

The California Cantata



Edited by L. Lambert Lawson



Kazka Press

The California Cantata
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MARRIED TO THE SEA (c) 2013 by Michael H. Payne
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Foreword
L. Lambert Lawson

California. My words cannot touch her beauty. Few folks' words can.
But the stories in this slim volume come damn close.
Damn close, indeed.
Enjoy. Enjoy.

Valley of the Bears

David A. Elsensohn

Major John C. Fremont was shouting, and I stood like a pillar, gazing resolutely ahead at the ornate porcelain altar hung on the wall. His voice echoed most impressively through the entire mission.

I was, thankfully, not in the crosshairs of his steely disappointment, but winced inwardly for the poor soldier next to me who was the subject of the Major's dressing-down. Sergeant Brant had dared to stride through the echoing nave of La Misión de San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, and demand that we should comb the surrounding woods with guns and horses, destroying anything unusual we found. The Major, who had commandeered the mission's dining room as his office, did not respond well.

"We have come south, Sergeant, through rain and wind and gunfire and damnation, raising the flag without protest, until now! This valley is killing off my troops, if you've noticed, and until I discover the cause of it, I'll be good and Goddamned if I'll let you send more squads blundering into the woods! Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir."

I remained, eyes fixated on the finely decorated altar, as Sgt. Brant was summarily dismissed. Major Fremont changed expressions immediately, face now stony behind wide-set eyes and flaring sideburns that reached to his upper lip.

"Sergeant Talbot, at ease, grab a chair," he said.

"Sir," I replied, standing.

Behind Major Fremont sat Captain Dana in buckskins, legs crossed and coffee forgotten, pinching his temples as if they pained him. The Captain lived a day's ride south; owner of the Nipomo Rancho, he had received our few hundred exhausted mounted infantry with good grace and a fresh supply of beef.

"We are in a church, John," rebuked Captain Dana mildly, eyes creased under fading blond hair. "Let's make the inhabitants happy and try not to take the Lord's name."

"If the good Lord would see fit to stop dropping enough rain on our heads to float an ark, I might do," Major Fremont said, tiredly. He coiled into the rocking chair under the altar, swiping up his mug of calinche, a

blood-red concoction made from prickly pear, and into which he had poured a healthy measure of whiskey. “Sorry, Captain. We have a goal, and not since Sonoma have we been balked so dreadfully.”

“You had some vampire trouble up there, I hear.”

“Yes, sir, up near Petaluma. Not too bad. We had daylight on our side and all that, and wooden bayonets. Nothing like this. Sergeant? You know what happened.”

“Yes, sir, I heard the commotion last night, but have not yet been to the scene,” I said.

“Seventeen men dead in their barracks, Talbot, the same men sent out yesterday to find what was killing our horses. You had to have heard it. Crashing and thumping and roaring like a locomotive fell over on the building, and my men slashed to pieces. Four more horses killed. Two days before that, my scouts vanish.”

“I’d venture to say a bear, but the grizzlies don’t generally bother the ranchos,” said Captain Dana. “We’re in the habit of leaving some dead livestock around now and then, but it appears only the forts and the barracks are being targeted. Beeves are spooked lately, though.”

“Captain McLane marked that the barrel on the six-pounder was bent. Bent! Captain Dana, we’ve got a couple of bronze field guns, nine hundred pounds if they’re an ounce, and something hit that barrel and dented it enough to make it useless. Can a grizzly do that? All that destruction, and a single pair of footprints off into the woods.” Fremont turned to me. “But see here, Talbot, you’re our arcanist. I want you to find out what’s going on.”

There is typically a single spellcasting company among a battalion, a specialized unit like the artillery. We arcanists perform various sorcerous duties, according to our skill: with our spells we scout with more than human eyes, remove small obstacles, set bones and close wounds, and put blessings on the rifles. I have, fairly often, been tasked with making the food taste better for morale’s sake. The best of us can bring down fog on an enemy, feed all the troops, heal grievous wounds, or even kill from a distance, but gentlemen of that stature get to work with the big armies. I was fortunate enough to serve with the weatherbeaten California Battalion—buckskinned, moccasined and shabby, unsuited for a parade but more than capable—working its way south with a mission to bring California under the flag of the United States. I led the magical platoon, which consisted only of myself.

“I want to know, first, what’s blocking us,” the Major continued, dark eyes pinning me. “Rain coming down in unseasonal buckets. A mounted company unable to travel more than eight miles south, because the horses will not advance a step farther, even though Captain Dana can come and go freely. Something is keeping us, here, and that’s your department.”

“I attempted some spellwork, sir, but there were... difficulties. Extenuating circumstances.” In one of the small adobe houses attached to the mission like shy children, I had sat this morning on my bunk and concentrated, casting my will outward, trying to see outside the oak-tressed valley; each time I encountered firm resistance, as if floundering through mud. An independent will, dark and determined, halted me. I finally tried a Phrase of Dismissal, and the response had nearly pitched me forward senseless on the floor.

“Talks like a lawyer, he does,” muttered Major Fremont to Captain Dana.

“I will bring results, sir,” I replied, hoping I was not digging myself an accommodating grave. Without meaning to I gouged a booted toe into the square-tiled floor.

“Take Burroughs and Copeland with you. Dismissed, Talbot.”

#

Outside, I paced under the arched porticos of the mission, past neatly tended rows of fruit trees and shrubbery that hissed at the heavy hand of the rain. I tapped my mustache in thought. Until today, everything our footsore battalion encountered was simply, if perilously, dealt with: ambushes by the resistance, a coven of bloodsucking undead, storms. Rifles, and hearts, and spells, and the idea of a collective California had been enough. Yet something here did not like us, and I could not fathom what.

It could not be the mere presence of humans in this still-wild land, for the Chumash had dwelt here peacefully for time out of mind. I had heard of nature striking back against the settlement of white men: sudden elemental storms driving buffalo herds through towns, the very trees rising up to crush homes and collapse mines. We were a barely-perceived insect, annoying enough on occasion to bring a killing swat. Yet the Spanish-built mission had been here for over seventy-five years, and the Danas for almost a decade, on land granted by the Mexican government. It was something here, and now, due perhaps to something we’d done.

On a whim I pushed my wide-brimmed hat downward, although it was nearly sodden, and vaulted out into the rain, splashing toward the adobe where our impromptu prison was. I passed the stone well jutting from the marshy earth, normally the source of the mission's water, but currently unemployed due to the sheer abundance of the stuff. It had been newly repaired, a chore not relished by the men and horses who had hauled new stones from the foothills, but the Major had insisted, as payment for our board. I shook my head at the wasted effort and ran on.

Corporal Stanley shot upright as I entered the prison, playing cards scattering from the table like leaves, but relaxed immediately, knowing I was not likely to reprimand him. I wrung out my hat and nodded to him.

"Who is here, Stanley?"

"Just the two," he drawled, picking up his cards in a vain attempt to reconstruct his game. "The curly-haired hombre there, that's Tortorio Pico. Court-martialed, due to be hanged tomorrow. Behind much of the resistance trouble we had coming down, I hear."

I looked into the larger of the two cells, at the rotund man snoring in his cot. He looked disheveled but well treated, and the remains of a steak dinner lay just outside his barred door.

"And him?" I gestured with a thumb.

In the other cell stood a silent man, barefooted on the damp stone, gazing at nothing. He was broad-shouldered but emaciated, his face hard-bitten, and he wore only leather trousers. Thin wisps of black hair trailed from either side of his lip. I could not discern his age, but assumed he was Chumash.

"Don't know. He was found near where we picked up Pico, so we brought him in. Doesn't say much," said Stanley, bored with my presence.

I replaced my nigh-useless hat and left.

#

"Don't you have nothin' to keep off the rain, Talbot?" growled Burroughs. He always growled, because he hated everything, and mostly everything returned the sentiment. The lanky blond man was, however, a marksman without peer, hence his presence at my reluctant side. I went unarmed, but then my skill with a gun was indifferent at best.

"I have my hat, and someday I hope to obtain another," I replied placidly.

“Damned useless sorcery is, then, and I don’t wonder the Good Book bans it,” he sneered. Despite his brutal attitude toward the world, he had a fondness for reading the Scriptures, and hurled them at people when the chance arose.

“I like the spell you put on the rations,” grinned Copeland over his shoulder. He bent low over the rain-ruined grasses, trying to track the prints that had walked away from the carnage the previous night. It was a futile effort, but Copeland was as capable a scout as Burroughs a rifleman. We got along well; the red-haired, freckled farmer’s son was inherently agreeable. “The orange taste on the biscuits, I think I’ll tell Martha to try that when I get home.”

Burroughs did not sneer exactly, but his face took on a more severe twist.

We were marching upward, east of the mission into the foothills. The rain had lessened to a begrudging spatter, but our boots and moccasins yet suffered the indignities of ankle-high mud. I was reaching with my thoughts, murmuring under my breath words that extended my sight as if through a brass telescope, feeling the spiritual weight of the land. It was heavy here, a wool blanket pulled over a sleeper’s eyes, and old—there was not a presence so much as an exhalation, as if something massive had pressed deeply on its way through, and the land was slowly unfolding and creaking in its wake. Darkness, and anger. My words faltered as I brushed against what was no longer there.

“Look,” said Copeland gently, pointing ahead at a clearing, in the center of which thrust a white shape. We advanced, and saw a mound of pale stone. Heaped in a ring, the stones were an ancient construction, grass long grown through the seams. Atop its crown was a depression, filled with a myriad of objects: leathern garments, beads, shells, bones, feathers, even food. It could only be something ritualistic in form; I had read of northerly tribes who danced and held ceremonies for a god called Kuksu, or perhaps Cooksuy, and who employed such cairnlike mounds.

I passed a hand over the rocky altar, smoothing the air over it like the flattening of a map. It did not feel as oppressive as the rest of the mountain’s roots, but it felt—locked. Dead and unmoving. Without much reason I dug into my canvas pouch, drew forth a fistful of hardtack crackers, and scattered it on the jumble of offerings.

“You have got to be kidding,” muttered Burroughs.

“We’ll camp here,” I said. Copeland nodded and rooted through the underbrush for wood that might still be dry.

#

Burroughs had scoffed at my offering, but his head kept turning to look back, as if the ancient mound would somehow awaken. He kept his weapon close; he was one of few in our battalion who had laid hands on a muzzle-loading M1841 Mississippi rifle, and his skill was such that within a minute he could hit four targets a thousand yards away. He loaded it, and laid back against a tree, peering about him.

It had taken a goodly supply of flint, tinder, kindling, cursing, and spells to get the fire going, but it was now licking at the night air, no longer spitting in anger at the drops falling from the sky. Clouds scudded quickly past in front of a sickly moon. Below us rose the white mound of stone, above us the rocky slope blanketed with trees. My eyelids grew heavy.

Something tickled the edges of my temples, and I snapped awake. The moon had traveled several handspans across the heavens, and the fire was a muttering orange glow. Copeland gasped and sat up, and Burroughs scrambled to his feet, rifled musket swept up into his practiced hands.

A burly, very tall man stood silently downhill, palms raised. Dressed in pale leathers, his angular face looked vaguely Chumash, but white hair grew down the sides of his temples and jaw, and his eyes shone gold in the firelight. A necklace of bones sprouted from his breast, hanging to his waist. He seemed familiar, as if—yes. A face very like the man held prisoner back at the mission.

I stood up slowly, prepared to speak with what little of the several Chumash dialects I had learned, but froze. Behind the man were shapes—very large shapes. They moved between the trees, hulking and deliberate. Burroughs swept his barrel back and forth like a broom, not knowing where to aim; Copeland crouched low, hunting knife in hand. I could hear his breath, quick and shallow.

“You are the people,” said the tall man, slowly, not as if our language was a barrier, but as if language itself was. He stood downhill from us, yet met our eyes; he was a giant among men. “Your people brought this.”

“Brought what?” I asked. “We do not wish to harm anyone. We came to find out what is attacking our men.”

“Im-prisoned,” he said, pointing at the white stone altar behind him.

“Imprisoned? Is there something we have done, that we can put to rights?” I asked.

“We are its protectors,” he said. “The tallest nunashish walks.”

