



The Plague Carnival



Doomtown: Reloaded's
Best Fiction



THE PLAGUE CARNIVAL

DOOMTOWN: RELOADED'S BEST FICTION

Compiled and with Interstitial Fiction
by David Orange

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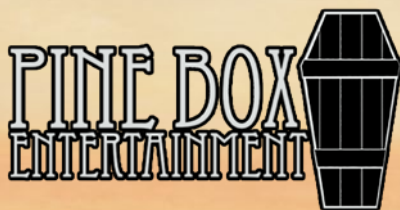


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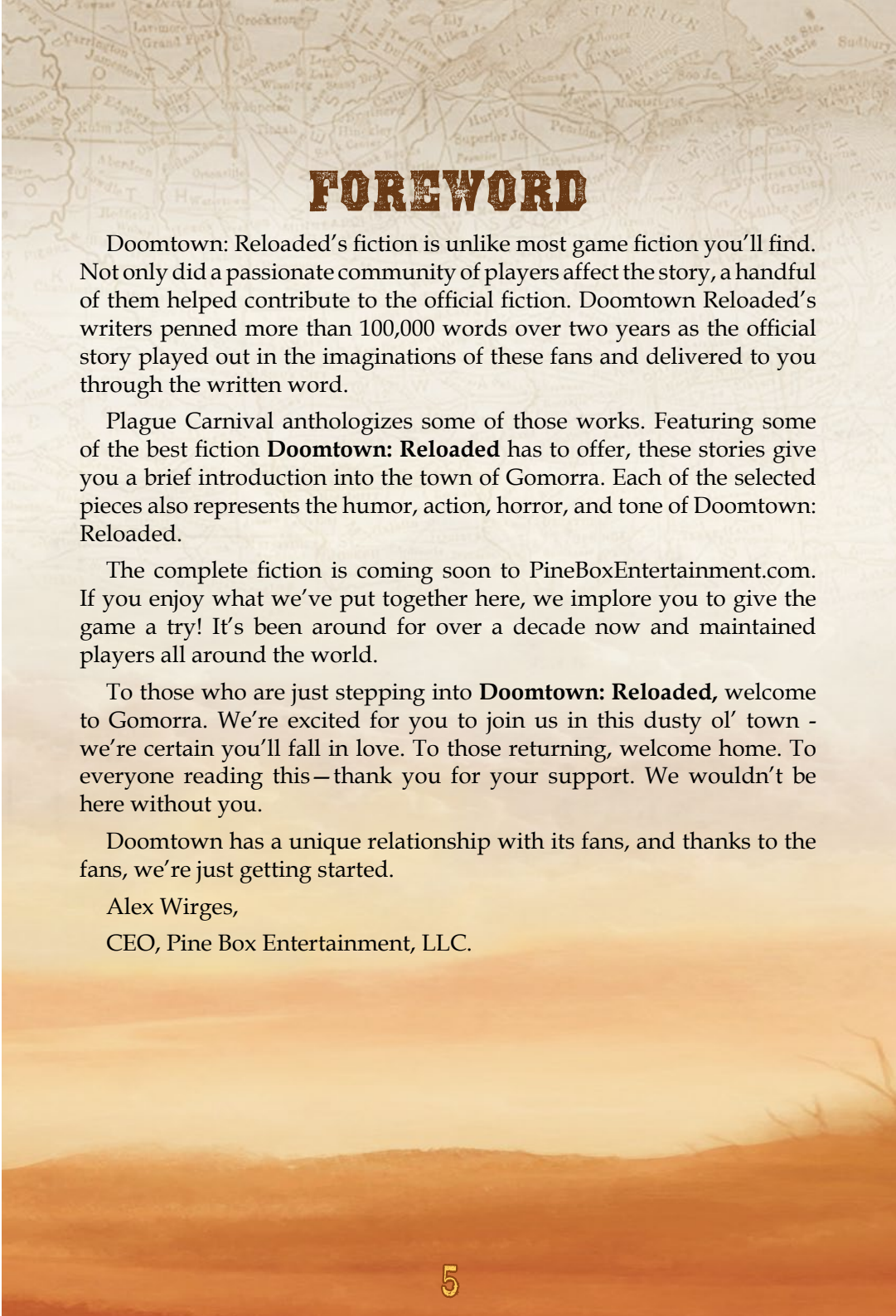


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FOREWORD

Doomtown: Reloaded's fiction is unlike most game fiction you'll find. Not only did a passionate community of players affect the story, a handful of them helped contribute to the official fiction. Doomtown Reloaded's writers penned more than 100,000 words over two years as the official story played out in the imaginations of these fans and delivered to you through the written word.

Plague Carnival anthologizes some of those works. Featuring some of the best fiction **Doomtown: Reloaded** has to offer, these stories give you a brief introduction into the town of Gomorra. Each of the selected pieces also represents the humor, action, horror, and tone of Doomtown: Reloaded.

The complete fiction is coming soon to PineBoxEntertainment.com. If you enjoy what we've put together here, we implore you to give the game a try! It's been around for over a decade now and maintained players all around the world.

To those who are just stepping into **Doomtown: Reloaded**, welcome to Gomorra. We're excited for you to join us in this dusty ol' town - we're certain you'll fall in love. To those returning, welcome home. To everyone reading this—thank you for your support. We wouldn't be here without you.

Doomtown has a unique relationship with its fans, and thanks to the fans, we're just getting started.

Alex Wirges,

CEO, Pine Box Entertainment, LLC.

INTRODUCTION

Doomtown: Reloaded's story arc began innocuously enough. A few characters reprised from Doomtown's original run gave a nostalgic look at the game's storied past, while paving the way for a new set of adventures. The initial fictions portrayed the Sloane Gang as outlaws having their way with the local peacekeepers known as the Lawdogs. Meanwhile, a traveling circus entertained townsfolk weary for a respite from brawls and shootouts. Except that no one could recall exactly *when* the Fourth Ring circus arrived in Gomorra. The Fourth Ring's brief sojourn became an extended engagement. This collection contains some of the key stories that told of the horrors that Ivor Hawley, Fourth Ring's leader and ringmaster, and his circus unleashed upon Gomorra.

David Orange,

Doomtown: Reloaded writer and editor

Pine Box Entertainment, LLC. Story Lead

Putting the Pieces Together

"You understand my hesitation, of course," Abram Grothe said, begging understanding from the scientist as he paused his pacing behind his desk in the Sheriff's Office.

"Monsieur Grothe, as a man of science, I assure you that my skepticism exceeds yours by tenfold," Louis Pasteur remarked, his eyes wandering to the silver cross that hung at the Sheriff's chest. "But the more I think of it, the clearer matters become. As I have traced it, the epidemic began after the circus arrived, and with only few exceptions, Hawley's people have largely avoided its effects."

"But Ivor has worked to help with that. The tents ... the Sanatorium -"

"A ruse ... an elaborate charade intended to divert our attention. I have tried to track the recovery of patients in town, but all roads lead to and end at their so-called 'Sanatorium,' where that troll, Odett, denies me entrance at every turn. There is something amiss about the 'healing' the circus promises."

Abram thought for a moment, remembering recent encounters of his own. "You're not the only one. But you're not talking about poor medical practices; you're calling the circus's ringmaster a demon."

"I said no such thing," Pasteur asserted. "I said that Madame Morgan called him a demon. I do not understand the rite she performed, Sheriff, any more than I suppose you would condone it. But I believe she saw something altogether invisible to my eyes. Not only did she identify Ivor as the source of the plague, but she claimed insight into his hidden nature and ambitions, both of which involved the destruction of this town and everyone in it." The scientist stopped his pacing to look Abram square in the eye. "That is why I am here. You have a responsibility to address this, even if it is only remotely true, just as I have a responsibility to apply this new hypothesis to my research."

"Let's say you're right, Doctor. There are no charges to arrest a man on suspicion of being some kind of a ... a ... a 'plague-demon'."

"Perhaps I can help with that." The two men turned to see a young woman standing in the doorway, eyeing them both with hesitation through a pair of spectacles and a few curls that escaped confinement within the bundle atop her head. "Are you really going after Hawley?"

"Indeed we are, Miss -?" Abram said, gesturing her inside.

"Batten," she said. "I've been working for the ringmaster for months now, but I won't smile and pretend ignorance with that murderer another day."

" 'Murderer', you say?" Pasteur said. He turned to address the sheriff once more. "If I'm not mistaken, that is still a chargeable offense, even in Gomorra."

Abram gave Pasteur a warning glance not to push his patience as he turned his attention back to Valeria. "Why don't you start at the beginning, Miss Batten? Tell me everything you know about Ivor Hawley."

* * *

"It began like any other quest," said Valeria. She paused, recalling details of the last few months. "Ivor Hawley was yet another patron with a few odd requests, but no more or less than anyone else who paid for Dr. Slavin's expertise."

Dark Places

"This looks to be the place," said Dr. Richard Slavin, setting his pack down on the dusty planks. At his feet was a wooden sign, split down the middle and almost broken in half. The faded painting of a grinning desert lizard sat under carved words "The Smiling Lizard Lode: Private Property." He wiped his brow with a neatly folded white cloth and took in the view. "Isn't it marvelous, Miss Batten?"

"Oh, yes," his young assistant intoned, taking a drink from her canteen and pushing her glasses to the peak of her sharp nose. "If you like rocks. Or dirt. Or rocks and dirt." Valeria Batten swung her pack down with a grunt.

"Now, now, Miss Batten," he admonished, "it may not look like much, but it's what's inside that counts ... if your sources are correct, of course."

"Aren't they always?" Valeria replied, leaning her Winchester on the rock wall.

"They are indeed."

Slavin had to admit the construction must have been impressive when the mine was operational years ago. Built into a sheer rock face about 30 feet above the rolling waves of the Great Maze, the scaffolding system gave access to two entrances, one near the top of the cliff and one near the middle. Much of the top section was now in a state of disrepair; rot permeated the wooden beams and rust snaked its way through what remained of the metal frame. Entire sections of the intricate construction had long since collapsed into the sea below, leaving only jagged metal, broken wood, and frayed rope behind.

Apart from an occasional missing floorboard or loose handrail, the lower levels were remarkably sturdy, having been built with a much wider framework to accommodate the construction of a larger entryway. After spending the last twenty minutes on a decaying rope bridge that his assistant had aptly called "a deathtrap," Slavin was thankful for the scaffold's superior workmanship. The entrance to the shaft had been boarded up for some time. Rusty nails framed a message across the wooden barrier, hastily scrawled in red paint and faded from years of exposure: "Warning: Mine Closed - Keep the Outside Out and the Inside In!"

"Are you sure about this, Dr. Slavin?" Valeria asked. "Sure that you can trust this Mr. Hawley?"

"Trust him?" Slavin asked as he struck a match. "God, no! That man's smile could set fire to a convent." He knelt down and lit his lantern. "But the instructions from our employer were quite clear: we are to deliver this package to Hawley and his band of degenerates, the same as the others." He took two iron crowbars from his bag and handed one to his assistant. "And so we shall."

"Of course," she said, prying the first nail loose, "but doesn't it bother you, working for someone you don't know? Someone who won't even give you a name, let alone a face to put it to? Especially someone who would use a creature like Ivor Hawley as a go-between?"

"Our employer has opened my eyes to wonders and relics that I could never have dreamed of, my dear," Slavin replied. "The secrets I could unlock ... the mysteries of the Earth laid bare at my feet. The power ..." He trailed off, as if suddenly remembering the task at hand. His voice took on a manufactured air of calm as he drove the iron bar into the wood. "Such knowledge is a priceless commodity."

"It's not just Hawley, Dr. Slavin. The locals have told me some very colorful accounts of what happened here just before the mine was closed down. Brutal working conditions. Cave-ins. Dozens of worker deaths. Some even say that once the living help expired ... other means of labor were sought."

"You can hardly call a few tall tales from the local inebriates 'gospel', Miss Batten. I would encourage you not to believe everything you hear about ghosts and superstitions."

"Just like Canada?" she grunted, as the last board came free and crashed to the floor.

"How was I supposed to know wendigos were more than a myth?" Slavin replied, pulling out the cartridge of his revolver and checking the ammo. "Besides," he said, flipping it shut with a snap, "we had the last laugh there, didn't we?"

"How's that?"

"We survived," he said with a grin.

"As you say." She pulled a book from her pack and brushed off a seat on the wooden planks. "If you won't be needing anything else?"

"Oh, where is your sense of adventure?"

"I believe I left it in Saskatchewan," she said flatly.

Slavin shook his head slightly at her before lifting his lantern and crossing the threshold.

* * *

The light of the entryway had faded completely, and the meager slashes from his lantern were now barely enough to illuminate the tunnel around him. As the shaft eased downward in a gentle slope, Slavin traced his free hand along the dusty walls for bearing. Under the noise of his boots grinding on the rocks he began to hear another sound, barely audible but growing as he ventured deeper. It was a light, rhythmic hum that swelled in his head, resonating more with each forward step.

She was right. It's here.

A faint, green light seeped through the corner of the floor ahead. He took several hurried steps and knelt to examine the source. The misty rays shot through several small seams, running like emerald veins along the ground and part way up the wall. He pressed his ear to dirt, listening for some other sound to accompany the song swelling in his head. Faint trickles of water tip-tapped in the distance. Perhaps a cavern below?

More noises echoed beyond the next corner. He made out light shuffling sounds, like animal paws hitting the rocky ground, as well as a series of muffled metallic clangs. He pulled his revolver from his belt and cocked the hammer. It wouldn't be out of the question for some manner of beast to have found their way into the abandoned shafts.

After carefully rounding the corner, he shined his lamp forward and stopped dead in his tracks, his breath catching in his throat. Several human figures stood in the tunnel ahead of him, the closest only a few meters away. They were dressed in tattered rags, some of the clothing barely holding together amidst the holes and tears. Their skin was gray and peeling in places, stretched over their skeletal frames like wax paper. In other spots their skin was gone completely, replaced with bits of bone or rotting muscle.

Some of them still had their pickaxes in their hands.

They shambled from one side of the shaft to the other, swinging their tools at the rock walls in slow, ragged motions. As the closest figure turned in his direction, Slavin caught a glimpse of the logo set into its hard hat: a crossed shovel and pickaxe encircled by the words "Sweetrock Mining Co." They are still mining, he marveled. No one

ever told them to stop. The veins of green were visible here, too. The miner's weak, uneven strokes must have uncovered them over years of systematic digging.

Slavin stood frozen as the creature slouched past him, dragging one skeletal foot across the ground. He put a cloth to his nose to dampen the smell of decaying flesh. His lamplight did not seem to deter them from their eternal work, and with any luck he could sneak through unnoticed. He walked gingerly, his breath shallow, weaving his way between the abominations as they continued about their tasks.

Just a few more steps and –

He turned towards the wall to avoid one of the miners as it shifted course, but his foot caught the rusty head of a pickaxe stacked with a pile of tools on the ground. He bent to grab for it in the gloom, but it was too late. The pile fell sideways, crashing to the rock floor with a series of echoing clangs. The creatures around him stopped moving and Slavin froze in his crouch, hoping that they wouldn't notice the source. For a brief moment nothing moved. Then, with a low moan, the closest miner turned and lunged, dead hands outstretched towards him. As he dove sideways to avoid the attack, he noticed the other figures turning towards him.

He quickly took aim, firing at the mob as he stumbled backwards. Several shots lodged themselves in their torsos, having little effect on their advance. His fifth shot passed through the skull of the closest, taking the top half of its head off with a resonating crunch. The figure took one more trembling step and fell to the floor. His last shot passed through the neck of the next. The dollar sized hole through the creature's throat did not appear to have any effect as it grabbed his shoulder. He knocked the cold hand away and dove backward to avoid the reach of the others. He grabbed one of the pickaxes that littered the floor as the figures closed in.

He swung wildly, knocking a few of them back, but it was no use. The creatures closed in, surrounding him. As they circled, the hum in his head grew sharper, beating at his skull like a drum. The green light streaming from the seams in the wall pulsed in time with his racing heart, and in a moment of pure clarity, Slavin swung the axe into the wall with all he could muster, burying it deep into the one of the fissures. Green cracks burst open, snaking their way to the ceiling with a low rumble. He rolled sideways and covered his head as the ceiling split, spilling jagged rocks onto the creatures around him. As the stones crashed down, the floor opened up beneath him, and he fell into a sea of emerald.

Slavin opened his eyes, allowing for his vision to adjust to the pounding of his head. He was staring at the ceiling of a cave, directly under the opening through which he had fallen, perhaps twenty feet above. The walls danced in a soft green glow, and the sound of rushing water surrounded him. As he sat up, one quick look revealed several streams rushing along the cavern floor, forming a waterfall mere feet from where he had fallen.

Lucky, he thought as he braced himself on his hands to stand. A few feet further and — A sharp pain shot through his right arm, drawing his attention to a gash that ran the width of his forearm, spilling small droplets of blood into the cool water. He tore a piece of cloth from his shirt and hastily dressed the wound, grimacing as he knotted the makeshift bandage. He spared a quick glance for any glimpse of movement. The only sign of his attackers was a gnarled gray arm jutting from the center of a rock pile to his left, its hand hanging lifeless in the air. With any luck, the rest were trapped above.

Slavin struggled to his feet and looked back to the other end of the cavern. The water originated from under the far wall, spilling through a series of cracks and archways near the floor. The stone wall itself pulsed in a brilliant green glow, the shining light strongest near the center. As he approached, designs began to appear upon the wall's face. Some seemed to be symbols of a language he could not identify, some simple pictograms. The primitive artwork seemed to come alive in the light. Great serpents crashed through waves, savage horned faces snarled at him, temples crumbled to the ground, and kneeling human figures bowed in prayer under strange constellations in the sky. As he was drawn towards the center of the tapestry, the light and the hum converged in a moment of pure harmony.

He stood before an ornate pedestal, carved in the shape of two cupped hands. A stone idol, perhaps a foot tall, stood alone on the small dais. Slavin crouched to get a better look. Rudimentary faces circled the bottom of the small statue, and a series of crude eyes and mouths were dotted across the top. The shapes seemed to twist in the green light, the mouths silently screaming and the eyes blinking at him in the glow. He opened his satchel and carefully gripped the bottom of the idol. The hum in his mind formed itself into a single whispered word.

Richard...

Startled, he shoved the idol into the satchel, the hum fading when he closed and latched the flap. As he took a deep breath to steady himself, the wall groaned and sighed beside him. Several small cracks began to appear on its face, allowing tiny rivulets of water to escape. There had to be another way out. Perhaps he could -

A low moan echoed behind him, and Slavin whirled just in time to avoid the gray hand that lashed out for him. He rolled to the side and scrambled to his feet, as three undead miners advanced upon him. Behind him, small sections of the wall crumbled to the floor, allowing more water to gush through. Soon it would break and be washed away, carrying him with it. He looked frantically for something to use as a weapon, settling on a rectangular chunk of stone as the abominations boxed him in.

As he was preparing a last, desperate swing, a gunshot echoed through the cavern. The top half of the first miner's head exploded to the left in a fine black mist, its body collapsing to the ground. He swung the stone at the next figure, connecting with its head and knocking it aside. The fingers of the third creature brushed his neck as he dashed past. A rope dropped down from the hole in the ceiling, and at the top his assistant crouched, rifle in hand, her figure glowing in the orange light of her lantern.

Another shot rang out as he sprinted for the rope and another body fell behind him, splashing to the watery floor. He turned his head back to see the rest of the stone wall crumbling to the ground, each flow of water growing as they rushed into the cavern. When he was within a few feet of the dangling rope he dove forward, his fingers forming a vise-like grip on its hide.

