

**The Quick and the Unholy**

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“Have you ever seen a storm brew up so fast?”

The mid-day sun was already disappearing behind the rapidly shifting clouds in the sky. Dustin reckoned they had crossed over into southern Colorado, but he couldn't be too sure. He hadn't been paying much attention to his current surroundings, being lost in the past for the last hour. The Rocky Mountains were creeping steadily closer and the valleys they traveled were becoming ever deeper. He looked briefly at the speaker, a man named Wallace. He hadn't been with this group of wranglers for very long and he was still trying to remember their names.

As Wallace, an older cowpoke who talked too much, rambled on about storms and floods he had seen, Dustin watched the strange dark clouds roll over the mountains to the west. It gave him an uneasy feeling he couldn't explain.

His thoughts were interrupted when Macy stumbled. Dustin leaned forward in his saddle in time to see a stone roll free of her hooves, dislodged while traversing the gentle upward slope of the hill. He patted her gently on her neck. Settling back in the saddle, he sighed and wrapped his bandanna around his face as they crested the hill.

The bowl shaped valley before him stewed with the activity of over five hundred cattle. As Dustin expected, the wind kicked up all the loose dirt and dust the herd had ground into a fine powder. The valley was an earthen bowl, boiling over with a soup of gravel. Intermittently, patches of green could be seen between the enormous bovine bodies as they rubbed up together and then parted. The ground looked like it was breathing.

Being new to the group, Dustin was almost always assigned dust eater duty for Maxwell's cattle. Hubert Maxwell, one of the richest men on the eastern slope, had never met any of his wranglers. Most likely, he had never even seen his herd. Being rich meant being too busy to deal with the smaller aspects of his fortune. From what Dustin had heard, it sounded like Maxwell was only in the industry for bragging rights in the smoky back rooms of estate houses and mansions. This level of interaction suited Dustin just fine.

As his face took on a fresh coat of gray, he looked forward to a few days from now. It had been a while since he had slept in a soft bed, and he looked forward to a warm bath and perhaps some company to go with it. Dust in places he couldn't reach wasn't the only thing making him itchy.

“I hope it rains.”

Henry Walker rode up alongside Dustin. His baritone voice contrasted nicely with his slender frame. His skin was naturally darker than the others, which complimented soulful brown eyes. Rumor had it that his grandfather was an Iroquois medicine man, but when pressed he never answered. He seldom spoke at all; equally as outcast as Dustin from the strangers he rode with. He too was a dust eater.

Dustin nodded his head in agreement. It hadn't rained in a few weeks and the cattle had to be moved more often because of the lack of greenery. That and it made the dust worse.

He kept his eye on the clouds as the afternoon wore on. They continued to pile higher and higher on top of each other without heading towards the herd. The sky grew dark as the sun began to set behind the growing storm. The shadows of the herd faded as they were consumed by the growing darkness.

The group began to pull together as the cattle settled on a nearby slope. Dustin had just finished brushing down Macy when Colin, his boss, called him over.

“I need you on Nighthawk tonight.” Before Dustin could protest, Colin cut him off. “I know it’s not your turn, but with those clouds brewing, I want an extra pair of eyes on the herd in case something fierce breaks. We’re counting on you.” Colin left little room for protest as he turned and walked away.

Dustin grumbled to himself. He hated doing Nighthawk duty. In the dark, he felt the same vulnerability he had when he was younger and constantly being hunted. He pulled some coffee grounds from his war bag, along with a small tin cup. After a quiet dinner to himself and a few cups of coffee, he saddled Macy back up. He walked her over to Wallace and Walker. Walker nodded his head at Dustin, mounted his grey, and cantered off into the night. Wallace began chewing at Dustin’s ear about the weather as they headed back into the valley towards the herd. Dustin looked back briefly at the warm campfire next to the supply wagon. He sighed as the sound of laughter reached him. It was going to be a long night.

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Four hours passed. Dustin could feel the dust still in his eyes as he stared at the herd. They mooed to each other softly and occasionally shifted amongst themselves. Tired, he met up with Walker and Wallace. They had dismounted from their horses and made their own makeshift camp. Not being allowed a fire, Dustin and Walker just sat in silence as Wallace chattered to them. The stars had long ago disappeared and the shadows were like spilled ink. Occasionally a distant rumble of thunder would follow a bolt of lightning in the clouds. The light was enough to see the herd briefly before they returned into darkness.

“That ones going to hit us soon.” Dustin saw Walker’s head tilt to one side. “The spirits are angry about something.”

Dustin glanced at Wallace, who was now carrying the whole conversation by himself. He realized that Walker had spoken to him specifically. The weight of his words revealed more than he had ever admitted to anybody else. Dustin thought for a moment, unsure how to respond.

“Are they angry at us?”

Walker shifted beside him.

“No. We are insignificant.”

“Oh.” Dustin watched as the lightning built in frequency. Even Wallace had quit speaking.

“Those are Thunderbirds.” Walker stood up and put his hat on. “They are coming this way. I suggest we seek shelter.”

“Thunders just a noise, Hank.” Wallace stood up and dusted his hands off.

Walker said nothing as he walked over to his horse. He untied its lead from the tree and mounted up.

“Stay then.”

Dustin scrambled to follow as thunder pealed out from the mountains, loud in his ears. Wallace wasn’t far behind as Walker galloped down the hill.

“Where are we going?” Dustin hollered, unsure if his words would reach Walker.

Walker, his shadow barely discernible, pointed towards the other side of the valley. Dustin didn't see anything, but was willing to let someone else lead the charge. They could still see the cattle, so no harm would be done.

Lightning began crawling across the sky. The wind began picking up and dust billowed out everywhere. Already Dustin could hear some panic among the herd. He glanced down into the valley. He saw nothing other than large shadows.

It felt like forever. Dustin's heart was racing as the lightning both gave him light and blinded him. As one bolt flashed, he felt Macy start beneath him. He was already having trouble keeping her under control and assumed the others were as well. All of the sudden, he found himself underneath a rocky outcrop. Walker dismounted and slapped his horse on its rump. It took off.

"Are you crazy?" Walker practically pulled Dustin from the saddle as lightning struck nearby. Macy reared in terror, the whites of her eyes showing. Behind her, Wallace was dumped from the saddle as his horse reacted as well. The men ran over to him and helped him to his feet. The wind began to roar loud in their ears.

As one, they crawled towards the back. The storm opened up into its full fury. Lightning sank from the sky and crawled along the ground like a giant centipede. Thunder echoed in the valley back and forth, creating a cacophony of noise that made Dustin's ears ring.

"Look!" Wallace pointed out towards the herd and Dustin watched, his heart in his throat. It started as a faint blue glow along the ground, but quickly claimed the herd as its own. Blue sparks of electricity danced along horns and hooves, driving the herd into a fury. As one, the herd formed a mass of bodies and began shifting back and forth as the cattle frantically sought refuge.

"What is that?" Dustin hollered over the wind.

"Saint Elmo's fire." Walker's voice carried over the wind, unaltered by the storms fury.

