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## **POUND OF FLESH**

by

Rob Armstrong

When the dust and debris settled from the dynamite explosion, Chief Engineer Perry moved out from behind the shelter of a boulder and pointed to the black abyss. "We've got a mess, boys. There's a damn cave running underneath the rail bed!"

"We're already behind schedule. In six months we need to be in Promontory Summit, Utah, for the meet-up with Central Pacific," Mr. Tilment said while diligently sweeping the kicked-up dust from his gray suit. As the western territories' vice president of Union Pacific, it was his assignment to make sure the transcontinental railroad project was successful—no matter what.

"Let's hope the cave is small enough to backfill, else we have to construct a curve to the left, which will burn time," Perry said.

"Send in men with lanterns to inspect," Mr. Tilment barked in response. "Not a single minute can be wasted."

Perry shook his head. "Not today—dusk approaches, maybe tomorrow. We need to let this formation settle; I don't want to risk a collapse while my men are down there. The company is paying me to be safe, not to get workers killed."

"The company is paying you for results," his superior stated coldly. In a lower voice he

added, "And cheap labor is expendable."

"It's not what the Good Book teaches," Perry retorted.

Frustrated, Mr. Tilment shouted over to Dimmel, the sergeant first class of the U.S. Army platoon assigned to protect the rail crew. "I need you to send in a couple of your men and determine the size of that cave, Sergeant."

Dimmel came to Mr. Tilment's side and removed his hat. "Sir, I don't mean no disrespect, but the U.S. Army is only here to protect from hostiles. We aren't part of the railroad crew."

This only served to make the vice president of the company tighten his jaw. Union Pacific was paying Lieutenant Fuller handfuls of secret money to carry out Mr. Tilment's wishes vigorously; therefore, he expected compliance.

"If I have to get on my horse and ride into Dalton to speak to your lieutenant about your unhelpfulness over a matter of national priority, I'm sure he will strip you of your rank on the spot and make you dig a latrine so deep that it will take ten years to fill it up with your platoon's detritus."

Dimmel was about to object but swallowed his words. He had already surmised that the lieutenant had compromised loyalties based on his biased behavior during their current assignment. There would be no advantages to him refusing these orders. After Dimmel called over three soldiers from their posts, Mr. Tilment nodded his approval.

The assembled group—led by the reluctant sergeant—scrambled into the jagged hole of the rocky hill. The cave's ceiling collapse had created a natural slope of debris and boulders, which allowed them to quickly reach the bottom, which was some twenty feet below the surface.

Dimmel called up to Perry and Mr. Tilment, who stood at the rim of the entrance to the cave, “So far it doesn’t look too big. We’ll go deeper for a look-see.”

The sergeant took the lantern from the soldier to his left and walked forward, stopping when his boots crushed what seemed to be dry kindling from the crisp snap it made underfoot. After looking down, Dimmel recoiled slightly, discovering that he’d trodden on human bones.

“There are more bones over here,” said Jim, the other soldier with a lantern. “Do you think it’s an Indian burial site?”

“Not by the clothes they were wearing,” Dimmel responded. “These look like the clothes worn by ranchers—flannels, jeans, boots, and such. See, right there is a Stetson. These bones have been rotting for quite some time.”

Jim pointed his light rightward. Surprisingly, a tall, emaciated man held up a heavy rock mere steps away. His clothes were in tatters, his boots shredded. The stranger’s eyes were glazed over, and his face was contorted into a leer.

“Are you alright?” Jim called out. “Have you been trapped in this cave?”

Without warning the unknown man lunged forward with unnatural speed and the rock aloft above his head. Jim flinched and cried out. Moments later the heavy implement crushed Jim’s skull, an act that was accompanied by the sickening sound of crushed bone and flesh being pulped. His body pitched back; the lantern crashed to the stone floor and erupted into a puddle of flame.

Dimmel drew his Bowie knife and pointed it toward the killer. None of them had brought their guns down into the cave. “Clear out.”

A thick arm came from behind him and encircled his neck, crushing his throat and

starving him of oxygen. He stabbed at the arm with the knife, plunging its steel into flesh until it dug into bone.

The attacker wrested the knife away with his free hand using an inhuman level of strength that mangled the bones of the sergeant's hand. Just inches from his ear, Dimmel's killer croaked gruffly, "The name's Jasper Wallace, and my ranch hands formally welcome you to the bone orchard."

Dimmel's stolen Bowie knife—the very one his father gave him as a gift when he came of age—sank into his stomach and then disemboweled him. His vision blurred. His heart raced. Then he was pushed to the ground upon his own fallen entrails. Before his vision melted away entirely, the dying man saw five of what he believed to be ghouls clamber the rocky debris toward the train crew and the rest of his soldiers.

"Lord, the Almighty," Perry screamed, "it's Hell unleashed!" He called for his workers to run as the remaining two soldiers in the cave also died violently.