“Holy...,” began Copeland. For one of the other shapes had advanced forward into the combined light of the moon and our fire. Covered in the deepest brown fur, the bear on its four paws stood as high as I did at the shoulder, the orange glow glinting from its eyes and nose. Fearsomely large, it would have been but a grizzly, save for the bone necklace that circled its ruff; what hung loosely from the tall man’s neck was embedded snugly in the bear’s coat. I saw the beast move, and felt it too, its shadow larger than its body, mighty and wild.

It huffed like a bellows, and from its throat came speech.

I could not follow it, for its voice was lower than the deepest bass, but I caught a word or two in Obispeño, one of the Chumash languages: tawa, moon, and siqsa, to kill. The tall man listened, and nodded, and to our shock hunched toward the ground and began to change. His body swelled and darkened, with a sound of cracking and rustling like a flag snapping in the wind, and his necklace tightened about him until it, too, fit like a choker around his great neck. Two grizzlies stood now before us, one dark, one grey-muzzled.

“To the blazes with you!” yelled Burroughs.

“No!” I shouted, but he had already aimed and fired, filling the night with blaring orange fire and a wall of sound that crashed into the ring of trees. A lead ball over a half inch in diameter roared through a grey bloom of smoke, to strike the grey-muzzled beast in the shoulder, and it barked in deep pain and anger.

Something rushed from the trees to our right, and the Mississippi rifle was batted away, bent nearly in half, spinning like a daisy to crack against an oak bough. Burroughs was swept from his feet, thrashed from left to right by paws as large as his head, then dropped to collapse on the cool grass. Copeland hiccuped in terror and scrambled backward, somehow tumbling upward into a long-legged run that took him out of view. I fell flat, weaving words into a spell of shadow and speed. I vanished from view; the firelit camp faded into a fog, and I rolled away and to my feet, dashing downhill into the night.

I raced with fear gnashing at my heels, ran past trees and over boulders, ribs threatening to split. The three of us had walked all day, painstakingly,

tracking and searching, but it took me a pair of hours to hurtle back down into the lantern-lit settlement around the mission. I crashed against the side of an adobe house, my breath gone and my lungs rasping with ice, hoping against hope that Copeland was still alive. I did not think Burroughs had survived the vengeful mauling.

Imprisoned. Still gasping, I pulled myself up and staggered to the prison and through the door. Stanley shouted himself awake at my entrance, but I passed by him to the cell where the emaciated man stood.

“It’s you, isn’t it,” I groaned.

“No, it is not me,” he said quietly.

“I get it. We imprisoned you, we offended your god Cooksuy, how can we make it right? Stanley! Go to the Major, get permission, tell him Talbot said we need to release this man.”

Stanley, displeased but confused enough to obey, shuffled out.

The man shook his head, the wisps of his black mustache swaying. “It is too late. But you left a token, and that is good. That is why they spoke to you. But there are other mounds, and you tore one down. The mounds are not to appease the Creator, which you call Cooksuy. You awoke the darker side of the mountain.”

I was not surprised that he somehow knew of my night’s endeavours, but I gazed open-jawed at him, wringing my brain for something that made sense. Other mounds. A mound that we tore down, and awoke something, something that now hampered us and destroyed what it touched. When the realization came I bent my head forward to knock against the bars.

Leaving him, I rushed to the barracks where the Supply Sergeant slept, and had him awakened. Sergeant Adams had a permanently bored expression, and he applied it now as he asked me what audacity possessed the battalion’s arcanist.

“The well. You repaired the well,” I snapped.

“We did, and in the rain, too,” he replied. “Why that was so blamed important when water was all around us I could not tell you, Talbot. I thought it was you who’d insisted on it, I would have expected it of you, what with all that lack of sanity you call magic.”

“Where did you get the stone?”

His eyebrows actually raised upward, equivalent to a startled scream by a lesser man. “Southeast a half day or so. Found one of those old Indian

burial mounds, or altars, or what have you. Lots of good stone in that. We were ordered, and so we did.”

My face went as neutral as his, and without a word I turned and went back to the prison. The soldiers could not have known—but I was now trapped between loyalty and a desire to restore balance.

Stanley had returned and unlocked the barred door. The emaciated man loped out, face as serene as ever, and silently received his belongings; he immediately reached into his pouch and extracted a hand-rolled cigarette. He looked at me until I absent-mindedly flicked a spell at it, and he drew in its vapors, pleased.

I followed him as he set out eastward, in ground-eating strides back toward the foothills from which I had fled. He spoke evenly as I tried to keep up.

“A dark voice has been released, white magician. Full of hatred, once buried beneath the mountain. One of the nunanish.”

“So the altars kept it... locked away?”

“Kept it sleeping.” He bent to pick a tall arroyo lupine thrusting its way through the sodden earth, as if that was the most important thing to look at; in sunlight it would have been a brilliant purple. He tucked it in his hide trousers, drew in smoke, and continued.

I knew of such barriers between the sheets of existence; much of the symbol-laden spellwork of centuries past, the province of hoary, secretive scholars, had assumed such bastions of protection between the caster and whatever powerful entity was summoned.

“So we can put it back! We’ll take the stone from the well,” I began.

“When a prisoner escapes, does he return because you repaired the door? This darkest of the nunashish has power, white magician. ‘Atishwinic power has no heart, it has no cares, and it lives strong in this being. You are your army are mites crawling on its skin, and it is slowly crushing you, and will not let you leave. Your men cannot touch it.’”

He had straightened and resumed his pace uphill. The long day, lack of sleep, and my panicked flight was beginning to tell, and I struggled to keep pace.

“So we are doomed.”

“I am Merikubu,” he said. “Come with me, and we will talk with the bears.”

I sat crosslegged at another campfire, nodding with exhaustion but sparking with fear. In my hands was a stick of elderberry; called a wansak', it was split along its length and bound together at one end with a hawk's feather. I kept it clacking rhythmically in my palm like a drum according to Merikubu's instruction, and tried not to think of the fact that we awaited beings who my companion had attacked. I hoped they would not seek revenge on me in his stead.

He sat across from me, warming his hands and humming. Another cigarette dangled from his thin lips. Every now and again he lowered his head and sighed deeply, as if considering a deep regret, and sent a tower of smoke upward.

I did not even notice when they arrived, and tried not to flinch when a bear's muzzle moved slowly into my peripheral vision. They were there, and I suddenly saw them, and smelt deeply of their wild, pungent essence. I kept beating the wansak' against my palm, looking at Merikubu and hoping he would keep me safe, or at least hold them off long enough to explain my actions.

The world began to turn a little, like when one lies drunken on the floor, and they began to dance, shuffling in low waves around the fire, some with feet of men and some with paws of bear. I could not count them. Their voices raised like the thunder of ocean, and along with my rhythm they rumbled and whistled, until the white-haired, burly one raised a palm, and they snuffled, growled and grunted themselves to sitting positions. All of them were strange but familiar, native and yet older than human.

"You are not hurt," I ventured to say to the white-haired giant. Burrough's ball had struck him solidly.

"Our will and a balm of temelhepe saw to this," he said, as slowly as he had earlier that day. There seemed to be no anger in his dark eyes.

"We have a task, white magician," said Merikubu, as if translating. "And you have need of us, and we have need of you. The nunanish fade away before daybreak, but not this one. He walks, and he walks toward us. It will take everything to stop him. Will you help us?"

"Of course," I said. "We set it free in our ignorance... but I'm not powerful."

"All you do will be enough," he said, and he pointed up the hill, far up against the moon-burnished sky. The silhouettes of the trees could barely be discerned, but I could see a shadow above them.

Its form was not certain, but fear coursed through me like a hot wind. The shape had eyes, red and blazing like distant torches, and horns that stretched from each side of its head, like the Minotaur of ancient tales. Its shoulders stood higher than the trees. I saw this only when it moved, its deeper darkness obscuring the shadow of the hills or blotting out the tiny stars that hung near the horizon—and it moved toward us.

All around me the men, the bears, and those in between, massive furred eidolons who strode on two legs and grasped with sharp claws, all rose and shuffled upward to meet the nunashish who walked with mile-long steps down at us. Sheer, vital power throbbed near me, and I felt ashamed at my own small, unlearned prowess.

Merikubu patted my shoulder, smiled, and rose, rustling and crackling into the shape of a black bear even as he did. Light flecked around his shoulders and eyes, as if eager to escape and seek an old enemy.

When battle was joined there was no ceremony or announcement or call to arms, only an onrush of spirit and fury that battered the trees and bowled me onto my back. Lightning streaked a sky empty of clouds. The air shuddered with roars and shrieks and hisses, and the night was lit by fires that were sometimes yellow, or blue, or white. Magic was exchanged in godly amounts, nature meeting the unnatural, each terrible in its effort to cast the other down. I could not imagine what the men of my battalion saw and heard, away up on this distant hillside.

It was all I could do to run forward and apply my own spells, laying healing hands atop wounded furred shapes, weaving clouds of strength and goodwill and certainty into my allies. From somewhere I even drew enough to hurl bolts of fire against the horned creature, who crackled and roiled in fury against us, and was at once a man-sized brute and a gigantic horned shadow. I have never known from whence an arcanist's power comes, but I stretched mine to its limits; my throat was a dead desert canyon, my arms sand-filled twigs, my eyes granite marbles. I felt only pain hissing through me, as if my veins ran with silver, but I did not stop, helping the stewards of the land drive the nunashish, who had slain so many of my own kind, back into its sleep. I saw men and bears advance into shadow, claws and teeth gleaming, and others fall, never to rise.

In the corners of my mind I knew this was the last battle they would ever fight. They were not fighting it for me, or my battalion, or even humans, but I was glad, for there would have been nothing to stop the

demon that once waited beneath the mountain, unless all the arcanists from all the armies and academies of the world could be gathered and brought to bear, palms upraised and magic flashing from fingertips.

It was, somehow, enough. Dawn edged over the mountains east, revealing only bodies and a few straggling souls, and a blasted landscape. Trees splayed out in all directions, and in places the wet grasses had been burnt down to the grey rock. My friends who had fallen began to fade, until they seemed nothing more than heaps of brush and old boulders that had always been there. There was no sign of the fearsome horned shadow that blocked out stars when it walked.

Merikubu sat near me, alive, his left arm nearly missing, but peace in his eyes. From somewhere he had produced flame for his cigarette, and he nodded at me as he puffed.

“Goodbye, white magician,” he said. “Those of us who remain will remember.”

It was almost noon when I stumbled into the camp, bleary-eyed and bloodied around the nostrils and ears. Major Fremont received me with a cheery smile, as if I had delivered the newly sunny day. The battalion was packing up, readying itself to finish its mission; I swore I saw Copeland’s rust-colored head among the men drawing water from the white-stoned well, and I nodded, relieved.

“Bully! I don’t know what you did, Talbot, but you sure kept us awake last night with the lights and the thunder,” laughed the Major, mug of whiskey-spiked calinche in hand.

I begged for a bunk and a few hours, and Fremont waved me away, but I did not sleep, staring upward at the ceiling, thinking of ancient lives and history that had been lost forever that night. When the battalion moved on I moved with it, resuming my role as rifle-blessor and food-seasoner, and I kept to myself.

#

Major Fremont and his battalion finally worked its way down through Los Angeles and San Diego, and was not hampered in its quest. California became a state, finally, in 1850, and San Luis Obispo was among its first counties. I like to think I had something to do with that, because it was a near thing, but I will remember the name given to this place by Father Juan Crespí, back when the mission was new: la Cañada de los Osos—Valley of the Bears.

Married to the Sea

Michael H. Payne

"Please, Uncle Scotty? Please?" Laurie's voice, Carl hated to admit, sometimes scraped his ears like the branches of big ficus tree out front rasping against the upstairs windows. But now that she was seven, he'd gotten used to it; it barely made him flinch anymore.

"Hmmp! Honestly, Carlton!" Scott's voice, on the other hand, made Carl think of the fog that often crept up the streets between the ocean and Newport Harbor on these autumn nights when the Santa Anas didn't blow: slow and thick but not at all unpleasant. "What sort of a daughter are you raising here? That a proper young lady should request such a thing!"