"It's a stampede!" Wallace hollered as the cattle poured out of the valley. Over the thunder, the sounds of their hooves could be heard as the glowing figures disappeared. As the storm reached its peak, Wallace and Dustin crawled towards the back of the overhang. Walker remained at the edge, gazing up towards the sky.

To him, the thunder sounded like the flapping of giant wings.

\* \* \*

"Christ."

Wallace cursed as they came over the top of the hill. Dustin stared at what was left of the camp. Walker brought up the rear, saying nothing.

The supply wagon had been knocked over, shattering out one whole side. Colin was frantically barking orders in the early morning light as the other wranglers tended to their wounds. During the storm, the wind had carried the supply wagon into one of the older wranglers, crushing his leg. Their campfire had spread and startled away the horses. Already, two of them had been recovered and attempts were being made to right the fallen wagon.

"Wallace! Walker! Anderson!" Colin waved at them. They were walking over when Walker let out that shrieking whistle of his again. Dustin looked at him in annoyance, but Walker fixed him with a dark gaze. He had been doing that ever since they left the safety of the rocks.

“Which way did the herd go?”

Walker pointed off to the northwest.

“Thank god for small miracles.” Colin had his men gather around. “Okay, we’re down but not out.” He unrolled his map and nodded to himself. “If we head to the west, there’s a small mining town. Called Stonewood. We can restock our supplies and tend to the wounded. Get some more horses too, if we’re lucky.”

Walker let out his shrill whistle once again. Everybody stared at him in awe as they heard a whinny answer him in the distance. The group turned to see Walker’s horse come over the hill. Close behind, Macy and Wallace’s mount reappeared. Walker greeted his horse with a pat on the head and an old apple from his war bag.

“I’ll be damned if yer Grandpa wasn’t a redskin.” A dirty old wrangler named Nick spat on the ground. Walker said nothing as he checked his horse for injuries.

“Okay, it’s settled.” Colin rolled up his map and pointed at Dustin. “I want you three to track the cattle. Find where the herds gone. Once you have, I want you to meet us at Stonewood.” He pointed at two large hills in the distance. “The town should be between those hills. If you can, get a headcount for me. That was one hell of a storm and I’d be a fool if I thought we didn’t lose one during it.”

It wasn’t long before the wagon was righted again. Dustin checked his own supplies and replaced what he had lost. If they were lucky, they would find the cattle tonight. If not, then it could take a couple of days.

Walker was already on his horse when Dustin climbed up on Macy. He rubbed her forehead, happy to have her back. They looked back at Wallace as he began his own grumbling, unhappy that he had gone without sleep for so long.

“See you in Stonewood!” Colin waved as the recovery efforts continued. The three wranglers said nothing as Walker led them back towards the valley they had just left.

It didn’t take long to find the trail. Two thousand hooves left their mark in passing and they were soon in a casual pursuit of their charge. They followed the trail for some time. It was just after noon when Walker called for a break.

Wallace was asleep in moments, his hat pulled over his face as he stretched out on a soft patch of grass. Walker shared some cheese and a tin of meat with Dustin, who accepted it gratefully. The two ate wordlessly, happy for the peace and quiet. When they finished, Walker pinched some snuff into a pipe Dustin had never seen before and began to smoke. Dustin just smiled at him and pulled a deck of cards out of his war bag.

“So how long you been running?”

Dustin felt his blood become ice.

“Beg pardon?”

Walker blew out a puff of smoke and turned to regard him with deep brown eyes. He smiled and scratched the back of his neck.

“Don’t worry. I’ve known from the beginning. Every man deserves a fresh start.”

Dustin’s hand had already started hovering over his pistol, but he kept his hand off it.

“How did you know?”

“I have a memory for faces. Places. Things like that.” He blew another puff of smoke into the air. “I’ve seen the posters, well over a year old. A job where you’re seldom in town, always have your face covered in sweat and dirt, and nobody questions it? Pretty smart idea really.”

Dustin looked over at Wallace. The man was snoring like a coal train.

“I’ll do this just long enough till no one will recognize the man I used to be.”

Walker nodded in agreement. Dustin waited for a response, but got nothing.

“It was a stupid thing, really. Becoming a gunslinger. My family had no money, had to steal more than once. It’s one of the few things I was good at. Then one day, I killed a man and realized I didn’t enjoy it. People treated me with fear, not respect. My money was always welcome wherever I went, but the man I had become wasn’t. One day I disappear and take a job with some wranglers over three hundred miles away. I pass from job to job, being careful not to get too close, not to get recognized.” Dustin felt a chill in his stomach as he revealed his secret to a man he hardly knew.

Walker put his pipe away and shrugged.

“Like I said, every man deserves a fresh start.” He stood up and began walking away. Part of Dustin wanted to shoot him in the back and be done with it. Kill both of them and run. The other part of Dustin recognized a kinship with Walker and knew to even draw his gun would be fatal somehow.

Walker kicked one of Wallace’s outstretched feet. The old man groaned and sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“Let’s move out sunshine.” The three men mounted up. Dustin sighed to himself as Walker gave him one of those deep piercing looks. For just a second, they shared an understanding. Dustin patted Macy’s neck and they rode off.

They noticed the smell first. When the wind shifted, traces of death filled their noses. Wallace began grumbling about it incessantly, but Dustin and Walker tuned him out easy enough.

The stench went from awful to overpowering. Dustin pulled his mask up in the hopes it would help. It didn’t.

Coming over the top of a hill, the three cowboys stopped. The better half of their herd was spread out over the grass, the bodies stretched and distorted.

“Oh my god,” Wallace moaned, taking off his hat. “I ain’t never seen something like this.”

They rode forward, quietly. The cattle had been ripped open and gutted, for the most parts. Innards were strewn everywhere, and Dustin was extremely hesitant to even consider getting down for a closer look.

Walker looked the most disturbed of all. Gazing at the mess on the ground, wheels were obviously turning in his head. He kept his thoughts to himself.

Saying nothing, they rode through the mess, keeping silent counts in their heads. It was soon becoming clear that most of the herd was indeed laid out in the field. The afternoon heat did its best to bring out the aromatic qualities of decaying flesh.

“Shit.” Wallace pulled his hat back and ran dirty fingers through scraggly hairs. “What do we do now?”

“We should go to town. Meet up with the others and figure out what Colin wants us to do. Can’t fault a man for doing what he’s told.” Dustin hocked something up and spit, hoping the taste in his mouth would go with it. It didn’t work.

“I agree.” Walker urged his horse to the nearest edge of the carnage. After a few minutes of careful stepping, they were clear.

Dustin stared over his shoulder at the bloody hoof prints they were tracking. He needed to find a stream to walk Macy through before flies got to biting her.

Wallace took the lead, mumbling to himself. Dustin fell back, realizing Walker wanted to talk.

“Last night was an omen.”

Dustin shrugged. He didn't know how to respond.

“What do you think could do that to a herd of cattle overnight? I've seen a herd of coyote tear apart a cow before, but that was one cow. And those,” he pointed back towards the grisly scene. “That wasn't coyotes.”

Walker nodded in response to Dustin's remark and squinted into the sunlight.

“There are things out there that humans were never meant to know about.”

Dustin snorted.

“That ain't gonna get us paid.”

