

Beyond Camp Six

A Tale of Vampire Earth

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The Green Hell, August, the thirty-fifth year of the Kurian Order: A Mississippi summer can be as parched and dust-blown as any in North America, where the midday sun strikes anyone foolish enough to leave the shade like a blacksmith's tempering hammer . Manual labor raises dust thick enough to turn a handkerchief's residue chocolate, gumming the eyes and caking the face's sweat until you feel as if your face is covered with filthy greasepaint.

Only the coastal south and the corner of the state tucked into the protective fold of Louisiana stays wet, though the residents would have it otherwise. The humidity makes perspiration is an exercise in futility, but that doesn't stop the body from trying. The water pouring out of the brow, the back, the armpits, the crotch, and even from the palms leaves the body so cramped and exhausted that licking the sweat-salt from your palms tastes sweet.

This humid inferno is not a place people come willingly. The land is worked by lowest strata of Earth's New Order, under conditions that make an old-timer out of anyone who survives five years. Whether a five- year-man (for no woman has ever made it longer than four) counts himself fortunate to have lived so long is another matter.

Hal Steiner had never heard the word "coolie," but had someone explained it to him he would have known the full meaning of the term. Only someone who has been one can know the truth of a forced labor camp, the "can to can't" workday (meaning from the moment you can see, to sometime after you can't) in any weather on poor provision. It means infrequent days of

respite which usually involve making minor repairs to the long barracks propped up off the ground on cinderblocks. It means no mental challenge beyond constant scheming to get more rest, food, and water out of the overseers, men whose own position is dependant on the denial of those extras. It means enduring verbal abuse and even blows as patiently as a plowhorse. Not having heard the word coolie, had Hal Steiner been asked for a word to describe himself, would have answered "slave."

He looked like a coolie in the summer heat, wearing nothing but a loincloth, a broad brimmed straw hat, and mud as he endlessly transferred the young rice stalks to the foot-deep water of the rice paddy. He had learned the trick of taking a wide stance to make the endless bending as he planted the slender green shoots easier. With one eye to the other workers in the paddy, all behind him (getting an extra ten minutes break and a second cupful of tepid water out of the supervisor was eased by being the first to finish) he bent, reached, planted, and then shuffled a stride sideways in a slow, easy rhythm.

He could remember, in mental picture-postcard clarity, when he was not a slave. In those days he had been Hal "Stiffneck." He had worked in the rail depot outside of Jackson Mississippi, where his size made him an asset in loading and unloading boxcars. Though he had a German last name and ancestors from Thuringia, there was something of a wild Irishman to him, right down to his red hair, startlingly green eyes, and "stiff-necked" attitude. He answered back to his supervisors, obeyed orders on his own terms, and showed so little respect for the Kurian-backed aristocracy of the Jackson Cantonment that he urinated on the Yard Supervisor's azaleas outside the red-brick Yard Office. His attitude brought threats, but as when he put his mind to it he could, and frequently did, do the work of three men none of the warnings were followed up by action. He helped his case by attending the Universal Church lectures, mostly because it gave him three hours loafing in a squeaky wooden chair with nothing to do but refill his cup of bitter-tasting hot chocolate. He had a good mind, and could recite chapter and verse

the stories about the 20th century poisoning of the earth, citing statistics supporting the Universal Church doctrine that before the Kurian advent, human civilization was an out-of-control juggernaut destroying the human race and taking the planet down with it. The great Gotterdamerung of 2022 ended with the Kurians taking control, rescuing humanity from the brink of self-genocide.

Steiner's old life ended with a brawl over a girl with the musical name of LaLee Evergreen. LaLee was the milk-skinned daughter of one of the town's beauties, who at fifteen showed every sign of growing into her mother's curvaceous figure. At eighteen, Hal had thought himself above fifteen-year olds until he saw LaLee running an errand for her mother (who managed a diner in Jackson) at the railyard, filling the three baskets on her bicycle with parcels from the day's train. Not one for shyness, Hal introduced himself in his usual open manner and recognized in LaLee's giggling blushes and cast-down eyes potential for some fine Saturday nights. She promised to go out walking with him his next evening off. "Wouldn't mind that at all, Mr. Steiner," she had said in response to his various innocent-sounding suggestions. It was the first time anyone had called him Mister anything.

