

PULP FACTORY



JUNE 2021

Pulp Factory E-Zine

June 2021

Issue 7

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

Copyright 2021

Copyright © 2021 by Pulp Factory

No part of this publication may be reproduced, scanned, or transmitted in any printed, electronic, or mechanical medium including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Individual authors retain all rights to stories included herein.

Edited by Blake Ray



From the Editors

Dear Readers,

Thank you for coming back! And for all of our new readers, welcome! We are so thankful to have you and can't wait to share this month's stories with you.

If you are new here, we are a monthly pulp magazine and writing contest. This month is one of our last in this format. We are beginning a new phase soon. We are expanding and publishing even more content for you.

One of the things that is not discussed often enough is how big a contribution to popular culture. Pulp magazines and novels gave rise to some of the biggest writers, influencers, and futurists from James M. Cain to Philip K. Dick. The pulps were a place for new voices to be heard, and that is what we are striving to do here.

So, sit back, relax, and enjoy.

Cheers, Pulpsters,

Blake & Ian

Our winner this month, and for an unprecedented third month in a row, is Jeremy Wininger. This story follows the fantasy story published in our April issue.

*

Jeremy Wininger is an up and coming writer and life long storyteller. He is currently working on a series of fantasy adventure stories and creating a world of modern urban fantasy/horror.

Of Fallen Angels and Risen Demons An Esyr-Tyrum Story

By Jeremy Wininger

The map to the vault led Devon and Ralgum down the maze-like catacombs beneath Gran Kael. Through wit and stealth, the two had managed over the last day to avoid other prisoners of the Bandit King and were now close to the secret door that would lead them to treasure and glory. Sweat beaded on Devon's forehead as he moved stealthily ahead of Ralgum, acting as a scout for the young mage. The cool weather of the surface had been replaced by a more consistent heat underground. There were several hot springs in the catacombs that gave the area close to the vault warmth and humidity.

"We should be getting close, if I remember your map correctly," Ralgum whispered.

"Yeah, that's right," Devon said non-plussed. Over the last day, he had quickly learned that Ralgum's memory was good, very good. He had also become somewhat annoyed by the recall of the southerner. Still, Devon recognized how fortunate he was to have met the mage. There were very few sources of light so deep in the catacombs and, while Devon could have relied on the bioluminescent fungus that was indigenous to the caves, Ralgum's magic made things easier. "Okay, I think we're close enough. Do you have the strength to create more mage light?" Devon called back, a little louder than Ralgum had spoken.

The caves leading to the secret vault were natural and had been left mostly untouched by the Priest Kings of Gran Kael before the fall of the city. As Ralgum's quiet incantation floated through the air, he stepped forward and waved his hand over the dagger that Devon held. The dagger slowly glowed with an inner light that, after a few moments, was brighter than a torch. Though the spell was of a weaker nature, Ralgum had eaten only what mushrooms they had found and knew were safe in the last day. Before that,

he had gone an entire day with no food, and the casting of any spell was taxing on the body.

Devon held the dagger high, knowing that the enchantment would only last so long, and peered down the tunnel. “There,” Devon’s voice once again cut through the silence of the caverns. He pointed toward what, at first glance, appeared to be a dead end.

“I don’t see—” Ralgum’s voice trailed off as he noticed some of the stones near the top of the wall had fallen away, revealing worked stone blocks behind them. One of the stone blocks seemed to be missing, creating a hole large enough for him to crawl through. “How cunning, the cavern wall looks so real, natural.” Ralgum spoke with admiration for those who had crafted the façade.

Devon stepped forward and ran his trained fingertips over the false cavern wall. Taking great care, he slowly inspected the wall.

“Is this necessary? We already have a way in.” Ralgum spoke with a touch of impatience.

“Sometimes traps reset automatically. Given the blood around the hole, I’d rather not find out the hard way that this is one of those traps.” Devon waved a hand at the hole above them.

Ralgum returned his gaze to the hole and saw for the first time the dried blood on the stone. It surprised him that he had missed that detail. Ralgum’s impatience mollified, he stepped back and found a large stone to sit on, as Devon continued his work.

