

“AN EYE FOR AN EYE, LEAVES US ALL BLIND!”

Dedicated to Crowfoot and the staff of DSC

THE PREACHER MAN

By ERRATIC CHEESE

Isabella woke up suddenly. She was late!

The nineteen year old kicked off the covers and leapt out of bed, pulling her thick cotton robe over her shoulders as she did so. She grabbed her wristwatch from the nightstand and glanced at its indifferent face. Six thirty-five! She had twenty minutes to get to work!

Isabella raced downstairs, mentally calendaring her time. Five minutes to run down to the river, five minutes to bathe, ten minutes to run to town . . .

It was possible, but she had to hurry.

“Isabella, slow down!” Her mother called out.

“Momma, I’m late. I’ve got to go!” Isabella skidded to a halt and found herself in the family’s tiny kitchen. Pots and pans hung drably above the sink, while cheap cutlery glinted away like counterfeit diamonds.

“You have time for breakfast.”

“No time.” Isabella argued. “Time to go.”

She darted into the laundry room and scanned the clothesline. Skirt, blouse, stockings, underwear . . . shoes? Where were her shoes? She grabbed the clothes off the line and bundled them in her arms, all the while trying to recollect where she had left her footwear the night before.

“Momma, where are my-”

Her mother walked in with a smile, the pair of cheap black shoes in one hand and a paper-wrapped sandwich in the other.

“Thanks momma.” Isabella planted a wet kiss on her mother’s cheek and raced back through the kitchen and out into the small living room.

“Slow down!” Her father ordered, sitting on a ragged couch and cleaning an antique hunting rifle. “You’re gonna slip n’ break your neck!”

“Bye Pa!” She said reflexively, stuffing the sandwich into a pocket and nudging the front door open with her shoulder. “I’ll see you later.”

“Okay.” Her dad called out. “Have a good day at work!”

“I will.” Isabella promised. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Her dad replied, but young Isabella was already half way to Needle Creek.

* * *

Spring had set in, and already the pine needles were beginning to fall from the trees. The entire river surface was covered with leaves, all racing downstream like a pretty little chlorophyll flotilla.

Isabella reached the river ahead of schedule. She skipped up to the riverbank and quickly dropped her robe. She set her clothes and sandwich down on a nearby cluster of rocks and inhaled deeply, the fresh country air filling her lungs. She then tore off her pyjamas, slid out of her thin cotton panties and tentatively stepped into the frigid, early morning water.

Isabella bathed her naked body. She closed her eyes and dipped her head under the water, feeling the river rushing above her. She surfaced moments later, grabbed a small bar of soap from a nearby knot of rocks, and began lathering her breasts with urgency.

Isabella glanced at her watch again. Six forty! Old Mister Kenneth Kline would be opening the shop soon. Isabella had never been late to work before, but old Mister Kline wasn’t the sort of man to take past actions into account. He’d surely fire her without remorse. And when a small town like

Port Hamilton had more people populating it than it did businesses to run, she was sure the old man would have no problem finding a replacement.

Isabella returned the bar of soap to the rock cropping and exited the river. She grabbed her robe and was about to sling it over her shoulders when she stopped suddenly, feeling the weight of eyes staring ominously at her naked body . . .

She looked up.

Six men stood there, large grins on their faces.

“Lookey what we got here, boys.” One of the men said, twin revolvers dangling from a leather hip harness.

“It ain’t good manners to be spying on a girl while she washes!” Isabella frantically pulled on her robe and tightened the straps.

“My apologies little lady.” The same man said. “If I’d known you were gonna be down here, I wouldn’t have brought my friends.”

The man took a step towards Isabella . . .

“Cus’ I ain’t the kinda guy, likes to share a pretty woman with another man!”

He darted forward and grabbed Isabella by the neck, his muscular grip forcing the young girl to her knees.

“Let go of me! Let go!” Isabella screamed, both in pain and with hopes of her cries falling upon helpful ears.

“Shut up!” The man slapped Isabella, her lip bursting, blood trickling down her chin.

“Stop it! Stop it!”

The man leaned forward and kissed her bloodied lips. He ripped open her robe and worked his way down her neck and breasts, leaving blood stained lip prints along her body like decorations on a Valentines Day card.

Isabella tried to push him away, but he was much too strong. He pinned her down against the rocks and spread her legs, his tongue snaking it's way down her quivering stomach. The girl squirmed in his grip, her cold naked flesh still slick with river water . . .

“Don't be hogging the lady, Carson.” Another of the men said.

“Shut the fuck up and wait your turn, Gus!” Carson pushed Isabella away and stood up. “I've pumped many a man's face full a' bullets for far less than annoyance!”

“I'm just suggesting-”

With one swift motion, Carson grabbed his gun and fired two shots into Gus's head. The man collapsed onto the rocks, dead. Blood oozed from the twin bullet holes in his skull . . .

“Anyone else wanna start makin' suggestions?” Carson let his gaze drift over the other four men.

“Nope.” They said in unison, shaking their heads and backing away from their gun-slinging leader.

“Good.” Carson returned the smoking weapon to its holster and turned to face Isabella.

She was panting heavily, a look of pure fear in her eyes. The remaining five men had formed a loose circle around her. They had her boxed in. Caged like an animal! Maybe if she ran fast enough and pushed hard enough, she could escape. Maybe if she screamed loud enough, someone would come running to her assistance . . .

“What's your name, little lady?” Carson unbuckled his guns and let the holster drop to the ground.

“Is...Is..Isabella.” The girl said weakly.

“Well Isabella,” Carson slid off his pants with a sadistic grin, “you ever been raped by a man before?”

* * *

Isabella's father, Mister Ralph Tobias, tossed the dust-cloth aside and held the gleaming rifle up before his eyes. He had polished the weapon with such vigour, that he could now see his own reflection shimmering across the muzzle.

The rifle was over sixty years old and fired ball-shaped lead slugs, as laser technology was scarce in this part of the universe. Eager to test the old gun, Ralph Tobias grabbed a box of bullets from a nearby shelf and stepped out onto the front porch. The old floorboards creaked beneath his faded leather boots.

"Keep playin' with that there gun and you're liable to shoot yourself in the toe!" His wife, Clair Tobias, called out. She was out in the garden, planting flowers with a small spade and bucket.

"Keep plantin' them damned flowers and they're liable to spring legs n' run away!" He countered with a chuckle.

It was then that the radiophone sounded, startling the forty-nine year old man. He set the gun down and re-entered the living room, snatching the phone up with a polish-scented hand.

"Now you look here, Mister Tobias." Old Mister Kenneth Kline's voice erupted over the small speaker. "I ain't the kinda man does take kindly to his employees takin' days off without givin' me notice."

"Mister Kline?" Ralph asked. "Why, Isabella left for work almost an hour ago."

"Well she mighta left for work, but she certainly ain't at work!"

"Listen Mister Kline, I'm sure there must be some reason-"

"I'm too old for reasons, Mister Tobias!" Kline growled. "You tell that daughter of yours that she's fired! Good day to you."

Isabella's father set the phone down, a look of confusion washing over his face. It wasn't like Isabella to miss a day of . . .

Suddenly a ghostly shriek filled the room. His wife!

"Claire!"

Ralph Tobias darted out of the living room and onto the front porch, his eyes whip-panning across the garden to where his wife had been pottering. Claire's spade and bucket lay unattended. Deserted like orphans. His wife was nowhere in sight!

"Claire!" Ralph shouted again.

He grabbed his gun and ran out into the garden, scanning the leafy surroundings for his wife. He only had one shot in the rifle. He hoped that one bullet would be enough . . .

"Ralph! Oh Ralph! Come quick!"

Her voice was coming from behind the house! Ralph broke into a sprint and raced to the back of their home . . .

His jaw dropped. His heart seemed to stop . . .the fist-shaped organ slackening for a painful moment.

"Isabella!" He cried.

His daughter was at the far end of the garden, naked, on her knees, her face swollen and bruised. The poor girl was gasping for breath, maroon bloodstains marring her once beautiful body.

"Oh God!"

He ran toward her, his face contorting with disgust as the details became more apparent. Isabella's bleeding eyes were swollen shut, her breasts were cut, her left arm hung limply from its socket at an impossible angle . . .

Oh God! Who had done this to his baby!

* * *

“Jimmy Carson.” The Sheriff said, puffing on his cigar. “We found one of his men shot dead, down by the river.”

“Jimmy Carson?” Ralph Tobias asked weakly.

“Murderer, bandit, rapist, outlaw.” The Sheriff nodded ominously. “What my dear-ole-granny used to call an all round bad egg.”

The duo sat in the Sheriff’s office, smack dab in the middle of town. Sheriff Willey was a jovial looking sort of man. With plump features and a large moustache, he had the kind of face you’d paint on a bucket to advertise stir-fried chicken.

“I want this Jimmy Carson caught, Sheriff.” Ralph’s eyes narrowed to slits. “I want him hanged!”

“Ain’t gonna be easy, Ralph.” Sheriff Willey stood up and moved over to a nearby window. “Carson’s been a gunslinger all his life. I’ve had deputies combing the desert, looking for him for the past 2 years.”

“Well why haven’t they found that dirty son-of-a-bitch?”

“Well you see those deputies, they all have one thing in common.” The Sheriff turned to face Ralph. “They’re all dead.”

Ralph Tobias paused for a moment. “You tellin’ me there ain’t nothin’ you can do?”

“I ain’t saying that, Ralph.” The Sheriff said. “I’m just saying that Port Hamilton is a small town. We ain’t got the manpower for this kinda manhunt.”

Sheriff Willey folded his arms and sighed. “Fact is, nobody gives a rat’s ass what happens down here. Ain’t like we got no fancy Battle robots-”

“BattleMechs.”

“Yeah.” The Sheriff nodded. “Ain’t like we got no fancy BattleMechs to help uphold the law.”

“I got me some money.” Ralph Tobias whipped out his wallet. “Maybe you can put a bounty on Carson.”

“Ain’t gonna help.” Sheriff Willey dabbed his cigar against his stained tabletop. “My deputies are already up to their necks, jus’ tryin’ to keep this town free of trouble. Now you’re tellin’ me, you want me to send those boys out there looking for this crazy gunslinger, Jimmy Carson?”

The Sheriff laughed and shook his head. “Money or no money, those boys’ll quit and retire before that order leaves my mouth.”

“So what do you expect me to do?” Ralph asked, his voice almost inaudible. “Just sit by while my daughter’s rapists live free?”

“Listen Ralph . . .” Sheriff Willey sat back down behind his desk. “I can’t imagine what you and the family must be going through. Heck, I’ve known Claire and you all my life. You’re good, fine, upstanding folk. But maybe . . . maybe you should be thankin’ the Dear-Ole-Lord that Isabella came through this thing alive.”

Ralph Tobias stood up, a murderous rage in his eyes. “Good day to you Sheriff.”

“Now wait one moment, Ralph!” Sheriff Willey called out. “I ain’t saying I won’t help you. I’m just sayin’ it’s gonna be a little difficult, that’s all.”

“You’ve said enough, Sheriff.”

“Don’t go takin’ the law into your own hands, Ralph.” The Sheriff warned. “You’re an old man now. Don’t do nothin’ foolish.”

Ralph headed for the doorway. “Foolish is me comin’ here expectin’ your help!”

“Don’t say that Ralph.” The Sheriff stood up. “Just be patient. Justice has a way of workin’ out.”

“No.” Ralph Tobias shook his head. “There ain’t no justice here.”

* * *

Several miles away, in the neighbouring town of Port Allistor, Jimmy Carson and his henchmen entered the local boarding house. They stepped into a small reception area, their mud encased boots staining the timber floorboards.

“All our rooms are booked!” Croaked an old man seated behind a crusty desk. “Unless you folk planning on killing another of me guests!”

“Shut up old man!” Jimmy Carson spat. “Tell me where Celina’s at!”

“She ain’t here!”

Carson pulled back his coat and yanked out his gun. “Don’t fuck with me, old-timer!”

The old guy gulped. “Room twelve.”

“Much obliged.”

Carson shot the guy, right between the eyes.

* * *

Carson kicked open the doors and stepped into the cramped apartment. Celina lay on a tiny bed, her palms resting on her pregnant stomach.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding?” Carson hissed.

The girl bolted upright, a sudden look of horror washing over her face. “Jimmy, what are you doing here?”

“Made my daily quota for whisky, pussy and food.” Carson walked towards her, a devilish snarl affixed to his face. “Figured I’d start the day early and hunt down my bastard wife, like the dirty whore of a dog she is!”

“Go away Jimmy!” She stood up and defensively wrapped her arms around her swollen belly. “Harry’ll be here soon!”

Carson grabbed her by the neck and tossed the woman to the floor. She fell hard, her knees and palms slamming against the floor with a sickening THUD.

“Harry?” Carson loomed tall over her. “That the cocksucker you’ve been hangin’ out with?”

“Don’t do this Jimmy. . .”

Carson whipped out his pistol and aimed it at her pregnant stomach.

“Who’d you pay to kill me off?” Carson yelled.

The girl looked back at him, dumbfounded. “Wh-what?”

“Who the hell did you send after me?!”

“No one, Jimmy . . . Baby, baby, what are you talking about?”

“Don’t lie to me, Cee.” Carson fumed. “I’ve seen him in my nightmares. Every fucking time I close my eyes, he’s right there, staring back at me! A bounty hunter from hell!”

“Jimmy, I swear to God,” she cried, “I don’t know what ya talking about!”

Carson knelt down and jammed the muzzle of his pistol hard against her swollen stomach. Tears streaked down the girl’s cheeks, her lips quivering with fright . . .

“What’s wrong Cee?” Carson asked. “Why ya crying? Do you find me sadistic?”

“Jimmy baby, please . . . just . . . just calm down.”

“I’m perfectly calm!” Carson yelled. “I asked you a question and I want a fuckin’ answer!”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Who did you send after me?!”

“Baby, no one!”

“Who did you-”

“No one!”

Carson sighed and stood up. “I’m gonna ask you one more time, Cee. You feed me this innocent girl bullshit and I’m gonna blow that son-of-a-bitch’s baby out from under you!”

“It’s your baby, Jimmy.” She cried. “It’s your baby . . .”

“WHO DID YOU SEND AFTER ME!” Carson yelled.

“Jimmy I don’t-”

He shot her twice in the stomach, her belly exploding, geysers of blood and skin splattering against the floorboards.

* * *

Ralph Tobias entered Curly’s Tavern and coughed. The air was thick with tobacco smoke, the overhead ceiling fans churning up the fumes and dispersing the vulgar scent evenly throughout the room. Off in one corner, billiard balls clattered violently with a hollow thud, while a nearby jukebox played “Sweet Dixie” for the third time in a row.