He spent the next day on pins and needles in anticipation of the time with LaLee, planning just how he would work it so as to take her hand, and later put his arm around her shoulders. She would be able to tuck her body under his broad arm like a robin snuggling into a nest. Reality broke in on his hopes when he saw LaLee being squired around by the son of the azalea-wetted Yard Supervisor, in a car no less. The subsequent fight left the Yard Supervisor's son with a broken jaw and two eyes swollen shut, and Hal on a slow train south for Camp Six.

Things were run differently in the large, semi-mobile work camp. Hal could remember the day they broke him, two years ago, equally vividly and more uncomfortably. It had happened after two weeks in camp, when an obscene gesture he made at the turned back of a crop-wielding overseer named Keefer was reported by one of the camp stoolies. They beat him until he

admitted it, then beat him until he apologized for it. The endless thudding of heavy boots into his kidneys, groin, elbows and knees seemed to go on for an eternity, until spitting teeth he sobbed out an apology in the required wording to Keefer: *please sir, I beg forgiveness for the offence, please sir.* Then his punishment began. They wired his bruised body to some kind of electrical device, throwing him into convulsions that made him certain either his spine would snap or his eyeballs pop out. Through the blurred vision and brain-fog of the shocks, Steiner thought he saw a tall figure in black watching the proceedings, speaking now and then to his tormentors in a low, breathy voice that made the words hard to understand. When his punishment finally ended he loved Keefer more perfectly than he had ever loved any woman in his life, including his mother, for the simple grace of making the pain stop.

He was broken.

And like a broken horse, he worked.

He learned how to survive in the camp, how to chafe for an easy job, and how to get the supervisors to like him so he might get put on garbage detail, with all the possibilities for kitchen leftovers that that entailed. Stiff-necked no more, he spoke in the cadence of a servant, his words filled with deference and respect. While he refused to become a lickspittle or stoolie, his hard work and exemplary record made him someone whose aluminum platter got an oversized scoop of beans and a thicker piece of bread in the dinner line. He stayed out of fights, which really meant keeping away from the Grog.

The Grog, variegated servants of the Kur, were a mystery to Steiner. He knew they came with the Kurians and helped them subjugate the former rulers of the earth, but where the over-muscled and under-brained species came from in the first place was unknown and, considering his situation, unimportant. Grog that became superfluous to the Kur ended up in Camp Six as easily as humans. Not as numerous as the men and women sharing the camp, they received separate (and better) quarters, food and work allotments. The resentment felt by the

Homo sapiens of the camp flared into a full scale riot Steiner's first year in the camp, leaving scores of dead on both sides when the guards quelled the battling mobs with rifle and machine-gun fire. The Grog considered themselves superior to the humans in the camp, and never hesitated to issue a blow as encouragement.

Steiner finished his handfuls of rice, and waded through the muddy water to one of the heavy bins filled with rice from the seedling fields. The Grog who bore the yolk back and forth squatted on his thick haunches and gnawed at one of the large loafs of plain bread handed out as part of the rations. The field supervisor had wandered off, probably to the shade of the guard's latrine, leaving the field in the charge of the Grog for the moment.

He gathered up two handfuls of stalks, careful not to make eye contact with the Grog. Sometimes they regarded just looking up at a challenge.

"Eh. Big man," it said, the deep-throated words sounding in its wide mouth as if they were produced by grinding machinery.

Pretending not to hear would lead to a blow. Steiner looked up into its gargoyle face.

"You work good. Soon done."

Most Grog only spoke a few words of English, this one seemed to have picked up a vocabulary somewhere.

Steiner weighed simply saying 'thanks,' but if the Grog wanted to talk he might get a few minutes off his feet. "Soon done," he said. Agreeing with the Grog could hardly lead to trouble.

