

FENCED WITH IRON  
*The Revised Edition*

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“But the sons of Belial shall be all of them as thorns thrust away, because they cannot be taken with hands. But the man that shall touch them must be fenced with iron and the staff of a spear, and they shall be utterly burned with fire in the same place.”

- 2 Samuel 23:6-7

*October, After The Kill*

“Name?”

“Thasunke Khokiphapi.”

The investigator had his eyes to a sheet of paper and was filling in bits of information as they came to him.

“That’s quite a name, son. You’re Oglala, correct?”

“Half. Name means Young Man Afraid Of His Horses. But that old shit’s a mouthful. You can call me Young.”

The investigator looked up into a pair of dark eyes as black as a dogs, set deep in the pale mahogany of the inmate’s narrow face. Long black hair, like a river of oil, set forth across the gray hills of his shoulders in the canvas prison scrub.

“OK, Young. How’s your memory?”

“Memory’s fine. How’s your coffee?”

Young shifted in his chair. The chains rattled.

“Get Mr. Young a cup. Will ya please, Henry?”

An old deputy in a well ironed uniform left the room and came back with a paper cup of coffee.

“OK, Mr. Young. Let’s have it from the beginning. Before all this got so complicated, you had the bright idea to shoot Mr. Lincoln Knoll in the arm. Correct?”

“*Father* Lincoln panicked. I just sorta reacted. I meant to scare him is all, but I was careless. The bullet took half his shoulder.

Took it right into the trees. I remember a dime sized chunk of flesh hitting a large maple. It stuck there like a piece of spaghetti.

‘NO!’ he screamed.

Or it sounded like no. Sometimes people just scream and words form. Like instinct. His word was no. No don’t blast my shoulder into spaghetti. No please God I have many years ahead. Ripe ones. So many days left to turn it all around.

I didn’t care about all that. To be honest, I didn’t think he owed me anything anymore and still don’t. I don’t need him or anything he can give me. You neither.”

Young leaned forward and blew the steam from his coffee.

“Can you please be brief, Mr. Young? I don’t have all day here.”

“Fine then. So here we were in the woods like children playing Cowboys and Indians. Only he now had half a shoulder and didn’t wanna play no more.

He got up and ran. Pretty fast too, for a man in his condition. I holstered the revolver and followed. For a while I couldn’t gain an inch on him. Then he slowed down. Got weak. He passed out. Landed in a wild raspberry bush. Squashed enough berries to hide the blood, or it *all* looked like blood and like he had none left in all the veins of his dying body. He was still breathing though. I don’t think a shoulder wound will kill you that quick. At least it didn’t kill *him*.

His mouth was moving, and his head rolled from side to side. The words meant nothing. He wasn’t all there at this point, and yet I tried to apologize anyway. He wouldn’t know what I was saying, but I said things like I was sorry and just wanted to scare him.

‘Just playing around,’ I said ‘You see?’

He didn’t see. He could hardly think.”

Young sipped his coffee.

As he moved the paper cup from his lips to his lap, the chain connecting his wrists and ankles fell across the metal chair between his legs. Each link went *clank clank* like the cars of a passing train.

“OK, so you shot Father Knoll. You let him live, and he made his way to town. When he left the hospital, he came right here and filed against you and went back home. Home being the church. The brick one off Rutger with the big bell on top. I got that much. Then what happened?”

“Nothing, I guess. Not for a few days. Then I went to visit him again. Mass ended at ten. I was there and watching from the edge of the forest. People came pouring down the stone steps and over the lawn. Some stayed there and talked, while others kept moving and got into cars and trucks and started the engines. The engines ripped through the voices on the lawn. Tore them to shreds. The vehicles all vanished through the trees and in a cloud of dust made golden by the sun.”

“Young, I aint gonna tell you again. This aint a damn poetry reading. Get to the point.”

“Right. Lincoln was the only one still inside. I had my own way of getting wine then. I broke the lock on the bulkhead of the church and made weekly trips. Always when the night had been on long enough to know I was the only one still awake in this part of the country. I would take five bottles at a time and load them into an old sweater with the neck sewn shut. The sleeves sewn into a shoulder strap.”

Young gestured with both chained hands, from his shoulder to his hip.

The investigator dropped his pen on the table and pinched the skin of his nose, between the eyes.

“Anyway, Lincoln came out slow with half his body wrapped. His arm in a sling. He looked sad, but who wouldn’t the way he was?

When he was halfway to the lawn, I sank back into the trees and moved around to where the bulkhead was. I had taken a head count of the sisters and fathers. No patrons ever hung around as long as I’ve ever known them. If they had that day, it would have been pure and blameless bad luck.

I passed quick and quiet through the wine cellar and up the stairs. Stopped at the main floor and listened for any voices or shuffling feet. It was quiet. I was alone. This is the time on Sunday when the sisters and fathers get their sunshine and soil their shoes.

I quit being careful and made my way into Lincoln’s room. His little corner of the church that’s as cold and lonely as ever a corner could be. Stone walls. Stone bed frame. Box spring worn and sinking to one side. Mattress yellow with bodily oils and God knows what else.

I had with me my makeshift shoulder bag which I had filled with the thorns of Abraham. I don’t actually know what the scientific, or whatever, name of these thorns is, but they’re brutal and they only grow in one place. Around the statue of Abraham at the end of the northern trail. Lincoln’s trail. He made it. He put the statue there, and he probably planted those damn thorns too. Where the hell else would they come from?

I took a bundle of thorns from my sweater bag and wrapped his pillow tightly and hid the whole mess under the cotton case. Just

a *hello*. Let him know who's been to visit him.

Then I drew my blade up from my boot and made a lengthwise slit in my thumb. The way the Iroquois used to do to their enemies. I don't know which fingers they started with, but I did the thumb and used the blood to paint the wall over Lincoln's door. He was safe from the angel of death, but not from me."

"Hold it," said the investigator, "I'm a little confused. What's the motive here?"

"Right. Fine. The short version is Lincoln Knoll killed my father."

The investigator lifted his pen from the table.

"OK, now this is important, so I hope you have your facts straight. This is all going on the record. Please continue."

"When I was six years old my mother sent me to a Christian reform school led by Lincoln and some other fool whites. The whole school was dedicated to converting any young Natives still living in the area. The small piece of shit reserve we had left was on too valuable a track of land, I guess. Turns out a church would look real nice in those woods."

"And this is the church Lincoln currently resides in?"

"Actually, no. The church was never built. They laid the foundation and nearly started a war. A few white folks were murdered and even more Oglalas.

My father barged into Lincoln's reform school to take me out of it. He had some Indians with him, and they were armed to the teeth. The police showed up, and my father took the whole class hostage. He had all the white men on the ground and let the kids go.

The Indians and the cops kept each other busy. My father tried to escape out the side door with Lincoln at gun point. I was standing by the woods and saw the whole thing. Lincoln pulled a knife and he put it right through my father's eye. Quicker than he could blink, he was dead."

"Hold it. I've been serving this county for over twenty years and never heard anything like that. Every one of those men was either killed by a cop or by their own gun like a coward."

Young got quiet and sipped his coffee.

"So you know this story or don't you?" he asked.

"There's a report, yea. A shootout doesn't occur without a report. Lincoln Knoll did not kill anyone. They all died like I said they did."

"Like *you* said. But I was there."

"Fine. So you think Lincoln killed your dad and you wanted revenge. That about it?"

"Basically."

"You said earlier he didn't owe you anything."

Young leaned in, letting the chain drag on the floor.

The investigator chewed his lip and rubbed his forehead with two fingers, just above his eye.

"No. He doesn't owe me," Young leaned back, "My father had a gun to his head. He did what any man would do, and he doesn't owe me a thing."

"Then why not leave him be?"



“I don’t think you understand, sir. He killed my father.”

The investigator rubbed his chin and then the back of his neck. He made a sound with his lips like an airplane starting up.

“Quite a contradiction we got here,” the investigator slowly rose to his feet, “We’ll talk more tomorrow. Henry?”

The old deputy came around and took Young by the arm.

“What would you do if you got out of here?”

Young grinned.

“Kill Lincoln.”

The investigator waved them away. The deputy led Young back to his cell, shut the door and locked it.

*August, Before The Kill, A Call To The South*

A few dull rays of sunshine snuck through the blinds. They showed nothing but rug and the tip of a scuffed leather boot. Dried up mountains at the edge of an even drier desert, where thirsty western conifer seeds kept on in a limbo of right angles and cigarette smoke that passed like a wind storm over their heads.

