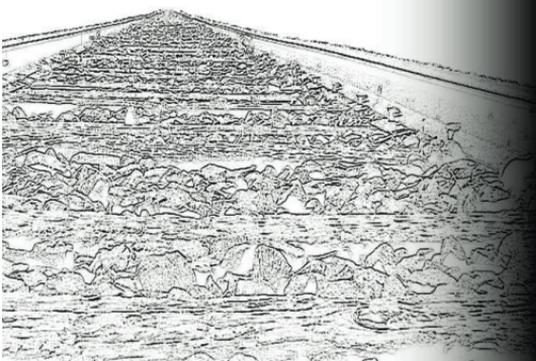


BEYOND THE WASTELAND

A.D. BANE



"THE TRAIN WENT
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BEYOND THE WASTELAND

by AD Bane

Beyond the Wasteland
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Published by

BANE PRINT

British Columbia, Canada

An imprint of AD Bane Publishing

Published in Canada, printed in the USA

First Printing, 2018

Second Edition

ISBN-13: 978-0-9918330-4-7

ISBN-10: 099183304X

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“It came from the east and went into the west with a rustle of the prairie grass and a cry of the rails that lasted on the wind, even until it was well beyond the next hill.”

“It was a demon-train, Tucker, an evil thing if ever I saw one . . . and I intend to catch it.”

This is a free Sample

For anyone whose childhood
was filled with orcs and dragons.

For those who fight the hordes
solely for the heart of the princess.

For the few who still follow the rails,
not because they must
but because they hear the call.

For the ones that persist
against demons and storms,
even though they never feel like
they're getting any closer.

A hopeful plea to the masses who've
forsaken the suit as a childish fancy.

And finally, for the elders who,
though long in the journey,
have found the coach
and call us now to come
onward to something better.

As a fellow traveller on this journey,
I pray that your hand will be steady
and your eye true
as you yearn for the way of the coach.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank
all those whose hard work has made this book
possible. Without you, let's face it, this
eventuality would still have happened
but it wouldn't have been as good.

Thanks to Hiram Webb and Dixie Webb
for taking the time to read and comment
on the manuscript. Your notes and honesty
have made this a better book.

Thanks to everyone who gave
me help with the rear-cover blurb. It's a monster
to write, since it's gotta sell
(and obviously it's working)
and your comments were all beneficial.
Thanks again to Hiram Webb
for the final draft.

~PROLOGUE~

THE DEMON-TRAIN

It came from the east and went into the west with a rustle of the prairie grass and a cry of the rails that lasted on the wind, even until it was well beyond the next hill. He stood on the platform and watched it go, watched the smoke from its single stack rising against the deepening scarlet horizon. He watched the dust drifting from the wasteless tracts of the Frontier like a memory to follow after it. He watched the last crimson flicker of its lamps in their eerie, demonic glow. A very human shudder went up his spine, and he wondered where it would go.

Demon-trains were uncommon, though not unheard-of. They were the stuff of stories, a thing told mostly in the wild fancies of children,

of which their insatiable hunger for excitement didn't care if the object was real or not, only that it was exciting. And the stories certainly excited them in the most graphic ways.

Of course demon-trains were feared. And well they might be – was it not said that Amos Donary himself had ridden one west to conquer the Inlands and the Frontier? The un-creature iron-horse would forever be marked in the minds of the people as undesirable, though little understood.

Everyone from Yorkport to Hembridge knew what a demon-train looked like. It was instilled in the minds of the young with their first words, this haunting image of a thing beyond mastery and reason that would come with no expectation, bringing darkness and cold, and leave again as wistfully as it had barrelled down the rails to begin with. And so, when the train blew through the station at Dhill and ran on he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what it was. He knew the dread that he felt. He shuddered at the shriek it made of the rails as it thundered by with the wind so suddenly gone cold. He even knew why it was that he hated it so.

But the thing that baffled his sense of reason was his inane desire to follow it.

