

# BEELZEBUB JONES

## THE FORSAKEN TERRITORY



SHORT STORY BY

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## BEELZEBUB'S VISION

*Ten years later...*

Stars twinkled like fragments of broken glass on black velvet as Beelzebub Jones stared through whisky-dulled eyes at camp fire flame-demons vanishing into the Badlands sky.

A lonesome coyote howl echoed around the canyon. Beelzebub Jones blinked slowly, grunted and reached again for the stone jug. As the last drops of harsh liquor splashed into his mouth, the jug fell from his hand and he collapsed sideways and began to snore.

Next morning, wisps of tired smoke were all that remained of the fire, and as Beelzebub Jones groaned and dragged himself upright, he relived the dream-vision that had invaded his stupor.

His fingers rasped over chin stubble as he stared into the middle-distance and recalled the vivid, complex and glorious images of horror, destruction and wanton savagery that had filled his consciousness with screams of torment.

Thrilled beyond measure, he knew that his apocalyptic vision of annihilation was no mere whisky-induced hallucination. This was a portent of things to come, a prophecy of ultimate obliteration at which he would be at the forefront.

"About damn time," he growled to no one. "Things've been too quiet lately."

As he replayed the images he recalled a figure, a vague, featureless, charcoal-sketch representation dancing around the periphery with stiff-legged, spastic movements as he incanted the message.

The message.

Beelzebub Jones frowned. What was the message?

Inhaling deeply, he closed his eyes and drifted back into the dream state, waiting patiently until the figure wisped once more into his periphery.

"Chapel of Bones," it whispered. "Your destiny lies in the Chapel of Bones."

The mustang's snort brought him back to reality. Beelzebub Jones smiled. Next to the campfire lay his battered leather saddle. Unhooking the water canteen from the pommel, he retrieved his Stetson from the desert floor.

Once a striking piebald, thousands of moonlit transformations had faded the mustang's distinctive black and white markings to a ghost-like paleness. The horse slurped noisily as Beelzebub Jones, still reliving fragments of his vision, stroked its mane, his fingers caressing the pock-marked scar at the base of its neck.

The Stetson flew from Beelzebub Jones' hand as the mustang jerked its muzzle and stamped its hoof.

"Ornery ol' bastard, ain't ya?" he growled. "But you're still the best damn horse I ever had."

Minutes later they were good to go. Beelzebub Jones cinched the girth strap, took a final look around the campsite, steadied the mustang and then swung himself onto the saddle.

The only way out of the Badlands was to head east through Redemption Valley. The closest thing to civilisation was a town called Trinity, about four hours away. He figured that was as good a place to start as anywhere.

It was good to have a plan.

Beelzebub Jones adjusted his Stetson, guided the mustang around to point its head eastwards, and then spurred its flanks.

## THE PREACHER

The Church of St. Barnabas was a broken-down wooden building about a mile or so from Trinity. Faded white paint flaked like a skin disease from its rotting structure, and as Beelzebub Jones rode near, the cross at the top of the sagging spire canted over to the left, and slid down the wooden shingles to land upside-down next to an ancient, wind-scored tombstone.

"That happens a lot," he said.

Beelzebub Jones dismounted and tied the mustang to a fence post. Instinctively, his right hand moved to his gun belt, his thumb hooking over the handle of the Colt .45 as he stepped cautiously towards the half-opened church door and then paused in the doorway, waiting for his eyes to adjust from the bleaching sunlight to the darkness of the interior.

"I heard ye' coming along the road," slurred an Irish voice. "Ye may as well come on inside."

Beelzebub Jones pushed open the church door. Sunlight washed in to reveal six rows of pews, separated by a narrow aisle leading to the altar, against which a grizzled old man in ragged priests' vestments lay slumped, necking from a bottle of cheap whisky. The priest frowned as he focused, and then raised the bottle in salute.

"If Communion wine is the blood of Christ, then American whisky is the piss of Satan. But sure, beggars can't be choosers." He drained the bottle, and allowed it to slip from his fingers, watching intently as it rolled across the wooden floor.

"Don't suppose ye' have any more about ya?" he slurred.

Beelzebub Jones shook his head. "I'm looking for the Chapel of Bones," he said. "I figured a preacher might know where that is."

The priest sat up. His vague, rheumy eyes suddenly alive with recognition. "I know your face," he said. "I've seen it on Wanted posters. You and your kind go around killing anyone who gets in your way, and spreading fear into the hearts of decent, hard-working people."

Beelzebub Jones raised an eyebrow. "I could say the same about your church," he said. "But I ain't here to bandy words." The priest's face shifted to an expression of low animal cunning. "The Chapel of Bones, ye say? I might have heard of that, but my memory's not what it was. Maybe some money for a little drink might help bring it back?"

The metallic click echoed around the church. The Colt .45, unwavering in Beelzebub Jones' right hand, aimed at the priest's face.

"In my experience, the option of not having a bullet between the eyes has the same effect."

The priest chuckled as he waved a dismissive hand. "Ye think you're the first eejit ever to point a gun at me? Shoot me if you will, I'll go to a better place, and you still won't know. Ye'll find that a bottle, or some coin will be far more persuasive."

"Chapel of Bones, preacher, tell me what you know or I'll walk outta here and leave you bleeding where you lay."

The priest shrugged. And then cleared his throat in a too-loud stage cough, his eyes darting to his left.

Beelzebub Jones' knuckle whitened against the trigger. And then relaxed. "What was that?"

