. Everyone turned to the disturbance. A startled Mr. Horton blurted out an uncharacteristic expletive. Mrs. Wilshire dropped her knitting.

The company watched the Ranger captain hold the door while a towering anouk warrior escorted a frail female native into the cozy confines of their boarding house. The natives' muddy, clawed feet trod roughly across the hand-hooked rug on the floor. The warrior's bold movements were accompanied by the clanking of evil, sharp tannis-bladed weaponry. The old witch was festooned with feathers and bones and tannis totems. A young Colonial Ranger followed the natives and closed the door behind them. Then the young man quickly reached up and removed his hat because he was indoors and that was the polite thing to do.

Miss Etta stood up from her seat at the fireplace. She cradled the massive feline McDuff in her arms and approached the new arrivals. Her face betrayed no more surprise than if the mailman had just arrived.

"Well, Captain Ross, I see you found your guests."

Ross unwrapped his frayed scarf and nodded with clipped politeness.

"Yes ma'am. Right where *she* said they'd be."

"How strange." The hardened old woman smiled at Martool. Then she cast a less welcoming glance at Fareel. "Can I get you all some food?"

"Sure. I expect they're pretty hungry coming all the way from Castle Rock."

"Fine. What do these folks eat?"

Fareel stared at McDuff with narrow eyes.

Miss Etta tightened her grip on the cat. "None of that," she chastised the warrior.

Ross asked her, "How is she?"

"Fine. She's in her room with Stew."

Ross extended his arm down the hall. Fareel ushered Martool along, with his eyes still locked on the cat. Ringo smiled politely to Miss Etta as he passed, following the anouks down the creaking floorboards. Ross came impatiently behind.

Ringo wasn't sure what was happening. Maybe this had something to do with Quantrill. Maybe Ross was teaming up with Martool and her clan again. Ringo trusted Ross had his reasons for bringing anouks here. After all, Miss Etta was probably the sole person in Temptation who would tolerate anouks under her roof.

The odd group passed down the hallway, its carpeted runner still stained with batrat blood. It was strange for Ringo to watch the massive, powerful anouks moving inside the familiar confines of a human house, so used to seeing them in the rough setting of Castle Rock. It only served to make them seem wilder and humans even more sedate.

Fareel and Martool stopped with eerie surety in front of the door to Debbi's old room. The kid's stomach twisted into a knot. The strangeness of the whole evening had caused him to overlook that this was Debbi's

Clay & Susan Griffith

boarding house. Now they were outside her old room. Voices wafted from inside. Strange, familiar voices. The hallway took on a weird, dreamlike state as the door opened.

Debbi stood there. She smiled in her wide, open way when she saw Martool. She laughed convulsively and tears welled in her eyes. Debbi reached out and embraced the old shaman. Martool cried out with joy and enfolded the young woman in her bony arms.

After a moment, Martool pulled back and took Debbi's face between her clawed hands. The shaman studied the human's green eyes for a long minute. Then she pulled Debbi's face into her chest and held it there. Her huge dark eyes glistened brightly with sheer joy.

Ross called from behind Ringo. "Inside."

Debbi stepped aside to let Martool shuffle in. Fareel stood rod-straight, staring at Debbi with a mixture of fear and awe. She backhanded the warrior good-naturedly on his muscular chest. He flinched and scuttled past her.

Then Debbi's green eyes turned to Ringo. She lit up and grabbed the kid.

"Ringo!" She pulled him in and hugged him.

The young Ranger felt disappointed. All this and it was just a dream. Many nights in the last few months, he'd dreamed that Debbi was still alive. He'd spent those nighttime periods floating in elation only to wake to wallow in a renewed sense of desolation. Now he'd have to go through it again and wake up to another morning of misery. How long until these dreams stopped?

Debbi put her arm around the kid's shoulder and led him into her room. Ringo had a polite, forbearing smile on his face. She stared at him carefully. "This is a shock, I guess."

"No, not really." Ringo spotted Stew across the room and waved. Odd. Stew wasn't usually involved in these dreams. In fact, this one was much more involved and detailed. His nose was still wet from the cold. He could actually smell Fareel and feel the wooden floor under his boots. Typically the only thing he remembered feeling was the warmth of Debbi's touch.

Debbi glanced at Ross who shrugged. The older Ranger took Ringo by the arm and put him in a wooden chair against the wall. Then Ross said, "Maybe the kid's got nerves of steel. Or maybe he's just in shock. Give him time to get his head around it."

Ringo sat complacently.

Martool took Debbi's hand. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long. A day or so."

"Not even," Ross volunteered. "Martool, I know you've got that native juju that let you know she was alive, but how'd you get here so fast?"

Martool glanced briefly at Ross without great affection. "I knew she would wake."

"What?" Ross shouted. "You knew? Then why the hell didn't you tell me? If you knew she was still alive then what was all the tooth gnashing you were doing back at Castle Rock? We've been through hell here!"

Fareel growled at Ross for his impertinence.

Martool replied to the furious Ranger, "She was not still alive. But I knew she would return." The shaman gently stroked Debbi's face. "While it was written that you would wake, I could not see *how* you would wake. I was afraid you might have died on unclean ground. Then I would have had to deal with you." The shaman studied Debbi. "But you have

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

returned to us whole and untainted."

Debbi laid her hand over Martool's. "Folks aren't comfortable seeing anouks strolling through town. You took a big risk coming here."

"I had to come." The shaman's face showed concern, an odd expression for an anouk.

Debbi responded dismissively, "I feel fine. Whatever happened to me at Castle Rock, I'm over it now. What's the big deal?"

Ross said, "You didn't just get over the flu. You came back from the dead."

Martool said, "It is my place to prepare you."

"Prepare me for what?" Debbi asked.

"For your place." Martool reached into a bag hanging from her belt and removed a piece of tannis. She handed it to Debbi. The Ranger took the stone casually, but soon looked at it with curiosity. Martool said, "Tell me about it."

Debbi manipulated the black rock between her fingers. "It's tannis. What's to tell?"

"Tell me where it came from?"

"How would I know—" Debbi stopped. Her brow wrinkled as she regarded the shard almost suspiciously. "North? The edge of the Glass Wastes?"

Martool nodded with satisfaction.

Debbi seemed lost in thought now, staring at the stone. She rubbed her thumb along its sleek, inky surface. The tannis had a faint purple sheen and changed shape under her touch as if it was putty instead of steel hard rock. Slowly, the lump of rock lengthened and thinned into a knife-like shard that glowed with violent energy.

Ross and Fareel craned their necks, watching with animated interest. Stew stared with calm concern. Ringo leaned impatiently against the wall.

Ross asked Martool, "Did you charge that tannis?"

"No," the shaman answered. "She is doing it. She is connected to the tannis now."

Ross said, "So it's like blacklining? I've seen Reapers do that."

Martool replied, "No. This is natural. The planet has made her one of its own. She is one of its guardians. And, in time, she will take my place."

Debbi looked up, embarrassed she had forgotten the others. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

Martool reached into the bag again and brought out another small chunk of tannis. She handed it to Debbi. The human took it and instantly grimaced as if she smelled something vile.

"Ungh." Debbi turned her head. "Ghost rock."

Martool nodded again. "Yes. There is the slightest vein of the dead rock inside that piece. You can sense it now."

Debbi rubbed her forehead, slightly nauseated. "Great. So what? Now I'm allergic to ghost rock?"

"No. With time, it will not cause you discomfort. But you will still be insulted by its presence. And you will fight to destroy it."

For the first time Debbi seemed to notice that she had reshaped the first tannis chunk into a dagger shard. She held it stiffly in her open palm where it continued to glow purple like a dying ember. After a long silent moment, she looked painfully at Martool. "How is this possible? What am I?"

"The planet has brought you back. It has granted you powers that will

Clay & Susan Griffith

allow you to meet your responsibilities.”

“But I was dead. I don’t remember it, but everyone says I was. If I came back, then I’m just like those things that walked out of the graveyard. Just like Quantrill.”

Ross started to speak, but Martool now waved him to silence. The shaman moved closer, but wisely, didn’t touch Debbi. The anouk said with a strong voice from her younger days, “You are nothing like those things. You are not like Quantrill. He is dead. You are alive.”

“So I wasn’t really dead? Was I just stunned? Or in some kind of suspended animation?”

“No. You were dead. You were gone. But you are back now. Not just *among* the living. You *are* alive.”

Debbi backed up against the wall and slid down into a tight squat. She looked at her hands as if they belonged to someone else. She stared at both the glowing tannis shard and the ghost rock-infested piece. Even though she was afraid of what might happen, she couldn’t stop herself from trying again. She massaged the infected stone between her fingers with wary expectation. When nothing happened, her expectation turned to dismay and frustration. Debbi placed the shard in her coat pocket and took the lump in both hands. She rubbed the rock between her hands vigorously enough to start a fire. She glared angrily at the unyielding black stone.

Debbi asked Martool, “What’s wrong with it? It’s not working now.”

“Ghost rock,” the shaman replied. “It destroys our connection with the tannis. That is why it must be eradicated.”

Debbi returned her attention to the rock. Her eyes poured over the glassy facets. The surface of the tannis was so clean and pure. The color was deep and flawless. Her consciousness drifted over the surface and suddenly dove far beneath it. The stone was all around her even as she felt its hard texture under her fingers. It should have been simple to move it. She could visualize herself pushing the stone with her finger and making grooves in it, shaping it to her own design. But the fabric of the rock refused to yield, as she knew it should. It was like pushing against water, folding itself back around her, returning to its own shape.

Debbi saw the corruption that lay across her connection to the stone. It was even darker than the black tannis, but it was a darkness that transcended color. She moved towards it. It smelled of rot, loss, and disappointment. And it moved. It twisted and writhed like an eel pulled from the water and tossed dying on a pier. Tortured. Hopeless.

The desperation spread out before her. It seemed endless, piled one on the next beyond counting. All the despondent and lonely deaths, all the hungry anger and viciousness, trapped in this single vein of ghost rock and spreading through the planet. She felt it digging to the surface, breaking through with its load of fear and loathing, like some horrible fungus slowly rotting a ripe apple. But more, it was reaching across the entire system. Reaching out and grasping, pulling the innocent into its unending and unrelenting maw.

In that infinite instance, Debbi sensed numberless horrible personalities. Among the crowd, she touched a presence that used to be Coltrane. And she felt Captain Marat lost in the morass. Debbi almost smiled at the memory of his end despite her fear. And then she detected Quantrill in the distance. He was so extraordinarily bitter and necrotic she could smell his stench. She was overcome by an extraordinary hatred and outrage. Still, her terror was stronger and she struggled to stay clear of his sinister

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

location.

However, beyond Quantrill's signature was another presence she did not know. It was almost alluring in its loathsome magnificence.

Suddenly Debbi was staring into Martool's frightened eyes.

The shaman was shaking the woman's head between her gnarled, clawed hands. "Debbi! Stop it!"

Debbi blinked. She could still smell the rot in her nostrils. She felt Martool wrench the shard of ghost rock tainted tannis from her clutching hand and hurl it across the room. It impacted the wall inches from Ringo's head. The kid only turned with disinterest to look at the stone as it ricocheted across the floor.

A worried Stew instinctively started for Debbi until Ross waved him off. Stew hesitated, and then grudgingly stepped back. The two Rangers watched as Martool released her grip on Debbi's face.

The anouk exhaled with relief. "You are too impetuous by far. You shouldn't explore certain places. Certainly not now, and perhaps never."

"What did I just see?" Debbi asked. Inside this homey room surrounded by her friends, everything seemed normal again. Yet beyond this room was a world where fear and horror thrived and waited and dreamed of overwhelming this planet. It was powerful and all consuming. It was dedicated and remorseless. It was destined to conquer. And ghost rock was that corruption made real. Everything Martool had told her at Castle Rock that day in that sacred room was true.

Martool said, "You have seen the spirits of the restless dead and those they serve. They are arrayed against the living."

Debbi stared at Martool then her eyes widened with confusion. "How can we fight that?"

Martool said, "I knew you went too far. You saw too much."

"The whole planet is rotten," Debbi muttered.

"No," the shaman answered. "It is getting worse, but it isn't hopeless."

"I saw it. I smelled it. It doesn't have an end."

Martool nodded. "If you only see the decay, then yes. But you have to see the healthy side as well. As corruption can grow, so can the other. Look around. With your eyes. See these people here. Fareel. Me. Your fellow Rangers. They are all fighting the rot, as you call it. It isn't going to be easy. But it isn't hopeless. You yourself have brought more into the fight, perhaps without your knowledge. Even before the planet made you one of its own, you were part of the struggle. You are well on the way. You faced your fear. You faced your death. And now you must face what is worse than fear or death."

There was a knock at the door that caused everyone to jump. Ross angrily pulled the door open to reveal Miss Etta with a tray heavily laden with food. The force of Ross's response startled her.

"Am I interrupting anything?" The landlady stared innocently into the room.

Ross took the tray without a word and started to close the door with his foot.

McDuff slipped in low along the floor. The cat bolted across the room and leapt into Debbi's lap. She didn't react. McDuff arched the top of his head against her downturned face. The cat then flopped onto his side, paws in the air. He wriggled luxuriantly against Debbi's thighs, expecting his usual vigorous chin scratching. He was soon aggressively relaxed and his heavy purr was audible to everyone.

Debbi slowly put her arms around the animal and embraced him. She

Clay & Susan Griffith

lifted the seemingly boneless cat and buried her face in his furry side. She scratched the cat under chin sparking torrents of satisfied purrs. Debbi opened her eyes and looked at the cat with a slight smile.

Miss Etta shoved the door open and leaned in. "I'm sorry. I'll take him out."

Debbi held up her head. "That's okay. He can stay."

The landlady glanced around at the Rangers and anouks. She paused sternly at Fareel in a silent warning. "Fine. As long as he's no trouble." Miss Etta lingered hopefully in the threshold. "I guess I'll just go then." Ross closed the door in her face.

Debbi stroked the warm, vibrating cat as she looked about the room. Her eyes rested on each of the figures standing around her. Martool stared back at her. Fareel tried to appear bold, but was clearly wary of the human woman. Ringo inspected his fingernails. Stew smiled in support, but his blue eyes showed nothing but worry. Ross stood with his arms crossed. On the surface he seemed his usual assured self, but his face was etched with confusion and even fear. The troubled emotion that showed on him caused her to smile in reassurance.

"Okay," Debbi said, desperate to wrench things back to normal for the sake of everyone in the room. "I guess dead or alive doesn't matter. I learn on the job like usual. It's time to get to work. What matters is that we wipe out Quantrill."

"No!" Martool and Ross thundered at the same time. The shaman and the Ranger exchanged surprised glances then turned back to Debbi.

Debbi laughed, kissed McDuff on the top of his head, and set the cat aside where he curled up with a paw over his eyes.

"What's the problem?" Debbi asked Martool. "I thought I was supposed to fight evil creatures like him. Isn't that my new job description?"

"Don't be disrespectful," Martool scolded. "You obviously don't know enough about your new self. Your emotions are raw. You are not prepared. Didn't you see the vastness of the enemy? With time you will learn what I tried to tell you at Castle Rock." The anouk balled a quivering fist. "Sometimes you cannot fight with this." She opened her hand. "It will take time."

Debbi stood up. "The enemy is big. But for any big job, you break it down into tasks and get going. The first task is stomping Quantrill. I want him off my planet and I want him off now."

Ross shook his head with his typical superior attitude. "For God's sake! Hold your horses, Dallas. I just pulled your ass out of a coffin. Let's take some time and get yourself together."

Debbi replied, "You hold *your* horses, Ross. There'll be plenty of time once that monster is gone. Better to get it done now. Let's take the fight to him. You want him out there playing on his terms?"

Ross looked at Martool for support, a strange sight to everyone in the room. "Talk to her, willya?"

Martool said evenly, "Your captain is correct. You are not ready for such a dangerous and strenuous effort."

"Not ready? I just came back from the dead! I won't get more ready." Debbi rubbed her hands together. "No. He's got to go. Now."

Ross pointed at her. "Just settle down. Seems to me, I still give the orders in this outfit."

Debbi said, "The way I hear it, you basically gave up command so you could camp by the Sanitarium."

Ross swiveled his angry glare on Stew like a tank turret. The fair-

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

haired Ranger blushed.

"Uh... just bringing her up to speed," Stew stammered. "And you're right, Ross." He turned to Debbi. "He's right. Just relax for awhile. You've been through a lot."

The woman Ranger folded her hands over her chest in the classic death pose. "I've been relaxing, Stew. Now I'm ready to get up and move around." She flexed her shoulders and bones cracked.

"Stop this!" Martool exclaimed. "You are being foolish. You are too important to act so childish. This is no longer about you. You belong to the planet!"

"Seems to me," Debbi pointedly mimicked Ross's words, "that wiping out Quantrill would be just what the planet ordered. You said yourself he was part of the corruption. I say we squeeze him till he pops."

Martool said, "Perhaps you misunderstand your position. Just because you returned from the dead, doesn't mean you can't die again."

Debbi grinned. "Maybe I'll just come back then too."

Ross snapped, "And maybe you won't. You've been given an opportunity that nobody ever gets. You've gotten a second chance. Don't waste it."

She said soberly, "I don't want to waste it. I want to use it. I've got a purpose and destroying Quantrill is part of it. When did you turn so fraidy?"

There was a strained silence until Ross said quietly, "I'm just tired of burying people I care about."

Debbi touched him on the arm. "Okay. Next time I'll bury you."

Ross shook his head with an exasperated and disappointed sigh.

She caught his eye with an admission that her levity was out of place. "I know what you're saying. But I'm only doing the job you taught me. If we don't do it, who will?"

"I'm sick of the job."

"Too bad. Quantrill's on us. He's our responsibility. So is Temptation. After we get him and put things in order, maybe we can talk about doing something else."

Debbi and Ross stared at each other. Martool waited silently.

Ross exhaled. "Yeah, you're right. Let's do it."

Martool dropped her head in dismay.

