

The Man Who Shot Thomas Edison

~A "West of the Warlock" Novel~

Free Preview

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CHAPTER 1: THE INNOVATORS

The stagecoach was packed. The deluxe carriage wasn't all that spacious, and a dozen passengers with all of their luggage was enough to reach its maximum capacity. It was only about ten miles from the Yucca Junction train station to Selwood, so the ride was tolerable for those determined to make the trip.

Clarence Davison was used to cramped accommodations. The past years had seen him traveling in all sorts of tight spaces. Steamboat cabins, railcar sleeper compartments, and various holes in the wall had been his home on many occasions. Such was the life of a circuit preacher, spreading the good word to the populace.

This latest trip was a break from that hectic life, as he came to see an old friend.

It had been many years since Clarence had seen his mentor, the right and moral pastor, Matthew Jameson, and he was hoping for a warm homecoming. The man was as close to a father as Clarence had in this world, and he hoped to make him proud. Though, that might prove difficult on some fronts. Doctrine was a tricky thing, and biblical interpretations had made many a good man split from friends and family.

Clarence hoped it would not be an issue. There was no need for his mentor to know he held differing views. So long as he kept his mouth shut and didn't make any rash moves, the old man need never know of his views on magic.

Looking around inside the coach, Clarence examined the faces of his fellow passengers. They were a well-groomed bunch, though they all had the scent of their own humanity upon them. Most of them had been traveling for days, no doubt, and trains weren't noted for their baths. Clarence wouldn't have noticed the smell, had he not spent the night at Yucca Junction's Nexus Hotel, which provided fine cleaning services. A good scrubbing and a freshly laundered suit took away the stink off his own body, and let him sense the scent of others.

However, the sandy-haired fellow sitting beside him wasn't stinking up the place at all, and there was something strangely familiar about him. The stern-faced man didn't seem the kind to crack a smile all that often. He looked about thirty, with smooth hands and a quality suit that identified him as a businessman or educated professional of some sort, which could explain his attention to hygiene.

Clarence let his curiosity get the better of him, and he felt the urge to introduce himself. With a slight adjustment of his body, he managed to present a hand for the other man to shake. The clean-cut man shook the offered appendage silently with a strong grip.

"So, what brings you out to Selwood?" Clarence asked, hoping to get some information out of the silent man.

"Business, and an old friend," the man said.

"What a coincidence. It just so happens I'm traveling to see an old friend, myself," Clarence said.

"Really?" the man said, disinterested.

"Well, more than a friend, actually. The man practically raised me after my father died. It'll be good to be back."

"Not your first trip to Selwood, then," the man mentioned.

"No, I've been here a few times," Clarence replied. "Though, I mostly grew up in Kansas. We didn't move out to Nevada until seventy-six. I only spent a year in Selwood before going back east to college, and haven't been there since."

"College? You wouldn't happen to be wrangling for a job offer, would you?" the man asked suspiciously.

"No," Clarence said. "Why ever would you think that?"

A mustached man sitting across from Clarence cleared his throat and caught the young man's attention. "Hey, buddy, don't you know who this guy is?"

"No," Clarence said, adding a questioning look to his reply.

"That's Thomas Edison."

The name didn't escape Clarence, though at first he thought it must be some sort of joke. What would one of the world's foremost inventors be doing out here, riding the stagecoach to a town like Selwood? It might be the Nye County Seat, but it was still something of a backwater. Famous folks didn't spend weeks on trains and coaches just for a casual visit.

"It must be some friend you're visiting," Clarence remarked.

"You could say that," Edison said. "You really had no idea who I was?"

"No, Sir," Clarence replied, hiding his embarrassment.

"Then you're the odd sort of fellow who likes to chat-up strangers," Edison said, looking at him funny. "There aren't many types of businesses where that comes as a prerequisite."

"I guess not, but mine does," Clarence mentioned, regaining a carefree expression. "I'm a country preacher, spreading the good word."

Edison stiffened his lips and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he replied.

"For what?" Clarence asked, feeling the man's disdain like a palpable substance drifting through the air.

"Sorry that you've chosen to throw your life away on such nonsense," Edison said, turning his face to the window.

The words slapped Clarence like ice water, and they seemed to have a similar effect on a few of the other passengers. Though none of the others said a word about it, their sour expressions spoke volumes.

"Spreading the truth of God is never a waste," Clarence said, unwilling to let the comment go unchallenged.

Edison sighed and turned his gaze back from the passing scenery, to study his sudden antagonist. "The days of biblical superstition are nearing an end. No educated man can deny the truth of science."

"You profess that both are equally exclusive, but they're not," Clarence added quickly. "Yes, I am an educated man, and thereby I recognize the truth; science is every bit the creation of God. It is divine will that we seek to further understand His creation through the physical arts, for it serves to bring us closer to Him."

"Nonsense," Edison said unwilling to budge. "How can a rational mind truly believe that a being massive enough to forge this world of ours would in any way resemble our limited human existence, or care about us in the least?"

"You say God doesn't love us?"

"I say that we are less than ants compared to such an entity, and to think *it* cares for us more than that is childish fantasy, at best."

It was not something Clarence had expected to hear, though he'd run into a few such unbelievers over the years. There were always men who thought more of themselves, or less of God, to suit their own beliefs. The philosophies of Marx and Darwin were setting unholy trends within educated circles... but to hear it from someone as bright and progressive as Thomas Edison? It was enough to shake anyone's faith in mankind.

There was no sense arguing any further. A man of Edison's stature was not likely to bend to the brief pontifications of a young preacher. Still, Clarence wasn't going to lay down in defeat. He was a soldier of Christ, and felt called to action.

"I'm sorry," Clarence said.

"For what?" Edison asked.

"That your genius has led you to such an empty existence," Clarence replied.

A few of the spectators in the coach smirked at the slight, as Edison glared over at the young man seated next to him. Clarence maintained a cold, calculating look, feeling this wasn't a time to crack. This was a test, for certain, and one the Lord most certainly wouldn't let him fail.

After studying Clarence's face for a long period of silence, Edison smiled. He seemed on the verge of laughter, but he never got that far. Eventually, after grinning and fighting back chuckles, he said, "My life is anything but empty. I have a wife and children, a company that is on the cutting edge of societal evolution. I am advancing and improving human civilization unlike anyone else before me, and I really want for

nothing. How can that be called empty?"

Clarence ignored the boastful retort and continued to pursue a purchase in the man's soul. "Material wealth is meaningless without spiritual salvation. As it says in Matthew, '*what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*' You can't take it with you."

"That's assuming I'm going anywhere," Edison rebutted. "But, even assuming that wild improbability, what does the hereafter matter now, to those of us who are stuck in the here and now? I see it as a much better thing to improve the lives of the living than concern myself with the affairs of the dead. That is my most prevalent concern, and no amount of preaching will turn me away from the ways of progress."

Following his lecturing reply, Edison relaxed and stared straight ahead, seeming satisfied with himself. The conversation came to an end as abruptly as it had begun, leaving the many passengers of the stagecoach in varying degrees of discomfort and annoyance. When it became apparent that the debate was truly over, the people regained their usual, dispassionate expressions, as they waited to arrive at their destination.

Clarence felt he had done all he could for the man, and didn't regret the exchange. Uncomfortable as it may have been, he knew he'd sowed his seeds this day—if not in Edison, then in the other passengers in the cramped confines. It felt good to witness, in any circumstance.

Despite the heated exchange, Clarence still felt a hint of admiration for Thomas Edison, knowing the man was doing God's work, whether he knew it or not. Truly, the advancement of science and knowledge was the greatest purpose any man could hope to have, and the chosen vessels for such discovery held many faces. Edison was truly a man of innovation, worthy of respect above and beyond his flawed humanity.

* * *

Blood was running down his shirt. It was no surprise. That's what happens when you have a six inch knife stuck into your shoulder and twisted sideways. It didn't hurt much, just a cold sting. The damp shirt was more annoying than the injury itself to the unlikely deputy, Jesse Woodson James.

The drover who'd stabbed Jesse was gawking, shocked to see the man with a badge taking the wound so calmly. From the look on the former outlaw's face, you might think he'd been spit on, rather than stuck three inches above the heart. The surprise was fleeting, morphing into annoyance.

"That was mighty uncivilized of you," Jesse said, drawing his revolver. The unmistakable clicking sound of the hammer cocking echoed inside the still barroom.

The drover put up his hands and stumbled backwards, looking unprepared for the consequences of his actions. His gun remained in the holster at his side, and he knew it was too late to draw. Jesse had him dead to rights.

Jesse felt giddy, both from the blood he was losing and the thrill of having a man at his mercy. He wanted to put a bullet in the idiot, teach him a lesson for daring to be so unpleasant. Killing wasn't just easy for the outlaw-turned-lawman, but entertainment! Yet, fate was making him change his criminal ways, and it wouldn't serve to shoot a defenseless man with his hands in the air.

