

THEY HUNT AT NIGHT

Written by

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FADE IN:

"The world is deep, and deeper than the day can comprehend."

- Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883)

EXT. 1893, IN THE DISTANCE OVER THE HILL BARELY VISIBLE IS A NAVAJO VILLAGE. ALMOST PITCH BLACK WITH A FOREST AHEAD AS THE SOUND OF TWO PAIRS OF FEET CRACKING THE DRY BRITTLE GRASS. AN OWL HOOTS IN THE DISTANCE AS CRICKETS AND OTHER NIGHT CREATURES CALL OUT TO EACH OTHER.

EXT. NAVAJO LAND AT EDGE OF THE FOREST - NIGHT

The two Navajo boys enter with an arrow on each bow cocked and ready to fire. In the forest the sound of birds, chirping bugs and rustle of small animals are up ahead. The older of the two, ANAYEH BLACKHORSE(11), gestures to his brother Onacona to follow him. ONACONA BLACKHORSE (8) has his grandfather's whistle attached to his necklace in his mouth, just barely making a sound as he breathes. He makes a face for Onacona to be quiet. Onacona lets the whistle fall from his lips.

ANAYEH
(whispering)
You sure you want to go?

Onacona looks surprised at his older brother as he sees his breath fog before his lips.

ONACONA
(whispering a little too
loud)
Yes, of course! Think of how proud
they will be.

Onacona realizing he was too noisy makes a face.

ONACONA (CONT'D)
(quieter whispering)
Yes.

Anayeh looks at his brother and nods and leads the way as they head into the forest.

INT. DEEP IN THE FOREST - NIGHT

Anayeh and Onacona reach a downed tree and crouch down behind it as they hear some heavy feet moving within the forest. They look at each other with puzzled looks on their face.

The sounds of heavy breathing is prevalent in their ears. Every few minutes whatever it is lets out an unearthly whine. Onacona looks alarmed, Anayeh's hands are shaking.

ONACONA
(whispering)
I thought you said everyone was
back at the village?

Anayeh squints as he looks at his younger brother.

ANAYEH
(whispering)
Yes, they are. There was an elder
meeting.

Anayeh stands pointing his arrow in the direction of the sound. Onacona's eyes are wide and he is looking up at his brother too scared to move. Anayeh reaches for his brother's hand. Onacona looks at his hand and then the forest and still looks petrified.

ONACONA
I can't.

Anayeh shakes his head with disgust.

ANAYEH
Its okay little brother, I'll go.
If we need help you blow on
Grandfathers whistle.

Onacona looks horrified and is about to say something when Anayeh leaps forward deeper into the forest. Onacona opens his mouth.

ONACONA
(desperate whisper)
Don't Go Anayeh!

Onacona is left shivering behind the downed tree.

INT. FOREST - NIGHT

Anayeh keeps walking quickly and quietly into the forest until he comes upon a clearing. He stops and listens. More Heavy Breathing. A crack of a small branch up ahead. Anayeh frowns. A large crack of a branch behind him. Anayeh's eyes open wide.

ANAYEH
(muttering)
Where did it....

Claws rake across his back accompanied by a demonic scream throwing him forward screaming in pain. Anayeh falls flat on his face. He scrambles to turn over with the bow in his hands as his concussive eyes open wide with blurry vision staring at the creature attacking him. He lets lose an arrow and it lands somewhere in the darkness. Anayeh can barely make out the creatures outline. Its mouth emits a chatter as its back teeth vibrate against each other. The creature swipes at Anayeh again as he scrambles to his feet.

EXT. EDGE OF THE FOREST - NIGHT

Anayeh comes bounding out of the forest clutching his belly, still with his bow in his hand. He goes to leap over the downed tree but collapses as he falls over it. Onacona still frozen in place. Anayeh's eyes lock with his.

ANAYEH
Oni, Tell Father....

Anayeh's arm falls disconnected to the ground along with his insides. Onacona looks horrified as he sees all of the blood. He opens his mouth and screams.

EXT. 3 MONTHS LATER, BOOZY LADY SALOON - LATE AFTERNOON

The Boozy Lady Saloon faded paint peels from the facade like dead skin, revealing the rotting wood beneath. The crooked customer sign swings in the breeze.

ISAAC "ZAK" PAUL MARRANE (40s) guides his horse to a hitching post out front, where CASSIS DAE "CASSIE" ANN (late 20s) and WALTER "JUAN" JUANCHO (28) already stand waiting. Their shoulders nearly touch as they lean against the saloon's porch railing.

Isaac swings his leg over his mount and drops to the ground. His boots CRUNCH satisfyingly into the pea gravel surrounding the hitching post. Isaac makes a CRACK sound he wraps his reins around the post. Passerby's look for a moment and then carry on their travels.

ELMO "MO" AMLETO (50s) approaches behind him, his movements pained as he struggles to dismount. His face contorts with the effort, joints clearly protesting after long days in the saddle.

ISAAC
How long you planning to take,
preacher?

MO
(coldly)
"Do not answer a fool according to
his folly, or you yourself will be
just like him."

Isaac's eyes narrow slightly at the barb.

They approach the saloon entrance where Walter and Cassie stand close together, their shadows merging on the weathered boards.

PAMELA "PAM" SORREL (37) and LONDON D'ARCY (35) are standing and watching silently.

MALCOM "MAL" FREDDIE (32) stands apart from the others, his hand reaches into his jacket for a tarnished silver flask. His trembling fingers struggle with the cap before he manages to take a long, desperate pull.

Mo watches with undisguised contempt. Mal feels the stare and lowers the flask, meeting Mo's judgmental gaze.

MAL
Got something to say Mo, Mr. Holy
man?

MO
The Lord weeps for such weakness.

Mal's hand tightens around the flask, knuckles whitening as he puts it back in his jacket.

MAL
I weep for men who hide behind
books instead of facing the truth.

The tension between them crackles like electricity. Isaac steps between their line of sight, with a friendly smile, breaking the connection before it ignites further.

Pam plucks a hair from Mo's head, he yelps and she places it within an intricate brass device resembling a cross between a clam pocket watch and a compass. Pam gives him a dirty look.

PAM
Humidity's rising. Snow's coming.

She snaps the device closed, returning it to her bag as she eyeballs Mo. The Mal and Mo look skyward at the clear blue expanse, skepticism evident. Isaac claps his hands once.

ISAAC

I'm heading inside now. I'll meet
you all at Pilgrims Lodge in about
an hour.

Isaac puts his hand up as he pushes through the batwing doors
of the Boozy Lady. Music from a player piano greets him.

INT. THE BOOZY LADY

Isaac steps into lunacy as he scans the room. Men are soundly
spanking women over their laps laughing, women drinking in
excess as men are passing out on the tables. A burly African
American man, EZEKIEL WARD (40S), in a long Australian style
trench coat steps out from a private room entrance and
silently gestures to Isaac. Isaac nods as a drunk waitress
crosses in front of him about to trip over her serving tray
filled with booze. Isaac steadies the girl and the tray in a
blur. She looks at him and gives him a dopey drunken smile
and walks over to the bar where she drops the tray on the
floor with a crash. Isaac takes a deep breath and sighs as he
heads into the back of the establishment where his clients
are waiting for him.

INT. PRIVATE BACK ROOM AT THE BOOZY LADY

Isaac follows Ezekiel, to a table where three other people
are seated. On the table is a crude map of the US. A crude
circle around some text in Texas that says Kilgore. There is
a heavier set mustached Caucasian man, CYRUS STEELE (50s) who
draws a pipe out of his jacket. The dark haired brunette
beauty, SELA MOREAU (20S), reaches into her dress and pulls
out a lighter in the shape of an ornate skull, its jawbone on
a hinge and flicks it.

CYRUS

Thank You my dear.

Sela nods expressionless. The short Young Man, SIMON WHITLOCK
(20S), sitting next to her stares at her with a transfixed
look on his face. She doesn't look at him but can feel his
eyes.

SELA

Stop staring at me.

Simon's face turns a slight shade of red.

SIMON

I'm not....

Simon turns his head while making a face. Isaac stands in front of the group. Cyrus nods to Ezekiel who throws a large sack in front of Isaac onto the wooden table with a thump.

CYRUS

Gold Doubloons down payment. All
three thousand cattle are ready.
I've got some special imported
Angus stock in the herd that costs
a pretty penny. Take care of them
like they're family. Meet us in
Kilgore, Texas. Your balance is 10
times what's in that bag.

Isaac picks up the bag off the table weighing it with vertical shakes. Ezekiel Ward nods at Cyrus who smiles and turns to Isaac.

EZEKIEL

We are sending our best men with
you, an Indian tracker and some
muscle.

ISAAC

We never discussed additional men,
you know we don't split our fee.

Cyrus nods as he puffs on his pipe.

CYRUS

True true, you can Relax. We'll pay
them ourselves. Just think of them
as your hired help.

Sela is looking around the saloon when she sees Simon staring at her again. She rolls her eyes and makes a face as she looks away. Isaac nods as he looks at Simon Whitlock.

ISAAC

If a lady don't like to be looked
at, look somewhere else.

Simon rolls his eyes and looks off in a different direction into the saloon at the bar.

EZEKIEL

I trust our business is almost
complete?

Isaac flashes a small smile. Cyrus clears his throat.

ISAAC

What time we starting the drive?

CYRUS

Rumor is a shit storm is headed
here in the next few days. You can
take them out as early as tomorrow
morning. Our men will be there
waiting.

Isaac Nods. Six eyes across the saloon watch the bag in his
hand. Three scrawny white middle aged men with beat up hats
look at each other silently. They wait.

ISAAC

Then I best not waste another
second.

Isaac taps his hat as he acknowledges Sela and nods at the
rest of Cyrus' crew.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

Folks.

Isaac steps away from the table and into the main room.

EXT. BOOZY LADY STILL HAS A CACOPHONY OF SOUNDS EMANATING
FROM IT. SMALL SNOWFLAKES ARE JUST STARTING TO FALL -
AFTERNOON

Isaac steps out into the street and reaches out catching a
snowflake into the palm of his gloved right hand.

ISAAC

(muttering to himself)
Looks like the shit storm is about
to start.

Suddenly he feels the poke of a shotgun barrel into his lower
back. He stops in his tracks.

CRIMINAL ONE

(low talk)
You be real easy like so as my
waddie can unburden you of your
chink.

CRIMINAL TWO (40s) is holding the shotgun and jabs Isaac in
the back again with it. Isaac squints.

ISAAC

Pretty brazen boys, do you know who
I am?

CRIMINAL THREE (40s) steps out in front of Isaac.

CRIMINAL THREE

We don't give a shit who you are
mister. Drop it.

Criminal Three's hand reaches closer towards the bag and Isaac's left arm moves into action. He grabs Criminal Three's wrist with lightning speed immobilizing it and forcing him to his knees as Isaac side steps the shotgun just in time as Criminal Two squeezes the trigger and fires a blast. Isaac swings around and elbows Criminal Two in the face, knocking him out. Criminal One is standing behind as he falls. Isaac already has his gun drawn with his left hand while still gripping Criminal Three's wrist. Criminal One has a look of shock on his face.

CRIMINAL ONE

(gasps)
Well shit.

Isaac feigns a smile and points the gun at Criminal One's forehead and cocks it.

ISAAC

How bout you hightail it out of
here before I put one between your
eyes.

Criminal One looks down at Criminal Two still unconscious and Criminal Three struggling to break free from Isaacs vice like grip. He bolts down the street. Isaac nods and then looks at Criminal Three and points his gun at his head.

CRIMINAL THREE

Please, don't kill me, he promised
that we would eat tonight. I only
wanted to eat.

Isaac looks down at the would be thief and shakes his head. He releases his grip and holsters his gun.

ISAAC

You better get out of here before I
change my mind and take your
greenhorn friends.

The two Criminals grab their knocked out friend and head down the street in haste. Isaac digs into the bag and pulls out a doubloon.

The Criminals see the doubloon land at their feet to their surprise. They turn around and Isaac is already gone.

EXT. PILGRIM'S LODGE - EARLY MORNING

Snow whips through the air, obscuring the dilapidated Pilgrim's Lodge. Wooden planks, hastily nailed over broken windows, creak in the wind. A tattered sign swings precariously on rusted chains.

INT. PILGRIM'S LODGE

A large, round wooden table dominates the room with smaller café tables scattered about. Isaac sits with his back to the wall. His eyes constantly scan the room, one hand never far from his holster. Beside him, MO fidgets with his clerical collar he keeps in his jacket pocket, visibly uncomfortable in his own skin.

MO

(muttering)

Damned if I do, damned if I don't.
Story of my godforsaken life.

Isaac hears that and chuckles. The door BURSTS open. Snow swirls in, followed by Pam and Mal. Pam moves with grace, carefully removing her snow-dusted hat. She opens her satchel and looks inside and smiles. Chico looks back up at her.

PAM

(with a hint of sarcasm)

What a charming establishment
gentlemen. I do hope the company
improves upon the décor.

Mal lumbers in causing floorboards to GROAN.

MAL

(chuckling nervously)

Reckon this joints seen better
days. Much like myself.

Isaac gestures for him to sit. Mal approaches an empty chair at the table, eyeing it warily. He lowers himself slowly, wincing as the chair CREAKS. His shaking hand instinctively moves to the inside of his jacket, he removes the flask and holds it in his hand as if for comfort. The door SLAMS open again. Cassie strides in confidently, snow melting in her hair.

CASSIE

(nodding to the group)

Pleiades was bright this morning. I
hope it bodes well for our drive.

She's followed by London, who scans the room constantly and flinches at every sudden movement, and Walter, who limps noticeably.

LONDON
(eyes darting around)
Stars, my arse.

Cassie looks at London and closes her eyes as she shakes her head. She looks at Walter casting a smile as the WAITRESS delivers a tray of steaming mugs.

Cassie moves to the window, peering out at the swirling snow. Her fingers trace frozen snow flake constellations on the frost-covered glass. London's eyes are fixed on the ceiling, searching for something unseen. His fingers trace a spot behind his ear repeatedly.

Isaac stands abruptly, his chair SCRAPING against the floor. The room falls silent. He pulls out a worn map, spreading it across the table.

ISAAC
(gruffly)
Here we go.

The cowboys gather around. Mal leans in, squinting at the map, while Pam's eyes light up with recognition. MO mutters under his breath.

MO
(muttering under his
breath)
Lord have mercy on our souls... and
other anatomical parts.

London hangs back, his eyes darting between the map and the door. Walter edges closer, his limp more pronounced as he navigates around the others.

As Isaac's finger traces a route on the map, the tension in the room is palpable. Each cowboy reacts in their own way: Cassie's brow furrows in concentration, Mal quickly unscrews his flask and then takes a quick nip and puts it away, Pam nods as she looks at the route. London looks down at the route and sighs. Isaac looks at London and smirks.

ISAAC
We will follow this route down to
Kilgore.

A gust of wind HOWLS outside, rattling the windows. All heads turn simultaneously, hands instinctively moving to weapons.

They relax once they realize it is nothing.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE CAMP - DUSK

The massive herd settles for the evening, steam rising from their backs in the cold air.

Isaac stands reviewing the crude map when SPIKE (20s) clearly with some kind of Down Syndrome with a broad smile on his face blinking his eyes as he approaches on horseback. Despite his enormous size, his massive hands hang relaxed at his sides riding his massive horse beside a makeshift sawed off shotgun strapped to his leg.

Two additional figures approach from the direction of the herd - KAI BLACKHORSE (30s) and his son Onacona. The Navajo tracker boy's eyes miss nothing, taking in the camp.

Isaac folds the map, acknowledging the newcomers with a nod.

ISAAC

Gentlemen, how can I help you?

KAI

(soft-spoken)

Mr. Marrane. Cyrus sent us. My name is Kai and this is Spike. The little one is my son Onacona.

Isaac is surprised to see a child behind his father on the horse.

ISAAC

(to Kai)

You sure about bringing your son on this drive? This is not going to be an easy ride.

Isaac looks at Spike who still has a grin on his face as he stares off at the cattle.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

What's his story?

KAI

Spike is a strong young man but "touched in the head" as they say. His heart is pure where it counts. My son will be fine, this will be his coming of age journey.

He gestures to his son with subtle pride.

The boy stands straighter at the mention of his name but remains silent. Cassie, Walter, and the other cowboys gather around, curious about the newcomers.

WALTER
(gesturing toward Spike)
Where'd you find the mountain?

SPIKE
(with a gentle smile)
Montana territory. Worked cattle
wit my paw since I was twelve. I
was smaller then.

WALTER
I bet!

A ripple of appreciative laughter moves through the group. Even Kai's stoic expression softens briefly.

ISAAC
Kai you and your boy will scout
ahead. We ride at first light.
Double check your gear.

Kai nods.

Spike moves to help with the heavy work, his strength making quick work of what would take three men to accomplish.

Mal unconsciously draws his gun balancing it in his hand, eyes closed despite the precarious position on horseback. He opens his eyes then holsters it.

MAL
(chuckling nervously)
If this ain't the biggest mistake
of my god damn life...

CASSIE
(studying the herd through
squinted eyes)
Three thousand. Jesus Christ
himself would think twice about
this madness.

Isaac winces at the reference. Walter smiles at Cassie as he shifts uncomfortably in his saddle. MO looks at Isaac. Isaac looks about into the distance, seeing some shadows, he blinks his eyes and they vanish.

WALTER
(muttering to himself)
Even my horse thinks we're loco.

London D'Arcy's eyes dart between the cattle and the darkening sky, his hand absently rubbing his arm.

LONDON
(to no one in particular)
You can bet they're always
watching. Always.

Pam pulls out a modified compass with additional dials and markings. CHICO the chihuahua pops his out of the bag for a moment.

PAM
(checking the device)
Hi Chico! Isaac, we've got maybe
two hours before visibility drops.

Pam kisses Chico on the head. MO sees the dog and crosses himself with rosary beads, then immediately follows it with a string of colorful curses as his horse sidesteps beneath him. Pam puts Chico back in the saddlebag.

MO
The Lord's holy testicles, would
you look at this circus? Biggest
cattle drive since Moses parted the
Red Sea!

Isaac laughs for a moment then sits silently.

ISAAC
(mutters without turning)
You've all faced worse.

CASSIE
(sharply)
Have we? Name one thing worse than
driving a three thousand head
through a blizzard.

Isaac finally turns, a hint of a smile playing at his lips with pain in his eyes.

ISAAC
Living long enough to regret it.

The wind HOWLS across the valley, causing the cattle to shift again. London's horse dances sideways, but he maintains his seat.

PAM
(studying her contraption
again)
At worst we'll lose at least twenty
percent of the herd, even if
everything goes perfectly.

WALTER
(grimacing and rolling his
eyes)
Which it won't.

Cassie laughs.

CASSIE
(watching the restless
cattle)
Guess those odds are way better
than my last relationship.

Pam looks at her and laughs as well. Cassie laughs again.

MAL
What's life without a little
insanity to spice things up?

Isaac urges his horse forward a few steps, snow swirling
around the animal's hooves.

ISAAC
(voice carrying over the
wind)
The miracle isn't in just
succeeding. Sometimes it's just in
daring to try.

The others exchange worried glances. The snow falls harder
now, beginning to obscure the endless sea of cattle below. In
the distance, a lone wolf HOWLS.

INT. OLD LOG CABIN - MEXICO 3 YEARS AGO

SANTIAGO "El Diente" ROJAS (45) is sitting by the stove in a
worn down chair. The front door CREAKS open and Santiago
points and cocks the hammer of the gun at the entrance. PAM
puts up her hands.

PAM
(eyes open wide)
If you're going to shoot me just do
it already.

Santiago chuckles and puts his pistol on a nearby table.

SANTIAGO

Where have you been? I was going to
send Chico to find you. We're
getting hungry.

Pam laughs and turns her head. Chico the Chihuahua is asleep
on a set of blankets sitting in the sun.

PAM

That dog couldn't find his toy in
this room let alone find me.

Santiago stands slowly.

SANTIAGO

Oh Really?! Chico dislikes talks of
his incompetence.

Chico hearing his name looks in their direction and falls
back asleep.

Santiago looks into Pam's eyes with passion. Pam's eyes
reflect the same feelings. Santiago pulls her to the bed.

PAM

I thought you wanted me to start
cooking dinner?

Santiago smiles and nods slowly.

SANTIAGO

Dinner can wait, for now.

Pam giggles as they intertwine.

PAM

Anything you say "El Diente".

EXT. CENTER OF MASSIVE CATTLE HERD - LATE AFTERNOON

A vast ocean of cattle stretches in every direction. Steam
rises from thousands of backs in an endless CHORUS OF GRUNTS,
SNORTS, and shifting hooves.

SPIKE

(wide eyed)

Hehe Cows.

His horse snorts. Beside them, Kai sits perfectly balanced on
his painted mustang, his son Onacona pressed against his
back. Their horse stands rock-steady, frost collecting on it.
A white owl circles above.

ONACONA
(whispering)
Father, a white owl.

KAI
(nodding slightly)
She watches.

