



# THE SIXTH GUN

## VOLUME ONE



CULLEN BUNN + BRIAN HURTT + BILL CRABTREE













# THE SIXTH GUN™

## VOLUME ONE

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# FOREWORD BY JOHN LAYMAN

It happens every couple of years, without fail, and I don't know why.

*The Fifth Element* is playing on TV on some movie channel and I decide to watch it again. I don't know why, but I have fond memories of that movie, even though I hate it. And after a long enough period passes I think maybe I didn't give the movie enough of a chance, I forget the stuff I hated and I remember some bits I liked and I give it another viewing.

AND I FREAKING HATE IT ALL OVER AGAIN!!! Not only do I hate it, but I spend the next several weeks hating myself for re-watching it, and punching myself in the stupid brain for misremembering how badly the movie sucked. The humor grates, the pacing is wonky, and it's not just flawed at its core but fundamentally, insultingly stupid. Chris Tucker makes me want to stab my ears with a fork (and I *like* Chris Tucker). Seriously, I can't STAND that movie. At least, until a couple years pass and I forget and the whole sad cycle repeats itself.

*The Fifth Element* is the worst-case scenario, but Indiana Jones is like that for me, too. Everybody knows the fourth movie is a steaming pile of horse plop. That's beyond dispute. The franchise is better off forgetting it ever existed, and just pretending Indiana Jones is a trilogy, ending with *The Last Crusade*.

*The Crystal Skull* gets the bad rap it deserves, but people give a pass to *Temple of Doom*, which is also very much a lousy movie. There is a pattern to *Temple of Doom*, where every clunky joke gets repeated, and then gets repeated one more time than is funny. Once you clue into the pattern it's impossible to watch the movie and not get annoyed, and then the annoyance turns to anger (or in my case, rage). But *Temple of Doom* has a lot of cool stuff, and you end up overlooking the lousiness—and trust me, the overall amount of lousiness in that movie far outweighs the good—and remembering the movie as far better than it is.\*

This is sorta a long-winded way to get to two points I'm trying to make here. The first is that *The Sixth Gun* is awesome. For me, it's the inverse to *The Fifth Element*, because I *know* it's awesome, but when I haven't read it for a while I forget exactly how awesome it is.

How awesome is it? ABSOLUTELY AND COMPLETELY AWESOME.

Comic books tend to pile up in the hell-pit that is my office, no matter how much I try otherwise. Reading a book regularly for me means letting several issues pile up, or even having a stack I haven't got around to reading and then I notice the trade has come out, and I end up buying the trade even though I haven't read the issues.

So I read *The Sixth Gun* every couple months, and—even though I know it's going to be good—I'm floored by it. Absolutely beside myself with amazement. I can remember the first time reading the volume one trade (and if this is *your* first time I'm envious of you!). I loved it so much I couldn't wait to *re-read* it, even as I was reading it.

The action, man! I think *The Sixth Gun* is the only comic that's ever left me breathless with excitement, watching some of the action sequences explode off the pages. That giant bird-creature in the canyon, descending on the General's men! The underground mine collapsing! Brian Hurtt does the best action I've ever seen in a comic, and maybe some of the best action I've *ever* seen, period.

Pretty excellent character design as well, with every character and every oddball villain absolutely unique and memorable.

Of course, Mr. Cullen Bunn helps make these characters and their situations unforgettable, and I first became friends with, and rapidly fell in love with, every one of his characters. Even the nasty ol' General Hume and his wife Missy. Billjohn is my favorite, and I still get all misty when—oh wait... some of you haven't read this, perhaps. No spoilers here!

\*For the record, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *The Last Crusade* are both pretty damn good, and exactly what ALL the Indiana Jones movies *should* have been.



The coloring is top-notch. Hats off to Bill Crabtree. And, as a letterer myself who hates almost all lettering but my own, the lettering is pretty aces too. Good job, Hurtt, Sherwood and Brisson!

My point? My point is that I love *The Sixth Gun*. Every little bit. But each time I read it it's like a part of me forgot how much I love it, and then I feel guilty for not loving it enough. Because there are no superlatives in my brain that can impress upon you just how very, very good this book is. I think maybe it overloads my brain with its awesomeness to the point I can't process it, like *The Fifth Element* does with its crappiness. Every re-read is an act of rediscovery, and somehow with *The Sixth Gun* I walk away a little more amazed each time, because it's always a little further into the saga, and it never slips or sags or becomes anything less than great.

I have not met anybody who's read *The Sixth Gun* who does not feel the same way.

My second point is this: there's a thing called the elevator pitch, where you try to sum up what your comic (or movie, or tv show, etc.) is about in more or less a sentence, in case you run into some high-powered Hollywood executive on an elevator, and have 15 seconds to convince him to buy your pitch. It took me *years* to come up with the right one for my own creator-owned book, *Chew*. But for me, *The Sixth Gun* is a no-brainer.

I love *The Sixth Gun*. Whenever I'm asked what my favorite comics I'm reading are, *The Sixth Gun* is at the very top of the list. Like *Locke & Key*, and now *Manhattan Projects*, two of my other supreme favorites, I evangelize it whenever and wherever I can.

And then, when I'm asked to describe *The Sixth Gun*, I tell people this:

**"It's Indiana Jones, if Indiana Jones never sucked."**

Because everybody knows Indiana Jones has moments (or entire movies!) of pure suckage. The argument, perhaps, is the degree of suckage.

Not *The Sixth Gun*.

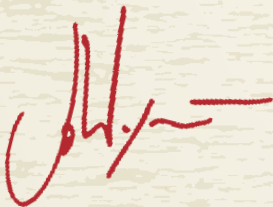
Imagine Indiana Jones, all the high adventure, pulpy thrills, action, the peppering of romance, the ol' timey period settings, dastardly baddies, and of course the gunplay, fights, narrow escapes and eerie occultism—imagine if it was *non-stop* awesome, firing on all cylinders at all times, with not a false note or a single misstep.

That's *The Sixth Gun*. And they've been doing it for 30-something issues now.

And that's my elevator pitch for it.

Followed quickly by: "It's freakin' great!"

Enough blather. Ladies and gentlemen, turn the page. Get yourself to the awesome.



—John Layman, writer and letterer of *Chew* and other comics, Twitter revolutionary, cat lover, Lego builder, *World of Warcraft* warlock, and Prince of Sadness.

@themightylayman / chewcomic.com

Summer, 2013.

(Please take this foreword with a grain of salt. Layman's favorite movie is *Titanic*. But his love for *Titanic* does not make *The Sixth Gun* any less awesome.)

[Editor's note: John Layman's sentiments do not reflect the opinions of the entire team of *The Sixth Gun* on the subject of *The Fifth Element*. Brian Hurtt and Layman are free as haters to be as wrongheaded as they like while some of us enjoy the Moebius and Jean Paul Gautier designed stylings of Luc Besson's bizarro French sci-fi aka the closest we'll get to *The Incal* movie. We can all, however, agree upon the dubiousness of *The Crystal Skull*.]





# CHAPTER ONE









Among those who know the truth of things, it is widely understood that the *Sixth Gun* vanished after the War.



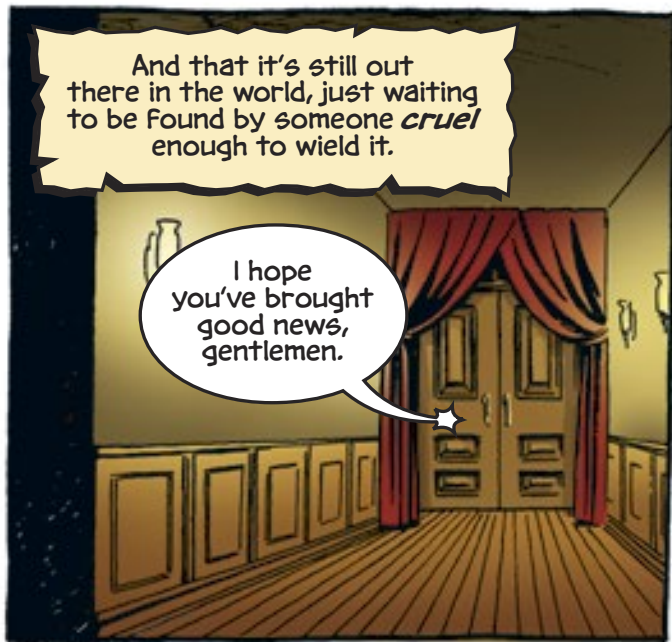
Some believe it was shattered to bits when General Oliander Bedford Hume was killed during the Razing of Devil's Forks.



Others believe something as *vile* as the gun couldn't ever be destroyed.

They say not even Hell would take the weapon back...



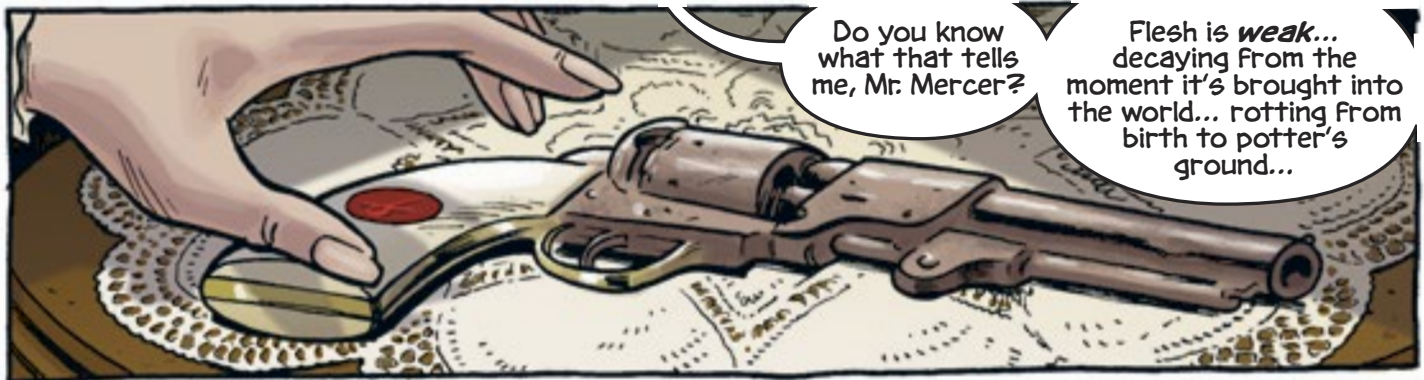






"Likewise, the *Tarot de Lamarliere* lived up to the rumors of its properties.

"Although my men were less inclined to take any chances with the old sorcerer."



Do you know what that tells me, Mr. Mercer?

Flesh is *weak*... decaying from the moment it's brought into the world... rotting from birth to potter's ground...



But *objects*... like the lantern and the cards... like *this* gun...



Well... they're just made to last, aren't they?



This should serve to illuminate, then, just how important it is to find my husband... not to mention his property... before it's too late.

And we've lost so much time already.



Of course, Mrs. Hume.

That's why I set my people about consulting the oracles as soon as we uncovered them.

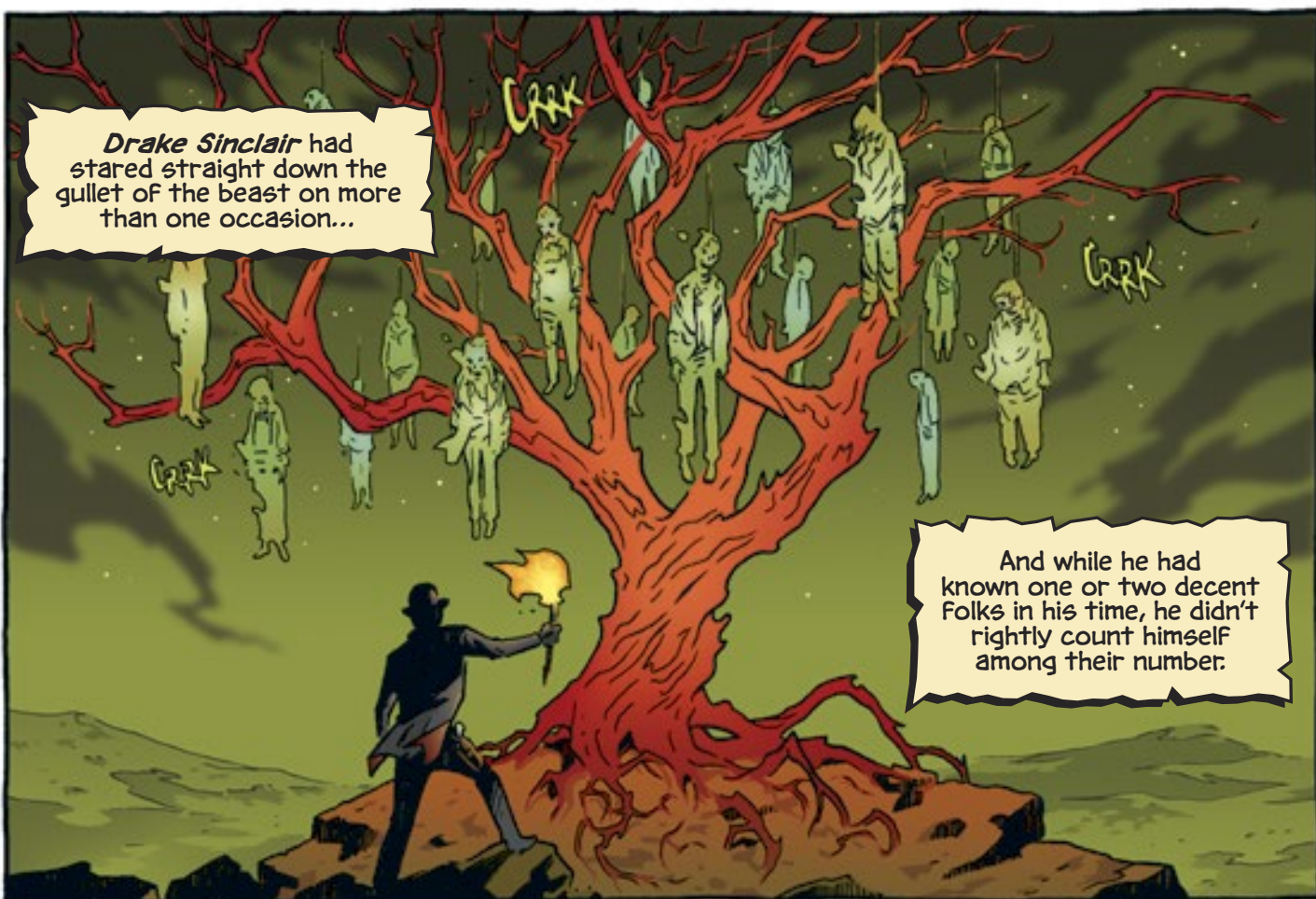
I believe you'll be *delighted* by what we found.



Oh, yes... This is indeed most *exciting*...

Although it appears I'll have further need of your services.





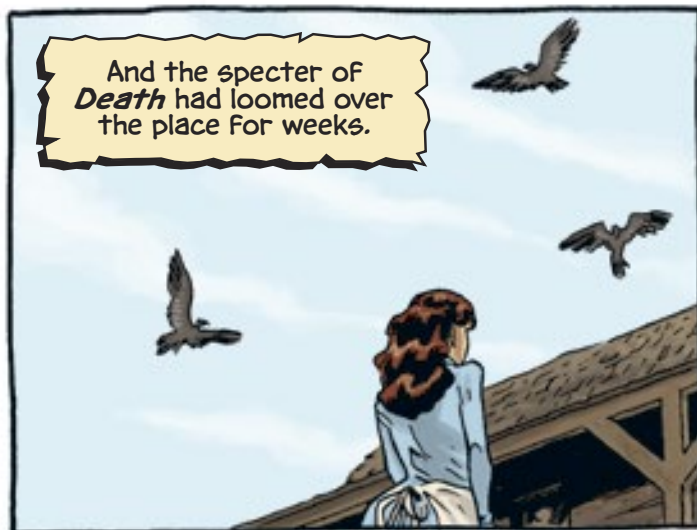




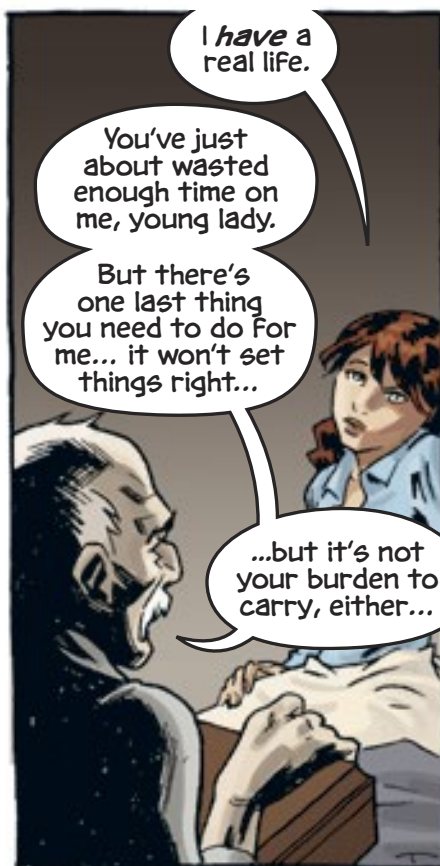
























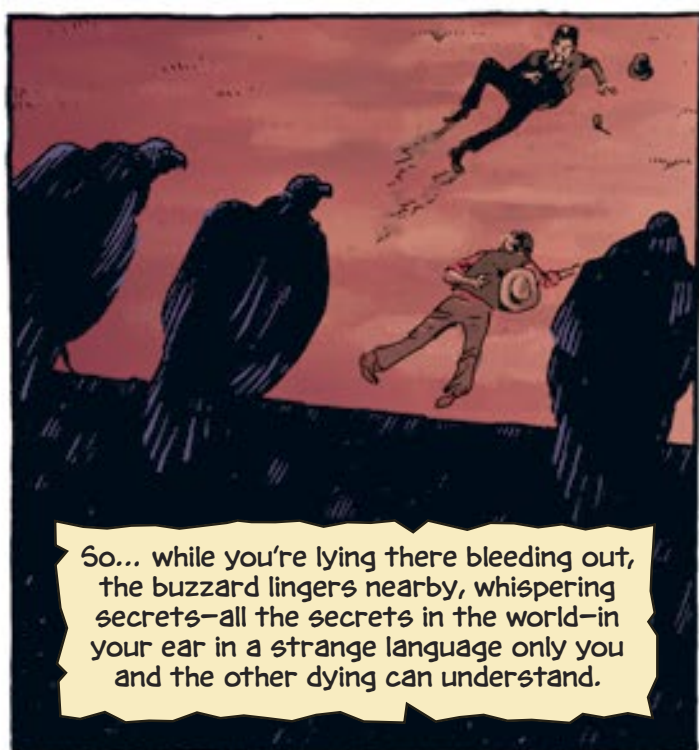








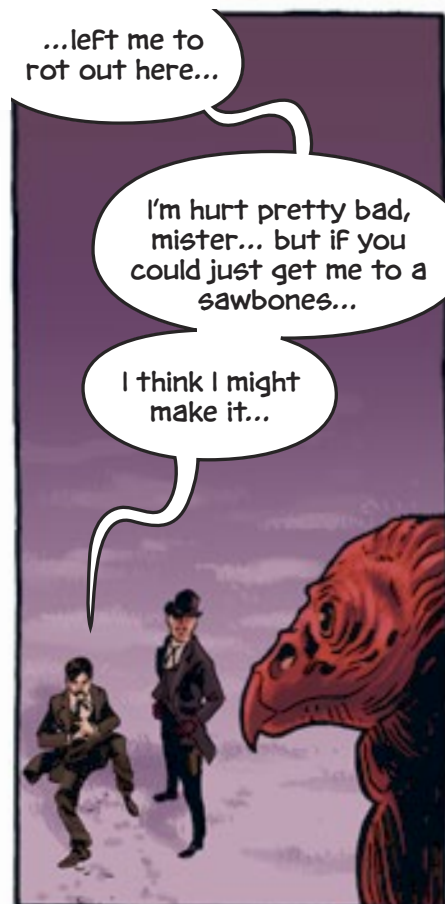
















































## CHAPTER Two











Silas "Bitter Ridge" Hedgepeth wasn't the deadliest shot among the general's riders.

But he had murdered more than his fair share of women and men.

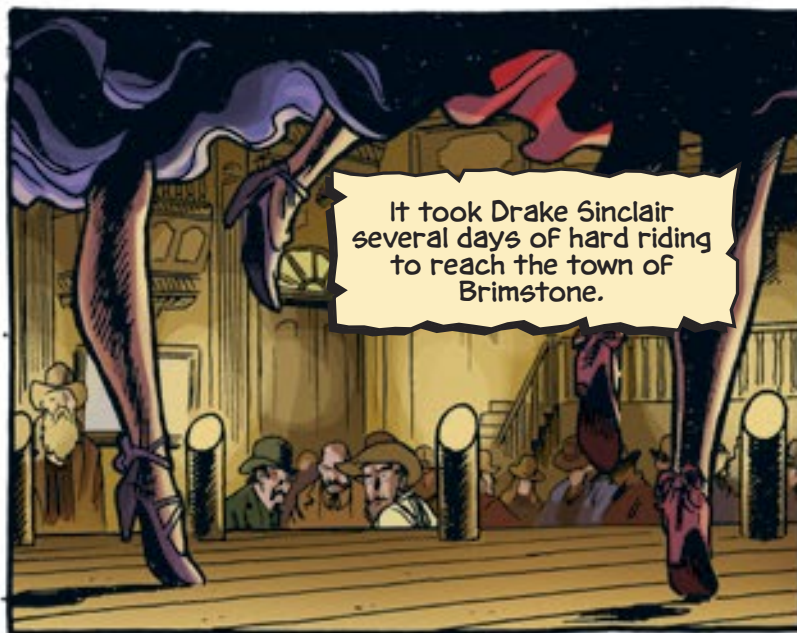
And once he had gunned them down...

...he could call them back up again.





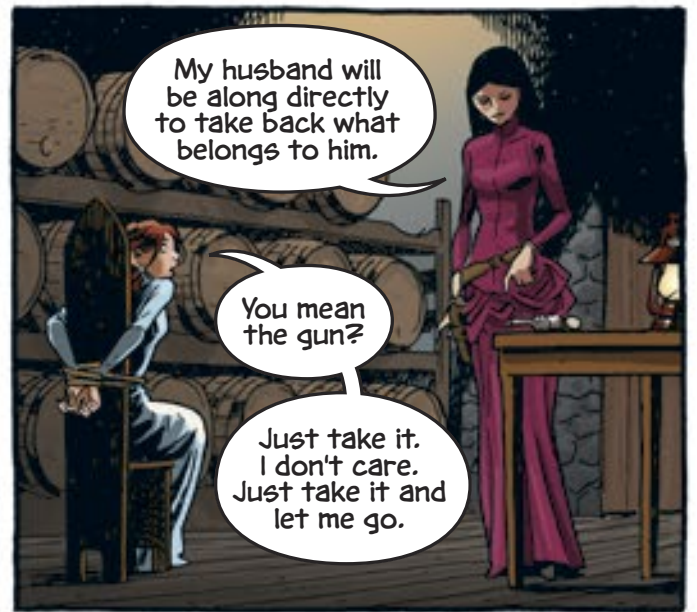




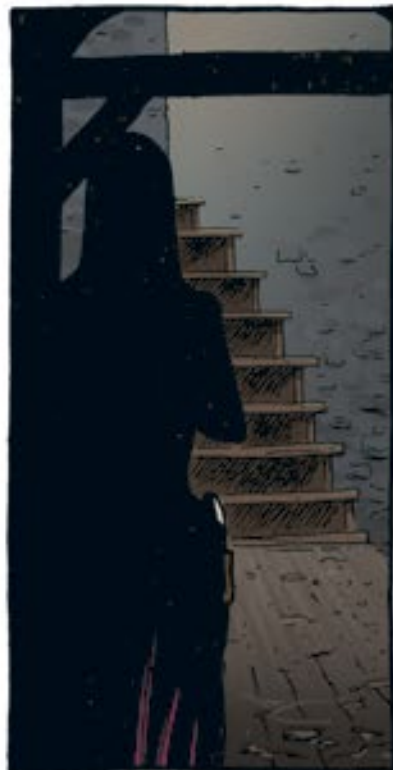




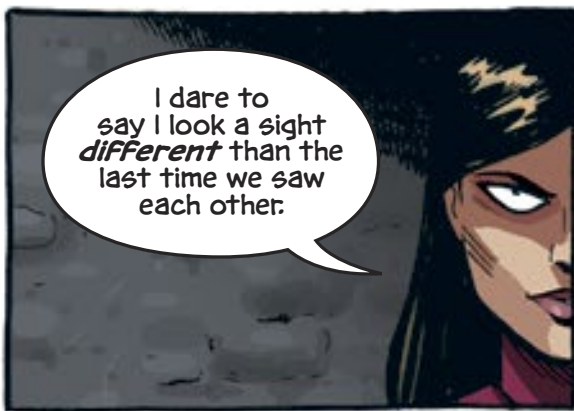




















W-Who are you?

What do you want?



Don't worry about that right now.

First things first, let's get you out of here. I doubt it'll be long before someone comes to check on you.



The gun... it's yours?

N-no... I... I don't want it.

Did you touch it?

Y-yes, but—



Pick it up.

I don't want to. I don't want anything to do with it. There's something... *wrong* with it. It isn't natural.



There's not a gun in this world that's *natural*...

...and I don't recall saying you had a whole lot of choice.



Oh...

















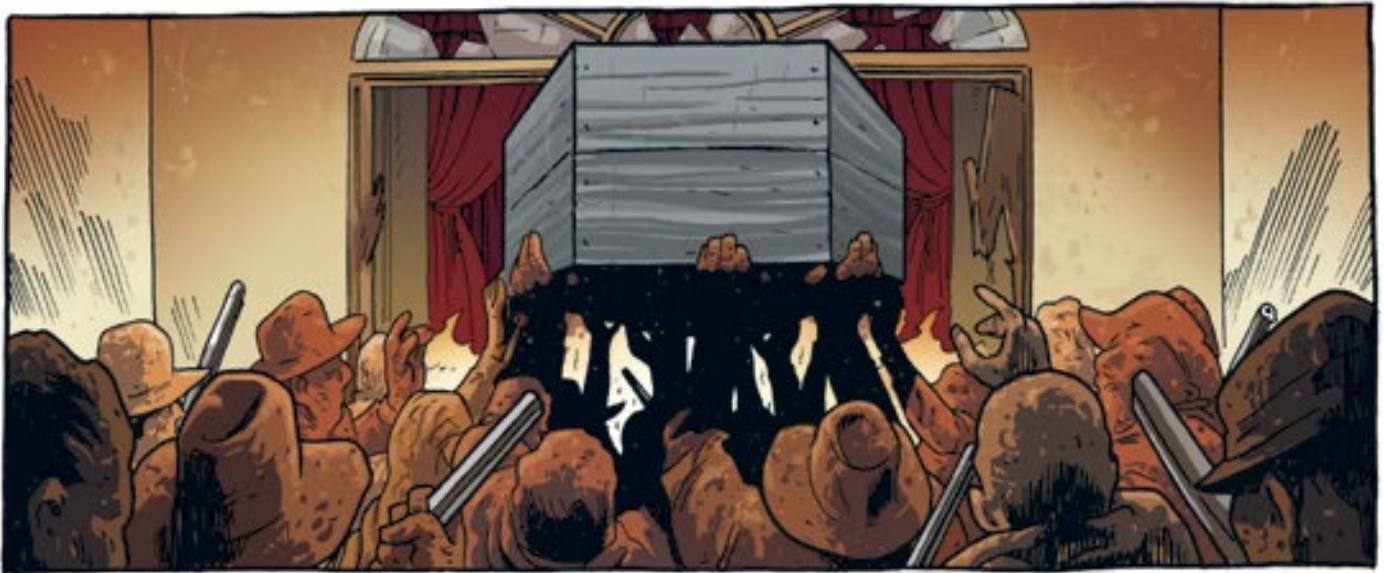












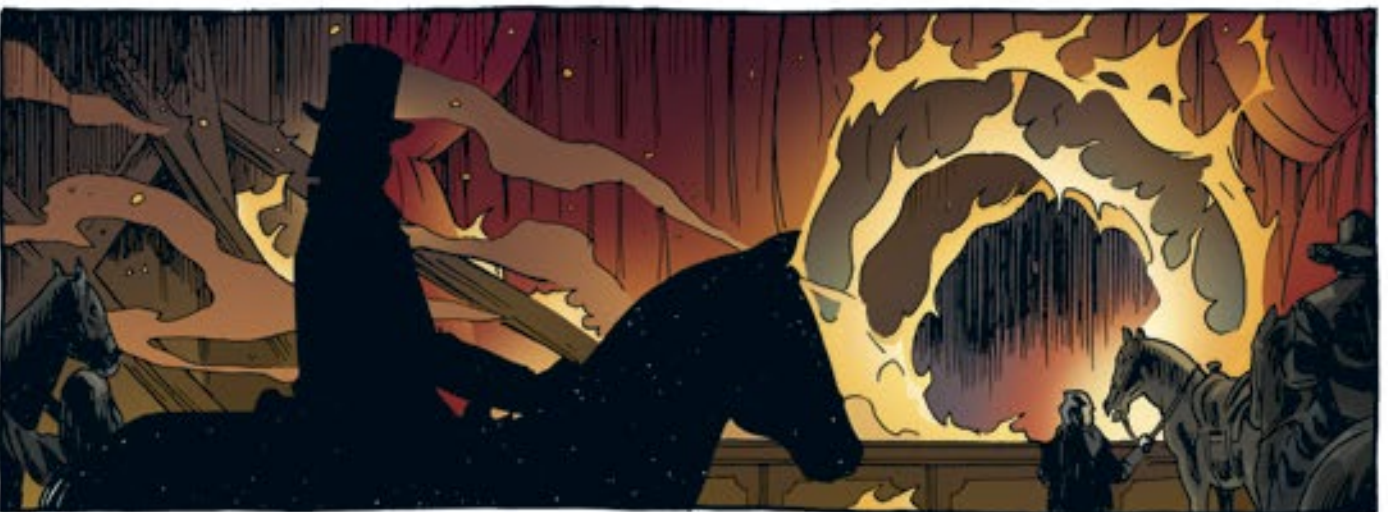
























## CHAPTER THREE





























"...and he knows it."



It's not that I'm not thankful for your help, but I deserve some answers at the very least.

Sooner or later you have to tell me what's going on.



Reckon she's got a point, Drake.

I suppose so.



I'm not some child who needs to be sheltered.

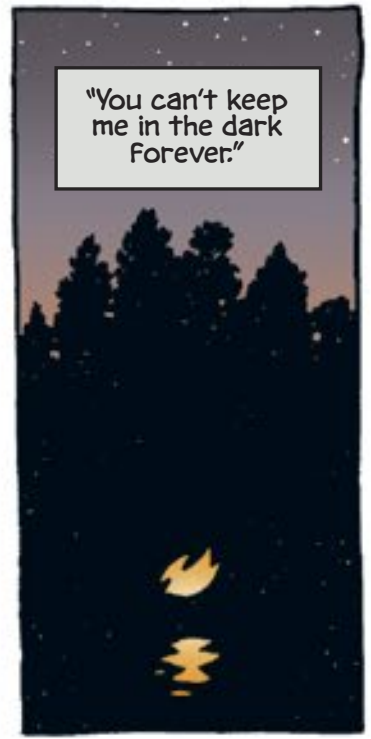
I haven't been that little girl for a long time.



Heh.

All right. Have a seat and I'll tell you what I can.







"Oliandar Bedford Hume was one of the most feared... and the most *reviled* generals of the Confederacy.

