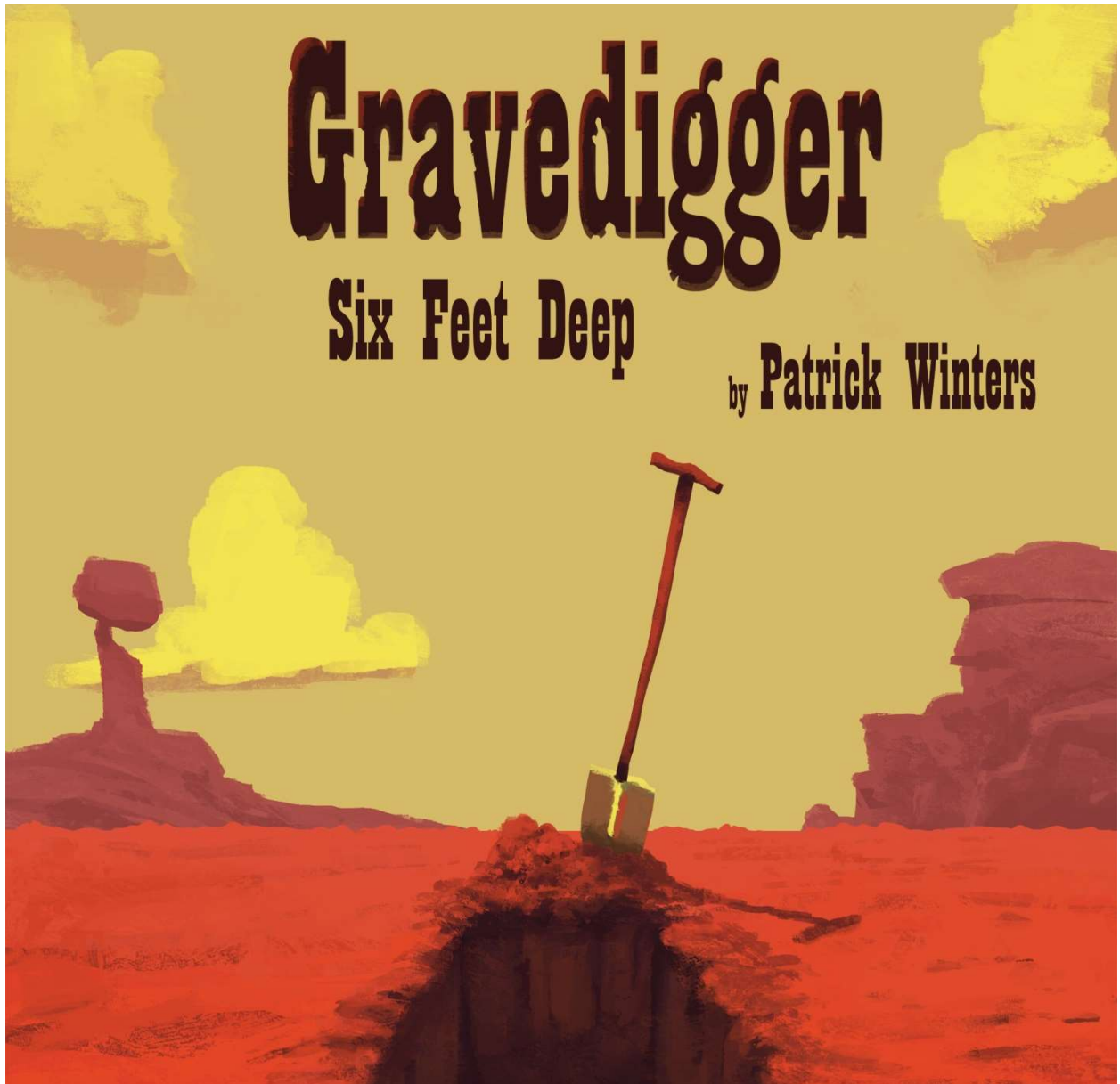


Gravedigger

Six Feet Deep

by Patrick Winters



Gravedigger

Six Feet Deep

Six Stories of Horror, the Supernatural, and the Weird West

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“The Stranger” first appeared in *Sanitarium Magazine*, copyright © Eye Trauma Press, 2015

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The Stranger

Matthew Howard rode up to the saloon, the old nag beneath him hanging its head low and huffing and puffing into the dirt at its hooves. It could no doubt use a good drink of water; Howard knew he could do for some water himself, the kind with fire in it.

He wished he'd bothered to bring some more water or alcohol than he had before he'd left San Merida behind him. Healthy water sources turned out to be scarce around these parts, distilleries even more so. The Arizona winds and the dust kicking up from them had left him parched the last hour or so of his ride, scratching at his spirits just as much as his throat. The sorry excuse for a saloon before him might just have the right brand to whet his thirst and bring those spirits back into even-temper. Though he had his doubts. The Crooked Cactus, as the ramshackle looking establishment was so terribly named, seemed like the kind of joint whose firewater emphasized the water and fell short of the more wanted alcohol. If the owner couldn't afford to give the place a suitable coat of paint (a dull, flaked red of wearing and age), fix the face of the building (the boards loose and hanging together only by God's good grace) or properly attach the sign (which hung limp by one thin chain over the doorway, the name writ upon it and the symbol of a cactus drawn below that), then the booze he sold couldn't be worth whatever he asked for a simple glassful. But in the desert, and with a long ride behind him and still ahead, Howard would take what he could get.

With a groan, he hauled himself over his horse, his spurs jangling and sending a puff of dust up as he jumped onto the bare earth of what passed for a street-way. The saloon was one of only about a dozen or more buildings clustered around each other, six or so on either side of a

wide dirt path between the flanking buildings. A brief road leading from nowhere, into this so-called township, and right on into nowhere again on the other side.

Howard gave a tug on his horse's reins, urging the dopey thing to move a bit faster. *You move slower than Mariah*, he thought, a cruel little smile spreading on his face. It fell away quickly, though. That was another thing alcohol could help him with—forgetting memories and forgetting names.

A trough of water sat in front of the stoop leading into the Crooked Cactus, free of any other horses. If anyone else was in the saloon, they'd have had to come by within walking distance of the place. Howard knotted the reins around the pole over the trough and turned away. His horse began to drink up the murky water as he took the steps up to the swinging doors of the saloon. He sauntered inside.

Quaint was the polite word for such a place; sparse was a less reserved term; a shithole with a place to sit was Howard's ideal choice of description. But as his sight fell on the shelves of drink behind the bartender, his criticisms slipped away.

The room was no bigger than a barn's space, nor did it smell much different. A thin layer of dirt seemed to swath over everything in sight, specks of it floating in the dim light shining in from the doorway and the few windows set into the face of the building. Off to the right were six tables, some circular in shape, some square, none of them matching. The thriftiness of a small-time saloon owner on display. Only one of the tables was occupied, the middle one closest to the far right wall. Three older gentlemen—miners by the looks of them, either retired or still barely in the profession—sat facing each other, small glasses and a bottle of something or other between them. They didn't bother to look up at Howard as he entered; they were caught in some heated debate only kooky frontiersmen can rightly manage. Off to the left, before the small array of booze on display, was a bar no larger than ten feet long, five stools in front of it, perhaps three capable of holding a grown man's weight without snapping.

The man tending the bar had the look of a curmudgeon: eyes permanently narrowed in either suspicion or anger, one side of his mouth up-turned in a small scowl, and shoulders slumped in age-old, bitter resignation as he wiped his glasses clean. A mop of gray-white hair hung around his face, and a thin mustache accentuated the look of disgust smacked on that haggard visage.

Howard stepped up to the bar, thinking briefly of sitting on one of the stools. He'd been sitting on his horse for hours, though, and his ass hurt from the brisk pace he'd set his horse to taking. Standing would do him some good. Besides, he wasn't sure which of the five stools he'd have hazarded a try on. Maybe if he ended up on a good drunk he'd reconsider.

"G'morning," Howard muttered to the man at the bar. He figured he'd have to be the one to engage any conversation with the salty old man. "Whiskey, or whatever you've got that carries a punch."

The bartender spared Howard an eye to eye glance, then he gave his customer a good once-over, then turned back to the glasses he was so lethargically tending to. He eventually set one in front of Howard.

"Do you use that often?" The old man's voice didn't betray any worry, but his eyes blinked in a nervous flurry as he nodded at the six-shooter on Howard's hip.

"On occasion, yes."

"Well, if an "occasion" should happen to follow you in here, take your business outside. Too many "occasions" in the past have put holes in my tables, shot up my bottles of drink, and just barely scooted past my wrinkled ass."

With the house-rules set and noted, the barkeep turned to the shelves behind him and grabbed hold of a bottle. He pulled the cork off with a pop, the sound that had brought a smile to Howard's face again and again, ever since he'd discovered the power of the drink. *The sound that tickles a man's taste*, he'd sometimes said when he asked Mariah for a glass of something or other at their supper-times. Again, Howard's smile faded at the thought. But only a little; he was still getting his beloved drink, after all.

The old man slid the glass of whiskey towards Howard. Howard didn't speak an agreement as to the barkeep's request; just let a brisk nod serve as an answer. He lifted the glass and downed the shot, barely taking the time to taste the drink before he smacked the glass down and nodded for another. The barkeep grabbed hold of the bottle again and tipped more of the booze into the glass.

". . . And he says to me, "Martin, I swear to you, by my pa's name and God in Heaven, we started shooting up that coach and not one bullet did a bit of harm to it.""

The words of one of the old men at the table caught Howard's attention. He listened in on their ranting while he kept sipping his drink, staring down at the counter-top while the man behind him continued.

"Went right on through, he says! He could see right through it, he says! Like it was some mirage, of sorts. But they could hear the wheels creaking and the carriage trembling as it raced on and away. He and his bunch couldn't make heads or tails out of it. He swears it was the Phantom Coach riding through, and he must have believed it—scared him so bad he never went back to the gang again."

A round of harrumphs came from the other two men at the table. One of them spoke up when he figured his friend was finished. "That story makes me mighty all-overish, Martin, swear it does. But 'taint nothing next to those stories I've been hearing coming from up South of here! Talks of some gravedigger character with an itchy trigger-finger and a habit of not dying right."

"The hell you mean, Samuel, not dying right?" Martin asked, the man who had spoken of the Phantom Coach.

"I mean what I say! This character's been going all across the territories, shooting up all manner of men. I heard the one's he goes for don't go down without a fight, neither! All gunslingers and scoundrels, and by the sound of it, each has put a shot into this bastard and he ain't died!"

"I heard the same," the third man at the table spoke up. "Heard from a cattle-driver headin' up North from Wyatt the other day talkin' 'bout it. He saw the man himself—this gravedigger fella. Said he called out some desperado-type in the middle of the street, talkin' 'bout the people the other one supposedly killed. Rattled off quite a list o' names 'fore the desperado pulled out his Colt and put three into the other's gut. Didn't put him down, though. He kept a'comin', and 'fore anyone could do or say a thing, this gravedigger shot the desperado dead, quicker than a rattler. No one was inclined to stick around after that."

"What's with callin' him the gravedigger?" the one named Martin asked.

"Gettin' to that. Well, a few people said they kept watch o' what happened after the scuffle—from their houses and behind their curtains, mind you. Said they saw him drag the body of the desperado just outside of the town limits, grab a shovel from his pack-horse, and dig up a grave for him. Tossed him in, refilled the grave, and kept on goin', right out of town, no one botherin' to stop him."

"Shot three times and never died? Garsh," Martin said. "Awful odd story . . ."

"I heard similar stories," Samuel, the one who'd initiated this line of discussion about this ghoulish gravedigger, said. "All about a man, some gunslinger of sorts, popping up in all sorts of places and shooting up people. Bad people, by the sound of it. Killers and the like. People are saying he's some kind of ghost."

"Heard tell he's a demon of some sort," the one that wasn't Martin or Samuel countered. "Somethin' Old Hob himself sent up from the fires o' hell. Took the shape o' a man to go around unnoticed—'lot a good that's done, by the talk of him. Collectin' up the souls of the damned and hell-bound for the devil. Apparently Old Hob can't wait for his black flock to come to his fiery fields in their own time."

Samuel persisted with his telling of events. "Well, I heard he's the spirit of some old bounty-hunter. Ruthless, he was, taking any bounty he could, no matter the price, big or small. Made his wages all over the west, collecting his share of posters town to town. Got himself cornered in a saloon one night when the brother of one of his bounties tracked him down. Shot him up something awful. Then he drug him out into the desert and buried him. But he didn't stay dead and buried. He got back up and has been chasing down more bounties ever since, never stopping, unable to die, killing and burying the people he hunts until he collects enough money to buy his way into heaven or hell, whichever will take him."

Any response or retort from the fellow's bar-buddies was stopped short by a loud, hard laugh by Howard. The three men at the table finally turned and saw him, each frowning, the one who'd just spoken looking downright angry. Howard turned around to face them in kind, leaning his back and one elbow against the counter, his glass half-raised at his chest for an anticipatory sip. He smiled an impish grin at the older men before he spoke up.

"If this ghost-man of yours is killing to keep turning in bounties, why would he bury them? How does he get the money?"

The other two men's looks of confusion deepened as they thought this over, looking at the one called Samuel, who'd grown upset, hunching his shoulders and looking down at the tabletop. Howard continued on in their silence.

"Besides, I never heard of any devil or God that wants coin to allow a soul into their hell or heaven—well, other than what the preacher may say when he passes 'round the plate come a Sunday."

Another quick run of silence from the men came as they thought it over. "He's right," one of the other two—Martin—said. "Got ta' show the bodies to collect rewards, ghost or not. Don't make much sense, now does it?"

"Of course not," Howard barked after drinking up and slamming the glass back down again. The bartender refilled as Howard retorted. "You're talking of ghosts and spirits and all manner of horse-shit that don't exist. The only "other side" I've ever concerned myself with is a river that needs crossing, and we ain't got many in Arizona, do we? And you should do the same. The superstitious is for scared children and half-wit savages. And for crotchety old coots drinking in saloons, of course." Howard gave a mock toast to the men as he downed another glass. He finished with a pleased sigh and said, "But by all means, continue blathering, if you will."

Samuel, sitting closest to the wall and furthest from Howard, narrowed his eyes, clenching his fists in useless anger at the younger man's haughty manner. He swallowed down whatever bitter words he wished to say and spoke in a measured, silent tone, just loud enough for all to hear. "You call it superstitious, boy, I call it knowing and respecting."

That got another laugh out of Howard. He looked down at his boots, shaking his head, and then turned his sight back to the old man. "Respect? For what, exactly, codger?"

Now all three of the men at the table were staring at Howard with that narrowed glare of judgment. Mocking beliefs was one thing; bringing up age or senility was another. It was Samuel that continued on. "For things we don't rightly understand. That land out there and this life we live have strange ways about it. Things that we "codgers", with all our years and the sights we've seen, can't explain away. And if we can't, a young pup like you surely can't, neither, in spite of all your thick-skulled ways."

"Things you can't understand?" Howard said, nearly spitting out the last word. "You're just retelling stories others have heard from someone else, who were doubtless told so by another person, in turn. Rumors! Besides, people get shot, killed, and buried every damn day out in these parts. We don't need devils, ghosts, and dead men to do it. You're putting nonsense in with hard facts: people kill people."

Samuel managed a smirk at this. He held his head in a defiant and confident tilt. "Sounds like you know a bit about killing, stranger. Maybe this gravedigger will find his way to you soon enough. You may just be his type."

The humid air of the saloon got a little bit warmer for Howard with that remark—especially under his collar. He frowned, and the old men must have seen it, because all three were smirking now. The "codgers" had gotten to the youngster. If he weren't holding his glass, Howard's hand may well have shot to his hip and to his iron. Three bullets to three faces ought to get rid of those mocking grins. Ought to prove that know-it-all Samuel right, too. But Howard stayed his fury and managed his proud tone back into his voice.

"Well, if your gravedigger does exist, let him come for me. Let him walk right in here and call me out on my so-called sins or what have you. I'll take his shovel and shove it up his . . ."

The doors of the saloon opened and a man trudged in, breaking the heated conversation. He stopped in the mouth of the doorway, the slight ringing of his spurs and the thump of his heavy footsteps giving way to silence as the others looked towards him. The newcomer looked to be about Howard's age, surely no more than forty. He sported a long, dark brown coat that fell to his ankles, covering broad shoulders that were angled in an eased state. He wore a black hat, the kind with a flat top and a perfect circle of a brim. Under the hat was a face that some may call handsome, with rather pale skin for someone who had ridden in the Arizona sun and a fine shadow of hair across his cheeks. Dark blonde hair with fine streaks of black was sneaking out from under the hat, hanging down to the nape of his neck.

The barkeep gave a nod to the man but said nothing. The man did the same. Then he looked towards the three older men at the table, then to Howard. Their eyes locked for a moment before the man moved to the bar. He stood there, staring at the wall before him while the bartender went to ask him what he wanted. He answered quietly, apparently asking for whiskey, too, though neither Howard nor the other three could hear his exact words. The bartender set to getting the new arrival a drink.

Howard turned back to the old coots at their table. "As I was saying," he continued, though he didn't pick up exactly where he'd left off, "I don't put stock in your ghost stories and your hear-say. Nothing you say, no tales you could spin, will change my mind. And if I should know anything of killing . . ." Howard paused for effect, noting the weight of the Colt at his side. "You're better off not knowing."

"Who would know?"

Howard had started to turn back to the bar, his say spoken and his attention shifting from the men, when the deep voice stopped him. It was the newcomer who'd spoken.

Howard stared at him, speechless for a moment. The other man at the bar kept staring at the wall, taking a quick drink. He said nothing more.

"Excuse me?" Howard set his little glass down on the counter, angling himself to face the other man. The weight on his hip found an extra pound or so. His hand tapped lightly on the edge of the counter, a foot away from the grip of his revolver. The air grew warmer again, his skin flushing red. He sensed the other patrons' eyes shifting from him to the newcomer, waiting. "You say something, stranger?"

The man set his own glass down, but he didn't bother to turn and face Howard. Just kept staring at the peeling paint of the wall. Seconds slipped by quietly.

"Who would know?" he repeated in the same blank, deep tone. "About whether or not you could kill? A hunting buddy? An old war compatriot?" He paused. "Your wife, perhaps?"

Howard's fingers stopped their brisk tapping. "Ain't got a wife," he answered.

The man didn't skip a beat with his next words. "No. Not anymore. You saw to that."

Howard's throat was suddenly dry again, despite the aftertaste of whiskey on his tongue. He didn't care for this man and his voice. Managing up some spittle and clearing his throat, Howard asked "Do I know you, mister?"

"No," the man said, "You don't. And I don't know you. But I know about you."

Howard remembered the barkeep's words. *If an "occasion" should happen to follow you in here, take your business outside.* He felt an occasion brewing, but whether or not it made it outside was yet to be seen. Meanwhile, the man kept speaking.

"I know you left San Merida two days ago. Lit out in a hurry. Took only essentials with you. I know you've been riding hard ever since. Probably pushing your horse close to death. I know you shot and killed your wife."

"Mister, you . . ."

"Mariah." Speaking that name cut Howard's denial short. The man knew! How could he know? "That was her name. Mariah."

Howard could feel the eyes of the codgers and the barkeep latch onto him. His hand slid a fraction closer to his hip. He didn't say anything. The man kept on in his stead.

"I don't know why you did it—just that you did. Maybe she messed up a meal. Maybe she had an individual thought. Maybe you just felt like doing something mean after a few glasses downed."

The man finally turned his head around and looked straight at Howard. Eyes that looked almost yellowish in the light shone with damning judgment.

"And I'm thinking maybe I ought to do something about it."

Howard swallowed down hard again, taking a small step forward, like a wildcat does when it's cornered by hunters—the daring bluff of a scared killer. He glanced down at the waist of the man, looking for the tell-tale bulge of a holster at the man's side. If there were a gun on the stranger, Howard couldn't tell by how the dark brown coat fell about the man's frame. "You some kind of lawman?"

A slight nod from the other man. "Some kind."

Another moment of silence, another bout of stillness. It was the barkeep who broke it. "Now," he began, inching his back against the wall, ready to dive out of sight should the need arise, "if you two fellars have some issue needs resolving, go outside and do it."

The other man gave Howard a look that said: *What'll it be? You decide.*

Howard grit his teeth, feeling his heart thudding away with the promise of violence, the alcohol pulsing through his veins making him all the more eager to put this mystery man down with a bullet. Howard nodded to the door, moving slowly towards it and keeping his eyes on the stranger. A cunning little grin slipped over his features, a show of bravado. Lawman or not, this sad sack was going to get killed for his troubles and his words. Howard had a plan.

The other man turned and made his way to the doors, walking slowly, but not cautiously. Almost strolling. Carefree. His back was to Howard, and his head was turned completely away from the man he'd just called out for murder. Howard could hear the legs of chairs screeching against the planks of the floor; the three old men were getting up, no doubt coming over to watch the sporadic and exciting event from the mouth of the doorway, or better and safer yet, the windows. Duels in a lonesome place like this didn't come too often. Quite the occurrence to see, albeit from a safe distance.

The man went out the swinging doors of the saloon and Howard now followed quickly behind, moving slightly faster in his confidence. His smile broadened as the stranger kept his sights forward. Once the doors closed behind him, Howard stopped, standing on the stoop of the

saloon. Technically, this was outside. The stranger walked on, going down the wooden steps of the saloon and stepping onto the dirt path leading through town.

The man had taken only a few paces before Howard drew his revolver and put a bullet square in the stranger's back.

The shot rang out like cannon-fire in the air of the desert, a great calamity in the isolation that was the west.

But the man was still standing. In fact, aside from a slight grunt and a small hitch forward as the bullet slammed through the back of his coat, the man hardly seemed to notice he'd been shot.

Howard stood there, feet spread, finger on the trigger, sweat forming on his brow under the hat he wore. He waited for the other man to fall down dead. Nearly prayed for it. But he didn't fall.

"It figures," the stranger said, still in the same calm, matter-of-fact depth he'd spoken in up to now, "that a man who'd shoot his own wife would shoot another man in the back."

The stranger turned around. The wind picked up, blowing his hair about a little and the flaps of his coat aside. Howard saw a belt full of bullets at the man's waist, and a holster at his right leg, a big black revolver resting there. Then Howard's eyes fell onto the man's chest. A vest scarred by what looked like bullet holes and knife punctures was now on display for Howard to see. One two-inch, ragged bullet hole in particular had torn through the man's undershirt and vest, a thin trickle of fresh blood pouring down the dark fabric. Howard's bullet had gone straight through the man, just under his heart. Right through bone and muscle, without a cry or scream from the man. By the easy stare on the stranger's face, Howard may as well have shot him with a toy slingshot and a pellet.

"What in the name . . ." Howard started, already taking aim again.

It was no use, though. The stranger was quick, and Howard's surprise and befuddlement made him slow. The other man had drawn, cocked his Colt, and fired off two rounds—one to Howard's chest, the other just below his throat—before he could finish. He fell to the wooden stoop, droplets of blood still falling through the air, sending up a puff of dust as the floorboards creaked under his fall.

Howard lay there, the life gone out of him before he'd even hit the stoop, spread-eagled with his Colt lying inches from his already chilling hand.

The stranger calmly slid his revolver back into its spot at his side. He moved towards the horse-trough, where two horses now stood. Howard's, and the stranger's, a dark red bay with a tail and mane of utter black. A blood-bay, as the type was often called. The stranger grabbed something from the pack of items hung about the horse's rear.

It was a shovel.

Then he stepped forward, back towards the saloon, climbing the few steps up to the stoop. He paid no mind to the faces of the barkeep and the three patrons staring out at him through the dirtied windows of the establishment. He leaned over, grabbing hold of the body once known as Matthew Howard by the ankle of his chaps. With a tight grip, the stranger turned back around and began dragging the body down the steps. One-armed and without as much as a grunt of exertion. Howard's limp head and arms smacked against each of the steps, then scraped along as the rest of him was pulled through the dirt.

One of the old men, Samuel, moved to the doorway of the saloon, peering out while the others stayed at the windows. Craning his wrinkled neck over the swinging doors, he watched as the stranger pulled the dead man along through the empty street-way, across to the other side, then past the remaining buildings to the so-called outskirts of the township.

From where they stood, looking through the filthy glass, the barkeep and his two friends couldn't see what the stranger was doing now. So they asked Samuel, "What the hell is he doin' with him?"

Samuel, eyes wide and lips trembling, said: "He's digging up a grave."

Nearly an hour passed as the stranger tended to his digging.

All the while, Samuel watched, running the stories he'd heard and recounted though never personally witnessed through his mind. He'd have a first-hand account to tell now. By God, he surely would.

After the slightly more than shallow grave was finished, the stranger kicked the body of Matthew Howard into it. But not before he stooped down and grabbed something off of the dead man; Samuel couldn't rightly tell what, from this distance. Then the process of refilling the hole began, taking far less time to do than digging it up had.

When he was done, the stranger turned and made his way back to the saloon.

The barkeep and the three men scurried back to their spots, acting as if nothing had occurred in the last two hours. Nothing at all. But they were dreadfully nervous about seeing the stranger's silhouette come back through the doorway.

They heard his boots and spurs as he mounted the steps. Then a pause. Then he entered once again. They took full notice of the bullet-hole and blood on his chest, but didn't dare speak of either. In his hands were a tied-up little pouch and Howard's revolver.

He stepped up to the bar, his head bowed low, not making eye-contact with either patrons or proprietor. He set the gun down on the counter, then opened the pouch—Howard's coin purse. He took out several coins and dropped them on the counter.

"For that man's drinks, and for my own." He paused, apparently thinking, then took out a few more coins and dropped them down, as well. "And for the blood out front." Then he tied the pouch up and slid it into the inside of his coat. His fingers brushed against Howard's gun, sliding it down the counter to where the barkeep stood at a safe distance. "Do what you will with that," the man said, turning back around and heading for the doors. "Its owner has no use for it anymore."

He stepped outside again, the doors swinging shut behind him.

Samuel rose and rushed over to the doorway, though both his friends hissed at and urged him to stay, out of fear. But he had to see the man. Had to see how it played out. Had to get the full story set in his mind for the future telling. Again, he peered out and watched.

The man had replaced his shovel on his pack and was mounting his blood-bay. He nudged his ride away from the trough, facing it to head north, in the opposite direction that Howard, and presumably he, had rode in from. At a slow trot, the man—who had been shot straight through and didn't die, who Samuel would forevermore swear was the gunslinging gravedigger of the spreading ghost stories and growing legends—made his way out of town. Samuel watched to see if the stranger would spare a glance at the gravesite of the man he'd just killed as he passed it by. He did no such thing.

He rode on.

The Wayward and the Dead

1 -- The Cabin

The caravan made its way through the lush Colorado forest at a slow pace. The air of the forest was crisp, a very light sheath of precipitation falling from on high, coating the timber, the pathway, and the procession. Where the grass of the path was worn and dead, dirt was turning to a stiff, messy mud. It stuck to the wheels of the caravan and left indentations in the earth as the vehicles kept to the path. The pathway in question was a natural one, weaving along through the many trees, as if God himself had traced his finger across this land to lead his children through this wilderness of creation.

Some ten to fifteen wagons, carriages, and coaches made up the meandering line rolling through the dense collection of pine trees. The tips of mountaintops could just barely be seen through the canopy, lumbering off in the east; the caravan crawled alongside the mountain ranges like an army of ants along the base of a grand anthill. The modes of transportation were various in style: worn-out ConCORDs, tiny shays, unremarkable covered wagons, among others. At the head of the procession was an immaculate, straight-black Conestoga wagon, pushing along with its great bulk and dark paint and cloth.

The constant buzzing of flies followed each of the wagons, coaches, and carriages, the little flying insects twisting and turning above and beside the vehicles.

The lead Conestoga wagon eventually eased to a stop. The rest of the travelers in tow

halted, in turn. They had come to a stop right beside a sloped clearing within the forest. A cabin rested there.

A man, tall and thin and clothed all in black, stepped down from the box of the Conestoga. In his hands, he carried a rather large glass flask, corked and glowing with an odd, faint luminescence. He held it out before him, arms extended and raised upwards, the flask aloft in a show of reverence. He stood still on the pathway, staring up the small slope and to the modest cabin—a simple log home, the basic but comfortable residence of pioneer-folk and mountainside dwellers. Beside the house was a wagon, no doubt one quite familiar with the ruts and bumps of the pathway the caravan was now traveling. Not far from the wagon was a pair of horses, standing and nibbling at the grass. The sight of the horses and the wagon pleased the man in black, making him smile—both would be needed, soon, and Providence itself had left them there for him and his travelers to appropriate.

He looked back to the cabin. Its doorway was made of long, thin sticks bound together; no stronger than simple tree branches, really. "He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep," the man in black spoke, his voice ringing with the musicality of a flute.

Others from the caravan began to gather around him, climbing down or stepping away from their own wagons with sluggish and haggard steps. As they moved, the clouds and buzzing of flies followed them. They stopped at the man's back or at his side—never before him. They, too, held items in their hands. Knives and butcher's cleavers.