The sound of approaching hooves brings seven riders through the corridor of cattle. Snow swirls in their wake as the massive herd parts before them. Isaac leads.

MAL
(muttering)
Sweet mother of mercy, that's a lot
of beef.

LONDON
(scanning the sky
nervously mumbles)
They're up there, watching.

London's horse dances sideways as he rubs a bump on his arm. Walter compensates for his bum leg, his horse stepping carefully to accommodate its rider's uneven weight.

WALTER
(wincing through pain)
Carajo, my bull riding pains
return.

MO's horse stamps impatiently while MO grips the rosary beads in his hands with his reins with white-knuckled intensity.

MO
(muttering while looking
up)
Lord give me strength... and a shot
of whiskey while you're at it.

Onacona peers around his father's broad back, his dark eyes wide as he takes in the scene. Spike and Isaac ride up along side them. Mal rides up.

MAL
(quietly)
You're lucky kid, my old man used
to put out cigarettes on my arm on
a good day. On bad ones he'd open
my back with a switch.

Mal pulls back his jacket exposing the burn marks under his jacket. Kai and Isaac look at MAL with pity.

The cattle grow restless as the snow intensifies. The ground trembles beneath of thousands of hooves.

CASSIE

(to Isaac)

You really think we can do this?

ISAAC

(squinting eyes scanning
the horizon)

Done harder things in my days.

MAL

(nervous laugh)

Well, if we die, at least we'll
make the history books.

MO rolls his eyes.

MO

(crossing himself again)

Good Lord, deliver us from this
fool's errand... and Mal's poor
attempts at humor.

Isaac raises his hand, and the group falls into formation. Steam from their breath creates a fog that hangs in the air, transforming the surrounding herd into shadowy shapes in the growing storm.

ISAAC

(projecting over the wind)

Keep the boy close, Kai. Spike you
follow Kai's lead. Rest of you, to
your positions. We move with the
storm.

KAI

(to his son)

Remember, Onacona. Fear is-

ONACONA

(finishing)

-the small death, father. I
remember.

The group disperses to their positions, disappearing one by one into the white curtain. There is an endless sound of cattle and the occasional glimpse of a rider.

EXT. OLD LOG CABIN - MEXICO 3 YEARS AGO

Santiago is wounded with a gun shot to his side with blood everywhere. He knocks on the door to the cabin. Pam opens the door and Santiago spills through it to the floor. Pam's eyes are wide as she GASPS.

PAM

Santiago!?! What happened?

Santiago gasps as he struggles to sit up. Pam props him up and smells some very strong cologne and winces.

SANTIAGO

Turns out that job was for being a cattle rustler. The Frenchman didn't like me asking questions.

Pam has tears in her eyes. Chico enters the cabin covered in blood.

PAM

Oh Chico!

Santiago coughs up blood.

SANTIAGO

Looks like he found his way back after all. Good boy Chico.

Santiago loses consciousness.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE - LATE AFTERNOON

Isaac's horse plods steadily through the sea of cattle, its hooves finding sure footing despite the deepening snow. But Isaac's mind is elsewhere, his eyes glazed over as he daydreams...

INT. COBBLER'S SHOP - MADRID - 1650 - DAY

Sunlight streams through dusty windows, catching motes of sawdust in its golden beams. Isaac sits at his workbench, sleeves rolled up, his hands moving over a half-finished boot. The TAP-TAP-TAP of his hammer echoes through the small shop, mixing with the distant sounds of street vendors and horse-drawn carriages. Strips of leather hang from the rafters like vines. A pot of hide glue simmers in the corner. The shop's door CREAKS open, letting in a slice of sunlight. ROSA (25, raven-haired, with crystal blue eyes) slips inside.

She moves silently, watching Isaac work with a lover's appreciation. Her skirts whisper against the wooden floor as she approaches.

ROSA
(softly)
Mi Amor...

Isaac doesn't look up, a smile plays at his lips as he continues to work the leather.

ISAAC
Sneaking away from your father
again?

Rosa's fingers trail along the workbench as she circles behind him. She leans close, her breath on his neck.

ROSA
He thinks I'm at confession.

ISAAC
(working the leather)
You are here? Confessing your sins?

Rosa's laugh is low and musical. She slides onto his lap, disrupting his work. Her fingers trace the features of his face.

ROSA
Some sins are worth repeating.

Their lips meet.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE - LATE AFTERNOON - PRESENT

PAM (O.S.)
(increasingly urgent)
Isaac! Isaac! ISAAC!

Reality CRASHES back. Isaac smiling suddenly blinks, finding himself surrounded by cattle and swirling snow. His horse has stopped moving, causing a backup in the massive herd. Pam riding beside him, her face etched with concern.

PAM (CONT'D)
(exasperated)
Been calling your name for five
minutes! The herd's splitting at
the south end.

Isaac straightens in his saddle. Around them, cattle BELLOW and STAMP in the growing storm. His horse shifts impatiently.

ISAAC
(voice rough)
My apologies. I was... elsewhere.

Pam eyes Isaac with a furrowed brow.

PAM
(studying him)
Somewhere warmer, I hope?

Isaac doesn't answer, but turns his horse toward the troubled section of the herd.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE CAMP - MID-MORNING

Snow has stopped. The camp spreads across a depression in the Texas prairie near a shallow creek. Cook fires send smoke skyward. The cattle herd grazes a hundred yards away.

Isaac stands by the main fire, his hands wrapped around a smoking cup of coffee. Walter and Cassie repair a saddle nearby while Mo sits apart, Bible open on his knee while Pam tinkers with her mechanical device with Chico on her lap. Chico growls low at first and increasingly louder.

Two riders approach from the east. DEVEROUX (40s), the lead rider, sits tall in a silver-adorned Mexican saddle, wearing once-fine garments now frayed at the edges. His face bears the ruddy complexion of a dedicated drinker. His companion, JENKINS (20s), follows behind - a wiry man with darting eyes.

Isaac straightens as they approach and sniffs the air. Walter and Cassie move to flank him as the cowboys form a loose semicircle around the visitors. Chico continues to growl. Pam tucks him back in the bag.

Deveroux removes his hat, revealing oil slicked-back hair. His smile yellowed, rotting teeth.

DEVEROUX
Good morning gentlemen! Ladies!

He gives Cassie a lingering look then winks, causing Walter to lay his right hand on his gun. Isaac draws his last sip of coffee.

DEVEROUX (CONT'D)
Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Sebastian Deveroux, proprietor of the finest establishment this side of the Mississippi - The Silver Spear Inn!

ISAAC

What brings you to our camp, Mr.
Deveroux?

DEVEROUX

Hospitality, my good man! Good old
fashioned hospitality!

His coat opens, revealing a pearl-handled revolver in a
shoulder holster.

DEVEROUX (CONT'D)

Word reaches even remote outposts
such as mine when quality folk are
passing through. My establishment
offers the finest whiskey, the
softest beds, and...

His eyebrows wag suggestively.

DEVEROUX (CONT'D)

...the finest companionship a trail-
weary man could desire.

WALTER

Your "establishment" must be a far
piece from here if you're inviting
us now.

DEVEROUX

My good man its merely a two days'
ride south east from here!

Deveroux points then his attention fixes on Kai and Onacona.
The Navajo tracker's expression remains impassive, his hand
resting on his son's shoulder.

DEVEROUX (CONT'D)

(coldly)

Of course, the invitation extends
ONLY to civilized company.

He urges his horse toward them and points at them.

DEVEROUX (CONT'D)

But not you, Indian, and your
papoose. You can sleep with the
cattle.

He LAUGHS, the sound hollow and harsh. London cringes.

LONDON

You're a bit of a cheeky bastard!

Isaac's arm shoots out, hand raised in command to London.

ISAAC
(quietly)
Easy.

LONDON
(protesting)
But he just—

ISAAC
(cutting him off)
No.

London stares down at his weapon, jaw clenched tight then turns his attention to the campfire.

Isaac turns to Deveroux, his expression transforming from stern to genial.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(pleasantly)
Mr. Deveroux, we appreciate the invitation. Perhaps we'll take you up on it when we pass that way.

DEVEROUX
You won't regret it! The Silver Spear offers carnal pleasures a man remembers till his dying day.

Behind the main group, two previously unnoticed men emerge, hands hovering near concealed weapons as they approach Walter and Isaac.

Spike, notices them and moves with surprising speed for his bulk. His hands shoot out, grabbing both men by their necks and lifting them off the ground. Deveroux's demeanor becomes frantic.

SPIKE
Boss, these fellas was sneaking up behind you.

DEVEROUX
A misunderstanding! Merely my outriders ensuring our safety!

ISAAC
Of course. Spike, please put the gentlemen down.

SPIKE
Boss?

ISAAC

I'm sure.

Spike releases them. They collapse gasping, scrambling backward. Pam arrives carrying her saddle bag. Chico growls inside.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

As you can see, Mr. Deveroux, we take certain precautions as well.

PAM

The Silver Spear Inn, you said?

She consults a small notebook.

PAM (CONT'D)

I've studied maps of this region extensively. Don't recall any establishment by that name.

DEVEROUX

Newly christened, my dear lady.
Under new management.

MO

(muttering)

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing...."

DEVEROUX

What's that supposed to mean, preacher?

MO

Just sharing the Good Word. As is my calling.

Chico growls in the bag as the tension thickens. Jenkins' hand now rests openly on his gun.

Isaac steps forward, placing himself between Deveroux and his cowboys. Deveroux unconsciously reins his horse back.

ISAAC

We thank you for the invitation, Mr. Deveroux.

For a moment, Deveroux seems ready to challenge this dismissal, but something gives him pause.

DEVEROUX

Well! We won't impose on your hospitality further!

He wheels his horse around and rides away, his men following. Pam puts the saddle bag on the ground and Chico scrambles out growling at the leaving riders. Chico looks at Pam. Pam shrugs.

As they depart, London steps beside Isaac.

LONDON
That wasn't friendly visiting.

ISAAC
No.

CASSIE
They were counting us. Noting weapons. Positions.

WALTER
Sizing us up.

ISAAC
Yes. A thief is not one who lacks but one who covets....

PAM
No Silver Spear on any map. But there is an abandoned trading post where he described. Chico hated him might I add.

Isaac smiles for a moment at the mention of the dog and then turns to Kai once the riders disappear.

ISAAC
(to everyone)
Double the watch tonight. No one rides alone.

He looks in the direction the men disappeared.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
We've got company on this trail now.

Above them, the white owl circles before flying after Deveroux and his men.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE - LATE AFTERNOON

Snow picks up again and falls in thick curtains, transforming the cattle drive into a ghostly procession. The massive herd moves like a dark river through the white landscape.

The cowboys materialize one by one from the whiteness, circling Isaac's position. Mal emerges first, his horse fighting against the wind. His hands shake.

Cassie appears next, one hand pulling her coat tighter. Three of her outriders are barely visible in the distance, dark shapes moving uncertainly through the white chaos. London's horse dances through the deepening snow. MO rides up, his frosted crucifix glittering against his dark coat, while Walter approaches.

Through this gathering of concerned riders, Isaac sits straight-backed and patient, snow gathering on his shoulders.

Kai guides his painted horse alongside them, his son Onaconda wrapped in a buffalo robe behind him. Snow has frosted his black hair white, but his face remains impassive as he tilts his head back, studying the sky through narrowed eyes.

KAI

The snow ends in two hours.

With grace, Kai reaches into his buckskin shirt and pulls out a gleaming gold pocket watch. The timepiece catches what little light remains. He studies it with the same intensity he gave the sky before tucking it away.

WALTER

(suspiciously)

Where'd an Injun come by something that fine?

KAI

(slight smile)

The same place as any man. With gold.

Isaac's weathered face breaks into a knowing smile.

ISAAC

You heard him. Two hours.

The others dissolve one by one into the swirling white, leaving Kai and Isaac briefly alone in the chaos. The two men exchange a look of mutual understanding before Kai melts back into the storm.

EXT. LAKESIDE - DUSK

The snowfall stops two hours later. The sudden silence hangs heavy in the air. The last few flakes drift down, catching the emerging moonlight.

MO
(crossing himself
elaborately)
Sweet mother of mercy, the savage
was right.

CASSIE
(snorting)
Or maybe some folks just know how
to read the weather better than a
reformed gambling man turned
priest.

Mo flashes Cassie a dirty look. The massive herd winds its way toward a vast lake. Steam rises from thousands of warm bodies, creating a ghostly mist that hovers above the cattle.

The cowboys guide their charges into a natural bowl near the water's edge. Exhausted beasts lower themselves into the snow, their breath creating individual clouds in the crystal-clear air.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE CAMP - MIDNIGHT

The half moon hangs in the winter sky, casting stark shadows across the sleeping herd. Frost crystallizes on the cattle's backs.

A blood-curdling SHRIEK shatters the night.

One steer THRASHES violently in the darkness, its legs kicking at empty air. Before anyone can react, the massive animal is yanked backwards by an unseen force, its belly RIPPING open with a wet, terrible sound. Steam rises from its exposed innards in the cold air as something invisible TEARS and CONSUMES with frightening speed.

The camp EXPLODES into chaos.

Cattle BELLOW in terror, surging to their feet in a panic. The ground TREMBLES beneath their frenzied movement. The cowboys emerge from bedrolls, guns drawn, squinting into the shadows as their horses SCREAM in fear. They mount their respective horses.

Cassie spurs her mount toward the panicking herd, trying to prevent a stampede. Her horse suddenly REARS, nearly unseating her as something massive and unseen BRUSHES against Cassie and her horse's legs. The animal spins in terror, eyes rolling white in the moonlight.

CASSIE
 (fighting for control)
 Sweet Jesus!

Above them the white owl SWOOPS, its cry sounds through the chaos, its wings silent.

Isaac stands in his stirrups revolver ready. His horse trembles beneath him but holds steady.

Mal fumbles with his gun with shaking hands. London's eyes dart wildly between earth and sky. Walter struggles to mount with his bad leg, cursing as his horse sidesteps in panic. Pam's eyes express fear. Pam looks horrified as Chico growls.

MO's voice carries across the chaos, switching rapidly between prayer and profanity. His horse spins in tight circles, refusing to move forward.

MO
 Our Father who art in-- SWEET
 MERCIFUL CHRIST what manner of
 devil--

Kai pulls his painted horse, one hand on his massive knife the other with the reigns of his horse. The boy's eyes are wide with terror, but he sits behind his father with his own knife drawn.

KAI
 (urgently to his son)
 Remember the stories?

ONACONA
 (barely a whisper)
 The owl didn't stop it, father.

More cattle SURGE away from an unseen presence moving through their midst. Horses SCREAM. The snow reflects the half-moon's light, turning shadow into silver but revealing nothing of what hunts among them.

PAM
 (whispering with
 controlled fear)
 Whatever it is, it ate nearly
 twelve hundred pounds of flesh in
 under thirty seconds. That's...
 that's not naturally possible.

The remains of the steer steam in the moonlight, its ribcage picked clean. No blood stains the snow around it - as if something collected every single drop.

The white owl circles overhead again. Below, the herd continues to mill in terror, their breath creating a fog that transforms the landscape. Picked-clean bones of its victim as evidence of its passing.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE CAMP - DAWN

After no sleep the cowboys look tired. Steam rises from Cassie's massive iron pot hung over the fire, the smell of coffee and frying bacon. Her spoon SCRAPES against the pot's bottom as she stirs a bubbling mixture of beans, salt pork, and cornmeal.

Cowboys huddle around the fire, their breath visible in the cold. Mal rubs his hands. London's eyes dart about, while Walter massages his bad leg, stiff from the cold. MO clutches his tin cup, muttering a prayer between sips of coffee.

PAM
(studying the cleaned
bones from last night)
The precision of these marks... no
normal predator could—

MAL
(interrupting, voice
shaky)
My pa used to talk about Bigfoot up
in the territories. Said it could
tear a—

WALTER
(cutting in)
My Abuela told me stories about
criaturas able to take any shape
they—

Cassie SLAMS her spoon against the pot rim, silencing them. Pam's eyebrows go up. Cassie looks at MAL and Walter with disdain.

CASSIE
(sharply)
Stop it, you're scaring the boy.
Hell you're scaring me!

Onacona sits close to his father watching the adults. Kai methodically sharpens his knife stone against steel.

Isaac raises his hand, and the chatter dies instantly.

ISAAC

Enough about monsters. Time to move on.

They wolf down the last of their breakfast, kicking snow over the fire. Horses stamp impatiently as saddles are cinched tight.

The massive herd BELLOWS and SNORTS as it's urged into motion, their bodies creating a river of flesh flowing toward the distant mountains.

Suddenly, wild movement erupts from a stand of bare trees. An OLD INDIAN WOMAN (70s) bursts into view, her silver braids flying, arms waving frantically above her head. She SPRINTS toward the herd with surprising speed, her moccasins barely touching the snow, shawl streaming behind her like a flag.

OLD WOMAN

(shouting)

Stop! STOP! PLEASE STOP!

Several cattle shy away from her approach, threatening to disrupt the herd's movement. The woman shows no fear of the massive beasts, ducking between their horns to reach the cowboys.

She reaches the group gasping for breath, her face deeply lined. When she grabs Isaac's reins, her hands are shaking violently. Isaac is speechless.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

(in heavily accented English)

You must listen. My people... we die.

She gestures toward a distant slope where thin streams of smoke rise, her movements sharp with panic.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

They come at night. Giants with hair like fire. Tall as three men. They... they eat us.

Her fingers trace a path down her torso, mimicking the way the steer was torn open the night before. The cowboys exchange uneasy glances.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

Only boys remain now. Too young to fight. Too young to...

Her voice breaks as tears freeze on her weathered cheeks. The cattle grow restless. Their movements create a rolling motion through the herd.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE - MORNING

ISAAC
(extending his hand)
Show us your people. Ride with us.

The old woman studies him. Isaac lifts her onto his horse behind him as if she weighs no more than a child, her silver braids catching the morning light.

Isaac's hands move through the crisp air in deliberate gestures - first pointing to Kai and Onaconda, their painted horse standing steady. Then to MO, who's still clutching his coffee cup like a shield, and finally to Pam, holding her saddle bag with Chico inside.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(voice carrying across the group)
You four with me. Rest of you mind the store.

CASSIE
(adjusting her gun belt)
You sure about splitting up after what happened-

ISAAC
(cutting her off with a raised hand)
Someone's got to keep these beeves breathing. Mal and Walter know cattle. London knows trouble. You know both.

MAL
Yeah, but what if them things come back? Ain't exactly feeling lucky after last night's show.

The old woman speaks from atop Isaac's horse, her accent thick but her words clear.

OLD WOMAN
They hunt by night. Day brings safety... for now.

MO
 (mounting up, muttering)
 Lord protect us from whatever
 ungodly thing we're riding into...

PAM
 (checking her instruments)
 If these giants are real, they
 might leave measurable....

WALTER
 (interrupting)
 Just don't get yourself and Chico
 eaten trying to measure 'em, girl.

Kai guides his painted horse alongside Isaac's, Onacona pressed against his back. The boy's eyes are wide but unafraid as he studies the old woman.

The massive herd SHIFTS and BELLOWS with steam-breath in the cold air.

ISAAC
 (to those staying behind)
 Keep 'em together. Keep 'em calm.
 We'll be back as soon as we can.

The old woman points toward the distant smoke trails rising from hidden lodges. The chosen group moves out.

EXT. INDIAN VILLAGE - LATE MORNING

The village materializes through the morning mist like a ghost town. No children play between the lodges. No women work at cooking fires. Only the sound of a low, rhythmic WAILING seems to come from everywhere.

The old woman slides from Isaac's horse with surprising agility, her moccasins silent in the snow. The rest of the cowboys dismount as she leads them toward the outskirts of the village, where a group of young boys huddle around an enormous pit, clutching spears still stained with dark blood.

PAM
 (checking her brass
 device)
 There's some kind of
 electromagnetic-

Her words fall away with a gasp as they reach the pit's edge. Seven feet below, stretched out in the frozen earth, lies a monster.

The giant's corpse spans nearly fifteen feet, its flame-red hair splayed out in the snow. Dozens of spears and arrows protrude from its massive chest and throat, its face bears an unnatural rictus grin - sharp teeth gleaming wetly. The eyes-deep blue and still open staring upward.

MO
(crossing himself
repeatedly)
"And there we saw the giants, the
sons of....

Isaac drops into the pit, his boots THUDDING against the frozen ground beside the corpse. He draws his knife.

OLD WOMAN
Ten of our strongest is what it
took. Ten men with spears and
arrows, and still it killed five
before falling.

Isaac begins sawing at a thick lock of the giant's red hair. The strand comes free with a sound like tearing silk.

MO
(voice shaking)
Looking this evil in the face...
there's power in that. Power we
might not want to meddle with,
Isaac.

Kai stands motionless at the pit's edge, one hand on Onacona's shoulder. The boy stares at the creature, his whistle in his mouth. He instinctively blows lightly.

Isaac examines the hair in his hand, its color seeming to shift like living flame even separated from its owner.

ISAAC
(whispering to himself)
Been a long time.

PAM
(finding her voice)
What did you say?

