

The Wild West.

Bleeding Hills, Dakota Territory

1866

This story is told from the point of view of the featured character. This work does not claim to be a definitive history, but stands as an account of events from one character's perspective. Some names have been changed -Editor

Sebastian Crane sat easy in the saddle as he guided his black and white mustang between the wagon ruts along the Bozeman Trail. The sky was pale grey, but pockmarked from horizon to horizon by swirling black cumulus clouds. The air was cold and snow clung in clumps to the north side of the rolling hills all around. This was the kind of weather that made Sebastian wish he was inside with a roaring fire in the hearth, in company good friends or with a willing lover, but he could not afford himself such luxuries on this day. He was a man forced out into this weather by a feeling in his gut, a nagging sensation that the coming of Spring was going to bring something terrible.

Spring was still a few weeks away, but Sebastian was always one to get an early start. The worst of the weather should be over, the heavy snows and white-outs should be past. But he could not be sure, this year winter refused to relinquish its hold on the land. Sebastian wondered if nature itself was trying to delay the inevitable.

The wind blew a strong gust from the North causing the grass on the hills around him to bend almost flat to the ground. The air smelled like snow. Sebastian searched the sky. It could be a light dusting or maybe something more. He shrugged. Even if a blizzard blew, Sebastian was not worried. He was often forced to travel in the harshest of weather. Sebastian was man that did not fear nature. He was dressed warmly, had ample provisions and more importantly he had the mind-set to survive the worst.

Sebastian's long black duster covered grey wool pants, vest and jacket. A black hat covered his head and a grey scarf protected his cheeks from the biting wind. A gunmetal grey pistol with a well-

worn wooden grip was holstered on his right hip. On his opposite hip he wore a razor sharp Bowie knife, its long blade reached down almost to his knee. A belted scabbard slung across his body supported a calvary saber. A small throwing knife was concealed in each of his boots. A leather saddle bag was draped across his horse's flank and contained food and water. His blanket roll was tied to the saddle bag and covered with a heavy canvas that would serve as a tent. A Henry lever-action repeater rifle hung in a fringed scabbard off the right side of his saddle; the weapon gave him sixteen shots of pure salvation. On the left side of the saddle in another scabbard hung a double barrel scattergun. Sebastian did not skimp when it came to weapons.

The trail on which Sebastian rode was named after John Bozeman a pioneer who cut the trail two years ago as a overland route from Fort Laramie to Virginia City, Montana. This trail removed hundreds of miles off the journey to the goldfields in Montana. The older trail, cut by Jim Bridger years before, was further to the south and circumnavigated the Big Horn Mountains. The Bozeman trail was a more direct route, but it crossed through the Powder River Basin, territory promised to the Indians in the 1851 treaty at Fort Laramie.

The Powder River Basin was a beautiful expanse of rolling hills, swaying grass and bubbling streams. The land was also the sacred hunting ground of the Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho. Sebastian could feel the magic of the place, raw power flowed here like nowhere else in the West. The land was still pure and sparkled with power. When the wind blew the grass small sparks seemed licks of energy shot up into the air. When the stars shone at night, the land itself seemed to come alive and dance around him. It was a pristine valley, remote and uncorrupted by the force of civilization, marred only by the twin muddy lines, the wagon ruts of the Bozeman Trail.

Tensions were running hot on the high plains in the winter of 1866 and there was talk that Red Cloud and the Sioux would go to war over the Bozeman Trail through the Power River Basin. Relations between the whites and Indians had been heated since Colonel John Chivington massacred Black Kettle's band at Sand Creek, Colorado in 1864 and the Cheyenne retaliated by raiding Julesberg, Colorado two months later.

After two years of trouble in the Power River Valley, the path established by John Bozeman,

became known as the Bloody Bozeman for the number of scalped travelers found lying mutilated in the prairie along its length. Sebastian heard a week ago that in the coming months the army planned to establish three forts along the Bozeman trail in an effort to protect the miners and hunters. These forts would certainly mean increased travel on the Bozeman and more buffalo hunting in the Powder River Basin. This would strain relations to the breaking point; the Indians and the whites were both riding to a bloody confrontation.