Debbi slapped Ross on the arm. "Great." She turned to Stew. "You in?"

"Of course."

"Ringo?"

The kid shrugged. "All right. But let's hurry up. I need to wake up soon and get to work."

Chapter 9

Lithia had begun to regret sending Thomas to be eaten months ago. As always, decisions spawned by the desire for personal satisfaction don't make for good management policy. Her efforts to rebuild Temptation were creating endless days dealing with mountains of paperwork. And it was actually "paper" work in some cases as this pathetic town used paper, and reused it, because of the collapse of their technology grid. Her requests to the HI Directors for an assistant had been met with delays. She knew they wanted to see miraculous results before they committed any further resources to the Banshee exile.

Only the Colonial Ranger foot-dragging kept her from moving forward. But she was working on that and she felt it would soon turn in her favor.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Her sources told her that the local Rangers were beginning to accept the continued absence of Captain Ross. This meant they would soon look to the future and a new command structure, one that would be easy to control. The former priest was the prime candidate. Stew would have to make a decision. She had managed to have a small cache of black guns transported to the surface so she could hand them out to the Rangers when the agreement was signed. It was good business to show the contractee the benefit of the contract immediately and earn instant goodwill. Then once she could demonstrate to the Board that the Temptation Rangers were safely in her pocket, she would have all the resources she needed.

Lithia had no doubt it would all fall into place. But it needed to happen soon because she was exhausted from doing menial administrative work. She had no idea what it took to construct a reactor and she didn't care. She needed a staff to handle those mundane items. She was a big picture person. And the big picture was that she would soon run this town.

It was that thought alone that kept her going through the long days and nights while the horrific winds blew through the cracks in her office walls. She had paid out of her own pocket account for laborers to repair the Hellstromme Industries office, but they had done a poor job. Eventually, this entire facility would have to be leveled and a new structure erected that would demonstrate to Temptation that HI was in charge. In fact, the location of the current Colonial Ranger headquarters would be a perfect spot to build.

Lithia smiled at the thought. Or at least the corners of her mouth quivered upward slightly.

The viewer on her desk buzzed to life and up popped a holo from the security camera at the front door. She saw the top of a dark hat and a long black duster blowing out behind. The person looked up at the camera.

It was Captain Ross.

Lithia dispatched one of her automatons to let Ross in. She watched him enter and proceed through the building. He walked with a purposeful stride. She could read people and she didn't like what she was reading from him.

Finally the door to her office opened and the veteran Ranger swept in. He took up a position in the middle of the room, one hip cocked, thumbs hooked in his gun belt.

"I hear you're looking for me," he said brusquely.

Lithia smiled innocently as if taken aback. "Captain Ross, I presume." She stood and extended her hand to a chair. "Please, sit. Can I offer you something to drink? I have real coffee."

"Didn't come for breakfast."

"You have me at a disadvantage, Captain. I was under the impression that you had resigned your command. I have been dealing with the Ranger named Stew. And we had made excellent progress toward cooperation in rebuilding Temptation."

"Now you're dealing with me."

"Very well. Stew and I had a number of matters under consideration. Let me call up the files."

Ross shook his head. "Look, let's cut through the crap. There's only one matter under consideration. I won't have you coming to Temptation with a pocket full of Hellstromme money and trying to buy up this town. I know your kind."

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

Lithia affected a confused, slightly insulted look. "I don't know—"

"And my Rangers damn sure aren't for sale. You'll play by my rules down here."

Lithia frosted over. "I have played by the rules, Captain. I have the triplicate permits to prove it. I don't understand or appreciate your aggression. I have tried very hard to meet with you since my arrival in Temptation. But you were never available. I'm trying desperately to work with the Rangers to make this a decent place to live again, to at least return it to the state the people enjoyed prior to the Worldstorm. And then to move beyond that. Hellstromme Industries understands that the Colonial Rangers are vital to the success of this project. We are interested only in enhancing your ability to do your job."

"This ain't a project, it's a town. And I don't slobber like a dog over technology. We've done without for a long time down here, and we can keep on. The Colonial Rangers won't be Hellstromme's private thugs."

"I'm sure we had no—"

"I'm the law in Temptation. You can go along or get out. If you push me, I'll shut you down." Ross touched the brim of his hat. "Ma'am."

"Captain." Lithia sat quietly. She had no desire to argue. There was no purpose in it. She watched Ross sweep out of the office and monitored him until he was stalking down the street through the wind. Just as she expected, he didn't smirk in childish triumph, thrilled by his tough talk and dramatic exit. For a man like Captain Ross, this meeting hadn't been a show; he wasn't posturing. He was giving his policy statement. And it was a troubling one for Lithia.

Just as she feared, this old Ranger was going to be an impediment. It wasn't that Ross didn't understand that Temptation would never progress without the considerable inputs of Hellstromme Industries, he just didn't care. He was willing to stand in the way of HI, to condemn this town to a perpetual frontier savagery, because he thrived in that environment. It made him necessary.

Lithia completely understood Ross. There was no debating with a man like that; he would never see reason. This was life and death for him; he could have only one position. But it was life and death for Lithia too. Fortunately, because she understood a man like Ross, she also knew how to deal with him.

The door behind her opened and a man stepped out. "That Ross is a real pain in the ass, ain't he?"

Lithia didn't turn. She could smell the mixture of alcohol and cheap hair tonic. "Yes, he is. I have a job for you."

The man sat heavily on the edge of Lithia's desk and leered at the woman. "I'm ready for anything, darling."

She glanced up icily at Ranger Ty Miller. She rejected any number of insulting retorts. This man was a child with an inflated sense of self-importance; he might react badly and she didn't need a tantrum spoiling her plans. Miller's quickness to be insulted was the reason he was here in the first place. He resented the way Ross treated him. That, and he was a raging drunk with a gambling problem. Ty Miller was one of the easiest coats Lithia had ever turned.

She told the Ranger, "It's time to remove Captain Ross from his position."

Miller lifted the whiskey bottle he clutched in his left hand to his lips and took a deep swig. Then he ran a finger along his moustache. "How you gonna do that?"

Clay & Susan Griffith

"I'm not going to. You are."

Miller screwed up his face in confusion. Then a look of horror appeared. "Whoa! Wait a minute! You think I'm gonna kill him?"

"Can't you?"

"Sure I could. I could put a bullet in him, and I might enjoy it, but where would that leave me? I don't intend to live the rest of my life with every Ranger on Banshee hunting me."

"I can see to it that you are removed from the scene. Far away where no Colonial Ranger will ever touch you."

Miller took a drink and gave out a wet gasp. "Forget it. You're not shipping me off to some planetoid or space station out on the rim. This crappy rock is the closest thing to Earth in this system. I'm not leaving it until I go home."

Lithia asked, "Well then, couldn't you stage some sort of provocation then shoot him in self-defense?"

Miller snorted. "Ross is a worthless son of a bitch, but even I'll admit he's hell with a firearm. There's no way I can outgun him."

"Can you recruit any of your fellow Rangers?"

"Are you kidding? They all kiss the ground he walks on. The old freak went off the deep end after Dallas died and they still think he's the last word. Why don't you just send some of those expensive robots of yours to blow his head off?"

Lithia sat back in her chair. "It's a tad obvious. But you may have an idea."

Miller grinned and sprawled across the desk. "I got lots of ideas, Lith."

The executive stared at the sodden Ranger. "That seems unlikely. However, I believe I may have some bait for Captain Ross."

"I bet that's true."

Lithia took a pen and pressed against Miller's arm as if she was shoveling the carcass of a dead animal off the road. "Why don't you take your breath out until I contact you again?"

Miller winked and pointed a finger pistol at her. "You got my number?"

"Yes. I do."

General Quantrill had spent months pouring over maps of Banshee. He had made peace with the debacle at Castle Rock. The failure was not his own. He wouldn't have attacked Castle Rock in the first place. It was Avernus and the disgusting Tekkeng who pressured him into abandoning his successful southern campaign. He knew the whole thing would come to a poor end with Avernus designing the strategy, but he relented to the pressure of the moment.

Quantrill wouldn't make that mistake again. He was excited because he now had formulated an excellent strategy for the conquest of the planet. It was foolproof and would make him the master of Banshee in only two short campaigning seasons, perhaps three allowing for unforeseen difficulties. The only problem was that he didn't have an army.

That was Avernus's problem, not his. He was command. Avernus was supply. It remained only for Avernus to find another supply of dead sykers and revive them. The few that had come in over the last few weeks were poor specimens and few in number compared to the great divisions of dead they had mined from the Red River valley. But still, enough of the old Syker Legion had been killed during Quantrill's days fighting the colonial wars, that there should be thousands more corpses moldering

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

under the dry soil of Banshee. If Avernus would simply attend to business, the new Legion could be in place by the end of winter.

However, Quantrill saw little of Avernus these days. The Fallen had taken to secreting himself away in Dr. Lupinz's old laboratories and conducting his experiments on inmates and cats. Avernus expected the Rangers to attack any day and he wanted to be ready.

Quantrill, on the other hand, was less convinced that the Colonial Rangers would assault the Sanitarium. He was a master of strategy and tactics, and he had sent elements of his once proud Reformed Syker Legion to far-flung places around the planet to distract the Rangers' attention and dissipate their resolve. Quantrill knew that Ross endlessly patrolled the asylum perimeter watching for signs of the General. But he also knew that he and Avernus had succeeded in hiding their presence from Ross's pet syker, the Legionary deserter Hallow, and that the Ranger captain had no evidence that the General was inside the Sanitarium. And Captain Ross had not returned to his watch post for several days now, leading Quantrill to assume that the Ranger had given up the chase as fruitless.

This gave the General even more confidence that he had time to reform his forces and strike at a time and place of his choosing. He would hit Temptation first with sufficient force to level the town and turn the surviving population into food for his army. If not for Captain Marat's failure, Quantrill would still have Temptation as a base. Yet, a great commander took setbacks and turned them to his own advantage. Quantrill was a great commander.

The door to Dr. Lupinz's office opened and Avernus entered. He was still in the guise of Lupinz, a visage which he hardly ever abandoned now. It was disturbing to Quantrill, not because he resented the original Lupinz, which he did, but because it made him question Avernus's mental stability.

Avernus looked distressed. This was an emotion Quantrill had never seen on the Fallen's face, in any guise. It caused the General to sit back from his maps.

Avernus paused to think how to say what he had to say. As he thought, he stripped off bloody gloves and slipped off a gore stained apron. He dropped the items in a pile on the floor.

Quantrill snarled silently. He had come to think of Lupinz's office as his own, and he was a tidy, organized man. "What do you want, Avernus?"

The Fallen snapped his glowing eyes on the undead syker. "We have a serious problem."

The General was tired of Avernus's pessimism. "There are no problems. Only challenges."

"How quaint," Avernus replied. "Do you recall when you told me that you had killed the Colonial Ranger named Dallas?"

Quantrill smiled at the traces of her pain in his memory, and at the thought of Captain Ross's anguish. "Of course."

"Well, she's alive."

The General merely looked at the Fallen for a moment. "What do you mean?" Then he leaned forward with an evil grin. "You revived her for our use? How twisted."

"No. She is alive. Not reanimated. Alive."

"That's impossible. How did you get your information?"

"I sensed her. She is out there. And there is something unusually powerful about her."

Quantrill scowled. "No. You've made a mistake. I know she's dead. I

Clay & Susan Griffith

saw her die. I felt her die.”

“There is no mistake. She may well have been dead. But she is alive today. I don’t understand how it happened. I don’t understand what she is.”

The General slammed his rotting fists on the mahogany desk, leaving patches of skin on the wooden surface and rattling the windows. “My God! How do I get rid of this woman!”

Avernus turned to the window and watched the bleak winter landscape. He saw several of his cats keeping watch, their fur bristling in the wind. He pondered the horizon and wondered what was happening on this planet.

Quantrill surged to his feet. “Let’s go, Avernus! I’ll recall the Legion. You marshal your servitors. And we’ll crush Temptation now. We’ll put an end to this bothersome woman once and for all!”

Avernus didn’t turn. “That is a mistake.”

The General swept the maps from the desk with a shout of rage. “What do you know? You told me Captain Ross was broken! You sent me to Castle Rock! You saddled me with Tekkeng and his petty private agenda! Don’t tell me what’s a mistake!”

Avernus cracked with energy. “I raised you from your grave, General. I’ll tell you whatever I choose. And you will believe it. Without me, you would be a pile of desiccated flesh and lifeless bone.”

Quantrill’s eyes glowed. “Power and the ability to use it are two different things.”

Avernus kept his back to the dangerous General. “Thank you for the philosophy lesson. Now, this Ranger can only be destroyed in a deadland. You will not take her in Temptation. She draws strength from it.”

“You sound like you’re afraid of her.”

“I am,” Avernus said in a matter of fact way. “We cultivate the fear of others. She cultivates their courage. It’s a sinister tendency she has. And one that we need to snuff out. We must bring her here where our power is supreme. We can destroy her here.”

As a general, Quantrill believed in taking the fight to the enemy’s homeland, destroying their resources, burning their homes. It was against his military nature to invite the enemy onto his territory. But no matter how he resented it, he sensed the truth in what Avernus said. Quantrill had detected an odd strength in Ranger Dallas himself when he encountered her in Temptation. Not only did she resist psychic tampering, but also the other Rangers focused on her, fed off her spirit. They respected Captain Ross, but they believed in her. They were even willing to die for her. Most of them anyway. There was something uniquely dangerous about this Dallas. Perhaps it would be wise to drag her into their home, stripped of her friends and support, cut off from the planet, to better finish her off.

Quantrill returned to his seat and the arcs of power diminished. “What are your recommendations?”

Avernus tapped the windowpane idly. “We’ll complete our preparations and wait. In time, she’ll come. She has to. And then she’ll die. Again and forever.”

Chapter 10

Doc Dazy removed the stethoscope from Debbi’s chest. “Sounds good. Strong. Normal.” The Doctor had been in a near stupor since Ross had

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

accompanied Debbi into his office. He had gone through the rote motions of a physical examination as if he was doing a random check up. Her pulse was good. Blood pressure was good. Respiration was good. Reflexes were good. Her eyes were good. Her hearing was good. He took blood and prepared a slide immediately. It looked good, although her white count was elevated a little. The Doctor now paused with the end of the stethoscope poised in midair, lost in thought.

Debbi leaned closer to the stethoscope and whispered, "Boo."

Doc Dazy jumped back and fell off his chair. He scrambled back across the floor until he recovered his wits. Debbi and Ross laughed at him. He glared up at the two as he regained his feet, straightened his eyeglasses, and brushed his muck encrusted lab coat.

"That's funny," he said stiffly. "Hilariously funny. I could've broken something."

Ross asked, "So what's the verdict? Is she alive?"

Dazy yanked the stethoscope from his ears and crossed the old operating theater to petulantly attend to some duties organizing instruments that mere civilians couldn't appreciate the importance of. "Yes. She's as healthy as a horse." He turned back and pointed at Debbi. "Your weight is down a bit, but that's to be expected after a couple of months in a casket without eating. So you have my permission to eat everything in sight."

Debbi stared unblinkingly back at the Doctor. She hopped off the examination table and licked her lips. "I must say, I've had some peculiar cravings lately."

Doc Dazy backed up abruptly against the equipment tray, sending it clattering to the tile floor with an ear-shattering clang. He glanced at Ross with eyes of sudden fear.

Ross laughed again, almost doubled over. The Ranger Captain never laughed this hard at anything.

Debbi appraised her boss with a curious glance. "Funnier when you're not on the receiving end, isn't it?"

Ross wiped away tears of mirth. "Damn straight."

The Doctor scowled at Ross then waggled an angry finger at Debbi. "Stop it! That's just childish! See how funny it is next time you come looking to have a bullet dug out of you! Yeah, that'll be a scream, I guarantee it!"

"Sorry," Debbi said. "Look, can you tell me anything?"

"No." Doc Dazy settled down and began to collect the fallen tools. "No. I don't have any earthly explanation for it."

"Any chance she wasn't really dead?" Ross asked.

"No," the Doctor replied quickly. "She was dead. I examined her. She wasn't just unconscious or catatonic. She was shredded by Quantrill's mindstorm." He briefly considered how those blunt comments might adversely affect Debbi, but then he remembered her jokes at his expense. "No, she was dead. Dead. Dead."

"Now I'm not," Debbi said. "But I'm not a zombie?"

"No. You could look at them and you'd see dead tissue. They were green. They smelled. You're just like you were before. You do smell of hyacinth."

"How would you explain it?" Ross asked.

"Soap?"

"Not the hyacinth," the veteran Ranger snapped. "Her being alive."

Doc Dazy tossed the gathered instruments on the tray. "Explain it? Hell,

Clay & Susan Griffith

I haven't been able to explain anything around here for years." He crossed the room and shook the hand of a bemused Debbi. "You're back from the dead. Way to go."

There was a sudden clatter of a crowd in the hallway of the infirmary. Doc Dazy pulled off his glasses in exasperation.

"Oh what now?" he exclaimed.

Ross said, "It's the Rangers. I asked them to meet here."

"Why? This isn't an Elk's Lodge. It's a hospital."

"I wanted them all to see her for the first time together."

"No one knows she's alive?"

Debbi grabbed her things. "A few, but not many. We wanted to make sure I was kosher before we made any sort of announcement."

"Whatever." Doc Dazy busied himself with pointless straightening. He had never seemed so distracted, even during the height of the undead invasion. Debbi's resurrection had thrown him badly.

The swinging door to the operating room swung open slightly and Stew poked his head inside.

"Ready?" he asked.

Debbi signaled to bring everyone in. Stew nodded and withdrew. She took a deep breath and leaned back on the examining table.

