

An excerpt from the novel LIMINAL STATES by Zack Parsons.

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Chapter Six

Gideon considered death, which he had not often contemplated, and wondered how, when his blood had finished running out of his shot belly, death would suit him. He decided it would feel like rising underdressed to a cold morning, and he thought, upon trying to decipher the strange shapes in his eyes when he looked up at the sky, that he would like to depart as a cloud. To dissipate and be carried away on the wind. To be breathed in and out and experience the world as the emptiness of the air.

Gideon held out some hope that the craven bastard Robert Broken Horse would recall his duty and come riding to save him. He was not certain how long he walked north—his gold pocket watch was ruined by water and no longer turned, and he was never a good judge of the trail—so he continued aimlessly and in a state of constant exhaustion.

For a time Gideon leaned against a sandstone boulder, unshackled his leg from the ruin of its brace, and tried to get at his wound with the thought of cauterizing it. He moaned when he saw the extent of his injury—the neat hole made by the bullet that had passed through him and left his body as a ragged, flapping wound—and the way the sticky blood filled his trousers and dribbled out in his footprints. He knew by the foul smell of the wound that his guts had been rent by the bullet.

Gideon surrendered to his misery against the rock. His plan was a failure, his fortune gone, his life spilled out with each passing moment. He laid the back of his head against the boulder and turned his face up to the heat of the sun. He closed his eyes and could still see the shapes moving against the red of his eyelids.

He thought of the sheriff's face, fantasized pressing thumbs into the man's eyes and tearing out the lawman's tongue. Gideon fell unconscious for a time. Dreamless. He awoke sun-sore and fearful of dying in that position, imagined his carcass explored by the beaks of vultures, and he opened his eyes. He could not readily stand and slid down onto his knees on the rocks.

He was overcome with thirst, and he crawled to the edge of the creek. The water was already diminished and flowed slowly. He lowered his face to the water and found it warm and with a mineral thickness that reminded him of broth. It was difficult to swallow, but he drank. The water coated his tongue with grit and did very little to slake his thirst.

Annie. He thought of her as he knew her years ago, when she first arrived in Spark. Young and beautiful, with a French manner in the saddle and a pretty face. Her voice was sweet and accented, though her English was never obscured by her upbringing. He called on her many times in those early days. Kissed her hand, her face, her lips only once. Never—

"Never fucked her, did you?"

Gideon looked up in surprise. Father sat on the western bank, across the creek, dressed in his flannel housecoat over filthy pajamas. He dipped his bare feet into the water. Though Father was only the scrap of a man Gideon had left in the sickbed, he seemed revitalized by Gideon's misery.

"Father?"

"Spent all that time courting her, writing her poems, and giving her flowers, for what? Who bedded her, little dandy? Who was the man to lay his seed in her and make her his?"

"She still loves me." Gideon staggered to his feet and stood in the shallow flow of the creek.

"I know all about your schoolboy letters and your lavish gifts. What woman would deny those jewels, boy? But when she lays her head down at night, whose is beside it? Whose hand feels her tit—"

"You are not real," said Gideon. "Do not speak of her that way."

"Real enough to torment you." Father played his feet back and forth through the water. "While you die, I yet live in my sickbed. Live to see the villain you've now become. Did you think some sacks of gold would make it all better? You would be a hero?"

"To hell with you," said Gideon.

"I can't help but think about that handsome sheriff. How that strapping Leander must swim to her and cram her full of meat at night."

"Damn you," said Gideon. He stumbled out into the water and toward Father.

"Like a beast. Like a wild dog. Rutting her while she howls his name at the moon. And you not fit to lick her piss from the pot, boy."

Gideon fell and sputtered, was nearly carried away by the hip-deep water, but he summoned the will and got his feet beneath him on the slippery rocks.

"Oh, Sheriff," Father said in a mockery of a woman's voice, "I would never have dreamed such pleasure could be felt."

Gideon fell again, his hands sliding on the rocks, but he was in the shallows and fought back onto his feet. Father chuckled at his predicament. Gideon stalked out of the water, eyes white against the mud covering his face, and Father's laughter climbed in pitch and became an insane cackle. The thrill of anger restored vigor to Gideon's limbs.

Father offered no resistance, only continued to laugh and shake with mirth, and Gideon got his hands around Father's bony neck. Gideon's thumbs pressed against the bulging windpipe, and he silenced Father's mocking laugh with a squeeze. The bones of Father's neck were as brittle as dead wood, and as Gideon tightened his grip, they crackled and snapped, and Father's head drooped lifelessly.