“Hey!”

Wallace startled the men by sitting up high in the saddle and waving his hat back and forth. In the distance, they saw a man standing out in a patch of tall grass, staring up at the sky. He turned a head towards Wallace and began walking towards them.

“Maybe he seen what happened.” Wallace spurred his horse forward and the others followed suit.

As the riders approached, Macy took an unexpected turn, veering away from the stranger. Frowning, Dustin turned her head forward and eased her on. Turning to look at Walker, he saw that he was having the same problem.

Wallace's horse started fighting the reins and he started yelling. The metal spurs on his boots made the beast close the distance.

“Hey, you seen what happened?”

The strange figure walked forward like he was drunk. A tilted hat made it hard for Dustin to see the figures face, but it was obviously a man. He felt along his belt, ensuring his gun was within reach. Behind him, he heard Walker pull his rifle free.

Frustrated, Wallace hopped down, ignoring the warning from his travel companions. Stepping over a log, he looked straight into the mans face for the first time.

The man's jaw was dislocated, hanging on one side like a broken saloon door. Milky white eyes somehow focused on Wallace as the man lunged forward, grabbing the man with both fists. The two went down in a scuffle.

Dustin and Walker began shouting, but to no avail. When they heard Wallace cry out in pain, Dustin fired a shot into his attacker's backside.

No effect. He fired off three more rounds before Walker fired his rifle. The heavier slug knocked the man sideways, and his hat fell from his face. Most of his scalp had been torn away from his face as well.

“Shit, shit!” Wallace ran back to his horse, which reared away in fright. Grabbing the reins, he pulled his own gun free and turned around. His attacker was standing again, lurching forward. The three men fired on him several times, the air filling with gun smoke.

Walker let out a breath and aimed for the man's temple. The shot was true and the man dropped to the ground, no longer moving.

For just a second, nobody said a word. They had all put more than enough lead into the man to kill him. They all waited, guns cocked.

After a minute, realizing he was down for the count, Wallace leaned in to get a closer look. Satisfied, he spit on the corpse and turned a pale face towards the others.

“That man was crazy. Did you see that?” He holstered his gun and set himself down on a large rock, breathing heavily.

“You all right Wallace?” Dustin asked, not taking his eyes from the figure on the ground.

“Yeah. Bastard got in a few lucky scratches is all.” Wallace felt around his neck and brought up blood stained fingers. “Must have bit me too.”

Dustin looked at Walker, who still hadn’t taken his eyes off the corpse. Part of him thought of simply riding away, going back the way he came and never looking back. This wasn’t a mess he really felt like dealing with.

Walker, as if reading Dustin’s mind, spoke. “I think it’s best that we stick together.” He began digging through his packs and replaced his spent shells. “Not sure what that was, but I’m betting there’s more just like it if we’re not careful.”

In the background, Wallace was bitching about something, but Dustin couldn’t care. Right now, he felt like he and Walker were making that connection again. Safety in numbers.

“Think I need a doctor. Don’t want it to get infected.” Wallace stood up and staggered towards his horse. The mare stepped away from him, but Wallace grabbed the reins and pulled himself up.

“A doctor, and a drink.” Wallace smiled and wiped his bloody fingers off on his vest.

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That evening, by the fire, it was clear that Wallace needed something much stronger than a drink. The old cowboy was laying on his bedroll, gasping for air and his skin had taken on a sickly hue. Dustin and Walker took turns caring for him, all the while exchanging glances. Whatever Wallace had caught was going to kill him.

“So thirsty.” Wallace grabbed for Dustin’s waterskin, but Dustin pulled it away. The old timer had already consumed all of his own water, water meant to last for three days. Most of it just ran down his beard and onto the ground around him.

Coughing in protest, Wallace leaned back and moaned something about kindness, but Dustin didn’t care. Walker was busy watching the horses. They were becoming unsettled by the scene and tugging at their ties.

Wallace finally closed his eyes, blood now dribbling from his eyes and nose. Dustin stood back, his mask over his face. Walker had done the same. They had both seen fevers before, but this was something different.

“This is no illness.” Walker’s deep voice broke the silence around the fire. In the distance, strange sounds could be heard, animal calls that Dustin was unfamiliar with. The night sky was dark, and even the stars looked a little different.

“*Porta postulo propinquus!*” Wallace sat up violently and screamed. Dustin and Walker both flinched away.

“*Porta!*” Wallace held up his hands in pleading. “*Sic fervens...*”

“What do you need Wallace?” Dustin walked forward, ready to offer a dying man a drink. Wallace’s eyes rolled back in his head and his back arched one last time in a spasm.

Having no way to bury him, Dustin and Walker wrapped him up in a blanket and dragged his body up a hill. It was too dark to bury him, so they weighed down the blankets edges with rocks, to keep away predators.



The two men said nothing. Dying was never a pretty business, but watching old Wallace die had been something more visceral. Dustin kept hearing the strange words Wallace had shouted, struggling to make sense of them.

“It was Latin.” Walker again spoke like he was reading Dustin’s mind. Saying nothing, he rolled over for the comforts of sleep. It was a long time coming and it wouldn’t last.

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The horses woke him first. They were making noise like something was giving them the spooks. Dustin opened his eyes and rolled over, looking at Walker’s sleeping form. The other man had heard it too, and they both sat upright, feeling for their guns.

It was the sounds of rocks shifting. Thinking it might be coyotes sniffing around old Wallace, both men stood up and walked towards the source of the disturbance.

Away from the firelight, it was hard to see exactly what was going on. The blanket had shifted and some of the rocks had rolled away. Curious, the two men waited for their eyes to adjust to darkness. With surprise, they watched as old Wallace struggled free of his blanket and staggered into a standing position.

“I thought he was dead,” Dustin remarked, frozen in place.

“He was.” Walker and Dustin exchanged a glance. At the sound of their voices, Wallace turned to face them.

It was a flicker of firelight that caught his face. His eyes were sunken into his head and his mouth was full of the blackness of dried blood. Raising his hands forward and stretching out his arms, he staggered towards the two cowboys.

“I think he still is.” With that being said, Walker pulled his handgun out and opened fire. Dustin followed suit. Like before, the rounds weren’t enough to stop Wallace. He continued forward, closing the gap between them.

“Aim for the head.” Walker stepped back to reload and Dustin took aim in the darkness. He waited until Wallace was almost on top of him and aimed between the eyes that would forever put him off runny eggs.

It was a clean shot, tearing a piece of scalp from the back of his head. Wallace fell over and quit moving.

“Nice shot.” The two men stood over their dead companion, neither sure what they had just witnessed. Off in the distance, the strange calls could be heard again.

Neither of them slept. They did throw the blanket back over Wallace, but this time doubled the number of rocks and balanced a couple of empty tins on them, for extra noise. They kept watch through the rest of the night, saying very little, as they waited for dawn.

As the sun rose, Walker mentioned that he could smell sulphur and smoke in the air. They checked once on Wallace, just to be sure he wouldn’t come back from the dead again. Satisfied, they rode off towards the town of Stonewood, eager to rejoin the others.