If he wanted to shoot someone, he'd have to do it right.

Uncocking his gun and putting it back in the holster, Jesse stepped back. "Go ahead and draw," he invited.

The drover shook his head and kept his hands in the air, clearly unwilling to test his nerves in a legitimate gunfight.

"Draw!" Jesse shouted.

The drover lowered his hands and started to shiver, looking eager to run away. His hands didn't reach for the gun as Jesse wanted, which only made things worse.

"Yankee coward!" Jesse shouted, drawing his gun and putting a hole in the floor between the drover's feet. "Draw, damn it!"

"That's enough, James," a commanding voice said.

Jesse turned around and saw the tall figure of Sheriff Doliber walking into the saloon. The long leather coat swayed with each step as the lawman marched over to the shaking drover. With practiced speed, he slapped a set of cuffs on the panicked cattleman and shoved him into a chair.

"Now, what's the story here?" Doliber asked.

"The coward stabbed me, so I offered him a fair fight," Jesse replied.

"Fair's got nothing to do with it," Doliber answered, clearly upset over the deputy's actions. "You know damn well nothing's fair when it comes to you and a gunfight."

"Yes, I am that good," Jesse boasted, looking pleased.

"You know what I mean," Doliber chided. "Even if you get shot, you're already dead, so you can't lose. That shadow body of yours will regenerate in hours, but if your opponent dies, he'll stay dead."

"The fight's fair," Jesse protested. "Since when does it matter how long you'll be dead?"

Another voice answered from the bar counter on the other side of the room. "Since you provoked the man by spitting on his shoes and suggesting he fornicates with his mother."

Jesse looked over at the elvish barkeeper, the prim and proper proprietor with a grin on his slim lips. "Stay outta this, Solen. Don't need your pointy words muddying things up."

Doliber frowned and folded his arms. "Damn it, James, I thought we had an arrangement. You stay out of trouble, and I help you stay out of Hell."

It was then that Jesse felt the effects of blood loss, and his giddiness sent him into delirium. He may have simply been a shadow—a soul trapped within a mystically-contrived body—but it still mimicked the form and limitations of genuine flesh. Lose enough blood, and he would die, if only for a time.

Having leaked more than a normal body could handle, Jesse felt the cold grip of unconsciousness sweeping over him yet again. When he woke up, perhaps he'd feel more interested in having a reasonable conversation.

With his deputy dead on the floor, Doliber dragged the drover onto his feet. "Come along, you," he grumbled.

"Aw, jeez, Sheriff, I'm really sorry about this, but he shouldn't uh talked 'bout my momma like that."

"Tell it to the judge," Doliber said, pushing the man forward.

"But he's gonna wake up, right? I ain't kilt nobody. Why you arrestin' me?"

"You did stab a man, with malicious intent," Doliber said. "Last I looked, that was still a crime in the State of Nevada."

The drover shut up and accepted his fate, glancing down at the limp body of Jesse James as he passed it.

As Doliber reached the door, he heard Solen's nagging voice behind him. "I suppose you expect me to clean up the mess?"

"He'll clean himself up in a few hours," Doliber replied. "If anything else is broken, you can sue this guy for the damages." He concluded by pushing the drover squarely between the shoulders, forcing him to stumble off the narrow porch and out into the street.

Once they were moving, the drover asked, "How'd you get here so fast?"

"Solen called me," Doliber said. "Sheriff's Office is down the street about two blocks."

"Called? You mean he's got one of them new fangled home telegraphophones?"

"Telephone," Doliber corrected. "No, he hasn't, but he does have a mystic call orb. Most of the businesses in Nye County have one, so they can call me in case there's trouble."

"Mystic? Y'all got some magician working for you, too?" the drover asked.

"I'm a journeyman warlock," Doliber clarified.

"Really? That must sure come in handy," the drover remarked.

"Yes," Doliber replied, sick of the conversation. He dealt with enough miscreants on a regular basis that he couldn't count the number of times he'd explained his powers. So many ranch hands and miners had passed through his jail cells over the last two years he was growing sick of it all. It was rarely anything major, just rough men being themselves in most cases, but there was something dissatisfying about policing the populace. He was capable of so much more, if only he had the wherewithal to pursue it.

There was no denying the service he provided for the people of Nye County, and he'd always been satisfied with his profession, knowing he was doing the right thing and bringing order to the west. Yet, now it was losing its appeal. The mundane aspects of the job were only half the problem, as he continued to question his own abilities and limitations.

When it came down to it, he wasn't sure if he was too good for the job, or not good enough.

Walking down the street was a calming luxury for Sheriff Doliber. It would have been a simple thing to teleport his prisoner to the prison, but he wasn't interested in taking such a leap today. He appreciated a decent walk through town, escorting his prisoner on foot, seeing the citizens watching him with looks of admiration and respect—for the most part. Never mind the few miscreants who shot him dirty looks.

The Sheriff's Office was an ordinary-looking building, with a barbershop across the street and a lawyer's house next door. Three short steps led up to the small deck in front of the door, and a quick turn of the knob granted access to the front room.

The office wasn't much to look at, twenty feet on either side, with a weathered desk in the right-hand corner and a gun rack behind that. A set of steps followed the wall to the left, leading to the second story living quarters, and an archway in the center of the back wall led to the jail cells. This humble facility had been Doliber's home for nearly two years, and it could be his for another two, at least, so long as he didn't decide to leave it.

Pushing his prisoner forward, Doliber caught the attention of the deputy currently

occupying the desk. The attractive lady elf was a most unlikely upholder of the law, even more absurd than having a dead outlaw on the job. She had come as a package deal some time ago with a gunslinging dwarf who served as the sheriff's right-hand man.

Doliber had to admit, Joella Talus had proven herself to be as capable as any man, and she was a sight prettier to look at.

"What have you got?" Joella asked, standing up and stretching. She'd been sitting in that seat for hours, and felt her limbs stiffening up.

"Somebody who doesn't know how to take an insult," Doliber said, escorting the man to the nearest cell beyond the archway. After opening the barred door, he unlocked the cuffs and tossed the man into prison without ceremony. A quick mystic trick locked the cell, and he walked out into the office to see his lady deputy.

"Solen wasn't overreacting, then?" Joella added, moving out from behind the desk to give Doliber access to his regular seat.

"No," Doliber said, sitting down and reaching for a box of cigars. He stopped himself before opening the lid, remembering that he was trying to quit. "Jesse goaded the guy into a fight, got himself stabbed pretty bad."

"You knew he'd be trouble," Joella said, finding another chair. The seat in front of the desk wasn't as comfortable, but it served its purpose.

"I know, but it's not like I had a choice," Doliber said, tapping his fingers on the desk, nervously fighting his craving for tobacco. "I needed his help at the time."

"And you feel responsible for him now," Joella added with a smile. "That's admirable. Don't doubt it."

Doliber stared at her and studied the neutral expression on his face. A month back, she'd saved his life in a harrowing act of heroism, and shortly thereafter confessed a growing attraction. Well, not so much confessed as planted a kiss on his lips and walked off in silence. They hadn't spoken about it since, though recently she'd been working on him. Her desires were clear enough, though restrained.

"So, where's Ron?" Doliber asked, realizing his dwarven deputy had disappeared during his short absence from the office.

"He headed down to Carter's livery stable," Joella replied. "Albert Silcox just rode in to town."

* * *

Ron wasn't the sort to jump when rich men called. The idea that any man was superior to him because of their monetary means was an insult, something that his country upbringing would not allow. As far as he was concerned, he was the match of any other American in rights and privileges, no matter his alleged social status. Money was just an object, handy to have but in no way indicative of a man's character. Having worked a wide assortment of jobs with a diverse cross-section of citizens over the years, he was not one who was easily impressed.

Albert Silcox was an exception at this point, being someone that Ron could respect despite his wealth. Silcox was a crafty businessman who owned a huge spread up on the Yucca Flat, a ranching enterprise made possible by magically engineered cattle and other ecological mysticism. Recently, he'd grown a keen fascination with Ron, and that left Ron more than a bit prideful, though also a tad suspicious of the man's motives.

Carter's Livery was one of three commercial stables in town, and it was certainly the largest. Owned by one of Selwood's founding families, the place was run at a

substantial profit, and there were always offers to buy the place from different cattlemen. The teenage brothers who worked the place would have gladly sold it, if not for their invalid mother who held the deed, and the nagging little sisters who wanted their share when they grew up. Therefore, the place remained a goldmine for all the heirs of Virgil Carter, rather than a quick payday for the sons.

Stepping over a clump of horse droppings, Ron approached the burly man in front of the first stall. "I'm looking for Albert Silcox," Ron said to the man's back. "Got word he was down here asking for me."

