



Weird Western Quarterly #10
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Weird Western Quarterly

Issue #10: "Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 2 (of 3)"

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The Arizona sky was a crisp, cloudless blue as the man made his way out of the foothills. The grade was too steep for riding, and he'd dismounted so he could safely lead his horse through the patches of mesquite and prickly pear. Despite the slower pace, he figured he could reach the town before sunset, though he was still unsure of what sort of welcome he'd get: many white folk got just as tense at the sight of a solitary Indian as they did around a whole passel of them. He knew that trying to explain that he was really as white as any of them (at least by birth) wouldn't help much either, not once they got a look at his long black hair, tanned complexion, and buckskin clothes. But those sort of prejudices were nothing new to the man many called Scalphunter, and if that was the sort of situation he found himself in once he reached town, he'd deal with it accordingly.

The foothills began to level off, and Scalphunter paused to take a drink from his canteen, then poured some water into his cupped hand so his horse could have a little relief. It was past midday, but the sun was still terribly hot, and both he and his mount were building up a good sweat. "Not much further, my friend," he told the horse in Kiowa, which was the language the man was most comfortable with. "If the people there are good, then we shall rest for a day before moving on." He patted the animal on the neck, and was about to continue on his way when he heard an odd noise — it seemed to be coming from a spot just up the hill, but he couldn't see anything there. He thought perhaps he was imagining it, but then his horse started whinnying and jerking its head, pulling the reins right out of Scalphunter's hand. As he tried to calm the animal down, he saw something that made him feel just as jittery as his horse: an oblong bubble had begun to form right where the noise was coming from, growing in length until it was nearly six feet across, then it split

like a seed pod, ejecting a man onto the hillside. The newcomer tumbled down the steep grade and right past Scalphunter, who had wisely stepped back the moment he saw that the man was headed in his direction, and eventually came to a stop about fifteen feet away from the Kiowa warrior as his momentum ran out.

Scalphunter stared at the newcomer, then back up the hillside at the spot he'd appeared from — the bubble was gone, as was the noise, and there was no evidence that either phenomenon had even occurred, save for the man now laying quite still nearby. *What just happened here?* Scalphunter thought. *It's not exactly normal for people to appear out of thin air like that.* He supposed it could have been some form of magic — he'd had a few dealings in the past with people and events of a supernatural nature — but if that was the case, was the man who appeared the source of the magic... or a victim of it?

One hand resting on the old cavalry pistol holster attached to his belt, Scalphunter slowly made his way downhill to the newcomer. As he got closer, he saw that the man was wearing nothing but a set of red long-underwear, along with black gloves and boots — strange choice of attire for the middle of nowhere. Then he noticed that the man's head was twisted so far around that it faced backwards, and the limbs were bent out of shape so badly that the sight made Scalphunter wince. *Must have snapped his neck as he fell,* he thought as he knelt down beside the man's still form, gazing at the strangely-placid face — if not for the gruesome injuries that he'd obviously suffered, one might have thought the man was merely asleep.

Then the newcomer let out a groan, startling Scalphunter so badly that he actually jumped back. *Not possible,* he thought. *That man should be dead.* But the man was far from dead, as evidenced by the way he opened his eyes and blinked in the bright sunlight, seemingly unaware that his head was pointed in the wrong direction. As if that wasn't startling enough, the man's arms and legs began to straighten themselves out of their own accord, untangling in slow motion until the only oddity about the newcomer (aside from the clothes) was his backwards head. This fact appeared to take a little longer for the man to notice, and it wasn't until after he'd sat up that he started to reorient it, twisting it around a good two or three times before finally regaining a normal, frontward-facing position. By then, Scalphunter had retreated a few feet away, unsure if

the newcomer before him was even human. "Who are you?" he asked the strange man in English, his pistol now drawn just in case. "What are you doing here?"

The man looked up at Scalphunter, registering the Kiowa warrior's presence for the first time, then opened his mouth to speak, but before he got even one word out, the man started clutching his head in pain. Actually, he did more than clutch it: the man's gloved fingers seemed to grow longer, until they encircled his skull. Scalphunter tried to keep his expression neutral as he said, "Whatever you are, I have no qualms about shooting you if you don't start talking."

"J-j-just... just a min... " the man replied, apparently struggling with each word. "Feels like... got kicked in th' head... "

"Considering how you looked a moment ago, I'm not surprised."

The man unwrapped his fingers from around his head, then ran a hand over his face and asked, "Why... why are you pointing a gun at me?"

His tone made Scalphunter pause. True, this man was far from average, but aside from that, he didn't seem to be malicious in any way. Actually, he didn't even appear to have the strength to stand... but appearances could be deceiving. "Until I'm sure of who and what you are," Scalphunter told him, "I feel more comfortable this way. Just don't make any sudden moves towards me, and I promise I won't shoot."

"Suppose... that's fair." He turned his head, taking in the landscape around them. "Mind if I ask... where we are?"

"Arizona Territory, about thirty-odd miles east of Desecration." Scalphunter cocked an eyebrow. "Mind if I ask where *you* came *from*?"

The newcomer didn't answer, instead rubbing the palms of his hands against his temples and mumbling, "Desecration... I know that name... somewhere... " He frowned. "I can't remember. It's like, it's *there*, but it's foggy... everything's foggy." Then a look of shock came over his features, and he said, "I can't remember *anything*. No name, no place, just *here*. My mind's... " He worked his fingers into his red hair as he stared up at Scalphunter. "What the heck happened to me? *Who am I*?"

The Kiowa warrior stood there silently, unable to offer any sort of answer as the newcomer climbed to his feet, wobbling in place and mumbling about getting himself to a hospital. *He must really be out-of-sorts if he thinks he's going to find a hospital in the middle of this wild country*, Scalphunter thought, and was about to tell him just that when the man's legs started to buckle. Afraid that he might take another tumble down the hillside, Scalphunter holstered his gun and dashed forward to grab hold of the man's arm... which stretched out about three feet while the rest of him continued to fall to the ground. *It's like he's made out of rubber*, he thought.

"What... what'd you do to *my arm?!?*" the man exclaimed, goggling at the sight of his appendage stretched out like red-and-black taffy. "Let go of me!" Scalphunter did as he was told, and the man's arm immediately snapped back to its normal length. Sitting on the ground once more, the man took hold of his right wrist with his left hand and began to bend and twist his arm every which way. "Doesn't even hurt," he wondered aloud, extending his limb until he was cupping his right elbow in his right hand. "Now I *know* that's physically impossible."

"I know that, and you know that, but your *body* doesn't appear to know that." Scalphunter hunkered down next to the newcomer, saying, "I saw an India rubber-man in a medicine show once... he could contort himself all sorts of ways, but nothing like you seem capable of doing."

"But how am I doing it?" he said as he literally tied his fingers into knots. "It's bizarre, but it also seems... normal. And I think I..." He stopped and shook his head. "Dammit, I *almost* remembered something, but it's gone again. What's wrong with me?"

"Can't say for sure, but it might have something to do with that odd entrance you made. It was like the sky ripped open and spat you out." Scalphunter gestured back up the hill to where it had occurred. "Maybe it's shock, or maybe you took a good blow to the head at some point. Whatever the reason, something tells me that we might not want to stick around here, just in case whoever or whatever chucked you through that rip decides to come back for you."

The man looked up the hill for a moment, then said, "You might be right."

I don't remember what happened before I got here, but... it was bad. I mean like 'I think I'm going to die' bad. That much I'm sure of."

"All the more reason to get moving." Scalphunter stood up, saying, "You thought the town I mentioned sounded familiar, and I'm already heading that way, so if you want, I'll escort you there. Maybe the sight of the place will jog your memory."

Pointing to the holstered gun, the man said with a smile, "I guess this means you're a little more comfortable around me now?"

"Comfortable enough, I suppose. You're still an odd fella, rubber-man, so don't expect me to fully put my guard down." He headed back up the slope to fetch his horse, then led it down to where the man was trying to get back on his feet again. "You still look pretty unsteady," Scalphunter told him. "Why don't you climb in the saddle 'til we reach town? The last thing you need is to take another tumble." The man did as he was asked, though it took him a moment to figure out how to mount up, which struck Scalphunter as very strange. *I can accept that he's forgotten who he is, but how do you forget how to ride a horse?*

Once the man was settled in, they continued on down the foothills, Scalphunter leading the horse by the reins like before. After a while, the man asked, "So, what do we do if we get to Desecration and I still don't remember anything?"

"Then we hunker down while I send out a couple of telegrams," Scalphunter replied. "Between your odd abilities and even odder entrance, I get the feeling that something nasty might be headed our way... and if that's the case, I want some friends around to back us up."