~CHAPTER ONE~

IN THE PATH OF THE TRAIN

The train went west, a phantom, perhaps, but he followed after it, nevertheless. His boots were dusty and his feet ached. He'd stepped from one rail-tie to the next since the day's first light, and he was tired. His clothes were hot, so hot he felt sure this was what a boiled prairie chicken must feel like. The sun was the enemy, and yet it wasn't as fierce as it would've been in earlier months. Though still plenty hot for the waning year, when he'd left the station in Dhill it'd been hot enough to boil the water in his can where he left it out on a granite boulder. The only relief was the gentle breeze that tousled his hair, and he'd taken his shirt off so it could dry the sweat on his back, in

spite of the possibility of chilly nights ahead without it, if he should chance to lose it on the trail. He tucked it into his belt. But the sweat still soaked his hair at the band of his hat and ran down his face, then down his neck, and then over his back, until he felt stiff and encrusted with it. He couldn't see himself, but each step brought up clouds of the dry, Frontier dust, and with the sweat on his back, he was certain he was beginning to look more like a gutty wildman with each day.

The rails ran on, as straight as an arrow out of Dhill. He kept his eyes on them and his feet moving, always to the next tie. For three days he'd persisted, until the food in his wallet was gone and his canteen was empty. Now it was a dwindling strength alone that kept him moving, for without food or water who knew how far he might go? The sun would make short work of him. He'd heard it said a man ill-equipped for the Frontier would be dead in a day or a little more, and he'd been going on for nearly that long since his water had run dry, his thumbs on his gunbelt to feel the weight, his empty canteen bumping against the iron from time to time, just to remind him that it was still there. His lips were parched, his fingers cracked, and he knew he must soon have water or else. And the rails ran on before, hardly another turn since the hills at Perth Canyon, and not a drop of water to save his soul. He'd hoped for a stream in the cut. They did say, afterall, that canyons were oft carved by moving water. But there had been none, and as he trudged again into the west he began to realize that he'd come too far now to return, much

too far; if he turned back the buzzards would have the meat from his bones before the sun would set on him again.

The sun wasn't the only enemy out here, either. A pack had been on his trail from Perth. He'd seen them in the distance when he rested at the crest of a hill. They wouldn't beset him beneath the high sun, he decided, not unless they were desperate with hunger – which they might just be out here in the Frontier. They were shrewd. More like they'd wait until it was the even, or maybe after dark, before they'd close in for the kill. But just knowing that they were at his heels kept him moving ahead, another reminder that he couldn't go back now. No, the only way ahead was forward, along the rails in the path of the coach.

It was absurd, really, following a coach-train, hoping to catch it. He knew, of course, that he never would. He *couldn't*: it was moving at least four turns to his one – and that was if he was running. And it never tired. If there was a station ahead then he might gain some ground – *might*, that is, if it stopped at all. But it may-aswell be a thousand turns in the heat and the sun and the dust of the Frontier, if it was a pace.

There *was* a town just beyond the horizon. It was a sleepy little nook of a camp built in the valley between the edge of the canyon and the Sundry Hills in the west, where the coach-train would be making its final stop before it went on into the uninhabited wasteland (the True Frontier, as it was known), if it found a way (and he had little doubt now that it would). The town was called Drayton. He'd known it was there;

he'd been there before. But he'd forgotten how far it was from Dhill: days on foot could be hours on horseback.

Drayton was the last lawless camp before the hills. Perhaps it had changed; things sometimes *did* change. It'd been some twenty odd years or so, back when he'd run with the Chartleton brothers out of Hembridge. Oh, those had been the glory days. The days of plenty. The days when a man never wanted for money in his pocket to spend because he always had it. And at the very height of the waning year they'd had more loot than they'd known what to do with. That was when they'd made west for Drayton camp with the law at their backs and so much *oliveshine* between the three of them that even their dreams couldn't spend it all. The heat and dust of the Frontier hadn't quelled his spirits then, so high had they been on the *furthings* they carried in tow.

But when they'd arrived in Drayton it was a different story, all together. All his memories from the camp were bad ones: of wet nights and sweltering days (it was always hot during high summer this far into the Frontier). Garette Borough had beat him down with the butt of a *blackiron* and pissed on his face. The next day Garette was gone from the camp, having made off with the contents of every strongbox in every house, including the stolen loot. Chock Brottle, the mayor (or perhaps *boss* was a more fitting term, for Chock was the only law in Drayton) had tracked the outlaw's trail three days into the hill where he'd found not more than a sun-worn

boot or two and a spot of blood where the coyotes had torn the carcass apart.

It had irked him something fierce to be played for a fool like that and then not even get his comeuppance.

