

RUNNING AGAINST
THE WIND

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Rain.

He would have appreciated it a great deal more if he had been safe and dry back in town but caught out on the trail, still a good day's ride away from a warm bed and a bottle of whiskey, he cursed the contrariness of the elements instead. Already drenched, he shivered as cold drops insinuated their way under his slicker to slide icily down his neck and wondered irritably if he would even be able to get a fire going should he be lucky enough to find anything remotely like shelter in this godforsaken expanse of nothingness. He looked around again and snorted his disgust; not even so much as a rabbit hole. Hunching his shoulders in a determined manner, he urged his equally miserable horse to pick up its pace with a nudge of his heels and bent his head against the driving rain.

Beggar's Canyon. He recognised the landmark and realised he had come much further north than he had originally intended but at least the error in navigation might afford him some degree of shelter for the night and in his present mood that was all that mattered. The canyon, a short defile really in spite of its name, seemed the best option open to him, and although his trail sense balked at the idea of entering the narrow cleft, he nevertheless turned his tired beast towards the less than inviting cutting in the rock. What the hell, he was only looking for a convenient bolt hole for a few hours.

Spouts of water cascaded from overhanging rocks and he negotiated the first fifty yards with difficulty, finally dismounting and leading the fractious gelding by the reins. He swore under his breath, cursing the horse as a worthless critter as he trudged through muddy pools of water that sucked clingingly at his boots and served to slow his forward progress still further. A rock tumbled from the canyon rim, bringing with it a shower of small stones and soft, moist clods of earth, to land a foot or two in front of him. The horse shied and reared back, dragging him momentarily off balance as his instincts went into overdrive, the certainty that something about the canyon was very wrong triggering a silent alarm in his brain.

Before he had even regained his balance fully, his gun was in his hand and he was searching the rocks overhead for sign of the danger that intuition told him was lurking overhead. Nothing. He wiped water from his face with a sodden sleeve and looked back down the defile, considering retracing his steps but he had reached the narrowest point of the rocky cleft and turning his horse around would be just about impossible. He let his eyes range along the canyon rim again and down the almost sheer walls looking for any hint of movement or colour but all was still and only the sound of the rain falling and his horse snorting broke the silence. Sighing, he un-cocked his Colt with a flick of his thumb but he followed his instincts and did not relax his grip, or take his finger off the trigger. *Goddamn it, he was more spooked than his horse.*

Jerking the reins he started forward once more, the thought of dry clothes, a bed and a generous supply of whiskey becoming more tempting by the minute. With a deep sigh of resignation he lowered his head and trudged through the glutinous mud, water cascading from the brim of his hat, seriously doubting that he would ever feel warm again.

It came on silent wings. Fledged with bright feathers and aimed true from an unseen hand, it whispered through the air seeking -- and finding -- a target of flesh and blood; sharp steel on a hardwood shaft tearing muscle and tissue, as it thudded home.

Chris grunted with the shock and pain of it, sinking to one knee in the mud as he fought to catch his breath, overcoming the temptation to drop his gun to clutch at the shaft of the arrow that had plunged deep into his side. Biting back the urge to cry out, he clenched his teeth and drew several ragged breaths as he fought to maintain his hold on the reins while trying to slide his gun into his holster before scrambling back into the scant shelter at the limits of the defile. Leaning awkwardly against the slick, shining rock he grasped the arrow with his gun hand where it entered his body, closing his fist tightly around it. Taking a deep breath he paused, mustering his resolve, then leaned forcefully into the rock

snapping the wooden shaft off to leave a five inch stump sticking out of the wound. *Jesus Christ!* He threw back his head, squeezing his eyes shut and letting the rain wash over his face as an unholy fire burned through his side and he felt the warm river of blood start to flow over his hand.

Ignoring the agony that flared with every movement he stumbled forward and pulled savagely on the horse's reins, forcing its head around to face the direction from which they had just come. Struggling to get his foot in the stirrup, he gasped aloud as he swung his leg across the animal's back, a wave of sickness washing over him as he kicked it into a gallop. The gelding leapt forward almost throwing him, and he clutched at the pommel, letting the reins hang slackly, no other thought on his mind than to escape the deadly trap that the defile had become.

oooOOOooo

The six brightly coloured wagons had formed a rough circle around a central fire and even as the sun rose there was movement in the camp. The mules, picketed a few yards from the wagons, stirred restlessly snorting and stamping in the cold of early morning. A boy of about nine years of age scurried around the camp perimeter collecting wood for the fire intent on his chore but stopping abruptly as a horse meandered towards him, reins trailing in the dust. The boy's mouth formed a perfect "o" of surprise at the unexpected encounter which turned into a yell of alarm as the animal's burden slid to the ground almost at his feet. Dropping his armload of firewood he fled back to the safety of the wagons. His father, a tall, swarthy and well-muscled man in his early thirties, dropped the axe he was using and grabbed his rifle at the sound of his son's cry.

"Bardu?"

The boy almost collided with his father as he jumped a wagon hitch on his way back into the defensive circle.

"Papa! There's a horse - and a man. He fell off his horse. I think he's dead."

A woman, Bardu's mother, hurried across the camp to her son's side. She looked worriedly at her husband.

"What is it, Spiro?"

The man hefted his rifle.

"I don't know, Tinha. Bardu says he saw a man. I'm just going to take a look."

She touched his arm as he moved away.

"Take care, husband."

He nodded once and crossed the barricade into the open.

The horse was wandering around the mule picket nuzzling scraps of fodder from the ground and avoiding kicks and bites from the tethered animals. Spiro collected the reins and loosely tied the beast to one of the wagons noting the fine rifle secured to the saddle. Some distance away he saw a dark shape in the scrub and cautiously he moved forward, own rifle at the ready. One glance at the figure on the ground told him that the man was no immediate threat, a second glance assured the man of aid as Spiro saw the blood dried to a sticky glue down one side of his body. In one smooth movement Spiro stooped, gathered the unconscious form and hoisted him over one powerful shoulder.

He had wakened, hurting, confused and disorientated, in a dim and smoky covered wagon surrounded by strangers. Strangers who held him down as one of their number cut into him with a heated knife, while he writhed, bucking and struggling, against the unwelcome invasion of the razor-sharp blade. Their words were kindly enough, sometimes spoken in another tongue but oddly comforting and he understood that they meant him no harm but that knowledge did nothing to lessen the searing

agony that surged through his body. His bared chest, shiny with sweat, heaved as he fought the urge to scream out loud, while dexterous fingers probed the open wound in an effort to remove the deeply embedded arrowhead. Sucking huge draughts of air into his lungs he tried to pull away from the source of the pain but strong arms restrained him, holding him, and he was forced to give in, having no strength left with which to fight. A damp cloth wiped the sweat from his face and in a moment of respite he looked up into a pair of dark eyes, the colour of the night sky, before another lance of white hot pain took his breath away. He tensed, his entire body rigid, as the pain peaked, before finally relaxing when it abruptly ebbed away, leaving him breathless and exhausted.

“Rest now, my son. It is done.”

Spent, he closed his eyes and sighed, finally surrendering his already tenuous grip on consciousness and sliding into welcome darkness.

The wagon train had made camp early. Just after noon the travellers came upon a watering hole surrounded by trees and greenery, a veritable oasis the like of which they had not had the good fortune to see in a number of days. The opportunity to rest the mules, take on fresh water, attend the laundry and bathe was too inviting to pass up.

Inside one of the wagons Chris lay unmoving, head still woolly from prolonged sleep and a bitter taste in his mouth, which led him to believe that the sleep had not been entirely natural. He had quickly discovered that several parts of him were either stiff, sore or both; his left shoulder and his lower back aching from, he guessed, a fall from his horse. Any movement at all rewarded him with a gut-wrenching spear of agony that tore through his right side but, gritting his teeth, he cautiously raised himself on his elbows and rested for a moment, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings. Where the hell was he? Finally, ignoring his injured side, he mustered enough strength to sit up, immediately regretting the rashness of his action as his vision greyed and a wave of dizziness made him want to throw up. His hand flew to his side, pressing against the wadded dressing that covered the wound. *Christ, that hurt!* To make his situation even more uncomfortable his bladder was aching full and demanding his immediate attention.

Carefully, he started to rise, clutching the blanket to him as the realisation struck him that, apart from the bandage around his waist, he was completely naked. Slowly, and with no small difficulty, he managed to stay upright and climb down from the wagon where, squinting against the bright daylight, he paused to gaze slack-jawed at the camp spread out before him. The boisterous activity going on around the clearing made his head spin and his tired senses were assaulted by the noise and colour, not the least of which were the garishly decorated wagons surrounding him. Someone played a lively fiddle and he could hear someone singing while several young children darted between the wagons intent on some game for which there seemed to be no purpose.

“You should not be out here.”

He turned quickly, swaying slightly as his body and brain adjusted to the rapid movement, to discover the voice emanated from the most exotically arresting woman he had ever seen, standing solicitously by his elbow. Momentarily speechless, his senses overloaded, he could only stare. The woman lowered her eyes and rested a shy hand upon his arm.

“Please. Let me help.”

Chris self-consciously gathered the blanket close about his waist, wondering exactly what had happened to his clothes and when he could possibly hope to see them returned.

“Thank you, but..um...I don't think you can help me, ma'am. Some things a man just gotta do on his own -- and answering the call of nature is one of 'em.”

He left her staring after him, a slight frown of puzzlement on her face. The short walk to the relative privacy of the trees quickly drained him of his last ounce of energy, each step torture for his wounded

side, and it was with some difficulty that he made the return trip once the purpose of the exercise had been fulfilled. Forced to accept his limitations, he made no objection when the woman met him half way back to the wagon and offered her support. In truth, had he not felt quite so wretched he would have appreciated the slim, sun-tanned arm around his back but instead he was conscious more of the rank state of his body and the effort it was taking for him to put one foot in front of the other. A second, older, woman hurried to join them fussing around him like a mother hen.

"What are you thinking of, Mimi, letting the *gadje* walk around like this?" she scolded, before transferring her attention to Chris himself. "You, " she almost accused, her accent thick, "should not be up!"

Chris was inclined to agree but had no intention of either being brow beaten or explaining that he had urgently needed to piss and that he really preferred to do that without an audience.

"Ma'am, if you don't mind," he responded wearily, "I just need a place to sit down."

It was a lie. What he needed was to find out just where he was and who these people were, and then he needed to find his clothes and get the hell out of there and back to town as fast as he could. Instead he found that he could walk no further than the wagon, obliged to sink weakly onto the wooden steps leading into the caravan as his stamina failed him. Not a lie after all, he really did need a place to sit down. Leaning on his elbow and squeezing his eyes shut against the vicious stabbing in his right side, he was forced to admit defeat. *Hell, Larabee. You ain't going anywhere.*

The last of the daylight had gone, the glowing ball of orange that was the setting sun slipping quickly beneath the horizon and leaving darkness in its wake. The campfire burned brightly in the center of the circle of wagons and the delicious aroma of roasting rabbit permeated the air, as the women prepared supper and the men smoked and talked on the steps of the caravans.

Chris stirred restlessly, still feverish and sick, but roused by the subtle changes in light and sound that filtered into his consciousness. At the smell of food his stomach clenched painfully, rumbling in anticipation and he realised that it had been almost three days since he had eaten anything substantial. Suddenly ravenous, he eased himself onto his elbow and glanced around the surprisingly roomy wagon, in the hope of finding his clothes. Seeing nothing that remotely resembled his pants or his shirt, never mind his hat and boots he felt the irritation in him growing. Grunting with the effort, he painfully got to his feet, keeping the blanket around him as he staggered to the doorway, leaning one hand against the door frame while still clutching the blanket with the other. Damp hair hanging limply across his forehead and feeling the same god-awful way he did with a hangover, he leaned precariously out of the wagon his exasperation aimed at no-one in particular. The activity of the camp abruptly ceased as his angry roar reverberated around the clustered caravans.

"Where are my goddamned clothes?"

Bare chested, in front of a flickering fire, Chris licked the last of the grease from his fingers and looked ruefully at the stripped carcass in front of him, finding it hard to remember when he had last enjoyed a meal quite so much. Nothing like plain hunger to make a man appreciate the simpler things in life, he mused.

Absently wiping his hands on his jeans, he looked around the campfire, judging that there were maybe three families, mostly women and children. He had seen only two men; one a little younger than himself, the other in his late fifties. The fact that both men wore gold hoops in their ears, was an intriguing novelty that fascinated him more than their exotic and colourful livery or the abundance of jewellery which adorned the women. Whoever these people were, he owed them a debt of gratitude and he decided he could live with the fact that the men wore earrings.

Chris swung his head to one side as the younger of the two men squatted beside him and silently offered him a slim, black cigarette. He took it, nodding his thanks and reached stiffly for a taper from the fire, his movements necessarily hampered by his injury. With a sigh of contentment, he leaned back and drew the acrid smoke into his lungs, feeling a sharp bite at the back of his throat from the raw strength of the tobacco and successfully resisting the urge to cough. The man contentedly puffed on his own cigarette for a few moments before speaking.

"I am Spiro," he waved an arm to encompass the camp, "And this is my family."

"Chris Larabee." He took another pull of the cigarette, appreciating its harsh and smoky flavour. "Where y'all headed?"

"To wherever the wind takes us."

Chris thought that sounded at best a little vague but refrained from comment, instead concentrating on examining the cigarette in his hand, the very strength of which had already made him a little light-headed. Still feeling the heat of fever, and the weakness brought about by loss of blood, he succumbed to the lethargy that was creeping over him and leaned back, supporting his weight on one outstretched arm.

By his calculations it was two days since he had made the mistake of entering the defile and had paid dearly for his error in judgement. His brows knitted together in concentration. *What could be so goddamn important in that canyon that someone was prepared to kill for?* The method of attack smacked of renegades but he had not made it to middle age in his particular line of work by jumping to hasty conclusions; just because he'd been shot with an arrow did not necessarily mean it was an Indian who had drawn the bow.

How long, he wondered, before the others started to concern themselves over his continued absence; another day? Two? How long before Vin would pick up his trail, as he was sure he would, and track him straight into the defile? Was the sign clear enough for the Texan to read the danger there? He sat up, too quickly, and bit back a groan, pressing his hand to his side as spots of light danced across his vision. *Hellfire, how was he going to ride a horse when he could barely manage to sit up straight?*

"I have to get back," he muttered, as much to himself as the stranger by his side. "Something I've gotta do."

Spiro looked keenly at him for a moment, recognising the urgency in his voice, then smiled, showing a gold tooth that reminded Chris of Ezra.

"You only have to show us the way, *gadje*, and we will take you home."

As simple as that.

Chris slowly, painfully, lowered himself to the ground again and, taking another drag on the cigarette, closed his eyes, reluctant to admit the truth. He needed these people. He needed their help.

"It's a deal."

oooOOOooo

Vin Tanner had saddled up at dawn. His horse now stood tethered outside the saloon, the bulky saddlebags packed with enough provisions for a couple of days. Any longer than that and he would live off the land. Inside, the Texan hastily swilled his breakfast down with a third cup of coffee, ignoring Buck's continued objections that he was over-reacting.

"Hell, Vin. It's only a coupla days! You know, Chris won't thank ya for nursemaidin' him."

Vin's silence seemed to indicate to the mustached man that he should continue his protest.

"It's the storm," he announced triumphantly, as if he had succeeded in solving the mystery of the universe. "That's all. He would've holed up until the storm was over."

Tanner got up and settled his hat comfortably over his long, brown hair obviously ready to leave. Wilmington stood up and followed the taciturn sharpshooter out onto the boardwalk and watched him prepare to mount his horse, recognising the certainty that Vin was going whatever he might say to the contrary.

“Vin!”

Finally, the Texan stopped in his tracks and turned to level a blue-eyed stare as lethal as the twin barrels of the mare’s leg strapped to his thigh.

“Ain’t you learned nothin’ from Jericho?”

Wilmington lowered his gaze remembering too well Chris’ ordeal in that particular town. He sighed.

“Want me to come with you?”

The first flicker of emotion crossed the tracker’s face, a bare suggestion of a smile as he swung into the saddle.

“Naw. Make better time on my own, Buck.” He pulled sharply on the reins and turned the animal’s head around, nudging the gelding in the flanks with his heels. “Thanks anyway.”

The black broke into a trot at its rider’s urging and by the end of the street was stretching into an easy lope.

