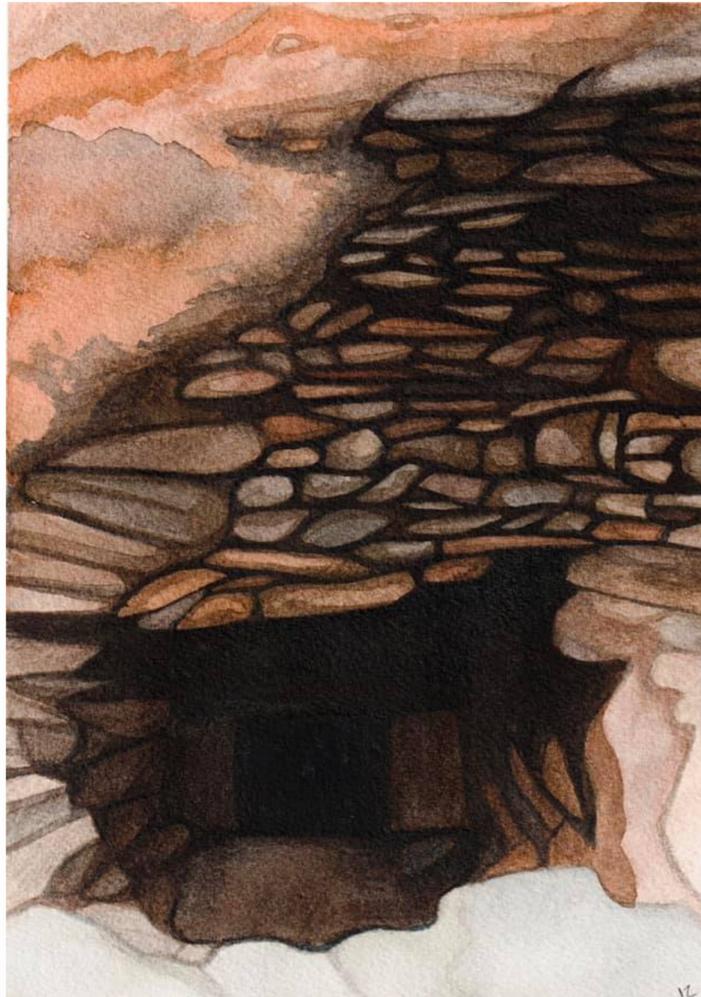


# Pulp Factory



April 2021

# **Pulp Factory E-Zine**

**April 2021**

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**Issue 5**

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**Edited and Compiled by  
Ian Mallon and Blake Ray**

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Edited by Blake Ray



## From the Editors

**Greetings and salutations, Pulpsters!**

**We have some truly exciting stories for you this month! And we have some really exciting news to announce shortly after the release of this issue! So after you're done reading this month's selection of shorts, be on the look out for a big announcement coming soon on our Facebook page!**

**Cheers,  
Ian Mallon**

**Dear Readers,**

**We are so excited to present this month's issue. It has been a journey, and we are loving the trip. It, of course, wouldn't be possible without all of you. We have the best readers and contributors.**

**As my compatriot said before, we have some big news coming soon. We can't wait to share it with you. Without putting too fine a point on it, we will have more for all of you soon. Stay posted!**

**Sincerely,  
Blake Ray**

**Our winner this month is Jeremy Winger's "The Reversion of Ownership." It is a fantastic story with such a grasp on the writing of action that we had to share it.**

\*

Jeremy Winger is a life long story teller and tabletop role player seeking to find his way into the world of writing. He has had 2 previous short stories published on the *Marion County Messenger*: "Out of the Cauldron and into the Fire," and "A Touch of Magic."

## The Reversion of Ownership

By Jeremy Winger

"... and in the event that a next of kin cannot be produced, all Dwarven crafted artifacts will have their ownership reverted back to that of the crafter or their next of kin...", Korven read the standard contract of his clan yet again. It had been a long journey from the halls of Clan Red Shield. It was one of the northern most Dwarven clans, their hall dug in under the snowy peaks of the Frost Wall Mountains, and the trip to the fallen kingdom of Gran Kael had taken them 3 weeks.

"Oi, Korven, perhaps we could stop by a barbarian tribe and see if they'll tattoo that document to the inside o' your eyelids? Then you could read it when you sleep, as well!" Laughter erupted from the 3 other dwarves at Guardet's jest.