ISAAC
Its time to see where these things
live.

Isaac is already climbing out of the pit, the giant's hair tucked away. Above them, storm clouds gather over the mountains, promising more snow. In the village, the mourning continues, mixing with the wind.

EXT. FOREST EDGE - NOON

The small group creeps through winter-bare brush, led by the old woman and two young warriors, their moccasins making no sound in the fresh snow. Steam from their breath threatens to give away their position as they approach the tree line.

A massive campfire ROARS in a clearing not far from their cave, black smoke curling the trees. Three giants - each as tall as the dead one - huddle around a feast of torn limbs of human flesh. Their red hair glowing in the flames' light.

PAM
(whispering)
Lord in heaven... there are more of
them.

An elderly man is being turned slowly on a crude spit above the flames, his flesh crackling. The giants tear at him with massive hands, their sharp teeth gleaming wet. They GRUNT and GROWL with pleasure between hacking COUGHS as smoke burns their eyes.

MO
(whispering)
"Though I walk through the valley
of death..."

Behind the fire, more bodies lie stacked like firewood. A hand twitches. A moan from the stack.

One of the young warriors vomits silently into the snow.

KAI
(pulling Onacona closer)
They keep them alive...

ISAAC
(eyes narrowing)
Fresh meat.

A giant COUGHS violently, sparks flying up as it pounds its massive chest. The others join in the coughing fit, the smoke clearly irritating their lungs.

Isaac's eyes track the rising smoke, then follow it back down to the giants' watering eyes. His hand instinctively finds the lock of red hair tucked in his jacket.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(turning to the others)
I have an idea.

He gestures for retreat, and the group backs away from the horror show. The giants' coughing and the sound of tearing flesh fade behind them.

The old woman leads them back toward the village. Behind them, black smoke continues to rise above the trees.

EXT. INDIAN VILLAGE - AFTERNOON

Isaac stands before a group of young warriors, none older than sixteen, each clutching a bow. Their eyes focused as they test their bowstrings.

ISAAC
(demonstrating with his
hands)
Arrows must fly true. One chance,
that's all we have.

MO's boots CRUNCHING in the snow as he approaches his horse. He reaches deep into his saddlebag, pulling out three bottles of amber liquid, the glass catching the sunlight.

MO
(sadly confesses to his
horse)
I had been saving these for a
special occasion George.

MO hands the bottles to the old woman who kneels in the snow, arranging torn clothing from the dead in a wide wooden bowl. Her gnarled fingers work quickly despite their trembling. She pours the whiskey over the cloth.

ONACONA
(stepping forward)
I can help.

KAI
(sharply)
No. You will not—

OLD WOMAN
(interrupting)
The children are all we have left.
Their hearts burn for justice.

A group of children, some as young as eight, gather nearby. They grip pieces of rope attached to large brush bundles, their small faces set with grim determination. Mo looks at the smoke rising from the cave.

MO

"And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him."

KAI

(turning to MO)

Where did you learn these words?

MO eagerly reaches into his jacket and then holds out his Bible, its leather cover cracked and worn from years of handling.

MO

Take it. Maybe it'll help you understand what God is about.

Kai looks the bible and then at MO and smiles. He refuses with his hand up. Kai's attention turns to the children as they test their ropes, their boots scraping in the snow. One boy, no more than ten, speaks up, his voice steady despite his youth. Mo looks dejected as he stows away his bible.

YOUNG BOY

They ate my father while my mother watched. Then ate her too.

OLD WOMAN

(closing her eyes)

The young ones are quickest. And they have nothing left to lose.

Kai looks at his son, seeing the same fire burning in his eyes that blazes in the others. His hand rests on his massive knife as he weighs the decision.

KAI

(looking at Isaac)

If my son fights, I fight beside him.

ISAAC

(nodding)

We all will.

MO watches the soaking of the rags and licks his lips instinctively. Pam studies the wind direction using the tree branches. The young archers practice their draws, arrows whisking through the winter air.

The old woman begins a low chant, her voice carrying across the snow like smoke. One by one, the children join in, their high voices mixing with her ancient tones.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - LATE EVENING

The monsters are sleeping inside the caves when a small contingent of children drag piles and piles of kindling silently to the mouth of the cave.

Next, from a safe distance at the edge of the forest they launch barrage of flaming arrows at the kindling.

The fire ROARS through the cave entrance. From deep within, INHUMAN SCREAMS echo across the clearing. The ground TREMBLES as massive bodies thrash in panic.

Suddenly, the cave mouth vomits forth two enormous figures. The first giant crashes through the flames, its red hair CRACKLING with fire, skin blistering and peeling away in charred sheets. It stumbles forward its blue eyes wildly looking about.

Behind it, a second giant emerges, already collapsing. It drops to its knees, mouth opening in a silent scream before CRASHING face-first into the snow. The impact sends a SHOCKWAVE across the ground, shaking everyone off balance. Inside the others are overtaken by the smoke.

The village Indians CHEER, their voices rising in triumph.

But the burned giant is still moving. It lurches forward, directly toward Onacona, who stands frozen in the snow, separated from the others. The boy's eyes widen as the towering inferno of flesh barrels toward him.

Kai SHOUTS from the tree line where he's been guiding the archers:

KAI
(voice breaking)
ONACONA!

But he's too far away, unable to reach his son in time.

Isaac moves with urgency. He sprints towards the giant, drawing the giant's attention with a sharp WHISTLE. The creature turns, its melted face contorting with hatred.

Isaac dodges the giant's first swing, a massive fist WHOOSHING through the air inches from Isaac's head. He darts between the creature's legs, staying too close for it to effectively strike. His movements are economical and practiced.

ISAAC
(shouting to Onacona)
RUN, BOY! Get out of here!

The child scrambles away as Isaac continues his deadly dance with the giant. The creature ROARS, each missed blow sinking its massive limbs deeper into the snow.

Isaac draws his gun in one smooth motion but doesn't immediately fire. He waits for the perfect moment, ducking another wild swing that exposes the giant's knee.

The CRACK of his pistol echoes through the trees. The giant's kneecap EXPLODES in a spray of blue-black blood. It HOWLS in agony that sets the horses bucking.

The wounded creature drops to its remaining good knee, then drags itself up again. With one last hateful glare at Isaac, it turns and hobbles toward the mountains, leaving a trail of steaming blood in the snow. Each step it takes produces a SQUELCH as blood pumps from its shattered joint.

The clearing falls silent except for the CRACKLING of the burning cave and the giant's fading moans.

MAL
(lowering his gun)
Shouldn't we go after it? Finish
the job?

Isaac watches the retreating figure. He turns to Kai, who has finally reached his son, clutching him to his chest with trembling hands. Pam watches quietly with her eyes welling with tears.

Their eyes meet across the bloodstained snow. Kai slowly shakes his head. Pam looks horrified. MO shakes his head.

ISAAC
(voice weary)
I think that's enough killing for
today Mal.

The firelight plays across the faces of the gathered warriors and cowboys. In the distance, the wounded giant disappears into the tree-line.

EXT. APPROACHING TOWN OF GREY GULCH - DAY 20 - NOON

The cattle drive resumes across rolling plains, a dark river of flesh moving through sun-dappled grassland.

On the horizon, the town of Grey Gulch appears like a mirage - a collection of weathered buildings nestled between a jagged mountain face and the shadowy edge of a pine forest. Smoke rises from chimneys.

Isaac pulls his horse alongside Cassie's, gesturing toward the town. He waves at Walter who nods.

ISAAC

Run 'em straight through. Keep 'em tight.

CASSIE

(adjusting her hat)
Town folk ain't gonna appreciate
three thousand head of cattle
trampling their streets.

ISAAC

(with the faintest smile)
To hell with them.

He turns his horse away from the main group, eyes fixed on a small homestead visible on the town's edge. The modest cabin sits partially shrouded by pine trees, a tendril of smoke rising from its stone chimney.

MAL

(calling after him)
Where you headed, boss?

ISAAC

Personal business. Won't be long.

As Isaac begins to ride off, MO unexpectedly spurs his horse to follow, a canteen swinging from his saddle horn. He catches up, humming an old hymn, the notes carried away by the wind.

MO

(uncorking the canteen)
Don't mind me. Just providing
spiritual guidance.

Isaac gives him a sidelong glance but doesn't object.

EXT. ADAM'S CABIN - AFTERNOON

Isaac dismounts with practiced ease, scanning the quiet homestead. A worn rocking chair sits empty on the porch, a quilt draped over its back. Firewood is stacked neatly against the cabin wall, alongside garden tools. MO takes out his flask and takes a swig of alcohol.

ISAAC

(to MO)
Wait here.

MO
(taking another swig)
Take your time. The Lord and I are
on speaking terms.

Mo raises his flask in salute, then settles in his saddle, watching Isaac approach the cabin door and pull out a key. Isaac unlocks the door and pushes it open gently.

INT. ADAM'S CABIN - CONTINUOUS

Inside, the cabin is warm but sparse. A fire CRACKLES in the hearth, casting dancing shadows across hand-hewn furniture.

ADAM MARRANE (85) lies in a bed near the fire, a skeletal figure beneath thick quilts. His skin is paper-thin, stretched across prominent bones. But his eyes are Isaac's eyes.

A wracking COUGH shakes his frail body as Isaac enters, creating a terrible RATTling in his chest that speaks of fluid-filled lungs.

ADAM
(voice barely above a
whisper)
I told Sarah I'd outlive us all...
guess the Lord's calling that
particular bluff.

Isaac moves to his son's bedside, lowering himself onto a three-legged stool. His weathered hand engulfs Adam's fragile one, the contrast between father and dying son evident. Isaac chuckles.

ISAAC
(softly)
I recall you were always a terrible
gambler.

Adam dissolves into another coughing fit. Isaac reaches for a cloth on a nearby side table, gently wiping blood from his son's lips.

ADAM
(struggling for breath)
Honored you best I could, Pa. Still
didn't make it to your age though.

ISAAC
(throat tight)
You did just fine boy. Better than
most.

The CREAK of the front door draws Isaac's attention. Kai steps into the cabin, Onacona close behind him.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(tensing)
What are you doing here?

KAI
You left suddenly. We were concerned.

Isaac's jaw tightens, but Adam has fallen into a light sleep, his breath shallow and uneven. Kai's eyes sweep the cabin, taking in the worn Bible on the table, the handmade quilt, the framed photographs.

One particular photo catches his attention - a sun-faded image of a younger Adam, perhaps thirty, standing beside Isaac and a beautiful woman with dark hair. Isaac looks exactly as he does now, untouched by the decades.

KAI (CONT'D)
(genuine warmth)
It looks like there were many good times in this family.

Isaac, still holding his son's hand, follows Kai's gaze to the photograph.

ISAAC
(nodding)
Yes. There were.

Kai moves slowly around the room, studying more photographs on the walls - Adam growing older in each one, with children and eventually grandchildren appearing, while Isaac remains unchanged.

Onacona approaches one particular picture, squinting.

ONACONA
(innocently)
You look just like your father in these pictures.

Adam's labored breathing the only sound in the room. Isaac's eyes meet Kai's across the room, a silent communication passing between them.

ISAAC
(after a long moment)
Kai. Take your son outside.

KAI
(understanding)
Onacona. Go help the holy man water
the horses.

ONACONA
But father—

KAI
(firmly)
Now.

Once the boy leaves, Isaac's shoulders sag slightly. He looks down at Adam, checking that he's still asleep.

ISAAC
This is my son. Not my grandson.
Not my nephew. My son.

KAI
How is this possible?

ISAAC
(bitterly)
A curse. A punishment for a
transgression.

Kai remains silent.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(holding Kai's gaze)
You must swear never to tell
anyone.

KAI
We all carry secrets Isaac. Some
heavier than others.

ISAAC
This is the heaviest one I could
ever imagine.

Adam gasps and then stirs, his eyes fluttering open. His gaze falls on Kai, confusion crossing his features.

ADAM
(weakly)
Pa? Who's this?

ISAAC
(gently)
A friend, Adam. Rest now.

Adam's eyes close again, his breathing becoming more labored. Isaac adjusts the quilt, clutching Adam's hand as his life releases from his body. Isaac stands up slowly. Kai exists the house quietly. Isaac leans over the body of his son, buries his face in his hands and cries.

EXT. HILLTOP OVERLOOKING ADAM'S CABIN - AFTERNOON

Isaac sits on a weathered log, staring down at the small cabin. Lamplight flickers in one window, then goes dark.

Mo approaches, his shadow stretching long across the grass. He settles beside Isaac without invitation, pulling out his flask. He offers a sip to Isaac.

Isaac shakes his head, continues staring at the cabin. Mo takes a swig.

Mo follows Isaac's gaze.

MO

How many sons have you buried?

Isaac's jaw muscle twitches. His hands rest on his knees, steady as stone.

ISAAC

Too many.

Mo nods.

MO

And you'll bury more. That's the nature of all of this. Then we rest in his arms.

Isaac finally turns and looks at Mo.

ISAAC

Men like us don't get to rest.

Isaac stands, walks toward his horse. Mo watches him mount with fluid grace, then ride away.

EXT. GREY GULCH MAIN STREET - LATE AFTERNOON

Red eyed Isaac, Kai, and Onacona ride slowly back toward town as the setting sun. The cattle drive has already moved through, leaving behind churned earth and lingering dust. Isaac leans towards a town preacher while still on his horse, gives him a wink and throws him a gold doubloon.

MO waits at the edge of town, swaying slightly in his saddle. As they approach, his eyes suddenly widen, focusing on something beyond them.

MO
(voice strangled)
Sweet mother of... Carla?

A beautiful Asian woman in a fine dress disappears around a corner. MO nearly falls from his horse in his haste to dismount.

MO (CONT'D)
(desperately)
CARLA! WAIT!

He stumbles after her, leaving Isaac and Kai to exchange a concerned glance as the sun sinks behind the mountains, casting long shadows across Grey Gulch.

EXT. CATTLE FIELD - EVENING

The herd spreads across the valley in the tall grass. The setting sun paints everything in blood orange and deep purple.

Walter sits low in his saddle, his bad leg stretched out awkwardly. He watches MO pacing his horse in agitated circles, muttering to himself. The ex-priest's eyes are bloodshot, his collar askew, the flask in hand.

WALTER
(calling out)
Hey, Padre! Thought I saw your lady
friend headed toward the saloon
with a gentleman caller.

MO's head snaps up, his face darkening.

MO
(voice dangerously low)
You'd do well to shut your mouth,
circus man.

Walter grins, his rodeo clown's instinct for provoking a reaction taking over. He guides his horse closer, weaving between the cattle with surprising grace despite his limp.

MO's knuckles whiten around his reins. A nearby steer BELLOWS nervously.

MO (CONT'D)
(through gritted teeth)
The Good Lord guides us through
these godless territories. His
light shines even here.

WALTER
(laughing harshly)
That right? Where was your precious
Lord when that bull took half my
leg? Where was He when your
congregation got butchered by
Indians?

Several cattle STAMP and SNORT, creating a ripple of movement
through the herd.

MO
(voice rising)
The Lord tests the faithful! Job
suffered worse and still praised
His name!

WALTER
(leaning forward in his
saddle)
Face it, Padre. Out here, it's just
men and guns. Your God ain't gonna
step in when lead starts flying.

Something breaks in MO's eyes. With surprising speed, he
draws his small cheap revolver, the barrel level at Walter's
chest.

MO
(voice shaking)
Blasphemy has consequences, even in
the territories.

Walter doesn't flinch. Instead, his smile widens, a death's-
head grin that speaks to years of staring down charging
bulls.

WALTER
(softly taunting)
Guess I struck a nerve, Padre?

CRACK!

A single gunshot splits the air. Both men's hats fly off
their heads simultaneously, spinning away into the grass.
MO's gun hand jerks reflexively skyward.

Mal sits on his horse thirty yards away, his smoking Colt held lazily in one hand. His eyes are closed, as if he'd fired the shot blind. When they open he appears irritated.

MAL

(calmly)

Next one can go through both your heads if you like. Enough problems without you two adding to the tally.

The spell broken, Walter dismounts with a grunt of pain, retrieving his hat. The bullet has punched a clean hole through the crown. He slaps it against his thigh, dust billowing.

MO holsters his weapon with shaking hands, then slides from his saddle. He picks up his own hat, fingers tracing the identical hole.

MO

(quietly)

The Lord works in mysterious ways.

WALTER

(under his breath)

So does a trick shot with too much time on his hands.

They remount, exchanging dark glances, the tension still simmering but defused for now. MO spurs his horse abruptly, riding toward the main herd where Isaac and Cassie are working.

Walter watches him go, then turns to Mal with grudging respect.

WALTER (CONT'D)

(touching his hat's new ventilation)

Not bad shooting for a drunk Italian. You owe me a new hat.

Mal doesn't answer, already weighing his gun in his hand again, eyes closed, communing with the weapon.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE - DAY - DRIVING RAIN

Massive thunderheads loom like mountains on the horizon, their underbellies lit from within by constant FLASHES of lightning. The rain falls in sheets turning the prairie into a vast, churning sea.

Isaac stands in his stirrups, scanning the sky. The wind HOWLS, tearing at his slicker, threatening to rip it from his body. Behind him, the herd stretches like a dark, undulating carpet.

ISAAC
(shouting above the storm)
HIGHER GROUND! MOVE THEM EAST!

His voice barely carries, whipped away by the screaming wind. Cowboys materialize from the deluge, their slickers plastered against their bodies, faces hidden beneath dripping hat brims.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(pointing frantically)
FUNNEL CLOUDS! THREE O'CLOCK!

In the distance, the sky begins to reach downward, long fingers of cloud stretching toward the earth. One touches down, then another, then a third - deadly vortices of wind.

CASSIE
(spurring her horse
forward)
They're coming straight for us!

The cattle sense the danger, their panic building. Eyes roll white, nostrils flare. The herd surges like a wave.

LONDON
(voice tight with false
bravado)
Just a little prairie breeze!
Nothing to worry about, folks!

His nervous laugh is swallowed by a deafening CRACK of thunder. London's instinctively shivers.

Mal rides like a man possessed, circling a broken off herd of steer, his hat flips into the wind, rain streaming down his face. Walter fights his own horse, the animal bucking in terror as lightning CRACKS overhead, splitting the sky with blinding light.

KAI
(pointing)
THE RIDGE! GET THEM TO THE RIDGE!

The rocky ridge rises ahead from the plains. The cowboys drive the terrified cattle toward it.

A sound rises above even the storm's fury - a BELLOWING of pure animal terror.

A lone steer, caught in the outer edge of a twister, rises into the air, plucked by a giant invisible hand. The massive animal SPINS helplessly, legs flailing against nothing.

MO
 (crossing himself
 repeatedly)
 Lord Jesus, merciful Christ! LOOK
 AT THAT!

The steer rises higher, a dark shape against the boiling clouds, before disappearing into the funnel cloud's maw. The wind carries its dying scream.

WALTER
 (face pale beneath his
 tan)
 Mother of God...

For a moment, the hardened cowboys sit transfixed, watching the impossible sight. Lightning STRIKES barely fifty yards away, the thunder deafening.

ISAAC
 (with command that cuts
 through the chaos)
 MOVE! NOW!

They continue to -drive the herd toward the ridge with urgency.

EXT. RIDGE CAMP - NIGHT

The storm has passed, leaving behind a world transformed. Mud stretches in every direction.

The cowboys have made camp on the relative safety of the ridge, their fire casting flickering shadows. The herd clusters below them, quiet.

MO
 (staring into his coffee
 cup)
 Twenty years riding God's earth.
 Never seen a storm like that.

CASSIE
 (wringing water from her
 bandana)
 Lost forty-three head by my count.
 Could've been worse.

A sudden, piercing SCREAM cuts through the night - not human, but animal. The cowboys spring to their feet, hands flying to weapons.

MAL
(drawing his gun)
What the hell—

Another SCREAM, abruptly cut short. The sound of THRASHING, then silence.

ISAAC
(already moving)
Lanterns! Now!

They scramble down the ridge toward the sound, lanterns bobbing like fireflies in the darkness. The cattle shift nervously.

They find the steer on the outer edge of the herd. The massive animal lies on its side, its belly torn open with surgical accuracy. Steam rises from exposed organs into the cool night air.

PAM
(covering her mouth)
Just like before...

LONDON
(voice cracking, trying to smile)
Probably just a really smart bear.
Nothing unusual about that.

His attempt at humor falls flat as his eyes dart nervously skyward.

Strange lights appear in the sky above. They move with purpose, dancing across the heavens in patterns that defy natural explanation. Blue, green, white - they pulse and shift, casting an eerie glow across the muddy landscape.

The lights multiply across the night sky. The cowboys stand transfixed, faces upturned, caught between wonder and terror.

MO
(voice barely above a whisper)
"I know not what they are - only that they run as fire across the heavens, and no man I know can say their cause.

A massive LIGHTNING BOLT tears across the sky without warning, striking one of the lights. The light SPIRALS downward, trailing fire and smoke, before crashing into the tree line at the base of the ridge.

A brief FLASH illuminates the forest, then darkness returns, deeper than before.