At Fort Laramie Sebastian had met Colonel Henry Carrington of the 2nd Battalion of the 18th Cavalry at Fort Laramie who had orders to erect a post near the Piney Fork of the Powder River. Sebastian had looked over the Colonel's forces. They were mostly new recruits armed with the muzzle loading Springfield rifles. These civil war hand-me-downs would be next to useless against the fast-moving, pony-riding Indians. The weapons slow rate of fire meant that the Indians could fire half quiver of arrows in the time it took a soldier to load and fire one shot. Those poor soldiers would be lambs to the slaughter.

Sebastian warned one of their officers, a renown hero of the Civil War named Captain William J. Fetterman. The parading peacock puffed up and dismissed his warning by saying, "If Johnny Reb couldn't shake the 18th a bunch of pony riding savages won't give us much challenge." Fetterman went on to expound his own merits saying he had fought under General William Tecumseh Sherman during the bloody Georgia campaign and applaud the perfect drill of his unit. Sebastian could see the arrogant man was a indeed knowledgeable soldier, but he could also see the officer before him knew nothing at all about fighting Indians.

Sebastian left Fort Laramie that afternoon with a nagging feeling of dread. He was traveling northwest on the Bozeman thinking to see for himself if Red Cloud was going to war. Sebastian had shared Red Cloud's fire once before many years ago. He doubted if the great warrior would remember him, but some of the Sioux chiefs and war leaders would. Sebastian had cultivated a relationship with the Sioux as a man of his word, but he did not have any illusions about his ability to sway the Indians from war. As a white man, Sebastian knew any words to dissuade them from war would cast suspicion on his own character; he would just have to see for himself how many lodges

followed Red Cloud.

The grim reality of the coming war affected Sebastian. He was angry, but at no one in particular. Damn the greed of the buffalo hunters who thinned the herd and stole the Indian's food. Damn the greed of the prospectors who traveled the Bozeman digging holes into the Black Hills disturbing what the Indians called the Essence-of-the Sacred-Mother. Damn the soldiers and their forts. Damn the homesteaders. Damn the Government. And damn the Indians and their pride. Blood was going to run on these high plains! He had friends in these mountains on both side of the conflict and he wondered how many would be alive at the end of the summer when the Moon of the Leaves came to pass.

Sebastian knew the confrontation had been brewing for a long time. He was a white man, but he grew up on the plains and knew these lands. Sebastian grudgingly respected the Indians. He traveled among the Indians and understood many of their ways, but he was not one of those whites who went native.

Sebastian saw the buzzards circling overhead. Buzzards were scavengers and almost always marked the dead or dying. It did not surprise Sebastian when he crested the ridge and saw the Conestoga wagon lying its side with its contents spilled over the prairie. From the feathered shafts left imbedded in the side of the wagon, he knew he'd found the first of many victims to come. As spring came, more travelers would attempt the trail and the Indians would be waiting to welcome them with death.

The oxen that pulled the wagon were dead. Sebastian could see the great beasts were pierced with many arrows. He guessed the wagon's operator had tried to flee the attack and the Indians had shot the oxen to stop the wagon. Firing bullets from a bouncing wagon was useless and running only encouraged the Indians. When attacked by Indians it was better to stop and start shooting as soon as possible. If a person got off a few good killing shots the Indians would usually lose their nerve, cut their loses and flee. Most Indian raiders would not throw their lives away riding towards a man who proved that he knew how to use a rifle effectively.

Instead these homesteaders had fled, causing the Indians to give chase. The land here was

rolling hills with lots of shallow inclines and small prairie dog holes. Once the fleeing wagon had left the rutted track they were doomed. It was only a matter of time before the wagon hit a prairie hole and shattered a wheel or tipped over on one of the inclines as this one did. After the wagon was down, the Indians just road up and feathered the oxen and the occupants with arrows.

A pair of buzzards had landed on the oxen corpses some time ago. Most of the flesh was still on the oxen; the scavengers of the plains had not completed their work. They were eagerly stripping the flesh away form the bones with their sharp beaks. They worked efficiently tearing the flesh in long, narrow strips and gulping it down with a backwards tilt of their head. Sebastian had seen birds eat so much in one sitting that they were unable to fly. He wondered how much these man-sized beasts would need to eat.

Buzzards were common enough on the high plains, but these bird were larger than normal. Their wing spans were easily as wide as the reach of a man. Most buzzards were scavengers and could be scared off with a shot or two, but the larger birds were more aggressive. They were known to attack lone travelers.