“Mornin’ Curly.” Ralph pulled himself up onto a vacant barstool. “Pour me a skinny, will ya.”

“God damn, Ralph. I heard what happened to ya daughter.” Curly whispered.

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“I understand.” Curly handed Ralph a foamy mug of brew. “Here’s one on the house.”

“Thanks.”

It was then that a hand reached out and tapped Ralph on the shoulder, jolting him as he tried to sip at his beer.

“What do you want?” Ralph asked, turning around.

A man stood there, about thirty-five years old, his face hardened by the sun. The stranger had a pair of revolvers dangling from twin hip harnesses and wore a black duster, heavy leather boots and a sheepskin jacket. But what stood out most about the guy was the silver chain hanging limply from his neck. The chain had a large silver cross, about the size of a man’s palm, attached to the end.

“I want your seat.” The stranger said simply, his voice intense.

“There’s a free stool right over there.” Ralph argued.

“Yours got a better view.”

Ralph Tobias knew better than to argue with a man with a cross and a gun.

“She’s yours.” Ralph slid off the chair and took the free stool next to it.

“Thanks” The stranger grunted.

Curly the bartender had already spotted the new customer and so quickly approached the stranger with a smile.

“Hey Preacher!” Curly joked, pointing at the cross. “What ya wanna drink? Holy water? HAHHAHA!”

The hunched over booze junkies at the bar all belly laughed at that one. It was a good joke. But in a town like this, a good joke could get ya killed.

“I ain’t here to drink.” The stranger raised his gaze slightly.

“Well, what ya here for?” Curly asked.

The stranger ignored the question. “I gotta joke for you too.”

Across the room the jukebox stopped playing.

“A joke for me?” Curly asked, a bit unsure as to what a guy carrying a palm sized cross around his neck considered to be a joke.

“Yeah.” The Preacher said, his voice monotone. “A man walks into a bar . . . shoots five men dead.”

“That it?”

“One of ‘em men is the bartender.”

Pause.

“That joke ain’t funny.”

“It ain’t that kinda joke.”

And with one smooth motion the Preacher half-spun around, whipped out his pistol, and fired four shots . . .

Four dead bodies collapsed in the tavern. Three far across the room and hidden in darkness, one behind the bar and wearing a nametag with the word “Curly” stencilled in big black letters.

“Holy sheeet!” The tavern clientele gasped, totally startled by the sudden bloodbath.

The Preacher stood up and scanned the room. It was clear to those all around that he meant business.

“I came here to kill five men.” The Preacher’s voice filled the tavern. “I’ve killed four. One’s missing.”

The Preacher waded his way through the maze of tables and drunks, his newfound congregation trembling with fear.

“Kenneth Joyce, I know you’re in here.” The Preacher said. “I saw you come in. And ain’t no fat man small enough to squeeze through them windows.”

The Preacher un-holstered his second gun. With a weapon in each hand, he cautiously advanced towards the rear of the tavern.

“Kenneth Joyce.” The Preacher repeated. “Fat man like you, can’t hide for long.”

Kenneth Joyce stepped out of the bathroom. “I’m over here.”

The Preacher raised his guns and pointed them at the fat man. “I’ve been looking for you and your friends for a very long time.”

“Are you here to kill me?”

“Not before you get on your knees and make your Peace with God.” The Preacher ordered.

“If it’s more money you want . . . I’ve got some.” Kenneth Joyce stammered. “You don’t have to kill me.”

“When I’m paid, I always follow my job through.” The Preacher stepped towards Kenneth. “You know that.”

“Please . . . don’t do this.” Kenneth pleaded. “I’m sorry for . . . I didn’t mean to do it . . . please forgive me.”

“Get on your knees.”

“But-”

“Get on your knees!”

The fat man collapsed to his knees, beads of sweat cascading down his face, suicidal globs of perspiration nose-diving off his nostrils.

“I beg you, please! Please don’t do this. You must forgive me!”

“Forgiveness is between you and God. I just arrange the meeting.”

BANG!

The stranger shot Kenneth Joyce in the head. Blood spewed everywhere, bits of skull and skin splattering against the faces of everyone nearby.

Everyone in the tavern gasped.

The Stranger holstered his weapons and exited the bar.

* * *

Ralph Tobias darted out into the streets, searching frantically for the stranger. He panned his gaze up and down the sidewalks, frenetically scanning the crowds for the mysterious man. Then he spotted him! Halfway up the street and heading westwards towards a dingy hotel called *La Hoya*.

“Hey!” Ralph called out. “Preacher!”

The stranger turned around, grabbed Ralph by the neck and slammed him hard against a wall. “Ain’t nobody calls me Preacher! Nobody!”

“But those men at the bar,” Ralph stammered, “they all called you . . .”

“And they’re all dead!”

Ralph Tobias gulped. “Why . . . why did you kill them?”

The stranger loosened his grip on Ralph and took a step back. "A man's gotta do somethin' for a livin' these days."

"Killin' ain't much of a living."

"Beats dyin'." The stranger continued walking.

"You're a bounty hunter." Ralph stated.

"I do the Lords work."

"Why did you kill that fat man?"

"I like killin' big fat men." The stranger hissed. "When they fall they make more noise."

Ralph didn't find the morbid joke, funny. "Is that the only reason?"

"It's all the reason I need."

"Listen, I know you're a gunslinger." Ralph stated. "I want you to work for me."

"Get yourself a maid."

"I ain't joking mister." Ralph insisted. "I ain't got much money, but I'll pay you whatever it takes. Whatever it takes for ya to kill the rotten son-of-a-bitch that gone and raped my daughter."

The stranger stopped in his tracks. He turned to face Ralph.

"What did you say?"

"My little girl, Isabella." Ralph said weakly "A gang led by a fella named Jimmy Carson . . . they gone and had their way with her. Cut her face. Cut her titties. They raped my pretty little angel. All but beat her to death."

The Preacher frowned. It was a glorious frown, full of deep thought and morbid contemplation. He then produced a large cigar from his belt and lit

one end with a small steel lighter. He bit down on the cigar with his lips, clenching the tobacco while he took a long, hard, puff.

“Rape ain’t a nice thing.” The Preacher finally said.

Ralph swallowed. “I want you to kill Jimmy Carson. Hunt him down, and kill him!”

The Preacher continued down the sidewalk and came to a halt outside the Hotel *La Hoya*. He studied the building carefully, paying particular attention to the steel-lattice fire escape that ran along the left face of the Hotel.

“I gotta kill a couple’a fellas inside.” The Preacher said. “Why don’t ya come with me?”

* * *

The main lobby of the Hotel *La Hoya* was no fancy affair. A pair of half-dead potted plants sat on either side of a peeling reception desk, tended to by a young clerk, about twenty years of age.

“I’m looking for Mister Paulson.” The Preacher told the clerk. “What room is he in?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t disclose that information.” The clerk replied.

The Preacher slammed his guns down on the counter.

“Yes. Mister . . . uh . . . Paulson.” The clerk frantically flipped through the large paper ledger. “He’s staying in room seventy seven. Second floor.”

The Preacher puffed on his cigar twice before blowing the smoke back at the kid. “I want you to call the telephone up in Mister Paulson’s room. Tell him I’m coming up to see him.”

The clerk nodded and picked up the phone. “Who . . . who should I say is coming up to see him?”

“Kenneth Joyce.” The Preacher said. “Tell him Kenneth Joyce is coming up.”

“Okay.” The clerk nodded and dialed the number for room seventy-seven.

The Preacher spat out his cigar and then turned to face Ralph Tobias.

“Go up to room seventy-seven,” the Preacher said, “knock on the door, but keep your back against the wall.”

“Hey now, wait just a minute-” Ralph started to protest.

“You do as I say and I promise to nail the dirty son-of-a-bitch who raped your daughter.” The Preacher snapped.

“But where’re you going?”

“Outside.” The Preacher turned and headed for the Hotel exit.

* * *

Up in room seventy-seven, the telephone rang. Mickey Paulson answered it.

“Was that room service?” Ned Claymore asked, when Paulson had set down the phone. “I ain’t had my breakfast yet.”

“Get ready.” Paulson shook his head. “Hell is coming to breakfast.”

“What?” Ned asked.

“Kenneth Joyce is on his way up!”

“Kenneth Joyce?” Ned’s eyes widened. “But you said the fat man was dead.”

“He is, but that Preacher Man ain’t!” Paulson stated. “Get the guns!”

Paulson and Ned raced into a nearby bedroom and lifted a dank mattress to reveal a pair of sawn-off shotguns. They each took a gun and cocked the muzzles.

“He’s gonna kill us, Paulie.” Ned trembled “I seen the angel of death, he’s got snake eyes, just like this Preacher man.”

“Ain’t nothin to worry about!” Paulson assured his friend. “When that son-of-a-bitch comes through the front door, we just keep on firing. Come on!”

They darted back into the main room and assumed firing positions to the left and right of the front door. Ned’s shotgun quivered in his timid grip, the wooden handled weapon bobbing up and down.

“Shhh!” Paulson ordered. “I hear footsteps coming up the corridor.”

The footsteps stopped.

Silence, then . . .

A deep knocking at the door.

“Who is it?” Paulson asked, his shotgun still pointed at the door.

No response.

“I said, who is it?” Paulson repeated.

Again, no response.

“Should we fire?” Ned whispered.

“Blow the son-of-a-bitch away!” Paulie ordered.

The duo opened fire, their bullets tearing away at the door. Bits of wood spiralled in the air, cascading in all directions as the shotguns chewed away at the timber. Then, after about fifty seconds of incessant firing, the two men lowered their weapons.

“You think we hit him?” Ned asked.

“I think we frightened him awa-”

Suddenly Paulie’s head exploded from behind, his forehead cracking in two as blood and brains spewed forward.

Ned shrieked with fright. He backed away from his dead companion and turned around to see the Preacher, stepping off of the fire escape and climbing through the bedroom window.

“Drop the gun, Ned.” The Preacher ordered, his pistols unwavering.

“But we had a deal.” Ned stammered, beads of sweat streaking down his face.

“Sorry Ned, but when I’m paid I always follow my job through.” The Preacher said. “You know that.”

“You ain’t gonna kill me.” Ned insisted, though he didn’t quite believe his own words.

“I ain’t killing ya till you give me the combination to your safe.”

“I wouldn’t give you the combination to the gates of hell!” Ned spat.

“That’s okay.” The Preacher cocked his weapon. “I got that one already.”

The Preacher shot Ned twice in the heart. The man’s chest exploded, a thin spray of crimson blood skittering across the faded Hotel carpet.

* * *

Ralph Tobias and the Preacher exited the Hotel, the morning sunlight beating down upon their solemn faces.

“You’re bleedin’.” Ralph pointed out.

“Ain’t my blood.”

“Who were those two men?” Ralph asked.

“Clients.” The stranger said with a lethargic frown. “Kenneth Joyce paid me to kill them.”

“And who paid you to kill Kenneth Joyce?” Ralph asked.

“They did.”

Ralph stopped in his tracks. “You played them against one another?”

“When a man's got money in his pocket he begins to appreciate peace.”

“And how much money does it take, till ya stop killin’?”

“Depends.” The Preacher said. “How much is killin’ Jimmy Carson worth to ya?”

Ralph said nothing loudly then whispered: “So where we goin’ now?”

The stranger continued walking. “Man’s gotta eat, same as worms.”

* * *

Debbie’s Diner was a small joint nestled on the outskirts of town. In the olden days, when agriculture here in Port Hamilton was thriving proper, the building used to house a seedy holo-theatre, dubbed “Jerk-off Palace” by the locals. They specialised in raunchy skin flicks and ran a special six o’ clock showing, every afternoon, for the cotton pickers and AgroMech pilots.

“This place got good food, old timer?” The Preacher asked a toothless old man at the Diner entrance.

“I ain’t ever been inside.” The senile old man said. “But if ya want, I’ll sell ya this piece of hard rock candy.”

The old man held up a chunk of translucent red candy. “But it ain’t for eatin’. It’s just for lookin’ through.”

The Preacher cracked a smile and stepped into the Diner. Overhead ceiling fans stabbed away at the morning air while a sexy maid in a short skirt tended to a customer. To their left, a chubby bald guy worked the counter, his heavy fingers pattering mindlessly against the till.

“Why don’t ya order us somtin’ to eat?” The Preacher glanced outside before turning to face Ralph. “I gotta use the facilities.”

Ralph nodded and watched as the Preacher disappeared into the diner’s rear bathroom.

“What’ll it be, partner?” The guy at the counter asked.

Ralph scanned the menu. “What ya got, that’s real cheap?”

“Well, you can get a mangy piece of chewed up corn sandwich for bout’ a half cred’.” The guy said, dead serious.

Suddenly a voice bellowed from behind Ralph.

“Hey you!”

Ralph turned to see a pair of deputies standing at the Diner entrance. They were young, about twenty-three years old, and had their uniform sleeves rolled up for business.

“We saw a big fella come in here.” One deputy said. “Wears a cross around the neck.”

“I seen him, officer!” The guy at the counter said. “He just moseyed on into the crap-house!”

The deputies nodded, drew their weapons, and cautiously approached the rear of the diner. Tentatively, their pistols held in a vice-like grip before them, they entered the bathroom.

“Looks like your friend got caught with his pants down.” The guy at the counter chuckled.

“I ain’t so sure.” Ralph said.

Two gunshots later and the Preacher stepped out of the bathroom, a thick plume of smoke streaking upwards from his left holster.

“Holy sheeet!” The guy at the counter whistled. “You done killed them two law men!”

The Preacher nodded. “To hell with them fellas. Ain’t yo mamma ever told you, it’s a sin to creep up on a man while he’s on the crapper?”

“Well shucks.” The guy grinned. “How bout I fix you up some grub? On the house, of course. Debbie don’t like me charging folk like you.”

The Preacher sat down and awaited his food.

* * *

Twenty minutes later.

The Preacher crossed the dusty streets and headed further downtown. He walked with purpose, his gaze unwavering, his eyes focused and determined.

“You still ain’t told me your name.” Ralph said.

“I ain’t got one.” The Preacher replied.

“Well me, they call me Ralph.” Ralph said. “Ralph Tobias.”

The Preacher said nothing.

“So where we goin’, Mister Man With No Name?” Ralph Tobias asked.

“One last stop.” The stranger said simply.

“Then what? You gonna kill Carson or not?” Ralph asked. “I’ve been following you all around town, watching you take care of business and you still ain’t given me a definite answer.”

“I like you Ralph.” The Preacher said. “You’re a serious man.”

“Yeah?” Ralph sighed. “Well, I’m glad you feel that way.”