Wilmington stared after the Texan, watching the empty street long after he had disappeared from view. He hoped that this time the tracker was wrong.

“Lost somethin’, Buck?”

J.D.’s curiosity had prevailed after seeing Buck staring thoughtfully down the deserted street, and showing no immediate inclination to move.

“I hope not, kid.” Wilmington gave a lopsided grin. “Vin’s gone to check on Chris. Don’t rightly know if he’s really worried or just wants an opportunity to kick out on his own for a spell.”

Dunne frowned.

“Shouldn’t someone have gone with him?”

Buck finally turned his back on the street.

“Hell, no. He’s old enough and ornery enough to look after himself. Besides I asked, and he didn’t want company. Said he’d make better time on his own.”

“But what if...?”

Wilmington cuffed the younger man around the ear.

“Don’t you start! Goddamn, if I know Chris he’ll still be south of the border bein’ entertained by the fine ladies down there in Purgatory.”

J.D. laughed.

“Ain’t no ladies in Purgatory, Buck!”

“Exactly. And there’s no reason for Chris to break his neck to get back here. Fact is I’m beginning to wish I’d gone with him now. Sure as hell is quiet around here. We could use a little excitement.”

Dunne pushed through the bat-wing doors into the saloon.

“Depends what excitement your lookin’ for, Buck. Now me? I just gotta get some breakfast to take to that Texas cowhand sitting over in the jail, then I’m ridin’ over to Miss Nettie’s to help with the horses.”

Buck shook his head, a sly grin on his face.

“Ain’t the horses at Nettie’s place that keep you goin’ back, boy. Maybe you’re learnin’ from old Buck after all.”

J.D. poured a cup of coffee and sipped at the fresh brew while Inez prepared a breakfast tray for his prisoner.

“Aw, hell, Buck, it ain’t like that at all,” he protested, “You know she lost a couple of mare’s day ‘fore yesterday. Got a broken fence needs fixin’, that’s all.”

"So who's minding the store?" Buck jerked a thumb towards the jail and stole a biscuit from the tray, receiving a slap across the wrist from a scowling Inez for his trouble.

"Josiah. I should be back by supper time."

"Want me to ride along?"

"Nope. Don't reckon I need any help."

Buck slapped him across the shoulder, winking suggestively at the younger man.

"Don't reckon you do at that, kid."

Vin rode hard for the first few miles giving the black its head and in truth glad to be alone for the first time in several weeks. For a man who had spent the greater part of his life in solitude, first as a buffalo hunter then later as a hunter of men for the bounty on their heads, the limits of four walls or even an imaginary town boundary proved entirely too claustrophobic at times. The day threatened to be another hot one, but until the sun climbed higher in the sky the air was still cool, and the feel of the wind in his face as he rode filled the tracker with a sense of well-being in spite of his underlying concern for Larabee.

He was not unduly worried for the gunslinger, two days was neither here nor there but it was an excuse to get out and into the wide open spaces while not taking anything for granted. Summer rains meant flash floods and if Chris had been travelling when the storm hit, then he could well have been caught unprepared. He smiled as he slowed the horse to a walk. Buck was right; Chris would not thank him for playing nursemaid and the man was quite capable of looking after himself -- even in a storm -- but the truth was that he missed the gunfighter's company. Tanner had come to appreciate the quiet, unobtrusive solidarity of Larabee at his side, as he had come to appreciate the uniqueness of each of the men that Chris had brought together. What surprised Vin was that they were still together. The seven of them had united for a common cause, but that once that purpose had been served instead of moving on they had formed an albeit sometimes uneasy alliance and had remained to serve the town. Peacekeeper. Vin found the role that had been manoeuvred into quite ironic. A man representing the law, however informally, who had a price on his own head.

The Texan's horse whickered softly, and Vin dragged his attention back to the present, scanning his surroundings. Not much point in tracking someone if he was going to spend the day wool-gathering. He dismounted and cast around the ground, surprised to find signs of three or four unshod ponies crossing the trail, heading north. Indian mounts? He fingered a deep rut, the impression made in mud which had since dried. Several laden wagons had followed the trail heading west, not uncommon but Vin had heard nothing of a wagon train passing through in the last week. He shrugged and rubbed his hands together, brushing off the dried mud then remounted his horse. The wagons were of little concern to him but he had misgivings about the possibility of Indian ponies so close to town. He'd have to talk it over with Chris once he actually ran the overdue gunslinger to ground and right now that was his number one priority. He looked around again and kicked the horse into a trot, angling south west towards Purgatory. *Where the hell are you, Chris?*

oooOOOooo

Larabee woke at first light to his second morning in the camp, still lying by the meagre remains of the fire, his head cradled on his arm and wrapped in a colourful woven blanket. He stretched, feeling the familiar aches that came from sleeping on the ground and rolled carefully onto his back trying not to antagonise the healing wound in his side, wondering just when he had fallen asleep. His last recollection was of Spiro telling him that they would take him home. Not that he had a real home, just an upstairs

room in a town that he was passing through. He grunted as he sat up. *Well, Larabee, you've been trying to move on from that town now for six months, seems kinda like you've stopped passing through don't you think?*

He wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, feeling the goose-flesh erupt across his naked chest in the early morning chill, and sat hunched next to the glowing embers slowly encouraging the fire to new life. Around him the camp stirred, and soon he was surrounded by women and children going about their daily business. Mimi shyly thanked him for tending the fire and added more fuel to encourage a warming blaze before swinging a blackened pot into place from the iron trivet that straddled the flames.

"You look rested, *gadge*."

He looked sideways at the woman, struck again by her exotic features; the high cheekbones and uptilted eyes, irises dark and liquid like coffee, slender neck and thick, black hair that cascaded around her shoulders in soft waves. She lowered her eyes under his intense scrutiny and he guiltily dropped his gaze, aware that he had been staring. He reached for some firewood to mask the heat rising in his face and tossed it onto the fire. *Christ! He was behaving like some greenhorn kid.*

"What does *gadge* mean?"

He noticed a slight frown creasing her forehead as she became thoughtful.

"It means that...you are not one of us. We are Rom, you are *Gadge*."

"Rom?"

"Some call us gypsies but we are Romany."

"I have a name," he said quietly, "It's Chris," and it was her turn to blush.

"Please forgive my ignorance, I have shamed you."

Chris reached out and circled her wrist with his fingers before she had a chance to leave.

"No. It's alright. I'm sorry. What's your name?"

"Mimi, Spiro's sister by marriage." She gently tried to pull free of his grasp. "I must go now. There is work to be done."

Chris reluctantly released her and she hastened away, not looking back. He rested a forearm across one raised knee and lowered his head onto his arm, suddenly weary and once again aware of every ache and pain in his body, thinking he would trade his very soul to be able to just get on his horse and ride away.

Ezra Standish was in no mood to listen to the long and involved tale of Buck's amorous dealings with the Hartford sisters but manners dictated that he should let the man finish his dialogue, however tiresome that might be. Without the young J.D. to keep him amused, Wilmington had gravitated towards the gambler who, whilst completing his turn at the jail, had proved a captive, if not entirely attentive, audience. So, the two men sat on the porch outside the jail; Buck colourfully describing his experience with the evidently lively set of twins while Ezra, listening with only half an ear and less interest, sifted his deck of cards through his agile fingers. It was a measure of the Southerner's desire to escape the tedious details of Wilmington's exploits that he was first to his feet and showing an unprecedented degree of interest in the man who was currently striding up the boardwalk towards them.

"You the law 'round here?"

Ezra graciously inclined his head.

"Such as there is. May I inquire as to what service we could offer you, sir?"

The man frowned and looked quickly to Wilmington as if seeking confirmation of the elegantly dressed gambler's status.

"You sure, you're the law? Don't look like no sheriff I've ever laid eyes on afore."

Buck stretched out his legs and tipped back his hat to look out from under the brim at the lanky

stranger.

"Don't have no badges if that's what you mean but we are hired to keep the peace in this town."

Still looking doubtful, the man shrugged.

"Name's Cunningham," he introduced himself, "Have a ranch just north of town. Been losin' stock this last week. First a coupla head of cattle, now two of my horses been stolen. Good horseflesh too."

The subtle change in Ezra's expression suggested that he doubted Cunningham would recognise good horseflesh if it came up behind him and bit him.

"You're sure they've been stolen and not just run off?"

Cunningham's expression left the two men in no doubt as to his thoughts on that particular theory.

"Well, son, less'n my stock's taken to carryin' wire cutters I'd say it's a pretty fair bet that someone done helped themselves to my beef and my horses."

Standish's initial enthusiasm in his haste to escape Buck's wearisome anecdotes was visibly waning at the prospect of investigating anything as mundane and potentially physical as stock theft and he quickly assumed an expression of guarded sympathy.

"Well, Mr. Cunningham, much as I commiserate with your unfortunate loss, I don't believe that actively pursuing errant stock falls within our mandate of protecting this town. Technically our jurisdiction is confined to matters that occur within the town limits or which immediately affect the resident populace."

Cunningham turned to Wilmington again.

"What'd he say?"

Buck stood up and threw a scathing glance at the Southerner who had resumed the indolent shuffling his cards.

"We'll look into it. Mister Cunningham. Can't promise we can do anythin' though. This is a mighty big territory to hide in and my guess is your stock is long gone by now."

The man nodded abruptly and tipped his hat.

"Guess you might be right at that." He started to turn away, then looked back at Standish with a frown of suspicion. "You sure that fella's a lawman."

Wilmington put a friendly hand on Cunningham's shoulder and drew him aside.

"Truth is, he's a Southerner." He winked conspiratorially, "Got to make allowances."

The man grunted as if Wilmington had confirmed everything he suspected about the red-jacketed dandy with the silk waistcoat and low crowned hat.

"Enough said. Can't expect no more from a whoreson Reb."

The rancher spun on his heel and walked away, his boots thumping heavily on the wooden boards.

Buck dropped back into his chair, hoping Ezra had not overheard Cunningham's last comment, and took off his hat, thoughtfully turning the brim in his hands.

"Ezra, tell me something."

Standish looked up from his dexterous manipulation of the playing cards, his fingers never missing a beat in the complicated rhythm he had established, inviting Buck to continue.

"Have you ever done an honest lick of work in your whole life?"

The Southerner laughed, genuinely amused.

"It may surprise you, Mr. Wilmington, that this particular 'whoreson Reb' has in the past had cause to lower himself to the essentially plebeian task of physical labour, albeit with a certain degree of coercion involved. Willingly? Never."

Buck snorted. He should have known Ezra never missed a trick.

"Don't know how you've gotten by this long without someone nailin' your sorry Southern hide to the wall, Ezra. Just remember beef and horses are Cunningham's livelihood. Man probably works from

sunup to sundown just to keep body and soul together.”

“While my heart bleeds for his plight, Mr. Wilmington, I have no immediate intention of chasing across the territory looking for stray beef or missing horses.”

“Me neither,” he sighed, “But you know, Nettie’s lost a couple horses too. J.D. just rode out to fix up her fences. Maybe there’s somethin’ in it.”

Standish pocketed his cards and slowly got to his feet, Wilmington almost forgotten as he stared with unbridled curiosity down the length of main street.

“Really?” He muttered absently. “A veritable outbreak of horse thieving, Mr. Wilmington.”

Buck ignored his sarcasm, instead following the direction of Ezra’s gaze and the sudden activity which had drawn his attention. A wagon train. Wilmington stepped down onto the street and settled his worn hat back on his head, dazzled by the vibrant splashes of colour adorning the wagons, that contrasted so starkly with the drab desert-worn colours of the town.

“What the hell is all this? Looks like a goddamn carnival!”

Ezra smiled recognising the distinctive style and livery of the painted wagons.

“No carnival, Buck. Tinkers. And,” he moved forward and focused on the lead wagon, “if I am not mistaken, our own Mr. Larabee.”

Chris carefully got down from the *vardo*, his gun-belt slung over his shoulder and glanced quickly down the length of the street, feeling conspicuous in a borrowed white shirt, its generous cut and softly billowing sleeves something more in tune with Ezra’s tastes than his own. He suppressed the overwhelming urge to march across to the saloon and sink several shots of whiskey in rapid succession; best pain-killer he could think of after a day being jolted over what seemed like half of New Mexico. His side throbbed mercilessly but he ignored the sensation which now merely registered as a minor distraction, as he sought familiar faces.

“Chris!”

Larabee waited for Wilmington and Standish to push through the gathering crowd, accepting the quizzical expression on Buck’s face as a comment on his appearance. As usual, Ezra gave nothing away but Chris was aware of his quietly intense appraisal nonetheless.

“Don’t ask,” he instructed brusquely, before either man could speak, “Where’s Nathan?”

“Right here.”

The former slave materialised from the crowd. Drawn by the growing commotion, his surprise at seeing Chris in the midst of the disturbance was clear but to his credit he refrained from comment, merely adding his silent scrutiny to that of the other two men.

“Vin?”

Buck frowned recognising that something was definitely amiss with the gunslinger.

“Went looking for you, pard. Took off at first light.”

“Damn!”

A flicker of what might have been concern momentarily clouded the blond man’s eyes, then he was all business again.

“Buck. Ezra.”

Standish and Wilmington straightened recognising the prelude to a forthcoming order but instead of continuing Chris stopped abruptly and turned back to look at the woman still sitting in the wagon, reins held loosely in her strong, capable hands and quietly sighed: “Look after these people. They saved my life.”

Vin slowed his horse to a stop once more and twisted round in the saddle, scanning yet again the dusty landscape through his spyglass. Nothing -- and too much of that even for him with his love of wide, open spaces. He had wasted no time in Purgatory once he had discovered that Chris had been gone for three or four days. No one seemed to be able to quite pin the point the exact time of his leaving but that hardly came as any surprise to the tracker. Always the careful one -- unless he was drunk of course -- Larabee would quietly have gone about his business and just as quietly slipped away, unnoticed, once that business was concluded. With a sigh he rested his forearm on the saddle horn and tried to put the pieces together that would give him at least a clue as to where the gunslinger had gone.

He nudged the horse forward into a slow walk and, looking at the vast open plain, thought of Larabee caught out in the storm. It made the sense that Chris would have been looking for shelter, but where? Following his instincts rather than any solid reasoning, Vin turned north and struck off the main trail towards the hills, a troubled frown creasing his forehead as his concern for his friend grew with each passing mile.

Chris bit back a curse and instead hissed softly through his teeth as Nathan took down the dressing that covered the wound in his side. He had negotiated the flight of stairs to the healer's infirmary without assistance but the effort had taxed his strength more than he was ready to admit and, uncharacteristically, he had been more than willing to stretch out on the cot and let Nathan go to work.

"Someone did a mighty fine job here, Chris," he commented admiringly, "Luck was definitely on your side this time."

Larabee's response was a noncommittal grunt which while open to interpretation Nathan chose to take as reluctant agreement.

"You need to rest up for a few days till this closes up. Start getting too active and it'll bust wide open again."

"Can't." One word; a wagon-load of determination.

Jackson sighed and began to clean the still oozing and angry-looking incision.

"Chris, if I have to I'll chain you to this bunk but I'm telling you straight, you ain't going nowhere for the next three or four days."

He ignored the smouldering intensity of the glare aimed at him from the injured gunfighter as he continued his ministrations, quite aware that he just might have to make good on his threat, to gain any degree of compliance from the blond man.

"You'd do it too, wouldn't you," accused Larabee breathlessly, the words erupting in a staccato burst through a tightly clenched jaw.

Nathan smiled and smeared a soothing aromatic salve of his own making over the wound.

"Try me."

A few minutes later, Chris carefully pushed himself up to sit on the edge of the cot and slowly buttoned his shirt.

"Someone wanted to keep me out of that canyon, Nathan. I want to know why." He looked up at the healer. "I want to know what's worth a man's life to keep hidden."

Jackson finished washing his hands and looked sympathetically at the gunslinger.

"Maybe ain't nothin' to hide, Chris. Maybe you just lit upon being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Leastways whoever it was didn't try to kill you."

Larabee held his side and got to his feet, strapping on his gun-belt with greater care than usual and settling the rig lower on his hips than customary in deference to his injury.

"Don't know that for sure, Nathan." He shadow of a smile crossed his lips. "Could be just a bad shot."

Jackson put down the rag on which he had dried his hands.

"You know, Chris. If you hadn't met up with those folks..."

"I know." Larabee finished securing the tie-down around his thigh, his sharp response a warning to the healer not to pursue the thought any further. "Now if you don't mind I'm going to get a drink."