The double doors swung wide. Fitz and Chennault were the first through. They were busy quibbling about why they were here. No one liked the infirmary. Ngoma crowded behind them with Tsukino and Curtiz. Hickok was with them too, looking like part of the crowd after a few months of cooperating in the hunt for Quantrill. Ringo brought up the rear, looking confused and somewhat lost. Fitz saw Debbi and stopped dead in his tracks. Ngoma and Tsukino collided with his broad back. Chennault continued chattering before she noticed the big Irishman was no longer beside her. She looked back at him curiously, and then followed his wide-eyed gaze to Debbi.

Chennault asked, "What the hell is that thing?"

"What thing?" Ngoma craned his neck around Fitz. "What—"

Debbi smiled nervously and waved. "Hey guys."

Chennault looked at Ross and jerked her thumb at Debbi. "Hey, Ross, what's that thing?"

Ross stayed silent.

Debbi said, "It's me, Chennault. Debbi."

The squat ex-Marine smirked. "What kinda sick gag is this?"

Debbi said, "I know it's a shock. We don't understand any more than you will. But here I am. Alive and breathing."

Ringo poked Fitz in the ribs with his elbow. "Hey. You seeing this too?" The kid was just starting to come to the conclusion that maybe this wasn't a dream. Maybe it was something more incredible.

Fitz didn't respond. He just stared at Debbi with his shocked mouth wide.

"I'm seeing it," Tsukino replied. "Is it really you?"

"Yes." Debbi stepped forward.

Fitz shuffled back. Chennault stood her ground, but she dropped her hand to her holstered Dragon.

It was Hickok who stepped out of the crowd of Rangers. She slipped between Fitz and Chennault and moved across the floor. Her incredulous eyes were wide. Her mouth was squeezed tight into a slit. She stopped a few feet from Debbi and instinctively reached out. Debbi took Hickok's bare hand and slowly pressed it against her cheek. Tears began to wash

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

down the pilot's face.

"See," Debbi said. "I'm flesh and blood."

Chennault said quietly, "Make a move to bite her and I'll blow your brains out."

"Easy, Chennault," Ross boomed. "That's really Dallas. Take your hand off your gun."

Hickok choked, "How is this possible?"

Debbi shrugged and embraced the pilot. "Things happen."

Doc Dazy shuffled noisily through the stunned Rangers. "Yeah, that's it! Centuries of medical science and *things happen*. I'll just start wearing feathers and throwing bones." He disappeared down the dingy corridor still muttering.

As he vanished, another voice roared out of the hallway. It was Miller. He pushed past Ringo and Stew at the door. "I got the message, Stew. I was busy. Is Ross here?" Miller shoved through the Rangers, glaring with annoyance at Fitz who stood as unmoving as a tree. "One side, you big goon. Hey, Ross! I got big news. I just heard where a shipment of black guns is located. I think we ought to go get them! Oh hey, Dallas, how's it going? What the f—"

Ross studied the place where Miller pointed on a map.

"There's no mine there," Ross said.

Miller exhaled in annoyance. His breath smelled of alcohol. "I didn't say it was a mine. I said it was a bunch of prospectors."

"You said it was a mine. But go ahead."

Miller threw up his hands. "What the hell do you expect? How can I get anything straight with her here?" He nervously indicated Debbi who stood next to Ross's desk.

Ross snapped, "Just go ahead with your story, Miller. Geezus."

"Okay. So this mine . . . these prospectors out here have some black guns."

"And Sharif told you that?"

Miller nodded vigorously. "Yeah. I picked him up on the radio. But he said he was moving out of communication range. I told you, Ross, he wanted you to come out."

Ross worked his jaw back and forth. "How many black guns?"

"Thirty."

"Sharif told you that too?"

"Sure. Yeah, something like that. Look, the guy said something about some prospectors having black guns. And he wanted you to come alone. You and him are pals, aren't you? I'm just passing on the message. Don't jump up my ass about it." His downturned eyes fixed again on Debbi. He shook his head and ran quivering hands through his oily hair.

Debbi asked, "Miller, are you sure it was Sharif?"

"How the hell should I know? That's what he said. What more can I do?"

She stared curiously at the agitated Ranger and said to Ross, "Could you raise Sharif?"

"No. Weather's knocking everything out of the air." Ross folded the map. "All right, I'll check it out."

Debbi said, "I'll go with you."

"No," Ross said quickly. "I mean, why don't you just stay here and rest up."

Clay & Susan Griffith

She cocked her eyebrow at the veteran Ranger. "Why don't you just seal me up in plastic and I'll keep fresh forever."

Ross sighed with aggravation. "Look, I'm just trying—"

"I know what you're trying. I need to get back in the saddle. Unless you fire me from the service, it's going to happen eventually anyway."

Ross caved in. "Yeah, all right. Get your stuff."

Miller started. "No! He said just you Ross."

Ross stared hard at the man across the desk who was flushed, almost frantic, a state he'd seen the man in far too often. Miller shrunk under his commander's glare. Ross stated, "Next time you're drunk on duty, you're gone. Understand? Now go ready a Prowler for us."

Miller's eyes were angry slits, his voice a hoarse whisper. "I'm not drunk. And I'm not on duty. I'm just telling you what Sharif said."

Ross had already turned his attention to gathering his mission kit. Miller was beneath his notice now. Miller stood up unsteadily and started for the door.

Debbi called after him, "Miller, anything else you can tell us?"

The withered Ranger turned to look at her. He paused almost sadly. Then he shook his head and went out.

The noise of *Mo's* was a distant background buzz to the gathered Colonial Rangers. Stew, Ringo, Miller, Fitz, and Chennault huddled at their table in the corner. They clutched drinks and beers, however all but Miller's were untouched. Miller had worked his way half through a bottle by himself.

Stew said, "We can't explain it. But that doesn't change it."

Ringo stared straight ahead.

Chennault said, "She just wasn't dead. Who knows what Quantrill did to her? Some kind of suspended animation. And she came out of it."

Fitz shook his head. "She was dead, Chennault. You know it. It's something else. I mean, we've seen the dead rise."

Stew leaned forward quickly. "Debbi isn't like those zombies we fought. Or like the Legionnaires. She's alive. Really alive."

Fitz held up a calming hand. His voice was surprisingly even. "Okay, Stew. That's not what I meant. I just mean we've seen plenty of strange things that change your ideas about life and death. This is another one." His look changed to one of questioning. "I mean this isn't something bad, right? What would the church say about it?"

Stew raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Well, first of all, I'm not in the church anymore, so I can't speak for it. Second of all, I don't know."

Miller poured another shot and snarled, "Okay, what's the big deal? Some kind of anouk magic or something. She's back. Who cares how it happened."

The other Rangers stared at Miller, surprised by the outburst.

Chennault shook her head in disgust. "What crawled up your butt, Miller?"

"Nothing," the drunk slurred. "I just don't know why we're all here worrying about Dallas. She wasn't dead. She was dead. So what? What does that mean to us? We're all still stuck here in the same crap pile of a planet."

Ringo grabbed the whiskey bottle. Miller's hand snaked out and seized the kid's wrist.

Miller shouted, "What are you doing, Stuckey?"

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

"Come on, Miller," Ringo replied. "You've had enough."

"Drop the bottle or I'll drop you."

The young Ranger kept his grip on the bottle. Miller pulled with all his strength and jerked Ringo onto the table. The kid held on, but didn't fight back. The other Rangers surged out of their chairs and reached for one or the other.

"Let him go, Miller!" Stew grabbed Ringo's waist.

Miller shouted incomprehensibly as the growing scuffle drew the attention of surrounding drinkers. Fitz grabbed Miller's wrist while Chennault tightened a muscular arm around the drunk's throat. Stew pulled Ringo back, with the bottle, splashing whiskey over the two of them. Chennault dragged Miller away from the table and held him fast despite his thrashing.

"Calm down!" Chennault growled at him. "Stop struggling or you're going to get hurt!"

Stew said, "Easy, Chennault. Just back off him."

The ex-Marine hesitated. And when she did unhook her arm from Miller's neck, he immediately spun and took a wild swing at her. She stepped back easily and avoided the air blow. Red-faced Miller staggered around and faced against Fitz who stood unmoving. Then he turned angrily on Stew and Ringo across the table.

Ringo said, "What are you so pissed off about, Miller?"

"It's not me. You guys can't stand that I'm my own man and you're just a bunch of puppets."

Chennault actually laughed and sat back at the table. "Go sleep it off."

Miller jabbed his finger at her. "I don't have to do what you say! Things are gonna change around here!"

Stew said, "You should get some shut eye."

"Hey, that's the first decision you made in the last three months," Miller snarled. "Poor Stew, Dallas is back. But now so is Ross." The drunken Ranger leaned forward on the table. "But maybe things'll work out for you after all."

Stew pulled his hat off the back of his chair. "I've got rounds. Miller, please go home."

As the former priest wound his way out of the saloon, Miller snorted with laughter. He looked at the other Rangers with a sodden grin.

Ringo placed the whiskey bottle gently on the table. "Here." The kid grabbed his hat and coat and left.

Miller grabbed up the bottle with a hoot of triumph. He struggled to pull his coat off his chair, but it hung there. He cursed and kicked the chair in frustration. Then he staggered through the crowd and pushed his way outside. Miller paused on the wooden sidewalk and took a deep draught of the whiskey. He wouldn't need his coat to stay warm. He could see Ringo huddled against the cold jogging down the street.

Miller shook his head. They did everything Ross said, but he didn't. The Rangers had to change, just like Lithia said. Ross was a dead end. It took smart guys to know how things would play out on Banshee. Miller felt confident that his cooperation with Hellstromme would put him on easy street in the future. In fact, he'd heard rumors that the Tunnel wasn't really broken; it was just kept tightly controlled by HI. The way he understood it, there were secret shuttles going back and forth to Earth all the time. If he played his cards right, Miller's growing connection to Lithia and Hellstromme would get him on one of those shuttles.

And he'd make sure there was space on the shuttle for any of his pals

Clay & Susan Griffith

that wanted to go with him. No matter how they treated him, he'd still stand by them. That's just the kind of guy he was.

Miller took a long drink and toppled off his feet, falling against the wall. Yeah, nobody would ever say Ty Miller didn't stand by his friends.

"For God's sake." The venomous words came from Lithia who stood above him, glaring down with extreme distaste. "Don't you have a job to do?"

Miller smirked up at her. "I did. I gave Ross the bait and he took it."

Lithia replied, "Were you going to inform me?"

"I've been busy, lady. Cut me some slack." He raised the bottle again, but got nothing. He held it upside down and shook it. "Hmm. Empty. How about a drink?"

"After it's done."

Miller looked annoyed. "He's going out tomorrow morning. Oh, and another Ranger will be with him. So tell your robots."

Lithia smiled now. "Don't worry. They'll have enough ammunition for all."

Miller struggled into an upright position. "No. I mean, they don't need to kill the other people . . . person. Just Ross."

The pale woman pulled the collar of her long coat tighter around her throat. The wind swept the hem around her ankles. "I'm afraid there won't be any witnesses left."

Miller blurted, "No. Just Ross. That's what you wanted, right?"

"Keep your voice down, you moron. Any Colonial Ranger we take out now will make it easier for you in the future. Don't get scruples now."

Miller struggled to make her understand through the liquor haze. "But you said—"

"Listen to me. It's done. There's no going back. You are on my team. So play along and everything will be fine." She pulled her hand out of her pocket and tossed a few HI credits on the ground next to the Ranger.

"Here. Buy yourself another bottle." She turned and walked off down the plank sidewalk with steps that echoed through the wind. Her automaton bodyguards slipped into place next to her. Two of them backed away from Miller, with their weapons ready, as if he could be a threat.

Miller just lay on the cold ground and watched them disappear into the dark. Then he gathered up the money.

Ringo trailed after Stew. He wanted to talk. He needed to talk. Stew had seen Dallas the most since her return, except for Ross of course, and Ringo couldn't talk to Ross. Stew seemed to have come to terms with the whole thing and Ringo wanted to know how.

Stew seemed to be deep in thought. Ringo didn't crowd him because he could tell the senior Ranger wasn't heading home. He was walking the streets, head down. Ringo followed quietly, trying to forget the cold wind that Stew didn't seem to feel at all.

Finally, Stew turned onto the street that ran along the churchyard of St. Calixtus. He paused at the iron gates which were still blown off their hinges from Debbi's fight with Coltrane's monster all those months ago. He stepped gracefully past the wrought iron wreckage and entered the churchyard.

Ringo paused at the gate and watched his friend move purposefully to the ruined cathedral. Most of the arches were collapsed and the gothic roof was nearly gone. Stew mounted the portico and entered the great

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

doors. Ringo trotted after him.

The young man stepped quietly to the door, stepping lightly to prevent his boots from echoing off the tannis. He felt embarrassed about following Stew now, but he had to continue. He went inside and squeezed between the fallen stones. As he moved along what had been the main aisle, he heard a sound. Ringo froze.

Through the wreckage, he saw Stew. The man had found a small circle of floor amidst the detritus and knelt on both knees. His hands were clasped in front of him and his head was bowed. His light voice echoed sweetly through the tannis as he prayed.

Ringo watched. He forgot sometimes that Stew was a man of myriad pasts. Ringo had never learned to pray, but the sound of Stew relaxed him. His search for his own answers had been fruitless. Stew's way was as good as any other. Ringo sat on a chunk of stone and allowed himself to be lulled into a state of inner peace. The first he'd had in many months.

Chapter 11

Ross peered through the windshield of the Prowler. He couldn't see the terrain in front of him. The vehicle shuddered under the impact of the thunderous winds that kicked up waves of sand. The Prowler rose on one corner and slammed down. Ross cursed and ground the vehicle over the rock outcropping he'd run into. Dust filled the cabin, blown in through the cracks and seams of the rattling ATV. Debbi coughed and studied a map.

"We're on course, right?" Ross asked as he struggled with the wheel.

Debbi flipped the map around. "Sure."

"You don't sound sure. Didn't you get some sort of sixth sense about direction along with everything else?"

"No."

Ross rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Of course not. *That* would be useful. But you sure can tell where tannis came from."

"Just drive."

"So how're you feeling?" Ross asked for the hundredth time since the trip began. "You okay?"

"I'm fine for heaven's sake," Debbi reiterated. "Doc Dazy said so." She caught Ross looking at her again. He had spent a lot of time looking at her during the four hours they'd been on the road. He sometimes had an expression of confusion, other times a sense of deep relief, and sometimes something else she couldn't identify. "Eyes on the road. You want to drive over a cliff?"

Ross turned grudgingly back to the windshield. "You're navigating. I assume you'll keep us from driving over a cliff."

Debbi grunted noncommittally as she flipped the map over again and ran her finger along the terrain marks that were out of date as of the Worldstorm. She stared out the window, but saw no landmarks in the swirling sandstorm. She sighed and sat back. "Do you think the others will accept me? They seem freaked out."

"They'll get over it." Ross replied simply.

Debbi said, "Well, I'm glad you think so. Ringo looks like he's stuck in an exam he never studied for."

"Kid's had a tough go recently, but he's getting better every day. Hold on." Ross wrestled with the Prowler as it slid down a low rise. He cursed again under his breath, gained control of the big ATV, checked a few

Clay & Susan Griffith

dials, then asked, "So, you remember anything about being dead?"

Debbi was amazed at Ross's offhanded approach. Nothing seemed to affect him the way it did others. Apparently he had already come to terms with the practical fact of her death and resurrection. It was typical of him; he may not understand what happened, but he knew he had to just accept it and move on with it. What he clearly had not come to terms with was Debbi's place in his life, but that was a more complicated issue for him.

She replied, "No, not really. I remember us riding outside Castle Rock. The next thing I know I was in your room."

"Did it hurt?"

"Dying?" The tone of his question made Debbi look at Ross. He was no longer so casual. He stared ahead intensely, shoulders hunched, pretending to make conversation while driving. But he was hanging on her response. She knew he was thinking about his wife's death. "Nah. There was no pain to it."

Ross nodded to himself. "Good." He adjusted a few controls, and then asked, "So did you see heaven or anything?"

"No." Debbi replied flatly, then asked with surprise, "You believe in heaven?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me." Ross sat forward in his seat. "What's that?"

A cluster of three small cabins became visible through the sandstorm. There were no signs of habitation. No vehicles. No lights.

Ross drew the Prowler to a halt. He purposefully pulled his com microphone closer to his mouth. "There're the prospectors' huts Miller talked about. I had my doubts about his story, but there they are by God. I guess we'll find the black guns here too. Nice navigating, Dallas."

"Nothing to it." Debbi tossed the map behind her with a silent prayer of gratitude.

The two Rangers swung out of their seats and slipped into thermal vests, flak jackets, and their normal overcoats. They strapped their gun belts over their coats. Then they slipped goggles over their eyes and wrapped scarves around their noses and mouths. Debbi checked her Dragon and carried it in her hand. Ross slid his six-shooter into his holster and pulled a Hellrazor from the wall clamp. He checked the loads.

"Ready?" Ross asked with a muffled voice.

Debbi gave him a thumbs up and the veteran Ranger flipped the switch and the Prowler's side door slid open. The wind blasted in and drenched them in a wall of sand. As Debbi watched Ross hop out of the vehicle, a feeling of exciting yet melancholy familiarity suddenly overwhelmed her. She was heading off on a mission with Ross. Something she always took for granted, but she realized with heart-sickening clarity that she might never have experienced this again. Yet here she was. Debbi didn't realize she'd reacted until Ross's sand covered face appeared in the hatchway. The concern in his eyes was visible even through the tinted goggles.

"What? What's wrong?" he shouted over the wind.

Debbi waved him off. "No. It's nothing. I . . . nothing." She followed and sealed the vehicle behind her.

The Rangers pushed through the sandstorm toward the three cabins. Ross signaled to one. Debbi moved into position on the opposite side of the door from Ross. The cabins were adobe with rough wood doors and

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

no windows. Ross slammed his fist several times against the door.

"Open up!" he yelled. "Colonial Rangers!"

They waited. Debbi sensed no movement, but with the wind she couldn't be sure. Ross counted down with his fingers. At zero, he kicked open the door, rifle up. She dove inside, rolled, and came up, Dragoon ready.

