

You were once a hunter of bounties that was allowed by the cash you got and pushed by your old age to rest: a retirement. Your mother called you August Heart, but in the town over the hill, across the state, and further along, they knew you as "Only Dead" Aug for all the cold and blue crooks, bandits, and outlaws you tossed onto the ground before the sheriff's office. You've made no exceptions whenever their bounty was \$5 or \$1000. You shoot them dead. You put your hand, wrinkled and pale, on top of rusted paper: a pillar of posters of men no longer wanted.

You took out one at random. You crumpled the corners and lifted the aged sheet to stir up a memory or two.

You rubbed your finger into the yellowed sketch of a haggard boy: Henry Kirkland. Your time-served eyes dealt with hundreds of posters, but "Loose Hands", as the name they gave him, was the only kid you knew with a bounty on his head. He rubbed a lot of people the wrong way, and so you were in a large town he frequented to make things right. A thief with no self-control or shame, you remember back then seeing him from a distance pushing through crowds, stealing their belongings and have-ins with innocent motions and a fake smile before reaching you. In seconds, you caught the hand he had over your gun's holster. It wasn't the way it usually went for him, it seemed, as the boy's face turned pale when you tightened your grasp.

Your pearl-handed revolver was polished, engraved, and had a smooth trigger. It was a gem. The boy wasn't the first to try and steal it from you.

"You want it?" you remember asking him, not waiting for an answer. You then took it out of the leather and put it to his head before taking the shot.

And just like that, the boy was dead. The only kid you had to kill, actually; it was nothing personal. You got 15 dollars for his body, and you almost forgot it all. You slipped his face back into the pile and then turned towards a sudden knock. Your lodge was far from anyone's eyes, so it was someone uninvited.

You knew which floorboards creaked and which did not, so it was the visitor's turn to be caught off-guard. Tiptoeing to where you kept your iron--a wall-mounted rack--you pulled out the revolver and turned towards the door. They didn't knock again. You knew you had five shots, and you loaded and cleaned it just yesterday. You spun the cylinder to a loaded round and prowled to meet the visitor on your terms. Once your shoulder was touching the hewed wall, you used your hand, and the strength you still had, to yank the door open and raise your revolver.

You had to lower the barrel to have her in your aim, as the person was shorter than expected; she looked just above her tens. She, however, followed the old American hospitality to the teeth, pointing her own revolver at your heart. The gun was old, caked in rust and engraved with dents, and, being as how young she was and how old it was, it was far-fetched that she bought it honestly. The girl's hair was cut short, was as messy as a wild mare's mane, and--same as her eyes--had a drab brown hue absent of any shine. Her kerchief was up to her cracked lower lip and looked as if it was black. Once.

Even after retiring, you kept the names and faces of fresh outlaws in mind, and she wasn't one of them.

"What do you want fr--"

"Your soul" --she pulled the rusty trigger-- "for his."

You ducked down into the entryway, shielding your heart and instead having her bullet pierce your shoulder. What was supposed to be a sound of a gunshot was replaced with a loud wail, as real as it could have been. Raising from her barrel was a thick black smoke crackling from within with burning embers. You ignored the freakish-weird and instead focused your attention on killing the brat. Yet, as you tried to raise your hand, you felt a spreading chill, as if you were tossed into the Pacific Ocean. It was far from your first time getting shot--even in your shoulder--but this time it felt different. The girl dipped her revolver away from you; you saw a smirk.

The clear noon sky thundered and echoed and then cracked like glass. Viscous black clouds seeped through the fractures like leaking blood until not even the sun was visible to you. Macabre shadows covered the landscape like hellish waves, and then the wind picked up and began to howl, ghastly blue storms descending upon you and the girl and swallowing you both like a whale. You blinked; it was a mistake. You opened your eyes to gaze at an empty wasteland resembling little of what you called home. Dreadful cold sand dimly shimmered beneath your feet underneath the pale-silver moon with no imperfections or marks—unlike the one you were so fond of—turning the vast mountains of clouds like a silent maelstrom. You saw your bones beneath a glossy veneer of your flesh.

Standing a few feet away, the girl too had flesh as lucent as soft glass, shimmering with hollow blue light and half-revealing her bones.

"It actually worked!" she said, her voice the same as before. She corked the hammer and shook her head, "Yeah, it worked."

"Good Lord ... " you stumbled, glaring at your see-through flesh and all the bones underneath. Your revolver slipped through your trembling hands into the greyish-bluish sand.

"Lord? Lord is not going to help you here," the girl said. She crossed her arms. "You better get used to this place, you'll be spending an eternity here."

You picked up your gun and put the girl in your sights.

She didn't even flinch. "It ain't going to work, not here."

"I'll try anyway" —you fired a shot— "you damn viper."

Her clothes and flesh exploded into a fine powder and then settled back from where you shot like thawing snow. She clenched her chest and heaved, sure feeling it at least.

"Hurts like hell," she muttered, not bothering to return the shot. She glared at you, "But it only hurts, you aren't going to be able to kill me here."

You shortened the distance and punched her across the face with the revolver's pearly grip, casting her teenage body onto the ground and tussling as she tried to free herself from your tackle. You pushed your elbow down her neck and grabbed a hold of her iron. You kept holding her down with the hand gripping your gun and then swung the cylinder open of hers with another. There was a strong smell of sulphur, almost venomous. The barrel was empty of cartridges: the shot she fired at you was the only one it had, leaving not even a cartridge inside. It wasn't the gun that did all this... it was the bullet. You felt your shoulder burn as though you were a cattle being branded with hot iron, the bullet still inside you.

"What did you shoot me with me?" you grabbed her kerchief.

"Lucifer's Lead, you brother killer." The bruised girl spat.

"Lucifer's ... ?" You glanced at your wound. The girl spoke like a lunatic, but the desolate nothingness around you tried her words true. The wind's howls sounded like songs of vultures, the iciness tearing into your transparent flesh, not unlike their claws and beaks. "Did no one teach you not to make deals with the devil, brat?"

"Spare me," she rolled her eyes. "We are here to make a trade. The only way I'll be stuck in here forever, like you, if we do not."

"And what's the trade?"

"Your soul for his," she said, nudging her head to the open blue plains. "We'll find my brother, he'll kill you, and I and him will return. Safe and sound."

"Loose Hands' Kirkland?"

Her eyes widened, "You guessed it. Yeah. The kid you butchered for a few bucks."

You looked left and right. There was nobody in sight. "And where is he?"

She paused, "He should be somewhere around here. Somewhere." She looked.

You struck the girl in the face. She groaned in pain. There was a crimson tint in the flames replacing her eyes as she winced and glared at you.

"Hitting me is not going to make things better," she said.

You pushed her gun beneath your belt and then held onto her kerchief with both your hands, the muzzle of your revolver nudging at her chin.

"It's not going to make them worse." You lifted her towards your face and then slammed her head against the purplish silt, lifting a satin ring of dust all around you both. She grunted, trying and failing to scratch you with her nails. You tightened your hold. "Where are we?"

"The same place you send him to, you brother killer."

You repeated the wallop with an impact strong enough to dislocate a child's neck.

"That wasn't what I asked."

She bit her lip to stifle a pained whimper. "I don't know what they call it. I haven't been here before!"

"Then how did you learn about all this," you pushed your knee against her rib to nail her to the ground, "and where did you get the bullet?"

"Same place all the deals with the devil are made, you imbecile: the crossroads. I was on my way to take revenge on you when I got lucky."

Lucky, huh? Your fingers dug into the black cloth.

"You're definitely not a smart one. What's stopping me from just walking away and leaving you here? I got no reason to help you now, and every reason to spite you."

The bruises started to slowly vanish off her face as if they were dirt marks washed away with soapy water. Through pain, she let out a gagged chuckle. "Leave to where? Sure, I was expecting Henry to be here, but I'll find him. You are not going to escape from us. All we have to do is find you again, won't be a problem." She kicked your side with her knee.

"You brat--"

Before you could gift her another whack, you harked a drunken echo. You lifted your head towards one of the four horizons. Melding into the phantom fog was a figure stumbling left and right with unstable steps. They were too far away for you to make note of their features, and distance deafened and choked whatever the person was saying ...

"You may call me a bad man--"

"You are."

"... but the people I've put in the ground were scum. If this place is Devil's hell, and your brother ended up here, then he's just as bad as me. Seems right?"

Outraged, she tried to knee you a second time but you pushed more of your weight onto her body to make it impossible. She clenched her fists instead.

"He's only here because you slew him," she raised her voice. "Scum?! Because some big hat thought to put his face on a wanted poster and promised to pay some soft cash to anyone who'd bother? That suddenly makes it just?" --she fought for her breath-- "He didn't kill anyone, you are not fooling yourself here. You killed a stainless orphan."

"So you say." You shook your head, tightened your grip, and stepped off her body, yanking her along by her neckcloth. The girl squealed as you swung her around in an arch and then, twisting her arm, punted her towards the figure. "Let's go meet the locals," you said at her look of disdain.

She grunted. She made a handful of attempts to break free, but with each one, you tightened your grasp and continued corkscrewing more until the pain made her relent.

Both your feet sunk in the otherworldly fog as you came nearer the person in the distance. A middle-aged man, you realised after a few steps more. His body was like worn cloth, glinting with a phantom silvery hue and exposing his skull and bones. He looked just like you, the girl, and, you felt, the rest of the damned you were going to meet here. He looked your's old age and had a dishevelled blond beard reaching his chest. His eyebrows were as thick as bushes and his nose looked like it should be on a hog. He took note of you. He waved to approach. He stumbled onto the ground and, for a moment, went missing in bluish fumes. The girl halted her footsteps. She bared her teeth at you as if she was a leech ready to bite.

You focused your attention on the sandy cloud. The man lumbered through, leaning left for one moment and then right for another, barely managing to stand.

"Howdy, you two look like a pair of schmucks," he said with a voice as coarse as sand and as biting as thorns. On his belt, he had a short blade. He lifted a jug and put it to his lips, drinking on its filling. After an exaggerated 'gulp' and 'ah' he looked at you and lowered the jug. "I'd love to share the spirit, but I can't, not a lot left." He excused. He then took another swing. "I would say I don't recognise you, but that's almost everyone I come upon recently." He swallowed the spirit and then briefly laughed at his own words.

The girl stood in seething silence.

"Name's Bill." The man waved the jug. "You two got a name? Got killed recently or long ago? You two killed by the same cowboy, I reckon?"

You twisted the girl's arm and pushed her towards the man. She niggled yet stumbled forward.

"Goldie Kirkland," she whispered, grinding her teeth as if to jag the words she spoke, "and I'm not staying here for long."

Billy smirked, tossing and circling the jug. "That's what they all say. You're a rare breed, Goldie. Ain't a love of womenfolk here, especially doves your age. You are whammied," he said before drunkenly leaning forward to see your hold on her. He looked at you from beneath, his eyes sullen and glassy, "And what about you, stranger?"

"Nathaniel Armison, and I'm not dead, just stop"

Goldie cleared her throat, "... Who?" She smacked her back against your rib cage and then squinted at Bill, "He's Aug, the 'Only Dead' Heart, the 'bounty hunter'."

You struck her leg and then yanked her arm until you could -see- the bones curve and tremble. Yet, despite the pain, she looked down with a twisted satisfied smirk.

Bill belched and, with some effort, straightened his shoulders and back. "Can't hold a grudge against you for trying to tuck away your identity, Aug. So ... you two?"

You sighed, it didn't seem the man knew of your virtues. "This brat killed me an hour ago or so if time works the same here, does it?"

His eyes opened. You waited as he bent his nape and pushed the jug's neck twelve O'Clock, shaking it until he got the last drops. He sighed.

"Darn it ... I'm all out," he said. "What was I saying? I reckon her story matches? You're in luck, Aug, there's only one way to find rest in those cursed badlands, and that is to bring judgement and justice." He pushed his fingers through his hair and, wincing in pain, gripped the greying locks, "So all you have to do is kill the girl."

Goldie glared sideways as you kept her still, "No, I've tried that already. It was the first thing I did. It didn't work." You shook your head, "What is this place?"

"You tried?" he blinked, "Are you sure? The few lucky men I saw get their revenge, vanished, and they looked quite happy about it ... though the ones slayed not so much." His legs trembled as he fell on his rear and sighed, "If you're scared that this is Hell, don't be, there are still places further down." He put the empty jug on the ground and paused. "Believers call it Purgatory, but I don't think that's it. I've been here for a while, Aug, but it's hard to keep track of time, through ... there are those with a pocket watch." He laughed at his own words. "This here is where those killed go, be it from a bullet or other means. And I mean slain, no illness or old age, as those don't. I've heard a lot of names used: the Endless Walk, the Plains of the Slain, the Land of the Killed, but my favourite is the Graveyard Frontier, just got that romance."

"Everyone who gets a bullet ends up here?"

Bill reached for the jug before remembering it was empty, "More or less." He looked at Goldie who was struggling, but doing it only for a show of disobedience and pissed animosity, "But I can't say what happens to you after justice is done, though it's unlikely it's anything worse, and I'm not really sure why it didn't work for you."

"I've got a clue," you said. "Wench made a deal with the devil to be able to kill me."

This was like a splash of cold water for the old man. "Deal with the devil? That's new."

She spat. "Your only business here is to get shot by my brother."

Bill deliberated before he raised his head. "How many people have you killed, Aug?"

You let your eyes wander the black-and-blue terrain and the emptiness of the Graveyard Frontier.

"Dozens and dozens of wanted men," you said. You took in the numbing air, "Just below half a hundred, I reckon."

"How many?" Goldie stuttered as she stomped on your boot and the sand around it, "I knew you killed a few, but so much? You're a mass murderer!"

"I'm a bounty hunter," you said as you pushed her away from the reach of your footwear, "I only went after people wanted dead, girl, and those people were outlaws. Often I was the only man for the job in all of the county, and they were all scum." Goldie squirmed in vain. You sighed and turned to Bill. "It was my duty."

"If they were all like my brother, you only seem to kill innocents!"

"No, they were worse. Your brother was the most pathetic of the bunch," you whacked her over the head though it did little to calm her.

The man reached for and from the jug. "I'm not judging," he said, his voice tired yet light, "but you're not going to have a fun time here, Aug."

"Because of the villains I killed?"

He nodded. "They are all in the Graveyard Frontier, and they'll be gunning for your head because it's first come first serve here. Once you're judged, the others are not getting the luxury of salvation, although it does not mean they won't try." He pushed one of his hands onto his knees and tried to stand up.

You frowned at your dismal prospects. "And the only way for me to be free is to kill the girl?"

Bill knee's trembled as he stood up. "That's the usual way, yes, but you already said you tried to?"

"I'm telling you, it's worthless," Goldie twisted her head to meet your eyes, "You can't get rid of me until my-"

"Until your brother shoots me," you nodded your head listlessly. "Yes, I heard you the first time."

She harrumphed and tossed her shoulder against your chest before you twisted her arms further.

"Darn it ... and now, apparently, you have dozen of men after you? You can't die to any of them, that'll be the end of me too. Wait until we find Henry!"

"I'm not biting the dust" --you furled her wrist and then tossed her onto the ground-- "to anyone; not to your thief of a brother. You're the one who got us here, so let's find a way to put your 'immortal' body to use." You turned to Bill who was beheading without interruptions. "What happens if I killed any of those who killed me?"

"They'll disappear, for a while, but, unless someone who died 'cause of you, and you are still unjudged, they'll come back, as other souls do. There's no final rest here otherwise, so, if someone you didn't put to death during your lifetime, a random soul, or a beast, kills you, it'll be the same for you. Still, I wouldn't recommend it."

"Why?"

"If you die here your soul will return, sure, but the pain will stay. Get your hand cut off? You'll feel it. Get torn apart by the Pack? Likewise. The pain remains."

You looked up and down at the old man. "Have you died many times here, Bill?"

Bill's smile was short and weak, "A couple, and it does hurt, but I make do with the spirits."

At least your life was safe with souls unaffiliated with you. "Who shot you for you to end up

here? You need help finding the rattlesnake?"

The man chuckled and then picked up the empty vessel. "Wasn't a bullet, but a cold sharp pickaxe." He placed his fingers on the top of his skull "Got it right here, just because I found a nugget of gold before he did, that son of a gun." He shook his head and looked up at the rumbling ragged skies. "But he will likely never come."

"Why are you so certain?"

"At some point, I know he'll be too much of a corpse to die to someone else. If old age or an illness takes him, he's not going to show up, so I'm stuck here forever."

"What if he's here but you don't know it? If all the people killed by someone else are walking those plains, that means it's massive and sparse?"

He nodded. "It goes on and on, this Graveyard Frontier. But I've seen it happen a few times. If your wrongdoer presents himself, you will know. You'll be certain."

"Instinctively?"

"From what I saw. You won't know exactly where, but you'll be certain he came."

Goldie gasped. "Doesn't that mean everyone this dirtbag killed knows he's here?" Her eyes widened, "As so much Henry."

The yellow-belly boy was the least of your problems. You pushed your hand on the barrel of your iron: three bullets counting.

You swung the cylinder back and pushed the cylinder's gate shut.

Your eyes followed the barrel as you put two of your fingers inside your mouth. There were many times you escaped death by an inch, but in your deadly brush with the \$1000 man, it came to a half a second. He had his iron between your teeth and his rubbery fingers around the trigger. You were half a second faster. You briefly bit your fingers and pulled them back, drying them against the spectral cloth of your vest.

You shadowed your thoughts. "Do we still need to sleep, eat, or drink?"

"Do you feel hungry?" he asked, trying to hide his pain with a smile.

You tapped your stomach. You felt no cramps of hunger and the only craving you had was for the taste of food, not the filling it gave you.

"As for thirst ..." --he hesitated-- "it's also not something you usually have to worry about."

"And who ever heard of a ghost that sleeps?" Goldie said mockingly.

"I am making sure. You know just as little as me, you brat."

Bill nodded and then sighed. "No dreams, no naps, no shuteye. If you're killed, that's will be one of a few times you'll be in a haze until your soul puts itself back together."

"And how long does that take?"

"Sometimes a day, sometimes a few, sometimes a week."

"Right, nothing is consistent in this hellhole." You squeezed your hands open and close. "I'm going to need more bullets, what's the easiest way to get some?"

"You'll need feeble iron, they call it, from the El Dorado Warren. They use it to make some goods here, but mostly knives, guns and ammo. They do, but it won't be as good as yours; like the name suggest it's feeble, fragile. Short-term solution. Doesn't matter with a bullet you'll shoot once, but for a revolver, it's very annoying."

"Is that some kind of mine?"

"Aye, but you shouldn't go inside, souls that do often don't return. From those that did, you can buy feeble iron or fool's gold or more outside or in the towns."

"There are towns here?"

Bill drunkenly bowed his head, "A couple, but they weren't exactly built ..." He winced and rubbed his head.

You scratched above your eyebrows "And you know how I can get to any of the two?"

Bill unbuttoned the worn collar buttons of his canvas jacket and pulled out two leash necklaces braided like barbed wire, a small black stick hanging from each one. He carefully

raised them in front of himself and nudged his head, inviting you to look. Goldie shook off the sand and dust you dropped her in and elbowed her way before you and Bill. You grasped her shoulder to push the girl away, but she was too petite to block your eyesight so you decided not to bother. The two pieces of chalk flowed off his palm upwards and then jerked in two opposite directions as if something was pulling them from the haunted horizon. "I have no idea where we are, Aug, but if we walk we might stumble upon a town I haven't even been to before. However, if we follow the chinks, one will lead us to the town of Overreach, and the second to the El Dorado Warren."

Goldie narrowed her eyes. "You have no idea where we are? How are you here then?"

"I drank" -he smiled - "I drank a lot."

Goldie was not convinced. She turned to you, her brows furrowed and her brown eyes staring at you. "We are going to the town! Henry is most likely to be there."

"And if we go somewhere else?" you asked.

"We'll stumble upon someplace, someone, or something ... eventually."

After a moment of deliberation, you pointed to one of the two chinks; though you did not know which pointed where you acted as if you did.

"Let's go to the El Dorado," you said, trying to sound like one of those Conquistadors of old.

"No!" Goldie said. She stomped the ground and then swung her fingers at Bill like a gun. "Don't listen to him, lead us to the town!"

Bill's cloudy eyes meandered between you. He scratched his scruffy neck. "They aren't that far from each other, but I'll go with his call."

Nudging his head, Bill looked at both of his necklaces and then tucked them underneath his shirt. He took the first step and you trailed behind him.

"We don't have the darn time." Goldie bent her knees and slapped them in frustration. "I'm not going along with this," she said, "I'll go and find Henry myself."

She spat on the ground, eyeing you like you were a snake in the grass. Then she began to walk away. You came to a halt and turned around to apprehend the girl, but she unexpectedly stopped, not going that far. With her back turned towards you, she clicked her tongue. "Another one." She spat the words in annoyance and warning, her eyes trained on something in the distance.

Just in view, there was another silhouette drawing closer with each step. It looked more shaded and murkier than the moonlit heath it walked across, and the pale blue fog couldn't cloak its shape. The figure was clothed in shreds and tatters that flailed and trashed in the damned squall like featherbare wings on a rotting bird carcass.

Bill turned too, his eyes briefly flashing white as he gripped the knife's handle. "That ain't no man" - he brandished the cold iron - "that's a leftover."

"Unfriendly?" You cocked your gun halfway.

He shook his head. "Not even if you had a noose around its neck. You can't reason with that thing."

Goldie withdrew back. "If it's not a man, what is it?"

"Natives are spared from this place, but they still bring a part of them here. A residue that wasn't enough for - their - afterlife; their grudges, aimed at us. There's plenty of them here, more than us dead men."

"How easy are they to put down?"

"If you compare them to the other fearsome critters? Not that hard, but the longer you fight it, the harder it makes for you." Bill cleared his throat. "It's slow, but if we continue, we might lose it. They are a persistent hurdle, so it might take us a few hours to get it to lose interest so we better start moving. Lucky for us, we have the space."

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"Mm-hmm," you agreed. You turned your head at Goldie. "If you want to take your chances with that thing then go, you rodent, but I'm headed that way."

Goldie gasped. Her eyes widened at the ghost drawing near. She looked at the back of your head as you and Bill continued in your retreat. She cursed.

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The chilling bleached moonlight floodlit the sand as you moved further and further away from the vengeful ghost. Bill was right—no matter how further away you got from it, it pursued. Your steps were slow as Bill dragged behind you. Were you alone, you reckoned, you could lose the corpse in a matter of minutes, but together with the tired drunk man, it took, most likely, an hour or two. Even after its black outline vanished in the skysill, you didn't feel like you were out of harm's way yet. Goldie followed ten feet away. You heard as she spat and whispered annoyed curses while also keeping her distance.

"Is there anyone else roaming this place I should be aware of? You mentioned some 'Pack'?"

As Bill walked, he kept squeezing the top of his head, as if trying to scratch an itch left by the pickaxe he was executed with.

"Yes, there are black fur beasts, oversized dire wolves, with red eyes, their desire to hunt stronger than their hunger. They travel in a pack of dozen, and once they decided on a soul, they keep returning for it. They follow the prey everywhere he goes and tear into the body until the spirit is tarnished. They hunt others for a while but then resume their pursuit. Day after day after day as the soul is brought back with more and more memories and torments of being ripped apart and eaten alive. The soul goes mad."

Goldie took a deep, relaxing breathe, as she heeded his words.

"Anyone else?"

"A Wendigo," he answered coldly. His gaze trailing against the eroded gravel. "Remember how I said a soul returns if killed? Well, not if you meet the Wendigo."

Before you could ask more, you noticed a bluish glow in the distance, luminous skin stretching over bare bones. You paused as a young boy came into view. Goldie shoved between you and Bill and then wriggled through to stand in front of you. Her eyes widened and her breath shortened.

"Henry?" She leaned forward.

You did nothing as Goldie darted towards the boy, tossing sand with each of her heavy steps. She stopped in front of him and dropped her head to catch her breath. The words they began to exchange were out of your ear reach, but after a few seconds, the girl grasped his

hands and her transparent skin turned fervent. After a few seconds more you drew out your revolver from its holster and focused the two bodies in your aim. They continued talking, Goldie as if fully forgetting you.

You drew out but eventually pulled the gun's hammer all the way; it clicked as it locked in place. Even if he'll reappear, you'd rather not be near anyone who has the power to end you. Then, from the corner of your eye, you noticed a second presence, much closer. You swung your arm and circled your body to have the person at your barrel's end.

As if born from the featureless cold fog stood a woman it took you a moment to recognise due to her bare bones and lucent jelly flesh. It was a friend from a bordello you were frequent and shame-free of visiting, Mercedes. Her brown eyes glowed with amber and red tones like pools of liquid gold. Her loose coal black laid upon her shoulders and unfurled on her back like a veil. Her lips were broken into stripes of white and pale orange. She had the same two brass earrings with a dust of gold as the last time you had met. She wore a moon-bleached dress with flared skirt and a chemise underneath.

"Heart?" Her voice was soothing and soft. Her lips quivered as she smirked. "And here I made a bet that I'll never see you here." She spread her arms for a hug.

Mercedes was someone you spent many nights with; she did everything you asked her for: from the obvious to ironing your clothes, singing, participating and outplaying you in cards, and more. She then disappeared from the brothel, and neither the madame nor the other girls knew of her whereabouts. If she was here, then she was killed.

You looked at Bill who wavered and then shrug his shoulder at you. You glanced at the siblings, still lost in each other's company.

For now, you let them be; they had no irons, no blades, and they were at a safe distance away. You smiled at your friend and approached her.

"It's been a while, Sunset Jay, or is it fine now that we are both walking dead to call you by your name?"

Bill got up, looking unsteady on his feet and, throwing you a glance, he walked away towards Goldie and Henry. Was he giving you a moment? Would he keep them on a leash? You wished so.

Mercedes lifted her smile further by taking each corner with her fingers. "I suppose, señor Heart, there's no reason to keep it a secret."

Again, she spread her arms. You came to Mercedes and wrapped your arms around her in a loose but intimate hug. Her head fell on your shoulder and cuddled your neck. You savoured the moment, burying your face in her raven hair. Mercedes was quiet, her breath soft and precious, meant only for you.

Then Goldie screamed. "No! Stop! What in tarnation are y'all doin'!?" Her sudden outburst caught you off guard, and you turned your head to where she stood, held in her brother's embrace like you were holding Mercedes. Next to them was Bill clutching a knife in his grip, the sharp point of which was in the boy's head. They whispered for a moment before she yelled again. "What the ... ?! Henry? Henry let go!"

You leaned away, or so you tried. Mercedes' head scratched your ghostly skin, and then, as you struggled to break the hug, prickled into your body like cactus thorns. She prolonged the silent hug. Your lips dried as you began to thirst for the first time here. The more you tried, the more it hurt. As you fought to lift your head, your shoulder's bullet wound was harshened and inflamed, burning like it was envious of the new pains you were cheating on it with.

"Mercedes, please let go of me." You echoed Goldie. You heard no answer.

"Come back, you old timer!" Goldie yelled.

You heard footsteps approaching you. Unable to lift or turn your head, Bill did you the courtesy to walk behind Mercedes and meet your gaze. He lifted the knife and stabbed it above her ear, thrusting the entire blade within. Even then, she didn't say a word or let out a whimper.

After a few seconds, Bill withdrew the knife and then placed his jug on the side of her head. She began to bleed but, rather than crimson and thick, her blood was clear and runny, with a faint greenish sheen.

Bill watched the liquid spill out, trickle down her cheek, and pour into the jug. "She's not your friend," Bill said.

"I figured," you replied. Your hand grasped the iron's grip but your arm was skewered firm by invisible soul-draining barbs.

"August, I beg your pardon, but there aren't many ways to get alcohol down here, and this is one of a few. I'm a slave to the spirit." He waited until the wound stopped leaking before chugging the drink and then sighing like a man spared by a bullet missed. "That hits the spot." He swirled the container with a forlorn expression and then took one of the necklaces off his neck, watching the black chalk lift and suspend in the air pointing further ahead. He tilted his head, "If you follow that way you'll get to the mines."

That said, Bill made sure he was out of your gun's reach. He scribbled a black chalk cross on the woman's cheek and, as he made the distance, you noticed it was pointing at her. He sighed. "I should've brought something with a cork, but they aren't easy to come by ... "

Goldie continued to shout insults and scream in the background.

"Have you lured us into a trap?" you asked in a calm voice.

He took another drink and shook his head, swallowing it with a gurgle after. "No, horseshoe luck, August. We call those things" --he glanced at Mercedes-- "Prickly Niceties, they are like otherworldly cactuses that feed on remains of the souls, or directly from them like with you now, to make the spirit. Even if I tried now, I don't think I can unfetter you straight off"

"Swell. So what now?"

"In a while, not soon, they'll cram full and their pricks will turn soft and you'll be able to escape. You'll feel the thirst, so I would advise drinking from the source."

You tried again to raise your arms and push yourself free but, at all the once throughout your body, there was yet another agonising sting as the Prickly Nicety kept you glued to it.

"If you struggle, it'll get more painful for you, August. You might be able to do it, but you know ... the pain loves to linger. And if you can't, it might be enough to kill you."

"I'll be reborn then?"

He put the jug's neck to his lips. "Yes, with horrible pain, and thirst, and it's unlikely it'll be here." His body began to waver and dance, bluish bones slipping into the mist and air. He noticed this long after you did, though he seemed unsurprised. "I reckon I got a mite carried away with my spirit ..." Bill's chuckle felt forced. "Guess it's my time to disappear somewhere else. I'll see you yet, but I hope you find a way outta here before that."

You knit your lips and then gave Bill nothing but a restrained glance. The man understood and said not a word more. A few moments after his body faded away like smoke and embers, and soon even those ceased to exist. You bruised your neck against "Mercedes" lingering presence and then let out a sigh. Why would Henry be here, in the middle of nowhere, and show zilch of interest in you? He didn't even spare a glare. Hindsight covers the gold. Were you to die trying to free yourself, your soul--according to Bill--would come together and reawaken somewhere else ... Away from Goldie, and without directions. You accepted the cards dealt; there was not much of a choice for you here. You had to wait until the Prickly Nicety had enough of you. You closed your eyes and let your body feel numb and soft, giving your best shot to ignore the stinging needles of your friend-shaped cacti and your gnawing bullet wound. You tried to meditate, to nap and you managed to do so for a while until another yell barked you awake and worsened the pain like hundred needles twisting in a ring.

"Hell!" Goldie's screams echoed beyond the ghastly terrain, rumbling like the mountainous skies above. "Darn it! Gah! Let freaking go of me!" You could hear but couldn't see what was happening with her.

Her raucous angered cries disrupted your quiet rollicking. Goldie would shut up for a brief moment of peace and then resume shouting in pain and anger the second after ... You considered joining in with the yelling, to tell her to shut up in case she would attract unneeded attention, but you felt too in need of a drink to care. You just had to wait a bit more.

"Oh shut up!" you heard her say for the last time and then fall silent.

You then heard the sand squeak and crush under her shuffling boots as she approached closer, freed and without wounds, walking behind the Prickly Nicety to hitch up her hazel irises.

"You're as thick as molasses. Seems like shooting people is the only thing you're good at, you brother killer." She approached, clenching her hands. "And punching girls."

"Seems like you and I both fell for that trick," you said. Her immortal soul gave her an edge to free herself, unlike yours. "How could you not tell it wasn't your brother?"

Instead of responding, she went towards you, bit into your hand and crushed your stalled fingers between her teeth. You felt rippling pain as your grip weakened and your revolver dropped onto the hollow soil. Goldie let go of your hand and picked the iron into her hands, distancing herself from you.

"You snake," you hissed, unable to grasp your hand.

She turned and grasped the iron barrel, glinting the pale moonlight against the ridged metal. "Is this the gun you killed him with ... ?"

You spat as your eyes darkened. "Right, that's the same one."

She inspected it more, opening and closing the bullet cask and then drumming the pearly grip. "If he sold it, we would be able to eat for at least a month." She looked at the ground and then settled down on the ground. Her knees flapped like butterfly wings as she steered the iron to your head. "You're so fortunate I could only shoot you once."

You bit your cheek. Likewise.

"Why are you just standing there?"

"Bill said it can damage my soul, and make things worse. If I just wait, I'll release me eventually."

"Just wait ..." Goldie echoed as she played with the trigger. "You won't be here long enough for me to find the real Henry and come back, would you?"

"He didn't say how long it was going to take, but even if he did, why would I tell you?"

She rubbed her forehead with the gun. "You're a bastard's son, you can't just make it easy and right for me," she said. "We are going to find him together, but I'm keeping this." She took out the three bullets and put one of them back into the barrel, separating the others in her front pocket. "To make it harder for you," she said, taking a deep breath of dry cold air.

"It might take days."

"Ain't surprising me," she said. She eyeballed "Mercedes" and narrowed her eyes further. "I heard you killed women, what I am surprised about is that someone is sticking by you."

"Ain't your business."

"I bet it's someone who you made stay with you by force," Goldie's expression was empty as she said so. She was silent.

"You know how old I was when you butchered Henry?"

"I don't--"

"Seven, when you killed the only family I had," she said with her hands trembling. "I endured for five years to get my revenge on you ... you are not taking this away from me."

You felt your throat brittle and your lips crack. How much worse was this thirst going to be?

You licked your lips, but it did little to help.

"What about the cad who issued the bounty in the first place? Have you found him?"

Goldie huffed. "What about him? You're the one who -killed- Henry."

"Bounties have a tendency to stick around," you said. "If he had lived to old age, it would've

found a way to outlast him."

"Spare me," Goldie clicked the hammer. "Even if that's true, any other hunter would've simply caught him, not kill! My beef is with you, Heart."

"You misjudge how much easier it is to bring a dead body than an unwilling one." You chewed your tongue, sucking your moisture like a cure it was not.

She knit her bushy brows. "No, it's just you, for the sake of your precious reputation. 'Only Dead' ..." She scowled at the surroundings. "Imagine how safe you would be if you didn't kill."

"The victims of the people I dealt with should be walking here too." You averted your gaze and said no more.

You leaned towards "Mercedes" neck, as you did many times before when you met. Her cloying yet fake scent toyed with your feelings and truths. However, you didn't wish to kiss her, but to bite into the chunk of flesh and drink the liquids inside; even if it looked and sounded like her, this was a blue yonder cactus. You understood you wouldn't be cannibalising a woman's ghost. You tethered your teeth shut until the grinding noise echoed inside your head. You couldn't drink now, while you were still trapped in its embrace, how would you clench your thirst after? Your attention returned to the girl once she shifted her weight and stood up. She cursed under her breath and then stepped to circle you and away from your eyesight.

"One of them is here again," Goldie said. There was a brief silence between her words and the sound of the gunshot ricocheting the air, followed by a reek of acrid smoke.

"Another of the Indian ghosts, or is it the same one that followed us?"

"I missed," she muttered. Her nails scratched the metal as you hear her unlock the cylinder and cluck the cartridge she took out before.

"You missed." You felt your dehydrated body quiver. One more precious bullet less. "How could you miss? If it's too far, just let it come closer!"

"I don't want it closer. Didn't you hear what the codget said?"

"Leastwise you'll hit your mark." Or not. "When you were gunning for my heart, standing just a spit away, you missed too! Have you ever even fired an iron?"

"More than enough times," she said, her voice indecisive. "I'll make sure this one won't miss." Her voice hitched up a confident tone.

"You shouldn't waste any more bullets, you rodent," you said. "Try and lure that Indian ghost to the thing that's ain't your brother, and see if you can push it into it."

It took her a few seconds to respond. "I'd rather not," she said, likely glaring at the Prickly Nicety in the shape of her brother. "If you let go of it, they continue to pretend they are who you think they are."

You let out a tired, thirsty sigh. "Fine, at least let it come as close as you can allow. I can't even hear the thing, it must be too far. You can't just hit the eye of the needle with your lack of abilities."

"I'm not an amateur," she said. "I just need to keep its head in the sights and then ..."

You cringed at her words. The breath you took was like a burnish to your throat. "Straighten your wrists," you said, remembering the screw-up pose she was on your doorsteps, "and lock your arms." She was silent, and you couldn't see whether she was even listening or not. "Hold it with both hands," you continued, "one hand on the grip and the other supporting it from below; that iron's too big and heavy for teenage hands." Distant wind sheered and howled as if trailing around the leftover. The coldness of its bite gave little relief to your predicament. Christ, with gale this strong even you would have a problem with your shots. There was no way, it would be impossible for her to hit. "Are you listening to me or not?!"

"I know all of that!" she said, fumbling with the gun.

The increasing wind began to deafen your words. You ignored her response and, with a hurting raised voice, continued. "How far is it? The further that thing is, the more the bullet's gonna drop. You gotta aim a little bit higher than where you want the bullet to hit, or you'll be

hitting the hills and the sand. Align the two sights. Level them with it. Keep both your eyes open."

There was another loud bang as Goldie pulled the trigger. The gunshot died in the howling of the gale. Goldie crudely unlocked the cylinder and patted her pockets for the last bullet.

"Damn it."

"You missed again," you monotoned. "I swear if you miss the last one, you better go and tussle with it."

"I'm not going to miss this one!" she said. "I'm ... getting the hang of it."

"Let it come even closer!" You raising your voice with demand and authority.

"A few steps closer, fine."

"You're not tossing the cartridges here, you are firing a revolver."

She harrumphed.

"Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, and put some weight on your dominant foot a little further back. When it's close enough, take a deep breath, and as you exhale, slowly squeeze the trigger. Slowly. Unlike your rust, my gun is well-kept, and so is the trigger." You sighed and then waited, there wasn't much else you could teach her with your back turn, and only a few seconds to instruct her.

The gun fired, the brief sound echoing like a whisper through the hollow grounds, again dying in the tempest. You heard Goldie lower the gun and let out a sigh of relief.

"Did you--"

"I hit it in the ribs, but it vanished none the least. I guess it only takes one bullet." You heard her voice become clearer as the winds began to weaken and settle with no ghosts to cling to.

You let out an exasperated sigh but said nothing more. You couldn't see how well—if even—Goldie followed your guidance, but you reckoned she didn't listen. She returned to where she sat earlier. You decided to close your eyes and ignore her. You counted the seconds but the thirst and pain made a mess of the numbers. Minutes, maybe ten, maybe twenty, passed by until you finally felt the prickly pear soften and its thorns wane; not completely, but enough to break the deadly hug. You gasped and immediately choked on how sore and dry you found your throat to be.

"Maybe stay, señor Heart?" Prickly Nicety spoke as soon as you stepped back. Again, she raised her arms and, with a charming smile and sunset eyes, offered you a hug.

You shook your head and swallowed what little moisture you had. Your eyes crossed over Goldie's as she stood up off the ground, your empty gun tightly gripped in her petite hands. You reached for the rusty iron she sent to the Graveyard Frontier with, and the only thing she left you. You took it out and, once more, meet her glare. You two stood in uneasy silence, neither willing to speak.

The heavens rolled in the distance, each smoke-darkened cloud smashing against another like a stampede of buffalo, the thundering clatter far but reaching, with a windy howl ringing beneath those strifes. Yet, the deathly moon hung in full view. The begrimed curls of unfortunate clouds caught in the intimate dance with the pale lady got torn asunder, rejected by an invisible maelstrom. It was an unfading hour of the night, but the specks of two more shapes somehow were darker than anything surrounding it: the cause of the disorder in the sky.

Goldie noticed it too, her fingers squeezing the iron. Your lips were parched, each crack begging for a drop of water that there was nowhere to be found ... You turned to the Prickly Nicety.

"Ni siquiera a farewell hug?" Mercedes' mirror-image asked, her illusionary coal black hair weightlessly flowing in the wind like ribbons. Your hands quivered at her presence.

You spat with reluctance and then raised Goldie's weathered revolver above the Prickly Nicety's head, holding it by its barrel. Her eyes kept her unique half-friendly half-flirtatious glint.

Your grip faltered, and you swung down, smashing the wooden grip against "Mercedes" shoulder to break asunder the ghastly plant and crack the release for the liquid inside. She continued to smile as if the pain was unknown to her and as if you did not just break shatter her shoulder. You cupped your hands and lifted them inches from her skin, collecting the bleeding nectar and then drinking on it. It had no smell, but tasted refreshingly cool and slightly sweet, with a much-needed bite of alcohol. You drank until you no longer felt any thirst.

You were a soul, but it did not stop the alcohol from intoxicating you, though not much. You felt softened and smoothed, it felt like dozen of invisible hands were gently kneading and squeezing your luminous flesh. The spirit not only got rid of your horrible thirst; even the pricks and the gunshot wound in your shoulder were masked by the alcohol. You glanced at "Mercedes" one more time and then, drying your hands with the cloth of your vest, you stepped away from your temptation.

Goldie watched. You approached the brat, the uneasy silence continuing to hang in the air. You reached for her with a heavy swing, one she stepped away from to the side but you followed to intercept. She shifted her weight and attempted to escape to the opposite flank, but her movements were blatant, and you seized her shoulder with one hand and the revolver she was holding with another. You tightened your grip and disarmed her, swaying the iron far away from her reach. Tailor-made grip again sank on the cushion of your palm. Goldie tussled against your hold, clutching into your arm and trying to break free. To her visible dismay, she couldn't even move it an inch.

"I'm taking it back," you said as you stared down at her. "It's just a piece of pig iron in your hands."

"You forfeited the right when you shot Henry with it!" she shouted, continuing to struggle even though the futility of it was obvious.

You sighed. "What kind of logic is that?" You shoved her back; Goldie stumbled and fell on her rear. Her irises shrank. "It'll only be just if he kills you with the same gun!"

"Well" --you yanked out the rusty revolver from your belt-- "he won't. Neither from my iron or any other." You tossed Goldie's revolver back to her feet. "You can have this one."

Her brown eyes darted from the gun to you and back. With a snake-like hiss, she leaned and took it and then, with the face of a scolded child, she pushed her knees to her chest and frowned.

"Yo te extrañaré, Heart," Prickly Nicety whispered with, you imagined, kind smile. You didn't look back to confirm or answer. Bill did not explain whether it only took the form of Mercedes because of what you thought, or if it only had the capacity because Sunset Jay was actually here. You hoped not, for as much as you missed her, that girl deserved to still be alive, or die from old age in her sleep.

You didn't invite Goldie to follow you, but she of course did. The two of you ventured further and further into the Graveyard Frontier, relentlessly pursued by the wicked blackish ghouls. After an hour of voyage, you and Goldie spotted a tangible translucent mirage, an ethereal glow of house contours and outlines nestled on the edge of the horizon clustered together; not a town but a place resembling a ranch. However, the buildings were not made out of any lumber known to the living--at least not your forty years of life. The wood was pulsating and shimmering with ghostly blue and cloudy green hues.

Goldie moved towards the homestead, but you did not. You looked around behind your shoulder for your shadowy pursuers, those you could no longer see but knew were still on your trail. This place wasn't even a town, so what interest aside from curiosity was there for you? None, and it wasn't time to be curious. You continued to walk.

Goldie's eyes widened at this. She rushed forward to step in front of you and widen her arms.

"What in tarnation are doing?" she said, nodding her head at the ranch. "Are you not going to check?"

You walked around her. You spat onto the moon-bleached sand. "No, I know where I am going, no reason to detour."

Goldie clutched her fives. Her voice hushed, as if she was talking to herself. "There might be someone there, someone who knows where Henry is."

You rolled your eye, putting more stretch between you as she stood there, pacing left and right.

"I reckon it ain't likely, do you think your brother suddenly became famous? Why would every person we meet know him?"

"I said -might-!" Goldie scoffed. She scuffed the soil with her boot before cursing in a hushed tone and hurrying to join in with your pace.

"Then go. You're annoying. Go and check if they know of your brother's whereabouts, but I couldn't care less. I'm going my way."

Goldie looked at you with a cold gaze, gasping short cut breaths from her canter. "It'll be far too bothersome to track you down again, I realised."

You looked the other way, focusing on the direction of the haunting fields Bill's chalk pointed to a while back. You travelled a far way, and you hoped you didn't meander too far from the straight line. The further you went, and the more time passed, the less your spiritual drunkenness numbed your soul. The impales left by the hundred pinpricks and your shattered shoulder began to gnaw anew, and even your throat started to dry out. You flung your glance to where the ranch was, but by now its cloudy ghost wood dwellings were out of your view. You could really use another drink ...As you reminisced on the taste of bitter ale and the freshness of spring water, you made out a sound of ill-advised footsteps, neither yours nor Goldie's.

From the thin sapphire mist, about a throw away, emerged a figure of a man with coarse and roughened hair with a scraggly and scruffy beard—his hair's hue took after a sunflower, seed black at the tips and deep orange and honey-yellow. When you reached for your revolver, the man simply drifted forwards, not even sparing you a glance. On his back, there was an enormous ashen coffin which he was carrying by belts twisted together with ropes and chains. The man wore heavy drab clothes with a worn-brimmed hat and gloves. His face was covered by charcoal paint, concealing the see-through skin as well as the white skull; it made him look like he did not belong here. He withdrew from your attention but, when his back was turned to you, slowed his pace. Despite the coffin's noticeable bulk and weight he effortlessly but slowly turned around and approached you. However, he focused his attention on the little rodent instead.

Goldie narrowed her eyes, cleared her throat, and stiffened her chest under the pale blue gloss of his eyes—the only tipoff that he was a damned soul. She opened her mouth.

He unintentionally muted her with a loud thud by settling the closed coffin upright on the ground. He had a bandoleer belt with many bullets and three holsters holding a separate revolver each, you noticed. "You poor thing," he said, reaching the coffin lid in which were at least a hundred silvery-lead nails, each glowing eerie white. He pulled out one of them with ease and kneeled towards the girl. "You are too young to be here, this place is neither for children nor gals." He drawled his words. "What is your name?" The man offered her the nail.

Goldie briefly glanced at you, then narrowed her eyes and said, "Goldie. Name's Goldie and surname's Kirkland."

"Marigold," he said, kneeling before her as if you weren't even there. "Where might your legs take you from here?"

The man kept all of his focus on the girl and continued to ignore you.

Goldie paused, trying to chew on something that wasn't there. "No, just Goldie. I'm here to get my brother back."

The man's eyes were still, his expression motionless. "What about yourself?" he said. He placed the shining nail into her empty palm. "Did you not consider your life?"

She harrumphed and smirked. "I made a deal, that both of us can come back, alive and safe."

His bones creaked as he looked over the girl with a budding interest. "A deal, I see ... You do look a bit different; that explains it." He raised his hand to reach and pat her, but Goldie quickly responded by shielding her head with her hands. The cowboy patted the back of her hands, as lucent as paper, instead. "You shouldn't have done that, Marigold."

She winced at his touch and words. "And why is that?"

"The Devil should not be making deals with the youths," he said, "do you realise that if you don't fulfil your bargain, your soul will be claimed by him?"

Goldie barely shook, her fists clutched shut and her eyes raised to meet his. "I guessed as much, and I don't intend to fail," she said. "What is it to you, mister?"

He smiled. "You can call me an 'Usher', and I aim to be of help to you."

"Help me?" She saw him nod. She shot her finger to point at your head, and the man's eyes followed her pointing. "All I need is to get my brother to shoot him dead. That's all my deal is."