Nathan raised his hands.

"Chris, as long as what you do doesn't involve getting on a horse or getting into a fight, you're free to go."

The two men exchanged a challenging stare; each daring the other to cross the line then after a moment Chris nodded briefly -- a tacit agreement that the ex-slave had his doubts would be honoured for too long -- before moving stiffly to the door and letting himself out.

The gypsy wagons had moved on and the main street had reverted to its former indolence. At least Chris was confident that Ezra would take care of them; in some things the crafty Southerner was entirely dependable. While he might shirk at getting his hands dirty, he would never compromise where women and children were concerned. Buck would be equally attentive, of that he was certain. His motives may be far less altruistic in that his interest was based solely on his fondness for the opposite sex but his heart was in the right place.

Pushing open the bat-wing doors to the saloon with his left hand he crossed the threshold into the dim interior. Time for a couple of pain-killers before he worked out his next move.

The Texan stood next to the ashes of a long-dead campfire and idly stirred the ground with the toe of his boot. Big camp. Six wagons, around thirty horses and a lot of people coming and going. He walked slowly around the perimeter, trailing his horse behind him, looking for something -- anything -- that might link, however tenuously, the abandoned camp to Chris. Maybe he had sheltered with the wagon train. He kicked the ground in frustration. Goddamnit! Maybe he had been nowhere near the wagon train. Maybe he was wasting his time.

Widening his search he continued to cast around the perimeter, finally coming across the picket lines at the eastern limit of the campsite. Nothing. He sighed. *Some tracker you are, Tanner. Even Ezra could find nothing without too much trouble.* Passing beyond the horse picket he stood for a moment contemplating his next move, reluctant to give up but knowing that to continue without any sort of clue was tantamount to spitting into the wind.

He tugged on the reins and moving to the animal's side prepared to mount. He swore as the black backed up and sidestepped, as skittish as a colt, before he could get a foot in the stirrup. Pulling the fractious beast around, he got into position again.

"Ornery bastard," he muttered affectionately, raising his foot for a second try.

The Texan paused, the action incomplete, as he noticed a dark patch in the pale dust not two feet away. He hesitated, straightening and in two minds as to whether he should take a closer look. *Probably nothing more than horse piss.* The tracker in him refused to ignore a potential clue and he walked quickly to the irregular marking in the sand. Disturbed, a cloud of flies rose into the air and Vin reached out to draw his fingers across the oddly textured ground, although his sense of smell was already telling him that this was blood. What it didn't tell him was whose blood. Casting around further he came to the conclusion that a lone horseman had approached from the East, not at speed but rather at a leisurely walk and the rider had not dismounted. In fact all indications were that the horseman had fallen from the saddle and, obviously bleeding, had been carried into the camp.

Vin rocked back on his heels. The scenario was all wrong. A rider coming in from the East would hardly be Chris, otherwise he would be backtracking -- heading back towards Purgatory rather than

away from it. He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his tangled hair. Nothing made sense. And the less it made sense, the more concerned he became. With a heavy sigh, he stood up. The least he could do was follow the horseman's trail back to its source or until he lost it. He swung up into the saddle, eyes focused on the ground. *What the hell. All his life he'd been spitting into the wind.*

Chris had not moved in three hours. For two very good reasons; he had nowhere to go and he needed time to think. He leaned back in the chair, and quickly sank another shot of whiskey, having come to the conclusion that as a remedy for pain the biting alcohol was satisfactory enough. He deliberately ignored the sudden uproar as the saloon doors crashed open and a half dozen men stormed noisily across the half-empty room to stand aggressively in front of his table, and slowly poured another shot glass of amber liquid before deigning to glance up at the delegation.

"Somethin' botherin' you boys?" His voice expressed a mild interest, nothing more.

"Plenty, Larabee."

A man Chris knew only by sight leaned belligerently on the table, his attempt at intimidation falling short of the mark when he was unable to match the gunslinger's even stare. He blustered on, reddening slightly under Chris' relentless scrutiny.

"What you plannin' on doing about them gypsies?"

Chris ran a finger slowly around the rim of the glass, taking his time in answering.

"Ain't plannin' on doing anything."

"But you brought 'em here."

Larabee swallowed half his drink, leisurely contemplating the remaining half before speaking again.

"Wrong. They brought me here. Got a problem with that?"

"Nope, not if they move themselves right along, but looks like they might have a mind to stay. That fancy gambler friend of yours is getting mighty thick with 'em." He turned to his companions. "Birds of a feather I say."

Murmurs of agreement, the first rumblings of a discontented mob.

Chris frowned feigning puzzlement.

"Last time I heard it was a free country."

The man straightened up, indignant at the very suggestion.

"Ain't no room in it for a bunch of thieving, conniving gypsies if you ask me."

The last of the whiskey disappeared in one gulp and Larabee slammed the glass down on the table. The last thing he needed was a fight; he was too damn sore to take on this kind of battle but the man was starting to annoy him.

"No one did."

"You're supposed to protect this town, Larabee, you and that gang of yours. Paid to protect it. Supposed to keep it safe for decent folk to live in. Can't just let a bunch of goddamn filthy foreign tramps move in and camp out in the main street!"

"Didn't stop you." The words were spoken quietly and the spokesman's face rapidly suffused with blood as one of his own followers stifled a laugh behind him at the unexpected riposte from the peace-keeper.

The leader of the deposition, the new owner of the mercantile if Chris remembered correctly, drew himself up to his full height and stabbed an accusatory finger in the gunman's direction.

"Wouldn't expect nothing else from a nigger lover!"

Chris' gun was drawn, cocked, aimed and a hair's breadth from hammer fall as his finger increased pressure on the trigger before the last word was out.

"Mister, I might just forget you said that, if you and your friends turn around right now and walk away."

Larabee's voice had not risen above a conversational level but the warning was there nonetheless. The Colt in his hand was an even more persuasive argument for a rethink in strategy and Chris could have been amused by the man's sudden and complete deflation if he had not been so disgusted by the man's bigoted sentiments. Sentiments that he knew would soon be echoed by others. It was enough that the merchant already had five cronies to join his impromptu vigilante committee.

The man hesitated then spat on the floor by Chris' boot -- not daring to aim closer -- his only gesture of defiance before turning on his heel and striding out of the saloon trailed by a silently subdued band of followers. Warily, Chris released the hammer with his thumb and slid the weapon back into its holster. Not the end, he knew, merely the beginning.

Buck and Ezra, choosing that moment to enter the saloon, were forced to yield before the combined force of the exiting group. Now, having been compelled to stand aside they looked with a mix of curiosity and puzzlement after the six retreating backs before making their way across the floor to where Chris sat.

"Trouble?" Buck straddled a chair and looked keenly at his friend.

"If I may be so bold as to hazard a guess," commented the Southerner, smoothly, "I suspect we have some disgruntled citizens and the target of their displeasure is without a doubt our recently arrived friends."

Chris stared into the depths of his empty glass.

"Yeah," he finally sighed reluctantly, as if not wanting to admit the reality.

After a beat he looked back up.

"I don't want that gypsy camp left unguarded. If there's going to be trouble, that's where it's gonna start. I want at least one of us there on watch for as long as it takes to keep them safe."

Buck shook his head.

"Not you, Chris. You ain't going nowhere."

The blond gunfighter glared long and hard at his longtime friend.

"I got one nursemaid already with Nathan, I sure as hell don't need another one, Buck."

Ezra coughed softly.

"Mr. Larabee, as prodigious as your talents are, I believe Buck has a perfectly valid point. Taking on a mob of decidedly unfriendly townfolk is hardly the task for a man in your current state of health."

Larabee switched his attention to the gambler.

"I'm not a goddamn invalid, Ezra!" he growled, "All I need is this."

Again the gun was in his hand, testimony to the blond man's lightening-fast reflexes but, unimpressed, Standish merely raised a sceptical eyebrow, the fact that Chris was aiming the Colt in his direction having no noticeable impact on his equanimity.

"A convincing argument, Mr. Larabee, but not necessarily a sound one."

Chris laid the gun down.

"I'll be the judge of that. Right now, I want the both of you to get Josiah and ride out to Beggar's Canyon -- swing by Nettie's and pick up J.D. on the way, we're going to need him back here. Just check it out, don't go lookin' for any trouble. Nathan and me will take care of anything here in town."

Buck stood up, and Ezra reluctantly followed suit, both men knowing there was nothing to be gained from arguing with Chris once his mind was made up. The taller man, his concern written clearly on his face, nodded acquiescence.

"Watch your back, pard."

Something was definitely wrong. Nothing he could name, but if he had been a dog his hackles would have been raised and he would have been slinking away with his tail between his legs. Vin looked for a long time at the narrow entrance to the defile and thoughtfully scratched the stubble on his chin, unable to give any logical explanation as to why he felt so uncomfortable but ready to rely on his instincts nonetheless. He had lost any clear trail several miles before, any sign destroyed by the rain, but had arrived at the canyon following nothing more than a vague hunch. Now he was going to turn around and ride away. He had already made that decision and, kicking his horse into action, was circling away when he hesitated, then stopped. With a sigh pulled on the reins and brought the animal around again to face the canyon mouth, unable to leave if there was even a remote possibility that Chris might have been this way.

Slowly, reluctantly even, he dismounted and led his horse to a shaded spot, looping the reins over a stunted shrub before sliding his rifle out of its scabbard. Resting the Winchester on his shoulder he glanced up at the boulder strewn rock face that climbed away to right and left, and once more flicked a wary glance at the narrow entrance. *Well, Tanner, there's more than one way to skin a polecat.* With that thought in mind he skirted north and began the hard climb that would take him to the canyon rim.

The Texan paused to wipe the sweat from his face with his bandanna and wished for a moment that he had brought his canteen as he licked dry lips. *Gettin' soft, Tanner?* He smiled at the thought, reflecting on the last few months of his life and the subtle changes he could feel in himself. Changes wrought by the responsibility of having others depend on him. Always a loner, Vin had been surprised at the intensity of his feelings for the six men who had somehow become an integral part of his life since that day when he taken that first fateful step and exchanged his apron and broom for a rifle. One glance across a dusty street, a mutual decision arrived at without a word being spoken, had set him down this path; a journey he could never have imagined as he strode down the main street with the silent gunslinger at his side. Chris Larabee. Fate.

He looked up at the rocky incline ahead of him and pressed on, moving quickly and quietly over the unstable surface, eager now to reach the top. He had wasted enough time already and for all he knew Chris was by now sitting safely back in the saloon out of the sun with a bottle of whiskey to keep him company while he rode halfway across the territory chasing shadows.

oooOOOooo

Chris moved without haste, his usual determined stride noticeably absent as he made his way across town to the Romany encampment. Nathan might have forbidden him to ride but he could still walk, although he fancied he would have fared better if Ezra and Buck had seen fit to settle the camp a little closer to main street. Of course, he mused, for some in town the next county would have been too close. He rolled his shoulders easing the stiffness in his neck and irritably wiped the perspiration from his face with his sleeve. *Too damned hot for walking anywhere.*

The six wagons were again drawn into a circle as if shutting out the world beyond, maintaining a defence against the *gadje*. Not such a bad move, thought Chris, considering the reception they had received. A reception that they were no doubt well used to. As he approached he heard the sound of one of the women singing above the noise of chattering and squealing children, and in the background he could hear the haunting sound of a fiddle being played with a mournful soulfulness that pulled curiously at his emotions. He shook his head. *Goddamn it, Larabee, you're getting soft.* He hefted the Winchester in his left hand and passed between two wagons, that step taking him into the camp proper and a world as different from his own as he could ever hope to find.

"Chris!"

Spiro, stripped to the waist and revealing a sun-bronzed and heavily muscled torso, casually threw the axe he had been wielding into a log with a deceptive ease that spoke of great strength, came forward to greet the blond gunman. He gestured to the rifle, a frown creasing his forehead.

"You are expecting trouble, my friend?"

Chris swung the weapon onto his shoulder and relaxed one hip, easing the tension in his side.

"It's called being prepared. Fewer surprises that way."

Spiro nodded, a smile quickly replacing the frown.

"Ay, it is only in a village without a dog that a man can walk without a stick." He clapped a hand on Larabee's shoulder. "Come. Take some tea with us, or maybe something a little stronger, eh? You have eaten? No? There is food if you wish it. Eat with my blessing."

Without waiting for an answer, Spiro issued a torrent of Romany that galvanised the camp into action and once again Chris wondered at the open-hearted generosity of these people.

The 'something a little stronger' turned out to be liquid fire. Chris coughed, choking on the deceptively bland tasting alcohol, eliciting a booming laugh from the gypsy men as he gasped for air. He grinned but was unsettled by the fact that his reaction had been as much from a sudden difficulty in swallowing the raw spirit as its fiery assault on his throat.

"Goddamn!" he breathed, his voice hoarse, "Kicks like a mule."

The older man emptied his own glass and muttered something in Rom before grinning wolfishly.

"What'd he say?"

The gypsy looked amused as he reached for the bottle.

"It has no literal translation, but Yodjo describes a stallion servicing a mare."

There was a brief pause, then the three men burst into laughter as the bottle passed quickly from hand to hand.

Chris put aside his plate and leaned back against the wagon wheel. He was hungry but it was just too difficult to eat. His jaw ached and the difficulty he had found in swallowing the potent alcohol earlier had worsened, until he could barely get anything down at all. Closing his eyes he rubbed at the tight muscles at the back of his neck and started to wonder if he might not be coming down with a fever.

He jumped as a hand touched his forehead, and for a moment he stiffened involuntarily, the muscles of his neck and torso tensing to the point of rigidity before the spasm passed and his body was able to relax again.

"Chris?"

He opened his eyes to see Mimi watching him, her dark eyes clouded with concern. He irritably drew back from the touch of her hand, just wanting to be left alone.

"I'm alright," he snapped peevishly, "Too much to drink that's all."

He knew the way he was feeling had nothing to do with having too much to drink but he wanted Mimi to go away. Just as he wanted to take his stiff and sore body and find a cool place to sleep but he had come to the camp with the intention of providing protection and sleeping was not an option he could consider. The woman nodded, not convinced but recognising by the tone of his voice that she was not welcome and with downcast eyes she retreated, leaving him as he wished -- alone.

Chris finally pushed himself to his feet and picked up his rifle. He had a job to do and sitting idly in the shade of a wagon would do neither him nor the gypsies any good. His purpose was to be seen and to leave no doubts for anyone watching as to his intentions to offer his protection to the camp. He guessed if there was to be any trouble it would come after sundown but as he had already told Spiro, being prepared made for fewer surprises.

Slowly, he walked around the perimeter of the wagons, hoping the activity would drive away some of

the lethargy that was creeping over him, but after a few minutes he was obliged to sit down on the steps of one of the caravans, sweat pouring from him in rivulets and suddenly finding it a real challenge to draw breath. Damn, but he felt bad. Worse even than the day he had first woken up in the *vardo*. He hated to admit that Nathan was right but he really was in no fit state to be doing much of anything. *Should've listened to the healer this time.*

He rolled his shoulders trying to ease the tightness in his neck and back, thinking that he really could do with a hot bath to ease out some of the kinks. Hell, the last time he had felt so stiff and sore he had been thrown from a cantankerous horse which had then proceeded to stomp all over him out of sheer meanness. Only then there had been Sarah to ease the hurt. Smiling sadly at the memory, he massaged the back of his neck, and started to get up again, telling himself that he was just getting soft from living in town all these months.

The seizure struck him like a bolt of lightning. Sharp and violent, every muscle contracted painfully in a powerful tonic spasm that snapped his body into rigidity and stopped the breath in his lungs as his chest and abdominal muscles cramped into immobility. Gripped by a sense of panic, and finding he no longer had any influence over his own movements, he jerked uncontrollably as the intense contractions stiffened his muscles. Head thrown back and jaw clenching tightly as his spine arched impossibly, he wondered if this was how he was going to die: writhing in agony in the dust of a gypsy encampment, alone and afraid. And, unable to speak, move or breathe, he was afraid.

"Chris!"

Spiro was kneeling beside him, uncertainty etched on his face, and the gunman could see his own fear mirrored in the gypsy's eyes. Every muscle straining, his lips drawn back in the parody of a grin, he wanted to scream his agony. Then as quickly as it had come the seizure passed and Chris took a shuddering, shallow breath, his entire body trembling in the aftermath of the violent and painful episode. Still unable to make his voice work, he turned his eyes in mute appeal to the man beside him. *Do something.*

oooOOOooo

J.D. took a deep breath and put all his strength into tightening the last strand of wire on Nettie's fence, his biceps bulging with the sustained effort. With a last twist of the wire strainers he stood back and admired his handiwork, pleased with the effect of taut, new wire gleaming brightly between the wooden uprights. *A good job, J.D.*

"You done a fair job of that boy and that's no mistake."