Mr. Tilment, a Union veteran of the Battles of Manassas and Fort Donelson, quickly acted when he saw the approaching danger. He reached for his Derringer from the holster beneath his jacket and fired it at the closest attacker. The bullet slammed into the chest of the man-thing that called itself Jasper Wallace, tearing away a chunk of skin and leaving a scorch mark, yet it did not slow his ascent from the cave. The fiend had a thin face, dark hair, and a lanky frame. Like the other four with him, Wallace had a wide, deep ringlet of red soreness around his neck. When he reached the top and stopped, the owner of the Wallace Ranch shouted at Mr. Tilment, who stood with Chief Engineer Perry, "Which way is the town of Dalton?"

The remaining Union soldiers were in a semicircle behind Mr. Tilment and Perry,

weapons at the ready.

Mr. Tilment's hand was raised to keep the soldiers from firing. He needed to understand this new potential threat to the railroad project before he had all of them killed. Men, such as these pathetic creatures were, were too dangerous, and he needed to know if there were more like them in the area. "Halt, all of you! Or the soldiers will shoot all five of you down where you stand. Identify yourselves and let us know why you killed our soldiers and how you found yourselves in that cave."

"And how the hell did you not die from that bullet?" Perry said.

Mr. Tilment holstered his one-shot Derringer.

"Don't know about the bullet or why we don't eat no more—been down there for a long time in the dark. We feel different—stronger, better. We was hung by Sheriff Bartlett and his posse out of Dalton a while back. The whole damn town turned on us. Then we woke up trapped in that cave and been there ever since. There was no trial and no evidence against us except for the cow-pie load that Colton Child made up to steal my grazing land for its water rights. Sheriff Bartlett is on Child's payroll," Wallace said accusingly as his men reached down to pick up rocks.

"Looks like we have a bit of a standoff, but don't you boys do anything you'll regret," Mr. Tilment said. He still had not gotten all the information he wanted, so he still kept his hand up to prevent the soldiers from seeking vengeance. No doubt they wanted payback for their comrades.

"We don't regret much now that the shadows whisper to us," Wallace said. There was an ambivalence to the curious statement that hung in the air.

“What does that mean?” Perry whispered to Mr. Tilment.

“Just crazy talk—all of their behavior is odd. Maybe there is a back way into this cave, and they are playing us, trying to get our sympathy. Wallace and crew won’t matter in a few minutes,” Mr. Tilment whispered to Perry. Aloud he said, “I know of Rancher Child; what did he say you did?”

“Said I stole his cattle and switched the cattle brand on them. Child cut the wire between our pastures, let his cattle run wild along my river. He done the rebranding to the cows and figured if I was gone, he could buy my land cheap at auction. So is Sheriff Bartlett and that weasel Child still in Dalton? I sent my boy to ride for the federal marshal to help us get justice, save our land, and throw them two scum in jail,” Wallace said.

“That’s a big ball of yarn to untangle for any marshal, my friend,” Mr. Tilment said. “Both of them are still in Dalton, which lies about five miles down the track behind me. I never heard about any federal intervention from a while ago nor anything about your son. Are there any more of you?”

“Nope,” Wallace said casually. “The shadows say that we’re enough to kill the whole damn town and bury their carcasses in the cave. They all deserve to be reaped for their sins. Appreciate your pointing the way. Give my regards to the shadows. We’re done with you.”

“And I with you,” Mr. Tilment said as he lowered his hand.

Behind him a cry went up as twelve Austrian-made Lorenz rifles fired in unison at Wallace and his men. The bullets ripped into pale flesh, shredding skin, puncturing an eye, smashing teeth, and snapping leg muscles. A moment after the volley of shots, the Wallace crew hurled their collected rocks with deadly accuracy, despite their wounds. The first projectiles

killed two soldiers instantly with all-too-well-placed hits to the head and further shots that injured four others, severely damaging arms and legs.

The remaining railroad workers—those who had not heeded Perry’s first call to run—leaped out from their hiding spots and tried to flee the hilltop. One of the Wallace crew named Lucas, who’d lost an eye to a gunshot, chased after them, swinging a collected pickaxe that cleaved skulls and impaled the meaty parts of their bodies until none escaped alive.

A call went out from the remaining sergeant for his dwindling ranks to affix their bayonets; the Lorenz was a one-shot rifle, meaning the time and distance from the enemy prevented a quick reload. During the initial chaos Mr. Tilment had turned to run for his horse. He needed to ride into Dalton and request that the lieutenant call for reinforcements from the troop stationed in the town. For the moment all was lost.

Perry gripped Mr. Tilment by the arm. “Where are you going? Please don’t leave me. I’m coming with you.”

Mr. Tilment swung a roundhouse punch that knocked Perry off-kilter. The train executive pushed the chief engineer with a shove of his foot toward Jasper Wallace, who now looked toward Mr. Tilment with a homicidal leer. “I need you to sacrifice yourself, Chief.”

Wallace lunged at the stumbling Perry with savage fury and twisted his neck until it snapped. Before the man succumbed to the onslaught, while his head was momentarily between the meaty hands of Wallace, he saw that the rancher’s eyes were beginning to shine red in the fast-dimming light of dusk.

Amidst the chaos Mr. Tilment mounted his horse and rode hard for the town of Dalton.