It broke off the heel of the football-shaped loaf. "Here," it said, thrusting the hunk of bread towards him.

Steiner took it from the wire-haired, clawed hand. "Thanks," he now said in earnest, and sat beside the Grog on the earth dike separating two paddies. There were a good four mouthfuls and he could take his time chewing.

"Eat more. Grow strong like me," the Grog said, slapping a tree trunk of a leg. Its ochre

face broke into a leering smile.

“Already strong like you,” Steiner said, comfortably off his feet and chewing slowly.

“Manshit. You no strong like me.”

“Try me.”

The Grog went to its yolk. Its crossbeam was as thick as a railroad tie, supporting chains that held two iron planters. With the smallest of grunts, it lifted the yolk and easily walked ten feet along the dike, then set it down.

“You do,” it said, setting the beam down.

Steiner walked over to the contraption, finishing the last of his bread. He put the beam across his shoulders, pushing his chin forward to his chest to accommodate it. He planted his legs, and lifted. Straining, he retraced the Grog’s steps.

“Almost empty,” the Grog said, shaking its head. It quickly emptied the planter, placing the seedlings safely in the mud at the edge of the dike. It then filled both large planters with water, and lifted them one at a time to the top of the low dike. Again placing itself under the yolk, it lifted it and walked back to the edge of the field, a little unsteadily. Triumphantlly, it turned to Steiner.

“You so strong, you now.”

He looked doubtfully at the yolk and the two planters, brimming with water. Breathing deeply, he placed his feet shoulder width apart and took up the yolk. With a gasp, he raised the planters off the ground, straining every muscle with the effort. He lurched forward, almost falling under the load, but turned the near disaster into a short run along the dike. He collapsed after six steps and one of the planters fell into the paddy, taking him and the yolk with it. The Grog laughed, a barking sound.

“You in water. Funny.”

He stood up, plastered with mud and dripping, and stepped back onto the dike.

“I put you in water,” Steiner said. “Wrestle you down.”

“Ho! Never!” the Grog said. It placed its palm atop Steiner’s head, and drew it back in a horizontal line to its broad chest muscles. The Grog towered over him by a full foot. “You no do, man. We-folk stronger.”

“Can do,” Steiner said, grabbing the Grog by its leather jerkin, his left hand reaching up to the Grog’s shoulder, his right hand under its armpit.

“Oh Kay man,” it said, drawling out the words. “You have you big joke. Ready... go.”

They began to pull at each other, testing each other’s strength and balance on the loose footing of the earthen platform. The other workers in the paddy looked up and watched. The Grog, having weight and muscle on its side, pressed its advantage, and began to shove Steiner. He felt his feet slipping in the dirt as the Grog bent him backwards, bearing down on him with better than four hundred pounds of weight.

Steiner suddenly collapsed, falling on his back and tucking his knees up to his chest as he did so. The Grog crashed down on top of him, but he managed to get his bare feet against the Grog’s chest as his back hit the dirt. Rolling up like a ball, he pressed out with the full strength of his legs and coiled body. He launched the Grog over him in the direction the Grog was already going, using the its own momentum as well as his muscles to send the surprised creature flying face-first into the water and mud of the paddy.

The Grog belly-flopped, and came up plastered with gray gunk. Steiner read surprised confusion in its eyes as it rose, rather than the fury it expected.

“Now you big joke,” Steiner said.

The Grog thought it over and began to chuckle, a hooting sound. It began wiping the mud from its body. “You do good little joke,” it said, philosophically, cleaning a pointed ear with a long claw, thoughtfully sniffing at the dirty residue.

From that moment on Steiner and that particular Grog were “Big Joke” and “Little Joke” to each other. The Grog smuggled him bits of food now and again, mostly bread or a rare piece of ham. They shared another laugh when a month later while clearing a swamp. They knocked down a large tree causing a shower of bugs, lizards, and small snakes to rain down on them, and Steiner frantically brushed them away. He hated the feel of something creeping across his skin.

“You good dancer,” was Big Joke’s amused critique.