Sebastian rode closer and the birds began to hiss and beat their wings. He reached down and pulled the double barrel scattergun from the left side of the saddle. The scatter gun had a double trigger. He pulled the first trigger and the right barrel spewed out tiny lead balls. The blast took the bird facing him in the chest. Feathers flew into the air as the chest-shot bird was blasted backward off the oxen and landed in the dirt. It was not dead and would soon recover from the blast of shot.

The other buzzard spun around, flapped its powerful wings and took to the air. The bird hovered in the air for a few moments, and then suddenly flew toward Sebastian. The birds powerful beak was open screeching in pain and fury. Sebastian calmly pulled the second trigger and the other barrel belched out lead shot that struck the bird in the face. It was a killing shot, the buzzard's head blasted apart in a splatter of gore. The bird's carcass dropped down to the ground, still twitching and bleeding.

The first buzzard was up and running along the ground toward Sebastian. The bloody buzzard running toward him screeching, hissing and dripping blood down onto the sandy soil. The avian's wild

charge spooked Sebastian's horse. The animal reared up onto its hind legs, kicking out its forelegs. The buzzard swiped at the horse using its sharp talons. Sebastian gripped the saddle tightly with his knees and pulled on the horse's reins with his left hand to control the panicked animal. Using his right he cracked open the double barrel shotgun and upended the weapon so the empty shells fell out onto the ground.

The horse dropped back down to the ground onto its forelegs and skittered off to the left. With a powerful flap of its wings, the buzzard came up at Sebastian who kicked the flying beast in the head with his boot. The bird fell back and landed heavily on the ground, but was not dead. It ran away, flapped its wings and took flight. The buzzard began circling in the sky directly above Sebastian who took advantage of the pause and reloaded the shotgun. The buzzard screeched and began diving down to attack from above, Sebastian pulled both triggers and blasted the buzzard into falling feathers, shattered bones and smear of bloody flesh.

Sebastian looked at the horizon, keeping watch on the hills around him. Both buzzards were dead. He wondered if his shots had been heard by others. The massacre had taken place not too long ago. Maybe a day or two. Sebastian knew the Indians could still be in the area, but the lone rider was not concerned. He was on good terms with the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota, the tribes that made up the Sioux confederation. He figured he might be able to deal with the Cheyenne and Arapaho, especially if they gave him a chance to speak and show the Indian belt he carried with him wrapped carefully in his saddlebag.

As Sebastian guided his horse closer to the wagon, he felt his hackles rise and his spine begin to tingle. The wagon's canvas top was pulled tightly closed so he could not see inside, but the wispy tendrils of black energy, swirling around the small tears in canvas rose his suspicions. A growling moan from within the wagon told him all he needed to know. Keeping his distance he circled around the wagon. He saw the markings on the canvas covering. A black skull drawn with charcoal on the white cloth. A warning sign to all Indians; stay clear of the wagon this was cursed by a Dark Shaman.

Sebastian pulled back, retreating up the incline that had caused the wagon to flip. He dismounted and hobbled his horse near the top of the ridge. With grim resolved, he reloaded the

scattergun and then he walked back to the wagon. The early afternoon sun was still high in the sky. He had plenty of time before dark. At least one thing was in his favor.

He went around to the canvas top and waited. He heard movement within as if a person was shifting their weight. He heard whispering and a low moan. A less experienced man would believe there was a frightened, perhaps injured man within the wagon. Sebastian knew better. The creatures inside the wagon were neither injured, nor frightened. They were harbingers of evil, created by Indians whose hatred of the whites was greater than their respect for the world. The black wisps of corrupted energy swirling around the wagon, informed Sebastian all he needed to know. The people within the wagon were undead, most likely zombies or skeletons.

Sebastian believed the creatures inside the wagon were aware of his presence. He could hear the creatures moving and whispering. No matter how silently he tried to move, the frozen grass crunched under his feet.

He guessed there were three or four inside and were likely trying to decide how to lure him within the wagon, because undead could not come out into the sunlight. The sun would hurt them, burn their flesh away as the rays of warming light touched their dead cold flesh. Sebastian considered slashing holes in the canvas, but at the first slice they would all swarm him at once. They would have to . . . the wagon's heavy canvas was their only protection. They would panic and attack with terrible ferocity. Sebastian needed to kill a couple of them first, before they made the decision to attack as a group.