Seeing Lucas’s success, the Wallace crew grabbed pickaxes, shovels, and claw bars and

beset upon the soldiers, who fell into a closed, defensive formation. Holden howled through his broken teeth and plunged his heavy claw bar into the chest of the first soldier he reached.

Instantly two bayonets pierced his body, yet he felt nothing. Zane, his closest friend, used a coal shovel to slice the throat of one of Holden's attackers; with the backswing he crushed the skull of the other.

In a matter of minutes, the soldiers lay broken and dead upon the train tracks, blood and gore staining their blue-wool sack coats and gray trousers. The moon edged above the horizon with the sun's passing into the west. Agleam in the slick of blood that was then highlighted in the first moonlight, Jasper Wallace stared across the plain before him at the dim lights of Dalton and thought of revenge as well as what he had lost. He felt growing energy within him that healed him of his wounds and heard the siren whispers of the shadows telling him to fill the cave with the bodies of the slain. With as many as he could kill, for as long as he was able.

At a breakneck pace and with a heightened feeling of panic, Mr. Tilment reached the small mining town of Dalton. Lieutenant Fuller was a drunk who enjoyed playing cards; the Union Pacific vice president knew he could be found at Twitmyer's Saloon rather than the Catholic church, which served as a de facto barracks while the company was in the county. Jasper Wallace and his crew were a clear danger to the intercontinental railroad project. They needed to be put down like stray dogs. How was it possible they had survived the hangman's noose and a long period of time in that cave? Maybe all of their stories were a lie? If he was not a man who relied on cold, hard logic, Mr. Tilment might consider that Wallace and his ranchers were supernatural creatures; yet that was foolish to even consider, regardless of what he'd seen with his own eyes.



Before Mr. Tilment's frantic entrance into Twitmyer's Saloon, Molly Twitmyer, newly a widow and now the saloon's proprietor, poured a shot and gave a bottle of cheap whiskey to Harlan Stoudt for two-bit. Stoudt was the deputy sheriff of Dalton, but as far as she was concerned, he was a murderer and a thug who followed the orders of the sheriff. The deputy murdered her husband not more than six months ago in the storeroom behind the bar she now tended. The official statement from the town's sheriff was that her husband had been strangled in an after-hours robbery gone wrong by two gold prospectors from Louisiana. The faux murderers were said to have committed suicide by hanging themselves in jail cells not long after the attempted theft. Of course, Molly did not believe this reported turn of events was true.

After her husband Henry's funeral, she read in his diary that Colton Child, the largest landowner rancher in southern Utah, had designs to purchase the saloon as part of his expansion plans to control commerce in Dalton. It was not hard to connect the dots that Child had the sheriff and the deputy kill her husband when he refused a sale; the lawmen were on his leash. Molly needed to figure out how to raise enough money to get out of Dalton without selling the saloon to Child. For now, the wealthy rancher was being overly friendly to her, presumably as a first move toward wooing her into completing a sale.

If she did not have her daughter, Chloe, to look after, she would burn down the saloon with Child, Sheriff Bartlett, and Deputy Stoudt inside it while holding a gun to their sorry, good-for-nothing heads. She would be willing to go to Hell as long as she had them as company in those torturous depths.

Across from Molly in the nearly crowded space, U.S. Army Lieutenant Fuller lost another hand of poker to Colton Child. The more the officer drank, the worse he played poker,

but he was too inebriated to make that connection yet again. Sheriff Bartlett guffawed at seeing the lieutenant lose once more. “It’s a good thing the U.S. Army provides three square meals and a place to sleep; otherwise I think you might be shoveling out and sleeping in a barn tonight.”

Angered by the comment, Lieutenant Fuller pounded the table. He was about to shout at the sheriff, but Deputy Stoudt came up behind him and placed the whiskey bottle he had just purchased on the table. “Here you go—no reason for anger, Lieutenant. It’s just cards among friends. Maybe you can take my money.” Stoudt winked at the sheriff. “Mr. Child, would you care to deal me in on this next round?”

“I’d be happy to, Deputy Stoudt. I don’t think the lieutenant is quite done with us yet. I have a feeling he will have a change of luck and be the one taking our money next,” Mr. Child said with a sly smile.

As soon as the first chips were thrown into the poker pot, Mr. Tilment burst through the oak batwing doors of the saloon. After spying the lieutenant and the sheriff through the crowd, he rushed to their table. “The train crew was attacked. Everyone, including the soldiers, is presumed dead.”

The news sent a jolt of sobriety through Lieutenant Fuller. “Who attacked? How many?”

Mr. Tilment took a swig from the bottle of whiskey on the table. “We were doing an excavation up on Saltbrush Plateau and unearthed a cave. Sergeant Dimmel and his men got attacked and killed in the cave by Jasper Wallace and a few of his ranch hands.” He detailed what else transpired as the men at the poker table shook their heads and were slack-jawed.

After hearing the whole story, Child’s demeanor turned from amused to serious. Child pointed through the entrance to the Twitmyer Saloon. “I don’t buy it. That thieving dog Wallace

and his crew got hung right over there in the square five years ago. There is no such thing as men coming back from the dead, except in the Bible. You must have heard him wrong. Maybe they were trying to scare you, hoping you would believe them to be ghosts or some devils.”