Startled at the unexpected echo of his own thoughts, he turned and smiled, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Glad to help, Miz Wells. Can't have any more of them horses runnin' off."

Nettie folded her arms and frowned severely.

"Run off, in a pig's eye!"

J.D. ducked his head, partly to hide his grin.

"I know. They were stolen. But it'll stop any more of 'em running off."

The woman's face softened and she held out J.D.'s shirt which he had left hanging from a post.

"Until the next time. Now come on, son. You wash up and I'll rustle up somethin' to eat. A fair day's work deserves -- food."

He took his shirt and picked up his guns before falling into step with the grey-haired woman and walking back towards the homestead, hoping he might get a chance to sit with Casey for a while before he had to ride back to town. The fencing had taken longer than he had planned but he hardly thought

there was any reason to rush back.

Nettie stopped abruptly and turned, head cocked as if listening.

"Someone's comin'. In a mighty big hurry too by the sound of it."

Dunne followed the direction of her gaze and at the tell-tale plume of dust that confirmed not only her words but the fact that her hearing was keener than his. He shrugged into his shirt and hastily buckling on his gun belt, waited for the riders to approach.

"Well, my stars and garters," she exclaimed, shading her eyes, "if it ain't that fancy gambler friend of yours, J.D. Can see that red jacket o' his comin' a mile away."

"Wonder what he wants."

Nettie raised an eyebrow.

"Well, he ain't here to mend fences, boy, that's for damn sure."

The three horsemen trotted into the yard, iron-shod hoofs drumming a tattoo on the hard ground, sending chickens scattering as they rode forward. The musical jingle of tack as the horses tossed their heads and snorted noisily through dust coated nostrils was the only sound on the air for several moments then Ezra, always the gentleman, tipped his hat and acknowledged the woman although none of them made a move to dismount.

"Ma'am."

Nettie looked at the three of them keenly.

"This ain't a social visit is it, boys?"

Buck switched his attention to Dunne.

"Mount up, son. We ain't got any time to waste."

"Where are we going?"

"You're going back to town. Chris wants you back there."

"Vin found him then?"

"Nope," interrupted Josiah, "Band of wandering gypsies found him wounded. Someone took a shot at him in Beggar's Canyon."

"I know those folk," nodded Nettie, "camped a few nights back over in my top acres. Weren't no trouble. Stayed a day and moved on."

J.D. looked sharply at Wilmington.

"So you get to go to Beggar's Canyon and I get to go back to town, right?"

"That's what Chris wants, kid, and the way he's feelin' right now I wouldn't care to tell him different," replied Buck evenly, "Some of the townfolk ain't too pleased about the gypsies staying around town. Might get ugly if they decide to do something about it and Chris is gonna need some help."

"But I don't see..."

"Hell, kid! Just get on your horse and get going. I ain't got time to argue."

Ezra shifted in his saddle and shook his head slowly at the exchange.

"Gentlemen, please. If Mr. Dunne is so keen to spend a day in the saddle, eating dust and looking for miscreants then I am quite prepared to surrender my place in this little expedition and instead I'll be the one to return to town to offer my support there."

Buck looked suspiciously at the Southerner, trying to figure out the gambler's real intent, then at J.D.'s eager expression. Yet in spite of his misgivings that Ezra was just finding a way to get out of anything remotely akin to work, he had to concede that Ezra had a point. He was certainly more likely to be able to put his smooth-talking to good use and defuse any trouble brewing in town. Besides, in the final analysis, he would rather put up with Dunne's rampant enthusiasm than Ezra's complaints about the primitive conditions he was forced to endure for the miserly sum of a dollar a day.

Wilmington nodded reluctantly, seeing the advantage in such a strategy. He just hoped Chris would

see it too.

“Okay. J.D saddle up. You’re with us. Ezra...”

“I’m on my way.”

Without a pause, the Southerner wheeled his horse and kicked it in to a canter, heading back the way he had come. In the yard Nettie watched the gambler depart with a knowing smile and a shake of the head.

“Never a seen a man go to so much trouble to avoid gettin’ his hands dirty.”

Josiah turned in his saddle and followed Ezra with his eyes, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“Oh, Ezra gets his hands dirty alright. Just not quite in the same way as the rest of us, ma’am.”

Nathan noticed it as soon as he walked into the street. Something was different. The closest he could come to describing it was the charged atmosphere before a summer storm, that was it -- the calm before a storm. A few people were going about their business but he noticed with a great sense of misgiving that a group of townsfolk had gathered in front of the mercantile and more than one furtive glance was cast in his direction as he passed.

Jackson knew that Chris, anticipating trouble, had gone to the gypsy camp but he wondered now if the gunslinger might not have underestimated the possible threat. It only took one spark to ignite the powder-keg and it was obvious that someone was hell bent on striking flint against steel. Larabee, bull-headed as always, had been confident enough that two of them could handle any trouble but Nathan knew that Chris, however much he denied it, was suffering with his injury and doubted that he would be up to any sort of physical confrontation.

He lengthened his stride and hastened down the boardwalk sensing the ripple of discontent that followed him along the street. It was a feeling he remembered well, and a feeling he had hoped not to experience again. Still it seemed to be an undeniable truth that times changed but people didn’t - at least some people.

The camp was quiet as he approached, although he could smell something cooking that made his stomach rumble with hunger and he remembered that he had not eaten since sunup. Several children peered from behind a brightly painted yellow caravan and watched him with open curiosity as he entered the circle of wagons. A young woman, her clothing a riot of colour, eyed him suspiciously as he moved towards her but stood her ground, dark eyes smouldering in an unspoken challenge.

“Ma’am,” he touched the brim of his hat, “I’m lookin’ for Chris Larabee.”

“You are a friend?”

“Yes, ma’am. Can you tell me where he is?”

She glanced quickly at one of the wagons and back to the healer as if making a decision.

“Come. Your friend sickens.”

Jackson swore softly and followed the woman. *Why did Chris never listen to advice?*

There was little light in the caravan, its shutters closed and curtained. Nathan took a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness, not sure of his bearings in the confined space, and gradually he realised that the gunfighter was lying on a bunk that was cleverly built in to the wagon.

“Chris?”

The body on the bed jerked as if startled and as Nathan moved closer, a woman’s voice cautioned him.

“Speak softly, my friend. The fits are upon him less when there is no disturbance.”

“Fits?”

The healer touched skin and felt the heat of fever under his hand. Chris was as tense as an over-

wound clock spring and from the short, almost gasping, breaths Nathan could tell that he was having trouble breathing.

"How long has he been like this?"

The woman, face indistinct in the dim light, squeezed water from a cloth and wiped the sweat from Chris' face and neck.

"Three hours, no more."

"Tell me what happened."

The woman sighed.

"The fit came upon him without warning and he has lain in a fever as you see now since then. He is awake but does not speak yet I believe he hears still. I closed the shutters because the light troubled him. I know not what ails him."

Nathan carefully moved his fingers along the blond man's tightly clenched jaw and down his neck, feeling the rigidity of the muscles there before spreading both hands across a ribcage barely rising with each laboured inspiration.

"I think I do."

Outside the wagon a child shrieked innocently in play, a piercing scream the like of which only an excited child can produce and in violent response, Chris' back arched lifting his body completely off the bed, every muscle in painful spasm. A few moments later Chris, his eyes betraying his panic, slumped back, one hand moving vaguely towards his chest as he sought to fill his lungs once again with air. The healer captured the hand in his own and squeezed gently, overwhelmed by a sudden feeling of complete helplessness. Yes, he knew. He had seen these symptoms before -- as a stretcher bearer in the war. And he knew that men died from it. He also remembered that it had a name -- lockjaw -- and that there was nothing that anyone could do but watch and wait.

Ezra was not at all confident that he had made the right decision. In fact he wondered if riding blithely into town when Mr. Larabee was expecting the young Dunne might not be the height of foolishness but he had committed himself to returning and would have to face the consequences. He took a little comfort from the thought that at least he could look forward to a comfortable night in his own feather bed rather than spending a night out under the stars lying on the hard ground with the uninviting prospect of a myriad of insects invading his bedroll.

He would never have admitted it to Buck but he was concerned for the Rom. Indeed, if Chris was correct in his assessment, then the town was soon liable to erupt in a wave of ill-feeling that would make the Battle of Bull Run look like a church picnic. In which case sending J.D. into the thick of it was hardly a move his conscience was prepared to accept. Let Buck think what he would. The gambler spared a glance at the westering sun, knowing that by the time he reached town it would already be dusk.

The Southerner was not sure what he was expecting but as he jogged his horse down main street towards the livery he felt the back of his neck prickle, a sure indication that he was being watched and a sensation he found disturbing. The fire pots lighting the street burned smokily as always, and the familiar evening sounds drifting from the saloons would have been comforting if a profound sense of disquiet had not begun to unsettle him. Having spent a lifetime living by his wits and following his instincts, Ezra now judged it was time to listen to the gut feeling that was telling him all was not as it should be. Without haste he casually flicked back his jacket and freed the Remington at his right hip, hoping he would not be needing it but by the same token not prepared to leave anything to chance.

Ezra guided the gelding to a halt before the livery and turned to view the street before slowly dismounting and brushing the dust from his coat, wishing he could take a hot bath and retire to the

saloon for a evening's quiet entertainment but knowing that luxury was not to be afforded him any time soon. After waiting a few moments for the stable-hand to appear he walked his horse into the empty stable and sighed. Looked like he would be rubbing down his own mount too.

Under normal circumstances the gambler was not averse to tending his own horse, but his attentions to the tired beast on this particular occasion were necessarily brief. Finally done, he snatched up his rifle in his left hand and hurried out of the livery heading towards the Romany encampment. Time to find out just what was going on.

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He dropped to a crouch and pressed himself into the rock that still retained the strong heat of the day, although the sun was well into its final descent, his dun coloured clothing offering a natural camouflage that would conceal him from all but the most determined observer. Head bent and hat brim pulled low he listened again for the faint noises that had drifted from the canyon floor. Horses, of that he was certain, and a fair number from the sound of it. A raised voice abruptly silenced and the hint of wood smoke on the passing breeze confirmed the presence of men, although how many and whether of a friendly disposition he could not tell.

Tanner allowed his gaze the slowly travel over the rocky terrain, his keen eye ready to identify an inconsistency that would hint at a concealed sentry but he saw nothing. He sat back on his heels and tried to figure some reasonable explanation as to why Chris would possibly have come to this place, and if indeed he had, would there be some reason for him to remain. His natural caution honed over years of bounty hunting dictated that he watch and wait. A man lived longer that way.

The sun had dipped below the horizon before the Texan moved again. The shifting breeze had brought snippets of disjointed conversation to him suggesting that there were at least four different voices, and every instinct told him these men were not just a band of innocent travellers. The odds persuaded him that he should refrain from announcing himself but his curiosity demanded satisfaction and he carefully started to work his way up to the canyon rim.

The eastern end of the canyon had been boxed in, the narrow defile blocked with brush and deadwood, and milling in the open space before it fifteen or more horses moved restlessly. Vin eased out his spyglass and focused the lens on the shifting animals. A few rangy, wild-eyed mustangs mingled with sleeker, quality stock that Tanner knew had not been captured on the open range. Horse thieves. It made sense. Only the day before Nettie Wells had been irate about losing two of her best mares and Vin would bet a dollar to a dime that if he looked hard enough he would find her stock right here in this canyon. He trained the spyglass on a well-muscled bay and picked out the brand on its nearside shoulder. Not one he recognised but no wild pony free for the taking either. Sighing, he pocketed the spyglass and, clutching the Winchester in his right hand, started to slide away from the edge of the defile. He had come looking for Chris and found a gang of horse thieves instead.

"Netdaha!"

He rolled reflexively as soon as the word was uttered, recognising both the Apache tongue and the threat but before he could change his grip on the Winchester a foot had connected solidly with the side of his head. Stunned, he felt the crushing weight of a knee pinning both his hand and the weapon to the ground, and he grunted in protest as the rifle stock dug painfully into his fingers. He would still have reached for the mare's leg with his left hand but the knife at his throat convinced him to reconsider the wisdom of that particular course of action. Feeling the sharp sting of the blade as it pressed home to draw blood he ceased to struggle. *Wrong, Tanner. You found trouble.*

He had been in worse situations in his life but he was hard pressed to remember just when he had been more uncomfortable. His arms had gone beyond aching to being on fire as the joints started to protest at being strained beyond their limits, for not only were his wrists tied securely behind him, but his elbows had been tightly bound for good measure forcing his shoulders painfully back. Strictly speaking though he didn't think he was in bad shape. Something in his hand had snapped when the Apache's knee had smashed forcefully across it and now it throbbed with an evil intensity, but he could still move his fingers so for that he was thankful. On reflection, he could have done without the dull headache, although in truth he had to admit that he had endured worse from a rot-gut hangover.

The Texan raised his head and watched the five men around the campfire eating a supper of bacon and beans. His own stomach was empty but food was the furthest thing from his mind as, instead, he ran his tongue over dry lips and tried not to think of how long it was since he had taken a drink, or how long it was likely to be before he would take another. The first breath of cool evening air raised goose-flesh on his skin, his upper body covered only by a calico shirt after the Apache had stripped him of coat and hat and he shivered, awaiting the reality of an uncomfortable night of bone-chilling cold. It crossed his mind again that for all his good intentions he had ended up on a wild goose chase and while he was strung up against a stunted tree, hog-tied, hungry, thirsty and cold, Chris may well be sitting comfortably in the saloon and getting ready to take on Ezra at cards. The thought did nothing at all to cheer him.

So far, he had been largely ignored by his captors. Their initial exchange had been brief as a man dressed in a mixture of Apache and western cast off clothes had asked the obvious question. What was he doing there? Vin had looked evenly at the mixed-blood trying to gauge the man's temperament and which answer was likely to satisfy and which answer would likely get him killed.

"I was lookin' for someone."

His response had drawn a thin smile.

"Well, mister. You found someone. Guess it just ain't who you were expectin'."

Vin's hard, blue-eyed and silently defiant stare had not wavered.

"Guess not."

The Texan's laconic reply seemed to infuriate the man and he had lashed out with a casual back-handed blow, the gesture of a man confident that no retaliation would be forthcoming, that rattled Vin's teeth and finally forced him to break eye contact.

"Cocky bastard ain't ya?"

Tanner had quickly seen the wisdom in remaining silent and had been left to contemplate his position while the gang ate supper.

As faint snippets of the low conversation drifted to him on the breeze he understood that they were waiting for someone to join them. Whether that would bode well or ill for him he had no idea but from past experience he doubted that he was going to enjoy any of what might transpire in the near future. Hell, as far as he could see, he had no future.

The pain was beyond anything he had ever endured. With each new spasm that wracked his body he stopped breathing until once again his tortured muscles relaxed, and with each contortion of his spine that bent him impossibly until only his head and his heels still touched the bed, he believed he would die. Even when the contractions had passed he faced a continual struggle to keep breathing, and the surety that eventually his own body would conspire against him and fail, instilled a fear in him so strong that had he been able to, he would have wept unashamedly. Instead he panted, trembled and sweated, dreading the next seizure that he knew would come just as surely as one heartbeat followed the next.

The merest trickle of fluid ran down his throat and he managed to tolerate it without gagging, tasting

a bitterness behind the sweetness that lay heavily on his tongue. He was thirsty, the fever sucking the moisture from him as his body burned up, but he could barely swallow his own saliva let alone take a drink without choking. Exhausted, he closed his eyes, and let the murmuring cadence of whispered speech flow over him, desperate to rest yet afraid that if he did sleep that he would never wake up again.

The healer gently set aside the bowl and spoon, careful in his actions, knowing that something as innocuous as a dropped cup could start another seizure -- a raised voice, an unexpected touch, the barking of a dog, any stimulus to the senses could trigger the violent spasms -- and he had no desire to witness any more of Chris' pain. It would be easier to bear if the gunfighter was insensible but from the fear he had seen in the blond man's eyes, he knew that Chris was very aware of what was happening and suffering through every tortured moment. That he was unable to ease that suffering weighed heavily on his conscience.

