

Cowboys & Dragons

El Dorado

From Marco R. Baier

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The water of the pond was red with blood. It boiled and churned from the fight that was raging on below its surface, birthing pink foam that slowly drifted away in the current. Shock saturated the heavy air, it was fueled by the panic-stricken screams of a soldier who tried to stanch the blood gushing from the stump where his right arm had been. That fellow had been the first to climb the rocks that led to the waterfall. He had been careless—and unlucky. The dragon lying in wait behind the veil of falling water had made sure he would remember that for the rest of his life.

“Come on, come on, Az,” whispered Eddy, his gilded revolver in hand, scanning the water for any sign of the dragon or his best friend and partner, who, as usual when a wyrm needed killing, had lost no time diving into danger.

In this case, that meant jumping on the dragon’s back with nothing but his Bowie knife.

Azrael’s gloved hand, holding the knife in a reverse grip, tore through the foaming surface and disappeared just as quickly to be replaced by an equally brief view of a pale reptilian underbelly as the beast desperately rolled in the water to get rid of his attacker.

The soldiers started firing, their bullets whipping the water.

“Stop shooting,” shouted Eddy, worried they might hit his partner.

The order was repeated, albeit this time in flawless Spanish, by Marquis Isidro de Orellana, their employer on this ill-begotten adventure. The firing ceased instantly. The Marquis kept his dogs on a tight leash; Eddy at least had to give him that.

The struggle continued—a good sign, Eddy hoped. The beast was small for its kind, barely larger than a horse; it was ugly and wingless, a land hunting variation Eddy had not seen before. It reminded him more of a gargantuan lizard than the winged terrors that ruled the skies. Still, it had proven its deadliness once already, and even though Eddy knew no man more apt in the business of killing than Azrael—and Eddy knew many men in that line of work—he was still worried that his partner would run out of air soon.

A tense minute passed, and then the water took on an even deeper hue as more blood was spilled. Moments later, pink entrails rose toward the surface and floated away like snakes on the escape. The ugly, reptilian head of the dragon surfaced.

“Fuck!” Eddy fired.

In quick succession, Eddy emptied his revolver. He was sure that at least two bullets hit their mark, yet the beast did not move. Suddenly he realized he was the only one firing.

“It’s already dead,” grunted Azrael, panting heavily. Eddy almost slipped on the wet stones, so surprised was he to hear his partner’s voice. Azrael had surfaced a few feet away from him to his left.

“Not bad, Señor Grimes,” the Marquis complimented Azrael. “I can see your reputation is well earned.”

Azrael looked pleased, though Eddy knew it was not due to the compliment he had just received. Killing dragons always made him happy, and happiness was something seldom seen in the grim bounty killer.

Tall, pale, and as thin as a greyhound, he was clad in soaking wet black garments of sturdy cloth and leather. He carried more weapons than a small armory; two Colts dangled on crossed belts across his hip, and two sawed-off Buffalo rifles loomed from holsters strapped to his back by a pair of ammo belts crossing his chest. Brushing away an intestine that had been caught around his neck, he tucked away his huge knife in the sheath in his boot, the serrated blade looking as hungry as always.

The bounty killer gave Eddy a queer grin, and once more Eddy thought that in a beauty contest between the Grim Reaper and Azrael, the Grim Reaper would win. Horribly mutilated, most of the left side of his face was a mass of black scar tissue, a reminder of how dangerous dragon fire was. His left ear was gone, and yellow bone stretched from the temple to the back of his head, a few resilient tendons stretching over it stubbornly like a net. His left eye was white and blind and sat in the surrounding scar tissue like an exotic spider in a web. In contrast, apart from a smaller scar here and there, the right of his face remained mostly unharmed. Azrael had been a good looking man once, handsome in a cruel way.

Now he was a monster.

“Ahh, there you are,” the aged dragon killer grunted, reaching back into the water and snatching up his black hat. It had a broad rim, and a band of dragon-leather strapped the fist-sized skull of a dragon-hatchling to it. Azrael valued the hat even more than Eddy loved his gilded Peacemaker. He claimed that it was the skull of the first dragon he had ever killed, the same dragon that killed his two brothers. Eddy had never believed the story until one day, when he was drunk, the bounty killer had revealed how he slew this particular dragon.

At some point Azrael’s father, a dragon killer himself, threw his three kids, one after the other, into a pit with the dragon spawn. Alone, no older than three years, they had to fight the hungry beast for their lives. His two brethren died in that pit, yet Azrael survived and killed the dragon spawn with the split femur of one of his siblings.

Survival of the fittest, Azrael's father had called it.

After that, Eddy had avoided drinking too much with Azrael.

"Here, I'll give you a hand," Eddy said. He reached out for Azrael but slipped and fell into the pool himself. He came up, spewing water.

The mocking faces of the Marquis's soldiers greeted him. *At least the waterfall is blocking out their laughter*, he thought. Big and brutish men, the soldiers were in many ways the stark opposite of Eddy, who physically was the absolute average human being, a fact he covered with extraordinarily luxurious garments and equipment. Though, in the last three days, traveling through the jungles of the Incan Kingdom, he had wished a hundred times that he had traded his tailored suit for one of the bland uniforms of the soldiers. But then again, if he was about to die, he would do so in style, in his best suit—his only suit—with his gilded Peacemaker at his side. And of course his mouthful of gold teeth to prove that Eddy had done something with his life and risen from his meager beginnings as a poor dragon-egg thief to become . . .

Well, a richer dragon-egg thief.

"Enough delay. El Dorado is waiting," shouted the Marquis over the roaring of the waterfall in an imperious tone. In his twenties and therefore not much older than Eddy, he was tall, dark, and handsome.

Eddy hated him.

Reason for his hatred, apart from a bit of envy and general dislike toward rich and arrogant people, was the pale beauty standing at the Marquis's side: Isabella, his breathtakingly beautiful assistant and bodyguard.

Slender and small, she wore tight-fitting black military garments like the Marquis as well as knee-high riding boots. Dark, shoulder-length hair framed a perfectly symmetrical face, blue eyes, and lips red as cherries. At her hip hung a plain and functional German pistol and a richly adorned foot-long stiletto.

Life ain't fair, Eddy thought sullenly as his gaze lingered on her for a moment. The Marquis whispered something in her ear, and with a nod, she turned toward the wounded soldier being cared for by a comrade who tried unsuccessfully to stem the flow of blood. Without a word of warning, Isabella drew the stiletto and stabbed the wounded soldier through the heart. His comrade withdrew in shock, and the curses of the other soldiers filled the air.

"El Dorado is waiting, gentlemen," droned the Marquis, overshadowing the event, not even a hint of compassion on his cruel and handsome features. "We all knew sacrifices would have to be made. Let's hope this is the last one. Don't forget, the pride of the Incan Nations is hidden inside this mountain. El Dorado, the Golden City, and together we will snatch more riches out from under the dragon's paws than you could ever imagine. You will go home as kings!"

Greedy grins found their way onto the faces of the soldiers, their bleeding-out comrade already forgotten. Eddy had to hand it to him: the Marquis knew how to motivate his men—and how to intimidate them. Moments later, they were on the move again.