At his desk jammed into the corner of the tiny living room, Carl didn't even look over his shoulder, just grinned and tapped his laptop to bring up the L. A. Times website. "You know when her bedtime is, Scott. You could've stayed upstairs..."

"Please?" Laurie's request wasn't any louder, but it was somehow even more grating, a trick she'd inherited from her mother--but Carl put the brakes on that train of thought. After Donna's cheating had finally blown their marriage to bits and Carl had gotten full custody of Laurie and several restraining orders due to the escalating threats Donna had continued texting and emailing him during the proceedings, all he'd wanted was to put it all behind him, get himself and Laurie out of L. A., and start over.

So when a client had told him about this great refurbished cottage for sale down on the peninsula in Newport Beach, he hadn't even thought about it. Sure, the owner was asking a half million more than it was worth, but after driving down the coast to look the place over, he'd signed the forms, made the deal, and transferred to the firm's Orange County office, bound and determined to make a new and better life for his daughter.

Which was more than a little ironic, considering--

"I promise, Uncle Scotty!" A glance sideways showed him Laurie sitting on the edge of her little blue rocking chair, her gaze fixed on the other side of the room and her fuzzy toy lobster Wendy resting in her lap. "I'll go right to bed after, but it's my very favorite story ever!"

Scott snorted again, but more softly this time. "Well, it is quite stirring: One man alone in an open boat against the vicissitudes of nature

and all...." The creak-creak-creak of Laurie's chair started up, and then Scott was off: "I'd no business setting out that night in the first place, of course, but one of the joys of being a doryman is that you've no one to answer to but yourself!"

Carl laughed, clicked through to the day's stock reports. "That's right! You never did get married, did you?"

"Daddy!" Laurie's ice pick tones actually made Carl wince this time. "Uncle Scotty's married to the sea! Isn't that right, Uncle Scotty?"

"Quite so, m'dear." A cold breath puffed across Carl's neck. "Oh, Horace Salter at the feed yard tried for years to interest me in his youngest daughter Ruth in the hope that marriage might finally settle her in to helping her sister Sarah at the Sharps' Hotel, but the girl never had a single good thing to say about Newport, not the bay nor the ocean nor the village! 'A blazing mud pit' she called it more than once in my hearing, so when she lit out on the evening train to Santa Ana one Saturday with some lawyer from Anaheim or somewhere, well, I wasn't the only one thinking good riddance to bad rubbish, let me tell you! That's as close as I ever came to tying any sort of land bound knot, and I've never had any cause for regrets!"

"Really?" Carl opened the mutual fund averages. "What story are you about to tell us again?"

Half a second of silence, then: "Don't be facetious, Carlton. It doesn't suit you." Carl could almost feel Scott's attention slide away. "Now, where was I?"

The sound of Laurie's rocking had frozen as well. "The joys of being a doryman," she said.

"Ah, yes. With the jack mackerel running and a full moon rising over Saddleback, no true doryman can resist pushing off from beside Jamie McFadden's wharf and pulling for the shoals at Red Hole. Of course, that night, a mere empty yellow rind shone in the western sky at sundown, and that should've warned me."

"McFadden's Wharf." Laurie's chair started creaking again. "They call it the Newport Pier now; me and Daddy walk over there all the time."

Another stretch of silence got a little guilt poking at Carl. "Laurie, we should probably let Uncle Scotty tell his story."

"I am letting him! But when he doesn't use the right names--"

"Hmmp!" The grunt was more a sigh this time. "It's quite all right, Carlton, and I thank you, Laurie. I can remember with crystal clarity that

ridiculous bicycle young Jimmy Irvine would occasionally ride down the carriage road from the San Joaquin ranch, but ask me the name of the current president, and I founder in the shallows."

"It's OK, Uncle Scotty," Laurie said, her voice almost gentle for once. "That's why we have Google."

"Yes, well." Scott harrumphed another few times, then settled back into the by now familiar opening of the story. "Having no wife to set up shop on the beach and sell my catch, I'd arranged with Mrs. Salter to act as my agent through her shop next to the hotel. It meant I had to have fish to her before sunup each morning, however, so out I set, tacked the dory through the evening breezes an hour or so out to my usual fishing grounds, and by midnight, I'd managed to net a fair enough haul that I was considering heading back to shore.

"But a load of mackerel is one thing; some sea trout or channel cod to lay before the customers, well, that's another matter entirely. I had time, certainly, so I unsnapped my rod and hurled a line out into the darkness.

"A few quiet moments, the black sea sloshing my dory, the sliver of the moon sliding down to vanish behind the jagged silhouette of distant Catalina...

"And then my line went taut, the boat lurching beneath me, the reel whirling and screeching like a thing gone mad! My first impulse was to let the whole damn rod go, but--!"

"Language, Uncle Scotty," Carl said, clearing his throat.

A slightly annoyed "Hmmp!", then: "But I certainly had no funds to replace it. So I allowed the line to play out, hoping whatever'd snagged it would snap its way free.

"And indeed, the pull slackened at once, the boat slewing back to true, and I blew out a breath. I was so relieved, in fact, that I dismissed the first flash of pale green light I saw below the surface as merely my overwrought brain playing tricks.

"But more flashes, like lightning in distant clouds, one seeming to rise, wheeling and writhing, becoming torpedo-shaped, heading straight toward me. Following my line to the surface, I realized with a start."

Carl had stopped reading the article about the latest budget mess by then, caught up in the story as always. "And that," Scott continued, "was when the tentacles broke the water, their edges sharp as a cross-cut saw and flailing every which way, a beak the size of my fist hissing and snapping at

their center, my hook lodged within! A squid it was, Laurie, its head alone six feet long if it was an inch!"

"A Humboldt squid," Laurie said in a breathless tone. "I Googled them. They're mean."

"Ferocious is the word, m'dear, and they're brute enough when the packs start up the coast from Mexico. By the time they reach our waters, they're often in a frenzy, devouring one another and any creature unfortunate enough to fall into their path! I let go my pole, but alas, the beast had wrapped its suckered grip about the dory's gunwale, tipping the boat on edge again and nearly spilling me into its gnashing maw!

"I tore my knife from its sheath, stepped sideways to better slash at the squid's underbelly...and trod directly onto some loose jack mackerel! Down I went, my right hand flailing upward with the knife and slamming hard into the thwart I'd been sitting on not a handful of seconds before! The impact somehow sent the knife askew in my hand, and struggling to sit up, trying to keep away from the maddened squid latched onto the side of the boat, I..." A gust of a sigh. "I managed to slash the knife directly across the side of my own neck!"

"The carotid artery." Whenever Laurie spoke at this point in the story, she was as quiet as Carl had ever heard her. Scott's snort almost sounded like a chuckle. "You know, Laurie, I really think I ought to put together some sweet little mermaid tales for you."

"Oh, no, Uncle Scotty! Not unless they're true stories about mermaids you met!"

"Well, I've known a lady or two who enjoyed swimming..."

Carl did some more throat clearing. "But perhaps not," Scott said. "Still, as I've told you before, with the squid already maddened and my blood spraying over it, well, I've always thought myself most fortunate that I have no memory of what happened after that."

The silence then lasted a fistful of seconds before Laurie cried out, "Oh, I love you, Uncle Scotty! Good night!" Carl turned to see her leap from her rocking chair, Wendy clutched in her arms. "Night, Daddy! I love you, too!" And she scampered down the hall toward her room.

Looking back at the sea chest he'd found in the cramped attic of the place when he and Laurie had moved in a few months ago, Carl grinned at the shadow wavering over it. "No regrets, I think you were saying?" he asked.

"Hmmp!" The shadow ruffled. "Were I to have one, Carlton, it would be that I didn't live long enough to talk Jamie McFadden out of selling the wharf and the railroad and all his holdings hereabouts! When you tell me how much you paid for this crackerbox hovel of mine, I can't help but weep, thinking of the fortune his children could've made!"

Carl shrugged. "Except McFadden kept trying to turn Newport into a commercial harbor, didn't he?"

"And a fine one it would've been!" Carl almost imagined he could see arms waving from the dimness above the old chest. "If those robber barons from the Southern Pacific hadn't undercut Jamie's every effort, he would've-
-!"

"Would've covered the place with warehouses and crane gantries." Carl shook his head. "Concrete instead of sand, oily water, air that stinks of cargo ships: what was it your would-be girlfriend called it? 'A blazing mud pit'? 'Cause that's exactly what it'd be right now if you'd been there to talk McFadden into staying." He spread his hands. "And however badly your marriage to the sea ended, Scott, I don't think you would've enjoyed seeing what a hundred years as a commercial port would've done to her."

"Hmmp!" The room brightened as if someone had turned the track lighting up a notch, and Carl realized he was alone.

He blew out a breath and powered off the laptop. With all the stories he'd heard about Newport Beach--the TV soap operas and reality shows; basketball players throwing massive parties on the beach; even some of what the neighbors had told him, the petty sex and drug scandals in the various mini-mansions that had replaced most of the old cottages and which were now for sale all up and down the street--he sure never expected to find himself trading quips with the ghost of a fisherman who'd died just before the turn of the last century.

And sure, it had been a little freaky when Laurie had started telling him about Uncle Scotty, the man who lived in the upstairs hall. But it had all worked out after he'd found the wallpapered-over crawlway into the attic and--

A squeal of tires outside, a smash of metal and a shattering of glass: Carl was on his feet almost before he knew it, taking the few steps down the hall to the front door, grabbing the knob with one hand, fumbling in his pocket for his cell phone with the other. He wrenched the door open, the orange light from the lamppost across the street seeping through the autumn

darkness to show him the postage stamp front yard, the big ficus tree towering up in the corner to overshadow the house--and a black SUV pulled partway up the driveway, its fender resting solidly against the back of his Audi.

He could make out a figure behind the wheel, and he was about to start shouting when movement on his left made him turn, something swinging at him; he reacted just enough so that whatever it was hit him hard in the shoulder instead of the head, the force of the blow spinning him around and down into the grass. A dark form rushed past him into the house, the thump-thump-thump of shoes on the wood flooring, Carl rolling, shaking his head, trying to stand. What the Hell was going on??

A shriek from inside sliced through him, and he pushed himself to his knees, cried out, "Laurie!" Clenching a fist, he stumbled to the doorway, figured he could body check the bastard when he came out, raised his eyes--

Only to see the house flicker. Not the lights of the house--they stayed steady: it was more as if the air around the house had tightened for a moment, as if Carl had briefly been looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope.

And the scream that rang out then, it was way too deep to be Laurie. Carl blinked through still spinning eyes, a figure in black pounding down the hall; crouching, he braced himself as boots slammed into him, a body tumbling over his back, the other man's second scream cutting off with a crunch.

The SUV's engine cranked to sudden life, its headlights flooding Carl; he stumbled to his feet, his whole left side feeling like one solid bruise, not sure what he could or should do--and a thick voice behind him whispered, "Not likely." A wave of cold air washed past, and he swore he could see it dash against the SUV like a storm surge, the headlights wavering, the engine sputtering.

The big car didn't stop, though, the figure behind the wheel spinning it back onto the street with a stink of burning rubber, the SUV roaring up the block for the boulevard. "Hmmp!" came Scott's snort from somewhere nearby. "Not quite in range..."

"Daddy!"

"Laurie!" Her voice the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard, Carl spun, caught her in his arms, hugged her as tightly as he could. "What was--?? Are you--?? Did he--??"

"He grabbed me!" She pressed her damp face into his shoulder. "But Uncle Scotty made him let me go!"

Turning, Carl saw a darker piece of the night fluttering over the guy, sprawled sideways on the lawn, the ski mask somehow peeling away from his face. "D'you know the bilge rat, Carlton?" Scott's voice drifted back to him.

A quick look--the guy was still breathing at least--and Carl shook his head. "I know his type. My ex-wife has a thing for curly black hair and chiseled chins like that." Grimacing, he settled onto the front stoop, Laurie in his lap, finally managed to dig out his cell phone and stab his thumb at 9-1-1. "And thanks, Scott. I mean, if you hadn't--"

"Hmmp!" The sound had more wistfulness in it than Carl had heard there before. "Well, those of us who married unwisely must stick together, mustn't we?"