WALTER
(breaking the silence)
Did... did lightning just shoot
down a star?

KAI
(his hand on his knife)
That was no star.

Isaac stares at the dark forest, his eyes reflecting the remaining lights that continue their dance overhead. His hand rests on Little Jesus, the hidden gun strapped to his ankle.

ISAAC
(quietly)
Double the watch tonight. No one
goes into those trees alone.

The cattle remain silent as the cowboys return to camp, throwing anxious glances skyward where the strange lights continue their mysterious ballet.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE CAMP - DAWN

Cowboys roll bedding, pack supplies, and kick dirt over dying fires. The cattle below shift restlessly, eager to move.

Cassie kneels by a small creek, splashing water on her face. The cool liquid washes away the grime of the trail.

Approaching hoofbeats turns heads. Spike rides in, followed by a stranger with hard eyes and a too-wide smile.

SPIKE
(gesturing back)
Look who I done bumped into on the
ridge trail.

The stranger sits confidently astride a chestnut stallion. GERALD (30s, scarred face, eyes like flint) wears his gun belt low and his hat pulled down.

Cassie freezes, water dripping from her fingers. Recognition and disgust flash across her face.

CASSIE
(standing slowly)
Gerald. Long way from Tennessee.

Gerald dismounts with a theatrical flourish, spurs JINGLING as his boots hit dirt. He removes his hat.

GERALD
(mock politeness)
Miss Cassie. Been a spell. Brother
sends his regards from the
afterlife.

Cassie's hand instinctively drifts toward her holster. Around them, cowboys pause their morning tasks, sensing the tension. Spike looks worried.

CASSIE
(coldly)
Your brother had no manners. I see
it runs in the family.

GERALD
(circling slowly)
Manners? That what you call it when
you put three bullets in a man's
chest?

CASSIE
That's what I call it when he tried
to put his hands on me one too many
times.

Walter looks up from saddling his horse, his eyes sharp. Mal pauses mid-bite of hardtack. Nearby, Pam pretends to check on Chico in her saddlebag while watching the confrontation from a side-glance.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
You still riding with Blackwater
Jack and that sorry bunch?

Gerald's smile tightens, his fingers flexing near his holster.

GERALD
(evasively)
Here and there. Man's gotta eat.

CASSIE
Man's gotta have principles too.
Something your brother never
learned.

Gerald's friendly façade cracks. His eyes flash with raw hatred, lips peel back in a feral grin that transforms his face.

GERALD

Principles? Oh I got principles.

His hand moves in a blur, drawing his pistol. But Cassie is faster, her open palm CRACKING against his wrist. The gun flies from his grip, landing in the dirt.

CASSIE

(incredulously)

You done drawn a gun on me?

Before Gerald can respond, Cassie launches herself at him. Her first punch connects with his jaw, snapping his head back with surprising force for her small frame. Gerald stumbles, recovering just in time to catch a second blow to his ribs.

He swings wildly, but Cassie ducks under his arm with grace. Her elbow drives into his kidney, doubling him over.

The cowboys form a loose circle, none interfering. Isaac rides up on his stallion, raising a hand to keep everyone back. His eyes watch assessing rather than alarmed.

ISAAC

(softly)

Let them settle it.

Gerald spits blood, circling more cautiously now. His confidence replaced by desperation. He feints left, then charges, hoping to use his greater weight to his advantage.

Cassie sidesteps, hammering three rapid blows to his temple as he passes. Gerald crashes to the ground, spitting out teeth and blood. When he looks up, his eyes dart briefly toward the nearby forest with an odd, suspicious glance.

GERALD

(through bloody lips)

You always did fight dirty. That's why Malik couldn't break you. But he's got friends who ain't forgotten. Friends who are watching.

Cassie steps closer, her breathing controlled despite the exertion.

CASSIE

Your brother broke himself. And you're heading the same direction.

Gerald staggers to his feet, swaying like a drunk. His hand wipes blood from his mouth.

GERALD
(venomously)
You put on a good show bitch, but I
know what you are. Nothing but a-

Cassie's open palm CRACKS across his face, the sound like a bullwhip. Gerald's arm swings back reflexively, but before it can complete its arc, Walter appears, moving with unexpected speed despite his limp. His hand locks around Gerald's wrist in an iron grip.

WALTER
(dangerously soft)
Didn't your daddy teach you any
manners, ingrate? You don't EVER
hit a woman.

Walter's grip tightens. Gerald's face contorts in pain. Cassie spits a mouthful of blood onto the ground before Gerald's boots, her eyes never leaving his.

WALTER (CONT'D)
(genuine concern to
Cassie)
You okay?

Gerald's free hand drops to his belt, drawing a hidden derringer. He levels it at Walter, whose eyes widen in shock as he releases Gerald's wrist and throws up his hands.

The metallic CLICK of a hammer being cocked sounds directly behind Gerald's head. He freezes.

LONDON
(appearing from nowhere,
smiling)
You take one more step and the
vultures and crows will be eatin'
good today, my friend.

Gerald stands perfectly still, caught between London's gun and Walter's glare. Slowly, he uncocks the derringer and holsters it, then raising both hands in surrender.

London keeps his gun steady, using its barrel to gesture toward the horizon.

LONDON (CONT'D)
You have exactly one minute to
gather your things and get the hell
out of here.

Gerald lowers his hands, shooting London a venomous look as he retrieves his fallen pistol and limps toward his horse. He turns, mouth opening to deliver one final barb to Cassie, but London shakes his head.

LONDON (CONT'D)
(deadly serious)
You've said enough, now git!

Gerald mounts awkwardly. With a final hateful glance, he spurs his horse and rides away.

Isaac guides his horse alongside London, offering a subtle wink of approval. The other cowboys return to their morning tasks, the excitement over.

MO approaches, a tin cup of coffee in his hand, staring at London.

MO
(puzzled)
Where the hell have you been, man?
Looked for you half the night after
that light fell.

London's brow furrows, genuine confusion and alarm crossing his face.

LONDON
(mystified)
I never realized I left!

EXT. NEW CAMPSITE - EVENING

The new campsite offers protection from the elements while providing clear sight lines in all directions. Ancient cottonwoods dot the landscape. A crystal-clear stream winds through one edge of the camp.

At the center of camp, flames leap from a freshly built fire pit lined with river stones. The fire CRACKLES and SPITS as coffee boils in blackened pots and Cassie's iron skillet sizzles with beans, salt pork, and cornbread.

Isaac sits on his saddle laying across a boulder, using it as a makeshift chair. His eyes scan the horizon with vigilance as he accepts a tin plate from Cassie. The others settle around the fire, exhaustion evident in their movements.

MAL
(shoveling beans into his
mouth)
(MORE)

MAL (CONT'D)

If this weather holds, we might
actually make decent time tomorrow.

WALTER

(massaging his bad leg)
Weather ain't what concerns me.
It's what's watchin' us from them
woods.

MO

(gesturing with his fork)
Lord protects the righteous,
friend. Though in your case, you
might need to put in some extra
prayer work.

Four figures appear at the edge of the firelight as if from
nowhere.

The cowboys freeze, hands instinctively drifting toward
weapons. Isaac alone seems unsurprised, slowly setting his
plate aside and rising to his feet.

Cyrus leads the group with a smile. Beside him, Sela surveys
the camp. Ezekiel stands with military rigidity, while Simon
fidgets with a device in his hand that gleams strangely in
the firelight.

ISAAC

(dryly)
Checking up on us Cyrus?

CYRUS

(smirks)
Not at all Isaac. The drive appears
to be progressing... adequately.

ISAAC

How did you find us out here in the
middle of nowhere?

CYRUS

(chuckling)
We asked for directions.

Behind him, Sela's eyes find London sitting on a flat rock by
the fire. She flashes him a smile. London tips his hat.

SELA

(voice like silk)
Lovely evening for a campfire,
isn't it?

London shifts uncomfortably, unconsciously touching the bump on his arm. MO watches the exchange, his plate forgotten in his hands.

MO
 (under his breath)
 Looks like the gang's all here!
 Next up, will Moses be parting the
 beans on my dinner plate? Jesus
 turning our coffee into whiskey?
 (tipping an imaginary hat
 to Cyrus)
 Though that last one I wouldn't
 mind, friend. Not one bit.

CYRUS
 (ignoring MO)
 Isaac, might I have a word? In
 private.

Isaac nods and they both walk towards the steer. In moments the sound of approaching hoofbeats draws attention to a new arrival. Ezekiel frowns, Sela squints at the figure and Simon makes a face. A slender Japanese child in his early teens rides into camp, his movements mechanical. HIKARU (13) sits on his horse with perfect posture with vacant eyes.

HIKARU
 (voice with a Japanese
 accent)
 I bring greetings, I have been
 summoned to assist you.

The simple declaration hangs in the air. The cowboys look at Hikaru and then at each other. MO squints, then points his fork at the newcomer.

MO
 (sarcastic)
 We ain't interested in expanding
 the railroad out here boy.

LONDON
 (stuffing the last beans
 into his mouth)
 Leave the kid alone MO. Look at
 him, he's all skin and bones.

Pam looks at MO throwing him a look of disappointment with Chico on her lap. MO lowers his head. London stands, gesturing to his vacated rock.

LONDON (CONT'D)
You sit here boy. Walter will set
you up with some food.

WALTER
(eyebrows shooting up)
What am I, a babysitter?!

Cassie's unexpected GIGGLE cuts through the tension. The sound causes Walter's irritation to dissolve. An involuntary smile spreads across his face.

WALTER (CONT'D)
(sighing)
Sit down, kid. I'll fix you a
plate.

Kai watches from the edge of the gathering, his son Onacona close by his side.

ONACONA
What is it, father?

Kai nods toward his saddled horse. The white owl has returned, perched regally on the worn leather, its unblinking eyes reflecting the firelight.

ONACONA (CONT'D)
(approaching cautiously)
Shoo! Go away!

The owl locks eyes with the boy then launches into the darkening sky and vanishes.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE - MIDDAY

The sun is a white-hot coin in a cloudless sky as the cowboys approach the town of Silver Gulch. Heat ripples off the dusty main street, distorting the outlines of weathered buildings.

The SILVER SPUR INN dominates the far end of the street - a sprawling three-story structure with fresh paint and polished windows that stand in stark contrast to the surrounding decay. A hand-carved sign swings in the hot breeze, the silver spurs depicted on it catching sunlight.

Isaac reins his horse, surveying the town with suspicious eyes.

ISAAC

(to the group)

Remember, we're here for a quick
Food and drink, then back to the
herd.

PAM

(holding a makeshift dog
leash)

A storm is building from the west
Isaac. Right Chico?

Isaac laughs at the sight of Chico. He is wearing a small
Mexican hat and black leather dog coat, he wags his tail. MO
chuckles at the sight.

CASSIE

(adjusting her gun belt)

This is the longest I've gone
without a proper bath. Just give me
twenty minutes with hot water-
please!

WALTER

(grinning)

Hell, I'd settle for whiskey that
doesn't taste like it was poured
from a dead man's boot.

LONDON

(eyes scanning rooftops
nervously)

Don't like leaving the herd with
just Spike and the Indian.

ISAAC

(firmly)

Cattle need rest same as us. We've
pushed them hard. Two hours, then
we ride.

They dismount outside the Silver Spur, tying their horses to
the freshly painted hitching post. Through the inn's windows,
faint MUSIC and LAUGHTER drift into the street.

INT. SILVER SPUR INN - CONTINUOUS

The cowboys push through the swinging doors into a scene of
startling debauchery. The Silver Spur's interior is red
velvet drapes, polished mahogany, and gleaming brass
fixtures. The opulent décor is merely backdrop to the human
tableau.

Half-naked women drape themselves across the laps of miners and drifters. In shadowy corners, couples and sometimes trios engage in activities barely concealed by strategic positioning. The air is thick with tobacco smoke. Isaac Squints.

MO
(crossing himself
reflexively)
Sweet suffering saints... Its Sodom
and Gomorrah.

Deveroux emerges from behind the bar in a silver-threaded vest and tailored pants. Hanging from his hip is a silver-plated revolver. He opens a pocket watch, checks the time and then closes it. Pam squints from afar. Chico is looking around sniffing the air.

DEVEROUX
(arms spread wide)
My guests of honor have arrived!
Welcome my friends to the Silver
Spur!

He gestures expansively to the room, where several familiar looking faces turn toward them.

MAL
(under his breath)
Thought this was a special
invitation...

DEVEROUX
(approaching Isaac)
Mr. Marrane, I've had a special
bottle set aside for a man of
your... importance.

ISAAC
(eyes narrowing slightly)
Very generous of you.

DEVEROUX
Not at all. Good business to treat
the man overseeing three thousand
head of prime beef with respect.

The emphasis on the cattle's value isn't lost on Isaac. His eyes take in the room again. Pam steps up next to Isaac with Chico in tow. Chico smells the air and starts growling. Pam looks down at the dog. Deveroux looks at Chico, surprised for a moment and then dismissive.

PAM
Chico, its okay boy.

CASSIE
(accepting a glass from a
half-dressed male server)
Quite a crowd.

DEVEROUX
(smiling too widely)
The Silver Spur welcomes all who
thirst, Miss Ann.

PAM
(voice low)
How do you know her name?

Devereaux's smile falters for just a moment as he looks at
Chico.

DEVEROUX
Word travels fast about a beautiful
woman driving cattle my dear
Pamela.
(turning to Walter)
And a famous rodeo performer!

Chico is now barking at Deveroux who looks annoyed. Walter's
eyes narrow, his hand unconsciously moving to his bad leg.

WALTER
Haven't performed in years. Since
the accident.

Chico continues to yap and Deveroux instinctively floats his
hand over his pistol.

DEVEROUX
(smoothly)
Of course, of course. A tragedy.
Please, enjoy yourselves. Our
specialties are on the house for
you and your companions.

He glides away, stopping to whisper to a bartender who nods
and disappears through a rear door. A half naked BLONDE
WAITRESS (20S) steps up to Pam.

WAITRESS
You'll have to take your dog
outside. No exceptions.

Pam frowns and looks at Isaac who nods.

PAM
I'll be outside if you need me.
C'mon Chico.

Pam walks Chico back out the front door. MO sidles up to Isaac, his expression belying the tension in his voice.

MO
(nodding toward DEVEROUX)
That fella's smiling like a possum
eating yellow jackets. Something
ain't right.

ISAAC
Noticed that too.

CASSIE
(thinking out loud)
If everyone here was invited
separately...

ISAAC
(finishing her thought)
Then Spike and the Navajos are
alone with three thousand reasons
for someone to pay them a visit.

London appears beside them, having circled the room. His eyes are alert despite his relaxed posture.

LONDON
Back door leads to a stable. Three
men saddling up, looking mighty
purposeful.

Isaac catches Mal's eye across the room and gives a subtle nod. He immediately disengages from a conversation with a local woman, drifting toward Cassie and Walter at the bar.

DEVEROUX returns, a gleaming bottle of amber liquid in his hands and two shot glasses. He places both glasses on the bar and pours.

DEVEROUX
Mr. Marrane, as promised. THE
Finest bourbon this side of
Kentucky.

ISAAC
(watching him pour)
What brings a man with your...
refinement to a place like Silver
Gulch Deveroux?

Deveroux PUSHES a full shot glass towards Isaac. MO's mouth is watering.

DEVEROUX

Opportunity, my friend. The West is full of it. For those with vision.

MO

(chuckling)

"For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?". Though I suspect some folks misplace their souls long before they get to profiting.

Devereaux's smile grows strained at the biblical reference.

DEVEROUX

(raising his glass to Isaac's)

To profit, then. And successful ventures.

Isaac doesn't touch his drink. His threatening eyes meet Devereaux's.

ISAAC

(softly)

How much did they pay you? The rustlers.

DEVEROUX doesn't flinch, but his eyes harden.

DEVEROUX

(equally soft with a grin)

It's nothing personal. Just business.

Deveroux flashes a grin and nods to a group of men stationed near the front door. They all nod to him and draw their weapons.

ISAAC

(nodding)

Always is.

Across the room, Cassie has gathered Mal and Walter. They begin drifting toward the door, movements casual but purposeful. London follows, creating a path for Pam.

MO
(speaking loud enough to
be heard across the room)
"The sword of the wicked shall
enter into their own heart, and
their bows shall be broken." Ain't
that something?

Isaac winces but the message is received. The cowboys draw their pistols and begin making their way out.

DEVEROUX watches them, his smile never faltering even as his eyes track their movements.

DEVEREAUX
(taunting)
Leaving so soon Isaac? The night's
just beginning! Surely you're not
going to leave before the food is
served!?! That's just bad
manners!!!

Isaac moves towards the bar, grabbing an unopened bottle of whiskey. He tears a strip from a bar rag and stuffs it into the bottle's neck. Isaac winks at Devereaux across the room. Devereaux fires his pistol at Isaac and misses.

ISAAC
Party's over.

Isaac strikes a match against the bar top, touching it to the makeshift fuse. The cloth ignites with a WHOOSH.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
Nothing personal.
(echoing Devereaux's
words)
Just business.

He hurls the flaming bottle over the bar. It EXPLODES against the wall of bottles, sending glass and burning alcohol in all directions. Flames race across the bar top, leaping to the velvet drapes.

Chaos erupts as patrons scramble for exits. Isaac backs toward the door. The other cowboys have already mounted up outside.

EXT. SILVER SPUR INN - CONTINUOUS

The cowboys swing into their saddles, spurring their horses down the main street.

Behind them, smoke begins billowing from the Silver Spur's windows. Townsfolk emerge from buildings, shouting and pointing.

WALTER
(as they gallop away)
Nothing like making new friends
everywhere we go!

CASSIE
(grimly)
Save it for the rustlers.

They ride hard, dust billowing behind them as they race toward their camp and the cattle.

EXT. CATTLE GRAZING FIELD - SAME TIME

The massive herd grazes peacefully in the late afternoon sun. Spike rides the perimeter, rifle across his saddle. Kai and Onaona sit atop a small rise, scanning the horizon. Nearby, Hikaru crouches beside a large steer, his hand resting on its flank as if communing with the animal.

The Japanese man lifts his head. His formerly vacant eyes are now sharp, alert. He LISTENS.

The cattle begin to shift restlessly, sensing something approaching. A distant THUNDER of hoofbeats grows steadily louder.

Hikaru springs to his feet, running toward Kai and Onaona.

HIKARU
(shouting)
Here they come!

On the horizon, a dust cloud appears. Within it, the silhouettes of at least twenty riders materialize, spreading out in attack formation as they approach the herd.

Kai reaches for his rifle.

EXT. GRAZING FIELDS - LATE AFTERNOON

The massive herd is in chaos. Two distinct groups of riders have split the cattle like a knife through butter, driving the valuable Angus steers.

Dust rises as the rustlers push the panicked animals hard. Isaac and the others arrive and converge like spokes in a wheel. No words are needed - they've faced this before. They break into two units.

Isaac points, dividing the field:

ISAAC
(commanding)
Cassie, Walter, Pam - west! Mal,
Mo, London - with me east!

They split.

EXT. WESTERN FIELD - CONTINUOUS

Cassie leads her group, twin pistols already drawn. The rustlers ahead - eight men in mismatched clothes - drive about a thousand steer toward a ravine.

CASSIE
(shouting over the wind)
Cut them off at the wash!

Walter's horse moves with unexpected speed, circling wide to flank the rustlers. His face transforms, from the carefree humor replaced by deadly focus.

PAM
Three hundred yards to intercept!

The lead rustler spots them coming. He stands in his stirrups, signaling his men to form a defensive line. Guns appear in hands.

LEAD RUSTLER
(yelling to his men)
Take 'em down! Don't let 'em near
the beeves!

Gunfire ERUPTS across the field. Bullets whistle through tall grass, kicking up dirt geysers around the charging cowboys.

Walter draws with lightning speed, his first shot catching a rustler square in the chest. The man topples from his saddle without a sound.

WALTER
(grimly)
One down.

Cassie's twin pistols bark in rhythm. BLAM-BLAM. BLAM-BLAM. Two more rustlers fall.

PAM
 (ducking a bullet)
 They're boxed in! Push them back
 toward the main herd!

The rustlers realize they're outmatched despite superior numbers. Their shots grow desperate, wild.

LEAD RUSTLER
 (panicking)
 Fall back! Get the cattle moving!

Too late. Walter has circled behind them, cutting off their retreat. He grins.

WALTER
 (tipping his hat)
 Pardon me, boys. Those ain't yours.

His gun speaks again. Another rustler falls.

EXT. EASTERN FIELD - CONTINUOUS

Isaac's group pursues the larger gang - at least fifteen riders driving over fifteen hundred steer. These rustlers are organized, moving with military precision.

London rides hard, his earlier nervousness replaced by cold focus. Beside him, Mal, gun in hand, with eyes closed as his horse gallops at full speed.

LONDON
 (grimly)
 I count fifteen. Not great odds.

ISAAC
 Done faced worse.

MO
 (reciting with his gun
 drawn)
 "Though I walk through the valley
 of DEATH, I shall FEAR no evil."