"He was a brilliant strategist, leading his troops to victory after victory. It was said that if you followed Hume, you followed him to glory.

"But he was also a bloodthirsty madman...

"...the kind of man who inspired all manner of dark rumors and god-awful stories.

"Only, no matter how awful the stories were, the *truth* was far more frightening.

"Hume gathered the worst of the worst into his service—men who shared his bloodlust and his cruelty; men who wouldn't bat an eye at the General's foul plans."

What about the guns?

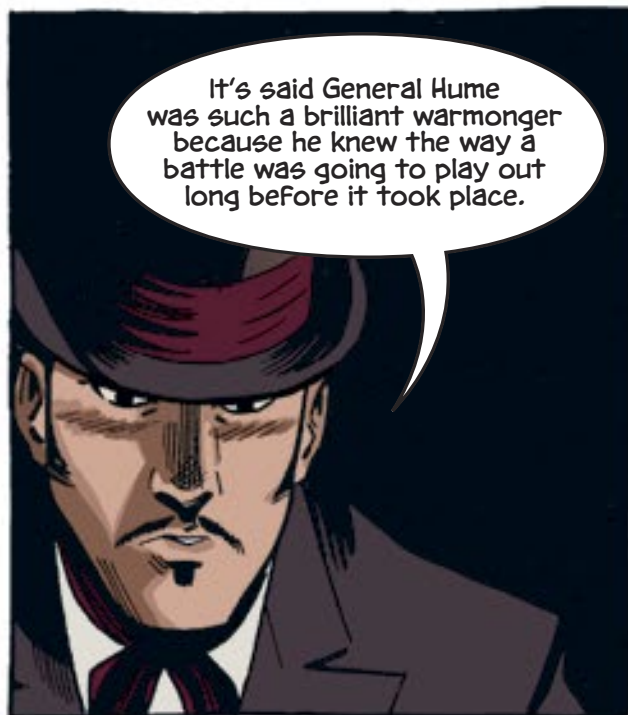
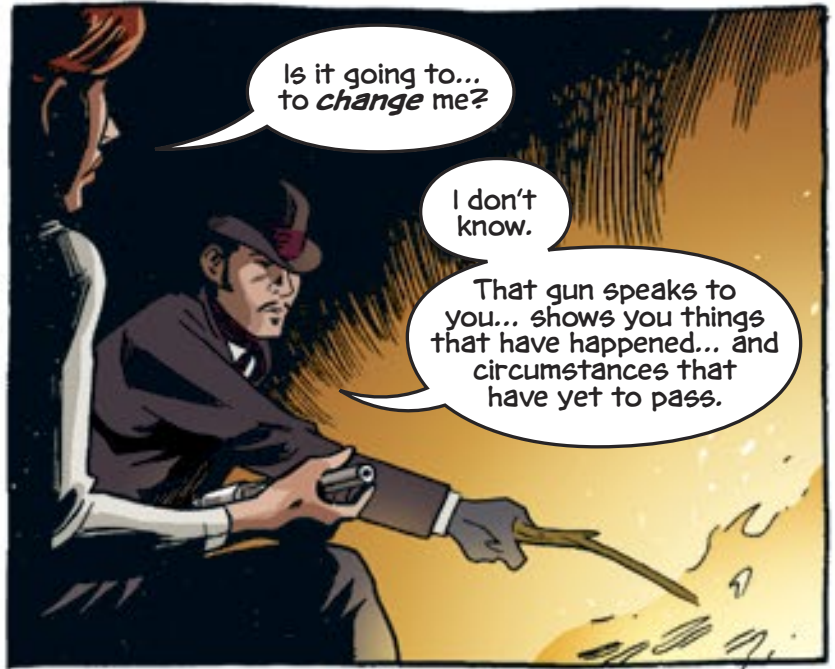
I don't know if anyone other than the General himself knows where the guns came from.

Some say he conjured them up using sorcery. Others say he found them in some forgotten ruin.











"There was a man, though, who recognized General Hume for the monster he was..."

"...recognized him as a beast that needed to be put down before he achieved whatever the Hell it was he wanted.

"He rallied what few like-minded souls he could find, and they struck when the General was ill-prepared and caught off guard.

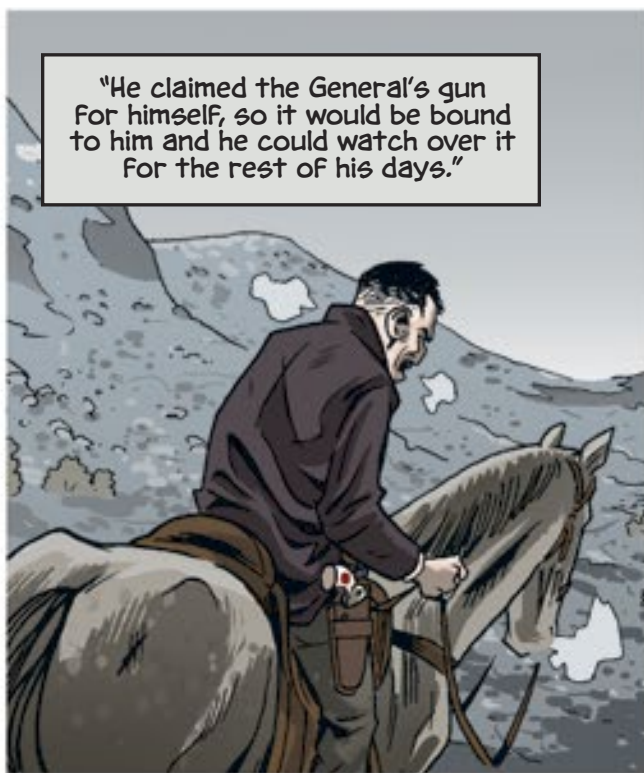
"Even then, almost every man who attacked the General died on that day.



"He knew the General might rise again, so he secreted the body on *holy ground*.



"He claimed the General's gun for himself, so it would be bound to him and he could watch over it for the rest of his days."



He changed his name, I suppose, from VonAllen to Montcrief, so the General's agents would have a harder time tracking him.

He found himself a family, took up with a lonely widow and her daughter.

Pa...

You'd best get some rest.



"Tomorrow's going to be a long day."







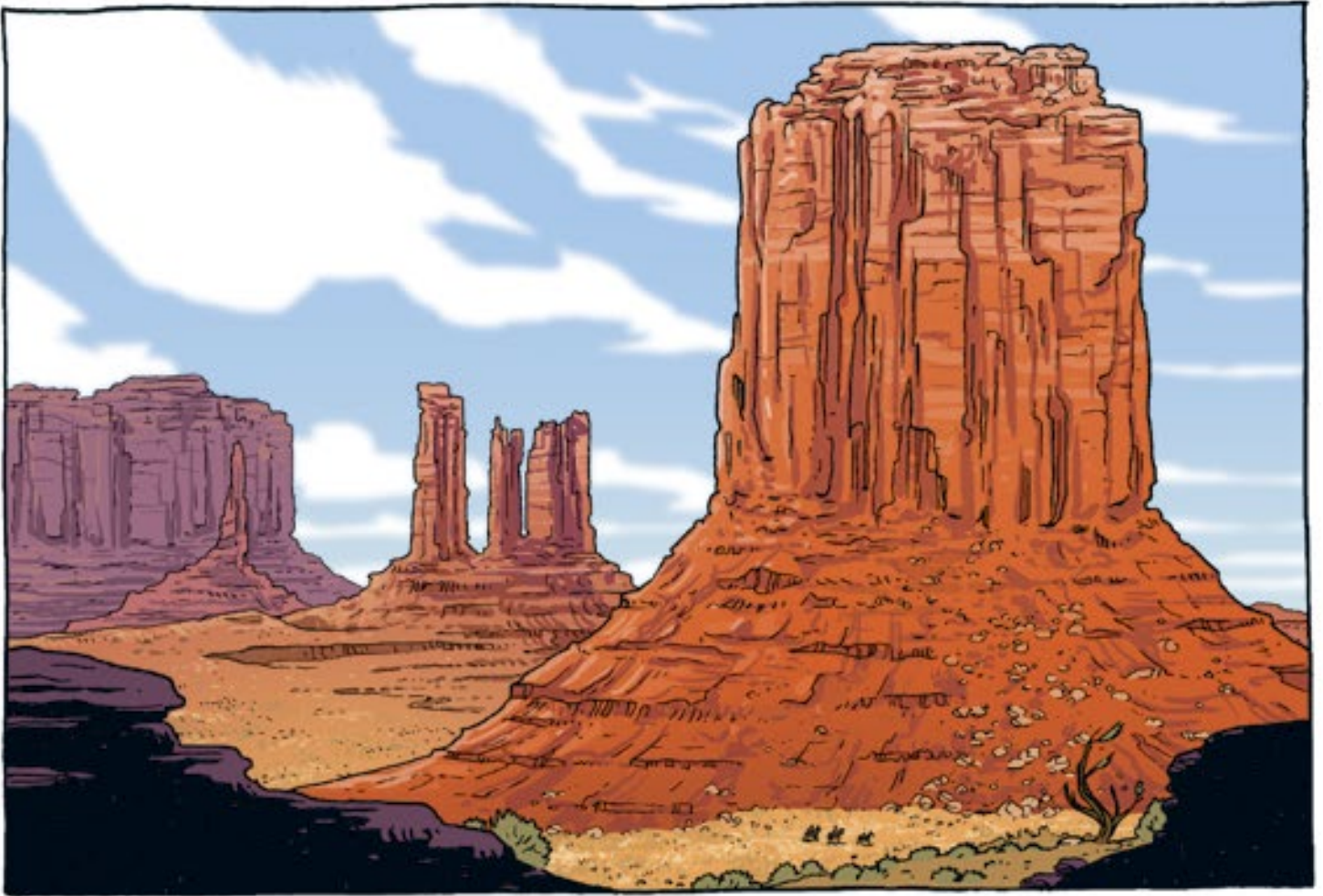














































Predator and prey...

...that's the natural  
order of things...

...but only the brave or  
the foolhardy dare tramp  
upon *Forbidden* paths  
lest they wake something  
best left undisturbed.

And any *predator*—don't  
matter how cunning, devious, or  
lethal—might find himself *prey*  
for the beast on a night when  
an unkind thunder roars.





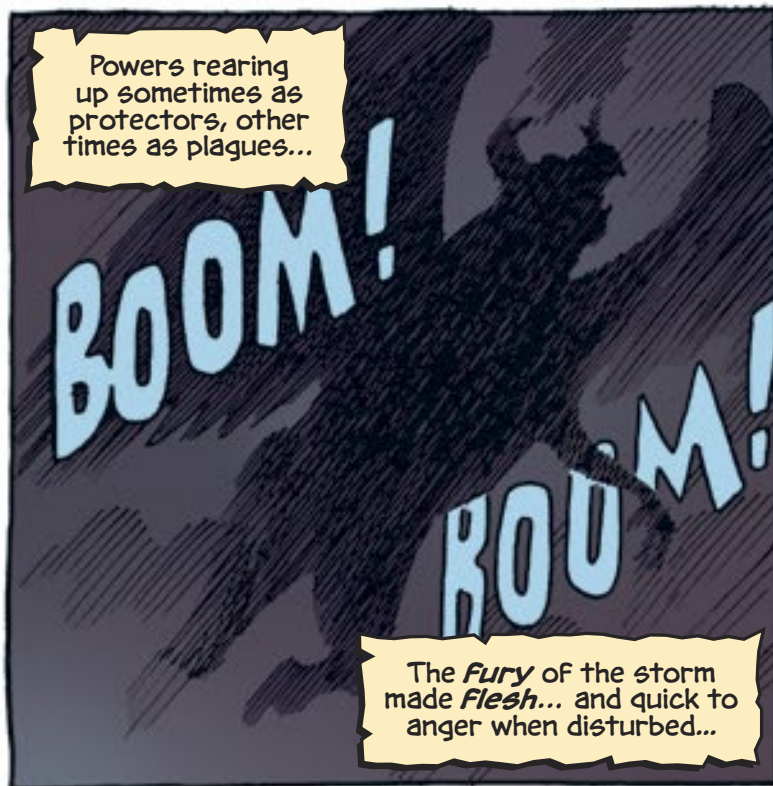


## CHAPTER FOUR









































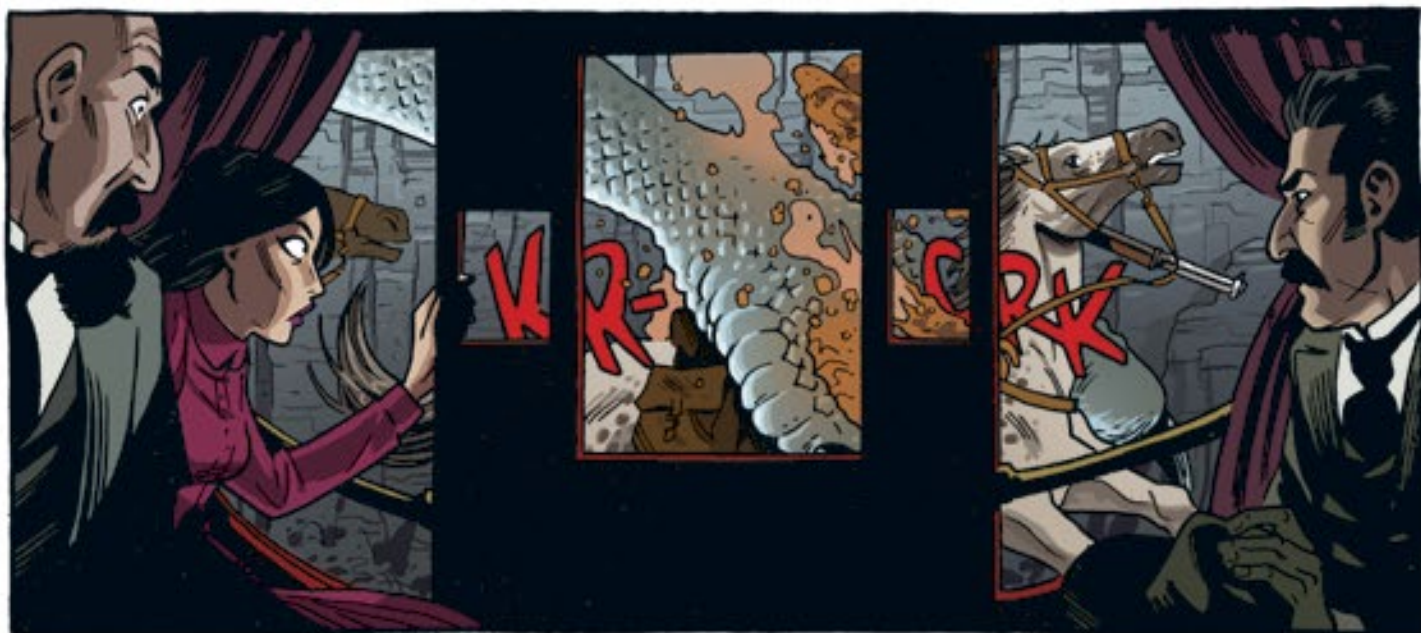




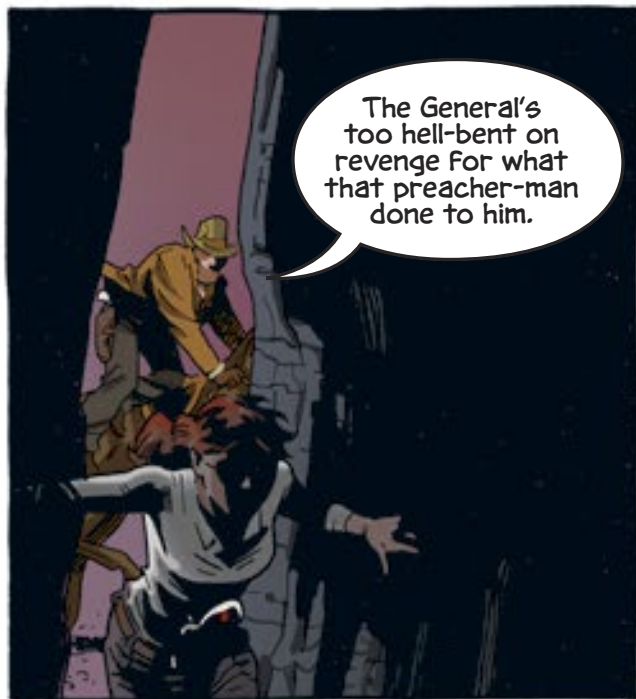








































Over here, you  
witless overgrown  
*buzzard!*

I led these  
men through your  
lands! I'm the one  
you want!





















"And he asked us to take up new arms for his cause."



"For the first time in my military career, I *hesitated*."

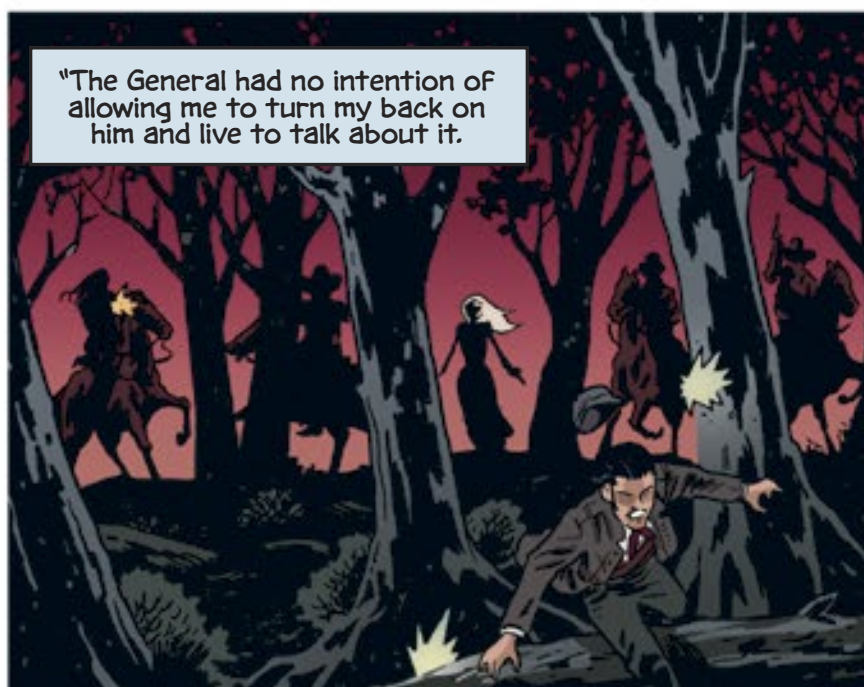


"I knew there was something... wrong with those guns..."

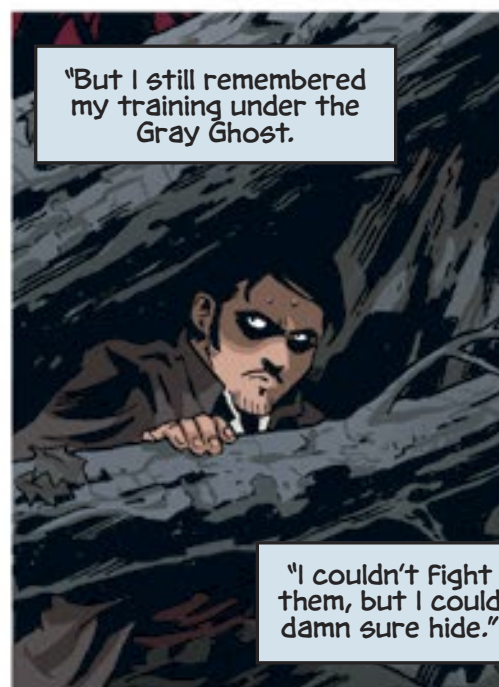
"As awful a man as I was, I couldn't bring myself to take up something of such pure *evil*."



"So, the General found someone to take my place."



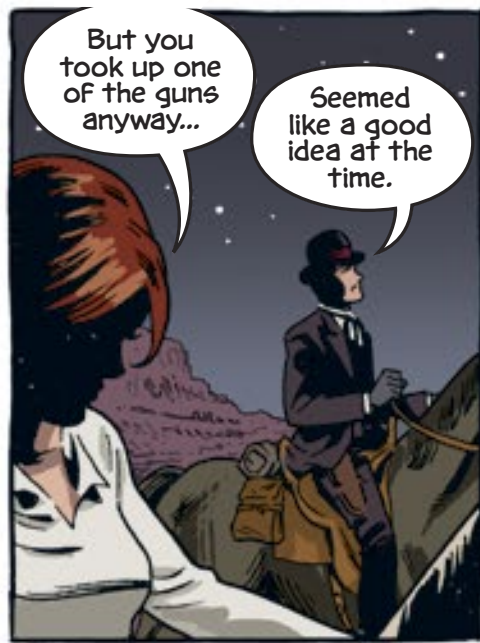
"The General had no intention of allowing me to turn my back on him and live to talk about it."



"But I still remembered my training under the Gray Ghost."

"I couldn't fight them, but I could damn sure hide."









## CHAPTER FIVE









The Maw.



While few had ever seen the place, the legends grew—as legends are likely to do—even though most folks spoke of it only in whispers if at all...

For if the Maw existed in anything other than the yarns of old thieves and killers, it must surely be a snake pit of misfortune and misery...



...and *death*.



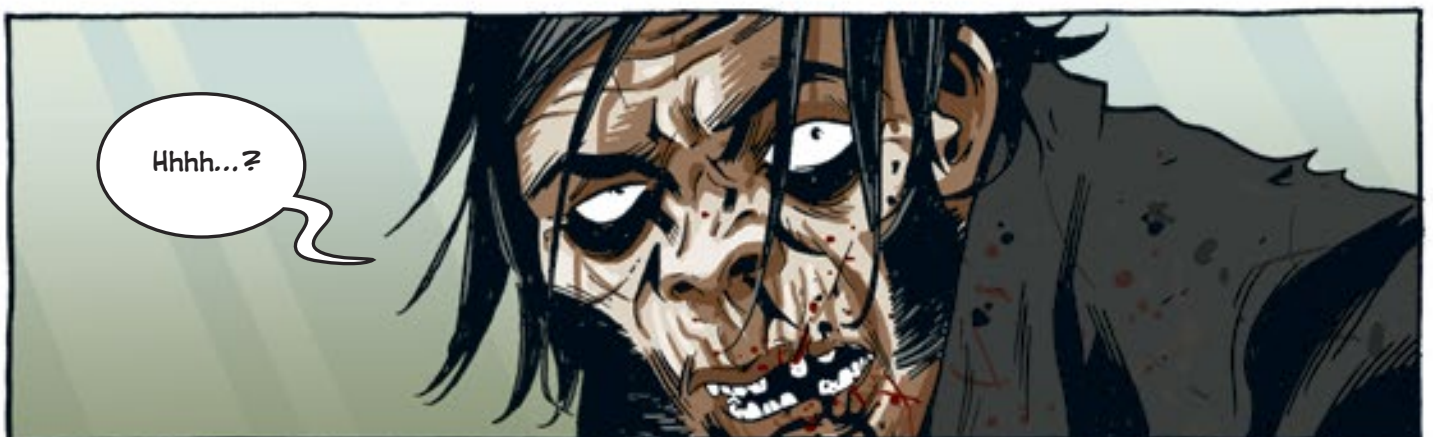
I *hate* this gun...







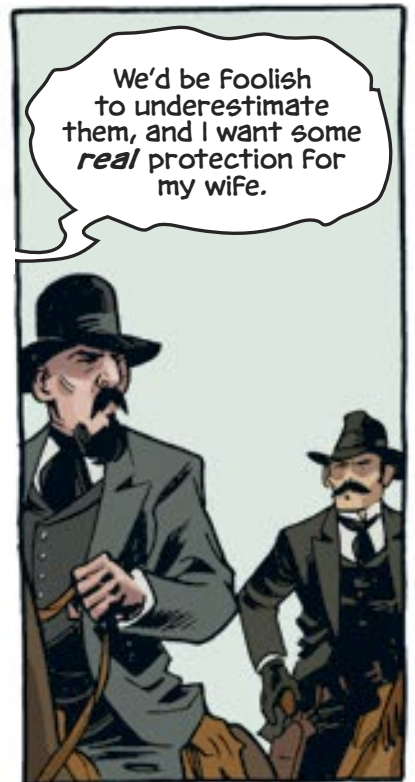












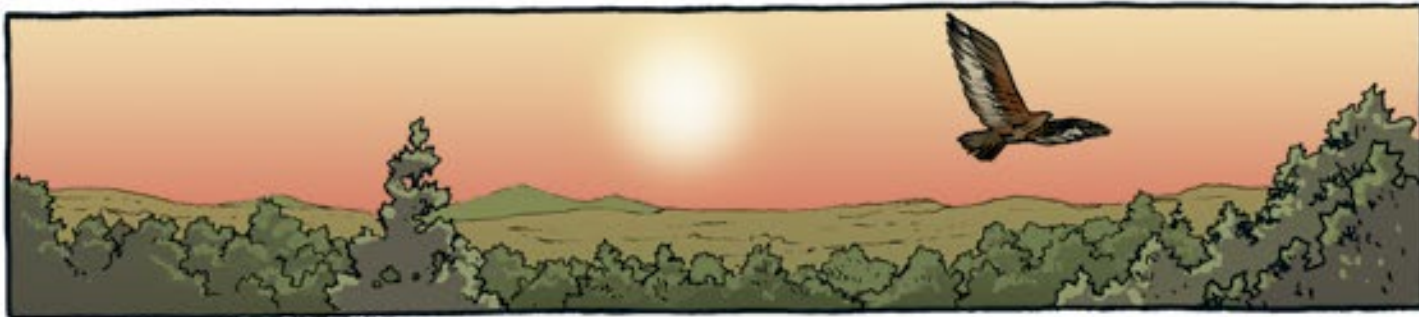
































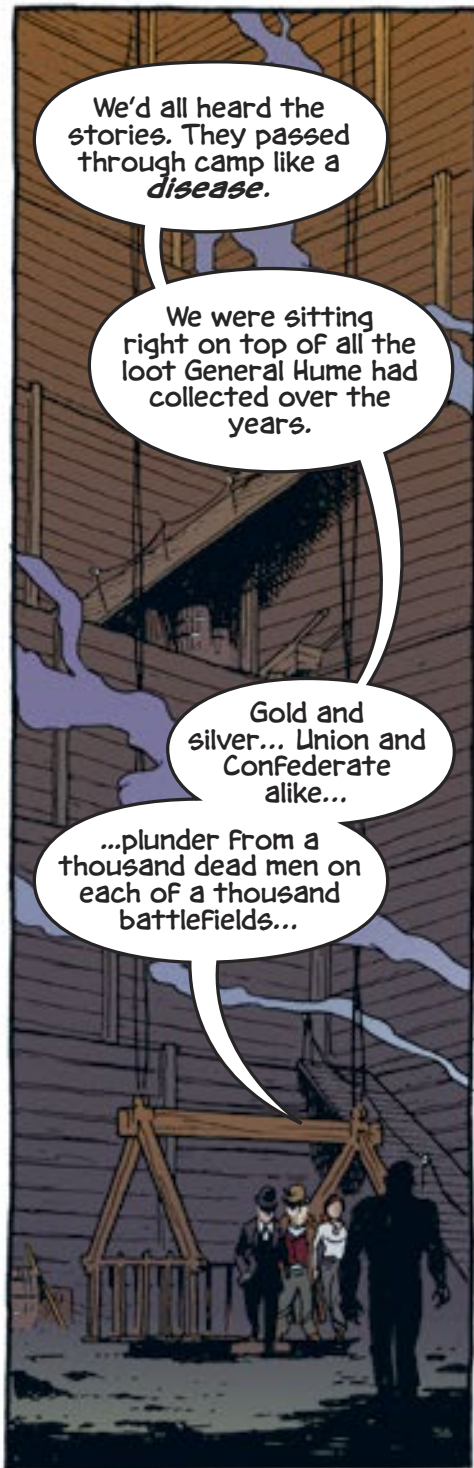










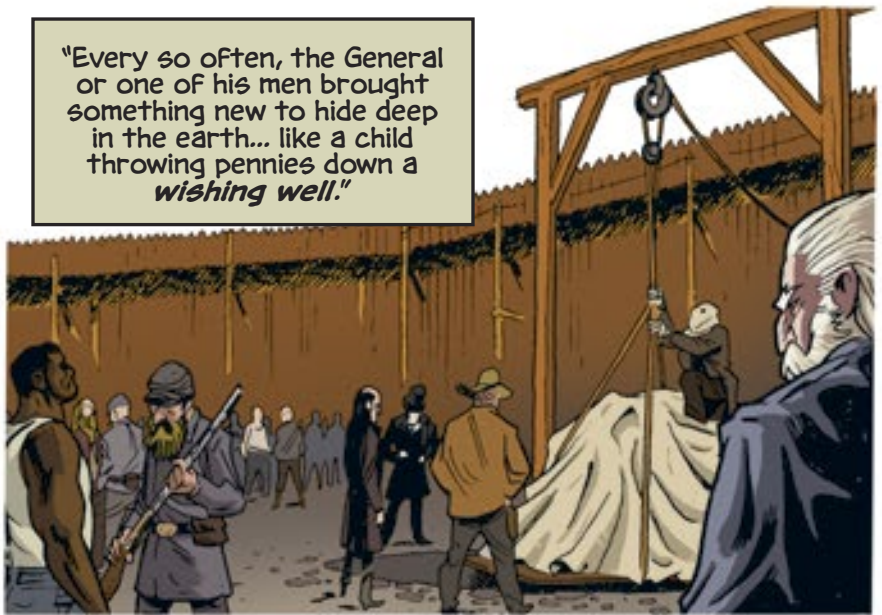


We'd all heard the stories. They passed through camp like a *disease*.

We were sitting right on top of all the loot General Hume had collected over the years.

Gold and silver... Union and Confederate alike...

...plunder from a thousand dead men on each of a thousand battlefields...



"Every so often, the General or one of his men brought something new to hide deep in the earth... like a child throwing pennies down a *wishing well*."



Even back in those days, there were plenty of plans to steal the treasure and make an escape.

But nobody ever made good on them.



"Then... 'round about the end of the war, I reckon... the General's well just collapsed in upon itself.

"And we never saw Hume again."



So we started to *dig*.

And *this* is what we found.



You might be interested in the vault's *locking mechanism*.

The guns...

You need all *six* of the guns to open the vault...













What did you see?



I don't know what's sealed away in that vault, Drake, but General Hume didn't put it there.

And... whatever it is... it's *awful*. I can *feel* it. The gun told me.



It was that gun that brought us here.

I was looking for the treasure... I was sent to you... and the gun led us to the Maw.



Did you ever stop to think that the General's definition of treasure—that the gun's definition of treasure—is different from yours?

We know next to nothing about the guns...

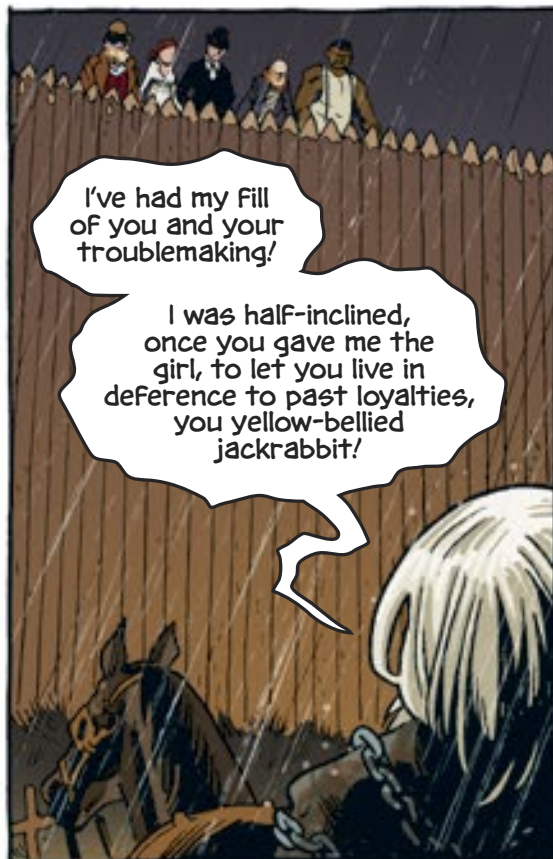
























## CHAPTER SIX







It was the *Sixth Gun* that brought Drake Sinclair to the Maw...