American Shadow

Beth Cato

If that banshee wailed one more time, Penny was going to scream.

The noise was awful, worse than the time her street had four cats in heat at once, that's for sure. Worst of all, the banshee's presence meant that Nana was about to die and there wasn't a thing the doctors could do to stop it.

Penny couldn't take it anymore. She had to get out of that house.

She wiggled through her blackout curtains and onto the crunchy grass. Darkness lay thickly over the dirt street. Cloth and paper smothered the windows of every house, preventing any leakage of light. A nearby radio blared the heavy horn instrumentals of Glenn Miller's "Chattanooga Choo Choo." The summer wind carried the mustiness of dust and the sweet and sour perfume of the cannery and packing house upwind. Depending on the sourness, sometimes the stench of nearby dairies was preferable. That said a lot, considering Kings County probably had more cows than people.

Somewhere overhead, an airplane buzzed. The fellows at the listening post would recognize the sound well enough to identify the plane. Penny couldn't imagine Japan actually attacking Armona--what would they do, steal all the peaches, apricots, and walnuts? But then, she never imagined Susan would be sent away, either.

Susan Miyamoto's little house was dark behind a haphazard fence made of planks from citrus crates. Tears brimmed in Penny's eyes. Two months had passed since Susan and her family walked down the street, suitcases in hand. It wasn't right. Susan was born here--as American as Penny and everyone else in town. The other accents in Armona ranged from thick Portuguese to tongue-flicking fast Spanish to the long, slow drawls of transplanted Okies and Arkies. Almost everyone came from somewhere else. Out in the camp by the cannery, a thousand folks lived in cabins just for the packing season, tripling the town's population.

Penny rounded the backside of Susan's house and hopped over the rotting hay bales that bordered the canal. A length of string lay on the dirt. She picked it up, twining it between her fingers. She couldn't hear the banshee, but she didn't feel any better. Now, all she could think about was Susan. Her best friend through all her ten years of life, gone.

The pale soil of the canal glowed beneath the moon. Penny twiddled the string until it unraveled between her fingers. Powder-soft dust fogged her footsteps as she walked along. This late in summer, everything dried out. Walnut trees formed a black wall along the far bank of the ditch.

Something scampered just ahead, a shadow nearly as big as her.

"Susan?" she whispered. It was silly to think her friend had sneaked home, but she couldn't help a surge of hope.

The shadow leaped to the side, directly into the five-foot gap of the canal. Gasping, Penny rushed to the edge. It was so black down there she could scarcely see a thing.

"Hello?" It must have been a dog or something, but no dogs around were that big. Her heart thudded against her chest. Something shifted in the darkness and crawled towards her. She bit her lip and backed away from the edge as she knotted the string between her fingers.

The creature's slick body curved forward, its lips wide like a monkey's. A circle like a crown rested atop its head, and after a moment, she realized it was hair. A gentle slant curved its eyes.

"You're a kappa," she whispered.

Susan had an old book of stories her parents brought from Japan, and this looked straight out of a woodblock illustration. A kappa lived in water, like the kelpies that Nana used to call. The kappa's skin shone grey, but she imagined in good light it would be vivid green like a frog.

Where had it come from? Susan sure hadn't known a kappa lived close by. Penny turned around and saw the back fence of Mr. Hatsumi's house. He was an old man who had worked down at Frank's Market. He'd gone off to the camps just like Susan. The kappa had to be his.

The water sprite returned her scrutiny. Its lips opened, and words slithered out. Susan had taught Penny a few words of Japanese, but not enough to make sense of this. The creature's slick brow came together in a frown and then the kappa dashed straight at her.

She stepped back with a cry, her fingers parting. The kappa grabbed the string and danced backward, holding it up high, taunting. Penny stared. The kappa frowned and draped it closer.

"Oh," she said, understanding. Like a cat, she lunged for the string. Cackling, the kappa ran away, the limp string trailing behind. A dark turtle shell gleamed on the kappa's back. They ran along the bank, dodged the rusting chassis of a tractor, and looped back around.

The water sprite slowed, its thin chest heaving for breath. Granting her a strangely-wide smile, it released the string. She snatched the string and stuffed it into a pocket.

The kappa reached to the top of its head and plucked something from its pate. When Penny leaned closer to see, the kappa flicked the object into her hands. Surprised, she clutched the thing between her fingers. It was a snail's shell, smoothed by touch. The kappa frowned and gave her a small push, its hands cold on her sweaty shoulder. Oh, it was her turn. Laughing, she ran ahead, the kappa chittering in pursuit. She hadn't played like this since Susan left. Strange happiness lightened her steps.

They ended their chase behind Mr. Hatsumi's house. Penny dropped the shell into the kappa's webbed hands.

"You're lonely, too, huh?" she asked softly.

The kappa quivered. This close, she could see cracks in its skin, and it just plain looked wrong. Painful. The kappa retreated down the bank. There was a small slosh of water. Penny sucked in a breath. The canal would completely dry out soon.

"You need to come to my house." She stifled a yawn against her wrist. "Mama has a pond in the backyard, with an oak tree growing nearby. And she has a Victory Garden, too. I bet there's something there to eat, so long as you don't eat too much. She complains about the jackrabbits but she doesn't hate them, not really. Come on!"

She walked about ten feet up the bank and turned around. The kappa hadn't followed, staying below and almost invisible but for the gleam of moonlight on its carapace.

It didn't understand. Nana talked about how back in Ireland, fairies lived in certain forests and had been there for years and years. If the canal was the kappa's home, it wouldn't want to move, either.

Nana would know what to do. She knew all about the special creatures she carried with her from Ireland, and something from Japan couldn't be that different.

"I'll be back!" Lickety-split, Penny dashed towards home.

#

Penny wriggled through the curtains and landed head-first on her bed. She kicked to untangle her legs and sat upright.

Mama stood in the doorway, her arms crossed.

"Oh." Penny gulped.

"Where were you?"

"I just... I went on a walk down to the canal. I need to talk to Nana. It's urgent!" She stepped towards the door, but Mama didn't move. That's when Penny noticed the tears on Mama's cheeks and the piercing quiet.

"No," she whispered. "Nana?"

"Just a few minutes ago."

Suddenly boneless, Penny collapsed to sit on the bed.

The old floor creaked like Mama's voice. Almost hidden behind Mama, Penny's other grandmother stared from the shadows. In the thin light, Tati's raisin-wrinkled face appeared eye-less, her chin jutting out like a puppet's distended jaw.

All her life, Penny had shared the household with her two grandmothers. Nana had made friends with every child, grown-up, and cat in Armona. Then there was Tati, who hadn't said a word since she came to America over twenty years ago. The Turks killed her husband, her friends and family. Papa was the only one left.

If Tati had been the one who died, few would have noticed.

Penny absorbed the silence for a long minute. "I needed Nana's help. I found a creature. And she, she would know what to..." Withheld tears burned in her eyes and throat.

"No one knew such things like her." Mama's dull voice offered little comfort.

Nana's gentle lilt could evoke kelpies and pookas, leprechauns and fairies. With a sinuous tug of her hands, she pulled spirits from her shadow and set them free. And when Bing Crosby played on the radio! Oh, she'd get up and dance, body jiggling beneath a tent of cotton, and reach behind her to find her partners. The fairies emerged, iridescent and bright with joy, and joined in until Nana collapsed in a chair, her face ruddy and grin wide.

The knack had been so distinctly Nana that Penny had never thought about how she did it.

"How do I learn?" asked Penny.

The floor creaked as Tati shifted in the hallway. The shriveled old woman blended into the house like another piece of furniture. Quiet. Listening. Penny looked towards Mama instead, swallowing down her disgust. Tati never said anything, though if she kicked a chair leg, she'd mutter strange syllables as dark as coffee.

"I don't know." Mama shrugged her thin shoulders. "I never connected with things the way she did. Your Nana loved Ireland, and she loved what she brought with her, even that banshee. We each carry different things with us in life." Mama straightened and took in a rattling breath, brushing herself off as if to sweep away words. "Enough of this. None of us have gotten sleep. I have to be at the packing house by six."

"What about Nana?" asked Penny.

"We leave her be. We'll tend to her in the morning. Get yourself ready for bed." Mama left, the floor creaks fading with each footstep.

Tati lingered, staring at Penny. Penny stared back. Tati cocked her head like a bird and then sighed. The action seemed to deflate her bowed shoulders, and she waddled away.

Penny fell back onto the bed with a slight bounce. Above her face, the curtains waved with a gentle summer breeze. It would be awfully hot tomorrow. The canal would dry up in no time. Susan was gone. Nana was dead. How could Penny save the kappa?

#

Because Tati was mute and about as huggable as an electric pole, it was Penny's duty to accept condolences and casseroles from the neighbors all morning long. Tati drifted in the kitchen, cowering whenever someone knocked at the door. Between visitors, the house felt empty without Nana's presence. Even bed-bound, she had constantly sung and chattered.

Penny finally fled to the canal for a few minutes of peace. Daylight revealed that a mere ribbon of water was all that remained. There was no sign of the kappa. Lots of fairy creatures favored the night, and apparently the kappa was one of them. Penny sat on the bank and stared at the scant water. Who could help? A few folks in town would want the kappa dead. It was a creature of Japan. Penny didn't mind the anger at Japan, what with all the awful things they'd done, but that wasn't the kappa's fault.

It wasn't Susan's fault, either.

When she returned home, Papa was awake and pulling on his boots. He didn't speak much more than Tati, but Penny was desperate for answers.

"How do you make a fairy change its home?" she asked.

Papa frowned, his big mustache curving with his lips. "Nana left something?"

"No, this isn't Nana's, it's..." She hesitated. Papa had been tolerant of her friendship with Susan, but only that. "It's something I found."

"Fairies." He grunted the word. "Worse than riddles. In Armenia, we had p'eris. Same thing."

Her eyes widened. She had never heard of Armenian fairies before. "Did you ever see them?"

His movements slowed and he raised his head. Tati stood at the table feet away, making their lahvosh. Her beady gaze penetrated Penny. One gnarled hand reached into the bin of flour beside her. She lifted high a palm of flour and then released it in a cloud of white dust.

Papa shuddered. "We are in America. We have no need for such thoughts." He stood and walked away, his steps heavy.

Penny turned to Tati. "Why did you do that? What did it mean?"

The old woman's body seemed to shrivel as she sidestepped to tend to her bread. Penny clenched her teeth and looked away. She ached to scream at Tati, as if to compensate for the old woman's silence.

Supper was much the same. Mama, exhausted, slowly chewed each bite of food like cud. Tati hunkered in her chair, barely present at all. Penny stared at her water glass and wondered if she could carry buckets to the canal to save the kappa. With the earth so dry and the walk so far, she feared it wouldn't be enough.

The dreadful meal over, Penny sat on the front stoop while the stars pried their way into the pink and purple sky. The kappa would be waking up about now. Her hands shoved in her dress pockets, she headed towards the canal, ignoring Susan's house and the tears that threatened her again.

"Hey," she called to the ditch. The moon gleamed over the fading violet of the distant foothills. The radio blared some jazzy number from a few houses away.

Chattering, the kappa crept up the bank again. She grinned, relieved to see it, and then saw its skin. Dry lines furrowed its spindly arms like cracks in the parched basin.

"Oh no," she whispered.

The kappa's eyes went wider, and it retreated into the canal. Penny turned.

A flashlight beam sliced through the black. She recognized the shuffling walk before she saw Tati's face. The old woman worked her way along the bank and stopped a few feet away. Papa's old chrome flashlight in her hand, Tati motioned to the canal and back at Penny. Tati raised a questioning eyebrow.

"It's called a kappa," Penny muttered. "It's a water spirit, and the water's almost gone. I want to take it home to Mama's pond, but..."

Tati worked her gums together, her chin bobbing. Her eyes squinted beneath thick pillows of wrinkles. For a long second, Penny stared, wondering if Tati would actually speak.

That's when the old woman whapped Penny with her cane.

"Ow!" she yelped, jumping on one foot and holding her wounded calf. "Why'd you do that?"

The cane swooped toward her other leg, but Penny managed to hop out of the way. In the background, tinny trumpets from the radio kept a merry beat. As though conducting an orchestra, Tati bobbed her cane and shuffled her feet.