Samael was pulling a green handled toothbrush through the barrel of an S&W handgun when the telephone rang.

“Uh huh?”

“Hello, Sam.”

“Lincoln. It’s been a long one, Father. How’s the fort in the north holding? Giving up on the cold yet, huh? God has.”

“Yes, well, I think you may be right there, Sam.”

There was a pause long enough for Samael to drop the fresh cigarette he rolled and pick it up and light it. A big exhale brought unexpected weather to the conifers.

“Doesn’t sound like you, Lincoln. What’s going on?”

“You remember Christ The King, I’m sure?”

“I do. You don’t forget things like that.”

“Not easily you don’t. You remember Old Khokiphapi?”

“I said I remembered. Now what about it?”

“You remember why, right? He came for his son. One of my students.”

“Yea, so?”

“Well. I think I ran into his boy, Sam. He came to see me.”

“Hm. All grown up, huh? Seven foot Injun warrior is he now?”

“Sam, it’s serious. He had a gun with him. He used it.”

Samael pulled both boots to the foot of his sofa chair. His heels thumped the wooden frame. He stubbed out his cigarette and pressed the phone closer to his ear.

“What’re you saying, Lincoln?”

“I’m saying he shot me, Sam. Nearly blew my damn arm off. Half my shoulder is rotting in the woods as we speak.”

“Shit, Lincoln. You sure it was him? You sure it was Old’s boy?”

“He said he was. Scared me to death. I was strolling the trail and this ragged looking Indian boy came outta nowhere waving a damn revolver in my face.”

“Jesus Christ, Lincoln. The damn Injuns is at it still. Can’t bury a damn thing. I’ll be up tomorrow and settle this whole mess.”

“Cool it, Sam. I just wanted you to know about it. I’m going to find him myself. I think he’s living in the woods by Abraham. I’ll save his damned soul, Sam. I have to. I owe him that much.”

“You owe him a smack, but I know I can’t talk you outta nothing. Just promise me you’ll be armed, or you may find yourself in a mess you can’t get out of. Huh?”

“Sure, Sam. Pray for me, will you?”

“You bet your ass I’ll be praying. I don’t wanna have to drive

up there and save your ass from no red maniac.”

“Alright, Sam.”

“Alright then.”

Sam set the horn in its cradle and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

“Huh.”

*August, Before The Kill, Lincoln Takes The Bait*

A lengthy courtyard edged with ponderosa pines and low growing dropseed, where large black crows strutted and pecked and cawed. A rabbit in its summer coat moved forward, lifted its puny head, then moved forward again. The crows took flight, one after the other, dropping beyond a line of boulders in the north.

“You see the blood over my door?” asked Lincoln, “This boy is begging to be saved.”

The wool robe hung from his shoulders, tied at the center with a sand colored rope.

“Our interpretations are more than a hair different on this one, Linc,” said the priest walking beside him, “I mean no disrespect, but blood over your door is no way to ask for saving. It’s just silly. It’s madness. You need to protect yourself from this kind of thing.”

“Savages are not beyond the grace of God.”

“I never said they were. In fact, I have great respect for these people, but this one is different. This one is dangerous. Look at yourself, Lincoln. Look at your arm. You need to heal yourself before you go healing tramps and killers.”

Lincoln raised his arm chest high and gave the man a little wave. His face was clenched with pain, but he grinned through it and winked.

“See? Good as new.”

A gray cloud moved in from the east, with darker ones in its wake. The priest held out his hand and looked to the sky, then wiped his hand on his robe, even though no rain drop had struck

it.

“You should wait until morning, at least.”

“What for?”

They walked to the rock wall at the edge of the courtyard, then turned. A man with blue overalls and a screwdriver was giving the bulkhead a new lock.

“Let the sheriff deal with it, Linc. That's what they're for.”

Lincoln lifted his hand and gestured towards the church.

“This is why we're here, Andrew. This is what we're here for.”

Andrew stopped short, as a light rain began to fall.

“You know how I feel about that, Linc. I want no part of it.”

“It's God's will.”

“It's not right.”

“They needed us, and we came.”

Andrew shook his head.

“Then go,” he said, “Go save him. Kill him if you have to.”

“Andrew,” said Lincoln, with a tone of authority.

Andrew rubbed his temples with both hands.

“Just be safe,” said Andrew, as he shuffled away, towards the church.

Lincoln watched him sink into the bricks, through a tall

wooden door that slammed shut behind him.

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There was still plenty of daylight, but the clouds had thickened. Late summer raindrops fell sparingly through the evergreens, leaving spots on chapped earth.

The statue of Abraham stood at the trail's end. The heads of his many children resting one atop the other, in a blanket at Abe's bosom.

Lincoln circled the altar. Over and over. Muttering prayers as he trampled the thorned overgrowth, moving a few feet further with each rotation. Widening his circle. Scanning the dirt and the leaves for signs of Young.

The police had told Lincoln that Young must have fled. Lincoln himself was content with that version, until he laid down one night and felt the thorns in his scalp. Saw the blood over his door.

The same day, a local hunter found a mutilated rabbit carcass. The feet were missing. The skin of its torso was pulled back like bat wings, with sticks holding it open.

After four rotations, he spotted a fresh print in a soft patch of mud ten feet to the north. It led to another print and then another. He walked for thirty minutes, through thick brush, over fallen oaks and open grassland. The prints led deeper and deeper, into the thickest part of the forest. A river ran alongside them, then curved east and was gone.

Lincoln moved slowly, stopping every few dozen feet to listen and survey, but the forest was silent. There was the sound of light rain and the beating of his own heart and little else.

The tracks led to a ramshackle door up against the mouth of a

cave. The door was made of wood. Planks that were mostly machine cut, but some were crude, like they had been cut with a hand saw.

Lincoln pulled the door open, but could see only darkness within. He took one wide look around, lifted his robe and drew a blade from his stocking. His heart rose to his throat. Something snapped in the woods behind him. He turned, but saw nothing. A crow flew overhead. Lincoln closed his eyes, made the sign of the cross, then stepped inside.

He paused just beyond the door, squinting for signs of light or movement. There was nothing. Just dead air and the even deader sensation that he was headed somewhere he wouldn't be able to return from.

He felt, for the first time in many years, that his Lord was not paying attention. Like he had walked right under God's throne, where the dust of forever collects and is forgotten.



*August, Before The Kill, Sun And Son*

Samael paced from wall to wall, waving the S&W in small circles, touching the barrel to his ear lobe each time. Clouds of dust swirled in the light of the blinds. A dense, dirty air that stuck in Sam's throat.

He tossed the pistol onto the sofa cushion and continued his pacing. The telephone rattled with each heavy step.

"Kinda man are you?" he muttered to himself, "No good piece of trash."

He lifted the phone and brought it to his ear and just as quickly hung it up again. He hadn't bit a single fingernail in two years, but he was biting them now. They tasted like old cigarettes at the bottom of a cup of cola. He spit them on the floor, where they hid into the rug fibers like burrowing worms.

A freshly hand rolled cigarette was lit. Sam exhaled loudly and lifted the horn off its cradle. A metal spring somewhere was disturbed, and the tiniest sound swam by his ears.

The mouth end went between his jaw and shoulder. The top end hovered a quarter inch from his head. A few scraggly gray hairs reached for it from underneath the wide brim of his hat.

He left the cigarette between his lips and dialed seven numbers, then pulled it back out and exhaled a loud one.

"Hello?" came a worn, native voice.

"Hey, Sunshine. How you been?"

"The fuck you want, Sam?"

"Jason there? I'd like to talk to him."

“And why in the fuck you wanna talk to that boy for? My boy?”

“My boy too, Sun.”

“Your what? Your what, Sam? Do you even know his middle name, you pasty prick? Let’s see, Sam. When was the last time you came to visit him? Oh, that’s right. On the day he was fucking born. Fuck you, Samael.”

Sam got quiet. He let the phone slip a little, but he caught it and pressed it close to his ear.

“I’m his father, Sun.”

“I would have agreed with you twenty five years ago, but today you can fuck yourself.”

“Please, Sun? I just wanna talk to him. Just for a minute.”

“Well, you can’t.”

“ Just let me talk to the boy, will ya?”

“The boy is not here. Hasn’t been here. Probably never come back here. He’s gone.”

“How you mean?”

“I mean he moved away. Said he was moving to Montana, or somewhere, and up and left his mama all alone. Sound familiar?”

Sam went quiet for a moment.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Sun.”