The gun with its promises of wealth...

...and it had *lied*.

It was only a gun, after all, and guns ain't known for the truth.

A gun only speaks of *death*.

And when you're *lost*... when you're *alone*... such words are cold comfort.

















Reinforcements  
are coming.



Becky got  
separated from us in  
the first salvo. We're  
not going anywhere  
without her.

Billjohn, you need  
to find her. Once you  
do, get her out of here.  
We can't risk that gun  
finding its way back to  
the General.



What  
about  
you?

I'm  
staying.

It was the promise  
of gold and silver  
that brought Drake  
to the Maw.



But there comes a  
time when a man has  
to choose between his  
*Fortune* and his *fate*.

The General and  
me have matters  
to discuss.





















Mrs. Hume...  
Where'd she  
go?

I don't know.  
She took off on her  
own like she was  
trying to lose us.

Ask me, she's  
more trouble than she's  
worth! Client or not, I  
hope she gets herself  
killed! But I doubt we'll  
be so lucky...

Grrrrkkk!



But their notion  
of chivalry-for-hire... their  
incessant coddling... only  
frustrates my efforts  
to finish this business  
once and for all...

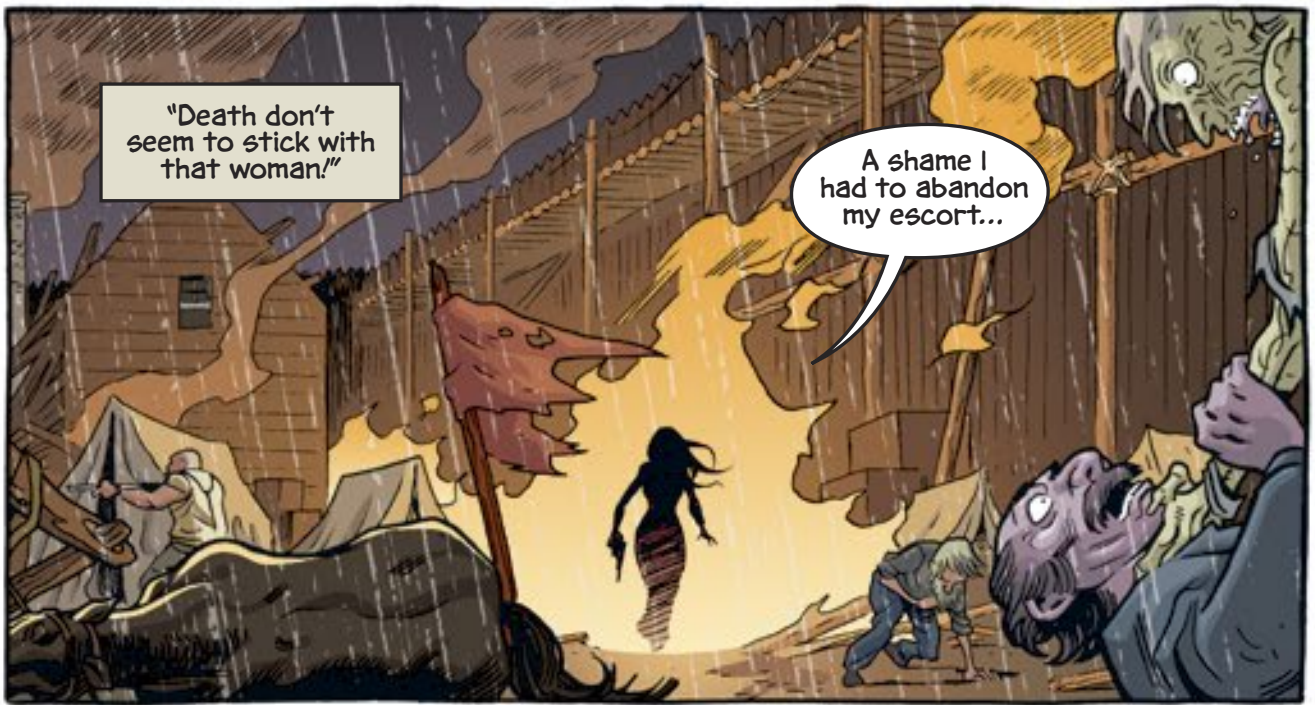
Besides, this  
is just between  
us women...



You little  
witch!



































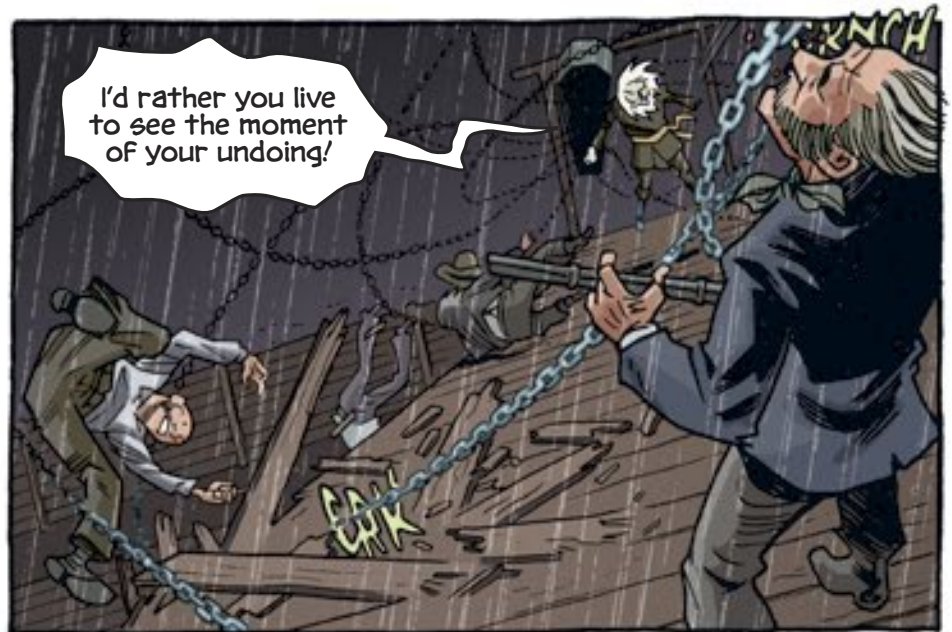




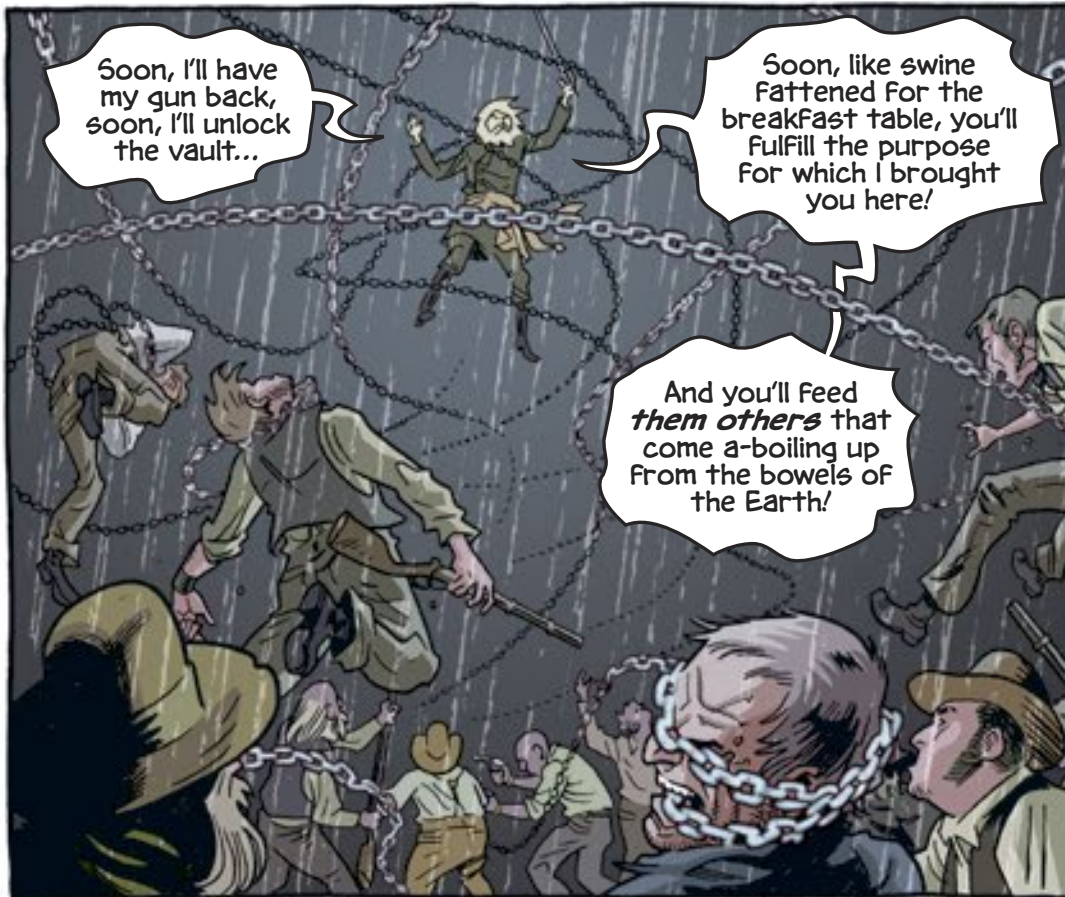




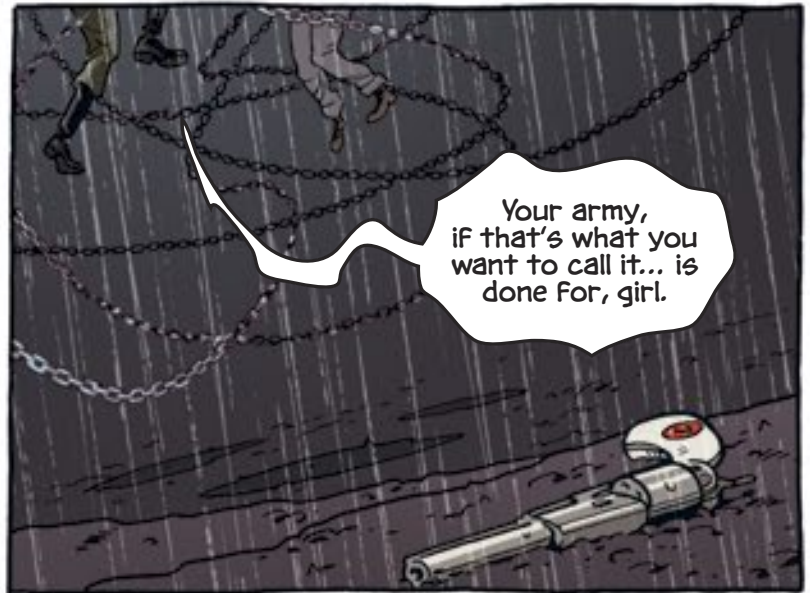






























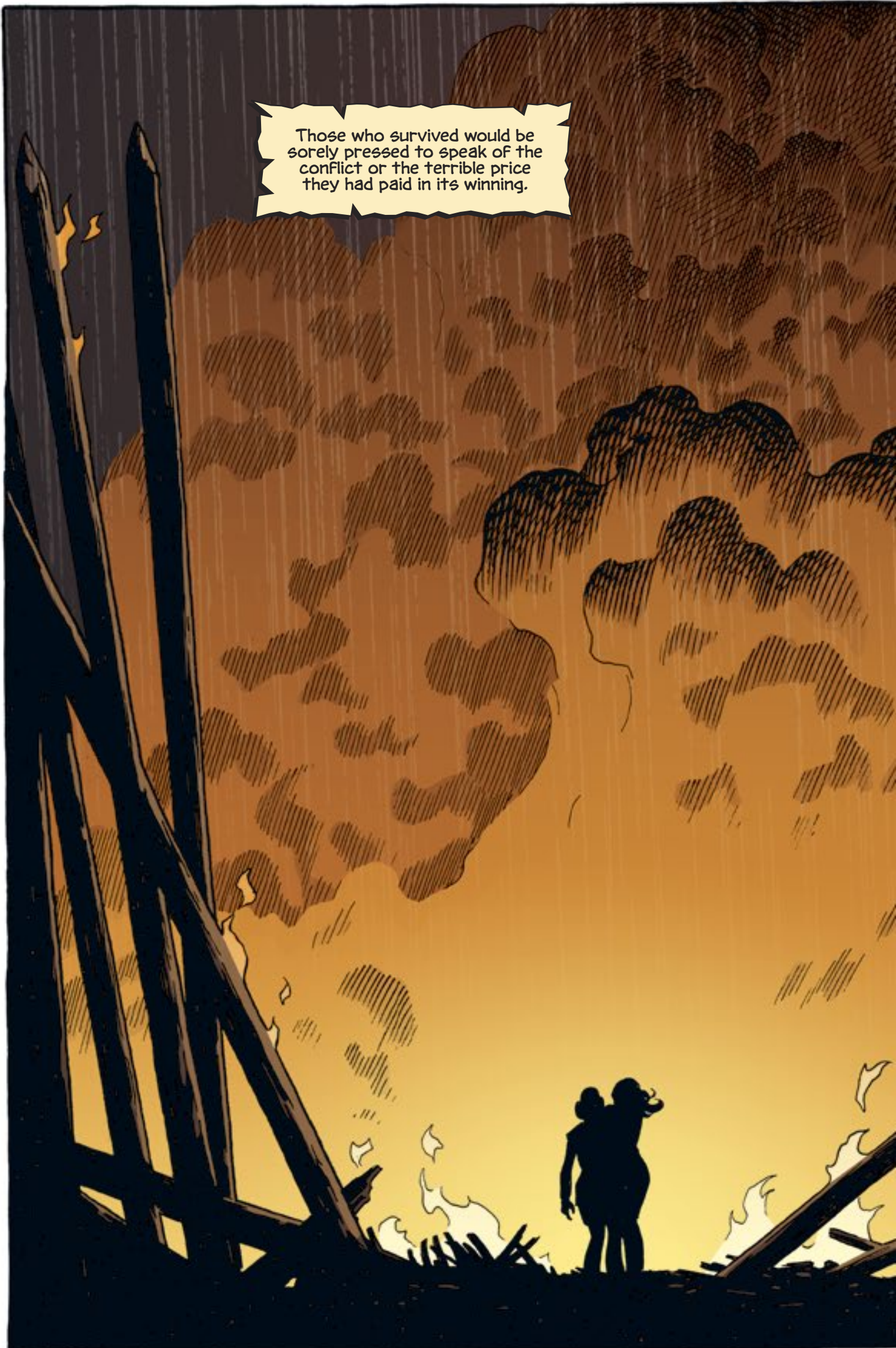








Those who survived would be  
sorely pressed to speak of the  
conflict or the terrible price  
they had paid in its winning.







And there was  
nary another witness  
to remember what  
had happened.



Nary a  
witness...

...except the  
buzzards.



## EPILOGUE















## CHAPTER SEVEN







Some time after the battle of the Maw, Drake Sinclair found himself in the Crescent City.

And it was there he hoped to find a way to break the supernatural ties that bound him to the four wretched pistols he had taken up in order to kill the undead General Hume.

But *misfortune* circled those weapons like carrion flies.

And even though Drake secreted his guns away... even though he no longer carried them at his hip... their foulness lingered with him.

The guns *haunted* him.

I ever tell you how much I hate this city?

Hell, there's money to be made here, that's for damn sure...

But there's always somebody waiting to slice your throat for it, too.

"Laissez les bon temps rouler..."

Might be a nice sentiment if the bad times weren't always nipping after the good.

You remember the time we had to shoot our way out of that Gellatin Street saloon...

...all on account of some fever dream Gutshot O'Toole had about Lafitte's gold?





















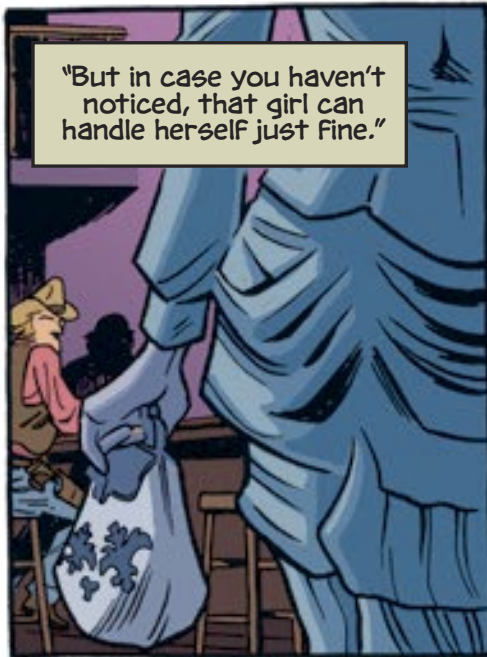
















"I figured a little *company* is just what you need to take your mind off him for a bit."

























It's been said the only thing darker than a cypress swamp is the Devil's soul.



And even the ghost-lights that dance over the deepest parts of the bog do little to pierce the shadows.



Those shadows can drown a man as sure as marsh water.



Those shadows can poison a man's blood as sure as a cottonmouth's bite.





Drake had passed through more than one Devil's Crossroads...



...a place where the footpaths of the dead and the damned had worn a hole straight through to the spirit world...



...and he knew to tread carefully lest he lose his way and become lost forever among the wayward souls.



Might as well come on out.

If we're going to *bargain*, it might as well be face-to-face.



Most mortals hold their tongue around me...



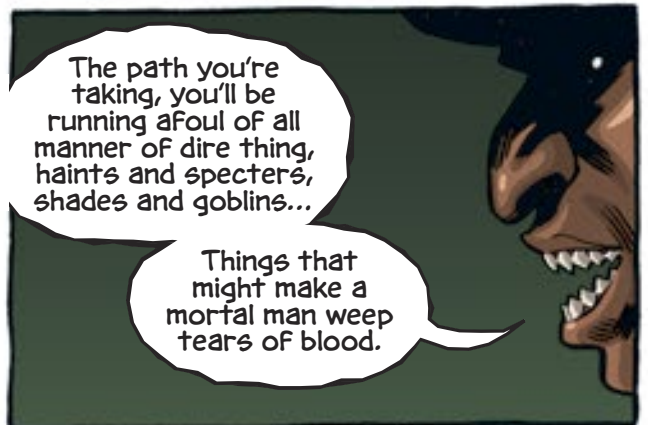
Don't mean to be rude, but I don't have much time for games.

Otherwise, I might have searched for a way to avoid you altogether.



That might have been wise...

























## CHAPTER EIGHT







Drake Sinclair had come to Louisiana in search of *bad sorts*...

Men and women who bartered in forbidden knowledge and the blackest sorceries.

Among their number—*Henri Fournier*, a man who dealt in strange antiquities the way an undertaker dealt in death.

Fournier's profession and proclivities warranted privacy...

...a privacy afforded by the foul humours of the swamp...



A spirit-haunted  
place few ever saw...  
save in *nightmares*.























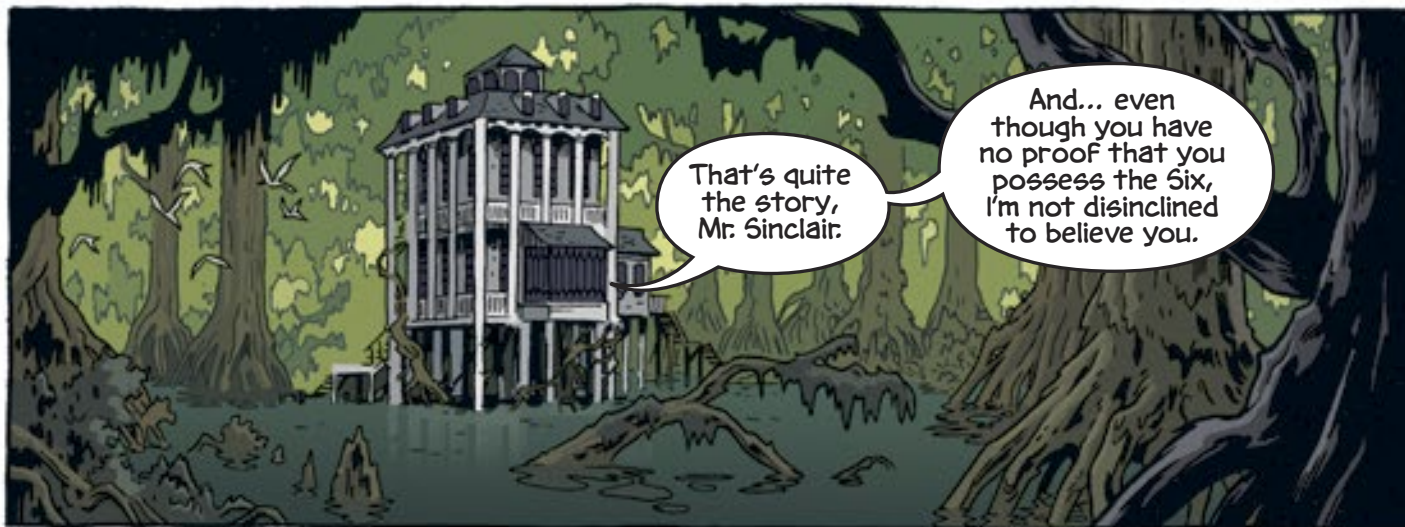












That's quite the story, Mr. Sinclair.

And... even though you have no proof that you possess the Six, I'm not disinclined to believe you.



Question is... will you help me?



What would you do with the guns once the bond was broken?

I find that *doubtful*.

I hadn't thought that far ahead.



Why don't *you* take them?



Oh, Lords, no...

Even if I could sever your connection to the Six... which I can't... I wouldn't take those guns...



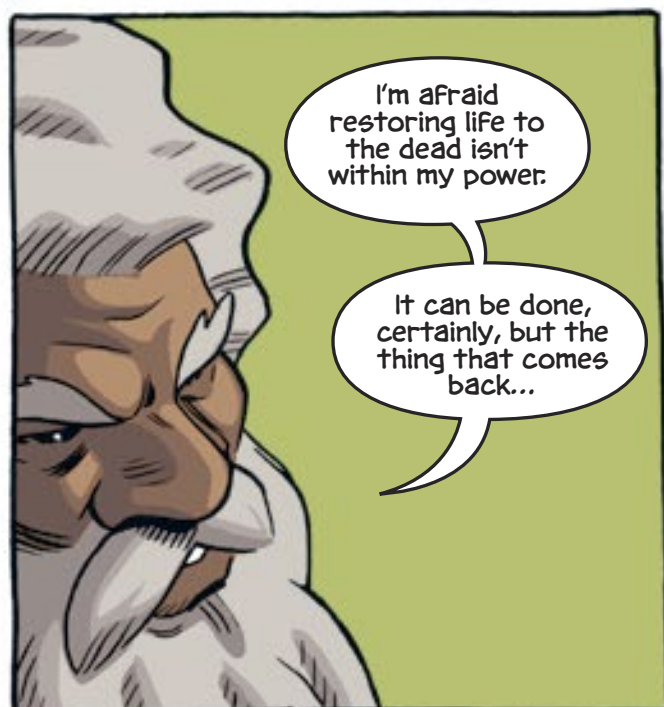
From what I hear, you've claimed ownership of your share of treacherous items.

Made quite a bit of profit from them, too.









































Drake!

What the Hell happened to you?

Reckon I crossed some spirit or another.

I'd been warned. Just didn't expect it to happen so soon.













## CHAPTER NINE













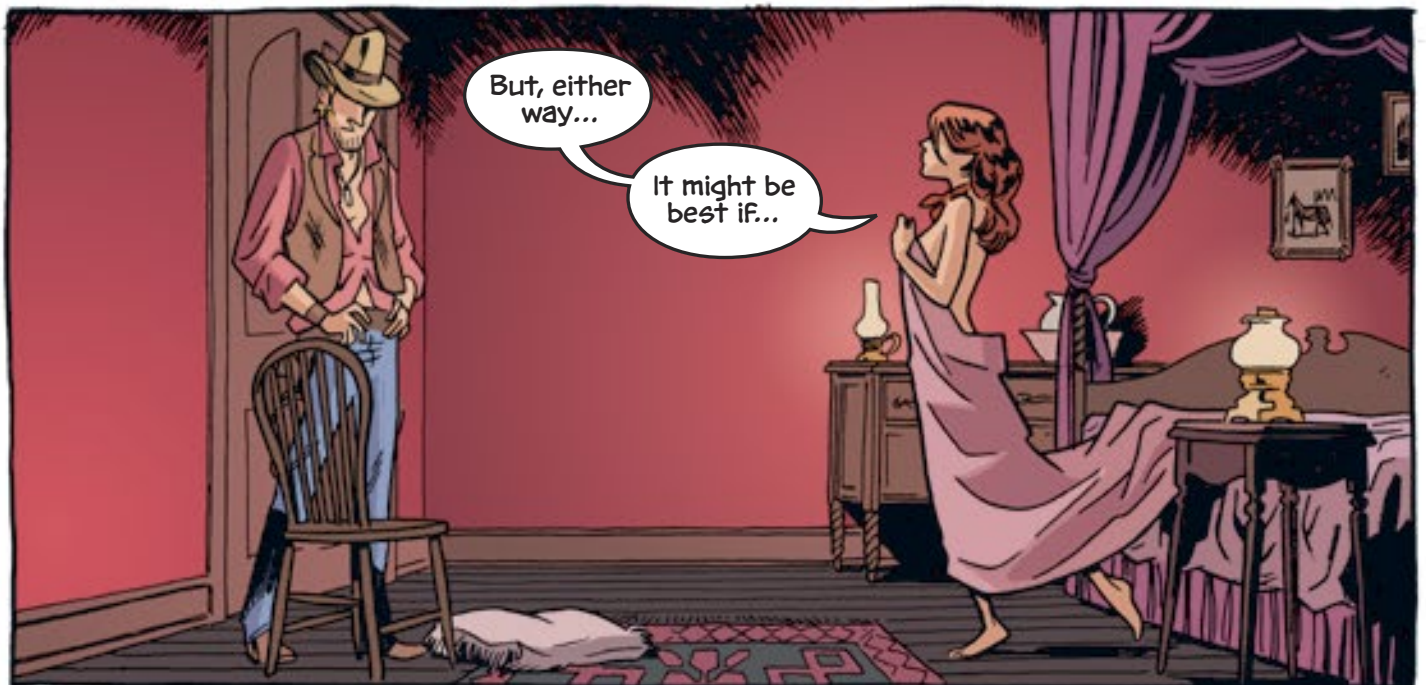














The quiet and stillness that settled on the Velvet Dove was balanced on a knife's edge.

And in the spirit-haunted marsh, far from the ken of civilized folk, an act of vicious skullduggery was coming to light.

Hmm?

Henri Fournier...

Don't see much of you these days. It's not often you venture outside of that fancy house of yours, is it?

But if you've come to share a drink with me, I hope you brought some rum and gunpowder.

Not this time, Kalfu.

I'm looking for my man, Woodmael. He's been slipping out into the swamp in the dead of night, lurking someplace hereabouts...

Having trouble with the hired help, are you?

That's a damnable shame.

















































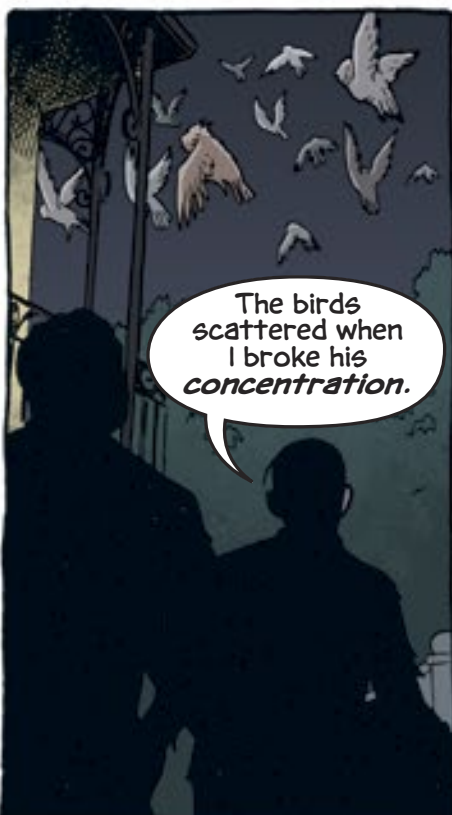




















## CHAPTER TEN













The Smuggler's Rest was a flophouse of the lowest order.



Pirates, murderers, and cutthroats had hunkered down there from time to time...

...and the ghosts of a strangled nanny and her Sunday-man were said to wander the rotting halls at night.



And it was here that Becky Montcrief found herself *trapped* in a little corner of Hell.

Tell me...



Tell me...

Those guns...



Drake hid those guns...

Tell me...



Rest...

Those guns...





























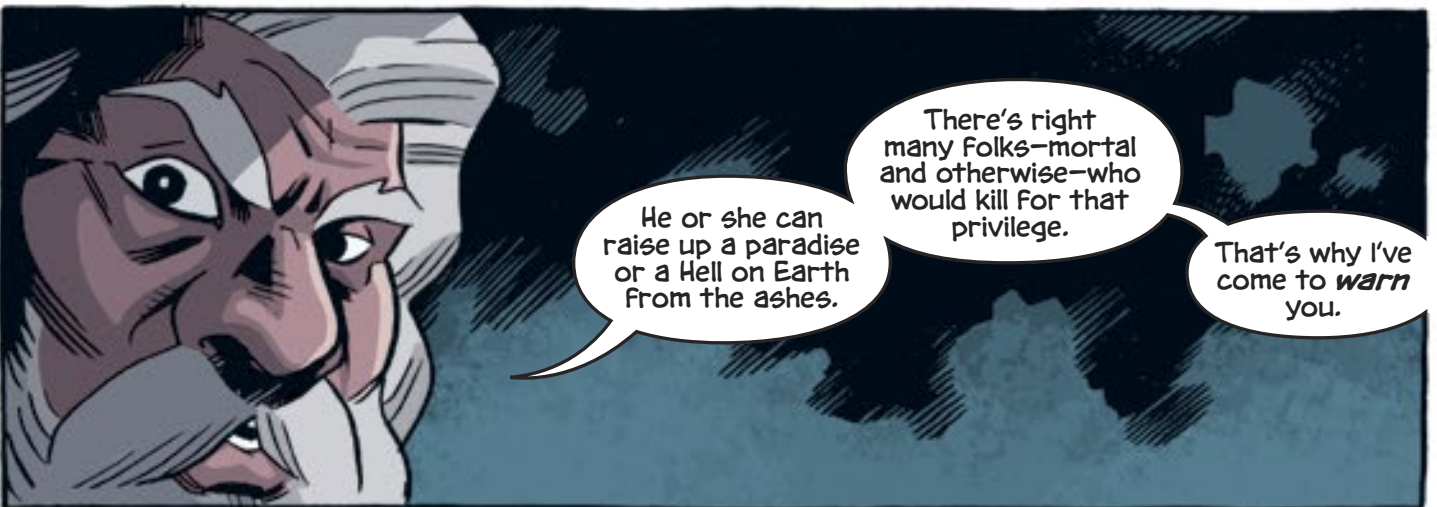
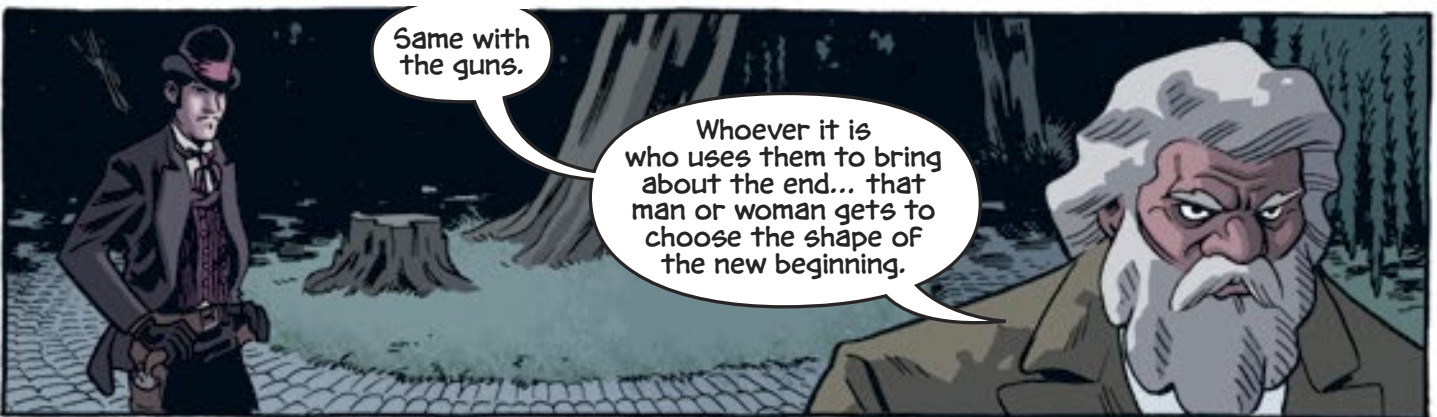




































Well, what do you know?