He learned that Big Joke ended up in Camp Six because of a semi-mutiny. The Grog had been part of a company that worked with human support traversing Appalachians. Their unit was up against terrorist enclaves in the mountains stretching down from the north into Georgia. The humans, who worked the heavy weapons, relied on the Grog to serve as shock troops, and Big Joke’s fellow Grog grew tired of the disparate casualties. One day they decided it was their turn to work the machine guns and mortars, and have the humans go in with rifles. They seized the weaponry and told their human allies that today the roles would be reversed. It almost came to bloodshed, and Big Joke’s Grog were broken up and dispersed to labor camps. “Only godlings stop big fight us and men,” Big Joke explained.

“Godlings?”

“Robes. Pale skin, tall, talk like wind in leaves.”

Steiner shuddered. The Hoods, the Praetorian Guard of the Kurian Order, who acted as eyes, ears, and teeth of their Masters. He’d rather bust through a mirror placed under a ladder while bisecting the path of a black cat than come within the reach of one of *them*. Even in his old days as Hal Stiffneck he stayed in at night when he heard they were in the area.

They had two whole days in camp after draining the swamp. Rumor said the camp would be broken down and moved shortly, and they would be marched on to lumbering somewhere north. A new batch of “recruits” were being brought into camp, and afterwards there

would be the inevitable culling of the sick and weak who would not make the long march to the new site. Even worse, this process involved the arrival of Big Joke's "godlings."

Times like these Steiner, blessed in his youth and health, pushed thoughts of the future away with the ease of one who had just turned twenty, and coldly observed the proceedings with a blue-steel knot in his stomach. As many as four Hoods would come into the camp for a Shakeout Inspection. The rejects would be separated, sometimes released into the woods, sometimes put in a special, wire-enclosed barrack. Then at night the Hoods would emerge, and in the morning there would be nothing but bodies and swollen, sated Hoods returning to their refuge. Steiner had been through two camp moves, and each one left him sick with fear and despair. Back in Jackson people would just disappear, but you never knew if it was the Hoods or if they ran for the Wild Blue Yonder. Absences were discussed there in the polite, hushed tones of a secret local scandal, and theories would quietly be passed through the grapevine about how the victim had displeased the regime. Here, the grim process was out in the open.

It was a sunny morning, wisps of clouds making little white brushstrokes against the blue, when the Section Wardens moved through camp, bellowing out orders for assembly. The laborers gathered eagerly enough, with the twin intent of looking healthy and viewing the "newsers" coming into Camp Six. They formed themselves into their sections, facing each other on either side of the gravel road that bisected the camp before looping around the wired-in enclosure of the buildings housing the guards and heavy equipment.

Steiner watched the fearful expressions, the exhaustion of the march replaced by anxious glances as they moved in past the camp stables and between the ragged twin lines of the old hands. It was the usual ratio, about eight out of ten male. The women looked to be the usual assortment of...

His gaze locked on a face, half hidden by the shoulder of a man in a stained bathrobe. Even with just a tangled mass of hair and one wary eye showing, he recognized LaLee

Evergreen. She had good reason to look scared, thought Steiner, his heart recovering after skipping a beat. An attractive young woman in Camp Six would be faced with a choice: not whether or not she would be used, but by whom. The overseers did not separate the sexes, and while pregnancy ensured a woman of a ticket out of the camp, there were ugly scenes in the barracks and alleys precipitating the pregnancies more often than not. If LaLee were very lucky, she might fall in with one of the little families that had coalesced in the camp, groups of people guided by a father or mother figure and protected by a team of strong young “sons.” A life inside the wire of the little guards establishment was a possibility for a woman with her looks, either as a mistress of one of the camp officers or in the harem/bordello of the “camp wives” barracks servicing the guards and section chiefs in cooking, cleaning, and sewing. Otherwise she could only hope to ally herself with one of the stronger men in camp to avoid brutal and almost inevitable gang-rape. Something of the old Hal, of quick temper and quicker fists, awoke as he watched LaLee shuffle by toward her bleak future at Camp Six.