The fellow turned around and glared down at the dwarf. The large fellow was young, and had a pale, brown mustache that failed to give his face distinction. Anyone in town could identify the guy as Elwood, oldest son of the family. He was barely seventeen, but many a working man was well into adulthood at that age in the west.

Hooking a thumb to the side and making a peculiar snickering sound with his mouth, Elwood told Ron all he needed to know, and then went back to fiddling with the horse.

Ron continued down into the stable, seeing occupied stalls all along the left side. The multitude of horses was a common sight, and they were very much the life of modern America. Without a decent horse, a man couldn't get very far on his own. That might be all well and good for some city dweller, or for those who rode the rails, but every regular working man needed a ride. A healthy steed and a good rifle were prerequisites to life, as far as Ron was concerned.

At the back of the stable sat a large, black carriage with a broken wheel. A couple of men were in the process of jacking the vehicle up to fix the damage as Ron approached, but they didn't pay him any mind. He repaid the favor and kept his eyes peeled for Albert Silcox. He finally spotted him by the rear stall, tending to his pair of trotters.

"Ah, Deputy Grimes, good to see you again," Silcox greeted as Ron neared.

"Likewise," Ron said politely, reaching up to shake the old man's hand. "What can I do for you?"

"What, I can't just say hello to a friend?" Silcox asked.

Ron didn't say anything, feeling it best to keep silent. He didn't really consider himself a *friend* of Silcox, though it wasn't polite to say otherwise. The old man had taken a shine to Ron, and that commanded a modicum of manners in return.

"All right, you caught me," Silcox said, sounding happy. "I *do* have an ulterior motive in mind."

"You're not here to strong arm me into the sheriff's job again, are you?" Ron asked. "Doliber hasn't resigned, and I don't expect him to."

"Oh, no, this is nothing of the sort," Silcox replied. "I have some important business dealings to handle at the moment, and I was hoping you would be so kind as to entertain my granddaughter for a few hours. I trust the sheriff can live without you at the moment?"

It wasn't the sort of assignment Ron was used to receiving, but it seemed harmless enough. What would it take to keep this granddaughter occupied? That would all depend on her age and temperament, of course. Either way, the task seemed harmless enough, so Ron accepted.

With Ron's agreement, Silcox walked over to the carriage, which the men had just

put up on blocks. Tapping on the door, the old man beckoned his granddaughter to come out, which surprised Ron. What was she doing in the carriage as it was being jacked up? Hiding?

The door to the carriage swung open, and Silcox reached inside. "Allow me to introduce my oldest granddaughter, Fiora May Silcox," he said, helping the little lady out of the carriage with both hands. As he set her down on the ground, her diminished height was instantly apparent. At first, Ron suspected she was still a child, but as she walked over, he quickly realized the age on her face. This was no little girl, but a young woman two inches shorter than him.

"Fiora, this is Deputy Boron Grimes," Silcox said as the short woman extended a hand for Ron to take.

Caught off guard, Ron cleared his throat and shook Fiora's hand. "Uh, pleasure, ma'am," he said awkwardly.

Fiora smiled at his demeanor.

"I trust you will enjoy yourselves on this fine day," Silcox said, pulling a gold watch out of his pocket to check the time. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to meet a man about a herd."

With a spring in his step that defied his many years, Albert Silcox made his way out of the stable, leaving his granddaughter in Ron's capable hands.

Retaining the amused smile, Fiora studied Ron and asked, "So, Deputy Grimes, what ever shall we do together?"

* * *

A small crowd was gathered at the Grayson Stage Company on the northern edge of Selwood. Three coaches were arriving from Yucca Junction, and the welcoming committee was as diverse as the passengers. A few wives were around to greet their husbands, and a number of businessmen were there to shake hands with their traveling colleagues. Besides the people with legitimate reasons for being there, a small enclave of onlookers had shown up to lay eyes on a most noted man of merit.

Thomas Edison stepped out of the stagecoach and avoided eye contact with the pack of greeters. He was getting used to the celebrity, as word of his technological wonders continued to spread. There wasn't a town in America that didn't know his name, and he appreciated the fame. It was good for business.

Meeting the masses wasn't his initial goal on this visit, however. That could wait a few hours. What he really wanted—after stretching his legs—was to find the man who had brought him out west to begin with.

Scanning the crowd, Edison spotted the man he'd come to see. The slim, unassuming fellow with thinning hair and a pair of spectacles raised a hand in greeting as the famed inventor approached.

"Henry!" Edison shouted, shaking hands with Selwood's senior telegraph operator. "Henry Carrant, it's been too long."

"I suppose so, Mr. Edison," Henry replied as the handshake ended.

"Is that any way to greet an old friend? Do me the courtesy of calling me by my first name, at least."

"Of course, Thomas," Henry said, feeling a sight intimidated.

"What's the matter?" Edison asked. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

"I suppose," Henry said. "It's been a while, and a lot has changed over the years."

"Things may have changed, but not between us," Edison said, straightening up. "Let's go somewhere more private. We have a lot of catching up to do."

Henry escorted Edison away from the pack and over to the telegraph office a block away. It was pretty quiet there, with only the assistant operator in residence, waiting at the wire.

"So, what brings you to Selwood?" Henry asked, sitting down in a spare seat behind the junior telegrapher. The young man listening at the wire gave him something of a look, clearly bothered by the intrusion—as if a casual conversation might disturb him.

"A few things," Edison replied. "I'm doing something of a tour across the country, showing off a few of my more popular inventions, seeing if I can round up a few new customers. But the reason I'm here, of all places, is you, Henry."

"Me?" Henry asked, sounding pleasantly surprised.

"Yes, a most curious news story came across my desk about a month ago, about an old coworker of mine who was running for mayor of a prominent Nevada city. I never realized you had it in you."

"Oh, that," Henry said. "No, I'm not really running. Our last mayor died suddenly, and a few folks around town figured I ought to take over, being the respectable sort and all."

"But your name is on the ballot, correct?" Edison said.

"Well, I haven't seen a ballot, so I can't say if they've put it there or not. Either way, I don't expect to win. Like I said, I'm not really running."

"Then don't," Edison suggested. "If you don't want the job, tell these people you have no interest in becoming their figurehead and excuse yourself of any responsibility in the matter."

"It's not that simple," Henry replied, getting sheepish again. "It's not that I wouldn't like to be mayor. I just haven't decided if I want to waste my time on a race I'll probably lose anyway."

"You were never one to take chances," Edison added.

"And you were never satisfied unless you were working on some grand design," Henry said. "Always pushing the boundaries of technology, looking for that new flash of genius. Never afraid to try and fail."

"Time was, you could have followed the same path," Edison mentioned. "I remember that ambitious, young telegrapher who worked with me all those years ago. We made a good team back then. Remember the stock ticker?"

"Hey, now, I only helped you test it," Henry said modestly.

"Yes, and your careful observation and poignant notes helped me to perfect the design. I really couldn't have done it without you."

Henry almost rolled his eyes at the high praise, clearly disbelieving his own importance in the affair. "All right, what do you want, Thomas?"

"You know me too well," Edison said, maintaining his cool, businessman poise.

"I know you're never one to give anyone else credit unless it'll get you something in return."

Edison gave Henry a dirty look, which let the telegrapher know how insulting the comment had been. The truth often was.

After the tension of the moment faded, Edison replied. "I came here to offer you

a job, Henry. I want you to come work for me at Menlo Park."

It was hard for Henry to believe, that a man like Thomas Edison would come all this way for something so trivial. If he wanted to send a job offer to an old friend, that's what the telegraph was for. The fact that they hadn't seen each other in over five years made Henry wonder if there wasn't a sentimental streak in the great inventor.

"You came all the way out here just to offer me a job?" Henry asked.

"Not entirely," Edison replied. "I have other business in mind, but seeing you seemed like a good excuse to visit Selwood. Who knows, this town of yours might go for electricity."

"Perhaps someday," Henry said.

Standing up, Edison straightened his suit jacket and gave Henry a reassuring smile. "Consider my offer. It would be good to have you on board."

"What's the pay?" Henry asked out of sheer curiosity.

"Eighteen dollars a week, to start," Edison replied, "and you'd be accomplishing a lot more for society than you could ever hope to as the mayor of this town."

"I'll consider it," Henry agreed, albeit reluctantly. Though the pay sounded promising, he knew the sort of businessman he'd be working for, and he didn't want to end up losing a friend in the process.

Deciding their conversation had reached its end, Edison chose to see himself out, leaving Henry sitting in silent contemplation. Before closing the door to the telegraph office, Edison said, "I'll be setting up a demonstration in front of your city hall this evening. I trust you'll be in attendance."

"Of course," Henry said.

Edison nodded and left.

