
THE BACKSIDE OF HADES

AN EXCERPT ...



One

Really, Really Late 1876

Deadwood, Dakota Territory

Boone McCreery pushed aside a branch of the bush concealing him and his companions to peek at the rickety log cabin, half buried by drifted snow. He squinted against the early morning light. There was no smoke coming from the chimney.

“Definitely somebody in there,” he said. “Can’t see who or what though.”

“It’s *Draug*,” Clementine Johanssen stood tall next to Boone, almost his height short a couple of inches, with her arms crossed over her thick wool coat. Her expression was as cold and stony as the rocky outcrop behind them. “And it isn’t just one, it’s a small herd. Eight or ten, I’d guess.”

“Of course. We’re not even in Slagton yet.” Anxiety dropped a pile of stones in his belly at the notion of riding into the small mining town that was supposedly overrun with ... “*Draug*,” Boone repeated, sniffing in the cold, dry air. “The diseased, abnormally strong, rotting carcasses of the dearly departed being used as an army by a malevolent usurper who means to take the Black Hills as a prize, killing anything that gets in his way?” He shivered against a frigid gust. “You mean that kind of *Draug*?”

She turned to Boone, lines fanning out from the corners of her gray eyes. “Don’t forget shapeshifting.”

“What?” He’d heard her, but his sensibilities didn’t allow him to believe it.

“Shapeshifting.” Clementine shrugged. “Of course, I don’t believe that, or that *Draug* can grow to colossal size. Those are myths.” She bit her lower lip. “I think.”

“What?” Boone said again. He was listening more intently now, but still having some difficulty comprehending.

“Need help makin’ sentences there, Booney?” Jack “Rabbit” Fields piped in, joining them. After a glance through the branches, he grinned big and fluttered his eyelashes at Boone while skinning his pistol and spinning the cylinder. Quick as chain lightning, his expression sobered and his brow furrowed. “I’m good for four, maybe six. You stand behind me, Booney. Don’t want you gettin’ hurt.”

“Shut up, Rabbit.” Boone shook his head. After spending the better part of his life with Mr. Quickdraw, who’d become as close to him as a brother before they were even knee-high

to a grasshopper, Boone knew Rabbit was just as nervous as he was. He reached for his pistol, too, but changed his mind and instead grabbed the handle of his black-bladed scimitar.

They were holster-deep in a Black Hills bitter cold winter. Boone and his companions, with their mounts alongside, had opted to spend the night out away from Slagton, since none of them carried any intention of approaching the sinister little camp in the dark—not even Clementine, who’d faced off against a town full of *Draug* in her bloodstained past. Boone measured last night in the woods as one of the coldest, most fitful, and frigid he’d ever had the displeasure of spending under the stars, even though Rabbit’s heated complaints had helped keep the campsite warm till almost midnight. And his list of expletives was far more colorful than Boone’s in spite of the presence of a female. So far, things weren’t looking any better in the morning light.

Clementine had been quiet since they’d left Deadwood. She wasn’t usually a prattler and on this trip, especially not. Boone could see she was uneasy, apprehensive even. Her normally stoic demeanor was absent, replaced by repeated shifting, twitching, both in and out of her saddle, undoubtedly due to her past experiences with *Draug*. He didn’t blame her. The description of the abominations alone nearly curdled his blood.

“Somebody just tell me what I’m shootin’ at,” Hank Varney spoke up from behind them. Boone turned to see the well-weathered man jerk his new LeMat pistol from its holster. Ice crystals in his finger-length beard added sparkles to his appearance, matching those in his eyes. He was ready to ride to Hades and back, if that was where Clementine was going.

Rabbit daintily fanned his face. “You’re so strong and brave, Hank,” he said in a high-pitched dainty voice, pretending to swoon.

“Now cut that out, Jack Rabbit. Like to make me blush.” Hank lowered his pistol and punched Rabbit on the shoulder.