"What was what?" said the priest.

"The noise you tried to cover up. You're hidin' something. Your face looks guiltier than I am."

"I'm hidin' nothin'," said the priest. "This place is full of holes, you heard the wind tryin' to get in, that's all."

Beelzebub Jones looked to the right. Saw the ringbolt in the floor. Saw the outline of the trapdoor. Heard a faint scuffle.

"What's under there?" he said.

The priest shrugged. "A few auld prayer books and bibles. Sure, ye probably heard a rat down there." He paused. "Or a rattlesnake."

His attempt at a grin sealed his fate.

The boom of the Colt .45 mixed with the scream of the priest as the bullet blew his knee apart.

Beelzebub Jones grinned. "Don't want you running off now."

His boots clumped on the wooden floor as he stepped over to the trapdoor. "What's under here, preacher?" he said. "What am I gonna find when I open this up?"

The priest could only moan as he gripped his wounded leg.

Beelzebub Jones cocked his Colt .45, stooped, grasped the ringbolt, lifted the trapdoor and stepped back.

In the void beneath the floor, two small children, a boy and a girl, looked up terrified, blinking at the sudden light, their olive complexions grimy and tear-streaked.

A thousand nightmare images erupted like a cloud of disturbed bats from the subterranean cave of Beelzebub Jones' memory. He looked across to the priest and then back to the children. Kneeling down, he lifted them from the void, his body quivering with rage as he laid them gently on the floor.

"¿Eres mexicano?" he said.

The little girl sniffed, her eyes wary. "Si, señor," she whispered.

"¿Habla usted Inglés?"

She shook her head. "No señor."

"¿estás herido?"

Again, she shook her head. "Estoy bien, pero mi hermano está herido. El cura es un hombre malo."

Beelzebub Jones nodded, and then pointed to the door. "Te mantendré a salvo. Ve afuera y espérame. Mi caballo necesita caricias."

The little girl nodded, took her brother's hand and led him out of the chapel.

When they'd gone, Beelzebub Jones turned to the priest. "I heard tell of some Texas Rangers who went bad," he said. "Heard they liked to ride across the border, kidnapping women and children and bringing them back to sell to anyone with a proclivity for lascivious tendencies."

He knelt down next to the priest. "That little girl, she told me her brother was hurt. She said that you were a bad man. What did you do?"

The priest screamed as Beelzebub Jones pushed the Colt's gun barrel into his damaged knee.

"It was God's will," gasped the priest. "It meant nothing to them, they're just ignorant savages."

Beelzebub Jones pointed the Colt .45 at the priest's face.

"Pray hard, preacher. Your time is over."

"You're the devil himself," spat the priest.

Beelzebub Jones grinned. "No, no I ain't," he said. "But I've been drunk with him, and I've pissed on hell-fire."

And then he shot the priest in the face.

Outside, the children stood in shadow of the mustang.

Beelzebub Jones squatted in front of the little girl. "El sacerdote ya no te hará daño," he said. "¿Cuál es tu nombre?"

"Rosalita," she said.

She pointed to her brother. "Su nombre es Jesús."

Beelzebub Jones sighed. "Of course it is."

He stood upright, lifted them both onto the saddle, untied the reins and led the mustang away from the chapel.

"¿A dónde vamos?" said Rosalita.

Beelzebub Jones turned to look at her. "Te llevaré a una ciudad donde estarás a salvo," he said.

"Gracias Señor," she smiled. "Eres un buen hombre."

Beelzebub Jones turned away. "No," he said. "No, I ain't."



## TRINITY

Two hours later they approached the town of Trinity, the mustang's hooves scuffing up dust clouds along Main Street as curious townsfolk turned to stare.

Beelzebub Jones led the mustang to a water trough outside the General Store. Two elderly women, clad in identical dark, mud-stained prairie dresses and white bonnets watched on with silent disapproval.

As the horse drank, Beelzebub Jones turned and tipped his Stetson to the two women. "Good day, ladies," he said. "Has this town got a doctor? Or a teacher, maybe?"

"We got both," sniffed one. "The teacher is the doctor's wife."

Beelzebub Jones nodded. "Perfect," he said. "And where might I find them at this time of day?"

The other woman pointed along the street. "The doctor's place is next to the sheriff's office. He should be there now."

She nodded to the children, her face sour. "What are they, half-breeds?"

Beelzebub Jones' face hardened, but he said nothing.

When the mustang had drunk its fill, Beelzebub Jones moved to its neck, began to lead it away and then stopped and turned to look at the women.

"Thank you for your help, ladies," he said. "I got one more question, if you don't mind me asking?"

The women looked at one another. "What is it?" said one.

"Well, ma'am, looks to me like you two could be a couple good-time gals. I was wondering if either of you could recommend a good drinking parlour. Somewhere a man can get outside of some cheap rotgut whisky and raise a ruckus in the company of other unwashed ne'er-do-wells?" Beelzebub Jones winked. "Maybe a place with some sportin' women waiting upstairs to do business on their backs?"

He paused long enough to relish their contemptuous outrage. "And to answer your earlier question, no ma'am they ain't half-breeds. They're children, and right now there's a priest bein' shown around hell for what he done to them."

Minutes later he tied the mustang to a hitching post outside the doctor's office and was about to step up onto the porch when the door opened and a tall, well-dressed man stepped outside.

"Can I help you?"

Beelzebub Jones nodded. "I'm looking for the doctor."