Hearing about the exposition gave Henry a slight respite from the hard decisions he had placed before him. The chance to see some of Edison's inventions for himself was exciting, to say the least. Despite the magic he'd witnessed in his lifetime, the idea of an electrically powered light or a talking machine was quite a thrill to consider.

The age of technology was nipping at the heels of mysticism, and it was a growing debate about which power would dominate the future.

CHAPTER 2: **THE GRAND STAGE**

The building looked as old as the hills, its clapboard siding weathered and gray. Though, Clarence recalled how it had all come to be built, this humble house at the end of the lane. It was the "left over" land, the extra parcel that had come with the church. Pastor Matthew Jameson had spent his entire life savings on the relocation to Selwood, yet a house had been the last thing on his mind. Coming to town, he'd accepted the hospitality of strangers, as he waited for his new flock and accompanying followers to build him a place of his own.

Clarence remembered the many nails he had personally hammered during the construction. It had only been six years, but time had a habit of wearing upon the world. So much had changed in those few years, and many people had come and gone from the young preacher's life.

He wondered, could he truly return here, to this home he had barely known, and the man who had given his life meaning?

The path leading up to the door was lined by sprigs of grass, yet it was never so green as it should've been. The arid land kept it tan, which disturbed Clarence even now. Things had more color to them in the Midwest, where he'd taken his first steps and first felt the calling of his Holy Savior. Though, he understood why Pastor Jameson had relocated his ministry. Wherever people settled, men of faith had to follow, and Selwood was such a place in need of spiritual guidance.

Yet, did things have to remain so naturally bleak?

Kneeling down toward a clump of dying grass, Clarence reached out his hand and gently brushed the blades, feeling the parched strands scraping his soft skin. It was a simple kind of life, and plants were easy to heal. Tapping into the tiniest fraction of his mystical powers, he sent a faint spark of light into the grass, and in seconds the energy went to work, revitalizing the grass that had rarely seen comfort. Ripples of color flowed up from the roots until each blade shined with natural beauty. A single clump among thousands stood as a minor miracle amidst the wastes.

Clarence stood and admired his work for a moment, feeling a twinge of apprehension as he realized what he had done. The use of magic was becoming second-

nature to him, yet he knew what Jameson would say. Magic was the work of Lucifer, a false trickery that abused the natural laws of God. No matter if that power was used for good or evil, it was all wrong in the eyes of the good pastor. Though, it was a doctrine Clarence could no longer share.

It would have been safer for Clarence to stay away, he knew—to perform healings and use his power for the glory of God where it was appreciated—but he couldn't stay away. An inexplicable compunction drew him back to this place, to an old mentor who was more right than he was wrong. A single difference in ideology threatened their oneness of thought, though it was a big difference, and one he wished to remedy.

After all, through God anything was possible.

There was a need to return, Clarence knew. In his own ministry as an itinerant preacher, he had felt the spirit of God working through him. He knew his powers were sourced from the creator, and *that* knowledge left him longing to return home and share the truth with those he cared about. It would be a delicate process, but somehow he would manage it, and sow the seeds of understanding amidst those who would listen. At the very least, he would show his fellow believers what he'd made of himself, and gain the respect of his peers.

Yet, when it came down to it, there were only two people he really needed to please, his heavenly father and his adopted one on Earth. How to go about doing that remained in question as Clarence stepped up to the door and rapped his knuckles upon its whitewashed surface. He waited nervously until his summons was answered.

The door creaked open, revealing the aged figure of Matthew Jameson. The old pastor looked straight ahead into the face of the young man at his doorstep. He appeared just as Clarence remembered him, even wearing the same black suit he'd been wearing when last they'd met. His stance showed no weakness, as the years had been kind to his body, even if his thinned, white hair and wrinkled skin expressed his age.

"Welcome," Jameson simply said, sounding pleased. He stepped aside and invited Clarence into the house.

The interior hadn't changed in the least; a neatly-ordered domicile without much in the way of decoration. This was the home of a true man of God, with little in the way of worldly possessions, despite his lucrative position. The tithes of the flock could have supplied Pastor Jameson with garish luxury, but the old man would have none of it. What he didn't need for his basic needs and limited reading habit went to further the ministry and spread the good word. Clarence tried to follow in those footsteps in so many ways.

"It's good that you've come," Pastor Jameson said, leading the way through the small parlor and into the kitchen. "I was starting to worry. Before last week's telegram, foretelling of your return, I had not heard from you in months."

"My travels took me away from standard mail routes, I'm afraid," Clarence replied, though he knew it was a hollow excuse. Truthfully, he'd stopped writing because he feared what his old mentor would think, were he to reveal what he'd truly been doing recently. Sending letters had become difficult, as omitting the truth of his mystic ministry became more onerous and deceitful.

"Well, you're here now, so I hope we'll have plenty of time to catch up," Jameson said, ushering them both into the Spartan living room. It was a chamber with a few chairs, a reading desk, and a large rack of shelves filled with books. The large space

could have easily accommodated three times the furniture, and not a single decoration could be seen; even the twin side windows remained plain and bare with simple gray sheets for curtains.

Taking his seat behind the reading desk, Jameson waved Clarence toward the only other chair, directly across from him. The young man found the padded seat comfortable, like an old pair of shoes that you hadn't worn in years but couldn't deny were pattered to your feet. This was the same chair he'd spent his childhood in, reading before his mentor and learning the wisdom of the ages. Funny, how something that simple could be so comforting; it almost made him forget about the philosophical schism that loomed before him.

"I must say," Jameson started as Clarence got settled in, "when I first heard that you were leaving school to pursue the path of a traveling minister, I had mixed emotions."

"How so?" Clarence asked.

"Oh, it was no surprise. You were always destined to follow the path—of that I had no doubt—and you have always been a sight impulsive. Yet, while I was proud that you were eager to accept the calling, part of me wondered if you were truly ready."

"It wasn't a brash decision," Clarence defended. "I spent eighteen months beforehand listening to professors and scholars of divinity, and I found that little of it was new to me. The important matters of faith I'd already learned from you, and my own meditations told me it was time to move on. I had works to perform."

Pastor Jameson nodded his head knowingly. "I see that now. Your early letters, explaining your ministry in the wild hill country, revealed the truth to me. Hearing of the people you were saving, the souls you were bringing to Christ, it put my early doubts to rest. I'm proud of you, Clarence, truly proud."

The tone of voice and subtle smile were further comfort to Clarence, and he began to wonder if he could shatter his mentor's pride by explaining his current talents. They were on such good terms at the moment, it seemed an utter shame to shatter the illusion. Yet, if his non-magical works could bring his mentor such joy, perhaps Jameson would see that his new path of healing the sick and feeding the hungry with mystical ministrations was righteous. He knew it was a longshot, at best.

"There is something else," Clarence began, preparing to test the waters. "At college, there was a professor, Alvin Bennett, teaching a class called The Divine Ministrations of Mysticism."

"At my Alma Mater?" Jameson said, eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Yes, the course is highly popular, especially among the religious philosophy majors. I... attended the class, myself," Clarence dared to admit.

"I hope you saw it as the blasphemy that it is." Jameson shook his head and hissed through his teeth. "To think, my beloved university would admit such a charlatan to the faculty. I suppose this Bennett practices some form of sorcery, himself?"

"He's a certified Warlock," Clarence admitted.

"Disgraceful," Jameson said. "I tell you, in my youth no Methodist would deign to consider the dark arts as spiritually valid curriculum, let alone the Board of a highly-respected Methodist University."

Clarence felt his hopes dashed, as he saw his old mentor was as rigid as ever when it came to the practice of magic. He had been expecting too much, and knew it

would be an insurmountable task to convince Jameson of the righteousness of the mystic arts. Still, he had to press the issue, hope that God could make up the difference.

"I can't say it was wrong to attend the class," Clarence said. "It gave me the impetus to leave school and pursue my ministry abroad."

"Ah," Jameson said, thinking he understood. "I would have done the same. Preaching the truth is far nobler than learning lies."

"That isn't exactly what I meant," Clarence continued.

"What did you mean?" Jameson asked, restoring a reserved composure.

"Besides speaking of the divinity involved with magic, Professor Bennett prompted us to pursue works, to utilize our innate gifts to further the Lord's cause, and better the world around us. It was this prompting that convinced me that I was ready for more than a classroom. I could help people and make a difference in their lives, just as I'd always wanted to. Further schooling could wait."

Jameson nodded approvingly. "I respect that. Yet, I remain skeptical of any advice given by a practitioner of the dark arts."

Hearing the contempt in his mentor's voice, Clarence felt a stinging rebuke. Even though Jameson didn't know that his protégé was one of those "practitioners," it didn't make the insult any gentler.

"Please, don't take this the wrong way," Clarence started, fighting back the nervous lump in the pit of his stomach, "but I can't say I share your convictions that all magic is a dark art."

