

The Man With No Face

by Jake Bible, ...

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“Gone rancid,” The Man With No Face said as he sniffed the jar of bear grease in his hand. “Just like me.”

He chuckled to himself as he sat naked upon his bedroll, a small campfire lighting the scrub brush and cacti surrounding him. The flames' light flickered across the patchwork of leathers that made up his skin.

The Man puckered his withered lips and blew. He knew what tune he wanted to whistle, but his lips hadn't cooperated for years. Nevertheless, he bobbed his head to the wispy sound as he applied liberal amounts of the bear grease onto his leathers.

As always, when greasing himself up, The Man's mind wandered back to how he was forced to become what he was.

His memory was spotty, and there were incidents he'd intentionally blocked out, but he remembered the POW camp the Union Army forced him in.

And he remembered one Colonel Milton.

"Hold him down, boys!" Colonel Milton shouted when they came for The Man. "The strips need to be exact or the magic ain't gonna work!"

"He's squirrely, sir," Corporal Herschel McMannon complained. "Guy won't cooperate."

The Man's head rocked to the side as Private Marcus Grimes slammed an axe handle into his cheek. The world spun and he struggled to keep focus, but the ringing in his skull was near deafening.

When he'd been back in his tent, ankle deep in mud and shit, he knew it was only a matter of time before they came for him. He'd watched man after man get yanked from the tent each night. None returned. He'd tried to fight, even gouging out a Yank's eye with his thumb, but they overwhelmed him and dragged him through the muck to the room attached to the Colonel's quarters.

Colonel Elias Milton was short, stout and meaner than anyone The Man had ever met. He'd watched the Colonel stomp on a puppy's head, pushing it under the mud, until the thing died from sucking mud into its tiny lungs. He'd watched the Colonel do even worse to the Confederate soldiers under his "care".

There'd been a rumor going around that the Colonel wasn't what he'd seemed; that he was a man of the Devil. The Man had seen plenty of evil in his days, from slaves whipped until they died on the post, to the bloodbaths that were considered battles in the War Between the States. But, the Colonel was made of a different evil. An evil that stank and smoldered behind the man's eyes.

"Start with his face," Colonel Milton ordered. "Keep it intact this time, you imbeciles! I don't want to go through this again. He's the last one that can make this happen."

The Man was dazed enough that he didn't feel the first cuts, but once the skin was lifted from his skull, well, he felt that.

His screams were ignored, his pleading laughed at, and his misery mocked.

And then the true horror started.

Colonel Milton placed The Man's face on his own, blood dripping down his neck and onto his blue uniform, as he recited an incantation he knew by heart. The many candles that lit the room suddenly dimmed and the temperature dropped a good twenty degrees in seconds.

Not that The Man noticed. He was too busy screaming as his skin was removed from his body, strip by strip. He was thankful when God showed him mercy and he slipped into unconsciousness.

The Man applied the bear grease to each and every inch of his body. He made sure he worked it in good to the lacing that held the leathers to his body and held them to each other. Dry laces pulled at the leathers and in turn pulled at the points they were anchored to his flesh and bone. He hated it when the laces pulled.

He kept his dry whistling up as he thought back on the prison camp.

When he came to, The Man With No Face found himself smothered in a pile of offal and corpses. It was a pile he'd been forced to walk past everyday for a year as he was held in the camp. He'd always wondered when it was to be his turn.

He was thankful to be alive, but as feeling came back into his body, he quickly wished he wasn't. Every nerve was on fire as he dragged himself from the pile and into the cool, wet mud that covered every inch of the camp. Flashes of what had happened to him flew through his mind, but he pushed the images and feelings aside as he slowly crawled his way to the edge of the camp. Covered in muck, he was impossible to see in the moonless night and easily slipped through the fence.

Under the cover of thick rain clouds, The Man snagged an oil cloth that was abandoned just outside the fence line and wrapped it about his exposed body. Every step was excruciating, as the Colonel had insisted they take the skin from the soles of his feet also, but The Man pushed forward and was well away from the prison camp before the dawn light pierced the overcast sky.

With the grease applied, The Man With No Face slid his trousers back on and lay back on his bedroll as the fire died next to him. He wrapped himself in his duster and watched the stars twinkle in the desert night sky. In seconds he drifted off to sleep. A sleep that was never sound and always brought him to the one place he never wanted to remember.

It took The Man With No Face six weeks to make his way to his small farm in the mountains of North Carolina. When he stumbled onto the porch, a porch he had built with his own two hands, he made sure to kiss every single board and nail, praising God the entire time.