You got a little more *life* in you than I thought, big boy.



But... while I'd love to discuss free will and the location of the soul...

...I'm afraid I've got to be going.

And if you need to shoot me, Becky, you go right ahead.



I won't be shooting back.



That was a foolish thing to do, Miss Montcrief.













"In order to manifest physically, she'll ride a human host."



"My guess is that she will choose Woodmael."



"And it will be a *violent* union."

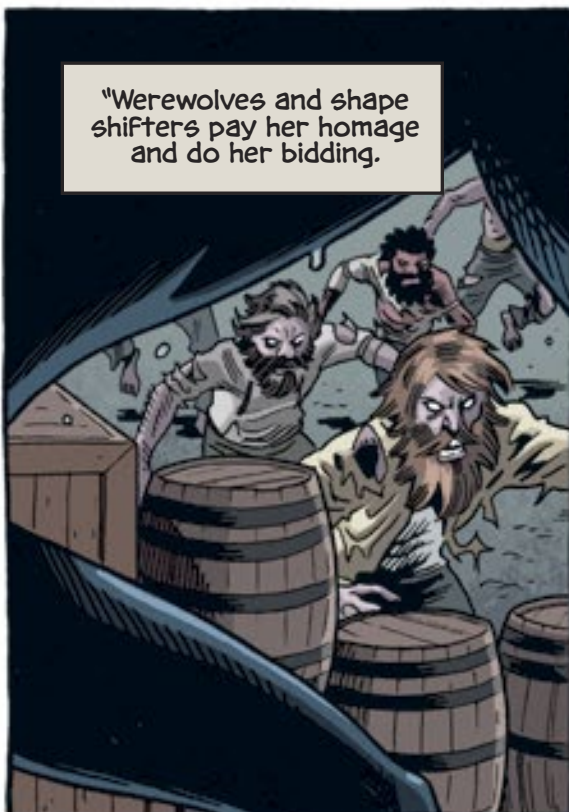


"But Woodmael is not her only servant."



"Of that you can be sure."

"She is worshipped like a god by all manner of terrible thing..."



"Werewolves and shape shifters pay her homage and do her bidding."



"Joining with mortal flesh will be painful, both for the host and for Marinette herself."



"Her *rage* will be uncontrollable."



"She'll be drawn to  
the guns like a moth  
to the flame.

"And I pity any  
man or woman who  
stands in her way."





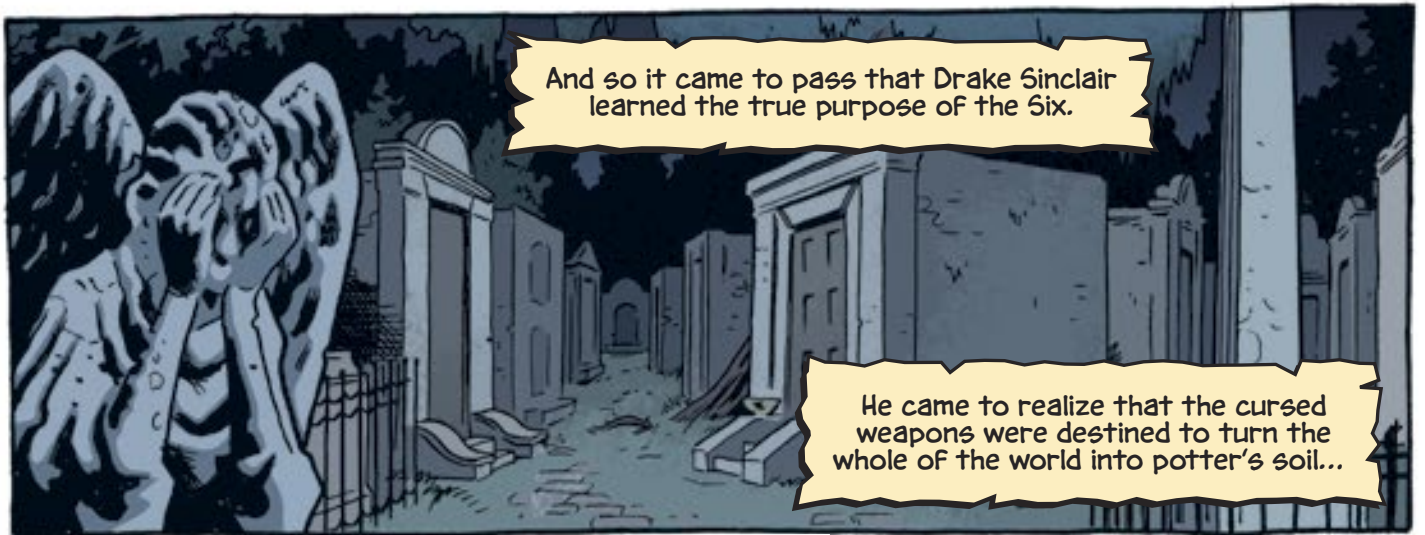


# CHAPTER ELEVEN









And so it came to pass that Drake Sinclair learned the true purpose of the Six.

He came to realize that the cursed weapons were destined to turn the whole of the world into potter's soil...



And he came to understand that those pistols couldn't be hidden—wouldn't *allow* themselves to remain hidden—for long.



You can *relax*, Miss Montcrief. I'm not here to do you harm.

I am *Roberto*.

*Brother* Roberto.



You're one of the priests.

The ones we sent for... to watch over the General.



We received Sinclair's missive, yes, and we've come for General Hume's remains...

...but it appears we are needed for more than guardianship of the dead.

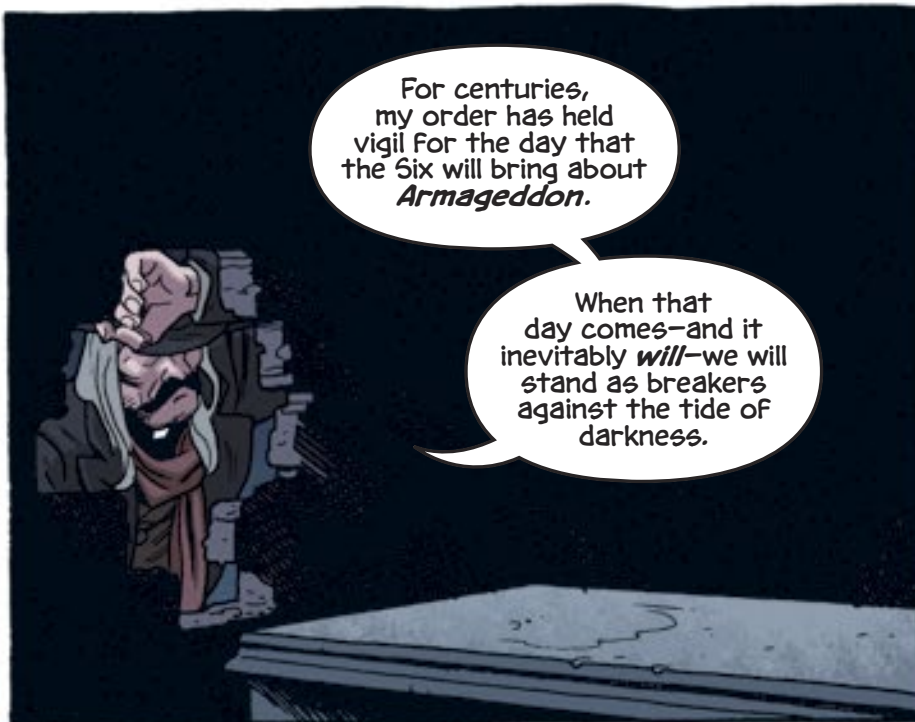


Drake thought he could hide the guns... here in the cemetery... but...

...but a *thief* found them.

And now the Devil's own arsenal has fallen into the wrong hands once again.



















































































## EPILOGUE

You sure this is the right decision?

You sure you'll be *safe* with them?

I'm sure we won't be *safe*, not with them or anyone else...

But these priests—the Sword of Abraham—they might afford us some protection next time trouble comes calling.

I don't like it. They were supposed to take the General's body, not the two of you.

We'll be *Fine*.

Are you sure you won't come with us?

I'll catch up with you soon enough.

Just keep your wits about you.

You do the same.

In the meantime, I have an idea where I might track down the rest of Albrecht Krieg's books. They might contain some answers as to how to get rid of those guns once and for all.

It's like you said, as long as you carry those guns, you're a target.

I suspect that *Kirby Hale* Fella will make another play for the pistols at some point.

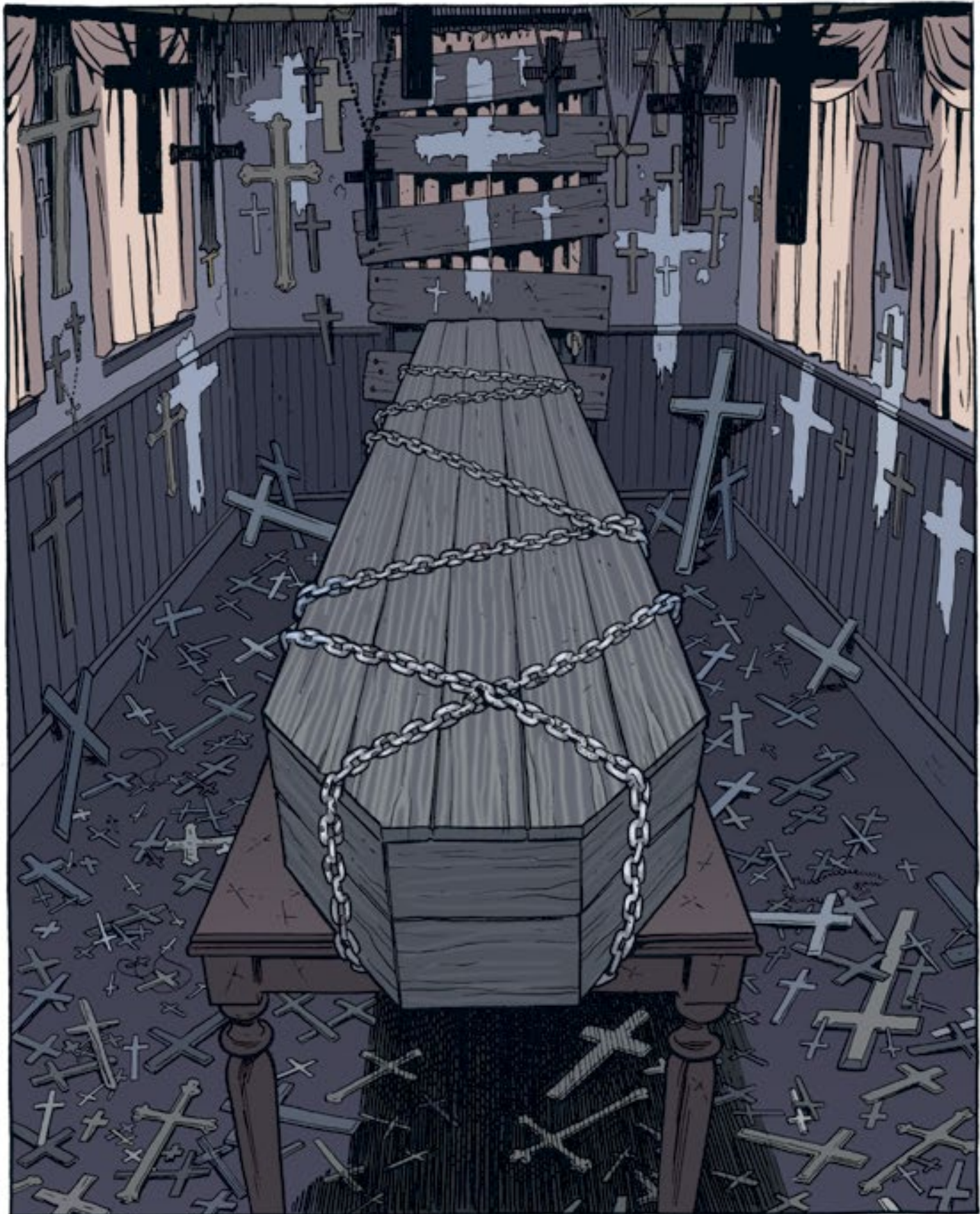
He doesn't strike me as the type to give up on what he wants without a fight.

I wouldn't fret over him.











# THE SIXTH GUN™

## THEM WHAT AILS YA

From the earliest days of putting the comic book series together, I knew that there were countless stories to be told in the world of *The Sixth Gun*. “Them What Ails Ya” is one of those yarns. My first forays into writing weird westerns were through prose. In fact, the first short story I ever sold was a supernatural western. So, using prose to tease and expand the comic book series seemed pretty natural. Published in December 2009 (before the publication of our first issue), this story of carnivals, cannibals, and Christmas served as the introduction to Drake Sinclair for many readers. To firmly root the tale in the comic book tradition, Brian Hurtt and I also put together a bookend comic, and Brian supplied some stellar artwork to spruce up the story along the way. I’m actually at work on another tale of Drake’s pre-comic book adventures right now. It’s not a Christmas story, but it might feature flesh-eating... because—hey! —I might as well stick to the formula that works!

Cull Bur







“If old Ezra could read minds and foretell the future and such, how come he didn’t know he was gonna get himself ate by cannibals?”

That’s how my brother, Jessie, saw things, and I reckon it was difficult to argue with his reasoning no matter how bad I wanted to do just that. Even after all the peculiar things we’d seen over the years, Jessie was ever the skeptic, especially when it came to Ezra. Me, on the other hand, I believed the old codger’s tales of learning mind-reading from a medicine man, hypnosis from a Creole voodoo priest, and potion-making from a beautiful French witch. According to my brother, that made me no better than a rube paying two-bits for a palm reading. But I never needed a lick of proof in regards to Ezra’s abilities. I don’t know much about faith, but sometimes you just got to go with your gut.

So how come Ezra didn’t see his death coming?

The old man once said, “It ain’t the province of man to know the time and place of his own demise, although there’re some who risk plumb-awful magicks to discern that very thing.” His demeanor grew dark and brooding then, like he was dwelling on something he could hardly bear to think about. “But once those steps are taken... well, then that man ain’t got nothing on his hands but time to regret what he’s done, all for some inkling of events that can’t be changed. It don’t matter two spits how much foresight you have, when it’s your time to die, there ain’t nothing to be done about it... nor can you do anything to change when you’re gonna come back.”

At the time, I didn’t think much of Ezra’s cryptic rambling. The old man liked his drink, and was prone to strange rantings when he’d tipped back a few shots. But things started to make a little more sense to me after he was killed, and after the events that unfolded on that Christmas Eve...

Well, let’s just say it wan’t Ezra’s whiskey talking, after all.

Way I figure it, Ezra had known Boone Friedrichs and his gang was coming, knew his time was growing short. He’d grown quiet and sullen a few days earlier, and he won’t to be seen unless it was with a near-empty bottle of his special elixir in hand. Maybe his thoughts in those final days were plagued with visions of the gnashing of teeth and the carving of flesh and the screaming that don’t never seem to stop.

“It ain’t the province of man to know the time and place of his own demise,” he had said.

But—by God—he knew, and I shudder to think what foul bargains he’d made in order to obtain such knowledge. I reckon it would have been a kindness on his part if he’d warned the rest of us of the dark days to come. If we’d been prepared, maybe we could’ve avoided the tragedy that befell us. Maybe I wouldn’t have seen fit to wander out into the cold and snow, a shooting iron strapped around my waist and my mind set on revenge.

Jessie might’ve called me a damn fool or worse for traipsing off after Boone Friedrichs and his men. He might’ve been right, too, but I don’t think he or anybody else could blame me.

My brother got ate by cannibals, too. All told, they had killed six people—counting Ezra and my brother—over the course of two weeks. Just dragged them off into the hills and did Lord knows what to them before they devoured their flesh. Sometimes, you could hear them screaming out there in the icy cold. I won’t never forget Jessie’s screams, not until the day I die, just like I won’t never forget my shame at not doing something sooner.

I was no gunman, though, not in those days, and I calculate I might have ended up worse than dead if it weren’t for the stranger—a dark figure striding across a plain of white with the wind whipping snow into phantom shapes all around him. When I first saw him, I thought he was a dark angel come to claim me. And he did bring death with him—wore it on his hip and carried it in his heart—but not for me.

The stranger was there with me when Ezra and Jessie and all the others came back from the dead—a genuine Christmas miracle, although I’m more inclined to call it a nightmare.

This is how it happened.

\*\*\*







Climbing into the sharpshooter’s wagon was like stirring up a rattlesnake’s nest of memories.

I hoisted myself into the wagon, and suddenly, it weren’t the dead of winter anymore, and it weren’t the dead of night, neither. Warmth—or at least the distant recollection of warmth—flooded back into my frostbit fingers and toes, and I smelled the first wildflowers of spring along the open road, the rich stink of the horses and the animal pens, the putrid odor of Ezra’s potions a-brewing, and the aroma of cinnamon nuts roasting. And it was no longer the memories of screams that echoed in my ears, because suddenly I could hear Old Ezra himself, barking to the crowd about his special elixir.

“And I’m here to tell you friends—and I do consider each and every one of you good souls a dear friend, so you know I wouldn’t steer ya wrong—this here tonic will cure what ails ya! The nature of the ailment... well, that’s your business, and you’re entitled to your privacy. Looking out amongst you, I can pretty much guess that this group’s got all manner of worries, concerns, and consternations!”

Laughter then, carried away on the wind.

“But it don’t matter because this is a miracle tonic, and it’ll damn near cure anything! Bad skin! Bad teeth! The piles! The back door trots! This brew’s as much a great equalizer for the sick as a barking iron’s a great equalizer for the gunslinger! Ya have my personal guarantee, friends! This tonic will purge the bad spirits out from your body, sure as I’m standing here before you today!”

Memories of better times, that’s all, but I would’ve gladly sat there for hours, savoring those bygone days.

Soon enough, though, I snapped out of it and set about my task. If Mr. Newcomb caught me snooping around Colt McGregor’s wagon, near about the best I could hope for was one Hell of a drubbing. More than likely, I’d find myself in the same predicament as Ezra and Jessie and all them others—namely, sacrificed to Boone Friedrichs and his band of murderers. Newcomb kept the wagon locked up tight ever since Colt ran afoul of Daisy the Dancing Bear and ended up buried in an unmarked roadside grave for his troubles. Newcomb had claimed the wagon and its contents as his own property, just as he’d claimed the whole camp, and he didn’t take kindly to anyone challenging his decrees.

I glanced around camp as I pulled the wagon door shut behind me. From the looks of it, no one had noticed me pick the old padlock and slip inside. The camp was quiet, and the circled wagons were dark. Several inches of glistening snow covered the ground, further muffling all sound. In the center of camp stood a tall evergreen tree decorated with bits of colored yarn, tiny figures made of straw, and strips of old carnival tents cut into ribbons. Even with all that had happened, folks still thought they might experience a little joy and hope, what with Christmas being just a couple of days away. Far as I was concerned, though, they were grasping at straws, and the tree—with the sad looking little straw men and the ribbons tossing feebly in the breeze—looked more like a funeral marker than anything else.

Hell! I thought. For all we know, them flesh-eaters’ll come back into camp again before the holiday was over. Maybe they’ll want another of us to serve as their own Christmas feast!

I turned my attention to the contents of the dead man’s wagon. There, amongst dusty crates full of props and racks full of musty old costumes, I found the small, wooden case. It was shoved underneath a scarred-up saddle, and as I dragged it out, every crate and box in the wagon seemed to shift, like moving one small piece would bring the whole place crashing down around me. I moved a little more slowly, grabbed the box without any major calamity, then jumped out of the wagon and scurried off into the shadows with my prize.

Inside the box I found McGregor’s pearl-handled Colt revolver. The gun gleamed in the darkness, and as I grasped the handle, I could’ve sworn I felt a jolt of greased lightning jump through my fingers. There was magic in that six-shooter, I just knew it. I’d seen Colt shoot the feathers off a crow’s ass at a thousand paces and at the wink of an eye. I’d seen him perform such feats with that gun—feats I wouldn’t have thought possible. Like I said, I didn’t know much about guns and about shooting and about killing, but I figured I could use whatever magic was left in that gun to help me.

To help me put those cannibals in the ground once and for all.

\*\*\*



It didn't take me long to find one of them murderous bastards.

I had a good notion as to where Friedrichs and his band might be hiding out. Up there in the hills, not too terribly far from camp, there was a series of tunnels. Jessie and I went exploring up there when the weather was warmer, and on more than one occasion I'd stolen away with one of the camp girls for a kiss and a hug up in the shadows of those caves. The snow had hit hard and fast, almost as if the cannibals had brought the foul weather with them. If they were looking for a place to hole up until the thaw, the camp might've been their best choice, but I reckon they didn't want to live amongst their food. The caves were the likely second choice.

Trudging across the snow, I glanced behind me and saw the path of my footsteps trailing back towards camp. Part of me wanted to turn and hike back in that direction. But another part of me wanted to keep marching on. Even after I killed those bastards—assuming I survived—I wanted to just keep on walking, leaving a trail of footprints leading on into forever.

I'd had it up to my gullet with Mr. Newcomb and his cruel ways. The camp wasn't a home to me, not anymore. With Ezra and Jessie gone, I didn't have much of anything to return to. I think I decided then and there that I won't never going back.

The snow was kicking up again, and I was near about blind out there in the white, but up ahead, I could make out the hills and the caves on the horizon. I pulled McGregor's pistol from my belt, tested the weight. I didn't feel that charge of electricity this time, but I figured it would come back when I needed it.

Six bullets. Six bullets for six killers.

With a little luck and a little magic from the gun, that's all I'd need.

For half a second there, I felt like a dyed-in-the-wool killer my own self. Might've kept on feeling that way with every step closer to the caves, too, if I hadn't been caught unawares.

I rounded an outcropping of rock, and almost walked smack into the ugliest man I'd ever met. I ain't kidding. He was so ugly he could've chased a buzzard off a gut wagon. He was skinny and filthy and scraggly, and his pale flesh was covered in nasty boils. All of Friedrichs' men were dirty and sickly-looking, but this fella might've been the worst. His eyes were almost as pale as the snow-devil's eyes, Jessie would've called them. He was hitching up his breeches as I ran into him. He must've been finishing up some personal business. He had a gun on his sagging, unbuckled belt, but he didn't go for it.

I almost thought I'd gotten the drop on him. I brought the sharpshooter's gun up, but my hand seemed to be moving too slow, like my bones and muscles were frozen. As the gun came up, I kept willing the magic to spring to life, to give me the strength and speed I needed. But I didn't have no such luck.

Like I said, he didn't go for his own gun. Instead, he moved with an animal quickness and yanked an Arkansas toothpick out from I-don't-know-where. His breath gave a frosty blast, and he cackled as he slashed at my face with the knife. I'd like to say I wasn't scared, but I squeaked right loud and jumped back. I didn't fall, but I sure almost did. The gun slipped right out of my fingers as I dodged the blade, and it thumped into the snow.

The killer waved the knife back and forth. The point of the blade reminded me of the head of one of them cobras the camp's snake charmer used to tame. The pigsticker was like a living thing, waiting for the right place to strike.

I couldn't move. I wanted to, but fear held me in place.

The killer smiled.

His teeth were sharp. My gut reaction was that they looked like an animal's teeth. But they reminded me of something else, too. Years ago, Jessie and I had caught a garfish in the creek. Was one of the meanest looking things I'd ever seen, and its long snout was lined with dozens of haphazardly placed, needle-sharp fangs. The killer's teeth were kind of like that.







They damn sure weren't human.

"What you doing out here, boy?" His bloated, gray tongue snaked out of his mouth, slithered across his sharp, yellowed teeth. His breath plumed in the chilly air, like he was sending up smoke signals. "Armed with that there six-shooter, you come out here looking for trouble?"

I glanced across the frozen ground to where the gun lay. No more than a couple of yards away, but it might as well have been a thousand miles. I knew if I so much as twitched the wrong way, the killer's knife would plunge into my neck, and I'd be done for. He felt flushed and hot, despite the weather, and I couldn't help but tremble with fear.

"I didn't come out here looking for no trouble myself." The killer sucked at his teeth. "You came from that camp, didn't you?"

I swallowed down my fear. I figured if I could keep him talking, I might catch a lucky break. I nodded.

"You know how it is then, don't you? You spend your every waking hour with the same folks, sooner or later, you need to slip away, get a little time to yourself, clear your head. Am I right?"

I nodded again. A slight smile curled the corner's of the killer's lips, and he sucked his teeth once more. I didn't like to think about what he was trying to dislodge. He looked back towards me, his smile slipping away.

"But like I said, you came out here looking for trouble." He looked towards my gun. "I'd guess that there smoke-wagon's meant for me, along with them others I'm riding with, too."

I couldn't help myself. The words jumped from my mouth like a toad from a hot skillet.

"You killed my friends, my brother."

"Hell, son. If I went around gunning down everybody what killed one of my brothers, I'd never have a moment's peace, and that ain't even taking into consideration I'd have to eat the barrel of my own pistol for what I done to young Jasper." He coughed out a laugh, a halo of frosty vapors exploding from his lips. "And you thought you might be able to get the drop on all six of us, is that right? You never stood a chance, boy. Boone would've skinned you alive before you even realized what was happening to you."

Now the cold seeped into my bones again.

The killer leaned in close, as if sharing a secret. "But I guess I ain't gonna tell Boone about finding you out here."

I blinked, unsure of what the man had just said. "Y-you're not?"

"Hell, no. It ain't none of Boone's concern what I find when I'm out enjoying a little alone time."

The killer's grin widened then, wider than I thought possible, almost like his entire head was splitting open, and a graveyard stink oozed from his mouth in a cloud of frost, and I saw bits of ragged meat between his teeth.

"If I keep this little meeting to myself," he said, "it just means more for me."

He took a step towards me. I flinched back, looking towards the gun. It didn't matter if I'd make it or not, I had to make a grab for the pistol. He might have killed me before I reached the weapon, but at least I'd die fighting. I threw myself towards the gun, but even as I landed hard in the snow, I felt his hand clamp around my ankle, and he started hauling me backwards with a strength I didn't expect.

I rolled over, kicking at him, and he fell upon me. His sharp teeth snapped at my face, and I turned my head to avoid getting my nose bitten off. Rancid slobber fell across my face. He was punching me in the belly over and over again.



No, not punching, I realized.

He was stabbing me.

I felt the icy cold of the blade slicing into my flesh. The warmth of my blood.

I cried out, trying to push him back.

Just then, a voice called out—

“Frank Cartwright!”

And the killer immediately released me. He jumped to his feet, turning. His bloody knife lay forgotten on the ground. I scurried away, wiping freezing snow and ice and spit from my face. I could move and I could breathe, and I figured the cuts in my stomach might not be as bad as I thought. I scrambled to my feet, and I saw blood in the snow. I dared not look at my stomach, though.

A figure in black strode through the snow. He was tall and lean, and his gait was sure and steady, like no amount of snow or ice or freezing cold could sway him from his purpose.

It was the walk of a gunfighter.

I couldn’t make out his features. A flurry of snow whipped around him, and the derby hat he wore cast a shadow across his face. But the killer—Frank Cartwright—he seemed to recognize him straight away, and his smile turned to a sneer.

“I was wondering when you were gonna show yourself again,” Cartwright growled.

A muscle along his jawline twitched nervously. His hand inched towards the pistol at his side.

The wind howled, and a sheet of snow whipped between the two men.

The rapport of a gun cracked through the cold night air. The sudden smell of gun smoke stung my nostrils and made my eyes water.

I have seen some fast gunmen in my time. Up until that moment, I had always believed Colt McGregor to be the fastest man who ever drew breath. But Cartwright made Colt—even when he was in his prime—look slow and feeble. His hand snapped to his hip and back up in the blink of an eye.

But near as I could tell, his finger never touched the trigger.

The killer staggered, and toppled backwards. Frosty steam no longer streamed from his mouth, but instead boiled up from a bloody hole right through his murderous heart.

I blinked in disbelief as the gunfighter approached. I’d seen men die before, sure, but I’d never seen such an efficient killing. It was downright professional.

Glistening blood oozed through the snowy ground, spreading like a crimson blanket around Frank Cartwright’s body. I took a step backwards, away from the spreading blood. It was about that time that I looked down and remembered not all the blood belonged to the killer. I remembered the pigsticker. I remembered the killer driving the weapon into my stomach. The frigid cold had numbed me to the stab wounds in my belly, but as soon as I saw my own blood staining my shirt and running down my legs to my boots, I started feeling light-headed.

He killed me after all, I thought.

And about that time, my eyes rolled back into my skull and I passed out into the cold and darkness.

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Ezra cried out in the dark.

“I don’t speak lightly of miracles, friends! Miracles are too few and far between, and to treat them with an air of triviality... why, that’s a fool’s business!”

I’d heard those words—well-rehearsed to part rubes from their money—a thousand times in a thousand mud-hole towns. But hearing them at that moment, after all that had happened, reminded me of happier times, back when a bunch of rickety wagons felt like home, and I had friends and family and hot meals and a warm bed.

But Ezra was dead. So was my brother.

And I didn’t have a home, not anymore.

I was dreaming—I knew it—but I couldn’t wake up. I didn’t want to wake up. A good dream can damn near fool you into thinking you’ve died and gone to Heaven.

“...I’ve traveled far and wide, through lands civilized and savage, to find the perfect fixings for this here tonic...”

I’ll admit, I’d never so much as tasted the potion. The stink of it—like rotten eggs and bacon grease—put me off. Nor had I been allowed to watch Ezra brew the stuff in his wagon stocked with strange-smelling roots and jars of colorful powders. But Jessie told me the primary ingredient of the tonic was whiskey, and a lot of it. The way Ezra near pickled himself with the stuff, I believed it.

“...and if this elixir ain’t a genuine miracle, then I don’t know if such a thing truly exists! One sip, friends, and you’ll feel strong as an ox, healthy as a horse, and—dare I say—positively virile!”

