

The Duel

2021 Meliora Literature story

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Chapter 1

The Desert Moon

The world seemed silent. Then Cavendish took a step, his leather boots clicking and clacking against the hard desert ground, in toe was an odd-looking red and white fox with nine tails. Cavendish took a look at the vast expanse of coarse red sand and dirt under the moonlight and proclaimed to the world, “Blasted desert, is there not any water?” he sighed as he and the fox sat down on a large rock placed between two tall cottonwood trees. It was the dead of night and now that he had sat down the only noise present was the howl of the wind and the clattering of tumbleweeds as they crossed the open plain.

At that moment the sound of horses galloping echoed through a nearby canyon. Cavendish sat up and pulled out his pocket watch, the time read a quarter past two AM, he looked up and declared to the fox “Well now Satoru, I suppose our targets here.” Satoru the fox made a sort of chirping noise in response and then followed Cavendish, as He shuffled over to a nearby brush, a few paces away from the trees, and crouched down. He grabbed a long black case and opened it. Inside was a bronze, gold, and black clockwork sniper rifle, he pulled it out of the case, loaded the gun, and then set his sights towards the opening of the canyon. He listened to the rumbling of horse hooves, generated from the ravine, and stated “Sounds like there’s 4 of them; no, 5.” Satoru again made a chirping noise in agreement as they sat quietly, waiting for the right moment.

A few minutes passed but nothing happened; however, the rumbling still came from the canyon. Cavendish signaled to his small companion to follow him, as he army-crawled across the open field. When he reached the towering stone wall of the plateau, he turned his head around the corner of the ravine and saw that the horses of his targets had been spooked by an enormous rattlesnake, so big it towered over the tallest of the horses which stood at least six and a half feet tall. The monstrous creature had just finished gulping down the last of the desert bandits. Behind the creature was a steam-powered wagon and an escort of horses.

That's when its tongue flickered splattering out blood painting the canyon maroon as if sensing something, the snake turned around and looked Cavendish directly in his eyes, the moon glinting off of them. Now if Cavendish was a normal person he would have run to a horse, hopped on, and ridden it to the nearest settlement, however, he was not normal and so he walked directly towards the snake. In a flurry of quick and smooth movements, he pulled his sniper rifle out of his case, trawled it into his hands, like a magician playing with cards, brought it up to his line of sight, aimed for the beast's head, and **BANG**. The snake dropped dead and Cavendish scoffed as he declared, "You took my bounties, you reptilian oaf." Cavendish Began to skin the snake, taking its meat, bones, and whatever else was of value to him. He grabbed a piece of meat and tossed it over to Satoru. The fox replied by happily wagging all nine of his tails. Cavendish then wandered over to the horses previously owned by the desert bandits, out of the three horses that had stuck around, two of them had satchels on the side. Cavendish calmed the horse enough to take the satchel and see what was inside after that he untied the horses which neighed approvingly and rode off. One of the satchels was filled with water, enough for about 3 days, and the other had a hastily drawn map to Bellfall, the city of steam, and the home to most of the scum in the west.

Cavendish walked to the side of the canyon leaned against it and slid down the wall, with Satoru as a blanket, and dozed off. During his slumber Cavendish dreamt; he dreamt of a giant looming snake, and then of a town that had gone up in a blaze, ash, smoke, and sparks flying about, the sky which burnt orange created an atmosphere that looked hellish. The sound of screaming pierced through the air and then Cavendish woke. His eyes slowly opened up to the gleam of the canyon wall, which glistened and shone with the sunrise. The chill of the night wind had not vanished and trailed into the thin and clear dawn air.

The morning dew dripped off the top of Cavendish's brown bowler hat onto the ground in small splatter, as he stood he picked up Satoru and set him on his shoulder. The horses that had long since rushed away, left only their saddles and their hoofprints in the rock-like soil.

Cavendish picked up the map and the satchel with water, placing the satchel over his neck, careful not to hit Satoru. He then walked down the canyon heading east towards the sunrise.