Sebastian waited studying the arrow holes in the canvas. Then he saw a cloudy dead eye pressed itself against one of the holes in an attempt to gaze out and see who was walking on the frozen bloodstained grass around the wagon. The eye was surrounded by a pale face which was framed with a tangled mass of long blond hair. She was a zombie, Sebastian relaxed a little. Zombies were dangerous, but there were other types of undead that were much more deadly.

The woman continued to stare through the hole. In life, the woman would have been beautiful, in unlife her attractiveness made her utterly horrifying. Sebastian could not help her; there was only one thing to do. The dead woman's eye widened as Sebastian lifted the scattergun. He fired both barrels

and the woman's lifeless face exploded into fragments of bones and flesh. Through the smoking hole in the canvas Sebastian saw the other members of her murdered family clambering away from the shaft of sunlight streaming in.

Sebastian quickly reloaded the scatter gun. The creatures within were startled. They were whispering, trying to decide what to do. Individually zombies were dangerous, but a group of them could be deadly event to an experienced hunter like Sebastian. They not yet decided to risk a few moments of sun to swarm him. He moved to allow himself a better to look into the hole. He saw what once was a teenage girl pressed against the wooden side of the buckboard. The shaft of sunlight ended inches from her toes and she had crawled as far from it as possible. Her dead eyes regarded Sebastian with a terrible hunger.

The Indians who attacked the wagon had murdered the entire family. Sebastian found this very peculiar, normally the plains Indians would kill the men and carry off the woman and children. Many of these woman became wives, some were traded back to the white man for various goods and a few were killed in rituals, but almost all of the children were adopted into Indian families. Why was this family killed? He glanced at the arrows imbedded in the wagon, but did not recognize the markings on the shaft or the types of lashing used to tie on the feathers. This murder was performed by a tribe unknown to him; Sebastian knew all of the tribes of the great plains.

Perhaps the more important question to be asked, thought Sebastian, was what motivated the Dark Shaman to kill these people and leave them behind. A Dark Shaman was an evil Indian priest who used foul, corrupted forces to break the natural cycle of life and death. Dark Shamans could created zombies and other forms of undead creatures, but doing so corrupted the land.

Sebastian could not help himself. He glanced at the beautiful land around him a shuddered, this glowing pristine valley could become a blighted landscape of death. He'd seen the Mojave Desert and walked amid the black energies that swirled in Death Valley. He shuddered at the thought of the northern plains becoming a vast field of corruption. He now understood the nagging fear that pulled him from Fort Laramie; an ancient evil had come into the Power River Basin and was spreading across the land as a shadow spread in evening twilight. In that moment Sebastian saw the sun set of the Indian

people and his heart trembled.

A teenage zombie hissed and spat blood from the hole in the canvas. The young girl's skin was drawn taut and leather-like, her fingernails were black and crusted with blood and her green eyes that once twinkled in wonder at the world were clouded white in death and filled with hate and murderous intent. The zombie child hissed and spat again at Sebastian when their eyes met. In her hands she held a small knife.

Sebastian raised the scatter gun and pulled both triggers. The dual blast took the girl in the chest, exploding her ribs and shattering her spine. She fell forward into the sunlight and the wagon filled with smoke as her flesh sputtered and burned. Their dead girl moaned once and then was still.

Sebastian tossed down the scattergun and pulled out his bowie know. The weapon had a wide heavy blade that Sebastian kept honed to razor sharpness. He slashed through the canvas covering the front of the wagon. The sunlight streamed in. A large male zombie, likely husband and father, crouched inside holding a lumber cutting axe in both hands. The zombie's flesh began to smoke, but it would be many minutes before the sunlight killed the creature.

The zombie leapt out into the sun swinging the ax. Sebastian ducked beneath wild stroke and drove his blade into the zombie's gut. Rotten, worm infested intestines spilled out over the blade. Sebastian stepped back to avoid the refuse rolling out of the zombie's belly. The zombie came again, its intestines dragging behind like some macabre tail.

Sebastian blocked the zombie's next swing and thrust the point of his long knife into the zombie's chest. The zombie staggered back and tripped over its intestines. Sebastian transferred the knife to his left hand, pulled his pistol and poured lead into the undead man until he stopped moving.

He heard the soft cry from the inside wagon and he cursed. The cry came again. He walked to the wagon and peered inside. The teenage girl with the hole in her chest had mostly burned away and the air was clear enough for him to see within. The faceless woman lay dead again in the far corner of the wagon. The sound can again from a small swaddled form lying in the shadows.