Clementine peered at the cabin around a branch. “You can’t use that pistol, Hank. You’ll bring every creature within a half-mile radius down on us. Besides, it’s best—”

“Let me guess,” Boone cut in.

“Take the heads,” Rabbit finished before Boone had the chance.

Clementine nodded, stepping away from the branch. “Leave Fred the Mule and the horses here. We may make camp back here tonight. They can make their way back to Deadwood if necessary.” Without a backward glance, she took off for the cabin in long strides.

“There she goes.” Boone sprang after her, followed by Rabbit and Hank.

Boone wondered if Clementine knew how predictable she was when it came to dispatching the otherworldly, and often not human, troublemakers that she referred to as *others*. Or in this case, the ambulating remains of several dead humans somehow roaming the forest.

“Dammit, Miss Clementine!” Rabbit said in a loud whisper as he fell into a jog next to Boone.

“No guns,” Clementine said over her shoulder.

“Goldurnit, Booney. No guns?” Rabbit holstered his pistol and skinned one of the five throwing knives from his belt sheath.

“You know, well as I do.” Boone rushed to keep up with Clementine.

Rabbit sheathed his throwing knife. “This is close-in fighting and I ain’t none too fond of it, so’s you know. Gonna need my Bowie.” He grabbed the gigantic knife from his boot

without missing a step.

Hank came along behind, chuffing like a locomotive. "Rather stick an arrow ..." He puffed and sucked a breath, "... in 'em myself, Jack Rabbit."

"Wanna trade?" Rabbit pointed his Bowie at Boone's sword.

Boone scoffed. "Not today. But I'll keep an eye on ya, in case you get yourself into a pickle." Boone rested his scimitar on his shoulder as they approached the cabin. "Clementine," he whispered when he caught up with her. "You have a plan?"

"Sure. Kill everything in that cabin." She stopped behind a stand of yearling pines that offered cover and faced the three of them. "You've prepared for this. Remember the cattle-driver terms you used a while back?" When they each nodded, she continued, "Well, I have point. You two are flank," she said to Boone and Rabbit. "And Hank is drag." She started to turn away, but then looked back again. "Oh, and don't let them bite you."

"Yes, ma'am!" Hank puffed. He had secured the LeMat in the holster Rabbit had tooled for him. For Hank, arrows flew swifter and more true than words or bullets and with far deadlier effect.

"Yep. We're with ya, Miss Clementine," Rabbit joined in, pulling a second knife from its sheath.

"No biting." Boone paused mid-nod. "Wait, you didn't say anything about ... they bite?" He tried not to allow fear to taint his voice, or let on that his heart was thumping hard in his chest. This was happening too damned fast. His mind was still wrestling with the idea of colossal, shapeshifting corpses.

But Clementine was already heading for the cabin. When Boone and the others caught up with her at the pine pole door, she pulled two thin-bladed swords from within her coat and aimed an intense glare at Boone.

He knew that look. She was bent on destruction, and they were in the thick of it with her.

She cocked her leg and kicked the door, breaking it clean away from the hinges. It flew into the cabin, slamming into two *Draug*, knocking them to the floor.

Stunned, Boone watched as she barreled inside, her swords spinning so fast they looked like wagon wheels on a runaway freight wagon.

He leapt through the doorway to join her. Rabbit pushed in behind him and split left, his Bowie raised and ready to strike.

A wave of humid, fetid air washed over Boone, stinging his eyes and coating his tongue and throat. He doubled over, gagging. His knees wobbled under his weight, and the biscuits he'd had for breakfast worked their way up into his throat.

Rabbit reeled backward, crashing into Boone's side, bending over at the waist. "Somebody stuffed a dead rat in my mouth!" He spit and gagged, wiping at his tongue with his coat sleeve.

Hank pushed in behind them, his knife drawn. "Boonedog! What—" He retched, grabbed Boone's shoulder and straightened him up, but then bent forward, convulsing. "Tar... agph...nation!"