He struggled to recall what he could of the disease but he remembered little except that the two men he remembered had both died. For one it had ended quickly, his heart stopping mid-seizure after a day of unending spasms -- a blessing Nathan had felt at the time -- and the other, unable to take swallow the smallest amount of fluid had finally died of thirst after four days. He pushed aside the memory, and as his sense of hopelessness increased he wondered if it was even possible for Chris to survive.

The latch on the wooden door rattled softly and he turned anxiously, afraid that any new disturbance would provoke another seizure, instinctively raising his hand to signal silence. The familiar red jacket of the gambler was the last thing he expected to see and Jackson was surprised at his own profound sense of relief at the Southerner's appearance. The green eyes, cat-like in the lamplight, flicked from Nathan to the bare-chested gunfighter lying on the bed and a frown creased his forehead.

"Would you care to enlighten me, Mr. Jackson, as to exactly what is going on here?"

His voice was a soft drawl, but underneath the studied nonchalance of the words themselves Nathan was very aware of his concern for the blond gunfighter that he knew the gambler would never express aloud. It had come as somewhat of a revelation to him that the one person he had always considered the most selfish and self-serving of men, in fact had a greater capacity for caring than he ever would have imagined possible.

"Lockjaw," Nathan replied simply, his own voice low, and as if to demonstrate the truth behind the words, Chris threw his head back indicating the start of yet another seizure.

For almost half a minute, Larabee's body described a perfect arch, every rib in the lean body shown in relief against the taut skin of his chest as he ceased to breathe, suspended in a moment between life and death.

"Dear Lord."

The healer could sympathise with Ezra's stricken expression, understanding too well the feeling of standing by and helplessly watching the suffering of another. As the intense spasms subsided and Chris slumped, sweating and trembling, back onto the narrow bed, Standish turned mutely to look at him, his natural verbosity having deserted him in the face of such a display of violence. Jackson read the unspoken question in the Southerner's troubled eyes and slowly shook his head.

"There's nothing I can do, Ezra."

The gambler opened his mouth as if he was going to speak, then with a quick movement he abruptly turned on his heel and left, but the very essence of the emotion he was trying to suppress remained. The gypsy woman looked up as the red jacketed visitor disappeared into the night, and gently smoothed errant strands of sweat dampened hair from Chris' forehead.

"He has a great love for this man," she uttered softly, then raised knowing dark eyes to Jackson, "As do you. He is lucky to have such friends."

Nathan ducked his head, uncomfortable with the woman's ready talk of love between men whose relationship was more often than not one of friction, yet deep down he recognised the truth of her observation. She smiled as if she had read his thoughts and began again the ongoing process of cooling Chris' fevered body.

"Go. Talk. Share your grief. It is not wise to keep it all here." She struck her chest with an open palm. "Trust me."

Nathan found the gambler a little way from the wagons, one foot resting on a felled tree as he looked away towards the town, his Remington rifle held loosely in his left hand, and the set of his shoulders giving out the clear message that he wanted to be left alone. Jackson hesitated. He and Ezra had shared an uneasy relationship in the past, former prejudices and preconceived notions often muddying the waters and getting in the way of any possible friendship. Instead they had built a somewhat fragile association based more on mutual tolerance than any feeling of kinship. With a mental shrug he moved forward.

"Ezra."

The Southerner raised his right hand, holding the familiar silver hip flask, in a casual salute before downing a healthy swallow of the contents.

"Mr. Jackson."

A silence fell, neither man knowing precisely what to say under the circumstances. Finally Jackson turned to sit on the tree bole, facing the gambler, and rested his palms on the rough bark as his eyes focused on the wagon he had just left.

"Will he die?"

The question was unexpected, more so for being delivered with an abruptness uncharacteristic of the Southerner.

"He might."

"There's nothing at all you can do?"

Nathan felt his throat constrict, overwhelmed by his own sense of inadequacy.

"No." The admission came out thick with emotion and he saw Ezra turn to look at him, his own expression full of sorrow and undisguised sympathy that caught the ex-slave unawares. "Nothing except pray."

Standish stared out across the open desert.

"Hardly the most reliable of treatments, Mr. Jackson."

The healer's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"No, but it's all I got to offer."

Ezra turned quickly, a shadow passing over his face.

"Forgive me, Nathan. That was uncalled for and an unforgivable slight on your talents for which I have had cause to be truly grateful on more than one occasion myself."

He passed the flask to the healer, a peace offering. Nathan hesitated, then took the elegantly chased container and drank, caught off guard by the Southerner's gesture. The alcohol was smooth and warming, not the savage bite of the rot gut he was used to and he took a second draught before passing back the flask. Jackson watched, waiting for the gambler to wipe the neck of the container before drinking again but Ezra smoothly and apparently without a second thought resumed sipping, his attention far away. Suddenly Jackson felt a pang of guilt for having once again thought the worst of Standish.

"Ezra?"

The green eyes slowly turned on him; watching, waiting.

"If Chris dies..."

“No!”

Nathan was startled by the Southerner’s quiet vehemence, his absolute denial.

“But there’s nothing I can do. I don’t know enough to save him.”

The gambler slowly screwed the cap on the flask and slipped it into his jacket pocket, before finally pushing off from the tree with his foot and turning his back on the healer.

“Then it’s all over, Nathan.”

Without a backward glance he walked away, heading towards town.

Standish was not an overtly violent man by nature, generally preferring more subtle methods than physical aggression but as he strode into town he felt the overwhelming urge to hit something. In response, his fingers tightened on the rifle in his hand then in a moment of absolute clarity he recognised the uselessness of an anger that had no real direction, and he stopped at the end of main street, struggling to rein in his emotions. A buzzing murmur, voices in motion, reached his ears and he cocked his head, listening, a terrible sense of foreboding settling over him, as apprehension quickly drove away the anger.

There were twenty of them. More than enough to be dangerous. Changing the angle of his grip on the rifle, Ezra curled his index finger around the trigger and stood his ground as the mob approached. This is what Chris had been afraid of, only now the gunfighter was in no position to defend his Romany Samaritans and these men had hatred in their hearts and violence on their minds.

“Something I can help you gentlemen with?”

Ezra’s voice carried clearly on the night air and the company came to a ragged halt, uncertain now that they had been challenged. The Southerner may not wear a badge but every man was well aware of both his status as one of Larabee’s regulators and his reputation as a crack shot. Many had heard the tale of the gambler placing six shots into a single bullet hole he had drilled through an ace of spades; few believed it but enough were sufficiently unsure as to think twice about taking Standish on.

In the silence that ensued, Ezra shifted his feet, altering his stance to allow quick and ready access to the sidearm at his right hip. If things turned ugly, he wanted to at least go down fighting.

“While I agree that this is the most beautiful night for an evening promenade, my friends, I do believe that twenty armed men constitutes an illegal assembly even in this godforsaken territory.”

“Stand aside. This is no business of yours.”

The gambler laughed, and shook his head, not once taking his eyes off the group.

“I beg to differ, Sir. In case you are in any doubt may I remind you that I am employed as an officer of the law in this town, as are my six colleagues, and as such have been charged with protecting this town and keeping the peace. That in itself, and gentlemen you would correct me if I was wrong, makes this little impromptu gathering very much my business.”

A number of voices called out:

“You ain’t paid to protect gypsy trash!”

“This ain’t your fight, Standish!”

“Back off, Reb.”

“So where’s Larabee then?”

A crude laugh followed.

“Gotten his leg over a gypsy whore I’ll bet!”

Ezra’s anger, so far contained, bubbled to the surface and his finger tightened on the trigger, the rifle discharging inches over the heads of the mob. The gambler took a small measure of satisfaction in the fact that a number of men instinctively ducked and a few separated themselves from the main body and disappeared back towards town.

“Take my advice, gentlemen and go home before someone gets hurt!”

One man stepped forward, a shotgun levelled at the Southerner.

"Sorry, but the only one who's at risk of getting hurt right now is you."

Ezra raised an eyebrow, ready to call the man's bluff.

"Really? I assume that is intended as a threat?"

In a deliberately slow movement he drew his handgun from the holster, and raised it, smoothly cocking the hammer with his thumb as he aimed at the shotgun wielding mobster.

"Your move, Sir."

Nathan cursed as the sound of a gunshot reverberated through the camp. Ezra. Without hesitation he ran back to the vardo and throwing open the door, reached in for his carbine, tearing his eyes away from the predictable sight of Chris in the throes of another seizure. He could do nothing for Chris but the Southerner just might be in trouble of the kind that a forty-four and a Spencer carbine could help cure. At a run he set off in the direction of the shot which he judged to be at the southern end of town and hoped he would not be too late.

Jackson slowed to a walk as he neared the uneven standoff, in the region of fifteen to one he guessed. Not the kind of odds Ezra would normally favour, thought the healer grimly. Given his due, Standish could not be accused of lacking in nerve. To face down an armed mob alone, even for the pretentious gambler, was either very foolish or very gallant and while Ezra may be many things, Nathan did not believe that foolish could be counted among them. He kept his pace even and was glad that he was the only one who could tell just how fast his heart was beating. He sidled into position beside the smaller gambler, standing shoulder to shoulder.

"Thought you might need a little help here."

Ezra kept his eye on the restless crowd, his unwavering right arm still aimed at the front rank of men.

"My thanks, Mr. Jackson." He raised his voice slightly, just enough for it to carry to the mob. "Seven...eight to one, Mr. Jackson. Just our kind of fight wouldn't you say?"

Nathan cocked the carbine with a theatrical gesture that brought a smile to the gambler's lips.

"I reckon so. Just give the word, Ezra."

The crowd started to break up, muttering darkly but generally in agreement that getting themselves killed had not been part of the plan. Soon only the man with the shotgun and two more determined followers remained.

"Well, Sirs. It seems this party may indeed be over. Might I suggest that you reconsider your next move very carefully?"

The leader briefly traded stares with the green-eyed gambler but, unable to maintain eye contact for long, dropped his gaze and his lowered his weapon, making an exhibition of uncocking the twin hammers.

"You'd better watch your back if you're going to let them gypsy's stay around these parts, mister. We don't want their kind here."

The Southerner's eyes narrowed and he took a deep breath as if calming himself before he spoke.

"On the contrary, you would do well to watch your own because I promise you that if you or any of your misguided followers come anywhere near these people I will personally shoot you dead."

The man lip curled in a sneer, then he casually spat towards the two regulators and turned away, taking his lieutenants with him. Ezra lowered his handgun but stared for a long time down the street, a thoughtful expression on his face. Nathan let out an explosive sigh.

"You plannin' on getting dead sooner than later, Ezra?"

The gambler tore his gaze from the now empty street and turning to the taller man, smiled thinly.

"Come now, Mr. Jackson. This is no different to a game of poker. We just upped the ante, called their

bluff -- and won."

Nathan dropped a large hand onto Ezra's shoulder.

"You mind doin' me a favour and dealing me out of the game next time then?"

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Vin was sure his shoulder was dislocated. He had been released just long enough to relieve himself and had discovered then that not only had his hand begun to swell but that he could barely move his arm without being rewarded with a white hot lance of pain that speared through his shoulder. His right arm. His gun hand. Not that it mattered, he mused bitterly, when he had no gun.

The cowboy riding herd on him, a youngster Vin figured to be around J.D's age or even younger, had retied his hands in front of him and given him a half-cup of water and a strip of salt beef. Retiring a few paces, he had cautiously played out the remaining length of rope, all the while keeping his shotgun trained on the tracker. Grateful for the opportunity to sit, the Texan cared little for anything other than being able to ease the aching of his already tortured thigh muscles.

"Better eat, Mister. Ain't likely to get nothin' else for a while."

Vin had no intention of eating the heavily salted meat which might temporarily satisfy his hunger but which would ultimately only increase his thirst. Instead he just drank the water. Slowly, holding it in his mouth before he swallowed, he let the cooling liquid bathe his parched tongue before allowing it to flow down his into his throat. Food was of no consequence -- he'd gone hungry before -- but water was precious.

His shoulder burned with every movement it took to raise the cup to his lips but he found that if he kept his actions economical, he was able to maintain the pain at a tolerable level. Regretfully he finished the water and letting the tin cup hang from his index finger, looked evenly at the youth.

"Waitin' for someone, kid?" His voice was raspy, his throat still dry.

The young cowboy shifted the gun sharply, the movement exaggerated, as if he expected the tracker to make a run for it. Tanner was hard pressed not to smile but a boy with injured pride could be more ornery than a wounded grizzly and he was not about to get himself shot by a greenhorn with something to prove.

"Ain't none of your business."

The Texan ducked his head and stared at the ground, half-afraid that the youth would see something in his expression -- real or imagined -- that would seal his fate.

"No. Guess it's not."

"Darn right it ain't." The kid fell silent for a moment, then dropped to a crouch, still pointing the gun at Tanner and trying to maintain a grip the rope, his jaw working incessantly as he chewed on a wad of tobacco. "What's a fella like you doin' away out here on his own anyway?"

Vin was inclined to tell him it was none of his business, but he wanted the cowboy to talk.

"Told you. Looking for someone."

The boy shook his head.

"Cochinay don't believe that. Says you're the law, lookin' to take us in. Gonna see us hang."

Tanner's face remained expressionless but the irony was not lost on him. He was the one with a bounty on his head and a noose waiting in Tuscosa.

"You see a badge?"

The kid spat expertly, an indication of his disgust.

"All I see's a fella lookin' for trouble. Don't know who y'all are, don't care."

The tracker stretched, trying to relieve the ache along his spine and ease the pain in his shoulder

when he saw the kid's finger tighten on the dual triggers.

"Easy, kid," he spoke, hastily, "Ain't got no plans on goin' nowhere."

Vin lifted his bound hands attached to the rope held by the kid as a reminder of his status.

"You move them sorry bones so much as an inch and I'll blow you to kingdom come, Mister. And don't call me kid!"

Just a cub, thought the Texan. Young, proud, and dangerous, and like as not to be dead before he ever got a chance to get a real taste of life. He wondered if the kid had ever killed anyone before and how easy it would be for him to translate his threat into action but he was not about to put it to the test. Leaning back against the tree, he briefly closed his eyes while at the back of his mind lurked the unwelcome but persistent thought that it could well be days before he could count on anyone to come looking for him and by then it may be too late. He'd be buzzard bait.

A sharp tug on the rope, forced a hiss of pain from the Texan and his eyes flew open already knowing it was no gesture of the kid's. Keeping a tight rein on his emotions, determined to show neither pain or fear, he looked calmly at the man with a foot in two cultures yet who obviously belonged to neither.

"Cochinay." Vin acknowledged him, not failing to see the glance of malevolence he levelled at the youth guarding him and he guessed the kid would soon pay for his indiscretion. *Some lessons have to be learned the hard way, son.* "If you let me go now, it will be as if I never saw you."

The man drew a knife from his belt, thoughtfully running his thumb along the blade.

"If I kill you now it will be the same." He grinned wolfishly. "Dead men know best how to keep secrets."

"I see nothing except some men and some horses," ventured the tracker cautiously, "It's not my concern who they are or where they're going."

Cochinay laughed and weighed the knife in his hand.

"You lie, lawman." he accused easily, "You tracked us here. Delshay has watched you follow our trail."

"Hell, I'm no lawman," protested Vin, believing the distinction fine enough to make what he said the truth, "And I'm looking for one man. If he came this way you would have seen him."

The boy started to speak but Cochinay silenced him with a gesture without taking his eyes from the Texan.

"Enough! You have wasted your journey, and now, you have wasted your life."

Vin saw the truth in the renegade's eyes and braced himself for the final kiss of the blade, regretting only the fact that no one would ever know what had happened to him; that Chris and the others might think he had decided to move on without a word. And, he found, that mattered more to him than dying.

They made camp just after sundown. Buck would have kept on riding, eager to finish the job and get back to town, but Josiah and common-sense had won out. Now, after having eaten a meal that was consumed as hastily as it was cooked, the three of them stretched out around a fire, three unequal sides of the same triangle.

J.D lay on his back, hands laced behind his head, staring up at the night sky.

"Why d'you think Ezra went back to town and let me come in his place?"

Buck snorted a half-laugh.

"Not as a favour to you, kid, if that's what you're thinking. Probably had a poker game lined up tonight he didn't want to miss."

"No offence," broke in the preacher, emulating J.Ds posture as he looked up at the stars, "but I think

you're wrong this time, Brother,"

"Come on, Josiah," argued Buck, "You know Ezra'll do just about anything to get out of doing any work."