As they formed the newers into sections and culled the younger and stronger into existing crews, the selection began. The lecherous quack that served as Camp Six’s doctor moved up and down the rows with Keefer and four guards with shotguns, judging at a glance those strong enough to make the move to the new location. Steiner felt his heart give a flutter as the doctor passed him with a quick glance, and wondered if Keefer even remembered Hal’s torture in his first weeks at the camp. Slowly, inevitably, the team wound it’s way back and forth through the rows, approaching LaLee like a hunting sidewinder. All the while the dispirited little group at the center of the road grew as the doctor quickly sorted out healthy from infirm.

Steiner knew, even before it happened, that Keefer would pause the group before LaLee. His stomach convulsed when his tormentor pulled up in front of her. He could not hear the words, they were a good twenty yards away with a lot of bodies in between, but Keefer’s sneer was easy enough to read on the side of his face, and LaLee’s shifting her gaze to her feet, hiding

her face beneath her tangled strawberry hair told him the content of the exchange. Keefer said something to one of his lackeys, who nodded appreciatively in return. Something old, older than Camp Six or Steiner or the New Order or words and names flickered within him... and his abused spirit waxed as its flame grew. Steiner felt the sick ache in his gut move up his body, turning into a warm red glow. The pain of his fingernails digging into his palm as he balled his fists brought him out of the slow-burn, and he felt exquisitely alive as the little party worked its way through the rest of the newcomers. When they selected one matron with a rasping cough to join the party in the center, she shrank back into her neighbors in fright. Two guards seized her and she began screaming, and as heads turned Steiner acted.

The Section Warden for Steiner's group stood facing his charges, but all his attention was on the scene by Keefer, where the guards were dragging the woman by an arm and her hair toward the center of the road. Steiner bent to tie the leather thongs that served as laces on his mismatched shoes, and drew a sharpened, stiffened twist of wire from the instep, an item that served as a threat of last resort in the dog-eat-dog world of Camp Six. He leapt forward from the crouch, barreling between the two men in front of him, knocking them aside like bowling pins in the path of a cannon ball. The warden turned his face just in time to catch the shiv in his face, its length making a bloody pulp of his an eye before driving into his brain.

The death of the Section Warden was only a byproduct of Steiner's desire for a real weapon, and he took up the Warden's club, a handy two foot length of leather-wrapped pipe. He ignored the holstered pistol, knowing that the wardens rarely loaded their rusted handguns, which were carried more for show than effect.

"Run!" he barked at the shocked group in between the two columns. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye as men who had friends and loved ones amongst the rejects began to move, either attacking the startled section wardens or running to the aid of those in the group they cared for. Others simply danced and yelled with excitement, kicking up the dry

bile-colored soil into clouds of dust.

Infectious pandemonium broke out all across the center of Camp Six, and Steiner shouldered his way through the chaos as a shotgun blast rang out. Keeping the club behind his back, he struggled to get to Keefer.

Keefer was beating a man trying to wrestle a shotgun out of the hands of one of the guards, laying the short riding crop he carried across the back of the man's neck in an ineffectual attempt to get him to break the death-grip he held on the guard's shotgun.

"Keefer!" Steiner growled, making the word sound obscene in his vehemence.

Something in Steiner's tone must have warned the overseer of danger, for he lashed out with the crop even as he turned to face the new threat. The blow caught Steiner across the chest, but he felt no more pain than a charging rhinoceros might at the crop's lick. The club made a low "whoosh" as it tore through the air, the whole weight of Steiner's powerful body behind it. It caught Keefer across the jaw, crushing teeth, bone, and turning the overseer's lower lip into a gleaming worm of bloody flesh hanging from one end of his mouth. Steiner unleashed a backhand blow even as Keefer staggered, this time cracking him across the temple. The leather stitching covering the pipe parted at the force of the second hit, and Keefer collapsed like a scarecrow blown off its stake.

A panicked guard fired both barrels of his shotgun into a prisoner running nowhere in particular, while right next to him another man was pummeling Camp Six's "doctor" into oblivion with a fist-sized stone. Steiner found LaLee Evergreen in the massed confusion, backing away from the growing brawl between guards, wardens and prisoners.