“And how did five unarmed men kill over twenty armed and trained U.S. soldiers? I may have been drinking but not enough to believe what you’re saying,” the lieutenant said. “I fear the sheriff and his deputy here put you up to this as a prank to brighten our poker evening with a wild tale.” The lieutenant smiled while slurring his words as he sipped whiskey. “Well done, Mr. Tilment. Should the railroad no longer need your services, I suspect you will get rave reviews as an actor.”

“Sir, you know me to be a sober man. Never once have you heard me make or be part of a jest,” Mr. Tilment responded. “There are dead soldiers on that hilltop, and the villains who killed them are coming this way, bent on sowing violence in Dalton. The town is in mortal danger. They specifically called out Mr. Child and the sheriff.”

“Mr. Tilment, I believe you that violence has occurred,” Sheriff Bartlett said. “But as Mr. Child said, these rogues are playing dead men to scare you. I saw the gravedigger take Wallace and his men away shortly after being pronounced dead.”

The deputy stood up and pointed to an older, disheveled man who stood at the bar nursing his drink. “In fact, we can ask the gravedigger now; he’s right over there.” Stoudt called for the man to come over.

Boris Andrik limped to the table. He was a shoemaker by trade, yet to make ends meet, he dug graves away from town when the wages were not high enough to entice the usual local men who performed this duty. Mostly he buried paupers or strangers who met their deaths during

violent altercations or at the hands of convicts.

“A long time back, after we hung that scoundrel Jasper Wallace and his boys, did you take them out to Saltbrush Plateau and bury them?” Sheriff Bartlett said.

“Yes, sir, Sheriff,” Andrik mumbled. “I threw them down into a cave I found up there. It was easier than digging fresh holes for each of them. I don’t break my back for murderers or thieves. Years earlier I’d thrown some poor dead folks in the same place.”

“If you just threw all those bodies down in the cave, how did it get covered up? We laid dynamite all over there to flatten the area for the rail bed,” Mr. Tilment said. “There was no cave when we surveyed.”

“There wouldn’t be evidence of a cave after I was done. Back then I had my own dynamite. I found a box of it left behind when one of the local mines was abandoned. I brought a hill down over the entrance ’cause I’m superstitious. I didn’t want their evil souls to escape,” Andrik said.

Lieutenant Fuller unsteadily rose to his feet and called to his aide.

“Go back to the church and round up a dozen men on horseback. Tell them to meet me with my horse out front in twenty minutes,” he said to the rest of the table. “Mr. Tilment, you will lead me back to the site, and I hope the sheriff and his deputy will join us. We need to get to the bottom of this situation, since it is not considered a joke anymore, and it may be that many of my men are dead.”

As most of the table rose to leave, Jasper Wallace entered the saloon with Lucas and Zane. All of the dead cowboys had vibrant red eyes, giving them an unholy aura. They were covered in blood and gore and ominously held knives and pistols in their well-worn hands.

Someone in the crowd shouted, “Holy Ghost, it’s Wallace back from the dead!” A few of the women present screamed.

Wallace had a maniacal countenance as his eyes roamed the room. “We’ve come to Dalton for our revenge—we take our pound of flesh for the sins you committed against us. All of you were silent as the sheriff and his men hung us for the lie that Colton Child told to make himself richer. Tonight you will join the shadows.”

A voice shouted, “Eat lead, demon!”

Gunfire erupted from all corners of the room, which was directed at the trio of ghastly newcomers. Numerous people ran for the back entrance or sought cover behind tables or the oak bar, which lined the width of the saloon.

As Wallace spoke, Mr. Tilment eased backward between people in the crowd; he pulled at Lieutenant Fuller’s arm, hoping he would follow. The officer understood and backstepped with his aide. Mr. Tilment saw that the terrible wounds inflicted on Wallace and his men on the hilltop were now healed, which led a cold chill to run down the length of his spine; logically he could not think of a reason for their miraculous healing. Determinedly clinging onto his past beliefs, he repeatedly muttered to himself, “There are no evil spirits.”

When the shooting started Sheriff Bartlett tipped his circular, oak table over and pulled Child down behind it. Deputy Stoudt instinctively followed suit and drew his Colt revolver.

“I can’t believe he’s back from the dead,” Child said, shaking his head slowly. “How can that be? We hung him. He’s a devil incarnate.”

Boris Andrik sought cover behind the bar. He crawled on the floor between the shooting townspeople and those running away. A few people tripped over him, spilling to the floor with a

string of curses on their lips. Boris had been in other life-threatening situations when he was a Hungarian soldier in the War of Austrian Succession many years earlier. He ascribed to the practice of not drawing attention to yourself when the shooting started; it was always better to be where people were not looking.

Boris discovered Molly and her daughter huddled on the floor when he made it behind the bar. Chloe had her hands cupped over her ears and her eyes were closed, while her mother held two revolvers upright, ready to shoot. Next to them the war veteran recognized Father Doyle, the cowboy missionary who had come up from Texas on an assignment to spread the Catholic faith in Utah. He was rumored to be a good boxer, a heavy drinker, and quite the marksman. Occasionally he aided the U.S. marshal with outstanding warrants and bounties.