“You shouldn’t be glad.” The Preacher hissed. “When I get to likin’ someone, they usually ain’t around long.”

“I notice when you get to DISlikin’ someone they ain’t around for much long neither.”

The Preacher smiled. “You still ain’t told me why you want this Jimmy Carson dead.”

“I told you, he raped my daughter.”

“Yeah.” The Preacher nodded. “But do you want justice or revenge?”

“Revenge.” Ralph said, without batting an eyelid.

The Preacher produced another cigar and lit its business end. He inhaled the tobacco, thick plumes of smoke venting from his nostrils. “Revenge is a dangerous thing, Ralph. You swear revenge on a man, you better be sure you can shoot him down before he shoots you, because revenge . . . it ain’t ever gonna stop coming. Ain’t gonna stop till you’re dead n’ buried.”

“Is that what they teach you at Bible school?”

“No. That’s what you learn on the streets.”

“Then why do you wear that cross around your neck?” Ralph asked. “You afraid of dyin’?”

“I ain’t afraid of dying.” The Preacher said firmly. “Bullets dance off of me.”

* * *

They approached a large apartment complex, about four stories tall. The redbrick structure loomed high above them, its walls flaking paint, its edges jagged and ugly. The building looked like Satan himself was the architect.

“Up on the third floor is a room with seven men and one safe.” The Preacher explained. “In that safe is my money.”

“Do you really think you can shoot down seven men before they shoot you?”

The Preacher nodded. “God wants those men dead, and I wanna collect my earnings.”

“Why don’t you just ask them?”

“Because one of those men is the brother of Ned Claymore and another is the brother of Mickey Paulson.” The Preacher said. “And they deserve a chance at killin’ me.”

“Well don’t get yourself killed.” Ralph warned. “You and I, we have a deal.”

“I know.” The Preacher nodded. “But right now, Jimmy Carson’s the last man on my death list.”

* * *

The Preacher entered the apartment complex and quickly scanned his surroundings. A pair of rusty elevator doors lay directly ahead of him, while a spiralling staircase coiled its way up the left side of the building.

The Preacher stepped into the elevator and pressed the “3” button. The doors slid shut. The lift creaked upwards . . .

Alone in the elevator car, the Preacher removed his right revolver and checked the barrels. They were all full.

Second Floor.

The Preacher removed his left revolver and checked the barrels. Two empty chambers stared blankly, back up at him. He slid a bullet into each vacant cavity and then holstered the weapon.

Third floor.

The elevator cart jolted to a halt. With a hellish whine, the doors slid open to reveal a narrow corridor about fifteen meters long and lined with vomit-inducing maroon carpet.

The overhead lights flickered.

The Preacher walked down the corridor and came to a halt before door number sixty-four. He pressed his ear against the door and listened. Silence. Too quiet.

The Preacher eased the door open and stepped inside the cramped apartment
...

Seven men stood there, guns strapped firmly to their waists.

“You men better get on your knees and make your Peace with God.” The Preacher boldly said. “Confess your sins before I start my killin’.”

“You’ve been doin’ a lot of killin’ today, Preacher man!” Willy Claymore snapped. “But up until you killed my brother Ned, I didn’t give a damn!”

“I came here for my money, Willy.” The Preacher said. “Now open that safe and hand it to me.”

“We ain’t paying you shit!”

“Now Willy, your brother and I, we had a deal.” The Preacher explained. “I took care of his business. You break my contract and I ain’t gonna like that. I’m gonna have to get a little rowdy with you fellas.”

Willy laughed and yanked out a knife. “A little rowdy? You hear that boys? He’s gonna get a little rowdy with us!”

The men laughed.

The Preacher's eyes narrowed to slits. "You're gonna look pretty silly with that knife sticking outta your ass, Willy."

Willy fell silent. "They say you're fast on the draw, Preacher Man."

"I'm inclined to agree with that."

"Well you may be a fast hand with a gun," Willy said, "but ain't no man can quick-draw n' kill seven men."

"I was only plannin' on killing six." The Preacher hissed. "Somebody's gotta tell me the combination to that safe."

Willy snarled. "You're a dead man, Preacher!"

"Well you boys better pull your pistols." The Preacher seethed. "Cus' I'm done talkin'."

* * *

Ten minutes later and the Preacher stepped out of the apartment complex, his left arm dripping blood . . .

"You're bleeding." Ralph gasped.

The Preacher had a large bullet hole in his left arm. The wound oozed blood, maroon clumps coagulating into pulpy scabs.

"No I ain't." The Preacher shook his head, seemingly oblivious to the wound.

"Your arm's been shot!"

"Ignorin's the fastest way to stop bleeding." The Preacher explained. "Just leave it be."

“Did you get your money?”

The Preacher nodded. “I just wish I had time to bury them fellas.”

* * *

Several miles away, in the neighbouring town of Port Allistor, Jimmy Carson and his henchmen entered the local Saloon. They pushed the doors open and scanned the dimly lit room, feeling curious gazes weighing heavy on their shoulders.

“Hey waiter!” Carson yelled. “What say you fix me and my boys up with some sweet pumpkin pie!”

Carson and his men joined two tables together and sat down, perching their mud encased boots up upon the sleek tabletop.

“Lookey there at that fair lady-girl across by the bar.” Carson whistled. “I’ll be damned if that ain’t the prettiest face I seen in years.”

Across the room and standing at the bar was a female specimen worthy of heaven itself. Her oak brown hair cascaded over her shoulders, her lips sculpted to a permanent pout, inviting and delicious.

Rico, one of Carson’s burly cronies, nodded. “A woman like that don’t venture a place like this, unless she got a man close by.”

“I’ve pumped many a man’s face full a’ bullets for far less than acquirin’ a pretty lady.” Carson reminded them.

“Thought you don’t kill on a weekend, boss?” Another henchman asked.

“Is that what day it is?”

“Sunday, if my calendar piece is right.”

Carson shook his head. “Well, I ain’t ever had much use for calendars.”

A pair of waiters arrived and set down six plates and jugs. The thick pumpkin pies glistened deliciously in their plates, wafting sweet aromas.

“Well I’ll be damned.” Carson looked down at his pie. “This some mighty lookin’ pie!”

Carson was about to take his first bite when a gunshot sounded from behind. The bullet zipped over his head and struck a poker player several meters away.

Carson smiled and sat up straight. “Ernie RedHorn.”

“How did you know it was me?” Ernie growled.

“Every gun makes its own tune.” Carson grinned.

“That was just a warning shot.”

“Well I’m kinda busy right now, Ernie.” Carson said. “And I generally smoke just after I eat. So why don’t you come back in about twenty minutes?”

“Twenty minutes you’ll be smoking in Hell!”

“Well then you better shoot me in the back, Ernie.” Carson advised. “Cus’ I got a hankerin’ for pie and I ain’t the kinda man does kill on an empty stomach.”

“Eight months I been lookin’ for you, Carson!” Ernie growled. “Whenever I should have had a gun in my right hand, I thought of you. But I’ve had plenty of time to learn to shoot with my left. So stand up n’ turn around! Turn around so I can collect my vengeance!”

“Go away Ernie.” Rico spun his chair around. “Ain’t no lefty can shoot down a man like Jimmy Carson.”

Ernie RedHorn took a step forward, his gun still pointed squarely at Carson’s back.

“You know Rico, when I lay there in that hospital bed, I got to thinkin’.” Ernie began. “I think I finally realise what makes your boss do the things he does.”

“And what’s that, Ernie?” Rico asked.

“A man like Jimmy Carson got a great big hole, right in the middle of his fuckin’ soul.” Ernie explained. “And he can never kill enough, or steal enough, or inflict enough pain to ever fill it!”

Jimmy Carson pushed his pie away, stood up and turned around. The one armed man stood before him, a pistol in his left hand, his right arm a mere stump, the skin tightly stitched at the elbow.

“Do I gotta shoot you to get ya to shut up?” Carson growled.

“Where’s your gun?” Ernie asked.

Carson pulled back his coat to reveal twin pistols dangling from hip harnesses. “I keep my guns closer than my wife.”

“I didn’t know you had a wife.”

“That’s okay.” Carson yanked out his pistol and shot Ernie in the forehead. “She don’t know she got a husband.”

* * *

Port Hamilton.

The midday sun blazed overhead.

“You ever been to the Outlands?” The Preacher asked, wading his way through the busy streets.

“Ain’t nobody been to the Outlands.” Ralph scratched his chin. “All that radiation, kills a man fast.”

“I’ve been out there.” The Preacher said. “Others have been too.”

“I don’t know where you’ve been, but it ain’t the Outlands.” Ralph insisted. “When that big spaceship crashed out yonder it spilled radiation far and wide.”

Ralph stopped for a moment and panned his hand along the distant horizon. “Explosion lit up the desert. Heck, thirty miles away and the soil here in Hamilton still struggles to grow a plant.”

The Preacher lit a cigar. He inhaled the tobacco before exorcising the smoke, watching with intensity as the ghostly plumes left his body.

“Radiation is a thing, fades fast just like a man.” The Preacher finally said.

Ralph looked at the stranger strangely. “Well then, what you seen out there?”

“Bandit camp, out in the wreckage.” The Preacher said. “Twenty maybe thirty men.”

“You think Carson and his gang hide out there?”

“I know they do.”

“You plannin’ on jus walking up to that place?” Ralph Tobias asked. “Kill all them men by yourself?”

“Killin’ them fellas ain’t the problem.” The Preacher stated. “Surviving that trek through the desert is.”

The Preacher came to a halt outside a rustic looking Mooring House. Back in the olden days, the cement and brick structure was used by the Trading Guilds to dock their big transport ships. Freighters would drop by, load up their holds with grain and fruit, before hauling themselves back to the factories on the mainland.

“You ain’t gonna find no freight-ships in there.” Ralph stated. “These Moorings shut down when the fields dried up.”

“I ain’t lookin’ for no freight-ships.”

They entered the Mooring House. The oval shaped building had its hydraulic roof swung completely open, revealing the clear blue midday sky. Boxes and crates littered the room, bits of rusty machinery flaking away in shadowy corners. But what stood out most were the dozen or so AgroMechs, hanging limply from overhead grasping arms like water soaked laundry on a countryside clothesline.

“That your idea of a transport?” Ralph studied the ancient looking Harvester Units.

“It’s a long walk.” The Preacher nodded. “And where we going ain’t got roads.”

Just then, four men approached the duo. Wearing knee length dusters and gloved hands they each had weapons strapped to their waists.

“You two fellas say you lookin’ for transport?” One of the men asked.

The Preacher nodded.

“Where to?”

“The Outlands.”

“The Outlands?” The man asked, raising an eyebrow. “What business do you got out there?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“But there ain’t nothing out there but that great ole pile of wreckage.”

“Maybe that’s where we’re heading.” The Preacher said.

The man’s brow plunged to a V. “You know, me and these fellas, we got friends out there in that desert. And when a man like you comes by saying he wants to go out n’ visit them . . . well . . . we get a little suspicious.”

The Preacher shrugged. "I'm just one man with a cross and a gun. Don't mean nobody no harm but those who have it coming their way."

"You the fella been going round town shooting folk up?"

The Preacher nodded.

"Well I guess it ain't wise of me to argue with you."

"I guess it ain't." The Preacher agreed.

The man cracked a tiny smile. "They call me Snake. How bout you and your friend come back in half an hour. We'll ready up 4 of these Harvester 'Mechs for you."

Snake gestured to a pair of men behind him. "Sam and Johnson over there, they'll escort you though the desert."

The Preacher nodded. "Much obliged."

* * *

Ralph and the Preacher exited the Mooring House.

"What now?" Ralph asked. "We've got thirty minutes to waste before those guys ready those AgroMechs."

"They ain't preparing those 'Mechs." The Preacher said. "They're preparing an ambush."

"What?"

"Those are Carson's men." The Preacher explained. "And they know I'm going to kill their boss."

"Are you sure?"

“Yeah.” The Preacher nodded. “When you spend all your life in the company of death, you get to knowing when a man is planning to kill ya . . . get down.”

“What?”

“GET DOWN!” The Preacher pushed Ralph to the ground and dove sideways. A pair of gunshots went off moments later, the bullets hitting the dirt hard.

The Preacher looked up and scanned the alleyway before him. A pair of lawmen was racing towards him, their badges glistening in the sunlight.

“Two more, over there!” Ralph yelled, his finger whip-panning across the street to where 2 deputies were loading a pair of rifles.

“Stay on the ground.” The Preacher instructed. “I gotta kill these fellas.”

“Wait!” Ralph barked. “They’re only doing their job!”

“So am I.” The Preacher darted for the alley, drawing his left and right pistols as he did so.

“Drop those guns!” The officers in the alleyway ordered.

The Preacher kept walking towards them, his pace quickening . . .

“I said drop those guns now!” The officers shouted.

With one fluid motion, the Preacher whipped up both hands and fired two shots. Both deputies fell to the floor, dead . . .

Across the street, the two remaining deputies gasped with horror. They dropped to their knees and opened fire with their rifles, but the Preacher had already disappeared into the alley.

“Shit! Do we follow him?” One of the deputies asked the other.

“No!”

“But there are two of us and only one of him!”

“There *were* four of us!” His partner trembled. “I ain’t going after this Preacher Man without more backup!”

The deputy whipped out his radio and flipped it open. “This is officer Jerry Simmons on 5th street. Request back up, over.”

The radio crackled. Then: “Jerry? This is Carl and Meadows on Eight. We heard gunfire, what the hell is going on?”

“We found the Preacher Man! He has Phil and me pinned down!” Jerry Simmons croaked. “He shot Riley and Mathews!”

“Shit.” Carl cursed. “Okay. Hang tight. Back up is on the way!”

Jerry slammed his radio shut and stood up, his rifle now held in a double-handed grip. Aside from Ralph Tobias, still laying at the far end of the sidewalk, the streets were virtually empty, the pedestrians and locals having scattered from the gunshots.

“You there!” Jerry called out to Ralph. “Are you hit?”

“No!” Ralph replied. “Don’t shoot.”

“Get on your feet and walk over to us.” Jerry yelled.

“What?”

“Get over here!” Jerry repeated

Ralph stood up and crossed the dusty street, coming to a halt before the two officers. Just then, a battered looking police van hauled itself down the street, its hover engines kicking up rolling clouds of dust. The vehicle skidded to a halt, its side doors slamming open to reveal a half dozen uniformed officers.

“Where’s the Preacher?” Officer Meadows asked, as he stepped out of the van and cocked his shotgun.

Jerry gulped. “He ran down that alley.”

“He didn’t run away.” Ralph whispered. “He’s probably watching us right now. Deciding which of you to kill first!”