"Like swimmin' in the guts of a week-dead cow!" Rabbit spit again, coughing in between.

Hank grasped Rabbit's sheepskin collar and stood him up too.

"To *Hel's* kingdom, devils!" Clementine's voice rang out above the din of moaning *Draug*, not to mention Boone's gags, Rabbit's retches, and Hank's curses.

Clementine! Boone wiped the tears from his eyes, raised his sword, and swung around to help her just as the head of the last *Draug* sailed in a graceful arc up and away from its body.

It landed with a squishy thump on the chest of one of the many headless *Draug* bodies piled around her feet.

He turned back to Clementine. The dark, cold fury in her eyes and hardened expression on her face chilled him more than a night sleeping under a winter sky.

That's the look of a *Scharfrichter*. A killer.

"Clementine?" He wasn't sure what to expect.

She took a deep breath and then pushed her hair away from her face with the back of her hand. Her face, her entire body, softened somehow. After surveying the carnage around her for a moment, she looked at Boone and scrunched her nose. "I don't remember their odor being this disagreeable. Did I mention they stink? Not this much, I didn't think. Maybe it's because they were penned up in here."

"Sheaat." Rabbit sheathed his knife and evaluated the mess she'd left behind, his expression a mixture of disgust and awe. "Miss Clementine, you didn't give us a chance!"

"You'll get your chance." She pulled a scrap of muslin from her coat pocket and wiped the dark, sticky blood and pieces of rotten flesh from her blades, then tossed the rag on the floor.

Boone flicked a chunk of squishy *Draug* meat from Rabbit's coat with his scimitar and gave Clementine a once-over. "You don't have any *Draug* guts on you. How do you not have any ..." he trailed off.

"None at all, even," Hank agreed, inspecting her up and down.

She glanced at herself. "I think I got a little here." She lifted her feet, one at a time, shaking loose the hunks of flesh that clung to her boots.

Boone eyed Rabbit sideways with a "You're-shittin'-me" look. Rabbit was wearing the same expression.

"Miss Clem." Hank patted her back. "We ought to mosey. You shook the tree. No tellin' what might fall out. Vapor in here is like to soak into my disposition if'n we stay." He backed out the doorway, pinching his nose with his finger and thumb. In a nasally voice he added, "Won't never utter complaints about odors in The Pyre ever again."

Rabbit was quick to follow. "I'm with you, Hank. Spurs the mind to bad recollections, like Boone's bedroom when we was growin' up." He disappeared out the doorway.

"Bangtail!" Boone hollered at Rabbit's back.

Clementine chuckled. "Not one to spend time on cleaning your room, huh?" She slid one of her short swords back inside her coat.

"He's full of shit." He shot Clementine a quick frown, not liking the possibility she might get the wrong idea about his cleanliness. Or thinking ill of him in any way, for that matter. "We didn't see the floor of his bedroom for five years after he turned ten. He's just a windbag."

"I heard that, fiddlehead," Rabbit called from outside.

"I hope so. I said it for you, Bunny Rabbit."

"Don't call me 'bunny,' Mr. Tight Britches."

"We should go." Clementine patted his chest, her hand remaining on the lapel of his overcoat for a moment, and then headed out into the morning sun.

Boone fell in behind her, happy to breathe the cold, fresh air again. A glance back at the cabin sparked a realization. "They didn't turn into dirt, or dust, or fire, or whatever it is *others* turn into when you put the squabash on that walking buzzard food in there." Usually, death by Clementine's blade or hand yielded much different results.

"They were human once."

“Ah. Of course.” Boone had forgotten to make the distinction between humans and *others*, as in those non-*Homo sapiens* that Clementine had been contracted to eliminate. “Why were the *Draug* crowded into there, do you think?”

“I’m not sure. But did you see the animal carcasses piled in the corner?” She pointed her thumb over her shoulder at the cabin.

“Must’ve missed that, what with all the body parts flying around.”

