



DOOMTOWN: FIRST STORY ARCH



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FORWARD

The year is 1878, but the history is not our own. The Civil War grinds on, neither side able to establish a clear advantage. A huge earthquake dropped California into the sea, forming an amazing labyrinth of sea-canyons known as the Great Maze. The Sioux Nations have reclaimed the Dakotas. The Coyote Confederation dances the Ghost Dance on the High Plains. Monsters stalk the deserts and prowl the dark streets of the boomtowns. And the dead walk among us.

This is the world of Deadlands. In 1863, a vengeful Indian shaman named Raven released the manitous - demons which had been imprisoned in the Hunting Grounds for centuries. With the manitous' return came a flood of supernatural energy and the awakening of the Reckoners. These mysterious beings use fear to create Deadlands on earth - areas where humanity's terror is so great it actually warps the land itself into twisted reflections of itself.

The manitous and other monsters that roam the Weird West create fear for the Reckoning, though to what sinister end they work has yet to be revealed.

But where there are monsters, there are also heroes. These brave souls are hex-slinging hucksters, Bible-thumping preachers, deadly gunfighters, fearless Indian braves, wizened shamans, and mad scientists armed with weird steampunk gadgets.

Gomorra, the town some call Doomtown, is a place in dire need of such heroes. A huge vein of ghost rock - an amazing superfuel that was discovered in the Great Maze - was struck in Gomorra, turning it into a boomtown overnight.

The miners search the twisting caverns of chip away at the faces of the Maze's towering mesas in search of the ghost rock, a substance more precious than gold. After them come bartenders and soiled doves, outlaws and law dogs, politicians and other hard-bitten folk, all desperate to fleece the miners of the rock they spend their days scratching out of the unforgiving canyon walls.

Gomorra's a hard place for hard people, and most that come to town these days seem to leave it in a pine box.

That's why they call it Doomtown.

INTRODUCTION

The Big Setup

By Rob Vaux

Evenin', stranger. Why don't ya pull up a stool, an' make yerself comfortable. My name's Charlie Landers; I sling whisky 'round these parts, and I got enough sense ta keep my eyes open and my mouth shut. Which means I kin tell ya just about anythin' you want to know about the town of Gomorra here.

I bet yer figurin' to waltz in here and take over, ain't ya? Ya got that look in yer eye that says you wanna be king o' the hill. Not that I blame ya. There's enough money flowing through this place ta choke a Rockefeller, and whoever's in charge is gonna get a hefty chunk of it. That's reason enough ta make a play fer controllin' it. But before ye start electin' yerself mayor - before ya bite off morea this town than ya kin chew - there's a few things about it ya oughta know. Gomorra ain't the safest place in Creation, an' if ya don't have a good idea what yer gettin' into, it'll kill you quicker'n frostbite in January.

Yes sir, Gomorra, California. The biggest, baddest snake pit in the Great Maze. Lyin' on top of more ghostrock than anyone's ever seen, and full of every gunslinger, bushwhacker and con artist lookin' ta cash in on it. Didn't start out like that, though.

In the beginning, it was just another pile o' scrub brush on the edge of the desert, home to snakes and coyotes and not a whole lot else. Back then, there was just one guy who wanted ta be out here, and everyone thought he was crazy as a sewer rat. Called himself Humphrey Walters, and he claimed that a vision had brought him out there. He bought up a big plot o' worthless land, built himself a little shack - smack dab in the middle o' nowhere, ya understand - and settled down in it like a king in his castle. The few folk who passed by asked what he was doin' out there. "Waitin'" was all he ever said. And fer a few years, it stayed that way, just him and the snakes bakin' in the California sun.

Then the Big Quake hit and the scenery changed a bit. Instead of a desert, Walters found himself on the edge of the Great Maze - an' on top of the biggest ghost rock lode anyone had ever seen. It was right there, practically on top of his shack, and it didn't seem like there was any end to it. All of a sudden, his empty little patch of desert got real crowded, as anybody with two hands an' a shovel came lookin' fer their little bit of paradise. The boom town sprung up overnight like most boomtowns do, and since most o' the land belonged to Walters anyway, they asked him to name it. He called in Gomorra, like in the Bible, only spelled a little different on accounta it bein' the city God destroyed an' all. Some of the church goin' folk raised a fuss 'bout it, but the name stuck and our little burg was on the map.

Like everything though, Gomorra was destined fer some rough times. It started with Walters, who went out in the Maze one day and came back ravin' like a loon. They asked him what was wrong, an' he only said "the rocks... the rocks is screamin' at me..." Some folks thought he

was fakin' it; they said that the screamin' rocks musta been ghostrock and that he had found the mine ta end all mines out there. Other people said he was nuts all along an' that this was just the result of too many years in the sun. But whatever the reason, the town founder had gone, an' his fortune went with him. He's still around these days - pan handlin' and occasionally rantin' 'bout the end of the world. People keep him fed, and make sure he stays out of trouble, which some say is the charitble thing ta do. Me, I think they're hopin' he knows somethin', that his screamin' rocks 're the biggest damn ghostrock lode ever, an' that if they keep him around long enough, he's gonna tell them where ta find it. As long as it keeps the poor bastard fed, I suppose it's okay.

Gomorra's problems didn't end there, though. With Walters' property up fer sale, there was a bit of a panic ta snatch up everything he had. The lion's share went ta the Sweetrock Mining Co., a firm back east with a big interest in "developing Gomorra's resources." Meanin' they grabbed everything they could git their hands on and set about running the rest into the ground. When the dust settled, they had most of the bigger mines, a fair chunk of the town proper, and the docks. They git twenty cents of every dollar that comes through here, and ship out the ghost rock like it was goin' outta style. I hear tell they're even plannin' on settin' up their own rail line, which oughta be interestin'. In any case, they're closer than anyone else to ownin' Gomorra outright. They've certainly put a "civilized" veneer on things - hotels, saloons, a dispatch station - makin' this place look like a town instead a just a miner's camp. But don't go thinkin' they're on the side o' the angels. Sweetrock's front man, Howard Findley, don't take kindly to folks that git in his way, and people who complain about the company's strongarm tactics have a tendency to disappear permanent-like.

With that in mind, it ain't a big surprise that Sweetrock's got more'n a few enemies around here. Rival businesses, miners they run out - anybody they've flattened on their way ta makin' a buck. Most of 'em do their best ta stay afloat - figgerin' that any money they make's not goin' ta Sweetwater. But one gent's not happy with just shavin' their profits: he wants ta bleed 'em til they cry uncle. His name's Jackson - don't know if it's his first er last name, no one's ever said - and he's got a chip on his shoulder the size o' Texas. Jackson was a miner, an independent operator who hit upon a pretty solid hunk o' ghost rock out in the Maze. Most independents 're too small fer Sweetrock ta notice, but Jackson's claim was a corker by God. When Sweetrock heard about it, they didn't waste any time - seized the deed, claimed it was part o' one o' their veins an' moved their people right on in. They even sent a gang o' thugs to roust Jackson outta his hole. That may a' been their big mistake.

Y'see Jackson's got the fastest hands anyone's ever seen, and he don't take kindly to bein' pushed. He left his claim all right, but not before puttin three o' Sweetrock's boys into the ground and promisin' he'd be back fer more. He found himself a hideout out in the Maze somewhere and started hirin' on help fer his new project - stickin' it ta Sweetrock. Most o' the guys he got're scum - two-bit outlaws with nuthin' more than a quick buck on their minds. But Jackson - they called him Black Jack now - he's got enough brains to make up fer it. They started by hittin' a Sweetrock shipment outside o' town. Then they robbed an executive comin' out here ta see the operation. I heard they even sunk a couple o' cargo ships out in the Maze. Black Jack and his gang are makin' themselves right unpopular with the Sweetrock folks. The feud's been escalatin' ever since, and it's gonna get real ugly before it's all said n' done.

Which brings us to Gomorra's vaulted sheriff's department. Lord Almighty, I don't envy those boys - tryin' ta keep Black Jack and Sweetrock from flattenin' each other and the town while they're at it. Sheriff Coleman's a good enough fella, and he does his best to keep a lid on the town, but it ain't easy. The Sheriff used to be a miner ye see, operatin' outta one of Sweetrock's big shafts. Sweetrock figures that makes him one of them. But the Sheriff, he don't take kindly to bein' ordered around, and he's made it clear that he ain't at their beck and call. It gets a burr under their saddles, that's fer sure, but there's not a whole lot they kin do about it. He stays away from their operations - so long as they follow the letter o' the law -and keeps things as orderly as he can around town. That's enough to keep Sweetrock from makin' an issue out of it; that and the fact that Black Jack's convinced he's nuthin' more than a toadie fer the mining company, and treats him as such. With Jackson's gang raising thirty kinds o' hell, plus the normal ruckus a half-wild mining town can raise, it's enough to keep Coleman off Sweetrock's back.

And what're the sheriff and his deputies like to the rest of us? That depends on who ya ask. Most people like Sheriff Coleman, as long as he's not draggin' 'em off to jail. He's got an easygoin' way about him, and tends ta make folk feel a little safer when he's around. His chief deputy, though, that's another story. Nash Bilton, from San Francisco before it got sunk, or so he claims. That man's like forty miles o' bad road. He's the sort who puts law n' order above right n' wrong, and he ain't shy about bustin' heads ta make his point. As long as Coleman's around, Bilton stays more er less under control, but give him a free reign and he'll run roughshod all over this town. He doesn't watch himself, he's gonna end up on the end of a rope.

No town like Gomorra is ever complete without its wild cards. Here, we got a whole group of 'em - the Distinguished Collegium of Interspatial Physics. They started out small, arrivin' in little groups o' one er two. Scientists, perfessers, inventors hopin' ta bring us a better

tomorrow - they come to the ghostrock like flies ta honey. All of 'em got their latest gadgets in tow, gadgets which won't work without a steady supply of the rock. Like attracts like, I always say, and pretty soon those ones and twos had formed their own union. A whole mad scientists brigade, complete with a meeting hall and dues. They claim they need ta stick together in order to stay safe. "Lookin' out fer their own interests," they say. I don't know about that, but the contraptions they have're more than enough to keep most folks away. What's worse than a guy with a ghostrock powered death ray? Twenty of 'em, all lookin' out fer each other. Makes me shiver just thinkin' about it. Thankfully, they don't cause nearly as much trouble as they could. They're a secretive bunch, that's fer sure, and they don't like busybodies pokin' in their little projects, but they ain't lookin' fer trouble. As long as the ghostrock supply stays steady, and they're left alone ta do their work, they tend ta let folks be. Fer now, at least.

So what's the problem? The problem is that everyone else is eyeballin' their gizmos, thinkin' that their Geocosmic Doohickey is just what they need to settle an old score. If Sweetrock, Black Jack, or any old lunatic lookin' ta get even ends up with a Collegium gadget... the ante gets upped fer the whole town. Or even worse, they decide they don't like somebody and wanna ace him themselves. An arms race is the last thing Gomorra needs, and the Collegium's in a position to give it to 'em - at the very least. If Gomorra's a pile of dynamite, then these guys are a lit match, which makes 'em more dangerous than anyone else combined. Be thankful that their noses 're buried in their inventions; I hope ta God they never look up.

So there 'tis in a nutshell, the town of Gomorra California. Sure, there's plenty o' reasons ta stick around: we got money, noteriety and the best damn bartender in the west if I say so myself. The ghostrock flows like a river, and from what I hear tell, we haven't even hit the biggest lodes yet. If there's somethin' you want, Gomorra's probably got it.

But ye ain't gonna get any of it without a price, a price most folks can't begin ta pay. Ye gotta fight off a hundred other hoods and cowpokes lookin' ta make their name. Things 're as bad here as I've ever seen, and they're only gonna git worse. It's only a matter of time before Gomorra goes up like one o' them Chinese firecrackers.

Think ya kin take this town? Finish yer drink, buddy. Yer gonna need it.

EPISODE 1,2 & 3

Episode 1-3

by Rob Vaux

The doors to the Fat Chance Saloon exploded outward into the afternoon sunshine. A fat man with a tin star on his vest flew into the street and collapsed in an ungainly heap beside a ripe pile of horse apples. His opponent sauntered slowly after him, a tall black man with the easy grace of an accomplished fighter. The stout figure staggered to his feet, his piggy eyes red with booze.

"Black Jack Jackson," he slurred. "I'm playshing you unner arrest fer ashaultin' an offisher of the law."

Jackson stood in the doorway. "Sure you are, Johnny," he said quietly. "Just like Sheriff Coleman will fire you for drinking on duty."

The fat man stopped as the comment sunk in. He swayed back and forth with a Herculean effort to remain on his feet. Finally, he lowered his head and turned away from the saloon.

"Thish ain't the end of it," he growled.

"Of that you can be assured," his opponent replied. Pulling a neat black handkerchief from his leather vest, he sauntered back into the saloon. The impossibly small bartender continued polishing glasses, his squashed face swinging between amusement and anger.

"Charlie," Jackson asked, "why do you waste perfectly good whiskey on a slug like Templeton?" The tiny man shrugged. "His money's good. And in here, he ain't buggin' anyone but me."

"And me."

"Yeah, I can see that." He gestured at a pile of broken glass on the floor. "Yer payin' fer that whiskey bottle, by the way."

Jackson tossed a silver coin on the bar and cocked his hat back. "Think he'll come back?"

"I wouldn't bet on it. Boy had enough rotgut in him to kill a horse."

"A shining example of our town's law."

The bartender stopped his polishing and leaned over toward Jackson. His misshapen left hand flopped uncomfortably next to him.

"Now don't go condemnin' the law on accounta that skunk's butt of a deputy. The rest do a good job o' keepin' the peace 'round here."

Jackson's face was unchanged. "They're in Sweetrock's pocket, all of them. There isn't a real law here anymore than there's a real mayor or town council. Just the mining company and the people they've bought."

"Yer beef with Sweetrock still don't change the fact that Coleman's the elected sheriff and that he an' his deputies are the law in Gomorra. You'd best remember that the next time ya go pickin' a fight with one of them."

"I don't like bullies, C.L."

Charlie scoffed. "Lord Almighty, no one does! But bullies come in all shapes and sizes, and some got a way o' climbin' to the top of the heap."

"Like the good Deputy Templeton, perhaps?"

Charlie set the glass down. "Let's just say that Gomorra seems made for people like him."

Jackson smiled a wan, little grin. "Well, we'll see about that Charlie. We'll just see..."

Just Another Fish Story

by Rob Vaux

"King me!"

George Jacob Dawson - Big Jake to his friends - leaned back from the checkerboard and grinned in ferocious glee. His hulking opponent studied the positioning carefully before throwing his hat down in disgust

"Aw, panther poop!"

"Scooter, you got to learn to handle losin' wit more grace den dat. Checkers is da sport o' kings. Y'all don't see da Queen of England cursin' like dat when she gets smoked, do you?"

"No, but she don't have to listen to you crow like a rooster about it for the next six days."

"Hey, you wanna start playin' more'n one game a week, dat's fine by me. Meantime, cough me up onea dem red jewels so's I can keep whoopin' yer behind."

Scooter glowered menacingly at his companion before producing the aforementioned checker and crowning his partner's piece.

The two men were comfortably settled in the stacks of sea barrels and packing crates that made up the Gomorra town docks, and were liable to stay there for quite awhile. Situated at the foot of a great mesa in the midst of the California Maze, the docks rarely saw much activity this early in the week. A pair of Maze runners floated lost amid the dozen piers and jetties that poked out into the waterway. Three rickety warehouses - built right upon the side of the cliff - flanked a strange contraption of ropes and pulleys that stretched all the way up to the mesa top. In the midst of these surroundings, the gigantic Scooter and his diminutive companion seemed utterly at home.

Their mutual concentration was interrupted by the distant sounds of a boat approaching. The thick plume of smoke and the labored rumblings of the engine suggested that it was coming in fast.

"Whoops. Company's comin'," Big Jake hopped off the packing crate he had been using for a seat and gazed out into the Maze. "Better get yer fishin' gear on."

"Right."

The game forgotten, Scooter leapt to his feet, producing a huge buffalo rifle as he did so. The weapon looked big enough to be mounted on a tripod, but Scooter hefted it with the ease of a child's air gun. A large telescopic sight, the product of some mad scientist's ravings, was mounted on the barrel.

The disturbance grew louder, now accompanied by the unmistakable roar of a maze dragon. Scooter trotted out to the edged of the docks while feeding a handful of enormous shells into his gun. Moments later, a ship appeared in one of the narrow lanes that composed the great Maze. It looked like a steam freighter, smaller than most, but fast and maneuverable, as all boats needed to be in these waters. Its ghost rock engine belched great clouds of smoke into the sky, suggesting that its pilot had it running at full steam? The reason why soon became apparent. The little craft executed a tight turn around a bend of rocks, just as a giant fanged maw rose up from behind it.

The maze dragon wasn't the biggest that Scooter had seen, but it seemed to be making up for it in enthusiasm. It snaked its neck high into the air, and roared a shockwave that rumbled through the entire canyon. The craft continued speeding towards the docks, but now had little room to maneuver. The dragon centered its beady eyes on its prey and reared back, preparing to strike. A huge explosion rattled the docks as Scooter's weapon discharged. He saw the shell strike the dragon dead in the eye, sending a great spray of black blood shooting into the air. Its roar cut off abruptly, replaced by a choking sigh and a great crash as it fell backwards into the water. The craft it had been chasing, rocked back and forth in the creature's backwash, but remained afloat.

"Nice shootin', Scoot."

"Thanks." The big man ejected his spent casing. "Next time, I'll sink the boat and we can call it even."

The little boat continued on its breakneck pace until it approached the dock, slowing down just enough to coast serenely to a halt. Big Jake trotted up to secure the mooring lines, then suddenly stopped short.

"Sweet Mary and Joseph, what is that stench?"

"Money," the boat's occupant popped his head out of the pilothouse. "The sickly sweet odor of pure profit."

Jake squinted up, his nostrils still trying to wrap themselves around the amazing stink that rose from the hold. The speaker seemed unaffected by the smell. He was a short man, though a bit taller than Jake, and dressed in a comic conglomeration of sailor's gear and gentleman's attire. Hip-waders and a striped undershirt competed with a tattered top hat and formal coat - complete with tails. An empty cigarette holder offset the scruffy beard and yellowing teeth, while the speech emitting from his mouth was pure Harvard.

"My thanks to you, gentlemen, for your timely assistance. I've never seen so many maze dragons as those I've seen on my journey here." He leapt down upon the deck, and warmly shook Big Jake's hand.

"Nicholas P. Cumberson esq., captain of the Pacific Mermaid, at your service, sir." Jake looked back at him incredulously.

"Whachoo got in dere? Seafood?"

"A form of ambergris, my dear man. Harvested from the rolling waves of the calm Pacific. The excretion of certain aquatic creatures has a high market value among the finer salons and perfume dealers of the Eastern Seaboard. It is my humble duty to procure such elements, that the good ladies of Boston and New York remain as attractive as they have always been."

"Smells like randy tuna." Scooter's nose wrinkled as he approached. "They got women back East wanna spawn with fish?"

"It's fashion, you pugnacious fellow. Attractiveness transcends the barriers between man and animal, smiting all those with a bent towards the romantic."

"I don't see nothin' romantic about a buncha fish thrashin' around like..."

"How long ye stayin' in our fair town, sir?" Big Jake interrupted his partner.

"Just a few hours to wash the dirt off, then I'm on my way again. I've heard such marvelous things about your little miner's camp here, I just couldn't resist."

"Um... okay," Jake agreed lamely, unsure how to respond to genuine praise. "Dockin' fee's two bits, and Scooter'll take you up in da lift winch." he gestured at the contraption behind them.

"Lift winch. How droll!" He began marching broadly towards the cliff face. The two dockworkers trailed like awkward bridesmaids.

"Um... you said you had trouble with maze dragons comin' in?"

"Oh yes, dozens of them! they couldn't seem to stay away. My harpoon gun convinced most of them to find easier prey elsewhere, but it was unfortunately devoured earlier this morning. Along with it's operator, a 'Stinky' somebody or other whose company I never did appreciate." He stepped into the lift winch's swinging basket and secured himself, as Scooter began prepping the device's endless array of pulleys. Big Jake remained incredulous.

"Say, that maze dragon wasn't after your cargo, now was he?"

The man laughed. "Of course not, dear boy. They'll prey on anything their tiny brains perceive as prey. I'm sure the olfactory aroma arising from my cargo hold was merely incidental."

"But you said..."

"Trick of the wind my boy, I swear. Those brutes can no more smell my cargo than they could elect themselves president." He leaned over and tipped his hat to them, ignoring their incredulous glares. "Keep a good eye on it, fellows, and there will be an extra quarter in it for you."

"Yeah, swell," Scooter muttered, beginning to crank the wheel's great handle. The rickety carrier began to rise, and had soon vanished up the side of the cliff, its occupant speeding towards the questionable enticements of Gomorra. The big man grunted amicably as he continued to turn the big wheel, grinding out sweat and motion in equal amounts. Finally, the carrier stopped, and they could see their customer disembarking high above.

Scooter trundled back to the dock and took a seat next to his friend. The two stared at the Pacific Mermaid in silence for several minutes; the stench rose from it in nearly palpable waves. Somewhere, far off, they heard the roar of an abomination in the Maze.

"Man, dat stuff stinks.," Big Jake finally commented.

"Yeah."

An uncomfortable pause.

"You think dere's more maze dragons out dere?"

"Yeah."

Another pause. Jake looked pointedly at his partner.

"Wanna dump his cargo?"

"Yeah."

In a flash, the two were moving towards the waiting boat.

The cargo bay proved remarkably easy to open, although their sinuses paid a terrible price for it. Big Jake collapsed on the floor, tears in his eyes while Scooter began to lift the huge ambergris-filled barrels out of their storage space. The stench seemed to come from everywhere. Shaking his head, Jake struggled up to the first barrel and lifted it over the side. It splashed in the foamy water, then bobbed up like a cork. It was swiftly seized the current and carried off some hundred yards to rest by a shoal of rocks.

The worked in silence for several minutes. Scooter tossed the barrels up with childish ease while his partner wrestled with nausea while lifting them over the side. Soon, they had a cheerful little row floating away from the docks, the odor wafting up in the noon day sun.

Another roar sounded from the Maze. Big Jake forgot about the smell for a moment.

"Um... listen Scoot. Why don't you let me take care o' de heavy liftin'. I can get dese puppies in de water without any help."

"Aw, I can handle it. We're doin' fine as a team."

"Yeah, but we do better as a team when you're shootin' the nasty critter comin' at us."

Scooter's head shot out of the hatch. The unmistakable hump of maze dragon hide emerged some fifty yards distant.

In a flash, the big man had unslung his rifle and aimed it along the cliff side. A pair of quick shots into the beast's side brought it charging to the surface, where a flurry of shells dropped it beneath the waves again.

A second roar came on the heels of the first, followed by several more further out. The floating row of barrels became a pack, then a stampede as Jake pushed them over the side with panicked abandon. The flotilla gathered at the rocks parted for the maw of a sleek-looking abomination, all green fins and glistening teeth. Another round of shots from Scooter's gun convinced it to hunt elsewhere.

By the time fifth one came, all pretense of subtly was gone. Jake was hurling barrels out of the cargo hold with no thought as to where or how they landed. A few mistimed throws crashed into each other upon delivery, filling the nearby sea with sticky grey mess. But his recklessness was paying off: the space in the hold grew larger and larger with a speed few could match. With Scooter holding down the fort, they might actually succeed in their task.

The howl of another maze dragon rose, this one alarmingly close "Jake..." the big man admonished.

"Hold on, Scooter, just gotta couple more."

"JAKE..."

"Two minutes, an' we'll have da whole dock cleared..."

"JAKE, I'M OUTTA AMMO!!!"

"Great horny toads!" Big Jake yelled, dropping the last barrel to his feet. He had all of three seconds to back away before it - and the area of the hull behind it - exploded a cloud of splinters. The dragon's hoary maw dripped seaweed and ambergris as it gulped down the last remaining piece of Nicholas P. Cumberson's cargo.

Big Jake screamed, which he felt was perfectly appropriate given the circumstances. His squeals were interrupted by a meaty paw, which wrapped around his shoulder and quickly jerked him out of harm's way. Scooter stepped up towards the face of the beast, brandishing an absolutely monstrous knife in his left hand. "Knife" was actually too small a word; it could pass for a cavalry saber in certain countries. As the dragon opened its gaping maw, Scooter wedged himself between it and the hull, and slammed it into the creature's lower jaw, pinning it to the deck. It howled in pain and tried to twist loose, as bloody flecks of spittle flew in all direction. Scooter grunted and jammed the knife in harder.

"Jake... a little help here..."

In a flash, the shorter man reached into the recesses of his coat, and produced a sawed-off shotgun. Aiming it at the lizard's snout, he released both barrels, which caught the beast full in the jaw. It jerked backward with a yelp and crashed down in the water behind them. A few bloody bubble rose and the terrible sound of what could have been a death rattle. In any case, the beast did not rise again.

Big Jake and Scooter sat there, wide-eyed, for a few moments longer. The last barrels floated off to join their companions, adding to the colony that had gathered by the rock shoal.

* * *

With a twist of the wheel, the winch-bucket lowered again, down from Gomorra to the seaside junk pile it called a port. Even at this distance, Jake could make out the top hat planted on its occupant's head.

"How do you think he's gonna take it?" he asked conversationally.

"We could just kill him and save ourselves the headache."

"Yeah. Hold dat thought." He grinned evilly as the lift winch slowly closed the arduous distance between them

"Evenin' Mr. Cumberson. How were da sordid delight or our fair town?"

"Sufficient my boy, sufficient." The man had recently shaved, and his clothes looked like they had receive a much-needed washing. A lit cigarette stood in his holder, which he cocked jauntily in his mouth. "Though I must confess a trifle jubilant for my tastes. But no matter. I trust your tenure down here in my absence was unevent... GAH!!!"

The Pacific Mermaid was a disaster area. Slathered in gore and the slime-encrusted remains of its cargo, it tilted to one side like a drunken lamppost. A large chunk had been bitten out of its side, a deficiency that had apparently been corrected by nailing a few loose boards in place. Behind it, the precious cargo from its hold bobbed slowly up and down in the gentle tide.

"What did you maniacs do?!" he sputtered

"Yeah, well, we've been wantin' to talk to you 'bout dat. Seems da local critters took a likin' to yer cargo dere, and we had to get rid of it before dey ate da whole dock.

"You dumped it all?! My entire cargo!?"

"Cept fer the stuff the maze dragons ate." Scooter chimed in. "We been tryin' keep 'em off it fer the last couple of hours, but it ain't been easy what with the repairs and all.

"My fortune... my wonderful ambergris... it's gone. Gone!"

"Now I wouldn't call it gone, Mr. Cumberson," Big Jake consoled easily. "You just gotta go out there and git it again, just like ya done before..."

"I'll sue!!!" he turned on them in a sudden fury. "I'll have your miserable hides brought up on charges!!! I'll take your wretched carcasses to the highest court in the land!!!" His hands quivered with

rage as he spat all manner of epithets at the two dockworkers. It took several more minutes of swearing (and some unique speculations on their ancestry) before he calmed himself enough to stop. He stood there, panting and blowing like a racehorse. His ears had flared pink and his recently-shaven cheeks puffed in and out like a blowfish.

Big Jake looked up at him without blinking.

"So do we still get the tip?" he asked.

"Get away from me, you horrid little man before I beat you to death right here!"

Jake shrugged and stepped away from the dock, allowing Nicholas P. Cumberson esq., to proceed. The ragged captain stomped furiously towards his boat, casting withering glance back at the dockworkers.

"You'd better pray I can salvage my cargo!" He fired up the engines in a great fury before jerking the tiller around and slowly backing away from the pier. Big Jake and Scooter watched him go.

"This that 'losing gracefully' thing you were talkin', about?" The big man asked.

"Something like dat yeah."

The boat chugged determinedly out to where the ambergris barrels still floated on the waves. It pulled up alongside a large collection, more or less intact, and the disgruntled pilot began to fish them out one by one with a boating hook.

"Well that could have gone worse," Scooter mused.

"Yeah. But how long you figure before that crazy bastard -"

It came so quickly they didn't have time to think. A pair of colossal tentacles - each thicker than the trunk of a redwood - rose silently on either side of the Mermaid. The pilot looked up with a yelp as they wrapped themselves around his craft and tugged... once. The ship promptly vanished below the surface in the blink of an eye, leaving nothing but churning foam in its wake. Big Jake looked wide-eyed at his partner.

"Did you see dat?"

"I didn't see that."

The smaller man considered for a minute.

"Yeah, me neither."

Without another word, the two turned away from the dock. Behind them, a few boards and pieces of spar floated lazily to the surface.

EPISODE 4

Episode 4

by Rob Vaux

The darkness was omnipresent, lit only by a single candle in the gloom. The old lady sat passively in its light; her blind eyes reflecting it like polished marble. She did not move or speak, she hardly seemed to breathe. Her waxen skin and archaic clothes looked for all the world like a portrait come to life, a statue given the disturbing semblance of flesh.

Presently, a second figure stepped into the candlelight, a young gentleman in a dark suit and bowler hat. His long hair was neatly combed and a pair of rimless spectacles sat on a sharp nose. He held a deck of cards in his right hand, which glowed a sinister green. The old woman stirred at his approach.

"Have you been to the town, my dumpling?"

Nicodemus Whateley smiled infernally and began shuffling his deck from one hand to the next. The cards moved with a life of their own, flying across the space like bats across the moon.

"It is as the book says, grandmother. Gomorra is a nest of scorpions, striking at each other mad impunity."

"What of the law?" she asked.

"We have nothing to fear from the law. They believe we have come here to mine ghost rock. The sheriff thinks we will keep the dominant company - Sweetrock, I believe they are called - in check. He has no inkling of our true purpose."

"And the others."

"Ready to tear themselves to pieces. A few well-placed lies will set them against each other like dogs."

"Excellent," she cackled with glee. "You've done well, pretty puppet. The time of prophecy is close, and the dark one grows impatient. The dead have begun to walk the streets here and the horrors of the night will soon converge like wasps to honey. With the sheriff diverted, and the Sweetrock fools obsessed with their lovely baubles, the town will tear itself to pieces."

"It has already begun, grandmother," Nicodemus leaned in close to her - close enough to kiss. "Even now, the bodies have begun to pile up."

"As was foretold, child, as was foretold."

The young man fell silent suddenly, his gaze dropping away from the matriarch.

"And what of the Confederate - Stoker?"

"What of him?" she retorted.

"He is powerful, grandmother. He knows far more than he should."

"He is foolish and alone. He cannot harm us."

"Are you willing to stake all our plans on it?"

"Have faith, my child, have faith. When the time is right, he will serve us more faithfully than any willing ally."

Nicodemus closed his eyes as he pondered her words.

"Then what do we do now, grandmother?" he said at last.

"We watch what happens. We watch and we revel in the storm before the calm."

For the briefest instant, something rippled under Nicodemus's clothes, distending the buttons on his vest before vanishing as if it had never been. He bowed low before his grandmother, then retreated into the darkness as suddenly as he had arrived.

"Soon, my chicklings," Wilhelmina whispered after him. "Very, very soon..."

EPISODE 5

Episode 5

by Rob Vaux

"It's the arrogance of the act which galls me, Mr. McNeil!" Howard Findley slammed his fist on the desktop for emphasis. "This second-rate claim jumper has the savings of an entire town at his feet, and chooses to ignore it all - all except ours."

The bearded man opposite him looked incredulous. "How much did he take?"

"The amount is irrelevant, Mr. McNeil," Findley replied. "What matters is that he has humiliated the Sweetrock Mining Company. He didn't rob the 1st Bank; if he had he'd have taken it all. He robbed us and our ghost rock. That they happened to be located at the bank is circumstance."

"And the sheriff hasn't done anything about it?"

"He doesn't understand Sweetrock's position in Gomorra. If he knew how important we are to this town, he'd have tried and hung the whole mangy gang of them by now."

"Bank robbery's a serious offence, Findley," McNeil's gaze was unwavering. "You're saying he hasn't moved on it at all?"

"I'm saying he has no concept of its implications. Gomorra is our town. We built it, we own it, and we intend to keep it. The faster the inhabitants realize that, the better off they'll be. But now, even as we establish our presence they see this... this 'Black Jack' tearing it all down. They see him destroy our property, steal our assets, THUMB HIS NOSE at everything we do... It weakens us, Mr. McNeil. And I will not tolerate anyone weakening us."

"So you want me to kill him."

"We've let you suckle on our teat long enough; it's time for you to justify our confidence in you. Bring me his head on a plate, Mr. McNeil. You do that and you can name your price."

"And his compatriots?"

"Without the head, the body will die. Take as many of them as you wish; we'll match any bounty placed on their heads. But I want you to make an example of Black Jack. A warning to anyone else who crosses this company."

McNeil stood up. "You'll have it, Mr. Findley."

For the first time since the conversation started, Findley smiled.

"Good, good."

At the door, McNeil turned and looked back at his employer.

"By the way, a little bird told me that Sheriff's Coleman's already got a warrant out on Black Jack. The way I heard, it sounds like the whole county's after him."

"They're after him, Mr. McNeil, but they won't catch him. He's too slippery and too clever. I trust you won't have the same problem."

McNeil stroked the butt of his pistol. "I'll drag him out of whatever hole he hides in and make him wish he'd never crossed Sweetrock Mining."

Findley's smile widened. "I expect nothing less."

Ill Met By Moonlight

by Rob Vaux

Rutger stopped at the cemetery gates and looked up at the moon. Standing here at the edge of Elephant Hill, with the lights from Gomorra twinkling behind him, this seemed quite the fool's errand.

Sweetrock hadn't said much about the job. They wanted to talk to a member of the Whateley family, they said. Just a friendly chat to size them up. Right. Everyone knew the Whateleys were muscling in on Sweetrock's mining holdings. With the bank robbery and Black Jack

and lord knows what else, it was more than they could handle. So they went to a freelancer - a man like Rutger, who knew the value of an honest dollar - and asked them to bring them a hostage. It wasn't kidnapping of course; that would be illegal. It was just a nice friendly chat... that would last until the Whateleys saw things Sweetrock's way.

So here he was, at the Elephant Hill cemetery in the middle of the night, looking for a crazy girl to take back with him. They said Dolores Whateley was mad; that she came dancing up here every night, singing to the tombstones and shouting out nonsensical nursery rhymes. But at the same time, she was one of only two Whateleys who left the grounds of their ramshackle mansion. And she would probably come without a fuss. He didn't think Nicodemus (Her brother? Husband? The specifics of Whateley interrelations were so unclear.) would be so accommodating.

For the great sprawl of the Elephant Hill, it didn't take long to find her. Her sing-song voice carried far on the winds, and he followed it like a bloodhound to the center of the necropolis. She stood in the moonlight, her black hair flying in cascades down her back. Her white dress was torn and soiled, and matched the pale luminescence of her skin perfectly. There was a fistful of flowers in her hands. Nightshade, it looked like. He thought that didn't grow around here.

"Moon, sweet moon! I thank thee for thy sunny beams!" She cried, tossing fistfuls of petals to the wind. She spun like a little girl in the moonlight, and stamped the grass down with her bare feet. The approaching gunman didn't seem to register with her at all.

Rutger watched her prance about for several minutes

"Some folks want to have a word with you missy."

"Word! Words fly up, their thoughts remain below; words without thoughts never to heaven go..."

The gunslinger looked at her incredulously. He unbuttoned his waistcoat to reveal the revolver on his belt.

"Put it any way you want, little lady. Mr. Findley's got some concerns about your clan, and I think it best that you come discuss the matter with him."

She stopped suddenly and looked at him. Her face scrunched up with concentration, as if she were trying to remember something.

"Discuss? Discuss, discuss, you're full of pus. You'll break your head with all that fuss!" she stepped nimbly from tombstone to tombstone, pacing back and forth across their tops.

"Uh... yeah." He felt silly. This girl couldn't tell you her own name. "Listen, maybe you better just come with me."

"You?" she asked curiously. "I don't know you! Don't know you at all!"

Rutger smiled in what he hoped was a disarming way. "Well, you can get to know me on the way back to town. Don't you want to go back to town?"

Dolores giggled and hid her face behind her torn sleeve

"But you haven't met my playmate yet!"

He stopped, his hands fingering his gun.

"Playmate?"

"We have ever so much fun. He doesn't know many words, but maybe you can teach him some."

He turned around slowly to face her. She grinned at him and circled her arms above her head like a mischievous ballerina.

"His name's Tommy. Do say hello."

The ground below him exploded heavenward. A pair of skeletal hands shot towards him, grabbing his leather chaps and pulling him to his knees. The worm-ridden skull pulled up out of the ground and hissed silently at him.

"Sonuva -"

He tried to scramble to his feet, but the corpse held him tight. His knees sunk into the grave's black earth as he twisted and thrashed in an effort to break free.

Dolores capered around him madly.

"Tom, Tom, the piper's son. Stole a pig and away he run. Ask him if the pig's down there mister."

Rutger snarled and drew his pistol, aiming straight at the thing's face. The gunshot echoed across the cemetery... then another... then another. Rutger watched as the corpse's face shattered into a million pieces in front of him. He grinned evilly before realizing that nothing had changed. The harrowed body continued to claw at him, no worse for wear after losing its head. Rutger realized to his horror that the ground beneath him was giving way, and that his legs were now sinking rapidly into the earth. He looked up at Dolores, who giggled again.

"Help! Help me please, I'm sinking!"

"That's how you play the game, silly. You scream and he pulls you down. Then when you're below with him, you can tell him what you meant to say."

His gunbelt slipped beneath the ground, then his belly. He couldn't see the creature's face anymore, but its grip was as strong as ever. He began to frantically beat at its arms with its pistol butt. The rotted graveclothes gave way, revealing more maggots and the soil packed tightly between the things bones. Yet still it pulled, dragging him into its horrified embrace. He was now sunk up to his torso.

"Golden lads and girls all must, as chimney-sweepers, come to dust!"

The thing grabbed his shooting arm and pulled it beneath the ground. For the first time, panic gripped him, and he began to shake with fear. Skeletal fingers closed around his throat and reduced him to a wet gasping. The last thing he saw before the hoary hands dragged

him under was Dolores, cavorting madly on a nearby sarcophagus. and singing up to the heavens.

"The other months have thirty-one," she danced. "Rain and sky and jolly sun. And the moon grows fat in every one!"

His screams became choked with dirt as his face slipped below the blackened earth. The grave shuddered several times, then fell silent. The original occupant did not reappear, nor did its unwilling guest.

Dolores leapt from the sarcophagus to land daintily on the space Rutger had once occupied. Her arms flew up again and she danced a little pirouette in the moonlight. Just for him.

EPISODE 6

Episode 6

"Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats." Oswald Hardinger banged his gavel on the podium in front of him. "I'm glad to see you all arrived promptly; there is much we need to discuss." Before him sat the scientists, professors and inventors that comprised Gomorra's Collegium. Normally, they kept to themselves, distracted by their own experiments or inventions. But circumstances had changed.

After the crowd had settled, Hardinger cleared his throat again.

"As you all know, we have recently lost one of our own. Mr. Pierre Fontaine was tragically killed in the Maze after the abduction of his mining craft. Memorial services will be held Tuesday; there weren't enough earthly remains to make a proper funeral.

"The exact nature of our colleague's demise is a matter of some concern, and has bearing on the town proper. It appears as if Mr. Fontaine was done in by the so-called 'Maze Rats', a band of pirates. Prof. Franklin, would you please explain your findings to the floor?"

A bespectacled woman rose to her feet, and shifted the hastily written notes in her gloved hands.

"Based on the nature of the remains and the small quantity thereof, we have determined that Mr. Fontaine's death was caused by shark attack. Or, more specifically, by a large school of sharks.

"An immediate examination of the murder site, provided by my telescopes and Mr. Xemo's psychokinetic amplification, clearly displayed Mr. Fontaine's boat as it was boarded and seized by the members of the Maze Rats. It was subsequently tied to their junk, the Typhoon and towed further into the Maze."

An angry murmur arose from the crowd. Hardinger banged on his gavel for silence.

"What about the sheriff," someone asked. "Is this not his jurisdiction?"

"Sheriff Coleman and his men," Hardinger replied. "do not have the resources to pursue the pirates adequately. This town boils on the edge of anarchy, and Coleman cannot waste time on a single 'accidental death.' Or so he told me.

"There are other reports, too. Claims that the Whateley family have been practicing black magic on the streets, rumors of abominations coming down from the wilderness. There have even been instances of cadavers mobilus reported, that the Elephant Hill cemetery has become a haven for the living dead."

It took several seconds of pounding to quiet the assemblage again.

"So what do we do about the situation?" a man in the back queried.

"I'll tell you what we do: we stop experimenting and use our resources to restore order to this town. The sheriff is overwhelmed, the Sioux have done nothing, and Sweetrock only cares about the profits of their fuel. That leaves us, ladies and gentlemen; the only ones left who can make a difference.

"I call upon every person in this room to assist us in taming the streets again. I propose that we, my valued colleagues, take it upon ourselves to restore order to this situation. We have the will, the ethics, and the technological superiority to succeed where others have failed." He paused for dramatic emphasis as his words sunk in.

"Does anyone have reason to dispute this course of action?"

The room was silent.

"Very well. It's time Gomorra learned what it means to cross the Distinguished Collegium of Interspatial Physics. And I think these 'Maze Rats' will make perfect examples..."

Corky's Day at the Office

by Rob Vaux

Corky knew the man was trouble when he started eating his own entrails. Cannibalism was frowned upon in most social circles and the enthusiasm with which he chewed made the sheer grotesquerie of it hit her like hot copper.

Add the fact that he had killed six people and it made for a dicey afternoon.

There had been rumors about the walking dead almost as soon as Corky was deputized. Gomorra was a rough town; people died all the time, and most of 'em were mean enough that bullets seemed a little too easy. Add to that the fact that drifters came and went every day, and sure, you're bound to have a few stories about fellas coming back

from the grave. But until this morning, she never gave any credence to them.

Now, she was prepared to rethink things.

She and Templeton were on duty, when a woman came flying in, talking about someone shooting up the LAD Saloon. Johnny went to get the Sheriff while Corky - lucky her - got to scope out the situation. People were flying off the street as usual during a gunfight, so nothing seemed extraordinarily amiss. Then she got to the saloon. Or more precisely, to the sidewalk outside the saloon.

And there he was, noshing on his innards like they were Sunday brunch. The large shotgun hole in his guts suggested that someone had already tried to put him down, but judging by the way he was scooping stuff out of it, it didn't seem to matter. His skin had a gray-green quality, like meat that's gone bad. He had a six-gun in one hand, and from what it looked like, he had given plenty of use. Two bodies were slumped on the street around him, and a third lay half in and half out of the LAD's window.

Corky didn't waste any time with him. Drawing her pistol, she capped off a shot that punched him right in the chest. She'd been a trick shooter on the rodeo circuit before turning to law enforcement, and could hit a bird blindfolded if she had time to aim. She saw the bullet blow out the back of his ribcage to imbed itself in the LAD's swinging doors.

The man grinned at her and started shooting back.

Instincts kicked in and she dived to safety just as the bullets whizzed past her. She pulled herself behind the cover of a nearby water barrel as screams echoed from up the street. The people hurrying for cover picked up their pace, and out of the corner of her eye, she could see onlookers scattering like panicked lemmings. The Cannibal Man didn't seem too attached to her as a target; he kept shooting, presumably at those hapless folk still clearing the street.

"Gotta stop him," she thought to herself. Easier said than done. A man who keeps goin' after you've plugged him in the heart needs a lot more than what she had to slow him down. "Still, I gotta try."

In one smooth motion, she popped up from the waterbarrel and took aim. Cannibal Man was cackling like a rooster and throwin' his hand in the air; his pistol hung limply from one outstretched hand. "Perfect," she thought. The first shot blew the man's index finger off, the second his thumb. Maybe he couldn't be killed, but Corky was damned if she'd let him pick up a firearm again. His six-gun clattered to the ground, along with the digits that used to work it. He didn't look overly concerned.

Crouching like a dog ("and still cackling - what was so goldarned funny anyway?!"), he snatched his fingers up with his mutilated hand. Corky's next shot went wide while he stuffed the fingers into his

mouth and began chewing enthusiastically. She cringed and ducked back behind the barrel to reload.

When she came up again, he had a surprise for her. In his free hand was another pistol - this one sporting a circular array of barrels. The gun jiggled and the air was full of shrapnel.

"Gatling! He's got a Gatling pistol!" her thoughts screamed. The ricochets careened around her head even as the gun continued to spit out new bullets. She hunkered down and tried to stay invisible while the onslaught continued; gazing around furtively in hopes that Templeton might show up with the cavalry. Good God... Her eyes widened. A mother and her two small children walked out of Miss Coutreau's, into the line of fire like they hadn't a care in the world. That didn't last long; Cannibal Man grinned and leveled the Gatling at them...

Blam! Blam! Blam! Corky's gun pulled his attention away from the potential victims. His chest thudded as the bullets slammed into him, but he kept his feet and continued to spray the street with bullets.

"Get yer kids off the street!!!" she screamed, as the trio scampered away. Just what this situation needed was a new gaggle of innocent bystanders.