Sebastian cursed softly to himself. These cursed Indians had killed an infant and brought it back as an undead. The zombie baby cried again. Sebastian walked over, and slowly reloaded his colt.

The child twisted its head and clawed up with tiny talons. Sebastian aimed his pistol and put one bullet through its brain.

Sebastian dragged the dead man's body back to the wagon. He broke up the wagon wheels with the ax and piled the wood inside on the bodies. He cut down the grass from around the outside of the wagon and then spread the cuttings inside the wagon. He then took out his flint and steel and started a fire inside the wagon. In a short time, the eager flames spread across the floor of the wagon and burned up to the canvas which aught even more quickly. The leathery bodies began to smoulder. As the fire grew hotter, the greedy flames were eager to consume the corpses. The stink of burning flesh filled the air

Sebastian walked away from the blaze. He checked his horse for injuries, the buzzards had not hurt the animal. He patted its neck and then mounted the horse. Sebastian turned to watch the flames consume the wagon. The fire popped, snapped and crackled. The smoke billowed into the sky. If the gunshots did not draw others, the smoke surely would.

He did not have long to wait. He saw the band of Indians coming toward him out of the east. It was a small band of warriors on fast moving ponies. Instead of fleeing as most white men would do, Sebastian road towards them. Most Indians respected courage; their culture particularly despised cowardice.

Sebastian meet the Indians. Sebastian could tell by the style of dress that all of the Indians except one were Sioux. The one that was not Sioux was taller than the rest. His muscular arms were banded with copper ringlets and he wore a breastplate of buffalo bones. A shield hung on his pony near his left knee. A bow and the strap of quicker crossed his chest. In his right hand he carried a feathered spear.

These Indians were not a simple hunting party. All of the Indians were painted for war and carried their weapons at the ready. The Sioux were dressed in brain tanned war-shirts with scalp-locks dangling from the shoulder seams and both arms. The soft buckskin was painted with primitive pictographs denoting their exploits in war, buffalo hunting and pony-stealing. Their limbs were adorned with brass armbands and finger-rings. From their ear lobes hung dentalium shells all the way from the

Oregon coast. Their pipe bags and medicine pouches were beaded with intricate designs. On their belts hung quilled knife scabbards with metal knives and throwing tomahawks with images of animals engraved on their hilt. Shiny brass trinkets that shone in the sun adorned their chests.

These were great warriors, perhaps even a chief. Sebastian rode towards them with the confidence of a man born on the plains. He was often tested by the harsh land and its native people. To Sebastian life was a series of challenges, each one to be met and overcome when it arose.

“You burn the wagon of the white man,” spoke the Indian who was not a Sioux when Sebastian had approached within easy speaking distance.

“I burned creatures created by the bad medicine of a Dark Shaman,” replied Sebastian.

The Indian who had spoken nodded when he heard Sebastian’s claim and then quickly made an ancient series of hand signs to ward off evil. The Indians with him did the same.

Sebastian. “I am Sebastian Crane.”

“We have heard your name spoken around the council fires,” spoke oldest Indian. “I am Man-Afraid-Of-His-Horses. This is my son Curly. And these three are my warriors.” He pointed to the braves nearest his son. “I welcome Sebastian Crane to the Powder River, but give you warnings of war to come. The lodges gather and all white men who come beyond Crazy Woman Fork will die.”

Sebastian nodded.

The old Sioux motioned to the remaining Indian. “I will let Thunder-Rumbles-The-Mountain-Speak for himself.”

Sebastian could see that the powerful Indian regarded him suspiciously. “I am called Thunder. I am blessed by the Sacred-Mother and trained to hunt Corruptions-of-the-Earth by Seeing-All-Under-Heaven. I am a member of the Ionnack Tribe. Our home was east of the great river, but our tribe was destroyed by the white man in my grandfather’s time. Those who survived fled west and the Sioux took us in. I am friend to no white man, but I respect the welcome of Mad-Afraid-of-His-Horses and will not raise my weapon to you this day.”

Sebastian nodded grimly and thought that the Thunder was aptly named, for there seemed a barely contained anger raging within the Indian. Sebastian chose his next words carefully as he

addressed Thunder.

“I have chosen to hunt evil things. Those creatures in the wagon, you call them Corruptions-of-the-Earth. My people call them undead. They are evil things. We both have the same task. You are blessed by the Sacred-Mother, and I have the Knack. These words mean the same thing. We both have skills that set us apart from the rest of our people; skills that seem like magic and allow us to perform incredible feats. I use my skills protect all people. I ride where ever I see the Earth corrupted. And I ride for the good of all men, red, white, yellow and black.”