Your eyes meet and both your gazes hung steady. You hand palmed the grip of the hollow iron.

"Him?" he asked, looking away from you to her. "I think you made it clear enough then, but you are having issues?"

She scowled and tosses her arms at him. "Yeah! I don't know where to look; I don't even know where to begin looking!"

The man chuckled halfheartedly and touched her hand. "I gave you all the help you need then, Marigold."

"A ... nail?" Goldie twirled the flat-headed metal spike in her palm. She looked at the large casket embodied by such nails, glistening like uncanny morning stars. "Thanks, I suppose?"

"It's a coffin nail," he said the obvious, removing his hand and standing off the ground. "You don't need to know much more than that it can become anything you miss and anything you forgot to take with you when you were alive but better," he said. "Changed by the powers of this place to be of even more help to you." He nodded at the nail, "Try it, just fantasise."

Goldie briefly hesitated and then clutched the nail between her two hands. She closed her eyes, then raised them to her chin, and started to mutter. She spend a minute or less in that pose until her eyes snapped open and she revealed her hands. The nail had become a pocket watch crafted from what looked like a mix of brass, gold and silver; with intricate engravings and elaborate decorations. She clicked it open with trembling hands; the bottom half was that of a normal but expensive timekeeper while the top half had Henry's portrait.

Goldie swallowed, her eyes darting from the man to the watch and back to him again. "It didn't ... use to have his face," she said, her voice faltering. "But I don't -need- this now."

He pointed his leathered finger against the bezel and glass. "It's not going to tell you the time."

She inspected it closer, shifting the watch until she came to a realisation—from a distance, you saw it too—the hour hand pointed to Goldie and the hourly hand pointed elsewhere. She raised her head and stared as if it was a compass. "Is he out there?" she asked the man who scratched his beard and then nodded slowly in response. "If you want to find him."

"I do, that's the number one thing I must do," she said, her eyes dancing. She then paused and looked at you. You scowled: it was obviously pointing in a direction away from the mines.

The man, for the first time, acknowledged your presence properly. His eyes glowed blue around his blackened face as if it was burned oak.

"You killed her sibling, have you not? Are you not going to go to atone for your crimes?" he asked with a much harsher and colder tone than the one he spoke to Goldie with.

You waved your iron at the girl. "Who are you to judge? You will believe everything she says? What if her brother was a murderer or worse?"

"He was not!" Goldie snapped her head, practically growling at you.

Usher whistled in through his teeth. "Don't need to, I know from a glare what kind of person you are" --he glanced at Goldilocks-- "and she must be spared."

"Do you not care at all that she made a deal with the Devil?!"

He hovered his palm above her head as if petting her. "It does ... but only in the sense that I need to protect her from the consequences."

You noisily cleared your throat. "Protect her from the consequences, you say? And why is that?" Your grip tightened. "Listen here ... partner, I killed a lot of men, every single one of them deserving the bullet. She made a deal with the Devil and brought my soul here. As far as I'm concerned, we're both in the same boat, and I ain't fixing to save her hide at the cost o' my own. It is not my fault she made that accursed deal, and I don't care what happens to her."

He paused and reached for his revolver, but you let out a harrumph.

"I've only been here for a couple of hours, but I know how it works. You can't force me to do anything, because if you shot me, I'll just reappear elsewhere."

His fingers dug into the leather of the belt but remained on it. "Yes, you are right on that count. Then you are also aware that every person you killed is now hunting out for you?"

"Yeah, I've learnt about that too." You grimaced and then shifted your eyes to the hundred shimmering nails hammered across the coffin's shell. "Does everyone else here have those nails? Can they use them to make the same kind of watch the brat did to track me down?"

He sighed. "Yes, a few of them will."

"So they could be moving for me as we speak."

"Yes, that is why, if you are going to be killed and become a Judged regardless, why not let it be for a good reason, and let Marigold reunite with her brother?"

"Not interested, partner. I'm going to find a way out on my own. I've been in a few predicaments throughout my life, I'll treat this as any other."

"I see ... but there is no way out for you, cowboy. You can't kill the girl to get revenge, from what I see; all you can do is keep running away from those you wronged."

"And if I make a similar deal with the Devil?"

Forlorn surprise flashed across his eyes. "You're going to do that?"

"Is that an option?"

You gauged his reaction. The Usher said no more. You spat and then, with an annoyed click, turned your shoulder at the man.

"I have places to be unless you want to share with me bullets and them nails."

"I ... do not," he said. He looked down at the girl with a slight smile. "What's your brother's name, Marigold?"

Goldie looked and frowned at you. "Henry, he should look similar to me, though we are not twins. If you see him ... "

"Hendrick Kirkland," he said and nodded, "I'll tell your brother you are looking for him, Marigold."

The man lifted his belts and heaved the coffin on rugged his shoulders. He looked at you again.

Goldie nodded and her eyes fell back to the watch, her fingers fumbling with the arrows.

"I hope you will realise the right choice to make, cowboy. If those men you killed are as deserving as you say, then it is really up to you who gets to be happy slaying you first."

"I've killed them all once, I can do it many more times. As much as I need until I find a way out."

"Not with an empty iron you will," he said in a mocking voice.

He walked away, dragging his feet against the grey-blue sand. He soon vanished and disappeared in the mist. Again, you found yourself standing alone with the girl, her hands tightly gripping the pocket watch--the hour arrow pointing to where her brother was. She looked at you

and scowled. Behind her, at a far distance, you saw a bluish light, merging with the opalescent darkness of the endless night, as large as an isolated bell tower, slowly creeping to the left, its smoky light vanishing in the dusk before allowing you to see what it can be.

You turned your eyes away from the lights: any detour you would take might had put you in peril greater than you were already in. No, not until you get bullets. You persisted on your walk with the brat closely following behind you. Her eyes glistened like embers of a campfire, darting up to stare off at the dreary vistas and then down on the accursed watch. She hummed, and you heard her babble, 'I can't wait to see you again, Henry. It's been five years. You survived in this hellhole for so long, but we are going to be together, just you wait ...'

You rolled your eyes, heaving your gaze to the path without marks or prints. You were tired of walking. Not physically: your muscles did not ache and your boots still fit you as well as your cowboy hat. It was the dreariness of this place, the knowledge that you were being hunted, hot burning coals of thirst flaring up inside your throat to evaporate the dew you had--although it wasn't yet unbearable--that made it tiring. Bill had said that the pain lingers--it wasn't going to kill you--but for how long? You scratched your neck.

Goldie legged it towards you. She grabbed your canvas sleeve but instead of making you anchor right away, you dragged her along. You shot her an icy stare.

She returned the venomous look while pulling on your shirt. "Let's go find Henry! The longer we avoid this, the more chance you'll get shot by someone else."

"Are you deaf? Is something wrong with your head?" you said, flipping your arm to toss her off--she clung to your arm like a wrapped bullwhip. You clenched your hand and then punched her in her head. "Let go of me, you snake. Consider yourself lucky that I'm tolerating your company at all. I am not 'saving' your brother."

"Why not?!" she showed her teeth.

"Because ..." --your lower arm joined in your bashing-- "I don't give a shit about your brother or any soul I brought here, or anyone who is fixing to gun me down again. I -don't-."

Goldie's head swung like a timber seesaw as she struggled to keep your eyes locked. "Of all the people you killed, was he not the most innocent?!"

"Innocent," you spat and hit her again. "He did the least wrong, sure, the bounty said nothing about him going farther than thievery, but that--"

"So from all the men hunting you down, he's the one with the right to kill you!"

You grabbed her hair and yanked her away for good. "Let me say it again, as it does not seem you went to a schoolhouse, girl. Nobody is killing me."

"Why, so you are going to search for a way to return back yourself?"

"Yes."

She scowled. "What for? When I found you, you were holed up in that creaky old cabin, all alone. You are ten times older than your shack and your time is almost out anyway, even if you come back. My brother was twelve, he got a whole life ahead. You shortened the life of half a hundred people, and yet you can't spare a few of your own years?"

A few of your own years, she said. Those were the years of retirement you worked by the sweat off your brow for.

"You heard what the old Bill said, girl. The pain of this place stays with you and you lose yourself to it and the Graveyard Frontier itself over time. It applies to your brother too; even if you'll find him, he'll only be a shadow of himself after those years. We've only been here a few hours and I already feel twisted in my soul." You put your hand to your chest.

She gasped for foggy air before proper words left her throat. "Henry's stronger than that. He's stronger than you. Those five years wouldn't have changed him!"

You squeezed your fist, your knuckles crackling with no echo. "You believe this why? Have any of the people we met so far had their heads twisted right?"

"They looked good enough," she said. "If Henry is as 'lost' as them, then I'm completely fine

with it!"

"Unlike those men, he's a kid. Do you not think it was much harder for him to drudge along against the evil forces; and to exist without losing it?"

"You can't know that," she said. She held up her hand—a thin brass chain wrapped around her digits—with the swaying watch under her wrist. "Not until we, I, see him."

You sighed, your gaze briefly grazing the watch. "Do you think the Devil offered you the deal with no strings attached? That is never how it works."

"Ain't none of your freaking business." The girl touched the bruise you left her with. She huffed. "The drawback is that if I fail, I'll stay here, that's more than enough."

You cleared your throat with a short chortle. "And you think that's all it wants from you in return?"

Her brown eyes narrowed into slits. "You know nothing, and I'm not going to tell you anything more."

You shut your eyes and drew in a long deep breath. "Be a cursed soul, then ... You said your brother is innocent if we ignore the thievery. Are you going to turn him into a cold-blooded killer?"

"What are you talking about?"

"How anymore clear should I be here?" You furrowed your brows and leaned in "To get him back you are going to make him shoot me, that's what needs to happen, right? He needs to kill me, like a manslaughter--."

"It's different!" she raised her voice to cut you mid-word. "You killed him first, you send him here to this godforsaken place, that's how it works here, and he'll only be doing it to bring himself back."

"So you are making exceptions to your killing, and to what your brother 'must' do, but killing the men wanted by law doesn't absolve me?"

"Exactly."

"You are a hypocrite."

"You are just talking manure, of course, there's a bloody difference, brother killer."

"I see none, you are not being just or righteous here, girl, but only played by the Devil. I'm sure you are thinking that once you and your brother are free from the Graveyard Frontier and return to the land living, you'll never have to pull the trigger or yank a knife again ... or until it's absolutely necessary? Tell me, will you kill to keep your life?"

"Shut up!" she yelled, grasping and then throwing the rusty revolver at your head. You turned your body, the iron bluntly hitting your arm and then tumbling over the sandy ground.

"So you will, you'll kill and deliver people here." You spread your hands to motion at the hallowed landscapes washed out by the bluish miasma. "To be here like your brother is."

"If they try to kill me or my brother, then this is a place for them!"

"And then, I reckon, you wish to live until your old age, and die without ever letting those souls you'll be 'forced' to kill to ever get their rest by killing you in return."

"I ain't taking no moral lessons from someone like you," she retorted, her voice laced with anger. She picked up a handful of sand and flung it in your way. "Nothing you trick-say will convince me to forgive you!"

You sighed and picked up the revolver she pitched. You briefly shook it free of sand and slid it in your belt, "And so it seems ..." The girl was either too ignorant, too thick, or just plain stupid to understand what you were trying to tell her...or maybe she understood all too well that you were trying to convince yourself as much as you were trying to convince her.

You had nothing else to tell her that you reckoned she wouldn't ignore; you ruled it was better to keep moving ahead. Perhaps, though unlikely, her hopes would ring true, and she would find her brother an unchanged man. Else, the devil would get his dues. You glanced at her with brief pity and then moved ahead, your soles drifting through the sand and leaving your

imprint on the Graveyard Frontier. With a seething expression, Goldie looked as you ignored the watch hand guiding towards Henry and instead trudged to where you deemed right to go. You were not going to be led by a child, neither were you going to walk to your death ... even though Bill said the El Dorado Warren was not a nice place either.

Another couple of hours passed in trudging silence, the soreness of prick marks boo-hooing in mild annoyance. The bullet wound cracked in your luminous flesh as if it was a sunken knife that chipped and then shattered into dozen shards while still inside your shoulder. You grasped your joint but it did little to veil the pain. The only thing keeping your attention from the wound was your thirst: what meagre drops of cactus juice you had in your body were becoming a memory. If Prickly Nicety's nectar was a drink of choice in the Graveyard Frontier, then you hoped you would chance upon it again, even if it was going to dress in the flesh clothing of someone you knew. It wouldn't be another Mercedes. Would it? You knew other people the welcoming and kind presence who could try and challenge your reason besides her, true?

As you recollected their names and visages of them, you heard the sound of creaking metal and then, once you focused your gaze, a dazzling spectral monument in the shape of a windmill--no, a windpump. Standing there was a tower of abandoned opaque lumber that was curved and shifting like mist, similar to the ranch you saw not so long ago. Its eerie glow shifted from pale blue to intense green and cast a dim light which battled but soon faded into the fog. The many unmoving blades flashed under the moonlight, scintillating rust gnawing on the outlines. The rotor ground and groaned, but barely moved an inch. You neared underneath the phantom construction towards the empty pipe, as dry as your throat. You swallowed and scratched your head, was this some sort of joke on the behalf of the underworld?

You dragged your hand against the ghastly pipe. You struck it with your knuckles to no avail.

"Are you thirsty?" you asked her.

"Why should you care?" Goldie said. She crossed her arms and, after a pause, remarked, "No ... I'm neither hungry nor thirsty nor do I feel tired. That's how it works here, it seems."

"Lucky you," you said, not putting much weight into your words. You pointed to your throat. "Looks like your brother's thorns didn't bedevil your body in any way," you said, "but as for me, I feel as dry as a tumbleweed, thirsty enough I can imagine myself biting the dust. If that happens, I'll reemerge God knows where from here."

"Yes, I get it--you are in pain, how bad. How horrible. If we followed into the town instead as I said, you could've found a drink there."

"You suggested we go there before we even stumbled upon the Prickly Niceties," you sighed. You nudged your head up, "We need to pull the blades to see if that'll get the rotor and the pump movi--"

"Us?" she asked, frowning her brows and scowling.

Your fingers trailed a path through your graying hair. "You got an unbreakable soul when you got here, girl. Do you want me to disappear out of your grasp or nay?"

Goldie pouted. Her eyes rolled up to the top of the windmill. "I don't really like" --she swallowed-- "Do it yourself, you are making it hard for me so why should I make it easier for you? The more in pain you are the breezier it'll be for Henry." She cocked her head and, for a second, her irises shrunk. "I know you are going to resist."

You exhaled through your teeth and then spat on the ground. Rolling your shoulders and flexing your arms you approached the twisted timbered tower and, grabbing into the vague spectral wood--chilling, fizzy and wispy to the touch--you began to ascend it. Slowly. Irregularly, your fingers slipped through the wood like it was rotten but it returned to its unstable firmness when you removed your hands and it didn't repeat the trickery on your second tries. Eventually, you stood near the decaying blades. You peered towards the horizon but the hanging haze hid anything of interest, the shadows of the hanging billows shrouding everything else.

You approached the edge of the platform, steadying yourself in the harrowing moonlight as if you were closer to it than it was within the Graveyard's Frontier law. You reached beneath the closest blade with your fingers, and, as soon as you brushed against the rusty iron, you feel a piercing bite, your shining skin cut to the bone.

This was going to be painful ...

You released the blade with a flinching gasp. You took a look at the wounds, the ghostly flesh shifting back onto its place, mending the cuts but not the pain of it. You cursed--Fuck!--and waved your hands to make sure the only damage was the burn of the cut. You sighed and turned to a piece of the scaffolding, grasping it first and then pulling it to break to use it as some sort of clutch. The devilish wood hissed at your touch, its palish glow dwindling the closer you came to breaking a piece of it. It tonelessly cracked as you pulled a clutch-worth of lumber; big enough to use as a medium between you and the sharp iron. Almost weightless, it lost its fiendish light and, moments after, vanished from your hands into a cyan mist. You held into the dying sparks, but the dust soon resettled where you broke it off and reappeared.

It didn't seem like it was made using nails, at least. With an annoyed sigh, you took off your vest and covered your naked hands with it, approaching the blade for the second time. You grabbed into it and felt the edge cut into your soul, the thick cloth doing not much short of nothing. You yelled in pain as you turned the blade with a hollow grind. The gears rang above your head like a slowly cracking bell as the edge cut you again. You pulled the blade all the way down below yourself and further ... Shuddering from pain you approached the tower's edge, clenched your fists, bit your lip and then spent an unpleasant moment with the anguish.

"Is there anything at all?!" you yelled, your voice cracking from a duet of pain and thirst.

You could swear Goldie rolled her eyes. "Yes! There's something," she yelled back, "but you better climb down faster, there ain't much there!"

Your palms felt as if they were cut by an executioner's clean sever, only to regrow to be cut again--an existence worthy of a damned Hellworld. You took a moment to bargain with the fresh sensation before you began the descent. Your hands infrequently passed through the unstable scaffolding but it was less worry climbing down. You jumped off and onto the ground when the height got negligible, raising a dust cloud beneath your feet. You came within the reach of the damp pipe ...

Goldie stood not far from it, her palms cupped together with a murky black liquid held in them.

You raised your pained arm. "Don't even think about it, brat."

She smirked. "Think about what?"

"About drinking it yourself."

She cast her gaze at the drink. "There's no way I'm drinking this shit."

"... or about throwing it on the ground."

"I would really like to, just so know that," she said. "Fine. Do you -want- to drink it?" she rose her hands.

You stopped in front of the girl and looked at the spirit, blackish and watery, shifting the visage of her glowing skin and bones. It didn't look that appealing. You took off your Stetson hat and span it in your hands to point the crown downwards. You removed your vest and a part of it on top of the under brim, gently pressing a cavity.

"Drop it here," you said.

"Tsk." Goldie clicked her tongue and opened her hands, pouring the efforts of your sweat onto the cloth. The black water trembled as it fell on top of your vest but then it settled still, and, very slowly, began to filter through the canvas and cotton. Goldie waited impatiently as you watched, drop by drop, the fluid seep through the fabric without leaving any stains or muck. Your hands quavered from the cuts as you kept the hat steady. After several long moments, you removed the vest and looked inside.

The liquid was as black as before. Either the makeshift filter wasn't good enough or this is how the underground water looked in its purest form in this hellhole.

You hesitated yet eventually rose the hat to your chin, smelling the onyx fluid. It had no smell, no foulness that anything not meant to be drunk should have had. Then again, this was the underworld, the Graveyard Frontier, things didn't act, feel, or smell the way they were supposed to. You glanced at the still steel blades of the windpump; someone had made this thing, somehow, to pump the liquid from the grounds below. Would someone go through all that trouble just to pump poison? You reckoned it to be unlikely...but if this windpump was truly crafted by Purgatory herself, then it wouldn't make sense for it not to try to seduce you with the blades already spinning and the water pouring.

You took a bitty sip, swirling the water between your cheeks for any faults. It tasted like water, freshening and quenching; there was also a strange mellow bitter taste, noticeable but sparse; it tasted like an over-roasted coffee, tolerably charred and smoky. You swallowed and, after a brief pause, you then raised your hat to take a second drink. There was only a handful of the strange liquid for you to drink, and in only half a dozen mouthfuls you emptied your hat off it. Your thirst was sated, just a tad, but there was also something else ... you felt heavier and tenser, your feet sinking deeper into the sand.

Goldie narrowed her eyes. "What in all hell is happening to you?"

You didn't feel like you were dying, however, but something did feel different. Wrong. You stood up, your body denser and heftier than before. Underneath the luminous skin, your ordinary alabaster bones had become charred black and had a rugged grainy texture. Your unsteadily shining flesh felt constricted as if the bones clung to it tighter than ever before ...

"My bones turned black," you said.

"I can see -that-," she huffed and then pointed her finger at your chest. "Anything else?"

You paused, looking over yourself; your every bone was blacker than before. "I feel a tad different," you said, "but I'm not sure what exactly is happening." Your thirst was delayed. You looked over yourself once more and then took a step forward, your body lowering slightly yet much deeper into the desert plains as if it was snow.

In the distance, beyond the veil of mist, a shifting light caught your eye. It was in the very loose semblance of a horse, its shape burning a pure white hue with dancing spectral outlines. It drew nearer, or so it looked that way.

You shifted your gaze from your bones to the spectre. Cursing through your teeth, you took hold of Goldie's elbow and scorned her once she complained.

"Be silent," you said, motioning towards the figure which you put hope in that she noticed too.

Goldie grumbled at you initially, then quickly covered her mouth, as if trying to stifle any sounds or words that might escape through her hands. The both of you hurried behind the construction that was neither tall nor especially wide, but enough to take cover behind. Leaning against the tower's shimmering emerald and sapphire tones, you waited for it to draw nearer; and it did. It was a stallion, a ghost, with a rider on top. The horse paced, his hooves flowing above the untrodden sand as it neared the windpump and halted with a whine.

The rider, his bones blacker than yours, took his hands off the reins and slid off the fiery horse, his boots landing on the ground with a hollow thwack. He was without a hat. A loose-fitting oilcloth duster covered his body together with similar-looking leather trousers. Dropping down over his upper lip was a thick horseshoe moustache.

The man approached the steed's backside and from it deftly pulled down another shadowy figure, whose flickering flames emitted a dim yet distinctively sharp purplish-white hue, unlike the bluish glow emanating from your, his, or Goldie's flesh. The rider picked the man off the ground and then pushed him towards the tower's hulk. His victim let out a mournful sound as he wobbled to the tower, all of his body shuddering and his eyes hollow of any life. Once he

approached closer, you saw that chains with links of different sizes and shapes were wrapped around his chest and lower body. Around his neck, a large, opaque metal collar hung like that of a slave. His wrists and ankles were bound in bracers, shackles, and leg irons, each tethered to a ball of metal with thin links that seemed almost invisible, like strands of spiderweb glinting in the light but, to him, they seemed real and a burden.

The prisoner grasped the planks of the half-corporeal structure and, gasping for air and then clenching his jaw, pulled himself up. The wood creaked echoing your attempt, but the weight of the heavy anchors seemed to be nonexistent to the structure, as there was little difference. The windmill's traps were the same, and as he ascended higher, the man's hands phased through one of the scaffolds. In a moment of panic, he grasped onto the one below, but lost his grip and tumbled down to the ground with a clamorous clatter.

The cowboy snapped the whip, thick as a snake's body it cracked in the air inches away from the poor man's face and the thorns surrounding the braided leather scarred over his body. "Don't go dying on me, you rascal! I brought you here to do a job, and you are going to do it," he said. "Now, start climbing!"

The man stood up, his empty irises briefly glancing to where you stood. He then turned his attention back to the tower before him, leaving you wondering if he had truly seen you or not.

As soon as the cowboy became distracted by the captured climber the malignant windpump you stepped back, and then walked into the thick graveyard mist. Swivelling her gaze from you to the two men, Goldie let out a low-volume hiss and then her darkened figure followed you. With her petite limbs, she scurried to catch up with you, to avoid losing you in the fog. She glared at you in silence once she could see your face; you had no intention of getting rid of her right now, but she didn't need to know that. You put two fingers to your lips and then turned away from her, quickly and quietly moving forward from the sights of the two men—one a slave and one a slaver.

After a few minutes, you halted your stride and glanced behind your shoulder. Bedevilled blades howled in the distance. You could no longer see the blades—nor the windpump—but their churning and clattering rang out like a pleading presence. The deep invisible cuts on your palms burned in response to those sounds. You met Goldie's gaze.

"For a moment, I wondered if you were going to stay and lend a hand to the man in chains," you said.

"No" —she swallowed and looked up from her childish height with her eyes squinted— "the only thing I care about is Henry, no one else."

"Good," you stalled on the last two syllables. "Good, we are on the same page. I don't care about the man's well-being to help either."

You walked, your charred bones now lumbered with vehement weight and strain, tempered by the water you drank. The other man, you reckoned, he had a horse, he had a whip designed by devils, and his bones were black like yours. You didn't know the exact effects of what changed within you, but either it was a drug you now had to deal with or something beneficial; you prayed it was the latter ...

You saw Goldie look behind her shoulder a few more times until the sounds were muted by a long distance. The elusive El Dorado Warren remained hidden from your sight. Were you even going the right way? Was it even there? How convinced even were you that Bill didn't lie so that you wouldn't find him? And even if he didn't, you only had a single direction given to follow, and you had plenty of distractions since. There were no landmarks but the moon to readjust your inner compass, and though you made notes in your head, they were just that. You had to hope that the harvest moon wasn't here to harvest your suffering but to—passively—assist you.

Goldie shadowed you like a ghost, like the Grim Reaper she pretended to be. The silence felt oppressively tense, not to your liking.

"Well now," you said, "do you already have a plan on what are you going to do once you

drag your brother out of here?"

She paused and smirked ever so slightly. You glanced elsewhere to not see her face. "You want me to believe you accepted your fate? Well if you did, we should be walking to him."

You let out a loud sigh. "Whether I did or not, we are still going to need bullets." The ill-fated burden of your weighty bones had Goldie easily keep up with you—even soon catch up.

"I guess," she said, obviously annoyed. She cleared her throat and then spat out. "Why are you asking?"

You shrug one of your shoulders. "Just wondering."

"For someone living on your own in a far-away cabin you sure crave for any scraps of a conversation, brother killer."

"Forget I asked."

"What are we going to do after," she said as if ignoring your last words. "Anything we want, together, as a kind. We'll find a job, prove our worth, build a life somewhere safe."

You blinked and turned your head back at her. "You ... you got no damn ideas or plans on what you are going to do after this?"

"Screw you, I just told you," she said. "What did you expect me to say?"

"I had no expectations, and you still managed to come up short." You saw her brows furrow. "Do you think the fact that your once-dead brother is alive won't be a problem?"

"Why would it be?"

"The people who saw him die? The people who buried him? His grave? His bounty?"

She waved her hand as if waving away all the concerns you raised. "Our only relatives probably never heard, and no other people cared. As for bounty, it was five years ago."

"You might be right, you might not. I haven't even heard any tall stories about the dead coming back. Will he raise from his grave, his body rotten?"

"No." Goldie looked you in the eyes and hesitated. "No, his body will be alright. I think." Her brown hair rippled as she rocked her head. "I know, that's what the Devil promised me!"

"The Devil promised you," you said with sarcasm. "Anything else he said?"

Goldie scratched her head, tightening her locks within her grip. "You think I'm some dumb kid, do you? I'm not. He didn't say anything that'll help you escape if you are wondering."

"Can't say I wasn't, but if there's a way for both you, me, and your brother to leave this place in one piece, wouldn't you reckon that would be for the best?"

She harrumphed. "Even the way I'm doing it is unconventional, brother killer. I doubt there's another one to make everyone happy, and I doubt I want you to be happy."

"Do you care more about bringing back your brother, or having your revenge, brat?"

"Both," she said with no hesitation. She pushed her finger at her head. "I would prefer both, those five years I lived without him are still here."

"You'll barely remember them when you're as old as me," you said with a sigh. "So, did you sign some kind of written agreement, a piece of paper?"

"Of course, and if I don't keep my part of the deal he's going to take me to fiery hell court with hell judges and I'm going to have to hire a hell lawyer or two to defend me."

"Fine, fine. I get the gist: no contract."

Goldie kicked the dirt and then leaned towards you. "There was, he ain't tricking you, he made sure a few times that I understood the deal."

"Were you not afraid of him?" It's the Devil for God's sake!

She hesitated, her voice as firm as a string. "No ... he ain't that monstrous, least not from what I saw. He was a black, dressed as any other man. Only his eyes were red; that and his voice were the only giveaways. Well, and the fact that he appeared to me in the middle of the highway crossroads, in the middle of the night." She paused to remember. "He said he was waiting for someone else, but my request would do."

"You -really- aren't bothered by your deal?"

"If he had offered me to sell my soul in exchange for my brother's ... well, I would have to think. But he didn't ask my soul, he said he would allow an exchange of Henry's for yours."

"And if it fails, then he'll get yours," you corrected her.

"... I'm not going to. You won't go to Hell if Henry kills you, you'll stay here in the Graveyard Frontier, like everyone else. Henry will go back, and so will I. What is there for you to return to?"

You shook the still-wet hat by its crown. "Now that I'm aware what sort of afterlife awaits me here? First things first, I'd like to reconnect with some of my kin and my old pals with the time I've got left. I never knew what to expect, but if it's an eternal purgatory, then sharing a drink and a few tales with them would be downright grand."

Goldie narrowed her eyes. "You want to meddle with Henry's one chance just so you can say your goodbyes? Try better."

You glared hard at her. "I'm not bothering to convince you, you rodent. Were you even asking in earnest?"

"Not really."

You cracked your blackened joints, dismissing her. "... and now that I'm aware of the Graveyard Frontier, I want to return to my bounty hunting days and sent a few killers whose victims await them here."

Her pace slowed down, the raised dust settling on the bottom of her jeans. "You want to kill ... more people?" she spoke, her voice almost choking. "Am I understanding it right?"

"It ain't fair that innocent folk are stuck in this pit, either, just for being gunned down. Don't you think people here deserve some sort of justice? At least one of them per killer?"

"I know that Henry deserves his damn justice."

"If we ignore Henry--"

"Why" --she raised her voice, her tiny fists clenching-- "should we ignore Henry?"

You sighed and rubbed the hairy edges of your neck. "For fuck sake kid ... is there anything else in your mind besides him?"

Her irises sharpened like polished daggers, whittling you like silver birch. "Why should there be?" she said, tameless impatience growing.

You sighed again. It's not healthy, you thought to yourself. You walked furthermore in silence. However, the words neither of you spoke were only a small part of the cacophonous whole as if the open plains sifted every sound through a fine mist of echoing. Your bones creaked and cracked, your clothes rustled, Goldie's teetering steps crunched the sand beneath them, the rolling tempest clouds rumbled like cracking ceiling, and the forlorn moon hummed as if waves splashed on its unseen white terrain.

Then you heard a whistle, a quiet and distant one. You broke your stride. The swollen fog lightened and settle into the blue-grey plains. Granite flats, cracked into stretching expanses of hundreds of massive ragged tiles, appeared to you, no longer hidden by the mist. Your boot stepped on one such unyielding rock, covered in a grainy crust that fell as if barely clinging to the surface of the piece. The moon shimmer began to dance on the now-cleaned coarse-grained stone. Each monolith plate was unlevelled, stretched, bumped and fractured by a few inches between the other, yet the land still appeared as flat as a pancake. White gold, iridescent with intense colour, connected each fissure and crack, solidified yet seeming liquid and flowing.

You took a moment to admire the scenery before heading to the whistle. There, a few yards away, almost unseen unless one was looking for it, was a deep crevice, veiled by the scintillating white light of its walls and uncarved steps descending into a pocket of darkness, large enough to be a mineshaft. A pile of pickaxes laid in a pile nearby, emitting an eerie green and blue glow from within their opaque forms. Another whistle echoed from within the tunnels beneath and then a blurry shadow jumped off the wall, trembling and then slowly growing with each moment after.

You called out for Goldie to approach, and she did. You grasped her shoulder firmly and tilted your head towards the shadow; you hoped she would take the point.

"Someone there," she said.

"Yes, and you can take a bullet better than me if it's someone hostile," you said, releasing your grip and pushing her with your palm. "I'll vanish elsewhere if I die."

"Yeah-yeah," she grumbled "I know that. Sure, I can take a bullet, but I'd rather not because it hurts, and because I'll be doing it for you."

You rolled your eyes and then came to the edge of the chasm. You drummed your fingers over the stitches of your leather holster before you slid them off, deciding to appear nonthreatening to the nearing silhouette. Carrying on with their whistles, the living soul drew near. As you heard a sudden thrashing of wings you stepped aside before half a dozen canaries careened from the mine, their wings glowing like those of fireflies. The songbirds chirped with haunting cadence as they circled the plunge like vultures.

When you lowered your gaze a man was in your sight. He was tall but lank with scrawny body and square shoulders. His chin was chiselled sharp and his cheeks were sunken like stone reliefs. Over his neck was a bolo tie, the onyx stone shining with the bright light of a recently bought oil lamp. The man was gripping a pickaxe—unlike the ones huddled together in a heap close by, it looked real, with a solid wooden handle and a hardened iron head. Despite his height, the pick wasn't too small, it was the ideal length and shape. In his other hand was a burlap sack, filled and tied by a braided leather knot. He had no hard hat, but a stripped bandanna with the blues, whites, and reds of the American flag. One of the ghost birds dived into the gulch to land on the man's shoulder. He let out a whistle, a tune, and then twisted his dim glowing arm and the white bones that were visible beneath it.

"Huh ..." he said, tapping the wood against the shoulder of his shirt. "Huh ..." His gaze fell on the girl and then back at you. "Charred Bones', I heard. Trying to rob me?"

"No, that ain't me," you said, not moving any closer to him.

"Not you?" His eyes briefly widened as he tilted his head. "There is one thing. One thing about him. 'Charred Bones' black bones. Only one like that."

You looked down at him. You rolled your hat over your elbow and then fit it on your head to then tip it towards the man. "Make me a second one. The name's Aug."

Again, he looked at Goldie who, as if to your annoyance, said nothing. The man rolled his shoulder to position the pickaxe and then ascended a few more steps.

"I haven't heard that," he said. The man's glowing blue gaze crept up and down your body. "If not for ambush. Why are you here?"

You gestured with a nod behind him. "Well," you said, "if this is the El Dorado Warren, I'm here to get some feeble iron. Is there any in there?"

"Among many other things." Concealed spoils within the man's sack rattled with the sounds of ore and iron. "As for advice. Don't. It is too dangerous."

"Dangerous you say ... not dangerous enough to stop you?"

He drew closer. He placed one of his feet firmly on the canyon's ridge and then looked over the pile of picks. "You'll get lost there. Like many others."

"Many others?" You followed his glance and furrowed your brows. "What do you mean?"

"The mine wants miners. It lures them inside. Then most get lost."

You swallowed hard. "But do you know of a way to keep me from getting lost down there?"

He shook his head. "Less of a way. More of an expertise. You might gain it." He climbed out of the pit and passed you by. "You want to trade?"

You caught the nudge. "I wish I had anything to barter with," you spread your arms. "But I'm afraid I don't have anything of interest to you."

"Anything to drink?" he said, his voice as dry as grinding millstone.

"I wish I had some myself."

He scoffed. "I will be going. My name is Perry. Remember it or not." He took a few steps forward, but Goldie stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

"Where are you going now?" Goldie asked the man.

"I thought you mute," he said. He tapped his collarbone. "A town that's near. They're waiting to trade."

"A town" --her noggin turned to you as she waved her hand-- "we should be going there."

You gave a disdainful snort. "I need to replace the bullets you wasted, kid. I am not going to any town without some."

"Then ... Then ..." Repeatedly she gripped and then let go of her fists. "You got your revolver, just exchange the things he got for it!"

Perry's eyebrow perked as he inched his gaze at you.

"Why the hell would I need bullets if I lose my iron? Have you lost your senses?"

"You got two! You got the gun you stole from me, you can just use that one!"

"It barely works."

"It works well enough, or do your gunslinging skills depend on how good the gun is?"

Damn snake! "You are not going to rile me up."

Perry balanced the pickaxe on the ground. "You got an iron? Can I see it?"

You reached for the holster and pulled out your keepsake by its pearly grip.

He nodded. "Something not from here. Out of this wasteland. I'll make it fair. Want a fair deal?"

You turned the firearm in your hand. No, you didn't want to, but you doubted he would be as interested in Goldie's rusty piece as in this.

"Or maybe," Perry said. "We can do gamble." He scratched the pocket of his pants as if his ghostly skin was itching. "Winner takes all."

"You got cards?"

"I do have cards."

Pondering for a moment, you said, "No." The iron was your prized possession, and you weren't willing to let go of it. Goldie glared at you like a rattlesnake as you refused the man his offer. You tipped the barrel and, with a flick of your wrist, twirled the six-shooter back into your holster. From your belt, you took out the girl's worn-out iron. You gripped the bottom of her gun and then lifted it to present to the man. His expression soured. Barely.

"I've heard feeble iron ain't that durable," you said. "If that's the case, even this thing here will be better over what you got, as it's from the outside world, no?"

"It's not durable," Perry said with an unmoving stare. "I see it's weathered. Old. Feeble iron guns ain't."

Your shoulder ached as you spoke. "It can still fire a round."

"I will not trade," he cut you off.

Suit yourself, you shrugged your shoulders. You snatched one of the dozen pickaxes and tested its weight in your hand, feeling its ethereal lightness. You walked past the towering man and then skipped on the hard granite steps. You nodded to the man in a farewell and then, lazily eyeing Goldie, you took another step down.

"Not willing to trade," the man repeated, making you stop. His hands trembled as he squeezed his pants. "But I will gamble."

You sighed. "I'm not gambling with my soul."

"No, not your soul. That revolver for iron. Smidgen of feeble iron."

You placed your free hand on your hip. "How much is a smidgen?"

"It's three bullets worth."

"For the used gun?"

"For the used gun," he echoed.

The man was desperate for a deal, but if he wasn't going to barter with you, you weren't going to entertain his whims either.

You shook your head and then holstered the iron. "Thanks, but no thanks, partner." As you descended, the granite ledge sliced through the hounding moon like a sharp blade and, with one more step, buried all of it entirely. For the first time, the spotless satellite no longer loomed above your head, although its sickly white glow still bathed the sparkling crevices and cracks. Goldie sat on the edge of the hole. She gnawed her lips as she watched you leave.

"You're not going?" you asked without much concern.

She hissed in response. "I'm not interested. Damn it, you are doing whatever you want! I think I'll just stay here, yeah. Come back quickly."

You let out a weary sigh. "Do as you please, but if I don't make it back, you'll be none the wiser, and you'll just be sitting here like a lost fawn."

Goldie's eyes widened as the truth of your words hit her like a slap. She grunted and then, slapping her pants clean, approached the heap and snatched a pickaxe identical to yours with both hands. Grunting under her breath, she bounced down the first gradual slope. She stared you down, her bedazzling immortal body trembling.

"I was going to tell you to pick one up," you said, nodding at the pick she held.

She spat. "I didn't pick it because you were going to ask me to! God damn!"

Perry approached the edge and looked down at you, his shadow casting over both you and the girl and his outlines glinting bright under the moonlight. He whispered something too low for you to hear.

He clenched his hands until they stopped trembling. With a dejected sigh, he returned the pickaxe to his shoulder. "Let's gamble anyways. Hear me out," he said, pausing. "If you go down. If you come back. Find me. On those conditions. I'll give something worthwhile. I bet you won't. You will venture inside. You will not return. Bet on your fortune."

You narrowed your eyes. "Yeah," you drawled. "Maybe some other time."

With each further step down the chthonic staircase, the clinging sparks of moonlight dwindled further into subdued drops, their brilliance quickly fading into the darkness. Soon, the only light remaining was the washed-out greenish glow of your pickaxe. Goldie's similar flickering illuminated the returning ascent. Your glistening skin seemed weak and fleeting, like a reflection of a candle on a surface of a lake. It seemed that your charred bones weakened the shine from your flesh. Damn it.

Eventually, you reached the bottom of the hole. The tunnel was your height--undersized for Perry--and opened with a shambled jagged arch as if carved by unskilled hands; perhaps unpaid demons. You looked at Goldie, who remained pouting and silent. With a sigh, you stepped inside the El Dorado Warren. Your plan of action was simple: dig up enough of the feeble iron to never need more and get out.

You flicked the weightless pickaxe like an ethereal torch, its light illuminating the shifting colours of the walls. Waterfalls of frozen mercury swallowed the pickaxe's glow--what remained of hazy radiance dimming and fading into pure black. There was no mist or fog, and the air was dry and warm. The granite seemed to change colours as if made from chameleon skin, turning black and then pristine white as you shifted your gaze.

"You are awfully quiet," you said as you turned your head to look over your shoulder, but Goldie was gone.

Your leg twisted as you abruptly stood still.

"Brat?" you asked, waving your pickaxe to see no one hidden in the shadowy corners. You circled your body. "Goldie?" You tried out her name but heard no response. Have someone, or something, snapped her without you noticing? You looked forward, then back and suddenly realized that the roughened stone and serrated granite faces appeared much the same but very actually different! Tiny, small, almost invisible, but you could swear there were differences!

The tunnels were changing their forms, or their entire design when you weren't looking at them; such was the feeling you had. When you moved forward they stood still. In the ghost illumination of your pick, the granite wall in front of you showed little difference from the rough neighbours around it. You grasped the pickaxe's hollow handle and then struck the middle of the speckled surface with a steady hand: not too forcefully but not too half-heartedly either. Your pickaxe clanged against the sheathing of the granite as you engraved a vertical stripe, barely an inch in size or depth. The companionless ringing crept against the crevices and cracks and then scrambled into the darkness where the living tunnels shifted and changed. You stepped back and made note of your work.

Alright, you thought to yourself. The sentience of those ghost-carved galleries didn't let them feel pain from being struck, or at least not immediately. With harshened breath and stubbornly returning thirst you waited for any dismal signs, but, as your eyes remained on the scratch you made, there were none. You raised your hand to touch it but found nothing suspicious. You turned away your gaze, and when you looked back at the wall, the mark was gone. In the dim green light, it was impossible to differentiate one grainy surface from another, but it was clear that no traces of your strike remained.

Gripping the pick with both hands you bent your body and hit the wall for a second time, chiselling a mining scar twice as large as the last one. A much louder sharper sound momentarily cut your ears and then, as if disregarded by the walls which were supposed to echo it, was gagged by them instead. Staring directly at it you blinked, as it was human nature, and, to your faint hope, it was there. Gripping the handle again you, this time intentionally, shut your eyes, counting to no more than two seconds before opening them again. This was enough for the bedevilled subterranean face to shift, change, or swallow the mark without any sound or spectacle.

You lifted your head to the darkness of one of the passages. You expected the wall to change again the next time you looked back, as it has done several times now. Before you could ruminate further, you heard a sound from the deepest unseen distance. It was faint yet inviting; it took you a few seconds to realise it was a human song.

You kept your gaze fixed ahead and your eyes steady and unmoving to avoid the tunnels morphing around you. You crept towards the source of the singing in the darkened passageway. Gripping the borrowed pickaxe you skulked around the cavern walls, circling the bent drifts with your pick's ghostly light as your torch. With each step you took, the melody grew louder and clearer, rising in its height. The source of it wasn't too far.

You stepped into a chamber that was wide and expansive, yet also confining due to the crushingly low ceiling: there were only inches to spare for your head. Twilight hues flooded the den from the roof, the colours merging with the song. Above, spread over the entire ceiling, hung a chain of purple stalactites in the likeness of a web woven by hundreds of spiders. An illuminated vent, roughly the size of a revolver, extended ahead from the carved meshwork, nearly at its centre but not quite. A returning melodic medley of three women's voices flinched you: it was your mother's, Mercedes', and another you couldn't quite place. You couldn't remember who it belonged to and you cursed yourself for it: despite how soothing your mother's voice was, or how serene Mercedes was, this third, remote yet recognisable songster overshadowed them both. Shimmering like morning dewdrops, bluish-red sparks coated and drifted down the spider silk strands as if they were guitar strings. The more the lines scintillated, the more inviting and familiar the voices became.

You yawned, feeling tired for the first time. You shook your head. Where once your charcoal bones made you tense and heavy, now you felt relaxed and calm, drifting into sleep. Sleep? You recalled Bill's word, that in Graveyard Frontier one does not need to eat, sleep, or drink ... was this an exception? You swallowed another yawn and then realised that the brief thirst you felt was gone. The pain from the Prickled Niceties, the endless ache in your palms from the rusted blade, and even the gunshot wound from Lucifer's puppet ... all of it was gone.

Your bones stayed charred and black, but, in your eyes, even they were becoming blurry and faint.

Your body felt soft and your mind was drifting into the fog. It took a great effort to stagger against a wall and, as you turned your head, you noticed that the way you came from was gone. The cavernous chamber became enclosed and, while it did change when you looked away and back again, the replacing stone walls remained sealed.

You pushed your back against the jagged surface of the cavern wall and let go of the feather pickaxe to have it settle silently underneath your feet. You covered your ears as tight as you could and then you began to sing the foulest nastiest drinking song you were aware of—full of slurs, curses and double entendres. Your stare hung on the shimmering dripstones that hung from the ceiling as you awaited a reaction from it. The gradient glow intensified.

More and more sparks settled on the petrified ceiling cords, brightening from softly flickering pinks to blinding purples. Soon, the once mellow voices resounded in your mind despite your best efforts. Whenever your intentionally bad singing had no effect, or it made it even worse, you didn't know. What you did know was that the serenade oatmeal heightened while remaining soft and soothing.

In addition to feeling calm and relaxed, you also felt dizzy, as if you had been drinking the strongest rotgut for the whole night and the sleep would have been a remedy for both your hangover and exhaustion. The sharp details of the cavern began to flash and blur. You fumbled to reach for the pickaxe before you finally felt its handle. The unprotected ear you couldn't cover let in the low-pitched yet almost deafening sounds of magic; like a bell ringing inches away from it. You quickly covered it with your elbow, but it could barely deafen the cursed singing. You limbed with your shoulder scrapping against the sealed cavern. You kicked and felt to no avail.

You bit the inside of your cheek to bring a pain you could focus on. Dazed by the shifting sounds, you inhaled. Instead of trying to drown out the singing of the gemstone stonework, you attempted to join in with the barely familiar melody. Each verse you recalled accurately silenced the painfully deafening melody, but when you stumbled over the wrong lyrics or replaced a word with a hum, the sound abruptly returned with a deafening resound, without a moment's pause between the silence and loudness. You closed your eyes and waited until you could sing along. Then, blinked them open in the brief mute moment. Carved into black stone at the other end of the cavern was a narrow, tight passage. Enough to squeeze through, you reckoned. You snarled when the sudden crooning echoed in your ears. As long as you kept your gaze steady, you could see the way out, unwelcoming as it was.

You felt both dizzy and drained as you stumbled towards the narrow egress. Despite your efforts to shield your ear, the singing resonance grew so loud it effortlessly penetrated the spectral flesh of the hand you held over your ear; even though you tried to sing along with the song you barely knew, it scrambled your hearing and consciousness when you botched the lyrics. Your sluggish feet defied your impulse to escape, slowing your dash to a plod. You squeezed and twisted your ear, adding more pain to prevent yourself from collapsing. You felt engulfed by the scintillating hues of the twilight overhead as you sneaked beneath where it was the loudest.

You swung your pickaxe in an arc, plunging the blade into the tangled web of twilight stalactites. The sparkling dew crackled as your pickaxe blade scraped it off the ceiling, the once melodious singing twisting into a cacophony. You writhed and cried as the changed melody no longer sought to lull you to sleep, but only cause you pain. You dragged the pickaxe for several feet above your head before twisting and pulling it down, a shower of purple dust and debris cascading behind it; very little humanity remained in the high-pitched clamour. You squeezed yourself into the passageway and then moved away from the chamber.

