

MARIO MICOLUCCI

Damn Loot!



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«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Micolucci M.

Damn Loot! / M. Micolucci — «Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

An Italian-style Western On a day like any other in the morally depraved town of Little Pit, a dusty man on a horse rides up. The man is in a hurry and carrying with him a suspicious package. Hugg Badfinger cannot resist the temptation to discover what's inside, so he takes the man down and sends his kid to claim the man's effects. Not long after, father and son burst out of the town on horseback as though they have the devil at their heels. What did they find?

DAMN LOOT!

A Western Novel

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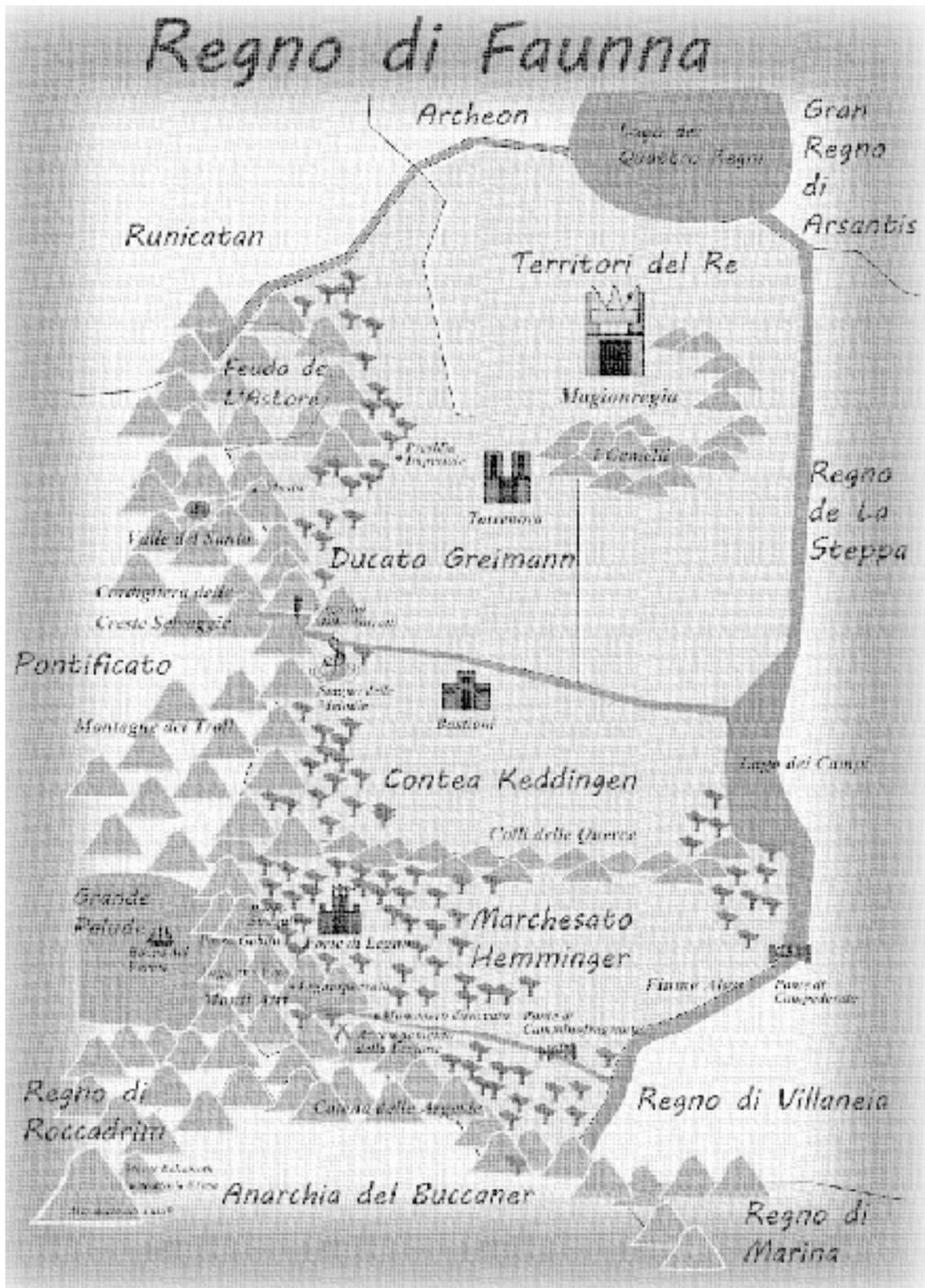
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To my father, with whom I have shared a life-long passion for the genre.

Although set in a real geo-historical context, it is a work of fantasy. Therefore, names, characters, places and events are the result of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to facts, places or people is completely random. The mention of famous people who really existed only serves to define the historical background of the events. In fact, they never take an active part in the development of the plot.

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1 Little Pit.

Little Pit was a miserable little town. It always had been. Miserable, dusty and run down.

It was born as decaying as the souls of those who built it, and the persistent beating of the sun only made matters worse. The only thing that could explain its continued existence was a small watering hole from which to draw a few buckets of muddy water to sprinkle over the sparse vegetables. The watering hole was the only one for miles, but it wasn't worth much to anyone, save the occasional drifter who stumbled across it after surviving a journey across No Man's Land.

Anyone who came to the town certainly did not do so for enjoyment. Many of its inhabitants had less-than-respectable pasts that they were trying to escape. Sometimes they were even brought there against their will. Whether they were on the run or had been banished to that snake-pit hellhole to die of exposure, the occasional visitor would usually appear at the watering hole, weary and nearly dead, without a penny to their name. If they did happen to arrive there with any wherewithal, it was so rare that it would never have been enough to sustain any local business.

In Little Pit, no saloon was to be found. At least, not anymore. One day many suns ago, an enterprising Joe Otthims came back with a load of beer and whiskey, the source of which is better left a mystery. It was enough to put behind a countertop and call it a saloon, which is exactly what Joe did in his rickety old cowshed. As not entirely unpredictable, the years came and went, but the patrons were few. Old Joe, having nothing better to do with his time waiting for patrons, whittled away at his inventory until he had no more. He ended up a drunkard without a drop to drink.

Through the years, Joe's saloon crumbled into kindling until all that remained was its welcome sign. Now illegible and softened by rot, it dangled on its last remaining rusty hook. It swung in distress with every gust of wind. The grim creaking sound it produced was typically the only noise that filled the unnerving silence of that place. It was a place made of crumbling buildings whose inhabitants were equally worn and weary souls. The town was a hodgepodge of transients, fugitives, and outcasts. The women were usually either discarded wives or whores so used up they weren't employable even by the worst brothels. More often, both.

Truth be told, not all the wayfarers who sought relief from the well were completely destitute. In that lawless and godless place, however, the art of making a living through commerce was completely lost on the townspeople. To compensate, many took advantage of the persuasive power of firearms to earn their keep. The unlucky newcomer who brought anything of value became the unwilling prey of the crook who got to him first. The resulting spoils usually offered them at least a few dollars to get properly roostered at Joe's saloon. In fact, the few patrons that Joe had in his best years were mostly his own fellow town folk who were the first to take advantage of the generous donations of passers by.

On a harshly dry and windy day like many others, a man arrived on horseback and approached the watering hole. Apart from his hat and boots, he wore only dusty, threadbare rags. However, strapped to the saddle was a curiously suspicious parcel. The inhabitants of Little Pit were very fond of curiously suspicious parcels. In fact, curiously suspicious parcels very often contained happy little surprises. The man was well armed and seemed to be in quite hurry – all excellent signs. His surly demeanor and body language suggested that he was not to be prodded. However, before that theory could be proven, Hugg Badfinger put a bullet in his head.

