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Surrenstrada: For Honor

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Surrenstrada: For Honor

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The genre of my novel is Fantasy. The subgenre is Weird West. This novel showcases monsters and creatures set in a western world. This book is heavily influenced by high fantasy novels with shades of steampunk.

Even though this project is set in a fantasy world, traditional fantasy plays a significant role. *The Dark Elf* trilogy by R.A. Salvatore influenced the work significantly in form. Christie Golden *Arthas* book along with her other *Warcraft* novels influenced plot and characterization. Old western films like *The Shootist* and television shows like *Gunsmoke* along with *Wagon Train* guided the western style.

First and foremost objective of the work is to create a compelling story. The second objective is to apply the lessons learned from this university.

Surrenstrada: For Honor takes place in its own world. That in itself presents a challenge. Continuity proves challenging because the world needs to be consistent. The first step – create a world that possess a deep history. Things that will never hit the pages but provides the reader with immersion. Questions slow your writing because one always asks, “would that monster be there” or “what is the climate in this area?” The questions never stopped during the writing process.

The second challenge of writing this novel was consistency. This challenge sounds easy but proved problematic. Something as simple as the spelling of a character’s name. This led to time spent during the editing process.

Reading other authors first and foremost proved to be invaluable. Authors like Salvatore, Golden and even Tolkien provided strong influences. These authors gave me insight into form and showed the potential of storytelling in this genre.

The other two, despite reluctance to admit, watching westerns all the time as a child. Westerns during my youth displayed a fascinating world of the hero or heroine jumping on a horse riding to confront the villain. Also, the game *Dungeons and Dragons*. This gave the lore of fantasy monsters used in this novel. This game is gaining interest with shows like *Stranger Things*.

Surrenstrada: For Honor sub-genre is Weird West. This genre, even though a few works have been done, is relatively open. This work adds to a sub-genre by giving compelling characters, new world and tells a compelling story.

The implications of this work shows this genre that creating a world and putting monsters against your heroes is all secondary. Despite being set in a fantastical world, there is always a human element. That is where the story hides.

Surrenstrada: For Honor

By: Ken Watkins

Part I:

Today I was at the bar drinking. A card shark got caught cheating. The cheated man reacted as anyone else does in Surrenstrada. He told him to draw. The cheater begged for him not to be a hero. The cheater's reputation seemed superior as a gunman rather than a card shark. Cards seemed to be something that passed the time away as a hobby. The man that had been cheated felt out of control and reached for his weapon. The cheater did not even stand up to gain his posture. He merely drew calmly. He put three in the man's chest. After the cheated fell down the cheater said, "Friend - I told you not to be a hero."

That word "hero" stuck with me. It is the very reason I take pen to paper in this entry of my journal. First I ask myself what is a hero? Is it someone that stands for good? Have they moral superiority? The men that I label heroes in my lifetime are two things. The first they are not moral. They try to be, but they have their flaws. Whether it be drinking, women, money, gambling, so on and so forth - there is a weakness. The second thing about heroes, like the cheated found out, they are all dead.

Then I thought to myself - a hero stands against a villain. This concept made sense to me. If the world has no villains, then there are no heroes. If the world has only heroes, then there are no villains. This is a black and white way to look at the world, but once I started seeing the world in this perspective I felt born again.

Make no mistake. I am the villain of the story. I knew that after my first kill. I worked tumultuous hours in a coal mine. The work was horrid. Sometimes, in my

nightmares, I am there again, and the dust forces me to choke. I tell you that not to get pity but to provide insight into my motivations as a villain. I came out of the coal mine to retrieve my pay. I saw the coffer full of coin. I saw this fat, slob of a man with a gun handing it out next to an elderly man standing over him. Something inside of me exploded. I took the man's gun out of his holster. I shot him. I shot the elderly man. He had a very killable disposition. All are posturing with superiority because he is the richest man in a close vicinity, but he was no gunman.

After that, I linked up with a highwayman. These people varied. My first boss was full of energy. He would kill at the drop of a hat. My second and final boss, he was more like me. He showed me how to plan jobs, read, write, and the importance of inference which is anticipation. I have a saying. Always fear the old gunman, for they are old for a reason.

The Civil War came. Granted, Surrenstrada stayed out of it, for the most part, that whole one gate opens for a day every year in random locations, I still found myself profiting from robbing trains of supplies. It mattered not to me the side. It is the world that does not seem my own. Both sides guns and ammo. Their money is no good here, but it does not hurt to have some laying around to tell you the truth. The guns and ammo I stole fetched me a lot of coin, and I started me up a wagon train that traveled to and from Surrenstrada.

Then the wagon train business took off as families wanted to come from various small towns to Surrenstrada or move from the big city to a smaller town. I cared not. Their money all spent the same. Anyway, my profits began to get cut due to how many wagon trains there were at the time. I figured I would buy them and employ their staff. It

worked for the most part. Except one, The Last Wagon Master of Surenstrada. His name is Victor, and I trained him.

Is he a hero? Well, he does have a fatal flaw. He loves food and has the occasional drink. At the same time, he has no other vices. I would say age, but that is more of a flaw than a vice. Well, there I have it. Victor is the hero, and I Lavon the villain of the story.

If whoever reads this is curious, the man who shot the cheated is named Three Burst. He gets that name because whenever he shoots - his signature is a quick three rounds to the chest. It seems a bit wasteful to me. Myself and even Victor need just one round. Anyway, I will remember that name. It is a possibility him and I will have future endeavors together.

“The Villain” –Lavon

Chapter 1

A small boy, approximately nine summers old, stared at the word “cat” on a large piece of paper surrounded by other simple words like “dog” and “red.” A few stains appeared on his brown, collared shirt but barely visible. He sat at a fine oaken table assembled and carved with beautiful detail. High vaulted ceilings accommodated bookshelves which housed knowledge in paper form. The windows rested open which allowed a gentle, summer breeze to dance through the room. He nervously pulled the thick, brown hair out of his almond colored eyes. He cleared his throat before saying, “Sir, uhm, I forget the sound the letter ‘c’ makes.”

A lean man, six foot – three in height, covered in sweat, stood on a ladder hammered away at a dormant monstrosity appearing to be human. His soaked, black cotton shirt soaked matched perfectly with his black cowboy boots and black pants. One Colt revolver hung from his right hip while a large sheath pointed to his right hand sat at rest on his left side. The man’s thick, silver, sweat soaked hair hung freely as he paused to address the boy. He paused a moment from swinging hammer and looked directly at the kid. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the dirt from his forehead then said, “Alvin, it makes a ‘cuh’ sound.” His voice sounded deep but in control while being warm.

Alvin smiled then said, “Cuh, ay, no, ah, t. Cat! It’s cat! Levon, I mean sir I read it!”

Lavon looked at the boy with pride. He gave an approving nod in the child’s direction. He said, “Keep reading Alvin. I believe in you.”

Alvin perked up immediately. His eyes, full of motivation, gripped the book tighter. He said, “Yes sir.”

Lavon placed a nail on a gargantuan human like being. With three precise but powerful strikes with his hammer, he drove it home. He stared at his creation for a few more seconds. He smiled as he took pleasure in his work.

Alvin stammered, “Cat, rrr,ah, a, ennn. Cat ran?”

Lavon’s smile increased as he looked at Alvin. He said, “That is it. Outstanding Alvin. Keep going.”

A knock at the door broke the mood of the room. Lavon calmly said “Enter.”

The door opened. Six men walked across the threshold. Sizes and physical descriptions varied. They each wore scowls upon seeing Alvin. Each made himself at home. They meandered to his bar immediately after sending hateful looks toward the boy. They grabbed the expensive whiskey he kept and started filling matching glasses.

Trailing the six men, a thin blonde woman with long curls cautiously entered the room. She noted everything in the room first. She noticed the monstrosity that stared at them lifeless. She sized up Alvin next. She knew that young children often perform the dirtiest of deeds in Surrestrada. She came to this knowledge by experience. Lavon approached her at a young age to perform tasks. At first simple messenger jobs. The pay that bought a few warm meals, seemed worth it.

As time steamed forward the jobs steadily transitioned to ones that felt shrouded in moral ambiguity. She merely provided a distraction or gave a reason for a man to follow her to an alley. She told herself that Surrestrada played her that hand. No child should choose pig slop over being morally innocent or feeling guilty how one acquires a warm meal.

She snapped out of her stream of conscious. Her footsteps slowed as her suspicious gaze landed on Lavon. She knew him for years. He saw her at highs and lows. She knew his weapons and his proficiency for violence. His weapons, she noticed, displayed in the open. She knew Levon could draw both weapons instantly. This marked a dangerous man in Surrestrada she knew. A coward will hide their weapons. Professionals leave them exposed. Levon smiled with pride as he noticed her casing him.

The six neanderthals she assessed a second time despite sizing them up previously. She knew they carried visible weapons. The weapons that worried seemed to be the unseen. She noticed that one of the man's spurs on his left side seemed sharpened to a point. He could use his right leg to kick his horse, but the left spur seemed to hold a more sinister purpose. She figured that most of the men, as with most bandits for hire, carried a hidden knife or gun.

She walked to Lavon and hugged him. As she hugged him, she kept her gaze on the six men. The hug ended. She said, "Hello Lavon, who is the studious young man?"

Alvin looked at her and said, "My name's Alvin! I 'm pleased to meet you ma'am." He then held out his hand for her to shake.

She squatted down showing off the control she possessed over her body. She looked Alvin in the eyes and reciprocated the handshake. She smiled then said, "Hello Alvin. My name is Verna. The pleasure is all mine."

The two exchanged a smile as Verna turned to Lavon. He said, "Alvin, my dear boy. How about you go run and play. Now that you know the cat ran, I want you to think about where the cat ran? Why is he running? I want to hear your hypothesis. See you tomorrow."

Alvin smiled and looked at him wide eyed. He scurried off out the door. The moment the door closed Lavon looked at Verna, “Did you have any problems finding a crew?”

“No more than usual.”

One of the men yelled, “No one wants to work for a woman. I’m in charge now you see.”

The other men looked at him then agreed.

Lavon looked at the man then said, “Please come over here. I do not yell. It is bad manners and disrespectful.”

The man started walking over to him. He closed the distance with quick, loud and intimidating steps. His boots hit the wooden floor with authority and purpose. He put his face in Lavon’s and postured his chest in an attempt at intimidating Lavon while he towered over him.

Lavon returned his gaze obviously not shaken. He started to unbutton the cuffs of his fine black collared shirt. He said, “What is your name, man with no manners.”

“My name is Bell. I ain’t got time for no manners.”

“Well, now that I know your name, how do you want to settle our differences? Do you want to talk? If so, then please respect my personal space. Do you wish to fight using hands? We keep it honorable, and we both live to fight another day. If you reach for your knife, then the likelihood of you dying is high. Bell, if you reach for your gun, I guarantee that will be the last thing you ever do. Am I clear?”

Bell pulled up his right hand, preparing to deliver a mighty blow. Lavon said, “Well, looks like this will be a gentleman’s combat.” Lavon quickly ducked under the

punch. He turned on the ball of his left foot to face his opponent. He pushed the much larger Bell in the back to acquire space. Lavon assumed his orthodox fighting stance. His hands closed over his face. His elbows tight to his body with his chin tucked towards his throat. He waved the man forward and said, "Now we can solve this as gentlemen after your sucker punch."

Lavon began to circle. As Bell approached, Lavon moved his head unpredictably but nothing out of control. Lavon assessed the man quickly. The first thing he noticed, his opponent held an orthodox fighting stance with his weak leg leading and his power leg trailing. He seemed aggressive and strong but lacked any proper footwork.

Verna realized that Bell potentially held esteem among his fellow scoundrels. Using the distraction of this conflict, she inconspicuously moved toward the group as they watched. The advantage she knew that consistently swayed in her favor seemed to be the constant underestimation of her by the males in Surrestrada. At first, she hated it. Now she accepted it because it gave her a favorable advantage. Like being able to move about in a room during a scuffle because no one viewed her as a threat. She listened to those that cheered for Bell and read the anxious body language of one that remained silent. She slipped behind the tall, window curtain allowing it to cover her.

Lavon slipped the jab by weaving his head to the right. Immediately Bell followed it up with a crushing cross. Lavon spun his head to the left missing the punch with ease. To Bell's surprise, the old man Lavon countered with a powerful left hook that stunned him, a cross to the body that dropped Bell's hands while it released his hair and a devastating left-handed upper cut that sent Bell to the ground feeling every bit of each blow.

Bell felt like someone turned the lights out in his mind. Lavon backed away then said, “Mr. Bell, do you yield?”

Bell grabbed his knife, “Let’s see how well you do against my knife you old bastard!”

Several of the men cheered while Lavon sternly looked at him, “Very well. You knew the consequences.”

Before Bell closed the gap, Lavon drew his knife and changed his stance. He put his right leg forward and his knife on his right hip. He placed his left hand palm down over his heart. He studied Bell as he approached wildly and off balance from the blows dealt earlier.

Bell’s right arm, holding his knife, approached Lavon looking for a killing blow over his head. As he started to come down, Lavon parried the blow by moving his knife from his hip to the right wrist of Bell that held the knife. It swung his blade wide from the mark while slashing the attacker’s wrist, spilling his blood on the clean floor.

With Bell off balance, Lavon returned his knife to its original position then quickly thrust his knife deep into Bell’s throat puncturing his trachea. He made a quarter turn away from Bell then circled away toward his opponent’s left side. Lavon looked at Bell then said, “You are going to die unless you get medical attention in the next few minutes. Put your knife down, and you may get the attention you need. I do not further my plans by killing you here today.”

Bell dropped his knife. Lavon nodded then placed his knife in its sheath. He then started to roll his right sleeve down. Without warning, Bell reached for his gun. Lavon

drew his Colt and put a bullet center mass in his chest. Bell weakly squeezed the handle of his weapon, squirmed on the floor, then died with his eyes wide open.

One of the men yelled, “No!” Afterward, he reached for his gun and aimed it at Lavon.

Verna glided from behind the curtain and snuck up on the man. He felt the barrel of her gun for only a second before she fired. She looked around with her pistol at the ready at the other four members of her crew. Angrily she shouted, “Anyone else?”

Lavon holstered his weapon. He calmly walked over to Verna while he assessed the disposition of the other four men who appeared terrified. He walked to the side of Verna’s gun hand. He placed his hand gently over Verna’s extended wrist and started to apply force, so she dropped her weapon. He said, “Verna my dear, these men seem to be gentlemen and will treat you accordingly. Is that right, Verna’s new crewman?”

The remaining men nodded their heads in agreement. They each looked at Verna and took their hats off then one spoke, “Ma’am, we’ll do whatever you want all you gotta’ do is give the order.”

Lavon walked over to his desk. He opened the left side, top drawer. He pulled out a white towel, took out his knife and wiped the blood from it. He said, “Now we can talk about business. I further my agenda, and you can make money. We can go on with the business of living.”

Verna placed her pistol inside its holster then said, “What do you want us to do?”

He unbuckled his sheath and started shining his knife. While he did this, he focused on what he needed to say, as he wanted to provide the necessary specifics of the

mission. After taking a short moment, he said, “I want you to field test my – creation. It will be ready by tomorrow morning.”

Verna said, “Who are we testing it against?”

“The last Wagon Master – Victor.”

Several men shook their head. Verna said, “Do we engage with Victor while the machine is testing him?”

Lavon furrowed his brow thinking deeply then said, “Do not fight Victor while he battles the machine. I want to know what the machine can do.” Lavon threw the bloody handkerchief on Bell’s corpse.

Verna asked, “If Victor beats the machine, do we then go after Victor?”

Lavon smiled, “Excellent question Verna.” He took a deep breath and the smile left. A frown formed as he said, “Yes, kill him. If the opportunity presents itself. Victor can be tricky.”

Verna said, “If we kill Victor do we get extra?”

Lavon nodded yes.

Verna continued, “Victor will not be the last Wagon Master. A native by the name of Fred will take his place.”

Lavon placed a hand in the air, “I have an alternate plan for Fred. Your primary mission is to test my machine against Victor. That is paramount. Only go after Victor if the opportunity presents itself.”

Verna nodded that she understood the mission.

Lavon reached in his back pocket and took out his wallet. He reached inside and took out a giant stack of money. He handed it to Verna then said, "Here. This should be plenty for you to acquire the supplies you need."

Verna smiled and accepted the money. She said, "Will you help me with the planning like old times? No one can infer like you."

Lavon returned her smile honored at her sentimental gesture. He said, "I would be honored to help plan this."

Verna asked, "Ten percent of my cut right for your input?"

"No no. It would be an honor to help you with this. I remember you growing up. I found you eating scraps. Now, look at you. You are fierce my dear. I had a small role in what you became. I do not charge family."

Verna looked at her crew then said, "Alright gents, we have supplies to get. Let's go."

As the crew shuffled outside, Verna hung back. When they all left, Verna looked at them then said, "One second." She shut the door and looked at Lavon. She walked over to him and hugged his old body tight. She said just loud enough for him to hear, "Thank you for everything - Poppa."

Lavon squeezed her tight then said, "Be careful my child. You know I worry so when you go out on a mission for me."

"I will be by later in the evening."

"I will make sure the cook prepares that stew you like. We have a lot of planning to do."

"We sure do."

They ended their embrace. Verna walked to the door. Before she opened it, she waved and said, “See ya’.”

Lavon’s smile widened as he waved until Verna exited and shut the door. Pride radiated from him as he started walking to the wall that hung a giant picture of Surrenstrada. He muttered, “Please be careful my child. I do not have one to lose.”

Chapter 2

Wagon Master Victor scratched his chin subtly showing his desire for sustenance. He cleared his throat to knock loose the dirt that settled in the back of his mouth. He looked off into the distance while saying, “Conductor Trev, please signal my whip brothers that we are stoppin’ for the night. Circle the wagons just in case.”

Conductor Trev took out a bright white flag in his pocket. He then made a square motion with it then a triangle and lastly a circle. Trev looked at Victor, “You expecting trouble sir?”

Victor looked and showed a smile, “Never hurts to be cautious right? We are the only wagon train that hasn’t signed with Levon’s Mercenaries and Security Guild.”

“Sir, many of the wagon trains took a buyout or landed a position with them. I do not think they are as bad as you say.”

“Conductor Trev, I worked for them a long time. I got my trainin’ from em’. Taken out all my fellow freelancers out there doesn’t bode well. I have a bad feelin’.”

Victor pulled back on the reins, commanding the horses to stop. He reached for the brake lever, gently applying pressure until the simple mechanism engaged. Victor’s whip brothers drove their wagons in a masterfully choreographed dance number with each wagon driver executing his maneuvers with precision and hitting their spots masterfully. Victor climbed out of the wagon making loud “clip-clop” sounds with his cowboy boots. He surveyed the perfect circle his wagon brothers made causing him to smile. In that brief moment when the hard driving ended, Victor’s serenity revealed itself.

Victor’s moment broke when Trev shouted but not too loudly, “Victor will you please help me down?”

“Ah, yeah. I gotcha’,” Victor stated as he cleared away the long gray hairs that stuck to his face by a mixture of dirt and sweat. Trev grabbed Victor’s broad shoulder and took a step down. Victor, with his inside arm, grabbed around Trev’s body, securing his weight long enough to force a potential fall into a safe glide until Trev’s feet hit the ground.

“Thank you, Victor. I will get with you later after I make sure everyone is alright.”

Victor patted Trev on the back as he walked to the back of the wagon. He grabbed an apple from a wooden bucket. Victor took a large bite. As the sweet juice of the apple hit his taste buds, he closed his eyes from the ecstasy it provided him. He walked at a leisurely pace toward his wagon’s team of horses still in their traces. He reached under the lead horse’s bridle, scratching his fur. “You da’ best lead horse in all of Surrenstrada, aren’t ya’?” He switched to each of the four horses harnessed to his wagon. He reached for his knife inside a shoulder harness on his left side. He unbuckled it and took the large bowie knife in his right hand. He cut the seeds from the core. Next, he tossed the seeds out of reach of the horse’s eating range then cut the core into four equal parts. Each horse received a piece of the apple core and a brief moment of affection motivated by an appreciation for the work they did. He glanced at the knife, remembered a life he left for a second, placed the knife back in its harness, then started relieving the horses of their burden of the trace.

“Sir! Sir! Please let me take care of the horses! You hired me to be your stable boy,” screamed a tan, blond haired and blue eyed boy with only a few years behind him. He immediately grabbed a horse’s trace and started nervously unbuckling it. “We do this

every day sir! Please let me do my job. I feel sorry. You have done so much for me since my parents were...”

“Bobby. I told ya’ when I hired ya’ that it’s not a problem. Just work hard. You do. Now you’re a part of my crew. Whether I help ya’ with these horses or not, you being part of my crew ain’t gonna’ change. Ya’ understand me, Bobby?”

Bobby’s nerves calmed instantly as his hands relaxed and he began to show why others say Bobby reigns as king of all stable boys in the west. “Yes, sir.”

“Bobby. You listenin’?”

“Yes sir, why?”

“Make sure ya’ eat enough tonight boy. Women in the west are hungry. They love a man with a big ole’ belly like mine.”

Bobby and Victor both laughed at the joke. “Victor, what did you do before you became a wagon master?”

Victor’s face transitioned from laughter to concern. Victor took his cowboy hat off, wiped the sweat with the cuff off his sleeve, then put it back on his head. Victor’s words dragged out of his mouth, “Bobby I’m gonna’ shoot ya’ straight. Can ya’ keep a secret?”

“Yes, sir I can.”

“I started out a stable boy like you. A man named Levon was good to me. When things were slow for him, he would train me to use various weapons. He started teaching me how to shoot this here six shooter.” Victor pointed to a shiny revolver that hung over his right hip.” He taught me how to use the rifle in the wagon. I became a good shot. He then asked me what I would do if someone pulled a knife on me. I then told him I don’t

know. He then taught me how to use this knife.” He then tapped the knife inside his shoulder harness.

“Could you teach me, Sir?”

“I will teach ya’ how to defend you and yours. I wasn’t too much older than ya’. The first lesson will be how to grease and clean a wagon’s axle. The next lesson will be greasing the wheels.”

Bobby smiled widely “Yes sir. I will get the grease out of the wagon.”

Dust rose from the ground giving the appearance that the group of twelve horsemen traveled inside a tide of dirt. The one that led the group looked at the man to her right. She peered at him through playful blonde locks. Her voice danced with violence as she talked to the man on her right, “Lavon gave us precise orders. I’m sure we have been spotted already. It’s time for the next part of our plan. Let’s stop. A few rest while the others set up the – uh test subject.”

The man on her right peering through his spyglass spoke up, “Mistress Verna, why can’t we just blast ‘em. I got my rifle Betsy rigged up real nice ya’ see. I could blast him an’ send him to hell fast. We could be back in town drinkin’ whiskey real quick like.”

Verna smiled then her facial expression transitioned to disdain. She rotated her head to him, “That is why I’m the leader. Our job is to scare the wagon train. Lavon promised that the Wagon Master would send his wagon train ahead, and he alone would make a final stand.”

“If the result is the wagon master dead, why don’t we just kill ‘em.”

“He wants the contraption to get a test. There is something about that Wagon Master that makes our employer believe he is the perfect test subject.”

“You know what it is?”

Verna looked down at her saddle horn. She made a nervous smile to her crew, “I have the schematics. Its name is Doomsteam.”

“You think it’ll turn on us?”

“For the amount, we’re getting paid, I would kill you a thousand times and throw one in for free because I would be rich and money would not matter. Now get to work. Give me two of your best men. We will take the first shift of bringing the machine to life. Do rest well. This amount of money should never be comfortable.”

The man swallowed heavy trying to force the terror down. “Yes, ma'am. As you command.”

Chapter 3

Victor glared at the sun as it retreated behind the horizon to come back tomorrow. He finished chewing a small bite of cornbread that carried the juice of the beans. He scraped the last of the beans on his plate together to make one last spoonful. His ear caught a slight sound as a twig snapped in the distance. He swallowed the cornbread then stared off into the direction of the twig. "You must be getting older. Lettin' a twig snap. You sound like a toddler playin' in the woods Fred."

A tall, slender Native American man slid from the bushes wearing a bright emerald shirt, black pants with black boots. His long, straight black hair seemed to magnify the shadows that followed him. He made a cold look at Victor then spoke, "I am going to stop sneaking up on you. In your advanced age, I could give you a heart attack, old man."

Victor laughed, but it was muffled by a belly full of beans and cornbread. He slapped his knee, "Fred, you're getting' old. You made a joke." Victor stood up. He walked over to Fred with his cornbread in his left hand and clasped Fred's hand with his own then the two sat down on the ground illuminated by Victor's campfire.

Fred reached into his knapsack and pulled out a freshly killed and skinned rabbit with an arrow in the middle of it. "Victor, you want some of my rabbit?"

"Have you ever witnessed me turning down food?"

"Never - in my time knowing you."

Fred took out his water skin and soaked the arrow that ran through the rabbit's middle. He positioned 'y' shaped twigs along the fire that gave the perfect height to the arrow but would still allow the rabbit to cook while Fred slowly turned the shaft that ran

through the rabbit. He glanced over at Victor whose eyes showed that he eagerly awaited the end product. Fred cleared his throat before he spoke. While he turned the rabbit, he grumbled. "Victor, I have bad news."

Victor paused his thoughts regarding the rabbit. "What is it, Fred?"

"A group of twelve. At first, I thought they were just bandits along the road. Then I glanced at the leader. It was a female. During my time in town, I heard about a lady named Verna..."

"I've heard of her. She's a mercenary."

"Victor. She is not a mercenary, she is an assassin." Fred stated, dripping with concern, desperately trying to get his point across to Victor.

Victor's face became heavy. He took his hat off and placed it on his bent knee. The brief silence broke down when Trev's voice pierced the night air. "Wagon Master Victor I have a question for you. This lovely couple would like to exchange vows." Trev gestured at a couple who shared a youthful exuberance and nervousness.

The male took his hat off and placed it over his heart. He looked at the ground briefly then spoke, "Wagon Master Victor, my bride and I would greatly appreciate it sir."

Victor smiled, "Yes, it would be an honor. Give me some time to arrange the paperwork, so it is all legal. You two make your plans. Congratulations."

The two scurried off to prepare for the evening's festivities. Victor's smile quickly disappeared. "Trev will you have a seat please?" Victor gestured at another knotted stump around the campfire. Trev braced himself on Fred's arm as he bent down

to meet the log. “Fred notified me of a group of twelve that means a world of death on this wagon train. Fred, how much time we got?”

Fred stared at the rabbit as it still cooked. The fire reflected in his eyes. “They will attack us just before dawn. The wagon train will still be slumbering. They will creep where our sentries are weak then wait for a distraction. Many will die before they wake.”

Trev shouted, “We could arm everyone with what we have. This is a wagon train after all! We have numbers.”

Fred shifted, “They carry – different cargo. It smells like a train.”

Victor looked at Fred. “Trev, at the wedding make an announcement everyone is leaving in three hours. My last action as Wagon Master will be to marry those two youngins’. Fred, you are the Wagon Master after that. Let’s try to consolidate. I will need one wagon with horses. I will follow until you reach The Narrow. Once you guys pass, I will make a stand. You must reach there. That’ll be an aggressive pace.”

Fred looked at him. “No. You do not die yet. That is suicide.”

Victor laughed, “Fred you gettin’ soft on me?”

Fred smiled then ripped a piece of the cooked rabbit. He took a bite of it, “Just make sure you send a few into the afterlife with you.”

“I ain’t plannin’ on dyin Fred! I plan on livin’. Seein’ the couple’s child grow up because she’s expectin’. I’m just an old school Wagon Master. This wrecks of Lavon. He wants me dead. He intends to corner the wagon train market. With him it’s personal. Me, well, this is my wagon train’s lives. It’s folks like Bobby who are young in this world. I reckon the people that trust me to get them from one point to another deserve better than a shallow, unmarked grave. Besides, Trev you would make for one ugly corpse.”

Trev looked at Victor with tears in his eyes, “Sir, the appearance of my corpse would be fabulous. You would be envious with your bloated, well-fed stomach.”

The three laughed. Victor looked at Trev. “Open an extra bottle of whiskey. No one said anyone had to be sober for the early wake-up.”

The night wrapped around the wagon train. Victor stood in front of the happy young couple illuminated by a quaint bonfire while onlookers witnessed the small ceremony. Victor dressed in finer clothes than before. He held his black cowboy hat in both hands on top of a large belt buckle. His long gray hair, washed by hand using a few handfuls of water from the horse’s water bucket, sat straight on his shoulders. The dirt on his face disappeared by the same handfuls of water that washed his hair. Dust made its home deep inside the cracks and crevices of Victor’s face. The surface dirt disappeared from the washing, broadcasting his trademark ornery smile and his well-aged wrinkles. Victor cleared his throat then his voice boomed, “Fellow wagon riders, we are gathered her today to celebrate the union of this young couple. I’m not a fancy man, and I’ve forgotten my lines...”

The onlookers laughed as Victor continued, “Without further shenanigans. Do you take her to be your wife?”

The young man looked at his bride to be, smiled then said: “I do.”

Victor looked at the young lady who looked nervous but glowed. “Young lady, you take him to be your husband?”

“I do.”

Victor patted the two on the back then lifted the hand of the bride and groom in the air. “By the temporary powers held up by the courts in Surrenstrada, I pronounce this couple married.”

The crowd cheered. A woman sang a slow, melodic song about love and how powerful it can be. The newlyweds walked as one and began to dance. Victor thought of retiring to bed then changed his mind. This could be that last time he gets to dance and listen to music. He danced with anyone and everyone he could. Fast dance or slow it mattered not to the jovial Wagon Master.

Fred, a blue-eyed, blond haired boy named Bobby and Trev sat down on a log facing three women sitting on a stump just a few feet away. Victor made it over to the three, looked at them, then gave Fred a massive pat on the back. “You three, this is a celebration. Get up and ask those ladies if they wanna’ dance.”

Fred’s delicate senses smelled recycled alcohol. Victor’s breath smelled of strong whiskey, and while he danced his sweat wreaked of the same alcohol that he previously drank. Fred’s face wrinkled as he spoke, “If I dance with a girl. Will that get your stink away?”

“Fred, my friend that’s the only way.”

“Then it is done. Trev and Bobby let us dance.”

Victor leaned a forearm on a tree smiling from ear to ear as the three men asked the females to dance. The three ladies accepted the offer. Victor pondered the reason women accepted invitations to dance or go on a long ride together. His mind whispered to him clearly that he will miss that sudden jolt of adrenaline as he is not long for this world.

Victor unbuckled his knife. He pulled it out of its shoulder harness. He felt the heft of it. The thing felt heavier to him. Victor told himself that his current state of inebriation gave the illusion that explained the sudden heft. He let out a deep breath. He knew the reason as he looked at his dry, calloused and wrinkled hands. Also, his hand absorbed the color of the reins that he held for many years. He thought of how to make his hands look better. He then smiled and let out a deep breath as he realized the cure for old age still shrouds itself in mystery.

An hour passed as Victor sharpened his knife sitting under a tree enjoying the moon hanging up in the sky with its star friends. The “schwoop-shwoop” the blade made against the sharpening stone played a steady rhythm as the fiddle played in the distance. After about an hour Fred sneaked his way expertly to Victor. He sat on the opposite side of the tree trunk staring up at the sky as Victor continued sharpening his knife. Fred spoke, “You continue sharpening your knife even though it could cut the tension of your thoughts.”

“Fred, y’all need to leave in an hour’s time.”

“As you command, Wagon Master. Where will you make your stand?”

“I have a sneaky notion that Levon wants me not the wagon train. I’ll wait ‘till y’all cross the bridge then if I have time I will blow it up.”

“The bridge?”

“Yup.”

“You are not planning on going out quietly.”

“Nope.”

“Blowing up the bridge will force them to bottleneck. You might have a chance.”

“Fred you tellin’ me I can win?”

“Nope. I said a chance. I definitely would not bet any currency.”

“Fred promise me somethin’.”

“Depends. Tell me what it is.”

“Make sure no one stops to mourn. You guys hightail it ta’ that monastery where they study animals. They owe me a favor. If you guys push it, then they will take ya’ in for a night or two so y’all can rest up.”

Fred stood up and walked over to face the sitting Victor. He studied the man’s face, but it stayed out of sight covered by his hat and looking down at his sharpening stone. “You know I will. I will prepare a wagon for you.”

Victor continued looking down, hiding his face. His voice seemed broken, “Make sure you leave me some grease, my rifle, and my whip. I want to make good time to rendezvous with y’all.”

Fred continued to stare down at the faceless man. “On one condition. You honestly tell me your thoughts. You took a native of only eleven winters in when you saw him eating pig slop. That was the last time I ate scrap. You are a good man full of honor, and you have taught me that honorable code. If you do die then I will miss you.” He turned on his heels fully preparing to do what Victor told him to do regardless if Victor lived up to his part of the bargain.

A voice even more muffled, “Fred – I’m terrified.” Victor held his hand out, and the two shared a brief handshake before Fred left quietly, sliding on the trail’s floor to carry out his end of their bargain.

Chapter 4

Verna brought her sleek Palomino horse down the road. She held a fist straight up in the air signaling for those in her crew to stop. She peered off into the distance seeing an angry river and a broken bridge. Her eyes found one man clutching a rifle on top of a wagon with two horses. Verna barked, “We have our orders. Stay out of Doomsteam’s way. Let him and Victor battle it out. Take your horses into the clearing, but first, bring that thing to life.”

“As you command,” said two workers who went to the back of a covered wagon with an old sheet covering the cargo. They lifted the sheet revealing a giant, human like figure. They grabbed the latches on the man’s chest, twisted and then pulled open the door revealing a giant hole with coal inside. One man grabbed kindling from his pocket and gently placed it inside. The other man lit the match. They blew on the tiny embers until the flame awoke. Eventually, the coals combusted. They closed the lid and secured the latches.

The crew placed a metallic rod inside a small hole inside the monsters right arm through a small opening. They connected a curved handle to the other end of the rod and began turning quickly. Gears started to grind. A massive hand reached for the man that turned the hand crank. The monster’s hand found the man’s throat. Audible snapping sounds emanated from the crewman’s neck as Doomsteam tossed the man - sending him flying.

The other man looked terrified. He turned his back to get out of the wagon. The metallic beast grabbed the man’s head in the palm of his hand. It squeezed slowly as the

man kicked and screamed for mercy. The cries fell on deaf ears as his head exploded from the compression.

Doomsteam leaped from the wagon. The abomination stood well over ten feet tall. The monster wore no clothing except for a pair of small brown pants with several rips from the sheer size of the half flesh, half metal legs.

Doomsteam let out a tremendous yell that turned into a train whistle after it reached a certain decibel. Its face appeared to be that of a man, but below the nose held more metallic pieces than flesh. It closed its jaws after letting out the scream. The noise sounded like a bear trap closing. It took a few steps closer as Verna slyly sneaked behind the creature.

Verna grabbed a small locket out of her pocket. “Look,” she said with nervousness in her voice but still assertive. “Do you want to see Katie alive?”

Doomsteam screamed, but it quickly turned into a loud howl as steam protruded from his mouth, ears, and nose. “She’s alive?”

Verna gave a dangerous smile, “Only if you kill the man guarding the bridge.”

Doomsteam looked Victor’s direction. He jogged at first then his pace quickened. As he picked up speed, his body sounded like a train moving on the tracks. He screamed “Katie!” His voice turned into a whistle as he headed toward The Last Wagon Master.

Victor squinted his eyes as he tried to focus on the giant dust cloud screaming toward him. He heard the train whistle but disregarded the notion due to the smaller size of the cloud. The cloud came within two hundred yards away. Victor hoisted his trusted

rifle which contained fifteen shots at victory and stared down the barrel waiting for his chance.

I can't see the damn thing he thought to himself. He stared down the barrel holding steady until a shot presented itself.

A hundred yards now. I should move. It makes a train sound. Trains don't change direction without a track. He ain't got no track."

Victor dropped the rifle and ran to his left. His old lungs reminded him of his age as he panted and gasped briefly for air. Doomsteam sped past him. It stopped quickly. His hypothesis proved correct. Doomsteam struggled to change direction. Victor brought his rifle up to his eye. Victor aimed and let loose a violent barrage of gun fire. Cartridges hit the ground as he played the lever action of his rifle masterfully.