Ezra’s voice grew distant, like he was calling from the bottom of a deep well.

“This’ll cure them what ails ya, folks! It’ll drive the foul spirits from your body like your Granny chasing cats from the kitchen!”

The shadows swallowed up the old man’s voice, and he was gone.

The dream ended.

\* \* \*

Sensation oozed back into my body as I awoke. A deep chill had settled in the meat of my bones. Every breath felt like I was inhaling snow. Maybe I should’ve been thankful for that. I’d been cut open like a Christmas goose, and I imagine the pain might’ve been unbearable if not for the numbing cold.

I opened my eyes...

...and a dead man stared back at me.

Frank Cartwright—the cannibal who’d tried to kill me—lay not two feet away. His devil’s eyes were clouded over. His skin was as pallid as a sheet phantom. His bluish lips looked like a pair of frozen slugs, and behind them I spied the sharp tips of his teeth.

I jumped up, and a lance of pain shot through my stomach, almost knocking me right back down. Somehow, I kept from screaming—just barely.

“Easy now.” A firm, steadying hand grasped my shoulder. The stranger’s voice was deep, and his accent betrayed a Southern upbringing. “Most of your cuts weren’t that deep, and I patched you up best I could. I’m no sawbones, though. Wouldn’t take much to tear open that dressing and start you bleeding again.”

I ran my hands under my ripped and bloodied shirt. My belly was wrapped in bandages.



I glanced at Frank Cartwright, who lay still as a coffin nail. It looked like the stranger had searched the dead man's body—emptied his pockets, removed his gun belt, undone his shirt, even pulled off his boots.

I wondered if his ghoulish pursuits had yielded results.

I didn't ask what he was searching for, though, and I didn't ask the stranger's name. I had a sneaking suspicion I wouldn't have gotten an answer to either question.

Cartwright's too-pale eyes followed me. I shivered, partly because of the cold, partly because of the dead man's fixed stare.

"I wouldn't worry about him." The stranger's words were dry. "He doesn't have much fight left in him."

The gunslinger looked the way you might have suspected, the way men of his ilk were portrayed in dime novels—dangerous, menacing. Shadows crawled across his face. His eyes seemed to catch the feeble moonlight and hold onto it like a fly in a spider's web.

I can't say how long I was out. An hour, maybe less. I'd been dragged—along with the dead man—up into the hills. Large boulders and outcroppings of jagged stone offered a little protection from the frigid, gusting winds and the sweeping snow. Covered in ice crystals, the rocks glistened. Beneath me, the hard stone ground tried to leech what little body heat I had left. Above me, the sky was a churning stew of thick clouds waiting to dump a pure blizzard.

I struggled to my feet. My legs were unsteady, and my head pounded.

A saddle and bags lay on the ground nearby. From the looks of it, the stranger had been riding for days, and he had supplies aplenty to stay in the wilds for some time. A large stallion stood at the edge of the campsite. Its coat was as pitch as the night itself, and the animal was so still and quiet that it was almost invisible. It was the kind of horse I pictured a ghost riding in a campfire story.

Speaking of campfires, the stranger hadn't started one. The camp was cold, dark. There wasn't even a single stick of kindling to be seen.

I started to complain, but all that I could stammer was, "C-c-cold."

"So you can talk after all." He smirked. "I was beginning to wonder if Frank hadn't cut your tongue from your mouth before I killed him. Move around a bit if you're cold. That'll get your blood pumping. Afraid I can't risk a fire. I'd guess Friedrichs and his men are keeping a lookout. I'm surprised the gunshots didn't bring them scurrying out of hiding like rats in high water. They'd spot us for sure if I started a blaze, and they might even have a rifle or two up there."

He gazed into the hills, and I looked, too. I didn't see a thing, but imagining those cannibals staring down on me with their gleaming eyes and chattering fish-teeth didn't do a thing to make me feel any warmer.

"Why are you tracking them?" I asked at last. "You chasing a bounty?"

"Not exactly."

One of his pistols near jumped into his hand, and I couldn't help but stagger back a step. With a flick of his wrist, he snapped the gun open, checked the chamber, and returned the weapon to its holster in the blink of an eye. He repeated the act with his other pistol. Then he looked at me, sizing me up.

"I noticed a bunch of circled wagons a ways back. That where you're from?"

"Yes, sir."

What he'd seen was the final resting place of Newcomb and Judd's Wild West Extravaganza. Once upon a time, it was the finest congress of cowboys, painted ladies, rough riders, and magicians to ever draw a crowd.



That was before Mr. Judd died with consumption, of course, leaving that heartless cur Newcomb as sole owner.

“I reckon you got stuck in the snowstorm.” He nudged Cartwright’s body with the toe of his boot. “Bad luck making camp just in time for this lot to find you. Men like Friedrichs, they don’t pass up easy meat. Now that they’ve found you, they’ll hide out in the hills, watching like coyotes or buzzards. They’ll pick every one of you clean to the bone before they’re done.”

I didn’t mention Newcomb’s arrangement with the cannibals.

The stranger had his secret, and I had mine... for the time being.

“You’re going to kill them...” I said, “...ain’t you?”

The stranger’s stark eyes peered at me. After a time, he spoke, his words as cold as the deepest winter frost.

“I suppose I am.”

“Let me help you then.” I couldn’t help but feel a rush of sudden excitement. “I don’t even want no part of any reward money. Those bastards killed my friend... killed my brother... and I aim to see them dead. I have a gun—”

My fingers strayed to my belt where Colt McGregor’s pistol should’ve been. The weapon was missing, and I suddenly remembered dropping the revolver in the snow. Had it been left behind? I glanced frantically around the camp.

“Looking for this?”

The stranger drew McGregor’s pistol from his own bullet-studded belt. He turned the gun over in his hand deftly, then tossed it to me. The weapon spun in the air, glinting, and I caught it in both hands. The gun felt heavier than I remembered, and I almost dropped it once again.

“You don’t strike me as someone who goes heeled often,” the stranger said. “Where’d you get the six-shooter, kid?”

I looked down, embarrassed. “I stole it, I reckon.”

“So, you’re a killer and a thief, is that it?”

There was no judgment in his words.

“I may not be a gunfighter.” I gripped McGregor’s pistol tightly. “But this gun once belonged to the deadliest shootist to ever pull a trigger. I figured—”

He sensed where I was head and interrupted me.

“Son, I know a thing or two about magic guns... and that ain’t one of them.”

My gut told me the stranger knew what he was talking about. The gun seemed to gain twenty pounds in my hands. My shoulders sagged.

“Just the same,” I said, “I’m gonna make those men pay.”

“Men...” He nearly spat the word from his mouth. “Let me ask you something, boy. Did you get a good look at Cartwright’s teeth?”

“I saw them up close and personal.”

“And did they look like teeth that belonged in the mouth of a normal man?”







I looked at Cartwright, then back at the stranger. “What is he then, if not a man?”

“There are a lot of stories.” The stranger shrugged. “Most of them don’t hold water. But the bad stories, the really frightening ones... more often than not there’s at least a little truth to them. There’s a legend that says when one man eats the flesh of another, then that man invites an evil spirit to take up in his soul. It’s like a hungry worm, this spirit, wriggling around inside its host, and it wants nothing more than to taste human flesh again. And what the spirit wants, the host wants.”

“And Friedrichs and his men, they’ve got these things inside them?”

“Maybe so. During the war, they did some awful things, and now it might be catching up with them. They’re changing, becoming less like men and more like the spirits growing inside them.”

“You’re saying they’re...” I didn’t want to speak the word. “...monsters.”

“I’m saying you’ll be walking into a world of trouble if you come with me.”

“I ain’t scared,” I lied.

Maybe the gunfighter knew there was no sense in arguing with me. If he left me behind, I’d just follow him. Or maybe he was just coppering his chances by bringing an extra gun... and an extra body along.

Just then, a strong gust cut between the rocks, and Cartwright’s shirt blew open.

There was something wrong with the dead man’s stomach. Several large, dark bruises covered his pale flesh. From each of the bruises radiated numerous winding veins, like black rivers across his skin. His belly was distended, like that of a snake that had just raided an overfull chicken nest. Something knobby and boney pressed against the skin from within.

“What is that?” I asked. “What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know,” the stranger answered. “Maybe he was sick.”

But that didn’t look like no disease I’d ever heard about.

“Forget about that,” the stranger said. “You’d best get real comfortable with that revolver of yours... and fast. We’re heading up into the hills shortly, and I expect there’ll be... bloodshed.”

I barely heard him. I couldn’t take my eyes off the horrible bruises and protrusions on Cartwright’s flesh.

It looked like something had been trying to force its way out of the dead man’s guts.

\* \* \*

Here’s what I didn’t tell the stranger about Newcomb and the cannibals:

Not long after the second person was taken from camp, Newcomb, who saw himself as a shepherd, came up with a plan he thought would help his flock survive until the thaw. Dressed in one of his finest black suits, he called the camp to meeting, where he stood on one of the barking stages and addressed the crowd.

“We’ve already lost a dear, dear friend in Ezra,” he started.

My blood boiled at that, seeing how Newcomb had never kept his hatred of Old Ezra a secret.

“And now,” he continued, “our sweet—” He paused, searching his memory for the girl’s name. “—Emily has been taken from us as well.”

Cries for action rose from the crowd, but the big boss raised a pudgy hand and waved for silence. He’d been



barking since long before I was born, and those old skills came easy to him as he spoke to the carnies gathered before him.

“If we fight back, those men will murder every last one of us. If we try to run, they’ll catch us and gun us down right there in the snow.”

The crowd moaned with despair.

“But all is not lost! We might not be able to slay the dragon, and we might not be able to escape its fiery breath, but we can make offerings to appease the beast lest we all suffer a gruesome fate!”

I didn’t have a clue what he was going on about, and neither did anyone else. That’s the way Newcomb liked it, I figured. He took our confusion and our anger and our fear and worked us up into a frenzy until he had near about everyone agreeing with every word he said... whether they understood it or not.

“I’m not saying this won’t be painful,” he said. “We must all make sacrifices. But at least the camp might thrive, albeit with grief and sorrow in our hearts!”

And so we started the lottery.

Within a few days, a tree trunk post had been raised at the outskirts of camp, and everyone had scrawled their name on a slip of paper gathered in Newcomb’s old top hat. Only Newcomb himself was allowed to draw a name, and he did so every few days.

The lottery was wrong, but no one spoke up against it.

They knew better.

We marched our friends and family out to that post and left them tied out there, waiting to be snatched up and eaten. Sometimes, we left gifts, too—blankets, canned fruit, heirlooms and other valuables—all in hopes the cannibals wouldn’t attack us outright.

Awful as it was, it might’ve worked... up until the point my brother got the idea Newcomb wasn’t drawing names at random at all but was giving up people who crossed him.

Then, of course, Jessie’s name was drawn.

Like I said, Jessie screamed when they dragged him out to the post, and no one lifted a finger to help him, myself included. We wept and we looked away and we prayed we weren’t next. But we didn’t help. Everyone knew Newcomb was up to no good, but nobody did a damn thing.

In that way, we were all in it with him.

\* \* \*

“It’s after midnight,” I realized. “Christmas Eve.”

“Ain’t that something,” the stranger said. “Hush up now.”

We crept along a zig-zagging path leading into the hills. The stranger took the lead, and I followed close behind. The stranger didn’t make a sound as he slipped along the path. He darted from one patch of shadow to the next. If I took my eyes off him for long, I might’ve lost him completely. Me, I shuffled along, trying to be as quiet as I could despite my chattering teeth and shivering muscles.

Wind swept down the pass, casting sheets of snow in our faces, trying to buffet us back. I grabbed my coat collar in one hand, pulling it tightly closed. My eyes were dry. My nose ran, and the snot froze to my upper lip.

Up ahead, the cannibals waited.



As we walked along, I kicked something in the snow. There was a strange clattering sound, and for a split second I feared Friedrich had set a booby trap and I had stumbled right into it. But no pit opened up beneath me. No deadfall crashed on top of me. Something gleamed in the shadows.

There along the rock wall lay a small green bottle. I recognized it right away, and I hurried to where I'd kicked it. Scooping it up, I saw the bottle was empty, but the rotten stink of Ezra's tonic was still on it.

"What is it?" the stranger asked.

"Medicine," I said. "Or at least it was. My friend, he made the stuff. 'It'll cure them what ails ya,' he used to say. The cannibals must've stolen some of it during one of their raids."

The truth was, we'd more than likely given them the tonic, left it like a Christmas gift at the sacrificial post.

I tucked the bottle into my jacket, and we walked on.

We walked no more than a dozen more yards when an awful smell assaulted my nostrils.

Rotten meat.

The stranger's hands dropped to the handles of his six-shooters.

"This is it, boy. One more step and there's no turning back. Remember what I told you. I don't know how these men got started down their path. A lot of folks did bad things during the war. They're changing, though, and Boone, he'll be the worst. He might not die so easily."

I thought of Jessie and Ezra and all them others who didn't get to live to see Christmas this year.

"Let's go," I said.

And we did.

\*\*\*

There's a reason the cannibals didn't come a-looking at the sound of gunfire in the valley.

An awful reason.

Directly, we spotted the cave Boone Friedrichs and his men had been using as a hideout. It was a gaping maw in the rock wall, and bits of bone and clothing—cast offs from their victims—littered the ground leading up to the cave.

The horrid odor of decay came from within, but I didn't see sign of a sentry or lookout.

The stranger motioned for me to drop back a step or two. He pulled one of his revolvers and inched closer to the warren. The idea of walking into that pitch black hole in the ground didn't appeal to me one bit. The stranger must've had the same notion. After peering into the cave for a few seconds, he turned to me.

"Fetch one of those bones and some scraps of cloth," he whispered. "Make a torch."

As I set about the grim task, I wondered just whose clothes... whose bones... would be lighting our way.

"Stay a couple of steps behind me with that fire." The gunslinger drew his second pistol. "Don't get close enough to blind me. Hold it off to the side a bit, too. I don't want to be back-lit. The light'll make us both easier targets as it is."

The cave was a lot deeper than I expected. The tunnel wound down and off to the side, like a giant serpent had burrowed its way through the stone. The torch guttered in the wind.



We hadn't taken more than a dozen steps when a gunshot rang out from somewhere up ahead.

I flinched. The stranger didn't.

Another gunshot thundered in the dark, and I thought I saw a muzzle flash chase shadows across the tunnel walls.

Time passed slowly as we waited... watching... listening...

A figure staggered into view—tall and bulky with shaggy hair. He held a gun, and he was aiming at something low to the ground behind him. He pulled the trigger, and in the flash I saw his face was a mask of fright. He clutched his stomach with his free hand. Blood covered his lips and chin.

He spotted us, too, and his bloody mouth gaped open in surprise. His teeth were razor sharp.

His gun hand hung limply at his side now, the smoking pistol pointed at the floor. He stumbled towards us, a couple of steps, no more.

"Sinclair," he muttered. "You—"

The stranger—I reckon his name was Sinclair—snapped his own gun up in the blink of an eye and blew the cannibal to Kingdom Come before he could finish his sentence.

He moved quick now, dropping down next to the dead man and searching the body. Whatever he was looking for, he didn't find, and he spat out a curse. "Come on," he said, and he sprang to his feet and plunged into the darkness.

"What do you think he was shooting at?" I asked, but I had my answer soon enough.

I heard something.

Something wet.

Something meaty.

That's the only way to describe it.

As the torchlight flooded through the tunnel, I gasped.

"God Almighty!"

I won't one to blaspheme, but no other exclamation seemed quite right.

This... thing squirmed on the ground. It was about the size of a large dog, hairless, skinless, without any distinguishable face. It was a mass of twitching muscle and bone, flopping about of its own accord. It had been shot a couple of times, and from the bullet holes pumped blood. But it kept on moving, wriggling, like it was trying to unfold itself like the petals of a flower.

It smelled like rotten eggs and bacon grease.

"What is it?" I asked.

Sinclair didn't answer. He just looked at it for a moment, then moved along.

It was worse up ahead. Much worse.

We entered a sprawling chamber. The torchlight licked at the rough-hewn walls, the columns of stone. Scattered around the room were some of the "gifts" the folks from Newcomb's Wild West Extravaganza had given Friedrichs and his men.



Among the debris were dozens of empty green bottles.

“This’ll cure them what ails ya,” Ezra had said.

Three cannibals were sprawled on the floor. I knew they were dead right away. They were too pale, too still. Blood covered their mouths. Their bellies were swollen and distended.

“It’ll drive the foul spirits from your body like your Granny chasing cats from the kitchen!”

In the deep crevices and pockets of dark the torch couldn’t touch, something flapped and flopped, a gristled, meaty kind of noise. I thought of stepping closer, taking a look, but I was too scared to force my legs to work. The hair stood on end on the backs of my arms. My nostrils burned at the overwhelming smell of Old Ezra’s medicine.

My first thought was that the cannibals had drunk down Ezra’s tonic, and it had driven the hungry spirits from their bodies. Only the spirits, they hadn’t died. I found no comfort in the notion, though, as it meant the vile things lurking outside my field of vision were demons made flesh.

One of the dead men had something sticking out of his mouth.

I stepped closer, shoving the torch towards the cannibal’s face.

Fingers—human fingers—juttied out from between his lips, and the way his throat was swollen up and bruised, I knew those fingers were attached to an arm pushing its way up from the man’s gullet.

The fingers twitched.

The flopping, flapping creatures in the darkness moved closer. I heard them slithering on the stone, heard their nails scraping the rock. Their shapes became more distinct. Some were formless masses like the thing we’d seen in the tunnel. Others were vaguely human in size and shape. Their blood-soaked flesh glistened.

I knew they weren’t demons at all.

“You’ve done come too late.”

The voice came from the other side of the chamber, and even though it was no more than a whisper, it shocked me like cannon fire. Boone Friedrichs stepped into our light. If his men had been large, Boone himself was massive—big the way things from Biblical times were big. He was hunched over, though, and every couple of seconds he hacked up a mouthful of blood. Despite the cold, he wore no shirt. His stomach was swollen and something boney moved inside his gut.

Sinclair’s twin pistols snapped towards him like a compass needle pointing north.

“If you’ve come to kill me,” Friedrichs said, “you’re too late.”

“Killing you is fairly high on my list.” Sinclair stepped towards the man. “But I didn’t track you down for just that purpose.”

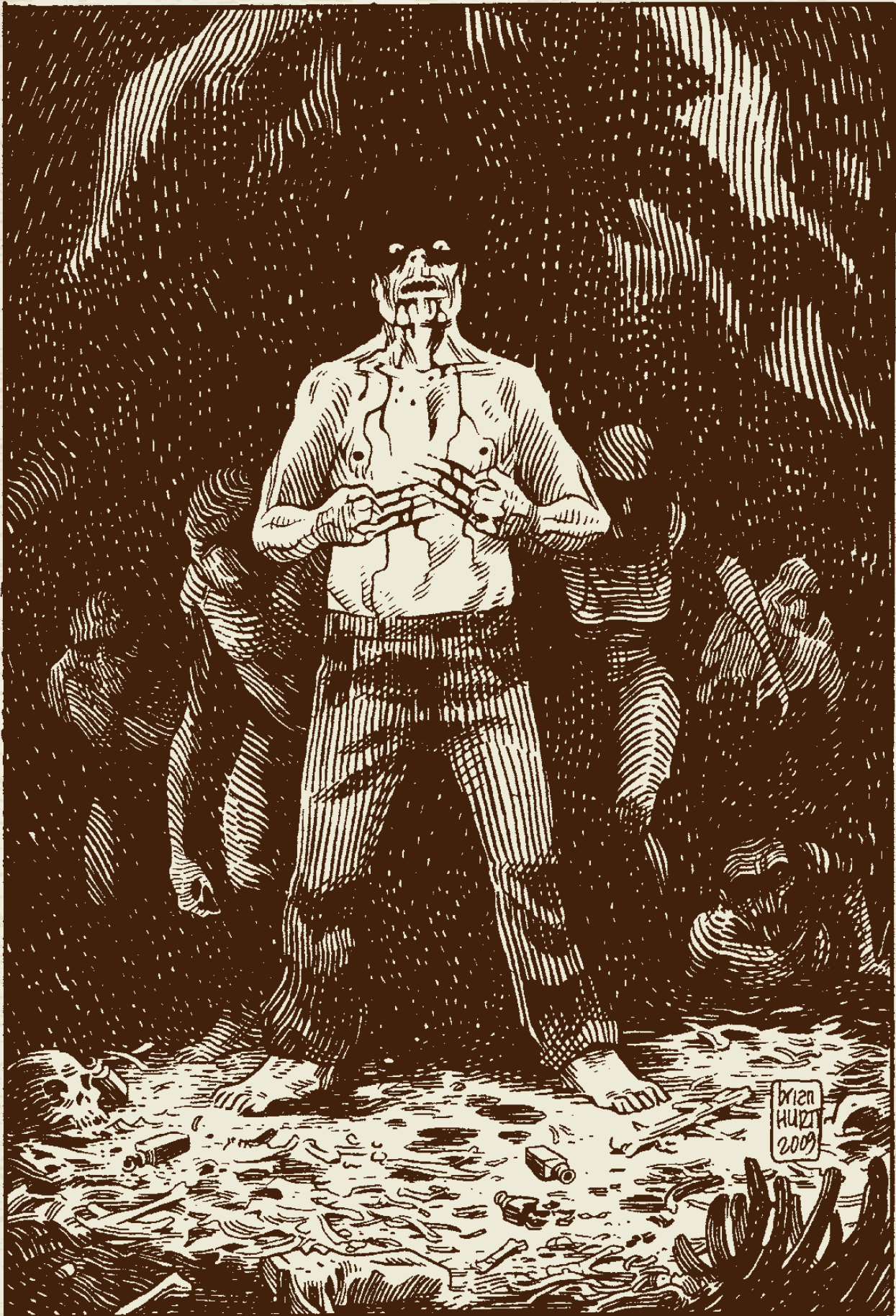
“You still after this?” Friedrichs dug in his pants pocket, pulled an ugly necklace out. It was no more than a hideous clay totem on a strip of old leather. “You’ve come a long way for this old thing.”

“I know someone who’ll pay good money for that,” Sinclair said. “And I knew one of you no-counts must’ve taken it after what you did to that shaman.”

The shapes in the darkness inched closer. They were closing in around us, slowly. I could hear them breathing, a rattling noise from their throats... or what passed for throats.

“I don’t have no use for this.” Friedrichs looked at the necklace. “Supposed to be good luck, but looks like that’s a bunch of bunk.”







He eyed his dead companions. His tongue snaked out, slithered across his razor-like teeth. He turned his gaze towards the numerous bottles, glinting in the torchlight.

“Those people from the camp... they poisoned us... passed that bilge on to us...”

Sinclair kept one gun trained on Friedrichs. He dropped the other into the holster. He reached out towards the cannibal.

“Just give me the necklace,” he said, “and we’ll leave you be.”

“What?” I asked.

“Look at him, boy. Look around you. He’s as good as dead.”

The misshapen figures moved closer. Some of them had faces—slavering, hideous faces, but faces just the same. I recognized some of them. People from camp. People who’d been tied to the sacrificial pole. Emily... Samuel...

...Darcy...

...Jessie.

I shuddered, and a sob escaped my throat.

“They came back up,” Friedrich said. “We ate them, by God, and we drank that tonic water down, and it brought them back to life... It brought what was left of them back to life inside us...”

He groaned and clutched his stomach. The thing inside him pushed against the walls of his belly, stretching the skin tight, trying to force its way out.

And I knew what... who... was growing in his stomach.

Old Ezra.

“The necklace,” Sinclair urged.

“Take it.” Friedrichs tossed the totem at Sinclair, and the gunslinger snatched it out of the air. “Take it and go.”

Tucking the necklace in his vest pocket, Sinclair turned away from the cannibal. He eyed the squirming, shambling figures cautiously, then looked towards me.

“He’s finished,” he said. “Let’s go while we still can.”

I watched the hideous, twisted faces of my friends... my family... all around me. I hadn’t done a thing to save them. I hadn’t done a thing to avenge them.

I may not have been quick on the draw like Sinclair. There might not have been any magic in Colt McGregor’s pistol.

But I put a hole right between Boone Friedrichs’ eyes.

And he died without any trouble at all.

I waited.

Sinclair didn’t.

He left without much of a goodbye, not that I expected one.



The fleshy, bloody things gathered around me. At first, I thought they might kill me. There was a kind of malice in their eyes. They might have ripped me to shreds, too, if not for me killing Friedrichs the way I did. Maybe they saw that as an act of atonement.

The thing in Friedrichs' belly continued to squirm and kick. Eventually I used a knife to slice the cannibal open. A fleshy mass spilled out, and over the next few hours, it uncurled and grew into something resembling my friend.

Ezra. At first it wobbled on its legs like a newborn colt, and it mewled with a voice that was as much beast as it was infant. Soon enough, it found its footing and it settled into a solemn, grim silence.

And then they started to shamble out into the night.

Maybe they were the hunger spirits made flesh... maybe they were the people from camp brought back from the dead. More than likely, they were a little of both, conjured up by the potion and all mixed up to the point I couldn't tell where the evil spirit ended and the living dead began.

I knew where they were heading, of course, with their hearts full of anger and malice. They were slow, especially in the cold, and I could've outdistanced them without problem. I could have slipped past them and raced back to camp and warned those folks sitting around the Christmas tree hoping for a miracle to save them.

But I didn't.

Ezra and Jessie and all the rest, they walked again, and that was miracle enough on a cold night like tonight.

I felt a stab of guilt for the camp. Not everyone deserved what was coming for them. They were just cowards, like me. But I'd made my peace, paid my penance. I'd been judged under the eyes of those twisted creatures, and I'd been left to live another day for the trouble. The others—down in the valley praying for a Christmas miracle—they'd have to do the same.

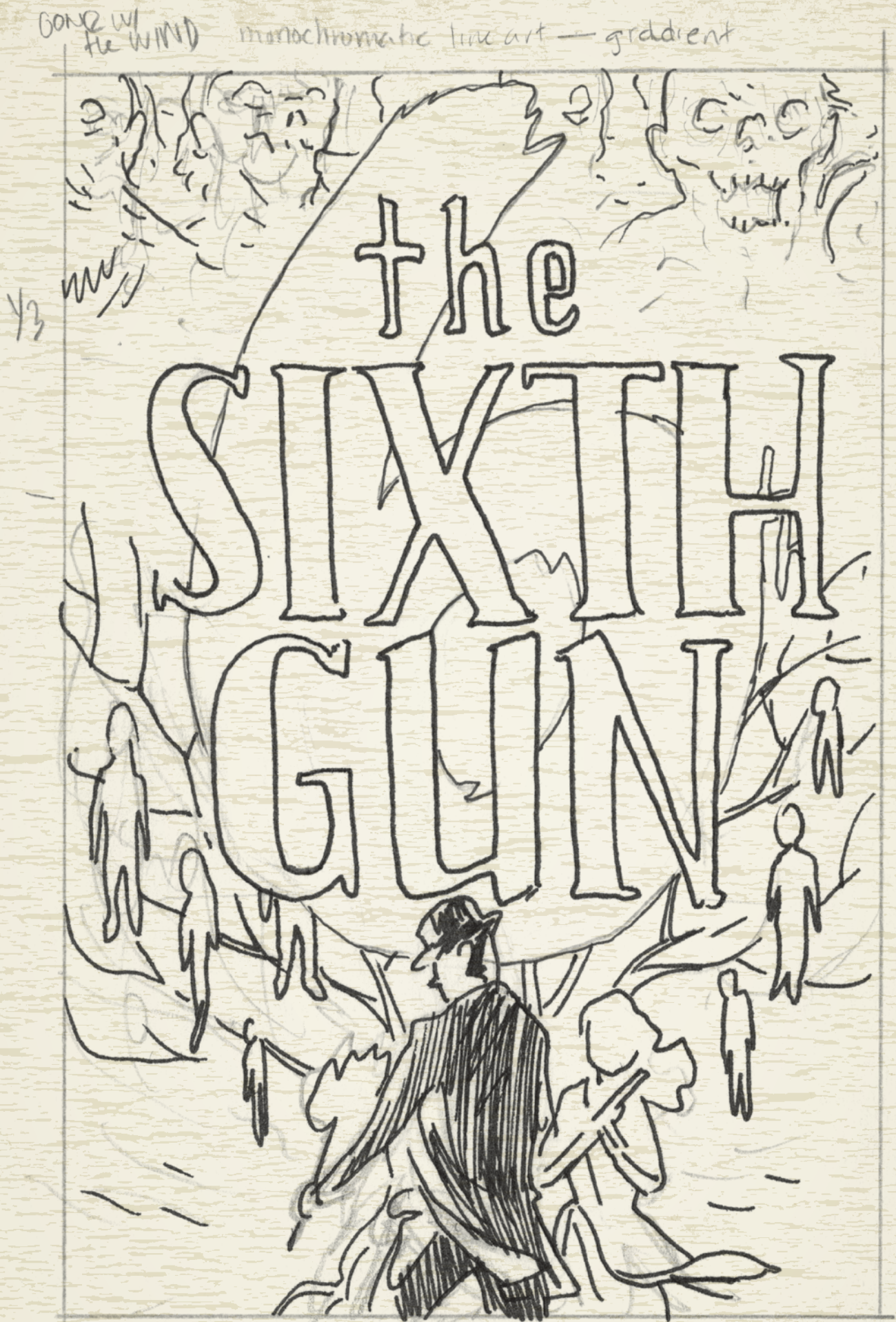
I followed the creatures to the foot of the hills, watched them march in the direction of camp. Their bloody footprints trailed off into what may as well have been forever.

I walked the other way.









## COVER GALLERY

The following pages contain the original covers for the first eleven issues of *The Sixth Gun* series, plus, the first two trade paperback covers. Shown here is an early, unused cover concept drawn by Brian Hurtt in early 2010.