The corner of Korven's mouth quirked up into a half smile. "Oh aye Guardet and I'll say thank ye too, once we're home with the contents of our vault legally in our possession." Korven realized that his fellow Red Shield cousins appreciated the effort he was going through to protect their lawful claim to the treasure that once belonged to the human kingdom of Gran Kael. Dwarven contracts were not deceitful nor unfair, but in the event that no one else could profit, they did guarantee certain considerations go to the Dwarf or Dwarves that wrote the document. In this case, that meant the vault that was built by Clan Red Shield for Royal Temple of Gran Kael, the priest-king's home. Through Korven's efforts he had discovered that, after the cataclysm that had destroyed Gran Kael and eradicated its royal family, the vault and any items still contained within belonged to the Dwarves that had built it. It was an elegant idea that profited the Dwarven builders once all other legal claims were exhausted.

Korven moved closer to the others, removing the physical distance, but not the emotional. Korven had left Clan Red Shield 15 years ago and had only returned upon discovering a copy of this lost contract. While the clan had accepted the former mining foreman turned mercenary back with open arms, Korven always had a sense that he didn't quite belong with them anymore.

Djornden was dishing out bowls of stew made from their provisions, as Guardet turned to Korven and Hilda.

"I've heard o' some grim rumors surrounding your vault, Korven."

"Not a thing but balderdash," Hilda quipped as she accepted the offered stew.

Djornden handed Guardet his bowl of stew and offered, “Don’t you listen none to Hilda’s doubts lad, Gran Kael is ruled by bandits, so they say. And them bandits is feeding something in the vaults with their prisoners.”

“Terrible,” Korven shook his head, accepting his own bowl. “Human savagery, it’s a wonder they don’t ally with the Orcs or Lizard Folk.”

Amidst the nods of agreement, Hilda spoke up again, “But, you have to admit, it’s far more likely that the bandits just can’t find the vault that our ancestors built to keep out intruders than there being any lick of truth that the vault has some sort o’ beastly guarding it.”

“Aw, you’re just scared, Hilda. Spent too many hours leading patrols against goblin raiders. Made you paranoid!”, Guardet said with humor in his voice.

Hilda ignored the humor and replied, a bit defensively, “Guardet, ye wouldn’t even know what end of the axe to swing it by. And don’t ye start laughing Djornden. Ye’d just as likely to stab at a goblin with a pen as a sword! Now don’t you two go off in a huff. Korven, ye seen more o’ the world than any other here, what’s your estimation?” Hilda asked as Djornden and Guardet turned their attention to the veteran.

Korven looked about them for a moment, a grin forming in his ruddy cheeks. “Well the way I see it, it don’t really matter. If there’s something that needs to be counted and recorded, there’s nothing Guardet and Djornden can’t handle and if there be some vile creature that needs its skull crushed, then Hilda Ax-hurler can do as fair a job as any!”

Hilda flicked a spoon full of stew across the camp fire and nailed Korven on the forehead. Guardet and Djornden erupted in laughter, both at Hilda’s accuracy with a spoon and Korven’s reference to Hilda’s first patrol.

She had just come of age and her group had encountered a pack of goblins. In the battle that ensued, she had swung her axe, only to have it slip from her grip and fly 10 feet to kill a completely different goblin than the one she was facing. The nickname had stuck but there were very few brave enough to call it to her face.

The stew rolled down onto Korven’s nose and Hilda burst into laughter as well. Korven wiped the stew away, grumbling about a waste of perfectly good food. Guardet, Hilda, and Djornden continued their good-natured laughter, and Korven joined in. Their laughter faded and their camp quietened as sleep overtook them. Tomorrow, they would be moving down into the caves that ran for miles, leading to a secret back entrance to the vault. They slept, dreaming of gold, unaware of the dark fate that awaited them...

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The Dwarves made a good pace in the natural caverns. The tunnel entrance lay roughly 20 miles outside of Gran Kael, hidden in the forests. They had already camped five times since entering the cave. Though they expected no resistance, the Dwarves stayed in a formation while walking. Korven and Hilda walked shoulder to shoulder in the front, with Guardet and Djornden in second row. Hilda, a

cunning fighter and born leader, carried a shortened halberd. It would allow her to swing it like an axe, the preferred weapon of most Dwarves, when there was room to do so. Otherwise, she could thrust the spear in more narrow tunnels. Korven, a capable enough fighter by Dwarven standards, carried many weapons on his muscled frame, including an axe, a heavy mace, a throwing axe, and a pair of daggers tucked into his belt, hidden by his fiery red beard. The rear two Dwarves were less capable fighters and carried spears. Guardet had been brought due to his keen eye for value in gemstones and DJORNDEN was a capable scribe and good with estimation. By the agreement between this scouting party and the other Red Shield clan members these four would get first pick of whatever treasure they could carry as compensation for securing the route through the 'back door', the Dwarves had left in the vault centuries ago.