"You found him."

"I got two kids here, been kinda mistreated. I need you to look after 'em."

"I see," the doctor stared hard. "An' exactly who done the mistreatin'?"

"A certain priest who ain't around no more."

The doctor nodded. "That don't surprise me none. And I'm guessing you had a hand in helping him on his way?"

Beelzebub Jones shrugged, turned to the mustang, pulled a draw-strung leather pouch from the saddle bag and offered it to the doctor.

"Gold nuggets," he said. "Should be enough to pay for whatever it takes to put 'em right. If it ain't, I'll bring the rest next time I'm in town."

The doctor looked at the children and then back at Beelzebub Jones.

"I guess I can do that," he said. "But I don't want your gold."

Beelzebub Jones frowned.

"How's that?"

"Well," said the doctor. "I ain't one to judge, but I'm guessing that whoever owned that gold before you didn't give it up easy, so I'd rather not have anything to do with it."

He looked back at the children. "I'll take care of 'em," he said. "And when they're healed, my wife'll give 'em some schooling. They'll be safe with us."

He paused. "You got my word on that."

Beelzebub Jones thought about this, and then nodded. "I'll be checking up on 'em next time I'm around," he said. "So I guess we'll see how good your word is."

"I know who you are," said the doctor. "I seen the posters. There's a price on your head in this town, dead or alive."

Beelzebub Jones grinned. "You gonna turn me in, doc?"

The doctor shook his head. "No I ain't. The way I see it, any man who brings two kids to me and offers me gold to look after 'em, well, he can't be all bad."

Beelzebub Jones grunted. "Hold on to that thought," he said.

He lifted the children down onto the porch and then squatted in front of them. "Este es un doctor," he said. "Es un buen hombre, te cuidará. Nadie te va a lastimar más."

The children nodded solemnly as Beelzebub Jones ruffled their hair and then straightened up.

"Say," he said. "You ever heard of the Chapel of Bones?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Can't say I have," he said. "But I ain't been here too long. There's an old timer, name of Gabby, hangs out in the Wormy Dog Saloon. He used to be a prospector, panned for gold from here to Mexico, so they say. Might be worth asking him?"

"What's he look like?"

The doctor grunted. "Like someone warmed up a dead skunk. Smells like he wants to be alone and his mouth's all rotten from too much chewin' tobacco."

Beelzebub Jones nodded. "Appreciate that," he said.

"You want me to go and get him?"

Beelzebub Jones frowned. "Why would I want you to do that?"

"Mister," said the doctor. "I recognised you straightaway. Like I said, I ain't gonna be responsible for the hanging of a man who saved the lives of two little 'uns, but there's plenty in this town who'd sell out their own mother for a dollar, and you'll find most of 'em in the Wormy Dog."

He paused. "And likely you won't get no trial. They'll drag you up to Hangman's Hill at sundown."

Beelzebub Jones scratched his chin, and then looked up at the sky.

"Sundown, you say?" he said. "Why's that?"

The doctor shrugged. "That's what the sheriff likes to do. Kind of a tradition. The whole town gathers on Hangman's Hill. Outlaws gets hanged and then everyone gets drunk by torchlight. Why are you smiling?"

"Oh, I was just thinking I might get time for a couple drinks before they put a noose around my neck."

"You got a strange sense of humour, mister."

Beelzebub Jones nodded. "Yeah, I hear that a lot."

He looked back up at the sky, and then back to the doctor.

"You got a stable around here?"

The doctor frowned. "Sure, it's around the back. Why?"

Beelzebub Jones grabbed the mustang's reins.

"I got a favor to ask," he said.

## THE WORMY DOG SALOON

Beelzebub Jones could hear the ruckus from down the street. As he approached the Wormy Dog Saloon, the sound of 'Turkey in The Straw', played on an out of tune piano carried above the roar of yelling and fighting.

He reached the bat-wing doors and then stepped aside as a body flew past him, cleared the porch and hit the street in a cloud of dust.

Beelzebub Jones steadied a swinging door, checked the derringer in his pocket and then walked into bedlam. A card game that had degenerated into a free-for-all had drawn a crowd of drunks, all yelling encouragement as fists flew in a whirlwind of teeth and blood.

At the far end of the bar, the piano player hammered the keys of the battered upright as if his life depended on it. Next to him a wet-brained old-timer spat gobs of black liquid with unerring accuracy into a dented spittoon as he lurched around in a semblance of a clog dance, almost in time with the music.

Feeling naked without his gun-belt, Beelzebub Jones skirted the brawl and made his way to the bar.

The bartender had to lean close to be heard, "Howdy," he said. "What can I get you?"

Beelzebub Jones saw the glint of recognition in his eyes.

"Whisky," he said. "Cheapest you got, and keep it coming."

The bartender's hands shook as he poured the whisky into a filthy glass. "You ain't here to cause trouble are you, mister?" he said.

Beelzebub Jones shook his head and lifted his hands. "Ain't wearing my guns. I'm just here for a drink."

He leaned onto the bar, lifted the glass, quaffed the harsh liquor and offered the glass to the bartender.

"Leave the bottle," he said.

The bartender nodded. "You got it."

Beelzebub Jones poured another shot.

"I'm looking for Gabby," he said. "You know where he is?"

The bartender nodded towards the piano. "That's him dancing," he said. "There's a gal he likes upstairs, but he cain't afford her so about this time every day he's drunk enough to make him think that he can dance his way into her bed."