The cabin was empty of humans. But it was full of sand and crates. She and Ross began a quick search. They opened case after case of standard weapons and ammunition. It was a mildly impressive stash, but then they found a small, nondescript crate at the bottom. Debbi pried it open.

Ross reached into the crate. "Black guns. Probably fifty of 'em."

Debbi returned to the wind hole of a door and looked out. She saw nothing and signaled it to Ross.

He joined her and pulled his mike closer to his mouth. "Let's check the other shacks. Looks like we're all alone out here."

The two Rangers went out. Near one of the other shacks, Debbi saw a shape moving through the sandy air. She tapped Ross on the arm and pointed at the man-sized shape. Then they saw a second. And a third. The figures strode easily through the gale and gathered in the middle of the semicircle formed by the three cabins. They faced the two Rangers. The strangers were unrecognizable except that they were humans and all the exact same size. Large humans in nondescript clothing carrying large pulse rifles.

Debbi switched her goggles to IR. The figures didn't show heat. She turned and nodded to Ross.

Ross was busy grabbing her arm and pulling her back. Heavy shells pounded past them as they piled behind the far corner of the first cabin. Debbi berated herself for being a step slow. Ross was already returning fire around the corner.

Debbi looked longingly at the Prowler, only fifty yards away, with its heavy cannon. A fourth figure stepped into view in front of the vehicle. It also aimed a pulse rifle at Debbi and Ross. This time Debbi grabbed her partner and yanked him back. He followed her without question as shots gouged divots out of the adobe wall above their heads. They scrambled around the rear of the cabin.

Ross hunkered down at one corner. He grabbed his com mike and held it close to his mouth, shouting, "I said it looks like we're all alone out here!"

Debbi ran for the far corner of the cabin. The three strangers were walking deliberately toward the Rangers. She lobbed a grenade from her Dragoon at them. They fell back from the explosion, but ripped her position with retreating fire.

Meanwhile, Ross took careful aim and shot the figure standing by the Prowler. Even through the sandstorm, the shell clearly hit the gunman and rocked him. The stranger kept his feet, slipped behind the cover of the Prowler, and returned fire.

Ross ducked amidst the shrapnel and screamed into his com mike, "I guess we're all alone . . . Ah screw it! Stew, get in here! We're getting our asses shot off!"

Debbi heard empty static through her com. She shouted over to Ross, "You think he's reading you?"

More heavy shells tore off the corner of the cabin. "I sure hope so or those Hellstromme robots are gonna slaughter us."

Clay & Susan Griffith

"Do you know how to stop an automaton?"

"Yeah. Use a real big gun. Sorry, Dallas. You're hardly back at work and I get us killed."

"This was my caper. I just hope Stew didn't lose track of us in the storm." Debbi pointed at the figure near the Prowler. "You know, if we drop that guy, at least we'd have the Prowler's cannon."

"Savvy." Ross extended his pulse rifle to Debbi with one hand and pulled his Peacemaker. "Cover me."

"I don't think so, old man."

Ross eyed her. "I've got HE microloads in this thing."

"I've got grenades. Shut up and cover me."

Ross growled and holstered his pistol. He opened up with the Hellrazor on the automaton near the Prowler. Debbi took off in an oblique sprint towards it, while swinging her Dragoon over toward the middle of the settlement. With a quick look, she saw the other three automatons had regrouped and were advancing again. She lobbed two grenades at them. The blasts caught one of them square and blew it off its feet. The other two held their fire, perhaps because their sensors, already pressed to the maximum by the sandstorm, were scrambled temporarily by the explosions.

Debbi ran toward the Prowler, unafraid that one of Ross's well-placed shots would hit her. He was too good for that. Besides, she was making this up on the fly.

As Debbi battled through the sandstorm over a hundred yards of open ground toward a heavily armed automaton, there no longer appeared to be a workable plan. She had hoped to whipsaw the unsuspecting automatons with Stew's Stallion, but it was nowhere to be seen. While the foul weather might serve to debilitate the automatons' sensors, the magnitude of the storm could have driven Stew off course or perhaps even out of the sky. Or maybe Miller had double-crossed them again.

Now it was Debbi and Ross against four Hellstromme automatons. Not good.

Debbi raised her Dragoon and fired at the android as she ran. With the storm and her running, she wasn't striking the target well enough. The automaton drew a bead with its pulse rifle.

Debbi felt a flush race through her body. She thought at first she'd been shot. She kept running and became extraordinarily conscious of each step hitting the ground. She felt her feet touching the surface of the planet one after the other. The automaton suddenly fell to one side and fired into the air as it went down. She wondered if Ross had hit it, but she felt something oddly and deeply satisfying surge through her and knew that she had done it. Somehow.

She was on the back of the prone automaton. The android tried to stand. It was immensely strong, like trying to press an enraged barka against the ground.

Debbi pressed the muzzle of her Dragoon against the automaton's head and pulled the trigger. The backlash of the blast tore the weapon from her hand. Half of its head was missing, but it was still moving.

Dammit! Its power core wasn't in the head. What was she thinking? That's the kind of stupid mistake that gets you killed. Again.

Debbi wrestled with the thrashing machine while searching for her gun that was lost in the sand. The automaton flipped onto its back under her. Its arms flailed, searching for a target without functioning opticals. She ducked several swipes, but then a steel-hard arm slammed against

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

her temple. The goggles flew off her head and she blanked out briefly with a surge of pain and nausea.

Debbi blindly grabbed one of the automaton's wrists with both of her hands. She pushed it to the ground with all her strength. Then she felt cold fingers seize her throat.

This is it, she thought. These things can crush granite in their hands. One good squeeze and I'm dead.

The metal fingers stiffened, but didn't contract around her neck. Debbi felt that the automaton was no longer thrashing. She released the android's wrist and reached up to her throat to pull its hand away. The thing's arm dropped lifelessly to the dirt.

The Ranger opened her eyes, squinting through the blowing sand. The automaton's right arm, shoulder, and much of its ribcage was buried in the ground. Under drifting sand, solid tannis trapped the android's metallic flesh in its crushing embrace. The automaton was "dead," its circuitry smashed by the rock that contained it.

Somehow, Debbi had pushed the automaton half way into solid rock.

Then Debbi felt a presence behind her. Her first thought was Ross so she slowly turned, covering her eyes with her hand. Through the parted fingers she saw a tall figure in nondescript clothing. It aimed a pulse rifle down at her.

Another automaton.

Before she could react, a purple glare filled the air. Sparks flew behind it. The automaton stood still for a long second before the top of its torso dropped off the lower and the legs continued to stand by themselves.

Debbi felt a strong hand on her arm. Fareel stood above her with his glowing atax. Her first added thought was disappointment that he'd been responsible for the automaton sinking into the tannis. After the anouk warrior grinned at the bisected automaton, he saw the one that was locked into rock. With furrowed brow, he looked at Debbi, actually impressed. Then he drew a war ax, powered it, and moved off into the storm, to hunt more of the enemy.

Through the blinding sand, Debbi saw the faint shape of a Stallion pass above her. The cavalry was finally here. Yes, it was satisfying when a plan came together as expected.

Debbi couldn't help but turn her attention to the lifeless android sticking halfway into the ground under her. Even she was impressed.

Chapter 12

The door to the Colonial Ranger office opened and Lithia appeared out of the early morning cold accompanied by a blast of frigid wind. Her long coat, high heeled boots, and fur hat set off a typically stylish wintertime ensemble. However, her face was an uncharacteristic mask of anger. She stared fiercely at Miller who sat at one of the squad room desks. He quickly looked down.

"What happened?" Lithia whispered harshly. "It's been more than a day and I haven't heard—" She grew silent when she heard a shuffling from the interior office. She assumed a typically bland demeanor as Debbi emerged from Ross's private office.

Debbi smiled politely and leaned against the wall near the door to lockup. "Good morning. Can I help you?"

Lithia seemed admirably businesslike, but studied Debbi's face for some sort of information as to the state of the Rangers. She certainly

Clay & Susan Griffith

didn't see grief, which worried her. And Miller wasn't looking very happy. "I am looking for . . . Captain Ross."

"He's not here," Debbi answered. "What can I do for you?"

Lithia's eyes flicked to Miller then back to Debbi. "Who are you, may I ask?"

"Dallas. You're Lithia, the HI liaison, right?"

"Yes." Lithia looked confused. "Dallas? I was told you were dead?"

"I was. Thanks for asking."

Lithia laid her hand on the doorknob behind her. She didn't linger where she wasn't in control. "I'll come back later to see if Captain Ross has returned." She opened the door and turned to leave, but her path was suddenly blocked by a large figure.

Lithia backed up as Ross stepped inside. The tall Ranger locked onto her surprised gaze and held it as he calmly shut the door behind him. Lithia stared up at him with barely concealed shock. The frontier was slowly but surely stripping her of her well-honed emotionless demeanor.

"Lithia," Ross greeted her in a quiet voice as he swept his hat from his head. "Lose something?"

"Captain Ross? I . . . no. I was here to enquire about the paperwork on the reactor."

A bitter smile played over Ross's lips as he methodically stripped off his gloves. He looked over her head. "Miller? You got anything for Lithia?"

"No. It's . . . uh . . . no," Miller stammered into his collarbone.

Ross slowly tilted his gaze back down to Lithia. "Sorry. Got nothing for you. Anything else?"

"No," Lithia replied frostily. "I'm pleased to see you well."

"Couldn't be better." He tossed the gloves into his upturned hat.

"You Colonial Rangers are so admirably healthy. Must be the fresh air."

Ross was already sick of playing word games with Lithia. He wasn't designed for such things. He stepped away from the door without another word, a clear invitation for Lithia to get out.

Debbi pushed herself off the wall, ready to intervene. She could tell that if Lithia attempted any further clever repartee, Ross would probably just toss her in the lockup for conspiracy to murder and for annoying him. He wouldn't pause to think about the firestorm it would create with Hellstromme Industries.

Luckily, Lithia stepped past Ross with no further comment, but Debbi couldn't resist a last quip of her own. "Lithia, be careful out there. I don't see your bodyguards with you today."

Lithia glanced over her shoulder at Debbi with an enigmatic purse of her lips. "Yes, I seemed to have misplaced them. But I can handle myself, thank you. Oh, and welcome back from the grave, Ranger Dallas. The pallor is hardly noticeable from this distance."

Debbi regarded the dark-haired woman grimly as she closed the door quietly and disappeared across the street. She crossed to the front window, muttering to herself, "*The pallor is hardly noticeable from this distance.* She's got nerve. I'd like to kick her pale, bony ass to—"

Ross said, "Don't toy with her, Dallas. We were damn lucky to get out of her trap with our skins."

Debbi dismissed him. "And what were you doing there?" She mimicked Ross, "*Lose something?*"

Ross walked to his office without sparing a word or glance at the frozen Miller. "Call Stew and let's get this thing going if we're going." Dallas watched him slam his door.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

Miller rubbed his face vigorously. "Oh man. Just let me get out of here. I don't like this job anyway."

Debbi said forcefully, "Wait it out, Miller. The fact is you played straight with us when push came to shove. Your intel on the automatons' capabilities was helpful. And you were the one who convinced Lithia to put the real black guns out there."

Miller had been on the verge of a boozy nervous breakdown when he grabbed Debbi before she went out with Ross and confessed that he was in Lithia's pocket. There had been no message from Sharif. Yes, there was a prospectors' settlement and there were a few black guns there, but there would also be a squad of automatons waiting to kill Ross, and any other Colonial Ranger with him.

Ross hadn't seemed surprised. He claimed he hadn't believed Miller's ridiculous story about Sharif and black guns. He was only going along to see where it went. Ross actually laughed that the only one of his Colonial Rangers Lithia could turn was an incompetent like Miller. Ross had wanted to strip Miller's badge and go grab up Lithia.

Debbi had other ideas. This was a good opportunity to get more black guns, which would be needed for the assault on Quantrill. She convinced a wary Ross to call in a few others and hatch a plot. She argued to include Miller in the mix because she sensed that he had hit rock bottom and she could bring him back up right.

Sitting at his desk, staring up at Debbi's stern face, Miller thought about her supportive words. "Well, I just told Lithia that if Ross didn't see the goods, he'd get itchy and bolt before her robots could draw a bead. She bought it hook, line, and sinker." He grinned halfheartedly. "You know, I was kinda planning to trick her the whole time."

Debbi stared straight into him. "Uh uh. You'll do better sticking to the truth. No matter how bad it is."

"I don't know. The truth ain't real good. The truth is I'm a drunk and now Ross and Lithia both want me dead."

Debbi sat on the edge of his desk. "Yeah, you're right. But you've come this far. You might as well go farther. Believe it or not, Ross will come around with time. He doesn't hold mistakes against people, as long as you fix them."

"Easy for you to say. He hates me. He loves you."

Debbi felt a shock at the words. She'd never heard them said so plainly, or at all. She sat perplexed for a long minute until Ross's door opened and he filled the doorway.

Ross snapped, "So? Is Stew on the way?"

"No, I'll get him." Debbi looked at Ross in what must have been a peculiar way because he squinted back at her in confusion.

"What's with you?" he asked. "You feel all right?"

"Yeah." She slipped her com unit off her belt and clicked Stew's frequency. "Stew, Dallas."

"Go ahead."

"Can you get to HQ?"

"On my way."

Debbi hung her com on her belt again, brushed her hands with a flamboyant "job's done" motion, and smiled at Ross. He rolled his eyes and returned to his desk.

She followed him. "How about calling Martool and Fareel?"

Ross swiveled in his chair, pushed up the window, and leaned out into the cold. In the middle of the equipment yard, amidst the Stallions and

Clay & Susan Griffith

Prowlers, was a small campfire. Two anouks huddled around its pale, cold flame. Their breath misted out into the morning air. A massive chanouk rested on the ground behind them, fur coat ruffling in the wind, forming a barrier against the wind.

Ross put two fingers to his lips and gave a shrill whistle. Fareel looked up from the spit where he was cooking something small over the fire. Ross crooked his finger at the anouks and slammed the frosted window shut. He didn't want to know what they were eating out there.

Debbi was studying a freehand drawing Ross had been making of the interior of the Lupinz Sanitarium. The schematic wasn't very complete. He'd been to the Sanitarium on a few occasions other than the time he was captured by Quantrill, to deliver prisoners into the hands of Lupinz. But most of that time was spent in the entry foyer or in the Doctor's private office. Ross felt a chill watching Debbi and thinking of her inside that gray monument to horror.

He said, "Be a good idea if we waited till we have a better idea of the layout."

Debbi continued to study the plan. "We don't have time. And there's no way to get that information unless we put somebody inside."

"Send Miller."

Debbi laughed.

"Oh hell," Ross exclaimed, scrubbing hard at his head with both hands, "maybe Quantrill's really not in there. Nobody else thinks he is. I could be wrong. I was drinking a lot. And there are reports of Legionnaires all over the damn planet."

Debbi crossed her arms. "This is no time to start second guessing yourself. If you think he's in the Sanitarium, I'm betting that he is. But let's wait to hear what Martool has to say about it."

Ross stared at Debbi and bit his lip. He'd never felt such anxiety during the run-up to a mission before. Any sort of operation naturally brought concern over success or failure, but he had never worried much about living or dying. It had always given him an edge, made him just a little harder than the other guy.

Now, however, he was experiencing a peculiar feeling something like fear. All he could think about was the near disaster of recovering the black guns. He and Debbi almost died in a routine mission. If they could barely survive that caper, what chance did they have against Quantrill? They should postpone until Debbi was back in prime and until the Rangers were comfortable with her resurrection.

Yet, fear that they were walking into a slaughterhouse at the asylum wouldn't leave him. Ross needed all his attention for operational matters now, and he tried to force his mind to work as it always had on the nuts and bolts of the coming mission, but worry was paralyzing parts of his willpower. He stared at Debbi studying maps, her skin unmarred by any scar or mark left by the horrible wounds she suffered at her death. It was as if it never happened, but Ross couldn't help but picture that torn and battered body lying on the jagged tannis at Castle Rock. And worse, the unwilling vision kept passing through his mind of it happening again in the stinking stone corridors of the Sanitarium.

Ross had never labored under this burden before. How could he do his job if he suddenly had something to live for?

"I believe General Quantrill is there," Martool said simply.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

Debbi slapped her hands together. "Good enough for me."

Ross's heart sank a little. "Are you sure, Martool? You haven't moved out of that yard in three days. How can you sit there and tell me for sure that Quantrill is in the Lupinz Sanitarium?"

Martool replied, "I cannot. But I can tell you he has been there. Recently. And most likely he is there now. I can sense the decay around the Sanitarium. It is horrible."

"How do you know that?" Ross argued.

Martool's face was a like stone. "I have, as you may recall, native juju." Debbi laughed at the shaman's sarcasm and only earned herself a scathing glare from Ross.

Stew flipped through aerial photographs of the Sanitarium taken during a recent fly-by. "Just to make a suggestion. But why do we have to send people in. Can't we just bomb it? There are no air defenses of any sort. Or, for that matter, why can't Martool demolish it like she did at Castle Rock?"

Debbi blurted out, "There are still patients in there. We're not here to kill innocent people."

The aged anouk shaman added, "My powers were severely weakened by the stress of my actions at Castle Rock. In addition, I had painstakingly cleansed the ground there. The region you are entering is corrupted. The dead rock holds sway. My powers are worthless there."

Debbi held out her hand like a magician. "Well, I'll be there. I mean, I hate to brag, but I did push one of those automatons right into the tannis. That was pretty cool."

Martool looked pointedly at Debbi. "The blind luck you experienced with your powers, though impressive for a foolish novice, will also be worthless."

"What?"

Martool pursed her lips like a long-suffering mother watching her beloved child on the verge of a rash and dangerous decision. "The tannis surrounding the Sanitarium is rotten. It will not respond to you."

"Oh." Debbi dropped her hand. "Shoot."

Ross spoke up eagerly, "Then maybe you ought to stay here. You won't have your weird powers, whatever they are. And frankly, you were a few steps slow against the automatons. I'd rather not risk it."