The rough granite scraped your seams and nicked your ghostly skin as you pushed through the barely-passable crawl space. Your hand grasped the open air before you pushed your entire

body free and collapsed onto the lukewarm parched terrain. The luminous glow of your pickaxe shielded you from the warren's abyss. The repeating voices burned in your ears like the voice of a scalped preacher gasping and choking in his slow and anguishing death. It didn't linger for long. Echoes of your wounds reappeared all at once. The prickling stabs, the shot shoulder, the drying thirst, the fleshy gash across your palms ... none of those afflictions were enough to rip and scatter your soul--yet, together, at the same time, they could. You felt like dying. You were dying. You closed your eyes as your spectral flesh flared and twisted. You felt your charred marrow twist and curl into fleeing essence, seizing it with a savage wolf's unyielding bite. You laid in the ghostly light for a long time. The voices returned in one ear.

"That was a fine shot, little man." "If I weren't in such a dire need of cash, I wouldn't take it, Heart; that was quite the night." "The townsfolk are looking to add to the bounty reward. You really going to turn down their generosity?" "I wish my husband was at least half the man you are." "You might be the most cherished man in the West, Aug." "Impressive. Let's give it another go."

Your bones loosened and your ghostly skin stitched itself together. You grunted at the flattery and pushed your wrists up against your earlobe. Other faith voices echoed in your other ear.

"What ... what do you mean he ain't not a wanted criminal?! You ... you can't just up and leave!" "You shouldn't be stealing, August, it ain't worth the trouble." "And here you are, gunning down a woman for her voice." "You are gonna die miserable and alone, Aug." "She's gone, August. Three weeks ago. Tuberculosis. She wished you'd been there so she could see ya."

Shit. Fuck. What?! You covered your ears and muffled the praises and condemnations. Shimmering in the bluish-greens you noticed a dozen broken blueberry shards resting on both your shoulders. With a grunt, you dusted off the ambers into your palm and, to your relief, that helped. At last, the only voice you could hear was your laboured breathing ...

"Hey there, partner," you called out from a safe distance.

The ghostly figure froze. His spine straightened from the hunched posture he had. Lifting his shoulder, he turned his head, his chin pushing against his shoulder. The sunken eyes within his ivory skull flickered with pale blue spark and then, as if it broken, his jaw fell open and his mouth stretched wide. The man released the pick, and with writhing echoing exhale, he twisted his shape and collapsed face first onto the ground. Like an animal he dashed at you on both his hands and legs.

You grabbed and lifted the pickaxe to defend yourself against the deranged miner, but his savage unpredictable movements made him hard to predict. He scampered from one wall to another before lunging at you. You winced as he leaped. His trembling opaque hands gripped your face and forced your eyes wide open. You locked eyes with his crazed gaze.

"Don't close them," he said. "Don't. Blink!" His breaths came out rapid and shallow. "Where did you come from?" He lifted his head. "Is it from there? Don't you fucking blink! Don't turn away your face? Where ... don't!" He raised his voice. "Don't fucking blink, I said! Where is the way out? Is it there? How far is it? Is it far? I said don't blink!"

"Get off me!"

You struck the man's stomach with your knee. His grip weakened as he flinched and grimaced from your blow. You grabbed his collar and then hurled him off you. As his body fell onto the rough solid ground, you lifted the pickaxe pointed the chisel's tip at him. He jerked, falling onto his knees and then dragging his head against the dust-coated floor. Though he was a soul like you, his slate ghostly glow was weathered and dim. He painted and then eyed you warily.

"I don't know a way out," you added after a moment of silence. "Don't you dare touch me again, partner."

The man lurched back on his legs. He gripped his knees with his hands as he recoiled. "The way out is there, just don't don't blink!"

"Too late for that," you said. "I've already blinked more than a few times. I didn't know it was a rule before I got here."

"No ..." he whispered as his voice turned quiet. His eyes, suddenly wide, darter towards the wall he mined; your eyes followed.

"No!" he cried out, dashing towards it and then slapping his palms against the unyielding granite. He scraped his nails against the speckled stone. The efforts of his hard work had disappeared.

He fell on his knees gasping for breath. He began to scratch the tunnel wall in desperation. "Come back. No. Come back. Give it back to me ... Please ... Please!"

You stood there in awkward hush, your pick casting its eerie radiance on the deceiving tunnel walls.

The man's head snapped to you. "It's your fault," he said. "Wait, I see. Your bones ... you are just another twisted creation like the one before. You're not trapped! Damn you!" He punched the wall; his bones crackled like burning firewood. "I'm sorry. I am sorry. Please let me out, El Dorado. Let me out. I left you all your riches! I don't need them!"

You remained still until the man spied out his guts. Once he was out of little breath he had, you asked. "How long have you been here for?"

He wrapped his arms around his stained wear and then curled up on the rock-faced floor. His whole body was wriggling and shuddering.

"Too long," he finally said.

You rolled your eyes. "Too long can mean a whole mess of things. A few days? A couple of weeks? Many months?"

"Months ... I reckon," he rolled on his back gasping for air. The muted embers of his eyes looked up to the gnarled ceiling. "Or days. Or years. I stopped counting."

"It can't be years," you said with a sigh. Can it? For how long the Graveyard Frontier had existed? You scratched your neck. "Instead of suffering down here, have you tried killing yourself? You know: to have your soul rejuvenate aboveground? It's how it works, right?"

His breathing stopped. He wheezed. "You didn't know? You haven't 'died' even once yet? You won't be, the El Dorado keeps your soul!"

Your hand and the pick you clutched wavered. "What do you mean?"

His head rolled as his cheek touched the rugged ground. "It'll regenerate, sure, but down here. You'll always appear down here, even more lost than before."

"Is that right?" Darn. You bit your lip. "You came here alone?"

The man's eyes shifted to you. "I don't know what's up with your bones, but I'll trust you're real." He averted his gaze and closed his eyelids. "Of course, I wanted -all- the riches I could get, so I went all alone. And sure, I got them. I got all the things the people in the Endless Walk need for! Damn it, damn you, it won't let me leave!"

"And what ways have you tried to escape with?"

"Everything you can think of, I've tried. Now, I was just trying to break through those walls by force. But them walls are unyielding."

"There must be a way," you said. "How else would all those other miners who come here and back return to sell what they mined?"

He put his hands on his face and started to sob. "I don't know. I don't know! I wish to know how they've done it. What's their trick? What is it?! Tell me!"

You ignored the man's cries.

"Have you met more miners trapped hereabouts?"

"Many. Lots of them. They were all mad. All lost down here!"

The man didn't count himself as one. Your fingers moved over your neck and then skimmed inside your unshaven chin. "And what's that creature you mentioned?"

You saw him shudder and then tighten his embrace. "It doesn't have a name ... but it's a

frightful thing. A grey hairless hound, it was."

You tilted your head to the side. "Sure, that's not common but doesn't sound like something to be scared of. Something more to it?"

He swallowed and nodded. "It morphs you into cattle. My arm somehow became a cow's leg and my head that of a sheep."

"You look human to me now."

"You return to normal when you die after it's done eating you. So painful. So awful. It's somewhere in here, with us. I don't want to see it no more!"

"Now, now, calm down," you told him as you lowered the pick in a gesture of goodwill. "I ain't planning of leaving just yet, I came here looking for feeble iron, and I'm not returning without getting me some." You hit your hat's brim and then peered down at him. "And after that's done, I'll be more than happy to find a way out together."

The man blinked at you. Scoffing, he staggered from the speckled floor to sit down on it instead. He pushed his knees to his chest and then put one of his hands on the ageless granite. He began to rub it as if hoping to scrub it off like dirt. "You think I'm dumber than you? How do you figure you'll find it?"

You shook your head. "If you and the rest of the prospectors you met had gone mad and lost, that means all of you are doing something wrong here."

"Yeah." He lifted his trembling digit at you. "We erred by setting foot here in the first place!"

You rubbed the temple of your forehead and sighed. "No," you said. "When I was entering the Warren I met a man who was leaving it."

The man let go of the stone and turned to you with his eyes wide open. "You did? A man leaving?"

You nodded. "Correct. I assume you weren't fortunate enough to meet him, or he made sure to avoid you. He had a bagworth of stuff he'd mined."

"He walked out? He just walked out of the mine?"

"In a way," you recalled. "Let's see. He had a real pickaxe, not one you and me picked from the entrance. He also had a bolo tie that shone as bright as a lantern. Oh, and there were ghost birds, flying around him. Perhaps they showed him a way out?" You glanced around the dispersing blue-green lights. "Nothing I'm seasoned to."

The man's bones cracked as he interwove his hands together and then set them on his knees. "Maybe. No. Either he had them on him when he passed, or he used coffin nails to manifest them. If it's the second then ... then ... they would be infused with the powers he needs. Yes, of course, he had everything thought out. Damn him!"

"It's the second time I'm hearing about those 'coffin nails', care to clue me in?"

The man swallowed, seeming to regain his composure—at least in your eyes. "Fine. Sure. I'll tell you. This damn place has many rules and quirks. One of them is the so-called Coffin Field, a place where your casket appears if you get a burial. A proper burial. And everyone else's. I've been there once, but for all it's worth, I didn't get a pine box for myself."

"You didn't?"

"No," he said. He hid his face in his knees and continued talking, his voice much rougher than before. "I died in a mine. Reckon they didn't bother to haul out my body"

"In a mine?" you asked. Was he pulling your leg?

"Yes! I died in a cave-in! And now I'm stuck here. Darn. Again."

You waved your palm at his outburst. "I get it, simmer down. Ain't you suppose to get killed by someone to end up here?"

"That's what they say." He sighed. "Someone fella used a stick of dynamite, I guess they are the ones the blame counts at. Great."

"Not that great," you said what he really meant.

Would they bury you? Your homestead was a bit out of the way, but still within a town's

reach. You had a decent name there. "What about them that do get a coffin? Do they get devil's nails from them? And then one can pull it out to make a thing?" A thing like a watch Goldie had made.

The man nodded with little enthusiasm. "Fishy. Seem like you know more than you are letting on. Are you really here just for the feeble iron? That's all?"

"I reckon I just got a quick wit," you said. "And yes, just need more bullets. Unless there's something else I ought to be interested in?"

"I ain't sure," he said. "Anyhow. Only a person buried can prey on a nail from his coffin, but after that, that nail is fair game for the taking. Ain't nothin' stoppin' it from bein' swiped right off your hands. Plenty of no-good rogues and bandits lurk in the Coffin Fields, waiting for folks to do just that. Even if you do get a coffin, it won't be of much use to you if you're stuck down here in El Dorado."

"Ain't not lie in that." You nodded. "Let's hightail it outta here. These tunnels shift when you ain't looking, so how about we walk back-to-back so they don't pull any more tricks on us?"

With a wobble, using the granite face to assist his clamber, he stood up from the ground and bowed his head. "Sounds like a plan unlike any I got, stranger."

"I go by Aug."

"I'll be Landry."

"Landry, glad to know you."

You cast a glance to where you'd come from--the path that was swallowed by the phantom mineshafts. You clicked your tongue.

"Here's the plan," you said. "Like I mentioned, we'll be walking face to face. I'll be the one walking first, my back facing the darkness. Sounds about right?"

He nodded, "Sounds about right. Yes. I'll be behind you, keeping an eye on what's ahead. I can't say I'm too keen of the prospects, though"

You shouldered your pickaxe. "Not like we got a choice, you and me." You scratched your whiskers. "Before we make an unchanging tunnel, let's find one that's more interesting."

Landry gnawed on his nails; his ghostly fingernails crumbled to dust before reforming again. "I don't know. I ain't sure if we should do that."

You corked your eyebrow.

"You see," he said, "the more we let them caverns change around us, the deeper they take us. The deeper you go, the harder it is to leave, is what I reckon."

"You say that, but I can't recall any kind of descent 'cept from the entrance one. I have only been walking straight, bumps and all."

He hesitated for a moment. The black forelocks of his hair draped over his face, veiling his eyes, his nose, and lips. "Maybe I'm wrong."

"Maybe you are," you nodded. "Come on, let's turn away from it and see what we can rustle up."

You averted your gaze, focusing on the ink-coloured walls instead. Landry let out a sigh and followed your example. On your return look, they tunnels had convoluted again. The new granite walls were nigh on identical to the ones you faced seconds before: marked with surface-level veins and gritty jagged ridges. There was nothing of particular uniqueness you could see. You looked at Landry. You turned your eyes to the unfocused man and gave him a nod. You tried again, two times, but your only luck was to replace one dark tunnel with another.

You spat. "Not even a sound. It ain't giving us anything interesting without exploring first, is that how it is?"

"Yes," Landry said. He pattered the ground with his boot. "There's nothing fortuitous about El Dorado. Not a lick. Zilch."

You shook your head, let out a deep sigh, and then scratched the edges of your brows. "Let's delve in, if it want us to."

Keeping your attention on your new acquaintance, you slid your feet back. "You ready? It's awkward walking like this, so don't be too hasty."

"You shouldn't worry, Aug. Unless there's a clear image of the sky I ain't running."

You snapped your fingers. "Even if there is, you shouldn't. It's best if we have both pairs of our eyes on it."

Landry took a moment to nod. He fell in your pace as you, face towards him, began to walk in reverse. You embarked through several turns for a couple of silent minutes.

"I have a question as well. I'm curious," he uttered, his blue eyes burning into yours. "If you're a ghost like me, what happened to your bones? That ain't normal, Aug."

"It ain't nothing to be riled or scared about," you said. "On my way here, there was a watermill. Before that, I'd stumbled upon some Prickly Niceties and got tricked and pricked. Them things are infamous, ain't they? I was parched as a desert, partner, so any kind of chance to quench my thirst was a godsend. And so I drank the black water that came from the pipe, and it changed my bones black. And it wasn't much I drank. I've tried to clean it, but you can't simply scrub it off. Thorn in my boot."

"Huh. So, no repercussions besides that?"

"Well," you bit your lip, "Nothing I'm aware of besides the colour." You opted not to bring out the owner of the mill with the same bones as you; nor his prisoner.

"Down here there's always a catch, Aug. I doubt it's just a paint for your bones. I don't reckon so. You best figure it out, lest it turns out to be a rattlesnake in your bedroll."

You briefly glanced at your marrow fingertips and returned a nod to the man in front of you. You shuffled back your foot and then another as you stayed the backwards course. You pondered on your change and whether it was a permanent grime on your phantom frame or not. With a sigh, you decided to focus on the--

You heard a crack beneath your boots as the ground underfoot shattered like brittle glass. It exploded. Shards of piebald stone tore your britches and pierced your ghostly boots. Sharp yet tiny, those splinters sliced through the cloth and leather but went no deeper, only barely scrapping your phantom skin. You came to a halt--Landry didn't catch on quick enough. He lost his footing, lost his balance, and collided with you. He wasn't that strong or hefty but it was still enough to force you to take another step back. You closed your eyes, bracing for the worse, but no second shattering came. Landry squinted, then gazed down at the granite foundation. After a short moment, you grabbed the man's shoulders and pulled him back. You turned around and then stood up right next to him.

A deep crack split the ground. Its blackened innards were filled with toothed sharp stones. The other place you stepped on wasn't.

"Apologies," he said, looking at you. "That was too sudden."

"It's all good," you said. You snapped your fingers to turn the man's attention to the ground. "Let's make sure we are looking at the same place here."

"Yeah," Landry sighed. He crouched before the hole you made by stepping on it and then hovered his trembling hand above it. He kept his hand an inch from touching it.

"Got any notion what's happening here?" you asked.

Your eyes trailed the granite walls, its ceiling and the floor, there was no noticeable difference between the place where the ground exploded and where it didn't.

"If it's our luck, we just stumbled upon some feeble stone," Landry said, "and where there's fragile stone, there's feeble iron. This here seems like a deposit."

"How does it look? Can you see it?"

Landry slowly stood up. "Feeble iron? If you've ever been to a mine you'll know, it looks like regular iron ore, but more on the silvery side. The problem's with the feeble stone. Ain't nothing useful about it. It looks like granite because it's so reflective, but it sure ain't." Landry gestured towards the tunnel ahead. "So they look the same. If you step on the feeble stone, it'll

do ... well, you know by now. Them shards can be small, but they also can be sizeable. You can never be sure."

"Feeble iron is what I'm here for. Do I have to break the stone to find it?"

Landry shook his head. "Not always. Feeble iron will be visible, unlike the feeble stone. Sometimes a vein of it will be around feeble stone instead of the granite."

"So, if I'm lucky and only step on the real granite, nothing will go wrong for me?" You saw him nod. "Can't we use picks to see if the path is safe?"

Landry let out a mocking chuckle. "You could. It could get in your eyes or, if it's a large enough chunk of fragile stone, explode like a dynamite bomb. Imagine."

"No, I'd rather steer clear of both," you said. "However, unless we go through here, this tunnel is a no go. We'll need to find another way through"

Landry scratched his flake-laden hair and sighed. "We haven't travelled that far," he said, catching your glare. "If we do that it'll take us further. Deeper."

"Let's not unhammer that nail then. We'll go through here," you said, nodding your head at the tunnel ahead. Maybe pick some fragile iron on your way through, you reckoned.

"We'll have to," he said, returning the nod.

"I'm counting on your to lend a hand."

He tucked his forelocks out of his eyes. "Aug, I may not look that way, but I've been dying and suffering in this cursed place for ages. The pains, wounds, injuries I've got --they all make themselves known every tick of the clock. I'll lend you a hand, but you're the lead rider. I'd like to sidestep adding anymore injuries to my case. Alright? So?"

You let out a groan. "Do you want out or no?"

With eyes like morning embers Landry steadied his gaze and then, as if proclaimed guilty by the judge, he sighed and lifted his hand pick.

"So?" he repeated.

You tilted down your head "I'll go on the left wall, you'll be on the other side. Let's take turns a-probing the ground for steady and safe parts."

He scuffled dandruff off his hair. "I don't reckon that's the savviest of ways to go about it ... but if you want it to be fair." He stepped forward.

You dismissed the man with your glare. Sliding your forefoot a smidge forward, you swung your pick at the floor, splintering the granite. Dusty pebbles spluttered from where the metal of your ghostly pick bit into. You shifted your weight onto your back foot, but no crack, shatter, or explosion followed suit. You swept the spectral sweat off your brow and stepped ahead.

Landry's luck weren't the same. On his first strike, the granite soil ruptured into jagged pieces like he'd bashed a puddle. As he cursed and jumped, the barbed stones tore through his birches and into the flesh of his ankles. He stumbled back and grit his teeth. He glared at you; all you could do was reply with a shoulder shrug, which you did.

The two of you forged on. You reckoned the tunnel tried to even up the score, for the next fragile stone that bursted into smithereens was yours. The chunk was smaller than the one hit by Landry moments ago, and brought you nary a scratch nor pain. You moseyed through the crumpled tunnel of solid real and exploding phony grained stone. The raving miner was right, even with all your trying it was downright impossible to tell the difference between the two. You had a sharp eyes, but it didn't amount to a lick of good.

During your progress plenty of the stones you struck showered you with slicing shrapnel--you'd hit four and Landry ... well, he hit at least nine, and one of them was the size of an arm. The shattering blast sent a hail of hundred shards into him, burying deep all the way up to his neck; a fistful grazed and sunk into your skin, but his body took the blunt of them. Landry slammed the pick down.

"What in tarnation?! You holding out on me, Aug?" With each of his ragged breaths, the phantom flames of his soul swirled around the embedded stones. "Let's swap sides. Come on.

Let's."

You raised your hand to stop him, silent-like. "Hold up, Landry," you said. Hold up." You squinting your eyes to confirm what you'd catch a glimpse of: an outlying spoil. Sunken into—and likely beneath—the blackened stone were petite veins of gleaming ore shining back the bluish-green of your pickaxe. Landry followed your eyes. He scowled and then scratched his foot inside his boots.

"Tell me that's the iron."

"That's the iron," he nodded. He backed a safe distance away. "Ain't the tiniest of lodes. Go get it."

You followed in Landry's footsteps, stepping on the ground well-proven safe. Landry's left eye squinted and his other brow arched as if he was puzzled by what you were trying to do. You gripped and lifted the pick making the aquamarine mist dazzle between his body and yours. You rolled your shoulder and then held the handle with both hands. You turned around to face the shadowed facade. How skilled you were at throwing mining picks? You were about to find out.

You dragged your boot behind the other and then you swung the pick in a high arch above your head. Releasing your grip at just the right moment, the pick soared through the air like a waggon's wheel. Then, with a loud thud, the blunt side of the eye slammed against the vein and granite, tumbled with a ricochet, and finally came crashing down on the ground, splitting and cracking the feeble floor.

Like a geyser beneath a frozen lake, a torrent of splinters and shards erupted, flying in every each way, leaving no place to escape. Another fracture started splitting the ground through the tunnel's depths. With each blink of an eye the crack widened and grew, reaching and bursting apart another feeble stone, sending razor silvers girdling around you like a devil of dust. It all happened in a heartbeat: the crack touching the boulder-sized feeble stone. Like a stash of powder kegs inside a window glass factory, it exploded into many thousands of smithereens.

Time was running short. You shot Landry a semi-apologetic look and then hunkered down on the lukewarm bedrock. Just as you covered your head with your arms and curled up tight, knees pressed against your stomach, you were deafened by a cacophony of shattering glass. Needle-like shards shrouded the cavernous chamber like gnawing grinding dust. You shut close your lids to avoid getting blind blinded—were that be possible or not—or to suffer from an everlasting stabbing pain. You were wrapped up in a blanket, the soft cotton replaced with thorny wicker bushes and the feather filling with crooked nails and barbed wire. You could feel them push against your clothes before sinking into your ghostly flesh. Though each of the shards was no bigger than half the length of your finger, each felt as long as an Indian arrow. Hundreds of them.

You cried, you reckoned, but either the pain numbed your voice or the chorus of fractures and cracks drowned it, you couldn't hear it. It was a pain so fierce you knew that you were on the brink of dying. As if you were bleeding out, your soul seemed to evaporate through each of the tiny wounds you had, like a fleeing mist. What you had become in the Graveyard Frontier, your ghostly essence, was dissolving from your charred skeleton. Knowing you were gonna return didn't ease your pain one bit. Yet then, as your bones neared being stripped bare, you felt your marrow reach out for nourishment. As though each and every one of your molasses bones deformed into phalanges and grasped at the fading spirit. One by one the hundred skeletal fingers clutched the edges of the phantom haze to drag it back like a smouldering dry cloth from a blazing fire.

The wait dragged on an agonising while. You began to wish you could just shed this soul and start anew; you didn't care where or how anymore. You wallowed in this pain for seconds that felt like hours, and hours that felt like days. Yet, even though the new stabbing pain you were unlikely to ever get rid of surpassed every other lingering wound you had before it, it somehow became bearable.

You opened your eyes to peer into the swallowing darkness. Your pickaxe, the culprit of it all--were you to exclude yourself--gleamed with underworldly light; its shine was weakened by the expanded limits of the altered cavern. Uncountable granite chunks in all manner of shapes had vanished--exploded--leaving in their place holes with pointed piercing spikes, standing there like exposed pit traps. You struggled to stand up.

What you saw was an eerie honeycomb abyss, as if an enormous colony of oversized ants and bees had joined forces to form and shape it. You reckoned there wasn't a single fragile stone left here: you'd shattered them all. A narrow granite path stretched across a deep chasm bristling in deadly spikes below it.

Landry was gone, and so was his pickaxe. Your bones remained black as coal ... was there a reason to feel chipper?

You grasped your pick from the edge of the pathway. Stumbling in your efforts to pick yourself up, you lifted it upward to light the way. The ore you'd tried to free was gone--likely still there somewhere, but tossed away to where you couldn't find it any more. Yet, replacing it several feet away stood a massive pillar growing from the barely seen depths and into the unseen cavernous roof. You shambled across the winding bridge, above the deadly spikes you risked falling on, until you reached it. Ribbed like a destroyed honeycomb, the pillar held the metallic ore alternating within the granite stone from piece to piece. The hexagonal veins sparkled under the ethereal glow. There was a heap of it. More than enough.

You took a deep calming breath. Leaning against it, you began chipping at the exposed ore, striking it and one by one you collecting the feeble iron chunks of varying sizes onto your palm. Relentless stinging and throbbing consumed your nerves and veins, intensifying and then rippling across your ghostly flesh like venom. You shut your eyes and gasped for air, grasping the bulky pillar with your entwining arms to avoid collapsing into the impalement pits you'd only caught a glimpse of. Again, the aching persisted for a prolonged span of time until the ferocity of it mildly weakened. To you, it felt as if it there was a coursing layer of salt grinding against the torn skin of your back, its rough bite returning unannounced.

"God damn it", you whispered to yourself, clutching at the granite.

You pulled yourself up and then slid your body inches away from the pillar. Returning to the task, you mined as many of the ore nuggets as you could find the ways of carrying. You gathered a solid pound's worth of it in your palm--glistening with bleak white sheen--and paused. How were you suppose to turn it into bullets? You recalled how the Usher, be that his name, instructed the girl to do it with the nail. That was the only way you could even pretend to guess how it worked. You sealed your hand, closed your eyes shut, and imagined a round. Letting the brittle iron simmer in your grip, you unclenched your fingers. The lump of ore remained as it was. You sighed, rubbing the edge of your neck with pick's blunt underside as a thought sprouted in your head: was it too big?

You gripped the pick beneath its chisel-shaped head and tapped it against the chunk's grain, cracking the lump into several bits. Again, you closed your palm and imagined the contours of many bullets. You waited one-sixtieth of an hour before jointly unfurling both your eyes and palm. The rounds glistened in your eyes: lustrous, delicate, and fragile, like the cheapest of silverwares. You couldn't help it, a relaxed yet satisfied grin corked your cheek. Finally. You leaned the pick against the stone and lifted Goldie's revolver to load six of the cartridges into the barrel, one by one. You shook the cylinder back into frame to hear the oh-so-satisfying click of the firmly shut lock. You nestled the rusty iron behind your belt and then repeated the process with your Colt. Its loaded pearl-handled grip laid smooth and reassuring in your palm like a mother's hand. You spun the iron to confirm the bullets held tight.

You mined for a while longer. The largest of the chunks you tucked underneath your left arm, while everything else weighted down the pockets of your clothes. "Landry!" you shouted, just in case, but the only response was an echo of your voice. He was gone, and it was partly your doing. Partly. Heavy-laden with all the iron you'd gathered, you began to trudge across the

canyon until you reached the other side. The pillar's scuffed frame, no longer reflecting the ethereal light, made it look like a leafless black locust tree, only blacker.

Holding the skull-sized piece of ore with one hand and hazily illuminating pick with the other, you reached a place where the feeble stone was no longer in view, and the mazed tunnel walls closed the way they were before the explosion. From the distant darkness you spotted an odd twinkle, which you drew nearer to investigate. On the ground lay a pocket-sized tri-colour watch.

You picked it and flipped it open. As you figured by the boy's portrait inside, it was Goldie's new timepiece. The hour and minute hands were pointing away from each other. The minute's to somewhere deeper in the tunnel in front of you. The hour, the one guiding to Henry if you reckoned right, was pointing behind you.

"Brat? You there?" you said. No one answered.

Your weary sigh brushed the flickering monochromatic walls and then returned to you as a hushed echo. Hesitating for a spell, you slung the opened chronometer 'round your neck, feeling the gilded chain graze against your haired skin. You let it hang, the watch face and its hands partly hidden but enough to keep track of 'time'. For sure, there were things in these mines that could keep Goldie either busy or trapped for eternity. There might also have been hidden trump cards down here you hadn't yet found or made aware of, but you sure didn't want her to hold 'em. You reckoned it was better to keep her close: like a rare venomous rattler that had poisoned you with a bite, yet you had to carry it along to show to the doc in the hope that he'd figure out the right antivenom needed to save you.

You moved on, your new pain gnawing at you with annoying vigour and the gathered ore weighing down your steps. Careful not to lose sight of the beckoning mineshaft presenting you with a consistent path you avoided twisting your head; even as you blinked, you didn't let your eyes stay shut for more than a cut second. The tunnel stayed straight and narrow until it didn't, and as you rounded the bent and broke an arched road a malformed black shadow swept across the granite your pick had been illuminating. Whirling around, you heard a growl from the choking guts of the thing hiding from your sigh. You spotted a pair of sickly yellowish eyes as striking as smallpox scars on a sinner's pallid skin. Large and contorted knife-like teeth swallowed the spectral light as it leaned.

Swinging first you hurled your pickaxe at the lurking abomination. The gleaming pick cartwheeled towards the boar-sized beast, illuminating its features with a trembling light: cracked fangs sharpened by their deformities, sickly greying-green fleshy hide, claws twisted and stretching like branches, a jaw too cramped too hold all its bulging teeth, backward-bending contorted legs, and, contrary to Landry's assurances, a back sporadically covered with arched quills as long as your forearm. The hound dodged away before your pick could carve into its skull. It jumped left, and then right, shuffling through the shadowy gaps. You brandished your revolver, cocked the well-oiled hammer and then caressed the smooth trigger.

Pale white smoke spat from your barrel as the shot blasted the beast. There was no blood, but the hound quivered and shrieked as if a mortal wound had been dealt. Its claws shred into the granite stone with a grating chalkboard screech as it readied itself, then skittered across the floor like a belly-dragging snake. It bent its form and wove its way towards you; you fired two more shots at its back and rear. Suddenly, you heard a loud snap, followed by a long, muscular, green-tinged, kangaroo-like tail whipping through the air at your feet.

With all of your weight you stomped down on beast's tail, crushing some of quills that ridged along its length beneath your rubber heel. The creature wailed and leapt, its enormous forked claws flailing within a spitting distance yet missing. You pushed the muzzle against the moulting throat and fired another shot. The creature let out a choking growl as you turned the iron sideways and hovered it above its head. The last two feeble rounds discharged with a scintillating fire as the recoil from such a close range made your hand tremble. The beast collapsed on the darkened ground with its six bullets wounds letting out a wailing hiss before its

entire body turned to ashed smoke and dissipated before your very eyes. You leaned against the wall.

You suppressed a grin; if there was one thing you were good at it was shooting things. You surveyed the tunnel from which the wretched thing had emerged before taking out a handful of feeble iron and creating six more gleaming bullets. You opened the cylinder to discard the spent shots but each hole revealed to be empty of such and clean -- one less hassle to worry about. You reloaded your pearl-handed peacemaker before tucking it back into its holster. Now that you had collected a deposit of the iron, you didn't have to be conservative with your use of bullets.

You glanced to where the beast's body laid moment before--nothing remained but the scratch marks it made in the granite--before retrieving your pickaxe. It was just a tad annoying to constantly switch between the iron and the tool. Clutch-holding the pick you ventured even further and deeper into the El Dorado Warren, guided not only by chance but also by Goldie's watch. You walked cautiously yet without any encounters or commences for less than an hour--not that you bothered to keep exact count--before finally entering a lengthy chamber.

Green-tinted dust hung in the still air before you like an ethereal veil, sparse and barely visible were it not for your bright mining tool. The stone ground was covered by its shimmering presence, glimmering like finely crushed powder in the otherworldly glow. Above it all, on the ceiling, were patterns and silhouettes resembling petrified floral bouquets, suspended in their eternal bloom. From them, the strange mist fell. It was then you noticed Goldie's body lying within sight, unmoving and still, with lime pollen layered over her like snow.

"What in tarnation are you doing, just laying about?!" you yelled.

Goldie stayed mum. You swapped you pick for a stone you spotted lying on the ground and, with a squinted eye and steady arm, you hurled it at her. The stone struck the girl's unconscious body and, as it did, a cloud of sharp and venomous green bursted into pollen-like plume, floating in the still air like disturbed young fireflies. You narrowed your eyes, but saw neither a twitch nor a shift from her body. She was behaving in a way that was unnatural for the souls of the Graveyard Frontier, but then again, her body wasn't like all the others'. Perhaps she, and she alone could get knocked out cold in this unholy place.

You pulled out your iron and fired a shot, the scintillating flower powder engulfing the heated smoke of your discharge. The shot echoed with a lonesome resonance before the bullet found its way into Goldie's side. Another smaller cloud of powdery particles scattered around the mark you'd hit, shrouding the brat in a lemon-lime haze. You turned the cylinder a touch, just enough to ready the next round in case she lunged at you in a frenzied charge. However, once more, she laid motionless. You spat at the ground.

You lifted the watch off your neck using the polished wooden butt of your revolver's grip. Sure enough, the minute hand was pointing towards her ... As the particles cleared and settled, right behind Goldie's body, you noticed a set of granite stairs gradually ascending upwards, less grand than the ones you used to enter the El Dorado Warren, but similar. You scratched your greying beard and paused to ponder. You cast a second look at the embezzled glass, this time at hour hand. It was trembling subtly, pointing somewhere behind you. You frowned.

With a slow drowned out step you entered the blossom-adorned tunnel. Pollen feel, clung, and coated your shoulders and the brim of your hat, feeling light yet irritatingly viscous. You made your way across the thin, lime powdered sleet, the pollen grains floating and sticking to your cloth like crushed sagebrush. You drew nearer the girl and gazed down at her with disappointment and content. You stepped over her and reached for the exit.

You felt a soft squishy texture before your fingers encountered solid stone beneath. Your eyes widened as you took a step back--the tunnel to ascend back to the surface was nothing more than a mirage. Naturally, it wasn't going to be that doggone simple ... You shuffled your feet back before you felt your hells press against a yielding surface. You looked down at your pollen-dusted pants and, you realised, what was suppose to be Goldie underneath you. Your

boot pressed through her neck like she was nothing but a wisp of mist.

Your eyes dropped down and then turned back to the path you had come from. It was right there, wasn't it? It was hard to tell, as there were a dozen identical passages with similar ascending sets of granite stairs, with only minute differences. You shortened your breath, your gaze darting between each one. The pollen snow continued to fall.

You tightened the grip of your left hand on the large chunk of ore you were holding. Raising your pick to illuminate the ceiling above, you looked up, hoping to find a way to deal with the falling pollen and the illusions it made. The overhead's arched ridges, petal-shaped stalactites, and domed hollows formed an intricate display of petrified floral patterns, blooming like a frozen garden. From each, like dripping water, grains of lime-zest pollen trickled down one a time.

Before you could dissect it any further, a speck of pollen granules trembled from the brim of your hat and fell directly into your eyes. It settled in the hollows of your skull as if it was a ground-up cactus, obscuring the flash of your eyes like moss. Tarnation! You closed your left eye and rubbed your right one with your wrist in hope of clearing it. You managed, but only a tad, you felt as if you'd been blinded by sand. You stumbled forwards.

Cursing, you were about to bury your gaze to the ground, but a peculiar sight stopped you. Among the mineral flowers was a hollow opening, neither large nor small. Whether you had failed to notice it before, or it was new, you couldn't tell. Yet, it lead to the outside, the sky clearly visible through it like a window without glass... but not the sky of the Graveyard Frontier. Clear heavens shimmered like morning water with a distant yet warm sun dancing at its heart. As you watched, an unknown figure, their body hidden by the shadow, peered down at you from above. The figure hoisted its hands and threw down a long rope ladder; it stopped just short of touching the ground. You moved closer.

Your feet stepped through something soft and then you plunged downward, the ground vanishing beneath you. Your pickaxe scraped against the granite as it ends embedded into the solid stone, leaving you suspended in a hole almost as if it was tailor-made for a size large than you. You gasped for breath as you felt your hold weaken. The heavy feeble iron was weighting you down, as well as your laden jacket. Beneath you couldn't see a thing, yet a sound, a very distant sound of running water, reached your ears. Your throat, parched and yearning for another drink, shrivelled.

With a strained strength, you arched your left arm upwards, slamming the heavy chunk of ore onto the edge of the hole, then bracing yourself against the stone surface with your elbow. You took a steadying breath and then, releasing the pickaxe, you threw yourself on the ledge with a wavering grip. You started to hustle your way up from the chasm by your elbows. The granite cracked, your right elbow slipped, and your unbalanced body fumbled down. You gripped the jagged edges of the ore chunk with both hands, your chest scraping against the weather-beaten granite. The small pieces of ore cackled inside your pockets as they trashed against one another. You pulled yourself up to find another grip, but then the ore slipped and fell off the edge. Your fingers reached for the pickaxe but only grazed the very ends of its ethereal handle before you fell into the abyss.

The emerald light disappeared along with the pickaxe you had left behind. Darkness swallowed your fall, the descent lasting long enough for you to grasp your plight. You held to the ore with both hands as if it was a cross just before the underground waters cushioned your fall. Sulfurous water warmed your spectral flesh as you reached the rough rugged riverbed—the lightless river just deep enough to catch you. Unsure of which direction to swim in, you began to flail your arms in desperation.

Just like not needing rest and food, you knew you were in no real need of breath, yet you still gasped, almost instinctively. The unspoilt creamy freshness of the water flooded your parched throat like a soothing balm before its taste turned abruptly sour and rotten. As you tried to spit it out—a challenging task underwater—your mind was blinded by an onslaught of

clouding images. You found yourself immersed in a vision where everything around you was blurry and distorted.

In your hand was a drawn revolver, smoke drawing from its muzzle. The stone beneath your feet was marred by fractures and splits. From these cracks emerged black arms, twisted and veined with fiery red, their nails coiled and long as if never clipped. Those grotesque limbs reached for you, clawing at the air. One by one those deformed black hands started to rip at your flesh and scrape your bones, pulling you closer to the scalding embers of their abode.

As soon as you were free of the nightmare and could see the glistening white water again, you dropped the cumbersome ore and then propelled yourself upward, your boots pushing off the stone. Your arms pierced the surface of the water before you lifted your head. In the darkness, a tiny shimmering line marked the boundary between the river and the rest of the cavern. Mindful to avoid swallowing even a spit more of this water, you manoeuvred through the shrouded underground with a feverish frenzy. Your gaze, now cleared of pollen, adjusted to the shadows. You swam towards what seemed to be a small islet in the middle of the river. Barely large enough to stretch a waggon's wheel axle, the islet's soil met your wet fingertips, revealing a cover of powdery ash. From beneath this snowy blanket, grey blades of grass protruded, their glossy and gnawed appearance resembling nails. The moment you stepped on them, they emitted an audible crunch.

In the centre of the islet, a tree with ghostly ashen bark claimed dominance. Its barren branches sprawled overhead like a damaged rooftop. Its massive trunk looked like a pile of animal skeletons and their horns were twisted like a cloth for drying. In the absence of wind, its bare limbs hung motionless and lifeless. Your boots sank into the ashen soot as you approached closer. The stark tree, in its waxen pallor, had a very fleeting resemblance to a cherry tree. Dangling from the skeletal branches, you noticed fruits akin to white crab apples. With a sense of cautious curiosity, you extended your right hand to touch one of them.

When it was in reach, your bullet wound flared with renewed pain. Your shoulder twisted as if you were wrestling a wild horse with a lasso, and your shoulder bone bowed under the strain, ready to snap. You steeled yourself from collapsing into the graven snow and coarse brittle grass, your eyes locked on the place where Goldie fired her shot. A few moments later, it calmed down, and you could move your arm again.

You clenched your teeth and shoved your wayward right arm beneath your jacket and belt as a safeguard against any further bouts of rebellion. With some hesitancy, you lifted your arm and plucked the porcelain fruit, its skin as soft as tangerine's. Just like a tangerine, it began to unravel and split into even segments in your palm, with a single seed at its core. The seed bore the shape of a bullet, appearing as though it was intricately etched from white beeswax: a perfect fit for a revolver. Running your thumb over the seed, it felt solid.

You tossed aside the pulp and peel of the fruit at your feet and then drew your better revolver with your free hand. Slotting the bullet into its chamber, you swivelled the cylinder and then snapped the drum's latch shut, now holding one bullet more. For one reason or another you felt a sudden surge of excitement, as if pulling the trigger and firing the round was the answer to all your troubles.

With the tree in your sights, you cocked back the hammer with your thumb, the other finger hovering over the trigger. The tree was your mark, and you were about to bleed it of its secrets. Yet before you could fully squeeze the trigger, a sudden agony seized your groin. Your right hand clenched it with a grip meant for snapping necks or prying crates open. Of all the pains you'd braced for in the Graveyard Frontier, this was one you hadn't expected to suffer. Sharp, intense, and excruciating, so it was. You hunched over and pressed the revolver to your chest. In the throes of enduring nausea, your left hand seized your wrist. It yanked the firearm from your loosened hold and, with all the strength you could feel coursing through it, it hurled it into the milky depths. Your heirloom splashed against the river's surface and soon vanished beneath the faint ripples.

"What in God's name?!" your yell cut through the pain.

You fell on your knee and grabbed your rebellious left hand with your right, glaring at it as if expecting the eyeless palm to respond. It did not. Seconds after the toss, you felt in control of your left hand again ... at least it seemed that way. Pain rushing through your legs, you exhaled a weary breath and shut your eyes. Why was your arm acting this way? Was it trying to prevent you from finding something that could free you from this damned purgatory, or was there another reason?

Shaking off the thought, you stifled the aching pain in your groin by biting down your lip. A full body shudder passed through you as you steeled yourself to plunge back into the warm creamy waters. An owl's eyes yours were not, but the darkness wasn't absolute either. You had seen the splash marking where your six-shooter had landed. Walking along the rough seabed, you moved deeper until the water was reaching your neck, at which point you began to swim. You were self-taught, so the way you swam wasn't ideal, yet practical enough.

Drawing in a deep breath, you plunged headfirst into the white river to descend towards its bottom. The dense opaqueness veiled your sight, forcing you to depend on you feeling the stone with your hands. Holding a breathless pause, you scoured the riverbed. As minutes faded away and the need for air grew urgent, your hands stumbled upon the revolver's handle. With one more push off the rocky bed, you rushed to ascend to break the surface. You found a spot where your boots touched the bottom and kept your head above the billows.

You lifted the revolver to check on it; it was soaked in the ethereal chalk water. You gave it a quick shake, then reached with your right hand to assess the cylinder. Your shoulder wound flared when fingers barely grazed it. You withdrew the iron away from the offending hand, but the twinge lingered nonetheless.

You spat. "Ain't keen on me firing you, are you?" you asked the question rhetorically.

Your gaze bore into your hand as the pain gradually receded. Sighing, you stowed away the gun in its holster, one of its chambers now hosting an otherworldly "bullet".

You cast a fleeting glance at the water ... what was that disturbing vision drinking it revealed to you only moments ago?

You looked down at the trembling water and licked your parched lips. For now, your good sense conquered your longing to wet your whistle. With a dismissive shake of your head, you began to make your way back to the islet. When one of your boots fell through the duff of soot and hit the bone-strewn soil beneath, something rigid grazed your other sole. Rightfully paranoid, you scrambled out of the river and darted back from the islet's edge.

There, beneath the milky hues, a subdued glitter of fish scales caught your eye, followed by a ghostly white shadow of an unseen creature. A tip of a copper tail punctured the surface, sending ripples across the water. You retreated even further from it. After several ticks of the clock, the thing pivoted and then retreated. Whatever it was, you reckoned yourself fortunate to leave the river with the haste you did.

You cast your gaze across the expansive breadth of the cavern, noting the presence of a dimly lit yet distinct ceiling. As your eyes trailed along the serpentine tail of arches you spotted a soft aquamarine spark, akin to a far-off star, suspended above the white tree. Letting out a sigh, you extended your hand to graze the tree's lowest branch and then pushed it even further to hoist yourself up with your boots.

From the leafless branch came out a sound like snapping bones, followed by a distressed whisper reminiscent of mourning. The sounds carried on with every ivory branch you seized to hoist yourself further up the tree, as though you were intruding on a funeral, or worse, eavesdropping on your own rites from inside a casket. Them seeded fruits, dotting along the branches of the tree, seemed to recoil your right hand every time it came to hover too close to one. You weren't good enough to scale the tree one-handed, so you had to make due and endure. In the absence of any light, save for the ghostly glow of your flesh, your ascent was a godforsaken chore.

Even with one of your hands flailing about as if possessed, you managed to climb the barren canopy. Although the branches were reaching higher, your prudence dictated the choice of the sturdier branches to settle your weight on. Lifting your gaze, you noticed a round granite hollow set into the cavern roof, tantalisingly close if you dared to make the jump. The ethereal green-blue glow shining from above grew a notch brighter, its shimmer reflecting off the cavern ceiling; was it a glow of another's pick? The granite encasement had an unvarying width and was large enough for you to spread your arms. A still rope came into view: faded black and fraying yet still as thick as an anchor's line. You squinted, but nothing else of note appeared.

You leapt from the branches to grasp at the tail end of the rope. With muscles strained your fingers curled around the coarse hemp, your body swaying above the jagged leafless crown. With a heavy of your arm, you widened your grip, coiling the rope around your ankles and knees to take advantage of the security it gave. You squinted up into the darkness to where the rope was hooked, too far and too hazy for you to make out the details. You hoped it was tied to something sturdy as you hauled yourself higher. While you kept to your wits, the worn-out cordage kept steadfast, proving herself not of the sort to easily snap.

Lifting your eyes once more to adjust your grip, you discerned a single thread of bleached, nearly white hemp in the twisted bundle of the rope. The solitary thread, beginning beneath your clutched fingers, traced an upward line, unravelling a sentence in intricate cursive with each letter poised above the next, as though the regular looping calligraphy wasn't challenging to read for you already.

'Art thou deserving of thy place?' it queried.

"No," you spat out, venom colouring your voice.

You traced a path over the woven words and then hoisted yourself higher. A loud snap ricocheted in your ears. In your grip, the rope twitched, its white thread quivering as it snapped, its strength waning in your palms. The weight of your black bones, accursed burden, added to the load pulling you down. Your grip tightened in response.

"Darn it to hell," you said, your harsh growl scraping raw at your throat. You waited until the much less reliable rope settled its strained trembling.

You cast your gaze upon the rope, now a thread less. "Are you saying I got it wrong?" you asked. Of course, it didn't reply. You climbed further until another sentence appeared.

'Does each soul you have brought merit its presence?'

You mulled over the question for a spell. Your gaze eyes lifted to track the unravelling thread slicing through the rope. You gripped the tether and bore your teeth.

Did they all belong here, it asked. For sure, you reckoned, most of them ... all of them; why was it pressing you so? "No," you said, more of a guess than a lie.

The twine embodying the question ruptured as if riddled by bullets, fraying through the tangled core like a chasm. You swore, the icy breath clinging to your throat. The fibbers broke with a sound akin to a searing skillet, turning in your grip from taunt to slack as loose rifts formed between the strands. Your phantom heart pounded. Your hands strained higher, searching for a safe rope-hold to avoid losing your grip and plummeting onto the jagged carapace below.

You braced your boots against the slippery granite walls, your heels skidding off the surface before scrambling to find a foothold. Finally, you seized the damaged tether, anchoring yourself in place. Damnations, had you erred again? Just discernible were the edges of the hole, a few grasps within reach. Poised between you and it, as if daring you to get it wrong one last time, was a white strand holding the severed ends like gnarled tendons. The pendent sentence said:

'Be there deliverance from this everlasting damnation?'

Were those questions tricks or not? You squinted at the swirled thread, "There will be," you spoke in a tamed whisper, "and if there ain't, I'll find that path myself."