“Father, promise me you’ll take care of Chloe if I don’t make it out of here,” Molly said.

“Your odds of getting out of here alive are just as good as mine, Molly,” Father Doyle said. “But if we work together, maybe we can both escape with Chloe. I think God would like that plan better.”

“Sounds like we got a compact, Father,” Molly affirmed, pointing at a door behind the bar with one of her guns. “Behind there is the storage room. We can get out through a skylight window if we can get in there. Let’s wait for the shooting to slow and then make our break.”

Father Doyle nodded.

The first volley of bullets struck Wallace and his ranch hands violently, rocking their bodies to and fro like ships bobbing on a restless sea. Dozens of shots struck them, punching holes through their bodies. They felt no pain. Just as they felt nothing when the bayonets had impaled them earlier. A haze of smoke filled the room from the gunpowder—shouts mixed with

the gunshots to create a din of battle that was both beautiful and mesmerizing. The shadows were thirsty and called to the dead cowboys to kill.

Lucas and Zane gleefully returned fire with the pistols they had taken from the dead soldiers near the cave. Their accuracy with the guns was unnatural; all they had to do was think about who they should hit and it happened reflexively. Their attackers fell one by one in line with their synchronized efficiency of shooting and reloading. Their targets howled in pain; the dead they made fell inert to the wood decking of the saloon, lying in their own spilled blood.

Wallace focused his attention on Colton Child and Sheriff Bartlett from the onslaught. He saw Bartlett flip the table and knew the trio cowered behind it. The only time he fired his pistol was to kill somebody in his path toward the men who had vilified him by accusing him of stealing cattle. As soon as Wallace peered over their table, Sheriff Bartlett and Stoudt unloaded their guns at him. The bullet holes they created were large; in fact, Wallace's face and chest looked like a pack of wolves had chewed upon him.

As Bartlett and Stoudt hastily reloaded their guns, Wallace holstered his weapon, snatched Child from the ground, and gruffly pulled the sobbing man up to his feet with one hand. Wallace held a Bowie knife in his other hand. "You're next, Sheriff Bartlett, after Child."

"Please don't do this. I'll give you back your land, say I was the one who lied," Child pleaded. "I've got family."

"I assume you already killed all of my family when no one was looking," Wallace said. "And as for the land you stole, I'm dead. I don't need land anymore."

Wallace slashed the Bowie knife across Child's neck, and blood spurted as his victim weakly tried to stem it with his hands. Before he fell Wallace grabbed him under the shoulder

and sawed his head off.

Sheriff Bartlett placed his pistol against Wallace's temple and pulled the trigger. A gaping wound opened and sprayed out brains, yet he ignored the head injury and lifted Child's fallen head by the hair. He threw it across the room against the large mirror behind the bar. The decapitated head cracked the mirror and fell, leaving several bloody trails to trickle down across its surface. For a few seconds the fighting paused as the barbarity of this act punctuated the unfathomable violence in the saloon.

Molly bolted upright from the bar, and Father Doyle followed her lead. Seeing the gruesome scene that was playing out between Wallace, Sheriff Bartlett, and Deputy Stoudt, she aimed one of her guns at the sheriff and fired without hesitating; the bullet struck the sheriff in the back of the head, and the lawman pitched forward toward the long-dead man.

With Chloe in tow, Molly and Father Doyle went through the door behind the bar into the storage room. Noting his chance to escape the mayhem, Boris crawled after them.

The sight of the sheriff falling ignited the townspeople into a panicked need to fight for their survival. The pandemonium of death that Lucas and Zane started was continuing despite their injuries. In a resolute way they moved, unencumbered, across the saloon, shooting and slitting throats.

Wallace tossed the sheriff's body aside as a coordinated group of men attacked him with table legs and chairs. Realizing that Wallace was undefeatable, Deputy Stoudt did not stay to become his next victim. He pushed and shoved his way toward the bar and used the exit that Molly Twitmyer had conveniently shown him.

Meanwhile, Mr. Tilment and Lieutenant Fuller managed to be at the center of the throng



of frightened people who stampeded toward the back entrance of the saloon. The lieutenant's aide had fallen behind; the last the officer saw of the diminutive man was him being crushed underfoot by dozens of people.

When the mob spilled into the open air behind the saloon, they were met by the last two members of the Wallace ranch-hand crew—Holden and Buck. The two dead cowboys each had two pistols, and when the first dozen people ran out of the saloon, they stepped out from behind a woodshed and unloaded their weapons. The people who followed the first group out of the saloon tripped unwittingly over the recently slain and wounded. Instead of reloading their weapons, Holden and Buck tossed them aside and attacked with their knives, cutting and slashing with unbridled fury.

In spite of his generous whiskey intake that night, Lieutenant Fuller had enough clarity of thought to realize what was happening when he exited the saloon. He pushed Mr. Tilment away from the whirling knives by Holden and Buck, and drawing his sidearm, the lieutenant repeatedly fired at the ranch hands.

