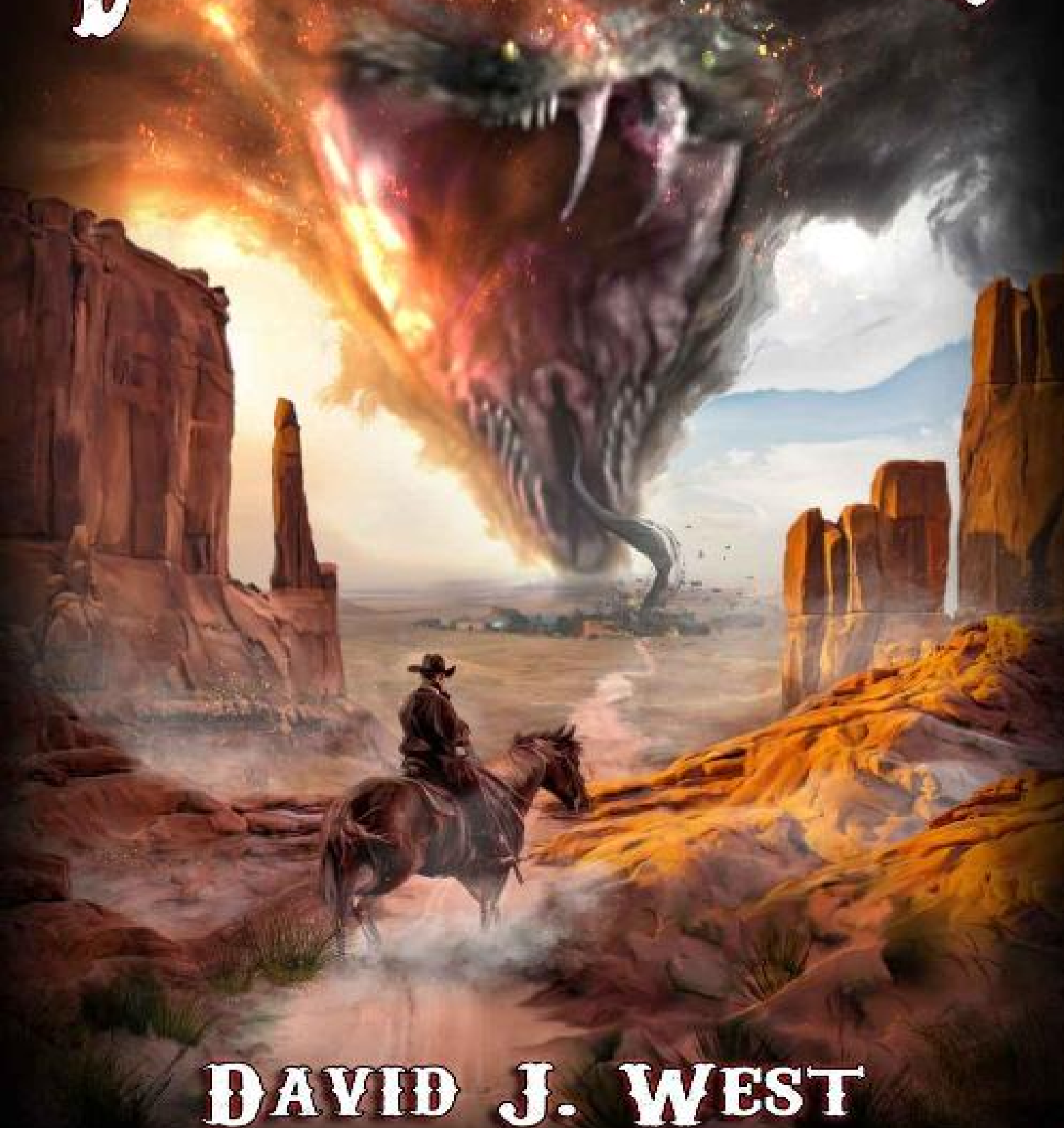


# BURY ME NOT ON THE LOATHSOME PRAIRIE



DAVID J. WEST

Bury Me Not  
on the loathsome prairie

Cowboys & Cthulhu Book four



David J. West

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Luke 10:19 *Behold, I give unto you power to tread on  
serpents...*

# Prologue: The Nameless Mountains

This was a land uncharted. Unknown. The mountains to his right had no name he knew of. Maybe he wasn't the first white man to stand beside these mountains, but he was the first American.

Jim Bridger asked some of the Indians he was traveling with, "What is it that peak called?"

The old Indian answered him, "We Diné call it *Dzil Bizhi' Ádiní*. It means 'the mountain whose name is missing'."

"Mountain whose name is missing? What's that supposed to mean?"

The old Indian shrugged. "It is not a good place. My people do not go there if they can help it. Much bad blood from long ago."

"Thanks a heap," Jim answered.

“I will tell you but will never speak of it again,” said the old Indian. He wouldn’t ask outright for anything in return for his story, but the expectation was implied with a long pause.

Jim dug out a bit of tobacco and a half-empty flask of whiskey.

“You recognize the signs of the conquistadors that were here centuries ago. Father Escalante and some of Coronado’s expedition too. After them came their grandsons, Mexican gold hunters. They found gold first by dowsing and then by capturing Indian braves who, as a token of their manhood, had gold nuggets in their medicine pouches.

“Surely if each brave had a nugget or two, there must be more, a lot more, reasoned the Mexicans, and they would get that treasure one way or another. With cannon and sword, rifle and other weapons of war, they subdued and captured the local tribes and used them as slave labor to delve into the earth.

“Until the Indians rose up and struck down the Latins in a hail of blood and thunder.

“Once they had defeated their oppressors, the natives buried their dead in the mines, thus making their tomb sacred ground. The dead were not to be disturbed. They had earned the right to remain in the ground and not have any molest their



bones in the hunt for gold. They chopped the hooves off the mules and tossed them away so even the ghosts of the beasts of burden couldn't carry away the ill-gotten treasures.

“But you know these old stories and why the Mexicans had come so far looking for the treasure of ages.” The old Indian paused to finish off the flask.

Jim nodded. “They came from Mexico because of the legends and rumors of those who had fled Tenochtitlán back when Cortez's men first slew Moctezuma and stole all the treasure they could. But they lost out on the greater portions, most of it was secreted away, right?”

The old Indian nodded as he lit his tobacco. “The Aztec's fought back and took their treasure hoard back to the land where they had come from, which was called Aztlán. There, they hid their treasures up in the deeps of the mountains. The Mexican grandsons learned the legends of the lost homeland and knew the direction it lay, north to where a range of mountains ran east and west rather than north and south. Though the treasure seekers did not know the exact location of the seven sacred caves, they knew where to begin hunting.”

“This isn't those same mountains though,” Jim protested.

The old man puffed on his tobacco and said, “There are more sacred sites than just the legendary Carre Shinob. Among those other sacred caves were places the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan knew they should stay away from. Places where the forces were too dark for even their bloodthirsty gods. Places like this unnamed mountain range born of ancient blood and fire.

“Here the Divine Lord of Snakes administered a large domain. Kept hidden and guarded by the Snake Clan for generations, their sacred and ancient underground temple city lay hidden inside these nameless mountains.

“Over in the mountains, lost in one of the hidden canyons, there is an ancient underground city, said by the Snake People to have been large enough to house many villages worth of people at one time. The Serpent Temple of Yig is deep in these unknown mountains—and said to be haunted...”

Jim was intrigued and pressed for more information that he judged was worthy of his paying the tobacco and flask of whiskey.

“I urge you to listen to my story but not go to the mountains, or you will remain there forever.”

“You trying to scare me, chief? Who or what is Yig?”

The old Indian smiled. "I'm telling you the truth. When I was younger than you, I thought to perhaps retrieve some of the gold and trade with the Mexicans for one of their rifles. I did a sweat and prepared myself to attempt my quest. I spent many days hunting over the mountain for the treasure. One day I found a tunnel that went more than a hundred paces into the earth and led to very large stone doors. At the beginning of this tunnel, one would start out in ankle deep water, but by the time I reached the ten-foot-tall stone doors, I was up to my armpits in cold water. These doors were of curious make, created by the ancients of long ago. Snakes were carved on the stone in great relief, and I knew these were the doors to the Serpent Temple of Yig. I had found the place I sought, but knew I was not to open the doors."

Jim shook his head. "Treasure was on the other side. Why didn't you open the stone doors?"

The old Indian chuckled. "Water was leaking through and from the tops of the doors. There might have been a river beyond, and I could not open them."

"Why a 'serpent temple'?"

"The markings of the Snake God are everywhere if you know where to look. Some call him Yig, some Set, and others

KuKulacan or Quetzalcoatl, but they all denote the Great Snake Father.”

One of the younger Indians whispered to the old man, who stood and prepared to leave.

“What’s the matter?” Jim asked.

“We had best be moving away before nightfall. I have said too much this close to his domain.”

Jim Bridger felt the eerie taint of the place upon his back like the eyes of a serpent ready to strike, and he couldn’t ride away from there fast enough. Rain began to fall and run in quick brown streams through the crevices and ravines that littered the mountainside. He remembered the lines from the poem he had read not long ago:

*This was his land before ours. The ocean too, under dark stars.*

*The woman took the fruit and the man was shown the route.*

*Together they left the garden, but did the snake remain while hearts were left to harden?*

*Evil won’t wash away no matter how many times the earth cracks and reels,*

*Noah in his boat, the lamb lies with the scapegoat, and  
Cain held up his court of appeals,*

*The serpent is king here, lord of all doubt and fear,*

*Down on his scaly belly, waiting for the heel to crush him  
to jelly*

*Til that day, avoid the fang and say, the snake is king of  
the desert way...*

A few decades later...

# The Stars Reel

Dusk was coming on fast and strong, leaving a rusty red glow at the edge of the canyon. Just before the sun completely dropped, everything was painted red with God's own brush; the sky, the ground, the autumnal leaves, the rocks, even the stallion's bobbing head right in front of Porter.

Porter gave his stallion a slight kick as they traversed a path that was as much a dry creek bed as road. "Hurry up, we're almost there."

They came up to the top of the draw, and Porter gazed down. Moonlight glinted on the winding Sulphur creek below.

The sun dipped finally, and aided by dark clouds at the far horizon, the canyons on his right became dark as the tombs in Egypt. But the shifting sands of the path before him were still light enough to see which way they should continue.

"Keep going, we're not too far now, and I want to sleep in a pile of hay as much as you want some to eat," Porter said, as he patted the strong neck of his stallion.

Far away a coyote yipped in the arroyo as the moon rose higher.

The ground was like a frozen sea of ink compared to the dark azure of the sky above, splashed with shadowy clouds of silver racing beside the bright moon.

Porter made his way along the trail, lined by tall clumps of sage and the occasional aspen. He pushed his stallion to make the last mile. It got dark quick this time of year, and he still had not made it to where he hoped to bed down for the night. He knew there would be room in a barn or loft in the little settlement of Junction. The place had one thing going for it out here, they grew some wonderful fruit, and the women made great pie. He could almost smell it now.

Nope, that was not his imagination, he did smell apple pie.

Then he caught the scent of something else, gunpowder and the sour stink of bodies.

Shots from a pair of rifles shattered the stillness of night. Bright flashes arced from behind shadowy sage. Porter drew his six-gun as his horse screamed and reared in its death throes.



At least one of the bullets had hit the stallion in the neck. Porter got off one shot as the horse fell. He may as well have been aiming for the bright moon above for all the good his bullet did. A third shot from a rifle ripped into the foreleg of the horse, and it twisted about. Porter's foot caught in the stirrup as he attempted to dismount. The stallion came down hard, trapping Porter's right leg against the rocky ground and its heavy ribs. The wind was knocked out of him, and his head crashed against the shale-covered ground, making him see more stars than were yet in the sky. His pistol fell somewhere in the dark beside him just as the moon hid behind a bank of clouds.

His head reeled.

It took a moment to catch his breath and gain his faculties. He blinked at the dazedness that washed over him in the dry dusty air. His head swam in a sea of pain. He wanted to gain his feet, but there was no escaping the vise the dead horse held him in. He blinked to wash away the sea of stars that swirled over him as the moon was eclipsed by dark clouds.

How long had he been knocked senseless? Where was his gun? Who had shot at him? Where were they now? These thoughts buzzed in his throbbing head like a swarm of worry.

Porter swatted them away as he put one foot against the animal's rump and pushed, with no hint of movement. He tugged at his trapped leg, but it would not budge, so caught up in the stirrup and dead horse's weight.

"Did we get him?" asked a timid voice in the shadowy gloom somewhere behind the sagebrush.

"I reckon I did, you hit the horse," snarled another.

Porter could not see them, but their boots tramped over the broken shale, coming closer.

His fingers crawled like a tarantula over the ground for where he thought his pistol had fallen but did not discover the black steel frame. He strained against the dead horse once more but was forced to admit to himself that he was trapped.

The more timid of the two voices asked again, "You sure, you got him?"

"He ain't a firing back, is he?"

Their footfalls drew nearer.

The click of a hammer being pulled echoed in the dark.

Porter spread his arms wide, straining for any hint of his six-gun. Far to his left, his index finger brushed against cold steel.

“You reckon he was following us?” asked the timid voice.

“Course he was, for all the good it did him.”

Somewhere in the dark a coyote yipped, and the bushwhackers froze in their advance. Porter tore off his hat and used the brim to pull at his pistol, scraping it an inch closer.

“What’s that sound?” asked the coward.

“Coyote, you idjit!”

“No, I heard a scraping.”

“Jesse! Get over here! He must have fallen with the horse. I can see his leg,” proclaimed the bolder of the two. “Even if he ain’t dead we got him!”

Jesse, the coward, was emboldened at the other’s words and rushed forward, stomping over the shale.

“Look at that,” said the bold one. “He’s stuck under the horse.”

“So he’s dead?” asked Jesse as they stepped closer.

“I reckon, but if not, I’ll finish him good.”

Jesse disagreed. “Maybe you should let him suffer.”

Any possible sympathies Porter held for the coward being bullied by the bold one were gone in that moment of spite. Too often the coward will betray just how cruel they can be when given an ounce of power.

They rounded about the horse to look down on Porter as the moon crept from behind the curtain of clouds, revealing the dull gleam of his blue gun barrel.

Porter shot the bold bushwhacker between the eyes before he could put a bead on Porter with the rifle. He was ready for the other one too.

But Jesse, the coward, shrieked and ran.

Porter was not afraid of shooting the man, trapped as he was, but he didn't want to remain stuck beneath the dead horse. He was willing to cut a deal with the bushwhacker.

"Jesse! Get over here!" he repeated what the bold one had shouted a moment before his death.

But Jesse didn't listen, instead he mounted his horse, took the reins of the dead man's horse too, and raced away as swiftly as he could. Hoofbeats drummed against the stone cliffs in the distance for what seemed a terrible long time.

His leg was numb beneath the dead stallion's ribs, and Porter struggled once more to escape but to no avail. Finally, he had to relent that he was stuck in the moment and allowed the weariness to take him as he went to sleep on the cold rocky ground, wondering if he might have to carve his way free of his favorite horse with the bowie knife in the morning.

## Born in the Badlands

Morning's golden sunlight splashed into Porter's eyes, and he blinked awake. His leg was numb, but the rest of his body was sore from sleeping on the ground and being almost thrown by his dead horse. He rubbed the sleep from the edges of his eyes and strained for his canteen that was just out of reach.

He hoped to pull his leg free even if it meant leaving the boot beneath the horse, but his foot was almost certainly trapped in the stirrup that must have been twisted under the horse. After giving it several more tries, he looked at his bowie knife, lamenting what had to be done to free himself.

The stallion had been one of the best horses he had owned in years, and now it had been done in by some low-down bushwhackers. Porter would make them pay.

But first he had to get free. The idea of carving himself free was nauseating but seemed necessary.

He positioned the knife above the animal's back... then froze as a cowbell clanged nearby.

He struggled against his trapped leg all the while the cowbell drew nearer, albeit at a very leisurely pace. Could it be cattle grazing and slowly moving to a better spot for range? Glancing about, there was little forage anywhere nearby, even in the dry creek-bed of a trail.

The tin sound of the cowbell continued for several minutes, then finally went silent.

Porter arched around. A young girl, maybe ten-years-old, stood beside a cow. She stared at him, unmoving save for the slight breeze that stirred her dress.

“Hey, girl, I could use some help. Maybe get your pa.”

“Pa is gone.”

“Your ma then.”

“She died a year ago.”

Porter sighed and decided on a new approach. “You got a fine cow there. Maybe you could hustle it to the other side of my horse and attach it to the saddle and pull it off of my leg. I’m stuck here.”

She remained in place. “I heard shooting last night and then horses running past our place. Was that you?”

“Half of that was me, yeah.”

“You kill that man there?” She pointed toward the dead bushwhacker.

Porter had nearly forgotten him as he had fallen out of sight.

“I did, yeah. They were trying to bushwhack me. I got the one, and the other must have been who went by your place. Come on, girl, my leg is powerful sore, and I need help. Gotta get the blood flowing again or I’m a goner. I’ll choke out here.”

“Choke?”

“It’s what they call dying of thirst.”

“I suppose Petunia might be able to pull that horse off your leg,” she said, leading the cow with a short bit of rope. The dairy cow seemed accustomed to the girl and followed along, though it had a slight amount of trepidation as it realized it was being led toward the dead horse. “You a bad man?”



“Only to other bad men,” Porter answered. “I’m a territorial marshal, on my way to Graves Valley.”

“Pa says there’s a lot of bad types over in Graves Valley.”

“Well, I’m a marshal, so that’s why I’m going that way.”

“They kilt the last lawman who went there.”

Porter sighed again, growing impatient as he waited to free his leg. “I heard that. But I aim to go anyhow. Now how about we get that cow of yours on the other side and tug this horse off my leg?”

The girl looked sullenly at him. “My name is Holli[HA1].”

“Holli, I’d be much obliged if you would get your cow there to pull the horse off of me.”

“I’m fixing to do that, I just thought I should know your name before I did that in case you’re a bad man too.”

“Holli, I’m Porter Rockwell, territorial marshal.”

“I think I’ve heard your name. I thought your hair would be longer though.”

“I keep it up under my hat sometimes, see?” He pulled his hat off, letting more of his hair tumble out where it had been

braided up.

“All right, pleased to meet you. Come on Petunia.” She took the skittish cow to the opposite side and tied the animal to a section of saddle. She must have been adept at knots despite her age, because Porter didn’t need to adjust her work or give her any tips. She simply took Petunia’s rope and looped it around the saddle horn, then led the cow to pulling. With a few great heaves the stallion’s body was tugged up an inch or two and to the side, just enough that Porter managed to free his leg and twist out of the boot before the stirrup would let go.

Pain washed over the leg as blood returned. He wondered if it was broken, but after a long moment in which he was grateful Holli asked him no more questions, he was able to brace himself on the side of the dead stallion and stand.

Gritting his teeth and doing his damndest to not swear in front of the girl, he hobbled about, falling once and catching himself against the saddle. His leg was not broken but terribly bruised and painful.

“Thank you much for that, Holli.”

“What would you have done if I hadn’t come along?” She gestured skyward at the circling buzzards.

“I suppose I would have had to eat my way out, ahead of them birds.”

She wrinkled her nose at that.

Porter asked, “Where is your pa?”

“He had to go out to the Olsen’s ranch yesterday, to help with their roundup. Told me he thought he would be back later tonight or tomorrow.”

“You’re all by your lonesome?”

“No, old Mrs. Reade isn’t too far away, but after last night, I thought I’d come and see what that shooting was.”

“That could have been dangerous.”

Holli shrugged. “It was late last night, not this morning. I heard a couple horses go racing past, and I wondered what I’d find up here after that shooting. And it was you.”

“I am much obliged.” He uncinched his saddle and with some effort pulled it free of the dead horse and slung it and the saddle bags over his shoulder.

“You still ought to think twice about going to Graves Valley. I ain’t heard anything good about it.”

Porter nodded as he leaned and hobbled alongside her.

“How far is your place?”

“Just down the hill a spell and back in the trees.”

“Don’t suppose I was smelling apple pie from your place last night, was I?”

“I made some with Mrs. Reade, yes. You want to barter for some?”

Porter smiled. “I’ll barter with you for some apple pie, let me see what I’ve got.” He reached into his saddlebags and found a top that he had saved for trade in case he came across any Indian children.

“That’s a kid’s toy.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not a child. Pa says I am a little woman.”

“I bet you are. What else might you be interested in? I have a spyglass, but that seems like it would be worth more than a pie.”

“Listen. You’re without a horse. You ought to be concerned about that before you go worrying about a pie.”

“You’re right, I need a horse, but I’m hungry now.”

“I can feed you if you feel up to some chores around the house, and we can talk to my Pa about a horse. He might be willing to sell you a Sorrell we got named Jenny.”

It wasn't that far of a walk back to the girl's farmstead. Just down the hill and to the right of an orchard. Small apple trees were bearing fruit, and the warm sunshine felt good against the crisp morning air. His leg had blood flowing again and felt better despite the continuing sting of the bruises.

“This is a nice place, nestled between the canyon walls here. Pretty too,” Porter said.

“Pa sure likes it, but I get awful lonely.”

“I thought there were people hereabouts, you mentioned a Mrs. someone.”

Holli paused and said, “There are people here, but not many children, I don't hardly ever see other children, and there's no one to play with even when my chores are done. I know why Pa likes it, he's so busy he doesn't have time to think about Ma being gone.”

“I'm sorry 'bout that.”

“I'm used to it.” She nodded toward an outbuilding. “There's the barn, and we could use some chopped wood and

apples harvested.”

“I’ll get on that,” Porter said. It was good clean work that he had no trouble doing, but he did lament the loss of a good horse and this delay keeping him from his mission, but he had to find some amount of gratitude for this opportunity. Most of the time out in the badlands there wouldn’t be a helping hand at all.

Holli put the cow, Petunia, into a corralled pasture beside the barn and said, “I’ll find you some breakfast, once you done a stack of wood.”

“All right,” Porter answered, tipping his hat. “Thanks again.”

After he had split a few cords of wood, Holli brought him a breakfast of eggs and a big slice of apple pie. He ate ravenously; food never tastes so good as it does to a hungry man.

“That might make you sick, eating like that,” Holli said.

“I worked up an appetite,” Porter said.

Holli pointed back toward the red cliffs. “Over there across the river is a bunch of Indian drawings.”

“I’ve seen them before,” Porter said.

“When?”

“I passed by this way a few years ago.”

“They’re strange. Red, like clotted blood, and men with horns.”

Porter nodded. “They are ancient. The horns are usually a medicine man.”

“How do you know?”

He finished the last bite of the pie. “I’ve met a few.”

“Men with horns?”

Porter chuckled. “No. Medicine men, the shamans of the tribes. They wear buffalo horns on their headdresses. They’re supposed to talk to the spirits and such. They go on dream quests and come back and tell the tribe what their ancestors or the gods said.”

“Pa says there is only one God.”

“One God in charge sure, but what about the ten commandments?”

Holli wrinkled her nose and shook her head, answering, “Indians don’t follow the ten commandments.”

Porter grinned. “Near enough white men don’t either. But do you know them?” he asked, pointing an accusatory finger.

“I know them. I go to church on Sunday.”

“Do ya?”

“Yes, I do, Mr. Rockwell, and I know the scriptures!”

“Well then, you’ll know that the very first commandment is what?”

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”

Porter stood. “Yep, he said that, but notice he didn’t say that there weren’t any other gods, just that you shouldn’t have any others before him.”

“I guess I just always thought they were demons.”

“Demons or small gods, call them what you will, but they’re out there.” He gestured toward the canyon walls.

“You trying to scare me now?”

“Nope.” Porter shook his head. “We’re just talking about what the medicine men do and why they put their marks on the stone ages ago.”

“I don’t think I like where this talk is going.”



Porter nodded again. “Fine, how about another slice of that apple pie?”

Holli rolled her eyes but took his plate, saying, “I’ll be right back. You keep splitting that wood.”

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It was getting late when Harry Wilkins made it back. He had been doing a fall roundup with neighbors in Torrey and was anxious to get home and check on his daughter. He was surprised to come through the front door of his modest little cabin and see his daughter, Holli, and old Mrs Reade knitting in the rocking chair by the fire, entertaining a sinister looking stranger. He hadn’t expected anyone else to be there as there was no horse out front.

“Howdy, stranger, I’m Harry Wilkins,” he said, mustering up courage against his awkward surprise.

Porter rose and extended a hand and they shook. “I’m Port.”

“Port? What are you doing out here? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Not at all,” Porter said. “Had my horse shot out from under me by bushwhackers, and your daughter was kind

enough to pull me loose and said that you might have a Sorrell you could sell me.”

“Maybe,” Harry said as he rubbed his chin. He winked as he answered, “But Jenny is yours, Holli.”

Holli said, “I wasn’t going to sell her without your approval, Pa.”

“Where are you headed, Mr. Port?”

“Graves Valley. I’m after some rustlers.”

Harry leaned forward in his chair. “Without a horse?”

“I started with a posse, but they were called away when we were only as far as Levan. My horse was shot, as I said.”

Harry pondered a moment. “Where are those dry-gulchers now?”

“Graves Valley I’d imagine. If you ain’t got a horse to sell, can you direct me to anyone hereabouts that would?”

Harry rubbed his chin nervously again. “We can sell you the Sorrell, but I feel I ought to warn you about going to Graves Valley on your lonesome. Lot of outlaws congregate there. They’re supported by a few of the local ranchers. Fork their own broncs, if you catch my drift. They won’t talk, and they won’t take kindly to any lawman coming in. Best to keep

clear of them unless you have an army of a posse with you, and then the rustlers would likely just fade away into one of their hideaway canyons and you'd never find them anyhow."

"Be that as it may, I have a job to do. There's a few things I need to reckon on out that way, and maybe by my lonesome is best, for the sake of if those boys can fade away into lost canyons."

Harry nodded. "Can't say we didn't warn ya."

"I'd never say that," Porter answered with a smile.

"Harry," interrupted old Mrs. Reade as she continued knitting.

"In a moment, Mrs. Reade. Port, I suppose we could sell the horse for, say, one hundred and fifty dollars. A saddle will be another fifty."

"Harry," Mrs. Reade repeated.

Harry held up a hand to her. "In a moment."

"I've got a saddle," Porter said. "I've got twenty-five dollars I can pay right now and a promise I can do the rest soon as I collect the reward on some of the bounties from those fellers in Graves Valley."

Harry scoffed. “Bounties for men you haven’t caught yet? Gunmen that already dry-gulched you once? I’m sorry, Port, but that dog don’t hunt. I cannot advance you for a horse you’re likely to get shot out of tomorrow when you go riding into Graves Valley like a fool.”

“Harry,” Mrs. Reade prodded.

Harry merely held a hand up to call for silence on the matter. He didn’t need the old woman butting in and trying to make him cut a losing deal on a horse for a man who was simply going to be killed or ride away the very next day.

Porter nodded. “I understand. Any more pie, Holli?”

Holli stood. “Yes, Mr. Rockwell.” She took his plate.

Old Mrs. Reade remained in the rocking chair but cackled aloud.

Harry blanched. “Did you just say Rockwell? You’re Port Rockwell? Orrin Porter Rockwell?”

“Yup,” Porter answered.

Only now did Harry notice the telltale long hair coming down Port’s shoulders like a dark river. The dull gleam of wood and steel where the gun handles poked out of his vest pockets, reflecting the hint of firelight. The bowie knife at his

hip and the well-worn boots of a man who strode through the badlands with impunity.

Harry gulped. “The horse is yours. We’ll let you pay any time you can.”

Porter gave him a wolfish grin. “Much obliged.”

# Bruising a Heel

Porter spent the night in the barn and rose early the next morning to prepare the Sorrell and make his way toward Graves Valley. Holli had packed him some jerky and another pie wrapped up in a dishcloth that she carefully put into his saddle bags.

“Someday, you’re going to make a man very happy, little woman.”

“I’ll remember you said that next time there is a dance and young Tommy Gifford ignores my asking him to waltz,” she said.

“They won’t be ignoring you soon enough.” He tipped his hat and bid them farewell.

Porter rode down to Sulphur Creek and followed it through the serpentine canyon that wove between the towering red cliffs. For now, there was plenty of good water and trees along its banks for cover, good grass for the horse to forage on, and clear sky above. It was a very pleasant place, and

Porter wondered about what lay ahead for him, when he'd followed the Sulphur to where it would meet Muddy Creek and form the Dirty Devil River. That junction was where Graves Valley lay.

Could the stories he had heard be true? So many strange things came wandering to his mind that he'd heard since he set out on this hunt. The peculiar circumstances of his posse all being drawn off one by one. The ambush and losing the best horse he had owned in years. The recent loss of his good dog, Dawg. The rumors the Wilkins had spoken of. All of it tumbled together to create a warning of sorts. He'd already suspected for some time that it was a haven for rustlers and robbers, aided by ranchers who would look the other way when misdeeds occurred. This wouldn't be the only place like that in the territory, Brown's Hole to the north was the same. But no one ever said Brown's Hole had a curse on it like Graves Valley.

Not that it changed things. He was drawn here—like a magnet to a lodestone. And he wasn't the only one. Bad men, too, thinking this was a place they could hide from the law.

Porter had tracked more than two dozen rustlers heading this way, and then he heard from friends and fellow lawmen,

Bill Hickman and Lot Smith, that more men had been converging toward this area. He suspected a new gang of rustlers. But some of it didn't add up. Some of the men were completely unconnected to the others, robbing the stage out of Nephi. Others that had come around the mountains down from Ogden. All of them seemed to be heading this way.

The sun beat down, and Porter found himself in a wide-open space. He cut across a hillside that he gauged would save him and the horse a little time and saw a massive butte in the distance. Then something else that caught his eye—circling vultures and a blue and brown shape laying out in some rocks nearby.

It looked like a man sprawled out on his back. Another victim of the bushwhackers?

As Porter rode in closer, the man's legs kicked a little, and he moved to the side as if he could hear the hoofbeats approaching.

“Lo there,” called Porter. “You all right?”

The man was still on his back and gasped then grunted as he rolled over and crawled away on his belly, down the ledge and out of Porter's sight.



“Take it easy,” Porter said, “I just wanted to make sure you were all right.”

He could hear the man scrambling over some rocks. Porter eased his horse around the side, wondering if perhaps the man was wounded, scared, or driven mad by the sun.

Porter rode around the boulder, surprised to see the man standing there. He was filthy but fully dressed and stood facing Porter with a blank expression on his gray-bearded face. His eyes looked solid white like he was blind. Then he blinked and they became yellowed slits for just a heartbeat and then back to spider-egg white.

“You all right?” Porter asked, wondering if he was all right himself or if he had imagined the horrific eye change.

The man hissed and backed away a step or two.

Porter held his hands up to show he wasn't holding a weapon. “I don't want anything from you, old man, was just checking to see if you were all right. A body could die out here in this lonesome.”

The man's tongue slipped out of his mouth as if he were tasting the air.

“I can’t help you if you can’t help yourself,” Porter said as much to himself, judging that the old man was crazy. “I’m heading toward Graves Valley and some civilization, I think, if you want to come along.”

The old man rocked his head slowly from side to side.

Porter frowned with disgust. This was beyond anything he had any skill to help with, and the old man seemed perfectly capable of movement, just insane.

Jenny the Sorrell was nervous and neighed then stepped back in reproach. She disliked the old man more than Porter did.

The old man’s tongue slipped out once more, then he scurried forward, making inhumane sounds as he did so.

Jenny startled, and it was all Porter could do to stay in the saddle while the old man rushed him with his mouth wide open like he intended to bite either Porter or the horse.

Porter drew his gun and fired once in the air, but the old man didn’t halt his attack.

Jenny panicked and reared back, throwing Porter from the saddle. He landed on the caprock on an already terrible sore

leg. He dropped his gun too. Both things made him tremendously angry.

The old man went for the horse, but it sidled away faster than he could, so his attention was turned back to Porter lying on the ground trying to catch his stolen breath.

“You crazy coot!” Porter snarled as the old man snatched at him with scarred-up old sunburnt hands.

The old man’s eyes flickered back to the baleful yellow and black slits—they looked like a rattlesnake’s eyes.

Porter kicked him away, sending a shot of pain through his sore leg. His fingers found the fallen gun.

The old man raced back toward Port with his mouth agape, making the terrible hissing sound.

Feeling like he had no choice; Porter shot the crazed old man in the knee.