Debbi cocked her head in defiance. "What the hell do you mean?"

"I just don't fancy starting a game when I know Quantrill's holding the best cards."

"Since when?" Debbi argued. "From what I hear, you'd have gone in alone guns drawn if Sharif hadn't stopped you."

Ross glared at her, red-faced. "That was then. This is now."

"You agreed we needed to get Quantrill. I've already sent Hickok to get Hallow and Sharif. So look, we've got the manpower and the firepower. Let's take it to him before he digs up another army. It's that simple."

Ross slammed his fists on his desk. "You think you can just waltz into Quantrill's house? I've been inside that hellhole! There are powerful sykers inside that asylum, plus God knows what kind of monsters waiting for us! Excuse me for thinking first! I just don't like the odds!"

"They aren't getting any better sitting here doing nothing!" Debbi yelled back. "And I don't want to hear any crap about me being a step slow!"

Stew held up his hands. "Hey hey hey. Calm down. We're all on the same team."

"Yeah, I thought we were too!" Debbi snarled.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Ross cooled, retreating behind the cold eyes of the commander. "Take it down a notch, Dallas. I still make the call on who has what duty." Then a sudden wash of excitement slipped over him. It hadn't occurred to Ross until this minute that he had it in his power to keep Debbi safe. He ran this outfit; he could order her to stay behind and he had valid reasons. She was not up to speed yet. She had been a step slow against the HI automatons. If he hadn't pulled her out of the line of fire, she'd be dead. If she could die.

Debbi looked at Ross with a growing sense of outrage and terror. She knew him well and while to most he seemed virtually emotionless, to her Ross was an open book. The simplest change of expression revealed his thoughts. Her voice was a serrated whisper. "Don't do this."

Ross met Debbi's desperate yet forceful eyes. He knew her. She would never accept being ordered off the mission. For Debbi, this wasn't a simple matter of revenge. This involved a call to duty in her that Ross appreciated, even if he didn't understand its full implications. It didn't matter that by stopping her, he was saving her life; she would never forgive him. And she didn't have to make a show about threatening to quit the Rangers. Ross felt it. Debbi would walk out of this office and never look back. He knew she believed that if Ross didn't trust her to be at his side now, she had no part in the Colonial Rangers.

The worst part was she was right.

Ross knew he could preserve her life with a word and save himself from the crushing guilt if he lost her again. It was the smart and right thing to do. But just as certainly he knew he wouldn't order her to stay behind.

Debbi could read through his hooded eyes and she relaxed. Ross accepted her victory. The final domino had fallen and, for all intents and purposes, this was her outfit now.

For a brief second, he felt a heavy weight lift now that he'd surrendered to her. Ross felt like he was the one who had lost a step.

But then a vision of her mutilated body appeared. Ross felt like a coward.

Chapter 13

Stew, Miller, and Ringo squatted in the cold. Their old thermal vests kept them slightly above freezing. The sun was still two hours from rising. All three Rangers stared through the darkness and kept completely silent. Their ears were attuned to any sound that might penetrate the howling winds.

Beyond the rise where they hid, a sudden ripple of rocks shifting sent them into tense alertness. The sounds may have been the result of careless footfalls of intruders. The Rangers grasped their weapons although shooting was a last resort. They were under communications and weapons silence except for extreme emergencies. Their breathing grew heavy as they waited.

The sound did not reoccur. A false alarm. Simply a loose stone tumbling from its own weight or dislodged by a passing small animal.

Stew had to be sure. He grasped binoculars and slowly crawled to the top of the rise. He inched to the crest and peered over, bracing for a sudden claw or gaping snout surging at him. He saw nothing but rocky ground and scraggly, water-starved scrub. The sandy haired Ranger settled on his elbows with the wind blasting him in the face. He stared

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

through the glasses across two miles of rocky terrain at the Sanitarium. The starlite filter highlighted the eerie mansion in ghostly green.

Green blurs stood around the yard inside the high wire fence. Some were human-sized. Others were larger. Switching to IR, Stew noted that none of the human blurs gave off heat. Legionnaires. They stood motionless in groups of ten to twenty, and he could make out maybe a hundred of them total from this vantage point. On the other hand, the big blobs glowed hot and they were uncountable because they prowled in and out of sight around the asylum without stopping. Cats. Big ones.

The situation at the Sanitarium hadn't changed appreciably since the Rangers had been camped out there watching for three days. Stew and his group had this position two miles south of the mansion. Fitz, Ngoma, and Curtiz were about two miles east. Chennault and Tsukino were two miles west. Debbi's crew roved in uncertain positions. Stew didn't know where they were at any time, but one of them would show every night to receive reports, usually Debbi accompanied by Hallow.

The first night Stew had watched a group of forty Legionnaires march into the gates of the Sanitarium, but that had been the last major reinforcements from outside. The large cat creatures were a constant presence around the house. Debbi and Ross had briefed them all on those monsters that they had encountered along the Red River. They were smart and aggressive, and hard to kill. So what else was new on Banshee?

As Stew continued to spy, two human shapes shambled out the asylum's main gate into the dark badlands. They were inmates from the Sanitarium, now twisted to Lupinz's service, just like the ones Debbi and Ross had encountered during their first trip to the Red River. The figures wandered off and vanished into the landscape. This was the fourth pair to venture out that night, which had been standard operating procedure every night the Rangers had been watching. Stew itched to hit the mysterious night stalkers and eliminate them one by one, but he was under orders to stay put and avoid contact. These night patrols seemed to show that those inside the Sanitarium, whether Quantrill or just Lupinz, were aware that an attack of some kind might come at some time. However, Stew had observed no frantic activity or preparation that demonstrated they knew the Rangers had them surrounded.

And, of course, only a Colonial Ranger would think that a force of less than fifteen could possibly have over one hundred enemy troops *surrounded*.

Stew turned to slide back down the hill and saw two lunatics behind Ringo and Miller. They wore simple dark clothing that blended with the night. Their eyes were wide and devoid of reason, almost devoid of awareness. The abominations were only thirty feet from the two unsuspecting Rangers. Stew waved frantically.

Miller waved back, but Ringo turned and saw the approaching inmates. He tugged on his sidearm, but it stuck in his holster.

The two intruders made ready to pounce. Their bony fingers outstretched; their champing teeth, filed sharp, showed in the darkness.

Stew pulled his Dragoon and fired in one swift motion. The first shell splattered an inmate's chest. The second caught the other in the shoulder and sent him cartwheeling down the slope. Ringo freed his weapon and shot the closest inmate three times as he continued to struggle with unnatural stamina. Stew skidded down the loose shale, leveled his arm, and blasted the lunatic at the bottom of the hill as he started mindlessly to regain his feet. The lunatic's head exploded and he fell still.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Miller jumped to his feet and searched wildly for more targets. There were no more intruders to be seen.

"Well, I guess we got 'em." Miller twirled his heavy Dragoon awkwardly and slid it back in its holster.

"Thanks, Deadeye," Stew muttered. "Dammit. Those shots will give us away."

"Maybe not," Ringo suggested. "We're downwind. I'll bet you couldn't hear those shots at a hundred yards."

Stew hesitated. His boyish good looks were frozen and ashen. "I should alert Debbi and Ross."

Miller said, "That's breaking radio silence."

The fair-haired Ranger glared at Miller. "I know. But if we don't and the enemy tumbles to us, they're all sitting ducks." He kicked the inmate at his feet and the body rolled down the hill.

Miller and Ringo watched Stew. Finally, the former priest cursed lightly to himself and scrambled back up to the ridgeline. Once on the crest, he clicked in the special emergency frequency.

"Base. Stallion One. Come in."

The static broke with Ross's tight voice. "Yeah?"

"We just contacted a night patrol. Shots fired."

"Casualties?"

"No."

He heard Ross conversing with someone else, no doubt Debbi. Then Ross said, "Go."

"Roger that," Stew replied and clicked his stopwatch. He slid down the hill between the waiting Ringo and Miller. His eyes were focused in the distance as he told them, "We're going in."

Ringo and Miller exchanged glances and followed. This was it. There was no more waiting and watching for the best opportunity to strike. It was go now. At the bottom of the slope, Stew stepped over the two inmates and raced several yards along the wadi. He stopped and reached out for what looked to be nothing but air. He yanked a large camo net to reveal the nose of a Stallion. Miller and Ringo joined him in wrestling with the net and soon the battered, old craft was uncovered and glistening in the starlight.

Stew strapped into the pilot's seat as Ringo stepped wordlessly into the passenger's side. Miller climbed into the rear compartment and began to double-check several Hellrazor pulse rifles. Stew primed the cannons while Ringo went through a secondary checklist with a small flashlight clamped in his teeth. When Ringo gave his partner a thumbs up, Stew fired the ship's engines. The cab vibrated hard.

The Stallion rose straight up into the night air. Stew took a moment to stabilize the Hoss against the wind. Within thirty seconds, a Stallion appeared a mile to the east and then another in the west. Although they were running without lights, Stew's trained eye picked them out as their distant, dark shapes moved up across the stars.

Stew checked his watch. Two minutes to go. Ringo slid the targeting headset on and oriented his eye to the lens. From the dash, he took the makeshift trigger cord for the black needle Gatling and kept it in his left hand.

Stew fought to keep the hovering Hoss stable in the wind as the gunship hummed and shivered. It was poised like an attack dog in a cage, waiting for the telltale clank of the gate opening.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

Debbi touched her Dragoon in its holster. Then, for the hundredth time, she ran her hands over the extra black gun, four clips and grenades on her belt. When she reached up to adjust her goggles, the *Deadwood II* took a hard bank and Debbi stumbled against Ross. He was wedged tightly against the bulkhead. The veteran Ranger grabbed her around the waist and smiled briefly. Ross hadn't touched her since she had awakened in his room. The heat of his large hands seeped through her thick jacket, or maybe it was just her imagination. Either way, it sent a tendril of electricity through her. There was so much to say to him, but no time to say it. Life was like that on *Banshee*. Ross set her back on her feet and returned to checking his six-shooter. He holstered the pistol, looked at his watch, cradled the shotgun, and waited.

Debbi checked her own watch. Thirty seconds until Stew and the Stallions opened up on the front. Ninety seconds until Hickok set them down inside the Sanitarium grounds near the rear door. If all went well, within two minutes, she would be inside the Sanitarium facing . . . she didn't know what.

Debbi was carrying a fully loaded Dragoon and had a second strapped to her back. This was exactly the sort of operation these weapons were built for, heavy firepower in tight quarters. A Hellrazor pulse rifle was out of the question inside the cramped corridors of the asylum. Ross had his trusty pistol and sawed off shotgun.

Her "irregulars" who were gathered in the *Deadwood* were more peculiarly armed. Hallow sat next to the pilot Hickok to protect her from possible syker attack. He carried no weapons. He was clad in his desert robes, but had abandoned the turban which usually covered his bald head, the sign of a syker. For this mission he didn't want to hide his true self; he wanted to revel in it. Hallow stared unseeing straight ahead, rolling expertly with the ship's motion. It was as if it was ten years ago and he was back on an EXFOR dropship, moving in to attack an unwary enemy.

In the ship's main compartment, Sharif clutched onto the crash couch. He was not at home in a swerving ship. He carried a small autopistol in his belt and his powerful scimitar was sheathed at his waist. His eyes were closed and his lips moved. The Tuareg was praying.

The anouk warrior Fareel was praying too, but he was wide-eyed and rigid with terror as he muttered a feverish plea to his gods. It wasn't the prospect of coming battle that frightened him, but rather the slipping, turbulent flight. This transport was unnatural and horrifying for the anouk. He had wanted to storm the gate on chanoukback and face his enemies head on, like a true warrior, but Debbi needed his hand-to-hand power inside the asylum. But for now, the fearsome Fareel rolled his head and gnashed his jagged teeth with every shudder of the ship.

Hickok was strapped in the pilot's seat. She ignored the irony of Debbi recruiting her back into her old livelihood of flying a swift vehicle into a battle zone and disgorging soldiers. If she was distressed by it, she locked the emotion behind a cold mask of efficiency as she drove the ship through the weather to the target area. Her job was to drop her passengers and dust off immediately, although she desperately wanted to go with them. However, the *Deadwood* had been fitted with a couple of heavy cannons and Hickok was best used standing off nearby and waiting to either reinforce Stew and the Stallions or move into close air support if something went badly wrong.

The fact was, Debbi knew, that if something went badly wrong, there

Clay & Susan Griffith

likely wouldn't be anyone coming out of the Sanitarium for Hickok to support. This was an all or nothing mission. If Quantrill was inside, either he would die or Debbi's team would die.

Debbi heard Hickok's voice in her ear. "I see fire from the front. The attack has started."

Debbi felt a thrill as she pictured Stew's cold blue eyes guiding the trio of Stallion gunships at the Sanitarium, leading the attack out of the dark with no lights. Rocket salvos will blast holes in the Legionary squads to disorient them as the three Stallions roar in toward the fence perimeter. The second wave will knock out the lights on the fence and the house. The Hosses will then open up on the men and creatures in the yard with Gatling guns and the special heavy black needle shooters they rigged in Temptation. Hellrazor muzzles will extend from the Hoss' rear windows and pepper the ground below. The attack will draw the attention of all the Legionnaires and inmates and cat creatures to the front of the Sanitarium and soon the area will be a melee of destruction and distraction.

When the sudden attack started, the *Deadwood* pivoted and accelerated into the final approach. Fareel shouted in surprise, gripping a metal wall bracket so tightly it bent. Debbi flexed her knees for balance as the engines whined up and the speeding ship tilted nose down. She turned toward the outer hatch, tightening her grip on her Dragoon. Ross kept his spot lodged against the wall with his eyes closed as if asleep. Sharif concluded his prayers and pulled his weapons. Hallow laughed without humor.

Debbi didn't sense deceleration until the ship slammed down. Hickok was out of practice. The Ranger's hand hit the release and the hatch fell open. Two steps out into the cold and she leapt from the ramp to the ground. Dust rose around her head where it was seized by the wind and wafted away. She scanned one direction, clicking her goggles to starlite filter, her Dragoon up and ready. She heard Ross land on the opposite side of the ramp.

"Clear," Debbi said.

"Clear," Ross replied.

They both started running toward the rear of the towering Sanitarium. The sounds of feet ringing on the ramp followed them. The only sign of the ship lifting off was a massive blast of hot air on their backs.

The asylum's imposing Victorian bulk hid the Stallion attack from view, but the metallic clatter of the Gatling guns was audible over the wind. Debbi sensed the almost electric edge of syker activity in the air. The Legionnaires were awake and fighting back against Stew's team.

Debbi pushed that concern from her mind as she and Ross ran into the lee of the sprawling mansion. Thirty yards away, Debbi stopped, aimed, and fired a grenade at the nearest door. It blew off its hinges. The Rangers took the six steps to the small masonry porch in two strides. Ross fired his scattergun into the smoke-filled doorway and followed in low. A small, furry shape screeched and scampered out of his way. The two Rangers penetrated the private wing of the Sanitarium followed closely by Hallow and Sharif, with Fareel following and covering their rear.

Without warning, the far end of the corridor filled with running figures. Inmates. They rushed headlong at the Rangers with savage abandon, arms swathed in the long white sleeves of straightjackets

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

flailing as they ran. They were silent except for the sound of their pounding feet and the clink of metal buckles on the wood-finished walls. There must have been fifteen of them jamming the long hallway like ants crawling to the surface. They surged forward, thrashing and writhing. Fifty feet away. Thirty feet away.

Debbi raised a Dragoon and Ross his shotgun. They opened fire. The barrage ripped through the approaching mob. Red stains spread on white canvas and bodies dropped. Inmates in the rear fought past their wounded fellows and kept charging with hands flying and mouths frothing. Not one of them showed any fear because Lupinz had scooped out their consciousness and replaced it with simple attack codes. They would keep attacking until they were called off or killed.

So they all died.

Debbi and Ross stood their ground, shoulder to shoulder, and the corridor filled with smoke and blood. The last inmate fell with his fingertips mere inches from Debbi's boot. The Ranger slapped a fresh magazine into her weapon and slowly started up the hallway. "Protect yourselves. Treat any inmate who's loose as a hostile."

Sharif asked, "But what about the innocent?"

Ross responded coldly, "Nobody's innocent in here."

Fareel spit on the ground. "*Richos!*" He hefted a war ax in one hand and his glowing atax in the other. Suddenly the anouk warrior jerked and tilted his head as if listening to a distant noise. He spun around and snarled.

Two of the large feline monsters appeared out of the night through the blasted doorway. They crouched low, growling and staring into the dimly lit and crowded corridor. Debbi raised her Dragoon, trying to push the muzzle past Hallow and Sharif who filled the hall behind her.

"Get down!" she shouted.

Fareel refused to move his seven-foot frame. He shouted with warlike fury and awkwardly threw his atax at the prowling creatures. The cramped quarters hampered the toss, but still the twirling violet star sliced through one of the feline's shoulders. It shrieked with pain, but instead of fleeing, it attacked. Both of the giant cats charged the doorway. The anouk glanced quickly over his shoulder at the humans and grinned. Then he charged the monsters with a lung-scarring scream.

The horrific cats struggled against each other to be the first inside the corridor just as the anouk slammed into them. Fareel bent back under the weight of the monsters' power. The muscles in his incredibly powerful back and shoulders knotted like cords on a sailing ship under full sail. He planted his feet under him and pressed slowly forward. The great clawed feet of the cats slapped Fareel's shoulders and dug into his midsection. Snapping fanged jaws crunched down around one of his forearms. Blood streamed down his side and back. Still, the anouk pushed against the powerful creatures, forcing them back inch by inch and blocking the doorway.

Debbi had to make use of the time Fareel was giving them. "Come on! Let's get to Lupinz's office!"

Ross moved to her side immediately. Hallow came after, his eyes half closed, trying unsuccessfully to pick up any syker activity in the area. Sharif looked at the straining Fareel with concern, but then turned and followed his colleagues.