As they rode up into the mountains, it soon became clear that the sulphur smell was from hot springs. They rode carefully around them, following what existed of the trail up there. They experienced a sense of relief when they broke through some narrow rocks and saw the city of Stonewood down in a small valley.

Stonewood had started as a few claims over ten years ago, but had quickly grown. Over a hundred people could be found in town on any given day, and dozens more working claims around the area. The mines in Stonewood were the main draw. A man

could make enough in a month to buy him a house, which is what several had done, contributing to the size of the city.

Dustin and Walker smiled at each other and rode down into the valley, pulling Wallace's horse close behind. Dustin owed it to Colin to inform him of the dead cattle, and depending on what was said, would likely ride off to somewhere new. He was done with this mess, too many complications. The death of Wallace would likely bring the law as well, something Dustin hoped to avoid for a few more years.

"Maybe we can con Colin into an overnight stay?" Walker's remark caught Dustin off guard. He turned to face the mysterious cowboy.

"I'm just saying. Looks like this town has a bar, and maybe some company." Walker smiled at Dustin. "First shots on me."

Dustin laughed and shook his head. "I'm gonna hold you to that."

"You can count on me." Walker spurred his horse forward and Dustin followed him down into the valley.

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They were just on the outskirts of Stonewood when they saw what was left of the supply cart. Sliding down from Macy, Dustin examined the cart itself. He spotted a few bullet holes and deep gouges in the wood. Walking toward the front, he saw a bloody handprint smeared down one side. The hand that made it was on the ground.

"This ain't good Walker." His gun in hand, he began checking the cart. He found some food and spare water skins. Digging deeper, he found an ammo case and a few spare guns. A hand touched his shoulder and he jumped. It was only Walker.

The two of them dug through the cart, taking what they could carry on the horses. It had gone unspoken, but they both knew they were leaving.

They would have too if they hadn't heard the gunfire and the screaming. Walker was on his horse and away before Dustin realized it was a woman's voice. Cursing, he soon followed, bringing up the rear.

Stonewood was just like all of the other back water mountain towns Dustin had seen, if not much bigger. Bodies littered the street, animal and human. Some more gunfire came from inside a building and Walker backed out, a woman tucked into an arm. He pushed her out towards the road where she saw Dustin and waved him over.

"They're coming out!" She held a tiny little pistol in one hand and carried a satchel over an arm. She was obviously a prostitute, and she wasn't much for pretty, but carried herself well. Dustin tossed her a spare pistol, knowing the one she used was mainly for overzealous customers.

Seven men came limping out of the building, a doctor's office. Dustin recognized one as a man named Randy, a fellow dust eater. Randy only had one arm and half his face was gone.

The working girl blew a hole in Randy's face and he fell to the ground. Walker backed up, leaving a steady trail of dead men before him.

Dustin got that feeling in his gut, the same one that had saved him in so many gun fights. He spun around and saw that several of the dead on the street had stood up and were almost on him. He drew a second pistol and opened fire.

He had six bullets a gun, and dropped eleven targets. The last jerked sideways at the last moment, but Walker stepped around Dustin and took him down before he got any closer.

“C’mon!” The woman waved them on and began running towards a tall building towards the opposite side of town. Seeing the large cross out front, Dustin surmised it was a church. When they got closer, a man in a priest’s collar held open the door with one hand and a shotgun with the other. He leveled the gun at Walker, but the woman said something they couldn’t hear.

“Bring the horses inside, hurry!”

Feeling it was sacrilegious, Dustin listened anyway. He rode Macy up the two steps and through the church door. Inside, the pews had all been moved to the outer walls leaving plenty of room in the middle. Pieces of wood were nailed over the few outer windows and the church was lit only by the sunlight that trickled in through the broken glass and a few windows.

The woman ran over to a small group of people, all of them huddled together with different injuries. Off to the side, a small boy huddled, his hands around his legs. The priest had them move the horses off towards the side. Walker and Dustin tied the horses off to a support beam.

“Walker? Anderson?” The familiar voice was surprising. They turned to see Colin limp his way forward. “I never thought I would see you two again. Where’s Wallace?”

Neither of them answered, though Dustin took off his hat in respect. Colin just snorted.

“It’s not a surprise. We are knee deep in a river of shit here.”

“You got any whiskey?” Walker’s question was directed at the priest. He took Walker into a room in the back. Colin shook his head with a grin.

“Nothing ever fazes that one.” He put his hands on Dustin’s shoulders. “The herd?”

“The ones we found was killed.”

“Not a surprise. You’ve got horses though. There’s still a chance.” He turned to look at the group behind him. “We all tried to flee on foot last night. There was over twenty of us. This is what’s left.

“Those dead men ain’t too fast Colin.”

Colin turned to look at Dustin, his face suddenly pale. “The dead men aren’t as bad as what comes out at night. The only reason we still here is that the things that come out at night, they can’t come too close to the church. The dead ones can though.” He nodded towards the boarded windows. “With the horses, some of us may be able to ride for help.”

“Some of us could.” They turned to look at a man covered in soot from head to toe.

“This is Huck. He’s one of the miners here who thinks he knows what’s going on.” Huck was wearing a white cotton shirt, torn in several places revealing his long red undergarments. He smelled like musk and had a wild beard and a squirrely look to his eyes.

“If you all would just listen, I could tell you why this happened.”

“I want to hear this.” Walker approached and handed Dustin a shot glass. He poured Dustin some whiskey from a dusty old bottle and gave him a mock salute before drinking it. “Next rounds on you.”

Dustin grinned and sunk one back. A few days ago, he would have called this whiskey delicious. Today, it transcended delicious and went straight to sinful.

“Tell me, Huck.” Walker offered an empty glass, but Huck grabbed the bottle and drank deeply from it. Walker’s face fell, but he didn’t say anything.

“We was deep in the mine, deeper than we ever been, picking at the rock. Eddie, my cousin, started hollering about something. We all ran over, and I’ll be damned if Eddie didn’t find hisself a door right there in a crack in the mountain.”

“A door?” Dustin looked at Walker and Colin.

“Yeah, a big iron door. Had funny words written all over it.”

“What did it say?” asked Walker.

“Can’t read.” Huck shrugged. “Anyway, me and the boys start working to free it up. I ran to get one of the lanterns and Eddie opened that door right up with the help of three other men.” Huck started to tremble. “The lantern went out, and I heard the voices first. They was whispering things to me, they felt like spiders on my skin. There was a glow from the door and I could see a flight of stairs. I don’t know why, but I started runnin. That’s when I heard them start screaming.” Big tears were rolling down the miners face now. The whiskey was kicking in.

“When was this?” Colin grabbed Huck’s shoulders.

“Two night ago.” The priest answered. “Huck came bursting in through the door screaming that they had found a gate straight into Hell itself. First time I seen him in church. Woke me up with screaming and yelling and demanded I take his confession. I thought he was just drunk, but I could see something in his eyes, something that didn’t sit right. Right about then, that storm hit.”

Everybody looked at each other. They remembered the storm. Dustin thought of great birds made of thunder and lightning flying in the sky.

“Everybody took cover, it was a bad storm. In the morning, we discovered that some of the houses were damaged, but the people in them had disappeared. We were organizing a search party when some of the miners showed up.”

