

# A THING IMMORTAL



A DARK FANTASY

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# ONE



## THE WING-THIEF

**T**HE WING-THIEF STARED DOWN the shaft of the nocked arrow, the black tattoos that lined his arms and wrapped around his back dancing with each muscle twitch. The bowstring was pulled to full extension, sunlight glinting off the obsidian arrowhead. He knelt on one knee, bracing himself against a sturdy aspen in the thick grove behind the trapper's shack. The sun slid below the snow-capped peaks to the west, shadows stretching long, blanketing the ground and darkening the gaps between the trees.

The holy man squatted behind him and leaned close, gently brushing Black Wing's hair behind his ear with a finger. "Tell me what you see," whispered the holy man, his lips inches from Black Wing's ear, his breath hot on the wing-thief's cheek.

"The same thing you see," answered the wing-thief, ignoring the holy man's provocations.

"Not likely," said the holy man Antelope Eyes. His voice rose, a gentle lilt to his tone. "Look closely and tell me exactly what you see."

"I see a girl being menaced by a naked man."

"Describe the man."

"I just did."

"More detail, please."

Black Wing sighed. The holy man often exasperated him. "You can see the man as well as I."

"Oh, I see him all right. I see far more than you do, I assure you. But I don't have an arrow pointing at his heart. I'm not

the one who is a twitch of the finger away from killing him. I know what I see. I want to know what *you* see."

"He is a white eye," said Black Wing.

"Is that why you want to kill him? Because he is a white eye?"

"I do not want to kill him."

"Really? It certainly seems to me you want to kill him."

"No. But I am prepared to kill him if necessary."

"Interesting," said Antelope Eyes. "Tell me more about this man. What do you see when you look at him?"

"Please stop."

"Humor me."

The wing-thief sighed. "His movements are sluggish. Lethargic. As if he is intoxicated."

"Very observant. Is he tall?"

"No. He is short. Hirsute. His beard is scraggly, streaked with gray."

"What animal does he most resemble?"

"He has the face of a weasel."

"And his body?"

"He looks like a small, shaved bear."

The holy man twirled a lock of Black Wing's hair with his finger. "You said he was menacing."

"You don't find bears menacing?"

Antelope Eyes snickered. "Actually, I find bears can be quite charming, so long as they are well-fed and do not feel threatened. Tell me why you have an arrow pointing at his heart."

"The cruelty he shows the girl is not explanation enough for you?"

"We're not talking about the girl just yet," said Antelope Eyes.

"We're still talking about the shaved bear." He paused, then said, "Can you see his manhood?"

Black Wing sighed again. "You know I can."

"Describe it to me."

"I am not describing his cock to you."

"Is it erect?"

"We can both see that it is."

"Do you know this man?"

"I've seen him before," the wing-thief said through gritted teeth. "He sets traps on the mountainside. Iron abominations that crush the legs of wolverines and badgers."

"You do not like the man?" asked Antelope Eyes.

"He sets traps that crush the legs of wolverines and badgers."

The holy man smiled, whispered in the wing-thief's ear. "So you have decided to kill him, then?"

Black Wing's eyes narrowed. "No. He will decide if I kill him."

"Interesting. And how will you know when he has made his decision?"

"When he moves to harm the girl."

"Ah. So you are protecting the girl then, are you?"

"I grow weary of this game," said the wing-thief

"Then end it. Release your arrow. Kill him."

"I meant your game, not his."

"They are one and the same. So if you want to end the game, then kill him and be done with it."

The wing-thief hesitated.

"So perhaps you do not want the game to end just yet. Very well, then. Since you brought up the girl again, we will talk about her now. Describe her to me."

"We both see her," said Black Wing, frustration in his voice.

"You are angry with me? This is for your benefit, not mine. If you won't describe her, then tell me what she is doing."

The wing-thief took a breath. "She is clutching a rooster to her breast."

"Why is she doing that?"

"For protection. She is attempting to maintain a buffer between herself and the drunkard."

The holy man reached beneath Black Wing's arm, his fingers sliding across the wing-thief's chest until he found the medicine bundle Black Wing kept tied in a pouch around his neck. He cupped the pouch gently. "If you are so interested in protecting the girl, there is a more direct route than your bow. Use your medicine. You are a wing-thief, are you not? Swap bodies with the rooster. A rooster's spur is sharp enough to injure the man badly. You could blind him. You could slit his throat."

"And if he caught the rooster, he could just as easily wring its neck."