That damn contraption still commin' after me. Damn it! 13 and 14, remember to save one in the chamber. He let go of the rifle, and it fell to his side until the shoulder harness held tautly. He reached for his sidearm and aimed center mass. He began to back pedal as he noticed Doomsteam facing him once more and began to pick up speed.

Four and five, remember to save one in the chamber. He placed his gun back in the holster then drew his knife. He allowed himself to feel the heft of it in his right hand. He allowed himself to look at the sharpened blade. He glared at Doomsteam. *This thing just took fourteen rifle rounds and five Colt shots. All I got is this knife and two emergency rounds.*

Doomsteam turned his massive body to face Victor. Doomsteam yelled, "Katie!" as he began to charge.

I shouldn't let him build up uh' head of steam. Victor charged toward Doomsteam. The two headed towards each other - destined to meet in a cloud of dust and pain.

I'm not gonna' win squarin' up on this thing. Just before the two collided Victor dived out of the way. *My damn hip. I think I just broke it.* He shook off the pain. He planted one hand firm into the ground to help propel himself forward with force. He waited for Doomsteam to strike first, hoping that he could use his quickness to gain an advantage.

Doomsteam's arm came at him like a piston slapping a cylinder. Victor dodged out of the way. The force of the machine's punch landed on the ground sending an earthquake which sent Victor off balance for a moment.

Victor gathered himself, slashing at the back of Doomsteam's planted knee. Doomsteam glared at the cut. Doomsteam could see a tear in his flesh revealing his metallic frame. Victor moved to Doomsteam's back. He cut deep into Doomsteam's side, then one long gash along its back.

Victor's disappointment dominated his mind for a moment. *Damn it! How am I sposed' to beat this thing!*

Doomsteam turned around and wrapped Victor fully in his arms. Doomsteam squeezed while it lifted Victor off the ground. Victor could feel his breath leave his body with no chance of returning and his bones getting ready to snap. Instinctually, he placed his left hand on Doomsteam's chin and straightened his arm.

Unfortunately for Victor, two of his fingers traveled over Doomsteam's mouth. Doomsteam bit down on them with enough force to sever them from Victor's hand. He

felt the pain shoot through his body. He knew he had no time to pay mind to his fresh wounds. He pressed up with his three fingered hand, eventually forcing enough room to loosen the rifle off his shoulder. He placed the butt of the rifle under Doomsteam's chin and used it as leverage to free the rest of his body. He knew he needed to put some distance between him and Doomsteam.

Thing's fast. What's faster than a train? Victor thought to himself. He surveyed his surroundings looking for an answer. Off into the distance, he heard a horse cry out in fear. *That's it! I should lure him into the woods that'll slow him down. That will buy me enough time to free one of 'em.*

Victor's force of will propelled his legs forward. Energy and adrenaline left his body along with his two fingers. He held his knife tight as he reached the tree line. He clasped his hand over his mouth because his gasping echoed and occupied his hearing. He needed that sense to track the movements of Doomsteam. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up on end. He could hear the wind breeze making the leaves dance in rhythm with the grass.

The familiar train whistle blew. He listened intently as he attempted to hone in on the exact location. He could hear the pistons that connected the monstrosity to the ground driving it closer to him. *Now!* Victor mentally yelled. His mind moved quicker than his legs. He stumbled but caught himself.

Doomsteam continued to charge inside and out, dodging trees while looking for Victor. He laid eyes on the familiar lead horse. He continued his lumbering trot until he could put his three fingered left hand solidly on the bridle of his lead horse. He cut the

horse from its trace then he grabbed a saddle from inside the wagon. He saw the axle grease. *Fire. I could light the dang thing on fire!*

Victor saddled the horse expertly. The man held over fifty years of executing the task. He heard Doomsteam's mechanical stride line up for a charge. Victor mounted the horse with purpose as he sent the horse in a gallop. *I'll double back for the grease.*

Doomsteam charged toward Victor with his head down. Victor redirected his horse to the right then to the direction of the wagon.

Victor heard Doomsteam's momentum carry him toward the river. While he slowed down to grab the bucket of grease he noticed Doomsteam lumbering along the riverbank sacrificing balance to slow down. Victor knew time swayed in his favor for the moment. He took full advantage. While still straddling his mount, Victor grabbed the bucket of grease.

He commanded his horse forward by a gentle kick to its side. Victor heard Doomsteam squaring up for another charge. Victor could feel the ground shake through his horse as Doomsteam picked up momentum. Victor knew he needed to move but not before forcing the metallic being into a predetermined trajectory.

Doomsteam committed to trampling his foe. Victor heard the whistle and could see the steam. Victor sped his horse along the side of Doomsteam but out of reach of the monster. Victor requested a burst of speed from the horse, and the horse answered. Victor and his horse pulled away five feet in front of Doomsteam. Victor tugged on the reins to turn into Doomsteam. Victor could see its eyes as they burned hot with life and rage.

Victor placed the reins in between his teeth. He lifted his right hand that held the bucket of grease. He brought it to his left hand and turned it toward the monster. He

jerked the bucket in the direction of the monstrosity. The oil fell on the abomination, covering the upper half of his body. Victor continued the momentum this time taking him away from the riverbank.

I need to light it now. I have an emergency bullet in my rifle. Victor stopped his galloping horse and raised his gun. He glared down the barrel.

Doomsteam smacked a tree, sending it timbering over which made a loud crashing noise. Victor waited for his shot by staring down the barrel of his rifle while focusing on how to catch his breath.

Turn around! Come on now turn around! Victor thought to himself while waiting for his shot. Fortunately for him, he could save the round.

The monstrosity turned around, and Victor noticed smoke, not steam, emanating from the heap of living metal. Doomsteam grabbed at its eyes as they provided no vision. Frantically, it began trying to get the substance off his eyes. The smoke picked up more volume. Sparks started slowly at first, then found their mark - combusting the grease.

Victor could hear Doomsteam cry. He walked his horse at a slow trot, trying to move stealthily. He dismounted, tied it to the wagon, and headed off to face his hindered assailant.

I still have my emergency round in my rifle and pistol. That won't do. He touched his knife as he closed the distance stealthily on Doomsteam. *I think I've defended myself with this more than any other weapon.* He drew his knife from his shoulder harness. He could feel the weight. He always liked the heft of the object in his hand.

The distance between Victor and Doomsteam reached an end. The half train and half man swung his arms widely while banging his head trying to stop the fire. Victor

noticed that the skin on his torso melted away and now more than ever Victor realized the bipedal train dwelled in this realm as more machine than man.

He closed the distance making a forehand slash on the front left thigh of Doomsteam as he continued his momentum, passing to the creature's back making a large gash with a long backstroke with his blade. The monster showed no interest in Victor.

Victor repeated the same attack except on the right side but in reverse order instead targeting the back of the right thigh and making the large cut on Doomsteam's chest. After he performed the practiced slashing motion, he noticed that the front of its chest held what looked like two fireplace knobs. Victor retreated, deciding to take a moment to think about the newfound information.

That is where they keep the coal and the blaze that drives this thing. I need to expose it, then put it out. It's gonna' be hot to touch, and he's still on fire. Victor held his left arm out in front of him. He moved to make sure the tree he leaned up against shielded him from any glances that abomination could send his way. He cut the cuffs off both of his sleeves and wrapped them around his right hand. *Just open the door then get out.*

Victor sneaked up to Doomsteam as he continued to writhe in annoyance at the loss of his vision. Victor, despite his heavy breathing and nervousness, came within striking distance of the machine. He leaped at it placing his right hand on the bottom of the two latches. He turned and popped the first latch.

The undead reacted with a backhand that sent Victor flying and hitting a tree. Victor heard a loud snap as the force broke two of his ribs. Victor grimaced in pain, knowing that he needed to continue the fight, and get that other latch open.

A harsh reality crashed Victor's motivation. With his rib injury, the mere task of breathing labored him. He made several small puffs as his face contorted from the agony. Throwing the loss of his fingers and his ribs to the side, Victor charged forward.

Doomsteam lost track of Victor. Victor made it to the creature now dangerously ablaze. Victor reached up, grabbed the last latch and remembered the backhand slap from last time. He ducked out of the way. This movement reminded him of his injury. He turned on his heel and ran away from the monstrosity.

Now what? Victor thought to himself as he ran a crooked line toward the wagon. His eyes saw the river and the wagon. *That's it!* Victor ran to his horse, untied it from the wagon and mounted the horse. As Victor took off, he could see the whip he left behind. *Ha! I have a better idea!*

Victor approached Doomsteam, mustering up every bit of speed. He knew he needed to ride in a straight line to accelerate, but not straight enough to where it could pinpoint his path of travel. Victor eventually made it within striking distance. He jerked the reins to the left, slightly forcing the horse to move just in front of the blinded enemy.

Victor snapped his whip aimed at the blazing monstrosity. The whip landed around the undead's legs. Victor quickly tied the whip around the saddle horn before the strap became taut. Victor felt the jerk of the whip as he saw the machine fall on its back and could feel the vibration of the impact.

The horse slowed briefly with the added weight, but the animal's momentum propelled them forward. *Time to cool it down.* Victor towed Doomsteam in tow to the river. The horse high stepped into the water, forcing cold splashes everywhere on Victor.

Victor looked back as the monster entered the water. The water boiled briefly as the cool water mixed with the heat from that half man, half machine.

Victor could see the bright glow of the furnace in the center of the abomination's chest. It burned brightly, then began to fade. The monster made a few more desperate thrashes in the water. Victor could hear the gears inside slowly come to a halt. The monster, through gurgled words, shouted, "Katie – Take care of my Katie!"

Victor dismounted from his horse. He took his hat off and placed it over his heart. "You have my word. I'll take care of your Katie 'till my dyin' day."

"Thank you."

After Doomsteam's words, Victor could hear no gears turning.

Chapter 5

Victor knew that the Doomsteam battle ended, but another one quickly approached. He patted his horse gently on the hind end while making a “heeeyaah” sound. The horse obeyed its master’s command and left. Victor quietly hid behind a tree while reloading his rifle.

“We have you surrounded - surrender. Lavon just wants to talk with you. You have my word. Throw your weapons down, especially your knife and no one gets hurt,” screamed Verna from off in the distance.

“If you want me to surrender then why is someone in a black hat setting up a shot. I ain’t gonna’ let ‘em get me dead to rights. You want to talk then call him off.”

“Your eyes are possibly not as old as you look Victor.”

“Call him off. Last chance.”

“Bert, take the shot once you get it.”

Victor, while hugging his back to the tree, moved to his left as a rifle shot hit where his head rested two seconds prior. Victor continued the movement until he knew the tree gave him complete cover from the shooter. He dove on the ground in a prone position. He brought his rifle up to his face, staring down the barrel, finding the man in the black hat. He aimed just below the hat like Levon taught him and fired.

The man’s face fell limp as he dropped the rifle. Verna peered through her spyglass, seeing that Victor’s shot hit Bert square - killing him.

“Now I warned ya’. His blood is on your hands,” he began reloading his six shooter.

Verna felt herself becoming unnerved at the shot. She only thought Levon held that level of expertise. She shook off the nervousness quickly because she did not want the other members of her crew to see her intimidated. Verna's smile that made the men in her crew nervous. "Levon tells me you are an honorable man. We could spare some bloodshed. You and me in a duel. You win then you can leave."

"I have your word?"

"You have my word. Back to back, ten paces then fire duel. We will settle this like two honorable people in Surrestrada."

"Duel accepted."

As Victor approached, Verna's emotion fell on the fearful end of the spectrum. He held his pistol in his right hand and clutched his ribs with his three fingered left hand. His clothes sloshed from the water, but he managed to be filthy in places the water did not touch. Still, Victor took out Doomsteam. He shot her a glance as he came closer. At that moment, Verna's knees buckled in dread. At that moment, she knew she could not beat him.

"Let's get this over with, so I can catch up to my wagon train." Victor turned his back to Verna, glaring off into the distance. He waited for only a moment as he felt Verna's back on his. The two cocked their guns as one of the onlookers shouted, "Start your paces!"

Victor and Verna both took one step forward and let the other foot catch up with the lead foot. The man shouted, "One!"

Victor took a deep breath in then exhaled slowly. Verna decided to copy him. She took in a deep breath. It helped Verna for a moment. She looked around at her crew. She

knew they wanted to see their leader best Victor in a duel or die. It did not matter. The only ties her crew kept with those who put the most coin in their pocket.

The two completed their second step. Victor stated, “You don’t have to do this. Whatever Levon has on ya’ I can help you get out from underneath it. We can stop right now, and I can help you. You seem honorable. Let me getcha’ off this path you’re on.” Verna listened as she began to take her next step.

Verna tensed her jaw. Out of sheer panic, she turned around to face Victor’s back. She raised her gun and pulled the trigger, sending a bullet into the back of Victor’s skull.

Victor’s body hit the ground with a thud. His blood flowed onto the earth. Verna studied the look on Victor’s face. His face seemed to be locked in a state of concern for all eternity. Verna’s thoughts returned to her as her crew cheered on her actions. She looked at them and smiled. “This corpse had honor. What good did it do him?”

Part 2

I was getting ready to head back to the caravan after having a nice lunch at Sheryl's during most recent layover in Surrestrada. Nice big plate of eggs, bacon, biscuits - the size of my fist with a heap of homemade jam, and of course hash browns. Sheryl is such a lovely lady. She came over during The Exchange and opened her business. Everyone, I'm pretty sure, has stayed at her place at one time or another. She never judges. She just serves your food and gets a room ready for ya'.

Anyway, while I was there, I got to talking to a man named Mitch Merreltey. He said that he was a man of the law. I asked what that meant, and he says that he helps his clients navigate the long, winding road of the law. I told him that is one way to put it, and that he walks belly down like a snake is another. Everyone chuckled in the room, but I apologized. I didn't want him thinking I disrespected him. Anyway, he suggested at my age and occupation I should see him about a will. I asked what that was, and he told me it is my wishes of how to handle my estate upon my death.

At first, I chuckled at the man. Then I thought about it. I am getting longer in the tooth. Also, people think I am The Last Wagon Master. Now, that lately, has become a mark for death. Every man at some point in time thinks about his end. When it will appear, where will it happen, and how it all will go down. I'm not going to sit here and say I don't think about that. I stew on it a lot. I just don't fear it. I've lived a long time. I reckon a lot longer than anyone thought I would. I sat there and ate my food while thinking. I decided to take him up on his offer.

First I asked how much it would cost. He told me that it depended on how long it took. I said well, I ain't got much. I gotta' nice little savings in the bank. I got my wagon

train business, my horses, I have a little shack in Surrenstrada and little land down south. I always thought about finding me a nice woman, so I could settle down and build a beautiful place on that property. I could raise sheep. I like the idea of always having lamb chops around and some wool. I thought about that years ago – how time flies. My occupation keeps me busy and single. I've not been in the city long enough to find anyone that caught my fancy. As soon as the wagon train arrived in Surrenstrada, it was time to say bye to those folks that traveled with me and say hi to new customers that wished to get out of the city.

I realized something after my assessment of my belongings. The fact is I don't have much, but I like to think I'm leaving behind a legacy. I met Fred walking to my wagon train getting ready to leave Surrenstrada. The Exchange just happened, and he jumped through the portal. He ate with pigs and other nasty stuff. I saw myself in him. He had a will to survive, but when I approached him, I saw a man of peace despite life choices. Lavon took me in at that age. He taught me to read and write. Also, how to be a wagon master. I offered him a job as an extra hand on my wagon train. He took the job and never went hungry again. I watched him grow up into the man he has become. I'm so proud. He can think and make the right decision on his own. I like to think I played a role in that, but he was a good man before I met him. He will also be a good man after I leave. He is strong of body, mind, and will. I am proud to have known him.

Then there is Bobby. I found his boy similarly to the way I found Fred. That little boy compared to Fred was a harder worker and a lot more tender - hearted. I would take Fred hunting and he would kill a turkey with no problem. He'd pluck the thing looking forward to eatin' it. Bobby, on the other hand, I remember the boy's first successful hunt.

He looked down the barrel and just kept lookin'. The boy had no intention of killing that animal. I told him that it was alright, and I held no grudge about that. In fact, that is what I like about him the most. He has a good heart, and I hope nothing changes that too much throughout his life.

I left everything to Trev as he will be sure to take care of those two. That's what he does - he just oversees things. I have very little to leave behind, but I like to think I leave behind a legacy. I am leaving behind two men that are good folk. When I leave this world, and I'm just embers in the sky or housin' worms, those two will be carrying on and leadin' that ole' wagon train. More importantly, they will see those that need a little help. Those that just need a helpin' hand and maybe someone to give them someone to look up to in life. I have pride when I think about what I leave behind. It's not the shack or land, that's my legacy. It's two boys that will continue to help those that need helpin' even when it's not easy. You can have my possessions - I'll take my legacy. Them two boys make me damn proud, and there ain't a day that goes by that I don't give thanks for puttin' those boys in my path. I have no problem leavin' this place havin' known those two, and I'll do it with a smile knowin' I am leaving Surrestrada better than I came to it.

Trev, when I pass – take care of my boys. My new friend made it all legal like.

Victor Blue

Chapter 6

“Oh, my! There it is sir,” Trev stated as he looked in the distance, pointing to a stone building barely visible on the horizon because of the thick moss.

“Trev, for the fifteenth time, stop calling me sir,” Fred stated as he took in the sight of the Temple of the Ancient Ways. “Trev, what do you know of this temple?”

Trev straightened out his traveling cloak then cleared his throat. “Well, from my readings they worship animals. Any story about someone trying physical violence against them never ends well. They can use their legs to choke you like a big anaconda or pounce on you like a giant tiger.”

Fred took his gaze away from the road and ran his fingers through his long black hair. He looked at Trev then stated, “So what you are saying is I should not punch them in the face then scream by right of conquest this place is mine?”

Trev tightened his jaw and sent a dirty look Fred’s direction. He noticed the cloth draped over Fred’s mouth to protect from the dirt that kicked up from the horses as they propelled the wagon forward. “Fred, one day I am going to make you a sarcasm filter. Victor always said you were a nice fellow, a bit quiet, but a nice fellow nonetheless. He never told me you discharge sarcasm.”

Fred laughed, “My world is full of dread. I have disappointed Trev. My life will never be the same”

Trev’s face contorted into anger, “Fred what – that was smart. Well played.” Trev laughed. He could sense that Fred smiled through his mask. “Now that we are here, how long do we wait for Victor?”

Fred let out a deep breath then said, “We wait for a day maybe two. People have been operating on three hours of sleep while he pushed to this spot. We should allow them rest.”

Trev placed an understanding hand on Fred’s shoulder. “I agree Fred.” Trev did that not because Fred needed the reassurance, but he wanted to provide his support.

Fred lifted his hand and pointed to the temple as he gave a light tap of the reins to send them into a quicker gallop. Fred could hear the other wagon drivers picking up their pace, creating a cacophony of dirt and sound finishing the rough trek.

Fred led his wagon to a gate where two large men stood beside it. Both men wore undyed, linen britches with matching shirts, leather boots but the headpiece each man wore grabbed Fred’s attention. One man wore a deer skin pelt that started over his head and draped down well below his shoulders. The deer head placed over the man’s head made him appear to be a bi pedal deer, complete with antlers. The second man wore a fox’s head the same way the other man wore the deer. The second seemed younger. Fred noticed that they not only seemed to be in peak physical condition, but also held a calming spirit about them. Fred made eye contact with them and held it. “We are traveling to Surrenstrada. Victor sent us here saying we could find haven?”

The two men looked at each other then sent a stern gaze Fred’s direction. “Victor?” Yes, we know Victor. We owe him a favor. He repaired one of our wagon axles while teaching us how to do it many moon cycles ago. You and yours can find your haven. The stable is the first building to the left.” The two men opened the gate, welcoming them into their home.

Fred led his wagon train through the wooden gate. He instantly noticed mature trees that each held a swing where children laughed as they enjoyed flying through the air. Behind each child, stood a tall, well-muscled male or female. They dressed the same as the first two that let them in, but their headdresses differed. Headdresses varied from rams to coyotes and even a few black bears, which Fred thought seemed to be the most eye-catching. As they continued down the path, Fred started to notice an overlap on the headdresses, noticing that most wore deer.

A large building appeared on the right side of the trail. Fred put his right arm in the air and made a fist with it signaling the wagon train to stop. Fred leaped out of the wagon and took a long look around the area. He noticed the architecture of the stable. The construction at first glance seemed to be of primitive nature. Upon further inspection, Fred realized that the building's frame, made entirely of dead pine wood, held many carvings of various animals, but one stood out above all others. A large horse ran with a human behind the horse. The carving's interpretation led Fred to believe that they wanted to remind the observer that man is slower compared to that of a horse. Over the lever of the door that secured it read *be humble and give thanks*.

"Fred, you mind helping an old man down from the wagon?" Trev politely shouted while standing up on the wagon leaning over showing his age.

"I got you Trev," Fred stated as he walked to Trev's side. He reached up and held his left forearm out for Trev to grab onto it. As Trev began to fall, Fred grabbed Trev's waist, his right slowing Trev's momentum before his feet hit the ground.

"This place is well – green," Trev said with a look of disgust on his face.

"What is wrong with green, Trev?" Fred questioned.

Trev scoffed, “Nothing if you like rodents and mosquitos. When I get bit, I swell up to the size of a watermelon.”

Fred smiled as he made his way to the stable. “Trev you mind getting all the travelers comfortable and resting? Bobby and I have preparations to make.”

Trev cleared his throat. “Sure thing, Fred. I will see you at dinner.”

Fred opened the door to the stable. He walked in seeing the continued subtly detailed craftsmanship of the architecture. He noticed the cleanliness of the stalls and the comfort level of the horses held no equal. Each horse dwelled in its stall and wore a large fur blanket. Inside their accommodations, each contained plenty of water and enough food that Fred thought four horses could eat. This stable, the way they treated their horses made Fred feel safe. Fred felt he could rest, which happens to be a valuable commodity in Surrestrada.

Fred walked back out and placed one hand on the trace of his lead horse. He petted the horse. A familiar voice cut through exclaiming, “Sir, sir let me do that! Victor hired me to tend the horses. Let me do my job,” Bobby pleaded.

“You and Bobby will continue to do so as long as you do good work – which you do. Do not worry,” Fred stated in an attempt to calm the boy.

Bobby looked around. “These are the nicest stables I’ve ever seen!” He began to release the horses from their traces while brushing them.

“Bobby, you and Victor normally do all the maintenance on this wagon before you rest right?” Fred inquired of Bobby.

Bobby continued to release the horses from their burdens as he spoke. “That is normally what happens. He shouldn’t help me. We generally free the horses, then grease the axles and wheels. Every wagon team does this before they turn in.”

Fred nodded to Bobby as he walked to grab the grease in the wagon. “Bobby, have I ever told you the story of how Victor discovered me.”

Bobby held a focus as he performed his tasks, “No Fred you’ve not.”

Fred crawled underneath the wagon. “I was about your age. I was lost during a relocation of my tribe. I ended up in Surrestrada. Victor saw me eating pig slop. It was a vile mix of things to be thrown away. He told me I have a job. That job was to scout and make sure I can see trouble coming the wagon train’s way, and Trev taught me English.”

Bobby looked fascinated. “You’re the best scout in Surrestrada! You always come back with good information.”

Fred looked troubled. “That is the problem. I can only see trouble a few hundred yards away from the wagon train. I cannot see it behind us.”

Bobby’s face made an understanding expression, and his blue eyes softened. “Like Victor? I’m worried. I hope he’s alive.”

Fred nodded in agreement. “Yes. I hope he is alive as well.”

Bobby looked at Fred, and his mind delivered an epiphany. “Fred, you know if Victor dies then that makes you The Last Wagon Master?”

Fred continued to grease the wheel. “Bobby that is a responsibility I do not want.”

Verna stood over Victor’s corpse. Victor fell face down. The bullet hole stared at her. The moment held her in what seemed like a pocket dimension. She heard the cheers of her crew as they knew that Lavon would pay them that bonus due them for bringing

Victor's demise. Still, the noises seemed dampened as the dead's words flew in her mind like a train on a circle track.

She snapped out of her trance when a crew member placed his arm around her. The man's breath smelled of raw meat. He said, "Verna ya' damn crazy, chaotic princess! You shot 'em dead. For what, for honor? Classic line, we'll be drinkin' and toastin' to that one boys won't we?"

Verna looked at him, and she slid his arm off of her. She smiled, "First rounds on me after we get back to Surrenstrada with that thing in our wagon."

One of the other men walked to face Verna. His eyes squinted with malicious intent. He said, "We're gonna' go get The Last Wagon Master, Fred. I betcha' we'll get a bounty for 'em."

Verna cocked her head. She lacked the ability to understand his logic. She grabbed her pistol handle then said, "We did the job. We did exactly what Lavon wanted us to. Put the machine in the wagon and let's go!"

The man placed his hand on his pistol and stared at Verna, "Listen to me Lavon leftovers, I ain't seen you do a damn thing besides shootin' some old man with his back turned. I'm leavin' with anyone that wants ta' make some money." He waited for Verna to either draw or walk away.

Verna looked at the other men. They held the same position with their hand over their pistol handle, ready to draw. One of the men agreeing said, "Verna, it's big money! It's just business."

The fellow who tried to put his arm around Verna stepped in between Verna and the man. With his palms open and hands out to show no wicked intent, he said, "Guys,

come on now. Just go ahead and go. There ain't no reason to pull those guns. No one makes money that way."

The man let go of the pistol handle. He said, "This crew and I are gone. You want in on this action come with us. If not, get the hell out of our way."

Verna took a deep breath, then released her grip on her pistol. Her deep blue eyes squinted, holding back the hate that consumed her. She said, "If you want to get killed by those damn animal worshipers then go ahead."

"Animal worshipers?" the man questioned.

"Yes, with their loss it's only logical to seek refuge there."

"You mean the folks that keep to themselves? Those tree lickers ain't got no weapons. We're gonna' ride up in nere' and make money and get Lavon's favor."

Verna looked at the other men following his lead. She shook her head then said, "Guys, they're weird, yes, but they have numbers. You can't just ride in there with no plan."

The lead man looked at her then said, "We have a plan. We shoot the gate guards and ride on in there."

Verna rolled her eyes then said, "Did you spend a long time calculating that plan?"

The man started walking to his horse. With his back turned he said, "Well, some of us that want Levon's favor can't just sleep with him or shoot an old man in the back."

The other men followed suit to mount their horses. The all laughed at the previous comment. Pleading with the men leaving, Verna said, "Listen you're all following a fool! He's gonna' get y'all killed!"

They all looked at her as they grabbed their reins. One of the men piped up and said, “Money and Levon owing us a favor. It’s worth the risk.”

The men started blazing their path toward the wagon train. As they became blurry from a distance, Verna shouted, “I bet y’all will be animal droppings by mornin’!”

Verna kicked the dust and started pacing violently.

Her new friend, the one with the bad breath, stayed behind. He said, “Maam, the name’s Trinto. You can call me Trin.”

“Well Trin, I don’t think we’re going to get a chance to get that abomination out of the water. I think we should camp for the night then leave in the morning to collect our fee.”

Trin nodded then walked away to gather wood. Verna thought long, malicious thoughts to herself while he walked away. She thought to herself about the cowardly way she killed Victor and how her crew left. She screamed in violent protest at the way her life turned out to this point.

The distance between Trin and her increased. She kept her eyes on him as he drifted into the thicker foliage of trees and shrubs. She felt a cool breeze that reminded her to take a deep breath. She closed her eyes and exhaled deeply. When she opened her eyes - she felt relief. As if her problems shrank as her breath left her body. She walked over to her horse. A palomino with a blonde mane. She stood tall, and she dared not hide her affection for Verna. The mane, long and blonde, neatly trimmed with tight braids. She reached inside the saddle bags and pulled out a small, brown bag. She took out her knife in its sheath on her right side, and with a precise stroke, she cut the bag but dared not release it.

The horse shifted its head and neighed in her direction in anticipation of the feed on the ground. Verna took her cowboy hat off her head then ran her fingers through her long, blonde locks. She poured the mixture of oats and barley into her hat. She walked over to her horse. She held her hat to where the horse could eat the concoction. The horse eagerly obliged. Verna said, "Hey there Sassy. You eat girl. You earned it like ya' always do dear." She gently rubbed in between the horse's eyes with her other hand. The voice softened and lost its usual harshness as she said, "Sorry I made you pull the coach. You did well. You always do well. My girl. My Sassy girl." She started petting the horse under the bridle as she continued talking delicately.

Footsteps approached from behind her. She looked back and noticed Trin striding back to camp with a good mix of various sizes of firewood in his hands. Verna turned back to Sassy and whispered, "Well, I guess our private time is over now."

Trin approached and noticed the pleasing shape of Verna's body. Her long, blonde hair that covered her whole back. He saw her knife sheath that hung on her left side waistband and the gun belt that hung low. He noticed that her hips prevented it from going to the ground. He failed to take his eyes off her curvaceous body. He said, "Ya' know, this could be right romantic. It's just you and me out here ya' know. A campfire, the stars, I mean you an' I can make a nice go of it an' no one has ta' know."

Verna rolled her eyes. She heard this same line from various crew members numerous times. She kept petting Sassy while she said, "I've heard this a million times before. I've got far better looking and richer men pursuing me. Set up the fire and our food is in my saddle bag."

She heard the wood drop on the ground. She kept petting the horse and looking into Sassy's eyes. She noticed the reflection in Sassy's eyes of herself. She saw the tiredness and age she acquired through the years of a rough time trying to survive in Surrestrada. She saw movement coming from behind her in the horse's eyes. She saw Trin standing directly behind her in Sassy's almond orbs. She turned around quickly to face him. She saw the crazed look in Trin's eyes.

Unfortunately, Verna failed to see the large limb Trin sent crashing on her face. The limb landed directly on the side of her left temple. Her vision turned to watery waves. Inside her head emanated a loud distracting ringing. She fell after a failed attempt at gathering her senses. She lay on the ground, quickly fading into unconsciousness.

Verna felt Trin on top of her. She smelled his breath as he started to kiss her. His breath smelled of tobacco and his last meal. Verna felt her head beginning to sink into the ground as she wanted nothing more at the moment than rest. Her eyes closed as sleep took her.

A stern voice rang out in Verna's discombobulated mind. The voice sounded like Levon, and it said "Stay awake. Fight this man off you. Do not be a victim for the rest of your life." She opened her eyes. She saw the blurry night sky. She started kissing him. Shortly afterward, she allowed her hand to drift where he wanted. With her other hand, Verna looked for a weapon. Trin failed to notice any of this as he started to enjoy himself.

Verna's fingers came across Trin's weapon inside his holster on his hip. She slowly removed it from the holster while the other hand distracted Trin. Overcome with passion, Trin felt the time came to remove the top half of Verna's clothing. He lifted up

and started unbuttoning Verna's shirt. One button and she shot him a seductive look that promised the blonde haired, violent goddess of Surrenstrada before him pledged to satisfy his every dream. He looked deeper into her eyes then returned to the task. He reached for button number two while Verna continued to touch him in all the right places.

With the other hand, Verna brought Trin's six shooter to the side of its owners head. He heard the click, realizing the woman had bested him. For Trin, Verna failed to make him wait long. She pulled the trigger releasing the contents of Trin's head onto the ground and on her. She felt this body parts and blood on her. The limp body fell on top of her, and more blood from her attacker spilled on top of her shirt. She struggled to lift the bleeding carcass from atop her. Eventually, she wriggled her hips in the right direction until the man just simply fell to the ground.

Verna took a moment to get to her feet. She felt a gigantic knot at the location of impact from the branch Trin hit her with across her face. As she stood up, she felt the world spin. She knew that once her adrenaline stopped pumping from the altercation that her symptoms only stood to worsen when they returned. She looked at Sassy. Verna dizzily struggled to walk towards her.

She patted Sassy then used her for balance. The emotional creature knew that its master seemed troubled. Verna looked around to see her saddle and the bit. Time passed, and with each moment, she knew she became more vulnerable. She wanted the ringing and dizziness to go away, and the only way to get that seemed sleep. She stood at the horse's neck and placed her arms around the willing creature's throat. Afterward, she put her head on the horse's back. She mustered her remaining strength to take a few running steps then she used the momentum to swing onto the horse. Verna knew this seemed not

to be her most graceful bareback mount attempt. At the same time, it worked. She relaxed her body and went limp. Verna leaned forward and rested her head on top of Sassy's back. Verna whispered to her girl, "Get us home my Sassy girl. Get us home." The horse started slowly walking in the direction of home Verna thought. She allowed herself to drift into unconsciousness then realized she survived. She will make everything else right later.

Chapter 7

Bobby, Fred, and Trev ate their cornbread and beans while staring into the campfire. Trev dipped his cornbread in his beans then devoured it. “This cornbread is absolutely delightful.”

Bobby looked at Fred while the firelight flickered and the fire crackled. Bobby then asked, “Fred when are we leaving?”

Fred looked at Bobby. Fred stated in a reassuring tone, “We will rest for one full day. The travelers are tired. A full day of rest will do everyone good. I myself will be sleeping in tomorrow.”

Trev smiled, “I am going to turn in so early tonight and open these old eyes only to take my meals. Three hours hurt my body and feelings.”

The sound of a traveler’s heavy boots clunked on the ground. The three of them turned in that direction. Bobby’s eyes widened as the fire provided insight to the shape that approached. Her clothes clung to her feminine frame making the young boy speechless. Fred noticed her long black hair tied in a high ponytail giving it a bounce and making her seem playful. She spoke and her voice sounded glasslike. As she spoke she enthralled the three. “Excuse me, um Fred? I noticed that you are the acting Wagon Master. I made this for you. It is tea with a herb extraction to help you sleep. I know you have responsibilities, and a good night’s sleep would do you some good.”

Fred took the cup. “Thank you miss? I did not catch your name. What is it?” Fred asked.

The lady smiled at Fred. Their eyes met and Fred noticed that the bow in her hair and her eyes shared the same emerald splendor. “The name is Kathryn. Kathryn McMillan.”

Fred sat the cup down on the ground. “Kathryn McMillan thank you for your gift. I will drink it tonight when I am ready to take my slumber.”

Kathryn smiled. “Sleep well Wagon Master.” Kathryn turned around and walked away. Bobby, Fred, and Trev leered at her. They enjoyed the shape of the woman’s backside and hips. When she eventually walked out of view, Fred looked at the other two. “We should make rounds and make sure everyone is ready to turn in for the evening.”

Trev nodded in agreement. “Well said, Fred. I will make sure that the beans are secure.”

Bobby smiled. “Just want one more helpin’. I’ll see if any of the wagon drivers need help with their wagon maintenance. They should be good. Fred, you should socialize. After all, you’re so talkative.”

Fred smiled. “I will answer any questions they have.”

Trev put a hand on Fred’s shoulder as he stood up. “Fred just you walking around checking on people will reassure them. Your greatest asset is the aura you have. You do not need to say a word to calm them. You will be just fine just answer any questions they have in a reassuring tone. Now, if you gentleman excuse me, I have some beans needing attending.”

Fred put his cup of tea by the log he sat upon. “Well, let us get to it. Bobby, remember to go to bed at a decent time. Get yourself plenty of rest.”

Fred walked over to the newly married couple. Fred made an effort to smile. “Greetings newlyweds. How are you all doing this evening?”

The newlyweds shifted uncomfortably. The husband spoke up. “Fred, are you the new Wagon Master?”

Fred nodded at the husband while making eye contact. “Yes, I am. At least until Victor gets back.”

The husband took his hat off and placed it over his heart and with the other touched the stomach of his bride. “She’s pregnant sir. We’re nervous ‘bout her givin’ birth on the road.”

Fred placed a reassuring hand on the man’s shoulder. “I assure you. We will do our best to make sure we are in Surrestrada before she does.”

The husband nodded graciously. “Thanks, Fred.”

Fred nodded and began to walk away. He heard loud footsteps approaching and turned around to face them as he reached for his knife out of instinct.

“Fred! Fred, one of the kids have been poisoned. Trev told me to come get cha’.” Bobby screamed as soon as Fred faced him.