Chapter 2

The Desert Sun

Cavendish furrowed his brow and wiped the sweat from his forehead, the blazing sun hung directly above the canyon, and to him, felt as though it could burn him alive. He wandered down the canyon glancing at the map every time a fork came up. At about half-past noon he saw something in the sky, a bird. He pulled out his rifle and aimed its sights on the bird. Upon closer inspection, Cavendish noticed the creature was carrying a rolled-up piece of paper, tied to its leg by a leather strap. He steadied his aim, pulled the trigger, and watched the bullet fly through the air heading right for its target. That's when... **DING!** Satoru jolted awake and slid accidentally, though gracefully off of Cavendish's shoulder. With a sharp metal clang, the bullet bounced off the bird and fell to the ground with a noise minuscule in comparison. The bird or I should say mechanical bird, turned its head Three-hundred and sixty degrees around to face Cavendish. Without a squawk or a chirp, the bird kept flying, and Cavendish wasn't going to let it get away, for he had never seen something like this before. He scooped up Satoru, placed him carefully in the satchel, and sprinted in the direction the bird went. Cavendish chased after the bird panting and sweating, wondering all the while if it would ever land, or ever needed to. After about ten minutes of following the bird non-stop, Cavendish reached a sheer cliff-face. He looked from the bottom to the top where he saw the bird taunting him, sitting on a tree branch overhanging the ravine. Cavendish's eye twitched and he thought "Confounded Metallic bird!"

Cavendish began his ascent of the sheer cliff face. He put one hand up and pulled, then the next and so on and so on until he neared the branch where the bird was perched. He pulled himself up onto a ledge and then looked up just in time to see a rock the size of his head falling directly towards him. He jumped out of the way, narrowly falling off of the ledge. He stabilized himself and continued climbing, by the time he reached the branch the bird was long gone and as he reached the top of the cliff he saw a magnificent view of a city that seemed to shine in the sunlight. Cavendish placed Satoru onto the ground and examined the map he had obtained during his skirmish with the snake and realized within a day and night he had reached Bellfall. He squinted his eyes as to not be blinded by the gleam that emitted from the bronze dome of the bell tower where the city had received its name. He scooped up Satoru and began his descent down a jagged sloping ramp towards the back entrance of the city.

He spent an hour or two making his way down the ramp, which was a much longer path than climbing directly up the cliff wall. When he reached the entrance to the city he saw a sign with a wanted poster, on it, were the faces of the five bandits the snake had eaten. He sighed when he saw the reward and continued walking. The city was the largest and most bustling place Cavendish had ever been. On his left were a run-down saloon, a clothing shop, and a bank, on his right there were houses and further on was much more, all surrounding the looming bell tower. This certainly wasn't like the towns Cavendish had been to before.

He glanced around and decided his first and best course of action would be to head into the saloon. As he walked in, a man playing the tack piano halted his song (as is customary) and the bustling chatter seemed to die down instantly. Cavendish felt eyes on him as he headed for the bar, the bartender looked at him and said in a voice so raspy it was like the crackling of a coal fire “Hold it mister, no varmints allowed, also is that a shooting iron ya’ have in that there case.” Cavendish looked towards his shoulder at Satoru and nodded, Satoru jumped off of Cavendish's shoulder and dragged the case which Cavendish set on the ground out the door. Cavendish looked at the bartender and coolly stated “That better?” The bartender returned Cavendish’s gaze and said, “I s'pose that'll do.” The piano player went back to his song and the tables once again became bustling. Cavendish hopped onto a barstool and ordered a drink, glancing around the room careful to not make eye contact, as to avoid any unfriendly confrontation. The loud sound of a table playing Black-Jack filled with a boisterous group of people shocked Cavendish and he thought to himself “drunk and gambling this early?” Cavendish had just finished downing his first glass when a man of extremely tall stature stumbled through the saloon door.

