

# CHANGING BREEDS: WILD WEST TALES

A FICTION ANTHOLOGY

STORYTELLERS  
VAULT



FOURTH EDITION

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Thanks are due to **Matt M. McElroy** for the idea, and especially to **Jessa Michalek** for getting the ball rolling.

Sorry things didn't work out, Jessa; hope we have better luck next time.



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# The Leadville Mind Heist

*Stephen R. Lickman*

Cassandra Beauregard waved her outstretched arms to coax more applause from the sparse crowd seated in the Tabor Opera House that evening. But as she gazed out from the stage it was apparent by the number of empty red-velvet seats that Ms. Beauregard's Tragedy and Comedy Theatrics troupe had earned all the adoration they were going to get. Beneath the painted smile on her face, she sighed. At least this evening they weren't competing with a hanging across the street.

She followed up with a delicate curtsy that would have made the ballerinas back in Savannah green with envy. Scanning the faces of what passed for Leadville's gentry, her mind drifted on to what would follow tonight's performance. Surely there would be someone handsome enough to buy a lady a drink after the show. A twist of her wrist edged the hems of her dress and petticoat up a little higher.

'Have a little bit of ankle, boys,' she thought. 'That should wet their whistles.'

She was in mid-flirt with the audience when her eyes locked on the familiar face of JD Kendall. The rush of blood filled her cheeks as her smile turned genuine. With JD in town her evening wasn't just salvaged, it would be fantastic. Cassandra fluttered her eyelashes in JD's direction and blew him a kiss.

Nothing. Aside from him continuing to applaud in his polite, English-bred manner, her outsized display of affection elicited no response. The flush of excitement she felt just moments earlier spiraled down into her heart in the form of indignity.

'Cassandra Beauregard,' her thoughts addressed her, 'I do declare if that man thinks he can breeze through town without giving a lady her proper due, both in companionship and information, well, he's going to find out just how much madder than a wet hen you can get! Or, raven, that is.'

She shifted her focus in hopes of finding another gentleman with whom she could perhaps generate some jealous friction with JD. Instead, she found herself staring into the lean countenance of Professor Syllas Obler. The orange light from the theater's gas lamps illuminated the round lenses of the pale man's pince-nez with an almost ghoulish intensity. Cassandra shuddered. It didn't matter how many times Obler attended her performances, she never grew comfortable with Leadville's resident Anansi's presence. He just looked, well, so Anansi.

As she stared, Cassandra realized that Obler's attention was not mirrored back on her, but rather on JD. Then, as if detecting her thoughts, he peered over the edges of his glasses at her. One eyebrow arched. Cassandra imagined she could hear him asking in that slow, silky way of his, "Well, isn't that interesting?"

Cassandra grasped the hands of her fellow thespians and hurried from the stage.

Frowning, Patrick Coging dug into the pocket of his waistcoat and then clicked the pair of coins he found within it down on the bar. It was only then that Samuels, the proprietor of the Opera Saloon, proceeded to refill his glass with another shot of rye.

‘The Opera Saloon,’ he mused as he sipped the alcohol. ‘Built right next door to the bloody opera house. Never let it be said that creativity isn’t thriving in the American West.’ He winced as the golden-brown liquid turned to fire and channeled its way down to his belly.

Cheers broke out at the front of the establishment as the players from the traveling theatrical troupe strode in for their nightly revels. Behind him, Coging heard the piano player tickle up the opening strains of Stephen Foster’s Beautiful Dreamer. But its pace bounced a bit too much and the high notes twanged more than a mouthful of honey tea. Samuels shook his head at Coging and indicated the handwritten sign posted above the piano. “Please don’t shoot the piano player,” it read. “He’s doing his damndest.”

Coging raised his glass to the old man before shooting back the last of the whiskey. He’d take this moment of camaraderie with the barkeep as a victory. After two weeks of gambling in this mining town, he was finally being regarded as a patron as opposed to just “Irish”.

The booze worked its magic, burning away the edges of his anxiety. Which was good, because dealing with Ms. Cassandra Beauregard’s ego could be trying in the best of circumstances. Never mind on nights when he had to give her troubling news. A rise in the number of whistles accompanied by a smattering of catcalls let him know that Ms. Beauregard had made her grand entrance. Her suitors would be lining up for their turn to share a few bars of a waltz with her. Coging turned to literally face the music, then sidled off his stool and into the crowd.

It took a few turns of backslapping and the exchanging of pleasantries before he positioned himself to be next in line for Ms. Beauregard’s attention. For the moment, he admired how she worked. Each man gushed over her, giving her the news of their day. And each man, no matter how comely received a smile and/or a flash from her emerald eyes. Despite his apprehension, Coging’s fingers tingled as he imagined taking her hand in his and wrapping his arm around the small of her back as they danced. Her effortless charm was part of what made her such a damn good informant. And as she turned to dance with him, her face radiated warmth.

“Why, Patrick Coging,” she exclaimed, “how nice to see you still in town.”

Coging leaned in close. The lavender scent of her perfume clouded the business areas of his mind, but he focused on the job at hand. “Cass, luv, we’ve got problems.”

The young woman shook her head, her blue-black curls catching the light. “Mr. Coging! While I may find your accent gives you a certain roguish charm, we have not been acquainted long enough for you to call me Cass. Or luv.”

Coging felt her start to slip away. “It’s about JD. JD Kendall.” She visibly startled at the name of their shared friend. Had she known already? “Aye. The London Times is more than a few pages short.”

Before he could pull her back, a lithe man in tailcoats cut in between them. Coging imagined the razor plumage of his Crinos form erupting from his neck and arms. But the flame of anger burning inside him withered in the icy chill that crept up his spine when the newcomer turned to face him.

“Good evening, Mr. Coging and Ms. Beauregard,” said Professor Syllas Obler. His words seemed to be woven in the air like a gauze. “I would very much like it if you two would join me for a walk.” Obler motioned towards the doors of the Opera Saloon and the empty dirt road which lay beyond it.

“How about we have a drink instead?” Coging licked his lips.

Oh,” replied Obler, “I’m afraid I never drink in public.” A grin crossed the man’s face that Coging would have taken for bashful were it not for the cruel squint in his eyes. “I believe I have some information of a pressing nature.”

Cassandra took Coging by the arm.

The trio exited the saloon. After walking a dozen or so paces down the street a young man approached them from the shadows. He wore a sullen posture along with a bent slouch hat. His dusty denim clothing marked him as a minor.

“Is this the dude you went to fetch, Professor?” he asked.

Obler motioned for the newcomer to join them. “Indeed. Patrick Coging, Ms. Beauregard, may I present William Bruce. A newcomer to your flock.”

Coging shut his eyes and inhaled. The crisp spring air filled his senses bringing with it an aura of vitality. A smell hung about the boy not unlike the energizing must that follows a rainstorm. Only it was not the smell of the earth but of the air. “One of us?” The realization triggered the memory of the

conversation he'd had with Kendall two days prior over breakfast.

"You're the corvid youngblood who joined up with Max Lawrence's gang. The migrators posing as mine workers."

"Yes, but naw! I ain't with them no more!" William's agitation wouldn't have been any plainer if he'd gone raven and shed feathers.

The gentle coaxing of a throat being cleared brought the younger man out of his flustered state. Standing further down the road within the dim yellow electric halo of one of Leadville's new streetlamps was the Professor. He beckoned the others on.

"Poor William's tale is intertwined with that of our mutual acquaintance, Mr. JD Kendall. I did hear you and Mr. Coging discussing the London Times earlier, did I not my dear?"

Cassandra did not reply but hurried her step.

"The London Times," Obler continued as he resumed his walk. "An appropriate title for a Corax of such distinction. Born in London yet he travels the American frontier as a reporter. There hasn't been an operation executed by the Children of Gaia within the Colorado, Wyoming, or Dakota territories that didn't benefit from Mr. Kendall's information. Such a personable man. He knows all of us." Obler paused to leer at Cassandra over the rim of his glasses. "Some more intimately than others."

Coging marched forward with the intent of defending Cassandra's honor. The sharp crack of a slap stopped him short. Obler collapsed to his knees in the dirt. One of his gloved hands caressed the red mark spreading across his cheek while the other fumbled about in the road for his glasses. Cassandra loomed over the Anansi. The light from the lamp reflected off the green folds of her gown, giving it the appearance of armor.

"No more toying, spider." she spat. "Get to the point or get out of town. And don't think I don't have the influence to make you a pariah."

"Be still my beating heart," Coging breathed. Next to him William Bruce removed his hat and clutched it to his chest. "Aye, lad, 'tis like bein' in church."

Obler stood and brushed the dust from his well-tailored trousers. "You witnessed it yourself tonight. He didn't recognize you. His memory is gone."

"What do you mean?" Anger mingled with fear in the tremble of Cassandra's voice.

"A Corax. Has had his memory. Stolen. I shouldn't have to explain to you how that is possible."

A sickening thought inched its way through Coging's temple. Shaking his head, he advanced on the arguing pair. "No. That rite is reserved as the most severe of punishments."

Obler met his eyes and for the first time ever, Coging saw fear in them. "Yes, Patrick. But what if it was used as a weapon?"

"The Rite of Memory Theft?" Cassandra asked. "But it would require at least three Corax...." her voice trailed off as both she and Coging turned to look at-

William dropped his hat. "T'wern't me! T'wern't me! I ran to the Professor!"

Coging's lips curled. "No, but that old codger Lawrence and his other two cronies did it, didn't they? Why?"

They listened aghast as the teen vomited out his tale. A stranger with a bad nose and a rotten smell bought Lawrence and the others round after round of drinks at the Silver Dollar last night. He plied them with a bag of shiny. He convinced them that JD had engineered the recent railroad wars all so he could write his stories and make a name for himself. When William started to ask questions, they shooed him away. But he followed. He watched.

"And when they were done, his memories were all in a little wooden box in the stranger's hand."

"Wait," Coging's brow furrowed. "Lawrence didn't crush the box? That shouldn't have worked. Does that mean?"

"Yes," Obler grimaced. "Kendall's memories could still be out there."

William retrieved his hat from the mud and turned it over in his hands. "The man laughed as he walked away. Fit to burst with pride. But it's not like they killed your friend."

"Oh, who's a pretty bird, now?" Coging snorted. "It would have been better if they had. What's the one thing we all have in common? JD Kendall! If his life's story gets put into someone else's skull"

"Then every shapeshifter working against the Wyrms out here is in danger," Cassandra finished.

“Alright, let’s go get Max Lawrence.”

“Oh,” said Obler. “I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of dealing with Lawrence myself.”

So engrossed in William’s story were they that they had failed to notice where the Professor had led them. They were behind Boot Hill Cemetery near the ancient cottonwood tree. It was every Leadville mob’s choice spot for lynching. Dangling by a translucent noose from its tallest claw-tipped branch was the very dead body of Max Lawrence.

“Who gets to do the honors?” asked Coging.

Or at least, he started to ask. Before he could fully form the question, Cassandra shifted into her Corvid form. She raced up the tree, her wings a flurry of shadows in motion. Her ascent stalled as she navigated around the white, matted nest of hair that Max Lawrence had called a beard. She circled his head once then settled in on his shoulder.

A soft pop whispered down the branches as she drove her beak into Lawrence’s right eye. Coging’s mouth watered. He imagined the salty gelatin-like flesh within the eye gliding over his tongue. Cassandra drilled deeper into the corpse’s face, and he heard her beak rattle inside the socket. Like flesh-filled teardrops, blood ran down the dead man’s face when she withdrew. Instead of rejoining the others below, however, she lay her head against Lawrence’s. The gesture struck Coging as almost affectionate. Next to him, William Bruce shifted. Confusion creased his brow.

“She’s interrogating his spirit, lad. Let’s hope the bastard feels some sort of remorse.”

Then she alighted from the dangling traitor, shifting back into her mortal form as she landed. “The man Max cut the deal with,” she said, “called himself Doctor Thaddeus Hassenstein. And the good news is I know where he’s heading. “Now,” she smiled, “which one of you handsome devils wants to help a lady rob a train tomorrow morning?”

For the third time in as many passenger cars, Cassandra politely turned down another gentleman’s offer to assist her with her bag. It simply would not do if they detected either the Volcanic repeater or LeMat revolver-shaped lumps pressing out from within. She opened the door to cross between carriages. The cold spring air of the Colorado countryside blasted her senses and the colors of green, brown, and red seemed to tumble past in rhythm with the rumble of the train. Two hours into their journey, and she had yet to locate their quarry. She shook off the chill from the air and tried not to think what would happen if JD’s box of memories arrived intact at Pueblo. Would it be put on a ferry or another rail? Or would it simply vanish into the populace of the rapidly expanding city?

She pressed on into the next car. A most unladylike grunt escaped her lips as she slammed the paneled door behind her. The rows of faces that greeted her when she turned around displayed an almost uncanny uniformity of bewilderment. She didn’t have to be a mind-reader or use any of the gifts Gaia gave her to know what they were thinking. After all, they were undoubtedly the sort of questions she’d been raised to gossip about as a privileged young belle in the South.

“Where is that woman’s gentleman companion?”

“Is she allowed to walk around alone like that? And this late in the trip?”

“The Oriental colors of that bag do not go well with that black linen dress!”

Cassandra exhaled and allowed the negative thoughts to flow out of her. “Showtime, again” she thought. She inhaled. The mélange of smells from the passenger car anchored her to the present. The leather from the benches. The earthiness of the polished wood. The unnatural piquancy of the polished brass fixtures. Pipe tobacco. And the sour pepper of humans sitting in their own sweat for too long.

“What a fright I must look like,” she giggled at the walrus-mustachioed man seated in front of her. “But I simply must find that doctor! Have you seen him?”

And so, she went on down the line, telling slight variations of the same tale. No. She wasn’t traveling alone. Yes, she’d been separated from her companion, a doctor. The bag was his. Had anyone seen him?

“You’re in luck, miss,” assured the blond middle-aged man with the most charming array of crow’s feet around his blue eyes. “I believe your companion rented out the next car.”

He jerked his thumb at the door directly behind him. Doing so opened his jacket wide enough for

Cassandra to see the shiny tin badge fastened to his waistcoat. Upon it were the words "U.S. MARSHAL". She squeezed the lawman's arm in thanks and rushed through the door before something more unladylike than a grunt came out of her.

The door clanged shut behind her. She leaned against it, taking a moment to lament their luck. She imagined Patrick would have something colorful to say about their odds. Still, there was nothing to be done about it, except verify. She crossed the threshold between the cars. A brass chain with a placard that read "PRIVATE" on it hung across its entrance. Cassandra raised her gloved fist and pounded on the door. When there was no answer, she pressed her face to its window. Thick burgundy curtains obscured her view.

The curtains snapped open. Surprised, Cassandra stepped backwards, for the face revealed was not a kindly one. She'd seen similar faces on the condors that fed on the dead along the wagon trails in Kansas. Her bearings lost; her backside bumped into the railing behind her. Cold seized her heart as her feet left the safety of the platform.

With a quickness that Cassandra didn't think possible, an arm shot out from the door, snatching her by the wrist. The world righted itself and she found herself pressed against the chest of the frightening man. What she had mistook for a ring of plumage around his neck was the fur-lined collar of his woolen coat. Yet it, combined with his crooked nose and bald head, kept the image of carrion eaters firmly in her mind.

"My heavens!" she exclaimed. "Is this not the way to the dining car?"

The condor-man's glare softened a tad. He took his hands away, yet his eyes roamed up and down the length of her dress. "Did you not read the sign, miss?" He pointed to the placard which now dangled off to the side. "This is a private car."

Cassandra popped open her fan and placed its lace leaves across her lips. She leaned it conspiratorially. "I'm afraid I never did quite master the art of reading, Mister...?"

"That's Doctor," he sniffed. Arrogance hung about him like a Parisian cologne. "Doctor Thaddeus Hassenstein. I suggest you head back into the car you came from and remind that Marshal that I don't wish to be disturbed!" He punctuated his sentence by stepping back into his room and slamming the door shut.

Cassandra retreated onto the platform of the previous carriage. A warm sense of satisfaction filled her as she channeled the Gift granted to her by the machine-spirit. She tapped out a message in Morse with the heel of her boot. "Target located," it said. "Sixth car."

Minutes later, the bird forms of Patrick Coging and William Bruce landed next to her. As they transformed back into their homid forms, she brought them up to speed. Patrick did indeed share a very colorful metaphor when he learned about the lawman who was mere feet away from them.

"Well, that changes things a bit, don't it? Can you keep the copper occupied while we retrieve the box? I'll leave the manner of distraction to your discretion." He brushed a lock of his ebony hair away from his eyes and winked. "Now let's see the hardware you brung us."

Cassandra opened the carpet bag. Patrick's eyes grew wide as he drew the weapons out from within. She glanced at the boy, William. He, too, turned pale and looked as if he were about to swallow his neck.

"Do those barrels ever stop?" he asked.

Patrick seemed to measure the weight of the pistols in his hands. "Glory be, luv. Did you rob General Stuart himself?"

Cassandra bristled. There he went with his familiar terms again. Still, she had to admit he was good looking. And his shoulders were as broad as a California sunrise. But business first. She waved both his concerns and her other thoughts away. "The idea is to avoid a gunfight. Those hand cannons should make the doctor think twice."

Patrick shrugged and dug back into the satchel. He pulled out two of the red sashes packed inside. "At least you were more of a traditionalist when it came to our masks." Patrick handed the LeMat revolver and one of the cloths to William. "Alright, young one, I've got a plan."

If life presents you with an opportunity to rob a train by busting through a window, you take it. So,

thought Coging. So that's what they did, swinging down from the roof and crashing through a window, feet first. Springing up from a roll, he leveled the Volcanic's ornate barrel at the doctor's eyeline. Cassandra had been right. Hassenstein was one ugly cuss.

He sat behind a mahogany desk at the other side of the car. A ledger of some sort lay open in front of him. Yet he didn't raise his eyebrows in alarm or fear. Instead, the expression on his face read, "Well? I'm waiting."

Coging gave their surroundings a quick once over. While the car wasn't quite built to Pullman-level luxury, its thick violet carpet, the small stove next to the desk, and the fact that it featured electric lighting all indicated money. He cranked the lever on the pistol, advancing a cartridge into firing position.

"Levantate los manos, por favor," he said. He smiled behind his mask, knowing that the words came out of him sounding exactly like Pacifico Ramirez. The bandit had weaseled \$200 out of him in a poker game in San Antonio, so it seemed fair to Coging that he gets something out of that humiliation. He nodded at William. 'Come on, kid,' he thought. 'Tell him this is a robbery. Este es un robo!'

The young blood cocked back the hammer on his revolver. "Ess day is uno robbo," he announced in a high-pitched accent that would get him shot in any Mexican village.

"Hmmm," Hassenstein said as he raised his hands. "If you two are Mexican outlaws, then I am Bavarian nobility."

Coging sighed at William. "Pretty bird. Surely your skills of mimicry will be legendary among our people."

"I ain't learned how, yet!"

"Keep him covered!" Coging ping-ponged his gaze from one corner of the car to the next. It landed on a small cedar chest underneath the window from which they entered the car. His mouth ran dry as he considered what was in the chest. Licking his lips, he knelt next to it. 'The first thing I'm going to do when this is over,' he thought, 'is grab myself a good, stiff drink.'

The hinges of the lid squealed as he peeked inside the chest. The object coiled within was unlike anything Coging had seen. At one end was a bowler-shaped cap with a tin band encircling the inside. Brass fittings jutted out from its circumference. Long strands of copper wires plugged into fittings with the ends of each terminating at another malleable strip of tin which was currently molded into the shape of a square cup.

"He slapped that down on JD's head before they started the other night."

Coging startled to see William craning his neck over him to look into the chest. "Watch him, kid!" He jabbed the barrel of his pistol in the direction of the desk but saw the situation had already changed.

Doctor Thaddeus Hassenstein now stood in front of his desk. In his right hand he held a small box with symbols sketched in thick black ink along its sides. "Perhaps you're looking for this?" he chuckled. Seeing the look of shock on Coging's face, his laughter deepened. "When will your kind learn that you cannot stop progress! It is in Man's best interests to exploit the resources of this new frontier." He twirled the fingers of his other hand. Mumbling replaced the man's laughter.

Unprovoked, the Volcanic's hammer engaged its firing pin. The back end of the gun exploded outward. Sharp heat stabbed through Coging's hand. He flung the shattered pistol aside, and a splatter of blood followed in its wake.

"Tsk, tsk," said Hassenstein. "Must be a misfire."

Coging clutched at his mangled fingers and stumbled to the far side of the car. Gritting his teeth, he used his elbow to bang out a message on the wall. The message was one word. He hoped Cassandra would understand. "Mage."

To William's credit, he leapt to Coging, shielding him from the doctor's view. With both hands, he raised the massive LeMat.

"Fulmen percutiens." Hassenstein waved his hand at the ceiling.

The light bulb directly over William's head exploded in a ball of searing white. Electricity arced from the jagged socket and down along the young man's body. His muscles danced the Tesla jig before he collapsed to the floor. His pistol clunked next to him as a smoldering ruin.

Coging scanned the smoking folds of William's shirt for any sign of life. The kid was breathing but down for the count. It would be minutes before his healing kicked in, which was more than enough time

for the mage to permanently snuff them out.

As if anticipating his fears, Hassenstein called out. "It's chilly outside. Perhaps you'd care to partake of my fire?" He advanced towards the stove.

Coging crouched, certain he did not want to experience what partaking in fire entailed. He had to lure the doctor away from William. He launched himself towards the still-open cedar chest, turning Corvid in mid-air. With his beak and talons, he snatched up the wiring of the techno-magical headset inside. Then he darted out the window.

The winds surrounding the train buffeted him about, yet he could still hear Hassenstein howl with rage behind him. He whirled through the air, allowing the extra momentum to fuel his speed as he banked back towards the roof of the car. The mage was already clawing his way up top. Coging touched down on the opposite side of the roof. The cap and its wiring were still clutched in his talons. With a spryness not evident in the man's crooked body, Hassenstein stalked towards him. He drew a Colt from his hip and aimed it in his direction.

"Well," thought Coging, "time to go to the big figure." The cords of his muscles cracked like whips as he burst into Crinos form. Hassenstein's response was to fire his pistol.

Pain blazed though his left thigh, and Coging gagged for breath. 'That sunnavabich is firing gold bullets!' Panic bubbled up from deep within his guts. Another solid shot and he would fold from life's grand game. He ripped a feather from his wing and ran his claws along it. It hardened like steel to his touch. He hurled it at Hassenstein, but with a wave of his hand the wind carried it off course. Coging threw another, but it too was blown wide. Desperate, he whirled around, his mind searching for a way out.

The trumpeting of the train's steam whistle grabbed his attention. Ahead of them along the left-hand side of the track towered the wooden tank of an approaching water station. In defiance of the agony spreading through his leg, Coging cackled. He narrowed his vision on a spot along the lower edge of the tower. Condensation seeped through the wood there. As the train barreled through the station, he spun. At the apex of his pirouette, he unleashed a sharpened feather at his target. With a satisfying thunk it punctured the wood of the tank. The focused blast of water it released cascaded across the roof of the car, carrying both men into the air. But Coging was okay with this. After all, Corax can fly. Humans, as a general rule, can't.

At a table in a dark corner of the Opera Saloon, Patrick Coging took another sip of his rye. Across from him, Cassandra continued filling him in on the events he'd missed. The box which contained the former life of JD Kendall rested between them on the table.

"Following that mess you made with the water tower, William awoke to find the doc had left the box sitting on his desk. He snatched it up and skedaddled during the confusion."

"And he's moved on?"

Cassandra nodded. "He's fixing to put his business with Lawrence's gang behind. Speaking of, the Professor is working on tying that loose end up."

"I guess that just leaves this." Coging stroked the lid of the box as if it were a loyal pet. "You say JD has gone missing?"