"This is true. Tell me, what do you think would happen to a wing-thief if the bird were to die while the thief was inside it?"

"I don't want to find out," said Black Wing. "That's why I'm still in my own body."

While the wing-thief and the holy man watched, the naked man escalated the situation, lunging awkwardly at the girl. She dodged easily enough, sidestepping and throwing the rooster

in his face, before turning and sprinting up the hillside and into the trees. The startled rooster flapped its wings madly, talons raking across the man's chest and arms. The naked, hirsute man grabbed the bird's head and did as Black Wing had suggested he might. He wrung the rooster's neck and dropped the limp carcass to the ground.

Black Wing kept the arrow trained on the man, waiting for him to follow the girl into the woods. But the man only staggered about, yelling after her, calling her vile names, and ordering her to come back. The girl ignored him. The man spewed threats, but still the girl did not come back. When the man ran out of threats, he spit in his hand and began masturbating.

"Kill him," whispered Antelope Eyes, his hand still holding the wing-thief's medicine bundle. "Release your arrow. "

Black Wing hesitated.

"End this."

"Why are we here?" the wing-thief asked. "Tell me the truth. Why did you bring me here? Was I meant to kill him? Was that your intention?"

The holy man smiled. He released the medicine bundle, then reached forward, pressing down gently on the wing-thief's bow arm. "No. He is not the reason I brought you here. He is no one. An insignificant fool who will be dead before the next moon. But not by your hand."

Black Wing eased the tension on the bowstring and lowered the nocked arrow. "Then we are here to rescue the girl from him?"

"No." The holy man pointed to an aspen trunk a few feet away from them. "If you were more observant, then you would have noticed that."

The wing-thief looked and saw a small carving on the tree, a series of cuts and slashes underscored by a looping mark.

Antelope Eyes smiled. "I told you, I see more than you. If you were to look closely, you would see that there is a similar ward carved into the trunk of many trees encircling the trapper's shack. You and I can get no closer than we are now. Your arrow, had you released it, would have dropped to the ground almost as soon as it left your hand."

"The wards would keep us out?"

"Yes. Just as they keep the girl trapped inside."

The naked man finished with a shudder, then yelled once more after the girl, before turning and staggering back inside the shack.

Black Wing was relieved to know the little man would be dead soon. "If we cannot cross the wards, if I cannot kill the man, nor rescue the girl, then why did you bring me here?"

The holy man smiled again. "Do you still see her?"

The wing-thief scanned the trees until he found her, squatting behind a moss-covered boulder jutting from the hillside. "Yes."

"Describe her to me."

"Must I? Have you not made your point?"

"Have I? Describe her."

Black Wing sighed. "She has dark hair."

"How old is she?"

"Perhaps twelve summers."

"More detail. What does she look like? What do you see?"

"She is pretty."

"Do you like pretty little girls?" Antelope Eyes said.

"You and I have established what I like," said the wing-thief.

The holy man smiled. "Is that the best description you can give me? Dark hair and pretty?"

"She is frightened."

"Why do you think this little white-eyed girl is frightened?"

"She is not a white," said Black Wing.

"Ah, you *do* see," said Antelope Eyes. "Perhaps you are not as hopeless as I feared. If she is not a white-eye, then look closely and tell me, who are her people?"

"I do not know. She does not look as if she belongs to any of the people of the plains."

"Does she have medicine?" asked the holy man.

Black Wing paused. "Yes."

"How do you know that? Can you see it?"

"How does one see medicine?"

"When your eyes have been opened, you will see. How do you know she has medicine?"

"I don't know." Black Wing turned his head, looked at the holy man. "You know this girl. Who is she?"

Antelope Eyes pointed. "There is something else you should see."

Black Wing saw the eyes first. Great yellow orbs emerging from the shimmering golden leaves of the aspens, glowing and sparkling like the afternoon sun. As he watched, the shad-

ows seemed to expand, taking on volume, flowing upward from the ground and coalescing around the eyes. The collective darkness morphed into a massive silhouette and the shadowy thing stepped into the light, revealing itself.

An impossibly large wolf, black as midnight and taller than a horse, stood in front of the crouching girl. To the wing-thief's surprise, the girl did not seem afraid. It was as if the wolf's presence comforted her. The giant wolf lowered its head, a submissive gesture inviting the girl's touch. The girl got to her feet, bracing herself against the boulder, and held out a tentative hand.

The wolf placed its head beneath the girl's hand. The girl scratched the top of the wolf's head, her fingers disappearing into the thick tuft of black fur.