Fred ran toward Bobby. “Lead the way Bobby.”

The two ran to a small hut made of elk hide. The stretched hide wrapped tautly to giant, dead pine timbers. Fred and Bobby strode their way inside the tent. He noticed a familiar girl that held a reputation for stealing table scraps after dinner every evening. The girl’s veins swelled to the point where they became visible on all the exposed parts of her body. A black, smoky translucent substance traveled up and down her body. Fred thought a snake slithered in the girl’s body.

Trev touched the girl’s skin and began tracing the vein. “This poison is part mystic. We need to get it out of the girl immediately. We should – “

“If you cut the girl’s vein and try to remove it then it will just turn around. You must kill the magic then remove it.” A woman wearing undyed linen pants, shirt and

leather boots strolled inside. Her well-maintained headdress of an otter hung off her head making her look like the animal.

Trev looked at the woman obviously not liking to be corrected. “Yes miss and how are we supposed to kill the magic? What is your name?”

The lady ignored the look and his tone. She grabbed a few herbs on a side table and placed them inside a well-aged mortar and pestle. “ My name is Trishna. This mystic creature travels his way through the girl’s veins putting the child through tremendous physical pain. This being also excretes a form of fear inducing hormone into the body. Right now she is living out her worst nightmare. She will continue to until she dies or we kill the magical entity inside.”

Bobby ran his fingers through his blond hair. “Maam’, how do we kill it?”

The lady continued mixing the herbs together in the pestle and mortar. She gave a calming look to Bobby, “You ask the right question, dear boy. There is a plant that grows in the Forsaken Swamp called Minstrol. It will kill the dark magic.” She leered over in Trev’s direction. “The poison came from a plant called Ivnet. The poison itself is harmless. “She made a small incision in the girl’s arm then she started to gently pack the herbs inside the freshly made cut. “But the intent has been amplified by necromancy. Isn’t that right Trev?”

Trev nodded. “My knowledge on necromancy is limited at best. Miss, you seem to know more than I do.” He changed his focus to Fred. “You know the location of this Forsaken Swamp?”

Fred scratched his chin. “Yes, it is about a hard day’s ride to the west.”

The skin flap that acted as a door swung open and there stood a bear of a man. He stood over six and a half feet tall. He wore the same clothes as everyone in the temple, but his brown bear headdress heightened the man's intimidating presence. His jaw held no curvature, giving it a perfect rectangular appearance. His shoulders appeared they could carry the weight of the world.

He looked at the lady placing herbs inside the girl's arm. "Otter Trishna, what is going on here?"

Trishna began putting thread through a needle. "Brown Bear Talsnow, this girl was poisoned. The poisoner used necromancy. They conjured a death worm."

Talsnow walked over to the girl. Fred, Trev and Bobby instantly noticed the grace and power with which the giant of a man walked. Talsnow gently patted the girl's head and ran his fingers through the child's hair. "This girl is full of life. Where do I need to go Trishna."

Trishna looked at Talsnow as she finished up the stitches on the girl. "The Forsaken Swamp to retrieve some Ivnet."

Talsnow scratched his chin. "Yes, Ivnet I have gathered that many times. I will leave now."

Fred looked at Talsnow. "I will get it Brown Bear Talsnow. I am the acting Wagon Master. It is my responsibility."

Trev looked at the Talsnow. "Fred, if you leave who will be acting Wagon Master? Me - I cannot perform those tasks. The next choice is Bobby. You have been Wagon Master for less than a day and someone already attempted to try and kill you. Let Talsnow go in your stead. Going would give Bobby a death sentence."

Bobby looked at Trev with determination on his face. “Fred you need to get goin’. I will be fine. We’ll not leave until you get back if that is alright with Talsnow.”

Talsnow turned to Bobby’s direction. He instantly felt the presence of the gigantic man wearing the headdress of an even more intimidating creature. “My temple will protect you and your wagon train, Wagon Master Bobby, while Fred retrieves the herb.”

Bobby felt overwhelmed but then he saw an empathetic smile emanating from Talsnow. “Thank you Brown Bear Talsnow.”

Fred nodded. “I will come back with the herb. What does it look like?”

Trishna pulled out a stretched piece of leather. She quickly drew a rough sketch of the herb. “Here. Now go.”

Talsnow looked at Bobby. “Wagon Master, I will increase the guard. Fred, go with the blessings of the temple.” Talsnow pulled the skin flap and departed.

Trev looked at Bobby and Fred. “I need to find out what happened to Victor. I will also be leaving. I will meet you as soon as I can.”

Bobby looked at him pleadingly. “Please stay. I’ve been Wagon Master for a few moments. I need an advisor.”

Trev placed a hand on the top of Bobby’s head. “You will be fine dear boy. You have Talsnow and Miss Lady Otter’s attitude over there who will help you with any rough decisions. Do not worry. I will be back with haste. Victor helped me when no one else would. He deserves to be put to rest.”

Fred nodded in agreement. “There is no chance of talking you out of it?”

Trev smiled at Fred. “Not even the slightest.”

Fred slammed his hand on Trev's back. "Be safe then and return as quickly as possible."

"You will not even know I am gone," Trev muttered.

Trev and Fred walked out of the tent, shook hands, and then went their separate ways. Bobby stared at Trishna as she worked over the girl. Trishna could feel his eyes burning over her. She smiled as she rubbed oil over her patient. "Wagon Master Bobby, you have more pressing matters than to stand over me tending to this child."

Bobby broke the eye contact with Trishna. "I don't know where to start maam'."

Trishna messed up Bobby's blond hair. "The first step is to take a deep breath. The second is to leave this tent. The rest will just happen naturally, dear boy."

Daybreak found Lavon's homestead. Sunlight illuminated the front part of his wraparound porch. In the immediate area surrounding Lavon's homestead, the typical building only possessed one floor, but a few contained two. His residence towered over the area with four gigantic floors. The architecture of the building stood out more than anything. Clean white shutters surrounded thick, glass windows on the exterior. A fresh coat of light, grey paint coated the exterior.

Lavon sat in a wooden rocking chair. He greeted the morning sun with a cup of coffee and his paper. *The Surrenstrada Journal*, which pumped out an issue daily, lay still folded on his lap as he took a sip of his coffee. He breathed deeply taking in the fresh scent of the morning's fine roast. He sat back in his rocking chair and placed his feet on the railing of his porch. He smiled as he looked at the sunrise and began unfolding his paper. The first article's headline read, "Sheriff Buchanon Stumped over Wagon Master's

Ofus' Murder." Lavon shook his head as he continued reading the article. Eventually he muttered, "My friend Ofus, you should have taken the payout my friend. You should have taken the payout." The sound of a horse trotting directly to him forced him to split his attention away from his paper.

The sight he saw destroyed his peaceful morning. Verna, laying limp on top of a horse at full gallop screamed toward him. Lavon's first step seemed instinctual as he leaped to his feet. He then thought that this could be a trap. He knew Victor never played this rough, but his understudy Fred might. His mind conjured the plan that she failed. Victor's understudy convinced him after defeating Verna to send her lifeless corpse back to him as a distraction. That felt like a lure to entice him out in the open on an impulse. He quickly ran inside and took the stairs as quickly as his legs could carry him. He ran to the closest room while grabbing the rifle from the rack by the window. His rooms, all designed with reinforced windows for a time like this, all provided a terrific view of the other rooftops in the surrounding area since his fort held stories above the others.

Lavon opened the window then lifted his rifle. He looked at his neighbor's houses through his rifle's scope special from the other side of the portal. Lavon bounced from one rooftop to another attempting to find someone vying for a shot at him. He took his time looking through his scope. He wanted to identify each individual hiding spot. The thought of Verna interrupted the count of hinges on the neighbor's barn door. He placed the rifle back on the rack then ran toward Verna.

As he ran down the stairs he promised himself that delaying in the open seemed the least strategic plan. No matter what, get the horse to the barn and deal with Verna then. He saw her with closed eyes. He knew something terrible happened because her

eyelids held in the light of her green orbs that he knew lit up the world around him. He noticed the whelp on the side of her face. Someone hit his little girl. He lost all his logic and violated the plan when he saw the vomit chunks on the side of the steed. He quickly lifted her off the horse and carried her inside his fortress.

He laid her in a wooden rocking chair with a thick, black pillow in the seat. Lavon lifted her feet then set them on a plush ottoman. He grabbed a bowl of warm water from his kitchen. With a rag, Lavon started to wipe away the vomit chunks gently from Verna's hair and around her mouth. Afterward, he gently patted her on the head, "Now, my dear. I am off to take care of the wonderful creature that brought you back to me." He put on his six shooter and left to attend her horse.

Lavon gently removed the bit from Sassy and scratched her underneath the halter. He then grabbed the halter and started walking toward his barn. A small boy, on the short side and not older than eight ran, greeted Lavon as he entered. The barn contained five stalls on each side for a total of ten and stood two stories tall. Each stall allowed the horse ample room to walk around, lay down and stand up with room to spare. One side of the barn housed the horses he used for his wagon which all seemed to be employed due to their absence. On the other side of the barn in the last stall housed his personal horse with his handcrafted, customized saddle setting on a rack next to the door. The second story stored extra materials. These ranged from extra feed and riding items.

The boy looked at Lavon and nervously said, "Sir, you want to give her a washin' and a good brushin' before puttin' her in a stall?"

Lavon made eye contact with the boy, “James, I am going to take care of that personally. Would you mind fetching me a couple of apples and honey from my kitchen?”

“Yes sir, right away sir.”

“James, do not forget to grab yourself a few as well.”

Lavon placed Sassy’s bit on a nail by the first open stall. He rubbed the horse’s neck as he gently led the horse to the other side of the barn and into a round pen. He closed the door then walked to a black bucket. With the bucket, he opened the gate to the round pen and went to the well on the other side of the pen. He grabbed the lever and started rotating it with slow, deliberate turns. Soon the bucket full of water returned to him, and he rolled up his sleeves. He started washing the horse, and he heard the footsteps of James running toward himself and Sassy.

“Sir, I got the apples and honey.”

Lavon smiled and looked at James then said, “James, take a break. You ever had apples with a little bit of honey? Go ahead and take a break in the kitchen. A grown boy like you should have breakfast anyway. Just leave my share of the apples and honey in a bucket in an open stall. Have Julian make you something good.”

“Like an omelet with ham and cheese?”

“Exactly like a ham and cheese omelet. Maybe have him make you some biscuits with some strawberry jam. That is what I like to eat. Some coffee in the morning and a few biscuits with that jam, and you will go long as me James. Oh! Also, another secret, I put some honey in my coffee first thing. I love that stuff,” Lavon said as he continued washing Sassy.

“Is that why you keep bees, sir?”

“I like the whole beekeeper process. They are fascinating creatures to me.

Sometimes I wish I could smell fear like they can. As humans, we tend to hide our fear. I guess my admiration stems from jealousy. I would like their power of cutting through the lies and deceit.”

“What would you do with that power, sir?”

“James, people act out of fear. These reactions based out of fear are not calculated and not planned. Often, they can be the most dangerous. Being able to smell the emotion so you could see the strike coming would be beneficial.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, enjoy your breakfast. Tell Julian to give you a fresh honeycomb. You will never forget the taste of it.”

The boy nodded then scurried off to take care of his rumbling belly. Lavon returned to focusing on the task at hand. He wanted to repay the creature that brought his Verna back to him. He cleaned Sassy, patted her down with towels, and walked her gently in the round pen until she was dry. He placed her inside a clean stall then grabbed the bucket James left for him on the inside of the stable door with the two apples and honey. He placed the bucket on top of the stable door. He held one of the apples and took out his knife. He made thin slices with his knife, but he paid close attention to properly remove the core. After repeating the process with another apple, he placed them in the bucket and poured honey on top of the apples. He hung the bucket on the inside hook of the stable door. Sassy instantly started eating it and looked at him gratefully before he walked outside.

The sight Lavon saw immediately angered him. The crew he assembled to help Verna retrieve Doomsteam and Victor's body sped toward him on horseback. His jaw locked as he saw the four of them closing the distance. He instantly straightened his hat as he scanned for any of them grabbing weapons. Lavon placed his hands on his belt buckle as the four riders surrounded him. He looked at each of them in the eye. He wanted to obtain a read on each man. The first he looked at seemed slow and followed orders because he lacked the intelligence to make his own. A solid layer of grease collected under the man's chin from his meal the night before.

The second man kept looking around and behind him. Lavon thought this man not a coward but a survivor. He was aware that not every man or woman born shot the quickest or straightest and fought like a cornered badger. He knew the man worked within his skillset. Lavon's read knew as long the confrontation stayed directly away from him there seemed no threat to him.

The third man seemed shorter than the average man in Surrestrada. His greasy black hair combed straight back underneath his hat. Lavon figured his temper, like his height, swung on the short side of the pendulum. The last man riding worried Lavon. His posture tight, the man held his reins loose as if he knew he held control of the beast. His ear to ear smile gave the impression of confidence. Lavon knew this man held the largest challenge.

Lavon made eye contact with each man that stared at him. He calmly said, "What happened to Verna?"

The man with the calm demeanor looked at Lavon and said, "Victor killed her, but don't you worry, Lavon - we killed Victor."

Lavon looked at the ground pretending that the news devastated him. He said while watching the ground, "Which one of you took charge after she passed?"

The man wearing the smile raised his eyebrows and shifted his head to the other side. He said, "I'm in charge of this outfit now."

Lavon made eye contact with the newly, self-declared leader then looked back at the ground. With Lavon's right arm he reached for his holster and pulled out his firearm. He took an aggressive step forward while aiming his pistol. Lavon squeezed the trigger and sent a round breaking the silence of a quiet morning. The bullet hit the leader between the eyes. The momentum of the bullet sent his head flying back, knocking his hat off and onto the ground. The smiling man's corpse hit the ground. He holstered his weapon and looked around at the remaining men then said, "As your employer, I am going to pay you half. I pay for the deal that was made and not delusions of grandeur. That being said, we can look at this as a new beginning. You learned your lesson. I am your new leader now. We ride out tomorrow morning. We will kill the last wagon master Fred."

The short man looked at Lavon and said, "Sir, what about the boy? He could step in line after the injun?"

Lavon made eye contact with the short man, "Well if he is to become the next Wagon Master then we will be forced to kill him as well. Now, get some sleep. We have a long voyage in the morning, but first - take care of this corpse on my property."

Chapter 8

Fred gently scratched his chestnut mare's mane before he saddled his horse. He smiled as he made eye contact with the docile creature. "What did Bobby name you?" He inquired as the saddle found the horse's back and latched the two buckles that secured it. The horse neighed his eagerness at the thought of running instead of pulling a wagon with his fellow toilers.

Fred reached into his backpack, peered around to investigate if any witnesses spotted him, then he grabbed his tomahawk out of his backpack. The Tomahawk possessed a long leather strap designed to be tied around the waist, but Fred placed the strap around his neck and put it on his back, so the strap would be out of his way while he rode. He unbuttoned his emerald green shirt while maneuvering around the harness that held his knife. He placed his shirt in the backpack while grabbing a waterskin. He poured the contents into his hand. The mixture of berries and wine thickened by flour made it obvious that this concoction stained what it touched. He then made markings on his face and body, giving the appearance of an owl. He returned the waterskin to his backpack and then acquired two feathers - one white and the other black. He placed them in his hair. Fred hung the bag on the saddle horn of the horse.

He climbed on top of his mount then lightly tapped its sides, which propelled the horse forward. Fred patiently waited while the horse walked and loosened up its massive muscles. He tapped the horse on the side again this time sending the horse galloping. Fred smiled as he repeated sending the horse on a sprint. Fred could feel the wind blowing through his hair.

The feeling of freedom failed to linger. Fred spotted the Forsaken Swamp showing itself on the horizon. The fog devoured any beam of sunlight that attempted to penetrate the permanent gloom. Fred could make out the dead disposition of the trees.

Fred slowed his horse to a walk as it closed the last mile. Fred noticed the threshold seemed unnatural. He thought to himself that the swamp started after a certain point. It did not blend in slowly. The horse stopped at the threshold and made a noise in defiance. The horse began to buck. Its massive body jerked and swayed, creating momentum attempting to get Fred off its back.

While trying to maintain his connection with the horse, Fred reached for his backpack that hung over the saddle horn while retaining his grip on the reins. The backpack gave way, and he held it with his left hand. Fred loosened his feet from the stirrups while keeping the restraints. Fred let go of the reins realizing that he no longer controlled the horse. He grabbed the saddle horn with his right hand and swung his feet around to the beast's back. Fred jumped from the horse, putting enough distance between himself and the quadrupedal bucking machine.

The moment Fred departed the horse's back, it went running away from the swamp. He stared at it as the creature put a considerable amount of distance between itself, Fred, and the dark location that awaited him. Fred took one last look around at The Forsaken Swamp. He unbuckled his knife, held it in his left hand, then grabbed his tomahawk with his right hand. Fred took a deep breath to calm his nerves then walked into the dismal swamp.

Fred's feet instantly sank in soggy puddles. He peered out at the terrain before him. This view confirmed his suspicion that the water below his feet would be a constant

during his travels in the swamp. As he traveled the water never rose above mid-shin. Fred noticed that the wildlife populated the area nicely but managed to stay hidden. The nature of his former job as a scout, always put him in places that held more primal qualities. Fred enjoyed these places more than being in a city. Normally he would be ecstatic to be out traipsing across the frontier. This adventure seemed different. His thoughts drifted to the new pressure of being the Last Wagon Master. His first day officially as Wagon Master brought him to this swamp trying to save a child who drank the poison meant for him. Guilt and pressure manifested itself into a ball in his stomach that he wanted to take his knife and tomahawk and cut it out of his body. Adding to the weight of Fred's inner turmoil - the constant sloshing. Fred could not recall a time when something as simple as soaked feet kept in waterlogged boots made him this irritable.

Fred trudged along for what felt like the short side of eternity before he realized that the problem disturbed his other senses. He quickly determined that he needed his faculties more than he needed his flooded boots. He glimpsed a large log sticking up from the water. The march felt much better with the sight of a place to sit down for a bit and get his boots off. He also decided that he should look at the rendering of the herb he needed to save the child.

The moment the stump took the weight from Fred's legs and feet, relief shot throughout the entirety of his body. He crossed his right leg over his left leg. He reached down and pulled his boot off. He noticed the texture of his feet. They appeared as fruit dried out in the sun after it fell off its tree. He placed his boot to the side and repeated the same task with his left side then let both his feet back in the water. It felt much better, but he still did not like leaving his feet unprotected on the swampy floor.

The swamp's fog shifted. Fred knew he kept the company of various creatures of the marsh, but now he knew an intruder approached. He reached for his tomahawk and knife and rolled off the log into the water. He heard a blowgun's dart fly through the air and hit the dead log behind him. He reached up for his boot. He placed the boot inside the water allowing the boot to fill up then he tried to spot the assassin. Fred gently put one ear inside the cloudy swamp water. Fred noticed instantly that the footsteps made as much noise as a rabbit. He listened intently to the splashing in the water and caught her trajectory. He picked his moment, but before he stood up, he noticed a smell. The scent stood out because it did not reek of something musty. The aroma pleased his nostrils. He knew this scent. He recalled being in a tavern in Surrenstrada, and the various women patrons of the establishment wore it. The word perfume came to mind as he sprang up from the water and glared right at her. The woman shot another dart, but it hit the boot Fred held. The boot began to seep water as he closed the distance on his attacker.

Water splashed as the distance closed. Fred's preconceived notions confirmed themselves as he noticed a female approximately six feet tall wearing gray wool pants, white linen shirt and a pair of knee-high black boots. His initial inference led him to believe someone much smaller than what he currently noticed. She possessed femininity in abundance. He continued to close as the lady readied herself for another shot with her blowgun. Fred grabbed the boot and sent the water inside in her direction. This caused a brief hesitation with the assassin. Fred realized that Kathryn from the camp earlier appeared to be the same person that stared at him.

She realized that the range of effectiveness of her blowgun approached an end with Fred's quick barefoot steps. She pulled out a saber with her right hand and a light

dagger with her other. Fred went in high with his knife, but she met the attack with her dagger which she held in her left hand.

Fred simultaneously brought his tomahawk aimed at her right leg. The assailant threw her leg out with anticipation while spinning around in an anticipatory fighting stance. The counter to his first attack did not worry Fred. The dodge impressed Fred, and the anticipation of the second attack concerned Fred. This assassin possessed training. He decided to let her attack. “What is your name?” he asked to confirm his suspicion while making a welcoming gesture.

“Katie – now fight you fool!” Katie pivoted on the ball of her left foot while cracking her right leg like a whip sending a light splash of water in all directions. The impact forced Fred to involuntarily drop from his stance momentarily. The splash impaired his vision, but before he could recover, he felt a boot in the center of his chest, causing him to backpedal. Fred knew the importance of balance in a skirmish, and he currently seemed to be at momentum’s mercy. He knew he needed to collect it before anything else.

Katie switched her feet, causing her to close the distance. She led this time with her saber, then immediately feigned with her dagger. She lifted her right leg and kicked it back while thrusting with her sabre. Her long red hair seemed to flow with her. Fred noticed remnants of ash and soot on the locks of his opponent. Her disguise deceived him – he fell for it.

Fred decided that allowing her to attack seemed to be a bigger mistake than the time Victor decided to eat honey after Fred told him that bears lurked in the Woods of Mearl. He needed to attack. He moved his left hand to his right shoulder and positioned

his right arm underneath his left arm, but on his right side. He moved his right foot slightly back to make his body slimmer. Fred gave a backstroke with his left hand aimed at her upper body, then followed with a forearm strike with his right once again aimed at her upper body. He immediately followed with a left again.

Fred's switched his feet, putting his right leg forward and following with his left. His arms shifted as well. The quickness of his attacks increased, and the strikes all aimed at her torso. Katie, growing impatient anticipated a movement too quickly. Fred noticed this and swiped the back of her leg with his tomahawk.

Katie snarled in rage and hit Fred on the nose with the hilt of her saber. She then went on the offensive - modeling the style move for move. Her movements not only grew in speed, but matured in ferocity. Fred knew he could not anticipate any attack. He needed to react, which seemed awkward considering the fact they multiplied in difficulty each time. The flurries continued, Fred grew impatient and ducked out of the way instead of meeting the blow. Katie met his duck and broke her rhythm and made a downstroke with the same weapon instead of returning it to the same stance. Her sabre found its mark as it cut Fred's face from his chin to the top of his forehead.

Fred grabbed Katie's left wrist with his back turned to her. He came up fast, and in one fluid motion placed his right arm underneath her armpit while touching her left shoulder. He placed his right leg on her left side while getting his hip lower than hers flipping her on the ground.

Katie exhaled violently as she hit the ground. Water flew in all directions. She kicked Fred in the head making a gash on it that flowed steadily with blood. Katie made a

front roll to get distance between her and Fred. She got back to her feet and returned to her original fighting stance.

Fred glanced at Katie. The white shirt that Katie wore absorbed all the water from being on the ground. What that shirt meant to hide failed at the moment. Katie noticed this and blushed.

“We do not have to fight, you know. We can fight Levon together. Victor told me no one works for him willingly. They are bribed or blackmailed. Which one are you?” Fred inquired as he returned to his original stance.

“Victor – was a good man. He was right, but it doesn’t matter. I will kill you, the Last Wagon Master. I can get mine and my husband’s freedom!” Katie stated coldly but with shades of hope in her voice.

Fred, through the dirty water and warpaint on his face, made an empathetic smile. “I will help you when I take the wagon train to Surrenstrada. We can stop him together. You don’t seem like a child killer to me. If you kill me that child you poisoned will not get what it needs,” Fred pleaded.

Katie’s face instantly filled with guilt. “I assure you. That child will not die. As soon as I kill you, I will make sure the antidote finds her. I am no child killer. It was meant for you.”

“You have the antidote?” Fred asked.

Katie gestured to a blue vial around her neck as she cleared her throat. “If you kill me, save that little girl.”

“There is no way I am going to talk you out of this am I?” Fred asked.

Katie looked at him for a moment. The look made Fred feel that if the circumstances differed, then their style of dancing would drastically change. Katie looked at the ground then back at Fred. Tears streamed down her face as she looked at Fred. “No.”

Fred shook his head and gripped his weapons. “Don’t do –.” The ground trembled beneath Fred’s feet. He glanced over at Katie. She felt the violent vibrations as well. Fred wondered what caused these tremors. He knew of a few places that did the same thing, but they occurred and ended quickly. This felt different. This sounded close and alive.

A giant tree shot up as if trying to fly to the heavens. It made a loud growl as it grabbed Katie with a branch. The monster appeared to be a giant dead tree standing over fifty feet tall. It sent a branch in Fred’s direction. His tomahawk countered the attack with one clean cut. He ran toward Katie while dodging and ducking other branches that attempted to grapple him.

Fred hacked at the branches holding Katie with his tomahawk. “What are you doing? Take the vial and go! Save yourself so you can save that kid!”

Fred smiled, “We both leave - or no one leaves. Tell me when and how to duck.” He continued to hack quickly at the branches while listening to Katie. After three strokes Katie wiggled loose.

“There. You got to be the big damn hero. Now let’s get out of here,” Katie scolded Fred.

“I need the weed unless you give me the vial,” Fred started thinking about an escape route.

“I will give you the damn vial. You just saved my life. While there is no code, well - I think there should be.” Katie smiled after the words left her mouth.

The two ran from the large tree while dodging and ducking branches.

Chapter 9

Bobby vacated the tent as per the instructions that Trishna gave him. *The rest will take of itself*, he thought. Those words of wisdom traveled in a circular motion in his mind, causing them to repeat. He walked toward his wagon train's camp. Bobby's dirty boots walked on the thickest and most verdant grass he recalled in his life.

He took a moment and knelt down and waved his hand on top of the green that dwelled below him. The grass blades felt cold and wet on his fingers. He smiled briefly and fought the urge to lay down on the field below him. A voice behind cut through the tranquility, "Wagon Master Bobby, we're runnin' low on food."

Bobby looked at an elderly man with short gray hair tied in a knot. He appeared to have bathed in flour. Bobby stood up, looked at the man and said, "Yes, Mr. Cook, is there something we can do?"

"I had an idea. If we took this opportunity to hunt, then we could save our supplies. It's getting' ta' be nightfall. I bet if you rushed you could get somethin' to improve our position."

Bobby nodded the said, "I'll hunt. I've never been by myself. Victor was always the one that returned with food. Sir, I bet Victor didn't even load my gun when we went."

The man laughed and stopped upon realizing that the boy told the truth. The cook said, "Sir, with the pace of this trip, is goin', we will be out of food 'bout two days before we hit Surrestrada. Fred has been helpin' out as much as he can. He'll bring back a rabbit here or a bird there now and then."

Bobby nodded, "I'll hunt. Thank ya' fur tellin' me."

The cook nodded and said, "I'll start preppin' for your return." The man wiped his flour covered hands on his flour covered apron then turned around and walked away toward the camp.

Bobby's confusion urged him to scratch his head. He placed one foot in front of the other in the direction of camp. He stopped and touched the tree trunk of a large, mature redwood with a tall trunk. He glared up noticing the green of the branches, and it seemed almost like a ladder to the sky above him. In that moment of intense beauty, Bobby's faith in himself wavered. The size of the tree reinforced Bobby's fears. He stood approximately four and a half feet tall.

The second fear that dominated his thoughts - revenge. Everything he heard about revenge sounded wrong. He wanted it. He desired greatly to end the life of the blonde haired woman who took Victor from him. He yelled out in anger as he punched the tree in front of him.

Embarrassed and ashamed, Bobby stopped and wiped the blood off his knuckles. He placed them in his pockets and turned around to head back to camp. After making the short trek to camp, he laid eyes on the new rifle in his wagon. He touched the Henry Rifle. As he picked up the gun, he verified that the firearm chambered no rounds. He grabbed five rounds of .44 caliber flathead ammunition. He struggled to pull the tab back but managed. Afterward, the onlookers whispered and soon motioned as if they loaded their imaginary Henry Rifle. Bobby knew about firearms. Victor taught him how to handle a weapon and the responsibility that goes with it.

The two lessons he remembered Victor giving, "Bobby, the first thing about a rifle is always treat it like it's loaded. You understand me? You are always a quick flinch

of the finger away from disaster.” The second, Victor said, “Bobby, with a firearm there is always intent. Never, and I mean never point a gun at somethin’ you don’t mean ta’ kill. Remember, that quick flinch of the finger?” Bobby thought about that word intent. The desire of vengeance swelled in him as he finished loading the weapon and released the tab. The passion welling in him to take his revenge upon the blonde lady must be placed on hold. The needs of the wagon train, his wagon train, took priority over his vendetta.

Bobby walked through the redwood trees and thick grass looking for any signs of a deer or something large. The squirrel and rabbit population thrived in this environment but that one kill lacked the size to feed his wagon train. He needed patience. The birds in the trees chirped a song that led Bobby away for a moment. He heard Victor’s voice telling him his favorite camp fire story. This particular story centered on a young Victor. Desperate for work, Victor decided that a bounty hunter’s life suited him. He took his first case. The lady that hired him, elderly in age, married a young man. As Victor tells the story, “I was about sixteen summers, not more than eighteen, I reckon. A simple gopher problem right? I thought, this’ll be easy money. I told the lady the only way I knew how to deal with the gophers was to blow the tee total hell outta’ ‘em ya’ see. I set the dynamite and laid the charges all delicate like then boom! I caved in them mines, killin’ those damn gophers plaguing that family’s farm. I told ‘em that their crops would suffer majorly, but they were alright with the damage as long as I took care of ‘em. Now, this is where the story turns. I put a charge close to the outhouse. Sure enough, that outhouse topples over, and the younger husband came out with the neighbor lady butt naked and covered in crap!”

Around this time the camp laughed and cackled loudly, even if they heard this story previously. Victor continued, "My employer divorced her husband and paid me extra. I quit the bounty hunting buidness right then there - I tell you what."

Bobby's brief reprieve from his grief ended as reality set in on his moment. His wagon train needed him, and this jaunt through the woods needed to end with meat. He began looking for tracks. He noticed on the trunk of a tree nearby an elk or deer recently sharpened its horns, leaving behind scratch marks.

His eyes widened. He began following the tracks, hastily moving in rhythm with the subtle breeze blowing on his face and toppling over the top of the grass. He brushed away thick shrubs and before him a break from thick trees. A clearing where the green grass took the forefront. Before he could take in the beauty - there it stood. Five feet of living meat. It grazed on the ample grass without a care in the world. He picked his Henry up and stared down at the barrel. His sights lined up just behind the deer's front shoulder. He took a deep breath and squeezed the trigger.

Something within Bobby prevented him from pulling the trigger the rest of the way. The elk looked at him, then kept grazing. Bobby picked up his rifle and tried again. He focused in on the kill zone of the beautiful bull before him. He noticed the well-defined muscular tone of the animal. He breathed slowly as he squeezed the trigger. Tears filled his eyes as lowered his weapon. He dropped the rifle on the ground and sobbed.

Bobby heard quiet but giant footsteps. A loud grunt made him lift his head as he saw a spear flying through the air. The projectile stuck deep into the bull as it tried to move away from its assailant but fell. Bobby wanted to find out who threw the spear. His curiosity took another direction. Instead, his attention stuck on the elk. He saw the animal

twitch. He noticed the eyes of the elk slowly fade. Death claimed the elk. It seemed present lately.

Great Bear walked over to Bobby. The boy felt a gigantic hand on his tiny shoulder. "I didn't shoot my first time either," he said as he placed one foot on the elk and extracted his spear out of its carcass. "Bobby – I" Great Bear stopped mid-sentence and kneeled beside Bobby, facing the kill. For a moment he sat there just patting Bobby on the back - letting the boy cry.

Bobby heard the ripping of the flesh as Great Bear began field dressing the animal. The tearing of cartilage and the ripping of flesh lifted his stomach up and down, creating a pump that wanted to release his previous meal onto the grass below him. He lifted his head off his hands and looked at Great Bear. Bobby said, "Sir, I should get back to my hunt."

Great Bear nodded, then said, "Bobby, this is your kill. I have plenty of food. I will dress it, so you can take it back and give it to your cook."

"But that's dishonest!"

"You tracked it. You just did not pull the trigger. Besides, you are having a bad day. We have all been there."

"Thanks, Great Bear. What is it exactly y'all do out here?"

"Well, we are wardens of nature. As the last, vast forest in Surrenstrada, it is our responsibility in this temple to ensure its survival."

"That's all?"

"Well, we also do something else."

"What is that?"

“I will tell you. Our world was created by two people. A man named Surren and a female named Esteralda.”

“Is that why our piece of the world is called Surrenstrada?”

“Precisely Bobby. The creator made these two and gave them this world to live and thrive. They did. They had several children. Surren grew older and became worried about his mortality. He began to use the arcane forces that surround us all to enhance his body.”

Bobby looked at Great Bear with confusion, and inquired, “Arcane forces – what is that?”

“Several energies pulse through our world. There are natural forces which are what we preserve. There are arcane forces which are the breaches to other worlds. The third is necromancy. That is the line between the living and the dead. This temple, we ensure that the arcane and necromancy does not go unchecked.”

Bobby nodded in agreement and said, “So arcane enhances?”

“Yes, Bobby. The arcane takes something natural and modifies it, giving it extra powers which are entirely unnatural.” Great Bear finished dressing the bull, and with one powerful motion deadlifted the carcass onto his massive shoulders. “Bobby, I think it is time to get back. I bet your people are hungry.”

Bobby nodded in agreement as the two headed toward the temple. “So what happened to Surren?”

Great Bear paused then turned away from Bobby. He glared out in the distance then said, “The constant playing with powers beyond his understanding drove him insane. He killed everything that he loved. As a last, desperate act to protect all that she loved,

Esteralda imbued a few of her offspring with wards against the arcane. As Surren lay dying, he imbued the others with arcane enhancements. This energy caused a war that is still being fought. We, at this temple, still fight.”

“How have I not heard about this before?”

Great Bear looked down Bobby as he, the large carcass on his shoulder, bounced in step with him. A loud snapping sound emanated from the distance. Large shrubs on the forest floor separated, allowing something to walk between them. Silence cut through Bobby’s resolve, “Great Bear, what is that?”

The dead elk on Great Bear’s shoulder hit the ground. Great Bear’s eyes filled with concern as he said, “Run, Bobby – run and do not look back. Warn the others!”

Bobby thought about arguing. He saw the sternness in Great Bear’s eyes and his body language. He also thought about getting a warning to others. He turned around and started running. His feet barely hit the ground before he picked the other one up, repeating the motion.

Trev propelled himself forward using the force of will alone. His arthritis limited his movements as his joints screamed in protest from the physicality of the task. As he walked, he noticed the serenity of The Temple of the Ancients. The green leaves swayed as the breeze gently caressed them. The lavish greenery that draped itself on the ground seemed almost carpet like in appearance. Trev recalled his decades of existence and concluded that he never laid eyes on this much green. This epiphany came to him as he noticed how the moss covered the rock, not in a dominating manner, but in a close

cohesiveness. Trev surveyed the scenery again as he walked. Everything worked in unison. Nature, even life in this temple, depended on other things creating this utopia.

When the thought crossed his mind, it made his face contort to a grimace. He could not help but think how peaceful would this place be if they forced themselves to get out of their fences and live in a place like Surrestrada. How close would they hold their beliefs to their heart after people tried to kill them? Trev scoffed at their natural, loving all life manner of living. Trev approached the guards at the gate. The men opened the familiar gate as he walked outside. The guards smiled and waved as he left.

A guard wearing a large buck head as a hat said, "Trev. Safe travels. May you find the answers you hunt." All the guards waved as he walked through the gate.

Trev nodded in agreement and said, "Bye. I will see you in a little while." He turned his back as he continued down the road. The green paradise quickly gave way to desolate, desert sand that kicked up, taking residence in uncovered orifices. The sun beamed on his skin, loosening his joints, giving him a temporary respite from his body that aged with every step. He kept pressing forward putting distance between himself and the temple.

Glancing over his shoulder, Trev realized the distance he desired arrived. He took one last look around and threw his stick to the ground and walked regularly, indicating a sign he held no need for it. He strode toward the quadruped with horns. He smiled and gestured openly toward the horned toad. "I compel you to walk toward me, my reptilian friend."