Sanchez's deep laugh rumbled in his chest.

"I won't argue with that, Buck, but something's been eating at Ezra since we left town."

Frowning, Wilmington levered himself up on one elbow, remembering Ezra's uncharacteristic reticence on the ride out to Nettie's.

"Now you mention it, he was downright unsociable."

"See, that's what I mean."

"Sure wanted to get back to town in a hurry," observed J.D, then added hastily, "Not that I'm complainin'."

"You think he was worried about leaving Chris? Hell, we're all worried about Chris but I reckon he's old enough and mean enough to look after himself."

Josiah sighed and sat up.

"Not just Chris. The gypsies."

"Ezra? Why would he care unless he can see a way to make money off 'em? You gotta admit he ain't exactly known for bein' charitable."

Sanchez poked at the fire with a stick, sending a shower of sparks spiralling up into the air.

"You want to know what I think, Buck? I think deep down Ezra cares about people a whole lot more than he'd ever want anybody to know."

He looked up surprised that Buck had not responded with a derisive laugh and found the mustached man looking at him over the fire with a thoughtful look in his eye.

"You know, Josiah," he said after a few moments, "There's only two men in that wagon train. The rest's just women and children."

The older man nodded.

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Maybe Ezra's one step ahead after all."

J.D. lifted his head.

"You think we should go back?"

The question hung in the air as the three men looked doubtfully at one another, weighing up the possibilities. Finally, Buck threw himself back down on the ground and pulled his blanket up over his shoulders.

"You wanna explain to Chris why we turned back, J.D, when we were this close? 'Cos I sure as hell don't!"

J.D. stared hard at his friend then laughed.

"Buck! You're scared of Chris!"

"Yep. That's why I'm gonna checkout that goddamn canyon before I go hightailin' it back to town, and if you're smart you'll be doin' the same. Now quit yammering the both of you and let a man get some shuteye!"

Dunne lay down, resting his head against his saddle, still laughing softly but when he slept his dreams were troubled, filled with images burning wagons and the sound of women and children screaming.

Nathan patiently spooned water into Chris' mouth, holding the man's head in the crook of his arm like a child as he trickled the liquid through clenched teeth and watched the convulsive action of his throat as he struggled to swallow even the smallest amount. Gently coaxing, keeping his movements calm and

slow, he painstakingly continued knowing that if the time came when he could no longer get the gunfighter to drink, the struggle would be over and Chris would die.

The healer wiped beads of sweat from his own brow with his forearm, feeling the claustrophobic closeness of the caravan now that the sun had risen again and wondering how he was going to endure another day of struggling to tend Chris under such conditions. He looked sadly down at the man resting against him, peaceful now, his sweat-slicked hair plastered to his head and his eyes closed in exhaustion. The night had been long, seizure after violent seizure wracking the gunfighter's lean body until Nathan thought his bones would break under the strain but no, each time he came through it, each time he drew a long shuddering breath and fell back as if dead until the next episode.

Carefully he set the blond head down on the pillow and felt for the pulse in Chris' neck, too fast but reassuringly strong under his fingers. No doubt about it, the man had the heart of an ox. Jackson smiled faintly. The heart of an ox, maybe, but it was more likely the stubborn streak of mulishness that was keeping him alive right now.

Fluttering eyelids revealed eyes of sea green that stared out of shadowed sockets, and Nathan's heart went out to the gunfighter at the fear he read in them. Unhesitatingly he took Chris' hand in his own and squeezed.

"I won't tell you it's going to be all right, Chris," he whispered, "cos I just don't know. You know I ain't never had no real schoolin' in doctoring. I just do the best I can and I'm doin' my best."

He dashed away a tear that rolled down his face, ashamed that he was crying in front of Chris but unable to contain the raw emotion that welled up inside him at his own inadequacy in the face of such pain. The gunfighter's eyes softened and Nathan felt the merest pressure on his hand as Chris tried to return the squeeze, telling him he understood, before the first tell-tale arch of the neck heralded a fresh seizure, the first of a new day.

Ezra had not slept. Now he sat on a three-legged stool outside one of the wagons shaving with a borrowed razor that had surely never had the benefit of a strop in quite some time, patiently removing the last of his stubble. Feeling like a wreck was one thing, looking like one was unthinkable. Staying awake all night was no new experience for the Southerner, he had often been a willing participant in poker games that lasted from early evening well into daylight hours but at the end of it had been the luxury of sleeping the clock around if necessary. Today he knew there would be no such luxury. In fact, if he escaped without having his neck stretched by the town's citizenry he would be lucky indeed.

The decidedly uncomfortable feeling of being watched prickled at his neck hairs and without breaking the rhythm of his shaving he eased the Colt out of his shoulder holster with his left hand, finally snapping it into a rapid draw and pointing it to where he had detected a subtle movement in the shadows between the wagons.

"Come out and show yourself." He requested almost conversationally, wiping the last of the soap from his cheeks with a towel.

Hand in hand two of the dark-eyed Romani children emerged to stand, heads bowed, before the Southerner. Sighing, the gambler returned the gun to its rig and bowed his head to conceal the smile that crossed his lips, wondering briefly how many years that particular moment had cost him. He gestured to the pair.

"Come here." His voice held no threat, only a quiet resignation and the children, a boy and a girl, moved hesitantly forward to stand before the gambler, staring with wide yet trusting eyes at the green-eyed stranger.

"You know you just took ten years off my life?" In response the girl giggled and he answered his own

question, "No, probably not. How could you know?"

Standish hung his head for a moment, saddened that such innocence would soon be lost, sooner than he would like if the people of this particular burgh had anything to do with it, he mused bitterly. As a small hand slipped into his own, he raised his head to look into warm brown eyes fringed with sooty lashes that melted his heart and knew he had not made a mistake in coming back to town.

The child clambered onto his knee, completely unafraid and rested her dark head on his shoulder.

"Gadje," she uttered, placing a small hand on his chest then touching her own, "Rom. Me som Mioaru."

The boy, a year or two older, seven by Ezra's guess stood gravely by his knee.

"She says you are *gadje*, she is Rom and her name is Mioaru. My name is Pietru."

"Well, Pietru, my name is Ezra and I'm honoured to meet you." The girl tugged briefly at his shirt sleeve bringing his attention back to her. "And, my darlin', it's a pleasure to meet you too."

Pietru looked steadily at the Southerner, with eyes wise beyond his years, before speaking.

"My uncle says it is God who brought you to us. You, the dark man and Chris. But now Chris will die from the sickness and we will be blamed. Who will be our friend here beyond the waters then?"

Ezra reached out his free hand and rested it on the boy's shoulder.

"Pietru, I promise on my honour that no harm will come to you." Deep in thought the gambler stroked the girl's long black hair and bent to place the gentlest of kisses on her head. "I promise."

The spasm had lasted more than half a minute and Nathan had begun to fret that the dusky blue tinge that had coloured Chris' lips was a sign that this was the seizure that would kill him but once again he had taken a shuddering breath and his colour had returned as soon as he had drawn air into his lungs. Jackson rubbed at his temples. Chris might be strong enough to endure these spasms but he was finding it increasingly more distressing.

He turned sharply as the door swung open, afraid that even such a minor disturbance would trigger another episode that the gunfighter may not survive. Mimi. They had so far shared the task of watching over Chris and he had guessed that the young woman had more than a passing interest in the blond gunman. Now she entered the caravan followed by an old woman that Nathan did not remember seeing before. She nodded a greeting and looked down at the heavily perspiring figure on the bed before bringing the older woman closer and speaking rapidly in the Romany tongue. The woman, of indeterminate years, touched the heated redness of Chris' wound and with a gesture sought Nathan's permission to take down the dressing.

The healer nodded but looked questioningly at Mimi.

"She is the wise woman of the family," explained the younger woman, "It was Ksenija who first removed the arrowhead from his side. I have spoken with her and she has some knowledge of this sickness."

The woman inspected the still weeping wound in his side then ran worn, but gentle hands over Larabee's body, muttering quietly to herself as she followed the contours of his ribs and felt the rigid muscles of his chest and neck before turning to the healer and loosing a torrent of Romany.

"She says you must first cut away the dead flesh in the wound, that this is poisoning his system. And she asks if he is still able to drink and..." she lowered her eyes before continuing, "...if he still makes water?"

Nathan nodded.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ksenija says she has medicine that will help stop the fits and take away the heat of the fever but she

warns that it is dangerous and too much can be worse than too little. She asks if you would want this medicine for your friend.”

Nathan reached out to once again wipe the sweat from Chris' face and chest.

“Tell her to do it. I have nothing that can help him.”

“But he may still die,” warned Mimi, carefully.

“Without some kind of help he'll die anyway,” reasoned the healer, “At least he might have a fighting chance with your medicine.”

Mimi nodded slowly.

“It is as you say. It is in God's hands.”

He had looked for death many times over the years and for many reasons but never had he felt as close to it as he did now, nor wished for it more. Exhausted, with every inch of his body aching, he had come to fear the next seizure, every passing second a torment until he the anticipation of the next agonising contractions distressed him as much as the spasms themselves.

He could not say how much time had passed for there was no longer any discernible day or night, only ever-present darkness and stifling heat. A fire seemed to be consuming him from within and his thirst raged, unassuaged by the fluid that Nathan had patiently spooned into him, the liquid seeming to evaporate like water on hot coals the moment it found its way past his clenched teeth and onto his tongue. Never had he felt so helpless before, his body traitorously betraying him in its weakness, while his mind turned in endless circles, aware yet, in utter despair. He had already seen the hopelessness in Nathan's eyes, affirmation of the inevitable, and had begun to prepare for the end; an end he prayed would come sooner rather than later.

The next attack came, like all the rest, without warning. A violent tensing of his muscles in an explosion of pain, that threw him into a back-breaking paroxysm and robbed him of the ability to move or even breathe. If he had been able to he would have begged for Jackson -- for anyone -- to shoot him and end his misery. Instead he suffered and slowly waited to die. The world, having faded to murky shades of grey, rushed back at him, filling his senses as his chest heaved jerkily and drew air into empty lungs. Abused muscles relaxing again, he sank back onto the bed, and was at once ashamed and horrified at the warm rush between his legs as he felt his bladder let go in the aftermath of the seizure. Shutting his eyes, finally defeated, he silently gave himself up to the stinging tears that leaked from beneath closed lids and settled on his lashes like drops of dew.

He was being held and, rebelling against the intrusion, he weakly tried to turn his head away but Nathan -- patiently insistent -- once again started spooning liquid into his mouth. Not water this time but something bitter and unpleasantly oily, with a mousy smell that made him gag and want to puke, but with no strength to resist he was forced to swallow the acrid mixture. Finally, the taste of warmed milk and honey displaced the former and he settled, but the vile taste lingered on his tongue and he wondered if the healer had finally taken pity on him and administered some draught that would end his agony once and for all.

Jackson had not moved for several hours and while his back ached and his eyes felt gritty he still maintained his vigil, watching and waiting, a spark of hope burning brighter with each passing hour. Before him Chris lay as still as death, his breathing frighteningly shallow, but for the first time in thirty-six hours he was at rest and for the last three of those there had been no seizures. The blond gunman's rapid lapse into a stupor had initially alarmed the healer and his total lack of response as Nathan had scoured the wound in his side, paring away dead tissue and packing the cavity with a paste of the gypsy-woman's making, simply reinforced his worst fears. Yet, Chris had not died. Neither had there been any

real sign of life other than the barely discernible rise and fall of his chest to indicate that he still breathed.

He let his hand rest on Larabee's ribcage, needing to feel the subtle movement beneath his fingers and feel the warmth radiating from his still fevered body that reassured him of Chris' continued existence. The medicine was far more powerful than laudanum and he wondered, not for the first time, what was in the noxious-smelling preparation that had so effectively arrested the muscle contractions and it brought home to him once again how little he knew of either the human body or the art of healing. He turned slightly alerted by a shaft of light penetrating the darkness and the caravan rocking gently on its axles as someone entered the wagon.

"You should get some sleep, Nathan." Ezra's hushed voice sounded weary.

The Southerner rarely, if ever, addressed him by his first name leading Jackson to believe he was either tired, or worried, or both to lapse into such unguarded familiarity.

"Later," he replied with equal weariness.

Standish moved forward and stared for a long moment at the pale and unmoving body of Chris Larabee, all hard muscles and sharp angles, the open wound in the gunfighter's side a hideous crimson slash against alabaster skin, his ribs and hipbones clearly defined against his lean frame.

"Do you really think there'll be a later for him?"

Nathan sighed and rubbed his face with his free hand.

"If you'd have asked me that two hours ago I'd have said no."

"And now?"

"Maybe."

"Just maybe?"

"Isn't that enough?"

The gambler looked down at the floor for a moment, his face in shadow, his emotions as ever closely guarded and when he finally spoke his voice was tightly controlled.

"Not the kind of odds I'd consider acceptable under normal circumstances, Mr. Jackson, but in this case I'll believe I'll take whatever you're offering," he paused and pinned the ex-slave with intense green-eyes, "a sentiment I'm sure Mr. Larabee would share given the opportunity."

Taking some degree of comfort from the slow thudding heartbeat beneath his hand, Nathan held the Southerner's gaze, a faint smile on his face.

"You know Chris. He's too damned stubborn to give up without a good fight and with any luck, he's already over the worst."

Standish nodded, trusting in Jackson's optimism.

"I hope you're right, Mr. Jackson and if I may be so bold, by my observations it is by your skill and diligence alone that the man still lives and breathes. He is indeed fortunate to have you as a friend -- as indeed am I." As if embarrassed by his admission he immediately straightened and his voice became suddenly abrupt and business-like. "Now if you'll excuse me I have a pressing appointment with our resident vigilante committee."

As the gambler started out of the door, Nathan threw a quick glance in his direction.

"You be careful, hear? There's gonna be no one to haul your ass out of the fire if things get a little too hot. You just take care out there, Ezra and watch your back."

The Southerner flashed a quick, if tired grin, his gold tooth winking in the light.

"Don't I always?"

oooOOOooo

The tracker stared in disbelief at the bone-handled knife embedded firmly in his thigh and resisted

the urge to immediately pull the blade free.

"Son of a bitch!"

It was not a particular bad wound although it was deep and -- *hell fire!* -- it hurt like blazes but it was one more complication he could do without. The temptation to rip the blade free and send the knife winging back to Cochinyay was strong, but he was acutely aware that he was still the captive and the ever-present reality of the shotgun trained on him ultimately stayed his hand. He would bide his time. *Didn't they say revenge was a dish that tasted all the sweeter for being eaten cold?*

Vin slowly raised his head, and looked levelly at the part-Apache, a challenging stare that invalidated any suggestion that the Texan had been in any way subdued. Without breaking eye contact, he closed his still bound hands around the hilt of the knife and, bracing himself, pulled it free then, in a gesture that demonstrated his disdain for the Apache, he tossed the bloodied weapon awkwardly aside.

Blood welled instantly from the open wound and the tracker used his hands to put pressure on it in spite of the jolt of pain that the action sent through his damaged shoulder. *Goddamn these bastards!* He gritted his teeth and waited for the throbbing pain to subside, his only thought now being to get back to town. He sighed, the ironic reality was that if Chris had ever been here, then he was long gone. Now all he had to do was find a way to do the same.

Cochinyay finally strode forward, grunting as he picked up the knife, muttering something in the Apache tongue that could have been a curse but which seemed to Vin to be more a sign of grudging respect. The Indian wiped the blade on his pants and thrust it back into his belt before turning to the boy.

"Fix him. We leave in one hour."

"But what about..."

Cochinyay's glare silenced the youth before he could utter another word.

"I said we leave in one hour -- and we'll take this one with us. Make sure he can ride."

The boy shrugged. He wasn't paid to think.

As Cochinyay hastened away, issuing orders to break camp, Vin's young guard put aside his shotgun and knelt hesitantly beside the injured tracker, pulling off his own bandana to tie around the wound.

"You ain't too smart, mister, are you?" He began conversationally.

Vin moved his hands and allowed the youngster to bind the strip of cloth around his thigh, wincing as he cinched the bandana tight enough to staunch the flow of blood.

"Why's that, kid?"

"Cochinyay don't mess around none when he gets mad. You're lucky he didn't gut you good and proper and leave you for crow bait." He looked up, a shadow suddenly passing over his eyes. "I seen him do that once. Tied a man up, ripped open his guts and just let 'em spill out. Don't know how long it took him to die 'cos we just road away and left him, but I reckon it weren't a purty way to go."