She reloaded again, this time with the last of her spare bullets. She was about to pop up for one last round of derring-do when she spotted the Indian coming down the street.

He was huge, built like the side of a barn, and his face was decorated with warpaint. His bare chest rippled with muscles, and he carried the biggest warclub Corky had ever seen over his shoulder. He was staring intently at the undead gunslinger; the high amount of lead in the air didn't seem to bother him. Corky felt it her civic duty to say a few things to him.

"Git down, ya crazy Injun! He's shootin' people!"

The big man turned. "I'm not an 'Injun,' Deputy Hendricks. I'm a New York Iroquois. And that Restless Spirit out there don't scare me any more than you do."

A bullet whizzed past his cheek and imbedded in the nearby wall. Corky almost snarled as she reached out and grabbed his forearm.

"Scairt er not, yer puttin' yerself in harm's way! An' I got a responsibility to keep you safe until Johnny shows up with the heavy artillery!"

"Hands off, woman," he spoke softly. The huge club in his hands gleamed in the sunlight as he hefted it over his shoulder and strode out into the street. Corky felt her grip slip away and her indignation rise.

"Fine!!!" Injun wanted to get killed that badly, why step in his way? Maybe she'd get a chance to blow some more fingers off while Cannibal Man was busy cleaning his clock.

The Indian calmly strolled towards the LAD. The gunman, spotting an obvious target, pulled the still-firing Gatling pistol in the big man's direction. Hot lead flew around him, nicking his clothes and buzzing past his ears. Yet none of it actually hit him, and he continued walking in a straight line towards the undead creature.

The monster paused, then took careful aim at the Indian's head. A hail of bullets spat out of the barrel in a deadly arc, but still, they missed their target. Again and again, the gun fired. Each time, it was found wanting. The Indian was now less than fifteen feet away.

"You're shooting iron looks a little broke there partner." He crossed his hands. The monster stopped and stared at him. The dull look in its eyes was slowly replaced by something else, something akin to fear. The big Iroquois smiled and hefted his club; three arrowheads gleamed along its bent surface.

The first blow took the thing's head off, like a branch sheared from a tree. It stared goggled-eyed at him, its jaw still chewing on the severed fingers. Without pausing, the Indian brought the war club up again, then brought it down on the thing's chest. It split wide open, shattering like a rotten melon and tumbling into disarray. The war club tore straight through the middle of the carcass, and didn't stop until it struck the hard wood of the sidewalk. Cannibal Man - his anatomy now reduced to a fetid pile of goop - let the pistol fall with an enthusiastic plop, then collapsed. As suddenly as it had begun, the ordeal was over.

The Indian pulled the club free and shook the detritus off of it. Corky poked her head out, then walked up behind him, shaking her head in disbelief.

"What the hell was that thing?" she asked.

"Walkin' Dead," he replied. "Real nasty one, too. You take its fingers off?"

"Yeah."

"Nice shootin'!" There a pause. Corky cleared her throat and started again.

"You gotta name?"

"My father called me Little Running Bear. You can call me Mr. Little Running Bear."

"Thanks for the assist, Mr. Little Running Bear. What are you doin' here?"

He smiled grimly.

"Just fishin'," he said. "Catchin' little fish 'til the big one shows up."

Corky pretended she understood and nodded her head sagely.

"So how come you weren't afraid of gettin' shot out there?"

Little Running Bear looked carefully at her. His granite eyes were not unkind.

"If you have to ask, Deputy Hendricks, then you wouldn't understand."

Corky nodded again. There were worse epitaphs to close the afternoon.

EPISODE 7

Episode 7

by Rob Vaux

The Fat Chance Saloon was nearly deserted the first time the Rangers came. Charlie only had one customer all day, who'd been tucked away in one of the back rooms since he came in. The diminutive bartender was taking advantage of the lull to restock the bar; the empty saloon wasn't likely to stay empty once the sun went down. He moved quickly despite his small size, and his twisted left hand manipulated the bottles with remarkable dexterity. He whistled as he worked, a half-remembered carny tune from his circus days.

The sound of swinging doors interrupted him. A trio of men dressed in tan dusters walked into the Fat Chance, glancing in Charlie's direction. Their six-guns hung with well-worn ease in their holsters, and their faces had the scruffy look of range riders in from a long haul. With a slight flourish, Charlie leapt up on the wide platform behind the bar and nodded at his new customers.

"Afternoon, fellas," he piped. "Can I git ya somethin' ta drink?"

"We're looking for Austin Stoker," the lead man replied.

"We don't serve it here. Ya might wanna try the Old Moon Saloon - I hear they got enough of them funky drinks ta drown a Mexican."

In a flash, the leader had wrapped his hands around Charlie's collar and pulled the smaller man across the bar.

"Don't toy with me half-pint. You don't want me to shoot you as an accessory."

Charlie bit his lip and glanced down at the star on the man's vest.

"Texas Rangers, are ya?"

"If you say so. Where's Stoker?"

"He's back there in the smoking lounge." He gestured at a stoutly closed door on the far wall.

"Thank you, sir." The Ranger released his grip and gestured at his companions, who drew their guns. Charlie straightened his shirt and watched as they moved towards the door.

"Look, friend, we don't allow gunfire on the premises," he said carefully.

"Should have thought about that before you let him in," the lead Ranger replied.

The door flew open with a crash and the three men stepped boldly into the darkened room. The shadows crept across the faded decor, lit by a single candle and the now-bright light from the afternoon sun. Its occupant looked up from the brandy snifter he was holding and narrowed his gaze. His flinty eyes matched the slate-grey uniform he wore; the bars on his collar proclaimed him a captain in the Confederate cavalry. His smooth Georgia voice cut through the tension in the air like ice.

"Ah surely hope you don't mean ta serve that warrant in your pocket, Jonah," he said evenly.

The Ranger stopped. "How did you know..." His face hardened as he leveled his pistol. "Austin Stoker, you're under arrest for crimes against the Confederate States of America. I have orders to escort you to Shannonsburg for trial."

"Ah'm afraid Ah can't do that. Ah have pressin' engagements here."

The sound of hammers cocking punctuated the Ranger's reply.

"You come with me you heretical bastard, or we'll spare the CSA the expense of burnin' you."

Stoker stood up very slowly, and looked at his three adversaries. Beneath the brim of his hat, his eyes began to glow an unearthly orange. "Too bad, boys," he sighed. "Too bad..." The door closed shut behind them.

Charlie looked up from the bar when he heard the gurgled chokes from behind the door. They continued for several seconds, wet throaty sounds that clucked and gobbled before slowly dwindling down to nothing. The door to the smoking lounge creaked open, and Stoker walked out casually, nodding benignly in Charlie's direction.

The bartender stared wide-eyed at the sight as he struggled to maintain his composure.

"Where... where are the Rangers?" he stammered.

"They had to go," Stoker replied. He straightened his hat and strolled out the door, a lit cigar in his mouth. "Ah wouldn't let it worry me none, C.L.," he spoke as he left. "There's plenty more where they came from."

Charlie promised himself he wouldn't look in the lounge.

Opening Salvo

by Rob Vaux

The Fat Chance Saloon was nearly deserted the first time the Rangers came. Charlie only had one customer all day, who'd been tucked away in one of the back rooms since he came in. The diminutive bartender was taking advantage of the lull to restock the bar; the empty saloon wasn't likely to stay empty once the sun went down. He moved quickly despite his small size, and his twisted left

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"Look, friend, we don't allow gunfire on the premises," he said carefully.

"Should have thought about that before you let him in," the lead Ranger replied.

The door flew open with a crash and the three men stepped boldly into the darkened room. The shadows crept across the faded decor, lit by a single candle and the now-bright light from the afternoon sun. Its occupant looked up from the brandy snifter he was holding and narrowed his gaze. His flinty eyes matched the slate-grey uniform he wore; the bars on his collar proclaimed him a captain in the Confederate cavalry. His smooth Georgia voice cut through the tension in the air like ice.

"Ah surely hope you don't mean ta serve that warrant in your pocket, Jonah," he said evenly.

The Ranger stopped. "How did you know..." His face hardened as he leveled his pistol. "Austin Stoker, you're under arrest for crimes against the Confederate States of America. I have orders to escort you to Shannonsburg for trial."

"Ah'm afraid Ah can't do that. Ah have pressin' engagements here."

The sound of hammers cocking punctuated the Ranger's reply.

"You come with me you heretical bastard, or we'll spare the CSA the expense of burnin' you."

Stoker stood up very slowly, and looked at his three adversaries. Beneath the brim of his hat, his eyes began to glow an unearthly orange. "Too bad, boys," he sighed. "Too bad..." The door closed shut behind them.

Charlie looked up from the bar when he heard the gurgled chokes from behind the door. They continued for several seconds, wet throaty sounds that clucked and gobbled before slowly dwindling down to nothing. The door to the smoking lounge creaked open, and Stoker walked out casually, nodding benignly in Charlie's direction.

The bartender stared wide-eyed at the sight as he struggled to maintain his composure.

"Where... where are the Rangers?" he stammered.

"They had to go," Stoker replied. He straightened his hat and strolled out the door, a lit cigar in his mouth. "Ah wouldn't let it worry me none, C.L.," he spoke as he left. "There's plenty more where they came from."

Charlie promised himself he wouldn't look in the lounge.

An Argument Over Nothing in Particular

by Rob Vaux

"You crazy, cock-eyed, back-scuttling skunk!" Rachel Sumner's voice echoed across the cavern walls. "What in Perdition's name did you think you were doing?!"

"Saving our skins the only way I could," the handsome black man met his underling's shouts with an unwavering gaze. "Would you have rather they strung the both of us up?"

"You don't know they would have done that, Jackie!"

"Oh no? They love that dog, Rachel. Or did before Spike killed it."

"Spike didn't know any better! How could he?! The man could barely count to five!"

"All the more reason to put him down before he did something worse."

The rest of the Blackjacks had slowly gathered around the pair, watching their banter with interest. It was rare that anyone stood up to their leader so forcefully. Rachel seemed to be making up for it, however.

"So you blew Spike's head off because he shot a lousy dog?"

"No, I blew Spike's head off because he shot the town's mascot. This was the one creature in Gomorra that nobody had a grudge against, that nobody hated or despised, that nobody wanted to see dead. And Spike killed him. Killed him in front of forty-odd gunmen who couldn't believe what they were seeing. Do you have any idea what kind of hurt that would have brought down on our heads if I hadn't ached him then and there?"

"He was the best gunman this gang's seen! We can't afford to lose him, Jackie."

"After that display in the town square, we couldn't afford anything else. Look around you," he gestured at the congregated gang. "We're, what, a dozen men? Gomorra's a big town. If they took a mind to, they could hunt us down and slaughter us like goats. The only reason - the only reason - we're still walking around is because enough people think we're in the right. They think we're sticking it to Sweetrock like no one else can, and that makes them forgive the fact that we're outside the law. It lets them ignore us, encourage us, even support us. But that support comes with a price. There certain boundaries we can't cross, certain things we can't do."

Rachel's eyes bulged incredulously. "Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Like shooting the damn town dog, that's what! You think the movers and shakers in Gomorra are content to just let us be? You think Howard Findley isn't trying every trick in the book to bring us down? Or that Nate Hunter's just waiting for an excuse to arrest us? We walk a very thin line, Rachel. And this morning, Spike Dougan crossed it."

"So that excuses what you did. And if one of us crosses the line...?"

Jack stiffened. "None of you are that stupid. Are you?" He looked around at the assembled outlaws. Silence greeted him. The men looked uncomfortable and fidgety.

"All right then. Issue settled." He walked towards the cavern entrance, ignoring Rachel's burning glower, which followed him out. "I run this gang as I see fit. Before you get to questioning me again, remember how much money I've put in your pockets."

"Besides," he punctuated, not looking back. "I liked that dog."

EPISODE 8

Episode 8

by Rob Vaux

The tall man had to stoop to enter the teepee. His lanky frame compressed like an accordion as he folded himself into the enclosed space set aside for him. He had to remove his hat, lest it dislodge the plethora of bones, rattles and beaded images that hung around the ceiling. He nodded sagely at the old Indian who sat cross-legged before him. His warm brown eyes belied the lines of concern that creased his face.

"I thought perhaps we should talk," he spoke solemnly.

"So my son has informed me," the Indian nodded. "And what would The Ghost want with a humble Dakota like me?"

The tall man started before smiling wearily. "I'm not sure where you and your people stand in the mix, and I want to make sure I don't eliminate any useful assets." The Indian started.

"Is that a threat?"

"Not unless you wish it to be. Please understand the problem that Gomorra is rapidly spiraling..."

"I understand Gomorra's problem all too well, Mr. Lane. More than you can possibly know." The tall man's brow furrowed.

"Then you can tell me what your 'Sioux Union' plans to do about it."

The old Indian leaned forward across the space that separated them.

"If I were to tell you, white man, I would be trusting you with a secret that could shatter the heavens."

"I've had my share of secrets."

"Not like this. This isn't Lincoln; you can't burn this town to the ground 'for the greater good'. Gomorra must fight the evil intact, or we will all be swallowed alive."

"How do you know this?" the tall man retorted.

"The same way you knew to talk to me instead of putting my teepee to the torch." Silence pervaded for a moment. "We are both on the same side, Mr. Lane. I have no wish to interfere in your 'clean-up' of Gomorra, and the being I wish to fight will invariably be weakened by your efforts."

The tall man considered it for a minute.

"I don't like loose ends. I could order you to help me..."

"You forget yourself, sir," the reply came sharp and sudden. "I am not a citizen of the United States, nor am I bound by their laws. My people and I need not obey your 'orders.'"

The tall man stopped for a moment. "I could order my men to drive you out," he said at last.

"Then Mr. Lane, you would have a fight on your hands. And a fight is something neither of us can afford."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," he replied thoughtfully. The Indian reached out and lightly grasped the tall man's wrist.

"You have nothing to fear from me, or from the men who follow me. I know of the abominations converging on Gomorra, and I applaud your efforts to destroy them. But I cannot join your fight. I am waiting for something far more terrible."

The tall man nodded quietly.

"If things go bad, I won't be able to guarantee your people's safety."

"If things go bad, Mr. Lane, my people's safety will be the least of your concerns."

A New Kind of Order

by Rob Vaux

"Democracy," Howard Findley muttered between clenched teeth. "Is precisely what we left Pennsylvania to get away from."

The well-dressed businessman stood at the wide window on one side of his office, brooding at the impressive view of the town square. Behind him on the desk lay a fresh copy of the Gomorra Gazette. "Hunter Wins!" was splayed in forty-point type across the top.

"We go to great lengths - extreme lengths - to bring the Sheriff's office into the fold, only to have it all scuttled by some well-meaning do-gooder with capped teeth," he spun in a sudden fury. "I will not have this company's future determined by an election! We've come too far to throw ourselves upon mob rule!"

Max Baine, standing hat in hand at the office door, flinched at his superior's words.

"He says he's going to find Coleman's killers, sir. Says it's his top priority."

"I've read the article, Maxwell!" he snapped. "Hunter's not going to find us. Even if he gets to MacNeil, I've already established plausible deniability. There's nothing connecting our burly hired gun to this office; if they catch him, he won't drag us down with him. Besides, with the evidence he planted, our new sheriff should be hot on the trail of someone entirely different..." Baine cleared his throat.

"Then what, may I ask sir, is the problem?"

"Good lord, you simpleton, can't you see?! The problem is that Hunter can't be controlled the way Bilton could. With Bilton in office, we could have had this town's resources in our pocket. Zoning laws, firearm laws, arrest warrants against whomever we chose! We could have kept the Maze Rats from coming ashore to resupply, had miners who refused to work sentenced and hung! But now, now we've this bright-eyed demagogue in office, with his own plans and own agenda! Do you understand what that means, Maxwell? Do you understand our position if we can't get use the sheriff's department to get our mining operations back on track?! We'll lose Gomorra, Maxwell. We'll lose the richest source of ghost rock on the continent. Would you like to go back to Pittsburgh and tell the owners that?!"

Baine grimaced slowly before his employer's rage.

"But hasn't the Collegium begun attacks against the Rats?"

"I wouldn't trust those cracked academics with a burnt match. Kang's men will feed them all to the sharks before the New Year."

Silence dominated the room for several moments.

"All right," Findley sighed at last. "Keep an eye on our new sheriff and make sure he keeps his nose pointed in the right direction. If we

can't use him against the Rats, we can at least let him run down Black Jack Jackson." He lowered himself into his chair and picked up the newspaper. "That's all Maxwell. Get out there and make sure no other headaches come crawling out of the woodwork." Baine nodded and vanished through the open door. Findley sighed again.

"Ye gods. All we want to do is make a little money..."

He opened the paper away from news of the election - he already had more of it than he could stomach - and towards the secondary story: more disappearances from the Elephant Hill Graveyard. The undead were apparently walking again, this time involved in a shootout with sheriff's deputies. Findley furrowed his forehead. He wasn't given over to wild speculation and didn't believe in the dead returning from the grave, but evidence to the contrary was becoming harder and harder to ignore. When they walked around in broad daylight, and shot at people in the street...

Findley began reading the article more closely, not sure why. As he pored over the facts and details of the case, the beginnings of an idea stirred in his brain.

"They're impervious to harm... they never stop or grow tired... they're never afraid and don't need payment of any sort..."

Suddenly, Findley's eyes lit up with revelation. He threw the paper aside and leapt to his feet, almost tripping over the bulk of his desk.

"Maxwell!" he yelled. "Maxwell, come back here!" His assistant turned as the excited businessman came bounding down the hall at him.

"Maxwell," Findley grinned evilly. "I want you to find Mr. Nicodemus Whateley, and bring him here. Tell him I want to make a deal..."

EPISODE 9

Episode 9

by Rob Vaux

Nate Hunter strode into the sheriff's office, the paper clutched in his hand.

"We've got 'em!" he called ecstatically. "We're finally going to nail those bastards." Corky looked up from the desk where she sat, slapping Templeton's hand away from her thigh. "Warwick signed it?"

"Signed, sealed and delivered. All we have to do is enforce it." he strapped on his six-guns.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Nate?" Corky tried to sound calm.

"Yes, I am." His blue eyes gleamed. "For Sheriff Coleman and for everything else they've done to this town."

Templeton rose to his feet and grabbed his nearby scattergun. "Black Jack's at the Fat Chance with most of his gang. We take 'em, hoss, we gotta take 'em ugly."

"Then we take them ugly. Go get Hector and T.C., and tell them to bring their weapons."

"Hot damn!" Templeton grinned. "We're finally gonna land on those uppity punks."

They strode across the town square, their guns gleaming in the noonday sun. The seven of them spread out in a wide line as they stalked towards the Fat Chance Saloon; they didn't want any of the Black Jacks making a run for it. With a glare the eagles would envy, Nate noticed a lone form break from the saloon and move towards one of the accompanying buildings. That would be Eddie Bellows, Jackson's long range sniper. MacNeil said he could handle Bellows.

As if on cue, Black Jack strolled casually out the doors of the Fat Chance, his gang in tow. Most of them were a vicious-looking lot, but Jack moved with a confidence - almost a nobility - that seemed out of place in Gomorra's dusty streets. He looked ready for Nate, and didn't even blink at the six gunmen backing the lawman up.

"Sheriff Hunter," he spoke smoothly. "How can we help you this fine afternoon?"

"You're under arrest, Jack. For the murder of J.P. Coleman."

Jackson sighed. "I suppose it won't make any difference to tell you I didn't do it."

"We have evidence that places you at the murder site."

"Supplied by who?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

Black Jack stopped as steel replaced the calm in his voice.

"You don't seriously think any evidence supplied by Sweetrock is valid."

"Why don't you come with me and we'll let the judge decide?"

"And get knifed in my cell? You may play fair, Sheriff, but Howard Findley sure as hell doesn't."

The guns behind Hunter clicked as rounds were chambered. They were answered by another round of clicks from Black Jack's gang. Hunter held up his hand for silence.

"Come with me Jack. I'll make sure you're treated fairly."

Jack's unwavering gaze met his.

"Let's cut the mincing, okay Hunter? I don't feel like being arrested today. My man Eddie is on the rooftop by now, and can take you down before you..."

A single pistol shot rang out in the air. A body fell from the nearby building.

"It seems your man Eddie has run into a little problem, Jackson."

Jackson's lip curl in anger and his fingers tickled his guns. "You sonsa..."

"Easy or hard, Jackie, your choice."

The moment froze in a heartbeat as the two groups looked to their leaders. Even the dust seemed reluctant to move, afraid to break the tension.

With a flash, Black Jack reached for his guns...

An Open Mind

by Rob Vaux

Katie saw the farmhouse on the horizon as the first rays of dawn tinged the sky. She still wasn't sure why she had come out, save that the man she wanted to talk to was here. Doing his job, she noted sourly, as good as a Yankee could anyways. How he reacted to her appearance would dictate the future of Gomorra. She spurred her horse faster, pulling her great coat close to hide the silver star pinned beneath it. If the Ghost were half as competent as he appeared, he'd already know she was a Ranger. But she didn't want to parade her status openly; engendering hostility with the damn Yankees was not her intent.

The house was closer now, and she could see the small figures surrounding it. There were five of them, apparently conducting a last-minute survey before setting the building to the torch. That was good. It meant the creature inside had been dispatched. The place was perfect for one of those misbegotten monstrosities - close enough to Gomorra to hunt there, far enough away to avoid detection. There wasn't another building within three miles; it could have watched someone approach from hours away. It must have put up a hell of a fight.

The Agents were an eclectic-looking bunch. The only one openly flaunting his affiliation was the hulking bald gunslinger dressed in the Agency's traditional black dusters. The others were a hodgepodge of Union fashion, from the blue-coated Army officer to the stout man in tweed snapping pictures of the entire scene. It was their leader she wanted, however. Tall and lanky, he stood on the porch and stared intently at her approach. She had never met the Ghost before, but from the look of him, all the stories were true. As she pulled the horse up, she saw in his eyes that this wasn't going to be easy.

"What do you want here, Rebel?" his gravely voice cut with scorn.

"I wanted to talk," she replied sternly.

"What could we two possibly have to talk about?"

"This town. The people in it. What your country and mine plan to do about it."

"Our country, Rebel," the scorn did not abate. "We're one nation. You blasted secessionists just haven't realized it yet."

Katie took care not to rise to the bait. "That argument's fifteen years old," she said carefully. "And we're not going to solve it tonight. What I have in mind is something more immediate."

The other Agents had taken notice of her presence, and began to saunter toward the porch. She fixed them with an iron gaze.

"I'm waiting," the Ghost rumbled.

"We're spending time and manpower watching each other, waiting for one of us to slip." She raised her voice to make sure all them heard it. "Sooner or later, it's going to come to blows. And as much as it pains me to admit it, neither of us can afford that. We were both sent here to destroy Gomorra's horrors. We can't do that if we're slaughtering each other."

The Ghost's face was unmoving. "And your solution to this... impasse?"

"An agreement not to push any farther. Call it a proactive cease-fire. We promise to stay out of each other's way until we can burn this town clean. The war, the rivalry, whatever you want to call it... that all stops until our mission here is done."

One of the Agents snorted derisively, while the rest hid grins behind their hands. Their leader was as implacable as ever, but she could sense he shared their sentiments.

"You can't be serious."

"I've never been moreso," her words were steel. "This is a question of pragmatics, sir. If we want to do our duty, then we need to put the war on hold. Our groups haven't started shooting at each other yet, but you and I both know it's just a matter of time."

The tall man didn't waver an instant. "A cease-fire may be in the interest of those bedraggled chicken thieves you call 'Rangers.' I'm certain you need all the help you can get. But I can assure you that the Agency has things well under control."

Now it was Katie's turn to snort. "Oh really? Tell me something, Yankee: if your men are so unstoppable, then why is Lord Grimely's Manor still standing? Why do the stories of Nasty Doc's keep persisting? Why..." this was the final blow. "Haven't you walked up to Nic Whateley and put a bullet through his grinning teeth?"

If anything, the Ghost became even more stoic.

"You know as well as I do that it's not that easy. A wise man will eat the elephant one bite at a time, not cram it down his throat as fast as he can."

"Which is all the more reason why we should work together. Don't you see? We're not enemies! Not here, not now! We both want the same thing, and we're both short the resources to do it! Fighting is a luxury neither of us can afford." she shot a pointed glare at the other Agents. "I don't want to have kill any of your men."

The Ghost nodded at his black-clad follower, who struck a match and tossed it through the window. Whatever was in there caught fast.

"I'm sorry, Captain." For just a moment, she thought she could see a resigned sadness in his eyes. "But it's too late for that. Too late by far." His face hardened. "Now I suggest you leave, before I remember which side you're on."

She started to open her mouth, then noticed the other Pinkertons fingering their guns. She brushed the handle of her own in response. For a moment, it looked like the bloodshed she had come here to prevent would claim them all. Then the Ghost gestured quietly, and his men relaxed. Katie regarded him silently.

"I'm sorry you feel that way." She turned her mount back towards town, giving him one last stare as she rode away.

"I'll see you around, Billy Yank."

The Ghost silently watched her ride off, ignoring the fire that bloomed behind him.

"Not if I see you first," he whispered at last.

Sam's Little Secret

by Frank Bustamante

The desert's light warm breeze felt as if some unseen creature was standing behind one's back and exhaling its earthy breath upon his neck. The voices of the desert also spoke with an eerie chorus that would soothe only the most insane of any that listened; as if pipes from some distant demonic plane had their notes carried in the breeze to the world of the living. In the distance, the silhouette of Gomorra's low skyline became more murky with each passing second as the waning light of the desert sun shrieked away from the coming night like a hunted animal trying to hide from a dangerous predator; the kind of dangerous predators that could only be brought forward by night's arrival. As twilight reached the booming mining town of Gomorra, three figures quickly ushered themselves into the nearing darkness of the desert surroundings.

After traveling about two miles out of town, the three figures rested. They were near their destination; a secret spot where they had recently buried some Indian braves that their family had brutally murdered. They wanted to play with the dead and subjugate their remains to even more vexation. For this family, this added up to an evening of frivolity and paganism. Leading the group was Nicodemus Whateley, one of the more sane members of his family. His skill in the arcane arts was only surpassed by Wilhelmina Whateley, the matriarch of their wealthy, insane and inbred family. His clothes were that of an eastern gentlemen, including white gloves, for he was one to never dirty his hands. Even during this trek, when he should have been

wearing boots, he insisted on loafers. He wore dark glasses to hide the misshapen corneas that would make one think that they may have been staring into the eyes of Satan himself. Normally covering his long strands of dark brown curls was a top hat, which he uncharacteristically left at home.

The next member of the group was Moses Whateley. He was the youngest member of the small band. He wore blue jeans with a shirt and straps. Though he was an original easterner, Moses had adjusted more to the lifestyle of the west than much of the rest of his family. He enjoyed playing the part of a rough and tumble cowboy. Moses' main distinctive feature was having large teeth that looked like a massive fang overbite. Even when keeping his mouth closed, one could still see the discolored ivory features. Moses was one of the few Whateley's that did not know the arcane arts of the huckster, hence he carried a six-shooter wherever he traveled.

The final member of this band was Saul Whateley, the younger brother of Nicodemus. Of all the members of the Whateley family, it was Saul who was considered the most unstable. He had been known to froth at the mouth and attack someone for no reason whatsoever, even a family member. There were only two people in the Whateley family that seemed to have any control over Saul: Nicodemus and Wilhelmina. Though Saul was an enraged soul, he did have the tainted gift of the arcane arts. If not for his constant battle to control his insanity, he might have become the most powerful huckster in the Whateley family. Even with his limited self-control Saul was a very formidable opponent for anyone.

After resting a few moments, they continued on their way to their final destination. The sky itself contained an eerie red tint from the desert dust that was being roused from its resting place by oncoming winds. And the moon seemed to be a blood red eye that was suspended in the void of space, where it watched over everything below it. As the winds began to pick up, it whipped the clothes of the three men and sent heavier pieces of dirt and debris all around. The weather seemed to be taking on a life of its own. Nicodemus began to concentrate. As the winds gained strength and seemed to be directly attacking them, he plucked glowing playing cards from the air. As he pulled each of the five cards the small hurricane slowly subsided until he pulled the last card, completing a poker hand of a full house, but the cards were three suicide kings and two queen of spades. The cards then vanished as if they never existed.

"That was good," Saul said as he came out from behind a rock. "You're getting better, but you had a bunch of the same cards and that could be bad." Nicodemus knew Saul's warnings to be true, but it was something with which he could not take the time to concern himself.

"Life's a risk my brother" said Nicodemus as he patted his brother on the back and bade him to continue to the location of their mass

grave. Moses brought up the rear. Aside from his obvious canine feature, Moses seemed to have hearing which was more acute than his other senses, leading one to think that maybe his branch of the family tree may have included a canine or two. With Moses in the group, there was no concern that someone could sneak up on them. As they were within reach of their destination, they heard the howl from a nearby distance. Immediately all three looked at each other and smiled. "The hunt is on!" Nicodemus clasped and rubbed his hands and Saul began to get highly agitated with anticipation. This was more than any of them could have hoped. "We wanted to play with the dead, but instead we'll play with a monster. A dangerous one at that".

"A monster!" was repeated by both Moses and Saul.

"First we have to make sure to catch the creatures attention. If you wouldn't mind my brother..." With his cue, Saul jumped on top of a large boulder and began to howl like an animal. After a few seconds Moses joined him. To Nicodemus, it was a concerto, and the audience would soon be arriving.

"Sam, you're such a swell guy that it always makes me wonder what someone like you is doing in a town like Gomorra?" Sam just smiled and continued walking Bob Bidwell out of the store. Sam hated being rude, but he was nearly at the point of shoving Bob out the door. Sam was not sure if he would get Bob Bidwell out before nightfall since the man seemed to be a never ending windbag that talked about nothing in particular. He quickly locked all the doors and windows and moved to the basement level of his store. Within his basement was a hidden room that contained a large iron cage and within it was a goat. He quickly moved through the secret door that lead to the cage and closed it behind him. Just as he was about to lock himself in the cage for the night, he began to spasm and fell to the ground.

"Damn you Bob!" were the last words spoken by Sam the General Store Guy.

Sam went through a transformation that turned him into one of the most feared creatures in the west, a Werewolf. Sam wasn't just any werewolf, he was a Razorback and this meant trouble, even more trouble than the typical canine-lycanthrope. A Razorback could be distinguished by the white silvery spine along its back, and any who that knew a single thing about werewolves, knew that this creature was something supernatural, unlike a normal werewolf. A Razorback was possessed and controlled by wild spirits when in this form. A manitou spirit had possessed the body when the person was in its lycanthrope form, which caused the spirit to be trapped somewhere within the person's soul when the possessed person was not in its were-form. This uncontrollable prison drives the manitou spirit to madness and turns what at one time may have been a calm calculating thinking demon into a rage that only knows hate and destruction.

The Razorback tore through the hidden wall in Sam's basement and moved up the stairs. It ripped through the clothes it wore with huge claws and teeth, leaving only Sam's workbelt with a feather duster hanging from its side. The creature quickly ransacked the store and broke through the rear door and headed out into the night. The salty warm air carried the scent of food in the direction of the desert and the creature had enough sense to keep away from the bright lights of the town. Its rage needed an outlet and it could sense that release in the darkness ahead. It howled with all its rage. It wanted to terrify its prey, for the hunt was more satisfying when it fed from its victim's fears. But the creature could have not been ready for what was ahead, and when it heard the responding howls, it became even more enraged. They mocked it, and for that there was only one penalty. Death would be slow and painful, as they would watch the creature harvest their organs and feast in front of their eyes.

Saul moved in behind a rock and pulled his own gun out of its holster. He then made a few gestures and a poker hand of three different sixes along with the Ace of Spades and the nine of hearts appeared from the air. As the cards disintegrated from Saul's hand, he spat on the nine of hearts. The hearts were a vile suit as far as Saul was concerned. The world around him then slowly steadied and everything in the surrounding area seemed to grow larger and more in focus. The creature would be an easier target for Saul's bullets. He performed the same magic on his cousin Moses and both waited for the creature to appear.

Nicodemus stood in the center of their selected playground and waited for their prey to arrive. It had been some years since he had captured and tortured a were-creature. He could remember the delight he experienced last time such an event had occurred. He knew the creature would be coming straight at him as soon as it sensed him. He once again made a slight motion with his hand and a new poker hand appeared. His body then began to fade from the scene, then just as it was about to disappear from sight, a second exact image of Nicodemus appeared. The new visible image stood in place, making slight motions to continue the illusion of truly existing. The other body seemed to fade entirely from the scene and became a shadow. Only the dark outline against the moonlight helped to determine where Nicodemus truly stood. A fragment of his lifeforce was required to create the wraith, which was now the bait. Nicodemus knew that when it felt pain, so would he. He was prepared for this. Pain was nothing that bothered the elder son of the Whateley family; in fact, he relished it.

The shadowed form of Nicodemus then cut the palm of his hand and tossed the blood drops to the ground. Within moments he began to pull card hands for each of the six blood drops. All but one of his incantations were successful and with each success he saw a giant deformed scorpion appear which each being just over two feet long.

One appendage contained a huge claw and the other was a clawed human-like hand. The creatures long bulbous bodies was separated into the head, which looked like the head of a newborn baby with six deep glowing red eyes with spiked tipped mandibles, the thorax, which housed four pair of legs which had strands of black hair hanging along the length of the legs, and finally there was the poisonous stinger, with its dark black icor seeping from the tip.

"My children, move into place and hide yourself and at my command, strike the beast". The five creatures moved into position around the wraith-like image of Nicodemus, then burrowed themselves into the ground, hiding their legs and tail, leaving only the childlike faces in plain sight for any to see. As they moved into place, all could hear the muffled cries of a newborn child coming from each of the vile creatures.

The Whateleys waited patiently for the beast to arrive. Nicodemus stood to the side, sure that it would not detect his presence. Both Saul and Moses continued to hide themselves on both sides of the clearing, Saul behind a rock and Moses hiding next to a huge tumbleweed that was nearby. All was still, even the slight breeze that seemed to begin to stir up just moments before had subsided; as if in anticipation for the oncoming trial.

Moments passed and the stillness of the hot desert air began to win the battle of nerves. Saul was using every ounce of self-control to not spring from his hiding place and begin shouting and shooting in all directions, but then they heard the crack of a twig and the attention of all the players once again focused on the deadly situation. Moses lifted his head to check out the surrounding area and was shocked to find a huge claw racking at his face as the huge beast jumped past him on a direct path with the wraith decoy. He barely moved his head in time to prevent its separation from his body. His right ear was the only casualty; being almost completely torn from the side of his head.

"You bastard!" screamed Moses. He lifted his pistol and fired into the creature. It ignored his shots.

Nicodemus stood in awe as the creature moved with a grace that equaled its ferocity. He instantly noted that the creature was much too big to be a normal werewolf, over eight feet tall. He and almost mistook the creature for a werebear, but then noticed the white streak on the creatures back. It was a Razorback.

"We are the hunted," he whispered to himself. As the creature moved in to strike the wraith, it suddenly stopped and looked directly at the true form of Nicodemus. In the mortal world of man there are very few things that frighten a Whateley, especially Nicodemus, and this creature was one of them. "Now my children!" And with his command, then large scorpion like creatures sprang and latched onto the hulking beast. Nicodemus quickly gestured once again and as each card appeared he quickly tossed them into the direction of the beast,

each growing in intensity as the rank of his poker hand increased; four Aces. The final card that struck sent a shockwave throughout the area. It stunned the creature and temporarily knocked the scorpions from their latched positions. Nicodemus became spent from the effort needed to cast his hex. If he did not recover soon he would probably be killed.

Saul sensed the dire situation. He knew his brother would not use such a powerful spell unless there was a need. He fired his shots into the beast then tossed his gun. The loud guttural sound that came from Saul's throat was something that could not have been imaged by anyone. The stunned beast froze for an instant. Saul charged the creature. As he charged the creature, he whispered a few words and threw his cards to the ground. Large fangs sprouted from Saul's mouth and his fingernails turned into razor-sharp talons. Saul Whateley charged without even thinking twice about his own life or the life of anyone else, including his brother. Saul Whateley saw in this beast an opportunity to rage like the true beast he was and no one was going to stop him.

As the creature was recovering from the harsh blow applied from Nicodemus Whateley, it sensed an oncoming foe. Just as Nicodemus shadowy body began to reappear, the werewolf struck his wraith-like form, causing much pain in Nicodemus. The true form of Nicodemus fell to the ground as his wraith-like double silently screamed and vanished from the scene. The dazed scorpions clamped once again onto the beast and struck with their stingers. The beast became even more infuriated. Saul tackled the beast, crushing one of the scorpions in the process.

Moses got to his feet and did his best to gather his wits. Through his blurred vision he saw Nicodemus scream and fall to the ground in pain. Though Saul cared for no one, including his family, Moses was a true patriot of the Whateleys and their causes and quickly rushed to his cousin's aid. He saw that Saul had the beast tangled in a brawl and hurried over to Nicodemus. "Can Saul handle that thing?" he asked Nicodemus. All Nicodemus could do was shake his head. "Are you alright?" he asked again. Nicodemus shook his head. Moses grabbed his bowie knife that was strapped to the side of his boot and charged into the fray. "Get out of here Nicodemus!"

The creature had managed to kill all the scorpions as it continued to fight off Saul. The creature's size was just too much for even Saul to handle, even if he was 6'2". But Saul seemed to be fighting the creature to a near standstill. After a few moments, the creature seemed to gain the upper hand and just as its claw had wrapped around Saul's neck and was about to snap it, the beast felt a sharp pain at the back of its shoulder. It howled in pain as it dropped Saul, who struggled to keep conscious. The Razorback turned and struck Moses with the back

of its hand sending the protective Whateley back ten feet into the air and unconscious before he even hit the ground.

The creature tried to reach the knife and remove it, but could not. Saul and the scorpions had left the creature bloody, cut and tired, but it would make Moses pay for his knife wound. It moved toward the unconscious Moses. As it was about to stomp its foot on Moses' head, it felt a sharp pain rise from its other calf. Saul had bit into the creature and had staked his next meal, which he devilishly chewed. The creature fell to the ground and kicked Saul in the head sending the younger Whateley brother to the land of nightmares.

The Razorback had just staggered to its feet when the first blast struck. The second was even stronger, and the beast knew it might not survive if it continued its fight with the remaining member of its prey, so it turned and limped into the night.

Nicodemus did his best to help both his brother and cousin. He performed arcane tricks and bandaged both with strips of cloth. All the while he wore a smile on his face. He had seen a razorback up close and lived to tell the tale. It would only make his reputation within the family grow. Someday, he would be in charge of the family and all would revere him as they do "mother" Wilhelmina.

"That was a razorback" said Nicodemus to his brother and cousin. "Some would say that we are lucky to be alive."

"To hell with that" said Saul. "I cut him good. I could've taken him!" Both Nicodemus and Moses shook their heads. "Next time I'll finish eating all that bastard!"

"I'm sure you will cousin," said Moses. "Can we go home now?"

As they began to move out of the area, Nicodemus noticed a leather belt, and on it was a feather duster. On the belt were the words: Sam's General Store. He was curious for a moment. He took the items and thought nothing more of it.

The next morning, it was all over Gomorra how Sam's General Store had been ransacked by some deadly creature and it had attacked Sam and had left him barely alive. He had been naked and covered in blood, with his clothes all torn off.

This news reached Nicodemus Whateley and he decided that he was in need of some matches, this caught other family members by surprise since he could create fire with but a thought. He excused himself from their presence and took with him a broken belt and feather duster.

As he reached the store, Nicodemus noticed Bob Bidwell talking to Sam as he tried to clean. Bob did not even seem to help or have a care for Sam obvious struggle, since both his leg and shoulder had been bandaged. "Maybe Bob has a bit of Whateley blood in him after all." Thought Nicodemus, but a second later he recanted the thought " By the dark one, I sincerely hope not!" As Bob Bidwell saw Nicodemus Whateley walk into the store, he stopped talking and excused himself.

He gave Nicodemus a polite nod as he went out the door. There were rumors of Whateley family members hunting folk that had been rude to them. Nicodemus gave a slight acknowledgment to Bob as he left, but he concentrated on the person before him.

"Good afternoon," Sam Said. "Can I help with anything. It's a bit of a mess, but I'll do my best".

Nicodemus nodded. "My good man. I've seen your best, and trust me, you have the full respect of Nicodemus Whateley" He then handed the broken belt and feather duster to Sam. "Your secret is safe with me", and as Nicodemus turned around to leave, he stopped himself, "At least until I feel I have no use for you or you cross me". Nicodemus Whateley did not know if he had found an ally or an enemy, but either way - he did not really care. He continued on his way, as if he had not a care in the world.

INTERLUDE

Interlude

"Our wait is over Joseph. We're stickin' it to the Whateley, and we're doin' it right now!"

Little Running Bear towered above the old Sioux like a mountain of rage. The braves around him - young men mostly, brandishing ugly weapons - nodded their heads in agreement. Behind them, the Sioux encampment lay in ruins. Teepees and lodges burned with fitful intensity; others lay scattered like sticks after a storm. The scent of blood was in the air and carrion birds had gathered in the growing gloom. Somewhere, a woman was sobbing.

Joseph Eyes-Like-Rain gauged his words carefully before responding.

"Vengeance on the Whateley family will not achieve our purpose. It will only blunt it."

"To hell with our 'purpose!'" Bear snarled. "They ran their tamed demon through our camp like a damn tornado. It killed six people! Are you sayin' we should just sit back and take it?!"

"No. But ask yourself why it came now and not earlier. Ask yourself why it chose helpless targets instead of those that could fight back. Was it to hurt us? Or to draw us into an ill-timed and emotionally-driven attack?"

"Does it matter?" a brave in the crowd responded. Bear nodded fiercely and began again.

"We've been sitting here, watchin' this town sink lower and lower, because you said we shouldn't act. That's fine." He thumped his

warclub on the ground for emphasis. "But when somebody pushes me, I push back! And the Great Spirit help anyone in my way!"

"Listen to me, Iroquois. We must conserve our strength. You don't know the horrors that await us at the end of this."

"Wrong! I seen a little girl with her guts ripped out today Joseph. That thing killed her for them because they thought it would be funny! I don't stand there and take that for nobody! Not for you, not for this town, and not for those monsters and their sick jokes!"

"Please, Bear," Joseph shook his head. "Please do not do this."

"You said it yourself, Joseph. We gotta take those inbred devils one way or another. We're just gonna do it sooner rather than later!"

"You cannot kill them without help. You cannot do it by tearing our Union to pieces."

"It's too late to play it coy! You want to wait until the sun falls for an evil that never comes, you do that." He turned slightly towards the crowd and raised his voice. "Me, I'm gonna cut me a Whateley heart out tonight!"

A chorus of shouts answered his call. Bear turned on his heels and sprinted towards the camp entrance, his club raised high above his head. In an angry cloud of dust, the other men followed him.

"Stop it! Can't you see that they intended this?! It's just what they want! IT'S JUST WHAT THEY WANT!!!"

But for all his shouts, the braves continued to tear out of the camp, sending whoops and war cries into the evening air. His wrinkled hands clenched in frustration as he watched them go. Presently, he felt a comforting presence behind him, and a touch linger on his shoulder.

"They're just angry, father," John Blood-Knife soothed. "It will be all right."

"No, John," he whispered, his eyes filling with tears. "It won't."

Last Dance Before an Execution

by Steve Crow

Cort Williams stepped into the lobby of the Golden Mare Hotel as he stepped into any unfriendly territory, with three glances. The first was a quick one to take a body count. One woman, behind a desk. No threat.

The second was a bit more caution, to determine any hiding spots that might conceal a bushwhacker. The third glance assessed potential exits: both those the original architects had intended, and those they had not.

Satisfied, Cort stepped up to the front desk, scrutinizing the woman there more closely. Mid 30's, although attempting to appear younger. Blonde hair, good looks. Cort had caught a glimpse of Lilith Vandekamp shortly after he had first arrived in Gomorra. She had been

pale then: now she was bone-white. That, combined with her blank stare and near-immobile manner, leant her the appearance of a china doll.

"I'm looking for a girl. Chinese. I'm particular, and I hear you've got a good one."

The woman blinked, slowly, then turned her head to face the gunfighter. Her mouth dropped open. "No customers until nightfall. Come back then."

Cort frowned, and scrutinized the woman more carefully. No holes on the neck, but he knew from hard experience how little that meant. He withdrew a wad of Union currency from beneath his duster. "I'll pay top price."

"No customers until nightfall. Come back then."

This would be harder than he thought. Reaching into another pocket, Cort withdrew a highly polished .45 caliber bullet. He held it up in his right hand, into one of the shafts of light that filtered into the lobby through the windows. As he began to twirl it between his fingers, the light reflected off into Vandekamp's eyes.

She blinked, as if awakening from a nap. "Ummm...?"

Cort tossed the wad of currency onto the counter in front of the woman. "The China woman. Which room?"

"Room... room 22." Hesitant as if she was afraid it would bite her, Vandekamp took the money without counting it and thrust it through a slot in the counter top.