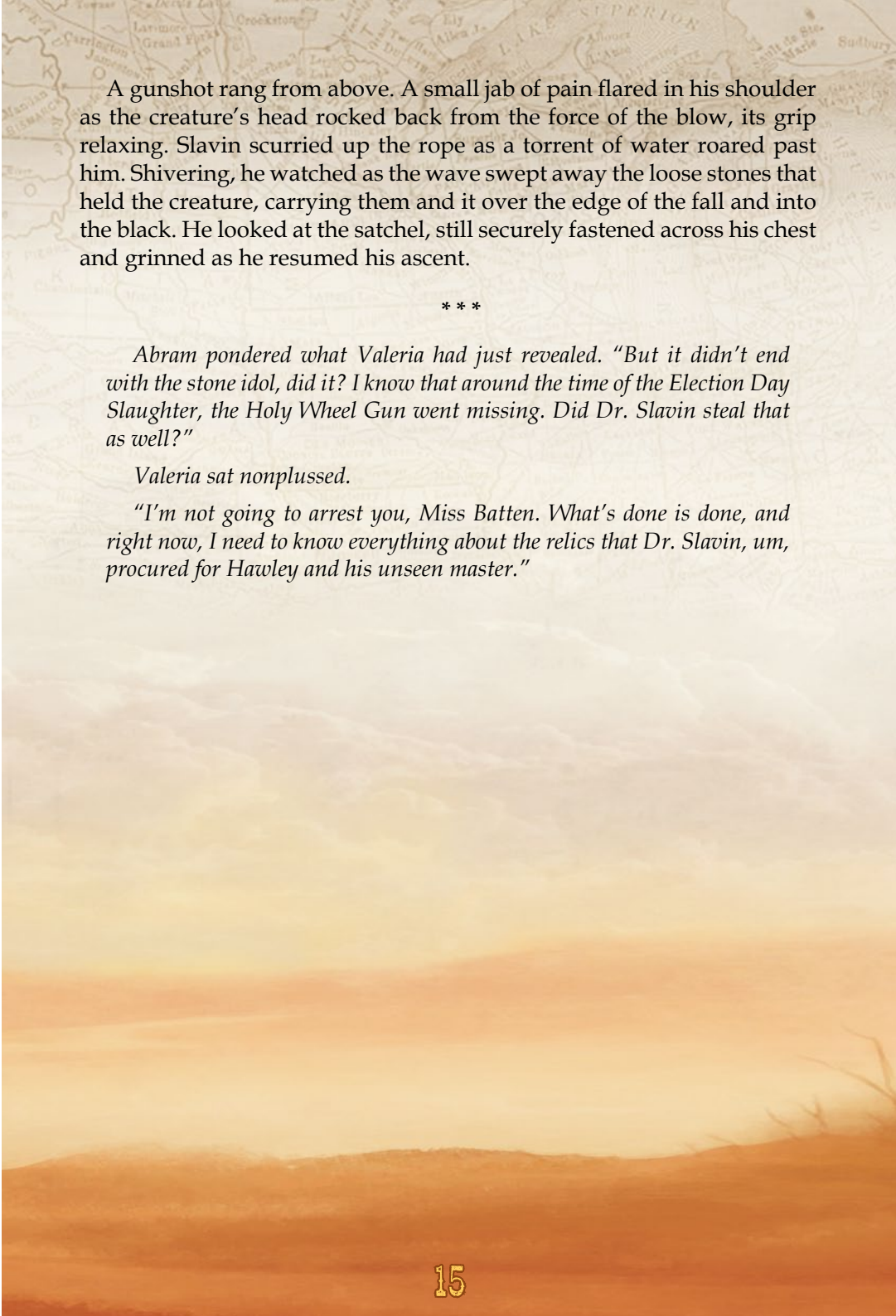
As he began to haul himself up, he felt a cold, wet tug at his foot. He looked down to find slick gray fingers curled around his ankle. The creature, still half trapped in the rubble, stared up with black eyes as it tried to pull him back to the cavern floor.

"Shoot it!" he yelled, as he scrambled to free himself from the icy grip.

"I can't get a clean shot!" Valeria called back.

He heard a thunderous cracking sound behind him and whirled his head to see the rest of wall collapse outward, unleashing a torrent of water that threatened to sweep him into the abyss below.

"Shoot now!!!"



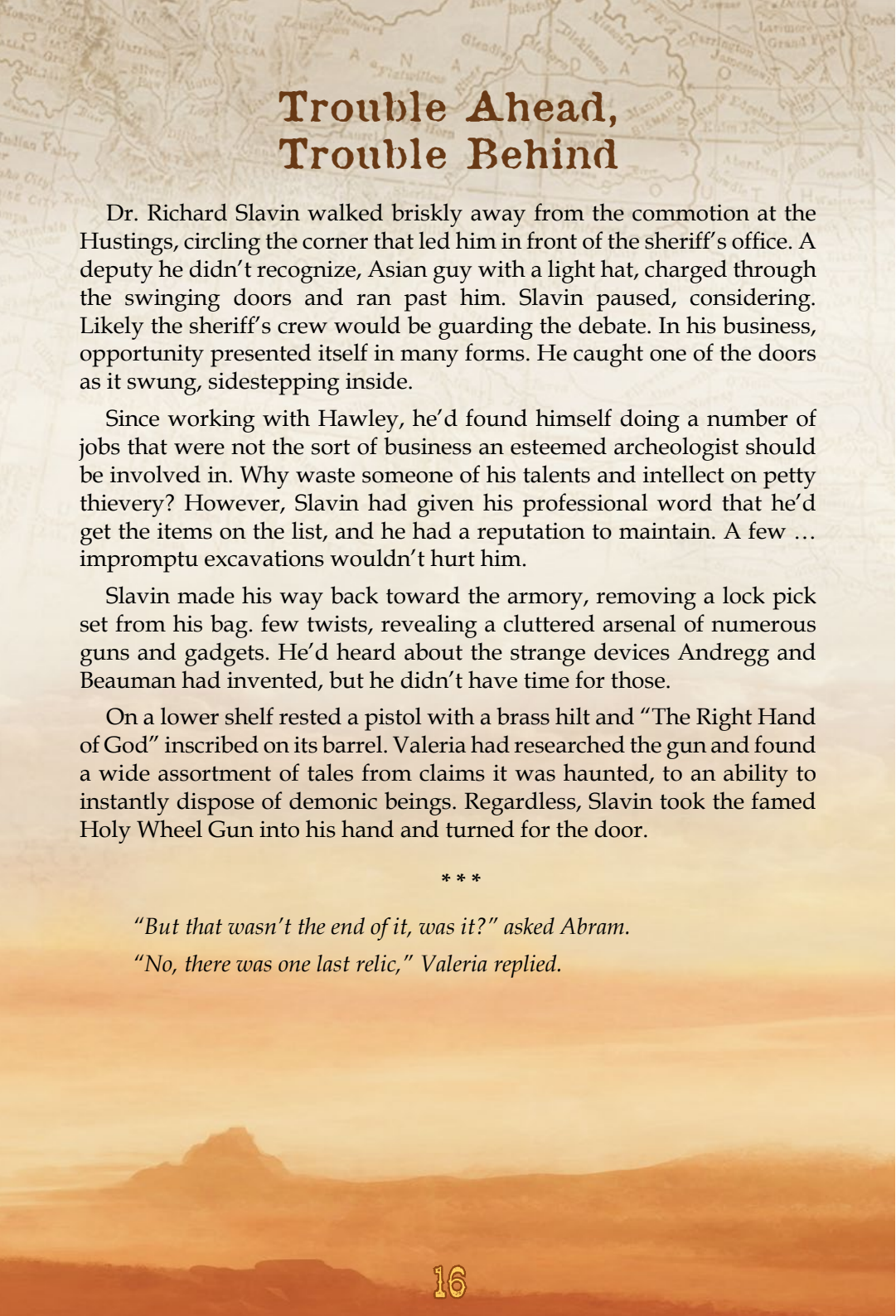
A gunshot rang from above. A small jab of pain flared in his shoulder as the creature's head rocked back from the force of the blow, its grip relaxing. Slavin scurried up the rope as a torrent of water roared past him. Shivering, he watched as the wave swept away the loose stones that held the creature, carrying them and it over the edge of the fall and into the black. He looked at the satchel, still securely fastened across his chest and grinned as he resumed his ascent.

* * *

Abram pondered what Valeria had just revealed. "But it didn't end with the stone idol, did it? I know that around the time of the Election Day Slaughter, the Holy Wheel Gun went missing. Did Dr. Slavin steal that as well?"

Valeria sat nonplussed.

"I'm not going to arrest you, Miss Batten. What's done is done, and right now, I need to know everything about the relics that Dr. Slavin, um, procured for Hawley and his unseen master."

A detailed, sepia-toned map of the American West, showing state boundaries, major cities, and geographical features like rivers and mountains. The map is oriented horizontally and serves as a background for the top half of the page.

Trouble Ahead, Trouble Behind

Dr. Richard Slavin walked briskly away from the commotion at the Hustings, circling the corner that led him in front of the sheriff's office. A deputy he didn't recognize, Asian guy with a light hat, charged through the swinging doors and ran past him. Slavin paused, considering. Likely the sheriff's crew would be guarding the debate. In his business, opportunity presented itself in many forms. He caught one of the doors as it swung, sidestepping inside.

Since working with Hawley, he'd found himself doing a number of jobs that were not the sort of business an esteemed archeologist should be involved in. Why waste someone of his talents and intellect on petty thievery? However, Slavin had given his professional word that he'd get the items on the list, and he had a reputation to maintain. A few ... impromptu excavations wouldn't hurt him.

Slavin made his way back toward the armory, removing a lock pick set from his bag. A few twists, revealing a cluttered arsenal of numerous guns and gadgets. He'd heard about the strange devices Andregg and Beauman had invented, but he didn't have time for those.

On a lower shelf rested a pistol with a brass hilt and "The Right Hand of God" inscribed on its barrel. Valeria had researched the gun and found a wide assortment of tales from claims it was haunted, to an ability to instantly dispose of demonic beings. Regardless, Slavin took the famed Holy Wheel Gun into his hand and turned for the door.

* * *

"But that wasn't the end of it, was it?" asked Abram.

"No, there was one last relic," Valeria replied.

A Sky Full of Stars

"What now?" Slavin asked, nodding towards the black fog that concealed them. Keep Bobo calm. The burly clown's overalls were torn where the bullet had torn through, and a small trail of black blood ran down the length of his arm, pooling on his rolled cuffs. If he was in pain, it wasn't obvious. To Slavin, he just looked angry. "How do we get in?"

"A distraction," Jia replied. From the mire of the black fog, a dark figure appeared, the smoke curling into the form of a man in a long, black duster. Slavin watched The Ghostly Gun draw his weapons and disappear through the wall of smoke in the direction of the mansion.

Soon, the sound of gunfire followed...

... Gunfire echoed through the manor as Richard Slavin bounded up one side of the twin staircases. When he reached the landing, he dashed down the hall, smiling as his prize came into view. Before him hung a curved silver scabbard, adorned with gold trim and a cloth tassel, displayed with pride on the wall.

"Looks like the old drunk was right," he murmured, reaching out to touch the blackened leather handle. He traced his finger along the golden curves of the saber's handguard. Exquisite. Such a piece would fetch a handsome fee to any collector, and the power that lay within was intoxicating to think about. It was almost a shame to put it in the hands of a creature like Ivor Hawley, but a deal was a deal and he held out hope for more deals to be struck before it was over.

As he reached to take the saber from its perch, he heard the cocking of a gun behind him.

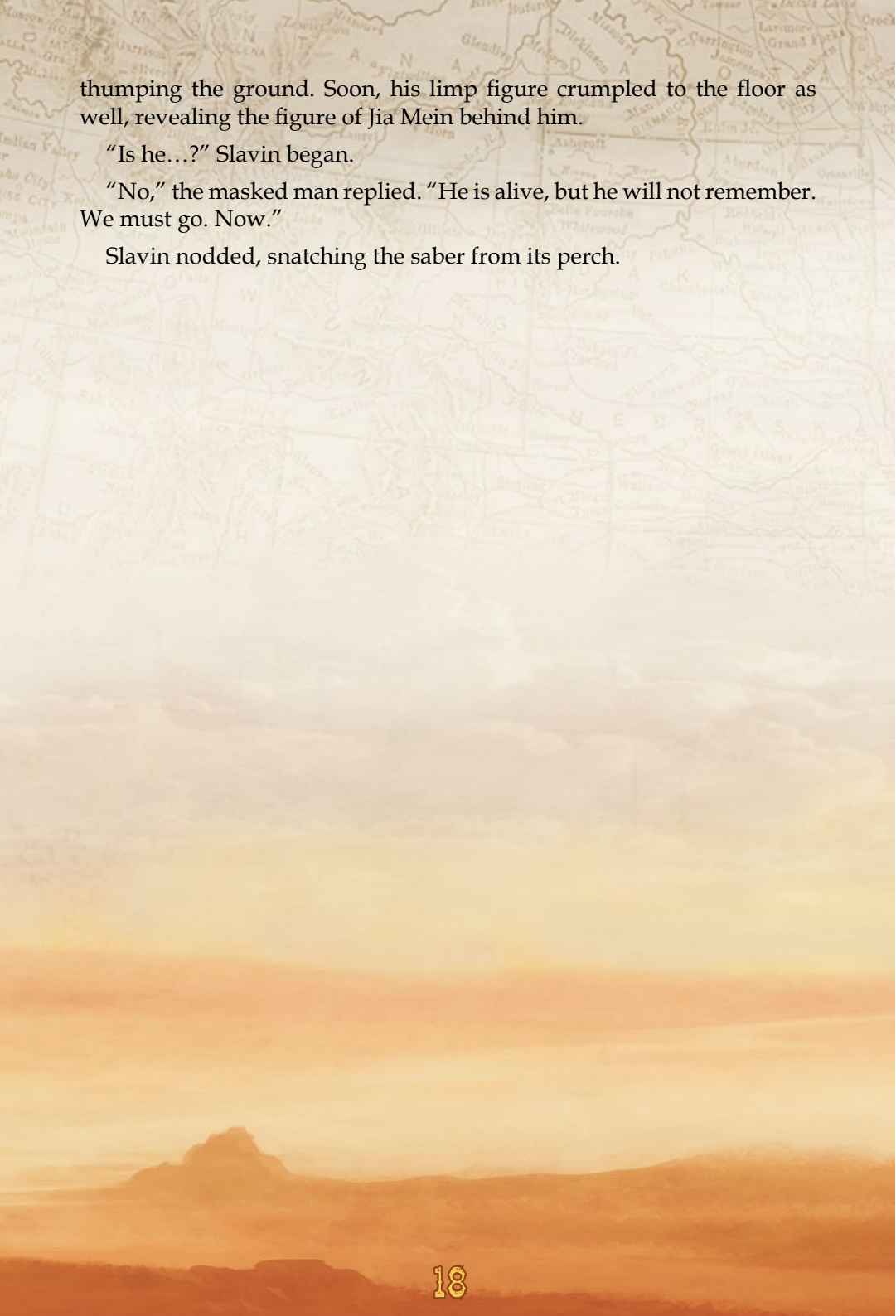
"And I thought you'd have wanted something important."

Slavin sighed and slowly turned, hands raised. Lane Healey, standing tall in his well-tailored brown suit, was a few feet down the hall, pistol trained directly on him. As he began to think of a way to talk himself out of his predicament, Slavin noticed the air behind Lane begin to change, swirling and thickening into a black mist. He smiled.

"Something about this situation funny to you?"

"You have no idea."

A pair of gloved hands reached out and encircled Lane's temple. He struggled for a moment at the fine green aura that encircled his head, but after a moment his arms fell slack by his side, sending his sidearm

The background of the page is a composite image. The top half features a faded, sepia-toned map of the United States, showing state boundaries and major cities. The bottom half shows a landscape at sunset or sunrise, with a large, dark mountain peak in the foreground and a bright, orange-hued sky with soft clouds.

thumping the ground. Soon, his limp figure crumpled to the floor as well, revealing the figure of Jia Mein behind him.

"Is he...?" Slavin began.

"No," the masked man replied. "He is alive, but he will not remember. We must go. Now."

Slavin nodded, snatching the saber from its perch.

Epilogue

"Ahhh!" Ivor exclaimed, lifting the scabbard from Kevin's outstretched hands, "such a thing of beauty! You have done well, Kevin."

Kevin grinned and waddled to take his place at Ivor's side. The ringmaster gripped the hilt of the sabre and drew it slowly from its scabbard. A dull, blue light pulsed from the strange markings that covered the silver blade.

"Delivered, as promised," said Richard Slavin from the corner of the tent. He struck a match across the tent pole and lit a cigarette. "Now, Hawley, about our deal. Whatever these items are for, I want in. You said -"

"Delivered, certainly ... but not without cost," Ivor said solemnly, removing his top hat and ignoring Slavin's query entirely.

Kevin pulled a small flask from his vest pocket and poured the contents on the ground. "For Slade and Bobo."

Slavin sighed and moved closer to the ringmaster. "Our, deal, Hawley?"

"Respect for the dead, Doctor," Hawley said, his stare a quiet warning. "We have lost family tonight." He turned to leave the tent, but Slavin followed close.

"I have delivered on everything - everything - you have asked for."

Kevin waddled behind, shaking his head.

Beneath the open sky, Slavin quickened his pace, reaching out his hand to grasp the ringmaster's shoulder. "I DEMAND -"

Hawley whirled, reaching out one gloved hand. Eyes wide, Slavin stopped abruptly, suspended mid-stride. His cigarette still burned between two locked fingers.

"You demand?" Hawley said quietly, tightened his fingers slightly. A hollow groan escaped Slavin's lips, parted in a frozen snarl. "You will demand nothing of me."

Hawley's fingers closed tighter. A vein pulsed in Slavin's forehead as more muffled groans came forth. Finally, Ivor relaxed his grip, and Slavin collapsed to the grass, shaking.

"I ... I ..." he began.

Breathing heavily, Kevin finally arrived at his master's side.

The ringmaster spread his coattails with a flourish and bent over, his face mere inches from that of Dr. Richard Slavin. "You have something to say?"

Shaking, Slavin caught his breath and stood weakly, meeting the ringmaster's stare. "I ... must ... know."

Ivor nodded his head slowly. "And so you shall."

Ivor raised a gloved hand, his eyes widening in a savage mixture of glee and malice. The sky around him crackled with a white glow. Before Kevin could blink, there was a flash of bright light, and Richard Slavin's limp form crumpled to the ground, his cigarette landing in the soft grass.

As Ivor looked on, Kevin walked over and stepped on the smoldering patch, fervently twisting his foot into the dirt. Small wisps of steam were still rising from the body, curling into the air. Slavin's face lay frozen in surprise, his mouth wide as if to scream. Kevin stared at the grotesque visage and smiled, unaware of the pair of eyes watching from the darkness at the edge of tent entrance.

* * *

Her narrative ended, Valeria shivered as she held back tears.

"You must understand, Sheriff, that for Dr. Richard Slavin archaeological finds were waypoints on a journey of knowledge. But at some point, those relics and the money they brought became ends to themselves. Dr. Slavin may not have been a good man, but he was not evil. Not evil like that demonic monstrosity that is Ivor Hawley."

"Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil... against the rulers of the darkness of this world...," Abram said.

"Ephesians 6:11,12. Know thy enemy. I do know more than musty old tomes found in the back alcoves of a library," replied Valeria.

"But you have been among the Fourth Ring and its grotesque denizens. Tell us what you know, so that we may understand our foe."

THE FOURTH RING'S DENIZENS

Opening Act

As Ivor Hawley walks, he stirs broken and heartless people into his wake, a comet of ill omen passing through and tearing a dark patch from the heavens. None are more heartless or more broken than Kevin Wainwright, the little man following at his heels, eager and fearful like a whipped dog.

"Two days until opening night," Ivor says without looking back. "Will we be ready, Kevin?" Micah Ryse spies the pair walking past as he cuts a side of bacon for his breakfast, and carves a gash right between his thumb and forefinger. He looks at it as if to grunt in pain, but then simply, silently returns his gaze to Ivor.

"We're going to need everything to be perfect to really wow this town," says Ivor. "Everyone has to be in top form."

"Everything's going to be ready, s-s-sir," Kevin says, head jerking. "The, ah, the trick shooter arrived yesterday, and the, ah, ah, the clowns have been rehearsing all week..." One of those clowns — one whose makeup never seems to come off — lies asleep, but looking like a sun-baked corpse sprawled next to a sledgehammer and a half-assembled fortune-teller's tent. As Ivor's shadow passes over him, the clown twitches with newfound energy, flails into a standing position like he's having a seizure in reverse, giggling manically and pounding in the tent stakes like they were rabbits buried up to their necks.

"Good, good, I love their act!" Ivor chortles. "I only hope that our more traditional clowns can keep up with... our 'special' sorts of performers." He spins his cane, wind creating little whirling dust devils in his path. "And our advertising? I don't want anyone to miss the show."

"Arnold, he, uh, he handled our advertising..." Kevin stutters. "There's, I've seen his posters, and our barkers in the town... But, uh, I don't think... I mean..." Kevin trails off. Working at his sun-bleached bench, masked Jia Mien uses his forbidden alchemy to mix together the show's pyrotechnics. Ivor glances his way, and instinctively Jia bows his head in deference, looking back up to see the sensitive chemicals he's holding curdling and turning black from the heat of his hand.

"Oh, don't worry, I know we've not got our money's worth. How could we, when we're too astounding to describe?" With an airy flourish, Ivor laughs at his own wit as he walks by Mongwau the knife-eater practicing his endurance by holding his hand in a campfire. As Ivor laughs, a knot in one of the logs bursts. Startled, Mongwau yelps and falls backwards while hoping no one saw his momentary fright.

"Uh, yes, yes, of course," Kevin replies. He winces, grits his teeth, in anticipation of something terrible. "There's, um, there's one small problem that has to be addressed..."

Ivor stops and sighs. "Kevin. We've spoken about this."

"I, I know, I'm sorry, it, I tried to—" Kevin stammers, desperate.

Ivor kneels down to eye level with the man, giving his shoulder a paternal tap. Hot shame radiates all through Kevin's skin from the ringmaster's touch, his shoulders buckle like he's trying to dislocate them. "You don't need to worry about this, Kevin. You're a good man! You don't need to drive yourself crazy over every little thing." He starts to jostle his assistant playfully. "All right? I want you to remember how well you've done, okay?"

Kevin blushes for at least three reasons. "I'm sorry... I mean, okay... our suppliers, some of them are starting to say they can't deliver, and I just don't want to let you all down..." he says, lying about that last part, but Ivor doesn't notice because he isn't the one being lied to.

