Death Cloud

The Life and Times of William Buckingham

By

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All persons, incidents, and places mentioned in the story are products of the author's imagination. There are no Rocky Mountains and there were no mountain men. There are no such things as spirits or the Old One either. However…whiskey (as depicted in this tale) most definitely did exist with the described ingredients.

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Prologue

"The leaves of memory make a mournful rustle in the dark." - Longfellow

Ice cubes swirl, clinking gently against the Waterford glass as they float in the amber whiskey.

He has been listening to the conversation, weighing in his mind whether his words would be wasted on those around him, for normally silence would be best; the story left untold.

As it had been in the past.

Yet these were trusted friends and business partners. Men of power, and men in search of the exceptional in life, whether it be material or intellectual.

Tonight, however, the glow of scotch in his veins lowered his guard, and raised his trust. A rarity for this man.

With a half smile he places his drink on the leather coaster protecting the top of an ageless oak desk. The desk's surface is already ornamented with dozens of circular stains. The coaster is tradition, for no new marks are permitted to join those created more than a hundred years earlier.

Rising from his chair he slowly circles the desk to sit upon its corner and from this perch he half raises his hand. All talk in the room ceases with the gesture, as is proper when the host wants to speak.

"Gentlemen. You speak of legends, but I speak of a man. The man is

now a memory; and memories, like autumn leaves, are scattered by the wind. Those leaves are fated to lie crumpled and ignored until the seasons cover them with a cleansing blanket of snow."

He hesitates. "With the rebirth of spring the dead leaves have vanished from the face of the earth, and likewise with time the memories from the minds of men; forgotten and without trace."

Picking up the drink, he sips the single malt and smiles. "So I speak of a forgotten man. William Buckingham."

He lowers his glass and stares at his friends. "But while he lived the life and times of William Buckingham had power. Power that shook the very earth."

"Refill your glasses, and listen to a tale. A tale of men and gods, of buckskin, black powder and sorcery." He stares deep into his drink. "Perhaps in a small part a story about the whiskey you drink tonight. A tale of William Buckingham, mountain man."

Chapter One
Song of Death

"Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live." - Norman Cousins

Dying is Saint Louis had twisted what little of his mind remained; molding it into a warped and tattered mockery of what it had been.

The final act made everything vague; reality consisted of foggy images that mixed with distant memories; floating on the horizon of his consciousness.

Reality and memory flashed like lightning, fusing, merging into fevered fantasies that served to amuse what remained of the once remarkable mind. A mind rapidly collapsing into darkness and insanity.

One of the images that flickered like a flame in the night was that of a valley. A valley that had haunted Buck through out his last years of life, but now it was no longer a distant and suppressed memory. Now it was a memory hovering over the death bed.

A memory bringing with it a feeling of dread; a feeling of standing frozen on the tracks of life while the oncoming train of death approached.

Yet even the horrifying memory of that loathsome valley was better than lying helpless, listening to the final beats of a failing heart. Lying helpless, forced to listen to a room filled with the contrite voices belonging to other borders.

Sometimes the voices spoke of his impending death.

Sometimes they spoke of the strange disfigurement that branded his face.

If the borders had been able to tear their eyes from his face, they would have noticed the scars covering his withered body, but such distraction was impossible.

The gleaming crystal orb set next to the deep blue eye stared unblinking from the pale face and pulled their souls in for judging. For most on-lookers it was not a comfortable feeling.

In the beginning, the voices made him want to scream, "I'm dying, not deaf!" With passing time even the rude observations of his morbid spectators became acceptable, for he knew the soft voices would eventually fade as he slipped into unconsciousness. Once more old memories would dance on the back of his eyelid, while each slip into darkness spurred his tired heart to race in fear that *this* was the final moment. Each awakening made his heart race in relief. A relief quickly replaced by regret.

The valley haunting Buck's memory was years in the past and miles across the nation. A nation that had been rapidly shrinking, with vile blossoms of cities that spread along vines comprised of roads, waterways and iron rails.

This valley was a place he often thought about returning to, but even in health he had realized the journey would be in vain.

But still…still it burned in his memory like a smoldering ember.

Sad, he thought, that the only journey available to him now was a journey of death. A stretch of map Buck did not want to cross, but one he knew was demanded by his unending plunge down a river of failing health.

Death cast a cold shadow across Buck's final camp, and Buck knew it to be a piss poor camp at best.

A clapboard shack - just an impoverished boarding house standing at the edge of town and eternity.

Buckingham lay on a cobbled bed constructed of rough planks. The wood crudely hammered together in what he envisioned to be the masterpiece of some unknown and drunken carpenter. Nestled inside its splintered framework was a lice infested canvas mattress. The only bedding to cover it was a moth eaten cavalry blanket that reeked of sweat, vomit and piss.

The stench from his rack held him in a tainted lover's embrace, writhing and mingling with death's odor. A smell seeping from every pore on his body.

Too tired to move Buck shed silent tears. Tears of regret that this embrace was so very different than that of his wool Hudson. Lord, a season's pelts he would gladly give to feel the itch of his old blanket. To wrap himself in its pungent smell steeped in the wood smoke from a hundred fires that had blazed under a million stars.

His table matched style and grace with his final bed. An old cottonwood stump, crudely hewn with a bucksaw and topped with scarred planks of varying length. Upon it sat a single kerosene lamp, its chimney blacked from sleepless nights of pain; the agony and nightmares kept at bay by the small, flickering yellow flame that stood guard.

Indeed, the chimney of the soot darkened lamp was in need of cleaning, but it mattered little. Buck no longer had coin to purchase the cupful of fuel required to feed the diminutive flame, and even if he had been rich, he no longer had the strength to lift such a cup.

Ah, money. The money was absent to pay for his lodging as well, but even his cold fingered landlord was not so glacial of heart to cast out a dying man. Particularly a man fading so fast. Death would be the great evictor from this property.

Except for one man, the same morbid audience who watched and waited called him Mr. Buckingham - or "that poor bastard." Not out of respect or sympathy, Buck figured, but out of regard for his dying. People seldom respect others, but they did respect death. They always have a tendency to respect that which scares the hell out of them. Buck no longer thought of himself by any baptismal name and had not for years. Only one man called him by a name he responded to and that name had followed him from his years in the mountains.

It was a heathen name. *Walks with Limp*.

The man from whose tongue this name fell, and without whose help the familiar wings of death would have carried Buck away years before, was friend and compadre. A compadre who had offered to move Buck from this hovel and into comfort months earlier. Only pride had kept Buck from taking the offer, and now he found himself cursing that arrogance. Buck was happy that his pride had not extended to refusing the god-awful whiskey his compadre was so proud of, and grateful when his friend slowly dribbled the potent liquid into his slack mouth.

In the Rockies, Buckingham had lived as a by-god, thunder'in, drinkin', fur trappin' Mountain Man.

Now he would die a derelict. A wooden plank pried from his rickety table and inscribed with the civilized name plaguing him since birth. An unwanted marker for his final resting place.

In days of old, the rocks and trees had no use of calling him by his Christian name, although they had talked to him every day. Well, perhaps not talked to him as they had his red brother, but spoken their word nonetheless. Crisp songs of wind in the mountains, the rumble of thunder in the sky - always wild and free voices. The land had known him and his heart to the fullest, and accepted him as he had accepted the wild world he loved.

Now Buck was not sure who he was, or even what he was. Existence consisted of laying in his own filth and watching a grimed view out a smudged window. Trying to think thoughts that were not too deep.

Watching the clouds gather above the skyline of roofs and chimneys brought a feeling of dread. No longer were clouds a thing of beauty. Buck shuddered and closed his tired eye.

Years before he had felt secure in what he knew. Or thought he knew. His thoughts back then had ran as deep as a spring flood in a narrow river.

Once more his heart raced as darkness poured over him. In sleep his aching muscles relaxed and his thoughts flew to a time burned on his mind, soul and body. The memory was no longer distant.

Chapter Two

Song of the Mountain Man

"Mountains appear more lofty, the nearer they are approached, but great men resemble them not in this particular." - Marguerite Blessington

The idea that the valley was holy ground - and cursed - struck Buckingham as a queer notion, but then Buck had figured out the red man had quite a few strange notions.

As dancing flames printed flickering shadows on the lodge cover after evening meals, Buck had heard many things. Things he could nod at with a smile, but not things he took to heart.

Eyes sparkled and songs flowed from a dozen lips in turn. Tales were told of how the great Thunderbird would take wing to the top of the sky and swallow the sun. At the end of the flight day would darken to night and blackness would cover the land.

Later the feathered God of Lightening would vomit the fiery ball from his ebon beak, unable to bear the burning ember inside its craw.

Voices murmured in agreement then, heads nodding, as elders took turns telling another story.

This story of a solitary warrior stalking the high country in search of game.

After a long day of walking, the man found a coyote standing alone and exposed.

As the hunter approached, the trickster would trot ahead; always staying just out of reach, always out of range of the hunter's bow.

Time passed as the hunter follows the coyote. The edge of the sun touched the horizon. Dusk is upon the warrior and to his amazement, gone is the coyote.

As the warrior turned, he discovered a young maiden of great beauty standing in the mountain clearing. A woman who offered him pleasure and companionship in the evening.

Long black hair and smiling lips brought the warrior near. Midnight eyes pulled him into the deadly sorcery.

The next day, long after the sun had risen in the east, his bleached bones were found next to the cold ashes of camp, the empty sockets of the snow-white skull staring sightless at the morning sun. All appears as if a dozen years have passed, but strangely, no animal will approach the pale skeleton.

In mournful salute, packs of coyotes gathered in the rim rocks above the onlookers to howl funeral dirges that echo between the mountain peaks. Their wailing songs be spoke the foolishness of man.

One coyote sat apart from the pack, in silence, waiting for the others to finish. It sat resplendent, with midnight eyes and crimson fangs.

This story was one of Buck's favorites and Buckingham had felt no shame as he sat with the children listening to the parables and stories that were passed down, generation to generation. It was part of being a family and Buck was proud to be part of that family.

What he didn't like, as he stood inside the jagged tree line watching the far-flung valley stretching out before him, was a nagging tickle that ran up and down his spine.

Warm wind rushed up the mountainside from the valley below, bringing with it the smell of moist earth and pine. Trees swayed, their branches beckoning him to enter the peaceful valley. The same breeze gently pushed his tangled beard back against his face in a playful caress, while the fur of his cap flattened downward, mingling with his shaggy eyebrows.

The fur was soft and retained the beauty the mountain lion had possessed in life, but Buck had paid a dear price for the bonnet. A price not measured in gold, but scars.

Before him stood a valley much as a thousand other valleys he had come across in these mountains. It had been painted on the canvas of earth, as the All Mighty always seemed to slap on His bawdy pigments. The strokes had style, beauty, and power that came from a commanding hand.

Buck wasn't a religious man, but if there was a God, He lived in these mountains.

Pines blanketed the rock studded slopes on high, while in the bottom

where water flowed; aspen flashed pale golden leaves and sang their rustling song. A song that never failed to bring a smile to his lips. The liquid gurgle of a small creek sat behind the crisp parchment sound of leaves, both tunes in harmony with each other.

From the harsh blue sky above came the sharp cawing of Father Raven.

The chill of evening had faded, leaving a neutral temperature that served to accent the heat of the sun. The warmth of the golden light made a man want to stand, eyes closed, and just exist in the moment.

Buck's eyes opened wide.

Standing with one's eyes closed wasn't a healthy pastime for a mountain man.

He shook his head and shivered, but just couldn't dislodge the damned tickle. It was an annoying critter that flitted around under his skin shirt. A skeeter that wouldn't land long enough for him to smash it.

Buckingham was thirty years of age and he reckoned and those years had not come and gone by merely trusting his eyes. If a man wanted to keep his scalp in place, he used more than the bloodshot orbs hidden beneath his fur cap.

Smell was one watchdog - even the feel of the air moving over what little exposed skin he allowed was another.

Hearing was another friend that stood by you in the day and the night. A by-god mountain man used all his senses if he wanted to see the next season.

Even then many a good man that paid attention to the world around him did not see the thaw of spring. The Rocky Mountains were harsh teachers and mistresses. They passed out the grades without emotion.

The grades were written in blood, and ranged from a passing score of life, to a dunce cap of death.

This tickle wasn't a stranger and its touch had kept him alive countless times in the past. Times when the world put a song in his heart and some greasy bastard wanted to place a lead ball in his brisket.

"No," he thought, "*it would not do to lightly dismiss the warning."*

Moving slowly he gripped the frizzen of the flintlock, easing the curved piece of metal forward.

His fingers, shattered in the past and healed in a parody of normal, held it carefully, keeping the arched iron plate from clicking against its backstop. The sound released by contact would have been small, but there

was no reason to chance the clatter might fall upon sharp ears. Sharp ears which might be listening for intruders such as himself.

Rolling his eyes downward, Buck reassured himself the small pinch of black powder was still nestled snug in the pan; a dark smidgen not caked by moisture from the air or mysteriously vanished with the wind. Just as carefully and silently he pulled the frizzen back to where the folded leaf spring held it tightly once more, trapping the vital pinch securely.

That pinch of dust was the heart of a chain of events dictating whether the rifle would roar or remain silent. Whether a man might live or die.

In the same motion, he slid his thumb across the leather wrapped flint, making sure it was clean and sharp, able to peel a sliver of metal from the frizzen in a small orange-white spark. The thumbnail sized piece of stone was held in the jaws of the hammer secure as a priceless gem in a spinster's ring. There was not a wiggle to the caramel colored rock, and Buckingham knew this was good medicine.

Something about *this* particular valley gave him the hoodoos. Buck figured that uneasy feeling held over from his last night spent in the lodges.

What bothered him about that final evening was not so much his Black Foot brothers warning against his journey to this valley to trap beaver, although they had been strong in their words that a pelt was not worth his life.

Nope.

Normally when they warned you against something, they got right riled up if you butted heads with their wishes and beliefs. No, what really wet his powder was their response when he announced he was going anyway, whether they liked it or not.

He had prepared himself for argument and for anger. He expected threats. He'd prepared himself for a rip-roar'in fight, but he had not been primed for the look of sadness in his friends' eyes.

Particularly the look in Swimming Snake's eyes. Those normally unreadable eyes were darkened with concern and resignation. Snake had turned his back and slowly stooped, exiting through the circular doorway into the night. He left no words to mark his trail and that was not like him. Snake had lectures - not sparse words - to mark almost any event in life.

Buckingham didn't kid himself the concern was about his value to the encampment. He realized that most of the tribe really didn't care he was

going, let alone where he was going. Only a small band of friends had a hankering to see him keep his topknot.

The others figured the valley would take care of itself, and if the white man insisted on the trip, then the white man could take care of himself.

They would count their ponies after he left and go on with life.

In the first light of morning the campfires lay dark and cold. Silent figures huddled around frost rimed stones, while lifeless ashes stirred under the breath of cold morning breezes. Colorful blankets shrouded the figures, warding off the chill.

Swimming Snake was present and it startled Buck that a thin coating of gray ash covered Snake's down turned face. That was when the damn tickle had started. He knew the face-of-ash was reserved for the death of a warrior. Snake was already counting him gone.

Not one set of eyes met Buck's. Even the children remained hidden behind skin walls of the lodges. People had resigned Buckingham to the shadow world already, and treated the man before them as merely a phantom who stepped briefly among the living.

Buck now realized it was at *that* moment the tickle was born. The first sensations had crawled up his backbone using the bony knobs of his spine as a ladder to race up and down.

The tickle remained even now, a long two days later. Buck moved carefully back into the tree line and sat hidden amongst shadows just below the rim of the valley.

In shadow he stayed, feeling the world around him grow warm as the sun rose higher in the sky. His butt was tight to the ground and across his lap, secure in both hands, was his rifle. His back pressed against a tree easing some of the ache it always held, while the shade in which he hid fell silently from the trees, moving slowly across rocks and ground with the journey of the sun.

In time, the shadows passed over him, theirs the only motion, until the morning sun stabbed his eyes. He squinted, but did not stir, until the need to relieve himself became overpowering.

When ignoring the pressure was no longer possible, he stood. He laughed sharply in contempt, hiked his skin shirt, pulled aside the loincloth, and pissed against a nearby tree trunk. The amber stream darkened the bark as he marked his territory.

"Caution was one thing," thought Buckingham, "*but a man could go to his maker by being unable to spit in the eye of what troubled him."*

Habit still kept his eyes darting in all directions for danger, even as his water arched to wood.

Trails were visible across the valley and were matched by trails on his side. They wandered in and out of the trees and view. Deer and elk traveled these mountains, for they were its secluded denizens. Each day, or moon filled night, they would forage to fill their bellies, then travel to water before hiding in repose. In doing so, their travel wore down the grass and packed the earth in thin pathways. To unknowing eye and weary feet, the trails seemed to wander aimlessly, the foot wide paths scoring the mountainsides.

Any mountain man worth his powder knew that if one followed them downward, they usually led to water. He also knew that in normal times, if one valued his life – and Buck was mighty partial to his – you avoided their beckoning ease, staying many paces off that inviting smoothness.

Buck rubbed his beard and plucked out a stray twig.

This did not seem a normal time. It was improbable he would cross the path of any hunting or war parties by following the trails. From what he had been told, no one except himself was brave enough – or fool enough – to stride this particular valley in the first place.

Mentally he weighed the possibility of encountering old Ephraim on the trail.

Probably not.

The tree trunks were not scarred by claws and no stumps had he found torn asunder in the search for grubs and insects.

Buck had misgivings and knew he might regret the action, but he eyed the trail again, weighing it against the tickle. The scales in his head slowly tilted in one direction.

Grunting, he shouldered his heavy wicker pack, feeling it flatten slightly against his back. He cradled his long rifle in the crook of his arm and started down the trail, muttering to himself.

"Damn horse."

This journey would have been easier on horseback, but that was just not in the cards.

His horse had gone under more than half a year earlier; during the time the grasses were getting full sprout and fresh game had been hard to come by in the encampment. The best hunters had returned to scolding wives with hands empty and their quivers full. The winter had been mild and no reason could be found for the lack of game.

One morning, after eating a meal of what little stored pemmican was left; he and Swimming Snake decided to attempt a hunt themselves. Seemed like a good idea, for Swimming Snake had an uncanny knack of knowing where critters hid – pretty much any kind of critter you wanted.

You named it and Snake took you to it. Snake had agreed to find food and felt it better his white brother came with his rifle. The rifle had greater range than the bows of the hunters.

Besides, hungry bellies and end-of-winter boredom made both men eager to see different ground.

The horses, shaggy from the loss of winter hair, awaited them. As Buck approached his mount he reached up and gently stroked its neck in a calming gesture as he had a hundred times before.

At his first touch, the animal dropped over dead.

No particular reason for it to do so except to enrage Buck and bring howls of laughter from Swimming Snake.

After that day mothers used to threaten to have Buck touch them if children misbehaved too much.

Still pissed him off when his thoughts turned to it and Buckingham continued to take it personal that the critter had expired without thought as to the predicament it left him in.

Worse, the beast had been right tough and without good flavor. Didn't even give the satisfaction of a decent meal.

Since that time Buck was forced to ride a horse from his tribe's camp when travel consisted of more than a few minutes walk.

While he owned little, his friendship with Swimming Snake went far towards making others in the tribe charitable. For this present journey none had felt obliged to lend him a pony.

Gambling was a favored activity of the red man. His return was a gamble, but no one felt the odds of his return great enough to wager a horse.

Now Buckingham carried all his worldly belongings on his back – meager little that burden – and his own two moccasin clad feet replaced the four hooves he had grown accustomed to.

While he could walk for days on end, the miles falling away beneath his feet, it pained him. His leg served as a reminder of his introduction to Swimming Snake, and the pain in it was always there, accenting each step.

In the pack, swaying abrasively on his back, rested a battered pot serving most every cooking need where the food could not be tossed onto

a stone next to open flames. A small pouch of tea, a smaller pouch of tobacco, another of salt and a handful of red seedpods consisted of most his pantry. He used the pods in small pinches to season whatever he could find to stuff his gullet.

The dried peppers would make your eyes water, your nose run, and your belly believe it was full with only a few bites. Right handy to fool one's paunch when you were starving.

A handful of jerky and a double handful of pemmican completed his victuals.

The dried meat and pemmican were gifts from Swimming Snake's mother. She felt a need to dote over someone if Snake were not available and Buck was right proud when her attention turned to him.

He smiled when he thought of the old woman. She was a figure to be reckoned with, by God; her wrinkled brown flesh like leather covered a will of steel and a heart of gold. She would have been a handful in her younger years. Still was – and he grinned broader at the remembrance of the old woman.

A mold, crucible, ladle, and a few bars of galena were packed away in the bottom – just in case – to feed his rifle. Along with the heavy ingots, a battered and slightly rusty spanner lay carelessly. Its purpose was to pull the plug from the base of the barrel. Buck had never used the spanner for such, but it served nicely as a light hammer, driving his skinning knife through the bars of lead when he needed to cut a chunk off for casting. The lead bars showed patches of shining silver where he had hewn chunks off to run balls. The silver would slowly gray with age until next it was needed.

No pistol hung from his belt, as the lock on his short weapon had broken a years earlier. It was that useless piece of metal and wood he had traded for those damn pods of the devil. He wasn't sure who had gotten the better end of the bargaining.

Setting next to all this, and taking up more than its share of space, was a ceramic jug that managed to remain intact through his travels. Crudely painted on its surface was the flaked and peeling proclamation – Kendred's Fine Whiskey. It held only a swallow or two of whiskey left over from the last rendezvous and it was a tall tale to call it 'fine.'

Even so, Buck could not throw it out regardless of the space and weight it wasted. On the other hand, no matter how tempted he was, he could not bring himself to drink the last of his fluid companion, for when gone it

would be a long and dry spell.

Knowing it was there, sloshing ever so quietly in his pack was a relief. Having the godforsaken beverage he did not need it, but when absent he knew he would grieve the loss and crave its searing taste.

Midway up the pack a battered sailcloth bag encased his traps. Not many of the metal contraptions left, but enough in number to give him slim hope for the approaching season. With luck, he could replace them next year if he managed to get to the gathering.

Atop all was his prize blanket – a white Hudson with multicolored stripes, reminiscent of the hard candy Swimming Snake was so fond of. Once, when the pack was full, the blanket had ridden strapped on the top, a colorful blossom crowning a gray wicker stem. Now it nestled nicely inside the top, forming a colorful woolen cap to his belongings.

Covering Buck's body were brain tanned skins – another gift from the old woman. A gift painstakingly cut and sewn around the fire during a cold winter. A war shirt without decoration covering him to his knees, its soft golden leather was a comfort against his skin.

Morning Star had offered to relieve its plainness with some pony beads Buck had brought to her as a present. Buckingham had been tempted, but the thought of watching Snake's mother force her aged hands to work through the pain was too much. He had talked her into making a red flannel loincloth instead. Taking less physical effort to create, it would form a barricade that kept the crawling buggies from attacking his privates too much.

The plan backfired, however, as the old woman still made him a set of buckskin leggings to protect his legs from the brush. They came from the same batch of skins that produced his shirt – and if that wasn't enough, his moccasins were cut from the dark, smoke permeated leather of an old lodge, stitched by the old woman with care and patience.

She had worked with no pattern, only the memory of having looked at his feet, never letting on to him she was preparing these gifts. Preparing them after all had gone to sleep so Buckingham would not scold her and make her stop. The soles of the glove-like shoes were thinner now, but still had a mountain and prairie of travel left in them.

Buck shook his head at the memory. The old woman had informed him at the end of her labor of the high cost she would levy for the goods, but she had never gotten around to charging him for the clothing.

Buck figured his silly grin and joy upon receiving them must have been

payment enough for her. He had spent a week pointing out to all in camp the fact that the old woman's work and craftsmanship was far superior to all the other women. He even pointed this out to the young lassies, whose nimble fingers could not match the skill that resided in the crooked nubs of Morning Star.

It might have cost him a few smiles from the maidens, but the pride in the old woman's eyes more than made up for the frowns of the young'uns.

Hanging from right shoulder, crossing left, was his possibles bag. In it lay almost everything he might need to keep his plunder and person in right decent shape. Buckingham was not sure what hid in its dark recesses anymore for it seemed like anything he needed could be found in it.

Laid over all was his powder horn, still holding almost a full pound of powder – enough to make him feel right pert.

On the left side of his grease blackened leather belt hung a small deerskin pouch with a dozen round balls, each slightly over a half inch in diameter; caliber .54 to be precise. On the right was his skinning knife in a leather sheath. The sheath was not made by the old woman and one look would tell you that. It was crudely laced with bits of wang.

Makeshift at best.

Buck's necklace was more functional than decorative, but it served to hold his pipe and a small patch knife. The pipe was a replacement for his original, this one carved from a pale green piece of soapstone; its stem formed from a stout section of reed. The stem had busted off and the pipe was shorter than it started, but it still gave a man satisfaction around the fire at night. In good times he had tobacco. In poor times he smoked a mixture of willow bark and dried waxy green leaves of kinnickinic. It gave smoke, but little satisfaction. For now he walked in the midst of luxury with his small stash of real tobacco.

While he would not admit it, Buck secretly felt that he was as handsome as a wild flower to the maidens.

"Not that a mountain man such as myself would worry about such foo-for-rah," Buck thought.

Yes sir, the old herd bull still cut a wide path – if you ignored the flattened nose and scars that decorated his body.

Buck moved vigilantly down the trail, his senses taking in everything they could. This trail would have been dangerously steep had it not zigzagged back and forth across the mountainside as it worked its way

down towards the water below.

Pine needles covered the trail making for a slippery stride. When stepped on, they acted as small rollers causing his feet to slide until the smooth soles gained purchase once more in the dirt. The needles, he noted, showed signs of displacement; the underlying dirt imprinted and disturbed by various sized marks indicating the passage of mountain animals.

At one spot on the trail where a tree had fallen across the path, bark had been ripped from the topside where hooves had scraped its coarse skin – hooves not lifted high enough to clear the natural obstruction.

The morning's light darkened as clouds slipped silently in front of the sun, only to scurry on as if they realized the insolence of their actions.

Buckingham had to admit it was a right pretty day – except for that damn tickle. It was an itch that moved when he tried to scratch it, still seeming to be an inch or two away from his grasp.

The sudden explosion of sound and movement from his right took him by surprise. His heart clenched briefly in his chest. Swinging his rifle smoothly towards the unseen danger the octagon barrel collided with a thin lodge pole pine at the precise moment his feet decided to give up their tentative hold on the slippery pine needles. His eyes watched helplessly as the blade front sight swung merrily in the sky, then his butt hit the ground hard.

The impact jarred from tailbone to teeth and was the start of a short ride – a ride lasting till Buck's down hill race was halted by another small lodge pole slamming between his out spread legs.

With the sudden stop, fire blossomed in his belly, and sparks filled his eyes; tears of pain formed instantly, blurring what was left of his vision, but the salty droplets were unable to wash away the prancing spots that raced across his eyesight, nor extinguish the fire between his legs.

Try as he might, he was unable to move from this humiliating position for precious minutes. While only measured in minutes, the pain in his groin stretched them into hours.

Instinct told him to react - to move - to protect himself, but his body didn't much give a damn what it was told.

Slowly the waves of fire subsided, and with agonizing effort he regained his feet on shaking legs. Buck did not bother to investigate the flurry of activity on the hillside that started this unexpected ordeal. If something hostile *had* been lurking, he would have known it by now.

Although taking a ball or blade in the belly would not have felt much worse. He shook his head and wiped the tears from his eyes.

"The Lord sure played a mean trick by putting them things on the outside of a man where they were banged around so much," Buck thought.

Made him think that the Lord was still secretly pissed about the apple incident in that garden.

Pulling the loincloth aside, Buck investigated for damage. He was pleased to note that nothing looked much worse for wear – no worse than normal anyway. A man had to count his blessings in situations like this.

He still counted two.

For this he was grateful.

Staggering slightly on pain bowed legs he continued the arduous drop towards the valley below. The mellow feeling that had formerly taken him was gone, in its place was a mood most foul. Woe to the creature or man who crossed his path. It was right strange how a man's demeanor could toss from caution and mellow to a cold and furious wind because of a mite of discomfort.

The sun had moved considerable by the time his feet secured his throbbing legs to the ground on the canyon bottom. The stabbing pain in his belly had subsided to a dull ache and his mind was once more able to somewhat appreciate the humor of current events.

The joy he could salvage was that some day – around a campfire and jug – he would regale other trappers with a colorful tale of his wild ride.

By the time of telling it would be bragged he slid a mile down the mountainside, over razor sharp rocks and cactus, off a cliff, into the arms of an enraged griz; only to come out grinning and a spittin' hair.

It was only right and fair the tale would improve with age. Most things did in a person's mind.

Standing on the lush grass of the bottomland, Buck's mood further improved with what he saw along the creek banks. His ever-moving eyes took in the willows growing in abundance - and that was good. Better yet, these were not just any willows.

The densely packed green stems bore slick white scars – visible evidence that teeth of beaver had severed some of their thumb thick bodies. Where there were stubs – there were dams, where there were dams – there were beaver and where there were beaver there was money. Made life right simple.

A man left the settlements to get away from people and the need for gold or wealth. Sad to say, but the same men fled to the mountains attempting to bring back the furry pelts that one could convert so readily to money.

T'were just trading one devil for another in a way. It was just giving a man a choice of how he sold his soul.

Yes, some men abandoned all trappings of civilization, including the need and greed for money.

Buckingham knew several who had forsaken the last vestiges of civilization and gone hibernant.

Mountain men choosing this path lived a life in the mountains as alone as possible, cherishing the solitude and never returning to the companionship of fellow man; be they savage or civilized. Those men became more animal than human, passing into eternity with no more impact on the world than a creature of the wild dying in the forest.