“It looked to me like someone was keeping them fed.” She stopped alongside Hank, scanning the trees and hills around them. “Maybe they were corralling some that escaped. Or they could have been readying them for an attack on a nearby mining camp.”

“You see that, Miss Clem? Jack Rabbit?” Hank pointed, his voice low. “Over there, through them trees.”

Rabbit used his hat to shield his eyes from a blade of sunlight piercing the trees. “I see it.”

“You see, Miss Clem? Thought it was a deer first thing, but it ain’t. It’s one of your *Draugies*.”

Rabbit squinted at it. “He’s teeterin’ along with a purpose.” His voice went high and shrill as he added, “‘Late for supper again, Henry,’ his wife’ll say.”

“Stop it, Rabbit.” Boone smirked. The *Draug* lurched along through the snow, barely covered in a tattered and dirty shirt, suspenders, and torn trousers. Its shock of black hair was mussed, sticking up on one side and matted down on the other, as if it had just rolled out of the grave.

Clementine aimed her short sword at it. “Who wants it?”

“I got it.” Hank pulled his bow and plucked an arrow from his quiver. “Just gotta get a wee closer.” He tiptoed toward the meandering corpse, slinking tree to tree to remain unnoticed.

Clementine drew her other sword, spinning both blades in her palms. “That Sioux bow won’t do him any good.”

“Are you going to tell him that?” Boone asked, glancing from her to Hank and back.

“No. He can manage one *Draug*. Let’s see how he does it.”

Boone noticed a twinkle in her eyes to match her grin.

Rabbit smiled, too, but his brow was puckered. Probably from the same concern giving Boone heartburn.

Hank worked his way to a tree within thirty yards of the lone *Draug*. He strung his arrow, drew back, aimed, and the arrow disappeared. *Fwhip*.

Boone watched the *Draug*’s head pitch to the side, coming back upright with an arrow protruding from its cheek. “Good aim.”

“Nice shot, Hank,” Rabbit whispered.

The *Draug* staggered, swatted at the arrow, veered right, and shuffled in Hank’s general direction, its legs plowing through the shin-deep snow.

Clementine shook her head. “He needs to—”

“Right,” Boone interrupted her.

Rabbit cupped the side of his mouth. “Hank!” he whisper-yelled.

Hank looked back at them and shrugged.

“The head!” Rabbit grabbed his own head and pretended to pop it off and throw it on the ground.

Hank stuck his finger in the air and nodded. He drew his Bowie and began to work his way around the arrow-stuck *Draug*.

Meanwhile, the staggering *Draug* wandered too close to a tree, and the shaft of the arrow tangled in a low branch. It pulled clumsily against the snag, attempting to free itself. Boone would have laughed if the smell of rotting flesh wasn't still clinging to his nostrils ... and except for the fact that what he was looking at was real and not just the result of gulping bad whiskey.

Rabbit did laugh. "Haha! Too beef-headed to free itself."

Hank swung around behind the struggling *Draug* and raised his knife. He paused for a few breaths, then backed up and looked at Clementine, Boone, and Rabbit, and shook his head.

The *Draug* batted feebly at the branch tormenting him.

Boone watched as Hank's shoulders sagged. "He can't do it."

"His heart's too big for his own good." Clementine trotted to Hank's side. She patted his shoulder and in a flash the *Draug* head was sitting half buried in snow, propped upright by the arrow sticking out of its cheek.

"There's another one." Rabbit pointed into the trees to their left.

Boone squinted through the shadowed tree trunks streaked with sunlight. This particular *Draug* had been one hell of a brute judging from the breadth of his shoulders and thick legs. The bull of a man, or what used to be a man, appeared to have spotted them and was headed in their direction, pushing through the snow more quickly than the first, but still clumsily and no faster than a leisurely saunter.

Boone was utterly repulsed by the sight, especially taking into account the smell of these plodding creatures, but they seemed too slow to be very dangerous. Why had Clementine considered them such a threat?