Working from Kent’s instructions, it still took Devon half an hour to find all the slots and mechanisms to disarm the traps and open the releases on the vault door, so cleverly were they hidden. He stood in front of the door and began pulling at one of the concealed handles. As Devon’s muscles strained against the weight of the door, a low grinding sound filled the tunnel and the door slowly opened.

Devon held up his dagger, still carrying the light Ralgum had placed on it, up against the darkness. Holding the whip in his other hand, carefully coiled, Devon stepped forth. On the ground to the left of the doorway lay a skeleton on the bloodstained floor. Several of the long-dead skeleton’s bones had been broken under the force of whatever trap had ended its expedition. Devon returned his attention to the vault ahead of him. He knew that the vault was built in a multi-chamber layout, but Kent had never told him much about its contents. Kent had always been more concerned about restoring his fallen brother to Kael’s favor. Ralgum joined Devon at the entrance, and they proceeded into the chamber.

A few steps into the entry hall, Devon halted and Ralgum bumped into him.

“Do you smell that?”

Ralgum took a moment to deeply inhale. The smell of death and rot carried in the humid air.

“Something dead lies within here,” Ralgum’s voice was a whisper.

“Dru’M’Bar’s been hunting.” Devon’s voice was whispered, but his eyes had taken on a sharp focus.

A tearing noise softly echoed from further into the vault, followed by noises like the skittering of sharp claws on stone. “Ye can choke on me bones, demon spawn!”, a deep rough voice yelled from deeper in the vault.

Ralgum raised an eyebrow.

“Does Dru’M’Bar have a Dwarven accent?”

Devon was already moving before Ralgum finished his question.

“More likely a victim,” Devon slipped into the shadows, as he tossed the glowing dagger to Ralgum’s feet. As Ralgum picked the dagger and moved to follow, Devon sped forward through the entry hall and into the main chamber. The two men barely had a moment to take in the massive amount of treasure stacked about the room, some of it long ago burst free from the chests that once contained it, before seeing the small black shapes dart about the room.

Ralgum halted at the edge of the treasure room and started reciting, from his memory, the litany he had read from Devon’s scroll.

“Durnam’s beard, where’d ye come from?” the Dwarven voice spoke again from the floor near Devon. Lying there, wrapped up in some web-like cocoon the face of a Dwarf could just barely be seen.

The strange appearance of the Dwarf caused Devon’s movement to falter, and one of the dozen, foot-long creatures leapt at him from the ceiling. Devon’s quick reflexes saved his eye, as he deflected the hurtling creature with his coiled whip. His action caused the strange creature, which to Devon looked like a humanoid insect hybrid, to land on the cocoon right below the Dwarf’s face. The creature recovered quickly, raising up on its rear legs. Its barbed tail poised over its elongated head, aiming at the unprotected face trapped in the cocoon.

“Get it off!” the Dwarf roared in anger, fueled by fear. The creatures, which until this point had been scrambling through the shadows in surprise, were now coming in waves. Strange chittering noises filled the vault, as they began their hunt.

Two of the creatures shot through the air, from high on the walls, toward Devon. As he released the coil on his whip and sent it seeking the closer of the two, he stepped forward and landed a kick with his bare foot on the creature that was attacking the Dwarf. His kick was meant to send the creature flying from the cocoon, and, as it did so, Devon felt the thing’s disgusting, leathery skin against his own. Had he not been so focused on his whip catching one of his two attackers, he might have wretched at the thought. Devon was barely able to duck beneath the path of his second attacker, as he wrenched hard at his whip causing it to cinch, momentarily, around his target. He turned his body a full rotation, hoping to build up as much force as possible before the whip released its captive. The tiny demon’s

form shot from the end of the whip and slammed against a far wall with a strange crunch. Orange glowing blood stained the wall where the thing lay dying.

“Someone get me out of this damned thing!” the Dwarf’s roaring voice echoed.