He went down on his belly and *slithered* toward Porter, still hissing with his mouth open, oblivious to the blood and damage done. Clawed fingers grasped at Porter as the man attempted to bite his boot. Porter sent his heel into the open mouth and chin of the old man, knocking teeth loose—and still the crazed old man continued his vicious attack.

With no other choice, Porter shot him.

Like a sidewinder, the old man writhed on his back and twisted away as the bullet ripped through his rib cage.

Porter had meant a head shot, but the old man moved with sinewy reflexes faster than belied his filthy old look.

The old man twitched inward on himself, then lashed out, attempting to bite, his mouth bloody and wretched, but he did not sound like a human in pain, and that was the most horrific thing to Porter.

He had heard many men die, most called out for their mothers or cursed their enemies, some cried out for relief from the pain, and some in fear of judgement and God's own wrath for their misdeeds, but this crazy old man's humanity was gone.

Porter got himself up and dusted off, angry that his leg stung so bad from a second fall. He glared at Jenny, upset that he had lost a better horse that wouldn't panic quite so bad.

"I tried to warn you off, you damn fool," Porter said as he strode toward the old man laying on his back.

The punctured lung brought up red froth from the wound as the old man clawed at his rib cage and twisted about like

wounded animal. He rolled over onto his belly and crawled toward Porter with his bloody mouth open, hissing like a snake.

“Crazy.” Porter shook his head and put a bullet in the brain pan of the old man. Even with such a mortal wound the man twisted about and struck out like a distressed snake, trying to wound what was impossible to reach.

Finally, the old man went still. There was nothing around, no saddlebags or other articles to identify the man or tell what or who he was.

Morbid curiosity drove Porter to run a hand over the man’s eyes and see what they looked like. Would they remain white or reveal a yellowed snakes?

Brushing against the eyelid showed that there were two lids, a solid white and a yellow snakes beneath. Porter had never seen such a curious mutation, and he cursed softly to himself.

“Maybe he was always a freak of nature and lived out here like a reptile?” he said to Jenny, who snorted in disagreement.

“You’re right, he wouldn’t be wearing clothes even in this sorry of shape if he hadn’t come from somewhere.”

He glanced across the wide valley and tried to gauge how far it was to Graves Valley, but as soon as he considered it, he gave the thought up. The dead old man had a terrible snaky smell, and Jenny wanted nothing to do with him. Porter didn’t like the idea of carting the body behind him on the saddle either, so he spent time to bury the old man under a pile of stones and then be on his way.

“That at least should keep the coyotes off him,” he said to Jenny, who was still careful not to come too close to the crazed old man.

He would have to ask in Graves Valley if anyone knew of a crazy old man west of town. Someone must have come across him before. Maybe the old man hadn’t always been crazed like a snake man, or worse, maybe he had bitten someone else. That wasn’t the kind of thing anyone was likely to forget.

# A Brood of Vipers

Porter rode past a promontory that stuck up out of the red rock like a sentinel. Below stretched a valley, wild and untamed as anywhere. Cottonwoods and cedars grew alongside the river that snaked through, but not far beyond were the stark red cliffs reminding him that the desert was waiting there like a lion ready to pounce. The unnamed mountains were not far in the distance to the south.

Just beyond the edge of the small town was an archway made of logs. Two big pillars from great trees and two more logs set horizontal, almost making the thing look like a big rounded letter A—near enough to thirty feet high. But the truly disturbing thing was that a man hung from just off center. Crows picked at his carcass.

He had been there for some time. Porter guessed at least a week given his sorry condition. The body drifted back and forth in the wind like a pendulum. It was gruesome, especially with the crows perched on his shoulders like dark companions, picking away at his bones.

Porter had to ride just beneath and to the side of the body to avoid the occasionally falling maggot. He frowned and stole a glance upward, wondering at who the dead man was. The dirty rotten clothing and terrible condition of the deceased left nothing recognizable on the death's head. But the left boot heel had a purposeful indentation cut into it. A five-pointed star. Porter now had a good idea who the dead man was. A fellow deputy marshal name of Tibbets who had just such a pattern cut into his boot so fellow lawmen like Porter would know who they were tracking in the desert if need be.

This wasn't tracking, and Porter wasn't looking for Tibbets, but at least he could now identify the dead man.

An old man sat not far away along the banks of the Dirty Devil River, and Porter called to him. "Here now, who is that dead man swinging and why is his carcass still hanging up there?"

The old man looked timid at Porter calling him away from fishing. "That was a rustler, and we don't take no guff from them types here. Ain't no one gonna try and steal cattle from us hereabout. He was left to swing as a warning to the other rustlers."

"He was a rustler?"



“That’s right,” said the old man.

Porter knew that was a lie, at least so far as what Tibbets would have been doing, but the old man seemed like he believed what someone else had said.

“Is there a lawman in town?”

“Thank the heavens no, we fork our own broncs here. We don’t need nothing from nobody. If you’re looking for trouble you had better keep on riding. But if you’re looking for work, go ahead and ask the Tinker about it. He knows everybody.”

“And you don’t? It ain’t a very big town.”

“Nope,” answered the man, not even bothering to look at Porter. “But I mind my own business and just fish. Safer that way. You ask the Tinker.”

“I’ll do that,” Porter said, tipping his hat and riding on.

The town of Graves Valley was spread amongst a few small hills and trees. Ramshackle buildings made of logs or discarded, broken down wagons. Nothing went to waste here. One place had even hollowed out the red underside of a cliff-face, making a cave house of sorts. A few cattle bawled in lodgepole corrals, but Porter could see more along the river in the lush grass. Smoke rose lazily from the chimneys, and it

seemed peaceful enough, though Porter knew that folk here were at least skirting the law. To see Tibbets hung and left to rot made him angry, but he wasn't going to start anything about it just yet. He would get to that soon enough and see to it that he had a proper burial.

There was no church or schoolyard, no children playing nor anything with a sign that even resembled a saloon or hotel, just homes and barns. Not that that didn't mean some place was gathering like a saloon, just no one bothered with a sign out here.

Horses were quartered in front of a few of the buildings, and Porter guessed the larger of them belonged to the bushwhackers he was seeking.

A fancy covered wagon was set with wood panels all about and had the words "Medicine Show" in big garish letters painted across both sides. Porter had seen the lettering before somewhere but could not recollect where. Odd for such an outfit to be in a tiny place like this. Typically snake oil salesmen sold their wares and move on quick. Stuck in a small desert town like this, days away from other spots to hide, could be bad for business. Soon as one customer comes up

sick, or worse, the townsfolk would lynch such a professed quack of a doctor.

The man himself appeared, rummaging in the back of his wagon. He gave Porter a quick look then went back to foraging in the back, as if making himself available for Porter but forcing the newcomer to come to him first.

Porter rode up beside the wagon and coughed.

The Tinker had a familiar look about him, like he was someone you used to know but couldn't quite place. His age was indeterminate, which didn't help things. His hair was gray but full and shiny as if he still had a full head of hair beneath the top hat and was one of those people whose color fades to ash while they're still young. His skin was ruddy and tight, though the mustache and short, well-kept beard were gray as ash too. His clothing was strange, a mismatch of fine eastern garb but well-worn from travel and use with a few patches at the elbows and knees. He wore a long coat where any weapon might be hidden, but he did not wear a gun-belt or carry a knife openly.

“Anything I can help you with, friend?” the Tinker asked as he stood apart from his wagon and shut the rear door. He gesticulated his arms widely while speaking, as if the hand

flourishes might give weight to his words. “I may have a cure for whatever ails you here in the Medicine Show wagon.”

Porter guessed it was all part of the showman’s act. “That’s all right. I just got to town,” he said. “You just getting here yourself?”

The Tinker shook his head. “I’ve been here for a spell,” he said with a disarming grin.

“Business that good or that bad?”

Porter couldn’t read well but had come to recognize certain words and headings upon stationery or signposts. He had seen such snake oil salesmen before and held them in low regard, but until the man broke the law, Porter would do his best to ignore him.

The Tinker chuckled. “I like you. Business is fine enough, I suppose. I do well with my tinctures and such. But my horse went lame, and I’m here trying to cut a deal, then I’ll move on, but this may be as good a spot as any to wait out the winter. Old Tilly rents a good room in exchange for my helping with her consumption.”

Porter narrowed his gaze. This was an unexpected turn. A quack medicine doctor like this waiting out the winter...here?

He must be in real good with the locals, otherwise he'd be run out on a rail. There must be a bigger story there.

“The winter? It's early October. You got time to make your way south to greener pastures,” Porter answered.

The Tinker didn't stop grinning. “If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were being unfriendly—and you're the stranger here. I have plenty of friends, if you're thinking of going highwayman on me.”

Porter shook his head. “I'm not highwayman, just pondering your stay in a small town like this.”

“That makes sense then, friend. Hope I didn't get your dander up.”

“A woman?” Porter pressed.

The Tinker laughed. “No. No women here that I'm interested in, just a couple ladies of the night and Shayla Randles. But no one I'm in love with.” He shifted his weight and took in Porter's situation. “And what about you? What brought you here? Looking for work?”

“What kind of work is here?”

“Oh, the usual. Some cow punching, roping, riding—maybe a little mining if we got some time to kill out in the

hills.”

Porter withdrew a flask and took a long pull, then said, “My understanding was there might be some highway work here.”

“Thought you weren’t a highwayman?” said the Tinker, cocking his head.

“I’m not. I’m the law.” Porter flashed a badge from inside his vest. “I’m a territorial marshal and heard tell that a lot of rustlers have been gathering hereabouts. I’m also looking for a man that shot my horse out from under me. I have reason to believe he came this way.”

“A lawman, huh? You don’t say...” The Tinker rubbed his chin. “Well now. I’d be careful letting some folks know, there are some toughs here, like Mexican Joe and his gang, and the Barber Gang too.”

“Barber?”

The Tinker nodded. “Lon Barber has a gang, and they just recently rode in. Ain’t none of my business, but they’re tough customers. I’d watch myself, or better yet, think about high-tailing it out of here.”

Porter glanced toward where the Tinker had gestured. There were seven horses tied to a rail and watering trough in front of a log and rock cabin. One skinny cowboy stood out front frowning toward Porter and the Tinker. He spit then went inside.

“That was the Laredo Kid giving you the stink-eye.”

Porter argued, “You sure it wasn’t for you?”

“I’m sure. Could be trouble any moment now.” The Tinker worked his way around the side of the wagon.

A door crashed open, and three cowboys came out, one walking a little crooked and slower than his companions as if he had a bum leg.

“Who the hell are you?” barked the foremost one, a young lad of perhaps eighteen or nineteen.

“Easy,” Porter said calmly, showing his hands.

“He’s got a big mouth, but he’s right. Who are you?” asked his elder companion of perhaps Porter’s same middle age. The third was still hobbling forward.

The Tinker was somewhere behind his Medicine Wagon. Porter always watched his backtrail.

Porter gave them a grin. "I guess I'm the latest stranger in town is all. Who're you fellers?"

The young slim man drew his six-gun and spun it in front of Porter, showcasing his skill and speed with the revolver. "I'm the Laredo Kid, and I've killed five men in gunfights between here and Texas."

Porter sniffed. "And what did that get you?"

"Easy," cautioned the older man. "He's goading you, Kid."

The Kid sneered. "I'm wanted in five territories, got a price on my head for five hundred dollars!" He spun his six-shooter and holstered it, then grinned as if waiting for applause.

Porter yawned, giving the Kid no satisfaction.

The third man had finally hobbled forward and stood behind his companions. He squinted at Porter as if trying to recall his face.

The elder man spoke, "I'm Wilson, behind me is Taylor, and you've met the Laredo Kid. Who are you?"

Porter smirked. "I'm Port."



“Rockwell?” asked Taylor from behind as if he now recollected where he recognized Porter.

“That’s right.”

“The lawman?”

“Yep.”

Time stood still, frozen in the early morning sunlight.

Fingers twitched.

Men glanced at one another.

The Laredo Kid made the first move to retake his pistol.

“Don’t,” cautioned Wilson. “I hear it on good authority he’s got some kind of charmed life.”

The Kid sneered. “No man is immortal.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Porter said dryly.

The Kid snarled a question like a cornered wolf. “What’d you come here for? Law ain’t wanted here.”

“Someone shot my horse, and I’m concerned it might be one of you.”

“A horse? Tough go for short dough, trying to get one of us to pay up.” The Kid glanced back at his companions.

Despite the tough talk, he clearly took comfort that they were behind him, backing him up.

“There’s more than you,” Porter answered. “Even small change adds up.”

“Small change?” The Kid’s lips curled into a sneer, his intent was clear, and he believed his friends would be forced into backing his play.

“I don’t think we want any trouble with Marshal Rockwell,” Wilson said, taking a step backward.

Taylor nodded his agreement. “Let’s go, Kid.”

The Kid shook his head, staring daggers at Porter. “He’s the law, and he’s here for me.”

Porter sniffed. “I never heard of you, kid, and unless your real name is Jesse, I don’t think you’re the one I’m looking for.”

“Jesse?” the Kid questioned. “You bluffing me?”

“Nope.”

“Let this go, Kid,” cautioned Wilson.

The Kid’s eyes shifted, suddenly emboldened. “He must have seen what we already did for the last one. He’s got to go

down.”

Port’s eyes flashed in anger, guessing they were the ones who had strung up Tibbets. They deserved to die.

Taylor protested, “No, Kid.”

But it was too late. The Laredo Kid made his move and his friends had to back his play. All hands reached and slapped leather as guns were drawn and fired.

Porter’s pistols roared as he fired with both hands. Lead flew past him, missing within mere hairs. Such was Porter’s blessing, still protecting his long-haired scalp.

The men were close, and all three of Porter’s foes dropped to the ground in anguish, terrible holes plowed through them like a farmer’s field. Wilson and Taylor were dead instantly, the Kid struggled on the ground for a moment, kicking, hate welling in his eyes before they dimmed, and his pistol hand went limp.

Men crowded out from the dwelling they had been in and looked aghast at the three dead men on the ground before Porter. One especially imposing man in the shadow of the dark doorway glanced at Porter and puffed on his cigar, like a coal

in Hell's dark cavern, before vanishing back into the oil lamp haunted gloom.

The Tinker stepped forward and shouted at the men gathered, "This here is Porter Rockwell, territorial marshal come to deliver justice to Graves Valley at last, you best watch yourselves! Judgment is coming for you!" He whooped and hollered, taking his hat off and slapping it against his leg, carrying on for a long moment and repeating himself as more townsfolk gathered about to look upon the dead.

"Enough of that," Porter said sternly. "Have these men placed in a barn or some such until I can get them to the coroner."

The Tinker held his palm out and said, "Graves Valley has no coroner, but for a small fee, I can help you out. I have been an undertaker in my time and can do the necessary work for their internment."

Porter nodded and dropped a quarter in his palm.

The Tinker frowned.

"More later," Porter said. "And get that corpse off that signpost in front of town. I expect a decent burial for him."

The Tinker whistled, and two men came running from up the street while two more appeared from just across the way.

Porter couldn't help but notice they'd been close by and watching in hiding when everything had happened. At least they hadn't interfered.

The Tinker said, "Geech, Turnpike, Sundown, help Smitty move these dead. After that, get the uh," he paused a long moment, "get the rustler down from the big H."

Three of the men looked as much like gun-fighting ruffians as cowboys, but in this country that was to be expected. The three of them clearly followed the Tinker's lead. The one called Sundown was a negro and wore a big sombrero like a Mexican, and fancy fringed chaps too. He nodded at Porter as he helped pick up one of the dead. The last one, Smitty, was an older man and clearly not of the same cloth as the other three.

"What does Barber say about it?" asked Geech.

The Tinker shook his head. "He didn't say nothing, so we just move 'em."

"Looks like the odds are swinging in our favor," Sundown said with a chuckle.

Porter asked the Tinker, “What did he mean by that?”

The Tinker said, “Those boys are good lads, but in opposition to Barber’s gang. I couldn’t very well ask Barber to move his own dead men out of the street. I wouldn’t get paid.”

“Hard bargain,” Porter agreed, pondering what kind of den of vipers he had ridden into.

# The coals may be dim but the fire is not out

A dust devil danced along the periphery of the town as the dead were moved off the street.

The dark curved outline of a woman stood at the far end of the town watching. The woman was of curious outline and for a moment it almost seemed if she had materialized out of the dust devil itself, but that was impossible. Her silhouette seemed to have too many writhing limbs coming from its hourglass shape. The sun shifted, and Porter got a better look at her. She was a tall Indian maiden wearing a tight, revealing buckskin vest. At least two large snakes slithered over her shoulders, bare arms, and in her long black hair. Feathers, turquoise jewelry, and other strange fetishes were also on her person, making her look exotic and bizarre compared to what the local Utes typically wore. She stood staring back at Porter with a single eye, a large black rag covering her opposite eye.

She stared for a long moment before walking away behind the sloping red hillside.

“Who the hell was that?” Porter asked.

“That Injun? That’s One Eye, she’s a Paiute medicine woman,” answered Geech, one of the men who had helped move the dead. “She’s always been around, right, Smitty?”

The older man, Smitty, nodded in agreement. “Yup. As long as anyone has lived hereabouts.”

“What can you tell me about her?” Porter asked.

Smitty answered, “One Eye? Not much. I know even her own people are afraid of her, always carrying on with those rattlesnakes of hers.”

“She carries live rattlesnakes?”

The old man nodded. “If she ain’t carrying them on her person, they’re in a satchel. She can call to them too, and they come right quick.”

“She’s magic,” Geech added, bobbing his head and grinning with big dirty teeth.

Porter squinted at that, dubious at the matter-of-fact explanation.



Smitty smoothed his beard. "I can see you doubt. Listen, you're a lawman and you came here because of the drygulchers that fill up this town, but hell, us here in town are more concerned about the law coming down on our heads than we are these bandits and rustlers. We service them and they pay us good. We just don't worry too much about where they're getting their money from, you know? You coming here is just upsetting the system. And I don't want to see any more blood spilt."

"You admitting to being an accomplice?" Porter asked.

The old man shook his head. "I wouldn't call it that."

"You don't think that will come back to haunt you?" Porter prodded.

"Maybe, but everything comes back someday, so the way we see it, we might as well be comfortable in the meantime. It's helped me have a semi-profitable saloon hereabouts."

Porter's interest was perked beyond any of the stories. "Saloon? Where?"

"Right through them doors, that's my place. I got whiskey."

Porter urged, "Let's go get a drink then."

“This way,” said the old man. “But remember, I ain’t got no truck with that Injun shaman. She may not like me talking about her.”

Porter scratched his chin then spit. “What’s any of that got to do with One Eye?”

The old man grinned. “Well, you see, we have a lot of bad men here, and one of the gangs, Holt’s, a year back or so started beating up on One Eye when they caught her stalking around their stable one night. Thought she might be fixing to steal one of their horses or maybe put a curse on them. But man did she show them!”

“Did she curse them?”

Smitty continued, “Hold your horses. They beat her within an inch of her life. And that’s after they did what bad men do to women.”

Geech added, “It’s why she’s missing an eye.”

Smitty nodded and said, “That’s right. They smashed it out of her skull, left her half dead, they did. Then they pissed on her and laughed and went drinking and to bed over there in what was Wheeler’s log cabin.” He gestured toward a black ruin that was now just a greasy spot on the landscape. The

faint hint of smoke seemed to hang over the burnt-out logs despite it being more than a year earlier.

“One Eye did that?”

“Well, she did, and she didn’t.” The old man almost jumped in place with glee. “I didn’t much care for Holt’s gang. They were cruel bastards. But they awoke in the morning inside the cabin, and it was filled with rattlers. They got all bit up, beyond what anyone could do to stave off the poison. Holt’s men burned the cabin to get rid of the snakes and the dead.”

“All of them died,” Geech said, bobbing his head.

“Soon enough, everyone but the kid, McCoy, who was asleep in the barn, that and he had no part in beating One Eye, so we all figured that’s why he was spared.”

“Holt himself?”

“He was one of the ones so snakebit he swelled up and squealed like a stuck pig. Begged one of his own men to shoot him and put him out of his misery. The last couple burnt the cabin and then died.”

Porter wondered aloud, “The rest of the town just gonna stand for this One Eye being around slinging curses and

snakes like that?”

“No one can prove it, and the Round Up boys and Barber’s gang were glad that Holt’s gang was gone. Until One Eye pulls something else drastic, I think she’ll be all right. ‘Sides, she can do medicine and fix folks up right quick if they pay her.”

“She can cure any snake bite or fever. She done fixed me up good last winter,” Geech said.

Porter asked, “What did they call her before the One Eye?”

Smitty shrugged. “Hell if I know. Probably Snake Woman.”

“This is a strange town.”

Smitty held the door open to the saloon. “You said it, now what can I get you to drink?”

“Whiskey,” Porter answered.

“Shayla! Get Mr. Rockwell a whiskey.”

Porter glanced at the figure behind the bar, realizing a moment later that he was staring. She had a sharp nose, strong cheekbones, and light-brunette hair, distinct brows and deep green eyes. Porter stared at her full lips and long eyelashes.

She had been smiling, speaking with some old woman at the counter who was getting up to leave, but she frowned as she saw Porter come through the door.

Smitty called again, “Shayla, whiskey for our new friend.”

“I heard you.”

She looked Porter up and down in return and reached for a whiskey bottle.

Porter went to the bar and took a seat on a wooden stool that looked like it was made from local juniper.

“You’re the law then?” she asked, dubious as anything. “You just shot a couple of Barber’s gang?”

“Three of them!” said Smitty with a cackle.

“I am territorial marshal Orrin—”

“Save it. If you’re the law I need your help with some rustlers that have been stealing from my herd, just out that way south. They think they can steal with impunity.”

“Impune!” laughed Smitty. “This girl and her big words.”

“I oughta slap you,” she said, holding a hand up for emphasis.

Smitty backed away, out of reach. “I tell you what I think. I think it could be Redbone and his braves on the warpath.”

Shayla shook her head. “They haven’t been this way in a long time. He respects the border of the nameless mountains, and we feed his tribe once in a while. It ain’t those Indians.”

Smitty continued, “Blackhawk was a friend, and look where they got us.”

“It’s not an Indian, it’s white men,” Shayla snapped.

Porter respected that and didn’t need to tell her he was friends with the savage chief Redbone, even helping rescue his daughter a few years ago. “You’re sure?”

“I’m positive. You up to doing something about it or just sitting here jawing?” She was right pretty and sure of herself.

It amused Porter that she had done almost all the talking between them and yet she was calling him out. He liked her. “Yeah, I can go look and see what I can.”

“Just look?” she prodded once more as she shifted her weight. She looked good in boots and denim jeans as opposed to most women wearing skirts. It was different, but despite how she dressed, she was a looker and feminine with a fetching way about her.

“Yeah, I’ll be looking, ma’am.”

“Ma’am? I’m Shayla Randles, and since my brother was shot by some polecat, I’m forced to take care of our herd on my own.”

“You got anyone to help you?”

“I’ve got a few cow hands, but I don’t think they’re quite as ready with a gun as you.”

So, she did know he could handle himself with a gun and wasn’t all talk. This must be a woman’s way of trying to get under his craw and force him into action. Action that she wanted. So long as it was just rustlers, that was fine. It was his job, and he could do it.

“Any idea about a man named of Jesse? I wouldn’t be surprised if he wasn’t among the rustlers.”

She shook her head, and the long wavy curls of her hair bounced a little. “Can’t say that I know who that is or where he is what with just a first name.”

“I ain’t got a second name for him, just that’s what his deceased companion called out as he ran away.”

“He ran away?” she asked, eyes flaring.

“Thought you didn’t know him?”

“I don’t, but I’m forever surprised at how every single man in this territory is a two-bit coward. Present company included.” She glared at Smitty.

Porter grinned. “I doubt that.”

“What?” she asked again.

“That you’re all that surprised.”

“I reckon I ain’t, but a girl can hope for more can’t she? At least in a place like this, where if you don’t have some amount of courage, you won’t get too far.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Porter mused. “I can go looking for sign of your rustlers tomorrow morning. What is your brand?”

“The Rocking J.”

“And you range down south of town?”

She gestured south. “All along the east side of the river so far as the mountains with no name.”

“And who is on the west side?”

“The Kelsey’s, who tend stock for no-goods like the Barber gang,” she said as she pushed a tumbler of whiskey into his waiting hand. “Your kinda folk, I’d imagine.”



Porter downed the whiskey and smiled. The warm liquid running down his throat felt good and quenched that hungry fire in the back of his brain. It had been a bit too long since he had a drink or a pleasant conversation with a woman. “My kinda folk?”

“Don’t you deal with troublemakers and roughnecks? Horse thieves and Indian braves who would just as soon skin you as look at you?”

“Somedays. Well, most days I reckon.” He smiled at her.

She smiled for the first time at him. “You are a very unpleasant looking lawman. You need a bath and a haircut. You might just look at a man and he’d curl up and die.” She said insulting things, but her eyes told a different story altogether. “I could give you a haircut.”

“I can’t accept that offer.”

“Why not?” Her lashes batted.

“Because I was promised something once upon a time.”

“What’s that?”

“That if I didn’t cut my hair, I could not be harmed by bullet or blade. And that’s stayed true all these years.”

“You funning me?” she asked as she held out her hand to shake. “Cause if you are, I’m Delilah.”

“I ain’t funning you,” he said as they shook hands.

Her touch awoke something that had been slumbering in him for a long time. Since long before his wife Mary Ann had passed a few years back.

“In spite of you desperately needing a haircut, I think I’m glad you came to town, Mr. Rockwell.”

They stared into each other’s eyes a long moment, until Smitty said something, stealing their attention.

“What’s that?” Shayla asked.

“I was wondering if Marshal Rockwell wouldn’t like some supper?”

She met Porter’s gaze once more and said, “I’ll fix the lawman up something right quick.” Shayla walked away, looking over her shoulder at Porter as she went into the kitchen.

She didn’t ask what he wanted, but there was a fire burning between them, and it excited Porter like nothing else had in a very long time.

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Once Porter had gone inside the saloon, Jesse came loping out across the dusty street like a skulking coyote avoiding a greater predator.

“Get back, you idjit,” snarled the Tinker. “He’s looking for you! Ya damn fool.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.” The Tinker raised his hand as if to strike Jesse despite him being ten feet away.

Jesse raced back to the log cabin he had just come from as the Tinker finished playing with the tinctures in the back of the Medicine Wagon.

Barely sticking his face out the door and watching toward the saloon, Jesse asked, “What are we gonna do?”

“If I was you, I’d stay hid till this is all over. It’s gonna get a bit more bloody sooner or later,” the Tinker said. “Till then, I’d stay put and out of sight or you’ll end up as dead as those three.” He gestured toward the three dead men of the Barber gang stretched out inside the empty barn.

“Just like he did to poor old Mike.”

“You sure Mike was dead?”

Jesse gulped. “He blew a hole in his head big enough to let moonlight shine thru.”

“Who else knows?”

“Nobody, but they *will* know.”

The Tinker shook his head. “You stay out of sight and don’t tell anyone else yet. Let’s just keep that bit of news under our hats for a little while. Swear to it.”

Jesse stood dumbstruck at that.

The Tinker slapped him. “I said swear to it.”

“Owww, I swear.”

The Tinker nodded as he lit a cigarette. “Good, now go hide for a spell.”

Jesse nodded, still rubbing his cheek, and slunk off.

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Porter had just finished his supper when the saloon door flew open, blasting sunlight inside, blinding the patrons. He held his six-gun at the ready beside the table, but it was unnecessary. As his eyes adjusted, Porter saw a man in a coonskin cap holding the door open as a shadow materialized out of the white sunlight and entered. He was tall and moved

with a pompous air. He wore a fancy red jacket with gold trim and a black hat with a small bill and naught else to protect his head. It was the queerest hat Porter had ever seen.

“That’s the Englishman, Monte something, I was telling you about,” Shayla whispered.

“You didn’t tell me about no Englishman.”

“Didn’t I? I thought I did.”

“Why is he here?” Porter asked.

“He’s hunting,” Shayla answered with a shrug.

“Hell, he could do that anywhere.”

The Englishman strode inside and seated himself at a table only after the man in the coonskin cap pulled out a chair and held it for him as he sat, then the coonskin capped man pushed him toward the table slightly. It was a rough go, since the floor was so uneven.

“I shall have the usual,” the Englishman proclaimed. “Along with a spot of tea served first and at the correct temperature this time.”

Porter’s lip curled in disgust. He looked to Shayla, who simply shrugged once more and went toward the cookstove.

“Hey,” Porter said loudly. “What’s your story?”

“Are you addressing me?”

“I am. I’m the territorial marshal, Porter Rockwell.”

“I see. I am Rhodes, Montague Rhodes, and I am quite sure that I am not breaking any laws, especially in this wild establishment.”

Porter scooted in his chair slightly. The Englishman was perhaps his same age, a bit past middle age, and had a well-trimmed reddish-brown mustache and chin. He had removed his cap to show short, well-coiffed hair beneath. He stood in stark contrast to his coonskin capped companion, who Porter now guessed was an opportunistic guide of sorts. “I heard you were here to hunt. What exactly might you be hunting? Seems you could hunt lots of places that aren’t so remote. That, and I doubt the game in these badlands can compare to some farther north where they tend to grow bigger. Deer in these parts aren’t that big.”

“The buffalo are big,” protested the coonskin.

“Enough of that Chauncey, you may fetch my provisions.”

Coonskin frowned at Porter but went out the door.

Porter said, "I'm just a might curious is all. This town has an abnormal amount of colorful characters."

The Englishman smiled. "Yes, it does indeed. But as to my whereabouts, I have hunted large game all over the world, Africa and now America. There are some great beasts here, grizzly bear and your smaller American lion is quite irascible, but now I am after something even more elusive and very dangerous—a giant snake. Have you seen one?"

"Snake? How big could the rattlers here be? Maybe twelve feet at the most and nothing to write home to England about."

"I beg to differ, sir. I heard reports, and I have come and not been disappointed in my endeavors."

"You seen something bigger?"

"I have not...yet."

Porter scoffed. "I thought not."

Coonskin came back inside carting several large bundles.

Monte continued, "But I have evidence enough that is worth my staying on, as you might say, for some time, until I am successful in my hunt."

Porter grunted. "Eh?"

“Chauncy, will you please. I would enjoy showing off my find to the constabulary.”

The man in the coonskin cap stood and grabbed some package from the far end of the cabinet beside where the two had sat.

“I think you will be impressed,” said the Englishman, raising his brows in anticipation. “I’ve looked at it a dozen times and am still thrilled at the very sight of it and what it could mean at the Royal Society.”

Porter scoffed once more until Chauncy stood more than twenty feet back from Porter, on purpose, giving himself all the room between them as possible.

Porter thought he held a blanket roll, until Chauncy released the roll and let it unfurl toward Porter.

A snakeskin the size of which had never been guessed. More than twenty feet, and it had more yet spooled.

“I’ll be dipped,” Porter said as he looked down at the snakeskin.

“Near enough to forty-five of your feet,” said the Englishman. “I’d wager that snake is now even larger.”

Chauncey the coonskin added, “They never stop growing.”



“What do you have to take it down?”

“This.” Monte held up a great double-barreled elephant gun. “If it can puncture a Nile crocodile’s wet hide, I think it will do for a giant snake.”

“Lot of talk about snakes hereabouts but, I thought it was all was hogwash,” Porter muttered.

The Englishman raised an eyebrow and, giving a wry laugh, said, “Damn, I certainly hope not.”

# Maybe There Ain't A Trail To Follow

Evening crimson came rolling in as the sun set in the west. Porter had been thoroughly enjoying Shayla's company, and even that of the Englishman, Monte, but he was dog tired, his smashed leg was still sore, and he needed some sleep if he was to go hunting for sign of rustlers in the morning. There was no hotel in town, but Smitty had said there was plenty of room in the loft of the barn next door

“So long as it's not the same one as the dead are in.”

“No, no, that's on the other side between us and the Round Up boys' place.”

“Round Up boys?”

Shayla answered, “My brothers' friends, they're good fellers even if they do bend the law sometimes.”

“Oh, I get it, rustlers you are friends with as opposed to those you're not.”

“Good folks don’t steal from their friends,” she said.

“I suppose not,” answered Porter before he bid them good evening and went to get some much-needed sleep. He was gonna take that bath, but maybe it could wait until later, after full dark.