His communion was broken by the gasps of his wife and daughters as they came out to see what the noise was. The Man With No Face, various animal skins sticking to his festering flesh where he'd attempted to cover himself, cowered in the corner of the porch, his hands waving his stunned family away.

"Dear Lord!" his wife cried out when she saw the blue of his eyes. The very eyes that drew her to him when he first came courting. "Girls, it's your father! Get some blankets and clean rags!" The girls, three of them, just stood there, their eyes glued to the abomination that their mother insisted was their father. "GO!"

They hurried inside and The Man could hear them pounding through the house as they gathered the things their mother kept calling for as she slowly inspected her suffering husband.

"We thought you were dead," she cried. "We got a letter saying you'd died in some Union camp."

"Can't kill me," The Man whispered. "Had to get back to you."

His wife watched him closely, and while she shuddered at the sight of him, she didn't hesitate when it was time to remove the rotting skins. The Man whimpered with every pull, but was too exhausted to scream. His wife tried to calm him by singing softly.

“Oh, I wish I was in the land of cotton,” she sang. “Old times they are not forgotten. Look away, look away...”

It took weeks for The Man to get his strength back. He slipped in and out of consciousness, his mind fevered with visions of Hell. His waking hours weren't much better as his wife decided his body couldn't be left exposed to the elements without skin. She came up with an ingenious way of sewing patches of thin leather together until every inch of him was covered.

When the day came for the final step of the process, the sewing of the leathers directly to his body, The Man, his wife, and his daughters prayed for an hour before they began the torturous ordeal. Three hours later it was done and The Man stood on his own two feet for the first time since his harried journey home.

The Man With No Face rested on his front porch and felt the breeze blow across his lips, the only part of him that wasn't covered in leathers.

“Nice farm you got here,” the voice of Colonel Milton said as he and his men stepped from the tree line that ringed The Man's farm house. “And what pretty girls, too.”

The Man came awake with a start, the sounds of his daughters' screams echoing in his mind. He felt a tugging at his leg and opened his eyes to see two coyotes fighting over his right calf. In one motion he drew his Remington 1858, cocked it and fired. The first coyote's head exploded in a spray of blood and grey fur. The second coyote fled instantly, its yelps getting quieter and quieter as it sprinted across the desert.

The Man With No Face grabbed the warm corpse of the coyote and chomped down on the bloody flesh that protruded from the headless neck. He tore chunk after chunk away and barely chewed them before swallowing. He had to race time, had to race to consume the flesh before all of the life essence drained away.

He wasn't proud of what needed to be done, but it was his way. The only way he could survive after he fled his farm. It was the only way he could keep going. The only way he could fuel his need for vengeance upon those that killed his loved ones.

He fed until his belly was full and the blood of the coyote ran through the laces holding the leathers to his face. Satiated, he slumped back in the dirt and watched the dawn light spread across the barren landscape.

“Guess I should get up and get moving,” The Man said aloud. “The fuckers ain't gonna kill themselves.”

“Is it me or are those buzzards getting closer?” Tim Sparr asked as he stirred the small pot of beans that hung over the campfire.

“Cain't be,” Lester Clingman replied as he looked at the circling scavengers that glowed in the light of the setting sun. “Cain't follow dead things.”

The two men looked at each other then back at the dozens of birds.

“You don't think...?” Tim asked.

“I try not to,” Lester replied.

The Man With No Face fought with all his strength as the screams from his girls pierced his brain. He heard them calling his name from inside the farmhouse.

And he heard each voice stop suddenly as his worst fears came to life.

“You fuckers!” he roared. “I damn your souls to Hell!”

“Little late for that,” Colonel Milton said from around a mouthful of fresh flesh. “But your daughters’ souls may still be up for grabs.”

“Why?!?” The Man asked. “Why not just let me be?!?”

The Colonel gave The Man a sorry look, like he was entertaining the thoughts of a small, idiot child.

“Cain’t be a sacrifice if the sacrifice don’t die,” Milton said as he tossed another chunk of bloody meat into his mouth. “You ruined it for us. In order to complete the process we had to kill your kin. Blood of the blood.”

The Man With No Face fought hard, but Private Tim Sparr and Private Lester Clingman held him tight.

“Want to see them?” Colonel Milton asked. “Hey, Marcus! Johnny Reb would like to see his girls. Can you oblige?”

Marcus walked onto the porch and held a head in each hand. Blood dripped onto the boards that The Man had nailed together himself.

“Only got two hands, Colonel,” Marcus grinned as he brought one of the necks to his mouth and drank from the drippings. “He’ll have to go inside to see the third one. Bitch put up a fight, though. Her head ain’t as pretty as these.”