The creatures’ chittering changed. For a moment, Devon hoped that the litany Ralgum was reciting was working, that whatever horror had been here for these past few years would be put at peace. Then, the creatures’ chittering became the litany itself. Almost a dozen voices speaking out unnervingly and quickly shifting to sound very much like Ralgum. Ralgum ceased his chant; his gaze fell on the large husk of a creature against a far wall, just barely within the light of the dagger.

“I do not think your priest’s friend became a demon; he was probably eaten by one. These are Dratti’Tsum”, Ralgum spoke with surety.

A hundred questions hit Devon’s mind at once, but he pushed those thoughts aside for later.

“Ra, cut the Dwarf free, quick!” Devon took a defensive stance as he spoke. Most likely, this Dwarf was just as bad as the other criminals that found themselves in the Bandit King’s dungeon, but Devon couldn’t leave anyone in a situation like this.

The creatures continued their mimicked chant, as they slowly circled their prey. An alien intelligence was revealed in their eyes by the glowing dagger that Ralgum now used to start cutting away at the Dwarf’s bindings.

“Know any tricks to stop them?” Devon asked softly, hoping that his voice wouldn’t be the catalyst for their attack. “A weakness?”

“Walls seem to do the trick”, Ralgum grunted out sardonically, as he struggled to free the Dwarf.

Some imperceptible signal seemed to pass through the Dratti’Tsum as they moved simultaneously forward toward the group. Five of the eleven creatures darted forward, in what was very much like a formation. Three shot forth toward Devon and the remaining two went for Ralgum and the Dwarf.

“Hurry!” called Devon, as he burst into motion. Stepping forward to intercept the three coming at him, he raised his whip, holding a length of the leather between his fists. The three leapt at him; Devon quickly ducked one of the demon spawn. At the same moment, he used his taunt whip like a clothesline along the chest of the second creature and Devon fell forward pulling his knee up to his chest. As he landed on top of the creature, his knee crushed its skull in a sickening burst of orange ichor. But Devon’s attack cost him. The third creature had sunk its tiny claws into Devon’s shoulder and now bit into his back with needle-like teeth.

While Devon rushed forward for his assault, Ralgum had redoubled his efforts to free the dwarf. He sawed furiously at the rubbery mass, aided by the Dwarf’s struggles from within. Long before Ralgum could finish his work,

the two creatures that had charged forth were upon them. Ralgum fell back, as one of the creatures barreled into his chest. He barely pulled his dagger up in time to stop the creature's fangs from finding his throat. He twisted and rolled his body over the spawn of Dru'M'Bar and, with both hands on the dagger, he clumsily fell upon the creature. Luck won out over ability, as the creatures jarring movements placed its back directly under the dagger's blade.

During Ralgum's struggle, the Dwarf had finally torn his left arm free with an audible ripping. Ralgum's efforts had weakened his bonds just enough. The Dratti'Tsum went for his face, but he deftly caught it around its neck at the last moment. The creature issued a shrill cry of warning and it scratched forward, attempting to bite the Dwarf's face. The Dwarf roared back in defiance, and realizing he had no other weapons at his disposal, he stopped pushing the demon spawn away from his face and, with a quick jerk, brought it straight toward his mouth.

While the first five Dratti'Tsum had started their assault, the remaining six had moved in groups of two, readying a second wave. It was only a few moments before they also moved into action. The first pair moved to pile upon Devon, along with the one he had avoided in the first wave. All three joined the one that had already dug its claws into his back. His tunic was partially protecting him from their claws and teeth, but it would not be long before they would be able to wear him down. Thinking quickly, he lunged forward from his kneeling position into a forward roll. One of the creatures was knocked free from his back. As he came up from the roll onto the balls of his feet, he spun his body so that his back was against the nearest wall. He flung himself into the wall as hard as he could manage and was rewarded by another Dratti'Tsum falling from its purchase on his tunic. The remaining two sunk their claws and teeth into his back and neck once again and Devon cried out in pain.