The lead rustlers turn to face the pursuit, forming a skirmish line. These men wear matching bandanas - a professional outfit, not opportunistic thieves.

A VOLLEY of gunfire erupts from their line. London's horse screams, hit in the shoulder, but keeps running. Bullets whiz past Isaac's head, one clipping his hat.

MAL
(eyes still closed while
shouting)
Just tell me when.

ISAAC
(drawing his pistol yells)
WHEN.

Mal's eyes snap open. In one fluid motion, he raises his gun and fires six shots in rapid succession. Five rustlers topple from their horses. The sixth bullet strikes a man's gun, shattering it in his hand.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
Not bad.

The rustlers break formation, some continuing to drive the cattle while others turn to engage the cowboys. Bullets crisscross the field.

London draws his rifle from its scabbard, firing from horseback with impossible accuracy. Three more rustlers fall.

Their advance seems unstoppable when something IMPOSSIBLE happens.

Near the center of the fleeing steer, one animal suddenly STOPS. Its body SHUDDERS violently. Then, defying nature, it rises on its hind legs, standing upright like a man. All eyes on the animal.

LONDON
(reining up hard)
What the hell—

The steer's body begins to bulge and swell, skin stretching obscenely as fluids build beneath its surface. A terrible SPLITTING sound fills the air as the animal's hide tears open from head to tail.

Blood, mucus and other fluids spray in a grotesque fountain. Chunks of muscle and flesh slough away, revealing something crouched within the carcass like a butterfly emerging from a hellish chrysalis.

The creature stretches itself - an albino gorilla physique, its body covered in blood and viscera. Rows of needle-like teeth fill its open mouth like a penguin.

The cryptid throws back its head and SCREAMS - a sound that freezes blood and stops hearts. London's mouth drops open.

Pam rides up to Isaac with Chico frantically barking inside the saddle bag. Mo watches the creature in horror, his hands start shaking.

PAM
That's what's been eating our
cattle?!?

MO
(crossing himself
repeatedly)
Holy Mary, Mother of God...

ISAAC
(genuinely shocked)
That's a new one.

MAL
(in shock fumbling to
reload)
What do we... how do we...

LONDON
(horrificed)
Holy Sh....

The creature lashes out, catching a nearby rustler and ripping him in half. It tosses the pieces aside and lopes toward the scattered cattle, causing them to stampede in blind terror.

EXT. WESTERN FIELD - CONTINUOUS

The cryptid's scream carries across the prairie. The remaining rustlers fighting Cassie's group hear it and panic, abandoning their prize cattle to flee.

Walter puts a bullet in one more rustler's back as the man runs.

WALTER
(calling after him)
At least die with some dignity!

The cryptid's distant form is visible even from their position, blood-slick and horrifying as it tears through man and beast alike. Chico is barking his head off in the saddlebag.

CASSIE
(eyes widening)
What in God's name...

PAM
(voice shaking)
I know Chico, I KNOW!

EXT. CENTRAL FIELD - CONTINUOUS

Kai and his son Onacona watch the chaos unfold. The white owl circles above them, SCREECHING in alarm.

ONACONA
(barely above a whisper)
Father... that sound...

KAI
(understanding
immediately)
Like your brother heard before...

The Japanese youth, Hikaru, stands transfixed, watching the monster with unnatural focus. His hand moves to his back, drawing a katana that had been concealed beneath his simple clothes. The blade gleams with an otherworldly sheen.

HIKARU
(in Japanese, subtitled)
"The hidden ones reveal themselves
at last."

Without warning, Onacona leaps from behind his father, sliding down the slope with his bow already nocked. Hikaru moves with inhuman grace, the katana held in perfect form.

KAI
(desperately)
ONACONA! NO!

The two youths race toward the creature and it sees them coming and rises to its full height - nearly eight feet of muscle, claw, and teeth.

Onacona draws, and looses an arrow in one fluid motion. The shaft strikes the creature's shoulder but barely penetrates its leathery hide. The cryptid ROARS and charges.

Hikaru moves with blinding speed, the katana flashing in the sun as he darts beneath the creature's reaching claws. The blade slices across its thigh, drawing black ichor that steams when it hits the ground.

The cryptid spins with unexpected agility, catching Hikaru with a backhand that sends him flying. Onacona looses another arrow, this one finding the creature's eye. It SHRIEKS in pain and rage.

ONACONA
 (shouting to Hikaru)
 Together!

The Japanese youth regains his feet, nodding. They circle the creature from opposite sides, working in perfect coordination despite never having fought together before.

The cryptid lashes out, catching Onacona's bow and snapping it like kindling. The boy falls backward, defenseless as the monster lunges for him, jaws wide.

A massive form crashes into the cryptid from the side - Kai riding a steer he's commandeered, his massive knife already slicing downward. The blade bites deep into the creature's neck, black blood spraying in an arc.

KAI
 (snarling)
 NOT MY SHIYÁZHÍ!

Hikaru leaps forward, katana raised high, bringing it down with inhuman strength through the cryptid's skull. The blade cleaves through bone and brain, lodging in the creature's jaw.

The monster shudders, its body convulsing as it collapses. Around them, the chaos gradually subsides as remaining rustlers flee.

Kai dismounts from the steer, rushing to his son. Onacona hands shake. Kai's eyes move to Hikaru, narrowing with suspicion.

Hikaru stands motionless, still gripping the katana embedded in the cryptid's skull. He slides the blade out, dripping ichor. For just a moment, Hikaru's form seems to shimmer and mutate - revealing something distinctly inhuman beneath the human façade. Hikaru smiles at Kai and Onacona.

HIKARU
 (bowing deeply)
 I am indebted to you for fighting
 at my side.

KAI
 (warily)
 Who... who are you?

HIKARU
 (smiling enigmatically)
 A friend. Is that not enough?

Before Kai can respond, the other cowboys converge on their position with guns still drawn.

EXT. CAMPSITE - NIGHT

The cowboys sit around the campfire in shocked silence. The cattle graze peacefully nearby, the recovered steer reintegrated with the main herd.

Mal tends the fire quietly. Kai approaches, settling beside him.

MAL
Your boy showed real courage today.

KAI
(watching Onaona sleep
nearby)
Too much courage. Like his brother.

MAL
(hesitating)
That Japanese kid... there's
something familiar about him.

KAI
You noticed it too?

MAL
(nodding)
Five years back, a Japanese
merchant's son went missing near
Broken Ridge. They found his body
eventually... bout a mile from
where we're sitting.

Both men turn to look for Hikaru, but he has vanished. In the distance, barely visible against the night sky, a cigar-shaped craft hovers, lights pulsing along its metallic surface. A beam of light connects it briefly to the earth before the craft accelerates vanishing into the stars.

EXT. CATTLE TRAIL - LATE MORNING

The massive herd creating a constant RUMBLE that reverberates through the earth.

The cowboys ride in loose formation around the herd, each lost in their own thoughts.

Isaac rides point, his eyes scanning the trail ahead. Behind him, Mo and Pam ride side by side, their debate carrying over the constant sound of the cattle.

MO

(gesturing with his reins)
 Evil ain't just a word in a book.
 It's got form and substance. Walks
 on two legs sometimes, slithers on
 its belly others.

PAM

(skeptically)
 There's a scientific explanation
 for everything we've seen.

ISAAC

(muttering)
 Oh some things defy explanation.

PAM

(startled)
 What did you just say?

Chico scrambles out of the saddle bag and stares at Isaac. Isaac doesn't answer, his attention caught by something ahead. Kai and his son have ridden ahead as scouts, and now the Navajo guides his horse back toward the main group at a canter, his expression grim.

KAI

(pointing)
 Abandoned homestead. Recently.

The group reins up as they crest a small rise. Below them sits a modest ranch - a main house, barn, and corral. The door to the main house is ajar, swinging in the breeze.

ISAAC

(to London and Walter)
 Keep the cattle moving. Make camp
 in that meadow beyond the ranch.

LONDON

(nervously)
 We splitting up again? Even after
 what just happened?

ISAAC

(patiently)
 We should check it out. Might have
 supplies we can use.

Cassie sits straight in her saddle, studying the homestead through narrowed eyes.

CASSIE
(quietly)
Hmmm, No birds.

MAL
(noticing the same)
That ain't natural.

WALTER
(uneasily)
Nothing about this drive has been natural.

Isaac dismounts, handing his reins to Mal.

ISAAC
Mo, Pam, Kai - with me. Rest of you, see to the herd.

The four approach the homestead cautiously, hands never far from their weapons. As they draw closer, the strange stillness of the place becomes more pronounced.

EXT. ABANDONED RANCH - MAIN HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The four reach the front porch. Weather-worn boards CREAK beneath their boots. The open door squeaks in the breeze.

MO
(making the sign of the cross)
"The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty."

ISAAC
(drawing his gun then cocking it)
Call me simple.

MO
Proverbs 22:3.

ISAAC
(pushing the door open)
Yes, I know.

INT. ABANDONED RANCH - MAIN HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The interior is dim, dust motes dancing in late afternoon sunlight. A table set for dinner, chairs pushed back as if the occupants stood suddenly. A pot sits on the cold stove, its contents dried to a crust. Pam has Chico on his leash. Chico sneezes.

PAM
 God bless you!
 (eying the wood burning
 stove)
 Fire's been out for days, not
 weeks. They were here recently.

Isaac moves deeper into the house, his boots CRUNCHING on something. He looks down, kneeling to examine small piles of gray ash scattered across the wooden floor. Pam picks up a document.

ISAAC
 (touching the ash
 cautiously)
 Interesting.

MO
 Feels like we're rummaging through
 the remains of the dead.

PAM
 Enrique Sandoval

KAI
 (from another room)
 It is said to not call the name of
 the dead because you will be
 followed by their shadows.

PAM
 (moving to a bookshelf)
 Valuables still here. Not a
 robbery.

Isaac finds a family Bible open on a side table. He flips it closed, examining the name inscribed on the cover.

ISAAC
 (reading)
 "The Sandoval's" Enrique, Elise,
 and children Jesus and Maria

MO
 Question is, where are they?

Isaac has no answer. He crouches down and traces through the ash on the floor, his eyes troubled by something.

EXT. CAMPSITE - EVENING

The camp has been established in a lush meadow beyond the abandoned ranch. A fire crackles at its center. The full moon bathing the landscape in silvery light.

The cattle graze peacefully in a nearby field, their silhouettes black against the moonlit grass.

WALTER
(tossing a stick into the
fire)
Indians, maybe? Took the family?

CASSIE
(shaking her head)
No signs of struggle. They just...
vanished.

LONDON
(nervously)
Or were taken. By... you know.

He glances skyward, rubbing the bump on his arm. Pam looks at London and shakes her head and rolls her eyes. Mo chuckles. Mal takes a swig from his flask.

MAL
Could be fever. Sweeps through,
kills quick.

MO
Then where are the bodies?

Silence falls over the group as they contemplate this question. Pam has been unusually quiet, studying something with tongs by the firelight. Chico is asleep on the ground snoring. Mo looks down at the dog and smirks. Chico starts to growl in his sleep. PAM watches Mo and chuckles to herself.

ISAAC
What've you got there?

PAM
(holding up a strange
plant with tongs)
Found these growing all around the
ranch. Never seen anything like
them.

She passes the specimen around with the metal tongs. White stems with black leaves and black stems with white leaves, growing in perfect pairs.

MO
(examining it)
Unnatural looking things. Probably
best to steer clear.

PAM
(confidently)
Curiosity....

MO
(shaking his head)
Killed the cat they say! "Trust in
the LORD with all your heart...."

PAM
(sarcastic)
"God helps those who help
themselves."

MO
(gasps)
That's not even IN the Bible! Best
leave the gospel to me, Miss
Sorrel.

PAM
(rolling her eyes)
And best leave science to those who
study it, Mr. Amleto.

No one notices the strange behavior beginning in the cattle grazing field.

EXT. GRAZING FIELD - NIGHT

Under the full moon and new Aurora Borealis lights, the cattle graze peacefully. Then, without warning or sound, one steer COLLAPSES as if its legs have been cut from under it. Another follows. Then another.

Like dominoes falling in slow motion, cattle begin dropping silently across the field. Their skin, visible in the moonlight, turns black as all blood drains from their bodies. No sound, no struggle.

EXT. CAMPSITE - LATE NIGHT

The cowboys sleep around the dying embers of the fire, wrapped in blankets against the night chill. Only the occasional SNORE or shifting body breaks the silence.

Beneath the earth, something STIRS. The soil bulges and cracks as white tendrils, thin as threads, emerge like questing fingers. They move toward the sleeping forms.

Black tendrils follow, glistening with some viscous secretion that SIZZLES faintly where it drips onto the grass.

The tendrils reach the first sleepers, coiling silently around throats, ankles, wrists - anything exposed. They tighten slowly.

Mal thrashing in his sleep, gripped by nightmares. His movement causes the tendril around his neck to constrict suddenly. His eyes snap open, hands flying to his throat as he GASPS for air.

He immediately grabs his knife from the ground beside his bedroll and SLASHES at the white tendril. It cuts with difficulty. The wounded tendril RECOILS, spraying a milky fluid into the air.

MAL
(hoarsely)
WAKE UP! EVERYONE WAKE UP!

His shout jolts Pam awake just as a black tendril hovers above her face, dripping caustic venom. She rolls aside, the liquid HISSING where it strikes her bedroll. In one fluid motion, she grabs her machete and SWINGS. Chico stands beside her barking at the tendril.

PAM
My God They're everywhere!

Walter and Cassie awaken simultaneously, finding themselves nearly cocooned in writhing tendrils. They reach for machetes, hacking at the mass of white and black tendrils. Mo and London wake with knives in their hands hacking and slashing.

WALTER
What in the name of-

CASSIE
(back-to-back with Walter)
Less talking, more chopping sugar!

MO
The devil is afoot!

LONDON
What in the Bloody Hell!?!

Across the campsite, Onacona's terrified scream cuts through the chaos.

Kai struggles to reach his son, slashing through tendrils with his massive knife.

The ground begins to SHAKE, a localized earthquake that rattles beneath their feet. With a sound like tearing fabric, the earth SPLITS open. A massive form rises - a colossal plant-like creature, primarily white with black veins pulsing along its central mass. Hundreds of tendrils extend from its body, some reaching twenty feet in length.

Isaac formerly sleeping beside his horse, fires his gun with each shot severing a tendril at its base.

ISAAC
Good Lord...

Isaac stops for a moment to reload, then firing into the creature's central mass. It SHRIEKS, a sound like metal grinding on metal.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(shouting)
The cattle! Drive them through!

London understands immediately, firing his gun into the air to startle the remaining cattle. The herd, already panicked by the commotion, begin to STAMPEDE directly toward the alien plant creature.

The earth SHAKES with the force of hundreds of hooves. The plant creature WRITHES, its tendrils lashing frantically as hooves of cattle bears down upon it.

Cowboys fire from all sides, bullets tearing through tendrils and central mass alike. The creature SHRIEKS again.

The first wave of cattle hits the creature like a battering ram, hooves TRAMPLING tendrils and massive body alike. The creature CONVULSES, then goes limp as the herd continues to stream over it.

When the last steer passes, the alien plant lies crushed and motionless, its tendrils twitching with the last sparks of life. Pam approaches with Chico on a leash still growling at the creature.

PAM
 (breathing heavily)
 Is... is it dead?

The sound of air being sucked out of a room. Four people step out of darkness.

EZEKIEL
 (impressed)
 Looks like you encountered the
 Tellurian Vines.

The Four survey the battlefield. The Cowboys are silent.

EZEKIEL (CONT'D)
 Rare meteor showers and Aurora
 Borealis events allow foreign
 matter through the atmosphere.

MO
 (stunned)
 I didn't know you could speak!?!

CYRUS
 (chuckling)
 He's a man of a few words.

Cyrus nods to Simon, who pulls a small device from his pocket. It telescopes into a pole, which he thrusts into the ground and activates with a twist.

The earth ILLUMINATES beneath their feet- the entire meadow is infested with the same white and black tendrils, now thrashing in response to the beacon's signal.

LONDON
 (backing away)
 Sweet Jesus...

Cyrus pulls a small pump bottle from his jacket pocket. He sprays each palm and rubs his hands together as if washing them. A thick, translucent material forms around his hands like gloves.

CYRUS
 (noticing Isaac and Pam
 watching)
 First invented as contraceptive
 technology - guy would spray his...
 uh... nevermind.

From another pocket, he produces a thick glass jar reinforced with metal braiding in the glass.

With specialized extra long forceps, Cyrus extracts a writhing tendril from the ground. It THRASHES violently, emitting a high-pitched screaming sound.

CYRUS (CONT'D)
Oh... this is a real feisty one.
Nasty buggers.

He deposits the specimen in the jar and quickly seals it, pressing an indentation on the lid that activates an advanced locking mechanism.

ISAAC
(watching warily)
What happens now?

CYRUS
(turning to face him)
It's all very simple. We're going to clean up here, and you guys will continue the cattle drive and will wake up with no memory of our conversation. Short-term memory wipe using enzymes in your brains.

The Four simultaneously insert small plugs into their nostrils. Cyrus tosses a metallic pellet onto the ground, which immediately releases a fine mist that envelops them all.

Beyond them, hooded figures emerge from the darkness - in black robes wearing white skull masks. Each carries a specialized backpack connected to sickle-shaped sprayer, which emit a fine mist as they move methodically across the infested ground. The alien plant remains wither away to dust.

The last thing Isaac sees before consciousness fades is Cyrus's face, watching him with an expression of sympathy.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE - MID-MORNING

Dust rises in great clouds, catching the morning sunlight. The Cowboys flank the herd.

Isaac rides point, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Mo rides up alongside him. Dark circles shadow his eyes.

MO
(troubled)
You notice anything strange this morning?

ISAAC
(eyes on the horizon)
Like what?

MO
Can't put my finger on it. Like
waking from a dream you can't
remember, but you know it was
important.

ISAAC
Well, the herd's smaller.

PAM
(confused)
I think my calculations are off.
According to my notes, we should be
ten miles further west.

She holds up her notebook, pages filled with complex
equations and strange symbols. Some notations appear to be in
her handwriting.

ISAAC
(frowning)
What's the last thing you remember
from yesterday?

PAM
(struggling)
The abandoned ranch. Setting up
camp. Then... nothing until I found
myself saddling my horse with Chico
at dawn.

CASSIE
(joining them)
We all have the same gap. Walter
thinks we might have stumbled onto
bad water, maybe some kind of
prairie fever.

LONDON
(nervously)
Or something took our memories.

He unconsciously touches the bump on his arm, eyes scanning
the sky briefly before returning to the herd. The others look
at London like he is crazy.

Kai approaches from the rear flank, guiding his horse with
subtle knee pressure. Onaconda sits in front of him, quiet and
watchful.

KAI
(to Isaac)
Something happened during the
night.

ISAAC
And none of us can seem to recall a
thing.

KAI
(troubled)
My son has strange marks on his
hands, as if he fought something.

He nods toward Onacona, whose knuckles are raw and scraped.
The boy stares straight ahead, his young face unusually
serious.

KAI (CONT'D)
The earth where we camped burned in
perfect circles. And then this.

He produces a small metallic object from his pouch - a
fragment of something clearly not made by human hands. The
metal has an iridescent quality, shifting colors as it
catches the light.

ISAAC
(squinting)
You find anything else?

KAI
(shaking his head)
Only that we are missing cattle,
yet there are no carcasses, no
signs of rustlers.

MAL
Sounds like ghost stories.

He doesn't elaborate, but his hand moves to his throat,
rubbing it as if remembering something constricting around
it. Mo rides up with a sarcastic grin.

MO
Only if you believe in ghosts.

WALTER
Whatever happened, we should put
miles between us and that place.

ISAAC
(nodding)
Agreed.

As they ride, Isaac notices something in the distance - four figures on a ridge, watching them. One raises its hand in what might be greeting or warning before they turn and disappear over the horizon.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Always the weird.

The cattle drive continues across the vast prairie, above a white owl circles.

EXT. CATTLE TRAIL - MIDDAY

The Texas sun in a cloudless blue sky, the prairie a sea of golden grass. The cattle move at a languid pace.

London begins to whistle - a jaunty tune that starts soft but grows more with each note.

MO
(irritably)
You mind stopping that infernal noise London? My head's pounding enough without your caterwauling.

London continues whistling, either not hearing or deliberately ignoring Mo's request. The tune takes on a more elaborate character, with trills and flourishes that showcase surprising musical talent.

MO (CONT'D)
(louder)
London! For the love of all that's holy, STOP!

London's whistling cuts off mid-note. He blinks at Mo, as if coming out of a trance.

LONDON
(confused)
Was I doing something?

WALTER
(amused)
Um, whistling like a damn canary with its tail feathers on fire.

Cassie's unexpected GIGGLE breaks through the tension.

MO
(riding up suddenly)
Whistling's is the devil's work!

His declaration lands with unexpected force in the conversational lull. All eyes turn to the former priest.

CASSIE

(still smiling)

Sounded nice to me. Reminds me of my granddaddy. He could whistle any tune after hearing it just once.