Immediately, the beast obeyed and sauntered toward Trev. He looked up at the old man, completely captivated and eager for his next order. Trev bent down and scooped

up the living thing into his frail, old arms. He made eye contact with the organism while making a compassionate facial expression, then said, “I take no pleasure in this. I will make this quick.”

Trev’s face contorted into one of anger and hate. His eyes filled with rage as they turned black. A violet energy began to pulse out of him. He stared into the animal’s eyes as it stared into his dark orbs. Trev placed one hand over its eyes and said “Drain.”

Purple energy began flowing from the creature. It fought, at first wiggling around, and then stopped. Trev placed the carcass on the ground. The being that crawled around moments ago appeared to have been dead for decades. Trev nodded to the dead thing in gratitude. “I am sorry my dear friend. I am in a hurry” Trev said as he straightened his collar. He took another look around to make sure he had no company. A smile brought new wrinkles on an already wrinkled face. He mumbled, “fly.”

Dark energy began to writhe and flail, centering on Trev’s back. The dark purple energy began to take the shape of large, batlike wings. The violet energy finished forming. Trev looked at the sky with his new demonic wings, with feet firmly planted on the ground, pushed skyward with his fragile legs. Trev blasted skyward. He whirled and twirled while he gained altitude. He headed toward Victor and away from Surrestrada.

Chapter 10

Fred stared at Katie as she disappeared into the foggy distance. He knew their missions potentially shared objectives in the future. A stunningly hardened yet delicate woman dominated his current thoughts. Katie the Resolute he named her mentally. Her circumstances and reasons for doing what she did challenged her in all aspects of her life. Fred nodded in her direction as a sign of respect then put one bare foot in front of the other, heading back toward the temple.

The knuckles on Fred's hands began to hurt because he clenched his weapons continuously. He noticed the wind picked up, blowing his hair and the top of the water with it. He took a deep breath, trying to take in the fresh air and not the musky smelling stench of swamp water on the other side of the threshold. He could hear his horse clomping. Fred turned his head to see his horse walking with his head down, looking very apologetic.

"Friend, no need to apologize." As he waited for his friend and transportation to come closer, Fred then mounted his horse and set it in motion. The horse made a light walk as Fred placed his backpack on the saddle horn. He grabbed his waterskin then poured a few drops in his hand. Fred splashed the water over the paintings on his body and face. He massaged the water around and removed the markings. Fred sifted through this belongings then pulled out his green shirt. He put the shirt on then pulled his long hair out of it then buttoned it. Fred closed his eyes, breathed in his nose, filling up his lungs, then slowly exhaled out his nostrils. "Let us travel back quickly. Someone depends on us, friend." He lightly nudged the horse to accelerate, and the horse ran like it disliked traveling through Surrenstrada during the night.

Fred decided to push through the dark to get back to the temple quicker. He grabbed the bandana out of his backpack because the dust quickly flew into his nose and mouth while guiding the horse with his knees. He finished tying it, then he heard a “whoop-whoop” sound. At first, he thought the terror dwelled only in his mind. Katie still dominated that realm. He thought it might be a punishment for thinking about a married woman in a passionate manner. He heard the noise again and turned his shoulder.

A massive black shadow with wings approached in the night sky. Fred motioned for the horse to pick up speed. The horse could hear the predator and obliged. The flying giant Falcon cared not about the sudden burst of speed the horse brought. The gigantic bird nosedived to gather its prey. Fred could now see the feathers and beak.

Unfortunately, he could also see the size of the bird. Its wingspan seemed like six of Fred, and he stood six feet tall. The bird made a little noise as it pursued Fred and his steed.

The bird came within twenty feet of the duo as it continued its headfirst dive. Fred took his feet out of the stirrups. He positioned himself back on the saddle, then he stood with his left foot on the horse’s bare back and his right foot on the saddle. Fred grabbed his tomahawk and his knife as he prepared for the large, monstrous bird to finish its approach.

Fred saw the bird as it glared at him. He hated the hunger in its eyes. The bird possessed brown feathers with a few white, making a pattern as they waved from the air displaced by its descent. Large talons caught Fred’s attention, along with a monstrous beak. This seemed to him the very definition of nocturnal predator. The only meal around traveled out in the open not even hidden by trees. He wondered why he failed to expect

this. Then he stopped being hard on himself, thinking about how could he predict death from above? He thought about why he never heard about a giant flying Falcon. Then he answered his question by stating the obvious - no one ever survived to tell the tale.

Fred, during the seconds he waited for the bird to close, decided he would wait for it to attack. He quickly decided against that tactic because it did not work against Katie. Fred could see himself in those black eyes with yellow rings around them. A massive but powerful beak and quiet movements that seemed to give the predator an unfair advantage. Usually, there is a growl or battle cry from a predator while it pursues its meal. This creature just stared at the horse. Fred waited until the creature came closer, then he leaped through the air with his tomahawk and knife at the ready.

The bird noticed Fred instantly jumping in the air. It moved its beak to pluck a meal from the sky, but Fred placed the top of his tomahawk over its beak, giving him more momentum as the bird lifted his head causing him to glide over the creature's head. He landed firmly on the bird's back and put his weapons to work.

The talons found the running horse as Fred stabbed and hacked in the bird's back. The bird kept its momentum as it grabbed the horse on a dead run. With a flick of the large bird's wings, Fred could feel himself gaining altitude. He continued to hack and stab the bird while he saw his horse in its clutches. Fred thought he could not jump at this height. He just kept cutting and hacking. Fred noticed that the Tomahawk slid off the feathers, as they acted as armor against the knife. Fred placed his hatchet in his left hand with his knife, then with his free right hand began ripping the feathers off the bird.

Feathers flew through the air as Fred frantically ripped them off the bird. Eventually, a bald spot appeared. He grabbed his tomahawk with his right hand, plunged

the knife into the bird with the left and came down on the blade with the flat part of the tomahawk, driving it like a railroad spike inside the bird as they gained altitude.

The bird finally made a noise. The cry sounded like a high pitched “kkkkkaaaakkaaawww” that made Fred shiver in fear. He could feel the bird tense every muscle, forcing him to drop the horse. The bird began a descent. Now the bird and Fred faced the ground.

In midair, the bird tore into the horse’s throat spilling its blood. Fred flew through the blood splatter. Fred, covered in blood, worked his knife free and repeated the same attack. The bird screeched in terror.

Fred heard the horse hit the ground first. No movement or sound emanated from it but the loud “thud” the body made on impact. The bird hit the ground with purpose. It wanted to get the thing off its back that brought the pain. Fred decided that his current battle plan seemed like it hindered the bird, but this would not kill his attacker.

The winged horror attempted to reach back and bite at him. It never came close enough. Fred stood on the creature’s back and waited for it to turn its head one more time. Fred landed the Tomahawk dead center in the raptor’s eye. The bird squealed in pain, allowing Fred to rip his tomahawk out of the bird’s pupil while he jumped off the creature. He ran away from the bird. After about twenty feet, squared up against the bird as it writhed in pain while he held his weapons.

The creature turned around and Fred flared his chest out while making a loud bird sound himself. The avian looked at the horse carcass on the ground and grabbed it with its talon. The bird showed Fred what a real bird sounded like as then they took to the sky.

Fred could feel the wind the winged giant picked up with its initial, forceful flaps to create the lift to get this terrifying beast skyward.

Fred kept his eyes on the raptor as it disappeared into the night sky with his transportation. He knew the trek now would be him and his two feet. Fred instantly wanted water, which hung on the saddle horn in his backpack on his dead horse. Fred exhaled deeply as his heart slowed down. He stowed his weapons and started to walk to the temple.

Trev tasted the humid air as he flew toward Victor's last known location before they parted. He laid eyes on the river crossing. As he began a descent, he noticed a large wagon with a large hunk of metal. A few feet away kneeled two men manipulating something. Victor pulled into a hover to investigate further. His onyx eyes spotted one of the men wearing Victor's hat while they rifled through his friend's pocket. He hoped that his friend lay motionless as part of a feinting scheme. He closed his eyes, then they burned crimson.

This eyelid allowed Trev to sense life essences. Hopeful anticipation guided his gaze as he only saw the two assailants glowing alive. His best friend over several decades lay on the ground lacking any light. Victor somehow died. These men lacked not only respect for the dead, but they now robbed him of any dignity post mortem.

While hovering, Victor kicked his legs skyward and faced his head to the ground. He soared in the direction of his dead friend, but more importantly, he flew toward vengeance. Trev adjusted his attitude to prepare for the landing. During this process, he

said “alter” loudly. Violet purple energy enveloped him. It swirled around him, then disappeared.

The two bandits turned around and saw Trev. His skin shimmered an unsettling onyx hue. A charcoal gray Homburg hat fit perfectly on Trev’s head. Dark, crimson horns protruded through the front of the well-tailored hat. Well shined black shoes glistened in the sunlight, matching the charcoal gray suit pants secured by a formal black leather belt. A black vest buttoned over a white collared shirt covered his chest. A green armband pulled taut while batlike wings ripped the white shirt and vest, giving him the appearance of a demon card dealer.

The two men clamored to grab their bearings. One mustered enough courage to give the other order. The one that just took his hand out of Victor’s chest pocket yelled: “Get ‘em, Dan!” With this hand twitching, Dan reached for his pistol.

“Whip,” Trev calmly said as he started walking to Dan as his hand reached for his weapon. Trev’s arms lengthened to long, thick, black whips. Simultaneously he whipped one arm at each assailant. The lashes wrapped around each bandit’s mouth. Hate engulfed Trev’s demonic face as he said “drain.”

Violet energy emanated from Trev’s hand and traveled in a circular pattern from each whip. The pulses slammed into the bandits engulfing them. They started twitching as the purple beams reversed and pulled the energy toward Trev. The bandits screamed through their bonds. Their pleas fell on deaf ears as their resistance began to slow down and eventually stopped as their life forces left their corpses.

Trev released the whip, sending the two bodies to the ground making audible “thuds” as they hit the desert floor. Trev walked over to the two bodies and held his hand

toward the one named Dan. Trev blinked his eyes until the crimson colored eyelids appeared. He studied their aura for a moment, verifying that they indeed held no life force within them. With his curiosity satisfied that Victor kept the company in the afterlife now, he said "Show."

Five small purple beams emanated from Trev's demonic fingers. Two sparks traveled, one for each of Dan's ears. It crept inside the orifice until an audible click sounded. Two traveled into his nostrils until the click emanated from that spot. The last beam, the largest, traveled past Dan's lips and continued into him until the last click rang out in the quiet desert. Trev held the opposite hand, palm up, at shoulder level. A scene played out as a well-dressed silver haired man gave Dan and his partner in crime orders.

Trev continued watching the scene as it played. The man paid them to retrieve something called Doomsteam in case its mission failed. He impatiently watched, trying to extract every morsel of vital information from this man's memory as possible. His suspicion confirmed itself as the two men rode up and discovered Victor's corpse. Trev felt rage. The two corpses who lay on the ground only took a job. Granted, they took the job from Lavon. He knew only two types of people who take jobs from Lavon. The blackmailed and the ones with a broken moral compass. Guilt engulfed him momentarily, but his demonic form quickly shrugged it off. He looked to the wagon. Inside the wagon lay a pile of metal. His scanning of the area halted as he spotted Victor's corpse. His demonic feet and sulfuric smell moved toward his friend. He strode a few steps and muttered, "Revert." Instantly his magic consumed him changing back into the frail, nearly crippled elderly man.

He knelt down beside his best friend. He attempted to fight back the tears then realized that no one but him populated the area. He touched Victor's thick gray hair. An emotional tidal wave of loss over took him, and he wept heavily over his dead friend's body. Through the tears, Trev said, "You deserved better my friend. Much better. I knew you would not let me go with you because you respected my wish to keep my powers a secret. Life dealt you its death card. Goodbye Victor. Rest in peace."

Trev sobbed until his tear ducts dried. He straightened out his vest and wiped the last of the streaming tears from his eyes. "Alright Victor, let me take a look at your wound." Trev gently lifted Victor's head. He placed one finger inside the entry wound. "Beam," Trev said as a small ray shot from the finger inside Victor's head. "The bullet entered the back of your head and went almost straight out. How does this happen?" He gently placed Victor's head back on the earth. He placed Victor's hands over his chest and closed his eyes. "I do not want to extract the information violently. I realize you are dead and will not feel a thing. At the same time, I just cannot shake that concept of disrespecting your corpse. You deserve to rest my friend." Trev slowly crept himself upright off the ground. He looked at the giant heap of metal laying in a wagon. Trev smiled as he began to walk toward it. "Maybe I will not need to Victor. Perhaps this scrap could give me the information I desire."

Trev walked to the wagon and climbed the steps to take his place in the wagon next to Doomsteam. He glared at the lifeless monstrosity as it lay dormant. His anger swelled inside him until his curiosity overtook him. Trev stretched his right arm and opened his hand toward Doomsteam's face. Purple chords projected from his hands. They found their way inside Doomsteam's ears and nostrils until an audible click emanated

from the mechanical corpse. Purple energy pulsed from Trev's hand, coursing through the tentacles and directly into Doomsteam. A loud winding sounded uncontrollably within the construct.

The energy continued to flow into Doomsteam. The monstrosity's eyes opened wide. It reached for Trev as its system became self-operational. Power and speed defined the abominations movement.

Trev waved his hand and dismissed the energy beams. With his other hand, he gestured toward the center of Doomsteam's chest, stopping him, and ceasing all movement. Trev cleared his throat, then said, "My dear boy. You are undead, unfortunately. This is fortunate for me. I am a Necromancer. I control all that is dead but not resting. Now, you will not move until I allow it. Do you understand my dear boy?"

Doomsteam realized the futility of the situation and said, "Yes. I understand."

Trev released the hold over the construct. He cleared his throat and questioned, "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions? I have them right now in spades."

The machine nodded his cooperation.

Trev leaned forward and said, "What happened here?"

Doomsteam's face filled with sorrow as he said, "I was revived by a crew that was led by a blonde lady with curly hair. Afterward, I fought a good man and lost."

"You lost? Quite impressive Victor. You said he was a good man. How did he die?"

"I don't know. He's dead?"

"Why do you think he was a good man?"

"He promised to take care of my Katie until his dying day."

“Start from the beginning, my dear boy.”

“My name is Der'monde La Rouche. I'm the son of the owner of the Rouche Railroad that is being built to run all along Surrenstrada.”

“Oh my! You were rich!”

“Very. My father was visited by Lavon who wanted to secure security contracts for the railroad. When my father refused, he kidnapped myself and my bride.”

“This sounds like Lavon. How long ago was this?”

“I don't know.”

“You know what happened to your bride?”

“Not a clue. Do you?”

“If I know Lavon, he figured out a way to fool her into thinking that you are still alive, and if you two are going to be together, she will need to do a series of tasks.”

“I must get back to her!”

“My dear boy. You are dead now. 'Till death do you part is the vow. Do not torture her.”

“I still love her. She's my bride!”

“This is going to be impossible for you to hear. I feel bad for your situation - I do. The state of being is simple. There is alive, and there is dead. Sometimes, by magical means, things are permitted to stay in the middle, which is undead. You, my dear boy, are undead.”

“I'm still a man. I love her. How could I still feel love for her if I was this undead you speak of?”

“Of course you love her, my dear boy. Memories from your previous life still carry weight if the magic used is strong enough.”

“Previous life? I am still alive!”

“Are you? Can you love her the way you once did? I am talking not just about coitus, that is an obvious no, I imagine. Lavon would not let you keep anything that would give you pleasure. I am talking about a basic human fundamental element of passing on life.

“Are you saying I shouldn't see my Katie anymore?”

“That is exactly what I am saying. You are caught between two worlds. The way I see it, there are two options.”

“What are they?”

“The first is the easy option. I use my powers to send you to the afterlife. The second is to use your enhancements, ensuring your loved ones are safe from Lavon's control. After that, if you are not in the afterlife, I put you there. The second option is by far the most selfless option there is. By the by, love is selfless is it not? Additionally, it would make me happy to think that Lavon doomed himself by his creation. I find that beautiful – poetic even.”

“I will make sure Katie is safe and Lavon is dead. I promise.”

“Will you help me lay my friend to rest?”

“Yes.”

“Would you mind gathering some scraps of wood as I prepare Victor's body?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.” Trev stared as Doomsteam as the machine traveled toward a densely populated area of woods a few miles away from where Trev stood. He surveyed the land around him thoroughly, ensuring that no unwanted guests accompanied him. Doomsteam’s footsteps sounded nearly miles away. The word “knife” flew out of Trev’s mouth with hesitation.

Large purple energy circled Trev’s palms. He closed his hand tightly, forming a fist and the violet energy escaped the cracks of his clenched hand and shined until a dark, metallic blade formed inside hands that lived many years.

Trev grabbed the cuff of his old white collared shirt that he wore. He cut the sleeve off with the knife and placed it on the ground as he approached Victor’s lifeless body. He grabbed and opened his waterskin. Trev poured some of the contents of the container onto the cloth. His body took its time kneeling down beside his beloved friend of many years. He began whipping the dirty face of his friend.

“I told you all the time to wash your face. Dirt leads to infection, and on a wagon train constantly moving, cleanliness on occasion from all participants would prevent unwanted germs. You always told me that there is no purpose to washing your face every day because there is no better feeling than arriving at Surrenstrada and taking a bath with hot water then sleeping on a bed with clean sheets.”

Trev folded the cloth in half and placed it on his shoulder. He slowly stood back up as his bones prevented him from spryly springing up to his feet. After Trev stood up, he then made a “come here” motion with his right hand, and Victor’s torso lifted, making it look like he sat on the floor. Trev poured water on Victor’s hair. Once thick gray hairs now appeared to be hundreds of violin strings tightly knit together.

Trev opened his hand toward his knife that lay on the ground harmlessly. It shook just before it flew toward him. As it traveled with intensifying velocity, Trev said “comb.” Immediately the flying knife glowed and intensified as it morphed into a hair brush. Trev motioned for the comb to start organizing the wet mane of Victor’s. As the comb did Trev’s will, Trev sobbed, “I told you not to go Victor! Any blasted fool with a hand of twos and an empty pistol could see that!”

The comb continued to work Trev’s will. The animated object straightened out the steel locks of Victor. “You should have taken Fred, Victor. I recall a time when we were getting tracked by that hungry giant from the Urroloway Hills. You and Fred shot off like a bullet leaving Bobby and myself in charge. Poor Bobby was upset to no end, and I will admit that I was concerned. After two days you two came back smelling of feces and making big belly laughs while you told us about your stratagem that hill giants follow their nose. The smell of the waste made them turn its back on you and Fred. Soon as it did, you and Fred descended on him like wrathful judgment. I bet that was a tremendous fight, and I would have loved to bear witness to your exploits. You had your reasons - I conjure. Someone had to stay with the train and Bobby.”

Trev looked at the night sky and the hundreds of holes poked through, allowing small pieces of silver light to shine from the heavens. “Bobby, he is a young boy. He has seen and done so much in his few years. I do not look forward to letting him know. Fred, well, you were the only person that made him laugh. It is only fitting when Fred laughs it spreads like bad gossip in a small saloon. Well - I will miss you, Victor. There I said it.”

Loud footsteps and a train whistle reverberated near Trev and Victor. Trev motioned Victor’s body to lay against the ground slowly and with reverence to the

resting. He then snapped his fingers and said “clean,” causing little sparks of violet energy to dance on Victor’s clothing, removing the numerous stains that outnumbered the various belts and buckles.

Trev cleared his throat and snapped his fingers for a second time. Purple flecks danced on his clothes. The flakes swirled with purpose as they removed the dirt and tear stains from his clothing. They eventually moved their way to his face, removing the various spots of dirt, but they additionally cleaned the large tear stains upon his wrinkly, elderly face.

Doomsteam’s footsteps pounded close to him. “I retrieved wood as you asked. I didn’t know how much you needed, so I brought a lot. I also got you a log for sitting.”

Trev looked at the monstrosity. The massive metal arms carried shrubs and logs which all seemed like the perfect design for burning. He gave a friendly nod to the abomination then said, “Doomsteam, would be a dear and build a pyre. I wish to lay my friend to rest.”

The metallic entity nodded as he walked over and laid all the wood down on the ground, his massive muscles not even feeling the weight or strain from the various sizes of discarded foliage. The machine placed each piece not only to provide structure for Victor’s body, but also that each piece caught fire eventually once the blaze roared.

After building the pyre, Doomsteam reluctantly picked up Victor’s body and placed it on the pyre with reverence and respect.

Trev then traveled toward his friend of decades and made small adjustments which put him in a restful position. Trev grabbed his knife and his six shooter along with

the belt. “Forgive me friend, but where you are going those will not be needed. I also figured you would want to give Fred the six shooters and Bobby the knife.”

He then took a deep breath and said “fire” with his arms facing the pyre. Mobile flames vacated Trev’s fingertips, catching the brush, and soon all the wood surrendered to the flames.

Doomsteam carried Trev’s log to him, so he could sit down while his friend’s body turned to ash.

Trev nodded at the machine in appreciation as tears trickled down his face. He slowly bent his legs so that he could rest on the log. As he watched the fire, a smirk appeared on his face.

Doomsteam sat awkwardly next to Trev. The man could feel the undead machine gazing at him. The abomination eventually spoke, “What are you smirking for?”

Trev looked directly at him. His smirk changed into a smile, “I am smiling because my friend will soon be ashes that I will spread across the trail of Surrenstrada. Most people take their rest six feet under. In some place that they only visited when they remembered their departed. That does not suit Victor, so I am smiling because he gets to rest on the very trail he lived on for decades shuttling people back and forth for so long.”

Doomsteam nodded in agreement then said, “Yes. That does seem fitting. The legends of Wagon Masters were something I was told of as a child.”

Trev made a bittersweet smile then said: “And he was great.”

“Was he the last?”

Trev's gaze traveled from the pyre to Doomsteam then said "No. One - maybe two still travels Surrestrada. Granted, they are being hunted like wild game at the moment by Lavon."

"So Victor is not the last?"

"Maybe. Between trains and bounty hunters, this job is the most dangerous in the country. Doomsteam, they violated the laws of life and death and created you just to kill Victor. The other two are not safe."

"Tell me about the other two."

"The first is Fred. He is a native. Fred was eating pig slop before Victor took him on as a scout. He taught him – well everything. Fred's greatest tool is the underestimation that is thrown his way. People think he is just this cannibalistic monster. He is one of the kindest and merciful people I have met."

"He sounds like a good man."

"He is. The second potential Wagon Master is young Bobby. Victor found him cleaning stalls and took him on as a traveling stable boy. Bobby is kindness personified. He represents the innocence we all held so tightly in our hands just slipped out and fell to the earth. His greatest asset is his destiny, much like everything else, is undetermined. Once some life experiences mold him, he will be a great man one day. I am afraid at the same time for him. I want him to hold onto his youth as long as he can, but I am afraid life and Lavon will not allow for that to happen."

"What will happen to them now?"

“With the passing of Victor, I imagine Lavon turned his sights to Fred. He will go after him with the fury of a hungry wolf pack. They will come from all directions. We will all help him. If we fail, then they go after Bobby.”

“So Lavon won’t stop until Fred and Bobby are dead?”

Trev looked into the fire. His eyes turned black and purple, flakes popped inside them. Trev said, “Yes.”

Doomsteam felt the anger wrap itself around Trev like a blanket. It quickly occurred to him that the situation required a subject change. The machine said, “What did you do before you joined the wagon train?”

Trev sensed that Doomsteam felt uncomfortable. He welcomed the subject change, and he allowed the dark magic to dissipate, which returned his eyes to normal. Trev smiled as he said, “I was a lawyer.”

Doomsteam formed laughter that manifested itself as a train whistle. Through the laughter, Doomsteam said, “How does a lawyer become a necromancer?”

Trev looked far off into the distance the squinted in Doomsteam’s direction. He smiled and said, “As far back as I can remember, I always loved books. The sound they made when you opened one for the first time and the smell. Inside those books were pages, and on those pages held a mysterious currency - knowledge.”

Doomsteam slapped his metallic knee as his laugh forced a train whistle that reverberated throughout the nighttime landscape. Doomsteam said, “You learned the mystic arts because you loved books?”

Trev smiled and tilted his head back then said, “Loved? I still love books. Unfortunately, while we were running from zealots of the Chastity Temple, I was forced

to ditch my books. I thought it was some special strategy. Victor had me throw my books at them as they caught up to our wagon. It happened when I first decided to travel as I became more dependent on draining life. When I first got here, my books filled up my wagon which was the lead. It was the slowest, you see, due to the weight. To Victor, the slowest wagon leads. It sets the pace. Anyway, as the zealots closed, I started throwing my books at them. They adjusted appropriately, but I managed to change their angle causing most of them to slow down. I even knocked one off his horse. Being pelted with books made them lose interest. I guess they did not believe strong enough to overcome a screaming wagon with an elderly man throwing books at them.” Trev laughed while his eyes filled with tears.

“Why didn’t he just shoot them? I can vouch that he was a crack shot.”

“The zealot’s religion tells its followers that they are not allowed to use weapons specifically designed to kill. They will use an axe or a pitchfork to kill their target sinner all day long, or in that case a foolish necromancer. Victor felt like we held an unfair advantage.”

“Did he always hold back like that?”

“No. I think boredom played a role in that instance, but later he told me that their tactics were erroneous.”

“How so?”

“Victor stated that anytime you use a weapon one must ascertain its area of effectiveness and use. In the zealots’ case, their axes were useless during their pursuit. Victor knew as long as those weapons stayed far away from us they were a waste.”

“So he knew he had better weapons?”

“Yes. He valued life and never enjoyed taking it. At the same time, if they would have made more of a coordinated attack rather than being fueled by their righteous indignation. Then Victor, would have met their passionate fury in kind.”

“Like what tactics?”

“Instead of chasing us, if they would have cut us off or taken a different angle then the fight would have turned.”

“So Victor would have killed them?”

“Without hesitation. The thing about Victor was he did things on the fly without thinking about them. I never knew if it was some belief in his god, his honor, or if he was bored and wanted a laugh. He was unpredictable. That is what I will miss about him.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

“He was a good man and my best friend.”

Chapter 11

Great Bear ran toward the sound while unbuttoning his shirt. He left the unbleached linen shirt on the forest floor. He stopped and puffed his chest out and took in a deep breath. His face and body started to grow brown fur. His headdress descended and synced with the rest of his body that now held the appearance of a brown bear. He started charging at the entity coming at him. He exhaled twice quickly. The breath swirled inside the animal's chest, creating an orchestra of primal rage.

Four paws attacked the earth as the bear sped toward his attacker. He sniffed the air, and the aroma led him to believe the creature stood before him. He slowed down and looked. He panted faintly as he raised his bear ears skyward. He laid eyes briefly on the monstrosity as it blinked intermittently out of sight.

The creature stood over ten feet tall. Its black, feline appearance moved in concert with constant shadow, and it blinked in and out of existence. The six legs moved together with quick, dexterous steps. Two long, black tentacles sprang from the creature's shoulders and moved independently from the monster's other appendages.

The bear pressed toward the entity. He tried looking at the creature as a whole. The monster sent a tentacle its way. He dodged, showing his surprising dexterity for a creature over a thousand pounds of flesh. He reached to take a bite of the tentacle as it traveled toward the ground. He bit air and felt the blow of the other tentacle that hit him on the hip. The tentacle pulled back but left the spike inside, severely limiting his range of motion and fighting ability.

He felt the tentacle. He dodged out of instinct as a blow traveled toward his neck. He dodged the blow, but the spike cut him. He heard the spike hit the ground. As blood

seeped through the fresh wound and the spike in his hip dug in deeper. The bear realized he needed to close his distance.

Bobby seemed to get faster as his feet hit the forest floor. He jumped over fallen timber and leaped over puddles. Memories of Victor flooded the young boy's mind. The time he gave the horse they called Boxes to him. The reason for the name, Bobby recalled, was that particular horse's tracks made perfect boxes. One hoof just followed the other which made perfectly symmetrical prints on the trail. After a hard day on the trail, Bobby and Victor performed their regular tasks. Afterward, Bobby brushed all the horses before he ate. While brushing Boxes, he noticed that the shoes on the horse's hooves broke during the day's journey. He immediately took them off and repaired them. Victor noticed this extra effort and awarded the horse.

Bobby remembered all his friends on their own. Fred trying to save the girl, Trev attempting to find out about Victor. Now, Great Bear fighting the creature in the woods. Bobby felt completely helpless. Bobby fought guilt. He eventually allowed this tide of emotion to cascade over him. If Great Bear dies, then he must shoulder the burden of blame forever. He stopped running for a second and looked over in the direction of Great Bear. Bobby then said, "No."

Great Bear heard the tentacles fly through the air as it blinked in and out of this plane. He charged toward the creature and dodged both of its tentacle attacks. He wanted to get a fix on the location to best attack the monstrosity. It swayed which left behind several shadows, making him wonder which one to attack.

He bit down at the creature's throat. Unfortunately, it blinked in time and missed the mortal blow. The creature countered by a flurry of its six legs. Black shadows

frantically jabbed at the bear, demanding space. The bear dodged as adeptly as possible, but a few found their mark. The blow hurt, but the thing that injured the bear seemed to be that monster's claws. He felt an initial hit, but then the claws dug in and tore his flesh.

The bear knew that blood stopped seeping out and now freely poured. He concluded that blows like that add up quickly, and he needed to avoid them. He pushed the attack once again, but this time he wanted to attack a limb as it came at him. He wanted to prove to himself that these things felt pain and bled. The first appendage came at him. He rolled out of the way then swung his powerful claw at the next leg that came to his direction. It went right through bear's ready claw.

Patience, the bear thought to himself. He dodged two quick strikes by the beast. He noticed that another leg came with an overhand angle. The bear honed in on that arm. He waited until it traveled to striking range, then leaped up and clamped down on it. He knew that hurt the beast and saw blood for a moment. The beast made a hiss as it blinked the arm out of the bear's jaw.

Great Bear felt two spikes go into his abdomen while he focused on his previous attack. He knew that those two blows eventually would quicken his demise. He knew he needed to fight and damage the creature before it killed him. Make an impression, he thought to himself as he pressed forward. His roar mighty and his movements powerful, Great Bear met living shadow face to face.

Bobby ran toward Great Bear after his decision. He looked at Great Bear dodging, and the shadow cat relentlessly attacking. Desperately, Bobby looked for a weapon. Any weapon, he thought to himself. There it lay on the forest floor. The rifle he brought with

him. He quickly sprinted toward the firearm. He picked it up and stared down the barrel. He noticed the offense seemed constant from the unnatural predator.

Great Bear desperately sought moments to press the attack. Great Bear's frustration grew as the creature moved and his exact location became unidentifiable. He heard a twig break in the distance. He glanced and noticed Bobby and growled toward the boy.

Bobby, still staring at the rifle sight, said, "No!" Bobby shot the first round at the cat. The round hit its mark, and the cat reeled in pain. Great Bear took the opportunity to strike. His bite found the shadow's neck. He clamped down and jerked his head, but the creature blinked out of the material plane.

The rifle sang its familiar song again, but this time the round traveled through the creature. Bobby quickly followed up with another round anticipating the creature's blinking. Bobby's hypothesis proved correct. The creature growled as Bobby followed with another burst of rounds that one found the creature's side. Bobby saw blood and felt relief, but he remembered Victor's advice of always leaving one round in the chamber for emergencies.

Great Bear identified this as an opportunity to take the attack to the monster. The bullets hitting the target provided a signal that the monster fought in its corporeal state. The mighty bear clawed the creature that left behind blood trails and kicked up flesh. Tentacles whipped, but Great Bear dodged and managed to tear one of the tentacles from the beast with a precise strike from his claw.

Bobby frantically thought about another weapon. He hid for a moment while desperation grew within him. He squinted his eyes while he ignored the sounds of combat a few feet away from him.

Great Bear kept pressing the attack. A thousand pounds of bear outmaneuvered every claw and tentacle that traveled his way. Great Bear failed to dodge the cat's greatest attack. Long teeth pierced the side of the bear's neck. Great Bear let out a giant roar and thought himself foolish for losing track, even momentarily, of the beast's greatest asset. The shadow ripped flesh and fur, spilling blood from the persistent bear.

Bobby desperately looked for anything. His eyes found Great Bear's bloody spear that he threw to kill the bull. He left the comfort of cover provided by the tree to frantically grab the spear. He then hurriedly ran toward the creature. The moment he closed on the creature he feigned a jab with the spear while standing next to Great Bear. He instantly blinked as he tightened his grip on the bear's neck. Bobby screamed, "No!" at that top of his lungs as he plunged the spear into the creature's side. This blow sent the shadow roaring in pain as the creature released its hold on the bear's neck.

Great Bear, pouring blood from various wounds on his body, returned the favor by biting the monster's neck. This time, Great Bear knew not to waste a moment. He shook and sent the creature flying through the air. It hit one of the giant redwood trunk's and lay still for a moment. It slowly found its way to its six legs dazed and corporeal from the impact.

Bobby took two, hop steps and flung the spear at the creature with such force it sent him off balance. The spear hit the creature and impaled it on the tree. It attempted to

blink, but after each time the duration shortened. The creature stopped twitching and accepted its fate.

Trev and Doomsteam relaxed as the moonlight illuminated the surface of the grasslands. Trev found himself shifting erratically, trying to position his body comfortably somewhere to take his rest for the evening. He listened to the fire burning as it consumed his best friend. Additionally, he could hear mechanical gears grinding as Doomsteam stood guard over the camp. Trev requested him to keep guard while he rested his weary bones. Trev looked at Doomsteam and said, “Do you have to turn your head like that? You are making too much noise for me to take my slumber?”

“Uhm, should I apologize for making noise while I keep a watch?”

Trev ignored the sarcasm in Doomsteam’s voice, then said, “You do not have to apologize.”

“Well, thank you for allowing me to stand this exciting watch.”

“I said you do not have to apologize. I never said you could not. It would be good manners, by the by.”

“I’m so sorry that my head moving to keep watch over you is preventing you from sleeping. Can you please find it in your cold, necromantic heart to forgive me?”

“Well, I suppose. You are forgiven. Now if you would, please keep it down. I must get my six hours of uninterrupted rest. Well, besides that I go to the bathroom several times throughout the night. Let us try this again. Good night Doomsteam.”

“Good night.”

Trev felt the log vibrate and the sounds of horses approaching from the north. Hooves slammed on the ground, creating a cacophony of violence speeding their way. The elderly man threw his blanket off his body in anger. “Doomsteam, do you not feel that?”

Doomsteam looked at him confused and said, “Hear what?”

“That symphony of peril barrel toward us.”

“No. Who do you think they are?”

“Well my metallic acquaintance, Lavon’s men. This would be a valuable occasion to remember your oath of vengeance.”

Doomsteam stood up as he said, “I remember. I will make them feel pain.”

“Well, that is all well and good. What is the plan?”

Doomsteam took a stride toward Trev and said, “I crush them. That is my plan.”

“Quick, put out the fire.”

“Fine.” The abomination rushed to put out the flame.

As the light flickered upon the construct, Trev noticed the metallic entity unbothered by the smoldering heat and smiled maniacally. “Doomsteam stop putting the fire out! I have a plan.”

Doomsteam felt the smile and ill intent radiating from Trev. He stood up from putting out the fire and said, “Why are you smiling at me?”

“I was just thinking about the glorious bait an imposing, purple glowing, giant standing next to a fire will be, and a tactical advantage it will give us.”

“What is your plan? What is imposing?”

“I will answer your second question first. Imposing means impressive. You are a giant, mechanical collection of metal things. That is imposing!”

“I don’t know how to be imposing.”

Trev exhaled deeply as he heard the horses close with a wagon in tow. “My apologies for not being clear. Also, I apologize for your teacher for not teaching you the definition of that word. Now, I need you to stand there and look imposing. Believe me; they will think you look imposing no matter what you do. You are an impervious, undead, monster!”

Doomsteam made a sad facial expression and looked at the ground. “You didn’t have to call me a monster.”

Trev realized that he lost his temper, momentarily straightened his clothes, and looked at Doomsteam directly with his empathetic eyes. “My apologies. Just stand there while I hide. You will draw their fire, and I will be your reinforcements.”