The watering hole was perfectly framed by the little window on the door of the outhouse; the ideal spot from which Hugg Badfinger could point his rifle without being seen. Hugg never relieved himself without Jagg, his tried and true Jacob Hawken rifle. It wasn't that strange of a habit to keep. After all, there were plenty of dandies out there who never did their business without a book. Hugg couldn't read, but his aim sure as heck made up for it.

The sound of the shot drew some attention, but it was *his* kill and he had no intention of sharing the spoils with anyone. Hugg sent his young son to do the picking while he stayed back and made sure no one got the bright idea to enter his space.

There was no need. Everyone in Little Pit knew that Hugg's left index finger was as prone to bouts of cold-blooded murder as a baby was prone to bouts of colic. No one was safe from his unpredictable wrath; not even his oldest boy who he gunned down over a petty squabble and his Misses who tried to protect him. God rest their souls.

There was no doubt that of all the scum that Little Pit had to offer, he was the most loathsome. As a result, he was also the most feared and respected.

Scurrying around like a ferret, the young boy expertly raided the corpse, pocketing the valuables. He then grabbed the bridle and returned to their dilapidated shack with the horse in tow. While all of this was going on, Hugg popped out of the outhouse, taking more care to keep the rifle well aimed than to finish pulling up his drawers. He walked heedfully up to the house, his empty holster not the only thing swinging in the dusty breeze.

"All right, kid, how'd we do?" The man's bulky mass loomed over the boy who, in contrast, was slim and small in stature; his mother's son. Hugg had no doubt, however, that he was the boy's father. Not because he had ever trusted the harlot he had regretfully married; as far as he was concerned, only the shiny forty-four in his belt was to be trusted. He had no doubt because of the thick and wiry reddish hair, freckled complexion, and snaggle-toothed features they had in common.

"Yes, Paw. I have a nice cowhide belt. In the holster there's a brand new Colt Navy, then I found this gold paperweight with about a hundred bucks in it. I really shoulda taken the boots and hat. They weren't bad at all, but in my hurry I didn't get a chance to take 'em. You want me to go back and fetch 'em?" The boy finished his sentence without meeting his father's gaze. He never looked anyone in the eye. He observed the world with meticulous detail, but never let it show. He was the only person in the entire town with the skill enough to be able to exchange more than four words with Hugg without sending him on a rampage. Finn was his given name, but everyone called him Weasel.

"No, let those four scoundrels out there scrounge for scraps. That way they won't bother us for a while. Y'know son, if you wanna get a pack of dogs out of your hair, toss a bone at'em and wait for'em to tear each other up." The boy had already come to that conclusion on his own, and knowingly chose not to pick the generous guest completely clean. He was getting pretty good at letting his father believe that he was the one in charge.

"Whew, I thought I messed it all up again. What do you say we take a gander at what's in the parcel, Paw?"

"Hold your horses, boy! Take the saddle off the horse and put him in the lean-to before he shits all over the parquet." With a shit-eating grin he spat on the floor, which was made not of parquet, but of rough cut, split, raw wood planks.

The boy did as he was told and led the animal through a back door that allowed access to the shed without having to leave the house. When he returned, he found that his father had just opened the cloth of the parcel on the table and was evaluating its contents. His eyes glistened as he surveyed the haul.

People always said that Badfinger was heartless. Oh, how wrong they were! The deep sentiment that Hugg felt about treasure was both tender and all-consuming.

The objects in the carefully obtained haul he was scanning resembled the image he had had in his mind when he first laid eyes on the package strapped to the stranger's saddle. There was only one thing he hadn't anticipated: the quantity. As he scanned over the banknotes, which were carefully folded and secured with a fine golden clip, he grew ever more elated. Goods like this couldn't belong to the likes of him, let alone the baboon he just offed. That guy would have either spent the money or kept it crumpled in his breeches. The hat and boots were too prissy for him too; they clashed with the rest of his getup like a glass of milk on a saloon bartop.

"So, Paw, how'd we fare?" Damn good. Too good. Weasel knew it already, and in his gut and he was starting to get worried.

"When're you gonna learn how to value a haul? You can't figure it out on your own?" he replied, winded with excitement. "I'd wager to say the guy and his cronies have been aiming high. They must've cleaned out the whole family of some big shot. Look at these jewels! I never seen diamonds like this. And this little revolver? It's got ivory and mother of pearl in it, with solid gold finish. By ginger, I'm droolin' all over myself!" He ran his hand across his mouth and dabbed at his eyes with his handkerchief. "It's pretty fine, but damn near useless. It's the kind of so-called weapon them Nancies like to carry," he wiped some more spittle with his filthy sleeve then used it to try to shine the pistol. "It even has a backloader. Wouldn't want to get gunpowder all over Nancy-boy's pretty little hands! Reckon its owner must've had it made just for him," he continued, examining it.

"Dang, Paw, I've heard about 'em before, but I've never seen a gun you can load in a single stroke!"

"Simmer down, kid. Backloading is a stupid invention and won't stick around for long. If you want to shoot straight, it's best to load the chamber yourself. Leave the toys to the babies. Way I see it, this ain't no different than the other baubles we found in our haul. Good to get a few dollars, but not something you use to put a bullet in somebody's behind."

He pulled out his long-barreled gun which he kept squeezed between his pot belly and his belt. He then slammed it on the table next to the smaller one and stood up straight, as though he were introducing a prize-winning hog. "Now *this* is a weapon. Eats black powder like a sow and shits it out in forty-four caliber pellets! Progress advances and the world becomes more and more confusing, but there's one thing I'm sure of: when talkin' weapons, nothin' shoots better than a Walker Colt and that'll still be the case a hundred years from now. Sure as shootin'."

The overall value of the loot was very high; much more than he had ever possessed. Because of this, the man was in a fantastic mood. After he pinched his son's cheeks raw, he burst into a resounding laugh.

"Finn, get me my Navy." His tone became serious, pensive.

"Right away, Paw!"

Is he really doing this? thought the boy as he handed it to him in its black and shiny leather holster.

Hugg pulled out the revolver, weighed it and flipped over in his hand. Being a thirty-six caliber, it wasn't a particularly powerful weapon, but it would do the trick. In his huge wooden palms it looked like a purse pistol.

"It's well made. A tad small. Little more than a toy, but for a kid like you it'll do fine," he said, handing it over to his son. He did so with some reluctance. He had no intention of using it anytime soon. He could actually make a few bucks hocking it, but now that he had that spread of riches in his

possession he had to have someone to watch his back. Not that he trusted the little snot much, but he was the person he was the least wary of. More than that, he was cheap labor. All in all, he had pretty much hired him with a play gun and some ammo.

Finn took the gun with gratitude. "I'll put it to good use. I did have a great teacher after all." His old man didn't ever really spend much time teaching him how to use one, but he was there nearly every time his father cleaned, loaded, and shot his. Finn had always been very observant. On top of that, his father had let him practice on a rusty old Paterson he had picked off of a dead Buffalo soldier. It had a little too much play between the barrel and the cylinder, but heck, it was a gun, and for years it was the only toy he had until it finally quit on him.

"If I ever find myself backed into a corner, I want you to have my back. You'd better not forget."

If there was anyone in the all the West with an impeccable memory it was Finn Badfinger. Even the most minute and unimportant details of people, places, and events were indelibly etched in his mind. No, his memory was anything but lacking, and he would prove it.