"Bat Lash!"

It took the gambler a moment to register that his name was being called as he made his way down the boardwalk. His mind was on the lovely lady he'd be spending the evening with... just as soon as he located one that struck his fancy, of course. The trouble was in picking out only one:

Tucson had quite a selection to choose from, which was the reason why he'd decided to stick around for so long. His hot streak at the gambling tables didn't exactly hurt his decision, either.

Lash's name was bellowed again, and he finally stopped to see what all the fuss was about. When he saw the three men elbowing past folk on the boardwalk, however, Lash's feet were in motion once more as he wisely beat a hasty retreat away from the approaching trio. Spotting a nearby alley, the gambler took a quick detour and tried to lose them behind the buildings lining the main street, but the men soon overtook him, one of them grabbing Lash by the back of his vest and slamming him face-first into a wall of the alley. "I want my money back, you perfumed son of a whore," his assailant growled.

"Y'know, most folks start a conversation with 'Hello'," Lash replied in a daze.

The man spun Lash around so they were face-to-face. "I ain't in the mood for no sass. You cheated me outta fifty bucks, and if'n you don't cough it up right now, me and the boys are gonna take it outta your stinkin' hide."

Should've known this fella was gonna be trouble, Lash thought to himself, then said to the man, "First off, would you mind not bein' so rough on my attire? This here vest is made of imported Chinese silk... an' hand-crafted by an imported Chinaman, to boot. Secondly, *I never cheat.* I won that money off'n you fair an' square, so if you want to pound somebody's head in, why don't you go find that faro dealer who gave you the bad hand?"

"Wrong answer, nancy-boy." He drove a fist into Lash's gut, and the gambler fell to his knees as he gasped for air, while the men stood over him laughing. "Actually, I changed my mind," his assailant told him. "I'm gonna take back my money *and* we're gonna beat y'all up anyhow. Sorry in advance for messin' up your fancy duds." He made to slam his bootheel into Lash's head, but the gambler rolled out of the way and managed to stagger to his feet. The other two men rushed forward and tried to grab hold of him, but he slipped away and started running down the alley once again. He hated to act in such a cowardly way, but he always did his best to take the peaceable route in all matters... and he

didn't think that these fellas knew the meaning of the word "peaceable".

Doubling back towards the main street, Lash hoped he could throw them off the trail. He was nearly there when somebody came out of nowhere and grabbed hold of him. The gambler cocked his fist, figuring it was one of the men chasing him, then stopped cold when he saw that it was a stranger clad in red longjohns and some sort of hood pulled tight over his head, with little gold wings where his ears should be. "What in the Sam Hill are you made up for?" Lash blurted out.

"That's what I've been wondering," the stranger said, then looked down the alley in the direction Lash had come from. "Is something wrong? Why are you running?"

Before Lash could answer, the three men tore around the corner, shouting, "There he is!" Lash tried to pull away from the stranger and get moving again, but he wouldn't let go. The three men skidded to a stop before them, the lead assailant telling the stranger, "I don't know who you are, mister, but you just saved us a lot of breath."

"And why is that?" he asked them. "Why are you chasing this man?"

"'Cause he's got an ass-whuppin' comin' to him, that's why," one of them said.

The stranger's eyes went from the men to Lash and back again, then he said, "I'm sorry, but that's not good enough. If he's a lawbreaker, then I'll help you take him to the police, but I won't just hand him over so you can pound on him."

"Mister, you ain't got no choice in the matter," the lead assailant said as he stepped forward, cracking his knuckles. But before he could do more than that, the stranger let go of Lash and suddenly became a blur of red lightning, knocking all three of the men flat within seconds.

"Still interested in that ass-whuppin'?" the stranger asked as he stood over them, hands balled into fists. The three men soon made it clear that they weren't by scrambling to their feet and taking off. Meanwhile, Lash was slowly backing away in the other direction, unsure of whether or not the stranger would turn on him next. The gambler hadn't gotten

more than six feet away when the stranger zipped up beside him in the blink of an eye, saying, "I'm gonna presume from their attitude that you're actually an innocent party in all this?"

"All's I did was have a run of good luck in the gamblin' hall, which those gentlemen couldn't appreciate." Despite the truth of the statement, Lash's voice was trembling — the incredible speed this individual possessed was unnerving him terribly. "Thanks for helpin' me out of that jam, mister. You didn't have to stick your neck out like that, but I'm grateful all the same."

"It's all part of the job."

"It's your job to hang out in back alleys an' wait for good-lookin' idiots like me to run by? Can't imagine that it pays well."

"No, I didn't mean it was literally my job... or maybe I did... I don't know." The stranger closed his eyes and began to rub at his temple. "To be perfectly honest, I don't know much of anything at the moment: my own name, why I'm wearing these clothes, how I can move so fast... I've been pretty confused ever since I woke up in the desert north of here." He sighed and looked at Lash. "I was all alone, without so much as a canteen on me... I figured for sure I was going to die out there, but I started walking anyways. Then after a few minutes, I just got this urge to run... and the next thing I knew, I'd cleared well over a hundred miles in about two seconds."

"You... you've got to be joshin' me! *Nothin'* can move that fast!" But then again, Lash had seen the stranger move awful damn quick just moments before. *This is too much*, the gambler thought, and began to pace in the alley. "Alright, let me get this straight: You woke up in the desert in your longjohns, with no water, no supplies, an' no memory... an' you just up an' *ran* all the way from there to Tucson?"

"Is that where I am? I only stopped here because it was the first town I came across." He cast a glance up to where the alley connected with the main street. "Unfortunately, I've been having to lay low ever since I got here. I can't exactly blend in with this outfit."

"Ain't it the truth? Lucky for you, I believe in paying back those who've

done me a good turn." He flashed the stranger a grin and hitched a thumb towards the main street, saying, "I reckon I might have some spare clothes back in my hotel room that'll fit you. An' if I don't, we'll head on down to the mercantile an' scrounge up something that does. In the meantime, y'all might want of pull off that fancy hood so's you don't get *too* many stares your way."

The stranger did as Lash advised, and the two of them headed over to the hotel. They did indeed get a few stares as they made their way down the main street, but Lash merely held his head high and acted as if nothing was amiss, and the stranger tried to do the same. When they entered the hotel lobby, the manager at the front desk did a double-take. "What's with your friend there, Mr. Lash?" the manager asked him. "I've heard of losing your shirt in a card game, but it looks like this here fella's been stripped clean."

Lash leaned against the desk and said, "Don't you know? That there's the latest Paris fashion." He waved a hand at the stranger, who was standing in the middle of the lobby looking about. "Pretty soon, every man in the States in gonna be struttin' around in his longjohns like that."

"If you say so, Mr. Lash. Personally, I'm more of a traditional sort." He turned to the wall behind the desk and pulled a piece of paper out a small cubbyhole marked with Lash's room number. "By the by, a telegram was just dropped off for you."

The gambler took the paper and read it over, then glanced up at the stranger, now standing before a mirror hanging on the wall of the lobby and looking hard at himself. "What are the odds of this?" Lash said under his breath. "Not the sort I'd want to bet on, that's for sure." He read it one more time before walking over to the stranger.

"I barely recognize myself," he said as Lash came up behind him. He kept brushing a hand through his short blond hair, as if making sure that it was really his. "I know the face, but I don't think of it as me. It's more like... somebody I met a long time ago." He turned to Lash. "Does that make any sense?"

"I'm beginning to think that the world's run short on sense all of the sudden." He held up the telegram, saying, "An old friend of mine just sent

me a message. Seems he also ran into an unusual fella today, only this one's made outta rubber, plus he dropped outta the clear blue sky. To top it off, this other fella's lost most of his memory too, an' what he *does* remember ain't exactly puttin' my friend at ease."

The stranger took the telegram out of Lash's hand and read it for himself. "The place your friend sent this from... Desecration, is it? Where is that?"

"Haven't the foggiest notion." Lash looked over at the manager and said, "Hey, Gerry! Y'all ever hear of anyplace called Desecration before?"

"There used to be a mining town called that about two hundred miles north of here," the manager replied, "but I think it went bust a couple years back."

"'Bout two hundred miles north, eh?" The gambler turned to his new companion. "So tell me again: which direction did you come from when you did all that runnin'?"

The stranger's eyes widened. "Do you really think that what happened to me also happened to this guy your friend met?"

"Well, if it didn't, then this is all one hell of a coincidence." Lash tucked the telegram inside his vest, saying, "Looks like we'll be makin' a little trip up north. But first, let's get you some proper clothes, then we'll hop on over to the depot an' see if they've got any trains headed near Desecration. It'll probably take us a day or so to get there, but... "

"Who needs a train?" the stranger said, and pulled that funny hood of his back into place. "Just point me in the right direction, and I'll have us there in no time flat."