MO

(defensively)

It was going through my skull like a hot knife.

Pam rolls her eyes dramatically. Chico is standing on the saddle in front of Pam taking it all in. Pam looks lovingly at him.

LONDON

(quietly)

Something happened. Something they took from us.

KAI

(raising an eyebrow)

They?

LONDON

(looking skyward)

Whoever's watching.

Cassie is amused as she scans the horizon.

CASSIE

I once heard that sailors believe whistling called up winds. Good or bad depending on the tune.

Kai rides up unexpectedly as he watches Spike in the distance.

KAI

My people say whistling at night summons monsters. During the day, it calls birds who carry messages to the spirits.

Isaac cracks a smile.

ISAAC

(cutting her off)

Whatever happened is behind us now. Best focus on what's ahead.

Isaac pulls off and heads towards where Spike is. Mo watches him depart and makes a face.

None of the cowboys notice the sleek, silvery object that has appeared in the distant sky. Its metallic surface catches the sunlight, sending occasional FLASHES across the landscape. The airship executes a wide circle above the cattle drive.

PAM
(tilting her head)
Do you hear that?

Before anyone can respond, the sound stops. When Pam looks up, the sky is empty. Chico looks upward as well. Mo rides up.

MO
(smiling)
Hear what my dear?

PAM
(uncertain now)
Nothing. Must be the heat playing tricks.

She rubs her temples, wincing at a headache.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE CAMP - EVENING

The cowboys gather around a crackling fire. Beyond the circle of light, their horses stand in loose formation near the edge of the massive cattle herd, occasional SNORTS and STOMPS the only sound breaking the prairie quiet.

The group settles in for the evening meal. Tin plates clatter softly, spoons scrape against metal as the cowboys eat Cassie's hearty stew.

Isaac leans back, balancing on his saddle which serves as his custom seat. Steam rises from the tin cup of coffee in his weathered hands, curling upward. His eyes lift to the darkening sky, where the first stars have begun to appear.

Without warning, the heavens come alive.

The Aurora Borealis stretches from horizon to horizon, casting an ethereal glow across the prairie. The cowboys' faces turn upward in unison, conversation dying as the spectacle claims their attention.

WALTER
(softly)
Would you look at that...

MAL

Seventeen years on the trail, never
seen the lights this far south.

Among the natural display, several points of light move with purpose - bright orbs executing impossible turns and sudden stops, weaving intricate patterns through the aurora's glow.

LONDON

(pointing)

Those ain't stars. Stars don't move
like that.

Isaac nods slightly, acknowledging the observation without comment. He returns his gaze to his coffee.

MO

(crossing himself)

"The heavens declare the glory of
God; the skies proclaim the work of
his hands." Though I admit, some of
those works are mighty strange.

CASSIE

(thoughtful)

My grandmother used to say the
lights were spirits of ancestors,
dancing across the sky.

Pam side glances up at the sky.

PAM

(analytically)

It's a scientific phenomenon.
Particles from the sun interacting
with our atmosphere.

WALTER

(sarcastic)

Oh sure, that explains the ones
doing somersaults up there.

He gestures to where several lights break formation,
executing a series of impossible aerial maneuvers.

MO

(to Cassie)

Hand me that salt pork, would you?

Cassie passes the wrapped package, their fingers briefly touching in the exchange. Mo clears his throat awkwardly. Pam watches intently.

MO (CONT'D)
You know Cassie that you could've
had a different life. Proper house,
family, not sleeping in dirt
chasin' cows across God's creation.

CASSIE
(not looking up from her
cooking)
And you could've stayed in your
nice church instead of blaspheming
all over the territories. We all
make choices.

MO
(chuckling)
Fair enough. Though I prefer to
think the Lord made my choices for
me. He sets my feet on the path,
even when it's muddy.

Isaac looks at Mo.

CASSIE
(softening slightly)
You really believe that? That
there's some... plan to all this?

Cassie gestures broadly, encompassing the camp, the cattle,
the vast wilderness around them.

MO
I believe that God forgives even if
you don't forgive yourself.

Isaac shakes his head.

ISAAC
In certain instances the
transgression is too great for even
God to forgive.

Mo looks at Isaac with sympathy.

MO
Some people say the largest
transgressions are eventually
forgiven, if you can forgive
yourself.

Mo trades his gaze and looks at Cassie.

MO (CONT'D)
He has a plan for all of us.

Isaac walks off. Mo looks after him.

A sudden FLUTTER of wings breaks the moment as the white owl lands atop a nearby log, its enormous wingspan briefly silhouetted against the aurora-lit sky. It settles, head swiveling to fix them with unblinking amber eyes.

CASSIE
(startled)
Jesus!

MO
Watch your language.
(looking at the owl)
Though I admit that's unsettling.
Thing's been following us for a
hundred miles at least.

The owl stares at them. Its feathers glow eerily in the dancing northern lights.

CASSIE
(uneasily)
You ever feel like it's... watching
us? Not just seeing, but watching?

A chorus of HOWLS rises from the distant darkness - wolves, calling to one another across the prairie. The cattle shift nervously, some rising to their feet.

WALTER
(tensing)
That's all we need. Wolves with the
creatures still out there.

London's hand moves unconsciously to the bump on his arm, rubbing it through his shirt.

MAL
(loading his pistol)
Wolves are the least of our
worries.

Before anyone can respond, a cattle BELLOWS in pain from the darkness beyond the fire's reach. Panicked SOUNDS and the thunder of hooves follow immediately as the herd begins to stir.

ISAAC
(on his feet instantly)
Weapons ready!

Cowboys grab guns, knives, and whatever weapons are at hand facing outward into the darkness where unknown threats await.

Isaac moves toward the cattle, drawing both pistols as he goes. Kai and Onacona follow close behind, the father's massive knife gleaming in the aurora light. The northern lights cast everything in surreal colors, making the familiar landscape suddenly alien.

From the darkness, a SNARL rises. The cattle panic fully now, breaking from their rest to move in confused circles.

PAM
(voice tight with fear)
Something's out there.

MO
(barely audible)
Multiple somethings.

Between the milling, frightened cattle, darker shapes move - low to the ground, unnaturally fast. A steer SCREAMS - as it's pulled down by something that shouldn't exist.

Isaac takes aim into the darkness, waiting for a clear shot. When it comes, the sight makes his blood run cold - a creature tearing into fallen cattle, its body a grotesque hybrid of human and bestial features, covered in coarse hair with an elongated snout filled with razor teeth.

He steadies his hand and fires twice. The bullets strike the creature but seem to cause little damage. It turns toward the sound, blood-red eyes fixing on Isaac.

ISAAC
(under his breath)
I'm getting too old for this.

He moves forward, firing repeatedly as he advances to draw the creature away from the others. The cryptid bounds toward him, covering ground in great leaps.

Isaac turns to face it, dropping his empty pistols and raising his fists. The creature slows, circling him with predatory patience. Isaac looks into the sky

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(grimly)
I'm ready.

Addressing the creature.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
Well, come on then! Let's dance.

The cryptid LAUNCHES itself at him. Isaac sidesteps with surprising agility, delivering a powerful blow to the creature's ribs as it passes. The impact barely staggers the monster.

It spins with unnatural quickness, slashing at Isaac with clawed hands. He dodges most blows, but not all - a claw catches his shirt, tearing fabric and deep into the skin beneath. Before he can recover, the creature SLAMS into him with its full weight, sending them both crashing to the ground.

Isaac's breath explodes from his lungs as he hits the earth. His pistol skitters away across the dirt. The creature looms over him, drool dripping from its fanged maw.

Kai and Onaconda arrive, witnessing Isaac's plight. The Navajo warrior reaches for his knife, but Isaac locks eyes with him.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

The gun... throw it!

Kai spots Isaac's fallen pistol and moves to retrieve it just as repeated GUNSHOTS ring out. Mo charges forward, firing his bullets at the cryptid.

MO

(shouting scripture)

"The Lord is my rock, and my
fortress, and my deliverer!" Return
to Hell demon!

The cryptid HOWLS in pain as the bullets strike. Isaac struggles to regain his feet, ribs screaming in protest.

Thirty yards away, Mal finishes reloading his pistol, unaware of the second cryptid slinking through the shadows behind him. His attention is caught by something above - one of the lights in the aurora separates from the others, descending.

MAL

(in awe)

Isaac not bad! Look at the-

The words die in his throat as claws PUNCH through his chest and erupt from his back in a spray of blood and bone. Other claws slash his face open. His eyes widen in shock and pain. His hand pointing into the sky with his left hand.

Isaac turns at Mal's voice, just in time to witness the horror. Mal's finger involuntarily squeezes the trigger on his gun and fires into nothingness. Time stands still - Mal suspended on the cryptid's arm, blood running down his chin, eyes meeting Isaac's in a final moment. Mal's eyes close.

ISAAC
 (anguished)
 MAL! God dammit No!

The first cryptid lunges for Isaac. Isaac rolls beneath the attack, reaching for the pistol Kai tosses towards him. Isaac rises to his knees and empties the chamber into the creature's face and throat.

The cryptid SHRIEKS, black ichor spurting from its wounds. It staggers backward, clawing at its ruined features.

Mal slumps to his knees as the second cryptid withdraws its blood-slicked arm. His gun falls from fingers. His body pitches forward, head striking a rock with a sickening CRACK.

A brilliant beam of light stabs downward from the hovering craft above, bathing the area in blinding white radiance. The cryptids HOWL in what might be triumph or pain as their bodies begin to rise in the light, feet leaving the ground thrashing.

To the cowboys' horror, Mal's body also begins to rise, lifting inches off the bloodstained earth. London looks up in anger.

LONDON
 (desperately)
 NO! YOU CAN'T HAVE HIM!

London lunges forward, grabbing Mal's boots. The implant in London's arm rips out of his skin. Walter seizes an arm, Cassie the other. More cowboys join, gripping their fallen comrade, anchoring him to the earth through sheer will.

For a moment, it's a grotesque tug-of-war between the cowboys and the unseen force above. Abruptly, the light cuts off. The cryptids vanish into the craft, but Mal's body falls heavily into the cowboys' arms, his weight suddenly restored.

London cradles Mal's head, blood soaking into his shirt. Cassie presses her hand uselessly against the massive chest wound, tears streaming down her face. Pam turns away, unable to watch, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs. Walter is open mouthed in shock. Mo prays.

Isaac approaches slowly, holding his severely injured arm where the cryptid's claws left deep gashes over Mal. Blood seeps between his fingers despite the pressure and drips into Mal's gaping wound. His face is a mask of grief and shame as he looks down at Mal's broken body. Isaac closes his eyes. Oanacona and Kai watch Isaac weep as he falls to his knees.

ISAAC
I'm sorry, old friend.

Above them, the craft rises silently, rejoining the dancing lights of the aurora. The wolves howl again in the distance.

Onacona moves to stand beside his father, looking up at the night sky.

ONACONA
They will return.

EXT. TEMPORARY CAMP - AFTERNOON

The cattle drive has stopped in a small protected valley. A shallow grave has been dug. Mal's body, wrapped in his blanket, lies beside it. The cowboys gather in a loose circle, hats removed, heads bowed.

Isaac stands at the head of the grave, his face carved from stone. Tears welling in his eyes.

MO
Maybe we should dig the grave deeper?

ISAAC
It's fine.

Cassie wipes tears from her cheeks, making no attempt to hide her grief. Pam keeps her eyes closed with tears streaming down her cheeks, Chico looks up at her.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(gently)
The stones we place will keep them away. And Mal wouldn't want us wasting strength on digging.

He looks around the circle silently gesturing for others to speak.

LONDON
Never knew a man could speak to a gun. Like he was having a conversation with it. Saw him shoot the pip out of a playing card at fifty paces once.

A sad smile touches his lips at the memory.

LONDON (CONT'D)

He had this way of closing his eyes, like he wasn't even aiming. He used to say the gun knew where to point itself if you just listened to it.

WALTER

(gruffly)

He cheated at cards.

A surprised silence follows before Walter continues.

WALTER (CONT'D)

(voice softening)

But he always made sure to lose to the poorest fella at the table. He also couldn't hold his liquor worth a damn, but that never stopped him from trying. Said his pappy nightmares kept him drinking.

Pam steps forward with Chico. Chico sniffs at the rocks.

PAM

I thought him as a fail and kind man. Cut down in his prime.

(brushing away tears)

CASSIE

He brought me wild flowers once. He said they reminded him of his mama's garden. Said he would hide from his exconvict daddy in that garden.

(choking up)

It was the only place he felt safe.

MO

(clearing his throat)

In Spanish, "mal" means bad or evil. But all I saw was the good he was trying to do for everyone else.

Mo clears his voice and opens his Bible, finding a marked passage.

MO (CONT'D)

It is said "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

(closing the Bible)

He stood with us against things no man should have to face.

(MORE)

MO (CONT'D)
 I think the Lord will judge him
 kindly for that, whatever sins he
 carried.

KAI
 (unexpectedly speaking)
 My people believe the manner of a
 man's death shapes his spirit's
 journey. To die in battle,
 protecting others - is a warrior's
 death. Honorable. Swift passage to
 the next world.

Onaconda steps forward, quietly placing a crudely carved
 wooden owl on Mal's chest.

ONACONA
 For protection on the journey.

Isaac nods, then begins to help lower the body into the
 shallow grave. The others join, each taking a corner of the
 blanket. When Mal is laid to rest, they begin placing stones
 over him marking his final resting place. The final stones
 are placed on Mal's grave. As the cowboys finally turn away
 from the grave, the white owl appears, circling once before
 landing on the cairn of stones. It watches them with
 unblinking eyes as they lead the cattle away.

EXT. PRAIRIE DAWN - EARLY MORNING

First light seeps across the eastern horizon.

An aurora borealis dances overhead despite the new day.

The cattle drive moves slowly through tall grass. Their
 breath forms clouds of steam in the cool morning.

Isaac rides point again. His horse moves with nervous energy,
 ears flicking back and forth at sounds only it can hear.

WALTER
 (voice low)
 That sky ain't right.

Pam rides up with Chico on the saddle. She is tapping her
 compass.

PAM
 Isaac, my compass needle wont
 settle.

She holds up the compass where the arrows spin wildly.

CASSIE
 (pointing)
 Look there! At the ridge!

Against the bizarre skyscape, a sleek metallic craft descends from the heavens. This object hovers momentarily before settling onto the hilltop with gentleness. A mist rises around it.

LONDON
 I told you! I told all of you!

London's hands trembling.

MO
 (making the sign of the cross)
 "And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death." The Nephilim have arrived.

Chico barks.

PAM
 I know Chico, I know.

WALTER
 (squinting)
 What is happening?

A seam appears in the craft's smooth surface, widening into a doorway from which intense light spills out. Silhouetted against this brilliance, several small figures emerge - no taller than children but with proportions that immediately register as wrong to human eyes. Their movements are fluid, though heads too large for their slender bodies, limbs too long. Cassie gasps.

CASSIE
 (barely audible)
 Sweet Jesus...

The small beings descend a ramp that materializes beneath their feet. They spread out around their craft with practiced efficiency, extracting devices from their garments that bear no resemblance to any human tool. Though hundreds of yards distant, the cowboys can see them collecting samples - soil, plants, small insects - each specimen carefully secured in containers that seem to shimmer with their own internal light.

KAI
 The star people.

ISAAC
 (calmly)
 You've seen them before?

KAI
 I have. My grandfather spoke of them as well. Visitors from beyond the sky who study the earth as a hunter studies game trails.

ONACONA
 (from his position behind his father)
 Are they here for us?

The question hangs in the air, giving voice to everyone's fear.

ISAAC
 (low talking)
 I don't think so, but that doesn't mean we're safe.

Static electricity begins to CRACKLE across the grass around them, causing the cattle to shift nervously. Small blue sparks jump between metallic objects - gun barrels, spurs, the bits in horses' mouths. Several cowboys yelp in surprise as they receive unexpected shocks. Pam's eyes are wide. Chico starts barking again, Pam looks at the dog and shushes him, Chico quiets down.

PAM
 This is like nothing I've ever seen!

The beings by the craft suddenly freeze in unison, their oversized heads turning toward the cattle drive.

MO
 (nervously)
 I don't think they expected an audience.

ISAAC
 Keep it moving. We still have a lot of ground to cover.

PAM
 (incredulous)
 You want us to just... ride past that?

ISAAC
 They're just observing, for now.

He kicks his horse forward, forcing the others to follow.

As they pass the ridge where the craft rests, now no more than a quarter-mile away, the small beings observe them with unblinking eyes. No attempt at communication is made, no movement toward the cowboys.

LONDON

(whispering hoarsely)

I remember you, you little bastards. I know what you done to me.

They finally crest the next hill, placing solid earth between themselves and the visitors. Behind them, the craft rises silently into the air, hovering momentarily before shooting upward leaving nothing but a perfect circle of bare soil.

CASSIE

My God.

Isaac looks up toward the eastern horizon, where the unnatural dawn continues to unfold in colors.

EXT. TEXAS BORDER - MIDDAY

The LOWING of steers mixes with the CREAK of saddle leather and the occasional SNAP of a whip.

The cowboys finally approach the border that marks their entry into Texas. An enormous wooden sign rising from the grass.

A bullet hole punctures the 'X' in "TEXAS," while rope burns around the central post suggest someone once tried to pull it down. Still legible, are the proud words:

WELCOME TO TEXAS

THE LONE STAR STATE

Isaac slows his horse as they approach, removing his hat to wipe sweat from his brow. His face, betrays the subtle relaxation around his eyes. Mo rides up beside him and makes the sign of the cross while looking at the sign.

MO

(grateful)

Texas at last. Thank God.

WALTER
 (spitting into the dust)
 Bout damn time. Thought we'd spend
 an eternity in that no-man's-land.

Isaac looks at Walter and frowns.

ISAAC
 So did Mal.

Walter looks Isaac in the eyes with regret and heads off to guide the cattle. A loud GURGLING sound breaks the moment. Cassie shifts uncomfortably in her saddle, pressing one hand against her stomach as it emits another audible RUMBLE. Heat flushes her cheeks as she realizes everyone has heard.

CASSIE
 (embarrassed)
 Sorry. Been a while since
 breakfast.

WALTER
 (grinning)
 Damn, woman! Thought we had another
 stampede starting.

He chuckles. His eyes crinkle at the corners.

LONDON
 I reckon we better stop for chow
 before it eats us all!

London's joke draws scattered laughter from the group. Even Isaac's mouth twitches in what might almost be a smile. Cassie squints at each of them.

CASSIE
 Keep it up, and neither of you will
 get a bite when I cook tonight.

She adjusts her bandana, using the motion to hide the smile tugging at her lips.

Pam looks down at her device. Chico looks up at her from the saddle.

PAM
 (consulting her
 instruments)
 We might actually have a few days
 of clear weather ahead. Right
 Chico?

Chico happily barks a couple of times.

LONDON

I think I'm going to love Texas.

London smiles despite the dark circles under his eyes.

CASSIE

(stomach GROWLING again)

Lord, I'd sell my left boot for one
of those Texas steaks I've heard
about.

WALTER

(licking his lips)

Got about two thousand steaks on
the hoof right there.

Cassie looks at Walter then laughs. Walter chuckles.

Onacona sits on the saddle in front of his father.

ONACONA

(pointing to the sign)

Look, father.

Atop the dilapidated welcome sign, the white owl is already
perched. It stares at the procession with unblinking amber
eyes.

ISAAC

(nodding toward the owl)

Seems our guide has arrived ahead
of us.

Cassie squints at the sight of the owl.

CASSIE

That thing gives me the willies. No
owl should be out in daylight. It
ain't natural.

WALTER

After everything we've seen, that's
what bothers you? A bird with
strange habits?

CASSIE

(defensively)

Natural things should behave, well
naturally. When they don't, it's
usually the first sign of bigger
trouble.

Walter nods and makes a face.

WALTER

Well we've had our share. You might
be onto something.

Her stomach GROWLS again, punctuating her point with comic timing. Walter raises an eyebrow, and she sighs in defeat.

WALTER (CONT'D)

(snorting)

Good Laud. That stomach is loud
enough to be heard in Mexico.

Walter looks at London who giggles like a kid.

CASSIE

(throwing up her hands)

That's it! Both of you can cook
your own dinner tonight.

The herd stretches back for nearly a mile. A steer near the front suddenly BELLOWS and rears back, nearly colliding with others behind it. For no apparent reason, it refuses to cross the border, shaking its massive head as if seeing something the humans cannot.

Isaac squints.

ISAAC

Trouble?

He spurs his horse forward, approaching the reluctant steer. The animal's eyes roll wildly, showing whites all around. Isaac studies the ground where the animal balked, but nothing visible explains its behavior. Isaac sniffs the air. Mo rides up and watches.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

(to the group)

I've crossed this border seventeen
times since they put up that sign.
First time was before the paint had
dried.

MO

(curious)

How old is that sign, exactly?

ISAAC

(with the faintest smile)

Older than you'd believe.

Isaac swings off his saddle and lands on the Texas soil with a CRUNCH. He scoops up a handful and sniffs it then looks at it closely.