"I won't forget, Paw!" Weasel took the revolver, put it back in the holster and fastened the belt on his waist. Then, with a swift action, he pulled it out, pretending to point it at an invisible adversary. He threw it into the air, grabbed it again, twirled it on one finger and put it back in place in one quick movement. The award for his performance was the back of a hand square in the jaw. The boy found himself on the floor with a red, swollen cheek and a puffy lip.

"Where did you learn that buffoonery? When you pull out the gun, it's for shootin' and when you shoot, you shoot. Period. You want to be a gunslinger or a two-penny circus act?"

Weasel looked at his feet. "Sorry, Paw."

"Sorry ain't gonna cut it. If I catch you playin' to the gallery again I'll ram that toy between your cheeks and pull the trigger so fast you won't know what hit you." He knew from experience that his father was dead serious.

Hugg went back to the table with the haul to try to summon back the good mood he was in. Muttering under his breath, he struggled to calculate how much he could possibly get for it all. The sums he was coming up with were in the thousands of dollars. That cheered him up a bit. It became short-lived, however, when he found himself unrolling a large sheet of paper. He hated when he couldn't understand things, and there was nothing he could understand less than a document full of writing. One thing he did know: rich and powerful folks could perform miracles by showing a piece of paper like that one. It looked official and the stamps seemed familiar, like the designs printed on banknotes. If tiny banknotes could hold so much power, maybe this big one would get him even further.

As he looked on, Weasel's stomach grew increasingly uneasy. It was something Hugg had mentioned in passing that Finn didn't think his father fully took note of while in the throes of his greedy bliss. *The dead thief had not acted alone.* Sure, he was alone when he had gotten to Little Pit, but that probably meant that he double-crossed his accomplices and took all the loot for himself. No doubt they would be on his heels in no time. If that band of outlaws could overpower the carriage of a big-shot, who when traveling with valuable goods would usually have some kind of security with them, they were not safe there. He had to turn the conversation back to the accomplices.

All in all, his old man was a clever man. Given enough time, he would always come to sensible conclusions. The threat, however, was imminent, and his greedy bastard of a father was so intoxicated by the bounty before him that he needed a little help to get back on track.

"Paw, you know what that paper is?" he began.

"No, but it could be worth somethin'." How could it not? If it had been placed among the most precious jewels, there had to be a more than valid reason.

"Why did you say 'the guy and his cronies' before?"

"Don't be stupid, boy. You have any idea how many watchmen rich folks have when they run around? You think that goose made off with all that loot by his lonesome?"

"I see, Paw. But where do you think they are now?"

"How in tarnation should I know? As far as I'm concerned, they can all go..." Hugg froze. He stared off into the distance for a few seconds, then barked, "Holy hell! We got to get out of here!"

1 Gratitude.

Hugg Badfinger and his son ran around like headless chickens as they scrambled in preparing to skip town. To avoid unwanted attention, they distributed their haul between the pockets of their vests and the saddle bags of their two horses: one new recruit and good 'ol Frik. The latter was a scrub of a horse. He was almost a mule in both appearance and gait, but he had always been reliable and devoted to his owner. In looking at him, there wasn't much to expect in the way of physical abilities. Moreover, his unsightliness was a great deterrent to thieves. If anyone wanted to steal a horse, they would be looking for a more presentable animal - not this poor, raggedy beast. Despite Frik's years of honorable service, his master would not bat an eye at the choice between haggard 'ol Frik and the glimmering chestnut steed he had just procured. Poor Frik was handed down to Weasel. Neither seemed to mind at all.

Having two mounts would make the desert around them decidedly smaller, but it was just past noon and crossing it at that time would not be pleasant at all. Perhaps it would be easier to wait a couple of hours before heading out, in order to reach the nearest town by nightfall. Better yet, leave before dawn and arrive with the sun already high, but still not really hot. By doing so, they would be taking advantage of the cover of darkness to leave the town without risking exposure to gunfire from their curious neighbors. Not that they shot at each other at every opportunity, but that curiously suspicious package and their sudden hurry may have piqued someone's interest. If this was true, the only way to accommodate them would be through about fifty grams of black powder, a little lead, and a smoking barrel.

They were all valid considerations, but the most likely scenario was that someone had caught on and was now organizing a band of ruthless professionals to spring on them at any moment. They may have even organized a little frolic in the town square. A frolic of bullets, fire, and death.

Another alternative could be to stash the corpse to throw off any pursuers. It would have undoubtedly been the easiest and safest way, but it would likely raise the alarm among the townspeople and immediately remove all doubt as to the value of the stolen goods. If that happened, they would have advanced on them like a pack of rabid canines.

Badfinger concluded that, as always, he would go with the most cynical choice. His loot was worth too much. It was worth much more than the miserable existence of a bunch of deadbeats. Nobody's life, apart from his, was more precious than that haul. If those hypothetical outlaws killed off all of the town's scoundrels, they would be doing him a favor because it would reduce the number of potential witnesses. That loot was his. His and his alone. He was possessive and could not bear the idea of anyone else knowing of its existence. He even had to push away unhealthy thoughts regarding the fate of his own son.

One look at Hugg was all Weasel needed. He immediately knew what he had decided and took action. They mounted their horses and bolted out of the shed in a cloud of dust and wood splinters. In doing so, they did not allow anyone time to react in offense.

"Paw, if we wear out the horses like this, they'll never make it across the desert!" the boy objected, while Frik huffed and puffed to keep pace with the chestnut horse. The scrub was holding his own by comparison, but only because the other mount was worn out from the charge he had just made.

"We ain't crossing the desert, we're hiding out. Now shut up and follow me, nitwit!" His cruel and barbaric ways could make him look like a brainless cretin who relied on violence to get what he wanted, but Finn knew very well that his father was no fool. Once again, he had opted for the best solution.

They spurred on the horses until they disappeared behind a hill, thus giving the impression of advancing deep into the desert. Once out of sight, they changed direction and climbed a high hill from its only passable side. Its other side, the one visible from the town, was nothing but a steep cliff. There, the ground was calcareous and consisted of innumerable caves and ravines: the ideal place from which to see without being seen.

They stashed the stolen goods in a small natural hollow where they took care to further conceal them with foliage. They tied up the horses in a cave, then crawled up the bank of the ravine to keep watch on Little Pit.

"We'll leave for Agua Dulce before dawn," Hugg said.

"I don't understand, Paw. Since it's a stone's throw from here, why don't we just go straight to El Paso? It's a big city and a couple of extra gringos won't be noticed. Agua Dulce has so few people we'll be noticed right away. You're the one who told me that! "

"Don't you go on thinkin' that now you got a gun you can tell me how things are! If I'm the one's taught you those things, it goes to show that I know more than you. Lots of the folks headed for El Paso make a stop in Agua Dulce to cool down and water their horses. So, smart-ass, we ain't gonna get noticed there either. Also, as you said: there ain't many folks there, so that means we have less a chance of running into a damn bounty hunter what knows my face. You know your harlot mother and moron brother ain't the only ones they know I killed."

"Sorry Paw, I'm still learning." Weasel's eyes flashed with fire for a fleeting moment. However, he kept his gaze low, as he always did, so the older man did not notice.

Night fell, and with it, a bitter cold. The damned desert was always that way; It would fry you during the day, then it would freeze you after sunset. Nevertheless, the two had years of experience in that hostile land, so they never traveled without a blanket. Even Finn had one of his own. It was half worm-eaten and home to more than a few lice, but it was warm and that was all that mattered.