"What are you... hey, put me down!" Lash squirmed about as the stranger scooped the gambler up into his arms. "What do you think you're doin'?"

"Saving you money on train fare." Seconds later, the stranger was speeding north out of Tucson as Bat Lash hollered, one arm pinning his hat to his head while the other was locked in fear around the speedster's neck.

The town of Desecration was dying. Looking at it now, it was hard to imagine that, only five years before, it had been a vibrant and prosperous place, with money pouring in every day from the nearby copper mine. But then came the day when every last scrap of ore had been ferreted out of the earth there, and the mine closed, taking with it Desecration's very reason for existence. Those who had the means to do so soon packed up their wagons and moved on, with only the ones who were too destitute or too stubborn remaining behind to watch their town wither under the blazing Arizona sun.

A few people still came into Desecration, although not in the droves that they once did. Some were outlaws who preferred places like this, free of lawmen and crowds. Others were simply wanderers, glad to find even a small oasis that could grant them respite from the parched land surrounding them. No matter who they were, however, nearly all of them gravitated at some point or another to the Desecration Saloon, one of the few places still open for business in this lonely town. As dusk began to settle over the town, the saloon had a decent compliment of customers, nearly all of them men. The only female in the entire place was a young lady standing at the bar, her slim figure clad in dusty chambray and denim, and her flaming-red hair partly hidden by a slouch hat. Her given name was Kate Manser, but because of her hair, some folks called her Cinnamon. She didn't like the nickname, and would only allow a handful of people to actually call her that, none of whom were currently present in the saloon. Not in the mood for company anyways, Kate sipped her whiskey and kept one ear cocked for anyone approaching behind her — in the past, her presence in such a masculine establishment sometimes led to uninvited gropes or other lecherous advances. Nothing of the sort had occurred yet since she'd arrived in town, but she was still wary.

Kate had finished her drink and was debating about ordering another when she heard footsteps near the entrance, followed by wolf-whistles and a man saying, "Would you take a gander at that over there?" The young woman set her jaw and let a hand creep down to the pistol strapped to her hip — she wasn't going to shoot the pigs just yet, only

scare them — then turned around to see that she'd been sorely mistaken. The comments hadn't come from new patrons entering the saloon, but from a group of men sitting near the doorway... and the object of their affection that had just walked through said door was certainly a sight to behold. It was a woman, to be sure, but a woman with *wings*, like an angel fallen to Earth. Instead of the usual heavenly robes, however, this angel wore garments that were so tight that they seemed to be painted on, with her arms and belly exposed for all the men to leer at, and a hawk-headed mask covering most of her face.

"I do believe my prayers have been answered," one of the men at the table said as he got up and walked over to the newcomer, his friends not far behind. "Look at what Heaven has done sent down to me."

"Reckon maybe the Lord sent her down fer all of us," another man said, and ran a grimy hand over her bare arm. "Ain't that right, sugar?"

The woman jerked away, her wings bristling a little as she yelled, "Don't touch me! Please, I just... I don't know where I am, but I know that sign outside. I... "

"Well, if'n you know the sign, then you obviously came into the right place." One of the men wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close, but she quickly shoved him off.

During the whole exchange, Kate stood frozen at the bar, staring at the winged woman. Though she'd never seen anyone that looked even remotely like that in her life, the sight of this newcomer gave Kate a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach. It made her think of the dreams she'd had as a little girl, dreams of flying... but that had been a long time ago, before her mind had become consumed by darker thoughts, ones that no little girl should ever have to face. Those thoughts were coming to the surface of Kate's mind as the four men circled around the newcomer, taunting and poking — the poor woman tried to defend herself, but she couldn't block every advance made on her, and it was obvious that the other patrons in the bar were too busy watching this little dance to intervene on her behalf. *But somebody has to do something*, Kate told herself, and before she even realized she was doing it, she'd reached into a pocket hidden in the lining of her vest and pulled out the object within, grasping it delicately between her fingers. This wasn't the purpose that

Kate had made it for, but it seemed appropriate for some reason.

"Let's get a look at the rest of ya," one of the men said as he reached for the winged woman's mask, but before he could pull it off, something sank into the back of his hand. He let out a cry and yanked his hand back to find what looked like a sheriff's badge stuck in his flesh, the edges filed razor-sharp. "What in blazes..." he started to say, then stopped when he heard the hammer of a gun click nearby.

"Step away from her," Kate said, a deadly look in her eye as she pointed her gun at them. "If you don't, then I don't have any problem with shootin' the lot of you."

"Little bitch," the man grunted, pulling the badge out of his hand and tossing it at Kate's feet. "I thought you looked like trouble afore, that's why I let ya be... but now you done stepped in it." He reached for his own gun, but the winged woman suddenly drove her fist into the man's jaw. His friends jumped into action at the sight of that, grabbing the newcomer much more roughly than they had previously and doing their best to restrain her. Unfortunately for them, they now had Kate to contend with as well, and one of the men let out a howl when the young woman smashed the butt of her gun against his nose. The newcomer shook the other two men loose, then let Kate take hold of her arm and lead her out of the saloon.

"I don't know who you are, little sister," Kate said to the woman as they headed up the street, "but you certainly picked the wrong town to visit."

"I didn't exactly have a lot of choices," she replied. "I've been flying around for a half-hour, and this place was the first sign of civilization I saw."

Kate stared at the woman anew. "You mean those things really *work*?" she asked, pointing at the wings, then cast a glance behind them to see the four men charging out of the saloon. They all had their guns out now, and the few people on the street began to look for cover. Letting go of the woman's arm, Kate said, "If you're serious, then you'd better take to the skies again before they start shootin'. I'll hold them off 'til you do."

The woman shook her head, saying, "No, I'm not going to leave you like

that. Maybe if I get a good grip, I can bring you along." But before she could attempt it, the two ladies saw a ridiculously-long leg slither out of an alley and lay in the street right in front of the men running towards them, all of whom immediately tripped over it and fell flat, cursing up a storm over the matter. As the men attempted to get to their feet again, the leg retracted back into the alley, and the person it was attached to stepped out, followed by a large Indian. A couple of the men brought their guns up and trained them on the newcomers, but the rubber-man stretched his arms out and plucked the weapons right out of their hands while his friend pulled out his own pistol, covering the rest.

"You know, I'm beginning to think coming here wasn't a good idea," the rubber-man said, tossing the confiscated guns into a nearby horse trough. "The locals don't seem very friendly."

"You get used to this sort of treatment after a while," the Indian replied, then turned to the other men. "My advice to you fellas is to do your drinking somewhere else for a while, or at least learn how to be respectful towards ladies."

One of the men growled, "We ain't takin' orders from no goddam Injun."

The two women stepped up beside the Indian and his companion, Kate saying, "Well, if y'all still want to have it out, that's fine by me. At least now the odds are even."

The man stood his ground, glaring at them, then one of the other men laid a hand on his shoulder and said, "Forget it, Roy. These freaks ain't worth the trouble."

Roy didn't move at first, then spat on the ground between himself and the newcomers. "Fine, take the damn bar for the night. Booze is watered down anyhow." He then turned on his heel and followed his drinking buddies down the street.

After they were gone, Kate said to the Indian, "Never thought I'd see the day when a red man would play the hero."

"And it's not often that I see a white woman display such bravery." He

offered his hand, saying, "I am called Ke-Woh-No-Tay."

"Kate Manser," she replied, shaking hands, then nodded towards the rubber-man. "So, where'd you pick that fella up?"

"Up in the foothills east of here... and that's a story in itself." He watched as the man in question approached the winged woman — both of them had strange looks on their faces as they slowly circled each other. "Did your friend happen to come from there as well, Miss Manser?"

Before Kate could reply, the winged woman took hold of the rubber-man's arm, saying, "I know you. I don't know where from, but... "

The rubber-man's eyebrows shot up comically. "Your name... your name's Kendra!" He started laughing, literally wrapping his arms around the woman and lifting her up. "Oh my God, you're Kendra, and I'm... I'm still blanking on my name."

"Give it a little more time, maybe. I can feel it coming back to me, just bits and pieces... " Kendra's eyes widened as she looked at the town around them. "This place shouldn't be in this good of shape."

"You had that feeling too?" He twisted his neck like a corkscrew, saying, "I thought it was just from me being... " He stopped talking and unwound himself from Kendra. "Ralph Dibny! That's my name!" He stretched over to where Scalphunter and Kate were standing and started shaking their hands vigorously. "How you doing? Ralph Dibny, damn glad to meet you!"