The man spoke to them: "Let us add to the flock."

Then he pulled the glowing flask back, cradling it against his chest as a mother would clutch a newborn babe to the teat. He stepped forward, inching up the slope, four of the others following close behind. When they reached the doorway, they didn't knock, didn't call out; two of them kicked it in, the man in black and the other two following them into the home.

Shouts of alarm and confusion rose up from inside the cabin. The shouts quickly turned into screams of agony. Then there was silence.

Minutes later, the five members of the caravan came out—with three new additions following them.

The three approached the snacking pair of horses slowly, the beasts whinnying and inching away from them in fear, at first, before being coaxed towards the wagon and hitched up to it. Then the three climbed atop the wagon and waited. The other four and the man in black

returned to their own modes of transportation. The man set his flask—glowing a smidgeon brighter than it had mere minutes before—beneath him in the seat of the Conestoga, tucked snugly away.

"On!" he cried, snapping reins and urging his horses to move. They did, starting the caravan back on its course and at its same leisurely pace. The wagon by the cabin pushed forward, and its three occupants fell in behind the others, bringing up the end of the caravan.

The man in black led them on through the forest, the morning waning gradually into the afternoon, then to evening. Nightfall was still several hours away, when the caravan would have to stop its long trek; but for now, there was still light to see by. Still light for the wayward to find their way.

2 -- The Clausens

From up above, a raven started cawing and carrying on, ruffling its wings from its perch on a spruce-tree branch. The calls echoed in the still evening, perhaps even up and away to the mountains a few miles east of the forest. It was a sound the Gravedigger had come to know well. *Food*, it said. *Food*.

Though the Gravedigger knew the call was perhaps too preemptive on the noisy bird's part. The nourishment its beady black eyes were peering at was only recently killed, no more than an hour ago. Too soon for easily pickable maggots, insects, or worms to take up residence on the carcasses; the bodies of the two dead Clausen Cousins were still too fresh to feed the bird and whatever mates it was calling out to.

Whatever duty it felt it had to its fellow winged friends, the raven wasn't keen on waiting for them to arrive to the hopeful feast. It flew down from the tree and landed on the body furthest from where the Gravedigger was digging up shovelfuls of earth. Its black wings fluttered in a mad flurry as it landed on the prodigious stomach of the elder Clausen, its claws digging into his blood-smeared shirt. The skinnier cousin lay only a few feet away from the other, something of a bastion between the hungry raven and the Gravedigger.

The Gravedigger had picked up the trail of the criminal cousins earlier that morning, having come across the smolders of one of their late-night campfires not long after dawn arose.

He knew they had been riding up north, fleeing in the wake of a succession of deviant acts. They'd robbed a stagecoach a month before, killing its riders and a small-town sheriff in the process, then a U.S. Marshall once he'd happened across them and failed to take them in—a dozen or so bullets from the cousins' guns had stopped his efforts. So, like so many others before them, the Gravedigger had tracked the men down and put his Colt revolver to use. One bullet for the skinnier one, three for the big one. The bigger ones tended to go down harder. Now he put his shovel to use, making their graves. He'd already loosed their rides off into the forest, taking what he needed from their provisions (bullets, mostly) and setting the rest aside to be buried with the men. His own horse, a blood-bay with a coat of deep scarlet, waited patiently for him to complete his task.

He'd long since taken off his hat, holster, and long brown coat, setting them aside for the work he had to do. His dark blonde hair hung around his face as he bent to dig; his holster, with its belt full of bullets and black Colt nestled safely inside, waited to be used again; his vest, riddled with holes from knives and bullets from past encounters with killers and scoundrels, was exposed to the Colorado air. As he set his shovel aside, finished with the massive grave (just one would suit the two cousins—no need for propriety with the violent dead), he stopped and stared at the raven, his yellow-tinged eyes taking it in with a cunning, narrowed stare.

The raven looked at him, its head twitching about at all angles, but always keeping the man in sight. When it seemed satisfied he wouldn't shoo it away, it hopped down the big guy's stomach, onto his sloping chest, and leaned over his face. It began pecking at the man's left eyeball, prying his eyelid open to get at its chosen morsel.

The Gravedigger shook his head at the perplexing circle that was existence. A bad man dies so that a simple raven might survive; those who eat to live eat of those who live no more. Quite perplexing, indeed. But his lot wasn't in questioning such eccentricities. His role was in gunslinging and grave-digging.

Seconds later, he heard a wet pop as the raven's pointed beak pulled out its desired body part. It clamped down on it, looking back to the Gravedigger as it tilted its head up and swallowed it down.

Right before the bird turned its attentions back to its stomach and the fat Clausen's other eye, the wind stirred. A barely existent breeze turned into a more forceful rushing, the stirring akin to a growing storm nigh on the horizon before it hovers swiftly across the land. It made the

blades of grass on the ground dance and the pine trees bend towards the north. With the wind came an odd sensation. It filled the Gravedigger, sending a subtle tremor across his frame and starting a tiny, vibrating hum in his ears. He looked to the north, knowing it was more than the steadily driving wind that pushed him towards the direction. The vibrant greenery of the forest stood before him, the spaces between the trees and in the near distance dark and small, the forest growing more dense further in.

He had felt the tremor and heard the hum often enough to know its significance. Something was leading him somewhere. To someone. Or to something. As it had led him to the Clausens and countless others.

Who or what it was, exactly, he'd have to find out for himself. He'd have to follow the pull. And he would.

The vibration in his limbs brought vigor back to the Gravedigger. He turned back to the Clausens and their new, eternal resting place. "Go," he said to the raven in his deep, even voice. "You've had an eyeful. In more ways than one."

The raven cawed one shrill, angry call, then fluttered its wings and flew off, up and over the treetops and out of sight. The Gravedigger stepped over to the Clausens, dragging the thin one into the deep hole he'd made. Then he half dragged, half rolled the bigger one into the grave, his bulk landing with a powerful thump onto the other. It would have been adding insult to injury, if the littler one had been alive to feel it.

Without a prayer or a word of remembrance, the Gravedigger started dumping in the earth he'd dug up. He never spared such sentimental finalities to those he sought out, but he was even less inclined to do so now. He was in a rush to get his job done.

It seemed another was waiting for him through the forest.

3 -- Discovery

The Gravedigger guided his horse through the woods as well as he could. He gave small tugs here, there, and often, trying to keep the blood-bay on a straight path northwards. The sporadic placement of the timber made keeping a straight-shot ride next to impossible, and both horse and rider wound their way along as a result. That inexplicable pull the Gravedigger still felt was the

only tool to provide his sense of direction and destination.

He'd finished burying the Clausens some two hours ago, judging by the amount and angle of the light shining through the canopy—though it was sometimes hard to tell in so-tightly packed a forest as this. He'd immediately returned his hat, coat, and holster to their rightful places on his person once he'd finished, took stock of his pack atop the bay (adding the generous donation of the Clausens' bullets to his supplies), then rode off. He'd cleared several miles since then, and as far as he could tell, there would perhaps be miles left to go. All he'd passed in that time of travel were trees, some occasional boulders, and of course, more trees. Aside from a growing, misty haze of precipitation hanging in the air and noting that the species about him started as spruce, then gave way to pine, there was little difference in the scenery thus far. No characters or things of questionable repute in sight. But he kept at it, riding along through the trees and waiting. Perhaps his wait would soon be over, for as his horse huffed up a slight slope, weaving through a close cluster of pines, they came upon what passed for a road out in the wilderness—a natural path of grass and dirt, free of trees and a little soggy from the dew.

Across the path, straight ahead of the Gravedigger and up another subtle slope, was a cabin.

The vibration about his body and the quiet humming in his ears rose as the structure came into sight, then both leveled off. Whatever was pulling him this way, it was telling him he'd found where he needed to be. The realization that the cabin's makeshift door lay splintered and broken in cinched the notion. Something had happened here.

The Gravedigger eased his steed to a stop on the other side of the pathway, right at the edge of where it became the slope. He hopped down, booted feet sinking a few slight centimeters deep into the wetted earth. His hand patted the rump of his horse, a familiar gesture between man and horse that said: *Stay*.

He stepped up the slope, his steady, cautious strides made out of a necessity to listen, to see, and to take the situation at hand all in, rather than slowed by worry or fear. He listened for any signs of life about him or up in the cabin—steps on the ground, coughs, sniffles, muted voices, anything betraying a person's presence. His keen ears picked up nothing, save for the little wet sounds of suction as his feet rose and fell in the muddied ground. A bird—perhaps the hungry, man-eating raven—called from some distance away, but all else was still. His yellowish eyes peered up to the cabin, noting that there was a faint light shining from within the black

mouth of the doorway—a sign that someone may be home. He took the place in, analyzing it. Large poles of wood for walls, hacked from trees, all made to be even and exact in shape, but all-in-all not quite right, giving the cabin a slant look. A roof made of sticks and brush, save for a small brick chimney popping out the front right corner of the place. No holes or windows to peer out of, at least on its front face. Trees situated about it on its flanks and to its back—thin trunks, too thin for anyone to hide behind or watch him from.

The Gravedigger eased his hand down to his hip, where it hovered above his Colt. He fixed his stare on the doorway, ready to draw and shoot should someone or something leap out.

He moved up to the doorway. The sticks that had made the door, once bound together with leather straps, lay splintered in pieces all around, their bits jagged and cracked. They crunched under the Gravedigger's boots as he stepped into the doorway and looked inside the cabin.

It was a modest home. Wooden boards served for a floor and a ceiling. The place was practically one big room. In the left corner, nestled between the walls, was a crude, long table with benches at its sides for seats—room for two at each side. A thick candle, nearly a stub, burned in a pottery bowl set at the middle of the table, the melted wax pooling and hardening inside. In the right corner sat a fireplace and its brick chimney, a dwindling fire burning away inside and giving off the light he'd seen from outside. It hadn't been tended to recently. In the back left corner was a large, unkempt bed—likely for a married couple. In the far right corner, in a room extending out from the cabin's seemingly rectangular shape, was another bedroom, a curtain drawn back showing two smaller beds within.

In the middle of the house, there was blood.

What passed as a sitting room for such a cabin was in shambles and showed the signs of a violent, bloody transaction. A rocking chair lay overturned, its light brown wood now painted in swaths of red, specks of the stuff all about on the floor, as well. A ghastly pool of blood sat close by, a piece of knitting soaking it up as it flowed about the cloth. A broken stool lay shattered beside it. Worst of all was a ripped child's doll, a raggedy thing in a dress made all the worse by a tear along its chest, its stuffing of fluff pouring out—as if it had been wrenched from a child's clutching, desperate hand only to be cast down where it lay. Its dead button eyes stared at a horrible slash of red splattered across the far right wall.

The Gravedigger stepped further into the cabin, taking it all in with a hollow pit forming

in his chest. Blood he'd seen before. Scenes of violence were nothing foreign to him. But the doll and what it implied . . .

His attention was so focused on the doll that he didn't hear the sound of footsteps on floorboards, or the brief inhalation of surprise from behind him at the doorway. But he did hear the cocking of a rifle and the half enraged, half terrified voice that spoke up afterwards.

"Who the hell are you? And what have you done to my family?"

4 -- Questions and Mysteries

The Gravedigger slowly raised his arms up, hands hovering above his head in a show of compliance and surrender. He had no fear of the rifle that had been cocked and likely centered at the point between his shoulders, but if this situation should escalate, best to give his a threat a sense of dominance, only to prove him wrong. A blow to a man's sense of control can be just as powerful as a fist to a jaw.

But the Gravedigger wasn't certain the person behind him was in much control. Huffs and puffs of worry and frustration were now rushing out of him—it was, indeed, a him, sounding very much like a young man just out of boyhood, judging by his voice. Though that incredibly scared and angry tone could be playing with his own timber, and that same mixture of tone denoted his lack of control; he wasn't in a state to think out and make decisions. He was either too frightened to find the courage to pull the trigger, or he was too pissed off to stop pulling once he'd started. The Gravedigger turned around, curious to find out which it would be.

"Don't move!" the person shouted, but the Gravedigger didn't stop until he was directly facing whoever was holding him at gunpoint.

It was a young man, after all, and he did look to be just barely out of boyhood. Sixteen years of age, perhaps a few older. His light blonde hair was cut short. His body was caught somewhere between a schoolboy's and a mountain-man—lithe and immature, but still having the hint of muscle mustered up by someone who had to work for survival in a wilderness like this. Raggedy deerskins and boots covered him, and at his feet sat three large, dead hares—the look and bounty of a hunter. The rifle he held was of a rolling block action, looked accurate, and had

the sweating, wide eyed face of the youngster staring at the Gravedigger from behind its long barrel.

"Who are you?" the boy demanded again, keeping his aim steady on the Gravedigger's chest in spite of his apparent distress. "What did you do to my Ma and Pa? What did you do with Sara?"

The young man's eyes shot over to the wall with the slash of blood sprayed across it. Then his eyes flicked back to his captor. His finger twitched the slightest motion closer to the trigger.

"Nothing," the Gravedigger said, inching his arms down ever so slowly, testing to see if the young man noticed. He didn't. "Was just riding along that path out there," he lied, "when I saw the state of the door. Came up to see what the issue was."

"I don't believe you," the young man said, his eyes flaring as he looked dead into the Gravedigger's. The boy was too focused on staring him down to notice the Gravedigger's hands were creeping further down, now level with his neck. "The blood . . ."

"Put the gun down," the Gravedigger said, hands still coming down. "It won't do you any good. So just put it down and we can figure this out together . . ."

With a deft speed even a desert cobra could envy, the Gravedigger struck out, grabbing hold of the rifle's barrel and tugging it out of the young man's hands. The boy's eyes widened all the more, and whatever fury he had at whatever happened to his family faded as he realized he'd been careless. And it could cost him his life. But the Gravedigger had no intentions of taking that from him. Holding the rifle by the barrel, the Gravedigger set the butt of the gun against the floor, showing he had no intent of using it. He held a hand out, fingers splayed and palm down, a gesture of saying all was well and to ease one's self.

The young man stood there, expectantly. Waiting to see what fate would befall him, not trusting the stranger standing before him.

"I didn't hurt your family," the Gravedigger said, trying to sooth his deep voice into a more calming pitch. "If I had, wouldn't your own rifle be pointed at you right now?" The young man said nothing, just swallowed down his worry and looked to the floor, the blood, the Gravedigger, and back again.

"What's your name?" the Gravedigger asked. The young man just looked at him. "Answer my questions, boy, and I'll help you figure out what happened here. Help you find your family."

For better or for worse, he thought bitterly.

Another moment's hesitation, then the young man spoke. "Ben. That's my name. Ben Combs."

"You and your family live here, Ben?"

"Yes. Me, my Pa, my Ma, and my little sister. Sara. She's only eight years young." Ben's eyes shifted to the doll on the floor.

The Gravedigger knelt to the floor, changing his grip on the rifle and brushing his fingers against the largest pool of blood. When he brought his fingertips to his eyes, a fine hint of red coated the skin. Fairly fresh blood, not yet dried. Spilled only a matter of hours ago, perhaps shortly after dawn. The Gravedigger told this bit of deduction to Ben.

"Where were you . . ." the Gravedigger started, trying not to insinuate the boy was involved in whatever had led to the apparent bloodshed. He knew the young Combs was guilty of nothing, save, perhaps, for a conscious that feared for not properly protecting his family.

"Where were you when whatever happened here happened?"

"I went out hunting as soon as dawn broke," Ben answered, nodding to the hares at his feet. He spoke in something of a daze. "Pa's been ill as of late. I've been going out looking for our food the past week. That's his rifle you're holding, not mine."

The Gravedigger nodded slightly, hesitantly handing the gun out to Ben. A show of respect, a show of trust. Ben accepted it, nodding a small thanks. He held it with its butt to the ground, no intent of turning the business end back on the kneeling stranger.

The Gravedigger stood up again, surveying the room. No definite tracks to speak of, some scuffs of dirt on the floorboards that could have been any of the Combs' prints, or anybody else's, for that matter. Nothing aside from the chaos in the center of the room looked out of place—no overturned beds or signs of thievery. The Gravedigger asked Ben if anything of value or note looked to be gone. The young man said no, his family had little worth taking, and nothing seemed to be amiss. Then something appeared to strike him, a look of something half-remembered. Then it hit him.

"Wait . . ." he stammered. "Our wagon! Our horses!"

The young man turned and bolted out the door. The Gravedigger strode out behind him. The boy stood just outside the cabin at the top of the slope, looking off to the right. "Our wagon and our horses are gone!" he shouted, pointing to an empty space before the trees where

something was meant to be. "They were taken." The boy turned back, looking expectantly at the Gravedigger. "Did . . . did someone hurt my family just to take our horses and wagon?"

The Gravedigger said nothing. He turned and looked back into the cabin. Horse-stealing was all too common out here, in a forest where hooves saved booted feet from walking, and wagons, even if not needed, could fetch a fair price from some buyer or trader. And people have been killed for both, but there was something about all this that the Gravedigger felt didn't support such an occurrence.

Where were the bodies of the boy's family?

If this were a matter of stealing a wagon and rides, and some thief felt the need to kill their owners, then they'd do the deed and light out with their gains. Leave the bodies where they lay. But there was none to be found in the cabin. Had they been hidden? There were no bloody smears or trails to show a body or more had been dragged out into the forest. If there were multiple thieves, they could carry them out, if they were of the strength. They'd get a fair deal of blood on them, judging by what there was in the center of the cabin. Still, for what purpose? It didn't make a great deal of sense to conceal the poor family, if they were indeed dead. There was something more to this situation than that.

The Gravedigger turned back around and down the slope to the path before the cabin. His horse whinnied at him as he neared it. He knelt beside the path and took it in. He looked up to the sky, with its haze of watery mist hanging in the air.

"Has there been any rain in this area for the morning?" he asked as Ben made his way to stand behind him.

"No, not really. The mists have kept up a fair bit this time of the year, though. Why?"

"These tracks," the Gravedigger said, pointing at the path. The dirt and grass around it had turned to a muddied substance from the precipitation, and there were horse tracks all along it, as well as wagon-wheel tracks at the edges of the path. They were deep impressions, too.

"A wagon-train or something of the sort has been through here. And recently. If it had been pouring rain around here, these tracks could maybe be made by a single wagon. But as deep as they are, with only this type of weather to wet the ground, they'd have to be made by several wagons passing along. Add all the horse tracks, and you've got a wagon-train of some sorts that's been through." He looked up to Ben. "Maybe your family's horses and wagons joined them." He stood up, looking northwards, where it seemed the tracks were leading to.

"You don't suppose . . ." Ben began, looking almost hopeful. "Maybe my family's still alive? Taken along with the horses and wagon. They ain't in the cabin. Maybe my Pa put up a fight and they took 'em. Or maybe one of them got hurt and they rode off to find help?"

A moment of silence and thought passed. The Gravedigger doubted the chances of any of Ben's theories being true. And by the look on Ben's face, the young didn't believe them either—he was just grasping at the last fringes of hope that his family would turn up alright.

"I'm going to find out what happened to your folks and your sister, Ben," the Gravedigger said, looking the boy in the eye. "I'm taking this path and finding whoever's been through here, for a start."

Ben's eyes narrowed and he frowned, confused as to why the complete stranger seemed so determined to help, to become involved. "You . . . why?"

The Gravedigger hesitated, thinking of the pull he'd felt, that had led him here. The sensation he didn't quite understand yet pursued at its every harkening. "It's just what I do," he finally answered, pulling his coat aside so Ben could see his Colt.

The boy looked at it, the sight of the gun seemingly striking some chord of resolve in him. His fear flushed away. His youth took a sidestep as a hard, matured determination took its place. He looked the Gravedigger in the eye again. "I'm coming along with you."

"You don't have a horse."

"I'll ride with you."

The Gravedigger opened his mouth to object, to say absolutely not. Hell no, in fact. The men and the things he tracked down had a habit of being violent, and he had always confronted them on his own. The boy could be a liability, could get in his way. But then, he thought of the pull. He wondered if Ben felt his own kind of force swaying him—be it justice, revenge, or something else. He wondered who he was to question it.

"Fine. But I've got rules. Rule one: things get violent around me. Don't come if you're not prepared to get violent yourself."

As an answer, Ben's grip on his father's rifle tightened and he drew it closer to himself.

"Second rule: I ride fast and I ride hard until I find what I'm looking for. No stops, no pause. Time is important to track this caravan down."

Ben nodded. "Anything else?" he asked.

"Yeah," the Gravedigger said, moving towards his horse. "When we ride, watch your

hands."

5 -- Ballad of the Combs Family

"What's your name?"

Ben asked the question as the horse slowed to a trot again. It was the first question he'd asked since they started their ride down the path four hours ago, his father's rifle strapped across his back and his arms around the Gravedigger's stomach, trying to hold on for the bumpy ride.

"Call me what you like," the Gravedigger answered quietly. It had been the first words out of his mouth in those four hours of travel, whereas the young Ben Combs had spoken at length through their traveling. The Gravedigger's horse had showed an uncanny resilience in its pace, switching from quick bursts of running to steady, brisk trots along the path—it never stopped once, nor showed any need to. Ben had commented on it once already, quite perplexed.

The Gravedigger just nodded, smiling a knowing grin.

It was during the periods of trotting, when the wind wasn't rushing in their ears, that the Gravedigger grew to hear Ben's life story, despite never having asked for it. The young man rambled on, the otherwise silent and hurried journey too much to contain the youth's anxiousness. So he spoke to quell his worries. He spoke mostly of his family.

It seemed his father, Daniel, and mother, Eliza, got caught up in the wildly-spreading rumors concerning abundant sources of gold being found in this part of the land some years ago. The stories, reaching all the way to the east coast, came to be heard by the Combs' ears. And like many others had, they'd sold off most of what they owned for a wagon, strong horses, and everything else they'd need to make the trip out west and set to mining and sluicing like the rest of the gold-struck dreamers. Ben, who was at nine years of age by that point, came along with them.

His family came to set up camp with other would-be miners and future rich-folk, many—including the Combs family—living out of the wagons they'd bought in haste, not yet knowing how to build a home for themselves out in the wilderness. Two long years of hammering away at rock, weighing tiny piles of yellowish-dust, and getting used to the feel of aching and pruning hands began. Some managed to find golden luck in the mountains and hills, striking it big, others

simply got by with a little dust to put in their coin pouches, and many more went back east, heads hung low and hopes dashed. The Combs family had been in the golden mean of the scenarios. Daniel Combs had found enough pebbles and bits of dust to make the journey almost worthwhile. Only almost, though. After those two years of toiling were over, he'd had enough of hoping and hammering. The family moved away from the camp, but chose to build a home not so far away from where the camp had once been—the land might not have provided wealth, but it did supply plenty of wood for a cabin, game for food, and scenery of nature to keep a soul content. Thus, their cabin was made, and their new home fashioned by their own hands.

Shortly after, Ben's little sister, Sara, was born. Ben, having been forced to become an independent, hardened lad of eleven, worked to raise the baby as much as his parents, learning how to hunt and cook and all other manners of essential habits for surviving in the woods. His father would occasionally delve into their modest cache of gold dust and take their wagon up north for various supplies and goods, where larger townships were beginning to sprout up thanks to trade; all else they found or made for themselves from what the forest offered them, leading rather solitary but contented lives.

Ben's stories of his family stopped when he reached today's events. That's when he began questioning the Gravedigger, instead.

"Do you think we're closing in on the caravan?" he asked once more.

The Gravedigger considered this. He had no way of knowing for sure. As they rode on, he looked for more signs of tracks. The path was still fairly evident, though it grew more narrow and indefinite at certain points; and the hoof-prints of the wagon-train's horses and its wheel markings were still noticeable, but there were no other tell-tale signs or hints to go by. No items dropped or discarded by the wayside, accidental or otherwise. No signs of pause along their trek.

"They've had hours' worth of a head-start," the Gravedigger finally answered, "but they ought to be moving slowly. If we don't catch up to them soon, then we'll come across them when they camp for the night."

"Are you sure they'll stop?"

"Never heard of a wagon-train that didn't stop come nightfall."

"What do we do when we find them?"

The Gravedigger said nothing more for quite a while.

6 -- The Caravan

Both night and the forest broke at roughly the same time. The countless spruce and pine trees that had made up the vast and dense forest this side of the mountains began to thin out. They grew further apart and became shorter, young trees degrading down to mere saplings and stalks the further they came to the edge of the woods. The bright yellow sun had fallen out of sight behind the tree-line nearly an hour ago. The swaths of purple, red, and orange painting the clouded skies above provided the last dying light for the Gravedigger and Ben Combs to see by. By the time they'd cleared the forest, coming to a grand outcropping of granite formations, the moon was suspended in the sky and shining down. Up and over the line of outcroppings, a plain of dirt and grass began, stretching on into the distance, another mountain range far ahead only a faint series of bumps on the dark horizon.

The Gravedigger finally pulled on the reins and brought his bay to a halt. The horse huffed and puffed but stayed on its four feet in spite of its long, arduous ride. From his spot on the horse, the Gravedigger scanned his eyes over the chunks and slabs of granite, looking for a large enough of a gap or way for a caravan to get through the rocky obstructions and out to the plain beyond it. In the dark, he could see neither hoof nor wheel prints, and with the outcropping as it was, there was no apparent path any sort of wagon could fit through. However, this was where the tracks had been leading to, and the only options for travelers on wagons would be to turn back around to the forests or follow the line of granite until a safe path through the rocks could be found. As the caravan was nowhere in sight, and since turning back was quite an unlikely decision, the Gravedigger assumed the travelers had found some way through.

"Get down, Ben," he said, looking first left and then right along the outcropping. The boy did so, hopping down from the horse with a groan. The Gravedigger stepped down next to him, looking the boy over. The boy was wincing in discomfort, his legs bow-legged and shaking in the moonlight. He had unslung his rifle from his back and was using it like a crutch.

"I'm . . . tender," Ben said, noticing the Gravedigger was staring at him. He straightened himself a little and changed the subject. "So, now what?"

"Now, we look for a place where the caravan could have crossed through the rocks. This place would have been a fair spot to make camp for the night, but they're clearly not here. So

they must have already gone through and onto the plains."

The Gravedigger patted his horse, telling it to stay, then turned to the large, jutting granite. He pointed to their left. "You scan the rocks that way. Look for a break in the stones that a wagon could pass between. I'll do the same this way." The Gravedigger moved away, peering at the granite. "Come to me if you see anything that could suffice."

The two had been apart for less than a minute when Ben gave a quiet hiss of a sound. The Gravedigger turned, seeing that the boy was waving him forward and pointing between the granite.

The Gravedigger bolted over to where Ben was leaning partially behind a large slab, staring out towards the plain. Stopping beside him, the Gravedigger saw the boy had found an enormous, flat block of rock making a slope from the forest's edge, through the outcropping, and down into the plains, a good ten to twelve feet of space between the rocks on either side. A fair, traversable path for travelers.

And no more than fifty yards from where they stood, a large spread of wagons sat clustered down on the plain.

Ten to fifteen wagons, carriages, and coaches were sitting about each other, closely packed. Several different styles and designs among them. Most were facing north, apparently prepared to keep their heading from the moment they woke and moved on in the morning. Others had been positioned aimlessly and without direction. It was safe to assume whoever their riders were, they were asleep or on the verge of falling into slumber—not a soul moved about, as near as the Gravedigger could tell, nor were there any glowing fires lit and raging by any of the transportation. No embers to cook or keep warm by. And at the center of the collection, standing out even against the darkness of the night and drawing the eye, was a great, dark colored Conestoga wagon. Its size dwarfed the others situated about it, the proverbial heart of the camp.

Ben gave a little lurch of surprise and an upsetting inhalation of breath. A trembling hand pointed at one wagon amongst the rest. "The wagon!" he lamented. "My family's wagon, right there! The one with the hole in the cover!"

Following the boy's finger, the Gravedigger spied a wagon on the outer edge of the varied collection, one that was fairly near to the outcropping they now hid behind. Thanks to the moonlight, the Gravedigger could just barely see a ragged, slashing tear along the side of a white covering tied on top of an otherwise ordinary covered wagon.

"I swear, that's ours!" Ben said, his flesh growing pallid as his hand kept shaking and pointing. The other hand grabbed hold of his rifle with a death-grip. "I was the one who tore the flap, back when I was a boy—my Pa gave me a hiding for it. He never got it fixed . . ." That last bit the boy whispered sadly, as if realizing his father would never get the chance to patch it.

The Gravedigger nodded grimly. "Then those people down there must know what happened to your folks and your sister." Thinking back on the pull, the blood, and the torn doll, the Gravedigger's right hand clenched and unclenched over the Colt at his hip.

"Damn right," Ben said through gritted teeth and with the shine of impending tears in his eyes, "and I intend to find it out from them!"

With that, the boy began running. He hustled past the Gravedigger before the other man could even react, the boy bumping into him and knocking him slightly aside.

"Ben!" the Gravedigger hissed out. "Get your ass back here!"