After studying it for a moment, he lets it sift through his fingers, watching as it falls. Something in his posture seems to reassure the balking steer, which finally moves forward with the rest of the herd. Isaac mounts up.

MO
(uncertain)
What was that about?

ISAAC
(cryptically)
Some boundaries run deeper than
state lines preacher.

He nudges his horse forward, passing under the watchful gaze of the owl as he crosses into Texas.

As Cassie crosses, her stomach GROWLS one final time, the sound startlingly loud in the momentary quiet. London catches Walter's eye, both men struggling to maintain straight faces.

CASSIE
(throwing up her hands)
Oh, go ahead and laugh. Get it out
of your systems.

They do, the sound of their mirth carrying across the prairie for a moment.

A cold chill hits London who shudders visibly, drawing his coat tighter despite the heat. He catches the attention of Isaac in the distance. Isaac waves his hand for them to keep moving.

LONDON
(barely above a whisper)
Did you feel that?

ISAAC
(shouting)
Just keep moving. We've got miles
to cover before sundown.

The owl launches suddenly from its perch. It circles once over the herd before flying ahead, a white speck diminishing in the distance.

ONACONA
(watching the owl)
It shows us the path.

KAI
(to his son)
Not all paths are safe to follow.

Spike, who has been quiet the entire ride turns to KAI and smiles knowingly. Kai frowns for a moment and then pushes his horse faster.

WALTER
(to Cassie, quietly)
When we make camp, I'll help you
with dinner.

CASSIE
Well that's unexpected.

WALTER
My ma taught me a thing or two
about floating biscuits.

CASSIE
(smiling)
I might just take you up on that.

Her stomach GROWLS in agreement, sending them both into another round of laughter.

The cattle drive continues as the dilapidated welcome sign recedes behind them.

EXT. KILGORE OUTSKIRTS - MID-DAY

The cattle drive crests a gentle rise, revealing the outskirts of Kilgore spread before them. A colossal wooden sign, tilts precariously at the town limits. Once-bright paint now peels in long strips, but the words "WELCOME TO KILGORE" still legible against the bleached wood.

More alarming is the landscape itself. The ground surrounding the approach to town is pockmarked with dozens of smoking fissures. Some are mere cracks leaking thin tendrils of gray smoke, while others form gaping maws several feet across, belching thick black plumes skyward. The acrid stench of petroleum hangs heavy in the air, stinging eyes and coating throats with each breath. All of the cowboys trade off on coughing.

Isaac reins his horse to a stop, studying the treacherous terrain as he sniffs the air. Sweat beads on his forehead, the unnatural heat from the earth below creating a disorienting contrast of temperatures.

ISAAC
(gesturing to the pits)
Lets keep the herd tight. Single
file if necessary.

A thunderous GURGLE emerges from Cassie's midsection, breaking the tense silence. She presses a hand against her stomach, embarrassment coloring her cheeks.

LONDON
(eyeing the smoking
ground)
Between your belly Cassie and this
hell ground, we got ourselves a
right symphony of the unholy.

Mo flashes London a dirty look as Cassie and Walter laugh at the joke. The cattle move forward hesitantly, nostrils flaring at the strange odors. One massive steer, bolder than the rest, ventures too close to a smoldering hole.

Without warning, the ground beneath the animal CRACKS. The steer BELLOWS in panic as its front legs plunge into suddenly liquefied earth. Black, viscous tar bubbles up around its chest, steam rising where the hot petroleum meets flesh. The animal's eyes roll white with terror as it struggles, each movement only hastening its descent. Isaac's eyes are wide.

A geyser of flame ERUPTS from the pit, engulfing the steer in a hellish orange blaze. Its agonized SHRIEK cuts through the air, mercifully brief as the inferno consumes it. Within moments, only the charred upper half of the carcass remains visible, the rest swallowed by the earth's hungry maw.

LONDON (CONT'D)
(breaking the shocked
silence)
Well now, now that there's good
eatin'.

Mo crosses himself before dismounting, his expression a mixture of disgust and resignation.

MO
(under his breath)
"Though I walk through the valley
of death..."

LONDON
(finishing dryly)
You'll be walking with a cooked
steer under your arm.

ISAAC
(nodding grimly)
Waste not, want not.

He gestures to Mo and London.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
Get what you can. Carefully.

Pam circles the perimeter of the zone, her brass instrument held before her like a divining rod. The device CLICKS and WHIRS as she processes the deadly landscape. Chico stands stoically on the saddle before her. Pam frowns.

PAM
The tar pits are everywhere. The
ground isn't stable

She points toward a distant outcropping of rock and scrub brush.

PAM (CONT'D)
We should make camp up there. Solid
ground.

Isaac nods in agreement.

ISAAC
(to everyone)
You heard her. Move the herd to
higher ground, NOW!

They spring into action, redirecting the cattle away from the treacherous field. London and Mo carefully extract the half-cooked steer from the now-smoking pit.

EXT. CAMP - EVENING

Flames from a carefully built campfire, casting long shadows across the faces of the cowboys.

Isaac thoughtfully gnaws on a chunk of meat, his gaze distant. Walter sits nearby, cleaning his gun. Pam scribbles notes in her journal, occasionally pausing to study the smoking fields visible in the distance. Everyone is devouring the meat and beans on their plate.

ISAAC
(speaking half to himself)
Strange how it's always the Angus.

WALTER
(looking up)
What's that?

ISAAC
The creatures, they always eat the
Angus cattle.

PAM
(closing her journal)
I've noticed that too.

WALTER
(squinting)
Coincidence?

ISAAC
(shaking his head)
Where I come from, no such thing.

He rises, pacing the perimeter of their firelight. Pam grits her teeth as Chico scratches at her leg for some meat.

PAM
(eyes widening with realization)
What if they're, somehow, mixed in with them?

WALTER
(incredulous)
You sayin we got monsters mixed in with our herd?

Cassie, her face reflects fear, drops her utensils. Isaac nods. Mo's mouth drops open. Kai and son's eyes are wide in disbelief. Spike is quietly clanging two rocks together.

ISAAC
Perfect disguise. Keep your food source as close as possible.

PAM
(excited now)
We could test them. Real cattle have predictable behaviors.

Isaac stares down at the ground then looks at Pam and London.

ISAAC
Hay. Cattle can't resist fresh hay after weeks on trail grass.

PAM
But the meat eaters wouldn't care about hay.

London snaps his fingers.

LONDON
 (approaching with a fresh
 plate)
 Like catching a Royal British rat.

The others turn to him, confused.

LONDON (CONT'D)
 (grinning)
 British Rats are smart – peanut
 butter bait on a "humane" trap and
 they lick it clean off. No- we need
 an old-fashioned snap trap. Kill
 the British Rats proper.

London mimics a snapping motion with his free hand, then
 LAUGHS at his own analogy.

Isaac sniffs the air multiple times and then holds up his
 right hand.

ISAAC
 You smell that? We might have a
 chance to catch multiple British
 Rats London.

London smiles.

The conversation halts as a distant RUMBLING and CREAKING now
 draws their attention. From around a bend in the trail comes
 an unexpected sight – a procession of brightly painted
 wagons.

HECTOR'S TRAVELING CIRCUS caravan rolls toward them, the lead
 wagon emblazoned with faded but flamboyant lettering. Most
 notable among the caravan are two massive iron-barred cages
 mounted on reinforced wagon beds. Both cages marked Tiger
 stand empty, their entrance doors hanging open.

Isaac watches the approaching circus then turns to Pam, whose
 expression transforms from concentration to sudden
 inspiration. She looks at London, whose hand unconsciously
 moves to the bump on his arm. London glances at Mo, who
 merely furrows his brow, clearly missing what the others have
 grasped.

PAM
 (voice low with
 excitement)
 Ohhh tiger cages...

Isaac smiles at Pam. Behind them, the tar pits continue to
 smoke and bubble.

EXT. OPEN FIELD - DUSK

The sun bleeds crimson across the horizon across a field dusted with fresh snow. Ice particles glitter on every surface, transforming the ordinary landscape.

Scattered across the open expanse, massive hay bales from the circus sit partially split open, their golden contents spilling onto the snow-whitened ground. The main cattle herd crowds around this feast, jostling and snorting as they devour it.

Walter and Cassie calmly circle the feeding herd on horseback. Their eyes constantly scan the perimeter, hands never straying far from their weapons. When their paths cross, their glances linger a moment longer.

WALTER
(quietly as they pass)
Holding steady so far.

CASSIE
(nodding)
Let's hope it stays that way.

At the far edge of the field stand two enormous tiger cages. Their open doors yawning like maws. Nearby, three black Angus steers stand with unnatural stillness, showing no interest in the hay that has captivated their brethren.

Behind a distant rise, the remaining cowboys watch the scene unfold. Pam gripping a shotgun in her trembling hands with Chico beside her. Mo's fingers work prayer beads while his lips moving in silence. London shifts his weight repeatedly, anxious to see things transpire.

Only Isaac stands perfectly still. A slight nod from him sets the plan in motion.

Atop the nearest tiger cage, Spike's massive form lies in perfect camouflage despite his size. His fingers curl around a rope mechanism designed to drop the cage door at a moment's notice.

Isaac's hand dips into his saddlebag, emerging with the sack of gold coins that Cyrus initially gave him. He approaches the nearest of the cages with unhurried steps. He tosses the sack of coins into the cage and the metallic THUD of the coins hitting the cage floor carries across the silent field.

The Navajo tracker and his son follow, their moccasins leaving almost no impression in the snow. Onaconda's wide eyes take in every detail of the trap's construction, his small hand clutching a whistle hung around his neck.

His father's hand rests on his shoulder, fingers tightening imperceptibly when they pass near the suspicious cattle.

KAI
(whispered to his son)
Watch, but do not stare.

Pam enters the cage behind Isaac voice carrying unnaturally as she examines the gold sack.

PAM
(deliberately loud)
Is that ALL the money from the
cattle drive?

The three Angus steers shift slightly. Mo follows with theatrical religiosity, arms raised toward heaven as he recites biblical warnings against greed.

MO
"The love of money is the root of
all evil." First Timothy, chapter
six.

London questions the safety of the gold.

LONDON
You think it's safe to leave all
that money in there?

Isaac's response is nothing more than a smile and a confident nod. His eyes, however, catch a flicker of movement among the trees that border the field. A shadow shifts against shadow, too deliberate to be wind or wildlife. His hand makes a nearly imperceptible gesture to the others as he backs out of the cage, his boot prints now leading away from the golden bait. Isaac sniffs the air.

ISAAC
Looks like our first British Rat
has taken the bait.

The group disperses, each member moving to predetermined positions as if simply continuing camp preparations. Mo builds a fire. Pam unpacks. London tends to the horses, positioning them for quick access if needed. Cassie and Walter tend to the herd along with Kai on horseback as his son collects wood for the fire on foot.

Within the shadowed tree line, Deveroux crouches behind a gnarled oak, his breath controlled. The pearl-handled revolver in his grip. Beside him, Gerald's eyes narrow as he holds his own weapon at the ready.

GERALD
(barely audible)
The gold or the boy first?

DEVEROUX
(with cruel certainty)
Always take what they value most.

They exchange a single nod.

The clearing falls quiet save for the distant sounds of the feeding cattle. Onacona wanders near the edge of the trees, absorbed in collecting twigs for the campfire and tooting his whistle.

Deveroux's patience shatters. He explodes from his hiding place, covering the distance to the boy in three long strides. His hand closes around Onacona's turquoise necklace, yanking the child off his feet. The boy's small hands fly to his throat as the necklace cuts into his windpipe, legs kicking futilely. His tooting turns loud and frantic.

The pearl-handled revolver rises in Deveroux's other hand, the hammer CLICKING as he presses the barrel against Onacona's temple.

Twenty yards away, Isaac freezes mid-motion, his hand hovering above his own weapon. The Navajo tracker's fingers curl around his knife handle. The others instinctively reach for weapons before halting at Isaac's subtle head shake.

Deveroux's voice carries across the clearing, the only human sound in the gathering twilight.

DEVEROUX (CONT'D)
I ain't got a problem splattering
this little savage's brains all
over this ground, Isaac.

ISAAC
(with deadly calm)
Best think carefully about your
next move Deveroux.

The three Angus steers turn as one toward the commotion, their heads lowering in perfect unison.

EXT. OPEN FIELD - DUSK

Isaac scans the three Angus cattle isolated from the main herd. Their black hides absorbing the fading light while their eyes reflect it with unnatural intensity.

Deveroux tightens his grip on the Navajo boy's necklace, twisting the turquoise beads until they dig into flesh. The gun barrel presses harder against Onacona's temple, leaving a circular indentation. The boy's face remains stoic despite the visible pain, eyes locked with his father's across the clearing.

ISAAC

What do you want, Deveroux?

Gerald steps forward, boots crushing the thin layer of snow. Sweat beads on his forehead, his gun hand trembling.

GERALD

(shouting)

You know what he wants!!

Deveroux's face darkens. He turns his head toward Gerald while maintaining his grip on the boy.

DEVEROUX

Now you know I don't need someone speaking for me, especially not some nig-

ISAAC

(cutting him off)

Now we don't need to be rude to each other here. Deveroux, what do YOU want?

The ground beneath them HISSES as steam escapes from dozens of small fissures.

Deveroux nods, waving his pearl-handled revolver toward the tiger cage.

DEVEROUX

I want that gold you left in the cage, Isaac. You bastards done killed all my men.

Mo's lips move in silent prayer before he speaks.

MO

"The wicked shall fall by his own wickedness."

Pam stands rigidly beside a smoldering fissure, the heat distorting the air around her. Her face contorts with naked disgust. Chico is on his leather leash beside her growling.

PAM

Well, we apologize for ruining your
cattle rustling.

London hawks a glob of tobacco-stained saliva onto the
ground, the moisture SIZZLING as it hits a hot spot in the
earth.

LONDON

You're gonna get yours, Frenchie.

Deveroux's lips pull back in a grin that exposes tobacco-
stained teeth. The gun barrel twists against Onacona's
temple, drawing a wince from the child.

DEVEROUX

The boy for the gold.

Gerald nods enthusiastically, eyes fixed on the sack visible
inside the cage. Isaac looks at Kai who nods once, Isaac
looks at each of the others and they all nod in agreement.

ISAAC

(addressing Deveroux)

Your terms are acceptable. The gold
is yours.

Deveroux points his gun at Gerald, then gestures toward the
tiger cage twenty yards away. Gerald's expression shifts to
confusion, finger pointing at his own chest.

DEVEROUX

Yes, you, you idiot. I have to stay
out here and make sure they don't
TRY anything.

Gerald hesitates, then moves toward the cage. His path takes
him across a section of ground marked by patches of smoking
grass. Steam rises around his boots with each step, dampening
his pant legs.

Pam's eyes shift between Gerald and the distant figures of
Cassie and Walter, who remain vigilant with the main herd.

PAM

Mind your step there, Gerald.

Gerald doesn't look down, his attention fixed on the gold
sack.

GERALD

Mind your business, bitch!

His next step lands in a smoking patch of ground that appears solid but isn't. The earth gives way beneath him with a wet SQUELCH. His leg plunges knee-deep into scalding mud that immediately hardens around the limb, trapping him.

Gerald yanks at his captured leg. The limb separates at mid-thigh with a sickening TEAR. Where flesh meets volcanic earth, skin blackens and peels away, exposing bone that crumbles like charcoal. The stench of burning meat fills the air.

GERALD (CONT'D)
(high-pitched scream)
JESUS CHRIST! MY LEG! MY LEG!

The ground beneath Gerald liquefies completely. He drops to his remaining knee, then pitches forward as a sinkhole forms. Molten earth bubbles up around him, consuming cloth and flesh with equal voracity. His skin darkens to black then glows cherry-red where it contacts the molten ground.

Deveroux watches in horror, gun hand dropping slightly. His face drains of color as Gerald reaches toward him, fingers already charred to bone.

GERALD (CONT'D)
(voice gurgling)
Help... me...

Kai seizes the moment. His horse launches forward from behind a stand of scrub brush, covering the distance to Deveroux in three powerful strides. The massive hunting knife in Kai's hand plunges into Deveroux's left shoulder.

The blade strikes with enough force to sever tendons. Deveroux's arm goes limp instantly, fingers releasing both gun and child. His scream of pain merges with Gerald's death cries.

Kai scoops Onacona from the ground without slowing, depositing the boy on the horse's saddle in front of him. The animal wheels around, carrying both to safety. Deveroux, wincing in pain, picks up his gun.

Gerald's body continues to sink, the process of carbonization transforming him. His outstretched hand is the last part visible before the earth swallows him completely.

Deveroux stumbles backward, clutching his wounded shoulder. Blood seeps between his fingers, soaking his shirt sleeve. His eyes dart between the dead man and the gold sack. He raises his gun toward Isaac.

DEVEROUX
(through gritted teeth)
You're gonna get it for me now.

The three Angus cattle shift position in unison.

EXT. OPEN FIELD - DUSK

Isaac raises his hands slowly, palms open toward Deveroux. His movements telegraph surrender while his eyes catalog escape routes, weapons within reach, distances between threats. He steps forward toward the tiger cage.

The ground between Isaac and the cage now resembles a battlefield. Dozens of fissures split the earth, some hairline cracks leaking wisps of steam, others gaping holes bubbling with tar-black liquid. Patches of grass smoke without visible flame, marking spots where the crust has thinned to dangerous levels.

Isaac places each boot step carefully, testing his weight before committing to each step.

Twenty yards away, Pam shakes her head and looks at Mo who reciprocates worry on his face. Chico barks at Deveroux as he strains at the leash.

PAM
(yelling)
I smell it now. I can smell your
cheap cologne from here. The same
cologne I smelled the day Santiago
was executed.

Deveroux fires Pam a dirty look.

DEVEROUX
Santiago was too good for us, too
good for stealing cattle.
Sanctimonious prick, he got what
was coming to him. I should have
killed his dog too.

Pam's eyes open wide with tears in her eyes.

PAM
(angry)
He was my fiancé you bastard. God
is going to fix you.

Mo stands beside her and places his hand on her shoulder. Pam looks at Mo gratefully.

Deveroux looks at her and smiles devilishly.

MO

(he whispers)

God help us all. Everything will be alright.

The tiger cage looms larger as Isaac approaches. Iron bars three inches thick form a prison. The open door, ready to swing shut at the pull of a hidden rope. Inside, the gold sack invitingly sits.

Isaac stops at the threshold and Deveroux catches up. His boot toe lands on solid ground while his heel hangs over a crack seeping sulfurous vapor. Behind him, Deveroux's breathing comes fast and shallow.

The pearl-handled revolver forcefully jabs between Isaac's shoulder blades. The barrel leaves an oil-black circle on Isaac's coat with gunpowder residue.

DEVEROUX

(voice tight with pain)

Now go get me my God damn money!

Blood continues to seep from Deveroux's shoulder wound, the dark stain spreading across his shirt. His injured arm hangs useless at his side while functional fingers white-knuckle the gun grip. Sweat and dirt streak his face.

Fifty yards away, Kai holds Onacona secure on their horse. The boy's small hand rises to his mouth, fingers closing around the whistle hanging from his neck.

Onacona's chest expands as he draws breath, cheeks puffing before he blows into the whistle. The first sound emerges soft, barely audible above the hissing ground. The second breath produces a louder note, carrying across the field.

Deveroux's head snaps toward the sound, face contorting with annoyance. The gun barrel digs deeper into Isaac's back as his attention splits. Chico's leash breaks and he runs in a beeline for Deveroux.

DEVEROUX (CONT'D)

(snarling)

Shut that brat up before I-

His threat dissolves as Onacona fills his lungs completely, forcing air through the whistle with every ounce of strength his small body possesses. Chico arrives and attacks Deveroux's testicles with his small but sharp teeth. Deveroux screams.

DEVEROUX (CONT'D)
Une horreur sur pattes

Deveroux breaks Chico's grip and kicks the dog a great distance away. Chico lands with a thump and a whimper.

PAM
CHICO!!!!

Pam runs over to Chico and scoops him up and heads back to Mo.

Oaconda's whistle sound finally hits the three questionable Angus cattle. Their heads jerk upward in unison, eyes wide and rolling. Muscle spasms race visibly beneath their hides, creating ripple patterns. Their legs lock in rigid extension, forcing their bodies upward into an impossible posture. Muscles twitch and spasm beneath the skin. Bones crack audibly as they realign into new configurations.

The first steer's spine straightens with a series of sharp POPS. Front legs lengthen while hooves split open, revealing jointed appendages more akin to fingers. Its neck extends, skull reshaping with wet, grinding sounds as the muzzle shortens and widens. The jaw dislocates.

The second steer's transformation follows seconds later. Its hide splits along the spine, opening like a seam to reveal glistening, translucent tissue beneath. Steam rises from the exposed inner surface, from the rapid oxidation of fluids never meant for open air. The creature's eyes bulge, then sink, then relocate higher on the enlarging skull.