The Man With No Face fell to his knees and his salty tears spilled onto the leathers that were his cheeks. All his strength left him and he crumpled into a wilted shell of a man.

“What we gonna do with his bitch wife?” Herschel called from inside the house.

“Do what you will,” the Colonel replied. “Then send her to the same fate has her girls.”

The Colonel walked down the porch and onto the grass where The Man lay. He pulled his pistol and took aim.

“Has a kinda symmetry if you really think about it,” the Colonel said as he pulled the trigger.

The Man’s chest bloomed with blood and he gasped several times before his eyes closed and the life drained from his tortured body.

“How’s that, sir?” Sparr asked.

“How’s what?” the Colonel responded, taking yet another bite of the meat he’d cut from one of The Man’s daughters.

“Symmetry, sir,” Sparr clarified.

“Oh, I don’t know, Sparr,” the Colonel laughed. “Just sounded like something to say before I sent the bastard to Hell.”

“You be dead!” Sparr shouted as he pulled his Colt and took aim at The Man With No Face. “The Colonel killed you!” He fired twice and The Man stumbled back from the impacts, but no blood flowed. The Colt fell from Sparr’s fingers, terror overtaking his muscles.

“And the Devil brought me back,” The Man said as he stepped over the corpse of Lester Clingman.

Clingman's head was twisted 180 degrees so that Tim Sparr could only see the man's bald spot. The bald spot was covered in blackheads, slick with grease, and shined from the light of the campfire. Tim Sparr didn't know whether to look at the bald spot or at The Man With No Face. His mind couldn't quite grasp what was happening.

"You can't kill us!" Sparr shouted. "We're protected by the Colonel! He said we'd live forever!"

"That may be true," The Man said as he slid two cartridges into the cylinder of his pistol. The campfire reflected off the brass they were made from and Sparr's eyes were drawn to the sigils carved into the metal. "But there's always a loophole somewhere."

Sparr shook his head. "Can't be. Colonel said the spell was unbreakable."

Clingman's body convulsed and his head straightened back around. Without looking, The Man With No Face fired into the fallen man's chest. Blood and bone exploded out the man's back and his eyes met Sparr's briefly before glazing over, dead forever.

"No, no, no, no," Sparr whined. "No! He'll come back. He will!"

"Well, how about I set a bit with you and we find out," The Man said as he took a seat by the campfire. He reached down and grabbed the bowl of beans Clingman had dropped when the two men were interrupted by The Man's uninvited appearance. "You don't mind if I eat, do you?"

Sparr just shook his head as he waited for Clingman to breathe again.

"You sure?" The Man With No Face asked. "These beans won't really give me any sustenance, but it's nice to taste something other than blood. You should eat up. Gonna be your last meal."

"Why... why don't you just kill me now?" Sparr asked. "If you're right then why not get it over with?"

"Because I am right," The Man replied. He set the bowl aside. "These are some good beans! You put sage in here, didn't you?" He looked into Sparr's terrified eyes. "You want to know why I don't take my pistol and put one of my special bullets right between your eyes, that it?"

Sparr nodded.

"Simple, Tim. You don't mind if I call you Tim, do you?"

Sparr shook his head.

"Good, good," The Man continued. "Well, Tim, I want you to know for sure that Mr. Clingman there ain't coming back. I want you to know for a fact that when I do put a bullet between your eyes that you ain't coming back neither." The Man leaned closer, his leathery face illuminated by the campfire. "I want you to know for 100% certain that Hell is waiting for you right now."

Sparr bolted from the campfire, but his progress was slowed considerably by the knife that flew from The Man's hand and into Sparr's leg. He tumbled to the ground and tried to pull the blade out, but only managed to tear the wound further.

"Barbed," The Man said as he got up and ripped the knife from Sparr's flesh, shredding muscle and ligament on its bloody way out. He showed Sparr the symbols etched onto the specially hooked blade. "Oh, and it can kill you too, but I

prefer a bullet.” The Man wiped the blade on Sparr’s dingy clothes. “Something about the immediacy of the death that gives me pleasure.”

“I never wanted to hurt your family,” Sparr cried. “It was the Colonel. He insisted we finish the ritual. Said your kin had to die or we’d lose our souls to the Devil by the next harvest moon.”

The Man glared down at Sparr. “And who do you think your soul is gonna go to when I end you?”

Sparr didn’t answer.

The Man sat back down and picked up the bowl of beans. “Damn, these are good. It’s sage, right?”

The Man With No Face pulled on his duster as he looked at the corpses of Sparr and Clingman that were already starting to bloat in the desert heat. He leaned down and placed a gold coin on each body.