It wasn't long until they spotted a group of eight individuals under the moonlight in the clearing below. They stopped their horses some distance from the town and sent a scout ahead. The scout removed his coat before he rolled in the dust and continued, on foot. They must have heard the rumors of the unconventional hospitality that Little Pit offered their guests when they arrived. The man, covered head to toe in filth, looked like a wretch of no interest to the townspeople. This would allow him to approach the watering hole undisturbed to feign drawing water while scanning the town.

He arrived in the town and was immediately approached by Studd Mash, a.k.a. Saloon. The man had one leg shorter than the other, which was how they recognized him from a distance and under the moonlight. With his slanted posture and his unbalanced gait he resembled the tattered old sign which was once Joe's welcome sign, which incidentally seemed to have the word "Saloon" faded on its face, at least as far as Hugg could tell. They watched the man hobble over to the guest, roughing him up in a search for valuables and then leaving, shaking his arms in frustration. As he walked away, his hat fell to the ground and he picked it up.

"Paw, that coot is wearing our benefactor's hat!"

"Crimany, son! How the heck do you see that?"

"I didn't see it, I guessed it. His would never have fallen to the ground because he has a string that keeps it tied under his chin. He put it on there so his hat wouldn't keep falling off on account of his hobbling."

"I think you might be right. Only Studd would be dumb enough to show off his stolen hat to the first drifter in sight. Well, 'bout now I'm thinkin' the town frolic is a sure thing."

The incognito scout sat on the ground with his back against a planked wall pretending to rest. After some time, he slowly got up and disappeared behind a barn. Some moments later, a fire broke out. He must have hidden some burning fuel in his leather pouch. That must have also been the signal. While the townspeople came out into the open to try to tame the flames, the group of outlaws galloped toward them. They rode in like a wave of death and caught the townspeople by surprise,

taking out anyone brave enough to draw their weapon. A few anxious moments were enough for the few surviving inhabitants of Little Pit to have been disarmed and lined up for interrogation. Of the assailants, only one seemed to have cashed in his chips.

Meanwhile, some of the outlaws began raiding homes to avoid being shot from behind. The risk was real. In fact, before they could react, someone had fired a couple of shotgun blasts from Sean's house. The first of the two made its mark, taking out another of the invaders.

“Only six left now”, said Hugg.

“Wrong... You didn't count me.”

Clack

The unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked sent his words from the tip of his tongue down to the pits of his bowels.

Father and son both put their hands in the air and slowly turned around. A thin man with hate in his eyes was pointing the business end of a shotgun at them. With a barely-there mustache and a grin like a fox in a hen house, his appearance was a real slap in the face. He was, however, on the right end of the barrel, so all said and done he had the upper hand. Hugg, making the best of his predicament, contented himself with a smirk and spat on the ground.

“I came up this hill to get a bird's eye view of the plain. Y'know, we don't like surprises,” he tilted his head back, “Lo and behold, look who I find perched on top – two ugly ass buzzards ready to dine with the corpses.” The man ran his tongue across his lips. “C'mon! What you just standing there for? Unbuckle them holsters and throw 'em under my feet. Any funny business and I'll put a bullet between your eyes.”

Their choices were few. They had to do what he said.

“All right now, maggots, kick that shootin' iron over the cliff.”

It wasn't just some old, shoddy gun, it was a buffalo gun, and a damn good one at that. Hugg hesitated for a moment. He instinctively looked for reassurance in his son's eyes, but found none, as the boy was pointedly looking down at his feet. It was as though the man had asked him to drop his drawers. Without his precious Jagg he felt naked as a worm. The forefinger of his tormentor began to put pressure on the trigger and once again, Hugg had no choice but to do what he was told. He sent his weapon - his beloved weapon - to its violent end, smashed on the rocks below. If he got out of this alive he would first have to find himself another rifle, or at least a decent pistol.

“Come on, gentlemen! Let's go join the others down there. You sure don't wanna miss the party!” Badfinger realized he despised the man's voice even more than he despised his face.

“You didn't happen to've run into a gunslinger on horseback in the past few hours, did you? We've been searching for him all across the desert. He just means so much to us,” said the ruffian during their descent. He walked a few steps behind them keeping them at gunpoint.

In situations like this, it's always best to keep one's mouth shut. Both hostages stayed silent.

“I get it - you don't want to sing. On the other hand, I always thought vultures loved to be heard. It's pretty sad to have to go to a party without being able to serenade the crowd. But don't worry; once we're down there I'll introduce you to Lane, and I guarantee you he knows how to make you sing like finches.”

Yep, he talked too damn much. In any case, Hugg felt his blood freeze in his veins at the prospect of being tortured.

The day had started out to be the best day he had ever had, but now it was on its way to conclude as the worst one.

BANG!

“You two! Turn around slowly.” That most certainly was not the same irritating voice as before.

Their former captor stared wide-eyed at the sky from a rocky shelf several feet down from the path. It seemed that his look of surprise was due in part to the hole in his forehead. A man with an icy glare and fairly well-groomed travel clothes peered at them from behind a Colt. He had another

revolver on the left side of his belt, along which a battery of pre-loaded charges were visible. The guy was the very picture of a lawman.

"I'm Cardigan Smith. Texas Ranger. Are you going to tell me what you were doing in the company of that criminal?" He was a lawman, and a dangerous one. He wasn't the usual high-ranking windbag. He was a Ranger. That meant that he was a skilled gunman or a former bounty hunter who had chosen to work for the state. The operative arm of the law.

"Thank you for saving us, Mr. Lieutenant. We're nothing but poor pikes tryin' to find a living in this cursed land," Hugg began.

"I'm not a Lieutenant... I wish. Anyhow, please continue."

"Yessir. We live close by, in Little Pit. Up yonder is where I buried my beloved wife and my other son when they died of smallpox." Hugg pointed to a nearby hill where he knew that there were two mounds without an inscription. The real story was that bodies of his spouse and his offspring had been left to rot in their old house in Louisiana. After having committed the crime he skipped town and was on the dodge. He pretended to choke back a sob, wiped away a non-existent tear and continued, "Today would've been our anniversary. Sixteen years. So me and m'boy came up here to spend some time with 'em. When it started to get dark we headed back home, but then we saw smoke coming from our town. Fearin' the worst, we climbed this here mountain to figure out what was goin' on. That's when that man attacked us. He kept askin' us about a gunslinger, but I didn't know what he was talkin' about. We didn't know what to tell him, so he said he'd take us to some person named Lane who would make us talk." A half-truth was always better than an outright lie.

"Lane... Lane Sadlann, I suppose," He said to himself. "There we go - finally!"

"What? I don't get it." Hugg tried to speculate.

"No, nothing that concerns you. I have to thank you, though. You saved me from having to retrieve the body of that outlaw over there. Now I don't have to, 'cause I've already gotten what I needed. Your faces don't seem to be on any wanted flyer, at least not from what I can recall. Anyhow, I still don't fully trust you, so you'll have to come with me to my company's camp. If you are who you say you are, you've got nothing to worry about. Where did you leave your horses?"

"We don't have no horses, Sir. How great it would be to have one. We could cross this desert in a few hours."

"I suspected as much. Damn! It would take us too long to get to the others at Cactus Cross." The man was cautiously aware that they could be in cahoots with the band of outlaws he was hunting. Therefore, in order to avoid any unpleasant surprises, he would have preferred to take them with him. Everything appeared to be pointing to the contrary, but in outlaw country one could never be too careful. On the other hand, he intended to get back to his company's camp as soon as possible to get the necessary reinforcements. If he was any bit the bounty hunter he once was he would have taken them out at even the slightest suspicion just to get them out of his way. However, he was a man of the law now, so he had to put aside the more cynical part of himself.