Issue #1 - Free Comic Book Day Edition

Rough cover design





Issue #1 - Free Comic Book Day Edition

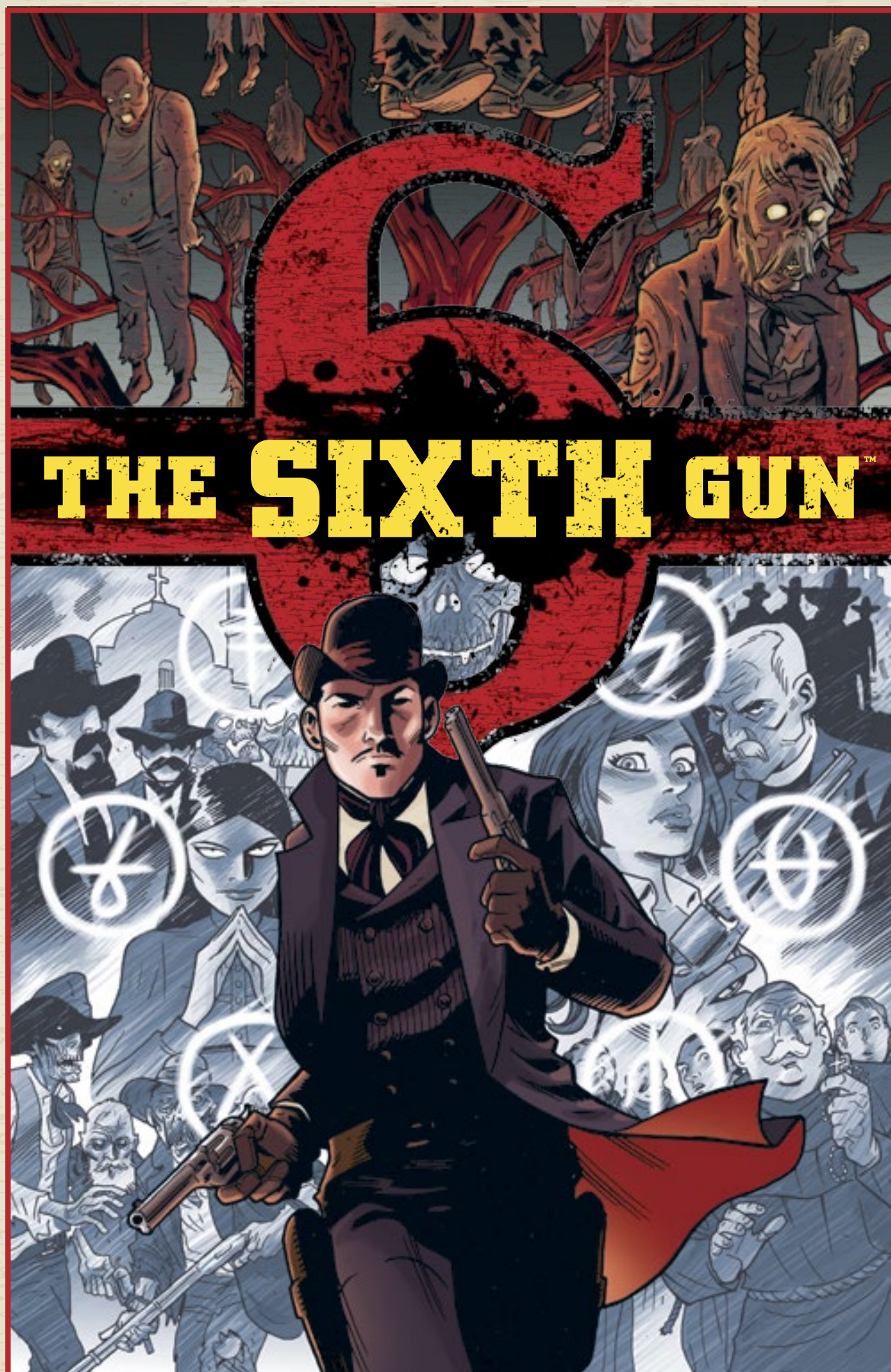
Illustrated and colored by Brian Hurtt





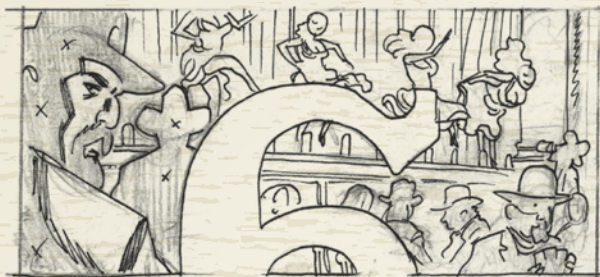
Issue #1 - Retail Edition  
Rough cover design



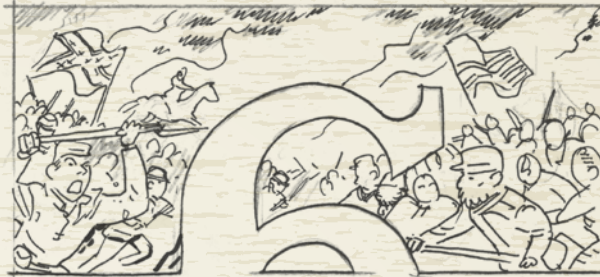
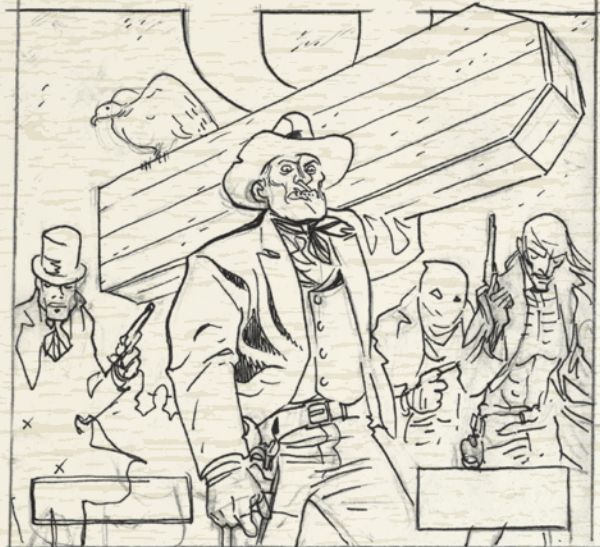


Issue #1 - Retail Edition  
Illustrated and colored by Brian Hurtt

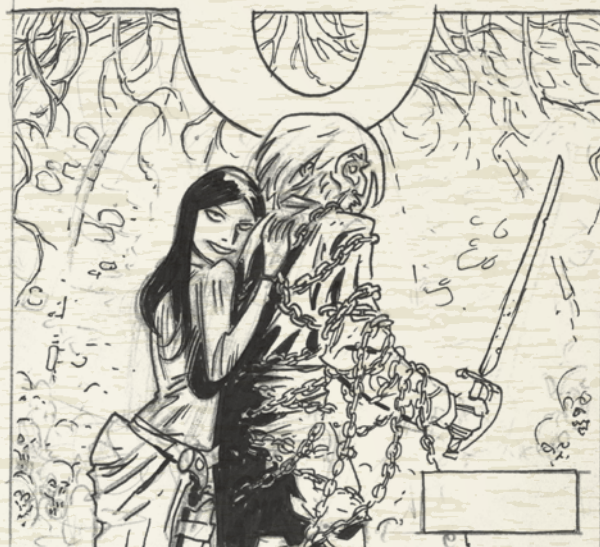




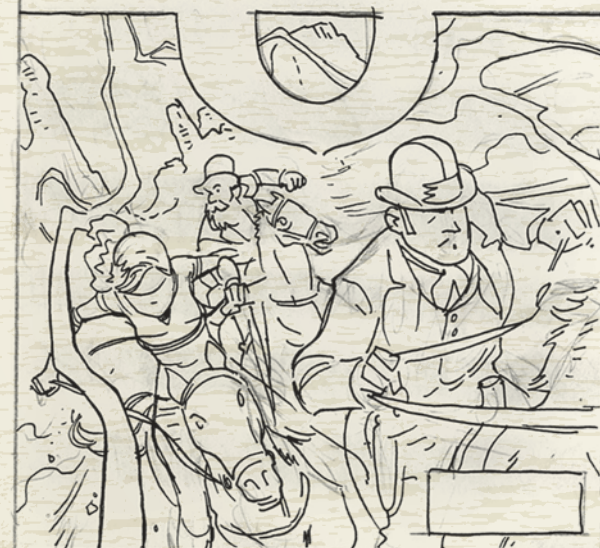
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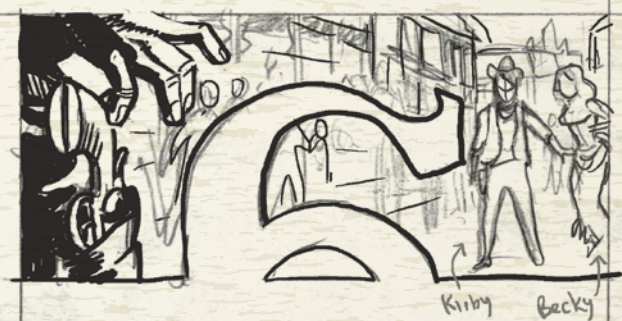
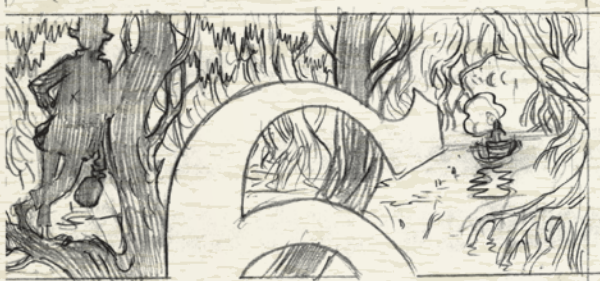
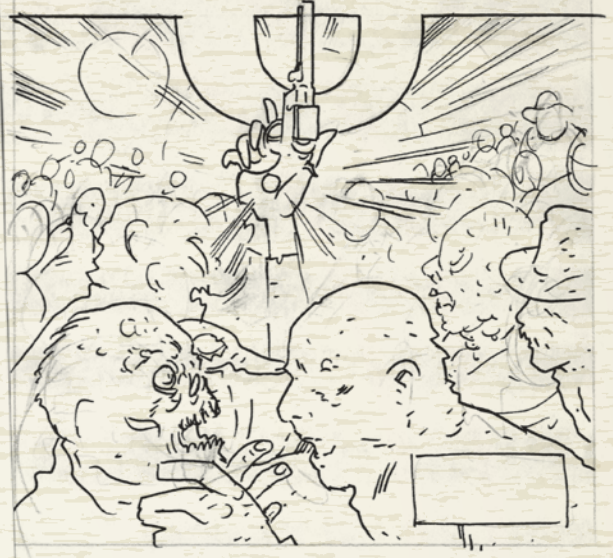


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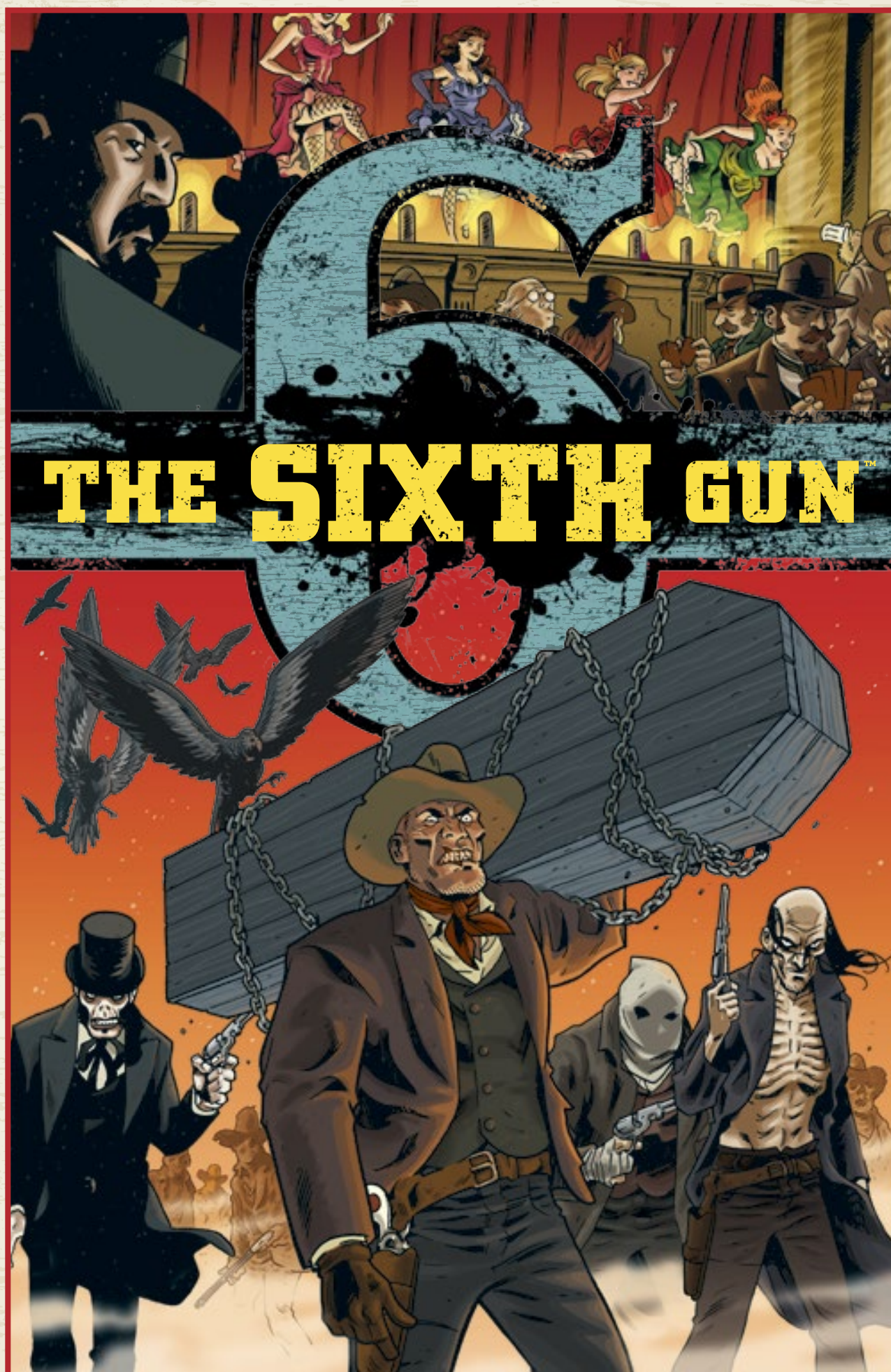
Cover roughs for issues #2-5  
by Brian Hurtt





Cover roughs for issues #5-7  
by Brian Hurtt





Issue #2

Illustrated and colored by Brian Hurtt

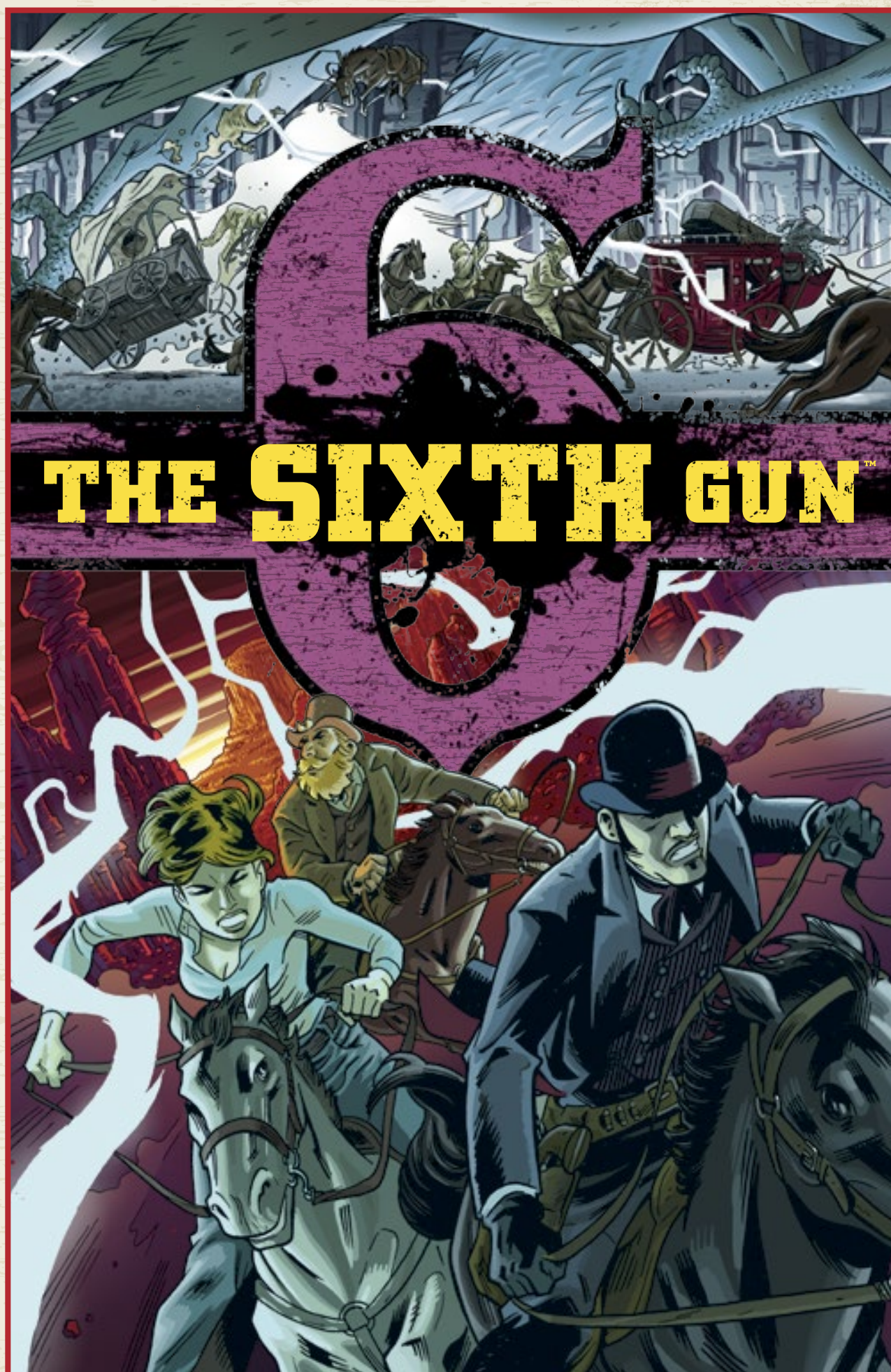




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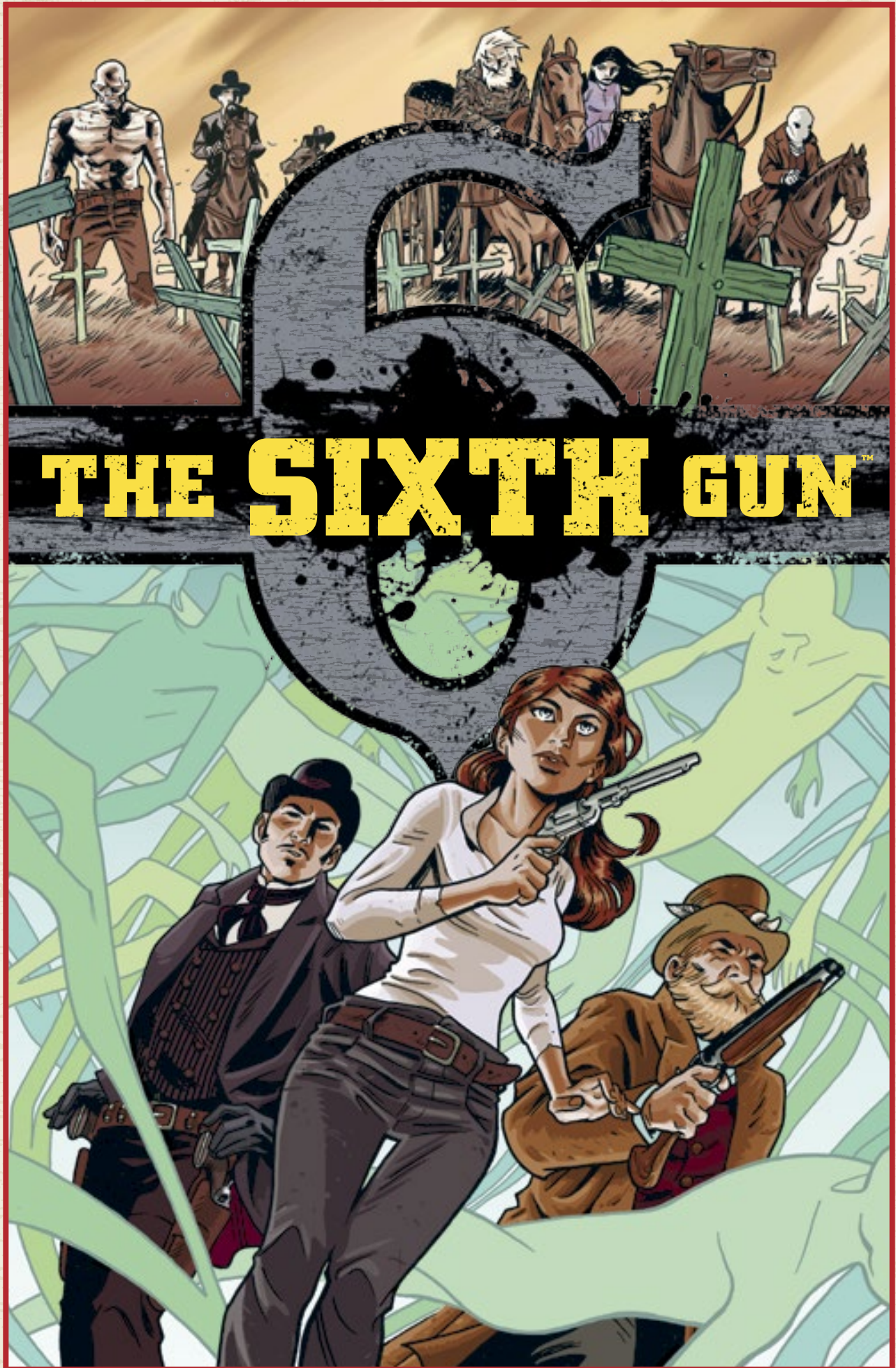




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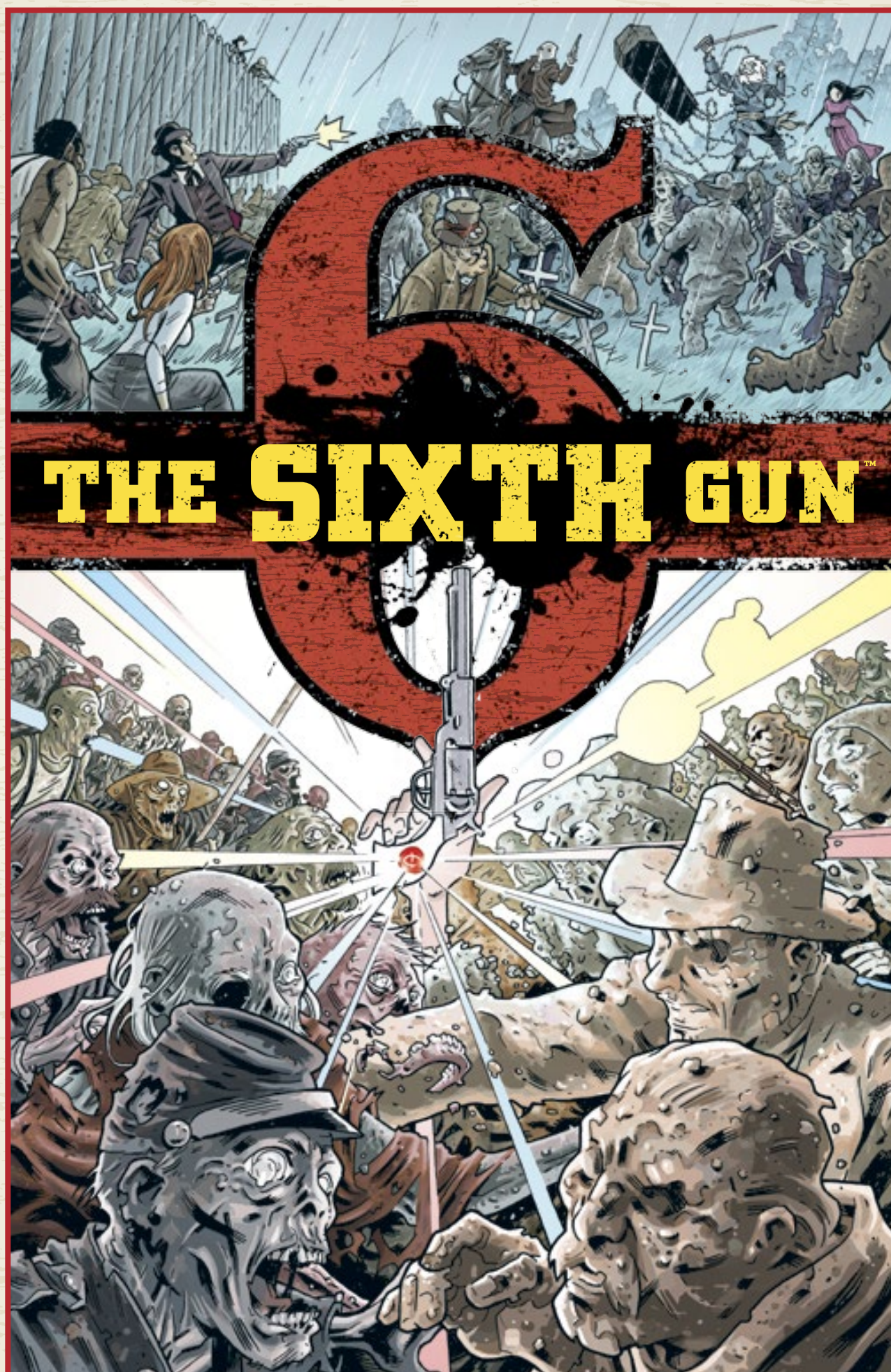




Issue #5

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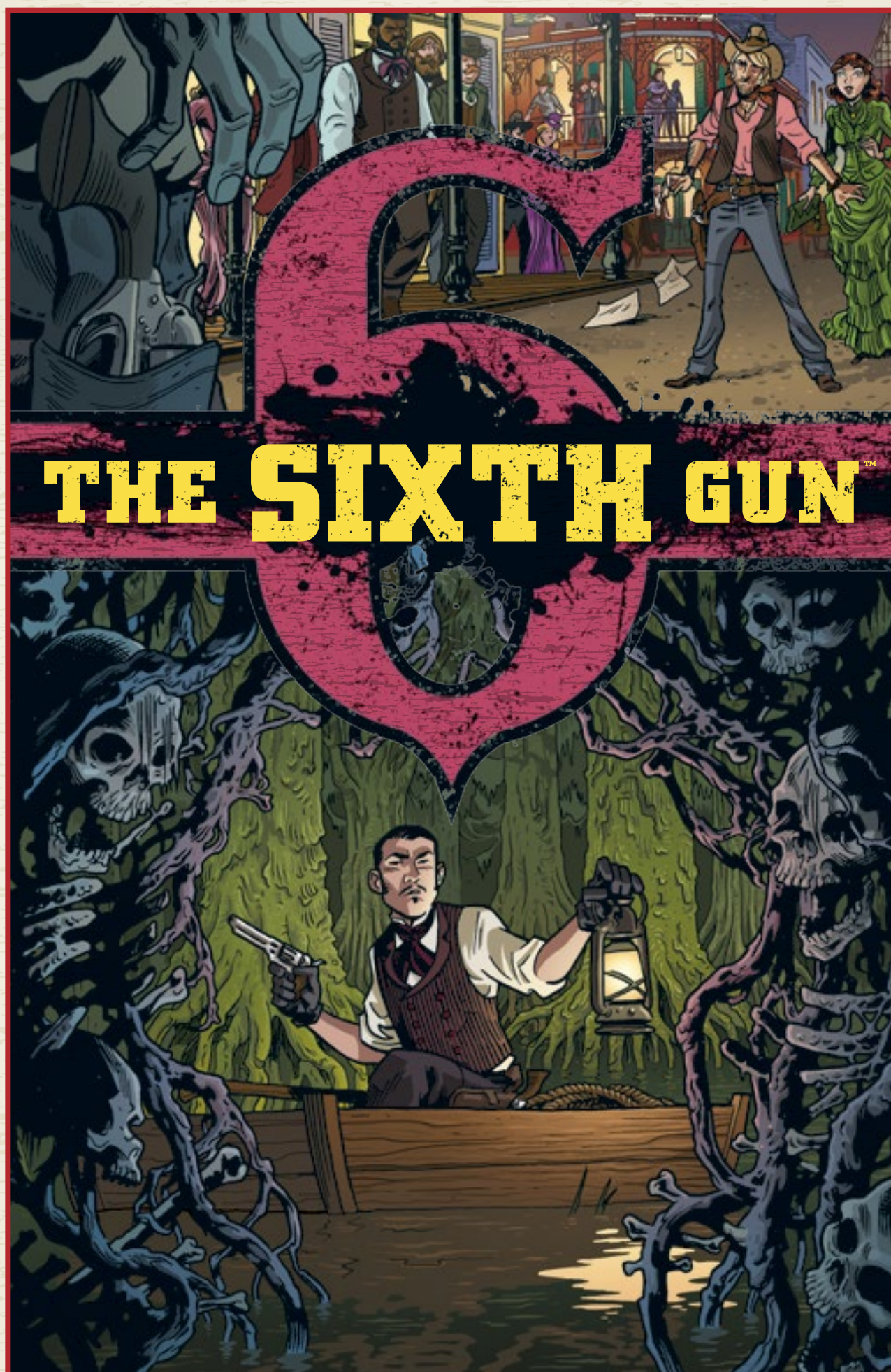




Issue #6

Illustrated and colored by Brian Hurtt



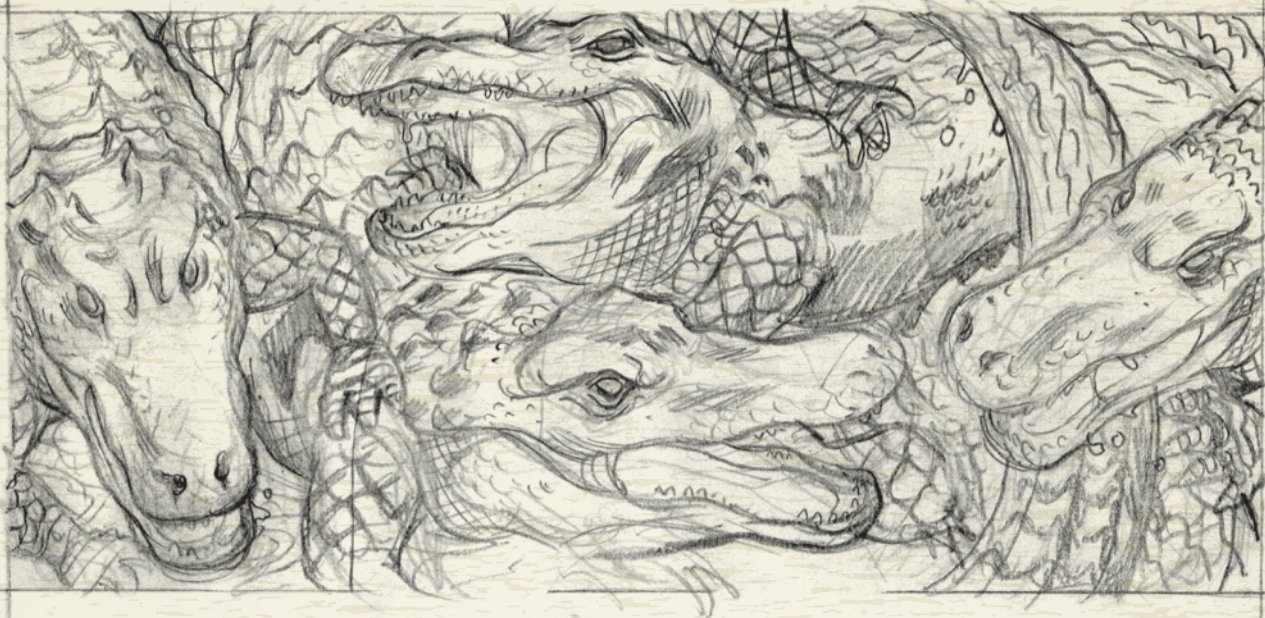


Issue #7

Illustrated and colored by Brian Hurtt



glowing eyes?