Your legs braced against the walls of the hollow and your body tensed in anticipation of a

snap. To your surprised relief, it held. Your gaze raked over the white thread as thought expecting it pull a fast one on you. Anchoring your boots against the sleek granite you towed yourself upward, the rope creaking under each tug. And even though the rope was slack and frayed, it held. You heaved yourself over the edge of the well onto the gritty tepid stone of yet another chamber.

You halted for a moment, your eyes fixed on the pitch black skyward ceiling without any stars. Pausing, you averted your eyes from it, shifting your attention to where the mint light beckoned you to. The cavern's eldritch nature had carved the white granite into a series of wide, squat steps around the abyss, as if it was a pyramid meant for the disposal of souls. You drew near the glow on one of such platforms to find, as you had suspected, an abandoned spectral pickaxe, the luminous shadows it cast bleaching the flat rises. You lifted it off the ground and swayed it around to light up the path ahead and to see if you could spot its owner. A lone tunnel appeared from the gloom.

Resisting the urge to look back and let the walls morph around you, you kept your attention steady on the tunnel, using the spectral pick as a lantern.

Out of nowhere, bathed in the phantasmal light, a human silhouette took shape from the shadows, her skin a translucent, faint blue sheen atop a pearlescent skeleton.

You pulled back the hammer hammer and levelled the rusty gun towards the girl. Knees drawn up against her chest, Goldie lifted her head. She waited in quiet stillness and then lowered her gaze again.

"If you're aiming to eat me, get on with it," she spat.

The hell was that? "Insult me or something so I that know you're the real one."

Her eyebrows shot up. She hesitated. "You look like him, you speak in Henry's voice ... but what you spew" --she rubbed her eyes and hissed-- "Damn it, can't see!"

"What's wrong with you?" you said. Maintaining a safe distance, you raised the watch and clicked it open. Sure enough, the supposed hand pointed at the snake.

The way she rubbed into her eyes, were she was flesh and bones and not an immortal soul, it would've certainly blinded her. She wept. "I see Henry everywhere, I ... agh!"

Taking a single step, you lifted the pick to shed more light on her. She tossed her fists in the air and slapped her knees, glaring directly at you. You saw it then, a faint dust of viper's green powder clinging to the hollows of her eyes, a pollen you had seen before. You chewed on the inner lining of your cheek.

Rolling your eyes, you pondered. The very word debt and how it was said twisted your stomach. Anyone asking to borrow with no intention of returning was a two-faced scoundrel, and those who did you a favour without asking for anything back were doubly so. You detested being in someone's debt, like a slave. She held the bone-blackening water for you.

You moved towards the girl, dropping to one knee near her. Her scorching blue eyes bore into yours, the aquamarine gleam shimmering in the pollen dust.

"Am I the only 'Henry' in your sights?"

She scoffed, spitting to the side. "No." Mimicking a gun with her point, she pointed at the wall. "I spot him there" --she waved it around-- "and there, and there, and over yonder. He's everywhere, damn it." She clicked her tongue. "You're the first one to move his yap, thought."

You reached for her face. "Keep still, it's likely the pollen in your peepers causing the problem."

Her wince was slight as you touched her glassy eyelids. You swept at her eyes using your fingertips as time-worn brushes, the green grains clinging to your fingers instead. Some of it remained.

"How is it looking?" you asked.

Goldie winced in response. Fluttering her eyelashes, she snarled, "Didn't do a lick of good, I still see you as him."

A weary sigh left your lips. Running your thumb over your tongue like you were wetting an envelope seal, you used the same thumb to try to clear away the pollen with your spit. Goldie felt it; she shuddered with disgust, let out a shaky whimper and clutched at your jacket sleeves as though she intended to shred them off.

You grabbed her chin to steady her and then repeated the attempt. Goldie squirmed in your grip, but after a few scrubs, her eyes seemed clean. You huffed at her eyes for good measure.

"Quit it. Stop!" she shouted, kicking you with her boot.

You did, but not because she so kindly asked you to.

Canting your head to one side, you queried, "What's the view like now?"

"I ... I reckon ... yeah," she said, rubbing her eyes, "I can see your ugly mug." She looked around, "And the rest are gone." You didn't get a thank you, but you hadn't given one earlier either.

"You also look the same," you said, rubbing your nose with your wrist. "Must be nice not being like everyone else in this godforsaken pit."

She scoffed. Well ain't you mistaken. I had my own share of troubles in spite of this body's mending itself. Fuck you, brother killer, for roping me into this mess. I should've stayed topside!"

"I didn't put a gun to your head," you said. "And my point still rings true. I reckon it holds true, as the one fellow I ran into said that your soul sticks around in Warren, even if you 'die' here."

Her brows pinched together, "Hold on, you met another living soul?" She was looking around and blinking rapidly, clearly struggling to take in the cavern's brotherless surroundings.

You clicked your tongue. "Yeah, lost him too. Souls here are like fleas on a hound, trapped with no way out."

"The walls move when you ain't looking," she said, her voice crackling with annoyance. She returned her gaze back to you and her eyes widened. "Thief! That's my ticker!"

Holding up the spectral pick to let the ghostly glow light you both, you rolled your eyes. "And this here pick too, I reckon? You're all over the place, losing things left and right."

She jumped off the floor ready to pounce at you. "Hand it over!"

Bracing her shoulder with your boot, you saw her down. "You'll just lose it again, It's better off with me."

"I ain't gonna!"

"Well that's mighty convincing," you said. The cold, gold-plated metal of the watch trembled in your hand. "Your brother's watch hand supposed to lead us out, ain't it?"

She spat, though no actual spit followed. "It s'posed to, I followed it, but then I ran into a whole mess of troubles."

"Troubles? Like the dust?"

She shook her head, "Those too, some before that, but after, there here apparitions looking like Henry 'cause of the blasted dust." She put her hand over her eyes, "They torn at me like I was their supper, gnawed at my flesh like it was beef, and then took a breather until I recovered, just to start their feast anew." A shiver racked her frame, "The image of my own brother cannibalising on me ..."

"I reckon I've crossed paths with that beast you're speaking about," you said. "I took care of it."

"It?" her eyes went wide.

A low growl grated against both your ears. Like a glint of fool's gold, the beast's yellow eyes flashed at you before vanishing. You clutched your pick and swung, casting an illuminating radiance where the beast had been, as if your tool was dripping with venom. Under the green-blue glow, it's diseased hide writhed and squirmed before recoiling back into the shadows. With startling speed, the varmint darted through the untouched shadows. Its myriad of teeth were

grinding and chattering from the unseen. Goldie leapt to her feet, her shoulder slamming the unyielding granite with pained cry.

"Is that what it was suppose to be?"

Your empty hand reached for a revolver ... but which one?

You unholstered your keepsake and, with a heartbeat's hesitation, tossed it in Goldie's unawaiting arms. She caught it.

That bullet was one of a kind, nevertheless ... "Shoot at it!" you yelled.

Your eyes snapped back to the crawling beast, your left hand clutching the pickaxe by its handle like a martial tool.

Goldie fumbled with the pearl-handed iron before she steadied it with both hands. She stopped all of a sudden, her mouth quivering.

The abomination skulked across the ground and drew nearer. It leapt through the glow cast by your pick, its gleam burning its hound-like form from above. You turned and swung the pickaxe at its grotesque body, only to strike the air as it caught the shoulder of the pick with its talons and pulled at it. Its swollen jaw gnashed against its own teeth. Before you could flinch, its lengthy, verdant tail whipped around the blade and snapped at your drawing hand with its quills, them piercing through your cloth and into the flesh.

It felt no worse than a nettle's sting. You grit your teeth, coiled the tail like it was some soggy seaweed, and, mustering your strength, tossed the tail and the rest of the beast against the wall and away from you. The hound clenched at the granite with its claws, as if attempting to soften its fall. A moment of respite.

Or a moment to realise how darn rotten it was for you. Your right hand, the one that put so many bullseye shots, bubbled and frothed like boiling oil, your thin pale flesh beginning to steam and shift.

Goldie's eyes meet yours. "There's something here in this iron of yours," she stated, her voice devoid of any concern for your plight.

Goddamn, which slot had you loaded the bullet-seed into? First? Second? It didn't matter now.

"Just shot, for heaven's sake," you yelled

Your eyes bounced from the still-recovering beast back to your arm. Emerging from a veil of thin mist smoke came an outline of what used to be your right hand, but was no more. From your elbow down, where the quills had torn into your arm, your formerly gleaming human hand kept its opaque shine, but was now morphed into a covering of partly stripped and soft feathers with a scaly blackened shank with curved clawed toes at the end. Your right hand was a chicken leg.

You had no time for despair, but it was crystal clear you couldn't let the tail spines skewer you anywhere else. Goldie clutched the iron with both hands, raising it at the beast. The creature prowled around and then settled on the ground, its lantern-like eyes burning with ungodly hunger. Its claws sprung open like a bear trap, gouging into the granite as it lunged across the distance you only just made. Gripping at your pickaxe with your left hand, you readied to strike.

For some forsaken reason, Goldie wasn't shooting yet! You didn't turn your head, but you could hear her turning the cylinder at her own will. A metallic click tinkled as she shifted from one chamber to another, and only then let the hammer fall, touching the trigger. A loud report crashed against the silent walls, making the air tremble like the surface of a disturbed lake. The first bullet missed, slamming into and fracturing the stone mere inches from the abominations' head. The second shot found its mark, lodging itself in the withered hide and staggering the beast's assault. You thwarted its attempt to slink back into the shadows by following its movement with the glow of your pick.

The beast snarled at you with a strained growl. You nudged your pick at it, as if daring it to

follow through. Its eyes flashed when it saw your arm, and if this hound had any reason before, now there was only raw hunger in its gaze. Another of Goldie's shots reverberated in your ears, but it was a fraction too late, hitting at a spot where the beast had been before it launched towards your turned arm. You baited it, waiting as it snapped open its monstrous jaws, revealing rows of deformed teeth from their struggling concealment. Just as they were about to snap shut, you yanked your right hand-claw-thing away and twisted your tensed body in a quick pivot. You brought your left arm swinging downward, driving the blade of the pickaxe straight into the beast's skull and using both your strength and the gravity's to slam it into the ground. The beast collapsed with deafening racket and then exploded into a cloud of black smoke until not even that of it remained. You cast a glance at your pick before you fixed your glare on the brat.

"You've sure taken your sweet time!"

She waited. With a pout, she unlatched the cylinder.

"What are you--"

"Shut your trap," she spat, hoisting the chamber above her head to eye the remaining bullets: one unlike the other. Her eyes widened and she bit her lip.

You harrumphed. "What is it? You know what it is, don't you?"

"I don't reckon if I owe you an answer," she said. "Where did you get it?"

"Tell me what is."

"You first."

You held the pocket watch inside your grasp. "Spit it out, or I'll break it."

Goldie's eyes grew wide and she reached with one hand at the space between you. "You low-down... you wouldn't!"

"I don't suggest you bet on it, vermin. Now, and make it snappy, tell me what it is." You knew not if you could actually break the watch, but she didn't know that either.

She wavered, her fingers trembling and sliding across the surface of the revolver. Finally, she lifted her gaze to the watch and sighed.

"Fine," she conceded. "Fine, you rat. You brother killer. I'll tell you."

She tapped the cylinder against her knee, and a bullet fell into her palm. She held it between three fingers. "It's ..."

You tilted your head, annoyed with her stalling. Out with it.

She exhaled, "It's the lead. The Lucifer's Lead. The very one I used to kill you."

You reached to take it, but a searing pain in your shoulder made you flinch. It felt like it had grown deeper.

Goldie scrambled back against the wall, clutching her hand as she saw you react. "It's ain't gonna bring you back."

"Naturally, that's what you would say. Hand it over."

She shook her head. "You best never let it loose from your piece."

You spat, grinding the spot under your booth. "Why's that?"

Goldie glanced at her hand. "If you are shot by it here, you're headed further down," she warned. "Reckon it's hell itself down there."

"And if I shot you?" You cocked your gun, each moment passing unclaimed.

"Wouldn't do you a lick of good, brother killer. I've already struck a deal with one devil, no other can come for me. But, if you miss, or worse, shoot yourself, you'll ruin us both."

You scratched with the handle, eyeing her. "And how do you know all this?"

Goldie licked her chapped lips. "It whispered to me," she said. "You held it, haven't you? Did you not hear its whispers?"

"Voices?" you echoed. You shook your head, "No voices."

"They are clear to me. Figures, given my position. Probably tricked a fool like you into thinking they were your own thoughts."

"Is that right?"

She nodded. "Yes, now, best let go of my watch, you lowlife. And I swear, if there's so much as a scratch on it ... And you've got no right holding onto it."

"You can keep the seed-bullet," you said, lashing your deformed hand towards her, "but I'm taking the iron."

You snatched the revolver with the four talons--awkwardly--scraping Goldie's hand by mistake. She yelped, grabbing her injured hand and recoiling from the sudden pain. The gun flew from your loose claw grasp, landing with embarrassing clatter on the stone floor. Your eyes flicked back and forth from your turned limb to the revolver, and back again. You clenched and unclenched your clawed hand, the black talons unfit for handling firearms. You felt Goldie's judgemental glare on you, the blue flame flaring up inside her eyes.

Clearing your throat, you shuffled over to the fallen gun. That was your shooting hand, damn it.

"You got a chicken claw," the girl said.

"Yep," --with only one proper hand, you were going to struggle switching between the pickaxe and the piece-- "You've got a keen eye."

Goldie levered herself upright against the wall, a smirk playing on her lips. "Even if we somehow stumble upon a third one, reckon it'd be no good if it chews on you. Can't rightly be easy shooting with a chicken claw."

"That's how it played out when it changed your parts?" you asked. Striving with your talons, you couldn't quite pick it.

You watched as she snuck the waxen bullet in one of her pockets and then rested her hands on her hips. "That's right."

Irritated, you set the pick aside against the wall and grabbed the empty revolver with your left hand. "Anyone else but you would've died from that, and I heard from the miner, you get your rightful limb back when you do." Your pitch-black bones made it harder to do that, to 'die'.

Goldie's glare hardened. "But if you die you'll wind up in God-knows-what corner of this purgatory!"

You clicked your gun's hammer, each hollow click nagging a new thought. "Not if I bite the dust in the mines, I'll stay put right here; so, first I'd rather be begone from this here place."

A harrumph wrapped around Goldie's words as she vented her frustration a nearby stone. "I've had my fill of this place too. You've got -my- timepiece, so you lead the way, killer."

"Don't make me leave you here," you said. "And if you try to get rid of the seed when my back is turned, I'll smash your clockwork heart, and that ain't no empty thread."

She answered by sticking out her tongue, running her incisors along the surface before pulling up her bandanna to hide her chin and nose.

With tired air, you fed your gun six fresh rounds, cowboy load and safety be damned. You had a fair share of feeble iron in your pockets, but without that hefty chunk of ore you surrendered to the milky depths, it was far from unlimited. You put your revolver into its leather home.

Goldie sidled up next to you, casting a gaze towards the watch. You let her look. The hour hand meandered back and forth over the morning hours. You let go of the pocket watch drop and let it dangle freely from your neck. You set off in the direction it insisted upon, towards a dark tunnel up ahead. Goldie's footsteps suddenly grew louder as she ran in front of you, jabbing a finger at your chest to stop you dead.

"Change of plans," she said. "That's how you lost me. I'll be in the front. If you ain't keen on giving me the gun, at least pass me the pick."

You nibbled at your inner cheek, mulling it over for a moment before offering her the pick. Keeping you in her sight, she grasped the pickaxe with both hands, letting the flickering pale flames of the handle caress her hands.

"At least you got a brain," she said.

You clamped your hand onto Goldie's shoulder, causing her eyes to widen and her voice to tremble as you reeled and dragged her behind you. 'Hey!' she protested, her ghostly skin flushing with anger. She was lightweight, practically malnourished—it took you no effort to manhandle her. Before she could mount a resistance, you made a hefty shove, pushing her even further back.

"No," you said. Shaking your head you freed your gun and levelled the barrel at her. "Those walls here are deceiving, you know? There's a way not get tricked, and that's to keep your peepers glued on me. As long as you can handle that, we'll get out of this hellhole godforsaken place together." You waved the iron. "That pick's our only lantern, so I'd prefer you didn't go astray. Hold it high so I can get a read on where we're at, and don't set your gaze nowhere else."

She slapped away your slackening grip. "I got it," she said, hoisting the pick overhead like some fancy umbrella, the blue-green light cascading around drizzling rain. "Start kicking the dust already."

You rolled your shoulders and gave her a nod. Clutching your firearm close, you walked onward, your faint shadow tempting you further away.

Goldie kept her silence, as you responded in kind. In time, no more than an hour, when one nebulous granite-lined tunnel replaced the next, you came upon a sprawling chamber. Before intruding inside, you noted an array of dice shaped cubes floating through the air like fishes. Not reflecting back the pickaxe's luminescence unlike the stone surrounding them, they loomed in opaque, inky blackness. Amongst them, about half your height, like a tombstone amongst small wooden crosses, floated the biggest one. From the structure emanated a soft, metallic tingle. Goldie sidled up to your back, craning her neck for a better look.

"Are you going in or what?"

You paused, throwing a cursory glance at the watch. Indeed, Henry, and your way to freedom, were on the other side.

You rested your hand on your grizzled chin, casting a gaze at Goldie.

She furrowed her brows. "What are you gawking at?"

You nudged your head towards the yawning maw of the cavern. "I reckon it'd do us good if you go first."

"Best for who?" she said, taking a cautionary step back. "You were all up in arms about me leading a minute ago, now you ain't?"

You sighed. "I reckon I'll be honest then. You got the privilege of your deathless hide, so you oughta be the one to gamble. Ain't like you can feel no long-lasting hurt, right?"

"I've spoken before, it doesn't mean I like getting wounded." She cast a glance at the floating cubes. "What got you spooked, anyhow? What do you reckon is gonna happen?"

"That's for you to figure out."

She threw her glare. "And if I say no? No."

You scratched at your gristly beard with your claw. "Well then, we'll just be planted here, twiddling our thumbs and rankling each other."

She drew a deep insulted breath, letting it out as a weary sigh. "Fine," she said, spitting at the hardpan floor. She pushed past you, stepping into the chamber, lifting the pickaxe to make the stone shine while the floating black dice swallowed this light and remained blackened. She scuffed her boots a few steps more and looked back.

"They aren't blowing up," she announced.

Your gaze flitted between the upstart and the cubes, nodding in return. Suddenly, you heard a faint scraping sound. It was a sound that didn't escape Goldie either. Her legs began to quake. The humming intensified, the sound growing louder into a high-pitched whine. Her body jerked backward, yanked by the unseen pull of the largest cube. She gasped as she tripped, falling

forward onto her own feet. Her boots scuffed against the rocky surface as she rapidly lost balance. She got pulled inches, then a yard from where she were.

Your hold on the revolver slackened for a fleeting moment before you clenched it again, resting the cool metal against your chest. You stepped back, maintaining a spectator's distance as Goldie scrambled to hold herself in place, an invisible rope drawing her inch by inch towards the ominous cube. The smoothed walls echoed the sound of her desperate struggle: her boots, body, and hands scraping along the granite floor with dull resonance. The harsh grinding of the pick sounded like wolf's teeth gnawing on a bone. She hollered and swore, but it did little to help. The nearer she was getting to the black rock, the swifter and more relentless its pull became. There was a ringing echo as she came into its reach, her body drifting but not pushing against it. She stamped her boots against the stone, struggling to regain her balance.

Goldie cast a glance your way. Her silhouette quivered like a disturbed flame. You pondered if she was she going to ask for help. The snake did not.

"Are you alright?"

Goldie gave a dismissive shake, her grip tightening around the pickaxe. "I feel like I'm being torn to pieces," she murmured, as if she was talking to herself alone. The haunting indigo of her flesh teetered and flowered like flailing branches amid the heavy gales, unveiling the stark white bones beneath her apparitional skin. While a few tendrils of her soul stretched to the smaller dice, the largest of them took his kingly share. If you had any advice to share, she acted before that.

The girl screamed, breaking the invisible spiderweb ensnaring her. With a swift circular motion, she hurled the pickaxe and aimed its blade at the ink-black cube. Teal smoke flashed as the tool smashed into the magnetic pull, its physical form swallowed up whole by the gluttonous void, its green-blue luminescence extinguished. Only the brat's untethered frenzied body was left to illuminate the chamber.

"What in tarnation, that did no good!"

In the dim light, you strained your eyes trying to see her. "Can you wrest free like you did with the cactuses?"

"You think I ain't been trying? It's yanking me back, and it hurts!"

Goldie swung her arm in an attempt to strike the cube. Her fist halted a hair's breadth away, the cube nibbling at her ethereal skin.

You shuffled your foot a fraction forth but halted as a ghostly yank caught at your collar and hair. Your throat rattled as you leaned your elbow against the stone for support.

"Keep at it," you shouted. "Try your damndest to break it!"

Goldie had her back turned towards you, her form, opaque and fracturing into whirling, pale flames. It was hard to discern her reaction. Regardless, she moved, screaming and thrusting her arms into the insatiable void. The free-floating cube responded with a vociferous hum, trembling like an intangible earthquake. A vast chunk of Goldie's soulflesh was torn off her bones as she pushed herself further, the unfeeling monolith only more eager to stretch its unseen jaws wider. Pieces of her luminous soul reformed as quickly as they were torn off and sucked into the devouring space.

Her bone-exposed fingers scraped the corners of the floating ore, her flickering being ebbing in the imposing blackness. She cried out, yanking at the stone with all her might, and then ... her light was snuffed out as if it was dry hay set ablaze by the sun. You stood in the pitch-black, your vision limited to the scant inches your own translucent skin could brighten. Thankfully, the faintly blue glow of her spirit came back.

Unnerved, you scraped at the granite with your chicken claw. "Brat? You holding up alright?"

Goldie's hands were no longer latched onto the cube, and the cube's ominous field continued to gnaw and tug at her ethereal soul.

Following the silence, Goldie let out a sound you'd never heard from her before: a sob. She swallowed, and then, chokingly managed, "I'm trying. I've tried. It hurts," she said. "It fucking hurts."

You reckoned intervening would likely make it worse.

"If you stand there and let it, it'll keep chewing at you" you said. "Ever had a rotten tooth?" -- you reckoned she didn't, not at her age-- "A loose baby tooth? Handle it like that."

"Shut the hell up!" Goldie retorted, clutching her ethereal skull and squeezing the marrow lines of it. "You're not the one going through the pain!" she said. "What would you know?"

You sighed, your mouth falling open but without having the correct words to say. Whatever you said, she would twist into an insult, an oil to the flame, even if your words were honest.

Whether spurred by your words or not, she gave it another go. Her screams filled the cavern, her form flickering in and out of existence several times as she wrestled with the invisible force. The once deafening hum was drowned out by the echoes of her shouts, cries, and frustrations. She grappled with the floating monolith, ramming it between her stomach and chest so close it ate at her soul as quickly as it could be replenished. Empty of glowing flesh, reduced to a skeleton, she let out a yell and shattered it. The reverberating hum, her agonised screams, and the shattering snap coalesced into a cacophony like starved gunfire against a herd of desperate buffalo. Then, all felt silent.

Goldie's wavering form sat hunched on the ground, the shattered cube clasped in her arms. She took deep, heaving breaths, each swallowing a muttered cursed.

"I swear on my life, you're gonna taste every speck of the torment I just endured once we're outta those mines," she said, raising her gaze to meet yours.

With a shrug she couldn't see, you stepped forward. The smaller cubes hovered in the air like fish in a pond, although causing no seen problems.

Hastening your pace, you ducked and tilted to avoid contact with the smaller die. Though they were active, their pull was soft, a bare whisper compared to the ferocious tug at the large one had exerted on Goldie. You stopped in front of the girl, her hands clutching the ore remains as she watched you.

You reached out with your working hand to claim the piece, only to find her grip tight and unyielding.

"Hey!" she shouted, yanking the chunk of lodestone back. "Are you some kind of hoarder? Always trying to take what's mine?"

You yanked your hand higher and then, after a moment's thought, you let go of the piece, making Goldie fall onto the ground.

"-You- can lug it around if that's to your liking" you said.

Goldie's gaze fixated on the fractured cube. "Carry it? I hadn't reckoned that."

"Then what? You don't want me to have it 'cause you just don't?"

There was a hollow scratch as Goldie tightened her grip on the chunks, running her nails against the crack.

"Well you ain't the one who suffered for it like I did."

You shook your head. "No, I ain't. Reckon you'll be keeping your new prize after al--"

"I'll hand it over," she cut in. "If you give my back my compass watch, you can have this whatever-it-is"

"Reckon you'll be keeping your new prize after all." You took a few steps back and then opened and lifted the timepiece. "Let's take a gander then ..."

Fuming, her breaths sharp and quick, the girl slammed the destroyed piece on the ground with little further damage. You felt her icy stare on the back of your neck.

Ignoring Goldie, you focused on not getting entrapped in any other otherworldly ore and their purgatorial powers. You moved forward, leaning once more to avoid smacking your forehead against the drifting black cubes. Behind you, Goldie stood up. You heard the shuffle

of her footsteps as she followed you. You knew you couldn't let yourself relax around her, neither should you.

Eventually, the wide cavern led into another, and that one opened up into the next expansive hollow. Without the pickaxe's light, Goldie made sure she was boot-treading on your heels, fearing of being led astray by the shifting walls. Devoid of any deposits or lights, you found yourself in granite hollow that, at a quick count, appeared to contained twelve different tunnels, burrows, and passages. A labyrinth that wasn't going to confused or stop you.

You waved the watch again. Henry's blurred and faded face stared back at you from behind the mineral lens of the opened lid. You kept your eyes on the boy's portrait for a moment, struggling to even remember how he looked dead. You shifted your focus on the hour hand, the one guiding to his whereabouts in the Graveyard Frontier. More importantly, in the midst of alternatives, it pointed to a single passage. You dipped your head for Goldie to notice and then walked down the indicated tunnel.

Before long, the accuracy of the watch proved right. You passed under a roughly hewn arch of stone. The tunnel then narrowed until it was barely tall enough for your passing, leading to a set of natural stairs. Looking up, you noticed a faint light illuminating the dust falling from above. You let out a sigh of relief, but then hastily gathered your composure by tugging on your collar. You weren't going to get fooled by those tunnels again. Goldie, spotting the steps and following your gaze, also let out a sigh, her lips briefly curling into a smile.

"Well ain't we lucky," you said, starting your ascent.

You leaned your shoulder against the crevassed walls embedded with white amber, each step you took drawing you closer to the surface, with no ill will or trickery thus far. And then, the moonlight touched you, washing you in its cold pale light. Your shadow, born anew, rippled across the shining granite. Approaching the precipice, the whole sky appeared in your view. It was as you recalled, like vestiges of a battlefield shrouded in dull and grey cloud sheets of soot and ash. Of course, save for the barren featureless moon, pendulous and alone by its own decree. The moon bathed the slate-shaded plateau in its light, the shimmering light revealing each granite flat of the long expanse.

With all this sudden brilliance, another fainter light escaped your notice. A phantom steed, its hooves leaving the ground covered in white dust untouched, stopped near the edge where you were standing, still within the mouth of the passage. Atop the mount sat a ghostly figure, one hand brandishing a gleaming revolver aimed at you, the other clutching a coiled lasso.

"Well, well, well," he said, his his lips twisting to match his horseshoe moustache. "Found you, rustler." He cocked the hammer with a chilling click. "And I'm going to make you pay for what you've stole from me."

It was the man from the watermill, you recognised, who, like you, had drawn waters from its pipes, the water which turned bones heavy and black as coal.

You barrelled, rushing back into the mineshaft before the outlander could pull his trigger. The granite cut his silhouette as you plunged down the steps, smacking onto Goldie on your descent. She barely managed to muffle a gasp as you pulled her along, rushing deeper into the tunnel. Underneath the covering of stone steps, you pulled back the iron's striker and leaned on the wall.

"What's happening?" Goldie demanded.

You hissed at the girl to lower her voice, or better yet, be silent.

She glared. "Don't shush me," she said.

A light dusting fell onto your hat from the man's boots above. "Running away, are we?" The man's voice echoed from above. "I see, I see, I see, won't be your first time for you, will it?" He sounded almost amused. "Don't think I'm a fool, you snake, I know you won't dare to return to the Warren after your lucky break. Looks like you're boxed in, like a rat. How 'bout you lay your down your irons and your spoils."

Would that be enough to win his "forgivingness"? You reckoned no.

Goldie chortled. "Hah, someone else branding you a snake like you did me."

You held out an annoyed sigh and kept your silence.

"I'm going to need you to be useful again," you said, tipping your hat towards the steps. "Head up there and catch him off guard."

"Me and what gun?"

"You ain't gonna need a piece for this, just get your hands dirty. I need you to use that immortal hide of yours to waste his ammo."

Goldie crossed her arms and scoffed. "Sounds like a 'go and get shot at' to me."

"That's what I'm telling you to do. You don't need to fuss about firing and missing, just go and get his attention."

"I don't want to get shot! I've had my fill of pain for one day."

You drummed your fingers on the gun barrel. "Well, do you want -me- to catch lead? It could happen, and you know what that'll do."

She flicked a lock of her hair with her fingertips. "No, I don't want that either, having to go hunting for you again. Just give me a gun."

"You'll just burn through our lead, and put him on edge straight away," you said. You clacked your talons towards her. "Keep him busy, let him shoot at you, and I'll take care of the rest."

The girl pursed her broken lips and scowled. "I don't want to do it," she said, "but if you ain't confident that you can take him on your own, and this is your brilliant plan ... fine."

You didn't like the way she worded it, but arguing was pointless. "My shooting hand is chicken's," you reminded her, waving your crippled arm in the air.

"Excuses," Goldie said. She slapped her hands on her thighs and stood, squinting at the steps above. "You better not just stand there and hawk while I get the tar beat out of me, again."

"I'm being practical. Come on, let's stop beating around the bush. I'll be right behind you."

She nodded begrudgingly and, squeezing her fists by her belt, took a deep breath, and then started climbing the steps. You leaned against the wall, matching with her pace as you followed.

"I see you decided to have some sense, you varlet. Good, good, good, drop your valuables and--"

"Get lost," Goldie cut in, her voice brined in annoyance and insolence. "I've got nothing of worth to give you but this." She spat in his direction.

"What the? A child?" the man stammered. A pause hovered in the air before he spoke again. "Stay where you are! Where's the other man?!"

"Other man? There ain't a soul here but me, and I've got nothing for you. So vamoose." She moved closer, causing the spectral horse to neigh as she approached.

"I told you to stay where you are," he bellowed, firing a deafening round.

You held your breath and waited, but Goldie didn't acknowledge the shot. It must have been a warning one, hitting the stone inches near from where she walked.

"Wasn't expecting a sprout to come out of the Warren, but I ain't gonna handle you any different. One more step and I'll drop you right here and now."

"You'll shoot me ..." she echoed, raising her hands in the air. "Well, give it your best try, whoever you are."

He hesitated, cocking back the hammer of his gun. "What's wrong with you, kiddo? You think I won't?" His narrowed his eyes. "I won't miss the next one. Where is he?"

She let out a dismissive sigh. "Who's he?" she asked.

Another shot rang out, and this time, Goldie yelled in pain. You stood up slightly from the mine. A piece of the girl's spectral flesh seemed to ripple from the gunshot, a vivid blue flame encircling a void beneath her collarbone. She covered the bloodless wound with her hands.

"I don't give second warnings," the man said, his eyes lingering on the girl. With a knock of

his boot against the spectral white steed side, the horse began to trot past her. "Now then--"

Abruptly, Goldie snatched the reins and yanked at them. Though she lacked the strength to halt the steed, its head jerked around from its place to meet her face.

Taken by surprise, the stranger fought to maintain balance. He glanced down at the girl, then at his glowing, faltering revolver, and then took aim at her once more.

"This here where you were suppose to vanish!"

That was enough. With a push of your elbow against the granite edge, you hoisted yourself up, aligning your shot with your left hand. Your fingers curled around the pearl-handed grip as you then nudged the trigger, trusting and letting your heirloom knowingly do the rest. Your arm was steady, fiery smoke spouting from the barrel as the feeble iron bullet pierced the moonlit air. A lone whistling note trailed the bullet. The man had only a moment to divert his gaze before the bullet struck true and exploded his forehead. The soulflesh erupted like smoke, baring his charred skull. You readied the next chamber immediately.

Sitting unmoving atop his horse, the man's lips twisted into a grimacing grin. Unlike Goldie's, his flaming flesh didn't simply dissipate and get born anew, but the mysterious force within his blackened marrow clung to his spectral form, piercing it back together. Without waiting for his flesh to return, he let out a loud whistle and gave a sharp tug on the leather reins. At his command, the stallion jerked his head and then thrust his muzzle and neck down against Goldie's midsection. The crash sent her flying, her body crashing into the powdery white dust, her bones echoing a gruesome crack upon landing. Her body laid on the ground, her groans cut short as she gasped for air.

"There you are," he said, turning his revolver at you-- four bullets left, you were counting.

You dropped your aim to the man's arm, repeating the motion and pulling the trigger to release another shot. Your bullet cut through the air, landing beyond his fingers, below his iron, and lodged deep inside his wrist. A tinted haze rose from the impact, leaving the black bones of his hand clutching at the grip of his six-shooter. At first, you thought your aim had failed. But then, you realised that while he still held the gun--his spectral hand stripped bare--his fingers couldn't pull the trigger. You watched his eyes widen, as if he wasn't expecting you to be a gunslinger of this calibre.

The man let out a 'Tsk', tilted his gaze from his hand to you, and then, with a swift motion of his other hand, unfurled a barbed whip. The whip cracked, its barbed end uncoiling and soaring through the air. It twisted and spiralled above you like a coiled snake. Each thorn on its tip was curved to impale like venomous fangs.

Before the whip could strike your body, you leaped back onto the granite steps and hid in the protection of the mineshaft. The whip struck the white stone with a ringing echo, shattering the edge and the very spot where you had stood just a moment before. As the man retracted his whip, the whip's barbs dug into the solid rock and scraped it. You pushed your sole against the stone and jumped from the mineshaft to find the stranger back within your aim, or--as you decided--to be more precise, his apparitional mount. The man's gaze locked with yours, but you moved with a seasoned grace which he, you reckoned and could see, was not good enough to counter.

You guided the cylinder to the next round, locked the hammer, nudged the firing lever, and sent loose another bullet from the barrel. The stallion's head was aglow, blurred, and without outlines, but you reckoned you shot it between the eyes. The ghost-of-a-horse stumbled, its hooves beating the air above the El Dorado's sandstone as if trying to stomp and unseen critter, before releasing a high-pitched scream and bucking wildly. It forced the man to battle with its suddenly unruly nature and clutch the reins with the hand--one he could already use--he was holding the revolver in. The spectral animal trashed about, throwing the hostile stranger left and right, and preventing him from finding any semblance of balance. It screamed and panted as though your bullet was burning inside of its forehead. You gave the cylinder another twist and fired again.

The horse halted all of a sudden, its knees trembling before it collapsed dead on the ground with a dull thud. The light that once surrounded its body flickered, wavered, and then disappeared, leaving the remains of its body to decompose into white cinders akin to a burned-out fire. Only the padded saddle remained.

The stranger regained his footing and steadied himself with a strained groan. He grasped onto his hand with the hand holding the whip and then set you in his sights. You only had a tick of a clock before he would fire, and only one bullet left in this gun, not counting the fully-loaded, rusted one.

Gun in your hand, you raised your arm high, confronting the man with a daring glare. He flinched once you reached for the trigger, and, as you pretended to discharge a round, he ducked, rightfully reckoning that you would aim for his head. An empty chamber's dry click echoed for a short second before it got consumed by the rumbling skies. It took the stranger a moment to catch onto your ruse; by the time he squeezed his trigger, you had already leapt aside, his bullet harmlessly whistling past your ear. That was half of his cylinder wasted.

"Stay put!" he yelled, his voice growing increasingly biting. He pulled back on the cocking lever, while his other hand tightened around the lasso, readying to throw.

You had a window to squeeze off a shot, perhaps a few more, before he could do either. From the corner of your eye you spotted Goldie crawling on her hands and knees, inching her way toward him.

You shifted your aim towards the hand holding the lasso, your bullet exploding his flesh into a plume of aquamarine smoke. He snarled, the smoky tendrils of his skin ascending to the air and weaving off his charred bones. As you tilted your now empty iron, the stranger returned the shot, the incendiary smoke swirling around and clinging to his gleaming revolver. You tried to sidestep, but, as in most cases, the bullet proved to be swifter than a man. His round burrowed into your shoulder, enveloping you in vapoured azure blood of your own. You stumbled in place.

Over your throbbing pain, you heard his hammer click into place.

"You're turning out to be a right bother, you old coot. I didn't expect that," he said. "But that's the end of it. I know the failing of them bones better than you. Take a dirt nap."

As you took a step back, your boots scuffing the ashen stone, your injured arm flailed useless and limp, not able to reach for Goldie's gun.

"Ain't gonna say it twice," the man said, his gaze fixed solely on you. He pushed his hand forward, the gun's barrel nudging at your head.

You nodded, not in surrender, but as a stalling tactic. You bent your knee and set it on the granite sand.

He nodded approvingly. "Good--" His fleeting smile collapsed into a stern line as he felt a sudden tug. Goldie's dainty hands grabbed the bare charred hand, breaking each finger apart, and then relinquishing the whip from his grasp. His left hand stayed outstretched, rendered useless and unable to reach for the whip. In motion, she pulled and seized the lasso before collapsing on the ground with her rear.

"You brat!" the man shouted, swinging the iron in an arch towards her instead. His teeth gritted as he fired, the bullet flying through the scorching cloud and into her head.

Goldie cried in pain as the bullet seared through her skull. For a split second, she sat motionless ... before letting out a scream of raw fury. With her hand gripping the handle of the whip, she dragged the rope across and ground and then swung it above her head, sending a cloud of dust spiralling into the air. The whip snapped in the wind, its thorny tendrils slicing the air before striking at the man. It coiled around him like a noose, too nicely of a swipe and coil for it to be Goldie's efforts and skills alone. She yanked back on the whip, trapping the man's arms.

"You should be goner!" he yelled, his body tightly squeezed from his neck down to his belly

by the leather lasso. His iron was trapped against his chest, both arms held captive by the whip's embrace.

"Well I'm damn well not," she said, spitting venomously at his face. She shot you a glare. "This how you 'handle the rest', brother killer?"

You briefly rolled your eye, suppressing a retort. You looked at your arm, the bones striving to contain the escaping wisps of ghostflesh. "How did you pull that off?" you asked instead.

Confusion and pain twisted the man's face as he tried to shift his weight. "How aren't you dead? You ain't got burned bones like me or him!"

"Wasn't my doing'," Goldie said, ignoring the man. Her brown gaze darted from the lasso in her hand to the man and back again. "It's his whip, there's some magic in it."

"Yes, you got me in a bind, I'm stuck! Oh no. You can let go of that whip, it's just keeping your hands busy."

Goldie bit her cheek and then shook her head. "No, I reckon I won't." She yanked at the lasso even harder.

"You little shit--"

You waited as your obsidian marrow pulled and then wrapped the fleeing smoke back onto its place. Holstering your heirloom you pulled out the girl's rusted iron that was tucked behind your belt instead. You confirmed with a sidelong glance at Goldie's hands that she had no trouble handling the whip; her grip on the leather lash was as sure as a driver's hold on a wagon's reins. You raised the pitted barrel and pressed it to the stranger's chin and throat, meeting the sight of his uneven eyes and the azure fires flickering inside of them.

"Didn't pan out as you'd hoped, did it?" you said.

The man scowled, his focus shifting from you to the girl. "Yeah, I reckoned you'd be strolling alone, and that your bones would've shed their shadow by now."

You swallowed the cold air, looking past your ghostly flesh at the charred skeleton beneath. "I'm to lose it?"

"Depends on how much of it you stole and swigged."

"Just a sip." Your gaze sharpened. The barrel of the loaded revolver nudged his chin upward. "What's the story with windmill water, and why does it turn the bones black?"

"You'll be a very brittle man come due time," he replied, his horseshoe moustache bent to fit his widening smile. "And I wouldn't suggest you die while they're still charred."

"That's not what I asked."

One of his eyes squinted shut while the other looked at your wound. "You already know. You can see how much tougher you've become instead of giving your soul to the wind when you were about to. It's what it does best."

"Suppose it does," you said. You clicked the hammer into place, echoing the loaded round in the stranger's ears. "But not immortal, huh? Just how many bullets can your bewitched skull take, two or maybe four?"

He winced, but his corked smile didn't falter. "You wouldn't fancy what'll fill my boots if you squeeze that trigger."

"What will?"

"I'll let your head mull on that."

Goldie circled the man, closing the distance an inch or two. Her hand reached out, swiftly nabbing a pendant from his neck. The man flinched, baring his teeth at the girl as she jumped back. She glanced down at the piece of black chalk she was then holding. As she opened her hand, the chalk on its braided rope fell through her fingers, jerking sideways by an unseen force.

"Stealing even more?" the man hissed between irate weighty breaths. "Didn't your ma teach you not to steal?"

"That was the least of her concern," she muttered to herself, shifting her gaze to you instead. "It's pointing to someplace."

You looked at the man. "At the watermill, I reckon. You were saying I shouldn't look to see my bones turn white again, weren't you?"

His response was a venomous silence, ending in a spittle-flying snarl. "No, no you ought to. You damn ought to. Keep your hands off my damn mill, you thieving cur. I'll swear I'll scalp you."

You sighed, relaxing your grip on the firearm. You looked over the man, seeking anything of potential value; his pockets and sidearms were concealed by the barbed lasso you didn't wish to handle. However, hanging from a strap on his waist was a feeble iron flask, its screw-top catching your eye. You took it, confirming with a brief shake the sloshing water inside.

The man's eyes flared with surprise, then furrowed and narrowed. A container for carrying much-needed liquids, and it was even half-full; finally. This was turning into quite a fortunate encounter.

"Doesn't seem like I'll be needing to pay that mill a visit after all."

He snarled. "What's your name, you coyote spawn?"

You raked your talons through your bedraggled hair. "I don't reckon I have one anymore. I can't recall it."

The man squinted. He smacked his front teeth with a nasty cluck and spat out, "Who are you trying to fool, you chicken-hearted-handed bastard?"

Goldie looked at you with tilted smile. "He ain't lying about that hollow noggin of his."

Your hand tightened on your firearm. You pushed on your knees, straightened, and then rose to your full height "Believe what you want-- "

"It's 'Charred Bones'," he said, cutting you. "I've got a name and it's Cassidy Jones. And ain't gonna let you swipe that." He glared at the container.

"I don't want your name, Cassidy," you said. "And you spouting yours ain't gonna jog my own loose." You moved the iron's sights on his forehead. "Now then ... "

"So, so so ... Best you remember it, I'll hunt you down again." He side-eyed Goldie and the chalk she had on her. "And you too, little missy. Things'll be a sight different then."

You pulled the trigger, firing a round through the breadth of his skull. His ghostflesh exploded into opaque blaze, the black magic trying to grapple its fleeting remains. Your gun's cylinder rolled onto the next chamber as you fired again, blasting his cranium at a yard's length. He yelled in pain as you did it over and over.

"You" --he grumbled, his head snapping back and forth from the jolting force-- "you shoulda... let be."

His grin faltered. You watched as his spirit was peeled from the bare skull, unravelling into the pale air as if you were snipping away threads. This was different, however, not quite like when Bill and Landry were dusted. He was gone, alright, but a dark silhouette of his skeletal frame remained still within the lasso's tight ensnare. Goldie eyed you, poised to slacken her grip.

"Hold on that," you warned before she could act, waving your iron at her. "Something is off-kilter."

You kept a wary eye on the stationary skeleton, ensuring a cautious gap between you two. Then it moved, each of its bones jangling and rattling like cattle bells. It craned its skull at you, its jaw opening and each tooth shuddering as if they were to fall loose. It hoisted itself off the granite stone, shuddering with irrepressible tremor. The girl tried to cinch the lasso tighter, but was jerked toward it instead. She dug her boot into the ground, halting just shy of spectre. The marrow wraith rose its arms, slowly fraying the lariat rope.

"It's fixing to snap it!" Goldie hollered the obvious, her hold slackening--she wasn't about to be dragged any nearer.

"I don't have enough lead left to handle that," you hollered at Goldie. "Where's that dark chunk I told you to tote?"

"Is -that- what you're worried about right now?" she yelled back, her eyes trembling at the strain on the nearly snapped leather. She wound the lasso's handle around her wrist. "I left it in the mine, of course. Got but two hands, and I needed 'em both."

Your gaze flit between the mineshaft's maw and the eerily rattling skeleton. It jittered and shook, its skull swivelling in your direction. The voids in its eye sockets pulsed famished glow.

"Ye', yeah, two hands," you clicked your tongue and nudged your head. "I'll hold off this bag of bones at a distance, you go fetch that black nugget you so graciously left there."

Goldie second-guessed your words, her fingers digging into the lasso's intertwining strands. Her boots scraped against the dusty white granite as the skeleton continued to yank at the lasso.

"Damn it, Goldie, let go I said!" you shouted, locking the revolver's hammer back with an authoritative snap and pointing it on the shadowy silhouette.

She spat on the ground and dropped the whip. "Suit yourself!"

The coiled lasso unravelled from the raven-hued skeleton, falling to the dirt before the rattling figure stepped on it. The wraith's bones writhed and lowered as it turned its skull at the girl. Steadying its trembling bony hands, it reached out towards her. Goldie skipped back, but not before the calcified fingers grabbed her ankle and tore away a piece of her ethereal flesh. She yelled, recoiling in pain and falling onto her elbow, yet managing to remain upright. She glared at the thing, then--annoyed--at you, and backed away even further.

You slide a step forward the wraith, snapping your chicken talons for its attention. The skeleton pressed the fading opaque soul it pried off Goldie to its chest, the flames briefly burning on its marrow before dissipating into the moon-shining air. It gazed as the ghostly matter refused to stick, withering away from its charred-black bones.

After a forlorn moment, it took a notice of you again. Its skull slanted, bending the bones of its neck with a creaking strain. It glared at you with its hollowed eyes, a mountain lion sizing up the meat of a potential prey. It deemed so, as it outstretched its trembling hands and then lunged at you, the rattle of its bones echoing across the barren flatlands. You had two bullets and no time to reload. They had to count.

You let the nuzzle drop and eased your finger off the steel squeeze. Shifting your handle, you grasped the six-shooter by its barrel. Angling away your shoulder, you leapt away from the wild and swift wraithlike skeleton. It missed by a hair's breadth, a few mere inches, its gaunt fingers clenching at the desolate air, its jittering teeth gnashing the nothingness between them. You arched your steps to put yourself behind it and, with an swinging arm, you brought the wooden handle down on its skull. The gun's grip shivered in your palm, the wood within cracking like a lizard crushed under a waggon's wheel. Your blow glanced off the blackened skeletal crown, seeming to do no damage.

