

Rage

And

Retribution

By Ray Gosa

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Dreams and Visions

33 The other Cunninghams didn't know the things Tex knew. Their fathers hadn't known them, so it was not theirs to know. On the night that the distant wailing stopped, no Cunningham consciously sensed it; yet, on that same night their dreams began to change. At the end, each one changed in its separate way; though, each changed at the beginning as one dream. The red glow that haloed the beautiful things of their dream worlds began to lighten to a burnt orange and then to a final yellow. It was not the vivid yellow of warm sunlight, nor the glistening yellow of pure gold. It was the cold, pale yellow that comes upon aging skin and poisoned bones.

34 As each dreamed-of image changed its shade, the sweet dreams of the Cunninghams drew ever closer to the ghastly nightmare. Finally, their sweet restfulness was gone, replaced by fitful fests, replete with dark visions of large rank men crossed in blood, skulking about the night; women who did not love the natural fruit of the womb; and beasts following laws made by men. The stench of swine was always a smothering blanket spread over the whole of the forest. And, as the night grew ever darker, ever deeper, everything in it faded into nothingness. At last, only the rancid, putrid stench remained and pairs of yellow-tinged eyes, stalking. The yellow orbs never failed to peer angrily from behind unseen rocks and broad trunks of aged trees.

35 Each time, the hovering circles that stalked Clint moved quickly out of the blackness toward him. Clint's hands weren't bound, though they were frozen in their place – one behind him and the other at his side. When the eyes stopped their advance, standing before him was a beast. It rose and towered above him for an instant then met him at his eyes. It growled and pawed the air. Then, it took off its

skin like a garment, and became Tobar, the oldest of the king's sons. It wore a crown atop its head and began to gnaw at its own claws until they were free of the paw. The hard claws then fastened themselves to a lace that hung about its neck. Though it was truly the grizzly Tobar, it continued to be the beast also – and it growled all the more and pawed. One of its paws became a large white jawbone with fangs to flash, and the other became a golden spear. The white bone had life in it and spoke; but its words were only the wild grunts and frightened yelps of a brute. Whether they were filled with threat or warning, Clint couldn't tell. On its own, the spear flew to the edge of the circle as if in defiance of a king.

36 Though it took no solid steps, the beast began to move again toward him. It had seemingly spoken, but Clint couldn't remember hearing its words. And, this lapse caused waves of anger to pulse through it, each one adding to the other. As the beast's anger grew, it grew also. Clint found himself totally surrounded by the one beast. Though, he held his place until the creature was only before his face. As it began to close within two arms' reach, the faint sound of beating wings were about. One seemed to be circling the beast and the other about Clint himself. As the scene grew in its confusion, Clint's trepidations began to change. A sense of indignation began to grow in him as he began to judge the deeds of the beast unworthy and his father's-fear a curse to his son. Then the thought of the welfare of his kinswomen came to him. It came accusingly, as a thing he should have already considered but had not. The accusing thought asked repeatedly, in the sweet female voices he'd learned to love and cherish: *What of us? What of us? What of us?*

37 The idea of hurt to his gentle family began to cut him like the heated lip of a bronze blade, turning his indignation to outrage. Upon that, the airy wing-beats about him grew louder, such that he couldn't hear even his own thoughts. He found himself in the muted silence that utter chaos brings. All he could think clearly and

all he could know plainly was this one thing: he had somehow grown to match the huge stature of the beast. Though his size matched foot for foot the beast's size, he sensed without question, the power in him was greater than that of his foe. With that, he set himself to strike.

38 He readied his heart to permit whatever just thing had to be. The stiff hand at his side could now move freely, and the one behind his back joined it. They held no sharp weapons, nor were any needed. The beast showed its vulnerable heart freely. In the shadow of its arrogance, it felt no need to hide or shield it. Then, in the midst of this silence, Clint's mind became clear, and his vague senses sharpened. He started to hear the very beats of that hideous creature's heart; and he knew it could be dealt the death blow with the power that surged in him. With that firm truth, a strong sense of relief and security came.

39 With immediate safety at hand, Clint's civil imprint quickly brought to mind the thought of a partial blow, one rendering the beast stunned and harmless. But, the thought of an eternal circle of retribution seemed too much to bear. The thought also of the ancient proverb came to him: *The battle, it said, is not always to the strong.* This thought made him all the more cautious in laying aside his certain victory. As well, the thought of losing the sure chance to make his clan safe tilted all things in favor of the kill. With deliberations done, Clint reared himself for his strike. Before he could, however, a third wing beat joined from the rear of the beast. None of the yellow eyes had moved. None had even blinked; yet, the grisly beast was struck, sharply and deeply. At that moment, Clint would be released from the grip of his vision. His fists would be tightened; his loins sweat-drenched; and his eyes red with power.

40 As the warmth of Sherry's visions grew cold, the yellow eyes stared; then, twin pairs moved toward her. She braced herself and put her thoughts in order. Her tender nature, she stroked quickly and sympathetically, as if consoling it for the

contradictions it had to bear. She was encumbered with little doubt that she would and could do the thing that was forced upon her. Gradually but surely, she became as cold as the haunting vision itself. She'd determined that she'd take no backward step, nor give ground in anywise. *Weakness*, she thought, *I dare not show!* As the pairs of eyes moved through the darkness, they entered the edge of the lighted ground where she stood. The hideous countenances of the stalkers were then seen clearly. To her dismay and ire, they both belonged to the squalid women from the Peaks!

41 Seeing their faces brought flashbacks and shudders to her soul. The coldness that guarded her instantly surrendered to the flame. These creatures, she knew, weren't seeking her – they were seeking her babies! She stared into the pale depth of their eyes, first one then the other. But, they didn't stare back – neither of them. Their eyes were peering down. Behind Sherry stood her girls, Yuly and Leah. Their full bodies weren't there --- just their tiny torsos, waving ghost-like. Yuly's little face wore the half-sad smile of resignation; but Leah's face showed a naked terror that stirred her mother's heart. Sherry hadn't known they were there. Her early decision to hold her place would no longer satisfy; now, she had to move forward. She had to strike first and finally. However, that deadly decision gave birth to the longest and darkest moments of her vision.

42 As she tried to move, she found that her feet had been bound. Raw pig's leather was wrapped and knotted about her ankles, and suddenly the smell of the forest surrounded her. She reached back to secure and comfort her babies, but touched nothing at all. They were no longer there. She called to them and cried, but neither of them answered. She peered then into the bleak darkness and at first saw nothing; then, in the far distance, she saw them. They were bare and tied to the wooden spit. She knew without doubt they were being carried to Grrbar's pit. The forms of a half dozen dirty children danced and cheered behind the women bearers

as they walked. As her babies cried out for her, she stared desperately and reached for them, crying helplessly till her voice became a whisper, pleading to fading ghosts.