When he saw the amount of damage his bullets had done and recognized the fact that they had still failed to slow Holden and Buck, he said, "Ye gods, who are these men?"

"I see them now as the devils they are," Mr. Tilment responded.

Holden, with surprising speed, lunged at the lieutenant. With a slash of his knife, he dismembered the officer's shooting hand. The pistol and gun fell to the ground, and he stumbled back against the wall of the saloon's stables. Holden merely howled and surged forward toward him. Instinctively, despite the blinding pain emanating from his arm, the lieutenant reached up with his remaining hand for a lit lantern that hung above him and swung it at the dead cowboy

like a mace.

The glass globe shattered against the skull of the former ranch employee and drenched him in lantern oil. The oil ignited and the dead cowboy became a torch. Holden furiously spun around while patting the flames across his body; despite his efforts, the fire engulfed him. He fell to the ground, having been destroyed.

Lieutenant Fuller pulled off his shirt and wrapped the bleeding stump of his arm.

In the meantime Buck witnessed the demise of Holden. He sneered and ran toward Mr. Tilment, thinking the railroad executive was the cause. In response, Tilment reached for another lantern and swung it before him, shouting, "Stay away, fiend!"

Buck ignored the warning and dove toward him with a tackle strike. Mr. Tilment brought the lantern down hard against Buck's back; the globe shattered and the oil spilled across his back. However, the flame had been snuffed out when the glass broke, meaning the dead cowboy did not burst into flames.

Buck pinned Mr. Tilment to the ground with his legs and repeatedly began to punch him until his sternum shattered and his ribs caved inward. The last things that the Union Pacific man saw before he died were the lieutenant running toward the church and the bloody hands of Buck tearing his organs from his body.

Molly and her daughter, Chloe, along with Father Doyle and Boris, carefully moved between the town's buildings toward the church at the end of the main street. It was there that the U.S. Army had set up their temporary barracks. The town had agreed to temporarily vacate its place of worship while the intercontinental railroad project was in the vicinity, and the U.S. government paid handsomely for the privilege. As they approached they could see many soldiers

hurriedly running around, preparing for the inevitable attack by Wallace and his men. Father Doyle thought seeking shelter at the church was the safest option. The troops had brought with them one of the newly created Gatling guns, and he understood that it could shoot two hundred rounds per minute if a hand crank was turned.

The group was now close to the army compound, which was surrounded by waist-high sandbags. Before Father Doyle hailed the sentry and they left the protected cover of the town's bank, Boris stopped them. "Father Doyle, I'd like to make a confession."

"Of course, Boris, but let's get into safety first. We have a young child to protect," Father Doyle said.

"I insist that it is now. I need you to tell the soldiers that they will be fighting the Devil's servants tonight," Boris said.

"What are you talking about?" Molly spat harshly. "This can wait."

Father Doyle raised a hand for calm.

"Tell me quickly. Anything to do with the Devil needs to be understood. We fight his evil every day."

Boris swallowed hard before he spoke. "In the northern part of Hungary, my grandmother was the protector of our village. She had the knowledge to create elixirs and charms of great power."

"I don't believe in such things," Molly said.

"There is much we don't understand, Molly. It is in ignorance that the Devil can prosper," Father Doyle retorted.

"One of the elixirs she created was to be a curse on your enemies upon their death. I

foolishly stole a vial of it before I came to America. I regret it now. Just a few drops of this potion on the lips would bring them back from the land of the dead. They would be ghouls, servants of the Devil, forever in rage because they cannot kill to serve their master—eventually they go mad. If you buried your enemy soon after giving them the elixir, they would be trapped, imprisoned, and suffer for all the ages. Only fire can destroy a Devil’s servant. To be buried alive is the worst punishment, even worse than being in hell,” Boris said. “The elixir is unholy—death magic—and I will never use it again. I’m deeply sorry to God for all the harm I’ve caused to the people of Dalton.”

“I don’t know what to say. Your deeds are a heavy sin to carry, Boris. How many people have you damned in this way?” Father Doyle said.

“Perhaps two dozen. Maybe more. All buried alive. When I’m given the task to bury a killer of the innocent, I use the elixir on them. Wallace and his crew were the only ones I used it on who did me personal harm,” Boris said. “I learned from my grandmother that evil always needs to be punished.”

“What did Wallace do to you?” Molly said.

“I married an Indian woman in secret. Wallace and his men accidentally shot her while they hunted illegally on reservation land,” Boris said.

“I’m sorry,” Molly said.

“I’m not,” a voice said from the shadow of the building. “This lying scum is the reason why most of this town will die tonight.”

Deputy Stoudt stepped into the dim light cast by the bank’s evening lanterns. He had his gun out. “Molly Twitmyer, you’re under arrest for the murder of Sheriff Bartlett. Boris, whatever

your last name is, you are under arrest for a whole bunch of wicked things that the judge and lawyers will take a lot of time to figure out. But, in the end, both of you will hang. I'm taking you to the jailhouse now. Let the army take care of Wallace and his crew."

"Deputy, I don't think this is the right time for this. Let's get to safety first within the church," Father Doyle said.