Before a curse could pass your lips, the wraith twisted its skull around. Grabbing your elbow with a steely grip, it chomped down on your left wrist, its teeth slicing through your spectral flesh as if it were tender overstewed fat. Stifling a pained shout, you bashed the handle against the skeletal ridge of its neck and spine--hell if you knew what those bones were called. But as if cast from iron, all you managed to do was further crack the weather-beaten grip of your firearm.

It bit deeper, its jagged teeth scraping against your charred bones. The wraith eased its clutch, pushed its hands against your wrist to tear off at the spectral essence seeping from your wound, and then made an abrupt leap backward. You lunged at it, your claw scraping across the skull as though it were carved from solid rock, causing you more pain than the skeleton seemed even capable of feeling. The skeleton tumbled onto the granite surface, the pallid moonlight rippling against its convulsing form. You watched as it tried to smear your stolen flesh over its skeletal frame.

The bluish smoke slipped from its grip, finding its way back to your sinewless wrist. Probably, you didn't had to worry; it would soon heal.

Goldie climbed out of the mineshaft, the shattered cube clasped in her hands. She let out a weary sigh, casting a look over her shoulder at you.

"You better darn well tail me," she yelled, her form blending into the fog until her features began to fade.

You held your breath, waiting to see what would come first: you regaining the use of your left hand or the skeleton wraith shifting its attention back at you. As if to be ironically fair, they both happened in tandem and as the last wisps of the mist left its skeletal grasp, the creature hungered for more ... in spite of all the futility of whatever it was trying to accomplish!

You were ready for its wild lunge. Sidestepping the charge, you brought the revolver crashing--splintering!--against its ribcage, toppling the heavy body to the ground. Its blackened carcass fell flat onto the rugged granite, splashing pallid dust up into the air and its rattling bones scraping the stone surface that was as unyielding as it were. You rushed to grab the discarded lassos, holding onto its handle like a drowning man would grip at a floating log.

The wraith had already hoisted itself upright, its spine trembling and wavering in ways bones shouldn't have been able to. You unfurled the rope, snapping the barbed leather at the looming demon. It cracked through the air, and despite your utter inexperience with using a lasso, it looped around the creature's neck as if with a mind of its own. The skeleton staggered as your whip tightened below its skull, the metallic barbs scraping at its marrow. It reached with its rattling hands to claw at the leather. Before it could, you wrapped the other end of the lasso around your arm and over your shoulder, using your chicken claw talons to painfully secure it in place. With every ounce of strength in your bones, you yanked at it. You heard a harsh hollow cracking sound as you fell to the ground, the wraith's skull snapping off behind you.

You watched as the black cranium whirled through the sky before landing yards away from its skeletal frame. The rope began to slip off the neck bones, only to be seized by the headless body. Its clawed fingers dug deep into the oiled weaves and strips, ruthlessly shredding them. You dropped the now useless whip and waited to see if separating the skeleton's head from its body had any effect. The skeleton wraith continued shredding at the lasso until nothing but scraps were left, scattering tattered fibres into the air like plucked feathers. It stood there, wavering on the spot, its trembling arms reaching out blindly.

With a heavy sigh, you turned to the dislodged skull. It twitched in place, before rolling to one side, its desolate sunken eyes turned to you. Returning its gaze, you noticed the headless body had understood where you were. God damn it! You heard a familiar clatter of blackened bones as it rushed at you. You kicked the dust, charging towards the skull. A cacophonous rattle followed in your steps. You reached the skull and then bashed it with your boot. The skull sailed above the ground, the skeleton frame behind you abruptly stopping in its tracks, fumbling in place. You kicked it quite far, you reckoned; the skull blurred into the mist, with you no longer in its gaze. You stared at the framework of bones to make sure it wouldn't and couldn't follow you--it would not--before leaving it there.

Rolling your shoulder--that pull was quite a pain to do--you headed to where you last saw Goldie vanish. You trudged through the graveyard shroud, the once clear and mercury-lined sights of the El Dorado Warren becoming something you could barely recall. Just as you were about to reach for the compass, a rustling sound made you halt.

Poised to reach for the empty revolver, you were taken back as Goldie suddenly emerged from the swirling mist. She slapped your chest with her palms.

"You took your sweet damn time," she said, immediately stepping back. You whistled in some spit and held it in.

"More trouble than I figured" --your stare locked on hers-- "but you knew that."

You scraped your wrist with your claw, the echo of its mutilation and tear penetrating your soul. Right on its heels, the sting of the man's bullet flared anew, as if smouldering with renewed

fire from withering cinders within your left shoulder. You pressed your normal hand onto the wound to try and suffocate the pain, but it fetched the tiniest relief.

A full day hadn't passed since your arrival, and you had already suffered enough wounds to kill a lesser man five times over ... yet, even in the Graveyard Frontier, you persisted, your spectral flesh and corporeal body inseparable. It seemed the man's warning held truth, lending credence to all his other sayings. You reached for the flask with a careful touch: the meagre iron was brittle and thin; it was a wonder they used this feeble ore to forge their blades and firearms. Was there truly no better material available? Holding the flask to your armpit, you grasped to uncork it, your ceaseless, insatiable thirst an unending torment.

You saw Goldie frown. "Is that what's in store for you too?" she asked, her brown gaze eyeing the charred bones visible beneath your translucent skin.

You halted, your fingers digging deeply into the cork's bottoms. You might, if your temporary end follows the man's fate, while your bones are still as black as midnight when that happens. "Worried, are you?"

"I'd just as soon not wrangle with your wandering bones if it's avoidable."

"Them water-charred bones make me tougher to kill," you said. "So, if it comes to that ... it won't be a problem in the first place."

Goldie, she ran her fingers around the edges of her nose before snorting. "Good reckoning. Guzzle till you're ready to burst, don't matter to me."

"On the other hand" --you shot a look at your bird-like claw and sneered-- "he claimed if I quit drinking, my bones'll turn back, but more fragile, whatever that's supposed to mean." You knew what it meant, the necessity to keep imbibing to fend off the consequences.

"So, like a drug?" She offered you a taunting smirk. "I'd fancy you weaker and more pitiful when we run into Henry. Suits me just fine."

You corked the flask and tucked it back beneath your belt. "I'll be easy pickings for everyone else who ain't your brother, too." You sighed. "Besides, I ain't got much use for this damned bird leg, and the only way to shed it is through 'death' and soul renewal. But, I ought not to do that while my bones are like this. Aside from you wrangling with my skeleton, who's to say if it'll lash out at others, or it'll come after me."

You opted against it. For now, you'll hold onto the flask without toughening your ebony bones.

You cocked your head. "We need to put some miles between us and this place, find a sport to rest for a spell." You paused, "And your gun's busted."

She tensed, leaning forward, her eyes unblinking as they fixed on you. "Whatever," she spat, "it ain't like it was of any importance, or I foot the bill for it. You weren't about to let me use it anyhow, you filcher." She reached her hand for your neck. "You can make amends by returning my watch."

You backed away from her outreaching hands, shaking your head to deny her.

"I ain't handing it back," you said. "It's more handy in my keep."

Goldie cocked her and grit her teeth. "That's not for you to judge!" she snapped.

You pulled at your shirt collar and hid the timepiece behind the fabric. "Only managed to trail you 'cause of it, doesn't that make my point?"

She skipped to the side and grabbed at your top, her fingers fanning around the buffalo horn buttons. "We ain't in them mines no more, are we?"

You grabbed her elbow, pulling on it with little leniency. "And you can go astray again."

The cotton stopped her from properly clutching the timepiece. "Without a means to find Henry, something you'd likely prefer."

"Enough!" you said, twisting her arm and casting her onto the ground--her hands empty. Staring down at her smoldering glare, you said. "How about I give you something else instead?"

Her hands clawed at the bleached sand. "What in tarnation else can you give me?"

You waited to see if the girl would make another grab for the ticker, but her venomous words masked a dash of inquiry that momentarily sated her. Reaching into your pocket, you took out a handful—all of them you had—of purple-blue shardlings from the hollering webbings you previously had to deal with.

Goldie scoffed and spat. "Why would I need anything from that damned place?" she asked. "All them ores and shards are there to make you suffer, you idiot."

"Those can too," you said, taking a cautious step at her. "They used to, in the original, bigger form, and they still can if you hold them to your left ear."

"What? Left ear? —she blinked, her mouth hung open— " ... What about the other one?"

You let out a tsk to prompt her to open her palms, then dropped the lilac fragments into her hands. The girl's eyes looked over you before she did as you told her to.

"I hear some— H-Henry?" she gasped, questioning the empty air. She moved the stones closer to her ear. "That's Henry's voice, what kind of witchcraft this be?"

You tapped your trousers firmly with your hand to dust it off.

She shut her eyes and let out a shaky whimper.

"It's truly his voice, I ain't forgotten. He's repeating what he told me, all over again; every last word. It's been a damned half-a-decade ... "

"Just your brother? No one else's?"

She paused, frowning her brows. "No, now that you mentioned it, I can hear an old storekeep praising me for— what is this thing?" She looked at you.

You shrugged, your gaze straying towards the foggy horizon. "Just something I squirrelled away just in case. If you like it, you can hold onto it for now."

Goldie curled her lips. "For now? What are you aiming to do with them?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I'm still fixing to take back that watch, you brother killer, but ... I ain't in the mood for dust-up anylonger."

You sighed, it seemed like you had managed to placate the girl for now.

Making sure first that no threat had followed in your steps, you sat on the empty ground surrounded by the featureless landscape. Goldie had also made herself comfortable, laying on the ground with her hands cradling the chattering shards spread underneath her head like a knuckle-stuffed pillow. Her eyes closed, a soft hum leaving her lips that curled into a content smile, tears quivering on her short lashes. She seemed at ease—a sentiment you couldn't echo.

Now that you tried to relax, no longer focused on traversing and weathering the ghastly blue expanse, your thoughts came back to your wounds, numerous and varied in their vehemence. The bullet wound in your shoulder whimpered for attention like a wild hound, unpredictable and capable of turning your arm—be it chicken's or not—against you at the drop of Lucifer's hat. You tried to swallow, but the parched residue in your mouth grated against your raw throat, making you cough and gasp for the funeral breath. You put your fingers against your neck in an attempt to soothe the dryness; instead, you flinched from the sweltering gashes on your palms: not merely wounds, but memories of them. The new injuries too, the bullet Cassidy lodged in your other shoulder and the damage he wrought on your wrist as a mindless wraith, ached like damnation itself.

You slouched on the ground, and it was then the worst of the pains chilled your body as if you and the lightning stepped to share a lake during the same estranging thunderstorm. The gnawing sensation of hundreds of stabs, punctures, and impalements made your bones shudder and your spectral flesh ripple like an ethereal cloud.

A curse slipped past your lips—God damn it!--as you laid there, writhing and wallowing from the lingering pains. Far from the moment of respite you hoped for, you found yourself tortured by those wounds, like a reminder of the ceaseless torment everyone else was damned to suffer in the Graveyard Frontier. You steadied your breath, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your throat like you were taught to. With no means to combat the pain, you yielded,

patiently waiting to somewhat acclimate to them.

You threw a glare at Goldie before bringing a finger to your mouth and biting down on it. You closed your eyes and focused on your breathing. The injuries, stabs, and gashes—you tried to turn them to mere itches. You knew you didn't have to fret over collapsed lungs, torn muscles, damaged joints, festering infections, bleeding out, or any such physical maladies; it was all in your mind, this torment was all a twisted design of the Graveyard Frontier. The injuries could be deadly at the moment, but they wouldn't persist. Still, it was a wonder the souls you met hadn't become mad, though Landry came the closest.

For hours, perhaps, you laid basking under the glow of the mortuary moon. The pains ebbed and receded, but only that, you reckoned you were never going to be free of them fully until you'd find your way home. It was a melancholic and sobering motivation, at least. The outside of your eyelids was veiled by an eclipsing darkness. You snap-opened your eyes and abruptly snatched Goldie's arm above you, causing her to yelp.

"What do you think are you doing?" you asked, your grip on her arm tightening enough to eventually fracture it.

She pulled in an attempt to free herself, but you didn't let her. "Looking in on you," she said, digging her nails into your skin with her free hand.

"Sure you were." You looked to where you stored the timepiece and sneered. "Grown tired of Henry's prattle and his sweet talk, have we?"

Her serpent-like gaze slithered over you. "You are a piece of shit, you are! Let go," she said.

Relinquishing your hold gradually, you eased your grip inch by painful inch, one finger at a time, until she could wrench free. She huffed at you.

You tucked your arm underneath you and propped yourself up to sit. You patted your pockets and your belt's holster to ensure that they were unbothered by the brat; seemed like you caught her in the first act. You tilted your neck side to side to snap the bones in place and sighed.

"Show me the chalk you snatched," you said, making a beckoning gesture with your open hand.

She squinted, clutching her stomach and chest with one hand. "You aiming to tail it?" she hesitated, "To the watermill?"

You gave a slight nod. "That's our only shot at a clear path, else we just left to wander and hope to stumble upon something."

Goldie furrowed her brows. "Not if we follow to where Henry is."

"That Cassidy is not going to be a problem for a spell, it's the prime time to head back there. Plus, there's that trapped soul we could cut loose."

Goldie's spit landed near your boots. "You couldn't give less of a damn about that slave, you said it yourself. You just want the darn water, ain't you?"

The reminder made you flinch; the only pain that captured your attention over and over every time you spoke or even drew breath was the drink hunger. There was a reason pioneers coined them spirits. You reached for the iron flask, only to stop midway as if you were reaching for an iron at a high noon. Cursing, you forced yourself to pull back the hand and turned to look at Goldie.

"No, we are going for the slave first. He was with ... what's his name, Charred Bones? If luck's on our side, he'll know a few landmarks we can rid on to."

Goldie kept you in her silent scrutiny. "Prove to me that this ain't just about you getting a drink."

"Prove it to you?" you asked. "How do you want me to--"

"Hand over the flask," she said, jabbing a finger at the container. "You made up your mind not to drink it, right? So it shouldn't be no issue."

You couldn't help but roll your eyes, making them unseen beneath your closed lids. You

slapped the surface of the flask and said, "Ain't gonna happen, girlie. It's staying right here with me."

Goldie locked her arms and pushed them against her chest. She locked her eyes on you with a daring stare. "Do you think I'm just gonna tail after you like a goddamn pet?"

"We both know you're just bidding your time to stab me in the back," you said. "Don't gotta prove a damn thing to you. Go, wander off if you like."

Goldie was quiet in her reckoning, scuffing the dirt under her boot and digging into the hollow soil. She then turned her back to you, walked to her previous spot, and picked up the heavy pieces of the lodestone cube. With only her burdened short groan breaking the silence, she hurled them at you! You raised your arm to shield your face as the black chunks struck your chest and neck. The sharp corners tore into your jacket and the blunt sides struck against your body. You caught the pieces mid-air before they could fall, glaring down at the girl.

"Ain't your pack mule either," she spat.

You took a deep, whistling breath and then held up the pieces of the lodestone. "You bitch. Gather up these godforsaken rocks, show me the damn chalk, and don't push my patience any further than you already have."

Goldie tucked her hands beneath her elbows and then lifted her chin. "Pray tell, or else what?"

Your grip tightened around the dark rock. "Your memory seems all too short, probably all of them blows to your thick skull. I swear I'll smash your darling little timepiece if you don't do as I tell ya."

"You ain't gonna do shit," she dared. "You need that to duck Henry like the lily-livered coward you are, too spineless to face up to your own deeds!"

You tossed the cube on the ground in front of the girl, your scowl tightening into a thin line. You reached inside your plaid shirt and yanked out the pocket watch by its chain. As Goldie tensed up, her arms pressing further against her ribs and her blue gaze flickering towards the piece, you snapped the watch open and hoisted it to your shoulder level. Spreading your claw, you touched the bezel and the glass case, scratching a nasty mark inches away from Henry's weathered portrait.

Goldie's eyes snapped wide open. She approached you with a quick step, her arms falling to her sides.

"Right you are, this little trinket sure is handy for keeping an eye on your brother and your pain-in-the-ass self," you said.

As she took another step, she started. "Wait--"

Your claw chipped and fractured the watch's glass face, the sound seemingly echoing in Goldie's ears like a drill.

"But you're dead wrong about how much I give a damn about it," you said, raising your eyes to meet the dilated flames in hers. With that, you squeezed the watch between your hand and your claw, cracking it further.

Goldie rushed and slammed her weight against your chest but you kept your ground, unfazed by her light push. The girl grabbed your hands with her own, standing on her tiptoes to reach them.

"I damn-well said ... stop!" she snarled.

You shook your head. With a swift motion, you lifted the timepiece above your head, breaking free of her pathetic grasp and moving it far out of her reach. She stumbled back, her breathing becoming short and sharp as she clenched her fists, seeming ready to punch you. However, her lifted leg wobbled in the air when you dared her to come closer, the watch's glass face continuing to crack under your clasp.

"This fancy thing holds no meaning or value to me," you paused, the crack in the watch's casing spreading across its entire surface. "Ready to start begging now?"

Goldie exhaled sharply into the frigid air, her gaze shifting uneasily between you and the watch ticking away seconds before it would break.

"I get it," she said as she stepped back and spat. "Fine, alright! I messed up, and said things I shouldn't have. Is that what you're aching to hear?"

"Partly," you paused and, keeping her on painful edge for a moment longer before dropping the watch onto your chest. "Now gather up them stones, and keep your unasked-for thoughts to yourself."

There was a sound, a splintering creaking like branches and trunks breaking asunder under a violent wind: although it was still. You and Goldie turned to face the looming shadow emerging from the pale-tinted mist. The fog unfurled to lay open your eyes to the eerie green glow of its spectral wood: a massive gallows-like structure. The hewed ethereal beams creaked as the structure lurched closer; the beams edging like legs not meant to be seen moving. The teetering beam rolled at each unsteady step, desolate and bare of the frayed hanging ropes meant to be there by design. A figure sat atop the planked platform, his gaze meeting yours. He tipped a hat that wasn't there and then turned the book he held in one hand to the next page with his finger—his other hand was in the air, elbow against his knee.

"Why isn't this a pleasant surprise," he said in a voice with a delicate lilt, each word cadencing into the next. "A man with bones as black as coal and a girl no older than sixteen. You two make for a curious pair." His eyes dropped to the page of his book before rising back to meet yours. "I'm all tied up with a troublesome riddle here, care to lend a helping hand?"

"First off, howdy, partner," you greeted, touching the brim of your hat in an acknowledgement. "Name's Aug. You've got yourself an interesting mount there, don't ya?"

The man craned his neck slightly, revealing a faint smile. His tawny shirt collar, turned up, obscured the gleaming skin of his throat.

"Wouldn't really call it a mount," he replied. "I was known as Abel once, but in these parts, people know me better by another name: The Riddle Wrangler."

"And which name do you fancy more?"

He tapped the coarse page he was reading, then lifted his hand.

"I don't mind either, dear Aug," he said, maintaining his smile. "I don't even mind if you'll mispronounce it as 'a-Bel'."

"Abel it is then. Got a few queries need answering, reckon you could help with that?"

He nodded almost as soon as you marked the dot. "I'll be more than happy to assist, long as you can lend me a hand first."

You glanced over at Goldie, who tilted her head and raised her fist. In spite of the insulting display, she begrudgingly began to pick up the pieces as you had asked.

"Keep me outta this," she said.

Abel chuckled. "If your delightful compadre wishes to try her hand at solving one as well, I wouldn't mind, dear Aug. She shouldn't shy away from stretching that brain of hers. You know ... there's that rot of age the youngsters just haven't yet experienced."

"Pay her no mind," you said, spitting into the dirt and grinding the spot with your boot. "So, what's the riddle?"

"I've got quite a few that are causing me trouble," he admitted with a tired sigh. "Here is one for you: what weighs more, a pound of hope or a kilogram of despair?"

"This is one of them trick questions, ain't it?" you said. "Well ... A kilogram weighs more than a pound. So, I reckon, I'd wager on despair."

Reaching into the spine of the book, the man drew out a lead pencil. He tapped the unsharpened end somewhere on the paper.

"That's not it," he said, sighing. "I've already tried that one myself. But it was a good guess nonetheless, dear Aug." His left knuckled grip, one holding nothing you could see, relaxed partially.

"Hold on a second," you said, biting your lip. "So this ain't one of them trick questions? We're talking metaphors here, ain't we? But damn, hope's supposed to lift us up, despair's supposed to weigh us down." Resting a hand on your belt, you tried again. "So... the answer's a pound of hope?"

Abel held down a chuckle. "Afraid not, Aug."

"Huh? So it ain't either one? What in tarnation kind of riddle is this?"

"One that's very hard to find a right answer to."

The man sighed and pressed the page with his pencil. A sudden itch crawled over your neck, making you scratch the irritated spot with your talons. Was it just a caprice of your ghost flesh?

"Any other guesses?" Abel's words flew as naturally as a bird's singsong; he seemed hopeful for an answer to his riddle as much as a bird hoped for another to join the nest.

"How you figure my answers are wrong?"

He glanced at the pages before saying, "I've got a hunch, dear Aug."

"A hunch?" you asked, eyeing the book of riddles. "You telling me you don't even know the right answer?"

Abel raised the book to his face and laughed. After a moment, his laughter died down. "No, I didn't come up with them riddles with an answer in mind."

"You didn't-- just how many of these riddles you got in that there book?"

"More than half a hundred," he said.

"And how many you reckon you've solved?"

"None," he admitted, lowering the book to his knees. "Not a single one." He turned to Goldie, who recoiled slightly under his gaze. "Do you mind giving it a try, Miss ... ?"

Goldie waved the chunk of ebony at him. "I ain't good at them riddles or quizzes. Ask the brother killer a second one instead." Her smirk twisted a little as she looked at you.

Abel glanced at you, then back at Goldie. "I insist," he said. His lips hung parted, his teeth locked together in an overly strained smile.

Goldie scoffed. "You insist, do you?" She turned her attention to the man as he nodded his head. "Solve your own riddles, I've got no interest in 'em," she said.

"Just spit something out," you said, turning to her. "Just give whatever answer you can think of, it's not like it'll be a correct one anyways."

Goldie's eyes narrowed. "Not like it'll be right?" She hefted the chunks of rock in her hands before having her gaze wander around. "Fine, give me another one," she said, lowering the necktie from her chin, "but if I get it right, you're helping -me-, not him." She jerked her head at you. "What I want is different from what the murder of my brother will question of you."

Abel leaned back, then pointed the pencil at the brat. "That sound more than fair to me, don't you agree, dear Aug?"

You pursed your lips. The watch pointing to Henry's whereabouts was in your possession; what else could she possibly bargain with him for? You didn't nod but didn't shake your head to disagree either.

Abel stashed his pen beneath the mustard-coloured pages, gripping the edge as he turned it to the next one. He made a gesture as if adjusting spectacles that weren't there with his wrist.

"I have one for you here, miss," he said, lifting the book to show her a page: there was a riddle inscribed in stark black ink with a perfect circle drawn right beneath it. "How do you spot a beginning of a circle?"

Goldie palmed her hand into half-a-triangle and put it against her nose and lips, letting go of a pent-up breath. She closed her eyes and, scratching at her chapped skin, fell into ponderance.

Abel waited, his legs swinging from the edge of the glowing gallows. You waited too, for a good ten minutes, before your patience began to wear thin.

"You gonna answer the man or what?" you snapped.

Goldie's eyes flickered at you; her voice was stifled by her hand. "I'm thinking," she said.

You grit your teeth and tsked your tongue. Thinking, she said, as if there's anything in that head of hers to think over.

Another ten minutes trudged before Goldie finally lowered her hand and turned to Abel. "Got my answer now," she said.

Abel's left hand twirled an unseen instrument in the air before he returned Goldie a small nod. "Well then, let's hear it, little miss."

She rubbed her thumb and forefinger together before pointing the latter at the man. "I reckon I'd just ask the one who drew it to point how he did it to me."

Abel cocked his head. He observed Goldie as she moved her finger to point it to the page. "That here's your handiwork, right? How 'bout you just tell me how you got it onto paper?"

"And if they don't tell you?" he asked, placing the pencil between the pages. He raised an imaginary quirkly to his lips and nibbled on the very end of it, taking a soft whiff.

Goldie withdrew her finger, balled her hand into a fist, and then cracked each of her knuckles against her shoulder blade. "Got plenty of ways to 'ask', you riddler."

Abel returned his attention to the page, a smirk hanging on his lips. "That's an interesting answer, but I'm afraid it's also a wrong one. Can't be of any help if I don't remember, now can I?"

"What?" she said.

"Even if I was the one to draw it this way, if I don't remember how I did it, there's no way I can tell you. Am I correct?"

Goldie shot him a sideways scowl. "You have a horrendously shitty memory," she said. Suddenly, Goldie slapped at her neck, blinking and clutching it as if a mosquito had taken a bite.

Hidden beneath the brilliant radiance of the gallows beam, you noticed a minute twinkle--tightly knotted cords alone--enveloping the crossbeam. Had these always been there? Was their faint existence obscured by the ethereal green glow of the rest of the structure and that's why you didn't notice them?

Abel's voice broke your train of thought. "You two didn't give me an answer, but you two gave it a shot ... I can't just let that effort go unappreciated, now can I?" he said, drumming on the misty platform with his pencil. The gallows lowered with a sound as if the hardwood inside of each vertical post splintered and cracked, like it was fracturing just to shift an inch.

The weathered staircase laid upon the white-grey earth, tendrils of smoke spiralling up from within the cracked steps. The path to ascent those gallows had no handrails to hold.

Abel motioned to you with his hand. "I'm happy to give you a lift... Now, where is it you're looking to go?"

"Take us to the watermill, I've got a pointer right here," you said, reaching to snatch the chalk on Goldie's neck. The imp evaded you, and shouted, "Take me to the town!"

The man let his raised hand fall and delved into his waistcoat pocket. "I'm afraid I can't accommodate both," he said, pulling out a coin and fastening the pocket's button. "Shall we decide with a coin flip?"

You recognised the golden coin: the Double Eagle. A full twenty-dollar worth in the size of a casino chip, Liberty herself on one side and eagle on the reverse. There was no federal coin worth more than that one.

"Heads or tails?" Abel asked, flipping -the- American coin between his fingers, leaving the question open to either you or Goldie.

"Heads, I reckon," you declared ahead of the brat.

Goldie looked at you sideways and huffed in retort. "You think calling it lets you wrangle the fortune, do you?" she asked.

You turned a deaf ear to her, gesturing for the Wrangler to toss the coin. Abel sent the coin

airborne with a flick of his thumb. The Double Eagle turned around itself a dozen or more times before it sailed above and over the edge of the gallows and began its descent. It fell onto the dirt between you and Goldie with a soft muted landing, the cryptic moonlight dancing on its edges and rims with every turn it made on its way down. You both hurried over to inspect the results. Goldie proved quicker than you, bending to announce the outcome.

"Look at that, it's 'Tails'," she said, stepping between you and the coin, the gold glinting in the blue flame of her empty sockets.

Goldie's petite frame was not enough to obstruct your view, but you realised that wasn't her aim. What she was trying to do was to prevent you from tampering with the result. Goldie squinted, bending her knees to make sure you she wasn't that easy to move. It was far too far for Abel to see ...

You raised your head and voice. "It's 'Tails'," you said.

Seizing Goldie by her arm, you pulled her to the ground, freeing the path to the coin. She blinked at your forthrightness, you imagined, caught off guard as you shoved her aside. You scooped up the coin worth twenty dollars and shot her a glare. You were no fork-tongued snake to lie and ... but, the town wasn't the worst place to head towards. You weren't losing all that much.

You ran your fingers over the golden edges, then flicked it upwards with your thumb, returning the coin to its rightful owner. As it was still in the air, you stepped past the imp you'd left sprawled in the dirt and planted your boot on the echoey, smoke-tinged steps of the gallows. You climbed the thirteen steps and made your way to the end of the platform to meet Abel eye to eye. You could hear the ghostly wood creak and sizzle as Goldie followed in your wake, one arm rubbing the other as she muttered something about the dollar under her quiet breath. Your boot struck the weathered lumber.

Abel drew together the sides of the book, its pages rustling, and slid the pen back into his sleeve. Putting both hands on his knees, he pushed himself to his feet, standing a few inches shorter than you.

"So, we'll be off to the 'town', as the dear miss suggested." Nodding first, he swept his fingers over the horizon line. "There is one ... if my memory serves me right, not far from here. Am I being correct?" He looked down to the gallows' platform.

It creaked the way it did before, no different ... or so you thought, but the Riddle Wrangled took that as an answer. He smiled. "I can't say that I quite recall its name, so you'll have to pardon me for that."

"It's fine," you said, looking aside keep an eye on Goldie who was stumbling and leaping over several steps, nearly falling off the handrail-less side. Once she reached the platform, the stairwell rose itself into the air.

"For Christ's sake!" Goldie shouted, gasping as she staggered back onto the platform. "A little warning would be nice!"

Abel chuckled and shook his head. "It's the gallows you ought to be cross with, but I'll apologise on their behalf, dear miss."

"Miss this, dear that," Goldie spat. "Just call me Goldie. You promised to get me to the town, so let's get a move on."

"Very well, I would suggest you find your footing," he advised, "or perhaps even cling to one of the pillars. This will be different from horseback riding."

The ghastly green gallows swayed and shifted, the framework beneath your feet trembling with every inch it moved. The pillars on which it stood quaked, sounding like rupture of tree trunks and branches, their inner fibbers cracking within but never splitting on the outside. Creak! Crunch! Snap! Crack! The dreadful noises melded into a cacophony, yet the man seemed unaffected, oblivious to both the tumult and the tremors. You couldn't hold it against Goldie when she pressed her palms hard against her ears to shut out the horrendous sounds.

You were, instead, tantalized by the quivering crossbeam just above your head. Two clusters of silvery knots shimmered around the girder, but there were no ropes or chains that you could see. Why were there gallows in the Graveyard Frontier, and more puzzling, why were there no hanging ropes attached to them? You felt a wave of unease, You felt a wave of unease, as if something was pulling at your neck. ... you reached to touch your throat just in case, but founding nothing unusual there. You cast a sidelong glance at Goldie, who seemed unaffected, aside from her chin being slightly lifted: was she -that- proud of winning the coin toss?

You couldn't decide whether the rumbling sky or the creaking gallows was louder. You approached Abel, your good left hand hovering over your holster.

"How did you meet your end?"

Abel's lips curled - was it amusement or a sneer? He pulled on his shirt's raised collar and then lifted his head to the beam overhead.

You swallowed, kneading on your throat with your fingers. "They strung you up?"

He nodded. "Indeed they did, and I can't really say I'm the only one around with a similar story."

You knelt and ran your talons over the opaque wood of the gallows. "That why this godforsaken structure resembles the gallows?"

"I didn't ask it to look like the execution stand. The Evergreen Molt had its own ideas, most likely channelling my recollections."

"The what-a-what?"

Abel adjusted his nonexistent glasses. "Dear Aug, despite your rough-and-tumble looks, seems like you're fresh to these parts?"

You squinted, grimacing. "That'd be correct. I ain't one for record-keeping, but if I had to hazard a guess, I'd say it's been 'bout a day."

"Just a day?" he looked you over, hat to toes. "Only a day ... and what, I might ask, happened to you in that short span?"

You scratched your neck. "I ain't against sharing, Abel, but how about you spill about these Evergreens first?"

"Fair enough, dear Aug," he said, turning his gaze from you. "These Forsaken Plains house behemoths the size of Sequoias, all made from the same ghostwood as the gallows, but less lumber ... more wood. Buildings, and other constructions here, all spawn from these giant-like, ambulatory trees. From time to time, pieces of them break off and tumble down. If lost souls happen upon such deadwood, their memories mold it into something they recognised. That's how these towns we have around sprung up, and how my memories shaped these gallows."

"So, do all these structures up and move around?"

The Riddle Wrangler shook his head. "No, it's not a common occurrence. Until you're aiming to craft a little shack from Evergreen Molt that'll traipse across the Forsaken Plains, I don't think you should worry about it."

You looked at the toppled down mountains of the steel-hued summits of the sky. "Ain't much to what happened to us," you confessed, looking over at Goldie sideways. "We turned up here, got wind of the El Dorado Warren, got conned into embracing the Prickly Niceties, then trudged on. We found the mines, delved in, delved in, spent a good while mining ores and courting trouble, then we up and left. That's when you stumbled upon us."

"You 'left it," Abel echoed, creases forming at the corners of his ethereal blue eyes. He took a draw from an imaginary quiry. "You make it sound so simple. Dip me in marvel, dear Aug, and don't say that that in front of the miners who've been stuck in there for years."

You shrugged your shoulders. "Saw another fella leaving as we were making our way onto the granite plains, so not everyone's stuck with the same rotten luck."

"Some of them know what they are doing, sure. Those headstrong lunatics who willingly

enter the mines again and again, risking to be stuck there forever each of those times." He nodded. "But they are appreciated."

"I can see why," you said, patting your pockets laden with the ore you'd gathered. "This iron, 'feeble' as they label it, seems to fetch quite the demand, doesn't it?"

"By some," Abel said, "by most." His eyes fell on your mangled hand. "That explains your arm. I've heard whispers of a beast called the Chupacabra lurking in the El Dorado Warren. It seems you had a run-in with it and lived to tell the tale. You must be quite the seasoned hand."

"Came across two of 'em, but I reckon the girl hinted there might be more down there." You let out a frustrated sigh. "Managed to hold 'em off, but it left me with this damned chicken claw for a hand."

"That is indeed a unfortunate" --that's all he offered, no cure or remedy he seemed willing to suggest.

You clutched the talons in one fistful. "I'll find a way to manage." Your attention swivelled to the paperback. "So, this book of riddles, you slipped that the riddles there are of your own making? Did you carry this book from the frontier? And if so, why the devil are you so hell-bent on cracking the answers rather than hunting down the man who ended you? Shouldn't you already know the answers?"

Goldie, having been left out of the conversation so far, uncorked her ears. The racket had her grimacing, but she wasn't about to let any 'whispered' discourse between you and Abel slip her by.

"That's the issue, dear Aug. I never intended for there to be any solution, I haven't crafted those riddles with an answer in mind." Abel scratched his scalp. "Nor did put them down in a book, they were all up here." He tapped his forehead. "But, not matter what they say about me, I am a man of faith. I went to the Coffin Fields, pulled a nail from my coffin, and sought an answer in prayer. In return, was handed this book, brimming with my own riddles to crack. Seems very ironic, sure, but it's also fitting. As for the man who strung me up, he's here ... but I have no desire for revenge."

"He's here, you say? Wouldn't just taking your revenge on him solve all your problems?"

Abel regarded, his shoulders slumping ever so slightly and the flames flickering in his skull. "Those who do vanish."

You blinked. "Exactly! They find solace from the Graveyard Frontier. What more could you possibly want?"

He extended a finger skyward. "I want to go there."

You trailed his gaze to the roiling clouds. "Where the Indians are?"

"No. No! Dear Aug, I yearn for Heaven."

"There's a Heaven?"

"I hold faith that there is. Hell exists, after all. Why wouldn't there be a Heaven? But merely killing the man who killed me won't lead me there."

"And cracking all your riddles will?"

"I've decided to believe it will," he responded, a tranquil smile finding its way back to his features "Given that I've never taken a life, I have a lot of time to ponder on them without worry."

Goldie scoffed at him and his words. "The man who did you in doesn't. If you don't off him for your own peace, someone else will, and there goes your chance."

Abel scratched his chin. "I don't regard it as an opportunity, dear Goldie. If another soul prefers oblivion to this torment, I can only be pleased with that. I hold no fondness for my executioner."

Goldie snapped her fingers. "I don't particularly care, but that's a surefire way out. Your book there, with riddles? There's no guarantee there, zero."

Abel maintained his smile, though his hands trembled slightly. "I wouldn't have been

handed this book if it bore no significance."

"How would you be privy to that?" you fixed Goldie with an icy glare. "You knew nothing about the Graveyard Frontier, and you remain so. Just 'cause taking out your killer is the path for most folk here, doesn't mean it's the sole one." You pivoted to Abel. "And if it's tailored to each soul here, as you stated, Abel, then it's plain to see why it ain't in common folktales."

Goldie huffed and folded her arms, her gaze locked somewhere below your neckline "Or those nails just summon a keepsake from your past, soaked in magic, akin to what we saw with my-ticker, and there's no more to 'em. You longing for a way out, killer? 'Cause there's but one for you: aid me in finding my bother and putting things right!"

You raised your chin, cracking your neck and then rolling your gaze away from Goldie.

"Again with that ..." you grumbled, exhaling a sigh. "Abel, where might them Coffin Fields be?"

The Riddle Wrangler tapped the empty air, as if adjusting an imagined brim of a hat. "I've only been there once, and I needed assistance, so I can't exactly point you in the right direction, but you don't need to fret. The townsfolk'll be more than happy to show you the path, for a price." He added with a smile, "The price just needs to be right, dear Aug."

"And what would they demand in recompense? Feeble iron?"

"Perhaps, if you're in luck, that's all they'll ask. Or something of higher value."

You shifted your shoulder. "Did you have to fork over anything to the 'help' you got, anything at all?"

His chuckle was soft, his voice melting into yours. "Yes, they might ask you for something in return - a nail from your own coffin."

You squinted, "I reckon I've heard tell of that ... once the nail's pulled out of your coffin, anyone can make use of it."

Abel twiddled the Double Eagle between his digits. "That's right, and that's why it's a common form of payback," he acknowledged. "Tell me, dear Aug, are you the type to be laid to rest in a coffin? I made sure to arrange a Christian burial for myself while I was still breathing, insurance and all. The virtuous chapel was to put my coffin to rest all properly."

"Am I the type?," you said. "I'm no villain, so once they'll stumble upon my body, they should ... place it in a casket. The hitch lies in when they'll uncover it. I was murdered at my secluded abode, away from prying eyes."

"There's no point trekking to the Coffin Fields if your coffin isn't there," he stated, smirking soon after, "I say that, but plenty still journey there, hoping to pilfer other's nails."

With a bent finger, you pointed at the brat. "Did you leave a body behind?"

Goldie scoffed at your question. "Of course I didn't. I ain't -dead-."

"You look like a soul to me," Abel said, his head swaying in with the drums of the relentless cacophony.

"Well I ain't. And I ain't sticking around a day longer or touring them 'fields' to entertain your hopeless hope."

In spite of her remarks, it was clear she intended to trail you wherever you ventured, even if it was to the fields. She was a leash.

"Did you recited anything specific when you prayed on that nail of yours?"

"Psalm 32:8," he said.

"That being?"

He recited the Bible, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you!"

A grunt left your lips--that was quite the verse. You raised your hand to rub at your cheek, striving to etch Abel's words into your memory. Was it necessary to be as precise as Abel to summon your means to escaping, assuming it would even work? It was a sliver of hope to latch onto, much like a hungry fish would bite onto a hook. Your attention shifted to your bones, and

with Cassidy's words echoing in your mind, you noticed your black veneer starting to fracture and peel away. Ashen flakes crumbled, revealing the stark white marrow beneath, stripping away the charred layer much like water would disperse dark ink.

You wrapped your fingers around the fragile layer of steel that held the cursed water within. Grasping the flask by its neck, you lifted it, resting it against your chest. You halted then, leaving the cork intact. Your charred bones were instrumental in your survival within the Warren, and you were uncertain of what to expect in the town soon to be ventured into, any edge would be welcomed. Merely remembering that you had the flask on you made you thirst for any sort of liquid, and as you swallowed, only the sharp, biting air flowed down your windpipe. A cough ruptured from your throat.

If you were going to get rid of your claw, you reckoned your soul would have to shatter at least once. You could only do that when your bones were no longer blackened. Moreover, black bones were likely to bring unnecessary attention in the town. Cassidy's moniker, "Charred Bones", was infamous, as at least the miner you met seemed to be aware of his charred bones. You had no wish to be mistaken for him. As you lowered the flask and returned it to your belt, you met Goldie's scrutinising gaze. You narrowed your eyes at her, then looked away, releasing your grip on the flask.

"That might be the place," Abel said, taking a few steps to approach the edge of the gallows.

There, in the distance, rising from the dense pallid haze like green trees devoured by flames on a smoke-choked night, appeared ghostly clusters of houses and barns. Shimmering with the same otherworldly blue-viridian as the gallows, the buildings, constructed from the opaque lumber, solidified from the shifting veil. An arched gateway, signs with hazy etchings, damaged fences both picked and barbed, hitching posts devoid of horses: everything echoed the eerie semblance of a forsaken town. But it wasn't, and as the gallows moved closer, the presence of the souls, their spectral flesh aglow with the typical cyan hue, encasing their white bones, became more evident.

It was a town, a genuine town, inhabited by many. It was as you expected, but you weren't prepared to witness such a collage of cursed souls all at once. The loud rattling of the nearing gallows drowned out every other sound in the town. The cracking uprights halted before the gate, the horrible noise drawing out a crowd. Most of them were men, with one woman and no children in sight, each clad in the attire they were found dead in.

"The Riddle Wrangler is back ... " one murmured once the trudging gallows no longer silenced his voice.

Abel tucked at his waistcoats and picked up his book of riddles with an reverberating snap. He situated himself in front of the gathered crowd, then raised his other hand, grabbing thin air with his fingertips.

"Howdy to you all. Would anyone be willing to lend a hand with a riddle? I'm having some trouble here ... 'How long is a moment that refuses to end?'"

He waited in silence until one man opened his mouth. Abel turned to him with a broad smile and a nod, but the woman covered his mouth to silence him.

"You lost your marbles?" she whispered into his ear. "Ain't you heard what came of Chuck? Don't be a fool!"

Abel's delicate grip briefly failed, his book slipping from his grasp before he managed to catch it mid-fall. He looked at other men, who all remained silent.

Clearing his throat, he ventured, "Might be a tricky one, to be fair. Any takers?" Despite his appeal, no one answered him. Abel sighed and tapped his foot against the gallows, the ladder plummeting with a splintering echo at his demand. Abel turned to you and Goldie with acknowledging low nod and then, closing the book and stowing it away, he descended the thirteen steps to the ground. "Chuck ... That is right, there was dear Chuck. Where might he be now?" he asked, his eyes searching.

One of the men pointed deeper into the town.

"Much obliged," Abel said. "That wasn't a riddle." He then turned to you. "Got some affairs to see to, dear Aug. Catch you sooner or later."

You returned Abel's farewell with a nod, parting ways with him for the time being. You and Goldie stood alone atop the towering gallows.

You sunk your teeth, watching Abel's figure dissolve into the flickering luminescence. Lifting your hat with your claw, you turned to face the crowd.

"You" --the woman, who had been watching Abel walk off as well, recoiled slightly, her eyes wide and her hands drawn up her chin-- "why were you two with Riddle Wrangler?" From her locked hands a single finger lifted to point at you. "What's with your hand? Did he curse you?! Are you in cahoots with him? Don't ask me a riddle!"

You lifted an open palm. "I'm just hitching a ride. As for the chicken claw, no, that ain't his doing. Why are you all so spooked? What came of Chuck?"

"Riding along with the Wrangler?! You outta your wits?" she gasped. "Chuck he--"

Before she could finish, the platform trembled. Goldie stamped her boots on the smoky gallows stage, rushing towards the stairs. She slithered down over several of them and then leapt off the staircase, landing in front of one of the men and burning him with her eyes. She perched on her tiptoes in front of the stupefied onlooker, grabbed the lapels of his faded coat, and finally yanked him close to her face. The man, clearly taken aback, got pulled in easily.

"Any Henrys around these parts?" she asked, her voice shrill and her cracked lip splitting further.

The man blinked at her question, casted a judgemental glance in your direction as though you were her father, and then shook his head. "Who the devil is Henry?"

She glared at him. "Kirkland Henry. Just a boy, 'bout my age. Seen anyone who fits that bill?"

The woman shifted her gaze from you, her attention drawn by the brat and her actions, as did the rest of the crowd. All except one man--who was staring at you. His eyes meet yours, and he sharply looked away to avoid that being the case. Turning his back to the gallows, the man rushed his steps and began to distance himself.

You freed your iron from its confinement and cocked the hammer to strike it like a flint. Walking a short distance to the right of the platform, you brought the man within the crosshairs. From the towering position of the gallows you found a clear shot. You tugged on the iron's trigger, the gleaming barrel steadfast in your grip. The gunshot rang out, stilling the crowd's babble, the fragile load exploding within a dusty cloud, wounding the earth where the man was a breath from stepping.

His body froze, his skull whirling to the source of the gunshot--to you--and his foot held in mid-air, as if treading water.

"Hold your horses right there, nice and straight," you cried out, pulling the iron's hammer back a few inches.

You sauntered the gallows' steps and began to descent, both your eyes and your six-shooter's muzzle zeroed in on the man. His stillness pleased you.

"What are you doing?!" the words slithered from Goldie's mouth.

The cluster of souls parted around you--some fumbling to reach below their belt, the others retreating, and lastly, the woman clutching a scintillating hatchet she had hanging off her riding skirt.

"His smoke waggon! It's a nail's one!" one of the men whispered, his shoulders sagging as you turned your gaze on him.

"You can't just start shooting up the place!" the woman hollered. "You come looking for trouble? Well I ain't interested in that! Someone, summon the sheriff! And tell 'em 'bout that damn Wrangler, too!"

Your gaze remained unwavering on the shady man, though you paused, a whisper away from the woman. You tilted your chin slightly towards her.

"This here's a personal tiff between him and me," you said, "I ain't here to spill blood or stir up trouble, ma'am. The lawman needn't fuss over this."

"What? You know him?" Her gaze bounced from you to the man. "Do you really ... ? You strike me as a suspicious sort. Specially, being so chummy with the Wrangler."

You nodded.

"I'm watching you", she said.

With the dame brought to tentative ease, you resumed striking your soles.

"Kid, stop wasting the good folk's time with your jabber and ask 'em what the deal is with Chuck, and what that Wrangler might've done to us," you told Goldie's visible shadow.

"What? Why would I give a hoot about that? If you ain't helping me find Henry, I'll do it my own damned way."

You tsked your tongue but didn't turn your head--you didn't want to let the man leave your sights. "I recall you owe him a riddle's answer too."

Her spit was her only retort. As you distanced yourself further from the crowd, her voice echoed back to you, 'Any lads about my age around here?'

You sighed. You had hoped she would prioritise her own life, but her half-immortality seemed to have rendered her reckless. As you bridged the distance with the man, the cold mouth of your iron pressed against his back. The stranger cringed, the hollows of his skull fizzling with azure flames.

"Why the hurried departure?"

"Spare me, gunslinger, it'll be a raw deal for us both: you dealing with the sheriff, and me having to find this town again! I... thought you looked familiar, but I wasn't sure so I went to check."

You rolled the cylinder to a loaded chamber. "Familiar, but you weren't sure?" you echoed him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"There's a face on a bounty poster that I reckon looks a lot like yours," he revealed.

"A wa--" --you coughed, your thirst-grinded throat seizing your words-- "poster?" Of you, a retired bounty hunter? In the Graveyard Frontier? "Guide me thither," you said.