"I reckon you're right, son." He tensed his thigh, testing the level of pain the movement engendered and decided it was tolerable before waiting a beat and looking intently at his youthful overseer. "You know where we're headed, kid?"

The youngster ducked his head and lowered his voice.

"Shoot, mister. The name's Danny. Just stop callin' me kid!"

"Okay, Danny it is. Now where is it we're going?"

"Texas. We head over the border to sell the horses. Town called Tuscosa. You know it?"

Vin closed his eyes, a wave of dread chilling his blood in his veins.

"Yeah, Danny. I know it."

They had been up at first light, none of them able to settle, each plagued by nagging doubts to which,

if asked, they would have been hard pressed to attach a name. Now as the terrain changed and they neared their destination, Buck's unease intensified. Chris had been ambushed and shot not too far from where they now rode -- that was a fact not a feeling -- and while there were three of them rather than one, there was every possibility that they might be following Larabee's footsteps right into a trap. This part of the territory was just about as lawless as you could get; a haven for cattle rustlers, horse thieves and renegades of every kind -- disenfranchised Chiricahua, Mexican banditos... hell, when it came down to it every bad-assed mother west of the Pecos looking for a hideout.

Buck reined in his horse and wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve, looking at his two companions.

"Anybody got any ideas? We need a plan."

Josiah squinted at the hard planes and angles of the rock rising steadily up out of the ground, the sun's light bouncing off the pale stone in eye-dazzling glare.

"Reckon not getting shot at's good enough for me."

Wilmington showed an uncharacteristic degree of irritation at the preacher's response.

"Oh, that's a great help, Josiah."

J.D. shifted in his saddle.

"Can't we just check this place out like Chris said and get the hell out of here?"

"You want to ride straight on through Beggar's Canyon, kid, then go ahead and be my guest. Leastwise we'll find out if there's any renegade band holing up there. Course, I reckon we might just be taking you back tied over your saddle..."

"Okay, Buck," interrupted Dunne, "I see your point! So how'd you want to do this?"

Buck rolled his eyes.

"That's what I'm asking you!"

Josiah kicked his horse forward into a slow walk.

"Pity Vin's not here. That spyglass of his'd come in mighty handy right about now."

"Well, he's not," sighed Buck, "and we are, so let's do something instead of wastin' time jawing."

Josiah turned in the saddle.

"Seems to me like you're the one with the most to say, Buck."

Wilmington scowled and urged his own horse forward.

"Fine then! We'll just ride on in and if we get shot at, it'll be no more than either of you deserve but don't say I didn't warn you."

J.D. drew level with the mustached man and shook his head, barely suppressing the laughter that threatened to erupt.

"Come on. The sooner we check this out, the sooner we can get back to town. Whoever was here is probably long gone by now anyway."

They were. Although it was obvious that someone had been using the defile as a bolt hole for several days. Buck trod carefully, skirting the boggy mire at the far end of the canyon redolent with the pungent aroma of ammonia and manure, instantly recognising the area for what it was -- a temporary corral.

"Reckon Chris stumbled across a bunch of horse thieves by the look of this. Someone didn't want him getting too close and took a shot at him." He walked back past the dead ashes of a cookfire and towards Josiah and J.D. "I'm guessing they lit out just a few hours ago."

J.D. was crouched in front of a gnarled and stunted tree, thoughtfully examining the ground and turning over a frayed piece of rope in his hands.

"Look, Buck. Someone was tied up here."

"Well, there's no one here now, so I guess they took whoever it was with 'em." he answered simply, his interest more in getting back to town than making any more of the situation than he needed to.

“Seems this bunch didn’t care much for visitors.”

J.D. stood up and brushed sand from his hands looking up at the steep walls to either side. He frowned and stepped forward as the sun’s rays picked out a reflection in the rock, something that did not belong.

“Back in a minute. I see something.”

The younger man trotted along the defile and finding a promising set of handholds started to scramble up the rock like a young mountain goat. Wilmington sighed and exchanged a weary glance with Sanchez.

“When J.D.’s finally stopped playing games, we’ll head back. No point in sticking around. The bastard who plugged Chris is over the hills and far away and I, for one, plan on riding right back home not chasing horse thieves half way across the territory. Ain’t what we get paid for.”

Josiah scratched his chin.

“Pity about Nettie’s horses though.”

Buck shook his head.

“No. Don’t even try that one. You ain’t catchin’ me out that way! We go back. Now. J.D!”

Dunne scrambled down the rock quicker than he had climbed up, sliding the last fifteen feet and bringing with him a shower of loose stones, to land awkwardly on the canyon floor. Catching his breath, he opened his mouth to speak, but unable to find his voice instead raised his hand to show the two men what he had retrieved.

“Vin!” he finally gasped out, “Vin was already here.”

Sure enough, in J.D.’s hand rested the Texan’s brass spyglass. In three strides Wilmington crossed the distance between himself and Dunne, snatching the familiar instrument from the younger man’s hand.

“Fuck it!” He looked up and cast a quick glance around the empty canyon. “Question is, where the hell is he now?”

oooOOOooo

Ezra looked thoughtfully at the destruction that had been wrought on his room, his face showing none of the rage or disgust that boiled beneath the composed exterior that he presented to the world.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Standish. I tried to stop them but there were too many of them and no one that would raise a hand against them.”

The Southerner turned to the woman and his expression softened.

“It’s all right, Mrs. Muldoon. It’s not your fault. However might I enquire as to the perpetrators of this wilful act of vandalism?”

“Mr. Shaw and those men that always seem to be with him.” She paused to consider. “Bill Massey and Joe O’Connor, I think it was.”

The gambler’s grip tightened on the rifle in his hand. Shaw, the self-appointed leader of the vigilantes, who else but he would bother to indulge in such a petty and pointless undertaking. He sighed and turned his back on the ruin of his possessions, gently resting his hand on the woman’s shoulder in a gesture of understanding that told her he placed none of the blame at her feet.

“If you will excuse me, ma’am. I believe I have some business to discuss with Mr. Shaw and his associates.”

She spun, confused, as he strode down the hall to the staircase.

“But the room...the mess...your things...”

“They can wait.”

He did not add that if events did not go according to plan he might have no further use for either the room or any of the things in it, unless it was his black suit for his laying out. With a quick smile at the landlady that belied his own inner turmoil he started to descend the stairs but she once again called his name.

"Mr. Standish," she hesitated, as he waited for her to go on. "Ezra. Be careful."

He sketched a hasty salute and trotted down the carpeted staircase. Two people in one morning had given him the same unnecessary warning, after all he was Mrs. Standish's son and as such he had spent a lifetime perfecting the art of saving his own hide. Careful might not be his middle name, but prudent certainly was.

The saloon was almost empty but Ezra had made himself comfortable at his usual table and was flicking cards from the deck in his hand with practiced ease -- waiting. The bottle of whiskey at his elbow stood untouched; his Remington rifle rested across the table within reach and he had deliberately removed his jacket to allow him ready access to his sidearms. If there was to be any confrontation he intended it to be on his own terms and the Southerner had intentionally minimised his vulnerability. Now he waited, secure in the knowledge that eventually Shaw would be obliged to seek him out and when he did, he would be ready. He did not have to wait long.

The gambler did not raise his head as the bat-wing doors of the saloon swung open, instead choosing to ignore the arrival of Shaw to gather the cards he had previously dealt himself and begin to shuffle them. His pose was deceptively relaxed as he leaned back in his chair and deftly manipulated the deck, seemingly unconcerned by the other man's arrival. After a few minutes of waiting to be acknowledged Shaw slammed his hand down on the table.

"Where's Larabee?"

Ezra sighed theatrically and finally looked up at the cluster of men, slowly letting his intense green eyes linger on each of the six men before turning his attention to Shaw himself.

"Gentlemen, and I do use the term loosely, is there a problem I could possibly help you with? Mr. Larabee is currently indisposed."

Shaw straightened up and grinned.

"Well, seems to me like you're on your own." He looked pointedly around the saloon.

The Southerner started to deal the cards again.

"Looks that way."

Shaw adjusted his stance slightly, reminding Ezra of a bantam rooster. If the merchant figured that with that piece of information the odds had improved, the gambler was about to disappoint him.

"You think you can stop us sending those folks on their way? Won't be no trouble if they go peaceable and all."

"I certainly intend to do all in my power to do just that, Sir."

"Then you're a bigger fool than I thought, Standish. There's no one to back you up now. Are you prepared to die for a bunch of worthless gypsies?"

"Are you, Mr. Shaw?" The revolver that appeared in the gambler's hand was regarded with surprise by the merchant who had not even been aware of Ezra moving to draw the weapon. "Able assisted by Mr. Colt and Mr. Remington, I believe I may be successful in shortening the odds somewhat. You know what they say, God created all men but it was Sam Colt who made them equal? Well, consider this the equaliser."

"You can only shoot one of us at a time."

The Southerner appeared to consider that for a moment.

"Indeed." He looked calmly at each man, taking their measure, then slowly brought back the hammer.

"So, who would you like me to start with?"

"*Suficiente!* Enough of this!" Inez wielded the shotgun with surprising dexterity, training the twin barrels on the cluster of men, now threatened on two fronts. "*Váyanse! Inmediatamente!*"

The Mexican woman gestured with the gun to make her meaning quite clear.

"Out. Now."

One of the men stepped forward.

"Now wait a minute, little lady..."

The shotgun exploded in a thunderous roar, abruptly terminating any discussion.

"Are you hard of hearing? I said, get out!"

Ezra was hard-pressed not to smile as the men started to shuffle out, not wanting to appear too eager but almost falling over each other in their haste to leave.

"Not you, Mr. Shaw," he said, evenly but with an authority that after a moment's hesitation the merchant chose not to ignore, "I haven't finished with you yet."

The Southerner turned to Inez and inclined his head.

"Thank you, Miss Recillos. Your intervention, while not entirely necessary, is much appreciated."

She cocked her head to one side and stared fiercely at the gambler.

"Hah! You want to get your foolish head blown off, Senor Standish, then you do it somewhere else and not in my saloon!"

"You can't do this to me!"

Shaw was unimpressed that he had been put behind bars.

"I can. And I have."

Ezra wrestled the key off the iron ring and pocketed it, not willing to risk leaving it where Shaw's cronies would be able to find it and free him.

"This is against the law," he protested, his face turning an interesting shade of red as he clutched the bars.

"No, Mr. Shaw. Against the law is burglary and destruction of property -- namely mine -- incitement to riot and the persecution of innocent travellers. I believe that's enough, my friend?"

He turned to walk out of the jail house, at least secure in the knowledge he had neutralised the most vocal and therefore most dangerous of the dissenters.

"You think you're real clever, don't you, mister? Well, this ain't over yet, not by a long shot. And think on this. When all is said and done you're just a drifter, we're the ones who have to live in this town and let me tell you, we don't want their kind -- or your kind for that matter -- settling down here."

The Southerner turned back and looked steadily at the belligerent merchant.

"My kind, Mr. Shaw? And what exactly would that be?"

"No account drifters, living by the gun, settling like a plague of locusts and taking what you can get from honest folk before moving on again."

For a brief moment a shadow passed over Ezra's eyes, turning them a darker shade of green, before he slowly spun on his heel and strode out of the door leaving Shaw to contemplate his transgressions alone in the jail house.

Once outside, Ezra glanced up and down the street, easily picking out the figures of Massey and O'Connor lurking outside the general store. With a smile he tipped his hat in their direction, feeling a profound sense of gratification as the pair of them shambled off throwing backward glances in his direction that would have been enough to fell a bull moose.

He walked back to the saloon wondering how one man -- especially as this particular nominee went by the name of Ezra Standish -- was going to contain a town ready to erupt in violence on his own. He

had few enough allies on whom he could depend, and those he would have to utilise most judiciously if he was going to live to enjoy the fruits of his peacekeeping labours for which he was paid the princely sum of one dollar a day.

He emerged from a death-like sleep, his limbs heavy and unresponsive but his mind acutely aware of both his condition and his surroundings. He was in pain; his side -- he remembered the arrow -- was on fire, and his back, chest and neck felt as if someone had taken to him with a sledgehammer. Swallowing with difficulty and feeling the tightness in the muscles of his throat, he knew at once that nothing had really changed. He was still in the grip of whatever malady had struck him down and he was powerless to move or even speak, realising that he had only temporarily escaped the exhausting torment of the illness as he slept. It was still an effort to breathe, pushing against resistant muscles until he was sure he could do it no more but he found the urge to live was too strong and each time he took just one more breath.

As always Nathan was there. Did the man never sleep? He had come to appreciate the strong hands of the healer having been washed, fed, tended and just plain held by them as the sickness had kept him in its own strong and relentless grip and had come to the conclusion that healing was more than binding wounds and giving herbal tea; the essence of healing came as much from the heart as through the hands. Even in the darkest moments when Chris had been sure death was imminent, Nathan had been there with him, lending him his strength and urging him on. Now he felt the spectre of death had been pushed back and if not driven away completely had been cowed for the present, giving him a chance to muster a modicum of strength with which to fight on his own.

The gypsy woman had been there too. Mimi. Her touch had been softer, the hands of a mother, a wife; and he had been reminded so much of Sarah that the very nearness of her had been as painful as the spasms that had wracked his body. At times he would have given anything to have had her lying with him, the touch of her body against his own but he knew now he had been confusing Mimi with Sarah and he put it down to the delirium of fever that had summoned such thoughts. In her own way she had healing in her hands too.

He felt cold now although without him noticing, a comforter had been drawn over him, and suddenly the heaviness and loss of feeling in his limbs frightened him almost as much as the paroxysms which had robbed him of the power to breathe. Was this then just another stage in the sickness, had he survived this far just to die after all? If he could have, he would have wept. So very cold.

Vin shivered in spite of the perspiration that was oozing out of his pores and he recognised the flush of fever building in him, wishing he could at least take the edge off his thirst but he was little more than a chattel, tied to his saddle and of no real concern to anyone. He wondered if they would treat him any better if they knew his hide was worth five hundred dollars if they got him to Tuscosa alive. Course, he was still worth a good bit dead if they only knew it, but he was hardly likely to be tempted to enlighten them in either case.

It was slow going with a string of horses to ride herd on. A mixed blessing for the Texan who was in no particular haste to cross over into his home state and finish his life swinging on the end of a rope for a murder he had not even committed. He held onto the thought that if Cochiny was unaware of his value then he was unlikely to hand him over to the law; he felt that the law and the renegade were not likely to be on friendly terms -- after all these men were horse thieves. No, his concern was that someone from his past would recognise him and claim the bounty.

On the other hand if he sickened, these were not the men to spare any sympathy on him and would be more likely take his horse, his guns and the clothes off his back before leaving him beside the trail for the buzzards. He hung his head feeling sick and dizzy. Any which way, the future was not looking too rosy for Vin Tanner.

"Hey, mister!"

Vin jerked his head up, startled by Danny's voice hissing in his ear. Goddamn it! He had been drifting off.

"You sick or something? You look mighty poorly."

"I'm okay, ki...Danny."

The youth who seemed to have staked some sort of claim on the bounty hunter, either by choice or default, nudged his mount closer and offered his water bottle, heedless of the fact that his knee was pushing against the knife wound in Tanner's leg. Ignoring the agony flaring in his thigh, Vin gratefully accepted the canteen, awkwardly but successfully raising the bottle to his lips hampered as he was by the bindings around his wrists. Taking a healthy swig he resisted the urge to keep drinking, knowing he would pay for the indulgence later if he was foolish enough to do so. Instead he handed the metal container back to Danny and raising his hands wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Hope you're right 'cos we ain't stoppin' till nightfall. We gotta make a trade in Indian Springs 'fore we go on to Texas and we're already late. Cochiny'll bust my balls if I let you get sick and slow us down. Hell, he'll probably just shoot you and be done with it."

Vin nodded, believing the boy.

"Don't fret none. I won't slow you down."

Josiah took off his hat and scratched his head.

"We don't know that Vin is with them."

Buck slapped his saddle in agitation, the sharp sound making his horse dance sideways.

"Then where in tarnation is he? And why would he leave his spyglass up there?"

"Reckon he dropped the spyglass. Maybe he took off in a hurry, same way as Chris had to."

"That's horse feathers, Josiah and you know it. If Vin'd come bustin' out of here we'd have met up with him on the trail long before now."