"Run off is more what I heard. He's now calling himself Jeremy Brian Kendall. As much as I miss the old JD, even if we chased him down there is no guarantee it would work."

"And we can't let this sit around." He poked the box. "Too dangerous. Don't you agree Ms. Beauregard?"

Cassandra entwined her fingers around his and with her other hand made a fist around the box. "Please, Patrick," she smiled. "Call me Cass." She squeezed her fist.

## *Stephen R. Lickman*

Stephen Lickman is a freelance writer of genre fiction. When not dreaming up ways to abuse his characters, he works in software quality assurance. He enjoys horror movies, cycling, gaming (video and tabletop), and home brewing beer. He acquired the last skill out of desperation, having lived for many years in Westerville, Ohio, otherwise known as “The Dry Capital of the World”.

He maintains a blog and reviews beers at [beerandmonsters.com](http://beerandmonsters.com).

# The Good Doctor

*Sarah Hans*

The bounty hunter wouldn't go to the barber for surgery. Several large men carried him in on a makeshift stretcher and deposited him on the repurposed kitchen table in the brothel infirmary where Ava usually did her work. She was baffled, but hustled to work anyway, grabbing a large pair of shears to cut away the stranger's jacket so she could access the bullet wound in his shoulder.

"Send my men out," the bounty hunter whispered, clutching at the jacket, and Ava shooed the gruff-looking fellows out of the small room. She was a tiny woman, but when she put on her blood-stained smock, perched a pair of spectacles on her nose, and pulled her long hair into a severe bun, no man could deny her orders.

When the door closed behind them, Ava bent over her patient and began to cut the jacket away, and very quickly saw why he—she—had asked to be alone.

"You're the commander of those men and they don't know?" Ava asked, noticing the particularly smooth line of the bounty hunter's jaw.

The bounty hunter winced and spoke in a strained voice. "There's some who suspect. But it would do me a mighty kindness were you not to mention my sex. It's a matter we simply do not discuss."

"I'm sure your sex has as much relevance to your profession as it does to mine," Ava said, nodding curtly and bending over the wound with a pair of tweezers.

"You're a proper doctor, then."

"I am indeed, as was my father before me, and his father. Dr. Clavin, at your service."

The bounty hunter snorted and didn't offer a name. Ava used a towel to clear away some of the blood, and then used the tweezers to carefully probe the bullet hole. The smell of blood filled the room, sweet and salty and delectable, and she resisted the urge to lick her lips. "This is too deep for me to remove safely, I'm afraid."

"What's that mean?"

"We're better off leaving it there. If I operate, we could introduce infection, or start it bleeding so much we can't stop it."

"What about my arm?"

Ava pressed her lips together and leaned closer, poking more aggressively with the tweezers. Her nose twitched with the smell of burned meat from deep inside the wound. "The bullet struck muscle and fat but not bone. You'll recover. Whether you'll have full use of the arm depends on how much you let yourself rest and heal." She met her patient's eyes. They were small but bright blue, clear as a summer day in the dingy light streaming in the infirmary window. There was something familiar about the harsh line of the bounty hunter's cheekbones, but Ava couldn't quite place where she knew the face. "You don't seem like the type to stay off a horse for long, but if you want to use this arm again, there'll be no riding, no shooting, no tussling for at least a month. Probably two."

The bounty hunter squirmed and hissed. "You got any laudanum?"

"Ordered it weeks ago but it hasn't arrived. That's the disadvantage of doctoring in the Nevada wilderness."

"You sure you're a bona fide doctor?"

"I've got some whiskey," Ava offered with a shrug and went to fetch the bottle.

"I've been shot four times and you're the first doctor who didn't remove the shot."

Ava sighed, accustomed to a lack of patient confidence. "I find that doctors of the masculine persuasion tend to be show-offs who think surgery is the solution to every problem. You're welcome to seek another opinion from the barber." She handed her patient the half-empty whiskey bottle, tossed the towel and tweezers into a crate by the door, and went to the bucket of water under the window to clean her hands.

The bounty hunter sat up and took a swig from the whiskey bottle. "Why'd you choose the name Clavin, doc?"

Ava looked up from the soap, her heart stutter-stepping. The bounty hunter was staring at her with a look full of knowledge, as if those blue, blue eyes had penetrated Ava's secrets. Ava's organs roiled with panic and she swallowed the sensation down. "Sorry?"

"The name Clavin. I know that's not your family name because I made it up."

Ava felt a sensation like lightning striking. Her skin was electric. She finally knew where she recognized those beady eyes, those cheekbones sharp enough to slice. "You're William Clavin."

The bounty hunter smirked and winced again, taking another long pull from the whiskey bottle. "Formerly."

Starstruck, Ava quickly dipped her hands in the bucket and dried them on the clean towel under the window. She'd followed news of William Clavin for years, ever since it was revealed that one of the Union's most successful generals was, in fact, a woman. "Surely you're not going by Wilhelmina Clayton now?"

The smirk grew to a grin. "Roger Buck."

Ava chortled. "An even more masculine choice than William."

Roger gestured at Ava's skirt. "You took my surname but elected not to disguise your gender."

Ava smiled ruefully. "There are days I regret that choice, but I could only live with so many lies." A spider dropped from the ceiling, small and black, lowering itself to the floor and scuttling under Ava's skirt. She blanched and hoped Roger hadn't noticed.

Roger nodded. "It's true, the lies do become more and more difficult to conceal. Out here though, it's easy to reinvent yourself. Living as a man felt like a necessary choice for my chosen vocation, but now I see women like you...and I wonder if it was truly necessary."

"You look around my tiny one-room surgery in a brothel in Nowhere, Nevada and think I'm the one that chose wisely?"

"You haven't done too badly for yourself. You've got a vocation, a roof over your head, and you're living as yourself. What could be better?"

Ava squirmed and moved for the cabinet with the bandages, desperate to change the topic of conversation. "Let's make you sling."

"Make it quick, doc. I gotta get my men out of here." The whiskey bottle was nearly empty, and Roger's words slurred.

Ava worked as quickly as she could cleaning and bandaging the wound, fashioning a sling from a length of clean cloth. "You sure you don't want to spend the night? Miss D will give you a discount for being one of my patients. You really should take it easy."

Roger staggered to her—his?—feet and dropped the whiskey bottle onto the floor with a thunk. "Arliss Boomhauer's the one shot me, but not before I killed his brother. He'll be coming after us. You gotta a shirt and a jacket?"

"Did you let the sheriff know?" Ava dug through the pile of extra clothes left behind by brothel patrons for something that would fit her patient.

"Yep. But him and one deputy ain't enough to hold off all them Boomhauers. Thanks for the medicine, doc." Roger pulled on the shirt and let Ava drape the jacket over his shoulders. He reached into

his trouser pocket and withdrew several large bills, dropping them onto the table.

"That's too much," Ava protested weakly.

"Rent a proper office. Out of a house or a storefront, not the back of a warehouse." Roger walked to the door, all drunken masculine swagger, even with one arm in a sling. "And get you a supply of laudanum, and maybe a nurse."

Ava stuffed the bills in the pocket of her smock and opened the door. Her body buzzed with gratitude and excitement. Like everything else in the lawless West, this money would come with a price—no doubt she'd be the bounty hunter's pet doctor, patching bullet holes and setting broken bones—but she considered that, perhaps, it was a price worth paying. Unless, of course, the Boomhauer Gang got wind of it.

Gunshots rang out in the hot afternoon, instantly replacing Ava's elation with terror. In the front room, prostitutes and customers raced for the bedrooms or hit the floor. Miss D, behind the bar, glanced at Ava, her wide, painted mouth frowning. "Get him out of here," she commanded, pointing at the front door.

Ava struggled to keep herself together. She pushed Roger toward the door. He drew his pistol, but he was wobbly with drink and using his off hand. Ava doubted he could shoot the fattest cow in the field from five feet away. From outside, she heard a voice calling, "Roger Buck! Get your worthless ass out here."

Ava reached out with her senses and counted how many men waited outside the brothel. The Boomhauer Gang numbered at least ten. And there was something wrong with them, something that twisted the air and tainted it with a smell like burning tar that filled her throat until she thought she would gag. "Roger, where are your men?"

Roger looked at her sharply, panic thinly disguised in the curve of his mouth. "Probably plotting an ambush or some such." He stepped toward the door.

Ava caught his sleeve. "You can't! They'll hang you, or worse."

The bounty hunter grinned then, a facade of ease sliding over his face. "I've faced worse odds, doc. Don't worry your pretty head." And then Roger leaned in and kissed her, leaving a heady tingle and the taste of whiskey on Ava's lips when he pulled away and strolled out the door as casually as could be.

Ava crouched by the window, her heart thumping wildly. Through the thin pane of glass, she heard Roger say, "There's only one request I'd make of you. Don't kill me in town. Take me outside into the wilderness to do your worst."

One of the gang members snorted and called, "And why would we do that?"

Roger spoke casually, as if he were in no hurry, not a hint of panic or fear in his slurred speech. "There's no need to terrorize innocent women and children. And besides, when my men return with the sheriff, they won't know where to find us. Your quarrel is with me, and no one else. Surely you see the sense in that."

Ava pressed her hand flat against her chest as if she needed to hold her heart in her body, certain the gang would laugh at this suggestion and shoot Roger dead right there on the spot. A handful of spiders crept into the cracks around the window and disappeared into her sleeve, the sensation of their tiny legs against her skin comforting as they rejoined her.

"Fine," the gang leader said. "Get him up on a horse," he ordered someone. Ava heard the distinct sound of someone dismounting a horse and stiffened. Heavy boots tread the walkway in front of the brothel, and the door was thrown open by a middle-aged man with a patch over one eye.

"Miss D," the man shouted, removing his hat. A stench rolled off him, like brimstone and rotting meat, and Ava's gorge rose.

Miss D popped up from behind the bar, smiling. "Arliss! Darling. What do you need?"

Arliss' expression became a snarl. "If you ever harbor another bounty hunter in your establishment, my gang will burn it to the ground. Do you understand me?"

Ava, crouched only a few feet from the door, sent a handful of her tiny spies across the floor and up Arliss' boots into his canvas trousers.

"Yes, of course." Miss D said cheerfully, her smile never faltering.

Arliss turned to Ava, gesturing with his hat. "I oughta cut your hands off."

Ava stood, her pulse beating a frantic drumbeat in her own ears. Spiders writhed under her clothes, longing to be free, to taste Arliss Boomhauer's hot blood. The words that came from her mouth were a surprise to her. "You could try."

Arliss looked startled, and then guffawed. Without another word, he placed his hat back on his head and marched from the brothel. Ava ran outside and watched him mount his horse, still chuckling. He and his gang headed North, with Roger Buck tied and seated on the saddle of his own horse, pulled on a lead and surrounded by members of the Boomhauer Gang. His sling was askew, and Ava's arm ached sympathetically.

The last thing Ava saw before the gang crested the ridge on the outskirts of town was Roger's face, looking back at her. She swore she heard a soft voice saying, "Don't worry, doc. I'll be back by supper."

Ava waited until they were out of sight to make sure she could still feel her tiny spies, their bodies the size of pinheads pressed up against Arliss Boomhauer's skin, glowing to her soul like beacons, telling her which way to go. Then, she went to get her coat and a horse.

Ava wasn't a particularly good rider. She and horses didn't really get along; they could sense what lay under her clothes, she imagined. The only horse in the town stable that would have her was an old mare, a plodding but steady creature who looked about a hundred years old. She didn't seem excited to be out of the stable, but she did her job without bucking or kicking, and for that, at least, Ava was grateful. She just wished they could move a little faster. The heat was oppressive on a summer day without much of a breeze, and she stripped off and abandoned her blouse, her corset, and her overskirt. She supposed in the end it wouldn't matter if she rode up fully nude but couldn't quite bring herself to go that far. The sun made her eyes ache and she regretted forgetting a hat.

Dusk was close at hand when Ava finally arrived at the Boomhauer Gang's hideout, a rocky outcropping with shade for the horses and a few tall trees perfect for hanging. Her stomach growled with hunger and churned with anxiety for what lay ahead. She'd thought to bring a canteen of water for the heat of daytime and a coat for the cool of evening but hadn't brought a meal. Now she remembered the cask of blood in the brothel cellar, hidden among the wine and beer, and her mouth salivated. And of course, without blood, how would she be any help to Roger? She hadn't thought this through properly. But who could have? She hadn't expected, when she woke that morning, to be attempting a daring wilderness rescue of a bounty hunter who turned out to be her girlhood hero.

Her horse stopped dead about 100 feet from the campsite. Ava kicked her sides. The mare stamped one hoof, and then bent to crop gently at the grass sprouting up between rocks. Ava groaned and slid from the saddle.

From the hideout, she heard the sound of whooping and hollering. A few gunshots sounded, abrupt in the still air. Her chest tightened. What if they were hanging Roger right now? She took a drink from her canteen and jogged toward the outcropping. She had no idea what she'd do when she got there. She just knew she had to save Roger-William-Wilhelmina. She couldn't live with herself if she didn't.

A roar split the air. It was not a human sound, but it was followed by human screams. Ava quickened her pace. As she rounded the outcropping, she dropped her canteen in shock.

A bear. A brown bear the size of a six-team passenger carriage reared up on its hind legs and swiped at the screaming men that ran before it. Human corpses littered the ground at its feet and a frayed length of rope dangled from its neck. The ursine grabbed a nearby tree and ripped it from the earth, hoisting it over its head and tossing it so that it knocked a fleeing henchman from his horse. The other horses screamed and frothed at the mouth and yanked at their harnesses until they could gallop away, leaving behind frantic men who tried to take aim at the bear with pistols and shotguns. The massive creature didn't seem to notice the bullets anymore than bee stings.

Ava looked for Roger but didn't see him anywhere in the confusion. The bear roared again, and fear gripped her so hard she nearly split apart. She opened her mouth to call Roger's name, but terror clutched her throat and she turned to run.

An arm closed around Ava's neck and the hard metal of a pistol pressed against her side. The stench of

brimstone and rotting meat made her gag.

Arliss Boomhauer dragged her a few steps closer to the bear. "Stop this right now or your girlfriend dies."

The bear's rampage stopped abruptly. The big brown head swiveled to Arliss, and blue eyes blinked down at Ava.

Realization crashed over Ava. This was Wilhelmina Clayton's true secret. It's easy to take a disguise and become another person when you already have to live a lie. Ava knew that all too well. What was living as another gender if it afforded William Clavin and Roger Buck the opportunities they'd been denied as Wilhelmina Clayton? What was living under an assumed name when you already couldn't reveal your true nature?

She knew, then, why the Boomhauer Gang smelled like burning tar. These men were tainted by the Wyrms. And she knew that Roger Buck pursued them not just for the bounty, but to cleanse the land they infested.

Roger lowered himself to his front paws as if in supplication, and released a low growling sort of moan, a sound of regret. Ava knew a split second before he did it that Arliss would turn the gun on Roger, and Roger would take multiple pistol wounds to the head, and even in the form of a bear the size of a small train car, might not survive.

Ava didn't want to let Roger see her true form, but wasn't that her only weapon? Hadn't she come here to rescue him, and hadn't she come here unarmed, knowing this was her only recourse? In an instant, she made peace with what she must do, bent her head, and bit into Arliss Boomhauer's fleshy arm.

Arliss screamed and fired his gun at Bear-Roger once, the bullet going wide. Ava sucked down his blood greedily. She hadn't drunk it hot from the vein in a long time. It was delicious, like the first frothy cup of milk fresh from the cow's teat, or the first pull on a mug of Miss D's hot coffee on a cold winter day. By the time Arliss managed to get the pistol aimed at her again, it was too late. She'd drunk enough to fuel her dormant power.

Ava exploded into spiders. The pistol fired and singed a few tiny black bodies, but the rest ran on, smothering Arliss and digging tiny fangs into his skin, draining him of what little blood remained in his body. His exsanguinated corpse collapsed to the ground. The mass of Ava-Spiders rolled across the earth, enveloping another gang member, and she relished the sound of his screams as her body—millions of tiny bodies, working as one—tore into his flesh and feasted on his blood. He smelled bad, like an old shoe or roadkill left in the sun too long, but his blood was tasty as any. The Ava-Spiders swelled, their feasting straining their tiny bodies.

Behind her, she heard Roger, roaring and chasing down the last of the Boomhauer gang. Pistols fired and men screamed, followed by the crunch of bone and flesh. The wilderness went strangely quiet.

Ava let herself collapse, spent, a mass of exhausted arachnids twitching in the dirt. The smells of trees and dirt and rocks and sky came back to her then, no longer blotted out by the reek of the Wyrms. She smelled Roger approaching, musky fur and metallic blood. He lay down nearby, licking his chops and breathing heavily.

Gradually, Ava reformed into a woman. Now she truly was nude, her clothes abandoned by Arliss' corpse when she became her true form. She gazed over at Roger, who made a soft mewling sound.

"What's wrong?" She got to her feet and rushed over to him, probing his injuries with her fingers. One of the bullets reeked of Wyrms-taint, blackening the wound, and Roger whimpered when she pressed it. "Don't worry."

Ava summoned the last of her strength and let her hand become spiders. Her tiny spies disappeared into the bullet hole and she felt the muscle closing around them, the hot metal of the bullet, the weird buzzing of the Wyrms-taint. Roger clenched his paws against the dirt and howled, the saddest sound Ava had ever heard. The spiders squirmed and lifted and pushed until the bullet popped free of the wound and Ava could grab it with her other fingers and toss it away.

Her spies rejoined her body and she praised their good work. "We need to wash that, but it should be fine," she told Roger, stepping back from him.

She knew her true form probably disgusted him. It was useful, sure, but who wants a doctor or a paramour who was truly a writhing mass of spiders? That most misunderstood and loathed of tiny

creatures. She hung her head and stepped back, suddenly ashamed of her nudity. She cast about for her clothes.

Roger's bones cracked and he gasped and moaned as he transformed from bear to person. "Are you alright?" His voice was thick, heavy with grief and pain. He stood with a stoop-shouldered posture, clearly exhausted.

Ava nodded numbly. She walked to her underthings and pulled them on. When she turned, Roger had found what remained of his own clothes. The shirt had somehow survived the adventure, but his trousers had not. "You're lucky you get to turn into lots of tiny creatures instead of one big one. I've wasted so many good trousers."

A sputtering laugh burst from Ava's lungs. She pointed at one of the henchmen, his head half-removed but the rest of his body intact. "That fellow looks about your size."

Roger gave her an appreciative salute. "Thank you kindly." He strode over and started attempting to remove the dead man's trousers.

Ava watched him work. Eventually she couldn't help herself and asked, "You didn't find all the tiny creatures...you know...disgusting?"

Roger stood and pulled on the man's clothes, buckling the belt tighter by two more notches. "Did you find mine disgusting?"

Tears rose in Ava's eyes and she shook her head.

"Then why would I find yours anything less than the form Gaia gave you? Are we not all beautiful as She made us? The only thing that disturbs me in this world is those creatures tainted by the Wurm. The number of legs you have matters not at all to me, though I admit," his eyes raked her appreciatively, "I do prefer you bipedal for aesthetic reasons."

Ava laughed with relief and didn't say anything about the Weaver or Queen Ananasa. That could wait for another day. For now, all she said was, "I have a horse, a little ways off."

Roger smiled and took her hand. "And hopefully some more clothes?"

Ava grinned. "I'm surprised you're so eager to get my clothes back on. I thought maybe after that kiss..."

"I'm only thinking of a young lady's virtue, Doctor Clavin."

"I think it's time you called me Ava."

Hand-in-hand, they walked together to the old mare, who would take them home.

## *Sarah Hans*

Sarah Hans is an award-winning writer, editor, and teacher whose stories have appeared in more than 30 publications, including *The Arcanist* and *Pseudopod*. Her first dark fantasy novel, *Entomophobia*, is scheduled to be published in Fall of 2020 by Omnium Gatherum. You can read more of Sarah's short stories in the collection *Dead Girls Don't Love*, published by Dragon's Roost Press, or by backing her [Patreon](#) for just \$1.

You can also find her on Twitter under the handle [@steampunkpanda](#).

# An Old Raven's Tale

*Megan Mackie*

My boots scraped against the rough wooden floor as I entered the shack. Military outpost Whatever. It was a shack in any other time or place. The place had a whole series of them, surrounded by a wood fence that couldn't keep sheep penned in.

The Garou inside...

A Garou is a werewolf, kid, pay attention.

The Garou inside the "shack," who sat behind the equally rough desk, wore the blue calvary of the United States Army. He had a few shiny emblems over his right breast pocket, so he thought he was something. I just thought he could use a good shower, or a spit to roast himself on. Wouldn't even need to baste him, he was already brining in his own juices.

"Hello, Sergeant," I crowed as I entered without an invite and took up a seat in a rickety chair that would have collapsed if a heavier-boned person sat on it.

"Get your dirty feet off my desk, Jack," he snapped, pushing my offending feet away before they could set in their usual perch. I liked putting my feet up on people-of-authority's desks. A way of thumbing my beak at them, without actually thumbing my beak at them.

"You're testy today." I sat up in the chair-of-better-days, giving my wolfie friend... okay friend is too generous a word for an on-again, off-again acquaintance... my current meal-ticket a knowing look over. I can't even remember his name, that's how close we were not.

He stared at me heavily and I had a very clear image flash through my mind; one of black feathers wafting around a set of very sharp teeth.

I raised my eyebrows. "Are you mad at me about something?"

"You're two days late."

I smiled, tucking my shaking hands into my armpits to hide them with nonchalance. I warned the Coyote I wouldn't be able to lie if asked a direct question. And here I was, where I needed to lie to save my own tail-feathers.

How ironic. Gaia would laugh.

Thankfully, I'm also quick-witted. "Only two? I thought I was far later than that," I said, which was true. "I have a terrible sense of time, you know that, Sergeant."

"Where have you been?"

I heaved a sigh and looked away out of the grubby glass window. The Sergeant's horse stood there, looking as anxious as I felt. I flew in, naturally, as a raven, but I wanted to wear clothes once I got here, heaven forbid me. That meant carrying them with me and landing outside the outpost to get dressed. Most of these puppies didn't know I was female. I'll be the first to admit the harsh sun and rough life I'd led so far had sanded away much of what these dogs would consider female. It serves me just fine. I've seen how they treat their women and I'm an educated one on top of that, Gaia forbid.

"Do you have it?" my employer growled.

I opened my satchel, the strap of leather as important to my work as my wings or winning personality. Even when I'm in Corvid form, I carried the satchel.

I handed the folded and sealed missive out to the Sergeant, who tore it from my fingers so fast my skin should have had paper burn.

"It was as you feared. The entire party was slaughtered."

"Captain Baker?" he asked, his fingers stilling before opening the final page.

"Yeah, he was there. Or what was left of him."

"Those savages," he growled.

"Yes, I suppose," I said. If I was to say what I truly felt about the whole situation, what they were now calling the Second War of Rage, I might as well crawl up on that spit myself. The Garou cared little for a Corax's opinion, only that we could send and bring messages quickly and scout where they didn't dare tread.

I only cared that I got paid.

The Garou read the missive, orders from his commander, detailing Captain Baker's "secret" mission, completely ignoring me. So, I waited to be paid and dismissed for my little scavenger hunt.

Ha-ha, I just realized what I said. Raven, scavenger. I crack myself up.

"Everything the way you like it?" I finally asked when I couldn't take the silence anymore.

"Did you read this?" he asked, his yellow eyes nailing me to the chair as I was partway to vacating it. Yes.

"It was still sealed, sir," I said politely, nodding at the wax seal hanging off the one end of the paper.

"Why would it have been sealed?"

It actually was, by the way, when I retrieved it off Captain Baker's corpse.

"I have no idea, not my business."

"I thought your kind was always poking your beaks where they don't belong?"

"Eh, that's okay, I'm not into treasure hunts," I said.