Gideon released Father's throat and let his corpse, so weightless, slip back onto the riverbank. His heart beat with exertion, and he gasped for breath. He lifted his head and saw he had crossed to the western shore of Green Creek. Father's corpse had become a coincidental doll of twigs and branches deposited by the flood.

Gideon Long climbed the western bank and set off into the desert of white sand toward the distant, dark shapes of the mountains.

Claws pinned Annie to the grass, and she was forced to see the volcanic sky. She could not turn her head or look away from the black roiling of the clouds lit from within by bursts of fire and lightning. Screaming voices rose from the tableland all around her, and the grass became switches that cut into her flesh. The she-thing was made of bones and black feathers, and its steaming drool was black and as hot as tar, and the long, purple tongue of a giraffe hung from its jaws, and when it hissed in its alien way, the spittle slopped on Annie's face.

Annie's legs were spread open, and another creature of bone and sinews stood before her. The creature was huge, with the humped shoulders and head of a Limousin bull, skinned and sick with flies and infection. It regarded her naked body and shook with laughter that sent webs of rotting yellow fat dripping from its shoulders. Her thighs burned where it violated her.

The crying voices around her fell silent, and the bull flared its nostrils. It lowered its head so that she felt the putrid heat of its breath on her body. Black fingernails traced her breasts and her distended stomach. The child stirred within her womb. The bull sensed the movement and jerked its head back and smiled with a mouth tangled with sharp, recurved teeth. It brayed with hunger, and in the hot dirge of its roar Annie could hear every imagined bestial terror of long, country nights.

She wailed as it forced her open and reached an arm into her, tearing at her womb with talons and fighting to grasp her unborn daughter. The pain was beyond anything she had ever known, yet she found the strength to kick and fight against the creature.

It was her belief that God would not intervene unless it was His will, and so Annie prayed to Him for strength and comfort, returning to the French words of her childhood. She thought of the preacher who visited their house and spoke of the tribulations their kind suffered at the hands of their countrymen. The words he taught her. God was not to be petitioned but worshipped.

She recalled Papa the patriot, who stood for his church and refused the entreaties of the German Calvinists and the curses of the Catholics and worshipped in his way. She remembered him

strong and wealthy in Alsace, before they were driven out, and thought of his smile as she said her prayers aloud.

The fleshless Minotaur and the rotted bird-woman laughed at her prayers and tore at her with even greater violence. She could feel the baby smothering in her womb, and she fought them. She threw off the she-thing from her arm, but it returned and pushed her down and held her with its claws, its lurid wings beating a terrible perfume into her face.

"Let go," said a voice near her head.

There was a crepuscular light on the plain, and it illuminated the withered trees of the apple orchard and the cracked pan of soil, and it transfixed in golden beams a figure wrapped in billowing clothes that could only be her mother. She recognized her from paintings and chromos but had never heard her voice. It sounded to Annie like her own voice echoing back from the mountains.

"Let go, Annie," said her mother. "Don't fight them."

"They're killing her," said Annie.

"She will die, because they are saving you." A hand rested upon her mother's shoulder, and it became, by revelation, attached to a man. His face was shaded by a wide-brimmed hat, and he wore the coat and boots of Warren. She felt uncertain it was Warren and could sense that it might be her father.

"Warren?"

"He's not here," said her mother. "You are alone."

The man was gone, and Annie felt a coldness and heaviness to her limbs. Her mother faded into the light, like motes of dust, and disappeared. Annie's unborn child meant everything to her. Still, she shut her eyes and accepted the bargain. Her life for her daughter's.

The day was closing down on Gideon as he limped northwest out of the graben basin and walked among the rippled, embryonic dunes and farther into the barchan crescents of white gypsum desert. The sun, retreating slowly among the distant mountains, dried his clothes and made of the day's filth a crusted shell that gave him the appearance of a primordial man. The mud flaked off his coat and trousers with each step.

The wind erased his uneven trail from the surface of the desert, and there was no rock, only intermittent scrub where the alkali desert had blown away and exposed the hardpan. Gideon's bleeding had slowed to a blackened, congealed seep, and he felt cold all over despite the lingering daylight heat.

In the great distance, seeming to emerge from the gray valleys and peaks of the San Andres, Gideon could see a single figure melting out from the desert littoral. He at first dismissed it as an illusion

of the heat or another apparition like his father, but from one minute to the next it grew in size, until he could discern a horse and rider.

Robert Broken Horse. He waved his arms and stumbled toward the damned Indian, already formulating the abuse he would heap on the cowardly old Crow. It was only as he crested a dune and could see the horse and rider descending an opposite dune that Gideon realized it was not Robert Broken Horse.