Debbi's cadre turned onto a dank, stinking corridor lined with cells. Most were already thrown open and empty. A few were closed and quick

Clay & Susan Griffith

glances through the barred windows revealed pathetic figures drawn up into fetal positions on the floor or crouched in the corner. A few patients met inquiring gazes with open eyes and pleas for help. But there was no time for them now.

Another grenade and the team was through a heavy metal door, out of the sinister patients' quarters, and into a once grand foyer. In its day, this entryway would have been magnificent. But now the marble floor was stained and chipped, and the walls were streaked with mildew. The great echoing space rounded with the sounds of heavy weapons fire from outside. Through the edges of the heavily draped windows, bright light flashed coinciding with explosions that made the decaying palace quiver.

Debbi cautiously led her group across the open space of the foyer. She covered forward and high with her Dragoon while the others studied the shadowy corners and doorways that surrounded the vast circular space. They padded across the marble floor under the spindly sweep of a half destroyed crystal chandelier.

Debbi heard a small splattering sound and a spot of liquid appeared on her gloved hand. Then another. Several viscous drops spattered onto the floor at her feet. Her first thought was that she'd been wounded by one of the inmates. Then she heard a faint tinkling noise from above.

Debbi looked up.

A strange spidery shape lurked in the viney shadows of the shattered chandelier. It shifted and the vast light fixture shuddered and tinkled. Debbi saw two eyes open in the mass as it suddenly dropped toward her.

"Get back!" she shouted as she backpedaled.

Debbi rolled away and came up on her feet just as the thing hit the hard marble with a wet thud. It cried out, but immediately rose on its arms and legs. Clearly, it had once been a woman and it wore the tattered remnants of a hospital gown. Now it was a black, necrotic thing. Its wiry frame was covered with boils and sores that oozed a yellowish fluid that dripped freely onto the floor all around it. It shifted its gaze around at the humans and its stringy, matted hair flew wildly about its head. It smiled with a hiss.

Debbi heard a wet slapping sound and a similar figure emerged from a dark doorway on the far side of the foyer. It was male and its padding bare feet were soaked in slime from its own sores. Another of the fetid things appeared at the top of the staircase and began to hop down toad-like.

Debbi's team instinctively gathered back to back in the center of the foyer.

Hallow said, "Don't let them touch you!"

Ross raised his scattergun at the female thing crouching on the floor.

Hallow grabbed his arm. "No! You'll blow God knows what kind of infection everywhere."

"How do you know?" Debbi asked the syker as she fingered a phosphor grenade on her belt.

"I sense it in their minds. Lupinz told them what he was doing to them while he did it."

The three putrid things herded Debbi and the team away from the staircase. The dripping inmates stayed too far apart from each other to burn them all with one phosphor grenade. And even so, a phosphor would set the house on fire. Before Debbi could act, the mutated things gave out gurgling screeches and charged.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

Sharif moved in a black blur. His sword appeared in a flash of silver. It whistled and one inmate's head came loose. Sharif spun, the scimitar arced, and a second suppurating head somersaulted across the foyer. The third diseased thing grabbed Sharif by the black-draped arm. With a loud stomping of his foot, the Tuareg drew his sword flat along his midsection and then lunged two-handed, driving the blade into the thing's body, pushing the toad off the floor. Sharif then yelled with triumph and drew the sword up. The blade sliced out of the inmate's shoulder and a long stream of liquid followed steel up through the air. The sword master studied the geyser of ooze with steady eyes as he danced quickly away and it splattered to the bare floor.

Debbi immediately started up the main staircase. Ross nodded at Sharif whose eyes were smiling with warrior pride.

"Quite a show," Hallow said morosely. "I hope you didn't breath in something nasty."

Sharif touched the fabric draped over his face. "This is a microweave air purifier. How do you think I survived so many years of breathing sand? I'd worry about yourself, my friend."

The group stormed up the staircase. Dr. Lupinz's office door was in sight. Debbi auto fired the Dragoon and splintered the wooden door. Ross slammed his shoulder against the jamb and pounded the butt of his shotgun against the remnants of the door to clear the way for Debbi to surge past. She leveled her firearm through the haze at a thin bald man who sat behind a heavy mahogany desk with a serene smile on his cadaverous face.

A shotgun roared next to her head.

"Ross, wait for Hall—" Debbi shouted even as a faint green sheen rippled in front of Dr. Lupinz. A force screen.

The calm old man lifted his right hand and the side of the doorway where Ross stood exploded. Debbi ducked and felt shrapnel tearing into her. Ross was gone, vanished in a mound of wreckage and wall of dust.

Hallow appeared through the haze, focused on the old man.

The doctor shifted his gaze from Debbi to Hallow. He tilted his head with amusement.

"Oh God." Hallow staggered in pain.

Debbi opened up with the black gun, but she saw small sparks of green as the needles struck the force shield in front of Lupinz. At the same time, Sharif leapt through the door, bounded across the floor, and swung his scimitar at the wizened doctor. The old man didn't take his eyes from Hallow, but his right hand flicked. Sharif screamed and spun around. His black robes were shredded. Blood flew.

The Tuareg fell to his knees, but immediately struggled up with a bubbling growl of rage. Another wave of the Doctor's fingers and Sharif doubled over accompanied by the sound of snapping bones. The swordsman dropped to the floor and writhed in silent agony.

Hallow's legs buckled and he almost collapsed. He opened his mouth, gaping like a fish. The syker quivered as if in a seizure.

Debbi switched to HE loads and opened up on Lupinz. The powerful shells smashed against his force shield, causing him to divert his attention if only slightly to her. She felt the telltale psychic fingers grip her mind, trying to wrench her consciousness. This was a stronger probe than she'd ever experienced. Debbi winced from the pressure and stumbled. Lupinz actually looked as if he was straining to attack her.

Hallow glowed light green and a bolt of energy flared from him and

Clay & Susan Griffith

sliced through the room. It struck the old man and knocked him to the floor. He sprang back up with incredible speed and glared at the rival syker with savage spikes of energy boiling out of his eyes. Hallow groaned and went rigid as if he was made of iron. His hands clenched into fists, shoulders hunched. Both sykers glowed, locked together.

A brilliant flash of psychic energy exploded between the two. Hallow screamed and collapsed. The doctor staggered back against the wall, clearly shaken.

Ross roared into the room, trailing a cloud of plaster dust. With his Peacemaker in hand, he flew across the mahogany desk and planted his boots against Dr. Lupinz's chest like a battering ram. The stunned old syker grunted and collapsed under the veteran Ranger's weight.

Ross squeezed the trigger of his pistol with frightening speed, filling the room with blue smoke and the sound of .45 caliber explosions. Over the roar of his repeater, Ross screamed, "Read my mind now, you son of a bitch!"

When the echo of gunfire faded, Dr. Lupinz lay still. Only he was no longer Dr. Lupinz.

Ross stood in surprise. Lupinz was now a taller, younger man, still with the typical syker bald head, but now wearing long robes over an old Legion uniform. The Ranger suspected some sort of mind trick so he pressed the hard edge of his boot against the man's throat. Even a syker had to breathe. There was no response.

Without turning his eyes from the bleeding syker, Ross shouted, "Dallas! You okay?"

Debbi felt as if she was trying to wake from a deep sleep. She waved that she was fine. "Is Lupinz dead?"

Ross said, "Well, somebody sure is, but it ain't Lupinz. Check Hallow. I've got Sharif."

Debbi holstered her weapon and scuttled over to Hallow. He was breathing heavily, drenched in sweat, his face covered in blood. She opened her medkit and popped him with painkillers.

Hallow whispered, "Avernus. Fallen."

"Just relax. You'll be okay."

Ross swore as he swiftly administered first-aid to Sharif's torn and motionless form. The grim Ranger looked at Debbi ashen faced. "He's a wreck. I don't think he's gonna make it."

Debbi appraised Hallow's condition. The syker was battered but aware. In fact, he tried to get to his feet. She pressed him back down.

Ross said to Debbi, "Call in Hickok. Let's evac him back to Temptation. Martool is there. Maybe she can save him."

Hallow argued, "You need me for Quantrell."

Debbi clicked onto Hickok's frequency as she told Hallow, "If you can walk then we need you to take Sharif back. Meet Hickok at the back door."

"No," Hallow muttered. "You need me."

Ross growled, "Do what she says."

Debbi injected the syker with another painkiller and a hypersteroid to bolster his stamina. Then she helped him to his feet. Ross lifted Sharif from the floor and placed the badly wounded caravaner across Hallow's shoulders.

"You got him?" Ross asked tersely.

"Don't worry, Captain. I'll get him out."

Debbi nodded to Hallow. "Be careful. See if you can find Fareel."

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

The syker retorted, "Wait for me. I'll come back."

Debbi wiped blood from Hallow's eyes. "No. When those stims wear off, you'll be out. Go."

Hallow looked from her to Ross, anger masking concern. "I feel Quantrill somewhere below. Under the house. And I sense a lot of psychic activity. Good luck." Then the syker hefted Sharif on his back and left the office.

Debbi said to Ross, "You're wounded. Your leg."

Ross glanced at the tear in his pants and a bloodstain on his right thigh. He paid it no more attention as he watched until Sharif and Hallow were out of sight. The veteran Ranger took a long breath as he reloaded his pistol. Debbi took a quick look at the unfamiliar body behind the desk.

Ross lifted his scattergun from the wreckage in the hall. "Ready?"

Debbi moved out of the office, slapping him on the shoulder as she passed. "Let's go get our man."

Chapter 14

The Stallion shuddered as the cannons roared. Ringo swept the chain guns in a path across the yard, ripping through the scattering inmates and cats. The only sign of the three Stallions above was the sparking of the guns as the crafts slipped through the air. The ground below was in near complete darkness. Small fires burned where rockets had torn into the fence and the searchlight towers.

The small Legion squads stood firm. There were four of them, each with around 20 troopers. An opening salvo of rockets had disrupted them, blowing a few sykers into unusable pieces, but the squares had reformed and begun to take on their sinister green glow. They were powering up. The Legionnaires had been the first priority targets, but they were still viable and Stew was worried.

He said into his mike, "Ranger Two, Ranger One. I'm moving in."

Chennault's voice replied, "Roger that, One."

Stew clicked to Miller who waited in the rear of the Hoss. "Miller, strap in. We're going hot." The pilot didn't have to tell Ringo to grab the trigger for the needle Gatling as the Hoss accelerated and banked up. The kid waited, outwardly calm. He knew Stew would gain some altitude and dive on the enemy. The former priest liked the speed and high profile because it gave the enemy the least attack angle. Ringo rubbed his thumb over the makeshift trigger assembly. They hadn't been able to assess these cobbled Gatlings in Temptation more than just to insure the mechanisms operated. They didn't have enough black needles to waste on testing.

Stew stuck the Hoss over hard. Then he grunted with surprise and pulled it again. A green flash filled the windshield. The Stallion rolled 360 degrees, a maneuver it wasn't built for. Ringo shouted with alarm. Had they been hit? Ringo grasped his seat in terror.

If they had been hit Stew's serene face didn't show it. He looked as if he was sitting in *Mo's* enjoying a beer rather than pushing an old Hoss beyond its capabilities over a battlefield. He tightened his lips and adjusted the stick. The ship righted with a gut-punching lurch and the distant ground appeared in the front view. The engines roared and the ground grew closer at an alarming rate.

Ringo saw a greenish Legion squad below them. He swallowed his panic and refocused on the targeting sights. The plain mathematics of the

Clay & Susan Griffith

readout calmed him. He could pretend he was no longer in a rattling gunship screaming toward the ground at insane speed. Now he was just waiting for the right coordinates to appear. And they did.

The kid hit the button and he heard the unsatisfying clicks of the nose-mounted needle Gatling gun. He waited four very long seconds for saturation, then followed up with the more visceral thumping of the autocannons. Behind the numbers in his eyesight, Ringo saw Legionnaires lock up helplessly and then get obliterated. He laughed.

Only when the view wooshed away from the sykers did he realize that Stew had dropped the Stallion close enough to burn the Legionnaires' heads with the backwash. Then suddenly the ground floor of the Sanitarium loomed up black before them.

"Stew!" Ringo shouted.

"Mm hmm." Stew's response was a slight tightening of his facial muscles as he pulled back on the stick.

The top of a Victorian turret swept past Ringo's window. He could count the shingles blown off in their wake. Then the stars filled his eyes as Stew climbed again.

The former priest turned and smiled. "Nice shooting, Ringo."

The kid swallowed without looking at him. "Thanks."

Stew yanked the Hoss around for another charge. He checked over his shoulder and muttered with alarm, "No, no, no." He clicked his com. "Ranger Two, break off!"

Ringo twisted in his seat to look. Far below them, he saw Chennault's Stallion roaring in low, cannons blasting the remnants of the square they'd just smashed. It seemed to Ringo that she was making good headway. But then he saw what caused Stew's concern. Another square, hidden from Chennault's view, was powered up.

It fired an energy lance.

Stew shouted, "Chennault, get out of—"

The blast caught her Stallion directly across the cabin. The front of the Hoss vanished in a wave of green that backlit the shrapnel bits tumbling through the air. The headless gunship continued on its level flight, sparking and smoking, for fifty more yards. Then it tilted and rolled sickly. The machine crashed into the ground and tumbled, breaking into large, crumpled pieces.

Ringo stared in amazement. Chennault and Tsukino had been in that ship.

Stew was already diving on the Legion square that hit them. "Ranger Three, cover me."

Ngoma's young voice came back, trying to hide its cracking uncertainty, "Roger that, One."

Stew calculated the maneuvers it would take to destroy the remaining Legionary squads. Then he would set down, along with Ngoma's crew, and switch to clean up with small arms. It would be more difficult without Chennault's Stallion, but it would still get done. Every Legionnaire had to die.

Ringo looked at Stew. Only the cold, blue eyes flicking between the windscreen and the controls betrayed any emotion in the pilot. Then those eyes darted toward the co-pilot, taking in the lost face of the young man.

"Ringo," Stew said calmly over the ear-numbing whine of the engines, "mind your guns."

"Yes, sir." Ringo turned back to his work, but his fingers felt numb on

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

the triggers.

The gunship roared down on the enemy.

Debbi and Ross's boots echoed as they descended the grand staircase and trod past the diseased cadavers lying in the foyer. Ross paused to get his bearings.

"I know where Quantrill must be," he said. "When I was here, he kept his Legionnaires stacked up in the basement. Runs under about half the house. This wing." He pointed toward a draped doorway off the foyer.

Debbi started off. "How do you get down?"

"I always went through the kitchen."

Debbi tentatively pushed through the drapery, studying the corridor beyond. Flickering candles in sconces spaced every twenty feet lighted the long hallway. There were several doors, but no cells. The striped wallpaper was peeling, and the paint cracked and puckered on the carved ceiling ten feet over their heads.

"Come on," she said. "We don't have time for door to door."

Ross agreed although he knew it was bad tactics to leave the rooms unchecked. They could be full of deranged inmates ready to pour out and cut off their line of retreat.

The two Rangers started down the hallway at a trot. Their ears were tuned for any peculiar sounds besides the continuing rumble of battle outside. Debbi desperately wanted to know how bad things were out there, but couldn't spare it more than the fleetest thought. At the far end of the corridor, Debbi took one side of a massive double door and Ross the other. They threw the doors open, guns out.

They found themselves facing into a formal dining room. This chamber, like the entire house, would have been magnificent once. Now it was a charnel house. The stench was horrible. The drone of swarming flies almost drowned out the distant chatter of gunfire. Skeletal remains were scattered around the room. The long banquet table was littered with bones, some still covered with bits of flesh, and crawling with insects. The bones were clearly human.

"Quantrill's dining room," Ross said. "His table manners haven't improved. There's a door."

Debbi and Ross walked alongside the table, swatting bugs that swarmed from the remains to them. Debbi placed her hand on another door stained with dark handprints. She pushed and, as the door swung in, the barrel of her Dragoon swept across the large stone kitchen.

This room was empty too. Several human bodies, both male and female, were spread out on a heavy wooden table. They had been partially butchered. Arms and legs lay to one side. Chest cavities split open like chickens for broiling. Organs piled neatly in a rust-colored slurry.

Ross muttered, "We should've just blown this place all to hell like Stew said."

Debbi backed across the room with a deep breath. She couldn't take her eyes off the slaughtered remnants of the men and women on the table. Perhaps they had been inmates, or they could've been settlers taken by force and brought here to be butchered. Either way, the result was the same. Now they were just so much rotting meat.

It was the Bone Camp all over again. With a shudder, Debbi realized this was what Quantrill had intended for Temptation and for Castle Rock.

Clay & Susan Griffith

Perhaps this was what he intended for all of Banshee.

Debbi stared at the waxy flesh of the butchered bodies and realized that she had been just as they were now. Their bodies were cold and lifeless. They were torn and abused. She had been too when she was lying in her casket in the ground.

So had Quantrill been in his grave as well.

Ross paused at a dark wooden door beyond an iron stove, with his hand on the doorknob. He looked back at his frozen partner. "What is it?"

Debbi's breathing became more rapid and she felt clammy. She tried to keep her face calm. She didn't want Ross to know she felt weak and afraid. No, it was more than fear. Everyone going into battle was afraid, but she was experiencing a terror that sapped her intuition and instinct.

Debbi blurted out, "We shouldn't be here."

Ross cocked a sarcastic eyebrow. "No kidding. But it's a little late for that now."

Debbi wiped sweat from her forehead. "This was a mistake. What can we do, the two of us?"

Ross snapped, "Geezus, Dallas! Don't let him get inside your head before you even see him."

Debbi swallowed her fear and frustration. It took intense effort, but she walked to the door without shaking. She felt perspiration dripping down her chin. She hoped her voice sounded of battlefield bluster, but it came out quavering. "You want to cut me some slack? The guy did kill me."

Ross didn't show any sympathy, just anger. "I know that. But you *wanted* to come get him. Now run this damn thing or people who are counting on you are going to die."