The dwarf flung the Dratti'Tsum's dead body at the two approaching him, a suspicious chunk missing from its skull being the only wound on the creature. The two charging demon spawn skittered around their flung brother and continued forward. Their dodge had bought the Dwarf enough time to reach under his beard and draw one of the two daggers sheathed there. He had time to throw the blade but decided against it. He wasn't good with his left hand in normal circumstances and being webbed to the floor would only make him worse. Instead, the Dwarf readied the dagger for the creatures' charge. They came on at the same time. In a split second, he decided to go for the one on his left. With all the strength his current position allowed, he thrust the dagger into the thing's mouth, the end of his blade protruding from the back of its other-worldly skull. The other creature hit the right side of his head. Quickly he turned his face to the left in an attempt to protect his eye from the Dratti'Tsum's seeking claws. He felt blood flowing from his scalp and, with a grunt of anger, thrust his still impaled dagger at

the creature. The blind thrust scored a painful wound on the thing's side. It hissed in pain and anger, scampering away for the moment.

Ralgum was not faring so well. In a moment of urgency, he had thrown his dagger at the pair of Dratti'Tsum bearing down on him. It had not found any target, other than the far wall. Now, he found himself scrambling back in a sitting position, hands and feet pumping as fast as they could. His progress halted as he hit one of the crumbling stacks of chests. So hard had been his scrambling escape that one of the trunks burst open and, once again, luck was with Ralgum. While gold and trinkets flowed out of the chest Ralgum's shoulder had broken, the rest of the chests stacked on top of it teetered and began to fall over Ralgum's head. Two old chests, deteriorated by the moisture in the air, fell and burst open. The closest hit Ralgum's lap, but the furthest landed on top of the demon spawn. While Ralgum was temporarily safe from attack, he was also pinned down by the rotted wood and contents of the chest.

As he started to grab at items to move them, his hand fell upon the hilt of a sword and the world stopped...

Ralgum stood on a ruined hill with the Dwarf. He knew the Dwarf (Korven) but did not know how. He was older here, he knew not how much older, but he felt a thick beard on his normally clean-shaven face. The Dwarf looked different as well; the beginnings of gray had snuck into his beard. The moon caught Ralgum's attention, and he marveled at how close it was. He had never seen it take up so much of the sky.

Then, below the hill in a valley, he spied Devon, perhaps 10 years older, walking. In his hands, he carried a sword that was as deadly as it was beautifully crafted. Devon held his arms over his head and reversed his grip on the sword so that the blade pointed toward the ground.

"Life must flow from death; nature demands her release. Our guardians have left us and now we stand on our own!" Devon's voice reverberated unnaturally throughout the valley and hills.

Ralgum gasped at the familiar words. Words he had learned long ago. He turned back to see the moon blowing away, like sand on a cobbled street. As the moon vanished, the valley began to flood with a crimson river of blood. Devon was nowhere in sight.

Ralgum came back to himself, only a few moments had passed during his vision, but things looked grim. Devon had managed to kill one of the four that had been assaulting him, but had somehow lost his whip. The Dwarf was still trapped and the last remaining Dratti'Tsum stalked him while injured. Ralgum looked down at the sword he held, graceful and slightly curved with a single edge; it was as much a weapon as a work of art. It was also the very sword that Devon had held in his vision. The images had left him unsure

about much, but one thing he was certain of was that this sword belonged in Devon's hands.

"Devon, catch!" Ralgum called out, as he tossed the sword Devon's way. The sword slid along the floor and stopped several feet in front of the young rogue.

Devon's eyes lit up with determination upon seeing the blade. He threw himself forward, twisting his body in the air as he went. The demon spawn had learned from this trick earlier and, as if thinking with one mind, they released their hold from his back. Devon had hoped they were smart enough for such a bluff to work. At the last possible moment, Devon flung his body backward in a rotation that allowed him to land on his hands and continue his motion onto his feet. On his way to a standing position, he grasped the sword. The four creatures rushed to him, as he fell into a fighting stance. He almost faltered at the perfect balance and light weight of the sword, but then he stepped forward to swing. The sword cut through the air with more speed than Devon would think possible. Two of the creatures fell away, cleaved apart, and he easily left his feet and tumbled through the air, avoiding the other two.