"Neither am I. When Captain Baker came to me with this outrageous scheme that he had actually found a map that would lead him to a cache of gold bars stolen by Sam Bass himself. Of course, I laughed.

'Treasure beyond compare' he claimed. Showed me this map, spent a better part of an hour explaining, telling me the story of this old army compatriot, a member of Bass' gang, sending it to him."

"Everyone knows that Sam Bass squandered his money, which is why he went to Texas to form another gang to rob stagecoaches," I said. The Union Pacific Big Springs robbery is one of my favorite stories.

"You really believe that?" The Sergeant raised an eyebrow at me. "That a man with a share of \$60,000 in newly minted \$20 dollar gold coins squandered all of it in less than four months."

No.

"You didn't believe it," I pointed out.

"I never said that," he replied.

He smiled a toothy smile and I cursed the Coyote in the back of my mind. Had we really needed 'expedition' money as the damn 'pure one' put it? Really, I should have cursed myself for agreeing to go back and collect the fee for the return of the map and word on what happened to the good captain.

"You're thinking about it aren't you? Getting curious, birdie?"

Deciding to cash my chips and leave the table, I stood up. "Well, it's been fun to string a whizzer with you, Sergeant, but I do desire that we be better strangers. Au Revoir!"

Unfortunately, two more Garou in uniform appeared, blocking the light through the open door to take up positions just inside, hands on their pistols.

"No, need for an escort, I know where the quartermaster is, I can get my pay myself," I said. I knew I wasn't fooling anybody, but you gotta try, right?

"Don't worry, you'll get what you deserve in a moment," the Sergeant said.

I folded my willowy self back into my chair and plastered an unworried smile to my face. "What else can I do for you, sir? Always eager to help."

The Sergeant stood then, his spurs clinking with each step as he rounded the desk. My foot started jiggling on its own.

Word of advice: never act nervous in a room full of angry Garou, especially if you want to die with your dignity.

“Where’s the Blood Stone?”

I blinked one eye, then the other as I took in his question.

“The what?”

I saw red for a moment as his backhand whipped my head to the side. My ears rang, blotting out his words. Instead, I focused my clearing sight on my Stetson, now upside down on the floor beside me and worked my screaming jaw up and down to be sure he hadn’t knocked that off too. I dreaded sitting back up again, and sure enough, I got another smack, the other way this time, for my trouble.

“You know, if you stop hitting me it’s easier to answer your question,” I retorted, as I tapped under my nose, then looked at my fingers to judge how much blood wolfie-boy smacked out of me.

“The Bloodstone!” he shouted.

“What in Gaia’s name is a bloodstone!?” I shouted back. I tried to stand up again, but a pair of too-hairy paws sat me back down, one on each shoulder.

A series of hits pummeled me then, while his compatriots held me. I tried to fight back, but it wasn’t until I turned to my dreadful Crinos form that they stopped. If you’ve ever seen a Corax’s hybrid form... it’s not a pretty thing. Two forms, one mammalian and the other avian, were never meant to merge. Instead of getting something angelic, you get unnatural and uncanny.

Feathers cover my face and body, while my mouth hardens into a beak that makes it harder, not impossible, just harder to talk. My hands gnarl like claws, and while I do have wings that let me fly, they do me little good pinned down by a pair of werewolves. Built like this, it’s very difficult to run if I attempt that. Chickens have more grace than me in this horrible form. If my face could blush red, it would have as the Garou Sergeant laughed at me.

“Damn it, you’re ugly,” he sneered, his compatriots joining him for a chuckle at my expense. I was thoroughly trounced, hanging there between the two soldiers, noting the patterns my blood splatter made on the wooden floor amongst of the freed black feathers scattered at our collective feet. I noted it was something a poet named Poe might find inspirational.

The Garou sergeant took a step back, regarding me with the first sign of intelligence I’d seen in him all day. “You really don’t know what I’m talking about?” he asked.

“I can’t lie, believe me, you’d know. Everyone does,” I cawed back.

“I see.” His mouth drew a tight line and he returned to his sit on the other side of his desk. “Too bad. Now you know too much.” He waved an imperious hand at me. “Hang him up out front for all to see. I’ll come up with something to charge him with.”

“No, wait!” I cawed, but I went out the door faster than my protest.

If I thought there would be some sort of objection to my summary execution, that notion dismissed itself with apologies the minute I was dragged into the harsh light of that sun. A scaffolding stood pre-built and waiting for me near the front of the outpost. The soldiers and residents who supported them gathered quickly at the sound of my protests. As fast as this was going, it took half an hour to organize my death. A new rope needed to be pitched up on the scaffolding. In that time, the good Sergeant had written up a nice little list of my “crimes.” They were generic: petty theft, assault, disorderly conduct, but what was getting me hanged was the selling of guns and liquor to Indians.

Little did the Garou Sergeant know, those last two offenses were actually true.

Joke’s on me.

Not for the murder of Captain Baker though, which I would have thought to be an obvious thing to charge me with, since he was piling them on.

By the time they got all set-up and the charges read out, there was a decent crowd gathered for my hanging. The jeers were the hardest part, since if I tried to change back to my homid form they broke a finger. It’s very rare that any of us get a choice when we die. I chose to not die with broken fingers.

My dignity already murdered; I truly began trying to make my peace with Gaia. Had I been the best messenger of her flock? Eh, I was alright. I was still young then. Suppose I can’t say I have improved much since then.

I thought I had a lot more time. When my adventuring and secret searching was done, I planned on creating my own spirit egg and settling down, get caught up on the latest Charles Dickens; find out what happened to Little Dorrit. Something like that.

When the jeers grew louder, I knew it was time to take the stage. Mounting the stairs was a new work of torture in my ungainly form. When they turned me to face the crowd, an even colder thought iced my heart. Would anybody remember my story?

I raised my deformed face to the rooftops and sky, searching for anyone, a crow or a raven watching. What if they heard of my death and didn't come? Not even to consume my eyes and see what I saw. It would be like I never existed. The enormity of my insignificance washed over me, even as the noose came around my neck and tightened.

A flap of wings!

As some priest I never met raised a hand to pray over me, I stared at the crow alighted on the scaffolding above me. It gave me a long eye and I very much wept with relief. He ruffled his feathers at me and cawed once. More Feathers, a dozen, two dozen, settled on the roofs of the outpost shacks and along the wood fencing, taking up positions while another dozen filled in behind. None of the Garou noticed, all salivating at me, waiting for my demise with black glee in their hearts. Not one of them noticed they were surrounded.

I would peck those hearts out and laugh.

Then the handle of the trap door I stood on was pulled.

My gnarled feet dropped with such force that my boots, which I had managed up to that point to keep on, slid off revealing the ugly, twisted things. My lighter bones kept me from breaking my neck as the rope went tight. Then I hit the ground hard.

"The hell!" I shouted, looking up into the face of the priest, holding a knife.

"Run, you idiot! Or fly, whichever," the priest, also known by me as the Coyote, shouted as he dropped his flat black hat and jumped down the hole beside me.

"You glorious bastard!" I crowed, relieved. Above us was chaos and the caws of the righteous. Other hideous forms like mine appeared just beyond my sight and the grateful whines and squeals of pain from the canines was music to my ears.

Coyote sawed through the rope binding my wings and I was free, not just of my bonds and what was left of my clothing but of my terrible form. Within a breath I was myself again, an enormous bird of beautiful wing and elegant—if bloody—feather. I burst out from under the scaffolding right into the eyes of a muscled canine, its bloody jaws open already as it screamed. I clawed the soft jelly from its eyes and leapt into the air in triumph.

But I couldn't leave yet.

I turned on my wing and beelined for the Sergeant's shack.

The coward was in there, scrambling for the map on his desk as I crested through the door, my claws extended. I wanted his eyes, but I needed his map. Or rather, I needed him to not have his map. I settled for dropping a load of my own on his face and I am proud to say I not only got his eyes; some went into his screaming mouth too.

A brief scramble of wing and claw against the opposing wall almost upset my rescue, but I managed to push off and soar back out the door. At my caw, my brethren and sistren took wing again, most becoming a black flock of justice in the sky.

I spied my partner Coyote galloping from the town, three Garou in full Lupus form giving chase behind him.

His horse screamed in terror. Smart horse.

I dropped down behind him, alighting on the back of the saddle before shifting into my homid form.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Coyote cried, his missionary education coming back to haunt him. I snaked my arms around him, naked as a jay bird behind him, and hugged him close.

"You came back to save me!" I declared.

"Of course, couldn't let my partner get executed."

"How did you get them to come?" I asked, glancing up as my Corax tribe surrounded us in a cloud of black.

“You’re not the only one with a silver tongue!”

I laughed as I slipped out his six-shooter from his belt and turned. With one smooth motion I aimed at the nearest Garou and fired. My first shot flew wide, with the bouncing of the horse, but my second shot found its mark as the approaching monster not only fumbled with a yip, but took out his second compatriots legs. Both went down in a glorious pile. The third Garou already nipped at our heels.

“Silver bullets. How much did that cost us?”

“Tell you later.”

“We can’t outrun it!” I shouted, trying to aim as the slathering jaws took a chance at our horse’s feet and missed.

“And I can’t fly!” Coyote answered. Two of my brethren attempted to harry the Garou, but one was injured for his trouble and coasted away. I fired my four shots, but it dodged them easily and kept coming.

“Go! Go, Jack!” Coyote said, bravely, if you can believe that.

“I’m not leaving you,” I promised, surprising myself. When had I become so attached to this double-crossing half-breed?

“Then my one noble deed in this life is for nothing. Get!”

Before I could refuse again, the raven who was still trying to harry the final pursuer changed. He shifted into his Crinos form, his hybrid form; that of man even as he continued to fly. In an instant his wings black-as-night wings silvered, sharpening like knives along the edges. In one clean move, he dived at the wolf, slicing along his hairy body with a metallic wing. Blood erupted at the unnoticed attack, and the Garou howled a painful sharp yip as it was knocked off his feet.

The Crinos warrior laughed as he turned on his wing and followed behind as our horse ate up the distance, leaving the outpost and its Garou soldiers far behind.

It wasn’t the last time we encountered the Garou soldiers. There was still a pile of gold to be found after all. I learned later that the Sergeant had been dishonorably discharged and became a bandit in his own right, One-eyed something or other. Like I said, I can’t remember his name. The funny part is he lost the one eye because of an untreated infection from my leavings. That gave me a good chuckle when I heard that. He got hemp fever—it means he got hung, kid. Dear lord, don’t you know anything? He got hung, and I’m the only one who remembers his story. I really should try to figure out what his name was. Only right.

But that was how it all started, how I met Touches Skies and learned how to razor my feathers like he did. It was also when Coyote and I became something more than convenient, though that took a while to find its way.

And no, I still haven’t gotten around to finishing Little Dorrit.

Oh, and the Bloodstone? Yes, Coyote had stolen that. Stuck it in his pocket and didn’t bother to tell me at the time we found Captain Baker and company. That little piece of treasure came with its own set of troubles.

And did we find Sam Bass’ gold? My, you’re a font of questions, aren’t you?

But that, youngling, is also another story and my glass is dry. I’m an old bird after all, and it’s mighty difficult these days to keep my tongue wet enough for the talking.

I might be persuaded to continue if you can be persuaded to buy another round? What do you say?

## *Megan Mackie*

Megan Mackie is a writer, actor, and playwright. She started her writing career as an indie author and had such smashing success in her first year with her inaugural book *The Finder of the Lucky Devil* that she made the transition to traditional publishing. She has become a personality at many cons, recognizable by her iconic leather hat and her engaging smile. She has joined Bard's Tower, a mobile con bookstore, and has sold her books next to great authors such as Peter David, Melinda Snodgrass, Dan Wells, Claudia Gray, John Jackson Miller, and Jim Butcher, to name a few.

She has published five novels including: *The Finder of the Lucky Devil*, *The Saint of Liars*, *The Devil's Day*, *Death and the Crone*, and *Saint Code: The Lost* through eSpec books. She is also a contributing writer in the role-playing game *Legendlore* and *Legendlore: Legacies* soon to be published by Onyx Path Publishing. Her short fiction has appeared in the anthologies *Horns and Haloes*, *Changing Breeds: Wild West Tales*, and *the Four of the Apocalypse*.

Outside of writing she likes to play games: board games, RPGs and video games. She has a regular role-play group who is working their way through *Rapanathuk*. She lives in Chicago with her husband and children, dog, three cats, and her mother in the apartment upstairs.

# Chasing Ghosts

*Joyce Chng*

It was the persistent hunger and continuous war that made the decision for him.

Drought gripped the village with the ferocity of a hungry ghost. Rivers dried up. Rice fields withered and became wasteland. Dust devils danced along the shores of parched streams. Families struggled to survive, forced to pick through leftover rice grains.

Then, the gang wars made the famine worse. Rival gangs, comprising of familial clans, fought each other for land and for resources.

He was big and strong, broad-shouldered and muscled. He could work, he rationalized. And he could send the money back once he'd made enough.

The recruiters talked about Gum Shan—Gold Mountain—as if it were the best thing on earth, a land of gold literally streaming forth from the earth. The other men who heard it chattered excitedly and wanted to leave immediately. It was salvation, wasn't it? A way to get away from the horrible conditions.

He should know better. Things were often not that simple. The land pulsed with forces pitiful, mortal humans didn't know existed. Spirits abounded, a lot of them, hungry and lost, and many more still non-human and often rapacious for human blood. The jiang shi, the demons, the things that haunted dreams... they roamed the land too. The land he would be going to would be the same, wouldn't it? It would be occupied by spirits and strange evil things of its own.

He packed a meager bag, filled only with his most treasured belongings: A clean pair of cloth trousers. A jade pendant belonging to his mother. A well-thumbed and tattered book of Taoist philosophy passed down from his master. Oh, the old tiger must be rolling in his grave now, if he knew where his disciple was going. Sifu loved roaming the land in his tiger form, speaking with the tongue of sages. He passed from extreme old age only two years ago.

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The journey to Gum Shan was death.

He traveled with many others, packed in a dark dank chamber that smelled of sweat, vomit, and disease. The wooden ship rocked with the sheer force of wind and water. A few of the men perished from fright and starvation. Many vomited, falling sick from contagious disease and the constant rocking.

The rations were not enough to keep a grown man fed and healthy. So, when they managed to disembark, many had grown wan and thin, their bodies shrunken, their faces hollow. It was a ship of dead men and lost hopes.

Gum Shan wasn't the Gold Mountain the runners had touted it to be. He had to cut off his queue

of hair, not that he was that loyal to the bloated corrupt Qing government. The white men eyed him with undisguised revulsion and dislike. Some took their hatred out on the men from the ships. He had to restrain himself from tearing out the throats of these hateful men.

Some of the men left to work in the mines, drawn by the prospect of real gold. Some stayed to work as coolies, carrying heavy cargo on their bare shoulders. He was one of them. His broad shoulders bore the weight of dry goods. His quarter in the shantytown was sparse, cramped and filled with weird odors.

And weird things too. Gum Shan had its own spirits and evil. Darkness lurked in fetid corners. He smelled other people like him—but the ones who made his fur bristle. The lang was here. Garou, in their awful language. They watched him as surely as he watched them. At the moment, there was no bloodshed.... Not yet.

And the spirits...

They were loud, not even subtle. They haunted the shantytowns. So many had died, and their spirits lingered, chained to the land. He knew hungry ghosts existed because of heinous crimes and vicious murders. They returned to wreak havoc on their murderers, to avenge their deaths.

They died from hunger.

They died from disease.

They died from the attacks from the white men.

And last of all, they died from homesickness.

---

It was soon Ghost Month.

He was one of many who kept to the old lunar calendar, mentally keeping count of the months and the seasons. It was a thing that kept him sane.

There were no joss nor paper money. The arriving men were all villagers and laborers. Some were artisans. No shops sold joss and paper offerings. They couldn't find materials to make them either. But still the men made do, squirreling the paper they could find (or salvage) and pooling resources together to make an altar.

The spirits grew louder. They screamed in his dreams.

\*

"Move!" the white man shouted in his ears. "Move, you lousy sluggard!"

He gritted his teeth, even every fiber of his body roared with the tiger's rage. He heaved the sack of coal upon his shoulders and began moving. His skin was sunburnt, his limbs sore. This company made the coolies work like dogs.

Deplorable.

Why were these people even worthy of... protection? They caused the darkness, didn't they? Invited it to come in with their base and selfish desires.

Disgusting.

And why should he—a tiger from a lineage of great warriors and scholars—be even concerned of their welfare? These men desecrated land, abused it for their use, exploited it for their pleasure. For money. For wealth. For...

A sharp pain lashed across his bare back. He bit his lip and moved on. He smelled blood, his. His skin bore a crisscross of wounds. In his mind, he envisioned his claws ripping into the soft ghost-white skin of his torturer. The grim glee kept him going. Some of his friends had succumbed. Lee Chin died of fever after his whip lashes became infected. His spirit lingered, demanding for recourse.

Meanwhile, the Ghost Month slowly built towards its climax: the fifteenth day of the month, when the full moon swelled. He heard the howls from the lang at night, echoing from the forests bordering Gum Shan. It was unsafe to go out at night because these beasts hunted.

"They fight for the same thing in principle," Sifu used to say, in one of his more garrulous moods. "We fight against the darkness together... in theory. They have their own ideas though."

"We are so divided," he had replied then, appalled. He was young, brimming with vitality and idealism.

Sifu nodded, his tigerish head spiked with white fur. "We are. And that's why the darkness is winning." Their conversation lasted only for a few minutes, as two tigers could not be in the same room for too long.

Now he was in a strange land with stranger beasts and spirits. Who was his ally? Who was his enemy? He was still learning. This land had ways to surprise him.

\*

Fog often obscured the land of Gum Shan. The smell of sea water thickened the air. It was cold and damp. He hated the cold. His bed in his little shantytown room was hard and felt like ice when he woke up. More men died of the damp cold, and the spirit world swelled even more.

The moon was a half-disc, shining dimly through the layers of thick pink clouds.

He looked at it, longing for freedom. He was a tiger, built to roam his territory. He was now confined to a cage of rickety walls prone to fire. He wondered about his family back home. Had his money reached them? He promised he would return once his contract was over and he had made enough money.

Clutching the jade pendant in his paw, he meditated, stilling his heart and slowing his breathing. His roommates snored, tossing and turning. Somewhere close by, someone was singing a mournful tune of home. Even closer, someone was crying in his sleep.

He could hear the spirits. The human ones wailed and beat their chests, their hair long and bedraggled. The non-human ones chattered and taunted him for being a rank coward. There was evil, blood shed by the white colonists who had come earlier to conquer the land. Their crimes had unleashed things and of course, they had brought over their own spirits from their homelands. Fomori. Ugly dark things. They too lurked in the darkness, waiting to pounce and devour.

---

A week before the Ghost Festival, a spate of murders occurred. Drownings. Throats being sliced. The local law authorities were bewildered. Lawlessness abounded in this new land. Everyone was making their own law.

Men swaggered, displaying their weapons. Bravado overflowed and soon festered. Even some of the men from the ships soon carried machetes of their own, tucked in their belts. The ones who couldn't afford machetes made their own shivs and daggers. There were duels almost daily. The body count added to the deaths.

He only had his claws, his senses, and his wits.

Murderers often left behind a trail. Humans were predators too, though not as efficient as a tiger or even one of the cursed Garou.

The trail led to a well, in the center of the town.

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The spirits wailed and demanded for recourse.

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"Off chasing ghosts?" Ma Zhou teased playfully.

He had befriended Ma Zhou on the ship and was glad that the younger man had also signed up for the same company: "Smith & Co: Dried Goods & Sundry". They both shared the same hatred towards Mr. Smith, Jr., who was a little too trigger-happy with his whip and gun.

Ma Zhou had seen his Taoist manual. He thought his friend was a Taoist priest of some sort.

"Oh, Ah Fang, you will need a peachwood sword," Ma Zhou always said. Old Fang Tian, Taoist priest and exorcist, as he would tell the other men living in the same shantytown. "Come to him to have your spirits banished."

"Yes, off chasing ghosts," he said with a brief smile on his lips. It was evening now. The men were released from their duties. They had carried enough sacks of root vegetables and grains until their backs

hurt. Cook fires lit the growing darkness. The oily smells of frying fish and chicken coated the air. He had put it off long enough. He knew hunting at night was foolish, because the Garou hunted too.

Fang Tian stepped out gingerly, watching his surroundings carefully. The shantytown where he lived was close to the well.

“Always remember the well from where you drink,” a favorite saying from Sifu surfaced unbidden in his mind. The saying meant always to remember where you came from and your benefactors. He kept it close to his heart as just as he kept the jade pendant.

There were people on the streets today. Carriages. Wagons. Horses snorting nervously the moment they scented him walking close by. Sounds of raucous laughter from the nearby bars and brothels. Someone spitting in the street.

The well looked nondescript, innocent. It was simply a deep well, dug with simple tools. Most of the townspeople got their water from this well.

He edged towards it, dodging a couple of white men in waistcoats. They hurled insults at him which he ignored. They thought the Chinamen had come to steal their jobs.

Something emanated from the well. Not visible from the naked eye. It bore a nauseous corona, a greasy shimmer.

Asura.

Darkness.

Darkness was here. Right in the town.

Drinking from the pain and sorrows of the townspeople and the shantytowns.

The white men had drunk from this well.

*Corruption.*

He growled, bristling, feeling the muscles bunch under his cloth shirt. He heard gross chittering. From the corner of his eye, twisted shapes danced.

Fomori.

The dark things.

They knew he was here.

He killed the vile things, cursing Asura as they perished like melted black tar. He was on edge now, his Rage incandescent.

Ma Zhou was fast asleep, snoring like a minor thunderstorm, when he returned. He scrubbed his skin fastidiously to cleanse himself from the taint.

When he dreamed, it was of home. Mother had prepared the altar for the Ghost Festival. Poor as they were, she had always kept a table filled with fruits, fish and a whole chicken which she managed to catch for the ceremony. They often couldn't afford a whole chicken. It was too expensive. So, they made do by rearing their own.

That was before the famine had hit the village.

She was burning sandalwood joss. The red tips of the joss sticks glowed in the dark.

Fang Tian's heart swelled at the sight of Mother; tired but still fiercely resilient. Like all tigers.

The fire burnt brighter. Mother was tossing the square paper money in now, muttering Buddhist prayers under her breath.

The flames grew bigger and bigger. Mother didn't seem to mind. For the moment, the light was a bulwark against the growing darkness.

Fang Tian growled. The darkness was indeed growing, spreading its oily tendrils outwards. The fomori

had invaded his dreams.

With a roar, he leapt at the darkness.

He was the scion of warriors, with the blood of fire burning bright in his veins. He would bring the light. He would...

“Hey, you were growling in your sleep,” Ma Zhou shook his shoulders gently.

Fang Tian sat up. It was already morning. Mr. Smith would have him whipped if he came to work late. Asura knows, he thought. This is bad.

Gum Shan had its moments of beauty. Golden sunlight turned the hills to brazen yellow and the sea to a bronze mirror.

It was Ghost Festival. Already the chorus of spirits had grown to a fevered pitch and shapes drifted in and out of existence. There were more spirits; the ones from the white men’s lands too took the opportunity to manifest as the veils between the worlds thinned.

It was also full moon.

The well brimmed with a toxic black sheen.

Fights broke out. Drunken brawls erupted. Even tempers flared amongst the coolies.

Fang Tian endured until evening descended. The spirits were now screaming. The tension was unbearable. He wanted to rip off his human skin.

He sneaked the sticks of dynamite from the store. Was he committing a crime? No. Besides, they stole the recipe for gunpowder, didn’t they?

He didn’t care about Mr. Smith.

At midnight, he approached the well cautiously. Earlier he had appeased the spirits, burning whatever he could find as offerings. The men had prayed and burnt their offerings. The air smelled of burnt paper.