“I’ll let the Colonel know you’re waiting for him down below,” The Man said. “He should be pleased to know you’ll all be one happy family again.”

He put on his hat and set off from the campsite, his nose telling him exactly where he needed to go. The Damned gave off a powerful scent and The Man With No Face knew that scent better than any person that walked the earth.

It was his scent, too, after all.

The sun beat down on The Man, making him boil with a thirst he knew he could never quench. He heard a splat and looked over at his right shoulder.

Buzzard crap.

“Damn beasts,” The Man With No Face muttered.

He took off his duster and slapped a handful of dirt on the fresh excrement. After a few wipes he had most of it off.

Splat.

The Man With No Face growled as he grabbed more dirt and wiped the crap from his arm.

Splat. Splat.

“Goddammit!” he cursed up at the sky. “Go gnaw on a deer or something! Leave me be!”

He decided to keep moving while he cleaned the rest of the bird shit from his leathers. Soon miles went by and the sun was directly in front of him, making him squint into the glare of the horizon.

By the time he stopped to make camp, The Man With No Face knew he was close to his prey.

“Maybe tomorrow,” he said to himself. “Maybe the next day. I got time.”

He lay back on his bedroll and listened to the night sounds. The coyotes were far, far off and he knew they wouldn’t mess with him again. The death of their brethren left a stink on him and they could smell it.

He licked his parched lips and closed his eyes, ready for the terrors his troubled sleep always brought.

Smoke lay heavy with the morning fog and The Man With No Face forced his eyes to open, willed them to see the horrors Colonel Milton had left him.

“That man don’t know the word *mercy*,” a deep Voice chuckled next to The Man. “He’d kill himself if he knew it would be to his advantage. Funny thing is it just might.”

The Man With No Face looked about, but all he could see was the scorched remains of his farmhouse. From the condition of the burn, he figured he’d been unconscious for a couple of days.

“Dead,” the Voice said. “You didn’t just wake from a nap, you’ve been dead. But I brought you back.”

“Who... what... where...?” The Man stuttered.

“Many names, many forms, many places,” the Voice answered. “Right now I’m your friend and I have a way for you to avenge your kin.”

“I don’t understand,” The Man said as he got up. He felt something squirm in his ear and he pulled a couple maggots (or corpse worms as his Nana used to say) out. He jumped back and shook his head in a frenzy. Several more maggots flew free.

“They don’t waste time, do they?” the Voice laughed. “Nature’s little wonders.”

Then silence. A silence so deep The Man thought he’d lost his hearing.

“Oh, wait, you said something, didn’t you?” the Voice asked. “Sorry. I was talking to a man in Paris. Something about wanting absolute power over women. Guess he doesn’t realize that just by asking for that he’s giving them all the power. Am I right?”

“I... I don’t know,” The Man said as he spun in circles, trying to find the source of the Voice.

“Stop that,” the Voice scolded. “You’re making me dizzy.”

The Man stopped. “Sorry.”

“Much obliged,” the Voice said. “So you want to understand, eh?”

“Yes, please,” The Man With No Face answered.

“Are you sure?” the Voice asked. “Sometimes knowledge isn’t always the best thing. Maybe you just want the abridged version?”

“No,” The Man With No Face answered as he looked at what was once his home. “I want to understand it all. I need to know why this happened to me...to them.”

Once again the silence enveloped everything.

“Fine,” the Voice said flatly. “I figured you’d say that. It’s why I brought you back. But, once you know everything, and once you’ve done what you need to do, then it’ll be time to do what I need.”

“Like what?” The Man asked.

The Voice chuckled and a small bag fell at The Man’s feet. He picked it up and dumped the contents into his palm. Coins. Gold coins.

“What are these for?” The Man asked.

“You’ll know what to do with them,” the Voice said. “Can’t spoil the ending, now can I?”

The Man With No Face tilted his wide brimmed hat back and squinted up at the sun, his eyes narrowing in disgust at the buzzards that circled overhead.

“You’re a blight upon my life,” The Man muttered as he stood on top of the bluff that overlooked the little town of Comely. All through Arizona territory the circle of buzzards grew as he hunted his prey.

They could smell his death. They could smell the wrong on him.

“Won’t be long now,” he struggled to say through dry lips and stiff cheeks.

Casually, as he’d done a thousand times on his journey through the desolate West, The Man pulled the jar of bear grease from his satchel and undid the top without looking. He dipped a couple fingers in and dabbed the grease liberally to the leather flaps and laces of sinew that covered his face.