Using their inhuman speed, the two creatures spun on their claws as they hit the ground and sprang back towards the warrior, but with so fine a blade in Devon's hands, it was hardly a contest. Devon sent a horizontal back-handed swing that neatly cut off one creature's head. Meanwhile, he ducked under the second creature and continued his swing into a pirouette that caught the unfortunate beast mid torso before it could land and ready another attack. It fell in two pieces onto the stone floor.

The last remaining Dratti'Tsum seemed to realize it was no match for this group and shot off, holding its wounded arm against its chest, toward a crumbled portion of wall where a hot spring had broken into the vault some time ago. The creature dove into the water and swam for safety.

It was only now that Devon could take the time to look around the room and take in more details. He saw other Dwarves, three of them, and one of them was hardly recognizable. Her torso was torn open from the inside. The moisture from the hot spring had caused most of wood in the room to rot and weaken.

As Ralgum finished removing all the treasure so he could stand, and Devon approached the Dwarf who, by this time, had dropped the dagger that he had impaled the Dratti'Tsum on, and had drawn his second dagger from under his beard. He was sawing at the rubbery bonds that held him. Devon looked down at him and their eyes met.

"So, what do we have here?" Devon quipped. The Dwarf's eyes looked back unflinchingly. Devon swung the blade in four swift and precise strokes and, suddenly, the Dwarf found himself free.

"Ye have my thanks," the Dwarf offered, cautiously.

“Think nothing of it,” Devon responded and held out his free hand to help the Dwarf to his feet. After a few moments, the Dwarf accepted the help and stood very gingerly. His right knee was obviously in pain. “I’m called Devon, and that’s Ra.” Devon nodded a head over to the young mage, as he brushed himself off.

“Please, it’s Ralgum.” He looked at the Dwarf and noticed for the first time that his beard and mouth was covered in orange gore. “Did you bite a Dratti’Tsum?” Ralgum asked in a mixture of shock and disgust.

“Tasted terrible, I wouldn’t recommend trying it,” the Dwarf said sourly. “I’m Korven Redshield, and I feel we are well met, and I owe you my life, but what in Durnam’s name are you two doing in my vault?”

Devon and Ralgum looked at each other, mild surprise playing on Ralgum’s face, humor crossing Devon’s.

“I suppose I’m here to burgle it, Korven. Though up until this point, I thought of it as treasure hunting, certainly no worse than salvage,” Devon spoke as he walked about the room. Korven stepped in front of him with not a bit of humor in his own dour features.

“Ye can drop that glib tongue of yours right now, lest I pull it from your head. My kinsmen died here and ye’ll not utter one more disrespectful syllable until they’re properly cared for. As for my claim, I have a legal document.” Korven stood glowering at Devon with his hands on his hips.

Devon looked about the room again, sobered by Korven’s words. “I’m sorry, you’re right. Sometimes it’s too easy to see what the Bandit King does above us in Gran Kael and forget there are still good people in this cursed place. Let me help.” Devon spoke sincerely, ashamed of his attitude.

“I would help as well,” Ralgum said solemnly.

A small campfire burned in the tunnel outside the door Korven had opened with his recovered hammer. The three survivors of the vault sat around the fire eating the provisions that the Dwarves had brought with them. They were all tired and dirty from burying the Dwarves under stones in the tunnel. Korven declared it a proper place for a Dwarf to rest their head for eternity.

“...and not only could ye have a share of the treasure, but ye can even keep that skinny Elf blade.” Korven sat back to let the others consider his offer.

“And all we have to do is go with you to Clan Red Shield and help make sure you arrive?” Devon asked, making sure he understood that such a simple task could pay this rich of a reward.

“It’d be a dangerous enough journey alone, but me knee’s put me in a dire straight, lads. No way I could make it on me own, I’m not too proud to say”, Korven spoke matter-of-factly, with not any hint of self-pity in his voice.