“Bet you are.”

“Hey, I gotta go. I’ll call you later, and we can talk about it.”

No reply. Sun had hung up at later, and Sam shortly after that.

He smoked the rest of his cigarette and pulled his coat on and stuffed his keys into his pocket. He opened the front door and stood there in the daylight looking confused. He pulled the keys from his pocket and looked at them. Scratched his left calf with his right toe, then backed into the house and shut the door.

He threw the keys on the table by the phone and pulled his coat off and sat down and rolled another cigarette.

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An opening in the forest, where yellow grass and red soil lay together in even patches. Birds sang songs that filled the space between the trees. All at competing volumes and chasing each other for love or pecking for the rights to a grub.

Three little ones flew in a circle. Up, then down to the ground for a moment, then up again. Spinning like a feathered tornado, turning up tiny clouds of red dust.

Young stood a near nine feet from the rabbit. A six shooter in his hand. The sight lined with his left eye.

The rabbit was chewing something small, with its attention anywhere but on Young and his shooter. He stood there, still and quiet, just watching the thing eat. Watching its hair grow. The ticks in the tall grass drew more attention than he. Their shifting legs like hatchets on cold stone next to the precise and total silence of Young.

Then, without a hint of hesitation, he pulled the hammer and let it go.

BANG!

The bird songs stopped. The sky filled with their frantic flight.

The rabbit's skull split apart. Blood poured out of a large hole, draining into the soil below.

Young shoved the pistol into his pocket, took a blade from under his mud caked shirt and removed the remaining half of the rabbit's head that still clung to the neck. He held the head up and sniffed at what remained of the face, before tossing it at the trees.

He lifted the body and walked on through the woods. The rabbit corpse dangling in one hand, and the blade dripping red in the other.

*August, Before The Kill, The Fall*

There was enough light from the cave door for Lincoln to see where what looked like the leg of a nightstand touched the mud. He reached out and felt the handle of the top draw. Then he felt further to a wax candle at the top and a book of matches next to that. He tucked the knife into his sock and lit the candle with one of the matches.

The room filled with dim light, and it was small. Four tight walls of plywood pressed up against the natural stone. On the wooden walls were nailed the hides of squirrels and rabbits and woodchucks and even the paddle tail of a beaver. Most of them were clean, but a few had left their mark as streaks of blood that reached all the way to the floor below.

Lincoln pulled at one of the clean ones and jolted when it fell like old paper. He held his breath and listened. A breeze from inside pushed at the plywood. A cave's exhale. It forced the front door to open, then swing shut again. The croaking of its hinges twisted Lincoln's stomach tighter than the stench of the hides.

The fallen hide had cracked on the floor, and there was dry mud in the fur. Lincoln thought of the mud caked over Young's clothing and skin when they had met. The way it flaked from his coat when he raised the revolver. The lack of animation in Young's face when the decision was made, and he pulled the trigger. Everything after that was a blur. Desperate moments in quicksand, when living and dying become two points that nearly meet.

"He lifted me out of the pit of confusion," whispered Lincoln, "Out of the mud and the mire."

There was a mattress tucked against the back corner of the room. No sheets. A large oval stain at the center. Lincoln toed it, then backed up as if Young would emerge from the stain like

some spirit of filth.

A rectangular cut in one of the sheets of plywood caught his eye. About four feet tall and three wide. The wood was warped, and the top left corner stuck out from the rest of the wall. Lincoln put his hand to it and felt the cool breeze whistling through.

He wrapped his fingers around the corner and pulled. The cut splintered at the edges, as it came free from the wall, then fell flat. A heavy gust of cold air pushed through his legs from an opening in the stone.

Lincoln lifted the candle and ducked inside, shielding the flame with his palm. Just more cave in a straight line, as far as the light could reach. No plywood walls or bloody decorations. A natural hallway of rock that wormed through the hill, and the smell of wet stone which overpowered that of the hides.

Lincoln traversed the long, intestinal hallway. Looking back every few seconds. His wide, watery eyes aglow with candle light. The uneven stone pulsed with shadows, as the breeze and the flame danced together.

About fifty feet in, the narrow path opened to a wide, circular den. There were long sheets of plywood across the floor that crisscrossed one another in chaotic patterns. The boards creaked and snapped as he entered.

The walls dripped with mysterious wetness from an unknown source above, where either rock or animal relieved itself.

There were no more rooms that he could see. No new caverns winding further through the hill. This was the end. A room with plywood floors. And also a rope that lay coiled near the opposite wall.

A curious Lincoln tiptoed towards the rope. As his weight shifted to the center of the room and the wooden boards, he

heard a sound, like the grinding of two pieces of metal. The plywood cracked, as the cave floor opened beneath him, like a mouth, and Lincoln fell.

*October, After The Kill, No Victors*

“He came after *me*. Tracked me down like a damn dog and got himself in a situation he wasn’t ready for.”

Young raised his chained hands to drag a thumbnail across his eyebrow, as Henry entered with two cups of coffee. One for each end of the laminate folding table.

“But you knew he’d track you,” said the investigator, “You baited the old fool. The thorns on the pillow, the blood on the door. All for what? Some serious trouble to hurt a man you don’t really care about hurting. A man who you said yourself owes you nothing.”

“He killed my father,” the words fell robotically from Young’s mouth.

“You keep saying that like you’re looking for comfort.”

The investigator leaned in like he had won the battle. Young met him halfway.

“Wrong, Mister,” said Young, “If I was looking for comfort, I’d be in *your* seat. Up every sunrise to the sound of an electric whip. Away every night with a dimwitted, pale wife.”

“Watch it, boy.”

The investigator rose to his feet and leaned further, with stiff arms, over the table.

“I bet she spits,” Young continued.

“Yea?” said the investigator, with fixed eyes and a reddened face.



“I bet she spits it right back up your little pisser, you half-wit.”

The investigator lunged. Took Young by the nape of the scrub and pulled him out of his chair. Young bit the man’s forearm on his way to the cold floor, removing a small chunk of flesh.

Henry put his arm around the investigator’s chest and yanked him upright.

“Cool it, Dick,” he shouted.

The investigator straightened his tie and tucked a loose piece of shirt back into his pants. Then he touched the bleeding spot in his arm, showing no signs that it hurt him.

“I’m tired,” said Young, as he rolled to his back to face the ceiling with a spot of blood on his lips, “Henry dear, take me home.”

The old deputy hesitated. Then he got the OK nod from the investigator, hoisted Young to his feet and off they went.

The halls were cold and oddly damp. Henry undid the ankle locks and separated them from the wrist locks, pulled the gate shut and locked it. Then Young held his hands out via the food port.

Henry would usually tell him in his own funny little old man way. He would say, “Let’s see the invisible baby Jesus,” and Young would hold his hands like he had a bowl in his palms. This time, Henry said nothing.

Henry undid the cuffs and pulled the chain out the port. Rapid clanks echoed through the cell and down the hall.

“I like you, Henry,” said Young, in a soft voice, nearly a whisper.

“Heck, son, I like you too. God loves all his children. Even

when they stray or break his heart, he loves em still.”

“You like me enough to break me outta here?”

Henry laughed a warm, friendly laugh and said goodnight, then started down the hall, but stopped and turned.

“You know, son. You shouldn’t have said such nasty things about the man’s wife. That’s just,” Henry paused and took a deep breath, “Not something you talk about.”

Young crawled in his bunk, pulled the covers across him and tilted his head back so he could see out the little one by one window at the back wall. A barred window to a star filled sky for miles over flat and barely treed plains, where nothing hardly ever moves but by the wind, and the occasional prairie hound perks to watch the endless nothing take minutes away.

*September, Before The Kill, Sam Heads North*

His Chrysler New Yorker cried as it went around the bend. The bald tires like hooves on a frozen pond. Sun always said, *one day it'll break at every seam and pour into the woods.*

Sam lit a cigarette. Two drags and the ash broke off and landed in his lap. He grabbed at it and tossed it out the window.

"Damn things," he said.

In the passenger seat was a map, a flashlight and a handgun. He eyed the map without touching it. Thirty bleak miles to the church ahead.

"The hell am I doing, anyway?" he asked himself. "If you're alive, Linc, I'm gonna... making me drive all the way up here to this dreary shithole."

He looked at the indicator telling him his gas tank was at a quarter.

"I'll send ya the bill, too."

He tried another cigarette with better luck.

"What're friends for, huh?" the smoke poured from each corner of his mouth, "Hell."