"There were worse things that could befall a man," thought Buck, but he was not sure how he wanted to die. At times he wanted the company of friends or people to ease his passing and remember him. Other days, the indignity of the final act compelled him to wish for solitude at the end. On rare occasion – generally in the company of a jug – he decided that he did not want to walk either route, just figured he would live forever and avoid the decision.

Not much chance of that.

Satisfied with his initial observation of the valley, Buck felt the need to treat himself to a day of lassitude; a reward for his pain and suffering. All would fall into place on the morrow, but for today he would indulge his lazy side - although he realized it would behoove him to set up a comfortable and secure temporary camp.

At least as comfortable and secure as that damn tickle would allow.

Buckingham would even allow himself to succumb to the urge of enjoying a large portion of the small amount of provisions he had brought in on his back. That would be a luxury, but life itself was often a luxury. Buck smiled to himself; sometimes a man had to sit back and enjoy the world around him – before he started his god-given right of conquering it.

Across the creek, a small stream joined the main body of water. The stream's width was less than half that of the main flow. On the westerly bank, where the two currents collided in a flurry of white water, a narrow triangle of ground had formed from the gradual buildup of silt and sand

sifting into slower eddies. Covering the far side, extending to the edge of the water, was a dense cloak of willows.

Beyond the willows, where the mass of interwoven branches met the mountainside, a thin stand of pine grew. The young trees stood like guards above the willows. In their midst was a solitary old growth tree.

Thoughtfully he made his way across the stream at a point where it widened dramatically, leaving the water only a foot deep. The water was cold and fast, but the temperature was not the burning cold that it would soon possess; when winter spit its icy slobber and the first ice clung to the banks.

The crossing went as he knew it would – as it had in a hundred crossings of a hundred streams.

Water swirled into his moccasins, depositing sand disturbed by his footsteps. There it gritted against the soles of his feet and ground uncomfortably between his toes. The clear and bright water crawled up the calves of his legs, leaving a sullen ache in its wake, the buckskin leggings clung wetly to his legs when he climbed onto the opposite bank.

The leggings would dry in time, but for the present it was a cold and clammy feeling Buck never enjoyed.

Standing close to them he realized the willows were so thick passage would be impossible. On the slippery grass beach, barely wide enough to stand on, he inspected the willows with a closer eye. At every turn they barred his way.

Buck briefly continued his search for passage before abandoning the notion all together. Giving in to the inevitable, he used the stream once more as a watery pathway to gain access to the interior of his new territory. His legs, just regaining their feeling, were cold once more and in the process of staggering through the chilled water he pinched his foot between two rocks on the bottom. The pain did not make it to his brain until the foot had warmed an hour later.

Mother Nature finally rewarded Buck for his effort. Towering in the center of this jungle of green he saw once more the single primordial pine. He had seen if from the other side, but not appreciated its true size; it was massive and out of place in the company of the lesser trees. The graceful branches stretched far and drooped low from their own weight. Jade tips brushed the ground in a circle around a trunk he would be unable to put his arms around.

Shedding his pack - and with a feeling of unease – his rifle, he pulled

the hawk from his belt and carefully studied the tree.

The act of laying aside his rifle was painful to his peace of mind. If given the choice of walking naked through the streets of Saint Louis or without rifle in the mountains, he knew what his decision would be.

Hell, he had been naked on city streets several times and no harm had befallen him. Normally he was given a secure (if barred) place to sleep until sober. On holidays he was even grudgingly given a meal.

Studying the tree keenly, he noticed one side of it where bottom boughs came within the span of his hand of touching a large boulder. The boulder itself was the size of a small house, with a thin crack scarring its side. Somewhere in the past it had rolled crashing and crushing from its roost above, until it came to rest here.

It was next to the boulder Buckingham would begin.

Sliding between the rock and the limbs, the hard face of the granite scraping his chest, and boughs grabbing his back he turned, dropping to his knees, and clenched a handful of sappy needles. Slowly he worked his way in a dozen feet until he reached the massive trunk.

Dirt and pine needles coated his wet leggings, the result of wallowing through the limbs on his hands and knees, but now he found himself in a living spherical cavern extending around the base of the trunk.

Using the hawk he carefully hewed selected limbs from the trunk, expanding the cavern into a home. The trimmings Buck saved, not casting them out, but using them as a carpet for his new abode.

To take them out would make obvious the fact someone had disturbed the area. In hiding them inside the tree, the only evidence of his work was a narrow tunnel leading to the outside, opening up against the immense rock where - unless one stood next to it in just the right spot – the doorway would go unnoticed.

Construction of a small fire was possible within the green walls. If care prevailed. The smoke generated from a miniature blaze could not help but disperse as it rose through the branches of the tree.

Buckingham did not kid himself.

The smell of smoke would be obvious, as would be the drifting blue haze, but the dispersal would go far in keeping his position hidden. As it was, Buck had noticed that when the sun hit the valley just right, it appeared there was already a haze over it. A faint haze. So faint one could almost think it imagination. He thought on it.

On his way into the valley, he had sniffed the wind. No smell of smoke

had come to him. Right queersome. Neither fog nor smoke. Just a haze most would not notice. He had seen it and been bothered, unable to explain its existence. It was far fainter, but reminded him of moon dogs – the gentle radiance that surrounded the lunar disc when ice crystals were forming in the night air. Many things existed in the world that he could not explain.

No sense in dwelling on them.

He grinned to himself. If Swimming Snake were here, there would be some silly assed explanation. Probably the breath of the spirits or farts from beyond.

Satisfied with his work he wiped the edge of his hawk on his damp leggings and returned to the world outside his living door – retrieved his pack and rifle – and stood straight, easing the crinks in his back.

Looking skyward, the only movement picked out by his eyes was an eagle, its wings set, gliding on air currents high above the valley. A solitary master sharing its realm with dark clouds that were building in the northeast. There was a heavy sensation in the air. Feeling a stab of envy at the sight of the bird, he pulled his belongings into the heart of the tree, cussing as a jagged stub rammed into the small of his back.

Removing the once white blanket with stripes from the pack, he spread it on the pine boughs he had carefully laid on the ground. Through trial and error – plus years of experience – he created a comfortable nest, in which the sharp points sprouting from the severed boughs did not dig into his body. A tedious task that would be rewarded with comfort.

With his head high on one point of the diamond formed by the blanket he pulled the bottom point over his feet, folded the left corner across his body, and followed it with the right.

Thus cocooned he had three layers over his feet, two his body, and one padding his weary bones from the ground beneath him.

Snuggling down he noticed the one small rock that always seemed to follow his travels. It rested happily under him, poking him between the shoulder blades. Not enough discomfort to redo all his work, but enough to be an annoyance.

If annoyances were gold then he would be a rich man indeed, he figured.

With slight unease in the back of his mind, and his rifle lying next to him, he closed his eyes and listened to the faint sound of thunder starting to roll between the mountain peaks, the flashes red behind his closed eyes when

the stark light broke through the tightly packed boughs.

Gradually the booming echoes incorporated into his dreams. Somewhere between the visions of killing and lovemaking, snow and warm sunshine, dreamless sleep folded him into its arms.

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It had waited and watched for decades.

It had existed for centuries.

Its duties were many.

Simple in nature and complex in performance it was one entity – comprised of billions of beings. Each of the individual beings was small, smaller than the flecks of dust floating in the air.

Was it alive?

Perhaps its maker could answer that question, but the makers had long since abandoned it to its station.

Would they return?

That mattered not to the watcher or the outpost.

They had their duties and those duties required performance, whether there was any to watch the watchers.

The watcher spread out over miles of rugged terrain and covered the valley from the bottomland and into the air until it almost reached the rim. With the expanse now covered, it was virtually invisible. If local eyes noticed it at all, those eyes saw a transparent fog that might glint in the sunlight at the rising of the morning sun, or when the sun set in a flare of red fire in the evening.

Normally there were no local eyes.

While the watcher might not be noticed, it noticed all – and it had noted the passage of the man descending to the bottom of its territory. A creature, bipedal – as the watcher had studied before – as it had categorized before – as it had harvested before.

No need of haste was required for examination. Creatures of this world would not flee unless danger was obvious to them.

Sometimes not even then.

There was no need for this unconscious creature to know danger loomed in the very air it breathed. It was far easier to study the subject in an artificial terrarium with no visible walls. With walls and bars, the test subject would fight to escape. Feeling secure in its freedom, the subject pursued normal habits and mannerisms. Mannerisms to be studied at

leisure. Leisure was not a prime concern to the watcher, but accuracy was.

The sacrifice of a few particles was considered necessary for an initial study. They attached themselves to the moist organs the creature used for respiration. Here the particles would monitor the actions and reactions of the subject's body.

Unnoticed, but noticing and recording all.

The particles would be expelled at completion of their duties.

A pale wisp gathered in the air above Buckingham.

Small in size, no more than the brief and tiny cloud a man might exhibit in winter when he exhaled a breath into the frigid morning air. The mist moved slowly and to an onlooker would have appeared to caress the face of the sleeping subject, but there was no onlooker.

The last creature in this valley had been studied and vivisected a dozen years before.

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When he opened his eyes again, Buckingham realized just how tired he had been. Coughing twice, his lungs felt a mite congested, but he drew in crisp air and felt his body responding to the new day.

Grunting he rose from the blanket and boughs and hunkered – taking stock of himself.

All the resident aches and pains were still there, scattered around his body. Made Buck comfortable to know he had not woken up as someone else.

The years of sloshing around in ice cold water had taken its toll on his knees and hips, he paid little heed to those aches; they were just a part of the dues one paid for a life of luxury in the high lonesome. His leg hurt at the site of an old scar, but then it always hurt there.

At its first pain in the morning he spouted his morning litany under his breath.

"Damned heathen…low life dog eating bastard…did it for my own good…bullshit," he muttered, rubbing his leg.

Movement during sleep had succeeded in dislodging his fur hat. On his second attempt he managed to snag the tawny helmet and set it atop his head once more.

Bending over to retrieve the headgear made him dizzy. He slung his possibles bag and horn over his shoulder, sheathed his knife and hawk

once more, grasped his rifle and started the crawl outside. It seemed a lot farther when stove up with the night pains.

The world greeting him was green and fresh, sparkling with blankets of dew covering everything in sight with a dusting of cool liquid diamonds. Jewels soon to be stolen by the morning sun. From the depths around the trees and willows, a transparent mist billowed and hovered a few feet above the ground. A ground fog gentling the morning and taking the rough edges off.

In the cities where Buck visited, and always abandoned, they had their own version of morning mist. It was one that was not soothing. In the cities it was smoke from the factories. Smoke that choked the life from a man and stank. Smoke from the fires of black coal.

Remaining motionless, he noted a small doe rummaging silently through the mist. It appeared as a gray-brown wraith. Grazing for a moment, it raised its head and peered fearfully around, ears tilted forward to catch the slightest sound, nose flared; attempting to catch wind of the closest predator, and with each breath, it was ready to flee.

Buckingham was hungry, but knew he needed to walk the pain out of his body first. From the looks of it, vittles were lined up at his doorstep and it wouldn't be a problem to bag his morning cuisine. No sense ordering the first item on the menu.

With wrinkled brow, he contemplated his course of action.

Being a mountain man, Buckingham spent a lot of time not knowing exactly where he was. Sure, he could reckon the directions without much trouble, but there were not much for maps in this part of the country. The only maps were drawn on the inside of your skull – then again, not knowing where one was made it hard to be lost, cuz you weren't supposed to be in any particular place. One could spend time being mightily confused, but only a flatlander would consider themselves lost.

Never seemed like a thing to get upset over to Buck – less you were in the high country during the winter.

Confused was dangerous then.

From the lip surrounding the valley he had surveyed the basic lay of the land. The valley was a drainage, not big enough to qualify as a hole. From jagged rim to jagged rim, it measured five miles across and just about twice that long. Its shape reminded him of the hourglasses he had seen on the desks of them high falutin' financiers in Saint Louie.

Also reminded him of the red warning sign nature put on the bottom of

the shiny black spider that could kill the young and elderly, or make a man wish he were dead.

In its middle where the valley nudged together like a woman wearing one of those confounded corsets, its mountainsides turned into right proper cliffs on both sides for a spell. The cliffs were not high, but higher than he cared to climb – or fall from. Buck was not sure if he could walk the dry along the edge, but he was sure the water was narrow and deep with a current to match. A slip of the foot and injury could result. The high lonesome was not a place to become injured. If you were hurt, you had two choices – crawl out or die.

Even worse medicine, his gear could become soaked or lost if he took a plunge. A broken bone had the chance of healing. An article lost in the torrent was gone forever and replacements were just a pipe dream.

Checking his rifle he thumbed the frizzen open once more and poured the tiny sum of powder from its hollow. Making sure his finger was dry; he gently wiped all traces of the black dust from it. It seemed not to have taken moisture from the night, but it was best to be sure.

Took only a second of time and a pinch of powder to set a man's mind at ease, but he knew that soon he would have to dig out his screw, pull the ball, and dump the powder charge from the barrel if he had not fired it. The charge had been setting there for several days. Probably would set for a month and still be good, but one did not want to bet his hair on it. Many a good man had died from a flash in the pan, with no shot to follow.

Making his way through the dense willows was difficult, but he had no mind to wade the cold water again this early in the morning. Yesterday the jungle of willows had stopped him. On this day he was fresh and determined. Though he tried to move quietly, it seemed that every damned willow had green hands that grabbed at him. Bark covered fingers grabbed at his rifle barrel and possibles bag. They grabbed his fur bonnet from his head. They grabbed his goat.

Buckingham knew he was just getting cantankerous in his old age. As one aged, it seemed that most everything in life fought you.

Clawing his way to the bank of the main stream, he paused. Sitting he waited, watched and listened, his mouth half-open and not breathing. Helped your smellin' some, along with your hearing, to leave yer mouth hanging slack jawed like that. It was one of the things he had learned, like not looking directly at something at night.

Nope. You looked beside it and you could see it better in the dark.

His eyes scanned the ground before him and the mountainsides beyond, not looking for anything in particular.

He watched for movement more than anything. Alternatively, anything that might just be 'out of place.' A man watched for birds flying from treetops in the distance. Might be something spooked them.

You watched for broken branches floating in the water. Something must have broken them off.

You watched the sand as the sun changed its angle over it. Shadows would show footprints of man or animal easily that way, making them stand out.

You listened for branches and twigs being snapped. There were always branches crackling, but they did not do it rhythmically in nature. Trees rubbed against each other in the wind, the sound coming from above – and it never hurt to look above either. Buckingham had learned the hard way that man was a creature of habit and seldom looked up. Buck had the lesson driven home as he lay on his back, an arrow in his leg, looking up at a red face sitting in a tree staring down on him.

His brother Swimming Snake always had been a sneaky bastard.

You listened for the frenzied chattering of squirrels. The furry woodland rats would set up a cry if any man or beast wandered past them. Less, of course, you were looking to pop one and eat it. Then they were quieter than a bunch of Crows sneaking up on your horses.

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After a half hour he felt comfortable he was alone in the valley.

Rising to full height, Buck decided to claim the valley. It was time to get down to the business of being a mountain man.

Stopping once more at the stream he knelt, and looked beneath its glistening surface. Just another mountain flow, sparkling and clear, but a might queersome. Iron pyrite gleamed at him with a golden allure. Many tin horns forked their soul over to the devil, consumed by greed, when they spied the heart stealing sparkles of yeller. Pork eaters had murdered their friends and family for a handful of sand that was worthless. It looked like gold, it glowed like gold, but it was not. Nothing but a fool's gold.

The rocks in the creek were a bit odd. All rivers and streams had stones and pebbles that were rounded and smooth. The rolling action of water grinding them together through the years did that. These were not much

different than those found in other streams, but the difference was enough to catch his eye.

Reaching into the eddy of water he pulled a handful to the surface.

These stones were rounded like most he'd seen, but more so. They seemed polished and felt oily to the touch, each almost identical in shape and color. Nothing to make him want to haul a load around with him, but they *were* a might prettier than most.

He noticed another thing as he squatted there, water dripping from his hand.

All creeks had living things in them.

Normally when you crept to the bank, you would see a fish or two – at least a couple of minnows – scurry from the area. Craw daddies would jack-knife in a puff of muddy smoke as they sought deeper water. Hellgrammites and other water bugs would cling to rocks; while their distant cousins would scurry across the surface like water walking spiders. Frogs would rest, eyes above the water, and watch, perhaps dreaming of a giant fly and a meal to end all meals.

Not here. Not in this waterway.

This was emptier than a rattlesnake's heart and Buckingham could see not a trace of life in the water.

Still and all, it didn't mean much. Maybe the frogs ate the bugs, the fish ate the frogs, and the eagle ate the fish and there weren't shit left.

Nothing to get his mind constipated over – but it did not help that tickle.

Standing, he stretched and looked around once more. It was like being in a card game where you never drew a high card.

Yes, it could happen, but it always made you feel a bit uneasy. Made a man wonder if life was on the up and up and what the next turn might bring.

Imprinted in the sandy banks of the creek prints showed life in this valley. Buck didn't remember having seen the prints the previous day.

Muddy scrapes and slides bespoke the presence of beaver and otters. Deer and elk had left their mark as they wandered the border between land and water to drink their fill.

Strange he had missed them. Wasn't like him.

He frowned for a moment over a stamping left in the mud by a bear. Bending, he studied it for a second, then smiled. The claws were curved and short. Black bear, *not old Ephraim.*

Now if it had been a griz, it would have given him pause. Buckingham

was not scared of griz, but he had a right powerful respect for silvertips. One might even say that if the two met on a trail, out of pure politeness Buckingham would give way to it – just because he had manners when it came to the old rogue mind you.

Thinking hard, Buck had to admit that most mountain men he knew had manners when it came to Ephraim. Them that did not were taught proper etiquette soon enough – if they lived through it.

From his possibles bag he tenderly pulled a small square of unbleached muslin. Brown and yellow stains covered the cloth, a promise of the delight within. Carefully unfolding it, he took the crumpled and dried leaves of tobacco and pushed them between his lip and jaw with his fingers. It was dry and flaked, gagging him, but soon the spit swelled it up and he savored the juices imparted by the brown flakes.

The sun had traveled far past overhead by the time his curiosity was satisfied, and his exploration of the valley ended for the day. Leaning wearily against a rock, he scooped his forefinger along the inside of his mouth and retrieved what was left of the tobacco.

These soggy remains he carefully placed in the dwindling sunlight, atop the rock on which he rested. The sun would dry the saliva from the brown mass, and this evening he could treat himself to a nightly smoke. It did not make the best chew, (and after chawing on it all day, not the best smoke) but then one stretched his supplies in whatever way he could.

Chapter Three

Song of Separate Paths

"Mountains cannot be surmounted, except by winding paths." - Johann Wolfgang von Goeth

High above, on the windswept edge of the valley, Swimming Snake looked down into the cursed land. He knew it was not too late to abandon this foolish idea, but he also knew his heart would not let him make the verdict to walk away. That would be a judgment of death to his brother.

This was the moment of decision.

His horse had already made its decision. There was no way Snake could coax the mount to take even one more tentative step towards the valley.

Snake reflected this horse always showed good sense, and wondered why it was he could not learn from the beast.

A few feet away the horse waited its master's choice. If he climbed onto the back of the pony he could ride back to his lodge and none would think the less of him.

Indeed most would applaud his decision as wise.

The cursed land looked the same as it had the last time Snake trespassed here with a small party of warriors. They had gathered, looking down from a clearing not far from where he now stood.

The others had been determined to journey onward. Swimming Snake had not understood, any more than he could understand the action of his white brother entering the valley.

Snake had been able to convince three of the previous party to return to the camp, not venturing further into the mouth of the waiting hell. The fourth had insisted on completing the journey.

Snake felt that he should have argued more persuasively, or at least looked upon the face of the fourth warrior harder. He could no longer remember it as well as he should and Snake had never seen that face again.

This time that would not happen – one friend lost to evil was enough.

Later the others had told of what they had seen from the rim of the valley. From their description, Snake could understand what drove them to enter the valley. He understood the driving compulsion to explore the valley. A valley of the Gods. Lush, luxuriant, teaming with game.

Swimming Snake also understood that what the others in the party saw had not been his vision of the waiting traps in the desolate hell.

Walks with Limp was his friend and brother. As much a friend as the medicine man had allowed himself for many seasons, and in truth a chance to walk with a man he could consider a brother. Walks with Limp brought him joy and amusement.

Walks with Limp was a friend who did not judge the actions of others too harshly and, although he *was* a white man, he attempted to understand and not laugh or scoff at the truths Swimming Snake repeatedly offered.

The white men, as a race, were savages Snake thought. But they had within them a quiet innocence. The white man would believe anything and shut their eyes to the reality of the world around them.

The white man worshiped their God in small buildings every seven days, and then locked the God in the building until they needed Him again. Any action was permissible in life as long as you told your God about it later and apologized. Even though they said the God already knew about the deeds.

How strange that a white man was not responsible for his actions.

It explained a lot.

Snake remembered when he first took interest in Walks with Limp. Years ago a small band of men had come into their area. As many men as the fingers on one hand. Two of the men had split off from the rest of the small band.

The warriors with Snake were dispatched to deal with the three who stayed in their camp.

Swimming Snake had skirted ahead and waited for the two men afoot. The first man he had taken in the back with an arrow. The man fell amazingly quietly and it took several steps for the other to notice.

When the remaining white man turned, Swimming Snake loosed

another arrow. This time the lower limb of his bow had been touching a wrist-thick branch of the tree Snake was sitting in. The arrow did not fly true and had taken the man in his lower leg, penetrating the muscle and lodging its stone head in the bone of the man's leg. As he fell, the man parted company with his rifle and struck his head a glancing blow on a rock.

Lying dazed on the ground he had looked Swimming Snake in the eye, smiled, and made what Snake later learned was a rude gesture.

The white man then passed out.

No fear had Swimming Snake seen in the man's eyes, and for some reason a voice told him to spare the fallen man.

Roughly carried to camp, Walks with Limp had been unceremoniously dumped in Snake's lodge. In time the wound had healed, but the arrowhead remained stuck fast deep within the leg, causing pain to his white brother. This injury bestowed the name 'Walks with Limp' upon him. Time bestowed the title brother.

The white man did not like the name given and held Snake responsible. In Snake's mind the name was not his fault, even though he had been the one who put an arrow through the invader's leg.

For a long time, the white man had showed animosity towards Snake and Snake found this confusing.

A day came when Snake had felt obligated to lighten the mood some. Knowing how slow mentally the white men were, he had shown the man a trick.

He had cleared a spot on the ground, placed the white man's hand over his and lowered his own hand to touch the earth. When he removed it, a small stone lay before them. The white man's eyes had gotten a bit bigger and the children watching had giggled.

He then put the white man's hand over his own again, and lowered his hand to cover the rock. When he pulled his hand away, a lizard was there and gone was the stone. The white man had pulled his hand back as if burnt and moved quickly away from Snake.

The children laughed.

Outside he preened with pride as the giggling children surrounded him.

"Are you not proud to have such a powerful medicine man in your midst?" he asked.

One boy answered, "That was not magic. You had the rock in your

hand."

Frowning, Snake asked him, "So you believe …but what then of the lizard?"

A girl reached out and touched the sleeve of his buckskin shirt. "You picked the rock up and the lizard you had hidden crawled down your sleeve."

Another chimed in, "Lizards do not live in rocks. There is no magic like that. Spirits live in rocks, but not lizards."

Yet another said thoughtfully, "Maybe the white man thought it possible, because lizards are always sunning themselves on rocks."

Children were so hard to fool these days, not like when Snake had been young. Moreover, the songs they now sang – he cringed.

While some people received their names through deeds of great bravery, others were given their names from things that occurred around them.

Snake was unique in his name – as befit a medicine man.

In youth he had been tagged with a childhood name. What that childhood name was is not important, but it had been a peculiar name, as befit a peculiar child.

Everyone has habits that are a bit difficult for others to understand and Snake was no different – although his habits were.

For some reason, known only to him and never shared, the young boy had found his own way to relax and meditate on the great mysteries that surrounded him.

A small rivulet of water ran by the main encampment where the lodges were set, their entrances facing the morning sun. It was too small to be a stream, but too big to just be run off from the hillsides. It was only five feet wide and one foot deep, but it moved along right smart, and its waters were always clear and cool.

On hot days Snake would strip and lower himself into the water, laying on his back with his head cradled on an old horse skull he carried everywhere. Why he carried the skull was never explained. No one ever felt the need to inquire.

As he lay comfortably in the water only two parts of his body stuck out above its surface. The tribe was not all that impressed with his solemn face staring up towards the heavens, eyes unblinking – but that swimming snake dangling downstream impressed them mightily.

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By mid afternoon of the third day Buckingham was tuckered out. He rested in the shade beneath the green willows and let the wind play over him drying the sweat from his brow and cooling his face. His mind was tired and foggy. He knew he wasn't as alert as he should be and he had difficulty remembering everything he did the day before. His belly was tight and he didn't remember eating either.

In the distance, above the rim, clouds were building and thunderheads were growing once more. That bothered him because most things in nature a person had control over. Lightning was not one of these.

Buckingham had little book learning in his life. For this he felt empty and a bit cheated when he was in the cities. Most of Buck's knowledge had been passed on to him by his mentor – LeBlanc.

When it came to lightning, however, Buckingham felt his schooling was right prime. He knew what he had observed over the years in the mountains. He had watched the blue fire crash down on trees, rocks and just about anything it took a mind to. When a man was caught in the middle of an electrical storm, it was like living inside the Old Testament that his daddy had spoke about.

Fire and brimstone.

Swimming Snake schooled him proper also, when it came to thunderbolts. Many a winter eve, sitting in Snake's lodge around the fire, he absorbed the tales offered by hushed voices over the evening meal.

The mountains pushed up into the sky, crowding it, intruding on territory not its own. The sky became angry and lashed out at the mountain peaks. Likewise the trees – particularly the tall ones – attempted to claim space that was not theirs. For this they were punished, splintered and broken, forced to bow beneath the power of the sky.

One lesson of Swimming Snake's he had not put much store in. That story was about the white man's rifles. Swimming Snake was of a mind that the boom of the rifle was too much like thunder, and for this reason Swimming Snake never used a smoke pole.

He solemnly said, when bored, the sky would take offense at the rifle and strike at it, and the man who wielded it. Just to teach a bit of humility to the offender. This part seemed a bit tall to Buckingham – until he was forced to think about it later.

During a rendezvous, Buck had been enjoying life to its fullest. Arriving at the festivities which blanketed the prairie, he had quickly converted his plews into provisions for the next year, foo-for-ah for

presents in the tribe, and credit for use at the rendezvous.

Buck realized that the price he had been given for his pelts was low. He also realized that had he bargained a bit harder – and longer – his gain would have been substantially more.

But the thirst was upon him.

Each moment that he stood and argued over the quality of his furs was a moment denying the rare sport of drinking. Almost in a panic, he had taken the offer before him and bolted from the tent.

Buckingham's first view of the whiskey wagon was not exceptionally reassuring. In a world of bright colors and banners it stood dark and unadorned. A simple wagon burdened with barrels and casks; coarsely burned into the plank side the information – "Kendred Sterling Whiskey."

Oil lamps were spiked to the side, their chimneys cracked and blackened, waiting in anticipation of nighttime customers. A lure to pull moths to the flame. Moths who had worked so long and hard for this moment.

Two other whiskey wagons stood near, both doing brisk trade in their fiery beverage; drunken mountain men surrounding them. Some men he recognized, some he did not. This particular wagon, however, had no lines of thirsty patrons. Two men were visible, one leaning against the wagon (grasping a rapidly swelling arm) groaning and rocking in pain; the second – face down – a few paces from the tongue of the wagon.

Giving careful consideration, Buck stroked his beard, contemplating the other two wagons with the impatient customers jostling and pushing in the long lines. The thirst was strong and it would not hurt to investigate the path less traveled.

Striding forward, he stepped carefully over the man lying motionless on the ground. In passing Buck noted that the man was not breathing.

Could be a coincidence, not having anything to do with the quality of whiskey provided by this vendor. Five paces from the wagon a voice called out to him.

"Aye and good morning, sar. Can I be of assistance to ye?"

Looking around, Buckingham spotted the man sitting quietly amongst the barrels in the bed of the wagon.

Buck stopped. "A prime morning to you. Do you have whiskey?" he asked, pulling his sleeve across his parched mouth.

"Uh-yep. Whiskey I have, but I am not open for business at this time." The man carefully lifted a round cover from a barrel, peered inside and

hastily slammed the cover back down.

"Be about thirty minutes, I recon." He smiled brightly at Buckingham. "It ain't rightly whiskey yet, but it will be shortly."

Buck was confused. The man appeared sane and rational, dressed in clean, but mended clothing. The vendor had medium length dark hair and a set of pince-nez glasses resting atop his nose. He did not look like what one would expect of a store clerk in the east, nor did he quite look like a man used to spending his time in the mountains.

"Perhaps a figure taking sabbatical from an asylum," thought Buck. As Buckingham stood, turning his eyes on the other two wagons, the whiskey trader jumped lightly from the wagon.

"Now, as ye may have noted, I am not accosted by a multitude of patrons at this moment. If ye have a powerful thirst, we can sit a spell and taste of me personal jug. After that, this vintage of fine whiskey should be completed." He moved farther down from the man writhing in pain and held aloft a jug in one hand, patting the ground with his other.

In one graceful motion Buck sank cross legged to the ground next to the man, his eyes stuck on the jug like a starving dog would watch a bone.

The man handed the jug to Buck and turned to retrieve two tin cups from the wagon. Turning back he found the mountain man drinking deeply from the jug. Shuddering, he tossed one cup over his shoulder where it rattled noisily into the dark shadows of the wagon bed.

Remembering his manners, Buckingham handed the jug back to the man. The trader carefully decanted a small amount into his own cup and handed the jug back, returning it to the grasp of the thirsty mountain man. Taking another pull from the jug, Buck sat it on the ground between them and looked back to the vendor.