"I'm in," Devon said with not one more moment of consideration. "I came for treasure, but I don't like leaving anyone in a lurch that they don't deserve." Devon looked to Ralgum.

Korven shifted his gaze to Ralgum as well. After long moments of consideration, Ralgum leaned forward and spoke. "I will go as well. Treasure can fund my travels, and the opportunity to see the inner workings of a Dwarven city isn't common."

Devon broke into a grin.

"That's the spirit, Ra. With the three of us, nothing can stand in our way", Devon slapped Ralgum's shoulder, bruised from the chests, and the mage winced.

"Then get your rest lads. In the morning, we'll sort through the treasure and take what we can. We can lock the vault up tight and soon Clan Red Shield can claim the rest", Korven smiled with satisfaction, if not a bit of sadness. He would mourn his cousins in the slow plodding way that Dwarves do such things. That sadness would become a part of him, just as the joy those three had given him during their lives was now a part of him. He crawled into his tent and double checked to make sure he still had the small enchanted hammer-shaped key. He liked Devon and Ralgum, but he did not yet trust them. Devon carried himself with a swagger that most law-abiding folks did not, and that gave Korven enough reason to keep an eye on the pair of Humans.

As Devon looked down at the Elven blade with obvious appreciation, Ralgum looked on with trepidation. He was a scholar first, even above his studies of magic, and he was well versed in religious history and prophecy. He knew that he had experienced a powerful vision, and what he had seen could not be mistaken. That was the prophecy of the Nightbringer, he who would usher the fall of Niebendar, god of the moon. Devon was a marked man, and Ralgum was afraid. He would follow Devon, not for adventure, but to learn more and see what destiny lay in store for the young rogue.

This month we are publishing another installment of Duke Raulston's novella, *Redemption*. It is fascinating mashup of westerns, horror, and fantasy that we are super proud of.

*

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 V

Three of Swords

By Duke Raulston

The next morning Luther was up before sunrise. He grabbed a piece of soda bread from the wagon and washed it down with a gourd dipper full of water. There was no time to wait around for breakfast; he had his orders. He had to catch Tim early. He took off at a trot toward Sweetwater.

Luther got into town just as the eastern sky turned blood red. He made himself inconspicuous a block or so from the church. He knew that Tim went out every morning to a little panderia down this street. Father Sanchez had a sweet tooth.

Just a few moments before seven, Tim came down the street. Luther stepped out beside him. Tim eyed him suspiciously. Despite what Luther had let on to the Preacher, he and Tim were not on good terms. Tim was one of the few people in Sweetwater that was small enough and vulnerable enough for Luther to take out his frustrations on. And take them out he had.

Tim was petrified. He edged away from Luther into the middle of the street. He knew that none of the townspeople would come to his aid. What did they care about a bastard being raised by the church? No. He would be on his own.

“Oh come on, Timmy—don't be like that,” Luther said.

Tim cut his eyes and said nothing.

“Here I am going out of my way to help you, and you won't even talk to me,” Luther sneered tossing a bag of coins up in the air. Tim's eyes bulged at the sight.

“Is that all your money?”

“No Timmy, this is *your* money!”

“What do I got to do?” Tim said uneasily.

“Nothing, Timmy. Nothing at all. You just gotta keep quite. Keep your trap shut for twenty-four hours. We got some business with Father Sanchez. When we finish I will give you this bag. In the morning, you get on a train for San Francisco. That's all there is to it.”

“Sanchez ain't never done nuthin' to me. I ain't going to sell him out.”

“Timmy, Timmy, Timmy, that is a real bad decision. I hope that you'll reconsider.”

Luther took out his knife and started cleaning his nails. It was a clumsy but effective threat.

“Are we gonna have business with you tonight too?”

Tim froze.

“A few days from now you can be in San Francisco,” Luther continued. “You can put all of this behind you. That sounds pretty good don't it?”

“How much money?”