It was no good. Carrying his father's rifle like a soldier rushing into war after the opening volleys, Ben rushed over the slab of granite, flying down the slope, and weaving through the brush on the plains. He was heading directly towards his family's wagon.

The Gravedigger gave chase a second later, unable to catch up with the more agile youth. He hoped that the boy hadn't just taken a bad situation and made it worse for the both of them.

7 -- Surprise and Violence

Ben could hear the stranger following after him. The man's deep voice was calling out to him in a forceful whisper, desperately trying to get his attention without alerting the camp of wagons to the outsiders' presence. The slight jingle-jangle of the other man's spurs could be heard with each hurried but cautious step taken directly behind him. But years of chasing down rabbits, deer, and other such quick critters in the forests had made Ben accustomed to running, and he was quite quick and nimble on his booted feet. The whispers of his name and the sound of spinning spurs were instantly lost to his gaining distance and the rush of blood in his ears.

With that adept nimbleness, Ben scurried onto the plain and wove around what scraggly bushes and chipped blocks of granite were in his way. His eyes were locked onto his family's wagon as he bolted along, boring a hole through the tear in its side. He half expected to catch a

glimpse of movement from within, from his family or otherwise, just beyond the tear, but he could see nothing. Only shadows lay within. The wagon grew closer and closer. Thirty feet away. Twenty feet. Now he was within the perimeter of the camp.

With a grip that could shame a carnival strong-man, he shifted his father's rifle in his hands. He now held it at the ready, butt to his right shoulder, left hand steadying the stock, finger a tick's length from the trigger. He rushed past the wagon out furthest on this side of the camp's edge, paying no heed to it or who could be in there. He leapt over a bush and then he was right at the backside of his family's wagon. He instantly noticed that a strong, nauseous odor tinted the air. The flaps of the back swayed in and out a little as he skittered to a stop, waiting—begging—to be opened.

Maybe they're in there, he once more dared to think. Asleep. Fine. Maybe kidnapped, maybe hurt, but otherwise fine . . .

As he listened for signs of life inside, not hearing a snore, or voice, or whispers, he prayed it could be true. There was only one way to find out, though. Taking his hand off the stock and breathing in a last hopeful breath, he grabbed hold of the nearest flap, hauled it up and over the top of the wagon, and stared inside at what the bright moonlight revealed.

His family sat inside, in a half circle, facing his direction. They looked up at him as one.

His father's head was split nearly in half diagonally, his nose caved in and all but gone, a gore-riddled crack splitting both skull and skin from his bearded right cheek to his left temple. His mother's right eye was gone, a thin, bloodied slash tracing down it from scalp to chin, the right side of her once-lovely face painted scarlet. His little sister Sara's neck was cut clear open from right to left, her favorite brown housedress long-since turned red in the front. Even in the pale moonlight, he could tell their skin was an off-color gray, as were their eyes—hazy, milky, and vacant.

They were dead, yet somehow still alive.

And at the sight of him, their son and brother, they wailed. The dark plain suddenly echoed with their ominous, drawn-out moans as their mouths became slack-jawed maws and their dead hands rose out towards him, clutching and clawing.

Ben stumbled back from the wagon with a dismayed and horrified cry, his eyes wide with disgust and his blood gone cold. He had no time to do anything else before he heard a loud, warning call of: "Ben! Behind you!"

Turning away from the nightmare that was once his family, Ben whirled around, his arms limp at his sides with numbed shock and his grip on the rifle loose, dragging it through the dirt of the plain.

Another dead, groaning face glared down at him, an unholy mask of hatred that sat atop a lumbering bulk of a body that stood heads above the boy. A blue, hairy hand reached for his throat, to snap it, while another holding a cleaver was starting an arch downwards to cut his skull in two.

A shot rang out and the hand holding the cleaver was gone, exploded into a flurry of blood and bits of fingers, the blade falling to the dirt. Another shot and the hateful glare was gone, as well, replaced by a gaping, pulpy hole. As the big body fell backwards, Ben saw the Gravedigger rushing towards him, gun held out in one hand and pulling out a wicked Bowie knife from behind his coat with the other.

"There's more!" he roared out to the boy. He fired off another shot, the bullet cutting the air to Ben's right. As the boy turned again, he saw the body of what once was an old woman sink down beside the wagon, headless and now quite certainly dead. And yes, there were more dead things coming.

Easily ten more of the moaning, enraged corpses were creeping quickly towards the intruders of the camp, their arrival announced just as much by their overpowering stench of rot as by their wailing. Men, women, and children. Sharply dressed city folk with top hats and party dresses on. Scoundrel-types with unused revolvers still around their slack belts and hats on their lolling heads. Bearded mountain-people and rustic pioneers that were big and burly. The dead people were certainly varied in dress and in appearance of decomposition, but all bore wounds of butchery and savagery, all were carrying knives, cleavers, and axes—and each was heading right towards Ben.

Ben's senses finally started to recover, and he began to back away from the approaching group of the dead. He grasped his rifle, bringing it up to his shoulder with a still-sluggish reaction, like the air about him had turned to thick molasses. The same couldn't be said of the Gravedigger. He was past the boy in an instant, fast as one of his bullets, leaping before the groaning, walking corpses and right into a supernatural fray.

He slashed down at a nearby dead man, cutting a huge gash from right to left across its chest, a previous, similar wound combining with the new one to make a bloody X across its bare

breast. It gurgled, perhaps in pain, and raised its cook's knife to return the favor. A flush shot to its head from the Gravedigger's revolver sent it careening backwards.

The Gravedigger slashed out again at a portly old woman with loose gray flesh for jowls. The blade of his knife slashed through its neck, through the bone, and then the head flopped backwards, hanging on the back by a sliver of that loose, dead skin.

Ben was preparing to take aim at one of the growing horde when he realized it was his father the sights were pointed at. Beside him were his mother and sister, inching closer towards him, mouths still agape with their moans and their hands still clutching.

"Shoot, dammit!" Ben heard the Gravedigger shout as he stabbed a lanky, banker-looking fellow in the side of the head. "Shoot them, Ben!"

Ben floundered as his eyes shot from the Gravedigger to his family. "I . . . can't . . ." he paused, sweat on his brow and ice in his veins. His sister suddenly snarled at him. "It's my family!"

"Not them anymore!" the Gravedigger shouted back, one of the dead women grabbing hold of his wrist, the hand with the knife. He put a bullet into its shoulder, but that didn't dissuade the creature. It fell upon him, as did another, and the Gravedigger was soon rolling on the ground between the two clawing, cold things.

"Shoot! Fight back!" he urged Ben through gritted teeth while he struggled.

Ben steadied himself and aimed once more. His family was still approaching, along with all the rest of the macabre camp. His father had been ten feet from him a moment ago. Now he— it—was about five feet away, Ben's mother and sister a step behind. Impossible to miss. Impossible to miss any of them.

He took a breath and stared down the sights through teary vision. His finger brushed the trigger ever so lightly. And a hard dead hand came smashing against the side of his head. In his dilemma, he hadn't noticed a dead miner man moving around him from behind.

Ben fell down to grass and dirt, the rifle slipping from his hands, dazed and seeing stars. Whether they were up in the sky or just dancing across his eyes, he wasn't sure. But he was sure that he saw the Gravedigger being surrounded by the vast portion of the dead attackers, which were piling onto him as he hollered and lashed out as best he could. Ben rolled onto his back, feeling consciousness slipping away from the blow, the shock, and the fear, combined.

Just before he passed out, he heard a high, reedy voice say "Do not harm them! Not yet!"

8 -- The Man in Black

The Gravedigger clawed his mind out of the blackness of unconsciousness, hearing a groan rising from somewhere beside him. It was Ben, the boy beginning to rouse himself from his own stupor.

The Gravedigger opened his eyes, blinking away the blurry vision that turned the dim light around them even darker. He lifted his head from his chest and saw that the light came from a lantern sitting on top of a trunk a few feet away from him. In the glow, he could see he was sitting in some kind of wagon. Dark cloth shielded them from above and hard, black-painted wood provided the floor he sat on, arms tied behind his back, cross-legged and back to back with the boy. The compartment was somewhat narrow compared to its prodigious length. Various items sat piled here and there—books and trunks, mostly.

They were in the big, black Conestoga wagon.

He looked at his waist, noticing his holster was there but bare. His Colt had been taken, doubtlessly along with his knife. He tested his bonds, tugging at the rope that was weaved and tied tightly at his wrists. His coaxing fists brushed Ben's limp hands, inciting another groan from the young man. "Ben?" the Gravedigger spoke up evenly. "You okay, boy?"

Another groan. Then a slurred, still-waking "I'm okay."

The Gravedigger kept pulling his bonds, giving it one last effort, tugging and rubbing at the bonds with his fingers, looking for a weak spot. He found none. He began picking at the strands of rope with his fingernails, grown long and hopefully sharp in his travels.

"Where . . . are we?" Ben asked, his head rising, looking up, knocking against the Gravedigger's.

"In the camp," the Gravedigger answered. "In the black wagon. We're tied up. Hate to think what for."

The lantern's flame flickered behind its glass, making the shadows in the compartment sway. The dance of the darkness continued on in silence for a few more minutes. Then Ben spoke again, his voice awake and alert, but quieted with shame.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. He didn't say what for until another minute passed. "I'm sorry I

couldn't shoot when . . . when we saw *them*. My family."

The Gravedigger answered without pause, and without anger. "It wasn't that you couldn't, Ben; it was that you didn't."

The boy stayed silent.

"They're not your family anymore, Ben. I don't know exactly what they are, but they're not that."

A bit of more silence. "I know."

"If I can get you another shot," the Gravedigger said, "will you take it?"

Silence, and then: "Yes."

"Good. Now let's hope we just get the shot." The Gravedigger focused back on his fingers and nails, working at the rope on his wrists, feeling little fibers wearing slowly away as he kept at it.

Another period of silence went by as each thought their own thoughts.

"When you saw those things . . ." Ben began, searching for the words. "You didn't seem surprised by them. Or afraid."

"I've dealt with strange things before. Call it a habit."

"Do you know what they are? *How* they are what they are?"

"They're dead and pissed. As to how they're still walking, you got me."

There was a sound of a flap being opened, steps on wood, and a high, lilting voice said: ""I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."" A brisk chuckle followed the quoting of scripture. "I used to just think that was a metaphor."

The Gravedigger looked up to see a man climbing into the back of the Conestoga. He was covered in clothes of purest black.; black leggings and a black coat, the Gravedigger's own Colt stuck down the front of his pants, no doubt to mock. By the light of the lantern, he could see that the man was older, skin still taut on his lanky frame. His voice had much more vitality to it than his appearance would seem to support. Tufts of white hair sprang from the sides of his head and above his ear, a bald scalp on top and parting the raised curls of silver-white. The man's eyes were a little sunken, creating dark rings of shadow in the light of the wagon, and a thin smile was spared towards the two prisoners. Underneath that smile and at the bottom of his throat, amidst his stark black clothing, was a sliver of white at the collar.

The man wore the clothing of a priest.

He stood staring at them for a moment, that smile persisting as the Gravedigger stared back steadily and Ben craned his neck around to try and see who was speaking to them. Eventually the priest sat himself down on the trunk with the lantern on top of it. He set his thin hands on his knees, at ease as he faced his captives.

"Have you read the Bible?" he asked, locking eyes with the Gravedigger.

"Who the hell are you?" the Gravedigger asked back, ignoring the question.

The priest paused for just a second. "My name is Father Thorne," he said, then continued with his line of questioning. "I've read the Bible—it's sort of my profession, after all. Have you read it?"

"What's it to you?"

"Merely an enquiry. Seeing what you know of faith. Seeing if you have any. Why are you here?"

"I was hoping you could tell us that," the Gravedigger answered, nodding about the wagon.

"After your . . . disruption . . . of our evening and our journey, I'm curious as to what brings you and this boy to our camp with your guns and your violence."

"Our camp?" the Gravedigger wondered. "As in you and those things out there?"

The smile on Father Thorne's face tweaked a little, a little tick of a dimple. "Those things, as you so crudely put it, are my flock. As a man of faith, I am their shepherd."

"Well, your flock's a bit gamey. And a bit dead. Some shepherd you are."

"Do you mean to antagonize me, sir?" the priest asked incredulously. "Your insults are quite bold, given your predicament."

"Just trying to understand your brand of crazy," the Gravedigger answered matter-of-factly. "You claim to be a man of the faith traveling with living dead, which have an affinity for blades. Haven't heard of most priests putting in with that sort of lot."

"I'm not most priests," Father Thorne said with actual pride, his skinny chest swelling out as his smile grew again. "I've been chosen by God almighty to lead my flock to the pearly, blessed gates of heaven when the Day of Judgment comes calling!"

"Oh, this I've got to hear," the Gravedigger sneered.

"Mock if you will—"

"I will."

"—but I no longer concern myself with your ilk, the scoundrels and the nonbelievers of the world. My lot is with the pure of heart and the faithful, God's chosen who will reside in blessed eternity. And I've been tasked to find such souls."

Father Thorne began his narrative with a look of one with a haunted past. As he continued, though, he grew elated. The Gravedigger sawed away at his bonds the whole time and listened.

"Long before this caravan and my new flock were gathered, I presided over a small church in a small town of Mississippi. Every Sunday, I stood with the good book in hand and love of the Lord in my heart, hoping to share both with my congregation. When I'd first overtaken the church, the town and its people crowded the pews and listened to my sermons, taking to heart the words I read from the Bible concerning belief, decency, and providence. But as time passed, the pews grew thinner. My words reached fewer and fewer ears.

"I grew despondent—both enraged and mortified by how those I thought I'd reached with the Word turned their backs on me, their priest, their light in the darkness of this ever-dimming world of sin and vice! And their backs were turned to more than me and the church—but to God himself! I saw the people rushing to saloons and brothels and other rendezvous with the Devil, and I knew I'd failed them! Failed their souls! I hid in my church, alone and beside myself with despair. But one evening changed that all. For I heard the voice of God!

"God himself spoke to me, declaring his holy omnipotence in seeing my woeful state! He said that I had not failed the people—they had failed me! They were damned already, but there were others I could yet save! He told me I did, indeed, have a flock to tend to, but first I must gather them. I must abandon my church and travel the roads, seeking those that had not been tainted by the evils of this world. And to keep them from those evils, to protect their life-eternal in paradise, I would forsake their bodies to save their souls! To keep them in my sanctified hands! God said there would be blood for them, but glory would yet follow!"

"You mean you'd kill them," the Gravedigger interjected. But Father Thorne wasn't to be dissuaded.

"And so I abandoned my church and set out on the path God set for me! For the first time in so long, I could see what the Lord intended me to do! I could see! For months now I have traveled through this ever-growing country, happening upon those that I sense are worthy of joining the flock, of being led by me into heaven once all have been gathered. With their souls in

my care, I can control them; make their forsaken bodies serve my will—God's will! Now, with their help, their righteous blades, we add to the caravan, we add to the worthy. Death is a small price to pay for lasting life at God's side!"

"The last I knew, God sent angels to do his work—not crazed preachers and walking corpses," the Gravedigger said. "You sure that voice you heard came from heaven and not the opposite direction?"

The priest's joyous, uplifted face crumbled and shifted as he glared at the Gravedigger in fury. He leapt up and dashed past them, out of the Gravedigger's sight and to the front of the Conestoga. He came back seconds later, carrying something before him with a reverent look on his face. The priest held a large glass flask stopped with a cork between his hands. It glowed with a bright, yellow, impossible light.

"See!" he nearly screamed. "See the souls of those I've claimed in His name! The souls he made along with all else and will call back to heaven, in time! I carry them through this world, and shall bear them unto the next!"

He put the bottle near the Gravedigger's face, urging him to look. The light shone on in the flask, in spite that there were no flames or embers of any sort in it. It simply glowed with powerful luminescence.

"Behold the wayward!" Father Thorne said, his exhalation dying down, growing calmer and steadier in his breathing.

"You killed my family!"

It was Ben who cried out now. He'd been silent ever since the priest had entered the wagon. His voice was shrill with a mounting fury.

"My Ma and Pa! My sister! You killed them, you bastard!"

Father Thorne looked at the boy as if he hadn't noticed him before then. He looked curious. "Your family . . ." A moment of thought passed. "Ah, our three newest members to the flock? Well, I'm sorry, dear boy; far be it from me to split a family." Father Thorne stopped and grinned broadly at him. "I'll see you're reunited with them soon."

"And what about me?" the Gravedigger said, trying to get the deluded priest's attention away from Ben. "Do you have a place for me in your flock?"

Father Thorne turned back to him, hunkering down beside him with the glowing flask tucked safely in his arms. He stared at the Gravedigger intensely. The Gravedigger stared back.

"There's . . . something wrong with you," the priest said, eyeing the Gravedigger with suspicion, especially when he looked at his vest with its many bullet and knife holes across it. Even a hint of trepidation lurked in the priest's stare.

"Damn right about that," the Gravedigger answered.

"I sensed it earlier. You aren't like my flock," Father Thorne continued, eyes narrowed and shifting, as if studying pieces of a puzzle that existed only in his mind. "But you aren't exactly alive, either. Are you?"

"Let's just say I have a habit of not dying right."

"Perhaps," the priest said with a coy smile, "But even the walls of Jericho fell. My flock and I will just have to be . . . inventive . . . in how to make you crumble."

The priest rose up again, his cherished flask held tightly to his chest. His smile grew thin again and he turned, making his way out the back of the wagon.

Not long after, his flock came into the wagon, dragging both Ben and the Gravedigger outside with them.

9 -- Before the Flock

Ben and the Gravedigger's stupor in the great black wagon must have lasted for several hours. As they were dragged out from the back of the Conestoga, they saw that the moonlit shadows of midnight had since become the encroaching dark before the dawn. The vast moon that had shined down upon the plain was now shrouded by clouds, leaving the land with a look of black and bare desolation.

However, there were still some sights to see amidst the blackness beyond the camp: before them stood the entirety of the caravan, some thirty or more shambling dead clustered in some twisted congregation between the numerous other wagons, coaches, and carriages. They stood before a raging bonfire, which provided light in the moon's stead. And heat.

Four once-muscled dead men had grabbed the Gravedigger and Ben by the crooks of their bound arms, leading them forcefully towards the bonfire. A figure stepped out from the crowd of dead and stood silhouetted against the red and orange flames—Father Thorne. The Gravedigger's gun was still stuffed down the front of the priest's pants, a token of victory. He

held the glowing flask of souls in his hands, the glass leveled at his waist. He raised it up to eye-level as the captives approached and the dead circled about them.

"Tonight, we add one wayward soul to the flock!" he announced over the mumblings and grumblings of the dead. "And, God willing, send another to the fires of hell with fire of our own!"

The Gravedigger tugged harder at his bonds, his fingers flicking fast and his nails wearing down. He could feel the rope loosening, but would it be fast enough . . . ?

Ben, meanwhile, was struggling to wrench his arms from the smelling, strong-limbed dead that were leading him towards the priest. "Ben," the Gravedigger said, looking into the young man's sweating and scared face. "We'll get out of this. Just keep fighting!" He hoped their chances were as hopeful as his words, but the Gravedigger wasn't certain. Ben didn't appear to believe in them, either; he struggled harder to be free, to run, but to no avail.

The Gravedigger's dead captors stopped him short of reaching the priest, while Ben was pushed closer to the man of faith. The Gravedigger looked to the sides of the dead men holding him fast, hoping for a spot of luck. He got it—the two holding him appeared to be highwayman, desperadoes, or some other type of ne'er-do-wells, because each had a gun and a knife at their belts, even in death. He looked away, still pulling at the rope around his wrist as some ritual of sorts began before him.

Ben was stopped mere feet away from Father Thorne, who was speaking as he would to a mass on a Sunday, with bravado and reverence. "Now, we will spill this boy's blood, and in so doing, spill his soul! And it is this soul that shall be gathered into this holy vessel—" he held the flask higher "—and he shall walk with us, ride with us, be one of the flock until kingdom come! And now, bring forth a righteous blade!"

Out of the crowd of the dead came Ben's mother, his father and sister edging their way through to witness the completion of this bloody practice. Eliza Combs' corpse shuffled forward, closer and closer to Ben, a long, curved knife brandished in her pale-skinned hand.

The Gravedigger pulled at his bonds harder now, desperately. He heard the fibers start to rip. Time was running out, and he had to be quick.

Eliza Combs stepped up to her son, holding the knife up and inches from his throat; Father Thorne came closer to the boy as well, a hand over the cork stopper bottling the flask, ready to pull it out and let Ben's soul in. Ben tried to shirk away, pulling his bared neck as far

away as he could while his captors urged him forward and his mother's blade grew closer.

Then it happened: one mighty tug from the Gravedigger and his bonds snapped off. With a grunt, he moved his arms around to his front and reached for the gun at the waist of the dead man to his right, and reached for the knife in the belt of the one at his left. He grabbed a hold of both weapons before the dead men could react and put them to use, shirking off their clutching holds and putting a bullet in the head of the one to his left, then stabbing the other right between its eyes. Both fell down, and the attention of the entire congregation set upon him.

The dead stared with slack-jawed hate. Father Thorne's elation grew into a look of rage.

Before any commands could be given, before any other movements were made, the Gravedigger was rushing forward. He leveled the gun in his hand first at Eliza Combs, putting a shot into her chest. She stumbled backwards and away from Ben, her knife falling away as her dead hand let it fly and she stepped back several paces. Then he put two shots, one each, into the heads of the dead men holding Ben. The boy was free, and in his shock stood still, staring hopefully at the Gravedigger as the man ran to free him.

The Gravedigger kicked at one dead person that finally understood he was to be stopped, his boot connecting to its stomach and forcing it back, knocking other approaching and clutching dead aside as it flailed. He slashed the knife across the face of a nearby dead woman, moving it from his way, and then he leapt toward Ben, all of the dead now aware of how the ritual had gone awry and that the two living people among them, aside from their master and shepherd, must be stopped.

Father Thorne screamed, pulling back as the dead stepped forward, holding the flask of his aloft and over his head.

The Gravedigger slashed at the rope binding Ben, and then the boy was free. The Gravedigger smacked the revolver into Ben's hands, then stood back to back with the young man, facing down the moaning, angry dead. Among them was the Combs family, bearing down upon Ben as he stared at them, finger on the trigger.

"You've got your shot, Ben!" the Gravedigger shouted. "Now take it!"

All around them, the dead were circling. Hands bared as claws to rip, tear, and rend reached for them and knives, cleavers, and hatchets glinted in the light of the rising bonfire. The raging screams of Father Thorne mixed with the murmuring grumblings of the dead. Death was approaching the boy in more ways than one. His father, mother, and sister were at the head of the

gathering dead, just feet away from him and before the barrel of the gun in his hands. He held the gun out, leveling at the things that were—once—his family. He took a breath. He aimed.

And then he whirled around and aimed at the glowing flask held high in Father Thorne's hands. He squeezed off two shots. One whizzed by the priest's hands, and the other sped right between them, shooting through the glass of the flask and sending it into a hail of shards.

Father Thorne bellowed and lamented in wordless cries of anguish as the flask shattered in his hands, cutting his flesh while the glow expanded and rose and shifted before vanishing in a bright, blinding flash.

As the flash lit the night, faces of the dead fell slack, eyes rolled into the backs of heads, and weapons fell out of reach. The dead around them crashed to the dirt of the plain, as one, limp and unmoving. They were now truly dead.

Father Thorne followed suit, falling to his knees in woe, lacerated hands held out and bleeding with glass shards cutting into the skin. He moaned and cried as he looked about him, his so-called flock freed of his control the instant Ben had destroyed the vessel holding their captured souls. The Gravedigger and the boy turned and surveyed the dead, too, then looked at one another. The Gravedigger nodded appreciatively to Ben. "Good thinking," he said with the faintest of smiles.

"I just found my shot and I took it," Ben answered, looking to where his family's bodies lay face-down in the dirt. He let the gun fall out of his hands.

The cries of the priest had turned into words now, and the Gravedigger and Ben turned to face him.

"My flock!" he screamed, tears streaming down his pale old cheeks. "Look what you've done to them! To their souls!" He stared at the shards of glass imbedded in his palm.

Ben stayed put while the Gravedigger moved forward, moving quickly towards the kneeling priest. He stepped over blades and bodies and stopped before Father Thorne, glaring down at him. "We set them free," the Gravedigger said, leaning down and pulling his own Colt from the front of the priest's pants. He straightened himself, stood back a bit, cocked the revolver, and leveled it at the priest's head. "Should I do the same for you, Father?"

Father Thorne glared up into the Gravedigger's eyes, defiant in spite of his woes. "I don't fear you!" he spat. "You may be damned, sir, but I still see the path that my God has made for me!"

In response, the Gravedigger put two rapid-fire shots through each of the priest's eyes, blowing their steely look through the back of his skull. His body tumbled back, and Father Thorne joined the dead he had made as such and traveled with. The shepherd had become like the flock.

The Gravedigger slid his revolver into his holster with satisfaction; it was back where it belonged. He turned and faced Ben. Behind the boy, across the horizon, the first light of a new day glowed as the sun started its trek through the sky. The bonfire stood blazing on beside him, its flames having fallen as the brush and wood fueling it burnt away. In another hour it would die, joining the ranks of dead things in this plain.

Ben turned his sight from his family and looked to the Gravedigger. "I want to bury them," he said. He nodded up towards the forest yards away from them, where they'd stood staring at the camp the night before, where they'd journeyed through to find this macabre caravan and all of its surprises. "I want to bury them in the forest. I think they would have liked that."

The Gravedigger nodded, sighing. "We'll need something to wrap them up in."

Then he turned and made his way to find some cloth from one of the wagons and rope to tie the cloth together. Ben followed him as they looked for what was needed to properly bury the Combs—or as properly as could be done out in as savage a wilderness as this.

10 -- The Wayward and the Dead

A dark raven flitted down from the trees, calling out through the early morning air that there was food to any other winged friends who'd hear. Its clawed feet latched onto the bosom of Eliza Combs, giving a quick, anticipatory squawk of delight. It moved to tear into the cloth the body was wrapped in, its beak pecking at the spot where her eyes would be.

The Gravedigger drew his revolver and blew the bird into a hail of bits and feathers.

He slid the Colt back into its hallowed holster and turned back to digging the last of the three graves. The smallest of them, for Sara.

Hours had passed since they'd wrapped the bodies of the Combs family with tarp from one of the caravan's many wagons, having found Daniel Combs' rifle in the process, reclaimed by his son in gratitude. After that deed was done, the Gravedigger returned to the outcrop of

rocks, where his blood-bay still waited for his return. He'd guided the horse down to the caravan, and with its help, he and Ben had set the bodies across its back and lead them up and into the forest. They'd found a clearing to Ben's liking and set about making the graves.

Ben sat somewhere behind him now, silent and working at something else as a man he still considered to be a stranger tended to the resting places of his family. The boy had bravely said he would dig the graves, nearly demanded to do so, but the Gravedigger had said no. "It's the second half of what I do," he'd answered quietly, holding his coat open to show his revolver to the boy. The boy understood, as before. The Gravedigger had added: "But it's not often that I dig for good people."

With that, the Gravedigger dug, and Ben sat quietly, mourning and tending to what he was. The former, now finished with his work, turned to see what the latter had been working at. Before the cross-legged boy were three crude crosses, made of sticks and bound with twine taken from one of the wagons on the plain.

The Gravedigger nodded, and Ben knew it meant he should help now. Together, they lifted the bodies of Daniel, Eliza, and Sara Combs into their places. Then the Gravedigger's work of refilling the graves began. Ben knelt nearby the whole time, whispering prayers learned from those returning to the earth before him, spoken in their honor and for their peace. Hours later the work was done. The Gravedigger stood to the side as Ben smacked the crosses into the earth and at the head of each resting place, uttering one last goodbye over each.

The two stood there, staring at the graves for a long while. The crazed priest, Father Thorne, had said he was going to lead Ben's family to the pearly gates of heaven. Both of them hoped that the family was finally beyond those gates and at rest somewhere better.

"I can't give you a ride back to your home, Ben," the Gravedigger said with honest regret. "I have graves to dig for the others."

Ben looked a little shocked at the idea of burying all of those dead, but didn't question the Gravedigger as to why he would. The young man was silent for a bit longer.

"I'm not going back," he eventually said, staring off into the forest. His eyes were weary, but no tears fell. "There's nothing there for me but memories and lonesomeness. The better memories and my Pa's rifle I'll take with me, but nothing else. I'll make my own way from here on out."

The Gravedigger nodded respectfully at this. "That's all a person can ever really do," he

said.

Ben looked him in the eye. "Will you dig a grave for him? The priest?"

The Gravedigger nodded again. "Yes. His will be the only one I smile over, though."

A hint of a grin came to the young boy's face, but quickly vanished. He turned and moved to pick up his father's rifle from the ground. He stood with it balanced in the crook of an arm, looking back to the Gravedigger.

"I still don't know your name," Ben said, eyes narrowing quizzically.

The Gravedigger propped his shovel onto his shoulder and shrugged. "Like I said, call me what you will."