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The cathedral residents were all waiting when he pulled up. He dragged the New Yorker through the dirt lot and parked it, then got out, leaving the gun and what else in the passenger seat and didn't bother locking the door.

“Sam,” said Andrew, with a steady fear in his eyes.

“Father,” said Sam, “Wish I could say it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“Uh huh,” Andrew looked down at the dirt.

“Lot of misfortune for a house of God.”

“That’s a bit easy, Sam. Even for you,” Andrew looked up and locked eyes with Sam, “I told him not to go.”

Sam pushed his hat back, revealing more of his tired face and gray hair.

“If he always listened to you, there’d be no God here still, huh?”

“There’d be less dead sons and daughters,” Andrew snapped back, quicker than Sam had expected.

“The Lord’s work aint always easy.”

The blood rushed Andrew’s face, turning it a bright red, and Sam grinned like he had won.

“Pulling a trigger comes plenty easy to you, Sam.”

Sam’s grin faded quick. He spit, and it would have landed on Andrew’s foot if he hadn’t stepped back.

*“You are not to build a house for my Name,” spoke Andrew, “because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight.”*

A silent sister in traditional habit came to Sam’s side and gently rubbed his arm. A way to ease the tension rising between the two men. Sam nodded at her like everything was OK. She smiled sadly and backed away.

“That’s the passage I read to Lincoln so many years ago, but he wouldn’t listen. What would this land be like now if he had? Where would he be now?”

“He’d be holding hands with an Indian, singing damn love songs. Jesus Christ, Andrew, you’re as thick as those walls,” Sam shook his head and threw a frustrated, impatient hand into the air, “I guess we should all shut up and get started, huh?”

Andrew looked up at the sky.

“Supper will be ready shortly,” he said, “In the morning, you can start.”

“*We* can start,” said Sam, “Or you gonna sit this one out like you always do?”

There was silence for a moment. No rebuttal. Andrew took a deep breath.

“You can stay in Lincoln’s room,” said Andrew, “We haven’t touched it, but it’s clean.”

*September, Before The Kill, The Search Party*

The sun had not yet risen. Sam held a string of thorns at his chest and stared blankly at the streak of blood on the doorframe.

“I’ll find you,” he whispered, “Both of you.”

He pulled his coat on and entered the dark stone hall with the front doors as tall as two men each. The faceless wooden giants of the still dark morn. He pushed one open, straining, then walked out and down the stone steps to the dewed lawn like glass under the moon.

Sam pulled the cut of thorns from his coat pocket, held it up in the moonlight and made a ring to frame the astral body.

“It’s just a matter of time.”

He drew a flashlight from his other pocket and flicked it on and headed for the northern path.

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The sun was up now. The church residents were all sauntering and talking in the hall when Sam returned. He sat at a pew with a fresh cut of thorns in hand.

“Prickers?” asked a nun with a face like a rotting peach.

“Yeup,” said Sam.

“You picked them?”

“Yeup.”

Sam smiled with forced politeness and said nothing more to her. She smiled back and turned awkwardly away and went off into one of the many nameless rooms surrounding the main hall.

The church filled with colorful light as the sun stretched over the trees to touch the stained glass windows. Mostly blues and yellows. Colors shaped like faces leaning over the pews and up the western wall.

Some residents gathered around Sam, following Andrew's lead as he appeared through a side door at the far end and tromped to where the man sat staring at the fresh vine.

"Alright," said Sam, before Andrew could speak, "Lincoln has been gone for some time now. I want all of you to understand what we might find."

"We understand," said Andrew, without protest.

"Where he could be is anyone's guess," Sam continued, "My guess is north. I found thorns in Lincoln's room, like what grows by Abraham. Could be Lincoln brought them there himself, but I also saw blood over his door on the inside frame. I assume none of you noticed this or you would have told me, huh?"

The priests exchanged innocent glances of confusion.

"Blood?" asked Andrew, failing to mention that Lincoln had told him about it before he disappeared.

"Most likely Young's blood," said Sam.

"The bulkhead lock had been broken," announced a fair-haired young priest at Andrew's side.

"Probably him," said Sam, "Could be Young broke in, left the thorns and the bloody mess, and then... left."

"Why?" asked Andrew.

“It’s bait. He’s toying with Lincoln, which could mean he’s still alive,” Sam stood from the pew and put his hands to his hips, “Young’s had the chance to kill him before and didn’t take it.”

“Then we need to find him,” said Andrew.

“No shit,” Sam stepped out from the pew and pushed through the crowd, “Let’s get to it, huh?”

Sam separated the priests and himself into four groups. Each group with three men, and they were set to head one north, one south, one east and one west. Sam’s group was headed north, past Abraham. They followed the path until it ended and the statue stood staring blindly from stone eyes.

Sam had the cut of thorns in his pocket. He pulled them out and tossed them into a bush full of the same nasty things.

“Here we go, boys,” said Sam, to no one special.

And on they went into the untamed forest.

For twenty minutes they walked. Passing trees and shrubs and flowers. The cold northern air chilling their sweat covered skin. Sections of open grassland, where birds danced like whirring twisters, came and went.

It wasn’t long before Sam saw the boot prints and the bare footprints beside them. Had been walking on them the whole time, but they were old prints and flattened. Hard to see, but the lack of rain kept them alive.

“I got you,” whispered Sam.



*September, Before The Kill, Arboreal Hunter*

Young had his rifle lined up and on the tail of a deer. He was ready to take the shot when the birds and insects went suddenly silent. Spooked by two voices coming from the south. The voices, and the new silence, spooked the deer, which took off in a zigzag through the brush.

The tree at Young's shoulder was set with a crooked ladder of sturdy logs all thick as baseball bats. The ladder led into a large basket of processed wood planks and more logs in an unbiased fashion, like a nest for birds. The structure resembled a child's tree house and was completely hidden by the wide reaching leaves and branches.

From the tree house and down the sight of his rifle, Young could see two priests in wool robes and boots. They had no names, as far as Young knew, and no distinguishable traits or features. Still, he recognized them. They walked slowly, with half-terrified faces like unfinished sculptures. Bald-skinned anatomic displays.

Young watched them move beyond the branches and disappear, though he could still hear the crunch of their steps and their voices. Only a few words were clear enough to make out.

"That a snake?," and the voices stopped for a moment, then continued.

Young kept his sight on the small patch of forest floor visible to him from the tree house. Another figure passed quickly and was gone beyond the branches.

The voices passed slowly into silence, until Young was alone in his tree.

He waited for the sound of birds and insects to return, then he

slipped down the ladder and ran south. The rifle's barrel bouncing on his shoulder with every step. He ran until night fell and turned the yellow grasslands blue and the forest trees black.

*September, Before The Kill, Sam Finds The Cave*

The ramshackle door stood shut before them. No candlelight poured from its creases, and with the cave stone jutting over top, casting its shadow, the door was nearly overlooked. Even Samael's keen eyes required two glances to know what it was.

"What now, Sam?" asked the younger of the two monks. Short brown hair just starting to bald.

"Now I go in. You can follow me, but it might be wise to have someone out front in case he runs."

"In case who runs?"

"Who do you think?" barked Sam, as quietly as his impatience would allow.

A twig snapped in the distance, followed by a flurry of wings. Black specks behind the trees that grew small and disappeared.

"What'll we do?" asked the older monk, still staring off at where the flurry had dispersed, "If we see him, I mean?"

"Lincoln might be in there," said Sam, in an attempt to rouse courage from the edgy men, "Or Young, or both, or neither. But either way, I go in and find out. If someone comes running through here who aint me... Stop them."

"Alright, Sam. We'll be right here in case he runs," the monk nodded like they were equals in this. One brave man acknowledging another.

"Fine," Sam grunted.

He pushed the door open as quietly as possible with his flashlight aimed at an angle downward. The room came to life.

The mattress and the end table with the candle. The box of tapes, empty and upturned on the mattress. The squirrel hides and the beaver tail and the second door at the back of the room.

Sam went in. Went through the end table. Found nothing important. Just some matches and coins and papers with scribbles. With the light outstretched, he examined the next door from afar. As crooked and ramshackle as the first.

“Sam!” came a voice from outside, “Anything?”

“Another door,” said Sam.

“An exit?”

“Probably not, seeing this is a cave and the room’s only so long. I say it just goes deeper. I’m gonna check it out. Stay there and keep a sharp eye out for anything.”

Sam shut the drawer of the nightstand and went on to the second door. He held his light out and let the new room fill up bright.

“Another room!” shouted Sam.