"Ok son, tie your father to that tree," he ordered, throwing him a rope. When he saw the young man hesitate, he added, "Don't worry. It's just a precaution. I have to do something first, then I'll come back and untie you. Look, I'll give you my blanket to keep the chill off."

Regrettably, Weasel did as he was told.

"Now, I have to tie you up too. I suggest that you don't do anything stupid or try to take off."

"I'm not takin' off! I'm not leavin' my Paw," he whined, emulating the insufferable voice of Denner, the only other kid in Little Pit.

The lawman put his gun back into his holster and took him by the arm to tie him up. Without warning, Weasel planted a booted heel on his foot and tried to escape, but to no avail. The man's grip was firm. The only thing he got out of it was a curse, but it bought his father the one distracted moment he needed bash the man's head in with a rock. The boy was skilled at knot-tying, and the false knot was his specialty.

“Did you kill him?”

“He look alive to you?” The ill-fated man’s eye was dangling from its socket.

“You could’ve just knocked him out. After all, he did just save our hides.”

“Well, since you’re so grateful to him, it’ll be you who’ll go warn his buddies since he won’t be able to. In these parts not many folks know who I am, but that don’t mean there’s nobody can identify me.” If the Rangers could take out the outlaws, it would eliminate the threat.

1 This side of the law.

Damn it, his old man could have gone a little easier on him!

Before sending him off to approach the Rangers, poor Finn’s father had practically beaten him to a pulp in order to make his appearance more effective and believable. He probably didn’t intend to go so hard on him, but just as appetite increases the more one eats, so the oaf grew a liking to pummeling the boy.

The general idea wasn’t bad at all. While many Rangers were corrupt and opportunistic, it was still hard to find one who wouldn’t jump at the opportunity to run to the aid of a poor, helpless boy who had been beaten senseless by outlaws. In the end, they were still just jackasses with a hero complex. Weasel struggled with the idea that adults could be so ignorant. He wasn’t necessarily surprised by the naivety as much as he was surprised by the fact that they had survived for so many years in spite of it.

He arrived, winded and wheezing at Cactus Cross camp, but it was no act; he really was in bad shape. He fell forward and raised a hand, pleading for help, then unceremoniously face-planted into the dirt.

There were eight men. Right away one of them lifted him up and poured some water in his mouth to revive him.

“Hey, kiddo, what happened to you?” The man was massive and ungracious, but it was easy to see that he was trying to be gentle with him. *Bingo! Here was the first aspiring hero.*

He slowly opened his eyes and pretended to not be able to focus properly on his surroundings, then gave a couple of coughs and began to babble unintelligibly.

“Come on, kid! Take another sip and talk slowly. Do you, or do you not, want us to help you?”

“They’re gonna kill everybody! Maw! Paw!” He said, rolling his eyes to the back of his head.

“Who’s gonna kill everybody? Where?”

“They lit the barn on fire! Gunslingers, on horseback. They shot to kill! They lined us all up in front of Joe’s old saloon. I cried and they beat me!” He had to pretend to be recovering from the shock by slowly coming to his senses and giving sensible information.

"Damn, son! Speak up, now! You’re safe here, we’re the Law. Can you at least tell us where you came from?"

"From Little Pit, Sir!" He pulled himself together and breathed from his nose. "I was on the ground in terrible pain. Sean tried to shoot those bad guys from his attic and I went and hid in the saloon’s crawlspace. Then I crawled out the other side and ran off into the desert."

“Much better! Now try to give me some more information about them, boy. It’s important! Any detail you can give us will help. For starters, did you hear them say any names?”

“There was a guy they called Lane. He was the meanest; he beat up lots of people. He’s the one who did this to me.”

“Lane, you say? Very good, boy!” In return for his story, he got a tender pat on the head that made his stomach turn. “Hey! You guys hear? I think the kid may have found “the Butcher” Sadlann. Seems like Cardigan was right all along. Let’s go!”

"Well why didn't Cardigan come and tell us, then?" Objected a blond man who had been dozing near the campfire using a saddle as a pillow. He didn't seem to want to inconvenience himself too much by getting up.

"They could've taken him out. Or worse, they might've taken him prisoner to interrogate him. Admit it, you're flunking out because Sadlann gives you the willies!" He antagonized the blond man.

"Hey, watch your mouth! I'd break your face if I didn't have to get up to do it. I fully intend to get another couple hours of sleep. Besides, geezer, yesterday we busted our asses to follow the trail and now you expect me to saddle up again before dawn. Loyalty is all fine and good, but for the beans the government gives us, I ain't in no hurry."

"Pull yourself together, Rick. Get your ass up! We ain't got time to waste!" He insisted.

"Who the hell do you think you are to boss me around? Piss off!" The man turned away to go back to sleep.

"Come on! You're gonna abandon us as soon as we get a chance to catch those bandits?"

"As soon as we get a chance to get shot by those bandits, more like."

"Gregory's right, now is not the time to dawdle." The new voice which chimed in was one of authority.

"Yes, Captain! But since we're not altogether certain how this bust is gonna go down, shouldn't one of us first report to the nearest command? As a precautionary measure, I mean. Maybe while I'm at it, I can take this poor boy to the El Paso infirmary. Is it, or is it not, our duty to ensure the safety of the people?" said the blond.

"You don't have to tell me the process, and it damn sure ain't up to you to decide who's going to report to command. Your laziness borders on desertion. Anyway, if you care so much, by all means, coffee boiler, do as you like. Just bear in mind that this skulduggery is gonna cost you three weeks of salary, not counting the annulment of your rights to the bounty for those criminals." The captain scribbled two lines on a piece of paper, crumpled it, and threw it at the man on the ground. "Deputy Richard Keen, hereby enclosed are your sanctions."

"Don't you think you're blowing this out of proportion, James? Three weeks! All right, you've convinced me. I'll get up and come with you." He sat up.

"That's Captain Bluemann to you! Sorry, but it's too late to change your mind. That was an order, not a suggestion. You will report back and so help me, if you don't hand over those sanctions, I'll write up a report that sends you straight to the gallows! I've had enough of you, good for nothing!" The man was purple.

"You commanders sure don't hesitate, do you? Scribble down two lines on a piece of paper and a poor Ranger loses several tens of dollars in salary. All this, after days of hard work!" Rick complained.

"Quit your bellyaching and remember what I said! Men, rattle your hocks and get going! The law calls!" The captain mounted his horse, spurred him on and ventured off into the desert followed by the others.

"Scalawags!" The blond man spat, passing a hand over his face. He got up very slowly, despite having a strong physique. He yawned, had a good stretch, and with a sudden leap, was on top of Weasel.

"So brat, spit it out!" He threatened, grabbing him by his unruly hair as though he were yanking a yucca plant out of the squalid earth.

"But Sir, I don't know what you're talking about!" Finn made his voice tremble.

"Look here, little shit! You can pull the wool over the eyes of that windbag James or that nitwit Greg, but not me. First off, there's no way you could've made it this far. Second, there ain't a chance in hell those outlaws would've missed a little whelp like you right under their noses. Finally, I know how Lane Sadlaan works. He's refined, a perfectionist. I would almost say he's a master of pain. His victims are not simply beaten, but meticulously mutilated," he said, his tone held a note of esteem.

"Didn't you hear the officer?" contested Finn. The guy was not the sluggard he appeared to be. In terms of hostility, he was shaping up to be quite the adversary. If he wanted to win him over, he

had to keep quiet and listen as much as possible in order to discern his intentions and act accordingly. He stayed silent a few moments.