He jabbed Rabbit with his elbow. "You or me?"

Rabbit bowed and with a twirl of his hand said, "Be my guest."

"Watch and learn, whippersnapper." Boone covered the distance quickly. He drew his black-bladed scimitar and sliced cleanly through its thick, rubbery neck skin. He'd already cleaned his blade in the snow before Clementine and Hank returned to Rabbit.

Half an hour and four headless, no-longer-aimlessly-wandering *Draug* later, they stood on a rocky bluff overlooking a long valley nearly twice as wide as Deadwood gulch. The cliffs all along each side did not reach as high as those framing Deadwood but were steep and looked impassible, excepting for the slumped landslide directly in front of them that had broken down the cliff to a negotiable grade. Heavy snow covering the thickly grown trees along the tops and sides of the cliffs presented the appearance of white frosting against the pastel tans and browns of the cliff faces. The white snow frosting had oozed over the sides of the cliffs here and there in the form of ice falls reaching down into the valley.

Below, tents and lean-tos were clustered to form the west side of a small town. Not really a town in Boone's eyes, since the shacks were strung out some fair distance, probably indicating each mining claim along the creek that meandered along the eastern side of the valley. The buildings did, however, thicken enough to form the boundaries of a street that looked to Boone a little like the deserted main street of Gayville, a small mining camp outside of Deadwood they'd passed through on their way to deal with a previous menace—*Babkann*.

A small stand of trees covered a portion of the valley to the south of the tent village. Many trees had been cut, leaving a bristle of stumps resembling the stubble of a poorly shaved jawline. The valley widened into thick dense forest to the southwest and a small, dark lake to the southeast.

Boone noticed movement in the almost-a-town.

“Look at ’em,” Hank whispered. “This what you wanted to know about Slagton, Miss Clem?”

“Movin’ slow like *Drang*, near as I can tell,” Rabbit said quietly, confirming Boone’s thought. “Something else down there, watching. Could be men? Lookouts?”

“They’re moving around—can’t get a count.” Boone cocked his head at Clementine, who stood silent beside him. “Can you make out what else is down there besides *Drang*? It looks like some of them are on four legs.”

Clementine squinted. “Humans. I’m not sure what else. There is *caper-sus* symbology on some of the buildings.”

Boone knew the sign of *caper-sus* represented a cult, or rather factions of cults, led by *others*, their ranks composed of humans aspiring to reap the rewards of faithful service. Namely, food and coins in the pocket. Black Hills gold drew in all sorts of folks, the adventure seekers and the desperate, and everyone in-between. But there were only so many claims in the hills carrying any color. For those that didn’t hit it rich, clothes and skin were soon hanging off their bones. Eating didn’t come cheap, and the *caper-sus* brand offered a meal ticket few could refuse.

“Look how they’re beatin’ them *Drangies* with sticks,” Hank said, scowling.

“Herding them like they’re cows,” Rabbit added.

“Looka that one. Fightin’ back. Give ’im what for.” Hank chuckled deep in his chest, then stopped. “Shouldn’t oughta be findin’ humor in it.”

“They don’t like getting hit, looks like.” Rabbit scratched at one of his sideburns. “Can’t say whose side I’d take, the *Drangies*, or the *caper-sus* sonsabitches.”

“They seem to have a mind, but they’re slow.” Boone smirked. “Like Rabbit.”

Rabbit flicked Boone’s hat. “Fuck around and see what happens.”

“They have a border set up around the town. See?” Clementine used her sword to show them. “There. And there. Those men with the sticks have got to be *caper-sus*. They’re blocking all the routes in and out of town. The road. Between buildings.”

Boone nodded. “So, they must get free from time to time. The escapees are what we kept finding in the forest.”

“Possibly.” Clementine rubbed her shoulder, the one that had been stuck with the tip of a *caper-sus* bastard’s sword not too many days past.

He tipped his head at her shoulder. “Still sore?”