Ben smiled a little. "I think I'll call you friend and be on my way."

The Gravedigger returned the smile and turned to his horse, waiting ever-patiently a few steps away. He fastened his shovel to his saddle's pack and climbed on top, giving a short glance back towards Ben, who was already going in the opposite direction and off into the forest. The Gravedigger led the horse back towards the caravan, the bodies, and his long work ahead.

He rode on.

Peeker's Peak

1 -- A Sight for Sore Danvers

Nothing much of note ever happened in the city of Danvers, so when a carriage came to stop on its main street carrying four lovely and mysterious women, it was seen as being quite the occasion. Nestled so far north up in the Wyoming Territory, the city was seeing fewer and fewer stopovers and travelers in these parts; most of those sort had their sights on the south-west. And there surely weren't any women of those four's type around there, either.

The gossip of the town's women and the leers of its men began at roughly equal times. The carriage had only just pulled to a stop in front of the general store, its rider hopping down from his box and stepping into the establishment for some goods, when the first wandering eyes of the townsfolk were caught by the pretty and fancy looking carriage; they weren't really held, though, until the transportation's door opened and a long, luxurious leg arched out, a red, feathery dress spilling out about it. The first of the women stepped out, arching her back and stretching her legs from what must have been a fair journey thus-far. Three others followed her and did much the same, each clothed in flamboyant and elaborate dresses of feathers, beads, and the baring of chests. Lush boas adorned their lithe arms and shoulders, adding to the rather

shocking attire. It took only a quick glance to tell the dresses were more of a uniform (all be it the temporary sort) for a "working girl," as it was tepidly referred to by the more respectful and timid people of Danvers. This realization and the women's appearances inspired the townsfolk to react in various fashions.

A budding Daisy Fallon took the women in with sighs of wonder, hoping to receive as much attention as they did and to have such lovely dresses of her own to fill out, one day; the girl was quickly rushed along as her mother grabbed her hand and whispered admonishments upon the youth. Old Donald Malone, at the tender age of eighty-four, felt a strain in his drawers that made him feel sixteen again, and young Timothy Brown, still five years off from sixteen, felt a similar rising. Widow Clemens—out looking to barter with the quilts she had only recently taken to sewing, her "talents" with a needle revealing as such—crossed the street to stay as far away from their ilk as possible. Pastor David, overseer of the local Baptist church, felt the flicking tongue of that serpent that slithered in Eden hissing at his ear when he glanced the women's way. He made a note to pray for their souls—and his own—later that evening, before he rushed off to the solace of his church.

Each of the four women was similar in just how different they were from the average sort of woman seen about those parts. Firstly, they were obviously foreign; there was a sensuous olive tone to their skin, as if they'd been born and lived under another sun, and their raven-black hair was straight, long, and sumptuously full, far more-so than a lady of this still-wild land could maintain. Their handsomeness and becoming frames were more likely to be sculpted by an artisan of the old world, rather than built and hewn from travel and labor through this hard country.

As similar as they were to one another, the four women each had their own distinguishing marks, airs, and—as the men walking here and there about Danvers stopped to ogle at—shapes. The tallest one of them could stare-down a grown mountain-man, and the cold, displeased look on her face seemed to hint that she would gladly do as such. Despite the tinge of menace, her visage did not go wanting for loveliness. The seemingly youngest of the four had the bearing of a flirt, looking every man that peeked her way in the eye and with a coy smile on her more supple features. The shortest one made up for her tiny and delicate frame with a bust that a body nearly had to stop and wonder at, the proportions of her bodice were so uneven. The last of the four, which the other three had gathered about like some unspoken representative, was of a beauty few

could conjure in the mind. Lips pursed in a permanent, waiting kiss any man would wish to return. Slender cheeks perfect for caressing and holding. Jade eyes that shone even from afar—the men of Danvers knew this for fact (though none were brave enough to approach too closely), as each took note of that pleasant green, in turn.

As the men walked about, either blatantly staring or only half-glancing towards the four women, those green eyes looked over each fellow, measuring them up. The look in her eyes was something no man could rightly describe, but most ached to figure out. But, her eyes wandered a good deal, never staying on any particular gent too long. Then she saw a man standing beside his horse, dressed in a long, dark coat and a hat that hid his face mostly in shadow. Her gaze fixed on him, just as she knew his was fixed on her under the darkness of his down-turned brim.

"Ready, madams," the driver called as he stepped out of the general store. He hopped up into his box and set a case of some goods or other on top of the luggage-riddled carriage roof.

The jade-eyed woman gave a brief smile to the man with his face in the shadows while the other three climbed back up into their ride. After another quick moment of staring, the fourth woman turned around and stepped up into the cabin. A crack of reins and the driver's outcry set the carriage's horses back into motion, and the carriage rolled down along the street-way of Danvers, and was soon out of sight.

The small crowds of people that had appeared at the news of the carriage dispersed, and those who had looked out at the scene from storefront and household windows went back to their own matters. The stopover had lasted for five minutes, at most, but the gossip and the lustful dreams would persist for another week before the public memory of Danvers left the encounter to the past.

However, one witness would not forget the carriage or its four occupants so easily. The man who had stood with his face half-hidden beneath his hat stepped out onto the road, leading his horse beside him. He stopped in the middle of the road to stare down the path the carriage had taken to the north.

While nearly all the men and boys about had ogled the women, feeling the pull of lust and desire, this man had felt a pull all his own. A sense of being drawn to something. Something that often lead him to violence, even death. Sometimes something much worse. When the jade-eyed woman had glanced his way and smiled, the feeling swept over him and mounted all the more. He knew something was brewing around the four exotic ladies, and it was up to him to

find out what.

The Gravedigger had work to do.

2 -- "Tailing the Tail!"

The Gravedigger followed the wagon full of women on through a full day, watched secretively over their camp when night fell and their journey came to a pause, and then kept trailing them as they continued onwards the next day.

He wasn't the only one, either.

On the first day, after seeing the spectacle of the women's stop-off in Danvers, the Gravedigger had given cautious pursuit of the wagon. He had let a solid hour pass before he left Danvers behind and set to dogging the wandering wagon and its lovely passengers. The time was just enough to let any paranoia the driver may have had about lackeys following them to fade from thought. Not that a driver would be inherently expecting trouble from anyone following the carriage, but if some rough and ragged fellow like the Gravedigger was noticed following in hot pursuit—with a carriage full of women, no less—it could look troublesome. So, the Gravedigger kept a fair distance from the transport at all times, sparing just short of a mile's length from him and the transport when the land leveled out and became bare plain, but within hearing distance of the horses' huffing and the wheels' turning when they were in the closed proximity of the forests.

When night began to fall and the air became thinner as they rose in altitude, the carriage came to a stop in a clearing of trees. The driver and the passengers took to making camp for the evening. The Gravedigger had taken note of a ridge that hung above the clearing, the mountainous landscape of the territory becoming more prominent as they journeyed, giving a strategic and good view of the forest-floor below it. He had found a way up to the vantage point, led his horse up to the ridge, and made ready to sit there overnight, keeping a watchful eye on the carriage, the driver, and the four women as they slept through the night, rallied 'round a modest fire. All through the night, the Gravedigger sat, cross-legged and watching, glaring down through the darkness about the camp below, waiting for something irksome to occur. For a scuffle with some night-thing, or a scream of pain or distress; but there had been no incident of note. The four women slept peacefully outside, huddled around their fire, while the driver kept to the carriage,

no doubt told by some superior or other to keep clear of the goods, lest his wages be cut for doing otherwise. Still, that pull—that sense of the impending that made the Gravedigger give chase in the first place—had persisted on through the evening, waxing and waning in intensity, but never completely disappearing. Like a fly that hovers over the skin but never lands there, its little wings tickling the air and causing irritation. The Gravedigger had felt the sensation too many times in the past and it had led him into just as many odd and troubling circumstances for it to go ignored. But for it to persist this long without any occurrence of any sort . . .

It was odd, and it pestered the Gravedigger, but also strengthened his resolve to continue following the carriage when day came. Those women were in the middle of something, or on their way to the middle. The Gravedigger would just have to wait until it was time for him to jump into it, too.

Day came, the carriage and the women moved on, and the Gravedigger followed after them. Half of the day passed while he kept on with his regiment of varied distances.

Then others started meandering out of the woods, some on foot, most on horseback, trotting down connecting pathways, working their way across ridges to reach the path the carriage was on. All fell in behind the transportation. Dirtied miner types on pack-mules, fursporting woodsmen, young men just out of boyhood, even one or two that rode with the air of entitled lawmen.

Within a matter of hours, the single carriage and the Gravedigger had become a large parade of men on horseback following after the transportation. At first, the more the pathway became cluttered with the traffic, the more the Gravedigger's caution flared. He kept up his distance from the carriage, paying particular attention to each and every one of the newcomers. Many approached the carriage as they joined the trail, taking peeks into the box and giving waves to the women before falling back a little and into the growing phalanx of travelers. The men were zealous to get a glimpse of the ladies, but none seemed dangerous, nor made any actions that could account for that uncanny, persisting pull the Gravedigger felt.

Riding amongst the men—and they were, indeed, all men—the Gravedigger listened as conversations sparked up between the travelers. He started to get an idea of what this sudden pilgrimage may have been for.

"Been to the Peak yet?" . . . "Aye, he said he lost most of his money, but he found a home away from home!" . . . "If you've got an itch for one of 'em and enough coin, they'll scratch it!" . .

. "Can't wait to see them lovelies comin' in . . ."

Keeping out of the frivolous conversation himself, but gleaning what he could from it and adding the women in the carriage to the situation, the Gravedigger came to the conclusion that he'd just joined a troop of gamblers and horny men on their way to an establishment of ill-repute; though its repute was anything but ill to this lot of lads. Their excitement and joy at going to wherever they were heading to was evident and they could hardly keep their spirits in.

One such reveler came up on a husk of a nag beside the Gravedigger, tapping him on the shoulder. The Gravedigger got a rush of boozy breath across his face as the portly man—a belly sticking out of his shirt and a bowler on his curly-haired head—started to speak. The man gave a snort and flashed a grin that was more gums than teeth. "We're tailing the tail!" he whooped, and burst into laughter that set his bulk to shaking. The Gravedigger gave a non-committal half-grin and a nod, pulling up on his horse's reins. He let the man and his poor nag pull ahead, leaving the man to revel in his comic brilliance alone.

"Not the talkative sort, eh?" a young man's voice said from behind the Gravedigger. As he turned to face the newcomer, the Gravedigger saw a chiseled-chin youth of twenty or so years urging his Quarter Horse across the path and over to the Gravedigger. The horse was a handsome one, a fine sheen over its brown coat, and the young man didn't go wanting for appearances, either; striking blue eyes, short black curls, strong jawline—the allure of the soft features of a boy shifting into the becoming air of a grown man.

The youth eased the Quarter Horse up to the Gravedigger's ride and flashed a winning smile that fit his features. "But, then, it's easy to talk on and on when half your wit is already gone with the drink," the young man continued, pointing a finger at the portly, laughing man ahead of them.

The Gravedigger gave a snort and a nod, in spite of himself, and finally spoke up. "And when you're half of wit, to begin with."

The youth gave a brisk laugh and then fell quiet. He stared ahead as the troop of travelers kept moving, the carriage now only a dozen yards up ahead, leading them on through the forest. A couple of minutes passed in silence—at least between the two, for the others about them prattled and gossiped on—before the youth spoke up again. "My name's Jason. Been to the Peak before? It's my first time going—heard it's quite the place."

"Never even heard of it," the Gravedigger answered, keeping his eyes on the carriage

ahead and not offering his name in turn to the youth.

Jason gave a baffled chuckle and thought that over, more than a little perplexed. He gave the Gravedigger a look-over, taking note of the shovel jutting out of his pack and his odd, tattered and torn vest and jacket. If he noticed the tint of unnatural yellow in the eyes of the Gravedigger, Jason didn't stare too hard or question it. "Well, if you're not going to the Peak, why are you following this bunch?"

The Gravedigger didn't answer, but the youth must have noticed where the man's eyes were focused after a while. "Ah . . ." he said in a joking but understanding manner. "Caught sight of those angels along your way, huh? Haven't seen them myself, yet. Well, if getting an eyeful of them is what you're so intent on, then you *are* heading to the Peak."

The Gravedigger turned to look at the boy. He said nothing, but the look on his face told the youth that he wanted more information. The youngster was all-too willing to continue, a fond hint of expectation in his voice and a look of nirvana on his face.

"Those pretty things are on their way to Peeker's Peak—cathouse, casino, saloon, and general meeting place of any man in these parts looking for some fun. It's new. Some rich foreign fella'—Dukas, I think is his name—came up here months and months ago and started building the place. He runs and owns it—the rich getting richer, from what I hear of his business. Just about anything a man could want is up in that establishment. A stout drink, plenty of tables dealing cards, some lovely dancers, and rooms to stay the night in with them for . . . dancing lessons." The young man looked at the Gravedigger with a raise of his eyebrows and a flare of mischief in his smile.

"And which of those are you looking for?" the Gravedigger asked, fairly certain of the answer.

Jason gave a half-hearted shrug and glanced towards the carriage. "A little of everything. My pa gave me some bills for my birthday—I'm 22 as of last week—and time off from working our farm to make the trip up this way. Said I should experience the world." The young man gave a bitter little laugh and hung his head low for a moment. "And I've, uh, never learned to dance yet."

The Gravedigger showed half a smile, catching the young man's drift. Dance, indeed.

"And between you, me, and the rest of this bunch here, I wouldn't mind getting my first lesson from one of those fine ladies in that carriage up there. Word has it they're quite the sight.

That Dukas fella' had them brought in from whatever country he hails from. Giving us scoundrels some new sights to see, I guess."

"They are sights to see, indeed," the Gravedigger answered. Even he could not deny it, and he began to wonder if any of the leering folk of Danvers had since joined the traveling group to get another eyeful—or even a handful—of the four women, again.

Judging by the grin on the young man's face, the Gravedigger had just confirmed the youth's ambitions, dangling the proverbial carrot in front of his face. Jason kicked his heels into the sides of his horse, urging it to move faster and towards the carriage. "I think it's time I took a look for myself," the young man called back, giving a little wave in the Gravedigger's direction. The Gravedigger gave no acknowledgment in return, just watched as the young man egged his horse through the crowd and up beside the carriage doors. He saw the youth lean over the neck of his horse a little, getting eye-level with the windows of the carriage's compartment, giving a playful and confident wave to the women inside.

The Gravedigger wondered if any of the women—the tall one, the flirt, the bust-blessed one, or the green-eyed beauty—gave a wave in return before Jason fell back in line as others urged their way forward to peer into the carriage. Jason made no move to return his horse next to the Gravedigger, falling in right behind the carriage for the remainder of the journey, but the youth did shoot back a wide smile that said: *You're right; very lovely, indeed, friend.*

The Gravedigger kept his spot in the crowd of wandering gamblers, would-be and already drunks, and randy lechs. He kept his ears open for any more information about the four women, this Pecker's Peak, or the businessman Dukas, but aside from more tales of previous rowdy nights and hopes for tonight's escapades, the Gravedigger received nothing of value.

He cleared his mind of the yammering and horse whinnying around him and sought out that pull, accepting the sensation as it thrummed through him. Like he was a string on a banjo being plucked by a force he couldn't quite grasp, he listened to the tune being played over him. It still resonated with danger.

Giving a sigh of exasperation, the Gravedigger kept on, wondering how much longer it would be until they reached the apparently notorious Pecker's Peak and whatever it was that awaited him on the other side of the pull.

3 -- Peeker's Peak

Within the hour, the façade of Peeker's Peak came into sight.

The Gravedigger heard a call come up from several of the travelers nearest to the carriage before he caught sight of the place. It was a cheer of success, of arrival after a tiresome journey, of pure victory. The path they were on took a bend, and for a moment, the Gravedigger lost sight of the leading carriage beyond a copse of trees, but as he and the men about him rounded the bend, it came back into view, along with the place of merriment they'd set out for.

The building was an impressive three stories tall, looked to be made entirely of wood, and sat in the center of a squared clearing. Its front face was as wide as a locomotive car, likely a smidgeon larger, even. A veranda stretched around the outside of the floor level, a few benches and chairs for lounging on in sight. Set in the center of its front were double doors as large and ornate as a well-off church's may be, a striking entrance into a place of a very different kind of worship, where sins were praised rather than absolved and prayed away. Glass windows stood out of the second and third stories, glinting in the sun of the approaching evening like eyes staring out at the newcomers. Most eye-catching of all was a sign situated on the roof of the establishment, propped and held in place by wooden beams and only God knew how many nails. With a dull yellow-painted background, the artistically stylized and bright red name of "*PEEKER'S PEAK*" stood out like a glimmering beacon. Beneath this were images painted on and designed more crudely than the moniker, but still poignant to the clientele: a full mug of some frothy brew, a card with the Ace of Spades design on it, a pair of wide eyes, and a stocking-covered leg extended out alluringly. Drinks, cards, sights to see, and women. Compelling advertising. And from the echoes of cheers and shouts coming from inside the building, there were already plenty of clients in there buying what the proprietor was selling.

The absent trees of the spacious clearing had no doubt been the ones felled to make the structure, along with a one-story, wide building yards off from the famed Peeker's Peak. Judging by the horses being lead in and out of this far-ranging structure, it was a collection of stalls for customer's rides to be kept, looked after, and sated while their owners looked after and sated their own desires.

With cat-calls and mock proclamations of love, the men that were beside and immediately behind the carriage waved and hollered at the transportation before pulling away

from it and moved in the direction of the stalls. Meanwhile, the carriage continued rolling off towards Peeker's Peak, readying to ride around its side and to the back of the establishment. The Gravedigger followed the swarms of men to the stalls, keeping a sideways glance on the carriage until it was lost behind the main building. He'd have some work ahead of him, scanning the crowd inside the place in order to pick out those four women again, but if they attracted as much attention in there as they did with these lot of newcomers, perhaps it wouldn't be too great a challenge.

As he neared the stalls, the Gravedigger hopped down from his blood-bay, leading it along by the reins. It gave a huff, sounding angry as it stared towards the stalls. It gave a sharp tug of its red head, its black mane whirling about, apparently annoyed at the prospect of being put in a stall with all the other horses around him. The Gravedigger smiled at his horse and patted its nose, both to calm it and apologize for the inconvenience. The Gravedigger fell in line with the other men tending to their steeds, the smell of hay and shit wafting out into the open air the closer you got to the entrance of the stalls. Inside, there were dozens of single stalls, most of which had been claimed, and a few larger stalls that were quickly cramping up with as many horses as could be fit into them. The Gravedigger stepped up to a single stall, glaring at another short, spectacled man who tried to get there first. The little man gave a shy look and a scared grin of apology to the Gravedigger, then moved his nag to a larger stall with haste.

Leading it in and locking the swinging gate behind it, the Gravedigger left his horse there to wait while its owner tended to his work. "Look after that for me," the Gravedigger said to the bay before walking off, pointing to his pack and his shovel.

Joining a crowd of men who'd seen to their horses and were more than ready to be entertained, the Gravedigger walked hurriedly over to the main building. They climbed up the stairs to the porch and threw the doors open, laughter and light from inside greeting them to this paradise of the wilderness.

4 -- Around Back

Owens pulled the carriage to a stop behind Peeker's Peek, as he'd been instructed to do upon arriving back with the four new madams. He called to the horses and gave a stiff tug on their

reigns to get them to stop at the back doors, where shipments and wagons of the establishment's booze and other supplies were unloaded and managed. A few workers came out to aid however they could; apparently the troop of travelers had been noticed from inside. The tug on the horses just barely wrangled them into their spot—they were itchy to be unhitched and to get back to their stables.

They'd been jittery the entire journey. In truth, so had Owens, and for the same reason as the steeds: the four women gave him the spooks.

When Mr. Dukas had given Owens the duty of riding down to Kansas City to complete a transaction the foreigner had been arranging since the Peak's erection, the middle-aged driver had been quite pleased. The businessman had been making a big hullabaloo over these four women for as long as Owens could remember, and to be entrusted to pick up and deliver the ladies to the Peak was a feather in the driver's proverbial cap. But something was odd about the whole affair from the get-go. Dukas, for all his swagger and pleasantries in dealing with both staff and customers alike, had pulled Owens aside before he'd set out, giving him a grave look and speaking with a stark tone that ensured Owens would follow every word.

"Pick up the ladies and hurry back," the foreigner had said. "When you have to stop for rest, they sleep outside. You sleep in the carriage—with the doors latched." Owens at first assumed that it was the businessman's attempt to keep him from fooling around or flirting with the ladies. But as Owens thought it over on the way to Missouri, he started to think he'd heard a smidgeon of worry in Dukas' voice.

If the boss hadn't have wanted Owens to flirt with the four women, that was something he didn't manage to do, at least at first. Upon meeting the four in a tavern inside Kansas City, he'd been smitten at their beauty and paid them many compliments, hoping a bit of his salary and the kind words could pay for a night with one of them in the future. But the flattery quickly ended as he helped them load their luggage and as the days of travel began—they received him in a very cold, detached manner, and they would stare at him in a very odd way. Not as you would look at a person, but some item that caught a twisted sort of fancy deep within, and not in a lustful sense, either.

They rarely spoke, and when they did, it was in a foreign tongue he couldn't make head or tail of. He believed they could speak English, but they chose to speak in their native language to keep him out of whatever they were saying. This, too, set him on edge.

On several nights, they had, indeed, been forced to stop to let him and the horses rest. He'd followed Dukas' advice about the sleeping arrangements, starting a fire for the ladies to sleep by and helping to set up bedrolls, then had left them to themselves while he slept in the carriage compartment. No, he'd hidden in the carriage; they had whispered on through most of the nights, their language spoken in hisses and other strange pronunciations that inspired him to never even once peek out the carriage windows to watch them convene.

Now that they'd arrived, Owens jumped off his seat and set to pulling down the women's luggage from the carriage-top. He was relieved to see one of the other workers opening the carriage doors for the ladies inside, meaning he wouldn't have to.

As he hopped down from the box, carrying a bag while other employees got the rest, Owens heard a proud voice speak up.

"Ah, my dears! You've arrived!"

The masculine, accented voice came from Mr. Dukas, who came bolting out the doors, dressed to the nines and a smile on his becoming face. He moved towards the women, arms outstretched like he was beholding a holy sight with awe. Owens turned away from the scene, moving quickly into the Peak along with the other workers. For the moment, Dukas was left alone with the four women.

"Greetings, ladies," the businessman said, now in his and their native tongue, both out of practiced formality and in conspiracy. He greeted each one by name and with a bow, the smile still on his face, but keeping a healthy distance from them.

"I trust your journey was a decent one?" He blinked rapidly, nervous as to what their response would be.

The green-eyed woman answered him, head held in a regal, superior air. "It was satisfactory."

Dukas nodded in a frenzy, buying time as to figure out how to broach the subject he knew must be addressed. "Our first part of the deal is complete. I've brought you to a new land, and you have come as asked." He paused, observing the way they stared at him with those same intimidating looks as they had when he'd met them on their home-island, a time now years ago in the past.

"You have," the green-eyed woman said, "and we have. And we expect to receive all you've promised us."

Dukas' smile faltered a tad at that, his play at pleasant composure shaken. "Yes, of course, ladies. But all things in good time, and discreetly. *Discreetly*." The repetition treaded a befuddling line between forceful command and pathetic plea.

Each of the women smiled without humor. It was a show of deviousness, a power-play that the suave, rich man had hoped would not be an issue in bringing them to the Peak. "We'll get what we desire," the green-eyed woman said, "And if we get what we want, you'll get all that you want, you greedy little man. So enjoy it."

Dukas, abashed but trying not to show it, gave a brisk nod and stepped aside, waving a hand towards the doors into his establishment. "Very well, ladies! Now, if you would follow me, I'll prepare you to greet your audience."

The women nodded with mock demure, and they entered Peeker's Peak with Dukas in tow.

5 -- Warm Welcome

The Gravedigger stepped inside, pushed and shoved along by a gang of rowdy gents barreling in behind him. They jostled him and worked their way around him as he came to a stop just inside the establishment, paying little heed to his disturbance of the incoming traffic. There was plenty else to take note of in the place that held his attention, instead.

For an establishment settled next to nowhere, it was quite a grand sight, indeed. The smells of sweat, sawdust, and perfumes each fought to reach the nose first, awaking the senses from the get-go. The walls were covered in a sensual red wallpaper, yellow lines intersecting to make continuous diamond patterns across the scarlet. Stretched out immediately before him were dozens of tables, each devoted to rousing and full games of black jack, poker, and plenty of other poisons for a gambler to pick from. There was even a giant roulette table set in the center of the gaming room, its polished wooden sheen and enormous size guaranteed to catch the eye of any customer. Each station was overseen by a man in a clean white shirt and solid gray vest, dealing out cards or spinning the wheel as hundreds of men placed their bets and counted their winnings—or losses. The scene was like a tumultuous sea, the waves of which were the swaying and playing bodies of the customers, and the crescendo of it all the ebb and flow of both cheers and groans as fortunes were either made or pissed away.

Off to the Gravedigger's left was an enormous bar with a stock of booze to match sitting behind it, easily a hundred different bottles and as many brands resting on shelves behind the dark wooden countertop. Not a single free stool was to be seen at the bar, and three bartenders saw to the revelers leaning in and out for the ordering of rounds. In the left corner of the place were several more tables where even more drinkers sat and held conversation. They were shouting their stories and their jokes to one another, adopting a necessary volume to be heard over the gamblers not too far away.

Straight across from the entrance, on the far side of the building and past the gambling section, was an assemblage of wooden chairs placed in lines before a large stage. A lush red curtain hung over the stage, looking as grand and high-brow as a newfangled New York opera-house's would. The chairs before it were empty now, but the Gravedigger was certain that would change when the renowned dancing girls would come out for their act.

The women . . .

If the young boy the Gravedigger had spoken to—Jason—was intent on sleeping with or doing anything else with a woman from this place, he'd have plenty to choose from. Dozens of flamboyantly dressed and half-dressed women of all ages, shapes, and colors walked amongst the men. Some laughed and drank a glass of champagne while sitting on the knees of the revelers, others helped the bartenders in delivering glasses and tankards to customers, and many more walked about strutting what they had to offer, not yet claimed or paid for but looking for prospective clients. To not find one who was willing to bargain for the price of a promising night would be like missing the broad side of a barn with a canon volley.

However, the Gravedigger did not yet see any of the four olive-skinned women of the carriage wandering about. Plenty of lovely faces here and there, but none that matched those particular ladies'.

The Gravedigger stepped forward, working a path through the bustling crowd of men and prostitutes making their way around Peeker's Peak. He stopped at the edge of the gambling tables, looking up at the ceiling and to the second and third floors above. Hanging from the roof was a large, ornate brass chandelier, each of its many candles lit and adding to the glow of the place, illuminating the stage and its seating right below it. Stairways to the far right led up to the second and third levels of the establishment, where the rooms available for overnight purchase and use were. Dozens of doorways could be seen up there on either level, brightly-polished

bronze numbers set into their wood faces. Wooden balustrades stretched around each level in square circumferences, the walkways open to where anyone up there could look down upon the goings-on of the floor level, adding to the open, spacious air of an already massive establishment. Men and women strode about up there already, early as it yet was, leaning in to whisper to one another and strike a deal. In the span of mere seconds, the Gravedigger saw at least three ladies leading three men into three rooms, shutting the doors hastily behind them.

A mumbling man with a mug of beer in each hand suddenly bumped into the Gravedigger's back, knocking one of the former's glasses to the ground, and knocking the latter out of his preoccupation with the upper levels. The man let out a curse and kept on stumbling along to the stairways, leaving the broken glass and its wasted spirits where they fell. The Gravedigger gave a sigh and started to move to the far right wall, weaving around the crowded card-tables and the others milling about. He made it to the wall without further incident—save for a tipsy young lady's stiletto falling on his left boot and giving him a jab—and pressed his back to it, holding his arms at his sides and looking out on the crowd.

Anyone that had a mind to take notice of him would have easily realized he was scouting for someone or something in particular, and his stern expression would have hinted at impending trouble; but no one was very keen on looking his way when they had their drinks to down, hands to play, and women to fawn over. The fact that there were no workers checking men for weapons also told the Gravedigger that this place wasn't up on deterring potential violence. His trusty black revolver still hung at his hip, but the fact that plenty of others could have their own beloved tools of death on them did little to quell his nerves. Any one of them—with the right argument or amount of drink in them—could spark that pull of danger the Gravedigger sensed around those four women in the carriage.

His sharp eyes wavered here, there, and everywhere, looking for the four women again. Of all the beauties bouncing and wandering about, not one of them had that tell-tale olive skin, or those long, black heads of hair. The Gravedigger was close to giving in on just standing and staring, on the verge of walking out into the crowd and asking as discreetly as possible about the women, when a single, bold voice rose up above the sounds of the establishment.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the voice proclaimed, bouncing off the walls in a boisterous echo, "I welcome you to Peeker's Peak!"