He shook his head.

Beelzebub Jones poured another whisky, and then gestured to the bartender. "You know who I am?" he said.

The bartender nodded, terrified.

"Well, today's your lucky day."

"How's that?" said the bartender.

"Because," said Beelzebub Jones. "I figure somebody's gonna run to the sheriff and claim the reward for me, so it might as well be you."

The bartender frowned. "I ain't sure I understand?"

Beelzebub Jones leaned closer. "I need to speak to Gabby," he said. "If he tells me what I want to know, I'll give you the nod and then you go and get the sheriff."

"If I get the sheriff, you're gonna be hanged tonight."

Beelzebub Jones winked. "You can't kill what will not die," he said. "Get me another glass and I'll have a talk with Gabby."

The bartender shrugged. "You got it."

When the song finished, Gabby leaned against the wall and launched a volley of tobacco-juice into the spittoon.

"Are you Gabby?"

He lurched around at the sound of his name, his liquor-sodden eyes struggling to focus.

"Who wantsh t'know?" Stumps of blackened teeth were arranged like broken gravestones in ulcerated gums.

Beelzebub Jones winced at the cancerous breath that whistled between them.

"I need some information," he said. "And I been told that you might help me."

Gabby swayed as he considered this.

"Whatsh'innit for me?"

Beelzebub Jones waved the whisky bottle. "I'm looking for the Chapel of Bones," he said. "You know where that is?"

Gabby's eyes narrowed in frontier cunning. "Maybe."

As Beelzebub Jones leaned in close the derringer appeared in his hand. "Don't even think of fucking with me, old timer. If you know where it is you get the whisky. Try and test me one more time and I'll put a bullet in your head."

Gabby blinked slowly at the pistol and then lifted his face.

"Silverton," he said.

"Where's that?"

"'s a ghost town now," said Gabby. "Built around the silver mines. Silver ran out, and then..."

Gabby shrugged and then belched poison gas.

"So, the chapel's in Silverton?" said Beelzebub Jones. "In the ghost town?"

Gabby cackled and shook his head.

"In the sheriff's office," he said.

"What's in the sheriff's office?"

Gabby cackled again.

Beelzebub Jones grabbed his shoulder. "You're not making sense," he said. "I want the Chapel of Bones, not the sheriff's office."

Gabby's eyes focused for a second. "There's a map in the sheriff's office," he said. "Pinned to the wall. I seen the Chapel of Bones marked on it."

"And you're sure about that?"

Gabby shrugged. "I spent a lot of time with the sheriff," he said. "Most nights in a cell til I sobered up. I remember every inch of his office, and I remember the map."

"OK," said Beelzebub Jones. "Is it still there?"

"How the hell do I know?" said Gabby. "I ain't been there since everyone left. That's gotta be..." he frowned at the calculation.

"That's gotta be ten years."

Beelzebub Jones nodded and handed over the bottle.

As Gabby suckled like a newborn, Beelzebub Jones returned to the bar and called the bartender over. "You can go and get the sheriff now," he said.



## THE ARREST

Beelzebub Jones was standing at the bar, leaning over his whisky glass when the sheriff burst into the saloon followed by a posse of ten men who fanned out either side of him.

"Beelzebub Jones," yelled the sheriff. "You're a wanted man in fifteen states. By the powers invested in me as sheriff of Trinity, I hereby arrest you and sentence you to be hanged by your neck at sundown. Do you have anything you want to say?"

Beelzebub Jones, drank the whisky, placed the glass on the counter and turned around.

Ten revolvers cocked at once as the posse drew their weapons. Beelzebub Jones raised his hands.

"Hanged at sundown, you say? Don't I gotta stand in front of a judge first?"

The sheriff shook his head. "You're wanted dead or alive, son," he said. "No need to bother the judge. Hell, I could shoot you down where you stand, step over your body and drink me a beer and afterwards folks would shake my hand."

Beelzebub Jones thought about this. "Sundown it is," he said. "I figure y'all are gonna take me to the jailhouse first, though? Cos I'm a might hungry and even a condemned man gets a final meal."

The sheriff sniffed. "We got leftover pork and beans," he said. "You're welcome to a plate 'fore we string you up."

Beelzebub Jones smiled. "Well, hell," he said. "That ain't the worst last meal I've ever had." He nodded to the posse. "Do you think them fine upstanding fellers would mind puttin' away their irons? As you can see I am unarmed, and I present no immediate threat to anyone in my vicinity."

The sheriff produced a pair of handcuffs. "They'll put down their guns when I say so," he said. "Now turn around and put your hands behind your back."

When the cuffs were locked Beelzebub Jones turned to face the sheriff. "There's a derringer in my pocket," he said. "I'm coming quietly and I ain't gonna cause you no trouble."

One of the posse stepped forward, his pistol aimed at Beelzebub Jones' chest.

"Mister," he said. "You sound pretty sanguine for someone who ain't gonna see another sunrise."

Beelzebub Jones smiled. "Sanguine," he said. "That's exactly how I feel, right now."

The posse man snickered. "Let's see how sanguine you feel at sundown when the noose tightens around your neck and you start dancing in the air."

When the saloon laughter died down Beelzebub Jones smiled and nodded. "You can't kill what will not die." He said.

The posse man frowned. "What the hell does that mean? Is that from the bible?"