The third completes the trio, its chest cavity expanding with rapid pulses. Ribs crack outward, repositioning for a bipedal stance. The tail withdraws into the body while new protrusions extend from shoulder blades.

All three rise onto hind legs in unison. Their forms now stand eight feet tall. The borrowed skin hangs loosely in places while stretching tight to breaking in others. Their faces retain just enough bovine features to make their humanlike elements more disturbing.

Pam stands frozen twenty yards away. Her face drains of color, lips barely moving as she speaks.

PAM (CONT'D)
(barely audible)
Mother of God...

Deveroux remains fixed in place, gun still pressed against Isaac's back but pressure lessening as shock overtakes him.

His eyes widen to perfect circles, jaw dropping as comprehension battles with denial. Isaac jumps aside.

DEVEROUX

(shouting)

What in the FUCK is this ?!?
Merde!!

The nearest cryptid pivots toward the sound with blinding speed. One elongated arm extends, fingers transforming into curved talons as it swings.

The strike connects with Deveroux's neck, claws slicing through skin, muscle, and vertebrae with equal ease. No blood sprays initially - the cut so clean and quick that vessels momentarily maintain their integrity.

Deveroux's head decapitates. For a split second, his face retains animation, eyes blinking once in incomprehension. His body remains standing, heart pumping two more beats before his body drops to the ground.

The head falls, bouncing once on the hard ground towards Pam and Mo before rolling toward a smoking fissure in the earth. It comes to rest atop a patch of grass. Its vacant stare looks at Pam who turns her head from the horror. The weight proves too much for the thin crust.

The ground gives way beneath Deveroux's severed head. Bright orange magma surges upward, engulfing the skull instantly. Bone carbonizes on contact. The eye sockets fill with liquid fire, creating a grotesque jack-o'-lantern effect for the second before the entire structure collapses.

The sinkhole expands rapidly, unstable earth crumbling inward. Deveroux's headless body topples backward, landing across the widening pit. The corpse slides downward feet-first, clothing igniting before flesh begins to bubble. Arms flail from heat contraction of muscles.

Within seconds, the body disappears entirely, consumed by the earth's molten core. Only a blackened patch of ground.

The cryptids pay no attention to this destruction. Their focus locks onto the living prey before them - Isaac standing at the tiger cage entrance.

A creature takes its first steps on new legs, movements becoming more fluid with each second as they adapt to their transformed bodies. Their heads turn in unison toward Isaac.

The whistle continues to sound from Onacona's lips, its pitch rising until it becomes almost inaudible to human ears.

The monsters react to this upper register, their movements becoming more aggressive, less controlled - as if the sound pushes them toward frenzy.

EXT. OPEN FIELD - NIGHT

Isaac draws his revolver in one fluid motion. The barrel aligns with the nearest cryptid's chest. He fires six rounds in rapid succession, the BANG-BANG-BANG echoing across the field.

The creature stands fully revealed now. Its body resembles a hairless albino gorilla, unnaturally pale skin stretched over powerful muscle. Long arms hang below its knees, each hand tipped with curved claws that catch the moonlight like polished bone. Its mouth - a cavernous opening that splits its face, filled with row upon row of teeth arranged like a shark's. It lets out a blood curdling SCREAM.

Bullets strike the creature's torso, punching through the pale hide. Black ichor sprays from the wounds instead of blood. The impacts slow the cryptid but fails to stop it.

Isaac backs toward the tiger cage, boots sliding on the uneven ground. His shoulders brush against the iron bars as he maintains focus on the advancing creature. His left hand instinctively reloads his empty pistol while he gauges distance.

The cryptid's massive jaws open wider, revealing more rows of teeth deeper in its throat. Its nostrils flare, taking in Isaac's scent. A low, rattling HISS emerges from its chest.

Isaac stumbles backward through the cage entrance. His boot heel catches on the uneven floor, sending him sprawling onto his back. He recovers quickly, pushing himself up with one hand while the other hand draws a second pistol from an ankle holster.

His eyes dart upward to the cage ceiling, spotting the camouflaged trapdoor and a peep hole. A barely perceptible nod confirms the plan still holds. Isaac holsters both weapons, hands empty as he reaches the back of the cage. The gold lies at his feet, bait forgotten in the face of larger prey. The creature walks slowly into the cage slowly. Its massive form stooping beneath the ceiling, temporarily limiting its mobility.

ISAAC
(taunting)
Come on then. Let's finish this.

The cryptid lunges forward. The long arms drag along the ground, claws leaving deep scratches in the metal floor. Its pale skin seems to glow faintly in the darkness of the cage.

Isaac crouches, muscles tensing. The creature advances step by step, viscous drool dripping from its jaws onto the cage floor where it sizzles like acid. When it reaches the center of the cage, Isaac explodes upward, jumping with both arms stretched toward the ceiling.

Spike's massive hands punch through the trapdoor, grabbing Isaac's outstretched wrists. His biceps bulge as he heaves Isaac upward. Isaac's body disappears through the opening just as the cryptid lunges forward.

Pam and Mo rush the cage door from positions on either side. Their shoulders hit the iron bars simultaneously, slamming the door shut with a metallic CLANG. The lock mechanism engages automatically, securing the creature inside.

The cryptid hurls itself against the bars, testing their strength. The entire cage rocks but holds firm. The creature HOWLS - a sound that seems to emanate from its multiple throats simultaneously, vibrating the metal itself with physical force.

PAM
(breathless)
One down.

The remaining two cryptids pivot with synchronized movement, abandoning their trapped companion. Their hairless heads swivel toward Pam and Mo. The larger of the pair charges toward them in a combination of bipedal running and knuckle-walking that gives it uncanny speed.

London gallops into the fray, his horse's hooves kicking up divots of scorched earth. He leans from the saddle, arm extended toward Pam. She grabs his forearm, allowing herself to be swept upward onto the horse behind him. Mo remains exposed, Bible clutched in one hand like a shield, his hands trembling in fear.

MO
Yea, though I walk through the
valley of the shadow of death, I
will fear no evil....

The second cryptid lunges for London's horse but misjudges its step. Its right leg plunges knee-deep into a smoking fissure. The ground gives way completely, opening into a pit of molten earth. Flames engulf the creature from legs upward. Its pale skin blackens, then cracks, exposing internal organs that ignite.

The cryptid thrashes, trying to pull free, but succeeds only in widening the hole. Within seconds, it disappears beneath the surface, leaving only a bubbling pit of magma.

Mo stands transfixed. Firelight reflects in his eyes, giving them an almost fanatical gleam.

MO (CONT'D)
"for thou art with me; thy rod and
thy staff they comfort me."

The final cryptid turns its attention to Mo. The creature drops to all fours, circling to cut off escape routes. Its pale skin seems to absorb the moonlight.

Mo reaches inside his coat, withdrawing Mal's pistol. His hands shaking as he levels the weapon at the approaching monster.

MO (CONT'D)
Thou preparest a table before me in
the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my
cup runneth over.

Mo pulls the trigger- nothing. Mo keeps pulling the trigger, nothing, the chambers are empty.

MO (CONT'D)
Surely goodness and mercy shall
follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of
the Lord for ever.

Mo swallows his pride as tears come to his eyes.

MO (CONT'D)
Heavenly Father, can you hear me?

The cryptid tenses to spring, its elongated spine flexing like a drawn bow. Mo drops the pistol. At that moment, two horses thunder into view. Walter and Cassie ride hard toward Mo, splitting to approach from different angles. The cryptid hesitates, its head swiveling toward the new threats.

It chooses Walter, changing direction with frightening speed. Walter's horse rears in terror, throwing him from the saddle. He lands hard on his back, air exploding from his lungs. The gun in his hand discharges randomly into the sky.

Walter scrambles to his knees, pistol raised despite the fall. He fires repeatedly at the approaching creature, bullets striking the pale hide without effect. Brass casings rain around him as he empties the cylinder.

The cryptid ignores the gunfire, focusing instead on Walter's panicked horse. It seizes the animal with both clawed hands, ripping through flesh and bone. Walter is thrown to the ground as the horse's scream cuts through the night. Blood is everywhere.

Walter's face contorts, rage replacing fear. Tears track through the dust on his cheeks as he continues firing, each trigger pull now meeting only the empty CLICK of spent chambers as he watches the creature.

WALTER
(hoarse with emotion)
You son of a bitch!

Isaac bursts into the scene, positioning for a clear shot. He swings low in the saddle, one arm extended to scoop Mo from his exposed position. He grabs Mo's forearm who allows himself to be pulled onto the horse saddle behind him.

MO
(relieved)
Bless you Isaac.

Isaac nods without a word.

The cryptid finishes with the horse, dropping the mangled carcass. It turns toward Walter, muzzle dripping with fresh blood.

Cassie approaches from behind, leveling her shotgun at the creature's back. She fires both barrels at close range. The blast tears chunks from the cryptid's pale hide, forcing it to one knee. Unlike regular bullets, the shotgun's spread causes enough damage to temporarily disable it.

The creature recovers quickly, spinning toward this new threat. Cassie's horse panics, nearly unseating her as it skitters sideways.

Isaac deposits Mo at the edge of the clearing and dismounts, revolver raised. He takes careful aim and fires a single shot that strikes the cryptid's left eye. The precise shot penetrates deeper than the body shots, reaching whatever passes for a brain. It HOWLS in pain, staggering backward.

Its foot lands near a bubbling smoking patch of ground. The creature fails to notice, focused on its injury.

CASSIE
(shouting)
Walter!

She tosses her second shotgun toward him. Walter looks up, momentarily confused. His eyes clear as he spots the weapon arcing through the air. He catches it.

Walter doesn't aim at the cryptid. Instead, he points the shotgun at the ground beneath its feet and pulls both triggers. The blast tears through the thin crust of earth, exposing the molten layer beneath. Superheated mud and rock spray upward, coating the cryptid's legs.

The creature's pale flesh sizzles on contact, blackening instantly. It loses balance, tipping toward the widening hole. One leg plunges into the molten earth, instantly cauterized at the knee. The cryptid claws at solid ground with its long arms, trying to prevent its full descent.

Cassie guides her horse alongside Walter. He grabs her extended arm, swinging up behind her with a grunt of pain. They ride as the ground continues to crumble.

The cryptid's movement widens the hole further. Its eyes reflect the infernal glow from below from the heat cooking it from below. The creature's spine arches as its lower body melts away. A final inhuman SHRIEK cuts off abruptly as its head disappears beneath the surface.

The bubbling pit remains for several seconds before cooling, a black crust forming over the liquid earth. Steam rises from the surface in diminishing clouds until only a dark scar remains.

ISAAC
(addressing Cassie and
Walter)
You two go mind the steer!

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

The captured cryptid paces the tiger cage in tight circles, its clawed feet scraping against the metal floor.

The creature stops suddenly. Its head tilts, examining the bars. Muscles bunch beneath hairless skin as it tests its weight against one side of the cage. The metal groans but holds.

Fifty yards away, London, Mo, and Pam catch their breath as Kai and his son watch from a farther distance.

Pam reloads her shotgun. Mo reloads Mal's pistol, his Bible tucked into his belt, lips moving in silent prayer of thanks. London scans the field for more immediate threats reloading as Isaac and Spike do the same.

None of them notice the change in the caged cryptid's behavior.

The creature grips two adjacent bars with its elongated hands. Claws wrap completely around the iron, digging into the metal itself. Its shoulders hunch forward, spine straightening as it applies pressure. The bars bend outward a fraction of an inch. It adjusts its grip, moving hands higher.

The bars separate with a metallic CREAK. The gap widens inch by inch as the creature applies steady pressure.

London spins toward the sound, hand dropping to his empty holster. The blood drains from his face as he registers what's happening.

The cryptid forces its massive head through the opening, rows of teeth scraping against metal. One shoulder follows, then the other. Its pale body contorts to slip through the gap it's created.

Free from its cage, the cryptid rises to its full height. Its nostrils flare. Its head turns toward the three humans standing frozen fifty yards away.

London's eyes dart to his companions, assessing their chances. His hand pats his belt, confirming what he already knows.

LONDON
(voice tight)
Only a couple left. You?

Mo's gun shakes in his hand as he aims it at the approaching monster.

MO
(panic rising)
Only a couple!!

Pam cocks her shotgun.

PAM
Couple of shells left.

The cryptid drops to all fours, its long arms allowing it to cover ground with unnatural speed.

The ground between them offers no convenient volcanic fissures, no traps, no salvation. The three humans back away in perfect unison, their expressions shifting from exhaustion to the cold realization of approaching death.

The cryptid coils its powerful legs beneath it then lunges for the kill. Pam fires her shotgun. Mo and London fire their pistols. The monster flinches from the impact but lands a couple of feet away.

Isaac rides straight at the creature, drawing its focus away from the others, becoming the more immediate threat.

The cryptid pivots, abandoning its previous targets. It watches the approaching horse and rider. When Isaac comes within range, it explodes into motion.

The creature leaps at Isaac. Its clawed hands stretch forward, aiming to pull him from the saddle.

The impact knocks Isaac clear off his horse. His body THUDS against the hard ground, air forced from his lungs by the collision.

Isaac pushes himself upright, boots finding purchase on the uneven ground. Isaac's figure casts a long black silhouette against the enormous, distorted shadow of the approaching cryptid.

The cryptid advances slowly now. Claws extend to their full length, gleaming like polished bone.

Isaac reaches for his gun tucked in his belt. His finger squeezes the trigger. BLAM BLAM BLAM. The creature feels the pain and howls.

The firing pin falls on an empty chamber with a hollow CLICK.

ISAAC

OH SHIT.

The cryptid lunges forward at Isaac. Time seems to slow as Isaac stands his ground.

Two arrows sail from the darkness, cutting through the night air with perfect trajectories. The first pierces the cryptid's left eye, driving deep into the brain of the creature. The second strikes its throat, transecting the neck completely and emerging from the other side.

The creature's momentum carries it forward despite the fatal wounds. Its body crashes into Isaac, driving him backward to the ground. Black ichor sprays from the arrow wounds, coating Isaac's chest and face with viscous fluid.

For a moment, nothing moves. Then the cryptid's body slides sideways, limbs twitching in death spasms before falling still. Isaac remains pinned beneath its substantial weight, struggling to push the corpse off.

At the edge of the clearing stand the Navajo father and son. Kai holds his bow at his side, lowered after a successful shot. Beside him, Onacona also holds a small bow, his arrow having found the creature's eye with impossible accuracy. Kai looks down on his son with tears welling in his eyes.

In the distance, the tiger cage stands empty, its bars bent outward.

Isaac finally pushes the dead creature off his person.

EXT. CAMP - MIDNIGHT

The surviving cowboys sit in a loose circle around a campfire, weapons still within easy reach.

The once caged cryptid corpse lies twenty feet away, covered with a burlap tarp.

The Four step out of the darkness.

Cyrus approaches the covered creature, lifting one corner of the tarp with two fingers. His face lights with genuine excitement.

CYRUS
(eyes wide)
A little birdie told me it was
quite a night tonight.

Isaac and the others are surprised by his appearance. Isaac stands. Cyrus is staring at the tarp.

CYRUS (CONT'D)
We'd like to take possession of it
and the cattle of course.

ISAAC
I don't know. I have to ask the
crew.

Laughter erupts - first from Mo, then Pam, spreading like contagion until even Kai's stoic features crack with a smile.

Ezekiel watches the display without expression.

EZEKIEL
We can consider it an even exchange
then. We bumped into one of your
friends along the way here.

He gestures toward the shadows. Isaac squints.

Mal walks into the firelight slowly. A savage wound bisects his face from hairline to chin, the flesh knitted together a scar that looks only days old.

The laughter dies instantly.

PAM
(voice cracking)
Now hold on- We we buried you?!? I
cried at your funeral.

Mo's hand forms the sign of the cross. Cassie mirrors the gesture, her usually steady hands trembling visibly. Walter stares at Mal unable to blink. Kai and his son are stunned. Spike continues to stare at the fire.

London's metal plate slips from his fingers, hitting the ground with a CLANG.

LONDON
What in the...

Isaac steps forward, arms encircling Mal in a warm embrace.

ISAAC
You hungry old friend?

MAL
(with a lopsided grin)
I could eat a horse.

The words land in absolute silence. Mal's eyes dart between his companions, confusion replacing his smile, Mal sits down on a rock.

MAL (CONT'D)
What? What did I miss?

Behind them, Cyrus signals with a subtle hand gesture. Ezekiel responds immediately, leading a packhorse into the camp's perimeter. The animal's saddlebags hang heavy, leather straining against the weight within. Metal clinks against metal with each step - the unmistakable sound of coins in quantity.

Cyrus approaches Isaac again, maintaining perfect posture despite the long day.

CYRUS
Great job, people. My boss will be
very happy.

His gaze lingers on Isaac. His voice drops, intended for Isaac alone in the quiet camp.

CYRUS (CONT'D)
I will contact you soon. You do
good work.

Isaac nods.

The Four collect the cryptid's remains in a container that seems too small to hold the creature yet somehow accommodates it completely. Cyrus nods to unseen men in the darkness as Simon and Sela roll the container into the night along with the cattle.

The Four vanish into the darkness. Only the gold-laden packhorse remains, tethered to a tree at the camp's edge.

Mal stands in the firelight as the cowboys stare at him.

EXT. RIVERSIDE - DAWN

Isaac kneels by a water's edge, cupping handfuls to splash his face. Mo approaches.

MO
Clean slate?

ISAAC
Never that simple.

Mo sits on a fallen log nearby and nods.

MO
I keep thinking about Adam.

Isaac's reflection wavers in the moving water.

ISAAC
What about?

MO
The way he looked at you at the
end. No anger, no blame, just...
love.

Isaac's hand touches the water's surface, disturbing his reflection into fragments.

MO (CONT'D)
Maybe that's what forgiveness looks
like.

Isaac looks away thoughtfully.

ISAAC
From Adam, maybe.

MO
I'm not talking about Adam.

Isaac stands, water dripping from his fingers,

ISAAC
I used to think forgiveness meant
him forgetting my transgression.
Now I think it means remembering it
differently.

Mo looks curious.

MO
How so?

Isaac steps from the water.

ISAAC
Instead of remembering what I've
lost... I have to remember what
I've been given.

EXT. CATTLE DRIVE CAMP - MORNING

Kai and Onacona are already mounted on their horse. Spike is following them on his horse. The boy waves back at the cowboys, then hugs his father as they ride westward, diminishing against the horizon. Isaac dividing gold coins into equal portions. He hands out leather sacks to each member of the crew. Walter and Cassie stand close together, their shoulders touching as they accept their payment.

WALTER
We're heading east first to buy a
horse then to get married. We'll
see you soon back where we started.

Mo stows his gold on his horse, his expression conflicted as he pats the Bible in his coat pocket.

MO
"For what shall it profit a man, if
he shall gain the whole world, and
lose his own soul?" I'll travel
back with you, Isaac if that is
okay.

Isaac nods, accepting the unexpected companionship with a slight smile. London pockets his gold, the weight making his vest sag.

LONDON

Maybe I'll buy a farm. Grow
something besides trouble for a
change.

Pam secures her portion on her saddle as well. Chico standing
and wagging his tail on top.

PAM

I'm going to visit my mother Cecile
up north.

She approaches Mo still fiddling with his horses saddle and
kisses his cheek, surprising him completely.

MO

(clearing his throat)
On second thought Isaac, perhaps I
should accompany Pamela. For safety
reasons of course.

Pam giggles, neither accepting nor rejecting his offer. Isaac
turns to Mal and hands him his gold sack.

MAL

It only gets better from here,
right Isaac? I'll head back with
you.

Mo stares at Mal then at Isaac, shaking his head in
disbelief.

PAM

What about you. Isaac? What will
you do with your share?

Isaac stares at the sack of gold on his saddle.

ISAAC

(tapping his hat brim)
Ahh, you know me Pam. I go looking
for trouble.

Isaac smiles at his friend warmly and saddles up. The rest of
the cowboys do the same except for Walter and Cassie who are
already on their horse.

MO

(pausing for a moment)
God bless you Isaac. rav-lekha
sevol (You have suffered enough)

Isaac recognizes the Hebrew saying and nods.

ISAAC

I hope so my friend, I hope so.
Thank You.

Each heading in different directions as darkness falls. Their extinguished campfire giving off smoke that remains visible for miles.

EXT. NAVAJO LAND AT EDGE OF THE FOREST - NIGHT

Moonlight cuts through pine trees.

A small gray alien sprints between trees, its oversized head bobbing. It holds a weapon that pulses with blue light. The device WHINES as the alien fires.

Behind it, a cryptid pursues with speed, using its elongated arms to propel itself forward. Rows of shark teeth glint in its open mouth as it gains ground with each step.

Energy pulses strike trees, missing the predator. The weapon clicks empty. The alien stumbles, leg caught between rocks. It breaks its own limb to escape, it claws itself forward.

The cryptid descends, jaws opening impossibly wide. The forest echoes with feeding sounds.

In the darkness beyond, red eyes watch. More cryptids materialize from shadows, a dozen waiting patiently. Once the feeding finishes, they move as one towards the distant lights of human settlement.

FADE TO BLACK.

END.