“A little. The cold makes it ache. Usually wounds like this heal more quickly. This one seems to be taking longer.” She carved a larger circle in the air. “They’re watching the forest around the town, too.”

“The four leggers. Yep.” Rabbit nodded. “One ... two, three ... I count four or six of them. Might be more out under the trees. Don’t look like *Babkann*, but too far away to tell.”

The hair on the back of Boone’s neck prickled. *Babkann*. “Teeth,” he whispered, remembering their fight in the mine.

“I’m with you, Boonedog. Just about every four-legged Black Hills bugger I ever seen come with a mouth full of too many pointy teeth.” Hank’s whole body shuddered.

Rabbit scratched at Hank. “And claws.”

A piercing shriek echoed through the forest. Boone winced and ducked low, along with Rabbit and Hank.

“Lord-a-mighty,” Rabbit said as the echoes died, his fingertips still jammed in his ears. “What the fuck was that? Sounded like a wounded puma cat.”

“More like a hawk right on my shoulder.” Boone’s ears were still ringing.

“A woman, mad as a hornet.” Hank shook his head. “Got my head t’ spinnin’.”

“I couldn’t tell where that came from.” Clementine was still staring down at Slagton, apparently unaffected by the sound. “Look,” she said, pointing.

Boone followed her line of sight down to the middle of town.

Slagton was in chaos, as all of the *Draug* seemed to suddenly have purpose, but none could decide where it was or how to achieve it. Lurching and stumbling and bumping into each other. It reminded him of the time the chickens got drunk on the rotted apples that had dropped from the trees back on the ranch in Santa Fe.

“Was it the caterwaul we just heard?” Boone looked at Clementine for the answer.

“Stirred ’em to a tizzy.” Hank stood motionless, watching.

A collective moan muffled by distance rose and fell as the *Draug* began to congregate and tear at each other. Wails and cries punctuated the rolling moans.

The comical image of drunken chickens began to fade.

“Jehoshaphat,” Hank murmured, his jaw hanging low.

“Booney.” Rabbit grabbed Boone’s shoulder, holding tight.

Boone glanced his way. “You all right, Rabbit?”

Rabbit slowly shook his head, his brow furrowed. “I don’t think so. That ain’t right.”

Boone’s focus returned to the ghoulish scene. He watched as the *Draug* pushed and tore and ripped at each other.

Screams rang out—human screams. He caught site of a *capers-sus* guard who was frantically swinging his stick at the mass of *Draug* but was caught up as more arms wrapped around him or snagged his clothing and pulled him in. He disappeared in the mass of bodies.

They were distant enough from the scene to be spared the grisly details, but it was obvious to Boone what was happening to the man.

More guards attacked, whacking impotently at the milling mass of *Draug*, only to be caught and dragged in as the first had been. Screams continued as more of the guards were swallowed up.

Boone leaned toward Clementine, shoulder bumping her while still keeping his eyes on the scene below. “One wail set all of this off?”

“I’m not sure what that first scream was, but I think you’re right. It sent them into a frenzy. They’ll attack anything that moves now, including each other.”

“Wait just a damned minute.” Rabbit shook his finger at Clementine. “When you told us about the time you and your afi slaughtered that village full of *Draug*, you never said nothin’ about that.” He huffed. “Nothin’ about them going plumb loco, either.”

Clementine grimaced. “I forgot about that part.”

“You *forgot*?” Boone pushed the brim of his hat up his forehead. “I don’t know if you noticed, but—”

“Wait!” Rabbit grabbed Boone’s coat and yanked him into a crouch. He motioned Hank and Clementine to do the same. “There’s something else down there.”

Boone squinted. “Where?”

“Barn. I think it came out of the barn, or the building beside it,” he said in a hushed tone.

“I see it!” Hank whispered loudly. He rummaged in his saddlebag and pulled a monocular out and extended it. It was a long few seconds before he let the monocular drop away from his eye. “Mother Mary.”