The holy man leaned closer to Black Wing, whispering in his ear. "First time you've seen a god?"

## Two



### THE GUNSLINGER

**T**HE OLD GUNSLINGER GAZED up at the night sky, billions of stars staring back at him as he waited for sleep to take him. An odd feeling rolled over him. The night was eerily silent, still as death. No breeze, no insects chirping or singing. No lonesome owl calling out for companionship. Hamish Frost realized he was frozen, unable to move. The old man didn't recall having lain down, nor even having made camp for the evening. Yet there he was, lying on the grassy plains, staring up at an ocean of stars. The milky, spiral nebulae hovered over him, swirling like a slow-spinning pinwheel, seeming so close he could almost reach up and scrape the stars with his fingertips or swat away a streaking comet.

As he watched, the constellations above began to rearrange themselves. Stars slid across the sky, miraculously avoiding collision as they repositioned themselves. Condensing and coalescing, the stars took on form and volume until a new shape appeared. Striding through the sky above him, a sparkling woman made entirely of star-stuff stood alone against a black void. Between her breasts, a single pulsing star flared and burned with the brightness of the midday sun.

*I'm having a vision,* he realized.

The star woman reached down, holding out a hand, motioning to the old gunslinger, beckoning him to leave the ground and fly up to her. Frost felt compelled to do just that, but the heat from the blazing star at her breast kept him at bay. The brightness grew so intense that he was forced to cross his arms in front of his face, shielding his eyes. He waited for



what seemed an eternity before he felt the blinding light fade and then disappear.

As his sight returned, he found the star-woman gone and the night sky back in its proper place. He, however, was no longer on his back in the grass. He was standing atop a wide, but narrow plateau high in the craggy mountains. Evergreens a hundred feet tall sprang from the sloping mountainside, casting soft shadows over the entire plateau.

Ahead of him, the old gunslinger could see a lonely tipi, the flap open and welcoming. Puffs of white smoke wafted through the vent at the top. On the ground, a trail of lush blue moss led all the way from where he stood to the flap of the tipi. A stiff but cool breeze pushed against his back, whipping his long, stringy white hair into his eyes and prodding him down the mossy path. He took one step forward and then...

...the old man opened his eyes and sat up. The night sky had been replaced by enormous billowing white clouds set against an expanse of cerulean blue, the sun rising steadily in the east. To the west, the craggy snow-capped peaks sparkled with an unnatural whiteness.

His fire had gone cold in the night, leaving only faintly smoldering embers. His painted horse grazed quietly on thick grasses in the near distance.

Hamish Frost had lived a long, long life. He had the wrinkles and the scars to prove it. He had learned many years ago to recognize the difference between dream and vision and to understand the importance of that difference. Dreams were meaningless and random. A jumble of nonsense, conjured by the unconscious mind. Visions, on the other hand, were encoded messages. Missives from a sender, a riddle to be deciphered. Often a warning.

The old gunslinger sensed he was not alone. He reached for his six-guns and they appeared in his hands as if by magic. Twin revolvers, polished steel with elephant ivory handles, his thumbs on the hammers, index fingers on the trigger of each. The old man's speed with the guns had not diminished with age. Hamish Frost was reputed to be the fastest there ever was and he had the kills to prove it.

A giant shadow came to life in front of him. Glowing amber-colored eyes set against an immense mound of fur as black as coal. The old gunslinger lowered his guns and smiled. *"Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood. Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage,"* he said with a theatrical flourish. *"Then lend*

*the eye to a terrible aspect. Let pry through the portage of the head like the brass cannon, let the brow o'erwhelm it as fearfully as doth a galled rock o'erhang and jutty his confounded base."*

The Shadow Wolf stared back at him, eyes aglow.

"I suppose the time has come to see the old woman again, huh?"

With a swipe of one massive paw, the Shadow Wolf spread dirt over the remains of Frost's campfire.

"I was about to do that."

The Shadow Wolf lowered its massive head, then swung its neck to the west, towards the distant mountains.

"I know," said the old gunslinger. "She sent me a vision. Any idea what she wants?"

The Shadow Wolf only stared at him.

"Now don't be impatient." The old man stood, stretched, and yawned. His skin was almost as pale as his white hair, his eyes a shade of violet. "It will take us at least a few days to get there. She can't be in that much of a rush. You can wait while I have some breakfast. Won't take that long."

The Shadow Wolf turned and began walking westward, the swaying grasses seeming to part ahead of each step.