The remainder of their group—six soldiers, Eddy, Azrael, the Marquis Orellana, and Isabella—climbed up the slippery stones and passed under the cascade of falling water. It was colder here, which proved to be a short but welcome reprieve from the smothering heat of the jungle. Even more appealing for Eddy was how the wet clothes of Isabella's uniform clung to her like a second skin. When they paused, he briefly felt butterflies welling up in his stomach as his gaze wandered up her lean frame like the hands of a lover—until he met her face. She was staring at him, her eyebrow crooked, a knowing smile playing at the angle of her mouth. Suddenly the picture of her killing the soldier pushed itself into Eddy's mind and he quickly turned around, pretending to look at something. Anything.

And there he saw it—a tunnel leading into the mountain became visible for a second as the water spray that was around them like fog lifted for a second. It was a tunnel, more foreboding than all the dragon lairs Eddy had ever laid eyes upon. It was covered in spiderwebs so thick that they could serve as a man's blanket. Animal and human bones lay scattered across the ground in front of the entrance. Suddenly, Eddy was very happy to have so many guns at his disposal. He told the others of his discovery, and they gathered in front of the entrance.

“This must be the secret tunnel to El Dorado my ancestor was rambling about. The secret tunnel to El Dorado through which he escaped more than 300 years ago,” said the Marquis, wiping his wet black hair from his face. “It is time to prove your worth, Señor Finn. Lead the way.”

Eddy's jaw dropped. “You want me to do what?”

“The way!” the Marquis repeated, his fingers playing impatiently with the cavalry sabre on his side. “Señor Grimes assured us that there is no man in the world with a better sense of direction when it comes to traveling caves—or avoiding dangers. You are like a mole-man, yes? So . . .” He pointed toward the cave. “Find us the way!”

Eddy stared at Azrael in disbelief. His long-time buddy and comrade-in-arms shrugged slowly and lifted his remaining eyebrow in a feeble and silent apology.

Eddy was about to object, yet as he looked into the faces of the surrounding soldiers, he thought otherwise. They were all exhausted from their trek through the jungle, yet a hunger for gold burned in their eyes—a hunger that could quickly turn into bloodlust if he didn't play his cards right.

In angry defeat Eddy grabbed a lamp from the hands of one of the soldiers and went toward the opening, grumbling under his breath, “Mole-man, I show you a mole you stupid f . . .”

“And Señor Finn,” added the Marquis while tying back his long hair into a ponytail, a hint of glee in his dark eyes. “Beware of the spiders.”

“Beware of the—what?” blurted Eddy, turning around, his eyes going big.

A mix of annoyance and satisfaction flashed over the Marquis's handsome features, "The spiders! The guardians of the caves. Didn't Señor Grimes tell you anything?"

Azrael spat out and said, "No need startling a horse by shaking a rattlesnake tail."

Eddy glared at him.

As an answer, Azrael pulled out his revolver and Bowie knife, then walked toward the cave, a cold grin on his mutilated face, "Can't be worse than the jungle, eh partner? Let's go."

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Twenty minutes in, the way through the tunnel had been eerie but uneventful so far. The craggy walls were covered in spider silk, and the shadows were as black as ink and as deep as souls, yet so far they had seen not a single spider cross their path. However, there was no mistaking they were there. The flickering light of the torches and lamps was reflected by small onyx eyes that regarded their passing coldly and indifferently. They hid in the cracks and web-covered niches, their hairy bodies just beyond the reach of light. It made Eddy's skin crawl. His rational mind told him that the spiders were more afraid of them than the other way around, that he and the others were too large and too big a group to be considered food. Yet from the sheer size of the prey that hung in smaller and larger nets or entwined in cocoons—bats, rats, and all kinds of giant insects—he started to wonder when these spiders might start thinking of them as just big enough for a nice treat.

The unspoken question was answered ten minutes later as they stepped into a natural chamber that was at least twenty feet high and wide enough to provide room for a camp of twenty men. At the other end, they saw the broken shell of a beast that made Eddy question his place in the food chain.

"Madre de dios!" one of the soldiers said in a hushed tone behind him. Eddy agreed.

It was a dragon. Twice the size of a horse, its wings must have measured at least thirty feet in flight; now it was a mummified reminder that, regardless how big, mean, and scary you are, there is always something bigger around to make your life miserable. Enshrouded in silk strands as thick as ropes, its body was an empty husk, the skin and scales as brittle as old parchment. In places the hide stretched over the mighty bones like leather on a drum. It lay on its side, half strapped to the wall between two different tunnels, its right wing broken and crushed under its own mass.

"It must have been dead already," said the Marquis, his fingers running over the lines of his razor-thin mustache in a nervous gesture. With a firmer voice and a nod to his men, he added, "Look, its wings are broken. It probably died of natural causes, and the spiders just fed on the carcass. "

Eddy thought he didn't sound too convincing, but judging from the nodding and mumbling of his soldiers the men seemed to buy it.

"Enough talk," grunted Azrael, rotating the barrel of his revolver. "Let's move on and shoot anything that's bigger and has more eyes than a dog."

Staring warily into the shadows, they moved forward.

“Which way?” asked Azrael once they stood before the mummified dragon and the two gaping tunnels.

Eddy looked at him, puzzled. “How should I know?”

“Well,” said Azrael, scratching his scarred cheek, “one of these tunnels leads to the famous city of El Dorado, a place that holds more riches than any man could ever dream of. Riches that can be used to buy a lifetime of pleasure from those whores you fancy so much.”

“Hey!” Eddy interrupted, looking nervously over his shoulder to see if Isabella had heard that. As usual, her face remained unreadable. Knowing his luck with women, Eddy thought she probably had.

Damn!

“The other tunnel will most likely lead to our grave . . .” continued Azrael. He grinned at Eddy. “If anybody can pick the right one just from a hunch, it is you. So, which is the right way?”

Eddy opened his mouth, closed it again, lifted his hand, and tried to speak. No words came to mind. Then he looked at the tunnels. “The right way . . .” he said hesitantly. “The right way is . . . is the right way.”

Blank faces stared at him

“The right tunnel!” he uttered, harried.

“Good enough for me,” said Azrael, and he walked toward the darkness.

“Wait a second. What logic is that?” interrupted a stocky soldier from the rear.

“He’s good in those things,” murmured Azrael, eyes on the tunnel, not bothering to look back. “He ain’t strong, smart, good looking, or fast . . .”

“Hey!” blurted Eddy as his stung pride registered the insult.

“. . . but he’s very lucky and has good instincts,” concluded Azrael. “Let’s go.”

“That’s idiotic,” replied the soldier, pushing his comrades aside and moving forward. “‘The right way is the right way.’ That is the stupidest thing I ever heard.” He stepped in front of the Marquis. “Master Orellana, you have been cheated. This man is an idiot! Do you feel the breeze coming from the right tunnel? Most likely, it will lead back to the surface. The air here”—he walked to the left tunnel—“is stale. El Dorado is underground, so it is only logical that—”

He never finished the sentence.

As he passed by the carcass of the dragon, a concealed spider the size of a mastiff jumped from its hiding spot in the hollow chest of the beast and pierced him with two spear-like legs that were as long as a man was tall, then dragged him back into the carcass. His screams were cut short as the gargantuan

arachnid sank two venom-dripping fangs the size of daggers into his face. It was over in the blink of an eye.

The shock lingered in the air like a bad smell.

“Anybody still having problems with the *right way*?” asked Azrael, his voice as calm as if he were talking about the weather.

“I am good with the right one,” said the Marquis, his face as ashen as the cobwebs all around them. Isabella, a shadow at his side, nodded slowly.

“The right way!” blurted a soldier.

“Right!” agreed another.

“Si. Si. El de la derecha!” the others were quick to add.