“What is it?” Boone tried to keep his eyes on it as it flitted from one place to the next, but it moved so fast he kept losing track.

Hank handed the monocular to Clementine.

“It’s movin’ so fast ... hard to keep on it. It’s like a shadow,” Rabbit said.

Clementine was silent as she watched through the monocular.

“Some sorta ... Not like a man ... looks like ...” Hank was at a loss to even describe it. “Jehoshaphat that thing is fast.”

Boone was at a loss too. Its movements weren’t anything he was accustomed to seeing. It remained stationary for a moment, then blurred, only to appear somewhere else, almost as if it were disappearing, moving, and then reappearing. He found it, then lost it again in the blur. It was confounding.

“It’s herding ’em. Like cattle, just like the bastards with sticks did. It’s gettin’ the job done though, see?” Rabbit pointed.

He was right. Boone watched as the thing darted this way and that, each time it appeared, the mass of *Draug*, which must have been at least a hundred strong, moved away from it, farther down the street.

“*Un vaquero y su rebaño*,” Rabbit said.

“What’s that now, Jack Rabbit?” Hank scrunched up his forehead.

“‘A cowboy and his herd,’” Boone translated. “The ‘*rebaño*’ seem to have an aversion to the *vaquero*.”

Clementine handed the monocular to Boone but continued to watch the spectacle below.

It was even harder to follow with the magnifier, but the glimpses Boone caught made him feel no better. The thing was generally shaped like a man, only it stood taller. Much taller. It was difficult to determine just how much taller from their vantage point, but the thing was easily half again as tall as the tallest *Draug* or *capers-sus* on the street. It was just too fast and far away to discern more particulars than that.

They all watched as the thing herded the *Draug* farther and farther south, away from their position on top of the cliff. It became apparent to Boone that they were headed for the oversize barn at the southwest end of town.

“They’re too far away now.” Rabbit reached for the monocular. “Give ’er here. Let me see.”

Boone didn’t, but began describing the scene before him. “They’re filing into the barn. Damn, that’s a big barn.” It was two stories tall, long enough to fit ten wagons end-to-end, and with the lean-to running along its side, wide enough for five, maybe more, rigs side by side. An unkempt, unpainted exterior and distinct sag sideways reminded him of a drunken, broke miner stumbling along the streets of Deadwood.

“That thing is still herding them. Picking up a stray here and there. Isn’t a single one getting away.”

“Let me see.” Rabbit snatched at the monocular, but Boone swatted his hand away.

“Some of the guys with the sticks are whacking at them, but they’re pretty much keeping a distance from the *Draug*. They’re keeping away from the *vaquero*, too.”

Still, Clementine watched but said nothing.

Boone handed the monocular to Rabbit. "That's the last of them. All inside. The *vaquero* went in too, there or the cabin next to the barn."

Rabbit backhanded Boone's shoulder. "Missed every damn thing, knucklehead."

"Whatcha s'pose they're doing in there?" Hank rose to his feet.

"Suppertime, then to the hoedown?" Rabbit suggested.

"Hoo! Jack Rabbit, stop that. This ain't funny." Hank chuckled anyway.

Clementine's brow lined. "You may be right, Jack."

"Better question." Boone stood. "What happened to those four-legged buggers wandering around in the trees down there? I don't see a one."

"And what the hell was that thing? Nothin' we've seen is that fast. Looks like I'll be savin' Boone's ass again if—"

"Close your trap, Rabbit. Clementine, no ideas on what that thing is? First time?"

Still hunkered low to the ground, Clementine shook her head almost imperceptibly. "I'm not sure. When we get closer maybe I'll have a better idea."

"Closer?" All three men said in unison.

Clementine nodded, firmly this time.

"Sticking to the plan, then?" Boone knew she would.

She nodded again.

"All right, fine by me, but I vote we call that quick sonofagun ..." Rabbit paused, swiping his hand in front of him as if he were reading from a store sign. "*El Vaquero!*"

"What's in that barn?" Boone wondered.