"Don't interfere with the law," Deputy Stoudt said. "The only reason I'm not shooting them dead now is because you're a priest."

Father Doyle was about to speak, but Boris ran toward the deputy with a knife he pulled from his waistband. "Get to safety."

The deputy fired his gun into Boris's midsection, making the shoemaker fall to the ground as he moaned in pain.

"A stomach wound is painful. It takes a long time to die from it," Deputy Stoudt cackled.

Molly drew her gun while the deputy was distracted and shot the lawman in the back of the head. "That's for killing my husband, Henry."

She did not care that Deputy Stoudt had not heard the reason why she shot him. Dead was dead, and that was all she really cared about when it came to the murderers of the man she'd loved. Contemplating what had just happened, Father Doyle was speechless. He pointed the way toward the church. After identifying themselves to the sentries, they were taken to the cellars beneath the religious building; there they were joined by the remaining townspeople who had so far survived that night.

Lieutenant Fuller leaned against the Gatling gun. The weapon was a technological leap forward in terms of lethality, and the Union Pacific railroad company had both paid for it and

given it as a gift to the U.S. Army for his unit. The officer was bleary-eyed, exhausted, and in great pain. Understandably, the doctor had wanted him to lie down and take morphine for his discomfort, yet he would only allow a medic to bandage his wound for the moment as he did not want to pass his command on to somebody else. It was his job to protect Dalton; the U.S. Army needed to stand its ground and conquer the enemy that had ravaged the town.

Lieutenant Fuller called out to the two lines of men in position behind the rows of sandbags. “Tonight we face nothing less than Hell itself. Four men with extraordinary strength will be marching down Main Street, intent on taking our encampment. The U.S. Army is the only thing that can stop them from killing the people of Dalton in our charge. I need you to give the full measure of yourselves to defend this church.”

A full-throated cheer came from the soldiers. The man in charge was grateful for their enthusiasm, but he knew that many of them would have already deserted if they had witnessed the horrific slaughter in Twitmyer’s Saloon.

Lieutenant Fuller did not have to wait long for Wallace and his remaining three men to walk down Main Street; each carried what appeared to be a sack. At that hour the moonlight was overhead, and visibility was better than he would have earlier thought. From the fluidity of their gait, the officer deduced that the damage inflicted upon them had generally healed already. Whatever evil animated them into resurrection was making them nearly invincible. Lieutenant Fuller made the sign of the cross; he’d need otherworldly protection of his own.

When the dead cowboys came within shouting distance, the officer thought there would be a demand for their surrender. When none came, he told his men to prepare to fire. He nodded to the Gatling gun crew. “Wait for my direct order to you and then start shooting.”

Wallace stopped walking, followed by his ranch hands. Then they all reached into their bags and threw what appeared to be a child's ball toward the line of soldiers. Before the first impact of what they had thrown hit, Lieutenant Fuller knew that they were the bloody heads of Child, Sheriff Bartlett, and two other townspeople. The body parts landed with a sickening plop behind the sandbags, rattling many of the younger soldiers who caught sight of them.

The dead cowboys charged forward with a bloodcurdling battle cry, which sounded like it was emitted from the Devil's lair. Wallace and his crew closed the distance toward the soldiers with blinding speed. Lieutenant Fuller roared, "Soldiers, commence firing! Send these dogs back to Hell!"

Two dozen rifles fired and clouds of smoke erupted across the line.

Many of the bullets hit, yet none seemed to slow the advance of the dead cowboys. Lieutenant Fuller called for the Gatling gun to fire. A rapid series of shots streamed out of its muzzle amidst a flurry of flashing sparks and smoke. The operator swept the mounted gun back and forth, peppering Main Street with its discharges as he turned the weapon's handle to spin its mechanisms. The Gatling gun's larger-caliber ammunition slowed the attackers, tearing flesh and splitting bone with mechanical precision.

Suddenly the large gun stopped; it required a reload.

One of the ranch hands fell, his right knee seemingly shattered, while another one bucked backward and dropped into the dirt—the two injured men struggled to rise. Lieutenant Fuller flashed a hand signal with his good arm. A half-dozen men came out from the shadows of the buildings along both sides of Main Street. In short order the two injured ranch hands were doused with lantern oil and set on fire.

Heedless of what had happened to his ranch hands behind him, Wallace and the man to his left continued to run toward the Gatling gun, determined to stop it from firing again. While it was unloading its first volley of destruction, the line of soldiers reloaded their one-shot Lorenz rifles and fired again. Wallace and Lucas absorbed the brunt of the second volley of bullets but not without it having an effect. Lieutenant Fuller could see that both dead cowboys were covered with deep wounds that exposed their muscles, tendons, and innards.

Just as the Gatling crew loaded another magazine into the top of the machine gun, Wallace and Lucas leaped over the sandbags and beset them. The undead leader plunged his Bowie knife into the throat of the triggerman while Lucas eviscerated the other two men who stood with him.

Lieutenant Fuller stumbled backward onto the ground and yelled, “Bayonets, gentlemen. The devils have overrun us. Fight to the last man—set them ablaze!”

A half-hearted cheer came from the soldiers.