Jameson was at a loss for words, but his stare spoke volumes. It was his turn to be insulted.

"I have seen the good that magic can do," Clarence persisted. "I've seen it heal the sick and lame. It provides bountiful harvests to feed the hungry. How is that evil?"

"If Judas Iscariot had used his thirty pieces of silver to help the poor and needy, would that have assuaged his guilt for betraying Christ? I tell you no!" Jameson slammed a fist against his desk. "Magic is derived from the devil, the source of all evil, and no amount of superficial good in this world can justify its use. The price is ultimately too high. Can you not see that?"

Clarence did not. Yet, there was no way he would change his pastor's mind—not today, anyway.

After a lengthy and uncomfortable silence, Pastor Jameson let his stern demeanor fade, and he stood up from behind his desk. "I can see that college has filled your head with some curious notions, but let us forget them. There are more pertinent matters to attend at the moment. There is a political debate due to start outside the Town Hall. If you are up for a lively exchange, I feel that that one would be more constructive."

Clarence nodded and smiled, glad for the momentary reprieve.

* * *

The primary debate in the Selwood mayoral race was scheduled for the first Saturday afternoon in August. Workmen had put together a sturdy platform in front of the town hall for the event, and it was destined to be a main attraction for the community. A crowd had been gathering since noon, and half the attendees were women and children—even though they couldn't vote. The civic-minded citizens were eager to hear what the different candidates had to say, and it served as a pleasant diversion from the mundane activities of daily life.

After escorting Fiora Silcox around town, Ron found himself gravitating toward the show. There wasn't much else to do. The young lady seemed fairly satisfied with their unremarkable walk, and she hadn't complained about the slop they'd been served at a local family eatery. She seemed easy enough to please, which was a relief. The offspring of wealthy parents often had a disagreeable streak in them.

Pushing through the crowd, Ron and Fiora made their way to the front of the crowd without too much hassle. When anyone complained about his trespass, Ron flashed his badge and claimed authority. It was a good ploy to get good seating, but also a logical one. As a deputy, he ought to be up front, to keep a close eye on things. Anywhere a large group of people congregated, the threat of trouble lingered.

There were some benches up front, and Ron used his station to procure a seat from a young couple who obliged reluctantly. The pair took a place behind the dwarves and leaned against each other in a most intimate fashion, leaving Ron to wonder what it might be like to fall in love. He'd never had that spark of romance, never known a serious relationship. It hadn't bothered him in his youth, but as he got older the thought of family was starting to weigh on him.

Oddly enough, he hadn't stopped to consider the young woman sitting beside him—not for a moment.

Two men came through the crowd and climbed the steps to the stage. The suits they wore denoted them as the more affluent types, though Ron couldn't place their names. No doubt, he'd remember after today.

The two men sat down in a couple of chairs toward the back of the stage and waited in silence. A few people in the crowd mumbled questions, and others mumbled answers. There were more candidates due to appear on stage, which accounted for the delay.

Just then, a small commotion arose toward the back of the crowd, as a few people cheered and clapped. A small corridor was made, as a few happy individuals escorted Henry Carrant along. The telegrapher gave some halfhearted waves to the people as he passed, appearing uncomfortable with the attention. He made his way up the stairs and took the third seat in-between the two polished gentlemen.

As the crowd once again mumbled amongst themselves, a fourth man climbed the steps, and Ron instantly identified him as Albert Silcox. The aging cattle baron walked over to the podium at center stage and shouted for everyone's attention.

"Citizens of Selwood, it is my pleasure to stand in as moderator for this important forum," Silcox announced, looking pleased with himself.

"What's this?" Ron whispered to Fiora.

"I don't know, but I like it." Standing up, Fiora whistled and waved at her father.

"Hi there, Fiora," Silcox acknowledged, then continued. "While not a citizen of your fair town, the election committee felt it would be appropriate for me to serve in this role, as an impartial observer. Of course, it would have been nice if they'd given me some warning ahead of time. I might have stayed home," he added with a smile.

The crowd laughed a little at his offhanded attempt at humor.

Glancing back at the seated candidates, Silcox continued. "Well, as it appears everyone is ready, I believe we can get started."

"Not so fast, boyo," a voice shouted from the crowd. The distinct, Irish accent was familiar to Ron, and he was suddenly put on edge.

A flash of light appeared on the stage beside Silcox, and a thin dwarf in a bowler hat materialized. He held a rolled up piece of paper in his right hand, and he lifted it above his head.

Before the Irishman could speak, Ron got to his feet and drew his Remington revolver. "Flaherty!" he shouted, recalling his last encounter with the magically skilled fellow.

Flaherty cocked his head and stared back at Ron. "Ah, Deputy Grimes, how nice tae see ye again. What's all this now, pointin' a gun at a mayoral candidate?"

"I'm pointing it at you, you blasted leprechaun!" Ron shouted.

A flash of light appeared over Ron's hand, and the gun vanished from his grasp. The weapon promptly materialized in Flaherty's hand. "As I said, ye were threatening a candidate." Lowering the gun, the leprechaun handed it to Silcox, along with his sheet of paper. "Michael James Flaherty, delivering me nomination."

The last statement caused a stir with the crowd, as different factions took in the news. Everyone was surprised, to say the least.

"You can't run for mayor," someone shouted.

"And just why not?" Flaherty asked as Silcox examined the paper.

"You're a no good Irishman," the protestor replied.

"Irishman perhaps, but I got me citizenship in sixty-three. I was a founding member of this here settlement, and I be reclaimin' me residency at thirty-four Berkshire Street. That makes me eligible."

"Ain't nobody gonna vote for no Irishman," someone else said.

"Let alone one behind bars," Ron said, storming the stage. When he reached the top of the stairs, he was enveloped in light, and promptly found himself back beside Fiora amidst the crowd.

"What's with all the hostility? You're not still harboring a grudge over our little trip in June."

"You bet I am. You kidnapped me and the sheriff!" Ron challenged. "I ought to arrest you!"

"I don't believe you want to be going that route," Flaherty said, eyeing Silcox. "It might bring about a whole host of unpleasantness."

Silcox caught the leprechaun staring at him and gave the look right back. "Whatever you've done, I think you'd best pay for it."

Flaherty grabbed his chest in an outlandish show of betrayal. "You wound me, old friend, and after all we've been through."

"You know this miscreant?" Ron asked, walking over to the stairs again. This time, he managed to get to the stage without a spell sending him away.

"Michael here is an old acquaintance of mine, and of Marshal Rodgers," Silcox explained.

"I see," Ron said, stepping in front of Flaherty so he could look him in the eye. "Then I suppose you were working for Rodgers when you waylaid me and Doliber."

The leprechaun narrowed his gaze and lowered his voice. "If ye take me to court, perhaps ye'll find out the hard way."

Ron whispered back, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Flaherty raised his voice and answered loudly, "It means I'm running for mayor! Let's get on with the debate!"

Ron felt like dragging him off the stage in handcuffs, but a voice echoed in the back of his mind. *"You should wait."* It took him a minute to realize it was Sheriff Doliber sending him a telepathic message.

"Damn it, Doliber, you know how I hate your prying mind," Ron replied with an angry thought.

"Occupational necessity," Doliber's disembodied voice said. *"I don't want to confront Flaherty. Not yet. We need to see what he's up to, and the best way to accomplish that is to let him run wild a bit."*

"Give him enough rope to hang himself, and his accomplices?" Ron asked.

"Precisely," Doliber replied. *"Now, stand down and watch the show. I'll be over when I can."*

Ron knew better than to protest, and did as he was asked, clomping off the stage without acting too upset. He went back to his seat and stared at the candidates as they each got up to make their initial presentations. Their words didn't really interest him at the moment, as his thoughts continued to churn through what facts he had. Flaherty was certainly up to something, and he was determined to figure it out.

All the while, Fiora Silcox sat beside him, cheering the speeches and prompting Ron to do the same. She helped him keep pace with the happy crowd as his mind wandered.

He was going to see that dirty leprechaun in jail, if it was the last thing he did.

* * *

As half the town was occupied at the political rally, Joella found herself on corpse watch. After careful consideration, Doliber had decided it was unwise to leave the body of Jesse James unattended. *Who knew what Solen might do to the man?* So, to make sure things weren't disturbed, he sent the first available deputy.

Joella didn't mind the job. In fact, she rather enjoyed the task, as it gave her the chance to razz Solen. The arrogant saloon owner had made his interest in her clear on occasion, though never in a sappy manner. He was more the playful sort, who made light of his potential conquest. Whether a defensive mechanism or his natural, carefree attitude, Joella took pleasure in shooting down his thinly-veiled advances whenever the chance presented itself.