Meadows turned to face Ralph, a chill running down his spine. “Who are you?”

“Ralph Tobias.” Ralph stated.

“Ralph Tobias?” Meadows raised an eyebrow. “You the father of that girl, been raped down by the river this mornin’?”

Ralph nodded.

“The Sheriff’s been looking for you all day.” Meadows stated, and gestured to an officer sitting at the front of the van. “Mike, take this guy back to the station. The rest of you grab your guns. We got a Holy Man to kill!”

* * *

After consuming his pie, Jimmy Carson swaggered up to the pretty girl at the bar. She looked beautiful. Stunning. She wore a partially unbuttoned blouse, the thin fabric peeling away to reveal the upper curves of her breasts. Her auburn hair flowed over her shoulders, her long silk skirt hugging her body, caressing her thighs as she moved . . .

“Hey pretty lady.” Carson smiled. “This fella with you?”

“Yes.” The girl said, playfully patting the chest of a guy at her side. “This hansom fella is my man.”

Carson grabbed the guy by the head and slammed his face into the bar. The man’s nose exploded, blood gushing from his smashed face. He fell to the floor, unconscious.

“Well he ain’t hansom no more!” Carson laughed.

Surprisingly, the girl chuckled. “I guess he isn’t.”

“Lookey here lads,” Carson grinned at his gang mates, “this girl and I, we gots the same sense of humour!”

She blushed and looked down at the guy at her feet. “He paid me 20 credits to spend the day with him.”

“Damn.” Carson cursed. “And here I am thinking you ain’t a whore!”

“I ain’t no whore!” She protested. “I’ve never been touched that way in all my life!”

“Well for 20 C’s that fella gonna expect some touching.”

The girl shrugged.

Carson smiled and leaned closer to her. “So what’s your name, little girl?”

She grinned, her rosy cheeks swelling as her lips curved upwards. “Katrina.”

“Well Katrina, your momma knows what you get up to in places like this?”

“My mother isn’t the boss of me.”

“Then who is?”

She licked her lips. “You, if you pay me right.”

Carson’s playful grin faded. Katrina may have been young, but she had a cold purpose about her. She was the kind of girl who always got what she wanted. She liked to be in control. He’d have to fix that . . .

“I ain’t the kinda man does pay for what he can take for free.” Carson grabbed her left arm and pulled her close. He inhaled her air, his nostrils flaring as he dragged in her sweet perfume.

But she didn’t resist him. “Are you planning on taking me someplace?”

“Do you want me too?”

Katrina knelt down and pulled a pair of keys from the unconscious guy’s shirt pocket.

“What’s that?” Carson asked.

Katrina leaned forward, pressing her body against Carson’s crotch as she whispered into his ear: “His hotel room.”

* * *

The Preacher ducked into another alleyway, and one by one, began reloading his pistols.

“What ya doin’, Mister?”

A young boy, about nine years of age, sat crouched in the alleyway, a shovel in one hand and a small paper box in the other.

“Getting ready to kill some people.” The Preacher continued sliding fresh bullets into the chambers.

The boy looked up at the Preacher with wide-eyed innocence. “Why?”

“Why what?” The Preacher growled.

“Why ya’ killing people?”

With a grunt, the Preacher said: “My momma always told me, never put off till tomorrow people you can kill today.”

The boy paused for a moment. “Do you want me to dig you a hole?”

“What?”

“I’m digging a grave for my dead parrot.” The boy held up the small box. “Look, I even made him a coffin. I can make you one if you like.”

“That coffin’s too small.” The Preacher fed his gun another bullet. “I ain’t planning on shooting midgets.”

“Well I can dig you a bigger hole if you like.” The kid offered.

The Preacher flashed the kid a look of pure annoyance. “A bigger hole?”

“Yup.” The boy grinned. “I got my shovel right here!”

The Preacher snapped the chambers shut and holstered his weapons. “That’s a lot of digging, kid.”

“That’s okay.” The boy insisted. “I’m a real fast digger. Uh-huh. Yes I am!”

“Listen kid, pretty soon bullets are gonna start flying.” The Preacher warned. “This street ain’t gonna be a safe place. Why don’t you run on home?”

“I don’t have a home.”

“Then use someone else’s.”

“But I can stay and dig you a grave!”

“One grave ain’t gonna be enough.” The Preacher sighed. “I reckon I’m gonna need about seven, and coffins too.”

“Well I can dig seven graves.” The boy chimed. “Real big ones! And coffins too!”

“Why you doing this, kid?”

“Doing what?”

“This.”

The boy shrugged. “I ain’t got nothing else to do.”

The Preacher eyed the little boy for a long moment. He felt a strange connection with the kid. A mystic bond that he didn’t fully understand . . .

The Preacher reached down and tousled the kid's hair. "Then you better get seven coffins ready."

"No problem!"

The Preacher cracked a smile, un-holstered his guns and stepped out into the streets. Eight deputies stood there, prowling the roadway, their weapons drawn.

"Hey kid." The Preacher grunted. "Better make that eight."

* * *

Sheriff Willey sat behind his table, a cigar in his mouth, a frown on his face.

"What the hell have you been up to Ralph?" The Sheriff blurted. "Since you left my office this morning, you've been spotted at four separate crime scenes!"

"I ain't killed nobody." Ralph snapped.

"I know you haven't!" The Sheriff sighed. "It's that damned Preacher Man!"

Ralph nodded. "I think he's a bounty hunter."

"A bounty hunter?" The Sheriff laughed. "A man like that ain't interested in no bounty. He kills for one reason only: to satisfy his soul!"

The Sheriff slid a sheet of paper across the desk.

"Take a look at what just came through the wire." Sheriff Willey said. "Four months ago, at Port Jackson, a stranger wearing a cross walks into town and shoots 9 people dead at a local church. Just like that! And then, two weeks later, he shows up at Port Irene. This time he kills 19 fellas, including six deputies. Then three weeks later, just a few miles from here, the same guy . . . this Preacher Man . . . he gets off a train at Port Mackenzie, murders ten

people in a hotel room and shoots a couple local Marshall's dead, straight between the eyes."

"Maybe those people deserved to die." Ralph whispered.

Sheriff Willey shook his head. "This is a dangerous man, Ralph. The kind of man, drinks a gallon of gasoline just so he can piss on your campfire! You understand? He washes in like a storm, leaving nothin' but dead bodies behind!"

"That's why I hired him."

"Hired him?" A look of concern washed over the Sheriff's face "What are you up to Ralph?"

Ralph Tobias said nothing.

"Listen Ralph, with your daughter bein' all raped up, being bitter is understandable." Sheriff Willey puffed on his cigar. "But this Preacher Man ain't no sane being. Don't go seeking no revenge, Ralph. Please."

"What's wrong with a little retribution, Sheriff?" Ralph seethed.

The Sheriff folded his arms. "My momma had a saying. She said when ya get ya ass stung by a bee, don't go chasing it. Leave it be. Cus' the moment you start raising issues with that there bee, pretty soon you gonna have the whole swarm, bearing down on your ass."

Ralph raised an eyebrow. "Seems like my momma knew your momma well."

"Why's that?" The Sheriff asked.

"Cus' my momma also had a saying. She said if you can't amaze people with your intelligence, confuse them with your bullshit!"

The Sheriff's jaw dropped. "Why you ungrateful son-of-a-gun!"

"Are you arresting me Sheriff?"

“What? Of course not.”

“Then can I leave?”

“Dammit Ralph! Of course you can leave.” The Sheriff sighed. “No one’s forcing you to stay here-”

“Good day to you Sheriff.” Ralph headed for the door.

“Listen to me, Ralph!” Sheriff Willey stood up. “Death follows this Preacher Man. Don’t go seeking no revenge! It ain’t worth it!”

* * *

The afternoon sun lingered low in the sky, casting a pinkish glow along the horizon.

The Preacher stepped out onto the street, his hands hovering above his hip holsters. Before him stood eight deputies, arranged like tombstones awaiting judgement.

“Preacher Man!” Officer Meadows called out. “You’re bleedin’! Turn yourself in and we can have a doctor patch ya up!”

The Preacher glanced at his left arm, as if noticing the limb for the very first time. It was still bleeding.

“Mister,” The Preacher began, “I’ve been in a really bad mood for the past few years, so I’d appreciate it if you and your men just left me the hell alone.”

“Now you know we can’t do that.” Meadows laughed. “You’ve killed a lot of people today. Justice has to be served.”

The eight deputies began to spread out, their hands hovering above their holsters . . .

“So drop your guns, Preacher Man!” Meadows ordered. “Drop them real slow.”

The Preacher just stood there, the wind tugging at his coat . . .

“I said drop your guns!” Meadows repeated. “I aim to bring ya in alive!”

The Preacher panned his gaze along the row of deputies . . .

“Drop or draw!” Meadows snapped. “I’ll shoot ya if I have to!”

The Preacher’s fingertips extended . . .

“Drop your guns, ya son-of-a-bitch!” Meadows yelled.

Silence . . .

“Well you gonna do somethin’?” Meadows shouted. “Or are ya just gonna stand there and bleeeeed?”

With a sudden burst of motion, the Preacher darted to his left, whipped out his pistol and started shooting. He sent a steam of bullets surging towards the 8 deputies, relentlessly fanning the hammer of his gun with the palm of his hand.

TOOF! TOOF! TOOF! TOOF!

The sound of gunshots filled the streets. Loud and thundering! Four deputies fell to the ground with a THUD, their dead bodies kicking up rolling clouds of dust. The other four scattered, seeking cover as they returned fire, clouds of smoke erupting from their weapons.

TOOF! TOOF! TOOF! TOOF!

The Preacher kept moving, bullets stabbing at the air around him. He pumped another deputy full of lead and watched as the man collapsed, blood oozing from his chest.

CLICK! The Preacher’s weapon was empty. He holstered it and grabbed his second pistol, his leather duster flapping as his hands moved.

TOOF! TOOF! TOOF! The Preacher changed direction. Always advancing, he zigzagged towards the remaining deputies, his left hand fanning the hammer, his right hand stroking the trigger insistently. Huge puffs of smoke bellowed from his weapon. Volley after volley. Shop windows shattered. Wall panels exploded. Two more deputies fell dead . . .

And then they were alone.

Officer Meadows darted across the street, trying desperately to dodge the Holy Hail of bullets. But there would be no escape. The Preacher fired one more shot and watched as the bullet tore through Meadows's knee. The man yelped with pain, blood splattering outwards. His leg buckled from under him and he hit the dirt hard.

“Don't . . . don't kill me!” Meadows squirmed, trembling as the Preacher loomed above him.

“I ain't here to kill ya.”

“Wh- wh- what are you doing?”

The Preacher un-holstered his second pistol. “Administerin' a double barrelled suppository.”

“What?”

“Stickin' these guns up your ass!”

BANG!

* * *

Katrina entered the hotel room and turned to face Carson.

“Are you going to take off your guns?” She asked.

“Why?” Carson entered the room and shut the door. “You afraid of guns?”

“I’m not afraid of guns.” She began unbuttoning her blouse, peeling back the fabric to reveal her nylon bra.

“You afraid of me?” Carson unbuckled his holster and tossed the guns aside.

“Should I be?” She had the cutest smile. Whenever her lips curved upwards, tiny dimples etched their way into her cheeks. Carson’s heart fluttered with anticipation . . .

“You should be.” Carson nodded. “If you knew who I was, your blood would boil.”

“Why’s that?” She slithered out of her skirt and stood before him, dressed only in tiny black panties and a nylon bra. The dim light of the hotel room accentuated her body, giving her skin a soft, almost surreal texture . . .

“Well . . .” Carson grabbed her thighs and pulled her forward, his hands patrolling the smooth curves of her buttocks. “Around these parts, I’m known as a bit of a bad fella.”

“Maybe I like bad fellas.” She undid the clasp and let her bra fall quietly to the floor.

The sight of those globes of flesh pounded hard in Carson’s head. He wanted to reach out and touch them. To smother his face in her breasts. But alarm bells were going off in his mind, rattling his skull . . .

“Nobody likes bad fellas.” Carson finally said.

“Some girls do.”

She stepped forward and kissed him, her tongue probing his mouth with purpose. Carson suddenly felt himself go hard. He pulled her closer and feasted on her lips, his sun-baked hands sliding down her body and yanking off her flimsy panties with one strong tug . . .

And then they were on the floor. A whirlpool of clothes and naked flesh. Katrina’s body was so lush, it burned with a tropical heat that seemed to scorch Carson’s very bones. He had never felt this way about a woman

before. Having her wasn't just an act of satisfying his primal lusts. No, she was a gift from the Gods.

A lamb sent down to appease his ways . . .

Yet why did he crave his guns? Why did he feel the urge to kill her?

Carson rolled on top of her, pinning Katrina down against the carpet. He forced himself into her and she whimpered, arching her head back with pleasure. Carson couldn't stop kissing her. He couldn't stop tasting her. His tongue snaked its way up down stomach, forging trails of moisture . . .

Yet . . . his guns kept calling.

Something was compelling him to kill her.

Carson looked down at Katrina, a bead of sweat dangling from his nose. It hung there for a few moments, precariously clinging to his skin, before falling downwards and splashing against her left breast.

"Who sent you?" He whispered.

Katrina didn't hear him. She clasped her legs high above his back, rocking gently back and forth, stroking his naked buttocks with her palms.

"I said, who sent you?" He repeated, louder this time, a faint hint of menace in his voice.

Katrina looked up at him. "What?"

"Who wants me dead?" He slid out of her and she groaned.

"What. . . what are you talking about?"

"Who wants me dead!?"

"No one!" She lowered her legs and looked up at him. "What's wrong with you?"

Carson pushed Katrina's sweat drenched body away. He stood up and quickly walked across the room.

"Where are you going?" Katrina stood up, naked, confused. She watched as he reached down and picked up his gun belt . . .

"He sent you to kill me, didn't he?!" Carson un-holstered the weapon and aimed it at Katrina.

"Stop it!" The young woman screamed with fright. She backed away from Carson and darted for the bathroom door . . .

BANG!

Carson shot Katrina in the back. The bullet tore through her bare shoulder, a spray of blood splattering against the bathroom door. Her body collapsed to the floor with a sickening thud.

Carson walked over to Katrina and knelt over her body. She was still alive. Twitching. He grabbed her hair and yanked her head upwards, pressing the barrel of his gun hard against the back of her skull.

He pulled the trigger and her head exploded.

* * *

Port Hamilton.

The Preacher entered the Mooring House and cautiously approached Carson's men. There were four of them, just as before.

"Hey Preacher Man." Snake called out. "We heard gunshots. You been doin' more killin'?"

"I'm here for those AgroMechs." The Preacher ignored the question.