Hal grabbed her by the upper arm. "Miss Evergreen," he implored, reverting to her surname for some reason known only to his racing brain. "It's me...Hal Steiner, out of White Cross, in Jackson. Remember me, Miss Evergreen?"

The absurdly formal greeting brought her out of her confused trance. "Hal Steiner? The

railyard boy?”

Shots began to come from somewhere at the edge of the confusion.

“Drop or die! Drop or die!” voices were shouting from two different areas.

Hal pulled LaLee off her feet, cushioning her fall with his body as they collapsed to the dirt. She buried her face in his chest as bullets whizzed overhead, rifle fire instead of shotgun blasts. The other guards had come running at the commotion loaded for bear, shouting and shooting as they came.

A few feet away, Keefer groaned and spat bloody saliva from his mouth. Steiner crawled over to the overseers ear.

“On your feet, Keefer! Get up, soldier!” he rasped.

Keefer shook his bleeding head and began to pick himself up. As he rose from a kneeling position a bullet caught him in the back, dropping him permanently this time. Steiner turned his head and looked over at LaLee, whose eyes were locked on the corpse virtually inches from her face.

“Miss Evergreen, it’s gonna get ugly today. If I’m still alive at night, I’ll come for you. Understand? You see me around where you are, ask to go to the latrine...err bathroom.”

She looked at him, eyes vacant in shock, making him feel as if he had just spoken to her in Greek.

“LaLee. Just trust me, and wait. I’ll get us out, if I can.”

Hope and understanding came into her expression. “Yes, Mister...Hal. But please, come soon. Before they can...”

The whip-crack of rifle fire drowned out the rest of her words. Yelling and shooting, the guards turned the riot into a ground-hugging carpet of bleeding humanity. The Prisoners of Camp Six passed the word from ear to ear:

“Deaf and dumb...deaf and dumb, or else!”

“Yeah,” another agreed. “I got selected. Anyone rats-out and he’s a dead man. I’m a goner anyway and I’m taking him with me. Count on it.”

“Same here,” someone else grunted, as the word was passed.

Deaf and dumb.

Camp six stayed deaf and dumb all through the afternoon. The prisoners were sorted, stripped, searched, and sent back to their barracks, and Steiner knew it was only a matter of time until someone talked. He maybe had until nightfall.

The easiest part of his plan was getting put on body detail. Most of the Camp Six men hated the process of picking up the dead, the vacant eyes staring and flesh cold to the touch. There was not even the ceremonial gratification of a burial at the end of the day, the bodies were just loaded on to a truck and hauled out of camp. Some said they were burned, other said they were ground up to feed hogs, but Hal figured they were simply dumped into the nearest swamp where the gars and crayfish would make short work of the corpses. Steiner hung at the open door to the barrack, knowing that slouching against the peeling doorjamb with his hands in his pockets was the surest way to be put to work.

The Groggs always supervised the grim process of collecting the dead. When one waved Steiner over to help another prisoner in picking up the scattered corpses, he began his hunt for Big Joke. He soon found the massive Grog, supervising the loading of the corpses into an old pickup truck that served as both ambulance and hearse, shielding his eyes against the setting sun. One of the brighter Groggs with a good understanding of machinery, Big Joke was often told to squeeze his frame into the cab and drive the mud-splattered, multi-toned vehicle.

“Bad business, Little Joke. Only godlings like make dead. Trouble coming for guards, and we-folk.” He offered his water-bottle to Steiner, who gladly took a swig. Some of the other prisoners laying out bodies in the bed of the truck frowned at the fraternal gesture. He jerked his

chin to the Grog, and the pair wandered over to a pump to refill the bottle.

Steiner lowed his voice, speaking into the filling bottle. "I want to get out of here. Escape. Go wild blue yonder."

"You?" the Grog asked. "You picked for godlings?"

"No. Keep it down. I found a girl, I have to get her out."

"Where you go?"