A figure stood before the well, as if standing guard. It stood strangely, its shoulders slumped, head flopping to the right side. The limbs looked rubbery.

Ma Zhou.

NO!

Asura had tainted the younger man’s mind, turned him into some mindless... demon.

“Off chasing ghosts?” lisped the fomori, mimicking the teasing tone of the man. Ma Zhou was no doubt dead. His body was now a shell, a host.

Fang Tian vowed revenge.

The fomori came at him with arched claws, its nails now blackened sharpened tips. Fang Tian changed effortlessly into his tiger form and swiped at the neck of the entity with his huge paw. His talons went through the skin as if it was putrid, rotting flesh.

“Hey, you were growling in your sleep,” the accursed thing was murmuring. Its throat gaped, leaking black liquid. It smelled of feces.

Praying to the spirit of Ma Zhou to forgive him, Fang Tian ripped the fomori into two. He then flung the remains away, disgusted with himself.

*Ma Zhou, forgive me.*

The spirits wailed around him. They wanted justice.

He couldn’t give it to them yet.

Fang Tian lit the dynamite sticks and tossed them into the well. He ran away in tiger form.

The explosion lit the sky like a sun, spewing bricks and rocks everywhere. The entire town woke, screaming, yelling, shouting. Some of the sections caught fire.

He heard the Garou howling. It was a full moon. They were furious.

But the source of the corruption, the source of death, was gone.

The spirits still screamed at him.

Fang Tian fled from the scene, escaping to the outskirts of the town. The incoming fog hid him from sight. Yet he knew now that his life was in danger. The wolves were now out to get him. Why did they even let Asura in? Were they that foolish?

The forest beckoned. The strange unfamiliar forest beckoned. The Garou had already claimed it as their territory.

He couldn't go back to home.

What was home?

Where was home?

He left home to escape starvation and death. Yet, this new place, this Gum Shan, this Gold Mountain was a place of starvation and death too. What was he going to do? How was he still going to send money back home?

A grim smile curved the tiger's lips. He could survive. All tigers could do that and do it very well. He would go and seek the gold in the mines.

He turned back to watch the glow of the fire in the town.

Asura was here in this new land. America.

Fang Tian was not afraid. He would collect lore about this land, listen to its whispers and seek out Kin. They were definitely around. Not the Garou though. Maybe one day... but not now.

The jade pendant hung at his throat, a solid reassuring presence. His Taoist manual was safe in his belt. He had his wits, his senses, and his claws.

He would find peachwood and craft it into his sword. He would offer his services as a Taoist priest to the men who came from his hometown and other provinces. The white men would continue to hate them. He would continue to fight them.

He would go chase ghosts. There were spirits who needed his help. Recourse. Justice. For Ma Zhou.

There were also evil spirits. There were evil spirits everywhere. Taint. Corruption.

With a rumbling laugh deep in his chest, the tiger slunk quickly into the shadows.

## Joyce Chng

Joyce Chng lives in Singapore. Their fiction has appeared in *The Apex Book of World SF II*, *We See A Different Frontier*, *Cranky Ladies of History*, and *Accessing The Future*. Joyce also co-edited *THE SEA IS OURS: Tales of Steampunk Southeast Asia* with Jaymee Goh. Their recent space opera novels deal with wolf clans (Starfang: Rise of the Clan) and vineyards (Water into Wine) respectively. They also write speculative poetry with recent ones in *Rambutan Literary* and *Uncanny Magazine*. Occasionally, they wrangle article editing at *Strange Horizons* and *Umbel & Panicle*, a poetry journal about and for plants and botany. Alter-ego J. Damask writes about werewolves in Singapore.

You can find them at [awolfstale.wordpress.com](http://awolfstale.wordpress.com) and [@jolantru](https://twitter.com/jolantru) on Twitter. (Pronouns: she/her, they/their)

# The Moon Sisters

*Rick Heinz*

"Please... don't take my face. Let me die like a man!" The creature crawled away from Sirrio's worn leather boots one inch at a time, its grey fur molting off as poison wracked and tore through veins with reckless fury. Its clouded eyes focused on the sun-drenched cliff ahead, a glimmer of salvation at the bottom of the red rock canyon.

Sirrio chuckled and eyed her two sisters. Deborah was passed out drunk from a night of drinking on her horse while Mary laid on her back staring at the sun. Sirrio shrugged. "Look how boring you are to them, Iron Rider," she flourished a curved silver dagger. "All the gold in Cripple Creek couldn't put a polish on your pathetic hide. You've what, opened ninety mines? Scouted them. Ripped open the earth. Blasted them to bits with that black powder of yours." She lunged forward, crushing any hopes of salvation with her steel close enough to shave. "There's a bounty on your head, wolfie, and the one-eyed dragon, Rivet isn't going to stop us from doing mother's work."

Deep down, Sirrio wondered if she should be taking pleasure in carving the human face off the Iron Rider. It was a bloody affair, more-so when still howling. Lately, it seemed as though Sirrio had been doing all of mother's work. Deborah and Mary had been too stoned, hungover, or listless of late. So, her work collecting bounties was her only solace these days. Besides, girls gotta eat, and faces prove we got the bounty. Once finished, she at least felt chipper enough to grant the explosives expert his final wish, she booted him over the edge—disappointed that he didn't explode when he hit bottom.

Tucking the face away with the other fifteen, Sirrio dragged her sisters back onto their horses with several grunts. "Girls, do you have to carry so many daggers? Don't tell me the wild's got you beat already? How are the Moon sisters ever going to gain glory if your daggers come back clean?" She slapped Mary on the bum and saddled up herself. "Five Iron pups down, ninety-nine to go if you count their kinfolk. If you two make me do all the work, I'm going to be one pissed-off Nagah. First, you go fall in love, Deborah, heart-broken ever since he cut tail. Then you Mary, full of booze as a fat tick day-in, and night-out."

Lightning danced on eastern clouds, and the twister touched down across the canyon. "Time to head west," Sirrio dug a heel into her stallion and started a trot. Her sisters were sick and no matter how much she tried to avoid the truth, she could tell. Omens floated in the air. A stillborn child in Pikes Peak, a swarm of locusts in Silverton, or even those Quakers going blind in Pitkin. The problem was clearly the Iron Riders and their wolf cousins. Mining operations. Blasting that stupid nitroglycerin day-and-night in search of fool's gold. Idiots. Even Sirrio had to check the streams she bathed in these days. Luckily for them, Aspa, the river mother kept their scales clean when needed. Unluckily, Rivet, the one-eyed Mokole stalked those same rivers. For some Luna-forsaken reason, he kept tarnishing the Moon sisters name for their vengeance. Sirrio spat. "Coward just can't do what it takes."

Heavy dollops of rain pelted her duster as the sisters rode into Leadville, a boomtown that had drawn thousands of miners to its late-night brothels. Even with the coming storm, shadowed figures stumbled on

the muddy roads in search of their next date. Sirrio roped off the horses outside the joke of a marshal's office and decided her sisters could use the shower. Especially after the drunk took one look at them and vomited over Mary's leg.

"Why do we even bother," Sirrio looked for Luna's guidance, but found only clouds. "I... I can beat him to a pulp yes?"

The miner cowed, giving his best attempt at groveling and slinked away before her boot could conveniently be located up his arse.

"Let's just get paid and move on." Sirrio scoured the Marshall's wall with her satchel of faces, plucking off sundried parchments that matched her skins. She pounded the reinforced door and peered in through the window, catching more of her worn reflection than any movement inside. "I wonder what I'd look like with long hair?" Sirrio scrunched her nose and studied herself. Short hair that she cut off as soon as it blocked her vision, and boyish features—she was never considered pretty. When they were young, Deborah was always gorgeous. Mary had a foul tongue and an iron sass about her, but Sirrio just had a face for fightin'. Combined, they were unstoppable, but nowadays, Sirrio worried how long they could keep going. Her boring brown eyes, scarred smile, and broken nose weren't attracting any suitors soon. She hated her face.

Dissatisfied with what she saw, emptiness in both reflection and the interior, the rain-soaked Nagah headed to the obvious. "Ye ol, den of inequities," she sighed. Business stayed the same no matter where they went. With a heavy sigh, she pushed herself into the establishment, leaving her sisters to figure out their own problems. It was a quiet night. No piano, no drunk fights, or even rip-roaring ribbing of miners by the girls. Instead, cards shuffled quietly and tobacco smoke hung low in the air and the marshal and some cardsharps squared off in a tense game of three-card brag.

"Of course you'd come in with a storm on your heels," the marshal rasped after his eyes glanced her way.

Sirrio strolled right up and emptied her satchel of faces of the table, some of them still wet. Everyone recoiled.

"Fold," the Marshall chucked his cards. "Heard the storm was blowing you in. Sirrio the Snake. Already gave our local builder a new color pants with these damn faces of yours." His eyes met Sirrios. "Can't you just be normal? Take people in all regular like most bounty hunters?"

"Last time I did that, none of you believed me. Even worse, ya'll forgot about me the moment we scooted town. We sisters do good work for good pay. Storm's pretty brutal tonight, so why don't you toss in an extra room with these bounties. We need a spot to sleep."

The Marshall chuckled and held up one face, throwing it onto the lap of another—who promptly squealed. "I don't think you'll want to rest tonight dearie. Your little conquest of killin' gold-rushers has taken up some competition. Rivet arrested, not killed, almost everyone on your little list, and locked them up behind bars. Most are happy to be there. Safer than being around you. The only one left is Colt out past Pikes Peak. You going to go cut another man's face off just because he owes a permit fee? Don't be surprised when Rivet comes after you for a bounty on your head."

"Bounty on my head? For what? Preventing you people from dying in a collapse? How many died of Dysentery or Bilious Fever?" Sirrio grabbed the nearest glass filled with... something brown and downed it. "There's plenty of ways to find gold in streams, great land for farming, and more to live. Heck, we ain't even the ones who put the bounties out. They get in trouble for stealin' and stabbin' each other. We're just doing the mother's work Marshall and damn good at it too. So, pay up."

The Marshall sorted out dollar bills and chips from the pot in the table. The gruesome work of matching faces to his posters he elected to simply ignore and just pay her. It was a measly bounty, good for about three months of living. A small price for a life.

When finished he chucked the bag over at her. "Price on your head is eight times that. Like you said, people put bounties on heads for all kinds of things. Stabbin' is one of them. You aren't the law and anyone you once helped has long forgotten the Moon sisters. Time for you to ride on and go be a memory or let Rivet catch ya."

"There is no bounty on—"

"Didn't you see it on the board," he laughed. "For all those faces you like, surprised you didn't see here. Now get. I've gotta give these ladies their money back," he scooped his cards.

I couldn't be wanted, could I? Icy panic set in as she bolted out the door, nearly pushing Deborah onto her back and ran back across the street. No. No. No. She worried to herself as she scanned the few remaining

posters. Lightning flashed as her eyes fell on herself. Wanted for Murder. Sirrio Moon. Aka, Sirrio The Snake. The picture barely looked anything like her. A tear welled in her eye as she realized the truth of the drawing; she was pretty. Quickly she scanned for her sisters and gave a heavy sigh of relief to find no sign.

“Hey girls, guess what?” Sirrio shouted over while saddling up her horse. “Time and again our gentleman Rivet continues to surprise. Put a bounty out on us! Marshall says he’s up near Pikes Peak after our last target. Two birds, one stone. Let’s head out!” She whistled, patted her steed, and rounded up her sisters. Howling winds nearly stole her hat. Mary looked furious when it did nab hers. Despite their protests, despite the fury and thunder of the storm, Sirrio grabbed her posse and led off. Spirits won’t confuse me with a Mokole when I skin Rivet’s wyrm-tainted face off. You’ve called your reckoning to you. “How the rising sun has fallen.”

She couldn’t help but smile. Aspa clearly paved her way to her target. Not only did Rivet get close to revealing the sisters’ secret as Nagah by proliferating “the Snake” moniker. His constant help of local miners and gold-seekers revealed the insidious corruption underneath his one-eyed mug to Sirrio. With two violations of the Sacred Laws, Sirrio felt as if the storm on her heels carried them onward to glory and honor. “Hya!”

The muddy trail leading north of Pikes Peak to the mine proved to be a boon to Sirrio for stalking her prey. Following fresh tracks was never easier; and a night of fast riding led them to the outskirts of a dig site. Heavy clouds hung low and plump in the air, giving an ugly grey sight to an otherwise beautiful mountain valley. Fat drops of rain still trickled from pine trees. Dismounting, Sirrio shifted forms into a small, unassuming cottonmouth—her Vasuki form. Sight told her that six humans walked north into the dig site at first light. With a taste of the air, she could smell the predators. A quick slither ahead and the footprints began to shift as well into wolf paws... and one set of very large, massive indents. Rivet. You’ve got the stealth of a bison you moron. Here to set a trap for us then?

Turning back to her sisters, Sirrio spoke to them in their Naga tongue. The fast journey and storm certainly took a toll on their compromised constitution. Don’t worry sisters, this will be over soon, but I need your help. Leave your horses here and sneak in from the back. Meet me in the middle. Deborah and Mary’s eyes flickered to life and Sirrio could feel their murderous intent well within them as they shambled off their steeds. We will see the Sessa when this is over, just fight for me once more. Sirrio’s persuasion was enough to get them moving, even if she had to compel their spirits. She waited and watched them vanish off through the trees before turning her tongue back to the trail.

Slipping silently through the underbrush, she made her way to the rocky ledge that looked down at the dig site. An Iron Rider wolf stood guard at the highest peak, closest to where she was, with three more pacing inside the blasted-out valley below on high alert - as if they could sense their coming demise. Colt, however, remained very much a human, leaning up against the wooden bracers at the mine entrance. Smoke billowed from beneath his hat and Sirrio could see at least six revolvers holstered across his leather vest. Despite being shadowed in the darkness of the mineshaft, Sirrio noticed that water broke before hitting the ground. A small trickle of water gave away the dragon’s location as it waited. They all waited for her.

Attacking straight on was suicide and Sirrio knew her sisters would be of limited use. She wasn’t expecting so many Iron Riders and Rivet at once. With only three uses of her venom before she needed rest... she would have to be careful. I’d get spotted if I tried to sneak into that shaft, and Colt has range. I need a better vantage. Without hesitation, she rushed through the underbrush to the highest cropping, one guarded by a wolf. The poor creature was doing its best at remaining alert. Air from all sides moved in its direction, preventing any upwind approach. It wouldn’t help. As a small cottonmouth, Sirrio slipped between the rocks, winding her way up until she could see the heat in his veins. Alert. Ready. Heightened heart rate; aren’t you a good little boy.

She lashed out, striking the jugular with her fangs. The poison caused paralysis instantaneously and sent the poor canine into seizures. Sirrio coiled around its neck, and squeezed, shifting into a larger cobra to prevent any loud movements or cries. Wrestled to the ground, Sirrio felt a tinge of guilt for the wolf. He was just a loyal packmate and her poison attacked the nervous system, leaving him fully aware just unable to move as he was slowly strangled. Return to the earth, child. You know not what horrors your master summons.

With her first strike achieved, she knew that time was now of the essence. From the higher vantage, she desperately searched for any safer way down to the mineshaft that could be undetectable. If she could avoid fighting the other wolves, she damn well would. There. A decently sized rain catcher was held aloft by wooden beams. From there, water flowed down the trough and into the mineshaft. Well, nobody said we couldn’t turn

their own devices against them.

Sirrio shifted into her favorite form, the Silkaram, human in appearance, but more agile and covered in brown scales. With her blessings, her skin became camouflage, mimicking the background of wherever she moved. With only her two fang daggers, she bolted to the edge of the cliff and vaulted herself into the air at the rain catcher. Tumbling into a somersault, she let her anger wash through her and shifted back into a small cottonmouth, plopping neatly into the tank with a soft splash.

She swam down through the trough right past the wolves who trotted blissfully unaware of her. Her path stayed true, merely inches away from Colt who was fiddling with silver rounds in a revolver. As she entered the shaft, a sick taste on the air made her stomach turn. The horrid stench of rotting decay and disease. A bane hive? I knew the Iron Riders were corrupted, but you Rivet? Sirrio was shocked at just how massive the Mokolé was. His form easily stretched a solid thirty feet into the shaft and many of his scales were a mix of crimson red and white. When she reached his tail at last, Sirrio finally poked her small head out of the trough.

Whispers in the depths begged Sirrio to save them.

I hope my sisters are in place. Do not let me down now girls. She snuck to the base of Rivet's leg, recoiled back—and lashed—biting down. The roar of the dragon shook every vertebra in her body as he rushed out of the cave. Thrashing himself against the walls, Sirrio cried in pain as she was crushed under the weight of the beast but did her best to hold on longer. All her poison was injected, or at least all she could muster before Colt grabbed her at the base of the skull and yanked her fangs out.

Sirrio needed to change into something larger pronto, and now wasn't the time to hold back. Her weight suddenly increased as her scales expanded, arms sprouted viciously deadly claws, and within seconds she grew over twenty feet in length. The Azi Dahaka war form of the Nagah, used only when the chips were down—and with several broken ribs—Sirrio's chips were certainly down.

"She's here!" Colt unloaded round after round into Sirrio and called his pack to his defense. Yet only one wolf leaped onto Sirrio's back, biting into her cobra hood.

"Get..." Sirrio hissed and rolled with the wolf, "this shit—" her claws dug in, "off me!" She whipped the wolf into the wooden support columns, breaking its back with the fury of her throw. Bullet wounds closed almost as soon as they appeared, but fresh blood still oozed down her scales. Deborah and Mary took positions at their sister's side, still in their human forms, and eyes filled with hatred.

"Wait!" Rivet boomed. "Violence does not win us this war!" The dragon rose, towering over the rain catcher and looking down at Sirrio. "Sirrio Moon, you've lost your way. You need help."

She braced for his strike that never came. Talking buys my poison time. "I've lost my way? You are the one guarding a bane-hive. Allowing these," she spat in Colt's direction, "betrayers to set free that which is in the cave."

"No child. You need to see as we see..." The dragon lunged forward with his claw, faster than Sirrio could dodge, but he only placed his massive claw on her head. She felt no harm as he moved it away.

"See... what?" She slinked back, nervous that something had been done to her. Anxiety turning her stomach. "Deborah... Mary? What did he do?" She looked at her sisters.

Deborah, always pretty, stood next to her. Maggots wiggled out of her mouth, and her nose dangled by fragments of loose skin. The rest of her face had been carved off. "He... he did this to you?!" Panicked, she turned to Mary and saw her sassy younger sister, now who was more teeth than anything. Worms animated what was left of her faceless body, and her short brown hair had rotted off in clumps from days of travel.

"What have you done! I'll kill you. I'll..."

"We've done nothing Sirrio," Rivet said, lowering himself to the ground. "You've been hunting so long you haven't even noticed your own taint. We Mokolé remember your life. How you went to hunt Relshab, the Faceless Eater. Trapped in these caves. The Iron Riders have been mining to lead an assault, and you," the dragon looked sad. "You and your sisters fell to his influence, and you've been protecting him ever since."

Sirrio heard the whispers of the cave grow louder. They spoke of her quest to assassinate those who would harm the world, and they wanted to help. By eating and taking the faces of those she killed, she gained power. She sold them for money, which gave her more tools, which allowed more hunts. Her sisters didn't see, they didn't listen, and one night under the moon—Sirrio took her dagger to their cheeks. It was the last moon Sirrio had seen.

She shifted back to human and collapsed to her knees. Crushed ribs pinching into her side. “Well ain’t that a bitch. I’m the villain.”

Rivet nudged Colt with a claw that trembled slightly. “Go forth, Iron Rider. Tell this tale of wisdom. Take your wounded. Storm Eater is still on her heels and we will need many more allies in this fight, but Reshalb’s assassin has been stopped.”

Colt looked confused and pushed the barrel of his gun on Sirrio’s temple. “She ain’t done until she’s dead.” “I said go!”

Colt flinched, clenched his jaw, and tossed a bit of a fit over the absurd command—but he wasn’t going to argue with a very deadly dragon.

Minutes passed as Sirrio stayed on her knees, processing everything. How she hated her own face, how everyone in towns recoiled when they came in, and how silent her sisters had been. Memories of them even hiding from spirits and gleefully swimming through bane nests, untouchable because they were forgotten. We can’t be hunted by things that have forgotten we exist. How did they find us?

Rivet’s breathing became more labored.

“You see now, why memory is so important?” Rivet gasped. “You see what you must do now, yes? One final act of glory?”

More minutes passed as thoughts and memories raced through until clarity struck in her soul. Did they find us because you remembered us Rivet? She rose once again. “I do Rivet. I suppose I owe you thanks for this gift you’ve given me. No longer do I live in a cloud of doubt and sadness.”

Dollops of heavy rain began once again as thunder boomed in the distance.

“So, what will you do now?” Rivet’s eyes were becoming lidded and heavy.

Sirrio wickedly smiled. “I’m going to get myself a new set of crocodile skinned boots. Didn’t you hear? A storm is coming.”

## Rick Heinz

Richard Heinz’ is as an electrician with a deep interest in politics, symbology, and not to mention countless caffeine-driven hours spent playing Diablo. [The Seventh Age: Dawn](#) is Rick’s first book, as well as book one in the sprawling urban fantasy epic, The Seventh Age Series. When he isn’t navigating the labyrinthine corridors of his own imagination, Rick writes immersive RPGs like *The Red Opera: Last Days of the Warlock* or GM Tips on Geek & Sundry.

You can follow Rick on any platform under the handle @CrankyBolt.  
Metal, sarcasm, and the end of the world.

# Dusk Rider

## Crystal Mazur

*Music carried through the streets as most of the townsfolk were out celebrating as Clint walked through them. Nobody noticed the howls reverberating in the distance, but Clint knew this was not some kind of coyote. The sounds sent a chill through his bones.*

*"Need some help?" a cool voice called from behind him.*

*"Not unless you are willing to die. Something is out there, and it's big." Clint readied his guns.*

*The thin form of a woman walked up next to him, the brim of her hat covering her eyes. "Not afraid to die. Not anymore. The name's Jane."*

*"Clint. Any idea of what is howling?"*

*"Yeah. Monsters, the really bad kind." She starts to take her clothes off, though Clint is far too focused to notice "Don't look too hard at them....or me. Don't shoot me, but stay behind me. Okay?"*

*"You sure?"*

*A growl escapes from Jane, and Clint finally glances her way, only to see her form grow in height and bulk before lunging forward into the dark. The ensuing battle was confusing, terrifying, and deadly. Clint was able to get a few shots off before getting knocked on the head and falling over.*

*The next moment Clint could remember was Jane holding her hand out to help him up. "You are lucky to be alive."*

*Clint hesitates briefly before taking it. "What did you turn into?" He stands up gingerly, his head still spinning.*

*"Just try to forget I exist. You will be better off."*

Clint slowed his horse down outside town, shook the memories from his head, and considered whether he should just turn around and forget about this job. He needed the money, which was for sure, but he was not well received the last time he was in this town.

Most of these towns didn't like having a black man around.

"Shit," he whispers as he spurred his horse forward toward the bar where his contact said to meet.

Clint was surprised he found a spot for his horse and walked through the street unhindered. The last time he was here, most of the people turned to walk away from him, shut themselves in their homes, or threatened him.

Muttering to himself, "Nice change," Clint feels a pair of eyes upon him, but when he turns, he sees nothing but a shadow.

He walked into The Wandering Boot, the bar in town. Immediately, all eyes turned to him; cold faces stared as a greeting. It wasn't until a very well-dressed gentleman stood up and went to greet him that everyone else went back to what they were doing, reaching a hand to shake.

"Mr. Clint, it is very nice to meet you. I apologize for having you meet me here, but I needed a good drink after traveling so far." He snapped his fingers and asked for a whiskey before he turned his focus back to Clint.