Walker and Dustin exchanged meaningful looks. They could only imagine.

“We lost ten people right away. We shot the lot of them, but they kept getting back up. Then, when they were all dead, our dead got back up and we lost a few more.” The priest made the sign of the cross over his head.

“That’s when we came into town. After the initial shooting.” Colin pointed at the group of people. “We heard gunfire, so couple of us came into town and left the rest with the wagon. Wish we hadn’t, cause that’s how we lost the horses, along with a few good men.”

“We all decided to leave town.” The woman who Walker saved pushed her way into their impromptu huddle. “But there was things waiting in the darkness to grab us. We was lucky to make it back to the church, cause those things won’t touch it.”

“Interesting.” Walker was stroking his chin with one hand.

“Some of us got hurt on the way back, I was get’n supplies from Doc’s place, that’s when you two came. Those dead men are everywhere.”

Dustin was now looking over at the huddled group. There were a couple of women, a few men, and one child. Nobody else from working the herd was there. “Was anybody bit?”

“Yes, but we learned already what that means. They out back, face down.” She looked at the priest. “Padre, do you have any spare food?”

“Yes, back in my office Chloe. I have a few tins set aside.” Chloe walked away, leaving the men to themselves.

“So what’s the plan?” Dustin looked at everybody. “We only have three horses. When do we leave?”

“In the morning. You, Walker and I head out to the nearest town and get us a posse.”

“How come you get to go?” Huck protested.

“They’re our horses.” Colin turned to face Huck. “Riding is our life. We can get there and back in half the time you could.”

“Hey.” Walker was looking out the window. “Come look.”

Dustin heard the cocking of guns as everybody in the room approached the windows. Looking outside, he saw that the dead men had formed a big circle around the church. They were all just staring at the building and swaying from side to side.

“What are they doin’?” Huck was peering back and forth, his eyes beady and nervous. “Nothin’ stopped them before.”

Dustin watched as more of them began to walk out of the buildings around town. The circle soon became two deep, and then three. It made Dustin think about the time a posse had gathered around a hotel they thought he was staying in. Luckily, he was smart and had paid for the room, sneaking out in the middle of the night to sleep in a barn.

“They’re gathering.” Walker pointed at a few more stragglers that were making their way forward.

“They’re waiting too.” Dustin knocked some dirt off his hat. “I’ve seen this before. They’ll all get here and wait for a signal or something. Then they’ll all close in at once.”

The circle outside tightened a little and the numbers grew larger.

“I know these people,” the priest spoke, tears in his eyes.

“Ain’t no helping it, Padre. Those ain’t your flock anymore.” Chloe held up the pistol Dustin had given her.

“The bell tower. Is there a door?” Walker, again in sync with Dustin, was already moving with his rifle in hand. The others just watched and listened as he climbed the stairs. A few moments went by and the crack of a rifle was followed by the crumpling of a body.

“He’s knocking down their numbers,” Dustin explained. “Whatever they’re waiting for, they won’t be able to do if we strike first.” Grabbing his own rifle, he was soon up in the bell tower with Colin and one of the men from downstairs. Downstairs, occasional shots were taken, but were largely ineffective.

An hour passed as the men up top took careful aim. There were plenty of dead men, but not enough bullets to waste. A giant circle of bodies had formed around the church, dead men and women everywhere.

Colin grabbed Dustin’s shoulder and indicated he was going in. Pointing at the sky, Dustin remembered that in the mountains, sunset was a lot sooner than normal. Proceeding inside, food was divvied up and an impromptu meal was served. After they ate dinner, people again took their posts at the windows. To everybody’s surprise, the remaining dead men had left.

The sun continued on its path and the night fell into darkness.

“I don’t get it,” Colin scratched at his head. “They attacked us before, right after we ran in here. When we killed them, the others didn’t come. Nothing makes sense anymore.”

Dustin agreed, staring at Walker. Henry Walker had knelt down in a corner and was softly singing some type of prayer to himself. The man had pulled out what looked like shoe polish and was conducting a private ceremony on his face.

Colin chuckled, seeing Dustin stare. "At least some things haven't changed."

They all jumped when the screeching noises in the hills began. It was dark in town, but already shadows had begun to move around. In the sky, Dustin heard the beating of leathery wings, like giant bats.

Walker stood, his face painted like a man going to war. He had revealed a few more secrets during the afternoon, including a hatchet covered in feathers and a long obsidian blade he hooked through a boot. Regarding Dustin with a look of seriousness, he pointed out the window.

"The thunder birds weren't fighting each other. They were fighting whatever is out there. A war between gods has started and we are just soldiers on the side of good."

Dustin looked around the room. He thought to himself that the gods could have picked better.

Walker held something out in one hand and Dustin accepted. Looking in his palm, he was puzzled.

"The first thing my grandfather taught me. Always carry silver. It's symbolic. Use them only if you have to." Walker had handed Dustin six perfectly molded silver bullets. Reaching for one of his pistols, he began to load it, but Walker stopped him.

"Symbolism counts Dustin. Use your real gun for those."

He couldn't help but look in awe at Walker. He walked over to Macy and lifted up his war bag. Underneath it, a secret pouch had been tooled into his saddle. He pulled out the revolver from his gunfights, an ivory handled Colt .45 Peacemaker. It had been his father's for all of a month before someone shot him over a hand of poker. Loading it, he felt like he was seeing an old friend in a new light.

He tucked the .45 away from sight, making sure that he could grab it easily.

Looking around the room, he saw that everybody had assumed posts. Colin and the Padre were by the front door and Walker was standing by himself, across from Chloe. He hadn't learned the names of the others, it didn't much matter to him. Looking again, he realized Huck was gone.

"Hey, where's Huck?" Looking again, he realized someone else was missing. "And that kid. Where did they go?"

Chloe turned towards Dustin, a queer look on her face.

"There ain't any kids in Stonewood."

So many questions started to go through Dustin's head when Huck's body fell from the bell tower. It was covered in a sticky residue, much like a spider's web. Everybody pointed their guns at the stairs going up.

"*Minimus araneus compluvium ascendit...*" The voice was high pitched and came from up the stairs. Everybody looked at each other. A child's giggle followed and Huck stood up.

"*Deorsum pluvial araneum eluit.*" Huck's innards were missing. A couple people fired, but Dustin held back. He could see the silvery threads going up into the tower. Whatever was up there was using Huck like a puppet.

Huck hopped up and down and did a queer little dance. When his head popped up, everybody winced. Huck had no eyes.

*“Tum sol lucet, et pluviam siccat, ut.”* Huck jerked back and forth as if he was being shaken.

“It’s singing the itsby bitsy spider.” The padre looked at Dustin in horror, understanding every word. “It’s singing in Latin.”

*“Minimus araneus...”* There was a thud and Huck fell down. A brief struggle was heard, and an inhuman scream came from the bell tower.

Walker, unseen by the others, had figured they were being played for fools. So while whatever it was sung its stupid song, he had simply walked up the stairs in absolute silence. Reaching the top, he saw what may have once looked like a child holding several arms out over the opening, a silvery thread in each. Not wasting time, Walker pulled his tomahawk from his belt and lunged forward, burying the blade in the things skull.