"Yes. Things just got more complicated." Clementine sighed and then pushed to her feet.

"I'd say." It was Boone's estimation that things were likely to get more complicated whenever Clementine was around. "And what screamed to set off the *Draug* in the first place?"

"I don't know." She stood at his side, studying the barn below.

"Them things the same as that German village you was in, Miss Clem?" Hank asked, moving up next to Clementine.

"The Day of Decay," Boone remembered out loud. His thoughts flitted through Clementine's story about the battle she and her grandfather had fought against a village full of *Draug*. "If I recollect," Boone said, "those *Draug* were made from freshly dead people." He looked around to see all three of them staring at him.

"Booney, c'mon now." Rabbit grimaced. "They ain't beef hangin' on the hook."

Clementine nodded at Boone. "Most of those in Kremplestadt were newly dead, whereas these *Draug* here are well dead."

"Does that make a difference?" Rabbit asked.

"I don't know." She wrinkled her nose. "They smell worse."

"Blah. Think if it was a summer day. Flesh and guts rotting in the hot sun." Rabbit stifled a gag.

"Jack Rabbit! That's a revoltin' thought." Hank shuddered.

"How many were in that German village?" Boone waved an arm at the barn. "That many?"

"Fewer, if I had to guess."

Boone frowned at her. "Then that's too many for just the four of us, right?"

She didn't answer, but instead stared at the valley below, her brow furrowed.

“Seems like too many,” Rabbit answered for her.

“Might be we should get us somebody to back our play, Miss Clem?” Hank suggested.

Clementine still didn’t answer.

Why was she hesitating? “Let me sum everything up to now,” Boone said, leaning over into her line of sight until she made eye contact with him. “We’re facing dead-but-walking, half-witted, pestilence-spreading, rotting corpses that may or may not be able to change their appearance at will, and—I can’t believe I’m saying this—may or may not be able to make themselves bigger. Oh, and they might or might not be unusually strong.”

Clementine pursed her lips. “That’s about right.”

“And not just one or a couple, but hundreds,” Boone added.

“Don’t forget the smell.” Rabbit buck-snorted at the snow.

“Or that dad-blasted, ghosty devil that’ll probably do one or three of us in,” Hank tacked on.

“Not to mention,” Boone continued, still not finished making his case. “We have no idea what to expect in that barn.”

“*And* the four-leggers out in the trees lookin’ for some Sidewinder vittles.” Hank poked at Rabbit.

“We can expect some *Draug*,” Clementine replied with a shrug.

Boone threw up his hands. “Lordy, woman! I’m talking about whatever it was that herded the *Draug* in there.”

Rabbit used his deep voice. “*El Vaquero*.”

Boone felt his eye twitch.

“Easy now, Booney.” Rabbit patted Boone’s shoulder. “We don’t *know* that they can grow extra big. Or change the way they look. We don’t know they’re strong as an ox, neither.”

“Well ...” Clementine scratched under the side of her fur trapper’s hat and scrunched her face. “They are powerful. I once saw one—”

“Miss Clementine,” Rabbit interrupted. “You ain’t helpin’!”

She pinched her lips together, her gray eyes turning to Boone.

“Right.” Boone held her stare, wishing they could climb on their horses and ride out, back to hot coffee and a warm supper. But he knew Clementine too well. “Is there anything else we don’t know about *Draug*? Anything else that you might have ‘forgotten’ to mention?”

“Well, there’s one other thing.” She picked up her pack. The cold, fierce look was back in her eyes.

Boone grimaced. “What now?”

She leaned closer to him. “They like to eat warm brains.”

Hank looked away and coughed into his fist.

Boone gaped at her. “They *what*?”

Rabbit frowned. “No how!”

She grinned. “I made that up.” She strung her pack over her shoulder and began picking her way down the embankment toward the town below. “See, it’s not as bad as it could be. Now, are you boys ready to go kill some *Draug*?”