"I don't rightly wish to be too inquisitive, but I notice our companions," Buck gestured towards the other two mountain men, "appear to be in some distress."

"Aye, you notice correctly. Me name be Kendred. I assure you that my whiskey was not to blame for their conditions." He looked at the two men, now both on the ground. The man who had been grasping his arm was now quiet and appeared to be sleeping.

"Well, perhaps inadvertently it was, but they were given fair warning." Kendred took a small sip from his cup and placed it on a level spoke of the wagon wheel he was leaning back against.

"In the old country, me family made a verra fine whiskey. A good and

true Scot's Whiskey. Here," he shrugged, "one must settle for a lesser quality. Aye, here it is but swill compared to the old sod's drink."

Kendred reached out, grabbed Buck's sleeve and looked him in the eye. The strength in the grasp surprised Buckingham.

"Do ye know what I have been reduced to in this heathen land? Do ye have any concept?"

Buckingham simply shook his head no. Kendred rubbed his hands together and warmed to his tale.

"On the far side of the Mississippi I took my last savings and made purchase of this decrepit wagon against which we now rest. Then, through the last of my cash and promises I must fulfill, I obtained twenty barrels. Five of them filled with straight grain alcohol and the rest empty."

With a tear in his eye, Kendred stopped, took another small sip, and continued. Buck wasn't sure if the tear was from emotion or the godforsaken liquid they were drinking.

"The trip was fearful. At one time I thought that these red men were savages, but after the company of the ruffians and hooligans I traveled with, I find the red man to be well mannered and of superior social and moral quality."

Buck nodded silently in agreement, dividing his attention between whiskey and host.

"When I arrived here, I distributed the alcohol evenly amongst the barrels and filled them almost to the top with fresh spring water." Kendred hesitated. "Aye, at least that was me intent. I could only obtain the muddy discolored water of the misbegotten stream that flows through this camp. Taking the last of me tobacco, I carefully dispensed it into all the barrels." He cocked his head and reflected for a moment. "It gives the liquid a beautiful golden color, although it does give it a wee bit of an off taste.

For a cupful of the straight alcohol, I had traded for a bucket of these things." Kendred pointed to a wooden hopper filled with dried red pepper pods. "Seems people actually consider them edible." He handed one to Buck and turned to his cup for another sip. "Be careful that ye…oh my…."

While it looked a bit like some kind of jerky, when Buck had bitten half of it off and started chewing he found it was like trying to eat glowing coals from a campfire.

Kendred shook his finger at Buckingham.

"Ye should only take a pinch of it and crush it between your fingers and sprinkle it on your meal." He pulled his finger back and looked at it. "Aye, and then do not put those fingers near yer eyes for a couple days." He thought, then added. "Or near yer privates."

Buck sat, tears streaming from his eyes, spitting fragments of the pepper and snot running from his nose as he gasped for air. Kendred continued his lecture.

"I take a handful of these and place them into each barrel. The other traders advised me to make two more additions. I add in several scoops of molasses to give it some sweet and further the color."

Kendred stopped once more to peer at the motionless men.

"And the final ingredient I am not sure was required, but they told me to place a couple rattlesnake heads into the barrels – to give it the bite that you mountain men seem to expect." He sighed.

Buckingham nodded his head. The recipe sounded about right to him.

"Took me most of two days to gather enough serpents to do the job. Verra dangerous, I might add, but I did so, so not to disappoint my customers." Kendred shook his head and spoke in soft admission.

"I am not a hardened man, and I admit that my heart is a mite more tender than most. I just could not bring myself to kill the wee poor serpents, behead them and toss them in."

Kendred looked again at the motionless men.

"I opened the lids and placed the wee wigglies into the whiskey alive."

Raising his hands to the heavens Kendred asked, "How were I to know that the critters could swim, and swim so well for so long?"

Pointing to the two corpses Kendred said in explanation, "I told them it were not ready yet, but would they believe me? *No!* They were brutes, forcing past me to dip their cups deep into my barrels." He paused and lifted the jug, "May I offer you another refreshing sip?"

Somewhere – about four days into it as far as he could remember – and what he could remember was not much, Buck found himself sitting with Swimming Snake.

They were planted on their butts in a clearing overlooking the lodges and wagons. The first thing Buck realized was a hellish storm was going on all around and above them. But that did not seem to matter much.

He had been drinking Kendred's whiskey steady, and the world was a blur. He did note he was not sitting on a blanket, but both were

comfortably sunk in six inches of mud, as if waiting for roots to grow.

Swimming Snake was sitting there, dignified as ever, solemn as ever, holding a large stick of hard candy in his fist, taking small bites from it. The rain was melting it, covering his hand with sticky goo.

This mystified Buckingham somewhat, but not as much as the fact Buck himself was naked. Well, not totally naked. He still had one moccasin and his fur cap. For the life of him, he could not remember what had happened to his garments, and he was more than a little afraid to ask. Snake did not seem to notice Buckingham's lack of apparel.

While he sat there trying to sort it all out, Spider Web Johnson came roaring through the mud on his horse.

Course he wasn't known as Spider Web yet, but that name was a comin'.

When Spider Web hit the center of the clearing, whooping and a hollerin', he raised his rifle to the sky.

The sky must have taken offense, because the next thing anybody knew – after the brilliant flash – was the smoking carcasses of the horse and Johnson laying there in the mud.

Swimming Snake had turned to Buck with a pleased expression, pointed to the steaming bodies with the hard candy and said, "I spoke of this."

Exceptionally pleasing to Johnson was the fact that he was not dead. Addled and changed a mite, but still alive and kicking.

Now from his right wrist, up his arm, across his back, chest, and down his left leg, was a curious pattern of fine lines – looking essentially like a spider web.

Sometimes the lines were red and sometimes they hovered indecisively between black and blue. Overall the new decorations were pleasing, and a matter of great pride to Johnson's two wives. They would drag other women into their lodge and display him proudly; careful to point out that, as he got hot or cold the lines would change color.

The lines did not bother Johnson much, but he was becoming annoyed at his wives.

After that, Buck did take the rifle business a bit more seriously.

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Buckingham's thoughts returned to the tasks at hand. It had been a hard day, it had been a long day, and now, with satisfaction, Buck was ready to relax.

The meager supply of sets were planted and staked; nothing remained for labor in the area of trapping. He had placed his bait prim and proper, as he had so many times before, and soon he would be pulling in the pelts, scraping and stretching them.

Life would fall into a satisfying routine for the next several months. All seemed good and even the nagging tickle subsided some.

During the day, events passed that perplexed Buck. Actually the events had stymied him, causing great concern.

In the early afternoon Buck had watched a nice doe come to water and decided she would make a fitting supper; the remainder of the meat to be jerked for the uncertain future.

From where he was, she had been no more than seventy paces off. He had pulled the wiping stick from his rifle, planted one end on the ground, and used it as a monopod upon which to steady the heavy rifle. Pulling back the hammer, he squeezed the set trigger nestled inside the trigger guard. When pulled to its fullest, it set in action a mechanical series, whereby all the cogs and sears aligned, and only the slightest touch of the next trigger would fire the rifle.

When his finger touched the second trigger a gratifying 'pssst' and cloud of smoke from the pan sent a tongue of flame through the touchhole, caressing the main charge in the barrel. This ignited without hesitation and the rifle boomed, sending a cloud of smoke and linen wrapped lead ball to its target.

Now Buckingham was not the best shot in the world, but he was no slouch either. The thought of missing at this range never crossed his mind. In his mind the meat was already in the pan and his mouth was watering in anticipation. When the blue-white smoke had cleared, he strode forward to claim his vittles. To his surprise the doe was gone and upon inspection, no sign of blood wet the sand.

Buckingham blew down the barrel, pulled the plug from his horn, dumped a charge into the cylinder of carved antler hanging around his neck, and poured the measured charge down the muzzle of the rifle.

With his hand, he smacked the side of the rifle right smart to set all powder to the bottom, and from the possibles bag he pulled a small piece of linen. Sticking a corner of the wad in his mouth he let spit soak in while he rummaged in the bag once more for a galena pill.

Putting the soggy linen over the muzzle he placed the gray ball on top of the linen, drew his knife and used the handle to start the lethal package

into the barrel. With the honed blade he cut the linen flush with the muzzle, sheathed the knife and returned the rest of the linen to the pouch.

Retrieving his wiping stick from the ground, he pushed and tapped the ball and cloth to the bottom of the barrel. Eying the stick he noted his mark on the rod, indicating that the entire mess was seated as far as it could and should go.

Pleased with his efforts he replaced the stick into its thimbles on the underside of the barrel, where it slid home into the stock.

Pulling the fur cap from his head he wiped the sweat from his brow once more and frowned.

There were not any way he could have missed – but he had. He looked at the front blade and then the rear buckhorn sight. All looked right and nothing had moved or been jarred out of place. The scratch mark he had made when it was sighted still met its twin on the rear sight. He knew the deer had not moved nor had he flinched. Maybe the cloth patch holding the lead ball and conforming to the rifling had blown out or torn in its fiery rush down the barrel.

Even so, it probably would not have made the flying piece of lead miss its mark by that much.

It confounded him, but there was not much to do about it. There was always next time, and his supply of pemmican and jerky would have to suffice for the evening sup. It was a hard pill to swallow, but at least he could have a bit of tea to make his belly think it was getting a hot meal.

After retrieving a bit of food from his pack he gathered twigs and branches next to the creek and set them in a pile to build his fire. Pulling his flint, steel, and a piece of char cloth from his possibles bag, he set them down and looked for some dried grass. Finding a fine handful he set to work.

Laying the char cloth over the flint he struck hard with a C-shaped piece of iron. The spark caught on the cloth and expanded outward in a glowing orange ring. Poking the smoldering char cloth into the wad of dried grass he blew gently on the tinder.

A small amount of smoke issued from it, but did not take, no matter how tenderly and carefully he blew on it – it did not sprout the small feathers of flame he expected. He had performed this act countless times. It was more surprising for it not to work than if he had woke up in the morning to find the Queen of England under his robes.

He checked the grass. Perhaps it had been damp and he had not

noticed, but to his chagrin it was dry. Dry as his throat five months after rendezvous.

"Cannot put ball in a deer and cannot put fire in dry grass. Enough to cloud the nicest day," he muttered, but Buck was not without cunning and there was more than one way to tie a horse to a tree.

Trudging back to camp he pulled a length of rope from around his pack. Cutting four inches off the end, he grunted, retied the rope, and returned to the intended site of his campfire.

Pulling apart the three main cords that twisted together to form the main cordage, he set one down, and tossed the other two in his possibles bag. The one he had saved he pulled apart, fluffing it up into a ball of fibers as billowy as the down from a milkweed plant.

Digging out more char cloth he set ember to it, put it in the nest of rope, blew on it gently and in a few seconds was rewarded with a flare of fire. Grinning he set it on the ground, covered it with a small handful of tiny dry twigs, and felt his grin slip away when the twigs refused to smolder.

Cursing a blue streak he stood questioning the heritage of the twigs, the father of the tinder, and his own capabilities of making fire. With his leather covered foot he kicked the ill fated start of his campfire to the winds, stomped on the ground where his fire pit should have been, and stormed back to his tree.

"Fine," he bellowed to the sky. "I wanted a cold camp anyway. It matches the vittles."

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Swimming Snake was not happy. He had hurriedly planned for this journey and brought with him what he figured he needed. Now, having time to consider more carefully, he thought of a lot more things he could have brought.

Some more herbs. Some more items of power.

Perhaps a war party of ten heavily armed men.

From what he had seen already and from what he feared he would find, none of that – even the warriors – would be of any use. Carrying his bundle under his left arm, he reached up with his right, and fingered the medicine pouch around his neck. He carried no weapons as such, although he did have three Medicine items in the bundle that would serve as armaments.

He did not unwrap the bundle. The unseen eyes watching him had no

need to see what he carried, either in the bundle or in his heart. They would have to wait just as he had waited, hoping that his Brother Walks with Limp would return without having entered the valley.

That had not happened and Swimming Snake felt responsible. Yes, he had told the white man the valley was not to be entered, but the white man – all white men – were so stubborn in their ways. You could sing them the songs and warn them of the danger, and it only served to pique their interest. If you flat stated that they could not go, then they looked on it as a challenge, and would continue their actions, just to prove that no man had control over them.

Snake shook his head. He knew Walks with Limp and knew him well. Were it just other men he would be confronting, Swimming Snake would still be at home flirting with the young girls of the encampment.

Walks with Limp was a creature unlike any other Snake had met. He was perceptive in the ways of the forest and the animals. When provoked he was easily a match for any three, including the warriors of the village they both called home.

At rendezvous Snake had watched Buckingham, so drunk he could barely stand, pull a knife and dance the death dance with another; stand over the body of his enemy at the end with no regret in his eyes, and no gratification over the bloody deed.

Halfway down the valley slope Snake stopped. He could easily see through the trees around him. Each was barren and stripped. No pine needles hung from any bough and the ground itself was sterile dirt.

Neither a sprig of green could he see, nor the track of any animal other than the moccasin prints left by his brother.

Looking to the heavens he shivered. "Great Father, I know I am wrong to be treading this path. You created this ground and you destroyed this ground. I come not to take or give, but only to lead back a man. He knows not of your ways. He knows not the true legacy of the valley."

He stopped and looked around once more.

"It is clear to my heart he knows not what he is doing. Forgive him. There could be many reasons he does so. He could be filled with greed or ignorance. It could be to prove his bravery. Perhaps it is just because he is a stupid white man." He shrugged. "The last is probably the case, but he is my brother."

Snake sat and waited. He watched and waited with the rising sun, until movement in the valley rewarded his patience.

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Buckingham woke to his cold camp. His mood was not improved and while his belly was not as empty as it had been in the past it felt right cheated.

A momentary fear swept over him that he was loosing his touch. Loosing those skills that he had learned and earned at a high cost of year, blood and friends.

His eyes were gritty and his mouth was shitty, as one of his old (may he rest in peace) trapping partners used to say. Overall, he just felt worn, tired and confused. The normal aches were still there, but even they were dulled as if his body and mind were winding down. As if something was sucking the very life and vitality from his body.

It was not the lonesome either. Sometimes in the mountains a man hit a spell where the lonesome set in on him, grabbing his heart and spirit and giving a squeeze.

Nope.

It was not that. He was too fresh from the lodges for it to be that.

With slumped shoulders he hoisted his possibles and rifle, setting out for the creek. Buck prided himself in his bathing. He bathed right regular, every month or so, and sweat baths every couple of weeks. While he was afraid that it might weaken him to bath more often, he decided to chance it this time. Often, after scraping oneself off and washing, a person felt right pert. Seemed to give a man a new outlook on the world.

Swimming Snake spent most his time in the water. Never seemed to hurt him. Well, truth be told, he was an eccentric savage, but the water had not hurt him – at least not physically. Mentally? Who knew what had set the Snake's mind on the paths it followed.

With heavy footsteps he made his way to the creek. For some reason he seemed to remember something different. Something used to make his passage to the creek more difficult. He could not remember what it might have been. It seemed miles and the journey felt like it took hours. Once there he started the arduous process of removing his skins.

It took a while to adjust to having the skins off. The sunlight felt very strange against the bare skin of his back and chest. Buckingham turned and studied the creek with a slight anxiety.

Carefully he reached out one toe and touched the water. Sure he had been wading around in it the past couple days, but it did not make no mind

not to check it out again. It was cold and wet, much as he expected it to be. His toe did not fall off neither and that were good sign.

Another thing that he did not expect was the knife stabbing him in the back.

Chapter Four
Song of the Brothers

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother…" - William Shakespeare

The pain was not much, but a knife cut seldom is – at least during the fight. It would hurt like the bloody blazes later. This knife had taken him right below the shoulder blade on the left side. He did not know how much damage was done, but it had either kilt him or it hadn't. In either case he was still moving, and it was time to do something about it.

Unfortunately his rifle lay back in the direction the blade had come from. He threw himself forward into the creek where he did a watery forward somersault and came to his feet.

He whirled around to face his attacker.

"You no good, back stabbin,' sneaky low down piece of buffalo turd! Why for did you go and stab me?" He screamed at the Indian.

Swimming Snake was standing there.

In his right hand was an ornate knife with an intricately carved antler handle and long thin blade. The first half inch of blade was crimson with Buck's blood. With thumb and forefinger Snake wiped the blood from the steel, raised his hand to his face and sniffed the blood carefully. Then he frowned and touched his bloody finger to his tongue. Smiling with satisfaction he wiped his hand on his leggings.

Snake raised his hand to the white man.

"I had to be sure. I thought you were a spirit."

Pulling from behind him a wooden handled stone club he showed it to Buckingham.

"At first I was just going to smash your spirit head and set you free.

Then I thought – what if my friend and brother Walks with Limp is not a spirit. If I should release him with the medicine club and he is still of this world, then I will have been responsible for making him a spirit. I felt you might not like that, so I decided to check first."

As if lecturing a child he finished. "As you know spirits do not bleed real blood. I have spoke of this."

"And are ye satisfied that that is real blood?"

"Yes, but if you are still concerned," comforted Swimming Snake, "we can check again."

"No, damn you!"

Buck shook like a dog spraying the excess water off him. He then went about collecting his skins and putting them back on. It was obvious to Snake that Walks with Limp was in ill humor again – for some reason.

Pulling on his shirt the first words out of his mouth when his head popped through were, "What in blue blazes are ye doing here in the first place? Other than stabbin' me in the back for my own protection?"

Snake settled cross legged on the ground.

"When you left the camp I was concerned. I waited for many days hoping you would return. When you didn't I decided to come for you."

Buckingham looked at him with disbelief in his eyes. "I don't know what you have been smoking in your medicine pipe, but you had better go back to kinnic-a-nik. I have only been here a couple of days. Hardly had time to set up camp and get my sets out."

"Brother…you have been gone from the lodges for the time it takes the sun to rise and set the number of fingers on both ones hands twice."

"Now that is plumb crazy."

Swimming Snake thought for a moment.

"You remember my brother, just before you left, we had a feast. It was in celebration of Small Rock becoming a man."

Buckingham laughed. "Sure I do. It was hard for me to forget. He spent almost a year leadin' up to it practicing stealing horses. Most the time he practiced on yours."

Snake smiled also in memory. "Then you remember that evening, when I was making the monument for the medicine pouch he was to receive?"

Buckingham squinted and thought for a moment.

"Yep. I guess I do. You and I hauled some river rock to build it. As I rightly remember, the ones close to the camp weren't the *right* ones, and we had to haul them from a hellacious distance away."

Snake shook his head. "Yes. You remember the slight bit of trouble we went through to get the proper stones for the ceremony, but do you not remember my grievous injury?"

Buck nodded. "Yeah, if'n you mean your pinching your finger and howling like a baby. That I remember."

What had actually occurred during the time was Snake had slammed a rock the size of his head down on the growing pile. In the process he had smashed his finger between the rocks. It had been a mighty blow and severe enough to remove the nail from the finger.

By Buckingham's remembrance that had been about six days ago.

Without word, Snake held his hand out for Buck's viewing.

Buckingham looked at it and then took the hand in his own. "Okay, let me see your other hand." Snake held out the other hand.

"That's right peculiar." Buckingham could see injury to one finger and it was almost totally healed.

"But you always were right good at healing people. Maybe you just had some good herbs and grasses for it."

"You know that is not the truth."

Buck looked around for a spell. "Then maybe you could tell me the truth – without making me drag it all out of ya. Now, I am not promising I will buy it, but I would like to hear the story. I admit there have been some mighty perplexing things happen here." He held up his hands. "Nothing dangerous, but just mighty peculiar." He plopped down on the ground.

"Here is as good a place as any to tell it."

Snake looked around. "There is not any place in this valley that is good." Seeing the look on Buckingham's face he hurried on. "Then when no place is good, they are all the same." He sat on the stony ground facing Buckingham.

Chapter Five
Song of the Valley

"I tell you that the cloud of murder hangs thicker and lower than that over the heads of the people. It is the Valley of Fear. The Valley of Death. The terror is in the hearts of the people from dusk to dawn. Wait, young man, and you will learn for yourself." "Arthur Conan Doyle

"***M***any years ago, my people came to this area. Not to this valley, but to camp near where we camp now. This was in the days of my father's father. When my father's father was young." He grinned slyly. "You might remember the time."

Snake looked at Buckingham innocently, waiting for a response. When none came, he continued.

"Game was plentiful then. The hunting parties were short and always returned with meat for the tribe.

The land was good and blessed by the spirits. Not as you see it now." Snake looked at the countryside then at Buck. "Or as I see it. You and most others see it as it was, not how it is."

"Then the stars fell from the sky and came to rest in this valley. We no longer sing the songs telling of it. It is bad. We do not sing of this bad thing.

One night the entire village watched. From the heavens the stars came down and spread their wings over the countryside. They crossed the sky – back and forth – each night for several days. During that time we guarded our families and horses." Snake hesitated. "We tried."

"During the day we would wander. Close to camp at first, for we feared the stars might return during the day. Then we went farther searching for game. We found animals – deer, elk – even some of the horses that had wandered.

They lay dead. Drained of blood. Parts of them had been …removed. During the night we would watch the stars fly. In the day we would walk the ground beneath where they had flown and find the carcasses of the animals." Snake looked on the face of Walks with Limp, searching for belief.

"A few warriors went out to learn of what happened during the night. They did not return. The tribe went out during the day looking for them. We feared we would find them as they found the animals, but that was not to be. They simply were not found."

Buckingham raised his hand and started to speak, then thought better of it and motioned Snake to continue.

"Finally one night when the moon was gone the stars all came to this valley. From the camp all could see them. They came from every direction and stayed over the valley for a time. It was said that the night was as day around this valley. Before morning they descended, fell as the hawk does upon his prey, into the valley.

There they did stay for six risings and settings of the sun. People went out – it was impossible to forbid them – to look upon the stars come to earth. Those that were near said the valley was afire with a light the color of new grass tufts in the spring.

Those that went over the rim and down into the valley spoke of it briefly. They became ill. Sores and blisters as if the pox appeared on their bodies. Blood came from their eyes, ears and noses. Before death they spoke of what they had seen in the valley."

Swimming Snake stopped his lesson. He looked to the sky and then down to the earth before looking his brother in the eyes.

"What I have said has been told to me. What I have to say now will be difficult for you to believe. This I know. I did not see it with my own eyes and it was difficult for me to accept. Many times I wondered if the songs were wrong. If they had been embellished for the entertainment of the tribe. If they were intended only to scare the children in the late nights around the fires."

He continued doggedly. "Having seen the valley – having talked to others who have seen this valley…I must accept. You must accept also if we are to leave this place together.

The dying ones spoke of the children. Children not of the skin you call red, but of gray. The gray of smoke from the campfires. On their heads they bore no scalps only more skin of this gray. They had heads of the buffalo. Not shaggy and with horn, but large when set atop their bodies. Eyes big and the color of the night sky.

They spoke that they had gotten close to the children. Close enough to see all this with certainty. The children knew of their presence, but ignored them, much as we ignore a cur slinking around the camp. In the

morning the children would gather in a circle – there were many of them. Facing inwards the morning sun would rise in the middle of them. It made no sound, but they looked upon the light for as long it might take a man to eat his fill."

Snake looked at Buck again.

"Then they would separate wandering in and out of their lodges the color of polished iron."

After a time the stars rose back into the sky and the children walked the valley no more. The valley died. All trees gave up their spirits as well as the grass. No animal walked the valley. It is as it is today. Barren and dead."

Snake looked at Walks with Limp a final time. "I have spoken the words of my grand father and my father. I have spoken."

Chapter Six
Song of the Search

"The search for truth is more precious than its possession." - Albert Einstein

Buckingham looked around him before daring to speak.

"Swimming Snake…I have heard the words you have spoken. I can tell you mean them from your heart. By the heavens man – look around you! This valley is not dead. The trees and grass grow and critters wander its length. Do you not see this?"

"No, my brother," said Snake. "I do not see what you or most see when I look upon this valley. This I cannot explain. Do you not have things about this valley that you cannot explain?"

Buck thought for a moment. He remembered missing the doe and the fire he could not build. These memories were faint and fading quickly.

"Well, there are a few things that took me by surprise. Nothing, howsoever that is strange and dangerous. I do know that I ain't seen any strange children running around. Besides," Buck continued, "I for one see some holes in your story."

Buckingham pulled his pipe, loaded it, and set on his own yarn.

"All this would have happened some fifty, maybe sixty years ago. That be a long time. Anything that was hoodooing this valley would be long gone by now." He pointed the stem of his pipe at Swimming Snake. "In your lifetime have you ever seen the stars come down and fly around?"

Snake thought for but a moment. "No."

"Have you, or any of the current tribe, ever seen these here children you spoke of?"

Swimming Snake started to speak, but Buckingham broke in. "Now in

person, mind you, face to face, not in your dreams."

"No," admitted Swimming Snake.

"And," continued Buck, "do you see any difference in me since I have been in the valley?"

"No," said Snake. "You are still the same stubborn and unbelieving white man you have always been."

"Now, you know what you see. I know what I see, and you say it is not the same. Who is to say which of us is right? But I will make you a deal."

Swimming Snake grimaced. "I know how most deals work with a white man. Why does my heart not sing to hear of this deal?"

Buckingham frowned. "You are an astute man."

He saw confusion on Snake's face. "That means you see a lot of what is around you. You cross the trail of a badger, weeks old, and are able to tell the tale of its passing. You have been to encampments long abandoned. You were able to tell me how many people were there. Men, women and children. How many ponies they had. How long they stayed and in what direction they left in. Do I speak the truth?"

Snake smiled in modesty. "Yes, this is true. I possess the knowledge of reading the past through sign." He was quite pleased that his brother had noted his skill.

"Then it would not be a problem if you and I looked around this valley. You seeing what you see and me seeing what I see – and between the two of us we should be able to find sign of these children having been here. Even if it were a bit ago."

Snake fumed. "Your heart is black and your skin is white. You complimented only to get your way."

"But it be the truth, is it not?"

"Yes," said Snake.

"Then tomorrow morning we set out. We find the truth."

"No," said Snake. "Tomorrow it will not be. We must do it now. Today. While this sun still stands in the sky. Tomorrow – with or without you my brother – my feet will not walk this ground."

It took little time to prepare. Snake had only his medicine knife, ceremonial club and bundle. Buckingham grabbed his rifle, crammed a handful of jerky into his possibles bag and rejoined Swimming Snake.

Swimming Snake had stood and watched as Walks with Limp went to get the small amount of food.

He watched as Buck went through elaborate motions getting to the

trunk of his tree. A tree – for all that Snake could see – that was nothing but spindly barren branches one could push aside and walk through. It was obvious, however, that to his brother it was a full and living tree.

"Now I will have you know," said Buckingham, "I walked pretty nigh this entire valley the first day I was here. Not to spoil yer hopes, but I didn't see anything much out of the ordinary."

Together they walked towards the middle of the valley bottom to an area next to the creek and about a quarter mile downstream. There a small mound of earth stood. From the slight additional height it gave, they could see well. Climbing to the top both surveyed the landscape around them with careful eyes.

"It might be farther downstream to the south, after the valley tightens up. That may be where yer little children had their playground," said Buckingham.

"No. It was said their encampment was at the end from which the cold wind blows."

"Well let's get on with it. That tickle I had has come back and it is worse than before."

Buckingham eyed Swimming Snake, waiting for him to make the first move. Snake stood fingering the medicine pouch around his neck. He started walking.

For almost three hours they crisscrossed the valley floor, carefully looking at everything there was to see. They studied the ground. They studied the rocks on the ground. They studied the sky. They looked to the tops of the ridges and rims around them. Their journey led them in a large circle by the time they were finished.

Sitting atop the mound that they had started from, they planned their next move.

"Well, that weren't all that fruitful," said Buck.

Swimming Snake merely grunted. Holding his medicine bag he alternated between grasping it and letting it dangle and swing.

Reaching into his possibles bag Buck pulled a piece of jerky and twisted it in half. Assuring himself both portions were about equal he offered a gnarled brown slab to Snake. Snake accepted it with another nod then lifted it to his nose and carefully smelled of it. Satisfied it was not tainted; he ripped a hunk off and started chewing it thoughtfully.

"My brother, tell me this. When you look across from here, what is it you see and hear?" asked Snake.

Buck thought for a moment then studied the view.

"I see the willows yonder. The wind is blowing and moving them some. Makes a whispering noise, it does. Always liked that sound."

"Now close your eyes," commanded Swimming Snake.

Buckingham did so.

"Tell me – do you hear the wind now? Do you feel the wind?"

Buckingham sat for a moment then quickly opened his eyes. After a second, he closed them and sat motionless. A few minutes later he opened his eyes once more.

"This is right strange. When I close my eyes, I can no longer hear the wind. It just sort of fades off. What's stranger, when I close my eyes I can't feel the wind on me anymore," said Buck.

Swimming Snake nodded, rose to his feet and pointed. "It is time. We walk this way."

For another two hours both men walked the floor of the valley. They searched anything and everything that they could think of. Again they observed, they listened, and they even smelled everything in their path. Again rocks were pulled up from the ground and inspected.

Snake thought it perplexing, but Walks with Limp even inspected some things that he himself could not see.

Thus it went.

No contentment was found for either man.

As they rounded a bend in the creek Buckingham pointed out a deer with fawn grazing peacefully on the grass. Snake looked, but did not see the deer. When he pointed this out to Buck, the man cursed, asking him if he were blind.

"Then shoot the animal. This will be proof," said Swimming Snake.

"You know I do not kill for sport or fun," snarled Buckingham.

"I do not ask you to kill for pleasure. If indeed you kill the animal, then I am wrong. If I am wrong, then we spend the night – we spend many nights here in this valley. We will need food." Swimming Snake stared at Buck, waiting for his words to sink home.

Buckingham thought about it and raised his rifle, took a fine bead on the animal, then lowered the rifle.