Cort tipped his hat and strode up the stairs without another word to her. For such a large man, he moved quietly, and the thick carpet further muffled his footsteps. Still, he knew that the prey he sought possessed greater-than-human senses, and no other noises emerged from behind the doors he passed, noises that might further conceal his passage.

Moving like a ghost (although not 'The Ghost', Cort thought to himself with a moment's irony), the gunslinger moved to Number 22. There was nothing to distinguish it from the other second-floor rooms. Without a moment's hesitation, Cort kicked in the door and strode in.

The woman standing by the window spun. If she had been a mere human, she might have mistaken the sudden appearance of the gun in Williams' hand for magic. Her senses and reflexes were greater than human, even during the daylight hours, however. She knew who had entered her room, however, and knew that in her somewhat weakened state, her abilities would not be sufficient to deal with her new visitor.

"Cort?"

The gunslinger sighed, wearily. "Meizhu." Just as he had suspected.

The prostitute was indeed Chinese, and if Lilith had been pale, this woman was paler still. Her dark hair and blood-red slash of a mouth helped the effect further, lending vivid contrast to her skin. Her pale

white undergarments further accentuated the effect that some ghost-like creature stood before him.

"Have you come to kill me, then? And with a mere gun?"

Her English had improved since their last meeting, Cort noted.

"Blessed bullets, Meizhu. They'll kill you as quick and sure as a stake. Or whatever it is that will do you in."

Meizhu made no effort to defend herself, knowing it would do no good in any event. Taking a small, dainty step to the side, she leaned back against the wall next to the window. "Then get it over with, and quickly."

"Is that what you want?"

The prostitute feigned a sigh (All the better to disguise her true nature, Cort observed dispassionately). "I know not to expect sympathy from you. Not after Shan Fan."

"I didn't have a choice."

"And if you had known what powers I would embrace as a result of your departure?"

Williams shrugged. "No choice. So do your new powers aid Kang?"

Meizhu smiled sardonically. "They serve myself, and no other. Was that what drove you from me? Your pride that another man 'owned' me?"

"Like I said," Cort replied tersely, "Duty."

"And now 'duty' brings you back to me. How ironic. So what are you waiting for? Doesn't your 'duty' dictate that you kill me?"

"Would you kill me, given the chance?" the gunslinger asked in return.

The prostitute pondered his question, but only for a moment. "No. You, never. The people of this town, though, are scum, and a few more dead bodies will never be noticed."

"We noticed them. And now it's time to put an end to it." Cort raised the pistol, and sighted carefully down its barrel, pulled back the hammer...

...then paused. "Your choice, Meizhu. I won't do it, but the ones I work with will be coming for you. Slate and Rocescu won't give you any sympathy. Forty-eight hours is all I can give you."

"What if I don't want sympathy? Yours or theirs?"

"Then you'll get none, rest assured of that. This is the best I can do. If you want to... 'live', then take my advice and get out of Gomorra. Now."

"And if I don't?"

Cort shrugged. "That's your choice, then. Not mine."

Meizhu sneered. "How convenient. Your 'duty' leaves you blameless in abandoning me, and now you clean your hands of me by leaving my execution to someone else."

"It's all I have to offer."

The prostitute sighed, as if weary of the whole situation. "A handful of dust is all you ever had to offer." She considered for a moment, then nodded to the pristine bed. "I've said it once, and I shall say it again. By my ancestors, I swear you are safe with me. Would you join me in one last dance?"

"Before the execution?" Cort replied. "I don't think so, Meizhu. There's no going back. I'm sworn to my service, and you've sworn yourself to... whatever." The gunslinger stepped back to the door, still careful never to let his eyes or his gun leave the woman before him.

"Forty-eight hours, Meizhu. That's all you've got." And with that, he slipped out the door, disappearing quietly.

The prostitute turned back to contemplate the view out the window. The eaves of the Golden Mare and her north facing allowed her to look out on the world in daylight without exposing herself to the damaging rays of the sun.

"It's all I've ever had," she sighed, making no effort to pack her few belongings.

A Light Snack

by Rob Vaux

Nicolai Rocescu checked his pocket watch against the great clock in Gomorra's town square. Two hours before sunset. If Vandecamp knew where the fiend was staying, he could find it and pound a stake in its heart well before then.

The Ghost had admonished him about working alone, but he wasn't interested in back up. Not this time. The Americans didn't understand the delicacy of vampire hunting. Like a hare or a deer, the quarry could be spooked very easily; a missed step or misspoken word could alert them to the danger. And an aware vampire was a deadly vampire. Let Slate kick down the doors and flash-fry everything in sight. He'd take care of the Golden Mare's problem without the fireworks, thank you very much.

He had approached Vandecamp a short while ago, and asked her to help. She had scoffed then. "A vampire in my den?! You're inhaling peyote!" But last night, when one of her girls appeared shivering at his doorway, her tune had changed. Now, she wanted protection, she wanted to be saved from this thing which stalked her halls. "Please come, Mr. Rocescu," he had been told. "It may already know." He had smiled at the harlot's desperation.

As he crossed Main Street towards the Golden Mare, he reminded himself to ask about the girls. He didn't believe that a vampire could live in one of the busiest brothels in town without acquiring a few thralls. The ones who looked pale, the ones who stay out of the sun...

it shouldn't be too difficult to sniff them out. And after their mistress was dispatched, they would fall like dominoes.

He strolled up on the porch and stepped through the doors without knocking. The entryway was tastefully decorated and dimly lit, as most brothels were. A plethora of doorways lead deeper into the building, allowing girls to lead their johns off quietly. No wonder the creature liked it.

Vandecamp stood on the stairwell, looking fretful and nervous. The broad, older woman wore a black dance hall outfit, adorned with a father to mark her status as madam. She sighed with relief at Rocescu's appearance, and moved towards him as the door swung slowly shut.

"Thank God you're here, Mr. Rocescu. I'm sorry I ever doubted you."

"Yes, yes. No time for apologies." He knelt down into his satchel and produced a hammer and wooden stake. "You said you've found the creature's lair?"

"In the cellar, I believe, under the floorboards." She motioned behind her as he closed his bag.

"Excellent. That gives me plenty of time. Now listen, Miss Vandecamp, this is very important. Have any of your girls been acting strangely lately. Staying in their rooms, not leaving during the daylight hours, anything like that."

"We all keep out of the sun these days." The tone in her voice hardened quietly. "But you required some special adjustments."

For the first time, he noticed the velvet curtains covering the windows.

They came from every entryway, jennies and jezebels with blood on their chins. His eyes widened as they closed in around him, and the first hints of fear tugged at his throat. It seemed his quarry had been busier than he believed. Lilith smiled, and the sharp incisors gleamed through her lips.

"Don't scream, Mr. Rocescu. My girls are as gentle as lambs."

Rocescu chose to ignore her advice, but the velvet muffled his screams admirably.

MOUTH OF HELL

Mouth of Hell

by Rob Vaux

The Fat Chance Saloon was boisterous and crowded that night, but Sheriff Nate Hunter didn't notice any of it. Ensconced in a darkened table, an unopened bottle of whiskey in front of him, he

surrounded himself in a pall of gloom to protect him from the fierce joy of the other customers. He didn't feel like celebrating.

In his hands he held a deputy's badge, the battered surface broken with drops of stained blood. He turned it over and over again in his hands, trying to bore it into the table with his eyes. Maybe if he stared at it long enough, it would go away.

The gunfight with the Blackjacks was a bloody one to be sure. None of his deputies had escaped without taking lead, and only Tao Cheng was healthy enough to avoid a visit from Doc Branson. Hardly surprising, considering the gunman they were up against. The good news was that they were all fairly superficial injuries - a minor miracle - and with one exception, the law dogs had been bandaged up and back on the street within a few days.

With one exception.

He closed his eyes to clench back tears and shot back once more to that dusty street, facing off with Black Jack and his crew

Corky...

Jackson had pulled his guns faster than anyone Nate had seen. The cocksure outlaw had tried to stop the fight before it could get started, and aimed both his pistols right at the sheriff's heart. Nate barely had time to realize the danger before the gunshots went off. And then, in an act more instinctive than heroic, she had pushed him out of the way. The bullets meant for his chest had slammed into hers, spinning her into his arms like a top. She looked up at him and he knew she was going even before the scarlet blooms appeared on her shirt. But it wasn't her mortal injury that filled his heart with such pain, it wasn't the fact that she has sacrificed herself to save him. It was the way she went. No screaming, no crying, no shock at rapidly approaching oblivion. Just three quiet words, whispered calmly before she lay still forever.

"I love you."

What happened next was hazy. He remembered howling in rage and standing unmoving in the middle of the street. The hot lead of friend and foe alike whizzed past him, oblivious to his mindless agony. He seemed to recall drawing his guns and returning fire, but he couldn't say who he had hit or even if he had done any good.

Black Jack was hit, that much he could recall. The outlaw had been caught right in the shoulder, which had silenced his guns before they could do any more damage. The last he saw of him, Victor Navarro was dragging him into One-eyed Ike's trying desperately to escape the firestorm before it engulfed them both. Somehow, the two of them vanished from the building without a trace.

And then it was over, the square littered with bodies, the calls of wounded drowning out the blood pounding in his ears. Corky lay on his lap like a pile of logs, the heat of the day unable to warm her stiffening body.

In the corner of the Fat Chance, he covered her badge and tried to make it go away.

There were four Blackjacks stretched out in the morgue. The rest has been scattered to the winds, their strength broken forever. Without their former mates, they would be easy pickings for the bounty hunters who already scurried to claim Sweetrock's price on their heads. But that wasn't enough. It wouldn't make his grief any less palpable and it wouldn't give the woman who loved him a second chance at life. He didn't want another man to claim her killer - one who hadn't watched her die or heard those wonderful, horrible words on her lips. That was his job, and his alone. He would cut Black Jack's heart out with his own two hands and lay it on her grave. He owed her nothing less.

"You're a dead man, Jackson," he whispered to the dark around him. "You just don't know it yet."

Friends and Promises

by Rob Vaux

"Jackie..."

Black Jack stirred from a troubled sleep. The wound in his shoulder was aching again and someone was calling his name. It was probably a dream; the voice sounded like Spike's.

"...Jackie... you there Jackie...?"

It wasn't a dream. Someone was calling. Jack stumbled towards consciousness, then winced as the throbbing wound brought him fully awake. The crawlspace beneath the Mission House was not the best place to spend the night, even without bandages. He shook his head and opened the trapdoor a crack. The kitchen above was deserted, the little pot-bellied stove lit as always. The calls were coming from the nave, and now the sound of footsteps accompanied them. Jack produced a pistol in his good hand, and moved forward.

"It's odd," he thought, rounding the altar quietly. "That voice really does sound just like..."

"Jackie? I think I hurt my head, Jackie..."

Spike Dougan staggered slowly up the pews, still clad in the torn shirt they buried him in. He stared vacantly from side to side, with the same childish grin Jack remembered, and his eyes had a look of untold wonder in them. As he lurched up the aisle, he knocked the pews aside like toys, sending Bibles flying into the air. But none of that concerned Black Jack. What concerned him was the blackened bullet hole in the middle of Spike's forehead: the hole he himself had put there.

"There you are!" Spike called, his face brightening. "I been looking for you all over Jackie!"

"Sorry... sorry Spike," Jack returned, hiding his growing unease. "But you found me now!"

"I sure did. Hee-hee. You been hidin' from me Jackie?" He drew closer and now Jack could see that the back of the man's skull had shattered. Chunks of grey brain matter remained in his pan, pulsing grotesquely in the dim candlelight. Jack fought the urge to retch.

"No...no. It's just that I... we've been having some trouble." He cocked his gun.

"You went an' left me on the street. I woke up an' I was all alone. You didn't wait for me?"

"I couldn't," he swallowed and narrowed his eyes. "We had things to do."

"I remember I fell down. I think that's where I hurt my head. You didn't help me up."

"Like I said, we had to..."

"Why didn't you help me up, Jackie? I was hurt."

"I know, but I figured a big guy like you..."

The puppy-dog look in Spike's eye began to fade, replaced by a faint glow.

"I hurt my head, Jackie. Do you remember how I hurt my head?"

Jack raised the pistol slowly.

"I can't say as I do." The glow in Spike's eyes was brighter now, and his face began to twist.

"I think you hurt my head, Jackie. Why'd you do that?"

"I don't remember Spike." The pistol went off with a loud crack, followed by three more. Jack couldn't fan the hammer with his weak arm, but he fired quickly enough. Spike staggered backward as the bullets slammed into his chest...

...and kept coming. His smile cracked into a snarl and he spoke with a thundering voice that had no place on human lips.

"Why'd you have to do that Jackie? Now I'm gonna kill you."

Jack backed up against the altar, trying desperately to reload. The chamber fell from his fumbling fingers and agony shot through his shoulder as he bent down to recover it. The thing in Spike Dougan's form careened toward him, all traces of humanity vanished. Jack closed his eyes and braced himself for the blow.

It never came. A shotgun blast caught the Harrowed outlaw from behind, obliterating the front of his skull to match the back. Spike's face vanished in a spray of red and his clenched fists fell limply to his sides. The now-headless body crashed to the ground before Jack, revealing the concerned face of the church's pastor at the head of the aisle. Father Juan Navarro clenched the smoking shotgun like a rosary, his eyes flinty and unmoving. Jack breathed a sigh of relief.

"Debitum Naturae," the priest muttered. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

"I thought you never killed anyone, Father."

"I don't. Señor Dougan has been dead for some time."

"Yeah," Jack stared wide-eyed at the corpse, allowing the shock to settle in for the first time. "He... he really was dead, wasn't he?"

"I'm afraid so. Are you hurt?"

"I'll live. I'm a little more concerned with the fellow I killed last month showing up and asking me why I did it."

"It's worse than that," Navarro's face was creased with concern. "Señor Dougan is not an isolated case, I fear."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that this is the start of something more. The dead returning to life. Monsters walking the streets. The legions of Hell, preparing to make Gomorra their own."

Jack snorted. "Now wait a minute Father. This town isn't exactly Bethlehem, but I wouldn't..."

"You haven't been on the streets lately. You haven't seen the fear in the people's eyes."

"That doesn't..."

"Then explain what just happened here."

Jack considered for a minute.

"I can't," he conceded at last.

"I know. I was as incredulous as you Señor. But something happened here a few nights ago that changed my mind." He gestured back towards the door. A small huddled figure stepped tentatively into the light, his bearded face glancing nervously from side to side.

"This is Humphrey Walters," Navarro explained. "I'm sure you know the name. He has something to tell you, and I want you to listen very carefully..."

"It's preposterous! Complete horse manure!" Jackson stood up from the pew the trio were clustered around, and threw up his hands.

"That's what I used to think," Walters giggled maniacally. "But then I saw the light."

"You're crazy! He's crazy, Juan. You know that!"

"He may be mad, but that doesn't mean he's wrong." The priest spoke with quiet authority.

"You actually believe this?! That the mother lode is actually a gateway to hell, and that it's resting beneath Lord Grimely's?!"

"Yes. Consider the evidence."

"Consider the source! With all due respect, Mr. Walters, you're deranged!"

"Ever wonder why?" the madman snickered. "I used to. But now I know better."

"I don't believe this!" Jackson shouted.

Juan put his hand on the outlaw's shoulder. "If you won't believe me, at least trust me. I'm not a fool, nor am I given to wild speculations. And I'm telling you that something fearsome has its eye on Gomorra."

Jackson studied him for a moment. "Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that all this is true, and that some demon is on his way here to drag us all to perdition. What do you expect me to do about it?"

"Help us stop it. You and your gang."

"Gang? I don't have a gang anymore. You and your brother, that's my gang."

Juan looked at him pointedly. "Then ask the sheriff's department for help."

Jackson burst out laughing. "Now I know you're cracked!"

Juan said nothing. The laughing slowly stopped.

"They killed my whole gang!" Jack spat. "Laid four guys out dead - one of them shot in the back I might add!"

"Such are the hazards of your profession. It's time to move past that."

"No! Absolutely not!"

Juan looked at him.

"They'll kill me if I show my face!" Jack shouted.

Juan said nothing.

"Hunter's got my men's blood on his hands! I'll see this town in hell before I trust him!"

"Are you sure about that?" Navarro asked quietly. Jack sighed.

"It's coming, my good fellow," Walters whispered. "As sure as the sun shines."

The outlaw looked at the two men, from one face to the other. Their eyes spoke volumes. He sighed again and sat down.

"Hunter won't listen to me."

"He will if he understands the stakes." Juan was patient. "Don't you see? This is the cause of it! You and Sweetrock, the Collegium and the Maze Rats, Federals and Confederates! This entire town is tearing at each other's throats! It brings the unholy ones here, like sharks to blood. What happened to Señor Dougan will continue, growing worse and worse... until we let go of our hatred and realize who the true enemy is!"

"I'm... I'm sorry Father," Jackson shook his head. "It's all just too much to swallow. I know you mean well. I now you want us to turn the other cheek. But I just can't believe it. I need to see some real proof before I shake hands with the men who want me dead."

"The proof lies there before you," Navarro gestured at Dougan's corpse. "But if you need more, I think that can be arranged." He stood up. "Tomorrow night, a man is coming here, a man who saved me from creatures I can scarcely describe. Speak to him, listen to what he has to say. If he can't convince you... I'll look elsewhere for help."

"One man can do all that?"

"You haven't met him. I don't trust Austin Stoker, but he knows what we face," Navarro paused.

"And he can show you what you need to see."

Street Justice

by Rob Vaux

The doors to the Buffalo Chip Saloon exploded off their hinges, hurtled across the street and embedded themselves in the opposite wall. Windows shattered and drunkards dove for cover while a gleeful cackle followed quietly in their wake. Watching from up the street, Sheriff Nate Hunter was in no mood to laugh.

He turned from the soiled dove he had been admonishing in time to see the doors pinwheel across the thoroughfare, just missing a pair of gunslingers as they struggled to remain upright. Above the screams of the crowd, the cackling came as clear as a bell. His eyes hardened at the sound.

"Just what I need," he muttered.

He strode quickly and purposefully towards the Buffalo Chip, admonishing the fleeing patrons to keep calm. A muffled crash came from the saloon, and the cries increased. Glancing quickly through the crowd, he hoped for a glimpse of a deputy and found none. Guess I do this alone, he thought to himself. The people kept retreating, although a few gawkers seemed to be looking for safe places to watch. As long as they kept clear of the saloon, he was willing to let them. "In any situation," Coleman once told him. "Concentrate on what you can change and ignore what you can't." Onlookers, it seemed, would be inevitable at this point.

Even from the street, the damage inside the Buffalo Chip looked severe. Chairs had been smashed, tables overturned in a shambles. A series of long scorch marks was etched into the wall, and the second story banister was dangling precariously on a single support beam. A whirl of combat could be seen towards the back, but many patrons were slumped unconscious, or nursing injuries. All of that passed through Hunter's mind in a blink, but what caught his attention was the smiling man standing in the smoldering remains of the front door.

"Sheriff Hunter!" Erik Zarkov exclaimed. "Lovely to see you."

The Collegium professor appeared unperturbed by the chaos behind him. His white lab coat flapped casually in the breeze, while wisps of smoke rose from the wild blonde hair framing his face. Black goggles hid the man's eyes, but his toothy grin betrayed his emotions. His phlogostonic deatomizer - the dreaded mad scientist's weapon that gave the hardest gunslinger pause - smoked casually in his hands.

"You want to tell me what the hell you think you're doing?" Hunter barked. He had an easier time intimidating people after Corky died.

"Citizen's arrest, sheriff. The gentleman in question had become surly with some of the other patrons, and my companions and I felt obliged to intervene."

"One guy did this?"

"Unfortunately, he had friends."

The window to their left crashed outward as a cowboy flew bleeding into the street. Behind him, another three had a pale, sickly looking man by the shoulders, and were struggling to force him down. He wasn't giving easily.

"Looking good Gunther!" Zarkov called without looking back. Hunter moved forward.

"I'm stopping this right now."

"I... wouldn't get involved, sheriff. Mr. Hapworth and I have things well in hand."

"Don't tell me what to do, Zarkov." He tried to push past him, but the scientist moved to block the door. The smile took on a harder tone.

"This is our problem, sheriff, not yours."

"You're destroying property, disturbing the peace and guilty of assault. You move right now, or I'll have you arrested."

"Oh, you don't want to do that. Mr. Hapworth wouldn't take it at all well. Besides, we're on the same side."

Hunter's eyes narrowed. "That's right, you're 'protecting the streets' now, a self-appointed position if I'm clear." He leaned in close and lowered his voice to a menacing hiss.

"You think I don't know what you're up to? You think I don't see you trying to pull this town out from under me?"

"Until you've demonstrated proper control over Gomorra, it behooves us to defend ourselves as we see fit."

"Your vigilante campaign has caused more destruction than any two outlaw gangs. You've got people afraid to leave their houses!"

"That's the point. Fear breeds obedience, which creates order. And order is a common goal of both of us."

"You're wrong. You want order at all costs. I just want what's right."

"'Right' is a tricky term, Hunter. Your predecessor didn't do what's 'right' by Mr. Fountaine. So we're doing it for him."

A crash sounded from inside the Buffalo Chip. Zarkov's companion had lifted the player piano from the corner and brought it down on his attackers like a piece of driftwood. It smashed apart with an atonal clang, sending coils of wire and broken keys scattering across the room. His assailants lay unmoving beneath the mess.

Hunter snarled and tried to push through the door, but again, Zarkov blocked the way.

"For God's sake, he's killing them!"

"He's doing no such thing. Besides, people will say they had it coming."

The sheriff stepped back, his hand falling to his gun. Almost unconsciously, the deatomizer pivoted in his direction.

"I don't want trouble," Zarkov clipped.

"Then get out of my way!"

"No."

"Dammit, man, can't you see what you're doing? There are good people in this town! Decent folks you're scaring to death!"

"They have nothing to fear from us, sheriff. Nor do you, as long as you respect our right to defend ourselves."

"To hell with your right, and to hell with you!"

"Well, you'll just have to bring us before the judge then... oh, that's right, you can't! How goes the hunt for Warwick's killer, by the way?"

Hunter's ears flushed red, and his hand itched the pistol butt.

"Not funny," he whispered.

"I'm not trying to be, my dear man. But the fact remains that you have too much to worry about without adding us to the list. There's a killer out there, picking off your deputies. Mr. Jackson has yet to be found, and I imagine he's quite upset at you. And all those strange stories coming from the Maze... monsters, zombies, Lord knows what. To say nothing of all the 'good people' in this town who would love to see you dead. You're a good man, sheriff. But Gomorra's falling apart. Like or not, you need us."

Hunter froze as the words sunk in. Slowly, the fire in his eyes dimmed.

"This is a bar fight," Zarkov admonished. "Nothing more."

Hunter nodded grudgingly. Behind them. Gunther Hapworth had dispatched his last opponent, dusted off his clothes, and recovered his battered stovepipe hat. The show, it appeared, was over.

"All right," Hunter clenched. "As you say, a bar fight. But your vigilantism ends now. I'm back here in five minutes with my deputies; we're locking the west side down. You're still here, I'm arresting you. And tell Hardinger if your crew pulls any stunts like this again, I'm coming after all of you."

Zarkov laughed, not unkindly. "If you feel that is your duty, you're certainly welcome to try."

Hunter met his gaze unwaveringly, then turned to go. He didn't notice the cowboy in the street, the one Hapworth had thrown through the window. The man rose with a snarl of hate, and pulled a pistol from his belt. His gun barrel gleamed in the soft moonlight, and Hunter caught the glint out of the corner of his eye. Even as he turned, he knew he was too late to prevent the shot.

But it never came. A beam of pure energy flew from the doorway of the Buffalo Chip, crossing the space in a heartbeat. It engulfed the man's six-gun with eerie accuracy, bathing it in a shaft of pure light. When it faded, the pistol was gone - along with the hand that held it. The cowboy looked incredulously at the cauterized stump of his forearm, then toppled backwards, unconscious. Hunter gaped at the sight.

"Targeting sight. Gift from a friend. I know you wouldn't approve if I flash-fried the miscreant."

"You..."

"Oh, I'm sorry, we're supposed to be gone. Can't have a vigilante watching your back." He waved cheerfully, then ducked out of the doorway to follow his companion into the night.

The sheriff declined to return the wave.

Traitors

by Rob Vaux

"Nashhhhhh..."

The hissing whisper shot him from his sleep like a bolt. Instantly, his gun was in his hand, sheets thrown back to the dark. Moonlight streamed across his modest bedroom, stretching shadows across the foyer and bathing the floor in an eerie glow. There was no sign of the speaker.

"Who's there?" Nash Bilton barked, cocking his pistol for emphasis. Silence greeted him.

In one smooth motion, he had bounded across the room, taking a defensive position beside the doorway. He wouldn't give the interloper an easy target.

"You can turn tail now, punk, and I won't unload this in your gut. You and I both know I'm twice the gunman you are."

"You sure about that?" the sharp hiss carried across the moonlight to where he crouched. That tore it. Reaching behind him, he grasped the greatcoat hanging on a nearby peg, then tossed it through the open doorway. Any nervous trigger fingers would make themselves known the minute they spotted it.

To his surprise, he heard no gunshots. Instead, a sharp laugh greeted him, low and biting.

"I know that trick, Nash. We used it to flush out the Thompson gang, remember?"

Bilton started, his resolve wavering for the first time.

"How did you know about that? The only people there are all dead now!"

"I say again: you sure about that?" There was something in the tone, a diction to the voice that nagged at him. He knew the owner, knew him very well.

Cautiously, taking care not to step into the moonlight, he glanced into the main room of his flat. Across from him stood the front door, thrown wide open in the moonlight. The empty Gomorra street could be seen through the tall form dominating the entrance. Its hands dangled empty at its side, no weapon in ready sight. The shadows hid

its face, but the tall frame and wide shoulders were unmistakable. Bilton gaped incredulously.

"... Coleman...?" he breathed, trying to hide the shock.

"You've been a bad boy, Nash. Not the sort of thing I encourage in my deputies..."

"Coleman... Jesus, what happened to you?"

"Howard Findley and his attack dog happened. Or weren't you at the board meeting where that was discussed?"

Sweat beaded Bilton's forehead. The idiots hadn't put him down. They hadn't put him down and now he was back to even the score.

"J.P., listen, I don't know who you've been talking to, but I didn't know..."

Something twitched on the form's corner, and Bilton reacted. Quick as a whip, his gun came up, the barrel spat fire into the interloper. He watched the bullets strike him chest, saw him shudder from the impact and take a step back. But he didn't fall, he didn't even seem that heard, and as the smoke rose from the bullet holes, he heard that awful grating laugh again.

"Nice try."

As his eyes widened, Nash saw what had twitched in the sheriff's hand. It was a scorpion, black and shiny in the moonlight. It dropped down from Coleman's sleeve and scuttled across the floor. Nash backed up slowly as realization dawned. It seemed the idiots had put him down after all. He just wouldn't let it take.

Like a crack of lightning, Coleman leapt at his former deputy. The gun went off again, but it didn't matter. Nash felt Coleman's limbs entwine him like a sinister jack-in-the-box, felt his feet come out from under him as he was slammed against the wall. A clammy hand slammed across his throat, cutting his air down to the minimum. The sheriff's face was inches from his own and he could see the cold touch of the grave in his eyes. J.P. Coleman had been somewhere Nash never wanted to see. And now, his former boss looked ready to give him a guided tour.

A second scorpion crawled out of Coleman's hair, skittering across his face before dropping to the floor. The Harrowed sheriff never blinked.

"You let them kill me. You wanted my job and turned the other cheek while they shot me in the back."

"Please..." the quavering in his voice couldn't be helped. "Please J.P., I didn't know..."

"I'm giving you a chance. One chance to make amends. Stay away from Sweetrock, Bilton. It's going to get very ugly over there..."

The gun slipped from Nash's grasp. Sweat coated the butt in a fine sheen.

"I... I just work for them."

"Stop. Right now. You don't want any part of what they've got."

And then it was over, as suddenly as it began. Nash felt J.P.'s grasp loosen on his throat, saw the darkened form obscure the doorway again. Then he was gone, leaving Bilton alone in his moonlit room. A short bark of laughter echoed across the floors, following the undead lawman out into the street. It held madness at its edge, as from someone who can't quite believe that his nightmares have come true.

He couldn't decide if it was his or Coleman's.

* * *

The blood from Byron St. James's bowels dripped through his hair to pool on the dust beneath it. Most of his major organs had been removed, but there was still enough to make an awful mess.

He was hung upside down, spread-eagle across a crude wooden framework. A sign written in blood - SWEETROCK BUTCHER - hung balanced on his chin. His unblinking eyes and dumbfounded grin belied the sign's sentiments: he looked far more pig than pig-cutter. The entire display sat fifteen feet from Sweetrock Mining's front door.

Howard Findley sat gazing down on it from his office. A pair of deputies had been dispatched to remove the carcass, but the way the law was these days, it might take them some time. The delay, however, didn't concern him. As he watched the flies gather on Byron's intestines, something entirely different was on his mind.

"Those bastards. Those back-biting bastards."

"Sir?" Max Baine stepped up from his traditional spot in the hall at the sound of his superior's voice.

"They're after me, you dunderhead!" He spun around and his eyes gleamed feverishly in the light. "Enemies from without and within!"

"I'm not sure I follow you, sir."

"That side of beef out there is Byron St. James, an occasional employee of Sweetrock Mining. He's the eyes and ears of the board back in Pittsburgh. Or was, before his unfortunate accident."

"And this is a problem?"

"They didn't tell me he was here!!! They sent him out to Gomorra without bothering to inform me! I never laid eyes on him until this morning! He could have been here for months... watching everything we've done and sending it all back east... Can you imagine the gall?! The nerve of them to go behind my back like that?! And this isn't the end of it; oh no..."

Baine considered carefully before asking his next question.

"So you're not concerned about the murder, sir?"

"Concerned?! Why should I be concerned?! Whoever it was, he's done me a favor. No, Max, the problem is those interfering chimpanzees in Pittsburgh! They've got spies out here watching me. If St. James is here, you can bet there are others as well! We need to find out who, and do it now!!!!" He stopped suddenly and looked cock-eyed at his assistant. "Max, how long have you worked for me?"

"Sir, I don't think that..."

Findley stopped and turned back to the window. "Never mind, it's not important. Bring Sandra Harris in here; do it now. I want to know exactly what St. James was telling the boys back in Pittsburgh."

"Yessir."

"Get MacNeil and make sure the Black Jack situation is under control. I want the problem squashed and squashed now."

"Yessir."

"And find that simpleton, Bilton. It's time he started earning his pay."

At that, Baine paused. "He... uh... he isn't here, sir."

"Whaaat?!" Findley's hands lashed out with suddenly fury against the windowsill.

"He's gone, sir. We sent someone over this morning after St. James was found. His rooms are empty and his horse is gone."

"Traitor! Backstabbing worm!!!" He seethed openly, his face a rictus of hate. "He knows something about this. He knows, and I'm betting he's known for a long, long time."

"Get him here. I don't care how. Use the zombies if you have to, but I want his seat in that chair by ten a.m. tomorrow. Am I clear?"

"Crystal, sir."

"Good. On your way then. And Max...?"

Baine looked up at his employer. Findley's eyes blazed fury and a thin trickle of blood leaked from the executive's knuckles where he had struck the window.

"Don't fail me, Max," he spoke with murderous calm. "This is my town, and I'll kill anyone who tries to take it from me."

Maxwell Baine didn't have the guts to ask if he was joking.

Work-Related Stress

by Rob Vaux

Howard Findley hustled past the guards at the Sweetrock door, his face snappish and harried. The secretary raised her arm and tried to get his attention. He ignored her and pushed on down the hall, scrambling to keep the papers in his hands from flying away. One of them broke loose and he clawed for it desperately, using his free hand to balance the precarious stack against his chest. He was so intent on his task that he failed to notice his lieutenant, position in the hall to intercept him.

He flung open the doors to his office and stopped dead in his tracks.

"Mr. Findley!" A sharp voice called across his desk. "I should have thought you'd be late."

The dropped paper

"Prim," Findley spat through clenched teeth. "

"Thank you, Max. You may go."

"DO YOU HEAR ME, YOU BUFFOON!!! YOU..."

Thuck!

"CAN..."

Thuck!

"HAVE..."

Thuck!

"NOTHING!!!"

THUCK!!!

The blood spattered like raindrops across his window. He howled incoherently and brought the bust down again, before he realized he was no longer striking flesh. With quivering hands, he looked down at Cladon Prim's shuddering body, at the pile of meat and hair that used to be his face. His arms jerked spasmodically in post-mortem shock, sending crimson rivulets out across the floor. Findley blew out a long, slow breath and slumped to the floor.

He turned and looked at the bust. The dignified features of its marble surface were smeared with blood and bits of bone, turning the figure into a garish clown. Findley stared conversationally at the inscription on the base.

"Horace P. Sweetrock, Founder," he read, and began to chuckle, which became guffaws as Prim's spasms finally slowed. The flies began to alight on the outside windows, and the pounding at the door faded into nothing. He glanced back and forth between the bust and the body, his laughs growing louder with each passing moment.

It was the funniest thing in the world.

A Feasibility Study

by Steve Crow

Mitobu looked around the Hunter's Moon with a mixture of pride and scorn. Pride, since he and Longfellow were responsible for it the strike falling into the hands of the Maze Rats. Scorn because the Collegium had foolishly left the area unattended.

The Typhoon's harpoonist could hear the Collegium's "automatons" working away, the clanging of their pick-axes echoing up through the mineshaft. *More ghost rock for us*, Mitobu thought to himself. He would send up a flare signaling Captain Sim and they could seize the ghost rock already mined, then leave behind a skeleton crew to guard the area.

At the sound of footsteps, Mitobu spun, his harpoon at the ready. Longfellow should be returning, but Mitobu wasn't about to take chances. The weapon he held now was nothing compared to the gun mounted on the Typhoon, but it was impressive nonetheless, and deadly as any firearm in his capable hands.

Mitobu readied himself to fire upon whomever stepping into view, but was surprised when it was revealed to be an attractive woman. Her hair was black as night, and she a one-piece fur tunic. Stepping out into view, she did not approach him, nor raise any weapons. She simply stood there, silent and unmoving.

Mitobu frowned. Whoever the woman was, she didn't work for the Collegium. Nor was she a miner. The Typhoon crew avoided Gomorra proper, since some residents were rather sore about the Rats occasionally "misplacing" their strikes. It was therefore possible that the woman lived in town, though he doubted that someone with her "rustic" attire would be readily accepted there.

The harpoonist spared a moment's distraction to glance behind him. Nothing but the mouth of the strike, dropping off toward the waters of the Maze. So the woman wasn't a distraction for an ambush - at least not one he could easily see...

The woman still hadn't spoken. Mitobu held his harpoon ready, but was beginning to think there was little, if any, real danger. Perhaps she was some prostitute or camp follower. The Collegium automatons would have no use for her, but perhaps some scientist had taken a fancy to her, brought her out here, and then stranded her. Or maybe she was a drifter, looking to steal some ghost rock.

"So missy, what is it you be wanting?" Mitobu asked.

The woman merely licked her lips. Whether alluringly or nervously, the pirate couldn't tell.

"The Maze, it be a dangerous place. Maze dragons, stone men, pit wasps... you should be lookin' for protection if you plan on stayin' here. Or maybe you want Mitobu to take you under his wing, eh?"

The woman still remained silent. Mitobu was beginning to grow irritated. And where was Longfellow? He should be back by now. Had the woman attacked him? It was daylight, so she was no vampire. But as his old friend Hieronymous Grost had once told him that there are as many vampires as there are beasts of prey. Maybe this was some kind of daytime variety?

Before Mitobu could consider any other possibilities, the woman reached behind a rock and pulled forth a long metal pipe with a curious ball-shaped device at one end.

"What da...?" But before Mitobu trigger his weapon, the woman pointed the pipe at him and worked some kind of trigger-like mechanism. The pipe joined the ball and a cylindrical projectile shot out, slamming into the rock in front of the pirate.

Desperate, Mitobu threw himself backward, a split-second before the stick of dynamite exploded. He fell backwards toward the waters below, his last sight of rock and debris thundering down after him.

The woman remained absolutely still, even after she heard the Maze Rat's splash far below. Silence embraced the Hunter's Moon

strike for a time, and then a pale-skinned man, dressed in black, stepped out to join her.

"Very good, Kara, very good," he said, stroking her cheek with one hand. The woman remained motionless, but her face creased with a smile at the caress.

"Did it work?" a voice rang out.

Gunther Hapworth turned at the sound, greeted by a tall, thin stick of a man, dressed in the finest European clothing. A stovepipe hat added another foot to his already considerable height.

"Perfectly, Herr Klippstein. Others of our organization may decry my chemical potions, but this will prove them all horribly wrong. What of Mr. Longfellow?" Hapworth nodded toward a syringe held firmly in Klippstein's hand.

"Out like a bad diode, my friend." Klippstein tossed aside the used syringe. "Hiz protege, Miss Daniels, haz a number of devicez whose location remains unknown. Hopefully he can be persuaded to tell us ov zem."

The German scientist eyed Kara warily. "And ov her? You are sure your alchemical zpell has completely subdued her?"

"Entirely, Gerald. Thanks to my biochemical additives, not only does her unfortunate lycanthropic condition remain in remission, but her mind is... *susceptible* to outside influences. No doubt some villain could take advantage of her, but I find a particular irony in utilizing her unique combat abilities in the service of humanity."

"Az represented by the Collegium, ov course."

"Of course. As a feasibility study, this test is an unqualified success," Gunther chuckled. Then he glanced up, as a shadow blotted out the sun. "And that would be Fineas, right on schedule. The ghost rock has served its purpose as bait: now we shall put it to use in its true role... as fuel for further research"

Klippstein nodded. "I must conzede, our zupplies have been running low of late. You vould not believe how ze Grossvagon gulps down ze fuel."

"This should put a dent in the Maze Rats operations. But remember our agreement. No word of this to Oswald."

"Az you vish. Although I still do not understand why."

"Everything we do, my friend, we do for the Collegium," Gunther virtuously declared. "Which in turn benefits Oswald. But without knowledge of our means, he can maintain deniability if something goes... amiss. So long as he must deal with the Gomorra Town Council, our agenda must remain independent of his political concerns."

"Az you say, mein friend."

And Kara, under my exclusive control, might prove a formidable weapon against our enemies - both within and without our organization,

Gunther thought to himself as he guided his enthralled subject toward the Grosswagon. *But Gerald need not know that... yet.*

The Envy Of All The Girls...

by Steve Crow

Salem, 1692

"An outstanding performance, my dear. Perhaps the best it has ever been my privilege to witness."

Anne spun, startled, as the voice whispered in her ear. The man who had moved silently behind her was well-dressed in the finest styles from England. He was tall, elegant, and handsome, with impeccably styled white hair. And yet, Anne could sense...something about him. His face seemed almost to waver, as if what she saw was some manner of glamour.

The man took note of her glance and smiled. In return, he scrutinized Anne. She could feel his eyes boring into him, perhaps into her very soul. She shuddered.

"And yet, despite your recent testimony, you don't truly believe in the supernatural, do you? In the worlds that lie beyond this one? No matter. Tell me, my dear: did you enjoy making them suffer? Did you take pleasure in going into a trance, in shouting out the sins they were accused of and sentencing them to inevitable death?"

Anne flinched. How had he known...? And yet, there was something in the man's glance that compelled her to speak. Indeed, she had long sought the relief of confession, and somehow knew that the man would understand. Anne didn't even bother to look around. She somehow sensed that whatever was communicated between her and the stranger, it would go no further.

"Not all of them. Just Rebecah. She was always looking down on me. She thought she was so superior. But I showed her. So I spoke out against her."

"And the others?" the man asked, mildly enough. There was no tone of accusation in his voice. He asked only out of curiosity.

"Arrogant snobs, the lot of them. Or men who scorned me. What matter if they shared Rebecah's fate."

The man nodded, to himself, as if Anne's words had confirmed some inner suspicions. For herself, Anne was relieved. She held little regard for the church, and even if she had, she dared not bare her soul to any reverend. That would reveal her crime, and deny her prize.

"Excellent," he said, smiling broadly. "You may indeed be the one I seek."

"Seek for...what?" Anne asked hesitantly. She knew nothing of this stranger. He had not the look of a witch-finder or a man of the cloth.

Her recent experiences, however, left her with no doubt that very little was what it truly seemed.

"I am amassing a...collection, of sorts. Of certain individuals, with a driving need at their heart. Seven individuals, to be exact. There are certain prophecies to be fulfilled, and certain promises to be kept. The number of seven has many talismanic properties, and is powerful indeed. You are the third of the Seven I must choose, and have not yet fully to choose."

"Listen carefully, now, for I offer you this chance but once. I am Elijah, and power can be yours for the taking. Power second only to my own, of course, but power such as you have never dreamed of."

The man, Elijah, moved closer. "What is it you wish, Anne? Beauty? A snap of my fingers, and anything within my power is yours for the taking. Wealth? Everything I have, which is considerable, will be yours for the taking. Long life? My plans will be centuries in motion, and you will be there with me through every moment of it."

Elijah stepped back a pace, sweeping his arm wide. "What is your alternative, Anne? To stay here, in this pathetic village? You may not share the fate of those you confessed against, but your life here will never be 'normal' again. There will always be a mark against you. And what of Giles, Mary's beau. He will never be yours. And indeed, do you really want him? Isn't he a simply farmer, far too crude for your tastes? Didn't you only want him because he was Mary's, and not yours? And of course, you felt that if your "visions" were greater than hers, he would seek you instead?"

Anne felt herself nodding at the stranger's words. It was true. Giles was a clod, albeit a handsome one. But he and Mary had laughed - laughed! At her! Mocked her learning, what little she could acquire in this provincial backwater. They had scorned her plain looks. And if Giles could not be hers, then he would be no ones.

It seemed as if Elijah could sense her inner thoughts. "Do you seek punishment upon Giles for rejecting you? That too is easy enough a wish to grant. When we're through, he'll scream as loudly as those bound for the gallows. Would that please you?"

Anne nodded. "Good. Then you are the one I seek. Take my hand, take my offer. First Giles, then the world. Join with me, and become the Third. I ask this but once: will you accept?"

There was no hesitation. Anne stepped forward, taking Elijah's extended hand. His smile broke out wider than ever, a triumphant grin.

Gomorrah, 1877

Looking in the mirror, the woman who had once been Anne sighed. Elijah had not lied. Nearly three centuries of long life had been hers, and she looked little different than she had back in 1692.

She could have looked different. She could have beauty to exceed a common whore like Lilith Vandekamp, or surpass the wild unkempt attractiveness of a Rachel Sumner. But she had had such beauty in the

past. And it had never been enough. Always, there was someone just a bit more attractive, more charismatic, more personable with the men. In frustration, Anne had ultimately reverted back to her original form, albeit a somewhat more aged one. Elijah had claimed anything further was beyond his power.

Could she die? Anne didn't know. She had seen the woman known as Gluttony embrace death a dozen times, as she embraced everything, yet rise each time under the touch of Elijah's healing hands.

Wrath and Pride had fought on a hundred battlefields, fought as if to stave off Death himself. Neither would relinquish their long lives without fight.

Idleness seemed never to contemplate such thoughts, or any thought at all other than Elijah's will, while Avarice cared for nothing except the accumulation of wealth. Lechery meanwhile leant himself to the accumulation of...other things.

As for the others...who knew? Beyond the Seven, others had attached themselves to Elijah in more recent times. Although only she could see them, dark creatures had slunk from the shadows just prior to their arrival in Gomorra, and had rarely strayed far from their 'master' since. Who could guess at the thoughts of such creatures?

And the newest arrivals: John, Mary, Phillip, and Jacob. They were enigmas to Anne. They were not of the Seven, and they were hardly more skilled in harnessing Elijah's "miracle" than she. Mary seemed almost worthless. But Elijah had called his dark spirits to him, and they answered him willingly enough. Or perhaps not. Who knew?

Anne supposed that this was her lot. Now, she envied even death, as she had envied with a burning heart anything that had been denied her, anything she imagined was better than what she had.

She remembered how Elijah had promised the fulfillment of her every wish within his power to grant. And indeed, he had spoken truth. He had simply neglected to mention the price that she, and the others, would have to pay.

Now, the only remaining wish that she desired, she dare not ask of him. In her secret heart, she suspected it was the one wish that Elijah would not (or could not) grant her. Death would be too easy an escape for her, and one that would not suit his plans. The Seven were drawn, the other players were on the board. Now they would struggle, and perhaps die. All for whatever plan Elijah had for the town of Gomorra.

Perhaps Elijah would grant her wish, however indirectly. The best Anne could hope for was that she would die in some obscure battle, over the control of some pathetic strike or to gain influence over another stinking saloon. In the end, all she could do is fight, and hope that her struggles would break the strings Elijah used to control her.

Envy, as Anne now called herself and was known to by all others, adjusted the hat and checked its position in the mirror. As satisfied as

possible, she turned. The store's owner, who had been hovering nervously in the background, bustled forward.

"Will that be sufficient, Miss...?"

"Is it the best that you have, shopkeeper?"

Reputation of Elijah's "Flock" preceded them. "It was shipped by stagecoach direct from Boston. There is none finer, my dear, in all of California."