The Lucca Saloon was practically empty at two in the afternoon, which was unusual. Even at mid-afternoon, there were usually a few gamblers playing cards or a drover taking an early dinner. The absolute absence of anyone besides a couple of whores made the place feel even more dead than the blood-stained body in front of the bar.

"Aren't you going to take him out of here?" Solen asked as Joella continued to stare at Jesse's lifeless form.

"He can do it himself... eventually," Joella answered, followed by a smile.

"Not before he scares off more customers," Solen said, slapping a damp rag down on the counter.

"What customers? Everyone's at the rally."

"Yes, speaking of which," he said as a thought crossed his mind. He turned to the three girls who were playing with their makeup. "Why don't you ladies get down there and rustle up some clients."

"We don't work outside the house, Solen," the dark-haired one replied snottily.

"Lose the attitude, Sally. One of these days you'll get me in the wrong mood, and I swear you'll be looking for fresh accommodations."

"Right, Solen. Only, then who would you vent to?" Sally asked. Deciding against an escalation of hostilities, she grabbed her makeup kit and trotted upstairs.

Solen shook his head and turned back to Joella. "Get that body out of here, before I get a shovel."

"You'd actually attempt manual labor?" Joella asked, feigning surprise.

"Fritz, get out here," Solen shouted to the teenage waiter hiding in the kitchen. "Deputy Talus has a hole for you to dig."

Joella folded her arms and looked disappointed. "That's one of the things I really dislike about you, Solen," she said. "You've always got somebody else to do your dirty work for you."

"I'm sure you know how that is, being a Talus of Clan Talus," Solen replied, setting his cleaning rag aside. "No doubt, you had plenty of pampering growing up, which is why you're so tough and capable now. You think you've got something to prove."

"I don't have to prove anything," Joella said. "I just know the value of independence and hard work."

"You know, we could do some *hard work* together," Solen suggested with a jerk of his eyebrows.

"Perhaps," Joella replied, looking down at Jesse's stirring body, "but after I stabbed you, I doubt you'd rise from the dead."

The slight twitch turned into a full spasm, as Jesse returned to life. The stab wound in his shoulder was completely healed, and his eyes flickered, as consciousness returned. With a stiff roll, he managed to get into a sitting position and breathe deeply.

"Feeling better?" Joella asked as he took note of his surroundings.

Looking down at his blood-stained shirt, he replied, "It seems I need another set of clothes."

Joella reached down and gave him a hand up. "Maybe if you weren't intent on getting yourself killed, you'd get more mileage out of them."

"Dying is never my intention," Jesse replied. "That Yankee coward made some disparaging remarks, so I made my own in return."

"What did he say?" Joella asked.

Jesse paused and thought about it, looking oddly amused. "I don't seem to recall."

"Then it probably wasn't worth getting stabbed over," Joella said. "Come on, let's go get you cleaned up."

Jesse rubbed the kinks out of his shoulder as he followed Joella out of the saloon. His body was always stiff after a revival, though no more than he'd get from a bad night's sleep. It would prove to be a deterrent if it were much worse, but he wasn't one to shirk from pain.

They didn't say much as they made their way down the street, and they got a number of shocked expressions from the people they passed. Jesse always got stares when he had blood on his shirt, and word was getting around about his unnatural nature. Nobody had yet complained about a "shadowganger" being on the sheriff's staff, though it was only a matter of time—especially considering that that shadow was also a wanted outlaw.

"I assume the man who stabbed me is locked up," Jesse said as they neared the Sheriff's Office.

"He'll get his day in court," Joella confirmed, waving at a passing pair of parasol-twirling ladies who turned up their noses at the uncouth law officers.

"Doliber should've let me shoot him and be done with it."

"And how would that fit in with your path to redemption?" Joella asked, walking up the steps to the office.

"I've been doing good for a while now," Jesse said, opening the door for Joella. "Feel I can afford a detour now and then."

They came in to find Doliber sitting behind his desk, eyes closed and seemingly asleep. Keeping quiet as she approached the desk, Joella waited until she was right beside him to stomp her foot and call for his attention. He didn't budge to her noise, even after she shouted his name twice.

"Is he all right?" Jesse asked, sliding the black jacket off his shoulders. He started examining it, and saw there wasn't much blood on it—seems he'd lucked out there, and would only need to replace his shirt. Jackets could get expensive.

"He's in a trance of some sort," Joella replied. "I think."

"I'm busy," Doliber answered, remaining still except for the movement of his lips.

The words startled Joella, and she felt silly for being tricked so easily. "You could have said something. What are you doing?"

"Watching the mayoral debate. Now shush."

Seeing Doliber had things well in hand, the two deputies turned to leave. Jesse headed upstairs to find a clean shirt, and Joella felt it wouldn't be a bad idea to head down to the rally and see the proceedings firsthand. Though, as she made for the front door, the sheriff's voice caught her attention.

"You have a telegram, Joella," Doliber said.

"Oh?" Joella asked, moving back toward the desk and looking for a sheet of paper. "When did it come in?"

"About twenty seconds ago," Doliber said.

"How do you know?" Joella asked. She felt she knew the answer, but wanted to hear confirmation.

"Call orb," Doliber replied. "The telegrapher on duty just activated it."

"So, what does the telegram say?" Joella asked.

"I didn't read more than the address," Doliber said.

"Thank you," Joella said, feeling less than eager to receive the message. There weren't many people she could think of who would spend the time or money to send her a telegram, and none of them would be sending a kind word. Whether it was Mactus Sellius—her deceased husband's cousin and her would-be husband—or her parents condemning her for rejecting him, this was not going to be pleasant.

Joella walked over to the telegraph office, her head hung low as she remembered the hard choices she'd had to make, and the consequences she knew were coming. Elvish Clan Law mandated that she marry her dead husband's first cousin, though she'd done everything possible to avoid it, and finally refused. Though legally the clan could not force her to do anything, her actions would see her shunned by any who followed the old ways, including her family.

Joella's relationship with her parents had been strained for years, as she hadn't

settled into the lifestyle of a good elvish housewife. Of course, they'd raised her on the frontier, and taught her all the independence necessary to survive in the wild. As soon as civilization took hold, however, they'd forgotten all of that, and expected her to conform to polite society. Yet, she had already been conditioned for the rugged life, and fate had delivered her away from the comforts of a submissive existence.

That, and the fact that her late husband had been a half-breed outlaw, made the prospects of her becoming a homemaker rather unlikely.

There was nothing in Clan Law that mandated the way a wife had to live, and while married to her often absent spouse—the scandalous half-elf bandit Vincent Lafayette—she'd been free to run her own affairs. That meant riding the range and playing cowgirl on the family spread much of the time.

While Law didn't dictate the behavior of a wife, it left that right to the husband, and Mactus wasn't the sort to tolerate unladylike behavior from any wife. He had three already who served in the traditional ways, and Joella would have simply been number four in his polygamous harem if she'd obeyed the ancient ways of her people. It was something she could never accept, and now she would have to live with the consequences of her rejection.

Stepping up to the telegraph window, Joella caught the attention of the junior operator, who promptly handed her the telegram. She stepped out from under the small awning so she could read the message in full sunlight.

The message wasn't from Mactus or her parents, but from her cousin, Doreen. Before she'd become the third wife of Mactus Sellius, Doreen had grown up with Joella, and they'd remained good friends into adulthood. It was understandable that she would be willing to defy her husband's wishes and bend Clan Law by contacting her shunned relation, especially considering the circumstances.

Reading the telegram, Joella felt her heart sink. It was short and to the point. Mactus had arranged a betrothal to Joella's younger sister, Sara.

"The son of a bitch actually did it," Joella whispered to herself, sickened by the move. He'd threatened to do it, but she'd always figured it was just a negotiating tactic, to force her into marrying him. She never thought he'd really go so far.

When it came to Joella, Mactus had never wanted the love and commitment of a real marriage. He already had three wives for that. With her, it had always been a matter of standing. Joella was the eldest heir to the Chieftain, and her heirs would someday rule the clan—or they would have, had she not refused Mactus and gotten herself excommunicated. When she did that, the bloodline shifted to the next in succession, namely her sole sibling.

Mactus was ambitious, and would stop at nothing to assure that his children would lead Clan Talus in the next century.

Marrying Sara was a new low, Joella thought. Mactus was a man pushing forty, and Sara was barely sixteen. How could such an arranged marriage be permitted in this day and age?

Joella couldn't believe it. How could her parents be so heartless and complacent? Signing their youngest daughter over to Mactus like that; how could they? Yes, her folks had been close with Mactus' parents, but that didn't mean they had to trade offspring like chattel.

There had to be a way to stop it. Sara was still more than a year away from

traditional marrying age, and nothing was set in stone. Her parents could revoke the betrothal at any time prior to the wedding day, and barring that the bride could always refuse. This wasn't the old country, it was America, and an elvish woman had the right to reject an arranged marriage, even if that meant turning her back on her people. It came with harsh consequences, but they were preferable to becoming a stepping stone to a man's ambition.