“Wassat?”

“NOTHER ROOM! Stay sharp for now. I’m going in.”

“Alright, Sam. Holler if anything.”

It sounded first like tires on gravel, but a few steps closer and he decided it was wind. Strong wind, if far away. Sam shut the light off and stood motionless, hoping to find some daylight at the wind’s source. An opening to the hill above maybe, but there was none. Just pitch blackness.

With the light going again, he followed the narrow hall to yet another door.

“Jesus,” he said.

He didn’t bother telling the priests and went in. What he saw, and felt, confused him. The wind was much louder. So loud that he should have felt its push, but didn’t. The air around him was warm and stale. Not even the faintest breeze, but he did see the source, and its light. It came from below, not above. A bluish glow radiated from a hole in the cave floor, and there was a rope going from darkness above down into the pit. The sound of the wind crunched like it was electrified, and the blue turned to green. A golden green abyss of static hush.

Sam moved slowly towards the pit’s edge. He felt the crunch of loose rocks beneath his boots, but the sound was rendered mute by its competition.

At the edge, he knelt, pocketing the light with one hand and gripping the lip of the pit with the other. His eyes followed the rope to a portable television set throwing static green in all directions. The set’s speakers delivered the scratch of wind recorded on a cheap microphone.

And there at the bottom was Lincoln like an autumn leaf, broken but hanging on.

“LINCOLN!” hollered Sam, but the digital wind was too strong.

Sam scooped one of the loose rocks and was ready to drop it when the wind cut out and was replaced by the ripping sound of no more tape.

Lincoln’s eyes opened.

“LINCOLN!” Sam yelled again.

Lincoln pushed upright with weak arms and his head fell back against the stone.

“Wh-who?” The word dropped from his mouth.



*September, Before The Kill, The River Lodge*

Young's hair floated away from his head and looked like the feathers of a black paon. Bubbles from both sides of his mouth broke on the surface above. There was a wall of logs in front of him, and he was pushing something into the cracks. Huge wads of something white and greasy. The remnants covered his hands. Left them shiny and slick.

He ran out of bubbles and rose to the surface, breaking through and gasping for air. He swam to the shore and got out and walked naked to a tree where his hideous wool shirt hung and some half worn to hell khaki pants. A string of beads hung from another branch. He pulled everything on and hung the beads over his head and tucked them into the wool shirt.

It was an underwater log wall he was waterproofing that rose just to the surface of the river. A ceiling of similar logs ran six feet, atop two side walls, to the shore's edge. It all looked like nothing. It looked like a pile of logs hung up in the water, no less natural than an abandoned beaver den. At the top was a wooden latch that opened outwards on a thin string of horsehair rope. Young pulled it and it dripped, and the water inside was as level as it was in the river.

Young scooped water out of the log burrow with a tin bucket and dumped it back into the river. He scooped and scooped and when the inside was halfway dry it began to rain. Rain ran over the bridge of his nose and fell beyond. Little dark spots on his wool shirt and khakis.

Young made no sound. No hint of frustration, or anything at all, left his mouth. He dropped into the den and pulled the lid over him. Everything went dark. Sitting chest high in water, with eyes as wide as half dollars and nothing to entertain them, he hugged his knees and waited. The clothes he bothered to keep

dry were now soaked through completely.

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“Hold on, Linc. They’ll be here.”

Samael yanked the portable television from the pit and swung it so hard it turned to crumbs against the stone wall. Plastic crumbs that shot to every corner of the cave and some even fell back into the pit, pelting Lincoln like warm hail.

“I thought I was dead,” cried Lincoln, as he brushed the plastic bits from his abdomen.

“Nope. You live, old man. It’s that Young sonufabitch that’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“He will be.”

Lincoln groaned as he pushed himself up against the pit wall, careful not to jostle his leg.

“No, Sam,” he hollered, “It was my own damn fault for hanging around caves,” a little laugh escaped him, then a cough took it over, “I fell, Sam. Young didn’t do this. Hell, he fed me,” Lincoln cleared his throat and spit at the floor, “But he’s not right, Sam. He’s far from everything right. You find him and you help him. For me, Sam. You hear?”

The local police arrived and some medics with a stretcher and climbing gear. They got down into the hole and had Lincoln’s leg splinted and had him tied tightly to a flat stretcher. They hauled him out that way. One medic hung by his side to secure the whole rig in case it got loose, but it didn’t get loose and Lincoln was soon free.



A medic and a police officer carried Lincoln, via stretcher, out the cave. It was dark now. The light of electric lanterns turned the forest a crystal blue color. Sam was watching Lincoln, and Lincoln was fixed on Sam.

“Help him, Sam.”

Samael said nothing. Rain sparkled in the artificial light.

*September, Before The Kill, Far From Over*

It was early morning. Young now sat in neck high water with a string of sunlight dangling through a crack in the logs. He rose heavy and wet and shoved the latch open, poked his head up nose high and looked all around. There was no one, but a hundred feet down the shoreline, where the river became thin, stood the top half of the statue of Abraham, over the brush like a giant. He pulled himself out and stripped, peeling the wool shirt off first and ringing the water from it.

Tearing through a nearby bush, he pulled a short handled shovel and tossed it towards the den, then found a small nylon bag and pulled it open as he sat down. He took out two cans of tuna and set them on the ground beside him, then pulled the stained string on the bag and the nylon mouth came together tight, and he tossed the whole thing aside. He drained the water from one of the cans and ate the tuna with his bare hands. It only took a few mouthfuls to finish it off.

There were no clouds in the sky.

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The cathedral residents all expected that Samael's work was through. They didn't quickly react to his giving orders and rounding up new groups. Some of the priests did. Some of them moved where he pointed them to move, but with looks of confusion. One priest particularly didn't budge.

"It's over," said Andrew, "You got Lincoln back, and that's that."

"Four groups, just like last time," ordered Sam, "Let's go."

“You leave Young alone, Sam. Lincoln made that very clear. He needs the Lord now.”

“That’s exactly what I got for him.”

“The Lord, Sam. Not your own personal wrath.”

“He was going to let Lincoln die down there,” Sam got right in his face, “Got it? In that God forsaken shit cave. Excuse me, sisters, I apologize, but he left him to die in his own home. Right down where he slept at night. No innocent man would do that,” Sam lifted one hand into the air, “And have we forgotten that this boy shot Linc cold blooded? I mean, what’s wrong with you people? Why are you so quick to forget?”

“I didn’t say he was innocent, but he fed Lincoln. He kept him alive and Lincoln made sure I knew that fact. He didn’t let him die and he didn’t stick him in that hole, so your job is finished and you can leave now, Sam, so please do.”

Sam looked at the crowd of frightened residents before him.

“Fine,” he said, and that was that.

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Sam got in the Chrysler and made like he was leaving, but when he hit the main road, he drove a bit and pulled off again. He locked the Chrysler and went into the woods. Gun in hand.

There was plenty of vegetation, dirt and insects before he saw the church again. He made some distance between that and himself and continued on north until the church was far out of sight, then he cut east and found the path.

The statue came quicker than Sam expected, and he slowed when he saw it. His steps were precise and soft, as he regarded

the statue, which he saw as a marker. Where the forest really began. Where Young's forest began. Where the boy, and once his elders, came and went as quick as a Florida rain. Into caves and out again. Through the trees and up them. Samael hesitated for a moment. A smidgeon of sympathy perhaps. He ignored it.

*September, Before The Kill, After The Sun*

Young sat by the water's edge with as little movement as a stone. The sun was high at the center of everything and made dry all that was wet.

A groundhog burst forth from the brush, stopped to sniff the air, then inched forward. Another came through in pursuit of the first, forcing it closer to the stone-like figure. They slowed when a deer appeared and drank from the water thirty feet down river.

Young was motionless, watching the water and the shadows of fish along the riverbed. The deer drank, raised its head to look at Young, then drank again.

The nearest groundhog sniffed at Young's elbow. He ripped around and caught it by the neck. It squealed and squirmed. The other groundhog was gone in a blink. The deer reared and nearly melted into the green of the brush and was gone. The sound of thrashing leaves echoed across the still water, causing tiny ripples to bounce off the shore.

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Samael heard the rustling echo pass through the trees. He stopped with one foot in the brush and one on the last pebbles of the path, looked around with a wild and curious gleam, but only anxious streaks of dark green, light green and brown could be identified. The overwhelming sight of wilderness and all its thin lines and shadows. He shook his head, steadied his eyes and ducked low to pass under the thick forest canopy, down so far his knees nearly hit his chin as he moved. He shuffled that way until he met where the river got wide.