Chapter 3

The Snag at the Saloon

As the man stumbled through the door a trail of blood followed. He seemed to be covering a wound near his lower abdomen with his hands (which is not the most proficient way to stop bleeding). He tripped over one of the drunk's trench coats and ended up smashing into the barstool that was placed right next to Cavendish. Cavendish stood up and checked the man, who had passed out. He averted his eyes from the man to look at the doorway he'd come through, and saw the silhouette of a man edging towards the door. Cavendish said without changing his gaze from the door "Hey Barkeep, keep an eye on this guy." The barkeep rushed around the counter and dragged the man behind it. As Cavendish stood up the silhouette walked through the saloon doors. It was a stout disgruntled-looking man, who was checking a pocket watch. The man looked up from his watch, his eyes following the trail of blood that had been left behind, to where the bartender was standing nonchalantly wiping down a glass. Then the man's gaze landed on Cavendish and he said "where'd the man with the wound go?" Cavendish looked back at the man and said "How bout' you tell me who you're first."

"Fine then," said the man "my name is Allen Marshall and you are?" "The name's Cavendish." "That doesn't sound like a name I've heard of, you must be new in town, well since you're new I'll give you some advice, don't go messing around in other people's business." The Bartender's eyes widened in shock as he said "Sir, you wouldn't happen to be that Allen Marshall would'ja?" "Why, *I am* that Allen Marshall." The barkeep looked at the man who was bleeding out, then to Cavendish and said "Sorry I don't want no trouble from the man who supports that there gentleman, Mr. Marshall the man you're looking for is behind this counter." Marshall promptly walked towards the counter, making it halfway there; he was stopped by Cavendish.

Marshall furrowed his brow and put on an expression that seemed too far-fetched for the man whose face had been jolly moments ago and said "I told you, boy, you should not mess with me." Cavendish looked Marshall up and down and said, "That's great and all but I'd also like to hear that man's story." Marshall's eye twitched and his face turned from an agitated gaze to a snide smile, he chuckled as he said "you really don't know what you've gotten yourself into do you?" He reached his hand down to pull from his holster, however, Satoru was faster.

At a whistle from Cavendish, Satoru rushed through the door carrying a revolver between his teeth, climbed up onto Cavendish, and dropped the revolver into his hand. After promptly raising his hands in fear of the gun pointing at him, Marshall said "You might shoot me now, but the most feared man in Bellfall, Mordecai Harper is backing me." That's when a bullet, not from Cavendish, came flying straight in through the saloon window into Marshall. There were two sights out the window that Marshall had been shot through, smoke emitting from the place the bullet came from and a man standing atop a building holding the source of the smoke, a gun. Cavendish locked eyes with the man or at least it seemed like locking eyes, for the man was wearing thick black goggles with dark lenses. The man held the gaze for a moment that felt too long and then ran along the top of a building in the opposite direction of the saloon.

Cavendish turned to the bar's counter and walked to see if the man was alright. He looked at the tall man who, although pale from blood loss looked as though he was recovering. The tall man slowly opened his eyes to look at the face of Cavendish. He spat up a little as he coughed out the words "Thank you." the man tilted his head toward Cavendish and said, "The name's Roscoe Yates, thank you for saving me." "Of course." said Cavendish, "why was that man trying to kill you though?" Roscoe Replied "He worked for Mordecai Harper, the blasted fool who swindled me for all my worth and left me to rot in the desert, he probably sent Allen to finish the job and god knows Mordecai's put more than I through hell.

Say you seem like a fellow who can hold his own, how about an offer, I'll pay you to kill Mordecai Harper." Cavendish's eyebrows raised and he said, "How much?" Roscoe said, "As much as you're willing to do it for."

Cavendish walked out of the saloon with his pockets feeling much heavier as he walked towards the center of Bellfall. The sun seemed to fall as Cavendish stepped over the dry and cracked ground. He came to a halt when the shadow of a looming bell tower fell over him, he looked into the sky as the clock drilled into the side of the tower struck six.