Envy sighed wearily. The hat was of course, second-rate. There was a better one. There was always a better one. Somewhere, belonging to someone. One she couldn't obtain.

"It will have to do," she snarled. Mentally, she cursed Elijah again, for being so discerning that he could see her one fatal flaw so many years ago, and turn it to whatever advantage that he sought in this game.

Taking her purse out, Envy snapped down payment for the hat. Relieved, Miss Coutreau offered one final word of encouragement.

"There's none finer in Gomorra. You'll be the envy of every woman in town."

That's what I'm afraid of, Envy thought to herself. As she stepped out of the store, she reached into the covered basket on her other arm, pulled out a single snake, and tossed it behind her. Miss Coutreau's screams rang gloriously in her ears.

I hate irony.

The Clock Tower, Gomorra, 1877

"Gee, Mr. Elijah, is she really very useful?"

Tearing his gaze away from the slatted window, the self-proclaimed prophet known as 'Elijah' glanced at the boy next to him.

"She is part of my Lord's master plan, Phillip. Envy serves her purpose, as do they all. Even you."

"But...throwin' snakes around Gomorra? How does that help you?"

Elijah chuckled. "It spreads fear and insanity. And perhaps some deeper purpose as well, one my Lord has not chosen to communicate to me."

Phillip perched up on his toes, watching Envy as she strode across the town square. Not surprisingly, the few townfolk who dared to step out on the street, even in broad daylight, gave her a wide berth.

"Does she even know what she's doing, Mr. Elijah?"

Turning to leave the tower cupola, Elijah shrugged. "Who knows? When first I freed her in San Francisco, she claimed I was the incarnation of the Egyptian pharaoh Kha-Fu, sent to rescue her from spiritual bondage because she was an Immortal, cursed through eternity. When she first arrived here with me, she claimed Gomorra was the Land of Faerie that the wee ones had told her and her sister about back a few years ago in London. And yet, as far as I can tell, she had never been outside of San Francisco before I liberated her."

"She and others of the Seven are insane, my boy. I don't probe to deeply into their addled minds. As long as they serve myself and, ultimately, my Lord, they may think what they wish."

REAPING OF SOULS

Reaping of Souls

by Rob Vaux

Elijah threw open the book, revealing the passage that Wilhelmina had carefully marked for him. The Bible was old, the oldest he had ever seen, and it was fit that he should use it to purge the world of sin. The Whateley's book would bring about the new paradise for them.

"My friends!" he shouted to his gathered Flock. "The hour of our deliverance is here!" The throng around him cheered wildly, and he held up his hands for silence.

Above them, the sounds of gunfire and shouts could be heard. The others were fighting; Lord Grimely's had become quite the hot spot since the mother lode had been discovered in its basement. But while they squabbled over money, over power, over the "rightness" of its presence, he and his band had surreptitiously entered the mansion and descended to the lode entrance. The ghouls and apparitions which supposedly haunted the mansion had not appeared to them; the building was empty as a tomb.

"And now, join me in prayer, that we may save our fellows from their folly." Before him, his followers joined hands. In the depths of her estate Wilhelmina Whateley saw it all and laughed.

"Hear us, O Lord!" Elijah intoned. "We, Your servants, who have suffered all evil to come unto us!"

"Hear us!" the Flock intoned.

"We have taken the sins of the world and embraced to our bosom. We have brought mankind's folly into ourselves, setting him free to experience Your benevolence!"

"Hear us!" the Flock intoned.

"I call upon the enemies of light to take us, as is their duty! I call upon the beasts of darkest hell to claim their own, and leave this world in peace!"

"Hear us!" the Flock intoned, and now the ecstatic gleam shone in their eyes. The Rapture was at hand.

Placing his finger on the underlined passage in the book, Elijah began to chant. Behind him, the entrance of the mine shuddered and moaned. The passage beyond yawned into infinity, its depths vanishing into utter darkness. Suddenly, the entrance was bathed in light -

poisonous, burning, unremittingly white. Somewhere in the void, something began to step through. Ebon claws grasped the walls, rending stone and mortar as it fought for purchase. An unfathomably huge maw bellowed in pain and triumph, ripping a hole between this world and the next. For the briefest instant the onlookers could see beyond it, into the infernal world it was trying to escape. Whatever remained of the Flock's rationality snuffed out like a candle. It stepped into the basement with a rumble, its black skin drawn with blood and soot. A huge rack of horns crowned its head and as it looked upon the new world before it, its inhuman face broke into a grin.

I LIVE! It howled, and the Flock matched its insane screams. Hell had come to Gomorra, and its resident madmen welcomed it with open arms.

So intent were they on their revels, that they failed to notice the shadowy form which appeared at the foot of the stairs...

A Snowball From Hell

by Rob Vaux

Business at the Fat Chance was always feast or famine. Either the place was packed to the rafters, rocking with the boisterous antics of a hundred drunken cowboys, or it was as empty as a tomb, with one or at the most two patrons in the entire place. The two conditions swapped places about sundown; Charlie liked to brag that he could time the transition to the minute. Right now it was empty, which wouldn't have been odd except that it was half past eight. For some reason, people were just feeling the need to drink elsewhere.

It could have been the ambiance. The only drinker in the whole place set at the end of the bar, exuding waves of chill and gloom. His battered hat hid a face worn with time, a scruffy beard covered his chin. His eyes held years of sorrow and heartache, but fire still lurked in their depths. He drank his beer with slow deliberation, teeth clenched behind his lips. A cloud of anguish hung over him, filling the room with his grief.

No one liked drinking with a Ghost.

Charlie sat on the other end of the bar, determined not to raise his lone customer's ire. The evening was a wash already; he didn't want to compound the situation by getting shot. Still, he considered saying something when the second patron of the evening wandered in. The handsome woman's brown hair was hidden behind a grey Stetson, while a silver star hung pinned to her duster. The pistol on her hip still smelled of gunpowder, while red flecks covered her fingers. Her eyes held the same heartache as her counterpart at the bar. Charlie watched her walk to the bar and take a seat two chairs down from the Ghost.

After eyeing her for a moment, he retreated in silence, leaving the pair alone.

The Ghost didn't look up from his drink.

"I don't remember inviting you to sit down," he growled.

"I thought we should talk," Katie Karl's voice was clear and sharp.

"Did you?"

"I just heard about your raid on the Golden Mare. I'm sorry."

"I doubt that," he grated.

"You may find this hard to believe, but I still don't think of you as an enemy. I know your men are the best; I heard they took it hard."

The Ghost smoldered, still fixated on the bar.

"How many?" she asked.

"Rocescu at first. Slate and Quaid fell in the raid. Cort and Ben got out by the skin of their teeth, leaving me with a skeleton crew." He paused for a moment. "You went after the Whateleys, didn't you?"

"It seemed like a sound plan," she answered. "They couldn't have been in good shape after the Sioux."

A bitter smile crossed his lips.

"Better than you thought, I expect."

"They got Tombstone Frank. Best gunslinger I've ever seen and they dropped him like a headsman's axe. Larson and Hamilton went too. Maybe more, we're still regrouping."

"If they weren't as tough as they are, I'd have buried them the instant I walked into this town," he spoke over his glass.

"I just underestimated them is all."

"My good Captain, I have found that underestimating the opposition can be both costly and futile. It's a bitter pill to swallow, as I'm sure you're learning. I suspect, however, that you're not here to gloat over my casualties or to listen to me gloat over yours."

Katie's mouth turned in a hard-set line.

"This has to stop. They're tearing us apart out there, and it's only going to get worse."

"Maybe I'd rather die than ask for your help. Have you considered that?"

"Yes," her voice was calm and controlled. "I know you, Andrew Lane. You've fooled a lot of people out here, but you can't fool me. I know who you are and I know what you represent to my country. And I'm telling you we need to set that aside."

The Ghost uttered a short, bitter bark. "How magnanimous of you."

"I'm serious. We have difference, differences that may never work out, but I know the difference between a simple feud - however bloody - and the things that I watched tear apart my men last night. We have to stop them. You and I. Together."

The Ghost squeezed his eyes shut. "We can get along without you," he ventured, but the conviction was gone in his voice.

"You're lying. We'll both be dead within a week if we don't."

The Ghost said nothing.

"Think about it. Your team and mine, working together. We don't have to make it a permanent alliance. Just 'til this town is under control. Then we can go back to killing each other like we always have."

The silence was deafening.

"It's the only way," she spoke at last "You know it and I know it."

"God DAMN you Rebels!!!" he screamed without warning. "You couldn't let it sit, could you?! You couldn't trust us to work out our differences like civilized human beings! You tore our country apart for your own selfish ends, then made it bleed 'til it screamed! You think manumission of the slaves is enough to undo the damage you've done?! You think we can forgive you for the crimes you've committed?!"

"We just wanted to be left alone," Katie spoke quietly.

"Freedom isn't a gift, it's a responsibility! It takes work and pain and suffering to live free! But you thought it was some present, delivered with a golden bow! You want all the benefits, without having to work for them! You desire the reward without any of the effort! You've poisoned our country with your greed, and you may destroy it before all is said and done! God damn you and all your cowardly Rebel ilk!!!"

"Are you finished?"

Silence reigned for many long minutes. Finally the Ghost looked up. For an instant the mask cracked, showing a tired lonely old man behind the Agent's grim façade. Then it was gone, replaced by granite.

"I used to think the devil and the Confederacy were one and the same. God help me, I was wrong."

Slowly, grudgingly, his gloved hand came out. Katie took it.

"This town," he spoke gravely. "Then all bets are off."

"That's fair."

He pulled his hand away and dropped a coin on the bar.

"What happens now?" she asked.

"We take the Golden Mare first. I want to see if our teams can work together."

"And then?"

The ashes smoldered his eyes.

"Then Wilhelmina Whateley reaps the whirlwind."

A Game of Pool

by Steve Crow

"Damn, I wish there was a *challenge* in this here town."

Buster Madison leaned back against the billiard table, his arm resting upon his favorite cue stick. The newly opened Side Pocket

Billiard Hall was open this early in the day, but dark and quiet nonetheless. Buster didn't know who the owner was, but he was pretty sure it was a bad call opening such a place up here in Gomorra. No doubt it generated a moderate income, but at least three bartenders had been through here in the last two weeks. Even Billy No-Neck had worked here briefly.

Billy was an okay fella, so far as Buster was concerned. The huckster had acquired a new respect for Billy after he stepped in to prevent a barfight that Buster had found himself in over at the LAD Saloon.

I kinda miss the big lug, Buster thought to himself, even though he knew the bouncer wasn't necessary around here very often.

And that was why Buster was bored these days. The Side Pocket wasn't a challenge anymore. Most of Gomorra's gamblers preferred cards, and while Buster had his own special... gift with cards, he had never taken to poker the way many had. With folks like Whitmore and Casparo around, Buster was way out his league when it came to facing down across a poker table.

Problem was, there weren't any other good billiard players in town. The few who played the game at all had either already lost all their money to Madison, or had learned enough to know that they couldn't stand a chance against him.

A few folks occasionally sought out a game with Buster, but usually to hone their skill, and with stakes no higher than a drink at the bar. That left only the occasional itinerant for Madison to play. But very few wanderers made their way to Gomorra these days. The town's reputation tended to discourage all but the hardest types, and they were mostly miners (where there's ghost rock, there are always miners). And miners lacked the keenness of eye and steadiness of hand that Buster wanted - no, needed - in an opponent.

As for Buster's other skills... he had found them in small demand. One of the local ministers, Elijah, had approached him about lending his "services" to the Flock (the preacher's eyes had pierced Buster's soul, so there was little point bothering with the usual pretense that his skills at the table were in order). But the Prophet was surely a lunatic, and his "Flock" was on a course straight for Hell. Buster declined the offer in short order. Fortunately, Elijah accepted the refusal with good grace... well, a bare amount of civility. Madison *had* heard worse swearing, but never any put so... Biblically.

Then there were the Whateleys, but their group offered a gamble Buster wasn't about to submit himself to. He and Bobo LeVeux once sat down to a simple game, shared a few drinks, and exchanged anecdotes, which "cured" him of any interest in signing on with the Rangers as well.

Now, though, he was tempted to reconsider Bobo's offer. Without the game, there wasn't a challenge, after all.

"Perhaps I might offer you a challenge?"

Recognizing the uncanny timing of the words, Buster turned toward the voice which had interrupted his thoughts, to find a huge man, dressed in well-tailored clothing that took off twenty pounds. The newcomer had a cue case tucked underneath his left arm.

Madison frowned. The billiard hall was quiet, and he had not heard the man enter. (It wouldn't be the first large man he'd met who could move quietly, but Buster usually considered himself more perceptive than that; he could hear the click of a busted bank shot from across a rowdy saloon and home in on it like a shark.)

Buster couldn't even hear the man breathe. It was almost as if the newcomer was...

Stop thinkin' like that! Some things ain't wise to consider in Gomorra.

The newcomer appeared solid enough, remaining absolutely quiet as Buster sized him up. His eyes were a steely gray (Madison hadn't seen their like since Elijah paid him a visit). Again, looking into those eyes, terrible thoughts began to creep into Buster's intrigued mind. It was as if the newcomer's eyes could see into his very soul...

Buster shrugged the tension away. *Who cares whether the guy can see my soul? Not much in there, anyway.* Buster was a man of few vices (which might explain why Elijah accepted his refusal). No Seven Sins for him...

The newcomer appeared to be satisfied with whatever he saw, and extended his free hand. Buster accepted, finding it cold and clammy, despite the heat outside.

"I am a newcomer to town, looking for a game." Buster was impressed with the man's diction. It was precise and educated. Schooled men make the best billiard players, as Buster proved himself. You could go a long way with sheer dexterity and intuition, but you couldn't do much without the angles in your head.

Of course, Buster had all three.

Buster cocked one leg up on the table. "You planning on staying in Gomorra long?"

"I am here on... special assignment, Mr. Madison. No, I will not be staying long."

"You know my name."

The man nodded once. "Your reputation precedes you, my good sir. I have heard you are in need of a challenge."

Buster frowned again. Whatever his dissatisfaction, he had never expressed it out loud, not even to Bobo. He wasn't sure where this man had "heard" of his desire, and was pretty sure he didn't want to know. In Gomorra, knowledge of the unspoken was always a serious risk.

"Speaking of names... I didn't catch yours. Perhaps I've *heard* of you."

The man placed his case on the table, opened it, and withdrew two pieces of his cue stick. Buster whistled despite himself. The stick was carved from ivory, an amazing piece of art.

In fact, he had only ever heard of one such cue stick.

"Your name wouldn't happen to be... Brown, would it?"

The man looked up from assembling his cue stick. "Why, yes. You've heard of me?"

"I heard you died ten years ago, in a shootout in St. Louis. A sore loser, or so the rumor goes."

"Rumor has a habit of disproving itself. Here I am. Ready for a game."

Buster tipped his hat back. "Fats' Brown... the greatest billiard player who ever lived."

"At your service," the newcomer responded, with no hint of modesty. For him, it was a simple statement of fact.

Buster had always wondered how good Brown actually was. It was said he lived, ate, and slept with his cue stick - that he devoted eighteen hours a day to practicing the game.

Brown completed his assembly, then nodded to the table. "If you would care to rack them up..."

"Why?"

"*Why?* I thought you wanted a challenge, Mr. Madison. I am here to offer you one. Do you need any more incentive than that?"

"If you know I want a challenge, then you know the stakes have to be *high*. What are you offerin'?"

"Only everything, Mr. Madison. Life or death."

"Those seem to be popular stakes in Gomorra these days."

"Indeed, which is - in part - why I am here. You win against me, you live... *forever*."

"And if I lose? You kill me? Here and now? The local sheriff might take a dim view of that."

"This is between you and I. Perhaps I will kill you. Perhaps you will simply die in ignominy - a third-rater, never able to stand up to a real challenge. Unwilling to take on 'the best.'"

Brown leaned forward, peering into Buster's eyes. Madison thought he saw a hint of red somewhere in their depths. "Don't you think I know how you feel - night after night, with no one to challenge you? You *need* me, Buster Madison. Without me, you're nothing. You'll always whether you could 'best' the best.

"I'm offering you that chance. Here and now."

Transfixed, Buster continued to stare deeply into Brown's eyes. Then he whipped his cue stick down between them. He shook his head, Brown's spell broken, as the newcomer stepped back.

"I'm afraid I'll have to pass, Mr. Brown."

The newcomer chuckled. "No guts? A big talker with no spirit for the real game?"

Buster shrugged. "*Perhaps*." He turned back to the billiard table and began to rack the balls. "Maybe I'm satisfied with where I am, and what I have. And *maybe*... maybe you're not 'Fats' Brown at all. Maybe you're a demon, spawned in Hell and sent here. Or maybe you're his ghost, looking for a sucker to exchange for your own life..."

Buster completed the rack, placing the last ball dead center. He turned, but 'Fats' was gone, as if he had never existed.

"And maybe," Madison said to the empty air, "just maybe, a man should be careful what he wishes for in Gomorra."

(This story devoted to the memory of Red Serling, 1924-1975)

Turn of the Cards

by Steve Crow

Madame Zelda looked up from her card in frustration. Her Tarot layout warned of great danger, as it had for those few in Gomorra who had dared to come out to visit her in the last several weeks. But she could gain no specifics from her reading.

In frustration, she turned to her crystal ball. Although possessing no mystical powers, it often served as a focus in her meditations. Entering into what the uninformed might call a "trance," she slowly tried to divine what the future might hold for her...

She drew back with a muffle scream, startled. The face that had appeared to her was that of a skull: grim Death itself.

"What is it?"

Viktor peered into the parlor through the beaded curtain that led to their sparse living quarters. Business had not been great in Gomorra, and they had little chance to expand upon their few belongings since arriving in the town.

"Nothing, my beloved," Zelda whispered. Viktor had had to supplement their income with manual labor, and gypsies were no more beloved by the townsfolk than the Chinese laborers. He had enough to worry about without other concerns, such as the dim glimpses she had seen of the future.

Both of them looked up as the bell rang above the shop's door. Neither had heard the door actually open. Nor was it open now. But standing before it now were two men. The first was a tall, older man with a fringe of white hair and beard, who held himself arrogantly. He was dressed fashionably enough, although in an old-fashioned style.

The second man did not hold himself up at all. In fact, he slunk at the other man's feet like a mongrel cur. He was at least 20 years the other man's younger, with a thinning mop of black hair and a thin

mustache. There was a family resemblance between the two, in the eyes and the nose.

"We're closed," Viktor said, taking a step forward to usher them out. "Come back in the..."

"Dispatch him, Saul," the older man snapped.

Faster than Viktor could react, the younger man leaped forward from his crouch like a hunting dog. He slammed into Viktor, and the two of them tumbled back through the doorway. The beads rustled in the passing. Zelda heard a single sound. The sound of a dog worrying a bone.

The older man stepped forward, his attention focused squarely on Zelda. "Good evening, Madame... Zelda, isn't it? I am Jebediah Whateley."

Not Nicodemus! was Zelda's first thought. She had run into the young man on the streets, and had sensed nothing but evil from him. She had since asked around as to who he was, and found that he was a member of the enigmatic Whateley family.

The others of the clan were rarely seen. She could sense nothing from the man who now stood before her, but she could detect... something, perhaps deeply shrouded. While Nicodemus wore his evil like a badge, this man presented an acceptable face to the world.

Zelda said nothing, the man's eyes pushing her down into her seat. Jebediah seemed to expect no response, but instead continued.

"It has recently come to my attention that you have had a number of clients whom you have informed to leave town. I am afraid that is really not part of my family's plan. Your clients took your advice, you see, and some of them had children. It threatens the family business, and the Family's business."

"No children can leave this town!" he snarled, suddenly leaning down and slamming his fist down on the table. Then, recovering his composure, he straightened up and adjusted his jacket. In that moment's pause, Zelda heard the... gnawing sound cease from the backroom.

"My apologies, madame. In any case, I am here to offer you a... business proposition. If you will permit me to make a seeing of my own upon your future..." Jebediah nodded to the deck of Tarot cards from which Zelda had been performing her reading.

Zelda dared not say anything. Taking her silence as assent, or unconcerned for her approval, Jebediah reached forward and drew a single card from the top of the deck. He studied its face for a moment. Zelda watched him in terror. The Death card was already on the table, and the Tower with it. However, it would not have surprised her in that moment if her visitor had drawn either card anyway, though.

Then Jebediah turned it to her, laying it upon his right palm. It was the Ace of Swords, and Zelda uttered a sigh of relief.

A momentary smile passed across her visitor's face. He touched the face of the card with the index finger of his left hand. A brief

spark of blue passed into the card, igniting it with witchfire. Slowly, it rose from the palm of his hand, then began to turn. Faster, and faster.

A magician's trick, was Zelda's last thought before the spinning card left Jebediah's hand and flew across the distance between them.

The Whateley Manor

Wilhelmina paused in her knitting. Although blind, her other senses were in no way impaired. The scream, although muffled, echoed clearly in her head.

Beneath Lord Grimely's manor, she could hear Brother Elijah preaching to what sorry followers he had found in this God-forsaken town. At Elephant Hill, Dolores danced across the tombstones. The McCracken "brothers" were at the Fat Chance Saloon, tending to their personal business. Down in the nursery, young Lucifer made not a sound.

The scream was the third one she had heard since sunset. The first had been a weak scream coming from the Golden Mare Hotel. With a connoisseur's ear, Wilhelmina placed it as the sound of a man whose lifeblood was being drained.

The second had echoed out of the Maze, as Yut-San had his man Ironteeth tend to the business of remonstrating a defiant miner.

The third came as she expected it, as Jebediah, her eldest, tended to the family affairs. They had acquired a new business, and would profit from it as they had profited from all the properties they had "claimed" since arriving in Gomorra.

Contented, Wilhelmina went back to her knitting.

Special Delivery

By Steve Crow

"Damn!"

Sheila Mirabella steered the maze runner hard to port as she caught a glimpse of something large moving up ahead in the channel. It wasn't the first time she had seen a Maze Dragon. However, unlike Scooter and Big Jake, or Mitobu, Sheila had no desire to take one on, whether with a shotgun or in hand-to-hand combat.

Fortunately for her, the Dragon had the poor eyesight of all its kind. It could home in on violent motion like a shark, but Mirabella's runner was moving under sail. As she glided the ship down a side passage and out of the creature's line of sight, the Dragon moved deeper eastwards into the Maze. Most of the mine entrances were above the creature's reach, but it was too stupid to know any better. Besides, sometimes it got lucky, or found a tenderfoot who had started digging too low.

It wasn't any of Sheila's concern. The big outfits like Sweetrock wouldn't touch her, but no matter how many little independents got

wiped out, there were always more to replace them. And they kept her in business.

Inwardly, the maze pilot sighed. She could have had a comfortable job with Sweetrock, but Max Baine repulsed her. From what she had heard, he was number two in the company's western branch, now. That made him in no way any more attractive to her.

At the sound of rockets, Sheila glanced up. Robert Holmes waved to her as he went by some 50' overhead. Mirabella waved in response. They were both in a similar line of work, although she kept herself open to all employers (Well, almost all - I wouldn't take the Whateleys' money no matter how hard up I was, Sheila amended mentally). Holmes stuck with the Collegium, though. As they took their battle with the Rats into the Maze, the Collegium had requisitioned Holmes into make deliveries to their men in the field.

Not that Sheila could blame them. She had skipped ppast the Typhoon a half-dozen times. Baine might be the most offensive man in the Maze, but scum like Mitobu and O'Malley were only a step behind.

Comparing the current passage to the mental map she retained in her mind, Sheila steered her runner to port at the next passageway, avoided a concealed shoal, and then took a right. This brought her to a small dock some twenty feet above the waterline.

Carefully, Mirabella tied off her ship to one of the support pilings. Reaching behind her, she grabbed a small bag of supplies then climbed up the ladder.

"Hold it!" a voice called out.

Sheila sighed. They went through this every time.

"It's Mirabella. Your delivery gal, ya know?"

She pulled herself the rest of the way up the ladder and on to the deck. Ahead of her was the mouth of a small strike, the Harlot's Haven. Ironical, ain't it? Sheila thought to herself as a woman emerged out into the light.

The woman had reddish-brown hair and a revolver in either hand. Like Sheila, she wore a man's shirt and jeans, and a duster thrown over the entire assemblage. There was a sneer on her face. Ungrateful bitch Sheila cursed mentally.

"Took you long enough," Rachel Sumner snarled.

Sheila shrugged as she dumped the bag down on the dock. "Hunter has Deputy Powell watching the docks. I slipped by when he was talkin' to somebody named 'Johnny' who wasn't there. Suppose that's natural enough for Gomorra, I guess."

Sumner advanced warily across the dock, guns at the ready. She kicked the bag, once, then waited for a few seconds. For what, Sheila had no idea. A rattler, maybe.

"Food and supplies, a week's worth." Mirabella couldn't resist adding, "Same as always. More than that, and Sam would start to wonder."

"I don't take anythin' for granted," Rachel snarled back. "That's how I've stayed alive so long." Apparently satisfied for the moment, she holstered one gun and picked up the sack. Holding it by the neck, she pulled at the drawstring with her teeth and peered in.

Nodding, she shifted her grip on the sack's neck. With one final glance, she then holstered her remaining revolver.

"So what's the news in Gomorra?"

That was the other part of the ritual. Sheila replied, "You mean, since you gunned down Warwick?"

Rachel nodded. "I had a debt to pay. He was the first, but he won't be the last."

"Your boss, Jackson still hasn't been spotted yet. Flint's relatives are starting to drift into town. If you thought he was a piece of work, you should see them."

"I never liked him anyway. What about Father Juan?"

"Still at the Mission House. Rumor has it that he's sheltering Jackson, but Hunter's been through there a half-dozen times and seems satisfied. Victor's still at large, but he hasn't got hold of me. Why should he? This here's just our little secret, and no reason he should connect me with you."

"Damn straight. Anybody else?"

"The ones who survived? Haven't heard from them, either. There's some fella called Titus stirring up a fuss, claiming Jackson was innocent and all."

"That little camp-follower? Nobody's innocent, Jackson least of all. What about the Dogs?"

"Pretty much recovered, them's that are left. Like I told you last time, a couple of new deputies, and your pal Templeton is still out there."

"Surprised nobody's bushwhacked him yet. Guess I'll have to take care of him when the time's right."

"And that'll be...?" Sheila asked.

Sumner frowned. "You got a problem? Ain't like I'm not payin' you enough."

Mirabella shrugged. "I'm not complain' about the pay. You can stay out here as long as you please, for all I care - makes me no never mind. But things are pickin' up in Gomorra and around it. You've heard the sounds: the Rats and the College are goin' at it full-bore. Elijah's 'flock' is growin' every day. I think you'd be tempted to go after has collection plate, if nothing else."

"It's on my list."

"I'd think that'd be a higher priority then pickin' on defenseless old men."

Sumner frowned. "Don't be takin' no airs with me. I don't recall you bein' any friend of the Judge."

"Maybe so. But I can tell you this for a fact. The townsfolk of Gomorra ain't impressed, and neither am I. All this big talk of revenge, but you don't have the guts to gun down anyone except some old fart in a nightshirt and an unloaded scattergun."

Rachel tapped her fingers on her holstered revolvers ominously. "Is that so?"

Sheila shrugged. "That's so. Hide out here if you want, but don't expect anyone to be impressed. Far as I'm concerned, you're just another two-bit crook on the run, makin' threats but doin' nothin'. So don't be takin' no airs with me, Miss Sumner. Shoot me, and who's going to make your deliveries? And judgin' by all your talk and none of your action, you're goin' to be needin' deliveries for a long time to come."

Tension filled the air for a few seconds. If Rachel took it into her head to gun her down, there wasn't a thing Sheila could do about it. But she didn't kow-tow to anyone. She'd taught Baine that, and damn if she wouldn't show Sumner as well.

Finally, slightly, Sumner relaxed. She glanced around, at the Harlot's run-down dock, and a look of disgust passed her face. Whether at herself or at the hideout her crimes had driven her to, Sheila couldn't swear to.

"You delivered your news. Now, are you taking passengers?"

Side Shows, Gomorra, and Other Freak Attractions

by Steve Crow

The Fat Chance Saloon was quiet. Too quiet, Charlie Landers thought to himself.

There was a lull in the violence that seemed to have become part and parcel of life in Gomorra. Not surprising. When half the town had just been wiped out by vampires, or frog boys, or whatever it was lurking in the shadows this week, there wasn't a lot of folks left to be conducting violence.

No doubt the forces would rally once more and start throwing themselves at each other. Charlie had already heard that Katie Karl, Confederacy sharpshooter and leader of the Texas Rangers, and Andrew Lane, the man better and more appropriately known as "The Ghost," were teaming up. The Whateleys were lying low, Findley was packed off in a mental hospital somewhere, and Joseph Eyes-Like Rain had disappeared right when his people needed him most. Only Elijah and his Flock were increasing in size. And some of the kooks there were just as odd as the "Seven Sins" the Prophet had rolled into Gomorra with.

"We're closing for the night," Charlie heard from the door into the saloon. That was Billy No-Neck. His services had been much in demand

the first few months after Charlie had arrived in town, and all the hubbub had started. Billy'd been hired and fired from a half dozen outfits and now was back to his original job: bouncer.

"Not to me, boy. Outta the way."

Landers winced. He recognized that voice all right. As diplomatic as ever. But what could you expect...?

"Let him be, Billy!" Charlie called out. No-Neck could handle himself in a fight, but the new arrival wasn't someone anybody should have to fight if they could avoid it.

From his vantage point behind the bar, Charlie could see Billy mull it over for a few seconds. Clearly, the bouncer was tempted to ignore Lander's suggestion and pursue the matter further. The new arrival waited patiently, waiting to see if No-Neck would respond to his gibe. Only his fingers, tapping on the pearl handle of his holstered revolver, gave away his eagerness for a fight.

Finally, Billy nodded, shrugged, and turned back to the door. The arrival strode across the floor of the Fat Chance, and planted himself squarely in front of Landers. "I'll have a drink, barkeep!" he yelled boisterously.

Sighing, Charlie reached under the bar, grabbed the bottle, and poured a drink. He didn't bother wiping the shot glass: he knew that kind of subtlety would have been wasted.

The man picked up the drink and threw it back. As he did, Charlie took a few seconds to survey him.

Not much had changed. The man's hair and sideburns were a little better groomed. The revolver was new: no doubt a gift from the man's new "employers." He still wore that funny little English bowler and a black silk shirt. The hat was an affectation, but Charlie knew from experience that the shirt was an absolute necessity. Anything stiffer would have been absolute agony for...

"Ya still remember what we like, Charlie! Ya always were good with the drinks. Suppose that's why you're head barkeep in this hellhole."

Landers said nothing, but went back to polishing a shot glass.

"What, no words of greetin' for your ol' friends Castor and Pollux? Don't tell us you're gettin' above your station, are ya Charlie?"

Charlie sighed. "I'd heard you were in town."

"And ya didn't stop by the estate to pay us a visit?"

Charlie shuddered inwardly. There wasn't anything that would make him visit the Whateley household, day or night.

"I'm a busy man, Cas. Bartendin's a full-time occupation in Gomorra."

"Speakin' of which... another!"

Castor slammed the glass down. Charlie poured a refill. Castor picked it up but merely held it up to the light, contemplating.

"We missed ya, Charlie. Especially when you left without us. That really cut us to the quick, it did. Leavin' the Dark & Nightshade Pandemonium Travelling Circus without tellin' us you were goin'. Why, we would have gone with you if we'd known."

That's exactly what I was afraid of, Charlie thought to himself. Out loud, he replied, "You know how Mr. Dark was. He wasn't one to let his employees go."

"Oh we knows that for sure, yes we do. Don't we, Pol?" Castor seemed to listen to nothing for a moment, then nodded in seeming agreement. "He was... reluctant to let us go too. Fortunately, Miss Wilhelmina had a little chat with him when he brought the show to town a couple of months ago. After that, he was darned eager to let us go. Darned eager, I say."

Charlie nodded. He had tucked himself away in the basement when that carnival had rolled into town. Confusion and mayhem had been the order of the day: a precursor of things to come.

"So now, here we are. Castor & Pollux McCracken - Twins at Birth. And the Incredible Crab Boy. It's just like old times, ain't it? I hear Cassandra'll be rollin' into town by and by. And then the whole gang'll be here."

Landers shook his head. "'fraid you'll have to keep up the sideshow tradition without me. I've got steady work going here. My employer ain't a public type, but the pay's regular."

Castor frowned. "Turnin' down our offer might not be the healthiest thing you ever did, 'Crab Boy.' We're workin' for the Whateleys now, because we owe 'em for breakin' us loose. But we plan to be on top when the dust settles down. Cassandra was always... romantically inclined towards us (In your dreams! Charlie thought to himself). With you along, we'll just be one big happy family. Freaks have to stick together is what it boils down to at the end of the day."

Charlie sighed. He would've laughed, if it hadn't been so pathetic. That, and he put a high value on his own life.

"Sorry, Cas. But I fit in here, in Gomorra. There's enough weirdness goin' around that I'm considered downright 'normal' here. Or maybe there's enough freaks that I just blend right in. But I got a job, I got a life, and signin' back on just ain't my style. I'm not a joiner. Whether you're askin' for yourself, or for the Whateleys, my answer's got to be 'No.'"

Scowling ominously, Castor considered Charlie's refusal. Landers noticed that McCracken's right hand was once again tapping an impatient rhythm on the butt of his revolver once more. Charlie slid one hand over to the sawed-off shotgun he kept beneath the bar. If it came down to a shootout, though, Charlie knew who'd be winning that one. But he'd never rolled belly-up before, and wasn't planning on doing so now.

Finally, breaking off his inner communion, Castor nodded, once, then broke into a wide smile. "Never ya mind, then, Charlie. Just being sociable and all, givin' you the chance to get on the gravy train before it leaves the station. Ya don't want to join, that's your own business. We can't protect you, ya understand. But it might not come to that. And maybe we won't have to be the ones to do you in, if it does. We sure hope not, anyhow."

Castor took the glass in his left hand, and in one motion slid it into his shirtfront. There was a hideous slurping noise from within. Castor's eyes closed, apparently savoring the whiskey.

After a few seconds, he removed the glass, empty, and set it down on the bar. "Still the good stuff, Charlie. Well, be seein' you. We'll give Cassandra your regrets. If she don't find you first."

As the elder McCracken turned and strolled out of the Fat Chance, Charlie Landers breathed a sigh of relief, then gently took the glass (which now had a faintly yellow goo on the rim) and tossed it in the garbage. Them boys never did have no manners.

Separations of Church and Soul

by Steve Crow

The Mission House loomed before him.

The Coalition was forming, but the man variously known as "The Ghost" and "Andrew Lane" needed more support. His own Sister Jebediah was on the critical list, crippled. Karl's Rangers, despite their versatility, lacked a priest.

That left few who could call upon the miracles of the Lord God Almighty in the battle against evil. The Law Dogs and the Collegium were cozying up on their own, and the Ghost wouldn't trust Elijah's "Flock" on a bet. That left only one established "independent" miracle-worker at large: Father Juan Navarro.

The Ghost had heard little of him, but that which he had was favorable. Despite being a member of a supposedly "outlaw" band, and his relationship to one such member, Navarro had apparently never strayed from ministering to the people of Gomorra. In short, was the kind of man the Ghost needed? And it was that need that brought him here.

But as the Ghost approached the Mission House, it felt as if a strong gale wind rose up to oppose him. Each step became harder and harder, as if slogging through a bog.

And back in the dim recesses of his skull, the Ghost felt something... stir.

It was not something he had sensed in a while, although he had felt a dim sense of it when he and Karl had come to their arrangement at the Fat Chance several days ago. He was a strong-willed man, as he

had to be during the most turbulent times America had faced since its inception. He had sent tens of thousands to their deaths, and ignored the advice of generals and politicians alike to follow his own path.

Because of that, beating down the creature that shared his soul had not been a great difficulty in the past. In fact, the Ghost often managed to forget about it entirely. Only in the dark hours of the night when he waited for his undead body to shut down for a few hours of what could only loosely be called "sleep," did he remember his unwanted intruder. Or when it did its work to heal his body of the damage he often took because of the cause he followed.

But now, as the Ghost approached the Mission, the spirit rose up within him once more. He could feel it clawing at his soul, attempting to gain a handhold. Nightmare visions flashed through his mind...

...visions of his son Eddie's death at the age of three. The boy's months of suffering that he and Mary had been forced to witness before his passing.

...his third son, Willie, passing away in the White House.

...the shock to Mary, who had never fully recovered from her sons' deaths.

...leaving his bed and wandering through the White House, and seeing his shrouded body lying in the East Room.

...feeling Mary's hand in his, looking down on a stage, and feeling the bite of a bullet into the back of his skull while hearing the words *Sic Semper Tyrannis!* ringing in his ears.

...looking up into the startled faces of Barnes, Woodward, and the others as he clawed his way back to "life" several hours later. The hurried conversations with Johnson and Grant, the preparations for the body that would substitute for his on the train back to Springfield.

...standing in the shadows, watching his beloved son die in 1871 and seeing Mary sobbing at his bedside, and hoping against hope the boy would rise as he had risen.

With one final great effort, the Ghost strove hard and deep, and... cast the spirit back into the depths of his soul. Its screams echoed in his skull, but it was back where it belonged once more.

Looking up through eyes incapable of tears, he saw a warm, commanding face looking down into his. The man held a Bible in one hand, and a pistol at the other. He looked ready to use either. Or both. "Are you well, *Senor Lane?*"

The Ghost realized he had sagged down onto his knees in the dirt. Wearily, he rose to his feet. He was still a good thirty feet away from the Mission House, and could feel the resistance of its holy nature striving to push him back. The demon within him screamed its own defiance, and he knew that another step would unleash it for a battle of dominion again. And again. And again.

The Ghost could sense that even the presence of Father Navarro acted as an additional spur to the manitou. The Father's presence made him uncomfortable, an affront to the creature within him.

"You are a true man of God, aren't you, Father?"

"I try as best I can. And you... you are not, are you?"

The Ghost sighed. "Maybe I was, once. But now... it's something else lost to me, I reckon. I just never realized it, and didn't expect to in this town, at this time. I haven't ever encountered a spirit as strong as yours, or your church's. My apologies for taking your time, Father. It seems that my... 'nature' will deny me the allies I need most."

"I suspect you and I strive towards the same goals, Mr. Lane."

"I do too," the Ghost replied, turning to return to town. "I just hope we meet at the end of this thing."

And with that, the Ghost returned to the path he had taken.

Alamo Redux

by Rob Vaux

The men approached the gate with stealth and caution, guns at the ready. Silver stars hung on their shirts, guns stood ready in their hands. The grim, set faces spoke to the severity of their task, a task they seemed determined to carry out. It took them time to tear down the wrought iron blocking them from their goal, but it had been accomplished with uncanny silence. Now, they stood ready to strike.

The woman in the lead pushed past the gates, gesturing to her cohorts for quiet. They drew their pistols silently and stole into the wide swath of ground before the Whateley mansion. Katie Karl couldn't help but smile as her men moved forward; a better group of Rangers she couldn't find. Zeke Beuchamp, the Rangers' scout and front man, crouched in front of her, waiting for their arrival. His knife dug divots in the ground as he eyed the darkened estate before them.

"Sioux bodies," he gestured at the ground. Several Indians lay crumpled near the porch, the remains of Little Running Bear's War Party. Inbred kooks or no, the Whateleys wouldn't go quietly. Katie's eyes hardened.

"Shoot to kill. No talk, no questions." The Rangers nodded.

They fanned out before the porch, moving to block any exits from escape. The gabled house loomed before them like a pagan idol, its shutters closed, its entrance dark. No one noticed Nicodemus, or the hulking form of his cousins, until a distant lightning flash illuminated the porch.

"Uninvited guests again," he grinned. "That's twice in two days. I wonder what we've done to get so popular."

The gunfire was immediate and absolute. Ezekiel Whateley snapped backward as a bullet shattered his windpipe, while his cousin

Moses dived behind the crooked doorway for protection. Glass shattered and wood splintered around them, groaning in protest at the barrage. None of the lead struck Nicodemus however. He stood unmoving as the bullets flew around him, marking who fired and who stood back. When the first hail died down, he stepped calmly off the porch. A fanned circle of cards appeared in his hands, glowing with an inhuman light. Katie snarled and took aim at his head.

"Now is that any way to treat your hosts?" he asked conversationally.

The wall to his right exploded outward. The Rangers barely has time to register it before the cause was upon them. The creature towered above their heads, a mass of wormy tentacles and bulging eyestalks. Pouring out of the house in a writhing mass, it zeroed in on the gunmen and leapt toward them with an inhuman shriek. A huge face lurked beneath its tendrils; a face not unlike Nicodemus's.

"Have you met my cousin Enoch?" Nic asked. "A more degenerate family branch to be sure. But he still has his charms."

The monster engulfed the nearest two Rangers, pulling them into its form. They screamed in horror and fired indiscriminately at it, to no noticeable effect. Behind it, a second abomination emerged, this one a strange fanged toad. Leaping over its companion, it landed squarely on the shoulders of another Ranger, who squirmed madly out of its way. Nicodemus laughed.

Without blinking Katie turned and fanned her pistol at the cackling huckster. Nicodemus responded by hurling the fanned cards back at her. Each card flew with unhesitating accuracy, intercepting the bullets in midair. They exploded in a flash of green light, as cacophony of unholy energy in the air between the combatants.

"Nice try," Nic snickered. "Now it's my turn."

The suit was in his fingers in a flash - the Jack of Spades. He threw it towards the head Ranger as she pulled a second gun, watching it fly towards her faster than anyone could have imagined. The visage inside it seemed to grow as it flew, pulling away from the card to become all too real. Its face twisted into an insect-like maw, its crudely sketched swords becoming razor-sharp steel. The beast grew to huge proportions midair - large enough to hide its creator behind it. Katie's eyes widened and she dodged aside, hitting the dirt while the card-thing flew above her. She struck the turf at an odd angle and could feel the wind get sucked out of her chest. Struggling to breathe, she turned to see what had become of Nicodemus's creation.

Before it could move, a hail of gunfire caught its attention. Danny Hamilton charged the thing from the side, oblivious to the obvious dangers it represented. As the bullets struck it, it shuddered in pain. The flesh beneath the wound seemed strange, artificial, like the cardboard it had sprung from. Despite the injuries, however, it seemed unperturbed. It launched itself at Danny before he could reload; he

never blinked. Dropping his pistol, he produced a huge Bowie knife and jabbed it straight into the creature's maw. Bellowing in pain, it thrust itself down the length of the blade, tearing chunks of its head as it did so. It buried its fangs into Hamilton's neck, severing the jugular and sending blood spraying. Even as the Ranger screamed, he kept twisting the knife, until he had all but tore the beast's head from its shoulders. The two collapsed in a dying embrace, locked together and struggling to the end.

Katie pulled herself to her feet and looked around. Within moments, the assault had disintegrated into a massacre. The two monstrosities tore through the Rangers like wet paper, while Hamilton's dying gurgles intermingled with the card-beast on top of him. Other Rangers tried to fight back - at the creatures, at Nicodemus, at the house itself - but to no avail. Bobo Leveux's flashing voodoo magic seemed to be having some effect, but he was alone amidst the gunfighters. Even his partner could not be saved; Zeke's body lay amid Enoch's tentacles in bloody, twitching scraps. The few Rangers left alive would not remain so for long.

"Get back!" she yelled, trying vainly to be heard above the din. Her guns lay silent on the muddy turf, and as she stooped to pick them up, she saw Enoch's writhing bulk fall towards her. Plucking her pistol up, she knew she could do nothing to stop it. She cocked the hammer and resolved to go down as hard as she could.

Then he was there. He stood in the center of the raging storm and howled with the fury of hell. J.P. Coleman interposed himself between the combatants, matching Enoch's relentless horror with an infernal mark of his own. Enoch stopped, its tentacles writhing uncertainly as it regarded the Harrowed sheriff. A pair of scorpions skittered out of his boots, while his eyes regarded the creature unblinkingly. Something behind them - something unlike the man they belonged to - flashed a darkened stare.

Katie made good use of the pause. The gun blazed in her hand, spitting lead in an unerring line. This was no panicked scattershot; this was a deadeye aim from one of the best sharpshooters in Texas. Katie's bullets struck the Whateley face, and splattered comfortably red blood across its features. One blue eye ruptured the other stung in pain at the blinding red spray. It shrieked again and Katie could hear genuine pain in its voice for the first time.

She pressed forward for another attack, unaware of the fact that combat had ceased. Enoch snarled and turned towards her, the glee gone from its inhumanly human face. She shook her head and snarled. Yet again, her fatalistic plans unraveled Coleman's clammy hands caught her coat and dragged her away from the slaughterhouse. She kicked and screamed as her gun discharged harmlessly above her. But the sheriff's inhuman strength held her fast, carrying her back to safety.

"It's over," he hissed, his grating voice cutting through the noise. "They've won."

"No!" she howled. "NOOOOO!!!" Her cries went unheard, her protests ignored. With the thrashing Ranger still in his arms, Coleman retreated, a smattering of survivors fleeing before him. Nicodemus's laughter chased them all the way back to Gomorra.