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They followed the winding tunnels for what seemed like hours, treading carefully every step of the way. The tunnel system was vast and labyrinthine; they crossed over narrow ledges spanning vast chasms, passed by subterranean lakes with water as dark and clear as the night sky. It was a place of beauty, yet also of horror. Eddy had to be pushed onward by Azrael on several occasions when they encountered the corpses of both beasts and humans who had fallen victim to the many dangers of the caves.

On one occasion they stumbled upon a mummified corpse no one could recognize at first. Cocooned against the wall, it had no head. Instead, a spider the size of a cat rose up from the shoulders, its legs curled below its body in a fashion that made it look as if they belonged to the torso. Eddy thought for a moment that the dead man was coming back to life. The sight almost sent Eddy running back down the tunnel, screaming. He managed to endure somehow, the guns to his back outweighing the dangers in front of him just slightly.

It was much to his relief when he saw sunlight, bright and pure, illuminating the end of the tunnel ahead of him. A fresh breeze played with the cobwebs shrouding the tunnel walls, yet his relief was cut short, because carried on the wind were the baying, screeching, and roaring of dragons. Inching his way toward the light, Azrael closed behind him, while the others waited back. Eddy saw that the tunnel ended abruptly and opened into the gaping maw of a shaft of enormous dimensions. As he edged closer, the cacophony of sound became louder, as did an almost oppressive smell of reptile.

Overcoming his disgust with the cobwebs covering the walls, Eddy slid past them and closer to the opening, trying to make himself as small as possible. Once he reached the rim, he saw himself staring into a shaft at least three hundred feet across that spiraled downwards into a bottomless pit. Swallowing hard, he wrested his gaze from the depths and, staring up, saw that the shaft reached upwards for several hundred feet, gradually widening to a funnel. The sun was just setting, and shadows

were beginning to darken the walls of the shaft. Against the darkening sky, Eddy could see dozens of bat-like shapes flying and gliding above him.

It was a dragon den, the largest Eddy had ever seen or heard of. The gargantuan reptiles had made their lairs and nesting spots all along the walls of the shaft and soared in and out of their habitat by the dozen. The craggy walls were soiled by dragon guano and littered with the split bones of their prey. The air quivered with their roars.

Suddenly a strong hand pushed Eddy toward the pit and into oblivion—his heart skipped a beat—but then the hand was back, grabbing his arm and pulling him to safety. Eddy jerked his head around, his one hand coming up in defense while the other clawed for some hold on the wall. Secure again, he found himself staring into Azrael’s skull-face. He was grinning like a boy.

“Just kidding,” he said.

There was a gleam in the eyes of the dragon killer as he looked past Eddy and at the flock of dragons, something that Eddy had learned to recognize as sincere happiness. He didn’t want to spoil this moment for the bounty hunter—even though he very much wanted to punch him in the face.

“So,” Azrael said, his eyes still fixed on the soaring dragons, “where to go from here?”

A good question.

Eddy scratched the back of his head, peering again into the shaft. It was riddled with holes and openings, like maggot-infested cheese. He didn’t fancy the thought of climbing out into the shaft to another tunnel, but the thought of going back was even less appealing. And probably more dangerous, considering how edgy the soldiers were by this point.

At least there seem to be no spiders in the shaft, he thought, and it was true. There was no proof of arachnid life in the vast shaft apart from the odd torn web. Probably the dragons picked them off from time to time, adding the spiders to their menu. The thought of him hanging out there pushed itself into Eddy’s mind. He would be defenseless while a flock of dragons soared above him.

If just one of them looked down . . .

Before he could conclude the thought, Azrael nudged him and pointed toward the left side of the shaft. Following his outstretched finger, Eddy saw an opening not far from them in the wall that was unlike all the others. It was caked in filth, and a constant trickle of dirty water was flowing from it. Its size seemed big enough for a man to crawl through on his knees, and a vile smell wafted over to him. It reeked of rotting flesh, waste, and human excretions. He turned back to Azrael.

“Shit,” said Eddy.

The dragon killer gave him a queer grin.

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“Well that was fun,” grunted Eddy while wiping a splash of grime from his face, and his words were partially true. For a change, it had not been he who had to climb up the sewer shaft first. Isabella, lithe and nimble, had taken the lead in venturing up the stinking tunnel, securing it by rope and hook.

At first, he had objected to her going, volunteering himself to lead while an astonished voice in his head asked, *Wait, who said that?* In the end, however, after creeping upward through the filth like a cockroach, he had been blessed with a glimpse of heaven—Isabella’s bosoms close and directly in front of his eyes as she hauled him up through the large bell-mouthed drainage opening that led into this room from the small muck tunnel.

He grinned dreamily while cleaning more filth from his suit.

“Does this amuse you?” the Marquis demanded to know.

Lost in thought, Eddy had not noticed that his dream-clouded eyes had rested on the Marquis, who was even more covered in filth than he. The disgusted look on his face spoke volumes of how he felt about that, and his eyes were like poisonous daggers aimed directly at Eddy.

Eddy gave him a wide grin, flashing his golden teeth, nodding, but saying loud and clearly, “No.”

Then he turned his back and quickly stepped toward his partner, bringing the other man’s tall frame between himself and the noble. He glanced back. The Marquis had murder in his eyes. Eddy allowed himself a hidden smile.

“Some sort of sewer system,” Azrael said into the emptiness of the large circular chamber while looking around. The room had been hewn from rough stone and seemed to be a confluence of several drainages, all significantly smaller than the one they had entered through. Dirty water and garbage sloshed and trickled down the drainages like small tainted waterfalls to disappear into the bell-mouthed shaft they had emerged from. The chamber was empty, yet signs of human life were easily found. An odd-looking piece of a chair, an oily old rope, several strange gadgets, and what looked like an abnormally long poker stood in the corner.

“It must be the sewers Francisco de Orellana managed to escape through all those years ago,” said Isabella, who had appeared beside Eddy like a newly cast shadow. The quietness with which she had moved startled him.

“Should not be far, then,” added the Marquis as he closed the distance to the trio, his eyes full of venom as he regarded Eddy. He pointed at a shadow-shrouded corridor that led away into the darkness. “That should bring us to the Corridor of Golden Corpses,” he said.

“Ok, that’s it!” hissed Eddy. “An army of dragons, giant spiders, stinking sewer tunnels, and now ‘Golden Corpses’?”

He glared up at Azrael, ignoring the baffled looks of the others. “What else did you not tell me about? What other horror is waiting for us in the mountain?”

Azrael regarded him coldly, then said with a grin, “Only the God of the Dragons—if I am lucky.”

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After the dark corridor and a secret door that opened on silent hinges, the group found themselves in a world that was the stark opposite of the stinking sewers they had just climbed up from.

They found themselves in the beating heart of El Dorado.

Strange sounds and smells greeted them. The air was hot and dry and smelled faintly of rotten eggs, and they could hear chanting echoing down the corridor. There was a torch every ten feet down the wall, and together they illuminated more riches than Eddy had ever seen in his life. Gold and precious stones had been worked into the floor, walls, and even the ceiling to create intricate geometrical patterns of marvelous craftsmanship. There were also stone reliefs with gold highlighting scenes of Incan history, and others depicting their pantheon of gods, scenes of war, and what seemed to be human sacrifices.

They told a story that was as old as it was cruel, yet Eddy had little interest in their intellectual worth. He was more interested in the practical value. He had labored in gold mines, so he had seen his fair share of gold veins; none of them came even close to the amount of wealth that shone all around him.