The wanton guzzling of glasses halted, games paused, and the loud conversations and

talking fell to a polite murmur as everyone's eyes gradually turned to the grand stage. People from the bar and the tables were quickly rising from their spots, rushing as quickly as they could to claim one of the seats before the stage. The real show was getting ready to begin.

The Gravedigger turned to look at the stage, as well, and edged his way down the wall to get a closer look at the proud voice's owner, who was standing atop the stage. The man was dressed smartly in a deep blue coat and matching pants that held a luster in the light, and a frilled white shirt showed underneath the fashionable dress. He was handsome, with dark hair worn long but slicked back and shining from the light of the chandelier overhead. His skin was a familiar olive tone, and baubles and rings hung on his tanned hands, a black cane held in the right one, extended out to the crowd as a symbol of attention.

As the seats before the stage were sufficiently filled, the man continued on with bravado.

"I am your host, Alexandros Dukas!" He lapsed into a provocative accent as he spoke his name, which became more reserved as he continued. "And we are overjoyed to have such a large crowd tonight with even larger appetites—and for all things with taste!"

Dukas, the owner and brains of the establishment that Jason the boy had previously mentioned to the Gravedigger, paused as a satisfied and mischievous round of cheers and laughter sprung up from the patrons.

"Peeker's Peak is proud to give each of you a peek—and possibly much more—at the pleasures and entertainments the entire world has to offer. Now, I expect this crowd to be as abundant as it is on this particular night for some *new* pleasures I have been promising you all, as of late! And to give you the sights and joys of the world, I have brought four stupendous young women—the finest beauties from my own, native land, no less—to this country, and they have just arrived this very night!"

Another cheer rose up from the crowd and an applause started working through the place. Dukas smiled broadly, happily—and with a bit of judgment only the Gravedigger seemed bothered to take heed of.

"Would you care to see them, gentlemen?" Another round of applause came at the foreign man's words.

"Then feast your eyes on these gorgeous bodies!"

With that, the dark red curtain behind Dukas opened, and there were the four women, standing on stage with their colorful, feathery attire and coy smiles on their beautiful faces. The

crowd's cheering rose to a fever-pitch, and more than a couple were prepared to jump onto the stage and make a grab for each of the ladies, if others hadn't held them back.

From left to right, standing proudly and sensually in the light, were the tallest one, then the young flirt, then the short but chesty one, and on the far right, the jade-eyed beauty. Dukas let the cheers continue for another matter of moments before he waved them to calm down.

"Now, I'm proud to introduce . . ." the man's free hand pointed to each of the women in turn as he gave their names, allowing a moment's cheer and ogling for each of them. "Barbara! Ismênê! Rhea! And Daphne!"

As the crowd roared once more, the Gravedigger committed names with faces to his memory. Barbara, the giant. Ismênê, the vixen. Rhea, the wonder-bodice. And Daphne, with her enticing green eyes. As he wondered at them, the Gravedigger thought that Daphne caught sight of him once more. Even as far off from the stage as he was, he felt her eyes fall on him and stay there for a moment before taking in the other, more ecstatic men.

Dukas began speaking again. "Now, I assure you these ladies have lovely singing voices and can dance to put any coryphée to shame, but they have had a long journey and are quite tired." The man's sly smile crept back onto his face. "However, that's not to say they aren't so weary as to take a fine fellow to bed with them! Who among you would help them rest with true ease?"

A thunderous cheer sprang up, as did most of the men sitting before the stage, leaping out of their chairs with coin-purses and bills in hand. Dukas, overjoyed with his role as overseer of the bunch, began peering at the prospective clients, seeking to pick one out for this rare opportunity of sampling the new talents. His eyes fell on someone and latched onto him, as well as the money in his hand, and he pointed to him and asked him to step up to the stage. The Gravedigger felt a cold pit in his chest as he realized it was the boy from their journey, Jason, who stepped up beside Dukas and handed over his money to the proprietor.

"Well, for this amount of money, my boy," Dukas announced, "you can have your pick of these four lovelies! Which is it to be?"

The lively and playful air of the crowd sparked again as they cheered the boy on and shouted which of the women he should choose. But the young Jason had his eye on only one of the four—the equally young and abundantly sensual Ismênê. He pointed to her, the crowd applauded, and Dukas motioned the selected girl forward. She swayed her hips as she moved

swiftly over to Jason, wrapping an arm about his waste and getting real friendly real fast.

"Enjoy!" Dukas proclaimed, pulling a key out of his pocket and handing it to Jason. The boy beamed with joy, looking from the key, out to the crowd, to Dukas, and to Ismênê, then back again.

"Now, gentlemen, I'll leave it to the remaining darlings up here to choose a worthy soul, and I'll leave each of you to your pleasures! Enjoy! Enjoy!"

Then Dukas hopped off of the stage, quickly becoming lost in the crowd of men that rushed to and around the stage, hopes set on either the three new ladies or one of the many others standing around, just waiting to bargain for a pleasant evening.

The Gravedigger lurched forward, as well, but for a different purpose; he moved towards Jason, feeling a sudden urge to warn the boy, but of what, he didn't quite know. He simply understood that it would be unwise for the boy to take the girl to bed. He had to tell the boy that there were plenty of others who could give him what he desired. Just so long as it wasn't that girl, or any of her three compatriots. Fighting against the assemblage of patrons, the Gravedigger managed to reach Jason, who had his arm over Ismênê's shoulder and was leading her over to the stairs leading up to the private rooms above. The Gravedigger gave him a hard tap on the shoulder and the boy turned around.

Jason looked at the Gravedigger with a look of pleasant recognition, pride, and triumph, a grin on his face that likely couldn't even be slapped off. "Hello, friend!" he said, giving the Gravedigger's shoulder a friendly pat. "Sorry, but this fine thing is mine!"

"Jason . . ." the Gravedigger started, looking for a subtle but poignant way to dissuade the youth from taking the girl upstairs. But he was cut off as Ismênê laughed and gawked at Jason.

"*Ooh!*" she crooned, looking the boy over with an eye of scrutiny and a mischievous grin. Her accent of her homeland was strong, but her English was unbroken and learned. "You're name is Jason, huh? I once knew a Jason." Her smile grew wider. "He was quite a man. You've got a lot to live up to."

Ben actually blushed, but his confidence wouldn't fluster. "Well, I look forward to living up to the name, then!"

Ismênê swayed with a lustful motion, her hips rubbing against the boy's. "Oh," she moaned. "I could just eat you up!"

Jason shot the Gravedigger an impatient look and a shake of his head. *Got to go*, the

motion said, and the boy and the girl pulled away from him before he could do anything else. A chance passing of a drunken crowd of revelers quickly got in between the couple and the Gravedigger, and the two were up the stairs in a matter of seconds while the Gravedigger stood there, unsure of what to do next.

"Let them have their fun," a silky voice said from behind him. "We could have our own."

The Gravedigger turned and was face to face with the green-eyed Daphne.

She was inches away from him, close enough for him to smell the rose-scented perfume coating her supple skin and to see the true depths of her emerald eyes. She smiled at him with regard, but there was a mocking tone in her voice belying her amorous words. She waited for an answer, her lips parted and showing pretty teeth.

The Gravedigger said nothing, just gave her a hard stare for a moment and then trudged away. He turned his head after a few steps, seeing if she had followed after him, but she hadn't. Daphne had begun a conversation with another man, this one much older and of too-frail a body to last through much physical activity. Setting his back to another wall, the Gravedigger caught sight of Jason and Ismêne as they slipped into a room on the second floor, right above the curtained stage.

With his sight that a hawk could envy, the Gravedigger peered up to and at the door they'd shut, hoping to discern the room number emblazoned on the wood. Number 12.

A spot of time passed as the Gravedigger considered his options. Cutting his losses and leaving wasn't an option; he still felt uneasy about this place and the four foreign women. He would stay, but do what, exactly? Sulk in a corner and wait and watch for trouble to erupt down here? Stand outside Jason's room like a stupid guard-dog waiting for a bone? He surely couldn't keep an eye on all four women at once, if they were busy entertaining. After debating with himself a while longer, he moved across the room and over to the bar, weaseling his way in and catching the attention of a bartender. Then the Gravedigger fished a silver coin out of a breast pocket and smacked it down on the counter.

"Get me the key to room 11."

With temporary claim to the room beside Jason's own, the Gravedigger had at least hedged his bets, somewhat. At any point, he could trudge upstairs and step into the room he'd paid for, a potential strategic place to spy on and listen in on what the goings-on of next door were. Much better than skulking outside their door, on the chance someone managed out a care to overwhelm their spirits and thus alert the establishment of his behavior. This tactic was far more inconspicuous, though when he did enter his room, it would be alone, a thought these horny buggers around him wouldn't be able to grasp should they notice. The Gravedigger imagined the walls would be thin, and if trouble should spark up between the boy and the girl in room 12, he'd know it. The only trouble would be discerning moans of pleasure from moans of pain echoing through the walls—two sounds that could be eerily similar.

After waiting another ten minutes—leaning casually against the bar and his sight shifting between the other three foreign women as they made deals with men—he moved to head upstairs, taking note of where the other women would be spending at least part of the night. Tall Barbara was with a crotchety miner in room 22, third level and directly above Jason's and Ismêne's room; chesty Rhea in 21, above the Gravedigger's room, leading along a boy in every sense of the word, looking like he belonged in a schoolyard rather than a prostitute's arms; and Daphne, hand in hand with a dapper looking gentlemen of means, slipping into room 4, situated above the bar.

The Gravedigger sidestepped a heavily-bearded man and an absurdly thin young lady kissing on the second level walkway, their passions apparently more important than privacy. He spared a glance down at the floor level, a sight that afforded him a look at the entirety of the bar, the card tables, the stage, and all else. The sea of temptation down below was as shifting and loud as ever. He stepped up to his room, unlocked it, and stepped inside.

Peeker's Peak may have promoted opulence on its floor level, but if all other rooms were the same as this one, they spared little expense on presentation for private quarters. The walls were bare planks of wood, as was the floor. A bed just big enough for two and with nondescript white sheets and pillows sat on a bronze frame, centered against the left wall, and a glass window on the far wall showed the darkened evening sky outside. Beyond these details, the room was quite unremarkable. Apparently, it was up to the customers and the working girls to supply engaging sights in these rooms.

The Gravedigger strode across the room and up to the wall on the right, the one between

his and room 12. He spared a foot's worth of space between himself and the bare wall, turning his left ear to the wood, shutting his eyes, and listening. The faint murmur of the floor level's gaiety came to him first, but as he listened, he could pick up on giggling from next door, punctuated with a slightly nervous laugh. Despite the vague tremor in the laugh, the Gravedigger recognized it as Jason's. The Gravedigger slowly stepped back from the wall, keeping his ears open as to how well he could hear the boy and girl in the next room and from how far away he could hear it.

As he sat down on the edge of his bed, he could still hear the laughter of the two, the sounds of good cheer quickly turning into muffled moans and groans. The creaking and thumping of a bed-frame against the wall soon interlaced with the sounds of pleasure.

The Gravedigger sat there for what seemed like forever, feeling no shame but growing irritated, as he listened and waited.

Then something changed. The pounding and squeaking of the bed-frame stopped. The boy's climactic moans turned into a muffled, startled grunt.

The Gravedigger was up in an instant, rushing to the door. He thrust it open and stepped out onto the walkway. He moved to the door of room 12, grabbing the knob and trying to twist it. It held fast, locked. Another grunt came from behind the door, this one full of pain and choked out.

To hell with being inconspicuous. He'd come here for a reason, and the Gravedigger was sick of standing by.

He placed his hand over his revolver in its holster, ready to draw. He hauled off and kicked his booted foot out at the door. It caved inwards, its hinges splintering and cracking, crashing down to the floor. He rushed in, ready to react to just about anything. He came to a stop just three strides in.

Ismênê—or what at one point had been the youthful, alluring woman—straddled the already paling, dead body of Jason. The boy laid beneath her, sprawled out, arms flailed over his lolling head, eyes and mouth wide in his terrible moment of death, and a rent and torn neck of gore the cause of that death. Bits of what had been his throat, muscles, blood, and all splattered the white sheets and pillows of the bed. But it was the foreign woman that held the Gravedigger's eye most. For the girl was anything but a girl now.

When the sound of the intrusion caught her attention, she had whirled to face him. She

was naked, bare in what was some horrid, inhuman transformation into something else.

Her luscious and taut olive skin had become gray and loose, the flesh of her breasts and her stomach hanging and haggard-looking, nearly corpse-like in its ancient appearance. Her once-lovely face turned upon him in a blood-coated snarl, her upper lip and nose melding into a beak-like formation beneath her changed eyes, whose pupils were a pure, large blackness and the sclera a vibrant, unnatural orange. Her jaw had flattened inwards, completing the semi-beak of her mouth, which bore short but sharp teeth flecked with red and chunks of Jason's neck. Her black locks had shrunk into her head and become thick clumps of what looked like a combination of feathers and sickly tufts of gray hair. But what was most shocking and perplexing of all were her arms. They were not the lithe limbs of a girl, but wings—enormous, gray and brown feathered, held high and out in the space of the room, spanning ten feet from one tip to the other, at the least.

If the Gravedigger had known anything of ancient and foreign tales from across oceans and across ages, he might have recognized this wretched creature to be a harpy. A creature of terror and constant hunger that had found its way into myth and was renowned for its twisted half-human, half-bird appearance, which now lay on display. But the Gravedigger knew of no such stories or beasts—only that he should have drawn his revolver by now. He chose to remedy that now, his hand a blur of motion as he pulled the gun up and level to shoot.

Knowing the Gravedigger's intent, the bird-woman gave a shrill screech that made the gunslinger flinch and recoil, the noise grating against the ears, the pitch caught between the shout of a woman and a hawk's proud cry. As she gave her battle-call, those giant wings sprang up and then swiftly down, lifting her off the bed in a flurry as she turned and leapt toward the Gravedigger. Her legs and feet were coming down on him, giving the Gravedigger a split second's thought that she was aiming to kick him. But just as quickly he noticed how her feet had changed, as well. They were no longer a human's five-digit appendages, but carrion claws, two-toes on each that ended in gray-black, knife-like talons, a larger one protruding out from where the balls of her heels should have been. She intended to tear him to pieces with those claws.

The Gravedigger was quick, but not quick enough. He'd cocked the hammer and was taking aim at the woman-creature's chest when she came swooping in, her claws biting into his shoulders. Their tips tore into his coat, into his vest, and scratched his skin, latching on with a vice-like grip. Before he could re-aim and get off a shot, the Gravedigger was being lifted up off

his feet and pulled backwards.

An uproarious crash filled Peeker's Peak as the Ismênê-creature burst through the wall of the second level room, her uncanny strength and her long wingspan tearing through the wooden walls as if it were mere paper. Shouts of shock and awe rose up from the floor level as all eyes turned to the strange sight. The beast drug the Gravedigger out with her as her wings flapped furiously, pulling her up higher, up toward the third level and beyond. The world became a rushing blur to the Gravedigger as he was whipped and shaken about in her clutch. But through it all, he realized something clearly: the beast was rising as high as she could get so she could drop him, letting him plummet to severe harm or even death. Or she thought.

The Gravedigger fought his vertigo and steadied his arm, holding it straight up and aiming as best he could at the creature's wings. As she started to circle about the grand chandelier, the Gravedigger shot. The bullet tore through the upper area of its left wing, sending blood and feathers flying as it screeched in pain. It lost control of its flight, leaning into a dive right as it crashed into the chandelier. Her claws let go of the Gravedigger and he tumbled down as she became caught up in the arms of the chandelier, the whole thing tearing from the ceiling under her added weight.

The Gravedigger fell in a wild arch that ended with him landing hard on the large roulette table at the center of the gaming area, sending chips flying and customers scattering as he thumped onto it with force. It hurt, especially for his upper back that took the brunt of the landing, but the Gravedigger was quickly sitting up.

Just as he'd landed on the table, the chandelier smashed down onto the collection of chairs before the stage, breaking at least a dozen and sending patrons running as they dropped their cards and booze. The weight of the brass fixture drove the harpy down beneath it and pinned her to the now-cluttered floor. Candles went tumbling through the air and landed all about, pelting the gaming tables, the chairs, the stage—and worse, the curtain across it. As soon as they hit the blazing-red fabric, it truly became blazing, with red, orange, and yellow flames sending it up in a fiery veneer. Numerous other small fires started up as the candles fell to the wooden surfaces of Peeker's Peak.

Grunting but still functioning, the Gravedigger sat up and set his revolver's sights on the harpy, ready to empty all five remaining chambers, if he had to. It turned out he wouldn't have to; amidst the shattered chair-pieces and the limbs of the chandelier, the Gravedigger could see

that Ismênê had managed to snap her neck in the fall, her head lolling awkwardly on the floor—much like Jason's still was, up in that room—and her eyes had rolled up in their sockets, her teeth bared in a deathly snarl.

The moment of victory was short-lived; an enraged screech came from on high. The Gravedigger's head spun about and he looked up to the second floor, where green-eyed Daphne stood hanging over the railing before room 4. She was nude, her tanned skin bare for all to see, a sight most in the place would love to behold if not for the unnatural coat of blood covering her ample chest. The sticky red fluid painted her chin and lips, as well. Her face was twisted in a mask of rage and despair, her stare shifting from the dead Ismênê to the Gravedigger.

She howled out words that the Gravedigger didn't understand, but he could tell by the force with which they were spat out that she was giving a damnable command of some sort. And he knew what was about to happen.

Whirling his head back around to look up above the stage and at the walkway of the third floor, he saw the doors to rooms 21 and 22 opening. Out stepped the giant Barbara and the buxom Rhea, likewise nude and some poor soul's lifeblood on their well-shaped bodies. Each peered down, saw their dear Ismênê crushed and broken, and then glared at the Gravedigger. Together, they leapt over the walkway, and in a matter of seconds of their free-fall, their own transformations had begun and been completed. Their luscious skin became gray and old-looking, their arms extended and grew feathers from nothingness, and their faces and feet changed into the beaked maws and clutching claws of birds. Together, the shape-shifters glided down to strike out at the Gravedigger, screaming those awful screams of fury.

Rhea, her once prodigious chest now wrinkled bags of sagging flesh, swooped in first, her claws coming down and glinting. The Gravedigger rolled to the left and tumbled off of the roulette table and onto the floor, right as the Rhea-creature's talons pierced into the wood of the table. They went in deep, and she instantly began flapping her wings and tugging her legs up, trying to wedge herself free from the table and get back to the assault.

The Barbara-creature, meanwhile, changed trajectory at the last second, trying to swipe out at the Gravedigger as she pulled to her right and came in low. The angle was too off, and her claws didn't even come within three feet of him before she was pulling back up and flying around, circling for another go at him as he stood up.

As the inferno of the curtain over the stage blazed higher and hotter, rising gradually up

to the second floor walkway above, the Gravedigger spared a moment to choose which of the creatures to shoot. He decided to take a shot at Rhea, who had one foot free and was close to having the other back. He put two shots into her chest, the force of them pounding through her chest with a force that knocked her back and off the table. She landed in a heap, knocking over some of the gaming tables and their chairs with her big, flailing wings.

A screech came from behind him, and the Gravedigger had only halfway turned about when he saw a monstrous Daphne flying in towards him. He could see that those jade eyes were nothing like they once had been, pupils big and black, wide with carrion's hunger. He managed to duck and she swooped over him in a rush of feathers and wind. When he stood again, he realized he'd been duped—the Barbara-creature had circled around and saw her chance, and she was heading right for him. Before he could react, she kicked him with staggering might, cutting at his coat and knocking him up into the air and flinging him backwards.

He flew through the air, himself—for a brief moment, at least. His back crashed over a poker table and he did a back flip onto the floor. He landed hard on his stomach, the wind knocked out of him all of a sudden. Lying there, he heard the crackling of flames as the smaller fires throughout the place grew larger, some finding their way to the pools of liquor and glass that had been dropped in haste, now fuel for the literal fire. Soon, the entire place would be ablaze. But rising above the noise of the flames were the frantic shouts and screams of the men and the prostitutes who were still in the place, their cries of terror mixing with the sound of stamping feet as they all rushed for the doors out of the establishment. Of all the voices, only one came to the Gravedigger's ears as actually forming words.

"No!" someone not so far away was shouting in dismay. "You weren't supposed to do this! Stop it! Stop!"

Pushing himself up onto his hands and knees, the Gravedigger turned his head and saw Alexandros Dukas leaning helplessly against the wall, palms held tight to the wall and a look of utter, sad amazement on his face. His eyes took in the fires and the harpies that were destroying what he'd worked so hard and paid so much for. Getting onto one knee, the Gravedigger saw the Daphne-creature cease her circling to hover over Dukas, glaring at the man with a ferocious grin—or what passed for one on her weird, beak-like mouth.

While the Barbara-creature swept over a crowd, cutting at their throats out of sheer bloodlust, Daphne laughed out a foreign word of mockery to Dukas. Then she turned her

attention back to the Gravedigger, who was back on his feet and aiming his revolver at her forehead. He fired, but she was too quick, ducking and rushing in at him, battering him with one of her wings and knocking him aside.

This time he was launched up and over the bar. He slammed into a shelf of booze, breaking the bottles. He fell behind the bar and a hail of glass and drops of alcohol drizzled him. His body, durable and used to severe injury, ached like a son of a bitch now. He knew he would heal, assuming he could survive this attack. He just had to survive it, and that was looking more and more like a long-shot. But as he fought to sit up and get back into the fight, he caught sight of something beneath the bar's counter.

A mean looking coach gun leaned in a hollow beneath the counter-top, its black, double-barreled-self begging to be used now. The Gravedigger felt a surge of renewed action and holstered his revolver for the moment. He crouched close to the hollow, grabbing hold of the coach gun with vigor. He popped it open and smiled at the sight of two shells resting there, ready for use. Maybe he'd underestimated the Peak's security tactics, after all.

He closed it once more and positioned it in his arms, finger on the first of the double triggers, set to pop up and take aim at whichever of the harpy-whores was nearest.

Judging by a sudden screech from the other side of the bar, one of them was closing in on his position, ready to leap over and tear him apart. He wouldn't give the thing the opportunity; he bolted up and whirled around, bringing the gun to bear. It was pointed directly at the face of the Barbara-creature, which was leaning over the bar, intent on toying with him before she killed him. Her joy in playing with her food switched to instant fear as she stared straight down the two barrels.

He pulled the trigger and her head was gone, simple as that.

As her headless, giant body tumbled to the floor, a mist of blood and skull-bits hung in the air. Through it, the Gravedigger saw the Daphne-creature rounding on him with a maddening shriek. She turned sharply in mid-air, fury overtaking her inhuman face, and she began to dive down.

The Gravedigger turned the coach gun up in her direction, timing his shot, aiming for her chest as she drew closer. He gave a pull on the second trigger and the shot tore through the air. It connected with her right wing, blowing a gaping hole in the skin, feathers, and cartilage of the appendage. She cried out in pain and tumbled straight down, her power of flight stolen in a bang

of buckshot. She crashed onto the floor with a mighty thump and stayed there.

The Gravedigger dropped the coach gun, its usefulness over with. He hopped over the bar, landing on the other side and drawing his revolver yet again. He spared a quick glance at the state of Peeker's Peak as he stepped closer to the fallen harpy. The second and third floors were enveloped in flames, the hard smell of smoke overpowering the nose. The stage looked like a gateway to hell, the curtain in blazing tatters and the arch of its outline a maw of red and orange madness. The chairs before it and the chandelier were fully alight, Ismênê's remains along with them. The fires were quickly spreading over all the gaming tables and to Rhea's corpse, and the blaze was heading for the entrance area and the bar of the floor level. Nothing would save Peeker's Peak from burning to its foundations. Looking off to his right, the Gravedigger saw that all but Dukas—at least the one's who'd not been slain by Barbara's random outburst of ripping and rending—had rushed outside; the businessman was now heading out the doors, with one more quick glance back towards the Daphne-thing.

The Gravedigger turned back to Daphne. He stopped a few feet away from her, his gun held at his hip and trained on her. The harpy was groaning and grunting with effort to get back up and fight with whatever strength she had left. She turned to face him, looking up at him with eyes that shone with hatred and defiance. She spat out some foreign curse and then launched herself at him, her beak and teeth snapping out with one last, desperate lunge of revenge. The Gravedigger fired off his last three shots, bullet-holes trailing up from her gut, into her chest, and the last into her neck, sending her falling back a few feet and into the spreading fire, which roared over her and claimed her twisted form.

The Gravedigger holstered his revolver and turned back around, heading for the doors as the fire followed at his heels. He walked out onto the veranda, slowing at the sight of the couple dozen people who stood outside, watching as Peeker's Peak burned. The rest had long since gathered up their horses and lit off to as far away as they could get from this place, aching to leave the horrid sights behind them, unsure if they had even seen what they'd seen, but not wanting to find out for certain. The ones who remained were mostly workers and prostitutes, either too stupid to simply flee or too intrigued at what became of the four strange creatures and the man who'd provoked their ire. One of these people still hanging about was Dukas, his eyes and mouth wide with sorrow and shock as his livelihood and claim to fame was destroyed.

Looking at the well-dressed man, something struck the Gravedigger, a memory of what

Dukas' reaction had been to the harpies.

"You knew. . ." the Gravedigger said as he drew closer to Dukas. The foreign man's look of surprise and horror automatically fell into a fake, incredulous mask of innocence. He held his hands out before him in a pleading fashion, his cane out of his hands, no doubt dropped and burning somewhere back inside the establishment. He took a few steps back as the Gravedigger approached, but the latter closed the distance with deft speed, grabbing hold of the businessman's lapels. "You knew!" the Gravedigger hissed, shaking the man furiously back and forth, goading out an admittance. "You knew what those things were!"

"N-no . . ." the rich man stammered, his haughty air abandoned for a coward's blundering excuses. "I . . . I d-didn't . . . couldn't have . . ."

The Gravedigger released a hand from Dukas' blue coat and pulled out his revolver. He stuck the barrel up and under Dukas' chin, cocking the hammer with a threatening click. Of course, the chambers were empty, but Dukas didn't know that. As a man who dealt in gambling, it would be interesting to see if he fell for the bluff.

He folded. The story cascaded out of his mouth like tainted water.

"Okay! Yes, yes, I knew! I . . . I knew they were those damned things!" He paused, thinking of how he could save his skin by sharing his knowledge and original run-in with the four beasts. "They . . . they made me! I had to keep quiet! I'm a traveling man, an adventurous man! I came across them on an island in . . . in my homeland. I had heard stories of them, all my people have, but I n-never believed they were real. Their cave—it was full of bones! They'd eaten men! They'd have eaten me, too! B-but . . . I bartered with them! I offered them my wealth, my resources. I said I could bring them to America—give them a new home, a better one, and they could . . . they could . . ."

"Taste American dining," the Gravedigger finished, thinking of how Jason's throat had been rent open and eaten by the *Ismênê*-creature. Dukas shrugged his shoulders, unwilling to describe the killing and eating of people in any other fashion.

"I . . . brought them here, on a ship. They'd work for me, and they . . . could do what they do." The man's voice was falling more and more silent until the last words were a mere whisper. "Please, I had no choice! Can't you see? I had . . ."

"A chance to take what you could from men when they were alive, and then everything you couldn't when they were dead. How much more could you have made selling their horses,

their clothing?" The Gravedigger paused, thinking of how not all carrion's were winged. "A businessman like you must have seen the profits."

Dukas said nothing, his eyes narrowing and looking down at the gun jammed under his chin, waiting for a bullet to be fired. He whined, a man left with nothing now but his guilt and the ghost of his greed. If there had been a bullet in the chamber, the Gravedigger would be half-tempted to use it. But no; no wasting of lead on Dukas' ilk.

The Gravedigger stuck his gun back in its holster, much to Dukas' relief, but then he grabbed hold of the foreign man tightly about his neck and began dragging him along. No one tried to stop the scene; the one's who'd stayed and finally seen and heard enough turned away, rushing off to the stables for their horses. Dukas whined and grunted as he was hauled over to the porch of Peeker's Peak. Pulling him up the steps, the Gravedigger stopped in the doorway of the establishment. Inside, all was fire, the flames having covered everything and everywhere, the place held up by its fading timber.

The Gravedigger gave a yell and threw Dukas into the Peak. The man screamed in pure horror as he fell to the fiery floor and became enveloped by the flames, rolling and screaming and dying painfully within the hellish element. Moments later, he'd fallen still and silent, and the brain behind Peeker's Peak was gone. Soon, its body would collapse in on his ashes.

The Gravedigger stepped off the porch, moving swiftly over to the stables and listening to the rising inferno behind him. His was the only horse still in there, staring at him expectantly from his single stable. "No need for that," the Gravedigger said to his blood-bay, looking at his old shovel. "No bodies left to bury this time."

Jason. Dukas. The four creatures. The others who'd been slaughtered. Ashes to ashes and all that business. There was nothing left for the Gravedigger to do.