“You and I are nothing alike,” whispered Thunder.

“Would you interfere with one such as I, whose life is pledged to thwarting those who use corrupt the Sacred-Earth?” Asked Sebastian.

“I hate corruption more than I hate the white man,” spoke Thunder. “So I would not interfere with your work. Long have I spoke against the use of the Bad-Medicine to fight the whites, but times are changing in these lands.” Thunder looked at Man-Afraid. “There are those among the Sioux who use the Corrupt-Essence.”

This revelation took Sebastian by surprise. He spoke to Man-Afraid, “The honorable tribes of the Powder River Basin forbid all to use the Black Magic that corrupts the land. Do not tell me the brave Sioux would break the cycle of life and death.”

“We honor the teaching of our ancestors. Most of us still believe the Dark Essence must be avoided,” spoke Man-Afraid. “But Thunder speaks true; times are changing. Chiefs who once forbid use of the Dark Essence are now considering it as a means to drive the white man from our lands.”

“These chiefs would have you save your lands by destroying them?” Asked Sebastian.

Man-Afraid looked away.

“They believe they can control the corruption,” rumbled Thunder. He was clearly displeased with those who spoke of using the Dark Powers. “Years ago Dark Shamans practiced in secret. If they were caught in their dark rites they were banished from the tribal land or some times even killed. The white man’s steady advance has made many chiefs reconsider. Red Cloud’s talk of war has drawn Black Shamans to the Powder River Country. They fly like buzzard to feast on fallen corpses.

The Dark Shamans once shunned by all tribes are now allowed to speak.”

The rage must have been plain on Sebastian’s face, for Thunder paused.

“And what do the Dark Shamans say?” asked Sebastian through gritted teeth. It was a Dark Shaman that had killed his family that cold rainy night twenty years ago when he was just a teenage boy. He would have died that day as well if not for the old miner, Rigamarole Bob, who had saved his life.

“The Dark Shamans promise a new age,” spoke Man-Afraid. “They predict a great victory; a way to turn the tide and drive the white man back across the great river. They speak of lost tribes who will be willing to help Red Cloud win his war if they are granted lands. These tribes have great powers and very strong medicine, but they are corrupted by the their use of the Dark Essence.”

“And what does the great chief Red Cloud say of the Dark Shamans in his land?” asked Sebastian Man-Afraid.

“Red Cloud does not embrace the Dark Shamans as his brothers, but has not banished them. Many lesser chiefs are lured by the promises of the Dark Shamans and Red Cloud does not wish to anger them or lose their support. Because he tolerate their presence many of our young warriors are seduced to their evil ways.”

“Surely they know the Dark Power will poison the land,” insisted Sebastian. “It will corrupt this valley . . . It will corrupt all the Sioux and all their allies and all who come in contact with them, including their enemies.”

“They know all this and more,” spat Thunder. “But they do not wish to lose their lands to the white-man.”

“This is madness!” spoke Sebastian.

Man-Afraid nodded. “We are all in agreement, Sebastian-Crane. I spoke against the Black Shamans. The Hunter-of-the-Corrupted who was trained by Seeing-All has also spoken against them. But many chiefs would risk corruption to avoid the complete destruction of our way of life. I do not wish to be apart of this plan. I am riding to the South to attack the white man’s iron machines that ride on the steel rails. I want no part of a war plan that will embrace corruption.”

“What is this plan?” asked Sebastian.

Man-Afraid appeared to weigh his words carefully, "I will not hinder your travels, nor will I help your endeavors this day. There is great discord, the time for peace is ending and all must choose their path. I will carry word to the chiefs that Sebastian Crane is in the Powder River Country. Some may give you passage, but others may take your scalp. I for one wish you well. . . The Dark Shamans are an evil that I will never accept, but the choice is not mine alone to make. Every chief will have to follow his heart."

Sebastian could see the old chief had spoken all he would on the matter. He let his eyes drift over the warriors traveling with him. Their expressions reflected a mixture of opinion. Most appeared to agree with the old man, while one lusted for his scalp. Sebastian's eyes locked on the young curly haired boy identified as Man-Afraid's son. There was a fire in the boy's eyes that burned brightly with hate for the white man.