Confronted with the riches and nobody in sight to stop them, the soldiers tried to pry off some gems and gold inlays from the walls, yet a hiss from their master jerked them back like dogs on a leash. There would be time enough to loot once he had what they came for, he promised. Like good dogs, the soldiers obeyed. Eddy was about to object, yet a slight shake of Azrael’s head convinced him otherwise. He sullenly did as he was told.

Following Isabella’s lead as she nimbly and silently moved from shadow to shadow, they soon found the Corridor of Golden Corpses, a broad passageway with gold statues that lined both sides of the wide corridor like silent guards.

The detail that went into the statues was astonishing; they looked so alive that Eddy had to touch one to be sure it was not. They all depicted humans, apparently Incas of importance: warriors with swords and spears in their hands, priests with golden tablets, even kings. Almost all of them were unified by one thing, however. Agony was etched into their faces, mostly suppressed, sometimes openly visible.

All gave Eddy the shudders.

“This is it,” murmured the Marquis as he saw the statues, his eyes bright with a hungry gleam. “The Alley of Tormented Souls, the Corridor of Corpses my ancestor rambled about. It will lead us to a gallery right above the temple. There we will find the Black Diamond.”

Eddy found the fervor in his voice a bit unnerving, even by his standards. He was about to comment on it to Azrael as they suddenly found themselves confronted with an Inca that came round a corridor in front of them. He seemed positively shocked to see their little raiding party and froze in his tracks. He was young, not older than twenty, and wore little more than a loincloth and two necklaces around his throat.

His eyes went wide in surprise, his mouth following quickly after to give voice to it, but no sound ever left his lips. A stiletto suddenly appeared in his throat. Isabella's stiletto. It had been hurled so quickly that, to Eddy's eyes, it appeared as if it had materialized from thin air. The Inca gurgled, blood gushing from the wound in his neck and from his mouth, and then he went down on his knees, dropping a small sack he had been carrying.

Azrael surged forward, getting beyond the collapsing Inca and covering the corridor from which he had appeared.

The outburst of violence passed as quickly as it came and left Eddy with a bad taste in his mouth.

"A messenger, maybe," said the Marquis, giving the heel of the Inca a small kick. "Hide him in the shadows. We had best not be here when somebody starts missing him."

After that they moved on even more carefully. Suppressing a pang of guilt, Eddy looked back at the alcove where they had stashed the body of the dead Inca; he hoped that this would be the last man they encountered.

More silently now, to avoid any other detection, they moved on, hugging every shadow they could find.

Once, while Eddy was hiding behind a statue—Isabella had given them a sign to lay low because of a group of Incas crossing the corridor ahead of them—he quickly reached upward to pry off the pinky of the figure above him. The golden digit came off surprisingly easily. A moment later Eddy realized why: it was hollow. Inside it, Eddy could see a human finger bone. Dust trickled from the hole in the statue's hand and tainted the air. Eddy swallowed hard and held his breath so as not to inhale the dust; he was relieved soon after when Isabella gave them the sign to move on.

The noble's words remained true, and they soon entered onto a large balcony that curved out of sight to the left and right. It was so richly adorned that the corridor they had just traveled through faded in comparison. Jewels of all sizes and types spotted the wall of massive gold, yet as impressive as it was, all paled as their eyes fell on the sight beyond the edge of the parapet.

A vast cave-chamber, oval in shape, stretched out in front of them for hundreds of leagues and was home to a lake unlike any they had ever seen: a lake of molten gold. Hundreds of small fires danced, died, and were reborn across its surface, illuminating everything in a warm orange glow. The air was sweltering and tasted of metal. Sweat began to run down Eddy's face, and not all because of the heat.

The sheer dimensions of the cave were mindboggling. Eddy had seen whole towns take up less space than the lake that filled the cave, the yellow metal bubbling and boiling like stew in a kettle. Following a visible bend, the gallery seemed to run around half the cave. On the lower level, Eddy could make out a tongue of rock reaching into the lake. At least five hundred feet in length, it rose fifteen feet over the boiling metal and seemed to be twice as wide. It reminded Eddy of a massive jetty.

Dozens of women, their lean bodies naked and covered in gold dust, danced on the jetty like candle flames in the wind. Their movements were slow, sensual, and mesmerizing. Eddy would have enjoyed

watching them if not for the giant beast looming on the platform at the end of the jetty. It was the largest dragon he had ever seen in his life.

“The Dragongod,” he whispered.

The beast was huge. His body was as large as a small house, and on a serpentine neck rested a head with dagger-long teeth in a mouth that was big enough to swallow a man whole. Ebony horns, each as long as he was tall, sprouted from his reptilian skull like a crown. His leathery body was the color of sand and bulged with enormous muscles that twitched slightly as he listened to the siren song the naked dancers were humming. In an almost relaxed fashion—like a tired man stretching his arms—he spread his sail-sized wings and refolded them around his mass like a king shrouding himself in his cape.

Suddenly Eddy had lost all interest in gold and riches. There was no chance that a group as small as theirs could defeat a beast as glorious and dreadful as this. An army would not be enough. All but Azrael cowered in a primeval mix of fear and respect behind the wall of the parapet, their eyes and mouths wide open as they regarded this terror. The dragon killer, however, stood unimpressed and stared at the beast from the shadow of a column.

A new chant filled the cave—stronger, more forceful, initiated by a tall woman with a feather-topped headpiece in the form of a stylized dragon’s head. She stood in front of a vast block of gold that immediately reminded Eddy of an altar. Was she a ceremonial master? A priestess? Eddy was not sure what to make of her. She was definitely of some importance, since she stood closest to the dragon, atop a small staircase that led to the platform the beast rested upon. The dancers fell in quickly with her song, their bodies contorting and quivering in ecstasy as if they made love to an invisible lover.

Eddy found his previous terror fleeing, giving way to a more pleasant feeling that welled up inside him. Against his will, he smiled, then noticed that Isabella had crawled up to him and was looking at him reproachfully. He grinned, apologetic, and shrugged. Isabella rolled her eyes and focused on the ceremony again.

Performing some sort of ritual, the high priestess now raised a black diamond the size of a human skull toward the gargantuan beast like an offering. Eddy could hear the Marquis gasp for air. The high priestess gently moved the gemstone to the left and right, the women behind her mimicking the movement. The dragon seemed mesmerized, his forked tongue tasting the air.

“What a beast,” murmured the Marquis, his voice for once having lost its arrogant tone.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” agreed Isabella, slightly more composed. Hushed whispers of the soldiers around them spoke in equal awe.

Only Azrael remained quiet. As Eddy looked at him, he found that his partner even seemed disappointed.

Crawling toward him, Eddy whispered, “What’s wrong?”

The bounty killer, his eyes still on the dragon, shrugged slowly before he replied, "I envisioned him bigger . . ."

"Well," said Eddy, realizing once more how nuts his partner was, "we can't always get what we want."

Azrael grunted. Then Eddy saw something unnerving. The grim dragon killer's face took on a surprised expression. His eyes went wide; his mouth fell open.

"What the . . ." he said, then lost his voice.

Alarmed, Eddy followed his gaze.