It fell forward and down the hole, landing with a crack on the ground. Guns were fired in horror as the thing flipped itself over and stood up. The child had unfolded itself so that it now had eight appendages and a vicious mouth where its stomach had been. It let out a howl of fury at the room. Everybody covered their ears.

Walker, ever the opportunist, cut the rope on the bell with his knife.

600 pounds of brass came down, crushing the thing instantly. Green gore squirted out, painting the floors and front door. Smoke came out of both as the wood was quickly eaten away.

Colin ran over to calm the horses, who were struggling now to break free. Dustin ran over to grab Macy, and Walker’s horse soon settled. Wallace’s horse, a grey mare named Nancy, pulled hard enough to break the rope that secured her. Running circles in the room, she knocked over Chloe and reared up, kicking one of the townspeople. The man went down, completely limp. The whites of Nancy’s eyes were showing as she dashed forward through what was left of the front door, splintering wood everywhere.

Dustin watched Nancy sprinting down the main road. She made it to the saloon before a creature with wings swooped down and grabbed her with a bundle of writhing tentacles. They could all hear the horse scream somewhere high above as the life was squeezed from it.

“Protect us, Oh Lord.” The padre began praying as he stared up into the inky black sky. The stars were almost completely blotted out by swirling shapes. He pulled out a bible and began to pray by the open door.

Dustin heard those leathery wings again and watched as Nancy reappeared, thrown through the opening in the church. The padre was crushed and killed immediately and Nancy’s body twisted on the bell, looking like a giant piece of horse jerky.

“Shit!” Looking outside, he saw other objects in the road get picked up by more of the flying monsters. Walker reappeared in the stairwell, his eyes wide in fear.

“It’s a target!”

At first Dustin didn’t know what he meant, but his brain shortly worked it out. The dark things couldn’t come in or near the church, like the dead men could. When they had killed so many of them off, they had created a circle that would easily be spotted from the air.

Something slammed into one of the walls and a window was broken apart as a corpse was hurtled through. Another shadow passed over the entry way, followed by a steady barrage of corpses from the street.

“We have to get underneath! Does this church have a basement?” Walker was helping Chloe to her feet. She stumbled like she was drunk and she nodded.

“There’s a cellar, but the only entrance is out back.” Blood trickled from her nose and she wiped it away on a sleeve. “It’s locked too.”

One of the women from town, someone named Annie, began digging through the padre’s pockets. She pulled up a ring of keys and held it up high, stepping over Huck’s body.

Unseen by everybody else, Huck’s body had started to squirm and distort, only slightly. When Annie stepped over it, Huck’s body exploded. Tiny little red spiders numbering in the thousands swiftly swarmed up her legs and over her body. Screaming, she fell back as they consumed her almost instantly, leaving behind bloody clothes and bone meal. They all scrambled to get out into the open night.

“Fuck!” Colin ran over and picked up the keys. “We need to move now!”

Something crashed through the roof, caving in the back of the church. It was the saloons piano.

They all ran for the door. Dustin stopped to look at the man Nancy had crushed, knowing right away he was down good. He stopped to put a bullet through his head just in case.

Walker ran over to the horses and cut them free. Macy and Walker’s horse bolted out into the night, their odds just as good as they were in here. Something crashed into the church again and they followed.

Outside the building, they saw that the flying things weren’t the only immediate problem. The last two townsfolk, a barkeep named Freddy and another prostitute, ran ahead of Chloe and Colin. Freddy had the keys, but was held up by some of the dead men. As he fought to keep them back, the prostitute ran a wide circle around them in an attempt to get by.

Snake like coils erupted from the earth and wrapped around her body, squeezing hard. Her mouth opened to scream and was filled with the writhing tentacles. With one solid yank, all that remained of the woman was a small gurgling hole in the ground.

Freddy fought the dead men off, opening fire with the padre’s shotgun. Walker and Dustin had made it halfway along the back of the church when Freddy, Colin, and Chloe had turned the far corner. Both Dustin and Walker were raining bullets into the night sky, and the strange creatures sometimes crashed in the darkness.

Dustin heard the sound of creaking wood. He looked down the main road and saw strange shapes falling from the sky. Squinting, he could just make out the handle of a skillet.

“Look out!” He crouched down as the supply wagon went crashing through the roof of the church, tearing the building down completely. Walker, heeding the warning, found himself covered by a panel of wood. Breaking free, he helped Dustin to his feet as they skirted the foundation.

The double cellar doors were unlocked, but there was no sign of anybody else. One of Colin’s boots stood patiently by the sealed door.

They saw Freddy stand up, well outside the perimeter of the church. He swung a hand up to call for them when a twenty foot tall shadow picked him up in one hand and swallowed him whole.



They opened up the cellar door when Walker heard Chloe moaning. Turning, he saw that she had been buried by a portion of the church itself. Grabbing her by the arm, he dragged her inside and Dustin shut the doors behind them.

The things outside hollered in both victory and frustration. Stumbling around in the darkness, Walker found a candle and lit it. The cellar was full of food and water, and what looked like several hymnals and plenty of chopped wood. In the corner was a five foot tall cross, a spare in case somebody desecrated the one outside the building.

“Can they get in here?” Dustin watched the door, waiting for a giant mouth to pull it open and suck them away.

“No.” Walker was busy examining Chloe. Her shoulder was busted up for certain, and both of her legs were sprained.

“That spider thing did.” Dustin gestured around the room with his pistol. “How do you explain that?”

“We let him in,” Chloe responded. “When everybody was fleeing to the church, the padre told everybody to come right in. I bet nobody even noticed he was there.”

Walker nodded as if it made sense. Dustin threw him a frustrated look, but Walker answered with a single word.

“Symbolism.”

Dustin sat watching the door, thinking about the word for a moment. To most people, God may not even be real, but a church was still a symbol to be respected. Church was a safe place for a man to go and expose his sins, and still be forgiven.

“They can’t come near the church because it’s a safe place.” Dustin turned to look at Walker. “And the dead men, they’re still men, which is why they still could.”

“You understand.” Walker knelt down by Chloe, who gave him a grateful look.

“You saved my life.” Reaching into her bodice, she pulled free a flask she had hidden away. Taking a swig, she handed it over. “The rest is yours.”

“You honor me.” Walker took a deep drink of whatever it was and offered some to Dustin, who accepted. Dustin couldn’t taste it, but it burned down his throat, that’s all he cared about. Handing it back to Walker, Dustin stared at the door.

“What now? Morning comes, and then what? Stay here? Run for help? The horses are gone.”

“Well,” Walker stretched out, removing his hat. “I think we go into that mine and close the gate that Huck opened. And after we do that, we cave in the mine. And maybe even burn this place to the ground.”

“You think that’ll work?” Chloe asked, leaning into a sitting position.

“Symbolism,” Dustin answered. “Those things out there can tear through any old gate, rip a man to pieces. They can’t come out during the day, and I’m willing to bet they all go down in that hole of theirs. We close the door..”

“And that’s all she wrote,” Walker finished, taking another swig.