Mounting his steed, the Gravedigger urged it out of the stables. The horse gave an excited whinny as it laid its sight on the towering blaze of Peeker's Peak. Horse and rider paused to watch as the grand sign of the establishment tumbled down, the roof caving in and crashing with a flurry of embers and smoke. After that, the Gravedigger had seen enough. He coaxed his horse in a south-east direction, and the horse took him that way.

He rode on.

Serenidad

The deserts of Mexico . . .

Smoke rose up in a haze, wafting and swirling about in the chilled night air. Its wispy tendrils reached up to the star-filled sky above, coalescing and hanging in a gray screen that blocked out the light of those oh-so distant pinpoints. It skewed and covered the world before his eyes—all the better to reach a world his mortal eyes could not glimpse.

Setting his lips back to his pipe, Severo took another draw from his special concoction. The mix of peyote and ground human femur was gradually working its literal magic. He drew it into his chest, holding it in with eyes closed, letting it fill him in his cross-legged position of meditation. He focused, calmed himself, and felt his thinking mind slowly slip aside while his feeling spirit took over. He opened his eyes and exhaled, watching the smoke as it rose and hung across his vision once more. He continued whispering the words his father had taught him as a *niño*, and which he would teach his progeny one day to keep the line of the *brujo* in existence.

Once more, he reached out to the dark god that could supply him with his vengeance upon the people of Serenidad.

It was terrible enough that his ancestors had been all but wiped out by foreigners carrying crosses and muskets centuries ago, the lessons of *brujeria* disappearing in the wake of those righteous conquerors; it was another matter entirely to be an outcast from his own people and village, who had turned their backs on their blood, their heritage—on him. They'd abandoned the craft and shunned him for his devotion to the forces that they refused to understand and use. Blame for their various misfortunes had fallen to him, though only half of these had indeed been caused by his magic, and only when his neighbors roused his ire. Strange turns in the weather, sicknesses that struck them, miscarriages in the wombs of their women—for this and more he had been thrust out of his home, chased off like some lanky, begging mongrel. Forced to live alone in the forsaken dunes, the seed of hatred had spread its vines into his already dark heart, and he would wet them with the blood of those who'd betrayed him. However, his grasp of the dark arts was not yet tight enough, his abilities limited; he would need aid to bring about the wanton punishment he so desired. And he could yet have the aid—if only he could reach *him* . . .

He drew from the pipe again. Breathed out. Whispered the words. Let the anger in his soul speak as loudly as his incantations.

He opened his eyes. The haze was now a dense fog that was reshaping his sight, shifting the world, bringing him into a realm that few still-breathing souls had seen and much less desired to. As the smoke dissipated, he knew he had been summoned to the underworld. The sand and dirt beneath him had become cold, black stone. The starry sky was now a cavernous chamber that loomed over him, comprised of dirt and shadow. And before him, on a throne of bones, sat the god of death and lord of the underworld, Mictlantecuhtli. His frail, skeleton-like frame belied his otherworldly might, and his godly eyes stared at Severo from a stern, skull-painted face.

Before Severo could muster up words to say to the ancient being, the dark god addressed him, saying that the *brujo's* wishes of punishment had been heard and would be fulfilled—in exchange for the sorcerer's lasting service to his new master's will, and that of his descendants, as well, until their bloodline had drained away and their spirits rested with the dead. Severo readily and joyously agreed to such terms.

Then, Mictlantecuhtli told the mortal of what was to follow. The dark lord's words pleased Severo.

With the deal struck and the forces of the great beyond set into motion, the fog washed over Severo again; when it was gone, he'd been returned to the mortal plane, where he sat outside his tent. Beside him, something was stirring itself up from the sands.

Severo looked down to see a lizard clawing its way from out of the earth—perhaps from the very underworld itself. Its scales were of black and orange, its eyes a dreadful, impossible red. It flicked its tongue at him in greeting. A moment later, two more peeked out of the earth beside their comrade. Then two more, then even more.

Each stared at Severo, watching and waiting, eyes of red looking upon the mortal whose revenge they would see to fashioning soon enough.

The next day, in the desert . . .

The sun beat down from a partly-clouded sky, bathing the Mexican desert in golden light. The simmering heat of mid-day cast shimmers and waves in the near distance, looking like a translucent ocean churning just above the horizon. Bits of brush and sprouting cacti broke from the yellow-red ground here and there, but it seemed that the further one went into the territory, the more the vegetation gave way to pure, unwelcoming earth.

The Gravedigger's blood-bay took a nip at a branch of a prodigious bush as master and horse passed it by, perhaps out of some hunger, more likely out of boredom. The Gravedigger gave a chuckle and an appreciative pat on his steed's neck. Their ride had been a long one, and could be longer yet. Their query had been elusive.

They'd crossed into Mexican territory three days ago, and had begun the hunt for the now notorious Diego Valdez another two before that. Word of the outlaw had first reached the Gravedigger's ears weeks before, as it had to most of the nation's—Valdez had quickly made his presence known through the states since his arrival in the country mere months ago. The man had gone from being an unknown traveler to one of the country's most wanted in short time, and with numerous deeds to his spoiled name. The foreigner had been linked to several killings, a botched bank robbery in Fillmore—capital of the Utah territory—contributing a fair number to the tally. Since he'd been spotted fleeing, wanted posters with his likeness had been circulating

the territories; not long after, a slew of stories all across the west began popping up of a Mexican man with long, black hair and a cleft lip matching Valdez's description. He'd since been linked to incidents of rape and murder throughout multiple towns, the patterns showing that he was heading south again.

It was in the Arizona Territory where the Gravedigger heard that Valdez had been spotted crossing back into Mexico, only days before. A traveling postman had regaled his sighting of the outlaw to a crowd in a nameless township, the Gravedigger being one of the listeners. The postman believed—and the Gravedigger agreed with this—that Valdez was no doubt seeking shelter in his home country. The way the Gravedigger heard it, the U.S. Marshals who had been pursuing the outlaw with dogged determination would be forced to give up the search; they held no jurisdiction or right to hunt down a Mexican national in his own country. And any chance that the United States government could count on the Mexican government's aid in capturing him was highly unlikely; Mexico had its own conflict to worry about, the Liberals and the Conservatives engaging in their own civil war. The Liberals, even though they had the United States' aid and support, would not deign to hunt for a criminal who had crossed back through and would no doubt hole up in Conservative territory. Even American bounty hunters, who would go to the ends of the earth for the sake of a reward, wouldn't be inclined to follow Valdez if they should get caught up in the conflict. With tempers flaring and the fate of the Mexican nation in the balance, American sentiments would not be met kindly when it came to a single outlaw.

The Gravedigger, however, was no lawman—not by title or bestowment of a star, anyways. He sought no reward for Valdez's capture or death, the latter paying more according to the wanted posters, and he wasn't to be held back by the raging politics of any people, nor for any reason. No; he felt that Valdez, with the numerous deaths attached to his name, was just the sort of man whose grave should be dug by his shovel. A hunt for the outlaw was a chance to apply his trade and his revolver to good use.

With that, the Gravedigger was off, a wanted poster stuffed into his coat pocket and the search for Valdez on its way. It was certainly a long-shot, finding and following the killer's trail through Mexico, but the man was distinct enough in his features that the Gravedigger hoped a little asking around and flashing of the poster would resonate with the people of one town or another. The problem thus-far was that in the past three days, and in the five towns and tiny villages the Gravedigger passed through, there had been no sight of the outlaw. The Gravedigger

had believed every person he asked when they shook their head while looking at the poster or who said no when he asked if they'd heard of Valdez. Conservative or not, they had no knowledge of the man.

So, it was back to rambling through the desert and finding others to question. Back to shimmering horizons and trudging across yellow-red miles under a hot sun.

The blood-bay gave a groan of apparent dissatisfaction that rumbled through his body. The Gravedigger gave another reassuring pat on its neck. "We'll stop come nightfall," he spoke to the horse. "But we'll be back at it again tomorrow. On to the next village, if we ever find one."

They kept on moving, and the sun kept on shining.

Meanwhile . . .

At noon, the people of Serenidad bore witness to the sight of soldiers entering their humble village. Much of the people's work and the children's play came to a pause as the procession of gun-toting and saber-wielding men came riding down their dirt pathways.

The citizens gazed at the eight men, sitting atop their horses and in their blue-black uniforms, and they wondered at the far filthier one walking in tow behind the soldiers, his wrists in chains. Several horses without riders trotted alongside them, but not one was offered to the man among them who was obviously a prisoner. One of the horses towed along a hefty weapon the likes of which few had seen before; it was a gun, of sorts, with a collection of long barrels fashioned together and perched atop an axle drawn along by two wagon-wheels. The barrels had a crank behind them, allowing for rapid-fire assault. It was a crude machine, highly experimental; the design had been secretively nabbed and adjusted from plans conceived by an American man by the name of Gatling. It had yet to be used in battle by these Conservatives, and its capabilities were in question, but the simple sight of it certainly made the citizens of Serenidad halt and take notice.

The place had a full understanding of and history with military-men. Serenidad had originated as an outpost for invading Spaniards decades ago, a minor base of operation established for housing troops, stocking supplies, and holding the occasional prisoner. After the

conquistadors had abandoned it, the native people claimed it as their own, building their own meager huts and adobe households around the outpost. They named it Serenidad, hoping to lead simple and happy lives that embraced the place's namesake, and generations had since lived and died there in relative ease. At the center of the village stood a two story church, the largest edifice Serenidad could boast and a place of worship and meditation for those who had accepted Catholicism and its God—which was most, since the village now lay within a Conservative state. The Spanish conquistadors—whose devotion to their faith had only been matched by their need to show power—erected a modest jailhouse a short distance from the church. Three cells of iron, each without cots and large enough to hold a few grown men, had served to contain the ruffian and troublemaking natives who rejected Spanish rule. The jail had since fallen into disuse.

The soldier at the head of the procession, with his officious shoulder pads and a chest clad in a handful of glimmering medals, called his troop to a stop in the middle of the street. They halted right before the entrance of the church, each of the soldiers and their prisoner staring out at the villagers who were gradually meandering about them. The villagers all took time to observe the troop, save for one man who had wandered into the village only hours ago; with the arrival of the soldiers, the man with the long black hair and the cleft lip took it as an opportunity to slip away unnoticed. With that, Diego Valdez headed further south, no one wiser as to who he was or why he had passed through.

Meanwhile, a member of the village—a wood-worker of noticeable age—stepped forward from the growing crowds. He stood before the lead soldier, who stayed upon his horse while the others dismounted. Staring down at the old wood-worker with a profound look of authority, the soldier gave a brief nod.

"Captain Hector Asturias," he said, speaking his name and rank with a tone of bland officiousness. "Officer and representative of the Conservative Mexican Army."

The wood-worker gave the captain a forced smile and a greeting of his own. Military types made most of Serenidad's citizens uneasy, no matter which political party they fought for. The wood-worker glanced behind the captain, back to the man in shackles, who stood staring at the ground while two corporals stood at his side, bayoneted rifles in hand.

"And who is he, *señor*? If I may ask . . ."

"Manuel Morales," the captain answered, a sneer twisting his lips as he spoke. "Perhaps you've heard of him."

The wood-worker had not, and said as much.

"He is a Liberal and a spreader of propaganda," the captain began to explain. "He has made and spread posters and pamphlets which have dared to defame and critique the efforts of the Conservative party. Quite the nuisance. We've been ordered to capture him and bring him before President Miguel Gregorio de la Luz Atenógenes Miramón y Tarelo himself, who will see to making an example of him for all of Mexico to see. We've tended to the first part of our duty, and now we're on our journey back home to tend to the last."

The captain paused, letting his authoritative tone and words sink into the old man's mind. The wood-worker gave another uncertain smile and nodded, urging the captain to continue.

"We've travelled far, and have many miles yet to go." Asturias glanced towards his men. "I request food and water for my men, and lodging with which we may spend the night."

For a request, it sounded much like a guaranteed demand. The wood-worker, who had apparently become the middle-man between the soldiers and the citizens of Serenidad, felt compelled to nod and give the entirety of the village's agreement. "Yes, of course, Captain. We will accommodate you."

The captain gave a curt nod and asked of more. "We also require a fairly fortified area with which we may hold our prisoner. Have you such lodging?"

The old man once again agreed, pointing a thumb to the old jail as he detailed it to the soldier. The captain gave another polite nod and turned his attention away from the wood-worker.

"Bring the prisoner forth, men!"

The troop moved as one over to the jailhouse, the two looking after Morales giving him a shove forward. His chains rattled and his mouth opened in silent protest, but the way they grasped their rifles staid his admonishments. He trudged ahead, eyes once again downcast. The wood-worker went back to the pockets of Serenidad's citizens, spreading the word and telling them of the Conservatives, their demands and needs, and then seeing to their fulfillment. The village immediately went about clearing households for the soldiers to rest in and gathering food and drink for them. As the crowds dissipated and went about their tasks, the soldiers entered the

jailhouse with Morales, leaving their horses and their astounding weapon outside with a lone guard to keep watch.

A young boy no older than eight stood barefoot in the street, staring across the way at the guard. The youth was entranced by the red and gold trim of the man's uniform, the way the other villagers looked at him and his comrades with respect, and even a little fear. Lost in his admiration, the boy failed to notice the stirring of the sand beside his foot. It wasn't until a jabbing pain shot through his tiny foot, forcing out a cry, that he bothered to look down. An orange and black scaled lizard had burrowed out of the earth and taken a nip at him.

Whimpering lightly as blood beaded from the wound, the boy recoiled from the lizard and scampered off to find his mother. As he ran, he prayed to God that it had not been a venomous creature.

The lizard flicked its tongue, tasting the iron of the blood. Then it crawled back into the earth, hiding under the streets of Serenidad.

It was not the only one of its kind lying in wait.

The next day . . .

Though the Gravedigger did not need rest like most normal men, he took their nightly respite to catch up on some sleep. As dawn approached and he awoke, he wished he hadn't. Dreams of countless miles and hails of gunfire and dreaded screams and dying cries—ones he'd heard long ago, and which repeated themselves in nightly visions—melded into a cacophonous six hours of mock rest.

He'd stirred his blood-bay to wake, and the two continued on their journey before half of the day's sun had risen over the eastern horizon. He continued heading south, further into the country. Though it was still quite warm, the skies were cloudy enough that the sun only occasionally peeked from behind them with its burning rays. Humid, yes, but a damned sight better than it had been in the past week. If nothing else, the scenery afforded some greater variation as he went along. The simple desert dunes and hills gave way to odd rock formations and fissures, here and there. Far, far off to the west, the very tips of the Sierra Madre crept up

into the sky, their expansive heights and stretching length looking only like the size of an inchworm from this distance.

After ascending a rocky hill, just before the hour struck noon, the Gravedigger finally caught sight of a village. From atop the hill, he could see a smattering of buildings that still lay perhaps two to three miles off. They were barely discernible, for the most part, their adobe structures the same orange-red color of the dirt that they had no doubt been formed from; however, one building in particular stood out from his vantage point, one of white stone and with a church's tower and spire rising from it.

The blood-bay shook its head, whipping its black mane about and giving a whiny of what the Gravedigger took for excitement. Apparently its keen eyes had also spotted the village, and it knew that a village meant some rest. The horse increased its speed a fraction more without its rider's urging, its trudge becoming a trot. The Gravedigger—in an ironic, metaphoric sense—gave his steed the reins as it quickly closed the miles from the hill to the outskirts of the village.

The Gravedigger steeled himself, honing his thoughts in only the way that men of action can when the possibility of violence draws near. The weight of the revolver holstered about his hip became more noticeable as the image of Diego Valdez came to mind. If the outlaw were by chance in the village, he'd be ready to call him out and take him down—and if not, than he'd be ready to show off his crinkled wanted poster to all the bystanders he could and ask his tired questions.

He entered the village, peering about for signs of life. There were none, at least not immediately.

No one ambled about, completing chores or visiting with neighbors, and no one was glancing at him from doorways or opened windows. He passed by a corral of goats and two full chicken coops, neither group of animals being tended to or looked after. The wide-open doors of a meager shed revealed only tools inside, no workers; a hoe lay in the threshold, its handle oddly shattered in two. A child's doll lay upon a spread blanket in front of a household, going uncared for. No gossip-obsessed, paranoid codgers came out to greet or question him, the white stranger who'd entered their quaint village. Indeed, not a single voice came to the Gravedigger's ear, not even the muffled utterances of people nestled away in their households. At only mid-day, the place should have been a bustle of people going about their lives. However, it seemed abandoned.

The Gravedigger spotted something quite out of place, giving an abrupt tug of the blood-bay's reins and urging the horse to halt. The bay gave a huff of surprise, jarred by the pull of the reins, but it stopped all the same. The Gravedigger glared down at the earth before them.

The dirt in the middle of the street was covered by a patch whose red hue was deeper than the rest of the sand around it—a stain of bloody red.

The Gravedigger dismounted quickly, whispering at his steed to stay put. He inched forward to the bloodied earth, a cautious hand beside his revolver. Taking slow steps and with his eyes darting off to the sides, looking for threats, he came to a stop at the edge of the stain. It was blood, alright, as the Gravedigger had seen plenty of it wet the earth in the past. And it had been shed within very recent hours: the darkened earth had absorbed much of the liquid, turning it to a muddied patch of muck which still had some wetness to it, but which was drying quickly under the sun. The blood had pooled into a large circular pattern, as large as a wagon wheel, and was relatively uniform, save for an edge where the dirt had been clawed at and smudged, like paint under a brush. Something had been dragged from this spot.

The Gravedigger eyed a subtle path traced through the dirt, following where that something—which looked to have been the size and weight of a grown man—had been carried off to. The disturbed dirt—also lightly darkened and flecked by blood—stretched from the stain, across the street, and straight to the threshold of an adobe home off to the Gravedigger's left. A hint of red at the doorway caught his attention, and he moved closer towards the household, keeping that slow, wary step. Peering down at the edge of the entryway, only a few inches from the ground, the Gravedigger saw four bright red streaks smearing the orange-brown clay. They'd been made by a human hand whose bloodied fingers had desperately grabbed at the wall as the person was dragged, bleeding and dying, into the household.

The Gravedigger pulled out his revolver and thumbed back the hammer. The subtle turn of its cylinder was audible amidst the stillness of the village. He raised the gun to hip-level, aiming at the dark maw that was the unlit insides of the home, ready, waiting, peering into the shadows within.

A fierce whiny from the blood-bay made the Gravedigger spin about. The sand and dirt behind him was rising up, breaking apart and slipping off the form of something burrowing out of the ground. Something big. First, a head broke out of the earth, then shoulders, arms, and a torso. The Gravedigger spied a skin of black and orange covering the thing as it shook dust off of

its rough hide. With a hissing snarl, the thing was up and out of the hole it had dug and standing before the Gravedigger, slightly crouched and ready to attack.

The Gravedigger looked upon a beast that was half man, half lizard. Hairless and seemingly sexless, it was covered entirely in round, near-horizontal rows of orange and black scales. A reptile's face glared at him with slitted, angry eyes that were hauntingly human. It licked the air with a thin, long tongue that danced between sharp, stubby teeth. Hands whose fingers were thin and talon-like looked braced to slash and rend.

It had reared back one of those lethal hands and taken one quick step forward when the Gravedigger put a bullet through its hissing mouth. Scale chips and brain matter shot out the back of its skull and it fell dead to the ground.

From out of the shadows of the doorway behind him, another of the creatures leapt out, careening into the Gravedigger's back. It latched onto him as they tumbled forward and over the dead one. The Gravedigger landed with a grunt onto the ground, face to the dirt. The snarl in his left ear and the hot breath on the side of his neck told him the creature was set to sink its teeth into his throat, and he gave a forceful, wild jab of his elbow. The thing growled in pain and recoiled, and man and beast began rolling across the dirt, each tussling and flailing to get the better of the other.

The Gravedigger was able to pin the creature beneath him, his left forearm to its throat. Slobber and blood from a recent kill caked its reptilian lips, which were bared in a screech of hatred as it tried to bite at him again. Spittle flew up into the Gravedigger's face as he angled the barrel of the gun into its chest. A quick squeeze of the trigger sent a bullet through its heart and with a death-wheeze, its mouth and limbs fell slack.

The Gravedigger got back to his feet, a dead lizard-man to either side of him. He didn't have long to catch his breath, as another whiny from his horse drew his attention. A few yards away, his bay was turning about in circles in the middle of the street, rearing up on its back legs in fright. Three more of the scaly creatures had appeared and surrounded it, eyeing a larger kill and meal than the gunslinger could provide. They ducked in and out, trying to scratch and claw at the blood-bay, but its frantic turning and jarring kept them at a cautious distance. The Gravedigger advanced to help his steed, leveling his gun at the creatures. It was no use, though: they weren't still enough to get a bead on, and he could just as easily hit the horse.

One of the creatures leapt at the horse from behind, going for its legs; but the bay caught sight of it, and pitching forward, it kicked its legs out and back. The attacking creature was hit square in the chest and jaw, and it shot backwards through the air with the force of a canon volley. It crashed lifelessly through the wall of a wooden hut, disappearing from sight. The remaining two halted their assault and stared dumbfounded toward the hut. It was just the thing the Gravedigger needed to get off a clear shot.

The revolver sent a bullet flying into the nearest creature's back, a spurt of blood shooting out from its shoulder. With a screech it whirled around, facing him before charging. The Gravedigger's horse, meanwhile, turned around and bolted down the street, the other creature giving chase to the steed. The Gravedigger spared a quick shot at the thing, but missed. The horse turned a corner and was out of sight, its attacker following, and the Gravedigger could only hope that it would be alright—he had his own attacker to tend to. He aimed at the charging creature again, fired. It stumbled as it was hit in the gut, but it kept coming. The Gravedigger put another bullet in its throat, and it finally fell to the ground, gurgling to death on its own blood.

The Gravedigger dashed forward, looking to follow after his horse. He quickly came to a halt, though, for a little ways down the street, more of the creatures were appearing. A couple popped up out of the dirt, clawing their way to the surface; another lumbered out of a shed, looking about hungrily; another peeked out from the edge of an adobe home's roof, its odd shape and form stark against the blue of the sky above. Each set their sights to him. He aimed the revolver at one of the dirt-dwellers and pulled the trigger.

Nothing. The gun was empty. Cursing under his breath, the Gravedigger turned and bolted off.

He popped open the cylinder and set about slipping bullets from his belt into the chambers, reloading as he evaded the creatures that were now running close behind him. The further he ran into the village, the more he glimpsed scenes of carnage and rampant death.

The bodies of men, women, and children lay in the streets, sporting deep, pulpy wounds where their chests, stomachs, and faces should have been, some with their limbs torn clear off. A woman laid face-down in the dirt, cut down in mid-run and her arms around a lifeless bundle. Half a dozen men had fallen about each other, the simple farm tools they'd taken up arms with lying useless in their cold hands. A once majestic Azteca's thick neck had been all but chewed away, its body lying by a trough of red water. Blood had spurted and been smeared against walls,

wooden doors had been splintered from the intruding creatures. One lone hut was gradually burning away, a fire having erupted from within as smoke began to rise up into the air. The village and its awful sights could easily be mistaken for some hellish battlefield of a forsaken war-zone.

The Gravedigger had finally reloaded the chambers and smacked the cylinder shut. He cocked the hammer and turned, running backwards as he aimed. The four beasts were drawing closer, the nearest only an arm's length behind. He placed one shot into its forehead and its days of running after prey were through. He shot at another approaching from his right, the bullet going lower than intended and through the thing's left knee; it wasn't a killing blow, but the creature was out of the chase, all the same, writhing on the ground in rage.

The Gravedigger turned forward once more and rushed ahead, making a sharp left down the narrow gap of two adobe homes. As he popped out into the next street over, he turned back, aiming straight down the gap. One creature was halfway through it, the other just turning into it, skidding as it changed course. The Gravedigger fired at the front one, missing, and the lackey took the shot to its chest instead. It kept coming, though. The Gravedigger fired again, and this one hit the nearer target, straight through the thing's mouth, blowing off its jaw in a mist of bone, blood, and scales. It fell limp to the ground, and its comrade leapt over it with a reptilian roar.

The Gravedigger rushed down and across the street towards another row of homes, hoping for another narrow gap to catch the thing in and mow it down. But the remaining lizard-man was close behind him, huffing and hissing as it ran. He turned back around to fire. He'd barely completed an about-face before the creature jumped upon him. The force of it dashing into him sent the two falling back and through the wood door of a household, knocking it off its hinges.

The Gravedigger landed on his back with a groan, the rug spread across the boarded floor doing little to cushion the fall. Worse, the creature was quickly straddling him, gaining the advantage. It raised one of its clawed hands up high and brought it down in a swift slash. Its fingers tore into the Gravedigger's chest, through his vest and shirt and cutting the skin beneath. He gave a cry of pain as the beast raised its other hand to slash again. Its fingers glanced against his right cheek, cutting four close, bloody lines across the skin. It pummeled his chest and arms with closed fists before opening its claws again, intending to go for the throat this time. The Gravedigger gripped his gun tight and raised it up swiftly. He got the barrel under the thing's jaw

long enough to shoot, and the top of its head blew apart with a mixed sound of the gun's boom and the thing's brain splattering. It fell upon him, still and dead.

Grunting, feeling the ache of his back where it hit the floor and the pain of his sliced chest, the Gravedigger pushed and pulled the carcass off of him. It slipped aside to his left, freeing him. He sat up slowly, bits of the thing's face and brain matter clinging to and falling off his vest and coat. His senses were dazed but quickly coming back; he couldn't afford to let them wander, after all—there could easily be more of the blasted lizard-people out there. He had to fight.

As he got up onto one knee, a sound reached his ears. A slight, quiet one, but evident all the same. It was a dripping noise. He looked down at the dead creature. Blood was pouring out from its head like honey from a smashed comb. The blood was seeping between the floorboards, falling in drops down below. Into a cellar. As the Gravedigger listened to the *drip-drip-drip* of it, he heard something else: whimpering.

He stood up, grabbing hold of the rug's edge and hauling it up, sending the dead creature rolling away and tossing the cloth aside. A trap-door lay beneath, a rope handle sticking out for access. He grabbed hold of it and lifted the door up, gun at the ready and pointed down the short wooden stairway that led below.

From the dim orange light of their lantern, the Gravedigger saw a middle-aged man and woman huddled against the far dirt wall, and what looked to be a young boy cradled and hidden between them. They stared up at him, half in fright, half in hope.

The man motioned for the Gravedigger to come down, pointing a finger at the trap-door—*hurry up and close it*. The Gravedigger did exactly that, entering the cellar and lifting the hidden door up and over him. He shut it as tightly as it allowed. He moved down the steps gingerly as his eyesight adjusted to the dimness, taking care not to step where the creature's blood had fallen and spattered upon the wooden stairs.

As his sight grew sharper, he saw how crude and bare the cellar was. Dirt walls and a dirt floor, roughly hollowed out with dimensions of perhaps ten by ten by six feet, just barely deep enough for the Gravedigger to stand straight without his hat brushing the floorboards above. A couple of barrels sat in the far right corner, but otherwise, nothing but the people were in their secretive cellar.

The man had stood up, pointing to the others and whispering distraught words that the Gravedigger only partly understood. His knowledge of Spanish was shallow, but he could comprehend and speak a few choice words, and get the gist of others. The man was asking who he was, for starters. Before he could get an answer, though, the man was saying something about the woman—his wife—and the boy—his son—and what had happened to them. The Gravedigger understood words such as attack, running, and hiding, but the rest was too much for his knowledge of the language. The man repeatedly said something about "*los lagartos*," but the Gravedigger wasn't sure what it meant—he assumed the man was talking about the creatures. Then the man said something to the degree that the boy had been bitten by "*los lagartos pequeña*," and his hurried fear and excitement turned to a solemn stillness. The woman had begun crying, her quite moaning becoming outright sobs and heaves, and the man turned back to his family. The Gravedigger slowly followed him over to them.

The man whispered something gently to the woman, questioningly, as if convincing her. She shook her head, clutching the boy closer to her chest, his face hidden away in her bosom. The man whispered his words again, this time a bit more forcefully and with a stern yet loving hand set on her shoulder. She looked to the Gravedigger, to her husband, and then down at her boy. She released her tight grip and the boy rolled over, wheezing heavily and facing the ceiling.

The Gravedigger didn't know what to make of what he saw.

Even in the dim glow of the nearby lantern, he could tell that the boy was undergoing some sort of change. And a truly horrible one, at that. His skin was hardly skin anymore, but scales of a familiar black and orange patterning, his youthful face now the visage of some newly-hatched reptile. His arms were covered in scales, save for patches of human skin still in the inner forearm, and most of his little legs were equally covered. His feet had become sharply nailed, the toes all abnormally long and blackened. His short dark hair about his head was falling off, the strands covering his mother's clothes. If not for a small patch of hair on the back right of his skull, one would think the boy had been bald. Indeed, the only thing the boy's body could still claim as its own were the brown, human eyes that looked blankly up to the ceiling. In the time it took for the Gravedigger to note all of these horrendous changes, the boy's sick wheezing had become a more wet, animalistic hissing, and it was frightfully obvious to them all that the youth was becoming one of those creatures that were stalking and killing up above.