"Do you want me to dance?" Penny shook her head. "I don't feel like dancing. Nana's dead."

Nana would have danced. If Nana had lived another day, she would have swayed from side to side in her sick bed, one hand flicking as it kept time.

Something hardened in Tati's gaze, and she swung the cane again and again. Penny backed up, keeping an eye on the edge of the canal, and finally waved the old woman back.

"Fine. I'll dance. I'll try."

Penny closed her eyes and inhaled unsettled dust and that underlying fruity tang. It smelled like home. The heat of tears flooded her lashes. Nana loved this place.

For Nana, she could dance.

Penny pivoted, letting the music claim her. She opened her eyes and took in the starry-filled dome of sky and the dark silhouettes of the walnut grove across the ditch, and she swayed. She moved as she imagined Nana moving. Young, full of grace, buoyant music carrying her like a ship on a wave. Her feet shuffled and kicked at the plush dirt. Motes of light waltzed beside her.

Nana's fairies.

Penny sucked in a breath, hesitating for a second, and then danced on. More fairies joined. Dozens. Hundreds. Her world glowed. There were more than Nana had ever pulled forth. How?! Penny looked at her own arm, how it angled outward, at the beam of light that illuminated her even through the thickness of iridescent wings. Tati had the flashlight angled just

so. Penny's hand, stretched out, mimicked what she had seen Nana do a hundred times, pulling at her shadow.

Penny laughed, surprised at her own joy.

The music faded away and her steps slowed. A commercial blared with sing-song voices. Fairies drifted around her like lazily falling leaves as they blurred into the shadows again.

Penny's hand dropped to her side. Tati waited, the beam of light trembling in her unsteady hand. Tati had known Nana for years, too, shared the household with her for all of Penny's life. Tati uplifted her knob of a chin to reveal the unchanged sorrow carved into her face. The pain was there. The pain was always there. Nana's death was another loss on top of many.

Dust shifted around them, like the cloud of flour released from Tati's hand.

Maybe Tati had danced with p'eris in a different life, a life of joy and happiness and countless smiling family. Now, Tati possessed a sorrow so deep she couldn't voice it, perhaps so deep that it had severed that overlap between soul and shadow.

There would be no gift of p'eris, not from Tati. And Penny would never ask that of her.

"There's still the kappa," Penny whispered. "It lives in water. It hasn't danced at all. I don't think it reacts to music like fairies do. I don't know what to do. I'm not Japanese like Susan."

Speaking Susan's name aloud broke her brave facade. Tears quickly turned into full body-quaking sobs. Nana was dead. Susan was gone. Susan--would she ever come home? Would they ever slip notes to each other in class, or race to pluck peaches the fastest? They used to joke that they were twins, blooded sisters separated at birth.

There was a curious chirp and Penny blinked, looking down. The kappa squatted at her feet and caught Penny's tears against its face. It smiled, jaw agape with sheer delight.

Her memories of Nana had called the fairies. The kappa was part of Susan's heritage, part of Susan. Part of her. They were blood sisters, after all. Penny straightened, tears still streaming.

She stepped sideways so that her shadow draped over the kappa, and she reached into those depths and tugged, gently. In her mind, she framed Susan's face--the way she laughed and how her eyes crinkled. How her hair

waved like a silken banner that time they went horse-riding, and how her kites always won first place in Kite Day at school. How she and Susan had sat together, reading a book of Japanese fairy tales, and how the thought of a kappa made her dearest friend smile.

She felt the kappa meld with her soul, and it felt right. Cozy. Hot stew on a cold winter night. The connection was there all along. The kappa knew. Now Penny understood as well.

She stepped forward and she knew the kappa came with her along with the lively sparkles of fairies and even the muted beauty of the banshee. Someday, maybe, she would come to understand the p'eris as well. Armenian, Irish, Japanese, they were all a part of her. Penny was American. She absorbed them, just as she absorbed the heat of Susan's hand when they first started school and walked hand in hand, skipping all the way.

She reached for Tati's hand, the skin so loose and wrinkled and unfamiliar. The old woman took a step back, slipping away, her breath an alarmed hiss.

"It's okay," said Penny. "You don't have to." She smiled to show she meant it.

Tati offered a brusque nod and sidled just close enough so that their knuckles touched. That was enough.

With Glenn Miller playing accompaniment, they walked home, Penny's shadow a flickering pool around her feet.

Counting It Up

Michael Haynes

The ghost of Frank Carlton watched the men at the courthouse as they started working their way through the ballot boxes.

A young man unlocked one of the boxes and pulled out several slips of paper.

"Five here," he said. "All for Belleville."

One of the other men snorted at that. "Well, what d'ya expect. That's one of the Belleville precincts' boxes. You think they're gonna be voting for San Bernardino?"

Carlton, if he'd still had a body, would've grimaced at this. Belleville, after all, was the town where he'd died. Been murdered, if you want to not put too fine a point on it.

Oh, no one would've called it murder. "Execution" or just plain "death by hanging" would have been how anyone else would've described Carlton's death. Except he was innocent of the crime they'd hanged him for, so in his mind it was murder.

"One hundred ninety-eight votes so far for Belleville, one hundred eighty-three for San Bernardino," a white-haired gentleman announced.

Carlton drifted down closer to where the men were working, closer to the bonfire. He didn't truly feel heat or cold, but the pop and crackle of the fire soothed him a bit all the same. He couldn't say what had drawn him to the courthouse on this evening, but if he was going to be here, he might as well enjoy it as best he could.

They men kept counting the votes, box after box, as the night wore on. From time to time, a boy would throw a few more logs on the fire.

The tally shifted in fits and starts, San Bernardino occasionally coming out a bit ahead, Belleville keeping the lead most often. The men down below, Bernardino men all, grumbled every time Belleville got a passel of votes. Carlton would've been happy to join in the grumbling, if he could. His old stomping grounds becoming the new county seat wouldn't make him a bit happy.

Another box, the next to last, was opened. The man who'd pulled out the ballots counted through them twice before announcing, "Eight in this box for San Bernardino, three for Belleville,"

"Four hundred seventy-three for San Bernardino, Four hundred seventy-one for Belleville," the old man who kept the tally said.

A couple of the men whooped at this update while the youngest of the men doing the counting went to fetch the last box. He picked it up and stared at it a good long minute.

"God damn," he said, at last. "This one's a Belleville box."

The faces of the other men fell. With only one vote advantage San Bernardino was bound to lose the election now.

"Ain't nothin' to be done for it," one of them said. "Bring it on over and let's get it done with."

Carlton's ghost seethed at the thought of what was about to happen. He'd happily see Belleville rot, just like they'd been happy to see him do, but there was little chance of that if it ended up with all the power that came with being the county seat.

The young man carrying the box took a couple of steps forward and Carlton rushed towards him, momentarily forgetting in his rage that he had no body and would simply pass through the man.

And pass through he did. But Carlton heard the man cry out as his incorporeal self and the other man's physical form occupied the same space for one brief moment.

There was a crash then and a bunch of commotion. Carlton looked around and saw the young man sprawled out on the floor, unhurt except for his pride.

The same could not be said for the ballot box, for it had landed square in the bonfire and even now its wood slats were charring.

"For God's sake, Joseph, what happened to you?"

The young man had gotten to his feet and he brushed himself off. "I've got no idea, Paul. I just got the most unearthly feeling there for a moment and..." He broke off and rushed toward the fire. "The box!"

But it was far too late. By the time they managed to extract the burning remnants of the ballot box from the fire all that remained inside were wisps of blackened paper.

The men all looked around, none of them speaking.

Finally, the one called Paul said, "What was that last count, Lee?"

"Four seventy-three to four seventy-one."

Paul nodded. "Well, then, looks like we've kept ourselves the county seat, men." He went over and clapped Joseph on the shoulder. "And, son,

whatever saint it was that made you stumble, say an extra prayer to him for us all."

The young man blushed a bit but smiled as the others began to celebrate.

A saint, thought Carlton, as he drifted up and away from the courthouse. I reckon I've never been called one of those before, but who am I to argue with those men. And if he could have laughed as he drifted off toward Belleville, anxious to see the looks on the faces of the folks there when they heard they'd lost the election by two votes, he most certainly would have.

Blood and Dust

CJ Hurtt

The driving steel and yelling wasn't what woke him. It wasn't the heat although the town was already a sweltering mess at five in the morning. It was the need. The need would shake any man awake. Augusten suspected the reason why most dope fiends aged so well was that the need kept calling them back from the grave. You could live forever with just enough morphine.

Augusten eased himself upright and reached for his works. The metal syringe smiled coldly at him in the Bakersfield morning light. A hint of sulfur, a little water, the flame, and a breath full of prayers. The four elements shot straight into your arm. It's magic. Augusten's eyes rolled back as the sounds of the workers struggling to build the railway started to fade. The heat, the need, and the steel had subsided a bit. It would be time again soon enough though. The need always comes back and there was a lot of work to do before then.

Climbing out of his hotel room bed, Augusten kicked a blood-flecked penny dreadful out of the way. More lurid tales of Whitechapel from the year before. The train stations had been full of those things. From Chicago to Bakersfield and only tales of bloody London to keep him occupied while counting the hours between shots.

He stumbled to the chamber-pot and began his day. The assignment slowly started to come back to him. He hated these Pinkerton jobs. They never paid what they were worth, but he took them anyway. The Agency had a friendly doctor that always fitted him out properly before a journey. "It's not the wage, but the benefits that makes the job attractive," he had told a friend once. Other than that, the Agency could go to hell.

Augusten had been called to the same Masonic hall their little muscle-for-hire club had been founded in. That's how he knew it was big. Skull busting and union malarkey were always handled in-house. There were some things that they were ill-equipped to handle though. That's when they sent for him. They usually found him in a bar or in the basement/opium den of some out-of-the-way market. To get sent to the Hall? That was cause to pay special attention.

The nameless man who always sent for him was waiting inside. The black and white floor spread out like an eternal chessboard between them.

“We need you to go to California,” the man had said, his grey eyes never blinking.

“You know I don’t do railroad trouble. I’m not in the union busting business,” Augusten replied.

“We need you to address a certain problem we’ve been having in Bakersfield with...employee retention.”

“Murder, you mean. You want me to commit it or stop it?”

“Likely both by the time you are finished there. Savage killings. One survivor who is now totally mad. Workers running in the dead of night into the desert and never seen again.”

“This doesn’t sound so unusual. The west is far from tamed,” Augusten said.

“So we’ve noticed. We have reason to believe that what’s going on there is no mere lunatic or mass-hysteria. You are to go see if these suspicions prove true and take care of the situation if they are.”

“I see. I assume that I am to take the next train?”

“Yes. You do have time to visit Doctor Lee before leaving though. He’ll...see to your needs,” the nameless man said and turned away. Augusten had been dismissed.

A few days later he arrived in Sumner. A quick ride and he was in Bakersfield. His pockets filled with cash and dope, he sought lodging to wait for morning.

Augusten walked down the muddy street. The tule marsh the town had once been was long gone. With the buildings and railways, men from the east had tipped the scales to the desert’s advantage. Even though Bakersfield was in its infancy, Augusten could tell that the changes were permanent.

“You’re Pinkerton,” a voice said to his left. Augusten turned and saw a lanky man leaning against the exterior door of the makeshift hospital that was Augusten’s first stop.

“Not really,” he replied and slid a hand into his coat where his gun hid. The Agency was a divisive entity.

“You work for them. I can tell.”

“I contract for them. Them and many others.”

“Mercenary,” the man said and looked away. He nodded his head as if agreeing with something and, still staring straight ahead, stuck out his hand for Augusten to shake.

“McNab. Kinda like the dog. Nice to meet ya.”

“Augusten. What makes you privy to my employers?”

“Clothes too clean. Gussed you’re from back east. Not east like Oklahoma, east like New York.”

“Chicago.”

“Same difference. So how come you admitted who you were? Pinkertons don’t like that, I reckon.”

“Let’s say I’m cultivating contacts. Figure we’d start out honest. You seem aware of things. Maybe you’d be help if we could trust each other,” Augusten said.