Frost sighed. "Seriously? No breakfast? You're not even going to let me have a proper morning shit, are you? Can you at least wait long enough for me to pull on my boots and saddle my horse?"

The Shadow Wolf kept walking and was almost out of sight by the time the old gunslinger saddled up and followed after it.

# THREE



## THE MANHUNTER

O ZYMANDIAS HAYES SUPPRESSED A rising sense of foreboding as he surveyed the landscape. The sun hung low on the immense horizon abutting the plains, painting the sparsely clouded sky in shades of red, orange, and purple. Hayes twisted in the saddle and looked over his shoulder, the long shadows cast by the horses stretching into the distance.

"This is not a good spot," said Hayes. "We should keep moving."

His partner Jacob Hutchens scoffed. "Nonsense. It's an ideal spot."

Hayes shook his head. "We've got at least an hour until sunset. We can find better."

"Better than ideal?" Hutchens sat ramrod straight in the saddle, shoulders back, chest out. He pointed toward a ridge near a small creek where the plain undulated like a cresting wave on the ocean. "That little rise there will block our campfire from view and the cottonwoods behind it will mask any cast shadows. Our pursuers would be damned hard-pressed to see us there. And with the bluff to the north, you couldn't ask for a more secure spot should our prisoner's gang somehow chance upon us in the night."

Hayes looked at their prisoner. Enoch Munn sat on a horse next to Hutchens, his hands tied behind his back. His head lolled, his chin on his chest, a shock of red hair falling over a face left in ruin by a severe bout of chickenpox. Munn's eyes were closed, but Hayes knew he was feigning sleep, biding his

time, waiting for an opening. Any chance — no matter how small — to escape his predicament.

"If his gang catches up to us in the dark of night," Hayes said, "we need to be sure we see them coming long before they see us. That bluff guarantees we won't."

Hutchens dismissed the argument without consideration. "No. I'm exercising my prerogative as your superior. This is the spot. We make camp here."

Hayes had long since concluded that Jacob Hutchens was a blustering fool. He needed no further evidence, but the man continuously provided it. "The topography here — that ridge over there — works against us. We'll be somewhat hidden, that's true, but when night falls, we won't be able to see anyone approaching until they're practically on top of us. And the cottonwoods will hinder our line of sight in the opposite direction. This is a dangerously poor spot for a camp. We'd do better to put some distance between us and the bluff, find a clear, flat area with a three-hundred-sixty-degree view, and forego the campfire altogether. Even a small fire would be like a beacon on these plains."

"Camp out in the open? Totally exposed? No fire? With a gang of murderous outlaws pursuing us? I think not." Hutchens laughed derisively. "I thought you negroes didn't cotton to the cold." He smiled, having amused himself with the double entendre.

"Nee-gro." Enoch Munn lifted his head, grinning devilishly, his buck teeth on display. "Nee-gro. Is that the same thing as a nigger? Don't tell me I been sayin' it wrong all this time?"

"Shut your mouth," barked Hutchens.

"Nee-gro," Munn laughed again. "That's the funniest fuckin' word I ever did hear."

Hayes gave Munn a stone-faced stare. Munn only winked and smiled back at him. The look made Hayes' skin crawl.

"I'll book no further argument," said Hutchens. "We camp here. You square away our prisoner and get the fire started while I hobble the horses and do a little surveillance."

Hayes bit his tongue, deciding against pointing out to Hutchens that it wasn't necessary to hobble horses when there were trees to which they could be tied off. He climbed down from his horse and attempted to assist Munn off of his.

"Don't touch me, nigger!" Munn hocked and spit, a large wad of phlegm landing squarely between Hayes' eyes.

Hayes calmly wiped away the spittle with the back of his glove, then grabbed Munn by the arm and snatched him from the saddle, making no effort to ease Munn's fall. A gasp escaped from Munn's lips as he landed flat on his back, the air vacating his lungs on impact. Hayes took a coil of rope from his saddle while Munn was still struggling to reclaim his breath. Hayes grabbed a fistful of red hair and dragged Munn across the ground to a cottonwood. He lashed the outlaw to the tree trunk, then yanked Munn's filthy kerchief from his neck, wadded it, and shoved it in Munn's mouth.

Hutchens adopted a leisurely pace, taking care to be sure that Hayes did most of the work in setting camp. Hayes built the fire from the driest wood he could find, keeping the fire small and tight. Fast burning with as little smoke as possible.

"I've been monitoring the trail behind us," Hutchens said.