"Well we got four ready, just as promised." Snake grinned.

To the rear of the room stood four AgroMechs, their cockpits wide open, access ladders nestled up to their sides.

“Where’s ya friend?” Snake asked, noticing the missing Ralph Tobias. “Look’s like we’re one man short.”

“No.” The Preacher shook his head. “Look’s like your two ’Mechs too many.”

Snake’s smile faded. He made a dart for his gun . . . but was two seconds too late.

The Preacher fired four shots. All four men fell to the ground.

* * *

Ralph Tobias darted across the streets, his footsteps thumping in time with his heart beat. He kicked the Mooring House doors open and rushed into the room . . .

“I’ve been waiting.” The Preacher said, sitting in the shade of one of the Harvester ’Mechs, his legs folded.

“There are eight dead deputies, out there on the streets!” Ralph was panting heavily.

“I know.” The Preacher nodded. “I killed them.”

“How many people have you killed, since I been gone?”

“Just those eight deputies.” The Preacher pointed at Carson’s dead henchmen. “And these four sons-of-bitches.”

“When I asked ya to kill Jimmy Carson, I didn’t mean for all these people to end up bitin’ the dust!”

The Preacher stood up and lit a large cigar. He clenched it between his teeth before taking a long, deep puff. "I told you Ralph, revenge is a real ugly thing. You swear revenge on a man, your heart turns black."

The Preacher exhaled a cloud of smoke. "You're gonna see a lot more killin' before Carson's dead."

Ralph shook his head. "You enjoy this, don't you?"

"What?"

"Killin'."

"No." The Preacher tilted his head slightly. "I just hate it less than most other things."

Ralph sighed and stepped towards the small Harvester 'Mech.

"So what we gonna do now?" Ralph asked. "I mean, now that everyone in town is dead."

The Preacher shrugged. "You got a wife, Ralph?"

"What?"

"A wife."

"Uh . . . yeah." Ralph scratched his chin. "Why?"

"She a good cook?"

* * *

The sun eased its way below the horizon, slowly draining all light from the skies.

The duo approached Ralph's house and stood out in the gardens, savouring the cool afternoon breeze. All around them, tall trees swayed, pristine blades of grass trembling in the wind . . .

"Real nice lookin' home, Ralph." The Preacher said. "Makes a man like me regret his ways."

"You don't got a home?" Ralph asked.

The Preacher shook his head. "Ain't no man ever changed his ways over a couple'a trees."

"It's the river." Ralph explained. "Runs along the back of the house. Helps fight back the desert."

Claire Tobias stepped out onto the front porch. She wore a white apron and carried a bowl of fruit in her hands. The solemn look on her face gave way to an uneasy smile when she noticed Ralph and the Preacher standing far across the garden.

"That your wife?" The Preacher asked.

"Yeah." Ralph nodded. "That's Claire."

"Nice lookin' woman." The Preacher said, a strange look of pity in his eyes. "You got a lot of nice things, Ralph."

Ralph nodded "Come on, I'll introduce you."

* * *

They sat around the dinner table, a delicious feast spread out before them. Thick slices of lamb dripped wet with olive oil, wedges of butter slowly melting to death, avalanching down a stack of golden baked potatoes.

They couldn't help but salivate with anticipation.

“Looks mighty delicious, Mrs Tobias.” The Preacher adjusted his gun belt and sat down.

“Thank you.” She blushed.

“Do you mind if a say a lil’ prayer before we dig in?” The Preacher asked. “Man like me eats a meal like this, once in a lifetime.”

Claire nodded. “That would be splendid.”

Ralph Tobias shook his head, a sudden look of anger in his eyes. “Wait a minute . . . I ain’t watching ya speak with the man upstairs! He’s a son-of-a-bitch, and I’ll be holding a grudge on him for letting this rape befall my sweet little Isabella!”

“Ralph!” Claire snapped. “Don’t you be talking that way over the table!”

“Why not?” Ralph flashed his wife a look of anger. “Man’s got a right to be angry!”

“He just wants to bless the food, Ralph!” Claire protested.

“Well let him do his blessin’ outside!”

The Preacher leaned back in his chair. “Don’t you believe in God, Ralph?”

“I believe God is a sadist!”

“You have a lot of hate in you Ralph.”

“Yeah.” Ralph nodded. “I also got a daughter layin’ unconscious in a hospital bed with a hole between her legs the size of a’ melon!”

The Preacher said nothing.

“I’m sorry.” Ralph sighed and started sliding food into his plate. “Got a little riled up, is all.”

Claire, eager to change the conversation, turned to face their guest. “I noticed your arm’s bleeding. I can clean that wound for you, if you like.”

The Preacher shook his head. “I think I’ll let it bleed.”

Claire couldn’t tell if he was being serious. “I’ve never seen a man ignore a hole in his arm before.”

“Well I ain’t like most men.”

“But doesn’t it hurt?” Claire asked.

“When things do what they ain’t designed to do, they eventually fall apart.” The Preacher held up his fork. “A fella is just like this fork. As long as you use it for eating, this fork’ll last forever. But the moment you start usin’ it for drivin’ nails or diggin’ trenches, it’s gonna start wearing away.”

The Preacher lowered his gaze. “I’m designed for killin’. It’s best if I bleed.”

* * *

After supper, Claire Tobias stood in the kitchen, vigorously washing plates and cutlery.

“Can I help?” The Preacher asked. He walked over to the sink, the floorboards creaking under his heavy boots.

Claire turned to face him. “Don’t take Ralph with you.”

“I don’t want to.” The Preacher said. “But it’s his choice to make. Ain’t like he doesn’t know what’s out there.”

Claire bowed her head, staring absently at the soapy plate in her hand.

“I wish this day had never happened,” she sobbed. “I wish Isabella had never gone down to that Creek . . . I wish Ralph had never met you.”

The Preacher leaned against the kitchen table. “When a man meets me, it’s usually for a reason.”

“You mean fate?”

“I mean death.”

“You say you’re a Holy Man,” Claire began, “yet you go around killin’ people.”

“Killin’s my only vice.”

“And are you good at what you do?”

“I’m alive, ain’t I?”

“I don’t know.” Claire locked gazes with him. “Are you?”

The Preacher smiled knowingly. He produced a large cigar from his coat and introduced it to his mouth, lighting one end with his steel lighter.

“How is Isabella?” He finally said.

“Unconscious.” Claire whispered, her hands now scrubbing the pots and pans with vivacity. “Doctors say she could wake up at any time. I’ve been at her side all day.”

“I’m gonna kill Jimmy Carson, Mrs Tobias.” The Preacher promised. “I’m gonna make him pay for what he did to your family.”

“I don’t care.” Claire turned her back to the Preacher. “I never asked you for revenge.”

* * *

The Preacher stepped out onto the front porch. Ralph Tobias stood there, leaning against the wooden railings, a cigar in his mouth.

Crickets chirped away in the night.

“I got a hankerin’ for a good smoke.” Ralph said, puffing on his cigar as the Preacher approached. “I see you do, too.”

The Preacher lowered his cigar and exhaled. He looked up at the night sky. Feint veins of electricity sliced through the darkness, followed by the ominous growl of thunder.

“A storm’s comin’.” The Preacher stated.

“Yeah.” Ralph cranked his gaze upwards “Hasn’t rained in these parts for months.”

“Well, it’s gonna rain tonight.”

Ralph turned to face the Preacher. “You know, what I said back there at the table, I didn’t meant any of it. I ain’t angry at God. He’s a bastard, but I ain’t angry at him.”

“You sure?”

Thunder rumbled overhead.

“Yeah.” Ralph nodded. “I guess I done better than most folk. I got me health, a pretty wife, a nice home . . . Yeah, the man up stairs has done a buncha’ good for me. But for all the good he’s done, there still ain’t no denyin’ his mistakes.”

The Preacher nodded. “Some of those mistakes are men.”

“Yeah.” Ralph scowled. “Men like Jimmy Carson.”

The Preacher tossed his cigar out into the garden. The blunt spiralled in the air, trailing tiny fireflies of cinder before disappearing into the darkness.

“A lot of people are gonna die tonight, Ralph.” The Preacher said. “And I’m gonna kill ‘em.”

“I know.”

“So are ya coming with me?”

A flash of lightning, then . . .

“Yeah.” Ralph tossed his cigar aside. “I gotta be there at the point of dyin’. Gotta see that last look in Carson’s eyes.”

* * *

The duo arrived at the Mooring House, but not before the rains. Furious beads of water pelted their way downwards, viciously tearing through the skies.

“This rain ain’t normal.” Ralph said, kicking open the doors and entering the Mooring House. “Not in these parts.”

“Tears from Heaven.” The Preacher said solemnly.

“What’s that mean?”

“Something bad is gonna happen.”

“Great.”

The four prepared AgroMechs still stood at the centre of the Mooring House, as did the four bodies, shot dead by the Preacher just hours earlier.

“You driven one of these things before?” The Preacher asked as he approached one of the ’Mech’s access ladders.

“Before the drought I made my livin’ drivin’ these things.” Ralph explained. “Twenty years as a Harvester.”

“Good.” The Preacher climbed into a cockpit. “Strap in.”

* * *

Rico entered the Hotel room to find Jimmy Carson on the floor, naked, Katrina's dead body at his side.

"Carson!" Rico yelled. "Holy shit! What the hell happened in here?"

Carson turned to face his henchman. "I got something in side of me, Rico. Something bad."

Rico stared at the dead woman in disbelief. "Why'd ya shoot her?"

"I don't know." Carson stood up weakly, his crotch and chest stained with Katrina's blood. "Hand me my clothes."

Rico scanned the floor. Carson's clothes lay intermingled with Katrina's flimsy underwear. He picked up his boss's garments and handed them to Carson.

"She looks so pretty now." Carson said, staring eerily at the dead body.

"She looked prettier before." Rico winced. Katrina's skull was shattered, blood still oozing from her head and shoulder.

"You know Rico, I'm starting to think, maybe Ernie was right." Carson pulled on his trousers. "Maybe a man like me ain't got a soul. Maybe I got something else instead. Something bad."

"Something bad?"

"Like the devil." Carson pulled on his shirt with blood stained hands.

Rico gulped. "This place is crawling with deputies. After that shooting at the saloon, people been looking for you."

"People always lookin' for me."

"Well we gotta leave town, Carson." Rico stated. "Head back to the camp. Lay low for a while."

"I ain't leaving town." Carson said. "I gotta be here. Gotta meet someone."

“What you talkin’ about?”

“He’s gonna try n’ kill me, Rico.” Carson said. “I’ve seen him in my dreams. That’s what he does.”

“What?” Rico asked. “Who’s comin’ to kill ya?”

“A Holy Man.”

“What Holy Man?”

“You ain’t ever gonna understand, Rico.” Carson tightened his gun straps. “People like me got something inside. Something to do with death. I gotta be here. . . here in Allistor.”

“Well this guy, what does he want?” Rico asked.

“Same thing everyone wants.” Carson exhaled. “Revenge.”

“Revenge for what?”

“Bein’ born.”

Jimmy Carson moved over to the window and pulled back the curtains. The stormy night sky stretched out before him. The gunslinger seemed to be in a daze, his eyes staring beyond infinity . . .

“Radio the camp.” Carson turned to face Rico. “Bring me everyone.”

Rico looked back at his boss with a blank expression. “What do you mean “everyone”?”

“EVERY FUCKIN’ ONE!”

* * *

The two AgroMechs marched through the night, plodding through the sheets of rain, their chassis's glinting eerily with each flash of lightning.

“Is that it?” Ralph Tobias asked, staring out of his forward cockpit canopy with awe.

“That’s it.” The Preacher nodded.

Ahead of them lay the remains of a giant space ship. The steel carcass lay half buried in the desert sands, giant metal struts looming high. The entire outer surface of the ship was toasted black, the telltale scars of laser fire etched deep into the hull. The entire wreckage looked unstable, as if the jagged decks were busy contemplating a synchronised collapse.

“I ain’t expected it to be this big.” Ralph admitted.

“I expect she was bigger before the crash.”

“Yeah.” Ralph nodded. “So where we heading?”

“That pool of light is the hanger.” The Preacher pointed out. “That’s where we’re headin’.”

“Looks empty.” Ralph observed. “Maybe the storm scared em’ off.”

“These days, takes more than a storm to scare a fella.”

“You think Carson is in there?”

“No.” The Preacher shook his head. “But he’s real close.”

* * *

Inside the dilapidated bandit camp, Earl Zimmer tapped the portable sensor monitor.

“What the hell?” Earl cursed. “Hey Burns, what’s Snake doing out here at this hour?”

Burns, half asleep in a faded sleeping bag, rubbed his eyes and sat up. “What the hell ya jabberin’ about?”

“The scope’s picking up two ’Mech’s.” Earl explained. “Snake and the boys must be bringing over some more grub.”

“In this weather?”

“Musta figured we needed more rations.” Earl shrugged.

Burns sighed and stepped out of his sleeping bag. “Damn this shit.”

“What?” Earl asked. “Thought ya always starvin’ for more food?”

“Yeah.” Burns admitted. “But with everyone else gone, we gotta do all the damn unloadin’ by ourselves!”

* * *

Earl and Burns entered the Hangar Bay, shivering as the wet winds blew inwards. Ahead of them stood the two AgroMechs, their metal chassis slick with water.

“Snake!” Earl yelled, as he ran up to the nearest ’Mech. “What the fuck ya doin’ out here at this hour?”

Suddenly the ’Mech’s canopy arched upwards to reveal the Preacher, both his weapons drawn.

“What the hell!” Earl gasped. “Where’s Snake?”

“Snake’s dead.” The Preacher said.

“And who the hell are you?”

“I’m the guy who killed him.”

BANG!

The Preacher's bullet tore through Earl's palm, severing his trigger fingers and blowing off his thumb.

"AHHHHH!" Earl collapsed to the floor, blood spurting from the ugly wound.

"You son of a bitch!" Burns dropped to his knees, whipped out his guns and started shooting.

But the Preacher was too fast. He leapt out of his cockpit and fired once, the bullet tearing through Burn's left shoulder . . .

"GAHHH!" Burns collapsed flat onto his back, blood oozing from his shoulder.

"Now drop those pistols!" The Preacher ordered.

"Okay . . . okay . . ." Burns dropped his guns. "Just don't shoot me."

The Preacher strode up to Burns and shot him in the face. The guy's head exploded, a supernova of blood and brain.

Earl gasped with horror. "You bastard!"

The Preacher knelt down and jammed his pistol against Earl's cheek. "Where's Carson?"

"You son of a bitch!"

"Jimmy Carson." The Preacher repeated. "Where is he?"

"I ain't gonna tell you shit!"