The Indian who rode at him sat atop a half-tamed war pony, a blanket beneath his legs, and the rider had the mien and trappings of a savage. The Indian wore feathers and beads in his hair and, over bare chest, a green Mexican cavalry coat, ragged and dusty, probably torn from the murdered body of some unlucky presidial trooper.

Crude panniers hung over the hindquarters of the pony, and these were festooned with scalps that flopped as horse and Indian rode at Gideon at a gallop. The Indian cradled a flintlock rifle like a babe in one arm and rested the stock across his lap.

Gideon surrendered himself to the Indian without a fight, weakly raised his hands into the air, and the savage rode around him in a circle so near that he could smell the stink of the riding blanket and chewed tobacco. The Indian shouted in Spanish, and the horse kicked the white sand into Gideon's eyes. He fell and braced himself for the blow or shot that would end his life.

"If you will not fight," said Father, "at least stand and die like a man."

Gideon regained his feet and opened his eyes. The Indian clicked with his tongue, and the horse pranced to a stop, snorting and snarling at Gideon.

The Indian reached back to the pannier, took something out, and threw it at Gideon's chest. It struck him nearly hard enough to knock him over. He managed to catch it in his arms and felt a moment's horror as he saw blood red. He realized, with relief, that it was no gory trophy but the valise belonging to Father's lawyer.

He laughed at his improbable fortune. The Indian did not like this, and he brought up his flintlock and shouted in Spanish.

"I do not speak Spanish," Gideon said. "No . . . *no habla espanol, amigo.*"

The Indian's smile showed dirty teeth. "Specie," the Indian said. "Silver or gold."

"English?"

"I learned your language from a man who made me kill him. I thought he was my friend. He lied to me. Did you lie to me?"

Gideon patted his body to demonstrate he carried no coins.

"Not a lie." Gideon gestured to the Red Lines. "Red Stem. The town there. I have your money."

The Indian folded his arms across his chest. His dark skin was dusted with the alkali sand, and his hair caught the wind, blowing behind him like a black standard.

"*Agua*," Gideon said. "Water. Water, please."

The Indian dragged up two skins of water slung across the pony's back and measured the weight of each in his hands. He poured most of the water into one of the skins and tied it to the pannier. He handed the other to Gideon. It was light, only a few sips, but Gideon tilted it up and drained the warm water into his mouth. It was clean and pure compared to the floodwater he'd drunk at Green Creek.

The Indian watched sullenly, as if he might yet decide to kill Gideon and take back his water.

"We cannot go to the place of your people," said the Indian. "Not this night or for some time to come. I have seen the blue army ride out in anger, and they will kill any Indian they find."

Gideon lowered the empty skin from his lips. "The Army? I must return. They will not kill me. Let me take your horse. I can ride in and fetch your money."

The Indian leaned down to examine Gideon more closely. "If I split you in half, which half will remain with me?"

"I am a wealthy man," said Gideon. "You have done what I asked, and I mean to pay."

"You do not have water or horse, and you are dying. You are a wealthy man. That is good. What is your name, wealthy man?"

"Gideon Long."

The Indian climbed down from the horse and stood so that his face was near Gideon's. His eyes were dark, unyielding, like polished buttons or the painted eyes of a doll.

"That is your body's name. What is your name? Do you know it yet?"

"I . . . I am not sure how to answer. I only know the name I was given. What . . ." Gideon paused to swallow the dryness returning to his throat. "What is your name?"

"Why are you playing along with this savage hoodoo?" said Father. "Kill this animal, take his horse and water. You have a pistol in your coat. I can see it."

"The Mescalero call me Speaks With Knife. They were my people once, a long time before they let themselves be caged. I have other names, but you may call me by that name. May I ask you, Gideon Long, are you a Christian?"

"Yes, well, I am, but I do not pursue it. I do not worship in a church or proselytize. It is something I have learned in school. I think that God should . . . why are you asking me this?"

Speaks With Knife took a leather-bound Bible from his riding pouches. It was of the cheap sort carried by frontier preachers, and when the Indian lifted it from the pack, Gideon could see the unmistakable dark stain of blood on its pages.

"You are going to die, Gideon Long. I have letters. Would you like me to read from this book over your body?"

"I do not intend to die," Gideon said.

Speaks With Knife leaned very close to Gideon and flared his nostrils and inhaled deeply. He touched Gideon's face with short fingers. "You must be a powerful shaman. To refuse death, you must be most powerful of all. Will you be reborn like White Painted Woman, or will you refuse to leave your body?"

"What?"

"I have seen many strange things, wealthy man Gideon Long. There is a book in your Christian Bible. It says this world will be destroyed in plague and war, and beasts of terrible power will walk the earth. The sickness and guns are here already, Gideon Long. Do you wield this terrible power?"