As the group moved forward, their lanterns providing ample light for their dark seeing eyes, the natural tunnel began to change. As expected, Dwarf laid stone and mortar was replacing natural rock. There were but a few feet of this stone before the hallway ended. There, it looked as if five slabs of stone had been used to make the floor, ceiling, and three walls.

"This is it", Hilda's voice rang out in the isolated cavern. Echoes of her voice carried on for a few moments.

More quietly, DJORNDEN turned to Korven, "Have ye the key?"

Korven pulled a small hammer from his belt, its pure silver reflection dancing in the light of their lanterns. "Aye, here it is. Are ye ready lass, lads?" Seeing the look of excitement and determination, Korven walked up to the stone slab at the end of the worked tunnel. The hammer had been with the contract when Korven had stumbled upon them 3 years ago. If the old magic still held it would open the vault's secret entrance. Slowly, he raised the hammer and he flicked the tiny artifact forward. A clear note rang out, as the hammer struck stone. It was followed by a deep rumble, and the stone wall glowed in a faint, eerie blue. Slowly, the wall lowered itself, and as the rumbling ceased, an open-door way faced the Dwarves.

Instantly, shimmering flashes of gold reflected from their lanterns. In the awe of the treasures that they had just uncovered, the Dwarves made their way into the vault. Almost absent mindedly, Korven turned back and rang the small silver hammer against the wall. The wall rumbled back into place, sealing the vault, as surely as it did the grim fate of the Dwarves.

The layout of the vault was, of course, detailed within the contract that Korven carried. The group moved carefully from the side chamber they had entered through and into what the document detailed as the main chamber. DJORNDEN was the first to notice that something was amiss.

"It's a bit warmer than I expected," he whispered, lest his voice break the solemn quiet the vault possessed.

Korven could feel the moisture in the air, bringing forth beads of sweat on his forehead. He took his long beard in his hand and mopped at the sweat with it. As he stepped into the chamber, he nearly slid on something slimy on the floor. He let

out a soft grunt that brought the others to a halt. Holding his lantern down closer, he saw a large white mass on the ground before him.

“What is that?” Djournden said in a soft voice.

“Wot ees,” a voice spoke quietly from the darkness ahead. It’s whispering voice, sounding shrill, echoed from the yawning room. “Wot is thot. Wat is that? What is that? What is that?”, each repetition becoming gruffer and the inflection changing from that of learning to pronounce the words to imitating the question. By the last one, it sounded very much like Djournden’s voice.

The hairs stood up on Korven’s neck and he promptly pulled his axe from the loop on his belt, hung his lantern on a hook on his hip, and took the axe in a two-handed grip. The two dwarves in the back followed suit and Hilda had brandished her own demi-halberd faster than Korven.

Hilda and Korven instinctively stepped towards each other in a fighting formation, as the group moved further into the chamber. The Dwarves remained silent; they each knew that if one of the others had knowledge of what spoke in the darkness, they would share it. There was no need to speak and give the thing that was whispering in the dark more of an advantage.

“Oy, look at all dat gold”, an astonished voice said in a deep uneducated accent.

“Pretty boss, very shiny!” a higher pitched voice in the same accent called from the same direction. These voices were louder than the whispering one that, by the end, sounded like a dwarf.

“I think it’s mimicking voices it’s heard,” Hilda whispered quietly enough that only Korven could hear her. She edged forward, relying almost as much on her hearing as she did her sight that was so well adapted to seeing in the dim caverns. “Ready that key, Korven. If things go badly, we’ll want that door opened and closed fast”.

Korven nodded his head, pulled the small hammer from his belt, and bit on it like a knife blade. He then returned both hands to his axe. A few more feet forward and a stifled gasp from behind them caused Korven and Hilda to spin about. Guardet stood there, eyes wide with surprise, but there was no trace of Djournden. “Where-“

“He’s vanished”, Guardet cut off Korven’s question. “One moment there, when next I looked, gone.” His whisper was filled with fear.