The Preacher shot Earl in the knee.

"AHHHHH!"

"Where is he?" The Preacher repeated.

“Port Allistor!” Earl snapped. “God damn! Everyone’s over there. All the gang!”

“Why aren’t you?”

“Me and Burns . . . we . . . we stayed back to man the radio.”

“Just the two of you?” The Preacher jammed his gun hard against Earl’s left cheek. The muzzle was still hot.

“Yeah.” Earl flinched as his flesh sizzled.

“You ain’t lyin’ to me, are ya?” The Preacher hissed.

“Swear to God, I ain’t.” Earl squirmed. “They’re all at Allistor. Swear to God!”

“Port Allistor?” Ralph asked, as he stepped out of his AgroMech “That’s the next town over.”

“Yeah . . .” Earl nodded. “About three . . . four miles from here.”

“Why did they all pick up and leave?” The Preacher asked, lowering his gun slightly.

“Carson radioed maybe two hours ago.” Earl explained. “Said someone was coming to kill him . . . Guess he was talking about you guys.”

The Preacher grinned. “Guess so.”

“I ain’t ever seen him act this way before.” Earl was panting heavily. Sweating. “You guys got him all scared.”

The Preacher shook his head. “It’s what people know about themselves inside, that makes ‘em afraid.”

“That’s all well and good.” Earl said. “But with all due respect, I think he’s more afraid of you guys pumping his face full a’ fuckin’ bullets!”

“Wait a second.” Ralph interrupted. “How does Carson know we’re coming?”

The Preacher turned to face Ralph. “Same way I knew where he was.”

“And how’s that?” Ralph asked.

“Men like Carson and I, we’re cut from the same cloth.” The Preacher explained. “He does what he does and I do what I do.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talkin’ about death.”

Ralph said nothing.

“You boys think you can just mosey on over there and take out Carson?” Earl laughed. “He’s got thirty gunmen over there at that town, all holed up and waitin’ for ya! Thirty fuckin’ gunmen! There ain’t no way ya can kill ‘em all!”

“Yeah?” The Preacher raised an eyebrow. “Well maybe I’m countin’ on a little Divine Intervention.”

The Preacher shot Earl, right between the eyes.

* * *

Port Allistor.

The local Whore House stood at the edge of town, dominating the streets with its gothic architecture. Jimmy Carson and his thirty gunmen strode up to the three-story building, their heavy coats flapping violently in the wind.

“Thirty men just to kill one fella?” Rico asked Carson. “Ain’t ya goin’ a little overboard, boss?”

Carson ignored Rico's comment. He just stood there, studying the swirling night sky, watching as the thick globs of water needled downwards, the watery explosions erupting against his coat.

"Rain like this falls for one reason only." Carson finally said.

"And why's that?"

"To wash away blood."

Rico cranked his gaze upwards. "Guess someone is expecting a lot of blood."

"Yeah." Carson grunted and turned to face the building.

The Whore House loomed high above them, eerie grunts of pleasure emanating from its thin walls. The brothel seemed alive. Evil. Inside the building, sweat drenched bodies gyrated with ecstasy. A sexual orgy of convulsing limbs and naked skin. Carson's heart pounded hard.

"The men are confused." Rico said. "They wanna know what's goin' on."

"We're waiting." Carson had a primal intensity in his eyes. "Waitin' for the fuckin' Preacher Man."

"In the rain?"

"Inside." Carson snapped. "He'll come looking for us."

"This is crazy, boss." Rico argued. "Who is this fella?"

"I ain't sure." Carson admitted. "But he better have balls. Cus' I intend to blow 'em off, one by one!"

Thunder rumbled overhead and Carson turned to face his gang. "What the hell you boys doin' out in the rain? Come inside! Might as well fuck a couple'a whores before ya die!"

* * *

The two AgroMechs sliced through the stormy night, leaving nothing but footprints behind.

“You ever been to Port Allistor?” Ralph Tobias asked, the raindrops pattering against his canopy like war-drums.

“Been meaning to.” The Preacher admitted.

“Ain’t a nice place.” Ralph said. “A real cesspit.”

“Most places are.”

“Yeah.” Ralph nodded. “Mayor Bowman ran the town to hell. Ain’t no surprise that Carson and his men hang out there. They’re sick fellas, and Port Allistor is a sick place.”

Up ahead, vaguely visible along the horizon, the soft lights of Port Allistor fought desperately to be seen.

“You know, you still ain’t told me your name.” Ralph Tobias said.

The Preacher leaned back in his chair. “I ain’t got one.”

“Everybody’s gotta have a name.”

“The dead don’t remember names,” the Preacher explained, “so what’s the use me carryin’ one?”

Ralph shook his head with pity. “How can you live your life with not even a name to be remembered by?”

“There ain’t ever anythin’ to be remembered by.” The Preacher said. “My work doesn’t last. No one’s does. Eventually everything falls to time.”

“Well if that’s true, then what’s the point of livin’?” Ralph asked.

“Maybe there ain’t no point in livin’.” The Preacher’s voice filled Ralph’s cockpit. “Maybe that’s why we die.”

“Is that how you justify all your killin’?”

“The people I’m gonna kill tonight, they got the blackest hearts.” The Preacher explained. “That’s how I justify my killin’.”

“But is your heart any lighter?”

“That, I find out tonight.”

* * *

The prostitute sat at the edge of the bed, a cigarette dangling from her lips.

“What’s your name?” Jimmy Carson asked.

“Whatever you want it to be.” She smiled.

“Get naked.” Carson ordered.

“Money first.” She tossed her cigarette aside.

Carson shook his head and un-holstered his pistol. “Get naked or I kill ya.”

“Then go ahead. Kill me, shoot me, beat me.” She said. “See if I care.”

Carson grabbed her by the neck and pushed her backwards, pinning her down against the bed. He tore off his pants with one hand and jammed the muzzle of his pistol against her chin with the other.

“I know you’re afraid.” Carson whispered. “Don’t pretend.”

She shook her head. “If you want to, you can beat me and amuse yourself, and even call in your men. No woman ever died from that. But when you’re finished, all I’ll need is a tub of boiling water, and I’ll be exactly what I was before- with just another filthy memory.”

Carson pushed her away and stood up. “I recognise you.”

“You should. You fucked me two months ago.” The girl sat up. “Cept’ then you had the courtesy to pay.”

“No.” Carson shook his head. “I mean you remind me of my mother.”

The girl looked confused. “Was she also a whore?”

“The biggest whore in Allistor.” Carson nodded. “And the finest woman that ever lived. Whoever my father was, for an hour or for a month- he musta been a happy man.”

“Do you miss them?”

“Who?”

“Your parents.”

“I miss being their child.”

The girl studied Carson’s troubled expression. He looked pained. Tortured. His eyes lifeless.

“I reckon we all dream of being a child again. Even the worst of us.” She said. “Perhaps the worst most of all.”

“Yeah.” Carson grunted.

“I guess you were conceived in a place like this?”

“Ashes to ashes.” Carson grinned. “Whore house to whore house.”

The girl smiled. “So ya gonna fuck me or kill me?”

“I ain’t decided yet.”

“Well pick one fast. I have other clients waiting.”

Carson shot the girl twice in the head. Her body collapsed onto a pillow, crimson puddles of blood soaking into the sheets.

Just then, Rico burst into the room, his clothes soaking wet.

“Carson. . . Holy shit!” Rico blurted. “Why’d ya kill her?”

Carson shrugged.

“Well pull up your pants and strap on your guns.” Rico snapped. “You got more killin’ to do!”

“What’s going on?”

“We’ve got company.” Rico explained. “Two Harvester ’Mechs just turned up at the edge of town.”

“The Holy Man?”

Rico nodded. “One of the pilots is wearing a cross.”

* * *

Like steel gargoyles in the night, the Harvester ’Mechs stood solemnly at the edge of town. Dwarfed by the giant beasts, Ralph Tobias and the Preacher stood out in the rain.

“Stay here.” The Preacher ordered.

“What?” Ralph snapped. “No, I’m coming with you.”

The Preacher yanked out his gun and shot Ralph in the left knee. Ralph’s leg buckled from under him, blood spewing from the wound.

“You’re stayin’ here, Ralph.”

“GAHH!” Ralph collapsed painfully to the muddy ground. “You shot me, you son of a bitch!”

“Ignore the pain.”

Ralph thrashed about in the mud, his blood mingling with the rain. “You bastard! Are you tryin’ to kill me?!”

“Ain’t no man can escape death.” The Preacher said. “It’s the colour of his soul that matters.”

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“I’m talkin’ about you, Ralph.” The Preacher said. “You’ve been with me all day. You’ve seen a lot of fella’s die in the name of revenge. Yet here you are with me, walkin’ straight into hell.”

“I deserve my vengeance!”

“Vengeance is lazy grief.” The Preacher said. “Go home and grieve with your wife.”

“I’ve gotta see Carson die!” Ralph cried. “I’m paying you to kill him!”

“I ain’t gonna accept money from a dead man.”

“You bastard!” Ralph cursed. “You dirty bastard!”

“Get back in that ’Mech, Ralph.” The Preacher said. “Get in and drive back home.”

“I ain’t leavin’ this place!”

“You still got a life, Ralph. You got a lot of good things on the other side of that desert.” The Preacher said. “Turn back.”

“No!” Ralph yelled. “I’ve gotta see Carson die! Gotta look him in the eyes!”

The Preacher shot Ralph in the other knee. The bullet tore through flesh, sending a jolt of pain surging up Ralph’s body.

“GAHHH!”

“Stop squirmin’.” The Preacher ordered. “It’s just a flesh wound.”

“Why. . .why are you doing this?”

“Because I like you, Ralph.” The Preacher admitted. “You’re a good man. You ain’t deserve any of this.”

The Preacher levelled his weapon at Ralph’s head. “Now get in that ’Mech.”

“No!”

The Preacher fired another shot, the bullet ploughing into the mud beside Ralph’s head.

“I’m tired of missing, Ralph.”

“Okay . . . okay.” Ralph stammered. “Stop shooting!”

The Preacher watched as Ralph climbed awkwardly into the AgroMech. Satisfied, he then holstered his weapons and headed into town.

* * *

Rico tossed his ammunition belt onto the bed beside the dead prostitute. He then pulled out his revolvers and began sliding fresh bullets into their empty chambers.

“You think he’s coming through the front door?” Rico asked.

Carson sat down at the edge of the bed and flexed his trigger fingers.

“I think it doesn’t matter where he comes in from.” Carson said. “A lot of people are gonna die, either way.”

“Can we kill him?”

“I ain’t sure.” Carson admitted. “But he better kill me. Whoever crosses me and leaves me alive, understands nothin’ about Jimmy Carson.”

Suddenly the bedroom door slammed open and one of Carson's gang members stepped in.

"He's coming this way, boss!" The gunslinger was panting heavily. "The Preacher Man is on Sixth Street!"

"What about the second guy?"

"He musta stayed behind." The gunslinger shrugged.

"Then tell the men to get ready." Carson stood up and yanked out his pistols. "This Preacher Man dies tonight."

* * *

The rains tore up the streets, causing inverted umbrellas of mud to splatter in all directions. The Preacher made his way through the downpour, his eyes scanning the shadows, his hands poised above his holsters.

Then he saw them.

Three gunmen standing in the night. Murky silhouettes obscured by the rain.

"Stop right there, Preacher Man." One of the men said.

The Preacher came to a halt before the three gunslingers. He studied them carefully. They all wore long dusters, the heavy coats flapping in the stormy winds. The nearest man sported a thick beard, a cigar hanging limply from his chapped lips. The other two were younger, about twenty-five years old, shotguns held firmly in their hands.

"I saw four of those dusters a short time ago." The Preacher pointed at their rain soaked coats. "Inside those dusters, there were four men."

"So?" The bearded man hissed.

"Inside those men, there were four bullets."

Thunder rumbled overhead.

“That’s a crazy story, Preacher Man, for two reasons.” The bearded man said. “One, nobody around these parts wears these dusters except Carson’s men. And two, Carson’s men don’t get killed.”

“That’s impressive.”

“What is?”

“That you can count all the way up to two.”

The bearded thug spun the magazine of his revolver with the tip of his thumb. “All the way up to six if I have to . . . And maybe faster than you.”

The Preacher smiled. “I doubt that.”

“Care to put me to tha’ test?”

“Care to die?”

The bearded man snarled at the insult. His hands plunged downwards, surging towards his gun belt . . .

BANG!

The Preacher fired, his first shot hitting the bearded thug in the shoulder, spinning the guy around like a human tornado.

BANG! BANG!

The Preacher’s second and third shots nailed the two remaining goons, surging through their foreheads and shattering their skulls.

The Preacher un-holstered his second pistol and strode over to the bearded man. The guy lay in the mud, twitching like a headless lizard.

“Where’s Carson?” The Preacher asked.

“Don’t . . . don’t kill me.” The bearded man begged. He was clutching his wounded shoulder, his chest oozing blood with each breath.

“Where is he?”

“He’s . . .” The guy coughed. “He’s at the Whore House.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah . . .”

“Much obliged.”

The Preacher shot the gunslinger twice in the head.

* * *

Telly Fargo, one of Carson’s senior gunslingers, burst into the bedroom. He carried a large duffel bag in each hand.

“He’s coming.” Telly tossed the bags to the floor and wiped his rain soaked forehead. “Where do you want me?”

“Covering the rear staircase.” Carson ordered. “You got my light shooters?”

“Yeah.” Telly zipped open the bags and dumped their contents out onto the carpet. Pistols, bullets, grenades, knives, headsets, shotguns and even a rocket-launcher, all tumbled out onto the bedroom floor. But what stood out most were the pair of oddly shaped pistols laying at the top of the pile. They were Rem-Tek 7’s. Laser guns. Rare in these parts.

Carson reached down and picked up the pistols. “If bullets don’t kill that son-of-a-bitch, then maybe a stomach full a’ hot light will!”

Carson stuffed the laser guns into his belt and then turned to face Telly. “Are the men ready?”

“Ten men on each floor,” Telly nodded. “They don’t know what’s goin’ on, but they’re spread out and waitin’, just like you ordered.”

“Then start handing out headsets and grenades.” Carson snapped. “I got a feelin’ we gonna need more than guns to kill this fucker.”

* * *

The Preacher approached the Whore House. The building was lit up in the night, the windows blazing yellow amongst a stormy backdrop of black.

THUD!

A bit of wood arched through the air and thumped against the Whore House’s upper wall.

THUD!

Another chunk of wood slammed hard against the building.

The Preacher panned his gaze downwards and noticed an old woman standing at the foot of the brothel. She was dressed in rags and carried a large basket, filled to the brim with firewood. The woman grabbed another log-wood missile and hurled it towards the building . . .