McNab burst out laughing. “That is some of the best horseshit I’ve heard in years. You lay that on all the unwashed yokels? Anyway, I do happen to be around if you have money for it,” McNab said and pulled himself from the wall. He chuckled a bit as he ambled down the street. Augusten turned and entered the hospital shack.

“He says there were many teeth. Teeth of darkness,” the woman next to the man in bed said. This man, Hsiang, was the unlucky survivor the nameless man had spoken of. What was left of him anyway.

“What time of night was this?” Augusten asked, taking out a notepad. The woman asked Hsiang the question in Mandarin and he responded slowly, his bandages oozing with blood.

“He says it was night. He does not know when. He was walking home.”

“From where?” Augusten watched the red overtake the white of the gauze as Hsiang’s labored breathing seemed to get shallower with every breath. He wouldn’t be a survivor for long. Both his hands missing, leg mostly gone, and his face a total patchwork. Poor guy wouldn’t see too many more mornings before the infections took him.

Hsiang and the woman began yelling at each other. What little strength he had left, Augusten had to hand it to him; the man was a fighter.

“He was in the tunnels!” the woman finally blurted out. She tried her best to suck that last word back in, but it had escaped.

“Tunnels?” The railway had already passed through the nearest mountain. Whatever she was talking about, they weren’t train tunnels.

She looked down at the floor, instantly sorry that she had said anything. “Not really tunnels. Basements. Under stores. They connect. Many doors.”

Augusten nodded. He was no stranger to the underground and unspoken worlds beneath the cities that the polite people lived in. Card games, opium, working women, and guns ran through the secret halls and unmapped corners of everywhere that had money enough to have them.

Hsiang would say no more though. An outsider wasn't going to be welcome in the world beneath the floorboards of more legitimate commerce. He'd need to be vetted and with the whole place seemingly knowing his ties to the Pinkerton Agency, he seemed an unlikely candidate for acceptance. Augusten said his thanks and walked back out into the glare of the San Joaquin sun. The sweat welling around his collar was cold though. He'd have to fix soon.

A brisk walk back to the hotel and his arm was primed and ready. The shakes and sweat came sooner and sooner. The relief lessened every time. He knew he'd have to take the cure soon. He'd have to walk away for a while. Get clean. Not today. He hungrily watched the solution boil in the spoon. A slight twinge. Silence.

He knew he was different by the time he was fifteen. He had seen things. Things that aren't. His mother had told him that it was the coyotes taking the chickens. He knew better. At night he could see them. Small, hairy creatures that stood like men. Their eyes glowed green. They had claws. In the darkness those eyes saw him too.

At first, they only took chickens. He could hear them out at the coop at night, screeching their words to each other. Their voices sounded like a nail being worked out of a plank. When he had finally worked up the nerve to try and run them off, things escalated.

They would wait for him. If he went to the creek to fetch water or to bathe, they would be in the shadows. If he went to the outhouse at night, they'd swoop upon him. Most the time it was just scratches and bites. Nothing that looked unusual on a farm boy. But these things, Augusten knew, were just toying with him. Soon enough chickens wouldn't be the only thing missing.

One night in August a travelling tent show came to town. His mother brought him to meet the man that could teach him about Jesus.

“He'll learn ya into Heaven,” she said.

Augusten smiled and went into the tent. The air was hot and still as the man at the front of the crowd ranted about the fires of hell and the pitfalls awaiting anyone wishing to reach Salvation.

“The glory of God is not gained through dainty clothes and clean hands,” the preacher had said, “it is gotten through the blood. You must bathe in the blood of the Lord!”

After the crowds had left, Augusten approached the preacher. Dizzy with thoughts of the blood of the Lamb, he asked to be baptized and prayed with. The preacher stopped packing his wagon and knelt.

“Please, oh Lord, show this young man the ways of your wisdom ...” The night was suddenly full of screeching and the scrapping of familiar claws.

The preacher pulled a pistol and handed Augusten a length of rod. “Suffer not one to live!” The preacher screamed and the carnage began.

Blood spilled for hours, theirs and the creature’s. In the end, the “spawns of evil” were but piles of fur and gore. Augusten could feel that his ribs were cracked, his flesh torn.

The preacher pulled a small bag from the wagon. Augusten saw a hint of glass as the preacher put something to Augusten’s lips.

“Laudanum, son. Drink, but be careful,” the preacher said. Augusten could feel the liquid slowly numb his mouth.

“You see now, dontcha, son? Yes, you see.”

He removed the needle from his arm and waved away the memory. The years since that time, the preacher whose name he couldn’t remember and the drug he’d never forget, Augusten learned a lot about blood. Blood could be used for many things and not just moving the morphine around. There was magic in the blood. Power. He could will things to happen. Symbols and sigils. Blood and medicine. He was well on the path when the Pinkerton Agency found him. They always needed arcane men like him.

By the time Augusten made it to the door, the work had stopped for the day. The relentless hammering gave way to revelry. There was drinking and laughter. The day was going dim. The heat held on, but there was always whisky for that.

Augusten set out for McNab. If he was going to get into the basements, McNab was going to be the only way to get there. Saloon after saloon, no one had seen him though. Heads would shake, eyes would avert. Buying drinks did no good either. The man had vanished. When midnight had rolled

around and Augusten had given up for the night, a familiar voice snuck up on his left.

“Heard you was looking for me,” McNab said.

“Not the easiest to find,” Augusten replied.

“Yeah. Well.” McNab waved his hand in the night air, ending further inquiry.

“Listen,” Augusten said, “I need to get into the...tunnels. I need in to do my job.”

“So?”

“I get paid for my job. You want money? I need to get paid first to give it to you.”

“You’ll give me mine now,” McNab said.

“And you’ll get half when I’m in,” said Augusten.

“This is not a debate. I’d be sticking my neck out, for a total stranger I may add, for what? The promise of half a payment now and half whenever you feel? No.”

“Ok. What’s your price then? Keep in mind that if you disappear with my money and I don’t get what I need, you’ll be dead in a week,” Augusten said.

“Like that isn’t a possibility anyways. Alright. Ten dollars in my hand, right now, and I’ll talk to the doorman. Ok?”

“Fine.” Augusten reached into his pocket and pulled out his billfold. He looked down to count out the then when lightning split his skull.

Looking up, he saw McNab standing over him. A brick was in his hand. The world swam, but the pain was not far enough away for him to swim with it. He tried to get up, but McNab kicked him back down. Augusten felt woozy and the world got a little darker. McNab’s arm arced, the brick jutting from his hand. Black.

“Sorry, fella.”

The cool burn of his skin shocked Augusten awake. He was alone. His head spilt and exploded. The pain was so intense, he threw up as he shook and sweated. The brick had cracked his skull and his morphine was far, far away. The vice of withdrawal tightened around him as his sickly green flesh burned.

“Oh God,” he muttered as he stood up.

The room was a dim, windowless, rectangle lit only with the flickering and dying oil lamps left behind. An overturned card table and a few

smashed bottles cluttered the corner. The tunnels.

“Well. I’m in.”

Augusten shuffled silently and sickly from room to room. There were beds, bottles, remnants of victimless crime everywhere. The occasional bloodstain reminded him that the crimes may not have been totally victimless after all.

Room after room, as advertised, of vice and misdeed. The place looked like it would have been a fun time, he thought, if he hadn’t been imprisoned in it for some reason. Finally, after what seemed years, he came to the room he sought.

Pipes lay on mattresses and at tables. Paper lamps hung on the wall. This room would be as still as it was then even if it had been full of customers. The opium den. The crown jewel of the industrial revolution.

Augusten frantically searched the room. The proprietor had, of course, taken his stash with him. There was nothing. The sickness turned to despair. He saw no way to even think about making a plan with the illness bearing down on him. He would be shut down forever. His only hope lay on the floor and table tops.

Pox, they call it. Ash from the opium pipe. It doesn’t go down without a fight and will not improve your mood any. It’s worse than it sounds and Augusten welcomed it like a wounded leg welcomes amputation. It’s a hated practice that all opium fiends eventually turn to. It’s horrible, but if you can eat enough, you can keep the shakes and burning at bay for a little while. Augusten hoped that was all he needed.

The tremors and withdrawal backed down a bit, but wouldn’t leave completely. Augusten left the den and turned right. He could see all the way to the end of the hall. Most of the basements of the main street must have been connected. It was at least a thousand feet to the other end. He had to find a way out. That’s when he heard the growl.

Low and deep, the sound spread through the empty basements. Whatever had attacked Hsiang was down there with him. He wasn’t there to find the beast; he was there to feed it. Augusten took off towards the nearest door that looked like it may lead to a stairway of some kind. Instead, the door led to yet another hall with ever more doors. The growl was closer. “Great,” he thought, “I’ve been dumped in the opium maze to fight the Minotaur or whatever passes for Greek myth in this town.” There was no other way out. He had to fight.

Augusten looked around the floor. Under a table was a broken whisky bottle. Perfect. The pain barely registered. The pox was doing its job better than he expected. The blood flowed from his arm and trailed behind him on the floor as he ran.

When he found a room big enough, Augusten drew a protective circle around him. The symbols he had known even before he had seen them in the old skin-bound books glowed faintly on the floor around him. The opium and blood providing the protection of ancient magic. The growling shook the walls. Augusten closed his eyes. A bright light pierced through his eyelids. There was a hot rush of wind and the smell of brimstone. He had been found.

The being growled and tried to break the barrier, but could not. As long as Augusten did not open his eyes he would be safe...that was until the pox ran out. As soon as the shakes started again, he was done for.

“What are you?” the beast asked.

“Just a man.”

“No. You are not. Why are you here?”

“I was sent to find you by other men. To kill you. Then I was sent here by other men to be killed by you.”

The beast walked slowly around the circle. “And what are you going to do now?” it asked.

“That’s kind of up to you,” Augusten said, “I’m in no shape to fight and I doubt I’d make a good meal. What are you?”

“They say dragon, but that is not right. They do not know. I am that which I am. That is all.”

“So...not a dragon then, huh?” Augusten asked.

“I was here long before the people were. I was here before words. Dragon is the closest word they have.”

“So, do we have to do this?”

“This?”

“Well, there’s no law that we have to fight to the death is there? Also, since you were here before people I am guessing that you don’t have to eat them.” Augusten dug a bit of glass into his palm. He could feel the blood well up.

“I do not eat their flesh,” the voice was closer now, “I devour their life. I need to have their essence. In exchange they receive a gift.”

“Gift?” Just a little longer. Just a little more blood.

“The man that was here earlier. The one who lived? He was worthy. He will join me. He is...something new now.”

Augusten opened his eyes and the barrier fell. The beast stared deep into his eyes. Eight feet tall at the least, the creature had a mouth filled with rows of teeth. It was, as Hsaing said, made of darkness.

Augusten threw his hand out as the thing lunged at him, his blood coating its shadowy and billowing skin. The creature stumbled and looked at Augusten with renewed interest.

“Facinating. You will be honored,” it said.

“Io! Hia! Ai-el!” Augusten shouted. The best faltered a second and lunged again, its horrible mouth distended and ready to devour.

“Ai-el Hia Io!” Augusten pleaded as the beast crushed him under its weight. He yelled again. The teeth sank into his chest. He yelled again the practiced and anointed words, but the creature only laughed as it fed on him.

“Slowly. You will go slowly. And then, you will be whole again. You will be one of us, as you already are. You feed the four elements into your blood. You feed on the essences. You know. You understand magic.”

As the teeth tore deeper into his chest, arms, and legs, Augusten’s voice dissolved into a wail. He raised his left arm and bit deeply, his hungry veins spewed forth a torrent of blood. Tendrils of red filled the air and enveloped the beast, dragging it inward to hell. The ancient language of screaming pain flowed from Augusten’s mouth. The world fell away.

He came to walking up the stairs. He was covered in blood, but not a single open wound. The shakes and burning that usually met him when his eyes opened were gone. It was as if he had taken the Final Shot. He smiled at the thought of being fixed for life. No need to go through the cure. No pain. No worry. Everything would be fine.

The door opened and the city was busy in the heat. The clang of metal reverberated, the promise of steam and coal, and the edge of town edged a little closer to the horizon. The dragon had chased him and he had shot that son of a bitch. He would ride that high forever.