Satisfied that he’d gotten enough grease into all the nooks and crannies, The Man With No Face puckered up his weathered lips and blew. A weak hiss came out that resembled a song, but no one would have been able to place the tune.

Even with the lack of musicality, The Man With No Face seemed satisfied at the results and slowly made his way down the steep path that led from the bluff and into Comely.

He’d only gone a couple feet before he stopped and worked at a spot near his nose that had been bugging him for the past few days. After a good five minutes of digging he finally came away with a wriggling maggot. Not one to waste good protein, The Man With No Face popped the maggot into his mouth and chewed with relish as he continued his way into Comely.

The sandy streets of Comely were deserted, what with the oppressive heat of the noonday sun, so The Man With No Face was able to saunter up the steps of the saloon without notice. He smacked the dirt from his long duster as he stepped inside and assessed his surroundings before walking slowly to the bar. Run down, dirty, and unoccupied except for a sleeping drunk at one of the corner tables. He’d seen more than his share of the same all across the West.

“What can I get ya?” the bartender asked as The Man With No Face leaned against the stained and tarnished bar rail.

“Information,” The Man With No Face said in a voice that made most men shiver and most woman turn and run.

The bartender instinctively sensed trouble and reached under the bar to make sure his hog leg was there. When his hand touched the cool wood of the shotgun’s handle he felt relief, but when he saw The Man’s face all reassurances the firearm could provide went out the window.

“Damn...” the bartender exclaimed in a choked whisper. “You got more leather stitched into your face than I got on my Sunday saddle.”

The Man With No Face grimaced, but it was hard to tell due to the patchwork laced across his skull. “Better than looking at what’s underneath.”

“I don’t doubt that,” the bartender replied. “What information you looking fer? We don’t get many folk ‘round here, so I probably cain’t be of much help.”

“Just looking for some folks,” The Man nodded. “Three men. One’s a Colonel from the Union army. Probably got his uniform still on.”

“No, sir,” the bartender shook his head. “Cain’t say I’ve seen any Colonels. But I did see a Corporal or Private or whatever the peons is called. Not much to look at.”

The drunk in the corner snorted and chuckled then let loose with an enormous fart. The sound flapped through the air like the pages of a thick-papered book. A couple very wet follow-ups came right behind.

“Dammit, Horace!” the Bartender shouted. “If you shat yourself again I swear to the Maker I’ll put a bullet in your feeble head!”

"The Corporal you saw," The Man insisted, ignoring the interaction between the bartender and his customer. "Was his name Herschel McMannon?"

"Herschel McMannon? That some kinda Jew-Mick name?"

"Scot," The Man replied. "And I'd appreciate it if you didn't use racial slurs. Ain't polite."

"Racial slurs? Ain't polite?" the bartender laughed. "This is Arizona Territory, mister. If some skirt wearin' Nancy boy shows his ass lovin' face 'round here then he's gonna have it comin'."

The Man With No Face grimaced further and the unsettling sound of his leathered face crinkling filled the saloon. The bartender couldn't help but to shudder. "At least he has a face," The Man glared.

"Right, well, uh, no offense meant," the bartender stuttered. "You gonna order a drink, mister?"

"Nope," The Man shook his head. "Don't drink."

"That ain't right!" the drunk, Horace, shouted. "Man that don't drink cain't be trusted!"

"Never said I could be trusted," The Man responded as he set his Remington 1858 revolver on the bar. The brass shown like the sun; clean as if it was brand new. "The man, what was his name?"

"That's Confederate iron you're carryin' there. You a Johnny Reb?" The Man didn't answer. The bartender gripped his hog leg even tighter, but continued on. "Don't know. He bought some bottles, spent some time with the whores upstairs. Then left." He chuckled a bit. "A Johnny Reb counselin' me on racial slurs. If that don't beat all! The war's over, ya know, right?" The bartender chuckled louder.

The Man With No Face sniffed the air and watched the bartender very closely. "You got nothing else for me, is that it?"

"Sorry," the bartender smiled. "He left. That's all I know."

A shiny silver coin was slapped onto the bar. The bartender stared at the money, his greedy mouth salivating.

"You sure?" The Man asked.

"Gee, mister, wish I could help more," the bartender replied, his eyes never leaving the coin. "You know what? You may want to check with Mr. Collins down the livery. I know he put their horses in Collins's care. Bet he'd have a name."

Their horses...

The seconds ticked by as The Man With No Face kept one finger placed on the coin. After studying the bartender's eyes, for what seemed to the drink slinger like an eternity, The Man slid the silver piece over.