Doomsteam smiled. “Thank you for the apology. I understand.”

Trev hobbled to a gathering of bushes that offered him cover. The spot provided him with the perfect amount of concealment, but it also supplied a clear line of sight to the ever approaching battle.

Doomsteam’s face held an expression of confusion. The machine said, “Maybe if I put my chest out, then pulled my shoulders back, then I could look imposing.”

Trev sighed heavily as the monster shifted from pose to pose trying to look imposing. He shook his head at the sight of the monstrosity, but he could feel the unwanted guests approaching.

Doomsteam laid eyes on what traveled toward him. A group of five wagons in a “v” formation approached. The abomination shouted, “Five wagons.”

Trev heard the intelligence the undead provided. His mind calculated numbers and possible scenarios. He mumbled quietly to himself, “Let me see here. They are traveling with haste, so there should be no more than three to four people per wagon, plus the driver and navigator. That is six people per wagon. There are five wagons. Worst case scenario there are thirty men. Possibly not the worst case scenario. I mean that could have a large gun that shoots large rounds rapidly. Now, two people per wagon that would be ten. Worst case scenario is thirty. Best case is ten.”

Doomsteam stared at the wagons as they closed. He could see white canopy’s of them as they kicked up the ground below them. The center wagon stopped as the others kept going and made a circle around him.

The driver in the center wagon hopped out of his seat first. He wore khaki pants and a blue shirt. His red bandana hung over his mouth to prevent any dirt from the trail getting into it. He sized up the monster and said, “This is the monster we’re ‘sposed take back boys! It’s alive! Lavon told us it was dead!”

Doomsteam looked at him and said, “See, your job was to take back a dead monster. Your contract is no good.”

The man took his six shooter out of its holster. He glared down the barrel and said, “Nope. That just means he will pay more.” The first shot broke the quiet of the night. Five shots followed, creating a mixture of gunpowder and audible malice.

All of the bandits’ shots hit Doomsteam center mass. The monstrosity shook his head and said, “I’m not dead. I’m not alive. I’m undead. Apparently - it’s a thing.”

After the shots fired, each man dropped down from the wagon and drew his weapon. Most of the bandits carried pistols, but a few desired more distance, because they carried rifles pointed directly at the large undead.

Doomsteam stared at the leader. His gaze and facial features pleaded for them to stop. The monster said, "I don't want to hurt or kill any of you, but I will defend myself."

The lead bandit's fear urged him to reload his weapon rapidly. As soon as all six bullets entered their chamber, he aimed and yelled, "Fire!"

Rifles and pistols cut through the serene night sky, finding their mark. Doomsteam moved his right foot back as he shifted all his weight to it. The force of the impact of his foot as he began his charge left an indentation on the ground beneath him. A train whistle resonated from him as he built momentum. He dropped his shoulder, hitting the bandit leader in his chest. The force sent him flying backward. The bandit leader's flight ended as the harnesses of his wagon's horses broke his fall. The sudden change of direction and the impact he made with the ground rendered him unconscious.

The monstrosity took determined steps which put him within striking range of a bandit with a rifle. His hands wrapped around the barrel. He yanked the barrel forward, causing the wielder to travel with it as he never let go of his firearm. Doomsteam pushed the rifle, causing the butt end of the rifle to smack him hard enough for him to release his weapon. With the rifle now free, the undead smacked the rifleman on the nose with his own weapon. He held back on the blow because the monster desired for it not to be a killing blow. Afterward, he turned back toward the other bandits and continued to receive heavy fire.

Trev monitored the entire situation from his hiding spot. He let out a deep breath and said, "Well, I guess I should help him. This needs to end quickly. We need five survivors. We need them to not only drive the carriages back, but more importantly, send a message to Lavon. Trev said, "Change." After he finished saying the last word, purple energy enveloped him. Large, black wings sprouted from his back. Vivid red devil horns protruded from his head. His skin tightened, which forced his wrinkles to disappear then. His skin turned violet. His eyes surrendered and changed. Fire sprang from his sockets which burned brightly in the night. His clothes, which were enveloped in the purple energy, morphed into black slacks, a white shirt, suspenders and the hat that soon horns protruded from, giving him the appearance of a card dealer in Surrestrada. He took stock of his change, smiled, and then said, "Fly." His wings spread wide, then fluttered giving him altitude.

He flew high, wanting to survey the battlefield. He saw that Doomsteam defended himself appropriately. Probably too much, Trev thought to himself. He needed to end it quickly. He understood its desire to not hurt anyone. At the same time, these bandits lacked basic human decency. If the opportunity presented itself, they would kill him and his newfound acquaintance. As he started his descent, Trev decided the best course of action for the first five bandits he would come across will be to put down quickly and without hesitation or remorse. As his nosedive built up momentum he said, "Invisible." Black energy enveloped him, and soon he became undetectable to the human eye.

Trev circled as he tried to figure out the most advantageous position. He noticed a rifleman hanging back, peppering Doomsteam unhindered. Trev whispered, "This is number one."

As he landed, he heard gunfire all around and men screaming. These sounds of combat covered the whisper of his landing. He murmured, "Fire hammer." Violet energy coalesced around his arm. It rotated, building a spiked pommel underneath Trev's hand. The purple energy continued as it created dark, onyx colored leather straps that he grabbed with both hands. It continued as it created the dark haft. The eye of the maul mounted the large, flaming head of the weapon. Trev said, "Charge."

Trev flew forward as purple energy propelled him to the unsuspecting rifleman. He placed the Warhammer above his head, and with a downstroke - crushed the man's head into his spine. The man fell instantly. No noise alarmed others, but the sound of the corpse hitting the ground.

He knew that the strike countered his invisibility. He peered at the battlefield and saw another rifleman hiding behind a wagon discharging his weapon. With one, quick flutter of his wings he was in the night sky. Trev felt the wind on his face as he flew. Those on the battlefield witnessed a man-sized, batlike creature flying through the darkness and briefly covering a full moon.

Trev landed just behind the rifleman. The bandit pointed the weapon at the demon. The second before he pulled the trigger, Trev swiveled on his front foot and rotated his back foot a quarter of a circle. With his blazing Warhammer, he struck the rifleman on the chest, claiming a few broken ribs. This action nullified any aiming attempt as he sent a stray bullet into the void of the blackened landscape.

He followed the weight of the head of the weapon to his left side and quickly moved his left hand higher as he placed his right hand on the leather handgrip. He switched feet, so his right foot took a position in front of his left. Trev delivered a

crushing blow that caved in the right temple of the rifleman. The bandit fell forward onto the ground crying out in pain.

Trev grabbed his Warhammer with both hands. He lifted the weapon above his head and came down caving in the man's skull. Every bandit looked in his direction and screamed words of terror.

This distraction allowed Doomsteam to backhand one of the men on the head, which knocked him down. The undead grabbed the prone man by the ankles and tossed him toward a clump of two bandits.

Trev saw the three men on the ground as the five bandits split their focus away from Doomsteam and opened fire on Trev.

With a flutter of his demonic wings, he flew high into the sky, avoiding desperate gunfire. Doomsteam charged the ones that fired as the three men lay on the ground trying to obtain their bearings.

The first bandit to make it to his feet felt the heat of the engulfed Warhammer just before Trev slammed in the man's kneecaps with a sidestroke then, finished him off with an overhead attack. The other two frantically tried to find their feet, but they failed. Trev brought the Warhammer down on the first one that lay prone. The noise it made as it crushed his chest cavity sent a grotesque sound echoing into the night. Trev hit the other man directly on top of the forehead. He heard no sound coming from that one anymore, and with one precise downward blow finished off the man with a concave chest.

Trev looked at Doomsteam and said, "Render the rest unconscious. They are our prisoners and will deliver our message."

Doomsteam nodded, then charged the two bandits. He grabbed two men by the throat and started to choke them while he lifted them off the ground. Their feet dangled helplessly as their oxygen left their body and abomination's hand prevented any from returning.

Trev said, "Dispel." The blazing Warhammer disappeared in his palm. He followed with, "Whips." In his right and left hand, whips coalesced, spawning from ebony and violet energy. Once a whip formed, Trev said, "Charge." He speedily moved within striking distance of two bandits. He flung his whips at each of the bandits. The whips found their marks over their mouths. They attempted to wriggle free but failed.

A lone gunshot emanated from the darkness. Trev felt the pistol round enter his stomach. Trev, with anger in his voice said, "Drain." Dark energy pulsed from the men in the whips. Trev felt the shot, and now he felt his foe's life force flowing through him. He glanced over at his undead companion then said, "Doomsteam, I think those two are unconscious. Would you be so kind as to take care of this last one that shot me."

Doomsteam charged the shooter. While he moved effortlessly across the battlefield, the bandit emptied his pistol toward the monster. The bullets bounced off the metallic being. Doomsteam effectively closed the distance. The shooter felt mechanical hands strangling him as his body lifted high off the ground.

Trev saw the two bodies that he drained hit the ground. He quickly said, "Dispel." His whips disappeared as he looked toward the abomination. "Now that, Doomsteam, was imposing."

Chapter 12

Crimson and azure crystals sparkled from the beast's corpse. They detached from the creature's skin and swirled in the air. The body that lay impaled appeared to be a regular panther. Its feline eyes wide open as the enhancement magic left the body. It flew into the air harmlessly.

Great Bear changed back to human form and collapsed to his hands and knees on the forest floor. His wounds visible but not nearly as severe compared to how they looked when he fought in bear form. Great Bear said, "I told you to warn the others. Why?"

Bobby looked nervous, then replied, "I'm tired of people dyin' to protect me. It's not going to happen anymore. No."

Great Bear smiled, then shook his head. He took another moment then stood up and said, "Bobby, we will talk about his later."

"Yes sir," Bobby said hanging his head low.

"Bobby, thank you. You saved my life, but we need to go."

"Yes, sir."

"Where's that bull? I need to eat meat now."

Bobby pointed to the discarded bull carcass and said, "It's over there."

"Well, I will get it. Go ahead and get back so you can start a fire to get this meat cooking."

"Yes sir," Bobby said, turning around to run toward camp. As he picked one foot off the ground to propel himself forward, the crimson and azure crystals, appearing as mist, circled Bobby then plunged into the boy's skin. Bobby yelled in agony as he hit the ground - paralyzed.

Great Bear ran to Bobby. He started the investigation of the cause of the scream and collapse of a healthy boy. He instantly recognized the cause of the kid's pain. He saw the crystals all over his body. Bobby yelled out in pain, and this forced a look of helplessness on Great Bear's face. He scooped the boy in his arms, causing more screams, and immediately ran toward the temple.

“Ahhhhh! Great Bear, it hurts. I ain't ever felt nothin' like this before.”

“I know Bobby, stay strong for me.”

“Aghhh. I can't move my legs.”

“Bobby, you don't need to move. I got you.”

Great Bear's face turned to desperation while he planted his giant feet onto the ground. His powerful legs carried Bobby through the thick woods. Thorns from the shrubs brushed across Great Bear's, cutting an already torn body, but he paid no heed to pain. Bobby continued to scream out in agony, then his body started to convulse violently. Arms and legs flailed around and started choking.

Great Bear stopped running and set the boy on the ground. His loud panting covered the sound of Bobby having a seizure. Great Bear forcefully placed Bobby on his side and grabbed the boy's tongue. He placed his body weight on the boy and sucked in his elbows. He felt the boy want to move, and allowed the movements that would not hurt him.

Bobby stopped convulsing. Great Bear realized that Bobby stood a chance not to make it back to camp. He realized that Bobby suffered this pain while in a conscious state. He lifted Bobby to his knees. He placed his massive left forearm under Bobby's chin. Next, he placed his left hand on the forearm of his right hand then slipped the back

of his right hand behind Bobby's head, forcing the boy to slip into unconsciousness. Once he felt the boy go limp, he picked him up into his arms. The kid that killed a massive monster felt light in his arms.

Great Bear ran across the forest floor. His strode long and powerfully through his homeland. He picked up his legs and put them down consistently. He held no great speed, but his endurance allowed him to make up time because he never stopped. Bobby stirred in his arms and groaned in pain. His mind streaming in and out of consciousness. The words that sprang from him seemed incoherent ramblings. Occasionally, Great Bear heard cries of help from the boy to Victor.

The temple ground showed itself to Great Bear. The ivy grew over the homes of stretched leather. The wagon train relaxed as a few of the people played banjos. Children chased one another during an innocent game of tag. He continued running until his eyes rested upon his destination. Trishna's residence. He pushed forward, calling upon any spare energy and horsepower he possibly held within him. "Trishna!" Great Bear screamed, causing all the onlookers to turn their heads in astonishment. Great Bear ignored them as he pressed on toward her.

Trishna opened the flap and noticed that Bobby lay unconscious in Great Bear's arms. "What happened?" she asked Great Bear as she scurried to get her examining tools. Great Bear placed Bobby on a large, oaken table that stood next to the table where the poisoned girl lay.

Great Bear looked at Trishna with concern on his face, "The boy went hunting. A blinking panther attacked us. After the boy killed the creature, it sent a mist of red and blue crystals."

“You know our headdresses are more than ceremonial?”

“No.”

“They are anointed with special oil and herbs that repel that magic. Anytime those beasts are killed they pass on their enhancements. Bobby was unprotected. Why didn’t you tell him to run back?”

“I did.”

“He didn’t listen to you?”

“No. The boy came back and fought. He was fearless.”

“Boy just lost the equivalent of his father. He shouldn’t have been out hunting.” Trishna started to cut Bobby’s shirt. She threw it to the side. She discovered the crystals spread themselves to his chest. They buried deep, causing blood to trickle from each side. She tried to pull one out, but could not. She signaled Great Bear to try.

Great Bear gripped the crystal. He yanked mightily but failed to move the object.

Trishna gently ran her fingers through Bobby’s curly blond locks and started to cry. “They’ve already merged with him. Best case scenario, he survives the merge. Afterward, the rest of his life will be fights against this magic within him. Worst case scenario, he doesn’t live to see the sun rise.”

Great Bear looked down at the boy writhing in pain then said, “Can you do anything for him?”

Trishna opened a bottle ointment. She poured it over his chest. She said, “This oil will fight the infection of the open wounds. I will do what I can. The rest will be up to him.”

“I cannot do anything for him?”

“No. It’s all on him.”

“I should get out of your way. Please update me if there is any change.”

“I will.”

Great Bear lifted the flap of the tent open and left. Trishna walked to a box full of herbs. She placed them in a pot then grabbed the flint and tinder next to it. She sparked a fire, causing the concoction to ignite. Smoke filled the room then she said toward Bobby, “This should dull the pain and improve your odds of survival. Nothing to do but sit and wait.” She then walked over to a chair in the corner and sat down in it.

Trev, in his demonic form, paced around the five bandits that knelt down on both knees with their hands tied behind their backs. Doomsteam’s gears grinded as he paces back and forth. The five bandits looked at the two with fear in their eyes. One of them pleaded, “Please don’t kill us! We won’t attack anyone ever! Please don’t kill us!”

Trev crouched down and glared at him with his blazing eyes. He tilted his head to the side and said, “No. You are fortunately going to go back to Lavon with a message. There are five carts. Inside each cart is the body of a dead companion. Now, I imagine your lot holds loyalty in low regards. These are a reminder of what your task is.”

“Please, we’ll do anything!” one of the bandits begged.

“Yes, of course. As mentioned before, you will be delivering a message. I want you to show Lavon each one of the bodies. I want you to tell him that the demon and Doomsteam protect the Last Wagon Master and his wagon train. Tell him Doomsteam lives! Doomsteam is watching him! Doomsteam is coming!”

“Yes, sir. As you command.”

“What did I command?”

“You said, take wagon tell Lavon he’s dead!”

“You left the main part out of it. Tell him Doomsteam is going to kill him. Now, repeat it back to me the terms of our agreement.”

“You let us go. We tell Lavon Doomsteam killed the people in our wagons.”

“Very good. You may get on the road.”

Trev untied the man’s bindings, then the bandit scurried into one of the five wagons and sent it speeding into the night. Trev continued ensuring that each member of the bandit crew received his clear and concise orders. Each bandit member recalled them, and soon they all departed, headed toward Surrestrada and Lavon to complete their new mission in life.

Doomsteam stared at the last wagon speeding away and slowly decreasing in size as it chased the horizon. The monstrosity stared at Trev and said, “A few questions before you go.”

“Yes, Doomsteam. I think you have earned them, but how did you know I was getting ready to leave?”

“Uhm, it is getting late, and the sun should be coming up soon.”

Trev scoffed and then laughed. Through a lingering smile in his demonic form, Trev said, “I am a necromancer. I am not a vampire. That tickled me the undead. I need to get back to my crew so that I can inform them of the passing of their friend.”

Doomsteam nodded and said, “Was I imposing?”

Trev smiled at the abomination and said, “Dear Boy, you were grand and impressive in appearance. Yes, you were and are imposing.”

Doomsteam nodded in appreciation at the compliment, “Why did you say my name like that over and over?”

Trev’s smile changed from pride to mischief, then he said, “Ah. Good question. Someone like Lavon always needs to be chasing something or someone. He catches it and moves onto the next chase. By giving him your name, I gave Lavon something to chase. You can handle it. After all, you are imposing. Hopefully, it will get his focus off the Last Wagon Master, and we can conduct our business in peace even for just a little while. Speaking of which. I must be getting back. I suggest heading to Surrenstrada, but not a straight line. Once you reach Surrenstrada, there is an area north by northwest of Surrenstrada called ‘Sorrow Song Ridge.’ No one travels there due to the whole being haunted. You will be able to lumber about there and not be bothered. Teresa is a nice girl. She might ask you to play a game with her, but that girl is the sweetest ghost I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. When the time has come to attack Lavon and his crew - I will find you. Now, if you excuse me I need to be going.” Trev looked toward the sky and bent down as he prepared to fly into the sky.

Doomsteam asked, “Can I ask one last question before you go?”

Trev looked at the machine, and said, “Yes you may.”

“Why a card dealer?”

Trev smiled and said, “They terrify me. Chance is the only thing that scares me in life. Mathematically, in any gambling game really, the house has the advantage. More importantly, I cannot control, nor can any player control what card you get. It is the not knowing. There is, but they call that cheating and is frowned upon. I will see you around Doomsteam. Please take care of yourself and anyone on your path.”

The undead waved at Trev. He returned the wave as he took off into the night sky flying toward the temple and his friends. His mind drifted to what methodology should he use to tell Fred and Bobby that Victor is dead? He felt his speed slow. At that moment, he came to terms with his desire to procrastinate on this task.

Chapter 13

Ten men on horseback rode toward the temple gates. The two sentries stood at the entrance. The gate stood well over ten feet tall. The craftsmanship appeared to be simple, but the prowess of design showed their awareness of the creation. One sentry wore a headdress of a large buck and the other of a beaver. They called out to them, "Greetings travelers, how may we help you today?"

As the horseman continued to approach, "Hello, we are here to trade with you."

The horsemen reached their destination. The leader, wearing a bright red shirt, tan pants and a white cowboy hat, said, "We're prepared to let everyone live as long as you give us the Last Wagon Master." He then quickly drew his revolver and shot the sentry wearing the beaver headdress. The man wearing the large buck headdress reached for his weapon but failed to do it quickly. Another shot rang out, killing the sentry wearing the buck headdress.

As they entered the temple grounds, four riders stopped. One spoke up as he drew his revolver. "Hey, we didn't sign up for this. I never thought this place would have guards. We're leavin'."

The six riders looked on as the four riders.

"Well, we could follow 'em." one man said.

They looked around at one another then silently rode toward the temple.

Great Bear exited the tent after seeing Bobby. Frustration cursed through him because a boy lay helpless in his care. Additionally - he felt helpless. For all of Great Bear's strength, no path presented itself that could fix Bobby's predicament. Two gunshots rang out from the front gate. The noise reverberated violently as it startled Great

Bear. He ran toward the central camp, then yelled, "Everyone, prepare for combat! We must protect our guests." Great Bear's headdress started to take control of his whole body. He ran toward the path the gunmen rode from and hid.

The mighty bear saw his acolytes morph and scurry away to hide. He knew the population of his village. He thought to himself that the populace seemed to be mostly deer, beaver, and other animals that served a purpose in the ecological system, but not in a fight. Then he thought to the acolytes that fought well. He tallied them up in his head quickly. He calculated two lions, three tigers, a few cheetahs, several elk and himself, a brown bear. His confidence grew. The moon caught his attention. A large, silver circle illuminated the temple, giving the place an eerie calm. He knew the forest floor hungered for blood. As the six men and their horses came closer, so did battle.

The first pair of men passed Great Bear as they rode to create mayhem. Another pair then another traveled by him. He heard no other riders approaching. There seemed only this six. Great Bear charged at the six hard. He kept his head low and his paws quiet. The six slowed down. The bear made a mighty swipe on the backside of the horse, the back, right rider rode. The animal instinctually stopped and turned around to meet its assailant. It also hit the fifth rider and sent it reeling against the others, which knocked them all off balance for a moment. This abrupt movement sent its rider flailing off their horses. Once on the ground, the grizzly bit hard on the human's neck. He quickly moved toward the thicker part of the woods.

Once the bear felt that camouflage surround him, he bit down harder on the man's neck. He jerked and swayed the full grown, adult male, forcing him to flail around in all

directions. Great Bear heard several pops and cracks before he realized the rider passed to the afterlife. He left the carcass there and ran toward the sounds of battle.

Upon arriving at the battle he noticed that the horsemen placed their steeds in a circle, and the men took cover inside that circle. They shot at various things that sped past them. They saw the members of the wagon train taking cover. They started opening fire on them and the various huts. One of the horsemen said, "Just keep firin' until they give us the Last Wagon Master or we'll kill 'em."

Another one directed towards the combatants, "We don't wanna' hurt anyone else. We're just here for the Last Wagon Master?"

Their handling of the horses became sloppy with their escalation in aggression. From the top of Trishna's tent, two lions pounced from the side and leaped onto two of the horses. No amount of handling prevented the two horses from running to safety. The riders immediately pointed their guns at the two beasts, but their attempt failed. The lions quickly mauled their gun arms then yanked them down with their mighty jaws. This caused the two men to lean over, and the lions then bit the top of their necks causing them to fall to the ground as they flailed for a few moments then died.

One man shot twice in Trishna's tent then ran inside in a desperate attempt to escape. He looked at Trishna who stood over the poisoned girl's corpse. A fresh bullet hole showed itself on the girl's head. She stood over the little girl's corpse thinking herself a failure. The man's face brightened with excitement as he realized who lay next to the dead girl: The Last Wagon Master - helpless before him. He just needed to kill him and survive. The rider thought of money and fame, but more importantly, a favor from Lavon. He pointed his shaky gun hand toward Bobby.

Trishna put her whole body on the boy, shielding his torso and his head from the incoming bullet. She started to close her eyes as she waited for the doomful sound of an incoming bullet. The second before they shut, she saw two tentacles holding spikes spring out from around Bobby's shoulder blades.

One tentacle traveled straight toward the gunman's neck. The second spike trailed. It waited for the first to retract, then immediately buried itself in the fleshy part underneath the gunman's chin. Trishna heard the spike enter the man's brain before he collapsed motionless on the floor.

The last two gunmen fired in all directions. Their bullets traveled in all directions with no real intent. The time came for them to reload. A grizzly bear with bloody teeth stood before them. This made them drop the reins of their horses. Standing over their left shoulder, two lions appeared ready to pounce. Above, two panthers stalked them on the branches of the large redwood trees that inhabited this place. They ran in the right direction. Two tigers leaped from shrubs. Their massive bodies landed on the two men. The two men screamed for the animals not to eat them, but only for a little while.

Great Bear immediately ran into Trishna's tent after morphing into human form. She stood over the dead girl, cleaning her wound. He knew not to say anything, so he just put his gigantic hand on her shoulder and let her cry.

"What happened?" Great Bear asked. His voice lacked the harshness it usually carried.

Trishna buried her face into his chest, "I was dressing Bobby's wounds, and I heard a shot and looked. There she was - dead." She then pointed to the one on the floor with two spikes imbedded in his person. "He then ran in here and wanted to kill Bobby.

The boy grew two tentacles and killed the man. It all happened so fast; I couldn't do anything. A little girl died in my care." She started hitting him, and he gently pulled her closer to him.

Great Bear said, "Trishna, these tentacles the boy grew, were they black? Did they come from his shoulder blade area?"

"Yes," Trishna, said crying without attempting to fight them back anymore.

"The creature we fought did that. He did gain its enhancements."

"You think Bobby will make it?"

"Only time will tell. This will be a rough evening for him."

Lavon looked at Verna across his dinner table. She looked better after a bath and a few hours of sleep, he noticed. Lavon said, "Verna will you pass the pheasant please?"

Verna reached for them then said, "Absolutely, sir. This meal looks really good."

Lavon grabbed the pheasant politely, "Thank you." He then reached for a light colored gravy, pouring it over the meat. He started cutting it but stopped. He put his knife and fork down, then placed his plate over to the side. He leaned over and placed his elbows on the table, clasped his hands together and gazed at Verna. The silence broke between them after Lavon said, "It is nice to watch you eat. When I send you out on one of your missions, I always worry. It is nice to see you back – safe – here with me."

Verna smiled at him and said, "Believe me. It is good to be back."

Lavon breathed deeply then said, "Normally, I do not like to talk business at the dinner table, but I would like to make an exception. What happened?"

Verna lowered her head in shame. She replied, "I killed Victor."

Lavon tilted his head to the other side then said, "You seemed ashamed. Why?"

"Victor took out Doomsteam. When you told me he was someone not to underestimate you were not kidding. After he toppled Doomsteam, he started plugging at my men with his old rifle. A challenge was said. A duel between us two."

"You bested him in a duel? I am proud of you!"

"It did not happen that way. We took three steps, and he kept telling me that he could help me. Before step four, I turned around and shot him in the back of the head. I was scared, sir."

Lavon breathed deeply, "How did he kill Doomsteam?"

"He tied a rope around his legs while on a dead sprint with his horse. This tripped him up. Then he dragged him through the water. That drowned the furnace."

Lavon smiled and shook his head. He said, "Victor was always a terrific fighter. What happened after this Verna?"

"He picked up his rifle and took cover behind a tree. I sent Dippins into position to snipe Victor. Victor gave a warning before the shot. He killed Dippins. He made the challenge, and I didn't want to turn it down in front of the crew."

"Yes, if you would have turned down the match it would have ended badly."

"Yes, sir. After I shot Lavon, all the men except Trin wanted to pursue the rest of their wagon train."

"That was not part of the deal."

"That is what I said, sir."

"Are you getting to the part where you come back to me unconscious and beaten?"

“Yes, sir. After I watch them leave, Trin and I decided to set up camp. It was getting late, and I wanted some rest before we headed back.”

“I understand.”

“Thank you, sir. As we made camp, he Uhm, this is awkward. He tried to force himself on me after he hit me with a piece of fire wood.”

“I will kill him. Is he still alive?”

“No, sir. He’s dead. I killed him. I fought off the blow and played along until he lost his senses then I blew his brains out for what he was trying to do to me.”

Lavon rubbed his chin then said, “You did nothing wrong, my dear. Your result was exactly what was agreed upon. Dealing with these types of men can be - troublesome. You need to be as vicious as them. The other option is what you did. You outsmarted Victor and Trin. Now that is a tactic I can get behind.”

“Sir, may I say something.”

“Say on.”

“I don’t think I outsmarted Victor. When I looked at his face, I saw sympathy on it. I genuinely think he wanted to be merciful.”

“Let me tell you something about Victor. He was at one time my best friend. He was a good man, and he left behind a crew that no doubt wants to avenge him. Victor always had a moral compass that pointed north. He was a fool.”

“Sir I still feel guilty.”

“I do as well. I am not a savage. I do not enjoy hearing about my former friends dying.”

“Yes, sir.”

“My little Verna. You learned valuable lessons today. Sometimes you must retreat to advance. The second is that, as an assassin, not all of your kills are going to be clean and precise. A good assassin can work through the chaos. I am proud of you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Lavon picked up his fork. He said, “Now let us eat before it gets cold my dear girl.”

Verna picked up her knife and fork. She shot Lavon a smile that showed her intention to agree. She said, “Yes sir.”

Chapter 14

Daylight illuminated Bobby as he greased the wagon axle in front of him. Victor walked over to him and placed a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder, "It was a rough day of traveling wasn't it Bobby?"

Bobby looked up at Victor, "Yes sir. It sure was. A lot of stuff happened."

"Yup. A lot of stuff did happen? Why you greasing up that ole', broken down axle for Bobby?"

"Sir, I think it will still ride true."

"Bobby, that axle is older than you. Just give up on it. There are far better things you could do than work on that lost cause over there."

"Sir, you always told me to not give up on things. Sometimes things in this world just need a little tenderness and care."

"I told you that? Was a drunk?"

"No, sir. You were in your right mind."

"Bobby, sometimes ya' just gotta' move on. Ya' know, put somethin' down to pick somethin' else up."

"So, sir, you're sayin' I should just give up? You're not Victor!"

Bobby's words echoed in his mind. His vision turned black as he descended down a pitch black cave. He felt like the drop lasted forever. He landed in a jail cell. One torch flickered in the cell providing intermittent light. He saw the familiar Black Panther before him. Bobby instinctually wanted a weapon. He searched for one but to no avail. He reached down to the ground, but only found water with a depth that came to slightly above his wrist.

He circled the creature. It growled and reverberated throughout the empty floor space. At that moment, Bobby realized the fight of his lifetime arrived. He put his left hand in the water and splashed the creature's face with it. The creature closed its eyes for a split second, but Bobby sprang into action - punching, kicking and kneeing the creature letting his rage fuel his attacks.

The strikes sent the creature reeling and backpedaling. The monster showed its two tentacles and lashed out at Bobby with them. He dodged the first one, but the second one he grabbed the tentacle. He jumped on the creature's back and stabbed the monster in the center of the spine.

The creature writhed in pain, and Bobby leaped off the monster and landed on the floor. The creature looked at him as it lay dying. It tried to get up but collapsed again. Blue and red smoke filled the cell where Bobby stood. He ran toward the cell door. He tried opening it, but his attempts proved futile. Bobby felt tired. His time for running ended as he opened his arms and closed his eyes, waiting to be enveloped by the smoke. It surrounded him.

Bobby woke up to Trishna's face full of tears. She gave a soft smile as she ran her fingers through Bobby's hair. Trishna said, "You're awake Bobby! I knew you would make it!"

The boy leaned up on his bed then said, "How long was I out ma'am?"

"You were out about twelve hours."

"What happened to the poisoned little girl? Has Fred returned?"

Trishna got on her knees in front of Bobby. She moved Bobby's curls out of his eyes. Her touch felt gentle on Bobby's cheek. She made a noise, but the rest of the sounds

failed to make a sentence. She cleared her throat then said, “Bobby, dear boy, she was killed by some horsemen that came through here.”

Bobby closed his eyes for a second then said, “Is Fred back yet?”

“No Bobby, he sure isn’t.”

Bobby collapsed into Trishna’s arms. She could hear him crying and felt completely helpless in that moment. She hugged him tightly. Bobby, through tears, said, “She was curious and a little thirsty. That is it. She didn’t deserve to die.”

Trishna squeezed Bobby tight. She thought about saying something, but she decided not speaking the best option.

“Trishna, you can’t hug me. I am poison.”

Trishna pulled him closer then said, “Bobby, you don’t worry about that now. So much weight is on your shoulders now. You won’t know peace for some time.”

Bobby and Trishna ended their hug. He looked at her then said, “I should go wait for Fred. He’ll want answers.”

The boy walked to the tent flap and opened it. As he placed one foot outside, Trishna said, “Bobby, one more thing.”

He turned around to look at Trishna then said, “Yes ma’am’.”

Trishna's face turned assertive as she said, “None of this is your fault. You understand me?”

Bobby nodded that he understood what she said as he walked outside of the tent. He walked in the direction where the horses slept for the night. The horses neighed and tried to put distance between themselves and Bobby. He looked at a tall black mare. “Are

you going not to like me? After all the trails we traveled down?” The tall black mare stepped toward him as if Bobby just shamed her.

He rode down the trail that took him outside the gate. As he left the gate, the night sky caught his attention. He felt at peace in the dark unlike he ever felt before. He felt at home and comfortable. He dismounted his steed and sat down on a comfortable rock. He peered down the road in the direction he imagined Fred traveled.

Fred’s tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth from dehydration. He laid eyes on the temple, but he wanted to collapse on the trail and rest. He never realized how much humans depended on horses for travel; this gave a deep insight into the carvings on the stables elsewhere in the temple. He walked throughout the night and the next day. He clutched the blue vial and held it up to the moon and placed it back in his pocket. He hoped looking at the vial would give him the motivation to continue. For a moment the vial succeeded, then fatigue reminded his body that it controlled his actions. Fred kept his eyes on the temple as the foliage slowly passed him.

The sounds of hooves hitting the ground caught his attention. He saw Bobby standing in the stirrups with his heels down galloping at full speed, expertly summoning all the momentum within the horse. He knew Bobby rode the horse in that manner because only he and Bobby possessed the balance to ride like that without falling. Fred stopped walking and eagerly awaited his friend to make it to him. “Fred, Fred, I have bad news.”

Bobby’s voice initially warmed Fred because of the exhaustion he felt. The idea of bad news felt like that kick to his chest by Katie earlier. “What is it, Bobby?”

Bobby finished riding up to him and leaped off the horse gracefully. “We had an attack – the girl took some crossfire. Sorry,” Bobby stated as he stared at the ground with this head down.

Fred rubbed his temple and inquired “She’s dead?”

“Yes, sir,” Bobby mumbled.

Fred sensed that Bobby felt more comfortable in the violence than telling someone he admired that during his watch people died. “I’m sure you did all you could. Will you help me get on the horse? I am exhausted.” Fred knew he could get on the horse, but he wanted to give Bobby a task so he would look at him. He grabbed the boy on the shoulder with his right hand. “Bobby, whatever happened was not your fault you hear me. What are those crystals on your skin?”

Bobby guided Fred onto the horse and stated, “It’s a long story, sir.”

Fred gestured with this hand, welcoming him to get on the horse with him. “Let us go, Bobby. We can talk in the morning and make plans.”

Bobby shook his head and looked at the ground. “Sir, if it’s all the same with you, I’d like to walk back.”

Fred nodded. “As you wish Bobby. Find me in the morning. I have a feeling we wore out our welcome.”

Bobby smiled. “Yes, sir.”

Fred tapped the horse on the side sending it into a trot. He looked over his shoulder and saw Bobby, his head down on the path walking toward the temple with a heavy mind. He mentally cursed the situation at hand. His mind drifted to Katie. Every word she spoke stuck to him. He now held the title of the Last Wagon Master. Bobby,

next in line, became a mark the minute he rode away to help the little girl. Fred frowned at the thought of being Surrenstrada's marked man. His ethnicity made him a mark, but now he held the position. His piety only lasted a moment as the thought of Bobby entered his mind. The thing that frustrated him the most poured in as memories of the young teen's gentle demeanor. It angered him that the most wanted people in Surrenstrada possessed good intentions. He could not shake the thoughts all ride long, and until the time his head hit the pillow.

Surrenstrada managed to take things from him that meant a lot. He imagined it will until he took the fight to it. His mind stopped churning when a name hit him. The name of Lavon gave him purpose. That name seemed to be the pivot point of all the turmoil and strife in Surrenstrada. Lavon must die, he thought to himself as he rode hard under the light of a full moon.

Lavon and Verna arrived at the stables with their backpacks and bedrolls. The two kept quiet out of nervous excitement. Verna reached in her back pocket and grabbed a carrot. She held it underneath Sassy's nose. The horse nibbled at the carrot while she gently rubbed her beneath the bridle. She whispered to her horse, "Eat up my Sassy girl while I rub your spot. We've got a long ride ahead of us."

Lavon laughed, "Just because you whisper does not mean I cannot hear you."

Verna looked embarrassed. She said, "This is our ritual. Before every mission, you send me on we do this. I feed her a carrot while petting her underneath her bridle. I pet her some more then I put her saddle on her back. Pet her some more before we ride out to do our task. I'm excited! This is the first time we have went on a mission together."