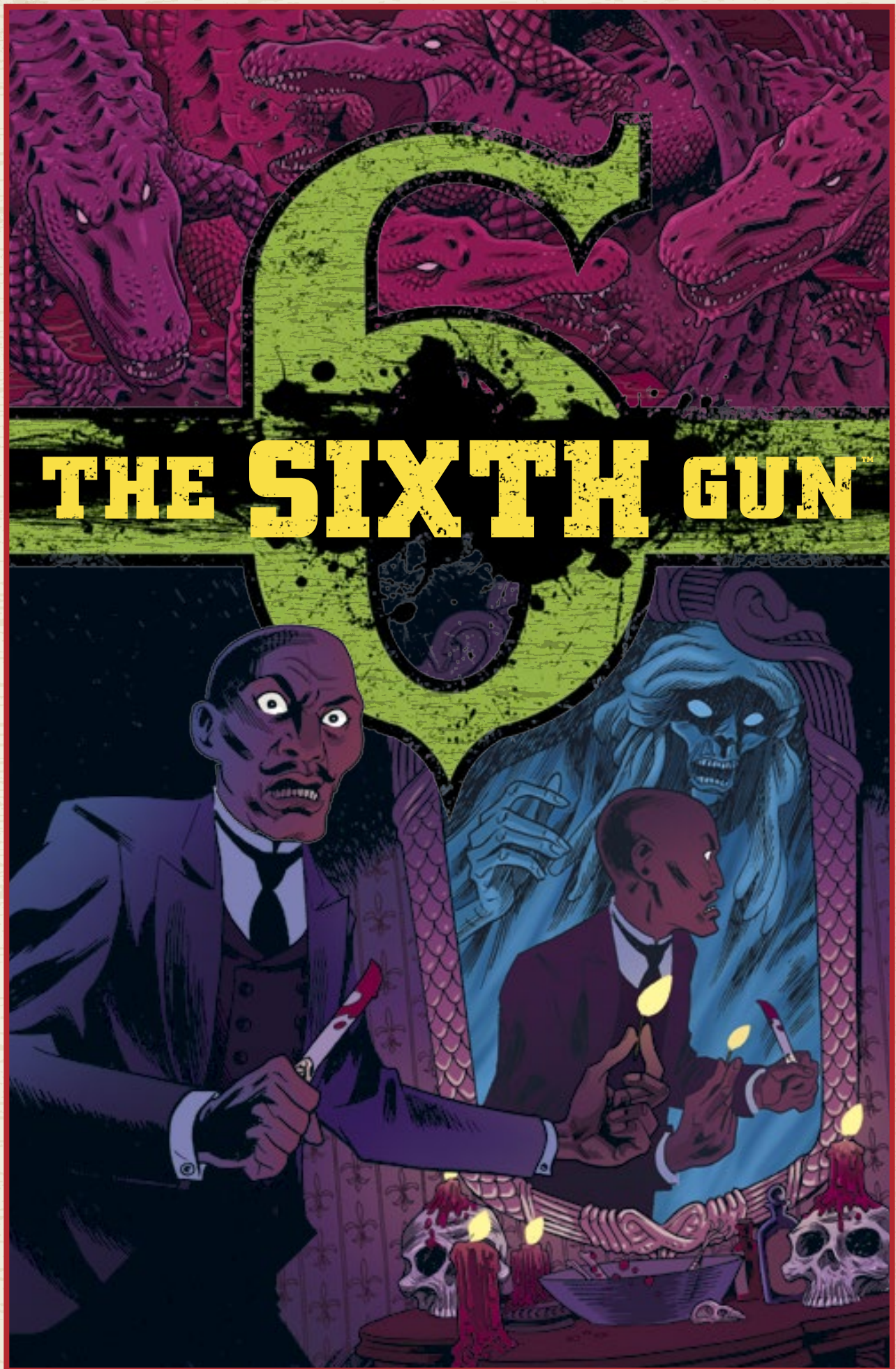
bump  
him  
↑  
and  
←



Issue #8

Rough cover design





Issue #8

Illustrated and colored by Brian Hurtt

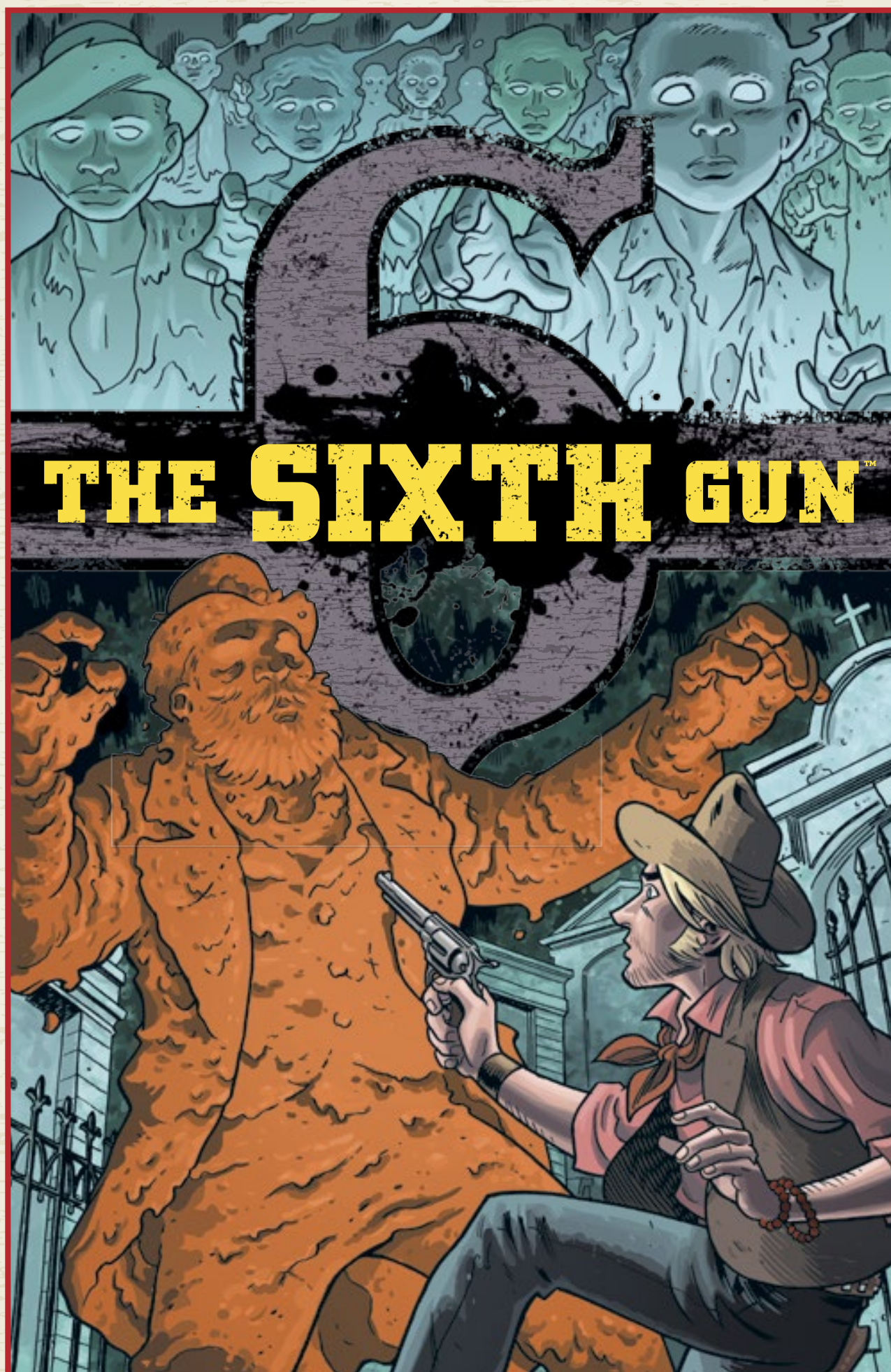




Issue #9

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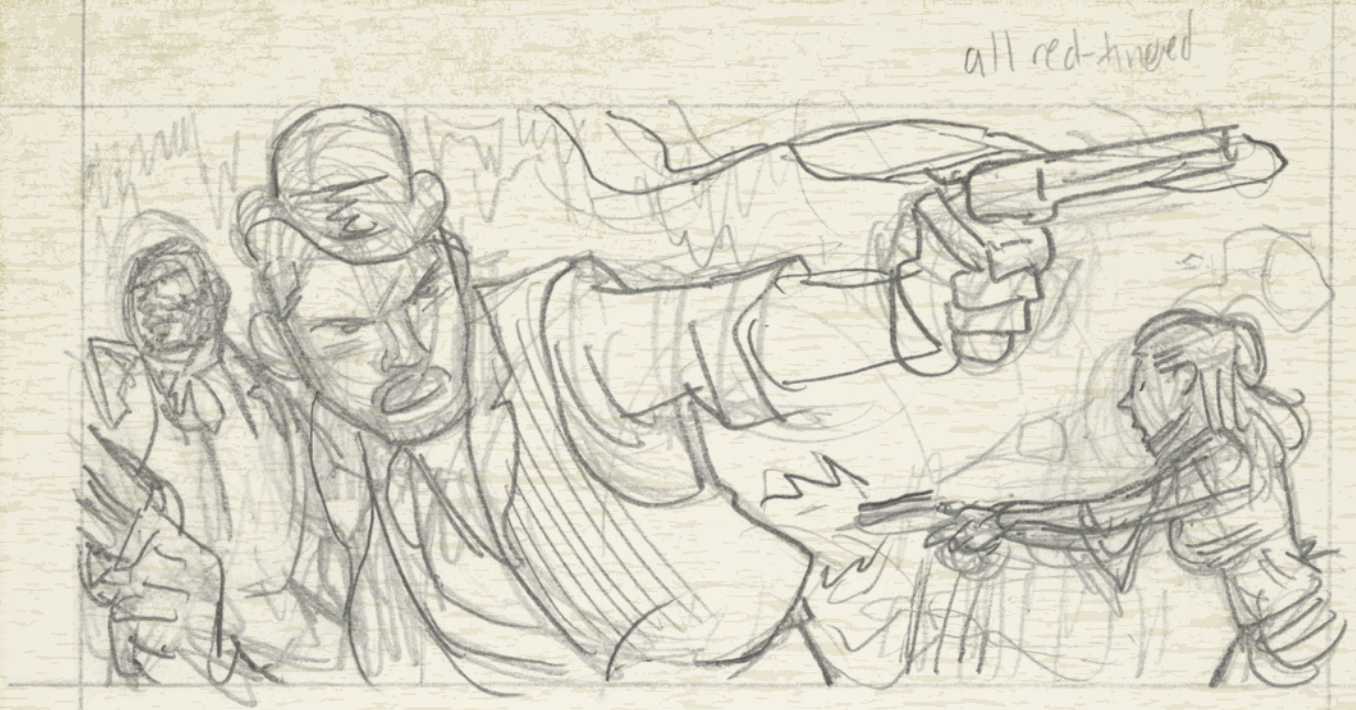




Issue #10

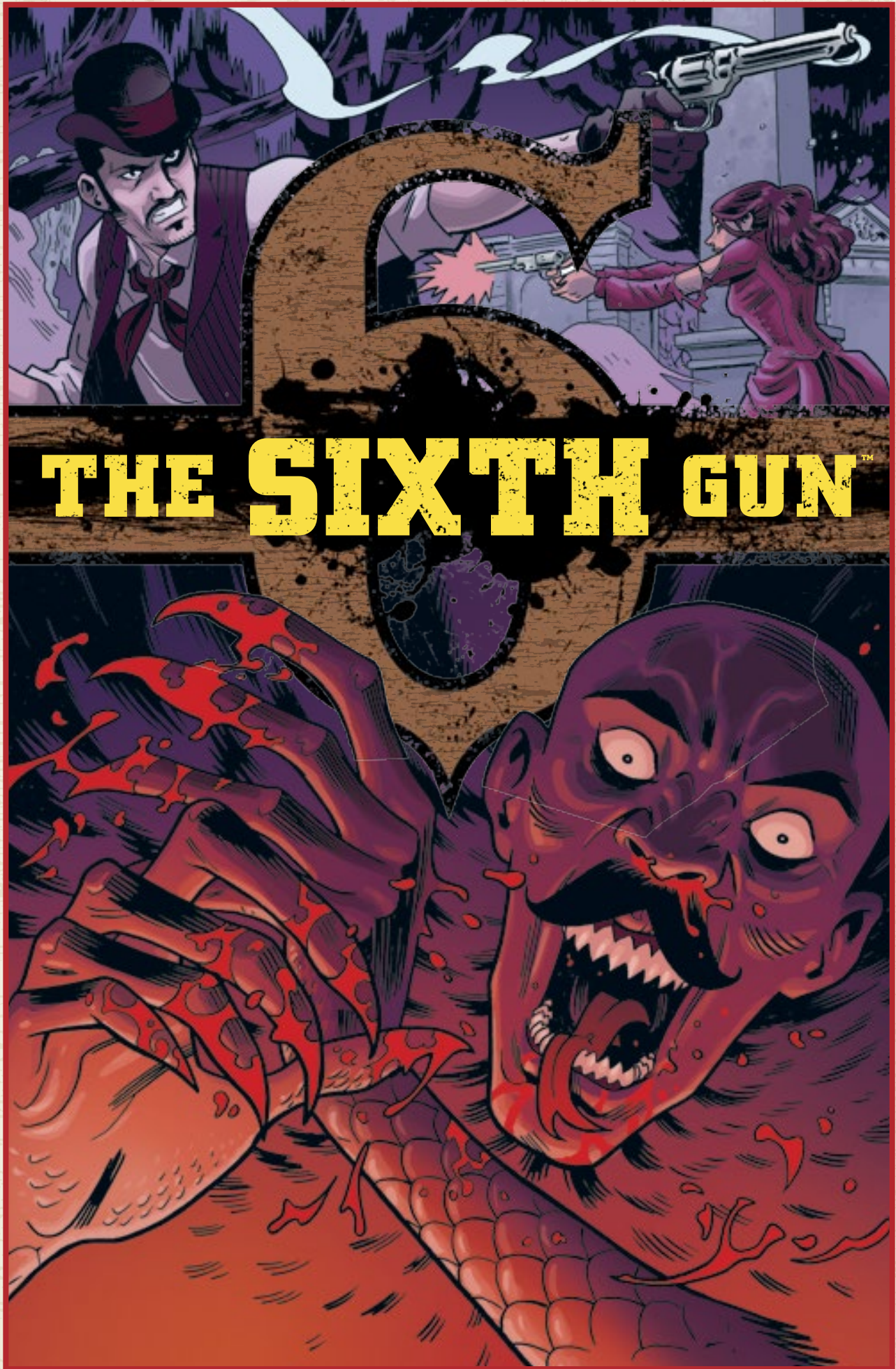
Illustrated and colored by Brian Hurtt





Issue #11  
Rough cover layout





Issue #11

Illustrated and colored by Brian Hurtt





*The Sixth Gun* Volume 1: Cold Dead Fingers

Rough sketch

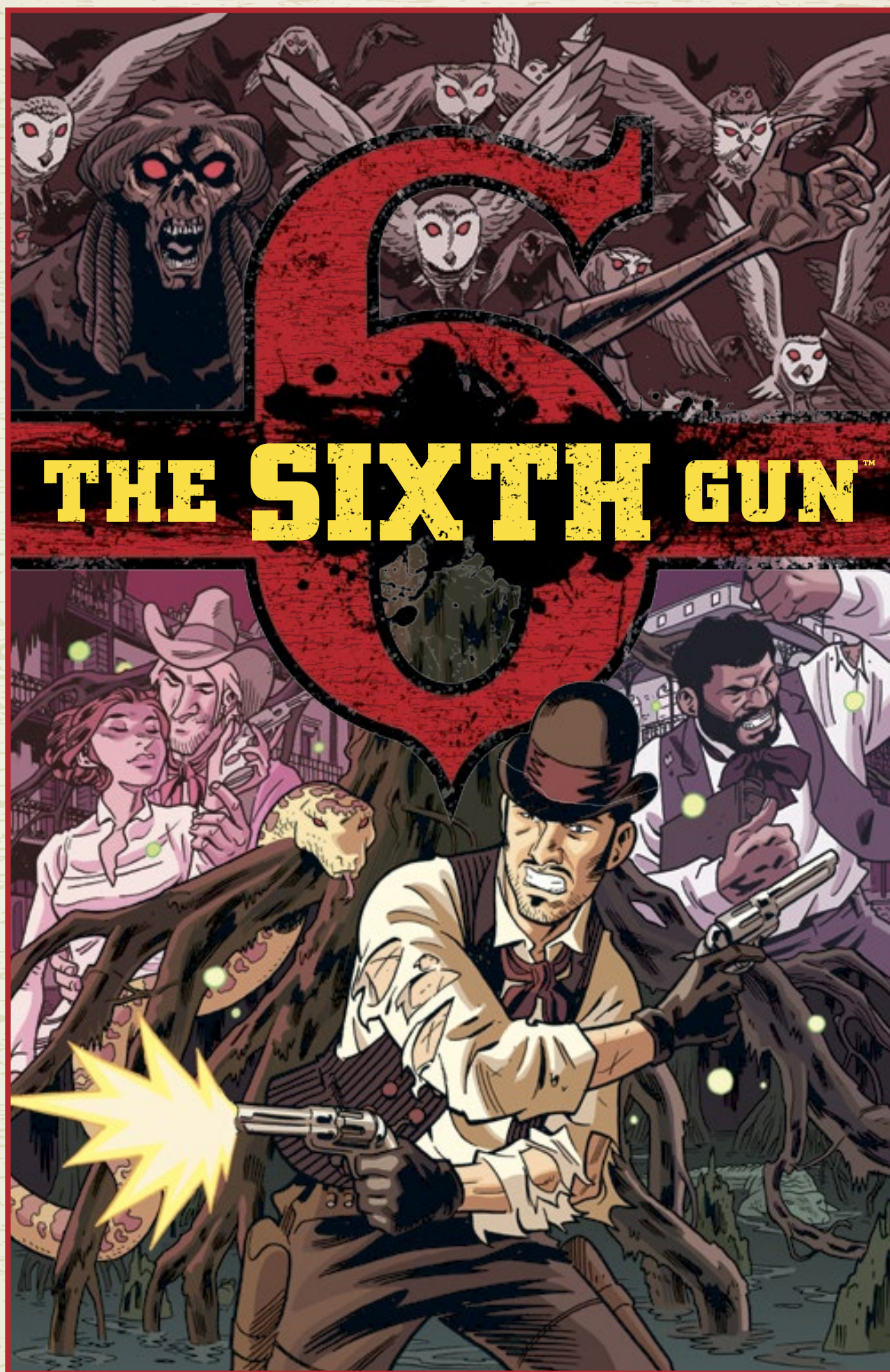




*The Sixth Gun* Volume 1: Cold Dead Fingers

Illustrated and colored by Brian Hurtt





*The Sixth Gun* Volume 2: Crossroads  
Illustrated by Brian Hurtt and colored by Bill Crabtree





## ARTWORK FROM THE ORIGINAL PITCH

The following pages contain original artwork illustrated and colored by Brian Hurtt for *The Sixth Gun* as it was being pitched to Oni Press. These pieces served not only as sample artwork, but also as proof of concept for *The Sixth Gun*'s tone and atmosphere.

In the course of development, the stories and characters and concepts have evolved from the versions seen here to the series as it is currently being read.

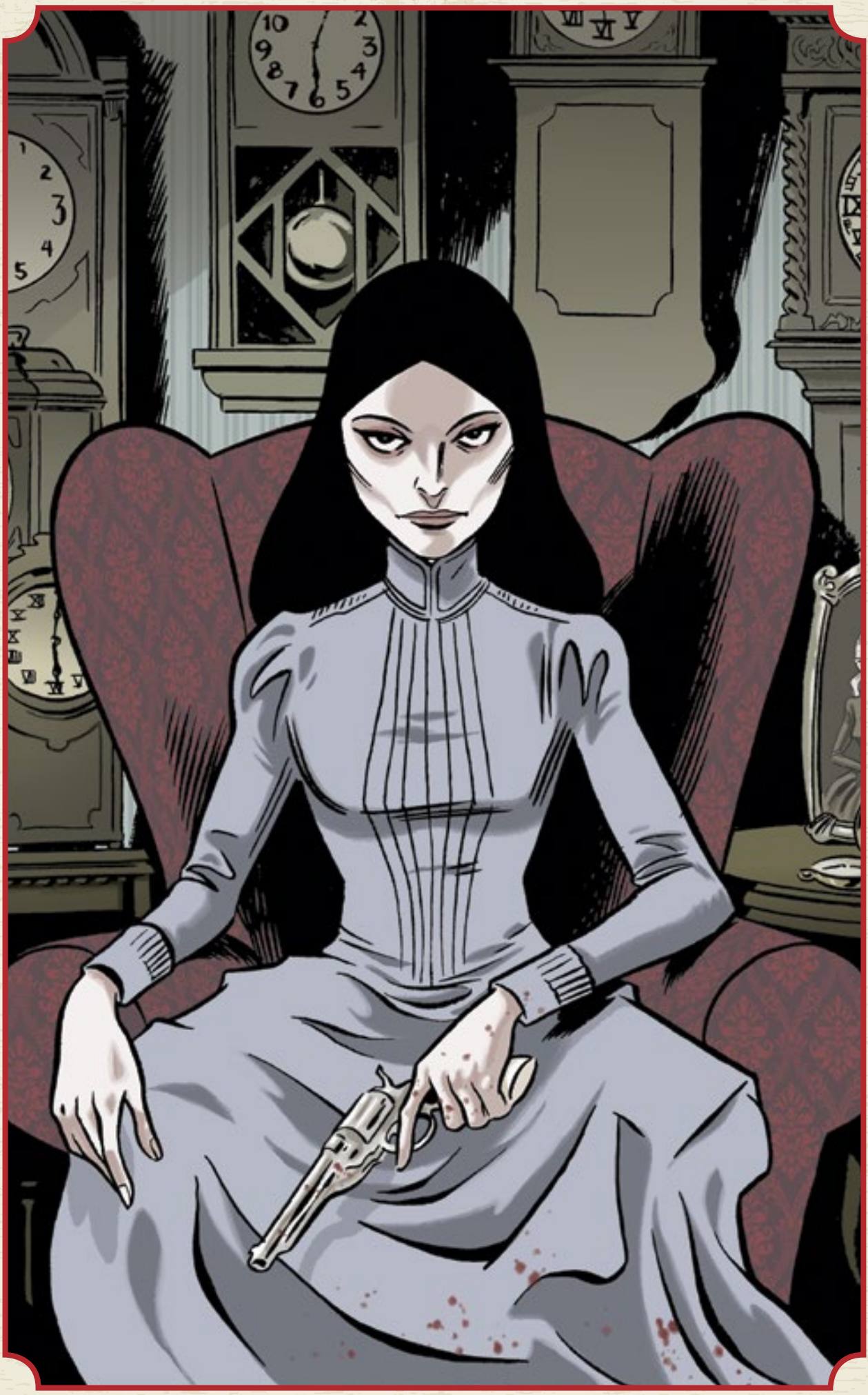




























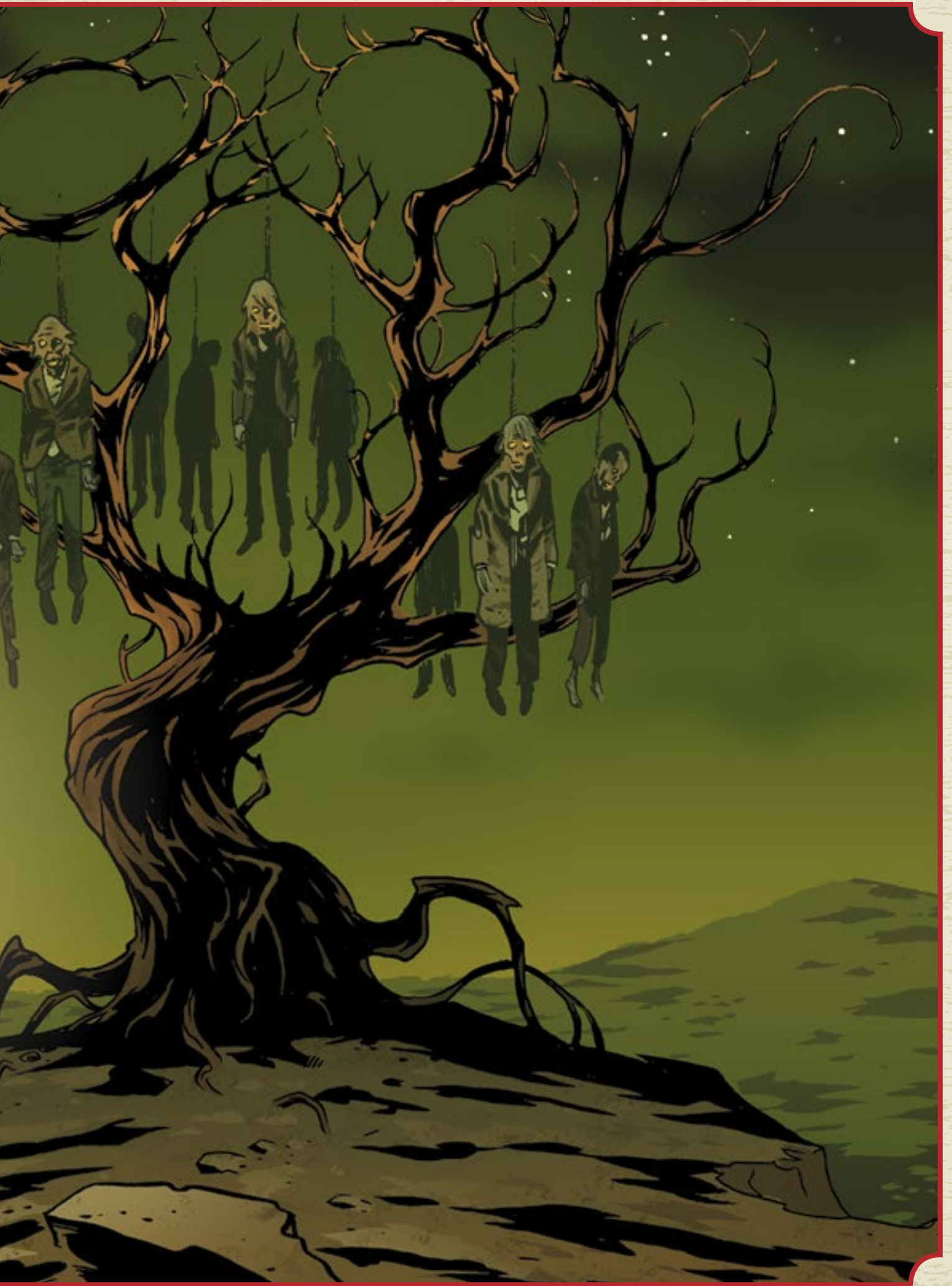




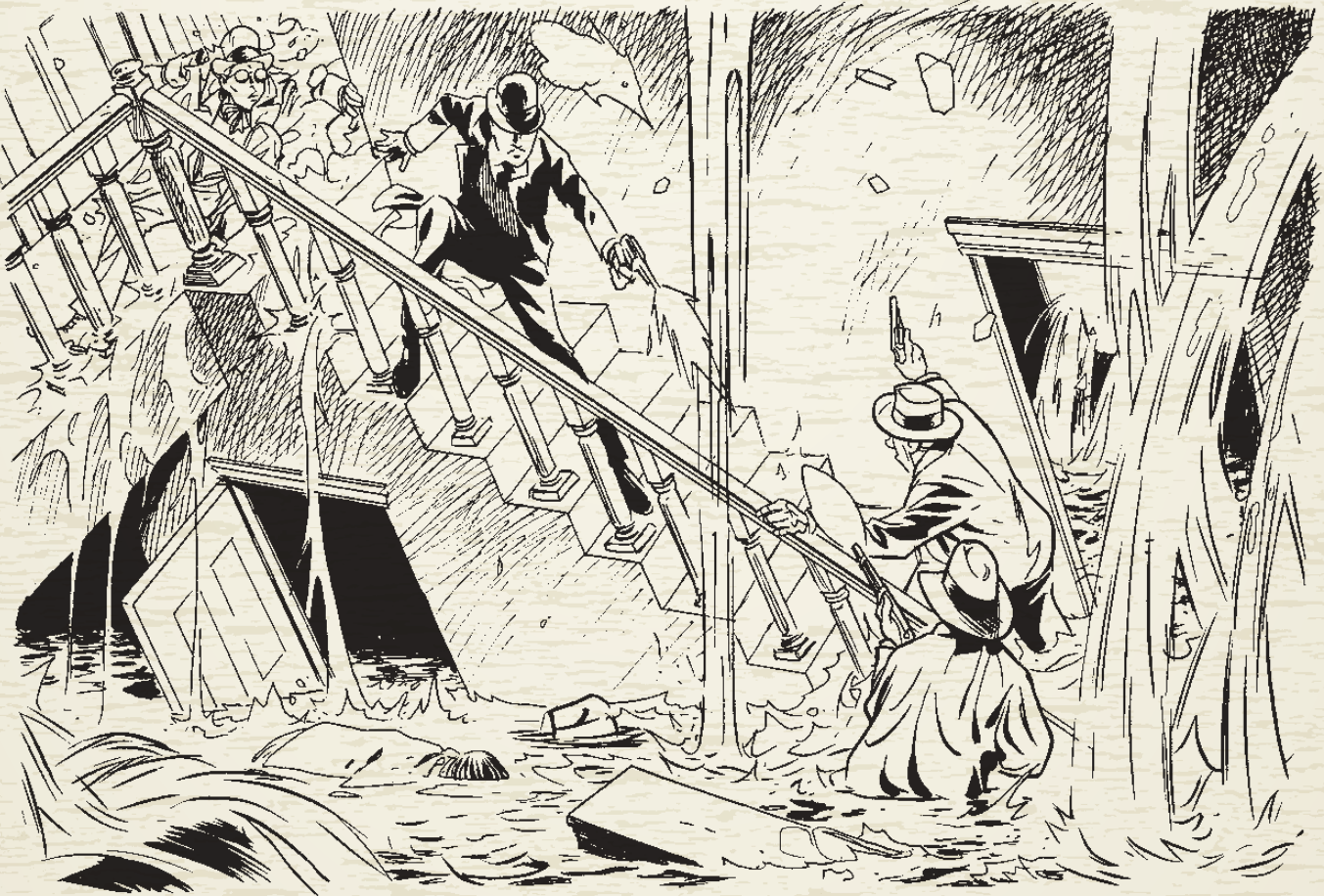














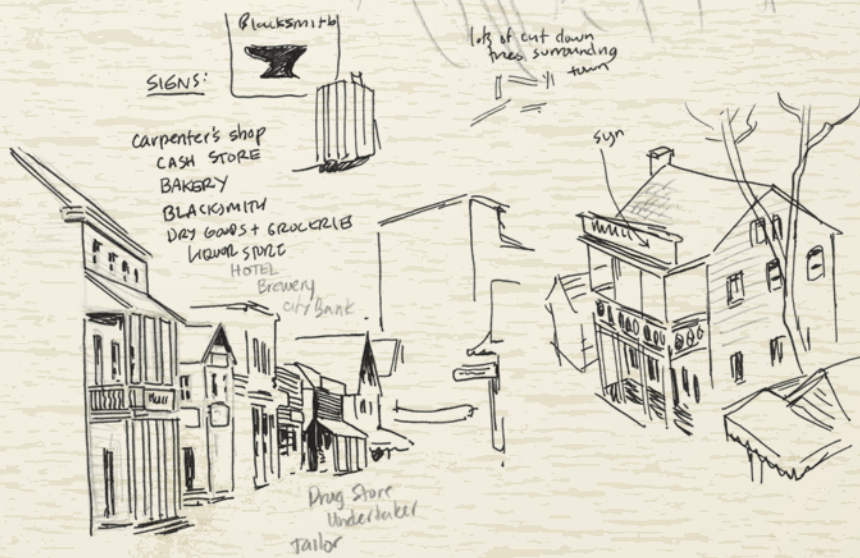
# the SIXTH GUN



## PRODUCTION ARTWORK

The following pages contain production sketches, designs and various artwork by Brian Hurtt.













What if he's this  
country boy that  
has travelled the  
world. Maybe he's  
picked up transcendental  
meditation or is a  
practicing Buddhist.  
(could be fun trying  
to reconcile that w/  
being a gunslinger).

Maybe he lives very  
clean. No alcohol.  
No tobacco. Nothing  
that might dim his  
senses.  
He's a tracker.