* * *

Two figures watched the carnage silently, hidden in the shadows far away. They saw the gibbering things Wilhelmina had unleashed, heard the screams of strong men as they were pulled apart. The tall one stared impassively at the sight while his companion gaped with unbelieving eyes. The white bandage on his shoulder contrasted sharply with the black clothing that comprised his ensemble. Occasionally, he scratched at it, as if the wound beneath had not quite healed. At last, as the howls died down and the inhuman creatures capered silently among the remains, the one looked up at the other.

"All right. I'm convinced," Black Jack said. "What do I have to do?"

Austin Stoker grinned. "Bury the hatchet. And pray Nate Hunter's willing to do the same."

How to get Ahead in Gomorra Without Really Trying

by Steve Crow

"How's it coming, poppin?"

William Badson looked up from his workbench. "Just great, Master! I'm just finishing it up. Here, see!"

With that, he picked up the oddly shaped object and tossed it to his Master, Nicodemus Whateley. His elder neatly caught it one-handed without interrupting a cut of his ever-present deck with the other hand.

He studied it carefully, then nodded. "Top marks, my boy. All done by the ancient rituals. I take it my...gift' was suitable."

"Oh yes, Master. It seemed to almost...leap to the task. It made the ceremony much easier."

Smiling in approval, Nicodemus tossed the object back to William. He caught it. "Well, you know what to do, boy. Go out and have some fun." The words had barely left his mouth before young Badson was out the door and down the stairs.

Moving to the window, Nicodemus watched William run across the front yard of the estate. As he noted how well Saul and the recovered Ezekiel had cleaned up after the events of the last few days, he felt a presence at his side.

"They grow up so quickly, don't they, Delores?"

"Oh yes, Nicky. He's like the son we never had."

"We don't have a son, my dear. Yet." That prerogative was currently taken for the Master, and little Lucifer was more than a handful as it was. However, Nicodemus hoped to produce his own one day, when the current situation was resolved.

"Exactly. And William's just like him."

Nicodemus sighed tolerantly at his...sister's' (for lack of better word - one could spend forever trying to untangle the various crossed branches of the family tree) twisted logic. Thank...well, not goodness, but something that he had escaped the insanity that had claimed so many of his family members.

Chuckling maniacally, he continued on, "Boys will be boys. It's our purpose to channel him, to fulfill the ancient prophecies. Speaking of our purpose, we have work to do. Shall we?"

Taking Dolores by the arm, the two of them headed out to pursue the family business.

* * *

"You guys want to play?"

Timmy Derrick looked up from the ground where he and Sally were playing marbles. It was a slow, boring day at the orphanage. Most days were. Granted, the place was never the most thrilling place in the world. But all the recent deaths among the miners had swelled its population, and the only way to get a breath of fresh air was to go outside.

He glared at the blonde-haired boy who had simply...appeared. He was just standing there, his hands behind his back. Timmy hadn't heard him crawl over the fence, or seen him come through the back door of the orphanage. Anyway, Willllliiaaam (nobody called him "Willy" or "Billy") was an orphan, but he didn't stay at the orphanage. Sometimes he just...appeared. Watching. Waiting. He gave Timmy the creeps.

Timmy looked over at Sally, who was eyeing the new arrival warily as well. She had hopped the fence to play with Timmy. Even though her parents were dead, she didn't live at the orphanage. Instead, she stayed with that weird Longfellow guy when she wasn't out on the streets 'acquirin' something, as she put it.

He shrugged. "Sure. Ya got yer marbles?"

William shook his head. "That's dumb. How about a new game?" He brought his hands out. In it was a weird brown shape. It was kinda like an egg, but pointed at both ends. There was a big white series of stitches along one side.

Sally sniffed the air. "Did a cow die out here?"

"It's fresh leather, stupid," William explained. "I made it myself."

"What is it?" Timmy asked, eyeing it warily.

"I call it a 'kickball.' You use your foot and...well, kick it around."

"It's not round," Sally pointed out, reasonably enough. "Why call it a ball?"

William rolled his eyes. "The shape's...important. Otherwise I'd make it round, sure. But it's got to look like this."

Sally looked at Timmy. Who looked back at her and shrugged. "Sure, let's play." Pocketing their marbles, the two got up off their knees and walked towards to William. He held the ball out in both hands, then dropped it and kicked it with his toe.

Caught by surprise, Timmy held his hands up and the ball nestled firmly into them. He had to admit, the ball's shape was perfect for catching. Experimentally, he dropped the ball and tried to hit it with his foot. He failed, and it bounced off the ground. Leaping forward, Sally kicked it on the fly and sent it spinning off into where it slammed into the fence.

"Hey, this is kinda fun!" she exclaimed.

"Let me take a turn!" Timmy yelled, running off after it. He caught it this time, sending it bouncing across the grass.

"Make sure all the kids get a turn," William called out. "And tell them they owe me one."

Timmy and Sally only vaguely heard him. But by now they were thoroughly engrossed in booting the 'kickball' across the orphanage yard.

* * *

'Tombstone' Frank woke to darkness.

The next to the last he remembered was he and the other Rangers facing down the Whateley's pet horrors in front of their estate.

The last thing he remembered was a thousand pricking needles sticking into his body from all directions. He didn't remember who was doing it, or where he had been: he just remembered the pain.

For the Harrowed, pain was pretty damn rare. Walking around as a corpse tended to inure you to the little aches and pains of humanity. Not to mention, say, a .44 in the chest. Frank had taken such wounds before, and laughed them off. The pain he had just felt was nothing like that.

Or had he just felt it? He didn't know how long he had been unconscious. It could have been days. Weeks. Months. Typically he only "shut down" for a few hours, when his body and the demon inside it demanded it. But now, floating in a black void, he realized he had no idea how long it had been since the pain. It could have been seconds.

Dimly, Frank tried to open his eyes, but the blackness remained absolute, unresolved. He didn't have a whole lot of feelin' sensation in his body anyway, but this was worse than usual. He couldn't get a sense of his arms, or legs. He couldn't hear anything, and he couldn't even smell the usual underlying odor of decay that accompanied him wherever he went.

Experimentally, he... reached back into the depths of his soul, like a man tonguing the empty spot where a tooth had fallen out. But if the

demon that shared his body was there, it was so dimmed down that he couldn't feel it. Assuming it was even there.

Suddenly there was a bright, sharp flash of pain. Frank couldn't tell where it came from, or what part of his body felt it. The pain was everywhere, overwhelming. He would have screamed, but had no mouth. For a timeless second his thoughts were literally overwhelmed with the pain. Then it stopped, as abruptly as it had come, leaving not a single after-ache.

Then another burst of pain. Different, unique, but just as excruciating. And another, and another.

The pain soon built up to a steady stream of sharp flashes. Dimly, in the small part of his mind that was still coherent, Frank screamed Let it stop, let it stop, let it stop...!

* * *

And back behind the orphanage back yard, the other kids joined Timmy and Sally in their fun.

Finders Keepers

by Steve Crow

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"They grow up so quickly, don't they, Delores?"

"Oh yes, Nicky. He's like the son we never had."

"We don't have a son, my dear. Yet." That prerogative was currently taken for the Master, and little Lucifer was more than a handful as it was. However, Nicodemus hoped to produce his own one day, when the current situation was resolved.

"Exactly. And William's just like him."

Nicodemus sighed tolerantly at his...sister's' (for lack of better word - one could spend forever trying to untangle the various crossed branches of the family tree) twisted logic. Thank...well, not goodness, but something that he had escaped the insanity that had claimed so many of his family members.

Chuckling maniacally, he continued on, "Boys will be boys. It's our purpose to channel him, to fulfill the ancient prophecies. Speaking of our purpose, we have work to do. Shall we?"

Taking Dolores by the arm, the two of them headed out to pursue the family business.

* * *

"You guys want to play?"

Timmy Derrick looked up from the ground where he and Sally were playing marbles. It was a slow, boring day at the orphanage. Most days were. Granted, the place was never the most thrilling place in the world. But all the recent deaths among the miners had swelled its population, and the only way to get a breath of fresh air was to go outside.

He glared at the blonde-haired boy who had simply...appeared. He was just standing there, his hands behind his back. Timmy hadn't heard him crawl over the fence, or seen him come through the back door of the orphanage. Anyway, Willlllliaaam (nobody called him "Willy" or "Billy") was an orphan, but he didn't stay at the orphanage. Sometimes he just...appeared. Watching. Waiting. He gave Timmy the creeps.

Timmy looked over at Sally, who was eyeing the new arrival warily as well. She had hopped the fence to play with Timmy. Even though her parents were dead, she didn't live at the orphanage. Instead, she stayed with that weird Longfellow guy when she wasn't out on the streets 'acquirin' something, as she put it.

He shrugged. "Sure. Ya got yer marbles?"

William shook his head. "That's dumb. How about a new game?" He brought his hands out. In it was a weird brown shape. It was kinda like an egg, but pointed at both ends. There was a big white series of stitches along one side.

Sally sniffed the air. "Did a cow die out here?"

"It's fresh leather, stupid," William explained. "I made it myself."

"What is it?" Timmy asked, eyeing it warily.

"I call it a 'kickball.' You use your foot and...well, kick it around."

"It's not round," Sally pointed out, reasonably enough. "Why call it a ball?"

William rolled his eyes. "The shape's...important. Otherwise I'd make it round, sure. But it's got to look like this."

Sally looked at Timmy. Who looked back at her and shrugged.

"Sure, let's play." Pocketing their marbles, the two got up off their

knees and walked towards William. He held the ball out in both hands, then dropped it and kicked it with his toe.

Caught by surprise, Timmy held his hands up and the ball nestled firmly into them. He had to admit, the ball's shape was perfect for catching. Experimentally, he dropped the ball and tried to hit it with his foot. He failed, and it bounced off the ground. Leaping forward, Sally kicked it on the fly and sent it spinning off into where it slammed into the fence.

"Hey, this is kinda fun!" she exclaimed.

"Let me take a turn!" Timmy yelled, running off after it. He caught it this time, sending it bouncing across the grass.

"Make sure all the kids get a turn," William called out. "And tell them they owe me one."

Timmy and Sally only vaguely heard him. But by now they were thoroughly engrossed in booting the 'kickball' across the orphanage yard.

* * *

'Tombstone' Frank woke to darkness.

The next to the last he remembered was he and the other Rangers facing down the Whateley's pet horrors in front of their estate.

The last thing he remembered was a thousand pricking needles sticking into his body from all directions. He didn't remember who was doing it, or where he had been: he just remembered the pain.

For the Harrowed, pain was pretty damn rare. Walking around as a corpse tended to inure you to the little aches and pains of humanity. Not to mention, say, a .44 in the chest. Frank had taken such wounds before, and laughed them off. The pain he had just felt was nothing like that.

Or had he just felt it? He didn't know how long he had been unconscious. It could have been days. Weeks. Months. Typically he only "shut down" for a few hours, when his body and the demon inside it demanded it. But now, floating in a black void, he realized he had no idea how long it had been since the pain. It could have been seconds.

Dimly, Frank tried to open his eyes, but the blackness remained absolute, unresolved. He didn't have a whole lot of feelin' sensation in his body anyway, but this was worse than usual. He couldn't get a sense of his arms, or legs. He couldn't hear anything, and he couldn't even smell the usual underlying odor of decay that accompanied him wherever he went.

Experimentally, he... reached back into the depths of his soul, like a man tonguing the empty spot where a tooth had fallen out. But if the demon that shared his body was there, it was so dimmed down that he couldn't feel it. Assuming it was even there.

Suddenly there was a bright, sharp flash of pain. Frank couldn't tell where it came from, or what part of his body felt it. The pain was

everywhere, overwhelming. He would have screamed, but had no mouth. For a timeless second his thoughts were literally overwhelmed with the pain. Then it stopped, as abruptly as it had come, leaving not a single after-ache.

Then another burst of pain. Different, unique, but just as excruciating. And another, and another.

The pain soon built up to a steady stream of sharp flashes. Dimly, in the small part of his mind that was still coherent, Frank screamed Let it stop, let it stop, let it stop...!

* * *

And back behind the orphanage back yard, the other kids joined Timmy and Sally in their fun.

The Fightin' Life of Arizona Jane

by Rob Vaux

Jane knew someone was trying to kill her from the first night. Not her first night per se, but certainly the killer's. She sat in the corner of the Fat Chance, eyeballing her opponents over an exquisite full house, and became aware that someone in the room was eyeballing her with the same intensity. Not that she could tell who exactly. The Fat Chance was choked to the gills with gunman, miners and mad scientists, all working industriously to drink themselves into a stupor. Spotting one focused face in such a sea was ridiculous.

Nevertheless, she felt someone's gaze boring into her, felt it in the same place she kept her gunfighter's instincts. You didn't live as long as Jane did without listening to that place very closely.

"Raise," she smiled quietly and threw another chip onto the stack. Just because her life was in danger didn't mean she have to blow this hand. The cowboys surrounding her looked glumly at their own cards, then tossed them onto the table. Jane slid the winnings into her hat and stood up.

"Nice game, boys. I'll let ya try an' win it back tomorrow." Already, she was scanning the crowd for the watcher, trying to nail his eyes to the wall. To the bar where Charlie Landers poured his drinks and chatted amiably... to the far corner where a pair of Texas Rangers almost succeeded in looking inconspicuous... past the poker games and the beer pitchers and the bar fights waiting to happen... There. A darkened form near the swinging doors, black hair sprouting from behind a tan rancher's hat - that one. She strode across the floor with powerful steps, pushing men twice her size out of the way. The figure turned and vanished through the doors at the first sign of movement, disappearing into the Gomorra night. Jane broke into a run, but it was too late. The streets outside were deserted, the figure vanished.

"Bring it on pal," she muttered beneath her breath. "I ain't goin' anywhere."

* * *

She was back in the Fat Chance several days later, lounging at the bar with a drink in her hand, when he next appeared. The form hovered in an alleyway across from the saloon, visible through the windows. It never moved, only stared intently back at her. She couldn't make out the face, hidden behind the shadows and that rancher's hat. She could feel his gaze, though, boring into her like screws. Her eyes slit and she gazed right back.

"See anythin' green?"

She started and turned in a flash. Charlie the bartender stood behind her, his flattened face broken with a toothy grin.

"Easy there. I ain't packin'."

She sighed and turned back around.

"Sorry Charlie. You kinda snuck up on me."

"Yeah, I got a way o' doin' that. So what're you lookin' at out there that's so interestin'?"

"There's a man across the street who wants to kill me."

"Oh." He fell silent for a moment. "Plan to do anything about it?"

"Sure. As soon as he makes his move."

"Any idea who'd want ta kill ya?"

"Plenty. Bucktooth Jim Sampson fer what I did in Tombstone. The LeVile twins, they got a beef. Then there were those guys in Shan Fan..."

"Sounds to me like you could use some friends."

"Those were my friends, Charlie. Why do ya think they're so mad?"

"Then it sounds like yer pickin' the wrong ones."

"Maybe. That's why I stopped."

"Lonely way to live. Lonely way to die, too."

"I don't apologize for my mistakes, but I'm smart enough to learn from them. If I pick the wrong friends, at least I'm smart enough to know it."

"I suppose. Still - it can leave you hangin', can't it?"

"Hangin' can't kill me, Charlie. And I don't die easily." Tossing a coin on the bar, she leapt suddenly and sprinted out the door, charging towards the shadowy figure in the ally. He vanished the instant she moved, and as Charlie watched, she turned this way and that, searching vainly in the dusty street.

"Lonely way to live," he repeated quietly.

* * *

Evening again, spreading deepening purple across Gomorra's west side. The cowboys were out in force as they were every night, trying to spend as much money as they could as quickly as possible. Shouts and drunken singing filled the air, punctuated by the occasional gunshot. Arizona Jane moved through the crowded thoroughfare with

unusual sobriety. She hadn't had a drink in three days, and didn't intend to until her stalker lay cold and stiff.

She walked briskly towards the Fat Chance, weaving between crowds of men in various stages of inebriation. As she moved, she let her gunfighter's instincts take over, reach out, scan the area in ways her eyes and ears couldn't. He was out there. Somewhere. Waiting for her.

Behind you.

Risking a glance, she turned back briefly. There it was. Tan hat. Black hair. About fifty yards behind her, following intently.

"Time to end this," she muttered. She ducked suddenly into the alley beside the Fat Chance, but not so suddenly as to confuse her pursuer. The narrow walkway was empty, save for a few crates piled beside the saloon. She flattened herself against the wall and waited.

Sure as sin, the man followed, stepping into the alley with cautious steps. He was shorter than she thought, his face still hidden beneath the hat's wide brim. As he moved, she grabbed his arm and flung him forward. He flew like a rag doll, smashing against the boxes in an ungainly heap. Despite that, he managed to break the fall, and the rifle on his shoulder moved instantly into his hands. Whoever he was, he knew how to take care of himself.

She cocked her gun and pointed it right at the miscreant's head.

"Make a move and I'll drill yer skull wide open." The figure froze. "What do you want with me?"

"Nothin'!" The voice was high, feminine. "Just wanted to meet you is all."

Jane's brow scrunched in confusion, and looked closely at the form. From under the tan hat, a teenage face blinked. Wide-eyed wonder broke the features of a fifteen-year old girl, a shining light of adoration in her eyes. The holster at her belt held a paperback book; the cover read clearly. *The Fightin' Life of Arizona Jane.*

"I think you're the greatest gunfighter in the whole world!" she breathed. "Better even than Hank Ketchum!"

"You..."

"My name's Mandy. Mandy Holland. They call me 'Montana' Holland," she added shyly. "On account of I want be just like you."

Jane blinked incredulously, struggling for words. "Just... like... me..."

"Did you really kill six banditos with a broken pistol?"

"Well... um... yes, actually. Although t'weren't like the newspapers said. There was this chandelier and when my gun misfired, it just..."

"That's great! I always

"Where are you from girl?" she finally found her tongue.

"Missoula. Lived there my whole life until my pa hit me, and I figured it was time to clear out. I been lookin' fer you for two years."

"Two years? You been out here fer two years?"

"Yup. You ain't easy to find, you know that? I went to Arizona first on accounta yer name, and couldn't find you, but then this guy says he seen you in Denver, so I rode a cattle train up there but you weren't there an' then..."

Jane held up her hand for silence, a mixture of bemusement and perplexity playing on her face.

"What do you want?"

"I wanna be with you, Miss Jane. Be yer partner, help tame the west."

"Tame the west?!"

"Just like the book says."

"Listen, sweetie. I don't know where you got that book, but I ain't here to tame the west. I'm just a gunfighter."

"That's okay. You're the best gunfighter in the world."

"I don't need a partner. Sorry."

Devastation played across the girl's face.

"But you've got to! It's all I've ever wanted to do!"

"I live dangerous, girl. Follow me around and you could get hurt."

"I can take care of myself."

"I've heard that before."

"Oh please, Miss Jane... please...?"

She eyed the rifle in the girl's hands - solid, well-used. Her young hands moved with an easy care, as someone used to handling weapons. And to get here all the way from Missoula... Jane sighed and took off her hat.

"Okay. You can stay."

"Really?! Great!" she clapped her hands. "I won't be no trouble, Miss Jane, Honest."

"See that you ain't. This place don't forgive." Her face relaxed. "And you can call me Jane."

"Okay... Jane."

They turned and walked towards the entrance to the alleyway.

"Can I ask you something?" Holland breathed. "What part of Arizona are you from?"

"The Cleveland, Ohio part," she replied. "Arizona just sounds better."

"Really? I called myself Montana 'cause I'm from Montana, an' I didn't wanna be Arizona 'cause you had it. I guess I'll stay Montana, even though you didn't stay Ohio, 'cause..."

Jane smiled to herself as Holland kept chatting. Maybe she did have a habit of picking the wrong friends. But it might be all right if a friend picked her.

Just this once.

REVELATIONS

Revelations

by Rob Vaux

Jackson lost count of the number of people he had killed since leaving the sheriff's office. He had spent weeks underneath Father Juan's mission, healing his wounds and hiding from the law. When he had left, Gomorra was still fairly normal - wild, maybe, but nothing he hadn't seen before. Now, however... now things had changed.

The town was a war zone, an open field of combat reminiscent of Dante's hell. Main Street was on fire, as hotels and saloons burned out of control. The moonlight threw strange shadows across the landscape, highlighting corpses spread ankle deep in the streets. Gunfighters and prospectors charged through the streets, battling shadows, madness and each other with equal ferocity. And here and there, things came gibbering out of the night. Creatures he had heard rumors of, but never believed. Never until now.

Something twitched behind him and he spun, firing almost unconsciously. His companions started at the sudden noise, then gaped as a Harrowed monstrosity fell from an open doorway. Another two steps and it would have taken Templeton's head off.

"That's one you owe me fat boy."

Templeton glared with his piggy eyes, and Jack thought for a moment he might forget the shaky alliance they had forged. Then Sheriff Hunter interposed himself between them and the moment passed. For now.

I just wanted to be a miner, he thought ruefully. Where had that innocent desire gone so wrong?

They moved on, toward the edge of town. Stoker remained in front of the group, moving slowly and resolutely in the direction of Lord Grimely's. The renegade Confederate's eyes flashed with maniacal energy and he snickered as he struck down anything in his path, his glowing saber wet with blood. Quite a change from the steel calm of his reputation. The ragged band of outlaws and lawmen behind him fought fiercely, but they weren't a part of this nightmare realm, not like Stoker was. Demon or man, he belonged here.

To his left, he could hear war-cries from the Sioux encampment and saw the flash of what may have been spirit magic. At least we're not fighting this alone. There were others as well: the rumble of machinery from some Collegium contraption echoed across the

landscape, and he couldn't believe that the Agency was down for the count. Once upon a time, they had all been at each other's throats. Squabbling for rights to the ghost rock mines or screaming vainly of unseen enemies. And while they had bickered, an unseen evil had stolen it, brought here by centuries-old machinations and the crazed beliefs of madman prophet. Did they have anything left that could stop it?

As they topped the rise and laid eyes on Lord Grimely's, the true magnitude of their enemy became clear. It stood in the center of the blasted plain, towering above the carnage like a mountaintop. Its ebon head turned left and right as it surveyed the ruins of Gomorra, and from its razor-sharp jaws an inhuman bellow rang across the open plains. It turned as they approached, alien eyes narrowing in unspoken recognition. And as a chill ran up Black Jack's spine - the first hints of fear he had ever known - it beckoned to them with crimson talons.

"What in the name of Hell is that?!" he heard Hunter gasp.

"That," Stoker grinned, "is what we're gonna kill."

Executioners Regrets

by Steve Crow

The man known as "The Ghost" strode into the Fat Chance Saloon. As always, one part of his mind carefully analyzed every entrance, every shadow, every drunken occupant of the bar. His group, and Katie Karl's as well, had long since determined that it was as safe a place as any in Gomorra for a public meeting. And he knew from harsh personal experience that there was no better method of drawing attention to yourself than by conspiring in some dark deep corner out of public sight.

However, he never took chances. Reflectively, the Ghost tugged at the scarred tissue behind his right ear. He had learned that lesson as well. These days, he was a lot more indestructible, but a well-placed bullet could still put him down. He was fortunate his first killer was a poor shot. One more inch, and there wouldn't have been enough grey matter for...well, something or another to latch on to.

Whether the saloon was safe or not was a moot point: the Ghost had an errand to perform, and nothing was going to stop him. He glanced over at the dwarf barkeep, Landers. The man was casually polishing a glass while watching his now-familiar customer survey the Saloon. He nodded to a beaded curtain near the back.

The Ghost strode confidently across the room. Even before he reached the curtain, he could smell the reek of grain alcohol. The heavy odor was enough to disguise a half-wasted Harrowed, although the Ghost preferred cologne himself.

Damned fool's going to get himself killed, the Ghost thought. Then: Maybe that's what he wants.

Sweeping aside the curtain, the Ghost surveyed the small private room that lay beyond. It was little more than a booth, although the walls were solid. The one small table took up most of the space. Seated behind it was a red-haired man, slumped half back in his chair and holding up a glass of whiskey before him. One half-filled bottle, and a half-dozen empties, lay scattered on the tabletop in a pool of booze.

The man looked up blearily from his contemplative stupor. Struggling, he waved a weak greeting to the Ghost, who looked at him in contempt.

"Greetings, sirrrh," Cort Williams slurred out. "My apologies if I can't greet you properly, but I seem to find myself...indisposed at the moment."

The Ghost glared at the man. The full force of his gaze, which had once moved men to march off to war on their brothers, now had the powers of Heaven and Hell behind it. But Williams stared back defiantly, unflinching. He might be drinking to forget his sorrows, but he had lost none of his nerve. It was that nerve which the Ghost was going to need.

Sitting himself down in the room's one remaining chair, the Ghost pondered the wreck of a man before him for a minute. Williams returned the stare for a moment, then returned to his drinking, emptying the shot glass and pouring himself another.

Williams might not be the best straight-up shooter that had ever served the Ghost. Slate had been better overall. Roberts and the new fella, Derek, could probably match Cort bullet-for-bullet. But the man could put down a vampire or a werewolf without flinching. He had traveled far and wide, and his knowledge of the supernatural was unrivaled. Only now was the Ghost beginning to realize where he might have picked up some of that knowledge.

The massacre at the Golden Mare had left him short-handed, though. Bad enough he had to join forces with Rebel scum. He needed his most trusted lieutenant at his side. Quentin was at his counterpart Prospectus' throat, Sister Mary was still on the critical list, Dean was no fighter, Roberts and Armstrong were still trying to maintain their public covers, Gallagher was a mover, not a fighter, and O'Bannon and Derek were untested qualities.

The Ghost needed Williams. He needed an even-tempered fighter that he could trust. Cort was the one who scouted out the trouble spots in advance, provided the info, and was there when the stakes went in and the silver bullets flashed.

A minute of silence filled the room, broken only by the sounds of whiskey going down a man's throat. Finally, the Ghost spoke up, "So,

you going to tell me what the matter is, son? Or do I have to beat it out of you?"

Cort finished off his current glass, then put it down on the table with exaggerated gentility. He looked at the Ghost. Then he sighed wearily.

"They're dead. Rocescu, Quaid, Slate. All dead. And I'm responsible."

"Damn you to hell, you're straight on that one, Williams!" the Ghost snapped.

A look of drunken surprise ran across Williams' face. "You knew?!?"

"Do you think I'm an idiot, son? You wouldn't be on my team if I didn't know everything about you, from what day your momma changed your first nappie, to what you were doing during that little recon stunt over to the Golden Mare a few weeks ago."

"But it was daylight, and I told you they couldn't do anything. That's how I was able to get out..."

"That, and that 'Meizhu,' your old gal, let you go. Or you let her go. I'll grant you, I don't know exactly what went on in that room. But she didn't leave town despite your warning, did she? And you knew she wouldn't..."

"Maybe..."

"Maybe nothing," the Ghost snapped out. "I don't know what she once was. But she's evil now. Maybe she was always like that. Or maybe it's the thing inside her driving her to it. Believe me, I can understand that."

"But if'n' that's the case, she can't control it. She's got to be put down. Same way that if I...went over, I'd expect you to do the same for me."

"But I made her a promise, a long time ago..."

"And you swore an oath to do your duty by me and your country too, Cort. No man knows better than me the price you have to pay by balancing duty and oath. I may not have killed them myself, but the blood of thousands of men cover my hands. Men I swore to protect, not to send off to war. But I knew my duty, and them and me all paid the price. I'm still paying it, come to that. When you sober up, let me tell you about a little visit I paid to the Mission House a few days ago."

William's shoulders slumped as he gazed down at the tabletop, contemplating the empty bottles.

The Ghost shrugged and rose to his feet. "Your choice, son. You can drink yourself to death here, while Gomorra comes tumblin' down around you. If you're lucky, maybe someone'll shoot you. Or if I don't make it back, maybe your old gal or one of her "girls" will stop over and pay you a visit. You think you can balance your oaths and your duties after that happens?"

Mutely, Cort shook his head 'no'.

"I didn't reckon so. Or you can get up, come with me, we'll pour a couple gallons of that paint varnish Dean calls 'coffee' down your throat, and see if you've still got what it takes."

Cort looked up. "Where are we headin'?"

"Right now, back to HQ. After that, we're going to pay your old girlfriend and her girls a little visit over at the Golden Mare. Me, you, Katie Karl and some of her Rangers..."

"The Rangers?!?"

"You have been out of the way, son. Thanks to your little stunt, we're understaffed. Fortunately, dependin' on how you look at it, so is she. Can't say I'm fond of teamin' up with Johnny Reb, but we've got a truce going until things straighten out around here. Another reason I need you. I'm Union, and undead. That's two reasons for her to put a bullet in me right there. I need a man at my side, one I can trust. Are you up to it?"

There were a few moments of silence, and then Cort got unsteadily to his feet. He staggered, but the Ghost made no effort to offer him assistance.

Finally, Williams made it to the door. The Ghost turned to go, then paused. "Oh, and son..."

"Yes?"

"One more stunt like that, and I'll kill you myself."

Negotiations

by Steve Crow

(This story takes place just prior to Rob Vaux's "Full Circle", and is a sequel to my own "Special Delivery".)

"Get out there and find Rachel, Vic. We've got to stop her before it's too late."

As if it were that easy, Victor thought to himself, as he remembered Black Jack's words.

He had been over most of Gomorra by now, and hit many of the remaining outlying strike as well. Wherever Sumner had gone to ground, she had gone deep.

Vic's contacts among the docks had given him one last sign of hope. Sheila Mirabella had been making deliveries out of town, including a few items that you wouldn't normally expect miners (living or dead) to have use of. So Victor had come down to what was left of the docks area, what with Big Jake and Scooter having registered their displeasure with Sweetrock's business practices and all, to see if anyone had seen hide or hair of her.

Vic stepped to the edge of the dock, and shielded his eyes against the setting sun. Damn! He could just make out Mirabella's maze runner moving off into the canyons of the Maze.

But then he turned, his keen ears picking up a noise of leather on wood. He caught a glimpse of someone moving in the shadows off to his left. Drawing his revolver, he advanced carefully.

And then stopped, at the click of a hammer being drawn back. Then a woman's voice called out, "Navarro...?"

Victor sighed, relieved, and lowered his gun. "Yep, it's me, Rach. Welcome back."

The attractive bandit moved out of the shadows. She hadn't changed much from when Vic had last seen her, during the shootout with the Law Dogs. The ever-present cigar in her mouth was unlit, a concession to her attempts at stealth. Her clothes were maybe a little dirtier, but her gun was still spotless.

"What's it to you?" Sumner snarled. Rather nervously, Victor noticed that her own gun was still up and ready to fill the air with lead.

"Blackjack sent me to find you."

Rachel snorted. "Hell with that. You and Mirabella sound about the same. She claimed Jackie had survived the shootout, too. I saw him go down. Truth to tell, you hadn't looked too good last time I saw you."

Victor shrugged. "Blackjack pulled through, thanks to my brother. Myself as well. Flint, Eddie, Twitch, and Cletus didn't pull through..."

"Yeah, I heard. So how am I supposed to know that Jackie didn't really die? You too, for that matter." As if reminded, Rachel shifted her gun's aim from Victor's chest to his head.

Wherever she had been, the weeks of solitude hadn't done the girl much good. Rachel had never been particularly stable, Victor thought. Now she was full-blown paranoid. Not that that's necessarily a bad thing to be in Gomorra. Vic reminded himself. He remembered what Blackjack and Juan had told him about Spike Dougan's... "return." He was an inquisitive man by nature, but that one was one thing he had no desire to see.

Vic was tempted to try out his charms with Rachel. Though Juan had been quite the lady's man before taking up the cloth, Vic had eventually surpassed him. Or so his many ex-lovers could testify.

But Rachel had never been the kind to be impressed by any man. If she weren't ready to shoot him on the spot, trying to seduce would probably earn him a bullet for sure. Although it might be worth it, Vic thought, eyeing the Ace of Spades tattoo exposed by Sumner's partially unbuttoned shirt.

But this wasn't the time. Vic shrugged, and tried a more reasonable line. "Do I _look_ dead? We're heading for the mission house, so you can check with Juan about me, Blackjack, and anything else you're curious about. Yeah, there's a bunch of the walkin' undead, what my brother calls "harrowed," walking around Gomorra. And that's why the boss me to find you. We're aimin' to take them out."

"I only see you, doing the talking. Who's 'we'?"

"Me, Blackjack, Horowitz, Juan as much as he can. Flint's relatives are in town, and the boss has convinced them to come along with him. Don't know if they're too reliable - looks like they'll shoot anything that moves, but Blackjack'll point them in the right direction. Some old friend of the boss's called Wendigo is heading in, too."

Rachel shrugged, and lowered her gun slightly. "Well, maybe that'll be enough. As long as there's some money in it at the end of the day. We'll have to take care of Hunter and his surviving buddies first, though."

"Ummm, that's the other thing, Rach..."

The revolver came up again. "What other thing?"

"Well, the long and short of it is... we're working with Hunter and his deputies."

"What?!?"

Victor sighed. "It wasn't my idea. But the boss has been talking with that Stoker fella, and it sounds like whatever's threatenin' Gomorra, it's going to take everyone we can round up to finish it off."

"Hell with that! First Jackie guns down Spike, then we lose half our number to the Law Dogs, and now you're claimin' he's going to make some deal with Hunter's thugs? You expect me to believe any of that?"

Rachel began to pace back and forth, never taking her eyes or her gun off of Victor. "Maybe you and your brother are tryin' to take over the gang, Vic? Using the boss' name and rep to build up your own? I never did trust Juan - who ever heard of an outlaw priest?"

Vic was getting irritated. For all he cared, Rachel could climb back into whatever hole she had come from. But she had already gunned down two Dogs, and if left to run amuck, she'd undoubtedly kill more. He didn't know if he believed everything Blackjack had told him, but Juan did. And that was enough for him. Without the Law Dogs helping them, they were dead meat. And if Rachel gunned more of them down, there was no chance for any kind of alliance. And for the party the boss was planning, Vic wanted as many guns at his back as possible.

"You can probably take me, Rach. You might even be able to take the boss..."

"If he's still alive."

"...if he's still alive. Whatever. But you willing to take that chance? Blackjack's never steered us wrong yet. Neither's my brother, when you think about it. If both of them say that heavy shit's comin' down and we need the Law Dogs, I'm inclined to believe them."

"Besides... you can always shoot your share of Law Dogs later. If they're signed on with us now, I just figure there's more of them that'll take some bullets before they get to us."

Rachel eyed him cautiously. Then nodded. "That sounds more like the Victor Navarro I fought beside. The only one in the gang beside Jackie, Spike, and Eddie that were worth more than a bucket of spit."

"Not that I'm sure I totally believe you, but if you want to show me Blackjack, I reckon I'll take a look and see what he has to say. Or put a bullet through his head, if he's walkin' dead. Either way's fine with me."

Relieved, Victor sighed. "He's supposed to be at Hunter's office in a half-hour. Take the back route and meet him there. I'll meet you later - I've got to check on a few other folks."

Rachel nodded once in acknowledgment, then turned and moved off into the dusk.

This had better damned well be worth it, Victor thought. I don't want to go through that again.

Full Circle

by Rob Vaux

Sitting at his desk, rifle on his knees, Nate Hunter knew that something would be coming for him soon. Templeton was out gathering the troops, Olsen releasing the last of the prisoners. Rearranging deck chairs while the ship sank beneath them. Out on the streets, chaos reigned. Unspeakable things stalked the town square, devouring those unfortunate enough to get in their way. Rumors of zombies rising from the docks were no longer rumors. A saloon had caught fire, and the lower west side was now engulfed in flames. It was all coming down around their ears. But he was still sheriff. Two days ago, he had asked his remaining deputies if they wanted to quit. None of them did. So when Johnny came back, they would all head out into the nightmare and do what they could before it claimed them.

Meantime, he had to hold the fort - in case any hapless soul came looking for protection. The sheriff's office was a bastion, which meant that someone had to be here. It also meant that any of the things out there could pop in and remove the last vestiges of Gomorra's authority in one meaty slurp. He was all alone; hardly a threat for a supernatural creature from beyond the grave. He tightened his grip on the rifle and braced himself for whatever horror chose to shamble in out of the night.

He was almost relieved when it turned out to be Rachel.

"Come on in, killer," he called as the outlaw walked slowly in. Her brown hair hung loose around her soot-stained face, while the burnished steel in her hands pointed right at Hunter's heart. Her cigar butt had gone out she spat it contemptuously across the desk at him.

"Shut up."

"Johnny'll be back soon with Charlie Flatbush and the Chengs, maybe more if the demons haven't gotten them. You want to wait, you can wipe the rest of us out too."

"All I need is you," she snarled, cocking her guns.

"Still angry about the gunfight, are you? Even after everythin' that's happened?"

"You killed my friends!" she shouted.

"I'm sorry. It was a mistake. But frankly, all that means squat right about now. We got bigger fish to fry, Sumner. Or haven't you looked outside?"

"You think I give a dump of manure what happens to this town? All I want is your blood on that wall."

Hunter flicked the safety off his rifle. "Then shoot and let's be done with it."

Sumner's grip on the pistol's tightened...

"Stop Rachel." The voice came from the back door. Rachel's mouth fell open.

"Jackie?"

Black Jack stepped carefully into the office, interposing himself between the sheriff and his former partner. His guns were trained on both, though his left hand was a little more ginger than his right. Hunter froze in his chair, while Rachel turned back to her intended target. Her mouth still gaped however.

"You're not dead..." she gasped.

"Not yet. Put down the guns down and I'll tell you all about it." His words were calm.

"What are you talkin' about?"

"I'm talking about you not shooting Sheriff Hunter."

"Why not?!"

"Because I'm asking you to. And because I'll kill you if you do." Jack's voice never wavered.

"Have you gone nuts?!" she barked. "He killed the whole gang!"

"I know. I was there, remember? That's over now; it has to be. There's something we need to do, and we can't do it with Hunter lying cold and stiff. Please Rachel."

"He's gotta go," she hissed.

"Then so do you," he returned.

"You're bluffing. You wouldn't kill me."

"So help me God, I'll put this right through your skull unless you DROP THE GUNS!"

For an instant, Rachel's hands moved from Nate to Black Jack. Then, slowly and deliberately, she eased the hammers back. The pistols slid silently into her holsters, and she folded her arms angrily.

"Okay boss," she glared. "Fer auld lang syne."

Jackson nodded. "Thank you."

His right arm pivoted to point both guns at Hunter. The sheriff had wisely remained silent during the altercation, but now he sized the outlaw up very carefully. His hands hadn't moved from the rifle.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Your help."

"Why should I help you?"

"I think you know the reason."

Nate was silent for a moment.

"What's its name?"

"Stoker calls it 'Knicknevin.' The Whateleys brought it here through the gate at Lord Grimely's."

"And to kill it, you and I are gonna have to let bygones be bygones?"

"That seems to be the situation."

Nate grimaced. "You killed Corky."

"And you killed half of my men. You think it was easy, me coming here? I could have let Rachel plug you right between the eyes. We've got to get past that."

The sheriff's knuckles turned white on the rifle stock.

"I... I don't think I can do that."

Jack sighed. "Then you're going to bury this town."

"You killed her!" Nate suddenly screamed. "She was in love with me and you shot her dead! Don't you realize that?!"

"It doesn't matter. I killed Corky. You killed Eddie. We could keep this up all night if we wanted." He lowered his guns to the floor. "Shoot me if you like, if you think it'll bring her back. Then Rachel will shoot you; Templeton shoots her, Vic Navarro shoots Templeton... it can go on forever if you like. But if we don't stop - right now - then none of it will matter." He turned his back.

"You want me dead? This is the best chance you'll ever get."

Hunter's hands wavered on the gun. He wanted to bring it up, to blow Corky's murderer across the room. But his fingers wouldn't obey the impulse. With a cry of anguish, he knocked the gun away, spilling the papers on top of his desk to the ground.

"I can't," he whispered. "Not this way."

Black Jack turned around again. "It's not like you expected, is it?"

"There's just supposed to be right and wrong," the sheriff rumbled.

"Not anymore. Not with Knicknevin getting ready to swallow this town whole. I won't make excuses for what I've done; I had my reasons. But you and I, we're the only one's left who can stop this."

He held his hand out across the table. "I've got friends, allies who can help us. I've got what's left of my gang and I've got Rachel if she's with me..." he glanced over at the silent outlaw. "But we can't do this without you Nate. I'm not asking for your forgiveness, but I am asking you to set your hate aside for one night. Can you do that?"

Slowly, grudgingly, Sheriff Nate Hunter took Black Jack's hand in his own.

"To do what we gotta," he agreed.

"Can you control your people?"

"If you can control yours." Hunter looked over at Rachel, who hadn't moved.

"How about it?" Jackson asked her. "You in?"
"Fer now," she nodded. "But when it's done..."
"I'll be ready anytime you wanna come lookin'" Hunter intoned.
Rachel shrugged.
"So what if we can't stop this thing?" she asked wryly. Jackson sighed.

Final Justice

by Steve Crow

"Where is he?"
The voice rung clear and loud over the muffled scrams and shots that echoed in the streets outside. Charlie Landers poked his head up over the bar to see who had entered the Fat Chance Saloon. He kept his good right hand on the sawed-off shotgun, his favorite "enforcer," that he kept beneath the bar.
The sight of the man who had entered the bar almost elicited a sigh of relief from the bartender. Almost. These days, anyone and everyone was suspect. Even a Law Dog.
Charlie had to admit, though, that he'd heard nothing but good about Deputy Montreal. The man was reputed to be tough but fair, avoiding a showdown when he could but unwilling to look the other way. Like Coleman and Hunter, Lord only knew what Gomorra had done to deserve him.
Now Montreal looked battered and bloody. Smoke was still curling from the barrel of the Winchester he held on his right shoulder. Given everything that was going on outside, Charlie wasn't surprised. The man looked like he had fought his way through Hell to get to the Fat Chance.
Montreal glanced over the room. Business was light, and only a few die-hards were left in the bar. Apparently the man he was looking for wasn't in the main room. He strode over to the bar, his weight causing the floorboards to creak beneath him.
"Judge Gabriel. Is he in tonight?"
Landers was surprised. Nobody had been asking after Gabriel in months. Not that he could blame them. The "judge" gave him the willies.
Charlie shrugged and pointed with his bad hand towards one of the small curtained alcoves scattered along the walls of the saloon.
Deputy Montreal nodded then strode off and brushed through the curtains. Charlie listened for the sounds of a gunshot, or a fist fight, or... well, something. But nothing.
Shrugging, Charlie ducked back down behind the bar. It didn't look like Montreal wanted a drink, and no one or no... thing had come in after him. As far as he was concerned, anything else was none of his business.

* * *

Dave Montreal stepped into the small private room. There was only one man in there, and there was no doubt it was the one he was looking for.

The man was dressed in darkness. Black suit, black gloves, dark blue shirt. A black overcoat was slung over an adjacent chair, a black broad-brimmed hat perched atop it. His hair, what there was of it, was black. He had thin black eyebrows and a narrow black mustache. Even his pale skin was shading over to a gray pallor.

The only splotch of cover was the amber liquid in the glass before the man, and the brown-tinted bottle next to it. The bottle was half-empty, while the glass was full. The room's sole occupant was contemplating the glass before him, as if it were a crystal ball holding some secret of the future.

"Judge Gabriel? I've come to see you."

The man looked up from his drink. Montreal was heartened to see that the eyes that stared back at him were sharp, boring into him like a knife. He had feared for a moment that the Judge might have turned to alcohol. Why, Montreal couldn't imagine. But why else hide in a bar when Hell walked the streets?

"I am the man you name, sssirr. What is your pleassssure?"

Despite what he had heard, Montreal's hand tightened on his rifle. It was said that "Hangin' Judge" Gabriel's nickname was more than that, that it was associated with him certain hellspawn that stalked the Wild West.

Gabriel read the suspicion in the deputy's eye. Chuckling to himself, he shrugged. "My apologies. One must maintain the public facade. It tends to keep the lowlives from bothering me. I'd even go so far as to say it's expected of me by now. One doesn't want to disappoint."

Montreal sighed. "Then you're not...?"

"An undead creature, walking the earth and meting out "justice" to the undeserving, claiming to serve the cause of justice?"

"Something like that."

"Not quite," Gabriel replied. "I've never had the "pleasure" of encountering such creatures. Although obviously I have been mistaken for them from time to time. If they do exist, they don't seem to have taken offense at my small impersonation."

"So you are the man I'm seeking, then."

"That, sir, depends on exactly what it is that you're seekin'."

Montreal took the chair opposite Gabriel and leaned forward. "I've always looked up to you, sir. Your reputation for justice precedes you, so much so that the courts weren't good enough for you. There's all kinds of wild tales about how you've been gunned down a half-dozen times but keep coming back. I'd heard that you had come to Gomorra

seeking someone who had escaped the law, and sent him to his just reward."

Gabriel chuckled. There was no humor in the sound. "just" indeed. I dispatched the miscreant, true enough. And he was a lawbreaker, with a price on his head. Not that I sought payment for my deed. The act was "reward" enough."

Montreal nodded. "And now we need you more than ever. There's all manner of evil afoot in Gomorra. We've allied with Black Jack Jackson's men..."