“What about the dead men?”

Walker waved a hand in the air. “It’s the evil that hides inside them. I bet they’re connected like everything else. They come out during the day only cause they used to be men like us.”

“What if we fail?” Both men looked at Chloe, and Dustin laughed.

“I don’t think it could be any worse than what’s waiting for us now.”

“Indeed.” Walker began moving some stores around and eventually held up some cans of meat. “First thing tomorrow, we find the mine.”

“I can show you where it is.” Chloe offered.

“Good.” He tossed a can to Dustin. “For now, let’s eat up. Won’t be much time in the morning.”

Dustin shook his head. Eating was really the last thing on his mind, but he managed to help himself to the church’s stores as well.

It didn’t hurt that everything tasted so good.

\* \* \*

They took turns watching the cellar doors for that sliver of daylight. They knew in advance it was coming when the shrill cries of the dark things outside began to fade away and vanish. Chloe spent the night telling them about the things she saw on the first escape attempt, about beasts disguised as hills, and trees that wrapped people up in their branches. Apparently one of her friends had simply disappeared when a mouth in the earth had opened up and swallowed her whole.

Nobody slept much, and it was going to have to be enough. Walker and Dustin took stock of all of their ammo. Between the two of them, they still had plenty. Chloe swore she was up to walking, and when they opened up those double doors, she proved it.

Stepping out into the cold rays of dawn, they saw that the leveling of the church hadn’t ceased after they crawled beneath it. It was through luck alone that nothing had blocked their only exit.

Watching for dead men, the trio made their way up the main street in town. No activity came out to greet them, which suited them all just fine. Chloe showed them the trail that went up into the mountains and they hiked up as quickly as they could. After an hour, they spotted the tracks that the mine carts were pulled along and began following them up the mountain.

It was still long before noon when they found themselves at the opening of the mine. Not a single soul, good or bad, was there to greet them.

“This makes me more than a little nervous.” Dustin spit on the ground and smacked some of the dirt off his duster. He adjusted his hat and made sure all of his guns were loaded and ready. Walker and Chloe did the same, though Chloe only had two guns and a busted arm. Deciding early on that she should carry the lantern, they found one and lit it. They made one extra stop on the way into the mine. Standing next to the wooden crates marked TNT, they all grabbed a handful, knowing they were all in. As they entered the mine, they all saw a chalkboard with a list of names.

Chloe paused for a moment and pointed.

“It says Huck and his cousin were working the south shaft.” She pointed into the darkness. “The tunnels should be marked. If we can find the south shaft, we can get this done and over with.”

Walking forward, they came to a juncture that had been marked in grease pencil. It named three shafts one way and two the other. They turned left towards the south shaft. All three of them felt the sunlight disappear behind them.

It wasn’t long before strange moans and guttural noises began to fill the mine shaft. Coming to another juncture, already deep within the earth, they saw them. The dead men were all packed into the caves, waiting. Whatever entity controlled them had known.

Walker smiled in the soft light of the lantern and looked at Dustin. He had washed the paint from his face and now had a crow's feather tucked up underneath the band of his hat.

"Ready partner?"

Dustin grinned and looked back once at Chloe.

"Keep the light on for a couple of cowboys, would you?"

Chloe nodded, soot already smudged over her face.

This deep in the cave, their guns sounded like cannons. Dustin and Walker made their way forward, fire, step, fire. If a gun ran empty, they handed it back to Chloe who reloaded it for them. If a pistol jammed, it was discarded.

Muzzle flashes lit up angry faces before disintegrating them. Every shot was aimed for the head, and almost every bullet rang true. Dustin and Walker were both screaming, yelling in fear, anger, and exhilaration. Behind them, Chloe took the occasional shot when she could, though it wasn't often.

Sometimes they had to squeeze through gaps, or step around body piles. Somewhere along the way, Dustin and Walker became one person. Dustin would aim over the shoulder of an approaching dead man, knowing that Walker had it covered. At one point, an unseen dead man grabbed Walker's arm and Dustin, without looking, fired his pistol straight into the creature's face.

They used the shotgun to clear narrow caverns and made one final turn into a tight, freshly cut corridor. It had been cold up until this point, but strangely the temperature was now climbing. Strange orange moss was growing on the walls now, moss that burned to the touch like fire.

Dustin knew they were there before anyone else did. They walked into a room where the temperature was over a hundred degrees. Staring forward into the rock, he could see a rectangular portal ahead of them that light would not penetrate. The darkness across it moved like a liquid and simple iron doors were folded back and away on the sides.

Walker and Dustin pushed their way to the sides and let Chloe through. Stepping back into the corridor, another surge of dead men poured forward, struggling to bring them down.

Even more gunplay ensued and the bodies fell to the left and right. The sound of clicking hammers filled the narrow chamber and the men looked at each other. They dropped the guns they were holding. Walker pulled out his rifle and gave Dustin a grim look.

"I got ten rounds."

Dustin held up two pistols.

"Twelve and a few." He pointed meaningfully at the bulge under his jacket.

Chloe took the opportunity to grab one of the doors with her good hand and pull. It wasn't budging. Frustrated, she freed her other arm from its sling and set the lantern down. Grabbing on and digging in with her heels, she leaned away from the door, pulling as hard as she could.

Her feet lost traction and she started to slip. Leaning forward to steady herself, her left hand slipped just inside the darkness. Something pierced her flesh.

She was pulled forward without a sound.

The hall was empty. Dustin and Walker exchanged looks. There were only so many dead men to begin with. They turned to look and saw that Chloe had vanished from sight.

In the darkness, they both heard her scream in agony. Dustin reached out to stop Walker from going, but was surprised to see that he hadn't moved.

"I may be chivalrous, but I'm not stupid. Let's close those doors."

They approached cautiously. Dustin could tell the darkness was bubbling outwards just slightly, as if it wanted to invade the cavern. Each man took a position on a different door and shoved as hard as they could. They creaked only slightly, even after they both tried to shut just one.

"Maybe the dynamite," Dustin offered.

"No," Walker shook his head. "The gate would still be open, even under this rock."

"Damn." They both heard movement outside in the tunnel. Walker shifted the lantern and both men saw creatures made of teeth and leather scurry away from the darkness down the way they had come. Dustin fired a couple of shots into the dark and the creatures melted back into the stone.

"What now?" Dustin looked at Walker and Walker started to say something. Dustin felt something wrap around his leg and he was pulled back into the mine, away from the door and the light.

He felt everything he had ever been afraid of as he was dragged into the dark. He felt snakes slither across his skin, he felt the hair of spider's legs all over his hands and face. He heard Walker scream his name and Dustin fired wildly, listening to the ricochets around him. In the flashes of light, he could see hideous creatures flinch away, and felt their hungry hands and mouths reaching for him.

Both of his guns clicked empty. He was slowly being overwhelmed when he heard them, the voices of the damned, calling his name, whispering promises of torment that sent chills down his spine. He saw a light in the distance coming for him.