McNab was waiting for him at the end of the street. His nervous smile and his fidgety hand broadcasted his uncertainty.

“I’m sorry for what I did there. We just needed help. I...I wouldn’t...” he trailed off. It didn’t matter.

“Desperation makes good men evil all day long. You’re not the first,” Augusten said. He patted McNab on the shoulder. Then he felt it. The burning was going to come. The shaking. When they finally got to him, it wouldn’t be like before. It wouldn’t be “nasty, but survivable.” It would be the end. The Ultimate Sickness. It might take decades, but it was coming. The hourglass just got bigger is all. Nothing ever changes. Not really. “You will be honored,” the beast had said, “Something new.” The words of a hopeful dope fiend selling his soul right along with his product. Even the dragon has hope. There’s just no fix for that.

Weaverville

Pieter Lars

Trinity County, 1853.

Cap Bisby stood, wiped the dirt from his hands, and rolled a cigarette. He lit it and dropped the match into a clump of dry weeds, letting them catch and smolder before stomping them out. Then he bent, pinched a bit of the ash and held it under his nose to sniff it.

Ping watched from the shack's porch.

"Did that tell you something?" the Chinaman asked, referring to the ash. Ping spoke with an accent, but his English was near-perfect and a refreshing change. Cap didn't have anything against the Chinese in particular - they worked as hard as anyone - but it was nice to be able to have a conversation with one.

Cap shrugged and slapped at his neck, fucking bugs.

"I have to ask," he said, "and this isn't an accusation, but why were your boys up here to begin with?"

"The man who owns this claim often comes to me looking for workers. He pays well and was well-liked."

"And you haven't seen him or your men?" Cap asked.

Ping shook his head. "No. And as I said, they are not the first to disappear. I believe your predecessor had already begun an investigation before he was called away."

Jacob Wells, the last to be stationed in Trinity County, had not been called away, but had simply ceased his reports. As far as Cap knew, nobody had heard from him in months. Cap would have cursed the man for being the cause of his current backwoods assignment if he wasn't convinced Wells was dead.

Cap stood with a sigh and hitched his pants. His belly had shrunk over the past few weeks, which was about the only good thing about his new station. The rest of it was dust and sweat and horse-shit. Not even a good shaving soap to be had within a hundred miles. He couldn't remember what his cheeks felt like smooth.

Duty calls, but it's rarely welcome.

He turned back to the eviscerated mules.

There were two of them, splayed out and opened from neck to groin. Despite the heat they were free of flies, as if even the bugs knew not to involve themselves with dark ritual.

The mules' entrails were missing, cut away, but where they'd ended up was anyone's guess. Probably filling some demon's gut.

Large furrows crossed the ground around the kill-site. Like huge moles had carved tunnels through the property. Cap sifted some of the loose dirt through his fingers and found half a dozen flecks of gold.

Diggers weren't the worst sort of demons Cap had faced, but they could be dangerous in large numbers and were almost common out West. When you dig deep enough you unearth more than gold.

"You know anything about tracking, Ping?"

The Chinaman shook his head.

"Me neither, but that tunneling shouldn't be hard to follow," Cap said, pointing at the channels the Diggers had cut away. "You up for a hike?"

#

The Digger trails ended in a small clearing. It didn't take any supernatural sense to know that something terrible had happened there. He could smell it. Blood and decay.

Cap began his preparations. His magic was of a more alchemical nature, which he preferred over the Aethereal. He was a man who trusted measurements.

He checked the load on his Dragoons. The one on the right held plain old .44 caliber balls, coated with an oil of his own invention, suitable for blowing holes in just about anything, earthly or otherwise.

But it was the left-hand gun that he was more concerned with; the gun loaded with incendiary. The gun that had brought him West.

He hoped he wouldn't need it today.

Ping's own preparations amounted to little more than a drink of water and a quick hand wash from a small canteen.

Cap fished a straw paper cylinder from his pouches. It was covered in Chinese writing. Ping leaned over to inspect it.

"Think I got this from your store as a matter of fact Mr. Ping," Cap said.

He cut off the end of the tube and poured a measure of the powder into his palm. He drew deeply on his cigarette, then blew the smoke across his palm. The powder began to glow faintly. With a whispered incantation, he

threw it into the air and the little sparks zipped off into the trees around them.

"What is that?" Ping asked.

"They're my familiars," Cap replied. "Little sentries. If something approaches they'll start popping."

Ping nodded. If the Chinaman was nervous, it didn't show.

They stepped out of the trees. The earth in the clearing was torn and churned as if in some frenzy.

Cap kicked at the dirt and saw more of the gold flecks. He'd heard reports of pacts being made with earth demons. Sacrifices paid in exchange for gold, but if those pacts were being made in the valleys around Weaverville, it was on a much larger scale. According to Ping, at least two dozen people, mostly Chinese, had disappeared over the course of the last year, and who knew how much livestock. That much blood would claim a lot of gold.

Something across the clearing caught Cap's eye. A rope tied to a tree. Its end was frayed and there was a white powder spread across the ground beneath the tree. The remains of some ritual circle.

"Something was strung up here," Cap said.

Ping was digging around in the weeds. He brought something up and held it out for Cap. The nub of a brown cigar.

Cap took it and sniffed it, tasted it. It was sour, like wet loam and gunpowder.

He flicked it away and as he did there was a sudden flurry of snaps and pops from the trees to his left as the familiars ignited.

Ping turned quickly and opened his robes to reveal a row of glass vials strapped to a bandoleer. The Chinaman pulled two of the vials and popped their corks with his thumbs.

Cap's guns were drawn in an instant. He turned toward the sparks and watched the tree-line.

At first nothing happened. Then a tree shuddered, sending down a shower of leaves and dust. As the Digger approached, carving its bulging channel, clods of dirt and bits of undergrowth were thrown into the air.

Cap cocked both his guns, taking aim with the left.

"Ping, I hope you have something more than water in those robes. I only have twelve shots."

The Digger's tunnel came to a sudden halt ten feet away. Cap aimed and waited. He could see the earth pulsing as the creature huddled beneath the surface. But it didn't attack.

Then, in an instant, the tunnel collapsed as the Digger reversed course and dug its way back into the forest.

"Where is it going?" Ping asked.

"I don't know," Cap asked. What had stopped it? Could it sense their weaponry?

Or had something, or someone, called it off?

#

Mr. Fuhrman sat behind his huge oak desk in his huge oak study surrounded by huge oak bookshelves. His offices were in one of the new brick buildings, built to withstand the forest fires that often swept through the county.

He leaned back in his armchair and smoothed his mustache while he listened to Cap Bisby's tale.

His man, Haversham, stood against a window and looked on.

"I assure you, Mr. Bisby-" Fuhrman started.

"Captain Bisby, if you please," Cap interjected.

Fuhrman nodded. "Of course. I meant no disrespect." He raised his hands in placation. "As I was saying, I assure you that I have made every effort to accommodate your office. Your predecessor, Captain Wells, came with his own questions not two months ago. I am sure that if you compare notes, you will find that myself and my company have been very, as you say, 'above board.'"

"I would love to compare notes with my predecessor but, like your workers, nobody seems to have heard from him," Cap answered.

Fuhrman frowned. "I am at a loss, Mr. Bisby. Have you come to my home to suggest that I had some part in his disappearance? I do not presume to know what happened to Mr. Wells. Perhaps the climate did not suit him. But as for my men, there is a simple explanation.

"As you are no doubt aware, mining accidents happen, and they happen frequently. It is unfortunate, yes, but all of my men, whether they are of Oriental descent or otherwise, are well compensated for the risks they take."

Fuhrman's voice had taken an edge, but it seemed forced. Like a man putting on a show of holding back his outrage. "My company employs hundreds of men. When accidents happen, investigations are made and

reports are filed. I would be happy to show you our records if you so desire."

Haversham rummaged in his pockets, brought out a cigar and lit it with a match. The room filled with the sour smell of old earth. A familiar smell.

Cap stopped and turned in his chair to give the man a better look. Haversham was big, and hairy, with a meaty brow and the shoulders of an ox. His bearded face was sharp and severe and his hands were scarred. He was the sort of man you wanted lifting your ore, not acting as your secretary.

But Cap wasn't stupid. There was certainly more to the man than Fuhrman let on and Cap felt in his gut that the man had been out in those woods the day before. It didn't explain why the Diggers hadn't attacked though. It would have been a good opportunity to get rid of the new law. Especially when the new law was about to start sniffin'.

"Mining accidents," Cap said with a solemn nod. "Well, if you have a machine that can cut a mule open like an envelope, and devour its innards, then we may have another issue entirely."

Fuhrman gave a confused look.

"Have you had problems with Diggers lately, Mister Fuhrman?" He wasn't going to give the slimy man the benefit of his full title. Cap hated these would-be Barons. Men who brought their old money West, like the country was some buffet to be picked over, with only scraps left for the men who had actually done the work.

It was happening back East with the steam lines, and it was infecting this new land like some plague. He wished he could be the man to cut it away. Just a few quick slices and they could leave these hills in peace. He could go back to Boston, where his boots would hold a polish.

"Diggers?" Fuhrman asked with a glance at Haversham. The big man shifted against the window, but continued puffing on his cigar.

"Well, I'm not sure what you call them where you're from, but you know what I'm talking about. Earth demons."

Fuhrman nodded. "They are a problem yes. With any mining operation, there is always the risk, but I cannot say we have had an unusual number of attacks."

"Right," Cap said with a nod. "Just the cost of doing business. You probably know exactly how much money each of their attacks costs your company, am I right?"

Fuhrman shrugged. "I am not sure I see your point-"

"My point is that something, or someone has been feeding them. I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, but seeing as how the majority of the missing people in town were under your employ, I'm afraid I'm going to have to visit your operations here in the valley."

Fuhrman's demeanor shifted from cold business to sudden acquiescence. "Of course," he said. "Does Friday work for you, Captain?"

Cap shook his head. "How about this afternoon?"

"I am afraid that will not work, unfortunately. We have some business in Junction this afternoon which will take us well into tomorrow."

"That's fine. I'm sure I can find it. How about you just draw me a map," Cap said with a smile.

#

Weaverville was larger and more established than it had any right to be, being just a couple years old. Cap was astonished at how quickly the wild was being tamed in the West.

The wheels of greed turn quickly. He wondered, as he walked through town, what the county would look like in ten years, or forty. How much gold was there to be had? How deep, and how wide, could man dig? And what else would they find lurking beneath the surface?

Chinatown was as bustling as ever. Over a thousand men from the Orient had come seeking their own small piece of the pie, and many had brought their families; sad-faced women and children who stared at their surroundings in bewilderment.

He met Ping at the end of town, standing with two other Chinese. They were watching over a new construction project. Chinese men were sawing and nailing at boards while women walked around carrying water.

Those of them that took notice of Cap gave him stern, distrustful looks. He wondered what reputation Wells had given the badge they both wore.

"Captain Bisby," Ping said with a small bow. "It is good to see you. May I introduce you to friends?" Ping gestured at the two Chinese standing with him; a woman and a man, both dressed in flowing white silk.

"Feng and Mei," Ping said, gesturing to the man, then the woman. Both bowed but remained silent. "They are recently arrived."

Cap gave a nod of welcome.

He motioned to the construction project. "What are you all building now? A new gambling hall?"

Ping gave a small smile. "No. A temple."

Cap nodded. He had less than the barest grasp of their strange religious beliefs. "What sort of temple?"

"It will be a miao. A place of worship, but also a place of protection. A Sanctuary, if you will. The Temple of the Forest Beneath the Clouds, Ping said with a proud smile.

Cap nodded again. "That's...descriptive."

"How did your meeting go?" Ping asked.

Cap shrugged. "He's not going to roll out a carpet for us, but I did get him to mark their newest site on a map. His man, Haversham, was with him, smoking a familiar-looking cigar."

Ping nodded and said something in Chinese that sounded like Guai.

"I didn't catch that," Cap said.

"Haversham," Ping said. "He is the freak. The - as you say here - Cambion. Half-demon."

Cap didn't know if Ping was being literal, or if he was speaking in hyperbole. He had heard of the rare cross-breeds, but had never imagined such creatures could look human.