As Porter made his way there, smiling to himself, he kept an eye on the cabin across the way where he had shot the men of the Barber Gang earlier. There was the sound of some carousing and drinking but nothing that said they were going to attempt any repercussions, at least not yet.

He rounded the barn entrance and was surprised by a person standing there in the shadows. He drew his pistol, but she held her hands up.

“Don’t shoot,” she said. She was attractive in a rough, primeval way, even with the makeshift eye-patch, but Porter was mostly glad she wasn’t draped with rattlers at the moment, or he might have pulled that trigger.

“So you’re called One Eye, huh? Are you Paiute?”

“I am she. But I am Ute.”

“Huh. What you doing here?”

“I have lived here since before the white man came. These are my lands.” She remained stationary, standing before him, her hands at her sides, and he didn’t see the rattlesnake satchel that Smitty had mentioned, nor hear the telltale rattle. Still, it was unnerving, her being here when all he wanted was to go to sleep.

“Did you want to talk to me?”

Her eyes remained as fixed on him as ever. “Why did you think you came here?”

Porter gave her good natured grin. “I get it, you’re asking me what I’m asking you. I’m a lawman. I came to find out who shot my horse a night ago and deal with some rustlers I heard tell were in the area, but I gotta admit, this place is a lot stranger than I was expecting. Probably on account of persons much like yourself.”

“There is no one like me.”

“I believe it, but if you don’t mind, I want to go and get some shut-eye.”

“No,” she cooed. “You came because you were called.”

He had been ready to fall asleep as soon as he laid down in the hay, but now he was unnerved at her peculiar attitude and

words. The idea that she had rattlers on her person was another big concern.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, One Eye, but—”

“My name is Snake Woman, and I am Puwarat.” At the puzzled look on his face, she added, “I am a medicine woman.”

He shook his head. “Fine. I can talk to you tomorrow about my leg. Who sent you? Smitty?”

“You are here because you were called forth by Yig. I am to dance the sacred snake dance for you.”

“What is that?”

She swayed back and forth with sensuous desire, then she unbuttoned her vest, exposing herself. “It is the mating dance. You were called forth by great Yig, and I will—”

Porter was shocked. This was not what he had expected, and a conflicting mix of emotions washed over him, but then with suspicions aroused he stood rapidly.

She smiled alluringly, rubbing her hands over herself and then reaching outward for him.

He took her by the offered arm, pushed her outside the barn, and shut the door. “My leg is fine. I don’t need your

help. Good night!” He shouted sternly as he barred the barn door. Her shadow lingered there a long moment before it went away, and only then did he prepare to sleep up in the loft, once he was sure there were no snakes hiding amongst the shadows.

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In the morning, Porter awoke. The smell of coffee brewing and bacon cooking wafted on the low pressure of the cool morning air. The sun was just peeking over the horizon of the far blue mountains, and it was the kind of morning it felt good to be alive. Even his leg hurt less than it had the day before, and he could actually walk without a limp. It had been all he could do yesterday to hide his injury from the townsfolk, not wanting to let potential enemies like that know anything about a weakness. He checked on Jenny the sorrel and made sure she had water and oats.

There was a deep trough of water so he quickly disrobed and jumped in for a makeshift bath.

It was cold, but he wanted to clean up some before breakfast. Once he got dressed, he found a comb in his saddlebags and ran it through his long hair and beard.

Remembering One Eye, he glanced about warily as he made his way to the front door of the saloon. Come to think of

it, how had she known about his hurt leg? There was no sign of the Indian woman or any snakes.

He went in and sat in the same spot by the bar where Shayla had served him yesterday. He guessed she would make him a good breakfast, and then he would head out on his own to look for those rustlers.

Shayla came in carrying a bucket of milk that was too full and threatening to spill over the lip. “Here it is, Slim,” she said to one of the patrons already inside. “Who are you? You look a little different.” She teased.

“Porter Rockwell, lawman.” He answered, tipping his hat.

Her brows perked up. “Lawman? Why are you here?”

“Sounds like rustlers have been hiding out in these parts.”

She teased, “Rustlers huh? None that I’ve seen, and I would have noticed.”

“I bet you would have. Keen eyes you have.”

She smiled, and Porter couldn’t help but appreciate her. “I’m going with you,” she said. “Right after breakfast.” She slid a prepared plate toward him, followed by a warm mug of coffee.

“Thank you, ma’am.” He liked her, but her coming with him wasn’t part of the plan. “It could be dangerous. Those three men I had to shoot yesterday might have friends that want to try something when they think I’m not looking.”

She shook her head as she batted her eyes. “I know, but it’s my herd I’m asking you to look after, and I aim to show you exactly where the trouble is. And I want to be there if you catch any of them.”

Porter frowned. “That usually takes some time, and I might have to ride on out into the hills to get them, it ain’t usually a quick thing.”

She looked deep into his eyes. “You ain’t always this slow on the uptake, are you? I want to come with you,” she said firmly but low so no one else could hear.

“All right, soon as I finish this breakfast you made.”

They soon got their horses, checked the saddles and cinched them tight, and rode out of town. Porter watched his backtrail but didn’t see anyone stirring from the other spots—Barbers or the Round Up Boys. “I heard there was another gang hereabouts, that of Mexican Joe. You know anything about him?”



“He comes and goes,” Shayla answered.

“You didn’t mention him before, the Tinker did. You don’t suspect him do you?”

“Mexican Joe? No, he’s more of a highwayman, and when he rides out, they can be gone for a couple weeks at a time. I think they head into New Mexico or Colorado. He puts a lot of miles on his horses and likes having a spot far away from wherever he finds trouble—so he don’t start none here.”

“He someone I’m gonna have to tangle with?”

“Maybe eventually. He’s friends with my brother, and that may be why I haven’t seen Mike for more than a week. He might have rode off with him and forgot to tell me where or what he was doing.”

“How did you hear he was shot? Just hurt or worse?”

Shayla paused a long moment to reflect, and Porter took in the grand vista.

The rolling hills stretched out for miles, the wind whipping the yellowed grass about like the waves of a great inner sea, the nameless mountains in the distance like islands on the edge of the world.

“The Tinker told me he was shot a couple days ago, but we don’t know how serious it is. He has been in scrapes before. Just wish he would come home.”

Porter prodded the conversation in a direction he didn’t relish but felt pushed to find out more on. “So, he was shot and is gone away enough that he is leaving his sister to look after things.”

She pulled on the reins making her horse stop in midstride. “You judging my kin?” Her tone was sheer winter ice.

“Just so much as if he is being an outlaw and leaving the real-life, the hard life, to you.”

She shook her head. “He is my baby brother, and he has been in trouble a time or two, but it isn’t like that. He is a good boy at heart, and I’ve been more of a mother to him than our parents were.”

Porter gestured about them, toward the red buttes to the north and purple mountains to the south. “Speaking of, what brought you out here? This is a desolate land. Beautiful in its own way, but it can be harsh.”

Her eyes took on a faraway gaze, remembering back into the rolling years. “I was just a little girl in Nauvoo. We came

out west because we thought this was the place, just like Brother Brigham said. We trusted him. Well, my father trusted him. Mother just went along because that's what a good wife does. Pa helped build Salt Lake, then Fort Utah, then St. George. He was always doing what was asked without complaint. Packing up and moving us to the next place just on account of Brigham's say so. Never feeling at peace, never finding Zion, just always going on to the next god-forsaken place to build it up and let someone else reap the reward. It killed my mother. When Pa died, we left St. George and came out this way. Away from the Saints and all that comes with that. I knew who you were the moment you came through that door, even if I had to fight a girlish giddiness at it. Half of me wondered if you were sent to get my brother or bring me back and make me repent."

Porter leaned toward her and said softly, "Do you got anything to repent of?"

Her cheeks took on a rosy hue. "I guess I do."

"We all do." He offered his flask, the most touching, giving thing he could think of in the moment, but she declined.

"It's a little early for that."

Porter shrugged. “But I didn’t come knowing anything about you or yours. Some might say I was called to come and check out the area.” His own words surprised him like a snake bite as he recalled what One Eye had said last night, and he regretted it inside, curious and confused at what the Indian woman had wanted and how far her supernatural powers went. He didn’t feel like mentioning the incident or anything One Eye had said to Shayla, especially when she was in the midst of her own faith crisis story.

“You just felt you had to come out this way?” Shayla asked, hopeful expectation in her eyes.

“I suppose I did. And I typically go whenever and wherever I feel myself led. Things just have a way of working out once I get there.”

“Maybe prayers do get answered, even if I was in denial and refusing to say prayers anymore, I had them in my heart, wondering what God had in store for me.” Then she blushed again and went silent for a long moment. “I’m sorry I shouldn’t have said all that and pinned anything on you. I don’t know where my mind is going today, maybe I do need that drink.”

He offered her the flask once more.

She took a small sip and handed it back. “You’ve probably seen it all and heard it all.”

“Nothing new under the sun,” Porter said. “But there is plenty out there that is new to you and new to me. We’re all human, but plenty of new experiences for all of us individually in this world.”

“You aren’t going to reprimand me and tell me to get myself back to church?”

“Ha, no, I’m not what anyone calls orthodox myself. My only thought is sometimes we are in the right place at the right time to help bring about God’s plan. But there are still plenty of trials in this life. Things happen that we don’t like, and I guess a wiser man than me said it’s all ultimately for our own good.”

“What do you mean?”

Porter shook his head, answering, “Can’t know the bitter without the sweet, appreciate the warmth without the cold, know the light without acknowledging the dark.”

“I like that.”

“I’ve had to face the dark plenty of times. I’m the last person in the world who is gonna call you to repentance. Best I

can do is hold your hand and help you take that step, if that's what you want to do."

"I'd like that," she said extending a hand.

It was cool and soft, white and almost frail compared to his sun-bronzed and gnarled fingers. But it felt good. It felt right. This was a woman he could see himself with.

He caught himself. He was getting foolish. He let go. Time to change the subject and remember why they were out here.

Porter scanned the ground. "Any of these tracks look like your herd? This where they were a few days ago? That's how old these tracks are."

"I believe so," she said softly.

"Then let's get a move on this way, looks like they ranged toward that valley yonder." He led them toward the Southeast, following a cattle trail that meandered up and down rolling hills vaguely following a small trickle of a stream.

They didn't speak much for the next mile or more.

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The Tinker strode about near the mouth of a slot canyon, dangling a golden chain from his outstretched hand.

Porter and Shayla clearly startled him, and he whipped the chain back into his inside coat pocket. Composing himself, he took off his hat and waved it at them. “Good afternoon, and how are you doing on this fine day?” He put his hat back on and did a terrible job at acting inconspicuous.

“We’re tracking my missing cattle,” Shayla answered with an edge to her voice. “I take it you haven’t seen them?”

“Of course not, I’d tell you right away if I had.”

Porter scrutinized the Tinker from his saddle and spat. “What are you dowsing for?”

“Dowsing?” asked the Tinker, a perplexed wrinkle gracing his forehead.

Porter shifted in the saddle. “Call it what you will, but I saw you had a chain and weight and were divining for something. So, what are you looking for?”

The Tinker nodded sagely. “Water. I’m looking for water, this is a desert after all.”

“Water? In the mouth of a slot canyon when you crossed the Dirty Devil river not more than a mile back, and this clearly ain’t your property out here, so how about you tell the

truth,” Porter ordered as he swiveled his scattergun toward the man.

“Easy,” said the Tinker raising his hands.

Shayla said, “Porter this ain’t necessary.”

Porter sniffed but did not move the shotgun away. “Well?”

The Tinker frowned and admitted, “I do divine things, and typically people can be suspicious and superstitious enough that if they get wind of a body doing such a thing they can be run out on a rail.”

Porter prodded, “I imagine you’ve deserved getting run out on occasion too.”

The Tinker tipped his hat. “Touché, but this time I am simply looking for gold. I’ve heard tell there could be gold in these mountains.”

Shayla argued, “Any gold was mined out by the Spanish long ago, none left now. Otherwise, there would still be men picking for it.”

Porter gave her the side-eye.

The Tinker squinted against the mid-morning sun. “There’s always more hiding somewhere, surely you can’t begrudge me using every tool at my disposal to try and find a little treasure,



eh, Porter? I understand you have hunted for gold plenty of times.”

“I have,” Porter admitted. “Do you have a claim on this hillside?”

“No one does, it’s open, empty land.”

“That’s true,” affirmed Shayla.

“May I continue?” The Tinker withdrew his golden chain with a weighted bauble on the end. “I would appreciate your discretion in my proclivities.”

“Whatever,” Porter grumbled as they rode on.

“He’s hiding something,” Shayla said.

“Sure is, but what? Gotta be something more than just divining for gold, but that is a neat trick if it works.”

“You don’t believe?”

“Do you?”

“No.” She shook her head. “He tried to tell me the stars about my birth and gave a big longwinded speech about how I was an obvious Sagittarius and what not.”

“Well?”

“I don’t know when I was born, so he sure as shooting couldn’t be telling me about no star signs.”

They looked back at the Tinker before they rounded the hillside. He stood watching them, holding the golden chain out as it swung back and forth.

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They rode across the countryside for several hours and never came across the tracks they had hoped for. Shayla wiped a tear from her eye. “Don’t know how I’ll carry on without my herd. I put near every dollar into them, and I still haven’t heard from my brother Mike, either. Nothing is going my way, except you coming into town.”

Porter scanned the horizon. Gold and red sun washed over the towering hills. “Only place left to look is across the river.”

Shayla said, “I don’t reckon I want to ride toward them mountains at all. Always give me the chills. Always felt like someone was watching me over there.”

“But if that’s where your herd was taken...” Porter pushed.

“Then I guess that’s where I’ll have to go.”

“Good, cuz that’s where I’m gonna go.”

She smiled and leaned toward him as her tongue darted out to lick her slightly puckered lips.

Porter raised his eyebrows and sucked in a breath. He liked her a lot, her chestnut hair and large eyes were striking. She was strong and self-assured, and he liked that even more, but this was sudden. He had lost his wife a year back and wasn't sure he was ready for this.

Shayla didn't give him much of a choice. She leaned, almost ready to fall off her saddle if he didn't catch her lips against his.

So he caught her.

# News from Nodens

Dusk had fallen as they rode side by side back to town. Quick, stolen glances at one another, his heart pumping, and a giddy feeling kicking inside him like a newborn colt finding its legs had Porter feeling self-conscious as someone called out to them.

It was the Englishman. “I say there, what are you two doing coming back in so late? Looks like a storm is on the horizon.”

“What is he saying?” Porter asked, tense and ready to fight.

“We were distracted,” Shayla said, pointing to the west where dark clouds swirled over the landscape.

“Can’t believe I missed that,” Porter admitted.

“You were looking at something else, I hope.”

“I was indeed.”

The Englishman asked, “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Yes,” said Shayla.

“No,” answered Porter, as they looked at each other.

Shayla corrected herself. “What I meant was, no, we didn’t find the herd but think we know where their tracks are leading across the river toward the mountains.”

Monte said, “I was planning on going that way myself tomorrow, perhaps I could tag along as we are each hunting in that realm.”

Porter frowned. “I don’t think—”

“That would be most helpful,” Shayla answered.

“Splendid, we shall accompany you tomorrow in the hunt then,” he said as he rode to the stables.

Porter cast a curious eye at her.

Shayla shrugged and whispered, “I don’t care if he sees me collecting a kiss from you. Unless you’re ashamed of me, now, are you?”

Porter shook his head and whispered back, “Hell no, I just don’t care for his company.”

“I can understand that, but another set of eyes and a gun while we’re heading out toward those haunted mountains is fine by me.”

“That would be prudent,” Porter said, attempting his best British accent.

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Back inside the saloon, they had a drink and Shayla said, “I’ll get us some dinner on.”

Porter relaxed and took a bottle of whiskey from Smitty, who was playing checkers with Slim. He poured himself a drink and then stretched out like a cat.

“Did you see anything?” asked Slim.

“Some sign that makes me think the cattle were taken across the river toward the mountains,” answered Porter.

“That’s no good,” Slim said.

“No, it ain’t,” agreed Porter. “The idea that rustlers think they can get away with it out here.” He downed the whiskey and filled another.

Slim shook his head. “No, I meant heading toward those mountains.”

“How so?”

“Those damn giant snakes is out that way.”

Porter squinted at him. “That again?”

“You think I’m funning you?”

Porter shook his head. “Giant snakes?”

“You saw the Englishman’s snake-skin,” said Smitty.

“Yeah, but why aren’t they everywhere? Why just stay by the mountains?” Porter argued.

“Who knows? Plenty of game by the mountains even without our cattle. Elk, bison, deer. Water too,” said Slim.

“How come no one else has seen giant snakes anywhere else but in these mountains?”

Slim continued, “Maybe there is a reason they are only in these mountains. Like they are guardians or something. That’s what I think.”

Porter scrutinized the tall old man. “Where did you get that idea?”

“One Eye said something about it to me once when I patched up her bad eye. She was delirious with pain and had a bit too much to drink, but she was very concerned with getting back to the mountain and doing some kind of ritual. I asked her about it later, but she wouldn’t talk about it to me.”

“She is an odd one,” Porter said softly under his breath. He still didn’t want to mention the strange woman’s behavior in

front of Shayla.

“That, and I saw one of them once,” said Slim.

“You saw one?”

Slim nodded soberly. “I was leading my burro out to my sister’s ranch at the edge of the mountains for a visit. This was right when I first arrived out this way a couple years ago. She married one of the Walters. Anyhow I arrived at my sister’s property late one night, holding a lantern against the dark, and I couldn’t see the trail too good. I reached the edge of their fence-line and was cutting across the pasture, and when I went to open the cattle gate leading to the other side I had the fright of my life. They had a wide corral and fence-line all around their cabin. I was hit suddenly with a strong smell, a smell I recognized as the musky odor of a pit viper. You know it? It’s kinda like sliced cucumbers.”

Smitty said, “Can’t say I eat those much, but I’ve smelled a rattlesnake den.”

“Yeah, I’ve had some run ins,” Porter agreed.

Slim continued, “I quickly retreated, expecting one must be coiled right around the gate and catching the heat off the rocks nearby. I turned the lantern all the way up and peered out in



the night, just in time to spot the large yellow eyes of a snake staring back at me from the bushes ahead.”

Porter remained silent, expecting something more.

Slim stared straight ahead as if reliving the moment, the fear freezing him once more. “That big, flat head was as big as my horse’s head, I’m telling you. It was reared up as tall as I was. We were eye to eye.”

Porter chewed at the edge of his mustache and asked, “Why didn’t it come and eat you, being that close and all?”

“I froze up. I thought I was a goner. It was so big. But then, because I had turned the lantern up too high and it was almost out of oil, wouldn’t you know it? It went out. That, I tell you, made it worse, knowing that giant thing was out there and now I couldn’t see it. But you know snakes, you know with that forked tongue and such, they sure see you.”

“But you’re here, you’re alive.”

Slim shivered. “I was frozen in fear. I sat still and heard a strange dragging sound coming from where the snake was. I had the impression that the giant snake had already eaten one of the steers and was pulling itself along the ground. I think the only reason I’m alive is because that snake was already

full. I didn't move until I couldn't hear it moving anymore. I told my sister about it. She said that something had been stalking her cattle, and it was likely the giant snake. They asked other ranchers, but no one took them seriously. Though the other ranchers had to admit they'd been losing cattle to some mysterious, unknown predator. And no one had an explanation for what had been happening to their own herds out alongside the western end of those mountains."

Shayla looked at Porter and said, "Mine are on the western side."

"We think," he added. "We'll start there first and move along as we find sign."

"I'm glad you're with me," she said, clutching his hand.

"Me too."

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It was still early as the Pony Express rider made his way into town. He rode right up to the saloon and dropped from his horse, taking the mail bag from his mount before going inside.

"The Express comes here?" asked Porter.

"No, it doesn't," answered Slim.

“I’ve only got the one letter and one package, but I was paid a week’s wages to bring it here from Colorado Springs, for a Mr. Orrin Porter Rockwell.”

“That’s me. Who is it from?”

The rider looked at his order and read aloud, “A Mr. Nodens.”

“Damn it.” Porter took the final swallow from his whiskey bottle. “Can you read it for me?”

“It might be confidential,” said the rider.

“Ain’t nothing I’m worried about you reading from him,” Porter answered.

“All right then.” The rider tore open the letter and read, “Porter, I know where you are as you may have guessed but cannot come myself to speak as I am detained with other business here.”

Porter rolled his eyes and tapped the bar at Slim for another round.

The rider continued, “As you have noted by now, there are peculiar goings on in Graves Valley and thereabouts, like the crazy snake man.”

“Does he mean the Injun, Crazy Snake, down by Navajo Mountain?” asked Slim.

Porter shook his head.

“That is not the last you will see of his kind, for the source of that dark power is in the mountains, and you need to seal him up and away.”

“And just how am I going to do that?” Porter mused to himself.

“Since I can anticipate your needs in that department, the rider has been instructed to give you a package which will help on that basis, and more is on the way but will be at least a day or two behind on a stage.”

Porter looked at the Rider who handed over another sack from the opposite side of his saddle bags. Looking inside, Porter smiled, having an idea on how this might be of use. It was several sticks of dynamite wrapped in yet another wet gunny sack. “Nodens you devil, what are you trying to make me do?”

The rider continued reading the letter, “Father Yig is sending out his influence among men to corrupt their souls and minds. He must be held at bay and made to sleep again in the

earth for a space. I cannot abide these Old Ones and their attempts at manipulation and ultimate destruction of man. Do what must be done, and be careful. Signed, Mr. Nodens.”

The rider finished and handed Porter the letter, and as he could not read it himself, he simply passed it on to Shayla, who scrutinized the signature.

The rider was puzzled. “I just read all of that and it didn’t make a lick of sense to me. What did it mean? Are you all in some kind of cult out here?”

“Yes,” said Shayla.

“No,” said Porter.

“All right then, I’ll be going.” The rider backed out of the saloon, keeping his eyes on those present. He bumped into the Englishman and whirled to face him, eyes widening as he took in Monte’s fancy red jacket and cap, then Chauncy and his mountain-man coonskin attire.

“Wait!” Porter ordered, and the rider paused.

Porter rubbed at his beard and wondered as he took stock of the dynamite. “More is coming it says?” he directed the question at the rider.

“A stage is heading here. but I rode fast, sir, and think I could be as much as two days ahead.”

Porter nodded. “I understand, I’ve done the ride myself heading east of here through Skull Valley.”

“Did any of that make sense to you, sir? Because it shore didn’t to me.”

“Probably better it didn’t,” Porter answered him.

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The Pony Express rider ate a quick, hearty breakfast with them then got on his horse and headed back east toward Colorado.

“We ought to be getting along ourselves,” said Porter. “We’re burning daylight.”

“Don’t know about that,” said Smitty. “That Pony Express rider was in a hurry to get ahead of the storm since he’s heading east and away, but a storm is coming, and I don’t know that you want to be out hunting for cattle and rustlers in it.”

Porter looked out toward the west, and sure enough, a gray thunderhead was moving their way. Lightning danced along the far edge, the distant roll of thunder sounding a long while

after the flashes. The wind picked up, throwing sand and dust in their direction.

Shayla moved to Porter's shoulder and asked, "Well?"

"We ought to sit this out for a little, unless you want to get sanded and soaked out there," Porter said.

"No, I don't, but it gives them rustlers more time to get wherever they're going and rebrand."

"If they're rebranding, they did that already, but you can recognize a rebrand easy enough in the difference between the fresh burn and old. Tracks will be harder to find with a good rain, but you've hitched your wagon to someone that is awful good at what they do, if I do say so myself."

She put her arms around him and whispered, "Thank you," into his ear. There was a big part of him that was happy there was a storm, and now they could just spend time together inside by a warm fire.

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It rained heavy all morning and only began tapering off but not fully stopping that evening. It was wet and cold with gusts that battered the windows and doors like ghosts begging to be let inside.

Shayla's thigh pressed up against his as she sat close to him, holding hands under the blanket and making small talk of their lives before they met—as well as their dreams of the future. Certain things were hinted at but nothing was asked out loud. Porter had proposed to three women before this, and he wanted to wait a little more than a day before he made this a fourth. He wondered if this wasn't God's way of giving him a break from the usual business at hand and letting him just enjoy the moment.

After dark, as they sat together on the buffalo couch watching the dying coals of the fire, One Eye came through the door.



# The Serpents Eye

Slim came through the door behind One Eye and said, “One Eye knows as much as anyone about them snakes. She told me she would talk to you about them if you like.”

“That so?” enquired Porter.

Shayla whispered, “I don’t want her in here. It’s bad for business.”

“What business?”

Shayla glared.

Porter, however, did not want a repeat of One Eye propositioning him like she had the other night, and he still didn’t want to reveal that occurrence to Shayla. In his mind, talking to her in the saloon was a win, they would be in public and keep things above board, and he could still glean information from her. “It will be fine,” he whispered back to Shayla.

Shayla snorted.

One Eye nodded. "I will tell you the story if you buy me a drink. And by drink, I mean a bottle." She pointed to the bar.

"What a deal," Porter mused. "Yeah, I'll buy you a bottle for information on snakes and other pukes in the vicinity. You got any stories on bushwhackers too?"

"I know of them all." One Eye sat down opposite Porter, staring intently at him with her single dark eye. She wore a big bearskin robe, open at the chest, revealing a scandalous amount of cleavage beside her medicine pouch. If she even had a shirt on beneath the robe was of serious doubt.

"You want the bottle, you pay for it up front." Shayla got up from the couch and threw the buffalo robe over the top of Porter.

"What's that for?"

"Accident," Shayla said, casting a venomous eye toward the Indian woman. She wouldn't bring the bottle; she was showing her stand against One Eye's presence. She went out the door, shutting it none too gently.

Slim's brows rose in consternation, and he gave a worried look to Porter, who simply shrugged.

One Eye stared at Porter as if she had not even noticed Shayla's behavior or departure.

Porter looked at Slim and tapped the table with his fingers. Slim brought a bottle and placed it before him.

One Eye continued to watch Porter intently.

Slim asked, "You want I should go check on Shayla?"

"I'd rather you stay here for this," Porter answered. "Stoke that fire, huh?"

"All right." Slim threw a few pieces into the coals then sat down with his back to the fireplace. Flames caught the dry wood and cast orange light and black shadows against the wall.

Porter opened the bottle and pushed it toward One Eye. "Here's the bottle. Tell me a few things about this place."

"What do you want to know?"

Porter frowned, he wanted the stories of this place, to know why bad men were driven to come here, why there were legends of giant snakes in the hills, and what made men go mad. "I've got plenty of questions, you said I was called to come here, do you mean my duty as a lawman or something else?"

“Something else,” she said before taking a long swig from the bottle.

“Don’t finish it all in one go before you can fulfill your end of the bargain.”

She gave him a crooked smile that was unnerving. “I can handle my liquor. Can you?”

Porter snorted. “Course I can.”

“You refused me. Why?”

“I’m asking the questions. You want to ask me anything, you buy me a bottle.”

She pushed it toward him, offering to share.

Slim’s brow rose in surprise.

Porter shook his head. “Uh uh. This was about me getting information from you, not you asking me the questions.”

One Eye shrugged. “What do you want to know then?”

Porter was slightly flustered. “Why do men feel drawn to this place? Bad men? I’ve been following several gangs this way, and it’s odd for them to all cluster here.”

One Eye nodded soberly. “Yig calls to them. He slithers into their dreams and brings them here for his purposes. You

were called too, but not for the same reasons.”

“Which are?”

“I wanted a strong man who—”

Porter cut her off. “We’ll talk about that some other time, let’s get back to the gangs of bad men. Didn’t you already deal with some of them yourself? I heard Holt’s boys messed with you and then you sicked a bunch of rattlesnakes on them.”

“Those men almost killed me, but I can’t help that they built their cabin over a snake pit. When the snakes emerge for springtime they must find a way out, and if men molest them, they attack. I tried to tell them the snakes would soon awaken from their winter sleep. But they would not listen, and they were evil men.”

Porter nodded. “That makes sense.”

One Eye watched him, eyebrow raised. “We could go to my wigwam, and I could show you more.” Her gesture toward the door opened her bearskin robe quite a bit more, revealing the curve of warm flesh.

Porter averted his eyes. “That’s all right. You know anything about giant snakes? Slim here says he has seen one, and the Englishman found a big old snakeskin.”

“I could show you a big snake,” she said.

Porter frowned, scrunching up his nose. “No, just tell me.”

One Eye was clearly less interested in talking about snakes than she was in taking Porter back to her wigwam. “They are here, great servants of Yig.”

“Yig? You’ve mentioned that name before.”

One Eye nodded. “When I was young I ate rattlesnakes that my father caught, but when I became a woman at my first blood, I was consecrated to mighty Yig and no longer eat them.”

“How did that happen?”

“I was sitting on a rock beside the canyon trail one day, and one of the giant snakes came out of a hole in a pile of rocks nearby. I was terrified but remained frozen as it rose up to face me. It opened its mouth so close that I could smell its foul breath. Venom dripped from its fangs. This snake was like nothing I had ever seen. Its skin was leathery instead of scales. Its head was larger than my head and had a dorsal ridge down it.” One Eye gestured over herself to show how the ridge on its head would have looked, and again, Porter had to avert his eyes.

“After a long moment, it lowered its head and crossed the trail in a diagonal, disappearing down the hill on the other side. The tail was on one side of the trail as the head reached the other. It was a very big snake. As long as this building.”

Porter’s brow arched up. “That has to be more than forty feet.”

One Eye simply nodded.

Porter continued, “You just seeing one consecrated you to them?”

One Eye shook her head. “They chose not to devour me. I was blessed to be a servant of Yig, a medicine woman who would serve him all my days. He has blessed me with power in his name and the sight of many things.”

Porter squinted against her mentioning “sight,” with the one eye and ragged bandage over her missing orb.

Porter asked, “What is there on that mountain that makes it sacred?”

“My grandfather said there was an underground city and gold mines under the mountains. My grandfather told me of the Serpent Temple of Yig. I knew when I met the serpent and was spared, that I was chosen.”

Porter glanced at Slim who nodded and said, "I've visited the area and already told you about the one I saw."

"It makes no sense for there to be giant snakes out here."

"Them snakes live inside the tunnels in the mountain where the temperatures are constant, with plenty of water since the springs come up through there."

One Eye said, "The snakes were put there to protect the sacred temple, which contains a chamber with a wall lined with gold or gold tablets upon which the history of mankind is written. The ancients who went south helped build it for mighty Yig. For the god, Yig, is also called Quetzalcoatl and Kukulcan. His house there is called Calakmul. The snake dynasty will rule again. Join me and let us complete the snake dance." She stood and tugged on Porter's hand, but he brushed her off.

"Wait, you said gold?" Porter repeated. "And ancients? The Aztecs? Well, if the "snakes" were put there, how come they didn't spread out?"

Slim interrupted, "That might be the easiest part. Those mountains are an oasis in the desert, plenty of water, a whole lot of deer, and one of the last big buffalo herds in the country.



The area around the mountains is inhospitable. It's perfect for what she says it is."

Porter wondered aloud, "What connection does this place have, if any, to Calakmul and the Snake Dynasty of Kaan Sky? Snake Kingdom or the ancient city of KuKulacan?"

One Eye said, "I cannot refuse to call upon the powers that have been gifted to me."

"That so?"

"They call to you. You are driven to accept the gift of Yig."

Porter nodded then asked, "What else is up there in them mountains? I've heard some interesting stories already, and it seems like you're here watching, seeing if folks go out that way. Spanish gold mines? Places where your ancestors were forced to slave and die under their watch?"

"You cannot guess what is out there but must be shown. I will show you. Come with me."

"Come on, tell me your secret."

The edge of her lip curled in a sneer. "The Serpent Temple of Yig needs a man and woman to consecrate the altar."

"What's that?"

“The snake god of the ancients. Yig is great, worshipped from here to the jungles of Mexico. He lords over all these lands, but this is his sacred home from where he slithers into the minds of men.”

Porter was dubious, but he had seen enough strange things in his time that he was willing to listen to hear anything simply because he could not rule out anything being too strange to be possible.

“How does he slither into the minds of men?”

One Eye gave a cruel smile, utterly unlike what Porter expected. “He can see into your heart—yours, mine, anyone’s. He can find what you fear and make his way in.”

Porter didn’t like the sound of that, One Eye’s smile was unnerving.