The man, with tears in his eyes and a terribly hoarse voice, turned back to the Gravedigger. He pointed to his boy's foot. He once more whispered something about being bitten. Then he fell silent, thinking. He looked down to the gun in the Gravedigger's hand. He pointed at it. Then he pointed to his son, looking up into the Gravedigger's eyes with forced resolve.

The Gravedigger understood the man's meaning as the mother began to cry once more. He looked at the boy—trembling, breathing heavily, and changing in his mother's arms. Becoming a monster. Becoming less and less of whom he once was. The Gravedigger met the man's eyes again. He nodded, gripping his revolver tightly, and the father nodded back.

Without warning, the boy gave an inhuman scream and leapt up, wrapping his arms around his mother's neck and biting deep into her throat with a sickening crunch of meat and cartilage.

The father shouted in shock and fell back against the wall in terror, and the Gravedigger was rooted where he stood by numbing disbelief. The mother let out a dismayed cry and swatted at the boy to no avail. Her scream gave way to a choking, wet gargle as the thing that had once been her son pulled back, ripping her throat out in a burst of blood. She slumped back against the wall, dead, eyes wide with painful dread. The boy rose up to his haunches and scurried closer to the Gravedigger, set to continue the attack. The Gravedigger lifted his revolver and shot the boy-creature in the head, and its wild screeching ceased.

All was silent in the cellar except for the man's moans of disgust and sorrow. He'd been a father and husband mere moments ago and now could claim neither. The Gravedigger looked to him, wanting to say some word of consolation, or apology, or anything. But he knew nothing would do, and so he said nothing.

The man's agony was short-lived, though. For as he leaned against the wall, another of the blasted creatures burst right through it, digging out a hole directly behind the man and clutching at its unwary prey. Its claws raked his face and throat, ripping them away as he desperately struggled and screamed a death-scream. The Gravedigger jumped at the sudden entrance and quickly fired at the beast. The bullet struck it straight in its eye and it died, its upper body hanging out from its hole in the wall, arms slack and head lolling. The man's body crumpled to the cellar floor, its nearly skinless face looking towards his dead family.

The Gravedigger stood there, surveying the carnage. Right before his eyes, another three souls had joined the death toll of Serenidad. He mourned them quickly, and then set to reloading his revolver. If there were more of those creatures out there—and surely there were—then they no doubt heard the gunfire and would come to investigate. Having more of the things bearing down upon him, trapped in the cellar with nowhere to run, would do him no good. He had to keep moving.

When the revolver was loaded, he climbed the steps and opened the trap-door. He spared one more glance at the forsaken family and let the door slam shut. He left their home and went out into the streets, ready for battle.

The Gravedigger slunk through the streets and alleyways, bracing himself against walls and doing the best he could to make himself small. He used the slanted rays of the sun and the shadows it cast to his covert advantage, hiding in the darkness as the yellow-orange orb began its gradual descent in the western sky.

He waited for another sighting of the creatures, another surprise attack, but none came. With every corner he turned, every step he stole, he expected to encounter one, to see one lurking in the dark of a now-ownerless home or see one rise from the very dirt that lay underfoot. The fact that he saw none at all was actually more disconcerting than if he had.

As he peered around a corner, he saw the front of the great white church he had spied riding into the village, with its stubby tower and cross-shaped spire rising high above the rest of the village. As striking a sight as the church was, it was what lay before it that held the Gravedigger's eye more.

Bodies lay in the town-square in the dozens. Most of them were human, several were horses, and some of them were the lizard-people. It looked like half of the village's inhabitants had fallen to their deaths here, before their place of worship. A little ways to the side of the church—before another larger, officious looking building—laid uniform-clad corpses that the Gravedigger knew to belong to the Mexican Army. Even from across the street, he could see how their blue-black uniforms had turned a noticeable brown; the fabric had since soaked up the blood from their numerous wounds. Though the dead soldiers and their rifles lay scattered about

the square, the bulk of them had fallen before the building nestled beside the church, clustered about a large gun-looking thing the Gravedigger had never seen before. The place had been their bastion in the midst of the fray—a fray they'd clearly lost.

The Gravedigger turned his sights back to the church and up to the tower. It sported a window or two on either side. A good vantage point to survey the town, perhaps even pick off the creatures with one of the soldier's rifles. A place to fortify and strike back. The best option of a bad situation.

The Gravedigger scanned the square, and satisfied that there weren't any lizard-people about, he bolted towards the church's entrance. As he leapt over and weaved through the maze of bodies, he nabbed one of the soldier's rifles, one with a trusty bayonet. As he reached the church, he skidded to a stop. He heard something through the sanctuary's open doorway: hissing and snarling. A lot of it, too. The creatures were in there. And it sounded like they were coming out.

Cursing, he turned around and dashed over to the nearest place of cover—the building with the weird weapon in front of it. The place may not have served the soldiers well, but perhaps he'd have better luck with it.

As he rushed inside, he came to a stop. He realized the place was a jailhouse, with half of its one room separated into three cells of iron bars. A soldier lay dead in the corner to his right, his face horrifically slashed, bloodied medals pinned to his still chest, and a pistol beside his limp hand. Off to the left and in the furthest cell was a lone man, locked inside and moaning in fear. He was bracing himself against the wall, far from the cage's door, where a child-sized lizard-creature was reaching through the bars. It was growling and clawing for him, forcing its face against the bars and gnashing its teeth.

Holstering his revolver, the Gravedigger grabbed hold of the rifle with both hands, thrusting the bayonet out before him. He rushed the creature and jabbed the bayonet into the side of its head. The blade pierced one temple and went straight through the other, taking it completely unawares. The thing gave a lurch of pain and its noise-making and clutching stopped. Pulling out the blade, the thing crumpled to the floor.

The man was off the wall and to the Gravedigger in an instant, his shaking hands wrapping around the bars in anxiousness. "*Gracias, señor!*" he said again and again. "Thank you!"

"Do you speak much English?" the Gravedigger asked.

"Yes," the man said, nodding vehemently. "Please, let me out! Those things . . ." He fell silent, his eyes wide and mouth agape.

"Are you sure?" the Gravedigger countered, looking over the cells and the wooden floor. "These bars may be the safest protection in the village—the only reason you're still alive."

The man looked downward, considering this, but shook his head. "Better to die out there than live in a cage."

The Gravedigger shrugged. "That's debatable. Where are the keys?"

The man stuck his arm through the bars and pointed to the dead soldier in the corner. "On him."

The Gravedigger moved to the soldier, looking out through the door and to the square as he did so. He saw a pack of the creatures skulking out of the church not far off. He quickly shut the door of the jailhouse before they caught sight of him. It was a simple wooden one; it wouldn't hold well if they discovered the two men were in there and if they had the mind to break it down to get to them, but any line of defense was still some defense. He then bent to the soldier, finding a ring of three keys looped about his belt. He grabbed them and moved back to the man's cell.

"What's your name?" The Gravedigger asked as he tried the first key. "And how'd you get in here, anyways?"

"My name is Manuel Morales," the man answered. "The soldiers claimed me as a prisoner. I'm a Liberal freedom-fighter, of sorts, and they're Conservatives. Well, were. . ."

The first key didn't work, and the Gravedigger tried the next. "What the hell happened here, Morales?"

Morales shook his head and shrugged, blinking in confusion. "I don't know. Hours after they locked me in here, I heard my guards talking about the villagers. Lizards. People in the town were being bitten by lizards." He paused, trying to make sense of it himself. "I heard a soldier say that the villagers were afraid of some mystic-man's magic—that *he* had somehow sent the lizards. Then things started happening. People fell ill. Then those . . . *things* . . . came from nowhere. Started killing the villagers."

The second key didn't work, either. The Gravedigger used the third. "Those creatures *are* the villagers. Some of them, anyways—they've been changed, somehow. The bitten were turned. All the others are dead."

The man's jaw dropped in perplexed disbelief. He swallowed hard after a moment and continued on. "They killed the villagers," he repeated. "Screams. I heard screams all through the night. Saw shadows creeping through the streets." He motioned to a small square window in the wall. "The soldiers tried to fight. But . . . they were slaughtered. Captain Asturias was killed. The others became afraid . . . tried to escape the village. They were going to leave me."

The Gravedigger turned the key and felt the lock shift. He grabbed one of the cell door's bars and opened it, its hinges giving a squeak. Morales was out of his prison in an instant, stepping past the Gravedigger and nervously pacing about.

"I saw them die," Morales continued, speaking more to himself than the Gravedigger. "I thought I'd die with them, cut down and . . . Or I thought I'd die slowly, kept in that cell with nothing to eat or drink . . . How terrible! The screams . . ."

The man swayed as if he were about to faint, but he held his bearings. He shook his head as though clearing cobwebs and remnants of nightmares from it. He looked to the Gravedigger, pointing at his chest. "One of them clawed you," he pointed out rather off-handedly.

The Gravedigger glanced down at where the one lizard-man had attacked him. He only now noticed the four long, diagonal tears stretched across his vest and shirt, the red of his blood lost against their dark brown-black fabric. Underneath, where the claws had scratched his skin, he felt no pain—could, in fact, feel the wounds closing and healing rapidly as only his body could muster. And as Morales pointed out his chest rather than his clawed face, the marks upon his cheek must have already healed to the point of being hardly noticeable; but he felt no need to inform Morales of such oddities.

"Just a scratch," he said to the Mexican man.

Morales nodded, looking about more. When he again focused on the Gravedigger, he gave a shrug of his shoulders. "Now what do we do?"

"We fight," the Gravedigger said. He moved across the room to a window looking out on the town square. Peering through the glass, he saw that the creatures from the church were kneeling by the numerous corpses and biting at their limbs, gnawing at their torsos, eating them. A few more lumbered out from the shadows of the church to join the feeding; with their addition, the Gravedigger counted at least a dozen of the creatures out in the square.

"Fight? *Joder!*" Morales said it with mounting doubt and alarm. "Fight those things? How? They slaughtered the whole village, and you hope to fight them? We're two against . . . Well, we don't even know how many of them there are!"

The Gravedigger pulled away from the window and stepped up to Morales. The Mexican shrank back a little as he spoke.

"We know that there are a good number of them out there, right this instant, with their attention on their kills and hunger on their minds rather than attack."

". . . And how does that bode well for us?"

"We can take them by surprise. With whatever that thing is out there." The Gravedigger pointed out the window. Morales followed his finger, out to where the Conservative soldier's big, experimental weapon sat.

"Do you have any idea how to operate it?" Morales asked, a very slight rise of hope in his words.

"No," the Gravedigger said honestly, "but there's no better time to learn. If we can catch those things unawares, get them into that gun's line of fire, than we can at least take out a fair number of them."

"And if they overtake us, like they did the soldiers?"

"You said it yourself: better to die out there than live in a cage." The Gravedigger waved a hand about the jailhouse, emphasizing his point.

Morales frowned. "My words always get me into trouble."

The Gravedigger went back to the dead soldier, picking up his pistol from off the floor. He slapped it into Morales' hand. He thrust the bayoneted rifle into his other. The man looked at both in doubt.

"Our plan—such as it is—is that you cover me while I try and work that big gun out there," the Gravedigger said. "Try and stay quiet; right now, they're so focused on their food that they shouldn't notice us until we start firing. If we get the gun working, you try and get the ones that dodge out of its field of fire. Use the pistol first, then the rifle, if need be. If it doesn't work . . . well, run like hell back into here and we'll deal with whatever comes next."

Morales didn't answer; he just stared at the guns in his hands.

"I thought you said you were a freedom-fighter?" the Gravedigger said, wondering at why Morales looked so afraid of the weapons.

"Of sorts, I said," Morales answered. He looked into the Gravedigger's eyes meekly. "I fight with my words and my ideas, not with guns."

The Gravedigger stared at him. "Well, words won't put these bastards down. Time to start shooting lead rather than shooting your mouth."

Morales looked abashed, but only for a moment. Whatever acts he had seen these lizard-people commit made him clutch the guns with a decided readiness to use them. He slung the rifle's strap about his shoulder, letting it hang there. He switched the pistol to his left hand, liking the feel of it there over his right. He gave a nod, waiting for the Gravedigger to call their next move.

"Alright then," the Gravedigger sighed, moving to the jailhouse door. "Cover me." With that, he thrust open the door and the two rushed, albeit quietly, out into the square. They covered the few yards from the doorway to the strange, large weapon with their eyes fastened upon the creatures at their feeding. Luckily for the two bold men, each of the things was busy biting and chewing on either human or horse meat; their attention on their food only ever drifted to swat away the gathering flies hoping for a home upon the corpses.

The Gravedigger knelt behind the bulk of the big gun, both for cover and to examine and determine its method of operation. Morales hung over his left shoulder, crouching and hiding himself behind the gun as best he could, the pistol in his hand pointed out to the square. For all the man's doubts and fears, he now seemed determined to do the duty the Gravedigger had given him. Nothing made warriors out of the common quite like desperation and threat of death.

The Gravedigger looked over the gun quickly, taking in each curve, each attachment, and each nut and bolt with a natural-born fighter's knack for weapons. The multiple barrels allowed for rapid fire; the crank at the thing's back was the de facto trigger; a hopper hanging off to the barrels' left was where ammo was fed into, a bundle of bullets already inside and ready for use. A soldier's sack laid by one of the wheels, filled with brass bullets—more usable ammo. And the Gravedigger was glad to see that the gun could be swiveled about, at least a tad; perhaps forty-five degrees worth of turn to either direction, increasing field of fire much, much more. Perhaps this little revelation meant that the Gravedigger wouldn't have to rely on Morales' covering abilities that much, after all. Now, all that remained was seeing if the damned gun would even shoot.

The Gravedigger rose up and Morales stood off to his side, mumbling something in Spanish—perhaps a prayer, or a rousing poet's quote, or famous last words. Setting his hand to the crank and swinging the sights of the weapon off to the left, where a cluster of creatures hovered over the same dead horse, the Gravedigger took in a breath. Then he turned the crank.

The weapon went off with a violent *put-put-put-put* of gunfire that offended the ears. The barrels turned and bullets sprayed out, a cartridge spitting out each second. The four creatures feasting on the horse were cut down and dead before the others situated throughout the square could even lift their heads in alarm. But as one stood up, dropping a youth's severed arm that it had been eating like a turkey leg, it gave a wild scream of fury. In half an instant, the cry was picked up by the others. All eyes turned to the last prey left alive in Serenidad. And as one, they charged forward.

The Gravedigger swung the barrels to face directly forward, where a few of the creatures had bunched up in their coming attack. With a couple rotations of the crank and the bullets that followed, they fell. He turned it to another two advancing from the far right. As he opened fire, he heard Morales give a war-cry, and the Mexican fired his pistol at another of the things.

The calamity of gunfire and monstrous howls rang through the streets of the village, and soon, more of the creatures came to join the fray. A handful leapt out from buildings and street-ways, but a complete drove came dashing out of the church, where the bulk of the beasts had apparently decided to nest in. The Gravedigger turned the rapid-fire weapon to the church's entrance and opened fire, yelling at Morales to pick off the others throughout the square.

The approaching flood of lizard-people fanned out, each going in different directions to avoid getting hit in the Gravedigger's aim. He was soon turning the gun back and forth, to and fro, shooting them down in a wild spray, hoping that each bullet could find a worthy mark. Though some struck nothing but air or the church wall, the cascade of creatures was so thick that most found homes in their reptilian selves, mowing them down. Their bodies fell on top of one another, and the living leapt over the dead only to join them a moment later when the barrels came swinging back around. When most had fallen, save for a few late-comers, the ammo finally ran dry, and the Gravedigger's cranking was to no avail.

He made to grab the bag of ammunition, to toss it into the hopper and keep firing, but Morales was already tossing his empty pistol aside. He fumbled to get the rifle off his shoulder, and the other remaining creatures in the square—a small several in total—were rapidly closing

in. If the Gravedigger tried to reload the big gun now, the two men would be overtaken before he could use it. Cursing, knowing that the rapid-fire weapon had outlived its usefulness, the Gravedigger pulled out his revolver and fired on the encroaching beasts.

He downed one with a well-placed shot to the forehead, and then another, with the round finding its mark in the thing's chest. Morales had finally gotten the rifle ready and fired hastily, a lucky shot taking off a huge creature's head in a big burst of blood and teeth. Four more remained, each only a few yards away from leaping upon them.

The Gravedigger shot one that was drawing close to Morales' left side, unbeknownst to the Mexican. It fell right before the man's feet, making him jump back in surprise. Another creature saw its window of opportunity and took it, jumping at Morales with arms outstretched and sharp fingers clutching. Morales got the rifle situated just in time, bayonet glinting in the sunlight, and the thing was impaled upon the rifle's end, the bayonet's tip pointing out its back. Its deadweight and falling corpse sent Morales off balance and he fell to the dirt with a moan.

Now there were only two left, one bearing down upon Morales, another charging the Gravedigger. The one heading for Morales was closer to its kill, and the Gravedigger knew it. Turning about, the Gravedigger fired at the thing as it stood above Morales, screeching in what it thought was victory. With two shots to its chest, it fell back dead. As he twirled back to face his own adversary, the Gravedigger realized it was too late. The thing rushed him, its shoulder connecting with the side of his gut and sending him flying to the ground. The jarring force made him lose his grip on his revolver and it went sailing through the air. He fell to the ground, the thing on top of him. It was trying to roll him over to get at his throat. He elbowed it repeatedly, and finally it tumbled off of him.

As he got to his knees, he reached into his coat, behind his back. His hands wrapped around the handle of the knife he kept hidden away in its sheath. He pulled it out, its long blade sharp and itching to bite into an enemy. Hauling himself up, he turned around just as the creature had regained its own footing and was leaping at him. Sidestepping slightly and driving the knife up at the proper moment, the blade pierced into the underside of the creature's jaw and jabbed up into its brain. The thing's hands clutched at the Gravedigger's neck and shoulders as it gurgled and groaned. It glared at him with wickedness, still trying to kill and rend, until the wickedness and all other life in its eyes were gone. The Gravedigger pulled out his knife and let the thing tumble to the ground in a puff of dust.

Morales was back on his feet now, inching over to stand beside the Gravedigger. The two looked out upon the square, which had gained another large, terrible number of corpses to sport. Nary a patch of ground seemed to lie in sight—only limbs and still-spilling lifeblood. After a moment of reflection passed, Morales sighed and spoke up: "It's over."

"Maybe," the Gravedigger answered, walking to where his revolver had fallen, bending down to grab it. He opened it and pulled out bullets from his belt, reloading.

"Wha . . . What do you mean?" Morales asked, puzzled and nervous once more.

"There may be more of them," the Gravedigger answered, stepping over bodies and making his way to the doors of the church. "They could still be all over the town. Hiding, waiting. We need to make sure that not one is left living."

Morales groaned in dismay, but leaned over and began tugging at the rifle jutting through the one fallen creature. When he had it out, he followed after the Gravedigger. They stopped before the threshold of the church, and the Gravedigger turned to him,

"This is where we start looking for the rest. You stay here. Keep an eye out for others. Cover my back. And yours."

The Gravedigger strode into the church, revolver in one hand, his knife in the other. Morales spun around, putting his back to the wall, leveling the rifle out before him as he kept watch. His eyes darted back and forth, across the square, down alleys, and over the rooftops; all the while he listened, waiting for sounds of a scuffle from within the church. After an intolerably still moment, a gunshot went off inside the sanctuary, making Morales jump. Then another. Then a creature's death-screach echoed out. More shots followed. Hissing and hacking blurred into one odd noise. Then there was silence.

The Gravedigger came out of the church. Fresh blood painted the blade of his knife, and he was once more reloading the revolver. He looked to Morales. "On to the next place," he said, and kept on going. Morales followed in tow as they started to check the rest of the town.

Within the hour, all of Serenidad had had been trekked and checked by the two men.

Every household, shed, and alley had been looked over, every cranny where a creature could be hiding brought to light. Only four more of the things had turned up, one dashing

through the streets and eyeing a chicken coop, the other three crouching in homes, eating their former owners; all four fell to the Gravedigger's gun. The rest of their search held no notable incident, save for one: in a nearly-empty stable on the southern outskirts of the village, the Gravedigger found his trusted blood-bay. This is where the horse had gotten off to, where it had found some safety. It was lying in a stall, chewing on some hay. Two dead creatures lay outside of the stall, their reptilian forms trampled, one with a mighty large hoof-print across its smashed face. The Gravedigger had given a chuckle and the horse arose at the sound, whinnying a greeting.

Master gave steed a pat on the neck, speaking to it as a dear old friend. "You did well, you dopey nag. But you still ran away. Coward . . ."

The horse gave a shake of its head, whipping the Gravedigger with its mane. Chuckling more, the Gravedigger led the horse out of the stable, and the steed joined their search of the village.

When their seeking was done, they ended up back in the village square. Morales trudged tiredly over to a wooden bench beside a household, sitting down with a huff. He let the rifle fall from his hand; it clattered to the ground, its usefulness through. "What now?" he asked with his head held in his palms.

The Gravedigger stood beside him, scanning the collection of bodies all about. He reached for his old shovel nestled within his pack atop the blood-bay. He pulled it out; it had had seen much use, and was about to see a fair deal more. "Now we bury the dead."

Morales' head shot up, an eyebrow furrowed in confusion. He looked to the bodies. "All of them? You're going to bury an entire village?"

"Yes, every single one. Even those creatures—they used to be human, too, mind you. Bury them for what they once were, not what they are," the Gravedigger answered plainly. "And it's *we*. *We* are going to bury them."

"But . . . I . . . it will take . . ."

"A long time, yes. Several days' worth of work, if not more. All the better to start now, then."

The Gravedigger moved away from Morales, stepping to the body of a fallen young woman. "If you want to go, then go. But there aren't any other horses than mine about, so you'll have to walk—and through the desert, in the heat of day and the cold of night, for miles and

miles in whichever direction you take. Stay for now, help me bury the dead, and I'll give you a ride."

He looked to Morales, letting the man weigh his options. Morales rubbed at his wrists, remembering where chains had been tightly clasped around them a day before, remembering his forced walk through the Mexican desert while the Conservative soldiers pulled him along and laughed at him. His decision didn't take long to make, and he rose up, rubbing his hands in anticipation of long, hard work. "Okay," he whispered. "Let's get to it, then."

"We'll find you a shovel. There has to be another one around here somewhere. We'll bury them outside of the town, in the plains."

"We'll have to dig quite a few graves, *señor*. Quite a few."

"Yes. Dig them quickly and dig them shallow—as long as they're under the ground and put to rest."

Morales nodded and went to a shed across the street. He returned shortly with a shovel in his hands.

"We'll work as long as we can, as long as we have to. Eat when you must. If you get to the point when you can't keep going, sleep, and then pick up where you left off as soon as you wake."

"I could sleep now, I'm so tired. But I'll work, all the same. Get these people to God, if they're not on their way to him already."

The Gravedigger nodded and began walking to the eastern edge of town, where they'd begin to dig.

"And once we're done," Morales said, "what then? Where will we go? What will we do?"

The Gravedigger shrugged, setting his shovel across his shoulders as the two walked along. Diego Valdez was still out there, on the run, and this strange, unfortunate occurrence at Serenidad had delayed his hunt for the outlaw only temporarily. With that in mind, the Gravedigger gave his answer:

"We'll ride on."

Little People and Lost Souls

The late afternoon wasn't so much sweltering hot as it was dreadfully humid. Though a bright Mexican sun traced the western sky overhead, it was the thickness of the air that made the day seem so hot. A thin gray fog hung in the air above, shifting and wavering through the branches and tops of oak trees. Amidst the scene of forest, there was a large clearing where a village sat, here at the edge of the western Sierra Madre mountains. Everyone within the little village had a sheen of sweat about their skin, wetting or even outright soaking their clothing. As they saw to washing and wringing their laundry and cooking their late lunches over their fires, many a tanned hand was lifted to wipe at their brow, flicking sweat away with a sigh. A group of men breathed and worked hard as they carved and hacked away at wooden poles, shaping them just right; they then set them and tied them together not far away, where a new hut was being fashioned amidst the multitude of others.

The only person in sight who seemed relatively unaffected by the humidity was the white stranger who'd only just appeared among them. Even dressed in his dark clothing and long, dark coat, the Gravedigger had very little sweat accumulating on his brow and beneath his black hat. While others here and about sighed and huffed with exertion, he strode along silently, apparently unperturbed by the heat. He led his horse along through the village, the blood-bay's deep red coat standing out against the dark greens of the forest around them.

The green of plant-life was a welcomed sight compared to the stark reds and desolate yellows of the Mexican desert, which the man and his horse had been stolidly traveling through for the past week. The long, bold venture had been undertaken for the hunt of a sole man: Diego

Valdez, an outlaw who had carved a path of rape and murder through the United States before fleeing back across the border. The Gravedigger had since trekked far into Mexico, stopping off at every town and village he happened upon and asking its people about the outlaw. He'd had no such luck yet as he headed further and further south, hoping to pick up on Valdez's trail.

The Gravedigger and his bay had left the arid, sandy plains of the land behind them two days ago, along with their recent companion: one Manuel Morales, a Liberal freedom-fighter who had until quite recently been a prisoner of the Conservative Mexican military. After their first encounter and their harrowing experience together in the village of Serenidad (a tale too elaborate and strange to properly detail here and now), the two men had travelled the lonesome desert for two days, in search of another, more welcoming village. They'd found one such place in Villa de Rosa, a small town that had appeared to them as the desert gave way to grassy plains. It was here that the two men agreed to part ways. Morales reflected on what he would do and where he would go from then on; when the Conservatives realized the troop that was to bring him in had done no such thing, the hunt for him would likely continue. He would not return to his home in the north, but perhaps try and seek sanctuary among Liberals along the eastern coast. Morales then thanked him for the ride by translating as the Gravedigger questioned the people of Villa de Rosa about Diego Valdez. The questioning had brought him his first bit of luck in his search. A few locals had, indeed, seen the outlaw pass through just days before—he'd rented a room at the town's inn for a couple of days before moving on south. They recognized him by the wanted poster the Gravedigger carried, the tell-tale features of his long black hair and cleft-lip fresh in their minds.

With this, the Gravedigger continued his pursuit in renewed vigor and with a final farewell to Morales.

His journey took him down along the plains of Mexico, and eventually into the forests surrounding the western peaks of the Sierra Madre. This village before him was the first he'd encountered since Villa de Rosa, and his questioning for Valdez was underway once more. The few he'd asked so far refused to answer his queries—had hardly even acknowledged him, really—but he was still determined to get something from someone.

The Gravedigger spotted a woman standing outside her hut, working at a wobbly table piled with ears and ears of corn. She was busy shucking them, tugging away at their outer leaves to reveal the white and yellow kernels beneath. He stepped over to her with Valdez's wanted

poster in hand, its paper crinkled and its edges torn from being folded and unfolded, stuffed and pulled out of his coat pocket, again and again.

"Have you seen this man?" the Gravedigger asked the woman in perfect Spanish (courtesy of a sparse lesson in the language by Morales). He held the poster under her sight. She looked away from her corn long enough to look at it, for only a second. Then she looked back to the vegetables. She nodded.

"*Sí, señor,*" she said with a disapproving shake of her head. Then she elaborated in some broken-English, her tone quite chastising. "Ugly man go into forest. Tell him not to—he still go. *Estúpido.*"

"Why'd you try to stop him?" the Gravedigger asked, glad to know he was closing in on the criminal, but wondering what it could have possibly mattered to the woman what Valdez did or didn't do.

"Bad place to go. *Chaneques* in there. No like people much."

The Gravedigger had no idea what on earth she was talking about. "*Chaneques?*" he asked, trying to get the pronunciation right.

The woman nodded, keeping right on with her shucking. "Little people. *Hadas*. They protect the trees. Take men's *almas*—their souls."

She said this all rather blandly, as if it were common knowledge and thick-skulled to ask about. The sureness of her words and her apparent belief in these "little people"—whatever they were—held no room for doubt, in spite of how peculiar and fantastic it sounded.

"He go into forest, he lose his soul," she said, finally meeting the Gravedigger's eyes. "You go, you lose yours. Don't go."

The Gravedigger folded up his poster, sticking it back into the pocket of his coat. Just about any other man would have laughed at the woman and her statements, either to himself or straight to her face, calling her a superstitious simpleton while he was at it. The Gravedigger, however, wasn't so quick to shame or disregard stories of the strange, and he took the woman's claims seriously enough; still, he wasn't about to be swayed into abandoning his hunt for Valdez.

"When and where did he go into the forest, *señorita?*" he asked.

She sighed and put her sight back to her work. "*Estúpido,*" she said, giving another shake of her head. The woman was silent for another moment or two, and the Gravedigger waited for an answer. When she realized he wouldn't leave her be until he got what he wanted, she said:

"He go in yesterday, over there." She flicked a finger across the way, where a flank of trees stood swaying in the day's breeze.