“A plague on you! A plague on the whole stinking lot of ya!” The old woman yelled. “Without morals or laws, you’re all filthy whores! You got no honour! It’s no wonder you all came to this town! They wouldn’t have you anywhere else! You’re savages, that’s what you all are! A bunch of bloody savages! A plague on you! A plague I say!”

The woman tossed another bit of wood and then hobbled away from the Whore House, the intense rains beating down upon her hunched back. It was only when she stepped out onto the sidewalk that she noticed the Preacher Man.

She gasped, her eyes widening. “Father, are you here to cast them out? Please, tell me that you are.”

The Preacher looked down at the old woman with emotionless eyes. She was on the verge of death, her white hair soaked grey, the wrinkles on her face greedily swallowing raindrops like starved orphans. Her frail body quivered with each breath.

“Place like this will always survive where people sin,” The Preacher finally said.

She nodded weakly. “Some folk don’t do much else.”

“What’s your name?”

“Oh, I’m too old for anyone to care.”

The Preacher pointed at her basket. “Can you manage?”

“I’m tired,” she admitted, “and it’s getting heavy.”

“Then let me take it.”

“Thank you.” She handed him the basket. “It’s yours now.”

The Preacher nodded and watched the old woman hobble off into the night.

* * *

Carson pulled back the curtains and looked out of the third story window.

“What’s he doing?” Rico asked.

“He’s just standing there.” Carson replied. “With a basket of firewood.”

“What?” Rico asked, confused.

“He’s got a knife now.” Carson said. “Son-of-a-bitch is whittling on a piece of timber!”

Rico approached the window. “You sure this is the right guy?”

Carson nodded.

“What the hell is he doin’?”

“I ain’t sure.” Carson admitted. “But I have a feelin’, when he’s done whittlin’, something’s gonna happen.”

* * *

The Preacher stood out in the rain, whittling on a piece of logwood with his knife. He looked like a stone-faced monolith in the darkness, the occasional flash of lightning illuminating the detached contours of his rain soaked visage.

Thunder rumbled overhead and the Preacher lifted his gaze. His eyes came to a rest on the Whore House’s third story window. Through the hazy downpour he could make out a shadowy silhouette observing him. He sensed it was Jimmy Carson.

The Preacher continued whittling.

* * *

“He’s messin’ with us.” Carson pulled the curtains shut.

“We got enough guns. We got enough guys.” Rico said. “We can go down there and blow this creep away!”

“No.” Carson snarled. “We nail him inside. We wait for that fucker to come to us!”

“He ain’t comin’, boss.” Rico insisted.

“Then we’ll bait him in.” Carson said. “Send someone out there.”

Rico nodded and toggled his headset communicator.

* * *

The front doors opened and one of Carson's gunslingers stepped out of the Whore House.

"What ya doin' out in this rain, Preacher Man?" The gunman asked.

The Preacher lifted his gaze slightly. "Whittlin'."

"What ya whittlin'?"

The Preacher folded his knife and casually returned it to his coat pocket. He then held up the piece of wood that he had been working on. He had carved a small cross, about two inches long.

"Looks good."

The Preacher said nothing.

"They say you're here to kill Jimmy Carson."

The Preacher nodded. "Couple'a other fellas too."

"You got a lot a' balls, Preacher Man."

"And even more bullets."

The gunslinger grinned. "You know how many people in this here buildin', just waitin' to pump ya full of holes?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Why's that?"

"Because you and your friends all got one thing in common."

“Oh?” The gunslinger raised an eyebrow. “And what might that be?”

“A high mortality rate!”

The Preacher whipped out his pistols, shot the guy in the forehead, kicked open the front doors and burst into the Whore House.

The dead body collapsed behind him.

* * *

The Preacher entered the Whore House and the carnage began.

BANG! BANG!

Two gunslingers fell dead, their bodies collapsing before an ornate staircase.

BANG! BANG!

Two more guys, standing at the top of the stairs, took bullets to their heads. Their bodies arched forward and they fell to the floor below.

The sudden eruption of violence shocked everyone. Prostitutes and pimps scampered for cover, screaming with fright, their hands flailing wildly. But there would be no escape. The Preacher picked them off one by one, his bullets tearing through scantily clad flesh, chewing on skin and shattering bone. He didn't hesitate. He didn't show mercy. Tonight, they would all die!

CLICK! CLICK!

The Preacher's hammers hit empty chambers. He rolled to his left, ducked behind a reception desk and quickly began reloading his guns.

TOOF! TOOF! TOOF!

Someone was firing at the desk! Bullets tore away at the wood, bits of fractured timber spiralling through the air. The Preacher ignored the shrapnel raining down upon him. With mechanical purpose, he continued reloading his guns . . .

Four bullets . . . five . . . six.

One gun loaded.

He could hear footsteps now. Feet scampered across the floorboards above him. In his mind he pictured Carson's men huddling around the upper staircase, waiting to gun him down.

Three . . . four . . .

Three had to be another way up. Another staircase. Speed was his advantage. If he faked a move up the main staircase he might be able to double back and rush upstairs via a different route.

Five . . . six . . . CLICK!

Second gun loaded.

The Preacher stood up and started firing. He peppered the upstairs balcony with fire and watched as three gunmen ducked for cover. He then darted to his right, kicked open a door and rushed into a side room.

* * *

It was a kitchen. Tiny.

Even whores get hungry.

Movement. A girl in a transparent negligee leapt up from behind a table and scampered towards the kitchen's rear doorway. The Preacher shot her in the back. He could hear his bullet tearing through her spine. The girl crashed to the floor, her dead body wedging the door open.

TOOF-TOOF-TOOF!

A sudden barrage of shots rang out. The Preacher rolled to his left and ducked behind the kitchen table, bullets stabbing at the air above him.

TOOF-TOOF-TOOF!

There were two guys in the next room with automatic weapons. With the door wedged open they had a perfect line of fire.

TOOF-TOOF-TOOF!

The Preacher began reloading his guns.

One . . .two . . .three . . .

Automatic gunfire peppered the kitchen, slamming hard against the walls, clattering against pots and pans and shattering stacks of ceramic plates. Shrapnel zipped through the air, shards of pottery pattering against the timber floorboards like ivory notes on a grand piano. Then, as suddenly as the deadly chorus had begun, the firing stopped . . .

Carson's men were reloading their guns!

Four . . . five . . . six . . . CLICK!

The Preacher leapt up and darted through the rear kitchen doorway, his twin barrels whip-panning across the room and zeroing in on the two gunmen . . .

BANG! BANG!

The Preacher's bullets flung both gunmen backwards, blood sputtering from the twin holes in their heads. He rolled to a crouch beside their dead bodies and scanned the new room. It was dimly lit. A single overhead lamp struggled to pump the room full of light. Glossy strip poles ran from ceiling to floor. Discarded lingerie lay crumpled on the carpet. The air smelt of sex.

"Don't shoot me . . .Please don't shoot me!" A girl, about nineteen, knelt in the corner of the room. She was bare-breasted, wore heavy makeup and cradled a mortified baby in her arms. Her left nipple leaked milk.

“I . . . I have a baby.” The girl held up the crying infant.

“I don’t care.” The Preacher fired one shot, the bullet tearing through the baby’s back and striking the girl in the head. Mother and child fell limply to the floor.

* * *

Carson sat at the edge of the bed, his unblinking eyes staring beyond infinity.

“Everyone on the ground floor is dead.” Rico snarled and tore off his headset. “Everyone but the Preacher Man!”

“I told you,” Carson whispered. “A lot of people are gonna die tonight.”

* * *

The Preacher found the second staircase. It was narrow, and climbed steeply up to the floor above. He noticed the lights upstairs were all out. Carson’s men were waiting in the darkness. Waiting to ambush him.

The Preacher holstered one gun and backtracked into the previous room. The timber floorboards creaked beneath his heavy boots. He knelt down beside one of Carson’s dead goons and plucked a pair of pistols and a pair of grenades from the dead guy’s belt.

He stood up and headed for the staircase.

* * *

Telly Fargo pressed his back against the wall. He waited silently in the darkness for the Preacher to make his way up the stairs.

THUD!

Something hit the floorboards beside Telly's feet.

Telly gasped.

The grenade's explosion shook the building.

* * *

The Preacher raced up the staircase and stepped into the smoke filled corridor. Dead bodies lay everywhere. The walls were on fire. The floor was scorched black. Each breath filled his lungs with a burning desire to kill.

Then the bedroom doors swung open and the prostitutes rushed out like ants. They tumbled awkwardly into the corridor, the crackling flames and rolling clouds of smoke stinging their eyes and burning their lungs. They plunged through the haze, fanning the air and coughing violently, trying desperately to make their way to the staircase.

But there would be no escape. The Preacher stood at the top of the stairs, calmly framed against the fires, a pistol in each hand.

"Ain't no man passes down these stairs!" The Preacher slowly raised his guns. "Lest' they wanna be judged by these here pistols!"

The small crowd came to a halt.

"I'm the mayor!" A chubby man, his shirt unbuttoned, nudged his way to the front of the throng. "Let us pass!"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The Preacher shot Mayor Bowman twice in the testicles and once in the head. The guy's skull exploded, bits of blood soaked scalp splattering against the faces of everyone nearby.

The crowd gasped with horror.

The Preacher lifted his gaze. “Guess who’s next.”

He shot them all.

Bullets tore through flesh and bone, mists of blood mingling with the smoke. A topless prostitute flung herself towards the Preacher, but was sent flying backwards, her breasts exploding as bullets needed their way through her erect nipples.

But still, they kept coming. Wearing nothing but nightgowns, thongs and skimpy skirts, the whores poured forward. They had no choice. If the Preacher didn’t get them, the fires would.

CLICK!

The Preacher tossed the empty gun aside and plucked another from his belt.

The carnage resumed.

One woman flung herself at the Preacher’s feet, sobbing, begging for her life.

“Please don’t kill me!” She pleaded. “Please, let me pass!”

The Preacher slammed her against the wall and plunged his gun into her mouth. The hot steel muzzle shattered her teeth, the cold lead bullet exploded her skull. A rainbow of blood and brain arched through the corridor, splattering against the faces of everyone nearby.

He advanced through the crowd. They were becoming more violent. Women clawed at his chest and clients pounded his body with their fists. But the Preacher ignored the pain.

He kept firing.

Each bullet, a confession. Each drop of blood, a sacrifice.

The flames were growing more fierce and the thinning crowd was growing desperate. A burnt floorboard collapsed and a woman's left foot plunged through. She fell to the floor, screaming with pain as the masses trampled over her, crushing her to death.

And still the Preacher kept firing. His bullets flew and his targets contorted with pain. The hellish flames were spreading, roasting the dead and burning the living. The Preacher grabbed a whore by her ponytail and slammed her face against a flaming wall. He held her there with one hand, the whore's face melting in his grip. The fires liquefied her flesh, roasting her lips and boiling her blood. The Preacher pulled her away and tossed her mangled body into the crowd, bloody teardrops arching through the air . . .

“AHHHH!” Another whore yelled as a fiery roof panel collapsed onto her head, shattering her skull and setting her hair ablaze. “Help me! Help me!”

The Preacher shot her in the chest, her tattooed bosom vomiting crimson blood. She squealed in agony but the Preacher kept firing. His hands darted back and forth, a ballet of bullets and bloodied bodies . . .

It didn't take long for the Preacher to slaughter them all.

* * *

Up on the third floor, Carson and his men waited nervously. They listened to the eerie screams, the cries of the dying, the thundering gunshots and the crackling flames. Smoke filtered through the floorboards, the thick haze heralding the fires . . .

Then the final gunshot sounded and the screams stopped.

Carson un-holstered his pistols and stood up. “Here he comes.”

* * *

The third floor was thick with smoke, tendrils of white squeezing their way through the expanding floorboards. The Preacher made his way up the hazy staircase, his guns smoking, his face emotionless.

“Stop right there, Preacher Man!” Rico snarled.

The Preacher found himself in a small lobby occupied by twelve gunslingers, their weapons drawn.

“You boys picked a mighty fine night to die!” The Preacher’s bitter words forced their way through clenched teeth.

“Ain’t nobody dyin’ tonight, but you, Preacher man.”

“Then you better shoot me through the heart.” The Preacher growled. “Cus’ there ain’t no other way to kill a man like me!”

Rico laughed. “You think you’re some kinda God, walking about with that rusty ole cross and those fuckin’ six shooters?”

“No.” The Preacher shook his head. “God shows mercy. I don’t.”

Rico’s smile faded. There was an eerie intensity in the Preacher’s expression. A steadfast gaze that bore deep into your soul . . .

“Well, we ain’t killin’ you just yet.” Rico stated. “Carson wants to speak with ya.”

“Then take me to him.”

“Not before you drop your pistols.”

“I drop my guns for no man!”

“You ain’t got much of a choice!”

The Preacher said nothing. He stood his ground, the smoke swirling around him . . .

“I ain’t gonna ask again, Preacher Man.” Rico said. “There’s twelve guns pointed at ya. And I’m betting you ain’t got more than four bullets in those chambers.”

“Maybe I got four, maybe I got more.” The Preacher hissed. “But know this: my first bullet goes through your head!”

The Preacher raised his guns and started shooting . . .

* * *

Port Hamilton. A telephone rings. Claire Tobias answers it.

“Hello?”

“Mrs Tobias?” It was Terry Claymont, Katrina’s doctor. “I have some news regarding your daughter.”

Claire’s heart stopped. “What is it? Is she alright?”

“Katrina just snapped out of her coma.” Terry whispered. “I think it would be best if you and your husband came down here as soon as possible.”

* * *

The Preacher stepped into the flaming bedroom, blood leaking from the numerous bullet holes in his chest . . .

“I didn’t expect them to kill you.” Jimmy Carson watched with hawk-like intensity as the Preacher entered the bedroom. “Man like me doesn’t deserve as much.”

The Preacher slowly shook his head. “Deservin’s ain’t got nothin’ to do with it, Carson.”

“There were twelve men out there.”

“Yeah.” The Preacher grunted. “Twelve dead men.”

The Preacher walked over to the centre of the burning room, his heavy footsteps inaudible over the crackling flames. Carson noticed the stranger’s gun-belt was empty.

“I’ve seen you in my nightmares.” Carson said. “You a bounty hunter?”

The Preacher shook his head. “I’m just a spoke on a wheel.”

“What do you want with me?”

“I’m here to kill ya.”

“I’m already dead on the inside.”

“Then I’ll kill ya on the outside.”

“And what filth did I do to deserve this?”

“You raped a little girl.”

“I rape a lot of little girls, Preacher Man.” Carson hissed. “I got a lot of bad in me.”