He nodded obediently. With his hands folded in pious surrender on his chest, he shepherded you through the bleached roads of the ghost town until, in a matter of minutes, you found yourself tucked in a quiet corner street, staring at an unassuming smoky facade. A somber stillness hung in the air; it was just you and the man. Though the corner laid just a stone's throw from the town's main artery, there was no one here. Indeed, hanging on the smoky lumber was a newsprint sheet of your face, your likeness glaring back at you, etched not in print but in the confident strokes of an inkpen.

Wanted, it said, Aug "Only Dead" Heart. Below the header and your name was a portrait, a rendering of a man from a decade past. It was a nice sketch, but the place where it was detracted from its artistry. Curiously, your physical descriptors were absent, their space annexed for a different purpose. \$4000.05 was the reward, and with it, the missing puzzle piece fell into place in your memory. You recalled this poster, from your distant past when you ventured into Orderly town hunting a \$4000 mark, a man named Moses "Gadfly" Monroe. On arrival, the very same jest of a wanted poster was there, on the noticeboard, looking you in the eye. Only, the sum was less then, \$3999.95. Ten cents less...

Below your sketch, where the supposed Dear Or Alive' should have been, a macabre list sprawled ...shot, hanged, stabbed, trampled, drowned, poisoned, dismembered, strangled, suffocated, crushed, burned, decapitated, dismembered, skewered, beaten, bludgeoned, gored, lynched, mauled, impaled, buried, arrowed, exploded, starved. The remaining further words were severed by the paper's edge. You shuddered away a cold chill, the memory of a man's gun

lodged in your throat coming back.

"That there be you," the man you kept a lead's length away said.

You cleared your throat. No one had worth for the greenbacks in the Graveyard Frontier; no soul would hunt you for such.

"That bucks looks much spryer than me," you countered. "Why is this poster here? How long's it been swaying? Why ain't no one peeled it off?"

"Maybe a year ... no, it's been more than that. It was here when I first set foot in Ruetown. Longer than that," he shared. "And no soul dared to scrape it off, 'cause they couldn't"

"And why not?"

He cast a wary eye. "The reason this spot's desolate is 'cause the poster speaks to you. Try to scrape it off, and it fights back. No one's got the ropes to tangle with it, so they let it be."

You slid the barrel off the man's backside and aimed it at the wanted poster. You eased your fingers on the feather trigger, firing the feeble iron bullet into the poster. With the threat of being shot by you gone, the man withdrew a few steps from the scene. Scattering the hanging charred smoke with your hand and the gun in it, you squinted at your handiwork. Your bullet had left a ragged hole in the list of ways it wanted you dead; you'd chosen to spare your winsome face. The singed edges, reminiscent of a fresh wound, began to flicker with spectral teal embers, and then the hole closed, as if stitched together by a seamstress.

The portrait's sketched eyes came to life, fixing their gaze on you. Like a living person, your likeness moved, opening its mouth to revealing burning magic within.

"I'm the greatest bounty hunter there ever was!" it spoke in your voice, each of its words etched to sound sharp and laced with arrogance. "Aug 'Only Dead' Heart! Did you savvy that the full name's August? Why shorten it? Who knows!" Your portrait chuckled mockingly. "To not waste time? I'm always hoofing it, so I could use the time! Sure as me shooting them, there's always someone with a price on their head, and I'm hell-bent on finding 'em." Its word feel into a slow unhinged cadence. "To kill, to kill, to kill. I hunt for the kill, not for the dust. A thief? I'll kill him! A grieving mother? Makes no difference to me! A man who is only wanted alive? No exceptions! I got a name to uphold, after all, I'm 'Only Dead' Aug!"

You looked sidelong glance at the man. He returned your look with an expression of shock, fear, and horror. His cheekbones rose and fell like storm-tossed waves.

You waited a patient second for the sketch to finish its rant, but it kept going and going with its tirade. Waving your iron at it, you took a step forward.

"What in tarnation are you? Who put you here and why?" you demanded, though deep in your gut you suspected you knew the answer.

The wanted poster cackled, its animated form contorting the limits of the paper as if attempting to escape its confines.

"I'm the best! I am the greatest!" it crowed between fits of laughter. "So if you're a wanted man, you best skedaddle and hide up in Canada, but I'll sniff you out even there!"

"What the hell is your problem?" You leaned in. "If you're gonna play at being me, at least be honest! A grieving mother? That bitch drowned her own children! And that man? Nowhere on his poster did it say he was wanted 'only alive'! I took it for a blunder, a typo, figured they'd left out 'dead'!"

The sketch didn't respond to your questions; it barely seemed to acknowledge you were there.

"I'll kill them for a dollar. I'll kill them for a dime! Pay me with a warm bed and I'll off the pests you got. I've downed the Gadfly, the greatest outlaw there was, splattered his dome like a blown train boiler! I'm 'Only Dead' Aug, and there ain't no reins on me! Rights granted by law! I'll wander those lands and dust every black hat I see!"

There was no sign of coherency or reason, only a continuous stream of mockery.

You turned to address the man you had at gunpoint a moment ago. "Listen, partner, all that

bullshit it just spouted is--"

But the man was gone, slipped away while your back was turned and you were distracted. You grimaced. Was that going to be a problem?

You stepped away from the poster, retreating to where you had been standing. The sketched portrait continued to deride and jeer for a while longer, however, as you distanced yourself and ignored its taunts, it relented and returned to being silent and still. Scoffing, you looked at the alley's entrance, where the glowing timbered walls cast dancing ghostly shadows from both sides. You bid your time, and before long, the man returned, this time with a stranger by his side.

The newcomer had a left eye socket empty of a burning flame, the cavity behind it marred and bubbled with molten lead which fillet it. Atop his head was a black bowler hat, a hole torn through one side. In his hand, he held an iron--none of the feeble kind. He tucked at his collar with his other free hand, his single eye appraising you.

"Heard you're causing a ruckus, son," he said, shuffling his step and the white ground alongside it. "Leave this alley be, son, and that cursed dodger along with it."

The familiar man behind him peeked out. "That's him, Caleb, the man on the poster shares the same mug."

Caleb spared a glance at the portrait, smirking. "I can quite see the resemblance. So you're not just a figment of some loony's imagination--you're real."

"I'm real," you said, pointing at the poster. "But whatever it's been spewing is a sack of lies. You savvy who strung it up?"

"Know is a tall word, son," Caleb said, not lowering his gun. The man looked at least a decade younger than you. "Laid eyes on him once, though. Came to town, didn't linger long. We didn't know the dodger was the cursed sort until after he vamoosed, Thought he was just touched in the head when he decided to string it up."

"I hope you realise that's not a genuine bounty, if it weren't hanging down here."

"Of course I realise ... that price is too steep for a common man, he sure craves your death in a thousand nasty ways, son. But tell me regardless, are you an outlaw?"

"I'm a bounty hunter," you said. "A retired one, mind you."

"A bounty hunter?" he laughed. "Devil, you ain't gonna find much peace here in the blue beyond. I'll take deeds over words, so spill, what did you come to this town for?"

His gaze flicked to your talons but he made no comment about them.

"I'm looking for a guide to the Coffin Fields," you said. "Are there any partners of the sort in this here town you can swear by?"

Caleb flinched, shrugging off the man hiding behind him. "You're in luck, son. We have a fella who does just that. Ain't always in town, but I reckon he's about now."

"Good fortune, that," you said. "What's his handle and where can I scare him up?"

Caleb's fingers on his iron loosened as he mulled over your question--though it wasn't your question he was pondering over. "You'll spot him in the saloon, he's a character that's tough to overlook."

You nodded, then cast a wary glance at the deceptively quiet poster. "You're in the peacekeeping business, ain't ya? Can't you tear this thing down?"

He waved at it with dismiss. "I ain't going to hinder you, son, but trying to yank it off is more hassle than it's worth, at least for me. We just leave it be."

You bit you ghostflesh lip and scoffed at his words.

"However" --he went on, brandishing his more-than-real six-smoke waggon at the wall-- "don't go blasting willy-nilly at it. There are souls on the other side of that wall."

You glanced at the muzzle of your iron and with inching care you holstered it back. Better to heed the man's words if you wanted to keep your stay here peaceful.

"One last question from this bounty chaser," you said, releasing your grip on the handle.

"You acquainted with anyone by the name Henry Kirkland? Or have you ever heard the name?"

His eyebrow arched. "Henry?" He echoed you, letting the name swirl in his marrow mouth. "Know a good many souls round here, son, but no Henrys. Pardon."

"No matter," you lied, feigning indifference. If even a local 'Peacekeeper' didn't know of him, then Goldie's brother wasn't going to be your immediate concern.

Caleb touched the brim of his bowler's hat in farewell. "You seem to be the straight kind, Aug. Don't go causing any trouble in this town."

"You're just going to let him walk?" the man who was shielding himself from your gaze queried.

Caleb chuckled, a spectral edge present in his mirth. "Well I ain't interested in the four thousand greenbacks while we are in here, and I doubt anyone would fork over, even if you did haul him in. What would you even use them for?"

You shot the man a look, causing him to avert his gaze. He shook his head, "No, of course not, Caleb. If you reckon he'll behave, then that's that!"

Caleb gave a nod, first to him, then to you. "Come on, let's leave him be. Looks like he's in a terrible rush," he said, taking his leave.

Your talons dug into your arm as you pondered on the wanted poster before. It had hung there for a year or more, stirring all the trouble it could. You haven't been in the Graveyard Frontier for even a pinch of that time, yet it seemed Gadfly was waiting for you. The poster had been his in life, and for some godforsaken reason, he'd brought it with him to the afterlife. Your clawy grasp clenched, bruising your spectral flesh before you realised what you were doing. Your swallowed air nipped your abraded throat. You readied and spat in the direction of your sketched face, turning on your heel to leave it in your shadow.

You exited the narrow alley, hand hovering inches from the iron's handle; you couldn't let your guard down now. Back on the main road, you made for the place where frontier towns usually housed their saloons. Many of the townsfolk you passed glanced at your claw, curiosity, suspicion, and bewilderment flashing in their eyes. After too many looks, you hid your hand in your vest pocket, out of sight. A hung sign creaked like a snapped bone above you, the haze of smoke enveloping the six glistening letters: 'Saloon'. Just as promised, a drinking establishment stood not too far from it.

You stepped onto the porch, the wood soft beneath your boots. As you reached for the doors, they screeched and swung open, a man appearing behind it. He used his hip to hold the door open, then his elbow to push it wide. His hair was tousled, falling in strands across his face as if drenched. You leaned against the wall to give him some space. With a drunken grip, he clutched a thin as air glass tumbler, dark tendrils coiling around it. He walked off the porch, found his balance, looked at you, lifted the glass to his lips, and drank. The moment the rim touched his lips, the glass shattered, spilling some of its contents onto the white sand. The man looked down at the empty air where his drink had been. His body began to visibly pale.

"The drinks here are to die for," he said, his gaze still nailed to the dirt. "I didn't... I don't reckon I've had my fill yet."

The flesh around his bones rippled and swayed, with the bones themselves blending into the nightly fog. Little by little he was burned until his words rang hollow and false as he disappeared.

You watched the space where he'd stood, reminded of how Bill--that bastard--had faded in the same way doing the same thing: drinking.

You creaked the hinges and pushed the batwing doors open, stepping into the heart of the town's drunken revelry while ensuring your claw remained veiled. The interior of the saloon, engulfed in the consuming otherworldly turquoise gleam of the wood's grain, was as homely as you hoped it would be. Only the lukewarm swirling smoke seemed to acknowledge your

entrance, the dozen of lively patrons inside paid you heed, as if you were just one soul replacing the last.

Above, a large tin ceiling spanned the room, adorned with patterns of swirling tumbleweeds and dust devils. They intertwined with each other to form an ever-shifting metal tapestry. The silver-white hues of the tin mingled with the seafoam greens of the patina in the ways they weren't suppose to, not as a series of layers but mixed like paint. Specks of the faintly glowing timber reflected on the surface, like impossible daylight stars that shifted with each blink.

Many souls gathered ate the elongated bar, with a middle strip of silvering sand pushed between two curved gleaming planks of the bar table. Despite the sooty black fissure holding the thousands of pieces together, it reflected the saloon as if it were a doorway to an extension of the drinkery you were not permitted to enter.

Tucked in the corner of the saloon was a piano, its mahogany wood weathered from birth by its spectral origins. An unseen touch played blue melodies on the keys, echoing from lived memories. Perhaps it was another cursed object, but you'd seen self-playing pianos in your living life. It was a melancholic tune, but a good one.

Near the wall on the opposite end, a designated gambling area featured a large baize table as its centerpiece. The sounds of clinking ores and shuffling cards were as loud as the banter of the men using them to banter. Four of them had seats, ten more nestled close by. You recognised the tallest of them, the miner Perry who, even seated, could look the standing men in the eye. He hid his cards behind his broad shoulders, waited a moment in glee, then revealed them, whatever they were. Laughter boomed from him as he reached his long hands across the table to claim the various items and ores wagered.

Lost in his gambling euphoria, he didn't notice your presence.

You bit down on your molars and, with pained effort, turned away from the drinks the men at the bar seemed to be revealing in. You had your emergency drink at your hip, and you deemed that enough. The feeble iron you had was for making bullets for your Colt, not for squandering on games of chance. You had a lot, but much less than when you'd pocketed them... if only you held onto the larger piece.

You stepped away to the corner and leaned on a wall nearside the fogged window, your eyes fixed on the floor.

"Come on, Perry. Just trade us the ores!" one of the men sharing the table with the lank miner begged.

"You hankering the ores?" Perry answered with a reserved smile, his cards seeming to ghost through each other as he shuffled them in his hands. "Then gamble and win. A fair trade, that. You could have everything."

"Or nothing," the other man said, his words slurred by the drink soaking his ginger beard.

"We ain't got much left to wager with," the first man added.

"That is a shame," Perry said, cocking his head back as if with genuine sympathy, tucking his forelocks under the striped blue-white-red bandana. "I will be here. With everything I mined. You was so close. All could be won." He reached into his burlap sack, placing a shiny hunk, just like a nugget of gold, on the table, humming as he spun it. "Any interest in this?"

You looked away, your gaze sweeping the saloon. There were many men here, and you even spotted two cowgirls sitting away from the rest, but no one who you could deem 'tough to overlook'. The only exception was Perry, and he was attempting to coax anyone to sit down for a gamble. A few seemed on the verge of succumbing.

You leaned your elbow against the green-tinted window, patient as a desert snake, and watched the gang gamble from a distance. Eventually, a man crowned with a white Stetson—his top hovering amongst the standing crowd like a halo—circled around the table. With snow-white laced gloves he gripped and then pulled back the empty chair, sitting himself down to face Perry. His hand hovered over the heart of the table before he opened it, letting a nail fall on top.

The flat-headed metal spike sparkled with an inner shine, rolling to a stop.

Some of the men recoiled, others gasped and edged closer.

"That's a coffin nail!" one of them said. The others echoed his words much quieter.

The white-hatted man pulled back his hand and placed his thumb against the table's edge. He fixed his eyes on Perry and waved a finger at the nail. "I'll be wagering -that- for all you've just raked in, Perry."

With a look as unimpressed as if he'd stumbled upon a dried-out riverbed, Perry returned his gaze, idly scratching the surface of one of his hands with the other.

"Ain't no fair offer. That's just a nail. Ain't nothing more ... but reckon I'll agree."

The white-hatted man pointed at the deck of ghostly cards. "Let someone else shuffle them up."

Perry halted his shuffling and beckoned a bystander, handing over the deck.

"Scramble 'em up good," Perry said in emotionless voice, locking his jittery fingers together. "I lost a couple. Just this week. You reckon I cheat?"

The man across the table waved his laced hands. "No, Perry, I ain't accusing you of cheating. But that deck's crafted from your nail, ain't it? Shuffle them cards as long as you have, who's to say they won't grow fond of you?" He smiled.

Perry pushed the gambled gains back to the centre of the felt table, his face unreadable. He waved to the white-hatted man once the other fellow had finished with the shuffling.

"You'll have no outs," Perry declared. "Draw your hand first."

The white-hatted man reached for the deck, rubbing the corner of the top card with his fingertips. He counted and picked four cards, laying them neatly in front of himself.

"For me too," Perry said, eyes narrowing. "It will be square. For all to witness."

The man slapped his knee and guffawed, happy with the way Perry was letting him do it. He took four more cards from the stack and placed them in front of the miner.

They began to play, laying down one card at a time. The higher rank bested the lower one, the 'beaten' cards set aside in their own separate pile, replaced in their hand from the first, dwindling deck. If a man's cards couldn't be rid of, either Perry or the white-hatted stranger had to take them into their hands. You watched it all, eyes as sharp as a hawk's flying above the harvesting grounds, vigilant for any sign of foul play from the miner. Through the game, his hands trembled, fingers tightening around the cards he held onto. His cheeks seemed to sink, lips wavering between a feeble frown and a weak smirk. Perry had his back against the wall, a tactic you knew well, one meant to avoid getting a surprise shot from the door, but it also meant that his cards eluded your sight.

The man he was gambling against, however, had his cards lifted just enough for you to see them. As your eyes flicked between Perry and his opponent, you noticed the stranger rubbing the edges of his cards. He held all his cards close, only an inch of each card visible, showing only half of the suit and number. The saloon, and their table, basked in the green glow of Evergreen lumber, a shine that cast an eerie gloom. In that dim light, it was hard to trust your eyes, but you could have sworn one of the man's left cards turned invisible, replaced by the appearing inching edge from the right side instead he was also fondling.

Noticing what seemed to be foul play, you pushed your iron against your ribs, lifting the muzzle to discreetly aim it at the man. He had the cowboy's keen sense to notice, his body immediately stiffening. He moved all of his cards to hold them in one hand, then reached for his waist, casting a covert glance your way. Upon realizing you weren't hurrying to pull on the trigger, he bit his lip and returned to the cardplay, playing the card he'd just grabbed from the void seconds beforehand. Perry's gaze flicked over his hands, and with a loud sigh, he accepted the deal, having nothing in his hand to beat it. The white-hatted man reached for the deck, rubbed the edge of another card, and then picked two, a visible and an invisible one, placing them under his thumbs; the cards in the deck were so tightly interlocked that discerning his

trick was difficult.

Even though he'd seen you and your iron, he continued on with his wrongdoing, either unafraid to be shot or confident you wouldn't actually do it. Perry looked to be losing ...

"You ain't too shabby," Perry told his opponent with a smirk, seemingly blind to the deceit. He placed a card in front of the white-hatted man, who answered by beating it.

The man glanced at you out of the corner of his eye and then leaned closer on the table, "Gotta be good if I aim to best you, partner. Got anything else up yer sleeve to surprise me with--"

A hand reached out from the encircling spectators and grasped the nail tight. Before anyone could react, a stranger leapt onto and rolled across the table, sending the ores and everything else scattering like a debris from an exploded minecart. The man who had previously shuffled the cards at Perry's request was on his feet and near you before anyone could even understand what had happened. There were screams and yells, demanding him to stop, but he was refused to slow down, hugging the nail to his chest.

You straightened your leg, extending your boot to trip the fleeing bandit. With a stumble, the robber fell, his skull cracking against the smoke-soaked lumber floor, the self-mending plank giving way and cracking. Blue dust scattered off his body as he clutched at his chest, then, narrowing his eyes, peering at you with a blighting glare. The revolver's hammer clicked into place--the saloon's guests growing quieter--as the white-hatted man steadied on the trigger and closed in on the fallen soul.

"Hand over that nail, right this darn instant!" he commanded, striding past you and angling his gun at the robber.

The fallen thief defied the white hat. Turning his gaze away from you in silence, he coiled his body like a perturbed hedgehog.

"What are-- you lowdown snake, I said let go of it!" The white-hatted man pushed his gun's muzzle into the man's side, spittle frothing at his lips. "Making a heirloom, are you? You are, ain't you?" He punctuated his words with a punch to the man's ribs. "Don't you dare!"

Perry, unusually slow for a man of his height, finally made his way over, his bare feet scuffing the luminous floor as he ceased his steps in front of you. He moved a finger from his chin to his forehead, sweeping a strand of hair away from his brows, his eyes unblinking as they fixed on you from above.

"You are the man," he said. "From El Dorado Warren." His lips parted just a sliver. "That was quick."

You met his gaze squarely, allowing him to scrutinise your features so he would know you were, indeed, the man.

"Your bones ain't black," he noted, returning his attention to the two scuffling men at his feet. He sounded a swift, brief whistle.

The moment you opened your mouth to clear the thirst and speak, shadows trashed their way into the saloon like a gagged murder of crows from unseen roost. Half a dozen canaries, their bodies aglow with melting light, deafened the ambiance with their carrion aria. They descended upon the fallen man, their small claws perching and beaks tearing at his flesh as he cried out in pain, rolling and twisting, the tiny birds more akin to vultures than the delicate creatures they seemed to be. They clawed and pecked at his fingers, fragmenting his focus, weakening his grip.

Taking a cautious step away from the songbirds, the white-hatted man drew forward, lifting and then stamping his spurs and sole onto the other man's hands. The thief's grip gave way, and the gleaming casket nail dropped from him. The man in the white hat snatched it from the air before it could touch the floor, then shoved the barrel of his six-shooter against the man's chin and neck.

Without another tick of the cloak, he pulled the trigger, exploding the thief's skull in a

cloud of blue mist, painting the still air as if were fresh blood. The victim's eyes went pale, his body convulsing as his ghostly flesh began to smolder like burning wood, his marrow crumbling into fine dust, mingling with the vanishing azure haze until they the smoke touched the tin ceiling and became unseen. The white-hatted man huffed, glaring at the barkeeper and other men.

Perry's intense gaze weighted down on the table as if to warn the onlookers not to meddle with the things on it, less they wished to share the fate. He let out a controlled breath and turned to the man.

"You'll be approached. Sheriff's men will be here. We can't continue now."

The white-hatted figure twirled his gun and then tucked it between the belt and his waist. "We still got time, partner. Just enough for us to finish our game. Let's get to it."

Perry's shoulders lifted akin to creaking icebergs.

He looked you over and said, "What was your name? You won our gamble. Can't lose another one."

You tipped your hat upward with a light flick of the wrist. "I'll remind you: the handle's Aug."

Perry's expression waned as he nodded his head, "Aug. I recall your mug. Not your name. Ain't an uncommon issue."

"That's just fine," you said. You reckoned that the less people here recognized you, the better. Leaning on his shoulder, you lowered your voice, "I don't know if you are blind or just ain't paying mind, you digger, but that fella in the white hat's playing a crooked game. You'd do well to leave it be."

He frowned. "That's a hefty claim. Why would you lie ... ? Got something for proof?"

"Hand me them cards and I'll show you," you said. "Got a pencil or a bit of coal I could use?"

Perry angled his head to look at the white-hatted man, now settled behind the table with his elbows resting on the felt.

"Ain't got neither," Perry said, fingers grazing the cotton shirt below his throat. "Chalk's no good. It will spoil. And pencils? Don't carry 'em."

Frown marred your expression. With dismissive wave at your earlier appeal, you said. "Never mind then. Just let me see them cards of his."

Perry rubbed his five o'clock shadow. "I don't play cheaters. See if he is."

Walking in the invisible shadow of the miner, you approached the side of the gambling table. Perry's hand hovered close to the seated man.

"Ain't sitting down?" the white-hatted man asked; the burnings sparks in his eyes locked onto you instead of the prospector. "You said it, the sheriff's boys are on their way," he added, his voice reaching Perry yet his eyes never shifting from you.

"Man claims you're cheating. Pulling from the bottom. Care to show otherwise?"

The man whistled silently through his teeth before clearing his throat. Flashing his four cards at you, he told Perry, "Look away, partner."

Perry averted his gaze and tilted his head to the lonely chair waiting for his return. The man flashed you a wolfish grin, "Well, what do you see?"

You cracked your knuckles first before reaching for the air where the invisible card was suppose to be. The cold air passed through your digits. You felt nothing as you attempted to pinch it. The white-hatted man's lips remained calm and thin as he watched you, in vain, search for what seemingly wasn't there. Gathering warmth into your fist, you took another shot with a visible card, mimicking the motion you'd seen him make.

"Convinced now, pal?" he drawled, clutching the cards back to him. "Now, let's wrap this up. Time's ticking."

You frowned, sensing a mocking smile on his curved jaw, even if it wasn't truly visible. You stepped aback—a reluctant surrendering.

"Might've been seeing things," you said.

The man in the white hat twirled a card between his fingers, concealing its number and face. "Them cards might as well look like they come out and into existence, with how ghostly they are," he said, resting it on the table after and leveling a gaze at the digger. Perry's countenance remained emotionless when your attempts fell short of exposing the deceit you were more or less convinced in, and he was quick to become engrossed in the game once again. His hands trembled as if he had a sip of tarantula juice, the white flicker of the cards reflecting with the burning blue flames of his eyes. You watched as they tossed and then seized their cards.

Twice more, the stranger subtly rubbed his card hand with his white gloves: quick and discreet.

"That's my last card," he announced, proving his words by placing the card Perry couldn't top. The man leaned on the chair, resting his elbow on his knee and waiting for Perry to acknowledge his win. Perry, with his inscrutable expression, glanced at the stack of cards before him; then, he pressed them together, placing--almost tossing--them near him. He let out a near-silent sigh. He took a pause to wring his bandanna before speaking.

"Got a good hand," he congratulated the man, his arms encompassing the spread of the winnings. "Loot's all yours, stranger."

Murmurs swirled amongst the beholders, the volume growing like cavernous echo as many seemed caught by Perry's unfolded loss.

The man tipped his hat, the halo Stetson swaying in the verdant sheen like he was an angel in here. With a pace that was at leisure yet also in a hurry, he packed his winnings, including the coveted nail, into an ornate saddlebag with intricate white threadwork, and slung it over his shoulder.

"Better fortune next time, Perry," he said, his eyes darting between you and the exit. "Sheriff shouldn't know of my path, don't you think?"

Perry leaned against the table, his voice even. "Didn't ask. Don't care to tell," he assured the man.

He tipped his hat and treaded with a silence that belied the weight of his boots to leave the saloon, pausing but not giving you a glance.

Perry waved off the rowdy people he deemed too timid to gamble. He beckoned you to the recently vacated chair.

"Reckon I'm done here," he said, eyeing the barren table. He hefted a rough burlap sack: its contents clinking like shattered glass.

You rested your left arm over your right shoulder. "You gambled away quite a load there," you said, "Believe me or not, but he wasn't playing square."

Perry delved into the bag, his fingers moving as if stirring some witches' potion. "Didn't catch it. Seemed fair to me."

You snorted. "That's how it works?"

"It does for me," he said. "Folk need them ores. I find and bring. I claim my needs. Here for the gamble. Nothing more."

You rested on the edge of the chair, your eyes looking down at his cards. "Is there anything you need? You didn't seem too keen even on that nail."

He paused and then said, "Gambling over trading. Is what I prefer. You can't always win. Takes the fun out."

From the jute sack he pulled out an ornate case made out of nickel silver. Its surface bore an intricate design: a skeletal figure, half-buried, puffing on a pipe, with the smoke morphing into the shape of its own skull. Two small gemstones, a diamond and an emerald, were set as its eyes. Diamond dust also covered the engraved smoke. He snapped open the case, revealing cigarettes nestled in cotton interior, it glowing like some white embers without flame or smoke. A pair of five clips gripped slender cigarettes, each wrapped in a translucent gilded paper, the

first and fourth being empty.

He lifted it to you. "Take one. Token from lost bet."

You rubbed your fingers above the cigarettes, stopping an inch from taking the gilded smokes. "And what am I being rewarded with here?"

"They're the 'life's gasps'. They let you peek. At the living world. After you had died. Any place you want. Perhaps, five minutes. Make use of it."

You extended your hand, palm facing upward, motioning for Perry to wait. He held the cigarette case open and raised as you reached into your pocket. You took out a handful of iron, the crude ore scratching at your skin, and shuffled it before his eyes from one pocket to another. Taking the cigarette, you carefully nestled it in the now empty pocket, hoping it would remain safe there.

Perry's eyes followed the lead-to-be. The man snapped the silvered box shut and satcheled it back.

"You've hit pay dirt, manhunter. That's a rich haul."

You smirked, fingers brushing the ethereal felt. "That ain't the only I dug up," you said. "Mind sharing on their uses?"

Perry leaned in, bending his spine like a spindly pine. He trailed his fingertips along the edges of his bandanna, pulling the bow to tighten the patriotically patterned colours tightly around his skull. Cracking his shoulders with one twist, he turned towards you.

"What ya got there?" he inquired.

"Well, to start, we ran into a big floating cube," you began. "Took a pull at my soul, and nearly took the girl with it. We broke it apart, and decided to keep a piece of it just in case. Perry, that's your name, ain't it? It's quite a pain to carry. Got any use for it?"

"That's lodestone cube," he said, his words drawing into yours. "Most seek small ones. You are describing larger. You really broke it?"

You nodded. "Sucked the very life outta us as we did, but we got by."

Perry narrowed his translucent eyes. "Yes, that's what happens. Most give a birth. Yet you broke it?"

You shrugged. "Them black bones I used to have" --you laid weight on the 'used to'-- helped me out. Fought off that cube's pull."

Perry seemed lost in thought for a moment, lifting and then placing down a bag near his chair's leg. "Charred bones, you say?"

"Ayep, they've had my back more times than I can count in those mines. It's no wonder that 'Charred Bones' blackens them the way he does," you said, before adding. "I've killed the man, actually."

Perry's head slipped back an inch, his even stoic breath shivering. "You put 'Charred Bones'? El Dorado's renegade?"

Your gaze pointed to your shoulder and wrist, the freshest of your paining injuries. "Not that easily. He left his mark on me. Tried to rob me as soon as we left the mines."

"That's his manner. He'll come back around. No doubt. That's how he works," he said. "You made an enemy. And those black bones? He won't lose them."

You smirked, opting not to share that you'd secured both the flask and the chalk tie pointing to the man's watermill.

You waved your hand to brush aside the topic. "What 'bout what I asked?"

Perry's fingers traced the table's edge. "I'll lay it out. It is handy, expensive. It can be used. To keep one bound. To avoid appearing yonder."

"I have yet to 'die' in here," you said, "but I've seen 'Charred Bones' and a few others just vanish, 'specially them that took one too many sips of that Prickly Niceties's bleeding."

He nodded. "Afterwards. Once your soul reemerges. Here in this Purgatory. You're lost in wherewithal. Hunting the path back. It's a real headache; annoyance."

"Sounds about as I expected," you said. "So you're telling me I can use these cube bits to tie myself down somewhere? Mind spelling it out?"

"Here's how it goes. Harder bits you've done. Do as I say. Take a piece. Snap it in two. Hold onto one. Or where you'll reappear. Other half, crush it. Then down it. Cactus juice or none. It'll work after that. Time frame's uncertain." Perry gathered the cards. "Now. Anything else you've got?"

You let out a mirthful exhale. "Ease up in that chair of yours, Perry. I've got a few mo--"

The saloon's swinging doors creaked ajar. A familiar figure with a molten eye scar and a bowler hat entered the drinkery.

"Where are they?" Caleb's voice rang like a gunshot. He was missing a badge, but, perhaps, were he one, that wasn't necessary to be a sheriff down here. While he tried to coax information out of the bartender, another individual rudely shoved past his legs.

"Heart!" Goldie hollered, her dainty frame gliding past the man. Everyone's attention, including the lawman's, turned at her. "You damn fool, if you don't act fast, that riddler Abel will have you swinging!" The malnourished girl continued her beeline for the gambling table. "It ain't bother me, I can just lop off my head, but you, brother killer, will just end up swinging like a piñata! He's fixing to skip town, tell him to take off that cursed rope!"

She was the loudest in the saloon, but also the youngest, her booming voice echoing like it didn't belong.

"Noose? Piñata? What in tarnation are you hawing about?"

"You answered the Wrangler's?" Perry mused, scratched his chin. "In just a week. You've been busy."

"I reckon there's some matters I need to see to," you told Perry, nodding towards the viper leering at your flank. You rose from the table. "Pardon. But I'll be needing you once that's done."

"Best be quick then," Perry warned, rubbing at the crease in his brow under the colourful cloth, flicking the invisible sweat. "You're walking into troubles."

You let out a sharp breath, snatching the revolver from its leather bed and then hurrying it past Goldie, the bystanders, and making a beeline to the weathered saloon doors.

You ran into the town's drag shimmered in greenish golden hues. The trail twisted with shifting shadows, the ghostly lights never staying stagnant. Shielding your marked hand beneath your duster, you made way for the wooden gateway, Goldie's uneven steps echoing not far behind. 'Hold on, you ornery whelp, that's my piece!' hollered a voice, as a seizable figure lumbered out of the saloon, right in Goldie's shadow; you sideeyed her, a fresh-snagged gun held tight in her greenhorn hands. You tsked your lips, not having the time for such petty trifles. You hurriedly reached the town's threshold.

In the distance, the walking gallows ambled on. The scaffold hadn't gathered much distance from the frontier town, but the bone-breaking creak of its timbered skeleton made it impossible for any voice you'd yell to reach him.

Damn it!

You were sure of your aim; you could kill or wound the man even from this vantage, but would it lift the alleged curse Goldie claimed he put on you? That was the question. There wasn't any way to be certain. At best, taking the shot might have just wasted both your bullets and time. An invisible tether puller at your neck, drawing your chin skyward an inch, much like a fresh bruise demanding care and stillness. You tried to scratch it, but your fingers found only air.

Goldie boot brushed against your heels as she moved past, her gaze fixed on the expanse. "Blasted tarnation damn it! Brother killer, we done lost him! It's on your head now!"

You rolled your eyes but decided not to retort the obvious. You noticed: Goldie's neck bore a similar strain, needing to be corked unnaturally high--a sight and weight of Abel's invisible

noose.

Silent as the grave, you took back the fractured black piece of the cube stone from Goldie's hold. She'd been cradling it in her arms, somewhat clutching the pilfered firearm at the same time. Blind to the onlookers and mute to Goldie's bemusement, you acted on Perry's advice, breaking the stone in half. One piece met the pale sand, its hastily buried place marking Ruetown, this place, for your fated reemergence. Holding the remaining fragment in hand, you exposed your clawed talons to the onlookers to begin whittling the piece down with your poultry limb. You turned the fragments in your palm, hurriedly crumbling it into increasingly finer minute bits and pieces.

It wasn't quite dust, far from it, but you reckoned, feared, that time was of the essence. You feared that Abel's spectral noose would cinch around your throat the moment he, and his gallows, merged with the distant fog. You pushed the candy-sized pieces past your cracked lips--now much similar to the brat's. Your gullet was dry, arid, and unwelcoming, the saliva's dearth making swallowing the speckled powder harder than riding a twister. Forcing your fingers down your throat to guide the pieces, you made the shards drop down your stomach like sand grains in an hourglass. The pain was visceral and intense, as if jagged needles were cutting your insides. You held your throat, tilting your head back beyond even the invisible noose's pull, to help the bits go down. You hacked.

Goldie looked at you bedazzled, her eyes flitting as though someone were trying to snuff them out.

"You ain't ... You haven't gone mad, have you?"

She was cut off mid-sentence as a hefty hand latched onto her neckerchief from behind.

"You thieving varmint," the man said, pulling on her scarf further to steal her breath and words. "Thought you could pilfer from me and skedaddle? I'll beat you till you're naught but a bloody mess! Nothing more than mush!"

Unlike her beloved brother, Goldie seemed all thumbs--devoid of thieving finesse. She wasn't the talent of her family. Her capture by the man she just robbed served her right. You looked elsewhere, instead deciding to scratch at your neck -again-, dreading the inevitable pull of the mute noose.

"Let go of me, you bastard!" Goldie shouted through hacking breaths, struggling with the man's firm grip.

"You brats ought to know your place!" the man bellowed, raising his voice above that of the girl.

He tugged her in, snatching at her wrist.

In that moment, Goldie's knobby elbow rammed into his ribs. She wriggled her wrist free from the cowboy's broken grip and leaned her head on him. Before you could spit, she pivoted the pilfered revolver into her own mouth, the brittle barrel lodged between her tinged teeth and against her tongue. Without a word, or a spittle, she squeezed the trigger. The curved metal gleamed over her cracked nails as Goldie clutched it without shuddering recoil. The woman, clad in riding garments, stood close by, as if her role was to grudgingly welcome the visitors; she screamed a strained, mangled cry of disbelief.

The gunshot boomed under the dark rumbling skies, echoing like a ship's hull shattering in a storm tossed ocean. The back of Goldie's head blew up in a cloud of marrow, her skull bursting like a white glass. She stood together with the man behind her in shivering stillness, two grand plumes rising in succession like an Indian smoke signal. Goldie had pulled the trigger not only on herself, but also on him--and only one of them was immortal. The man's body crumbled into dust of swirling curls. Goldie coughed up the gun. The sunk to her knees, spitting at the sand inches from her lips. Her skull and effulgent skin reshaped in front of the onlookers, leaving many in sheer bewilderment of what had happened. Goldie put her hands on the the back of her head and cried out as even the shadow of the man vanished into the pale air.

"God damn it, that smarted!" Goldie cried, clutching her once shattered cranium. "Ah! My head! It's burning like three hells!"

Near you, murmurs broke out. One man's gaze was making circles around her.

"What in tarnation did I just see?" he asked.

"She ain't vanishing!" said the other man.

You too were slightly curious by Goldie's decided way to handle her problems. You didn't cry for the man, but she sure was drawing needless attention.

Askance you spotted a deadman, a soul standing at the Colt's guaranteed reach of fifty yards, with his gun drawn at neither Goldie or anyone else, but you.

Not wasting a moment, you reached out for Goldie's felled body. Your talons sunk into her shoulder as you lifted her up. Not a blink after, as the brat was still weeping about blasting her own skull, another bullet sunk into her upper chest. Her bluish flesh sizzled much like a wet stone that's been left to boil under a blazing sun. The brief moment her immortal body halted the bullet's path afforded you to push you boot away and, when it exited out from the opposite side with a immediate burst, have it merely graze your jacket's neck.

The billowing smoke spiraled from her collarbone, thinning out until it wafted around and encircled her, much like the hangman's noose she was missing. Shaking awake, Goldie threw off your burying talons away and fell on the ground. The delicate feeble iron handgun crackled as she wrenched the handle and smashed its barrel's end against your chin and neck.

"You piece of shit!" she seethed, standing on her tiptoes to press the cold metal to your throat. "I swear, I'll put you down here, and then I'll just hunt you down again!"

But your mind was already elsewhere, your withdrawn piece drawn towards the origins of the gunshot.

"Not if he beats you to the draw," you whispered, peeking at Goldie and then away. He wasn't there anymore. "Fuck."

"He?" Goldie queried, her lip quivering as if she had bitten into it, her head jerking to where you were looking. "One of your killed?"

You spat near her boots. "I ain't sure," you uttered, using your piece to knock her stolen gun away from your neck.

Not keen on finding out how deadly the next bullet would be, you made a quit retreat towards the town's gate, it's arch strained above you like a tortured's leftover. You quickened your steps, your neck pushed into your shoulder to watch the muddled crowd dissolve into the fog. Goldie, always a burr, scurried after you, her revolver drawn with intent not to guard your back, but to threaten it. You didn't show it any attention, instead slipping into the mist-covered plains.

Once Ruetown's distinct structured became as a clear as a sickly mirage, you halted and looked around. You saw no sign of the Chindi, the remnants of native souls who roamed this purgatorial frontier. Suited you right; it's what you were afraid of. Even so, you instead saw blood red eyes singeing the fog around them. Isolated silhouette observed you.

"Why did you stop?" Goldie said. As if was a wrong question to ask, two more pairs of ember eyes flanked the original on each side.

A chilling howl skewered the dry air; it was so close, so tangible, it felt as if the very beasts behind those eyes stood inches away.

A wild pack. Hadn't that lowlife Bill warned you about them?

Didn't Bill warn you? Yet, facing these purgatorial wolves seemed a mite safer than letting that gunhawk land a single fortuitous shot. Clutching your iron, you moved through the thickening mist towards those fiery eyes. Their haunting howls grew silent. Goldie shuffled her feet, lagging behind you. The closer you got to those still stares, the more she seemed to dawdle and widen the gap between you two. You pulled back the striker.

"The nose won't do you in," Goldie said, her sudden voice like a prick of a needle. Her gun's cocking sound echoed yours.

Your gaze swept back and forth among the three pairs of eyes. "What's it gonna do then?"

"It'll hoist you up bit by bit. Once your feet leave the dirt, you're stuck there hanging. Only way out is ending yourself."

"You been asking around after I told you so, huh?"

With a spit, her voice grew louder. "Weren't doing it for you!" she yelled. She took a deep breath before continuing. "To hell with you ... anyway ... Chuck, he was up there for weeks. Abel likes to give 'em time to mull over his riddles, so they say."

"I ain't planning on dangling for weeks over some damn riddle--"

You came to a sudden stop. Your boots marred the sand as you watched the previously still irises begin to morph, their copper tones turning into spiralling streaks. More creatures emerged from the soaked smog, bringing the total to a dozen. Their vampiric eyes burned through the fog like cotton, the unseen warmth drawing you towards them like you were a hypnotised prey. But you knew better. The ground gave way beneath their massive paws like it was a soft moss. As one of the wolves edged closer, you noticed the mist ripple around its bristling sharp fur, the moon's glisten trickling down its sharp velvet strands like rain water. For a wolf, its size was closer to that of a grizzly bear. Its nostrils flared, making you feel as if it could physically grasp your scent and pull it off you like scalped skin.

The beast let out a growl; your reflection, ripped and mangled, mirrored in each bubble of its drool.

You levelled your iron at the nearing beast. Your finger tensing around the trigger, you let loose when the creature seemed to miss your hint. The bullet tore through its jaw, shattering those rows of fangs like porcelain. The wolf's saliva dripped like blood off its chipped teeth. The beast stumbled for a moment, the bullet you'd put through its mouth not enough to lay it down. As you readied the next shot, it lunged with a ferocity that sent ripples of scalding air--hot enough to dry the wet mist. You fired again, aiming for its heart--or where you reckoned it to be. The wolf skewered itself on your lead, its massive form tilting before toppling over like a great boulder from a mesa cliff's edge, its cranium twisting as it hit the ground.

The crimson light persisted smouldering within its eyes. Your attention shifted to the others of its pack, emerging one by one from the twilight to encircle you.

A sudden yank caught your neck--was it Abel's noose? From the wolves, your gaze fell downwards.

Goldie had a firm grip on your placket, her fingers digging inside of it.

"Fixing on reappearing elsewhere, are ya?" she yelled, squeezing the chain of the ticker off your neck. She bared her teeth. "You ain't slipping away with -my- watch!"

Before you could fend her off, you heard a growl behind you. Another beast plunged its claws deep into your back, each talon as thick and as lengthy as a knife. Cold coursed through you, your smoky flesh unraveling from the wound in tendrils of steel-blue vapour. Goldie deftly snatched the watch as if you were a scarecrow. When she stumbled back with a satisfied smirk, the felled wolf sprang up from the ground as swiftly as a jack rabbit. Its jaws, though mangled from your bullet, clamped shut on Goldie's wrists. With a deafening crunch, the wolf twisted and pulled away its head, tearing away her hands like they didn't belong there.

Handless and tripping in retreat, Goldie's cry cut through the endless night as her tears drenched her neckerchief. Tuning her off, the beast spat out the watch, its baleful eyes settling on you once more.

You locked eyes with the beast, leaping to claim the timepiece before Goldie could. You grabbed it firm, your fingers coiling the gilded chain like a spilled lung. As you were about to savor the triumph, searing pain ached from your back: the beast had sunk its teeth deeper in your wound. Your ethereal form began to crumble around the bite, dissolving into a fine powder and opaque mist, drawing into the creature's greedy maw before melting away into the

fade through its teeth. Goldie staggered back and fell. Though her hands started to resurface from her immortal flesh, the sheer pain, even unlingering, pushed her into shock. You lifted the shut tucker like a wall between you.

"I ain't making it easy for you," you said.

You gasped one last time as the other wolves descended upon you, joining in to tear away at your back. Your body had its limit, and, before long, entirely, it withered into ethereal mist. Similar to chugging a bottle of whiskey from the neck without pause, and only taking a second between the gulps to swallow each one, your lingering throes palliated in exchange for the intoxication.

Though your body was gone, you could still feel its form; like standing in a serene river, with no reason to breath or move, with only the smooth refreshing currents enveloping you in a comforting embrace. The clamorous thunder seemed distant now--deafened--replaced by a muted rumble of horizon wagon caravan, their wheels stuck in endless roll, with murmured conversations of lost pioneers still carried by the wind. Your vision was blinded by layers of white varying in intensity but unblemished in purity. Like with clouds, the patterns you discerned seemed like only a whimsy of your mind. It felt nice. Perhaps it wasn't bad being dead; truly dead.

You couldn't guess how long you'd been in that state--too fleeting, unsatisfying brief. A sudden oppressive weight bore down on you, every bone's creak separate in your mind like a jumbled collection of birds trapped within a traveling menagerie. With each part of you that reformed, so did the dormant pains. Your right shoulder screamed its presence, the Lucifer's Lead howling through your arm like an angered banshee. Each of the Prickly Niceties' thorns rereinded of themselves separately, biting as if you fell, covered in molasses, into an anthill. The unseen gashes on your palms seared like you were grasping a white-hot iron.

Upon feeling the whitened sand beneath your boots, you collapsed, arms wrapping around yourself like a casket. The marks left by the "Charred Bone's" Cassidy, the bullet wound, and the torn bit of your wrist, surged back with renewed agony. But they were mere flickers compared to rest. The echo of thousands of razor-sharp shards gored into your back all at once, piercing every square inch of flesh. This torment intertwined with another visceral one: the gnawing feasting of the wolves--the way they butchered you--their teeth sinking deep into your flesh and ripping it away.

Yet, while those pains threatened to pull you into darkness, the worse of torments was the thirst. Mere thought of relief had your gullet lining feeling like parched tree, each layer seemingly peeling away, causing you such pain you could only earn for a single droplet. You knew that wasn't the case, but your right hand reached for the cold, feeble iron flask as if on its own, brushing it against your cracked lips and pouring the invigoration liquid of what felt like watered down coffee to quench your thirst. You drank more than necessary, but you couldn't control yourself, and no one was around to halt your indulgence. You imbibed until the flask ran dry, clutching it with such desperation that the fragile container shattered in your grasp.

You tossed aside the broken fragment, exhaling a dampened breath. Rationing the black water would've been wise, but the piercing thirst had driven all rational thought from your mind. You knew you wouldn't be able to focus on anything else with such maddening thirst. You pulled yourself to your knees and took in your surroundings. You were expecting to see a pestering crowd, but instead, before you laid the ghostly remains of it. You were in Ruetown, but Ruetown wasn't there. Where shops and cabins once stood, there were only ruinous piles of splintered wood, faintly glowing with a chilled green glowing. What in tarnation had happened?

Digging your heels into the ground, you rose with some effort, feeling the black heaviness seep into your bones. The weight of your hastily charring marrow urged you back to the sand that was quick to swallow your boots. With some effort, you straightened your back and cracked your shoulders in rhyme, making your way deeper into the town's ruins. Your blackened bones grasped at your soul from within, pulling at it like a sky drawing the last rays

of light from the dawn.