"Nope," he said. "You know darned well that I would kill the mother for food. If I was starving and of a mind I would take the fawn, but just to prove a point – right or wrong – this I will not do."

Swimming Snake sighed. "You are afraid that I am right. Think of this.

We stand here talking; they take no notice if your eyes are to be believed."

"Yep. Been known to happen."

"In which direction is the wind blowing then? The wind that you feel?" asked Snake.

Buck thought again, raised his rifle in one smooth motion, and fired when the sights came to rest just behind the deer's front shoulder. The blast rocked the valley, blue-gray smoke drifting slowly before him.

When the sound had died and the smoke dispersed, silence reigned over all.

From the look on Buck's face, Swimming Snake knew the answer, but asked anyway.

"Did you kill it with your rifle?" asked Snake.

Buckingham looked down at his moccasins.

"Nope." He slowly pulled the makin's and reloaded his rifle.

"Well, Swimming Snake…you made your point. The wind – if there is any wind at all – is coming from our backs. The deer should have bolted long ago. They might ignore noise – would not be normal, but they might – but they wouldn't ignore our scent."

He did not speak again until his ramrod was set back in place.

"When I fired they weren't there. The instant I pulled the trigger they were gone. Not like they had run off – they was just gone."

Swimming Snake waited.

"Okay," Buck said. "I owe you an apology." He grinned. "You ain't gunna get it, but I owe you one."

They wandered slowly back to the mound and sat cross legged once more. One sat with heavy heart from truth learned, while the other sat relieved that truth had been accepted. The sun beat down on both, but neither man moved.

Finally Buckingham spoke.

"At least we found proof this valley is hoodoo. Might not have found anything else, but I am a believer." He looked around. "It all looks real. You can reach out and touch it. Now I don't know what to trust."

Snake looked up. "We have found more than what is *not* here. We have found what *is* here."

Buckingham tossed a handful of dirt to the wind and asked, "And what did we find? I admit the deer were but a dream in my eyes and did not exist. What exactly is it that we might have found?"

"There are places. Places with power." Swimming Snake responded.

Buck tossed another handful of earth and looked around. "I am sure that has some deep meaning. Howsoever, at this time that meaning escapes me. Perhaps in your infinite wisdom you would enlighten this pilgrim."

Snake rolled his eyes to the sky. "Always you need an explanation. Always you need the white man's proof. Power places exist in many lands. How they come to be is mystery. It is enough to know that they exist. By their existence, they draw people to them. They draw happenings."

Snake stopped and looked at Buckingham. "Does this help you my brother?"

"Yep. It's a start."

"You feel…what was it you said you felt about this valley?" asked Swimming Snake.

Buck replied. "It's like a tickle. Just a feeling that seems to crawl over yer skin. I had it before I even got here, but…," he paused, "…since I got into the belly of this valley its been worse."

Snake nodded. "Yes. A tickle. For me I can feel it in my medicine bag. When I am near a place that has this power, the medicine in the pouch moves. It quivers. Watch…"

Swimming Snake held the medicine bag by the thong, letting it dangle from between his fingers. Buckingham watched as it slowly swung back and forth, and then stopped its pendulum motion. Even as it stopped swinging, he could see the slender piece of leather that suspended it seemed to vibrate.

Snake stood and spoke softly. "Now watch."

Slowly – barely moving – he kept the bag dangling and started walking down the side of the mound, his motions smooth and graceful.

As Buck moved with him, Buck kept his eyes glued on the bag. His head mere inches from it.

When Snake moved from the top of the mound the bag no longer hung straight down. It seemed to angle out of plumb. The pouch seemed drawn to the mound; perhaps the center of the mound.

"That be right strange, too," said Buckingham. "How you doing that?"

Snake stopped and gave Buck a dark look. "I am doing nothing. This is not by my hand. I just spoke of this. How it is doing so, I know not. Why it is doing so, I know not."

"This isn't another of those lizard things is it?" asked Buckingham.

"No, this is not a trick. Remember when we started our search? Here is where we started. Then we ended our search here. We left again and we ended again," said Snake in disgust. He looped the medicine bag back over his head.

With the side of his foot Buckingham kicked half-heartedly at the side of the mound.

"Then what do we do now?"

Swimming Snake stared at him as if he were insane. "We leave."

"That just don't seem right," said Buck. "Don't you think we should explore some more? See what is causing this? Don't seem right not knowing what it be that is here."

"My brother, when you find the bear sleeping, do you stick your hand in its mouth to see it if has a tongue and teeth?"

"Nope. That sounds a mite risky to me," answered Buckingham.

Swimming Snake nodded towards the sun that was starting its drop towards the rim of the valley.

"We must start now. It will be dark by the time we make the top of the rim. In the day there is danger, but it seeks us out not. To remain while darkness covers this cursed land is to stab our own hearts. At the top we can spread our blankets. It will be a long walk back to the village."

Buck asked, "Didn't you bring a horse? As I remember, you are not that fond of walking."

"I brought a horse. I believe he has left by now. He is a smart animal you know."

Gathering their meager belongings they started the grueling trek towards the top of the valley.

Chapter Seven
Dance of Escape

"You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today." - Abraham Lincoln

By the time they had reached the top of the canyon the sun had set behind the horizon. A dull and sullen blue coated the world around them and clouds glowed as if afire, illuminated by the sun they could no longer see.

Pulling the fur cap from his head, Buck wiped the sweat from his face with a leather sleeve blackened from years.

"Bout time we took a breather."

Swimming Snake looked at the almost black sky, at Buckingham, and then the valley behind them. He motioned with his hand.

"No. This is not a place to rest."

Buck squinted and peered back on the path they had come. "I know I am tired. I figure you must be a mite winded. Any particular reason we can not sit a spell?"

"It follows," Snake said simply.

Buckingham swung his rifle towards the canyon.

"What follows?"

Snake shrugged. "I do not know."

Buckingham kept his eyes on the canyon rim behind them. "Do we want to know?"

"I do not think so," said Swimming Snake.

Buck gave his brother a hard look in the growing darkness. "Reckon that's good enough for me."

The two men started walking once more, through the clearing of a saddle separating the canyon from the shallow draw next to it. They

walked silently into the night, looking back every few steps.

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Buck awoke to the morning sun. He sat up, the blanket falling from his chest and looked around, his hand instinctively feeling for his rifle. The morning pressed a light chill against his face.

Swimming Snake sat a few paces away, watching the sunrise forming in the east. Buck knew without asking the man had sat all night without sleep.

Rising to his feet he turned towards Snake.

"Reckon we should get on our way."

Swimming Snake shook his head. "There is no hurry now, my brother."

"What ever it is, or was, isn't following us anymore?"

Swimming Snake looked towards the ground.

"No. It is not following us. It past us in the night and has moved on before us."

"Why in tarnation didn't you wake me?"

Still staring at his feet Snake spoke, "I was afraid. I was afraid to make a noise. I was afraid to move. It was out there and watched us for a while. Then it moved on."

Buck looked at his own feet and could think of nothing to say. Snake had never used the word afraid when speaking about himself.

They walked single file, five paces separating them from each other. Each man looked to the sky, the ground their feet were traveling, and the countryside around him.

Occasionally they would stop – listening and smelling, searching for anything out of the ordinary. Buck's thumb stayed on the hammer of his rifle and his finger inside the trigger guard. The long stock cradled in the crook of his left arm.

Words spoken were clipped, quiet and rare. The tickle that Buckingham had felt was gone and slowly fading into memory. Halfway through the day, when the sun had risen to where it beat down on them, they found the first sign.

Swimming Snake stopped his stride and raised a hand halfway up and out to his side. When he heard Buck's footsteps cease, he slowly moved his hand forward and to the front. Pointing.

Buckingham's eyes searched for a split second before he saw it. A gray form lying in the sagebrush. From years of hunting he knew it was the

shape of a mule deer.

Deer were unpredictable critters. They might jump and run when you were a half mile off. If you caught them off guard, they might lay in wait, not moving, hoping that you would walk past them – then bolt to safety.

But this didn't feel right.

He slowly raised his rifle to his shoulder and sighted down the barrel. Setting the blade in the rear V-notch he took a coarse sighting picture. His thumb pulled the hammer back – its click reached his ear. His finger pulled the rear trigger and he felt the set trigger engage, hearing the sears click into place. He then touched – ever so gently – the front trigger. He held the rifle on target waiting. He was not sure of what he was waiting for, but he felt danger.

After Buckingham had stood so long the heavy rifle started wobbling, he placed his thumb back on the hammer and lowered it. Both men looked at each other and started walking towards the deer.

Standing across from each other – the carcass of the deer between them – Snake motioned to the body and said, "My grandfather spoke of this."

There were wounds on the body of the deer that would cause death. None of these wounds were such that the animal would have stood still while they were being performed.

On its muzzle, skin and tissue had vanished from a section shaped like an egg and teeth were visible. A couple of teeth were gone. Buck knelt and examined the wound closely.

From where Swimming Snake stood he could see that its ass hole had been removed. No blood had flowed from any of the wounds he saw.

On its belly a "T" shaped incision had been made and innards fell out in pink and purple coils. With a cautious hand he moved the guts around and peered at it again. Moments later he repeated the action.

While kneeling Buckingham pulled his knife and made a cut on the neck of the dead animal. Looking at the cut he shook his head, wiped the blade on his legging, and returned it to its sheath. He stood and motioned to Snake.

"Snake…look at this." He pointed to the cut he had made and to the cut where the flap had been removed from the deer's muzzle.

Swimming Snake knelt and stared at both.

"I see, but I do not understand."

Buck grinned broadly, gleeful that he was now the teacher.

"The cut on the deer's mouth…when you look at the hair on the border

of the cut…then compare it to mine. You see? You know I keep my blade sharp, but look here," he pointed to both again. "When I made my cut it was clean and deep. Nevertheless, even the sharpest blade moves some of the hairs aside. Rolls them away. It does not slice through them all when you cut."

He pointed to the original wound. "See here? The hairs – every individual hair – is cut in half cleanly."

He stuck his face down close to the cut and inhaled. Raising his face he exhaled, performed the same motion and inhaled again.

"And it smells…well…burned. But it doesn't appear scorched or blackened."

Snake waved his hand in agreement. Pointing to the bowels lying on the ground he said, "Yes, and things are missing. Things one would not normally take as prize eating. The heart is gone, but also those vines and artillery you told me of. Those are missing."

Buck looked over. "Vines and artillery? Ah! Veins and arteries. Ya mean veins and arteries. I had a book learned doctor tell me about them. They carry the blood."

"They are missing. One does not generally eat them."

Buckingham stood. "Do ya think the spookums you saw last night did this?"

"I do not know." Snake looked at the body laying there. "There is much meat here. There is much death and waste."

Buck's shoulders slumped. He looked towards the sky once more. Even the vultures had not gathered over this hunk of dead meat.

They resumed their trek until they hit upon a small stream that still bore water this late in the year. Its clarity and pureness slaked their thirst and pulled layers of fatigue off their spirits.

Their bellies still hungered for food.

Digging in his pack Buckingham pulled forth his jug. Swirling it in his hands he reflected upon it. Pulling the cork, he drank what he felt to be about half. It burned as molten fire in his mouth and seared his throat going down. When it hit bottom it exploded into heat that burned away the hunger.

Turning to Swimming Snake he offered the jug.

"This will take the edge off the hunger for a while. Besides – I need the jug."

Snake took it without word and drank deeply, finishing the last of the

whiskey. He shuddered and handed the jug back to Buck. "Only the white man can bottle his evil."

"You never complained about it before," said Buckingham.

"It is good to know the heart of your enemy. Before I drank only for knowledge."

Buck took the jug and put a small amount of water in it. He swirled it and drank the lightly flavored water. No sense in wasting any drops of the liquor. He then filled the jug with water, corked it, and replaced it into his pack.

Chapter Eight
Dance of the Cloud

Clouds symbolize the veils that shroud God. - Balzac

Morning in camp was uneventful.

The sun rose, as always, upon thirty lodges; all erected with their doors and smoke flaps facing the rising sun. When the false dawn started (the period of time when the new day was but a faint light in the east) a few people were up and about their early morning tasks.

Ashes in the fire pits scattered gently at the touch of probing fingers. Cold hands searched for glowing embers that rested beneath the powdery gray blanket. When small sparks of red appeared, dry grass was set atop them. The old women starting the morning fires gently blew life into them again; small tongues of red and orange blossoming as dancing flowers, growing to warming blazes that shot sparks into the still dark heavens.

In the distance, a coyote howled briefly, to be answered by its pack mates across the prairie.

Overhead bats fluttered here and there through the sky, picking the occasional insect from midair.

The sky itself – the very air around them – had a dreary and numb feeling. The feeling one would find just before a storm. Eyes scoured the brightening heavens, but only one small cloud was visible, glowing on the farthest horizon.

Children snuck quietly from the lodges, so as not to wake their elders. Mischief was the order of the day and it would not bode well to attract attention, or awaken those that might dampen such plans.

Morning Star had risen early, started one fire and was now

contemplating gathering water and bringing it back to the lodge. A chore performed each morning that stretched back in time so far she could no longer remember when the task had been laid upon her shoulders.

Her eyes still sparkled with happiness at the new day. She heard the young ones planning their day of secrecy and adventure. In her heart, she would have given anything to join them. She sighed. The problem with growing old was not in growing old itself. No, the problem was the requirement of dignity. Elders were to be respected. She laughed. As such they were supposed to act with dignity and wisdom.

Morning Star thought to herself that she was indeed an elder, but dignity and wisdom were overrated.

It was always difficult when the body was eighty, but the heart was twenty.

Sighing again, she picked up two skins and began her slow walk to the creek bank, upstream from the animals.

Hearing her footsteps and labored breathing, the young boy and his sister who had crept silently from their lodge gave pursuit. Moving like shadows they followed the old woman with stealth. Darting from sagebrush to rock. From rock to tree.

Morning Star noticed her companions immediately but could not bring herself to ruin their fun by acknowledging their presence.

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In the distance, the cloud from the valley moved leisurely from west to east.

When it left the valley its movement had been slow, no more than a fast walk.

For years it lay scattered throughout the valley, spread so thin it was invisible. Even spread thinly its power had not diminished, nor had time reduced its lethality.

At the start, it had gradually flowed together over the mound. As more and more of its bulk congregated over the site, it became visible.

If there had been an unfortunate onlooker, they would have seen a light fog appear, a fog slowly twisting and turning above the ground, extending to a height ten feet above the dome of earth.

If there had been an onlooker their life would have ended then.

As the shadows of sunset fell over it, and it gained in size, a gentle luminosity appeared.

Not a glow, but the merest hint of a radiance.

When this bluish tint formed, the cloud began its journey.

Flowing over the ground it moved towards the surrounding mountainside and started to climb. Behind it the bulk of its nature flowed, a diaphanous tail stretching back – fading slowly to invisibility – chasing the growing glow and following the path taken by the two men.

As it crested the containing walls of the valley, the leading edge of the cloud stopped, while the rest caught up. It boiled in a low spot on the ground, tendrils stretching outwards as if searching, and then falling back into the main body. As it grew in size the glow increased.

The glow concentrated in a small ball of electric blue in the center of the billowing mass; then expanded outwards, starting bright and dimming as the light spread until it touched the farthest boundaries of the cloud. The color changed slowly to green and the glow contracted back upon itself, growing in intensity until it was a small ball of intense, unearthly green. The cycle repeated – it changed to blue and started its outward migration once more.

By the time the farthest particles had joined the body proper it stretched a hundred yards across and fifty feet high. The grass and brush beneath it began to dry and char. The cloud slowly started moving once more.

Flowing across the ground the cloud flattened, dipping into depressions that pocked the earth. When it reached a rise or hill, it would slow and part, flowing around the obstacle, only to rejoin beyond it.

After several miles it lifted from the ground and hovered at a height of a hundred feet, from where it would occasionally drop to the ground, stop, and then regain its motion, rising back into the air.

In its path nothing was readily visible as to changes in the terrain it covered. The ground held a lingering dry smell and radiant heat came from the earth. Energy was being used.

The exorbitant expenditure of energy was wasteful and programming quickly changed to seek only movement beneath the death cloud. Movement equaled danger.

Passing over the burrows of a prairie dog town it leisurely descended, attracted by the movement of a lone sentry. Blanketing the ground, the glow changed from its color of blue to purple, then from purple to a brooding red. The dog standing guard fled to the supposed safety of its burrow.

Tentacles stretched from the main body of the cloud and invaded the

mouth of the burrows. Each tentacle the thickness of a man's arm. The ghostly snakes followed the twisting tunnels to scores of chambers hidden below the surface.

The small creatures that were asleep awoke, setting up a chatter of fear. En mass they fled the chambers, scurrying down tunnels. As they fled they ran head long into the probing fog.

Above ground, the cloud retracted its misty serpents, the scarlet color faded back to blue, the blue contracted and it rose back into the sky, resuming its voyage of death.

On the ground silence reigned. Empty tunnels stood as mute witness to the passage of the death cloud.

An hour into its trip the world put forth its first resistance. An impediment to the death cloud's progress. From the east a brisk wind sprang up.

In the mountains winds are more often than not predictable. In the day the air is heated and moves up the mountains in a rising wind. At night the cold air returns to the valleys dropping down the mountainsides in a chill breeze. The flats of the prairie catch the eddies that spill out from the mountains like ripples in a lake.

This wind was subtly different. It did not vary in its strength or speed. No gusts punctuated the moving air.

It did not generate from thermals or weather fronts for it came from the soul of the earth.

When it hit. the wind slowed the progress of the death cloud to a halt. Streamers flowed backwards from the top and sides. Pale ribbons that stretched and fluttered, but never detached from the main core.

The color migrated forward until the light centered and focused on the front of the cloud. The back grew dark – a dull gray like the bottom of a thundercloud.

The cloud moved forward once more.

For an hour the wind blew unwaveringly, halving the speed of the cloud. Then – as quickly as it had begun – the wind died.

The first battle had been lost, *but the sleepers had awakened*.

Without pause the cloud reclaimed its wind tossed streamers.

Now it moved with caution.

Something had confronted it. Something it could not analyze.

Three quarters of a mile farther the cloud halted once more. Hovering above the ground it waited and *sensed.* As it waited it took note that there

was no noise. It noted that there was no motion. In its own way the cloud was patient. It had lain for decades in the valley and an hour here would be but the blink of an eye in its measurement of time.

On the ground, in the darkness, Swimming Snake had sat with his fear. Unmoving. Unblinking. Hoping that his brother would not awaken. Thus, he stayed until morning, assessing his fear and wondering at the wind from the heart of the world.

Long had it been since he had felt the earth sigh.

The awe and fear balanced each other.

Rising back into the air, the death cloud moved on with no wind to help it, but none to hinder.

A half hour farther in its trip it passed above the next creature in its path. A young mule deer sprang to its feet and stood silently, studying its surroundings. It sensed danger, but could not identify from where. Ears stood straight seeking the slightest noise. Nose twitched – it snorted and sniffed again. It stamped a hoof, attempting to induce the unseen to show itself, but time had run out for the animal.

Its standing was more than enough motion for the death cloud to track.

The killer cloud settled over the deer.

Since its creation, the cloud served many functions.

Primarily it was an information gatherer.

It would evaluate the forms of life it ran across. It would *sample* them, cataloging this information and saving it for future reference. At other times it would *gather* the life form, taking them whole for processing.

Slowly it encompassed the deer. At its touch, the deer became motionless. No longer did it search frantically for danger, for the danger was upon it and the option of flight was no longer available.

The cloud could perform muscular paralysis with life forms not possessing a sophisticated enough nervous system to override the basic program. The involuntary muscles still worked. The heart beat frantically in its chest, but not even its eyes could move. The deer had become a living statue awaiting its fate.

The death cloud recognized this life form and found the required information nestled amongst thousands of other bits of information. This would not be a gather, merely a sample. Perfunctory. A double check of existing data.

From the outer edges of the cloud thin threads of crimson light grew – each no thicker than a human hair. Around them a corolla of pink glowed

as the bright strings harshly illuminated the fog around them. They extended towards the trapped animal.

After a dozen had grown in adequate length they wove a precisely patterned web around the deer, flitting close, but not touching.

Two threads darted forward to the same point on the deer's face, landing in a slight puff of smoke. They separated in opposite directions, curving, till they met once more outlining a precise oval on the jaw.

At the same time two other strands were at work.

One writhed under the deer to caress its belly and the other snapped to the tail of the creature.

Less than a minute elapsed, and the threads retracted back to the outer edges of the cloud and faded. Muscles relaxing, the deer sank quietly to the ground. Death claimed it as the cloud rose and continued its inexorable motion east.

Chapter Nine
Dance of Decision

"In the words of the ancients, one should make his decisions within the space of seven breaths…when matters are done leisurely; seven out of ten will turn out badly. - Hagakure, Book of the Samurai

To the west, Buckingham and Swimming Snake continued their forced march.

The ground of the prairie was easy walking and, while never flat, the falling and rising of the earth was gradual and not steep. Sagebrush had to be avoided and sporadic islands of young trees by-passed. Their pace was not of a laid back walk – or a hurried lope either. It was a quick step without breaks that would rapidly eat up the miles.

A pace that would not allow for idle chatter, but not causing the lungs to heave for breath.

After some hours the pace had taken its toll on Buckingham; his limp became more pronounced.

Swimming Snake looked to the face of his brother, but knew it was a wasted effort.

The pain that was undoubtedly growing in his brother's leg was reflected in his eyes, but complaint would never pass his lips. His brother reserved complaining for unimportant times.

"Ya know Snake, I am a might confused," said Buckingham.

No response came from Snake who kept his steady pace.

"I mean, I know we are headed for the village. I know you think that…well that whatever it is…is headed for the village. I am a might confused as to what we are going to do when we catch up to it."

He stopped talking to catch his breath.

Several minutes later Snake replied.

"I have given that much thought. We will fight it."

Buckingham grimaced. "That might just be a tall order to fill."

"We will not be fighting it alone." Swimming Snake reassured him.

Buckingham perked up. "Now that be good news. I figure there are about a dozen first class warriors in the camp. If we can get some of your neighbors – the ones we ain't stolen any horses from lately, anyway to help us, we should be able to field a decent little army. Say fifty men or so."

Snake kept walking but spoke. "No. There will be no warriors in this battle. I do not believe a hundred seasoned warriors could count coup on this enemy."

Buck stumbled once as his bad leg caught a rock.

"If the warriors are not going to help us, who is? I mean I realize that a couple of the women in camp are meaner than badgers, but that doesn't reassure me a lot."

Swimming Snake shook his head without breaking stride and said, "No. That is not of which I speak. I will call upon the spirits to help us. They are awakening. They fought the evil last night."

Buckingham came to a dead stop.

"Snake, we have to palaver here some before we go any farther. I know you have given this much thought, but I think I would really like to know what those thoughts are."

Snake stopped and looked at his brother.

"We loose time by stopping."

Buck pulled his sweat drenched cap from his head, the fur now matted and dark. He nodded to himself.

"Ayup, we do. Now the faster you explain a few small details to me, the faster we will be back on the trail."

"What questions do you have this time, my brother?"

Buckingham took a deep breath and then blew it out between pursed lips.

"Oh, Lordy. Where to start," he bent and placed his hands on his knees, catching his breath while searching for the words.

"Okay. What are the spirits that are going to help us? Where do they come from? Ever fought with them before? What can they do? How come I ain't never heard or seen'um before? Why am I headed east when I should be making tracks in any other direction?"

He paused.

"Guess that will do for the first round of questions." He took a deep breath. "But I got a bunch more left to ask."

"It must be difficult being a white man," replied Swimming Snake.

"It has its moments."

"You know I am a medicine man." Snake said. "You are familiar with us as you have lived among us and other tribes before. There are medicine men and there are shamans. All medicine men have their beginning in nature.

From a young age we study the world around us and our elders teach us. The Great Spirit teaches us the ways of the animals and the ways of the plants. We learn what is useful…what can heal and what can harm. We also study the spirits and honor them."

He thought for a second before adding. "There are medicine men…and then there are medicine men."

He hesitated and looked around the area they sat.

"At a young age this is how I began my study. On my first vision quest – you are familiar with these quests – my learning was," he paused, "slightly exceptional. My quest led me to the mountains north of where our camp lies.

It was there I waited and fasted. It was there my quest was answered. In a quest one is sometimes granted audience by a spirit who becomes their totem. I know you believe this to be a madness that is brought on by hunger and exposure."

Buck spread his hands out, fingers splayed, in agreement.

"For me a spirit appeared. Not the spirit of the eagle or owl. Not the spirit of any animal. It was the spirit of the earth itself. Behind it stood all the other spirits. It did not seek to teach or instruct me. It stood in judgment of me. It measured me. If it accepted or rejected me, I do not know. At that time I realized that the spirits had been with me since I was a young child.

One of the gifts given that night was of vision. I could see the world and all things in it. How they nurtured, or destroyed each other. Why they nurtured. Why they destroyed. All things – even the blades of grass on the ground – are connected.

Laces of silver light connect all things to each other.

These laces can be broken. They can be mended sometimes, but of this I was given warnings.

How it works I do not know. Why it works I do not know.

Since that time I have been able to…do things. I am not sure why." Snake extended his hand, palm down facing east. He slowly turned a complete circle.

The next words were addressed to that broad circle and not Buckingham.

"I have not practiced these things. They frighten me as they are things of power, and I do not feel I am worthy of them. I do not feel that any man is worthy of them."

Swimming Snake lowered himself until one knee rested on the ground. "Even speaking of these things make me feel unease." He lowered his eyes to the grass beneath him. "I am just a man. I am not worthy to stand next to the spirits. Through the years, I have thought of how much power and respect I could demand, if I so chose. Women to pleasure me. Great deeds in battle. To be leader to many people. These thoughts prove my unworthiness." He looked up at Buck. "So I play the fool and the medicine man."

Buckingham was speechless. Snake had always treated his station in life with humor, and to see him kneel and speak of his life and inner thoughts with such seriousness was unnerving. It saddened his heart to see how much belief Snake placed in his "spirits," and his lack of acceptance for feelings that came to every man.

Standing, he told Snake, "My brother, you do not need to trouble your heart. I know you are a good man, but to place our faith in these…um…powers, that is not something we can depend on.

You know me. You know I have heart for only those things I can see and feel. I am not sure I can come across for your spirit friends. If they believe in me as much as I believe in them, we might not make such a good band. After all. I am just a white man."

"It is good when a man can admit his failings." Snake's eyes lit up. "Is that all it takes to remove your fear? More proof?" He laughed. "I should have known. When you had the arrow in your leg, my heart told me that you must live. That our lives were twined together. That your deeds would be great. That is why I took you to my lodge." He laughed again.

Buckingham was touched, but not much persuaded.

"I appreciate you saving me." He frowned. "Even if'n it were your arrow in the first place. The fact you let me live is appreciated, but it don't reassure me right now. I need…"

"…proof." Finished Swimming Snake.

"I understand. The gift of life was long ago. It was a gift I gave because I felt it might help me later. As such, it was tainted." He nodded.

Snake raised his right hand to his chest and then his brow. Holding his hand to his head for but a moment, he lowered it and blinked.

"Now I give you a gift. This one is not for my gain. This has no requirements. This is for you, in sorrow of the pain I inflicted on you. A gift long overdue."

Raising his hand he pointed towards Buck. A warm wind blew against Buck, rocking him back a step.

Snake turned his back on his white brother and started walking.

Buck paused, started to call out, and then tentatively followed Snake with mixed emotions. Sixty paces farther it dawned on him. The pain in his leg was gone and the muscles felt tight and strong. No longer did agony spear up to his hip with each step.

His leg felt – good.

Swallowing his questions and doubts, he followed. He was still concerned, but he needed to see what happened next. He called out to Snake.

"Snake – that thing you did with the lizard. Were that…?"

"No, it was hidden up my sleeve."

Buckingham slapped his knee and grinned. "I knew it."

Swimming Snake turned.

"But before the lizard…I had no rock in my hand."

Buckingham stopped grinning.

Chapter Ten
Dance of Death

"Death smiles at us all; all a man can do is smile back." -
- From the movie Gladiator

The cloud rapidly approached the village.

From its height, the village was sensed as a multitude of cones entrenched on a morning landscape. On the western side, nearest the cloud, sunlight struck the tops of the first lodges, the rays cresting the distant mountains with its golden illumination.

The tops glowed in sharp contrast to the bottoms, and in a few heartbeats, the light cascaded down the sides bringing them to sharp relief – surrealistic against the brown and green of the prairie.

Smoke spilled from the tops of the lodges, their morning fires all ablaze. The blue haze rose straight up in the morning sky, only to strike a layer of cold air and flatten out into a blanket that covered the village at a height above that of the death cloud.

Morning Star felt the warmth of the sun as it laid golden hands on her old body. The gentle warmth brought a tremble of pleasure.

Matching giggles rang out from the brush, telling her of the joy morning brought to her hidden companions. The two children moved slightly in the bushes, shielding their eyes from the intense light, but allowing it to cover their bodies.

Star smiled. The children felt hidden as long as their faces remained concealed. They gave no thought to their bodies left exposed. The innocence and games of youth.

Taking one of the water bags, she moved carefully to the water's edge.

The grass gave way to dirt and the dirt to rocks. The rocks were damp, a coating of green algae making footing treacherous. With caution, she planted her feet on stones she knew would not shift beneath her weight, and knelt next to the flowing water.

A small pool formed behind three of these rocks, the water was clear, cold, and deep enough to submerse the skin without disturbing the bottom, muddying the water. One hand forced the neck below the surface while the other prodded the body under. Protesting bubbles spewed forth, for a time, and then the crisp water flowed smoothly into the skin.

Her hands were numb and cold by the time the pouch could accept no more. The pain of age would return shortly, bones generating the ache that always appeared upon contact with frigid water.

Morning Star rose slowly, no hurry investing itself in her this morning. It was just another day and not one to rush forward through; she leaned, set the skin securely on the bank, and looked around at the new day.