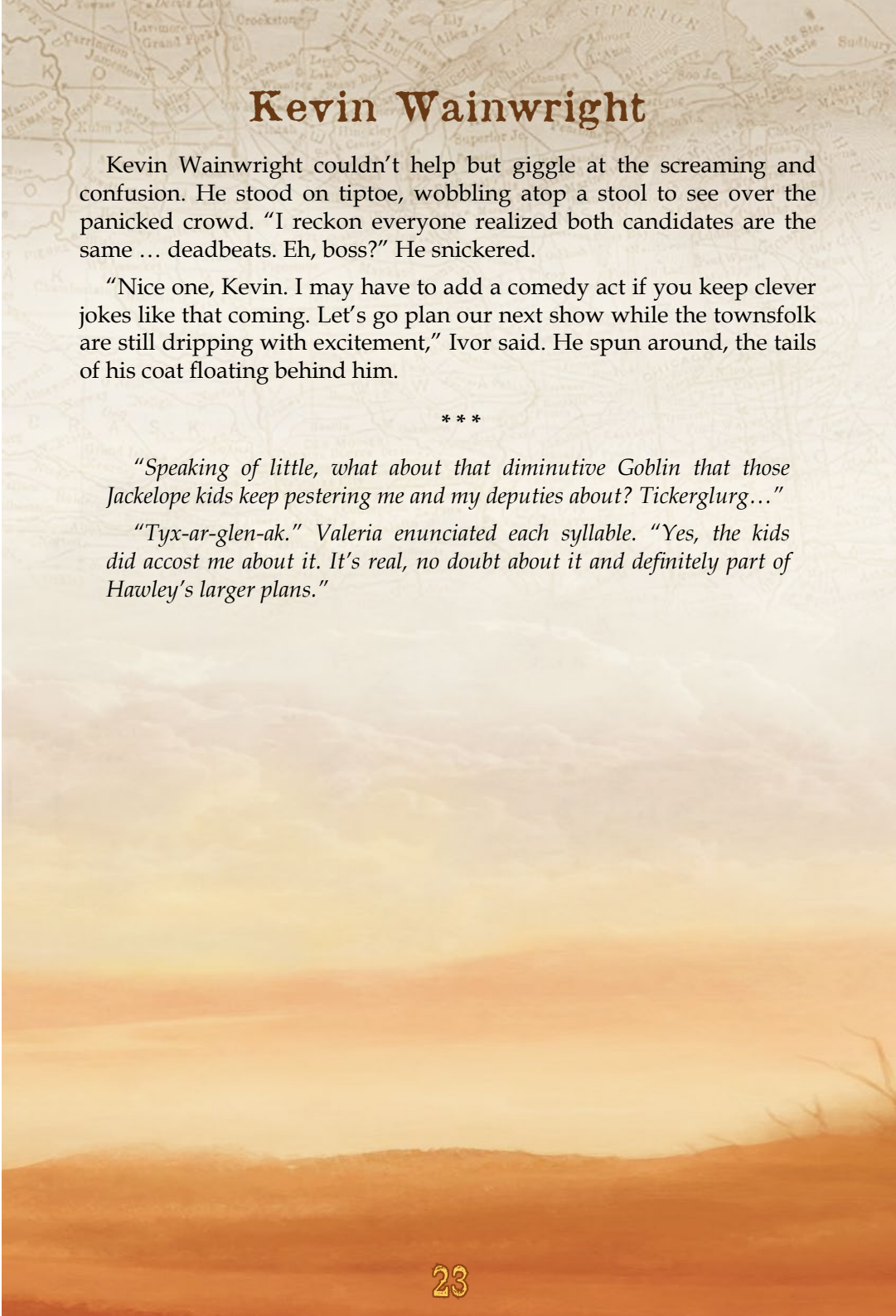
"You're not going to let us down, Kevin!" Ivor says, rising back up, theatrically pulling his waistcoat with his thumbs. "It's hardly your fault if someone else made a promise they couldn't deliver on. We'll just make do with the supplies we have and abduct their lying salesmen once we have our cages set up, and everything's going to be simply smashing!"

The ringmaster smiles, eager and genuine, and in all the hastily assembled bunks around them, sleeping carnies' dreams turn to visions of death and ruin. "Yes, we're going to put on a show this town will be talking about for the rest of their lives!"

* * *

"That little man that follows Hawley around and does his bidding around Gomorra?" Abram asked.

"Kevin Wainwright? He does seem both afraid and protective of the Ringmaster," replied Valeria.



Kevin Wainwright

Kevin Wainwright couldn't help but giggle at the screaming and confusion. He stood on tiptoe, wobbling atop a stool to see over the panicked crowd. "I reckon everyone realized both candidates are the same ... deadbeats. Eh, boss?" He snickered.

"Nice one, Kevin. I may have to add a comedy act if you keep clever jokes like that coming. Let's go plan our next show while the townsfolk are still dripping with excitement," Ivor said. He spun around, the tails of his coat floating behind him.

* * *

"Speaking of little, what about that diminutive Goblin that those Jackelope kids keep pestering me and my deputies about? Tickerglurg..."

"Tyx-ar-glen-ak." Valeria enunciated each syllable. "Yes, the kids did accost me about it. It's real, no doubt about it and definitely part of Hawley's larger plans."

Too Much Attention

"Ty!" whispered Drew. "It's behind you. Whatever you do, don't... turn... around!"

Much like every other human being who had ever received such a directive, Tyler immediately turned around.

It took him a few seconds to pick out what he was looking for, but once he did, there was no mistaking it; that little goblin was back, with its dumb little hat and its jar of fireflies, grunting as it rummaged through a pile of garbage left behind Yan Li's tailor shop. Tyler, Drew, and Jack had been hunting the critter for days, when they weren't busy playing marbles or climbing trees or throwing bugs in each other's hair, and now here it was, right behind them.

Drew slowly, wordlessly, loaded a marble into his ever-present slingshot, and pulled it back. The critter extracted itself from the trash pile as if it was done — though it hadn't taken out anything — dusted off its hands, and then froze as if it knew it was being watched. Just as it started to go for something in its belt, Drew let fly, the rubber of the slingshot making a satisfying WHAP right before the even more satisfying THWACK of a marble nailing a goblin right in the back of the head. It bounced forward into the pile, sprung back to its feet, whirled around, and growled, baring sharp and snaggletoothed fangs and waving a knife at the three youngsters.

"Get 'im!" shouted Jack, and every ounce of intimidation in the critter left with a high-pitched yip. It dropped the knife, abandoned the jar of fireflies, and bounded up the back wall of Yan Li's, digging its little claws into the wood to scramble up to the roof. The boys may have been champion climbers of most anything an adult might tell them to get the heck off of, but they were no match for critter claws. They heard it jump off the roof to another, and Drew looked to his two pals. "We got him on the run! Let's split up and find him!"

Half an hour later, they returned, empty-handed.

"You find him?" asked Drew, even though he knew the answer.

"Nope," said Jack. "Couldn't see it anywhere. The heck do you think it was doin' anyway?"

"Dunno," Drew said. "Nothin' good. And until we catch 'im, he's just gonna keep on doin' it. Who knows? He could be stealin' ladies underthings or poisonin' our water or drawin' those evil un-crosses

on stuff so God gets all mad and smotes us, or, or somethin' so bad we can't even figure it!"

"Nah, he's probably still at the general store, stuffin' lemon drops into his mouth," said Tyler.

Both older boys turned to him, eyes and jaws widening. "Ty... How do you know that?"

"'Cause me and Mittens saw him like ten minutes ago in the General Store, just shovelin' 'em into his head!" He grinned. "That means he's gotta find me now, right?"

* * *

"I can understand why people would see the Circus once, but again and again? My deputies and I have rarely ever break up a saloon fight when the Circus performs."

"Ah, attribute the peace or at least ceasefire to one Avie Cline."

"That snake charmer? What is it about her? I rarely see her around town?"

"No need for her to go out and about. The menfolk come to her, and repeatedly as you've observed."

A Snake in Woman's Clothes

Henry Lunsmith was livid. "Good riddance, Avie Cline, you two-timin' hussy!" Indeed, he could not bring himself to use his surname, bestowed lovingly a year ago upon his bride.

Avie lifted the oilskin covering the stagecoach's otherwise open window. Thrusting her head outside, she retorted, "Not to mention the three you never knew about!" Even better than cheating on Henry was his gladly paying to banish her far away from the fork in the roads that was Burns, Oregon.

She ducked back inside as the driver cracked the whip, gee-hawing the team into motion. As the stage raced across the basalt-strewn badlands, Avie's thoughts drifted westward. What wonders lay beyond the snow-capped Cascades? Portland? Perhaps a steamer or train to Shan Fan?

A low, steady rumbling shook the stagecoach while the horses neighed in a frenzy. Before Avie could react, a geyser of earth and rock spewed upwards, pelting the stage with debris. Immediately, the huge, tentacled maw of a Mojave rattler exploded out of the opening and pounced upon the closest horse. As the enormous worm continued to breach the hole, it glanced the side of the stagecoach. Separated from the harness traces, the coach rolled before settling on its side.

* * *

Avie tried to lift herself up and screamed from the pain of a broken arm. With some effort from her bruised, but otherwise undamaged, other arm, Avie extricated herself from the ruined stagecoach. As she peered over the edge of the upturned stage, Avie teetered and lost her balance. As she fell, a jagged piece of basalt gashed her leg, sending blood coursing down her stocking.

After the monster's whirlwind of carnage, the moonless night was once again quiet. A whirring buzz did not provide sufficient warning as Avie felt twin stabs into her gashed leg. Rattlesnakes, a whole den of them! Several more bites came in quick succession and Avie's limbs swelled painfully from the venom.

* * *

Avie's eyes opened and squinted against the sunlight. Something slithered across her body and continued up her arm. Moving the arm summoned the pain anew and reminded Avie of how she ended up in this ravine to begin with. Startled, the snake gave a quick buzz of its tail, but otherwise made no attempt to strike. Out of the corner of her eye, Avie glimpsed yet another rattlesnake languidly flicking its tongue across her cheek. Exhausted, she shivered as at least another dozen serpents continuously weaved in and out of her tattered dress and blouse.

* * *

"It is close, very close. I sense it is new and just right for us," Ivor Hawley spoke as much to himself as to Kevin Wainwright. Ivor leaned forward out the carriage window and instructed his coachman, "Detour over towards that outcrop."

The ornate circus carriage was nevertheless sturdy enough to handle the jostling of the mixed rocks and sagebrush that lay between the wagon trail and the indicated rock formation. After a few minutes, Ivor once again hailed his coachman, this time to pull to a stop.

Kevin bounded out and after a brief search called back to his master, "Mr. Hawley sir," he wheezed, "it's a woman."

* * *

Was that the sound of an approaching calliope? Avie's heart raced, and the vipers struck up an angry chorus. Eventually, the lead coach for the caravan stopped beside the wrecked stagecoach. Avie's vision blurred as if seeing through eyes that were no longer her own. A little man in a top hat careened towards her, his lantern bouncing in a crazy arc.

A much taller man had come up behind the diminutive lantern bearer. He bent down to peer over his assistant's shoulder. Undisturbed by the snakes' gape-jawed hisses, he bowed, "You are most very welcome to accompany my traveling troupe."

"But, but, who are you," Avie stammered in a voice she scarcely recognized as her own. "And why should I come with you?"

"I am Ivor Hawley, Ringmaster of the Fourth Ring. You are, of course, free to remain here as you please," Ivor gave a dismissive wave of the rocky terrain that surrounded Avie.

Avie surveyed her bleak surroundings as she lurched to her feet. She gazed eastward towards Burns and turned back to Ivor. "Can't be any worse than Burns or this pile of rocks," Avie rasped as she stumbled towards Ivor's extended hand.

With one smooth motion, Ivor caught Avie's fall and twirled her around and into the waiting carriage before entering himself. Ivor exhorted his troupe's newest member, "Shed your past! Embrace the power that lives within and sustains you!"

As the troupe resumed its journey, Avie turned and asked Ivor, "But where are we going?"

Ivor gave a wide, toothsome grin, "Why, mon chere, California, here we come!"

* * *

"But the Circus can't rely solely on repeat customers? Somebody has to drive new and different customers to the Fourth Ring Circus."

"Indeed, Sheriff. The persuasive entreaties of Dulf Zug soon wore thin. And you had to be passing by the tents to hear him. So the Circus now has an agent who has set up shop in the town square, of all places."

"Dabney Scuttlesby? He is slick, but hard to believe that smarmy quack peddler is a minion of the Fourth Ring."

"Exactly, but listen to him sometime. His pitches always end up with invitations to the Circus. He even GIVES the tickets away. Ask yourself this, Sheriff; why would anyone give something away?"

For What Ails You

You there, sir! Yes, you! You have a worried look about you. What could possibly be troubling you, my good man? Come, come, over here now. Don't let the crowd fool you. This ain't a revival, just good ol' fashioned wonders.

See you got a spot of boils there. Bad news, that is ... been seeing it all day.

How many kids do you have, eh? Three? Hand to heart, it's nearly impossible to keep those little 'uns safe. Must be making your hair fall out ... but we'll get to that in a moment. Coughing already, are they? Shame, shame. Been goin' around something fierce from what I hear.

Well, what If I told you that I can protect you and your loved ones, all for little more than the price of a mint Julep? 'Madness,' you say! But look again, good sir: Scuttlesby's Miracle Tonic! Distilled through an incredible mix of far eastern phosphenes, lunules, and mountain orchids, filtered through a unique skeuomorph of my own design, this fantastic tonic guarantees a clear mind, sharpened senses, and a body free of any sickness, fever, or malady you care to name ... and it'll even regrow that hair to boot! Don't be shy, take a whiff sir.

Smells like science, doesn't it? I could tell you were a perceptive man the moment I set eyes on you. That's why I'll offer you a deal like no other. This very day, a one time only offer, you can supply your whole family with Scuttlesby's perfected, proven, and patented panacea.

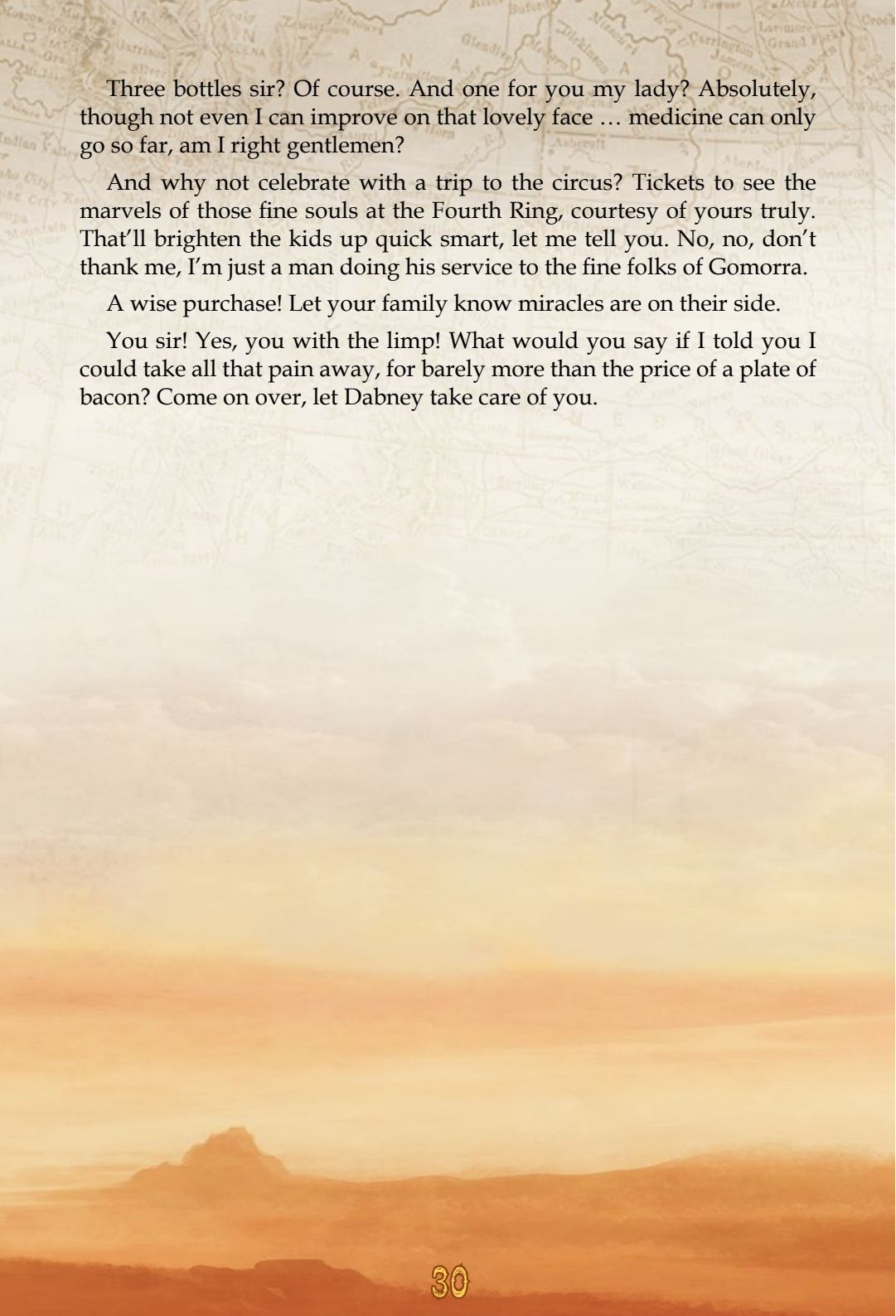
Boils? Thing of the past.

Itchy rash? A mere memory.

And best of all, take care of those poor little children's coughin' and wheezin' the whole day through.

Does it truly? Good people, would I stand here — a proud man, with knowledge gleaned from mystical medicinal masters from the Far East — and lie to you? Why would I, when it's simply a matter of unique design working in cadence with the body's natural equilibrium through correcting all negative bio-conductive influences? Elementary science!

Dabney Scuttlesby's a man of his word. You'll never feel better. Guaranteed results, on my dear grandmother's life.

A faint, sepia-toned map of the United States serves as the background for the top half of the page. It shows state boundaries and major cities, with a warm, golden-brown color palette.

Three bottles sir? Of course. And one for you my lady? Absolutely, though not even I can improve on that lovely face ... medicine can only go so far, am I right gentlemen?

And why not celebrate with a trip to the circus? Tickets to see the marvels of those fine souls at the Fourth Ring, courtesy of yours truly. That'll brighten the kids up quick smart, let me tell you. No, no, don't thank me, I'm just a man doing his service to the fine folks of Gomorra.

A wise purchase! Let your family know miracles are on their side.

You sir! Yes, you with the limp! What would you say if I told you I could take all that pain away, for barely more than the price of a plate of bacon? Come on over, let Dabney take care of you.

IVOR HAWLEY'S POLITICAL MACHINATIONS

"You say Ivor Hawley was acting on behalf of another? Who? Why?"

"I did not glean that, but Ivor did influence the ill-fated election, ably playing both sides. To what advantage, may well forever remain a mystery. But here is what I learned..."

Double Dealin'

Ivor rose as the man entered his private tent.

"Mr. Byre, or should I call you Mayor Byre?" Ivor shook his guest's hand and smiled.

Both men sat, Byre smoothing out his suit as he did. "Please, for a campaign contributor like you, Ringmaster, call me Roderick."

"And of course, you may call me Ivor. The contribution was nothing, Roderick, the least I could do to support the candidate who is looking forward. I saw your new voting machines. I cannot wait to cast my vote for you."

"Ah, then the Circus will be staying a tad longer? I was trying to remember how long you had been in town. It's been a week or two, right? I know your assistant, Mr. Wainwright brought by your donation – what was it? – four, five days ago?"

"Something like that, friend. We are awaiting a few deliveries still, so we will be here a bit longer." Ivor fell silent, concentrating for a moment as his eyes began to glow. Glowing cards fell all around Roderick Byre's head, and his eyes began to glow as well.

The room grew dark as Ivor's spell worked its magic, and Ivor transformed. Where he had formerly been his normal, charming self, he had now become a dark twisted mirror image, his lightly tanned skin ashen and taught, his teeth pointed like sharp fangs, his glowing eyes, already unnatural, taking on a yellow tint. Ivor felt his full power surge in his true form. Looking back at his "guest" and sneering slightly, he uttered a single word, "Dance."

As the mayoral candidate sprang from his chair and began waltzing around the room with an invisible partner, Ivor's sneer turned to

a genuine smile. "Interesting choice." Ivor motioned, and the man approached him. "Lick my shoe." Ivor extended one shoe to the man, who knelt and eagerly licked it. Ivor grinned from ear to ear, his black lips parting his monstrous face.

With another wave of Ivor's hand, the man strode back to his chair, turned and sat back down as suddenly as he had sprung from it.

The room suddenly lit back up and both men's eyes returned to normal, along with Ivor's appearance. Roderick slumped slightly before sitting back up straight.

"Well, I am elated to hear your lovely circus will be staying in town, you must show me the secrets sometime though! I still haven't figured out how you did that levitation trick! You must tell me before you move on from town."

"Ah, but it would violate the showman's code if I told you."

"Well perhaps once I'm mayor, I will order you to tell me. Then you would have to show me."

"Of course, Mr. Mayor, I would have no choice." Ivor's long, spindly fingers held out a small bowl of mint candies. "Care for a mint, Roderick?"

Roderick reached out, "Actually I would. I have the strangest taste in my mouth."

"Oh, do you? How puzzling. Could you describe it?"

"Salty, a little sour, and a tiny bit spicy. Which makes no sense, as I had a muffin earlier, but that's all."

"Odd." Ivor placed the dish down as Roderick popped the mint into his mouth. "I do believe that taste is how I have heard tiger urine described."

"Hah, very odd, but I can guarantee I haven't tasted any tiger urine."

"I'm certain not, my friend. But I do believe you had best be going soon."

Roderick glanced at his pocket watch. "Oh my, where does the time go? Sorry to rush, but I have another appointment. I'm very glad for your contribution and your friendship, Ivor."