“You serve this Yig—”

“We all serve Yig. But some do not know this.”

“Let me finish. You serve this Yig, but what is your goal?”

“Only to serve him.”

Porter shook his head. “No, there is something you’re not telling me. How do you serve Yig?”

“I will show you. Come with me.”

“I don’t think so. You have to tell me here and now.”

One Eye twisted her head like she was trying to understand Port’s meaning. “I give him homage. I pay respects. Give sacrifice and light the fires.”

“Sacrifices? Do you kill for him?”

One Eye’s cruel smile resurfaced like a snake swimming across still waters. “I have no need to kill for him. Yig takes as he pleases. I only light the fires and give him smoke. I tell the stories to the young of my tribe and let them know he is still there in the mountains, waiting...”

“Waiting? Waiting for what?”

“The day he can reveal himself and chase out the white man.”

Porter shook his head and laughed. “You playing at being some kind of Wovoka yourself now? Bringing the snake dance instead of the ghost?”

One Eye laughed dryly. “You will not come with me?”

Porter shook his head. “No, I don’t think I will. I’m fine to stay here with the white man’s God and let you do as you will, so long as you aren’t killing anyone.”

One Eye cocked her head. "I don't kill anyone."

"You got the blame for them rattlers that bit the Holt gang."

"Snake pit, they awoke and came out."

Porter nodded. "All right, I know the same thing happened in Manti out from under the Temple hill that first spring they were there."

One Eye stood to leave, looked longingly at Porter, and ran a hand through his long hair. "I will go. I have asked you to the snake dance, the rest is up to you. You will come."

She gave him one last smile and went out the door into the gloom.

Porter looked at Slim and smacked him on the arm. "I don't think I needed that whole rigamarole right when things were getting good with Shayla."

Slim blinked. "You and Shayla? 'Bout time she got herself a man."

Shayla came inside the saloon. "Well, what did she want, other than the obvious?"

"Just storytelling," said Porter.

"What did you give her?"

“Nothing.”

Shayla frowned. “I saw her putting something in her medicine pouch.”

“Like what?”

Shayla sat across from Porter and huffed. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you gave her a lock of your hair.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Slim twisted in his seat. “She had a handful.”

“Well, I didn’t give it to her. I didn’t feel her tug anything.”

“She had a little knife and sliced a lock, I think,” said Slim.

“What?!” Porter almost spat. “I don’t cut my hair for anyone!”

“Well, she got some, and she’s up to no good I’ll wager,” Shayla said.

Porter stood and looked out the front door of the saloon.

“I’m sure she is long gone now,” Shayla continued.

Porter mused, “Why would she want that, except for some witchery?”

“I think I know witchery when I see it, and I’ll be damned if you weren’t ignoring it for that shirtless hussy.”

“It ain’t like that.”

“I was going to ask you to spend the night in the house tonight, but I think you better get on to the barn.” Shayla huffed once more, went into the back room, and slammed the door.

Porter looked to Slim and shook his head.

“I know,” Slim answered.

They went out into the cold of the evening, and a thought crossed Porter’s mind. “Wait a minute, Slim, didn’t you say that incident with the Holt gang and rattlesnakes happened just a little while ago?”

Slim nodded. “A month back.”

“It’s the wrong season for rattlers to be coming out of their den and attacking anyone.”

Slim nodded once more. “You’re right. I’ll tell you, I have made several trips to the mountains and hereabouts. I can say there is something very different out there. It is a feeling I cannot describe, something ancient and forbidding. It’s as if you are constantly being watched. Be careful tomorrow.”

“I will, though I don’t know how well I’ll sleep tonight,” Porter said as he gazed out into the darkness.



# Promises of a Desperado

Porter, Shayla, Monte and Chauncy rode out toward the western slope of the mountain. Jagged peaks caught their eye far up, gleaming with the first snow of the season, but down in the valley there was still the final vestiges of summer's end heat amid the golden leaves of fall.

They passed by one of the abandoned cabins and corrals of settlers who had moved on in the last year. The corrals were made of juniper branches all entwined together in a vast circle. Crude but effective. Many of the cabins in the territory, like this one, were made of stacked rock as much as logs, the pioneers utilizing whatever was closest at hand to build a home.

They rode on in relative silence as Porter scanned the ground looking for tracks. He was beginning to doubt himself, as he was usually very skilled in tracking. The thought crossed his mind that maybe he was so enamored of Shayla that he wasn't utilizing his full skills. She knew he was concentrating on the hunt, so had kept talk to a minimum. And yet, that



bothered him more than it should, because he found himself thinking about taking her away from here, going back home to the Point of the Mountain and settling down. Let here worry about his cattle and horses, his homestead, why deal with rustlers and two-bit gunfighters out here? Snakes and desperadoes who would just as soon shoot you as look at you.

His eyes danced right over the top of a grass shrouded track, and he felt foolish for daydreaming and almost missing it.

He leapt from his horse to look closer and saw that it was just an excessively large elk sign, not what they were looking for at all.

“Anything?” Shayla asked.

Porter shook his head and scanned the area once more while he was afoot.

Monte broke the monotony. “I say. I do wish to support your endeavors and do hope you can find your stolen cattle, but I have my own mission to accomplish and think I should be heading in another direction. I do hope I am not inconveniencing you any further.”

Porter took a moment to fully understand him and then said, “No, that’s fine, you do what you’ve got to do.”

“Cheerio,” he said as he waved, then he and Chauncey rode away to the southeast and those juniper covered slopes.

Porter looked at Shayla and attempted the same wave back. “Too-da-loo.”

Shayla laughed, and it made him smile. He had never been very good at making women laugh and this felt like a first.

“Come along, Shayla,” he said, further attempting a British accent. “I suspect it’s this way.” He mounted his horse and started in the opposite direction from where the Englishman had gone.

She laughed and galloped after him.

It wasn’t long before Porter found the sign of horse tracks and more than a dozen cattle. “I think this is it,” he said.

“It’s the right number, all right. How many horsemen?”

“Three,” Porter murmured as he continued to scan the ground.

They followed the tracks into an impossible tangle of deep sandstone canyons. They took the Flint trail that cut through the Big Ledge and then opened again in a wider valley. Other

than tracks, there was no sign of the cattle. At one point the horsemen's tracks turned away and went to the north while the cattle continued down a dry streambed.

"Where did they go?" asked Shayla.

Porter shook his head. "The tracks are from near the same time, but maybe they are some outfit that was following and gave up the chase. Wouldn't be your cowboys, would it?"

"Those good for nothings? Maybe."

Porter asked, "Where are they now?"

"Blaine, Jones, and Sundown all picked up work for the Halsey's, saying I must have already lost my herd. I called them cowards and quitters, but they just laughed and rode on. Turnpike said he was too sick to get out of bed, and I haven't seen him for two days. Like I said, they're good for nothings."

"What would you think about leaving this place and going away with me?"

"Back up to Deseret? Where is your place?"

"Lehi. Point of the Mountain. I got a good spread, and there'll be plenty to do to keep you occupied."

She smiled and looked away. "I think I might like that. But I want to come into it with something of myself. Which is why

I want my herd back.”

“I understand,” he said, as they leaned together for a kiss.

They followed the trail until it crossed a gravelly wash. “I don’t see their tracks anymore. Do you think they went this way?” Shayla asked.

Porter turned about in the saddle and looked her dead in the eye. “I know they did. I can see their tracks plain as day.”

The cattle had gone between low hills and into a second wash that promised the possibility of water even in the desert. They wandered here and there but all kept to a basic direction. Not far off and from a few days earlier Porter even recognized the track of burros crossing from another direction. The burros had gone wild in the area after escaping from Spanish explorers, perhaps as long ago as the days of Escalante or Coronado. Finally, the trail started into yet another red-rimmed canyon flanked by pyramid-like hills of rusty complexion.

“I guess I’m not used to tracking anyone,” she offered. “I can’t see what you see.”

“They’re all moving down this draw. They probably smell water down there.”

Shayla shielded the sun from her eyes and glanced into the canyon. "I've been this way once. There was a spring down there coming out of the rocks in a couple of spots. Maybe not this late in the year, but it was there."

"I reckon it still is. But I still can't figure why those horse tracks drew off. They had to be right on top of the herd."

"Maybe they were driving them this way."

"Maybe," Porter wondered aloud as he looked over the valley before it rose into the canyon. There was only sagebrush and such out in the open here, no good place for anyone to hide unless they had the patience and craftiness of an Indian. But the tracks had not been Indian ponies, they were shod. There was no cover for men or horse until farther into the canyon. "Don't make sense for what I'm seeing on the ground, but the cattle did go in there for water, so let's ride on."

They followed the trail of hooves into the draw that gradually narrowed until it was cut deep between the red hills. Here and there greenery sprouted from crevices in the base of the rocks, and junipers and a few cottonwoods grew scattered about. There was sign of cattle but it was more than a day old.

Porter was puzzled. “In fact, if I didn’t know any better,” he said as much to himself as Shayla as he glanced up at the towering hills surrounding them. “I’d almost think they wanted me in this canyon.”

“Why is that?”

“Might be a good place for them to hide out or might be an even better place for them to ambush us, and I already know they’re back-shooting dogs.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That Jesse and his partner shot my horse out from under me two nights back.”

“The one you killed?”

“Yeah, I was on my way to Junction to get some apple pie when they tried to bushwhack me.”

“You like apple pie?”

Porter grinned. “I do.”

“I’ll remember that. But is that why you’re here? Some bushwhackers?”

“Part of the reason, yeah. They killed my horse. He was a great one. I can’t let that go, and besides, they’re up to no

good in this country. I can't let that lie."

Shayla hesitated and pulled back the reins on her mount. "Maybe you're right. I got a bad feeling here. Let's turn around."

Porter pulled the reins on Jenny and glanced up at the red hills and green junipers. Thunderheads raced above and it looked like rain would be coming by evening.

"I want to press on and catch them, but you're right. Weather is turning, and these canyons are no good spot to be in." He wheeled Jenny about just as a bullet sang past in the space where he had just been.

Several more shots rang out from the canyon walls above, albeit they were a little farther on as if the ambush was set up to be farther down the trail.

"What do we do?" Shayla asked as she ducked low in the saddle.

"Except for the one, they don't have a good line on us here. We need to either go back the way we came or head on fast."

Bullets zipped and whined as they struck the rocks behind them. Jenny snorted and stamped, impatient to run.

More shots came from behind them, and Porter made the decision. “We can’t go back. This might be a box canyon, but we must go forward.”

“And if we run right into them?” Shayla cried as she ducked and followed his lead.

“We deal with that later. Let’s ride!” Porter shouted as he shot back at the gunmen on the cliff walls. He blasted once with the shotgun from his off hand too. *Always best to throw plenty of lead*, he thought.

It gave them a precious few moments to ride on fast as the bushwhackers ducked at Porter’s barrage of lead.

The junipers gave them a scarce amount of cover, and he knew he could just as likely be running right into a pack of the devils ahead, but there was little choice, the shooters were behind them a small distance, racing along the edge of the canyon walls and raining bullets down at their heels.

A dark space appeared up ahead, offering a peculiar shelter.

“That’s Cowboy Cave,” Shayla shouted. “It’s big enough for the horses, and we’ll have some cover.”

Porter nodded, and the two of them rode right up to the cave opening, which was shaped like a half-moon on its side,



wide and broad—almost twenty feet high at the tallest point and twice again as wide. It had a slight curve to it, and they rushed inside and dismounted. Shayla took the horses toward the rear of the cave, and Porter watched from just inside the entrance. A man popped up on the canyon wall opposite, and Porter shot at him. His aim was true, as the man cried out and fell among the junipers there. Another man fired his rifle into the cave. Porter ducked farther back to avoid the bullets, just as a barrage of lead hit close to where he had been.

Like it or not, he was in a bad way, they couldn't get to him but they had the superior high ground to shoot from.

A crack of thunder broke the stillness, and he wondered if a Sharps had been brought to bear. He realized it was thunder when rain began hitting the desert floor, causing the sandy ground to puff in reprisal before the ground soaked up the downpour, and the rain became a torrent along the ground.

“Small miracles,” he said. “That storm hit a lot quicker than I expected.”

Shayla poked her head around the corner. “At least we're dry in here. Those varmints are gonna get soaked.”

“I hope they get struck by lightning,” Porter mused.

“Do you think they’ll try and get in?”

“Doubtful, so long as we can see, but after dark...” He shrugged. “We ought to try and make a break for it after dark, better for us to get out than them to come in.”

“What about the weather?”

“It will only help in evading them.”

The rain continued to fall along with the crash of lightning and thunder.

Several hours passed with only the occasional bullet fired into the cave. Porter preserved his ammunition unless he was sure he could hit a man.

At dusk a black-hatted cowboy in a blue shirt and black vest attempted to come around the corner, but Porter hit the rock-face right beside him, and he yelped and fell back.

“Now we know they’re close,” Porter said as he reloaded his six-gun. “But I don’t think they’ll try that again so long as there is any amount of light.”

“It’s almost dark now,” Shayla said.

Porter nodded, holding a pistol in each hand. “How far back does the cave go?”

“A few hundred feet and drops down to almost nothing.”

“That’s what I figured. We gotta go out the way we came in.”

“When?”

Porter shook his head. “Soon.”

The cave was a godsend to get shelter from the storm of lead raining down on him, but he knew he couldn’t stay there with Shayla and all those guns out there. This had to be a trap for him, and he would get her to safety then deal with them.

Lightning flashed, making the outside bright as high noon. A flash flood of red poured a few yards from the mouth of the cave as the cliffs contributed torrents of rain through the dry creek bed.

The cave was good shelter for now, but soon enough he was going to have to leave this spot if he wanted to survive and keep the girl alive as well.

A small rock fell just inside the cave, and Porter knew that someone crept as close as they dared, just around the outside of the cave, sheltered beside the outer rim. Porter kept his pistol and shotgun trained on the cavern mouth so when they showed themselves, they’d get a face full of lead.

“We got you cornered in a crossfire,” called the man over the din of the rain.

“Maybe I got you,” Porter answered.

“I’m sure you’d like to think so,” the man answered, “but we’ve got the numbers. More than a dozen guns on you.”

“That’s funny, I counted about six men firing at me earlier, and now you and yours are all wet, while I’m in here.”

“We don’t want to hit the girl but will if she won’t separate herself from you. Why don’t you let her out?”

“She ain’t a hostage.”

“Oh really?”

“I ain’t playing games with you fools. We come looking for rustlers and you bushwhacked us. I’m getting mighty tired of dallying with you all. Next man I see is dead.”

“Tough talk, but what brought you out here in the first place? This wasn’t anywhere the law was wanted.”

Another one added, “Tough go for short dough!”

Porter shook his head, laughing to himself. “One of yours killed my horse.”

“And you killed three of ours!” hollered another from the opposite side of the cave mouth.

Porter knew it was the remnants of the Barber gang. He was probably talking to Barber even now. “Lon Barber?”

“Yep,” answered Barber. “Tell you what. Throw down your guns, let the girl carry them out to us, and we’ll think about letting you live.”

“Hard bargain,” Porter answered, “but I don’t abide by the promises of a desperado.”

Lightning arced, revealing a man running from the right of the cave, moving to flank Porter and the cave mouth.

Porter already had his gun drawn, it was just a question of aiming and firing, and he was the best. His six-gun barked, and the man toppled into the red earth, a furrow dug into his back to match the running red sludge in the arroyo.

Someone to the right shouted, and Porter was ready.

Two men raced around the bend, firing wildly into the cave mouth. Their outlines were their undoing. Porter shot both. The blasts echoing in the cavern.

Shayla screamed and ran forward, but Porter grabbed her about the waist and pulled her back.

Bullets slammed against the cave mouth in a wild attack.  
Retribution for the three fallen men.

“Those bastards would kill you just trying to tag me.”

Shayla struggled in vain against his grip, then sagged and sobbed in his arms.

“Keep back from the mouth. Don’t want a ricochet to hit you.”

Shots barraged the mouth of the cave, but Porter’s trained senses could tell they were all from across the way and none too close. He reloaded his pistol, keeping the shotgun in the crook of his arm.

Silence met them, save for the falling rain and thunder the next few minutes.

“What do you think?” Shayla whispered.

“I think that might have been as much as they are gonna dare tonight. They lost three men right quick and probably aren’t gonna dare anymore in the storm.”

“But what should we do?” she asked. “I know them, they’re desperate men. I would have said before that they wouldn’t harm me on account of my brother, but now it seems like any familiarity has bred contempt.”

“We best ride on out of here in the dark, before they come up with a better plan and get us boxed in for good.”

Shayla nodded.

“But I need to know what we’re riding into, what’s down from this cave, a box canyon? Or does it open up on the plain before the mountains?”

“It is a rocky wash, but we can ride up and out without any trouble, then it opens up a good quarter mile down.”

“Get some rest for an hour or so, and then we’ll go, I’ll get the horses ready.”

“I can help,” she offered.

“You may need your rest, it’s got to be getting on toward midnight. I figure we ought to head out by two, when they are getting their most drowsy out there.”

“If you say so,” she said dejectedly.

Shayla curled up beside the cave wall around the bend. The rain lessened somewhat, the thunder and lightning easing up, no longer rattling their teeth with each clap.

Somewhere outside a man screamed, and gunshots went off chaotically, though none were directed toward the cave mouth, but instead, farther out on top of the draw.

“What’s happening?”

“I’m not sure, they’re shooting at something out there,” Porter said, as she scanned the dark-lined mesa top. “It’s not toward us.”

“Indians?”

Porter’s gaze pierced the dark, but through the clouds and rain he could see nothing save the occasional report of a gun flashing brilliant orange for a half second up on the mesa.

“I don’t hear anything except them guns, we better ride out now, regardless of whatever it is out there.”

“What if it is Indians?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think it is.”

They mounted up and, staying a short distance apart, raced out into the rain as fast as they dared take the horses over the uneven ground.

A few more shots were heard over their shoulders up on top, but no bullets were directed toward them.

They took it easy up the wash, and like Shayla had said, it was no trouble save for fording a newly filled pool of rainwater that went up to horses’ knees.



Up on the flat the false dawn beckoned at the far edge of the horizon.

Shayla asked, “If you don’t think it was Indians, then what? Wolves?”

Porter shook his head as he watched their back trail. “No, we would have heard them too.”

“Then what?”

“I saw a man, a strange man, earlier, before I came into Graves Valley. He was acting crazy.”

“Crazy like what? What did he say?”

Porter gave a mirthless chuckle. “He didn’t say nothing. He acted like he was a snake.”

“A snake?”

“Like he was a rattlesnake inhabiting a man’s body.”

“You didn’t kill him?”

“Oh, I killed him all right, and I buried him, but maybe whatever caused his condition, maybe,” he looked away, “maybe he wasn’t the only one.”

“What could do that?”

“I don’t know. Some kind of sorcery or old-time magic. That’s why I got that letter from Mr. Nodens. He is always mixing me up in something like this.”

Realization washed over Shayla’s face in the dark as the rain rolled down her cheeks like tears. “You think maybe One Eye is up to something?”

“I’ve seen stranger things.”

“Stranger than some Indian maiden turning men into snakes?”

“Well, at least twisting men’s brains into thinking they were snakes, but yeah, I’ve seen some things you wouldn’t believe, which is why I’m inclined to think I may be looking at something cosmic and weird like that again.”

“Again?”

“Yup. You know of anywhere else for shelter aside from us riding all the way back to town?”

“Yeah, I know a place. A ranch down by the mountains. No one lives there now, but it has a spring.”

Porter perked at that. “A spring? Why isn’t there anyone with a grubstake there now?”

“The Walters lived there for a long season and said they always had bad dreams there. That, and they said the water always tasted bad.”

“Sulphur?”

“That would have been tolerable. They said it tasted like snakes were living in it down in the earth.”

“Snakes again, why does it have to be snakes?” Porter pondered. “Is that the place old Slim mentioned where he saw a giant snake?”

Shayla shrugged. “Could be. The Walters had a spread of several families and cabins in the area. The one I’m thinking of is the only one I’ve been to though.”

Porter asked, “What ever happened to them? The Walters.”

“A couple of them died out there. Folks said it was the old Indian curse on these mountains, after that the rest pulled up stakes and left.”

“Did you say ‘pulled up snakes’?”

“Stakes. But I heard from the Tinker when he came into town that the remaining Walters had died when they got as far as Santa Fe.”

“He say why or how?”

“No, he didn’t. We figured it was the curse.”

Porter frowned at that, but at the same time he had seen too much to discount anything no matter how strange. But a curse could have just as likely been mercury poisoning. Still he would be cautious.

# A Cursed Land

It took them a few hours to reach the cabin through the dark and faltering rain. By that point it was almost daylight, and they were exhausted. Shayla was falling asleep in the saddle and Porter deemed they were better off getting some rest before heading back to Graves Valley. The deep blue of night revealed itself against the almost risen sun as the rain clouds began to flee, pushed by a continual cool breeze.

Despite being abandoned for the last year or so, the Walters' rock cabin was in reasonably good shape, but the front door hung open as if in grim invitation. The thatched roof remained with only a few gaps fallen in. A thick layer of dust shrouded the porch, and without any human intervention, most everything that had once been an attempted orchard and garden looked dead.

Tumbleweeds rolled between the fallen-in barn and front door of the cabin.

“Where is that snaky well?” Porter asked.

Shayla gestured toward the barn, the roof in the midst of collapsing in on itself. The branches and logs used to make it had not stood the test of time nearly so well as the fitted stones that made up the walls of the domicile.

“Seems like it could have been a decent place,” Porter mused as he dismounted and led the horses toward the well. It had a stout wooden cover protecting it, and he gingerly flipped half of the double bracketed lid. He readied himself for snakes but saw none. He pulled a bucket up for the horses. They snorted at the water but greedily drank it anyway.

Porter sniffed it himself and said, “I don’t smell snakes now.”

Shayla called from the rock cabin, “Look at this.”

Porter tied the horses to the rail beside the well and went to the cabin. A gust of wind brought a swirl of dust from the porch and sent it across the open yard between them. Porter thought he saw movement against the hillside a few hundred yards away, but as he paused to watch a long moment, he saw nothing more.

Shayla called again.

“What did you find?” he answered.

“They left a journal.”

“That’s awful strange if the folks were packing and moving out. Why leave it?”

Shayla shook her head. “I don’t know, but I have to read it now.” She scanned the first few pages, glancing at the dates, and muttered, “I’m gonna skip to the end.” The pages were weather-worn and rough and one tore out as she was turning pages, but since it was from earlier in the journal, she paid little mind. “Here we go,” she said, then she read aloud to Porter, “The dreams are too much. Pa has gone into the hills, and we cannot get him to come home. He slithers on his belly like a snake and tried to bite Willy.”

“Who was Willy?”

“The dog.”

“We thought to fetch Doc Winslow but it is no use, Pa died by midday, still acting insane like a snake.”

“When was that written?”

“The end of July. I guess they’ve been gone longer than I thought.”

Porter rubbed at his chin. “Just like that man I killed before I rode into Graves Valley. He was acting like a snake too.”

“You told me already but what did he look like?”

“Older, full head of hair, but it was all gray. He was thin as a rail, and his clothes were terrible dirty, maybe he had been slithering on the ground too. When I first saw him, I thought he was just resting, but he may have been sunning himself on a rock like a snake.”

“I wonder if that was Laurence Potter, he had gray hair and lived out halfway to Caineville.”

Porter shifted uncomfortably. “I wouldn’t a done it except he couldn’t be reasoned with. Tried to bite me too.”

“Do you really think this could be a curse?” she asked.

“I didn’t want to believe the curse stories; I thought maybe it was mercury poisoning from the water getting contaminated, but this...”

“But now?” she asked expectantly. “Should we not drink the water here?”

“The journal doesn’t say they all got it right? And the horses seem fine.”

Shayla scanned through the journal. “That’s the only one they wrote about.”



Porter said, “That letter I got before we left is from a strange man that always seems to be in the wrong place at the right time, or at least he is there when I am in the wrong place. He said that I was here for a reason, and that’s why he gave me the dynamite. Must be hinting at me to deal with whatever is here.”

“The Walters cabin?”

“Not just the cabin, the whole area. I think the well water seems fine, but there is some kind of taint in this land, and I reckon I must find it and stamp it out.”

“There may be more than you can handle,” she said.

Porter adjusted his gun belt then the snub-nosed revolver hidden in his vest pocket. “A man has got to do what a man has got to do. ‘Sides, I’ve faced this kind of thing before, I reckon I’m as qualified as anyone to take care of it.”

“You think pretty highly of yourself, Porter Rockwell,” she said as she wrapped her arms around him.

He smiled and held her close. “Reckon I do.” He tilted his head down and kissed her.

After a warm moment, Shayla gave a deep exhale and said, “I’m pretty tired. You mind if I take a cat nap?”

“No, you go ahead and do that, I’ll keep an eye out for trouble.”

She set herself up against the wall and got as comfortable as she could. Porter lent her his coat and soon came back inside with a horse blanket after he had loosened the cinches on their saddles. He peered at the mountainside where he thought he had seen movement but decided it had probably just been a deer moving with the morning’s light. He scanned in the direction of the canyon they had come from but saw no sign of men or horses. He considered lighting a fire to warm Shayla but decided against it, as he wanted no smoke signal to alert anyone of their position.

After a long spell of watching and waiting, with the gentle snores of Shayla as the only sound beyond the wind, he found himself dozing off as well.

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*He was in a land he both recognized and yet was completely alien and new to him. It was as if he had both been there many times before and yet knew he had never been to a land such as this. Pillars of stone towered higher than any he had ever seen, while through verdant valleys water flowed*

*among rich meadows, and fruit trees hung heavy with their harvest.*

*The sun beamed down on the land, coaxing him to relax. He thought he saw a good friend, Joseph, in the distance and called to him, but it was too far, and his friend did not hear him and walked on. Porter wanted to run and catch up to his old friend, but the sky grew dark and lightning crashed. He sought shelter under a tree. Rain fell in torrents until the landscape shifted and melted away under the deluge. Even the tree was uprooted and washed away while Porter stood along on the landscape rooted by his sheer will. Darkness prevailed as the rain and floodwater subsided.*

*He was in the desert, this desert near Graves valley, though it was different, it was also the same.*

*A massive serpent slithered past him, heedless, but it was such a monster that he reached for a weapon at his side, a weapon he did not possess. Had it been washed away in the flood? Had he ever had it here? He did not know.*

*He spun around at the sound of a mocking laugh, hunting for its source.*

*It was One Eye.*

*She stood before him naked as the day she was born. Now she had two eyes, the terrible wound repaired in this realm of deep night. Her dark hair glimmered in the dusky twilight, white teeth displaying an insolent smile. She swayed like a snake dancing in the field, at once both alluring and repellent.*

*“Can you still reject me here, Porter? Here we can complete the snake dance, the mating dance, and combine our essence for mighty Yig. Here we can consummate our communion for Father Yig.”*

*These were words he would never expect an Indian woman to say. These were words he wouldn't expect any woman to say on the frontier, but inside what he knew to be a dream, it all made sense, as if here was a place where all the high fallutin words he would never use made sense, where he understand all tongues and expressions, the very meaning of everyone's souls and intentions was as clear as the purest stream.*

*Then why was everything still so dark?*

*Why did she laugh so mockingly and hide in the shadows surrounding him, as if playing with a meal she was about to eat?*

*He didn't like it, and even weaponless he wouldn't go down without a fight.*

*“I told you, you were called. I told you, you would come to the mountain whether you wanted to or not. And here you are, in the mountain, in the belly of Yig.”*

*“Like hell, this is a dream.”*

*“Is it? Or have you simply awoken to your place? Your true place, at my side? This is the real world of spirit, far beyond that material world men know as Earth. That is the real illusion, this place is where truth matters.”*

*He shook his head as if that might clear away the cobwebs and he would find himself back in the Walters’ cabin, but it didn’t work. He was still here in the darkness with the naked, voluptuous woman taunting him, slithering about, always just behind his peripheral vision, ready to strike.*

*“Your real world is but a glove, with the truth being the hand inside, unseen that moves it. The spirit world is the real world, and I am the hand that wields it.”*

*“I’ve had about enough of your games. I ain’t your man, and I don’t serve Yig. Go on now and let me be.”*

*“Beg,” she said simply. “Beg...and I will still yet consecrate with you.”*

*She warped across his vision, always at his side no matter which way he turned, ready to face the attack.*

*“How are you doing this?”*

*“I took your hair and bound you to me through the finer realm of spirit. I have a connection, a hold on you that cannot be broken so long as I possess any part of you. I have your hair, and soon I will have your heart and more.” She laughed again, like a thunderbolt in his face, and slashed with clawed hands, as fangs sprouted from her mouth like daggers.*

*A river of blood flowed and he was drowning...*

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“Wake up! Shayla said as she smacked Porter across the face. “You were having a nightmare.”

Porter blinked awake and grabbed her hand before receiving a third slap. “I’m awake. I don’t have nightmares.”

“Well, you were mumbling something fierce, and it sure didn’t seem too pleasant. I know I had one myself before I woke up and saw the tossing and turning you were doing.”

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep,” he muttered as he stretched and stood and adjusted his gun belt. He looked outside the cabin to the far edge of the meadows where they had come

from the cowboy cave and shootout. Still no sign of pursuit. The sun was a good way up in the sky, denoting that it had been hours, but cloud cover had swung around again, painting everything a fine gray and dropping just a hint of drizzle. “Sorry, I fell asleep. I shouldn’t a’ done that.”

“It’s fine, we needed the rest after last night,” she said, before probing, “What did you dream about?”

He didn’t want to say. “Nothing. Snakes, I guess.”

“Me too. There must be something about this place and why the Walters left.”

He grunted in the affirmative.

Shayla held up the journal. “I read a little more while you were sleeping. The Walter boys were watching over their cattle at a spring near the site and saw a monstrous snake strike a one-year-old calf. They estimated the snake to be over thirty-five feet long. They said it knocked the calf over, wrapped around it, and took a long time to swallow it whole.”

Porter wondered, “When does it say they saw that?”

“Springtime.”

Shayla perused more of the journal. “In the following weeks it’s written that they saw it multiple times and went so

far as to ask other local ranchers if they had been losing any calves. They all replied that rustlers were apparently taking ten or twelve head of cattle a year in the area and had been for as long they had lived here.”

“How long would that be?”

“The last four to five years, I imagine.”

Porter took a deep breath and stretched once more then stepped out on the porch. Patches of sunlight broke through the clouds only to hide once more under the racing skyline. He’d had enough of this place, its snakes, rustlers, and backshooters. Time to get Shayla and head to less bizarre vistas. Time to go home. His home.

“You want to marry me?”

She looked up from the journal with bright eyes on the verge of tears and smiled. “With all my heart, I do.”

“Let’s get out of here. Let’s not worry about your herd, I’ve got plenty for the two of us. Leave a letter for your brother about it and gather your things and we’ll go. I don’t aim to come back here without a valid posse. And I guess you best warn your brother to straighten up and abide by the law.”



She nodded, wiping away a tear of joy. “This is sudden but so right.” She wrapped her arms around him, and they kissed. “I ain’t got much, but I’m all yours.”

“I’ll cinch up the horses, water them, and we’ll be on our way.” he said as he went out the door.

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Shayla continued reading through the journal. “This is interesting. They say they found some Indian ruins in the mountain.”

“In the mountain? Like a cave?”

“Not a cave exactly but up a slot canyon not far to the north. This says it’s a narrow canyon, wide enough for a wagon, only just. It opens wider into a box canyon farther inside. There are snake motifs everywhere, all carved along the walls, and it looks like it was an ancient city there where thousands of people could have dwelt eons ago.”

“Here?”

“That’s what it says they found, only back in May.”

“Why didn’t they tell anyone?”

“Sounds like they expected to find treasure but instead only found a mess of rattlers amid the ruins. But the place was so

large they kept looking, thinking they just hadn't found the treasure yet."

Porter pondered that as he watched their back trail against the swirling clouds.

Shayla asked, "You think they'll still be coming after us?"

"I'd expect so, considering I shot several of their compadres."

"Maybe they're licking their wounds."

"That's possible too. But that just means they'll be coming eventually."

"I want to see this serpent temple they're talking about."

Porter squinted at her. "How do we know it isn't the cause of that madness?"

Shayla returned his puzzled look. "You've seen an awful lot in your time."

"Yup."

"Do you think a place can make a man go crazy? Think he's a snake?"