“Circle round!” Hilda whispered with urgency. The 3 dwarves put their backs to one another to give them the best chance of seeing whatever was stalking them.

“What’s with all this stuff on the floor?” the higher pitched voice asked.

“We just found a king’s fortune and yere worried ‘bout some old trash,” responded the deeper voice.

The voices were moving about the trio, circling the group too fast to be people discussing the amount of gold in the vault. “Get yourselves ready, lads,” Hilda whispered determinedly.

Breaking from the shadows, in a burst of speed, came the mimicking horror. Its white carapace shimmered in the lantern light of the dwarves. Fresh blood

covered its maw and taloned claws. It moved with such ferocious speed that Korven barely took in those details before the thing's tail swung forward over its head and slammed into Korven's shoulder hard enough to send him spinning through the air. As Korven crashed into several broken trunks filled with various treasures, he felt something pop in his knee.

The creature towered over the 2 remaining Dwarves, standing upon its rear legs the creature's skull like elongated head reached almost 8 feet in height. Its long tail danced in the air, with a wickedly barbed tip bobbing like the head of a snake. Its arms, or fore legs, ended in taloned fingers that looked dexterous. The thing's lipless jaw opened and the high-pitched voice screamed from within, "What is it?! What is that thing?!" It lunged forward with its bony looking frame. Simultaneously, its tail shot towards Hilda while its claws and teeth went toward Guardet. Guardet's skill with his spear was good enough to parry a single attack from a warrior, he was even deft enough to swipe the creature's claws away from his vital areas, however he could not stop the thing's fangs from sinking into his throat and tearing the entirety of it loose. "It's a demon spawn," the thing mimicked the deeper voice once again.

Hilda had fared much better against the tail strike. As it shot at her abdomen, she used the flat of her demi-halberd's axe head to strike the barbed tail to the ground. Then she quickly stepped forward onto the tail and, just as the monster ripped Guardet's throat away, she swung with all her might at the horror's back. Cracks spiderwebbed over its carapace but it seemed that her best blow was not enough to even truly injure it.

The creature was, evedentally, alarmed by the strike and shot away from the Dwarves with another burst of speed. It spun, facing the remaining Dwarves, and its eerie maw dropped open again. "What is that?" Djournden's voice came from the creature.

Hilda charged the creature. Its sickly white tail whipped down over its head, barbed tip seeking an opening in Hilda's defenses. She blocked it with the haft of her weapon and stepped up to the creature. The stench of decay almost made her wretch, as she turned her demi-halberd and thrust its spearhead upward. The bony jaw deflected Hilda's attack. "Korven, tell me your still with me!" she called over her shoulder. The horror lunged forward, biting at Hilda's face. Once again, Hilda used the haft of the Demi-halberd to deflect the attack. As the creature's head flew away from the block, it struck Hilda with a back handed blow that sent her sprawling onto her back. The creature's jaw opened again, but instead of mimicking a voice this time, thick, ropey, weblike fluid gushed out. Hilda moved to the side just in time to avoid the webbing.

"I'm with ye lass," Korven called back. As Guardet's body slumped on a smaller pile of coins, his life-blood gushing from him, Korven had finally regained his feet, though his left knee could only just support him. He took hobbling steps forward, mace in his right hand and his last remaining throwing axe in his left; he had lost his other axes in his fall. As the creature reared high above Hilda, taloned hands poised for a killing blow, Korven hurled the axe. The throw wasn't perfect,

but luckily it found a chink in the foul beast's chitinous armor. Amidst the series of cracks that Hilda had put in its back, the axe quavered. Howling in pain, the beast turned its attention from Hilda to Korven and charged.

Korven knew that, between his knee and the creature's speed, he had but one chance to strike a blow of any consequence. The horror set his claws for an attack and lunged in. Korven moved as if to try and avoid the blow, he then doubled back on his motions and threw himself to meet the creature, going over its claws toward its head, and wrenching his injured knee in the movement. Gritting through the pain and putting all the strength he could into what he believed would be his last act, he swung his mace and connected with the side of the creature's head. A new set of cracks formed over the front of the elongated skull and the thing's jaw swung in a weird angle, now broken. Korven stumbled down to one leg and he saw Hilda rushing toward the horror's back. A smile of determination formed on his lips as he prepared to die, knowing that Hilda would surely get the final blow on the creature while it was distracted with him.