"*Gracias*," the Gravedigger said, giving her a tip of the hat, even though she didn't look up to see it. As he turned away from her, he heard her mumble "*estúpido*" once more.

The Gravedigger looked towards the flank of trees the woman had pointed to, envisioning Valdez walking through them just the day before; he was closing in on the man. If he and his bay were quick about it—and if the forest wasn't too hard to track in or to travel through—then he may very well meet the outlaw sooner rather than later. He'd be sure to greet Valdez with his revolver in hand.

He gave one quick look back to the woman who'd warned him of the "little people" in the forest. She gathered up an armful of corn ears and walked off towards another hut, going right past him without so much as a side-glance or another word of caution, as if he were a lost cause already beyond her help and thought. *Chaneques*—he supposed he may yet find out if she were right about such things, or just spreading children's tales.

The Gravedigger led his bay into the trees, and the forest closed in around them.

The forest was nigh-wondrous, with its numerous sights, smells, and wildlife which the Gravedigger had never seen before in woods north of the border.

Flowers and plants of bright and unnamed hues sprouted up all over, their petals, leaves, and pines utterly alien to his eyes. Insects that were a foot long inched through the soil or along leaves, eating one another or just lounging about. Lizards with marble-shaped eyes ate them up as their scaly hides changed hue, or shone with unique designs and patterns. Birds flitted and twittered through the trees, giving calls he could not place with any other species known to him. With such life and creatures, the place had a certain magic about it—a wonder and majesty that made it far more understandable for the native people to believe in magical little people residing somewhere within such a forest.

Despite his surprise in all it had to offer, the Gravedigger was intent upon finding Valdez's track, more so. He had been able to pick up on the tell-tale signs of someone on horseback working their way through the forest's flora. Long, broad leaves of exotic plants had

been nibbled on by a horse's teeth, fallen branches and dead leaves had been cracked and trampled underfoot, and the occasional hoof-print stood out in the dark brown soil of the forest floor. The forest was quite shaded, rays of the sun's light shining sparsely through the thick canopy of tree-tops towering above. The persistent fog of condensation floating through the air only added to the dimness. Because of it all, night seemed to fall faster within the trees, and with no light to properly see by, the Gravedigger decided it was best to make camp for the night.

He had not made a campfire, as he did not eat, nor was he chilled enough to warm himself by a flame. He did not sleep. Instead, he sat in darkness, his bay resting beside him, listening to the sounds of this foreign forest. He heard the trees and the bushes rustle and shake against each other in the calm nightly breeze that stirred now and again. He heard insects chirp and hiss and click in a constant murmur, but otherwise, there were no sounds or signs of animal life about. He peered into the shadows, deep and dark save for where both moon and starlight managed to creep through, looking for animals that crawl up trees or dart through the bushes, but only seeing blackness.

There came a point, however, when he felt that he was not alone in these woods. Though all that he saw and heard spoke to the contrary, he was certain that there were others out here with him. And that they were watching him. Even in the blotches of shadow and void all about him, he felt as though he could occasionally note a shift in their blankness—lighter patches that moved or hung against the night. Behind trees and within bushes, upon branches and out of holes in the ground—little shadows. Little shadows that moved and waited and watched.

The Gravedigger set his hand to his revolver and brought it out of its holster, setting it against his thigh as he stared out into the night. The drone of the insects kept going, the wind blew on, moving the trees and their branches in a soft sway. Minutes went by. An hour. Then, the small shadows were gone, and the Gravedigger didn't sense anything out of the ordinary. The night was simply the night, and he almost wondered if he hadn't just imagined the sensation of being spied upon, and if the shadows within shadows were just tricks of the moonlight weaving its way through the trees.

But, all the same, the Gravedigger kept his gun at hand the rest of the night. It wasn't until another hour had passed and he felt assured of his solitude that he finally napped some.

Shouting from far off in the forest woke the Gravedigger, but it was the racket of a gunshot that got him up to his feet. The gunfire echoed through the early morning, the report coming from a good distance to the southwest. Another shout—that of a grown man's filled with shock and alarm—followed, then another gunshot. The Gravedigger bundled up his bedroll in a hurry, setting it, his pack, and his saddle over his horse as the bay leapt up to its hooves, ever as alert and ready for action as its master was. The Gravedigger jumped up into the saddle and gave it a kick to the bay's sides, pulling its reigns to rush off through the forest.

Bushes and branches and leaves smacked both the horse and rider as they sped off through the trees, the bay doing its best to find its way through the dense growth of the plant-life. There was another shot—this one louder and closer, and the Gravedigger could now discern that it was coming from a revolver. He urged the horse to gallop faster, and corrected their course a tad, heading slightly further west. The sound of something rushing through the trees and bushes up ahead reached the Gravedigger's ear, and whatever it was, it was heading right towards them. He pulled out his revolver and held it out before him, ready to fire if whatever was coming wasn't friendly. It came bursting through the trees in a blur of black and green and he cocked the hammer and . . .

It was a horse, a dark Galiceno with an old leather saddle about its body, but no rider. It ran right by them, speeding off in utter fright. The Gravedigger paid little heed to it, though, as he caught sight of something else while the horse fled. Up in the trees above, he spotted something—no, some *things*—crawling and leaping from branch to branch, swinging across vines and pliable branches from one tree to the next, as primates would. They were heading in the same direction as the Gravedigger, right towards the shouting and gunfire—the source of which was only yards away now. The foliage shrouded them, and their surprising speed made it all the harder for the Gravedigger to make head or toe of what they were. He could tell one thing, though: they were little.

The bay came to a halt as a man—wielding two revolvers and giving the shouts they'd heard—suddenly appeared before them. It took the bay completely by surprise, and it rose up on its hind legs to keep from dashing into him and his gunfire; the Gravedigger, even more surprised, lost hold of the reigns and slid from his saddle. He was thrown from the bay's back,

and he fell to the grassy earth, landing hard on his side. With a tilted gaze at the world, the Gravedigger looked towards the fighting man.

The man was turning around and around in a frenzy, abandoned by his horse and left to fight instead of flee. He fired again, up into the trees and at the things that were gathering and jumping up above. They were giving strange, almost pig-like squeals to counter the man's frightened shouts. As his head cleared from his fall, the Gravedigger realized that the man—with his black hair whirling about his head and his cleft-lip raised in a sneer—was none other than Diego Valdez.

As the outlaw looked all about and above him, one of the little creatures leapt down from its spot in a tall tree. It landed with a huff behind Valdez, still a ways out of the Gravedigger's line of sight, and it quickly advanced on the outlaw. Valdez turned as it squealed, firing a round into its little chest. It blew up into a perplexing hail of dirt and leaves. Another creature landed on the ground, this one between Valdez and the Gravedigger. As it stood up, the Gravedigger caught sight of it, and it of him. It was a little person—the size of an adolescent child, no more than four feet tall. Its limbs and torso were stick-thin, its head oversized and oddly rounded, nearly globelike. Its skin was tanned, where it wasn't covered in mud and twigs and leaves. It wore a tiny loincloth and brandished a modest branch as a club. In spite of its young boy's size and frame, its face looked like that of a very elderly person, the skin of its cheeks and forehead a mass of wrinkles. Its eyes were mere slits and colored white, and a tiny mouth was set in a fierce grimace.

The creature rallied around Valdez, waving its club as it attacked him, smacking him in the knees and the shins. Valdez shouted a Spanish obscenity at it and leveled his gun to its head. He pulled the trigger and like its companion before it, it blew up into nothing more than specks of dirt and dried dead leaves.

The Gravedigger rose to his feet, keeping his gun at hip-level, uncertain of whom to take aim at: Valdez, or the tribe of little people above—what the Gravedigger took to be the Chaneques the woman in the village had warned of. For all their whooping and wailing, they all seemed to be focusing their uproar and their attack on Valdez. So, the Gravedigger stood there, watching the peculiar battle go on.

Valdez shot another of the Chaneques in mid-air as it came at him, getting a face full of its strange remains. Distracted by the leaves and dirt falling about him, another of the warrior

fairy-folk jumped down and landed on Valdez's chest. It propped its feet on his hips and grabbed hold of his collar, sticking its face right up to his. As Valdez looked into its slitted eyes, it let loose a wild howl, and its eyes grew bulbous and wide, their white hue shifting to gray and then to deep, reflective black in the passing of seconds. As it wailed at him, Valdez screamed back in absolute dread, dropping his guns and grabbing the thing about its minuscule waist, trying to pull it off. It was no use; the thing had a death-grip on him and would not stop its protracted, terrible shriek.

As its mouth opened wider, the Gravedigger saw a thin, smoke-like essence leaving Valdez's mouth and entering into the creature's own. The thin wisps became thicker and stronger as the thing kept on wailing. Valdez began spinning about, trying to wrench the thing off, but he stumbled instead and fell to the ground, landing on his back as he continued to try and pry the Chaneque off of him. Remembering the village woman's explanation of the little people, the Gravedigger assumed that this strange essence was Valdez's soul, being stolen from him by the mystical creatures; it was being filched out of his body and right into the little thing. What happened to the outlaw next made that belief seem all the more likely. His long, straight-black hair began to gray at the roots, the discoloration quickly taking each of the strands and spreading down to their tips. Then the gray gave way to wintery white—the way ghost stories say a man's hair will do when he dies of fright. His clutch on the little person gave, and his hands fell to his sides; his scream faded to a moan, and even the moan fell to silence within the passing of a moment. It was as though all the life that fueled his bones was slipping away, and as he fell silent, so, too, did the Chaneque.

The little person jumped off of Valdez and ran straight towards a towering tree. As his tiny comrades sitting atop the trees gave a whoop of victory, it leapt up onto the tree's trunk, its feet and hands grabbing hold of the bark with ease. It began climbing as quick and as assuredly as a squirrel would, scuttling up into the branches and disappearing from sight into the canopy.

The Gravedigger expected the rest to begin their assault on him, waited for them to leap upon him and to return fire on them, in kind—but no such action came. Several of the little people sat staring down at him, peering towards him in curiosity, but most went off through the trees, scattering in different directions and into the rest of the forest.

The Gravedigger heard a sniffing sound behind him, though, and hurriedly turned about. There, hanging from a vine directly behind him, was one of the Chaneque. It hung there with one

hand gripped around the vine, the other hanging to its side, and the vine curled around one of its legs. It was eye to eye with him, peering at his face as if it were cautiously studying him. It hung its head quizzically and gave another sniff, its old, wrinkled brow bunching up in deeper wrinkles of confusion. Its little mouth moved as though forming words of some sort, but all the Gravedigger got out of it were hesitant clicks and grunts and rollings of its tongue. After another moment of it looking at him, it gave a hard grunt and began climbing up the vine, leaving him to watch it hide away in the trees above. When he turned back around and looked to the other tree-tops, none of the little people remained. They had all gone.

The Gravedigger stood there, wondering at all he'd just witnessed, trying to make sense of it. It was a nicker from his bay that brought him back to the here and now. Looking to where the horse stood beside him, it gave a nod of its head, towards where Valdez lay on the ground. The Gravedigger stepped over to the outlaw, who was still breathing, albeit very slowly, and staring a vacant, soulless stare up to the sky and the canopy—looking, but not seeing; watching, but not registering. It was the thousand yard stare of the not-all-there, and who never would be, ever again. Whatever had made Diego Valdez who he was had been stolen, and this simply-existing shell remained.

Some, perhaps, could have mustered up pity for the man who was hardly a man anymore, and the Gravedigger was inclined to feel a twinge of it playing somewhere deep within him. But at the remembrance of Valdez's rapes and murders and other cruel-hearted deeds, the twinge quickly lost its sensation. The Gravedigger put a bullet in between those staring eyes and the shell breathed no more, the resounding shot serving as the death-song played in memory of another dead outlaw.

The Gravedigger was about to set to work digging up a grave for Valdez shortly after, but he gave it a second-thought. He felt that laying the criminal to rest in this, the domain of the Chaneques, was wrong to do. The little fairy-folk may have helped to end the man's existence, but they would not suffer his bones to rot in the soil that fed their ancient trees. So, the Gravedigger hauled the body up and across the back of his bay, and leading the horse on, they made their trek back the way they'd came. The Gravedigger kept a wary eye towards the tree-tops as they walked on, up until nightfall and until they had left the forest behind, but no more sights of the Chaneques were to be had.

When the Gravedigger entered back into the village he'd left behind the day before, the people were in their huts, eating dinner or sleeping. The humidity and heat on this night were low, and the air was pleasant both to breathe into one's lungs and to feel wafting across one's skin. No one saw him enter and then leave the village, as no one—especially the woman who'd told him of the little people in the forest, and who was now eating a meal of corn—had ever expected to see him again, and so had never looked to the trees for his return. They'd never know that the white stranger had seen the Chaneques—had even come face to face with them—and had left their home unharmed.

Several miles away from the village, the Gravedigger dug a hole to place Diego Valdez in. About an hour later, with that task accomplished and with the luminescent light of a fine moon to light his way, the Gravedigger was on his journey back to north of the border. A couple days from now, he'd be back in the hot, barren deserts. No shade, no water, no end to the stretching sands and dunes—and no trees for little people to watch over, either. At least the Gravedigger could accept the last of these.

He rode on.

One Tennessee Night

"Let us endeavor so to live so that when we come to die even the undertaker will be sorry." --
Mark Twain

The Tennessee night was a pleasant one. The temperature was slightly brisk, calling for a lightweight coat or covering of some sort, but not so frigid and difficult as to be forsaken for the far warmer and humid day that had preceded it. By comparison, the chill of the evening was welcome and nigh-wondrous.

A waxing gibbous moon hung in the sky, giving fair sight all along this side of the mountain range springing up from the east. So it was that the shadows of the evening shifted and slanted in the glow of that celestial disc overhead, the cedars and their crisp, dying leaves painted with a dull, gray-white hue.

The Gravedigger pulled in a refreshing breath of the woods and their musk as he rode along atop his blood-bay. Such a night as this wasn't to be wasted with rest, but to be experienced, embraced with gradual, steady journey. His horse breathed the night in, in turn, pleased to give its legs a stretch through such beautiful territory.

As they approached a glen, spaciouly open to the full light of the moon and with a meager stream of water running through it, the Girl appeared to them.

She had not been there the one instant, but was there the next. The Gravedigger was certain of that. He did not react beyond giving a subtle tug of his horse's reigns, bringing it to a

stop. Man and horse both stared at the Girl, standing directly across from the stream and on a slight ridge, the trickling line of water between them. No words were spoken on either party's behalf—neither greetings nor questions uttered—and in the quite, the Gravedigger studied the Girl.

She was young in appearance, with the height and bearing of a child no more than ten years old. Her hair was straight strands of brunette which had a fine sheen in the light of the moon. Her skin was pale, nearly the same hue of the white dress she wore on her lithe frame. Its cloth looked thin, a sleeping slip with her arms and ankles bared, far too thin and sparse to keep her warm in the lightly-nipping breeze of this night. Nevertheless, she did not appear cold, did not clutch herself with chills, and no fog of shivery breath escaped her young lips. She gave no hint at all of being perturbed by the weather; instead, she looked at him with a blank but not unaware stare, her little eyes set within shadow-ringed sockets.

What he noticed most about her was that, oddly enough, he could see partly through her, like she were some sort of a mirage out in a raging-hot desert, an illusory trick working upon addled and thirsting senses. But this was no desert, and she was no illusion. Though he could define the tree-line and the bumps of the earth behind her—their shapes clear and discernible through her dress, her skin, and her limbs—he knew she was truly there; in a sense, at least

The Girl was a ghost.

If it weren't obvious enough to the Gravedigger that she was a spirit by her transparency, her deathly skin tone, and her sheer presence of being, it became clear as she slowly began to approach him. Though her legs moved as if to walk, and though her bare, tiny feet looked to touch the ground, she floated along at a steady pace and without the bobbing motion of taking steps, and her feet hovered an inch above the ground. Not once did her toes touch or disturb the leaves and the grass underfoot, and as she crossed the stream, the water did not bend and flow around her limbs.

She came to a halt before the Gravedigger, looking at him with a curious dip in her brow, waiting to see how he would react when her state of being sunk in to his mind.

If she expected him to panic, to flee in terror at the sight of a spirit of the woods, she would be surprised—assuming she was capable of thought, in her deathly circumstance. The Gravedigger, no stranger to the otherworldly and the odd, or to those who were neither fully

living nor fully passed, did not fear this child-like apparition. In fact, looking upon her frail, innocent looking form, he felt pity. He felt sadness.

The Gravedigger hopped off of his horse and stood there, patiently waiting to see what the Girl would do.

The Girl stepped—such as it was—to his horse, her head tilting to the side in a curious look of half-recognition, her straight hair hanging about her head and the edges of her mouth raised ever-so slightly up. The hint of a smile. Perhaps the phantom of a memory flitting through the darkness of what passed for her memory.

The Gravedigger stood at her side, right at her shoulder. He watched her with a dubious look of curiosity.

Her pale left hand rose up slow, steady, little fingers fanning out. She lifted it out toward the blood-bay's big, red neck. The horse gave her a side glance, watching her hand come near it. He wasn't the sort of horse to let many people, living or dead, touch him—but he was calm and still as her hand closed the distance between her fingers and his coat.

The Girl's fingers connected, somewhat. Their tips sunk into the horse's body, slipping and disappearing right into its side, no more than air against its skin. If the bay felt discomfort at the sensation, it showed no sign of it; in fact, the horse inched closer to her.

She traced her fingers and her palm along its side, coaxing up and down the bay's neck, petting him. Her shy smile grew into a big, joyous one as she continued to pet. Her little teeth showed brightly in the moonlight as she gave a noiseless giggle.

She had liked horses.

The Girl turned to look up at the Gravedigger, her smile staying strong as she looked upon him. Her eyes beamed, her nose was slightly scrunched, and the liveliness she once had was on display, overcoming the deathly look of her skin and making her beautiful in spite of what she was.

The Gravedigger, a hard man made harder by experience, smiled with her.

She soon turned her attention back to the horse and her smile gradually slipped. The Gravedigger's own faltered with it. Her joy faded into a somber contentment. Then back to her more distant-thought sort of stare.

She pulled away from the blood-bay, floating back. She turned to the Gravedigger, looking at him blankly. Without looking in that direction, she lifted her hand and pointed behind

her, westward. She spoke no words nor made any attempt to, yet the Gravedigger understood what she was conveying, all the same.

Follow me. This way.

The Gravedigger nodded and the Girl turned around. Her spirit-legs began to carry her to the west, moving with a fluid motion, as if her wisp of a self were carried by a constant, steady breeze. She moved to head through the trees and out of the glen. She didn't turn to see if the Gravedigger followed after her, which he did, wrapping a hand around his horse's reigns and guiding it along, both man and horse following the ghost into the Tennessee woods.

Keeping up with the floating spirit was difficult, at first, her ability to hover above and about the earth giving her a nimble, maintained speed. The Gravedigger and his steed were able to keep up a similar steady pace, sparing several feet between her and them at most times, sometimes a little more where the earth became bumpy or hilly and harder to traverse. They always managed to keep her in sight, though, and her fine white dress was easy to spot in the darkened woods about them.

The walk took perhaps a quarter of an hour, tread in silence and somber thought. Many a tree was passed, many a star shined down upon them, and all the creatures of the night sat and slept silently as their journey was made.

Finally, they came upon a humble abode, where the Girl came to a halt.

Built in the middle of the woods, it was a simple and small log cabin, sitting nestled beside a steep ridge and half-hidden in the shadows of the hill, the trees sprouting up from it, and within the darkness of the night. Before the home was a crude wooden fence, stretching in a square about the place, serving more for quaint appearance than any practical purpose. A break in the fence led to a small path through a leaf-cluttered yard and up to the doorway. Through a single square window in its front face, a low-burning light of a candle shone from inside the sill, its dim glow flickering and swaying across the walls inside. The household was still and silent, the occupant or occupants within no doubt asleep at this late hour, the candle burning on after they had nodded off or to give some light to the darkened eve. Perhaps to serve as a beacon to the wayward.

The Gravedigger stopped beside the Girl, easing his horse to stay silent with a pat on the head. He looked from the cabin to the Girl, taking notice of the long look on her pale face; the

look of someone who yearns for something once held close to the heart, yet has since slipped from grasp.

A long moment of silence passed before the Gravedigger spoke in a whisper. "This was your home." It wasn't a question.

The Girl nodded, giving the Gravedigger a sad, sad glance. If she could have cried, he believed she would have. He felt nearly inclined to do so for her, in her stead, but before anymore words could be spoken or sorrows shared, the Girl was turning around and wandering off again.

The Gravedigger gave one more look towards the cabin, wondering who it was that now slept inside and how they had known the Girl, before following after her once more. She now headed on a northern bearing, the land before them narrowing gradually down in a long slope of woods.

Another quarter-hour walk began, the landscape giving way to rocky outcrops and caverns, the mouths of caves popping out of hillsides sporadically and hard, stone ridges cutting into the land. The ghost-girl flitted down and around these areas with ease; the going was much tougher for the Gravedigger and his horse, but not impossible. Eventually, after keeping his eyes on the rocky stones beneath his feet with the help of the moonlight, the Gravedigger looked up to see that the Girl had come to a stop and was staring at him.

She hovered before a concave formation set into a rather tall section of hill, not quite deep or large enough to be a cave, but pronounced enough to be a suitable shelter of sorts to some being or other. Stepping up to the Girl, the Gravedigger looked the spot over. By the glow of the waxing moon, he saw a sight to chill the blood and make the soul ache.

Nestled in the concave spot were human remains. Long-since turned to a collection of bones, the small remains were dressed in a tattered and dirtied white dress, half-hidden by clusters of dead, dried leaves. The Gravedigger looked to the Girl, but she could not return his gaze; she looked at the earth before her ghostly feet, head hung low and hair hiding her face.

The Gravedigger stepped forward, closer to the spot within the hill, staring down at what had once been the Girl. Her little bones looked intact, no limbs or parts noticeably missing from the remains—no small miracle, in woods where countless animals roamed looking for any food or nourishment they could bear to find. She lay flat on her back, an arm held over her stomach

and the other at her side, her leg-bones straight out, feet bare, as if lain to restful sleep in a bed. One ankle, however, appeared to be out of sorts. Twisted, broken.

An image and notion of the Girl's death leapt to the Gravedigger's mind, one he didn't wish to think upon, but which he must, if he were to do right by this spirit-girl. One where through some uncertain and unknowable circumstance, the girl had found herself out in the woods. Lost. Alone. Perhaps she wandered off too far playing, unaware of where home lay and in which direction. So she wandered further, in each and every direction, but ultimately the wrong one. Until she came to this place, with its rocks and hills and crags, treacherous and dangerous to the life and limbs of a scared, young girl. She broke her ankle in her fear, and she crawled to the nearest spot of safety—the small little cave. Wounded, with no way to walk, no idea where to go, and so far from home. No food, no protection, no way back. Starvation, sickness, exposure—she could have died in any number of ways and for any number of tragic reasons. And even in death, she remained lost, her family, whatever remained of it, unable to find her.

The Gravedigger looked to the spirit, who had finally torn her eyes from the earth and faced him. Her face spoke the plea that her words could not, and the Gravedigger knew why he'd been led here by her.

He nodded a silent confirmation to her and stepped back over to his horse. He grabbed hold of his shovel and a spare blanket bundled over his saddle. Turning around, he saw the Girl float off a few feet away, eyes to the ground, searching, judging.

She came to a halt before a tall, full-branched sycamore tree, fully alive and an air about it that could only be called majestic. A fitting spot. The Girl glanced at the tree and turned back around to face the Gravedigger.

He understood, and moved to start digging where she had stood.

He set to work making a resting place for her, digging up shovelfuls of earth with a heavy heart for the better part of an hour. All the while, the Girl's spirit stood at the foot of the would-be resting place beside the sycamore, watching as he worked. When he'd finished, he climbed out of the hole he'd dug, grabbed the bundled blanket he'd set aside, and moved back to where her bones lay.

He knelt down beside her and started setting her remains gingerly into the spread blanket. As he worked, something caught his eye. He reached towards it, finding a necklace that hung

about the vertebrae of her neck, half-concealed in the ruffles of her old white dress. The charm was an immaculate arrowhead of white stone tethered to a thin, worn string; a simple yet cherished item, no doubt.

The Gravedigger looked back to the Girl's spirit, indicating the necklace about her body's neck. The Girl gave a small smile and looked back the way they had come, back to the cabin that had been her home. Again, the Gravedigger understood her wishes.

Untying the necklace from her body and placing it in his coat pocket, he gathered up the rest of her bones. When he was done, he wrapped the blanket about her, lifted and carried them to the sycamore, and lay them down in the earth with ease and respect. He refilled her grave after another hour's toil.

When he was done, her ghost had disappeared from sight. She was gone.

She was not the first child he had been forced to bury. He hoped she may be the last.

His work complete, or nearly so, the Gravedigger returned his shovel to his pack about the blood-bay. He gave one final look to the Girl's grave, hoping she had found a peace that had been denied to her for far too long. He mounted the horse and urged it back the way they had come. All the while back to the cabin, he thought.

As remorseful and forlorn as the Girl's plight had made him feel, the Gravedigger took solace in one fact: her life, no matter how short, had not been without its happiness and its joys. Even in death, her remembrance and her love of horses had shown through her spirit's sorrows, and in that moment, he had seen a glimpse of how she had looked and been in life. Beautiful, energetic, aware. Appreciative of as simple a pleasure as petting a horse; life interacting with and recognizing life. This was what was to be remembered of her, and it was all the Gravedigger needed to know of her. That she had once truly lived.

The coming of death and the leaving of life need not be so terrible if the life was lived with satisfaction.

Soon, though it felt like far longer a time, the Gravedigger had returned to the cabin, with its fence and its flickering candle in the window. He pulled his horse up beside the break in the fence, stopping there briefly. He reached into his coat pocket and brought out the Girl's arrowhead necklace. He re-tied the string and hung it on the end-post of the fence with care, hoping it would be found by the Girl's family and, perhaps, give them some peace and knowledge that wherever the Girl was, she rested well.

He rode on.

Author's Note

Though I'm not Lucy Ricardo (we both have red hair, but that's where the similarities tend to end), I feel like I have a bit of 'splaining to do about this short story collection.

If you're reading this, then you've presumably read the six stories that came before it; and with luck, you've been entertained, thrilled, chilled, and perhaps even made to feel a tad nauseous at points—what can I say? I appreciate such reactions from readers. Above all else, though, I hope you have questions. Who is the Gravedigger? What is the Gravedigger? Is he good, bad, or somewhere in between, within that gray, sticky center? When will I have the answers to these quandaries and more, damn you!?

First: calm down; and second: as of right now, I can't answer any of that, as these are the first of an intended series of short stories (and perhaps even a novel or two?) that will continue to follow the exploits of the Gravedigger and gradually explore his strange nature, along with the equally-strange world he occupies. This project began with a whim, an experiment—my first attempt at writing a "Weird West" story that combined horror and supernatural events with an old western setting, a genre which I thoroughly enjoy, but had never dared to write in. That changed with "The Stranger," which I saw as a potential springboard/judge of whether or not I would write more stories in this vein. I felt the story was a fairly successful first-venture into the style, and when the U.K.'s *Sanitarium Magazine* picked it up for publication, I saw greater potential. I saw "SERIES" shining in my mind, and with the title character still fresh in my thoughts, I had ideas and plots to explore. So, I started writing like the wind, Bullseye.

I was eventually sitting on about ten short stories with the *Gravedigger* banner writ across them, and I thought: I really want people to see these! And I couldn't wait any longer. Thus, this collection was crafted; it was self-released the way it was to (hopefully) whet your

appetites for more, to see if you, my intrepid reader, really want the answers to all those questions and to see more adventures of this Gravedigger fellow.

However, I feel I must reiterate the idea that this exploration will, indeed, only gradually happen; don't expect the answers anytime soon, as I'm having too much fun teasing out the Gravedigger figure and his greater story, thrusting him into one strange situation after another with perhaps only the slightest hint towards his as-yet non-detailed past, added in to the mix for a smidgeon of spice and anticipation. Besides, even I'm a bit shady on his past—he's too busy shooting up zombies and harpy-whores to stop and tell me his origins!

Though I do have a plan for both the Gravedigger's past and future—as well as how to tell them—I'm still getting the feel for the character and the grander plot about him that's percolating in my odd mind. I'm still discovering what this character can be to both me and readers abroad, as well as what lies ahead for the gunslinging wanderer, and I like the idea of readers discovering that all along with me. The questions you have are, in a sense, questions that I still have, and I hope that in the near future, I can begin to give those answers with forthcoming installments and tales of the Gravedigger and his journey through a very weird and wild west. I have a handful of other such stories currently drafted, along with several more taking shape in my head, waiting to charge onto a page like a team of stallions hell-bent for the horizon. So, keep a weathered-eye out for more of the Gravedigger and keep your six-shooters loaded; he'll be heading your way again soon enough. But until then . . .

I'll write on.