Beelzebub Jones winked and fifteen minutes later was sitting on a wooden bench staring through the bars of a cell, lost in his thoughts as he scraped cold pork and beans from a metal plate. He woke to excited voices inside the jailhouse and the sound of a large crowd gathered outside.

The sheriff appeared holding handcuffs and large set of keys. "Time to go, son," he said. "You got any arrangements you want me to make on your behalf? Anyone you want me to contact?"

Beelzebub Jones shook his head. "No thank you, sheriff. All my affairs were sorted out a long time ago."

The sheriff nodded. "Well then stand up and turn around, and put your hands behind your back."

Outside the jailhouse a horse and open wagon was waiting. Behind the driver stood three of the posse, all of them holding Winchester rifles. All of them staring down at Beelzebub Jones as he was manhandled into the wagon.

"Each one of them is just itching to blow your head off," said the sheriff. "So I trust you ain't gonna cause no problems?"

Beelzebub Jones stood and nodded to the crowd. "And deprive these good folks of their entertainment?" he said. "I promise y'all that I will be the best-behaved corpse ever to dangle from Hangman's Hill."

He fell to the boards as the wagon lurched forward, followed by the townsfolk, some carrying burning torches and food hampers.

As the procession moved along Main St. Beelzebub Jones looked across to see the doctor standing outside his office. As their eyes met, the doctor gave the briefest of nods and then the macabre parade headed silently out of town.

## HANGMAN'S HILL

Hangman's Hill was a rocky bluff, some forty feet wide and rising to fifteen feet at its highest point. Cracking the bullwhip to get the horses to traverse the gentle slope, the driver brought the wagon to a halt directly below the noose hanging from the oak gallows.

The sheriff clambered onto the wagon, loosened the slip knot, placed the noose around Beelzebub Jones' neck and pulled it tight. Below them the crowd gathered quietly, staring patiently upwards as the execution ritual unfolded.

The sheriff pulled a key from his pocket, unlocked the handcuffs and then tied Beelzebub Jones' wrists with a length of cord. "Saves me coming back for 'em," he said.

He nodded to the posse, who jumped down from the wagon and took up firing positions, their Winchesters aiming into the wagon.

"Before I pass sentence," he said. "Have you got any last words?"

About a mile away, a dust cloud wisped into the air. Beelzebub Jones stared at it, and then smiled.

He looked at the sheriff and winked. "You can't kill what will not die," he said. "You better get some coffins ready, sheriff."

The crowd shuffled uneasily.

The sun was kissing the horizon when the sheriff patted Beelzebub Jones on the shoulder and then half-turned to the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he yelled. "We are gathered here to serve justice on an outlaw so incorrigible, so heinous that only a rope around the neck will cure him of his criminality."

The sheriff cleared his throat and puffed out his chest. "Wanted in more counties of more states than any of us can remember. The condemned is found guilty of the crimes of murder, armed

robberies of citizens, state banks and post offices, horse-stealing, extortion and passing counterfeit money. Therefore, according to the power invested in me as sheriff of Trinity I hereby sentence you, Beelzebub Jones, also known as the Bastard of the Badlands and any other aliases you may go by, to hang by the neck until you are dead."

The sheriff nodded to the cart driver. "Proceed."

The driver cracked the reins. The cart jolted forward and as Beelzebub Jones' heels dragged along the wooden bed, an expectant murmur rose from the crowd, reaching a crescendo as his body swung clear of the cart, the rope snapped taut and his legs began to jerk.

"Lookit him dance," yelled someone.

"Ain't such a bastard now," yelled another.

"Say hello to Satan you fuckin' heathen."

Beelzebub Jones choked and writhed as the noose bit into his neck. Blackness encroached on his senses, tunnelling his vision to a pinpoint of light that grew ever smaller. Voices from the crowd faded away, replaced by the erratic pulse thump-thump-thumping in his ears as he swung helplessly.

Pendulum of death.

Oh moon, come on and save me now.

Thump-thump-thump. Filling his head. Counting down.

Thump-thump-thump.

And then a new sound.

Thud-ud-dud.

Thud-ud-dud.

Thud-ud-dud.

Drawing closer.

Becoming louder.

Thud-ud-dud.

Thud-ud-dud.

And then a demonic whinnying squeal.

Approaching from behind, the mustang hit the crowd at full gallop. Broken bodies flying into the air as 800 pounds of muscle mowed through the screaming townsfolk, bucking and twisting, its hooves flailing as it cleared a path to the gallows. Beelzebub Jones felt his skin tighten as the welcome moonlight crawled across his body.

Flames burned around his neck and wrists, the stench of burning hemp filling his nostrils as he dropped to the ground. Around him the posse raised their Winchesters and then screeched in writhing agony, as simultaneously they combusted into black flames that reached up into the sky, consuming their bodies into piles of ash.

The crowd scattered, screaming as they trampled over one another to escape the whirlwind thrashing of the mustang.

"Best damn horse I ever had."

Beelzebub Jones whistled the mustang over, retrieved his gun belt from the saddlebag, strapped it around his waist with practised ease and leapt into the saddle.

A Colt .45 appeared in his hand as he whirled the mustang around.

On the back of the cart the sheriff stood open-mouthed.

"Skull face," he gasped.

And then the back of his head exploded in a fountain of blood, brain matter, skull fragments and hair.

Beelzebub Jones blew smoke from the Colt .45, holstered it, looked upwards, and then spurred his horse towards the eastern sky.