Slowly, something huge lifted itself from the lake behind the platform. Like a mountain it rose from the golden tides, torrents of liquid metal cascading down its form like waterfalls. The sheer size of it was hard to comprehend; it dwarfed even the dragon on the platform. With nameless terror, Eddy realized that they had been wrong. The dragon on the platform was not the Dragongod. He may have been the biggest dragon he had ever seen, truly a king of his kind, but compared to the behemoth that now reared his ugly head, the smaller dragon was nothing.

A clawed paw bigger than a horse-drawn carriage slowly rose and then came down on the mesmerized dragon, slamming him to the ground with so much force that his bones shattered like glass and his abdomen ruptured, sending entrails spilling over the ground. The high priestess jumped back in order to avoid the carnage, and the song came to an abrupt end. Instead, the doomed dragon's agonized roar filled the cave and echoed off the walls. Desperately he tried to wriggle free in an almost pitiful attempt to escape, his claws scratching over the golden jetty, tearing layers of gold from the stone, yet to no avail. Behind him, more details of the Dragongod became visible as, like a wet dog, he lazily shook the gold from his frame.

The brute was ugly. Not even the gold that still covered him could hide that.

Dragons had always reminded Eddy of cats, with their feline eyes, their graceful movements, and the sheer cruelty with which they struck their prey. This monstrosity was nothing like that. If anything, his squat muscular form reminded Eddy of a pit bull, one who had seen plenty of battles in its life. His massive form was pitted with scars as deep and broad as trenches; the brutish head sat on a muscle-gnarled short neck that was broader than it was high; and his teeth were larger than grown men. He had no wings, yet two bony stumps rose from his massive back like lightning-split trees, indicating that this had not always been the case.

Most unsettling, however, were the eyes. They were as black and cold as the eyes of the spiders Eddy had seen in the caves, yet within them burned an alien intelligence that he had never seen in man or beast. Of one thing he was sure, however . . .

The brute was enjoying this.

The trapped dragon-king roared in defiance and tried to free himself with a last desperate attack by breathing fire at the cruel god, but to no avail. The seething flames only helped to dissipate the remaining gold that clung to the short neck, revealing skin that looked like black rock. The Dragongod made a sound that reminded Eddy of two cliffs grinding against each other—a chuckle, he was sure. Then, like a Rottweiler killing a cat, the Dragongod snapped his jaws shut around the smaller monster’s neck and, with one terribly slow movement, tore his head off.

The king stopped twitching, and the god began to feed.

Everyone, even Azrael, followed the grisly spectacle in shocked silence. Once the god had satisfied his hunger, he sloshed back below the golden surface of the lake, and the priestess and the dancers left the jetty, leaving the Black Diamond behind on the gold altar. Eddy was reminded of cheese in a mousetrap.

He slumped behind the parapet like a wet sock sliding down a wall until he rested on his ass. He was drenched in sweat and thirstily gulped the rest of the water from his bottle. He craned his neck over to look at Azrael and was about to say, “Be careful what you wish for,” but thought otherwise when he saw the dragon killer’s face.

What he had mistaken for awe or even shock had been something completely different . . .

Azrael Grimes’s face was now showing an expression of bliss.

He had gotten what he wished for.

###

A short while later, the distant sound of chanting echoed through the caves and corridors. Eddy was both glad and worried that they had not seen a single guard so far, but the Marquis argued that in a place like this, guards would serve little purpose.

Just by looking at the splendor around him, Eddy knew the noble was right. In a city as rich as this, there would be no need to steal, especially if it would mean bringing down the wrath of God—literally. He also wondered aloud what use this gallery served, and again the Marquis educated him—in a somewhat annoyed tone—that it was for the population of El Dorado to behold and revere their god in more public ceremonies. All of a sudden Eddy realized that in a very real sense, they were in a church, trying to rob the cross from the altar.

The Marquis, Isabella, and Azrael crouched in the shadow of a pillar and talked about their next course of action, while the soldiers took to the task of securing the approaches to their position. Left to himself, Eddy used the time to secretly pry some of the gems from the walls and—after the Dragongod did not show his head to strike him down for his insolence—let them disappear into the pockets of his torn suit.

No one noticed him, and once Eddy had looted enough riches—the stones in his left pocket alone would enable him to spend the remainder of his days in the bordello of his choosing—he joined the others just as they finalized their plan.

In the end, their plan was so simple that Eddy could have come up with it in a second: go down, grab the diamond, and get the hell out. When Eddy asked what they should do if something went wrong, Azrael merely shrugged. “Improvise.”

“And I am sure you want me to snatch the stone,” snorted Eddy. “Like with the dragon eggs, right, Az? Because”—his voice imitated the gravel tone of Azrael—“he may have no skill, but he has more luck than any other man I—what?”

A faint smile appeared on Azrael’s face and stopped Eddy mid-ramble. The expression was strangely gentle, not befitting the killer’s mutilated features.

“I want you to stay here,” said Azrael. “You pulled your weight, partner, and I know fate has something else in store for you.”

Eddy did not quite know how to reply, and he never got the chance since the bounty killer turned his back on him and started moving down the gallery. Some hissed commands from the Marquis, and everybody fell in behind.

Eddy felt relieved as he hustled down the gallery with the others. He had expected to be the decoy, the one to pull the chestnuts out of the fire while Azrael protected his back, as it had always been in the past. This kindness was not the usual treatment from his grim partner.

Then Eddy realized what it meant. Azrael did not expect to succeed. He did not expect to survive whatever would come next, and this was his parting gift.

The insight hit Eddy like a hammer.

###

Azrael and Isabella went down to the jetty first, each on a rope fastened to the pillars lining the gallery. Once they gave the all clear, the Marquis followed with four of his remaining soldiers. The fifth, a burly fellow with a huge mustache, its tips hanging sadly down his face, remained with Eddy. If this was due to the Marquis doubting him or not trusting him to do the right thing if the situation got dire, Eddy could not tell.

Right then he couldn’t have cared less.

Eddy felt betrayed, happy, sad, and numb at the same time, an unusual cocktail for him to stomach.

He called himself stupid; after all, he was lucky to not be down there with the others. However, for the past three years, it had been he who walked into this sort of danger—usually with the threat and support of Azrael’s gun in his back, but still. This was his kind of thing, the sneaking, the crawling, the stealing. For Christ’s sake, he thought, it was he who was the one with the luck!

Azrael was a killer. It was the one thing he was better at than anyone else, but he was no thief, and the Marquis was nothing but a foppish dandy in Eddy’s eyes. Only Isabella moved with the grace and stealth

that befitted a delicate job like this, but seeing the beautiful bodyguard down in the danger zone while he was left behind like a lame horse . . . it didn't sit well with him. What annoyed him even more was that he should have been happy to be up here, safe, but he was not. He thought himself stupid for this and became angrier by the second.

"No worries, Mister Finn," interrupted the soldier, hunkering down beside Eddy, now voicing his thoughts. "Everything will be fine, yes."

"Ah yeah? What makes you think that?" Eddy hissed, not bothering to look at the man.

"The dragon just eaten. Probably sleeping now and lying at ground of lake."

"Is that so? Tell me then, how many dragons have you seen that are as large as mountains and sleep on the bottom of a sea of molten metal?"

The soldier opened his mouth, but no answer came out.

"I thought so," said Eddy, focusing again on the trio that by now had made its way over the jetty and carefully approached the golden altar on top of which the Black Diamond rested. Eddy's fingers grasped the handrail of the gallery. He had stopped sweating; his body had no water left to give, and thirstily he licked his lips. This was the moment of truth.