"Much obliged," The Man nodded. "I'll go check with Mr. Collins." He holstered his pistol and walked towards the doors then turned. "Oh, and Horace did shit himself. You can smell the jack rabbit stew he had for dinner last night."

"Sweet Jesus!" the bartender shouted as he dashed around the bar and over to Horace.

The Man With No Face had his Remington out, cocked and fired before the bartender got more than a few steps. Blood sprayed from the man's thigh and he screamed as he crumpled to the dirty, planked floor.

"What the fuck you do that for?!?" the bartender screamed.

The Man With No Face casually walked over to the bartender and knelt down.

“Now that you got your hand off that hog leg,” The Man said. “I’m guessing you can think a might easier and may recall a few more details.”

The bartender gripped his thigh as blood quickly soaked his trousers.

“You didn’t have to shoot me!” the bartender screamed. “Jesus Christ! You didn’t have to shoot me!”

“You know more than you were saying before?” The Man asked.

The bartender thought for a split second then nodded his head towards the stairs. The Man With No Face smiled. In his way.

“Then I guess I *did* need to shoot you,” The Man said as he walked back to the front doors.

“You’re goin’ the wrong way,” the bartender whined. “They’s upstairs.”

“Not anymore,” The Man With No Face said as he loaded a cartridge into the spent chamber. “Trust me.”

He spun about and put a bullet between Horace’s eyes. A small pistol clattered from the old drunk’s hand and slammed into the wood floor. The pistol discharged and the slug slammed into The Man’s left cheek, ripping the sewn leather from his face.

The bartender gasped as the flap of leather fell away, revealing warn and weathered teeth and jawbones. A black beetle crawled from out of an empty tooth socket and fell to the dirty floor. “Sweet Jesus...”

The Man With No Face pulled the flap from his face and tucked it into his trouser pocket as he put his boot heel upon the beetle and crushed it into the wood grain. He dug his fingers into the same socket and pulled out a second beetle. He observed it casually for a moment then squeezed it until it popped, yellow fluid squirting from its carapace.

The Man With No Face flung the remains at the stunned bartender and gave the bleeding man a dry-lidded wink as he left the saloon. The street was empty and the wind kicked up a couple of dust devils as The Man looked left then right.

Right into the butt of a rifle.

He grunted and tumbled down the couple of steps in front of the saloon. The Man didn’t stop and kept the roll going until he was able to come up on one knee, pistol drawn.

Dust and grit whipped through his open cheek as he searched his surroundings for the attacker and he absentmindedly chewed the grit. The feel of dirt between his teeth reminded him he was still moving, still going. Still alive, in his own way.

“That you, Herschel?” The Man called out. “Better just show yourself.”

A shot rang out and The Man was knocked backwards. He looked down at the smoking hole in his chest and frowned as he pushed himself back up on his feet.

“Come on, Herschel,” The Man yelled. “You can’t kill me. Get out here so we can get this out of the way.”

“Hersch is dead,” a gruff voice shouted from the shadows of the alley by the saloon. “Took a rattlesnake bite to the balls down Bisby way. He screamed for two days before I put him down. Fucking annoying.”

A large man stepped out into the sunlight, a Winchester rifle aiming right at The Man With No Face. His trousers were threadbare and stained and he only wore an alligator hide vest across his broad and muscled torso. Leather was sown into his

forearms, but The Man could see it wasn't from an animal source. Unless one counted people as animals.

Which, as The Man thought about it, he did.

"Pity," The Man said as he brushed himself off. "I was looking forward to that privilege." The Man looked right at the rifle. "Why even try, Marcus? It's a nice looking rifle, but it can't stop me. You know that or you wouldn't be running so hard."

"And your pea shooter on your hip can't stop me," Marcus countered. "I had to torch Herschel. Took him an hour to burn down to bone. He begged and pleaded with me the whole time."

"Damn," The Man swore. "Shame I missed that."

"I could set you ablaze and you could live the spectacle personally," Marcus suggested, a wry smile pulling at his deeply tanned face. "I don't mind, really."

"Think I'll skip that," The Man replied. "I won't be getting put down today."

"Sins of the flesh," Marcus said, shaking his head. "Quite the price, eh?"

"Wasn't my bill to pay," The Man growled. "That debt was forced upon me. You took what was good in my life and destroyed it. I aim to return the favor."

"Yeah, well, bygones," Marcus said, waving the statement off. "You're nothing but a bag of bones now, so I ain't too worried."

The Man With No Face looked down at his ragged appearance. Months upon months upon months of tracking his prey had left him thin and grimy, but only a fool would have considered him nothing to worry about. He looked back up at Marcus and the strips of skin sewn into his body.