## SILVERTON

The mustang flew across the open plains. Snorting with exertion, muscles rippling, hooves raising thunder.

Hunched over its neck, Beelzebub Jones laughed maniacally, his senses heightened by the transformation, his body thrilling to the exhilarating wash of the cold night air.

Half a mile ahead, broken pieces of moonlight danced on water.

He slowed the horse, dismounted and began walking. By the time they reached the river the mustang was breathing normally.

Pausing only to allow the mustang a brief drink and to fill his own water bottle, Beelzebub Jones grabbed the reins and splashed across the shallows. As they emerged onto the far bank he looked up at outline of The Silent Mountains, foreboding in the darkness.

Silverton was another half-mile further on. As they walked along Main Street, tumbleweed scudded out of the darkness. Dead, dry structures, fitting inhabitants of a long-dead, abandoned town.

But not completely abandoned.

As he led the mustang past the skeletons of once-buildings, ghostly whispers breezed towards and around him. Voices of the dead, hissing his name, taunting him in sighs carried on the breeze, growing and diminishing, but building in number until it seemed he was surrounded on a deserted street.

Enhanced by transformation, Beelzebub Jones sensed every presence that whirled and reeled around him. Impenitent sin, violence, debauchery and vice filled his consciousness.

Sodom and Gomorrah of the West.

As these words appeared in his mind, Beelzebub Jones found himself overwhelmed by a presence so dark that a shudder of unfamiliar terror washed through him.

"Ain't no righteous people to be found here," said the presence. "The ungodly have perished. What you see now is the legacy of their wickedness."

The voice paused.

"And now here you are," it said. "King of all you survey. Ain't life grand?"

"Better to be the king of shit," said Beelzebub Jones. "Than the shit of kings." His eyes narrowed. "I know you," he said. "You treated me. In the desert."

"Nicotine, Liquor and Blasphemy," said The Stranger. "Ten years, and you've spread my word with zeal and alacrity. You truly are a disciple."

Beelzebub Jones shuddered again. "What do you want with me now?"

"To show you your destiny. You know where it lies?"

"The Chapel of Bones," said Beelzebub Jones. "That was you, in my vision."

"You will find the map," said The Stranger. "And you will find the Chapel. And in the Chapel you will look into the water. And you will see."

"See what?" said Beelzebub Jones.

But The Stranger had gone.

Beelzebub Jones stood alone in the centre of Main Street. The voices, stilled by the presence of The Stranger, returned louder and more chaotic and accompanied by silver-grey translucent spectral forms that swirled and span through the air, changing gradually to becoming vague human forms floating inches above the dusty street.



As he walked amongst them Beelzebub Jones felt the fleeting chill-whisper of their touch, experienced fragments of their memories that appeared and then vanished in a finger-snap.

One such form appeared and drifted towards him. As it grew closer it clarified into a skinny young man with half a face, his finger pointing in shaking accusation. "You shot me," said the figure. "You robbed the bank and you shot me."

Beelzebub Jones remembered, but shrugged. "Should've done what you were told," he said. He carried on walking, leaving the ghost of the bank teller to dissipate in his wake.

More figures appeared, crowding the street with memories. Beelzebub Jones recognising each one, and ignoring them all with equal indifference.

Hundreds of victims. Some walked alone but most collected in groups. Each group the vestiges of a phantom posse gunned down by the holstered revolvers that swayed to the beat of Beelzebub Jones' pace as he strode towards the remains of a wooden building at the far end of the street.

Beelzebub Jones stopped outside the Sheriff's office, tied up the mustang and turned around to see a crowd of spectres standing in silent accusation. Apparitions from his past. Consequences of his upbringing and destined to haunt him for eternity.

Staring at the crowd, he chuckled at their expectation of remorse, spat into the dust and then turned and walked into the building.

Inside the Sheriff's office, fingers of moonlight reached in through splintered gaps to illuminate a curling, yellowing Wanted poster pinned to the wall.

Beelzebub Jones ripped down the poster, sneered at his likeness and then rolled it up tightly.

Delving into his shirt pocket he retrieved a box of Lucifer's matches, opened it and struck a match on his boot, sparks

hissing and spitting from the match-head as he set fire to the poster.

Beelzebub Jones made his way through the sheriff's office, following dancing shadows as he waved the makeshift torch along each wall. The flame had burned almost to his knuckles when he discovered the map. Right where Gabby had said it would be.

Tossing the remnants of burning paper to the floor, Beelzebub Jones felt around the edge of the map, smiling as the rusting thumb tacks yielded easily. Holding the map carefully he backed away and then turned and walked out of the building. Behind him, the last lick of flame from the embers of the poster kindled a small pile of termite dust, which flared into a larger flame, which reached across to ignite an empty cigarette pack, which burned fiercely next to an upturned wooden chair. The bone-dry wood caught fire instantly, flames engulfing the chair and rising to snatch greedily at a wooden table.

In minutes, the building was ablaze. Timbers cracking and spitting as the fire grew in ferocity. A gust of wind blew sparks to the old saloon next door, and soon that was burning too.

Outside, Beelzebub Jones read the map by moonlight then rolled it carefully and placed it into a saddlebag. Back in the saddle he tipped his Stetson at what remained of the Sheriff's office, turned the mustang around and walked back along Main Street, opening a path through the spectres like breeze through a morning mist.

Behind him, Silverton burned.