Debbi flushed with anger that quickly turned to shame. Her terror diminished slightly in the face of it. She searched Ross's typically snide squint for strength, but instead his eyes showed an unusual concern that she barely detected through her nervous energy. He was afraid too. For her. His way to deal with it was to push her.

Debbi gave him her best glare and retorted with equal vigor, "Open the damn door and just follow my lead." Her ragged impatience was real, but her sudden nerve still reeked of unconvincing bravado.

Ross worked his jaw for a second. He pressed his finger into her breastbone. "Can you feel your heart beating?"

Debbi eyed him nervously. "Yeah."

"Quantrill can't."

Debbi did feel her heart pounding beneath his fingertip. She focused on the sensation and found it comforting like the thump of the surf or the trembling of distant thunder. Or the drumming of the wind against her ears in the Banshee desert. The Ranger regained control over her breathing and feeling seeped back into her limbs. It was surprising, even touching, to see Ross try his first attempt at motivation that didn't include the phrase "or I'll kick your ass."

She took a deep breath. "Okay."

"All right. Now, don't get me killed down here." He reached for the doorknob. "Cause I don't think the planet'll spit me back up."

"Yeah." Debbi replied seriously. "The planet doesn't really like you."

Ross actually smiled. His eyes crinkled in the shadow of his hat brim. "Well then, darlin', maybe I'll see you on the other side. Say when."

She raised her Dragoon. "When."

On the other side of the door was a stone staircase that ran down beside a glistening, moss-covered wall into pitch darkness. Ross knew it

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

led to a large chamber that had been designed as a storage cellar for food and household items. When he was there, however, it had served as a holding pen for Legionnaire corpses awaiting revivification. They had been stacked like cordwood on the dank stone floor.

Debbi led the way down the crumbling, debris-strewn stairs. Her breath misted in the dark air. Even through the starlite goggles, she could see very little because there wasn't much ambient light to enhance. She could, however, see the frozen glare on Ross's face and hear the sharp breath hissing from his nostrils. No doubt, this descent was bringing back horrifying memories for him. She didn't know much about how Ross had suffered at the hands of Lupinz and Quantrill, and hoped he remembered little of it himself. The fact that Lupinz turned out to be someone else must've robbed Ross of some of the relief he wanted by destroying him. However, what she was slowly beginning to comprehend was that when Debbi had died, Ross forgot about his own tortures. He had long since lost interest in exacting vengeance for his sake. This was all about her and Quantrill.

The two Rangers went down the steps as stealthily as possible given the clanking hardware on their belts and the grit crunching loudly beneath their boots. They knew it was overly hopeful to think Quantrill wasn't aware they were coming. Debbi assumed the General was in some sort of psychic contact with his troops outside and perhaps with Lupinz, or whoever he really was, and knew the battle was on. She couldn't understand why he was lurking down in the cellar when there was fighting to be done. Quantrill was an inhuman creature, but he wasn't a coward. And he wasn't stupid.

As they reached the bottom, Debbi and Ross studied the silent expanse of the dark chamber. It was strangely crowded and, at first, Debbi thought the room was full of Legionnaires standing in stiff order. But she was wrong. The chamber had been fitted with rows of hooks along the ceiling and dead bodies hung from them. She could make out close to one hundred of them, naked and desiccated. Through the cold air she smelled the acrid scent of smoke. This was a storehouse full of smoked meat for the Legion.

Debbi noted that she was not physically repulsed by the sight, and that made her even more furious at Quantrill. The fact that she could become inured to this sort of horrific madness disturbed her. Ross pointed past her shoulder. She focused on a distant corner of the room where she barely made out a large mound of some sort. The ceiling was almost twelve feet high and the mound reached to it. Then, through the forest of hanging cadavers, she saw three more mounds around the chamber. More food?

Only when Debbi's foot lightly touched the surface of the floor and she could peer under the rows of dangling feet could she clearly discern the nearest mound.

It was a pyramid of bodies. Just as Ross had described. She recognized the tattered remnants of Syker Legion uniforms on the cadavers.

Not food. New recruits.

The Rangers crouched at the foot of the stairs, waiting, clutching their weapons and watching the blackness intently for any sort of movement.

Ross tapped Debbi's arm and pointed off to the right. Although the other side of the room was invisible in the darkness, he knew the door out was that way. They stood and began to weave through the suspended cadavers. When they walked past the first pile of syker corpses,

Clay & Susan Griffith

Debbi stared closely but saw no sign of animation.

Their night vision started to improve, revealing the gray shapes of five piles of dead Legionnaires laid out in the four corners and the center of the chamber. Several stone pillars helped obscure the view, but Debbi saw a heavy wooden door beyond one mound.

And then, with a shock, she saw General Quantrill.

Chapter 15

The dead General casually stepped out from behind a mound of his dead soldiers. He had his hands clasped behind his back and a stern glare on his rotting face. His ever-present adjutant lurked dutifully just behind him.

Debbi and Ross swung their guns on him and a shower of black needles hissed into the air. Tiny green phosphorescences sparked in front of the syker. A force shield.

Quantrill said, "Those toys are worthless now. It was a short-lived advantage."

The sound of his gravely voice sent a rush of horror through Debbi. It had been a long time since she'd heard it, a lifetime ago. It was different somehow, weaker, strained, but she couldn't tell if it was him or her.

"Tell that to Lupin," Ross retorted.

Quantrill smiled with his twisted lips. "Yes. A pity about him. But then, we all know death hardly means the end of a promising career here on Banshee." He nodded at Debbi as if they had an unspoken bond. The fraternity of the grave.

Debbi could barely keep from spitting at him out of disgust.

The General continued, "I'm not a monster, so I'll give you both a chance to surrender."

Ross snorted derisively. "Thanks, but don't print the menus yet."

Debbi aimed her Dragoon straight at Quantrill. "General, I don't think you can't keep it up for long. We know how your Legion works." She fired several shells and the force screen absorbed their impact. "I'm betting that if I keep pushing, you'll fold like a cheap, dead suit."

"Fire every bullet you have." Quantrill stared closely at her. "I guarantee I've got the power to drive you down to the core of this planet you love so much. You see, I've given up my Legionnaires above. Most of them were gone anyway. But there is *this*."

From behind the two Rangers came the sound of something sliding. Ross glanced back. In one of the mounds of the dead a scabrous arm moved. And a leg. Then more rustling, creaking noises signaled a second cadaver pile coming to unlife somewhere beyond the curtains of hanging corpses.

The Legionnaires unfolded themselves, pushing free of the mounds of tangled limbs, and slipping to the ground. Like soldiers climbing out of their bunks after reveille, they were groggy and unfocused. Yet even before they could struggle to their feet, they lifted their heads to look at the two Rangers. Many had eyes in their decaying faces, but those with empty sockets stared too.

"Son of a bitch." Ross shook his head. "I am so tired of this zombie crap."

Debbi studied Quantrill. The General had not made a move, physically. If Hallow was right and the Legion was a network with Quantrill as its head, then he alone had to be coordinating these reanimating troopers.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

She would risk that the task was too intensive for him to do much more at the same time.

Debbi pulled the second Dragoon off her back and turned on the nearest mass of squirming undead. She peppered them with black needles from two guns. Ross did the same. The sykers went predictably rigid. However, there were so many of them, their sheer numbers and close proximity to one another, arms enfolding arms, legs tangled with legs, prevented the Rangers from hitting them all. Plus, the effect of the needles was temporary thanks to the very networking that was keeping Quantrill occupied. Without destroying their brains, the Legionnaires would recover and keep coming.

Ross waded into a group of the semiconscious soldiers struggling to stand. He fired down with his shotgun, pumping shell after shell into the squirming mass. Bony fingers reached up and clutched at his legs. He kicked them off and kept shooting.

None of the new Legionnaires were using any syker powers yet, probably because they were so new to this fresh life after death. Soon, no doubt, they would all regain their abilities and overwhelm the Ranger duo.

Surely there was some way to defeat Quantrill, Debbi thought. When she had touched the tannis, when she pushed the automaton into the rock, she sensed power just beyond her fingertips. She'd seen Martool wield it at Castle Rock; Martool had destroyed the bulk of the Legion with just her mind. It cost her, but Debbi was willing to pay a similar price. She would pay any price.

As if a switch had been pulled, Debbi's mind reached out in a way she couldn't control. She sensed the planet waiting for her to call on it. It was a quivering mass, a storehouse of power that demanded direction. But something was blocking it. A dark, oozing presence. A viscous morass of corruption that seemed frustratingly weaker than the sharp, solid power of the planet, but thrived by being elusive and uncatchable.

Like an animal placing a tentative paw into a tar pit, Debbi had to push a little deeper, stretching for an important meal that was just out of reach. It was still safe. She could always pull free of the sticky blackness. And the reward would be worth it.

As she plunged deeper into the darkness, she began to feel nauseated and her awareness clouded. Soon, though, she would break through. She had to; it was the only way to defeat Quantrill. His power was too great to confront face to face. Martool was right after all; mere physical force wasn't a solution. But Debbi had the ability to bring enough force to bear, to smash the enemy once and for all. She just had to fight through the dark.

Debbi heard a voice shouting through the darkness. She couldn't tell who it was, but they needed help. She knew she had to go to them.

The darkness clutched tenaciously at her. With a jolt of terror, she realized the tar pit had her trapped. The harder she pulled, the more she was pulled in. It was a cold, devouring presence. A lonely, hateful thing. Debbi struggled on.

Debbi heard shouting again. It was Ross. And he needed her.

She spun around in time to see a dead syker grasping Ross around the throat from the back. Debbi popped it with a black needle. Ross pulled away, spun, and blasted its head off.

She was back in the cellar. Ross was pouring a withering fire into the horde of undead that surrounded them. Fresh bodies were piled on the

Clay & Susan Griffith

floor; Ross was saturated with ichor. His face was strained. How long had she been out? Ross eyed her quickly and returned to his business.

Debbi joined in the shooting. "Let's take the stairs before we're cut off."

Ross kicked free of rotting hands as he reloaded and the Rangers shuffled slowly back across the now slippery floor, slimy with pieces of the undead, both firing over and over in all directions. Ross blasted with his shotgun while Debbi roared away with her brace of Dragoons. Shells smashed into Legionnaires and tore through the smoked corpses. The retreating Rangers had to elbow their way past the suspended cadavers. Body after body began to swing to and fro, bumping its neighbor and setting up chain reactions of grisly pendulums that spread row after row across the shadowy chamber. Through them, swarms of undead came after Debbi and Ross, shoving their way silently through the creaking lines of swinging cadavers.

The two mounds of Legionnaires close to the staircase had unplied and the sykers were forming into an orderly rank. They were getting organized, and soon they would have their powers too. They had been lucky so far. It was only a matter of time before luck ran out.

Quantrill watched, his eyes flicking impatiently from his troopers to the retreating Rangers as if afraid his prey might escape before he could deliver the kill shot.

Debbi and Ross fought off countless clutching hands and gnashing teeth. She pulled an empty black gun off one Dragoon and slapped on the spare as Ross bashed his way through swarming Legionnaires. The barrage of black needles left a weird tableau of temporarily frozen cadavers standing and kneeling in their wake like statuary in a horrible procession.

The hairs on Debbi's neck rose suddenly. She plowed into Ross and knocked him to the floor just as a syker blast burned through the air over their heads. The energy lance smashed into a pillar and tore a massive chunk out of the brittle stone.

Ross rolled and sprayed the attacking squad with his black gun. Ragged hands hovered over Debbi. She fired up with both the black guns and the Dragoons, knocking the undead sykers back.

Debbi and Ross scrambled to their feet and ran low toward the steps. She caught sight of another formed squad glowing green. She fired a grenade from the hip that exploded in their midst. Sykers and pieces of sykers tumbled and bounced off the ceiling and the walls.

The blast shook the room, sending down a shower of dust and debris. The Rangers kept their unsteady feet and reached the stone steps. A mob of rotting corpses followed close on their heels. Ross fired again with the scattergun, but then the gun clicked empty. He swung it like a club to batter sykers off the steps. Then he drew his Peacemaker.

Once again, a faint green glow rose from the shadows of the room. Quantrill made his way across the room toward the foot of the stairs, watching the Rangers with raw hunger. The undead sykers swarmed around him, blocking the dead pendulums and creating a clear path for their commander.

Ross backed up the steps to where Debbi waited, covering him with her Dragoons, although her black guns were empty. He fired again with his black gun, but it too hissed empty. The veteran Ranger pulled it off his six-shooter and threw it down.

Ross reached over and tugged a grenade off Debbi's belt. He looked her in the eye and she nodded. Ross triggered the grenade and tossed it down

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

toward Quantrill. Meanwhile, Debbi fired two more at the stone pillars.

The explosions roared in a rolling succession that came like one massive eruption of fire. The walls shook. The Rangers were knocked to their knees. Sharp pain stabbed through their brains. The steps cracked under their hands. Large chunks of stone snapped off and fell with the wreckage. Smoke rose as great patches of the ceiling began to collapse. One of them dropped onto the General's faithful toady who cowered in the corner, and crushed him.

Through the smoke, Debbi saw Quantrill set his boot on the bottom step. She grabbed Ross's arm and yanked her partner to his feet. They charged up as the stone steps disintegrated beneath their boots. A rectangle of light shone dimly through the dust ahead of them.

Debbi and Ross burst into the kitchen, but before they could even contemplate being safe, they saw the tiled floor opening in a fissure under their feet. The roar increased. They stumbled through the filthy dining room, slipping along the filth caked floor. Debbi's knee twisted painfully and she heard something snap inside, but she refused to lose momentum in a frenzied haste to escape.

As they reached the long corridor outside the dining room, the house was still shaking. The wooden floor buckled. Ross reared up a booted foot and smashed it against a closed door. It flew open. He pulled Debbi after him as rafters dropped behind them.

Together they ran through the collapsing room and leapt out the window.

They landed on the hard ground, rolled, and came up together. Ross kept running. Debbi turned to look back at the mansion. There was a deep rumbling from inside and smoke poured from the window.

Ross yelled, "Get back! The place is coming down!"

Debbi only vaguely heard him through her ringing ears. She silently willed the asylum to stay up. Perhaps there were still some innocents inside and she didn't want them to die like they lived, at the whim of others. The roar of collapse faded into echoes although smoke and dust continued to pour out of windows in a dirty, brown wave. The house stayed up, for the most part. She exhaled in relief though she knew it had nothing to do with her.

Her immediate instinct was to go back in and search for those who needed help, but that hope was swept away like quicksilver. She and Ross were the ones in need of help.

General Quantrill appeared out of the dust cloud. With a roar and a sweep of his hand, Debbi was slammed to the ground by enormous force. She nearly blacked out, gasping for air. Quantrill was on her with terrible speed. He reached down and grabbed her by the throat, lifting her off her feet. He glared at her with a face that was partially crushed. He raised a hand that glowed red. She struggled to regain her senses.

Debbi went for her holster. Empty. She couldn't reach the knife in her boot. Her fingers scrabbled for something to use as a weapon. They grasped a hard object in her jacket pocket. She drew up the slender tannis shard that Martool had given her. Debbi plunged it viciously down into Quantrill's head. The knife-like shard of rock penetrated his rotten skull with a soft sucking sound.

Quantrill roared in pain. His malevolent eyes boiled with anger. His hand, glowing and surging with heat, neared her face.

Suddenly a heavy shape surged into view. Ross plowed into Quantrill, seizing the General's glowing hand with a muffled cry of pain. The

Clay & Susan Griffith

veteran Ranger and the undead syker tumbled aside leaving Debbi to drop hard to the rocky ground. Ross rolled on top of Quantrill and raised his fist. The General thrust his white-hot fingers into Ross's chest. The Ranger screamed.

Quantrill threw Ross aside and pushed himself up on one knee next to the struggling, insensible man. The General looked at Debbi, who was trying to climb unsteadily onto her unsteady hands and knees.

"Watch this," Quantrill spat at her. "It's the last memory you'll ever have."

Quantrill placed his hand on Ross's face. The Ranger yelled in agony, struggling to wrench off the syker's grip. Debbi pushed herself up and started toward them.

With a final shudder, Ross fell silent and limp.

Quantrill laughed.

Debbi watched the scene with disbelief as she sank to her knees. She saw Ross's head slip to the side, his tortured face fully visible, wisps of smoke rising from it.

She screamed. In horror and despair and fury. The scream ripped out of her lungs with physical force. It echoed in the wind.

Quantrill stopped laughing. He stared at her and then looked around with uncertainty.

Debbi kept screaming. Even though she was out of breath, the wailing continued, growing louder and more powerful.

Quantrill tried to stand. He felt the ground shaking deep beneath his feet. He tried to focus a blow on the woman kneeling before him, but something was wrong. Behind the screaming, he heard a strange whine. No, it was a singing.

The General grasped his head. The singing reverberated inside his skull.

The tannis. The damned woman had put a shard of tannis inside his brain.

Quantrill ripped at his own flesh, trying to grasp the stone, digging deep into his scalp with bony fingers. The shard vibrated and echoed the singing that circled around him. Then all he knew was a sweet singing.

Quantrill stood motionless for a second, his hands still poised at his now liquefied brain. Then he crumpled to the ground. Finally dead.

Debbi's scream played out and she slumped forward to the ground, her lungs raw and voided, feeling the windswept chimes of the distant tannis surge through her. She couldn't exalt in it because she was staring at Ross's lifeless body.

Is this what it was like for him, watching her die? He must've been stronger than she ever imagined to carry on, because she only wanted to lie down and die next to him. It was only right.

Debbi crawled to him to touch him. He was still warm from Quantrill's attack. She put her arms around his limp shoulders and pulled his burned face into her lap. She folded herself around him and gently rocked him.

"Can't breath," he said in a muffled voice.

"Sorry." Debbi leaned back to give him air. Then she felt a bolt of electricity arc through her. She stared down into his pain-blurred eyes. "You're alive!"

"Yeah."