“Mr. Lovelace, it is wonderful to meet you in person. I hear you have a job for me?” Drinks were set down on the table, and Clint checked his glass carefully before taking a sip. Clint had an uneasy feeling about Lovelace but chalked it up to the warm welcome he got walking into the bar.

Lovelace smiled, his eyes flashing a bit of green in the afternoon sunlight. “I do, Clint. May I call you Clint?” He takes a sip of his whiskey and continues, not waiting for a response. “And it is a significant one, one that could put you in the history books.”

His eyes get that green haze again, and Clint feels his stomach turn. “I need you to do a train heist.”

*That’s it? Seriously? That’s easy.* “Alright, Lovelace, I’ll bite. What is the loot?”

“I don’t want you to steal anything, Clint. I need you to place a package onto the train for me. The cost of shipping is high, and I don’t feel like paying for it.” Lovelace places a box about the size of a pint-sized mug and shrugs. “Besides, this will be the easiest 100 in gold you’ll ever make.”

*This story isn’t adding up.* There is something more going on here. Clint shifts uncomfortably at the table. “That is a lot of money for not stealing anything. You plan on blowing up the train?”

“Absolutely not. I need commerce to continue to thrive in these parts. No, there are some medications, anti-venom specifically, needed in a town further down the line, but they are scarce materials. It’s used to treat snakebites, a new invention my company has developed. I don’t want them listed on the manifest because they could be stolen. I have a contact in the town waiting for them. All I need you to do is put the package on the train. Simple, right?”

“What’s the catch?” There is always a catch, and Clint didn’t survive this long on his good looks alone.

“There is an individual who will be looking to destroy my cargo. Her name is Jane Belle, and she’s been a pain in my rear since I traveled here. She thinks I’m evil,” his laughter fills the room, and for one split second, Clint could swear everyone stopped and looked at him before going back to their conversations. “She’s quick, almost like she flies in out of nowhere. Keep your eyes peeled.”

“I’m familiar with Jane,” he sighs. “I’ve heard her name whispered around when folks are willing to talk around me,” Clint admits, not revealing the whole truth. Clint knew Jane. She had saved his life when some townsfolk got twitchy with him. “If I know she’s coming, she won’t be too much of an issue. What about the rest of your plan?”

Lovelace continued to fill Clint in on the plan, but Clint had some trouble focusing on the man, and for a brief second, he swore some sort of serpent was sitting across from him. The serpent suddenly asked if Clint had understood the plan, then everything snapped back into focus. Clint lifted his glass to his lips but didn’t drink. Maybe it was the alcohol doing this? It’s never bothered him this much after half a drink.

“Clint? You still here with me?” Lovelace’s voice cut through Clint’s thoughts, snapping him back to the moment.

“Yeah, I’m here. The heat might have gotten to me. My apologies. I think you said the train was a two-day ride?”

Nodding patiently, Lovelace repeated his instructions. “Correct. A two-day ride north. You meet up with the train in between towns where there is no security. You’ll need to get onto the train on your own. The shipment needs to be dropped off on the 6th car. Got it?”

Clint nods, “Yes. Will I need to leave right away or stay for the evening?” Clint looks around as the other patrons shift uncomfortably at that comment.

The silence in the room was imposing, weighing heavily upon Clint’s shoulders. “No, I need you to leave as soon as possible. Though, I have a feeling you will probably be more comfortable on the land. I’ll get you some supplies, as an extra for needing to rush you out.”

Rapping his hand on the table, Clint signals he understands, “Add a room for the night I get back so I can have a hot bath, and it will be ok.”

“I will certainly try. Go to the stable on the way out of town and let the hand know your supplies are on my tab. So, we have a deal?” Lovelace reaches his hand out toward Clint, who meets it with a firm grip. Once settled, Clint finishes his drink and stands.

“We have a deal.” Lovelace slides the box forward, and Clint takes the package. “See you in a few days.” The tension in the bar audibly releases as conversations start back up again.

Clint makes his way to his horse, which miraculously is still tied to the post at which he left it, and starts to go over his supplies. Once he knew what he needed, he headed toward the stable. The hand gave him a little push-back on supplies, but dropping Lovelace's name quickly changed his perspective. After a few short minutes, Clint was well on his way.

He always felt more comfortable in the wilderness, anyway. Nobody out here to judge him on the color of his skin. Anyone he runs into tends to need help, so they aren't as quick to push him away.

The first day's travel went quickly, and Clint was grateful to rest for a bit finally. He built his fire, got his horse settled, and some food for himself. The night animals started making their noises when he heard the wolves in the distance. He brought the horse closer to the fire and made sure it was going well before returning to his meal. A few more howls pierced through the night, and Clint found it difficult to find rest.

The figure in the darkness would have gone unnoticed if Clint hadn't seen the eyes glint in the fire. He went for his gun, but there was a voice that came from that shadow. It was calm, clear, and confident. "You've been led astray, cowboy. That package you carry is dangerous. Far more dangerous than you realize."

Clint wasn't sure what to make of this conversation, and the heavy pause after the shadow's statement hung in the air. When he found his voice, it wavered slightly. "I always keep my promises. I have a reputation to uphold."

"This extends far beyond your reputation. I do not envy your position. Give me the package, and I will leave you be. I will give you some time to consider." With that, the shadow left the area, and Clint heard the flutter of wings.

He didn't sleep much for the rest of the night.

The next day, Clint had a lot of trouble focusing. The hot sun beat down on him, and he could feel himself dozing in the saddle. It wasn't long before Clint felt himself pitch over the side of his horse and hit the ground with a thud. The heat and lack of sleep were too much, and Clint couldn't even get the energy to see if his horse stopped.

Clint woke to the sudden and sharp pain in his leg. As he finally was able to open his eyes, he watched as a snake slid into the brush, the rattle now loudly ringing in his ears.

"Shit!" He started ripping the tail of his shirt and wrapped a tourniquet around his leg above the bite in hopes of slowing the poison. The pain continued, and a hot throbbing sensation pulsed through his leg as he stood up in search of his horse. It was a 10-minute walk before he found the horse, and by that time, he could feel the heat moving through his body. His hands were shaking as he grabbed the reins to the horse, his eyes having trouble focusing through the pain.

He could barely stand, let alone get into the saddle. He had to get back to a town, and quick, but he couldn't coordinate his body long enough to get on the horse. The box has a vaccine for snake bites. He held onto the horse with one hand and searched in his saddle with the other, his hand finding the box. He had to concentrate to get his hands to grasp it, and he started to doubt if he would be able to even use it.

He collapsed onto the ground with the box, wrenching the top open in a final act of desperation. The glittering vials were almost too tiny for him to grasp, but through his will alone, he was able to grab the vial, jammed the syringe into his thigh, and pushed the plunger down.

He could feel the liquid inside, acting almost immediately. The pain subsided quickly, and Clint slowly recovered the coordination in his hands. He waited another couple of hours, but shockingly, he felt like nothing had happened, and even felt better than before the snake bite. It felt as if the years of his travels had not taken the toll they previously had.

Getting back onto the horse, Clint knew he would have to ride all night to meet up with the train in time, but he was refreshed and energetic, ready to make that trip. He felt better now than he ever had felt in his life.

"What is in that?" he mused out loud to his horse as he collected his things and hopped back on and eased it forward in an easy gait. "Hope you are ready for a long night."

The moon hung full in the sky as Clint rode through the countryside, creating menacing shadows all around him. He knew it was close to dawn when his horse's breath started fogging in the cool night air. In a few short hours, he would be able to get this package on the train and be done with this whole mess.

A shadow fell over him, unnoticed in the darkness. Clint could hear the howl of wolves in the distance

again and looked around to see if they were closer. It wasn't until the sun pulled higher in the sky, the horizon burning in yellow and orange, that Clint noticed the shadow above him. He glanced upward and, at first, was unsure of what he was seeing.

A giant winged creature, well larger than a man, was gliding high above him. A blood-curdling screech rang out over the plains, and it dove straight toward Clint. He kicked his horse and started making a run forward. The wind beat down as the creature swooped right over Clint, claws just brushing against his shirt. If it weren't for the adrenaline pumping in his veins, he would probably be terrified, but right now, his focus was on making it to the train.

He could see the smoke from the train in the distance as the creature swooped down on him once again, this time using his distraction to sink its claws into his shoulder. Clint worked to free himself, a strength he never had previously coursed through him, and his hand wrestled the claw free, his grip crushing it before he swerved his horse and gave himself some distance to watch it. "Shit, what in high heaven is that?"

The creature flew off, and he lost sight of it. The train was coming up fast, and Clint worried his horse was running out of steam "One more burst, come on. You can do it." The horse's breathing labored as it sped up. Clint readied himself to get onto the train, grabbing the box and sliding to one side of the saddle. The horse's speed was slowing just enough where Clint could see the train starting to pull away, the horse having nothing else left to give. With one last push, Clint balanced himself on the saddle and jumped onto the side of the train, grabbing the rails on the back door of the car. Clint could see the horse slow to a stop in a cloud of dust, its sides heaving.

Climbing onto the top of the car, Clint balanced precariously on the roof of the train and made his way toward the back. Before he got to the car he needed to be at, the creature that attacked him landed in front of the correct car and started to turn into a human figure. Clint blinked several times, trying to figure out what he was witnessing. The black, leathery wings and furry body morphed before his eyes into a naked, tan-skinned woman. "Give me the box, human." Her voice sounded familiar, and Clint realized who she was.

"Jane Belle? That was you the other night? What are you?"

She moved slowly toward him and smiled, "Camazotz, though you would know it more as a bat-person." She reaches her hand out to him. "The box, human."

"No. My answer hasn't changed from the last time you asked. You will have to kill me." Clint crouches down, readying himself for a fight.

Jane's head tips to the side, "You've been infected, haven't you?" She reflexively stretches her foot, moving it around a bit; the same side of the creature's claw he crushed. "You used the elixir in the box?"

"I had no choice."

"It will eat you inside. It will corrupt you. You will no longer be the same man. You will be a shadow of yourself. Give me the box, and I will help you."

Clint could feel the anger roar to life inside him, "No!" He lunged toward her, attempting to push her out of his way. Her hands clamped around his arms and wrestled him to the roof of the train. The two rolled around, trying to push the other off the top. Jane was powerful and well educated in fighting, and her strength would have normally crushed Clint. But he matched her strength and was able to position himself with his feet against her. With a scream, he used his legs to push her toward the edge, and she dropped off the side of the train. Catching his breath, Clint gingerly stood and made his way toward the car.

The train car had a safety door that was already unlocked, so he slid in easily. He found a space where he could place the box where it didn't look out of place with the rest of the cargo.

He took his time to find an opportune moment to exit the train and started making the trek back toward his horse, hoping it hadn't wandered off. But something Jane said weighed heavily on his mind.

That shot was affecting him; he needed to know more about it, and Jane seemed to be the only one with answers. His next job would be to track her down.

## *Crystal Mazur*

By day, Crystal is a mild-mannered educator with an affinity for superheroes and anything geeky. By night, Crystal is a freelance writer and artist who is inspired by horror, fantasy, and New Orleans. She is passionate about using games for education, and one of the genres she likes to write for child-friendly games. She is also a freelance writer for Third Eye Game's *Ennie* award-winning Pip System Core Book. She is also the Pip System Game Developer, creating Pip System Primer content each quarter, a guide to using the Pip System in different genres of games. Crystal also worked on *Chicago by Night*, a city setting for Vampire the Masquerade 5th Edition, developed the Warlocks, Pacts, and co-wrote the spell grimoir for *Snowhaven*, a snow-punk setting for 5E, and wrote several scenarios and the new Russian Revolution setting for *Never Going Home*, and is co-writing *Ironbound: Guardians of Novala*, a Wiccian setting for 5E. Her writing is powered by gothic horror aesthetic, metal, glitter, and lots of coffee.

# Mother's Homestead

*Angel Leigh McCoy*

My darlings,

As I write this, Mr. McGraw—your sire—is lying dead on the road, at the mercy of wolves. The outlaws who invaded our home will be far downstream by the time the river thaws. After today, I will no longer be Mother.

You must commit this to memory and then burn it. It is for you alone. It is your birthright to know me and to know how this land came to be yours, but if these words fall into the wrong hands, your enemies could use it against you in the cruelest of ways.

I was both your mother and your father, and no other person matters. Nevertheless, I will tell you about the man who delivered you into my belly, so that you might understand the sacrifices it takes to survive in this decaying world.

Myrtle was my twenty-seventh name, given me by a madam in Boston who said, “Never use your real name when whorin’. It’ll taint your soul.” She chose it for me because of the plant’s association with Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and if that ain’t a laugh, I don’t know what is.

No one living but me, the First Mother, and now you, know my birth name—Deòiridh. It means “pilgrim.”

I was Myrtle when I met Mr. McGraw in the saloon in Florence. I’d come to Idaho to get away from the War of the Rebellion. It was the autumn of 1861, and word had spread about gold in the hills. The men there prospected, and the women took advantage of the men’s needs. In those early days, everyone had coin in their pockets.

For me, their money didn’t satisfy. I saw the signs. The Cahlash was seducing them with gold, enticing them to spread their disease into the wild west. It wouldn’t last. Anything that shines that bright never does.

That first Winter was the hardest. Cold as a Chaya. It snowed for over a hundred days straight. Many men refused to take shelter; afraid they would miss their chance at striking gold. Instead they lost feet, hands, noses, and ears to frostbite, lost their sight to snow-blindness, and lost their lives to the cold. Food ran short. Many survived on flour paste and spruce tea.

Occasionally, I provided extra meat for the women in the saloon, but I had to be careful. They couldn’t know I’d tracked and killed the prey myself, so I made up stories about the men I’d favored to get it. The saloon was a regular target for robbers who thought they deserved food more than womenfolk did. We learned how to hide our stores in the snowbanks and cover our tracks.

Mr. McGraw became a regular in my bed. He thought my brown skin and female body gave him rights over me, and I let him think it. My subservience made him all the more eager to have me. I took his beatings without complaint and did everything for him that a good wife would—for a fee.

The day eventually came when he refused to share me with others. He insisted that I marry him, change my name to his, and move to his homestead. I protested just enough to enthrall him, then stood by in a

cloak of feigned shame while he took on my debt—paying the exaggerated amount quoted him by the saloon owner. The owner’s final words to me were whispered and private, “Give him boys, and he’ll care for ye.”

Mr. McGraw’s politics leaned toward the South. He wanted me to call him “Mr. McGraw,” or “Mister.” It sounded enough like “Master” that it satisfied something inside him. He liked whiskey, and I went out of my way to encourage it on him, so he’d sleep long and deep. He was a mean drunk, though, and I paid a price for it. I learned to take the pain, no matter how tempted I was to change, heal, and lash out at him. I did none of those things.

I bided my time.

For six months, Mr. McGraw and I lived on his homestead, leaving only to go to church on Sundays. The Mister hired men to build him a log house while he prospected the creek. I tended to the cooking, cleaning, and the garden. Together, we established his territory. He ran off anyone who tried to stake a claim on his land and shot plenty who resisted.

I prowled the hills and valleys too, and I killed more trespassers than he did. The land got the reputation for its bobcat attacks. They didn’t know no better, and I didn’t bother to correct them.

Eventually, three hundred and twenty acres of Idaho land would become Mr. McGraw’s by law, all thanks to President Abraham Lincoln’s Homestead Act.

The shadow of Cahlash spread, and the smell of gold attracted predators: highwaymen, rapists, and murderers. The town of Florence frenzied. Drunken men shot bullets into shops and homes without consideration for the townspeople sleeping within. Gunslingers passing through would steal anything they could get their hands on, including women and lives. More than once, Mr. McGraw killed bandits who wanted inside his house to do Nala knew what.

I learned to shoot so I had claws when I couldn’t shift. While Mr. McGraw was away at the creek, I practiced on prey. More than once, meals came from a bullet instead of my jaws. Such is the way to survive when you live among men.

The wild horses appeared on his land in the summer of ‘63. They came north looking for open fields, sweet grasses, and fresh water—and to get away, like me, from the violence of the Civil War.

Mr. McGraw saw the horses as another opportunity to get richer. He hired more men, and they corralled the horses, fenced them in. He beat them until they ran the direction he wanted, and if they resisted too forcefully, he shot them.

I once saw him lasso a young mare and force her to take his stallion. Her lips pulled back, and she cried out in pain—perhaps in outrage—and her eyes rolled to white. Her racing heart, terrified, pleaded with me to save her.

I knew well what it was like to be in her position. I ran to Mr. McGraw and fought him with my human hands. It was all I could do without giving myself away. He and his men laughed at me. Later, he beat me until I was submissive again, curled in the corner, bleeding and bruised. I didn’t dare change. Not then.

The time had not yet come for such things.

On Sundays when Mr. McGraw made me attend his church. I sat beside him, listening to him breathe and suck on his teeth, as the pastor spun fairytales from the pulpit. I folded my hands demurely and lifted my voice in song along with the others. All the while, I was feeding the flames of my hatred for Mr. McGraw and for those disgusting humans around me. If they’d known the devil seated in their midst, they’d have taken me out and lynched me on the spot.

Me, I took solace in my rage, in how it boiled low and steady in my gut. No matter what happened,

though, I never let it loose. Nor did I let it die.

Whenever we left the church, Mr. McGraw drove the wagon in silence, back along the road to the homestead. It may surprise you to know that I didn't mind. I loved riding on the wagon with the breeze firm on my cheeks, the sun warm on my hair. I always liked the ride back more than I did the ride out, but anything was better than being stuck inside with the Mister. For the duration of the journey back, I could almost forget he was seated beside me.

I'd begun to think of Mr. McGraw's territory as my own. I'd marked it from corner to corner and edge to edge, and I loved the land and even the little house we lived in. In the spring, the flowers bloomed all around. In summer, the grasses grew so high. In autumn, we harvested potatoes, carrots, beets, peas, and beans. And in winter, the snowfall and the cold reminded me that I was a tiny fragile thing in the eyes of the Jamaa; at their mercy.

It was during my second winter in Idaho that I realized you had come into my womb. That knowledge changed everything for me. I began to shift into something I'd never been before—a mother. You can't imagine how that affects you. You lose who you were, and it's no trouble. It's good. Your new self, your new name, your new duties are holy. Like the First Mother, you become creation itself when you have babies growing inside you. You'll do anything to protect those new lives you made.

By then, I'd been with Mr. McGraw for almost a year, and he meant nothing to me. Nothing. He was a black fly. I was afraid that if he buzzed too loudly or bit too hard, I wouldn't have the restraint to keep from swatting him.

The day I shot a man in front of him, he stared at me as if he didn't know me.

The bandit had come looking for food and gold, but with a gun in his hand instead of a pan. I was inside the house when he showed up. He was rabid, emaciated, and mangy like a Gnawer. I inhaled him with my Padaa and was relieved to discover he wasn't Garou. He was just a human, dirty and desperate.

He held Mr. McGraw at gunpoint, and not for the first time, I imagined the Mister's death and rejected it. It wasn't time yet. I don't know who was more surprised—Mr. McGraw or the bandit—when I stepped out of the house, aimed my six-gun, and put a bullet straight into the bandit's heart.

That was the night I told Mr. McGraw I was pregnant. Otherwise, his hurt pride would've inspired him to beat me. The owner of the saloon had been right. Once he knew I carried his child, he took better care of me. And when—months later—I birthed two fine baby boys, he sung my praises far and wide.

His names for you were Joseph and Adam, but I gave you your true birth names—Cynbel and Cynwrig—so you'd be strong, cunning, and powerful throughout your lives.

Mr. McGraw was proud of his role in creating you, but he wanted nothing to do with the care of infants. He spent many nights in the saloon, away from us. It pained me not at all, for it left me with you both. I was Mother, and you were my boys.

As you grew, I changed again. I became Teacher. I loved you no less, but the lessons I taught weren't always gentle or without suffering. You learned to walk, to run, and then to hunt. I couldn't have been prouder but, with each passing day, I knew the time to change was coming.

At Midsummer, Mr. McGraw ran afoul of a gunslinger who shot him in the leg over the outcome of a poker game. The Mister's bitterness became a weapon against the pain of losing the limb. He didn't leave the house for a whole year, Summer to Summer. He demanded more and more of me—and of you. My rage, so long quelled by your sweet faces, was simmering again. The first time he raised his fist to you, I barely managed to keep from shifting.

I understood the ways of man enough to know that it couldn't happen that way. So, I waited a little longer, and I protected you as best I could by placing myself between him and you. I was, after all, used to the pain.

My fourth winter in Idaho didn't have the same teeth the others had. I'd become a veritable frontierswoman, with all the skills and instincts that came with it. I could scent a predator from miles away, and few ever made it as far as the house again. I learned to never drop my guard. During winter, only the most desperate showed their faces, and putting them down was a mercy.

Mr. McGraw traded whiskey for laudanum—thanks to the human doctor who prescribed it for his pain. It made him balmy, so I encouraged that as well. After he drank it, I could manage his hurt pride for a time. Back then, I had all night to roam the forest and hills while he rode the opium.

Eventually, however, he got stir-crazy. He figured out how to get up on the wagon, and he hobbled his way to church and to the saloon, dragging us along with him most times. You and I were his crutches, and that's probably how you'll remember him best.

The day it all ended, Mr. McGraw had taken the wagon into Florence to get supplies and visit his doctor. For once, he'd left us behind at the homestead. The wind was howling and biting, and the air smelled of snow and horses. I let my guard down, and the outlaws made it all the way to the house before I scented them. I tucked you into the loft and met them outside—six-gun in hand. They laughed at the sight of me.

A lanky longrider joked, "Look at this Little Miss. She got herself a barkin' iron. Think she knows how to use it?"

Their leader thought himself a charmer, and his smile was his warning shot. He stepped down off his horse and stood facing me.

"Ma'am," he said, removing his hat. "We don't bring no trouble. We're just passing through. Hoping you'd be kind enough to warm our bellies." He paused for dramatic effect then added, "With a meal, of course." His men tried to hide their smirks and chuckles.

I hid my scowl. Two things stood out about those five men. First, they weren't afraid of me, and second, every single one of them—no matter how casual they sat—had a hand hidden from me.

I had to decide on what to do, lickety-split. I could've given them the benefit of the doubt; offered to feed them or even just sent them politely on their way. Trouble was, I knew exactly the kind of men they were. Word had spread at church the previous Sunday. A band of men belonging to the Innocents gang had slaughtered a family traveling west by covered wagon. They'd come through town, shot up the saloon, killed the sheriff, and done worse to a young woman who'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. These men were train-robbing, murdering outlaws.

And they were toying with me, like a well-fed cat toys with a mouse. They had no intention of leaving without taking everything I had with them. So, since you boys were inside, I decided they were never leaving.

I smiled at the leader and said, "I think I got just what you need," and lowered my gun. With my saloon-girl come-hither, I told them to come in one at a time, and I'd make sure they went away happy.

I started the change before I was even inside so, by the time they stopped guffawing and patting each other on the back, I was waiting in Crinos. I never felt so full of rage. After years of holding it in, I was stronger than I'd ever been. My jaws, my hands, my legs were taut with it. I set it free.

The first one—the leader—entered the house with a cooing, self-satisfied call. He went down quickly with a snap of his neck. I let him lie where he fell and charged out to the others. I hit the first one as he was lighting his cigarette and slashed across his throat. I disemboweled the second one as he was reaching for his gun. The third managed a scream before I bit down upon his neck and nearly tore his head from his body. His scream died in my jaws, and I took a moment to glory in the kill.

The fourth was still seated on his horse, and he turned it, kicking it into a gallop back the way they'd come. The other horses panicked and scattered.

It was a chase.

I let him run.

He kept looking back over his shoulder at me, hoping that I wasn't coming after him.

I could see each breath as it huffed out of me. I crouched and felt the tension in my muscles as I shook, holding myself back, just until he got out of sight.

Then I leapt.