Star's hands moved to the small of her back, pressing firmly, helping to remove the kinks her kneeling position had placed under the skin. In ritual, she turned to the east and greeted the morning sun. Slowly she turned, following the path the sun would take, first looking to the south. The world was warming to the slow heartbeat of day. As she turned to the west, she stopped.

Her eyes spotted the cloud, filling her with a sense of dread. The children and the water bags forgotten, she climbed the bank for a clearer view.

Morning Star reveled in nature. Born on the plains, and gradually moving to the mountains, nature was a foundation of her life, and in her own way she studied it, not for gain or knowledge per se, but for the secure feeling it gave her to know her place in the scheme of eternity. Upon the birth of Swimming Snake, it pleased her to see this wonder of the world passed on. As Snake grew, his wonder at the world – both seen and unseen – had exceeded her own. Her son warmed her heart more than the morning sun.

Eyes shaded with her hand, she studied the cloud.

It was wrong. Her eyes told her it was wrong. Her heart told her it was wrong. It was the only cloud in the sky and it moved towards her and the village – yet no wind fell against her face.

Her eyes were old, but still sharp at distance and she looked below the cloud to the landscape. No wind moved the grasses or leaves. The cloud

had shifting colors. This in itself did not bother her as she had seen clouds flash with every color of the rainbow, reflecting the rising and the setting sun, but this bluish-green was different. Its rotted colors were reminiscent of the iridescent bottom of a toad-stool.

Poisonous.

Deadly.

In her mind unheard voices told her to run. With the water skins forgotten, with the children forgotten, she stood…waiting. Watching.

The children in hiding noted the change immediately. They watched the old woman freeze and stare. Their young eyes searched the horizon for a problem, but saw nothing. In the east the sun was glowing, to the north and south, the countryside itself was starting to shine with color and life. In the west, the last darkness of night faded, blue sky appearing behind a lone cloud. No sign of trouble connected in their minds.

The cloud began its descent, not slowing its forward motion; it swept downwards, until the bottom glided over the ground. A figure stood before it unmoving, and at the last second, the figure turned as if to flee.

"Run children!" screamed Morning Star, her eyes searching for the children. The pair looked at her, eyes wide and mouths open. In haste, they turned and ran, but they turned to each other – running only into each other's arms. Falling to their knees, they watched the cloud approach, billowing over the figure of Morning Star.

As the death cloud swarmed around Morning Star, it knew disappointment.

This creature was old, offering no new information.

Perfunctorily it took a few samples and left the carcass, its attention now on two remaining figures in its midst. These were young. Nothing new was immediately noticeable, but it had been so long since samples and study of this species that the young posed the prospect of new data. No simple samples here, this was a possibility rating a full gather.

The red threads wove around two small figures, never quite touching them, wove themselves until the forms were totally covered, existing as blood-colored silhouettes. As quickly as the threads had appeared, they were gone – as were the two children. Footprints of the children ended at the spot they had clung to each other.

The people of the village observed the events.

Not all camp's occupants, but enough. They watched the cloud descend upon the old woman. They saw the cloud pass, leaving only a

dismembered body lying on the ground.

Life was harsh for the small band of Indians and they had learned to react quickly and without question to a thousand things that could threaten. In case of a raiding party, the warriors would strike back immediately, buying time for the women and children to escape. In time of storm, when the black funnel clouds formed, they would seek shelter.

This was different. This threat was new, and in their actions, they splintered. The warriors grabbed weapons at hand while the women searched for children and provisions.

In every mind was the imploring voice of an old woman. A voice that was familiar. It beseeched them to abandon all fight and possessions and flee. A few – a very few – paid heed to the ghostly voice and taking nothing, scattered to the winds.

Six warriors faced the oncoming demon. Two on horseback, charged bravely towards the death cloud, lances at ready. They yelled at the enemy, challenging it to battle but fifteen yards before contact the horses – eyes wild and rolling – skewed to a halt throwing the veteran riders. In panic the horses fled, one cresting the rise to the creek, tumbling into the stream in a watery curtain, its left foreleg snapping.

It lay thrashing in the water - until the cloud passed over it.

Of the two riders, one lay dead, his neck broken upon contact with the unyielding earth. The other ignored his cuts and shattered ribs, jumping to his feet. His lance had been lost in the fall; he turned to face his enemy, drawing his knife. Around him the cloud gathered.

The doomed warrior noted the cloud did not feel damp or cold, as he had expected.

He chanted his death song, swinging his knife in short arcs before him.

The red threads gathered around him. Swinging his blade to meet them, one crossed his thrust, catching his arm between wrist and elbow. The severed limb fell to earth. Still singing, he secured the arm to the ground with his foot, and with his other hand pried the knife from the quivering appendage on the ground. The threads flailed savagely at him. His song ceased.

The remaining four warriors could see only a shadowy picture of what was happening, but that was enough. As one, they fired a volley of arrows towards the cloud. Each aimed true, but there was no effect. The same was true on their second attempt. Realizing the futility of their battle, they turned and ran en mass.

Three of the four warriors were engulfed, the cloud swirling around them. The fourth saw the others swallowed by the cloud, and another flurry of red ribbons dance around his brothers in battle. At his feet landed a bloody leg. He stopped chanting and reserved his breath for a mad dash of salvation.

The women of the village fled with the children. Those children old enough, and fleet of foot ran with the women. Those too young to run were unceremoniousiously yanked from their resting places, tucked under arms, and carried.

Some ran for the low lying hills to the south and some ran for the brush and rocks to the north. A few ran to the east, fleeing on the bare and open grounds towards the sun now sitting above the horizon.

The remainder of the men circled the cloud and taunted. There was no fear now, the anger and pride far overwhelmed the fear.

The cloud flattened and took those that stayed.

The cloud pursued the ones that fled.

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As Buckingham and Swimming Snake stopped, the white man held his hand to the horizon. At arm's length he could place two hands between the morning sun and the horizon. Each finger one could fit was about fifteen minutes.

The sun had been up two hours.

"Okay Snake, how long do you figure we have to the village? We have been moving right along. The ground looks plumb familiar…."

"Half a day. Maybe a little more. When the sun is just past overhead." Replied Snake. "If our pace were a bit faster."

"Seems a long spell," said Buck.

"It matters not. It is already too late."

"What do ye mean?" asked Buckingham.

"I mean that it is too late."

Snake slowly pulled the medicine knife and placed it behind his head. With a slow sawing motion, he hacked through his flowing hair, letting it fall to the ground. Then, as Buck watched dumbfounded, Snake grasped the blade between thumb and forefinger – the sliver of exposed edge extending between them – and drew it across this chest three times, starting from left shoulder and angling downward to the right. Blood flowed coating his chest and belly.

"For Christ's sake man, what are ye doing?" shouted Buckingham.

"I am mourning." He stood facing the sun, his expression showing no emotion, nor pain.

"There is death. There is death of my friends and my family. The Morning Star burns no more."

Three fingers of each hand were drawn through the blood flooding his chest. Three fingers were pulled across his face on each side. Crimson tracks in their wake.

Swimming Snake turned and faced Buckingham, but it was not a face that Buck recognized.

"My brother…I told you that I am unworthy. I am unworthy because I have been tempted to use my power for my own gain. Always I desired things. Distinction amongst my brothers. Wealth…women. Of this I have spoken.

Now I have another desire. A desire that claims my heart. A desire I *will* use my power for, whether honorable or not. I desire *revenge.* I will not let my heart stop beating until I have that in my grasp."

Swimming Snake faced the morning sun once more, raised his hands, and cried a wordless scream. Beneath Buckingham's feet the ground trembled. The air around them dropped in temperature, as if a winter breeze had fallen upon them.

In the sky an eagle screamed back at Swimming Snake.

Buck stepped back a pace and looked at Snake. "You be scaring me some."

"As am I afraid," said Snake. He looked at his white brother. "No, I fear not my death. I fear what the world has become here. I fear what I shall become. I fear my death will be a failure to my people. His eyes burned deep in their sockets and though slight of stature, he now seemed broader than the sky.

"We part ways now. The battle we fight will be the same, but we will not stand together, except in our hearts." Reaching into his bundle he pulled forth the third item. A pouch a foot deep and a foot across.

"I do not know why I brought this, but it is yours. It is the white man's medicine. It is for you to use." He handed the pouch to Walks with Limp.

Buckingham took the pouch and peered inside.

"Good god, man. Where did you get this?"

Snake replied. "I have had it for – forever it seems. It was taken from the white men who were traveling with you when we first met."

Buck looked into the pouch again. "There must be ten pounds of powder in here. You are lucky you didn't blow yourself to kingdom come."

Snake looked to the horizon where the village would lie, then back to his brother. "You must return to the valley. It is defenseless now. You must remove its home as this evil has removed our home." He paused. "I must go and face the evil, but if I fail, it must not have a place to return to."

Buckingham felt ill. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"I do not know. This you must decide," replied Snake.

Buck thought about it for a moment.

"There is only one thing, Snake."

"What is that?" asked Swimming Snake.

"Why the hell did you let me walk this far only to tell me to turn around and go back? That is downright mean. You are acting more and more like a savage every day."

"And you like a white man."

"Take care my brother."

"And you, my brother. We *shall* meet once more.

Chapter Eleven
Song of Buckingham

"Is not the sky a father and the earth a mother, and are not all living things with feet or wings or roots their children?"
"Give me the strength to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that is!" -Black Elk

For the first mile, Buckingham walked a plodding march back the route he had came. His heart was heavy, and he knew in his leaden heart what Swimming Snake said was true. The village was gone. With each step, the gravity of the loss weighed him down more – a depression he had not felt for years.

For fifteen years he had wandered the mountains. A decade and a half into his life he had left from 'back east.' He had left a past he could not stomach, trading for a future he could not guess.

When he left, he had not known where he was headed, or what he hoped to find. All he had known, at the time, was that anything, even an unforeseen death, was better than the life that lay in store should he stay.

From a barefoot poor rock farm he fled. Never knowing his mother, who died giving birth to him, he had only his father for companionship; a father he felt resented Buck's very existence, blaming him for the loss of a wife.

Looking back with a wisdom that comes with age and experience, Buck realized what he had taken as punishment was probably not. The toil and struggle from sunrise to sunset was not a punishment, it was merely the requirement of making ends meet in an attempt to stave off famine and destitution.

The distance imposed by his father was not out of anger, but fear. Fear that came from loosing a loved one and the fear that he might loose the

offspring of that loved one.

Now he wondered. He wondered what had become of the tired man who had sired him. The work of the farm had been enough to kill two healthy men, let alone a single man who would now be old and infirm. The guilt of his youthful actions had always been carefully shielded – blanketed by day-to-day needs and requirements.

The need for a full belly. The requirement of shelter.

The actions of his life, and the decisions made, came crashing down on Buck. He found himself weeping in sorrow, guilt, and self pity as he walked.

Until now, he never thought much of his past decisions. Each day was a new day and a new life. Sleep at night was death of that day and morning a rebirth. It kept life simple.

At fifteen, he traveled hungry and alone, wearing only the rags on his back until he hit the Mississippi River. There, in a town – he could not remember the name – he lived on discarded scraps and handouts from those who would condescend to feed a homeless waif. He remembered fighting packs of dogs wandering the muddy streets for what bits of food might be found in the garbage.

As life was about to drag him into the folds of madness, he wandered into the midst of some men. Not ordinary men, with jobs and security, power and wealth, but men who stank of skins, whiskey, and bait.

Mountain men.

In the year of 1800, he found companions. Men who looked upon him with cold eyes and warm hearts.

Pierre Leblanc was the first of the mountain men he met. He still remembered the first words spoken by the man who was to become his mentor.

Pierre had smashed Buck's nose flat against his face and was holding a knife to his throat. The blood was running freely down Buckingham's face, coating his throat and sticking the torn shirt to his chest. LeBlanc spoke to him in a voice soft as silk and a breath that reeked of rotten meat and whiskey.

"Young puppy. Before I slit your gullet, I must ask. Why? Why did you feel you could take of my possessions without asking this one for permission?"

A grim smile was set on LeBlanc's face. "Come now. Go to your maker with the truth on your lips."

Buckingham no longer cared. He was too tired and hungry for death to frighten him. He welcomed the thought of a night never ending.

He said simply, "I was hungry."

LeBlanc's drunken eyes sharpened for a moment. The knife was still held to Buck's throat, but the pressure was less. Then the eyes lost their focus in thought.

"You were hungry. Yes. Hungry. Hunger can bring a man to do many things."

He lowered the knife. "It can do many things that do not make a man proud." LeBlanc looked squarely into Buckingham's eyes. "Are you so hungry you would do anything? Are you so hungry you would sell your soul? Are you so hungry you would eat your best friend if he were dead?"

Buck thought. "No. I do not think I could do that."

LeBlanc laughed. "But you had to think about it. Therefore, I think that you are truly hungry. A hunger that a man should not feel." He slipped the knife under a red sash lashed tightly around his lean waist. "Pray you are never so hungry that you must do that which can never be undone."

The world had gone to a soothing black and thought fled. When he awoke it was to a new life.

The blood on his face and chest was still there. It was no longer fluid, but caked and flaking. Rolling his head to the side, he saw three men hunkered down around a campfire in the early morning light. One he recognized – LeBlanc. Two he did not know.

Without turning his head, LeBlanc called out, "So. The puppy is awake." Taking a slab of wood, his knife reappeared as if by magic in his hand. With the bare blade he scraped the surface of the wood until it was fresh core. The blade then disappeared.

With careful fingers, he pulled a chunk of meat from a rock inside the fire pit and placed it upon the wood. Lifting a battered and bent tin cup, he filled it with something ladled from a blackened pot hanging over the fire. Both these he set next to Buckingham.

Charred meat on the outside and blood ran from the center. The cup steamed and Buck did not know what it contained, but it was the finest feast he had ever eaten.

No words of welcome were spoken. The only welcome was a meal that stretched the skin tight over his stomach.

No words of gratitude were spoken, except for tears of joy that dripped

from his chin, seasoning the roast of dog he ate.

Over the next year, he learned of the men who had accepted him. No, they had adopted him as one of their family, not accepted. One was named Pourelle, and of the same nationality as LeBlanc. Pourelle was a man well educated and quite insane.

A man who at times unpredicted would recite poetry and song to the land around him. A man who LeBlanc never turned his back upon.

The other was a man unnamed. Never once did Buck hear his name spoken, either to him or about him. Should the man speak, it was only in grunts or motions of his hands. At first, Buckingham thought the man impaired and unable to speak.

After months of companionship and travel, he realized that the man spent his time listening and observing, rather than expounding on matters that may – or may not – have been important to those around him.

At one time, high in the mountains and months after they had met, Buck and the man with no name sat on a hillside looking at the world.

The man turned to Buckingham and asked, "Did you see that? Did you hear it when it fell?"

Buck had been startled and shook his head.

The man looked saddened and shook his head in return. "It is not important."

Those were the last and only words that Buck ever heard him speak.

LeBlanc was the undeclared leader of the group. After time, Buck found that the man could read and write. To what extent Buck never knew. He did know that people feared LeBlanc. When they entered the taverns and inns, the sea of people would part, eyes would cast downward, and when addressed – it was with respect.

As leader of the group, LeBlanc outfitted Buck for his first trek to the mountains. He supplied Buckingham with the bare minimums. A small caliber rifle and a handful of powder and balls. A rusted butcher knife without a scabbard.

What he did not supply in material items he made up for in knowledge. He taught Buck to shoot, and to shoot to the mark. He taught him that any caliber rifle was worthless, unless the ball was placed in the right spot. He taught him to take the rust from the blade of his knife by rubbing it in the sand, and to sharpen it to an edge that could shave hair by stroking it on a flat river rock.

The man with no name taught Buck as well. He taught him that one

learned nothing, saw nothing, and heard nothing if one was talking and thinking about himself. By walking in silence with the man, he learned to listen to the wind, see the flight of birds in the sky, to notice the danger that lurked motionless in the shadow.

From Pourelle he learned that nothing mattered in life, unless one placed value on it. He learned that anything one owned could be taken at any time, except for the values of the thoughts in one's mind. If singing brought joy – you sang. If linking words together, and by doing so, it painted a picture in your mind, then indeed, it was a masterpiece, even if unappreciated by others. He learned the boundary.

An area created in your mind and surrounding oneself. If another forced entry into that space, you attacked. You attacked like a wild animal until the other was driven from your space or was dead. That space was yours and the only thing you could ever own in your life.

For five years he traveled with this family, until death collected its debts.

One spring morning they had awoken missing the man with no name. Searching they found him. Silent as always. Looking out over the land, sitting with eyes open and unblinking. They did not bury him, but left him as they found him.

Silent.

A few months later Pourelle stood up from the campfire, raised his voice in a tempest of rhyme and prose, and walked into the night – never to return.

On the morn, they searched in vain. His possessions were left at the campsite in the event he should return. If he did, they never learned, although they waited for three days.

A year after that, LeBlanc died as befitting a man of his character – and in a fashion he would have appreciated.

Buck and he had returned to a settlement; to winter in comfort and warmth. A night of entertainment was in order and by the dawn, Buckingham had learned the fate of his last friend.

LeBlanc had been stabbed through the heart with his own knife; by a whore he had purchased in the evening.

When asked why she had performed the deed, she replied, "Because I loved him."

Chapter Twelve
Song of Snake

When it comes time to die, be not like those whose hearts are filled with the fear of death, so when their time comes they weep and pray for a little more time to live their lives over again in a different way. Sing your death song, and die like a hero going home.
— Chief Aupumut

As Swimming Snake walked, he too reflected upon his own life.

Never in his life had he been consumed by the desire for revenge. Far from it. His life had been balanced and – for the most part – serene.

At the time of his birth, he too was deprived of a parent, his father. Not through any glorious act of battle or bravery, but through accident. While on a trip to the mountains, his father's horse spooked.

What it was that caused the horse to bolt, no one was sure, but what was known was that his father was thrown from the horse, breaking his right leg in the fall.

A splintered end of bone protruded forth from the skin, and bright blood pumped in arcing jets. It had severed an artery. All that remained was to watch as the man quickly and quietly bled out.

Morning Star entered a period of mourning, then set it aside, to care for her son.

Death was an unpleasant fact, it was something to be mourned, but not kept to one's breast for eternity. Life went on, and while the memory of her man never faded, the pain did. The pain eased each time her eyes fell upon her son.

Snake, then known as Runner, was much as other children in the tribe. He had energy that would not end, inquisitiveness that grew each day from the time his eyes opened in the morning to the time they grudgingly closed

at night; always there were questions on his lips.

A swarm of biting gnats was an aggravation, but an annoyance that would gladly be taken over the company of this young one.

While he showed respect to all elders, he plagued them – with every breath.

"Why do the birds not fall from the sky?"

"Why does the snake not have wings?"

"We eat sweet grasses, but some make us ill."

"Why is that?"

"Why does an arrow miss?"

"Why…why…why?"

Moreover, from morning to evening, he never stopped talking. He talked to the elders. He talked to the other children. He talked to the horses. Then – when his first decade had been reached – he talked to things that others could not see.

It was common to find him engaged in conversation with the very wind sweeping across the prairie. Elders of the tribe became worried. Children always have make believe friends, warriors of the imagination, a bevy of imaginary friends to occupy the day, but this went beyond normal in their eyes.

After a time, they chided him, and scolded his behavior.

As one morning a person awakes to find ice on the stream, Runner's behavior changed. No longer did he speak aloud to friends that could not be seen, in fact, no longer did he talk at great length to any.

Except for Morning Star. To her he would speak, and speak only the truth, though he knew at times her eyes showed disbelief.

Swimming Snake never questioned the reality of the voices he heard. If one sat inside one's lodge, talking to another outside, the two could not see each other, for they were separated by a thin piece of tanned hide. You could not see the other person, but they were real. There was no doubt of this.

He could find no difference between that and the voices he heard, for he and the voices were separated. This he understood.

Not by hide, but by something else – a veil imposed by the world. These voices gave him answers.

The hidden ones would answer any question he asked and never did they seem annoyed. If anything, they were joyful to have someone ask and seek their knowledge.

When he asked why the eagle did not drop from the sky, the voices explained.

They told of how the animal worked with the sky. The wings beat against the sky and pushed the animal away from the earth. More than that, the sun worked with the eagle. Snake did not fully understand, but the warmth of the sun would cause the air to rush upwards, supplying a wind from the ground allowing the bird to rest its wings and float.

All of his new knowledge he poured forth to Morning Star. She listened carefully to all things that her son repeated to her. Not fully accepting the existence of these voices, she realized it did not matter.

If the voice came from within Snake's own head, or if the voice indeed came from something not seen by others, the words that Snake repeated were wise.

Nothing he described could be found to contain fault or harm.

As he grew, Swimming Snake occasionally caught glimpses of…things. Never quite plain, they were as shadows or flickers in his eye. Once he felt the presence of a horse, and when he looked, he could almost see the shadow of the beast on the ground. He knew that it stood, head bowed, grazing on the grass. When he looked at the ground, he could see the grass was unmoving and untouched.

Immediately the question was silently placed by young Runner.

"What is it I am seeing?"

"You are seeing nothing and you are seeing the world around you."

Snake thought for a moment. "Then what is it that I am almost seeing? What is it that I am feeling?"

The voice laughed quietly. "You are almost seeing the horse. You are almost seeing a horse that has moved on in its existence."

"You mean dead?"

"Yes," the voice replied. "That is a word you use. Look at your feet. What do you see?"

Snake looked at the ground. He saw nothing out of place at first, but then caught a glimpse of it, hidden under a clump of sagebrush. It was a skull. The skull of a horse.

Picking it up, he held it high. The shadowy flicker that was the horse turned briefly to stare.

"Is this the…?"

"Yes, it is," said the voice.

"Does he miss it?"

The voice paused before answering. “Yes, he misses it. He has moved on and left it behind, but a part of him misses it. That is normal. That is the way of man and beast.”

For days thereafter, Swimming Snake carried the sun bleached skull around with him and thought on the matter. He would follow the phantom around, carrying the skull carefully, and in what he felt was a respectful manner.

When the horse went to water, he would accompany it. While the phantasm would stand in the creek drinking, it never seemed to get its fill of water. Tiring of waiting, Runner would lay in the water using the skull for a pillow. On occasion, he spoke to the horse and asked questions of it. Never did the ghost answer.

Unable to let the matter rest, he asked aloud why the horse did not answer. The voice answered quietly in his head.

“Perhaps the spirit does not wish to. For most of its life, it existed as a beast of burden. It existed for barter. In its time it was treated well, in its time it was treated badly, but always it was a slave to its owners.

After its death, it found that others had no further use for it.

No more did men brush it, feed it, or water it. No attention was paid to it. Now you follow and ask questions of it. Perhaps it is not paying attention to you.”

Snake rose from the water for the final time. He looked at the skull in his hands and gently set it on the bank of the stream. Without looking back, he walked from the water’s edge.

Chapter Thirteen
Return to the Valley

Battle not with monsters lest you become a monster, for if you gaze into the abyss the abyss gazes into you. -Nietzsche

Buckingham cussed the ground that made him trip. He cussed the wind that could not ease his troubled lungs. He cussed Swimming Snake for sending him back. He cussed himself for starting this god-awful mess in the first place.

He had no idea of what he was going to do once he had returned to the valley. The only thing driving him was the obsession to get there. To stand where it started. He was a man with demons that pushed him from behind and would stand in his path when he arrived at his final destination.

Buck had started out without looking back, a gentle but fast walk eating the miles. An hour into the return, he had broken into a lope – half-run and half-trot. A pace that not only ate the miles, but ate what little reserves of strength and stamina he had left.

He ran until he could run no more, then walked until he could catch his breath enough to run again.

No longer did he carefully watch his path and select the most comfortable ground. Cactus punctured his moccasins, embedding in the soles of his feet. The blood slicked the inside leather and, through the pain, he could feel the moccasins move and slide, lubricated with his own red oil.

In a way, it would not have bothered him if his pounding heart had given up and stopped. It would be a relief in its own rights, for to fall dead would mean that he no longer would have to make painful decisions.

No longer have to face the wave of guilt and despair. To no longer have responsibility fall on his weary shoulders.

This was not to be. While gaining in years, his body was used to harsh climates, stress, and extreme physical exertion. The pain and weariness felt like companions well met.

After an eternity and a minute, he stood on the valley rim for the second time.

An appalling view lay before Buckingham's eyes. This was not the lush, verdant crease in the earth that he remembered. It was a view of hell.

When Buck arrived at the rim of the valley, the immenseness and reality of his goal brought him to his knees.

His breath caught in his throat and his heart hammered in his chest.

Mirrored in the vista spread before him was the desolation of his spirit.

Years he had spent in God's mountains. He had seen the brilliant fire of the morning sun reflecting off glaciers, a hundred thousand years in the making; rivers of ice that defied the blazing sun of mountain summers. Frozen beauty that defied description.

He had watched as boiling water erupted from the ground in an immense geyser, spraying the heavens with steam, and mud pots bubble in an area known as Coulter's Hell.

His eyes had taken in layers of destruction left behind in miles of prairie, blackened by flash fires sparked by thunderstorms; setting the world ablaze for as far as the eye could see, but nothing he had seen prepared his heart for the panorama extending before him.

Life was stripped from this valley, stripped as the hide ripped from an animal before butchering, but it was more than that. It was as if the very soul of the earth had been raped and thrown from the basin, leaving only the naked and humiliated corpse of what once was. A graveyard – shunned by both demon and angel alike as unclean.

As far as Buckingham could see across the valley, down its slopes and scattered in the bottom, dead trees stood in a surrealistic caricature of a cemetery scattered with stark tombstones. Each second he looked, his eyes picked out more – still more – of an unearthly devastation.

The trip down the side was far easier than he anticipated it would be. His heavy heart pulled him downward. Buck could no more stop, or return uphill, than a river reverse itself and flow backward.

Tattered remnants of trees stretched out before him. The boughs were

tangled, snapped, and broken. Stripped from branches were all pine needles and leaves, leaving only gray skeletons visible. Those that had the dignity and grace to fall to earth were reduced to dust and decay.

The ground held neither moss nor grass, only a surly brown dirt that could hold no life. With no ground cover, the rains had furrowed it, leaving a texture that screamed of giant claws rending the surface.

From his vantage point, he could see the creek in the bottom, not sparkling and clear, but flowing with the same color as the ground. A mud choked stream that reminded him of a coffee colored serpent winding slowly through the lifeless land.

With a feeling of dismay, he continued towards the bottom. As he placed his feet on the first few steps leading into the barren ground, the air around him changed. Sound became dull and lifeless and he could feel his little remaining vitality slip from his body. The wind did not blow and no breeze was present to waft through the tops of the goblin trees.

As he walked and slid, he followed the tracks left where he and Snake climbed up out of the bottom. These were the only tracks he saw. Remembering his initial jaunt, and the sign he had seen – or thought he had seen – made him appreciate even more his brother coming after him. It had taken a lot of bravery to go after a foolish white man who had not listened. Swimming Snake had walked into the valley with his eyes unclouded.

In his mind, Buck had a revelation. It hit him hard. He faced that which he already knew, and had to accept the enormity of it.

If he had not gone to the valley in the first place, then whatever had followed them out would have stayed planted. If Snake were to be believed, about the village, and Buck believed him now with all his heart, then Buck himself was responsible for the fate that had fallen on the small tribe.

Buck had brought on the destruction of the people he had grown to love. It caused his chest to tighten and remorse to flood his being again. When it had almost brought his progress to a halt, he remembered something from the past.

Something LeBlanc had said in one of his lectures to a young and frightened boy.

"Little one…you sit and think of your past. Put it aside. It means nothing. Yes, you have done things that were wrong. You have made decisions that you wish you could go back and correct, but you cannot."

LeBlanc slowly stirred the campfire with a stick the length of his arm until a cloud of sparks danced up into the night air. They spiraled up for a ways then blinked out of sight.

"The past is like those sparks. It follows you for a while then goes black. It is still there, but you do not see it. Your mind will quiet and hide it. The good you will remember. The bad you will forget. If you do not…" He pointed towards Pourelle with the smoking branch, "then you will end up like our friend. Madness will consume you. Each day you will make decisions. Some will be good decisions, some will be bad. However, you will make them. When you are happy, you will make them. When you are sad, you will make them. When you are wise you will make them as well as when you are foolish.

If you come to a place where you refuse to make any more decisions, then you will be like our other friend." He pointed to the man whose name was not known. "He stopped making decisions. Now he only watches and listens. He travels the mountains with us, because I tell him to. He eats, because I tell him to."

Holding the branch by both ends he sat it across his knee and pressed both ends until it snapped, then he threw the pieces into the fire.

"Some day you will make a very bad decision. Maybe more than one. I know. I have made these. Your mind will not be able to ease the pain of those decisions. Then – and you will know when – you must act. You must do what you can to make amends for the decision. The decision will follow you, nipping at your heels and your heart until you do this."

The young Buckingham looked at LeBlanc. "You have done this? You have made a decision that haunted you?"

LeBlanc laughed until tears cut swaths through the dirt on his cheeks. "Yes! Once I made a bad decision. On one side I would die. On the other – well it does not matter. I chose the other and the memory of that haunted me. It chased me…through the day…and followed me into the nights. Then I acted on it."

"What did you do?"

LeBlanc looked at Buck and blinked. "I fed you."

"You fed me? And now the memories are gone?" asked Buck, fascinated.

"No, the memories are still there, but they do not chase me during the day." He looked at Buck and winked. "Only at night and their teeth are not as sharp now, but their eyes are still ferocious. One just does not look

them in the eye."

Now that he had grown, Buckingham understood it more. He also understood that now was a time that he would do something to remedy, or at least atone, for his decision.

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He walked the bottom at last.

Under his left arm was pinned the pouch Swimming Snake had given him. He still did not know what he was going to do with the powder. It was a right large amount, but even with the additional powder he had in his horn, it was not enough to affect the valley. There was not enough powder in the world to erase a ten mile long scar from the face of the earth.