Hayes took off his gloves and made a show of warming his hands near the flames. He didn't want the fire, knew it was a mistake to build it, but thought it wise to placate Hutchens. At least for the nonce. "See anything?" he asked.

"Looks clear," said Hutchens.

"I'll take first watch." Hayes volunteered, knowing that trusting his safety to the watchfulness of Jacob Hutchens was unwise in the least.

Hutchens acquiesced with a nod, retrieved his bedroll, and shook it out on the ground. "Wake me in the early a.m." He pulled off his boots and lowered himself to the ground, rolling onto his side, his back to Hayes. Inside of two minutes, Hutchens was snoring fitfully.

Hayes immediately kicked out the small campfire. The temperature would drop precipitously as the night wore on, but a fire was a terrible idea. The night wasn't dark enough to keep the smoke from giving away their position and the circle of light would not only illuminate them but would also prevent their eyes from adjusting enough to see past the ring of shadows at the light's terminus.

And Hayes knew Munn's gang was out there somewhere. Following them.

With the flames faded to smolders, Hayes used the toe of his boot to reassemble the embers, making it appear as if the fire had simply burned itself out. In the morning, he would explain to Hutchens that, in the dark, he'd been unable to restart the fire. A needful lie, but Hutchens would know no different.

Hayes next removed the hobbles and led the horses to the trees. If they needed to make a quick getaway in the night, untying the horses' reins from the trees would be much quicker than removing hobbles.

Hayes stole a glance at Enoch Munn. The prisoner watched him closely, eyes narrowed, mercifully silent thanks to the gag in his mouth.

*Should've done that at least a day ago*, thought Hayes.

After two weeks on his trail, Hayes and Hutchens had found Munn sleeping in a hollowed log on the banks of a river. In taking him into custody, Hayes discovered they had underestimated the limits of Munn's atrocities. In a satchel Munn was using as a pillow, Hayes found seven scalps, hair as black as ink, all of which, based on the closeness of the crown to the hairline, Hayes knew had come from children.

Jacob Hutchens had wrinkled his nose and shrugged. "At least he didn't scalp white children."

Hayes ground his teeth at the remark but managed to hold his tongue.

"What are these?" Hutchens asked, shaking from the satchel three dried, shriveled, fleshy things into his palm.

Munn chuckled. "Peckers. I collect 'em. I'll be adding both of your'n to my collection when my boys catch up to you. I ain't never cut off a nigger pecker before. I'm lookin' forward to that."

Jacob Hutchens struck Munn in the mouth with the butt of his pistol, then pulled back the hammer and aimed at Munn's head.

"No," said Hayes. "We're taking him to the fort. Alive."

"The handbill says 'Dead or Alive,'" said Hutchens. "Dead suits me just fine."

"Dead or Alive is not a sanction of murder," Hayes reminded him.

"Says who?"

"I say." Hayes paused. "The law says. And I'll not have you murder a man in front of me."

"You know what will happen to us if his gang catches up to us with him in our custody?"

"Same thing that would happen if you were to execute him here."

Hutchens grumbled but relented. He gathered up Munn's satchel, the scalps, and the mummified phalluses and tossed them all in the river. "Nobody needs to see Indian scalps and

a bunch of dried-up peckers. This fucker's going to hang with or without that shit. If I don't kill him before then."

For the first time since they'd been traveling together, Hayes noted Hutchens was probably right.

After an hour of listening to Hutchens snore, Hayes stood and patrolled the perimeter of the campsite. He kept low to the ground, careful to avoid silhouetting himself against the light of the moon. He spied a herd of several dozen mule deer moving quickly across the distant plains, not stampeding but traveling with haste, clearly spooked. Curious, he watched for a few minutes, expecting to see a pack of wolves pacing the herd. But there were no wolves. Instead, he saw another herd of... something. Of what exactly, he couldn't be sure. He saw only a silhouetted mass, packed tightly together and moving at a steady, unified pace.

A cold shiver ran down Hayes' spine and the hair on his arms rose as if drawn by a static charge. He struggled to make sense of what he was seeing. The mass resembled nothing more than people lumbering in lockstep. But that made no sense. None at all. He had seen the red men approach a target stealthily under cover of darkness, but that was not what he was witnessing now. There was no stealth in what he was seeing.

Was this Munn's gang? No. They would be on horseback, not walking. And at most, the gang would comprise five or six men. If this awkward mass was indeed people, there were dozens of them.

Thankfully, whatever he was seeing was moving away from his campsite, which suited Hayes just fine. Time permitting, he would check the tracks in the morning and see if that added any clarity to the mystery.