"Do you have any idea how unsettlin' that little trick is?" Kate asked.

"Don't know, don't care, I'm just happy to remember who I am!" he giggled.

"That's good," Scalphunter said, "but do you remember how you got here yet?"

Ralph opened his mouth as if to reply, then quickly shut it. "No... no, that part's still gone," he said after a while. "Kendra, do you... "

“Nothing at all,” she said. “It’s like staring at a blank wall in my mind.”

Kate looked from one to the other. “I don’t understand. Did you two get bonked on the head and lose your memory?”

“We’re still trying to puzzle that part out,” Scalphunter told her. “I just hope we can do that before anything worse happens.”

“‘Worse’?” Kate echoed. “Maybe you’d better fill me in on what you *do* know before I get in too deep. I’ve got enough of my own problems, and really don’t...”

Before she could finish, a whirlwind suddenly kicked up, blowing dust down the length of the street, and then seemed to circle back towards their little group. When the dust settled, a man in red longjohns was standing before them, holding another man in his arms. “I am never, *ever* doing that again!” the second man declared as he set his feet on the ground, his legs shaking so much that he fell to his knees. “I don’t care how much money you offer me, nothin’ is gonna make me want to experience that sort of terror twice in my life!”

Scalphunter stared at the man on the ground. “Lash? Is that you?”

“What’s left of me, I reckon.” He pulled off his hat, asking, “Is my hair white now? I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if it was.” He glared up at his old partner. “This is the last time I answer a telegram from you.”

“You mean you got it already? But I just sent it to Tucson not even twenty minutes ago... how’d you get here so fast?”

“Ask Red over here,” Lash replied, jerking a thumb at the speedster behind him as he climbed to his feet. “I was thinkin’ about enterin’ him in the Kentucky Derby, but he’d probably spook all the horses.”

“I’m really sorry about that, Mr. Lash,” the man in red told him. “I just got excited at the thought that your friend might be able to help me, and... well...”

“Apology accepted... but I still ain’t hitchin’ no more rides with you.” Finally calm once again, Lash nodded to the others, saying, “Forgive my

rudeness, folks. Here I am, babblin' on, an' I ain't properly introduced myself. Bartholomew Aloysius Lash, at your service, but you may call me... "

"Barry!" Kendra and Ralph called out in unison.

"Actually, it's 'Bat'," Lash replied, then saw a flash of red rush past him as the speedster ran over to join his oddly-dressed friends. "Oh, you meant *him*."

"OhmyGodIrememberyouAllIhadtodowaslookatyouanditsnappedback-into place," Barry rattled off, then did his best to slow down so he could be understood. "I don't know how, but seeing you guys broke through the amnesia."

"It was the same thing with us," Kendra told him. "One minute there was nothing at all, and the next it just started to flood in. There's still some parts missing, though."

"Yeah, like what the heck happened to us," Ralph added, "and does anybody else get the impression that we're maybe a little far from home?"

As the three of them tried to fill in the gaps for each other, Scalphunter, Kate, and Lash were having a talk of their own. "We should get them off the street," the Kiowa warrior said. "I thought having one character like that rubber-man around was strange enough, but now we've got three. I feel like it's just a matter of time before trouble hits."

Lash nodded. "Could be we're frettin' 'bout nothin', but you've got a point, friend. Like my pappy used to say, 'Better to spend a night in the cellar than to stand out in the yard waitin' for the twister'."

"What exactly are you two gettin' at?" Kate asked. "You keep talkin' like there's something horrible headed straight for us."

"Ke-Woh-No-Tay an' I have each seen more'n our share of odd things, an' while these folks over here seem okay," the gambler said, nodding towards the others, "there's a chance that something not-so-okay could be followin' in their wake." He looked at Scalphunter. "You mentioned Puerta Del Sol in the telegram... you don't really think it's gonna be *that*

bad, do you?"

"If you saw what I did up in the foothills, you wouldn't be asking that question." He was about to describe the phenomenon that preceded the rubber-man's arrival when he heard someone in the other group gasp. Immediately going on alert, Scalphunter asked, "What's wrong?"

Pale behind his mask, Barry said, "We just remembered... before we ended up here, there were *four* of us in our little group. We're still missing one guy."

He was dreaming of waterfalls, clear and cold, soaking his hair as he stuck his head beneath the unending cascade. He couldn't describe the relief that flooded through him while he let the water run into his open mouth, gulping it down so fast that he almost choked on it. He didn't care, though, just so long as it kept the heat away. He couldn't stand that heat anymore, sapping his strength, his will, his mind... no, the heat hadn't taken his mind, it had been... what had it been? A bearded face, laughing at his pain, *their* pain... then they'd been left to die, but he wouldn't... he'd refused to give up. He'd walked across the sun-baked land even while his body screamed for mercy, and then... and then...

Hal Jordan sat up abruptly, his breath coming in panicked gasps as he tried to figure out where he was. After a moment, he realized he was still down in the dry riverbed he'd collapsed in earlier, only now the sun had disappeared from the sky, and the stars were beginning to come out. He could feel drops of water trickling down his face, and he soon noticed his chest was soaked as well — looking down, he saw the wet rag which had fallen in his lap when he sat up. Then he saw the blanket laid out beneath him, providing some protection from the bare earth. He was still trying to puzzle it all out when a voice nearby said, "Glad tuh see yo're finally awake. Yuh had me worried."

Bringing his ring hand up, the Green Lantern turned to see a man standing just a few feet away, silhouetted by a campfire. He was dressed in a beat-up, gray uniform jacket with an equally-abused wide-brimmed hat, and a pair of faded blue jeans tucked into cuffed leather boots. While the

outfit struck Hal as strange, what really held his attention was the man's face... or rather, what remained of it. The whole right side was heavily scarred, to the point where his right cheek was nothing but a hole — the firelight playing off of it served only to make the sight more gruesome than it already was. "Who are you?" Hal asked. "What do you want from me?"

"Name's Jonah Hex, an' Ah don't want nothin' from yuh, 'cept fer y'all tuh quit pointin' thet damn fancy ring at me. Yuh almost took muh head off with it earlier, an' Ah didn't really appreciate thet." As he talked, he held up his hands, keeping them clear of the gunbelt he was wearing. Other than that gesture, however, he seemed completely at ease. "So why don't yuh just settle down an' try tuh get some food down yer gullet afore yuh pass out on me again?"

"No way," Hal replied, not letting the ring waver an inch.

Jonah sighed, then said, "Son, Ah'm doin' muh best tuh be patient with yuh, an' Ah ain't exactly known fer muh patience, so yuh kin imagine how tough this is on me. Now muhself, Ah'm hungry, so Ah'm gonna eat. As fer yerself, yuh got two choices: Y'all kin shoot me in the back when Ah turn around, or y'all kin come over by the fire an' join me in havin' a bite. But afore yuh decide, let me point out thet, if'n Ah wanted yuh dead, Ah sure as Hell wouldn't have bothered with keepin' yuh alive this long."

Despite his own confusion over the situation, Hal had to admit that the man had a point — it didn't make sense for someone to waste that much water in the middle of the desert on a person they were planning to kill. "You promise... do you promise that you're not going to double-cross me?"

"Ah swear on muh life, Ah ain't gonna do a thing tuh hurt yuh."

Slowly, Hal let his hand drop. "Okay, I'll trust you. But if you try anything..."

"Believe me, Ah ain't gonna risk it," Hex replied, and walked over to the fire. "Now come on over here. Y'all may not believe it, but the desert kin get mighty cold at night. Be damn stupid if'n Ah go tuh all this trouble

savin' yer life just tuh have yuh freeze tuh death on me." Hal did as he was told, wrapping the blanket around his shoulders as he sat down near the man, who was removing a small tin pot from the fire — the water inside was bubbling, and Jonah reached in and plucked out a bit of meat with his bare fingers without hesitation. After tasting it, he filled a tin cup with the pot's contents and handed it to the Green Lantern, saying, "Yuh may not be up fer eatin' just yet, but at least try tuh get the broth down."

Hal examined the pale chunks floating in the cloudy broth. It looked a little like chicken, but he doubted that there were any chickens in the desert. "What is this?"

"If'n Ah tell yuh, y'all might not eat it." He plucked some more meat out of the pot and ate it, and after a moment, Hal followed his lead, taking a few sips of broth, then fishing out some of the mystery meat and giving it a nibble. It definitely wasn't chicken, but it wasn't half-bad, either, plus the smell of it was making him realize how hungry he really was. As Hal polished off his share of the food, Jonah asked him, "So, yuh gonna tell me whut the Hell yo're doin' out here in the middle of nowhere, or are yuh gonna make me guess?"