"I reckon not, but that don't mean there isn't reason to be cautious."

“You afraid?”

“Hell no. But I don’t walk into a rattler’s den either.”

“You came with me looking for rustlers, I say you do go traipsing into a rattler’s den for me. And I want to go looking for that canyon and find that temple. What if there is treasure?”

“All right, but we wait until I know we’re not getting boxed in by those rustlers.”

“Fair enough.”

## A Reckless Wander

They rode over the tumble of rocks, always watching the mountain. The tickle at the backs of their necks told them it was watching them too. The wind blew just enough to make the autumn leaves sway, and the handful of dry grasses billowed like the waves of the sea lapping at the shore.

An eagle circled overhead, but it never came close to the ground, always just riding the thermals far above. Beyond that they saw no other animals.

They found a slot canyon and went inside, but it became impassable within fifty paces and was far too narrow compared to what they had read in the journal. A name was scrawled high on a wall, but it was Spanish, it read DeGuzman 1789.

“I think he was marking it so they would know they didn’t need to come this way.”

Shayla shrugged.

Porter remarked, “Besides, this can’t be it, not enough room for a horse, let alone a cart or wagon.”

Shayla asked, “What if a flood washed something out or knocked these stones in a landslide?”

“It wouldn’t change the canyon’s walls. Got to be somewhere else.” They continued their journey around the mountain, hunting and lurking in every one of the gulley’s, ravines, and canyons they could find. Several seemed almost to match the journal’s description, but would all prove faulty. One was too full of silt and dirt to be considered a slot canyon of stone, another ended in a stunted box canyon as soon as it began, and another, though beautiful with varying red colors of rock, was too narrow and twisted to be the correct place.

“Only snakes could use this one,” Porter said with a chuckle.

“Considering that, what if?” Shayla wondered.

Porter shook his head. “Still doesn’t follow what the journal said they found. We need one easily passable by us on horseback.”

“I wonder if we shouldn’t have gone left at the cabin rather than right?” Shayla asked. “What if their directions were

reversed. I heard sometimes people have done that with treasure maps.”

“You mean like if he was facing the other direction from what he wrote?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense, unless we keep going, but much farther and we’ll be around the north side, and that can’t be it.”

Porter rubbed at his beard and checked the sun. “We have a few more hours of daylight. I reckon we can check this way a little longer before we have to turn back.”

They rode around a dry creek wash where blocks of stone were half submerged in the strand of a flashflood washout. A small tree was bent sideways where it had been uprooted.

Shayla saw the sign first. “Port! Look at that!”

A serpent was scrawled right near the base, half covered in sand. It was a design utterly alien to Porter but was indeed a mark of the serpent god of Kukulkan.

The glyph was carved with a careful step pattern to denote the snake’s slither. There was no denying it.

“I think you’re right.” They examined the glyph for a moment, and Porter moved the sand away from the base to get

a better look at it, but there were no other markings to be seen in the creek bed. “Let’s keep looking, it must be close.”

Shayla rode around the towering bit of rock and was the first to see the canyon almost hidden behind the boulders. It was large enough for a wagon or cart, but only just. The tumble of stone hid the entrance while also being nothing out of the ordinary to catch the human eye and its perpetual attempt at finding a pattern. The other peculiar thing about it was the shape, it was almost a tunnel. Wide enough for a wagon, but overhead a man on horseback would have to duck. It was still open to the sky above, but the rock walls leaned perilously inward and almost closed in tight above. From far enough away, the canyon would not be seen in the jumble of stones, shadows, and scattered stunted junipers.

They led their horses up through the slot canyon, as it wound serpentine back and forth. Here and there they would see some sign on the canyon wall, like the serpent glyph but sometimes like men in curious costumes.

Shayla broke the silence, “Do you think a city could be up here? A place that thousands might have lived at one time, like those stories said.”

“Anything is possible, but it is queer. I can’t say what the ancients were thinking or what they did exactly, but they would have been much the same as us in their own way with their own concerns and desires. The practicality, pettiness and dreams would be the same despite the cultural differences.”

“You’ve given that much thought to the ancients?”

Porter faced her, “I have. Everywhere we walk across this big land was once home to someone else and they lived and died the same as us. Some good, some bad, but human all the same.”

Shayla cast a wary eye about them, looking up and down the towering red walls. “What about that talk of snake men and old gods?”

Porter chewed at the edges of his mustache, “That’s different. Them old gods are greedy and spiteful; cruel and hungry, they just might be trouble. If they’re dwelling in this serpent temple.”

“You sound like you’ve experienced them some.”

Porter just looked at her and said everything without a word.



The horses suddenly became skittish as the canyon widened slightly. It was open in a curved oblong manner more than tripling in width, with the walls going almost sheer up for more than a hundred feet.

Shayla asked, “You think they sense something?”

Porter scanned every direction, “I reckon so.” He had his pistol drawn and his hands on the reins as the Sorrell pulled back, wishing to exit the canyon. “I don’t see anything, but maybe it would be best to tie the horses up, back at the mouth while we investigate.”

They went back down canyon, nice and slow always watching their back. The feeling of being watched was always upon them despite no sign of life anywhere about.

The tied the horses up behind the large boulder that sheltered the mouth of the canyon and only then did they see a sign that someone else had been nearby. It was almost a quarter mile away back toward the way they had come.

Shayla pointed and said, “Look at that.”

Porter withdrew his telescope from the saddlebags and looked. It was a wagon, with a pair of horses grazing along the

shrubbery beside the trail. “What’s it doing here and where is the driver?”

He scanned up and down the mountainside as best he could but saw no sign of life.

“How did we miss him?” Shayla asked.

Porter shook his head. “If he came up behind us, as we found the sign of the serpent, we might have missed him and he us, but where could he have gone in the last half hour?”

Shayla said, “I guess it was enough time for him to go but why would he? I never heard shots or anything.”

“It might be some kind of bait, but we ought to go look. I’ll ride over ahead and see what I can, if I signal then you come on over.”

Porter rode toward the wagon. The horses were beside a small pool of rainwater and some sweet grass, their ears perked as they scented Jenny the Sorrell, but they were accustomed to other horses and continued grazing. Porter noted that the wagon was filled with a load of mail, various supplies and packages. Some of it had been torn open as if someone were looking for something, but once opened, was left in the bed of the wagon. One small crate especially caught

Port's eye as it was addressed to himself. A bit of dried blood was splashed across the buckboard, did it mean the driver had been shot? He again scanned the mountainside and saw no one. Only then did he signal for Shayla to join him.

As she rode closer enough to hear, Porter said, "This must be that pony express wagon that rider told us was coming in a day or two."

"But why is out here far away from the road. And where is the driver?"

Porter didn't answer but scanned the area. In the unlikely event the driver was nearby he would easily be seen from their vantage point. "I think someone tried to rob this wagon and for whatever reason the horses kept going without the driver until exhaustion had them stop near us."

"Why here?"

"That puddle of water and that sweet grass. It's a blessing in its own way."

"What do we do?"

"We take my crate of goods here and get some cover until we can be sure who we are dealing with."

"You got any ideas who would have tried to rob this?"

“Probably some of them same polecats we dealt with last night.”

Shayla wondered aloud, “We still don’t know why they drew off and who they were shooting at last night.”

“I figured it could have been one of the others that were enemies of theirs. It wasn’t Monte, we would have heard his gun.”

“Not Indians?”

Porter shook his head. “Only one around here I’ve seen is One Eye. Redbone and his tribe stay farther into the Swell.”

The sharp crack of a rifle cut the air near simultaneously Porter heard the whine as the bullet went right past him.

A second then a third hit all around them, tearing holes in the wagon’s buckboard sides.

Shayla grunted in pain as she leapt from the back to the ground.

Porter drew his gun to return fire, but also had his thoughts turn to the case of dynamite in the back of the wagon.

“We’ve got to get away from that. If they hit it...” He grabbed Shayla by the shoulder and hurried her toward the horses.

Several men were firing at them and converging from far off. Porter counted at least seven or eight.

They mounted and raced away toward the shelter of the boulders near the canyon mouth.

They ducked beside the massive boulders at the mouth and Porter rapidly returned fire. The horsemen kept themselves spread far out and were firing with their pistols and rifles from far off as they converged. Porter couldn't help but feel this and the wagon had been some kind of trap, but that didn't matter now. They had him pinned down.

Shayla groaned as she lay on the ground, only now did Porter see that she was wounded, as red rapidly stained her shirt.

"No, no, no!" he shouted in anger, as he knelt beside her.

Tears welled in her eyes as she gritted her teeth. Her face was pale.

Bullets ricocheted around them.

"Those sons of bitches, I'll kill them all."

"I'm scared, I need help," she said.

Porter fired until his six-gun was empty then dropped his spent brass. A bullet crashed just above their heads, spitting

bits of rock down on them. A second and third in roughly the same spot let him know they were zeroing in on his position. Nowhere to go from here but up the snake canyon. But he also didn't want to be trapped in a place he didn't know the end of. He knelt once more looking to see where the wound was. Shayla had been hit in the arm, hot red ran down her arm and stained the front of her shirt.

Porter tore a section of her shirtsleeve free and bound the wound, saying, "Keep pressure on it if you can. I've got to make them stay back a moment."

Men called out in fierce glee, firing at will.

Porter reloaded and came around the corner with both pistols. His aim was true and deadly, he took the nearest horsemen in the chest, the man cursed and fell from his horse. The next took aim with his rifle and the bullet tore through Porter's hat, but Port remained steady and fired back, taking the attacker in the forehead, splattering gore across the horse and rider behind. That one turned about and raced for cover along the boulders to the north.

A barrage of lead rained toward Porter, and he again knelt by Shayla's side as she held onto the makeshift bandage.

The loud boom from a rifle echoed along the mountainside and Porter perked. “That’s not one of theirs.”

“What is it?” she asked.

In spite of the grim situation, Porter smiled. “That was the elephant gun.”

## Better Off Alone If You Ask Me

The boom of the elephant gun along with the crack of Chauncy's 45.70 were some of the most welcome sounds Porter thought he had ever heard. The tide was flipped, he had been pinned down with a wounded Shayla and now the bushwhackers were getting it from both sides. The rainstorm of bullets heading his way was dramatically lifted as the ambushers shifted their attentions.

"God is good," he said to himself.

He could hear the desperadoes cursing as they now had to account for being shot at on two fronts. Had Monte been able to kill any of them yet? He wasn't sure, but it was time to take the fight to them.

Porter glanced around the edge of the boulders. The men were all dismounted now. The elephant gun's threat had made every man abandon his horse at this point.

Porter rounded the boulders he had been using for cover with a six-gun in each hand. A bullet whined past him. He



could feel the violence of its passage through the air as it careened off a stone behind him.

He took careful aim at the shooter. Porter recognized him. It was the negro wearing a sombrero from Graves Valley, what was he called? Sundown? Porter's first shot crashed a bullet through Sundown's lower chest, sending his sombrero flying while the second shot hit near enough to the heart. Sundown went down mute from the double impact. Porter scanned for another target.

A wiry man in a crimped black hat crouched and fired, sending a bullet at Porter's feet. Shots from Chauncy kept Black Hat low.

Porter fired with both guns and hit the Black Hat in the leg.

Black Hat cried out in pain and crawled back behind the concealment of a sagebrush.

The boom from the elephant gun dispatched another one of the desperadoes. But it was followed by the crack of a rifle and an immediate yelp, that Porter recognized as Monty's English accent. Had Monte been hit?

Anxious to support an ally, Porter rushed forward, firing into the vicinity he guessed Black Hat and others were hiding

in.

More shots rang out and Porter heard Chauncy this time, “I’m shot!”

A man got up to run from behind a sage and Porter let him have it with both barrels, the bushwhacker fell, firing into the ground as he went down.

Porter scanned with his gun pointing wherever his eyes were. Everything had gone eerily silent save for the drumming hooves of a fleeing horse. He could see Chauncy’s coonskin hat hanging off the man, beside a boulder. If he wasn’t dead, he must be hurt bad to be lying in such a position, but he was too far away through the possible firing lines to be checked on yet.

Moving as swiftly as he dared, hunkering low, Porter passed by Sundown who was definitively dead. Not more than a few paces away a blood trail led to another one of the bushwhackers with his back blown out by a shot from the elephant gun.

The sound of heavy breathing was not far away in the sage brush maze.

Porter stepped careful, ready for anything when he found another of the wounded bandits. This man had likely been hit by a smaller round from Chauncy's 45 70, still a devastating round to be hit with. The bandit was crawling along the ground, leaving enough blood behind that he would not last long.

Porter looked and saw the soon to be dead man had already abandoned his six-gun in the dirt ten feet away. Ever watchful for any more of his compatriots, Porter caught up to him and spun him over onto his back.

Pale as a ghost, the man cringed weakly, tears streaming down his face.

"Jesse?" Porter asked.

"Yes?" Jesse answered weakly.

"How many are there of you out there?"

Jesse sniffed and shook his head. "I'm cold."

Porter pressed the question, "How many men are you running with?"

"I'm thirsty."

Porter shook his head, "I'll give you a drink when you tell me how many are riding with you."

Jesse shivered and said, "Geech, Turnpike, Blaine, Sundown, and the Tinker."

Porter wondered at that. "The Tinker?" he asked.

"He's the boss man."

"Who else is out there? I know there was more than that."

"I don't know. Jones too and maybe Billy and Hobbs if he didn't run when that big gun first went. I need that drink mister."

Porter poured a trickle of the whiskey flask in Jesse's mouth.

"It doesn't hurt so bad now."

Porter quickly gazed across the tops of the sagebrush and listened. No one else was shooting. There was no noise but for a slight rustle of wind.

Jesse exhaled loudly and went still. He was gone.

Porter could only see four dead men, not counting Chauncy. He was confident he had killed another that had fallen from his horse but could not see the man. He hoped Monte wasn't dead, but there was no way of telling just yet.

Moving cautious, he heard the deadly alarm of a rattlesnake. It was coiled not more than three steps in front of him, its wedge-shaped head swaying ready to strike. He wanted to shoot it but wasn't going to give his position away to whoever else was out there, so he slightly backtracked, keeping an eye on the serpent as he made his way through a different gap in the sage. In doing so he came across another dead bandit, Black Hat, whatever his real name had been. That made it at least five dead out of eight, and there was almost certainly a sixth. Where were the last two?

He scrambled around some rocky ledges, edging toward where Chauncy looked like he was dead. In changing his approach, he could see the coonskin cap and buckskin fringed arm lying across the top of a fallen log.

There was about twenty feet of open clearing that would leave him wide open in approaching the man, but Porter felt he owed Chauncy, so he dashed forward.

Shots rang out and bullets skipped across the dirt at his feet. Porter dove behind the log as several more bullets punched into the old pine, knocking bark loose.

Chauncy was dead, having been hit in the upper chest. The log in front of him was drenched in blood. Porter took his 45

70 and crawled around to get a better vantage to shoot back at whoever was gunning for him. The rotted tree had fallen over years past and now where the roots flared up, Porter dared a look around the edge.

He thought he saw a man moving up the draw to his left. Porter didn't want the bushwhacker to get any closer to where Shayla lay hidden, so he started shooting. He couldn't tell that he hit the man but saw that he went low into the sage and grass.

A second shooter fired at him from closer, almost right in front of him. It was a miracle the man missed and only knocked dirt from the roots in front of Porter face.

Adjusting quickly Porter worked the lever action and let instinct take over, firing back as quick as he could. It at least had the antagonist ducking for cover, slim as cover was in sage brush and rock-strewn desert.

Porter moved quick and let loose the rest of the chambered rounds, then drew his six-guns. Creeping around the bend he found the Tinker. He was alive but bleeding.

“You gut shot me you bastard,” he snarled.

“Drop whatever you're packing,” Porter ordered.

The Tinker tossed his revolver away.

“What else you got, you snake?”

The Tinker moved a red right hand from his belly toward Porter. “Nothing, you hit me bad, I need help. You’re the marshal, you need to get me to a doctor.”

“I didn’t think there was a doctor in Graves valley and we’re still a long way off from there.”

The Tinker winced in pain. “I don’t have any other weapons. I need help. Take me into custody.”

“Who else is out there shooting at me?”

“I think it was Blaine.”

Porter didn’t trust the Tinker and keeping his right-hand pistol on him, he looked him over with his left. “Why’d you do this? What are we to you?”

“What?” gasped the Tinker.

“You came shooting at us! What for? What’s your game here?” Porter demanded.

“I didn’t know you had backup hidden behind us.”

“I didn’t either,” Porter said as he scanned for where Monte must have fallen. “But that didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m not a bad man,” said the Tinker.

Porter snorted in derision.

The Tinker shook his head. “Something about this place brings out the worst in men. Makes you think bad thoughts, go and do bad things you wouldn’t normally do. The temptations come and you act before you know why you do what you’re doing.”

Porter shook his head in answer. “Everyone’s got a choice what they’ll do. You’re a polecat, that’s my answer. What did you think we found treasure or something?”

“I thought maybe. I heard rumors of a canyon with gold, but I’m telling you this place it has an evil aura.”

Porter watched for the missing gunman that had been moving towards Shayla’s hiding place near the mouth of the canyon. From this spot the canyon still couldn’t be seen the way it was masked beside the tremendous sized boulders.

“Call for your friend, Blaine, get him to give it up or you’re gonna eat lead.”

The Tinker winced, but nodded and shouted hoarsely, “Blaine. Blaine, come on out. We’re caught in our own trap.”

Nothing but the soft slithering wind was heard.



“Guess, you’ve got to eat a bullet,” said Porter as he cocked the hammer.

“You’re bluffing,” said the Tinker.

“I am,” Porter answered softly, “but if he’s out there he don’t know that.”

“Lying can get you into trouble,” the Tinker said, as he glanced over Porter’s shoulder.

“I got him boss,” said Blaine, as he skulked out from behind Porter. His hammer clicked as he readied to shoot.

Boom!

The sound of the elephant gun rocked the mountainside.

Blaine’s body went flying back into the brush, the elephant gun hitting him like a kicking mule.

Monte came striding down the hillside with the still smoking gun. “I say that was in the nick of time, wasn’t it?”

Porter shook his head. “You always up there?”

Monte said, “No, I was moving around to get in a better spot, as they had me pegged when they hit Chauncy. Is he all right?”

“He’s dead.”

“That’s too bad. He was a fine chap. I shall bury him with fine honors,” said Monte. “What about Miss Randles?”

“She is wounded and right around the side of that boulder there. Since we seem to have accounted for all these polecats, could you round up the horses and we can head back?” Porter asked.

“That man there looks pretty grievously wounded,” said Monet.

“He is.”

Monte glanced about, “You seem to be offering me the more difficult of duties. All the horses have run off now, haven’t they?”

“They have, but we have a second option, with some horses I hobbled before we were bushwhacked.”

“Eh?” asked Monte.

Porter asked, “Did you come from the south or north?” He pointed down toward a bend along the mountainside. “Just south is a wagon, stolen from the pony express. We’ll need to put the Tinker, Shayla and Chauncy in it. It’s only a quarter mile down that way.”

Monte cast a shielded eye and said, "I see it. I shall retrieve it forthwith."

"I'll get her, and we'll be ready to head back to town."

"I shall return post haste," said Monte, as he went down the rocky slope and toward the wagon.

"Let's move," Porter said to the Tinker, pushing him forward and toward where Shayla was hunkered down.

The Tinker said, "I told you the truth of this lace. It brings out the worst in all men. You were ready to shoot me down back there."

Porter spit. "Like you were me?"

"Men can only do so much. They can be tempted too far, pushed too hard, made hopeless. Then they break and become animals."

Porter shot back, "They aren't animals, they're men. They're accountable."

The Tinker scoffed, "There you go putting others up on your standards."

"My standards are all I got. I learned from the best."

“Hold up, I’m hurt,” the Tinker said as he gingerly stepped down a flaky rock patch. “You saw them men that turned into snakes, didn’t you?”

“What are you talking about?”

The Tinker grinned as he wiped a hint of blood from the edge of his mouth. “I heard you saw one before you rode into town. There are more. You say men aren’t animals, but I have seen them. We shot some last night. Wasn’t that you riding like hell bent for leather out of the Cowboy Cave? We came in behind Barbers gang cuz we knew we could catch them open while focusing on you. But we didn’t expect there to be snake men too.”

“You’re lying,” Porter said.

“You know I’m not. The Walters and some of them others like the Holt gang, they’ve all been changed and become snake people, serving that damn snake god that One Eye talks about, Yig or Yog or some such.”

“You’re saying there is more.”

“Lots more,” said the Tinker. “And if I’m right about that, something you disagreed with at first,” he stumbled on a rocky escarpment. “You must agree that truth is relative.”

“Shut up.”

The Tinker prodded further, “You got too many sacred cows?”

“I don’t have any sacred cows, but I do have lines I won’t cross.”

“Well,” said the Tinker, “Some men don’t.”

“Keep moving.”

They made it to the sheltered space where Shayla lay against the boulder. She looked pale.

“You keeping pressure on that?” Porter asked.

She nodded. “One Eye was here.”

“What? Where is she now?”

“She is up the canyon,” said Shayla sleepily.

“What happened?” Porter asked, as he glanced for any sign of the Indian woman but saw none.

The Tinker still held a hand over his stomach and collapsed on the ground not far from Shayla. He had lost a lot of blood. Some trickled at the edge of his mouth. “What do you care?” he muttered.

“Shut your mouth!” Porter snapped.

“She...had a snake. Bit me,” said Shayla, as she extended her uninjured arm and Porter saw the twin marks from a rattlesnake’s fangs.

Porter was furious and drew his pistol and glanced toward the slim canyons opening. Everything in his mind screamed to go racing down that dark path and deal vengeance, but he had to stay and take care of Shayla. She needed him.

“Just deserts,” coughed the Tinker.

“I told you to shut up.”

The Tinker laughed and then coughed before saying, “Or what, you’ll gut shoot me again. Kill me just like you did her brother.”

“I didn’t kill her brother.”

The Tinker was deadly serious. “Oh yes you did.”

Shayla had been looking sleepy, but the conversation forced her awake.

Porter wanted to change the subject, “The Englishman, Monte, is still alive, he went to get the wagon, we’re gonna get you on it and ride back to town. Things are gonna be all right.”

“Don’t change the subject. Just admit it Porter, you killed her brother!” snarled the Tinker.

Shayla gasped and stared at Porter with her mouth open.

Porter scrutinized the Tinker. “Who? When?”

“That night you got bushwhacked. You shot her brother Mike!”

Porter shouted back, “How do you know that?” He picked Shayla up, so that she was standing while still leaning against the boulder.

The Tinker laughed, “My boy Jesse escaped. He told me. Said you blew a hole right through his skull, big enough for the moon to shine through.”

Shayla’s eyes flared wide in disbelief but still no words came as she stared at Porter.

Porter looked to Shayla, who now pulled away from him. “If that was him, I did what I had to do. He was about to kill me.”

She slumped to the ground as if the words had been a punch to the gut.

The Tinker taunted, “That’s right, it was him. You killed her baby brother in cold blood.”

“Shut up.”

The Tinker coughed and spit blood. “Oh, I think I’m beyond caring what you think marshal, you gut-shot me and I’m a goner, but I know one way to get my revenge. I drive a wedge between you two that will last forever.”

“Says you,” Porter muttered as he pointed his six-gun at the Tinker who was too weak to even hold his hands up any longer.

The Tinker panted as he said, “Told you...this place...brings out the worst. It’s an open door...for the bad things out there...hiding in the borders of shadow...like fleas on a dog’s hind leg.”

Porter shook his head but wondered if there wasn’t some truth to that.

The Tinker made as if to laugh, but exhaled once and then went silent and still.

“It’s true, isn’t it,” Shayla breathed.

“Yeah, I suppose so. But that doesn’t change us. Doesn’t change how I feel about you at all.”

“It changes things for me,” she said softly. “I still care for you, Lord knows I do, but I don’t think I can walk the rest of



my days trading kisses with the man who killed my baby brother, I just can't do it."

"It was him or me, you gotta understand."

She wouldn't look at him. "I know. I get it. I do understand. But you have to understand that I can't go through the rest of my life looking into the eyes of the man who killed my baby brother no matter what he done. I just can't."

Porter was angry now. What makes a woman think like she does? It makes no sense. Grief and anger he could understand, but to give up on a good thing because of the bad decisions of others, still didn't have no call with him. "Do I gotta worry about you gunning for revenge on me?" he asked.

"Of course not," she said, still refusing to meet his eye. "But I don't want to see you again neither. It's too hard."

"Lord, I do not understand all the pretty things you said and now giving up like this."

Shayla said, "It's not giving up, it's just me doing what I have to do. I can't be with the man who killed him. I just can't. Can't you understand that?"

"Don't let him be right," Porter argued, kicking at the Tinkers boot. "We can beat this."

“It’s bigger than him. Bigger than us. I can’t get over this trial. Gotta start again somewhere else and just try and forget you and everything I thought we had.”

Confusion reigned supreme in his mind, and he knew he couldn’t think straight. He was furious, but this was a fight he knew he could not win. A woman had made up her mind and there was no arguing logic against emotion. It was an impasse and the only thing he could do was go take a tangible fight to whatever else was lurking farther up that misbegotten canyon calling to him like a siren’s song. He had wanted to fight that call, run away with Shayla but now he felt inexorably drawn to it, like he should take that dark walk if she was gonna sit here and reject him. He could fight something else but not what he was feeling. His mind was flaring red, twisting up in knots and fighting was the only damn thing he knew how to do now, the only thing he felt like he was any good at.

He said, “You get back to town with Monte and do what you gotta do, I’m gonna go see to it that this ends here and now.”

“What about—”

He cut her off. “Nothing up there but snakes and evil. I can deal with that. I can understand that,” he finished angrily.

“You can’t go up there by yourself,” she said.

“I’m better off alone if you ask me,” he said, as he trudged around the corner, stomping as he went, forgetting any sense of being cautious.

# Lord of the Dark Places

The farther Porter went up the canyon, beyond where he had already been with Shayla, the more the sides were plastered with ornate carvings and designs. Peculiar glyphs were carved denoting languages he could not hope to understand. This place was ancient beyond words, beyond the tongue for what men could speak.

The thought came that maybe this was foolish to come by himself, but anger boiled over his common sense. The need for purpose, vengeance and a reckoning no matter how, overtake everything else.

The Tinker had been right about at least one thing, this place did prey upon the natural man's basic instincts and the urge to take that left hand path of giving in to the seven deadly sins and Porter certainly knew he felt wrath.

The biggest rattlesnake he had ever seen was coiled in his path. It was not the giant that Monte had found a snakeskin of, nor even close to the story that Slim told but still it was a

monster. At least twenty feet long, it uncoiled and slithered toward him menacingly.

Porter held his six-gun out and moved his gun in time with the rattlesnake's heads movements and he pulled the trigger just before he thought it might strike and reach him from more than ten feet away. The massive head burst from the bullets impact, and he felt bits of snake splash against his hat's brim. The leviathan's body itself twisted and slapped, flailing about in the canyon as if the monstrosity refused to die. Finally, its severed head found a wide cleft in the red walled canyon and slithered into the crevice until only about two feet of the tail hung outside as the body went still.

He went around a bend in the canyon where it opened up slightly and he could see a patch of blue sky above.

Rattles and hissing filled his ears.

Snakes launched themselves from ledges high up on the slot canyons walls and Porter shot them as they came flinging through the air toward him His six-gun roared death, exploding their fanged heads before they could connect. Never in all his days had snakes acted so aggressively. This was a vile place.

None were as large as the first but all of them would have been big enough to remark on how huge they were and beyond the norm.

The aura was oppressive and yet he did feel a call to continue, to face whatever lurked farther in and confront that heart of darkness.

A wider opening revealed the beginnings of some kind of manmade structures. A façade of snake carving in the rock revealed an artistic side that none of the local tribes had ever taken the time to utilize. If Porter had ever been to Mexico city and seen the Aztec ruins, he would have said there was great similarity between them and the pyramids of the ancients. Doorways loomed in several places, but no light penetrated or emanated within.

Ghostly voices beckoned from those shadowy doorways. Rattles shook as if titanic serpents moved just beyond the light of day in those unhallowed halls.

His stomach tightened into a knot, but he was determined to give this his all. He wasn't about to roll over and die no matter the turmoil that threatened his heart and mind.

The bizarre sound of scuffling over the ground met his ears. He couldn't see them yet, but he guessed what would be

arriving. He prepared himself to shoot no matter what he saw there.

A pale ashy face appeared in a dark doorway, its teeth and lips covered in blood. It had a human form but hissed like a snake.

Porter didn't recognize the face but that meant little in the moment as its eyes widened in recognition of what its animal instinct thought was food.

Porter's gun roared and the bullet split the once hissing skull. The body dropped and convulsed on the ground.

Porter watched every direction. He could sense there were more and that he had a great eye of evil upon him. The feeling of being watched surrounded him threatening to drown him and he wondered at the idea of his very mind being attacked by the unseen watchers.

The canyon opened slightly into a box with jagged walls reaching up dozens of feet with slight ledges all the way up. A hissing sound came from one of the ledges above a recessed doorway. A man with a scraggly beard lay up about ten feet but as he saw Porter he slithered on his belly to the edge and let himself drop to the sandy ground. He got to his feet and

raced forward. Porter shot him once in the leg, but still the insane snake man came on.

Porter fired again, as his peripheral vision caught another snake-man coming from his left around a hitherto unseen hiding spot.

Porter shot the first and then turned to hit the second, but this new foe was too quick and closed in so fast Porter could only knock him aside instead of firing his pistol.

This black-haired man had the same yellow eyes of hate that other serpent men had and was snapping his teeth as if he had fangs with Porter now saw he indeed had.

The terrible hissing was the only sound Porter could hear as he reached and grasped his bowie knife and as the snake man launched himself forward, Porter caught his neck with the blade.

The snake man would surely die from the terrible wound, but before he did, he was snapping with his awful mouth and the fangs which were at least two inches long. His clawed hands swiped at Porter, and it was all he could do to keep the stuck snake man at bay.



A wretched new hiss came from just around the bend and yet another snake man even further in their transformative state came closer. This one's very skin looked scaly as if they were halfway between a true snake and man. Their eyes had no lids or at least Porter never saw them blink, just that yellow and black slit as they came ever closer.

Taking an awful chance, Porter sheared the bowie knife out of the snake-man's neck as violently as he could, hoping to tear its head off in the process.

It was enough.

In gruesome spectacle the neck was sliced almost in half and the snapping head fell to the side as the snake-man tumbled down in a gout of blood. It writhed at Porter's feet but at least it was no longer a threat, as other new monstrosities drew near.

Two snake people came from around the bend in the slot canyon. Porter had thought all of them seemed to be men, but this one had the appearance of having once been a woman.

The thought dashed through his brain that maybe the Walter's had never left the valley, maybe they had all been transformed into snake people.

All the more reason to break this cursed place and end the abomination within.

Drawing his second pistol, Porter fired and dropped the nearest snake-man as the snake woman raced at him at full speed. It hissed but broke that sound up at the same time as it seemed to be speaking some unintelligible curse.

The first bullet ripped through its right shoulder, the second into its breast and still it came on.

Porter fired a third time but missed as the snake woman twisted in its attack and came around and under his field of fire. The previous wounds did nothing to slow it down.

Long fangs erupted from its mouth and venom oozed as it clamped its clawed and scaly hands on Porter's shoulder, preparing to bite him on the neck.

He brought the pistol up just in time to blow its head off in a gory blast. The thing crumpled at his feet, before twisting into an inhuman coil.

The bone structure was all wrong, a human being couldn't move like that, but this thing did. How much had they changed besides just their skin and eyes?

Already he had shot a dozen giant snakes and now six snake people, what else was in this canyon?

A massive snake shot out of a hole in the canyon wall.

He was out of bullets and there was no time to reload. The snake lanced forward, and Porter did the only thing he could think of—he smacked the handle of the six-gun down on the snake’s skull right between the eyes as hard as he could. Right where the big snake’s pea-sized brain lay behind a thick slab of bone. One strike wasn’t nearly enough despite the serpent appearing possibly dazed.

Porter hammered the pistol down battering away at the snake head like a blacksmith at the anvil and forge.

Bits of the hickory on the handle splintered away at the force as the steel handle itself buckled under the pressure and Port’s own hand stung from the impact. The snake likely went blind moments before blood splattered from the broken skull. It launched away and thrashed, battering itself against a dark doorway.