That was why now, with the toes of his boots on the rails toward Drayton, Jonas Arthur was a little uneasy. It was the dust on his feet and the grit in his teeth that assured him more than all else. Having just ridden into town with the Chartletons all those years ago they'd looked, if anything, like the boys from Hembridge that they were, or maybe even Dodge itself; but now he was just as dirty and slimy as any other *gun-toter* or *grootbiter*. He had the irons strapped to his sides to prove he wasn't no gutty, though, big grey shooters, six chambers each, and with enough kick to ruin even the best man's appetite. And he knew how to use them, too: Charles had said so himself. But then Charles had also been lying in a pool of his own blood with three *blackiron* slugs tugging at the back of his mind, so what did Charles know?

At the crown of a hill he stayed his pace to shake the dust from his boots; and as an added pardon, he chanced a glance over his shoulder. The pack was closing in on him, hungry beyond their time, no doubt, and eager for supper well before evening. And they'd have it soon enough, one way or the other.

On the other side of the hill there was a wide anthology of standing-stones, grey and dusty as chalk. Cover, or as close as he would find out here. In the shade of one he took from his holsters his irons and checked the chargeholes.

Full-up, both the same. And the shots were good, he had no doubt. But he'd been careful to number the pack, and his count had come up short at nine. No less, certainly. They never travelled light. No doubt fourteen or fifteen – maybe even as many as eighteen – was closer the mark. The quandary wouldn't answer itself, but supper would. He'd have to make it up as he went.

They were closer now. He knew it because he could no longer spot them when he leant out around the stone. He'd seen it before, how a pack could vanish into the dust of the Frontier only moments prior to making the kill. The only thing now was to wait.

He saw the attack before it came. His eyes were sharp, his ears keen, for a runner's must be if he doesn't wish to be shot in the back. He was hunkered in the earth when the *cani-bitch*, starved and scrawny to the bone, came upon him from around the stone to his right, its eyes alight and its fangs dripping with saliva. The hackles at its shoulders bristled as it struck, quick as a snake. But Jonas Arthur brought his gun to bear the quicker still. He shot it without mercy, without thought, and already his other gun was in hand and wheeling on the *cani's* mate, which was quick and quiet on his heels. Again he killed as willfully. And the gunshots echoed and came back to him from across the canyon.

He could see them now, startled a little, perhaps, by the thunder his guns had made; yet they wouldn't be driven afar. They lingered on the fringe, crouching in the dust and waiting for him to lower his guard, their eyes ever-watchful. And that was good fortune, as far as he was con-

cerned. Another time, perhaps, he may have missed, or he may have shot a whelp rather than the sires. And if that were the case he'd have had no choice but to spend all his lead on their worthless hides. But for now, perhaps, they'd let him be and he could save his shots for someone more deserving.

When he left the stones he now saw truly how large their number was: fourteen, counting those two he'd slain already. So the pack truly was ravenous. Likely they'd already lost some of their number since leaving the hills at Perth in search of a kill. All those that came close enough to see were little more than skin on bone — hardly good eating. Reasonable fair to keep his hand practiced, though, and as he continued on the rails his shadow told him that he might yet find the opportunity to join them to their *canis*.

The rails turned a little as they came over the last hill out of the canyon and began the wide and gradual remark that ultimately ended in a trestle over the murked and churning waters of the Drayton. Not that he minded the sun and the heat of the Frontier, but it would be a relief to be out on the trestle with the cool and violent stir of the breeze off the river in his hair. Perhaps he would even go down to those waters for a dip, Fall-willing he could find a path that wouldn't end in broken bones and shattered ambitions. And, that is, if the tail at his back had given up the suit.

The trestle didn't make him feel easy. It looked years in disrepair, and that made sense enough, because, to his knowledge, the trains hadn't even come past Hembridge for some

years. It'd been a sincere surprise to him when the coach had skipped the return point and kept going. Though, when he considered it, he supposed that if the ironhorse could cross the wild churning waters below then so could he. Even so, the eerie glow of the lanterns that swung gaily from its caboose had troubled him – and still did. Something about it just wasn't right. Perhaps a demon-train could cross the river without ever touching the trestle; a gunrunner in leather, carrying shooting-irons, however, could not.