The trees stopped and so did Samael, dropping himself down

before the last branch ended, scoping the river and beyond. It didn't take long for him to spot Young, the only man in a sea of green and brown.

"Sick puppy mother," the words hardly left Sam's mouth they were so quiet.

Young had the groundhog by its neck, strangling the rodent, and not the easy way. Not the quick way. He had it squirming and the pain was clear in every twist of a limb and curl of the tail.

"Sick piece of shit," more unheard words.

Samael drew his pistol up and took careful aim on him.

"In hell, if I don't make it."

He fired.

The gun rang and the bang nearly toppled the trees. It was a miss. A chunk of tree exploded into the brush. Young dropped the hog and his head turned. He was gone before Samael knew how. Into his den and without closing the latch. All Sam could see was a pile of logs.

"You rat!" he screamed.

Samael jumped from his spot on the shore and made a forward dive into the river. The water was shallow, and he wasn't much of a swimmer, so he ran with the water treading at his chest. Then his neck. Then he was over his head in water and thrashing violently while trying to keep his pistol dry. It was no use. The pistol was already wet, and so he let himself float slowly and awkwardly over to the logs where Young had his disappearing act.

Sam dragged his sopping hide up the bank and dropped the soaked pistol on the grass and pulled his shirt off. He was tired,

but too close to let up any. He looked around, saw the log pile and for a second was fooled before he noticed that no log pile comes with an open latch on makeshift hinges. If Young had bothered to close it behind him, he might have completed the disappearing act. Sam jumped right in. Danger be damned.

There was nothing inside. It had mostly dried up, but for some sopping earth. Sam drew his flashlight and flipped the switch and the hole lit up. The light was unaffected by the swim and burned gloriously.

The hole was squarely dug and narrow, but of course, there was a second hole that ran underground and away from the river.

“What the hell are you?” Sam laughed at the absurdity, after the cave, and what he’d seen, to see this now.

The tunnel ran on with the light and turned black and ran black for god knows how far.

*September, Before The Kill, In Circles*

The river was still. A few birds playing in the sky reflected on the surface of the water before it broke again when Young emerged. He climbed onto the shore by the log burrow. The latch was still open so he kicked it shut and set three large rocks on top, then lifted a fourth rock and held it to his chest and stood at the shore's edge looking back over the river.

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Samael moved through the tunnel with the light aflame, shielding it with his free hand from the constant dripping of wet mud. The tunnel curved slightly and sections were lined with twigs and branches. Each step forward, the floor gave a little and tiny bubbles surrounded the soles of his boots.

With how low the tunnel was, it was difficult for him to keep the lighter ahead of his boot tips, sinking in the mud and lifting again with a sucking sound from the earth beneath. There was a serious bend in the tunnel and a drop as well that went steeply into black water. Sam took one look back, knowing he hadn't missed anything. He flicked the light and the room went dark, but he knew where to go from here. The only way Young could have possibly gone, and so Samael went in. First his boots and then him. Feeling the walls at either side to be sure he didn't miss any potential side streets on this dark road of mud and water.

Sam was neck deep, pressing the top of his head to the mud above and his chin to the water below. Any further and the two places would meet.

*A sane man would turn back, he thought, a sane man would look at such a tunnel and say "fuck it" before he got this far.*



He took a deep breath. A practice one. Then let it out. Then he took an even deeper breath and submerged, pushing violently forward, feeling the muddy walls for direction. His eyes open, he saw nothing. He reached for the muddy ceiling and it was there. He pulled himself further along, letting his head fill with doubts and unspoken curses.

Then, like a miracle, he saw blue. Greenish blue, and it was getting brighter. He kicked and shoved, pushing like a bullet through the water, but it never got any deeper, until the ceiling, walls and floor all disappeared at once and the water before him was alight with blues and greens and he looked up and saw the underside of a tree. Warped and dancing beyond the surface.

He looked to his side and in the distance he saw a dark structure. It was the log den. All the curves had turned him completely around, until the tunnel fed him back into the river. So he swam, grabbing at the water like it would grab back. As if he half expected the river to take him by the hand and deliver him into all the luxuries of land and air.

He broke the surface, but kept grabbing at something and his first breath was so loud that a few birds appeared from a nearby tree and took off. Frightened by this mad, wet monster.

For a second, he thought he was being chased. Then he remembered it was the other way around, and he relaxed a bit and his arms stopped thrashing. He could see the spot ahead of him where he took his shot at Young from the opposite shore. He did a slow 180 until he could see the den. And then he could see Young. Standing over him. A large stone held high, the shadow of which cast a dim halo around Samael.

*September, Before The Kill, One Long Prank*

Sam pulled his limbs together and sank until his toes touched the riverbed. He heard the muffled splash of the rock breaking surface and did his best to dodge the incoming projectile. It grazed his right hand on its way down.

Samael swam with anxious, stabbing arms to the mouth of the tunnel, then half swam, half dragged himself through the water and mud to the stale air of the inner den.

He felt his pocket for the light, found it and flicked it, but nothing happened. A faint spark, like a dull gray firefly, but it would not catch. In total darkness, he pocketed the light and, using the walls for a guide, maneuvered around the curves until he saw three tiny slivers of light.

Moving forward, the slivers grew larger, as did the spaces between them, until one came to land on his cheek. He placed a hand on the latch and prepared himself for a backwards dive, in case Young had found another rock, but it didn't matter. The latch was weighed down. The pressure of Sam's hand against it grew until he was giving it all his strength, but it wouldn't budge. He gave up and let his strained arm drop to his side.

"How you feeling, boy?" Sam called through the cracks, "I'm sure as hell tired, myself. Got a pain in my shoulder. Not to mention the air down here. It's just awful."

No response. Young was sitting cross legged by the latch as Sam pleaded over and over in a variety of ways.

"I'm old and fragile, you know? Hell, I think I'm older than Lincoln. You got me beat, that's for sure."

Young tore up blades of grass and examined them.

“Look, we got to settle this one way or another. Let me out so we can talk. I promise I won’t shoot.”

Then Sam remembered that his gun was no longer with him, and if Young was up on the shore, then he probably saw the pistol lying there in the grass.

“You know I’m unarmed then? All the more reason to let me out,” Sam combed the wet hairs from his forehead with his fingers, “Come on, Young. Cut the shit and let’s talk.”

Silence for a whole minute. Sam sat down and rubbed his temples. Then he heard a rustle and the slivers of light turned dark. Young pulled the rocks off, took a small step back and kicked it open on its hinge.

“There’s a boy.”

Young had the pistol pointed at Sam as he stepped backwards from the hole. Sam pulled himself out and sprawled on the grass, breathing the fresh forest air like it was the first time.

“Goddamn,” he said.

Sam looked at his hand. A cut from the rock trickled blood onto his wrist.

“One hell of a long prank, Young,” Sam shook his head, “The gun’s all wet, bud. Won’t fire like that.”

Sam slowly got to his feet, wiping at his mud covered pants. Young said nothing. He held the pistol level to his face and watched Sam carefully.

“So what now, Young? What’s gonna happen? You gonna shoot me?”

To Sam’s surprise, the gun worked fine.

Young pulled the trigger once and blew the thumb off Sam's left hand. He screamed and cradled the wound as the missing digit rolled into the river. And when he looked back up at Young, to curse him, all he saw was the butt of the pistol before it shut his eyes for him.

*September, Before The Kill, Plaything*

When Sam awoke he was surrounded by black. His thumb had been bandaged and he felt the blood spot with the fingers of his right hand. The air was cold and musty. Not the humid air of the river den. And there were no slivers of light.

The floor was cold too, and solid. He crawled until he hit a wall, then stopped and listened. A clacking sound, like boots on stone. Then a light exploded far above him. Accompanied by a familiar sound of screeching wind.

The light grew brighter, swaying from side to side and occasionally jerking with a sound like plastic smacking rock. That's when Sam realized what it was. A dangling portable television set running the white static of a homemade video that had not yet reached its point of record. Then it did.

An image of sky appeared as the set bounced off the wall and spun, throwing blue in a circle like the lights of a police cruiser. It must have been eight feet above Sam's head.

*I smashed it, thought Sam, I smashed that fucking thing.*

"You dumb fuck," Sam hollered, "They'll come looking..."