“Snake got your tongue, huh? Looks like I nailed it! Alright then, I’ll help you out a little. Let’s see how much my theory proves true. You’re probably spooked, and I have a hunch as to why. I’ve come pretty close to the collecting the beans that you never would have dared to spill because you’re aiming to be a man of your word!” He was smart, but he was underestimating him. As such, he was making the mistake of talking too much. When playing poker, one must take care that the opponent does not see their hand. This the man knew very well, but what he did not realize was that his most worthy opponent was the brat which he currently had by the hair. In the land of jackals, an emaciated appearance and timid demeanor would have been taken for shortcomings, but the boy had learned to use them to his advantage in order to appear harmless.

“Let’s begin. Lane and his men showed up at your town and lit it on fire. This I don’t doubt. Now, what’s not clear to me is the motivation behind it. Can’t you throw me a little bone? You do something to piss him off?”

At this point he had to conjure a half-truth, otherwise he would start to be suspicious.

“Before they got there, someone else showed up. He had a nice hat and nice boots. Also, as soon as he got to the watering hole, he pulled out what looked like a gold pocket watch and checked the time. Studd thought he could have other valuables with him, so he shot him to get his stuff. They did end up finding some valuables on him, which caused a whole heap of people to rush in and grab for ‘em. Not long after, the man’s cronies arrived. There were nine of ‘em and they did everything I told you before.”

“Lookie there, now the story is starting to make some sense! They feared they had the law on their trail in Little Pit, so they sent one of them to check; perhaps the least known face. Evidently, the guy didn’t know that it’s never a good idea to show a pack of hungry dogs a nice, juicy steak. Well, since you’ve started to cooperate, I’ll help you out a little. In my opinion, you were sent here by Sadlann’s band. They forced you to put on this little show to set a trap, and to make sure you don’t do anything funny, they’re holding your family hostage. Am I right?” It was clear that Blondie had been able to draw the most plausible conclusion from the clues at his disposal. A battered boy was the perfect bait. Ironically enough, his father had also thought the same thing. Fortunately, there was no evidence that would lead the man to conclude that one of the criminals had escaped by pocketing all the loot. Plus, the truth was even more arbitrary and beyond believing than anyone could invent.

Finn’s silence was taken as a hesitating affirmation. If the answer was no, he would have responded immediately. He wanted to give the impression of wanting to talk, but being scared to do so. It was working.

"Here, see... I said it. *You* didn't spill anything.“ His grip on his hair was matting it. "So let's keep playing this little game. If you are here, it means that someone told them where we were. Did you see any hostages?"

Silence was the best way to make him keep exposing his cards and it was exactly what Weasel kept doing.

"Mighty fine!" Although the cop hadn’t received an answer, it was clear that he had been convinced that they had captured Cardigan and made him talk. "Now listen up, boy. I could still make it to my troop, warn them and stop the ambush."

"No! I’m begging you, if something goes wrong they would kill Paw, Maw and Emily!" That was the icing on the cake.

The officer continued, "Or... I could leave my colleagues to their inauspicious fate, outnumbered and caught off-guard. I don’t think they would come back in one piece." Blondie had sardonically placed his bets in favor of the outlaws. Reality, however, was quite different than what he was envisioning. They were not outnumbered, since the bandits had suffered the loss of two other

men in addition to the one Blondie also was aware of. Then there was the fact that there was no trap at all, and the outlaws would be the ones caught off-guard by the Rangers.

"I'll do anything, but I don't want my family to die! We are nothing but poor peasants." Finn screwed up his face into a pleading look.

"Fine. Then go and tell that big man down there that the rock he's hiding behind is too small for him. Then tell him I know everything but I'm willing to take a step back and not interfere. In exchange, I want three thousand dollars or equivalent. According to my estimates, the figure should correspond to about half of their portion of the stolen goods. If the guy they killed in Little Pit had some valuables with him, they've probably already divvied up the loot. So, you can't tell me they have nothing. Oh! Also tell him that if he doesn't agree to my offer, that I've got plenty of munitions that will agree for him." That rogue was not just slick, he had an eagle eye. Hugg had lurked almost a thousand yards from the camp. It was an impressive distance. Although several rifles exceeded that range, few were accurate enough and there were even fewer marksmen capable of such precision. Since his Jacob Hawken was three sheets to the wind, he might as well be out of range.

"Three... three thousand dollars?" Not even the most simple-minded wretch would have considered such an inconceivable figure.

"You tell him exactly what I told you. Three thousand dollars to turn a blind eye. Well, three thousand dollars, plus you as a bonus. I don't think my fool companions are going to make it, but I have to protect myself from any unforeseen circumstances. So, I still need to report to command, turn in this paper, and take you to the infirmary. Now, kid, if you let slip any of this and I'll not only kill you, but I'll go to Little Pit and take out your whole family if they're still standing. It won't be hard to find them. I know your sister's name. Emily, right? Think about it - who will they believe anyway? Some little rat-faced spawn of a reject of society, or an upright man of the law?"

"No, no, sir, I won't tell anyone! But actually, I'd like to go back to my town." He and his father had far more important business to attend to and it wouldn't be good for them to be seen in the company of a Ranger.

"Look, it's essential to me that I take you to the El Paso infirmary as soon as possible. Then you can make yourself scarce. In fact, if you disappear, as far as I'm concerned, it's even better." He shoved him roughly in Hugg's direction and barked, "Move! The sooner we get this over with, the sooner you can get back to your hokum."

The best way to profit is from a privileged position in the middle of the crowd. He had heard this saying from old Kent, the so-called bandit extraordinaire. Maybe he had been, but if he met his fate lying face down in Little Pit dust, extraordinaire he was not. At any rate, the motto fit perfectly with the revelation that Finn had just had: being on the side of the law required one to take possession of dirty money from time to time, but at the same time it allowed you to keep some of it. Operating with due caution, of course. Better than staying in that dung heap of a town waiting for some fool to show up with a pittance in his pocket. Blondie, keeping his eyes wide open and closing them only when the moment seemed fit, was about earn himself three thousand bucks and who knows how many other times he had already done it.

On the right side of the law was the best place to do the dirtiest work. He thought that this could probably be something he could get used to. There is something to be said for a young person who cultivates healthy intentions for the future.

At the moment, however, the task at hand was much more pertinent. He had reached his father and had to convince him to relinquish the sum that the crooked Ranger wanted, without getting his face smashed in more than it already had been.

"Paw, that guy there has eagle eyes. He saw you and he got suspicious!" Better to blame him for what was about to go down.

Years of work as a trapper led the man to instinctively seek the shelter of the rock with greater detail. Then he regained his composure and grabbed Finn by the collar. "Blazes sake! The hell is he suspicious of, exactly?" Finn flinched at the finger in his face.

"He thought you were one of those outlaws they are after and brought me here to set a trap."

"So why didn't he tell his companions?"

"That's my point, Paw. It's that he seems to want to keep it from them, 'cause he wants something in exchange for his silence." Weasel's voice was progressively waning and the last words came out as a barely audible whisper.

"Hahaha!"

Hugg let out a hearty laugh. "Let him go warn them! What do I care."

"Yes, but he's a pretty perceptive guy and if you let him go, he'll start to suspect something. Then there's one more thing. I don't think that for a smart guy like you it will be a problem, but he said that in the case you turn him down, he won't think twice about sparring with you. Of course, we only have pistols. He not only has those, but also has a brand new Sharps rifle. You know, Paw, they say that it has a good range and that it reloads in a flash. But you're the best and you can take him out, even if you have to circle him from a distance on horseback. Right?" He pretended to cling to him, as though he was seeking his father's protection.