"Including Blackjack himself?" Gabriel asked, showing the first signs of interest. "A wanted man, as I do recall?"

"Well, yes. But he's working for the law, like I said..."

"Then his death would be an... inconvenience to you?"

"I suppose."

Gabriel shrugged dismissively. "Then you do not want my involvement in your little 'posse.' I'm afraid his presence would force me to take measures that might inconvenience you. But go on."

Montreal continued, puzzled. "The Whateleys are apparently at the heart of all the evil that's been plaguing Gomorra. Rumor has it they've summoned some kind of demon at the Grimely Manor. We're going there later tonight to burn the place down."

"Arson is against the law," Gabriel said. And the Manor... private property, is it not? Trespassing is also a crime. Are the ones you plan on shooting it out with wanted?"

"Well, no. Sheriff Hunter's been a little busy to swear out a warrant these days. And if the creature the Whateley's have summoned is what it says it is... how do you put out a warrant on a demon from the bowels of Hell?"

"Then I'm afraid, Deputy, that my involvement is out of the question. I only seek those wanted by the law, or in violation of the specifics of man's law. Your own actions may force me to take an interest in you. An interest you would not desire."

Puzzled, Montreal scratched his head. This wasn't exactly what he had expected from Gabriel. "I don't understand. This is a matter of survival, and we need all the hands we can get. Surely you can overlook the letter of the law..."

Gabriel threw back his head and laughed. Loud. "Overlook the law! Deputy, despite my current lack of official employment, I cannot overlook the law. The law is my life. Literally. If I so choose, I can end the life of any wrong-doer in the eyes of the law."

Seeing the look of frustration on Montreal's face, Gabriel sighed. "Let me tell you a story, son. There was a judge, once. A hard man, this judge. He valued the letter of the law above all else."

"Then a man came before him. What some call a 'huckster.' He had killed a man, ripped his soul screaming from his body. He claimed

"self defense," but every killer down through the ages has made a similar claim."

"It didn't matter, though. He had a jury of his peers, and they found him guilty. The evidence said he was guilty. The Law said he was guilty. And so he was hung up and killed."

"Could this judge maybe have made an exception? Possibly. The case wasn't ironclad. How do you prove a man can blast a man's soul with a hand of cards? And was the jury unbiased? Well, maybe not. When the word 'witchcraft' starts getting tossed around, good sense leaves a lot of folks' heads."

"But the judge didn't do that. He prided himself on how he had handled the trial. And he stood there as the huckster was strung up. But with his dying words, this huckster laid a curse on this judge. That any wrongdoer he came across, he would have to end their life. At the cost of his own. But it wouldn't stop there. The judge would come back. Again. And again. Because the judge was sworn to the Law, he would give his life to it."

"Well, the judge thought the man was raving mad. Standing on the gallows will do that to a fellow. So he didn't give the huckster's words much heed. But the next time a wrongdoer came before him in court, he was compelled to throw himself at the criminal. The man, a robber, grabbed a gun and shot the judge even as the judge choked him to death with his bare hands."

"But this judge, you see... he didn't die. Or rather, he didn't stay dead. They buried him, and he had a fine ol' time digging himself out of his grave when he revived a couple of days later. Not nearly as fine a time, though, as he had laying in that grave, feeling the bullets in his body slowly being pushed out and the agony of his body re-stitchin' itself."

"Well, there's a word for folks that come back like that. 'Harrowed.' But this judge wasn't Harrowed. Although you could see how folks might think he was if he showed his face back in town. Dozens had seen him killed."

"So this judge... he didn't know what to do. He decided to head out of town. But on the stage out, he found himself sitting across from a woman. A prostitute. She had never been convicted, but it didn't matter. He knew she was a criminal, even though no one else could see it. He realized he had a sense for such things. He pulled out a knife and stabbed the woman through the heart."

Gabriel chuckled. "As you can imagine, the driver and the other passengers didn't take too well to that. They gunned the judge down, and tossed his body out of the coach. It took him longer to come back this time, though. What with the wolves and the vultures chewing on his body, the healing took a long time."

"So what could this judge do? Well, he could try to keep a low profile, and stay away from people. But from time he was compelled to

seek out those who have run afoul of the law and kill them. Sometimes a week might go by, sometimes a month. But eventually, the huckster's curse drives him out into the night."

"And every time, the judge dies at the hands of the lawbreaker he kills. Or bystanders shoot him down. Or he and the lawbreaker are killed in a burning building, or going over a cliff on a coach. And each time he comes back. Sometimes slow, sometimes fast. As long as it takes."

Gabriel sighed wearily, sitting back in his chair. "Now, Deputy, I've been in Gomorra for nearly a year and I've died three times so far. As you might have gathered from my little tale tellin', dyin' hurts. A lot. You'll pardon me if I give a pass on repeating that experience until I absolutely have to."

"Besides... like I said, you've got wanted fellas from Jackson's gang with you. If I were to join you... well, you can appreciate there's very little I can do to help. I'd get to them before I got to the Whateleys."

For a few moments, Montreal just stared at the man (or whatever it is a voice whispered in his head) before him.

Then he asked, "And there's no way to escape this curse?"

Gabriel shrugged. He pulled a revolver from beneath his jacket and placed it on the table before him. Idly he traced one finger over the pearl trim of the handle.

"There might be one. Like I said, only a wrongdoer can end my life, or someone after I've ended a lawbreaker's life. I've killed a lot of folks since this curse was placed upon me. I suppose if anyone qualifies, it might be me. It's just a matter of workin' up the guts for the job." Gabriel reached over and finished off the glass of rotgut without flinching.

There didn't seem to be anything more to say. Montreal turned and made to leave, but Gabriel spoke up.

"Oh, one more thing, Deputy."

Montreal paused, but didn't turn.

"You're a good man. At least, I figure as much. Otherwise neither one of us would be leaving this room on our feet."

"But those 'Law Dogs' that you're with... well, not all of them are quite as pure as heart as yourself. Even Hunter. You watch your back, and hope that I never run into any of them. Otherwise... who knows? Maybe next time you'll be the one who gets to gun me down."

The McCrackens' Last Stand

by Steve Crow

"Charlie? Charlie...?"

Castor McCracken staggered into the Fat Chance Saloon. A bullet had grazed his leg, and his clothing was charred and singed: he had

barely escaped the fire that had reduced the Whateley estate to ashes. Of the clan, half were dead or dying, Nicodemus had vanished, and Wilhelmina... Castor had seen the forces massing against her, and he'd no desire to go up against that!

"No siree bob, the McCrackens know when to call it quits. Don't we, Pollux? But we also know when to take care of business."

Cassandra had disappeared with Nicodemus. She had rejected their advances. As if she was too good for them. How dare she!

That left Charlie Landers. He had refused their previous, generous offer. If he had joined forces with the Brothers, perhaps now more of the Whateleys might be alive. Perhaps Castor wouldn't have been shot at by those damned Rangers. Perhaps he wouldn't have failed in his job.

Castor was pissed. So was Pollux. It was time to put an end to the barkeep's life. Loyalty among freaks could only go so far, and the former Crab Boy had gone far beyond the bounds of civilized manners.

Standing upright, Castor adjusted his bowler to the proper angle, checking it in the cracked mirror behind the bar. Ya have to look your best for a killin', or what's the point?

Then he drew his treasured pearl-handled revolver. If he had to kill Charlie, then he was at least going to do it with the nicest weapon he had, regrets or no.

Where would the dwarf had gone to ground? Behind the bar? Possible. Landers might not suspect the McCrackens were here to finish him off. Given the chaos outside, no one would take Castor drawing his gun as anything other than a precaution.

"Charlie...?"

Advancing to the end of the bar, Castor peered behind it and down. There was barely enough space between the elevated platform and the underside of the bar for a man to hide. But Castor checked it out nonetheless. You couldn't be too careful.

Castor spun at the sound of a shot outside. There was a brief, female scream of pain, abruptly cut off. In one motion Castor ducked behind the bar. Ma McCracken didn't raise no idjits... well, actually she didn't raise us much at all after we killed her as younguns, but still... The McCrackens had sided with the Whateleys and their unholy allies, so it was unlikely whoever was shooting was a friend. If they were, enough time to settle matters when they arrived.

The figure that came through the saloon doors was dressed in almost blinding white, although in places soot and dirt obscured her patina. A large figure, carrying a rifle at the ready.

As Castor popped up over the edge of the bar, the woman brought her rifle up and fired. "Jack! Hastings! Stay back! This one's mine!" Then she lunged forward into the saloon as McCracken's bullet whistled over her head.

His shot had thrown her aim off, and the woman's bullet shattered what was left of the Fat Chance's mirror. Castor turned to follow the Ranger, firing two shots. Somehow, the new arrival managed to stay just ahead of the bullets as she moved to cover behind an overturned table. Then she popped up on the far side of the table. A single shot ran out, and Castor's revolver went spinning across the room.

For a moment, Castor was stunned. He had never seen shooting like that. Then reluctantly he put his hands in the air. "You wouldn't shoot an unarmed man, would you, Ranger Karl?" he called out. "I might have worked for the Whateleys, but I ain't one of their clan. I'm just a gunfighter.

Slowly, Katie Karl rose up from behind the table, her rifle at the ready. She was cautious, but she was still an idiot. If Castor had had the drop on her, she'd be dead.

Still, his hands were in the air. She probably figured he was harmless. Idjit!

There was a sound of ripping cloth, and a pair of withered hands pulled themselves free of the black silk shirt that Castor wore. A twisted, malevolent face peered out from Castor's chest as the hands pointed at the Ranger.

There was a "crack" of mystic lightning, and energy shattered the table in front of Karl. With a curse, she threw herself back as Pollux McCracken directed his arcane energies across the room to follow her. Glasses and bottles flew everywhere, shattered by the beams of energy passing over them.

"Kill her, brother, kill her!" Castor screamed. He sidled to the right, trying to get to his revolver. The other Rangers would probably come to their leader's rescue, and he needed a weapon before they arrived.

"Not today!" Karl screamed back at him. She had no time to bring her rifle to bear, but she grabbed a shattered bottle and threw it across the room with all of her strength and accuracy guiding it to its target.

Pollux emitted an unearthly scream as the jagged edge imbedded itself in his face. The agony shot through Castor's body, and he crumpled back against the wall, the revolver still yards from his hand.

Shock drove him to his knees as his legs crumpled out from under him. His vision blurring, he reached down but there was nothing he could do for his brother. The wound was a fatal one. And if Pollux died, Castor wouldn't be far behind.

Dimly he looked up to see Karl towering over him, her rifle pointed square in his face. At the same time, he saw her face across his vision from a lower angle, as his brother's flickering eyes tried to take her in. The look of disgust on her face was plain to see.

"Another damned Whateley freak," she cursed.

Only what your damned God made me - the Whateleys had nothin' to do with it the thought flashed across Castor's mind. Whether it was

his or his brother's, he couldn't tell. And a second later, as Karl pulled the trigger, it didn't matter.

Dangerous Game

by Steve Crow

The man in hunter's whites slipped quietly out of the shadows cast by the big light above and approached the door in the base of the west lighthouse. He held his weapon of choice, a Sharps "Big 50", ready before him.

Ian Spencer-Whitney had come seeking a challenge. Not that Gomorra lacked challenges, but the creature he was seeking had taken up residence here, outside of town in one of the lighthouses. The trail had brought him here, so here he was.

The trail had been a complicated one. Ian had been after this particular abomination since before the sinking of the Typhoon, the Rats' ship. But when the Collegium had sunk Sim's vessel, the hunter had lost the trail. In fact, he had even suspected that his quarry might have been destroyed entirely. Eyewitness reports of the incident were vague; the Rats couldn't even be found, and the Collegium... well, Australia wasn't the only place with mad scientists. Spencer-Whitney preferred to give them a wide berth.

But recently, a series of cattle mutilations had been reported out in this direction by one of the stable hands at the Alright Corral. Dr. Lawrence, an archaeologist that Ian had met back in Australia, also mentioned that one of his assistants had disappeared mysteriously from a nearby dig.

Process of elimination had led the hunter here, to the Gomorra lighthouse. No one had seen the keeper, Jack Peet, recently. Given the chaos in town, that was hardly unusual, but combined with the other clues, it led Spencer-Whitney unerringly onward.

Rifle still in hand, Spencer-Whitney scrutinized the lighthouse door carefully. It was slightly ajar, and no light could be seen within. Given the dim twilight and the damp mist coming off the Maze, it seemed unlikely that the lighthouse wouldn't be in use. Apparently, Ian's suspicions were correct.

Without further ado, Spencer-Whitney kicked the door open and stepped in. The lighthouse's first floor was a mostly cylindrical chamber, with a spiral staircase in the center. A single small door led off to an adjacent home for Mr. Peet. There was also a trapdoor in the floor, presumably leading down into a basement of some sort.

If I were a vampire, where would I hide? Spencer-Whitney wondered. He briefly considered the high ground of the tower's summit, but quickly dismissed it. His particular prey was not a "traditional" bloodsucker, but still disliked the sun.

Finally, Ian decided that the living quarters would be the easiest and safest place to start. He slipped around the circumference of the first room and approached the rear door. There was little illumination; what little light there was came from the floodlight above, and its rotation hurt as much as it helped. The hunter found the rear door wide open, and could detect the smell of decay from within.

Hunter or victim? he wondered. Maybe both. Without pause, he stepped into the doorway, his weapon ready to blow anything within to Kingdom Come, if needbe.

The sight that greeted him was grim, to say the least. Old Jack's withered corpse was laid out on the bed. The sheets around him may have been white at some point, but were now stained a dark red from blood long spilled and dried.

A crash from behind alerted Whitney-Spencer to imminent danger. Spinning around, his rifle was suddenly yanked from his hands and tossed across the room, to hit the far wall with a loud clatter.

The creature had apparently leapt up through a floor-hatch in a single bound. Spencer-Whitney had noticed the trapdoor, but assumed that anything emerging from there would make enough noise to warn him before it could become a threat, and move slowly enough for him to get a free shot in before it could attack.

Remind me never to underestimate a hopping vampire again, he thought grimly to himself.

The abomination before him was pale as death and hairless, with features barely discernible as Oriental. Its visage, bloated by death, had been further distorted during its stay near the waters of the Maze. Stinking robes hid the rest of its skinny figure.

"You're one ugly bastard, you know that, mate?" Whitney-Spencer taunted, stepping back into Old Jack's room. He tested his footing carefully; no doubt the gyonshee had licked up any blood puddles, but Ian couldn't afford to slip at this point.

The vampire hissed at him and quickly advanced. It was familiar with the lighthouse's layout, and knew there was no escape. Ian glimpsed a window high up in the wall, but it was too small for him to climb through, even if he could dare to turn his back on the gyonshee.

The gyonshee lunged forward, and Spencer-Whitney slipped one hand behind his back, then lashed out, revealing a foot-long blade. Defensively, the hunter swept outward with the knife, slicing off the top of the gyonshee's extended hand. There was a hiss of steam and a howl of pain, and the creature dropped back, a palette of pain, hate, and confusion across its distorted face.

Ian twirled the knife in his hand, and smiled. "Hurts like a bastard, doesn't it?" He took a step forward, holding the knife up toward the creature. A small totem-stone, tied to the hilt by a piece of leather cord, could be seen affixed to the hilt.

"An Abo shaman crafted this for me five years ago; paying me for a favor owed, he was. It's carved from a Uluru rock, representing my reptile totem. The shaman said it would wound any creature from the Other Side, and you, mate, qualify. Shall we dance?"

With that, Ian lunged forward, the knife blade cutting an eloquent pirouette in the air.

* * *

Ten minutes later, the hunter stepped out and into the night air. Compared to the stench behind him, the salty tang of the Maze was a welcome relief.

The vampire had put up a good fight. Perhaps the best challenge Ian had ever been faced with. Even after half a dozen blows that would kill the average man, the gyonshee had fought on. But the seventh blow had done it, and the gyonshee was finally dead. Now Ian had just a little more cutting to do...

Minutes later, Ian stepped to the edge of the mesa, reached back, and threw the vampire's head far off into the waters. Of course, there was still the creature's heart to deal with. It would have to be cut out and burned - separate from the rest of the corpse, of course.

One down..., he thought to himself.

Ian turned to go back into the lighthouse, then paused for a moment, savoring his ebbing adrenaline rush. It had been touch and go for a while; a single misstep would have resulted in his death.

Now what was left? It was getting to the point where few creatures in Gomorra could challenge him any more. *Anyone* could kill a faminite or a dread wolf; Spencer-Whitney was far beyond deriving any pleasure from them any more.

Even maze dragons and terrormentals gave him little thrill these days. He had hoped the gyonshee might be more of a challenge - a sentient, bipedal creature instead of a hopped-up lizard with a supernatural furnace in its belly.

And it had been. But now it was dead for good.

Pity the Coalition hadn't let him in on the fun at the Golden Mare. *Bloody amateurs*, he quipped to himself. *It wouldn't have taken me two trips to put the damned she-vamps down.*

Still... Spencer-Whitney had little fondness for anyone who left the innocent to die. The gyonshee had been under the Maze Rats' control, and they had left their pet terror to its killing spree, too concerned with their own greed to care where it wound up, or who it killed. They had at least one Harrowed working for them, and it was said that Chester Nero was a formidable opponent. The surviving Rats would no doubt defend their Harrowed shipmate, and they had several hucksters working for them - hucksters drawing upon demons for their powers.

Those were pretty "abominable" traits in Ian's book...

Whistling cheerfully, Spencer-Whitney stepped back into the lighthouse to finish his work.
A hunter's work is never done.

Tempest

by Steve Crow

"Alas, poor Caligari. I knew him not."

Sighing, Nicodemus Whateley tossed the head sans its elderly owner to the stage. The foolish stage manager had attempted to interrupt him. That had been his last mistake.

Nicodemus glanced about the stage, and was satisfied. The ocean backdrop had satisfied his sense of the theatrical. And he had never liked "Steven Regret & His Shakespearean Troupe" anyway. Their corpses scattered about the theatre, would sign "Fini" to Nicodemus' most recent work of art. The slower among the theatergoers, their bodies now cooling in their seats, provided an adequate audience. Nicodemus was no master of the canvas like Basil, but he was skilled enough in sketching in blood and carnage. His only regret was that the few panicking sheep that had managed to flee would remember his power, but not the artist itself.

As Nicodemus glanced out past the footlights, making sure that no one had remained behind in the audience's stampede when he made his entrance, there was the rumble of thunder to his left.

"A pox o' your throat, you bawling, blasphemous incharitable dog!"

Nicodemus turned to see a broad figure of a man brush past the metal sheets used by the once-living stagehands to create thunder for the production. The new arrival wore jeans and a white short-sleeved shirt, and a cowboy's hat with a white feather tucked into the brim.

"I thought I sensed you sniffing at the edges, Whitmore," Whateley chuckled, smiling broadly. He tipped his own hat to the huckster in an insolent gesture with one hand, while executing a flourish-cut of his ever-present deck with the other. "Or are you still titling yourself 'Sir' Whitmore these days?"

"Hang cur, hang, you whoreson, insolent noisemaker!" Whitmore snarled, taking in the carnage. "What harm did these men and women ever do you?"

"They performed Shakespeare. As you may have noticed, I hate Shakespeare," Nicodemus snarled. "And our time has come upon this town. Gomorra is the Whateleys' now, its inhabitants playthings to suit my whim."

Whitmore sighed. "What does this destruction gain you?"

"Perhaps for you and others of your ilk, your libraries are dukedom enough. But we Whateleys seek more than that. 'Hell is empty, and all the devils are here.'"

Whitmore frowned. "For one who claims to hate Shakespeare, you quote it well enough."

Nicodemus replied, "The benefits of a classical education." Nicodemus chuckled. "Rest assured, I dispatched my teachers shortly thereafter."

"Enough!" Whitmore thrust his hand forward, a hand of cards materializing in it. A translucent yellow blast of energy shot across the stage, striking Nicodemus straight on.

The Whateley staggered for a moment, then shrugged and casually straightened. "'But this rough magic I here abjure.' Hardly good manners on your part, Whitmore."

The English huckster frowned. "That's not possible! Your soul should be rent asunder."

"You're assuming that I have one. 'You fool, I and my fellows are ministers of fate.' The Gulfs already have a lien against my soul in return for services rendered. For I am a devil, a born devil, on whose nature Nature can never stick."

"'You cram these words into mine ears, against the stomach of my sense.' Do you expect me to believe such a thing? 'If but one of your pockets could speak, would they not say you lie?'"

"Believe the evidence of your own eyes or not, as it pleases you," Whateley replied. Almost casually, he reached into the air with his free hand. A hand of cards appeared in it, and pale, almost invisible threads of energy surged across the stage and around Whitmore.

"Come on, obey. Thy nerves are in their infancy again, and you have no vigor in them."

Corporeal Twist! Staggering, Whitmore struggled against now-leaden limbs.

He had hoped to win the duel in the opening moments, but such was not to be.

Slowly, raggedly, Whitmore brought his hands up. He had moments before Nicodemus took advantage of his handicapped status to cast another, more lethal hex. Again he sent his senses forth, reaching into the Hunting Grounds to draw energy from a manitou there. The ritual of poker, ingrained upon his mind due to decades of application, steadied him for a moment and the cards materialized briefly in his hand.

There was a huge gust of wind as a swirling maelstrom formed on the stage where Nicodemus stood. The Whateley was forced to retreat, disrupting the twisting energies that strove to incapacitate Whitmore. For a moment, Whitmore tried to expand the twister's diameter, and boards and curtains flew everywhere.

Then, its purpose served, Whitmore ceased concentration on the miniature twister. Once more he and Nicodemus stood facing each other across what was left of the stage.

"Well played, Whitmore, but the game is not yet over!" taunted Nicodemus. "My . . . 'grandmother' would have crushed you by now. However, I lack her experience. For the moment, anyway. Still, you should be thankful she can't be bothered to deal with you."

"Wilhelmina is an abomination upon the face of the earth," Whitmore ridiculed, hoping to distract Whateley and force a crack in his smug exterior.

"I should sin to think but nobly of my grandmother," Nicodemus chuckled.

"Good wombs have born bad sons.' Let us see if enough remains of you to be sent back to your own granddam."

Once again Nicodemus gestured, the cards falling from his hand once more.

Chanting, he called out, "All the infections that the sun sucks up, from bogs, fens, flats, on Whitmore fall, and make him by inchmeal a disease!"

Before Whitmore's horrified eyes, a swirling cloud of insects, disease and plague given flesh, appeared before his debonair opponent. With another gesture, Nicodemus directed the cloud across the stage towards the English huckster.

Whitmore ducked to the rear of the stage, seeking the shadows for escape as he brought another hex to mind. The manitous on the Other Side, sensing that the critical moment was upon him, resisted his efforts. Still, Whitmore knew he could overcome their resistance. But there was a sudden disruption, an unexpected weakness, as if Nicodemus or something else was draining his energies. Whitmore reached the shadows but went nowhere, and then the plague cloud was upon him. Whitmore could feel the disease course through his blood from a hundred agonizing stings. Bugs crawled into his mouth, muffling any scream he might have made. Stumbling, he crashed into the metal sheets used for the sound of thunder and collapsed.

Nicodemus waited patiently for the living cloud to disperse. The hex was a new one. Even if he had lacked the element of surprise, however, the Englishman had been foolish to challenge him. Heroism. What a curious and quaint custom. Neither I nor Knicknevin shall tolerate it in our brave new world.

The insects were finally gone. Whateley strode forward to look down upon his fallen opponent. Whitmore's flesh bore the marks of a dozen diseases. Red splotches fought for dominance against open weeping sores and black mottled skin. Still, incredibly, Whitmore held on to life. Nicodemus knew, however, that it would not be long before the Englishman expired. He had seen too many tortured bodies to fail to recognize the nearness of the moment when they yielded to death.

Nicodemus could see Whitmore gasp for air. He knelt down on one knee, curious and faintly amused to hear the huckster's last words. Whateley made a faint moue of disappointment upon seeing the lack of fear in the man's yes. Almost a pity to waste such a working upon the unappreciative.

Almost.

Bending over, he could just make out Whitmore's last utterance. "He that dies pays all debts. I defy thee. Mercy upon us."

And with that, Whitmore fell back, going slack in that manner which Nicodemus always found so enchanting.

Standing and brushing his knees off, Nicodemus looked about the stage and was pleased. A fine day's work, and Whitmore an additional bonus. Enough of a holiday, though. Now, he had to tend to the Master's affairs. The fools would be amassing as best they could to defeat Knicknevin, and the Flock were incompetents. Nicodemus didn't expect them to hold against Stoker and whatever allies he could draw together for long. Now, however, they would have one less ally to draw upon.

Nicodemus' work here was done. He was supremely confident, but even so it would be foolish to leave any evidence. There was always a very small possibility Knicknevin might lose. And Wilhelmina Whateley had never raised any fools.

With a gesture, Nicodemus extended his senses to the Hunting Ground once more, and a manitou fell writhing in his mental grasp. He gestured and energy surged from his hand and across the theatre. The bolts o'doom insinuated themselves into the curtains, the gilded finery, the corpses, the chairs... everything.

Whistling cheerfully, Nicodemus departed stage left as the entire theatre collapsed behind him.

Cheaters Never Prosper

Gomorrah has gone to hell.

Scratch that.

Hell has come to Gomorrah.

Crawford Talmadge stands rigid, eyes desperately looking for a way to distance himself from the chaos. His frantic search for escape has taken him inside a theater that is filled with mutilated bodies of actors and patrons alike. On stage, two men are talking funny and facing off in some kind of sorcerers' duel.

What a night.

He has seen one of the fellows before and remembers that his name is Whitman (or something like that). A tingling in his gut tells him that they are hucksters of the highest order, danger incarnate... but

they might be the best way out of this mess. All he has to do is concentrate.

He can vanish if... he... can... just... concentrate.

The Whitman guy's face shows a moment of confusion as Crawford cheats a bit of energy from him. He gives an inward smile and, cautiously, slips out the exit and into the street.

There is a cackle and the steady rhythm of gunshots. An old woman with a gattling pistol is destroying everything around her not more than half a block away. Not wanting to be hit by a stray bullet, Crawford ducks behind a rain barrel.

Must concentrate! Visualize the hex!

An explosion rattles the glass in the window behind him and Crawford strains to find a suitable shadow to slip into. There! Behind the First Bank!

Concentrate!

* * *

He leaned back in his chair, the familiar texture of playing cards shifting comfortably in his sweaty fist.

Full House.

Crawford kept his poker face but was no less relieved. It was the tenth hand in a row that he had won that night, thanks to a few well-timed cheats. He knew none of the other players had discovered his hidden cards for, if they had, he would already be dead.

Cheating was nothing unusual for Crawford. It was the cornerstone of his career as a professional gambler. So far, even the most perceptive of folks couldn't catch him. The only people he had to give a second thought to were professional gamblers and fellow tricksters.

Tricksters.

Crawford had been studying Hoyle's little book and was convinced that some of the more accomplished folks he had faced across the card table already knew its secrets. He knew they didn't have to worry about keeping their cards hidden, and he craved to understand their ways.

Thinking of the mysterious book in his possession, he promptly decided that he had won enough for one night and shoveled his winnings into the hollow of his hat. Nodding politely to his puzzled opponents, he retired to his room, determined to practice the first trick he had deciphered.

He spent the rest of the night perched on the side of his dusty bed, going over the method again and again in his mind. When the orange rays of the morning stole through his window, he could not even remember why he wanted to study in the first place.

Exhausted, he laid back on the mattress. What a waste of time. There had to be more secrets in that blasted book, and an easier way to get them.

There was always a way to cheat.

* * *

Two weeks had passed and Crawford was in another saloon, gambling once again. He had won a few hands, but the bewitching lady across from him had taken most of the evening's spoils. She had even managed to do better than his cheats.

Envious, Crawford began watching her more closely, hunting for a telling sign. Everyone had a tell, he reminded himself. Eventually, his patience and observation was rewarded.

Like a bolt, Carter noticed something uncanny. Cards appeared in her fingers about every fifth hand or so...out of nowhere!

Focusing solely on the freakish feat, he was further amazed when the room grew dark and silent, shifting somehow. The card table was the same, but the players had changed. The lady was still there, but a third person, dressed in the shadows of a tattered duster and battered hat, had taken the place of his other two opponents.

"What are you doing here?" the woman stammered.

"No talking," the dark figure droned. "Deal the cards."

Warily, the woman flew out a hand to each of her opponents. A pile of poker chips rose out of the table in front of each of them. Looking down at his personal stash, Crawford immediately saw two chips adorned with maniacally grinning jokers, their teeth chattering mere inches away from his flesh.

What the hell were they serving with the whisky in this place?

Determined to make the best of a bad situation, he decided to continue the game. A few hands later and the woman was in the lead, Crawford and the dusky cowboy trailing behind. When it was his turn to deal, he determined it was time to try his old tricks. He dealt from the bottom of the deck and gave himself four jacks.

No one seemed to notice.

The woman looked down at her chips and then at the other two piles.

Expressionless, she anted up ten. The dark figure raised twenty. Crawford was not pleased, having only thirty chips left, along with the two snapping jokers. He raised both, and it was time to show.

The woman had three sevens. The figure placed down the ace of clubs, followed by the ace of diamonds and then the ace of hearts. There was a moment's hesitation, then the final two cards were revealed. Two kings.

Crawford could not contain his smile, laying down his four ill-gotten jacks.

Under the darkness of its hat, the figure gazed into him with smoldering red eyes. "What do you want?"

"I want to be able to pull off tricks like she does."

"So be it." The solid shadow rose from its chair and walked away.

The saloon returned in a blinding flash and deafening roar. Crawford found himself dealing cards to the disordered woman and the other two players. His luck improved for the rest of the night. From then on, it would always be a matter of concentration.

* * *

Concentrate!

Crawford clenches his eyes tight, willing the familiar card table to materialize before him. His head throbs, but the sound of destruction lessens. His phantom opponent is waiting.

"We're playing to let me disappear into the shadows," Crawford says, taking his seat.

The manitou's laugh is horrible. "No."

"What do you mean 'No'? I said we are playing for the Shadow Walk hex!"

The creature tips back its hat, revealing a grinning joker face. "I saw you rob the energy from Whitmore. You cheated and he lost. I don't play with cheaters."

Enraged and terrified, Crawford's eyes return to the ruin of Gomorra. He runs back into the street and is immediately knocked off his feet by a bald man, fleeing in panic from something huge and demonic that is ripping apart the Collegium's laboratory. He lands flat on his back, staring at the rampaging mass of people fleeing towards him like cattle. There's no time left to even get up.

Maybe it won't hurt if he doesn't think about it.

Concentrate!

A hot wind scatters his cards into the burning night.

Bookworm

"Klaatu barada. . . necktie? Klaatu barada . . . nickel?"

Despairing, Mordecai Whateley slammed the flesh-bound book closed. What good was all of the information at his fingertips if the thrice-cursed scribes of some bygone age couldn't be bothered to use decent ink?

Disaster loomed. Mordecai could feel it beneath his skin. On the surface, the state of the Whateley clan seemed well. Their enemies had been driven before them. Lilith and her "girls" had killed Slate and the others at the Golden Mare. The blood of the Rangers still decorated the yard around the Estate. Hunter was obsessed with vengeance for wrongs both real and imagined. Jackson was missing or dead, and the Collegium and the Rats were sniping at each other. Findley had played his part, however poorly, and the Flock was firmly under Wilhelmina's control.

And yet... and yet, Mordecai was worried. He had always been the pessimist in the Family. He didn't believe there was anything wrong

with preparing for the worst, and the best way to do so, in his opinion, was through research and study. One never knew what hex might assure the Family's final triumph, the completion of the plan the Dark Master had set forth so long ago.

Nicodemus, on the other hand, was an overconfident braggart - Mordecai's opposite in every way. Always one to crow when he had the upper hand, Nicodemus strutted about more than ever; where once he had moved through the shadows, he now walked with the confidence of a king. Only Jebediah's caution reined in the boy's arrogance, but everyone knew whom Granmama Wilhelmina favored.

Amidst the shifting alliances of the Family, Mordecai had more often than not sided with Jebediah. He preferred the older Whateley's studied caution over Nicodemus' youthful conceit. That, as much as his personal reticence, was why he was confined to this dusty library.

Mordecai served the Family loyally. What other choice did he have, when all was said and done? Besides, he had always been... different, even by Whateley standards. His own cousins and siblings had rejected him, treating him as if he were a monstrous freak like Enoch or Malrog.

In those dark times, Mordecai's only friends were his books. They had taken him to many faraway lands, and whispered to him of secrets that had allowed him to don the skin of humanity, slowly gaining the Family's respect. He wouldn't be locked up in a stinking basement somewhere. That he had sworn. If nothing else, he would choose his own cell.

Which brought Mordecai back to the matter at hand, as he glanced about the library. Thousands of books, imported from the main library in Utah, as well as from other parts of the world. Wilhelmina had spared no expense in bringing them here, and Mordecai had taken full advantage of her largesse.

He had paid dearly for works that were only whispered of in the catacombs of the Vatican. Sections of the Bible that had not been seen in 1600 years. The lost chapters of Hoyle, withheld for fear of the hexes locked within, and the demons they could unleash upon the earth.

Mordecai pored over such works now, seeking a hex or ritual that would give the Whateleys complete domination, and assure the fruition of the Master's plans.

Snatching up a book at random, Mordecai thumbed through it wearily. It was late, and although he did not sleep as mortal men did, even he could grow weary from too much effort.

A fragment of text intrigued him. "Joseph came with the power o' his gods, Wilhelmina with the power o' hers. Nobody could take a stand against either of 'em - except each other."

Frowning, Mordecai glanced over the page again. *Joseph? The Indian had disappeared after Nicodemus had his fun with their camp. The so-called "Sioux Nation" were less than nothing without their leader.* What could the text mean?

The cover provided Mordecai no clue about the book's origins. There was no title, no author. The title page was blank.

Could this book be prophecy? Mordecai wondered, awestruck. He had heard of such things - books that had been passed down through the dim ages... but from the future, not from the past. Perhaps some Whateley of the far future had sent this back to provide Mordecai with the knowledge he needed to assure the Whateleys' triumph, and his own position within the Family. Perhaps he had even sent it back himself!

Excited, Mordecai flipped to another page at random.

"Hurts, don't it? Welcome to my world, Knicknevin."

Did someone threaten the Master? Who had the power to do such a thing? Concerned, Mordecai thumbed back a page. He could pass any information he gained to Wilhelmina, who would assure the death of whomever considered harming Knickne-

"You reap what you sow, old woman. This isn't vengeance; this is justice." The Ghost held the torch to the house's foundations and watched with satisfaction as the aged wood caught fire..."

Mordecai looked up. Did he smell smoke? Yes. So enrapturing was his find that only now did he notice smoke seeping beneath his library door. Despairing, he raced to the door and cautiously tried the knob, only to quickly snatch his hand back. The door was hot - too hot.

This high up, the mansion's windows would provide no escape. And besides, Mordecai had a greater concern. The books! His life was nothing, but the books must be preserved.

But how? If the prophecy was correct, the Ghost and his followers had already surrounded the Estate. That left Mordecai with only one option...

Muttering a few words of Latin beneath his breath, and sketching an ancient druidic sigil in the air, Mordecai cast the Rite of Summoning. As his fingers completed the sign, they burst into flame, the power of the gulfs flowing directly through his body. The scholar was beyond such minor pain, and ignored the agony that might have overwhelmed a lesser being.

Instead, he merely smothered the fire by smashing his hand down on the table. There was enough fire in the Estate already, to judge by the flames growing at the library's upper corners. Dimly, Mordecai could hear a painful scream from above: Basil, in the attic. Mordecai couldn't help but register some small pleasure at the sound of mortal agony. "I bet the plump bastard wishes he hadn't placed his soul in that damnable painting now!"

If the attic was on fire, the library couldn't be far behind. Though it had the thickest walls of any room in the Manor, the fire wouldn't be held at bay forever. Mordecai busied himself gathering the necessary tomes. He considered the journal briefly, but his messenger could only carry so much, and Wilhelmina's orders had been clear...

There was a sound from one of the windows. Mordecai turned toward it just as it shattered inwards, shards flying everywhere. The skin of his face was laid bare in spots, revealing white flesh beneath. It was an inconvenience at best, the minor agony offset by the welcome sight of Nebuchanezzar responding to the Summoning.

"To me, my pet," Mordecai croaked as smoke filled his lungs. With his good hand, he gave the Family Bible, Hoyle's lost edition, and the annotated Pembroke's Analysis to the twisted green mockery of a man. "You know where to go. Give the books to Nicodemus or Jebediah." He considered telling Neb to visit Wilhelmina, but remembered the passage of prophecy. Could she survive Joseph's attack? He wasn't willing to put the books at risk by ordering the demon to seek her out. And Mordecai knew that if anyone could survive their enemies' attack, it would be Nicodemus. The arrogant bastard always managed to come out on top.

"Beware our enemies that lurk outside. Now go!" he commanded as a rafter slammed down behind him. Without a word, Nebuchanezzar scurried back out the way it had came.

The temperature rose in the library and books burst into flame as Mordecai sank back, his duty done. There was no escape for him; merely one final task.

He raised his right hand, its skin bubbling from the heat. Reaching up with his other hand, he peeled it back, revealing a stunted white appendage extended through a tubelike arm-construct of flesh and tissue. Then he firmly grasped his right wrist and pulled. The arm-tube pulled off and the pseudopod retracted into his shoulder.

Concentrating against the pain, Mordecai used what remained of his left "hand" to peel the rest of the flesh-covering from his chest, revealing the sickly tissue beneath. The fire aided him, its heat further loosening the carapace; within a matter of seconds, the remaining human flesh had sloughed away, and Mordecai slumped to the ground, a boneless wormlike mass.

Any semblance of humanity shorn away, Mordecai squirmed limlessly on the carpeted floor. He managed to raise his head enough to see the weakened ceiling coming down on him.

I shall greet the Masters as they made me, unadorned and unashamed.

Final Assault

by Steve Crow

"It's quiet. Too quiet," Katie Karl grumbled, more to let off steam than anything else.

Part of the silence was due to the nature of her erstwhile "partner." You couldn't expect the Harrowed to make any noise, and when the Ghost stood still, he stood *still*. He didn't shift his weight back and forth, or nervously tap his fingers on his gun butt. Hell, he didn't even *breathe*.

The near-quiet nearly surprised Katie, given the rioting that had swept over almost all of Gomorra. The screaming and fighting did provide cover for their activities, but apparently no one was foolish enough to riot near the Whateley Estate. Understandable, though the good guys could really use a noisy crowd right about now.

The Ghost didn't shrug, but Katie could hear it in his voice anyway. "O'Bannon's the best either of us has. If he can't pull this off, sending a dozen men in there won't succeed either."

Behind them, the surviving forces of the Agency and the Rangers waited in the darkness. With luck, Boom-Boom would bring the Estate down and there wouldn't be anything left for them to do but mop up the remaining Whateleys.

* * *

Miles "Boom Boom" O'Bannon finished cutting through the sixth and final bar on the basement window. Carefully shifting his explosives pack, he slipped through the gap and dropped down onto the dirt-packed floor.

I blow this place up, and we can all go home, O'Bannon thought to himself, as he looked about for the one perfect spot he could use to complete his assignment... *There!*

The Agency's demolition expert carefully picked his way through the loose rock, slime, and other... less identifiable objects that covered the floor, listening carefully as he proceeded toward the central, load-bearing beam. Far off in the distance, Boom Boom could just barely hear gunshots and screams from the rioting that had swept across Gomorra, but the basement was strangely quiet.

Kneeling down at the beam, Boom Boom carefully removed the explosives pack and began the laborious job of planting it at the joint. That was when he heard the raspy breathing behind him.

Operating on reflex alone, he dove to his right. Something slapped into the wall above the explosive pack, passing directly through the space occupied by his head only a moment before. As he hit the

ground, he twisted around to see a hideous, greenish-yellow creature emerging from the shadows. It slurped a sickly purple tongue back into its mouth and advanced on his position.

There was no trace of humanity in the monster's frog-like twisted body. *Malrog Whateley*, O'Bannon guessed, based upon intelligence reports received from the Rangers. Given the ferocity of the beast, Boom Boom knew that he would either die, or die fighting. But that didn't phase him: he'd never expected any other choice when his number came up.

Boom-Boom drew his .38 and tossed off a hip-shot. As if reading his thoughts, the Whateley creature jumped aside. It failed to leap entirely clear, however, and the shot pierced its left leg as it vanished back into the darkness.

Malrog was quiet... too damned quiet for O'Bannon's taste. It didn't matter, though, because Boom Boom could hear other sounds now - creatures and other... things scrabbling through the darkness, drawn by the sound of his gunshot. Instinctively, Boom Boom checked his ammunition. Only five bullets left-not enough.

Boom Boom knew that there was only one way to take out enough of the creatures in time. Scrabbling across the basement floor, he threw himself onto the explosives pack. He felt the first cold, wet touches of the monstrosities scrabbling at his back as he threw the switch

* * *

The muffled explosion resounded out across the Estate grounds. Fire and smoke belched out of the window where O'Bannon had entered the basement. The side of the house started to blaze, but there was no indication that the Whateley manor would come tumbling down anytime soon.

"Hellfire and damnation," the Ghost muttered. "Cort! Looks like we'll have to do this the hard way. Give the order!"

The Agency man gave the order as Katie nodded to Dexter Simpson to do the same. The gates of the manor had already been forced open, and the Agency and the Rangers spilled through as one united force-only to be greeted by a horde of creatures pouring out the front door and windows of the Estate.

Per the backup plan, the Rangers took the lead. The Agency had lost two of its operatives-Melissa Thomas and the Pennsylvania Kid-in the recent rioting, and were scarcely prepared to head off their Whateleys' massive counterstrike. Bobo LeVeux drew his opening hand as Katie, Dexter, and Mark Preston opened up into the enemy ranks. James Hastings and Los Ojos del Dios brought up the rear. Abominations like nothing Katie had ever seen in all her years charged at the group. But her men were well-trained, and managed to hold their ground and maintain their fire against the sweeping, monstrous horde.

Meanwhile, the Ghost and Williams split their charge, moving to flank the Whateleys. Williams signaled for Sister Mary and Nelson Roberts to back him up, while Windows Derek and Raymond Armstrong fell in line behind the Harrowed Agency leader. Once in position, all six Agency operatives opened up fire upon the horde, utilizing the crossfire to pepper the unholy aggressors' first rank.

Bats, wolves, skeletons with cattle skulls... all charged fearlessly into the volley of fire. On one side, bone-thin men with femurs for weaponry and gnashing teeth sought fresh victims. On the other, a huge figure that seemed carved of stone waded into the fray. A twitching grey blob flowed throughout, bullets passing through it's gelloid mass without effect.

Lightning and other mystic energies suddenly crackled down from the gables of the Manor, raining down upon the Coalition warriors. One bolt struck Mark Preston in the shoulder, sending him to his knees in agony. But before a second blast could strike home, Los Ojos del Dios raised his tattooed hands to the heavens, drawing the sparkling arc into himself where it dissipated harmlessly.

Moments later, the greyish puddle of ooze squirmed its way to the forefront of the Rangers. Katie plugged her last two rounds into it, only to see them pass into the ground without effect, and the creature slowly started to climb up her leg...

Bobo spun, a new hand of cards materializing in his hand. A miniature whirlwind came into existence directly atop the creature, sucking it up into the air and sending it spinning in a thousand directions. Katie glanced down at the rancid stain on her chaps. *That's never going to come out*, she thought absurdly

"You be owin' I'n'I a favor, boss!" the huckster called out, turning back in time to send another blast of energy into the horde of wolves snapping at his heels. At his side, Dexter Simpson had drawn his shotgun and was blasting away, filling the space where the Cajun's former partner, Zeke Beauchamp, had stood once before.

Katie snapped open the cylinder on her revolver and sped-load as fast as she could. They were rapidly being outmatched, however, and their bullets having much less effect than she would like. Even with Los Ojos del Dios lending his mystical powers to the fight and Hastings sniping the Whateley hucksters on the upper floors, she wasn't sure they could turn the tide.

And then someone new came through the manor gates?

* * *

Captain Sim, Sun Shu-Jen, and Freddy "Fast Hands" Groves, backed by a baker's dozen of Gomorra criminals and ex-Typhoon crewmen organized by Harold Longfellow, came pouring into the Estate grounds. Quickly surveying the situation, Sim barked, "Longfellow, take your

men to the right! Sun, Frederick, you're with me!", and the newcomers spread out to join the fray.

The Rats' Captain and his two fighters formed a living wedge and charged left, diving into the fight near the Ghost and his troops. Longfellow took his men to the right, flanking Katie to assist Cort Williams. The Agency gunslinger ducked beneath a swing from a huge stone club wielded by the lumbering Stone Man. Roberts was down. Longfellow couldn't tell whether he was unconscious or dead, but Sister Mary hovered over him protectively, beating off a sticklike creature with a pumpkin head with her one good arm.

"What brings you here, outlaw?" Cort called out to Longfellow. "I'm afraid I'm rather short of money for you to steal at the moment!"