Porter quickly reloaded his pistols, sweating over the fact that in shooting this last one he was empty. He had gone through too much ammunition already. He always liked to

have spare cartridges but was getting low by his own standards.

Something moved against the sandy gravel bottom, and he quickly brought his six-gun to bear.

It was One Eye.

It was almost like his nightmare, but this time she at least had a stitch of clothing on. She was a beautiful woman but frightening in her own aspect and power. Here she was queen and in charge, at least that was the impression she gave. She had no fear of the creatures here, she was the master, they were the mindless slaves of her will. She had two rattlesnakes draped over her shoulders and their forked tongues darted forth testing the air. Behind the gloomy passageways, the hint of gigantic snake eyes loomed ready to slither out and attack.

“Call ‘em off,” Porter said.

“They are not for me to command, I but serve Yig. I told you this.”

“You’re the only one in this canyon that I think has any control over the situation. They serve you. You made them didn’t you, through some kind of sorcery.”

She gave him a mocking smile. “I but serve Yig. I do not create but I manipulate.”

“Like you wanted me?”

“I still want you. You are a strong man. You deal in death, these are things great Yig can appreciate, even if you have slain his children. I can speak to him, we can make the family grow again, we can make more. You and I.”

“You’re crazy.”

She swayed before him sensuously, back and forth like a snake being charmed by a tune. A part of him screamed to shoot her right then and there, but he had no truck with shooting a woman, at least a human woman.

“You refuse me?”

“Yup.”

She sidled around him, and he turned slightly to face her, while still watching the shadows.

One Eye said, “You act like you don’t understand the call you were given.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You were chosen, you were called. You had no choice but to come to the Serpent Temple.”

“Coincidence,” he answered, trying to talk himself into the denial as he took a step back and she took a step forward. He had to respect the distance those big rattlers on her shoulders could reach and bite. “I did not come because you called.”

“If it pleases you to think so, but it does not change that you are here answering the call. We have me and will do the dance of the snake. We will bear witness to mighty Yig and his brood. Our passions will open the gate and the way...”

She took another step forward and he held his six-gun up answering, “That’s far enough.”

She cocked her head far over and slid a step or two back. “You deny the pull, the command, the call, but you will submit.” Her smile was an intense bit of derision.

“Like hell,” Porter muttered, but he wondered at his options now. He did not have much ammunition left and there were already more snake people than he had expected. He still had the dynamite and blasting caps but that would be dangerous in these close quarters of the slot canyon.

“Through me, Great Father Yig sent a summons for you, you were to be a champion of his as you were for the other,” she almost spit the name. “Abandon him.”

“Other? You mean God the Father?”

She hissed menacingly at that.

“Jesus Christ?” he said, wanting to test her reaction.

She hissed once more, making a horrific frown and baring her teeth.

“Interesting,” Porter said. “It’s almost like your god has the same kind of problems that Ba’al and Moloch did back in the day.”

“I know not those names,” she said, swaying back and forth in a strange dance as Porter backed away slightly.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t, not going to Sunday school and such. Still, you speak pretty good English.” He shuffled a little keeping his back to the red slot canyon wall. But cautiously checking that nothing was coming slithering over his head either.

“I know and share all the words from those who have been commanded by mighty Yig. My mind has traveled farther than anyone you have ever met.”

“That is a trick, isn’t it?” Porter sidestepped a little more and asked, “You want to tell me about your god?”

One Eye’s voice rose in timbre as she proclaimed, “Great Yig is the father of all serpents and the creator of the garden. He is lord of the dark places and sheds his skin and lives again and again. Reborn anew with every great cycle, and this is his new birth. The great reawakening!”

“Uh huh. Is he here now.”

“He comes quickly,” she said. “You will see and submit.”

A section of the inner chamber had a crackle of lightning and a purple mist flourished and expanded as the buzzing sound and smell of sulphur poured forth. Porter saw the giant head of a snake, likely fifty feet long in total as it gave a baleful stare from just inside the doorway.

“Is that the guardian of the temple?”

“Guardian? No, it is the coming of the God Yig!”

Shadows warped and coalesced and took serpentine form, writhing against the dark. It materialized into a great snake, with a sinewy body thicker than an oaken barrel, the wedge-shaped head swayed before Porter and fangs long as scimitars gleamed in the half-light, dripping searing venom.



This was the true king of all serpents, the god Yig, as One Eye had spoken of, but did it have a mind of its own or just the instinct of a natural born killer?

Innumerable rattles shook as its colossal tail drew up in its coiled position. It glared with yellow eyes of hate at Porter. He couldn't help but wonder at its anger, after all he had slain so many of its children.

One Eye stepped apart and spoke to it in a language he could not fathom.

One Eye spoke in the Uto-Aztecans tongue and Porter could understand none of it save the tone that was of great deference for this snake god and the disdain with which the Indian maiden spoke toward Porter and gesturing wildly.

The giant serpent's tongue flickered, testing the air, that was its only response, for the rattles had gone silent as One Eye spoke.

Porter slowly moved a hand toward his gun belt, but the massive serpent's eye was cast toward himself once more and he eased his hand away.

One Eye continued her diatribe, loud and accusatory.

Could a six-gun even harm a snake this big, Porter wondered, could an elephant gun? Maybe if he hit it in the eye and smashed the brain pan? But he didn't have the Englishman's gun and despite its great size it appeared fast as lightning.

Eternity moved in glacial epochs while he stood there waiting for the shaman to finish, as the snake gods hate filled yellow eye bore down upon him.

One Eye seemed to reach the crescendo of her performance and Yig drew itself taller yet within its coiled position. Was it his imagination of was the snake god growing even larger as he watched?

One Eye turned to face Porter. "I have proclaimed my vision for you. How I called you forth, and that the blood you shed is on my hands. Mighty Yig is displeased but as my growing power holds the gate open, he slithers forth."

"That why he is getting bigger?" Porter asked.

One Eye shouted, "I am the gate! And by my power, he will fully come forth and dwell here in our realm. It is inevitable."

Boom!

The elephant gun spoke and a hole the size of a fist went through One Eye and sent her flying back into the shrouded mists of Yig.

“Run Porter!” shouted Monte.

He didn't need to shout twice; Porter was racing back down the slit canyon as the titanic snake god uncoiled and slithered after them.

# Maybe Someday I'll Take You With Me

Monte had the head start but Porter had almost caught up to him in the wider section of the canyon where he had already brought the wagon and circled it around. Monte whipped the reins and the horses started running.

Porter ran and jumped into the back of the wagon as it was already rolling.

Shayla was there laid out flat and looking pale as ever.

Porter shouted, "What you bring her here for?"

Monte shouted back over his shoulder as he whipped the reins and the wagon bumped along, scraping its side boards against the slick rock canyons walls. "She insisted on it. Said you couldn't be coming up here alone."

"Thanks," Porter said as he looked back.

Snakes dropped from the canyon walls, and several fell into the wagon and Porter shot them or gripped them by the tail and tossed them out.

The wagon rattled along being jostled terribly by hitting the canyon walls or bumping on the uneven ground, here and there a large rock would hit the wagon wheels and cause them to fly up a foot or two. Shayla groaned in pain but endured.

Porter looked back and saw the snake god slithering after them like the largest reptile to have ever existed, the stuff of nightmares, the lord of dark places, hissing, black tongue flicking out, death incarnate.

The weight in his coat pocket tugged at his imagination. The dynamite. If he could light a short fuse, then maybe... maybe at least he could come up with something, but there was no time.

They raced the wagon through the narrow gap, the horses running for all they were worth while the buckboard sides were torn and ripped by the rough edges of the slot canyon. The canyon twisted and turned very often here making it difficult to see what lay just beyond, but Porter didn't want to take the chance the snake god would stop its pursuit.

It took a moment to find a match, but the precarious chase didn't allow him to light it let alone a fuse. He could not do it. Porter wondered if the snake god was right behind. He saw it slithering through the canyon, the bulk of its scaly body

sliding along just barely making it through just like the wagon.  
Was it even bigger than it was before?"

Porter yelled, "Do you have a shot in that elephant gun?"

"One left," answered Monte.

Porter wedged the stick of dynamite into the box and glancing ahead at the mouth of the canyon and the great serpent's face which had just come around the bend. He tossed the entire box up and over the backside of the stage. Then took up the elephant gun.

The horses careened out of the slot canyon and into the open arroyo.

Porter took aim, not at Yig but the crate of dynamite. He knew he was too close, but it was the only chance they had.

He pulled the trigger.

Boom!

The massive shot hit the crate and the canyon rocked.

The snake gods' eyes narrowed and vanished in the tumult. Dust spewed everywhere and stones flew and pelted them even as the horses carried them away.

A tremendous explosion echoed throughout the canyon and the mountain shook behind them, dust and debris flying into the air accompanied by the nitro's thunder. Boulders fell from above and the mountain tumbled into itself filling the defile with the stone and sand.

Monte shouted, "Did we make it? Is it gone?"

"I don't see it," Porter said.

Monte brought the coach to a halt and looked back at the cloud of red dust hanging over the ruined canyon entrance.

"Is it lost? Gone? Really?"

"You know for a moment I thought I saw a giant snake, along with all those dead madmen you killed."

"How big did it look to you?" Porter asked.

"Why as big as that snakeskin I found. Absolutely giant I expect."

Porter couldn't explain to him that the snake god was even bigger than Monte had believed, hell he couldn't believe it himself, how do you explain a thing like that. This was the kind of thing that called for a drink and not much else would suffice.

Then he realized as he saw Shayla, lying there pale and sad, that his anger was gone. The dark aura that had hung so heavy over him a short while ago had been locked away in that mountains crash too.

“You all right?” he asked her, touching her hand.

She pulled away slightly. “That hurt. The ride I mean.”

Porter nodded, “There’s no going back that way again, still, I would have liked to have seen that city of wonder. A relic of another time and place. But it’s gone now for good.”

“Lot of things are gone for good,” she said.

“Don’t be like that.”

She shook her head. “I ain’t changed my mind and maybe it’s for the best. This is a terrible way to go.”

“What are you talking about?” Porter said, “We can work through this. I’m sorry about your brother.”

She shivered and said, “Bury me not on this loathsome prairie. Take me somewhere else, somewhere pretty and lay me down. I do love you, but this is goodbye.”

Porter wept.



The End

Porter will return in **Hellbound Train**

# Where the River Ends

Outside Fort Duchesne, Utah Territory, 1859

The posse rode their horses hard until the sweat gleamed on the animals' flanks and the froth at the corners of their mouths turned pink with hints of foaming blood. Exhaustion was upon all of them, close to faltering and yet they doggedly continued their pursuit of the dark-clad rider. The rider was only a few hundred yards ahead when he turned abruptly to the lefthand path and vanished inside a red-rimmed slot canyon almost invisible as it melted into the towering, boulder-strewn mesa. Grey mountains were looming beyond like sharp citadels and the willows beside the creek whipped back and forth in the breeze.

The foremost rider of the pursuers, a slim Ute brave called Bishop by the white men, brought his appaloosa horse to a sudden halt at the edge of the slot canyons red-lined mouth.

The echo of hoofbeats escaping down that narrow causeway taunted the posse. Ravens overhead cawed in a mocking tone.

Several of the other Utes immediately wheeled their tired horses around and cantered slowly back the way they had come, as if the escape into what must surely be a box canyon below the mesa was just as good as if the dark rider had escaped behind impenetrable castle walls and was utterly safe from these half dozen heavily-armed men.

“What are you doing?” Porter Rockwell, the long-haired gunman beside Bishop roared. “He went that way!”

Bishop shook his head. “I do not want to let him go, but we cannot follow there.”

“Why not?” asked Porter. He tried to lead his palomino horse around, but Bishop moved his snorting appaloosa forward blocking him.

“No,” answered Bishop, raising a hand as if he were about to lay a blessing upon the irate white man.

“What do you mean, no?” Porter blinked as if this were but a dream, a waking nightmare of insanity. They were so near; he could feel how close they were to capturing the dark rider.

“Let’s go! His horse must be as tired as ours. He’s trapped! We got him!”

“You go down there,” Bishop said as he pointed firmly, “and there is no coming back.” He shook his head for emphasis.

Porter considered Bishop as trustworthy a Ute as he had ever known, but he was still dubious.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” he said with a good bit of venom, hoping to play upon the Ute’s sense of bravery and honor. “You wanna just let him go? A desperado that molested and stole from your tribe, and murdered your people?”

“I am not saying that. He will be back someday, and we can try and bring him in then.”

“Try? Why wait? What kind of sense does that make? If he can go down there and come back, so can I,” Porter said, giving Bishop a frown dark enough he hoped to make the Ute crawl into a hole.

“You are not understanding me,” Bishop said, as he pointed at the slot canyon. “This gulch devours men, it is an evil place. It lies upon the path of the Skinwalker. The veil between

worlds is thin here and beyond the bounds of what we can say.”

“Hogwash!”

“Sometimes it is just a pile of stones,” Bishop nodded solemnly. “Sometimes it takes you somewhere else.”

“Takes you? Through the mountain? Other side of the bluffs? What the blazes are you talking about? We’re burning daylight, let’s get him!” Porter’s palomino stamped, as impatient as his rider.

“I am not going,” Bishop said adamantly. “It’s not the other side of the bluffs, it is another place.”

“Talk sense! You’re saying he has friends? We’ll get ambushed?”

Bishop’s face was as taciturn as ever, but he was clearly frustrated that the white man was not catching his meaning.

“That path,” he pointed with great emphasis, “takes you to another world. If we go, we will not return. I am not ready to walk the path of spirits and leave my family. I will not go.”

“So, I’m on my own?” Porter drawled. “I thought you had more sand than that.”

Bishop shook his head.

“You are a determined man, Rockwell, but I do not know if even you could come back from that place.”

“What’s down there?” Porter asked, trying to get a little more from Bishop, to understand the Ute’s apprehension. He had never seen the man so immovable when it came to the hunt.

“Time is different there.” Bishop gave a deep sigh. “When I was a boy, the dark rider came to my village, and robbed us. He murdered my grandfather for a stone idol found among the ancient ruins in the Book Cliffs. He escaped into this same canyon before the braves could catch him. Sometimes that canyon is not there, or at least it is not visible to our eyes. I have not seen the dark rider since I was a boy, but he looked much the same today as he did then, and I am near forty winters old.”

“I’ve never heard any talk about the canyon that devours men before,” Porter said.

“We never speak of such things to white men,” Bishop answered. “I am telling you because I have much respect for you. But I will not speak of this again because it invites the old gods.”

“What? No one ever spoke about old gods here,” Porter protested. “Ain’t no old gods here.”

“They are like a dry river.” Bishop came as close to a sardonic chuckle as he ever did. “Might be gone now, but when the rains come, a river flows there that you can see and touch. The river is always there, even when it is dry. The river is forever.”

Porter held the reins of his impatient horse.

“That’s a mighty fine sentiment, but every moment we hesitate that murderer is getting farther away. I’d think you’d want to deliver him some justice.”

“Justice will come for him in the end whether we deliver it or not,” Bishop said.

Porter tore off his hat. “You got an aphorism for everything today, don’t you? But I ain’t gonna let him get away with it again. I’m bringing him in. Let’s go!”

“Then you do it alone. I cannot take that path,” said Bishop firmly. “I ask you again, let this go.”

“You know I can’t.” Porter spat.

“Then take this,” Bishop said as he reached for something around his neck. “May my sacred bag bring you blessings of

the Great Spirit.”

Porter scowled but took the medicine pouch and slung it over his own neck as the Ute had previously worn it, then he hurriedly rode on down through the canyon.

The slick rock canyon was narrow enough that the posse would have been forced to ride single file. On his own now, Porter was hyper-aware of what could be an ambush in front of him, but he was on fire to catch this desperado. He would bring this outlaw to justice.

Moving like this was foolish. It was usually best to have one man tracking, watching the ground for any sign, while another was keeping an eye out for traps and anyone lying in ambush.

No such luck now, but then Porter had done it this way on his own many times before. He had also made a promise long ago to protect him.

In only a few moments the slot canyon opened to a hundred feet wide, surrounded by towers of red sandstone cliffs while grey walls of granite threatened in the distance. Scrubby brush grew in clumps along the bone-dry stream bed, which he followed for a hundred yards as it curved to the left.



In an eroded corner of the creek, the bleached skull of a bull elk lay half covered in sand and gravel. To his right, the rest of its bones were scattered about like the tossed sticks of a children's game.

Hoofprints stood out plain in the dry rusty sand. Porter scanned ahead looking for any hint of life. He saw nothing beyond the dying vegetation. No birds or small vermin. Not a lick of movement.

The prints followed the creek bed another twenty paces then mounted up the edge of the slope and into the sagebrush. Porter looked as far ahead as he could and there was no sign of a horse and rider, but Bishop's hesitancy had given the desperado time enough to gain ground.

Chewing at his mustache, Porter forged ahead. When no gunshot rang out, he decided he could watch for signs on the hard packed ground and be sure he was on the right trail.

Holding his six-gun at the ready, he rode on through the brush. The clumpy yellow grass was only a foot or two tall along the edge of the dry creek bed. As he rode farther on the slim trail, a strong wind slapped him in the face, and he closed his eyes against the stinging dust.

Porter was sure his eyes were only closed for a heartbeat against the harsh breeze, but as he opened them he noticed that the grass was tall, green, and almost up to the horse's belly. Everything smelled moist. Looking around him, there was no mistaking the difference in humidity and foliage. It was like he was back east along the southern Mississippi again. This was not the high desert he was used to.

The medicine pouch hanging across his sternum seemed to thrum. He might have looked to see if there were a bumble bee inside when he became aware of other changes surrounding him. Wondering if he was about to ride into a swamp, he paused his horse and scanned all about himself.

The hall of red cliffs were absolutely gone, replaced instead by a border of tall, emerald trees. He had not noticed them as he ridden forward. True, he was hunting for sign, but he could not have missed such a lush forest in the dry wilderness. He had only been riding for a few paces since scanning the distance ahead.

The hoofprints that had kicked minuscule amounts of detritus on the ground told him that he was still on the trail of his quarry, but this was not the same world from which he had

just come. Looking behind, Porter could see a trail through the tall wavy grass like the wake of a ship.

Where was he?

He twisted about in the saddle looking in every direction. Anything familiar had vanished like a ghost, leaving only the strange, silent forest. The sky was a deeper blue than usual, if that were possible. Puzzled, he pondered in the moment if Bishop hadn't been right about this place and that he should follow his own trail back the way he had come. He may have done just that except...

A woman's piercing cry broke his awed reverie.

Alert, his pistol still in hand, Porter raced his palomino toward the sound of commotion, just a short distance into the thick trees. Breaking through the dense foliage, he saw a dark-haired Indian woman wearing only a scanty, torn, green dress. The woman's hair was tangled in the brambles of a vine covered tree. She was menaced by a cat beyond the size and scope of anything he had ever seen. The tawny cat was massive, a living nightmare with dagger-like teeth jutting from its open mouth. Rippling muscles on its shoulders were flexed and ready to spring. It looked as big and deadly as a grizzly bear, but much more agile.

The woman's teeth were clenched, as she whipped a short length of rope at the cat.

The monstrous cat cried out again, and Porter realized that the woman hadn't screamed. It was the tremendous beast making the bizarre caterwaul.

"Hang on," Porter said to the woman. "I got this."

The cat screamed again and turned its attention from prey to Porter.

Porter's horse panicked, sensing the deadly attack. It reared back, throwing off Porter's aim as he was tossed to the ground, losing both the air in his lungs and grip on the six-gun.

The gun's discharge was life-saving as the great cat balked at the thunderous sound, disturbed by the sharp echo.

The cat redirected its attention, as the woman pulled against the thorns and brambles that bound her to the tree.

Regaining his wind, Porter searched frantically for his gun. It was only a few feet away. Porter strained for the pistol as the cat swung its monstrous head back around and leapt for him just as his fingers gripped the hickory handle. Pulling the trigger as fast as possible was instinctual.

The heavy weight of the cat crushed any breath he had retrieved in the moment, and he was ready to vomit, as a sudden gush of hot blood covered him.

After he emptied the gun, Porter reached for his bowie knife, and he savaged the heavy body above him until he knew the huge beast was dead.

It took a supreme effort to get out from under the heavy cat. The big, dagger-like teeth were a marvel wHolli unexpected by Porter and he considered taking one as a trophy of sorts. Then he remembered the woman that had been facing the beast.

“It’s dead now,” he said, lifting his hat up a bit so she might see his face better.

The woman tentatively moved beside the tree. He then saw that her incredibly long hair was caught and wrapped in a tangle of branches, trapping her fast against the foliage.

“I think I can get you out of that,” Porter said.

She was beautiful and voluptuous, and chattered at Porter suddenly, but he couldn’t understand a word.

“Slow down, what language are you speaking? You’ve not got enough clothes on to fly a kite, let me give you my coat,”

he said, taking off his worn coat and moving to put it over her shoulders in reverse despite it being drenched in the tiger's blood. He kept his eyes averted as best he could from her somewhat exposed body.

He finally saw something of their environment beside the trees. A wide, green river curved through the jungle not far away. It was as wide as the upper Missouri, perhaps a few hundred yards across, with slight eddies proving its powerful current.

The woman muttered something illegible once more and resisted his help, letting the coat fall from her shoulders, as he reached to break apart the green branches.

“Hang on, I’m trying to help.”

Porter realized he was literally drenched in the blood of the big cat.

Sha motioned toward the dead cat and said a few more quick lines that he could not possibly follow.

“That thing still scaring you? I’m fine. It’s all the cat. You know what? I’ll show you it’s dead. I’m gonna take me one of them big teeth.” He handed her the coat once again and she held it limply in her left hand. Porter then strode over and

knocked one of the big, curved teeth out and put it in his vest pocket.

She seemed to have realized that she could not understand Porter either and went mute.

“Not sure what you were telling me,” Porter said. He then pointed at his horse and made a gesture asking if the woman had seen another rider.

She nodded and pointed to the west. She took another step but yet another long strand of hair was still caught in the thorns and vines.

“Guess, I’m hunting in that direction then, you wanting to come with me? Once I get you out of that tangle of course. I’m sure I can get you out, one way or the other.” He looked at the stout green branches that held her like a demon’s fingers and pondered if it wouldn’t be easier to cut her hair off than deal with the thick, twisted cordage. Still, he got to work with his knife cutting the brambles that caught in her long hair.

He almost had her free when movement sounded from just beyond sight, coming straight at them. He cut the last few strands of her hair free with his knife, not caring any longer about being delicate.

The woman cowered and seemed to urge Porter to flee.

“I ain’t leaving you to another one of them beasts,” he said, reloading his pistol and holding it at the ready.

She pushed him, as if urging him to go. Then pointed to herself and the deep green river beyond.

Porter was flummoxed and kept a tight grip on her wrist, not allowing her to run from their perceived cover just yet.

“Whatever it is, I ain’t leaving you to it alone.”

It sounded like there were several somethings coming through the forest.

“You know how to use one of these?” he asked the woman, as he withdrew from an extra pistol from his belt, but she stared blankly at it. “Fair enough, if you don’t.”

There was a murmur and the snapping of twigs underfoot.

Porter squatted to see beneath the canopy of trees in the direction of the ruckus, there was blurred movement darting between the tree trunks.

“I can’t tell what it is,” he whispered to the woman. “But I’m ready for anything these days.” He held a pistol in each hand.



A trio of men came through the thick underbrush, two of them were dressed alike in grey overalls. They looked similar, like they could have been father and son.

The third man wore a dark suit, had neatly combed hair parted in the center and a trimmed mustache. As his eyes fell on Porter he smiled.

“Porter! I wondered if I would find you here.”

Porter searched his memory but was quite sure that the man was a stranger.

“Do I know you?”

“No, I don’t suppose you do yet,” the man said as he smiled. “I was quite a bit younger, and you of course were much older.”

“Say again?” Porter asked as he wondered if this wasn’t a madman.

“I am Nikola Tesla, we went on a journey years ago, for me, but in the future yet for you I suppose, judging by your lack of grey hairs.” He then turned his attention to the two men in overalls. “Porter Rockwell meet Grant and William Hastings, my assistants in this endeavor. They help me operate the Horizon.” He then turned to the two men explaining, “I

went on a journey with Porter, the infamous gunslinger, to the lost city of R'lyeh when we sealed the Gate of Dreams, keeping Cthulhu bound for yet another season. Perhaps that is why we have met now at the crossroads of time so that I could impart that information to Porter and he would know what to do in that future excursion for him and long-ago venture for me. I suppose it does get confusing.”

The two men nodded to each other as if this all made perfect sense, but Porter was irritated at the insane explanation.

“I’m quite sure we have never met,” Porter said. “I’d remember.”

“Indeed, you would, but here we are in this crossroads, and thus, we should have some time to get reacquainted, deal with the present threat and then get back to our own temporal homes.”

“You’re using a whole lot of big words and yet you aren’t saying a damn thing. You responsible for this woman being trapped and left as bait for that monster cat?” Porter growled.

“Her? Why that’s no woman,” Tesla answered. “The true native Americans refer to it as a water baby.”

Porter frowned deeply.

“You can call the tribes whatever you want, and some of them are savage as hell, but they are still people,” Porter said.

“She is not human,” Tesla said, “but has only taken on our form as a means of illusion, for protection. Usually—well sometimes—they assume such a form to waylay and drown men. Stories of the fae doing such things are common enough upon both our continents.”

Porter cocked a suspicious brow at that.

“You must have guessed from my accent that I am European?” Tesla remarked.

Porter spit, answering, “You don’t say.”

Tesla faced his two men and said, “I would like nothing more than to examine the creature and discover the source of its ability to transmute itself. There must be something with frequency that rearranges its molecules by sheer willpower. Capture it and I will examine it after our true endeavor is accomplished.”

The woman cowed, surely understanding intention if not word and deed.

As the two men in grey overalls moved closer to the woman, she shook and backed away. Porter was on the verge of intervening violently on her behalf when she shrunk away slightly and changed in appearance. Her skin sagged as if melting and she grew hairier by the second until she was no longer a beautiful woman, but a hair-covered creature resembling a slight but very shaggy, moss-covered ape.

Porter was astounded and stepped back in horror and rubbed at his eyes.

“I must be dreaming. Why was she trapped here? What did she want?”

“She most likely wanted to gain your confidence and then drown you in the river there,” Tesla said as he pointed to the nearby water. “She could have easily escaped the great cat, but was more than willing to let you think yourself the hero and thusly be fooled as a rescuer and then led to your doom.”

“She was stuck in them brambles. She weren’t ambushing me,” Porter said. “I’d know.”

“I understand they are malevolent creatures,” Tesla continued. “Fae beings do not operate upon our human system of morals.”

Porter shook his head at the hairy creature.

“Now what?”

The water baby took a few furtive steps towards the river.

“Stop it,” Tesla commanded his men.

The water baby bolted for the river with the Hastings in swift pursuit. They were almost upon it when Porter intervened.

“Let it go!” he shouted, and fired a shot at the Hastings’ feet.

Earth exploded beside them, and the sound of gunfire echoed over the river.

The Hastings wheeled if only for a moment, but the creature was faster and easily escaped them and dove into the river. Once within the embrace of the dark waters, its head briefly rose several yards out, glancing back at the men, then it dipped and vanished from sight.

“That was unhelpful,” Tesla lamented to Porter. “Think of all we could have learned from a thorough examination. But that is not why I am here.”

“Oh,” Porter asked sarcastically. “Then why are you here anyway? To get me to question my own sanity?”

“I told you we are at the crossroads of time and reality. I need your help, or at least someone you may remember said you would be willing to be of assistance.”

“What?” Porter shrugged. “I don’t think you really want my help in messing with a changeling. Bad luck I’ll wager.”

“Yes, well as I said, that was not the reason we came here either,” Tesla conceded.

“Oh, and what was that for?” Porter asked as he searched his pockets for a cigar, finding none.

“The intersection of realms is open; someone is attempting a summoning. An invocation to allow passage to that which is banished. When I sensed your presence, I knew this must be the time to impart the knowledge of our future adventure.”

“What? You sensed my presence? What are you, some kind of spiritualist?”

Tesla shook his head.

“Certainly not. I am a scientist.”

“You talk like a one.” Porter furrowed his brow.

“Nevertheless, we are here now for the express purpose of stopping one of the agents of Nyarlathotep from opening a gate.”

“That name sounds a little familiar.” Porter rubbed at his jaw.

“It should,” said a tall, grey-mustachioed man as he stepped out from behind the wall of foliage. “I’m sure I’ve mentioned my intent to thwart his plans whenever possible.”

“Mr. Nodens,” Porter said, recognizing the man. “I should have known you’d be involved with this nonsense.”

“Ain’t nonsense, Port,” Nodens said as he tipped his hat. “Tesla here knows what he is talking about, I only filled in some the more esoteric things that your kind doesn’t usually cotton to. I told him how to adjust the frequency on his invention to bring us all here.”

“Maybe you can tell me what the hell is going on? Where the hell are we? I’m hunting for a killer, I go through a narrow draw and suddenly I sure ain’t in the state of Deseret no more.”

“You surely aren’t,” Mr. Nodens affirmed. “We are at a crossroads, maybe partly of your so-called Deseret, but this land has been a place that lies thin between the veil since time immemorial. Gates seem to open of their own accord here and sometimes things go in and sometimes they go out. You came in for the same reason we did, to get that dark rider. To Tesla

and his men, we came in a week ago, to you it was maybe a half hour. Time is a funny thing.”

Porter snorted at that. He didn't bother to carry a pocket watch. His days and nights were ruled by the sun and moon. What use did he have for the timekeeping of other people's schedules?

“Don't get in a tussle now with the boys over that creature,” Nodens continued. “They're just curious is all. ‘Sides, who knows what your good will might have engendered with the hairy little gal.”

Porter frowned at that and searched his pockets for his flask. Finding it, he kept an eye on his new companions as he downed the entire bottle in a single go. He closed his eyes, sighed heavily, and then looked at them.

“All right, what do you want from me?”

“That's what I like about you, Porter,” Mr. Nodens said as he clapped him on the shoulder, “You're always willing to get your hands dirty. Follow me.”

“Don't mention it,” Porter grumbled in response as he followed the mysterious old man to the river's edge.



“We haven’t much more time,” Nodens said. “Look down there and you can see the Rift getting ready to open. Just up yonder we have Mr. Tesla’s little steamship outfitted with his inventions to help deal with this possible incursion.” Nodens gestured downriver to what looked like the bright orange glow of a sunset.

Porter shielded his eyes, gazing toward the glow.

“See that, down where it looks like the river ends?”

“That sunset?” Porter casually asked. “Ain’t it too early for that?”

“Not here,” Nodens answered with a smirk. “That is the beginning of the biggest rift between worlds in your lifetime. The Rift, as far as your world is concerned.”

Porter frowned and spun about realizing that the cloud-covered sun on the opposite side of the sky resembled nothing so much as a smoky god and the light streaming from where the river ended was indeed something else entirely.

“Think of it like a crack in a pane of glass, and you think that rain is leaking through. But it isn’t just rain. It’s more like a porthole on a ship that’s well below the ocean’s surface. It won’t just leak water in, it will sink your world.”

“We gotta seal the crack?” Porter asked.

“Exactly,” Nodens said with a nod. “Get your horse, you’ll need it to get home when this is through.”

Porter retrieved his horse’s reins and followed his new companions along a winding path through the trees. As they were walking beside the river, he noted several times the slight impression of a face watching them, hidden among the reeds. Surely it was the water baby. But he felt no threat from the being and focused on Tesla and Mr. Nodens as they explained more of this crossroads phenomena, not that most of what was said made a lick of sense to his ears.

Tesla began a conversation with Nodens, as if it were something discussed well before they had encountered Porter.

“Give me a lever long enough and a place to stand and I will move the Rift on an intercosmic scale. I think my Peace Ray can do it.”

“That’s good,” Nodens replied, “Since the Da’aths exists outside all of space and time, you could insert a new creation from any point in time, whether it be past, present, or future.”

Porter rolled his eyes trying to fathom what they were talking about, but each continued their journey down the path

in the forest as if everything said was plain as day to one another.

“The Gateway of Da’aths is the opening of a pathway through the abyss itself,” Nodens went on.

“I see,” replied Tesla.

“Some of the most noted sorcerers have gone mad upon seeing its very edge. The abyss in the Qliphothic realm has no life of its own, as the very source of evil it is both intrinsically connected to and yet parasitic in relation to the Divine Light.”