"As far from here as possible. I need to be on this truck when it goes out of camp."

"No good, one Grog, one guard always go. No trust nobody. You ride in back with bodies?"

Steiner nodded. "Not just with, under."

The Grog pursed his lips tightly, a gesture Steiner knew meant deep cogitation. "I go too. I arrange drive truck, swap me-things for extra gas. Say trading on road out-wire. This help plan?"

"This help plan."

Night came, and Steiner knew he was in a race against the camp informers. Somehow one of them would get word out of his attack on a guard at the start of the riot, and then they would come for him. This time it would not just be steel-toed boots slamming into his kidneys, attacking a guard meant a date with the Reapers.

Lights out and lockup always came shortly after dark, and he joined the others at the washroom/latrine who wished to avoid using the night soil bucket in each barrack. He purposely loitered near the entrance, attempting to bum a cigarette out of the figures going in and out.

Steiner watched the sun set, setting the wispy clouds aflame with orange cooling to pink. He watched one cloud, vaguely wedge shape, pointing to the horizon like a beacon. Steiner did not believe in signs or omens, yet somehow the warm glow reassured him. He now knew which

direction he would turn if he and the LaLee made it safely away: west.

LaLee appeared as the last of the sunset's color vanished.

"They said if we had to go, to go now because they would be locking up," she breathed, rubbing her arms at the nervous chill. "I've been watching you for ten minutes, but I didn't see you wave or anything so I wasn't sure."

"No, this is fine," Steiner said. "Just take my hand, okay? Couples use this time to...you know."

Doubt suddenly rose in her eyes.

"Don't worry, it's not like that. I just want it to look like we're slipping off together. Actually this is better, we can go to the truck park without people thinking much of it. A quick bribe and the guards let you use the cabins."

Steiner gently took her hand and led her between two barracks. Their slightly furtive air may have helped appearances. They made their way to the motor pool and found Big Joke waiting behind a garage with the motor running, out of view from the tower at the gate.

"Hurry, I need be for gate now," the Grog said. "Pick up guard there." He unhooked the cargo net at the back of the truck.

The bodies lay nude, piled like cordwood.

"Okay, now we have to strip," Steiner said apologetically.

He expected reluctance from LaLee, but she showed a better grasp of the situation than he would have thought. She crouched, and began to remove her shirt and pants. Hal undid the few buttons from his own clothing and handed his boots up to Big Joke, who was moving bodies to make them a space.

"Your female skinny, Little Joke. No get many children, and fat baby need much milk."

LaLee flushed, but perhaps it was just from the coming cool of the night air.

"Now for the fun part," Steiner grumbled.

They climbed into the nest of bodies, and Big Joke covered them with corpses, smearing their exposed extremities with some of the blood and filth that had collected in the gutters of the pickup truck bed. Hal and LaLee clung to each other, sharing body warmth and seeking reassurance from the cold touch of dead flesh all around.

“Little Joke, we do run first, expecting me at River Camp,” the Grog explained, handing Steiner a heavy, pointed knife. “I no show they call out search. Before we get camp, I say sick, stop car. Make noise. Guard will watch me for trick, but you are trick. Good?”

“Very good.”

Big Joke climbed into the driver’s seat and the truck lurched into motion with a loud grind from the old transmission.

“You can trust that...thing?” LaLee whispered.

“Yes, I do.”

“I’ve never mixed with them, they never came into town. I’ve never heard they could talk.”

“Depends on the breed, or species or whatever it’s called. We call them all Grogs, but that’s like calling everything in a barn ‘animals.’ This one... I trust him more than I do a lot of people in camp. Quiet now, we’re at the gate.”

The guards at the gate made only the most casual search of the bodies in the bed. Steiner lay face down and watched the flashlight beam flicker over the corpses, holding his breath. Big Joke grunted companionably when one said “hey there Grogie, I guess we’re on meat wagon duty tonight,” and climbed into the passenger seat. Steiner felt the reverberation of the door slamming shut and the truck bounced out the rutted road leading out of Camp Six.