"And I yours, Roderick." The two men shook hands. "Please, use my personal exit; it will get you to the town proper a bit faster."

"Thank you again." Roderick ducked out the side flap of the giant tent.

No sooner had Ivor sat down than his next appointment appeared. He rose and smiled as the man entered.

"Mr. Crowley, or should I call you Mayor Crowley?" Ivor shook his guest's hand and smiled.

Both men sat, Crowley wiping the sweat from his forehead lightly with a handkerchief, "Please, afta' all yuh've done, yah'all can call me Wilber."

"And of course, you may call me Ivor."

* * *

"But the Ringmaster manipulated more than just Gomorra politics."

"Correct. He even influenced the breakup of Morgan Cattle Company into Morgan Cattle Company and Morgan Mining Company."

"Morgan Mining? Isn't that girl Tallulah's operation? She never struck me as being the brightest nugget in the lode, if you catch my meaning."

"As I said, she had help. From Ivor."

Dirty Deeds

Ivor Hawley strode through the new Morgan Mining Company building. On each side of him, surveyors and engineers huddled over maps and blueprints. Kevin, his diminutive assistant, hobbled forward to knock on the door of Lula Morgan's private office.

"Come in," Lula said.

Kevin opened the door. Lula's office had been decorated with a large painting of a red rose, purple drapes, and plush chairs with multi-colored weaved cushions. She sat behind a desk of finely carved mahogany. The office looked more like a fancy hotel lobby than a place to conduct business. Ivor removed his top hat, twisting it to his side in a fluid motion. He prepared to greet her with his typical energetic flair when he heard a click.

To his left, Lane Healey leaned against the wall with a cocked pistol. He didn't point the gun at Ivor, but the implication was clear. Kevin scampered between them, as if his compressed frame could stop the bullet if it came to that.

"Is he necessary?" Ivor asked Lula. "I merely came to commend you on your recent success and inquire about procuring some trivial items from you."

"I'm sure you're well intentioned, Ringmaster, but I've lived in Gomorra long enough not to trust anyone. Mr. Healey helps with that," Lula said, her hands folded over her desk, the shoulders of her dress nearly puffed up to her ears. "So save the act and let's cut to the chase. What exactly is it you're looking for?"

Ivor whimsically flicked his wrist. "As I said, trivial items ... pickaxes, carts, nothing of value. There's also the small matter of an abandoned property on the North End. It's in shambles and not worth a considerable amount. Our people began to clean it out, until I discovered that the Morgans held the deed. I have a grand vision for its use: a sanatorium to house the sick and give this town some much needed relief."

Lula considered him with vacant eyes, a pitiful attempt at appearing like she understood the finer points of negotiations. She nodded. "I believe we can come to an arrangement. Might we talk privately?"

"Kevin," Ivor said, motioning his cane back toward the door. "Kindly take a walk please."

Lula's gaze shifted away from Ivor and toward her muscle. "Lane, some privacy?" She batted her eyelashes. "Show the little man around the office."

Lane grunted an assent and pushed himself from the wall with his boot. "C'mon," he said, making his way out the door. Kevin followed along behind him.

Ivor waited until the voices diminished and he could no longer hear their companions. "Theatrical. I am a captive audience awaiting the grand reveal. Tell me, Miss Morgan, what is it you seek?" Ivor brandished a wicked smile back at Lula.

Lula's eyes narrowed, seriousness encroaching over her face. "Lillian. I want her gone." She took a deep breath and let it out again to quell some silent inner fury before continuing. "This company is rightfully mine, and Lillian is in the way of claiming it. I want it, and I want it now."

"Ahh, I see," Ivor said. He paced back and forth in front of Lula's desk, cane clicking as he feigned consideration of the notion, building anticipation as he would any show. "We at the Fourth Ring hold much sway in Gomorra, more than most realize. I have some 'creative' business practices I can exercise which would ensure your division thrives and hers falters. Oh, and this just might help as well!" Though fully intentional, Ivor patted his vest as if it were an afterthought. He reached into his pocket and lifted a handkerchief into the air. "This," he said, pausing for effect and employing his showman's voice, "will serve to amaze and dazzle, propelling you to the top of the Morgan empire as surely as my acrobats fly forth from the cannon!"

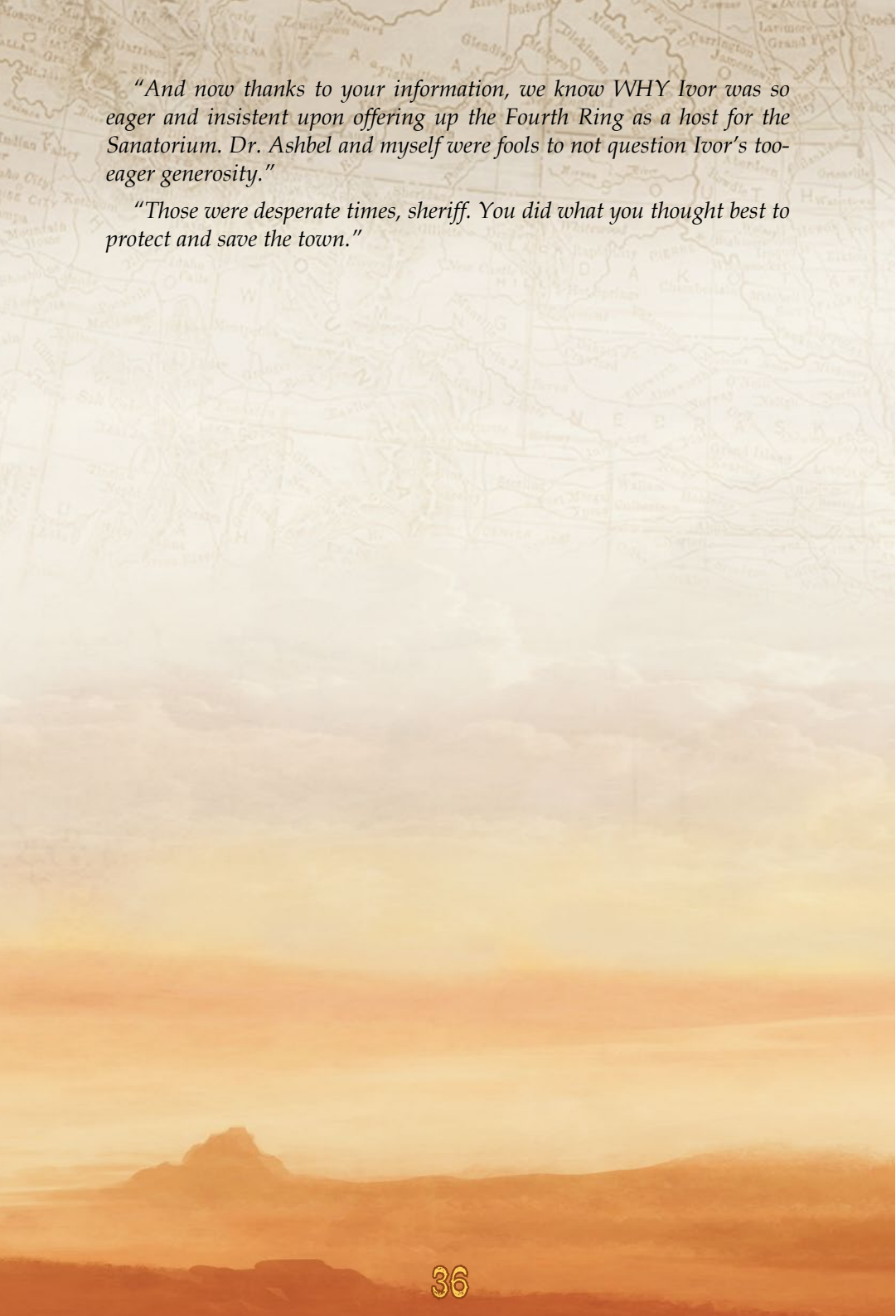
Lula huffed, unimpressed. "A handkerchief?"

"Not just any handkerchief, my dear," Ivor said. He set it on the corner of her desk. "But one guaranteed to cripple Lillian Morgan. One touch and she will be forced to hand this company over to you."

He could almost hear Lula's heart race with excitement. He'd struck the perfect chord. Her eyes lit up as they met his. "Yes, yes. I think we could have a deal." Her brow furrowed as she considered. "But all this for a worthless property and some rusty equipment? Why?"

"Favors, my dear Lula. Favors make the world go round."

* * *

The background of the page is a composite image. The top half features a faded, sepia-toned map of the United States, showing state boundaries and names. The bottom half shows a landscape at sunset or sunrise, with a large, dark, rocky mountain peak in the foreground and a bright, orange-hued sky with soft clouds.

"And now thanks to your information, we know WHY Ivor was so eager and insistent upon offering up the Fourth Ring as a host for the Sanatorium. Dr. Ashbel and myself were fools to not question Ivor's too-eager generosity."

"Those were desperate times, sheriff. You did what you thought best to protect and save the town."

Desperate Times

Abram Grothe paced Dave's cramped sheriff's office. Well, it's my office now, he thought. He stopped and stared at the cluttered piles of wanted posters, briefs from Judge Somerset, and last week's newspaper. Abram wanted to tidy up, if only to toss the papers into the fire and start anew.

"Sheriff," the tin star proclaimed. Abram wore it as reluctantly as he wore his sword. Like Nate Hunter and Dave Montreal, he was another deputy caught up in the noble pursuit to serve the law in Gomorra. Only Sheriff Coleman had been a professional lawman who wanted the job. In the end, all they got for their troubles was a long dirt nap, and for Coleman, the rest was short-lived.

Somewhere beyond the town square, gunfire rang through the streets as Sloane's gang staged yet another daylight raid on Gomorra's hapless merchants. Between the call and response of pistols, a buffalo rifle thundered.

Abram grabbed his sword and jail keys and raced outside. He paused to listen. It came from the other side of town. A brisk run brought him to the town square simultaneous with Mortimer Parsons' and Wendy Cheng's arrival.

"We were too late, Sheriff. Darn Sloaners. Nearly every other day brings another hold up," said an out-of-breath Wendy, followed by Mortimer.

"This time they raided a shipment out of Shan Fan. Dude's ok, but they got the cash box and lit a shuck back to Soddum 'fore Yi and I could chase 'em down," said Mortimer. "Abram, we need a posse to corral Sloane once and for all."

"We don't have anything close to a posse," Abram replied. "Most recruits don't have the guts to stand up to a gunfight. Andrew Burton is the only one to last more than a week. Most of the rest can't even get out of bed, they're so sick. This pestilence is affecting us just as much as the rest of the town." Who knew that Gomorra would have to face so many threats at once? What would you have me do, Lord? Run to battle like your soldier, Joshua, or tend to the sick?

Dejected, the trio made their slow way back to Abram's office.

Before Abram could get settled again, the office doors swung open. Lucy Clover and Emanuel Ashbel nearly collided full force trying to fit through. Both spoke at once.

"Abram, I have an idea –" Lucy said.

"Sheriff, we must do something, about this sickness –" interjected the doctor.

He was interrupted by another pair of newcomers. However, this time councilman Ebenezer Springfield waited to allow Tommy Harden, who was visibly ill, a wide berth.

"Yeah, Lucy 'n I can –" said Tommy, gagging. He quickly turned to vomit into a nearby spittoon.

"See what I mean?" said Ashbel.

"The town council demands that action be taken regarding this horrific plague!" Springfield demanded.

"Exactly what I have been trying to tell Sheriff Grothe," Ashbel said loudly enough to at last get Abram's attention.

"All right, Doctor. Speak your peace. How bad is it?" Abram asked.

"Very bad, indeed. Remember two weeks ago, that outbreak of typhoid fever?" Glum nods affirmed Emanuel's timeframe. "I expected a stomach bloat and diarrhea along with increased fever," the doctor continued. "However much to my surprise, the patients exhibited scaly rashes and feverish hallucinations. We have tried to restrain them once they turn violent, but some have even attacked their caretakers and loved ones before wandering off, never to be seen again. Whatever this is, it is not Typhoid. In fact, it's not any disease that I've ever seen or read about. Until I know what it is, I'm afraid that there is little I can do."

"But what did you do for them?" asked Wendy, who cast a nervous glance at Tommy Harden.

"Salves and ointments for the itching and medicated compresses to ease the fevers. Sometimes it works, mostly it does not. I spend every day walking from one end of town to the other, making house calls. By the time I reach one part of town, I receive word of another case where I just came from. Gomorra is simply not capable of handling an outbreak of this magnitude. There are so many sick, so many ..." Emanuel slumped down with a resigned shrug.

"Excuse me. Is Sheriff Grothe there?" came a wheezing teakettle of a voice. A diminutive man in tails and a top hat jostled his way through

the crowd. Reaching Abram, Kevin Wainwright proffered a calling card. "Ringmaster Hawley wishes to have a word with you, good sir."

"Back here, Mr. Hawley," Abram's shouted voice carried past Kevin and into the bar in front of his office. "Come in."

The assemblage parted to allow Ivor Hawley a clear path.

"My dear sheriff," Ivor said in a booming voice. "Once again, congratulations on your new post. Gomorra is indeed a town under great distress currently. Not only are you short-handed for deputies, but I'm afraid this plague is consuming all of the patrons for my incredible, spectacular, and amazing Fourth Ring circus. I ask, what is an entertainer without an audience to entertain?" A pouting frown spread beneath his curled mustache. "Which is why I have decided to help rid Gomorra of this terrible disease. Sir, the Fourth Ring is at your service," he ended with a sweeping bow.

"A merry heart doeth good like a medicine,' but I'm afraid our needs are too great for clowns to undo this time," said Abram.

"Ah, yes." Ivor held up a thin white-gloved finger in protest. "But even a humble circus has resources. We are citizens just like you. And as citizens, it is our duty to help the community fight this scourge," said Ivor, punctuating the last words with a stern military cadence. "We have set up one of our spare tents as an infirmary. Come one, come all, come see what we have for you."

Ivor's long strides and Kevin's pigeon-toed rolling gait led the group down Main Street and through the town square. A red and white striped tent stood in front of the troupe's usual big top. What it lacked in placards and promotions, the tent made up for with open flaps, welcoming all comers. Already, Dulf Zug was ushering in a few of the visibly sick from the day's performance.

As the ringmaster approached the tent, the Brute brought forth a massive stool used to support the largest of beasts. Once in place, Ivor nimbly stepped up, indicated the tent with his cane, and addressed the group. "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, children of all ages, welcome to the Fourth Ring's infirmary and triage. Here the ill and diseased will find rest and safe haven from the ravages of this vile pestilence."

"People are sick and dying, and this guy thinks it's showtime at the circus," Lucy whispered to Wendy.

Emanuel rushed to the front and shook Ivor's hand with repeated vigorous pumps. "This is exactly what we need to manage and quarantine this plague. How can we ever repay you for this?"

"Think nothing of it, Doctor," Ivor said with a dismissive gesture. "My troupe rejoices in any opportunity to help. Please allow me to show you what we have built so far. No doubt you will be able to make improvements."

With this, Emanuel gaped in awe. Could salvation from the disease really lie within those striped canvas walls?

The doctor turned to Abram and the others. "For now, I will set up my practice here. Tommy, let us take care of you first," he said as he motioned the deputy to accompany him into the tent.

As the pair entered, they paused to adjust to the dim light. Even Emanuel's camphor-soaked handkerchief could not diminish the enveloping putridness.

"Ringmaster," a man still in clown silks groaned as he reached for Ivor.

"Ah Leon," Ivor said, clasping the outstretched hand. "Fear not, the good doctor has arrived."

Despite the dim light, Ashbel observed the pus-encrusted scabs of the infirm clown's skin. "Beyond hope of any remedies that I may offer," Emanuel said. He frowned and cast his eyes low.

"Leon's artistry has brought a level of joy and wonderment to our clown's performances previously unheard of on this side of the Atlantic. You see, Dr. Ashbel, all of our tricks and illusions fare naught against the terror of this dreaded contagion."

Makeshift as this infirmary is, it will have to do. Emanuel looked Ivor in the eye as he addressed him, "You are most kind, and I am forever grateful for you and your Circus' aid. I accept your offer and will do my best to remedy the affliction that plagues these poor souls."

"Excellent! There is no doubt in my mind that you will succeed!"

Ashbel had already turned away and headed towards the first of his many newfound patients, failing to notice Ivor's toothy grin behind him.

* * *

"But even the Ringmaster occasionally met his match," said Valeria.

Payback Time

Avie Cline was being followed. She could tell right away; men like him always wore the same distinct uniform in the name of blending in and being inconspicuous. Dark suit. Dark hat. Dark demeanor. He'd walked into the tent in the middle of her act, the only one watching her instead of the snakes she charmed. She made sure it ran long just to make him wait.

He accosted her as she left, making sure to catch her in an area where there'd be witnesses. "Good to see you, Miss Cline," he said in a tone that made it clear it wasn't. "Judging by your reaction, I take it you know why I'm here."

"Oh, not at all!" she said, smiling like an idiot. "But I'm pleased to meet you, mister...?"

She extended her hand for a shake; he produced a dossier from his jacket and handed it to her instead. "Don't play with me. I am in the business of looking for... irregularities. And with you, I found a lot of them. I would like to give you a chance to make this right of your own accord, Miss Cline. You'll find the instructions for doing so within. If you do not, we will be forced to take corrective measures."

She tried to respond, wanted to put on an act and tug on whatever heartstrings a government man like him had left, but he was already gone. She opened the file folder he'd foisted off on her and scowled. This would have to be dealt with.

She didn't exactly fear going to Ivor Hawley for help. None of them did, except maybe Kevin, and Avie couldn't guess what was going on in that little man's head. Hawley made it clear he was always available for his folk, and indeed, the circus saw him as a father. That made her feel childish and weak, having to go to her father for help. But there was no other option.

"Ringmaster Hawley," she said when she found him in his private tent. "I need your help. I'm not sure how, but men from the government have tracked me down... bringing up things I'd rather they not bring up." She dropped the folder on his desk. "They gave me an ultimatum. I was hoping we had something in store for people who make demands like this, to make sure they don't try it again. Can you help?"

Hawley flipped through the first few papers before he addressed her. "Can I help? Avie, I'm the Ringmaster of the Fourth Ring." He spread

IVOR HAWLEY'S ACTIONS WITHIN THE FOURTH RING

A Ghost of a Chance

August 29, 1877

"I still hear hoof-beats behind us," Kevin Wainwright lifted his ear from the ground and looked back up towards the coach as he updated Ringmaster Ivor Hawley.

Ivor pensively rested his face on steepled hands that cradled his ornate walking stick as he looked down upon his assistant. "That must be the same gentleman that's been following us since Tombstone. It's time to make a play. Let him come to us."

There was only the rush of wind until he heard the sound of approaching hooves half an hour later. A lone horseman raced past, wheeled and reared his horse up, before he came to a stop fifty paces in front of Ivor's lead coach. "Yield in the name of the Confederacy!" proclaimed the rider. With this, he drew and leveled his six-shooters at the coach.

"And who in tarnation are you?" inquired the coachman.

"Joseph Willerston of the Texas Rangers. I'd have words with your master."

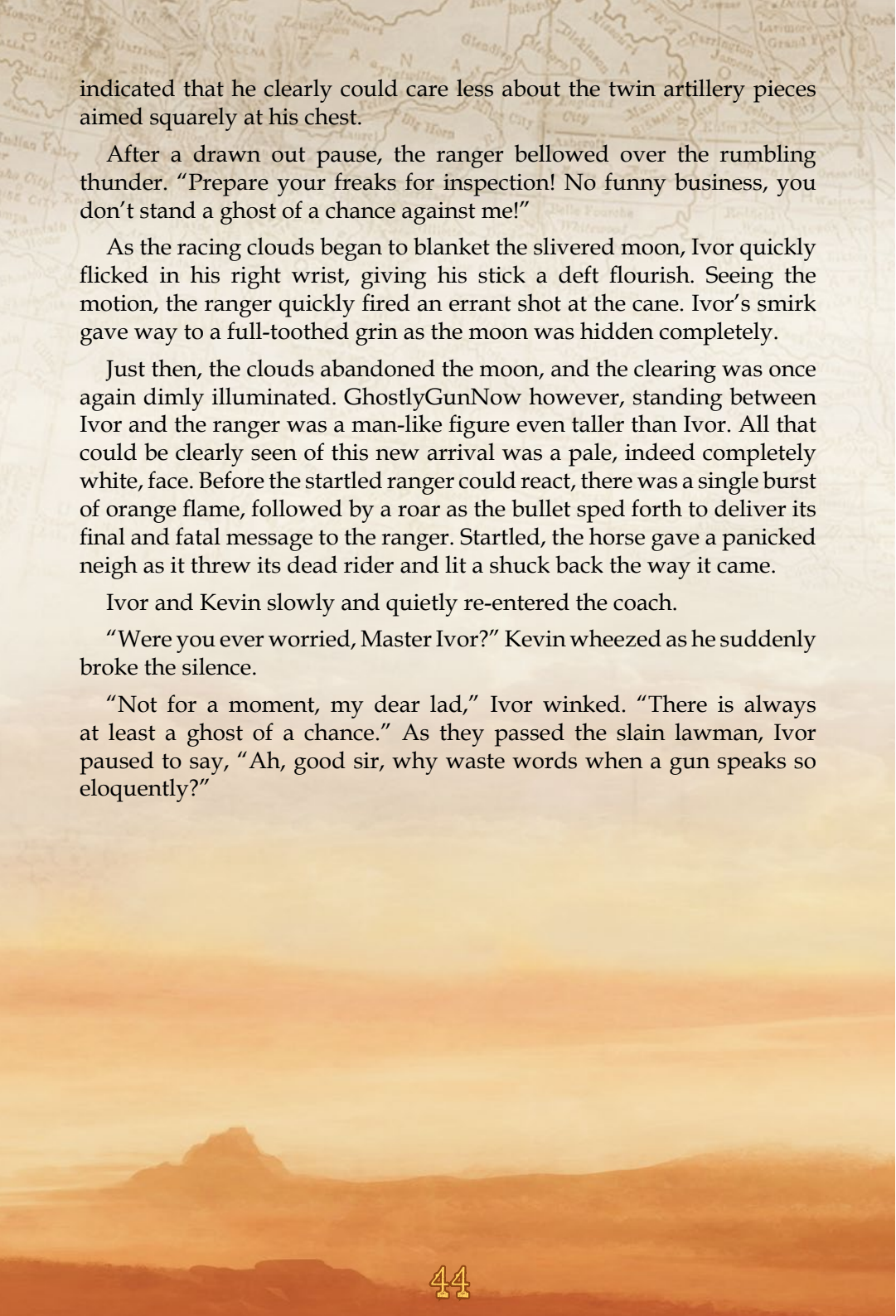
"Ringmaster Hawley answers to no one," blustered the coachman.