Next morning, Beelzebub Jones had skirted the base of the Silent Mountains and was crossing the Hinterland, and as the rising sun lifted clear of the horizon he felt himself revert to human form. This was the first morning that he'd seen without the effects of a gutful of whisky the night before, and he wasn't sure that he cared for it too much.

He rode on until the southern edge of Lake Mysterious came into view. Steering the mustang towards the river, he dismounted, removed the saddle and bridle and watched as the horse rolled and snickered in the dust and then walked to the water's edge.

Beelzebub Jones gathered wood and as flames licked through the campfire he thought back to Silverton and the way the dry buildings went up like tinder.

"Times like these," he said to the mustang. "It truly is a good day to be a bad guy."

A jug of coffee and several strips of beef jerky later, Beelzebub Jones stood up and looked north-east. In the far distance he could just make out the outline of a series of rock bluffs.

According to the map, the Chapel of Bones lay somewhere in those rocks.

## THE CHAPEL OF BONES

Beelzebub Jones woke two hours later.

At the lake's edge he knelt down and submerged his face, the cold-water shock rinsing away the last vestiges of his nightmare.

The mustang stood patiently as it was bridled and saddled and minutes later they were heading north-east.

It was close to noon when they reached the bluffs. Up close they looked impressive, a collection of huge sandstone rocks grouped close together and towering into the sky.

Beelzebub Jones scoured the bluffs, looking for anything resembling a chapel, but saw nothing but seemingly impenetrable and featureless rock.

It was the mustang that found the route in. Without any command from Beelzebub Jones, the horse turned towards the rockface and skipped through a narrow gap that opened into a stone-strewn path that snaked upwards and around the rocks. Beelzebub Jones gave the mustang the rein, sitting back in the saddle as they made their way upwards.

Further up, as it veered left between two huge rocks, the path steepened. Beelzebub Jones dismounted and led the mustang along the narrow path, its hoof-clops echoing between the stone faces.

The path zigzagged around the rock formations, taking them higher and higher, the gradient becoming so steep that the mustang could no longer walk, scaling the path instead by using a series of jumps, leaving Beelzebub Jones to scramble breathlessly behind.

The mustang disappeared around yet another rock and the air fell silent. When Beelzebub Jones caught up, the path had flattened and widened. Just ahead, the mustang pawed at the ground, snickering and tossing its head.

Beelzebub Jones looked beyond the horse, to a spot where the path disappeared into the gaping black hole of a cave hewn into the rock face.

A black hole framed by a structure formed from human bones. "Come on in, time's a'wastin'." The familiar voice boomed from inside the darkness. Beelzebub Jones took a deep breath and then stomped towards the entrance.

The cave opened to reveal a vast, majestic cathedral-like space lit by candlelight flickering from a thousand hollowed-out human skulls.

Pillars created by hundreds of intertwined spinal columns stood ten feet apart and towered fifty feet to the roof of the cavern, forming two lines to create a passageway to a hemispherical bowl twenty feet in diameter and twenty feet deep, hewn from stone, its lip ordained with human ribs, fingers and teeth.

A familiar presence shimmered at Beelzebub Jones' periphery. "Behold the Chapel of Bones," it said. "Reflections will reveal what is unknown."

Beelzebub Jones frowned. "Do what, now?"

He felt a tug on his soul that filled him with darkness as it guided him inexorably towards the immense bowl.

"Kneel before the Font of Destiny," said The Stranger.

Beelzebub Jones knelt. Saw his reflection staring back from the depths of the still, clear water.

"Ain't revealed nothin' yet," he said.

A human skull appeared from beyond the font, lifted into the air, drifted gently towards them and stopped, revolving slowly, inches above the water, as if suspended by an invisible line.

Beelzebub Jones looked closer. Like every other skull in the chapel the cranium had been sawn off at the forehead, the head

fashioned into a crude vessel and filled with a dark liquid. The skull revolved once more and then came to rest. Staring directly at Beelzebub Jones.

For a time, nothing happened. And then the skull began to slowly tip forwards, as if nodding in deference.

Or lowering in prayer.

As it did so, the liquid within began to creep towards the edge, and as it spilled over onto the forehead, Beelzebub Jones saw that the dark liquid shone red in the candlelight.

"Human blood," said The Stranger. "Blood of the long, long dead."

Beelzebub Jones stared in fascination as the blood crawled down the skeletal face, covering the teeth, gathering and collecting at the lower edge of the jaw bone and then dropping into the font in great drops of scarlet.

When the blood hit the water, the surface erupted into a torrid maelstrom of pink liquid that swirled, thrashed and boiled.

When the skull was empty, the font water, now clouded a deep pink, became still.

"Reflections will reveal what is unknown," said The Stranger.

"Look closely."

Beelzebub Jones leaned into the font. Watched as the blood dissipated, turning the water clear.

No. Not clear. Beelzebub Jones looked closer. In the depths of the font images began to appear. At first indistinct, but then growing in definition to reveal four figures, each positioned as if at a compass point. Each on horseback.

"The Four Horse riders," said The Stranger.

"Like in the Bible?" said Beelzebub Jones. "I always considered that to be a collection of stories, written by men and designed to frighten the ignorant."

"Most of it was," said The Stranger. "But not this."

"So, Revelations is real?"

"Some of it."

Beelzebub Jones looked closer still into the water, peering at the figures.

"Looking down, I can't make out who's who?" he said.

"Start at the West," said The Stranger.

The image on the left changed position to reveal a Native American woman, a knife in her hand, her face painted in fearsome colors, astride a chestnut mustang.