He was standing at the point now where the first few rising piers in the ground below extended perhaps three times his height to support the rails of the track. It didn't seem like a terribly long way down, but if he took another step there'd no longer be any earth or stone beneath him, just a dizzying fall into the black depths of the Drayton River; and from that adventure there could be no return.

He hesitated. He thought again of the little camp in the valley beyond, and then of the broken and rotted trestle before him. And then his thought came again to the platform just outside Dhill, the rattle of the tracks as the rail-coach went by, the dull-red glow of its lamps in the failing light, and then, as it mounted the hill, the dreadful cry of its whistle echoing back to him.

He stepped out onto the trestle.

The old timbers creaked and moaned, as very large, old houses often do on stormy nights. His weathered boots slipped on the stained wood and smooth rails. He wondered for a moment if it was not his end. He'd only ever asked that question once before in his whole entire life, in fact,

when Henry Dalton, the fastest hand west of Dodge, the Kid Darkfinger himself, had stood opposite him in the dusty street, back-bent, his hands poised about his gunbelts, one eye squint, the other turned a little down, as if of a different will than its neighbour. At that moment he'd known the Kid could blow a hole right through between his eyes before his finger could so much as twitch. He'd seen it before, for, afterall, Darkfinger had been the one who'd killed the Chartleton brothers, and he'd done that with only one bullet at nothing less than fifty turns. He'd had the sun in his eyes and the shooting finger of his left hand (his better) wrapped all up in bandages from when he'd near cut it off on a broken glass dicing in Dodge. Jonas had seen it, the look in the Kid's eye, the way his hand twitched.

But Jonas had lived. They *both* had walked away from it. He didn't know how or why, but it happened. And Jonas Arthur was left with the same question as no one before him had ever asked: was he not, perhaps, even faster than Kid Darkfinger? The thought might've driven better men mad. Now he likely would never know.

As he stood on the trestle perhaps some part of him knew that he couldn't die, not here, not now. He *would* make it across, though for all the screaming voices in his head his knees still shook something fierce and through his boots the iron rails felt like someone had run grease the length of them.

From that first moment on he counted each step and thereby each tie. By the time he made it to thirty-seven, when he looked down he was staring at nothing but old, groaning timbers and

black churning depths. By the time he was at fifty he could no longer hear the rush of the wind or feel it on his skin: his entire body felt numb, his neck and back taut with the strain. His dirty trousers clung to his legs, his boots felt stiff and damp, and there was sweat dripping from the brim of his hat, his head was bent so low – he was terrified he might miss his footing, and the thought of plummeting to his death made his head feel hollow.

It occurred to him now that if he could've beaten this obstacle with a draw of the iron in his holsters it would've been an easy-enough task. It was iron he knew so well, and it was quite an unfortunate thing, indeed, that not all enemies could be mastered by a quick hand and a sure eye.

He was still breathing hard when he stood again on the earth and gravel next to the rails at the west end of the trestle. And now, looking back, he wondered why he had ever started across at all, why his better instincts hadn't won out. What he hadn't noticed from the other end (but now saw, now that the sun was at his back) were the three consecutive piers missing where the east end of the trestle was rooted into the earth. And still worse was the slump in the track where even the rails had begun to sag beneath their own weight.

As he stood on the edge he breathed a prayer: "Keep my hand steady and mine eye true; pull me to when I stray."

As he turned his back to the east once more and his face to the sunset he was succinctly de-

cided that he wouldn't be going back that way – if, indeed, he went back at all.

It was not so very far to Drayton now. The camp was only just beyond the next set of Werpieris – as the rough, weather-worn rocky mounds of the Frontier are called (called, it was said, because at night as one was passing by they might appear to be a hundred savage wolves waiting in the dark; by daylight they were beautiful in a sort of *dulk*, stony fashion). He could actually see a shed or two on the far side of the valley, and a single column of grey smoke lifted lazily into the air.

He'd come by the road into Drayton at his last visit, he and the Chartletons having with them and between them more than twice their weight in the cold olive sunshine. The wagon had nearly given out on that last hill. But they'd known before ever they truly passed the borders of Drayton that they were safe from the lawmen at their backs because Drayton was a lawless town: no men-of-the-script poking irons in their faces here.