"It's all right," Ivor responded from inside the coach.

"Step outside and away from the carriage. Hands where I can see 'em," barked the ranger.

Ivor Hawley slowly opened the door and gracefully stepped down as he complied with the order. Kevin Wainwright stumbled and fell as he followed his master. The diminutive assistant assumed his master's straight stance and despite lacking a walking stick, also mimicked Ivor's outwardly splayed arms.

A sickle moon cast pale light upon the desert hardpan while the lingering humidity of the afternoon's monsoon rains heated the late summer air like a sauna. Sheet lightning crackled across the nearby ridges. Unperturbed by the harsh surroundings, Ivor's disdainful expression



indicated that he clearly could care less about the twin artillery pieces aimed squarely at his chest.

After a drawn out pause, the ranger bellowed over the rumbling thunder. "Prepare your freaks for inspection! No funny business, you don't stand a ghost of a chance against me!"

As the racing clouds began to blanket the slivered moon, Ivor quickly flicked in his right wrist, giving his stick a deft flourish. Seeing the motion, the ranger quickly fired an errant shot at the cane. Ivor's smirk gave way to a full-toothed grin as the moon was hidden completely.

Just then, the clouds abandoned the moon, and the clearing was once again dimly illuminated. GhostlyGunNow however, standing between Ivor and the ranger was a man-like figure even taller than Ivor. All that could be clearly seen of this new arrival was a pale, indeed completely white, face. Before the startled ranger could react, there was a single burst of orange flame, followed by a roar as the bullet sped forth to deliver its final and fatal message to the ranger. Startled, the horse gave a panicked neigh as it threw its dead rider and lit a shuck back the way it came.

Ivor and Kevin slowly and quietly re-entered the coach.

"Were you ever worried, Master Ivor?" Kevin wheezed as he suddenly broke the silence.

"Not for a moment, my dear lad," Ivor winked. "There is always at least a ghost of a chance." As they passed the slain lawman, Ivor paused to say, "Ah, good sir, why waste words when a gun speaks so eloquently?"

The Summoning

The stench of burnt flesh rose from a body beside a half-dug grave, the headstone labeled Tom Place. Kevin Wainwright, standing less than half the size of his master, held a stone idol carved with a myriad of tortured faces. When Ivor had Valeria Batten research, she warned of legends that it opened gateways to other realms. If true, the idol could make an excellent tool when combined with Ivor's own unnatural abilities.

Kevin frowned, prodding the body before him with his boot. "It didn't work. Forgive me, sir. I must not have held it properly. Should we call it a night?"

Ivor removed his top hat, setting it by the headstone to inspect the charred corpse. "Nonsense, Kevin. We're not done yet, m'boy," he said. "There's only so much time before our employer comes to collect this thing, and I intend to make use of it before then." Despite the smell, he took in a deep breath and concentrated. Light trickled from the idol, the gravestones casting shadowy figures as if to judge Ivor's deeds.

"Sir, this thing's gettin' hot. Don't know how much longer I can hold it," Kevin squeaked.

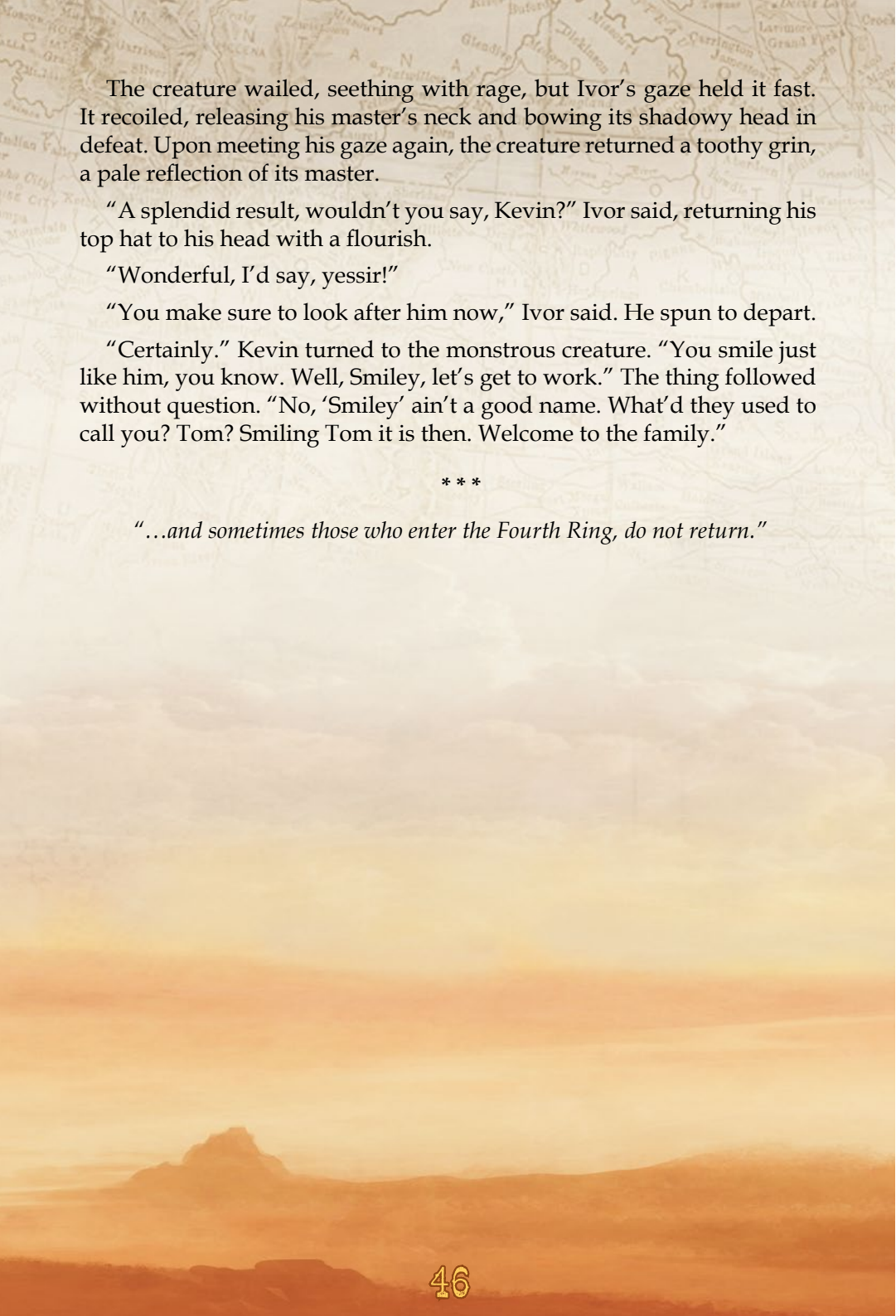
Though the life from the body was long gone, Ivor could still feel its spirit through the stone's radiant glow. He raised his hands, channeling its energy through his fingertips. Power flowed through him. "Te ab profundo inferni. Accipe oblationem corporis. Oriuntur!" Ivor commanded.

The stone burst with light. Kevin dropped it onto the dirt, cursing. Raw energy rushed towards the body on the ground. Ivor allowed some of his own life flow to depart his fingertips, to float toward the body and fill its nostrils like air. Breathe.

A smoky substance seeped from the body's chest, merging with the stone's power and Ivor's life flow. It swirled around the body, encompassing it. Little remained of its original form, but it had come to life.

The creature darted toward Ivor, releasing an angry and wretched scream. "Why did you bring me here?!" It lunged forward, wrapping its clawed digits around Ivor's neck.

The ringmaster stared at the abomination; it was the summoned, and Ivor its master. He crossed his arms and would not budge, his infamous grin creeping across his face.

A faint, light-colored map of the United States serves as the background for the top half of the page. It shows state boundaries and some major cities, though the text is the primary focus.

The creature wailed, seething with rage, but Ivor's gaze held it fast. It recoiled, releasing his master's neck and bowing its shadowy head in defeat. Upon meeting his gaze again, the creature returned a toothy grin, a pale reflection of its master.

"A splendid result, wouldn't you say, Kevin?" Ivor said, returning his top hat to his head with a flourish.

"Wonderful, I'd say, yessir!"

"You make sure to look after him now," Ivor said. He spun to depart.

"Certainly." Kevin turned to the monstrous creature. "You smile just like him, you know. Well, Smiley, let's get to work." The thing followed without question. "No, 'Smiley' ain't a good name. What'd they used to call you? Tom? Smiling Tom it is then. Welcome to the family."

* * *

"...and sometimes those who enter the Fourth Ring, do not return."

A Funny Story

Ivor Hawley crouched over an earth-filled flowerpot as Jia Mein stood nearby with a bottle and a dental hook. Ivor took both and drizzled viscous, green liquid from the bottle onto the soil. He put the hook inside his mouth, sucking before removing it, then spit into the bottle. He looked down and saw a soft pink bud extruding upwards.

“At last! Coaxed to the surface.”

He poured the murky brown potion on it, causing it to swell another half inch.

Ivor returned the tools, looking down on the pot like a proud father does his newborn baby. “The flower requires meticulous care. So rare ... but delightfully useful.” He turned to Jia. “Now tell me about this medicine delivery company.”

* * *

Jake Smiley waved a flyer outside the Bank of California.

“Investors wanted for a medicine delivery company! You’ll help Gomorra and reap your own rewards!”

Most passersby looked disgusted, but an elderly woman brought him a fat envelope. “It’s wonderful to see enterprising individuals rise to our hour of need!” She pressed the envelope into Jake’s hands. “I’m Ida MacGregor. I’ll visit you tomorrow.”

Jake took it and shook her hand. “Somebody must do something!” What Jake would do was order supplies from Smith & Robards, taking a 33% markup for himself. The fine print called it a ‘Samaritan bonus.’

Eventually Jake looked up from the hefty envelope to see Ivor Hawley directly in front of him, grinning widely.

“Mister Smiley! Your humanitarian effort warms my heart. You are a true flower of Gomorra!” Ivor withdrew a large pink flower from his coat. Before Jake could react, Ivor planted the flower on his lapel. There was a small pricking, but Jake was too polite to flinch. “Consider this a free ticket to the circus! Please walk with me. I’d like to invest in you!”

Jake felt unsteady, but the promise of money drew him. “Absolutely, sir! Let’s go to my office!”

The men only walked a block before Jake’s legs buckled. His face turned white as blood flowed from both nostrils over his lip and into his

mouth. The flower turned yellowish as more petals emerged. Ivor pulled Jake into an alley and shushed him with a soothing whisper.

"There, there. Just lie down. This won't take long."

Jake looked up from the ground. He felt threads running through his veins. His eyes dimmed, seeing only Ivor's inhumanly wide smile. There was a cut above one tooth, and a maggot protruded from within.

* * *

Ivor sighed as the new clown with the billowy orange flower tried to learn team juggling. His reaction was always too late, delivering bowling pin blows to the face three times.

Ivor grumbled. "Ugh ... he is by far the biggest waste of a rose ever. The only one of my clowns who has proven to be more useless after I claimed him!" Ivor trudged away, with Kevin Wainwright scuttling behind.

The trainer studied the new clown. "Perhaps he can do a clumsy fall. That's always good for a laugh."

* * *

"But Jake was a drifter, had no family, friends, or associates that anyone knew about. Ivor would not be so bold as to snatch someone away from their loved ones?"

"Oh yes, he would. In fact, they've probably come to you on more than one occasion seeking assistance."

"What could I do – I had no proof, no evidence. I'm a man of God, not a detective."

"Still, it's a sad tale that needs retelling..."

Circus Games

My wife and I had missed the train, the last one of the day. That was fine by us though, because we were in no hurry to bring our western adventure to an end. That's when we met him ... Mr. Dulf Zug, a "simple purveyor of curiosities".

"Too bad about the train," he said, his mouth bending in an exaggerated frown. "But, as luck would have it, we are presenting a very special show tonight!" He rolled his bowler hat down his arm and snapped his elbow, sending it spinning in the air. Annabeth — that's my wife — clapped with delight when it landed squarely atop his head. He winked at her before taking a quick bow. "Bring the Missus to the world's only four-ring circus!" He pressed an advertisement into my hand before sauntering away.

The bill showed a man in a suit and top hat, gesturing toward the words "A show you'll never forget!" His grin was wildly exaggerated and fire rose from his hands, forming the words: "Tonight only! A rare and grand performance from the amazing Ivor Hawley!"

We both agreed it would be a splendid way to spend our last evening in Gomorra. A real live circus show! How excited we were ...

We dressed up for the occasion, and Annabeth looked radiant in her favorite blue evening dress. She wore a studded purple brooch near her shoulder, a wedding gift from my mother. Her crystal blue eyes gleamed in the moonlight as we walked to the fairgrounds.

We were caught up in the spectacle as soon as we arrived. Tents and coaches littered the landscape, each more colorful than the last. Over a span of several hours, we marveled at an array of curiosities: a bearded lady from Tuscon, an Indian sword swallower, even a clown who juggled knives. When a heckler shouted that the blades were fake, the clown — Micah, I believe his name was — let one drop to the floor. We all gasped with delight when it buried itself into the wooden stage.

As the evening drew to a close, we found ourselves in the largest tent of all, ready for the main event. The same Mr. Zug who had invited us to the show approached the stage in the center, set up quickly in sections that intersected the four circus rings. "Ladies and gentleman, tonight you are in for a special treat! Here to dazzle you with feats of magic unheard, I present to you the one ... the only ... Ringmaster Ivor Hawley!"

The lights dimmed, and the man in question entered in a puff of green smoke, swinging a black cane in a broad circle. He stopped mid-stage, offering a deep bow to the house that was met with thunderous applause. We clapped, too. What a showman! I thought, before he even spoke a word. For the next hour, he dazzled us with a variety of acts – hypnosis, levitation, teleportation, mind reading – each trick more impressive than the last.

As the show drew to a close, he walked to the center of the stage and took a deep bow. “Thank you, thank you all! What a splendid audience you’ve been for this old showman! Alas, I fear we have almost come to our end...” He tipped his top hat, awaiting the boos and groans he knew would follow. “But not just yet! I wonder if you would indulge me in one more act before we part company!?” The cheers of the crowd gave him his answer, as if he didn’t already have us all in the palm of his hand. “Yes, indeed! I have one last feat in store ... one that will require a volunteer! Who among you will play assistant to your humble ringmaster!?”

Nearly every hand in the audience flew to the sky, and shouts of “Me! Me!” echoed through the tent. I nudged Annabeth gently and gave her a wink, prodding her to join the chorus with me. She smiled, her blue eyes sparkling as she raised her hand and played along. The ringmaster’s eyes scanned the crowd, savoring the cheers and cries. Before long, they came to rest on the seat next to mine and his lips parted in a devilish smile. “Yes! Yes! The lovely young woman with the purple brooch!”

Annabeth gave me a kiss before walking to the stage. Hawley spun her for the audience, making a grand show of there being no ropes, trap doors, or trickery. When he was through he backed away slowly, leaving her alone in the middle of the stage. “And now, my dear,” he said, raising his arms in the air, “walk with me in the shadows!”

His gloved hands glowed a fine green, and a soft mist rose from his fingertips. With a snap of his fingers, they both disappeared in a puff of smoke. The crowd gasped, and everyone sat up in their seats, myself among them. What a trick! I had never seen anything so authentic. The only sight on the stage was a thin wisp of purple smoke where Annabeth had been. Slowly, a human figure began to take shape, growing darker and darker, as if it was materializing from thin air. When the shadow was almost completely black, it began to spread its arms. Then, the lights rose and the smoke abruptly parted, revealing the figure of Ivor Hawley, standing with arms outstretched, his cane in one hand, his top hat in the other.

Whistles and cheers erupted from the crowd as the ringmaster took a deep bow. He raised his head slowly and looked directly at me, the smile returning to his face. As I stared into those eyes, my heart skipped a beat. As my smile began to fade and my hands ceased clapping, he spared me a quick wink and the lights went out abruptly, leaving only the sounds of the cheering crowd in the darkness.

For the longest time, I sat waiting ... waiting for the lights to return, waiting for my Annabeth to wander back to me. "What a story we will tell our friends back home!" she would say. I must have sat for minutes, replaying that image in my mind. Before I realized it, the crowd was gone and I was sitting alone in the tent, the other seats empty, the stage being disassembled before me. She must be backstage, waiting for me, I thought.

I asked several of the workers where I would be able to find her. Most didn't answer me, walking by as if they didn't hear a word. The few who acknowledged my queries met me with head shakes and simple shrugs.

Upon leaving the tent, I accosted a squat, ugly man in purple pinstripes and a bowtie. He was closing down the side booths when I demanded his name. "Name's McCadish," he said in a thick, Irish brogue. "You'd best be on yer way. Show's over." I demanded that he take me to see the ringmaster immediately. "You sure you wanna do that? Mr. Hawley don't like to be disturbed after the show." I insisted, threatening to come back with the sheriff if he did not comply. With a roll of his eyes he led me through the fairground to a small tent. Just outside, Hawley stood, his back to us.

"I'm afraid, sir, you will find the circus closed for business," he said, without turning.

"Where is my wife?" I asked, the last of my calm dissipating.

"You mean the lovely girl who assisted me with my grand finale?" he said, slowly turning to face me. "I'm sure I don't know. She left shortly after the show ended ... off to find you, I imagine." He came closer and put a gloved hand on my shoulder. "You'd better hurry off now," he said, his voice barely a whisper in my ear, "before you miss her."

They must have done something to me, because I can only remember bits and pieces after that. I remember his eyes, those pale green eyes ... they danced like fire. I remember walking down the road in the moonlight ... some flashes of trees. I'm sorry I can't be more descriptive

...

"And then you ... woke up in your hotel room and couldn't remember how you got there?" Tommy Harden asked, his eyebrow arching upward. He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat, stifling a yawn. The sun had barely risen, and it was way too early for this. Most of the crazy stories didn't start popping up until after noon, and they almost always seemed to land in his lap. Sure enough, shortly after he had arrived to relieve Clyde Owens of his overnight post, there came a furious knock at the office door.

"That's right ... just like I told you," said the man in the chair. He ran his fingers nervously through his hair as he shuffled in his seat. "She was gone. Everything was gone ... her clothes, her personal effects, everything."

"Yet all of your items remained in the room?" Tommy spared a sideways glance at Clyde, getting only a shrug in return. Part of him thought Clyde had stayed just for the entertainment value.

"Yes, yes. Everything was there. I see the way you two are looking at each other, Deputy, and I know how this sounds."

"Mister, I don't know that you do."

"No! Deputy, please listen!" the man pleaded. "There's something going on out there! That Hawley fellow ... if you had seen the way -"

"Right!" Owens interrupted, taking a quick sip from his flask as he leaned back in his chair. "Let's see if we got this straight. The circus kidnapped yer wife with a magic trick and stole all of her belongings out of your room before you magically got back to it. Oh, and of course they left all your stuff behind, including a gold watch and a Colt revolver that're worth more than everything in this whole damned office!" He mopped his brow with a handkerchief and turned his glance to Tommy. "Let's put an end to this one now, Harden - the poor bastard's wife probably just ran out on him!"

"My Annabeth would never!"

Clyde waved him off with a grunt. "'Bout time you found out life ain't fair, kid! There was this girl in Tulsa once -"

"Clyde, that's enough," Tommy said, trying to keep his voice level.

"Her name was Maribelle, and she -"

"Go home, Clyde."

"Oh, come on, Harden -"

"Go ... home."

Clyde lurched to his feet and grabbed his coat with an angry flourish. "You can't believe a word of this - what is it you Irishmen call it again? - blarney? Yeah, that's what this is, a bunch of -"

"Out."

Red faced, Clyde slowly lowered his eyes from Tommy's gaze and lumbered out the door, slamming it shut behind him.

"Sorry about that," Tommy said, shaking his head and turning back to the man in the chair. "That one can hold his liquor, but his tongue's a whole 'nother story. And you know that was ... ah ... quite a tale you just told us."

"I know," the man said, nodding his head reluctantly. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as if collecting himself. He pursed his lips and looked up at Tommy, his eyes much more calm than before. "Deputy please, I know how it sounds. I know how I sound, but you must believe me. There is something going on at that circus. Please ... just have a look around. See for yourself."