"I'm not sure about that, Ping."

Ping merely nodded. "It is known."

It would certainly explain a great deal, Cap decided. If the man could somehow communicate with Demons, it would make Furhman's negotiations a hell of a lot easier. Screech once for two Oriental hearts, twice for three.

"How long before you are ready to leave?" Cap asked.

Ping frowned, looked at the other two, said something in Chinese. Feng and Mei nodded and responded. Cap rolled a cigarette while he watched the exchange.

"An hour," Ping said, "but are you sure you wish to go tonight? What if we find your Diggers, or worse? Do you want to confront such things in the dark?"

Cap lit the cigarette hanging from his lip with the flick of a match.

"Light won't be a problem."

#

It was full dark when they finally reached the mine-site. In the moonlight, Cap saw huge swaths of the hillside cut away. Sluices filled a large channel in the ground that had once been a stream-bed.

Everywhere he looked were piles of tools and equipment.

Ping and the other two stood with him at the tree-line. He had half-expected to find a scene of bloody slaughter, or even stumble into a summoning ritual. Instead, the whole site was dark and silent. Just crickets and silhouettes.

Cap pulled a brass tube with a pistol grip out of one of his pouches. It was a signaling gun that he had been tinkering with, loaded with a modified Chinese firecracker. If he was correct, it would burn longer and hang in the air for a bit.

He whispered for the others to be ready, stepped out from under the trees and fired. The flare flew into the air with a sharp hiss, filling the clearing with a harsh white light. To Cap's satisfaction, it floated gently in the sky.

They spread out and began to search, stepping over the ruts and the sluice channels.

There was a dark spot in the middle of the clearing. Some kind of hole. The ground around it seemed darker - stained perhaps - but the flare's light washed out any color.

He stepped to the hole just as the flare finished its decent, and in the last second of light he saw the chains and the bones.

Then the flare died and the shouting started.

He cursed himself for not sending out his sentry sparks. That was stupid. He was too confident in their numbers and hadn't taken into account how silent the Diggers could be.

Three of them burst from the ground in rapid succession, flinging clods of dirt and rock into the air.

He heard a snarl in front of him and a scrape of claws on stone. His pistols were in his hands in an instant and he let fly with the left gun first. It kicked and roared in his hand and an eight-foot gout of red flame burst from its barrel, taking the creature full in its bony face.

The Digger let out a shrill shriek from its tiny round mouth and collapsed in a heap, clawing at its face to extinguish the flames. Cap rushed to where it lay, saw its black sinewy body, bony plates across its back and brow, the razor-sharp keratin claws. He lifted the right gun, capped it through its thick skull and its head exploded.

He turned, holstered the right gun, and dug through his pouches, bringing out a clay sphere. He tossed it onto a nearby pile of planks and it

broke with a clatter, spreading thick oil across the boards. He struck a match, lit the oil and suddenly there was light again.

Just in time to see the Digger tunnel rushing toward him like some mad, mutant gopher.

It flew out of the ground with a leap. Cap fired with the left gun at its apex, catching it in its unarmored underbelly. It didn't make a sound. Cap stepped to his left as it fell. Its crisping flesh smelled sour, like hot tar, but there was something else in the air.

Something earthy and vaguely sulfurous. A cigar.

He looked around for Haversham, saw Ping instead. The Chinaman was holding his vials. As Cap watched he threw one up in the air. The water inside splashed out in a spray that instantly froze into a hundred tiny slivers. Ping pushed with his right hand and the ice shot toward one of the Diggers.

The creature ducked and the shards bounced off its plates. It jumped at Ping but the little man was ready. He struck the bandoleer at his chest and Cap heard the crunch of glass, and then Ping's body was suddenly encased in a translucent sheet. He stepped to the side as the Digger swiped, avoiding most of the blow. Cap heard the scrape of the Digger's claws against Ping's raised shin.

The Chinaman pivoted to meet the Digger's next attack. His left hand closed with a crunch on its vial and the water inside flashed for a second as it froze, shooting out from his fist in a spike. The Digger swept again with a snarl. Ping turned on the balls of his feet and drove the blade deep into the dark flesh of the creature's neck. It shook its head once, then slumped to the dirt.

The ice covering the Chinaman was melting even as Cap turned to Feng and Mei. The man and woman were circling their Digger with small knives in their hands.

They better have more than that, Cap thought. And then he saw Haversham.

The man stood in the shadow of a pine. He looked bigger, impossibly big in the flickering light. His chest was bare and glistening with sweat. In each hand he held a huge chain and his arms bulged with their weight as he pulled.

Cap drew the right gun and sighted, but the ground lurched and shuddered beneath him and stumbled to his knees.

Haversham's chains led into the gaping hole in the center of the clearing. From its depths came an unearthly sound; part howl, part growl. All evil.

There was a groaning, like a straining scaffold. Haversham shouted something guttural, some underworld command, and heaved on the chains.

Cap didn't wait to see what it was. He pulled another of the naphtha grenades from his pouch, lit it, and tossed it into the hole, then dodged behind a stack of barrels.

The roar that followed was deafening. The edges of the pit disappeared, collapsed in on themselves as the form of a Greater Demon emerged from the pit.

It was massive. Fifteen feet tall at least. It climbed out, throwing moist earth and shards of white bone, tattered scraps of cloth; the remains of its last meal. Its form was not unlike the Diggers', but where the smaller creatures' armor was bone and keratin, the Greater Demon's was stone, streaked with a lacework of gold veins. The treasure that Fuhrman and Haversham had been killing for.

The stone across its back and shoulders was alight with the burning oil. Cap could see some of the gold melting and running down the beast's arms. Other than that however, the Demon was unaffected.

Cap needed a new strategy.

Ping was yelling something in Chinese, shouting at Feng and Mei. He had a stricken look on his face and was throwing vial after vial into the air. Each vial burst in a shower of glass and ice, before flying across the clearing to pepper the huge Beast.

Somehow Feng and Mei had taken down their Digger. It lay sprawled against a tool-pile with one of their blades protruding from its mouth.

The Greater Demon hadn't noticed Cap, but it had noticed the Chinese. Its bear-like maw opened and it barked. Haversham answered from the tree-line and the Demon turned on the trio, its chains pulled taught by the big ma; the Cambion.

There was no longer any doubt in Cap's mind that Haversham was the half-demon that Ping had said he was. It was the only explanation for how the man could bridle such a creature.

But was it tamed? Cap saw it struggling against its bonds. An angry reach for the chains which were bolted directly to its back. It kept tugging its shoulders forward in an attempt to slip Haversham's grip.

But what would it do if released? Would it would turn on Haversham?

Cap ran from his cover with his pistols drawn. The Demon's back was to him and it was taking tentative swipes at the three Chinese. Testing them. Ping continued to shower it with ice shards, but the Demon didn't seem to notice. Feng and Mei were trying to distract it away from the older man.

He fired once with the right pistol, but the ball bounced off the chain with a twang. The metal was too thick. He needed to soften it.

He let loose with the left gun. Four incendiaries remained and he fired them all in rapid succession. They blazed across the Demon's back, one after another, until the chain glowed orange.

Haversham seemed to sense what Cap was doing. He yelled something but the Demon ignored it, too intent on its prey.

It took two shots with the right gun before the chain snapped and flew back towards Haversham. The Demon stopped, felt over its shoulder, and turned with growl.

It pulled the second chain from its shoulder like an old cobweb. Bits of stone came away as the bolts broke free. The spell had been broken.

It went for Haversham with a terrible hunger. Haversham screamed a command. Screamed a plea. But the Demon just picked him up and tore him in two. Blood and gristle sprayed into the trees and dripped from Haversham's pieces. The Demon tossed them aside and turned back to the clearing.

Whatever time Cap had hoped to gain, he didn't get. The Demon made a rush for the three Chinese.

"Run!" Cap yelled. "Into the trees."

"No!" Ping shouted back. "We cannot let this beast loose."

Cap ran over, holstering his guns, taking mental stock of his remaining weapons. He had two of the grenades, but they were useless. He pulled another of the firecrackers out and loaded the signal gun.

Ping was standing by the barrel stack, pushing on one of them. Feng and Mei ran around the Demon's legs, shouting at it and waving their arms.

Ping tipped one of the barrels over just as the Demon attacked. Water poured onto the ground in a flood. The Demon lifted its arms and brought them down in a heavy blow.

The earth shook and heaved, launching Ping backward into the air. Cap could see a frosty sheen surrounding him, obscuring his features, but it

wasn't enough. The little man flew into a tree and struck it with a tinkling crash. His armor fell away in chunks and he hit the ground and lay still.

Cap fired the flare. It popped and hissed through the air and struck the beast in the left eye. It lodged there and smoked, flashing and bubbling away at whatever lay beneath the stone.

The Demon roared and thrashed. It pulled the incendiary away and threw it into the trees. Feng and Mei stood at its feet with their heads bowed and their eyes closed.

Cap yelled, or tried, but the Demon saw them first. It swept its huge clawed arm, catching them both in one strike.

Cap saw their bodies tear apart. He closed his eyes and looked away, but when he looked back they were gone. Not dead. Not in pieces. Gone.

Two ghostly forms swirled in their place, twisting in the air, reforming out of some kind of ethereal smoke.

When their transformation was complete, Cap looked upon two of the strangest creatures he had ever seen. Some hybrid of dog and lion, they glowed with bluish-white light.

Cap watched them circle the Demon. Their beauty was matched only by their size which, together, rivaled that of the Greater Demon.

The beast looked down at them in confusion, but before it could react, they began their attack.

Feng leapt into the air and clawed at the Demon's back. Mei mouthed a silent roar, baring large translucent fangs. She swirled low and took the Demon at the legs, while Feng wrapped his ghostly body around the Demon's back, clawing at its neck.

The two Chinese fought in silence while the Demon grunted and twisted, trying to free itself from the spirits, but it couldn't get a grip. Each grasp found only air, while the spirits rent great chunks of stone from the huge creature's body.

The Demon stumbled, fell to its knees. The spirits continued tearing, exposing pale red flesh beneath the rock armor.

When all the armor had been torn away, the Demon fell to its back. It turned its face to the sky, opened its mouth wide and howled. Feng and Mei dissolved to smoke and slipped down the creature's throat.

Cap watched as they tore the beast apart from the inside. Holes appeared in its flesh and white light poured out.

When there was nothing left of the Demon but a pile of smoldering ash, the lions reformed and stood side by side, padding over to where Cap knelt, trying to wake Ping

Feng and Mei circled them both like huge house cats, then lay down in the dirt and rested their heads on their paws.

#

The temple was finished while Ping lay recovering. When Cap wasn't working, or patrolling, he would pass by it to watch their progress and have a smoke. He became such a familiar face that most of the workers grew friendlier, calling him Meester Bizbee.

Fuhrman disappeared on a long trip back East, citing family troubles. The rumor was that he was bringing back some new mining apparatus that could carve the earth like butter. Everyone talked about how much gold they would find.

More new people arrived in town every day. Half-desperate men and women, drawn to hope, and likely to end up under the boot of men like Fuhrman. Men with a hunger that knew no satiation.

With the new Chinese came their Triads, already forming into a handful of gangs, each promising protection to some segment of their population.

He wrote the Marshall's office one night, half-drunk on whiskey, and resigned his post. He didn't want to leave Weaverville after what he'd seen and was afraid he would be posted elsewhere. These people needed more than temporary aid.

He hadn't seen Feng and Mei since the battle. Their transformation seemed permanent, but what became of them, he didn't know.

At the consecration ceremony for the temple, Ping - who, aside from a new limp, had fully recovered - unveiled the final piece of what the locals were calling the Joss House.

Two heavy objects had been placed on either end of the front steps, covered in silk cloth which Ping removed to a scattering of applause. Under the cloth were two stone carvings, male and female lion dogs. They were called Shishi, but Cap had heard one of the Chinese men refer to them as Fu Dogs. They were temple guardians, placed according to tradition.

Cap knew the Demons were out there still. You couldn't really kill them, and when they returned, they were usually angrier and hungrier, but something told him that when the time came for him draw his guns again, he wouldn't be fighting alone.