The deep snow had a hard crust that broke the moment I put my weight down upon it and that slowed my progress. The cold made my bare feet sensitive, turned my whiskers white, and burned my lungs. I cut through the trees and was bombarded with avalanches of snow falling from the branches as I pounded by them.

I saw him, clinging to his panicked horse's neck. I smelled his shit and piss. I heard his heaving sobs. And I kept pace with him.

He sensed me, and the whites of his eyes flared as he searched for me among the trees. He tried to shoot at me, but his hand was shaking. He nearly fell from his mount when he twisted too far, and the revolver dropped into the snow.

His horse was bleeding down its haunches where its rider was digging in with his spurs. I smelled the blood, and it raised my frenzy.

I was done playing.

My claws ripped into the horse's rear end as I used it to get to the screaming man. I came up behind him and wrapped my arms around his chest, clinging to the horse with my thighs as it fell forward. Our eyes met, and I saw more wild in his than I'd ever seen before. Saliva ran down my chin, and I bit. He tasted too sweet, too sour, like an apple that's been left to rot.

I pulled him with me off the horse before it could crush us, and we went down in the snow. My frenzy took over then, and by the time I was done, the snow was painted red.

The last outlaw was dead, but I wasn't done.

I waited there by the path, frozen on the outside. Only the burning of my rage kept me warm enough to wait the long hours until Mr. McGraw came into view. Only my hatred of him allowed me to shift back to human, still my shaking hand enough to point the outlaw's gun, and force my limbs to move as the Mister pulled the wagon to a halt.

It was perhaps the sight of me, naked in the frozen landscape, that made him hesitate. I fired three bullets into his body before he could finish calling out my whore name.

After that, I made the most difficult—and freeing—shift of my life. I cut my hair. I bound my breasts, and I traded my saloon-girl sway for a gunslinger swagger. I stopped going to church.

I'm small for a man, but my six-guns make me dangerous. I took the name Robert McGraw and told anyone who asked that I was Mr. McGraw's brother. When his body was found—having fed the animals of the forest—I inherited his homestead. No one dared challenge a man, a gunslinger, the devil brother of the Mister. Before long, the government stamped it.

Now, my skin itches for me to roam again. I waited until you'd seen your first change, but it's time for me to go.

Know that I do not abandon you. This is our way, and now you must help each other to survive and thrive. You're old enough now to make it on your own.

No matter how far we wander, this land will always be our homestead. From the shadows at the edge of the great forest, from the perch high above on the great cliff, I'll be watching. And if the day comes when you face something you can't handle, I will be there, walking beside you along the Silent Way.

Forever in your blood, forever in my heart,  
Mother

## *Angel Leigh McCoy*

Angel Leigh McCoy (@angelmccoy) has a history of creating in game worlds. She got her start writing for the old-school versions of *Vampire*, *Changeling*, *Mage*, *Werewolf*, and *Hunter*. For a decade or so, she wrote for video games including as a senior writer on the story, characters, and dialogue of *Guild Wars 2* and also for the 2019 IGN Video Game of the Year, *CONTROL* by Remedy. These days, she's writing dark mythic novels in a world of her own making called "Wyrdwood." The first trilogy is available for Kindle, in audio, and in bookstores. You can learn more at [WyrdwoodAngel.com](http://WyrdwoodAngel.com).

# Family Practice

*Aaron Rosenberg*

Ahanu “Doc” Crocker was startled awake from uneasy dreams by the sound of someone banging hard on his front door. “What?” he demanded, hauling himself upright, his voice carrying easily across the two rooms to whomever had disturbed his rest. Land, but he was tired! He’d been up half the night seeing to that idjit Aimes and his dang arm, not that he’d get much thanks from the old coot!

“Doc?” It was a man’s voice, and despite his fuzziness Crocker placed it quickly enough as belonging to Matthias Foster. That had him out of bed in a hurry, cursing as he tried to slam his big feet back into his boots, pull up his suspenders, and grab his glasses off the bedside table all at once. Matthias was a solid, stable, quiet man, not at all the type to wake him on some fool’s errand.

“Coming!” he shouted back, nearly tripping himself before his weight forced the boots on properly. “Coming!” Breathing heavily, he reached the front door, unlatched it, and hauled it open. Standing there was Matthias, and in his arms was a shivering, blanket-wrapped bundle. Oh, no! “What happened?” he asked, even as he swung the door wide and stepped back. “Bring her in, hurry.” Because the figure Matthias held was too small to be his wife Nadie, and the dark hair peeking out indicated it was not their son Hurit, who had his father’s red highlights. That left Kimi, their eldest, at all of thirteen; a quiet, curious girl with an elusive but bright smile and a rare but infectious laugh.

“We don’t know what’s wrong with her, Doc,” Matthias moaned, stumbling in and crossing the front room to deposit his daughter on the low couch set there for that purpose. “She was tossing and turning, and crying out, and when we checked her she was burning up. Can you help her?”

“Well, now, let’s just see, why don’t we?” Crocker replied in his best horse-gentling tone, resting a hand on the other man’s shoulder and guiding him to one of the chairs that lined the inner wall. “You take a load off and I’ll find out what’s what.” The poor man looked terrified, and Crocker could hardly blame him. Life could be hard out here, and many babes did not survive their first year. The thought of losing one who was nearly full-grown was enough to unman anyone, especially a kind, caring soul like Matthias.

Grabbing the stool from his desk, Crocker swung it over to the couch and then settled onto it, the furniture groaning under his weight. He lit a match and set it to the lamp, then dialed that up as high as it would go, chasing away the room’s shadows. Now he could see Kimi clearly, huddled inside that blanket, shivering. Her hair was plastered to her head, sweat stood out on her skin, and her eyes were wide but glazed. They did not track him at all as he leaned in close.

“Kimi?” he asked softly, setting the back of his hand against her forehead. “Can you hear me, child?” She felt like she was on fire, and she did not respond.

“Why don’t you stoke the fire a bit, set the pot on,” he suggested to Matthias. It was as much to give the man something to do as from any real need for heat or coffee, and the worried father jumped to his feet and set to the tasks with a will. That should keep him occupied for a few minutes, at least.

Taking out his stethoscope, Crocker warmed its end with his breath, then slid it under blankets and night shirt to set it against her thin chest, listening to the results. "Breathing's good," he reported after a moment. "She's feverish, all right, but it ain't pneumonia, so that's something."

The girl's lips were moving, he noticed, and he edged closer, trying to hear what she was mumbling. He couldn't quite make it out, but the motions weren't panicked or jumbled, her mouth moving calmly like she was in serious conversation, and a thought struck him. Pushing away a little, he swiveled around to study her father. "She get her monthlies yet?" As the town doctor, he couldn't afford to be shy about such things.

Not so poor Matthias, who turned red as a tomato. "Just started last month," he managed to mumble. "Why?"

Crocker took a deep breath, let it out, stirring the coarse, heavy whiskers that covered half his face. Even if he was right, how was he going to explain this? "Well, see, here's the thing—" he started, but got no further as someone kicked his door open with a thunderous crash.

"The hell!" he hollered, rising to his feet, but froze as three men staggered in. The two in front were wrapped round each other like a couple at their first dance, but after a second Crocker saw that in fact the one was supporting the other, who leaned on him like a bad drunk.

Only, the large, dark splotch along his side suggested it wasn't whiskey that had done him in.

"You the doc?" the man doing the holding up demanded. He was a mean-looking one, long, lean, and tanned as old leather, knife-cut blonde hair poking out from under his hat. His clothes were dusty and worn and probably hadn't been all that grand to start, but there was nothing faded about the pistols he carried, one in each hand, and one barrel tracked Crocker while the other honed in on Matthias, who'd been on his way back to his chair.

"That's right," Crocker replied, standing straight. He'd be damned if he let some stranger cow him in his own office, no matter how many guns he had! "Who the hell're you, and what d'ya mean, barging in like this, middle of the night?"

"Got you a patient," was all the man said by way of reply, half-leading and half-dragging his charge across the room. "Get that door shut," he ordered over his shoulder, and the third man, who had been trailing behind, shut and barred it. That one Crocker recognized, though the rifle and the furtive look were new. "Outa the way," the stranger was now demanding of Kimi, and Crocker intercepted him before he could reach the girl, his bulk forming an imposing barrier.

"Leave her be," he insisted. "You want a doctor, that's fine, I'm right here. She's none of your concern."

"My brother needs looking at," the man argued, getting right in Crocker's face. They were of equal height, but he was perhaps half Crocker's width, if that. "She needs to move."

"I'll—" the third man began but stopped when he met Crocker's hard stare and quickly subsided.

Crocker considered a second but could see this fella wasn't likely to let up. Nor was the commotion good for anyone. "Fine," he said finally. "Matthias, take Kimi and lay her on my bed. She can rest there for now." The homesteader opened his mouth to argue, then shut it again, nodded, and quickly slid past to hoist the girl up and carry her through the door to the back room. Crocker's was a small place, but it suited his needs—bedroom behind, office up front, washroom to one side. That was enough.

The stranger had deposited his wounded companion as soon as the couch was clear, and now hovered over him, anxious as a new mother. "You're gonna be alright, Sammy," he promised. "Doc here'll fix you right up." His eyes were hard as he glanced Crocker's way, and he hefted his pistols meaningfully. "Or else."

"Don't do no good threatening me," Crocker replied, adjusting his glasses on his nose. "I'll do my best, I took an oath for that, but whether he'll live or not ain't up to me, nor you neither. No gun's gonna change that."

"Maybe," the man agreed, though his face hadn't changed none. "Maybe not. Still, I think I'll keep the lead on you, all the same."

"Suit yourself." Crocker turned and shouldered the man aside, using his girth to clear a path for him. "But you can do that from over there, less you wanna try doing the doctoring yourself?"

That got a grumble, but the man didn't push back, instead settling himself heavily into the chair Matthias had so recently vacated. Crocker did his best to ignore him for now, and the third man, as he sat and concentrated on his new patient.

It was a gunshot wound, that much was obvious. “Pistol, rifle, or shotgun?” he asked, hauling the lamp closer. This one—Sammy, he recalled hearing the other say—had the same pale wheat hair and a similar cast to the eyes and mouth, though the nose was smaller and the face less lined. Brothers, he thought. And this one’s the younger.

“Mind yer business and do yer job,” Big Brother snapped, and Crocker rounded on him, though he didn’t rise from his stool.

“This is my business, you dolt!” he retorted, his voice loud enough that the man started back for just an instant. “I need to know what did this afore I can know how to fix it!”

They glared at one another a full three ticks before the man relented. “Pistol,” he snarled. “Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” Crocker replied. “And you should be too. If it’d been a shotgun, I’d say you were better off just digging the grave now and not wasting my time. Rifle’s tough, more likely to tear straight through but leaving lots of damage behind. Pistol’s the best of the three, far as your brother here’s concerned. I’ll need to dig the bullet out, see what it’s done to his innards, but at least there’s a chance.”

The older brother’s eyes had narrowed at the offhanded mention of their relationship, and now he gave a slow nod. “Know who we are, then?” he asked softly. He’d holstered one pistol but had the other resting in his lap, and now his fingers caressed the barrel like a girl petting a sleeping cat.

“No idea,” Crocker said. He’d turned back to Sammy and didn’t bother looking around. “Don’t care none, neither.” He produced a knife, small but sharp, and cut away the cloth around the wound, then gestured behind him. “There’s a pitcher and bowl over there. Fill the one from the other and bring it here.”

“Do it,” he heard, and a moment later the third man stomped over, the water sloshing as he walked.

“Set it down there, Lacy,” Crocker instructed, making the man jump. “Yes, I know you, you big galoot. Think I wouldn’t recognize my own handiwork?” He’d stitched the luckless trapper’s side a year or so back when he’d had a run-in with a boar, one of the few times he’d been called upon to treat someone outside his friends and neighbors but he’d traded with the folks at the outpost before and they knew enough to call on him. “I’m guessing this little visitation’s your fault?” He dipped a clean cloth in the water and used it to wipe away the blood from Sammy’s side, eliciting a moan.

“Sorry, Doc.” At least Lacy had the decency to hang his head. “We needed a proper sawbones and I knew you was good.”

Crocker harrumphed but let it go. Lacy had always struggled to make ends meet, so it wasn’t all that surprising he’d fall in with a bad sort. He hadn’t needed to bring them here, though!

With the wound finally clean, Crocker probed it with a blunt finger. Sammy cried out from the touch. “Bullet’s still there, all right,” he stated, feeling a hardness just beneath the torn and swollen flesh. “I’ll need to take that out.” He peeled back one of his patient’s eyelids, causing the young man to flinch. “You’ll want him out for that, though, and so’ll I—he thrashes while I’m cutting, he could do himself more damage than that bullet ever did.”

He turned and rose, crossing the room to his medicine cabinet. There he rummaged about before coming up with a bottle. “Laudanum,” he explained, pouring some into a shot glass, which he handed to Sammy’s brother. “Force this down his throat. I’ll be right back.”

The man rose to his feet, unhurried but fluid, that gun swiveling about to aim at Crocker’s belly. “And just where d’ya think you’re going?” His voice was low, soft, like a snake preparing to strike.

“I’ve got another patient, you might recall,” Crocker shot back. “It’ll take a few minutes for the laudanum to work. That gives me time to check on her.”

“Better not be going for a gun,” the man warned.

“No guns here,” was Crocker’s reply. “I’m a man of medicine, not violence.” That earned a dismissive snort, but what did he care? At least no one got in his way as he headed back to see how Kimi was doing.

Not terrible, was the answer, but not stellar neither. Still feverish but her lungs still sounded good and strong, as did her heart. Her mouth was still working, and Crocker strained to listen but still could not make out the words.

“You okay, Doc?” Matthias asked quietly. The poor man had been pacing beside the bed when he’d entered the room. He’d brought a rifle with him—few went walking without some sort of iron, even if it was just to Caleb’s general store or to call on a friend—but he’d set it aside when he’d entered, and of course it

was still in the front room now. Which was for the best, Crocker reckoned. Least this way he was less likely to try something stupid and leave Kimi and little Hurit without a father.

"I'm fine," he answered, rubbing his jaw through the beard and studying the girl on his bed. "And I think she will be too, by and by. I s'pect what's afflicting her is nothing more nor less than—" The door creaked, and he stopped, glancing up as Lacy eased his head into the room.

"Earl wanted I should check on you," the trapper explained. "Sorry. He says Sammy's out."

"Fine." Crocker patted Matthias's arm. "I'll be back later, but don't you worry. Kimi's gonna be all right, I reckon." Then he followed Lacy back to the front room, shutting the door firmly behind him.

"What kinda name's 'Kimmy,' anyways?" Lacy asked, leading the way. "That Injun? She looks it."

Crocker chose not to answer—the people hereabouts had been mingling bloodlines for nearly a century, but that wasn't anyone else's business. Instead he went straight to Sammy's side. The young man was clearly insensate now, head lolled back, mouth slightly open. Good.

"Right." He retrieved his tools from the desk drawer, tightly wrapped in their oilskin, and then unrolled them across the desktop. Selecting a scalpel, he tested its edge against the ball of his thumb. "You might want to look away," he cautioned.

The brother—Earl—only gave a wintry smile. "I think I can handle it."

"Suit yourself." Crocker didn't give the man another thought. All his attention was now on Sammy and that bullet.

The young man had been lucky. The wound was nasty, but it had missed the intestines, the bullet lodging in muscle and fat instead. It took a bit of cutting but Crocker was finally able to dig the metal lump free. He dropped it in the basin, where it clanked against the porcelain. "Hand me the middle needle and the thread," he ordered. Earl did—Lacy had retreated to staring out the front door—and he quickly threaded the needle and began stitching up the wound. "He'll live," Crocker announced. "Leastways, he will if he don't take a chill, or tear this open. But some rest, a warm fire, nothing more solid than soup and coffee for a week, no riding and no running, and he should be fine." He sat back and wiped his forehead. He'd dealt with worse wounds, but it'd still been touch-and go, and if they hadn't found him when they did Earl would've been one brother short before the sun came up.

"We've got a wagon," Earl answered. "I had him laid out in the back."

Crocker nodded. "That'll do. No faster than a trot, though—run the horses and the jostling'll tear those stitches."

Earl was studying him. He'd holstered the second gun at some point, but his fingers kept tapping at its handle. "Now then," he said, dragging the words out, "only question is, what to do about you?"

"Just take your brother and go," Crocker answered, rising to his feet and stretching to ease the tension in his back and neck. "I did what you wanted, leave it at that."

But the man continued to stand there, studying him. "I wish I could," he stated at last, though there was no sincerity in his tone. "Only thing is, you know who we are. And that ain't good."

Crocker snorted. "I know you're brothers," he replied. "That's all. No idea about the rest, and I don't care to."

Earl considered for a second, then shook his head. "Sorry, Doc," he said. "I just don't believe you. You already know Sammy's name, and I heard Lacy use mine."

Crocker shot a furious glance at the trapper, who refused to meet his gaze. Idjit! "Fine," he said at last. "Yes, I know your names. So what?"

"So, you might get a notion," Earl answered, "after we've gone, to go running to the law. Tell them you just had a visit from the infamous Holt Brothers. Tell 'em Sam Holt's wounded. Tell 'em we're in a wagon, slow as molasses and subtle as smoke signals." He shook his head again. "I can't have that." He nodded to Lacy and hitched his chin toward the bedroom, and Crocker went still.

"You don't wanna be doing that," he warned, his voice dropping to the floor, where it rumbled like shifting stone. "Just leave now. I won't say nothing, you got my word on that." He bunched his hands into fists. "But you take one step toward that little girl and there'll be trouble."

That drew a short, barking laugh from Earl. "Whatcha gonna do, Doc?" he asked. "Slap me around? Big fella like you, maybe there's some muscle under all that hair and fat, I wouldn't wanna chance it." Suddenly

both pistols were in his hands. "I'm better off drilling you now, afore you can take another step."

Lacy hadn't moved, and Earl tilted his head to snap at the other man, though his eyes and his guns never left Crocker. "Get to it!" he shouted. "Do it fast and let's get out of here!"

The trapper glanced at Crocker, gulped, and turned away from the door. Visibly steeling himself for the task at hand, he took a step toward the back.

And Crocker exploded into action.

He heard the twin reports of the pistols firing and felt the bullets tear into his flesh as he launched himself forward, but he was already changing and the slugs took him in the gut rather than the chest. They didn't even slow him down as he surged past Earl, who stood frozen, jaw slack, and lunged instead at Lacy. The poor man barely had time to turn and gape before a massive paw had swiped across his head and neck, the claws tearing his throat out and removing his jaw as well. By the time Lacy's knees hit the floor he was dead, though he continued to shudder and jerk for a few seconds more.

Then Crocker turned back toward Earl. The elder Holt brother stared up at him, blinking in terror at the hulking, fur-covered figure towering over him. He managed to raise his pistols as Crocker stalked toward him, and fired them once, twice, three times, the bullets hitting but not penetrating his thick hide. Then Crocker struck a single blow, laying the outlaw open from shoulder to hip. Earl Holt whimpered, glancing down at his own guts as they spilled out onto the floor, and collapsed in a heap on top of them, his life pouring out in seconds.

That left only Sammy. The part of Crocker that was still a physician cried out against the injustice of having to kill a man he had just saved, but the larger part of him knew it had to be done. The Holts were notorious, younger and older alike—if Sammy survived, he would come back here seeking revenge and probably laying waste to the whole community in the process. And that was something Crocker would not allow.

A single quick slash and it was done. Sam Holt never even woke up, slipping from drugged state to death without so much as a murmur.

Crocker was still standing over the bodies when he heard the bedroom door creak open.

"Doc?" It was Matthias, and the homesteader emerged carefully, cautiously—only to stare at the hulking figure before him. Unlike the outlaws, however, he still retained control enough to ask, "That you?"

Crocker nodded, then sighed and shifted back down to his normal form. "It's me, Matthias." He quickly wiped his hands on a cloth, then guided the man back to the bedroom. "Don't worry, I'll clean this all up before Kimi can see it. That's not how she should start her journey."

"Her...?" Her father's eyes went wide. "You mean...?" He glanced back at the three dead men, then at Crocker, then at the room ahead of them, where his daughter lay. "She's...?"

"I believe so, yes," Crocker replied. "Kimi is experiencing the start of her First Change. Gaia has called to her, and she has answered, is speaking with the Mother even now." Even with the carnage behind him, and the smell of blood and offal thick in the air, he smiled. "She is about to become one of the Gurahl."

"Like you," Matthias stated, shaking his head. "All this time, I had no idea."

"No, nor should you," Crocker told him. "My place is here, healing the sick. It is an honorable calling, and one I can do heaps better as a regular fella. But I can help ease this time of transition for Kimi. And once she has experienced the change, I will help her find a suitable mentor."

"Thank you," the other man said. "Thank you, Doc." There were tears in his eyes as they stepped over to the bed and stood there together, watching over the girl it held. She seemed to be resting more peacefully now, her mouth still now that her quiet dialogue appeared over, and he could already see that her fever had begun to break. "We didn't know, but after all these years, in both our families—Nadie's gonna be so proud."

Crocker nodded. Both sides were Kinfolk, so there had always been a chance, but it could skip over a generation, two, three, more. There was no foretelling Gaia's decisions. In all the time he had ministered to the needs of this community, only two had been chosen. Still, changed or not, they were all kin. They were family. And that was why he stayed, to see to their needs.

That was, after all, what a good doctor, a good family man, did.

## *Aaron Rosenberg*

Aaron Rosenberg is the author of the best-selling DuckBob SF comedy series, the Relicant Chronicles epic fantasy series, the Dread Remora space-opera series, and—with David Niall Wilson—the O.C.L.T. occult thriller series. Aaron's tie-in work contains novels for *Star Trek*, *Warhammer*, *World of WarCraft*, *Stargate: Atlantis*, *Shadowrun*, *Eureka*, *Mutants & Masterminds*, and more. He has written children's books (including the original series STEM Squad and Pete and Penny's Pizza Puzzles, the award-winning Bandslam: The Junior Novel, and the #1 best-selling *42: The Jackie Robinson Story*), educational books on a variety of topics, and over seventy roleplaying games (such as the original games Asylum, Spookshow, and Chosen, work for White Wolf, Wizards of the Coast, Fantasy Flight, Pinnacle, and many others, and both the Origins Award-winning *Gamemastering Secrets* and the Gold ENnie-winning *Lure of the Lich Lord*). He is the co-creator of the ReDeus series, and a founding member of Crazy 8 Press. Aaron lives in New York with his family. You can follow him online at [gryphonrose.com](http://gryphonrose.com), on Facebook at [facebook.com/gryphonrose](https://www.facebook.com/gryphonrose), and [@gryphonrose](https://twitter.com/gryphonrose) on Twitter.

# Cat & Crow

*Bill Bodden*

Coraline worked in a saloon in the Arizona Territory, in a one-horse mining town called Whisper; that was all the information at hand. Mina took a long, slow look around, but didn't catch sight of her, so she sauntered through the batwing doors and kept moving. Her eyes adjusted quickly from midday sun to shadowy barroom, and she took a brief look around—not laying eyes on anyone long enough to raise hackles, but long enough to know where trouble might start. She bellied up to the bar and got the barkeep's attention.

"Whiskey," she said, in as guttural a stage whisper as she could manage. The Bartender turned away, pulling a glass down from a shelf. He filled it with pale brown liquor—it might not have been whiskey exactly but it was close enough, and Mina didn't plan to drink much of it anyway—and slid it across the bar to her. The glass came to a stop an inch from her hand with not a single drop sloshing out.

"That'll be two bits."

"Hmm." Mina fished in her pocket and pulled out a quarter dollar, flipping it to the barman. She took a sip. The "whiskey" was, in fact, whiskey, though pricey for not being the good stuff, and it burned all the way down. Mina was used to drinking cheap booze, so it didn't bother her.

Mina crooked a tanned weather-beaten finger at the barkeep, and he came over after drawing a beer for a gentleman down the bar and taking his money.