The damn fool's enjoying all this! Longfellow cursed mentally. "Open fire!" he screamed at his men. A ragged volley of bullets took the stone creature in the torso, chipping pieces of flint off in all directions. The creature paused, just long enough for Williams to reload. A split-second later, the Agency gunfighter rose up, drew a bead on the creature's head, and fired.

The Stone Man paused for a moment, absolutely still. The bullet seemed to leave no more than a small crack in his forehead, but the gash soon spread across its head, down its neck, and across its body. Before Longfellow's disbelieving eyes, the Stone Man crumpled into a cloud of dust.

Williams turned to Longfellow, and the pirate-criminal smirked, curious to see if the Agency man would thank him. But the gunslinger's eyes were almost immediately drawn over the Maze Rat's shoulder, and his face turned pale beneath his tan. A dread sense of foreboding surged through Longfellow's body, and he spun around to greet a monstrosity that had burrowed through the ground to emerge behind him.

The new creature was little more than a writhing mass of purplish-white tendrils emerging from an octopus-like body. In the reddish cast of the fire that was spreading across the manor, the beast was a nauseating and horrifying sight. Worst of all was a small patch where a mass of tentacles came together, forming an identifiably human face.

For a split second, Harold wondered if Nicodemus Whateley had undergone some strange transformation. But this abomination had to be some other degenerate member of the family-something new and awful that no one had seen before.

The creature's wide mouth spread in a malevolent smile as it swooped down at Harold, filling his field of vision...

* * *

Cort gaped in horror as Longfellow's head was bitten clean off. The cutthroat's men ran in terror - and Williams couldn't blame them -

but he'd be damned if he'd allow the beast to get away with the vicious act.

Screaming in defiance, he ran forward, guns blazing. The Whateley creature dropped Longfellow's body to the ground, swaying its head out of the path of Cort's bullets. A few struck the creature's tentacles, but seemed to have no appreciable effect.

Dozens of tentacles extended to wrap around Cort's legs and torso, hoisting him into the air. He struggled to free the spent cartridges from his gun as Enoch Whateley's grinning face swooped down to face him. Cort braced himself to take his final breath, just as a swarm of bugs slammed into Enoch's face.

The distraction wasn't enough to cause him-it-to loosen its grip, but it did provide Cort the time and space he needed to reach deep into his duster. There wasn't time to thank Sister Mary for the timely miracle: as Enoch recovered, Cort lit the dynamite stick's short fuse and reached back for a long throw.

"Eat this!" he yelled, tossing the dynamite into the creature's mouth as hard as he could. Dropping him in surprise, Enoch coughed and gagged furiously to expel the explosive.

Two-second fuse, Cort thought to himself, throwing himself to the left towards Sister Mary. She had already thrown herself over Nelson, and he hit the ground just as Enoch Whateley exploded into a thousand pieces, driving bone shards into Cort's back.

* * *

To the left of the Estate, Sim and his men drove as far forward as they could before the sheer mass of the opposition blunted their momentum. In a desperate move to hold their position, all three stood back to back, facing out in all directions. Sim cut and parried tirelessly with his cutlass, as Freddy discharged the last of his flintlocks into the red eyes of an approaching zombie. Clubbing the barrel of one pistol into the face of a second corpse, Fast Hands spun around, lifting the other to collide with its skull. He heard the crunch that signaled the walkin' dead's final end, and tossed his guns aside, moving on with the blinding speed that had earned him his nickname.

Sun Shu-Jen... was untouchable. Nunchaku in either hand, nothing could come near him. His strength was so great, his attacks so focussed, that a single blow was sufficient to crush the skull of any opponent. Corpses of bats and wolves and shambling corpses flew backwards from him in waves... until a shot rang out.

Wincing in pain, Sim staggered back from the impact. Freddy was occupied with yet more of the progressing horde, but Sun ducked low and turned to see who had attacked his charge. Too close, a raven-haired woman stalked towards them through the darkness, wearing a simple black dress billowing in the night wind. She was attractive - of that there was no doubt - but it was obvious that her beauty wasn't her strongest asset-she wielded her Peacemaker with an expert's hand.

"So you decided to start the party without me!" Tzipporah Whateley called out. "Now, we can't have that. I've killed one man who considered himself a leader tonight... let's see if I can make it two!"

Tzipporah's voice took on a deep, rumbling tone and words flowed from her that defied any language known to man. Her firing arm whipped into position with inhuman speed and a burst of five rounds whistled through the air toward Sim.

There was only one choice. Sun Shu-Jen reached deep within himself, drawing on his remaining chi reserves. The screams, the gunshots, all died down to a low rumbling thunder around him. Time itself slowed before him. Sun could see the bullets carving their way through the air, and the contrails of their flight as they cut through toward their target.

In moments less than the blink of an eye, Sun moved into the bullets' path, and swung his nunchaku once... twice... three... and four times. Four bullets were deflected away into the night air, but even Sun wasn't fast enough to catch the fifth as it swerved in its path. It impacted the Shaolin warrior squarely in the chest. The thunder in his ears suddenly sped up, and time leapt back on track as he crumpled to the ground.

That's not possible! Tzipporah stared slack-jawed with awe. *Perhaps I should be satisfied with my kills for tonight after all*, she thought, retreating back away from the house.

"No!" Sim screamed, dropping to his knees beside his bodyguard. A twisted frog-like creature favoring its left leg tried to take advantage of Sim's distraction, but Freddy moved to intercede. "I don't think so," he snarled, snapping the creature's head back with a left-hand spinning knuckle strike. He spun in a complete circle, the momentum adding extra force to the follow-up left back-kick which broke the abomination's neck. Malrog Whateley hit the ground hard, and didn't get back up.

Sim reached beneath Sun's head, lifting it up and looking into the man's eyes. They were dimming rapidly. Po Yu and his apprentices were guarding the outfit's resources against the mobs, but there was obviously no chance of getting Shu-Jen out of the area in time.

Sun had killed dozens of men for the glory of Kang and the Rats, but his death was no easier for that. Continuing in his tradition of stoic bravery, however, Sun showed none of his agony. He merely looked up into the Captain's eyes, nodded once, and fell back, his duty fulfilled.

Sim closed his eyes for a mere second-all the time he could spare. Then, rising to his feet, he screamed for his remaining assistant. "Frederick!" he yelled, lashing out unconsciously with his sword to kill a bat-like creature that soared out of the sky to his right.

"Captain?" came Freddy's response.

"Signal the retreat. We've done enough here, and no one will thank us. Chin and the others are at Grimely's Manor. Find them, and order them back to headquarters."

"What about you?" Fast Hands queried, driving one gloved fist forward and disgustingly deep into a soft-fleshed creature that had drifted toward them from above.

"I've business to attend to."

"And Sun?"

Sim spared one last glance toward his bodyguard. "Leave him where he lies. He'd want it that way."

* * *

Los Ojos Del Dios glanced down, a tug on his pant leg. *Some new threat?* he wondered, pointing the palms of his hands toward the distraction, only to find a small blue demon kicking furiously at his shin. The creature didn't seem particularly strong or effectual - comical might be a better description.

Realizing he had been noticed, the demon glanced up. "Ummm, hi! Call me Francis. Anything I can do for you? Power? Women? Money? C'mon, bub, let's make a deal!"

Los Ojos reached down and grasped the creature by the neck. Lifting it up before his face, he stared at it with opaque white eyes as it continued.

"Okay, I can see you're a busy man. Tell you what. You're a first-timer, so it's 50 percent off. You can't beat that, can ya? Can ya?"

Los Ojos Del Dios frowned at the creature's flippant remarks.

"Hey, don't be sore, bub. I'll be around if you change your mi... Hey, that burns! Whatcha doin'? Ouch! Stop it, you big bully...!"

White fire spread from the tattoo on Los Ojos' hand, enveloping the small blue demon, then fading away to leave nothing but a trace of sulfur.

The Whateleys must be getting desperate, Los Ojos thought to himself before turning back to the battle.

* * *

Nicodemus Whateley strolled lazily down the road. The night had been good to him. A mildly annoying huckster, a Law Dog foolish enough to get in his way (though just fast enough to manage an attack that cracked his spectacles-and ensured him a particularly unpleasant death), and several dozen innocents. All dead. And Knicknevin ready for his grand emergence into his very own Kingdom.

Life couldn't get any better.

Up ahead, Nic could just make out gunshots and screams. Squinting, he noticed several shadowy figures, led by a white-shirted man, slinking out through the gates of the family Estate. Against one wall, he could make out a number of other figures climbing over the west wall. Lightning crashed down out of the sky, and bursts of

ectoplasmic energy shot back and forth from the ground behind the wall into the upper stories of the manor.

Granma Wilhelmina didn't raise no fools, Nicodemus thought as he turned and strolled back the way he had came, cheerfully whistling "Buffalo Girls" and flipping his deck into the chill night air.

* * *

As Freddy Fast-Hands led the remainder of Longfellow's men back out the gate, he saw a shadowy figure standing to one side. He dropped into a combat pose, then relaxed as the figure stepped out of the darkness.

"What brings you here, Lakota?" the Maze Rat asked.

"You leave the field of battle before the war is won?" Joseph Eyes-Like-Rain asked.

Freddy shrugged. "Them's my orders. Can't say as I like 'em... leaving a fight before it's done sticks in my craw. But I've my captain's men to look after, and his orders to obey. Besides, at least we were on the field. Where have you been?"

The fighter turned his back on the Indian leader and followed the other Rats toward Lord Grimely's, leaving Joseph to ponder the question.

* * *

The Ghost stood his ground fearlessly. Death held no terror for him. He'd seen Sim and the others try to reach him, to no avail. No matter. Tonight he was untouchable, and he would send these abominations back to Hell if it was the last thing he did. He fired, reloaded, and fired again, losing himself in the mindless repetition...

"Boss!"

Derek shoved the Ghost out of the way as ethereal beams of energy, barely visible in the pale moonlight, drifted down from the upper stories of the Estate. They spread across Derek's body, flowing up to concentrate on his head.

Automatically, the part of the Ghost's brain that was still his own catalogued the hex. *Mind Twist!* With a scream, Derek collapsed to the ground, grabbing at his skull. But before the Ghost could move to his aid, two huge grey wolves slammed into him, each grabbing one of his shoulders in its jaws. The Ghost fell to the ground, both dire beasts atop him. A third one advanced, ready to bite off his head at the neck. The Agency man threw all his undead strength into an effort to rise, but the wolves weighed too much...

There was a whistling noise, and the Ghost saw a crossbow bolt pass through the head of the third dread wolf. The other two wolves twisted to see where the bolt had come from, but refused to relinquish their grip. That was their mistake. A war club crushed one's skull, and a bare-chested Indian grabbed the other and casually snapped its neck.

The Ghost glanced over to his fallen comrade. Derek appeared unwounded, but he was twitching on the ground, frothing at the mouth. Nothing could be done for him now. "Armstrong!" he screamed. "Man down! Tend to him!"

Turning to the Indian war party that had come over the west wall of the Estate, the Ghost counted his reinforcements. Three women, six men, and their leader, Eagle Rock. One of the Sioux was conspicuously absent.

Eagle Rock, who had snapped the wolf's neck, dismissed the Ghost with a single glance. *That boy's going to be trouble... if he survives the night*, the Agency leader noted dimly as he got to his feet.

"Ferret's Eye, White Horse, into the house," Eagle Rock commanded. "The rest of you, with me. Let's finish..."

There was a sudden scream from one of the women, whom the Ghost didn't recognize. For a second he wondered if the Sioux were truly as tough as they claimed...

Then he saw the reason for the outburst. Skeletal hands, dozens of them, had emerged from the ground around and amidst them. An Indian squaw had been grabbed and pulled down before any of the Sioux could do anything, and now the rest of her people were occupied fending off other attacks.

The Ghost stomped down hard, shattering the finger bones of one of the undead that clutched at him. Fortunately, he was on the outskirts of whatever unholy planting field the skeletons had been placed in. The field before him was a sea of arms, reaching out to grab at the Sioux or drag themselves free of the fresh earth. Above it all, the Ghost heard a high chanting, like some unholy child reciting a nursery rhyme. "All... fall... down!" a woman's voice screamed to the heavens.

The Ghost stepped clear of the skeleton field, taking stock of the battle. The intervention of the Rats had helped. The Rangers were killing the few creatures that still remained near the front of the house, and Cort and Sister Mary had regained their second wind and put down the abominations on their other side of the house.

But it was too late for the Sioux woman. A sharpened fingerbone had cut her throat, draining her blood out onto the ground.

The Ghost could save others. He looked for the worst patch of fighting, and stepped toward it... as an enormous explosion sent the front of the house shooting outwards onto the weed-infested lawn. The only time the Ghost had heard a noise that loud was the moment when the gun had gone off by his ear, a lifetime ago...

* * *

"Mother of God!" Katie swore.

Striding... no, floating through the wreckage of the front of the house was Wilhelmina Whateley. Green mist-like energies floated

about her, lifting her clear of the burning wreckage on the ground. In the smoke, Katie could see drifting skeletal faces, like the glimpses sometimes seen in the vapors from burning ghost rock.

"Fire!" she screamed without thinking. Simpson, Preston, and Hastings opened fire a second later, as Bobo unleashed bolts of strange black lightning at the woman. Los Ojos del Dios chanted prayers to a god that seemed to have closed up shop for good, lending blessed miracles to the mix. A second later, Cort and Sister Mary followed suit, opening fire from the east flank.

But the barrage might as well have been a light drizzle to Wilhelmina. Even her clothes were undisturbed by the attack. Wilhelmina cackled wildly, and Katie was sure the eldest Whateley's voice was not entirely her own any longer. It was if dozens of voices spoke through her, laughing at the Coalition's futile effort.

Arrows and bolts flew through the air from Katie's left, bouncing off Wilhelmina with just as little effect as the Coalition bullets. Glancing in that direction, however, Katie made out the Ghost striding forward, a party of Indians at his back.

"No more!" he bellowed, leaping directly for Wilhelmina. His fingers extended into long, sharp claws, and he moved with the speed of the supernatural dead.

Wilhelmina gestured in his direction, and bolts of blackest magic shot out, but the Ghost shrugged them off and kept on coming-only to be brought up short as Wilhelmina grabbed him by the throat and lifted him entirely off the ground. Everyone stopped firing, unwilling to hit one of the Coalition co-leaders.

For a moment, silence reigned in the area, and all eyes looked to the unholy figure of the Whateley matriarch as she addressed the Ghost.

"You begin to annoy me!" she screamed, in that terrible voice of many voices. The Ghost slashed at her, but his claws were as ineffectual as the bullets and missiles had been. Wilhelmina tightened her grip further, and Katie could hear the Agency leader's bones cracking from twenty feet away.

The elder Whateley dropped the Ghost to the porch, almost casually, and he did not rise.

Katie was prepared to order another volley, but paused. Wilhelmina cocked her head, as if scenting the air. She seemed... distracted. Which was all the better as far as the Ranger's leader was concerned. Nothing they had done so far had gained her attention, let alone caused her harm.

A demonic smile crossed Wilhelmina's face. "You! I sense you, old man! Did you think you could hide from us?"

Another momentary hush fell across the yard as an aged Indian stepped through the gates. Katie knew him-like Wilhelmina Whateley-only by reputation.

Joseph Eyes-Like-Rain.

The Ghost had described him to her once, but had dismissed him as unimportant.

Now, however... nothing in his manner or stride could be dismissed. Joseph walked with the confidence of a natural leader, boldly approaching Wilhelmina with little other than his pride to protect him.

Behind her, Katie heard Los Ojos Del Dios whisper, "Another moment foreseen... now arrives. The first battle for the Last Kingdom? Heaven help us all."

But what can Joseph do...? Katie wondered.

* * *

Enough! Joseph thought, as he watched from the gate. Hopes-in-Winter gurgled her last fading words as her life's blood spilled onto the hands of the undead rising through the Whateley lawn.

He had held back, as the spirits had commanded - and another of his people had died.

Like his son had died.

Like all the others...

Enough?

Joseph strode down the twisted path leading to the wrecked house. He closed his eyes for a moment, and felt new strength flow through him from the Spirit Realm. When he opened his mouth, it was not just his voice that came forth, but the voice of a hundred of his bloodline, all heralding his arrival in unison.

"Wilhelmina!"

The very ground shook from the impact of the single word. Joseph knew that the force within the old woman could not resist such a challenge. The manitou that guided her would not permit it.

The old woman hovered before the front door of her devastated house, putting no effort forth to escape. Despite her blindness and the strength of Joseph's voice, she carried herself with the sighted confidence of one who knew herself to be invulnerable.

Of course, her confidence was not without cause. Joseph understood her power; he felt the shame of having granted some of it to her. He had held back when he should have led the Sioux forward, fearing the future that their offensive might unleash. His visions had revealed one possible future-a future in which the Sioux embraced a power beyond comprehension to combat the worst evils the Valley would ever face, but at a cost he could not allow them to pay.

Now he realized that his hesitation may have brought that very future to pass. First some of the Alliance's greatest fighters had died in the first assault on the Whateley Estate. Then others perished, as Elijah led his unholy Flock through the streets of Gomorra. Now Hopes-in-

Winter, a young woman who had done nothing to warrant such a pitiable death, lay buried with the restless dead.

Perhaps Joseph would die with them. Perhaps then he might repay some small measure of his debt to Gomorra - and the world.

Regardless, the time for hesitation was over. Perhaps the Master Demon would walk the earth, even if Joseph moved to stand in its way. Perhaps Wilhelmina's crimes, and the fact that she now meant to strike down all these good people, were all fated to occur. But Joseph had stood idly by long enough.

Enough!

All of those thoughts, and more, passed through Joseph's mind in a second. Setting aside all doubts, he looked full into the face of the most evil human being he had ever met in his long life.

"So, old man," Wilhelmina cackled, drifting to the ground and stepping off the porch. "You've come seekin' your death, have ye? Pay no mind to the mess. Those Agency and Ranger gnats have been busy, but their efforts are for naught. Once the Master's settled in, we'll soon have things fixed up again. Not that any of you will be here to see it."

"Nor will you, witch!" Joseph called out. Around him, the wind was rising steadily, and lightning crackled in the distance. Katie and the other Rangers cleared away from the path leading him to the elder Whateley. They could do nothing but bear witness to the coming spectacle. "The vision has come, and in our arrogance, we were not prepared. Your master walked free, old woman, while those who would help us bickered amongst themselves. But I have journeyed into the wilderness to seek forgiveness. I have atoned for the sins of our folly. And I am not afraid of you-or your master-any more."

With that, Joseph simply extended his arms forward.

It wasn't energy that coiled along them and flew towards Wilhelmina. To those standing nearby, it seemed as if the mist itself had come to life. The mist... and whatever lie within it. The Ghost, barely able to turn his head as the neckbones knit themselves back together, saw small children scurrying towards Wilhelmina. Katie Karl glimpsed young Confederate soldiers, marching off to war against the demoness. Sister Mary saw angels of the Lord Almighty, armed with flaming swords. Los Ojos Del Dios clenched his eyes tightly closed rather than glimpse whatever forces Joseph now commanded?

Eagle Rock and the other Sioux came closest to glimpsing the truth of the spirits that had come to Joseph's aid. *Such power!* Eagle Rock thought to himself. *If I survive this day, I must learn to harness it!*

What Wilhelmina saw in that brief second, no one would ever know. The spirits directed by Joseph slammed into her full tilt. In the blink of an eye, the green mist about her was shattered into a thousand fleeing shards. Some of the shards fought back, spirit-to-

spirit, but most were consumed in the wake of the tremendous spiritual attack.

Joseph strode forward amidst the battling spirits, meeting Wilhelmina's lunging attack with the strength and speed of his strongest ancestors.

"Die, you ignorant puppet!" Wilhelmina screamed, wrapping her hands around Joseph's throat.

There were no more hexes, no more spiritual favors. No mystic bibles or tomahawks. Joseph could do nothing but wrap his hands around her throat and tighten his grip. The awe-struck onlookers watched as the clouds of spirits coalesced about the two struggling elders, becoming the funnel of a veritable whirlwind of opposing forces that spiraled into the heavens above. Spirits and manitou alike were hurtled from the whirlwind and faded away as they cancelled each other out.

"This cannot be!" Wilhelmina screamed. Just as surely as she was choking the life out of Joseph Eyes-Like-Rain, so, too, was the Indian killing her.

"It is!" Joseph screamed back. "The moment of your reckoning comes now!"

Even as Joseph felt the life energy draining out of him, he could see that Wilhelmina Whateley was... withering. No doubt he looked the same way to her, if she could in fact see at all through her dim eyes. The Sioux leader knew at that moment there would be no escape for either of them?

* * *

"Damnation!" Jebediah Whateley swore. From his vantage point at a window of the upper manor, he could clearly make out the bitter battle - and what could only be Wilhelmina's final moments.

"What is it?" Dolores asked, dancing across the attic floor. "Have we won? Have we won?"

Jebediah sighed wearily. "We are undone. Granmama is dying, Dolores. Francis is gone, Enoch and Malrog struck down, Tzipporah fled, Nicodemus the gods know where."

"But I want to plaaayyy..." Dolores whined petulantly.

"Enough time to do that after Knicknevin has emerged the victor this night," Jebediah replied, taking her arm. *If he emerges the victor*, he thought to himself. Knicknevin's defeat had never been a consideration... but then again, neither was Wilhelmina's death.

Now was the time for improvisation. The family had prepared a rendezvous spot in town, and the secret tunnels they had constructed were still safe from the Coalition and its allies. At least he and Dolores could escape. With any luck, the others would all make it to the rendezvous point on their own?

* * *

Katie was the first to approach the motionless bodies lying near the manor's porch. She was careful not to get too close, though; both looked dead, but with what she'd just seen, anything was possible.

"Bravo!" a voice called out from behind her. She spun, guns aimed and ready, the surviving members of the Coalition training their guns in unison with her own.

A Chinaman stepped from the shadows, applauding the assembly gently. "Sim." Katie hissed. "It didn't have to end this way, you know! If you'd stayed and fought, Joseph - and a lot of others - might still be alive!"

Sim glanced briefly about the Estate grounds. "Maybe it would have worked out like this no matter what. Besides, what makes you think Joseph's dead?"

Katie knelt, and sure enough, Joseph was still breathing. Shallow, slow, but breathing nonetheless. She gestured to Los Ojos Del Dios, who stepped cautiously forward. He knelt and held his hands above the body, not quite touching the Lakota. After a few seconds, the Ranger shook his head. "It is beyond my power to save this man. His time has not quite come, Senora Karl, but it will arrive-soon."

The Ghost returned to his feet and shook his head once, as if to assure the neck bones had set properly, then strode over and kicked Wilhelmina's withered corpse. "You reap what you sow, old woman," he snarled. "This isn't vengeance. This is justice."

He turned to Katie, and she involuntarily shrunk back. She had a Ranger's distrust of Harrowed, but the Ghost had never given her any reason to doubt his control over the manitou... until now. His eyes glowed red, and his lips were drawn back in a feral snarl.

For a moment, she wasn't sure if he planned to go around her or through her. Then he paused, and tilted his head as if... sniffing the air. Then he nodded, once. "This isn't the end of it. Karl, see to the injured, then meet me at Lord Grimley's soon as you can. Armstrong, Cort, Sister Mary... you're with me." Without another word, the Ghost strode across the ravaged lawn and through the gates.

Eagle Rock stepped forward. He glanced once at Los Ojos, but seem satisfied with the Mexican's sightless prognosis. "I agree. Elijah and his Flock are still on the loose, and as powerful as Wilhelmina was, a greater power may still arise. We go to fight it. Alone."

"But what about Joseph?" asked one of the Sioux women, Singing Feather. "He might not yet be beyond our powers to heal..."

"Enough!" Eagle Rock answered. "Joseph returned at our moment of greatest need, but he has served his purpose. Now it is up to us." Without another word he strode out through the gate as well.

Most of those remaining on the Whateley grounds-especially the other Sioux-blinked in surprise at Eagle Rock's callousness. But they had already discovered what happened when they split their forces. In silence they followed their de facto leader.

Bobo, Los Ojos, and Hastings tended to the wounded, and Dexter strode over to Katie's side. He didn't dare put an arm around his leader's shoulder, but his voice carried the sympathetic tone she had come to rely upon from her closest friend. "You okay, Katie?"

She shrugged. "One Ranger, one riot. Maybe handling the looters would have been better. We didn't seem to do much here."

"Don't say that," Dexter replied. "Maybe Joseph was the only one with the firepower to take the witch down, but he wouldn't have had the opportunity if we hadn't thinned out her minions. It was worth it - count on that."

Katie nodded, then turned to Sim, who was slowly easing back into the shadows and out of sight. "You're with us, Sim. I need an extra pair of hands, and you're elected. Help me grab Joseph here and get him over to Grimely Manor."

Sim glanced at Katie's guns, which had been leveled toward his belly. "I find your argument... most persuasive, Miss Karl. And my men are already there, and I am going in that direction... so why not? But I do have one question: why are we bringing Joseph with us?"

"He's still alive - there must be some reason for that," Katie replied, kneeling down and slinging one of Joseph's arms over her shoulder. "Los Ojos might rely upon fate and predestination to make his decisions, but me, I believe in making my own choices. This one's mine."

She turned to go, then took one look back. The fire from Boom Boom's explosives had spread; the Estate was done for. Best they leave before some thrice-damned concoction exploded from the heat and killed them all.

"Let's get the hell out of here."

A Wilderness of Tigers

by Rob Vaux

Hunter watched as Jackson's guns blazed once again. He shook his head in amazement at the sheer speed of the man. No matter how many times he saw it, he still couldn't believe anyone could shoot like that.

The current target of the outlaw's ire danced like a puppet as the bullets slammed through him. Wrath, he had called himself. One of Elijah's flock. He skidded to the ground, sending countless weapons spilling into the dirt around him. He joined a pile of bodies on the ground around him: men and women he had gunned down as they attempted to reach Lord Grimely's. No one, it seemed could get past the well-armed Sin.

"No one except Black Jack," he spoke quietly. If Stoker wanted to reach Knicknevin, he had certainly picked the right people for the job.

A shadow wriggled, and Hunter fired almost instinctively. The shape yelped and fell back. He didn't have time to ponder what it was. Turning his head, he tried to gauge how many of his people were left. It was impossible to tell. The light from the burning Whateley mansion threw strange shadows across the landscape, transforming faces into masks of light and darkness. Besides Black Jack and Stoker himself, Hunter couldn't identify a single friendly face.

Ahead of them, the battle raged on. Gunslingers, pirates, and Indians surrounded the Stygian figure in front of the mansion, fighting tooth and claws to bring the creature down. Gunfire echoed through the air, joined by an occasional burst of shaman magic and something that could have been a huckster's cards. They may as well have been toys. Knicknevin towered high above them, swiping aside those who got too close. Bullets and magic glanced harmlessly off its hide. Beside it, members of Elijah's flock cackled and howled, striking targets of opportunity as they saw them. The struggle teetered on the verge of a massacre.

"What do we do now?" he shouted at Stoker. The Confederate turned.

"We wait for a distraction."

"And if on doesn't come?" he returned.

"Oh ye of little faith," Stoker almost laughed. "Watch."

The great red vehicle came thundering across the plain - a monstrosity almost worthy of the manitou it rumbled towards. It rolled on strange treaded tracks, moving quickly despite its great size. Guns of every variety jutted out from its armored carapace, while a pair of huge mechanical claws flanked the driver's seat. It thundered through the carnage, launching fire, bullets and a strange green beam of some sort against any creature which approached.

"The Collegium," Hunter whispered.

Knicknevin's alien eyes narrowed as the vehicle rolled toward it. It opened its claws in a hideous embrace, almost daring the mad scientists to do their best. The arcs of fire spraying from the guns narrow in its direction. Knicknevin never flinched.

The bus struck the creature head on, at a clip of almost forty-five miles an hour. The mechanical claws dug into the monster's flesh as wave after wave of withering fire engulfed its features. Knicknevin staggered from the blow, struggling to stay on its feet even as the front of the contraption crumpled like paper. After a paralyzed instant of hanging in space, it lost the battle with gravity. The front of Lord Grimely's collapsed under its weight as it fell with an earth-shattering thud. The Collegium tank continued to push forward, drawn by its own momentum and by the huge digits that grasped at its hull. The whole mess vanished in a cloud of timber and dust.

"Did they get it?" Hunter heard Jackson ask.

"Not likely," Stoker replied.

With a wrench of metal, Knicknevin rose to its feet. It not longer looked gleeful. Now it looked mad. Grasping the Collegium's machine like an oversized toy, it tore the vehicle in half. Armored rivets shredded like newspaper, a gout of fuel caught fire as it sprayed into the air, and Hunter could hear screams coming from within. Scientists bailed out of turrets and compartments like rats as Knicknevin lifted the shattered remains above its head. Something exploded within, sending shards of metal flying into the night. The few remaining combatants dove for whatever cover they could find.

"Sweet mother of mercy," Hunter breathed.

With a shout, Knicknevin launched itself into the air. Gigantic wings spread from its back as it leapt across the moon, soaring high above Hunter's head and back towards town. Its target soon became clear. The soft *whump* of an explosion rose behind him, coming from Gomorra's north end. The Collegium compound. Arcs of electricity rose into the air and a strange green fire engulfed the marble structure as Knicknevin crashed down through the roof.

"Come on," Stoker grabbed the sheriff's arm. "We haven't much time."

The band trotted onto the plain before Lord Grimely's and spread out amid the carnage. Knots

of survivors huddled amid corpses and flaming wreckage; most were trying to look brave in the face of what they had just seen. The sheriff's rifle sought out any readily available foes, but could find none. No Flock members could be seen, and the Whateley family seemed to have dispersed; small blessings smiled upon them.

Just before Lord Grimely's stood an ashen circle, surrounded by bodies and pieces of the Collegium's machine. Knicknevin's perch, where he had defended his newborn "kingdom" from all comers. The corpses around him spoke to the creature's success. Mostly Sioux and Rangers; good men and women helpless before its power. The lucky ones were intact; most had been torn apart, arms and legs shredded like so much meat. Hunter's eyes widened as he recognized the closest body.

"The Ghost."

Andrew Lane lay sprawled on the edge of the blasted circle. His bearded face was smeared with ash, while his hands clutched a useless pair of pistols. In another setting, he might have been sleeping; as it was, his motionless body spoke to the futile fight he had put up. Stoker knelt by the Ghost's form, trying to see if some life yet remained...

"Psst! Law Man!" a sharp whisper came to his right. "Over here!"

A small knot of men, dressed in sashes and kerchiefs, crouched near an earthen mound. Their leader gestured at Hunter while his companions looked nervously back to town.

"Maze Rats," Hunter spat at the site. "I thought the Collegium sank you."

"A minor concern in light our present situation," Captain Sim spoke softly. Please take cover sheriff. Our adversary will be back soon, and there's someone here who needs to speak with you."

Hunter considered for a moment, then nodded. The Maze Rats weren't stupid enough to pick a fight now, and even if they were, Black Jack stood right behind him. With the outlaw at his back, he followed the errant pirates.

A shallow crater lay behind the mound, forming an impromptu foxhole. Sitting cross-legged in the center of it was woman wearing the star of the Texas Rangers. Her face was as blackened as the Ghost's, but fire still gleamed in her eyes and her white hat remained firmly atop her head. She smiled ruefully as Jackson and Hunter approached.

"Glad you could join us," Katie Karl said morosely.

It took a moment for Hunter's eyes to adjust to the dark. As they did, he saw a second figure lying in the foxhole, its head resting on Katie's lap. The old Indian's wrinkled features were streaked with blood, and Hunter could see him struggling to sit up.

"We found him at the Whateley estate, beside that old woman," Sim explained. "We were going to leave him, but he asked to be brought here - to wait for you and the outlaw."

"What a kind man you are to be so thoughtful," Hunter's voice was incredulous.

"My orders are to stop that creature, no matter what the cost. Joseph was the first to warn us of it, and he might have enough power to do what we - and those thrice-cursed scientists - could not."

"What happened to the woman?" Jackson asked.

"Based on what we saw, I am no longer worry about her," Sim stared in fascination at the Indian. "This is not a man you should anger."

Joseph Eyes-Like-Rain sat up suddenly. The intensity on his face took Hunter aback.

"You have come," he looked past Hunter to the black-clad outlaw behind him. "And have buried the hatchet with your enemy. Would that that had come sooner."

"I'm sorry Joseph," Hunter returned. "I'm sorry about everything. But we've only got a short amount of time before that thing comes back and..."

"I know of our foe," Joseph returned. "And I know that you cannot stop it, Nathan Hunter. Nor you, Jackson Jackson. It takes more than mortal weapons to slay such a beast."

"Then why..."

"So that you may learn from what you have seen. So that the sacrifices we have made here will not be in vain. All of you..." He held his hands out to the pirates and to the Ranger supporting him. "...must tell others what happened here. Tell them that our hatred caused it, that our blindness fed it. Tell them we could not stand together until the threat had engulfed us. They must know this... so that Gomorra's fate doesn't befall the entire world..."

Concern crossed Hunter's face as he gazed at the old man.

"So it's over? There's nothin' we can do?"

Joseph shook his head. "Nothing." "What about you? Can't you do somethin'?"

Again, Joseph shook his head. "The spirits had given me what I needed to face our enemy, but the Whateley woman found me first. She paid the price, at the cost of draining me. My life grows faint..."

His body shuddered with coughs and he hunched over as blood leaked from his open mouth.

A shadow fell across the assemblage, dressed in Confederate gray. Austin Stoker looked down at the assemblage as chuckled softly to himself.

"Won't be long now," he drawled.

"You!" Joseph whispered at him. "You are an evil spirit, as bad as the one we fight. You killed my son. You took the lives of those who could help us. Hell burns within your eyes and taints your soul."

Stoker smiled, the sardonic grin of a corpse. "That may be, but I'm the best hope you people have." His voice rose. "Joseph ain't the only one with power here, and thanks to the two o' you -" here he gestured at Black Jack and the sheriff. "- I didn't have to spend it fightin' Knicknevin's toadies. I didn't come here alone, old man. I brought the best gunfighters in Gomorra to cut me a path."

Katie looked upon at him as anger and fear flashed across her face.

"So you have enough to stop it?" she asked.

"No," he said simply. "But I know someone who does."

A roar rose from town and an ebony shape rose from the still-burning compound. Knicknevin seemed to cross the distance in one fell leap. One moment, it stood amid the ghost-rock flames of the Collegium's folly, the next it had arced across the sky to land at its former location. Its knees bent as it touched down, and sulfur fumes belched from its grinning mouth.

"STOKER!!!" it bellowed. "YOUR TIME IS NIGH STOKER!!!"

Austin Stoker winked at the assemblage below him, then turned to face the nightmare. "Hello, Knicknevin," he said quietly. "Long time."

"I SEE YOU'VE ENJOYED MY STOLEN GIFTS."

"They had their uses," he returned. "But I'm done with them now." His eyes hardened. "You have something that belongs to me, and I mean to cut it out of your unholy hide."

"OH? AND HOW WILL YOU DO THAT WHEN I REND YOUR BODY TO THE WINDS?"

In response, Stoker drew a large, oddly shaped pistol from its holster. 'The Right Hand of God' was etched along its barrel. Knicknevin bellowed inhuman laughter.

"WEAPONS!!! EVEN NOW, YOU THINK AS A MORTAL DOES!!!"

The gun went off, sending a streak of light into the creature's shoulder. The bullet penetrated the inky flesh, eliciting a cry of surprise and pain from the monster it struck.

"Hurts, don't it?" Stoker smiled.

"YOU... STRUCK ME!!!" Knicknevin howled.

"The Collegium whipped this up. It's supposed to stop creatures like you an' me. Does a pretty good job from what I've seen." He looked up as Knicknevin's face twisted with hate and rage. "New rules out here in the world, hellspawn. It doesn't matter how tough you are, you can still bleed."

"DO YOU TRULY THINK YOU CAN SLAY ME WITH THAT... TRINKET?!"

"No," Stoker countered. "But I didn't bring it to use on you."

He pivoted the weapon and fired down at the creature's feet, where it struck the body lying prone on the ground.

The body of Andrew Lane.

"The Harrowed, Knicknevin," Stoker smiled. "The first way you manitou had of getting here. Revive a corpse, take control of its soul, and use it to wreak havoc however you can. It's a game you didn't want to play, Knicknevin. You remember why?"

The Ghost's eyes fluttered open. Something burned in their pits, something dark and infernal, and very, very mad.

"Take the Ghost here," he continued. "Strong-willed man, lots of good in his heart. He fought the manitou when it claimed his body. Didn't let it take control. In time, he completely mastered it, using its powers without surrendering any control to it. It's a risk you run every time you take over one of us. In this case, the manitou lost big time."

The Ghost leapt to his feet, an infernal grin creeping across his face. His fingers twisted into angry claws and his eyes began to glow with hellish strength.

"That didn't mean it was dead, though. No, it just waited deep inside. Waited and slept until something came along to wake it up. Something like a bullet from a mystical gun."

The thing behind Andrew Lane's face looked up at its ebony companion. "Didn't tell your buddies you were plannin' to come here, did you?" Stoker teeth flashed. "Didn't tell them about your secret gate."

Big mistake. They're awful upset at you... and now they got a weapon to do somethin' about it."

With a howl, the Ghost leapt up at Knicknevin, rage and glee playing across his features. His clawed hand imbedded in Knicknevin's side, drawing maggot-ridden blood from the wound. Knicknevin screamed and brought its own claws down upon the possessed agent, but the blow passed right through him like... like a ghost. Lane plunged his hands into the creature's stomach, rending and tearing like a wildcat

"STOKER!!!" Knicknevin rumbled. "KILL YOU STOKER!!!"

"I'm not the one you should worry about," Stoker returned. There was a slow rasp as he drew his saber from its scabbard. "But I don't see why Mr. Lane should have all the fun."

He struck the haft of Knicknevin's knee. The blade ate into the flesh and bone, and Knicknevin screamed again. It staggered for a moment, then toppled over as the knee gave out. Lane fell with it, sending gobbets of flesh flying in all directions. The wounded manitou tried to strike the Ghost, again to no avail.

Behind them, Hunter and Jackson rose to watch. They were joined by Katie Karl, who face bore testament to the horror of the scene. On the floor of the foxhole, Joseph Eyes-Like-Rain had stopped moving.

A huge clawed hand caught Stoker across the face. He grunted as the blood flew, feeling the searing pain cut to his soul. There was something else inside as well; a burning in his chest that seemed to grow as Knicknevin's pain increased. Stoker smiled and swung again at his nemesis, this time plunging the blade into its open wound. As its rage turned to agony, Knicknevin swiped again at Stoker's form. Its nails grasped the Confederate's coat and dug deep into the flesh beneath. It pulled him close as the Ghost shattered its ribs with another inhuman blow.

"IF I DIE, YOU DIE WITH ME!!!" it whispered.

Stoker spat in its face. "Better be sure..."

Lane smashed through Knicknevin's gore-soaked chest until his fingers grasped the black and beating organ beneath. With a triumphant cry - a cry that no human throat had ever uttered - he pulled the heart free of its owner...

And was engulfed in light. The manitou's horribly injured body exploded, washing attacker and onlooker alike. Lane was hurled backwards by a blast of energy, intermingled with Knicknevin's dying howl. Hunter gave a panicked shout and yanked Black Jack behind the rampart by his collar. Katie Karl flattened herself on top of the two of them as a blast of energy dispersed above their heads. Night became day as hurricane winds screamed across the plain. Nate clenched his eyes shut and held on. Slowly, the screams grew quieter, the light dimmed until only darkened silence remained.

"It's over," he heard Katie whisper. "I think it's finally over." He shook the dust off his hat and slowly rose out of the pit.

A crater stood where Knicknevin had been, dark earth baked rock-hard by the light and heat. The blast had removed the detritus from the area; the wreckage from Lord Grimely's was gone and no bodies could be seen. The Ghost lay some fifty feet away; his limbs twisted slowly, but he did not rise. Here and there, a few faces poked out of the plains. Survivors of various factions with enough good sense to keep their heads down. In the center of the crater, seared white by the blast, was a gigantic, inhuman skull. Knicknevin's teeth grinned up beneath empty sockets, eliciting a shudder from Hunter's spine. As he watched, the skull sunk slowly into the earth, drawn by some unseen force to vanish beneath the soil.

Of Austin Stoker, there was no sign.

Hunter stood at the edge of the crater; how long, he could not say. He watched the petrified earth and waited for the thing to rise again. He watched the brightening horizon and waited for Wilhelmina Whateley's clan to come looking for vengeance. He watched the sky above and waited for fire to drop from the heavens. Something else was coming, some new horror that would destroy them all.

A hand touched his shoulder softly. He turned to see Jackson in the pre-dawn light. Relief flooded the outlaw's face, and Hunter thought he could see tears in the man's eyes.

"It's over," his voice cracked. "It's going to be okay."

The sheriff of Gomorra listened to the words, then nodded shudderingly. Together, they turned away from the crater and walked slowly back to town.

Epilogue:

Charlie Landers poured his sheriff a drink. The Fat Chance wasn't open yet, but the diminutive bartender was making an exception. Nate Hunter nodded gratefully and downed the whisky in a single gulp.

"That bad, was it?" Charlie asked.

"You have no idea," Hunter returned. "I can't close my eyes without seeing it."

"Well for what it's worth, you folks won a lot for us. In case you haven't noticed, we still got a town here. The Flock's gone and the Whateley's are runnin' scared with their grandma gone. You may have nightmares, sheriff, but you brokered a good bargain fer 'em."

"Wendy's burying her father tomorrow. I've got three more deputies without families I've gotta put in the ground and two hundred others who weren't quite fast enough. That doesn't count the Rangers, the Sioux, the Agents..."

"It could have been worse," Charlie spoke matter-of-factly. "A lot worse."

"I know," Hunter returned. "I'm just gettin tired of payin' the price."

The doors swung open and a third man entered the saloon: Cort Williams, the Ghost's second-in-command. He pulled off his gloves and gestured for the whiskey bottle.

"What's the news?" Hunter asked as the Agent wiped his lips.

"It's hard to say. I'm not exactly overflowing with men these days. But wherever he's gone, he's not going out of the way to advertise."

"You Union boys never do," Charlie commented.

"So you'll be going after him?" Hunter offered.

"I can't."

"But he's got an angry manitou in him. God knows what he'll do!"

"I know, but right now only a small handful of people know about his condition. And if we can keep it quiet, it could buy us some time."

"Yeah, time to hunt him down an' make things right," Hunter barked.

Cort turned and looked him straight in the eye. "My orders came from President Grant himself: we are to maintain a Union presence in Gomorra. Knicknevin may be gone, but you're still sitting on the biggest lode of ghost rock in the world. Kang's making noises about bringing the Iron Dragon through here, and word's come down that Reverend Grimme wants a slice of this territory." He took another belt of whiskey. "We didn't go just go through Hell on earth to turn this town over the likes of them."

Hunter sighed. "Jesus."

"If it makes you feel any better, the Rangers are sticking around too. And for now, neither of us has anywhere near the manpower to squabble at each other."

The sheriff nodded. "Findley's in the nuthouse, so Sweetrock will be off our backs, and the Collegium will be rebuildin' fer months."

"Your bank robbers are gone, too. The priest is still around, but the others all lit out sometime before dawn."

Hunter barked laughter. "I figured as much."

"I could send Gus out to look for them if you -"

"No. Let them go," he thought back to Jackson's hand on his shoulder. "Killin' them ain't gonna bring Corky back, and I'm tired of all the blood. We gotta start livin' in the present. If they come back...well, if they come back, then we'll see."

Cort nodded. "Probably for the best." He took another shot of whiskey then put his gloves back on.

"Silence is the watchword, gentlemen," his voice was low and authoritative. "Nobody finds out what happened that night, and nobody finds out about the Ghost's... condition. Can you handle that?"

Hunter slowly stirred his drink.

"I suppose so. We don't need people getting' any edgier than they already are."

"How about you barkeep?" Williams turned to Charlie, who glared back at him.

"Contrary to popular opinion," the tiny man barked. "I can keep my mouth shut when I hafta."

"Good. Then I won't trouble you any further," he turned and walked back to the door. "Take care, sheriff. You won't see much of me anymore, but I'll be around." He stepped out into the noonday sun.

"Was that supposed to make me feel good or bad?" Hunter asked.

"Little o' both I think."

"Yeah," Hunter sighed and stirred his drink again. The Agency was still here. The Iron Dragon, moving in. Religious fanatics from the south, Union and Confederate forces from up north. And a mother lode of ghost rock, now freed from Knicknevin's clutches.

"I wonder," he spoke aloud. "I wonder if it'll ever really end."

"That isn't the point," Charlie returned. "The point is how much we do along the way."

The bartender smiled, a gap-toothed smile few had ever seen before.

"As far as I'm concerned, we've all done enough."

AFTERMATH

Ignis et Sanguis

by John Goodrich

Through a gap in the boarded-up window, Jebediah Whateley watched his home burn. The surviving remnants of his clan had taken refuge within the building formerly known as Nasty Doc's. Even in the chill Gomorra night, the abandoned structure was an oven, and the room's stifling air reeked of week-old blood and worse. Wilhelmina had carried out some of her most cruel plans here, and Jebediah's throat caught when he remembered her.