When he had left Snake, he had felt guilty. He had felt that Snake was racing into the teeth of danger and he was going the other way. Now – looking at the terrain around him – he wasn't so sure.

Kneeling he set the pouch on the ground gently.

Leather thongs, wrapped around the bag, prevented its explosive stuffing from spilling out. He undid the knots and carefully opened the bag to look once more. With thumb and forefinger, he gently spread the tattered canvas top.

Powder – nothing but plain old black powder. It was coarser than that which he carried. It would not do for priming, but might do in a bind to use as the main charge for his rifle. Dipping his finger in, he felt its texture for moisture.

Halfway through the swipe, the tip of his finger touched something. Frowning, he dug deeper until he could grasp it and pull it from the charcoal hued grave. Looking at it, he raised it to his lips and blew on it, scattering the last grains of powder from its soft surface.

It was a leather pouch, grayed from immersion in the gunpowder. It looked familiar to him; then he knew for sure where he had seen it.

It was Swimming Snake's medicine bag.

The temptation was on him. With all his heart he wanted to open the plain buckskin bag and explore its contents. For years he had wondered what Snake had in it that was so all fired important.

Buck had asked Snake a couple of times what it contained. Each time he had asked, Swimming Snake appeared insulted. The final time he asked, his brother had taken the time to explain to him the error of his

ways.

It seemed that what goes into a medicine bag is quite personal to the man creating it. It could be – does not mean there was – but could be things like a particular rock, twig, feather or whatever; anything that held 'power' for the owner.

One thing you did not do was let another open it and paw around. Just was not done. Buckingham reckoned that it would be similar to asking a man if he would have his wife undress so you could have a look see. Just not socially proper.

Buck no longer asked Snake what was in it, but he did offer guesses – just to annoy Snake – not that Buckingham really thought Snake would stuff horse dung or gopher peters into the bag. This was his chance to find out once and for all. Probably just a couple of kernels of corn, a shiny coin…or such.

Buck slowly grasped the top of the bag. As he did so the skin of his arm grew the biggest mass of goose bumps he had ever seen. It was like the coldest winter snow on that arm and someone walking over his grave at the same time.

He pulled his hand away with a start. Slowly his arm began to warm and tingle, returning to normal.

Buck shook his head, and then looped the bag around his neck. It did not bring on another attack, but instead felt warm. That were right strange in itself, as it did not touch his skin, but rested on his buckskin shirt.

Buck took stock of himself.

He was exhausted and bleeding from a dozen shallow cuts. The stock of his rifle had cracked somewhere towards the lower end of his slide into the valley and his cap was missing. He grunted.

The cap might be missing, but so was the guilt and fear.

In their place there was anger.

A cold red rage keeping him from feeling the sting of the cuts or the puncture of the cactus.

He was a by-god mountain man – here to demand an accounting.

Chapter Fourteen
Return to the Village

"Celebrate your success and stand strong when adversity hits, for when the storm clouds come in, the eagles soar while the small birds take cover" - Anon.

Swimming Snake saw the lodges long before he heard the wailing from the handful of survivors.

Smoke no longer rose into the sky from the abandoned lodges, the fires had burned down and were now as dead as the bodies lying scattered on the ground. Here and there, a few women and children clung to each other while watching the sky fearfully. No comfort could he give, so he did not attempt to give consolation.

Slowly he walked an ever expanding circle around the lodges.

Here lay the body of a warrior, dismembered with parts lying on the blood soaked ground. By the creek he found a horse. It was flayed with a thousand cuts. In any direction he turned, he found death.

Farther up the creek, he stopped – finding that for which he searched – turned, and went to his lodge.

Drawing his knife he slid it through the tough hide cover and sawed downwards until he had reached the edge next to the ground. Moving over he repeated the cut, then severed it across the top. Carefully folding this into a tight bundle, he slung it over his shoulder and returned to the creek.

There he laid it on the ground and tenderly wrapped the body of his mother in it. With rocks he weighted down the edges, not in burial, but to keep the prowling creatures from performing the acts that came naturally to them.

Returning to his desecrated lodge, he entered through the opening and

walked the path of the sun in proper fashion, until he was at the rear of the lodge. There he stripped off his clothing and stood naked. From a par fleche bag he pulled a simple loincloth and plain moccasins. These he put on, sank to the ground cross legged, and opened a second par fleche bag. From it he pulled a twist of dried sage.

Starting the smallest of fires in the fire pit, he felt the smoke burn his eyes until the flames took hold. Dipping the end of the twist into the flame, he withdrew it and waved it around, stopping at each of the four points of the compass. The sweet smoke of the sage filled his nostrils and was calming. When the ember had burned out, the remainder of dried sage he sat on a rock next to the fire.

Slowly he closed his eyes.

"It has been long since you sought my counsel."

"It has been long since I have felt the need to question the world around me." Snake replied aloud. "You have seen what has happened here. You know what is in my heart."

"You will fail."

Swimming Snake's eyes closed to slits. "There is nothing I can do to stop this evil?"

"You know the answer to that. You will fail. That is not the same as being unable to stop that which has passed through here.

When it came time for you to take your next steps in learning, you stopped talking to us. Let me ask of you a question. Can the worm fly"

Swimming Snake thought. "The worm cannot fly, but the worm can fly. That is not the answer I am seeking."

From the unseen, the voice said, "Then you will fail. You know the answer. You have spoken it. You know what must be done. Recite your lesson. In it is the answer, and it is the only answer you need."

Snake closed his eyes once more. "The worm cannot fly, but if it lets nature take its course, it becomes the butterfly, and being one and the same as the butterfly, it will take to the winds." He opened his eyes once more and asked, "If this thing I do will I be able to avenge my people?"

"No, you will fail."

"Then what is the purpose of my allowing this change in me?"

"For years you learned what it is and what it means to be one with the spirit of the world. To be one with the world. Even if you take the next step on the pathway, if you reject all and stand alone – you will fail. If you are one with the great circle, then *we* will not fail. I know this for

truth. Earlier I stood before the evil and tried to stop it. I could not. I failed, but if all work together, nothing can stand before us."

"If this thing I do, would it be possible…"

"*No*!" The voice was shrill and firm. "That must *never* be done. It is against the way of nature. The people you loved have moved on. Would you restore them to butchered and decaying bodies?

Would you hear their screams for eternity when they cannot die, and cannot live? Of this we have spoken before. Now you must decide."

Swimming Snake spoke. "I will do this. I fear for those of my tribe that are left."

"The creature has left. Others are watching it, it will not return for a while. There is time. There is always time. You have one more question. It is on your lips, but you ask it not. Now is not the time to deny such question."

Swimming Snake stood, fists clenched before him. "Why did you not stop it? I know you tried, but why did you not band together with the others? Why should this depend on me? Am I so powerful that you need me to do this thing?"

The laughter was as silver raindrops falling around Snake. "You ask. This is good. Nothing should be hidden.

We are old. Older than you can imagine. More moons have passed since our birth than stars in the sky. It has been so long that we do not even remember our birth.

The fire and passion has passed from our memory. Now, we go on set paths and let the burden fall upon what you call the way of nature. Death is the way of nature. It is not evil. It is not good. It is. What has happened to your people strikes your heart, but in the great circle of life, it is nothing.

My brothers and sisters give it no more notice than you would leaves falling from a tree. We are old. We are sleepy. You are needed. You will supply the passion. You will supply the anger.

If you gather wood all day, lay it in a pile, stand, and look upon it – what happens? Nothing. The wood lies there. It does not grow, it does not burn.

If a small spark is applied to it, a flame is born. The flame grows until it reaches the heavens. You will be that spark."

The laughter pealed out once more. "Believe in what I say. When the fire is ignited this time, nothing will stand before it. It will flee or die. A

death that will not be moving on, but extinction."

"What should I do?" asked Snake.

The voice hesitated. "You must go to where you stopped. The path goes on, but you must start again from the place at which you stopped. You knew this also, for you have cloaked yourself with the same items you wore when you stepped from the path. The only thing missing is the stone that you took before you fled from your future and placed it in the medicine bag."

Swimming Snake lowered his eyes to the ground. "The stone is now with another. Will it…"

"No. One pebble does not make the path. It will not be missed or hinder you. You have moved far beyond that. In some way it may help the other, but if it does not do that – it will do no harm. You worry about the man you call your brother. If you have question, ask."

Snake contemplated the question. "What is happening with him? What will his fate be?"

"A worthy question. You ask not what will become of you. You inquire as to your friend." A pause. "At this moment he digs in the earth like an animal. Before," the laughter returned, "he attempted to open the medicine bag. We were gentle with him. It is not time yet. Ask not the particulars, for they matter not. It is his fate. As to the future, that is different. His fate winds into a pattern even we cannot foresee – as if he will be the one to decide his destiny. How strange."

A wind rustled fiercely around the lodge, turning into a dust devil jumping across the plain. The voice was gone and Snake felt no need to call out to it for its return.

He knew what needed to be done. A part of his being rejoiced and a part of it feared, but he knew in his heart it no longer mattered. He was the worm, and a worm neither knows nor cares of its future. His wings awaited him. Behind the fire pit, he dug in the earth searching for an object long from view and memory.

Stepping from the lodge Snake looked around him a last time. The small handful of survivors worked together to pack and carry what they could. Without word they turned and walked for the horizon. No song or chant filled the air. Their grief now went unvoiced, the only sound the muffled footsteps fading into a dark future.

Swimming Snake turned and looked to a hill in the north. It was too large to be rightly called a hill and too small to be a mountain. Even if he

hurried, it would be nightfall before he stood on the top. That was good. It had been night when he left the path leading up it, and would be so when he returned to it.

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The darkness enfolded him as he sat on the rock outcropping that crowned the hill. Snake let his mind ease. His anger was still there, but in the swirling mix of anger and hatred, serenity for his coming actions was mixed – calming the rolling emotions. Gradually his ears once more registered the small sounds around him. Slowly his eyes picked out the small sparks of fire in the sky; stars standing crisp and clean in his vision.

They seemed to be watching him. Waiting.

Snake set the small leather pouch on the ground before him. He had been worried when he had first dug it up. Worried that time, dirt or moisture had destroyed that which he so desperately needed now. His concerns were unfounded. When Morning Star had buried it, protection had been provided; the package carefully wrapped with greased leather. Layer upon layer he had peeled from it.

The first layers decayed and falling to pieces in his hands. Subsequent layers remained firm, and finally when he had reached the heart of it, his search was over.

Morning Star's father had left nothing for his family but this pouch. No words had ever been spoken between Snake and his mother about its existence. None were needed, as it had never been hidden from him. She had been told to save it for her son. She did.

His grandfather's medicine bag rested gently in the grass at his feet. A gateway to a future only slightly understood.

Loosening the drawstring that held its mouth tightly puckered together; he cautiously emptied the contents into his hand. Setting the bag back on the ground, he brought his hand closer to get a glimpse in the darkness. There lay six small objects. They were as hardened pellets or nuts.

Swimming Snake knew that at one time they appeared differently. These were the dried buttons of a cactus used by shamans and medicine men. Snake knew that much of his grandfather's peyote. He had never used the buttons before and was not precisely sure of what it did, or how it was used. Snake knew there was ceremony involved, but not the performance of the ceremony.

Mentally he shrugged; the spirits must forgive some things.

Placing one in his mouth he tasted it on the tip of his tongue. It felt dry and wrinkled; the taste was a bit dusty. Gently he bit upon it and was surprised by its resistance. Biting harder it slowly flattened between his teeth like ancient leather. Suddenly his mouth was filled with a bitter taste and saliva flowed like a river. Gagging slightly he continued chewing. When that morsel could offer no more, he moved to the next, until he had completed all six of the buttons.

Sometime during his magic meal he vomited. It was not an unpleasant experience, more a flow and purging of his body. When all was done, he sat quietly and waited. His body felt numb. Not a numbness of illness or injury, but a numbness that bordered on emptiness. He felt himself a container awaiting something to fill it.

As he waited he knew he was being filled. The night around him entered at the top of his head, flowed freely down his neck and seemed to coat the inside of his chest. It kept a steady pace down the inside of his body, through his hips and into his legs. He could feel the stars sticking to the inside of his body and when he looked at his chest and legs, he could see them. Small specks that glowed through his skin, as if he were covered with fire flies.

Moving his hands before him in the air, the stars beneath the skin left long trails of light that glowed in the air after his hands passed. They did not disappear and soon an intricately woven net of light surrounded him. He found that by sitting silently and still, they would gradually darken and disappear.

As the lines vanished, his vision was drawn to the darkness around him once more. As his eyes adjusted he found the darkness had a subtle glow. This one more familiar to him.

Tiny threads of light were once more connecting all things together. He could see the grasshopper connected to the rock it was sitting on by a small, bright thread of silver. More than that, he could see another, but much dimmer thread, leading off into the night. As he watched, he saw the grasshopper take flight and followed that dim thread. As it traveled the path of the thread, the thread brightened and the insect became a comet heading off into its own personal future.

From his own body, from the stars embedded in it, a thousand small strands flew out in every direction. Instinctively he knew they were his attachments to everything in his life. His decisions made – and decisions about to be made. While all of the input should have been overwhelming

and incomprehensible, it was not. It all made perfect sense and made him feel at ease with himself. Even the voices made him feel at ease.

Sometime during his study of the threads, the voices had appeared. Not directed towards him, he had not responded. Now the hundreds of voices, all speaking at once, assailed his senses. Placing his hands to his ears did not seem to deaden them.

When he could stand no more he had yelled to them.

"I am here! I am ready to learn!"

Silence blanketed the landscape for a time, and then the voice he was familiar with spoke to him in a tinkle of laughter. The laughter grew as hundreds of other voices joined in the mirth.

"You are ready to learn?" The laughter grew in volume. "There is a lesson to be taught here tonight, but you will not be the student. Indeed, you shall be the teacher.

All things gather here tonight to learn. Except you. It is from you *we* will learn. It is you we will study and learn – or more precisely – remember. Let us begin."

The voices faded to whispers and the lesson began. Snake understood finally what was happening. It was not comforting, but at least he possessed understanding.

The creatures, the spirits, the sprites surrounding him, disassembled his life, from the time he was born onward. They were like wolves devouring Snake and his past. Every moment of his life was pulled forth from him and examined.

Never before remembered was his birth and the light that shown on his eyes, forcing them to clench tight. The discomfort, the feeling of slipperiness, the fear at birth; lapped up by the surrounding entities. They took the emotion into themselves and it swirled among them. The happiness and revitalization of the first time his lips suckled at the breast of his mother was relived and shared with the throng.

Through this, they felt the same happiness and security. It swelled through the surrounding beings, amplified by each until emotion coursed through the very earth upon which he stood.

Thus it continued for a time without end. The eternity of Snake's lifetime. An eternity that lasted the blink of an eye. All the deeds performed through his youth. The happiness, the shame, the sadness, the fear, the anger, the dreams. All multiplied in sharing. The time when first he felt love – both mental and physical. The stars embedded in his body

expanded outward and the very air was a dancing kaleidoscope of light and emotion.

The sharing continued through the death of Morning Star, the friendship of Buckingham, and the cloud. By that time, the emotions were more powerful than a thousand suns blazing on a desert of white sand.

A silence brought Snake back to his senses. At the final sharing of the end of his tribe, all was stillness. He sat, feeling the world and spirits around him, for they were still there, but silent.

They were different now. The calmness was gone, even though silence reigned. The world was now still. The world was now listening. The world was now deadly.

A voice came to him. No laughter in it. A voice sullen and flat as the still before the storm.

"You lead us. We will follow. We will hunt, bring forth the enemy. His death song will be trampled beneath our feet and hooves."

Swimming Snake rose to his feet as the first rays of the morning sun rose in the east. The light was blood red. The world rose with him. Where he walked, the earth trembled.

Chapter Fifteen
The Death Cloud

The hunting-ground of the Indian is yonder, among the purple clouds of the evening. The stars are very thick there, and the red light is heaped together like mountains in the heart of a forest. - Anna S. Stephens

The death cloud reached the maximum distance it could safely go from the Valley. Fear was not an emotion it recognized, but it did know its limitations.

Its boundaries.

Boundaries controlled by the power source emanating from the valley far behind. As the cloud moved farther and farther away from the valley it became increasingly difficult to maintain the energy required for proper and efficient function. In emergency situations, power could be pulled directly from the light of the sun, but this was neither efficient nor adequate. The solar radiation was enough to maintain existence, but not perform its duties.

The death cloud was not designed as an offensive entity, but it was not without offensive programs.

By design, it was built to accommodate almost all situations, and in proof, throughout the course of an hour, it had evolved into a battle posture.

The cloud modified its shape to configure to its new objective – survival. It understood in a way that it was facing a danger. This was novel in itself and not treated lightly. Seldom would such a machine face danger or the requirement to respond to that danger. The bilious cloud shrank into itself; the puffy but dangerous billows flattened in shape and spread out. Soon it covered an area of over three hundred yards in

diameter, but with a thickness of only one foot.

No longer did it appear as a cloud. From below, what could be seen appeared as the bottom of a large leafy autumn tree. The leaves composed of glass. The exposed surface was shiny and hard in appearance. The leaves glowed and pulsed with hues of red and orange, reflecting the blood red light of the morning sun. The branches, veins of energy, connecting the leaves were a stark and ghostly green.

Air currents no longer pulled from its body streamers and banners; in its battle mode the particles compressed against each other to a degree giving it substance and protection. It became its own armor. Lowering to a constant twenty feet above the surface of the ground it turned and began its flight back to the valley.

Beneath it – once more – the grass and sagebrush charred, and areas broke into flame. The wake of the cloud was marked with the smoke and fire of an alien hell. Small animals that had previously gone unnoticed, not betraying their position by not moving, were incinerated as a matter of course, not detection.

The expenditure of energy was calculated to increase as the distance to the Valley's power lessened.

Here, two jackrabbits froze in the brush. With an electric blue flash, their flesh charred and crumpled into the pit of molten glass formed when the sand under them melted and flowed together.

A colony of ants received similar treatment, although not warranting the same amount of effort. Their bodies sizzled and popped in a shimmer of heat waves that seared the life from the thousands of bodies.

Another deer – a white tail – shrilled a whistle like scream as its body ignited from within, flames bursting in jets from its hide, the smell of burned meat permeating the air.

The death cloud did not consider this a senseless slaughter. It knew not from where danger was coming and no chances would be taken.

Anything perceived as living, or in its path, would be extinguished in self-preservation.

For the first five miles of travel back towards the valley, the destruction was centrally located beneath the cloud. As it closed the distance, its area of destruction fanned out, encompassing an area not restricted to its shadowy footprint on the ground.

Flares of energy, small lightning bolts, sparkled outward claiming anything that was near its path. Spidery webs of energy hunted down even

the insects fleeing in the air, in a never ending flurry of tiny, lethal tendrils.

Nothing would be allowed to stand in the path to safety.

Chapter Sixteen

A Mountain Man Stands

"When their adventures do not succeed, they run away. It was the mark of a brave man to face things that are, and seem, terrible for a man, because it is noble to do so and disgraceful not to do so." - Aristotle

Buckingham stood in the valley. Not just anywhere in the valley, but by the mound that he and Swimming Snake had sat upon. His chest had stopped convulsing with the effort to regain his wind and the searing agony from his overtaxed lungs had faded to an ache that grew and shrank as he pulled breath into his body and expelled it.

Standing there, he realized he had absolutely no idea of what to do. He felt right foolish; his anger had supported him thus far, but it too was fading.

All he could do was stand on this cursed ground and look around. Nothing seemed available to vent upon what remained of his rage.

Settling his limited possessions on the ground he took stock. From his jug, he drank his fill of water and emptied the remainder on the ground where it splashed and slowly sank into a patch of mud and muck. Pulling the wiping stick from his rifle, he took a swatch of linen used for patching the balls of his rifle, and poked it down into the jug. With the end of the ramrod, he worked it around; absorbing what was left of the water inside.

Scowling, he opened his possibles bag and removed a worm jag from within, screwing it onto the end of the hickory wiping stick.

The rod was blackened from being rubbed with coal oil.

Poking the contraption inside the jug he twisted a few times and removed the now damp cloth.

The damp rag he tore into a long and narrow strip, stopping just short of

the edge and tearing it across – repeatedly – until he had a thin strip almost six feet long. Opening the bag of powder he pulled a handful forth, and setting the end of the strip into his powder filled hand, slowly pulled the cloth through his clenched fist.

When done, he had a powder caked wick to use as a fuse. Setting it aside, in the sunlight to dry, he turned back to the jug. Using one hand as a funnel, he filled the jug to the brim with powder.

"There," he said to the world, "Got myself a right fine little package. Not sure what to do with it, but by God, I bet there is something here that needs its attention."

Stymied as to his next move, Buckingham sat once more. It felt good to rest his body, though he knew there was little time left for action. The ground was hard and brown, and his eyes still drawn to the forest of lifeless trees around him. Placing his hands behind him he leaned back and looked skyward. Bright blue stood out more intense than he could remember, a sharp counter point to the desolation around him.

"Well…" he spoke idly to the sky. "If'n ya got any suggestions, now be the time. This pilgrim is lost."

Around his neck, the medicine bag began a gentle vibration. Without thinking he pulled it from his neck and cradled it in the palm of his hand. Felt in his hand, the vibration increased and before his eyes he saw the tawny buckskin disintegrate into powder, falling between his fingers. Among the powder lay the objects he had wondered about for so long.

When Buck finally saw the contents, he was not all that impressed. Here lay the claw of a hawk. Next to it a tiny square of thin parchment that appeared blood stained. Beneath all, a stone. Nothing that really instilled fear or confidence. Nothing that could explain the previous effect on his arm.

The mystery was not finished.

As he watched, the parchment burst into flame, turning to ash in an instant. It happened so fast that his hand was not burned. The claw glowed briefly…and…was gone. No dust, no flames, just not there anymore.

Buck fought the urge to fling the rock away, before something else happened. It was dusted with the fines from the powder left from the medicine bag. Carefully he wiped if off on his skin shirt, half expecting his shirt to go the way of the bag.

Holding it to his eye, to inspect his handiwork, he was taken by its

beauty. No ordinary stone was this. It was a crystal. Nature always created nice baubles, but this one was special. Clear, clearer than window glass in the cities. A bluish tint when the light struck it just perfect, six sided with faceted ends that tapered to a needle sharp point. In his wanderings he had found many pretties, but none so nice as this.

Looking through it gave a comforting view of the world. The sky was still a smothering blue, unaffected by the tint of the sparkler. The hillsides, with its death and decay, was mellowed some, the stone making even that desolation look somewhat more acceptable to a man's soul. As he turned, he stopped dead.

Through the crystal the mound appeared different. Rising off it was a mist. Through the almost undistorted picture he perceived the mist swirled in small vortexes across the surface of the mound. In an area on its near side, close to the top, they seemed more concentrated.

Lowering the fragment from his eye, he looked at the mound unfiltered. Without the unnatural lens between him and the mound, it looked as it always did. Just a rounded pile of earth about fifteen paces across and twice the height of a man.

Lifting his fragile monocle between him and the mound, he slowly walked towards it. As he approached, he could see the small whirlwinds more clearly.

They definitely were concentrated in one area. As he drew near the mount the crystal seemed to vibrate, tiny sparks jumped from its tip to sting his fingers. It was as if the rock itself did not want to go near this place. As if its purity would be sullied by proximity to the earthen mound.

Buckingham tried to walk up the side of the hillock, but could not do so. The crystal was doing something in his hand. It was a feeling that he had once in his life.

At a traveling medicine show they had displayed what they called a Leyden Jar. From a container rose a metal rod, ending in a small brass ball. When you touched it a spark would jump and if the person grasped it firmly, the muscles in arms and chest would quiver and convulse. The closer he got to the mount, the greater the intensity, until – when he reached the side and started to ascend – he had almost no control of his body.

Flinging himself away, he rolled in the dirt until he was far enough away that his body would respond to his commands and he could rise to his feet. Staggering back to his possessions, he laid the crystal on top of

his possibles bag and stood, heart pounding. Steeling his will and controlling his fear, he returned to the mound without the crystal.

This time he approached with caution. His caution was for nothing as when he arrived at the side and started moving to the top, there was no discomfort or pain. The sun shown down on his back and he stood atop the mound. Unharmed. Looking at his feet, to a spot a step or two away, he could see neither sign nor trace of the small whirlwinds he had viewed through the crystal. With his foot, he kicked and scuffed the earth. Nothing unusual, merely dirt, loose on top and hard packed an inch or two under the surface.

Nevertheless, something was here. Something that drew his mind and being; something the crystal let him see.

Sinking to his knees and facing uphill, he pulled his 'hawk from belt and pounded the blade into the ground, cutting and breaking the compacted soil into clumps. With his other hand he pulled them back between his legs like a badger digging a den. Buck concentrated his attention to an area two feet by two feet. Hacking and scraping in the limited space made it so he did not have to move and could devote full effort to the chore.

After a half hour, his mind drifted while his body continued the mindless task.

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Buckingham's first season in the mountains with LeBlanc had imprinted a dislike of digging. The high country had seemed like a dream to Buck. The warm summer nights, lying on the ground, blanket pushed aside, watching the stars burn far above. A full belly and friends, comfort and security – it felt like it would last forever.

Then came the first fall nights and the bite of mountain air chilled as a fine wine.

The blanket was now carefully tucked around the body, the body shaped into a crescent, facing the fire to catch all the heat that flowed from the flames, then radiated from the coals glowing orange in the darkness; when the flames died.

It was still a sense of well being, but halfway through the night, the cold crept into the small pockets of warmth nestled between blanket and body.

For a time the cold could be ignored, but when the shivers scooted across the skin, it was time to rise, toss twigs onto the coals and slowly

feed the fire back to its former intensity. When the shivers subsided, Buck would lay back down and catch an hour of sleep before starting the cycle over again.

As the newest member, that was his job. The cold was an omen. An omen of approaching times.

Summer had gradually slid into autumn, but there was no easy slide into winter. A man went to sleep one night expecting to wake up to a familiar world next day. He awoke to find the world a frightening wall of white and freezing cold. In the morning the sun came out feebly, but the world of white refused to melt and did not flee from the specter of the sun.

Buck had felt sure he would perish from the cold in the first week, but LeBlanc showed him the path of survival. In the afternoon, when the party made camp, a roaring fire was built, but with differences not found in any fire Buck had seen. Now the fire was built over a floor of rocks gathered from around the area. The size of the stones ranged from a man's fist to the size of his head. Buckingham remembered that now, more than ever, the fire was both friend and enemy.

The rocks, in their bed of fire, would pulse red from heat and some would explode, sending sharp fragments through the air, seeking blood from those who huddled close for warmth. When the fire was blazing enough to dispel the cold from the body, each man would return to the cold, just away from the fire and begin digging with his hawk. The frozen ground would grudgingly break into chunks and these were carefully set aside.

Labor continued until frozen hands refused to work. Each would return to the fire. Numb hands warmed slowly, until they tingled, then burned with the circulation returning to them. When fingers would bend once more, each returned to his personal hell of digging.

After the ground had been moved in an area the width of a man's body and its length, to a depth of eight inches; the super heated rocks would be carried between two sticks or rolled along the ground into the shallow nighttime graves. The earth that had been removed was placed back over the rocks and the frozen and tired bodies of the mountain men carefully lay atop all; covered with all the blankets available.

Rising through the ground and around the sleeping figures, captured by the blankets and held in a tenuous grasp, was the heat that kept a man neither cold nor warm, but in a purgatory in between state that would last until morning.

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The memory of the cold had returned to Buckingham at the same time reality returned. He found himself kneeling beside a hole in the ground that was almost as deep as his hands could reach.

His fingernails were broken and bloodied, but never had he noticed the pain. With a start, he realized he would probably still be digging, but he could go no farther.

Carefully sweeping the remaining dirt in the bottom of the hole aside, he peered in, eyes widening in amazement. The bottom of the hole was a sheet of metal. Dark gray, almost black – with a shine to it that reflected the image of a man possessed. Buck recoiled in horror, unable to stop himself even though he realized that it was his own image. Cold emanated from the metal, piercing his buckskin shirt, his flesh and threatening to freeze his heart.

Slumping to his side, he rolled to the bottom of the mound, unconsciousness taking his remaining scattered thoughts from him. Thus he stayed, in a sleep bordering death, until he awoke to a morning sun.

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Three entities formed three points – equally spaced – on a line stretching from west to east. At one end, in the east was the death cloud. At the western end of the line, Buckingham. In the middle was Swimming Snake. At this moment in their lives the trio shared the crimson morning sun. Their goals, though intertwined, were different. Ranging from repentance, vengeance and survival.

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Swimming Snake stood facing the morning sun. The night's activity and lack of sleep left him drained, emotionless. It felt the spirits surrounding him in the night had sucked all emotion from his mind and soul. Now, in the morning light, he could not feel the spirits' presence. Their power – the power that had surrounded him during his walk from the mountain was gone. Gone from his world, the spirits had disappeared into the void, taking with them a large portion of his life and spirit.

Snake stood at the edge of the deserted encampment, oblivious to the

flies and vermin that had gathered to feast upon the remains of his loved ones.

Even this did not evoke any strong feelings in him. Thought flashed in his mind that he was now less than human and a twinge of regret flared over his callousness of the moment. This was instantly blanketed and swept away by the dead feeling seeping from his mind. Unbidden, his feet propelled him forward to the east. A slow and unhurried shuffle.

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In the morning sun, the death cloud continued its destructive journey to the west.

During the night, it had grounded and flowed outward, dispersing until next to invisible. This was the best mode to conserve energy, with an added plus of being protected by its vast expanse.