“Thirty silver dollars and a one way ticket to San Francisco, Timmy. That's a nice little grubstake. The other way—well it ain't too good. What do you say?”

Tim starred down at the ground.

“I'll do it,” Timmy mumbled.

“You won't ever regret it, Timmy. We will see you tonight.”

“Who's ‘we’?” Tim asked.

“Don't you worry ‘bout that none.”

In the empty chapel, Timmy busied himself preparing the altar for Compline. It was a simple service to end the day in contemplation. No paten or chalice was needed—simply an altar cloth. Tim dressed the altar nervously; he was pale and trembling. He dropped the altar cloth from his shaking hands.

Tim didn't hear Father Sanchez come into the sanctuary. Sanchez had noticed Tim acting strangely all day, and he was concerned about the boy. He knew that the last priest had abused him. He had tried to get through to Tim but had never succeeded in breaking through his shell. Sanchez thought that he probably mistrusted all priests. Who could blame the boy? He saw Tim drop the altar cloth and cleared his throat.

Tim jumped, startled. He looked up and saw father Sanchez standing in the doorway.

“I am sorry Father.”

“For dropping a cloth? It is I that should apologize for startling you. Are you alright Timothy?”

“I am okay.”

“Forgive me Timothy, but you don't seem okay. You look as if you have seen a ghost.”

“I am fine, Father.”

“Very well Timothy. If you should decide that you want to talk about it, my door is always open.”

Father Sanchez walked hesitantly to the altar. He moved quickly through Compline, and came to the Responsory,

“Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit—”

The doors to the sanctuary swung open. The Preacher walked in with Luther at his side.

“Don't mind me, Padre,” the Preacher said. “I just thought I would come see how the other half lives.”

“You!” Sanchez sputtered. “What are you doing in my church? You thieving heathen!”

Luther snickered.

“That's down right hurtful, Padre,” the Preacher said. “Here I am trying to make up and you've got your hackles up like a wet cat.”

Luther kept walking toward Sanchez and snickering.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, Luther. You know better!” Sanchez was screaming.

Luther just kept walkin' Sanchez charged past him toward the Preacher.

“Get out of my church, Trash!” the priest yelled brandishing his rosary. Just then, Luther pulled a slapjack out of his sleeve, spun, and hit Sanchez on the base of his skull. The priest fell to the floor with a moan. Luther stood over him laughing.

“Now, now,” the Preacher said as he strolled to the prone figure of the priest. “Aren't you forgetting something, Luther?”

“Oh yeah!” Luther exclaimed. He tossed Tim the bag of coins.

Tim caught them in the air. There was a sick feeling in his stomach.

“We're a'countin' on you, Timmy.” Luther said with a wolfish grin. “You take that coin and you get on that train in the mornin' everything'll be alright. If you double cross us—if you talk—I'll cut your tongue out, as sure as God made green apples.

Sanchez was dimly aware of being lowered into the pit. He thought he heard the rustle of scales on the side of the wall as he descended. His head throbbed, and his stomach was churning. He hit the ground with a thud. It was like an electric shock. He rolled onto his side and retched. The ropes around his wrists cut deeply into his flesh. He looked up as Luther came down the rope.

Luther landed with a smile.

“Christ, Luther, what have you done?” Father Sanchez said through drying lips.

Luther just cackled and grabbed Father Sanchez by his robes and roughly hauled him to his feet. The priest could barely stand. Luther half drug him to two posts in the center of the pit. His vision was blurry, but he

saw a giant serpent, it's indigo scales gleaming like sapphires in the moonlight. He thought that he must be hallucinating, but the serpent was swaying in the moonlight as if in response to some unseen snake charmer.

Luther cut the Priest's bonds and roughly tied his wrists to the post. Luther smiled at the Priest and cackled.

"This is gonna smart."

Luther reached into the haversack that was slung over his shoulder and pulled out a giant nail and a hammer.

"God in Heaven what are you doing Luther?" Sanchez screamed as Luther drove the spike through sinew and bone. He writhed in agony, and blood spurted freely from his mangled wrists. Luther laughed with each blow. Sanchez barely noticed that others had gathered in the little cavern. One face that he did pick out was that of the Sheriff grinning at him.