Tommy slowly drained the last of his coffee and took a quick measure of the situation. As unbelievable as this man's story was, it did have a certain ring of desperation to it, not to mention an incredible amount of detail for something made up in the moment. Maybe it was too crazy to be true, but he had seen plenty of things that would have been too crazy to be true before he found his way to Gomorra and a lawman's badge. "Can you describe her for me?" he asked finally, resigning himself to a busy morning.

"I can do better than that, Deputy," replied the man, reaching into his coat pocket. He produced a folded picture and opened it gently, taking a moment to look at the likeness before handing it over. "Beautiful, isn't she?"

"That she is," Tommy replied, as he studied the photograph. He stood and checked his pocket watch. "Alright," he said, trying to sound upbeat, "let's wake up the sheriff."

Dave Montreal stopped for a moment and raised his black Stetson to wipe the sweat from his brow. He stood on a small patch of hill overlooking the tents and carriages spread out below. Just when he

thought he might get his first moment's peace of the morning, the smooth voice of Ivor Hawley sounded behind him.

"I trust you are satisfied now, Sheriff?"

Dave turned to see Hawley striding up to meet him, his purple coattails dancing in the wind. If being woken up at the crack of dawn and dragged into a wild goose chase wasn't bad enough, having to deal with Hawley's endless grinning and chiding manner would likely do him in.

"It would appear so," Dave replied, taking a quick sip from his canteen. Indeed, he and a few of his deputies had been over every inch of the circus grounds, finding nothing out of the ordinary, if there was such a thing as "ordinary" in this place.

Hawley stopped and stood next to him, his already tall frame exaggerated by thick-soled shoes and a black top hat. "That poor fellow!" he said, looking down the small hill and shaking his head slightly. "I do wish I could be of more help to you, Sheriff."

Just below them, Tommy Harden stood, one arm draped across the chest of the man who had brought them here. At first he had been docile enough, accompanying Dave and his posse without a fuss, but as the morning wore on, he became more erratic. Despite Dave's warning to stay quiet and let them do their job, the man had nearly broken down on several occasions, going so far as to take a wild swing at the ringmaster before Harden restrained him.

"You've done more than enough, under the circumstances," Dave replied. In truth, just standing next to the ringmaster made Dave uneasy, but while there was a certain oddity to Hawley's manner, there was nothing criminal going on here. If anything, Hawley had been more than accommodating with all of his requests, as well as the search itself.

Dave started back down the hill and Hawley followed, letting his cane swing in a small arc as he moved. At the base of the hill, they passed a group of performers, each dressed in checkered costumes of purple, pink, and yellow. They juggled red balls slowly in unison, first with two and then three. Another clown stood in front of them, dressed more simply in faded patchwork pants, a plaid shirt, and a small brown hat. He made slow, exaggerated motions, as if to show the rest the correct form. The leader turned as Ivor passed, revealing a face painted with arched eyebrows, circular red lips, and deep black circles under his eyes. He tipped his hat to the ringmaster.

"Excellent form, Leonardo!" said Ivor, tipping his hat in return. "The newest additions to my family!" he said, turning his attention back to Dave. "They are learning fast."

"Your family?" Dave asked.

"Oh, yes!" Hawley replied proudly. "The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb, Sheriff. I care for my people the way any father would for his children, no matter how they found their way to me."

Dave nodded and offered a quick smile. Though their morning search had turned up nothing, it had also done little to allay his growing uneasiness with the ringmaster and his "children".

* * *

The man didn't say a word as the sheriff silently passed him to leave, nor did he raise his eyes as Ivor Hawley approached. Still locked in Harden's grasp, he continued to heed the sheriff's warnings.

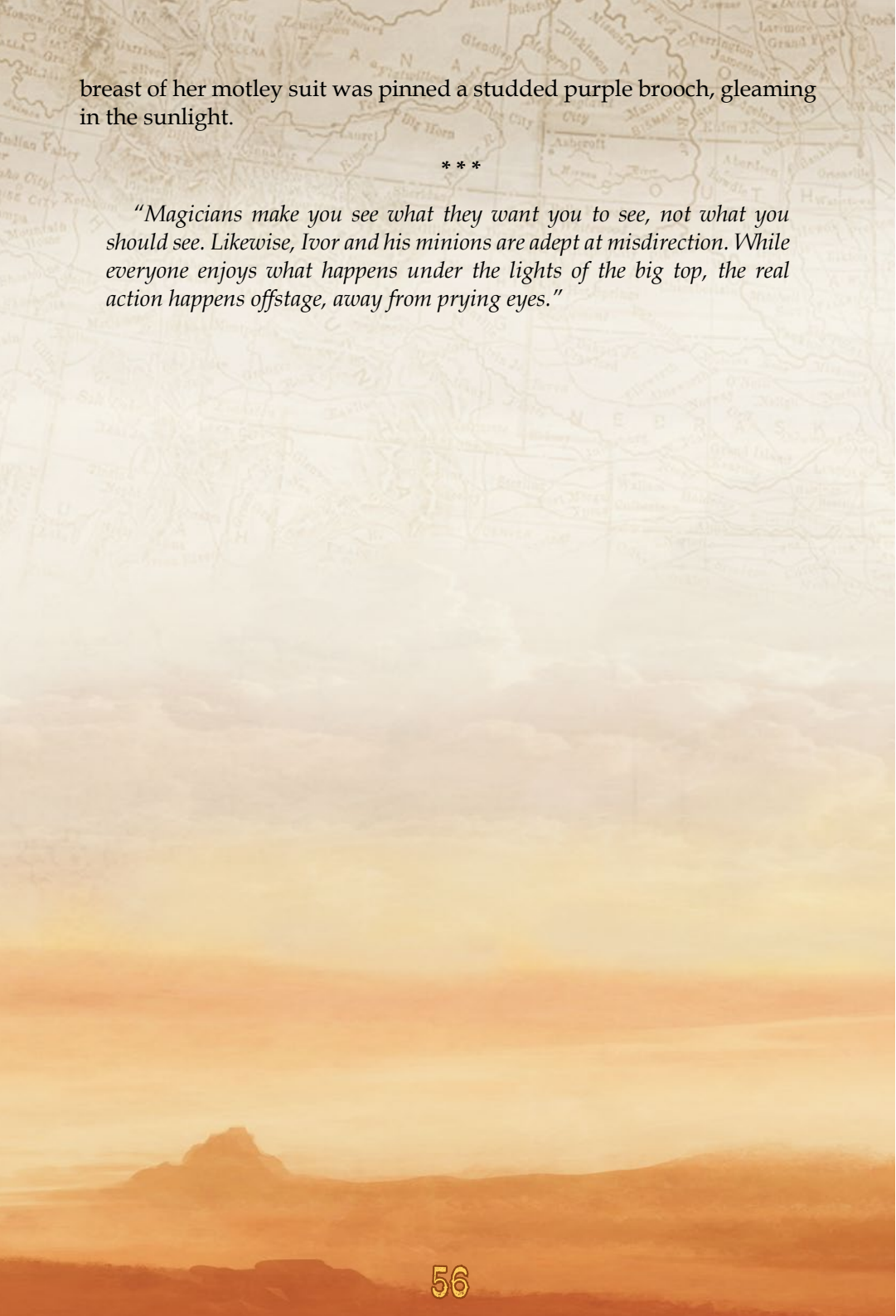
"I'm truly sorry that your search didn't bear more fruitful results, my friend," the ringmaster said, taking off one white glove and laying his hand gingerly on the man's shoulder. "She was a beautiful woman, and I sincerely hope you find her." As he pulled away, Hawley smiled and gently brushed the man's neck with his ring finger.

With that, the man struggled to free himself. "You son of a -" he began, before a sharp, burning sensation in his neck cut him off in surprise. The feeling swelled in his skin, quickly rushing over his body. Beads of sweat began to form on his brow, and a sudden, hacking cough doubled him over as the deputy struggled to hold him.

"Alright boyo, that's enough for one day," Harden said. "I've got a place where you can rest awhile back at the office." He adjusted his grip and turned to follow Dave from the grounds. The man shivered and shook, his feet kicking up patches of dirt and dust as he struggled.

The clowns ceased their juggling as Harden dragged the man past them. Their small, red practice balls fell from the air in unison as their heads turned, one by one, to follow him. Despite the fire rapidly spreading through his veins, a shiver ran through him as he met their unblinking stares.

Finally, his eyes fell with horror on the last performer in line, a woman. From behind its powdered makeup, a pair of familiar blue eyes stared back, swirling with a sadness that chilled him to the bone. On the left

The background of the page is a faded, sepia-toned map of the United States. Overlaid on the map is a soft, warm sunset or sunrise scene with orange and yellow light rays filtering through a layer of clouds. The horizon line is visible at the bottom of the page.

breast of her motley suit was pinned a studded purple brooch, gleaming in the sunlight.

* * *

“Magicians make you see what they want you to see, not what you should see. Likewise, Ivor and his minions are adept at misdirection. While everyone enjoys what happens under the lights of the big top, the real action happens offstage, away from prying eyes.”

When the Lights Go Down

"Ladies and gentlemen ... the ever-amazing Flying Popescus!" said Ivor Hawley as the twin aerialists finished their act, each bowing their heads and crossing their arms over their chests before the audience.

Once in the dressing room, they shed their performing bloomers and donned black unitards, keeping only their soft-soled slippers.

"Eszti, Ringmaster Hawley once more requests a body – living this time," Etilka said to her sister.

" 'Living'. Pah. As if what these fools have could be called 'life'," Eszti said.

Etilka produced a deck of cards from her sleeve, fanning them out in front of her twin. With a scissor grip, Eszti plucked two cards and flicked one of them back at Etilka who caught it even as her other hand held the remaining cards. She then replaced the deck back in the sleeve's modified hideout holster. The twins stepped outside the tent, bowed their heads, each still holding their card, and crossed their arms over their chest. One step forward into the darkness ...

... and into one of Gomorra's many alleyways. Most of the town's residents were still at the circus. Nonetheless, a few errant drunkards staggered from one saloon to the next, and a few idealistic lovers strolled away the evening. Etilka continued to embrace the shadows, guided towards a nearby casino by the boisterous notes from an out-of-tune piano. Cash-bereft gamblers, lost in remorseful clouds of 'shoulda, woulda, coulda' made for easy targets.

A nightjar's churring trill indicated that Eszti had positioned herself behind one of the casino's awning posts. Etilka waited as figures flitted past in pairs or small groups. At last an owl hoot indicated that Eszti had spotted the twin's quarry.

"Three Gomorra, Two Gomorra," Etilka counted calmly. She readied a throwing knife. At "one Gomorra" a tall man in a duster and Stetson passed across the alleyway.

Etilka threw the knife, hitting the man pommel first and sending him reeling. Eszti sprang out of the darkness and whacked him with her own knife hilt. Each twin slung one of the man's limp arms around her

shoulder. No spells this time; they would have to lug their victim back to the circus tents through the dark alleys of the town.

* * *

Despite the late hour, the oil lamp still glowed from Ivor Hawley's quarters. As the trio rounded the corner, Kevin Wainwright rose from his stool and scooted inside the tent. Once inside, the twins dropped the now stirring prisoner at Ivor's feet.

Ivor looked down at the man. "Healthy. For now. Ladies, you have indeed served us well this night."

"Until the end of days we serve," Etilka sang in return. "We shall scourge the world of human wickedness." Together, they bowed their heads and crossed their arms over their chests as Ivor lightly applauded their work ... another successful night of service to the Fourth Ring.

* * *

"But it's not just the people of Gomorra. The pestilence also affects the livestock. Morgan Cattle Company recently got hit hard," said Valeria.

"But how can anyone get out there? it's nearly out to the Maze itself?"

"Ivor sends his lackey, Kevin. And no, that little scoundrel doesn't walk. Ivor has ways of getting others to where they need to go."

Blight Serum

"Kevin ..." Ivor Hawley said.

On cue, his diminutive assistant strode through the tent flaps. "Yes, Ringmaster," Kevin squeaked.

Ivor held out two small vials of reddish liquid. "Per our earlier discussion, please see that these get delivered to the Blake Ranch. Now, be on your way."

"Indeed, Ringmaster. It shall be a most remarkable delivery." He bowed before disappearing through the tent's entrance.

* * *

Howard Aswell answered the knock at the ranch house door. He peered out through the window. "Who's there?"

Kevin stepped inside and brushed past, ignoring the query. He reached into his pocket and proffered a bottle to a tall, elegantly dressed man seated at the table in the center of the room. "Mr. Archer, I thought I might find you here at cards. Ringmaster Hawley sends his compliments."

Steele Archer held the bottle up to the wall lantern and examined the copper tinted liquor contained within. "Kentucky Bourbon," he said. "Tell the Ringmaster that I am most impressed." He bent down and whispered, "How in the world did you find me here?"

Kevin responded in a plain tone. "Magic. And by the by, this is a drink meant for sharing. You'll receive your usual payment in the morning." Kevin gave a cheery wave as he half-rolled, half-ambled out the door into the night.

* * *

To make his real delivery, Kevin needed to go where there wasn't any magic to guide him. Lowing cattle and the distinct smell of manure would have to suffice. Both indicated that Morgan Cattle Company's main herd had settled in for the night. Cattle and man ignored each other as Kevin made his way to the stock pond. Kneeling down, he poured the contents of the other vial into the water.



"Perfect!" Closing his good eye, he focused, took a single step into the shadows, and once again appeared in front of Ivor Hawley. "All is done as you wished, Ringmaster."

* * *

Jarrett Blake rode through the chaparral scrub towards the meadow where the cattle had been grazing. For the last week, the cowhands refused to go anywhere near the area. Buzzards flew languid circles as he passed the deserted line cabin.

He coughed, gagging from the stench as he pulled a bandana across his nose and mouth. Topping a ridge, he spurred his horse to investigate the horrors below.

His eyes widened at the sight. Dozens of dead cattle lay festering across the meadow. A bovine pestilence! Jarrett had seen it wipe out entire herds of cattle before, but never with such speed. By the look of it, some of the carcasses had been sitting for months, but that was impossible. Whirling his horse around, he set off back towards the ranch headquarters to prepare for the longer ride to Gomorra and the Morgan Research Institute. Morgan's scientists would certainly have some knowledge to focus on this scourge. He turned for one final look. Who could have orchestrated such a horrific scene?

* * *

"What actually goes on within the Sanatorium?"

"I don't know. I don't want to know. But we HAVE to know..."

Checking In

"I am very sorry to keep you waiting!" Karl Odett closed the door to his office and hurried into the room, smoothing his ill-fitting green vest and willing his lips into the most caring smile he could manage. He smoothed his oily hair to the side with one damp palm and took a seat behind his desk. "How may I be of service, Mrs. ...?"

"Fisher," the woman started, her eyes pensive. "Mary Fisher." Her hands fidgeted nervously on her lap, and her face wore several creases of worry. "My husband has gone missing, and I was told that he might have been brought here. His name is Arthur ... Arthur Fisher."

"Oh, my, how terrible!" Odett steeped his fingers and leaned forward on the desk. "And what makes you think he is here at the Sanatorium?"

"He ... he ..." she began, tears welling in her eyes.

Odett plucked a slightly wrinkled white handkerchief from his breast pocket and handed it across the desk. "It's alright, ma'am. Take your time."

"Thank you," she said, dabbing under her eyes. "You are too kind." Composing herself, she continued. "He had the sickness ... the same as a lot of folks in town. I went to visit him at the tents last night and he was gone. Someone said he might have been brought here for treatment."

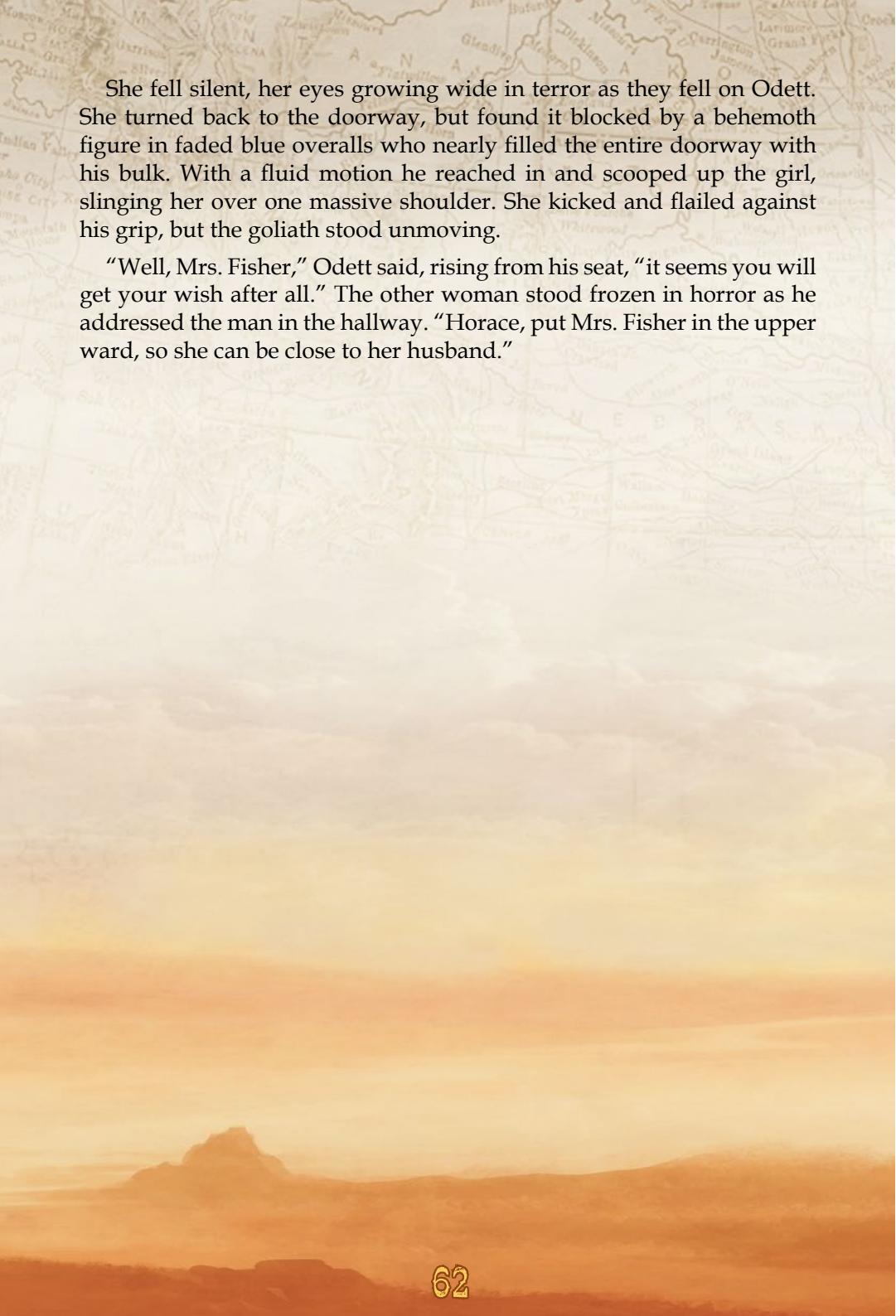
"Certainly possible. Our secluded location and clean air are just the thing to cleanse the body and spirit! But I am afraid your husband's name doesn't sound familiar."

"Could you please check ... just in case?"

"Of course!" Odett sighed under his breath as he reached into a desk drawer, pulling out the first papers he could find. The pages were blank but he studied them intently. "Hmmm ... there is no record of a Mr. Arthur Fisher here. Believe me, I know every patient that walks through these doors. I care for them as if they were my own, and each has a special place in my hear--"

Suddenly the door burst open behind them, and a ragged woman stumbled into the room. Her hair was a mess of tangles, and only a dirty blue hospital gown covered her lean frame. Her eyes darted around the room, falling on Mrs. Fisher first.

"Help me!" she shrieked. "Please ... you must help --"

The background of the page is a composite image. The top half features a faint, sepia-toned map of a region with various place names like 'HOGAN', 'Gladstone', 'Carrington', and 'Grand Forks'. The bottom half of the page shows a landscape at sunset or sunrise, with a large, dark, rocky peak in the foreground and a hazy, orange-tinted sky above it.

She fell silent, her eyes growing wide in terror as they fell on Odett. She turned back to the doorway, but found it blocked by a behemoth figure in faded blue overalls who nearly filled the entire doorway with his bulk. With a fluid motion he reached in and scooped up the girl, slinging her over one massive shoulder. She kicked and flailed against his grip, but the goliath stood unmoving.

“Well, Mrs. Fisher,” Odett said, rising from his seat, “it seems you will get your wish after all.” The other woman stood frozen in horror as he addressed the man in the hallway. “Horace, put Mrs. Fisher in the upper ward, so she can be close to her husband.”

Into the Darkness

Horace descended the dark stairs with unexpected grace, navigating each step quickly while keeping his cargo from jostling. He had made the trip so many times now that he didn't need the light.

Soon enough, however, he entered a small room and the light returned, emanating from a lantern hung on the wall. The space was new to the Sanatorium, hewn from the rock beneath its foundations to contain two items: a wooden cot and a large iron door.

Horace entered the space with his precious cargo, a frail-looking man wrapped in a white sheet. He was gaunt and pale, resting in Horace's enormous arms, limbs dangling. Open sores and scaly calluses speckled the man's skin; fevered sweat washed over gruesome fluids oozing from the deeper ones.

The man groaned awake as Horace gingerly laid him on the cot. "Am I dead yet?"