"You aren't looking so great, either," The Man observed. "Looks like you're adding to your body count. That skin a memento or to replace what's falling apart?"

"Like you're one to talk," Marcus grumbled. The Man With No Face had his answer.

"So all that killing hasn't done you a bit of good," The Man laughed. "You may live forever, but what will your life be like?"

"None of your concern," Marcus snapped.

The two men stared at each other for several minutes.

"What we doing here?" Marcus asked finally. "You can't kill me and I can't kill you. What's the point?"

The Man looked at the Remington in his hand. "That ain't exactly true," he said quietly. "I been busy studying while you been running."

"What?" Marcus asked. "You got some spell up your sleeve?"

"You could say that," The Man responded as he holstered his pistol. "Want to see?"

Marcus didn't hesitate as he emptied the rifle into The Man's chest and head.

"Don't bother," Marcus said as he side-stepped down the dirt street, loading the rifle as he went. "Ain't interested in spells no more. Didn't work out so well the first time."

The Man pushed himself up onto his elbows. He coughed up a couple slugs and let them fall from his shriveled lips. He felt his face, and the damage Marcus had done, and swore quietly under his breath. Then he saw his hat and the holes in the brim and crown.

“You ruined my hat!” The Man With No Face yelled. “And it’s gonna take me days to stitch myself back together!” Although anyone standing close—not that there would be—would have sworn they heard the Devil talking as the wind whipped through his exposed mouth and distorted the words as they came up from his throat. “Where ya going, Marcus? The Colonel down there at the livery? I’d sure love one last chance at a get together.”

Marcus heard the eerie mewling sounds of the buzzards above and shivered as he saw thirty black birds cast wild shadows over The Man.

“There’s something wrong inside you,” Marcus shouted. “You was black before we performed the ritual. That’s it. That’s why you wouldn’t die! That’s why you came back!”

“Just keep telling yourself that,” The Man sneered, or would have if most of his face wasn’t missing. Strips of leather flapped in the hot breeze, but Marcus was spared the worst of the sight due to the shadow The Man’s hat cast across his face as he placed it back on his head. “You killed for everlasting life. Ain’t my fault it all went South, as you Yanks say. I guess the South ain’t no place for Northern scum like you.”

“Stop playin’ with him, Marcus,” Colonel Milton said as he walked out of the livery. “Put a couple bullets in his knee caps and cripple the damn walking cadaver!”

“Nice to see you again, Colonel Milton,” The Man With No Face said as he tipped his holey hat to the Colonel.

“Fuck you,” Milton snarled. “You weren’t supposed to survive, you fucking affront to God.”

“God works in many ways, Colonel,” The Man said as he walked towards the livery. “I am but one of his servants.”

“Ain’t God you’re a servant of,” Marcus said as he put his rifle to his shoulder and took aim. “We stripped you bare and ate your goddamn skin! That should have put you down. That should have ended the ritual right there. But it didn’t! No, sir, we had to eat your girls and that pretty wife of yours. Did that work? No, it didn’t! You kept coming!” Marcus fired two shots and The Man’s legs buckled as his knee caps were blasted apart. “Not no more.”

The Man With No Face crumpled to the road, his legs literally shot out from under him. The calls of the buzzards above grew louder and several dipped and circled lower for a better look at the meal they had been tracking for so many miles.

“Wish I knew how to kill ya,” Milton said as he led his horse out of the livery. “I’d put you out of your demonic misery.”

“Aint’ too miserable, all considering,” The Man With No Face said as he pushed himself to his feet. “It has its moments.”

“He don’t ever fucking stop, Colonel!” Marcus shouted. “We was supposed to live forever, not him. This ain’t what I signed up for. Running for the rest of my life.”

“Quit your whining, Marcus,” Milton ordered. “He can’t kill us. So even if he does keep tracking us it’ll be just a nuisance.”

“That so?” The Man With No Face said as he stood on wobbly legs. Sure, his kneecaps were gone, but then so was nearly all his flesh and muscle. He’d learned to get by. The Man emptied the six regular cartridges from his cylinder into his

palm and slowly replaced them with new ones he pulled from his sleeve. "You see, boys, I've met a few people over the years as I followed you across the country. Some folks shared their knowledge willingly, some didn't. Either way I gathered the knowledge I needed."

He flipped the cylinder back in place and took aim.

"Now I'm gonna put that knowledge to use," he chuckled.

Marcus just stood there, his eyes locked on the barrel of The Man's gun. In a split second he had one less eye as The Man pulled the trigger and the slug tore through Marcus's ocular cavity and out the back of his head.