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Hal said, "I wish I *could* tell you, but... I can't remember anything. Not my name, or how I got here, or even what this thing is." He held up his ring hand. "I sort of remember fighting someone, but even that's fuzzy."

Jonah stared at him for a moment, then rolled his eyes upward, muttering, "Yuh just cain't make it easy fer me, kin yuh, Lord?" He looked back at Hal. "Yuh don't remember nothin'? Fine, we'll work around it. First off, tell me 'bout this fight yuh 'sort of' remember."

"Well, I... I'm not too sure if it was really a fight. I remember a lot of pain in my head." He rubbed his fingers against his temple. "And somebody laughing at us... "

"Us'? There was more'n one of yuh there?"

Hal paused, then said, "Yes... yes, there was. We were all in pain, and this man was laughing, and he said... " He squeezed his eyes shut as he

tried to bring the memory into focus, but it was no use. "Dammit, it's there, it's *right there*, but I can't *reach* it!"

"Don't force it too hard, son. When it wants tuh come out, it'll come."

"That's easy for you to say. You don't know what this is like, feeling like your head... your head's just *empty*..."

"As a matter of fact, Ah know exactly whut it's like. Quite a few years back, Ah got caught in a rockslide an' got muh brains scrambled well an' good fer muh trouble. Spent a month or so thinkin' Ah was a preacher-man."

Hal opened one eye and looked at him. "You're kidding."

"God's honest truth."

The Green Lantern laughed in spite of himself. "I don't know you in the least, but I seriously doubt anybody could mistake *you* for a preacher."

"Well, at the time, Ah wasn't wearing' this fine coat Jefferson Davis gave me," Hex said, plucking at his jacket's lapel. "Ah'd taken it off tuh move incognito, an' just muh luck, thet's when Ah got whacked by the damn rocks." He smiled and shook his head. "Yuh should've seen me tryin' tuh bluff muh way through a Sunday service... why the Lord didn't strike me down right then an' there fer blasphemy, Ah'll never know."

The mental image of this scarred cowboy standing at a church altar reading aloud from the Bible was just too much for Hal, and he started to laugh even harder, with Jonah joining in as well. After a few minutes, Hal got a hold of himself well enough to ask, "So how long did you... heh... how long before you got your memory back?"

"Oh, bits of it were comin' back all the time, but not enough tuh make sense of it. Wasn't 'til a month later thet the whole thing came a-tumblin' back in muh brain, an' when it did, everything was clear as day again."

"Do you think the same thing will happen with me?"

"It might. Reckon all's yuh need is the right thing tuh trigger it." Jonah

fell silent for a moment, turning his gaze towards the fire, then said, "Desecration."

"Excuse me?"

"There's supposed tuh be a town north of here called Desecration. Judgin' by the trail yuh left afore yuh passed out here, it looks like yuh came from the north, so..." Hex shrugged. "Just thought maybe if'n yuh heard the name, yuh might recall something."

"No, I..." Hal started to say, then paused. "Wait... yes, I do know it, but... I can see the word, but there's nothing to it. No connection." He gazed at the fire himself, a crease of worry forming on his brow. "How long is this going to last? You said that it took a month before you returned to normal... how can a person live for a *month* like this? And what if my memory *doesn't* come back? What then? Do I just spend the rest of my life fumbling around in the dark?" He leaned forward, covering his face with his hands and saying, "God, I can't remember what *year* this is, or how old I am, or what I even *look* like. I wouldn't even know myself if I saw a picture..."

Without a word, Jonah got up from the fire and walked over to his horse. He rummaged around inside his saddlebag, then went back to Hal and tapped him on the shoulder. Slowly, the Green Lantern lifted his head to see Jonah standing there, holding a small shaving mirror in front of him — reflected in the glass was the slightly-sunburned face of a man with tousled brown hair and a green mask covering his eyes. "Yo're a bit of a pretty-boy," the bounty hunter told him, "but yuh seem okay otherwise, so Ah ain't gonna hold that against yuh. As fer the year, it's 1878. Don't know if'n any of this will help yuh get yer memory back, but at least now yuh know."

Hal took the mirror from him, still staring at the image of himself. "No, it's not bringing anything to mind... but it does make me feel a little better." He looked up at the man, saying, "Thank you, Mr. Hex."

"No thanks needed... an' yuh kin drop the 'Mister Hex' nonsense. Muh friends call me Jonah, an' so long as yo're ridin' with me, y'all kin count on me as yer friend."

“Considering the mess I’m in right now,” Hal replied, contemplating the stranger in the mirror once more, “I’m glad I don’t have to count you as an enemy.”

It won't be long now, the man who called himself the Lord of Time thought as he leaned back in his seat. On the holographic monitors before him were myriad images of the Grand Canyon, which looked nearly the same here in the 19th Century as it would in the 21st, where he’d been only seconds ago. In fact, were it not for the instruments lining the console telling him otherwise, he could have easily believed that he hadn’t moved in time at all. The corner of his mouth turned up in a smile as he recalled some of the first trips he’d taken through the timestream, and how disorienting they’d been for him... but that had been a long time ago, before he’d acquired the skill and knowledge that allowed him to mold himself into the Lord of Time. Now, he was a master of all that had ever been and ever would be, and once he had the raw power contained within that chunk of anti-matter under his control, no one would dare challenge that mastery again.

Fingers dancing over the control pad hovering in front of him, the Lord of Time activated the drones he’d need to finish the work necessary to his plan. Within minutes, the drones would begin moving about the walls of the canyon, placing the chrono-stasis generators into position. In the meantime, all he’d have to do is sit and wait for the anti-matter to pass close enough to Earth so that he could alter its path, bringing it down to the surface so that the devices could capture all that energy and transfer it to where he wanted. According to the instruments he had trained on its current location, it should be in range around the same time the sun would be rising over Arizona. *How apropos,* he thought, *that the dawn shall mark the beginning of my reign.*

Suddenly, one of the instruments on the control pad began to beep shrilly, and the smile faded from his face. “What is this?” he whispered, then touched a series of buttons. The main holographic display of the canyon was replaced by a larger map of the area and its outlying regions, along with four bright pinpricks of light, three of which were clustered together — a fifth light occasionally flickered to life as well, but the

reading was so faint, it seemed more like a glitch in the program than a true threat. The Lord of Time stroked his beard as he stared at readings scrolling alongside the map, saying, "So, you managed to escape my trap, eh? And you also somehow found a way to follow me back here... quite remarkable, considering my records show that the League has no means of time-travel as of yet. Still, here you are, and luckily, I have my sensors set to constantly monitor for any chronal irregularities in my immediate vicinity. It makes it so much easier for me to wipe out my enemies before they can even get close to me."

He called up his drone inventory once more, and was pleased to see that, even after sending out the ones he needed to complete his plans, he still had a nice compliment in storage. The smile returning, he activated the ones he desired and began uploading them with appropriate files.

"So," Ralph said, "what are three dazzling urbanites like us doing in a rustic setting like this?" He and the others were sitting around a table near the back of the Desecration Saloon. The owner of the place, expecting more trouble, put up a fuss over their presence at first, but once Bat Lash tossed a decent sum of money at the man (and that was only after Scalphunter had prodded the gambler into doing such), the owner decided to leave them be for now.

"I really wish I knew," Barry replied. "The last thing I can remember with any clarity is helping Hawkgirl to her feet after I accidentally bopped her."

"Is that what this is from?" Kendra said, touching the bruise on her forehead — both she and Barry had removed their masks, as the notion of "secret identities" seemed rather silly while they were stranded 130 years away from home. "Remind me to kick you in the butt when we get back to our own time."

"I hope you don't have to wait too long to do that," Scalphunter told her. "Unfortunately, I'm not sure where we should begin when it comes to solving your... unique situation."

“‘Unique’ is puttin’ it mildly,” Lash added. “In all my days, I never dreamed I’d ever be sittin’ in a bar with three folks from the future.” He leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. “Is this sort of thing common where y’all come from?”

“Not exactly,” Barry said, “and that’s one of the things troubling me about all this: Did we get thrown back in time accidentally, or was this all intentional?”

“Judgin’ by what the rubber-man remembers, I’d say intentional.” Kate Manser was picking at the wooden tabletop with the pointed edge of the sheriff’s badge she’d thrown at Kendra’s assailants earlier that night. “From the sound of it, y’all got jumped by somebody... and it must’ve been a pretty nasty somebody to take out the three of you.”

“You mean the four of us,” Ralph corrected her. “I know for sure that Green Lantern was still with us when it happened.”