The madness of the night had vanished into the darkness; Knicknevin - for whose coming the Whateley family had labored so long and hard - was defeated, their beautiful house torched by ignorant fools. Jebediah focused an eye into a seam between the window frame and the boarded-up window, watching the inferno consuming Whateley Manor.

"It's all gone," he said, just above a whisper. Treasures more than four hundred years old had perished in the fire - arcane knowledge and artifacts older than the discovery of the New World. But worse, the inferno had claimed family. Studious Mordecai was lost, along with his beloved library, overwhelmed by smoke and confusion. Francis vanished after one of the Rangers cast a powerful hex at him.

'Touched' cousins Enoch and Malrog fought to keep interlopers away from the house, but the Coalition assaulted the family with everything they had, and both now lay dead on the field of battle.

Jebediah hung his head low, considering the family's losses, remembering those who had fallen. Too many dead; how could the family ever recover? Most of the family's survivors managed to escape to this questionable redoubt. Tzipporah stood guard on the door, her lustrous black hair singed in places, but the hand on her Peacemaker was steady. Saul, exhausted and battered, slept soundly, his earlier manic energy drained from him, now a prophet without a god. Basil limped back and forth in the confined space, dragging his damaged left foot, nursing the terrible wounds he had endured in the mansion's attic. At least tiny Lucifer had been spared the fire and carnage, stowed safely and anonymously among the orphans.

Dolores sat rocking in the dust at Tzipporah's feet, her precious moppet clutched tightly to her breast. "There's rosemary. That's for remembrance," she said to the small bundle of rags, her voice barely a whisper. "Pray, love, remember."

"Don't want to go back to Wasatch," Tzipporah murmured sulkily. "No fun in Deseret."

"Nothing else to do," Jebediah said in a desolate, forlorn voice, and turned to his nephew. In the feeble light, he could scarcely make out Basil's wounds and injuries, but it was probably better that way. Basil's hair was gone, and his face was a twisted ruin, blasted by intense heat and sorcerous backlash.

Of Nicodemus, there had been no sign. Jebediah hoped that Nicodemus had come to no harm. Although he had often scolded his nephew for being such a wastrel, he now recognized the secret pleasure he gained from seeing one of the family walk like a prince among average men. His own generation had lived in secrecy and hiding, in New Orleans, Deseret, and distant Vermont.

But now Jebediah's hopes for Nicodemus, Tzipporah, and little Lucifer - that they would be able to walk the rutted streets of Gomorra as the servants of a god on earth - had literally gone up in smoke. "What else can we do without Wilhelmina?"

Where are we without our Lord and Master? We must return to the desert." The last word was barely a whisper.

"Blasphemy," Basil spoke in a slow, strangled whisper, his smoke-roughened voice all but unrecognizably thick with pain. "The family has come too far to be run out of town now."

Jebediah looked at his nephew with pity. "Everything is gone, Basil. Everything. We have no books, no house, no allies, no money. We don't even know if Nicodemus is alive."

"We still own our mines," Basil's halting voice countered from the darkness.

"They're registered at the surveyor's office - to you, in fact. And their precious laws say that they can't take them away from us. It remains unlikely that our workers are going to unionize or desert."

"Lord Knicknevin built us up from nothing - everything we are we owe to Him," Jebediah returned, the fire of his loyalty heating his words. "Without our Lord, we are nothing."

"We're nothing except free." Basil rasped, his defiance of Jebediah slow but inexorable. "Knicknevin built something that outlasted his own time on Earth. He may be gone, but that doesn't mean that we have no reason to live. You can go back to Deseret if you like - go to Vermont, or Louisiana, even Wales if it suits you - but I'm staying." Basil gestured with the ruined stump of his right hand, "nobody does this to me and walks away."

Stymied, Jebediah went back to his hopeless vigil at the window. The streets were clear now, the terror of Stoker's rampage over. The looters and other vermin were still afraid to wander outside, especially near the burning wreckage of the Whateley Mansion and Lord Grimely's. At least the family could take some cold comfort in that.

For a time, only the distant roar of consuming flames was heard, interrupted occasionally by one of the occupants of the tiny building. Dolores crooned in a whisper, hugging her rag doll close.

"She is dead and gone, lady," Dolores rambled, "she is dead and gone; at her head the dead-brown turf, at her heels a stone."

The peaceful quiet was broken by the sound of furtive footsteps outside. They approached slowly, but inevitably, heading toward the locked and bolted front door of Nasty Doc's. In a flurry of silent activity, the family prepared to defend themselves. Tzipporah and Jebediah filled their hands with guns. The walls were gently caressed by the eerie, shifting glow of magic still at Basil's command.

Soon, a timid scratch was heard at the locked and bolted door, followed by a metallic double-click as Tzipporah drew back the hammer of her Peacemaker. The family held their breath, and the scratching came again, this time more insistent.

All eyes nervously rested upon Tzipporah's wiry arm and the enormous pistol held steady on the door. Everyone knew that the door would be little match for the Peacemaker's punch, but a shot in the still night could rouse sleeping Gomorra, and bring the family's enemies down upon them.

As silently as possible, Jebediah slipped a key into the well-oiled lock and turned, springing it with a slight "chuk." Tzipporah stood unmoving, facing the door, ready to kill. Her raven hair and black dress merged with the interior darkness, and only her bare arms and face were visible. Basil stood next to her, his good hand glowing with seething, scarcely restrained energies, his hoarse whisper a hiss in the blackness, forming words that were neither English nor Latin. Jebediah nudged the deadbolt out of position with his left hand, his right

holding the gun across his body. He might not be Blackjack, but family was at stake here, and he'd be damned if he didn't do everything he could to ensure their survival.

If the unknown presence outside knew what was going on, it didn't let on, or try to force the door open. It stood, ominously quiet, even as Jebediah silently lifted the latch. Finally, after a further, unbearable moment of silence, he jerked the door open. Pushed by Basil's spell, the figure was violently thrown into the hot, reeking depths of Nasty Doc's, as Jebediah slammed the door behind them. Tzipporah's gun tracked the impossibly scrawny figure as it sprawled at their feet. *Nebuchadnezzar*.

Mordecai's minion lay amidst the contents of a frayed bag it had been carrying - several moldy tomes, the words on their spines glimmering in the red firelight spilling through the cracks in the walls. Basil's gave a travesty of a grin, making out the word "Hoyle's" embossed in gold along one spine, and Pembroke's Analysis on the scarred leather binding of another. A third was too bulky to be anything other than the treasured Badb Nemain, borne out of Wales as the family fled Cromwell's persecution more than two hundred years ago.

The abomination's breathing was ragged, even for a being with its limited lung capacity, and its skin was purple in patches, as if severely bruised by some horrible weight - or a severe beating.

"What happened, little one?" Dolores ran her fingertips gently along the edges of the wounds, concern deeply drawn across her features. Basil knelt beside them both, twisting the horrific ruin of his head toward the creature, suddenly very attentive.

Nebuchadnezzar twitched in her arms, one eye hopelessly mangled. It managed to whisper a few strangled words into Basil's remaining ear before slipping into unconsciousness. The painter turned his twisted visage to the rest of the family - Jebediah in particular - fear and confusion playing across his ruined face.

"The Bible," he rasped. "Someone bushwhacked him and stole the Family Bible!"

Ticket to Ride

by Patrick Kapera

"My last day in Gomorra? Yeah, I remember it. Something like that you can't block out - not with the wind at your back, not with whiskey... It stays with you, settles in for a long nap in your belly, and just when you think it's gone and died, it wakes up for another round..."

"My last day in Gomorra was a Sunday, but the Lord had nothin' to do with it..."

* * *

Alfred Barkum Sr. observed the chaos through the window of the Sweetrock suite at the Stagecoach Office. Most of the town was already engulfed in the fighting - buildings burned in every direction, storefronts ravaged by looters lie shattered along Main Street. Shouting Tom paced back and forth in front of the Red Hill Hotel, his words lost in the pandemonium of the riots.

'Maybe the end really has come at last,' Barkum thought to himself.

Cassidy Greene stepped into the room, her clothes uncharacteristically practical, cropped close to her form and with plenty of breathing room. She hadn't dressed for appeal this morning; she was only concerned with getting out of town. Alfred had scarcely noticed her when she arrived, but she knew it had nothing to do with her looks.

"He hasn't shown up yet, has he?" she asked. "Your son..."

Barkum paused his window-side vigil long enough to cast a brief glance toward his new "assistant". His face was tight with worry. "No," he finally responded. "But..."

Elizabeth King appeared at the doorway behind Cassidy, poking her head in only long enough to pipe out a quick warning. "Two minutes, Mr. Barkum. Then I'm done loading your things, and we're leaving - with or without you."

The Sweetrock lawyer followed the driver through the office's narrow halls, pleading for her to reconsider. "Miss King, he'll be here. He promised me."

"That may be, Mr. Barkum, but we're not even sure he's still alive-"

"My son is still out there. He's alive! He'll be here."

King was never one to step back from a confrontation, and in any other circumstance, she would have relished this one. But not today. Not when the world was imploding around them. "Mr. Barkum," she sighed, exasperation lacing her words, "have you been outside? Have you seen what's crawling up through the ground? Take a look!"

Grabbing Barkum's shoulders, Elizabeth swiveled him around to look out through the Stagecoach Office's large front window. Across Main Street, Shouting Tom was screaming again, but this time from fear as the front door of the Ice House burst outward, splintering into a hundred fragments as... something stepped into the waning twilight.

A man - or what was left of one - shambled forward on broken legs, two enormous wounds gaping in its chest where bullets obviously exited its body. From the look of him, he'd been dead a long time, though his skin had ballooned and darkened with blood, disfiguring him until he was hardly recognizable as human. His form was slick and trailing a pale, viscous fluid in his wake, which shimmered in the light of the setting sun.

Shouting Tom fell backward, kicking out at the creature and snapping the remnants of its left leg in two. Without even a whimper

of pain, it crumpled to the ground, then started to crawl after him, tearing its stump free and dragging itself with its swollen arms.

Cassidy joined them in the lobby, but fell back when her vision trailed their own. "Oh god!" she shrieked, turning into Barkum's heavy frame. The lawyer's face was ashen, and he'd stopped breathing.

"Two minutes," King said again, then grabbed the remaining luggage and headed toward the side of the building, where her coach waited.

- - -

"Miss King! What in the name of God is that?"

"It's a steam gattling, Mr. Barkum. Smith and Robards left it behind when they skipped town yesterday. I figured it might come in handy."

"But if you're driving," Cassidy replied, "then... who...?"

"Into the carriage, you two. We're pressin' our luck already."

As her passengers boarded the armored coach, a dull thump came from the vehicle's roof. She looked to the others, but neither seemed to hear anything. Once she had them secured inside, and locked the rear hatch, she climbed up onto the boiler platform to glance at the top of the carriage, but found nothing.

'Must have been the wind,' she thought, 'or this town has got its claws dug deeper into me than I feared.'

Elizabeth checked the straps hugging the luggage racked on top of the carriage one last time, then stepped along the side-rail on her way to the cab. Just as she passed the passenger cabin, Mr. Barkum caught her one last time. "My son..." he pleaded.

She thought about telling him that he was welcome to stay here, but compassion got the better of her. She bit her lower lip and swallowed. "He'll have to catch up. Close the window, sir."

Elizabeth climbed up to the cab and took one last look about town. The riots had spread far from Main Street, and the fires followed close behind. People were crowding around the Pacific Maze Rail Station like starving rats on a crust of moldy bread. And there was a sound like howling on the wind, drifting up from the south, where the fighting was heaviest. Around the Whateley Estate, and Lord Grimely's beyond that...

'That's our cue,' she noted, 'and pulled herself into the driver's seat.'

Nearly ten minutes outside Gomorra, and Elizabeth King was finally beginning to rest a little easier. They hadn't encountered anything but fleeing refugees on their way down the path to Shan Fan, but rumors of something plaguing the north roads urged her to turn off into the prairie. Ultimately, she'd rather deal with the rigors of undeveloped land over minions from Hell any day of the week...

A knock at the door behind King drew her attention, and she reached back to unhook the latch. As she suspected, Mr. Barkum hunched to enter the cab, slipping into the passenger seat beside her.

"May I?" he asked, opening the passenger window and lighting one of his pungent cigars.

King's hackles rose, but then she noticed how much calmer he appeared after only the first long puff. "You could have smoked back there," she said as delicately as she could manage, nodding to the rear compartment.

"Miss Greene doesn't care for the odor."

Elizabeth could only shake her head and smile at the man's audacity. She was really starting to warm up to the old coot. "I'm... sorry about your son, Mr. Barkum. You know I waited as long as I could."

"I know you did, Miss King," he replied, sampling the film on the inside of his mouth. "We all did the best we could."

"You didn't have to come, you know. You could have stayed and waited for him."

"My son and I have an understanding. We respect each others' decisions, and honor each others' lies." Barkum finally looked at Elizabeth for the first time in the conversation, resignation and betrayal vying across his face. "He never intended to come with me. Alfred is a frontier lawyer, and always will be. He likes it out here." Barkum turned back to look out the window, toward the glowing horizon where Gomorra rested.

The coach passed beneath a thick canopy of trees - the last stretch of dense forest they would see for some time - and the cabin was doused in shadow. King flipped on the gas lantern that hung from the cab's roof, and watched the darkness ahead for signs of irregular ground - or unnatural predators.

"Miss King, could you stop the carriage a moment?" Barkum asked, starting out away from the forest's edge.

"What do you see?" King asked, bringing the vehicle to a halt.

"I'm... not sure," he answered, opening the door and stepping out onto the brambles of the light wood.

The hackles started to rise on Elizabeth's neck once again, and she looked back into the passenger cabin, where Cassidy Greene, obviously exhausted, snoozed quietly. Stepping out on the driver's side, she grabbed her shotgun and made her way around to the back of the carriage, where the steam engine gently rocked back and forth, idling quietly. Barkum had stepped out beyond the back end of the carriage, and was peering out into the night across the prairie, intent upon something.

"What is it?" King asked again, trying to make out anything against the broad expanse of high grass before the burning town. Something like laughter rolled across the plain, a bellowing giant's roar, followed by the indelible sounds of gunfire and artillery. Plumes of fire shot up over the Whateley mansion, and arcs of blessed wrath streaked across the night sky.

Beneath it all, there was a sound. Like a galloping horse - very, very close...

"Good God," Barkum exclaimed, pointing out across the plain. "He made it!"

Elizabeth followed Barkum's finger to see a single figure on horseback, darting across the prairie at a breakneck pace. Barkum's son, she realized.

Well I'll be damned...

But something wasn't right. Elizabeth hadn't needed horses for many years, and was admittedly a little out of touch with them, but something about the sound of Barkum Jr.'s horse was...wrong.

"We should get back inside the coach, Mr. Barkum," King advised. "Something isn't right."

"What? No," he answered. "This time I'm waiting."

"I don't think we're alone out here." She cocked her shotgun for emphasis. "Listen."

Barkum focused on the sounds of the approaching horse, but kept his eyes on his son. Within moments, he realized what she meant. The galloping sound couldn't be made by his son's horse - he was still too far away. "Another rider," he whispered.

King nodded, drawing him back toward the coach.

"But..."

"We can wait inside - just to be safe."

Elizabeth opened the carriage door and helped Barkum inside, only to hear his sudden exclamation. "How did you get in here?" Swinging into the front cab, she ducked her head into the passenger compartment to find young Timmy Derrick sitting across from Cassidy's slumbering form.

"You little stowaway," she sneered, ready to pounce.

"I didn't mean anythin' by it, Miss King, I swear!" Timmy pleaded. "I just couldn't stay around town no longer, and you were the only folks that hadn't left yet."

King's sneer turned to a wry smile. "Running from something, Timmy?" she prompted.

"No! I mean, well, yeah. From the fightin' and stuff..."

"He can't come with us," Barkum said, looking about the small carriage. "I won't share two thousand miles with a juvenile delinquent!"

"Well, I'm not going back," King retorted. "We'll drop him in Boulder City."

Barkum fell into his chair and folded his arms, glancing at Timmy only through the corner of his eye. The little bastard was laughing. "What's wrong, old man? Not used to listenin' to a woman yet?"

"Shut up and sit down!" Elizabeth yelled at him, then stepped back into the forward cab. "One more word, and you're staying here."

Stepping out onto the rail, King checked Barkum Jr.'s progress. He obviously knew where they were, which meant that they'd missed him

only by a few minutes. He must have tracked their exit along the crowded north road before someone pointed their detour out to him. He was riding like a bat out of Hell (an good comparison, she thought), and was making good progress, but still wasn't close enough to justify the ever-increasing sounds that echoed through the wood.

The wood...

A roar lifted up over the plains, trees and grasses trembling before it and drawing King's attention back to the remains of town. Someone or something was crawling out of the wreckage of Lord Grimley's. Even at this distance, she could make out two arms and two legs and...horns.

'From the deepest pits of Hell,' she thought, and rapidly considered her options. Back out onto the prairie, where she could be seen by that thing, or push through the forest and let Barkum Jr. catch up on his own. The choice was clear.

She pulled herself back into the driver's seat and started the coach up again. Immediately, Barkum Sr. was at her side, demanding to know what she was doing.

"We're leaving, Mr. Barkum. Your son has as much chance as we do now."

"What? What are you talking about?" he asked as the coach lurched forward, going deeper into the wood.

"Take a look behind us," she answered, pushing him back into the carriage and reaching over to close the passenger window.

Barkum opened one of the rear windows and craned his neck out to look behind the fleeing vehicle. His son had made it into the wood now, and was close behind them, but the scene beyond him...

"Mother of God!" he hissed, pulling back into the cabin and shutting the window.

"See?" King responded, weaving the coach's bulky mass between the trees far too quickly for her liking. She could only see twenty feet in every direction.

"Go, woman. Drive!" Barkum screamed, beyond all capacity for reason. Cassidy, awake now, pulled him in close, cradling his head to calm him down. Intrigued, Timmy climbed up into the gattling canopy to look behind them. Something that spooked the grownups this much, he had to see.

"Um... Can we go any faster?" he stammered a moment later.

"No!" King screamed at him from the cab. "Why?"

"Because it's following us!"

"That's not--" King started, glancing behind them. "That's not what I saw before."

"Then what is it?" Barkum howled.

"I don't know, but Timmy's right. It's following us!"

King veered left between two low-hanging trees and into a patch of deeper dark, hoping to lose the phantom image trailing behind them.

She didn't know what it was, but it couldn't have their health in mind. It was impossible. A dark rider, dressed in what appeared to be a Confederate cavalry uniform, carrying a burning jack o'lantern in its free hand. Worst of all was its truncated torso, as if the head had been chopped clean off.

Howling laughter followed the coach through the wood, resounding from open places as if there were more than one source. Sometimes it even seemed as if the cackling were coming from within the coach itself. King cracked her window just a bit to listen for the abomination's approach, just to make sure where it was. She couldn't risk turning herself around in the darkness and coming face to face with it.

Bursts of gunfire bled through the air, piercing the laughter and rattling everyone inside the coach. Barkum Sr. wailed, gripping his chest, and Cassidy cried out sharp enough to draw King's attention away from the wood.

"What the hell was that?" she screamed, looking up into the gattling canopy. Timmy Derrick's small body jerked about violently with the weapon's kick as he unloaded back into the monstrous rider. "Get down from there!"

"But I think I got 'em," Timmy pouted as he fell into one of the flat passenger seats.

King opened her window all the way and looked back, finding only darkness.

"Maybe you did," she said, the surprise obvious in her voice.

"Miss King, look out!" Cassidy shrieked, pointing out in front of them, where the ground dropped off into a gully...or a cliff.

Elizabeth swerved as tightly as she dared without tipping the coach and braced herself for a fall. The vehicle's front end dipped sharply and she felt the ground start to give below as they half-slid, half-drove downward.

"Grab hold of something!" she screamed at everyone. "This isn't going to be pretty!" Then she ducked down under the window herself, between the steering wheel and her seat and, for the first time in many years, started to pray.

- - -

The impact hadn't been nearly as serious as she'd suspected. The coach had slammed into a tree and tilted at a 45-degree angle, upon two wheels, and come to rest on level ground. All the windows were shattered, and glass and dirt were everywhere. Fortunately, it looked as though everyone was fine.

The passengers were crumpled in bunch upon the left door, which was pinned closed by the tree that they rested upon. Barkum was quivering next to Cassidy, nearly wrapped in a fetal position. She was a little too shaken to comfort him any longer, and merely sat in place, blood seeping from the few minor wounds she'd sustained in the

crash. Timmy had apparently weathered the accident better than anyone, and crawled about the rear compartment, looking for a way out.

"Settle down, Timmy," Elizabeth said, moving around a little to test whether it was safe. She didn't want the whole carriage going over on its side. If that happened, they'd never get out of here.

Beneath the sound of settling dirt, King noticed the approach of a horse, close and above them.

"Alfred!" Barkum strained, but King put her index finger to her lips, silencing him.

"Everyone stay here," she ordered, "and stay quiet."

Fishing her shotgun out of the footwell, King climbed out through the side door, sliding off the upended carriage and onto the ground. The coach had come to rest in a relatively open field at the bottom of a tall rise. The top of the incline was nearly 30 feet up. 'It's a wonder that we didn't flip over,' she thought to herself before seeking out the approaching rider.

Even though they had driven into the forest, she could still make out the distant sounds of mass combat back in town. 'Must have gotten turned around in here,' she concluded. 'Not surprising, given the damned shadows.'

The rider was approaching from the direction they had come, but its gallop was steady and clear, unlike the ethereal sound the headless horseman had made. But she readied her shotgun and took cover, just in case, and awaited the rider's appearance at the ridge above.

In moments, a lone figure materialized, slowing at the ridge as if surprised to find it there. Alfred Barkum Jr. peered into the darkness, spotting the coach, and started down after it. King waved to him, and motioned for him to meet her at the base of the rise. Appraising the scene, Barkum Jr. shot King a pained look, and sighed.

"Wrong turn?" he chided, and Elizabeth nearly laughed out loud. It was clear to her why so many people liked him back in Gomorra. Under other circumstances, she might even consider spending a little more time with him.

The levity of the moment was soon shattered, however, as Alfred focused on the leaning coach. "What's that?" he asked, directing King's attention to a dark pool spread out beneath the vehicle.

"Blood..." she answered, just as the vehicle emitted a low groaning sound. It shivered for a moment and then leaned back toward King and Alfred, coming to rest on all four wheels. Something had lifted it back into place.

King looked through the shattered windows and caught sight of something dark and gray beyond. The occupants were screaming and moving for the right door, but she screamed at them to "Get down!" and raised her shotgun level with the phantom rider.

Within the coach, Cassidy took action, grabbing both the others and pinning them to the floor as King let loose with both barrels. The rider howled in pain as he crashed back into the tree that had broken the coach's slide, and enormous red gouges appeared in its chest and shoulder.

"Ah! It bleeds!" King exclaimed, going for another pair of shells.

"What the Devil?" Alfred fought his horse's desire to run, but eventually lost, falling to the ground as it bolted away through the shadowed wood.

"Alfred, you alright?" King yelled, cocking the shotgun again.

"Yeah," he said, getting up. "I'm fine. What the hell is that thing?"

"Don't know, but if it can bleed, we can kill it!" King looked positively feral.

Alfred was mildly disturbed by her elation, but was more concerned with the rider as it came around the front end of the coach and stalked defiantly toward them, a flaming pumpkin-head appearing in its right hand. King fired again, both shells exploding into the creature's gut, but it scarcely paused in its advance. Rancid, decomposing organs seeped through its belly wounds, trailing behind. But its steady pace continued.

It was as if it was driven by instinct alone.

Alfred fell back as the horseman's arm shot out and gripped King by the throat, lifting her two feet off the ground. She struggled for air, but the monster continued to squeeze, threatening to crush her windpipe at any moment.

Regardless of the cost, Alfred couldn't let this happen. Not to a woman. Not right in front of him. He rose and grabbed the Derringer he hid in his boot for emergencies. One shot, he thought. Make it count.

Aiming for where the creature's heart should be, Alfred pulled the trigger and heard the gun go off, felt its kick. But the only effect it had was a tiny hole, spurting black blood like a broken pump. Alfred braced for the sound of King's neck snapping within the vile beast's clutches, but it never came. When next he opened his eyes, he found the creature pacing toward him, having dropped King to the ground behind.

'Yes,' he grimly realized. 'Instinct alone.'

- - -

Elizabeth King listened in horror as Alfred Barkum was ripped to shreds not five feet away. She couldn't see it, thank God, because her eyes had blurred several moments before, as the horseman was choking her. But she had heard it, and the sound would haunt her the rest of her natural life.

When she finally cleared her eyes, the horseman was finished with Alfred and moving toward her again. His pace was rigid, inhuman, like the deranged march of a soldier gone horribly mad.

She pulled herself to her feet and raced toward the coach, praying that she could get it running again. Maybe, if she could start it up before the horseman's infernal march brought it to the vehicle, they could get away.

Maybe.

Lifting herself into the driver's cabin, Elizabeth fell into the seat and attempted to turn the engine over. Nothing.

"My son... Alfred." Barkum's whimpering would normally drive Elizabeth to snap at him, but now --

"Get down, Mr. Barkum. All of you, keep out of sight!" She tried the engine again. Still nothing.

Her eyes started to well up again as she looked to the approaching horseman. He was only ten feet away and closing fast.

This is it. For the last time, she bent down into the driver's cabin and clasped her hands together. One more prayer.

In the distance, Elizabeth could make out the sounds of fighting and booming voices, voices like those she'd heard across the prairie before they'd left Gomorra behind. Gunfire and artillery and fright and horror all merged together, forming an unending discord she couldn't ignore. It rang within her and across the wood, bringing all the little moments together and tying them together, until only one remained.

Two voices rose above the rest, clear even across so many miles.

"IF I DIE, YOU DIE WITH ME!!!"

"Better be sure..."

A long and sickening sound followed, like the rupturing of ligaments and muscle. And there was a moment of absolute calm; a silence when even the horseman's diligent footfalls were lost to the void.

"What was that?" Timmy mumbled from the rear of the coach. "I thought I heard voices."

Elizabeth waited a moment longer, sure that the phantom horseman was going to reach in and tear her apart at any second. But he didn't. When she opened her eyes and looked outside the coach, he was nowhere to be found. Only a smoldering jack o'lantern remained, its face cracked apart like a broken mirror.

"I don't know, Timmy," she said finally. Then, looking back into the passenger compartment, she added, "I heard the voices, too."

* * *

"I don't know what happened to all of us that day, or whose voices those were in the night. But I'm pretty sure none of it was any good.

"We made it out alright - Barkum, Cassidy, Timmy, and I. But I don't think any of us are ever gonna be the same again. I know I'm not. It's like we were all part of somethin' impossible.

"Timmy and the others eventually went back to Gomorra. Can't say as I blame 'em. The rest o' the country's talkin' about us like we're

important somehow. They're even interviewin' the sheriff and the rest. But good ol' Nate ain't talkin'. Neither are most of the others I hear were there for the final battle. Good fer them! The less people know about what happened that night, the better!

"I sold my wagon. I started to hear voices and fightin' and soldiers while I was ridin' around in it - even all the way at the other end of the country. No one else ever complained about it - not even my passengers - so I figured it was time to pass the old war-coach on to someone who didn't have so many memories about her.

"Who'd I sell it to? A fella callin' himself 'Scratch'. Works with some travelin' sideshow. Said it was 'an amazin' vessel', whatever that means...

"Well, that's it. That's what you wanted, right? The story of how I got out o' Gomorra. Yer not plannin' on printin' this, are you, Reggie? I mean, after all, we both know what really happened out there, and I don't think anyone needs to know the truth.

"It's better that they just think we're lucky to have survived...

"Even though I can think of much luckier folks."

Alfred Barkum Jr.
1843-1877
R.I.P.

THE SMOKE CLEARS

Odds and Ends

The followin is a list of the unfortunate ending of a lot of folks. It also lists their final undoing.

Agency

Boom-Boom O'Bannon: - caught in the Whateley basement by Malrog

Johnny Quaid: - killed at the Golden Mare

Josef Nicolai Rocescu: - drained dry by Lilith Vandecamp's girls

Melissa Thomas: - struck down by Elijah

Mr. Slate: - killed by vampires at the Golden Mare

The Pennsylvania Kid: - poisoned by Envy's snakes

Blackjacks

Alfred Barkum, Jr.: Killed by the Headless Horseman

Cletus Peacock: - shot by sheriff's deputies

Eddie Bellows: - shot in the back by Jim MacNeil

Ely Parker: - eaten by Gluttony

Flint Parker: shot by sheriff's deputies

Humphrey Walters: Revelations - killed by Tzipporah Whateley's silver bullets

Jeb Parker: - killed during rioting

Lawrence Goodman: - crushed during a riot at the First Bank

Mae Parker: Revelations - killed in rioting

Spike Dougan: - shot by Black Jack,. Returned Harrowed but shortly thereafter had his head blown off by Father Juan Navarro.

The Twitch: - shot by sheriff's deputies

The Collegium

Alexander Whale: - killed when Knicknevin destroyed the Collegium compound

Dr. Lawrence: - killed when Knicknevin destroyed the Collegium compound

Gunther Hapworth: - killed when the Magic Bus was destroyed

Julius Bailey: - killed when Knicknevin destroyed the Collegium compound

Pierre Fontaine: - eaten by sharks surrounding the Typhoon

Robert Holmes: - crushed by SUZY 309

SUZY 309: - destroyed by Fineas Von Landingham

The Flock

Avarice: - killed during the rioting at the First Bank

Envy: - shot by Katie Karl

Flam: - killed by Austin Stoker

Flim: - killed by Nate Hunter

Gluttony: - hexed by Bobo Leveux

Lechery: - shot by Wendy Cheng

Pride: - marched defiantly in front of the Magic Bus

Sloth: - bedsores

Wrath: - shot by Black Jack

Everyone Else: - mostly killed in rioting and associated violence. A few killed by Blackjacks and sheriff's deputies

Mary the Wanderer: - being a ghost - did not die. She continues to haunt Gomorra to this day.

Elijah alone survived, taking Abel Owens and Cain Regen with him when he left town.

Law Dogs

Corky Hendricks: - shot by Black Jack

Hector Casparo: - shot by Rachel Sumner

Judge Henry Warwick: - shot by Rachel Sumner

Lukas Owens: - killed by Knicknevin

Redbrook: - overcome by walkin' dead

Reverend Simon MacPherson: - killed by Flim and Flam
T.C.: - killed by Nicodemus Whateley and his monstrous deck

Maze Rats

Ainsley Cunningham: - killed by Knicknevin
Chin Wei-Lun: - killed by Knicknevin
Denton Filmore: - shot by Wrath
Finnegan O'Malley: - broken in half by Gunther Hapworth
Gyonshee: - hunted down and destroyed by Ian Spencer-Whitney
Harold Longfellow: - torn apart by Enoch Whateley
Ironteeth: - shot by Wrath
Marko Muscovich: - disintegrated by Erik Zarkov
Mitobu: - went down with the sinking of the Typhoon
Sally Daniels: - crushed beneath Glutton
Squish-Eye Samantha: - dropped from a great height by Armitage the Damned
Sun Shu-Jen: - killed by Tzipporah Whateley while defending Captain Sim

Sioux Union

Benjamin Nightsinger: - killed by Avarice
Feather-in-his-Hair: - killed by Enoch Whateley
Ferret's Eye: - shot by Wrath
Hope In Winter: - torn apart by Dolores Whateley's "little friends"
John Bloody Knife: - shot in the back by Austin Stoke)
Joseph Eyes-Like-Rain: - died from injuries sustained while battling Wilhelmina Whateley
Little Mountain: - killed by Malrog Whateley
Red Crow: - struck down by the McCracken brothers
Spirit's Eyes: - killed by Knicknevin
Tioga Joe: - killed by Nicodemus Whateley
White Horse: - struck down by Elijah

Sweetrock

Byron St. James: - killed by J.P. Coleman
Jim MacNeil: - killed by J.P. Coleman
Mick Caples: - killed by the mad Howard Findley
Mortimer Jones: - killed when his train was derailed by the concussion from Knicknevin crashing onto the Collegium compound.
Mr. Prim: - bludgeoned to death by Howard Findley
Phillip Blackmoor: - killed in rioting
Robert Northrop: (Harrowed) - buried in a mine collapse
Sun in His Eyes: - killed returning from the asylum after "depositing" Findley

Texas Rangers

Brownsville Jack: - struck down by Elijah
Danny Hamilton: - killed by the Whateleys while saving Katie Karl's life
J.P. Coleman: (Harrowed) - killed by Jim MacNeil
Joe Larson: - killed by the Whateleys
Mark Preston: - shot by Wrath
"Rails" Richardson: - killed by unknown creatures within the Great Maze
Tombstone Frank: - killed by the Whateleys
Zeke Beauchamp: - killed by the Whateleys

The Whateleys

Enoch Whateley: - shot by Cort Williams
Ezekiel Whateley: - killed by the Texas Rangers
Francis Whateley: - banished by Los Ojos del Dios
Malrog Whateley: - killed by the Maze Rat
The McCracken Brothers: - killed by Katie Karl
Mordecai Whateley: - burned alive within the Whateley estate
Moses Whateley-Braun: - shot by the Texas Rangers
Tom O'Reilly: (Harrowed) - destroyed by walkin' dead
The Unknown Hooded Figure: (Harrowed!) - ectoplasmically calcified by Meredith Singleton
Wilhelmina Whateley: - killed by Joseph Eyes-Like-Rain and his spirit allies

Drifters

Angus McFadden: - killed by Knicknevin
Becky Hendrick: - killed by Knicknevin
Benny Hibbs: - killed in the destruction of the Magic Bus
Bladed Fist: - killed by Knicknevin
Bronco Bjork Gutmansen: - shot by Wrath
Cheyenne Bottoms: - shot by Wrath
Crawford Talmadge: - killed in rioting
Hank Gallagher: - killed during the rioting
Kansas City Kara: - shot by Cort Williams
Lilith Vandecamp: - staked by members of the Coalition
"Lucky" Ted: - killed when his own gun exploded in a drunken brawl
Mad Dog Campbell: - killed in a futile effort to destroy Knicknevin
Phillip Goodson: - strangled by Saul Whateley
Sammy Childs: - killed during the rioting
Sir Whitmore: - killed in a magical duel to the death with Nicodemus Whateley
Vampiric Dance Hall Girl: - staked by the Ghost
Werner Braun: - killed while trying to escape Gomorra by boat

Whiskey Nick: - drank himself to death
William Badson: - shot by Mark Preston

Scorched Earth

What remains of the town is little and far in between. But, for the good qualities of man to thrive; greed and stubbornness, the town is quickly getting rebuilt. The following list is of the buildings that got damaged beyond repair or just completely obliterated due to the chaos of Knicknevin.

1st Baptist Church of Gomorra: Angus McFadden made his last valiant stand against Knicknevin here; the property was closed until it could be reconsecrated - all the holy water turned to blood when Knicknevin arrived

Along the Way Strike: mysteriously collapsed during Revelations

Back Room: determined in practice to be catastrophically architecturally unsound

Bakery: owner driven into bankruptcy after Gluttony cleaned him out during the riots

Bathhouse: the site of Lechery's final battle with Wendy Cheng; the miracles he used consumed the building

Bat's Breath Mine: the entrance was collapsed fifty feet in - some say by the miners themselves

Big Doc's Casino: looted during the rioting

Blacksmith: no one but Robert Holmes was familiar with the strange tools and contraptions here; after he died, the shop was closed and the parts sold off as scrap or incorporated into new gadgets

Boardinghouse: many folks tried to fortify this place against the rampaging terrors; eventually overwhelmed, the defenders engaged in a frenzied firefight; a stray shot hit a miner's powder-laden backpack, triggering a tremendous explosion which leveled this *Deed Boat Yard*: smashed to bits when Scooter's winch crashed down into it

Bob's Fix-it Shop: no one but Robert Holmes was familiar with the strange tools and contraptions here; after he died, the shop was closed and the parts sold off as scrap or incorporated into new gadgets

Bottleneck Mine: abandoned after it went dry

Buffalo Chip Saloon: looted during the rioting at the First Bank of Gomorra

Buster's Gambling Hall: tables and cues used as kindling in the burning of the Whateley Estate

Candy Shop: the site where Gluttony was killed by Bobo Leveux, and where Sally Daniels was crushed to death

Carpenter's Shop: destroyed during the riots by miners who wanted their money

Casino Morongo: shut down by U.S. Marshals

Circle K Ranch: run out of business when the Alright Corral began selling horses at cheaper prices

Claims Office: destroyed during the riots by miners who wanted their money

Cobbler Shop: the cobbler hanged himself after his wife was killed in Knicknevin's rampage

Cooper: stock used as kindling to set the Whateley mansion on fire

Cracked Bone Strike: abomination pit - no one has bothered to retake it yet

Dance Hall: went out of business when all of its dancers were forced out in the daylight and burst into flame

Desert Rose Lode: mined dry

End of Time Lode: the mesa where this strike was collapsed into the Maze waters, as if it eroded overnight

Equipment Shop: looted for equipment and weapons

Exchange Office: destroyed along with the Orphanage

Far Away Strike: no one's heard from them for months

Flophouse: with immigration way down following Knicknevin's release, the flophouse was forced to close

Foreclosed Folly Strike: shut down by Max Baine; presumed to be dry

Fountain: plugged after recently-rent abomination parts emerged in it

Fu Leng's Laundry & Tailoring: after T.C.'s death, Wendy sold this shop off; it has since been renovated into a jewelry store

Gadget Warehouse: closed down when during the Collegium consolidation

Gaping Maw Strike: detonated by a Coalition strike team during Revelations

Gilded Feather: after what happened at the Golden Mare, business here just dropped off; this brothel was eventually closed

Glass Maker: owner sent into bankruptcy during Knicknevin's rampage; later bought by a fine china dealer

Golden Crack: fraudulent claim - closed by the new Law Dogs

Gomorra Gazette: destroyed along with the Orphanage

Gomorra Volunteer Fire Brigade: ironically, burned to the ground

Good Doctor: his office only; Branson survived

Grendel's Eye Strike: bled dry by Knicknevin's minions during Revelations

Guard Dog House: destroyed by Eureka

Harlot's Haven Strike: haunted by the ghost of its former owner

Helga's Wafflehaus: destroyed during Gluttony's rampage

Henry's Hole: mysteriously went dry after Kingdom Come

Hideout: discovered by Sheriff Hunter and his boys; now a drunk's

haven and lover's getaway
Hitched Buggy Strike: collapsed
Holmes' Workshop: no one but Robert Holmes was familiar with the strange tools and contraptions here; after he died, the shop was closed and the parts sold off as scrap or incorporated into new gadgets
Horse Doctor: the doctor and his patients were eaten by Harrowed Kenny
Horse Racetrack: after several harrowed "visits" and thefts by people fleeing town, the racetrack was forced into bankruptcy
Hunter's Moon Strike: the robots mining this strike all short-circuited, and had to be "put down"; the mine was later found to have mysteriously gone dry
Icehouse: compromised during the fighting; the ice promptly melted - leaving the building's secret contents to quickly decompose
Ignacio's Exotics: Ignacio was killed during the rioting, but no one entered his shop save the remaining Whateleys, who cleaned it out before skipping town
Ikes Strike: undermined and collapsed by nearby arroyo
Intelligence Shop: the Blackjacks broke into this "shop" during the riots, stealing reams of secrets only the recently deceased proprietor knew - including much about Sweetrock
Investment Broker: went broke after Gomorra property values suddenly plummeted
Knot Mine: the supports of this mine literally vanished during Revelations, leaving nothing but a dry, hollow shaft
Labyrinth Mine: the time of Revelations was also the spawning season for Maze Dragons; this site became the depository for several well-guarded eggs; now slowly filling with water
Library: destroyed by the Ghost as part of the Coalition's "scorched earth" policy to destroy any and all Whateley resources; then trampled by Knicknevin
Lighthouse: haunted by the owner, who was killed by the Gyonshee - see the official fiction "Dangerous Game" at www.Alderac.com
Lonesome Willow Strike: collapsed by the Maze Rats as they departed Gomorra; their reasons remain unknown
Look Homeward Mine: torn apart by a huge red demon about 0.2 seconds after the scene depicted on the card
Lord Grimeley's Manor: destroyed when Knicknevin rose through the gate
Lucky Dog Lode: thoroughly infested by Pit Wasps
Lucky Horseshoe Lode: eventually, the demons plaguing the miners of this strike were overwhelmed, and the place was infested with Knicknevin's minions; shortly thereafter, the demons vanished and the strike went mysteriously dry
Lumberyard: destroyed by fire during the riots

Machinist's Shop: gutted by the Collegium when they set up their temporary stronghold; now even squatters won't spend time here
Miner's Union House: after the Union was broken by Doctor Duvalier, there was no more need for this Deed
Miss Contreau's: Envy destroyed this place and killed many of the girls in a fit of pique; the Pennsylvania Kid was among the victims, a patron; Miss Contreau has since moved on to less dangerous pastures
Muddy Brown Strike: mysteriously collapsed following Revelations; not considered to be worth recovering
Museum: several of the relics came to life when Knicknevin rose, trampling the building
Nasty Doc's: the townsfolk tried to burn this building down three times, but the fire always went out without cause; Nasty Doc's is now largely abandoned
Nick's Never Closes: now sporting a "Closed" sign
Ninth Circle Mine: gambling heavily on Sweetrock West's future, Max Baine closed this mine following Kingdom Come
No-Tell Hotel: consumed in the fires that plagued Gomorra during Knicknevin's rampage
Old Moon Saloon: detonated and rebuilt by the Collegium
On the Side Strike: the tremblors caused by Knicknevin's rise sent this strike - and several thousand tons of mesa rock - into the sea
One Eyed Ike's Weapons Locker: sacked during the riots; Ike was killed defending his store
Orphanage: stomped to pieces during Knicknevin's rampage; fortunately, most of the children there - including Lucifer Whateley - were on a field trip at the edge of the valley at the time
Penny Arcade: consumed by fires that plagued Gomorra during Knicknevin's rampage)
Pharmacy: looted during epidemic scare following Knicknevin's "death"
Photographer Shop: proprietor moved after hearing of promising magic lantern show in Lost Angels
Polecat Saloon: closed down by Deputy Templeton during the rioting
Pony Express: stomped to bits during Knicknevin's rampage
Raven's Crevasse: mysteriously dried up following Revelations
Razor-Cliff Mine: collapsed by the Collegium during their fight against the Maze Rats
Reserve Judgment Strike: closed by the Union before it went under
Rough And Tumble Saloon: shouldn't have bought the Polecat Saloon's alcohol, which was poisoned by its owner before he left town
Sam's General Store: looted during the rioting at the First Bank of Gomorra; Sam died defending his wares
Scared Stiff Saloon: fell into a crevasse split open during Knicknevin's rampage

Schoolhouse: destroyed along with the Orphanage
Scooter's Lift Winch: knocked off the cliff by Knicknevin's heavy footfalls; collapsed into the Boat Yard
Scrapyard: slipped into the crater left when Knicknevin landed on the Collegium stronghold
Sea of Sorrows Mine: flooded by the Maze Rats
Seventh-Sign Strike: the mesa where this strike was located sank into the Maze waters, submerging the mine; dozens killed
Sheriff's Shaft: shut down by Sheriff Hunter and the Law Dogs
Shootin' Range: looted for weapons and set on fire during the riots
Side Pocket Billiard Hall: bought and closed by Buster Madison to make way for Buster's Gambling Hall
Stagecoach Office: trampled during Knicknevin's rampage
Steam Tunnel Lode: the time of Revelations was also the spawning season for Maze Dragons; this site became the depository for several well-guarded eggs
Storage Shed: looted for equipment and weapons
Strike Experiment #2: struck a vein of natural gas, and exploded
Sunnyside Hotel: destroyed by the Coalition for harboring terrors
Sweetrock Smoking Lounge: closed by Max Baine in an effort to "humanize" the company
T and Q Cattle Ranch: flattened in stampede
Tack and Harness Shop: irreparably damaged when Knicknevin landed on the Collegium compound, which was across the street
Tailor: consumed by fire
Tailoring Shop: the owner fled town at the first sight of trouble
Tent City: (Chinese Workers) many died in riots; the rest returned with the Maze Rats to Shan Fan to work as Gandy Dancers on the railroads
Theatre: the magical duel between Sir Whitmore and Nicodemus occurred here after the latter slaughtered most of the audience during a performance of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; subsequent devastation leveled the place
Thunder Gulch Strike: now the Thunder Gulch Spring
Town Hall: closed when its replacement was built
Trading Post: looted for equipment and weapons
U.S. Army Enlistment Office: closed in preparation for the new Union military base
Water Tower: toppled during Knicknevin's rampage
Water's Edge Strike: broke through to water; the strike mouth is now a beautiful waterfall
Weaponsmith: looted for equipment and weapon
Western Union Offices: consumed by fire
Whisky Nick's Joint: mashed flat when the Magic Bus fell on it
Wishing Well: destroyed by the Ghost as part of the Coalition's

"scorched earth" policy to destroy any and all Whateley resources