But, seemingly, the creature heard Hilda's final charge. It whipped its tail out with such force and speed that Hilda could not hope to block the attack. It hit her head with such force that Korven feared she was killed by the blow. Then the creature, with its full attention back on Korven, knocked his mace from his hand with a quick backhanded blow. Korven knew there was nothing more he could do and stared fiercely into the thing's sunken eyes. He'd not die cowering. The creature seemed to take a moment to consider, then, having chosen its course of action, it knocked Korven to the ground. Pinning Korven down to the ground, the horror leaned over Korven and opened its mouth.

The weblike fluid gushed from the beast's mouth and quickly covered most of Korven's body. Only a bit of his face and beard were left free. The horror backed away, releasing his arms and body, but the excretion had already begun to take on a thicker quality. Korven pulled with what little of his strength remained, but his limbs remained secured to the floor. With his heartbeat hammering through his ears, Korven could barely turn his head far enough to see the creature turning and stalking back toward the fallen Hilda. A mixture of relief and sorrow flooded Korven when he saw she was still breathing.

With what almost seemed to be reverence, the horror lifted Hilda and carried her to the center of the room. More of the white masses were in this part of the chamber and Korven could now see what they were. It was where the creature molted; it was its old, used up skin. There, it carefully inserted its barbed tail into Hilda's abdomen just below her sternum. Korven couldn't be sure from this distance, but it almost looked like the tail was pulsing. Hilda, still unconscious, began to convulse. Tears rolled down Korven's cheeks.

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The horror lay in the corner, just barely in Korven's vision, a withered husk. It had been two days and Korven was no closer to breaking free of his webbing.

Perhaps a blade could cut the rubbery excretion, but he could not reach a weapon. Soon after the creature had pierced Hilda, she had begun to swell. She woke up for a few minutes after that. She had been too weak to even speak but she stared with her stony gaze at the thing, as it slowly died.

By this time, Hilda was swollen so big that she had probably suffocated. Korven hoped she had because, for the last several hours, he had heard noises coming from inside her. He thought he knew what those noises were, soft tearing and hissing noises that were accompanied by masses moving beneath her flesh. Korven now believed this was how that thing reproduced. Hilda was now just a cocoon for its brood and that soon the things inside of her would finish eating their way out. Once they had, he would be trapped here alone and they would still be hungry...

**This month we are continuing the story from our last few issues. It is a novella we are absolutely enthralled by.**

\*

Duke Raulston owns *The Marion County Messenger*, an online newspaper. He also co-hosts a weekly horror show, *Tennessee Macabre* that airs on OtherworldsTV and iTVChattanooga. He has always loved pulp fiction.

Duke grew up reading Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft. It is his desire to spend the rest of his life creating pulp fiction.

## **Redemption**

Part III

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### **Nine of Swords**

By Duke Raulston

The Preacher drove the Medicine show wagon southwest out of Sweetwater. Luther dozed in the seat next to him. He had one thing that in all of his surface incarnations over the millennia he had never had. Freedom. He had always been tied to a temple. Always tied to a city. Always bound by the laws of a Pharaoh, an Emperor, or a king and their bureaucracy. Not here.

There were no cities—just tiny frontier settlements. Only a few souls to offer here and there, but when he was done he could move on. Sweetwater had been simple. His only serious opposition was the Church. Father Sanchez had presented an immediate problem. The Preacher at first thought that Father Sanchez resented an interloper in his territory. Now he wondered if the man just sensed something evil about him from the off. It happened almost immediately. The Preacher had parked his medicine wagon on the outskirts of town, across from the Nashville house.

He had taken a shine to a book called “Revelations.” It inspired just the right amount of fear among his congregants. It was mixed with enough fascination to bring the curious onlookers in and hold his audiences spellbound. He sold a whole case of Redemption Formula (he had decided that it would never do to call it McPhee’s Miracle Cure). After he finished preaching and started packing up, one onlooker remained.

The Preacher noticed that he was not leaving. He looked to be a relatively young man but one who had been twisted by nature, or maybe by a hard childhood on the frontier. Most of his teeth were missing and he walked with a pronounced limp. His eyes had a vacant, maniacal look. The Preacher knew right away that he could use this man in his work.

“Would you like to purchase a bottle of Redemption, boy!”

“I ain’t got no money.”