Lavon led his brown and white painted horse out of its stall. It stood nearly a foot taller than Sassy. Lavon grabbed a bucket and the brush inside. He started painting symbols on his horse. He said, "I am excited as well. We all have our rituals. These symbols are magic. I learned them from a book that I bought long ago. These symbols are what you would consider magic. To me, and other trained mages, they are precise and detailed runes of protection."

"Lavon, I didn't know you were a mage? Could you teach me?"

"I do not see the harm in teaching you. I use a few protection runes. It wards off a certain number of projectiles. After that number is depleted, then you are on your own," he said as he continued painting the symbols on his horse.

"Sir, what is the number of projectiles?"

"It depends on the practitioner. The variables are how assertive they are written, the precision within runes themselves and which runes you pick. The same goes for the incantation. How assertive and precise you are with it. We have time; I will be back with my book. Please saddle Dominion and your Sassy girl," he said, sending a smile her way.

She returned the smile and with eagerness and said, "Yes sir."

Lavon walked out of the stable. She walked over to Dominion. She petted him underneath the bridle and rubbed him in between the eyes. The horse jerked his head when she attempted to make eye contact. She laughed, "Oh! You are a tough boy aren't cha'?" The horse immediately calmed down as she put the saddle on him. She noticed that the horse stood tall and never swayed. He stood there still like nothing scared him. Verna said as she continued to saddle him, "My aren't you a brave thing. You are not scared of anything are you?" The horse stood there calm as she finished putting on the

saddle. She noticed that the runes appeared out of the way of the saddle. She nodded to herself then said, "I bet that is no accident. He did say the precision of the runes."

Lavon walked into the stables carrying a large book. He looked at Verna and said, "Very astute. That is exactly why I positioned the runes the way I did. Come over here please, I want to show you something."

Verna walked over to Lavon who started flipping through the book. He smiled and said, "Verna, this was my first rune. It is called Rune of Minor Protection. Here is the rune, draw that on your horse while saying this incantation. I say practice saying the incantation first until you feel that you have it right. Remove all doubt and fear within you when you do it. You must be assertive and precise."

She grabbed the book gently from Lavon, then said, "Yes sir." She placed her finger on the pages. They felt thin to her, but she noticed a few notes written in the margins by Lavon. She asked, "Lavon, what are these notes you wrote in here?"

Lavon walked over to her. He read one of them, "Blue works better for anything protection. Out of all the colors of the spectrum, blue seems to hold up the best. Oh! I was experimenting with which colors worked best for my runes. Blue seemed to hold up better than red, black, white, gray and yellow. I think it has to do with the way it reacts with the user. I like blue, so, I am more comfortable working with it. I do not like red, so, naturally, my runes would not be as accurate. It is the subtlety of the emotion it evokes."

"I like blue! I get what you are saying though. Black to me is depressing."

"Precisely, Verna!"

"So, which part do I practice?"

Lavon pointed to passage. He cleared his throat then said, “It is pronounced, “*Mekta brumsha eretbit*. Be confident in yourself. Imagine the combat ahead and the need for protection for you and your Sassy girl.”

Verna smiled, “You will never let me live that down will.”

Lavon returned the smile, “Not in this lifetime Verna. Now practice.”

Verna held the book in her hands. She cleared her throat, “*Mekta brumsha eretbit*. Was that right?”

“You must be confident. No doubt. Now do it this time with the utmost belief in yourself. *Mekta brumsha eretbit!*”

“That was much better!”

“*Mekta brumsha eretbit.*”

“There you go. Now trace the rune with your finger like you were drawing it.”

Verna started to trace the rune with her finger, “Like this?”

“Yes, but with more confidence! You must remove all doubt.”

“Yes, sir.” She continued to trace the rune on the book with her finger.

“Take a moment and let me know when you know you got it down.”

“I think I got it, sir.”

“No! You must know you do.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How did you get involved doing this?”

“Well, a peddler wearing tattered robes stopped me while I was walking home one day. He told me that he was selling books. I was wondering what books he had. This book stood out from the others. It was bigger. It seemed more aged. I held the book in my

hands then opened it. The pages contained information and a language I did not understand.”

Verna continued to trace the rune with her finger then asked, “How much did you pay for it?”

Lavon smiled then said, “Well - not as much as I should have.”

Verna smiled as she continued to trace the rune. She said, “You’re right. This book does stand out from all other books.”

“You about ready to try your first rune?”

Remembering how Lavon stressed confidence she said, “Yes.”

“Very good. I will grab the paint. Remind me to show you how to mix it. I think I have improved the technique in the book.” Lavon walked to her with the brush and the paint. He continued, “As you draw the rune repeat the incantation. Stay focused on the words and the lines of the rune. Make sure everything is crisp. Be in charge.”

Verna nodded. She handed the book back to Lavon while saying, “*Mekta brumsha eretbit.*” She took the paint and drew the first shape. She drew it on Sassy’s neck, towards the middle on the left side. Sassy stood perfectly still. The shape itself looked like an upside down “v.”

Lavon nodded his head approvingly with a smile on his face. He noted that her voice stayed solid and her lines seemed forceful. He sat back and smiled to himself, allowing his pride in her to show.

Verna continued to repeat the incantation. She confidently painted a straight, vertical line below the upside down “v” she painted earlier.

Lavon's eyes widened as one more symbol only need to be painted. He wanted to run to her and take the brush away from her and do it himself, but he fought the urge. He watched with eagerness as he put his hands above his head out of sheer excitement.

Verna confidently finished making a "v" shape below the vertical line. It looked like a sad face, but Verna said nothing. She focused hard, and after she made the last stroke she brought the brush back. She admired her work and nodded approvingly. A bright blue light emanated from the rune then faded. Verna smiled. She looked at Lavon, "Does the light mean it worked?"

Lavon elated said, "Yes! You did it! I am so proud of you."

"That was intense."

Lavon nodded then said, "It was nice to share that with you, and I can pass that tradition on to you."

"You're going to be around for a long time Lavon. You better!"

As he smiled, he said, "Yes Verna. I plan on it. We should finish the preparations for our journey before the rest of the crew shows up ready to go."

"Yes, sir. Lavon, thank you."

"You are welcome, Verna. You are very welcome." Lavon gave a pat to Sassy. He looked at the palomino horse for a moment, "Where did you buy her? She is quite the beast."

Verna smiled widely at the compliment. She said, "I saved for a while to buy my horse. I remember that always seemed to be freedom to me. If I wanted to go somewhere different, then I could just jump on one and ride away."

“On this beast, she will be able to take you far from here. Who did you buy her from?”

“Well, I saved for a while then I saw a man selling horses at the Exchange. I looked at him and asked how much. He replied with how much ya’ got? I said, well, I have this much. I was so entranced with the horse I forgot how much I had. He counted seventy-five Stratans. He said that’ll do. He gave me the bill of sale and the reins. That was one of my favorite days.”

Lavon smiled, “Excellent story. Terrible negotiating skills.” He then busted out in laughter.

Verna laughed. Their moment of peace ended when they heard the gate open and the noise of several horses traveling toward them. Verna and Lavon shared a caring look as they knew their moment of peace left as soon as the footsteps boomed in the distance. They mounted their horses once they exited the stables. Verna looked at Lavon and said, “This will be fun. Let’s meet our new friends.”

Lavon shook his head, entertained at Verna’s comment as the two traveled toward the four riders. As they reached talking distance, a man wearing a large cowboy hat with its better days behind it said, “Hello, my name is Three Burst. As promised, I assembled my crew as per the mission. It sounded like at least a six person mission.” His brown eyes seemed fairly friendly, but his wrinkled and dirty face showed a glint of mischief. He seemed taller than the average person standing in the mid six-foot range. He constantly scanned the world around him, making him seem cautious.

“Agreed, your pay will be what we discussed, and a bonus will be thrown in for each objective met.”

“That seems more than fair. Thank you, sir. Allow me to introduce the crew I put together. This here is Magma.” He pointed to a muscular man with no hair on his body whatsoever. Layers of soot stacked themselves on his tan and sweaty skin. He held a large, metal gunlike apparatus with a hose attached that led to a backpack. During the pauses and quiet moments his backpack, full of angry heat, yearned to be set free on some unsuspecting victim.

Three Burst continued as he pointed to a shorter man. He wore wire framed glasses and a crooked and worn fedora. His rifle, which seemed taller than the wielder, laid gently in a custom saddle bag. Notches showed along the buttstock of the firearm. Lavon and Verna easily inferred that each notch represented a kill by him. There appeared over twenty notches with plenty of room to grow on the oversized firearm. The man adjusted his glasses as Three Burst said, “This here is the greatest secret in Surrestrada. His name is Spectacle. He shoots from so far away no one knows he does it. He keeps track of them himself.” Spectacle racked a round in his custom firearm, then placed it back in the elaborate saddle bag designed specifically to allow him easy access.

The last man made Verna nervous. He stood well over six feet tall, but seemed lanky. His muscles appeared not bulky to her but explosive. She reminded him of a coiled up snake ready to pounce. He kept his long black hair in a ponytail. He wore a black, leather vest and pants. He wore no shirt underneath and no hat. He carried daggers all across his body. He additionally wore a long knife on each hip, but the thing that got her attention immediately seemed to be the normal, everyday axe across his back. She stared at it in awe as she noticed the detail on the weapon. Blood caked the head of the ax like the user never washed the weapon. The eye of the ax protruded enough that the owner

carved it to a point. This added another dimension to the two handed weapon where a thrust seemed more practical than an overhead chop. Everything on this man seemed designed to stab and cut a man Verna thought to herself. Three Burst exclaimed, “This here is Bit. He is named after the cutting part of the ax.”

Lavon eyed the four men and nodded. He said, “My name is Lavon. This here is my right hand, Verna. Next to me, take your orders from her. You understand what I am saying?”

Three Burst lifted an eyebrow, then dipped the brim of his hat toward Verna. He said, “Yes ma'am'. My crew ain't got no problem takin' orders from a female.”

Lavon gave a whistle that sent Dominion into a light trot. Everyone followed Lavon as they set course for the Last Wagon Master.

Chapter 15

Trev flew through the night, leaving a trail of purple energy streaking across the night sky. He attempted to form a strategy for telling two people their mentor's ashes drift on the trail of Surrestrada. Trev knew that Fred possessed a stoicism about his persona. Despite Bobby's years, he knew maturity never seemed in shortage with him.

He landed a mile away from the Temple of the Ancients. He said, "Revert." A purple sheen traveled the entirety of his body from head to toe. After a brief moment he changed into his original form after the purple lights danced on him. He took a deep breath and began walking.

He approached the temple. The front gate lay broken as two men stood guard. He ventured to them. Trev said, "What happened to the gate?"

A guard wearing a beaver's head said, "There was an attack tonight. They wanted to kill the Last, I mean, Wagon Master Bobby."

"Any fatalities?"

"About a dozen of us druids and the little girl on the wagon train that fell ill."

"The poor girl. Curiosity is a punishable offense, but the verdict does not fit the crime. I must talk to Fred and Bobby. May I please enter?"

They allowed him to enter the temple grounds. He walked on the trail. His curiosity manifested causing him to breathe rapidly. Despite feeling his body flutter he picked up his pace. He heard voices in the distance.

Great Bear Talsnow, Otter Trishna and Fred talked in the night sky. Trev knew his elderly feet lacked the ability to be quiet and his panting certainly hindered the cause. He knew that Fred held tremendous senses. Fred's employment as a scout provided him

time and experience to hone them. As far as Talsno and Trishna, he felt something mystic and natural flowing within them.

Great Bear Talsnow sniffed the air. “Good evening Trev.”

Fred smiled. “I was waiting for you to announce your presence. Your breathing is hard enough. I did not want to contribute to your lack of air.”

Otter Trishna said calmly, “We should let them talk. They have much to discuss.”

Trev nodded in agreement. “Yes Otter Trishna. Thank you both for the hospitality.”

Great Bear and Otter Trishna walked away as Fred walked toward Trev. They exchanged a heavy handshake. Fred asked, “You did not return with Victor. I take it he made it to the afterlife?”

Trev placed his right hand over Fred’s shoulder and said, “Fred, Victor was executed. Lavon created some man mixed with steam and necromantic magic.”

“So this monster killed Victor?”

“No. One of the crew did after Victor slayed the abomination.”

Fred ran his hands through his long straight, black hair the said, “You can tell Bobby.”

Trev smiled. “That is the Last Wagon Master’s responsibility.”

“Everyone acts like there is some hidden code. I think it is just people like yourself making up rules.”

“That is a possibility. What happened tonight on your end Fred?”

“Upon my return, I was greeted by Bobby who informed me that the girl died during an attack. I had the material to cure her.”

“That is unfortunate. Did you exude much effort?”

Fred smiled, shook his head, and said, “Much does not come close to defining it. I was attacked by a crazed lady working against her will. Our fight was interrupted by what can be described as the living swamp, then on my way back I was attacked by a giant bird.”

Trev rolled his eyes and let out a sigh. He laughed then said, “Fred, you are becoming one of my new favorite people. You weave an extraordinary tale. Who would have thought you had such an active imagination?”

Fred shot back, “Speaking of imagination. How does a man as well lived as you leave and get back so quickly?”

Trev’s smile disappeared. He squinted one eye and said, “How can you ask that? You know about giant birds. One was a nice fellow. He came down, ate a horned toad, then afterward we chatted for a while. He then asked me where I was going. I told him. He offered to give me a ride. I accepted, and now I am here. Nothing more.”

Fred shot a smirk at Trev. The smirk faded as Fred said, “As for Bobby, I was told that he went hunting with Great Bear.”

Trev shook his head in disapproval and said, “That boy is Victor incarnate. He is so stubborn and headstrong and not afraid of anything.”

Fred waited a moment, then took a deep breath and said, “Great Bear and him were attacked by a beast. He told Bobby to run. He did and turned back around to help Talsnow.”

Trev shook his head and said, “I do not like where this is going. He is not hurt is he?”

“No, he is not. Apparently, Bobby killed the beast. Unfortunately when you kill a beast it passes its magic onto you. The druids, that is what they call themselves, hunt with long spears and bows, and their headdresses protect them.”

“We need to get to Surrestrada quickly. I need to consult my volumes. How is Bobby?”

“I’m fine.” The voice snuck up behind them, startling Trev and Fred. The blond haired boy’s encircled eyes screamed of his exhaustion. His torn and dirty clothes gave him the appearance of a mineworker.

Fred laughed and said, “Bobby, first of all, I like to think I am quiet, but you put me to shame. Additionally, how does every speck of dirt on this trail seem to find you?”

Bobby tried to straighten up his clothes and wiped his dirty hands on specks of dirt on his clothes, which just smeared the dirt, spreading and making the stains worse on his hand and shirt. Bobby glared at his bare feet and with his head down said, “Trev, sir, how about Victor?”

Trev hobbled over behind Bobby and placed gentle hands on both of his shoulders. Fred bent down on one knee. He stared directly into Bobby’s eyes. His eyes softened. Fred said, “Bobby...”

Before the rest of the statement left Fred’s mouth, Bobby said, “He’s dead isn’t he?”

“Yes, Bobby.”

Trev said, “Bobby, he passed away protecting us.”

Bobby's face turned stern and filled with anger. He looked up Trev, then he turned around to face Trev. His voice filled the night sky as he asked with malice in his tone, "Who did it?"

Trev took a step back as the unfamiliarity with the new tone from Bobby struck him. He said, "Bobby, it seemed there was a crew, and the leader was a blonde woman."

Bobby said, "Blonde woman."

Fred followed, "Bobby she was probably working for Lavon."

Bobby's form began blinking in and out of this plane. His body became incorporeal, then flashed in the physical world.

Fred backed away, and so did Trev. Fred said, "Bobby, let us calm down so we can discuss what is going on with you."

Trev approached Bobby and said, "Tell me what happened to you, Bobby."

Bobby looked five feet away to his left. The boy disappeared and reappeared in the spot he spotted out a second ago. He looked at a spot toward the trail, then disappeared only to take form where he last looked.

He looked at the two and said, "Great Bear and I were hunting. It was spectacular! He was showing me that the entire world is connected and it is their responsibility..."

Bobby's blinking in and out of the material realm ceased. Bobby continued, "—we tracked this stag to this open area. Great Bear shouted 'run Bobby,' and I did. I ran, but then I heard a growl and a roar. I sprinted and saw this black catlike creature that flashed in and out on top of Great Bear. My rifle was useless against it. Great Bear roared!"

Trev paced angrily and said, "You are ten years old Bobby! You should be playing in the streets while yelling for no reason. Your hands should be sticky for no

reason and have germs on them. Various fluids should be hanging out of your nose, and you should be a child. Dear boy - you should not be fighting some phasing, black cat in the woods with tentacles!”

Fred looked at Trev and said, “For someone that always complains about manners, you just interrupted the boy.”

Trev scoffed at Fred and said, “I might have taught you how to read and write, but you sound and act like Victor with each sun rise.”

Bobby looked at Trev and said, “You get grumpier with each sun rise!”

Fred and Trev looked at Bobby and laughed. They chuckled until Trev said, “Well played my boy. Now, finish your story please.”

Bobby looked at both of them and said, “Well I fought the creature for a bit until I was able to finish it off with a spear. The moment it realized that it was going to die, it released this blue, smoke like stuff. Great Bear told me that I passed out, and I was crying out in pain.

Bobby looked at him with a sadness draping his face as he said, “People under my watch still died. I was irresponsible. I shouldn’t have went hunting. Victor would...”

Trev interrupted, “Bobby, I knew Victor for centuries. If going hunting in the woods with probably an expert in the field is a bad decision, then Victor would have done it tenfold, belly laughing like a fool all the way. That man loved to recognize a bad idea and do it just cause.”

Bobby looked down at his feet and said, “Yes sir. I think I am going to go to bed. We are getting on the trail tomorrow right?”

Fred nodded and said, “Yes. First thing after we bury that girl.”

Bobby said, “Yes sir. Good night.” He turned his back and started to walk toward the tent to sleep.

Fred said, “Bobby wait.”

Bobby turned around, “Yes sir?”

“Bobby, I was going to ask you this in the morning. Now that I am Wagon Master. The scout position in our wagon train is open. It is yours if you want it. It is a little increase in pay, but not much.”

Bobby’s eyes widened in excitement, “Yes sir! I will take it!”

Fred reached his hand out for Bobby to shake. Bobby reciprocated the gesture, then said, “I’m gonna’ go to bed now. Good night Fred. Good night Trev.”

Trev smiled warmly, “Good night Bobby. Try and sleep well.”

Bobby nodded at Trev and said, “Yes sir.”

Fred smiled and said, “Good night Bobby.”

Bobby waved as he traveled down the trail. Fred looked at Trev and said, “That boy deserves better than the company he keeps.”

Trev smiled and looked at Fred. He said, “I agree – whole heartedly.”

Part 3

Bobby called me Wagon Master today. The ring of the formal title struck me as odd. Only a handful of people knows who I am. When I first came here, they called me primitive. Like I was some old beast or species of a time long forgotten. I do not hate it when they look at me that way. I like it. They underestimate me – I use that to my advantage.

Another thing that is often misunderstood about me are the lessons that Victor taught me. Each lesson as valuable as the next. These lessons ranged from how to wash your clothes in the river, how to cut your steak in public, and how to fight with various weapons. How do you remember the man that took you in when no others would? How do you memorialize a man that meant everything to you? He deserves more than continuing to Surrenstrada as if nothing happened. A man, who lived over sixty winters, gave his life in service of others. I guess all you can do is go on with life. I am glad that I am part of his legacy and for that - I am thankful.

Someone also called me the Last Wagon Master. I do not believe that. In my heart of hearts, I believe that Bobby is. I must stay strong for him. I must survive to prevent him from having the title of the Last Wagon Master. I will use all of the lessons Victor has taught me to ensure this. I aim to make Lavon's life – uncomfortable for as long as I can.

-Fred

Chapter 16

Bobby peered over his shoulder as he rode away from the Temple of the Ancients. He smiled at the thick green moss that rested easily over tall oak and redwood trees. Various birds sang a song of peace and tranquility. He closed his eyes and took in the scenery for one last breath. As he exhaled, he opened his eyes. The last of the foliage passed him by as he looked at his surroundings of noisy wagon trains, the backsides of horses, and the desert as he rode at the back of the wagon train. He heard the horses step on the dry sand, and for a moment felt the sadness of leaving the sanctuary the druids provided him along with those he holds dear.

“Scout Bobby. Please come here,” Fred said from the lead cart.

Bobby noticed that Fred always spoke loud enough to be heard. He never shouted or screamed. Since his new enhancements, he felt people shouted for no reason. He gently tugged on the reins and urged the horse to accelerate forward by whistling loudly. The horse complied with the command. The black horse opened up as it made long, graceful strides. He loosened his grip on the reins, placing trust in the beast. The dust kicked up, getting on his face and in his hair. He placed a bandana over his nose like he saw Victor do many times. After a few seconds he arrived at the front of the wagon train looking at Fred. “Yes sir,” Bobby said to Fred.

Fred kept his eyes on the road as he smiled then said, “Scout Bobby, do your thing please.”

Bobby smiled, “Yes sir. I will be back before nightfall.”

Fred shifted his gaze to Bobby for a moment then said, “Scout Bobby, be careful.”

“Yes sir.”

“Bobby, I forgot to give you something important.” Fred reached into his backpack and pulled out a long golden rod. The rod housed two lenses. One big lens and one small lens book ended the copper tube. Fred collapsed the tube, which made it easier to stow in a backpack or saddlebag. He handed the tool to Bobby then stated, “This is a spyglass. You ride until you are getting ready to turn around to come back to the wagon train. You take a good look into the distance with this thing. If it is out there, you will see it. You understand Bobby?”

“Yes sir.”

“Be careful with this thing. It is expensive, and we cannot find a replacement until Surrestrada.”

“Yes sir. I will be careful.”

Fred noticed the boy’s eagerness. He smiled as he remembered his first time as a scout. The freedom he felt as he traveled alone during the day. He nodded at Bobby and whispered, “Ride Bobby – ride!”

Bobby smiled as eagerness took over his body. He made an ornery grin as he said, “Yes sir.” He turned his horse to the side assertively and whistled. The horse dashed in the direction, leaving behind a trail of dust in their wake. Bobby felt freedom. The blond boy stood in his stirrups and leaned his body forward.

It seemed as though the desert floor parted as Bobby rode hard. The sun traveled toward the middle of the sky, and Bobby felt his stomach grumble. He gently pulled back on the reins, which signaled the horse to slow down. The horse complied and slowed down to a walk. Bobby then stopped the horse completely. He jumped off the horse and

reached into his saddlebag. He grabbed some venison jerky from the container. He twitched the reins and whistled, urging his traveling companion to move along with him. The two walked as Bobby ate. He looked at his reluctant friend then said, “You’re nervous about me, aren’t ya’?”

The horse, as if awakened, looked at him seemingly in agreement. He noticed the horse shared a blue light similar to those of the crystals that emanated from his body.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I should’ve known.” Bobby patted the horse gently on the neck. He smiled, “Well, I wish there was a way I could thank ya’ for bein’ my horse, despite the danger I put ya’ in.”

He put his hand on his chin and looked at the sky. He moved the hand from his chin to his waist, snapped then said, “I got it! I’ll give ya’ a name! All the fancy horses have a name.”

Bobby started to look at the horse as he walked. He wanted to notice any standout features. He said, “Well - you’re a tall horse for sure. Your stride is long. Also, you’re by far one of the fastest horses I ever rode. That blue dust makes you look sparkley and dazzley. Sparkle? Or Dazzle? Nah – I wouldn’t like it if someone called me that. Hmm, what about Tallstrider?”

The horse lifted its head in approval and neighed. Bobby shook his head. He said, “Man, Tallstrider, it was almost like you can understand me?” He finished off the last of the jerky and mounted Tallstrider. He gave Tallstrider a few pats while he said, “Alright, we’re gonna’ ride hard for a few more hours, look through the spyglass then book it back to the wagon train. You up for that Tallstrider?” The horse bucked high as it neighed and

hit the ground. The horse broke out in full stride which forced Bobby to smile from ear to ear.

As Bobby traveled forward through the desert collecting sand, he glanced up at the sun. He noticed that the sun seemed on a downward trajectory, and the time arrived to turn back. He stopped Tallstrider. He reached in his saddle bag and pulled out the spyglass Fred gave him earlier in the day. He extended the shaft and put the big lens up to his eyes. He laughed, "That's not the end, Tallstrider. Why didn't you tell me?" The horse raised his head in confusion while Bobby reversed the spyglass. He peered out in the distance. He said, "That's the right end. Is there anything out there?"

Bobby panned the desert around him. He noticed movement from the distance. Six riders sped towards him. He sat up in the saddle nervously. He said to himself, "Ok. What would Fred look for?" He thought to himself. He noticed a blonde female. He noticed her long, blonde, curly hair that seemed familiar to him. Gathering his nerves, he said, "Ok. Uhm, he always leads with numbers then weapons." He continued to scan the female rider approaching him. He noticed a pistol, repeating rifle and a knife. The blue runes on the palomino horse she rode stood out to him.

Speaking of standing out in a crowd, next to her rode a man wearing all black. Blue runes covered the brown and white painted horse the man rode. Bobby noticed that the man's shirt held no wrinkles. Everything about the man appeared meticulous. This man seemed planned and organized to the last detail. Bobby noticed the man's weapons. The details of the weapons proved his initial theory of the man owning the best of everything. His Henry Repeater looked brand new along with his silver pistol hanging on his right hip. He noticed the shiny knife on his left hip. He imagined what it looked like

outside of its sheath.

He moved onto the next man. Large spectacles seemed to be the only thing that stood out about this man. He continued staring at him through the spyglass. He told himself that he needed to bring back good information with him. Keep looking, he told himself as he stared harder through the lens. He laid eyes on the long rifle in the custom saddle bag. The length of the rifle alarmed him as the buttstock traveled from the horse's backside to his neck. Bobby thought to himself that rifle held the potential to travel well over half a mile.

Moving on, Bobby looked at a nicely dressed man. He noticed the pistol and rifle but no knife. This led him to believe that he possessed one but hid it - giving it an element of surprise. He looked at the man's face. He recalled a man by the name of Three Burst that held a bit of fame as a hired gun. He remembered hearing about a gunfight during his last layover while the wagon train resupplied and recruited passengers. A fellow stable boy told him about the famed incident where Three Burst managed to shoot a man three times before the other man drew his firearm. Bobby suspected the tale a rumor. Now with him barreling toward him and all who he loves then the story must be taken into consideration.

He scanned to the next man. He noticed the sun beaming off a bald head. He investigated further and noticed that the man towered over his traveling companions. Bobby thought that the man must stand close to seven feet. He looked for details on the large man and found plenty. He noticed the soot and large contraption that looked similar to a hose that hooked on his backpack. He wondered what the device connected to, but he could not confirm anything due to the backpack being hidden by the large man's torso.

He surveyed the man quickly, looking for any clues. He noticed him being covered in a heavy amount of soot. It struck Bobby that the man wields flame.

The last man Bobby thought instantly reminded him of Fred. He seemed muscular yet lean. His skin a dark tan. His long, black hair looked similar to Fred's, except he wore it up. The number of daggers on the man gave Bobby the knowledge he sought. He collapsed the spyglass and placed it in the saddlebag. He whistled quietly at Tallstrider and the two sped toward the wagon train.

As Bobby turned his horse, he instantly felt the ground shake. Tallstrider bucked, but Bobby expertly stayed in the saddle. He looked around as the wildlife dashed and darted around him. They wanted to be anywhere but here where Bobby stood. He felt vulnerable. His hands shook as he whistled again to Tallstrider. The horse accommodated the command, not out of obedience, but due to the fact the horse's instincts urged it to leave. At that moment, the boy felt alive. Tallstrider broke on a dead sprint while Bobby hung on to the reins, letting the horse move. He knew he needed to get to the wagon train. He knew that victory or defeat depended upon the information that needed delivering. Bobby smiled to himself. The stable boy turned scout felt a sense of pride and his station in life improving. Also, that his family depended on him. The boy felt free and alive as he sped toward the wagon train he called home.

Fred knelt beside an axle. He finished greasing it, and now he wiped away the excess. He heard a voice creep from behind him. That voice came from his elderly friend Trev. He said, "Fred, have you heard from Bobby?"

Fred placed the wheel on the axle then tapped the wheel gently to move it into position. He noticed that Trev placed his hands on his waist. He smiled as he waited for the moment that Trev loses control and starts berating him. Fred continued to work by placing the cap on the wheel. He took a clean rag and wiped everything down.

“Fred, sometimes I wonder if you are hard of hearing.”

Fred looked at Trev and said, “Come on now Trev. I could hear you spooling up a long while ago.”

“Have you heard anything about Bobby?”

“What is for dinner? I hope ham is an option. A nice, fat pork steak sounds delicious.”

“Fred will you focus? Bobby, have you heard about him?”

“Are you going to be like this every day he does his job?”

“Yes. He is a boy. You forget that sometimes.”

“I think you forget that he has dealt with more than the average boy.”

“I have not forgotten. I have been there for the boy this entire time.”

Fred looked directly at Trev and said, “Like I have not? I do not like what you are implying.”

“How are you so calm? The boy is late.”

“There are a number of reasons he could be late. He could have misjudged his time. He could be hunting. I know I could go for some wild hog right now.”

“Fred, stop thinking about food.”

“Grilled to perfection over some – potatoes. Yes, that sounds good.” He scratched his chin as he continued thinking about dinner.

“Bobby, I bet the boy got caught by something.”

“Maybe I could talk to the cook and get him to make me that blueberry pie. That sounds really good.”

“Fred!”

“Trev! Calm down, the boy will be here. I remember my first day scouting. I was happy about my new promotion and freedom that I forgot about the time. I made it at the back end of dinner.”

“Was Victor mad?”

“Not mad, he was disappointed.”

“Good. That is what you get for being late.”

“He was not mad about me being late. He was mad that I did not go hunting. He had convinced himself that I brought down a deer. He was looking forward to fresh meat.”

“That sounds like Victor.”

They both laughed. Fred noticed a speeding cloud of desert dust heading towards them. He pointed to guide Trev’s line of sight in that direction. Fred said, “There he is.”

Trev cleared his throat then said, “Fred, uhm, please do not tell the boy I was worried.”

Fred smiled and shook his head then said, “Sure thing Trev.” He placed a hand on his shoulder as he started walking toward the cloud of dust.

Trev walked behind Fred. He said, “Fred, why does he have to ride fast all the time?”

“He rides that quickly to show the world he is the best rider in Surrenstrada.”

“You think he is that good?”

“A good rider can be placed on any horse and still be a good rider. Every time I see Bobby on a horse, I am reminded that I am sub par.”

“You think so, or are you being humble?”

“I always wondered what would happen if Bobby sat atop a horse worthy of his skillset. That cloud speeding toward us is the answer.”

The two stared at the cloud as it came closer. Soon, they saw a desert sand covered Bobby sitting atop Tallstrider. Trev felt sadness as the boy looked mature sitting tall in the saddle. This realization reminded him of the cruel reality that time passes on despite the protest of the individual. Bobby put his horse to a halt and said, “Six riders approach from Surrenstrada. One female, blonde, curly hair, carrying a rifle, knife and pistol. Next to her, an older man carrying the same weapons as the blonde lady. Three Burst sits next to him. A man with spectacles armed with a long rifle. Another man is built like Fred. He carries an axe and has daggers. The last man is gigantic. He carries a gun with a hose that connects to his backpack. He is covered in soot. My guess is that is a flame contraption.”

Fred stood up and helped Bobby off Tallstrider. He patted the top of the boy’s head, sending dust everywhere. Fred said, “Bobby, tell me about the rifle. Anything you can remember?”

Trev stood up and said, “Who cares about the rifle. I am more worried about Lavon and Verna. Those two are dangerous.”

Fred turned to face Trev and said, "You are right. Lavon and Verna are dangerous. Maybe they kill one of us or all three. With that rifle out there - one of us will die. Bobby please - any information will be appreciated."

"Let me see. Hmm. It was in a custom saddlebag. The length of the saddlebag went from its neck to its backside."

Fred looked at Trev then said, "That is one long rifle."

Trev placed a hand on his chin then said, "Yes, the long rifle is the weapon of cowards – or a professional. You take a banker or a lawyer from beyond the portal then you give them a long rifle. All of a sudden they are a hired killer in Surrestrada. They live off this sexy fantasy of ditching their office job and going to unknown lands."

"Except they do not really go to unknown lands. They end up being a hired gun for Lavon."

Bobby looked at Fred then said, "Fred! I remember something else the elderly man and the blonde lady both rode horses with markings all over them."

Fred looked at Trev, "This sounds like magic."

"Bobby, do you remember any of the markings?"

"They weren't of any particular shape. They seemed like jibberish to me."

Trev looked at Fred and said, "Yes, it does sound like magic. What are you going to do Wagon Master?"

Fred breathed deeply then said, "Bobby, you think they will make camp?"

"At their pace they'll need to."

"Ok. You alright with getting no sleep this evening?"

"That'll be fine."

Fred smiled, "You too old to ride one horse with me?"

"Yes, but I will still do it. I'm curious what your plan is."

Trev interjected, "So am I."

Fred looked at them both then said, "You stated that he kept it in a saddlebag. He will not keep it out at night. He will keep it in that saddlebag."

Trev said, "And the importance of this is?"

Ignoring the direct question Trev said, "Bobby and I ride one horse down there. We will take mine, so your horse can rest. We ride hard Bobby. After we arrive during the moonlight hours - we steal the horse. Bobby, can you still ride a horse bareback as fast as you can with a saddle?"

"Yes. I'll need to leave my shoes behind."

Fred smiled.

Trev rolled his eyes with the utmost of contempt then said, "You wish to steal his horse! This is your plan?"

"I aim to steal his horse with the rifle attached." He looked at Bobby, smiled and continued, "I always wanted a long rifle."

Trev's face hardened as he said, "Your plan is to walk into a camp and steal a horse?"

"More or less."

Bobby laughed at Fred's casualness then said, "You want me to ride the stolen horse back. Maybe I can take a good look at those runes."

Trev looked at Bobby, "You could."

Fred looked at Trev then said, "See Trev. It is going to work out for us."

Trev looked at Bobby then said, “Bobby, do you remember the man wearing all black clothes?”

“Yes.”

“Fantastic. Do you remember his horse?”

“Yes, his horse was a really tall painted horse. The lady’s with the runes was a palomino.”

“Perfect. Remember the largest glyph on the man’s horse alright. Lavon, an abjurer which makes sense. The larger the glyph the more powerful the magic. Bring it back to me, and I will be able to decipher his level.”

Bobby looked at Fred and said, “What time are we leaving?”

“Right away.”

“I will pack you two dinner.”

Bobby immediately said, “Thank you.”

Fred looked at Trev, “What is for dinner?”

“Well, at lunch the cook said cornbread and beans.”

Fred shook his head then said, “Well, at least we will be able to run and eat.”

Bobby smiled.

Trev looked at both of them then said, “You two be careful.” Trev turned around and walked toward the central part of camp.

Fred looked at Bobby then said, “Bobby, I need to grab a few items. I will be back. Meet me here in a few minutes.”

“Yes sir. Uhm, should I bring a weapon?”

“Absolutely, I will find something for you Bobby.”

Fred walked to his wagon to acquire his supplies. Bobby walked Tallstrider to the makeshift stable where the horses relax for the evening. He started brushing the angry being, which kicked up a large amount of sand. He laughed as he continued. He told Tallstrider to rest up because of their lengthy day.

Fred looked under the driver's seat. He looked at them as he placed them in his backpack. He laid eyes on Victor's old knife that Trev brought back with him. He thought about placing the sheath with knife inside on his belt. Then he thought that Bobby needs the weapon. He shook his head for a moment. He hated a world that forced a boy like Bobby, not even a teenager yet, to use such weapons of destruction for survival. He put his backpack on as he walked to deliver Bobby his new weapon.

Fred walked to the temporary stable and saw Bobby. For a moment he looked like the boy he met a few years ago. Reality set in as the boy scratched one of the blue crystals embedded in his body. He approached the boy. He said to Bobby, "You ready?"