"He is babbling like a heathen," said Father.

"Leave me some water," said Gideon. "I will walk to Spark. You found me once, you can find me again. If I am dead, you can take everything I have."

"When I was a boy, I believed the world went on forever. My mother told me it did. But I have seen maps, Gideon Long. The white man does not lie with maps to his own kind. The white man has found everything, and he has plans for it. Plans to gather up all of the shapes and make them square. He will put his houses in a row and raise trees of telegraph rope and turn the meadow with his plows. This is not the end of your world, but it is the end of a world."

"Listen to this fool!" said Father. "Kill him. Please. Shut him up."

"No," said Gideon.

"I have been wicked and cruel to the white man, crueler even than Riding Iron or Fierce Bear or any other war chief will allow, and still there will be no stopping the white man. Some may join him, but this is not my fate. These are the very last days. This is the Revelation. This book in your Christian Bible was written for me."

Speaks With Knife turned his back to Gideon, reached to the pannier, and hefted the water skin. "I will set a camp in the western hills and leave you some—"

Gideon's revolver popped and spit white smoke. The wet cartridge did not discharge properly. The Indian turned, bleeding from his cheek, his eyes wide and furious. Gideon fumbled with the pistol,

cocked back the hammer, fired a second time, missed in his haste, cocked again, and this time shot Speaks With Knife through the heart.

The Apache fell to the ground and sprawled beside the horse. His blood spilled out quickly across the sand, and Speaks With Knife lay on his back with his eyes open and blinking slowly. Gideon stood over him, darkening him with his shadow. The Indian's bloody hand grabbed at Gideon's leg, fingers twisting in the fabric and smearing the blood over the top of his boot. In a moment more the Indian was dead.

"You almost bungled it," said Father. "Look at this miserable animal. That could be you, but now you have a horse."

Gideon turned to catch the horse, and the pony snorted and reared up on its hind legs. He backed away, but the horse came at him, gnashing its jaws like a predator and snapping at him with its teeth. Father began to laugh and mock him. The horse would not be calmed, would not even flee. It circled around Gideon and tried to kick and bite him. He became terrified and reminded of Apollyon, though the Indian's horse was small, and Gideon's father laughed and mocked even more.

"Remember this, boy? Ha-ha, what a show. Outwitted by a horse once more."

In his limping attempts to avoid the pony's charging, Gideon became snared on the lifeless body of Speaks With Knife, and he fell on his back on the sticky, bloodied sand surrounding the Indian. An unshod hoof smashed against his shoulder, and another missed his neck by only a fraction of an inch. The horse rode over him, turned back, and as it came a second time, Gideon sat up and shot the animal in the head.

It stopped, snorted, tried to start toward him again, and fell onto its side. Father laughed very hard at this and even harder when Gideon realized his missed shot at the Indian had punctured the water skin.

"You've managed to kill yourself all over again," said Father.

Gideon saved what he could from the water skin—not much at all—and left the dead horse and Indian lying where they had fallen. In the panniers he discovered beads and bones and Mexican paper and a skin full of tiswin that he drank, burning and awful, though he knew it would soon worsen his thirst.

He clutched in his arm the red valise of Father's attorney, and he carried the Indian's flintlock and tobacco for a time, thinking of trading or protecting himself from animals, but as he grew weaker, these fell from his grasp. His hold on the valise tightened.

Night came, and the bright gibbous moon kept a deep shade of blue overhead. The sand seemed to glow beneath that cloudless sky. It appeared like snow, and, with the cold, it was easy for Gideon to imagine himself on the Christmas heath of Chatholm. He shivered out of cold and weakness, teeth clicking painfully, and thirst was his constant concern.

He was followed into the night, pursued by a cautious band of coyotes. Each time he looked back, he would catch only a glimpse as they disappeared behind the last dune he'd crossed. When the wind fell silent, he could hear them sniff and dig at his trail of blood or hear the soft pad of their feet on the sand. They snarled and yipped with excitement when he descended the face of a dune or slipped and fell in the spilling desert. He could sense them closing in and rose before they thought him too weak to continue and decided the moment had come to attack.

Father's voice mocked him, though he never saw the apparition after its strangulation at the creek. Delirious, dying, Gideon tumbled down a dune's slack, accompanied all the way by Father's laugh. The mountains seemed near enough to be touched. The San Andres. The black stones towered behind the desert, radiating heat, yet he felt, at last, he could not rise again.

Gideon laughed at himself. Laughed at his fate. The valise fell open, and papers began to spill out. The wind whipped papers into the air and swept the contents of the valise away down the rippling slack until only a single bound folio remained.