He watched until both the deer and their pursuers disappeared over the horizon. Hayes checked the position of the moon. It was past time he woke Hutchens. An equitable watch would have ended a few hours earlier, but fairness was not Hayes' guiding concern. His chances of surviving the night were increased if he spent more time on watch duty than Jacob Hutchens. If the dawn arrived without further event, he could still manage about three hours of sleep. Not enough, of course, but he had functioned on fewer.

Movement in his periphery caught his attention. Hayes spun, sidearm drawn. Standing on the crest of the ridge was a woman. Naked and startling in her beauty, slim with full

breasts and wide hips. Her long dark hair billowed about her head as if buffeted by strong winds, even though the night was still and the winds almost nonexistent.

Hayes froze. The woman made no effort to cover her nakedness. She stared at Hayes, a Mona Lisa smile on her lips. She did not speak, only stood there, as if waiting for him. To do what, he did not know.

Hayes opened his mouth to speak, but the words were sidetracked somewhere between brain and tongue. The woman's form shimmered in the moonlight, almost as if translucent. Hayes thought he could see the shape of the bluff behind her, through her, as if she were a mirage of some sort. She made a motion with her hand as if summoning him to her. Hayes took a step forward. The woman motioned him closer. He took another step.

And then she was no longer there.

Hayes blinked, rubbed his eyes, and looked all around him. There was nowhere for the woman to have gone, but she had disappeared. Vanished into the air.

*Had he just seen a ghost?*

Ozymandias Hayes was an educated man and never one to put stock in the supernatural, but how else to explain what he had just seen?

Had he been dreaming? Had he allowed himself to fall asleep on watch? He didn't think so, but that would provide an explanation. Certainly a better explanation than his having seen a phantom. It would also explain the silhouetted mass he had watched pursuing the herd of deer.

But he knew that wasn't so. He had not been sleeping. It wasn't a dream.

Was he hallucinating then? Was his exhausted, sleep-deprived mind showing him things that were not there?

He looked over at Enoch Munn tied to a tree behind him. Perhaps the outlaw had seen something as well. But Munn's head was down, red hair in front of his face. Whether sleeping or feigning sleep, this time didn't matter. Munn would be no help in determining whether the vision had been real or conjured.

Hutchens awoke with a start when Hayes prodded him. He reached immediately for his sidearm, but Hayes had expected this and rested his own hand over Hutchens' pistol before attempting to rouse him.



Satisfied that Hutchens had shaken off his slumber, Hayes gave him a brief report but mentioned nothing of the naked, spectral woman or the mule deer and their mystery pursuers.

Hutchens was not happy about the fire having gone cold. He rolled up his blankets, set them aside, and turned his attention to restarting the campfire. Hayes knew that his succeeding was unlikely. He retrieved his own bedroll from his saddle and stretched out on a grassy spot he had cleared of sticks and debris earlier in the evening. Sleep came quickly and deeply. But did not last long.

Hayes' eyes snapped open. The sun had broken over the horizon, its splintered rays spraying the morning sky with bands of light. To Hayes' surprise, Hutchens had somehow managed to restart the fire. It took him a few seconds to realize the sound that woke him was a gunshot. Jacob Hutchens was sitting across from him, head slumped over, asleep and snoring.

"Hutchens!" Hayes said as loudly as he dared. "Wake up!"

Hutchens' whole body jerked, his head snapping up and to attention.

"Someone's shooting at us." Hayes scrambled to his feet, keeping low to the ground, and pulled his pistol.

Hutchens looked around and then stood up.

"Don't stand, you fool!" Hayes' words came in almost perfect unison with the second gunshot.

Hutchens grimaced and clutched his chest. He crumbled, landing face-first in the fire.

Hayes leaped over and grabbed Hutchens' shoulders, pulling him from the flames as quickly as he could. For all the good it did. The fire had blistered Hutchens' face, his hair all singed away, but he was beyond feeling any of it.

Hayes scrambled for the cover of the trees. Another gunshot rang out, and he felt as much as heard the bullet whizz past his head. He dove behind the cottonwood tree where Enoch Munn was lashed. He got to his feet, flattening himself against the trunk. He lifted his pistol to eye level, then peered carefully around the tree, scanning, searching for the source of the gunshots.

He could see no one.

From somewhere behind him, Hayes heard a heavy foot-step and a twig cracking. He spun around, gun arm extended, leveled, and ready to fire, only to take the full brunt of a rifle butt in the face.