A drop of sweat trickled down the man's forehead. "Sure, I can take him out with my eyes closed. Only thing is, if I end up just woundin' him he'd go runnin' off to his pals, then we'd have a pack of Rangers on our heels. Maybe we're better off givin' him what he wants. What's his demand?"

This was the hardest part. Finn held up three fingers.

"Son of a crow! He wants a whole three hundred bucks just to turn a blind eye?"

"No, Paw... He doesn't want three hundred..."

"Oh! Aight then what're we standin' here for? Here, take the thirty dollars the chump wants and that'll be the end of it."

"No, he wants three thousand..."

This was it. He was going to get another pummeling. Weasel was going to find himself on the ground again spitting out blood and dirt.

"Fucking pigs! They gorge themselves on our taxes, and rather than helping the honest citizens, they go rogue and want three grand to turn a blind eye!" Finn wasn't sure his father ever paid a penny's worth of tax. Even "honest citizens" was a laugh. However, he preferred not to point out those details because he had grown a liking to keeping his hide intact.

Hugg breathed in large quantities of air in a vain attempt to stifle his anger, when he finally blurted out, "I break my back to get this loot, then that horse's ass shows up and wants three thousand, I say *three thousand* bucks! Well we'll just see about that when I make him eat dirt. Who does he think he is? I'm just gonna have to get back to that hollow so I can get my pistol. This toy gun ain't gonna get us nowhere. "

He gathered himself and pulled out his pistol. As he leaned out from his hiding spot, a bullet whizzed inches from his ear. After the near miss, the adversary could simply adjust his shot and hit him. Hugg immediately turned back around to crouch behind the rock.

"Consarn it! This stupid backloadin' pistol piece a dung can't hold a candle to my Jagg! If only I still had it..." He seemed more shaken up by the affront to his convictions than by risking his hide by a frog's hair. He huffed and started digging through his pockets, cursing under his breath.

"Finn! Finn, stop rollin' round in the dust like a cat in heat and get over here!" Despite his loss of equilibrium from the combination of the beating and getting up too quickly, he obeyed, but only to avoid an "encouragement kick" on top of everything else.

"Here. Take this. Should be worth about three thousand bucks. And you better hope he didn't realize I don't have a gun. If he did, he's gonna want it all and will try to take us out to get it. He'll have to pry it out of my cold dead hands!" His lump of a father shared nothing. Ever. But for some

reason when things got hairy, his father had no problem sharing the burden. Always. “Come on, We gotta cut stick now!” He added.

“Err, Paw... There’s one more thing.”

Badfinger stared daggers at him, took a deep breath through gritted teeth, and motioned for him to continue.

“The guy wants me, too. He wants to take me to El Paso for me to get bandaged up; he needs it to keep his cover.”

Hugg breathed a sigh of relief.

“Shoot, I was thinkin’ he wanted more than that! Fare thee well, kid. Don’t take any wooden nickels.” He chuckled, heartened.

“Actually, I’m gonna try to escape and meet you in Agua Dulce.”

“You do what you want. Y’know, sometimes you can be useful after all. I’ll stay at the only inn the place has. If you’re still alive by then I’ll see you there. If not, it’s been a pleasure! I’ve got a fifty-thousand-dollar haul to think about, So I can’t be goin’ out of my way for you, understand.” That bounty was too substantial for Hugg to keep his head on straight. It was in his possession for less than a day and it was already taking over; an obsession that clouded his judgment and made him even less rational than he already was. Even putting himself in the line of fire was out of character for him. Finn determined that if he left him alone for too long, he would soon lose his father, along with aura of sheer luck that always seemed to linger around him.

The boy neatly arranged the jewels he was holding in his hand in preparation of the hard sell ahead of him. He popped out from behind the rock and walked up to Blondie.

Rick scanned over the baubles, summing up their value under his breath. Then he made a barely perceptible grimace and barked, “Damn curmudgeon!” This junk is worth at most twenty-nine hundred dollars, not considering courtesy fee.” For some reason, this did not surprise Weasel in the least.

The man stood there, contemplating for a moment. He could have been tempted to send the brat back to the crook to demand more. Even worse, he could have been contemplating a violent attempt to take it all. Fortunately, he was convinced that the crook couldn't have more than five thousand dollars. In the end, he decided that the game was not worth the candle. "Alright then. Let's say that this time I give him a little finder's discount," he conceded by shaking his head.

1 Good manners.

Hugg Badfinger had a perfectly good reason to go straight to Agua Dulce. There, one could find a scanty old junk shop where a modest variety of services and accessories could be accessed by asking the right questions. For example, it was possible to pawn or sell an item, even if it was of dubious origin. Aaron Mansill, the shop owner, was nothing but a cheap loan shark, but he was the only hustler Hugg knew of in those parts. He had already concluded a few transactions with him and didn't have any complaints thus far.

He was very sure the merchant could never take on the entirety of the stolen goods; primarily because he did not have enough connections to be able to sell it all. He also wouldn't remotely have the liquidity to afford it all in one go. If he did have it, he wouldn't have been there counting the nickels earned from pickpockets. Either way, Hugg had to start somewhere.

He hadn't trusted himself enough to take the entirety of the loot with him, so he had stashed most of it under a rock just outside of town. He had been very careful, and before taking off he stood watch for a long while. Long enough to be absolutely certain that no one had seen him; a precaution which bordered paranoia.

He arrived at the saloon of Agua Dulce a moment before high noon. Just in time for old Ben to serve a flat, piss-warm beer and a potato and rabbit stew. He was reasonably sure that the “rabbit” was not rabbit at all, but he ate it anyway. He just needed to put something in his belly. Fortunately,

thanks to his grim face and standoffish demeanor, he had managed isolate himself in a secluded corner without being bothered.

According to an unwritten rule, he was supposed to offer a drink to the guy seated across the way from him. He had always hated this rule, and this aversion was not at all lessened by the fact that he was now rich. Upon finishing his meal, he was given a room to stay in. There he locked himself inside, turning the key twice to be sure. He intended to wait until late evening to go to the merchant. By showing up at closing time he would have plenty of time to make the deal without being disturbed by the occasional patron.

Evening came, and it was nearing the time to meet Aaron. Before he did anything else, he checked that he still had the jewels on him, even though they weren't likely to grow legs and run off. Then he slipped the important-looking document into an inside pocket of his vest, lit a cigar, and shuffled downstairs to grab himself a whiskey. His throat was dry, and as far as he was concerned, no good business deal was ever made without a little spirit.

He had just brought the glass to his lips, when an unpleasantly familiar voice made his drink go sideways.

"I knew I'd find you here! See what happens when you gorge yourself? Like I always say: anybody who drinks alone is gonna choke to death!" His overtly cheerful manner made one wonder if his statement had a double meaning.

"Ben! A fresh glass of firewater for my friend. What the devil are you doing here, you old spooney? How is it that you didn't go down with the rest of Little Pit?"

"Tell me now, Hugg, whereabouts did your little nipper run off to? When I was on my way back to town, a gunslinger on horseback who seemed to be in a bit of a rush went right by me. Then, when I was almost to town, I saw you dart away as though you had the devil on your heels. You was in the same hurry and... riding the same horse. I tried to shadow you in my carriage, but you was just too quick and I lost sight of you. But I knew I'd find you here. What you find on 'im?" Joe Otthims, who had sat down next to him, accompanied the question with a cheeky grin and an elbow nudge.

The man was huge and sported a very prominent belly. He was much bigger than Badfinger, who was also slightly better proportioned. His pockmarked and flushed face was surrounded by a black beard and an unkempt mop of salt and pepper hair. The gravelly, powerful voice and the colorful vernacular clashed with his perfect British accent.