Isabella was going for the diamond, but the Marquis waved her away. Even from here Eddy could see—feel—the man's desperate longing. It was in the way he opened and closed his hands, how he stalked toward the jewel like a man sneaking up to his lover to surprise her. Involuntarily, Eddy's thumbs and ring fingers started rubbing against each other in a fit of yearning.

It should be me down there, he thought.

An almost hysterical giggle escaped the Marquis, and its faint echo was still audible over the hissing and bubbling of the lake.

"Amateur," Eddy whispered.

Then, in an almost brash movement, as if he feared his prize would elude him at the last possible moment, the Marquis snatched the black jewel from the altar—and started screaming as though he had been set on fire.

Eddy's heart skipped a beat.

What is he doing?

The Marquis stumbled backward, wailing in agony while apparently unable—or unwilling—to let go of the diamond. He turned around, fell to his knees, and would have buried the jewel under him if Azrael had not acted. The dragon killer closed the distance to the Marquis in a heartbeat and kicked out, breaking the diamond from the noble's hands and sending it flying high toward the edge of the jetty.

Isabella, as quick as an arrow sprung from a bow, sprinted after it, dove forward, and slid over the ground, trying to catch the falling diamond. She skidded toward the end of the jetty the moment the stone passed over it; her momentum was almost enough to send her over the edge as well.

Eddy almost jumped in his anticipation.

Did she get it?

Azrael rushed toward her, gripped her ankle, and pulled her back from the rim. She lay on her belly for a moment, breathing hard, and then rolled on her back. The Black Diamond was firmly clutched to her chest, and no fit of pain wracked her frame. Whatever had happened to the Marquis, it did not affect her. On hands and knees, the noble crawled toward Isabella, his fingers reaching for the jewel yet stopping short of it. Anguish washed over his face; suddenly, alarmed screams and shouts echoed from below.

The screams of the Marquis had not gone unnoticed, and in response, the sound of naked feet slapping against stone became louder like the beating of drums. A gunshot rang out, and a death scream sounded from below.

“Mierda,” said the soldier from Eddy’s right, taking a firm grip of his rifle. “Looks like we are in frying pan now, yes?”

Eddy, his face going pale, pointed at the lake and whispered, “No. We are in the fire.”

The Dragongod was rising.

###

“Run!” shouted Eddy over the rising turmoil of gunshots, naked feet hitting the ground, and the bubbling and gurgling that filled the cave.

The Dragongod rose, but not slowly as he had before. This time the lake was in turmoil, and his head crashed through the surface like a new continent rising from the ocean. Liquid gold cascaded down his primeval form and splattered over the platform as a growl so deep it made the ground tremble suddenly filled the air.

After a moment of shock, Isabella and the Marquis turned and started running as fast as their legs would carry them. Azrael, however, remained, calmly seeking cover behind the altar upon which the Black Diamond had rested.

“Azrael! Don’t do it!” screamed Eddy.

The head of the giant brute rose over the platform, gold dripping from him like molten wax. Angrily he shook his head left and right, sending bucket-sized drops of molten metal everywhere. Baring his teeth, he opened his arachnid-like eyes, immediately catching sight of the two tiny figures racing toward the other end of the jetty.

Rapid gunfire filled the cave by now. Some of the shots were aimed at the golden titan and harmlessly bounced off of his exposed teeth or were sucked up by the gold still clinging to his frame. The Dragongod made a sound that reminded Eddy of a chuckle; then he opened his gaping maw, drawing a great breath and preparing to breathe fire on the two thieves who had dared to desecrate his temple.

Azrael acted.

With the calmness of a captain who had braved many storms, he stood and stared at the ancient beast. The gale tore at his clothes, sucking his black hat right from his head. Steadying himself against the altar, he brought both his hands up, each holding a sawed-off Buffalo rifle, a single-shot rifle so powerful that its cartridge could rip through the bodies of several men.

Eddy had seen Azrael kill dragons with these two rifles several times. Their deadliness and his skill with them were unquestioned, but Eddy doubted they would do much good against a horror such as this. In his heart, he bade the only friend he had ever known farewell.

Azrael aimed for a second and then pulled both triggers. The kickback was so strong that, while he was still standing, it sent him sliding back several feet, his boots not providing enough friction on the hard floor. In response, the Dragongod's left eye exploded in a shower of black ichor, and the world heard a sound it had not beheld in eons—the pain-filled scream of a god.

It was a scream that made the very mountain shudder, that cracked stone, rippled the golden lake, and sent stalactites falling from the ceiling like broken icicles. Eddy covered his ears and screamed, his frail voice countering the roar of the beast just enough to keep him from going deaf. The Dragongod's body twitched in a shudder of pain, a feeling long forgotten, and like a wolf howling at the moon, he reared his massive neck upward.

More stalactites fell from the shadow-shrouded ceiling. Like spears they plunged into the golden lake or exploded as they crashed on the jetty, turning the mad dash of the Marquis and Isabella into a death race. Dodging to the left and right, they miraculously managed to avoid being crushed by the falling stones. One of them, as large as a man was tall, crashed directly in front of the altar, mere feet away from Azrael, cracking the ground open.

The dragon killer did not even flinch. Instead he dropped both his rifles, pulled his revolvers, and started firing—at the ceiling.

Emptying both his revolvers in quick succession, he fired at a cluster of stalactites over the monster's head. Splinters of stone exploded from the stalactites, possibly due to the bullets, the deafening roar of the beast, or a combination of both; several stalactites broke and fell like spears. Most of them just burst as they hit the iron-hard bone of the Dragongod, but some lodged themselves into the softer flesh of his gums or maw.

And one of them pierced the right eye of the behemoth.

The Dragongod shuddered, and his mouth closed with a snap that sent splinters of his own teeth flying with the force of cannonballs. His head tilted slowly forward, revealing a man-sized splinter of stone jutting from the eye like the broken mast of a ship.

The stalactite had torn deep. Black ichor was already oozing down the compromised eyeball and mixing with the gold covering his face to form what, to Eddy, looked like a hideous death-mask. With a final shudder, the Dragongod slumped backward like a landslide falling into the sea, causing a huge wave to roll toward the other end of the cave.

There was a moment of shocked silence that seemed to go on forever. Even the firing had ceased.

Then Eddy screamed, “Yeeeeeeeeehaaaaaaa! That’s my frigging partner!”

Azrael allowed himself a grin, and with a spin, he put his revolvers away. With the relaxed ease of the victor he picked up his rifles, slid them into the holsters on his back, and swaggered back toward the others. Eddy was cheering and the others fell in, the dangers of their situation forgotten for a moment.

Then a giant claw rose from the golden sea and crashed down on the platform behind the dragon killer, cracking and shattering it. The following tremor was so strong that Azrael was almost thrown over the rim. He stumbled to a halt, stared over his shoulder—and started running as he had never run before.

###

Azrael sprinted down the jetty, his long legs carrying him away from the blind Dragongod as fast as they could. A mighty roar filled the cavern, a roar of primeval anger and malice. The Dragongod’s head came up, his once-black eyes now deep cauterized wounds in his skull. In blind anger he sliced his claws over the platform, eradicating it while pulling his bulk halfway out of the golden lake. He bellowed once more, and a stream of flames so intense it turned stone and gold to slag followed his outburst. Half crawling, half swimming like a wounded mastiff trying to get out of a river, he hauled himself forward, the jetty cracking and exploding under his immense bulk.