"War woman," said The Stranger. "She goes by the name of Ghigua."

Beelzebub Jones nodded. "Cherokee," he said. "You want a war, them folks'll bring one right to ya'."

"Look East," said The Stranger.

To the right appeared a tall, slim black woman, clad in colourful robes riding high on a jet-black Friesian horse. In her hand she held a pair of balances.

"Famine," said The Stranger.

"Don't see too many black gals out ridin'," said Beelzebub Jones. "What's her story?"

"Name's Azmera," said The Stranger. "She was a Maasai princess."

"What's a Maasai?"

"Warriors from East Africa," said The Stranger. "Not many got taken as slaves. But she did. And she gave 'em holy hell for it, too."

Beelzebub Jones nodded in admiration.

"To the south is Conquest," said The Stranger.

Directly below Beelzebub Jones the image clarified to show a second Native American astride a white horse and holding a large bow. His face painted white, mouth covered with a red painted handprint.

"Apache," said Beelzebub Jones. "Looks like Chiricahua. The red handprint means he's killed an enemy in hand to hand combat."

The Stranger said nothing.

Beelzebub Jones paused. "Who's the fourth one?"

"In the words of the fourth beast," said The Stranger. "come and see."

Beelzebub Jones looked to the north, squinted at the emerging figure emerged and then gasped as his likeness materialised.

"Behold, Death," said The Stranger.

Beelzebub Jones shook his head. "I don't understand."

"This is your destiny," said The Stranger. "When the seals are opened, hell will follow with you, and y'all will conquer and kill with the sword and with hunger and with death."

A smile crawled across Beelzebub Jones' face. "And then we get to watch the world burn?"

"Pretty much," said The Stranger.

"Will there be whisky?"

"As much as you want."

Beelzebub Jones nodded slowly, his voice softening. "And all good works will be undone," he said.

He gathered his thoughts. "First man I ever killed was a nasty ol' preacher with wanderin' hands. One day he whupped me one time too many, I stole me a Colt .45, stomped on down to the church house and shot him the head. First time I ever fired a gun. Knocked me on my ass and I thought I'd gone deaf."

He smiled at the recollection. "I left town that very day."

"I know," said The Stranger.

"That ol' bastard taught me about The Book of Revelations," said Beelzebub Jones. "Never thought I'd be taking part in it."

"Oh, I never had any doubt," said The Stranger. "Your whole life has been a preparation for this day."

"What do I have to do?"



"You were baptised in mire," said The Stranger. "The son of dirt. Now you will be baptised in blood."

A pause.

"Kneel at the Font of Destiny."

As Beelzebub Jones dropped to his knees, sensed the shimmer move from his periphery to somewhere behind him.

"Once baptised you will leave this place," said The Stranger.

"Leave behind your life and cross over to the Place Between. You will have to search out the Horse Riders and together you will fulfil your destinies as each seal is opened."

Beelzebub Jones felt a pressure on his shoulder blades, and then on the back of his head. Felt himself pushed forward, over the edge of the font until his forehead almost touched the crimson water.

"I baptise you in blood," said The Stranger. "Go forth and take your rightful place."

Beelzebub Jones felt the push, heard underwater sounds as his head was immersed three times.

And then an iron grip guided him backwards.

The Chapel was silent. The Stranger gone.

Beelzebub Jones felt the familiar exhilaration as he changed to skeletal form, blood-water dripping from his face as he stood upright.

He grinned as the cavern began to tremble. A low hum building from somewhere, rising to a thunderous roar as the vibrations intensified to juddering tremors. Skulls, loosened by the tremors, dropped to the ground, dust falling from the ceiling as bone structures began to quake and crumble.

Beelzebub Jones stood tall, laughing as the great pillars collapsed around him. Bones splashed into the Font of Destiny, igniting the red liquid into an eruption of oily black flames, instantly filling the cavern with the heat of a thousand hells and devouring everything that was flammable.

As the font roared like a furnace, bones crackled as they blackened and then blazed away to nothing, the intense heat stirring up a blizzard of ash and bone fragments.

It became impossible to breathe. The entrance to the cavern howling as the inferno sucked in a tornado of air, fuelling the fires, transforming the chapel into an incinerator.

And in the midst of it all stood Beelzebub Jones. Cruciform, laughing like a lunatic as the flames swirled around him.

To be continued...

## RICHARD WALL

Born in England in 1962, Richard grew up in a small market town in rural Herefordshire before joining the Royal Navy. After 22 years in the submarine service and having travelled extensively, Richard now lives and writes in rural Worcestershire.

His short stories, 'Evel Knievel and The Fat Elvis Diner', 'Five Pairs of Shorts' and 'Hank Williams' Cadillac' are available on Amazon Kindle. Richard also has songs and poetry scattered around the internet, most notably on [spillwords.com](http://spillwords.com) where Richard was voted Author of The Year 2017.

Richard's writing reflects his life-long fascination with the dark underbelly of American culture; be it tales of the Wild West, or the simmering menace of the Deep South, or the poetry of Charles Bukowski, or the writing of Langston Hughes or Andrew Vachss, or the music of Charley Patton, Son House, Johnny Cash, or Tom Waits.

A self-confessed Delta Blues music anorak, Richard embarked on a road trip from Memphis to New Orleans, where a bizarre encounter in Clarksdale, Mississippi inspired him to write his début novel, *Fat Man Blues*.

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