Barry sighed and said, “Be nice to know where he is right now.” He’d tried to raise Hal on the comlink earlier, then realized that it wouldn’t work without a satellite to relay the signal, and they were currently about 80 years away from Sputnik. “Maybe whoever did this to us captured him... or maybe he got away and he’s still in our time.”

“Or maybe he just hasn’t found his way here yet,” Kendra said to him. “He may have gone in the opposite direction like you did at first, in which case, he could be sitting in another town right now even more lost than we are.”

“Which is why I think we should be out there taking a look around instead of hiding in here.” Flash turned his attention to Scalphunter. “I agree with you that we might still be in danger, but we can’t ignore the fact that our friend could be out there somewhere in need of our help. Look, I can canvass the immediate area by myself so fast, you’d never even know I’d left.”

“Maybe you could,” the Kiowa warrior replied, “but considering that none of us — including you fancy future-folk — has any idea what we’re up against, I think letting you take off into the night on your own is an incredibly stupid move. What do you expect us to do if you don’t come

back?" He jabbed a finger at the tabletop. "Until the dawn comes, the majority of us will stay in here. We'll take turns walking sentry around town, but only in pairs, and if any trouble comes up, shoot to wound if you can. We won't get very many answers off a corpse." He looked the three Leaguers over and said, "We'll have to rustle up some more guns for you folk. I've got a spare rifle... "

"Sorry, that's not our style," Barry told him.

"Damn shame," Lash said. "With your speed, I reckon you could sling bullets faster'n a Gatling gun." The gambler then flashed a grin at Kendra and Kate, saying, "So, how would you fine ladies like to accompany me on first watch?"

"How would *you* like to be gelded?" Kate replied as she glared at him, flipping the badge between her fingers.

"Hold that thought, ma'am," Ralph said, his eyes on the doorway. Three men had just walked into the saloon, and the Elongated Man stretched his neck up a few more inches to get a better view of them. "Is it just me, or does something about those guys seem a little off-kilter?"

The others turned their attention towards the door now. Indeed, the oddness of the three men was immediately evident: they all looked exactly alike. Identical shirts, trousers, boots, hats... even their physical features were the same, right down to the haircuts. "Y'know, I've heard of a pair of look-alike gunfighters called the Trigger Twins," Lash offered. "Maybe that's who these fellas are."

"There's *three* of them, Bat," Scalphunter said.

"Trigger Triplets, then." As the gambler talked, the men turned in unison towards their group and started making a beeline for them. "Whoever they are, they seem to have taken an interest in us."

"Funny, I was prepared for something a lot more dangerous than this," Scalphunter said as he got up from his chair. "They don't even appear to be armed." He stepped in front of the three men, a hand on the butt of his gun, and said to them, "We don't want any trouble. Just tell us who you are, and what you're doing here."

In response, the centermost man lifted his right arm and held his palm up in front of Scalphunter, as if commanding him to halt. The Kiowa warrior couldn't figure out what to make of this, and was about to speak again when he saw a blood-red glow begin to appear in the center of the man's hand, and he suddenly realized how badly he'd misjudged the situation. Before he could even think about moving, Flash came up from behind and pushed him clear, then grabbed the strange man's arm and tried to point it away from the group. As the speedster did so, the red glow shot out of the man's hand and struck the saloon's ceiling, burning a six-inch-wide hole right through it.

"What the Hell was *that*?" Kate said, staring at the charred timbers above them. Before anyone could even attempt an answer, the other two men had raised their hands, their palms turning red now as well. She and the others dove out of the way as two more red beams tore through the table they were just sitting at, destroying it completely. In the midst of all this, the owner and the rest of the saloon's patrons were running for the door in terror — a simple bar fight was one thing, but this was shaping up to be a nightmare.

Lash and Ralph had ended up under another table, the gambler drawing his gun as he peeked out at their assailants. "Well, at least now we know who we're up against," he quipped. "They look familiar at all, Mr. Dibny?"

"Not in the least. If it wasn't for the laser show, I'd say they were just three average cowboys." He began to snake an arm out towards one standing near them, saying, "Let's see if we can restrain one and get some answers out of him." As Elongated Man made to grab onto the ankle of his target, his hand inexplicably passed right through the man's leg, which seemed to shimmer at his touch. "Holy crap, it's a..." Ralph started to say, but clammed up when the man he'd tried to grab onto caught sight of Ralph's stretched-out arm and turned towards them, taking aim. The two men barely had time to scramble across the floor before their hiding place turned to splinters.

Meanwhile, Flash was still struggling with the one he'd initially tried to restrain, though he had managed to keep the man's arm pointed upwards. The man's other hand, however, was locked tight around Barry's

throat, squeezing his windpipe with a shocking amount of strength. As he was debating whether he should vibrate free and risk losing his own hold on the man, Kate came up and smashed a chair across his assailant's back. Unfortunately, it had no effect, aside from the man swaying a little from the impact. That didn't deter her in the least, and she simply jumped on his back and wrapped her arm around the man's neck, attempting to use her own weight to topple him. *It's like I'm wrestling with a statue*, she thought as she delivered a kidney punch to the small of his back, then yelped when her fist hit what felt like solid steel.

"How in blazes do you stop people like this?" Scalphunter said as he reloaded his pistol. He'd taken refuge behind the bar after he had emptied his whole cylinder into one of their assailants, who didn't even flinch at all the lead being tossed his way.

"I don't think they're people," Kendra said, crouching beside him. Like Kate, she'd tried punching out one of them, and had almost broken her hand in the process. "I think we're dealing with robots."

"With *what*?"

"Machines that look and move like men... that's the simplest way to explain it." She paused as a laser blast tore through the bar, punching a hole in the solid oak framework. "You can't just shoot it and expect it to fall over like a regular person."

"Do you have a better idea, then?"

"I might." She glanced up at the wall behind the bar. Hanging above the shelves stocked with liquor bottles were a pair of metal tomahawks — she couldn't tell whether they'd been actual weapons used by Indians or just gussied-up hatchets made for display purposes, but they looked sturdy enough. "Get ready to lay down some cover fire," she told Scalphunter, "and try to aim for its head, there might be less armor there."

He nodded and, when she gave the word, popped up from behind the bar and trained his gun on the man before him. *Not a man, a machine*, he corrected himself. *But what sort of future are we headed for where you can mistake a machine for a living human being?* Pushing aside such concerns for the moment, he fired off one shot after another, scarcely able to

believe that this “robot” could survive so many bullets to the brainpan. Then Scalphunter saw that deadly arm come up once more, and he ducked down just as another blast tore through the bar, this time mere inches away from his own head. As this was occurring, he caught sight of Hawkgirl swooping up to grab the tomahawks, then twisting around in the air and diving straight at their opponent.

Peering carefully around the side of the bar, Scalphunter watched as Kendra brought her new weapons to bear, sinking the metal blades into either side of their opponent’s neck. There was a sound rather like a shriek of pain, and the outline of the man seemed to flicker like a mirage, until the man disappeared completely and left behind something that the Kiowa warrior couldn’t even find the words to describe. It had the general shape of a man, with a torso, two arms, and a head, but they could be termed that in only the loosest sense. The head was slim and featureless, save for a large circular lens set in the center, and the arms were spindly, fragile-looking things made of banded metal, with three jointed “fingers” at the end — the ones on the thing’s right hand were folded back to expose a short tube, which Scalphunter supposed was where the deadly beams of light came from. What shocked him the most was the fact that the thing had no legs, the hip sockets instead giving off a strange blue-white light as it hung in the air in front of Kendra, who was pulling the tomahawks free from the sparking wounds she’d inflicted. The thing began to raise its right arm and point it at her, but she brought one of the blades directly down on its shoulder joint, severing it completely, and a final blow to its neck sent the head flying — the thing continued to hang in the air for a few seconds before the light from its hip sockets went out and it dropped to the floor.

Despite his own problems, Barry saw what Kendra had done, and the revelation about what they were really fighting allowed him to change his tactics. Doing his best to look Kate in the eye, he choked out, “Get... clear...” Kate didn’t understand at first why the speedster wanted her to give up, then she saw him begin to vibrate, and felt how it was causing his assailant to shake as well. She let go and backed away, just as Flash increased the vibrations to such an intensity that the robot was starting to come apart at the seams, and within seconds, it was only so much scrap metal at Barry’s feet.