The monster’s movements were slow, but he was vast; little by little he thrashed his way closer to Azrael—and *closer to me*, Eddy realized. Droplets of liquid gold splattered the walls, and splinters of gold and hard stone ranging in size from bullets to cannonballs ricocheted throughout the caves as parts of the jetty exploded under the Dragongod’s weight. The whole situation had turned into a living hell in mere moments.

“A hand, if you please,” Eddy heard Isabella gasp. She had pulled herself half over the parapet and was breathing heavily, her left hand clinging to the rope while her right held on to the diamond. He had not even noticed her climbing up the rope. Somewhat embarrassed, he pulled himself together and helped her. The Marquis and three soldiers followed shortly after. Looking over the rim, Eddy realized what had happened to the remaining man. He was dead, his head obliterated by a falling stone.

“Let’s go,” ordered the Marquis.

“You go ahead,” grunted Eddy. “I’ll help Azrael.”

Wait, who said that?

“Your funeral,” the Marquis said, not even sparing Eddy a glance as he headed back the way they had come.

“Not if I can help it,” Eddy murmured. He turned toward the jetty, seeking cover behind the parapet from the flying stones that ricocheted around him.

“Come on, come on,” he said.

Azrael was sprinting down the jetty as fast than a horse on fire, dodging splashes of gold and the occasional boulder that whirled through the air. The bounty killer had an uncanny ability to step out of harm’s way; to Eddy, it seemed as if he would sidestep gold droplets and boulders that would have crushed him at the last possible second.

It didn’t last.

A stray rock hit Azrael in the back, and he tumbled and fell. He came to his knees, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it and getting to his feet again, but with the speed of the approaching dragon, Eddy knew he could not make it in time.

Eddy started running.

Following the others, he sprinted like never before in his life, his legs carrying him even faster than Azrael. Then, a hundred strides down the gallery, he came to a skidding halt and looked back. The Dragongod was like a giant ship crashing full sail into a harbor, and he had almost made up the distance to Azrael. A few more strides and it would be over. The dragon killer was as good as dead.

Eddy pulled his revolver and started firing at the Dragongod.

“Hey, you fat bastard son of a lizard. I took your eyes and now I take your gold! Come and get me!”

Ohh, that is sooooo stupid, a voice in Eddy’s head screamed.

As expected, the bullets fired at the beast did no damage, but they did irritate him. The brute stopped, his head tilted in a dog-like, confused fashion. Eddy continued running, firing blindly in the direction of the monster while shouting obscenities at him.

At the very least, he was buying his partner some time.

Then the behemoth slid from the jetty into the lake and toward Eddy.

“Fuck-fuck-fuck!” Eddy shouted as he realized that his ass was now on the menu. He stormed down the hallway with his mind fixed on his goal, the corridor through which they had entered. He did not look back, did not falter. When directly behind him, the gargantuan beast drove headfirst into the wall,

collapsing the parapet and sending Eddy tumbling head over heels to the ground. He did not dare glance back and was on his feet again in no time, charging on, knowing that if he looked back just once, he would be dead.

He dashed on even as a group of Incan warriors spilled from an adjoining corridor to his left. The look on their faces, a mix of awe and terror, was certainly not from encountering him. He increased his speed, charging through the dumbfounded group only to hear a rumble and feel a mighty pull of air seconds later. It tore at his clothes like a hurricane. He accelerated, forcing every last bit of energy into a mad dash. His lungs were ready to burst from exhaustion; dark spots had begun to dance before his eyes. His scared mind was just short of the cracking point.

Only a few more steps!

A roar, the crackling of a firestorm, and the death screams of men filled the world to his back. A searing white light washed close behind, illuminating the corridor in front of him and casting a long shadow on the ground.

Almost there!

He felt the fire sucking the oxygen from the air, creating a void that pulled him backward like a greedy hand. The corridor came up ahead on his left side. *Salvation*. He felt the hairs on his neck shrivel from the heat rolling toward him. Two more steps. Something told him he would be too slow.

With the little strength he had left, he threw himself sideways into the corridor. He had barely passed the threshold when a wall of white flame streamed down the gallery behind him, melting everything to cinder.

Eddy passed out before he hit the ground.

###

He awoke seconds later, gulping in air as greedily as a drowning man. It hurt like hell. He felt as if his lungs had been run through with a white-hot butcher knife.

His suit was smoking, small flames dancing on his trousers. He put them out with a curse that was almost lost in the popping and cracking of the rapidly cooling gallery behind him.

Then he heard a sound coming from behind, where the gallery was. He froze. He turned his gaze.

The gargantuan head of the Dragongod suddenly filled Eddy's world. From up here, it was even more gigantic and terrifying. The grisly wounds of his eyes were large enough for Eddy to stand inside. The beast shifted his head, his nostrils, sniffing like a dog, coming into view.

If Eddy had not been totally dehydrated, he surely would have soiled himself. But as it was, there was nothing to give, nothing to do anymore. All of a sudden, he became very calm. He waited for his final

judgment. A final sniff later, the beast roared. Eddy fell down, holding his ears, stifling his own scream . .

.

That's it, he thought.

The Dragongod gave a snorting sound, then turned his head and was gone.

Eddy couldn't believe it. Expecting a trap, he held his breath for one more minute, and then when nothing happened, he gulped in a breath of air, noticing that he smelled like roasted ham. He started crawling away, sending a prayer to any gods that would listen and thanking them. After he found his strength again, he started walking, and shortly after, he was running toward the exit.

Even braving the spider caves once more now seemed hollow in comparison to braving the dangers of this place.

###

Eddy made it into the sewers without being caught, although he had to hide in the shadows of side passages more than once as he heard frantic cries or feet slapping the ground. He also saw the signs of the others' passing; dead Incas, gunned or cut down, lay sprawled across the way. The three remaining soldiers, one cut to pieces and the other two riddled with arrows, were among them. Their pale, still faces gave Eddy the fear-born strength to carry on, and two times he was almost caught by small squads of Incas running toward the temple. He hid in the shadows at the last possible moment, his heart beating faster than their feet hitting the ground.

His luck was there to save him once again . . .

The descent through the sewer was quick. Eddy, dehydrated and exhausted, lost footing and tumbled down the small tunnel head over heels. His life was saved by luck rather than skill as his foot was caught in one of the ropes that they had attached to the climbing irons. He ripped out two of them before his slide came to an abrupt end, leaving him hanging upside down outside the tunnel, too dazed and shaken even to scream. Once the world stopped spinning, Eddy beheld the frantic behavior of the dragon flock above him. They could feel their god's torment and were reacting to it by fighting among each other, searing the heavens with their fire. Ironically, their frenzy allowed Eddy to pull himself up and cross the abyss undetected. Bereft of his strength, he stumbled into the spider caves, a faint smile gliding over his features as he saw his lamp waiting where he had left it. He lit it, only to realize that his hasty escape and near plunge to death had cost him his prized gilded Peacemaker and most of his loot. His pockets were almost empty, merely the golden digit he had taken from the statue and a few smaller gems remained. Eddy felt like crying.

Suppressing a sob, he ventured into the caves. He did not know how, but somehow he made it on his own. At long last, he reached the exit by the waterfall and was almost shot in the head as he stumbled from the dark. The gunshot tore a chunk of granite from the wall beside his head, peppering his face with stone dust!

“Whoa!” screamed Eddy, panicked while diving down. “It’s me. It’s me!”