Sam stopped himself when he realized he was supposed to have gone home. Who would be looking? *No one*, he thought, *I'm on my own.*

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At some point Sam had fallen asleep. When he woke, it was because of the loud static of the television having run out of video. The set was perfectly still, resting against the rock wall to

his right. He rubbed his eyes and cursed under his breath. Then over his breath. Then he stood up and without really thinking about it he grabbed for the television set, which was about as high as his outstretched palm now.

*Was it this close before?*

He gripped the rope and put some weight into it. There was no plan. He thought maybe the rope would snap and he could at least smash this set and hope Young didn't have a third. But nothing snapped and nothing fell. The rope took the pressure. Sam even lifted his toes off the ground so he was hanging, and still the rope held.

He put his toes to the stone floor again, realizing what had just happened. His eyes got wide. The gray and white light and the static sound kept on blaring. Sam let go and squinted past the static light for signs of motion, but there were none.

*Could be a trap*, he thought, but there was no point wasting the opportunity.

He didn't think any more about it and reached for the set, curling his fingers around the rope. He put his weight into it once more to be sure. The rope held, so Sam jumped and pulled at the same time with his left hand and threw his right hand up to a higher spot on the rope. Then one hand over the other, he slowly and painfully made his way up the wall. His half thumb throbbing. Blood running down the wrist, pulsing through the bandage fibers.

At the top, it took two attempts to actually pull himself over the lip of the pit. He rolled over the edge and took four deep breaths before he felt he could stand. It was too dark to see, so he took hold of the rope again and hoisted the television set out and held it like a flashlight in front of him. The unsteady white and gray light made unclear projections on the stone wall. He turned the knob just enough to cut the volume, but keep the set running.

Sam made a full circle survey of the room. No Young in sight. Then he saw the door. The same door he passed through on his first visit, and so he knew there was one more before the entrance to the front room. Once there, he aimed the television at the floor and leaned against the wall.

A little light was showing from inside. He shut the television off and inched his way to the door. What sections of the room he could see were empty. No Young. He reached out with his free hand and pushed the door with two fingers, holding the television set up by his shoulder like an axe.

He pushed until the door was all the way open, but still no Young. One lit candle stood burning on the nightstand. One thin line of wax bled across the table's top and dripped down the front and over the drawers. It was quiet. Sam stepped into the room and passed quickly to the opposite wall. The front door was shut tight, except for one small gap that the wind cried into. It cried for a few seconds, then dropped to a hum, then cried again.

To the right was the mattress. To the left he saw a squirrel hide. Back to the right he saw a rifle leaning in a dark corner against the stone. Back left he saw a dirty pan stuck with bits of meat.

The choice was obvious. He went for the rifle, slowly, still fearing that Young might make an appearance. The room was small. Nowhere to hide, but Sam still had his fears and he considered them wise enough. He didn't quite like the idea of living in a hole. And dying in one was no solid option. So Sam ditched the television set and had the rifle now firmly in his grip.

*September, The Kill*

Sam was sliding along the wall towards the front door when he heard two cracks like bones snapping. He slid back to the far corner and pressed himself as flat as he could, with the rifle to his chest. Then the door swung open and a carpet of light touched the nightstand, creating a contrast that cast Sam in near total darkness.

Young stepped through the door with something in his hands that looked like a white piece of cloth. Sam saw it and saw that Young's wool shirt was reversed. The loose front end neck hole was at his back. He had not yet noticed Sam or the rifle aimed at him. He went straight to the nightstand and pulled the drawer open. The candle tipped and some wax was thrown onto the floor. He stood the candle upright and sniffled and wiped his nose with the white cloth and shoved it into the drawer, then shut it and the candle tipped again.

Sam took a slow and difficult breath. Young stood up straight with his back to him, motionless for about ten slow seconds, staring at the hides on his cave wall. Sam nearly spoke, but Young relaxed again as he bent to grab the dirty pan by its handle.

Sam kept quiet with the rifle in his grip. He watched as Young pulled the bottom drawer of the nightstand and lifted nine stones the size of softballs out and set them on the ground. Then he lifted a bundle of sticks tied together with a piece of torn white cloth and set them beside the stones. Then a small can of kerosene and half a rabbit that had been skinned and gutted.

Sam couldn't help wondering how it all fit in that small bottom drawer. But the wonder was interrupted when, like some weird clap of thunder, Young spoke.

"Staying for supper?"



His voice was clear and clean and it sounded to Sam like he could have been a real wonderful country singer if he hadn't already been a sick puppy mother. Living in the woods on half rotten rabbits and who knows what else. Leaving men in dark caverns to die like fallen leaves.

"Nope. I don't think I will be."

Young was setting the stones in a circle on the floor. After putting the ninth stone in place, he turned to look at Sam, who couldn't help but wear his confusion thick on his face. And without knowing why, Sam spoke.

"You know you don't really need the stones," he said, "The floor is already stone. It won't burn nothing, even if you kicked her across the floor."

Young looked even more confused than Sam at that. He turned away and rose slowly to his feet, his back still to Sam, and Sam could see his wool shirt was moving a little.

"Don't, son," said Sam, "Don't you fucking dare or I'll cut you in half."

Young's shirt went still as Sam got his confidence back. He got behind Young and patted his shirt, found a blade in his belt and tossed it to the floor. Then he pulled the pistol Young had stole from him and stuck that in his pocket.

"How's hard time in a prison full of ordinary assholes just dying to chew a hole in you sound?" Sam took a step back, "Alright, let's go."

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Sam held the rifle at Young's back. He marched him out of the

cave and into the woods. Young showed no signs of rebellion and kept to himself all the way to the church. When they got there, they went inside and Sam put a hand on Young's shoulder and sat him down at a pew near the altar, then leaned the rifle against a far wall and rubbed the tension out of his lower back.

Once the priests saw Young in his ragged state, they all took Sam's side and congratulated him. All but Andrew, who took to the kitchen as soon as he knew what was going on.

"You play dangerous," said one priest.

"I believed in you though, Sam," said another,

"I know I should be more forgiving," said yet another, "but it don't seem right sometimes. It's for everyone's good this way. Even Lincoln will learn that's true one day."

"I doubt it highly," said Sam.

Andrew returned with a glass of water and handed it to Sam, who drained it in one gulp.

"The police are on their way," said Andrew.

"Switching sides?" said Sam, "I knew you'd come around."

"I just want you two out of my church."

"Soon enough."

"Is he cuffed?"

Sam rolled his eyes, "I don't have no damn cuffs."

"He's just sitting there loose?"

They all turned to look at Young. Then back to each other.

“He’s unarmed,” said Sam, “I checked.”

Then as if on cue, Young stood up. His arms were inside the wool sweatshirt, like a child keeping warm, and everyone turned again.

“The fuck you doing?” said Sam.

Young threw the sweatshirt over his head and it passed through the still air and draped over a pew four back from where he stood. In the same quick motion, like a magician reveals a bouquet of flowers, he had a revolver up and aimed at Sam.

Young fired, but Sam was already down. He had disappeared into another row about ten aisles back. Young stepped out the pew and walked his way. The priests all ran and Young fired at them in two random blasts. He caught Andrew in the neck and he was down. He gurgled and grabbed at his throat, but the shot was too good. There was no hope for him.

Sam came up with the pistol he pulled from his pocket and pulled the trigger. Click. No bullets. Young had emptied it at some point between blowing Sam’s thumb off and the pat down. Sam dropped back down to the floor.

Young walked the ten aisles between them, but Sam wasn’t there. He fired random at the far wall where the rifle stood. Sam’s head appeared, between the rifle and the door. He chose the door and ran for it. Young fired once more in his direction. A hit.

Sam crashed hard into the double doors and they flew open. A little early evening sunlight came through, and Sam was down in it. The doors tried to close, but Sam’s body held them apart.

“You forget protocol, or you just work on pure faith now, eh pop? Look where that got you,” Young stopped at the doors and looked down at him, “You’ll be dead in about four seconds. You got something to say, you better spit it out.”

Sam was moaning through his teeth. His shirt was red and a puddle was forming fast, trickling down the front steps. He opened his mouth to speak, but Young interrupted him with a bullet. It went up Sam's nose and through his skull. Suddenly there was an extra inch between his eyes that wasn't there before.

Young tossed the now empty revolver onto Sam's chest as the police cars filed into the lot. He was unarmed and barely put up a fight. There were too many of them. He only got one swing in that did little damage before they had him down and cuffed and in a patrol car.

*October, Hoka Hey*

“You killed Sam?”

The investigator had his hands together in a double fist under his chin.

“You already know that.”

“Yes I do. I just want *you* to know it.”