The light was Walker and he was pissed. The lantern was in one hand and his rifle was in the other. The creatures shrieked away from him, covering what may have been their eyes. Walker fired a slug into something that crawled his way. The bullet knocked it away, but did very little to harm it. Walker set the lantern down and reloaded, faster than Dustin could follow. Seven more shots knocked the things away from Dustin that the light would not and Walker pulled him back into the narrow room by his boot.

"Walker, I..." Two more shots rang out, and Walker reloaded between each. He helped Dustin up and gave him a cold look.

"That door needs closing Dustin."

Something stepped forward towards them from the hall. It was hunched over and had a queer domed head, like it was made of mud. Walker fired off one shot, which blew a greasy hole through the thing. The beast didn't budge. Instead, it unfolded itself outwards, revealing a squat body covered in screaming faces.

"Well now." Walker through down his rifle and pulled out the obsidian dagger he carried. "I got him. You get that damn door." Walker ran forward screaming and his hat fell from his head. He tackled the beast back into the darkness and disappeared.

Dustin turned towards the door and watched as Chloe emerged from it. At least, it used to be Chloe. It looked like Chloe, and he would have been fooled if not for the pools of ink where her eyes should have been. She made a strange squishing sound as she swayed.

"*In exordium,*" it said, its voice echoing in Dustin's mind. "*Illic eram tantum obscurum.*"

“What’s Latin for fuck you?” Dustin pulled out the Peacemaker, the gun that had ended so many lives, including his own. He fired once at Chloe’s head. A hole appeared and the darkness ran out like oil, leaving Chloe standing there, her head deflating. He took two more shots, lightning quick, aiming for her shins. It ran out on the ground and melted back into the inky blackness of forever.

Chloe deflated the rest of the way, leaving behind just her skin and the clothes she wore. He had three shots left and he fired the first into the darkness. It shrank away and he could hear screeching from inside. Bright streaks of light were left behind in the bullets trail. He fired one more time and the doors both shook in an attempt to close themselves.

Its gotta mean something, Dustin thought to himself. He held the gun up and opened his heart, letting it guide his next shot.

The last shot rang out and he felt the mountain tremble. A sound like a cork popping came from the other side and a powerful wind sucked him forward. Grabbing on to a hunk of rock, Dustin held on for dear life, tucking the Peacemaker away. He saw Walker’s hat blow past and grabbed on to it.

The lantern blew itself out and in the darkness, Dustin heard the slamming together of rock and iron.

\* \* \*

Dustin awoke. He was being dragged through the darkness by his feet. He started to struggle, but only got out a limp little kick.

“Good, you’re up.”

“Walker?” He couldn’t believe it. “Is it really you?”

A low baritone chuckle answered him. “It is, my friend.” They stopped moving. “Can you walk?”

“Maybe.” Walker set Dustin’s legs down and Dustin started to sit forward, being cautious because he couldn’t see a thing. “The more important question is, can you see?”

“Not at all. I have a really good memory though.” Dustin heard Walker shift. “Watch your hands. I’ve been dropping dynamite every thirty steps.”

Dustin stretched a blind hand forward and felt a hand grab his own. He clutched on tightly, feeling both strength and warmth from it.

“C’mon. I’ll lead us out. Watch your head.” Walker pulled Dustin forward and he followed. It was a long slow walk and every now and then they stopped to drop a stick of dynamite. Dustin chuckled to himself, wondering if it would even work, but he didn’t have any better ideas.

The burning moss was gone, but the danger of sharp corners and low hangs wasn’t. More than once the brim of his hat hit something before he did, but that wasn’t always the case.

Time had no meaning as Walker led him from the mountain. A couple times, he swore he saw the entrance, but Walker informed him it was just cave blindness playing tricks.

Finally, a dim glow could be seen. Approaching it, Walker and Dustin stepped out of the mine, still holding hands and stared at the beautiful night sky. Not a cloud was in the sky, and the moon was absent, giving Dustin a beautiful glimpse of the universe.

Walker found a lamp and lit it. Dustin could see his friend was covered in dried blood. Looking around the entrance to the mine, Walker grabbed a spare lamp and began pulling some coal out of a mine cart sitting nearby.

Dustin, seeing his intent, helped. Ten minutes of tired labor and they had emptied out a spot for the dynamite they hadn't been able to carry. They made sure it would roll real good, and then Walker lit a stick, throwing it in the cart. He pushed it real hard and they watched as it slid into the mineshaft.

They ran down the trail as fast as they could and it was only a few moments later when they heard the first explosion. They couldn't be sure if they heard others or not, but knew that they had caved in at least a good portion of the inside. Checking the entrance, they saw it was completely closed off by rubble.

"Good enough?" Dustin looked at Walker.

"It's gonna have to be," he answered.

They slept there that night, abandoning caution. Opening his eyes finally, Dustin stared as the sun rose overhead.

"What a morning." Dustin turned his head to see Walker drinking from Chloe's flask. "I would have shared, but there was only enough for me."

Dustin grinned and sat up. Walker handed him his flask and Dustin looked inside.

"There's still some left."

"It's a thank you. This hat was my fathers."

Dustin took a swallow and handed it back. "How did you survive in the tunnels?"

Walker drew his blade and handed it handle first to Dustin. Dustin looked at the intricate bead work around the handle.

"It's a ceremonial dagger."

"Symbolism." Dustin said the word softly, handing it back.

They limped into town together, making it at high noon. They returned to the church cellar, gathering food and water for the long trip ahead. Searching through what was left of the supply cart, they both grabbed any ammunition they could find. As they walked away from the destroyed town of Stonewood, Dustin looked back one last time.

"So where are we going?" Walker looked at Dustin as he slung the pack over his shoulder.

"Not sure yet. Don't think Maxwell will be happy about his cattle. And I know that nobody will believe what really happened here." Dustin looked down at his boots. They were caked in the dirt and blood of the last four days. He looked back at Walker, not as a fellow dust eater, but as a friend.

"Mind if I tag along?" Walker held up his pistol. "It could be dangerous."

"You're welcome to come, I guess." Dustin grinned and looked down at his feet.

"Wherever we're going, it's gonna be a hell of a long walk."

Walker put his fingers to his lips. His whistle echoed all across the valley. Dustin stared at the man in awe as he blew it again.

In the distance, a pair of horses answered.

###

#### **About the Author:**

J.R. Leckman currently resides somewhere in Colorado with his wife and a house full of pets. He is currently pursuing a degree in physics, but still finds that writing is his first love. He hoped you enjoyed or hated this story enough to leave a highly opinionated review and looks forward to inviting you into another of his worlds very soon.

#### **About the story**

I started writing this story over 5 years ago in a little paper notebook at my job. The first five pages of this story were among the first few pages I had ever really written. They remain largely untouched so I could see how I have evolved as a writer. For better or worse, it's always good to see where you've come from. In all honesty, the story was originally supposed to be a mash up of a cowboy story and a zombie movie. I like this iteration much better.

#### **About the cover**

The picture used for the cover was taken on vacation by my wife in Fairplay, Colorado at the South Park City museum, which is a restored mining town from the 1880's. You get to walk around inside the buildings and see and touch some amazing stuff. If you ever pass through the town, you should stop by, it's worth it.

#### **My other works**

**Bucketheads:** <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/32578>

**Anasazi:** <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/33010>