Horace looked down into the man's eyes, brushing away a wisp of hair threatening to obstruct them. "No," he sighed simply. "Death is not the end of this."

The man seemed disappointed but was far too weak to fully express it. "Where are you ... taking me?"

"To the darkness ... where you can rest."

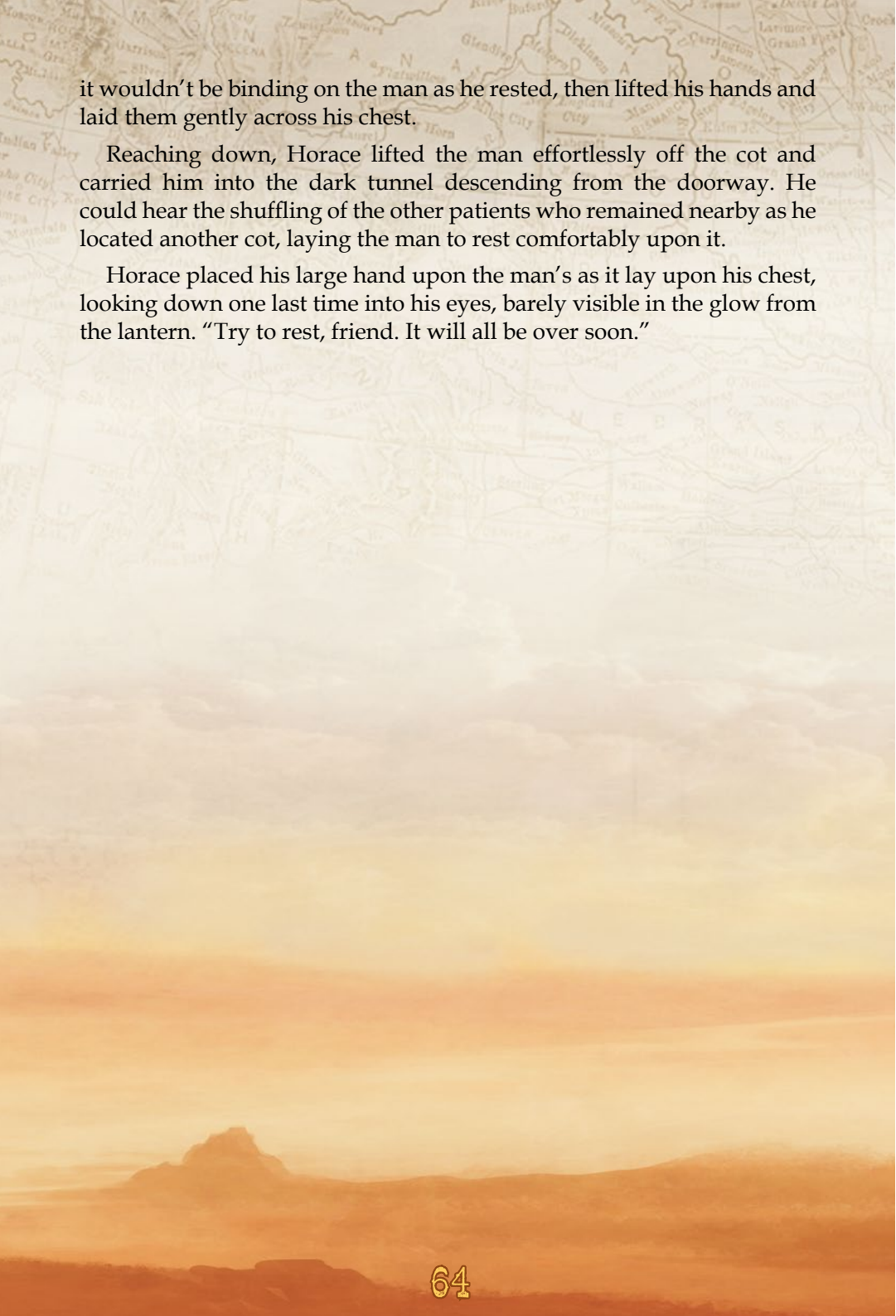
"Rest?" he wheezed. "I'm afraid ... I've given up ... on getting better."

"Better? No." Horace looked up and down the man's body with pity. "There is no 'better' ... only the darkness." He turned slowly to the iron door, sliding the pair of posts barring it shut. "You can wait there until it's finished ... until the master is ready."

The man let out a grunt as he used some of his precious energy reserves to turn his head toward the door. "Who? Odett?"

"No ... his master." Horace slid the tattered cloth around his neck up over his nose and mouth. He swung open the door as a wave of cold, damp air sprung forth, releasing an unholy stench. He winced slightly, but took comfort in knowing his patient would find it soothing.

Horace returned to the cot, leaning down for one final look. The man's eyes, the only part of him with any real life left, pleaded with Horace to end the suffering. The large man urged himself to finish the task, knowing the end of this trip would be just that. He adjusted the sheet so

A faint, light-colored map of the United States serves as the background for the top half of the page. It shows state boundaries and major cities, with a warm, golden-brown color palette.

it wouldn't be binding on the man as he rested, then lifted his hands and laid them gently across his chest.

Reaching down, Horace lifted the man effortlessly off the cot and carried him into the dark tunnel descending from the doorway. He could hear the shuffling of the other patients who remained nearby as he located another cot, laying the man to rest comfortably upon it.

Horace placed his large hand upon the man's as it lay upon his chest, looking down one last time into his eyes, barely visible in the glow from the lantern. "Try to rest, friend. It will all be over soon."

IVOR HAWLEY SETS HIS PLAN IN MOTION

An Evil Deed, Indeed

“Everyone but Pasteur, leave,” said Lillian Morgan.

Nobody ran, and nobody jostled. Nathan Shane spat into a spittoon near the door, which broke the soft flutter of hard leather soles on hardwood floor. Soon, the French biologist and the cattle baroness were alone in the room.

“The deed is simple enough. Lula sold a property to that ringmaster, Ivor. It’s fairly worthless property, and he overpaid for it. I don’t have time for Nathan and Warren to glean their aims, and somehow, I have a feeling they would come up empty. I need answers now, and of the people who could help me, you’ve got the best hands and you’re the most willing to assist with something you don’t fully understand.”

Louis raised an eyebrow, but still nodded. “If I can assist, I will. For the good of all the living.”

Lillian pointed to the liquor cabinet against the wall. “Open it. Grab the bottle of Night Train Reserve and pull.”

Pasteur moved to open the cabinet and saw the bottle near the front on the top shelf. He pulled, and with a soft clack, the entire inside of the cabinet moved forward. The bottles were all placed in slight recesses, so they didn’t spill. As he continued, the back panel of the cabinet passed the doors, and from beyond it a three-shelf rack of bottles, jars, and pots of various sizes emerged. Three shelves lined the other side as well. A wheel dropped down to support the revealed pharmacy. There was no dust to be seen, and Pasteur recognized this meant the supplies were used recently, and likely frequently.

Lillian pointed with one hand as the other tried to suppress a cough. “Dog’s eyes ... komodo scales ... owl liver extract ... elderberries ... black clover ... nitric acid ... and of course, witch hazel. Bring each bottle separately.” She took the thick clay crock that had been filled with soup earlier. “I’d normally use a brew for this, but I’m not up to leaving the room right now. So we’ll make an incense of it.”

After Pasteur brought the first bottle, she pointed to a pestle inside the 'normal' cabinet. Pasteur scooped it up and brought it with the second bottle. Lillian had already extracted the sticky contents into the crock. Pasteur looked at the shriveled and bruised orbs with scientific detachment.

He spoke thoughtfully as he watched her work. "A sympathetic connection ..."

Lillian silenced him with a snap of her fingers. "It's hard enough without someone else's words around. I know this is fascinating to you, but keep those thoughts inside your head." Lillian spoke a word she rarely offered with earnestness to anyone, but Louis Pasteur was a man of great reputation and skill. "Please."

Pasteur nodded and continued ferrying bottles to and from the cabinet. Lillian took each, added its contribution, and mashed the crock's contents with the pestle. Pasteur returned the last bottle and looked back to Lillian. She pointed to the bottom shelf.

"Infused ghost rock dust ... gently."

He reached precisely, taking the jar and moving it with smooth dexterity from the shelf to Lillian. Lillian tried to reach into the jar with her soup spoon, but Pasteur gently took hold of her shivering hand. "How much, Madame?"

Lillian released the spoon with a sigh of relief. "One ounce."

Pasteur measured out the powder deliberately, then closed and returned the jar. Lillian took a match from the side table.

"Have a seat, doctor. You can watch from the outside, but the show is just for me."

He nodded and took Warren's seat. Lillian touched the match to the powder, then picked up the deed.

"Hound's eye ... cry of night ... bitter lye bring me sight!" At the last word, the powder ignited.

From Louis Pasteur's vantage, a cloud of dark vapor surrounded Lillian. It suffused the air with a noxious, acrid smell.

From Lillian's vantage, the world vanished as her mind soared into the void beyond.

* * *

A dusky prairie was revealed, and on it stood a wreck of a human. Blood oozed from pores, pus dripped from every orifice, and skin hung loosely on bone. The skin was a mottled purple, the hair was stringy and grey, and the bones sharp and twisted. But it seemed to stand with pride, and it snarled at the sky.

“I consume thee!”

The skin bolted and jerked as muscles boiled out from within. Bodily fluids splattered the grass, and the human grew taller. Clothes materialized out from nowhere – the garb of a circus ringmaster. Ivor Hawley stood proudly, and his body seemed to grow larger every second as it fed on the energy of the diseased blood and mucus.

“I consume thee!”

At the edge of the prairie stood herds of cattle, birds and horses. Black lines, cables of thickened blood and ichor, shot from Hawley’s skin and speared the cattle, the birds, and the horses. They writhed, withered, and died. Hawley grew stronger, larger, and more terrible. He was now taller than any tree on Earth, and his eyes were on a set of structures at the edge of the prairie.

Gomorra, stood defiant yet ignorant of the giant lumbering toward it. At the close end stood the property Ivor had purchased. It resembled a large pustule, shivering with anticipation.

“I will consume thee!”

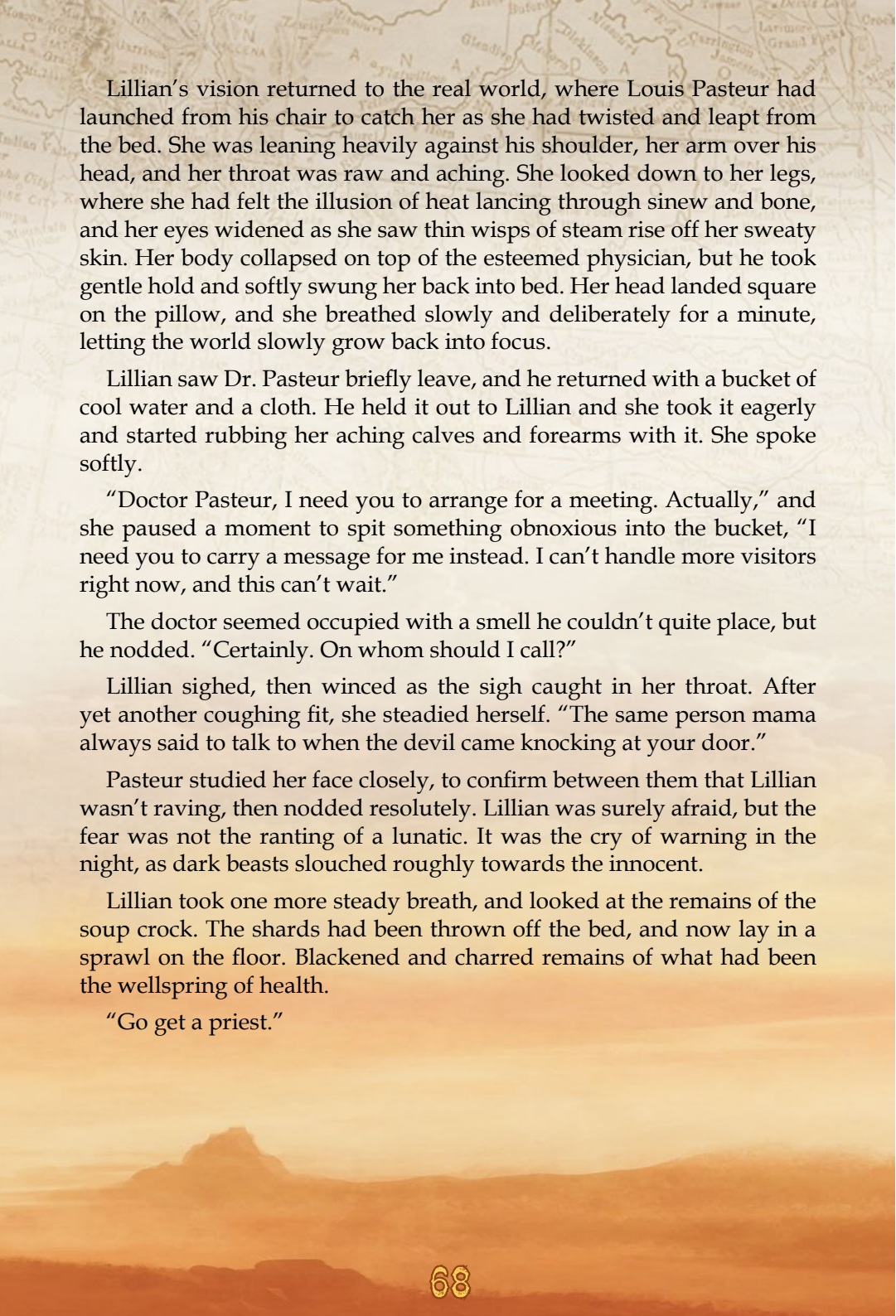
Ivor’s eyes were drawn to Lillian’s, even with the vaporous nature of the vision. But his eyes gleamed with thick silvery cataracts, and he pointed to Lillian’s lungs and the foul congestion within.

“I AM CONSUMING THEE!”

Instinctively, she turned to run and saw flames coming toward the prairie from the other direction. Off in the distance, the clang of hot iron rang through the air, a sulfurous fume stung her nose and eyes, and off towards the mountains at the far range of vision ...

She blinked amidst the smoke and flame. It wasn’t a mountain she saw off in the distance. It was a massive hoof ... a cloven hoof, black as coal, standing at the edge of vision. Lillian’s eyes tracked upwards to the leg, but her vision spiraled into blackness as the flames speared into her limbs.

* * *

A faint, sepia-toned map of Europe serves as the background for the top half of the page. It shows various countries and cities, including London, Paris, Berlin, and Rome, with a network of lines representing rivers and roads.

Lillian's vision returned to the real world, where Louis Pasteur had launched from his chair to catch her as she had twisted and leapt from the bed. She was leaning heavily against his shoulder, her arm over his head, and her throat was raw and aching. She looked down to her legs, where she had felt the illusion of heat lancing through sinew and bone, and her eyes widened as she saw thin wisps of steam rise off her sweaty skin. Her body collapsed on top of the esteemed physician, but he took gentle hold and softly swung her back into bed. Her head landed square on the pillow, and she breathed slowly and deliberately for a minute, letting the world slowly grow back into focus.

Lillian saw Dr. Pasteur briefly leave, and he returned with a bucket of cool water and a cloth. He held it out to Lillian and she took it eagerly and started rubbing her aching calves and forearms with it. She spoke softly.

"Doctor Pasteur, I need you to arrange for a meeting. Actually," and she paused a moment to spit something obnoxious into the bucket, "I need you to carry a message for me instead. I can't handle more visitors right now, and this can't wait."

The doctor seemed occupied with a smell he couldn't quite place, but he nodded. "Certainly. On whom should I call?"

Lillian sighed, then winced as the sigh caught in her throat. After yet another coughing fit, she steadied herself. "The same person mama always said to talk to when the devil came knocking at your door."

Pasteur studied her face closely, to confirm between them that Lillian wasn't raving, then nodded resolutely. Lillian was surely afraid, but the fear was not the ranting of a lunatic. It was the cry of warning in the night, as dark beasts slouched roughly towards the innocent.

Lillian took one more steady breath, and looked at the remains of the soup crock. The shards had been thrown off the bed, and now lay in a sprawl on the floor. Blackened and charred remains of what had been the wellspring of health.

"Go get a priest."

Bright Light, Dark Heart

Kevin Wainwright entered Ivor Hawley's private tent to find him seated at his desk. Kevin wrung his hands, as he knew Ivor's plans were coming to a crescendo ... a violent, bloody crescendo.

"Sir?"

Ivor responded by ringing a small bell on the desk with his ebony walking stick. The dull, low tone rippled away from the tent and out into the world. Kevin let out a slow breath. He knew who the bell summoned, and despite the many times they'd met, he'd never felt comfortable. After a minute's awkward silence, the tent flap rustled open. Ivor beckoned to the second visitor.

"Come now, Tyx. There's work to be done."

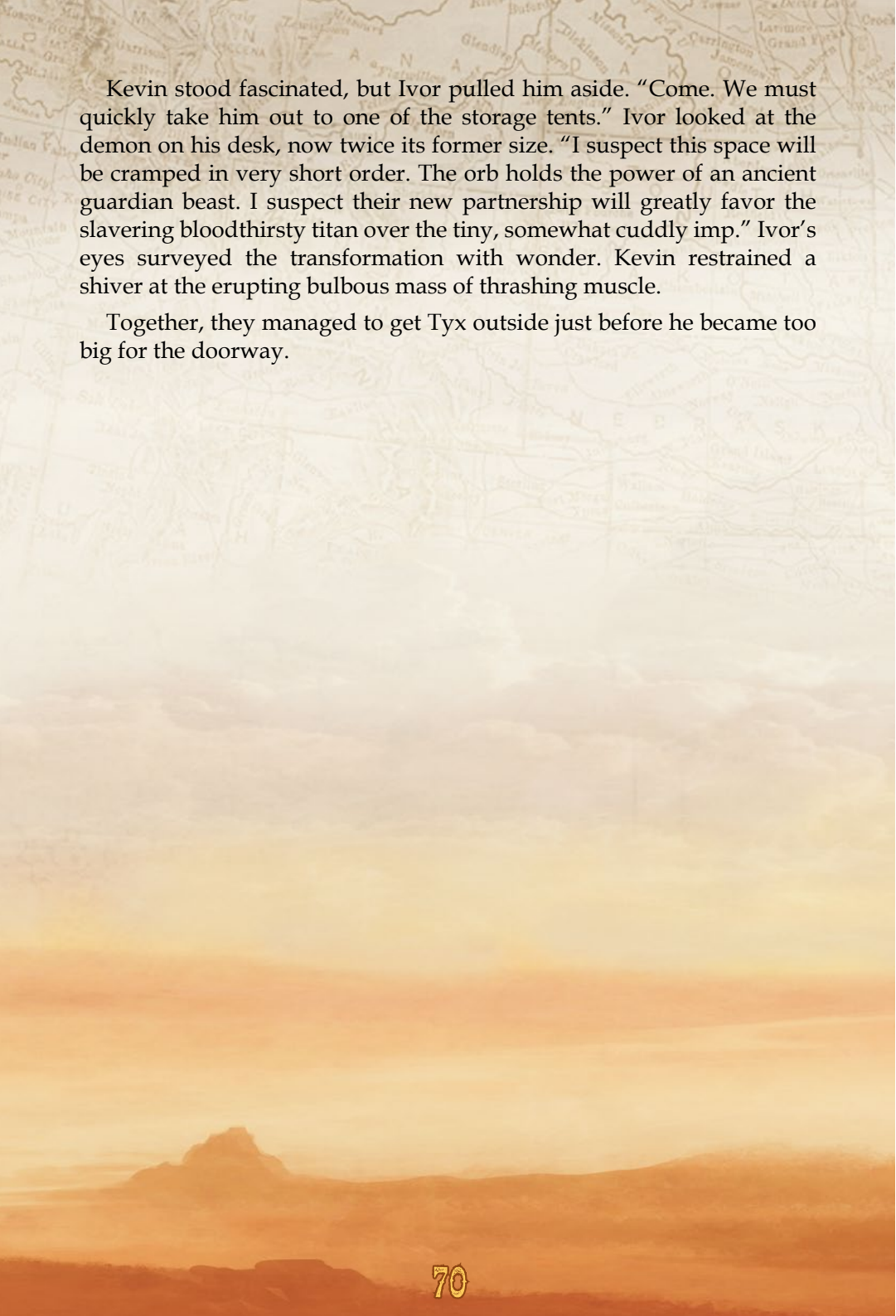
Tyxarglenak scuttled inside. His talons scratched the dirt, and he paused to sniff the air. Then, Tyx approached Ivor's desk and slowly clambered upwards. Once on top, he swiped at the air in front of Ivor and hissed.

Kevin watched the display with mixed confusion and contempt. "Is there something Tyx can do for you that I cannot?"

"I'm not sure you have the heart for this task, Kevin." Ivor smiled as he opened a desk drawer. The object within lit the tent with a wispy green glow. Ivor picked up the orb and held it up, staring with wonder at the faint image of the beast within it. "I've been staring at this for days, and its silence grows tiresome. I think it's time to let Tyx play with the ball."

Tyxarglenak clicked forward. Ivor touched the orb to the front of Tyx's chest. At once, the orb started to hum, with Tyx humming along in harmony. Green light flashed from the orb, and Tyx's glowing eyes turned from red to green. The orb sank into Tyx's chest, and gradually began pulsing with a regular rhythm. A heartbeat made visible.