Chapter 3

A Gun Called Death

As the Bells sound rang through the sky six times, a subtle creaking of a door and the cawing of a crow took place, as a man in all black with a mechanical bird on his shoulder exited the tower. He sauntered forward leisurely, his boots kicking up dirt in clouds of brown dust with every step. It was the same man that had shot Allen Marshall, Mordecai Harper. His thick black goggles glinted in the brunt orange light of the setting sun. He looked up to meet Cavendish's gaze, his expression was hidden behind a bandana but you could tell it was one of intrigue and smugness. Mordecai's mask moved as he spoke the words in a deep raspy voice, "So you've come to challenge me, have you?" Cavendish nodded his head and replied, "Yeah I reckon so." The two men stood there in silence as a tumbleweed rolled slowly across the road, and Satoru who was positioned on a balcony yipped. They turned around and took ten steps, then they became still. Mordecai put his hand on his holster, inside was a gun as black as night with something carved into the handle. It was a tally, a tally of lives that had been taken by that small piece of forged Damascus steel. Tension floated through the air like a thick haze, the chirping of crickets and birds could be heard, a falling leaf leaped through the air, that's when **BANG!**

A bullet went straight through Cavendish's chest. A loud whimper from Satoru became audible as the gunsmoke settled, through a cloud of dust there was a silhouette of a man in all black walking back to the clock tower. Mordecai was now entirely visible and as he put his hand on the door handle of the Belltower you could see a gaping hole in his head. He dropped to the ground in a small unsatisfying thud as a minuscule cloud of dust rose and the mechanical crow flew off his shoulder in a flapping of wings and a high-pitched squawking. The silent stretch of town that had once been there became bustling within the hour. There were children whose eyes were covered by their mothers who looked on to a bloodstained door with shock and disgust and men who stared at the scene with an unchanging expression, even horses who knew naught what had happened neighed and whinnied at the commotion. For there in front of them all, were two dead bodies.

Chapter 4

Hope Can't be lost

(Especially When There's Pie)

Ba-dum, Ba-dum, Ba-dum, the sound of a faint, yet present heartbeat rang throughout the air. The night had come, and the hustle and bustle of the city had died down and a single lantern flickered from inside a house. Inside the window, you could see an old woman rustling around her kitchen reaching into cabinets, lighting a stove, and placing something in an oven. A short while later the something that was in the oven was taken out and set to cool on the windowsill. A sweet and tart aroma wafted through the air until it reached a nose.

The smell engulfed a limp and seemingly lifeless Cavendish and with a sharp inhale his eyes fluttered open to the sight of one Satoru. His heartbeat steadied as he slowly and painfully rose into a seated position. He was left in the same position in which he had been when he fell to the ground, perhaps he was left out of respect or maybe fear. In his seated position Cavendish realized he couldn't move his left arm and looked down to a bloody wound in his shoulder and suddenly understood why his body ached so and why he survived. Mordecai had missed, if only by a hair but that was enough. Satoru hopped around Cavendish, chirping as loudly as he could muster. The sound of footsteps and clicking of lightswitches could be heard from nearby homes as people rushed to see what was going on outside. The noise might have been more interesting to Cavendish if his nose had not still been preoccupied with the smell of a delicious treat.

Cavendish weakly rose to his feet and was startled by a roar of applause. The townsfolk had come out of their homes and had seen the rising of their hero. Two of the friendly faces looking onward from the crowd were the Faces of Roscoe Yates and The Saloon Barkeep. Roscoe who was still limping from his wound walked up to Cavendish with the Barkeep, who leaned under Cavendish's shoulder and helped him to a bench. Townsfolk walked up to Cavendish one by one and thanked him for stopping Mordecai's tyrannical rule over Bellfall, until one kind-looking elderly woman came up to Cavendish with the source of the wonderful aroma. It was a warm, golden brown, apple pie. Steam rose through the gaps in the pie's crust, which revealed the sweet apples that comprised the filling. The old woman handed Cavendish the pie gently, which he promptly began to scarf down.

Chapter 5

Out of Town

Cavendish awoke on the same bench he had sat down on but he had, however, no recollection of falling asleep. Satoru was curled up on Cavendish's lap and inhaled softly as he slept. Cavendish sat in that seat for what felt like an eternity, he sat there as the moon fell and the sun rose staring off into the sky. As the morning came and the town became more lively, Cavendish stood and wrapped his wounded arm in a sling of cloth. He walked forwards towards the entrance of the saloon where he had started so many hours ago he saw that the horse he had left with food and water was still there, he slowly ambled towards it, hopped on, set Satoru on his shoulder, and without another word to the townsfolk rode off, out of town.