"What is the plan?" repeated Sebastian. His voice was flat and emotionless, but there was a dangerous threat in his voice. Some of the younger Sioux shifted nervously. Sebastian looked at Thunder, "If you are a hunter, then you swore an oath is to the Sacred-Mother. You are pledged to stop Corruption, yet you ride to the South and allow it to occur?"

"I will not fight my people?" spoke Thunder, Sebastian could see he warred with himself.

"You will allow the Sacred-Mother to be twisted with evil?"

Rage boiled in Thunder, but he seemed to reach a decision. "You will find what you seek near the town of Bleeding Hills."

"You should not have told him," spat the young brave named Curly.

The powerful Indian Thunder looked at the boy, and the boy looked away.

"I bid you farewell," spoke Sebastian to Thunder. "May the buffalo be plenty and your ponies swift."

Sebastian wheeled his horse and departed from the Indians without a backward glance, because to look who show that he had suspicion. He kept his eyes forward, even when he heard the hoof beats pounding the ground behind him. He fought the urge to turn and confront his attacker. He trusted the young curly-haired warrior following him would not be wielding a tomahawk or spear.

He felt the blow of the coup stick across his back and the pain that lanced down through his spine. He turned his horse back to the Indians on the hill behind him as the curly haired Indian road past whooping his battle cry. The young Indian pulled back on the reins of his pony and road in a circle around Sebastian who did not even look at the young warrior. Sebastian kept his eyes on Man-Afraid who face was impassive as he watched his son harass the white man.

The young Indian hollered and shook his coup stick. The feathers and scalps dangling from the shaft danced and fluttered with every shake. Finally, he road between Sebastian and his father. "Look at me!," screamed the young brave. "I have counted coup on the white man who claims to be a death-hunter! Maybe I will take his scalp! There are many who would agree that all white man should die."

Sebastian pulled his colt and fired a single shot. The bullet struck Curly's coup stick knocking it from his hand. Sebastian twirled the gun twice and then smoothly dropped the smoking gun back into its holster. He pulled his horse around and departed. He left the young brave named Curly rubbing his hand and the old Indian chief smiling. Sebastian figured the story would be told around the campfires. Curly would gain great renown for counting coup on Sebastian, but the story would end with the skill of the white man death-hunter.

Sebastian followed the tracks of the Dark Shaman and the Indians who road with him. They lead to the south west. From the signs he counted about twenty Indians. They were mounted on ponies and were making good time. Sebastian didn't intend to attack the band himself; Sebastian wanted to track them to their destination and then get some help.

A few days later, the Indian's course turned due south. Sebastian followed. The weather turned warmer and the threat of snow receded, but the sky remained grey. The land to the south was more arid. He moved into a bleak landscape of sagebrush and greasewood trees, where muddy streams flowed into alkali lakes and high grass swayed in the wind. There were a few isolated strands of trees and every so often he would see a line of cottonwoods marking a small stream or slow moving creek.

Despite the land's arid nature, wildlife was abundant. Antelope were numerous, deer were plentiful, too. Wolves howled in the moonlight and grizzly bears were as common as poisonous snakes.

Huge prairie dog warrens dotted the grasslands and when their sentries saw Sebastian riding close they would raise their shrill alarms and the entire population would head for cover.

The high plains were a harsh and unforgiving land, inhabited by unyielding men and women and terrible, ferocious beasts. It was a land of conflicting moments, burning hot in the summer, freezing cold in the winter. Sebastian was a child of this land. Some would say Sebastian was conflicted as the land he called home. He could be exceedingly stubborn, but was also able to react swiftly to changes around him. He was fast with a gun, quick with knife and deadly with his cavalry saber; he would not hesitate to kill a person that needed killing, but he respected life. He told himself he did what needed to be done.

Many people welcomed Sebastian, but others hated him. Some claimed he was heartless, cold as winter, they said. Sebastian himself paid little attention to what others spoke. He did not seek fame, or even infamy. He wanted no tales told about his exploits in the dime novels of the day.

Sebastian came to a muddy water hole and dismounted. He allowed the horse to drink, while he scouted for tracks. The water was muddy, but not stagnant or rancid. Others were drinking here not too long ago; the moccasin-shod footprints were still crisp and firm.

“They’ve been here not long before us,” spoke Sebastian to his horse. The animal stared down at him. “Thunder did not lie. These Indians are heading toward Bleeding Hills.

Sebastian’s horse snorted.