By the time Luther got to the other nail Sanchez had lost consciousness. He came to a little later. The Indigo serpent was still swaying, but he heard a rustling sound coming from the tunnel directly ahead of him. The Priest was conscious but his vision was blurred, and he could barely think because of the pain from his wrists and aching head. He knew that something bad was coming up that tunnel, and he knew that he would never survive to see the surface again. He could hear the crowd behind him talking and laughing. He could hear Luther cackling behind him like a braying ass. He was going to die, but he was going to meet his end like a Martyr in the coliseum not some quivering pile of flesh.

The priest used his spiked wrists to pull himself upright. Spasms of pain radiated through out his whole body, and his vision went for a moment, but he did not pass out. He ground his teeth together to keep from screaming out in agony. He composed himself for a moment until his vision returned. The scraping sounds in the tunnel were growing nearer. He sang a few quivering notes.

"Magnificat anima mea Dominum."

The crowd behind him grew silent. The Sheriff was astonished.

"Is that damned old queer singing?" the lawman asked of no one in particular.

"Et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo,"

"It's Latin," a voice answered the Sheriff. "He is singing a hymn in Latin!"

"I'll be damned!" the sheriff replied.

"We all will be, Sheriff!" Luther cackled.

Sanchez's voice got even stronger.

"Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae; ecce ex hoc beatem me dicent omnes generationes."

A huge wedge shape poked into the room from the tunnel. It's tongue flicked a few times to scent the air.

"Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est, et sanctum nomen ejus. Et

misericordia ejus a progenie in progenies timenthus eum.”

The serpentine creature poured from the passage, its coils piling higher and higher in front of the priest. It could not hear. It had no idea that the priest was singing, but it sensed odd vibrations emanating from its victim. Something else unsettled it as well. This creature was utterly unafraid. Even bound to the posts. It reasoned that it must move quickly to eliminate this threat. It reared back with its mottled, yellow head touching the limestone wall above the tunnel.

“Fecit potentiam brachio suo; dispersit superbos mente cordis sui.”

The creature struck. Sanchez continued singing until the gaping jaws snapped shut with a sickening crunch, tearing Sanchez in half. The beast raised its snout toward the midnight sky and swallowed.

After the sacrifice, when the other people left the pit, Luther left too and went back to the wagon. He built up the fire, and busied himself making a meal. The Preacher came through the Mesquite thicket as Luther was spreading some beans on a tortilla.

“You did good tonight, Boy!”

“Thank you,” Luther replied. He was a little in awe. He could not remember anybody ever telling him that he had done a good job before.

“As soon as you finish I need you to pack up the wagon. We are pulling out tonight!”

“We’re leavin’ in the middle of the night? Is somethin’ wrong, Preacher?”

“Nary a thing, Luther. We’ve got converts to carry on spreading the good word here Luther. We’ve got to move on to the next town. A missionary never sleeps, Luther.”

Luther wolfed down his tortilla, washed it down with a gourd full of water, and packed the medicine wagon. They were on the road in a half an hour.

The Preacher was driving, and Luther was swaying in the seat half awake. They were coming to the crossroad. This was as far as Luther had ever been. But he knew that you could turn north and go to Snyder, or go west to Big Spring. He didn’t know what was to the south. There was a big live oak tree at the crossroads. Luther could barely make it out in the predawn darkness. As the wagon crept nearer, he thought he could see a body hanging from the tree. Sure enough someone was hanging in the live oak tree. The preacher pulled up to the tree and set the break.

“It’s Timmy,” Luther exclaimed.

The preacher laughed and climbed down from the wagon. He stuck his hand in Timmy’s overcoat and fished out the bag of coins, laughing all the way back to the wagon. He looked at Luther.

“One thing you’ve got to know about this bag of silver,” the Preacher said.

“What’s that Preacher?”

“It always makes its way back to me,” the Preacher said with a mirthless laugh.