The third robot, seeing how its companions had been deactivated, began

to sweep its laser around the entire saloon in an effort to wipe out the Leaguers before they could take it down as well. Before it had a chance to hit anyone, however, Barry rushed over and grabbed its right arm, wrenching it free from the rest of the robot at super-speed — the feedback immediately shorted out the machine's camouflage. The robot then made to strike Flash with its other limb, but Ralph came up behind it and wrapped his own elastic arms around the thing, saying, "Sorry, play-time's over. Gotta put your toys away."

Lash walked up to it slowly, staring at the machine with wonder. "Forgive me if I sound like a country bumpkin, but can somebody tell me what in blazes I'm lookin' at?"

"The Hawkgirl called it a 'robot'... whatever that means," Scalphunter replied.

"It means that it's a very sophisticated machine," Barry said, readjusting his mask, "and that it's even *more* out of place in 1878 than *we* are." He looked the robot over as it tried to break free of Ralph's constricting limbs. "I don't recognize the design at all. Anybody else got a clue?" he asked his teammates.

"Not a one," Kendra said. "It looks pretty advanced, though, even for our time."

Kate shook her head, saying, "I don't understand. How come they looked like men when they came in here, and now they look like *that*? I mean, they had legs, too... "

"They were using a holographic projection to disguise themselves," Ralph explained. "I caught on to that when I tried to grab this one and my hand passed through his leg... these things must have some sort of built-in anti-gravity, as well."

"English, rubber-man, speak English!" Lash cried in exasperation.

"It's probably better that you don't understand it all, anyways," Barry told him. "Who knows how badly we've messed up the timestream already just by being in this town, and the longer we're here, the worse it's... "

"Don't worry, Flash," the robot said. "It will all be over soon. By the dawn, I shall have what I came for, and then I can dispose of you and your friends personally."

"Good Lord," Scalphunter said. "These things can *talk*, too?"

"No, it's not the robot," Kendra said to him. "It's broadcasting... and I know that voice. I don't know where from, but I'm positive that I've heard it before."

The robot's head turned slightly towards her as the unknown voice said, *"Have you forgotten me already, Hawkgirl? Admittedly, we didn't have much time to get to know each other before we parted, but..."* There was a pause, then a laugh which sounded terribly familiar to the Leaguers. *"Ah, I should have suspected this! When my sensors picked up your presence in this time, I assumed you followed me here intentionally, but that isn't the case, is it? And thanks to my psionic scrambler, you have no idea who I am or what my plans are! How ironic!"* The voice began to cackle louder.

Barry grabbed the robot's head in both hands and glared into the lens. "What are you talking about, you bastard? And what did you do to Green Lantern?"

"Nothing yet, but my drone will reach him soon. Poor little man, all alone out there... he doesn't stand a chance."

"I may not remember who you are," Barry said, "but if you hurt him, I swear to God you'll regret it for the rest of your life. Do you hear me?"

"I can hear you just fine... but can you hear this?" An electronic tone began to come out of the robot, slowly rising in pitch. At first, the Leaguers thought it was feedback of some sort, but then Ralph and Barry made eye contact, each of them mouthing the same word: "Bomb." A split-second later, Elongated Man unwound himself from around the robot, and Flash grabbed hold of it and raced away from Desecration, towards the busted copper mine just outside town — the speedster had no idea how powerful the ensuing blast might be, but he hoped that the now-deserted shafts the miners had dug out would be deep enough to contain it. He paused only a moment at the mine's entrance, then threw the robot

down into the darkness as hard as he could before taking off again. A few seconds later, an explosion shook the ground, and Barry looked on from a safe distance as clouds of dirt and scraps of timber spewed forth from the mine before the entrance collapsed in on itself.

As the echo of the explosion faded away, Barry scanned the night-shrouded horizon for even the tiniest glimpse of green. "We'll find you, Hal," he said under his breath. "I don't know where you are right now, but we'll find you. Just hang in there."

Roughly thirty miles south of Desecration, Hal Jordan was sleeping next to a waning campfire, a blanket pulled tight around him. Nearby sat Jonah Hex, who had given up on sleep, and instead was staring at the flickering flames as he attempted to ignore the thoughts that kept bubbling up in the back of his mind. He'd put up a good front for the past few hours, but now that the Green Lantern had nodded off, the need to pretend was gone, and Jonah was free to wrestle with the memories that he'd been trying to repress for over three years. He thought he'd licked the problem a while back, but judging by the way his hands kept shaking, it looked like he still had a ways to go. *Yuh kin deal with this*, Jonah told himself. *It ain't like it's anything new tuh y'all, it's just... unexpected. Yuh kin deal with this just fine, no fuss at all.* But it was a lie, and he knew it. Loath as he was to admit it, he was going to need some help to get through this.

Getting up from his place at the fire, Jonah went to his horse. The animal stirred at his approach, but Hex laid a hand on it and whispered, "Easy, girl," then pulled open one of the saddlebags. After a moment, he produced a bottle of whiskey, which he'd purchased right before he'd set out on the trail. The seal on it hadn't even been broken yet, and Jonah ran a callused thumb around the mouth of the bottle, debating if he should do so now. And really, it was such an easy thing to do: just yank the cork out, upend the bottle, and let all that booze pour straight down his gullet. Then maybe his hands would stop shaking for a bit, and maybe the old nightmares that still haunted him from time to time would recede back into the dark corners of his mind... and maybe he'd get so drunk that he would decide the Green Lantern wasn't worth all

the trouble, and maybe he'd just get on his horse and ride off into the night, consequences be damned...

Jonah gritted his teeth, then strode over to the edge of the dry riverbed and climbed out. He moved a good twenty paces away from the campsite before chucking the bottle out over the desert as far as he could — it was too dark out to track its flight path, but he heard the sound of shattering glass well enough. *Bad waste of good whiskey*, he thought with a sigh, then looked up at the stars, the one thing in his life that never seemed to change. "Ah'm keepin' muh promise," Hex said. "It might drive me mad, but Ah'm keepin' it... an' Ah'm gonna do it dead sober, too. Ah ain't sayin' that Ah won't crawl into a bottle fer a week or two afterward, but 'til this whole mess is done an' over with, Ah swear thet..."

A startled cry came from behind Jonah, and he whirled around, his hands automatically going to his Dragoons. He could see nothing wrong from where he stood, but he soon heard another cry, followed by the sounds of a struggle, and both appeared to be coming from the campsite. Cursing himself for leaving Hal alone, he rushed back to the edge of the riverbed and found an unknown man trying to pin down the Green Lantern. In the firelight, Jonah could see that the newcomer looked rather disheveled, with scraggly locks of blond hair framing his sun-blistered face, and the bounty hunter suddenly had a good idea of who this person was. Training his guns on the man, Jonah boomed out, "Give it up, McAllister! Yuh ain't got a chance of winnin'!"

Though briefly startled by the order, the man quickly threw an arm around Hal's neck, then pulled out a knife and jabbed the tip of it into the Lantern's ribs. "You take a shot at me, and this fella's gonna regret it," McAllister said in a raspy voice.

"Y'all shove thet pig-sticker in him, an' Ah'll shove it up yer ass sideways," Hex growled. "Ah ain't in the mood fer games, so just let him go afore Ah forget muh manners an' splatter yer brains all over muh friend there."

"Tough talk... but something tells me you ain't gonna risk it." He dug the knife in a little deeper, saying, "How 'bout I make you a counter-offer? You put those pistols away, toss all the canteens you got over here, and *then* I'll let him go."

As the two men stared each other down, Hal's eyes slipped closed in concentration. He hadn't been able to make that strange ring of his work again since he'd fired those pot-shots at Hex, but he needed to try once more if he wanted to get out of this alive. He ignored the voices shouting back and forth, clearing his mind until he was thinking only about the ring and the power contained within it — he had a vague sense that the ring could do much more than shoot out beams of light, but he had no idea what exactly it was capable of. *Just tell it what you want*, Hal thought. *That's how it worked before: you wanted to defend yourself, and it reacted accordingly. So tell it what you want now... focus on a specific action... focus...*

A brilliant flash of green suddenly burst forth from the ring, lighting up the landscape with emerald fire. Then it began to coalesce in front of Hal and McAllister into the form of a massive tusked creature carrying what looked like a gun the size of a tree trunk. It leveled the weapon at Hal's attacker and snarled something indecipherable, to which McAllister responded by screaming like a little girl. He shoved the Green Lantern towards the creature, then took off as fast as he could, a wet spot forming on his dusty trousers. Seconds later, the creature faded away as Hal keeled over from the effort.