Now, however, where the edge of the camp used to be was a high wall of stakes, probably dragged up from the river before the last timber in the hills was cut. Beyond the wall, where the camp had once been an expanding, growing entity, the workmen coming from far out east to man the machines that worked the Sundry mines, it was now a vast graveyard of weathered and abandoned shacks standing gaunt and empty, a world gone so cold. Most were missing wall or roof, probably to the needs of those now *inside* the fence. Business in the mines surely

had run dry in recent years, maybe even stopped all together. Many of the houses that once had been home to the miners now stood forsaken; the work-houses, which had once housed hundreds of young lads for the sweat and toil of the mines now bore the sound of piano music and the smell of whiskey and roasted beef.

And sure enough, it was nearly suppertime.

He stopped on the hill looking out on Drayton to return the shirt to his sweat-soaked back and to push his guns into his bedroll: better to be an unarmed, wayward traveller coming into Drayton than an iron-toting outlaw, if he wished to survive the night. Certainly the camp was lawless, but with that came also the given nature of men to hate each other for jealousy's sake, and many were not above putting a knife in a stranger's back to relieve him of his irons, for good shooting irons were scarce on the Frontier. Who knew: there might even be a bounty waiting for him in Dodge. The *droges* sometimes came out as far as Drayton. He didn't want to risk the possibility.

Drayton (at least what he could see of it from the edge of the hillock where he stood with the dust coming up around his knees, the weeds rolling past in the wind and the sun glaring orange on the left side of his face) was a more or less typical Frontier tumbleweed town. It was old, not so old as to be of any importance but just old enough to not be of any at all. When Hembridge began to develop, being the largest city west of Dodge, every tree had been cleaned from the hills as far as Drayton. It was a feat made possible by the railroad, which once had run through

the little valley, bringing on it coaches perhaps twice monthly. Now when the frontier camps needed that timber so badly it was not to be found. And so Drayton was falling into disrepair. The old cabins were all but gone, dismantled for their lumber. The new shacks that went up were only cheap, silly replicas of what the work-houses had been; many were nothing but shanties against the wall, or each other. In recent times, it seemed, Drayton had seen a scarcity of water and an abundance of wind and sun, and the result was the little town was drying up fast.

Down the hill the road wound itself, right to the edge of the camp, and there he paused again where the prairie grass ended in an overgrown firebreak that stretched away in both directions around the perimeter of what had once been a part of Drayton and now was not more than a graveyard. The weathered and tumbled shacks rose up before him like the discarded carapaces of gaunt sentries made so old and useless with time they do not yet realize the prize they guard has become worthless. It was a dead, cold, colourless sight, even with the setting sun turning to gold and crimson on the horizon. In fact, the only color in that whole ruinous camp beyond the walls were the tufts of bloodgrass that had grown up at the corners of the old cabins and between the boards in the walks – slender, dry stalks of weed as red as crimson. Bloodgrass didn't grow east of Hembridge (or even Dhill, for that matter); it grew only very sparsely in the Frontier. Jonas had only ever seen the crimson weed perhaps thrice before in his life, and not so much as a blade in Drayton before now. But he

had *heard* of those who chewed the stuff. 'Twas said that it took hold, and when it had, it didn't let go. They were bound, body and soul, to some demon that would keep them chewing, rotting through and through, until the day the weed finally claimed their minds and their bodies along with it. It was a sad prophecy of the end of Drayton, and perhaps the entire Frontier and their way of life.

In the failing light, with that terrible, cold yard before him, Jonas might have supposed that no one lived in the camp anymore. He certainly wouldn't have guessed anyone now lived outside the walls. But as he strode down the dusty road toward the gate he saw someone ambling toward him up what had once been a street, someone bent and doubled and leaning heavily on a stick. It was an aged fellow with few teeth behind his cracked lips and eyes that looked and looked but saw nothing. Even his hair was like the entrails of the crypt and hung about his shoulders in garlands of coarse weed.

He stopped when he saw Jonas watching him. For a moment he stood in the street, his eyes dim where the devils danced and his old, frail bones looking like they might shatter at any moment. His hand stooped momentarily toward his belt, as if he expected something to be there, and he called out in a voice like the wind through the reed-grass, "Har, father! What's it *cah-ree*? Reach for it, else Fall 'ang y'seff!" Then he turned back the way he'd come, ambling along with the support of his crook.