"Shut up, you idiot!" hissed Hugg, looking around in alarm.

"I'm on to something, eh! What's it worth? A hundred? Two hundred?" He gave it his best effort, but just wasn't capable of whispering. Hugg just shot him a fiery glare. Some patrons turned an interested glance in their direction.

"A hundred bucks and a gold-plated watch that could earn me another one-fifty if I'm lucky," he whispered, while still being deliberately audible. Two to three hundred dollars was the most common payload of Aaron's patrons. A fair sum, but nothing that would instigate a scuffle. On the other hand, the place was crawling with petty thieves trying to get similar amounts from their scanty spoils. He himself had never gotten more than two hundred dollars in earnings before that day.

"You have a hundred bucks in your pocket and you're hoping to get off with just one sip? You owe me at least a quart of whiskey! And I mean the good kind!"

Badfinger shook his head, snorted, and finally nodded to the bartender who handed him an entire bottle of bourbon. He grabbed it angrily and slammed it on the counter in front of Joe, then he settled the bill and left without saying a word. He had forgotten about the cigar, but it didn't matter; his urge to smoke had also dissipated. Hugg thought as he walked out, *I hope he'll be blackout drunk by the time it takes for me to disappear! Actually, it'd be even better if his liver dissolved once and for all, the damned fool!*

"Oi mate, watch out for Mansill! He always tries to cheat when namin' prices!" The Giant shouted after him. He should never have offered him that drink. He should have shot him full of holes

to see how much booze would leak out. He had to restrain himself from doing so, but not because he had any scruples. Given how things had gone down so far, much of his discretion had vanished in the wind. However, if he reacted badly, he would have attracted the attention of the entire county.

Joe hadn't downed even a third of his bottle before Weasel burst into the saloon. He was breathless and panting.

"Hey, rascal, you got the wrong waterin' hole. They don't serve milk here!" A man taunted, sparking snickers from the other barflies, most audibly his two drinking buddies. The man was a textbook bully; one who would likely never have the courage to ruffle the feathers of someone his own size. The boy ignored his taunting and continued toward the bar.

"Did you hear what I said, stinker, or do you need my boot in your ass to make you understand?" The bully got up from his rickety chair to cut him off.

Unfazed, Finn made to dart around him. The man decided then that he was going to teach him a hard lesson and tried to grab him. His lesson was thwarted, however, when he found himself with his arm twisted firmly behind his back. Before he could register what was happening, a well-aimed kick sent him crashing into the table he came from. This time, the laughter in the room was directed at the heckler.

"That boy is an acquaintance of mine. You and your little shit pals get back to minding your business and you'll have no trouble." Joe turned his back to him and joylessly sat back down to finish his drink.

"I think you're the one who's gonna have trouble, ya big baboon!" The sound of three guns clicking into action was unmistakable. Otthims grabbed what was left of Hugg's cigar, took a shot, put his hand under his vest to scratch his belly and let out a sigh of exasperation. Then, with characteristic indifference, he turned in their direction without getting up from his stool. In his hand was a bomb full of black powder. The fuse was lit, and it was short.

"First of all, didn't your Ma ever teach you good manners? You don't bring guns to the table! By now you will have understood that this saloon and all of us in it will soon be just a mem'ry if you don't hand over your guns in three...two...one..." The three obeyed and Finn quickly grabbed the revolvers. Meanwhile, Joe extinguished the last quarter inch of the fuse.

"Much better. Now, since I'm occupied with this lovely dame, I'd like to not be disturbed." He caressed the side of the bottle as though it were the one of the naked concubines depicted in the dingy painting on display behind the counter.

Otthims had no interest in their pistols, so he left them in the hands of the kid. The three amigos, however, still had knives. The companions exchanged glances and understood each other. The three of them, armed, against the unarmed mammoth. From behind, no less. It was almost too easy.

They drew their blades and hurtled toward him. The first man tumbled to the ground after Finn managed to trip him. The lunge of the second man was intercepted by Joe, who grabbed his wrist with such vigor that he heard it crack. He simply wanted to make him lose his grip on the knife, but it seemed that he didn't measure his strength properly. In a flash, without letting go, he slammed the man's hand in the face of the third who, stunned by the episode, froze his attack for just long enough. A double crack was enough to be certain that neither the bones of the hand nor the face on the other side of it withstood the forceful impact. One man lay lifeless in a pool of blood, while the other howled in pain from his shattered arm.

Fortunately, it didn't last long, because with a knock in the head that would flatten a bison, Joe sent him to sleep as well. In the confusion, the remaining amigo scampered past Weasel on all fours in attempt plant the blade in the calf of the brute. However, the boy saw him coming and promptly and planted the tip of his boot in his temple, putting him definitively out of action. The three amigos would not be back on their feet any time soon. All the other patrons stopped laughing and, feigning disinterest, returned to their own business.

The barman shook his head with a grimace, threw the cloth he was using to dry the glasses onto the counter and took a deep breath. In that godforsaken place, not a week went by without a fight. Otthims noticed his consternation and consoled him: "I hope I didn't do too much damage. I reckon I know what it's like: I used to run my own saloon once." Except that in his saloon, there had never been enough patrons to even have a one-on-one brawl.

The giant rummaged through the pockets of two of the men he had knocked out. He barely made it to nine dollars in all, which he promptly deposited on the counter. "This is for the ruckus. Young Badfinger, clean that one up too." He pointed to the guy lying beside the boy. It was the braggart who had taunted him. He had only six dollars in his pocket. To compensate, he was able to recover a gold tooth with a well-aimed pistol whip to the mouth.

When he saw the owner take off his apron to begin cleaning up the mess, Joe stopped him with a wave of his hand and a friendly smile. "Don't you worry about it! I'll take care of throwing out the garbage." He threw one of the men over his broad shoulder as if he were a palfrey saddle. He lifted the other two, one in each hand, using their shirts as handles. He then brought them out the swinging doors and tossed them in the clearing to collect dust.

As he started back towards the bar to finish his drink in peace, he found himself blocked by Weasel.

"Mr. Otthims, Ben told me that my old man talked to you and left a little while ago. Do you know where he went off to?" He knew that his father would go to those parts occasionally to sell items, but he had no idea where exactly it was he went to conduct his business. He hoped to discover any information the Giant had managed to tap from his father.

"He went to Aaron Mansill to exchange some loot." He gave a knowing smile.

I can't believe he confided in this simpleton! He had to investigate further.

"But can this Aaron guy take on a loot like ours?"

"Of course, it's easy to sell a good watch. He could even sell it for twice as much as he paid for it. I tried to tell your Pa', but he left without giving me the time'a day! Maybe you still have time to warn him. If it really is gold plated like he said, he shouldn't ask for less than two hundred bucks. One-fifty for sure wouldn't be enough."

"Well then I better get going! I just don't know whereabouts to find the dealer."

"No problem, son. Go left 'til you get to the blacksmith, take the street on the right, then go a few steps and you'll come to a shabby little shop full of junk. You can't go wrong; this town is a hole. Go on, now, if you wanna make it."

"Thanks!" The boy dashed out at breakneck speed. The reason for his rush was far more important than fifty dollars. It was likely that the double-dealing Rick was there, and he had to warn his father. In fact, when he was about to reach Agua Dulce, he heard the sound of hooves behind him. Luckily, he had a small hill between himself and the pursuer, so he had time to hide behind a bush. From there, he watched as the horseman streaked past and wondered to himself if he was also headed to Mansill to do business.

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