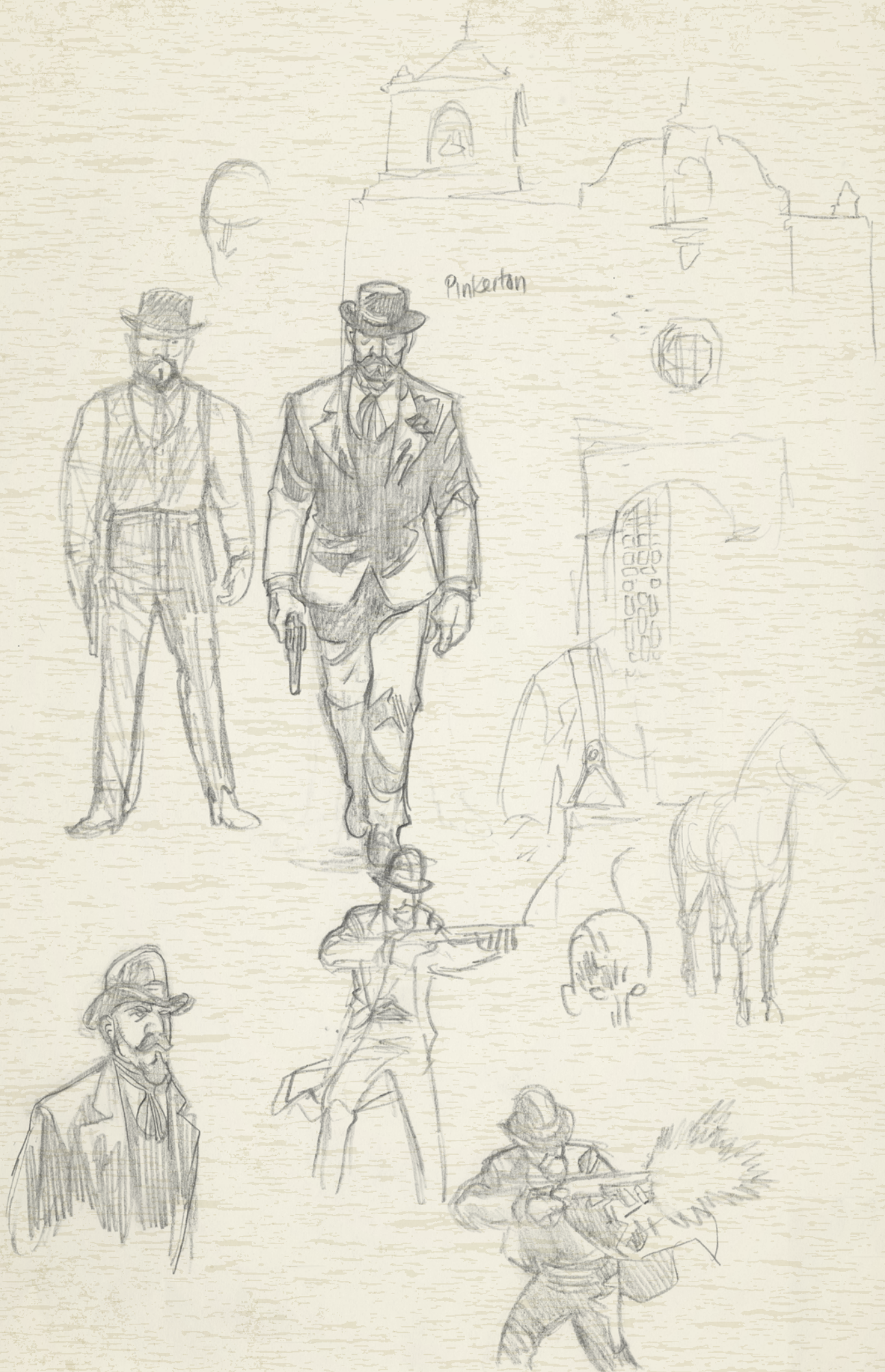








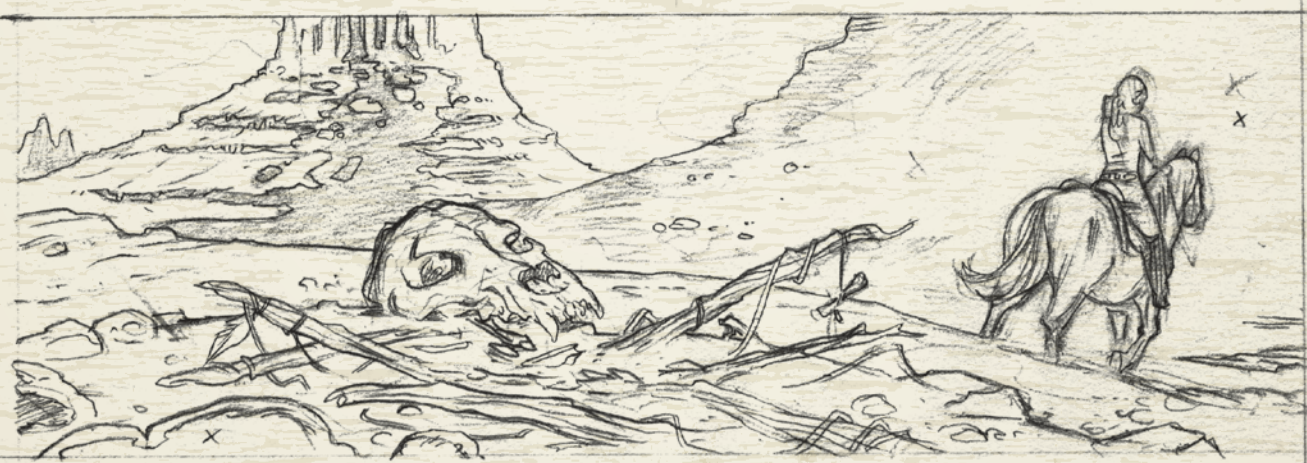
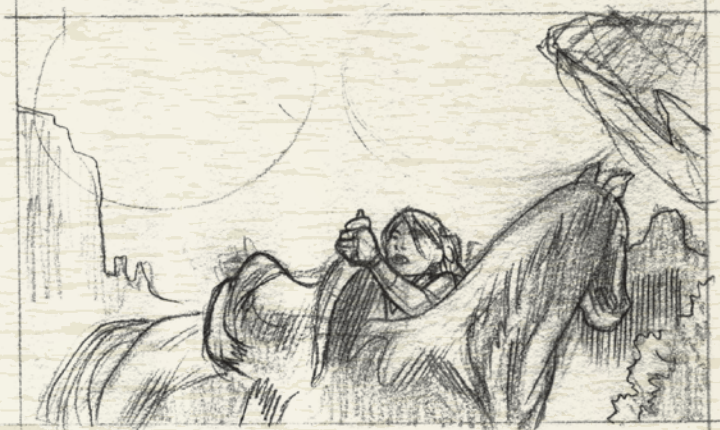




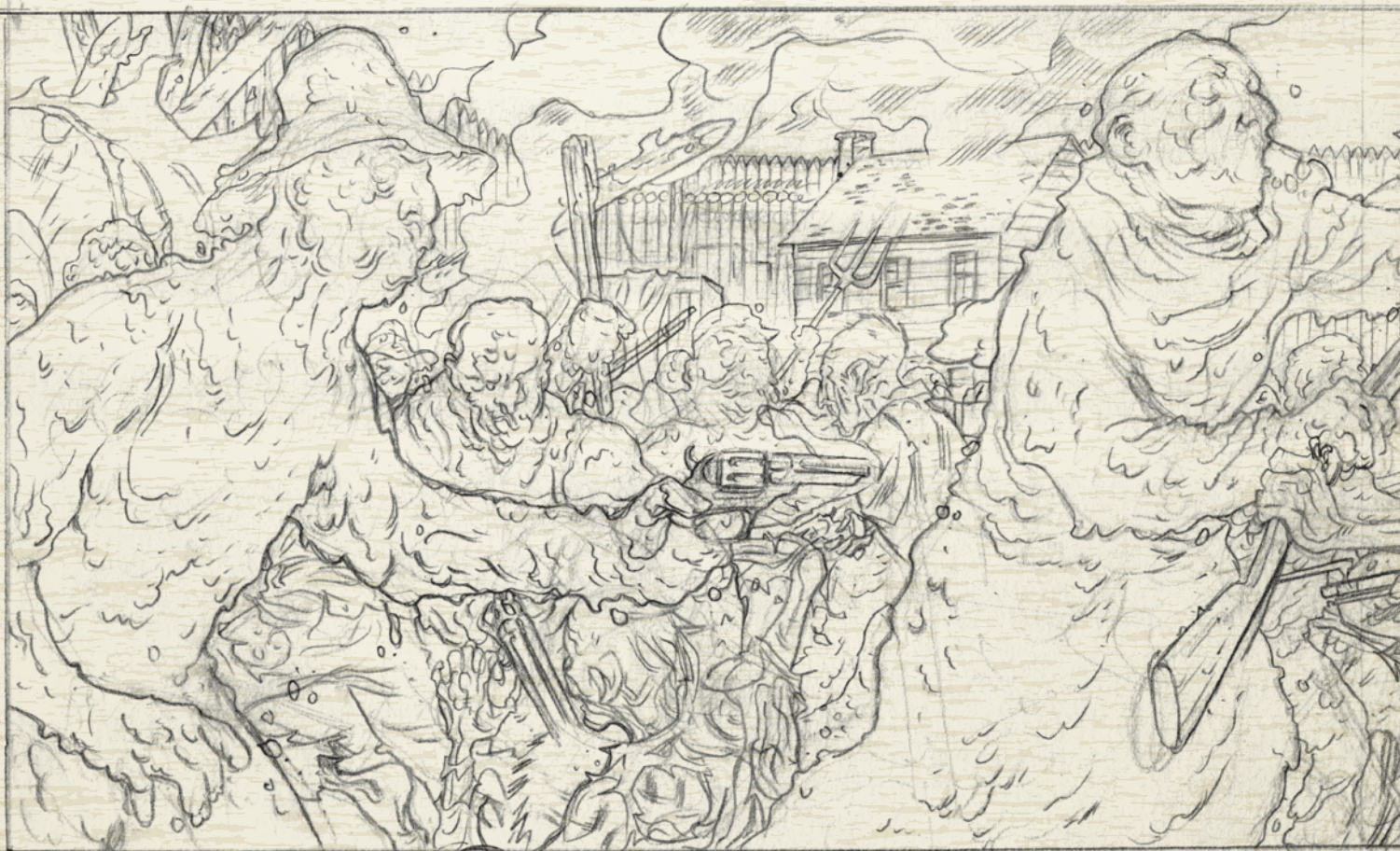
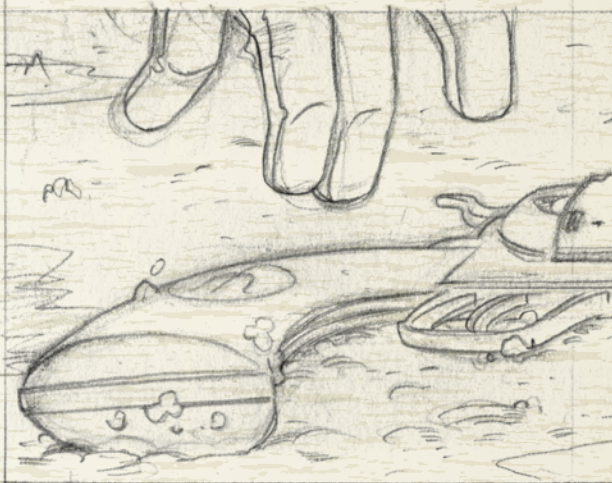
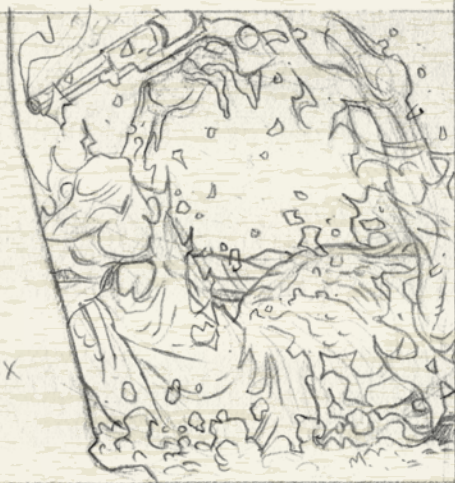
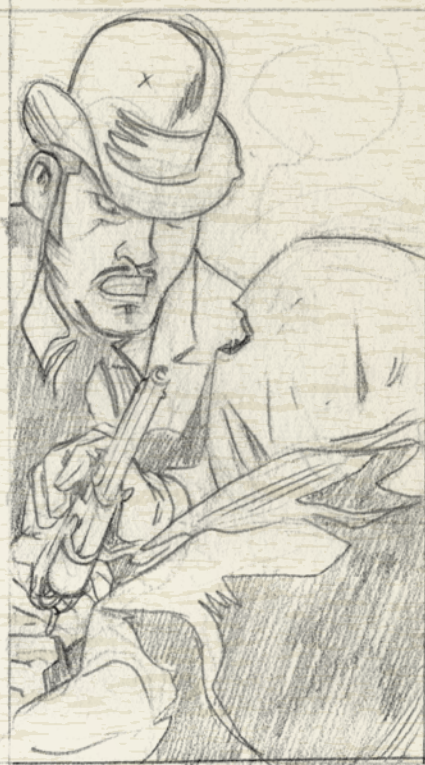




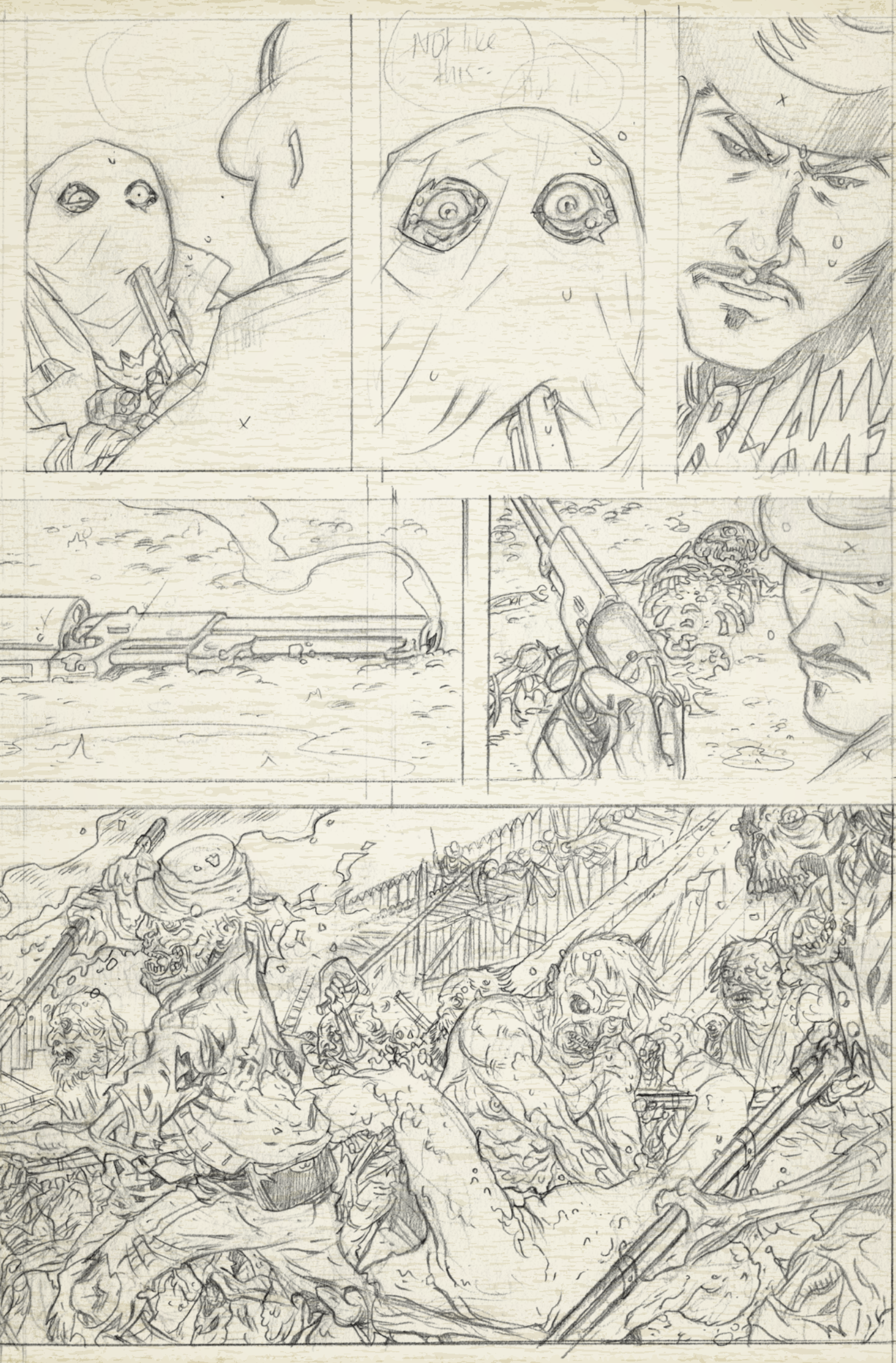






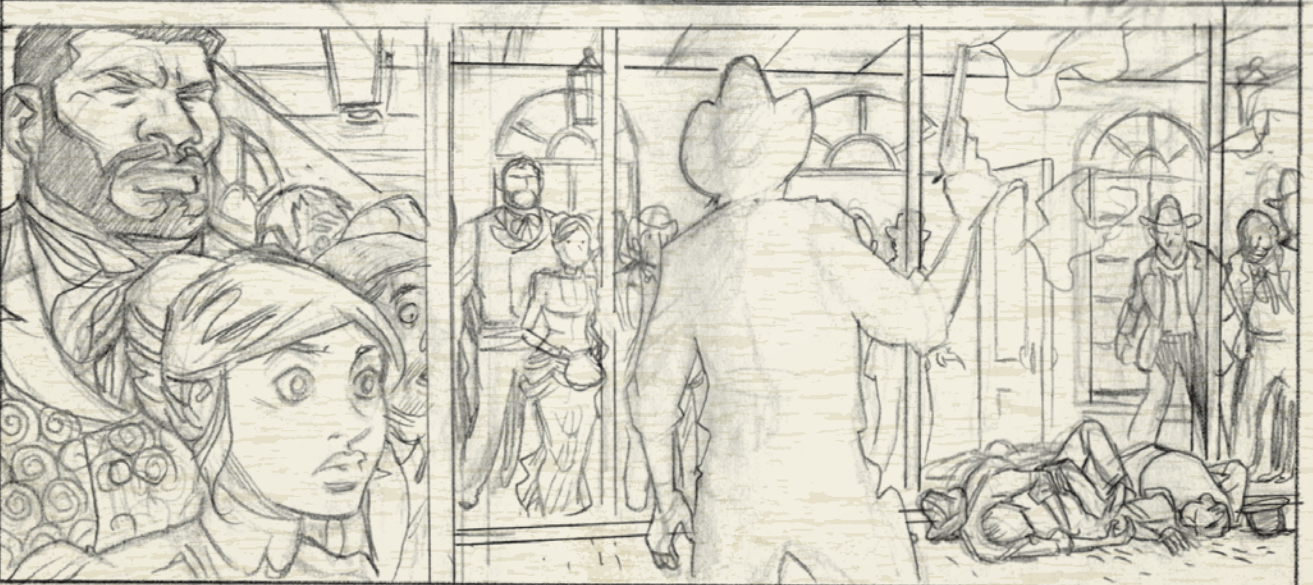
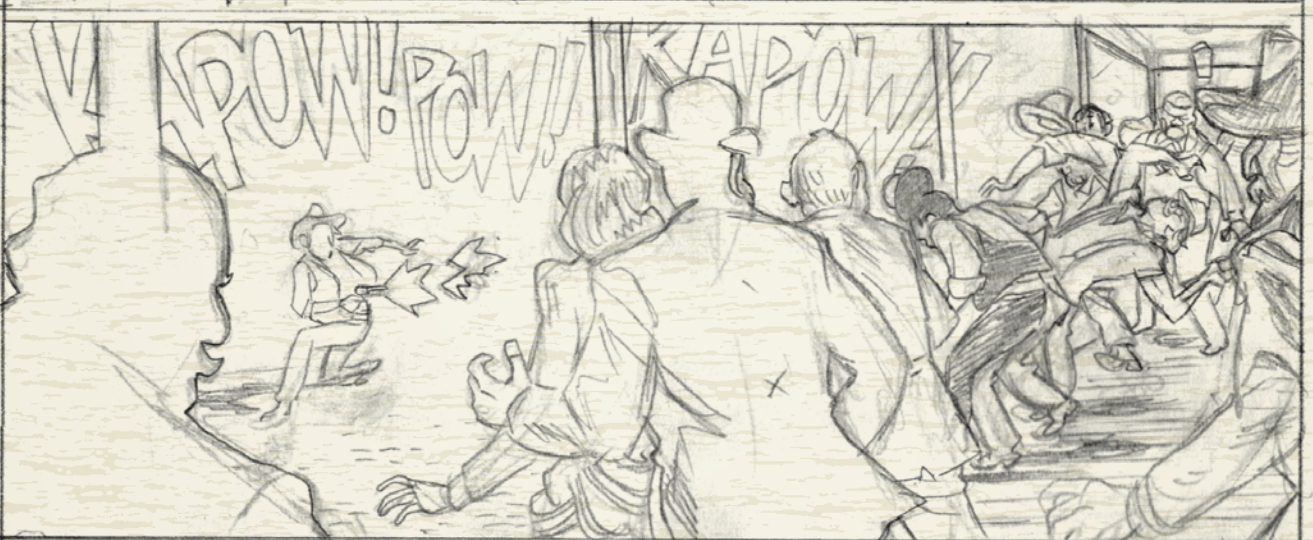
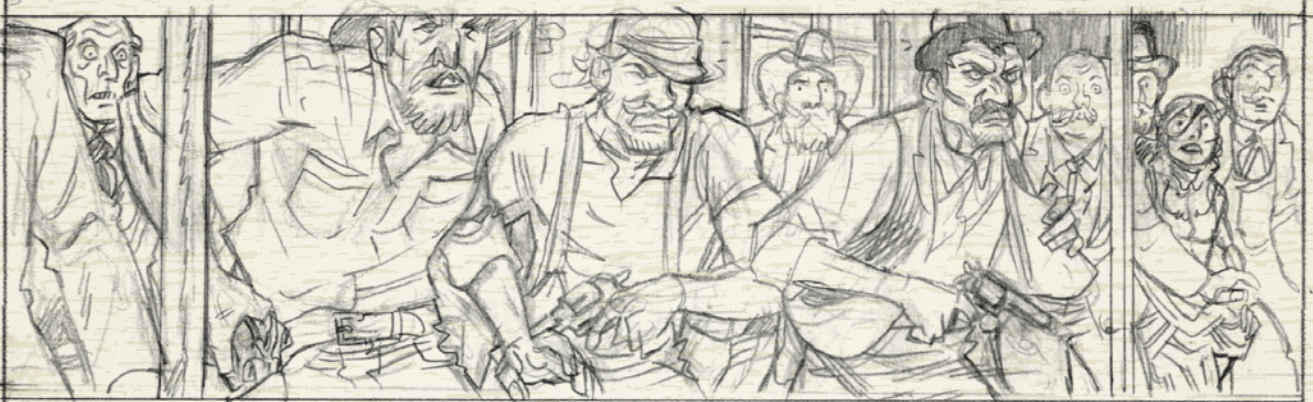
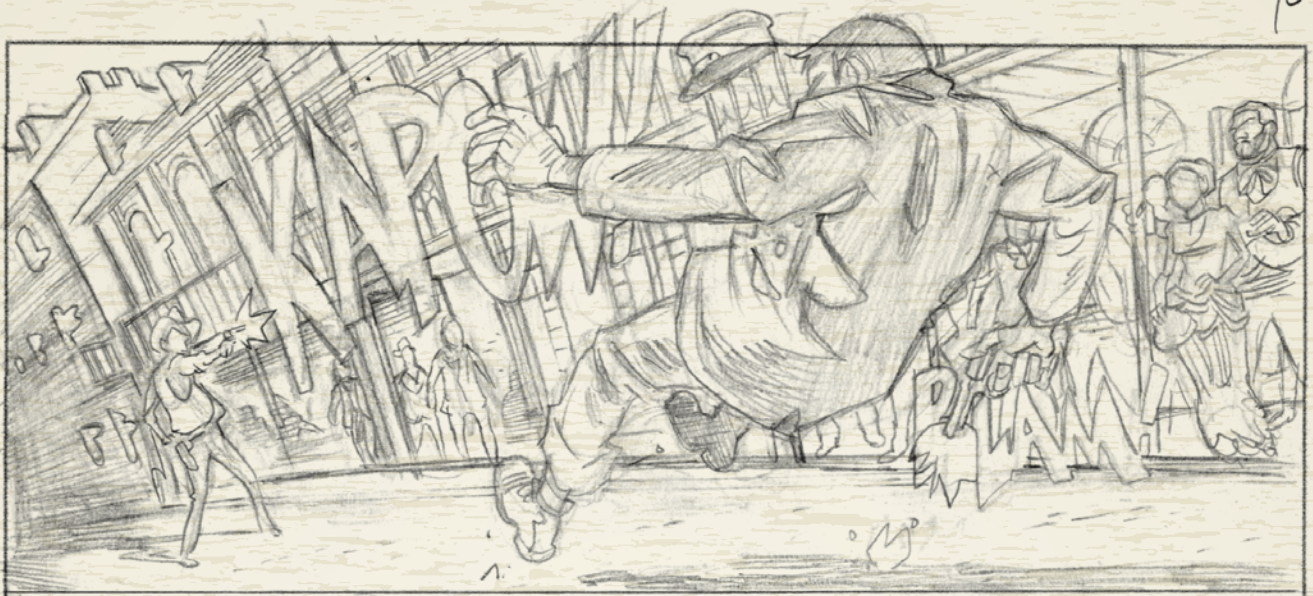




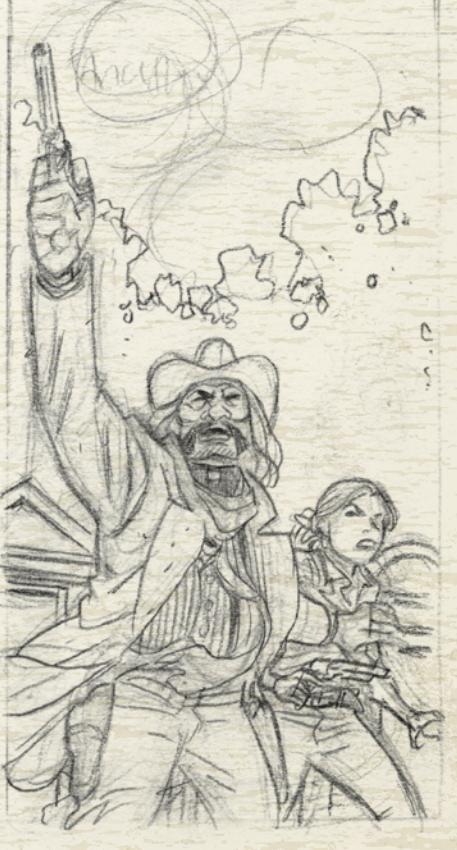
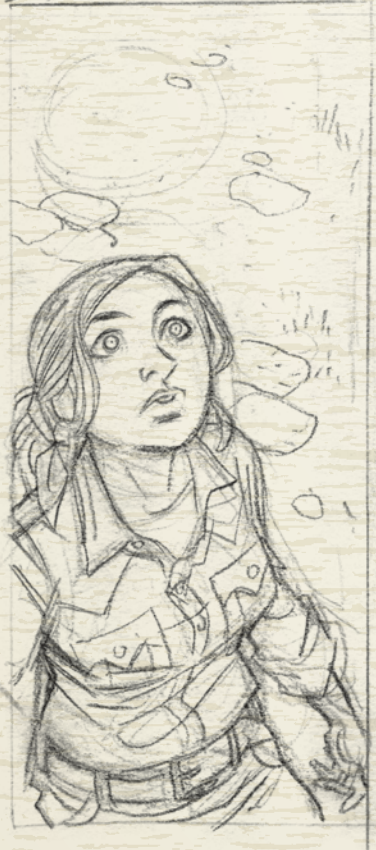




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Art Print for Challenger's Comics in Chicago, Illinois.  
illustrated and colored by Brian Hurtt





Photo by Charlie Cbu

**CULLEN BUNN** is the writer of comic books such as *The Sixth Gun*, *Helheim*, *The Damned*, and *The Tooth* for Oni Press. He has also written titles including *Fearless Defenders*, *Venom*, *Deadpool Killustrated*, and *Wolverine* for Marvel Comics.

In addition, he is the author of the middle reader horror novel, *Crooked Hills*, and the collection of short fiction, *Creeping Stones and Other Stories*.

His prose work has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. Somewhere along the way, he founded Undaunted Press and edited the critically acclaimed horror zine *Whispers From The Shattered Forum*.

Cullen claims to have worked as an Alien Autopsy Specialist, Rodeo Clown, Pro Wrestling Manager, and Sasquatch Wrangler. He has fought for his life against mountain lions and performed on stage as the World's Youngest Hypnotist. Buy him a drink sometime, and he'll tell you all about it.

His website is [cullenbunn.com](http://cullenbunn.com).

You can find him on Twitter at @cullenbunn.





**BRIAN HURT** got his start in comics working on Greg Rucka's *Queen & Country*. This was followed by art duties on several projects including *Three Strikes*, *Queen & Country: Declassified*, and Steve Gerber's critically acclaimed series *Hard Time*.

In 2006, Brian teamed with Cullen Bunn to create the Prohibition-era monster-noir sensation *The Damned*. The two found that their unique tastes and storytelling sensibilities were well-suited to one another and were eager to continue that relationship.

*The Sixth Gun* is their sophomore endeavor together and the next in what looks to be many years of creative collaboration.

Brian lives and works in St. Louis, Missouri.

His website is [brihurt.com](http://brihurt.com).

You can find him on Twitter at @brihurt.





Photo by Charlie Chu

**BILL CRABTREE'S** career as a colorist began in 2003 with the launch of Image Comics' *Invincible* and *Firebreather*. His work on the flagship Image Comics title, *Invincible*, for which he colored the first 50 issues, earned him a Harvey Awards nomination. He continues to color *Firebreather*, which was recently made into a feature film on Cartoon Network, *Godland*, and *Jack Staff*.

Perhaps the highlight of his comics career, his role as colorist on *The Sixth Gun* began with issue six, and has since been described as "like Christmas morning, but with guns."

You can find him on Twitter at @crabtree\_bill.





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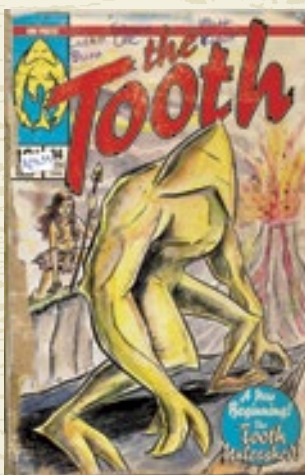
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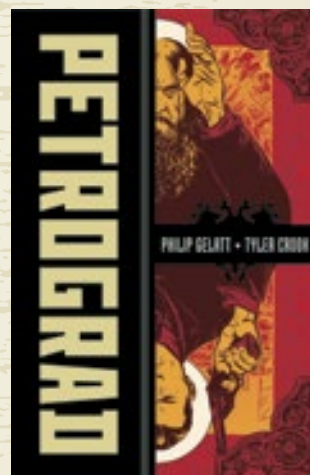
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