“Ah, Señor Finn, glad you have made it,” said the Marquis, sounding even more arrogant than usual. As the dust settled, Eddy could see the other man standing in front of the waterfall. Morning had begun to dawn, and the veil of water behind him had the color of a cloudy sky.

Isabella melted out of a shadow to Eddy’s right. He was too exhausted to even flinch. She gave him a warm smile.

“Good to see you, Eddy,” she said. Looking down the darkness of the tunnel, she added, “Mister Grimes?”

Eddy gave her a sad look, then pulled himself to his feet, dragged himself to the nearest wall, and slumped down against it. Isabella stared a few more moments into the black tunnel, then went back to the Marquis, who, already having forgotten Eddy, was now busy packing away a cloth-wrapped bundle.

The Black Diamond, no doubt, thought Eddy.

The Marquis started giggling.

“We did it. We did it!” he hissed between his fits. “I have the Black Diamond. I have it! With it, I can return home to Spain. It will restore the honor of my family.”

“So that’s it?” asked Eddy tiredly. “Azrael gone, your men dead, and a whole Dragon Nation pissed off and in uproar to redeem your lost honor?”

“What would a worm like you know about such things?” sneered the Marquis. He walked over to Eddy, towering before him in a defiant posture. “My family has been clawing its way up ever since my ancestor Francisco de Orellana fell into dishonor. You have no idea of the sacrifices my house has had to make, how many died to pave our way to the throne.”

He smiled. It was a smile Eddy didn’t like one bit.

“Yes, the throne,” the Marquis continued. “With this stone my family will become next in line for the succession of the throne of Spain. The queen is old; it is but a matter of time before she perishes, and as for her children . . . accidents happen all the time.”

Eddy suddenly felt very uncomfortable. What was being revealed to him was nothing anyone would ever share with somebody like Eddy.

“You see, my ancestor claimed that with the power of the Black Diamond, you could actually control dragons, and after what I have seen today, I believe very much that this is true. Once I have taken the power of the throne and learned how to use the diamond, I will bring an army back into this jungle and take the Golden City. We will rob it of its riches. We will slay the god your partner was so kind as to blind. And with the diamond, I will enslave the other dragons. The control over the dragons and the

riches of the Golden City will allow me to build an army that will conquer the world. Nothing will stand in my way!”

There was a brief moment of silence following the Marquis’s revelation. His eyes glittered feverishly. Slowly Eddy lifted his hands in an accommodating gesture. “Hey, good luck with that. I just want to go home and forget all this shit.”

A cruel smile split the Marquis’s face. “That will be a problem . . . since we can’t have a dirty cow herder like you live, knowing this.”

The noble pulled his pistol, and Eddy, having lost his revolver, could only stare at him balefully. An expression of amusement flashed over the Marquis’s face, as if a funny joke had just occurred to him. He lowered his gun, turned toward Isabella, who had placed herself slightly behind him, and said, “Isabella, do me a favor and kill this scum. We might still need the bullets.”

With a blank face and cold eyes, Isabella pulled her long stiletto.

Eddy was too tired to say anything. He had lost everything: his gems, his friend, his hope. And even if he could somehow manage to flee, there was only the way back into the mountain or down into the jungle, both roads probably leading to a death far worse than Isabella’s blade would provide. So he just stared at Isabella with tired, sad eyes.

She gave him a faint smile.

Then she drove her stiletto into the Marquis’s back.

Like a small thorn, the needle tip of the blade bloomed from the noble’s chest, a single red drop falling from it to the ground. Dumbstruck, the Marquis stared at the stiletto’s tip, his mouth opening in an unspoken question. Then the horror of realization washed over his features. It was a look of pure desperation.

Then he slid from the blade, dead, his body falling forward to the ground.

Eddy watched the scene unfold with a strange sense of detachment. Yet the surprise was visible on his face as the dead noble dropped to the ground. He was about to say something, to thank her, yet as he looked into her eyes, he saw that her deed had very little—if anything at all—to do with him. Hers was the gaze of a professional.

So instead he asked, “Why?”

She smirked and said, “The Marquis—or his family, for that matter—was very ambitious. Greedy, even, you might say. And over the years they amassed many enemies. Enemies who take revenge very seriously, and who want those who wronged them not only dead, but utterly destroyed.”

“Wait,” interrupted Eddy, having learned and experienced enough in one day. “I don’t really want to know. I am happy if I can get home in one piece and forget about all this.”

She smiled. “Wise choice . . . but one thing you should know. My employer wanted the Marquis to die at the peak of his success, with his prize in hand and him safely away. I had planned to take care of him once we were in the air and beyond the Dragon Gulf.” She shrugged. “But I guess that’s close enough. In any case, you owe me now.”

“No,” a voice echoed from the tunnel.

Isabella spun around, and Eddy came to his feet with a groan.

Azrael, the burned remains of his garments dotted with gold, stumbled from the darkness. He looked terrible. His flesh was raw and bloody, seared by flame and liquid metal. Ghastly wounds covered him, cuts and bruises, and the broken shafts of two arrows loomed from his back. His right arm was broken and looked as if it had gained an additional joint between shoulder and elbow, and his good eye was almost swollen shut. How he was still alive, let alone walking, Eddy could not understand.

“We owe you, once you bring us out of this shithole,” the dragon killer grunted before collapsing to the ground.

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In retrospect, Eddy could not understand how they actually made it out. The dangers of the jungle were as perilous on the way out as they had been on their way in—even more so, since the dragons in the area had gone wild and, in their frenzy, burned large parts of the jungle. Maybe it was because of this, he mused later. Any other creature in its right mind would have hidden until the storm of rage and fire blew over.

They needed four days to journey back to the zeppelin they had come in. Four days of hiding, sneaking, and fearing for their lives—at least in Eddy’s case. The condition of his partner worsened by the hour, his wounds festering in the humid air of the jungle, yet the grizzled bounty killer proved too stubborn to die. In fact, it was probably his display of iron will that brought them back to the zeppelin, where they basically collapsed into the arms of the waiting crew.

Eddy slept through the whole return voyage, and Azrael, who was as bandaged as a mummy, had to pour a bucket of water over him to wake him up once they landed.

The goodbye was brief, almost businesslike, as Isabella set them on land not far from a small town at the coast. As they stood in the shadow of the large airship, Eddy remembered something that he had wanted to ask Isabella since they escaped the Golden City.

“Tell me, why did holding the Black Diamond cause the Marquis pain, while it did not affect you in the slightest?”

Brushing her dark hair behind her ear, she smiled and replied, “Well, you know the old tales about dragons and their fondness of women who are pure. Seems like their artifacts share the same preference . . .”

Eddy's mouth fell open as he realized she was telling him that she was still a virgin.

Isabella just smiled at the reaction and turned to leave. Following an instinct, Eddy, who had never kissed a virgin before, snatched her up for one—and regretted his bold deed as he got a knee to the groin.

Women, assassin or not, they are all the same, he thought while going down with a painful grunt.

Isabella walked away, infuriation oozing from her stride, yet as she ascended the stairs to the zeppelin, she turned around to gaze at them a last time. Surprisingly, there was a smile on her face. Then she was gone, and the zeppelin lifted off.

“You think we’ll see her again?” groaned Eddy, still on his knees.

“Maybe on the next trip,” said Azrael, turning and walking toward the city.

“Next trip?” blurted Eddy, stumbling to his feet. “What do you mean by next trip?”

“That dragon ate my hat!” Azrael said in a gravelly voice. “I want his head for that.”

“Oh balls . . .” moaned Eddy.

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