Steiner wondered why they were going to “River Camp.” The long, bouncy, loud and slow ride grew more and more uncomfortable, and he whispered reassurances to LaLee that they were almost free. Then, astonishingly, they slept amongst the bodies.

The truck halted suddenly enough to wake him. He heard the Grog retching, and nerved himself for action. Rising like a gopher out of a burrow of corpses he poked his head up, to see the guard following Big Joke to the ditch beside the road with a lantern, shotgun at the ready.

“What the hell’s the matter, Grogie? Something you ate coming back up?”

For the second time that day, he leapt on an unaware enemy. He knocked the man to the ground, stabbing him repeatedly up under the ribs as Big Joke, suddenly well again, helped hold him down on top of the pinned shotgun.

“Quick, get guard clothes, before more blood,” Big Joke said, when the murder was accomplished.

Steiner stripped the still-twitching guard, a craggy veteran with a long scar above his lip, and began to climb into his clothes. He tried to think of him as no more than another piece of dead flesh, like the bodies in the bed of the truck. The mental game did not work until he brushed closed the lifeless eyes.

“You ride into River Camp, pretend to be guard. We put female off here, pick her up on return. In camp do nothing, say nothing, only help unload truck.”

The clothes did not fit, but a soldier in a dingy brown uniform with his pants hanging loosely around his middle would not be a remarkable sight in this part of the country. The guard’s shirt had absorbed most of the blood, and Steiner changed it for his own more ragged one under the tunic. He handed LaLee back her clothes, and reassured her that the truck would be coming back up the road in just a short time. She understood the necessity, and picked out a thatch of heavy brush with a good view of the road to wait for them.

She waved to him, a brave smile on her face, and he slid into the passenger seat next to Big Joke. The truck shuddered it’s way up to third gear.

“One more stop, and then freedom,” he said, checking the load in the shotgun.

“Free-dom? What that. Like being free of sickness?”

“You’re close. It’s not what we were. That’s the important thing.”

They topped a rise and began a sideways descent to Big Joke’s “River Camp.” It looked substantial, round wooden buildings and huts that looked like igloos made out of mud and thatch. Rather than using wire around the camp, a heavy, thorny growth formed a thick wall that, judging from the depth the headlights penetrated, would require construction equipment to get through rather than wire cutters. He saw a shape snuffling around the edge of the hedgerow, and at first thought it to be a dog, before it reared up on frog-like hind legs and blink into the oncoming lights with round goggle eyes. A machine gun with a banana-shaped magazine hung across it’s pale, glistening belly.

They pulled up to the gate, a convex contraption of metal plate fixed on thick timbers, and waited while a light illuminated the truck. Steiner saw eyes staring at him from firing slits, some glowing red, others twinkling like fireflies, and tried not to be afraid.

Fifty minutes later they were out of the Grog camp, grinding back up the hill to LaLee and a world that might never seem sane again, even if they made their way west to freedom. Given time, Steiner knew he could forget the menagerie of creatures inhabiting the Grog camp, lurching shapes that stalked, or hopped, or slithered from shadow to shadow on business of their own. The musical, inhuman hooting and grunting coming from the taverns by the camp entrance would fade from his ears. His nostrils, bringing in the humid but clean Mississippi air born by the breeze up the river, were already clear of the ferret-reek and pigsty-taint of River Camp.

What he would not forget, what he saw even when he shut his eyes and rubbed them until flashes of yellow painfully appeared, was the loading dock where they dropped off their gruesome cargo. Another truck was parked there, unloading more corpses into a cinderblock building with a thick coat of whitewash. Steiner could see the long lines of pale, stripped

corpses, some showing the wound just above the breastbone where the Reapers fed. The row of dead bodies was placed before a wide door leading inward to a refrigerated room, where headless corpses hung inverted, slit open from anus to ribcage and emptied of entrails, with muscular Groggs in bloody white smocks hauling the corpses to and fro with meathooks.

At the other end of the building, neatly arranged in stalls and windows, hung the joints and cuts of meat for the next day's sale.

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