A strange sight. A strange thing. A strange town. Anything could happen at the edge of the Frontier.

"Traveller!" cried the gate when Jonas approached the wide doors, the ramshackle huts now creeping in close on either side as if to tender his ensnarement in their cold clutches. It was a fairly solid door, to be sure. If he'd had a coach-wagon ram, like what the Chartletons had used to get into Fort Cardac he might have had it down in an hour or so, but as just a single man against those heavy-bound timber he was useless.

"Where is the warden?" he called up. "Who keeps the door?"

"I, Sir; 'tis I to say true," said an aging chap who'd just poked his head over the wall, his bright eyes looking down from beneath the broad brim of his hat. "But the door's locked and 'twill be 'til the sun's on the left o' my face 'gain."

"Why won't it open?" Jonas called.

"'Tis Lord Quenn's orders, Sir."

"*Quenn?*" asked Jonas. "Does Chock Brottle not still fancy himself mayor and law in Drayton camp?"

"Nay, man, not 'nemore. He's gone from hence, see, and not to come 'gain on the pains of his life as I 'eard it! But you may sit there in the road 'til the sun, *oh-she-rise!* if it please you!" The warden laughed a bright little cackle that was not so much friendly or pleasant as it was distastefully gleeful. "But I'll warrant a jack's what wants to eat you – will have its way! Or p'haps a coyote or wolf, if'n one 'appens by. Not

safe outside the walls when the sun's down, no Sir it tain't!"

"I could shoot you now," Jonas called back, "and have my way, anyhow."

"No you c'ain't, not without iron and lead, leastways!" replied the warden with another of his gleeful cackles. "You best turn yourself 'round now, traveller, and be on your way 'til dawn, lest my well-trained finger slip on my well-trained trigger!"

Jonas sighed. Drayton had been more welcoming at his last visit. Chock Brottle hadn't cared a single *furthing* if the gunslingers riding into town were lawmen or outlaws; all that concerned him was that they weren't up to be stirring things in his town. And, what's more, Jonas had respected the fanciful mayor. First night in the saloon he'd seen Mister Brottle drag a man perhaps twice his size through three tables, the knuckle of his nine-iron never leaving the drunks head. Then he'd thrown him out the door with little more than a heave. And as the derelict was making way from town, back toward the road with his tail tucked well between his legs, Chock discovered earlier that night he'd been the source of considerable disquiet at the Ladies House, and he'd run up out of the camp after, shooting him at fifty turns or more with his nine-iron before the man even knew he was being followed (fifty turns was a helluva shot, if the target wasn't moving; but they'd said the fellow was making as if the Purge was upon him at that very moment).

As Jonas turned back from the gate his eye caught sight of the old man sitting on the front

step of what had once been a low shack. He was pulling up tufts of the bloodgrass, chewing it and spitting it out again in great, snorting hacks like tobacco. But his face was contorted in pain as the weed bit into his fingers and mouth. When he spat it was more blood than grass, yet it was only with a terrible effort that seemed to strain him nearly to the point of breaking, as if something within him would not let go, that he coughed up the weed. His hands shook as he reached for more, his eyes dead-cold, so far beyond the point at which fear takes over, like a man bound by a will not his own, both in love and a dreadful hatred.

Perhaps they were not so different, he and the old man, Jonas thought: bound to some demon.

Jonas supposed he could head back up the hill to the road, or perhaps even back along the river gorge to the tracks, and find a place to make camp for the night. He might even find shelter up off the ground in the piers under the old trestle, but the thought of sleeping in those timbers rotting away beneath him was not a pleasant one. He rather would've faced the wolves that came from the desert by night; and dawn might as well be years away if wolves came, because no matter where he was their cries would awaken him.

Still, chances were there was another way into the camp. Often low walls and deep culverts went overlooked, and if one knew to search for them they weren't difficult to find.

He made north, first along the east wall, then a little away from it, until he could hear again

the thunder of the river where its gorge became shallow and quite close to the camp. There, on those hot days, the women from Drayton would make their way to the river for water. There ought to be a way down, if the Fall cared at all for his soul, and he'd have his dip, rain or shine.