It wouldn't be easy, but Joella had to try. Somehow, she would save her sister from the dreaded fate that awaited her, and finally put an end to the ambition of Mactus Sellius.

Wasting no time, Joella hurried over to her room at the Bormans' Boarding House and packed her belongings, preparing for a long ride. It was pretty quiet around mid-afternoon, as most of the boarders were over at city hall hearing the stump speeches of the mayoral candidates. It was the perfect cover she needed to get away unnoticed.

Joella made her way down the stairs, ready to hit the trail with her rugged leather attire. She didn't want a big send-off, not when she wasn't sure if she'd be coming back. All she owned was in the pack on her back and the saddlebags on her horse. It wasn't much to show for the past four months of upholding the law, but she wasn't in it for the money. Nobody ever got rich fighting crime, and she'd known plenty of wealthy crooks. Fighting for what was right had to be a reason all in itself.

As much as she'd come to enjoy being a deputy, there was another wrong she had to challenge. Her sister needed her, so she was off to save the day.

Joella was on her horse and turning to head out of town when Sheriff Doliber appeared in front of her. The sudden arrival worried her, for she hadn't asked permission for this little excursion. She liked being a deputy, but when family business conflicted with her duties there was no choice in the matter. She couldn't risk him telling her no, so she hadn't given him the chance. Yet, now, here he was.

"Planning to say goodbye?" Doliber asked.

Joella felt guilty as sin, trying to sneak off without a word. Caught in the act, she realized what a mistake it would be to leave without clearing it with her employer. The stress of her sister's situation was making her reckless.

"You could have asked me," Doliber mentioned.

"My sister needs my help," Joella said. "I didn't think there was time to ask."

Recognizing the importance of family affairs, Doliber nodded and stepped out of the horse's path, saying, "If you need a hand, I'm there for you."

"Thank you, but this is something I need to handle on my own," Joella replied, wishing she could take him up on his offer, but knowing it would only make things worse. It was never wise to bring outsiders into personal matters.

"I understand," Doliber said, petting her horse's neck. "How long will you be away?"

"A few days. Maybe a week," Joella replied.

"I guess we'll manage without you," Doliber said. He kept his hand on the horse and gave Joella a thoughtful look. He always had so much on his mind, it was often difficult to gauge the meaning of his reactions, but there was something telling in the way he was behaving at the moment, something Joella had been searching for these past months; an affinity, a trace of love... or was she just imagining things?

"Well, I'd better let you go," Doliber said, stepping back. "Don't be gone too

long."

"I won't," Joella said softly. "When I get back, we really should talk."

"Yes, I'm sure we'll both want to catch up and clear the air," Doliber said, quickly shielding himself. The longing in his eyes was gone, replaced with his usual, attentive glare. "Pleasant trip."

Joella gave a simple nod, and shook the reins. The horse started trotting forward as Doliber vanished in a flash of light, leaving her to ride away unobserved. The road west was dry and rocky, but she'd traveled it before. With any luck, she'd be able to cut the trip short with a quick teleport, though she hadn't tested her limited mystical ability since straining herself in a harrowing feat to save Doliber's life. That daring move had proven successful, but it could have killed her, and it left her with worries about tapping that ability now.

Doliber had been assuring her for weeks that nothing was wrong with her brain. It ought to be able to process magic energy just fine, though she had lingering doubts. She feared that something might be wrong the next time she tried to teleport, but she couldn't put it off any longer. The ride to Ravenna-West would take the better part of a week on horseback, while her teleporting skills could have her there within the hour.

Praying that she wasn't about to meet the reaper, she closed her eyes and prepared to take a leap of faith. Sensing where she wanted to go, a tingling sensation tickled the back of her eyes, as she activated the magic at her command. In a few moments, she'd find out if her skills truly were intact.

As the tingling stopped, Joella felt a gust of moist air on her cheek. Opening her eyes, she saw the arid desert was gone, replaced by the lush forests of eastern California. She knew this patch of woods well. She was barely five miles from home.

The first trial was over, and now she had to figure out her next move. What would it take to save her sister from the clutches of Mactus Sellius? She had five miles to figure it out.

* * *

After three long hours, the mayoral debate was nearing an end. The candidates had done their best to present their individual cases and highlight key issues to stimulate the voters. Many of the early attendees had since left, but new arrivals had kept the crowd substantial, even as things were winding down.

The leprechaun had just given his closing statements, swearing he had the connections necessary to guarantee construction of the Selwood rail spur, and Ron was feeling ready to sleep, even as the sun lingered in the western sky. He'd enjoyed hearing the arguments for a while, but he had his limits, and the candidates were all pretty much the same. They all had something different to offer Selwood, and each had a niche issue to tout, though none of it sounded very original. One man trumpeted his moral Methodism and the need for righteous leadership, while another decried the value of a working man's right to enjoy himself. Henry Currant played the fence and seemed uncomfortable on the stump, while Flaherty wasted time with his outlandish promises that nobody could take seriously. It grew tiring after a while, though most of the townspeople seemed to enjoy it.

With the final statements made, Silcox took the podium and concluded the candidate forum. Even as he shook the hands of the departing candidates, a new group of men stormed the stage, and the crowd remained to see what the new commotion was

about.

A mustached man took Silcox aside and talked briefly, after which the cattle baron made a new announcement. "Ladies and gentleman, the debates are over, but you may all come back at dusk for a very special presentation by the Edison Electric Light Company."

The new announcement brought a lot of excitement to the group, even as they dispersed to attend their afternoon business. Many would return, and no doubt bring friends to this new event. Two major presentations in one day was more positive excitement than Selwood had seen in years.

Albert Silcox left the stage and made a direct line for his granddaughter and Ron. Fiora hopped up on the bench and gave him a quick hug when he arrived, seeming relieved that the debate was over.

"We aren't going to stay around for the Edison show, are we?" she asked.

"We've already stayed this late," Silcox replied. "I don't see we'll be riding back to the ranch today, at any rate. Might as well make a fresh run in the morning."

"That doesn't mean we have to sit around for another three hours," Fiora complained. She turned to Ron and asked, "Is it okay if Mr. Grimes shows me around some more instead?"

"If you wish, and he's amenable," Silcox said, sounding pleased.

"Hey, now, I don't mind spending time with you, but I'm pretty partial to seeing this Edison lightshow," Ron said. "I've read a lot about these bulb things over the last few years; feel I ought to see one for myself."

"So what?" Fiora said, sounding childish. "It's just another sort of magic. You want to see a ball glow, Grandfather can light one up any time. Isn't that right?" she added, looking lovingly at Albert.

The old man nodded and held her arm reassuringly. "Yes, it's true I can enchant an orb, but magic and technology are not really the same. From what I was told, Edison will be showing off more than just his electric lights this evening, things you might enjoy. There are wonders of modern science that even magic has not crafted over the centuries, and you'd be well advised to take notice. The world your children grow up in may be far removed from the life any of us have known."

Fiora looked up at her grandfather, then over to Ron and sighed. "All right, I guess I can sit around a while longer, but I'll want to stretch my legs first." She held her hand out to Ron and waited for him to take it. "Shall we?"

Ron took her hand and she hopped down off the bench. Before he could let go, she wove her fingers into his and dragged him along playfully, even as her grandfather looked on with a reassuring smile.

The picture was clear for Ron to see. The more he observed of Albert Silcox's mannerisms and attitudes, the more he understood what this whole thing was about; why the man had taken a shine to him in the first place. Silcox was trying to find a suitable suitor for his granddaughter. The concept left Ron feeling uncomfortable. As much as he'd considered the value of having a family in recent months, Fiora was not his type for various reasons—and he wasn't too partial to being set up by a would-be in-law, rich or otherwise.

Ron waited until they turned the corner onto Lexicon Street before asking, "Where are we going?"

Fiora stopped jogging and turned to face him, keeping her hand firmly within his. "I don't know. I just felt like moving after all that sitting. Where do you want to go?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," Ron said.

"I know," Fiora said excitedly. "Why don't you show me where you live? You must have a home or a room. Somewhere private?"

"How would your grandfather approve of that?" Ron asked with mixed emotions.

"He would trust me to maintain my Christian virtue, in any situation, and he wouldn't have left me in your capable hands if he didn't already trust you."

"I think part of that trust is trusting that I won't be taking you to my private room in the first place," Ron said, seeking to avoid a tricky situation.

"I don't know about that," Fiora said. "Besides, if anything were to happen, we wouldn't have to say anything, would we?"

Fiora moved in and planted a kiss on Ron's lips, forcing her way past the thick beard hiding his mouth. Before she could get more than a peck, Ron pulled her back.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked.