"What can I do you for, stranger?" The barman's attitude was friendly but guarded. In a rough-and-tumble town like this one, staying alive required such attitudes.

"I'm looking for Coraline; told she works here. Seen her?"

"Seen her? Sure, I have; Cora's due to come out any minute now; just watch the stage."

Mina winced. She hated when people called Coraline 'Cora'. It rankled. She hadn't expected Coraline to be a performer here, but it didn't matter. She gathered information, and what she got was reliable: Coraline loved to follow a mystery. Just then the lights dimmed around the stage. A barely tuned piano started clinking away, and several showgirls strutted out in glittery—albeit very short—dresses trimmed with ostrich feathers, doing to Mina's eyes their best impressions of a turkey crossed with a feather duster. Sure enough, Coraline was in the middle of the three women, taller than either and slimmer too. Truth be told, she was the best-looking one of the lot. That was another reason why Mina liked her; her looks weren't enough to stop hearts, but they were more than enough to put a smile on Mina's face. Mina turned her back to the bar, leaning against it with her glass clutched in her left hand. Times like these men could get twitchy; it had paid handsome dividends in the past to keep her pistol-hand free when whores—or women who men might mistake for same—were around.

Coraline knew the dance, and kept the other two in step with gentle, almost unnoticeable nudges. Mina noticed, but then, she had a sharper eye than most. Coraline had a big smile on her face, and her eyes sparkled like dark diamonds, catching the light with every tilt or nod of her head. When it was over, the

ladies took their bows, collecting up the coins thrown to them in gratitude, and went backstage to change into less-revealing clothes.

Mina stayed where she was, taking smaller sips of her whiskey than she appeared to, and sized up the rest of the crowd. A few cowboys near the stage were getting lit up and rowdy; the ladies would have to watch out for the international brigade—Roman hands and Russian fingers—as they came out from backstage. Mina was sure Coraline had seen her, she had sharp eyes too, and besides, this was when and where they were supposed to meet.

“Heya doll; miss me?” Coraline’s talent for mimicry was nothing short of impressive, she sounded just like Lonesome John, a man Mina had had to kill in another time, another place. It rankled.

“Don’t do that; you know I hate that.”

“I know; that’s why I do it.” Coraline, her voice back to her own normal tones, put a hand on Mina’s shoulder, gently soothing away Mina’s anger with a few soft pats. “Let’s talk outside.”

They walked down the boardwalk, keeping silent until they were away from buildings and prying ears.

“A pack came through town last night. Couple of ‘em spent some coin in the saloon, but didn’t cause any trouble. I think there were five; two were women.”

“What were they here for?”

“Don’t know, but they seemed real interested in the mine, and who worked it. That mine’s been in our sights for a while; maybe if they’re going to start something, we could lend a hand?” That last word came with upward tone; Coraline was hopeful they could dynamite the mine, closing it forever.

“I know, but this pack could be just as dangerous. Are you sure they were Garou?”

“Their smell was unmistakable.”

Mina shook her head, eyes downcast. “Two of us, five of them; those are mighty long odds for dealing with Garou. They killed a lot of both our people back in the day.”

“That’s the thing—one of them knew I was Corax—I could see it in his eyes. They weren’t hostile at all and asked more direct questions about the mine once they knew. I don’t think they mean us any harm.”

If they were going to take out the Wyrms stronghold that the mine had become, it was worth the risk. Mina didn’t trust the wolves very much; she’d been told stories by her grandmother about how, in the old days, the wolves had turned on the other kinds of weres thinking “other” might also mean “traitor.” The Bats and the Hogs had never recovered, and the Bears went into hiding. They tolerated the crows for their exceptional messenger and spy skills, so Coraline was probably safe, but a cat like her? Now they were treading on dangerous ground.

Still, the mine was a sore spot and no mistake. The Wyrms had an interest in it, and these days it didn’t pay for ordinary folk to take too much notice of what went on there; but Mina and Coraline weren’t ordinary folk. The way Coraline heard it, a couple of rich-looking fellas with four of the biggest goons you ever laid eyes on came to town on the train one day, and went to talk to Festus about buying him out. Nobody saw Festus again after that, but they produced signed and notarized documents proving that Festus sold the mine to them, so that was that. Neither Mina nor Coraline had seen any of these folks, but the smell of the Wyrms they left behind was difficult to miss, so those four big boys were either Banes or Black Spiral Dancers—werewolves corrupted by the Wyrms—and either way, it was more trouble than the two of them could handle.

Mina tilted her black, broad-brimmed hat toward the back of her head. “Do you know where they’re staying?”

“I surely do.” said Coraline with a big smile, her eyes sparkling.

“We’ve got to be crazy to think this will work.” Mina spat on the dusty ground, bone dry for months and the rainy season still many weeks away.

“Give it some time; we don’t even know if they saw the note yet.” Coraline kept her eyes on the narrow file through the hills, watching for signs of anyone approaching.

“Here they come,” Mina lifted her rifle and cocked the lever, chambering a round. The group was four people on horseback trailed by one big grey wolf.

“Don’t.” Coraline’s tone was forbidding; Mina hadn’t heard it often, but when Coraline used it, she meant business. “Don’t get riled up before we even know anything.” She pulled her derringer out of her sleeve, checked that it was loaded, and slipped it back into hiding.

“I shouldn’t get riled?” Mina nodded at the hidden gun in Coraline’s sleeve.

“A girl can’t be too careful. Besides, I’m not waving it in their faces like your big, ol’ Winchester.”

Mina harrumphed but said nothing more. Coraline was right of course, but if they let the Garou get too close and they weren’t the friendly sort, it could well be curtains for both.

“That’s close enough!” Coraline’s voice rang out like a shot, echoing off the hills like it was a theater. The group stopped, looking around for the source of the voice.

“You stay here,” Coraline hiked up her skirts and scrambled over the rocks in front of them. “Cover me—just in case.”

Mina gave a slow nod, lifting the sight on her Winchester and turning to watch the new arrivals over the rifle’s barrel. Coraline scrambled down the rocks and strode to within a few yards of the group.

“Well, if it ain’t the dance-hall girl. Why did you bring us way out here?” The speaker was young man, tall and well-built, with a pistol on one hip and a heavy-looking pack hanging off one shoulder.

“To make sure of your intentions toward us. We’re here to help, but you Garou haven’t always been friendly towards us non-wolves.”

“Ancient history. We’ve learned from our mistakes,” said a grizzled old man who took off his hat, mopping his brow as he spoke. He ran fingers through a scruffy beard. “That don’t make what happened right, but we can’t change the past; these days we do the best we can to treat you folk right...”

“...especially when you’re trying to help us.” This was the younger man again. He wore a wary smile and was the only human without a hat, shading his eyes with his hand.

“Would that be true even if my friend wasn’t another Corax like me?”

“Well sure,” the old man hollered back “Unless your friend was a Black Spiral Dancer or something like that.”

Coraline turned to where Mina was hiding. “Come on out.”

Mina cursed, took a deep breath, and stood up, letting the rifle barrel point at the ground. The younger man nodded, still shading his eyes. One of the women, a redhead, kept her narrowed eyes on Mina as she clambered down from the rocks where she’d hidden.

“Yup; that’s them all right.” Mina crouched down lower and turned her back to the boulders. Two creatures guarded the entrance. One was a man once; now his face was a twisted parody of a human, warped by the presence of the Bane-spirit that had taken control of the body. The other looked more like a gigantic, human-wolf hybrid, nine-feet-tall, with black eyes like a shark, and a perpetual snarl revealing a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth. Both gave off a sickly aura that you didn’t have to have any special sight to notice. A set of rails led into the mouth of the mine, allowing mine cars to bring both the waste rock and valuable ores to the surface easily.

“How long have you been watching ‘em?” Zeke asked, running fingers through his fringe of gray-white hair. He slapped his hat back over his bald head.

“About two months; as soon as the new owners took over. Coraline’s been fishing for details ever since.”

“Jake, you were a military man once, what do you make of this?”

The younger man scratched his head. “One thing’s for sure, guns won’t do us any good from here on out.”

“Let’s just hope Cora’s plan works,” replied Zeke.

Mina winced.

The red-haired woman spoke: “That Black Spiral Dancer will smell us once we get close; we’ll have to move fast.”

The four of them crept back the way they came through the rocks. Once behind a rocky outcrop fifty or so yards down the trail, they regrouped with the others.

Five of them: Mina, Zeke, Amanda, Jake, and the wolf they called Few Teeth crammed into the back of

the wagon, dropping the canvas flaps once inside. Kimimela, the human, and Coraline sat on the bench. Kimimela slapped the reins and the horses lurched into motion, pulling the heavy supply wagon behind them.

“You say this is one of their wagons?” asked Jake.

“Yup. Coraline and I ambushed them a few miles out of town. Two Banes were driving the team; they won’t bother anybody no more. The horses were happy to get free of them.”

Kimimela leaned back, sticking her head through the wagon cover’s opening. “What did you do with the supplies?”

Mina smiled and said nothing.

Coraline hissed. “Shhh! We’re almost there.” She and Kimimela pulled their hats low over the eyes. It wouldn’t buy them much time, but in this game every second counted.

“Hold up there!” Boomed the big Crinos-form werewolf standing guard. “Where d’ya think yer going?”

The wagon cover began to flutter as Kimimela pulled on the reins and the horses stopped, their eyes wide with fear.

“Just bringing in more supplies.” said Coraline, keeping her tone neutral. The former man—now Bane-possessed—walked to the back of the wagon, his rifle held in the crook of his right arm.

The huge werewolf lifted his nose in the air, sniffing. “Something’s not right...” he began.

But he never got the chance to finish; Jake barreled through the front flap, bounding between Kimimela and Coraline on powerful, canine-like legs. He had transformed as they approached and was now as terrifying as the werewolf guard. Right behind him came another massive Crinos with reddish fur and blue tattoos peeking through; Amanda propelled herself after Jake, the two of them knocking the werewolf guardian to the ground. One on each arm, they savagely ripped at the creature’s throat until it was a mass of shredded flesh. The beast surrendered to the inevitable with a gurgle and lay still.

Meanwhile, as the Bane lifted the back flap of the wagon, Mina pounced so hard the wagon lurched, and she and the Bane tumbled for several yards before they came to a stop. Mina’s wicked claws gripped the body, while her saber-like fangs tore a huge hole in the possessed man’s throat. A cloud of black smoke issued from the dying man’s mouth as he breathed his last, the Bane abandoning its now-useless vessel. Mina spat the mouthful of flesh to the ground. His face looked familiar: one of the miners, corrupted by the Wyrms and sacrificed so a Bane could have a human body to move around in. Another score to settle.

“That went well.” Zeke’s voice, coming from his massive canine maw, was barely recognizable as more than a growl.

Zeke leapt out of the wagon’s back. “Kimimela, you stay with the wagon and guard our backs. If we need your magic, we’ll come back for you. Cora, you’re our back-up in case anything goes wrong. If worse comes to worst, we’ll need you to find the Silver Streams pack, and bring them back here to finish what we started.”

Kimimela picked up her rifle from the floor under her feet, and chambered a round, her eyes glued to the gap through which they had come. Coraline straightened her clothing and let her derringer slide into her palm.

Zeke, Amanda, Few Teeth, and Jake gathered; Few Teeth, still in the wolf-shape that was his normal form changed into his Crinos shape, as the horses shivered with fear. Together with Mina, the five of them followed the rails into the mine.

Mina waited impatiently for the wolves’ eyes to adjust to the deep darkness of the mine. There were no torches lit here; it’s just possible they were afraid of explosive gasses seeping up from below, Mina supposed.

As they went farther in, their keen senses detected the smell of decay up ahead, rotting flesh, in fact. They found a small cul-de-sac being used as a garbage pit. Among the less-identifiable trash the remains of several half-eaten humans were here, and judging by the smell, they’d been here for days.

They passed several mine carts lined up, their dusty payloads of waste rock and tailings proof that mining was the last thing the new owners were thinking about. Mina quickened her pace to take point; the others lagged for a step or three to give her some room.

Mina could smell it now, the corruption of the Wyrms was close - very close. She began to hug the wall, hoping to surprise anything she came upon.

As they crept further in, it got warmer and the air felt closer, stuffier, making it a little harder to breathe.

Ahead there was flickering light; Mina slowed her approach and help a paw up behind her to warn the others to ease up. Weird echoes from a wider space ahead made it sound like there was a choir inside. She sidled along the tunnel wall until she could peek around the edge of the opening. Inside, the chamber was large; just to her left was a half-full crate of dynamite, one bundle with a fuse carelessly left inserted; to her right was a mine car full of rocks. She heard the pack creeping up behind her, and her hackles rose.

“What-what is it?” growled a voice Mina thought might have been Jake.

“Sorry,” she said, hackles lowering. “Bad memories. I usually work alone.”

“I know you’ve got no reason to trust us, but you have my word that you’re in no danger from us.”

Mina let her ears and nose work; the Black Spiral Dancers were through here often enough that their scent lingered. Also, there was something else; a weird, burnt metal smell, the kind she associated with spirits. As she moved into the cavern, she continued to hug the wall, moving to the right. Jake and Few Teeth followed her, while Amanda and Zeke followed the wall off to the left. The weird chorus she’d heard before started up again—much closer this time. It seemed to be coming from inside the cavern, but they could see no one else beside the five of them. It grew louder, until it was almost the only thing Mina could hear. She put her paws over her ears to mute the sound a little and happened to look up. There, near the ceiling of the cavern, was a swirling mass of wispy, filmy shapes—almost like fog—fading in and out as they spun in a slow circle, not two feet above their heads. A face or two would appear in the misty circle, and the weird song-like sound she was struggling with was coming from them. Faces would appear, open-mouthed, and just as quickly vanish, but the sound continued. Mina’s hackles raised again, and her stomach tightened. Looking around, she noted that the fur on the backs of Jake and Few Teeth was also standing on end as they looked up. These, then, must be Banes, but collected here for what purpose?

Hearing voices approaching, the five of them scattered, finding any likely place to hide. All kept a carefully hidden eye on the cavern to see who—or what—was coming.

“...report a wagon at the main tunnel entrance.”

A larger, booming voice replied: “We’ll check it out. Maybe it’s those supplies that didn’t show up a week ago; finally made it after sleeping it off someplace. Huh...”

The speaker stopped, as did the other set of tromping feet. “Somethings got them all riled up. Where’s Baker and Moon Cloud?”

They had stepped far enough into the tunnel to be seen: a man and a Crinos-form Werewolf. The man was too nicely dressed to work in a mine. The stone in his tie pin sparkled in the torchlight. The werewolf had tattoos that glowed green in the low light, in contrast to its black fur and sparkling, white teeth.

“Last I heard they were guarding the front entrance. Why?”

“I smell something. Smells like...”

He didn’t get the chance to finish. The red-furred Amanda leapt out from behind a mine car and tore a savage rent in the chest of the Black Spiral Dancer. The man pulled a pistol, but grey-furred Zeke was on him in a flash, slapping the gun out of his hand. Few Teeth and Jake galloped over to help in the fight, but Mina scurried along the wall to the entrance the two had come from. What she saw made her stop, a throaty yowl of fear escaping from her throat.

The cavern beyond was full of men; several of them looked familiar to Mina, including old Festus, who reportedly sold the mine legitimately. If that was the case, they did him wrong after the sale: he was there, decaying and white-eyed but apparently not dead yet, with a ribbon of black drool hanging from his lower lip. All eyes... and there may have been a dozen or so, turned to regard her with unthinking malice. All contained a Bane, warped and twisted by the evil spirits’ corruption.

“We’ve got more company!” Screeched Mina, as she took a fighting stance, ready to hold the entrance at all costs. She heard a mighty struggle going on behind her; she had to buy them time to finish up and help her. Now would be a terrible time for her erstwhile allies to suddenly disappear, she thought, as the Banes-infested bodies shambled toward her.

Her claws came out, and she slashed at the Banes as they stumbled to reach her, crowding around the cavern mouth. Luckily, possession hadn’t sharpened their wits; they got in each other’s way trying to get through the narrow opening, and she could choose her attacks with care and precision. Soon they had to climb over a pile of their fallen comrades to get to her. Mina’s sensitive ears picked up an unnerving lack of

fight sounds from the cavern behind her, and she risked a look back to see what had happened. She saw Few Teeth, Jake, and Amanda in a circle around something on the floor. Amanda was kneeling. Between her and Jake, Mina could see a knife sticking up out of a furry mass, the visible inch of silvered blade practically glowing in the dimly lit cavern.

Zeke. Oh no...

The air was rent with howls. The sound was deafening; it penetrated her chest before her ears ever picked it up, making her stomach tighten again. She began to attack with even more ferocity, as she felt herself carried away by the power of the werewolves' grief and strengthening rage. She began to yowl too; while their calls were eerie and mournful, hers was a truly disturbing, unearthly wail. The Banes stopped trying to climb over the wall of bodies she was responsible for. Mina was being carried away by the wave of rage surging at her back. She leapt over the fallen bodies and crashed into the remaining Banes, her claws singing a deadly song of their own. The bodies she had struck down came hurtling past her, crashing into the still-standing ones as her new allies joined her, tearing possessed bodies limb-from-limb.

They finished off the Banes and began to move through the tunnels and caves like a runaway freight train, howling and smashing and rending anyone in their path. Two more Black Spiral Dancers appeared at the head of another half-dozen Banes, but their eyes showed fear as they pushed the Banes out ahead of them, cannon fodder against the threshing arms and reaping claws of death come to call. Amanda was a whirlwind of fury; the others followed in her wake, covering her back and mopping up after her, doing their best to keep up with her frenetic pace. Mina came to find out later that she had known Zeke the longest of any of them.

They rounded a corner and stopped. The small cavern they were now in was lit with a sickly blue glow. Standing directly in front of them was another well-dressed man: all eyes were fixed on the sparking bundle of dynamite in his hand, sputtering flame climbing lazily up the fuse. He was backlit by the glow, coming from a largish hole a few feet behind him. Beads of sweat stood out amongst the stubble on his upper lip.

"One more step and I'll send you all straight to the arms of the Wyrn." He held a pistol in his other hand, its barrel pointed at Amanda. "These bullets are silver—I'd like to see you—"

A shot rang out, and a puff of dust sprang from the well-dressed man's chest. He looked down at the black goo seeping from the wound. A second shot landed next to the first, causing another puff, and this time a steady stream of inky blackness jetted from the hole. The man staggered, stumbling back towards the pit and the blue light behind him. He fell into the pit.

"Dynamite—RUN!" Mina heard the voice, and as she and the others turned and sprinted away, she realized the voice had been hers. As they turned, they saw Kimimela, smoking rifle in her hands, and Coraline, though she didn't look much like the woman they'd left behind at the entrance to the mine. She was now covered head to toe in black feathers, and with vicious claws and beak; a walking nightmare, like the rest of them. In one smooth motion, Amanda scooped up Kimimela in her russet arms and loped through the cavern toward the outside. Coraline saw what was happening, and turned, leaping into the air and flapping furiously to get ahead of the mass of claws and teeth running for the exit. As they passed the mine cars, Mina spotted the crate of dynamite. Pausing ever so briefly to let the others pass by, she yanked a torch out of the crack in the wall where it was wedged and tossed it into the crate.

They felt the explosion before they heard it. First, it came from deep in the mine, the blue-lit pit. Much nearer and more violent explosions followed closely as the crate of dynamite reacted to the burning torch. The tunnel mouth was directly ahead, and in her frenzied state, Mina saw rocks passing by her in slow motion, projectiles hurled by the explosion. They cleared the mouth of the cave and kept running, dodging to the sides as more rocks came shooting out of the cave. The horses, panicked by the sudden appearance of a group of fast-moving predators, turned and dragged the wagon back towards town as fast as their hooves could carry them.

They howled that night in memory of Zeke. Mina and Coraline stood close by and joined in from time to time as the spirit moved them. They lit a fire with wood salvaged from the collapsed mine entrance and ate from a large cast-iron pot that Mina had retrieved from the stash of stolen supplies. They feasted on three rabbits Mina caught and a mule deer the Garou hunted, with beans and cornbread and hefty servings of beer... also salvaged from the stolen supplies. One by one they drifted away from the circle in the early hours

of the pre-dawn morning, wrapping themselves in a blanket or just their clothes, and fell asleep.

“What’ll you do now?” Mina asked Amanda, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as the sun rose.

“We’ll move on. There are other sites like this where agents of the Wyrms do their master’s filthy bidding. We will find them and destroy them—in memory of Zeke.”

Mina nodded. Amanda’s accent was charming and reminded her of Irish railroad workers she’d known once, in another place and time.

“What about you?” asked Jake, standing and stretching in the early morning sun.

“We won’t stick around here very long. There’ll be a lot of upset once people find out the mine is closed for good. They’ll start to ask questions—look for answers. Neither of us want to be around when that happens.”

“You could throw in with us. We worked well together yesterday.” Jake looked earnest, and in this light, even a little shy.

“Much obliged,” said Coraline, “But we’ve got a few things to work out first.” We may catch up with you later or send a friend to lead you to us.” She wrapped her right arm around Mina’s left one, and the two strolled away towards town.

“Why even go back to town? You know the kind of looks we’ll get, coming down from the mine like we are.”

“Wilhelmina Evangeline Blackwood, don’t you pay no mind to those gawkers! Besides, there are a few things I need to retrieve from my quarters before we can leave.”

“Such as...?”

“You’ll see. Those werewolves weren’t the only skin-changers that came through town recently. I made notes on who they were and where they were headed.”

Mina sighed. Coraline always loved to follow a mystery.

## *Bill Bodden*

Bill has written stories for a number of anthologies, most recently this one and [Darkened Streets](#), which feature some of the same characters. Bill has also written for a number of tabletop role-playing games for White Wolf/Onyx Path, Margaret Weis Productions, Games Workshop, Green Ronin Publishing, Third Eye Games, and Modiphius Entertainment, among others. Bill blogs regularly about life, gaming, writing, and conventions at his website [billbodden.com](http://billbodden.com). You can also find him at [@BillBodden](https://twitter.com/BillBodden) on Twitter.

# Pronghorn Jack

*Christine Morgan*

“Stagecoach!” Hector called, loud as ever he could. “Stagecoach a-comin’, Miz Nellie! Reckon it’s that there bounty hunter what they hired in!”

He about jumped up and down, unbearably excited as the pluming dust cloud did indeed resolve itself into the shape of a four-team drawing the tall coach, its roof laden with trunks and baggage, its driver high on the seat snapping the reins while his lookout rode shotgun beside him.

Someday, he himself might ride, or even drive, one of them. Go places. See places. Places far beyond boring old Joshua Flats! Why, there was a whole wide world out there, just waiting to be seen! Big cities! Riverboats! Locomotives! Gold to be plucked right out of clear-running streams up snowy Alaska way!

But, for now, being only not-quite-thirteen and an orphan to boot, Hector knew he was stuck here right good and proper for the time being. Here in Joshua Flats, this little nowhere town huddled at what his uncle called the ass-end of the Tehachapis. Nothing for miles ‘cepting some borax mines pocked into the foothills, and scrub-grass valleys where a few ranchers tried to make a go of it with hardy breeds of cattle, and hardier breeds of goat.

Two saloons, a church more like a shack than a house of God, the hardware and mining supply store, a mercantile with some rooms to let above for the rare traveler, a smithy what also doubled as a carpentry, a livery what also doubled as a wagonwright’s, a handful of struggling tent-run businesses that shuffled hands faster than a deck of cards, and that was purty-much it for Joshua Flats. Didn’t even have a school, not that Hector minded. Weren’t hardly any other kids around anyways—though that, he did mind; it got powerful tedious on his own.

‘Specially now what with Samuel dead and all.

He pushed away the pang of sorrow. No point dwelling on it, and besides, this bounty hunter would set straight the score. Find whoever—or whatever, depending on who you listened to—had done it, and make the bastard pay. For Samuel, and for them others.