“I understand. Tell me son, are you a believer?”

“I sure as Hell am!”

The Preacher grinned.

“Are you willing to work for me, son? I want you to think long and hard. The ways of the Lord are mysterious—you may not always understand why I am telling you to do what I am telling you to do. It may not always seem right to your eyes—do you understand?”

“Preacher, you pay me and I’m gonna’ do whatever you tell me too,” he said with a sickening laugh.

“Son we are going to get along just fine. I got a special batch of Redemption that I want you to try. You drink a bottle of this and it is going to make you feel a lot stronger.”

The Preacher reached underneath his seat on the wagon and pulled out a corked bottle. It was about three quarters full of thick red liquid. He made as if to hand the kid the bottle then he pulled it back.

“You know,” he said, “You ain’t even told me your name.”

“Luther, Luther Deal.” he answered, extending his hand greedily.

“You in this with me Luther Deal? I mean in this to the end. Ain’t no crawfishin’ on this deal.”

“I’m in Preacher, long as you pay me.” Luther reached for the bottle; the Preacher extended it to him. Luther turned it up and drank. He grimaced.

“It’s salty, taste like blood!”

“What do you care, Luther? It’s going to make you stronger. You will feel a difference in the morning.”

Luther frowned, lifted the bottle to his lips, and chugged the contents down. The Preacher looked over his shoulder. He saw Father Sanchez crossing the dusty street. The holy man was making a beeline for him. It did not look like he was happy.

“Who is that, Luther?”

“Father Sanchez, he’s a Mes-i-can Priest. Some say he’s a queer.”

“That a fact?”

“I dunno, that’s just what some folks say.”

“Finish packing the wagon for me, Luther.”

“Alright.”

The Priest had crossed the street. He was holding a bottle of Redemption Formula.

“What can I do for you Padre?” The Preacher asked politely.

“I just had to see you with my own eyes.”

The Preacher was taken aback, he was not expecting adulation,

“Really?” he smiled.

“Of course,” Emilio answered, “I just had to lay eyes on the man that has taken two thousand years of Christian doctrine, distilled it, mixed it with a few cups of rot-gut liquor and is selling it to the Lord’s Faithful. I wanted to

lay eyes on you myself. Tell me *Reverend*, how many bottles does it take to get a man's soul into heaven?"

"Well, I reckon that depends on what manner of sinner he is, Padre." The Preacher answered. He was not used to being talked to with such sarcasm. Luther was guffawing behind the wagon.

"I don't think this is very funny, young man. Preaching false doctrine is a very serious sin. You may not be preaching it Luther, but if you tie up with someone who is, you are just as guilty!"

"Really, Padre? It's a free country and a man can preach whatever he likes, even if the 'Mother Church' disagrees with it."

There was another man crossing the dusty street. This one was wearing a star. The Preacher was not liking the looks of this. Maybe it was time to pull up and move on to the next town.

"You are absolutely right, my friend—no one can forbid any doctrine you preach. However, one must purchase a business license to sell anything in Sweetwater. I am guessing that you have no such license. Am I correct?"

Sheriff Tate walked up.

"What seems to be the trouble here, Sanchez? Why did you send for me?"

The Preacher thought he detected a slight smirk when the Sheriff said it. He was really good at detecting such things. Maybe it was because he was a Catholic, probably because he was, as Luther said a "Mes-i-can", almost certainly because the Sheriff had heard the same rumors about Father Sanchez's sexuality. Whatever it was, there was a definite sneer of distaste there. He could use this. The Preacher tipped his hat.

"Good afternoon, Sheriff. We were just witnessen' to the good people of Sweetwater. I am not sure what we have done to invoke the ire of the Vatican."

Sanchez huffed, "I was just telling the Reverend here that Sweetwater requires a business license of anyone that does business here. Even a snake oil salesman!"

Sheriff Tate squinted at the Preacher.

"That's a hard, cold fact. You got a license, Preacher?"

The Preacher looked at the Sheriff.

"I wonder if I might speak with you in private for just a moment?"

Sheriff Tate nodded, and when he motioned him toward the back of the wagon, the Sheriff followed. Father Sanchez made to follow as well. Sheriff Tate looked harshly at him.

"He said in private, Sanchez."

Emilio threw up his hands and walked back to the street.

They got to the back of the wagon and the Preacher turned around.

"Sheriff, this boy, Luther, he came to my show today. He just stayed and didn't seem to have no place to go."