Debbi embraced him tightly once more. "Oh my God! You're alive!"

"Can't breath," Ross mumbled again, though not really caring. He tried

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

to crack a smile despite the pain.

"Sorry." She held his head and watched her tears drip onto his burned face. Debbi heard the whining of the Stallion's thrusters approaching as the tannis' voice softened from thunder to a whisper and soon drifted away completely.

Ross licked his cracked lips and moaned, "Where's Quantrill?"

Debbi nodded to one side. "Over there. We got him."

The veteran Ranger closed his eyes. "Good job."

"Thanks." Debbi brushed his cracked lips with her fingers. "I think I'm getting the hang of it."

Chapter 16

The cemetery was a quiet place, which Debbi appreciated. Finally, all the graves were still and covered.

All but one.

She stood before her own tombstone and gazed down into the yawning plot. Everyone thought her morbid for coming here, particularly Ross. But to her, it held no memories. She had died at Castle Rock and woke up in Ross's room. Nothing about the cemetery even whispered a recollection to her mind. It was all a blank and therefore nothing to fear.

Leaning on her cane, she craned her neck to see the casket in the bottom of the hole. At least it was a decent one, mahogany with a satin lining. It must have cost a mint; most likely everyone had chipped in for it. She'd have to remember to thank the Rangers at some point.

Late winter was fading and bright sunshine filled the sky. The warmth felt good seeping into her aching muscles. Although she could actually dispense with the cane, the pain lingered. She'd swear every part of her was bruised. Badges of honor, she reminded herself. Shifting to ease a cramp in her slowly healing knee, she sat on the edge of the grave and stretched out her leg into the hole, hissing with relief.

Something caught her eye at the bottom. Something glittered in the sunlight. It didn't look like a piece of the coffin. Using the crook of her cane, she reached down and shoved the dirt aside, revealing a gold chain. Puzzled, she hooked it and brought it up to her. It was odd since she didn't own any jewelry. Whose was it? A small gold locket dangled from the thin chain. She brushed away the encrusted dirt. Sure fingers opened it. Her breath caught at the picture within.

Ross. It was a picture of Ross. The same young Ross from the photograph on the mantelpiece of his home on Earth.

He must have buried it with her, though Lord knows how it got outside the coffin and buried in the dirt. It was a miracle she found it. The town was getting ready to fill in the plot, public hazard or some such nonsense. If she hadn't come out here today, she'd have never found it. She might never have known of his small gesture.

It was a simple matter to undo the clasp and place it around her neck. A perfect fit. The chain was just the right length and the locket fell against her chest.

Debbi's eyes closed and her hand clasped the locket tightly. What he had gone through those months after her death and what he had endured by her resurrection, she couldn't begin to understand. But one thing she did know, his feelings for her went deep.

She doubted he'd admit to such a thing even if she asked him. Hell, it was doubtful he'd own up to the locket. She wouldn't have it any other

Clay & Susan Griffith

way. When it was time, it was time. Her fingers dropped the locket down inside her shirt so it wasn't visible to anyone, but she could feel its presence.

Rising stiffly, she made her way to the gate with the cane resting on her shoulder in a jaunty fashion. She had made the rounds of fallen Colonial Rangers; Cass, Chennault, and Tsukino. It made her feel better to speak to them.

She neared the high, iron cemetery gate that creaked in the dusty breeze. Martool, Fareel, and Hallow waited outside the graveyard, the wind flapping their clothes. Debbi passed through the gate, feeling reinvigorated, and embraced the wizened shaman with more emphasis than normal. This was an important day.

Martool said softly, "We are leaving today, daughter."

Debbi smiled at the way the shaman addressed her. It had become Martool's fashion to call her "daughter" and she enjoyed it; it was a comforting part of a new life. Martool's new role didn't crowd Debbi's real mother from her thoughts. In fact, the shaman's familiarity brought her mother to mind in a kinder way. Debbi's thoughts of her mother were no longer a frantic woman racing back into a burning space station, soon to be dead. Now Debbi could recall times of soft kisses on her cheek and conspiratorial laughs over dinner. The terrible dreams had stopped.

Debbi replied, "I know. You've been away from your people a long time. Thank you for staying and helping me."

"Will I see you at Castle Rock soon?"

"Sure. As soon as I can get away." Debbi leaned over and slapped Fareel on the chest. "Take care of her, Fareel."

The warrior grunted and glared down at the woman, but not so angrily as he used to. He wore a long necklace of giant cat teeth.

Debbi then hugged the slightly resistant syker. "Good bye, Hallow."

The tall man smiled uncomfortably and pulled back, still uneasy with human closeness. That was part of the reason he was going to live with the anouks. However, Debbi knew he would experience as much, if not more, antipathy from them as he would from humans. But maybe he'd find some peace under Martool's tutelage.

Debbi turned back to Martool. "Where's Hickok? I thought she was flying you out."

Martool said, "She had to fly south on business of some kind. We'll walk."

"Walk? It's hundreds of miles."

"We walked here," Martool replied simply. "We can walk back. I'm not as old as I look."

"Do you want Little Joe to ride?"

"No." Martool hoisted a small bag of possessions onto her thin shoulder. "That chanouk is yours. He will serve no other." The shaman ran her leathery hand over Debbi's cheek. "I'll miss you, daughter. But we're always together."

Debbi's eyes teared up and a lump settled in her throat. She nodded without speaking. There was no reason to prolong this. Martool turned abruptly and started off into the desert, followed by Fareel and Hallow. The Ranger stood with the warm wind whipping through her hair until the three figures blended into the shimmering horizon. Debbi wiped her eyes and turned for town.

She passed through the city gates with a wave to Captain Holt who manned the watchtower. She strolled up to Ranger headquarters where

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

the streets buzzed with the heightened activity of a new caravan season. It seemed like eons ago when Debbi last experienced it.

Pausing to lean a hip and a shoulder against a wooden beam, Debbi took a luxurious moment to observe all that went on in the street around her on this late afternoon. Temptation was grinding its way back to its typical state. All was as it should be.

The familiar flare of a dark duster caught her eye and she grinned, straightening off the post and maneuvering as quickly as she could across the street. His face would carry Quantrill's mark forever, but thanks to Doc Dazy's amazing handiwork with the plastiskin, it wasn't jarring. In fact, the mild scarring gave him more character.

Ross regarded her approach with his trademark stern gaze as he limped along.

"Nice cane you have there," she remarked casually coming alongside him.

Grunting ever so slightly, Ross leaned again on his own cane as he took a step. "I'll have to find the man who sold it to me. Claimed it was one of a kind." He swept the street ahead of him for trouble as they walked.

"Seems to me you just know good quality when you see it."

"So long as it keeps my face out of the dirt, it'll do." He lifted his gaze back to her smiling face. She was staring at him strangely. "What?"

The grin didn't waver. "Nothing."

He looked away, but then jerked his head back to her since she was still staring. "What? Stop starin' at me."

Debbi turned aside her eyes with a shrug. She didn't need to look at him any more. After all, his picture bobbed against her chest. She could look at him all she wanted later.

"Stop yer smilin'," he growled. "It's unnerving."

"Yes, sir." But the grin refused to fade. She felt too good. They had won, against all odds and every horror they had won.

Gaining the sidewalk, they both paused and watched the steady river of people, animals, and machines parade by. Great shipments of wares and grains were once again marking their time in Temptation. Hagglers, venders, and hucksters were everywhere, their loud voices raised, and their money exchanging hands.

It wasn't hard to guess where Ross's mind was right now.

"Sharif's spirit is drifting on the wind today," she told him quietly. "Just think, he can travel anywhere he wishes. The whole of Banshee lies before him."

Ross was silent. Another friend lost to this war. He watched a bird fly overhead; its powerful wings carried it overland and out toward the desert plains where Sharif made his home. Where it would take Ross several days to travel that distance, even in a Prowler, the bird was already there. He murmured, "May soft winds speed you on your journey."

Then Ross took a deep breath and regarded Debbi who was watching the goings on in town with a practiced gaze, giving him a private moment. He put his hand over hers as she leaned on her cane.

Debbi glanced over at him, glad to see he was okay. She had been worried that the loss of another friend would have cast him back into despair. But he seemed at peace. She had a feeling a lot of it had to do with her.

She offered, "Want to go shake down that caravan over there? I have a feeling they're sportin' things they shouldn't."

Clay & Susan Griffith

Ross shook his head and released her hand. "Nah. You go ahead. Have some fun. I have a mountain of paperwork I want to dump on Miller."

"You ever going to ease up on him?"

"I don't see why."

"He's still hurting."

"So are we."

"Well, one of those cats nearly had him as its personal kitty toy."

Ross clucked with mock sympathy. "You'd think that would be enough, wouldn't you?" Ross lifted an eyebrow. "It ain't."

"Someday soon though, huh?"

"Maybe. Right now, the most compassion I can muster is giving him a desk job for a while."

Debbi considered that. "At least he's not on animal control. He'll appreciate that. Maybe." She stepped off the curb. "See ya 'round."

"Later, Dallas."

Ross watched her go. Even with a limp, she looked damn good. He rubbed a calloused hand roughly over his lips.

Debbi maneuvered down the street, passing the caravan she had pointed out to Ross. It wasn't doing anything suspicious; she had only made that up to intrigue Ross, desperate to engage him in ordinary Ranger activities. But Ross hadn't needed it. Harassing Miller was just as good for his soul as haranguing caravan bosses.

So onward she went toward the Depot. It was part of her normal routine, one that she was eager to get back to. Each duty she undertook made her life that much more ordinary.

She whistled as she walked. It almost sounded like *Red River Valley*. Or at least it would have if she could carry a tune.

A chair crashed out of *Mo's* window right in front of her. Glass scattered across the boardwalk at her feet; the shards were almost melodious in their pandemonium.

A sigh escaped her. Yup, things were definitely back to normal.

She pushed her way in through the batwing doors. *Mo's* typical chaos greeted her. It felt good. A monumental brawl was in full swing. A beer glass almost collided with her face. She leaned back and it brushed past her spitting warm beer across her cheek. It smashed into the wall behind her.

Stew and Ringo were there already, trying to put a halt to the fight, without success. Miller flew past her and collapsed in the puddle of beer.

"Hiya, Miller!"

He lifted a weak hand and slumped unconscious.

"Dallas!" *Mo's* head popped over the bar.

"Mo! How ya doin'!" Debbi greeted him.

"How do you think I'm doin'? My place is getting trashed!"

"Uh-huh. Sure is."

"Well do something!"

An easy smile played over her lips. "Get a beer ready for me and you have a deal."

"Done!"

Stew spotted her, and he and Ringo came over to flank her. She nodded her thanks, grateful to have Stew at her side no matter how small the fracas. Taking careful stock of the situation, she scanned the barroom for the epicenter of the disturbance, the place where the mayhem was the worst. It was easy to spot. A tall blond miner was wailing on a short black-haired caravaner. It was the usual thing.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave

With Stew's assistance, she climbed up on the bar, to get a better view of the chaos. Placing two fingers in her mouth she let loose with an ear-shattering whistle. It pierced through everyone. Even Miller stirred on the floor. The very floorboards centered over the tannis bedrock vibrated and could be felt through the legs of everyone standing. The room fell into stunned silence.

"That's better," she announced loudly for all to hear. "Now, I officially call this fight a draw. Anyone who thinks this fight was over a damn serious complaint can come with me to the Ranger office and we can discuss it at length in a cell." She looked around for any takers. There were none. She didn't think there would be.

"Great. Now steady on boys. The drinks are on me." A stampede started for the bar. Debbi hopped off the counter. Her beer was standing there as promised by Mo. She nodded her thanks to the barkeep and tossed him some currency to pay for the round.

"Damn, Dallas. You did it without shooting up my ceiling or breaking my antler chandelier." Mo wiggled a finger in his ear as Stew glared at him. "Well, except for a broken eardrum maybe. That's a hell of a whistle you got there."

Debbi laughed and gulped down her frothy mold. It tasted like ambrosia after so long.

Ringo said, "You're getting along pretty well without the cane now."

Debbi spun the cane with her fingers and almost whacked several patrons. "I've always been a fast healer."

The kid added, "You heard Stew is going away, right?"

Debbi looked up in shock. "What?"

Stew exhaled with exasperation. This obviously wasn't his choice of a time to tell her. "I'm . . . uh . . . taking long patrol down south for the season. Now that Quantrill's gone, the Reapers will be out again."

"Just for the season? Right?" Debbi watched Stew's cold, blue eyes, which were unusually distant, and wouldn't meet her gaze. "You're coming back to Temptation? Aren't you?"

The former priest hesitated. He pulled his hat from where it hung between his shoulder blades. Stew leaned on the bar and rotated the brim of the black hat between his fingers. "You know, they need Colonial Rangers in the south. Ghost Rock City is wide open. There's no law down there now."

"Stew, there's no town down there now. We need you here."

Stew stared at the floor and shook his head. "You and Ross have it under control."

Debbi said softly, "No, Ross won't approve it. There's too much going on up here. Hellstromme is building. Traffic is booming. And you've been in Temptation longer than anyone other than Ross." She took the hat out of Stew's hands and stared straight into his subdued face when he turned to look at her. "The bottom line is, I don't want to do this job without you here."

The fair-haired Ranger remained silent.

Debbi slapped the hat against his chest. "Look, if you're not back by the end of the season, I'll come get you. You know I will, so don't make me."

Stew nodded, more to himself, and then gave her a wan smile. "Alright."

Ringo laughed. "Great! We can't break up the gang. Dallas. Stew. Ringo. Even Miller. We're like a crew. An outfit."

Clay & Susan Griffith

Recovering some of his quiet good nature, Stew jutted his chin at the bleary-eyed Miller who lingered on the floor near the door. "Helluva an outfit we got here."

Debbi chuckled and set her empty glass on the bar. She made her way over to Miller and knelt beside him. She could smell the liquor over the hair tonic. The mix almost made her eyes water.

He smirked with groggy eyes. "Did you hear that train come through here?"

"Sure did." She hauled Miller to his feet and steered him to the door. "You were just in here getting a drink and got caught up in the frenzy, right?"

"Sounds good."

"Glad to hear it." Aiming him for the exit, she gave him a slight shove outside. "Better get to headquarters quick. Ross is looking for you."

"Oh, crap."

Miller staggered and ran for the office in an awkward stumble, almost getting crushed beneath a wagon in his haste. He didn't even notice Ross standing in the shadows just outside the saloon.

Ross ignored Miller and instead watched Debbi as she chatted with Stew and Ringo, surrounded by the people of Temptation, at least the hard drinking ones. A corner of his mouth quirked up into a grin. There was no doubt the town was hers now. Lock, stock, and barrel. The mantle had been passed. He felt no remorse, only pride. He was old school, and his time and his brand were no longer the way. It belonged to people like Debbi, brash and impetuous and filled with a love for this planet that transcended common law.

Ross knew he'd be there for her, his gun at her side. He trusted her instincts. And life would certainly never be dull.

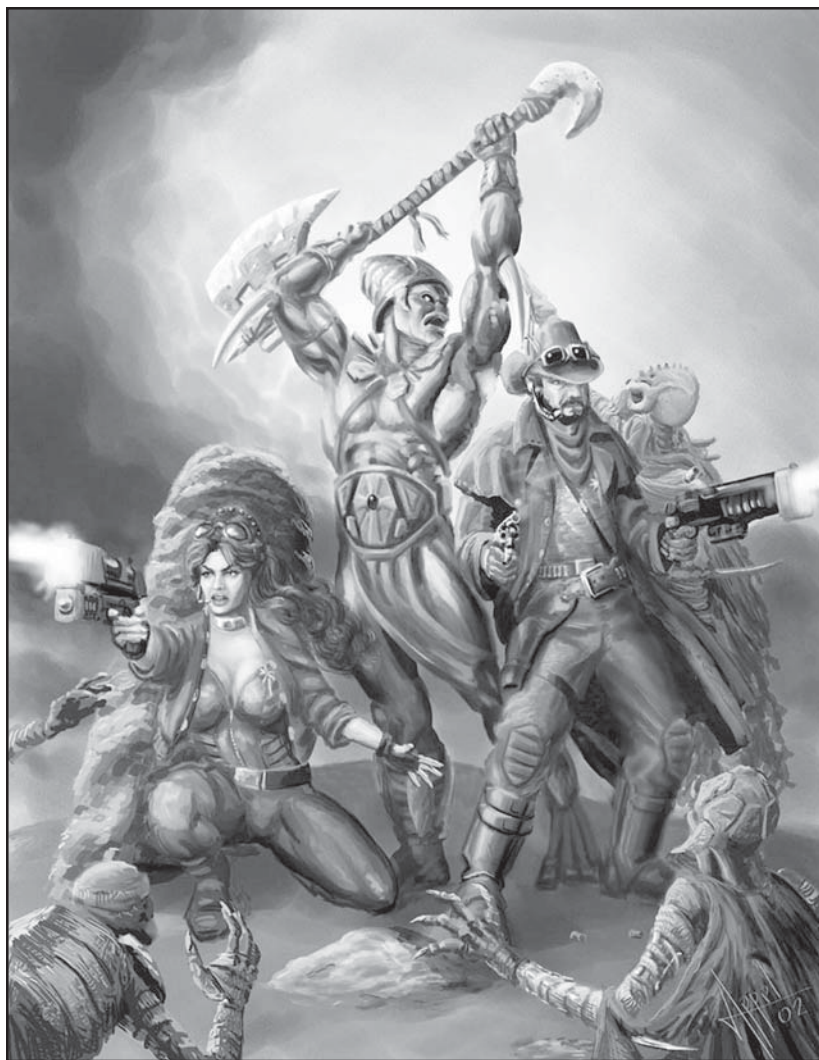
What kind of a damn shepherd would he have made anyhow?

Debbi finally caught sight of him standing just outside the saloon door. He tipped his hat to her and sauntered on down the boardwalk.

Debbi grinned.

All was as it should be.

Book III: The Fraternity of the Grave



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