Colonel Milton just watched, a look of boredom on his face. "That'll heal in a minute or so. You're wasting your time."

Marcus lay upon the dirt, his dark red blood soaking into the earth. Seconds ticked by then minutes, but the gator-vested man didn't stir.

Colonel Milton gulped and looked over at The Man With No Face.

"You figured it all out, eh?" Milton asked. "You found the end for us."

"I did," The Man said as he pointed the pistol at the Colonel. "For all of us."

He pulled the trigger and blood sprayed from the Colonel's mouth as the slug ripped through his throat. He gurgled and gasped and clutched at the hole in his neck. Thick blood poured over his fingers as he fell to his knees. He struggled to say something, but the life left him too quickly and he collapsed face first next to Marcus.

"There," The Man With No Face shouted up at the buzzards. "You can have them. Now leave me be."

He watched the scavengers circle and half expected an answer, but wasn't surprised when none came. None ever did.

The Man holstered his pistol and pushed the left sleeve of his duster up. He dug his fingers into the withered flesh of his forearm and pulled out the last two gold coins. His legs didn't cooperate as much he would have liked, but he was able to make his way over to the corpses that fed the parched earth with their blood.

"I release you," The Man said as he laid one coin on the back of the Colonel's head. "And you." He placed the second coin on Marcus's blood smeared forehead.

He took off his hat and placed it against his chest as he bowed his head. The weathered and polished bone of his skull shone like a white beacon in the Arizona sun. He'd lost those leathers quite a few miles back and never had the will to replace them.

After a couple minutes of silent prayer, The Man With No Face donned his hat once more and turned to look over the town of Comely. He knew eyes were watching him from the shadows just inside upstairs windows. He knew the people of Comely observed him through cracks in curtains and peepholes of doors.

A feeling of loss filled him as he realized his hunt was over. He'd spent the years going from town to town in search of those that had killed his family and cursed him. With his task completed, The Man With No face was unsure what to do next.

"Doubt they'd let me stay here," he mumbled. He squinted up at the cluster of birds that swirled and soared above him. "Doubt they'd let me stay anywhere."

"Doubt they will," the Voice said next to him.

The Man With No Face turned, but no one was there.

"Don't bother," the Voice said. "I can't be seen."

“So what now?” The Man With No Face asked.

“You ever been to California?” the Voice asked.

“Not yet, I haven’t,” The Man answered.

“Well, now that your business is done, it’s time for my business,” the Voice chuckled. “And I do have a lot of business. You sure you’re up for it?”

“That was the deal, wasn’t it?” The Man With No Face asked.

“Yes, yes it was,” the Voice replied. “You just keep walking west and I’ll let you know what I need done along the way.”

“Suits me,” The Man With No Face agreed. “Walking is what I do.”

“And you do it so well!” the Voice exclaimed. “Almost as well as you kill.”

“Well, we all have our God given talents,” The Man responded.

The silence was almost overwhelming.

“Yes, well, I guess we do,” the Voice said finally. “You aren’t going to eat?”

The Man looked back at the corpses of Colonel Milton and Marcus and shook his head.

“No people,” he replied. “Animals only.”

“Oh, I have a feeling that may change,” the Voice chuckled. Then the silence.

“I don’t believe it will,” The Man With No Face insisted. Something about the way he said it sent a chill through the air and even the silence seemed to waver.

“Well, we’ll see about that,” the Voice finally responded. “Care for a friendly wager?”

“I think I’ll decline,” The Man said.

“Suit yourself,” the Voice responded.

The Man With No Face could feel a change and he knew the Voice was gone.

He turned on his heels and carefully walked his way out of Comely, leaving the mess for the buzzards that didn’t quite have the patience to wait for his existence to end. But that was only a few, as most trailed him as they’d done for a thousand miles before.

As the winged carrion eaters kept him company he wondered if that was enough. He thought about the bullets in his pistol and the sigils and runes carved into their casings. One would end it all. But for The Man With No Face that would have been the ultimate sin. Whether God or the Devil gave him eternal life, even as empty and rotten as it was, it wasn’t his to question. He had a role to play in death just as he had played his role in life, just one of the hundreds of thousands of casualties in the War Between the States.

He sighed deeply, resigned to walk the land forever, and looked to the western horizon. The Man With No Face wondered what the Pacific ocean would feel like on his cursed body. He aimed to find out.

He puckered his half-rotted lips and blew hard. To anyone around –not that there was- it would have sounded like the wings of a buzzard as it flapped and fought for position on the carcass of Fate.

But to The Man With No Face it sounded like Dixie.