"Yes sir. I just need to put the blanket on him for the night."

"I will help you."

The two started to put on the blue blanket. Bobby broke the silence by saying, "Sir, did you find me a weapon?"

Fred nodded and said, "Yes."

"Is it a hatchet like yours?"

The two completed putting on the blanket. Bobby gave Tallstrider a good pat. He followed this by petting his horse on the neck. Fred walked over to Bobby. He showed Bobby the knife and sheath. Bobby said, "Did this knife belong to who I think it did?" He

gently touched the sheath and traced the stitching of the sheath with his fingers.

“Yes Bobby it does.”

“Trev doesn’t want it?”

“I thought he did. Every time he sees the thing he starts berating the thing. I am forced to remind him that he is browbeating an inanimate object.”

Bobby smiled at Fred’s comment. He pulled the knife out of its sheath. He noticed the blade’s shine. Not one part of the knife seemed dark. Even the wooden handle seemed to sparkle like the previous owner. He inspected the edge of the blade, and he recalled how every evening without fail he sharpened the weapon while laughing and telling a story. The blade felt heavy to him. He failed to recall the last time he held something in his hand with this quality.

Fred spoke softly, “Bobby, we need to be going.”

Bobby unbuckled his belt buckle and looped the belt to secure the sheath on the left side of his belt. He practiced reaching for the knife going across his body with his right arm. Fred smiled as he started saddling the brown horse he intended to take. He knew Bobby needed a minute to balance the emotional weight of his new weapon.

Fred finished saddling the horse and said, “Bobby, we must get going.”

“Yes sir.”

The two started walking with the horse in the direction they intended to travel. The two walked in silence for a hundred yards. Fred stopped with the horse. He placed his left foot in the stirrup and threw his other leg over to the other side. He reached a hand down to help Bobby up on the horse. He put one finger up in the air then said, “One moment.” Bobby took his boots off and placed them in the saddlebag. He grabbed Fred’s

outstretched hand. He took a few steps back while holding onto Fred's hand, then ran forward. Fred's grip acted as a stopping block, but Bobby rode the momentum to gather enough lift to land on the horse. He reluctantly held tight to Fred. Bobby let out a deep breath, which told Fred that he disapproved of hanging onto him.

“Bobby, I do not like this as much as you do. It is temporary.”

Bobby felt the gentle tug on the reins and the slight kick that propelled their brown horse forward. He felt the jerk of the horse as it reached its stride. Bobby felt nervous.

Fred said, “Let us ride Bobby. Let us ride.”

The tone in Fred's voice put Bobby at ease. He started to look around at the night sky as it blurred by him while the horse sped to its destination. Bobby smiled at the beauty of the moon and the night around him.

Chapter 17

Lavon took off his hat and placed it on his knee while he stared at the campfire. His long straight silver hair instantly fell down onto his shoulders. He looked over at Verna who ran her fingers through her blonde curly hair. He smiled while she took her boots off and put them on the ground. He looked at her and said, "You never developed a tolerance for shoes. I remember you as a teenager. You were a small, defiant little thing. I would need to take care of business in town. I would take you with me. I would have a nice blue or green dress made for you with shoes to match. While we walked, you would stash your shoes in the most random places." Lavon laughed while he looked at Verna.

Verna smiled and said, "It was because they were too small. They hurt my feet."

"Verna, I had professional cobblers measure your feet. If they were not boots, you wanted nothing to do with them."

"I'm sorry that I never was like a doll."

"Do not apologize. That is what I always liked about you."

"Thank you sir."

"No problem. It was more important for you to be independent. Things like defending yourself or think for yourself - those were the important things to me. That means more to me than you will ever know."

"So, you're sure me owning no dresses isn't a disappointment?"

"No. I would not trade your for anything here or beyond the portal."

She smiled at Lavon. She placed the gray wool blanket over her then whispered, "Good night papa."

Lavon smiled, “Good night, Verna. Sleep tight, and I will talk to you in the morning.”

Lavon stood up and walked over to Three Burst and his crew. He rolled up his silk sleeves and moved his hair out of his eyes. He noticed that the men’s intentions for the evening revolved around a game of cards by firelight. He looked at Three Burst then said, “You all get some rest. We have a busy day tomorrow. There is a plan in motion. The last thing it needs is a card game to get in the way. Get some sleep.”

Three Burst inhaled smoke from his cigar. He looked at Lavon. The desert night felt intimidating enough. Add on Lavon’s reputation and surviving the night and it seemed like a solid option. He looked at Lavon then said, “You’re the boss. We’ll go to bed.”

Lavon looked around at the quartet then said, “Who is on watch?”

All three men looked at the man carrying the daggers. Three Burst said, “It’s him. He’ll take them all. If there’s somethin’ out there he’ll find it.”

Lavon nodded his head approvingly, “That sounds good. Good night gentleman.”

Each of them waved at Lavon as he drifted off to the other end of the camp to sleep. Three Burst looked at the three with him, shrugged, then started taking off his boots. He looked at the other men and said, “Good night men. See ya’ in the mornin.”

Bit slipped into the night, allowing the darkness to devour him. He found residence behind a cactus that seemed to be the only thing resembling cover for miles. The others put their blanket on and prepared for a solid night of sleep.

Fred loved the night. The air seemed fresher as he exhaled quietly. He saw the campfire in the distance. The orange light swayed back and forth, playing games with the darkness and shadows that enveloped the camp. He reached into his saddlebag and pulled the spyglass to its full length. He pulled his hat down and peered through the simple contraption. He saw their camp in full detail. He saw Lavon, the blonde, Three Burst, a large man covered with soot and a skinny man with spectacles on his chest all asleep. He whispered to Bobby, "Bobby, are you sure there were six?"

Bobby whispered, "Yes sir. I'm positive. What'd ya' see?"

Fred, still whispering, "I saw Lavon, the blonde, Three Burst, the large man covered in soot and the skinny man with spectacles on his chest. They were all sleeping."

"You're missing the man covered in daggers."

"Hmm. I do not like it. He must have set a perimeter. He is on watch. I will track him. Let me take another look and see if I can lay eyes on the long rifle."

"Bobby. Dang it. I do not see the long rifle. I was hoping they left their saddles on for the night, but it seems they have taken them off to let their horses rest."

"Ok. I will find it."

"Bobby, you will need to find the saddle and saddlebags. The gun should still be inside."

"I can do it, Fred. I will also try and get a good look at those runes for Trev."

"Bobby, if you can, grab some powder for the rifle and a few rounds. I have no idea where he keeps it. If it is on him, then leave the ammo and powder. Us having the rifle will be enough."

“Yes, sir.”

“Wait about ten minutes, then sneak into camp.”

“What are you doing?”

“I will be catching daggers. Do not forget to rope the horse off please.”

“Any particular place?”

“Right here is fine. Remember, wait a few minutes, and then sneak into their camp. I will meet you on the road back.”

Bobby dismounted from the horse as he said “Yes sir.”

Fred slid off the horse and drew his two hatchets from his side. He whispered, “See you on the road Bobby.” He nodded, then snuck into the night. Bobby sensed a change in his demeanor. To him, Fred morphed from the protector he knew and loved to a man on the hunt. He never saw that side of Fred, but he knew that his prey stood in great danger. Bobby felt pity for the man with the daggers for a moment.

Fred stepped carefully on the desert ground below him. He hated sneaking on sand because at times he felt that solid footing sacrificed itself for quiet steps. He squinted in all directions, looking and listening for any signs of company. He looked up in the narrow tree line. Climbing them felt possible to Fred, as they lacked any girth, but getting any cover from them Fred knew seemed impossible. Fred looked at the moon wondering its illumination. His conclusion led him to the fact that it wanted rest this evening as well. He knew the obstacle of darkness played in his favor. He crouched low, continuing his search for this man with the daggers. He focused on controlling his breathing, which prevented panting. He inhaled deeply through his nose and exhaled slowly through tightened lips.

He stopped for a moment and took a knee on the ground. He closed his eyes and put his ear to the night breeze. The air dominated his senses until he heard a match. He looked in the noise's direction. He saw the silhouette of a man as the orange light showed his location for a split second.

Fred stood up and put his left axe in a low position and his right hatchet in a high position. He started his approach in a low crouch. The man propped himself on a thin tree trunk. Fred thought about attacking his exposed side but decided against it. Fred knew the loud scream that followed defeated his purpose. Instead, he crept slowly to the side. He planned on one solid blow to the neck, forcing his foe's head tumbling on the desert floor. He readied his right hand that he held high for the fatal blow. He swung and missed. The hatchet embedded itself in the dead tree.

Bobby tied Fred's horse off lazily on a thin trunk of a dying tree. He knew Fred possessed knowledge of the particular knot. He stood behind the horse while the fear collected in his mind and body. He wondered if ten minutes passed while he stood there impatiently waiting for ten minutes to pass.

He peaked his head from behind Fred's horse and started making his way to the encampment. His bare feet sank in the sand. He noticed that it felt warm in between his toes. Bobby enjoyed this feeling. He decided to revisit the sensation on a later date. He pressed forward, hearing snoring. He wanted to know Fred's situation, but knew Fred's ability to defend himself and decided that he needed to focus. The blond boy forced his feet to move toward the camp. The steps, nervous as they propelled the boy forward, brought him to within eyeshot of the camp.

Bobby saw an elderly man with silver hair. It occurred to him that must be Lavon. After a moment, he took in the sight of the man. The man's stature made him legend. This man sent his life down this course. He ordered Victor killed. All the fear in Bobby left. Bobby never felt rage like this before. Even the beast that he fought failed to anger him. This rage made him want to charge down in the camp. He took a deep breath and decided against it. Stick to Fred's orders, he thought.

Next, Bobby laid eyes on a blonde woman. He noticed the mop of blonde hair that looked familiar to him. Her back faced him, and he ran his hands through his own hair. He saw various women before with blonde hair, but few with the curls. Her natural curls spiraled down like his. No matter how much riding or whatever difficult task he performed, the curls stayed intact. He noticed Three Burst, the man with the soot, and the man sleeping with spectacles placed on his chest.

His eyes widened at his target being identified. He scanned around and quickly saw the horses. He identified his mark and his escape. Now he needed to identify the weapon. He glared intensely in the encampment. The long rifle never showed in his field of vision. He decided to sneak forward.

He approached the stench of bacon. His bare feet brought him to the horses. Each of them unsaddled and tethered to a dead tree. He looked them over to feel which one seemed the fastest and bravest. He thought about taking one of the horses with runes on it, but he quickly decided against it. He scanned quickly and noticed the upside down "v" shape on many of the runes between the two horses. As far as taking one of them, he knew nothing of magic. Best stay away from it. He glared at them. Each of the horses seemed neutral, as hay lay at their feet and a makeshift, portable trough gave them water.

He walked up to the darkest horse and loosened the rope. He wanted it tight enough to give the horse the impression that it still attached it to the tree while loose enough that one strong pull that he could mount the horse in one strong pull.

He tiptoed to Spectacle. His eyes focused on him and the surrounding area, looking for the long rifle. Bobby scanned the area. Once again his gaze stopped at the woman and her blonde hair. He shook off the momentary curiosity and continued on his mission. He thought about taking his knife out and slitting Lavon's throat right there. The thoughts of consequences and repercussions danced through his head. His capture seemed imminent if that course of action occurred.

He kept scanning for the long rifle and found it next to Spectacle in the custom saddlebag. He snuck toward him with his bare feet gliding over the desert sand. He looked at Spectacle sleeping. He snored loudly. Bobby noticed that Spectacle breathed in his moustache and exhaled pushing the moustache to its normal position. He grabbed the buttstock of the large rifle. He wiggled it until he held the large rifle in his hands. The heft of the thing surprised him as he almost dropped it while trying to hold it in one hand.

Bobby adjusted his grip. He held it toward the middle. He took a deep breath then remembered that Fred wanted the black powder and ammunition if the opportunity presented itself. The feeling in his stomach told him to ride away in the night. Bobby wanted to impress Fred and Trev. His desire to make an impression on his first day as a scout outweighed his fear. He opened the saddlebag and looked for the items he wanted.

Nothing on the initial feel inspection. He dug in the other saddle bag and felt a vial. He pulled the vial out of its container. He looked inside and noticed that it looked

like sand. Bobby smiled, realizing he found the gunpowder. He placed it in his pocket. Now, he thought, he wanted to find the ammunition.

He scanned the area and Spectacle. He found the ammunition, but unfortunately it seemed difficult to obtain. Spectacle held the rounds on his belt. Still, Bobby pressed forward. He quietly crawled toward the man's belt. He counted the rounds which numbered over ten. He decided to reach for the round farthest outside Spectacle's field of vision. He gently tapped the round on Spectacle's belt. He grabbed the end of the round and yanked.

Spectacle's eyes opened wide as he stared at Bobby.

Chapter 18

Fred wriggled his hatchet free from the tree he struck. Bit rolled forward, gaining space to stand. He threw a dagger from his right lapel. Fred saw the steel dagger as it rotated in the air toward him. Bit reached over to his right hip with his left hand, then tossed another dagger at Fred. He finished the volley by grabbing a dagger from his left hip with his right hand.

Overwhelmed, Fred with his left hand, blocked the first dagger that traveled for the top of his neck. The second dagger traveled toward the center of his chest, and he blocked it with his right hand. Fred blocked the last toss with his left hand due to the dagger being aimed similarly to the first. Fred thought to himself that tactic felt familiar. The first toss traveled much slower than the second two. The man fought with strategy and a plan. Fred remembered Victor's training on the importance of feigning, and the importance of a solid jab to gather reaction time. Fred wondered where the man standing in front of him received his training.

Fred realized he needed to close the distance. The daggers traveled too fast. He put himself in the attacker's position for a moment. He thought that the man's next move probably focused on his lower body. These attacks impaired movement and the mobility of vital joints. He decided to press. He leaped toward Bit. The moment Fred landed, Bit placed a solid kick on the center of Fred's chest.

A solid blow, but Fred felt much worse. He looked at Bit and realized the purpose of the blow. He needed space to pull out his axe. He instantly noticed the carved end of the bit designed to stab. Even the bottom part of the knob shared the design of a large end made to stab. Fred admired the man at that moment. He knew that he turned an

inexpensive, common tool into an object intent on harming others for a fraction of the cost as other weapons. Knives, to Fred's knowledge, carried a heavier price tag rather than the average axe.

Fred swung his right hand in a chopping motion. Bit's reaction surprised Fred. Bit merely sidestepped the overhand attack. Fred followed immediately with a slash, low with his off hand. Bit blocked it with the body of the handle. The strong, oaken handle parried the attack. Bit squared up against Fred. The moonlight illuminated Bit completely as the two circled each other. Daggers covered the man. He noticed the two of them looked similar. They both shared long straight black hair. Their builds looked lean and muscled. Fred noticed that Bit stood a half a foot taller than him. Fred looked at Bit and whispered, "I must know. Why have you not alerted your camp yet?"

Bit stared at him. He breathed deeply and said, "I am not much of a screamer."

Fred smiled and said, "Very well."

Bit lunged with the eye of his axe pointed forward. Fred stepped back anticipating the thrust. Once again, this attack proved another feint.

Bit lifted the axe up in the air. He stabbed now with the bottom of the handle, which Fred sidestepped. After he completed the motion, he reversed the grip of his axe and brought the head down with authority. Fred jumped out of the way.

Bit landed the axe and rolled the head over on the side. He made a motion that the head sunk in the ground from the mighty blow but in reality, the head lay covered in desert sand.

Fred, unaware of the ruse, rushed Bit. He prepared a powerful overhand right hand chop. Fred thought to himself victory belonged to him, but before he started his

downward motion, Fred received a face full of dirt courtesy of Bit's tactics. Fred staggered back with his hands on his face while holding his hatchets. He knew even though his attack stopped, he needed to prepare for his opponent's offense.

Fred turned on his heel and ran while getting the dirt out of his eyes. He ran with his hatchet out looking for anything that impeded his movement. A tree hit his right hatchet. He turned to take cover behind the tree. He rubbed his eyes. His vision returned in time to fall to the ground before Bit landed a fatal blow.

Fred reached back with his right hand holding the hatchet and landed a blow on Bit's right shin. Bit withdrew for moment which allowed Fred a chance to stand. Fred returned to his stance of right hand held high while his left hand fell across his body which help protect against low blows but coiled for a quick slashing attempt.

Bit attacked with a thrust, leading with the eye. He followed with a slash. Fred noticed that Bit seemed withdrawn. His attacks before felt calculated and now safer. No lunges or waiting a moment to return to his defensive stance.

Fred returned with a few measuring attacks of his own. Fred admired his opponent's footwork. In Fred's experience, those that fought with a mighty weapon lacked footwork and relied on brute force.

Bit attacked with the same routine from the previous set of attacks. Fred knew better than to fall into his trap. He blocked each attack with the same focused veracity as the time before last.

The two exchanged another set of attacks. Fred knew that time worked against him. He knew that Bit's trap depended on his impatience. It occurred to Fred that in order to hold a two handed weapon, a person needs two hands.

He waited for the thrust. Instead of parrying it with both hands, he parried the blow with this left hand. With Fred's right hand, he swung down hard on Bit's right wrist.

Instead of looking down at his work, Fred stared into Bit's eyes. They filled with shock as Fred heard his opponent's hand hit the desert floor, but Bit never screamed.

Bit assumed a defensive stance. He lunged once again at Fred. Fred noticed the lack of power and precision. He sidestepped to his left side, and with his left foot – pivoted, which sent his right foot toward Bit's back. The angle Fred created showed Bit's entire left flank with good position. Fred led with this left hand - slashing his throat. He immediately finished the attack off with an overhand right hand blow that the left hand started.

Bit let go of his axe and dropped to the ground. He held his neck as he bled on the desert floor. He mumbled, "Finish it."

Fred nodded. He grabbed Bit's axe. He prepared to deliver the final blow with Bit's axe. He heaved the axe above his head. He noticed Bit smiling, as he mumbled, "Told you I am not a screamer." He showed his neck in full, which provided Fred an easy target.

The blow landed. Fred saw the head separate from the body. He took a moment, then ran toward his horse. He wondered if Bobby completed his mission.

Bobby stared at the shocked man. For a moment his eyes and brain seemed out of alignment. Spectacle failed to process the blue eyed, blond boy with light, blue crystals glowing from various parts of his body. Bobby felt terror at the inevitable scream.

Bobby blinked in and out of existence. Bobby's vision became black and white. The ambient light multiplied his surroundings, making things seem midday as opposed to middle of the night. Bobby felt the beast within him awaken. He felt the urge to kill everything and eat. Fresh, warm meat straight from the source. He suppressed that urge quickly. He knew that the predator forced the feeling of primal desires. He never felt the urge at night. These feelings intensified into something else.

He felt alive. The black tentacles sprang from behind his back as Spectacle looked at him terrified but unable to move or scream. He heard two tentacles stab Spectacle in the neck. The other two sunk into his mouth, which muffled any noise the man made before dying. Bobby looked around for anyone that woke up during the events. He thought to himself. He met all his objectives. He stood up and the four tentacles wrapped Spectacle's corpse and lifted it. Bobby and the beast within thought best to dispose of the body a few feet away from the camp.

Bobby walked a few feet, then set the body down on the ground. He quietly stalked back to camp to fetch a horse. He found Spectacle's horse because it lacked any runes or soot. Bobby untied the horse from the dead tree. He pet the horse underneath its bridal. Bobby gently grabbed the horse's mane and hoisted himself up. With a light tap and a soft click, he signaled the horse to move forward. He took off slow at first, then urged the horse to run. He felt the night breeze in his hair as he traveled toward camp.

He ran the horse hard, putting as much distance as possible between him and the camp. By now the boy's crystals returned to the normal shade of blue that they stayed at normally. Bobby knew that traveling on horseback during the nighttime proved dangerous. He looked around for Fred, but he continued on the path toward camp as told.

He rode for what seemed like an entire evening before he heard a horse traveling faster than his. A familiar voice cut the tension in the night sky. Fred said, "Hey there traveler! How did you make out on your mission?"

Bobby smiled wide and said, "Yes sir. I got a little info on the rune, his rifle, the powder, his horse and a round."

Fred smiled, "Hey Bobby, well done!"

"Thank you, sir."

"Let me see that rifle."

Bobby handed the rifle to Fred. He glanced it over then said, "It never surprises me Bobby how many different ways smart men find to kill a man. This here is quite the contraption."

Bobby smiled, "Yes sir. It is really big."

Fred handed the rifle back to Bobby then said, "Bobby, let us get back. Sleep sounds absolutely delightful."

"I'm so tired Fred."

The two sped off into the darkness toward their camp which put an end to their long day.

Chapter 19

Lavon opened his eyes to greet the sun that traveled high into the late morning sky. He looked around for a moment. He failed to see Bit, then he laid eyes on Spectacle. His face locked in a horrified expression. He walked over to him and placed a hand in the holes that allowed the blood to escape his body. Lavon in his years of living knew that a man contained a multitude of blood, but he never witnessed the entire contents emptied out on the desert floor. He woke up Three Burst by shaking him. He waited for his eyes to open, then whispered, "Spectacle is dead. Where is Bit?"

Three Burst, who needed a moment to awake, said "I've got no idea."

Lavon pointed to the bloody carcass of Spectacle, "Wake up the big man to help you with his corpse. I will find Bit."

Three Burst nodded and said, "Yes, sir."

Lavon ran his fingers through his gray hair then said, "Please be quiet about it. I say let Verna sleep in this morning. She should not see this gruesome display."

Three Burst, still laying down, looked at Lavon quietly walk to locate Bit. Three Burst noticed that Lavon moved quietly, methodically and always knew his direction. He thought of him as a train. A force by his own right. Taking a job with him, you knew two things. The first stick to the plan. He agreed with this rule to the fullest extent. Someone hires you to execute a task, then your employer pays you. This marked the professional from the amateur in his mind.

The second rule terrified Three Burst. Taking a job from Lavon meant you performed your task or you died trying to achieve it. That rule escalated Lavon from man to myth. Three Burst heard rumors of what happened to the previous people he hired. At

the same time, he felt that the men pushed the boundary of their terms of employment. The rumors of Lavon being a black and silver messenger of death potentially stand as saloon talk. Out here in the field, watching this old man walk around like a man in his twenties, the risk of testing the theories of drunken men sounded outlandish.

Magma faced Three Burst. The mountain of a man seemed less threatening while he yawned and stretched. He placed his backpack on his back and then secured the straps. He looked at Three Burst and said, "What happened to Spectacle?"

"I got no idea. Help me move his body. He doesn't want Verna to see it."

"Ok."

Magma placed his left hand at the base of Spectacle's neck. He then grabbed Spectacle by the waist of the trousers. With a mighty lift, Magma deadlifted Spectacle onto his shoulders. He looked at Three Burst and said, "Where to?"

Three Burst started walking away from Lavon. He waved Magma toward him. Magma followed with Spectacle's corpse seeping blood onto the thick soot on his skin. The two obtained distance from the camp while Verna rested, Magma inquired, "Three Burst what happened last night?"

"No idea. I woke up to see Spectacle dead."

"Bit?"

"No idea on that either."

Magma dropped Spectacle from his shoulder allowing him to hit the desert floor. He said to Three Burst, "I don't want to see what or who took Bit out."

"Me neither. He was always easy to work with."

"I know he took the watches and he was a mighty fine scout."

“Yeah. I’ve got no idea what happened to Spectacle either, and he died right there beside me.”

“He did. People that get stabbed make noise. Why didn’t he?”

“I don’t know. I bet that look on his face will tell us why.”

“Well, let me get to it.” Magma stared at Spectacle. He then leaned down and placed Spectacle’s hand over his chest. He aimed his blowtorch at Spectacle and said, “Spectacle, you were a good shot. Three Burst, you got anything to say?”

“I didn’t know ya’ to well, except I knew ya’ had a long rifle and the know or knowhow to use it. May all your money be easy in the next life.”

Magma aimed his torch at Spectacle. He pressed a button and flames shot out. Spectacle’s corpse. Three Burst looked on as black smoke traveled skyward. Magma said, “Three Burst, I think he is ash now.”

“Yup. You’re right.”

“I wonder how Lavon is doing with Bit.”

Lavon wondered around the outskirts of the camp looking for any signs of Bit. He eventually found tracks that led away from the camp that seemed fresh enough to be his, but not too recent. He walked a few feet before he laid eyes on the corpse of Bit. A body left on the ground alone in Surrestrada rarely decomposes alone. Three vultures picked the flesh off the recently deceased dead man.

Lavon took out his six shooter. He pointed the gun at a slight angle skyward and squeezed the trigger. The two coyotes and several vultures fled the carcass as a result of the sudden noise. Lavon placed the instrument of destruction back in its holster. He walked over to the body and kneeled down over it.

The body felt cold to him. He moved Bit's black hair out of his face. Lavon looked at a wound on Bit's neck. The blood coagulated with the black hair. Lavon figured the wound and answers he sought lay below this bloody mess. He took his knife out of its sheath. The chrome glistened in the morning light. Lavon cut the hair covering up the mangled mess from the rest of Bit's hair on his head.

He noticed instantly that the wound seemed thicker than a knife gash. He wondered what weapon ended Bit's life. His curiosity stemmed more from self-preservation than caring for Bit. He knew the origin of the weapon, but his foe struck him as a mystery. He stood up, which made his knees pop, and took the black hat off his head. He wiped the sweat from his head then picked up Bit's weapon. After placing his hat on, Lavon started walking back to his camp. His eyes caught the vultures in the sky circling and the coyotes starting to return. Lavon placed Bit's axe over his shoulder then said, "Alright. Get back to your meal."

Verna opened her eyes. She looked around and saw Three Burst and Magma. She stood up and stretched. Magma looked at her profile, which reminded him that he traveled with a woman. He quickly stared off into the distance, allowing his hormones time to slow down.

Three Burst said, "Mornin' Verna. I saw that you slept well."

"I did." She looked around and noticed the missing members of her group. She said, "Where's the others?"

Magma looked at her and said, "Lavon went to find Bit, and Spectacle is dead."

"What happened?"

Three Burst chimed in and said, "No idea. We woke up and Spectacle was dead."

“Is that why we haven’t left yet?”

Three Burst said, “That, and Lavon isn’t back yet.”

“Where did he go?”

Three Burst said, “He went to look for Bit.”

“You guys think Bit is dead?”

“He has to be. I took jobs with him several times. Bit, that man could kill anything messin’ with camp without wakin’ us.”

“You don’t think he just fell asleep or something and some animal killed him?”

“Nah, Bit is more likely to sneak up on the animal and kill it. There was something about him. It’s like he had an extra sense about ‘em ya’ know.”

“No I don’t. I’ll take ya’ word for it. What happened with Spectacle?”

“Don’t know. All we know is that when he woke up he was dead.”

“How?”

“Seems like he was stabbed ta’ death in his sleep.”

“He was in camp?”

“Yup.”

“How did we not wake up?”

“Don’t know. My only guess is someone snuck up and slit his throat in the night.”

“Still, not a sound. Must be a professional. Why not all of us?”

“No idea. Maybe they were a mercenary and just had one job.”

“Like you.”

“Yes. He had a job and lived up to his contract.”

“So you really think it was a hitman? How would The Last Wagon Master be able to hire someone on the trail?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he sent a rider ahead?”

“Seems possible. Why only Spectacle? Why not more like Lavon? He is the leader?”

Lavon walked into camp and gently touched Verna on the shoulder. He carried Bit’s axe on his shoulder. Lavon said, “His long rifle.”

Verna looked up at him and said, “What about the long rifle?”

“The certainty of the weapon. Whoever went into our camp had one objective in mind, and it was that long rifle.”

“The long rifle really scares you that much?”

“It guarantees one death.”

“I never thought about it that way.”

“Three Burst, Magma, did you two notice any of Spectacles things missing besides his rifle?”

Three Burst looked at Lavon the said, “Yes – his horse.”

“Did you notice any of his rounds missing? Lavon said to Three Burst.

“Nah, we burned him with his belt with his ammo attached.”

“Ok.”

“You don’t think they took his rounds do you?”

“If I planned it I would.”

Silence filled the camp until Lavon broke it by saying, “You said his horse was stolen. I bet there was a team of two. They rode one horse in and stole Spectacles.”

Three Burst laughed then said, “Lavon, they must be really scared if they’re willin’ to break into camp just to steal a rifle.”

“Quite the opposite in fact. They do not fear us at all.”

Verna looked at Lavon then said, “Everyone’s afraid of Lavon.”

“Not this crew, sad to say. They fear a long rifle more than me.”

Verna looked at Lavon and said, “Should we abort the mission?”

“No. Worst case scenario one of us does not make it.”

Three Burst said, “Seems like there should be a better strategy.”

Lavon kicked dirt over the fire which extinguished the flame. He looked at the members of his crew and said, “If that happens, the other in members will need to close immediately. Come on let us ride.”

The four of them quickly saddled their horses. Lavon tapped his horse and they rode hard toward Fred and his wagon train.

Chapter 19

Fred woke up to darkness. This habit stemmed from his past. He learned his survival skills inside Surrenstrada. Waking up before sunrise meant that one could secure a meal from the tavern that closed down late and threw out their food. The customers of the establishment slept their drinks away from the night before while Fred acquired his breakfast from various trash cans outside in the alley.

Life improved a lot for him since Victor found him many years ago. Instead of eating leftovers, he ate fresh and warm food prepared by the best cook in Surrenstrada. He put on his green shirt and buttoned a few of the buttons. He tucked his shirt into his pants as he walked over to his bedroll. He folded it neatly and placed it by his pillow. After that, he lifted his pillow full of various feathers and found his two tomahawks. This habit of sleeping with two tomahawks under his pillow also stemmed from a place rooted in his days surviving on the mean streets of Surrenstrada.

He continued his morning by walking through the camp while everyone slumbered. He liked the quietness of the moment. It also reminded him daily of the trust placed in him to keep these people safe. Fred enjoyed their sense of hope. He remembered how Victor always loved to meet the new families that he accepted into his wagon train. He wanted to shake the man's hand and look him in the eye. He talked and visited with the wife of the family and even the children. He recalled a time when a child, not older than two seasons, cried loudly. The nervous single mother tried to position the baby while she grabbed something from her purse. Victor grabbed the baby and put it on his hip. He started singing and talking to the child in a calm tone. Soon the child stopped

crying. Victor welcomed the woman onto the wagon train, and he offered to watch the child while she took a nap. She took him up on his offer.

Fred knew he lacked the skill to be the charismatic leader, but Trev, he figured, held a different opinion. This process felt daunting, Fred thought to himself. The green shirt already made him feel uncomfortable. Hiding his tomahawks and his other primitive items in his backpack made him feel like a savage.

He made it to his horse and placed his tomahawks inside the backpack. He patted his horse on the neck. Fred smiled at the horse and said “I will fetch you an apple.” He then continued his walk to the makeshift kitchen where the cook worked diligently at breakfast for an entire wagon train.

He looked at the man in his mid-forties. He wore an apron caked with flour. He smiled at Fred then said, “Mornin’, Wagon Master. I just made your plate. It’s still warm.” The cook walked over to a wagon and reached inside. He pulled the plate with steam rising from it. Fred smelled the bacon and biscuits.

Fred said, “Cook, you take such good care of me.”

The chef wiped his hands on his apron and said, “Sir, I know our journey is comin’ to an end, and I was figurin’ since you say I do a good job – well – I could provide my services for the trip back?”

Fred smiled and said, “Absolutely.”

The cook’s eyes widened as he said, “Thank ya sir. Ya’ won’t regret it. I promise.”

They shook hands then Fred said, “Do you have any jam? These biscuits will be delicious with some?”

The cook reached inside the wagon again and pulled out a jar of jam. It held an orange color. The cook said, "Sir, all I got is peach. Sorry."

Fred eyes widened as he looked at the jam. He said, "Peach is my favorite."

"I'll make note of that Sir. That way when I stock up I can make sure we got plenty."

"Thank you."

"Go ahead and eat sir. I made plenty."

Fred grabbed an apple and left the cook. He looked for a quiet spot away from the wagon train but not out of sight. He settled on a large rock. He sat down and instantly opened his biscuit. With his knife, he spread a generous serving of the peach jam onto each piece. He took a bite and closed his eyes. He heard footsteps in the distance. They sounded slow to him. He said, "Who goes there?"

A familiar voice said, "What is your plan Fred?"

Fred rolled his eyes, "Eat my breakfast."

"You really are taking on the role of Victor. Soon you will refuse to miss a meal."

"Come to think of it, I cannot recall the last time I missed one."

"You have been missing sleep of late. You really should have gotten more rest."

"I am fine."

"Well – did you get the long rifle?"

"Yes."

"Well, what is your plan?"

"Have breakfast."

"You need more of a plan."

“Have breakfast while you bug me.”

“Fred, really – what is your plan?”

“Use the long rifle.”

“What?”

“Victor showed me how. My plan is to wait until they are in range then shoot one of them.”

“Which one? Lavon?”

“Probably not him or the blonde.”

“Why?”

“The magic.”

“Ah yes. I would advise against that. Those runes, from what Bobby described, are strong especially on Lavon’s horse.”

“What do you know of the magic? You know, from your studies.”

“Well, it is the school of abjuration. The magic is relatively straight forward. It really depends on how strong willed and disciplined the user is. Magic is an odd thing. Any wizard can cast a spell from any school. As with all things in life, some people hold a particular type of talent with specific schools. Friend might just know this spell. If he is an abjurer, he can cast the spells quicker, and they last longer. Sometimes people even acquire physical deformities due to their chosen school.”

“So you think the bullets would bounce off?”

“Well, from what I have read is that the runes deflect a number of attacks as long as the person is within range. The power of the magic is dependent on the practitioner.”

“Well, I will remember that when I fight him.”

“Which one will you go after?”

“Probably the fire user. He was a giant of a man, and that contraption of his can do some damage.”

“So you are going to leave their three best fighters?”

“Looks that way.”

“Your plan seems simple.”

“It is. Three Burst is only good up close. I will be waiting with another rifle.”

“So then there will be Lavon and the female?”

“Unless he retreats because of the event last night or died in his sleep then it appears that way.”

“Well, I will leave you to your breakfast. I just wanted to check in and hear your masterful plan.”

“See you later Trev.”

Trev limped over back to camp. Fred took another bite of his biscuit. He closed his eyes and smiled at the sweet taste of the jam.

The afternoon sun burned the desert ground below the four horsemen traveling toward the wagon train. Verna rode to the right of Lavon. On Lavon's left rode Three Burst and on the far end rode Magma. Dominion's long stride put Lavon a full horse length ahead. Three Burst tried to keep up with Lavon but failed. Magma kept close to Three Burst. Verna kept two horse lengths back from the group. Lavon shouted, “I can see them. We are getting ready to find out if they have any of Spectacle's ammo?”

“Well. I can see them coming.” Fred said while laying down in the back of a carriage. He held the long rifle underneath a white sheet. The barrel of the long rifle poked out giving him cover from those that pursued him and those he swore to protect.

“Which one are ya’ going for Fred?” Bobby said sitting on Tallstrider.

“I am thinking the one with the fire on his back. I really do not want to fight him.”

“That makes sense.”

Trev stared at the four people barreling toward them. He piped at Fred, “Fred take time with your shot. You only have one.”

“Trev - you have a book to go read right?”

“I always have a book to read. That does not change the fact that we are getting ready for a skirmish with Lavon and a few of his men. Your antics already motivated him.”

“Antics Trev? I was just introducing myself.”

“Just let me know when you are going to shoot. That thing is loud, and it could startle me.”

Bobby saw a smile flash on Fred’s face, and at that moment he knew Fred readied his shot. The quiet morning broke when Fred decided to make the rifle speak. It said “*Boom!*” The noise emanated from the long rifle and reverberated for miles. Fred immediately lifted off the sheet and wanted to see his handy work.

The four rode hard until they heard the shot. The bullet entered the center of Magma’s chest. The impact immediately forced him back, but the bullet exited with enough ferocity that it entered the large contraption on his back. It blew up and engulfed him. Magma never screamed.

The explosion blew Three Burst off his horse. The flames traveled toward Lavon. The runes on his horse glowed a bright blue and sent the flames outward. Unfortunately for Three Burst, the flames traveled back toward him. Three Burst and his horse burned to death. Lavon looked at Verna and signaled Dominion to run. Verna followed Lavon's lead and urged Sassy onward.