You threaded over and amidst the strewn wreckage, the Evergreen ghostwood no longer reflecting a memory of a homely town, but what one would remember of it after an eclipsing storm; although you knew there this was more to it than a tornado. Hadn't the ghostly wood been supposed to mend itself? Keeping a wary silence, you passed the upturned homes, revolver at the ready--not in your left, but in your run-of-the-mill right hand. Your death had remedied the Chupacabra's cursed bitemark, your arm no longer resembling the main ingredient of a poultry broth. When you left it, the town was ghostly, but now it appeared completely desolate, barren streets and haunting silence replacing the modest vestige of life that were. With a sigh, you halted your pace, drawing out and opening the gilded pocket watch, the minute and the hour hands separate of each other. A smirk of relief tugged at your lips--Goldie wasn't able to find him yet. You pondered the direction to where Henry's hour hand pointed, deliberating on beating Goldie to the punch.

Just then, a shadow wove off the glinting debris, and a man wearing a shiny white hat stepped within your eyeshot. His eyes widened in apparent surprise.

"You be ... 'Charred Bones?'" he questioned, retreating a step. Upon stepping on the dusty street, he held in his white-laced hands a half-opened saddlebag. Inside, odd trinkets peeked out: an anvil-shaped belt buckle, a brass whistle, and a branding iron. After a moment's pause he smirked at you, securing the bag with one hand while snatching out his six-shooter with the other. "Also a thief of fortune, are you?" Ahead of your reply he squinted first. "No, I know that mug of yours. You're the bounty hunter from that nettlesome poster, 'Only Dead' Heart, correct? Though, your bones are all black now ... almost didn't recognise you."

He aimed the barrel from your head to your chest. "Don't know how you're back, but lucky you are."

You responded by levelling your own gun at him. "What makes it so lucky?"

"My wife's been itching to see you" --a striker snapped from behind you, its tone much heavier and louder than any revolvers'-- "But running into you here and now? That was unexpected."

"Don't move a single inch, 'Only Dead' Aug," a woman spoke with a familiar, mellow voice.

You edged your head to confirm your suspicions. Annette "Lyrebird" Licorice. She who drowned her own daughters, and when that wasn't enough for her, used her voice and allure to do the same with all the others.

"I said. Don't. Move. An inch!" she fanned her words and then drew a sharp breath. "That really is you, 'Only Dead' Aug. Your luck never runs out, does it, Goodwin?"

"Nothing to do with luck, my sweet Anne," the man said, placing two of his fingers to his lips and passing her a playful kiss. "I make it myself."

You held into the iron's pearl grip tight and brandished it square at him.

"I'll blow a hole clean through his skull," you warned, casting a furtive glance over your shoulder.

The man donning the white Stetson hat just smirked, holding the barrel of his own six-shooter on you with a loose, almost mocking grip.

"You know what'll happen to me ain't much of a threat as what'll happen to you, 'Only Dead' Aug."

Lyrebird's voice dripped into his, "Reckon you remember who I am?"

You spat into the dust. "Ain't too many outlaw women I've hunted down. And among them all, Lyrebird, your unhinged voice is one to remember."

Goodwin scoffed, lifting his gun to scratch at his chin before turning the barrel back at you. "Unhinged"? Is the last word I'd use for my dear's voice."

"Nine or so years, 'Only Dead' Aug, and they've not been kind to you, have they?" Lyrebird said. "But I ain't looking to kill you here, or to get my revenge. I -will- do it, if you try to pull

anything on me, but that'll be bad for all of us. I'll get to rest before what I need is done, you'll become a Judged, and Goodwin here will be left lonesome."

"And if killing me ain't what you want, then what?"

"I reckon I'll make you do something for me. Seems a fairer way to settle our score than claiming' your soul. After all, you're just one bullet away from eternal damnation, 'Only Dead' Aug. My bullet."

"I'm one bullet away, that's true," you said, swinging your iron to press it to your temple. "But not from damnation--"

Before your sentence was finished, your hand exploded without presence of smoke or gunfire, as if the air in your spectral flesh had ignited within. Every fragment of your ghostly hand vanished into fading motes, the charred bones trembling from the shock. Your iron spiralled skyward, out of your reach, as if caught in the rise of campfire smoke under the starless sky. You gasped at your hand, dropping to one knee; the pain mild but stinging. Glaring up, you gaze meet Lyrebird's figure.

She stood with hair cut short and unruly, a tangle of curly brown-copper curls cascading around her ears and forehead. The rest of her hair was intricately braided in patterns as unpredictable as Lyrebird herself, each different from the next. She donned the same off-shoulder white blouse you ended her in, though not as awash in river water or blood. The ruffled blouse was tucked into a lengthy skirt of deep indigo, reaching below her ankles, layered such that each tier cascaded wider than the one above, reminiscent of tussling waves she stood in when she took the lives of men. She was holding by a lacquered walnut clutch an ethereal shotgun; the contours of it illuminated by a sunset-bright sheen while the rest was remained shrouded in almost invisible mist within the frame.

"I'd claim I have a second barrel left, but this one doesn't fire slugs," Lyrebird said, levelling the shotgun at your head and pulling back the hammer. "Enough of your theatrics, 'Only Dead' Aug."

Peering down, you saw ethereal wisps begin to coalesce around your skeletal hand, the ghost smoke drifting back to you after their shimmer. "Once I've done your bidding, what guarantees you won't turn that gun on me, looking for some respite?"

She shook her head. With a delicate motion, she tucked an untamed strand of hair off her face, only for it to stubbornly return "I wouldn't be able to, I reckon."

Your eyes stared into the flames of her eyes, then darted to your iron resting a distance away on the moon-scorched plains.

"Ain't the threat of becoming a Judged by my hand enough to motivate you, Aug?" Lyrebird nibbled on the corner of her lip. "Ain't it not?"

"I know you don't have, for whatever reason, your heart in it. I've no intention of entertaining an outlaw's whims."

The wooden grip creaked in protest as her grip tightened around it. "August, always so shrewd and certain. Righteous, busy, and oh-so-sure," she said. "You might think you've got me figured out, but it's been a long nine years. Maybe I yearn for some reprieve from the torments of the Down Below. But ... let's give it another go. How about a request of a mother, would you entertain that?"

You cocked an eyebrow. "A mother's plea? What in tarnation are you mulling about? I might not know much about mothers, but I'm pretty sure they don't do what you did."

Lyrebird let out a drained sigh; she eased the shotgun slightly, only to hastily realise that and raise the barrel back to your head.

"I told you to listen, not to accuse me," she huffed, pushing her free sleeve-puffed arm over her hip. "So, will you? The request is ... well ... a Wendigo."

"A Wendigo?" you echoed. "What does a Wendigo have to do with you being a horrible mother? You're not making sense."

"Might make sense if you let me finish," she said, drawing another sharp breath. She then smiled, fluttering her eyelashes, either at you or the man behind you. "There is a devil of a creature here they call the Wendigo. If it feasts on you, piece by bite, your soul is forever trapped to reappear within its gut, to be gobbled up time and time again. Only way out for those inside is if the creature's put down, but those trapped can't do a thing to help themselves." Lyrebird's grip faltered. "I've got as much blood on my hands as you do, 'Only Dead' Aug. Been eluding those after me for near a decade. But this Wendigo? Even with Goodwin backing me, it's too strong. So I want you, the famed bounty hunter, to help me."

By now, the cerulean smoke had fully enveloped your hand to shape the form of your fingertips.

"You're telling me that beast's got your children's souls?"

"Yes."

"And you aim to save 'em, just so they can pull a bullet in ya ... outta remorse?"

Lyrebird twisted the leather of her belt. "Yes, it's guilt, but I also wasn't in right mind back when I did it. You didn't care, and don't care, about my story, so why the sudden interest now?"

"I reckon I'm just curious." You shrugged, casting a sidelong glance at the stoic man in the white hat behind you. Maybe you could take -his- iron once he's in your reach?

"Get your fill of curiosity, 'Only Dead' Aug. I need to know, are you going to help me or I can consider all this talk for naught, and I shouldn't waste my chances with you?"

Memories stirred of old Bill mentioning the Wendigo, though he did little but mention it by its name. Lyrebird was desperate to save her children from the creature's clutches. If you did help, her offspring would be able to seek revenge on her, and then Lyrebird would, indeed, be helpless to rest her own soul after that. That's one less soul to fret over. But there's always the chance you're different, marked uniquely by Goldie's Lucifer Bullet ...

You narrowed your eyes and tilted your head her way.

"You got two sons--"

"Daughters."

"You got two daughters, then" you said. "Word 'round the Graveyard Frontier is only the first soul to settle their score finds peace. Set me straight, Lyrebird."

Specks of worn mercury lipstick shimmered on Lyrebird's bitten lips in the smothering moonlight. She shifted her weight, finding her footing anew with each sway. Pausing, she pushed down her head, letting it rest against her uncovered ghostflesh. She cast her gaze at your feet as she gathered her voice.

"So you're privy to that much, huh?" she murmured.

"You don't mean to say ... You thought this through any? Were you even aware?"

Meeting your stare, her eyes kindled with a fresh blaze of blue fire. "Of course I was aware. Been racking my brain on how ... Maybe they both stick their blades in me at once. I'll have both of 'em hold the iron they use to finish me off in their tiny hands." She pointed behind you, at Goodwin. "Or, once they're out, that coffin nail will conjure something to aid me."

You spit narrowly missed her bare toes. "And here I reckoned you had a scheme brewing, but you are clueless," you said. "I guess, one soul finding peace is better than none at all."

Lyrebird, first glaring at you, uncocked the shotgun's hammer. "I'll see to it both of 'em find peace." She lowered the barrel, pointing the shotgun downwards, then spat a scant womanly amount into her stretched palm. Her arm shot forward, fingers splayed and tensed. "Either way, that's my problem to worry about. All I'm asking from you, Aug, is a plain answer."

"Plain answer, you say?" Your eyes flicked to your hand, everything reformed and intact, bones charred yet whole. In deliberate motion, you curved your elbow and swept your hand past her open palm, withdrawing it to your hip after. It was sort of a long-distance handshake; after the Riddle Wrangler's bout, you had no intent to gamble on the deals and pacts, be they sealed with riddles or handshakes. "Fine. Do you even know where this there Wendigo's at?"

Lyrebird sighed at your reticent agreement, brushing off the spit against her indigo garment. "Not the Wendigo," she said, her left hand reaching past her thigh and into an unseen pocket of her waving skirt. She pulled out a small cardstock frame, enclosing a barren tintype photograph. Narrowing her eyes, the blue flames flickering through her eyelids, she lifted the photo up to her face. She began to drag it slowly left of her, With slow, measured steps, she began to trace a circle, and as she did, the blank grain of the tintype darkened to reveal two young girls, as if her movement was brushing away the metallic sands within the grained depiction. The girls' small forms grew more distinct with each subtle shift of the photograph. With her back turned to you, she said, "I know just where my little girls are at."

You let your eyes rest on the arcane tintype. "Well, that's something to hang yer hat on, leastways," you said. "Ever eyeballed that Wendigo up close?"

"Only caught sight of it," Goodwin said from behind. "The Wendigo is like a roaring dust storm; get too close, and it'll gulp you whole."

"So what do you want me to do?" you asked. "I'm a sure shot, but I reckon that alone ain't going to be enough." You glanced at Lyrebird, who hadn't taken her eyes off the photograph once. "Y'got any kind of ... I don't know, plan?"

"We got a couple aces we were pondering on," Goodwin said, resting his hand on his wrist while his other still held the revolver. One of his fingers lifted off the gun's grip. "One, we could use this here nail we got, hoping it'll summon something that'll match up well against the Wendigo. Two," he lifted his forefinger, "might lead that beast to a town, on the chance that it'll gorge itself to the point of incapacitation. Might work, might not. Even a critter that ornery's gotta have its fill hunger's eventually." Goodwin slid off his arm and wagged his smallest finger. "Lastly, there's the matter of the white buffalo."

"Folks been on the prowl for that thing for who knows how long; ain't no good of a plan, Goodwin."

"Ah, it's the best one, darling," the man said with a relaxed smile, darting his attention from Lyrebird to you. "Heard tell of a solitary white buffalo wandering these godforsaken parts, only shard of purity in the Down Below. Few claim they've laid eyes on it, but I reckon most are spinning yarns. Them Chindi? Well, that white buffalo's 'bout the only thing could divert 'em from yer trail, seeing as they'd hunt for it."

"And this there white buffalo's gonna whup the Wendigo?"

"Likely as not."

You traced the hairs of your grey beard, mulling over Goodwin's words.

"Figuring the white buffalo's our best bet. Where do we start looking for it?"

With a spin of the trigger guard, Goodwin holstered his shining revolver into his shoulder rig, seemingly content that Lyrebird's shotgun alone was a sufficient threat.

"Folks I figured weren't spouting wind about meeting that redskin ghost said much the same. Chindi or some other hell-spawn chasing 'em when that white buffalo came out of the twilight, bright as a rival moon. Just like that, it stole the beasts' gaze, and the tellers were able to escape. That's all they recall, and where I reckon we oughtta begin."

You gave a throaty cough, spitting onto the parched sands. "So your idea is to call down the Chindi or some worse, and pray the white buffalo shows up 'cause it will?"

"That's the up and down of it."

Your neck made a loose crack as you stretched it out, your eyes drifting to the trim frame of your iron laying at a distance.

"That buffalo never showed its hide when them hellhounds were mauling at me," you said.

Goodwin leaned on his knees and, blinking, said, "You got eyed by them black fur beasts?"

Your eyes turned slits. "And if that be the case?"

"Then they'll be hot on your trail," Lyrebird spoke, a tinge of resentment in her tone. She looked over her shoulder, at the horizon past the green ruins. "Then they'll follow you until the

end of days, 'Only Dead' Heart. That's what those beasts do, hunt. They run your soul ragged, wearing it down until there's nothing left. Maybe, just maybe, they had their sights on another, one that ain't returned since it met their fangs and claws, and you were just a wagon snack. But were I you I wouldn't gamble on it."

"And what if I weren't alone when them beasts set eyes on me?"

"Who?" Lyrebird asked.

"That 'who' ain't important. They going after me or the 'who'? First one they set eyes on?"

Goodwin adjusted his white hat. "That might be so, it's the one of the two who done made the chase more interesting for 'em?"

Delighted their hunt, he said. Goldie was regenerating the lost limbs of her soul in seconds, that would make her the ultimate prey for those wolves, wouldn't it? Not that you cared, but how did she escape?

"Seeing as you're like to be chased by them black fur beasts, reckon we might catch the eye of that white buffalo without even trying," Goodwin said, his smirk twisting more.

"That ain't no kind of plan," Lyrebird retorted, her ethereal shotgun's barrel still aimed on you.

You pointed your fingers at the luminescent outlines. "You aiming to lower that Winchester anytime soon, Lyrebird? Ain't we done shaking on it?" you asked.

"You're no cowboy if that's yer idea of a handshake," she said, echoing her earlier spit. She eased the hardwood grip, everything around it beginning to dissipate, the ethereal form melting into the cold air.

Goodwin whistled in the air through his teeth. "If we can call up some Chindi too, 'twixt them and the hellhounds, that white buffalo will have no choice but to show itself to 'rescue us'. What say you?"

"I reckon that's our best shot for crossing trails with the spirit," you said. "So, how are we fixing to call up more of them Chindi?"

"There ain't one way," Goodwin said. "It's often something you'd rather steer clear of."

"Well, I already had to deal with a few," you recalled; thinking back when Goldie struggled to shoot any with your Colt. You glanced about the spectral wreckage. "Let's just mosey on out into the open, like I done before to rustle up their notice." Your finger singled out the sand not far from Lyrebird. You looked at her. "You're going to let me pick that piece, or what?"

"Fine," she said.

Lyrebird turned around on her toes and neared the weapon. As she leaned for it, her layered skirt lifted and swayed like the inviting warm waves of the sea. Grasping the iron by the hilt, she studied its form. "Y'ever set foot in the Coffin Fields yourself, 'Only Dead' Aug?" she asked before tucking the gun under her blouse and then pitching it at you.

You caught it mid-air with a short, firm snap, sliding it into your holster. You drummed the engraved pearl-grip for a short spell before withdrawing your hand off it.

"No, ain't never been there," you said. "It's mine; had it on me the whole time."

"Someone bested the great bounty hunter in a shoot-out?" the man said, eyeing your firearm with newfound curiosity. He kicked at the ground, shifted his saddlebag over his shoulder, and, with a nod, started walking away.

You grimaced. "We were both armed," you said the truth, tilting your head at the ruins as you trailed him. "What exactly went down here, and how many days ago it happened?"

Lyrebird shifted too, shadowing you to form a chain with you in the middle.

"Who is keeping tabs on the days in this purgatory?" Goodwin laughed it off. He put the fingers of his free hand to his lips, licking the tip of each in turn. "More than five ... Ten days, no less, 'Only Dead' Aug." Goodwin wiped his wet fingers on his coat. "As for what came to pass, weren't here to see it unfold myself, but ain't hard to piece together. An Evergreen came back, and it was sore as a boil finding souls using its shedding to cobble together a town. Y'see, one of

them Evergreens sheds its parts to sprout from them anew, but that can't happen if souls repurpose it first. Now, if an Evergreen gets a whiff of that, it'll come down on the town in a fury, and considering its size, y'can reckon the mayhem."

Your gaze swept over the roofs and walls: wrecked in every single house, all equally laid to waste by the Evergreen's wrath. You stepped cautiously over the charred floorboards.

"So what's next? There here ruins gonna birth a new Evergreen?"

Goodwin looked your way, the brim of his white hat as if illuminating his eyes. "Who's to say? They're still just floorboards and timbers, aren't they? Maybe if no one troubles it for a few years ..." He paused, eyes closed, and let out a low chuckle "Ah, shoot, reckon it's too late? You, Annette, and me done riled it up. Add a few more years, suppose the tree's luck has run dry."

Behind you tinkled a dainty laughter. You turned your head, but Lyrebird had already muffled her mouth behind her palm, her faux-furrowed scowl wrinkling her forehead.

Your eyes remained still on her for a spell. What was so funny? Clearing your throat, you rolled your eyes and turned away.

"I was pondering, maybe we could go looking for half-breed Injuns? f we're on the hunt fer a redskin spirit, wouldn't it stand to reason to find someone versed in the myths of it?"

Goodwin scratched at his whiskers. "Sure enough, them half-breeds wind up here same as any cowboy. It's only the full-blood natives who get... who knows what? Their tailored-for paradise?"

"But if you die from a grizzle bear or the consumption, don't matter if you're red or white, y'ain't gonna land in the Graveyard Frontier? I recall hearing something like that."

"Odd, ain't it? The Down Below's a place fer cold-bloods, 'less you a Native, of course" he said. "Until you figure how to bend them here rules, you'll have play by them."

Rules, by who? Shaking your head, you dismissed the thought. "Do you know of any half-bloods, then?"

Goodwin shrugged. "All my time here, I've crossed paths with a few, or more that I've meet a few. Y'won't know they's half-breeds 'til they say so, same as y'won't know a black or a Chinese ..."

"I know of one," Lyrebird said. Her hand fell away from her mouth and her brows smoothed out, returning to how they were before.

You squinted with one of your eyes. "One that you killed?"

"Someone -you- had killed. Do you not recall?"

"Who?" Your knuckles brushed your brow. "I've done in a half-Injun? When did that happen?"

Lyrebird lips pulled back in a tight snarl. She held down a sigh. "Maria Stillwater. Otherwise known by 'Papoose'? Did that shake your memory?"

You nibbled on your lip. "Papoose'? ... That suppose to mean she's a half-breed? I'll take your word for it ... You met her?"

"Yes. Long before you showed up. She found me, asked 'bout the both of us, and gave me a beaded bracelet. I still got it, though it, but ain't 'round my wrist." She gestured to Goodwin's shoulder, where the saddlebag was. "Now that I think about it, reckon she meant for me to wear it if I ever crossed trails with you ... or maybe force you to wear it."

"I reckon you shouldn't force me to wear it, no," you said. "Do you even know what that thing does? You willing to gamble losing me before we even square off against the Wendigo?"

Lyrebird shook her head. "I'd rather you tangle with the Wendigo first. Just putting it plain, if you're hankering for the company of a half-breed, there's one yonder, and she even set aside lil' gift for you."

"Her true gift, I reckon, being a shiv she can stick me with," you said, stepping over the fallow soil and the splintered woodwork, an ethereal smoke-lit glow exuding from within the planks.

"Of all the ones you've sent here, 'Only Dead' Aug, how many you got to cross paths with?" Lyrebird asked, the azure flames within her eyes crackling in tune of her words.

Brushing your forelocks away from your eyes, you said, "Maybe one, not counting you. Had lead sent my way in this very town, but didn't linger long 'nuff to catch sight of the shooter. How'd you know I was here?"

Lyrebird slanted her skull, her gaze drifting past you to Goodwin. He glanced over, touched his steepled fingers to his chin in thought, and then splayed out his hand, palm open.

"Right there," she declared, pointing her finger upwards the sky.

Your eyes followed her gesture, climbing higher until they met a macabre sight. Suspended high above, thrice as the height the former structures of Ruetown stood, dangled a hatless man in faded denim garments. Looking up from the ground, he appeared no larger than your thumb. His head was thrown back, his neck stretched taut by an unseen rope, his body writhing as though still capable of drawing breath. He flailed his arms, grasping at the empty air. You squinted, turning your eyes back to Lyrebird.

"That fella?"

"Who now?" Lyrebird echoed. She lifted her gaze, her mouth opening an inch before she pressed her lips shut. "That wasn't what ... I was trying to point at."

Goodwin halted following you and Lyrebird. He tipped the brim of his hat back to afford himself an unblocked view. "Be that ... Chuck?"

"I-is there someone there?" an almost inaudible voice drifted down from above. "Lend me a hand, for the love of God" the spectral figure followed with a faint mutter..

"He was the one who couldn't crack that Riddle Wrangler's riddle, ain't he?" you said, gripping your iron. "I reckon I got just the way to cut you loose, partner!" you yelled.

"Wait! Please ... no ... hold your fire," the man said, the thunderous storm clouds drowning out his distant feeble voice. "The pain. I don't want to be saddle with that kinda of pain for eternity."

"Well, I ain't got another way of saving you," you said, moving your eyes away from the iron's crosshairs. "How long have you been dangle-hanging there, anyhow?"

He let out a hushed whimper. "I'm ... I can't reckon the time no more. Riddle Wrangler, he... he paid me two visits, and I still can't cipher his riddle."

"Oughtta known better than to tangle with that devil to begin with," Goodwin said, using his knuckles to smudgen his grin. "Ain't heard of a soul figuring one of 'em."

Your gaze shifted back and forth between Chuck and your iron. Chewing on the cold air, you said, "Well, darn it, how else are we supposed to get you down?"

Goodwin lazily waved his hand through the air. With a stifled chuckle, he imitated Chuck, "The riddle--"

"The godforsaken riddle," Chuck said, almost as through straining his voice. "I've lost all reckoning of time, and I still can't come up with a response, an answer, he'd take. Give it a ponder!"

Your fingers grazed your throat. "Who's to say you ain't aiming to pass your curse onto us? I don't want another of them noses over my neck again."

"Again?" Lyrebird said, her eyes shifting from the man to you; her eyes narrowed when you held your tongue.

"Wouldn't worry about it," Goodwin drawled. "During my last sojourn, heard tell that Chuck's been yammering his riddle to everyone passing below him."

"Then even if he tells us, we're just wasting time." Lyrebird looked at you as if staring down a rattlesnake. "You don't seem to be the riddle-cracking type anyhow, 'Only Dead' Aug."

Your brow creased. Locking eyes with the man, you said, "Well, spit it out."

Chuck jerked his head, the invisible noose around his neck twisting it like a bent nail. "What is" --he clawed at his throat-- "the question that dreads of its answer?"

Goodwin held his gaze on Chuck for a moment, then turned to you, his lips curled into a smirk. "So, 'Only Dead' Aug, you aiming to respond to that feller or what?"

You loosely rolled your shoulder. "Hell if I know," you said. "Riddles like these could've more than a hundred answers, but mark me, Abel would claim 'em all wrong."

Humming a tune through the tight set of his teeth, Goodwin pulled at the bottom of his alabaster gloves to adjust the fit. "Figures it's all just a trap to snare your windpipe."

"Ain't so, I reckon," you said, sinking your fingers into the ghostflesh of your neck, where the noose which you neither seen nor felt used to hang around. "He wants them riddles solved."

"How you figure?" Lyrebird posed, one of her hands resting on her belt and the other, on top of it, rubbing at the chaffed mercury lipstick.

You sighed, long and slow. "What does it matter? I've met him, I've done speaking with him, I've answered one of his riddles, and ended up wearing his noose. No more, but still."

Lyrebird's sigh mirrored your own, her hand dropping to adjust her skirt. The indigo fabric rippled in the windless air like a sudden but brief downpour. You licked your lips. Damn, you could feel your thirst returning; so soon? Your eyes left Lyrebird and the imagery of rain her skirt was evoking. Instead, your thoughts returned back to the damn riddle.

"Then I guess I was spot-on 'bout you not being much for riddles," Lyrebird said.

"Lots of yammering, Lyrebird. If you ain't going to add your two cents, then shut it."

"Don't be telling my wife to shut it, 'Only Dead' Aug," Goodwin said.

Your eyes rolled across the gradient sky. "Y'can join her in the silent company, if you'd like," you suggested, a short hum slipping from your lips. What is the question that dreads of its answer--what in tarnation could it be? Your gaze lifted to meet Chuck's. There he was, shaking in the air and struggling with his plight, begging you to solve his problems instead of just facing a bullet's mercy. Unlikely the man ever killed a soul, making him exempt from being hunted by his killed. Yet that didn't free him from the manifold of torments of the Graveyard Frontier, so he was playing safe, cowardly perhaps. Yet even his caution couldn't escape Abel; or maybe he found him because of it. Would you be any different? What if you arrived here not because of Goldie, but from some other Darwinian death? You stay here has been short, but already, you'd been subjected through so much excruciating sufferings: a pain that'll fester inside you until you'd find a way out. But if there was no escape for you, and you were like the rest of them, could you reach a point where you couldn't suffer anymore? Would you become as spineless as this man?

"Anything, I beg you," said Chuck, snapping you out of your thinking. "I just wanna feel dirt beneath my boots again."

You spat, then hiked up your voice to reach the man. "What about 'Am I dying'? Wouldn't fancy hearing the answer to that one, would you?" you offered. "Maybe, 'Whether or no there is a higher power?'. If there is, reckon it ain't concerned about us none." Your gaze dipped the dusty sands, then swung back up to him. "And lastly: 'Do I honest to God belongs in this here place? Do I deserve to?' And if the answer is yes, I'd be afraid to know."

Goodwin guffawed, his knee coming up just so he could give it a loud slap. "You took your best swing, but how're we to know if your answers are right or wrong? Ain't no Riddle Wrangler around these parts to make it official."

"No, no he ain't," you said. "He's already paid Chuck a visit twice, he said. Likely to hear his answers." You buried your face in your hand. "Fuck, reckon we're just wasting our time, then."

"What good's a question that ain't got no answer?" Lyrebird puzzled. "Can't say I got any liking for this Riddle Wrangler from what I'm hear--"

A sudden cry scrambled Lyrebird's singsong voice. Chuck was plummeting from high above, no longer held nor lifted by an unseen curse, his body soon to meet solid ground.

You retreated, your heels pulling in the dead land's dust with you. Chuck's shadow grew on the ground as he descended from the dizzying height, several dozen feet away to where you were

standing. Crying out for help, his voice became mangled and contorted by the obstructing air tearing at his throat. For a brief moment, the silvered moonlight soaked his frame, bathing him like embalming fluid. Lyrebird gripped Goodwin's hand and yanked him closer to you, away from the disaster.

With a sickening crash, Chuck hit the ground, the cacophony of his torn flesh and splintered bones ringing out like piano keys being smashes all at by angered amateur. Cracked splinters burst forth from within his body and marrow like squished out maggots, the blue ink of their insides hastily drying into dust. Chuck's warped body lied helpless and still, the pulped mess of his spectral flesh and tendered skeleton smouldering and crackling, as though he were a heap of autumn leaves burning slowly from within the heart. All at once, his entire body exploded into a torn cloud, a phantom blooming engulfing the remains of his form before it all and the rest of it mingled with the lingering mist.

You stooped, watching as the last wisps lifted from the ground, the shape of the man's body imprinted upon the shoved white sand.

"He ain't unfeeling that dirt any time soon," Goodwin said, the saddlebag rattling in his hands.

Lyrebird's lips twitched into a brief curve before she clenched her teeth, cringed, and sighed. She cleared her throat, grabbed Goodwin's shoulder, and sank her nails into his pad.

You doffed your hat, then straightened up to meet the gazes of the wedded pair.

"What else were your finger aiming at?" you asked.

Lyrebird's grip tightened around Goodwin's shoulder, the man smiling at her, before she pushed him aside to lock eyes with you instead. She inched her finger, then instead squeezed her hand into a fist and pocketed it into her skirt, choosing instead to point up with her chin. There was no second figure dangling in the air, only the moon piercing through a stratum of obsidian thunderclouds like a snow-clad summit; an iceberg in the chilling abyss of the polar ocean. Pristine, unblemished, unlike the moon you could recall from your youth. Her surface appeared like a marble tombstone: smoothly polished yet untouched by an engraving chisel.

"The moon?" you finally asked.

She tousled her locks. "Ayep, the moon. I can see your husk there, the dead one you left, like some shadow play on the moon's pale face."

"My corpse?" You squinted at the celestial body, seeing nothing. "And what's the sight? They give me a proper burying?" you asked.

She hummed a note. "Maybe. I'll tell you all about it once my gals are freed, if you'll be still willing to know."

"Why keep your tongue bit?" you asked, urging them both to get moving with a nod. "Even if I'm in the cold soil, I still don't know the way to them Coffin Fields for a getaway."

"You don't, else you'd have made your pilgrimage already, coffin or not," she said, stepping over Chuck's imprint in the sand. Her finger traced a path through the air, just an inch shy off your beard, before she moved further. "Wouldn't you fancy for there to be a prize? A lil' sugar on yer cornbread fer bringing down that Wendigo, in addition to my firm insistence?" She looked over her shoulder, her braids coiled around her scalp like serpents in a nest.

You hawked and spat. "Nah, hand over the payout," you said. "Is there a grave? They come across my dead body? What else is on the picture, and who else can lay eyes on it?"

You three walked on, brushing past the surviving glistening wall of the final homestead on Ruetown's outskirts, nothing but the fog-smothered desolate expanse beyond it. You shuddered at the memory, the mirage of red eyes flaring and then softening like drops of paint on a wet newspaper. You shook your head, and the mirage vanished into the fog.

Lyrebird caught Goodwin's eye and then brought her fingertips to her lips. She opened her mouth ever so slightly before pulling her hand away and began speaking, her voice reserved yet liling. "You were indeed buried; looking at your rotting corpse ain't pleasant, 'Only Dead' Aug.

Man with a snaggletooth found you after a few days, if you care for the details." There was a man like that: Clay, the moonshiner; he'd bring you the freshest cider to sell, and it wasn't even half bad. "Feller rifled through your belongings first, house too, stashing his plunder in his cart's grain before heaving your carcass atop." That bastard! "Your husk got hauled to the nearest town. Folks there dropped their jaws seeing you dead. But come burying day at the chapel ground, the crowd was sparse, and the preacher seemed 'bout as fired up as a wet match. Mind you, I can only see your body, but I reckon the man of the cloth tried at all, and I don't think the Good Lord were listening in. Nonetheless, you got a grave, meaning you got a Coffin Field's coffin, and the coffin nails in it." en ways to say "Lyrebird resuming speaking", it's not a dialogue.

You scowled. "Yeah, yeah, don't matter none. Was there anyone else they buried?"

She raised her brow. "Should there have been?"

You hesitated, then shook your head. "I was hoping the bastard that plugged me bit the dust too."

"If he had, you'd see his body on the moon. Seems you finally lost at the quick draw," Lyrebird said.

"Call it what you want," you uttered, a scowl etching itself across your features. Your gaze settled on the indistinct horizon. "So, every fella I send this way gets a good long gander at my mug on the moon's face, do I reckon right?"

"Your corpse, yes," she repeated. "Sits right there in the pine casket, ain't no maggots to be seen yet."

"Well ain't that a comfort," you said, sarcasm dripping.

Goodwin raised his palm to his forehead, touching the brim of his white hat, lifting it a hair's breadth. "I don't see any black fur beasts just yet."

"Y'even know what y'looking for, Goodwin?" Lyrebird said.

"Like wolves, don't they?" he said—you affirmed with a curt nod. He squared his shoulders. "With a coal-black fur and sizeable fangs."

Lyrebird turned your way. "Then you might count yourself lucky, 'Only Dead' Aug, and they decided to skip you as their one true prey, but that's not going to do you any favours with finding the white buffalo."

"It's too early to lower the iron; they ain't gonna pounce right outside of a town. Keep yer wits with you." You sighed. "Got a clue how to trip over them leftovers?"

"You don't find the leftovers, the leftovers find you," she said.

"Fine, what do know of them? Anything to better our odds? Quicken this mess? A coot I've met said they they're strewn across the Graveyard Frontier."

Goodwin halted, setting down his sack. A plume of dust rose as it hit the ground. He squatted and pulled on the rope, starting to fumble through the contents.

"Favour lone strays over groups," he said, eyes still on the bag.

Annoyed, you clicked your tongue. "So, we messed up right from the get-go."

"No, ain't that simple," he added. "It just means they'll come at us like a horde, a pack big enough even a white buffalo would think twice to overlook."

Your head tilted, catching Lyrebird's blue flames trained on you; their fiery depths burning at even length.

"I spilled about the moon, so tell me why your bones are black like they are," she said.

"You aren't in the dark about it yourself, are you?" Goodwin added.

A chortle pushed through from within her chest, her lips pressing together to hold it in. A muffled snicker broke through, followed by a short chuckle. Goodwin paused his rummaging to flash a self-satisfied grin.

Again, was there a joke that you missed? "You know about the 'Charred Bones', didn't you share with her?"

Goodwin shook his head. "I -know- about the 'Charred Bones' outlaw, but I don't know why

your bones match his, and why they be like th-- there!"

He yanked out a bundle of necklace ropes, twisted together like a nest of writhing serpents, each vying to break free. Jolting them in his hand, the chalky tips at the end floated skyward, resembling compass needles adrift without the metal shell, one angling towards Ruetown while the rest pointed in the cardinal directions, charting a path beyond the fog.

"Damn it, these here are a knotted mess. Can't make heads or tails of 'em."

"Do we even need a course?" you said.

"It's better than meandering through the Down Below aimlessly. Might find ourselves needing to escape if them leftovers show up but there ain't no white buffalo to save our hides," Goodwin said.

Lyrebird pointed with her finger. "Look for the one with the white thread, Goodwin, that's the one that points to the Next Stop, part chapel part station."

"The train station?" Goodwin eyed the mentioned piece. "Let's give that one a wide berth, my wife. Place be full of sanctimonious loafers, can't expect a lick of help from them," he said, his gaze shifting to another chalk. "This one's worn thin, reckon it's aimed at Grave Mercy." He looked at you. "Another town, only it ain't in ruins last time I've been there."

You put your palms against your breeches. "Well, if you can't make up your mind, here are my two cents. The half-church roost--you loudly snapped your fingers, gesturing toward the hovering chalk of the silver-threaded necklace-- "bet them devout types might have a trick or two on handling the godforsaken Wendigo." As for the town of Grave Mercy ... who's to say if Gaddly didn't visit every town in these parts? He's in the Graveyard Frontier too, looking for you.

"Doubt them folks know a lick about such matters." Goodwin pushed his nails between the knots. "I wouldn't be counting on them for nothing."

"He might be into something," Lyrebird said, approaching the man and gently tapping his upper arm. "We might not even need to set our feet on the ground."

He met her gaze and sighed, separating the necklaces before looping the lonely cord around his neck. He threw the rest back into the bag.

Lyrebird sidled past Goodwin and cinched the saddlebag closed. "Perhaps we'll even be able to hitch a train if we do decide to visit."

"Moon falling from the sky seems more likely," Goodwin laughed, picking up the rattling bag and slinging it over his shoulder.

As you distanced yourself, you glanced back. The glowing ruins melded into the burial mist to emerge as their former undestroyed outlines, the mist concealing the town's grim fate.

"There's a watermill Cassidy lays claims to," you began, sharing with both Lyrebird and Goodwin the nature of your blackness-infused marrow, how heavy and tight they felt, and how not even a fatal wound is not able to wreck your soul, for the bones grip at the ghostflesh like a newborn to a mother's hand. "And if my soul kicks it, an angry wraith will be left where I stood."

"Her bullets will be different," Goodwin said. "It'll make you a Judged, black bones or not."

"You're that certain?" you asked. "Any soul ever tried settling a score with Cassidy? Bet he's got a graveyard's worth waiting."

"I've never met the man himself, but folk talk 'bout 'Charred Bones', and it's him and only him when they mention the black bones."

"Now hear me. If a leftover's hatchet gets too cosy, or one of your bullets burrows too far, you two will be dancing on hot coals. Best keep an eye out for me."

"How do you figure that?" Lyrebird asked.

You tapped your left shoulder, then lifted your left wrist by the sleeve. "I tangled with that bony wraith myself, when Cassidy came calling for my head."

"All on your own?" he said.

You hesitated, skirting the mention of Goldie. "More or less. He might be a high outlaw

around these parts, but when his charred bones ain't playing importance, he's can be dealt with."

Lyrebird eyed your carcass, the intense black colour burning through your translucent flesh. "His bullets might might not work, but charred bones or no, -I- can make you a Judged."

You touched your neck, elbow pointing at her. "Well, if you reckoning y'know more than me. You sound cocksure, I reckon you must." You chewed on your cheek. "Anyways, Chuck fell because we got the riddle, right? But I've just quick shot them answers, I don't reckon which one was right." You turned to Goodwin. "Seems Abel, that Riddle Wrangler, had his judging eye working. Dunno if that noose knew to bide its time, or if Abel was eavesdropping on the whole shebang."

"You said he was in the dark himself?" Goodwin said.

"Yes. Rattled off saying he's got a book of riddles without answers from his time alive, aiming to sort 'em out now."

"If that riddle's the first cracked, and he's listening in, then he might think you know the answer for more of 'em," Lyrebird cautioned.

"Long as your trap stays shut, reckon your neck's outta the noose." Goodwin touched his beard. "What was the riddle he asked you?"

Scratching your cheek, you recalled. "What weighs more, a pound of hope or a kilogram of despair? His words."

"It don't matter if it's feathers or figments, kilo's gotta weigh more than a pound, right?"

You closed your eyes and let out a sigh. "Just what I said, but he disagreed. Ain't sure what he wanted to hear."

"What's on the scales," Lyrebird hushed.

"Beg you pardon?" you asked.

Lyrebird's lips were a thin, expressionless line. "That's my answer. What you load the scales with, what you measure, what matters to you, that weights more."

"And if he throws in, 'what if both are on put on the scales?'"

"Asking a follow-up question ain't how riddles work, but ... 'What's on the scales' will still hold whisky."

"Well, I'm ain't one to debate riddles, but if you been doing that instead of drowning folks, I would let you be in the living world."

Before she could respond, her eyes snapped open and she gripped her shotgun. A spectre loomed in the distance, its darkness swallowing the mist around it.

"That be one of them," Goodwin said.

You snatched the cold steel from its leathery sheath, holding it close to your hip. The spectre eclipsed the churning mist, gaunt and adorned in tattered deerskin. Shredded threads of its torn garments fluttered in the roused gales, their original colours grimed and faded. Its fringes hung loosely below its waist, fraying thinner with each step. A raven feather nestled in its headdress, hanging askew atop its head.

The leftover jerked its shoulder, lifting a crooked hornbow from the fog's depths. The brow's frame creaked as it pulled on the rawhide string, letting loose an arrow that seemed to materialise out of thin air. As the bowstring snapped, a gust of wind swirled the fog around the figure--the flat gale flattening the rest-- leaving only the sharp whistle of the arrow in its wake.

You flinched, taking an instinctive step back. "It's armed with a bow?!"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Lyrebird said, falling down on one knee and propping her elbow on the other. "Them damn things are hunting for us, after all."

The arrow zipped through the air, the gathering winds flowing through its fletchings. Its obsidian tip glinting the moonlight before the arrow vanished, flying straight at your head. You threw your shoulder back as if you were elbowing someone behind you, tumbling onto your rear, and having the arrow narrowly miss as it cut through the air, sliced your beard, and lodged itself in the earth, sending the sand flying. You cursed, drawing back the hammer of

your gun to cock it. A speck of your flesh flew back, mending the graze on your chin.

"And it got invisible arrow?"

"That, I don't know why," Lyrebird said.

You aligned the sights of your revolver with the subtle contours of the spectre. You aimed at its head; the long distance having the crosshairs completely cover the silhouette, the pitch darkness of Graveyard Frontier's perpetual night, the fog cloaking the horizon line, and the the raging winds drafting around the leftover, all blended to make it a trick shot. You steadied your breath, squared your stance, and pulled on the trigger: a shot spiralling forth from the rifled bore. Counting five seconds, the bullet zeroed it on its mark, banishing the leftover spirit as if it was exorcised. The wind died out with abrupt silence, as if an unseen hand had closed a window. You lowered the iron, a smoky swirl billowing after its barrel.

"God damn," Goodwin said, his attention shifting between you and the spot where the bullet had vanished. "How in tarnation did you pull that off?"

With a deft flick you swung to unlatch the revolver's cylinder, each bullet chamber empty of a bullet. Damnable distractions--you had lost count! Lucky that you finished the fight with the last one.

"Well, been carrying iron since the ripe age of six," you said, slipping your left hand into your vest pocket to clasp a handful of feeble iron. "My pa' gave it to me for finishing school. Reckon he was eager to have me start shooting people," you said, only half-joking.

You shut your eyes, raising your left hand to your shoulder height, squeezing the iron in your palm. You shaped the bullets in your mind. When you unclenched your hand and opened your eyes, new rounds appeared, gleaming with a tender silver sheen. You chambered each bullet as if placing chips on a roulette wheel, snapping the cylinder shut before giving it a spin like it was one. You loaded six, not five--you had no time for a safe cowboy load.

"Why did you go and kill it? Did you forget we need 'em kicking and chasing us to get that white buffalo's attention?" Lyrebird said.

"And we will," you assured, returning the Colt to its holster, "but not with a leftover with that sorta bow, that's just fucking irritating to deal with."

Lyrebird eyed you before letting out a yawn. "Suppose so. How long them dark bones of years you reckon will last?"

"Good stretch, I reckon. I don't know how to keep track of time around here, but them bones held since my El Dorado Warren stint, and then some."

"You've been to El Dorado?" she said. She smacked her lips, a fleeting dizziness briefly washing over you as she did so. "When did you manage to? You didn't get trapped?"

You rolled your thumb over the grip. "Made it in and out just fine. Needed me some bullets, so I took a reckoned gamble ... Went in blind, not knowing much about the place."

Goodwin looked at you, doffed his hat, shook his head, and chuckled. "You went into El Dorado just to fetch some lead? Know you could just barter for it in most places?"

"Didn't know," you said. "And even if I did, ain't had a red cent to barter with."

Catching Lyrebird's eye, Goodwin reached into his pocket and took out a small tin. He unscrewed the lid and pinched a wad of tobacco between his fingers, extending the offer to Lyrebird. She took the offered portion with gratitude and tucked it between her cheek and gum; Goodwin followed suit.

"Grit&Sour it says here on the tin," Goodwin commented. "Turns your soul's aches into the tobacco's bite, giving y'some respite long as you keep chewing."

"Alright? I'm happy you got it?"

"How about trading some for a pinch of your lead?" he offered.

You've been through the mill, how disgusting would chewing it turn out for you? But if it could end your ceaseless thirst for a swig, it might just be a welcoming break.

You cleared your parched throat, pressing two fingers to your protruding Adam's apple.

"Damn it, fine. Let's barter it that way," you said, drawing out a palmful of fragments out of your pocket. "You shape them into bullets yourself."

He shook your hand, taking hold of the presented silvers, and then pulling back his arm. With his other hand, he snapped off a sliver of his smokeless plug.

"Square's square," he said, mirth twinkling on his teeth as he savoured the chew tucked beneath them. "No more, no less than then weight we're gnawing."

You snatched it from him, nestling the morsel between your cheek and gum, biting on it with your teeth. As you began to chew, the promised bitterness flooded your mouth. Your thirst vanished, replaced with an unpalatable saltiness. Gagging, you pushed a hand over your mouth. One vile taste coalesced into the next; as the bullet wound left by Goldie palliated, a cinammon-tinged sulphurous taste stung the inner linings of your cheeks. Awashing your taste buds and replacing the prickling pain came a sharp searing heat of a sunbaked chilli pepper. Your palms no longer gashed with agony, but the cyanide taste of bitter almonds and slimy vinegar of a spoilt orange marmalade swapped in its stead was no more favourable. When the worst of your pains, the stabbing explosion that engulfed and buried you in El Dorado, faded, you fought through the nauseating tobacco. However, once the trade-off of it came, you tasted the mush of rancid oily fish, the sharp bitter sting of a fresh nettle, and the pungent kick of crushed black pepper. Unable to stomach it any longer, you spat out the chewing tobacco and gasped for breath of moist cold air.

Smirking, Goodwin looked down at the spit chew. "Couldn't handle it?"

The pains came back, obliterating any momentary relief; the noxious taste had mercifully departed. You glared at him.

Six brand-new bullets laid in Goodwin's open palm as he locked his eyes with you. He tucked them out of sight, smiling.

"I'll be charitable, but only this once," he said, proffering another sliver of the chew.

You took it, your gaze lingering before securing it in your vest. Maybe another try another time.

"Mighty fine, then," Goodwin said, watching the way the chalk was floating towards.

You moved ahead, widening the chasm between Ruetown and your group as you journeyed deeper into the featureless plains.

Suddenly, Goodwin halted his step. He inhaled a shallow, tired breath and then covered a yawn with his hand. He shifted his knapsack from one shoulder to the other, his body swaying as he kept his footing.

"You alright?" Lyrebird asked, approaching him from the side. Her dulcet voice was muffled by the chewing.

Goodwin waved his hand. "Just need a spell to catch my wind, love. Feeling some weariness, is all."

You levelled wary eye on the man. "Weariness? Ain't you supposed to need no shuteye nor rest in here?"

"Yeah," he said, his shoulder bone cracking as he readjusted the saddlebag. "Ain't that weird ..."

"You been mixing with any ill-willing spirits? Touched hexed trinkets, or strayed into hoodooed grounds?" you asked.

"Ain't none I recall," he said. "It's fine, I ain't dying. Must be a why, but ain't nothing we should fuss about right now."

Unsatisfied with that, you assessed him from his white hat to his boots. Nothing seemed out of ordinary until your gaze landed on the joined triumvirate of your shadows. You spotted an eerie fault; there, the part of Goodwin's shadow had a nebulous but abnormal look, bluish ripples moving through it like soft trembles moving through a trembling pond.