“Luther ain’t got no family left, some of the folks around treat him pretty bad. I don’t think he’s right in the head.”

“That’s what it looked like to me. So, it came into my mind to hire him. Sort of take him under my wing.”

“That’s awful good of you Preacher but you need to know something.”

“What’s that?”

“That kid is mean. Always has been. Luther is little, he ain’t never had the money to buy a gun nor has anybody taught him how to use one. So usually, Luther is on the receiving end. Anytime he ain’t, if it is somebody weaker than him or an animal, he is vicious. I seen it myself. You don’t want to lay down and go to sleep in that wagon with him around.”

“Thank you for your concern Sheriff. I think a little compassion and the Lord’s love can turn that young man around. If I didn’t believe that, I wouldn’t be in this line of work now, would I?”

“I guess not Preacher, but you need to be careful.”

“Much obliged. What I don’t understand is why Father Sanchez is so upset about it.”

The Sheriff turned back and scowled at the Priest.

“I got some idea why.”

“I was not aware that I needed a license.”

The Preacher reached into his pocket and took out a ten-dollar Golden Eagle coin. “Will this cover it Sheriff?” he asked innocently.

“That should more than cover it Preacher.”

The Sheriff smiled.

“Do you think you could help us get rid of Father Sanchez? I am more than willing to have a friendly discussion of theology with anyone at any time, but truth be told, his presence seems to be agitating Luther.”

“I bet it is!”

The Sheriff turned and stamped toward the Priest.

“Sanchez!” he screamed. “You wanted this man to buy a business license. He just bought one. Now get out of here and leave these folks alone.”

“I bet he did,” Sanchez sniped.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I am going to tell you this just once, Sanchez. That collar don’t mean a damned thing to me. I will run you in, just like anybody else. If you don’t believe me, just run your mouth some more and find out.”

The Sheriff was yelling and poking his finger in Sanchez’s face. Sanchez looked dumbfounded. He gave the Preacher an evil look. The Preacher just grinned at him.

Father Sanchez turned on his heel and stomped off. The sheriff watched with his hands on his hips until the Father was out of earshot.

“If he gives you any more trouble, just let me know, Preacher.”

“I will. I will send Luther to fetch you. I am sure he knows where the jail is.”

The Sheriff touched the brim of his hat.

“Before you go Sheriff, take a bottle of Miracle water with you...It’ll cure what ails you.”

“That’s mighty nice of you, Preacher. I have been down in my back lately.” The Sheriff took the bottle, uncorked it, drank a swallow. He coughed and sputtered. “That stuff’s rougher than a corn cob.”

“You’re going to be a new man in the morning.” The Preacher laughed.

“I sure hope so, thanks again,” the Sheriff hollered back as he walked down the dusty street.

*I am going to like Texas*, the Preacher thought. He was shocked at how easy it was to handle the sheriff. If everyone that he encountered was like this, he had found paradise. The priest, however, worried him. It had been his experience that nothing was worse for business than a priest that truly believed what he was preaching.

He was going to bide his time. It wouldn’t do to move too quickly. If all of his lives had taught him one thing, it was patience.

“Luther,” he spoke.

“Yeah,” Luther answered.

“That padre makes me uncomfortable. Can you watch him? Can you watch without being seen?”

Luther cracked a mirthless smile.

“I’m good at not being seen.”

“I bet you are! I just want to know where he goes and when, who he sees, and when he is alone.”

The preacher’s emphasis on *alone* did not escape Luther’s notice, and he cackled.

“I have a little knife,” he said, slipping a small skinning knife from his belt. “I could stick the little pig.” Luther laughed uncontrollably.

“No, that won’t be necessary. I have other plans for him. Do you know about the sinkhole on the edge of town?”

“The Devil’s Den. Oh yeah, I know about it...full of haints. That’s what everybody says. I ain’t never seen nuthin’ there myself.”

“So that’s what they say is it? They aren’t wrong.”

Luther’s eyes got big.

“You want to see some of them?”

“Hell yeah! I ain’t never seen no honest to God haint before. Are we going to give the Padre to the haint?”

The Preacher just smiled. Luther started dancing exuberantly in the dust. The Preacher had seen too many lives to believe in luck. Nonetheless, he knew that he had been sent the perfect companion—one that would revel in the sacrifice as much as he did, and one that had a glimmer of second sight.