Ivor rose. "Ah. Very pretty. But I think we can do better than a walking Christmas ornament." He placed his palm on the orb. Kevin noticed an open wound on Ivor's hand, slowly oozing dark green ichor. Ivor spoke a brief chant, and a jack of clubs momentarily appeared in his hand. Bolts of green lightning erupted from the orb and surrounded Tyx. Where they touched flesh, it bulged and swelled. Where it touched tooth and bone, it hardened and sharpened. The desk groaned under the additional weight.

The background of the page features a faint, sepia-toned map of a region with various place names like 'HOG', 'Gladstone', 'Carrington', and 'Grand Forks'. Below the map, there is a landscape illustration showing a large, dark, rocky mountain peak in the distance under a vast, orange-hued sky with soft, wispy clouds. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by oranges, yellows, and browns.

Kevin stood fascinated, but Ivor pulled him aside. "Come. We must quickly take him out to one of the storage tents." Ivor looked at the demon on his desk, now twice its former size. "I suspect this space will be cramped in very short order. The orb holds the power of an ancient guardian beast. I suspect their new partnership will greatly favor the slaving bloodthirsty titan over the tiny, somewhat cuddly imp." Ivor's eyes surveyed the transformation with wonder. Kevin restrained a shiver at the erupting bulbous mass of thrashing muscle.

Together, they managed to get Tyx outside just before he became too big for the doorway.

The Curtain Rises

Abram Grothe strode toward the Fourth Ring's tents, the mid-afternoon sun creating beads of sweat on his face. Recent insight into the disease plaguing Gomorra showed that the Ringmaster was responsible. When Valeria Batten came forward to say he was also responsible for murder, he decided it was past time to put a stop to them. "Everyone ready?" Abram asked.

"Let's bring this clown down," Lucy said, flanking Abram's right. Wendy, standing to his left, nodded.

Gang Yi, Drew Beauman, and Deborah West followed, completing the posse. The most healthy and able of those available, each with their own talents and gifts.

The group moved cautiously into the tent. It was empty, the barren stands surrounding an open dirt ring. "Ivor Hawley," Abram shouted. "You're wanted for the murder of Richard Slavin! Come out with your hands up!"

Crooked laughter echoed in response, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. "Is it showtime already? I was certain we had another few hours."

Gang Yi pushed past the others. "Show yourself, you coward!" he said.

"Tsk, ts. Where's your sense of drama, boy?" Ivor Hawley stepped into the circle through the rear entrance. "Step right up, come one, come all! Witness wonders like you've never seen!"

Gang Yi drew his pistol and looked to Abram, who nodded his assent. As he rushed forward to make the arrest, Hawley raised a single hand with lightning speed, wrapping his fingers firmly around the deputy's throat and lifting him off the ground.

The others drew their weapons as the ringmaster's form mutated into a dark shadow of the gregarious showman they'd all seen before. His appearance was no longer human. Unnatural, golden eyes glimmered; his face wrinkled, skin dripping as wax melting from a candle. A smile of sharp, rotted teeth mocked the posse who stood in terror.

"What in tarnation?" Lucy Clover breathed.

Wendy stepped backward, training her shotgun on Hawley. Even Deborah, blind as she was, felt the fear pour over her from Ivor's direction.

"Now there's the drama I was hoping for. Ladies and gentlemen! Prepare to be dazzled!" Ivor Hawley cackled through decayed teeth. He turned his attention back to Gang Yi, who struggled to free himself from the monster's grasp.

Gang Yi coughed and choked, gasping for air. He looked back at Abram, fear crossing his eyes like the Sheriff had never seen.

"Hawley, stop this! Now!" Abram said.

"Alas, Sheriff. The show must go on," Hawley said, intently focused on the weakening man in his hand. Gang Yi howled in pain. Onyx veins popped from his skin, crawling from the place where Ivor held him fast. His flesh bubbled with boils, some erupting into painful sores. "Abram—" he managed to spit out before his eyes rolled back into his head. All that followed was weak grumbles and growls, spittle dripping from his lips as the ringmaster dropped him to the ground.

"Oh my," Hawley said, horrific laughter escaping from behind those sharp teeth.

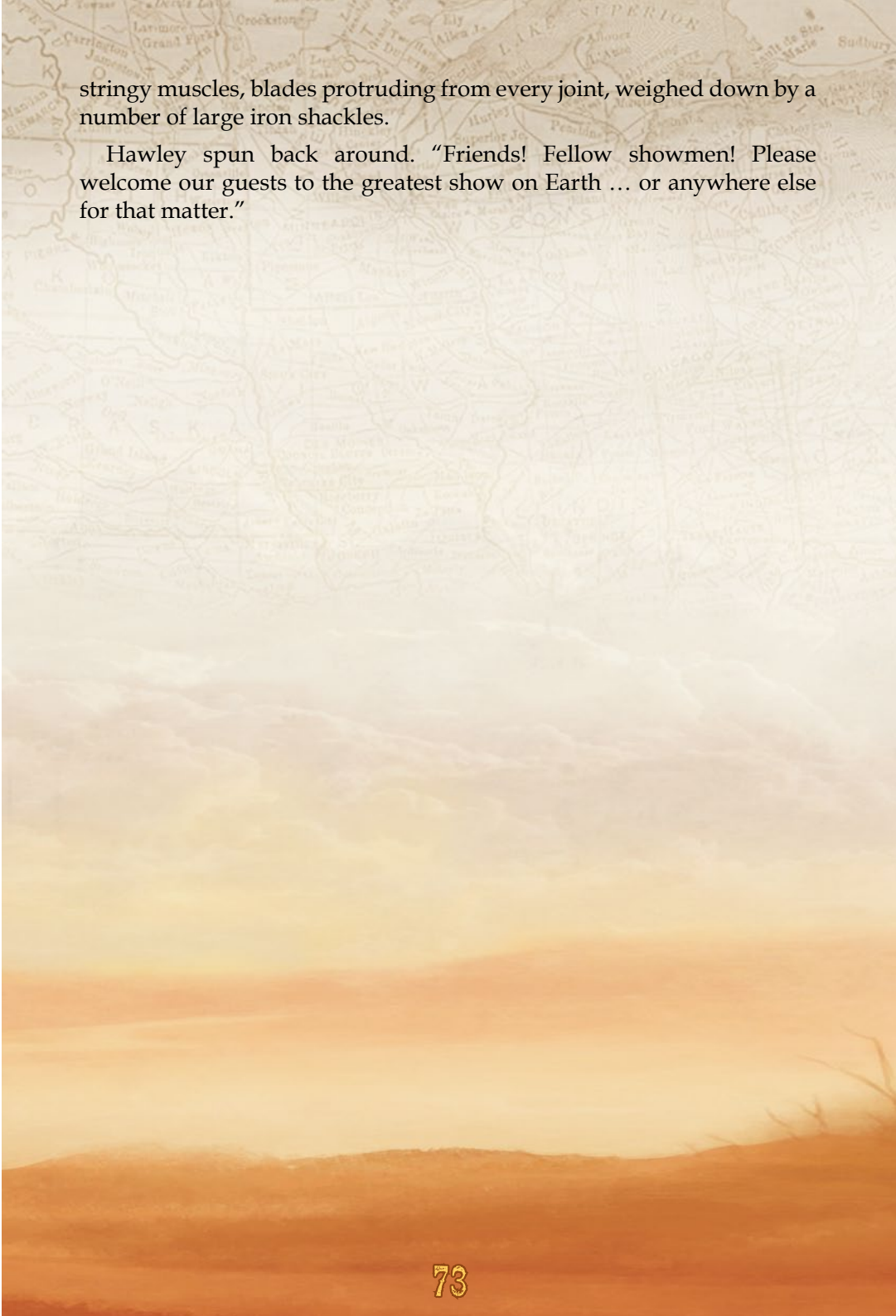
Abram's eyes widened. Clutching Evanor's hilt, he charged forward, only to slam into the air around Hawley like it was the adobe brick of the Gomorra Parish.

"Sheriff Grothe, as I recall, you attended our opening show. You should know you can't change the natural ebbs and flows of a command performance. The climax must be reached naturally. The main event shall come. But! Before that, perhaps a side show? Something to astound and dazzle you!"

Abram pushed, but to no avail. He couldn't press forward, only watch in horror at what followed. Hawley spun around toward the back entrance. "My family! The time has come to unveil our latest attractions!"

Shadows moved to either side of Abram. Clowns and horrors alike flooded in through the back flap. One by one they cut the ropes holding the back of the tent up. A large tarp cascaded toward the ground to reveal a pair of creatures cast from Hell itself.

The largest loomed before them, almost as large as the tent itself, with burning red eyes, gaping jaw, and horned face. The beast roared, its foul breath pungent even from Abram's distance. Twisted clowns rushed forward just behind it, followed by the second creature. It bulged with

The background of the page is a composite image. The top half features a faded, sepia-toned map of the Great Lakes region, showing the five lakes (Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario) and surrounding landmasses. The bottom half of the page shows a landscape with rolling hills under a warm, orange-hued sky, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall color palette is warm and historical.

stringy muscles, blades protruding from every joint, weighed down by a number of large iron shackles.

Hawley spun back around. "Friends! Fellow showmen! Please welcome our guests to the greatest show on Earth ... or anywhere else for that matter."

Showboating

The sky was choked out by thick, oily black smoke, highlighted in brilliant orange by rising flame. All around were the wails of burning Ghost Rock and the incoherent gibbering of the blighted as they rampaged hither and yon. The town's living were now holed up in the safest places they could find, hoping for a miracle to save them before they were claimed by the infected or the flames.

Even Nicodemus Whateley was hoping for divine intervention. Ivor could see it in the man's haggard, desperate face gazing down at him from the second-story window of the mayor's office as the blighted worked to tear down the door keeping them from him. Although Ivor doubted that slimy warlock was praying to the same God as everyone else, the answer would be the same.

"Well, he was right," Ivor thought. "We certainly did bump into each other again." He paused to smile at Whateley, removing his top hat and bowing low, as if accepting the thunderous applause of an unseen audience. He rose again to wave his hands dramatically at the burning carnage all around, displaying his handiwork, demanding another look at the chaos. He returned to stare at Nicodemus again, asking in his head, "Isn't it wonderful?"

"The best monster with the best family won," the monstrous ringmaster thought as he flourished his top hat back onto his head. He turned his back to the mayor, satisfied that the army of infected would get to him in time.

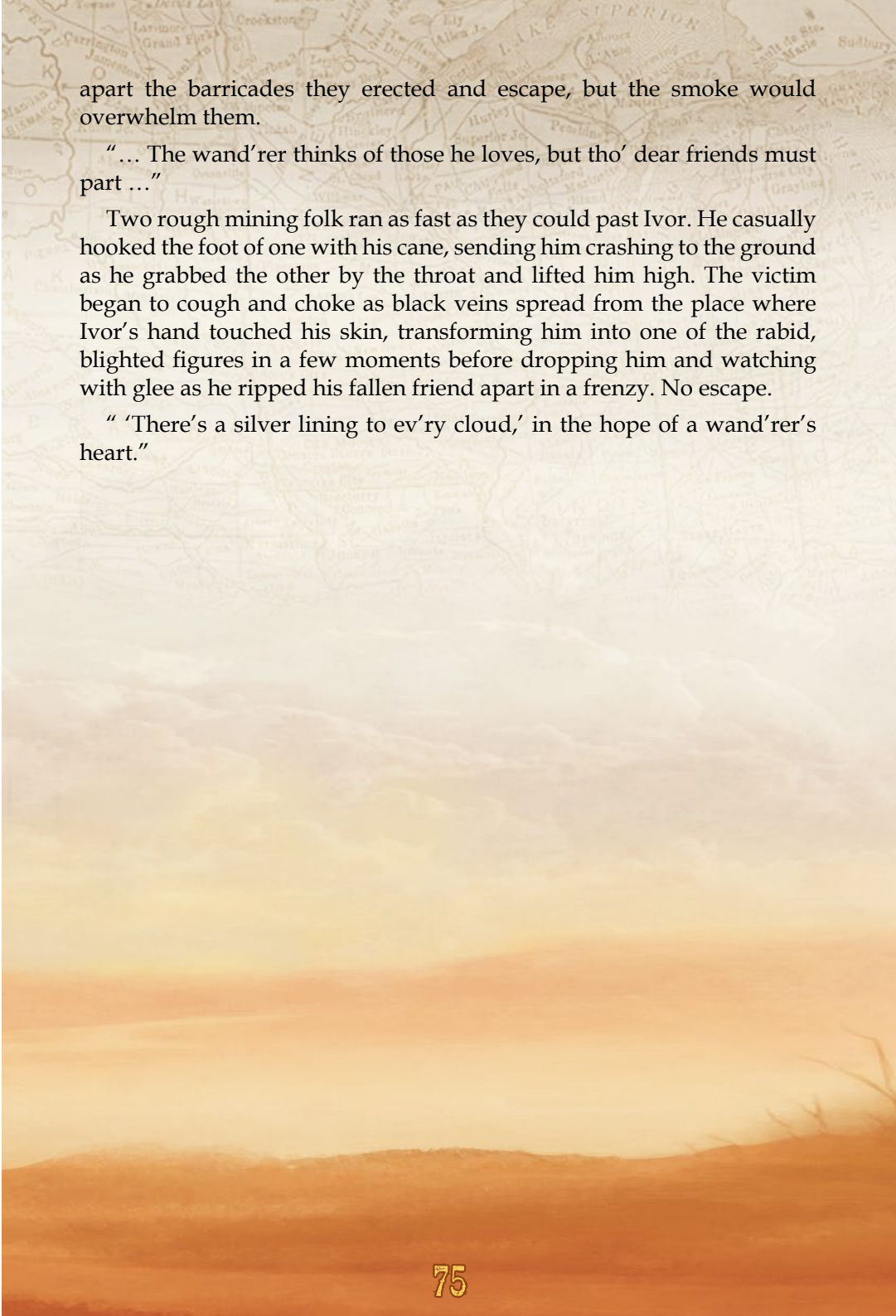
"It was fun for a spell, pulling the wool down over these fools," he thought as he surveyed the scene once more. "But this feels much more like home. As a matter of fact, it reminds me of a song ..." He spun his cane, grabbed it with both hands, and began to bob back and forth to the beat.

"At home, sweet home! back to the dear old home! ..."

Andrew Burton screamed in vain as three of the Blighted caught up with him, dragging him to the ground, clawing at his face and arms while screaming incoherently.

"... To find it bright and cheerful; Why did I wish to roam? ..."

Pearly's Palace erupted into a fireball the moment the flames reached the basement moonshine stash. Pearly and Genesee Gina tried to tear



apart the barricades they erected and escape, but the smoke would overwhelm them.

“... The wand’rer thinks of those he loves, but tho’ dear friends must part ...”

Two rough mining folk ran as fast as they could past Ivor. He casually hooked the foot of one with his cane, sending him crashing to the ground as he grabbed the other by the throat and lifted him high. The victim began to cough and choke as black veins spread from the place where Ivor’s hand touched his skin, transforming him into one of the rabid, blighted figures in a few moments before dropping him and watching with glee as he ripped his fallen friend apart in a frenzy. No escape.

“ ‘There’s a silver lining to ev’ry cloud,’ in the hope of a wand’rer’s heart.”

CODA

De Annulosysteriis

"It's one of three volumes," Valeria explained, pointing to the tome that lay open on the sheriff's desk. "This is the first one, and each is over three hundred years old. Hawley had us buy it off a collector in Virginia. She said she had the others, but at the time, we thought it a waste. It took me months to begin a translation and I had to start anew several times because Kahler intermingled at least four different languages. I mean most of it's gibberish, just the ravings of a lunatic. But now that we've seen –" She winced slightly at the memory. "– what we've seen ... I'm sure of it. It's all about the Fourth Ring. This book predicted this. I don't know how, but it did, and –"

"And the other two predict something else," Abram finished. "Hawley said this wasn't over. He said there was more, which is why we have to go."

Wendy stood across from him, arms folded, brow furrowed as she processed all of this. "I get it. But why's it have to be you?" Wendy asked.

"'Cause I don't know of anyone else," Abram shook his head. "We were the only ones who heard Ivor's words. Whoever these people are – this 'Fourth Ring' – someone needs to stop them, and for all we know, we're the only ones who even know they exist."

"But what about us?"

"You'll be alright. I don't think we could ask for better timing. Pasteur's cure is slow, but it's working. And whatever's left of the circus has made for the hills."

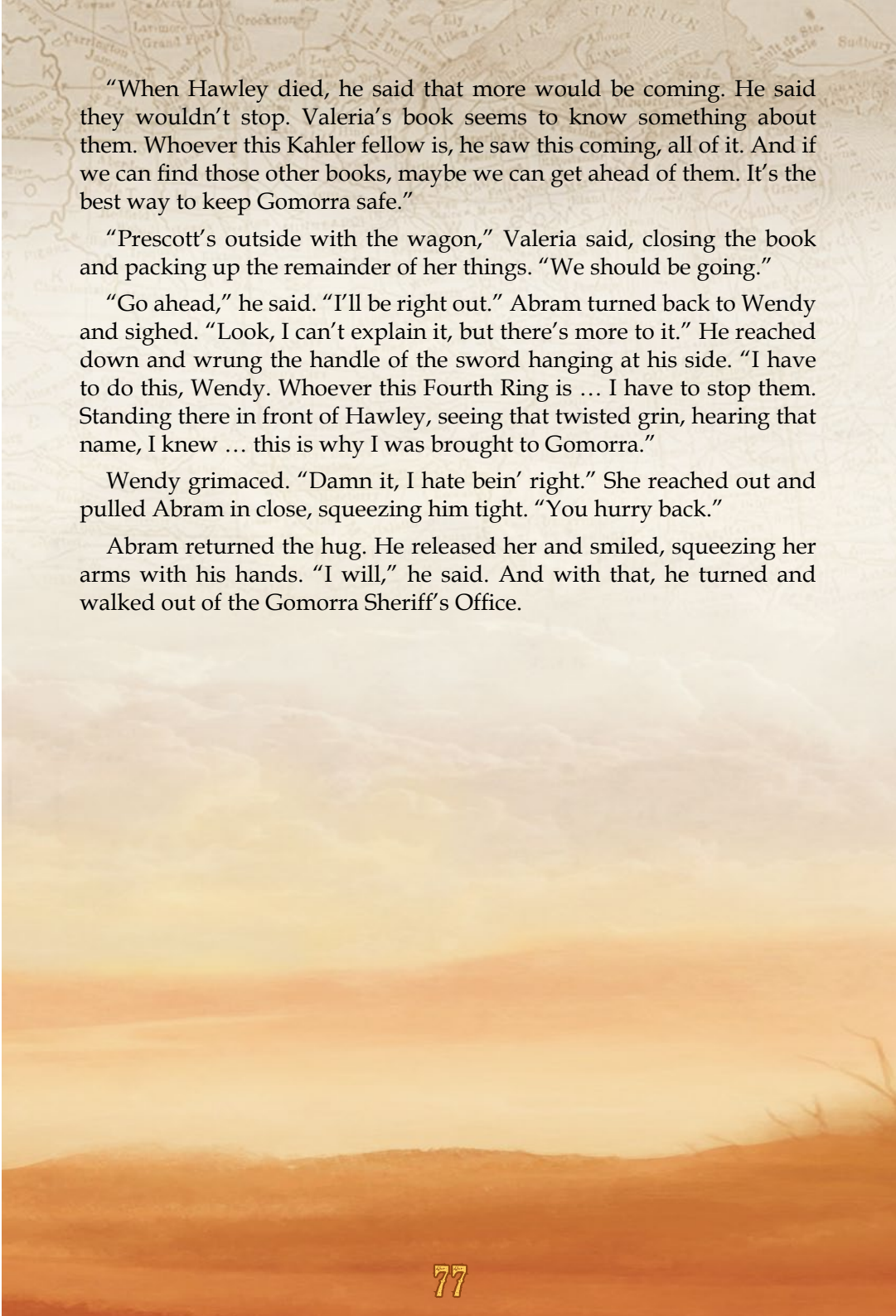
"And Sloane?"

"From what Lucy told us, I don't think we need to worry about her for a while. And by the time she comes back ... you'll be ready." He extended his hand, in which laid a silver star with the word "Sheriff" emblazoned across it.

"I told you before, Abram. I won't wear that badge."

"I know. But you're the best person to find someone who will."

Wendy sighed, taking the star from his hand. "I really can't talk you out of this, can I?"



"When Hawley died, he said that more would be coming. He said they wouldn't stop. Valeria's book seems to know something about them. Whoever this Kahler fellow is, he saw this coming, all of it. And if we can find those other books, maybe we can get ahead of them. It's the best way to keep Gomorra safe."

"Prescott's outside with the wagon," Valeria said, closing the book and packing up the remainder of her things. "We should be going."

"Go ahead," he said. "I'll be right out." Abram turned back to Wendy and sighed. "Look, I can't explain it, but there's more to it." He reached down and wrung the handle of the sword hanging at his side. "I have to do this, Wendy. Whoever this Fourth Ring is ... I have to stop them. Standing there in front of Hawley, seeing that twisted grin, hearing that name, I knew ... this is why I was brought to Gomorra."

Wendy grimaced. "Damn it, I hate bein' right." She reached out and pulled Abram in close, squeezing him tight. "You hurry back."

Abram returned the hug. He released her and smiled, squeezing her arms with his hands. "I will," he said. And with that, he turned and walked out of the Gomorra Sheriff's Office.