Reforming, it configured to its battle structure once more. Yet again the death it dealt as it traveled was as final, but now – total. The air below it shimmered as the flickering one sees on the desert as the sun pounds down. No longer did it seek out and destroy every life form. The concentration and memory that required could be used elsewhere. Now it sterilized. It sterilized the ground below it in a fan of death that radiated forty five degrees from the edges. No animal or insect could live beneath its passage. The ground was as the ground of the Valley, devoid of insect or plant, the remains already brown and decaying. Worms, seeds and roots dwelling below the surface were just as lifeless, all dead to a depth of fifty feet.

Above the death cloud no shimmer exposed the danger. Any bird that happened to pass above was marked and painted as a target. On the top surface of the cloud a small blister the size of a walnut would appear – bursting open – a glowing ball rivaling the brightness of the sun sprung forth, flying unerringly towards the predetermined – and doomed – target.

Upon contact the small sun expanded, taking the shape of the object it targeted, and a gentle rain of gray ash floated downward from the sky.

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Buckingham awoke to the sun in his face and for a moment his thoughts were lost, confusion claiming his thinking. All too soon reality flooded back. His mouth was dry and lips cracked.

Starting to look and reach, he remembered he had poured the last of his water from the jug the previous day. At this instant, he would have sworn celibacy of the whiskey, if he could have but one drink of plain water.

Buck's hands ached and were stiff. To straighten his fingers, he laid his hands on his chest and pressed them flat, until they no longer looked as claws. Then he worked them together and flattened them once more, until he could force them open and closed on their own.

Sitting, his stomach lurched and he folded to his side heaving. No food remained in his paunch, and the best he could bring forth was stinging bile.

Wiping it from his lips and chin, he crawled on his knees to begin this final day's work.

Now Buck had a plan of action, he just wasn't sure how to initiate it. The black powder charge in the jug was fairly powerful – but not powerful enough.

As the powder 'blew,' it would shatter the ceramic of the jug and make a mighty 'puff' of smoke – give a fair amount of shock, but probably not enough to do any real damage.

If he covered it with the earth he had so painstakingly removed, it would increase the power of the explosion tremendously. Trouble being, if he buried the jug, the fuse he had prepared would hit the ground, being smothered before it came close to igniting the charge. How to get the fire to the jug. Therein lay the confounding question.

Buck set the jug and the fuse next to the hole and slowly walked back to his pile of possessions to study them. Not much there. Nothing that he could see that would solve his problem. He was just plain and simple trying to make the powder do what it was not intended to do.

If it were in a rifle, pushing a bullet, it was one thing. The fire was contained behind the ball and expanded explosively, driving the patched round ball from the muzzle. This was different. There was just no way to let the small amount of air needed remain around the wick while it passed through the ground.

Well…he could stick the muzzle of the rifle in the jug, bury it, and then touch off the trigger – firing the rifle, but that had a tiny drawback. Would not be real healthy to stand on top of the jug when it went off. Might ruin his whole day.

If he had enough cordage, rope, twine or such, he could tie a hitch around the trigger and set it off from a distance. Taking into account all

he had for hemp, sinew, thread and the like, there was no way for him to get much more than a couple paces from the explosion.

Taking off his war shirt, he pulled his knife and studied it for the best way to cut it into an endless strip he could use to pull the trigger. Buckingham had almost started cutting when it came to him. He rifle was already busted up. There was no sense in him loosing his shirt also.

Raising the muzzle to the sky, he reflexively looked for clouds and possible lightning. No sense ending up like Spider Johnson. Seeing nothing, he gritted his teeth and pulled the first trigger, then the second. With a "pfft…" from the touchhole and a roaring boom from the muzzle, the rifle discharged into the sky; a rising cloud of smoke declaring the passage of the .54 caliber ball.

By the time the echoes of the shot had stopped their reverberations, he had sat himself on his butt next to his gear. With his knife, he pried the tenon pin from the side of the stock and pulled the wiping stick from its hardware. Lifting the muzzle of the barrel away from the stock, he extracted it from its rear mount. Setting the stock aside, he turned his attention to the octagonal barrel.

From the bottom of his pack, Buck pulled forth the shabby spanner that would supposedly fit the square hook protruding from the breach plug. It was with contentment he found that it actually fit, and fit quite snuggly. His smile of pleasure turned to a frown when he was unable to hold the barrel in one hand and unscrew the plug with the other. His grip was not firm enough to keep the barrel from twisting in his hand. Switching hands, he found the results the same.

His cursing turned the air almost as blue as the cloud of smoke that had dissipated from firing the damned rifle. Once more, he sat on his rump and contemplated the situation. Reminded him of a story once told to him by a fellow trapper around a forgotten campfire.

Seems a man had lost everything and was crawling across a burning desert. His luck had been on the tramp for some time and just kept getting worse. Finally, when he could bear no more, the man looked to the heavens and beseeched, "Oh, Lord! Why me O Lord?"

After a few seconds, the Lord's voice boomed down from on high saying, "I don't rightly know, compadre…just something about you pisses me off."

After another ten minutes, a halfway smile returned to his lips and he rose. Gathering the barrel, hawk, and spanner, he headed towards his old

camp in the tree.

At the boulder that sat adjacent to his now exposed former camp, he found what he hoped he remembered. A large crack ran down the side of the rock in one spot, starting out four inches wide at the top and tapering to a hairline at the bottom, about five feet down. Setting the muzzle in the crack, he worked it down as far as it would go, then tapped it solidly with the back of the hawk. The octagonal barrel wedged solidly in the crack, holding it as if it were part of the stone.

T'were a good thing, as it took the strength of both his hands and arms to force the barrel plug to turn. Once it started, and he had forced it three quarters of a turn, he was able to twist the crude wrench and plug with one hand until the plug was out. With both hands, he pried up and down on the barrel until the rock relinquished its hold.

Curiosity, more than anything, made him raise the barrel to the sky and peer through it. Darkened with the residue of his final shot, he could still see the rifling spiraling down the length of the tube. One full turn for every sixty inches. He noted it still looked sharp after he last had it freshed back in Saint Louie.

Them Hawkin brothers did shining work, no doubt about it.

Turning, he strode back towards the mound, pausing only to pick his wiping stick from the earth.

At the mound, he tucked the end of the fuse on the wiping stick. Carefully he poked it through the length of the barrel until three inches remained exposed from the muzzle. With his finger, he worked the wick into the neck of the jug. Setting the barrel inside the mouth, he felt it come up against the lip tight, when the front blade sight refused to go any farther. Setting all into the hole he had dug, he started back filling it with dirt. Now he wished he had not scattered it down hill quite so far.

Sighing mightily, he pulled his shirt off his back once more and set it below, where the dirt had accumulated downhill. With both hands, he pushed the dirt onto the shirt and dragged it back uphill, depositing it in the cavity. It took twenty trips with the shirt before the hole was filled to the top once more, and only the breech end of the barrel stood skyward, an iron flagpole missing its banner; not totally missing, perhaps, for it still bore three feet of blackened cloth that remained of his impromptu fuse.

Buckingham rested. Nothing remained except to light the damned thing and see what happened. He found himself hobbling back to his gear once more and retrieving his flint and steel. Slowly, painfully, he walked the

short distance and climbed the side of the hillock again.

Holding the stone close to the fuse, he struck it a glancing blow with the steel. A shower of sparks sprang from contact and danced off the wick.

Nothing.

A second time he laid steel to stone with a cascade of sparks bouncing off the fuse.

Nothing.

Not even an ember taking to the cloth. He closed his eyes tiredly.

On the third time, his weariness vanished as a foot of the cloth disappeared in a sizzling puff of smoke that raced towards the breach of the barrel.

Damn! It moved far faster than he had ever envisioned it would. Flinging the steel and flint away, he ran from the mound.

It took less than a second and a half for the hissing flame to consume the remainder of exposed fuse and hit the barrel. The barrel slowed the burn some, but not enough that one would notice. Buck had barely hit the bottom of the mound when the package detonated.

A dull boom, with the undertones of a gigantic bell being struck one time, rang out. Dirt blossomed into the sky, followed by a puffing ball of fire, surrounded by a bloom of blue smoke. All hung in the sky for a heartbeat.

At the base of the mound, a ring of dirt humped slightly from the ground, spreading like a ripple that follows a rock being tossed into a pond. Behind this ripple chased a hazy curtain, extending out of sight into the sky. If Buckingham had been facing it, he would have recognized it as similar to an intense display of northern lights, expanding outwards in a curtain.

The dirt ring wave overtook him, forcing his running feet forward, and spilling him backwards – into the ring of lights. When it hit the walls of the valley, it disappeared. No trace of it remained, nor did any trace of Buckingham..

The hole Buck had burrowed in the side of the mound was back. It was larger now and its edges ragged. The smoke clinging to the side of the mound and filling the hole slowly floated off into the surrounding air. The shiny surface of cold, reflective metal at the bottom of the hole was still there, but now blackened and dull. It had not dented and no gaping hole adorned its surface, but marring it was a crack. A crack that bled hissing white mist from damaged innards.

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As Swimming Snake walked, his pace gained a rhythm, a rhythm duplicating his heartbeat. His steps became shorter with each foot placed firmly. Not a stomping of the foot, but a firm and solid stroke that struck the ground hard, with each step his moccasins displaced a small puff of dust. Snake's eyes remained fixed on the horizon, his attention on that which lay before him. Not once did he turn and look behind.

Clouds appeared in the sky, sparkling white in the sunlight, now that the sun had risen far above the eastern edge of the world. The cirrus clouds floated together in thin chevrons, all pointing in the direction of the medicine man's travel. As they formed, they started moving with him. Following. Far above and silent.

As one took shape and started its migration, another would slowly spring to life, form its aerial arrowhead, and follow.

In the myriad of gullies and washes crossing the land, dirt and sand dislodged from the walls, trickling downward. From deep in the earth, Snake's footsteps echoed as the heartbeat of a behemoth, buried beneath the skin of the world.

The breath of the world flowed from behind also. One moment hot with dust devils spinning away from him and into the distance – the next cold, a wind flat to the ground, brushing the grass down and holding it pressed to the bosom of the earth. Snake realized a power was there, but a power held in check.

Waiting. Watching. Challenging. Following. Growing.

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The cloud stopped suddenly and hovered. For an instant, the power radiating from the valley had ceased. All communication from its host had halted, leaving the death cloud lost and alone. A feeling that it had never encountered before. Finally, the power was back, but at a reduced level. Communication was back, but whereas before interchange and interface had been instant, there were now pauses in the exchange of data. Pauses that would not constitute the blink of an eye, being measured only in milliseconds, but pauses present before.

For every blast of energy the cloud expended, a rebuild period was now needed to charge back to its original strength.

It shared with the valley the knowledge that the capability to send information outward, to its origin in the stars, was gone. The original code, requiring it to return to the valley, download its information, and transmit all details to its distant home was derailed.

The destruction inflicted on the landscape beneath the cloud ceased. Power levels were brought back to maximum potential – and the death cloud resumed flight. System analysis was performed, because of the sensor data the death cloud was receiving. The sensors sent out signals that returned to the surface of the cloud with information. Between it and the valley, seismic activity was increasing.

This was abnormal.

At any other time, this would warrant a full investigation. No tectonic plate activity, nor geothermal activity should be occurring in this area and the odds of such activity were minuscule.

Additionally, unusual weather formations were gathering. It sensed the high pressure and low pressure systems in the surrounding region, studying and evaluating them. The weather formations were in no way generated by those pressure systems, in fact they seemed to fly in the face of all influence that existed.

This was extraordinary.

This was impossible.

This was danger.

Once more, the cloud changed its shape and composition. Hovering, it flowed together forming a huge ball in midair. The exterior collapsed inward and the center flowed outward, forming a hollow shell – the outer body only two feet thick. The eastern surface shrank, moving its mass into the western surface and soon the shape was that of a teardrop. A teardrop lying horizontal with the ground. In size it had condensed down to a hundred feet long and fifty feet at its bulbous head. Color disappeared from it and it became almost transparent.

Through it the countryside appeared distorted, as the bottom of a stream might appear through water. In its hollow center, bolts of violet lightning formed and grew to a tapestry of light that danced to an unheard and alien song.

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In the valley, the mound was undergoing changes as well. To look upon the interior of the mound was to look upon a geode. The shiny metal

casing enclosed and protected a mass of crystals growing upon its inner surface. Crystals ranging from the size of a cigar, to the height of a man. No world had ever created these crystals through fire or pressure. These were grown in an environment where gravity held no sway.

In color, they resembled the pink quartz that decorated the mountains in some areas, except quartz did not have that subtle inner glow or clarity. The energy the crystals created, controlled, and stored was vast – but fragile. Surrounding the pink crystals – protecting them – was an inert gas, now tainted by the oxygen rich atmosphere that was slowly seeping into their quarters with its caustic oxidation. Near the offending crack, the wall dulled and the surfaces of the crystal spires turned a cancerous, milky white.

A crystalline cancer that slowly spread across the gemstone brain, madness running before it – the precursor of death.

The explosion had done more than cause a crack in the shell.

The shock of the explosion had caused the inner depths of the crystals to pulse in unison. The invisible energy formed by the shockwave had poured forth in an expanding circle – radiating its power through soil, rock, metal, and flesh. It displaced physical elements to a small degree, but it stretched the fibers of time and space to the verge of ripping.

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Buckingham did not know if he were alive or dead. If he had to place money on it, he would have to believe dead – and not gone to his maker in good graces. He knew he still had a body, for he could feel it, although not see it. He just knew it were there after a fashion. That he could not see it did not cause him great distress, because what he could see was beyond his grasp.

Buck had lived with good vision, but that vision had been restricted to what he could see before him and what he could catch out of the corner of his eyes. Now that was changed. He saw everything.

His view exposed that which lay before him, behind him, above him, and below him all at the same time. He was hard pressed to explain it, just as his mind was hard pressed to absorb the information.

Colors, as such, were gone, but everything had shape and vibration. The vibrations were too rapid and minute to fully 'see,' but it was there. Nothing appeared solid, and the vibrations of things and shapes behind the foreground blended through. He could 'see' in a full spherical circle around him, and in turn through everything.

Worse, he was not alone.

The other person…creature…entity, existed around him as well as his mind could figure out. Nothing you could pick out, but it was there, whether you liked it or not. It was akin to when a cloud passed over, and the shadow covered you. You could feel its passage. This 'other' was random vibrations that flitted here and there, not quite seen, but disrupting the vibrations of all objects it passed between. Seemed like it was controlling some of those objects.

More frightening was the fact that he could not only look outward in every direction, but inward.

When he looked inward – that were the wrong word, but the only word that he could think of – he saw his essence swirling down into a dark point. Concentrating on that dark point was like falling through a funnel. The dark vibration opened up into a new surrounding of vibrations, a new self. That essence had its own 'inward.'

This continued on, much like standing with a mirror behind you and one in front, watching a thousand images of yourself stretch off into infinity.

Looking 'outward' again, he was slowly able to gain a perspective of the valley. After study he was able to identify trees and rocks. The trees he was able to interpret as the barren skeletons he had seen before. Idly he wondered what they might look like if they were alive and vibrant. As he wondered, they slowly changed and became a vibration vision of what they might look like if located outside this cursed valley.

Not precisely, but as if a demented artist had set a pane of glass between the bones of the tree and the viewer, painting the difference on the glass so it overlaid the truth. In realizing this, he understood the trickery that had been thrust on him when he first entered the valley. In a second – if time really had any meaning here – he transformed the valley into the Garden of Eden it had once been. Immediately sickening of the lie, he let it slide back to reality.

A blast of intense pulsation slammed into him and threw him from the mound in what was readily interpreted pain. Buckingham found that anger was quite possible in this altered state. Buck also found that what he knew about the vicious tricks and tactics of fighting did not translate well to his newfound existence.

Reflex told him to drop and spin into his attacker – trouble was, if you could 'see' in all directions, it was right hard to figure out which direction you were facing in the first place. The reflex of dropping and spinning

translated into staying in one spot and vibrating like hell. To his good fortune, whatever had booted him from the interior of the mound did not seem set on pursuing him.

Buckingham had been unceremoniously tossed from an occasional drinking establishment in his time. All the forced departures had ever succeeded in doing was to rile him up; resulting in a wood splintering reentry – with an accompanying war whoop that normally froze his evictors long enough for him to set his attack into full effect.

Here, there weren't no wood doors to bust through, and there weren't no way to give a respectable battle cry. This was down right frustrating. Buckingham felt like a schoolboy who had been insulted and bullied, unable to make a decision on what to do, except stand there and be pissed.

Lord, this was one helluva day. Buck decided being dead was not very much fun.

In the effort Buck put forth to try to control his essence, he found motion was possible. No legs were involved, no putting oneself out of balance, falling, catching the fall on a foot, and transferring it to forward motion. To move, one simply picked a location – and was there.

'Looking' down the valley, Buck picked an area next to a bend in the creek. No sooner had he picked the area, but he was there, the new area opening up to him. The transition was as if he had blinked, only to find when he opened his eyes he was in a different location. The novelty of the experience entranced him for a spell, and he spent some time blinking/moving to random places in the valley.

At one stage, Buckingham blinked next to his gear. It was recognizable to him, and fascinated him in that he could see inside the pouches, recognizing the contents as well. On the ground next to his possibles, a spot glared. It was not a vibrant light he saw, but rather a vibration that was rhythmical and intense. Unthinking, he reached for it and with a reflex blink, it filled his world. The shimmering vibration had six ribs that appeared more intense than the sun. At the ends, the six lines of force flowed together to a point that gave off a secondary vibration that surrounded the object with smaller rays.

The shape leaped to him, blending into his own vibrations, and becoming a part of their pattern. Buck's pattern intensified, pulsed, and bonded.

On the valley floor – Swimming Snake's crystal was gone.

The feeling was unnerving, but not totally unpleasant. The tiredness,

aches and pains in Buck's new essence were gone. He felt…energized, with strength flowing throughout his being. The uncomfortable came from feeling…bloated. Something new was added to him and it was slowly melding with Buck, becoming one and a part of him – and ever so slowly growing, displacing and changing him. Buckingham could not find a way to control what was occurring, so he did the only thing he could.

He ignored it and hoped for the best. Looking inward, he saw the new vibrations flow into the multitudes of other Buckinghams continuing its passage into the infinite other versions.

Activity had returned to the mound. The small vortexes were visible once again, and as the air passed into the crack in its shell, it displaced the inner atmosphere, spilling it into the valley air. It also appeared as a vibration. Long wisps that snarled like snakes leaving a nest. Snakes made of mist.

Concentrating on the mound, Buck 'blinked' and was there. 'Looking' at the mound, he realized this was one object he could not see within. When he had been inside, looking out, the shell had been transparent. Now it concealed a shadowy world where only hints and flashes of the interior broke through. Another 'blink' and he was inside once more.

Buckingham knew immediately that a warm welcome was not in store. Mentally he hunkered down – a split second before he was slammed again. This time the world around him rocked fiercely, but he remained inside the mound. Buck felt surprise around him, followed by a much more violent attempt to expel him. When the universe had calmed and vibrations returned to normal, he remained where he wanted to be. Inside the mound.

The two opponents sized each other up. As brute force would no longer function, communication was in order. Words could not be passed, but basic feelings could, and those feelings translated into words familiar to Buck.

"Go," chimed the mound in a wave sweeping over Buck.

"No way in hell, here I stand and here I stay," thought Buckingham.

"Unacceptable. Intrusion. Dismay."

"Tough shit," thought Buck with some satisfaction.

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"Means it ain't gunna happen," Buck thought back.

"Imperative."

"Tough shit."

"Understood," the response, and the pain began.

The mound was forced to improvise. This incident had not been envisioned, and never before had such an occurrence happened. Hundreds – no millions – of samples had been collected. Those samples reduced to individual molecular vibration patterns and those patterns condensed and archived inside the crystal jungle of the mass.

This was an error of incredible magnitude. When the explosion had occurred and the wave warping time and space had gathered Buckingham up, it categorized him into a vibration pattern. It did not know what else to do with him. That was well and good. What had not been done was the completion of the job, condensing him down and storing the replica inside a crystal. Rather, it left a pattern mimicking in form and function that which controlled and oversaw the mound.

The mound's first response had been to cast the foreign body out. This it had done. If programming has a virus, it isolates the issue and removes it from the system. This virus had survived outside the mound when expelled – and possibly worse – acquired a secondary vibration from what had originally been assumed to be a harmless crystal structure of this world.

The only option left was to dampen the annoying vibration until it disintegrated, existing no more.

Buckingham was no stranger to pain.

Most of his life he had struggled with pain in one form or another. Pain ranging from the day-to-day aches, cuts and bruises; to having his belly ripped open by a cat he mistakenly assumed was dead. Of the cat, he remembered little but the pain.

The pain and fear had possessed his mind, and somewhere through the ordeal, he remembered LeBlanc standing over him while the others held his arms and legs. LeBlanc had looked at the pink ropes spilling from his belly and done the unthinkable. He had pissed on Buck.

Later he explained he did this to clean the wound, having no water. He then carefully placed the handful of guts back inside and stitched Buckingham up with sinew.

For three weeks Buck had fought the fever. LeBlanc later admitted that he contemplated placing a ball in Buck's head to end his suffering.

Buck still had the memory of the pain and a nice cat fur cap to crown his head, but even that pain was a lover's kiss compared to the molten wave of agony coursing through Buckingham. Just as Buck's newfound

‘body’ seemed to stretch on into eternity, so did the pain. Putting salt to the wound was the fact there was nothing Buck could do to fight back.

Chapter Seventeen
Battle Joined

When such men, who are beyond hope and fear, begin in their dim minds to see the source their woes, it may be an evil time for those who have wronged them. The weak man becomes strong when he has nothing, for then only can he feel the wild, mad thrill of despair. - Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

In the distance, the horizon blended with the sky. The scattered scrub pine painted a fuzzy border allowing the eyes to define the horizon, but not pick a clear line of demarcation between sky and earth. Standing, Swimming Snake shaded his eyes and searched the world before him. His eyes were sharp – not as sharp as the hawk's or eagle's, but trained from hunting to identify any movement or object that was out of place. By the time he spotted it, his heart had returned to a slow beat in his chest. It was there. A small point on the horizon. Moving slowly now, ever so slowly. The thrill of discovery sent his heart racing once more. The small, lethal point was moving towards him.

Snake waited with a patience born of his acceptance of past and future. His eyes remained fixed on the cloud until the hair on his arms stood out on their own and the nape of his neck bid him turn. In fear, he turned to see what danger lay behind him.

The sky behind was alive. The lead "V" of clouds had stopped and was now spinning in one place. As Swimming Snake watched, the following formations collided with the edge of the spinning circle and became part of the churning mass. One after another, they joined in the ever darkening storm growing larger over Snake's head.

No air moved on the ground and no wind swept the grasses. Above, the world's cloud moved with ever increasing speed. The center of it opened

into an eye of blue, while the iris took the gray-black color of a thunderhead. From nowhere other bits of cloud appeared, billowing out of points in the sky at the edge of the monster and throwing themselves into the storm. The storm now covered the sky behind and above Snake almost from horizon to horizon.

Large sections of it began to light brilliantly as lightening flared through the body of the tempest.

In the blue center of the storm, Snake saw the sun. Even it was touched by the magic of this day. From its edge, a crescent was chewed, the bite turning black.

Swimming Snake laughed. Even the mighty Thunderbird had taken wing this day, ready to consume the sun. The medicine was strong.

Snake turned to face the death cloud to the east.

Raising his arms, he cried out beseeching. "Come to me. Come let this day have end. In your death, I will sing to you the names of those you have taken from me. Together, we will sing of them and give them the honor you have removed."

The blazing sun, now half gone, still gave light to see the cloud. No longer did the cloud drive on relentlessly towards Snake, but slowed and stopped.

Swimming Snake fell to his knees and screamed wordlessly in frustration.

From the sky above, laughter burst forth with the thunder.

"You thirst for blood, little one."

Without looking up, Snake snarled with clenched teeth. "It stops. It shows cowardice and has no honor. It is nothing more than a beast."

From beside him a quieter voice agreed. "It has no honor. Indeed it is a beast, but why do you throw yourself to the ground as a child might?"

"You see for yourself. It shall run. It shall escape," said Snake.

"Ah…" replied the voice, now from behind. "This you believe?"

"Yes. It stands before us and you do not fight."

Patiently the spirit explained. "You have hunted the buffalo. Can you run as fast as the buffalo?"

"No, I cannot."

"Are you as strong as the buffalo?"

In spite of himself, Swimming Snake laughed. "No, but…"

"Then how is it," the voice asked merrily, "how is it that you have ever tasted of the creature?"

Swimming Snake knew the answer. He had known this answer since he was a child and watched the hunt played out. In a small way he had been a part of the hunt, even as a child.

Hunters on horse back carefully chose a place. When buffalo herds were near, charging horsemen would set them in motion. Once in motion, it was necessary to direct them. Natural objects were used, small hills and such. Then, bands of men, women, and children formed lines, waving blankets and yelling. All to direct the running and panicked herd to its death. They were channeled to the edge of a cliff from which there was no escape.

A buffalo jump.

By the time the herd realized the earth had ended, they were in midair and falling to the hard ground below.

"I understand," said Snake. "This is merely to set the evil one in motion, directing him to where you will fight."

The spirits around him hesitated in embarrassment. "Yes …and no."

One voice rang out from the multitude who all spoke at once. "Your passion has awoken us. This is as it was planned. What had not been considered was that when our passions were set aflame, it would awaken yet another. We now play no more a part in this than do you."

"This I do not understand," said Swimming Snake.

"The Old One has awoken. This matter has been taken from our hands."

"You will send the enemy fleeing into the arms of the Old One?" asked Snake.

The spirits around Snake shuddered and the air itself quivered.

"Yes, but now it is a game. The Old One does not need to have this enemy driven to it. There is no place on the world that it – or anything else – could hide from the Old One."

"No…" the spirit said thoughtfully, "for a time we were called from you. There we had to account for our actions. Actions we have performed, or failed to perform, for countless centuries.

It was the whim of the Old One for us to drive the enemy before our gathering. Perhaps it was a reward, a chance for us to count coup, as the battle has been taken from us. Perhaps it was merely a way to teach the enemy fear before his death. Perhaps it is a lesson to remind us of our place in the circle of life."

"Who is the Old One?" asked Swimming Snake.

"The Old One is the Old One. The One who was here before. The One we serve and honor. The Old One is more powerful than you can imagine. We control power. The Old One is power. Therein lays our origin. The Old One does not concern himself with trivial and small matters. We were given form so we could work as the fingers of the Old One. Our purpose was to perform the delicate matters of work." The spirit shuddered once more. "The end of this day will not be delicate, I fear."

Day has darkened revealing a night sky in the eye of the storm. A circle of fire showed, surrounded by stars. No longer could Snake see the death cloud plainly. Around him the world held its breath – waiting.

Swimming Snake looked to the heavens and into the dark world of the spirits, all swimming in the churning thundercloud. The dark world exploded into blue fire once more and the air surround him became a living and solid force.

"He calls. We must obey." Tolled the voices as one.

Snake knew instinctively he stood at a wall of death. Were he to take fifty paces forward, or backwards, into the world of the spirits; his life would be snuffed with no more thought and effort than an insect would be crushed, unknowingly, beneath his feet. He held his own breath as he waited for the storm to move and pass over him, sealing his fate. This happened not.

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The death cloud was no longer interested in engaging combat with creatures in its path. Something was amiss in the valley. Something that caused intermittent communication and direction from its primary programming source. While it was capable of functioning independently from the power source in the valley, this was not normal protocol. The advanced nanotechnology allowed the cloud a semblance of life, but it was a symbiotic life, dependant in majority on the controlling central mind and power of the valley.

For a time, information had passed normally with the valley, and then the data being transferred was corrupted. Information would come in that could not be processed. Contradictory. Meaningless. Instruction paths that lead around in spiraling circles performing no meaningful task. Now the only option available was a quick and direct approach to the valley to attempt to ascertain the problems that had arisen there.

Separated, neither the cloud nor the mound was capable of the massive

repair that was so obviously needed. The mound was the brain, but the cloud performed as the peripheral nervous system and the hands of the whole.

Compounding the problems that lay at hand was the celestial event that was known and expected.

The solar eclipse was easily predictable, it merely happened to fall into a window of time that was inconvenient. What could not be explained were the unusual electromagnetic fields that were forming in the earth of this area.

The sunlight dimmed to almost nothing, but visible light was not a requirement for the cloud to verify the occurrences around it.

To the area laying north by north-west, unusual weather phenomena had formed. Phenomena the cloud had easily detected and avoided. The detection was not a problem. Massive thunderclouds gathered. The electrical discharge inside the weather cell was impressive. At any other time, a careful observation would have been performed. Massive bolts arched throughout the cloud formation. On top, blue jets and red sprites danced in rampant abandon.

Microbursts, amounting to upside down tornadoes, lashed from the storm smashing into the ground, as if the cloud had sprouted a dozen feet and was stomping the earth below into submission.

From the top, rain fell through the black and rolling mass. As it approached the ground, the temperature – which had dropped dramatically – froze the droplets, then violent updrafts hurled the ice crystals upwards towards the top. They were recoated with water, fell again, and after a few passes were small hailstones. The process continued repeatedly, each time the hailstones grew with the coating of water that froze on its downward plunge. When they reached the size of a man's fist, their weight was enough to break the cycle; they plunged to ground battering all upon which they fell.

The gigantic hailstones were but a harbinger of the future. From the side of the thunderstorm came a popping noise. A globe of blue fire the size of a pony was birthed, shooting away from the storm and stopping. More popping and yet more balls of intense blue-white crackled from the interior of the storm. Each aligning with the first, not touching it, not quite standing still, but dancing around the first born.

On the ground, just outside the radius of destruction, stood Snake. He was lost in the fury of a world gone mad, unnoticed by cloud or storm.

When a hundred of the spirit balls had formed in the sky, the world was no longer dark. The sun was still swallowed by the Thunderbird, but the powerful light given off by these mystical spheres lit the countryside; to look upon their faces was impossible.