“And do you serve the Divine Light?” asked Tesla.  
“Whatever that is.”

Porter rolled his eyes once more, so utterly incomprehensible was the conversation that he doubted his own sanity upon hearing it.

“As near as you can understand, I suppose so,” Nodens replied. “Though I am an agent of myself rather than what you might call God.”

“I’m not sure there is a god anymore,” Tesla said.

“One? Ha,” Nodens laughed. “There are more than I care to count, but in relation to the Rift, we are only concerned with a few. That I have mentioned to you already.”

“Gamiszarra?” Tesla asked.

“Yes, the Living Island has already come through, but his hold here is tenuous at best. If Hudson can be dispatched, Gamiszarra will fade back through regardless of the talisman binding him here. Are you listening, Porter?”

“Huh? You talking to me? It all sounds Greek.”

“I am speaking to you. You cannot possibly fight the Living Island, but you can slay the man that summoned and binds him to the realm. Hudson, or as you think of him, the dark rider.”

“His name is Hudson?”

“It was when he began studying the art and ways of the Antiverse. He is now a pawn of Nyarlathotep and seeks to be an opener of the way.”

Porter arched his back and stretched his hands out, ready to draw his pistols.

“Trust me, if I see the dark rider, I’ll shoot him.”

“I knew you would,” Nodens said, before continuing his discussion with Tesla.

“Watch out. If the Rift is fully opened, you could see anything come through.”

“I understand,” Tesla said.

Porter looked at him and frowned.

Nodens went on, as he brushed a long vine out of the way. “Balance your Peace Ray between the Rift and the Gamiszarra if you can. I need you to be careful. No mystic—not even the most heretical of kabbalists—has ever explored more than a few dimensions in the Qliphothic realm. Seeking knowledge of the Qliphothic is both ethically and physically dangerous. Mystics who study the Tree of Death tend, unsurprisingly, to die in the most brutal fashions, or at the very least develop a disturbing fascination with annihilation and oblivion. Such madmen, like Hudson, have since established themselves in an attempt to usurp our universe, which is finely balanced on a razor’s edge of divine symmetry. If certain natural forces varied in their values by the tiniest fractions, not even stars could exist.”

Tesla nodded his head as if all of this made perfect sense to him, but Porter felt like he had been thrown into a cold lake.

“I don’t know what you are talking about Nodens,” Porter interjected. “You talk about gates and broken windowpanes letting the ship sink, but how can anything come through a gate that could destroy the earth?”

Nodens rubbed at his mustache as he answered.

“Good question, Porter. Eons before humanity, beings of mind-shattering power roamed the planes of these lifeless universes. The most secret lore of the Qliphothic realm obliquely lists these entities as the Kings of Edom, these beings which came from unstable worlds some might say God created and destroyed before our terrestrial cosmos came into existence. Parables from ancient oracles and the ravings of mystics driven mad by studying these Kings suggest that these entities source from dimensions collapsed into oblivion eternities ago. Age after age, they moved from one plane to another, becoming ever more powerful. For billions of years no other power stood against them, for none was there to stand across the chasm between mysticism and desolation. Not one in a billion barren worlds might suffer a King of Edom’s visit in a trillion years but where the Kings of Edom came, they and their servitor spawn wrought utter dissimulation of what matter was encountered. The horror of dissolution must have been inconceivable.”

“Any of that got anything to do with that murdering desperado I was hunting when I came here?” Porter asked.

“It does indeed,” Mr. Nodens said, “The desperado—as you so quaintly put it—is a mystic who is seeking communion with the antigods. He hopes to open a channel and allow their entry into our world and thusly begin a horrific end.”

“What? Why?”

“I suspect he has deep-seated hatred and pain consuming his mind and heart. Likely as not he is mad along with being incredibly intelligent. Whatever terrible deed he accomplished with your pursuit of him was a means to an end in his hopes of opening the passageway within the crossroads. I suspect he took a key from the Utes—one they didn’t even know they had—which could open this gateway.”

“You talk different to me than you do to Tesla,” Porter observed, as they came around a thick tree and found a steamship waiting for them at the edge of the river.

“So, I do, just keeping everything in an understandable venue for each of you.”

Porter sniffed at that as he looked upon the steamship. She wasn’t very large, perhaps not more than thirty feet, but she looked heavily encumbered with a wide variety of scientific equipment that was far beyond his understanding. There were pulleys and weathervane-type contraptions as well as a large

umbrella shaped device on the front but pointed backward and half upside down.

The two Hastings climbed aboard and one set to work in the wheelhouse, firing up the steam engine while the other seemed to be setting the bizarre contraptions up front to whatever their purposes.

Nodens took Porter's attention once more, saying, "It's nothing personal, you know what you know, and he knows what he knows and rarely do the two meet in twain."

"Twain!" Tesla said, "Where is he now?"

"Who?" Porter responded, assuming that the question had been for him.

"Never mind, you will meet him later and he will accompany us as well on our venture to R'lyeh, years from now," Tesla said, with more than a hint of satisfaction.

"Great," Porter sarcastically responded, "another person I don't know."

"Yet," Tesla corrected.

"Don't overwhelm the man," Nodens said. "Just let him do what he does."



“Overwhelm me? I don’t understand even a half of what you all have been talking about with the void, rift, and crossroads and lever to balance the world. Why am I even here?”

“To do what you do best, my friend. You’ve killed more of these lesser trespassers than about anyone I can think, without going mad in the process. That’s quite a feat. Your job is simple. Keep Tesla and his men alive, kill anything that tries to stop them, and you let them handle the technical otherworldly stuff.”

Porter chewed at the edge of his mustache.

“This would be a whole lot simpler if you stuck around and gave me hand in that. I know you’ve got some kind of magical ace in the hole.”

“You are that ace, Porter,” Nodens said, giving him a warm slap on the shoulder.

Porter grimaced.

Nodens shrugged.

“Don’t be glum,” he said. “I saw to it that they packed you a supply of ammunition and even a few extras that you would find handy.”

“It helps to have another pair of eyes when I’m slinging lead.”

Nodens smirked as he shook his head.

“Like I said before, I can’t be any more involved than I am in seeing to it that you humans intervene here. My setting this in motion is as far as I dare get involved without attracting any more attention from Nyarlathotep and his ilk. Last thing I want is the forces of Hastur or even Tsathoggua looking your way.”

Porter glanced at Tesla for those names meant nothing to him. Tesla echoed Nodens shrug.

“You’ve got this, Port. Take care of Nikola and you’ll be able to ride back through that draw in the canyon and be at the foot of the mesa in no time at all.”

“What about this man I’m hunting?”

“If you are successful, you’ll be dealing with him directly. He is down there where the river ends.”

“This Hudson feller?”

Nodens chuckled lightly.

“Ah, for him a name is just a suit of clothes. But he is flesh and blood for now, so you may be able to fill him full of lead and halt his transfiguration for a spell.”

Porter grunted with irritation at that answer.

“Don’t suppose you packed any of my other articles for this venture, did you?”

“Go ahead,” Nodens gestured to Tesla. “Show him the weapons I gave you requisition for. But Porter, I only had him bring one flask of whiskey for you, you gotta stay sharp on this one.”

“I’m always sharp, just need something to whet my appetite.”

Nodens laughed aloud.

“All right, have it your way. Until next time.” He gestured to the gangplank for the steamship and then turned and walked away from them with a brief wave and tip of his hat. As lightning tore their attention toward the swirling warp of a vortex in the distance, in the mere fraction of second it took as they looked back to where Nodens should have been, he was gone like the darkness at dawn.

“I hate it when he does that,” Porter muttered.

They clambered aboard the steamship. A variety of machines were placed all over the small ship in tight fashion, allowing only for one man at a time to pass each other upon

the narrow deck. Bizarre machinery with wires and pipes went every which way, resembling a rat's nest to Port's eyes. He recognized the steam machinery used to power the vessel, but the rest had little practical understanding for him. The most interesting thing to him was what might have resembled a cannon save that it had no barrel, instead it possessed the wide umbrella-like apparatus pointing forward from a central mass of gears, coils, and a clockwork apparatus.

“What is all of that?”

“In essence, it refracts waves of energy,” Tesla explained. “Some of what you see ahead is a rip in the frequency that keeps our dimensions separate.”

Porter squinted as he attempted to understand what was to him utterly unfathomable.

The younger Hastings stood by a mechanical winch at the back of the steamship as the elder undid a rope which had fastened the ship to a large fallen tree. It was how they had secured the craft when they came ashore and found Porter. When Porter saw the mechanized thing, he marveled at its expediate nature. It did the job faster than a trio of men could have.

“Trust me, friend,” Tesla said. “It will make sense to you someday. But we must get under way. Mr. Hastings, kindly take us downstream.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” called the younger of the two, as he threw back a large iron wheel and cranked up the steam power of the little ship. He then sent a short burst of steam out a whistle and the ship puffed and lurched as it left the shoreline and proceeded downriver.

Tesla checked various dials and regulator switches, the likes of which Porter had never dreamt of.

Porter harrumphed at that and asked, “Where are my weapons?”

“There, in those steamer chests,” Tesla said, gesturing toward two large trunks on the foredeck. “I believe they should be to your liking.”

As the chests were opened, Porter’s obvious amazement betrayed his taciturn exterior. His eyes widened fiercely upon the huge cache of ammunition. The first chest held boxes and boxes of cartridges, a year’s supply for several firearms; shotgun slugs, a 45.70 buffalo gun, and long magazines that he picked up and wondered aloud at what they were.

“They are for the Gatling gun.”

“What’s that?”

Tesla sucked in his breath through clenched teeth then asked. “What year is it, Porter?”

“1859, you know that. Why?”

“Not from where I left. I’m afraid I brought you the best weaponry I could from 1890.”

Porter threw back the second chest and saw a stack of what looked like brown paper wrapped candles with ridiculously thick wicks.

“You wouldn’t know dynamite in 1859, either, would you?”

Porter frowned.

“What are they?”

“They are explosives. Much easier to use and more portable than black powder. It should be most handy for your use against any denizens of the dark that may attempt to accost us.”

“Uh huh.”

“William,” Tesla called to his assistant, “please give him a demonstration. Better to alert our foe, which almost certainly

knows we are already underway, than have our gunman unsure of how to utilize them.”

The elder Hastings picked up one of the sticks of dynamite, showed Porter both ends and pointed to the blasting cap as he placed it. He struck a match and then lit the fuse which sparked and spat, giving off noxious fumes as it quickly raced toward the end. When only an inch of fuse was left, he tossed it overboard and as the light faded into the murky water, an uproarious belching explosion sounded from several feet under the surface, sending a great splash up at them.

“You’ve got to watch your timing, they’re quick, and we thought it best to have waterproof fuses,” William said. “You try it.”

Porter took one of the sticks, placed a blasting cap as he had seen done, and lit the fuse with a struck match.

“Quick now, throw it away,” William ordered.

Porter tossed his farther, with a greater arc than had William. It landed a good distance from the boat and exploded just as it touched the far bank. A concussive force slapped Porter in the face, almost dislodging his hat. A small amount of dirt and rock rained back toward them a moment after the explosion.

“I can see the value in that,” Porter said with a wry grin.  
“And this Gatling gun?”

William held up a finger, then pulled a stocky contraption from the bottom of the first chest. It looked like six rifle barrels arranged in a circular tube with a single firing mechanism and handle at the rear. He mounted the gun on a forward platform and showed Porter how to load with the long devices that Hastings called “magazines.”

“This crank loads it as you fire. It will send an awful lot of lead downrange quickly.”

“How much do those things hold?” Porter asked.

“Thirty-six rounds apiece, and you can reload real fast like this.” William racked the crank with his left hand as his right held the trigger on a handle and fired off the full magazine into the surrounding shrubbery and riverfront. He then rapidly reloaded and did it again.

“Now you try.”

Porter followed suit, loading a magazine stick, and then leveling the gun and firing away. He swiveled quickly as if following the lead of imaginary foes. He raked the gun up and down, tearing down tree branches and splashing stones along



the riverbank. When the gun was empty and the barrels spun once more, Porter stopped the crank.

“Now that was something!” he exclaimed.

Tesla noted, “You moved that like you know what to expect.”

“When Nodens is involved, I’ve had to expect a whole lot of things I never imagined before.”

“And they didn’t strike you as maddening?” Tesla asked.

Porter shook his head.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Tesla gestured with his hands in the air.

“Like the things are so horrible that your mind breaks and can’t hold it all. I’ve tried to let the Hastings know what to expect, but its beyond words. I hope they are all right when they finally see one of these old ones.”

“Monsters,” Porter spit. “Just monsters, they ain’t nothing I should do but shoot some lead at ’em.”

Tesla rubbed at his nose.

“Yes, well, I expect you to be as prepared as possible. We shall see your dark rider imminently. I suspect we’ll have a

good view as we round this bend in the river.”

The younger of the Hastings took the ship into the center of the river and as they came around the wide bend, they got a full view of the Rift. It, too, seemed to be centered upon the wide watery expanse, and the entirety of the river appeared to be flowing right into it. Beyond the orange glow was a solid black iris, as if the nothingness lay just beyond their perception and Porter could see nothing farther.

Directly in front of the Rift, however, was a small island which had a single man standing upon it with his arms upraised as if beckoning into the void.

As the ship approached with its constant drumming chug, the dark man looked over his shoulder and signaled to dark shapes that crouched upon trees that overhung the river. Thin black wings unfurled, and the skinny bodies took to the air. With curling horns on their heads, and forked tails trailing behind, they looked like ebony devils coming to claim the souls of the dead.

But Porter wasn't dead yet. He recognized these winged things as nightgaunts. They swooped to and fro through the air before diving toward the boat.

“Keep your heads down!” called Porter as he readied the Gatling gun.

As the first of the nightgaunts came screaming forward, Porter opened up and sent a rain of hot lead into the chest of the batlike demon and flung it crashing into the river. The second and third dove sideways away from the steamship in an effort to avoid the flying rounds, but Porter was quick and led the gun swiftly, catching one through the wings and forcing it to crash into the drooping trees. The third had its tail shot off and it howled in pain before taking a wide arc to counterattack.

A fourth had swung the long way about and raked a clawed hand at Porter, shredding the shoulder of his jacket and just missing his flesh. The Gatling gun was empty, and Porter drew his pistols and emptied them into the retreating fiend with a barrage of curses.

Struck multiple times, it fell into the river with nary a gasp.

The tailless nightgaunt savaged the far side of the steamship as it attempted to attack the younger Hastings who was piloting. Hastings had not been unarmed, however, and emptied his shotgun into the featureless face of the monster.

“Are there any more?” Porter asked, scanning the eerily glowing sky.

“Mr. Hastings,” Tesla called out, “fire up the generator, we are close enough for the Peace Ray.”

“It’s ready, sir!” shouted the elder Hastings.

A powerful electrical hum sounded from within the bowels of the ship. Tesla put on a pair of protective goggles and sat in a chair fixed right behind the backward umbrella-looking contraption. A beam of white light shot from the centermost portion and moved along the darkest point of the Rift forcing it to shrink upon contact.

A pained howling sounded from somewhere out in the depths. Porter didn’t know what that meant, but he guessed they were less than a quarter mile from the small island and less than a half mile from where the river met the Rift. He wondered if the current would force the ship into that dark pit before Tesla could close it.

Shambling monstrosities plowed through the trees on the banks and dove into the river before Porter could get a good look at them. The corner of his eye said they were big, but what were they? They must be swimming now, coming at the ship from both sides.

Tesla's Peace Ray wavered back and forth over the dark iris, forcing it to grow smaller and smaller.

Porter was sure now he could hear the dark rider—this sorcerer named Hudson—shouting in anger from the surface of the bare little island.

“Star spawn! Porter, I see them!” Tesla shouted from his observation chair.

Unsure what that was, Porter scanned the river and reloaded the Gatling gun. He could not see anything in the deep green waters, until he caught a hint of bubbles racing for the stern.

He cranked the gun and sent a shower of bullets into the bubbles' path. A squid-faced monstrosity rose from the river, bellowing like a butchered ox. But this thing was not butchered. It slapped a slimy green hand with six-fingers over the rail of the steamship and yanked, tearing off the topmost plank of the gunwale, then it disappeared back into the depths.

The ugly, multi-eyed face of another rose then dropped back on the opposite side of the river, and the steamship lurched as something struck it from beneath. Flabby, clawed hands scraped the underside and the timbers threatened to snap.

Porter grabbed two sticks of dynamite and lit the fuses simultaneously then tossed one over each side of the ship just as the fuse had nearly run out. Each exploded and instantly the banging upon the hull ceased.

Then all three star spawn gripped whatever they could reach, scuttling to climb aboard the already overloaded vessel.

Porter leveled the Gatling gun at the nearest of the three and cranked the lever as the gun belched fiery lead into the green mushroom-head of the tentacle-faced star spawn. Bullets split the head wide open, yet it would not die. The pulped sludge making up what was left of its head began to ooze back and reform as if the incident were happening in reverse.

Porter's eyes bulged in morbid fascination. He swapped out the magazine and unloaded at almost point-blank range once more, further ripping the bulbous mass in half, then as the gun emptied, he reached and took hold of a piece of dynamite and lit the fuse with a snap of his wrist. He tossed the crackling tube into the open gash of the wounded head and the slime of ages formed around the stick, covering it whole. The black eyes slid back up on the face of the beast and it stared at Porter blankly before the explosion sent pieces of the monster all over the side of the ship and river. Porter ducked his head just

in time for his hat to take the brunt of the flabby monster's gore, which now painted the side of the ship the foulest green.

The ship rocked back the other direction as the next star spawn gripped the gunwale and attempted to capsize the steamship. Luckily, Tesla's machinery made for heavy ballast and kept the ship beyond what the monster could tip and sink her. It was only a matter of time. Two of them could tip the boat over if they worked together.

The next star spawn had been wounded by the earlier dynamite and was trailing further behind the steamship. It was not out of the fight, but gave Porter a moment to deal with only one of the beasts.

Porter had an idea. He grabbed the tether line that had been used to attach the steamship to land. An expert at ropes around the ranch, he made a wide circle and lassoed the stout cordage around the squamous neck of the thing and slammed home the hoist, which suddenly cranked on the winch. The rope rapidly grew taught and pulled on the makeshift noose squeezing against the neck of the monster.

The star spawn fought and clawed at the rope, but it was already too tight, and its flabby fingers could not reach the line to cut it. The tentacles on its face stood out erect as the rope

strangled the ferocious beast, growing ever tighter as it pushed against the side of the steamship to escape its fate. Well, until the rope squeezed too tight and its head was popped clean off. Putrid ichor erupted like a fountain as the horrible thing went limp. Both gory head and body sank into the waiting river.

The final star spawn dipped its head under the water and Porter couldn't see it.

Knowing the dynamite could do some damage, he grabbed two sticks and lit them. He threw each on either side of the rear of the steamship, hoping he could drive the monster to come directly behind, unless he was lucky enough to land one right on top of it with the first throw. But he didn't bet on luck.

There were two explosions almost simultaneous close behind. Almost as suddenly as they burst through the top of the river, the last star spawn rose from the depths and grabbed the rear of the ship.

Porter tossed a ready stick at the monster but it batted the dynamite aside with one of the tentacles on its face. The stick flew behind, landed in the river, and exploded without having harmed the monster.

Attempting his rope trick once more, Porter tossed the loop at the beast, but it knocked this aside with its hand, too, and



the line went taut and caught it on the wrist.

This is not what he wanted.

The star spawn used the leverage of the steamship itself to pull against the line and as the rope grew tighter, and the winch smoked as the rope burned against the machine. Just as the monster's hand was about to pop off, the winch flew free from its mount and splashed into the river.

If the solid black eyes of the star spawn could be seen to dilate, they did as a malevolent twitch of its mouth curled beneath the writing tentacles and it pulled on the steamship forcing the ship the lurch back and river water to swamp the back side.

Porter blasted the buffalo gun into its face, smashing eyes and pulping tentacles, but the behemoth did not let go.

“If it gets water into the engine it will blow!” shouted the younger Hastings.

“It didn't need to hear that!” answered Porter as he was reloading.

The star spawn redoubled its efforts hefting more of its flabby bulk onto the rear of the ship causing more river water to pour over the smashed end.

The elder Hastings fired his guns at the swollen face of the creature as Porter grasped another stick of dynamite. With the barrage of bullets coming at it, the monster missed the stick which blew its head apart, raining gross material all over the rear of the steamship and its crew.

The blubbery carcass slid off the rear deck and sank into the river. The ship lurched forward when the strain was suddenly released, just as Tesla shouted a warning.

“Get ready! The real challenge lies ahead!”

The dark rider stood on the bare and rocky island as he mystically conjured at the shrinking Rift, like a sculptor forcing the statue out of marble. With each gesticulation of his arms and even fingers, spidery cracks formed at the edge of the Rift, forcing it to open ever so slightly with each refrain, as if each stanza of some infernal verse, each note of the profane awoke a terrible song in the fight of their lives. It was a symphony of destruction.

Tesla fired up his machine and sent a bolt of almost invisible energy radiating into the center of the portal. Ripples went out from the center and some of those cracks and webs the rider had opened sealed back up.

The dark rider turned, his hair flying over his sweat-stained face, which contorted in a mask of rage. He cried aloud and further drew upon the arcane to bend reality to his will.

Those on the steamship watched as something crawled out from the widest section of the Rift, something akin to a centipede but its round head and clasping jaws were as large as a long-horn steer, its length was as much as a half dozen of them. It wormed its way around the Rift and then, finding gravity on this side of the veil, it fell into the river below with a riotous splash. In no time it was snaking its way through the green waters like a serpent.

The monster was not lost on Porter, who reloaded the Gatling gun and opened fire into the river. Bullets hit the carapace with an audible thunk and the centipede beast went deeper, avoiding the rain of bullets. There was a brief respite, where every eye was cast upon the waters, every eddy and slight rock of the waves was suspected as they searched for the multilegged monster.

“Maybe you hit it?” suggested the younger of the Hastings.

“I doubt it,” Porter muttered, as he scanned everywhere.  
“Didn’t see any bits fly off.”

The ship lurched and rocked as the monstrosity scuttled aboard the aft deck with the speed and hideous grace of an insect. It seemed to understand where it could avoid the Gatling gun.

As the thing fully crawled up into the wheelhouse, the younger Hastings raised a rifle to fire but was caught in its champing jaws. His face betrayed a silent scream as the great pincers smashed his chest and lungs and he was severed in half.

“No!” cried the elder Hastings, as he fired with his own rifle, but the shots from the lesser rifle had no effect.

Porter tore the Gatling gun from its mount and leaning it near the forecastle, he cranked the arm until the cylinders ran dry, sending a dozen rounds of 45.70 into the terrible maw of the monster, pulverizing its face and half of its seemingly caustic gaze.

It was not dead yet.

Its tail, replete with a massive stinger, jammed into the gunwale, narrowly missing Porter. Tearing wood and rail apart with its backswing, it lashed out once more, knocking the Gatling gun to the deck.

Porter drew the shotgun from its scabbard and gave both barrels into what was left of the monster's head and cracked bulbous eyes. Effectively blind, the beast writhed and whipped uncontrollably, but only succeeded in pulping the dead Hastings corpse before losing its balance upon the ship and falling overboard in a great splash of water. As the ship moved forward the beast lost its ability to pursue the vessel.

Tesla continued his repair of the Rift with his Peace Ray. A second centipede monster crawled halfway through an opening lower on the central Rift. As Tesla swung the ray to confront that entry, it closed and cut the centipede in half. Leaking orange entrails, the monstrous centipede fell into the river with much less malevolent aplomb than its forebear.

Hudson turned to face them now that he had been unable to call for more denizens of the outer dark to serve him.

"I knew this might happen," he proclaimed. "Did you think I wouldn't be prepared?"

"We faced your preparations," Tesla answered. "Now the bill is due. Surrender yourself or die."

"Ha! You have only faced the lowliest of what I conjured. I began with the strongest, but let you face the weakest first." With those words, he rose into the air, hovering above the

small island. Only a few feet at first but he soared higher in the air with his arms bent at the elbows and held upward looking like a saint in the old pictures.

“I can hit him square,” Porter said, as he leveled the rifle.

“Do it,” Tesla answered. “There will be no reasoning with him. He has made his choice.”

Just as Porter pulled the trigger, the small island Hudson had been standing in shimmied in the water and it, too, rose. In so doing, it caused a great wave which moved the ship and all aboard, causing Porter’s aim to be thrown wildly off. He could hardly keep his feet on the deck as the island rose higher forcing the river to swell and twist about, sending the ship back upstream.

A deep sonorous roar filled their ears and Porter assumed it was the Rift. But, that looked much the same as before, though Hudson was now more than fifty feet in the air beside it.

“Shoot him if you can, I will try and hit that thing before it becomes fully aware of us.”

“What thing?” Porter called back against the din.

“The thing making that noise,” Tesla shouted.

Raising itself from the muck and slime of ages, a titanic behemoth stood now on four great squat legs. River mud coated the lower half. Porter could not tell what color it really was, but he saw the burning eyes as they looked back at him.

It was a chimera of sorts, resembling half a dozen different creatures that Porter knew and some things he did not. It was utterly alien and its size was beyond imagination. How could mere bullets harm this thing with a shell or scales like an armadillo or turtle, when its burning eyes were as large as a barn door? Teeth or tusks jutted from its mouth as big as trees. It was so vast that he could hardly see the Rift anymore.

This might have been as close to quitting as Porter had ever felt, the sheer monstrosity and size of the thing was beyond daunting, beyond fighting, beyond hope.

“Porter, hit Hudson. He controls the beast. Let me slow it down for you,” Tesla said as he focused the Peace Ray on the juggernaut of nightmares and fired a blast.

Orange rays hit the outer shell of the giant thing and it grumbled in pain, before shuffling around and letting its massive scaled back protect it from the Peace Ray. It dropped into the river then and the waves sent the steamship spinning farther back upstream, tossed like a child’s toy. There was no

way Porter could manage a shot at Hudson, he was barely able to hang on to the ship as it heaved.

“When the river calms, I’ll fire again, I really think I hurt it, but you must kill Hudson before he reopens the Rift and calls forth another Old One.”

“Damn! That’s an Old One?” Porter cursed to himself, if he could hardly stand, how could he shoot?

“A lesser one,” Tesla answered. “It may be Gamiszarra, the Living Island. I’m not sure.”

Porter’s face contorted at the scientist’s mundane explanation of the unfathomable.

They had been pushed back upriver almost a quarter mile, much too far for Porter to take an accurate shot at Hudson with his pistols or rifle.

“I need to get closer!” Porter called to Tesla, who had already gotten the ship pointed in the correct direction and was steaming back toward the Rift and the oncoming behemoth. The elder Hastings had taken up the wheelhouse in replacement of his lost son.

The ship’s chaotic push upriver slowed as the river’s current fought against the backwashing of Gamiszarra’s



approach. A series of new ripples struck the keel of the ship tipping it this way and that as the gigantic entity shambled toward them.

With the monstrous Old One approaching, Porter would not be able to get a shot at Hudson before the terrible behemoth overcame their steamship and smashed it to kindling.

“You got a backup plan?” He shouted over the din.

Tesla didn't answer. He focused the Peace Ray at the Rift. The black iris was sealed shut, leaving just a dull orange glow where once had been an open doorway to another realm.

Lightning arced from Hudson's position toward the steamship.

Porter couldn't see the sorcerer but guessed he was protected by the oncoming Old One.

River water swirled back with each step of the titanic thing and twisted the steamship about, drenching Porter. Tesla swiveled the Peace Ray and kept its continuous beam upon the Rift.

Gamizarra was almost upon them, and Porter imagined its massive foreleg crushing the steamship. He dropped the rifle he had been hoping to use on Hudson and loaded another

magazine into the Gatling gun. He cranked the full load into the face of Gamiszarra but beyond a mere twitching of its eyes, it was in no way hindered. A great clawed foreleg was lifted above the steamship like a hammer ready to fall.

Tesla switched the Peace Ray to the Old One's head and a renewed bolt of energy pulsed at the mighty being. Gamiszarra fell back a pace or two, attempting to avoid the radiation which blasted it in the face unceasingly.

Porter shouted, "Wish you would have told me you had that up your sleeve."

"You still need to get Hudson," Tesla answered. "I won't be able to hold off Gamiszarra for long."

"If I can hit Hudson, it will end this?"

"If you can, Gamiszarra will be recalled back to the other side of the Rift."

"He's already here!"

"This is a two-birds-with-one-stone maneuverer," Tesla responded. "But timing is everything. Hastings!"

Hastings who was still in the wheelhouse, suddenly pushed the steamship, taking it to its maximum speed which had been held in reserve until now. The little ship narrowly sped around

Gamizarra and was zipping downriver toward the Rift and Hudson who still hung in the sky like a marionette.

Porter grabbed the buffalo gun from where it had wedged against the gunwale and took careful aim. He could hear the monstrosity Gamizarra behind them as it wheeled about and plunged through the river, racing after them.

The great steps of the insanely huge monstrosity caused river water to swell and lift the ship, speeding it along to their destination. Luckily, Porter was able to maintain his sea legs enough to get a bead on Hudson. He prepared to take a shot.

Without the Peace Ray being fired on the Rift, cracks formed and spread over the orange glow. Light danced outward where pieces broke away and the black abyss opened again. The scope of what he was seeing was beyond Porter's ability for words. Thoughts raced through his mind on what was real, what was madness and his small part in this insane universe, but he remembered the feel of cold steel and knew what a bullet could do to a man.

He centered the rifles sights on Hudson, steadying himself as best he could. He pulled the trigger and sent a series of shots into Hudson's chest and legs. Dark blood splattered against the sorcerers' trousers and shirt. Red rain fell from the

wounds. The dark figure hanging in the air jerked as if invisible strings were plucked one by one.

“We haven’t much time!” Tesla shouted. “Porter, no matter what happens to me and the ship, when this is done, go find your horse and try to ride back the way you have come. I believe you shall make it through your own gate.”

Porter didn’t look at him, his gaze fixed upon the twitching Hudson, still suspended in the air, but he asked, “You think so?”

“I do, because you must make it back through. Otherwise, I would have no memory of you and our journey to R’lyeh which is in my past and your future.”

Porter rolled his eyes at that explanation and cast a look back over his shoulder at Gamiszarra, the Living Island who was coming at them causing a surge in the river’s water with every titanic step.

The Peace Ray was fixed upon the glow of the Rift and healing it like ice to a burn, the black fading away just as the twitching feelers of more of those hideous crawling things were about to pass through.

Hudson's head was slumped down as if in his death throes he was looking at his toes. It shot up and fixed his blazing mad gaze upon Porter and Tesla. His hands stretched forth and lightning danced outward, blasting across the steamship's prow, ripping planks from the forecastle and gunwale. Splinters and metal brackets rained upon Porter, and he shielded himself with his hands as best he could.

The roar of Gamiszarra behind was deafening and Porter could hear nothing but the tumult, though he saw Tesla shouting and pointing.

The river surged and sent the steamship tipping up at almost 70 degrees. For a moment that balance remained, and Porter took aim once again as the ship was carried aloft.

Closer now, they were separated by less than a hundred yards. Porter aimed for the center of Hudson's face and pulled the trigger. A buffalo gun does a lot of damage and Hudson's face was gone in a red haze with the bark of the rifle.

Then Porter flew through the air as he felt an ear-splitting, wood-splintering crunch behind as Gamiszarra trod upon the steamship.

Porter slapped the water hard and lost his breath. He lost the rifle, he lost his hat, and almost lost his life. He saw

sunlight glimmering above as the impossibly huge foot of Gamiszarra came crashing down. And then vanished. Not like the giant monster had stepped away, but faded like smoke. Tesla had been right about his mad ramblings and the monster was recalled back beyond the Rift with Hudson's death. All these thoughts raced through Porter's mind as he sank deeper into the river. He had no strength left to fight the current, no strength to even fight to catch a breath. He was lost, done, too weak to do anything but drown.

He felt clawed hands grasp his coat and pull him ferociously near. One of those dark creatures must have been scouring the trail of the steamship waiting to pounce. This was the end. He would drown in the dark river and be eaten by scaly monsters. No one would ever know what became of him, and his name would be a curse. This was the end.