Wallace turned to Lieutenant Fuller upon hearing his command. The officer cringed when he saw Wallace close up in the moonlight; the former rancher looked like a reanimated rotting corpse. Between broken and bloody teeth, Wallace hissed, “I hope they fight to the last man. I would expect nothing less from the U.S. Army.”

The lieutenant awkwardly fumbled for his gun with his less dominant hand, even though he realized that he and his men would be dead shortly, regardless of what any of them did next.

Twenty townspeople huddled in fear in the cellars below the church as they heard the horrific noises of the battle raging outside the wooden clapboard church. Some of their number were small children who muffled their cries because their mothers told them to stay quiet. The



owner of the general store—a man named Bart—tried to offer comfort to people, half-heartedly assuring them that they were under the protection of the U.S. Army. Another man, older than everyone else and a veteran of the Texas Revolution that created the Republic of Texas, advocated that they arm themselves with the weapons the army had stored in the basement. “We’ve got all we need to take the fight to them—pistols, rifles, knives, and, good golly, dynamite.” Nobody volunteered to join Jebediah Smith to take up arms.

Molly held Chloe close, whispering to her daughter that God would save them.

“Molly, I want you to take the children and their mothers to safety when the devils come for us down here,” Father Doyle said.

“How? There is only one way out: up those stairs,” Molly said, gesturing to the unlikely path to freedom.

“Before the army leased the church, Monsignor Murphy invited me to stay with him these last couple of months prior to his recent death. He hoped I would take over for him. I declined him on his deathbed because I’m a traveling missionary by nature. A few weeks ago I worked with some town boys to clear out the basement to make room for the army. In the back of the cellars is another door that leads to stairs that open behind the church. Unfortunately, that door is boarded up, and it would make too much noise for us to break it down. The devils would hear us,” Father Doyle said.

“How does that help us?” Molly replied.

“If we are found and the devils come for us, we can make a lot of noise,” Father Doyle said. “I placed a few sticks of dynamite on the blocked entrance that should open it.”

Molly shook her head. “That sounds too dangerous.”

“More so than the creatures we saw in your saloon?” Father Doyle said.

“What sort of priest are you who shoots guns, rides horses, and sets off dynamite?” Molly said.

“I’m like the fighting Jesuit priests who took up arms in the days of old against the enemies of Holy Rome,” Father Doyle smiled.

Molly returned his smirk. “I’ll collect the mothers and children and keep them with me. Let’s pray we are not found.”

Father Doyle clasped his hands together. “I will not let the devils take you.”

Molly hugged Father Doyle before taking Chloe away with her to gather the other children and their mothers discreetly.

Eventually the noises outside stopped. A palpable sense of fear filled the basement. Jebediah broke the silence as everyone pondered what to do next. “If we don’t hear the signal knocks on the door after a few more minutes, we can assume that all was lost. I suggest, like it or not, that all the men grab some weapons and be prepared for the worst. We will surround the base of the stairs and shoot whoever comes down if they haven’t used the correct signal.”

Reluctantly the men prepared for the worst.

The first noises the remaining townspeople heard were the footfalls of what they assumed were two people above them on the wooden planks of the church’s floor.

Father Doyle whispered to Molly, “I fear the devils have won. When you hear the explosion, run to the back of the cellar with whoever will follow.”

“What about you?” Molly said.

“I will stay and fight with the others to allow you time to escape,” Doyle said. “And I will

join you later.”

The priest then disappeared from her view.

A splintering crash of wood signaled the entrance of Wallace and Lucas into the basement. Both of the dead cowboys held pistols, which they began to shoot as they ran down the stairs into the lantern-lit cellar. The men who took up arms wildly shot at the fast-moving pair that sought to kill all of them. The townspeople aimed for either their heads or torsos from the cover of crates and barrels, yet none of their direct hits had any meaningful effect on stopping their nearing slaughter.

Molly heard the earsplitting explosion and called those with her to follow. She gripped Chloe’s hand and ran.

Father Doyle returned to the foot of the cellar stairs. Upon seeing the scene of mayhem in front of him, he thought he saw a vision from God for a brief moment. Subsequently he looked upon the grotesque forms of Wallace and Lucas, covered in the blood and gore of the people to whom he preached the Word of God, and realized that he had seen a glimpse of the eternal celestial struggle. Above, in the cellar doorway, there was a bright light. Within that white light stood a warrior angel armed with a sword and shield. The vision soon faded and Father Doyle felt that he had become that holy being.

The missionary priest struck a match and lit the fuse of the packs of dynamite he had strapped to himself beneath his long, leather coat, holding both sides of his jacket open and beginning to recite the Lord’s Prayer aloud.

As Father Doyle approached the end of the prayer, Wallace noticed him after he slew Bart and Jebediah with his knife, pausing as he tried to understand what the priest was doing. It

was unfathomable to him why a person would sacrifice himself to save others.

Wallace ran toward Father Doyle with blind fury and the intention to kill him, his inner rage compelling him to destroy anything good.

However, Wallace never reached Father Doyle because his entire world snapped into complete and absolute nothingness in the wake of the priest's final words: "...but deliver us from evil. Amen."

THE END