There was indeed a way. A cattle path, it wound through the scrub brush and right to the water's edge. There he stood, his boots sinking in the mud, the waters of the Drayton flowing by not a turn in front of him. To be truthful, it looked sick, black and deathly cold, contagious with some malevolent invader that had taken over the river and choked its current, streaming beneath the surface like algae in long garlands. He couldn't help but imagine those tendrils taking hold of him as he dove in, dragging him down until the crushing weight of the water on his head forced the life from him. But it would have to do.

He chanced a glance over his shoulder, then shook off his boots and put them on a rock, peeled off his shirt and breeches and put them up in a bush, pushed his bedroll (guns still tucked safely inside) beneath a particularly large boulder; and lastly he drew his stout knife and clutched it in his teeth. Then he slipped into the water. It *was* deathly cold: it stole the air from his lungs and left him a moment of panic. But he stayed in and pushed past the rock that sheltered the bank from the rushing current, right out into the life-force of the river, feeling the brush of those sick streamers against his feet. Then it was just the swift, cold water moving all

around, and he had to fight against it or be swept into the canyon below.

When he again scrambled past the rock and up to the bank, he was quite refreshed and even feeling a fair sight more hopeful about catching up the coach. First thing first, though: he needed to get into Drayton before night fell.

He dressed quickly and slung his bedroll, then plodded back up the path until he was standing beneath the high eastern fence. There was no way through, not even the smallest chink for a foothold. The stakes were strong and sturdy, and they plunged perhaps his height or more into the earth so as to make the camp impregnable. But every fortress has its weakness (he'd learned that at Fort Cardac), and Drayton's was to the north where the hills began to climb away and the fence was not so high.

He followed the wall in that way until he was standing on the hillocks that bordered the river as it wound its way down the canyon perhaps several thousand turns before righting and heading east, away from the Sundry Hills and toward the prairies and the Rim. And there he found it, what he'd been looking for: a high ridge of rock, the fence built right beneath it. If he jumped he could make it, he thought. And if not then he'd find himself coming up quite short on the up-turned end of the stakes – a gruesome way to die, to be sure.

But what was life if you didn't live it?

He dug his toes in and ran.

The pursuit of the demon-train
continues in

~CHAPTER TWO~
FRIENDS UNLOOKED-FOR

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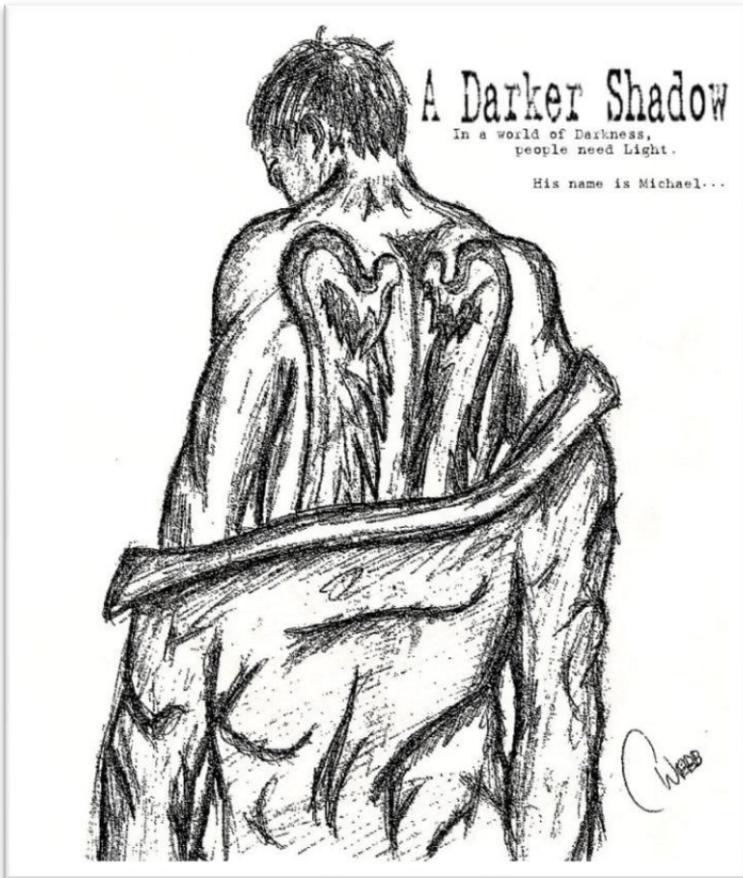
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