Darkness folded over him and nightmares of all that could have been sucked at his teeth. A heartbeat drummed in the dark and he wondered if it was his own or that of a Deep One. The slime of ages caressed his back, and reeling within the long dark abyss, he wondered if this was Hell. No angels would come to light his way. Not here.

He felt the pouch thrum against his chest, as if it sensed a power all its own.

Then he was pushed and pulled upward, light from a smoky god of a sun above greeted him.

He burst through the surface of the river as strong rough hands tossed him unceremoniously upon the grass-covered bank. He coughed roughly and tried to get his bearings along with a breath, but his eyes played tricks on him, and he could not see. Shadows moved in front, and it took a long time to draw a comforting breath of warm air.

A rough hand moved over his cheek and beard. He knew then it was the water baby that had saved him. She chattered an unintelligible word, placed his soaking wet hat upon his head and then he heard a splash before she vanished back into the river.

Unknown to Porter, a short distance away two beings stood by, having watched the entirety of the conflict.

“I told you,” Nodens spoke first.

The Crawling Chaos which like a dark pharaoh grunted.

“So be it, I would not have believed the Paohmaa would forgo the opportunity to slay a human that lay so completely within their power.”

“Well, he did save the water baby from the saber-toothed cat.”

The Crawling Chaos scoffed.

“That was a ruse, and you know it.”

“But then he also saved her from being captured by Tesla’s men and getting experimented on.”

“They could not have captured her. That was a ruse as well.”

Nodens grinned.

“Ah, but she still knew that in his heart he would not allow them to do anything to harm her, so point of fact, he saved her. And she decided to repay that kindness despite the enmity between their species.”

Nyarlathotep shrugged as much as a shadow of noble bearing could.

“Very well, this test between the beings of the human world and that of the fae is done. Even I can be surprised once in a millennium.”



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When he was rested and felt well enough, Porter waved goodbye to the river, understanding that the water baby was watching him from her hiding place. He finally found his horse and rode on back to where he had slain the big monstrous cat. From there he could track himself to where he had come from. Finding signs of his passage wasn't difficult as no rain had washed away his trail through the tall grass. He glanced back once more and then rode down the trail.

Maybe he felt a slight tingle from the medicine pouch as he passed through that invisible gateway. The next thing he knew, he was in the red-rimmed slot canyon. Looking back, he could see nothing out of the ordinary. Nodding to himself, he rode on.

Porter came riding out of the slot canyon. To his astonishment, Bishop was waiting there, looking much the same as when they had parted.

"Guess, I shouldn't be surprised, you're here," Porter called out to him. "You must have had a change of conscience and decided to come on in after me. Only took you three hours to muster the sand." He wasn't usually so harsh with a good man

like Bishop but after such an unbelievable adventure of horror, he had a bit of spite in him.

Bishop looked at him, then up toward the sun, then back to Porter and slowly shook his head.

“You only just rode into the canyon a few moments ago. I was waiting to hear gunshots or if you would change your mind.”

“Few moments ago? I feel like I’ve been gone for at least three hours,” Porter argued.

“More like three heartbeats.”

Porter looked at the ground and read the terrain like a civilized man could read a book. Bishop had not ridden away from where he had left him. It had only been moments for the Ute.

Porter’s own haggard appearance was also beyond what he might have been able to do to himself in that last few moments just out of sight. Each man took in the others version of events.

Porter just shook his head.

“Maybe you’re right, but I was still gone for hours.”

“I believe you,” Bishop said as he grinned. “With the legends I have heard about this canyon, you’re lucky to have made it back at all.”

Porter rubbed at his beard.

“I suppose you’re right.” He tossed the saber-tooth to Bishop, who caught it handily, his eyes widening at the monstrous fang. “Maybe you’re the only one that would believe my story anyhow.”

# Dead Eyes

*Ooljee, what have you done?*

Porter remembered...

He slammed the ax down, splitting wood. From around the back of the house he heard a commotion. The boys raced through the nearby thickets, hollering with hoarse voices barely louder than their boots crunching through the ice-glazed snow.

“Pa! Pa! Come quick!” Zarahemla cried as he almost tumbled into Porter. His friend, Tanner Jenson, was right on his heels.

“What is it Z?”

It took a moment for Zarahemla to catch his breath well enough to speak coherently. “We was off at the hot springs, and there’s undead in there!”

“Undead?” Porter asked, his ice-blue eyes firing to life.

Zarahemla nodded adamantly.

“It’s the truth, Brother Rockwell,” Tanner affirmed. “I saw it too.”

“Where?” Porter slammed the ax into the stump. “Saratoga? Down by the warm springs?”

“That’s right,” Tanner said. “How did you know?”

“Did they climb out? Did they tear after you?” Porter directed the question to Zarahemla with a slight smirk on his face.

He stood taller than Porter, though not so thick and well-muscled just yet, he still had a lot of growing left. “No, but they was looking right at us with their dead eyes, like we were gonna be their next meal. I ain’t lying.”

“I sure ain’t saying you are.”

“Why are you almost about to laugh at me? I’m serious. I know what I saw.”

Porter pondered that. “Maybe I know something you don’t but fetch the buffalo rifle anyway and we’ll go have a look.”

Tanner interjected. “Should I fetch my pa, too? Should we call up the militia?”

Porter shook his head. “I don’t think that’ll be necessary. Let’s just go take a look.”

The boys cast a dubious glance to one another at Porter's casual nature but did as he asked. Zarahemla fetched the big buffalo gun then the three of them made their way toward the hot springs close to the shores of Utah Lake.

"I ought to go and tell my pa," Tanner interjected.

"No, you'll come along with me and face your fears," Porter insisted. "You boys got to learn the way of the world."

Tanner gulped and followed, cowed by Porter's tone as much as his words.

This time of year, and with a bitter winter, the lake was covered in a flat field of ice as the breeze whipped over the silver surface. Gusts of wind carried handfuls of snow and cast it at them like ghosts taunting the living with freezing fingers, trying to pry open their jackets and get inside to their very guts.

Steam rose like a veil from the hot springs in contrast to the biting chill. This was a space where two worlds met, not unlike that peculiar place where the dead might greet the living, a juxtaposition of grief and joy, heat and cold.

It was only a small pond, this hot pot, the water rippling as the heat rose from deep below. It took a moment to see

through the roiling steam, but down in the murky depths lay pale, unnatural forms. Pale only in the sense of buckskin clothing and dead skin while black hair spooled about in the cloudy waters.

Then they saw the eyes.

White orbs like great spider eggs stared sightlessly up at the living.

Tanner gasped and moved back, shouting, "I told you!"

Zarahemla took a step back, but Porter held him by the shoulder as he demanded an answer from the boys, "Now hold on. Are they coming for us?"

"I can see them moving," Zarahemla argued.

"That's just the heat in the water making them sway back and forth. They ain't coming out."

"How'd they get there?" Tanner asked. "They look dead to me!"

"They are dead," Porter replied, "but they ain't going anywhere. Been cold enough the last couple weeks that the local Utes couldn't bury their dead proper, so they put them here to keep 'em out of harm's way. No coyote or buzzard is gonna get a piece of them down in the water. When it warms

up a bit and they can bury them right, they'll come and get them and do the deed proper like."

"Is this new?" Zarahemla asked.

Porter shook his head. "T'ain't new. The Utes have been doing this a long time in the winter, though I suppose there are enough of us around now that they won't likely keep doing it down here. Just as likely to have us start messing with the dead as the scavengers, so maybe this will be the last time they do it."

"You really think so?" Zarahemla asked.

"Yup."

"So, they've done this for years?"

"Generations, I imagine," Porter answered.

"Eww, I've been in that water, lots of times," Tanner groaned.

"Well, you ain't keeled over yet, so I expect you're just fine." Porter slapped him on the shoulder.

Zarahemla looked down into the roiling pool again. The body swayed back and forth in haunted rhythm just a few inches under the surface. The white eyes stared blankly upward. The movement gave the illusion of unlife.



“Now you boys know. Things ain’t always what they seem. You gotta keep your head about you. ‘Sides,” he finished with a shrug, “this is the new Holy Land, remember? Land of Deseret, been blessed by the prophet. Ain’t nothing evil like what you thought ever gonna happen here at home.”

Porter remembered, and that boast would haunt him for years.

Twenty years later...

*Ooljee, what have you done?*

“Brother Rockwell!” shouted Tanner Jenson as he raced inside the Point of the Mountain Saloon. “It’s the dead rising again! I seen ‘em.”

Porter sat beside the fireplace, stretched out real comfortable like. He had kicked off his scuffed boots and his bare feet were perched on an equally scuffed ottoman before the warming blaze of the crackling fire. Porter cocked an eye at Tanner and frowned. “Jenson, you have about the worst

timing I can imagine. I just got back from bringing my herd in before that storm hits, and you're asking me to run back and look at the dead in the hot pots? Get the hell out of here." He took a long pull of whiskey from his bottle.

Tanner moved in and knelt beside Porter. "It ain't the Indian dead in the hot pots, it's something else, and it's up the canyon. It moved like lightning and killed Brother Johansen. Whatever it was caught old Caleb Johansen by the neck and killed him. He is dead! I got sprayed with his blood. I don't know how I am still alive."

Porter sat up, growling, "You funning me? Thinking to pull one over on old Port cuz you're still embarrassed that I showed you and Z what was up?"

Tanner held out his hand. It was splashed with red gore, as was his jacket now that Porter looked closely.

"Old Caleb is really dead, and that thing up there is some kind of undead monstrosity," Tanner reiterated. "I came to you since you're the only one I know who has faced such things."

"Not here," Porter murmured as he shook his lion's mane-like head. "It couldn't be happening here."

"Well, it is."

Porter stretched and put on his boots. “What did it look like?”

Tanner gestured wildly with his arms outstretched. “Big. Big manlike, maybe ten feet tall, had a deer skull for a head and long, long arms that hung as far down as its knees. Claws covered in blood. If it hadn’t ‘a been feasting on Caleb, I don’t know how else I would have got away.”

Porter chewed at the edges of his mustache. “Maybe it was an Indian shaman in costume.”

“T’was no man.”

Porter chewed a little harder as he pondered. “Where was it?”

“Up American Fork Canyon, just below the cave.”

“All right, I’ll head on up. Stay—”

“I’m coming with you, just like old times.”

Porter cocked an eyebrow at him. “Old times? You came with me that one time with Z, and that was nothing but the dead in the hot pots.”

“Still, I’m coming with you. Gonna watch your back just like Zarahemla would if he were here.”

“You ain’t nothing like Z. Stay here.”

Tanner stamped a foot. “I need to show you where it is.”

Porter chuckled at the tantrum. “With as much blood as there is on your coat, I’m sure I can find it on my lonesome. Stay here. You’ll just get in my way. I can handle this. Don’t need no one to watch my back in my own backyard.”

“What would Zarahemla say to that if he were here?”

“You ain’t Zarahemla,” Porter shouted as he stood and knocked a calloused finger into Tanner’s chest. It was hard as stone.

That was odd, he had always figured Tanner for a soft boy, a man now, but surely still soft as pig fat. He sure seemed determined now though. But the comment about Zarahemla stuck in his craw and needled at him. Tanner sure wasn’t no replacement for his adopted son.

“He went and chose his own way and don’t need no one to try and fill in his shoes. Go home, I got this.”

Porter put on his hat and grabbed a rifle from the corner near the door. He glared daggers at Tanner as he went out into the falling snow of twilight.

He strode to the barn, angry at the man for presuming he could fill in his stepson's boots. No man could fill those massive boots.

It pained Porter that Zarahemla had to go his own way and that it took him so far and out of his life. It was his own fault, he had raised him to follow truth and his own heart, and when Porter had said some things in a moment of confidence as well as doubt, well, Z had to follow his own path that took him far from the land of Deseret and the Mormons.

"Wheat. It is what it is," Porter murmured to himself as he opened the barn door and retrieved the saddle for his favorite mare.

Dusk had fallen as surely as the snow, but at the same time, the drifting white helped illuminate everything, casting the land in a perpetual gray that would make things as easy to see as a severely cloudy day.

You couldn't ask for better monster hunting weather, could you? Porter grinned to himself and checked over his supplies as he rode on. Pistols, check; Sharps rifle, check; blessed Bowie knife, check; lantern and oil, check; rope, check; and even a crucifix that Zarahemla had given him before he left on his own path. It was silver and had a sharp pointed end. Z had

joked it could be used as a stake for a vampire if necessary. Being Mormon, Porter didn't usually cotton to wearing the cross or even keeping one around, but this gift from his son was something he always kept close at hand in a saddle bag or thereabouts, cuz you never know.

The mouth of American Fork Canyon was a narrow gash in the mountainside. All things considered it was not wide at all, hardly more than the amount of space it would take for a wagon to circle about, not that it could be done at the mouth of the canyon because half of that area was taken up by the half-frozen creek. It wasn't deep but constant, with good clean water racing down from the melting snows high above on Mount Timpanogos, which was supposedly named after a local Indian tribe. The Timp Utes didn't call it that, only the white men did. It made Porter chuckle thinking about how many times there were places named after Indian words that didn't mean what white men thought at all.

The opening canyon snaked back and forth as the racing river carved its way down. Pines grew in thick clusters along the upper slopes while aspens and willows crowded for life giving water. The frosted air was filled with steam from the creek, since the cold front came in and was even colder than

the snow-borne water. It made the canyon misty along with the gray haze of the lightly falling flakes.

On the trail, faint drops of dark blood rested in utter contrast to the pale hoofprints of Tanner's horse from earlier that day. Beside the hoofprints were Tanner's own boot prints. He hadn't ridden out of the canyon, he had walked. That was odd.

Sounds came from behind, and Porter eased back in the saddle to glance behind him. A gray shape swiftly approached. As the man got closer, Porter slowed his dun to a canter.

It was Tanner Jenson; he had run all this way without a horse! Maybe he wasn't so soft after all. That was heroic stamina all right. Maybe that would explain some things, he ran out of the canyon and now had run all the way back. Quite the marathon. Much as Porter was impressed, he wasn't about to show it.

"Thought I told you to stay home," Porter said a hair more unkindly than he meant. He'd meant it to be unkind in the first place, but his harsh emphasis surprised even himself.

"And I told you that someone needed to watch your back on this one. I know what I saw."

“If I find nothing more than some crazy Indian tracks in the snow, I’m of a mind to just shoot you for the trouble.”

Tanner shook his head. “It was not Indians that killed old Caleb. It was a monster.”

“We’ll see,” Porter drawled as he urged his mare onward. He didn’t want the help, but in his old age, he reluctantly decided to allow Tanner to tag along. “You got anything special besides an attitude?”

“Got my pistol.” He patted the inside of his jacket. He carried a gun in virtually the same place Porter carried his. That was odd.

Porter nodded. “All right, just keep your eyes skinned.”

“I am,” Tanner insisted.

“What were you two doing up here anyway? You had to know it was gonna snow tonight. And why ain’t you got a horse?”

“I did. Johansen’s wife, I mean widow, asked me to go find him. She said he was up here hunting for game. Fool’s errand, really, considering how much things must have gotten hunted out for Thanksgiving last month. I knew I could run this route no problem.”



Porter grunted in agreement. “Run huh?”

“But he was up here, and I found him just as the sun disappeared from the canyon’s view. Just a little farther on.”

“And?”

“He said he knew something was up here. He thought something was watching him.”

They rounded a bend in the canyon with the wind whipping cold in their faces. High above on the cliff, Porter knew there was a cave. They were getting close.

Other blackness was even closer.

Blood drops looked black in the snow. There was a big smear not far ahead, mingled with curious tracks. Not human, nor any animal Porter could yet recognize. He dismounted to get a better look.

Tanner continued, “The strangest thing, before it all went to hell, was he said he thought he saw Ooljee.”

“What?” Porter wheeled in the saddle. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me that before?”

“I forgot. Caleb’s dead. I don’t know why that thing didn’t get me! ‘Sides, I didn’t see her, I figured old Caleb must have mistaken some other Indian gal for her.”

“Thought you said there were no Indians, it was just a monster,” Porter grumbled as he scanned the prints. The falling snow cast distortions upon the prints but not so much that the seasoned tracker couldn’t still discern their shapes and direction of movement.

Tanner shrugged. “A lot happened quick. I was scared. I forgot ‘til just now.”

“Ooljee’s dead, but something Zarahemla told me never sat right. He sent a letter...” Porter trailed off, realizing he was speaking aloud and didn’t wish to continue telling Tanner anything more.

“Tell me.”

“Forget I said anything. But you better remember to tell me everything,” Porter snarled.

Tanner gulped. “Caleb said he couldn’t find no game, and I told him he was a damn fool. He said he thought he was being watched and once, near a shadowy edge of the cliff just below the caves, he said he thought he saw an Indian maiden. He thought it was Ooljee. He waved and started to say something to her, but she up and disappeared.”

“Sounds more like the legend of Princess Utahna,” Porter mused.

“It wasn’t like that. We all know that story.”

“So, what was different?”

“He knew Ooljee, said he was sure it was her, not just any other Indian maiden. He said he saw her just a little before I found him, we only talked for a couple minutes, and we were riding back home when I heard a guttural sound from behind. I looked back, and that undead thing loomed out of the trees and took Caleb by the throat. It squeezed and killed him dead as David killed Goliath. Splashed me with his life’s blood, it did. I raced away fast as I could.”

The wind moaned as it pushed through the trees, shaking another cloud of snow from the crestfallen branches.

Porter squinted. “What about his horse? Your horse?”

“Caleb was walking, he didn’t have no horse.”

“You said you were riding home.”

“I was, he was walking.”

“How did you get splashed with blood, up on a horse, ahead of poor old Caleb?”

Tanner gulped once more and shivered. “That thing picked him up off the ground. I told you it was big, like ten feet tall. It squeezed Caleb by the throat and tore his head off. I done what you asked, I’m telling you everything.” He glanced about nervously.

“If you were so in fear of your life, why weren’t you riding that horse at the mouth of the canyon?”

“We were far enough away, I thought I could give it a breather. I felt good enough to run, and that thing didn’t seem to be chasing us.”

Porter frowned and pulled his gun. “You’re good. Almost too good, but there are some things that kid would never ever say. Keep your hands where I can see them.”

Tanner cocked his head at Porter. “What are you talking about? It’s me, Tanner Jenson. You’ve known me since I was ten years old. I grew up in Lehi. I was friends with your boy, Zarahemla.”

“Oh, you look like him and talk like him, sure, but there’s a few things that just ain’t right.”

Tanner’s otherwise cheerful face twisted into a hateful sneer. “What gave it away?”

“That kid never had a lick of courage. He almost pissed himself when we went back to look at the dead in the hot pots. I don’t fault a kid for being scared, but it was all I could do to get him to come with us and learn. He was more afraid of me than he was the dead, that’s the only reason he came along that day. But this? Tonight? Tanner never would have done this on his own.”

The thing snorted in derision. “What are you concealing now?”

Porter shook his head. “You’re all about lies and such. I ain’t telling you nothing more. You’re gonna answer me, or I’m gonna blow a hole in you wide enough for a freight train to pass through. What are you?”

It cocked its head and smirked with wicked glee. “I am old as the mountains and long-lived as the rivers. I was here long before your people crossed the sea.”

“Not an answer.” Porter stalled. “Why are you here now?”

“Ooljee sent we three siblings from across the voids of time. We come to collect her revenge. When we are done with you, we will find Two Crows and the Widow along with her spawn.”

“You’re a liar,” Porter scoffed, though the statement cut him to the core.

The head cocked to the side farther than humanly possible as an evil smile widened. “I tell what you can understand.”

“Understand this,” Porter said as he pulled the hammer on his pistol. “And tell me what you are. Is Caleb dead. Is Tanner?”

“Yes, they were delicious.” The inhuman smile widened, and the lips curled back revealing more jagged teeth than any human under the sun could own.

“Great Gadiantons!” Porter gasped and took a step back in surprise at the transformation, but his pointed gun never wavered.

The thing’s legs elongated slightly, and its arms stretched as claws emerged from the tips of its fingers. Tufts of what had been Tanner’s blond hair sprouted into nubs which rapidly became wide, far-flung antlers. The eyes vanished into deep black holes, like the pit of hell where tiny flames burned amidst oceans of boiling tar. Evil dwelt there.

Porter pulled the trigger, and a gaping wound exploded scarlet from the center of its chest.

The wendigo staggered as Porter emptied the six-gun, saving the final round for between its black-socketed eyes.

It fell to its knees and extended its left hand outward as if begging for mercy, mercy Porter didn't believe it was capable of giving its victims.

Porter fired the last round, cracking the skull between the socketed eyes.

At the sudden impact, the thing's head flew back then snapped forward, and it stood supreme as if the lead had no effect despite the dripping ichor from its bosom and brainpan. "You're done," it rattled between broken teeth. "My turn." It lunged forward.

Terrible claws raked against Porter's coat. He fumbled to grab his blessed bowie as the monster's attack sent him reeling into the snowy brambles behind. His foot slipped on the embankment, and he fell into the shallow, ice-covered river. Porter tried to get up, breaking through the ice. Cold water flooded inside his boot.

Those terrible claws whistled through the air where his neck had just been.

There was no time to reload his pistol. What good would it do anyway? He moved as the wendigo stomped down the bank, snapping a tree limb thick as Porter's leg in an instant.

"I hunger for your sacred blood," rasped the wendigo. The burning in its eyes flared a moment as if it widened those pits into the abyss.

"Hate to disappoint," muttered Porter. Fingers found the smooth wooden handle of the bowie, and silver gleamed as he freed it of its leather sheath.

The wendigo stepped forward, long arms spread wide.

Porter arced the blade in a wide sweep, throwing all the power he could muster behind that Damascus steel. The blade bit into the wendigo's ribs, and the air inside its lungs burst outward in a huff. The blade could hurt the monstrosity where bullets had no more effect than flies.

The wendigo retreated a pace, clutching its long taloned fingers to the terrible gash.

Porter came on, ice water squelching from his boots. "Tell me again, why are you doing this for Ooljee? Where is she?"

"In hell," slurred the wendigo as it backed away another pace and fell to its knees.



“You came to my land, and you’re gonna be buried here.”  
Porter plunged the blade into its shoulder, pushing it down toward the thing’s black heart.

It roared once then went silent as Porter withdrew the blade that would allow none of the monster’s blood to stick.

“My siblings are,” a wet cough bubbled up from its chest, “coming for you.”

“They better put up a better fight than you.”

The wendigo gave a weak snort. “When you least expect it.” The monstrosity went still, and its body fragmented and blew away like cold ash before a storm.

“Ooljee, what have you done?”

The snow softly fell, heedless of the infernal battle that had just occurred.

Porter glanced about for his horse. It was gone. Animals generally knew better than humans when to avoid evil.

He thrummed his toes inside the cold boot. That liquid would turn to ice soon. He sat on the ground, took the boot off, then the stocking, and rolled it on the powdery snow to try and take the moisture from the soaked item. It worked a little. If he could keep it powdery and fling off the snow enough, at least

it would only be damp. He did the same with a handful of snow in the boot as well.

A snort made him look over his shoulder as his hand was still inside the boot.

A white buffalo stood at the edge of the clearing. Clouds of steam rose above its head from the flexing nostrils. Like the wendigo before it, it too had red flaming eyes. Coals of burning hatred and evil that pierced Porter's heart.

That it was white was a curiosity of unfounded proportions. Usually, such creatures denoted a sacred beast, but this one was a mockery, a twisted, vile thing that only put upon itself the sacred pure cover of the divine. Porter knew this was yet another Skinwalker, a witch, a spiritual sibling of Ooljee.

Red smeared the tufted chin of the buffalo. What had it slain? Whom had it already destroyed in its mission to avenge Ooljee? Porter could only wonder as the monstrosity bellowed and charged, the weight of its hoofbeats drumming the ground like thunder.

Porter rolled away, his hand still inside the boot. The white buffalo crashed into the trees where he had just been. Without a sock, Porter slid the boot on and reached for his knife, finding only an empty sheath. He glanced toward the

embankment where he'd set the knife as he had dried his sock, both now lost in the gloom. His six-gun would likely be as useless with this gargantuan creature as it had been the wendigo, but he would still try.

Snapping out the cylinder, he replaced it with a spare from his pocket where he always carried at least a half dozen.

Crashing back through the gray boughs, the pale buffalo snorted and ran at full speed toward Porter.

He emptied the gun into its thick skull to no effect, dodging aside at the last moment as it careened into the creek, sending jets of water up as it slammed into an icy pool.

Porter raced up the embankment, hunting for the blessed knife. The clearing had been churned up at the bison's passing; ruts of brown earth thrown up, dark across the white ground, hiding the object of his desire.

Bellowing, the white buffalo raised itself from the black pool and trudged to the shoreline.

Porter had no useful weapon, no means of stopping the mammoth creature. He would have to run to a place where he could climb the cliff and escape the four-legged demon. Back down the canyon he ran, slipping and sliding on snow and ice

that covered the trail. He struck a softer mass and tumbled face first to the ground.

It was his dead horse. The white buffalo had gored and slain his mare.

The bellowing behind grew nearer, and the ground shook as it pursued him. He couldn't see the beast but knew it was only moments behind.

The saddlebags!

Reaching inside the first, he discovered his rope, drenched in oil leaking from the smashed lantern. He yanked it free and felt in his pockets for the lighter. He spooled the rope into a wide noose, then, standing in the center of the trail, prepared his lasso.

The white buffalo rounded the dark corner; dim moonlight backlit the monstrosity as clouds of steam billowed from its nostrils. It thundered ahead as Porter spun the lasso.

Porter prayed for the Almighty to guide his hand as it came within mere steps of him. He slung forth the lasso, and like David's stone, the loop struck this goliath, encircling its broad neck.

Porter dodged aside, bracing himself against the dead horse as the line pulled taut, burning his hands as the rope rubbed his skin raw.

The white buffalo slumped in its tracks as the rope stole its air. Porter struck the lighter. A spark crackled and ran down the rope like lightning.

Porter's hands stung so bad from the rope burn that he almost wondered if his hands too were aflame. A ring of fire wrapped about the white buffalo's neck and burned as it asphyxiated the gargantuan Skinwalker.

It cried out in Navajo as the rope burned, and in its death throes reverted to its original human form.

Porter watched it burn and twist on the ground, surely in agony, but he had no pity for it. He clutched a handful of snow only to relieve the burning in his own hands.

“You are almost cruel enough to be one of us.”

Porter wheeled to see an Indian maiden who looked remarkably like Ooljee. Perhaps a younger sister?

She didn't linger but vanished into the waiting arms of the darkness.

“One of us,” she had said. She sure didn’t mean being an Indian, white men were generally far crueler in Porter’s experience, but she looked like Ooljee, that’s what she meant by “one of us.” A Skinwalker.

Porter knew where she was going. The cave.

“At least I know it’s a trap,” he said to himself. It took effort with his wounded hands, but he managed to move the dead horse just enough to retrieve the silver crucifix from the saddle bags. “Thanks for thinking of me, Z.” He tucked the crucifix into his shirt pocket and reloaded his six-gun.

A chill wind buffeted him before a low moan echoed from higher up the pass, the steady throb of a drum carried along with it. Or was it his own heartbeat? The rhythm was eerily similar.

He rubbed his raw hands in the snow again to satiate the burning. Moving alongside the crooked trail, he saw the flickering orange glow of a fire just beyond the mouth of the cave. She stood there waiting, stark blackness silhouetted by the hungry light.

Porter had to admit she got up there awful fast. “Damn Skinwalkers. Ooljee, what have you done?”

It took him longer than he would have liked to make that crooked climb up to the cave. When he reached the top, the full-blooded Indian maiden stared at him with haughty eyes.

“You took her away from us, now we will take all you have loved away from you,” she said.

Porter gave her a lopsided grin and thumbed back over his shoulder. “I took two of your siblings already, and you’re talking about payback? Maybe y’all should quit while you’re ahead.”

She stalked back and forth in front of the bonfire, eyes black as obsidian, an inhuman growl welled up from deep in her throat.

Porter continued, “True, plenty of things I don’t understand about your people, but I took in a little girl who would have died out in the wilderness without my help. I ain’t about to apologize for that regardless of what she done later in life.”

“She was being tested, you interrupted that.”

Porter shrugged. “Life is a test.”

“You led her down a path that brought confusion into her life, you and T’oo Bila Dijool. For this, you will pay the ultimate price.”

“Leave him outta this!”

She now returned the crooked smile with wolfish teeth.

“We will get him too.”

“That’s enough.” Porter drew his six-gun and fired.

This doppelganger of Ooljee, fast as lightning, crossed the half-dozen paces between them and fell upon him even as the revolver spat fire at her blurred form.

Nothing was that fast, nothing human anyway. She batted him away, and he slammed into a nearby pine. Before he could pick himself up, she kicked him and he flew a dozen feet away, hanging halfway off the side of the precipice.

He was amazed he had retained the grip on his six-gun through all of that, but he had been in a scrape or two before and knew better than to lose his gun.

For all the good it did him against this opponent.

He fired again, and she moved in a comet-like blur out of range, laughing at him. She struck again, taunting, “You will feel pain such as never before.”

Slammed to the ground, Porter strained with his left hand to keep her fangs from his throat as talons raked his flesh, shredding his buckskin jacket. The six-gun barked again and



again as he pulled the trigger in a vain attempt to free himself, but her flailing kept the flying lead at bay.

As she tore away at his clothing, her hand touched something in his breast pocket. She howled in pain. The stink of burnt flesh and hair filled Porter's nostrils as the doppelganger recoiled away from him, clutching at her wounded hand.

Shining bright like a star, the silver crucifix hung out of his rent shirt pocket by the barest of threads.

Porter grinned.

He snatched up the small bit of silver, gripping it with confidence, and launched himself at the foe.

She flew at him in turn, long talons upon abnormally long fingers reaching for his flesh. But with the power of the cross in his hand, he backhanded the shrieking Skinwalker away.

Usually silent in church, Porter had never been much of a singer, but he suddenly found himself belting out a new hymn he had recently heard, inspired by the cross in his hand. It was what he imagined Z might do. "Onward Christian soldiers, Marching as to war! With the Cross of Jesus, going on before!"

The doppelganger cried out, “Silence!” as she charged, only to be struck down once more from Porter’s mighty hand.

She had been so powerful before, but against the Cross of Jesus, she had no power.

The doppelganger of Ooljee backed toward the cave on her hands and knees, screeching a high-pitched wail as she stared daggers at the silver symbol of Jehovah, firelight reflected across its smooth surface.

“Christ the Royal Master, leads against the foe. Forward into battle, see the banners go!”

She cowered now at the edge of the cave, her brown hands flung up against his booming baritone. Her eyes, no longer solid black but brown and white, watched fearfully from between her fingers.

He didn’t see a Skinwalker or a doppelganger any longer; he only saw scared, little Ooljee just as she had been so many years ago. He felt pity now, even mercy, for such a monstrous thing.

He retained his grip on the cross and thought deeply about what it meant, what it offered, not just to saint and sinner, but to monster.

“Listen here, demon, you go and sin no more.”

She looked at him with frightened, watery eyes, as if imagining he was playing a trick on her. Liars always think everyone is lying.

He took a step back to give her room. “You hear me? You let all of this go and change your ways and I’ll let you live, but if I ever have to come after you...”

She slowly nodded her head. “Mercy even for me?”

Porter nodded.

She answered, “I will, but cannot speak for the others.”

“None of us can, but we can change. We can all do better.”

She cocked her head. “I see now why you took her in so long ago. It was what you thought right, you were not seeking to end our ways, but to save her life.”

“Something like that. You go on now, it’s been a long enough night already.” Porter turned to head back down the crooked trail.

“The others will not look kindly on my turning from the path,” she said.

“You’re right, you’ll need something.” He tossed her the silver cross. It landed with a soft thud at her feet. She twitched for a moment, but meeting his expectant gaze, she gingerly reached down and grasped the crucifix.

It didn’t burn her this time. Maybe repentance through the Light of Christ can be that quick. She clutched it to her breast and whispered, “Thank you.”

“Yep,” Porter murmured as he limped down the trail into the snowy night.

Thanks as always to Holli Anderson, Carter Reid, Rees, Shayla, Megan, Jason, Dave, and more I'm sure that I'm spacing at the moment as I write this up at 1 in the morning.

# About the Author



David J. West writes dark fantasy and weird westerns because the voices in his head won't quiet until someone else can hear them. He is a great fan of sword & sorcery, ghosts and lost ruins, so of course he lives in Utah.

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