“I know it.”

“Andrew too. He’s dead, if you didn’t know.”

“I guessed as much.”

Young drained his last drop of coffee from the small paper cup.

“So that’s it? That’s the end? All this and no one owed you anything and no one’s at fault for nothing and you can sit in a jail cell for eternity for nothing?”

“That’s about it,” said Young, “Enjoyed my time with the man some call Sam.”

The investigator cleared his throat, dragged a forefinger over the bridge of his nose and shrugged at Henry. The old deputy came forward and put his hand on Young’s shoulder.

“Alright, young man.”

“I like you, Henry,” said Young, “You’re a nice man.”

“Mm hmm.”

Young rose slowly, with an exaggerated strain, before sinking

back down in the chair. Henry took him by the bicep and helped him up.

“Sorry.”

“Aint your fault,” said Henry, with gentle reassurance.

“Actually, Henry, it is.”

Young swung right and had the chains over the old deputy’s neck and was pulling tightly. The old man struggled for air, but Young wasn’t out to kill him. He gave enough slack so the man could breathe.

The investigator shot up, with his hand by his side. By his pistol.

“Hold it, Young. Just calm down.”

“I don’t hate you or this man or anyone,” said Young.

“OK, that’s good. You got a heart, Young. Listen to it. What’s it saying?”

“Nothing,” Young glanced over his shoulder at the two way mirror, “I got to go.”

“Where to? The woods?” the investigator struggled for the words that might calm him down, “What kind of life is waiting for you out there?”

“I got to go, boss. I’m not supposed to be here.”

Young slacked enough to pull the pistol from Henry’s hip, then brought it to his ear and tightened the chain.

“Alright, alright,” the investigator raised his hands in surrender, “Let’s go then.”

He kept his arms up and walked backwards into the hall. A crowd of policemen formed behind him, but he told them to back off. Young came out with Henry. One officer pulled his gun and yelled, and the investigator yelled back.

“Cool it, hick. I’m serious,” shouted the investigator, “Put that shit away and back off.”

The officer did as he was told. Young moved slowly, pushing Henry forward. He scanned the hallway and counted nine officers and the investigator. Three men crowding the stairway.

“Out the way, boys,” ordered Young.

Young and Henry went up the stairs with the investigator shouting at the men to stand down between long lines of negotiator talk straight from the academy. *Let’s work this out, and we’re willing to cooperate.*

The stairs ended at the lobby and the front door. Young got the door open and pulled Henry through it. The investigator followed them out slowly. His hands up. Young ordered him to hand over his keys, which he did.

“It’s the white Tempo there, next to the Jeep.”

Young had Henry unlock the passenger door as more men exited the building.

“Everybody stay cool,” said the investigator.

The door was open and Young backed in, with the chains still over the deputy’s neck. As he shuffled over to the driver’s side, he tugged the chain and Henry sat down in the passenger’s seat and shut the door. Everyone from inside was outside now and watching. Young pulled the chain up over Henry’s head and they both relaxed.

“You OK?”

“Just fine,” said Henry, rubbing at his throat with shaky fingers.

Young started the engine. His chains were loose enough to drive and handle the gun, but not at the same time.

“You know what? You drive, old timer.”

Young pushed himself into the back seat with his feet, like he was jumping out of an airplane. The officers all stood along the sidewalk and watched him.

“I could have taken his ass out seven times, sir,” said one officer from behind the investigator.

“Shut up and stand down.”

“You got a hard on for Injuns, sir?”

“I said shut your fucking mouth. He’s got one of your men, in case you haven’t noticed. You think you’re a good enough shot? I don’t.”

Henry slid over and took the wheel. The cops all stood by as the Tempo began its journey west. They wore their hands by their sides like parade attendees watching the only float go by. Young watched them get smaller through the back window.

“So what now, Young?”

“What now is you drive.”

Young turned and saw the old deputy’s white eyes in the rear view.

“Eyes on the road.”

Henry did as he was told.



“You aint a bad kid, Young. I know you killed Sam and in a pretty cold blooded manner, but I don’t see hate in you. I don’t see anger neither. Not real anger.”

“What do you see then?”

“Not sure. Exhaustion maybe. You got a perpetual weariness in you.”

Young wiped his face with his free hand.

“But I also see an emptiness that you’ve grown far too comfortable with. Dangerously comfortable. It aint healthy, Young.

“Just drive, please.”

“Where to? Tell me that at least.”

“Forward. If there aint no place to rest at the end, how can we get lost on the way?”

“What is that? I know that. What is that?”

“Long dead Japanese fellow.”

“It’s a poem? I didn’t know you cared for poems. Hey, your name’s like a poem, aint it? Young Man something something?”

“Young Man Knows The Smell Of His Own Shit.”

“That aint it. Come on. What’s your name?”

Young dropped the clip on the pistol and checked the ammo, then pushed it back in and cocked it.

“Turn around. We’re going back.”

The old deputy eyed him in the rear view, but did as he was told. The Tempo pulled into the parking lot of a pet shop and circled around and pulled back out.

“Gun it.”

Young put the cold barrel to the back of Henry’s head.

“Gun it,” he said again.

The old man put his foot to the floor. The Tempo moaned and the trees began to fly by. They moved so fast that some of them seemed to be moving forwards instead of backwards.

They had only been driving for ten minutes, but at this speed it took only five to get back to the police station. The cops were gone. The front steps of the police station were empty. Most were inside getting geared up and ready for war. Others were loading shotguns into cruisers out back and grumbling about the federal investigator and how they’d have whooped Young’s ass already.

“Keep it steady.”

Young rolled down his window, leaned out and put four bullets through the front door.

The Tempo flew by and Young pulled back inside and told the deputy to turn around. A U-turn and they were aimed at the police station once more. This time there were a few cops outside. They had their guns drawn and were crouched and looking about like frightened prairie dogs.

The Tempo went by. Young ducked down and stuck his arm out the window and fired four more times. The cops all scattered, but didn’t shoot.

“Back around!” Young hollered.

“I won’t do it,” pleaded Henry.

“Yes you will.”

Young whacked the old man with the butt of the pistol and he jumped and spun the Tempo around.

“Gun it, fucker.”

“We’re both dead if we go back. You know that, right?”

“They wouldn’t shoot at a fellow officer. Not one as old and kind as you.”

“Real sweet, boy, but you’re fucking with some edgy rednecks. They will fire this time, I promise you that.”

The Tempo was nearly at the police station again. Nine officers on the stairway with riot shields and helmets and guns drawn. Some pistols. Some shotguns.

“Sorry, Henry.”

“That’s OK.”

Young leaned out the back window. Pistol up and aimed.

“Hoka Hey, fuckers!”

Young got seven shots off and two of them cracked a riot shield. The cops all fired. The Tempo took most of it. Holes the size of baseballs all over. Henry took the edge of a shotgun blast in the neck. The blood was plenty and ran thick as a river down his left side. His old head dropped to the driver’s side window. The door was soon red.

The Tempo spun a little and was aimed at the woods. Young got hit in the left arm and drew back inside just as the car smashed into a tree and stopped dead.

The officers surrounded the Tempo, which was silent, except for the hissing of a wounded engine. The back left door kicked open.

“Come on out, hands up. Don’t make us kill you.”

“Alright, fine!” came the voice of Young from somewhere inside.

He was cursing as they dragged his broken body out the back seat.

## *The End*

Young Man Afraid Of His Horses spent a few months in prison before he was killed by his cellmate over a packet of instant coffee. There was more to it than that, but months of bickering and brawling ended that day with Young shanked in the back.

The only life he ever mourned was the old deputy's. Henry's. He thought it was a shame and that's all. Just a shame. He never thought about it any deeper than that.

He rarely thought about Lincoln or even his father. Every violent moment in his life was independent of the others, and maybe way back he had a goal of some sort, but that time had passed.

The next year, sometime in April, when the news had all but killed Young itself, there came another man. Another Oglala claiming to be Thasunke Khokiphapi. A Data Analyst for some big bank in Omaha. Said he told his story to many folks in many bars over many drunk years before sobering up and joining the league of family men.

The reform school and the war that broke out the day his daddy died. He knew it all in detail. More detail than Young ever gave. More passion in his telling it too.

It was then told by the cellmate, in a detailed interview, that Young had once confessed to being half white. Said it was his only regret. And that Young prayed to the Sun every night. Or it sounded like it, he said. Said it irked him awful how much Young moaned about the Sun.

“Even in his sleep, he cried out for it.”

Sun.