The stagecoach rattle-rolled closer, coming up the trail at a good clip, the driver’s cries to his team audible above the rumble of the wheels and the creak of the springs. Miz Nellie had stepped out on the chuck house’s porch for a look, red-faced from the stove and smelling of boiled ham-hocks. Nor was she alone; folks were leaning out windows and lining the shabby boardwalks, craning to catch a gander.

A real-life bounty hunter, fancy that! In Joshua Flats! A gunslinger like from the dime novels, all lowered hat-brim and steely-cold eyes... sure to put paid to the source of their troubles.

And, maybe, who knew, put them on the map! If it turned out to be some kind of monster doing the killing, instead of a wild animal, vengeful renegade savage, or sun-struck prospector gone desert-mad from the heat... why, they’d have a story to tell then, wouldn’t they? People might come from all over to get themselves a glimpse, bringing notice, and, more important, bringing money.

Downstreet a ways, Hector saw Reverend Caleb standing at the church-shack’s door, frowning fair sad-like

with resigned disapproval. He'd made it known he didn't think answering death with more death was any sort of answer, but them as who'd lost friends and kinfolk to the hill-stalker weren't inclined to listen.

Hector did feel a mite bad for the preacher, who'd been kind to him when his ma took sick after his pa died in a mine collapse. Spoke well at their funerals, Reverend Caleb had. Spoke well at too many funerals lately, though, was the thing. At Samuel's... poor Samuel, a bit younger than Hector but tough and scrappy, found the way he had been...

The way they all had been. Boy, men, and dogs alike. Bloodied. Full of holes. Casket nailed shut. Hector hadn't seen with his own eyes, but his ears were good, and he'd heard plenty of talk while he sculleried at the chuck-house.

Surely, Reverend Caleb had to see they couldn't just sit idly by and do nothing. Elsewise, he'd have far more funerals to speak at, until those still left alive decided to pack up and call it quits altogether on Joshua Flats.

Hector's uncle, being stubborn, would have been among the last to leave, but his uncle was also sweet on Miz Nellie, and if she so decided, then so decided it'd be. Which meant Hector right along with them, as his uncle had taken him in, unsuited as either of them were to such an arrangement. Still, they got by well enough.

"Never argue with a woman," Uncle Wyatt often told Hector. "If you find y'self a good one, partic'ly one as can look after herself? You treat her like the treasure she is, boy, mark m'words." Then, usually after another slug of rotgut, he'd wink and add, "And if she can cook? Oh, hear you me, ain't nothin' else better. Kitchen beats bedroom any ol' time. 'Sides, at night, all cats are grey."

He'd never been quite sure what his uncle meant by that but wasn't about to ask. Miz Nellie could cook, though! Her fried cornbread made grown men weep for joy, and the chicken-and-dumplings she served up for Sunday suppers? Why, no fancy restaurant even in San Francisco could compare!

With a final billow of dust, the stagecoach stopped out front the mercantile, and a flurry of activity commenced as eager helpers rushed over to see to the horses, unload baggage, talk with the driver, and get an up-close look as the passengers began emerging from the compartment.

A couple were familiar, them as who'd gone to Bakersfield on business. Two others had the hardscrabble manner of looking-for-work miners or would-be prospectors. None were steely-eyed gunslingers yet that Hector could see.

He clambered up the porch rail, craning for a view... and damn near fell from his precarious perch as the coach's last occupant sprang lithely down the folding steps, gazing around with avid anticipation. And earning herself no small number of astounded stares in return!

She wore trousers like a man, but no man Hector had ever heard of wore his trousers that snug... or possessed such a pert, firm, peach-perfect backside! Her shirt and vest were also like a man's, but her bosom sure wasn't, swelling proud with creamy flesh and a hint of cleavage revealed. A sleek two-gun rig strapped her curved hips, knife-hilts protruded from the top of one boot. She held a scuffed leather duster draped over one arm, and an equally weathered hat in the other hand. Her hair, hanging in a single thick braid to the small of her back, was the color of a fresh-minted copper penny shining in the sun.

Yes, indeed, young though he was—hadn't even the first fuzz of chin-whiskers yet to speak of—Hector damn near did fall right off the chuck-house's porch rail. Might've gone headfirst into the dry horse trough down below and snapped his dang neck, and barely cared or noticed.

Uncle Wyatt with his sayings how at night all cats were gray was fine and well, but this here was broad daylight! Didn't matter none if she could cook or not, neither. She could burn water to a cinder with no never mind!

Lordy! Lord have mercy! Glory hallelujah! To make even Reverend Caleb stand up and shout in church!

Nor was he, by any means, the only person to have a similar reaction. For the menfolk, anyways... it was some different for the few women in town. Behind him on the porch, Miz Nellie huffed and grumbled something awful. Pretty blonde Susanna from the Lady Luck saloon looked about fit to spit. Old Missus Gibbs, coming out of the mercantile with her parcel-laden husband at her side, caught him gaping pop-eyed, and practically dragged him away by the ear.

The redhead, meanwhile, settled her hat on her head, tipped back at an angle so its shade didn't obscure

her fine, sharp features or clever whiskey-gold eyes. She flashed the whole town a dazzling grin of little white teeth.

"Afternoon, Joshua Flats!" she hailed in a strong, carrying voice. "I hear you've got a varmint needs killin'!"

"You're Vic Renard?"

Time and again, she heard it, and with that very same inflection. Why, if she had a nickel per, she could've hung up her gun belt and retired.

Not that she would, no sirree! Life was too short to spend sitting around.

This little one-horse town may not have looked like much, but her bright gaze devoured it keenly. Along one side rose rugged mountains, rocky and barren but striated with minerals to lend contrast against the clear blue sky. Along the other, the broad bowl of the Mojave spread toward a hazy horizon, and the hazier outline of more mountains beyond.

The few trees she could see were of a kind she'd only heard tell of before, the kind for which Joshua Flats had been named. Right peculiar, they were, thick, oddly limbed and oddly shaped, bristled all over with stiff blade-frond growths. Hardly seemed like proper trees at all. The rest of the sparse and scant foliage was scrub-grass, stickerbushes, some cactus, tenacious ground-hugger succulents, and tumbleweeds.

She took it all in—sights, sounds, smells—before following the local big-wigs into the larger of the two saloons. The Lady Luck proved typical of its breed, with a bar and card tables and a piano corner, stairs leading up to a gallery lined with smaller rooms, the prevailing mingled aromas such as to make her petite nose wrinkle. The central chandelier caught her eye in particular; instead of the more usual repurposed old wagon wheel, its spokes were made up of clusters of antlers, lanterns suspended from their branching points.

Vic studied them, as well as other trophy-antlers mounted on the walls for coat and hat hooks. Bleached deer skulls stared socket-eyed from the back of the bar, above shelves where bottles glittered in the indoors gloom. She thought of the high-desert grasslands occupying the Mojave's westernmost region... Antelope Valley, the place was said to be called, for the herds of pronghorn what roamed there.

Then she thought of the reports, the corpses gored all full of holes. Not eaten on, just run through and left to rot where they lay. Coyotes and hunting-dogs at first, followed by humans. Deliberate-like. Getting more and more vicious with each new attack.

Made sense, all right. Adding up, except for one crucial element what didn't quite fit. The Wind-Runner breeds weren't normally prone to such violent acts. Oh, they might fend off a predator in self-defense, or go after a threat to the younglings of the herd... they could kill, and sometimes did; she'd seen more than one hapless durn fool get his brains dashed out good by a hoof-kick from one of the horse-clanner types... hunting, stalking, and murder, though? That were another matter altogether.

Center-room, several tables had been pushed together for this impromptu conference. Vic tossed her hat to snag on one of the pronghorn wall-hooks, dropped herself into the nearest chair, and accepted with a grateful nod the shot of whiskey set down in front of her by the grizzled barman.

Tossing it back, she smacked her lips, smiled, and turned her attention to those gathered at the table. Ranchers, a couple of mine foremen, the two saloon keepers and some shopkeepers, and one mortally uncomfortable-looking preacher. Upstairs along the gallery railing loitered a few off-duty whores, fanning themselves with their tits half hanging out, and Vic supposed that didn't help none the preacher's state of mind. One busty blonde sure did seem to be shooting venomous eye-daggers Vic's way, but the others appeared curious, even intrigued.

So far, near as she could tell, nobody she'd run across was a Changer. Some hid it well, though, or repressed it down so far, they might as well have been just plain human. Sorry dull way to live, in her opinion. It offered the best of both worlds, why not make the most of it?

Once she'd assured them that yes, she in fact was Vic Renard, the very same Vic Renard they'd sent for, the Joshua Flats big-wigs set about elaborating on what their brief telegraphs had only partially conveyed. They showed her maps, described in greater detail the conditions of the bodies, and—after another round or two of whiskey—shared some increasingly nutty-bird theories.

Tommyknocker earth-goblins disturbed from deep in the mines, she was quick to discount. Likewise, unquiet ghosts and restless dead. One of the ranchers held determined it was a chupacabra. Another insisted there'd been eerie lights in the sky each night before another victim was found, like when those cattle got mutilated over in Nevada. The Lady Luck's proprietor, in a snide manner suggesting no love lost between them, asked the preacher if it might be the work of hell-devils spewed up by Satan.

Had to be an animal. Nonsense, had to be a man, what kind of animal? Well, what kind of man would? Maybe not all the native tribes had been moved along to the missions, were wanting their land back, wanting revenge. Could be a rabid catamount, or one of them giant lizards they found bones of up in Montana.

Back and forth they went, around and around. Finally, Vic thunked her empty glass on the table, and as the barman hustled over with the bottle, she asked, "Tracks? Spoor? Evidence? Anybody actually seen anything?"

"Ground some scratched and roughed up," a rancher said. "Grass tore, dirt kicked about."

"Big," added the foreman of the slightly more prosperous borax mine. "Some of my workers only caught a glimpse in the shadows, but they say it was big. Bigger than any coyote."

"Man-size or more," another rancher agreed. "Kinda lean, kinda gangly. But didn't move like a man. Fast. Low. Hunched over."

"Whatever it is," added the owner of the mercantile and boarding house, "sumbitch can jump. Pete Baxter said it cleared the drywash back of his place at one single bound."

"And where is this Pete Baxter?" Vic inquired.

"Dead," the other saloonkeeper said, flatly.

She arched an eyebrow, inviting more.

"Dead like the others," said the Lady Luck's proprietor, picking up the thread. "Was going to set a trap for it. Wanted it to suffer, see, after what it done to his best hound."

"Loved that hound, he did," someone else muttered.

"Damn Pete Baxter and damn his hound!" One of the ranchers, who'd heretofore stayed quiet, slammed a fist on the table. "What about my boy? You all forgotten my boy? My Samuel? Eleven years old, he was! Eleven!"

"You oughtn't've let him—" another man began.

"I din't let him! He went out of his own!" The rancher shot to his feet, fists clenched, eyes a'blazin. "Must've heard the goats squallin', thought he'd be brave, give a help, be a man. Should've woke me! Why din't he wake me? Them goats was in no danger; it ain't harmed a goat nor a cow nor a single goddamn chicken! It just wanted that no-count numb wit Coombs, more'n likely, after him and those fool 'prentices of your'n—"

"Don't blame me, now!" The gestured-at personage, a smith so burly Vic would have to sniff him close on the sly to make sure he wasn't Ursara, also shot to his feet. "How's I to know what they was up to?"

The rancher kept right on going, just raising it louder. "—got to drinkin' and went on their little midnight huntin' party, took some pot-shots at the thing but couldn't hit the broad side of a barn! So, it goes to hunt them down for some payback, and as it's right there gougin' the fuckin' giblets out of Coombs, along comes my innocent eleven-year-old boy!"

"We are all devastated by your loss—" The preacher tried to intervene, but the rancher ignored him.

"Skewers him through the throat! Then runs off, leaves Samuel chokin' on his own blood, for me and his mother to find as he gurgles his last! And you're all on about Pete Baxter and his goddamn hound—"

Most of them were on their feet now, everyone shouting, chairs tipped over, glasses spilled. Vic hopped up onto the table, drew, and sent a bullet into the ceiling. The sharp report and puff of gun smoke silenced the saloon. Several sets of eyes fixed upon her. The whores, cringing back from the gallery railing, were agog. The barman, behind the bar, held a shotgun not quite yet pointed in her direction, and she hoped she didn't have to plink him one; he'd been good and diligent with the whiskey.

"This ain't the way to solve your problems," she said. "You're scairt, you're upset, but that ain't no reason to go turning on one another. Enemy ain't in here. Enemy's out there somewhere. Now, why'n't you let me do the job you hired me for?"

A long moment passed, a moment of shame-faced foot-shuffling, sullen gaze-avoidance, silence, and

chagrin. The whore's gallery stared, still agog. The barman lowered the shotgun. The preacher exhaled shakily. "Don't recall hiring you to shoot holes in my place," the Lady Luck's proprietor grumbled, without any real venom.

Vic grinned, re-holstering. "No charge," she said. "That one's on me."

*Feral.*

She'd often heard it said sneering like, as if inferior somehow. As if being bound by, and limited by, the call of the moon was more righteous, or noble, or pure. Instead of having the choice, the control.

The freedom.

But, no, there were those as had to make it sound low. Bestial. As if ferals were ruled entirely by raw animal instinct, unthinking and uncivilized. Even monstrous. The way too many white folks talked about the natives, dismissing them as savages, little better than beasts themselves.

Mayhap, one day, they'd all come to see the error of their ways. Not that she'd be holding her breath in the waiting.

Joshua Flats' livery hadn't offered much in the way of selection, but Vic had found a mare who didn't go too skittish at her scent, and rode her borrowed mount out to personally inspect the various scenes of the crimes. She went alone, despite eager offers of company from more than a few young men, glad to have the wind in her face and the wide sky overhead after being cooped up in that stuffy stagecoach.

With the bodies removed and the blood long since dried, she found precious little in the way of clues. Tracks, she was hoping for. Tracks, or, ideally, spoor she could get a good scent from. Those from town would've been searching for boot-heels or moccasins, or the heavy, clawed paw-prints of a big predator.

Vic had a different notion in mind, and the marks she was looking for may well have gone dismissed or unnoticed.

The site of the most recent killing, that of Pete Baxter, appeared promising for clues. His place was a ways from town, hidden in the foothills where stunted, wild fruit trees struggled to thrive amid the scrub-brush and joshuas. It was a humble one-room cabin with attached outbuildings and a plank-fenced yard, and the unmistakable stench of dogs and old slaughter.

Vic's nose twitched as she approached. They'd mentioned the death of his best hound, but what about the others? Last she needed was a neglected, angry pack on her tail. Hearing no barks or growling, smelling nothing fresh, she reckoned someone else must've taken the rest after Baxter's abrupt demise.

She dismounted, looping the mare's reins on a post, and strolled over to the outbuildings. The slaughter-stench, mixed with rot-stench, hit her strongly, so it came as no surprise to find the remains of two antelope hung up. Skinned and gutted, partly butchered, but flyblown now, teeming with maggots. In a corner of the yard sat a small cart of bones, skulls, and antlers.

So. Pete Baxter had fancied himself a hunter, him and his hounds. Meat, hide, and horns to sell or to trade. Likely, the game made it easy for him, too, wandering close in hopes of grazing on pears or apples. Then, bang, dinner on the table, money in the bank.

The drywash was around back and downhill of the cabin, a gritty gully of rock-shards and scree that prob'ly risked flash-flooding during the brief rainy season. At its narrowest, its span was a good fifteen feet. Vic eyed the distance, deciding even with a running start, she didn't care for the odds of making a graceful landing on the other side.

To an antelope, though? A pronghorn? Easy as pie. One of their effortless bounds, up and over, like flying. And those antlers, less elaborate than a stag's or an elk's, would still be sharp and strong enough to get the job done.

And, given the proper motivation, mightn't even a Wind-Runner go vigilante? Go feral in that actual sense of the word, rogue and rabid?

She scoured the ground at the various spots where, according to what she'd been told and the sketch of the property she'd been shown, the incidents had occurred. Where Baxter's hound had been killed, where Baxter had seen the killer leap the drywash, and where Baxter himself had ended up gored to death in the middle of

setting up his would-be trap.

Scratched and roughed up, the rancher back at the Lady Luck had said. Grass tore, dirt kicked about. And, yes, that was what she was seeing... but none of the tracks she was looking for.

Smallish, they would've been. Dainty, almost, compared to the rounded press of a horse or a mule, though larger by far than those of any normal pronghorn. A hard-edged split-hoof, cloven, coming to two distinctive arrowhead points.

Where, then, were they? Even in a between-form, the hind hooves should stay, far more suited for running, leaping, and bounding 'cross drywash gullies than regular tender-flesh human feet.

Or, had whoever it was taken pains to cover the tell-tale tracks? Hence the scratched and roughed up ground, the kicked-about dirt?

But that, again, seemed unlike the Wind-Runner breed. Seemed craftier, sneakier. More like her own kind.

Could the horn-goring be a ruse? A weapon, to conceal the killer's true nature? Possibly frame the Wind-Runners, as well.

After a quick glance to make sure she remained unobserved, Vic removed her hat and her gun belt, then her boots, then her vest. Off went her blouse and trousers, and underthings. Naked, she unbraided her hair, so it fell free around her shoulders.

Takes a thief to catch a thief, her momma had always told her. Likewise, took a trickster to catch a trickster.

She sought the Change, and it came to her with its usual rush of exhilaration. Let the moon-snobs sneer; this was freedom!

As her form shifted, limbs altering, bones and joints reshaping, muscles stretching, blood coursing as liquid fire... as short, dark claws sprouted from the ends of her toes and her fingers, and callused pads formed on her soles and palms... as her face elongated into a pointed, black-tipped, whiskered muzzle... as her ears rose high as alert, furry triangles... as russet hair rippled plush over her creamy-pale skin, and her tail swept full and proud as a banner... as the day, already vibrant, came all the more alive to her senses...

Yes, this was freedom! To dart through the underbrush, fleet and clever, aware of every sound and scent! She heard birds rustling in dry-grass nests, smelled eggs not-yet-hatched and just there for the taking. Her nose stung at the acrid yellow stink of a coyote's territorial urine spray. She veered from a rattler's baleful warning, then recognized the signs of a rodent colony's burrow.

Crouching low, moving stealthily, she crept closer to where the long-tailed nocturnal rats huddled snoozing in their subterranean dugout. Tiny, warm bodies all in a pile. Tiny heartbeats thrumming in rapid flutters. Her haunches twitched. Her fingers flexed. With a springing bound, she covered the distance and landed forepaws-first, her concentrated weight breaking through the layer of earth.

Panic ensued, a mad scurrying panic, rats bolting every which way down a dozen tunnels. But her clawed hands snagged one, brought it up fat and squeaking. Its little bones crunched between her sharp teeth. The hot squirt of fresh blood was finer than any ol' knock of whiskey!

A whiff of carrion led her to the lair of another coyote, one who wouldn't be marking any more territory ever again. An older male, battle-scarred and no doubt savvy, but he'd been gored fuller of holes than a sharpshooter's tin can. A recent kill, too. No scavengers had got to him yet but a few buzzing flies.

Though he hadn't been a Changer, kinship—however distant—was kinship. In her current between-form, her reshaped muzzle didn't lend well to speech, so she settled for silently wishing him to be at peace.

As she turned from the corpse, she felt her nape-fur stand on end and her nostrils flare. The sensation of being watched was undeniable. Watched, and evaluated. Maybe stalked. Maybe hunted.

Vic continued her turn very slowly. She might have been far larger than any ordinary fox, even a full-grown coyote like the old soldier dead behind her, but that didn't leave her none too eager to tangle tooth-and-claw.

She spotted the horns first. Pronghorn antlers, they were, all right, but twice the size of any she'd seen on display in the saloon. Stout and curved and wicked-sharp. Uncomfortably easy to imagine the way they'd feel, punching through skin, gouging deep into flesh.

Next, below the horns, she saw the eyes. Dark. Glinting like chips of polished stone. And the suggestion of a shape, somehow both rangy and compact, hunkered down in the underbrush in a way that seemed contrary to her expectations.

And the... ears?

Great, tall, upright ears, near half as tall as the rising antlers. A dense, fuzzy-soft brownish pelt. A face, snub-muzzled and somewhat prominently buck-toothed... a face part manlike and part...

What would be the word? If hers was vulpine, would his be... lepine? She weren't no formal scholar.

Tilting her head inquisitively, Vic sniffed the air. Sneaky bastard was downwind, of course, but she caught enough to strongly hint at an insane, impossible truth.

Couldn't be! Could it?

She eased forward, keeping low. He stared at her as if he didn't know what to make of her, which was only fair on account of her feeling similar. Legends was all...or so she'd always believed. Yet, the closer she got, the more convinced she became.

Then he jumped, and that clinched it beyond any shadow of any doubt. Powerful hind-legs propelled him out of the bushes with tremendous velocity. Like a damn cannonball! And if he'd gone straight at her, she would've been perforated for sure, but he sailed up and over in a colossal leap. Vic saw him clearly, outlined against the sky, a legend made real right before her very eyes. Little tail stuck out behind him; bunny ears laid flat in the breeze.

The instant he met ground again, he was off like a shot. She was after him just as fast. Not chasing to bite, just not wanting to lose him. She yipped urgently, non-threatening-like, a "wait, wait, let's talk!" kind of yip, though she didn't really expect him to reconsider.

But, when he sprang to a rocky outcrop some yards above her reach, he did stop and turn and peer down at her.

Vic also stopped, huffing from the exertion and the desert heat. She loosed her hold on her between-form, shifting back to human, and crouched there all dusty and disheveled.

"Howdy, stranger," she said, in a mild friendly-type tone. "Or, should I say, cousin?"

He stared, blinked, stared some more.

"Close enough, anyways, I reckon," Vic went on. "Similar breeds, near's I can tell. Gussed you for a Wind-Runner at first."

His antlers shrank, retracting with a bony-gristle crackle. The long ears went with them. His brown pelt faded into tan skin, a shaggy crop of hair, and scruffy whiskers. Still had the prominent front-tooth overbite, and the oddly compact yet rangy build. Filthy as if he'd been rolled down a hill, but not unhandsome. Given a decent bath, he might clean up right nice.

"They..." He spoke like someone who hadn't for quite a time, coughed, and tried again. "They killed my warren. Coyotes. Dogs. Men... with guns. I thought... I thought I was the only one left."

And there went her bounty, her Joshua Flats payday, wheeling away a tumbleweed on the wind. She didn't regret it for one single second.

Found herself a gen-u-ine jackalope, she had.

"I'm Vic," she said. "Vic Renard. Short for Vixen. What's your name?"

"Haven't got one yet. Was still just Litter-Third when the others all died."

"Well, then." She stood up, flashing a smile, and extended a hand. "How's about I call you... Pronghorn Jack?"

## *Christine Morgan*

Christine Morgan has been dubbed "the Martha Stewart of extreme horror" for her creepy crafts and cookies as well as her writing. She recently won the Splatterpunk Award for Best Novel with *Lakehouse Infernal*, a sequel to Edward Lee's series, and her latest release is *The Night Silver River Run Red*, in the Death's Head Press splatter western series. Other works include the Viking-themed collection *The Raven's Table*, the zombie collection *Dawn of the Living-Impaired*, and the pioneer blizzard horror novel *White Death*. A two-time cancer survivor, she currently lives in Portland OR with a bunch of bossy cats and works the overnight shift in a residential psych facility. Her other interests include history, gaming, superheroes, cooking shows, and cheesy disaster movies. She can usually be found online at [christinemariemorgan.wordpress.com](http://christinemariemorgan.wordpress.com), on Twitter as [@CMorganAuthor](https://twitter.com/CMorganAuthor), or on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/christine.morgan.3154](http://www.facebook.com/christine.morgan.3154), and is always glad to hear from readers, writers, and fellow weirdos.

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