“Her name was Isabella . . .”

“I don’t give a shit!”

“. . . and I promised her father, I’d kill you.”

“Well that ain’t gonna happen, Preacher Man!” Carson snapped. “You may be quick on the draw, but ain’t no man faster than Jimmy Carson!”

“Everybody’s fast till’ they die.”

“Yeah, but like I said, I’m already dead!”

The Preacher smiled. "I guess it don't matter. My guns are dry. Emptied 'em on your friends outside."

"Then I can shoot you down, right here as you stand."

The Preacher nodded. "But you ain't gonna do that."

"Why not?"

"Cus' just like me, you gotta know." The Preacher said. "You gotta know the colour of your soul. Gotta know how bad you really are, deep down inside."

The Whore House rumbled, the burning timber wailing with pain. The log wood ceiling groaned, expanding painfully in the heat . . .

Carson sighed and pointed at the pile of weapons on the floor. "Grab yourself some guns, Preacher Man."

The Preacher reached down and picked up a pair of 6-barreled pistols. He flipped open the chambers and ensured that they were both loaded.

"You can return them to me when this is all over."

"Yeah." The Preacher agreed. "One bullet at a time."

Carson grinned and casually drew his pistols. "We bury our fuckin' sins right here. We wash them clean."

The Preacher shook his head. "Not before you get down on your knees and give thanks to the Almighty."

"I ain't got nothin' to give thanks for."

"Give thanks for the time and give thanks for the place."

"What time and place?"

"The time to live and the place to die." The Preacher explained. "That's all a man gets. Ain't no more, ain't no less."

Outside, thunder rumbled. The Whore House responded with a violent shudder, the floorboards snapping in the heat . . .

“This building ain’t gonna last much longer.” Carson remarked.

“Yeah.” The Preacher nodded. “We better start our killin’.”

* * *

Claire Tobias pushed her way through the double doors and burst into the hospital’s reception room. The building had once been a plantation house, but despite the rustic floorboards and ancient beam work, the hospital maintained an antiseptic ambience worthy of a fibreglass coffin.

“Terry!” Claire rushed towards the elderly doctor. “How is she?”

“Claire.” Doctor Claymont spun around. “Where’s Ralph?”

“He’s not coming.” Claire said. “How’s Isabella?”

Terry paused. “Claire, there’ve been some complications.”

Claire gulped, her lower lip quivering, her eyes swelling with tears . . .

“What kind of complications?”

“Listen Claire . . .” Terry took her hands and led her to a nearby chair. “Isabella is alright. Believe me, she’s alive and healthy. But she . . .she must have put up an incredible struggle, Claire. I think that’s why they beat her so severely. That’s why they . . . You have a very brave . . . a very brave daughter, Claire.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“I think you should sit down.”

“No!” Claire pushed past him and headed for the medical ward. “I want to see my daughter!”

Claire darted down the narrow corridor, her shoes frantically tapping against the hospital floorboards . . .

“Wait Claire!” Terry grabbed Claire’s arm and gently pulled her to a halt. “When you walk into your daughter’s room, you become a stranger! Isabella won’t recognise you! She won’t see her mother! All she’ll see is another faceless stranger with tears in their eyes.”

“What are you talking about?”

“They couldn’t have their way with her, so they beat her.” The doctor said. “They beat her brutally.”

Claire said nothing.

“She has amnesia, Claire.” The doctor whispered. “Your daughter has no memory of you.”

* * *

The Preacher stumbled out of the burning brothel and into the midnight rains. Blood gushed from his bullet-ridden body, thick veins of red bellowing from the holes in his chest. The Preacher paused for a moment. He tilted his head and closed his eyes, allowing the rains to beat down upon his face. He savoured the wetness as if for the very last time . . .

“I know I’m quite a spectacle.” The Preacher opened his eyes and turned to face Ralph Tobias. “But save your lookin’ for later.”

The giant AgroMech stood before the burning Whore House, glinting eerily in the darkness. Its cockpit canopy was tilted open, Ralph Tobias standing awkwardly inside.

“I saw the fires!” Ralph yelled over the downpour. “You’re bleeding!”

“I ain’t got blood left to bleed, Ralph.”

“Is he dead?”

The Preacher shook his head. “I told you to head back home.”

“Where’s Carson!?” Ralph yelled. “Did you-”

The Preacher coughed twice, collapsed to his knees and slumped forward, dead.

Ralph’s jaw dropped.

“He a friend of yours?” Jimmy Carson stepped out of the burning Whore House, a smouldering Rem-Tek 7 in each hand.

“You bastard!” Ralph screamed. “You killed him!”

Carson strode up to the Preacher’s dead body, aimed his light-shooter at the corpse’s head and pulled the trigger. A thick shaft of white light shot outwards and smashed hard into the Preacher’s skull. Molten flesh sizzled in the rain . . .

“It’s a pity he died so easy.” Carson knelt down and picked up the wooden cross that had fallen from the Preacher’s pocket. “Otherwise I mighta’ had a fuckin’ sense of satisfaction by now!”

A furious scowl wiped across Ralph’s splatter soaked face. He reached for the cockpit canopy and was about to swing it shut when . . .

“Take it easy fella.” Carson lifted his pistols. “One more move and I’ll pump ya skull full of sunshine!”

“You’re a filthy son-of-a-bitch, Carson!” Ralph wailed. “A filthy son-of-a-bitch!”

“You ain’t the first person to call me names today.” Carson stood up stepped towards the AgroMech. “Now tell me, why the fuck does everybody want me dead?”

Ralph was panting heavily, his tears merging with the rain. “You raped my little girl!”

Carson laughed. “And so you sent this Preacher Man after me? To collect your vengeance?”

“I paid him to kill you!”

“Well I guess he owes you a refund.”

Carson raised his guns and fired.

* * *

Claire Tobias clutched her chest and collapsed into the chair. “Amnesia?”

“It’s what we call retrograde amnesia.” The doctor nodded. “An inability to remember events that occurred during or before the . . . the . . . incident of trauma.”

“Will she get better?” Claire asked. “I mean . . . is this . . . is it permanent?”

“Maybe, maybe not.” The doctor admitted. “Claire, I can’t tell. That’s why I was hoping both you and your husband would be here. The brain works by association. If she sees you and Ralph together, it may trigger a spiral of recollection.”

“But I don’t know where Ralph is.”

“Will he be coming?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Can you contact him?”

“No.”

The doctor buried his hands within his deep coat pockets, his face tilting downwards, his eyes morbid and droopy.

“Terry . . .” Claire said weakly. “She must remember something.”

The doctor shook his head.

“Claire, all the events in her life, up to and including the assault this morning, have been wiped from Isabella’s memory.” The doctor said. “It’s like the rape never happened.”

* * *

The laser blast shattered the transparisteel canopy and hit Ralph Tobias in the chest. He collapsed into the AgroMech’s cockpit, blood spewing from the hole in his stomach.

“Ahhhhh.” Ralph screamed, rhythmic spasms shooting down his spine.

“Oh, come on.” Carson grabbed the access rungs and pulled himself up alongside the open cockpit. “Your fuckin’ daughter put up a better fight!”

Carson grabbed Ralph by the collar, yanked him out of the cockpit and tossed him to the rain soaked ground below. Ralph hit the mud hard, sludge splattering everywhere. He winced with pain and rolled onto his back, catching a glimpse of Carson dropping to the ground beside him.

“Get up old-man!” Carson kicked Ralph in the gut. “I’m right here! Come collect your vengeance!”

Ralph squirmed, his rib cage pulsating with pain . . .

“Get up!” Carson kicked Ralph again. “Broke more of a sweat gangbangin’ that little girl of yours!”

Ralph struggled to his feet, his feeble hands defending his bleeding chest. He couldn’t breathe. His bones felt shattered. He was already dead. He accepted that.

“This is the end, old man.” Carson tossed his guns aside. “The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways - one of us to die, one of us to live. Which is better, God only knows.”

Ralph wiped the blood and mud from his rain soaked lips . . .

“If there’s a God above, may he give me the strength to crush your skull!” Ralph growled. “The strength to collect the vengeance which I surely deserve!”

With a sudden roar, Ralph balled his hands into fists and charged towards Carson. His feet kicked up clumps of mud, thick blobs of rain slapping against his face, diluting his tears . . .

But Jimmy Carson was too agile. He sidestepped to his left and rammed his knee up into Ralph’s chest.

“AHHHHHHH!” The old man keeled over, blood oozing from his mouth.

“Stay down old-man!” Carson sneered. “You’re beat!”

Ralph shook his head. “You’re gonna have’ta kill me, Carson!”

“I reckon you’re right.”

Carson grabbed Ralph by the face and swung him against the burning Whore House. Ralph’s back slammed into the fiery woodwork, ash and cinder raining down upon his bleeding face. With a cry of agony Ralph collapsed to the ground, bits of flaming rubble tumbling all around him.

“This is the end, old man.” Carson loomed over Ralph. “This is the-”

SWOOSH!

Ralph swung a burning floorboard against Carson’s face. The superheated timber smashed against his skull, melting his skin and setting his eyebrows ablaze.

“GAH!!!” Carson stumbled backwards, defensively protecting his face with his hands. “YOU SON OF A-”

SWOOSH!

Ralph hit Carson again. The burning plank thumped hard against the gunslinger’s face, puncturing his eyeballs and tearing his sockets open. Carson fell over, blinded by the blow, his back sinking deep into the muddy ground.

“MY EYES!” Carson wailed. “MY FUCKIN’ EYES!”

Jimmy Carson thrashed about in the rain like a wounded animal. His feet and arms flailed wildly, his boots digging into the mud. Ralph stood before the injured gunslinger, the fiery plank smouldering to death in his right hand, a look of pure hatred affixed to his face.

Ralph knew what he had to do. There was no doubt in his mind. His entire day had been building towards this single moment. An inevitable crescendo of death and vengeance. It all boiled down to this. An instant of cosmic justice. He would avenge his daughter here and now. Jimmy Carson would die.

BANG!

Ralph Tobias fell to the floor, dead, blood oozing from the laser blast in his forehead . . .

“FUCK YOU AND YOUR DAUGHTER!!” Jimmy Carson’s mud soaked pistol panned from left to right, his ears frantically searching for the faint sounds of movement. “GET UP OLD MAN!!”

Carson’s left hand flapped about in the mud, searching for his second pistol. Seconds ticked away and the rains continued to pour down on the carnage, dousing the flames and washing away the blood . . .

“GET UP!!” Carson yelled. “I KNOW YOU AIN’T DEAD!”

The fires gasped and died, the flickering flames receding into the earth . . .

“I MAY BE BLIND, BUT I SURE AS FUCK, AIN’T DEAF!!” Carson yelled. “STAND UP OLD MAN!!”

The skies fell silent and the rains stopped . . .

“YOU BASTARD!” Carson screamed. “COME FINISH ME OFF!!”

But Ralph Tobias didn’t get back up. His day was over and a new one had begun. The morning sun hauled its massive bulk over the hazy horizon, brilliant and beautiful it cast its virgin glow upon a lone blind man and his guns.

* * *

Several weeks later . . .

Isabella skipped up to the riverbank and quickly dropped her robe. She set her clothes down on a nearby cluster of rocks and inhaled deeply, the fresh country air filling her lungs. She then tore off her pyjamas, slid out of her thin cotton panties and . . .

Isabella stopped suddenly.

“It’s okay.” The man said. “I ain’t got no eyes.”

Sitting at the far side of the river was a blind man, dressed in dirty clothes and wearing mud encased slippers. His feet dangled over the rocks, his toes deftly probing the river’s surface.

“What happened to them?” Isabella frantically pulled on her robe and tightened the straps.

“Lost ‘em in an accident.” The blind man splashed water on his face, the transparent droplets sliding down his blackened eyelids.

“I’m sorry.”

“Ain’t your fault.”

“I mean no disrespect mister,” Isabella strode over to him, “but a blind man like you shouldn’t be wandering these parts all by your lonesome.”

“Why not?” The guy awkwardly stood up, a small wooden cross dangling from a flimsy chain around his neck.

“Well, there are a lot of bad folk about.” Isabella remarked. “And some of ‘em might consider taking advantage of a man in your predicament.”

The stranger shrugged. “Maybe I’ll get what I deserve.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I’m jus’ joking.” The guy smiled sheepishly. “You have a very nice voice.”

Isabella blushed. “Thank you.”

“I bet you’re pretty.”

Isabella looked down at her body, the heeling scars and the fading bruises. “Well I reckon . . . I reckon sometimes I am.”

The stranger grinned. “I don’t mean to inconvenience you . . . I suppose a pretty gal like yourself gots places to be and things to do. But if you would be so kind, I’d much appreciate you pointing me in the direction of town.”

Isabella stifled a laugh. “No offence mister, but me pointing ain’t gonna be of much use to you!”

He laughed. “Yeah, yeah, make fun of the blind fool!”

“Oh no, you’re not a fool.” Isabella giggled. “Come on, I’m heading into town myself. I can take you there if you like.”

“No, no, no, I don’t want to be a bother.”

“It’s no bother at all.” Isabella said cheerfully. “My momma always says, if you don’t look out for others, the only helping hands you’re ever gonna get are when they lower you into your grave.”

The guy grinned. “Well thank God for your momma!”

Isabella playfully grabbed his hands and helped him off the rocks. “So what’s your name?”

“What?”

“Your name.” She repeated. “I’m Isabella.”

“Isabella?” He froze, a sudden look of realisation sweeping across his face. “Well Isabella . . . I ain’t . . . I ain’t got a name.”

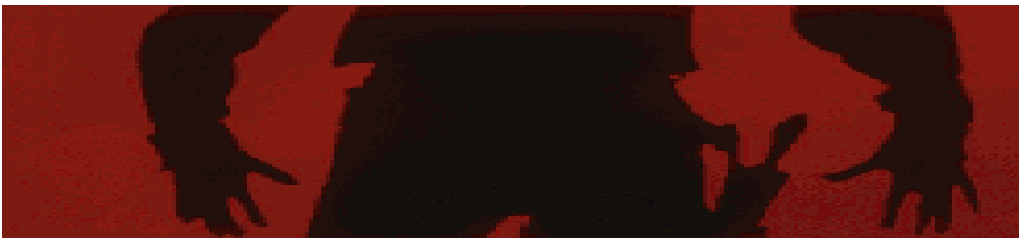
“Really?” Isabella couldn’t stop smiling. She found this blind man completely amusing. “But everybody’s gotta have a name.”

“Not everyone.”

“But what do folk call ya?”

“Nothing.” Jimmy Carson let go of her hand. “I’m just a spoke on a wheel.”

THE END



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