Fiora gave him a blank look and then started to blush. "I'm sorry. I thought that's what you wanted."

"You're pretty eager to give a man what you think he wants," Ron said, wary of her forwardness, even as he fought back primitive urges.

"I'm sorry," Fiora repeated. "I'm not usually like that, really."

"I find that hard to believe," Ron answered, considering the facts. She'd known him barely half a day and was already interested in having intimate relations? The only ladies Ron knew who would consider such action weren't the sort to act out of character, and were already in the habit.

"Oh," Fiora said, turning away. She took a few steps and stared down at her feet. "I ruined it. I knew I would."

Ron felt a twinge of guilt, but knew better than to fall into a potential trap. He'd known his share of women, and understood how manipulative the "fairer sex" could be. He wasn't going to play along. It was against his stubborn nature to give in to emotional blackmail.

"I think we should get you back to your grandpa now," Ron said, expecting it would put an end to this uncomfortable business.

"No, not yet," Fiora said. "Please, don't give up on me before we've even started."

Ron walked over and stepped in front of her, so he could see her eyes. They were red and damp, and it made him feel bad about his cold demeanor. "What do you expect to get out of this—out of me?"

"Nothing," Fiora said, wiping her tears, "and everything. Do you know I'm twenty-five years old, and no man has ever looked at me as more than a little girl? Twenty-five! I'm alone, Mr. Grimes, and I don't want to end up some old maid."

"That's nonsense," Ron said. "You're not even old yet, and I can't believe you won't find someone who'll treat you right."

"You don't understand," Fiora replied, sounding ready to cry again. "You're normal, what you're supposed to be. You're a *real* dwarf. I'm just a shrunken human. Nobody wants me."

Ron understood completely, and the worst part was he agreed with her assessment of herself. She wasn't a real dwarf in his eyes, and his own genetic bias continued to

color his feelings about her. He'd never once considered a romantic relationship with this girl, all because of his own racial pride. Despite their similar height, she wasn't *really* like him.

Seeing her sorrow made him feel sympathetic, but it would take more than a terse conversation to change his heart.

Putting a hand on her shoulder, Ron tried to ease her emotion. "Come on, why don't we get something to eat?"

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Grimes," Fiora said, starting to lighten up again. Her sadness was shifting to discomfort, which left her acting stiff.

"Call me Ron," he said as they started walking again. He let her take his hand, and wondered how far he would be willing to go to appease her. However things turned out, he knew this was the beginning of an unusual relationship.

* * *

Dusk was a busy time in Selwood, even on an ordinary Saturday night. The streetlamps were being lit as citizens walked about their business. There was a local theatre troupe who often put on plays, though this night they took a bow from their regular routine, as a superior performance presented itself.

The outdoor stage was glowing, and not by magic or fire. The bright shine of glass bulbs strung along the stage and podium gave adequate illumination for all present to see the men standing near the podium, the central figure being Thomas Edison, himself. The power for the lights came from several small crank generators that whined in the background, and three men—Edison's employees—kept their arms rotating in rhythmic fashion.

"You see these lights?" Edison continued with his speech. "These are the product of science. Not of mental mysticism or primitive conjuring, but of true physical knowledge and innovation. It was a long trek of discovery to manufacture a functional light bulb, but now that the pattern has been uncovered it is simple and relatively cheap to reproduce it. In time, these electric lights of mine will be commonplace, superceding all their counterparts, and only rich men will waste money on candles or magic orbs."

Edison waved at the cranking men to stop, and the lights grew dark. There was silence again, as the spectators wondered what Edison was doing now, and they watched shadowed figures moving around on the stage. After a few minutes, two lights turned on again, powered by a large storage battery. It was enough light to show Edison standing there with another of his inventions. The long, cylindrical device with a crank and a horn sat flatly on top of the podium, and with a steady turn of the handle Edison made the device speak.

"Hello, I am a phonograph, a talking machine. I can be used to record sounds and replay them, like so. Mary had a little lamb..."

The voice was clearly that of Thomas Edison, though tinny and distorted by the playback. As the crank was turned, the light from the bulbs sparkled against the metallic cylinder as it turned about the core of the phonograph.

As the recording came to an end, Edison stretched his arm and one of his employees took the machine away.

"That is one of the original prototypes I made, almost five years ago," Edison explained. "Improved models are available for purchase, if any of you would like to be the first in your community to own one. Being ahead of the trends isn't a bad thing when

it comes to technology. In a few short years, it won't be uncommon to see one of these devices in every household in America!"

"What's the point?" someone shouted from the crowd.

"Excuse me?" Edison asked.

"You heard me," the heckler persisted. "What's the point of these inventions of yours? We already got lights better than them bulb things. Half the homes in Selwood got magic orbs to see at night, and what good's a talking machine? Sounds like somebody's talking inside a tin barrel!"

The rest of the crowd remained eerily silent as Edison stared at them intently. It took him a minute to gather his thoughts and channel his anger before making a response.

"You want to know why I seek to advance the frontiers of science? To make inventions that improve the lives of people around the globe?"

"I asked *what's the point*," the heckler persisted. "Your lights ain't nothing new."

"Ah, you want to know why I seek to break our dependency on magic!" Edison said, looking pleased with the realization. "Isn't it obvious? Magic is an archaic form of energy, utilized by only a handful of people. It is limited in its functionality, and those who can use it extort large sums of money from all of us for their little trinkets. I seek to liberate us from that tyrannical system." He grabbed his lapels and stuck out his chest like a politician before continuing. "To cast magic, you have to be born special, and trained by other special men in order to adequately utilize your gifts. Yet, with true science, any man can learn to use its power. It doesn't take a Master of the Guild to make a light bulb. It only takes a man in a factory, copying a pattern, and the power that bulb needs is easily generated by scientific means, as well. As we speak, my work crews are setting up the first mass electrical distribution system, to supply power to customers in New York City. They aren't magic men using their minds to conjure that power. They are using science that anyone can utilize."

The heckler sought to continue. "Yeah, but..."

"You also asked about the phonograph, and there magic is sorely lacking. I have never encountered a magical device that can truly record sound and replay it. Yes, a skilled mentalist can speak into your mind or project a memory, but can any magician make a sound recording like the one I just played for you? No! Where magic has failed, science has succeeded!"

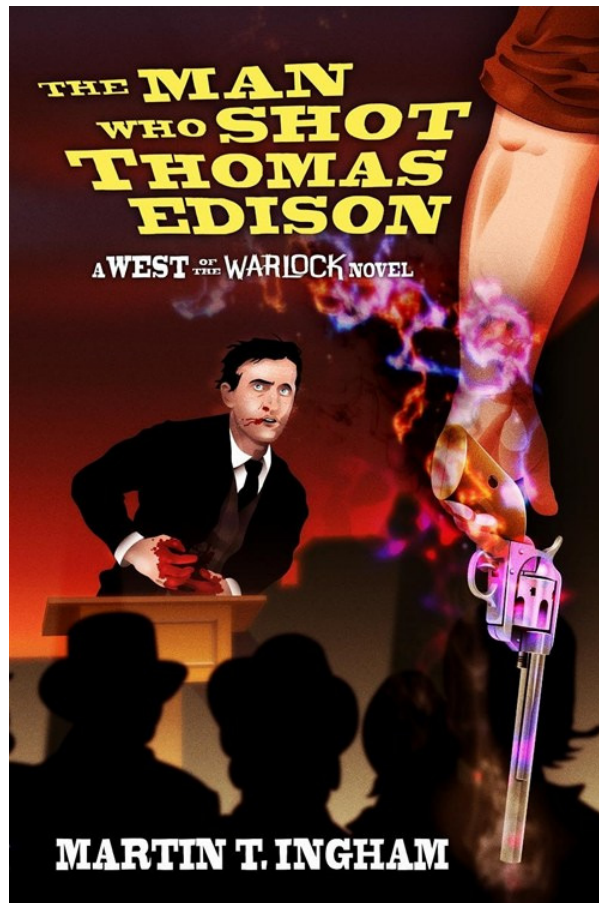
"This is the purpose of my work; to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and invent devices that are built on sound principles that improve society. I seek to revolutionize the world with the truth of real science, not flighty mysticism."

The crowd came alive with applause, clearly impressed with Edison's speech. The heckler had been thoroughly trounced in the war of words.

Edison stood there in front of the podium, looking smug and satisfied for a few moments before a sudden spasm struck him. His back arched, and he fell over onto his side, drawing the attention of his loyal employees. The cheers and clapping from the crowd ceased, as they saw the great inventor lying on the stage.

Ron Grimes made his way onto the stage and hurried over to the limp body. Checking him over along with the worried employees, he quickly discovered why the inventor had collapsed.

"Somebody, get a doctor," Ron shouted at the crowd. "Thomas Edison's just been shot!"



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