You stepped back, the distance splitting your shadows like a razor's edge.

Lyrebird turned to you. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

You pointed downward with the barrel of your gun. "Your shadow's askew, partner."

Lyrebird shifted her gaze to the soil, scattering the mist with the sweep of her hand. Her eyes widened as she saw the same thing. She slipped her hand inside her skirt, gripping at something hidden there.

"My shadow?" Goodwin echoed, staring at the rippling azure hues within his black penumbra. He crouched low, extending a white-laced glove toward the quivering blues.

Before he could touch the ground, Lyrebird fell by his side, driving the blade she was hiding into the dark sands. A murmurous essence weaved around the dagger, snaking towards Goodwin's cowhide boots. A foreign shadow slithered up his legs, winding its slender sinuous form around him.

"What the hell?!" he yelled, reaching for his sixshooter only to suddenly stop, the alien shadow's elongated arm reaching his fingertips with ephemeral grace.

The sinister veneer began to envelop him, clinging to his contours like a second skin. As part of it retreated from his arm, it left behind a dark resin seeming to seep into the very fibers of Goodwin's soul. A blackened crust hardened around his ghostly flesh, his hapless arm gripped in dark amber. Before he could flinch, the shadow stretched out to his neck, an inky hand swallowing his eyes, the blue flames within his eye sockets flickering, their azure colours dimming as if drained by the shadow's caress.

You lined up your shot, raising your sights on Goodwin's shadow-wrapped shoulder, a place where a bullet wound would be painful but not fatal. You left hand slid across the blued steel, hooking back the hammer with a final flick of your wrist and then pulling the trigger with a delicate squeeze. A gunshot resounded through the moist, silvered air, its impact shattering Goodwin's ghostly tissues into a midnight vapour. Goodwin's eyes squared in pain, his torn shoulder bone gleaming in the moonlight. The bullet cracked the ebony crust left by the shadow but the sinister entity had twisted its shape to evade the shot, further wrapping itself around the man.

"You're hurting him!" Lyrebird shouted, inching back her foot.

You pulled back the hammer, lining up the next chambered round. "What other option I've got?!"

Goodwin swung for his neck, but the stretched out darkness coiled around his hand, freezing it in a rigid grip. His saddlebag slipped from his hold and crashed down onto the ground. With last strength, he kicked it towards Lyrebird, the flames in his eyes shrinking to a feeble flicker. The white embroidery frayed at the seams, blossoming into winding patterns, and then a burdensome cascade of trinkets, relics, and ores--Goodwin's accumulated treasures--spilled onto the white sand.

"Annette," he gasped, "the bracelet."

His body stiffened until he was as lifeless as a scarecrow.

With shaking hands and darting gaze Lyrebird wrung the knife and then frantically lunged for the bracelet. The shadow inhaled a swallowing breath, and when it did, even your thoughts stilled. The noises--the sky depth's thunder, the lulling whisper of the moon, Goodwin's futile struggle--all ceased, swallowed by sudden silence.

Goodwin's frame scrunched and shivered. He fell onto the dirt like a wrangled bull, his encased body still but unscattered like a soul ought to be. The dark apparition slithered back, oozing down his neck, freeing its hold off his chest, and scurrying down his legs to meld back with his tranquil shadow, its unholy presence drifting inside it as glinting ripples. Lyrebird's fingers fumbled at the glass beads, floundering to latch it around her wrist.

In a swift moment, the silhouette whisked from Goodwin's shadow into Lyrebird's, grabbing at her bare feet. Thrown off, she tumbled on her backside, eyes aflame with shivering dread as the fiend began to inch higher. She pushed the bracelet again her hip, dragging it down her leg

and into the shadow like it was a smoothing hot iron—it scorched like one too. The forced silence lifted akin to a clogged ear. Seemingly holding down a bewitching yawn, Lyrebird scratched a line in the dirt with the bracelet, banishing the apparition further back.

The leaden heavens clashed, shattering thunder rumbling and rolling throughout them both as they eclipsed the surface. For a breath's time, a shroud of shadow spread over the plains. The moon shredded at the clouds, its aura scattering them like a dust devil heaving aside the plain's sands. Exhaustion grabbed hold of you, and you felt your body go stiff, your shoulders slumping all on their own. A deep yawn you couldn't silence pushes its way out. You took a step back, peering through the fog and mist at your own shadow, now tinged with the same eerie spell that had gripped Goodwin before.

"Lyrebird," you yelled, your open palm reaching at the air, "toss me that bracelet!"

The shadow crawled higher, its pure black tendrils encircling your feet and seeping its unholy essence into the ethereal fibers of your soul. A grunt left your lips as an icy sap solidified your opaque flesh in obsidian sleeve. The phantom drew in another shivering breath, bringing back the silencing hush over the landscape, muting even Lyrebird's answer. Staring back at you with her alight gaze, Lyrebird pushed her hand below her chin, her fingers fastening the beaded bracelet around her wrist. Seeming to grumble under a deafened breath, she stood up, walking with a staggered gait towards Goodwin's motionless body, pressing her clad wrist against his skin.

Your hand curled into a fist, teeth echoing your frustration. Quickly, you aimed your iron at the patch of darkness beneath your boots. Your arm was seized by the stretched out limbs of the spirit, your elbow twisting back like a snapped branch—the dark liquor coursed through your incorporeal form to curdle as if tainted by a snakebite venom that turns blood into molasses. Inch by inch your limbs turned straight and stiffened, like a glass bottle left outside during a wintry night, your charcoaled bones surrendering to the flesh enveloping presence with blind passivity. As you snatched for the revolver with your free hand, it came to a complete stop. You shook your head—the very last vestige of movement you were left with—with even your voice stolen away by the spectre. Its siphoning fingers grazed your eyes, drifting you to forced slumber.

You fell to the ground, the lead weight of your bones blending with the curse of crushing fatigue. The moon's unstained image blurred as if it had been nothing but a reflection.

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Awareness awashed you, rousing you at the very heart of an omnipresent darkness. A languid light appeared from the void, slowly dissolving the curtains of blackness coating the things it hid like a varnish, the sights and tangibles appearing from within it sketched by rich watercolours and buttery brushstrokes. Waves of softened colours crashed against a sky of finely crushed glass, expanding with each surge, reaching higher and higher. Amidst the watered crescendo of colours, a blinding warmth bathed you: the cloudless noon sun hung above your head with its judgemental reckoning, akin to a God's eyes scrutinising the drawn world below—or maybe, only you alone.

Sundry shapes and overflowing forms came from the banished gloom, drifting closer, like a scattering wind with crushed chalks of all hues within. Wooden facades, stone houses, spires of chapels, and leafy trees solidified around cobblestone streets—each of them absorbed and reflected the burgeoning light, like oil painting coming to life. Figures of people, too, emerged from the drifting rainbow mist. Dressed in fabrics and denims imbued with otherworldly dyes, their contours and faces smudged and rubbed, they moved about, as if it wasn't them who stepped out of the shadows, but rather, they were always there, only needing some backlight.

When the colours sealed the circle of darkness encircling you, you found yourself still, much smaller in stature. There, right before you, walked a horse, its coat such a deep obsidian

black not even the sun could highlight it. Its mane, equally as black, laid motionless across its broad shoulders. The empty pits of the stallion's eyes promised to show you the abyss ... were you to dare to look inside. Your hands appeared second to last, reaching for another's sidearm holster with a glistening pearl-handled revolver inside of it. A broad weathered hand grabbed your wrist, painfully tightening the hold. A cowboy rider sat in the saddle with a silver-streaked beard, his eyes as vacant as the cold metal of unlit lantern.

With your hand still clasped in the man's firm grip, you lifted your hand, meeting them together with a clap. You brought down your head, an apologetic sentence leaving your lips.

"Mighty sorr--"

The gun barrel pressed cold and hard between your brows, squeezing off the round--the gunshot ringing supplanting the funeral dirge in your mind-- and plunging everything into a profound darkness. The pain didn't linger, unlike everything else being wiped clean by the shot. Once more, you were rooted to the spot, not feeling your body, motionless, just as before, watching a completely different scenery slowly painting itself across the surrounding void. The sun came back first, its glare just as blinding and nigh as before, its scorching heat conjuring everything else around it. The things that emerged bore an ethereal, watercolour sheen: desert dunes, sprawled cactus orchards, reddish tent rock pillars--it was unmistakably the badlands.

One after another, whitetop wagons appeared drawn from the woven blackness. The more the darkness retreated, the more prairie wagons there were, like ships anchored in a sea of sand. You were placed at the very fringes of the trail's train, your own rickety wooden wagon looming behind, its iron-rimmed wheels inch-buried in the sand. The wagon's pale, sun-bleached canvas cast a shadow over you, a shadow that, all logic discarded in the dust, offered no respite from the scorching sun. The selfsame ebony stallion materialised within sight, but a few paces away, its iron hooves drumming a steady but resting rhythm on the dusty trail. The cowboy appeared shortly thereafter, when it seemed like he mightn't, a reach away from you. Though he was dressed a tad different, his beard less grey, but his eyes just as empty and white.

The darkness dissolved as it neared your feet, and your shaped body, like a fish returned to water, seemed to gasp for life.

In your hands you cradled a meat pie encrusted in a thick-golden brown shell, the smell of the seasoned beef tickling your senses. Had you baked it?

The rider, seemingly being presented with the cake, sneered, his hand inching towards his holster. "I'm ain't a fussy eater, but I steer clear of human meat," he said, the words scratching at the walls of your memory.

You raised your hands, the pie slipping from your palms and tumbling towards the barren earth. You lunged over the gap, reaching out and clutching the cowboy's hand just as his fingers tightened around the gun's mother-of-a-pearl handle. The crust splattered on impact with the ground, its meaty fillings spilling onto the scorching sand, sizzling as though being placed onto hot coals.

"Who are you?" you stammered, your own voice sounding foreign and obtuse to your own ears. "What do you want from me?!"

"No need to clutter your last thoughts with my name, you won't know even if I tell you", he said. "Just rest knowing you were brought to justice."

You felt his muscles tightened; he raised the hand, the iron coming up with it, effortlessly breaking your desperate grip. You stood at his height, unlike last time, but the body you were in was of a much weaker man ... or could it be a woman's? You faltered as he aimed the gun's barrel at your head, the hammer already primed and drawn, poised to unleash its deadly payload.

Your eyes drifted to the horse, wondering if getting the animal's attention might divert the cowboy's focus. The stallion stood too far for any physical provocation, and, when you looked the horse in the eyes to challenge and insult, left you alone hypnotised by the abyss in them. Biting at your lip you swayed and lunged forward, your hand reaching for the man's face. Just as

your nails were about to graze his skin, he thrust the wooden sole of his boot against your knee, then skimming the cold metal against your chin and neck before lifting the muzzle, letting you fall without grazing him. He pressed his boot onto your neck, grinding your face into the coarse sand, halting only when several men, donned in drab vests and rugged trousers, with their faces scrubbed clean, appeared from the nearby wagons, troubles by the sounds of the scuffle.

"Y'all need not fret. This skirt here, she's wanted" --he gestured with the gun, aligning the sights of it with you head-- "dead."

The gunshot echoed in your skull as the darkness enveloped you and everything around you once more. Impatient for the shadows to recede, you braced for the known scenario--a gun pointing at you--a with mere seconds to react before being shot dead. As the darkness faded, a room with wooden furnishing appeared in its place: haphazardly placed hewn tables and stools, checked cloths draping only some of them, stained yet empty deep-brown walls, their knots and grains intersecting; the room stood engulfed in yellowish-white sunlight streaming, almost melting, through the smoke-stained glass, the drapes pulled away to let it in. The patrons, their faces scrubbed bare of eyes, noses and mouths, sat or stood in eerie silence.

You couldn't spot your killer in the saloon, but you had few doubts he would be nearby. When the last shadows vanished beneath you, you found yourself leaning against the sturdy lumber bar, a large wooden cabinet standing behind it with a faceless bartender, nervelessly scrubbing the glass. The gleaming mirrors of the well-stocked armoire reflected the cigarette trail you discovered nestled between your teeth, but not your own reflection. Pressed against the cigarette's embers was a dynamite stick's waxed fuse, the cotton wick ignited and sizzling in your hand, to be exploded in short time.

When you regained senses, a Colt's discharge cracked and reverberated throughout the saloon, and then a bullet shattered the burning end of your cigarette, burying itself into the cabinet behind you, missing just shy of shattering the glass mirrors. Nothing but an arm and a glinting firearm had entered the saloon, the man still standing behind the swinging doors.

As the barrel clicked, rotating to the next chamber, you noticed that you had a few more unlit dynamite sticks inside of your belt.

"What do you want from me?" you shouted, your eyes darting over the patrons close-at-hand. "Who the hell are you?"

You spat out the wrecked cigarette, seizing a panic-stricken woman by her elbow with your free hand, the dynamite's burning fuse crackling near your ear as you shifted her weight, pushing your knee against her back. You wrestled her arms, stifling her cries by forcing the dynamite stick between her painted lips, pushing it in like a gag. Her ample frame was just enough to shield you from another gunshot. She had no loose tears to wreck her darkened lashes, nor a pair of quivering eyes to tremble at the burning wick.

The man, the gun still steady and straight in his grasp, stepped inside, the batwing doors yielding a narrow gap for his hips, just enough to let him pass. It was the cowboy. He uncurled his free fist, a wanted poster unfurling as he slapped it against the panelled wall. 'Wanted: Dear or Alive', it said, 'Reward: \$250'. 'Chuck "Kablooey" Rufus', read the bold, black typeface. The eyeless rider tapped the yellowed portrait on the poster: a man with thinning brittle hair, sun-freckled scalp, sullen eyes, and a scraggly, once promising, mossy beard.

"Have yourself a look-see in the mirror," the rider said, not bracing a smile. He let go of the poster with a harrumph, watching it flutter to the tobacco-stained sawdust floor before stepping on it, marking it with a dirty tread of his boot. He clicked his tongue. "Release the lady, Kablooey."

"Why ought I be courteous?" you challenged, nudging the woman closer to yourself as a shield. "If you're not even gonna answer my questions?"

The floorboards, turned supple by sawdust and hay, creaked under his boots. His gaze pierced through the woman's head, fixed on you as he circled a path, stopping before a whiskey barrel topped with a round tabletop. He picked up a half-full glass of whiskey resting amongst

the rows of empty ones, raising it close to his chin and gently swirling the amber liquid inside.

"I'm a bounty hunter, they call me 'Only Dead' ... and I'm here for the price on your head," he said, stifling an annoyed sigh. "Will you be courteous now?"

Fuck, you cursed. You twisted the woman's arms behind her, glaring at the man, daring him to act. Your eyes followed the burning down fuse, inching towards the nitroglycerine-soaked sawdust, soon to explode the saloon, him, and you. He flung his hand, the whiskey splattering across the woman's face and yours, the alcohol searing your eye, the sudden tears blurring your vision. As you cried out in pain, your grip slackened, the woman stumbling forward. Reaching to clear your eyes and wipe off the alcohol, you felt a glass mash against your head, its shard slicing your scalp, spilling out the blood.

You clutched at the gash, staggering back and hitting the bar, sliding down to the floor, soaked in blood and whiskey. Through the tears, you glanced up at the figure of yourself lifting the extinguished dynamite from the woman's mouth, pulling her away from you by the elbow. Once she was standing, he let go, the barrel of his Colt aligning with your forehead. He squeezed the trigger without a moment to pause, the gunshot deafening the saloon as the bullet founding its mark.

Another watercolour dream was swallowed by the abrupt darkness, vanishing completely as the image of yourself executed the outlaws you were living through. Was this all the shadow's doing? An endless dream? Was it to make you feel guilt? You still didn't, and you really doubted the dark spirit cared about that. You could do nothing but wait, guessing which of the man men you'd killed you'd were going to relive the last moments of next; perhaps pursuing a way that didn't end in their death.

The sun appeared through the blackness, shedding a watered sunlight and clear azure heavens. A dark streak was present on the radiant orb, something that didn't belong there. A slim black line clung to the sun's edge, as if peeling away from the daystar. An eclipse? You'd never killed during one, nor witnessed one before in your life.

The darkness receded away from the horizon, peeling away like worn black paint from the lush meadows. Gnarled cottonwood trees took root across the open fields, scattered like tombstones, casting dappled shadows on the prairies grass. A burst of colourful daisies, clovers, and shrubs flourished around the white poplars. Yet, something was unnatural about the whole thing: the grass and flowers within the shadows appeared worn, burned, and yellowed, while those exposed to the scalding sun bloomed with vibrant hues.

The shadows slithered over retreated from the riverbed, unveiling a mosaic of mossy sand and shimmering pebbles. The waters of a vast meandering river encircled you, closing on you from all sides. Long before you the darkness enclosed on you, you saw a weathered bridge in the distance, spanning the divide, arching high above the brook, only its rough-hewn support beams grazing the waters. But its cast shadow violated those waters. Unlike the parts lit by the sun, the shaded currents had turned grey and sour, and had begun to simmer and churn like a saline broth on the verge of boiling, heated by an unnatural heat.

Leaning against the bridge's timber fence was he, the bounty hunter. He had dismounted from the stallion, a horse you then recognised as your own, standing in the backdrop. The bridge, and the man--it felt odd to think of your own reflection as another--were at a considerable distance away, but you damn well knew he--you--could still land the shot. As the last shadows vanished beneath the azure waters, you fell into the control of another self, our neck and head barely above the waterline with your feet touching the bottom. In one hand, you had a short, keen-edged blade with a scratched steel handle, while your other hand clutched an unknown man's hair, his neck slashed open, spilling blood into the river.

"I ain't going to kill you for your voice," he called out, his voice travelling across the still water with a sharp and cold tone. "But for the deed I've just caught your doing."

Lifting your gaze, you stared back at the rider on the bridge, his silhouette sharply defined against the sunlight. In silence, you offered no response, turning away from the timber crossing.

Your fingers unwrapped from the lifeless man, the damp hand slipping from your hand. Dyeing the water red with his blood, his faced submerged in it, he drifted downstream, towards the bridge, once freed from your grasp. You pushed towards the nearest riverbed, the still waters cleaning the blood from the knife's blade. She had killed again, and that was Lyrebird's infamy--what she was wanted for. It began with her drowning her two children, and remained unsatiated even after she killed fifty more.

Dragging your feet against the thawing sediment, your entire body drenched and chilling from cold, you walked against the sluggish currents to the mossy riverbank. You made your way through the biting cattails and bullrushes, stepping on the slippery stones, and finally onto the dry shore, the dry pebbles crunching under your soles.

A shadow covered you from the sun, making the water droplets on your skin to sizzle like hot oil, reddening your flesh like a gust of moist heat, and provoking a shivering from an oppressive yet unexplainable warmth. It was the rider's black stallion, the winds failing to ruffle his mane, the eyes empty of your reflection.

From the saddle, the bounty hunter swung his leg up, laying his wrist on his knee, the loaded revolver, its hammer cocked back, nestled in his grip.

"Much obliged of saving me the hassle of dragging your carcass out of the river," he said. "I'll be grateful, and I'll make it swift and easy on you."

You gritted your teeth, meeting the bounty hunter's hollow, pale eyes with defiance. You knew that continuing on dying by the man's hands in this obscure dream was unwise--you had to find a way to steer clear of such end. You lifted the knife to your wrist, pressing the blade into the skin, slicing horizontally and drawing blood. Gasping from pain, you pressed the elbow of your bleeding arm against your chest and pushed the knife's hilt onto the palm to repeat the suicidal action on your other hand. Without flinching or averting your gaze, you tried to bring the knife to your neck, but your shaking, aching hands let it fall onto the stones, the blade slipping into the river and disappearing beneath the surface. You closed your eyes, lifted your toes, and let your back fall into the river, the waters, made lukewarm by the equine shadow, trembled but didn't make a splash. The depth was just enough to pull you to the bottom, the bounty hunter's image rippling throughout the river's surface.

The man seemed undisturbed by your act, giving a lone pull on the reins to move the stallion a single step. He gazed down at your bleeding form, not his expression unchanging. He spoke something that was muffled to you by the water, but as your life ebbed away, he stood and waited, annoyance etching his brows, a gun in his hand.

Despite dying by your own hand, you didn't feel any better or different, and the shadowy veil that came to cover the river, the bounty hunter, and all else, no different from those before it. Standing as a part of the ethereal void, you prepared for the next dream-landscape to unfold--the cycle seeming unbroken. A bright eruption of noon sky dripped onto black canvass beneath, the sun hanging at its zenith appearing blemished; darkness had crept even further across its gilded facade, a pilfering void stealing away at the daylight. A quarter of the sun had vanished, tempered by a encroaching eclipse ... one that you knew was foreign.

Standing against the horizon line, on the opposite side of dust-covered main street of a weathered frontier town, the bounty hunter appeared, uncloaked by the darkness. His legs were evenly apart, posture poised, shoulders level with his chin, his left hand resting on his knee, right hand hovering inches above his holstered revolver--a shootout stance. Darkness crept across the ribbon road of arid dust and dirt, revealing faceless onlookers as well as those few whose curiosity outmatched their courage to step outside their abodes. The faint breeze creaked the wooden boards, and as the last unbelonging shadows withdrew, you realised that you stood in the middle of the street, facing off against the rider in a duel. Who had challenged whom? You couldn't recall. Your hand hung above a brass-framed revolver ... at least you finally had a gun.

Your eye locked on the clock-bearing tower perched atop the town's hall faux ornate facade:

less than a minute remaining until the stroke of twelve. The sand was much the same in the shadow of the town hall as it was outside of it, and there was little left on the ground for it to scorch; even then, the heat seared the air, a wavy haze blurring the bounty hunter's outline.

You had no reason to follow the duelling etiquette here, of course, but the revolver that was in your reach ... it was a stranger to you: every aspect of it was unfamiliar, untested in your hands. A quick glance confirmed one thing: the hammer was cocked and drawn, sparing you a few precious seconds. You reckoned the bounty hunter would make his move the moment your hand would dart for the gun, so you bid your time, poised to meld drawing and shooting into one seamless motion. Yet, with two-thirds of the iron hidden by the leather canvas, you couldn't tell much about the weapon: the calibre, the balance of its weight, the state of its upkeep, the barrel's length, whether it housed a full chamber of six rounds, the sensitivity of the trigger, and whether there were any quirks to its wield.

Time was being wasted. Your fingers curled around the brass hilt.

You hoisted the iron, taking aim on the more youthful you within shooting range. The short barrel slid out of the holster, its brass sights reflecting a red hue under the eclipsing sunlight. With a briefest delay, the bounty hunter mirrored you, drawing his own iron. Your gun went off first—two of your fingers steadying the barrel—the bullet cutting a hissing path through the wavering mirage, leaving behind a swirling smoke trail and an echoing blast. The rider clutched his chest before any of his blood could spill. Stepping forth to regain his balance, the bounty hunter, too, pulled the trigger, his shot's thunderous roar drowning out the one you fashioned, the burnt gunpowder shrouding him in ghostly haze.

His bullet, like a lead shooting star, blazed through the mist, tearing into your flesh and piercing through your heart, a metallic taste biting your taste buds. You stumbled, the killing pain gnawing at your consciousness and numbing your senses; the iron slipped from your grip, sinking into the sand moments before you followed it. The bounty hunter, now a blur in your fading vision, remained motionless, a gun in hand.

You struck a fatal shot, you reckoned, and you did it first, but he returned the favour in his final breaths.

You didn't remember being so petty.

Shadows engulfed the frontier town and its surroundings like ink spilling over an unfinished letter, plunging you into an ocean of darkness. You had slain your own shadowy metaphor: wasn't that enough? Of the outlaws you'd killed, how many had guns? No more than a dozen. And of those, even fewer had their weapons within reach or in hand. It was a foolhardy gamble you'd get to be one of them again, and the eclipse outpaced the count of those you ended, whatever that signified.

You drew a tired breath as a fresh image emerged from the pitch-black backdrop, shadows sliding off the oak-panelled walls and floorboards, then peeling away from the cracked red paint and the wool rug. The room was dominated by a table so twisted only a drunkard could perceive as round, its sides originally carved unevenly and also worn with fractures and age. Its surface bore the scars of knife marks, burns from cigarettes, and stains with whiskey bottle rings. Outlaws, each showing off a different style of hat, sat on mismatched chairs with frayed upholstery, all three of them faceless, their features obscured by a pale pink splatter that smudged their eyes, noses, and mouths. You felt stuffed leather below your backside once the shadows receded to allow you to acclimate the unfamiliar body.

Daylight filtered through the room from a lone window, thick grimy curtains obscuring much of the glass. The room was suffused with unnatural, scorching shadows, the pungent stale air swirling with embered dust, making your skin sweat and singeing your nostrils. A chimney stack clung to one wall like a pillar, but it was cold, not the culprit of the heat. The men around you ceased their consternation mid-sentence, but you couldn't piece the cut words into any coherent sentence.

Someone knocked on the door ...

One of the faceless men, donning a six-inch crown Stetson, shifted slightly, inching his head. "Are we expecting someone?" he whispered.

Another, his hand resting on the table, stood up, the floorboards groaning as he did so. Shaking his head, he replied.

"No, we're all here," he said.

Reckoning that this was a gang, and you yourself as the gang leader, you gestured towards the door, clearing your throat.

"Flank the door," you whispered, rising and sliding your fingers across the bumpy tabletop.

The featureless men responded with a unified nod; the two of them moving stealthily to either side of the worn pinewood door, its bottom gap plugged with a rolled cloth. A third man positioned besides the large wooden frame, conspicuously missing an artwork, making it appear as if it was framing a random section of the wall. He drew a revolver from behind his belt, joined by one of the men near the door. Circling the table, you felt your belt for a firearm that wasn't there.

The door echoed with a second, more forceful knock. Silence followed: neither the knocker nor the men with scrubbed off faces uttered a word.

The men shared a silent look before turning to you, seemingly asking for guidance. You cursed under your breathe--not even sure if the door was locked. No, you were overthinking; it likely was locked, given everyone in the room want to keep it clear of uninvited guests. You pressed a finger against your lips, gesturing for the trio of men to be quiet. Though they all nodded, a man in a bowler hat cocked his gun, clicking the hammer into place. You waited, your gaze fixed on the door.

No third knock came, and then shuffling of the boots on the other side turned distant and hollow.

One of the men, scratching at his chin, let out a sigh and asked, "You think that was someone that was looking for trouble?"

"Trouble --the one leaning against the frame said, moving away from it to pull the tattered curtain aside and peer out the etched window-- "or our boss; or both--"

The glass shattered, the dusty pane erupting in shards as the bullet tore through, covering the wooden floor with blood drenched glass. Fresh blood blossomed from his shoulder, staining the frayed fabric of his jacket. Gritting his teeth, he stumbled away from the window and slid against the wall, leaving a red smear.

You put some distance away from the broken window, fleetingly eyeing the man leaning against the wall for support, crouching to meet his ailing gaze. The men flanking the door flinched at the sound of the gunshot and shattered glass. The one wearing a Duster's hat and brandishing an iron shuffled along the wall, looking at the wounded man.

"Who was it?" he asked, torn between peering out himself and staying a safe distance from the window.

"Didn't catch much," the injured man said, clutching the hilt of his revolver against his shoulder and coughing out blood. "Don't reckon it was a sheriff."

"A bounty hunter?" the unarmed third man in a grey Stetson said, patting at his pockets. After a moment, he pulled out a brass key. "Just one of them?"

"Weren't nobody around him," the man groaned in pain. "Fuck, I reckon he hit the bone ... hurts like the devil."

"Was he the one waiting outside the door?" the man with a firm grip on his gun questioned. "Where you be hightailing it? He's lurking outside."

"Not no more," the man in Stetson said, ramming the key into the lock. "Not outside the door. We can skedaddle through the window on the other side without him knowing."

"Running from just one bounty hunter?" the fella donning the Duster's hat scoffed at him. "Four of us, one of him. Doubt he'll best those odds."

The door creaked open. "Three to one are still fair odds, won't stop you trying."

"I ... don't reckon I can climb a window," the bleeding man said.

Opening the door further, he hesitated, then pulled his hat down by the crown. "Then you can buy us some time."

"Screw you!?" he yelled, choking on his blood. "You gonna leave me behind?" He looked to you, his words strained by the wound. "Boss, why ain't you saying a thing?! You're the one with a bounty on your head, he's after you no doubt."

The room fell into a profound silence, like an empty chapel with only the sinner--and the Almighty--within its wall. All three of them fixed their gaze on you, each with their own plan and burdened with their own sin.

You tapped your fingers on the floor. "Y'all ever ponder on dying, and what comes next?"

"What?" the injured man said, worming his body so that the silver barrel faced your head. "Dying is the last thing I want on my mind right now!"

You rolled your shoulders in a weary shrug. For them, the faceless side characters in -your-blurred recollection of an outlaw's last moments, everything was as real as they come.

You reached out your open palm at the bleeding outlaw.

"Give me the iron" --you paused, the hanging silence meant for a name you did not know-- "partner. They ain't leaving you. I'll go and handle the bounty hunter while you three get away."

The man with the grey Stetson asked, propping the door open with his hand, asked, "By yourself?"

With a trembling shake--or was it due to blood loss?--the wounded man passed you his revolver. You took it by the grip, lifting and then immediately scrutinising the details.

He returned his hand to the wound, his fingers clutching the blood-drenched clothes. "What if you get plugged?"

"Getting shot shouldn't be a worry for him," the Duster's hat desperado said, his finger fiddling with the hammer of his own gun. "He's only wanted still breathing, the bounty hunter won't just gun him down." He paced across the room and then lowered his eyeless face towards you. "Worst case, he'll snag him alive--they need you for the judges, right?"

You weren't savvy of what anything they said meant. "Just like you said, I'm the only one he'll think twice about shooting at," you said.

The man shook and then gestured his iron. "And what we supposed to do without you, boss? You're one with the claim to the Tarbelt, we need your will to do anything with it."

You racked your brain for any memory of the only-wanted-alive-man, but it had been decades; you drew a blank. Fixing your gaze on the broken outlines of the glass, you got to your feet. It was a tad better than the one from your last memory, the duel, but it was still a far cry from your pearl-handed piece that you were used to, and that the dark August had.

Approaching the door, the man with his hand on it hesitated briefly before pushing it wider, making the stagnant, dimly lit air of the corridor seep inside of the room.

"None of this'll be trouble if you put him down," he said, glancing outside. "He's at disadvantage trying to take you alive, so just put a bullet in him."

The bandit wearing the Duster's hat snapped the fingers of his gun-free hand. "Then you can meet up with us in Redwind," he added, his voice rising an octave.

"Yeah ... sure. We'll rendezvous at the Redwind," you answered back, cocking the hammer with a loud snap. "Make sure you keep him" --you nodded at the injured man-- "living and smiling, tend to his wounds and wrap them up once you find a safe spot. Catch you in a while." That said, you stepped outside the door and made your way along the unlit second-floor hallway.

You descended the stairs, each wooden step creaking like squashed cockroaches under your boots. You passed a kitchen room--the building appeared empty--and continued towards the entrance, the wind from outside causing the ajar door to slam and quiver on its hinges. Why

were you playing along? Your memory of the wanted man you lived through was vague, but one thing was certain—you never took the lawbreaker alive. Assuming it was a misprint on his wanted poster, you shot him like any other outlaw; you had doubts that the ominous representation of August haunting you in those dreams would do things differently.

Perhaps that one faceless dream apparition was correct, and four or three people would be enough to bring down your bounty hunting shadow, so ... why hadn't you agreed to that? Would there be a difference if it was someone else killing the dark August? It wasn't just your arrogance, was it? You sighed. You didn't know what you were suppose to do to escape this nightmarish prison; the only thing you were sure of was that you couldn't let yourself be killed ... Grasping the door's edge, you pushed it open, looking outside the street desolate of both faceless residents and the manhunter. The half-eclipsed sun hung in the empty sky, the encroaching shadows veiling much more of its brilliant surface than before.

Where did he go?

You bit your lip, your gaze sweeping across the empty town. No, it wasn't arrogance, you reckoned. You weren't even sure if killing the bounty hunter would solve anything at all: you had done so before, and it hadn't seemed to matter. The men you separated from would only be a hindrance. He was your reflection; if anyone knew how to confront him, it was you.

You crossed over the threshold and onto the town's thoroughfare, arm lifted—a gun clutched in your right—while keeping a sharp eye for any signs of his presence. As you stepped further into the open, a sudden warmth kissed your back, and as you turned, you saw the bounty hunter's long searing shadow stretch over you. His boots cracked the sand, your heirloom pistol present in his grip. His head was bare, his Stetson hand secured against his neck by a glistening cord. The normally thick beard, not yet fully grown, was coal-black and oiled, devoid of white strands, and trimmed, looking as if a grizzly's paw was resting on his chin. He was quite young.

"Deciding on sparing me the bother of looking for you?" he asked, his vacant, eyeless gaze fixed on you.

You lifted your arms an inch higher. "Didn't fancy getting shot by accident," you countered.

He halted and harrumphed. "An accident? You got the wrong bounty hunter, "Oilhopper". I only bring my bounties dead-cold."

"'Only Dead' Aug. I'm aware." A smile ghosted across your lips. "But you ought to know that the client needs me breathing, Heart."

Dark August frowned, his index finger rubbing the freshly cleaned barrel; he turned his head a bit to look elsewhere. "Ain't got the poster on me. You spinning yarns about the misprint?"

Staying still not to trigger the man's fast draw, you shook your head. "No, it's the honest truth." You mulled on what you heard. "Got something to do with a will and inheritance they're after."

The revolver's barrel dipped slightly in his hand. "Never heard tell of an outlaw wanted only living." He raised it again, aiming at your head. "I reckon he won't fuss over the small details."

Your souls were cut from the same cloth—you both shared the same attitude and sharpshooting skills. But in this lone scenario, you recalled something he couldn't know: what would follow next.

"They will fuss, Heart," you said, sifting through your memories. "They won't just refuse to pay you, they'll be riled up. They'll be a real annoyance, might even halt you through the courts."

Unblinking, the bounty hunter stared, as if looking for sweat—for lies. It wasn't a lie. You faintly recalled squandering days with the annoying aftermath on "Oilhopper" and his bounty.

With an annoyed grunt, he spat and lowered the revolver. "I'll leave that \$500 to another man, then. Hauling a live outlaw's more trouble than it's worth, and doesn't fit my name. You can consider yourself lucky this one time, 'Oilhopper'. But if they'll decide they want you dead

and in the dirt, I might have to rethink." He turned his back to you. "I'd prefer it."

He walked off, his shadow retreating and the absence of it awashing you with lukewarm chill. You lowered your aloft arms, resting them on your hips instead.

You waited until the bounty hunter disappeared from view, his gun no longer a life-threatening presence. After a quick glance at the street, you reentered the house and ascended past the wobbling crying staircase, stopping before the room on the left--opposite the gang's hideout. The window was flung open, the curtains thrashing against the walls like storm-tossed waves. A bloody trail marred the floor and the cheap carpets, but apart from it, there were no signs that the three bandits hadn't made their escape, to Redwind, wherever that was.

You returned to the hideout room, turning the cylinder and the rounds within with monotone echoing clicks. Approaching the shattered window, you pulled on the sashes, the cracked glass breaking further, its shards falling like hail to the ground below. Straddling the window's sill, you swung your leg over it and rested your back against the window wall.

The half-eclipsed sun basked you in its burning shadows, the void on its surface rippling like water trying to swallow the sand.

"Well?" you asked, spitting out and spreading your arms. "What now? What's your aim here? Planning to keep me holed up here forever?"

No answer came, and you didn't expect any. You needlessly gripped the already cocked hammer with your thumb, focusing your aim on the eclipsed half of the sun.

"If this is about me feeling guilt, well, I still ain't got none," you muttered to yourself. "I ain't got time to dwell over the past. If you don't set me free, I'll make you."

Gunshot echoed in the room, your bullet piercing the swirling gunpowder smoke as it exploded from the barrel. Turned out, the sun wasn't as far as your teachers had claimed; your bullet reached and shattered the darkness in just a few seconds. As soon as you made the shadow bleed, everything but you was consumed by the darkness, faster than before.

Reckoning you had only a brief window before another dream struck, you bided your time. The watercolour landscaped failed to materialise, and in the enclosure of the abyss, the silhouette of the manhunter was thrust before you--intimately close: his neck grazing your forehead. His hollow eyes were open wide, and a bead of sweat fell down his cheek. With the shadows streaming off your form, you found your hands gripping an iron with both hands, thrusting the whole barrel inside the man's throat. Even without irises to read, his fear was evident.

Cold iron touched your chin--his revolver. The confrontation, amid all others, was etched in your memory--Gadfly. You knew what was coming next: you recalled it clearly. By some miracle, a candle's flicker, your bullet would piece his skull first, scattering the grey matter of his brain. It was the sole hindrance that prevented him from squeezing the trigger, and was what had saved you. But you were the Gadfly now, and you knew death would follow as soon as your senses returned. With the uncanny eclipse drawing near, you were rendered powerless.

The sun appeared before that, unblemished and radiant. Still as a wax figure, unable to move, you were grateful for the fact. The radiance spilled out beyond the sun's outline, turning everything into a blinding white light.

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The leaden skied heralded your return to consciousness with a thunderous crash, the pale moon, untouched by the clouds, emitting a hushed alien forewarning. The Graveyard Frontier still held you captive, but the nightmare appeared to have ended. The pains, wounds, and lethal injuries made an unwelcome encore--these, you hadn't missed. With a groan, you leaned on your hand to sit up, casting a glance at your shadow. It was still, unflinching, the dark spirit that once writhed within it seemingly gone. Etched on the moon-bleached sands was a message:

'Stay here.'

Lyrebird had left you and the man, Abel, alone with the dark shadow. Abel was awake, standing a few paces away, the brim of his white Stetson melding into the moonlight. His shadow seemed no different from yours, also showed no trace of the accursed spirit. Had it followed Lyrebird? He didn't turn at the sound of your groan. Rocking slowly from side to side, he was staring vacantly at the horizon. He had left his spilled bag be, and everything that had been scattered now lied close to you.

Without getting to your feet just yet, you inched towards the bag and the items scattered around it. There were chunks of feeble iron, a large mix of other metals and irons you couldn't recognise, a curved cattle brand, a belt buckle shaped like an anvil, and a brass whistle. The guiding chalks were missing, you reckoned likely taken by Lyrebird in her escape.

You kept an eye on Abel--he hadn't looked your way even once. He suddenly took a step, quickening his pace as he approached the mist. The message drawn in the sand was too big for him to miss.

The lead resting on the soil resembled the one you had bartered with Goodwin for the chewing spit, but if it were indeed the same, it was a fair trade-off. You were no thief, and it belonged to him by all rights. He and Lyrebird were a pair of crooks, and you helping them was a favour enough; you wouldn't feel guilty taking anything from them for later use ... but you preferred not to steal from your "allies".

You lifted yourself off the ground and hurried towards Goodwin, his figure beginning to melt into the thickening mist. Before it could swallow him whole, you grasped his arm.

"Where are heading?" you said.

Goodwin shuddered, his eyes widening as he halted, the fog nipping at his ankles. "Away from here," he muttered, his spectral lips shivering.

You tightened your grip on his wrist, then let go of it. "Didn't you catch the message left by your wife?"

He opened his mouth empty like a fish. "Wife?" --he lowered his gaze-- "I don't understand."

"Lyrebird! Ain't that what you called her?"

He clenched his jaw and slid a hand to his neck. "I can't make heads or tails of what you're saying. Don't know where I am," he said. "Why does it feel like my neck's been slashed?" He drew slow breaths, his voice turning lost and weak.

Your gaze sharpened. "Because it likely has been."

Goodwin leaned into his ribs. "And here, feels like I've been stabbed and bitten."

Just the same, that was probably what had happened. "You said your name was Goodwin, didn't you?"

His eyes drifted past you and across the veiled expanse. "Have I? Did I say that?" he mumbled. He turned away. "I ... I oughta be moving on."

"Go where?"

"Anywhere. Can't say where I am, but this is not where I should be," he said, pulling at his white glove with the other hand.

"Can't let you leave, partner," you said, reaching out to clasp his shoulder. "To lay it out plain, your fate ain't much of my concern, but your wife'll surely care."

Goodwin's frown deepened as he tried, and failed, to shrug off your grip.

"Once she's back, then you can have your say about leaving to her--how's that sound?"

He paused, uncertainty trembling in his eyes as edges of blue flames. "I ain't certain" --he eyed you warily-- "you don't look trustworthy."

You scoffed, almost laughed. "Look, if you try to hightail it, I'll have to rein you in, might even get a tad rough if you need be--see? I'm giving you a plain honest talk here, no trickery from me."

He swallowed as he spoke, "I'm already aching plenty."

With a nod, you motioned for him to lead the way back. His shoulders hunched, he turned from the mist, his back facing you.

"Just until she's back," he said.

You responded with a silent nod. Your gaze lingered on the revolver tucked behind his belt, the feeble iron carcass glinting but remaining untouched by his hand. Returning to the message etched in the alabaster sands, you consolidated all the metals--irons, ores, and artefacts--into Goodwin's saddlebag, pulling the ropes taut to cinch it shut. You lifted it up and then threw it between you and him, settling yourself on the ground before taking a long, frigid breath. Goodwin stood still, soothing his elbows with his palms.

In due time, and after a considerable wait, Goodwin joined you on the ground. When he glanced away, you stretched out your hand to grab and pull the iron from behind his belt, executing a motion so seamless that Goodwin seemed oblivious to his loss, as if unaware he had been armed at all. You secreted the revolver behind your coat, away from his sight, then swivelled your gaze back to him.

"Recall how you died?"

His eyes, alight with indigo flames, flared at your question. "Died?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"You don't recall dying?" you said, crossing your arms and resting your elbows on your knees.

Goodwin hid half his face with his palms. "Can't recall, no. Try as I might, it's like grasping at smoke," he said. "So I ... died?"

"What can you remember?"

His words straggled by his hands, he lifted his gaze to the swollen grey skies. "I ain't sure."

With a sigh, you pointed at the top of his head. "Remember where you got that white Stetson of yours?"

He paused his gasping breath, then shook his head.

"What part of America you hail from?"

"America?" he echoed, sounding as disoriented as someone rousing from a deep coma.

The wait for Lyrebird stretched on, but eventually, her arrival ended the talk--her blue skirt flowing through the mist like a air-born fish. You stood up first, shooting her a steely cold glare. Lyrebird, with a contemplative air, looked back. She clutched the walnut clutch--the rest of her ethereal shotgun had yet to manifest.

"Ain't nothing happened to me to worry about," you said.

She looked past her shoulder, lost in thought. "I see ... I've ran across Stillwater, or more like, she found me after I used the bracelet."

Your hand darted for the six-shooter, your fingers wrapping around the pearl handle as you scanned the mist beyond Lyrebird, searching for the target and the threat.

"She didn't follow me," Lyrebird added, as if to reassure you. "Didn't look too eager to lay you low in exchange for her release, 'Only Dead' Aug. Can't say what she's after, then."

Goodwin slithered back when her voice grew louder and she stepped closer, retreating behind your legs in an attempt to vanish from her view in your shadow. Normal shadow.

"She done in the thing--Stillwater named it something native I can't remember--when it tried to get the better of me too." Her eyes locked onto Goodwin, she closed the gap even more, standing an arm's reach from you. "Whatever they be, she claimed they'd invade your mind and wipe your memories. She gave me a bearing, a direction, and insisted to quit chasing the white buffalo". Lyrebird's head dropped, she herself leaning towards her supposed husband.

"Goodwin ... ?"

You seized Lyrebird's sleeve, pulling her back from Goodwin.

"He'd forgotten about you," you said, speaking up before Goodwin could muster the guts to.

"That all-devouring shadow you just spoke of, Goodwin took the brunt of it,"

Her auburn brows arched slightly. She looked from you to the man in the white hat, then back, the fire in her eyes smouldering constant—the licks never leaving the flame. She glared, as if trying to saw through you like a tree in her way.

"Goodwin ... you don't recall me, not one bit?" she asked, her voice holding an unchanging pitch as she stooped down. Brushing a braid from her forehead, she pressed, "Nothing at all?"

Goodwin fidgeted, his fingers tightening around the ends of his jacket as he returned Lyrebird's gaze with jittery frown. "I can't recall marrying or knowing you, miss."

She stood up, her hand leaving her cotton knee. "I see," she murmured, staring at her palm. "I see," she repeated like a song's chorus, her expression unchanged.

After a prolonged awkward silence, Goodwin crawled back and then began to rise to his feet. "If I did know you somewhen, sorry for any debts unsettled."

Lyrebird ran her fingers through her hair and then pursed her mercury lips, causing a lightheadedness that made both you and Goodwin stagger "You leaving?"

Goodwin steadied himself. "I'd prefer to leave."

"If you don't recall a thing," Lyrebird said, "do you even know where you're heading?"

"I don't, but there ain't much else I can do."

"I won't let you leave, even if you try," Lyrebird said, balling her hand into a fist. "Ain't nothing out there for you but pain and loneliness."

"Then what?" he said. "I ... I don't want to follow either of you."

Lyrebird retrieved a bundle of chinks from the sea-like folds of her skirt. "I'll leave you be somewhere safe, Goodwin. The Next Stop." His brows knitted, and in response, Lyrebird let out a sigh. "It'll be a safe spot for you. Reckon you won't mind it there now, seeing as you don't remember why you were averse to religion."

Lyrebird veered towards you, and added. "First, we'll follow Stillwater's lead, then head to the Next Stop. With that done, we'll tackle the Wendigo."

You cleared your throat and spat.

"She's right," you said, "heading out there alone is daft. You might not die here, but that's small solace when you can still be ripped asunder."

Goodwin fiddled his glove's ivory edges, pulling on the silk. "What exactly is this Next Stop?" the man asked, his voice as parched as his lips.

"It's a train station," Lyrebird said; she rose her hand and pointed somewhere different from the chalk. "Or leastways, that's what they're aiming to make it." You noticed the bracelet she now wore on her wrist.

Goodwin's gaze shifted between the ground and where she pointed. "Train?"

Lyrebird cringed. With a nod of her head, she started walking, moving with unnecessary haste in front and ahead of you. After a moment of silence, she drawled, without looking back.

"Don't sweat the details, Goodwin. Just know that it's a safe place. You'll be outta harm's way there."

You quickened your stride to keep pace with her, finding an once-inch gap between your shoulders. "The first place we're heading to—what is it?"

Lyrebird rubbed her forehead, her gaze drifting into the distance as her footsteps crunched the forced silence and the sand.

"I only know -where-," she said.

A few minutes passed before you spoke up in quieter voice, your darkened bones crushing and sinking the sand beneath even louder than Lyrebird. "You are handling this better than expected."

Her flames flickered as she turned her head, the glow of her cheekbones dimming like an eclipse. "I'm aware I'm not doing it proper," she said. Abruptly, she stopped, the mist parting to reveal a circle in the sand. Shuffled by moccasin steps, it was nothing more but an imprint.

Amidst the sand laid an axe, its silver steel glistening.

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