Jonah slid back down into the riverbed, panic in his eyes as he rushed over to Hal's side. Once he'd assured himself that the Lantern was all right, he took off after McAllister, yelling, "Yuh ain't gonna get far, yuh crazy sonovabitch!" When the fleeing man started to climb out of the riverbed, Hex trained his guns on McAllister's back and made ready to fire. Before he could get off a shot, though, an emerald rope wrapped itself around Hex's wrists and pulled him off his feet. "Whut the Hell..." he started to say, then saw Hal, still sprawled out on the ground, holding the other end of the rope generated by his ring. "Whut's wrong with yuh? The bastard's gonna get away!"

"I'd rather he get away then let you kill him in cold blood," Hal replied, a hint of exhaustion in his voice.

"Ain't nothin' cold about it. Thet owlhoot's killed a bunch of men already... an' in case yuh missed it, he was about ready tuh do yuh in as well. Plus he's been hidin' out here in the desert fer the past week, so Lord knows how many other jaspers he's killed fer water an' supplies

durin' thet time. Trust me, he's far from innocent."

"It doesn't matter. You don't have the right to kill whomever you see fit."

"An' y'all ain't got the right tuh tell me how tuh do muh job." Jonah yanked at the rope-construct until it dissolved. "Ah don't rightly know how they handle owlhoots where y'all come from, but 'round here, the best way tuh deal with most of 'em is tuh gun 'em down afore they do any more damage... an' more often than not, Ah'm the only one with enough guts tuh do the deed. Reckon bounty huntin' ain't the most glamorous work, but it's necessary, so while yo're in muh world, y'all mind yer own goddam business." With that, Jonah started after McAllister once more, his ivory-handled Dragoons cocked and ready for action.

Hal got to his feet and followed him, saying, "Hex, you're a menace! And if you think for one second that I'm going to stand by and..." He stopped dead in his tracks as a blood-curdling scream pierced the night. It sounded like McAllister, but this time, it sounded like the scream was borne more out of agony than fear. The Green Lantern looked over at Jonah, who had moved close to the edge of the riverbank and was now peering carefully in the direction the outlaw had run. "What do you see?" Hal asked.

"Not a damn thing, but it smells like a barbeque up there." Hex moved a little further up the bank to get a better view, then froze, saying under his breath, "Holy Hannah..." He brought his weapons to bear once more and started shooting, emptying both guns just seconds before a bright-red streak of light ripped through the night towards him — Jonah tried to duck back down into the riverbed to avoid it, but it still managed to clip his torso and knock him flat onto the ground.

"Oh my God... Jonah, are you okay?" Hal fell to his knees beside the groaning bounty hunter, trying to figure out what happened. There was a burn mark on Jonah's left side, searing though layers of clothing all the way down to bare flesh — whatever had hit him was so hot, the shallow wound had immediately cauterized. *What in the world did this?* Hal thought, then caught movement out of the corner of his eye. He looked up to see an ordinary cowboy standing at the edge of the riverbank,

regarding the two of them with dead eyes. For the second time that night, Hal asked, "Who are you?"

In answer, the cowboy brought up his right arm, the center of his palm already glowing red, and fired directly at Green Lantern.

To be continued in JUSTICE LEAGUE #16!

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Weird Western Quarterly #0 (2005)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Prologue

Weird Western Quarterly #1 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 1 (of 4): Once Upon a Time in Texas.

The origin of Jonah Hex begins here! Before he could become the most feared bounty hunter in the Old West, he had to survive childhood. You're guaranteed to never look at the man the same way again!

Weird Western Quarterly #2 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 2 (of 4): Into the Wilderness.

The origin of Jonah Hex continues! Just when it seems things can't get any worse, Jonah's father makes a fateful decision, and the path of the boy's life takes an unexpected turn. It's frontier action at its finest as Hex moves closer to his destiny!

Weird Western Quarterly #3 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 3 (of 4): Life During Wartime.

The origin of Jonah Hex continues! He's finally got the life he wants, but will Jonah be able to keep it when war breaks out between North and South? Sides are taken, choices are made, and Hex dons a familiar-looking uniform for the first time!

Weird Western Quarterly #4 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 4 (of 4): When Jonah Comes Marching Home.

The final chapter in the origin of Jonah Hex! As the Civil War ends, Hex's new life begins, but first he faces an old enemy for the last time. It's the moment you've all been waiting for, and it ain't pretty! Don't say we didn't warn you!

Weird Western Quarterly #5 (2007)

Nighthawk: 'Til Things Are Brighter.

The soul of the Egyptian prince known as Khufu has passed through many lives, and, in each one, he's been a force for good...

or has he? For the first time anywhere, it's the untold origin of Nighthawk!

Weird Western Quarterly #6 (2007)

The Vigilante: A Lonely Soldier Away From Home

Weird Western Quarterly #7 (2007)

Bat Lash: In for a Penny, In for a Pounding

Weird Western Quarterly #8 (2007)

Windrunner: Inherit the Wind, Part 1 (of 2) - Secrets.

Before Barry Allen, before Jay Garrick, another man had been granted the power of the Speed Force. But who he was before he'd obtained those powers has always been a mystery...until now. A young man's quest for answers becomes entangled in magic and riddles in the first half of this 2-part tale!

Weird Western Quarterly #12 (2008)

It's the first annual Christmas issue of Weird Western Quarterly featuring a holiday tale with the Old West speedster, Windrunner as well as a Jonah Hex vignette, "Prelude to a Reckoning."

Weird Western Quarterly #9 (2008)

Windrunner: Inherit the Wind Part 2 (of 2) - Revelations.

Special extra-large issue! Torn between civilization and the wilderness, Chris Maxwell tries to find out where he fits...but when a strange old Indian shaman enters his life, he finds himself thrust into a power struggle beyond anything he can imagine, and a new legend of the West is born in a flash!

Justice League #15 (2008)

Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 1 (of 3).

What starts as a typical day for a group of Leaguers turns deadly as they are attacked by an unknown enemy. Who is the Lord of Time, and what diabolical scheme does he have that threatens both the past and the present with destruction? You won't want to miss what happens at the end of this issue!

Justice League #16 (2008)

Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 3 (of 3).

It's past and present versus the future as the Justice League teams up with some of the greatest heroes of the Old West to take down the Lord of Time! Can they stop his scheme before it's too late, or will Arizona be blown right off the map?

Weird Western Quarterly #13 (2009)

Jonah Hex: Children of Heaven

When Jonah Hex gets caught up in a fight between Chinese railroad workers and their white bosses, he thinks it's a pretty straightforward affair. But after meeting a young Chinese woman named Mei Ling, his life gets more complicated than he likes.

Weird Western Quarterly #16 (2009)

Weird Western Quarterly: The Better Part of Valor.

Rogues Gallery #17 (2009)

Rogues Gallery: El Diablo.

Legends of the Old West still resonate even today. One of the most persistent legends is of El Diablo and Lazarus Lane.

Journey with us back in time to the yesteryear of the Old West... as Rogues Gallery continues to put its spotlight on our guest writers...

This time by the acclaimed Susan Hillwig.

Weird Western Quarterly #20 (2010)

Weird Western Quarterly: The Reckoning.

Driven to the brink by the events of the previous issue, Jonah Hex goes on the warpath...but at what cost?

Weird Western Quarterly #19 (2010)

Weird Western Quarterly: Domestic Disturbance.

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #1 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray: The First Day of the Rest of Your Life.

The Blackest Night is over, and the Brightest Day has begun for twelve newly-resurrected people...but unbeknownst to all, there's a thirteenth person that got brought back as well. A hero to some, a villain to others, Jonah Hex once again walks amongst the living, and Death itself is a closer companion than ever!

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #2 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray: Back In Black.

Wait a minute, how in blazes can we have a second issue if Hex was killed in the first? Well, y'see, that's the funny thing...

What, you think we're gonna spoil the surprise here? Go read the issue and find out for yourself!

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #3 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray.

What started out as a quiet visit to Paradise Corners has turned into a big mess, and now Jonah has to decide between running for his life or making up for past mistakes.

Weird Western Quarterly #21 (2011)

Weird Western Quarterly: Brothers in Arms.

In the midst of the Civil War, Scalphunter and Matt Savage try to help a mysterious black woman ferrying slaves out of the South, while circumstances beyond their control threaten to drive the brothers apart.

Weird Western Quarterly #22 (2011)

Weird Western Quarterly: How Can I Miss You If You Won't Go Away?

Bat Lash once again crosses paths with Penny "Dreadful" Dreasney. Has the gambler learned his lesson from their last encounter? Yeah, I don't think so either.

Weird Western Quarterly #23 (2012)

Weird Western Quarterly: At War With the Devil, Part One.

As the North and the South begin to clash, Windrunner finds himself on the front lines of a different, more personal war. When the smoke clears at the end of this issue, you'll know this is only the beginning of a battle that's been a long time coming.



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