Fred jumped from the back of the carriage. His eyes widened as he looked at the devastation caused by the long rifle's round. He jumped down from the carriage and mounted his horse. He looked at Bobby and said, "I will take Lavon. You handle the lady."

Bobby nodded at Fred. The two sped off toward Lavon and Verna with Fred leading the way on his painted horse.

Chapter 20

Fred rode his painted horse toward Lavon. He crouched low and pulled out one tomahawk from his saddlebag. Through rumors, tales told by drunkard that Lavon's aim seemed perfect – he was the man that did not miss. He needed a plan. No time he thought to himself, and Lavon confirmed this by reaching for his six shooter. He lifted the tomahawk while he waited until the last second to heave the weapon at his enemy.

Lavon's right hand motioned toward Fred. Fred gripped the shaft of the tomahawk tight as he flung it toward Lavon. As the weapon left his hand, he saw the paint on Dominion. He realized that the attack seemed destined to fail. It traveled toward Lavon's chest, and even Lavon knew that the toss far exceeded anyone's accuracy he witnessed in his long life. That precision made him hesitate his draw for a moment. The tomahawk entered the perimeter of Dominion. Fred heard what sounded like glass shattering before he saw his tomahawk bounce off thin air. He noticed the blue paint on Dominion diminish in brightness, but the runes glowed still.

Fred urged his horse forward. He noticed the trajectory of his tomahawk after it bounced off the barrier, forcing it skyward and toward him. He knew if he pushed his painted horse he could grab it out of the air. He gave his horse two more light kicks indicating his desire. He leaned forward in the saddle and stood up in the stirrups.

He made it to the tomahawk and grabbed it from the air. Lavon cocked his double action pistol. The slightest sound to Fred in this moment rumbled like an active thunderstorm. Fred quickly sat down in the saddle and forced his feet out of the stirrups. He grabbed the saddle horn with both hands and leaned over to his right. His left leg

followed. Fred, with his right leg hugging his horse's belly, attempted with force of will and body to sit back up in his saddle.

After struggling, he made it back in his saddle. He noticed Lavon in striking distance, and he knew his attack came quicker than Lavon could cock his pistol, aim, and squeeze the trigger. He wanted off this horse. Fred worked his feet up the side of the horse quickly. Fred clenched the tomahawk between his teeth while he prepared a leap at Lavon. His breathing quickened, but the noises around him dulled. Even Lavon's movement crawled.

Fred leaped at Lavon. Fred noticed the shock in Lavon's eyes. Fred grabbed the back of Lavon's well pressed collar. Both hands went in deep and Fred thought briefly about landing on Dominion. He thought better of it because he wanted to take Lavon to the ground. No firearm for Lavon. He wanted the fight - tomahawk versus knife.

Bobby rode toward Verna saddled atop Tallstrider. The blue specs that adorned his body shed azure flakes onto his horse. The steed pounded its hooves in the ground almost as if angry at the desert floor beneath him and his rider. Bobby felt the beast within him. This time it failed to initiate anger. Instead, it heightened his desire for combat, but it fueled his need for revenge. Bobby struggled to not allow himself to descend to the depths of absolute savagery. Instead, he and the monster within him shared the same desire. The first time since Victor died he felt free – he loved it.

Verna stared at the boy heading toward her. She felt guilt as she reached for her pistol and pulled it out from its holster. She cocked the hammer and sent a round toward Bobby. Sassy jerked from the shock of the round as it left the barrel. Verna knew she hit

him center mass. To her surprise, Bobby phased and the bullet passed through him. She wondered what kind of magic the boy held. She cocked the hammer back and let another round loose.

She thought to herself as the boy weaved in and out of this world, ultimately making her bullets useless - she deserved her fate. Afterall – she killed Victor. If the roles somehow reversed, no power in Surrestrada had the ability to stop her. She attempted to use magic, but his magic appeared more powerful than her own. For the first time she thought to herself she found herself in a fair fight. She hated that feeling. After the last round exited the chamber, she knew her time in Surrestrada came closer to an end.

Bobby took his bare feet out of the stirrups and shifted in his saddle. He placed both hands on the saddle horn and shifted forward. He lifted his body up and placed his legs underneath himself. He then stood tall on Tallstrider. The horse breathed his anger to everyone around him.

He leaped off the horse with his body sideways which the impending impact bringing them together like a cross. Verna dropped her firearm as she readied herself for impact. Bobby felt the impact. He welcomed the pain. It coursed through his body, and he felt the beast share the load. The time arrived for his vengeance.

Verna heard a rib of hers crack as the boy landed on her. Bobby's right side landed closer to her head. The air immediately left her lungs. Bobby, with his right hand, reached around her neck. He fed his the arm tight around her throat. He secured his right wrist into the crease of his left elbow. She instantly felt the choke from Bobby, but because of the impact she held no air at the moment.

Bobby's momentum nearly broke her neck. Verna danced between consciousness and unconsciousness. Verna's feet still in the stirrups, the top half of her body lay on Sassy's back. Bobby hung off her neck as the choke became tighter and tighter. As a last ditch effort, she wriggled loose her stirrups which sent her and Bobby tumbling downward.

With the choke released, Verna instantly started coughing and trying to reclaim her lost air. Bobby, after several flips to avoid any damage, ran toward her. He touched his knife. He liked the heft of it in his hand, but he decided to not use it. He wanted to kill Victor's murderer with this own hands. He laid eyes on Verna coughing while on her knees. He grabbed Verna's hair from behind and pulled her hair back. He saw Verna's face. The blue eyes and no doubt similar jawline he possessed. He ignored the similarities as he punched her twice. He heard her nose crack, and he delighted in her misery.

She tried to scoot away. His grip tightened. Her attempt failed. Two more hits from the boy's fist found their home on her nose. Her eyes watered. She laid down on the ground with her hands covering her face. Her resistance appeared futile to Bobby. He changed the angle of the punches to skirt the issue of two flailing arms. Bobby, let go of her hair with his left hand and doubled the assault. His fists started slipping on the blood from that spurted from her nose. She wiggled to the side and for a moment hope sprang within her – Bobby denied this effort with a sudden elbow right to her temple.

Blood instantly seeped from the wound. Verna lay on her back with her eyes closed and her arms over her face. She felt Bobby on top of her. He placed his legs underneath the back of her knees. He kicked his legs which forced her legs to flatten on the desert sand. She felt every bit of Bobby's weight and then more. She failed since their

initial impact to acquire her breath. With his pressure and his fists landing, she knew her end rode on an angry horse. She opened her eyes. She wanted to look in his eyes as he beat her to death. She knew at this moment the boy wanted his reckoning, and this time the good guy wins.

She opened her eyes as she saw a fist slam onto her already broken nose. She closed her eyes from the pain and wanted to scream. The pressure from the way Bobby sat atop her prevented that from happening. Two more shots landed. She noticed her vision dulling. Her will left along with her air. She noticed the blue crystals sparkling a dark blue. Another punch landed from Bobby. This time it popped a vessel in her eye, causing a mix of red and blue. She asked, "One question before you kill me?"

Bobby, with his fist in the air stopped before it came down on her "What?"

Verna's face caked in blood from the various blows said, "How old are you exactly?"

Chapter 21

Both Lavon and Fred stumbled onto their feet. They each drew their weapon. Fred, gripping his weapons, lifted one tomahawk to his right ear and placed the other underneath his right armpit.

Lavon positioned himself with his right leg forward, his right hand with the knife rested on his right hip. He additionally placed his left hand over his heart. No appendages exposed themselves. All limbs tucked themselves within the frame of his body.

Fred swung first. His left tomahawk swept low. The arch of the swing barely missed Lavon's left foot, but forced Lavon to step over the swing. Lavon stepped over the tomahawk without forcing his weight to either side. He shifted his weight to his left side, stepped and returned to center like nothing happened.

Lavon pushed off on his left leg and lifted his right at an angle to end up facing Fred's back. Lavon thrust his knife as Fred made a quarter turn to square back up with Lavon. With his right hand, Fred parried the blow away, but Lavon countered with a left hook to the body.

Fred felt the blow. He knew he needed to acquire distance. He elbowed Lavon with a left elbow. He felt the man's flesh against his arm that everyone feared. He thought to himself for a second. This man can be hit. I want to see if he can bleed.

With Lavon's head up from the elbow, Fred used the blow to back away and obtain distance.

Lavon smiled, "An elbow – interesting. You got iron in your belly boy, I can admire that."

Fred let loose with a barrage of tomahawk attacks. He worked right to left. Lavon kept up with him. He even dodged a few below knee level. Fred returned to his stance as he ended his attack.

Lavon attacked immediately. Giving Fred time to recuperate sounded terrible to Lavon. Fred approached from the left side this time. This angle put him perfectly square against the native warrior in front of him. Lavon thrust a knife at the base of Fred's throat.

Fred parried the attack with his left hand. He continued the arms momentum to the left side of his body. This movement exposed Lavon's chest. Fred slashed at his opponent's flank. He heard the sound of cloth tearing and saw blood on his tomahawk as he returned to his stance.

Lavon sidestepped after the blow and before Fred thought to pursue, Fred felt boot in the center of his chest. Lavon thrust his hips forward and the boot knocked him back. Lavon smiled and said, "You fight with tomahawks, but I can tell Victor trained you."

"How so?"

"Your footwork. Your discipline. These were the same things I taught him."

"Well then. I must thank you for those lessons and the one today."

"What lesson is that? I am curious now."

"Even the great Lavon can bleed."

Having not felt the blow, Lavon looked down to find a gaping hole with blood seeping out from it.

Lavon smiled then said, "I wonder how I am going to kill you?"

“What do you mean?”

“Fate is funny. What method – what blow will finally do you in? Will it be by knife? Nah, fate does not say that weapon. Fate says – fist.” Lavon placed his knife back into the sheath on his hip. He switched his feet, which put his left leg forward. He made fists and put them up to below his eyes.

Fred’s fear overwhelmed him momentarily. He trained with Victor to know how to parry, counter and attack someone holding a knife. Someone as experienced as Lavon with this hands, he knew that fate played a dangerous card. He heard rumors of Lavon treating his fists with something. Fred shook off the fear and attacked. He led with his left tomahawk.

The tomahawk slice briefly exposed Fred’s face – that second Lavon took advantage. He jabbed Fred’s nose with this closed fist then landed a hook that felt like it knocked his consciousness somewhere on the other side of the portal. He threw his tomahawks down against his better judgements. Victor showed him a few things about hand to hand, but he knew he danced to Lavon’s music. He needed to keep his hands up that detail rang out in Victor’s voice.

Lavon twitched his left shoulder. Fred covered his face in preparation of the blow. Instead, Lavon landed a stiff uppercut to Fred’s solar plexus. The blow landed at the perfect upward angle that released all the air in Fred’s lungs.

Fred doubled over and put his hands over his stomach. Lavon sold out on a powerful hook that landed on Fred’s right temple. Things became blurry for Fred. He struggled for consciousness. He knew Lavon’s reputation. The man now approached for the kill.

Lavon approached and sold out on a right cross that landed. Fred felt Surrestrada shake before him. His eyes felt heavy as his ears started ringing. He knew that one more punch spelled the end for him and his wagon train.

Fred saw Lavon reach back with his left hand for a hook. Fred slouched wanting him to risk sloppy form and balance for a crushing blow – Lavon fell for the bait.

Fred mustered all of his energy and every bit of consciousness within him and dodged to the right. Lavon, off balance, stumbled toward Fred. With his right hand, Fred grabbed Lavon's left wrist and with this left foot kicked Lavon's left foot out from underneath him.

Lavon tumbled to the ground. Fred quickly sat on Lavon's chest and hit him two times with his right hand.

The silver haired fighter kept calm. He pinned Fred's left arm to his chest. He placed his right foot on the outside of Fred's left leg. Lavon bridged his hips toward the sky and rolled to his right.

With his left arm pinned to Lavon's chest, Fred lacked the ability to prevent the sweep. Lavon quickly landed one shot. Fred wiggled until his right leg split Lavon's centerline. He kned the middle of Lavon's back, which sent him shooting forward and losing his posture. Fred placed his right arm underneath Lavon's left arm and his right arm on the back of Lavon's head, then clasped his hands together.

With no way to acquire his posture, Lavon stood up trying to escape the clutches of Victor's understudy. Fred placed the toe of his left boot behind Lavon's right knee and swung his right leg in the air. He dropped his left leg and with all his might sent Lavon

skyward then to this right side. Fred, with his new dominant position, landed a powerful right hand that sent blood flying from Lavon's nose.

Lavon worked his hips to the right side. With his left leg, he grabbed Fred's right leg. He placed his left fist over his ear while he worked his hips trying to get to his right elbow. After moving his hips several times, he eventually managed the feat. He grabbed Fred's left arm and placed his right foot on the side of Lavon's left knee. He pulled Fred's left arm as he forced his foot on Fred's knee. Soon Fred lay on his back and Lavon held to dominant position. He reached back and landed another powerful right hand to the Last Wagon Master.

Bobby lifted off Verna for a second, which allowed her to breathe. She inhaled deeply. Bobby paused and said, "I'm about ten winters old."

Verna's eyes widened. She said, "I'm not proud ta' say that I gave up a boy around that time."

"Where did ya' leave me?"

"I left you with the Brotherhood of Hope. I figured you were better off with 'em."

"Well, I wasn't. They sold me into slavery."

Verna looked at Bobby with a face full of shame. She said, "I truly am sorry. I – I didn't know."

Bobby looked down at her with his fist clenched. Anger filled his eyes even further, "Ya' know what it's like to have someone own ya'? To see a receipt with your name on it? Bought and paid for it said." He shook her violently.

“Bobby!” she pleaded with him. He stopped shaking her. She then said, “I can’t imagine what they did to ya’. How did ya’ get here?”

“I ran away.”

“Where?”

“I hid in a stable with horses.”

“With horses?”

“Well – and pigs.”

“And pigs?”

“That is where I got my food.”

“Horses and pigs got you food?”

“No – I ate what the horses and pigs didn’t want.”

“Oh – Bobby – I’m sorry.”

“Ya’ see what you did? There is a man out there with a receipt that says ‘Bobby’ something on it – Paid in Full!”

“How did ya’ get out of the stable?”

“Victor found me. Victor saved me!” Bobby face contorted with anger as he began to shake Verna angrily again. He screamed, “The man you killed!”

While being jostled around, Verna pleaded “Bobby! I’m so sorry. Please – please understand. I was young, and I made a mistake. I thought you were better off without me and the father.”

Bobby stopped. He took a moment to find his breath. He then said, “Who is my father?”

Verna said while choked up on tears in her throat, “He was a man beyond the portal. He was a dangerous man.”

“Name.”

“Matt Smith. He was from beyond the portal. He carried a long rifle, but he could use a pistol. He was some kind of soldier.”

“Did you love him?”

“I did – he didn’t me though. I – like you was in a bad way.”

“What do you mean?”

“He beat me. He made me do things that I didn’t want to do. Bobby, understand, I didn’t want you involved with him or my life at the time.”

Bobby smiled and shook his head. He said, “You mean ta’ tell me I could’ve been a slave or the son of an abusive man?”

“Yes. I met Lavon. He is the one that got me out of this situation. He – he can help you! I will talk to him. Everything will be ok! We can be a family!”

Bobby looked around and noticed Verna’s pistol on the ground. He lifted himself off of her with his legs. He walked over to the pistol and picked it up from the desert floor. It felt light to him. He cocked the hammer. “Stand-up” he said.

Verna, noticed what the boy held in his hand. She stood up and looked at Bobby. Bobby said, “Ya’ know. I imagined what it would be like to meet my mom a thousand times. You would put your arms around me and tell me everything’ll be alright.” Bobby pointed the gun at Verna. He continued, “Imagine my disappointment when all I can smell on you is fear.” Bobby aimed the pistol at Verna’s chest.

She saw her death coming and for once she welcomed it. She smiled to herself as the reckoning of her life's mistake await her in the form of a bullet by her own hand. She waited for him to pull the trigger. She said, "Bobby, I'm not mad at ya'. To be honest, I'm kinda' relieved. Just pull the trigger hon'. I'm tired."

Bobby stared down the barrel. Verna noticed his hands shaking. She wondered why. Bobby soon answered her. He lowered the pistol and said, "I can't do it." He tossed the pistol and screamed, "Why can't I kill you!"

Verna smiled and started walking toward the boy. She felt relief in her chest. She took three steps before she felt a rumble in the ground. The ground steadily shook. Bobby and Verna reached for objects to steady themselves. Verna looked at Bobby and screamed "Run!"

Chapter 22

Fred jabbed at Lavon's nose. The silver haired man moved his head to his right side enough to miss the punch. He countered with a cross that landed on Fred's chin while moving his face back to its original position. The native instantly felt the pain. He sent another jab in his opponent's direction.

Lavon moved his head this time to the left side. He waited for the punch to fly by, then countered with a hook while returning his face to the center of his body with this chin tucked. He measured Fred for another attack with a right hand cross. He knew better than to overcommit as Fred made him pay each time he sought to land a knockout blow. Lanon's punch landed and he heard Fred wince in pain.

Fred returned the punch with a knee to his elder's ribs. He heard Lavon wince in pain. The native took this opportunity to acquire space. Lavon looked at the man half his age. He fought men and bested them. At this time in the fight, they usually wore terrified expressions on their face. The straight haired, tomahawk wielding man stood before him an unbroken entity – the man seemed almost serene to Lavon. He looked at the shirtless man in front of him, "It is nice to know I really scare you."

Fred smiled slightly then said, "You really terrify me."

The sarcasm rang in through his ears and rattled a conclusion – Victor lives. Granted, Fred and Victor looked completely different. Victor looked like someone that overate during every meal, while Fred ate enough to keep him alive. The way they fought – the way he moved seemed like Victor. Calmness and confidence emanated from his opponent. He felt like he fought his friend so many years ago.

Fred circled Lavon's jab sidehand. He knew that if he walked toward Lavon's power hand that a devastating blow seemed eminent. Fred sent out a jab at Lavon. The elder dodged the blow, but before he countered he felt the ground shake below his feet. His eyes caught his opponent's as they both took a step back.

"You feel that?" Fred inquired.

"Yes."

Lavon looked toward the direction he last saw Verna. He squinted in their direction, but before he focused he felt the ground shake again. Coming up from the ground stood a towering wormlike creature. The creature stood over twenty feet tall. He possessed no arms or legs. The flat head contained no visible eyes or ears. Its mouth, when opened, held teeth one foot each in length. The mouth made a complete circle, its head looking like a pit that stood upright. The creature matched perfectly with the sand. It attacked Lavon by opening its mouth and folding in half. Lavon, violating instinct, ran toward the creature.

The worm's mouth slammed on the ground. Lavon looked at Fred, "It is a Sand Worm. You ever fought one of these?"

Fred looked at the monstrous thing as it swayed back and forth. Fred's eyes never left the monstrosity as he said, "No."

"Me neither," Lavon said. He continued, "Keep it distracted. I will think of something."

Fred grabbed a rock and flung it at the Sand Worm. He looked over at Lavon and said, "Come up with your plan quickly."

Lavon shook his head. He scolded, "A rock – really?"

The monster burrowed back into the sand. Fred started running. He said, "I did not see you doing anything."

Lavon smiled as he thought about getting to fight with Victor on his side one more time.

The large Sand Worm breached the desert floor as it stood looking at Verna and Bobby. The blond boy leaped and grabbed the pistol. He then slid it on the ground toward Verna and said, "You're the better shot!" Verna bent down and picked up the pistol. She sent six quick shots directly at the Sand Worm. It scooted closer to her. Sand bulged around the sides of its snakelike body as it traveled closer toward her.

Shots bounced off the rock plates on the creature's torso. Verna dropped her pistol. She turned her back and started running away from the monster. She heard the monster opening its mouth. She heard what sounded like knives touching. Bobby shouted at Verna, "Don't turn around! It's exactly what it wants you to do!"

Verna stopped and turned around to see the worm chasing her. She sidestepped and, as she executed the maneuver, she heard the creature's mouth hit the ground with a loud thud. Bobby ran to the back of the creature with his bare feet. He pulled out Victor's knife. His eyes found a spot in between two of the rock plates. He plunged his knife in the gap. He twisted the knife and extricated it from the worm. The creature lifted its head in the air while it stopped chasing after Verna. It opened its mouth and bellowed. Sand came from the creature's mouth. Bobby stabbed it again. This time he twisted the knife to the left and right. He pulled his knife from the monster and took off in the opposite direction of Verna. He yelled, "Your turn!"

Verna changed direction. She wanted back on Sassy. A loud whistle emanated from Verna. Soon, a palomino sprinted toward her. She reloaded her six shooter as she waited for Sassy to close the distance. She grabbed the pistol. With her hands shaking, she gently halfway cocked the hammer to gain access to the loading gate. She heard Sassy's hooves getting louder. She loaded one round into the chamber, skipped the next chamber, and loaded four more into the remaining receptacles. She placed the pistol in her holster and awaited her horse.

Sassy pulled up to her, and she noticed the horse never broke eye contact. She mounted her horse. The dirty fingers of the daylong fight rubbed Sassy's mane. Verna gently said to her, "Let's ride, my Sassy girl. Let's ride."

The horse darted toward the worm's left flank. Verna desperately looked for any flesh not covered in thick rock. She said, "Come on girl, let's look at his back." The scared beast bent toward her master's will and ran toward the creature's back.

To Verna's surprise, she noticed the thickest armor seemed to be on its back. Only small gaps, only big enough for a knife to penetrate. She realized riding Sassy on a dead sprint while hitting her target would be problematic. She continued with the horse to the right flank, but this time she managed her expectations. She knew the monster's right flank likely mirrored the left. Still she gave a quick scan, and her hunch proved correct. No open flesh to shoot at on this worm.

Verna loosened the reins. She wanted to show Sassy that nothing terrified her, but the way her hands shook made her a liar. She decided to keep her distance rather than continue her circle. The palomino broke out directly in front of it putting distance between them. Looking behind her, Verna noticed that below the mouth a tan piece of

flesh stood out. With one hand gently on the reins, she cocked the hammer and aimed her pistol at the monster. She let one round fly and before she confirmed the rounds' accuracy then let another round fly followed by another.

With each round the Sand Worm screamed in pain. She looked at Bobby, who somehow stood in front of the beast, dodging its attacks. She screamed, "Just below the mouth! Aim what ya' got there!" She looked into the distance and saw a familiar black shirt fighting a Sand Worm. She wondered how they fared against the abomination.

Chapter 23

Fred circled back around to the point of the beginning of the battle with Lavon. He picked up his tomahawks and ran toward Lavon while sliding the handles into his belt. He felt the earth rattle below him. He saw the creature breach the earth. He instantly stopped and took a few steps backward. The creature traveled straight up as Fred looked at the monster springing from the ground. Fred faced the creature's back. He placed his hand on a circular, dry rock on the worm's back. He climbed to the next rock by feeling the crevices. The creature writhed, trying to gain momentum as it focused on Lavon. The bucking creature torqued Fred. His legs and resting arm jostled wildly while the hand held securely on the rock. He knew he needed to hold firm.

The monster chased Lavon. It bent down to swallow whole. As Lavon noticed its mouth spreading, he said firmly, "Quick Step." A blue light surrounded Lavon. He disappeared, leaving only blue lights behind him that looked like embers of a fire that someone kicked. Lavon soon reappeared approximately twenty feet away from where he previously stood. He drew his pistol, aimed, and let a round fly from the chamber. The bullet bounced off the creature, but it knew its meal's location.

Fred held onto the creature during the entire attack of Lavon. The creature changed direction. The native continued to ascend the giant worm. He reached up the rock plates on top of the creature. One by one he grabbed them. With his hands already hurting, he finally reached the top. He looked at the crown of the monster's head. No more rock plates, he instantly noticed. He expected the flesh of the creature he expected to possess a firm, leathery feel. Instead, to his delight, a soft, unprotected skin. He instantly thought of the times he and Victor put a worm in the water, waiting for fish to

bite. The native recalled how Victor cut the worm in half easily with his knife. The recollection gave him the hypothesis that his tomahawks fared well against the slimy exposed flesh.

Fred wedged his feet in between two rocks. He pulled out his two trusted weapons from his waistband. He lifted powerfully and drew his arms back, then sent them forward with ferocity. When his tomahawks made contact the creature cried its displeasure. He raked the tomahawks back toward him. He felt the flesh give way and blood started spurting out of the deep wounds.

The creature lifted its head. Lavon started with one round right in the center of the exposed flesh of the creature's neck. The creature continued to gyrate in pain as Fred came down with a tomahawk and Lavon sent another round in the same location as the previous round. Again, Lavon and Fred continued the attack. The creature writhed in pain. It fell – lifeless. They exchanged glances at one another, then Fred started running toward the other combatants caked in the blood of the Sand Worm. He ran to lend aid to Bobby.

Lavon muttered, “Quick Step,” disappeared and reappeared twenty feet closer to Verna. The two then started running quickly to their charges. They soon saw Verna and Bobby hanging on the creature stabbing it. They looked at each other and shared a momentary smile in respect to their understudies' adapting to the situation.

Bobby plunged his knife deeper into the worm. He twisted right, left, then right again finally extricating the blade from the creature. It writhed in pain with such force that it flung Bobby off its back. The boy landed and instantly the creature turned for its meal. It started on its downward trajectory to eat the boy.

The crystals on Bobby's body glowed bright blue. Black tentacles with what looked like daggers on the ends sprang from the center of his back. They traveled toward the monster's neck and plunged deep inside. They reeled in Bobby to just below his neck – next to the exposed flesh. Bobby cut with the knife while the tentacles alternated stabbing the worm. The worm writhed in pain then stood still. The monster died and started plunging toward the ground with Bobby below it. It impacted. Fred stopped and looked in horror as he thought Bobby dead from the impact. He ran toward the creature and saw Bobby on the other side blinking in and out of existence.

He instantly ran over to him and gave him a hug. He said, "Bobby! It's not a scout's job to scare the breakfast out of the Wagon Master!"

"Sorry sir."

"It's ok. Never scare me like that again."

"Never is a long time. Not sure I can do that."

Verna holstered her weapon and Lavon did the same. Lavon looked at Verna then she threw her arms around him. Lavon whispered, "I knew you would be alright."

"I knew you'd be alright as well sir. I just knew it."

Fred walked over to Lavon with Bobby standing next to him. Fred drew his tomahawks. Bobby drew his knife with the black tentacles emanating from his back whirling and twirling in the air. Fred mumbled at Lavon, "Shall we finish what we started?"

Lavon took his hat off his head. He ran his fingers through his stringy grey hair. He said, "Nope. Considering that the two of us had to put our differences aside to survive, it would not seem prudent to kill you today."

Fred's grip tightened around his tomahawks. He said, "You kill us?"

"Perhaps. Let us be honest. You are tired and low on ammo. I have dead to bury. Seems that I might have underestimated your outfit – a bit."

"Fine. You and Verna go. I do not want to see you two until my wagon train reaches Surrestrada."

"Make no mistake, Fred. Our journey continues once you step foot in Surrestrada."

"I would not want it any other way."

The four backed away slowly from one another. Bobby and Fred stared at the two with weapons still out, making sure they lived up to their word. Verna and Lavon retrieved their weapons. Lavon mounted Dominion slowly this time. He showed his age, which made Fred rethink the arrangement momentarily, but he kept his word.

Verna readied to mount Sassy. She sent Bobby a slight wave. Bobby failed to reciprocate. Instead he stared at her, the hardened boy that fate molded. She mounted her horse as a tear streamed down the side of her face. She looked back at Bobby one more time. She saw a subtle wave from him. He never lifted his hand above his waist, the motion slight. She took the wave as hope. She wiped the tears from her eyes and replaced them with a smile. The two rode away from Fred and Bobby. Fred placed an arm around Bobby and said, "Bobby, we are so close to Surrestrada there is no need to scout. We will be home before the sunset tomorrow. Let us get as far as we can today."

"Sir, you mind if I scout ahead today? I think I'll like some space."

"No Bobby. It's not every day you fight a Sand Worm. Collect yourself. See you for dinner?"

“Yes sir. Victor taught me to never miss a meal – especially a free one.”

Bobby mounted Tallstrider. The horse kicked angrily at the ground. Fred patted the horse on the neck despite its protest. Fred said, “Bobby be careful you understand.”

“Yes sir.”

“See you at Dinner.”

Bobby nodded. He tapped Tallstrider with the heels of his bare feet twice. The horse bucked and shot itself forward. The two disappeared quickly out of Fred’s sight. Fred smiled slightly to himself and shook his head. He whispered, “Ride, Bobby, ride.”

Chapter 24

Bobby rode Tallstrider next to Fred and Trev in the lead wagon. They ascended a steep hill. The sun positioned itself high in the sky as the wagon train moved ever forward. Soon, they reached the crest of the hill. A welcomed view caught their eyes as they started descending. In the distance, a city surrounded by a rock gate. In the center of the town stood a large building. They knew that as Lavon's. They saw what looked like ants scurrying about their daily lives in the large town. The second largest building, the Church of the New Ways, gave the town a certain calm. Everyone knew and loved the church bells because they rang without exception at midday. From the distance, this town looked almost serene to them.

Trev said, "We could have heard those bells today if someone did not find it necessary to eat his weight in breakfast."

"Trev, this was our last meal on this voyage. I wanted to make sure the cook knew to stock up on biscuits and gravy for our return trip."

"Pardon me! I did not understand this was all part of your grand scheme to ensure all the travelers enjoyed a steady helping of biscuits and gravy."

"You say that like it is a bad thing."

Bobby chimed in and said, "I had four of the biscuits piled high with gravy. I am a pig."

"You as well Bobby. I was hoping your pallet would slowly become more refined."

"I think my pallet gave up a long time ago."

"When?" Fred asked.

“One time Victor gave me this delicacy he called it. They were called something oysters – they were really just cow testicles.”

Fred and Trev laughed. Fred said, “Yeah he tried that with me once.”

“I fell for it. He was so convincing!”

“I could not get past the smell.”

“Victor looked like they were the best thing ever! I thought they smelled nasty. He gulped both of his down and looked at me like I was crazy because I hadn’t ate one yet.”

Trev interjected, “Well Bobby – did you?”

“Yes I did.”

Fred smiled, shook his head then said, “Bobby. Poor kid.”

Trev said, “Well was it good?”

“No. Not in the slightest.”

Fred looked at Bobby. He inquired, “Bobby, what is going to be the first thing you do when we arrive in town?”

“I can tell you what I am not going to do – I’m not going to have those oysters again.” They all laughed, then Bobby said, “I don’t know. I’ll go to the bank because before we left I opened an account.”

Fred looked at Trev. He said, “You told him to open an account? The first thing the authorities do is shut down your account if you work or are suspected of working outside the law. That is how they get you.”

Trev’s eyes widened. He said, “Well – not everyone is happy with putting their money underneath a really heavy rock on the outskirts of town.”

“Shows what you know. I put my money under a really heavy rock in the center of town.”

“Do not tell me that. You put your money in a bank account, and it draws interest. As often as we are on the road it will multiply rapidly! Also, why in the center of town? That is where everyone is? Do you think about anything Fred?”

“I think about how to get you worked up because that keeps my life entertaining.”

“So, you are kidding?”

“Of course. I keep most of my money in the bank. The rest I keep stashed around different locations.”

“Like where?”

“Well, I keep some in here for a rainy day. I keep some in various small settlements. I have one in the center of Surrenstrada and one on the outskirts of Surrenstrada. All over the place really.”

“Collect that money and put it in the bank. Why keep all that money around?”

“Why keep all your money in one place? What happens if the banks fail or we get hemmed up by the law?”

“Do not worry about the law. Seems that I am wasting my breath again on you Fred. Anyway – back to the original question. Bobby, what are you going to do?”

“Well, like I said, put my money in the bank. I am going to maybe get a room and take a bath.”

Trev smiled, looked at Bobby, and said, “You – a bath? I do not believe this is Bobby. Where did our Bobby go?”

Bobby and Fred smiled. Bobby said while keeping his focus on the trail, “Being a scout I have learned that I kick up so much dust. It’s like crammed in my nose and ears. I probably have fifty pounds of dirt on my body.”

Fred nodded. He said, “Yeah, I always felt filthy when I pulled into Surrenstrada. I will buy you a bandana to cover your mouth.”

“Thanks Fred.”

“No problem. So, after your bath, what next?”

“Well, I will probably eat a steak and baked potato. I want the steak so rare it drips blood, and I’ll have to sop it up with my roll. Enough butter on the potato that it leaks off the side. What about you Trev?”

“Oh, very similar, except that I want a bath, a meal, and a warm bed. I want to sleep for a day straight – uninterrupted. I want room service to bring me my absurdly expensive meals! What about you Fred?”

“Same thing as you both tonight. Then tomorrow look for new passengers on my train and gather supplies.”

Bobby said, “When are we leaving again?”

Fred smiled, “We do this all over again in three days.”

Lavon punched a stiff hide bag filled with feathers. He wore leather gloves with some padding, but the force from the punches still made a noise and an impression on the bag. The silver haired man worked up a sweat. His hair, matted up from the moisture, echoed his every movement by flying to the left and right as he swayed and bobbed.

Verna walked inside the room and sat down on a bench overlooking Lavon at practice. She stared at her mentor's chest. At first glance she picked up that his build seemed more muscular than she thought. Each muscle seemed defined, and he failed to look like the typical man of over sixty winters. She noticed whip marks, a few bullet holes and knife wounds. She thought to herself that if she continued down her current path, her body stood the potential of being like Lavon's chest – full of wounds. She thought about her son on the wagon train. How he seemed to not need her and honestly would be better off without her.

Lavon grabbed a towel from behind his desk chair. He wiped the sweat away from his face as he looked at Verna. He said, "Verna. I did not hear you come in my office. You know you are always welcome."

"Hello sir."

"Is something on your mind?"

"Uhm – yes sir."

"What is it?"

"I – uhm – I wish to take some time off."

"Absolutely. You have never asked for anytime. Is there something pressing? Do you need help with something?"

"This is something I wish to take care of myself. If I told you about it, then you would just take care of it."

"Very well. If you need anything, just find me. You know that. Is there anything else you want to talk about?"

"Nope."

“Verna. I have known you for a long time. I can tell when you are hiding something from me. Does it have something to do with that boy from that wagon train?”

Verna breathed deeply. She said, “Yes. Yes, it does.”

“Do you really think he is yours?”

“I know he is.”

“How do you know?”

“I gave up a boy his age. He comes from that temple.”

“These are all just coincidences. Verna, you should have told me about this?”

“Why? So you could clean this mess up? I made a mistake! I need to make this right!”

Lavon gently hugged her. Verna smelled the sweat from him. He said, “Go Verna. Go figure this out on your own. It goes without saying, but I will say it again. I am here for you if you need anything.”

“Thank you, Lavon.” She turned and walked away.

As Verna walked out the door, she heard Lavon say, “Be careful Verna. I do not have a child to lose.”

Lavon continued his bag work. Shortly after Verna’s departure, a man knocked at the door. Lavon walked over to his towel on his desk and said enter. He took his gloves off again as he noticed the man walking toward him. The man’s shadow followed every step his cowboy boots took. The man wore all black. He looked at Lavon with violent brown eyes. His beard made of black hair gave the man the illusion that he lacked any features and that somehow his whole being lacked any validation.

The man walked into Lavon's office and shut the door. Verna no longer heard anything from the two men. She kept walking. Lavon and the man stared at one another. The man broke the silence by saying to Lavon, "You sure it is wise to let Verna out and about looking into her child?"

Lavon poured a glass of water and gestured toward the man that stood before him. He took a sip of the water. He looked at the man, "Damon, her running around looking into what happened to her kid will be a distraction."

"What about, Fred?"

"I have something planned for him. It will only be a distraction while I look for what I need."

"When do we leave?"

"We head out tonight. I must find it. Let me get a quick bath, and I will meet you outside."

Lavon bathed quickly. He dressed in his black clothes with silver lining. He mounted Dominion after drawing the runes on him. He spurred the beast forward as Damon joined him. The two rode hard, seeking something in Surrestrada.

THE END