He watched the coyotes mount the dune above him, one next to the other, a formation ready to charge down after him. They growled and licked their jaws at the prospect of his meat. The largest started down the dune. Its eyes burned with the reflected moonlight, and Gideon could see strings of drool slipping from its open mouth.

The coyote stopped, flattened its ears, lowered the wedge of its head to the sand, and growled.

"Come on," Gideon said. "Come and have your meal."

He could nearly feel the teeth at his throat. The coyotes did not obey him. They were backing away, snarling and retreating back up the dune. Some near the top turned and ran, trailing piss, or slunk off with heads low and tails tucked beneath their bodies.

Gideon had enough sense left to realize these hungry animals were not afraid of him. He rolled his head and looked to the opposite dune.

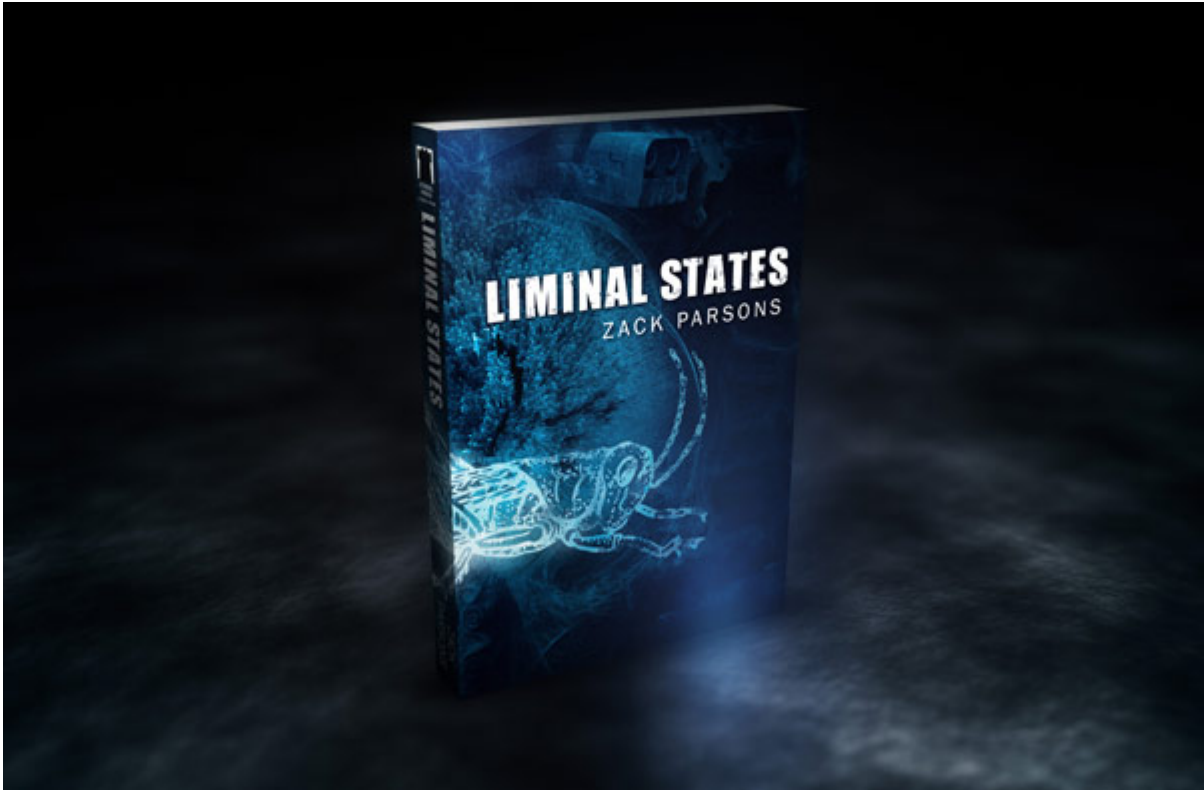
The lone dog stood limned by the light of the moon. It was of the mongrel, prick-eared sort kept by Indians. Its fur was completely white, nearly incandescent, as if lit from behind, whiter even than the gypsum sand, and its eyes were pale blue gems. Gideon had never seen a dog like it, and, in his way, he understood the fear of the coyotes. It was not a fear of violence but of something out of place, as if something had stepped from a dream and into the world.

The dog stared at him, not happily in the way of a pet, yet not in challenge; it was appraising him. It stared for a long time and then disappeared silently back over the dune.

Gideon found the strength to rise, scooped the remaining folio back into the valise, and, though he was afraid, felt compelled, by the strangeness of the dog and by his hopeless situation, to follow it.

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