Turning his back to them, he stared at where the cloud had last been. He could see it, reflecting the light radiated by the blazing orbs. It looked closer.

Before him lay his shadow, pointing like an ominous finger towards the cloud. Even as he watched, hands cupped around his face to shield his eyes from the fury of the light behind, the spirit balls moved.

They moved as a pack of wolves might, leaping to the chase, scattering across the prairie in their pursuit of a lone animal. Tightly grouped at first, they slowly scattered apart, forming smaller groups.

Some branched out to the left, another cluster of a dozen veered to the right – by the time they had covered half the distance to the cloud they formed a gigantic "C" shape, the horns of which pointed towards either side of the death cloud.

Inside the death cloud, internal alarms flashed across every synapse it possessed. In a flash, the immensity of approaching danger overwhelmed it.

What was taking place was impossible, impossible contradicted by the fact that the situation and environment was present and developing, it flew in the face of everything the cloud knew and understood.

It flew against all the data that had been stored through millennia of information gathered across thousands of light years of study – and it flew straight at the cloud. Nothing gathered during its stay on this world had presented an inkling of this possibility or capability.

Attack was imminent and not by the creatures of this world. Attack was forming from the planet itself and appeared – more than appeared, was irrevocably indicative – that this was a logical and tactical assault by one or more thinking beings.

In desperation, it fled from the oncoming attack.

The arms of blue fire contracted inwards upon the cloud. The first globe touched the side of the cloud with a resounding '*bang*,' exploding in a coruscating display of electrical energy spreading out across the surface of the death cloud. The second, third, and forth impacted the same area, with explosions of sound merging into one drawn out peel of thunder. This time the released energy traveled far, washing over the top and

bottom of the cloud, penetrating inward as well.

The cloud gave a soundless scream of agony. Never before had it been introduced to something that could be interpreted as pain. The concept of pain was memorized and not foreign, but this was an introduction into the reality of definition.

In defense, it threw out its own streamers of electrons in pencil thin ribbons of energy. The ribbons formed instantaneous connections with a dozen oncoming balls. The moment they touched the spheres, pathways formed back into the cloud and the energy of the ball lightning raced down the pathways.

The previous pain was nothing compared to this. All systems shut down and the death cloud – drifting slowly at first, then picking up speed – fell to earth.

Chapter Eighteen
Collateral Damage

"Over my dead body!"
"Okay, but it's going to hurt."
- movie, Last Man Standing

Buckingham did not know how long the pain had lasted. Might have been a minute. Might have been a year. Did not much seem to matter, what mattered was the pain was gone. For some reason, whatever was in the mound had turned its attention away from Buck.

Buck was not a man to run from a fight, but this were not rightly a fight. More like being held down and having boiling oil poured over one's privates.

No one was ordering him from the mound anymore – but the idea seemed right pleasing.

Buckingham's thoughts turned to the top of the valley, the rim rocks overlooking it, and instantly he was there. Still seeing all around him, he realized there was trouble. Buck had used the phrase, 'trouble in the air' before, but now it was not just a saying.

Far to the east was something the likes of which he had never witnessed. As quickly as his attention was focused on it, he was there, stuck in the center of a tempest of unearthly proportions.

The world went silent around him, and Buck could feel the thoughts and eyes of a hundred beings turn towards him in shock, amazement and anger.

Grabbed by unseen hands, he was held immobile. Buck knew those invisible hands were about to rip whatever he was to shreds and shit on the fragments.

Made the mound seem right hospitable.

The emotion surrounding him turned to amusement and recognition. Buck felt himself being tossed from being to being in a playful game. Each spinning him and flinging him to the next; in his mind he heard voices and they addressed him.

"What is this morsel that throws himself into the pack?"

A second voice, catching him, and looking into his essence replied, "Ah, it is the white man – the unbeliever – the brother of the one called Swimming Snake."

"Do you believe yet?"

"You are not a spirit, you are not a man. You are a spirit man. How came this to happen?"

Another voice cut through his mind. "He has not passed on. He is not a spirit." The spirit became thoughtful. "Should we not allow him to pass on?"

"Whoa!" said/thought Buckingham. "You and Swimming Snake think a bit too much alike. If'n I still be alive, lets let it stand as such.

Don't much like what I am right now – whatever the hell it is – but I am not that much partial to another change, if'n I can help it."

"IT IS NOT FOR THEM TO DECIDE."

This voice silenced all around him. The sentiment coming from this being held neither anger, fear, or humor. It held judgment and decision. The silence grew and Buck felt a need to dispel that silence.

With what he hoped was respect, he said/thought, "My name be William Buckingham. Might I ask who you be?"

"MY NAME IS LEGION, BUT NOT THE LEGION THAT IS SPOKEN OF IN YOUR BOOK. YOU KNOW THE NAMES BY WHICH MEN CALL ME. IF YOU DO NOT CARE TO ACCEPT THOSE NAMES, OR RECOGNIZE THEM, IT MATTERS NOT TO ME. THE QUESTION IS…WHAT SHALL BECOME OF THE MAN NAMED WILLIAM BUCKINGHAM?"

Buck thought for a moment, then gave an answer he would wonder about for the rest of his life.

"If'n it is up to me, I guess I would just like to go on livin' and die of old age somewhere far from this campfire."

Silence.

"A REQUEST NOT SHOWING THE HONOR OR SPIRIT I HAD EXPECTED, BUT GRANTED."

Gone was the voice, and the spirits surrounding Buckingham regarded him with disappointment.

"What just happened?" asked Buck.

"You were given a choice and it was granted," replied one voice. "You were given the chance to grasp a roaring river, and you chose a handful of water to drink," stated another in amazement.

"I don't understand," said Buckingham.

"You are either very wise, or very foolish. Being a white man, I fear that your wisdom is in question.

Never have I heard a mortal given the chance to pick its destiny."

"Come," said another, "the least we can do is give you what understanding we can. You shall watch and choose your own song to sing about this day and this battle."

The spirit could be felt shaking its head. "I, for one, stand in awe and respect of you. You have no greed. You have no selfishness. Indeed Swimming Snake was right, you are a man of power."

Buck was carried to a position he could watch the battle. He was moved not by the 'blink' he was just getting accustomed to, but in a massive rush of wind streaming past him. Its howl would have deafened him, were he still saddled with ears. The position was not one he would have though of, but one far above – above where even the eagle could soar. A vantage point reserved for the gods. In this place the spirits held him. Held him on both sides, much as a child tethered between parents to prevent him from wandering.

Above him, the sky was dark with stars shining brighter than he had seen before. His vision was now different, yet again. Whatever it was that had merged with him was allowing him to see as he had with the vibrations, but now colors were discernable. Below, the ground was a blur of blue, green and brown. The horizon was curved and misty. All this he could still see at one time.

Words failed Buckingham.

The insignificance of himself and his plight was brought home in a chimera of understanding. When he concentrated on the ground below, it rushed to the fore, and the clarity was flawless. The vision of not an eagle, but the legendary thunderbird itself.

With the guardian spirits he waited.

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When the death cloud fell to earth, its shape slowly changed. No longer did it retain the hard and compact teardrop shape it possessed during the short and decisive battle. Now it morphed into a semblance of its original form. It existed as a ground hugging mist, slowly spreading out across the prairie. Around it, in a circle, were the remaining balls of lightning.

Watching…waiting…hoping the cloud would attempt to flee.

Function and consciousness returned to the cloud as its systems rebooted. The ghost image of pain still overlay the functions and memory of the death cloud. As programs responded once more, its shape started to contract. It was cognizant of the circle and limit set around it.

It was respectful of that loop.

When it started to flow back together, the circle around it began to contract. When it ceased its movement, the contraction halted. The cloud was an intelligent being. It did not need to have additional punishment to reinforce what it had learned.

Quickly it stopped its reformation and let itself flow back out into a vapor. As it did so, the circle expanded. This was just as the cloud knew would happen, and as it feared would happen. Sequential events could be predicted, and it knew what was expected of it.

Allowing itself to fully reform into a bilious cloud once more, it returned to the air. When it had done so, the perimeter around it opened in one area. The death cloud studied the exit with resignation and slowly moved forward. As it did so, communication restored with the valley, and the situation was transferred in full.

In the last vestige of sanity, the mound received its warning. Unseen in the air above the mound a signal beamed skyward. A signal that moved with the speed of a beam of sunshine, until far from the earth it entered a blackness complete – a blackness the size of an acorn – and disappeared, only to appear in an area of space so far away, the distance would be incomprehensible to a man.

The cloud continued its journey, meekly and passively. Resistance could gain nothing. In its alien mind, it plotted and pursued a thousand scenarios. Each ended with the same result. Defeat. Destruction.

The blue-white balls surrounded it once more, stopping its forward progress, while the sun reappeared in the sky and light bathed the world once more. The brilliance of the returning star dimmed the presence of the lightning surrounding the cloud, but did not dim the danger. When the sun had fully reappeared, an opening presented itself once more to the

cloud, and it dutifully resumed its journey.

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Swimming Snake blinked his eyes with the return of the sun. Wheeling, he faced the gathered assembly of spirits and watched as the thunderhead above thinned in the middle and the eye of blue shown through. In a rush, the earth's clouds shot forward in wispy threads into the eye and darted upwards to dissipate and vanish. As it did so, the voices vanished – one by one – from his mind. In the space of twenty breaths, all were gone but one.

"Wait," cried out Snake.

A tinkle of silver laughter.

"I go no where."

"Where did they go? Why have all left?"

"We have been dismissed. Our presence is no longer required. To stay after dismissal would be to speak that we do not have confidence in the Old One."

"Is he present?" asked Swimming Snake.

"He is always present."

"No," said Snake. "Not the Old One. I felt the presence of my brother."

"He is near."

Swimming Snake implored of the spirit. "Then let me talk to him once more."

The spirit silently considered. "This is…allowed. It is allowed only because it is not forbidden. Written upon the picture of life is his future. To bring him here will smudge the picture, but not alter it greatly."

Three whirling gusts brushed Swimming Snake's face. Two of them left, followed by the spirit Snake had been talking to. The remaining spirit swarmed around Snake in happiness and confusion.

"This is you, my brother?" asked Swimming Snake, wonder in his voice.

"Good God, almighty! I can see you, hear you, and feel you. Kinda, sorta."

Snake pondered. "How came you to be this way, my brother?"

In a wild babble of explanation, Buck tried to educate Snake. The answer came as a rush of emotion, images and more. It fell upon Snake, pushing him to his knees. In a split second he had relived all that had occurred to Buckingham, and knelt dazed on the ground.

"Stop my brother. It is too much," Snake shook his head to clear it. When he raised his head, there was a sad smile upon his face. "You have power. I knew this, but did not realize how much power you have." He stopped and frowned, qualifying his statement. "For a white man, of course."

"Of course," replied Buck in a voice lacking the pure tones of the spirits, but fitting Snake's memory of his brother perfectly.

Swimming Snake spoke. "I stand in fearfulness of your decision. You were offered whatever you could conceive, yet you chose the path of a common man. I know not if I could have chosen so wisely.

The Old One was wrong. It has honor. It has humility without greed."

The spirit that was Buckingham chimed out, "You know – I ain't rightly sure what you are talking about – nor what choice I made. Or even when I was asked to make that choice. I feel mightily confused right now."

"It does not matter. You made the choice that befits a man of honor."

Buck hurried. "I ain't sure how I know, but I know the candle is burning out on our time. What are you going to do now? What the hell is happening?"

"This day comes to a close. All must walk the path laid before them."

"That tells me nothing. What are you gunna do, Snake? I have a right uneasy feeling about this."

"My part is done. I was but a spark. I sought vengeance, but have found something better. I have received acceptance of what has happened," said Swimming Snake.

Buckingham was grabbed and ripped skyward without the chance of reply or question.

"Stop," screamed Buck to the spirits transporting him aloft. "Taint neither right nor fair. I got no chance to say goodbye or ask what he were planning to do."

The two spirits spoke as one, comforting the man-spirit. "Why do you feel farewells are required? Your brother will do as it has always been written he will do. He shall return to his village."

"But his village is gone. Everyone is dead!"

"You see," said the voices, "you do understand. You just do not accept."

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In the mound, activity was anything but meek and passive. Safeguards

were incorporated in every monitoring station to prevent their overrun or external detection. The safeguards ranged from innocuous to total erasure of the crystalline complex. Operating procedure in this situation – although this situation had never been envisioned – would normally be the erasure of all physical evidence of the station. The artificial intelligence controlling the mound was not functioning on a normal level. It was insane.

The original intruder entity/vibration was gone.

This fact barely registered in the maelstrom of data flowing into the mound. It was aware of the capture and servitude of action placed upon its airborne counterpart on this world. Steps would be taken to include all entities in the erasure of recent events.

In the fragmented mind of the mound crystals, two events were set in action at the same time. Surrounding the mound materialized a sphere. Its surface was reflective, mirrored to the nth degree. Covering the mound like a dome, it extended beneath the mound in a continuation, forming a mathematically precise and perfect shell. Through it physical matter could not pass. Radiation of any nature was not allowed passage either. Sound, light, air, *everything* was barred from both entry and exit. Should the enclosed mound be set on the surface of the sun, nothing would be noted inside.

Inside the mound, a second sphere of the same nature formed. It was small – three feet across. Inside it was the corrupted air filling the mound. Dust particles, smoke, anything that existed in that space the split second before it formed. And something else.

A program. A program of destruction.

Systematically all that existed inside the miniature sphere disappeared from our universe. The air, the particles of dust flashed into nothingness – until all that was left was a hard vacuum and the program. Then the program itself vanished, leaving the process it started to continue on its own.

The next to go was space. No longer did the inside of the sphere have volume. Time followed quickly, leaving a status existing as was before the creation of the universe. Into this total emptiness bled a single drop. A droplet from nowhere. It started growing, the sphere now an egg of both creation and destruction. An egg envisioned by the creators of the mound, but a program never ran. The result of the program could not be totally evaluated, but those that wrote it, held it in fear. What it would

create was primordial. Energy from the beginning of time. An energy that could not be predicted or controlled.

The instant the sphere formed over and beneath the mound, the Old One howled in rage. No longer was the Old One satisfied to choreograph the spirits in battle. Its patience at an end, the Old One stepped onto the killing ground. With his entrance, the spirits vanished from the ground and sky surrounding the battlefield. The only spirits left hovered nervously – far above, to bear witness to the battle.

At the four points of the compass, slightly more than a hundred miles away from the mound in each direction, the earth cried out and split asunder. Four cracks formed. At first, they were but a dozen feet across and a hundred feet deep. Rocks, sod, and trees fell into their abyss as they widened and deepened.

Rapidly their depth increased until the skin of the earth bled forth molten blood – the magma trapped below the crust. The cracks extended, jagged rips in the face of the world that raced forward, all toward the silver ball that dared exist on the visage of the world.

The death cloud hovered, dazed. Its captors had vanished. As it started to move, the back of the floating mist glowed crimson with the reflected light of the onrushing river of fire. Sensors detected the skyrocketing heat, and for an instant, it hesitated – deciding between dispersal and whole mass flight.

Sheets of liquid rock shot into the air, blanketing the cloud. A billion individual nanotech particles died as one. The cloud's passage into oblivion was not even noted by the crystals in the mound, from which it had been cut off without warning.

From above, Buckingham watched as the red snakes in the earth converged upon the sphere, forming a cross, the sphere a silver jewel set in its center. Magma struck the sides, erupting high into the air as molten tidal waves washed over its surface. Where it struck, it flowed down the sides, leaving it unmarked, a pure and pristine reflector of the hell surrounding it.

Inside the sphere, no knowledge of the event was known or felt. When the converging rents struck, no notice was taken. No vibration. No sound. No effect.

Meanwhile, inside the primary sphere, the secondary sphere continued to fill. It would continue until the force growing exceeded its nonexistent capacity. How long it would take was a meaningless question. Inside the

small sphere, time did not exist. When ready, it would hatch as an egg immortal.

In brief periods of lucidity, the mound crystals were horrified by the action they had precipitated. Energy from the creation of the universe could just as easily destroy it. Solace came to the crystals as psychosis reclaimed its thought process and even the need to rationalize was negated.

Far above, from his restrained observation point, Buckingham commented to his guardians.

"Appears that yer Old One might have bitten off more than he could chew."

"We do not know the mind of the Old One," responded one of the spirits.

The second spirit added despondently, "Yes, but no matter the outcome, the damage *we* will have to repair. The battle is not delicate. Of this I spoke to your brother."

The first continued, "Disturbing this is, but – do you not sense the amusement in the Old One."

The second spirit seemed to think for a moment. "He beats his shield, waves his weapons, and cries insults to the enemy, but there is laughter in his song. I do not understand."

"Don't get me wrong, I am right impressed by the show that the Old…" Buckingham stopped short. In the blink of an eye – it was over.

Inside the mound, inside the sphere, the crystal had been waiting over its creation. Slowly the surface of the egg sphere began to change color from its silver to gray. It started to dissolve.

A pale light, not seen since creation, seeped out in rays that sparkled and bounced from pink crystal to crystal.

With the light, there was laughter.

"IT IS A GOOD DAY TO DIE. AND SO YOU SHALL. LONG HAS IT BEEN SINCE I HAVE HAD SUCH A PLEASURABLE ENEMY WITH WHICH TO PLAY. AN ENEMY WHO BUILDS A FORTRESS IMPENTRATABLE THEN OPENS THE GATE AND INVITES ME IN."

The mound could only watch as the Old One selected a small crystal from the wall. It wondered how this being knew the exact crystal to select, but it was no longer amazed. The tiny crystal powdered under the attention of the Old One, and the silver sphere protecting the mound vanished.

As Buck watched, the entire valley was engulfed. The thick lava rolled and bubbled gently, the excess flowing off through the same channels as the water had once flowed. Though distant, he imagined he could feel the incredible heat radiating against him.

And the world stilled.

With passing time, the lava crusted over. The next change was restoration and repair.

Work to be performed by the spirits. The lava filled cracks that had opened up – swallowing all in their path – had larger cracks open around them, swallowing the still burning fires back into the bowels of the earth. The lake of smoking rock that filled the valley quivered and sank abruptly, until it was only half filled. The earth then shook, the mountains broke apart, and all fell into the valley.

Nothing was as it had been, but the horrendous scar that had branded the earth had been removed. Looking to the east, the site of Snake's encampment, all that remained was a shallow depression in the earth.

Buck spoke to the spirits who had now released him. "It happened – it happened so fast. What will the Old One do now? What will happen and become of us…you…me?"

The spirits replied, almost as an afterthought. "Your questions begin to sound like your brother's used to. So fast? This was nothing. It was but the slightest display of the power of the Old One. Now he will return to where ever he goes, and do whatever he does for the ages between his appearances. However, we know he headed for a blackness in the heavens first. He follows something spewed forth by the enemy.

We are empowered to perform our work now. We will rebuild the earth, re-grow the plants, trees, and reset the rocks. When done, the circle will be complete. Perhaps we will honor this battle.

As for you? You have made your choice and it is now out of our hands – or yours. Know this, however – never shall you return to this valley."

William Buckingham was cast down from the sky.

Chapter Nineteen
Dies are Cast

"The countenance is the portrait of the mind, the eyes are its informers" - Marcus Cicero

The Bible said that Satan was cast from the heavens. If Buckingham had to compare, he figured Lucifer got off pretty lucky. As it were, Buck was cast from the heavens two hundred miles from the battle – and ten years later.

The first day was a blur of hunger, agony, and disorientation. Lying on his back, he saw steam rising up from around his naked body. None of this made much of an impression on his wretched mind. The hunger he felt deep in his soul. It was the need for food. Thirst was past. His mouth was dry and his tongue lay as a lead bar in his mouth, welded to the side of his cheek.

The agony was a pleasant companion to remind him he still lived. Most of it was concentrated in his head. Fluid had streamed down his face, around and beneath his right eye. There it caked, collecting the red dirt that he rolled in with his throes of pain. In a rare lucid moment, he raised his hand to his right eye. It was not there, but it was. In place of the soft, squishy ball that granted him vision was a hard round lump. It did not give him vision, only pain.

The first day passed in joy, he was still alive.

On that first day, he felt the sun pass over his body, reddening his skin and burning all that was exposed. With the passing of the sun, he felt the passage of insects. They crawled over every square inch of his body. Some in travel uncaring and others to stop briefly, making a meal of the exposed flesh. One he felt crawl to the edge of his eye, then nothing as it

traversed the globe that had replaced his god given eye. Then its minute footsteps continued as it crossed the bridge of his nose. His good eye shut in reflex as it continued its journey across his face.

The onset of evening filled Buck with bliss, the night air bathed his burning body with coolness, and sometime in the darkness, sleep overcame him and only the stars remained to guard Buckingham.

Morning found Buck just as hungry and thirsty, but refreshed somewhat in physical strength. He took stock of his surroundings. Trying to sit, waves of nausea forced him back to a prone position.

He called out to Swimming Snake, but there was no answer.

He called out to the spirits, but no voice rang through his head.

With his good eye, he scanned the ground he could see without having to move. It was not his eye that gave him hope, but his ears. Behind him, he heard the song. A song sung many times, but not one he could even hope for right now. It was the song of water. Not the chorus of a river, but the tiny, gentle hum of a stream.

Rolling to face it was one of the most exerting actions he had ever performed. After he managed to lever himself over, he lay disheartened. He could see willows rising above the hidden banks of the creek. With only one eye, he couldn't tell exactly how far it was. It was a ways off and any distance crawling on his naked belly was a far piece. It might as well been across the continent to Buck and no matter how he tried, he could not 'blink' himself to it.

At first, he tried counting how many times he laboriously raised himself on his elbows and pushed himself forward with his legs. That was just depressing as hell, and once again, his body took over while his mind fled.

The sharp rocks that opened the flesh on his chest went unnoticed.

Whether death would come to him on the open or in the wash did not matter. It would come. Buckingham was just too damn ornery to lie down and peacefully die.

His wandering mind did not even realize it when his body continued its bloody crawl over the edge and fell ungracefully in a tangled ball of arms and legs in the muddy water.

Chapter Twenty
Savior

"We are all travelers in the wilderness of this world, and the best we can find in our travels is an honest friend" -- Robert Lewis Stevenson

Kendred's thoughts swayed in unison with the wagon, its team plodding across the open prairie. This was his last trip through this god forsaken land. That fact brought no small happiness to his heart.

The last decade had brought him money. Indeed, he was to a stage where he could consider himself wealthy. That was a nice feature, but one that did not bring him as much pleasure as he had once thought it would.

The gatherings, outposts, and settlements that dotted the land west of the Mississippi were sponges that soaked up his whiskey. Once he had found he could set near any price on his goods, greed had set in for a spell. People might grumble, but that did not stop them from paying.

The greed was short lived, and he had lowered his fee to a figure he felt just and fair.

Yes, ten years of hard work had set him comfortable. With a distillery of modest size and a family large.

Citizens had taken note of his Scotch. Soon it had become a matter of pride to drink a "local spirit, the like of which cannot be found in Europe."

Now the time spent apart from his children and wife wore heavy on his heart. Independent haulers would take over the trips to supply his original customers, and Sterling could become the family and businessman he had always dreamt of.

As he drove, listening to the creaking of the wagon, the squeaking of the seat springs, he looked down the valley to his right. It was a smooth and broad belt of ground that slowly dropped in elevation until it was

sharply brought to a halt by the beginnings of the mountains. Many times he had pushed his way down that valley to rendezvous, but no more. Beaver were mostly gone, and the trapping was rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

About to turn his gaze from it for the final time, a spark of light caught his eye. He waited, but it did not repeat. Just as he moved to seat himself, the bright white glare shown forth once more – then vanished.

Pushing his silk top hat back upon his head, he wiped his brow with a square of fine linen.

Could be a thousand things, or naught.

Picking up the reins, he put in motion his team, only to stop again. For no particular reason, he turned into the valley and headed for the flash.

Latter he would admit to friends that he really was not sure why he stopped and turned. His curiosity was not that great, and his desire to continue home a driving force – but he turned.

It took the better part of an hour to pick his way down to where he thought he had seen the flash. Kendred knew he was close, but he could not pinpoint the site. Setting the brakes on the wagon, he spryly jumped to the ground and walked to the bank of the stream. The small creek had cut deep into the earth, but where he now stood the banks were only three feet high. With the undulations of the land, they grew to almost ten feet.

Resigning himself to task, he started walking upstream on the small waterway. After five minutes of walk, he felt nervous. His rifle remained in the wagon. It was not far, but it was not in his hand. His mountain customers had impressed the importance of that. Indeed, he had learned a lot in these mountains and become hardened in body and spirit.

Three paces farther, a sage hen erupted from the brush next to him, almost giving him a heart attack. Standing, shaking, he leaned forward and rested his hands on his thighs, gulping for breath. Enough was enough. He would head back towards the wagon.

At the wagon, he regained his rifle and decided to invest a few more minutes looking downstream. This decision bore fruit.

Standing on the crumbling dirt bank, Kendred was not sure what he was looking at. Might be a critter, might be a man. Looked kind of like an injun, red, naked, sprawled in the water and probably dead. He was not even sure if this was what he was looking for. With apprehension and a cocked rifle, he half strode, half slid down the embankment to the side of the – now known to be fact – man. The poor fellow was burnt to a crisp

from the sun, scrawny with ribs accenting the torn skin of his chest, and half drowned. With one hand on his rifle, he used the other to roll the man fully onto his back. Looked somewhat familiar. Half starved and half dead, the man's face stared up at him. The stare would give Sterling nightmares for years to come.

The man's face was drawn and the skin tightened across the cheekbones and facial structure like the head of a drum. But his eye. My god, the eye.

One eye was half open, staring with blue iris at Kendred. The other eye – the skin had pulled back, as if fearing to touch the eye itself.

The eye had neither iris nor pupil. It was a finely polished crystal ball. A sphere that reflected light from the sun as a diamond – blue-white and intense.

When his shadow fell across it, it glowed with an internal fire.

Taking his canteen, he gently poured a few drops between the slack lips. Rewarded for his effort, he leaned close to understand the whispered words.

"Been lying in water for days. Ain't got no more whiskey?"

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The final day passed easier for Buckingham than it did for the onlookers. His body still clung to its final ember of life, the mind was ready.

Shallow breathing was punctuated by gurgles and desperate gasps for air.

One observer commented. "We might as well haul the old carcass to the undertaker now. Will not be long."

Another onlooker, elderly and dignified, spoke. "You touch that man before he breathes his last and I will gut you. You are not worthy to clean the shit from his ass."

Turning to face the old man in anger, he saw something that made him lower his eyes and leave the room. Beneath the top hat, he saw a visage that was printed on men who had spent their lives in the mountains. This man was a respected businessman, but underneath the polished exterior lurked something primitive and deadly. Something better left untouched.

When the detractor had left, Kendred soothed the dying man's brow with a damp cloth.

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Buckingham had been wrong about one thing. No crude cross was placed at his gravesite. Sterling was later questioned about the fact that no cross or monument was erected to signify the last resting place of William Buckingham.

His only reply was to smile and state, “The earth knows this man and needs not a reminder of who he was.”

Epilogue

The awakening of the Old One did not go unnoticed by man. Thousands felt the battle, even if they did not witness it.

Some did see the side effects. What they saw was the earth heave and the great Mississippi run backwards; for a hundred days thereafter, they felt the ground tremble from the Old One's footsteps. Boats tied to the bank of the Mississippi were found forty miles away – upstream.

Bells adorning the white man's churches rang out in the town known as Boston; the tremors of the Old One's passage caused them to dance in their mounting.

In what is now the capital of our country, walls split, and windows shattered. The elite, the noble, the powerful people trembled in fear of the unknown.

The Indian tribe we know as Cherokees fled the area the white man called New Madrid, realizing that the Old One had awoken and feared his anger.

At the base of the Rockies, far to the west – where the battle took place – mountains bowed before his power, falling into valleys, leveling the earth of high and low in places.

The one man left alive who knew the truth – Buckingham – spoke not of the matter. Even on his deathbed the story did not pass his lips, although it passed before his eye once more.

How do I know of these things? Have patience.

If survivors of Swimming Snakes tribe still exist, never has the legend passed on in song.

If it is for the site you search, there are signs. Massive hieroglyphics mark the ground in our country. They contain indicators that point the way. In our simplicity we assume Native Americans placed them. Look to

the scope of the hieroglyphic's construction. Ask why a tribe would bother with such a tremendous chore. Ask instead if perhaps the servants of the Old One did not mark the path – so they themselves would never forget the forging of man, spirit and Old One in battle.

The one man possessing knowledge that the life and times of William Buckingham had power pieced the story I have told together from the addled ramblings of a man half dead and mad.

A man he accompanied back to Saint Louis, caring for him until the stricken mountain man was once more healthy, in body if not mind. They remained friends and companions, and that one man was present at Buckingham's deathbed.

The man passed the story down to his children and them to theirs, until it fell upon my ears. A story to be told when names such as Boone, Crockett, Johnson, Bass, Coulter and Bridger are mentioned in awe. A story to set legend into perspective.

A story told over a fine glass of scotch whisky that my family has made throughout the years. May I offer you another drink?

Enjoy the whiskey. It is far smoother and comfortable on the palate than that my great-great grandfather made almost two hundred years ago. Moreover, I promise – none of the ingredients we use now slithers."

About the Author

WG Marsh has had a varied and colorful background.

He has put in a little more than five decades on this earth, and in that time has worked as; a journeyman cement mason, mayor of Boulder, Montana, property management, and in the security field.

In the writing arena he has worked for two newspapers, started one of his own (*HighCountry Reporter*), founded a successful Ezine (*Ragged Edge Publishing - The Ezine*), and written close to a hundred short stories - a couple of which have taken top honors.

If William Buckingham were to describe him using modern terminology, he would say, "Aye, he's an ornery old codger who would bite a badger before breakfast; if'n he hasn't had his coffee. Yes siree, he's not the sharpest crayon in the box, but he do have a lot of color."

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