"You know, Josiah, Buck's got a point," agreed J.D. "Looks like they all went this way, heading east. Must've had Vin with them."

"Why? Why would Vin be important?"

"Hell, man. Why'd they shoot Chris? I don't know!"

"Just playin' devil's advocate here, Buck," explained the preacher, evenly, "How's Chris gonna feel if we go tearing off on a wild goose chase?"

"Goddamn the devil!" shouted Wilmington, finally, "How's Chris gonna feel if we don't and Vin's in trouble?"

Sanchez thoughtfully bowed his head for a moment, then looked up at Buck.

"You and J.D go on then. I'll go back to town. God knows what mischief Ezra might be getting into with just Nathan and Chris to keep an eye on him."

Buck was silent for a minute then nodded.

"Seems we're leaving ourselves mighty thin on the ground whichever way we do it. I guess the kid and me can handle anything that comes up, though I didn't reckon on taking on a bunch of renegade horse thieves!"

Josiah swung into the saddle and turned his horse around.

"Well, you ain't no tracker but I think even you can follow a trail made by fifteen horses and five or six riders."

Buck mirrored the preacher's movements and mounted up.

"It ain't the trail I'm worried about, Josiah. It's what's waitin' at the end of it."

"Have faith, Brother."

Wilmington grinned and kicked his horse into motion.

"Yeah. Right."

Sanchez shook his head and spurred his own horse in the opposite direction. If he rode into the night he could be back in town by sunrise.

oooOOOOooo

The coffee was good. After long hours in the cramped wagon, cat-napping when he felt he could and the rest of the time worrying himself sick about Chris, the fresh air and some food were a welcome change. He had hurriedly spooned the savoury stew down, hardly tasting it, realising just how hungry he was only when he started to eat. He sipped again at the scalding coffee and massaged the back of his neck, wondering if the worst was over.

Whatever was in the mixture that the gypsy woman had made, it seemed to have eased both the intensity and frequency of the seizures. At first he was certain the medicine was going to kill rather than cure and at times he had been sure the Chris had taken his last breath but with a tenacity typical of the gunfighter, he had kept on fighting. He just hoped Larabee could hold on to that fierce will to live because although the bone-breaking spasms seemed to be under control, he was still gravely ill and Nathan was not sure if the small amount of liquid he was managing to get down the blond man was enough. He looked down at the coffee remaining in his cup and sighed. Chris had not eaten in two days and the amount of water he had so painfully coaxed into him was barely enough to sustain life.

Jackson straightened and stretched, tossing the dregs from his cup on the ground and, almost as an afterthought, glanced in the direction of the town. For a moment he put aside his preoccupation with Chris' well-being and instead his thoughts switched to Ezra, not envying for a moment the Southerner his task of trying to keep a lid on the simmering cauldron the town had suddenly become. Still, he was somewhat reassured by the fact there had been neither gunshots nor any unwelcome visitors to the camp, so whatever Ezra was doing, it seemed to be working.

Sadly Nathan turned back to look at the circle of wagons and concluded that nothing ever really changed. The nation had divided and gone to war not too many years before over the very issue of man's inhumanity to man yet many years on, the same prejudice and hatred of which human beings seemed to be infinitely capable, lived on. He had been a victim himself and now it was obvious that it was the turn of the Romany.

He looked around the camp. Women going about their daily chores, children playing knuckle-bones in the dust, an old man whittling wood, none of it very much different to the activities taking place in town yet the gypsies had been branded as intruders not to be tolerated -- as outcasts. Hard pressed to understand what it was about these people that could possibly engender such animosity from total strangers, Nathan started walking back towards the brightly coloured wagon in which Chris still languished. The gunfighter probably owed them his life and he knew beyond any doubt that they would forever have his own gratitude and respect.

Mimi sat on the steps of the *vardo*, arms clasped around her knees and showing no immediate sign of moving as the healer approached.

"Ma'am." Nathan tipped his hat.

"You should sleep," she said bluntly, and in a tone that sounded more like an order than a suggestion.

"But ma'am, I need..."

She waved a hand, interrupting before he could say anymore.

"You need to sleep. There is no reason for you to be here. He is resting and so should you."

Nathan rubbed his eyes between thumb and forefinger, feeling the grittiness beneath his lids and knowing that she was right. In this case he could do nothing more for Chris than anyone else, it was just a matter of watching and waiting. Mimi had already proved that she was as capable of taking care of the gunslinger as he was and if he was completely truthful there was no reason that he had to be constantly in attendance -- except that he wanted to be.

"I don't like to leave him," he admitted, "Just 'cause he can't talk or move real well don't mean he can't hear, see and feel. He's scared, ma'am, and I don't want him to think he's on his own."

Mimi stretched out a hand and rested it on Jackson's arm.

"You're a good friend, Nathan. But he won't be alone. I'll be here."

Nathan looked anxiously at the door behind the gypsy woman.

"No offence, ma'am, but he don't know you that well."

A brief smile crossed her full lips.

"Trust me, Nathan. He knows me well enough. Now go. Sleep. I will wake you if there is any change." She pointed to the next wagon in line. "There is your bed. Rest."

After a moment's hesitation, Nathan nodded once, defeated by the woman's good sense and his own exhaustion.

"Promise you'll wake me if there's a change."

"May my child die tomorrow if I do not."

Moving to the next wagon, he slowly mounted the steps and manoeuvring his large frame through the narrow entrance, disappeared inside.

If it was possible for a man to feel as if he had lost substance, Ezra was that man and he had taken to watching the northern approaches to the town in the hope that before too long Vin and the others would make a timely reappearance. That hope was rapidly fading along with his own energy. Stifling a yawn he rubbed at his face, and feeling the stubble under his fingers pushed aside the flicker of annoyance that he had been unable to find time to shave. The reality was that his appearance was the least of his concerns at that moment, much as the notion offended his sensibilities.

He scanned the street, only lightly populated although it was mid-morning, and wondered how long he could manage to maintain a semblance of order. Putting Shaw behind bars had merely removed the chief agitator from circulation, it had not defused the powder keg that the normally peaceful town had become. The citizens had divided and the battle lines had been drawn, it was just a matter of time before something or someone triggered the hostilities. Once that happened, Ezra knew that to make a stand alone against them would be an act of suicide. No, he had already made the decision that if that moment came then he would be forced to make a tactical withdrawal. A smile came to his lips as he considered the limits of his own martial experience. After all, his part in the war had consisted of a successful career in blockade running, and although that had been a far from safe enterprise with its own unique version of combat, military strategy was not exactly his forté. What he did understand was that when all was said and done, a fighting retreat may be the only sensible course of action left open to him. A retreat, he believed, he could manage without too much difficulty. With a sigh he leaned back in the chair and lay the rifle across his knees, his finger never far from the trigger as he waited.

Ezra's instincts immediately kicked in when a lone figure on horseback trotted purposefully down the

street, and he experienced a moment of *deja vu* as he recognised the rancher who had reported stock losses several days before to him and Buck. He doubted very much that Cunningham was back in town now on a social visit. Trouble drew his kind like flies to a cow pat and considering the two of them had hardly struck up a friendship on their first meeting, the Southerner, remembering the slur on his origins, anticipated a degree of antagonism from the disgruntled rancher.

The man did not bother to dismount but instead turned his horse to face the regulator, leaning easily on his saddle horn as he studied the Southerner, not even trying to hide his contempt.

"Reckon I might just find my missing horses hereabouts from what I hear, mister, and I've come to take back what's rightfully mine."

"Really, Mr. Cunningham, and what brings you that that particular conclusion?" Ezra reclined nonchalantly in the chair, his apparent indolence a deliberate goad to the man on horseback, but his finger tightened imperceptibly on the trigger of the Remington.

"You tellin' me that there ain't a band of tinkers here with a string of horses they've thieved along the way?"

"I'm not telling you anything, sir. I'm merely suggesting that before you make accusations that you should be absolutely sure of your facts."

Cunningham straightened in the saddle and spat to one side.

"Reckon I'll just go take a look for myself."

The shot missed the man but not by a great deal and the rancher paled as he realised that Ezra had fired with intent and he had no doubt that had the lawman chosen he could have killed him on the spot. That Standish had not moved more than was necessary to draw his gun from his shoulder rig, or indeed changed his expression, did more to unnerve Cunningham than the smoking gun held loosely in the Southerner's left hand.

"You were saying, Mr. Cunningham?"

The rancher took a moment to recover, his face flushing with a combination of anger and embarrassment.

"You son-of-a-bitch," he spat, heatedly, "An honest man comes looking for his rightful property, comes to the so-called law in this piss-poor excuse for a town and all he gets is his head almost blown off for the trouble!"

Ezra sighed and finally rose from the chair.

"Mr. Cunningham, I have a perfectly good jail cell sitting empty. If you would care to spend a few days in custody I can certainly arrange it and if you persist in this course of action, I can guarantee it."

"You can't do that," protested the rancher, "I ain't done nothing wrong!"

"Neither have the people whom you insist on accusing of the theft of your livestock, Mr. Cunningham."

The man narrowed his eyes and studied the gambler carefully.

"How come you're so sure them tinker bastards are innocent?"

"How come you're so sure they're guilty?"

Cunningham shifted in the saddle.

"Cos I know they were camped on Nettie Wells' property and she lost two horses just a few days ago then they passed on by my place just a day after and I lost more stock."

"Sir, that is what is known as circumstantial evidence and there is no proof to substantiate your claim."

"You let me take one look at those horses and I'll show you proof. I'm bettin' you'll find my brand on some of 'em."

"And I'll wager you won't. What are you prepared to stake on the outcome, my friend?"

Cunningham looked cautiously from the chillingly cold green eyes to the rifle held almost casually in the Southerner's right hand and the revolver he still gripped in his left. Under the circumstances the rancher found the lawman's argument a difficult one to gainsay and with a curse, savagely pulled the horse's head around.

"Don't think you've won, mister. I ain't finished yet."

Ezra watched the rancher ride back the way he had come and quickly stepped down onto the dusty street. *Damn! How many more of these confrontations was he going to have to go through before someone called his bluff and blew his brains out?* Time to move before events took a turn for the worse and overtook him. He glanced at the closed and shuttered offices of The Clarion and for a moment wished that Mary had not left town to visit her son, then thanked God that she had. He was concerned enough for Inez's safety after she had clearly signalled her allegiance in the saloon, having Mary in town would have been a double-edged sword -- another ally but another burden for him to worry about. Without any show of haste he walked across to the saloon.

Danny had been right, they had not stopped until nightfall. The pace, while not punishing, had been gruelling enough and Vin knew that if it had not been for the young outlaw who rode beside him, he would already have fallen by the wayside. Why Danny had decided that it was his task to take care of him, the Texan had no clear idea, he just knew that he was grateful for it. He might yet be on his way to a certain hanging if he ever got to set foot in Tuscosa, but if he had to meet his maker he would rather it was later than sooner. He was still bound and his wrists were bloody from the chafing of the rope but he could not have made an escape even had they untied him, given him his horse and invited him to leave. He lay just where Danny had left him, sick to his stomach, feverish and barely able to raise his head. His leg throbbed relentlessly and from the tension in his thigh and the yellow discharge that leaked from under the makeshift bandage he knew the wound had turned. *Nathan, where are you when a man needs you most?*

"Mister, I brought you some water and somethin' to eat. You gotta sit up."

"Can't," he sighed, just wanting to sleep.

"Sure you can. Here, lemme help."

Casting a quick glance at the other four men, Danny moved in front of Vin shielding him from view as he pulled him into a sitting position. Tanner bit back a cry as his shoulder cracked like a pistol shot, perspiration standing out on his already sweat-slicked forehead as he rode the wave of pain that followed, barely managing to hold onto consciousness as his vision faded to grey then black.

"Jesus!" he breathed, swallowing the bile that had risen in his throat.

The young outlaw's eyes were huge in a pale face as he watched the tracker regain his own colour from ashen to the more familiar flush of fever.

"Sorry, mister," he whispered, fearfully, "Is it broke?"

Tanner experimentally rotated his shoulder and laughed, the savage pain suddenly a memory as he felt the joint turn more easily in its socket.

"No. It's not broken, Danny. In fact you just did me a big favour."

The youth tilted his head to one side, staring curiously at the Texan.

"Me? What did I do?"

Vin ducked his head guiltily. The kid was trying to help him but he was not ready to trust him. Let them go on thinking he was hurt worse than he really was, but thanks to Danny his shoulder was no longer dislocated. Still painful, but by no means incapacitating.

"Nothing. Nothing at all, Danny. Now what was that about water?"

He awkwardly grasped the tin cup and filled his mouth, trying to make it last but desperate for the soothing liquid as it flowed over a tongue and down a throat as dry as the desert dust itself. A cupful. Enough to keep a man alive, no more. This time he accepted the dried salt beef, weighing the cost of his increased thirst against the need to eat and the greater need to put some salt back in his system after sweating so much of it out. He was doing poorly enough without adding the agony of cramps to his catalogue of ailments.

Hindered by his bound hands, he struggled to loosen the bandana around his thigh, hoping to ease the burning pain that spread from the wound throughout his upper leg. Peeling back the bloodied fabric that had dried and stuck to raw and inflamed flesh he hissed between clenched teeth. Even to his eye the leg looked unhealthy, the surrounding skin reddened, puffy and tender while from the wound pale blood and a thick, yellowish discharge oozed.

"That don't look good, Mister."

"No, its turned." Tanner raised his head and looked evenly at his young guard. "And it's Vin. The name's Vin."

Danny shrugged as if it was of no matter what his name was and continued his endless chewing, moving the wad of tobacco around in his mouth from time to time and occasionally spitting into the dust.

"Gimme one of your bullets, Danny."

The youth frowned suspiciously.

"Hell, no!" he protested. "Cochinay'll kill me."

"What am I gonna do with a bullet, Danny. I don't have a gun," pointed out the tracker patiently, "I need it to cauterise this leg."

The outlaw still looked doubtful.

"Look, just break open a cartridge," he explained, "put the powder in the wound and then set it alight."

"Really?"

Vin decided the kid's enthusiasm at the prospect of seeing pain inflicted was a definite worry; more so because it was going to be his pain. He wondered for a moment if he was doing the right thing but the idea of a slowly putrefying wound convinced him that as drastic as the remedy was, he would rather choose it than risk the consequences. Back when he had been buffalo hunting he had been bitten by a wolf, long days away from any settlement, and he had been forced to use a similar strategy then. It was not a treatment he would gladly suffer by choice.

"Yes. Really." Danny broke open a cartridge with a willingness that brought a brief and reluctant smile to the tracker's face. "Now, you've got to pour the gunpowder in. No, wait, you'll have to open it up wider."

He snarled, cursing, as the youthful outlaw eagerly took to the task, performing the job almost too well, although given his due he did apologise when Vin mouthed a few choice oaths that set the lad grinning.

"Want me to set this afire now?"

"No," admitted Vin truthfully, "but do it anyway. Just give me a minute."

The tracker braced himself, preparing for the searing bite of the igniting gunpowder that would follow once Danny set the black powder alight. Striking a lucifer the youth hesitantly touched the gritty substance and was rewarded with a sizzling flame that burned intensely for several moments. Tanner uttered a single inarticulate roar of pain that echoed across the still desert night and set the horses milling in frightened confusion, before he regained control and subsided into shocked gasps. White-faced he rocked, biting his lip, until the pain settled to a dull throb, hoping that the flame had cleaned the wound as well as it had sealed it.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" he breathed when he finally found his voice again.

Awed, Danny sat back, never taking his eyes off the lean tracker.

"Amen to that, Vin."

In spite of the pain drilling through his thigh, the Texan began to laugh quietly. Finally, with no great effort on his part, he had succeeded in impressing the young outlaw.

"Thanks, kid. I'll remember you in my will."

"Sure," grinned Danny in return, expertly aiming a stream of tobacco juice into the dirt beside his boot, "I'll hold you to that, 'cos you'll be dead a long time before I will."

"Reckon you're probably right about that, Danny," Vin admitted, "Never planned on dyin' an old man in my bed anyway."

The youngster stirred the ground with a grubby finger.

"You got folks, Vin?"

"Nope." The Texan eased himself down to lean on one elbow. "Ma died when I was a young 'un, never knew my Pa."

"Me neither. Ran away from the work house once I was old enough to fend for myself. Been on the trail ever since."

Vin moved his injured leg into a more comfortable position, and lowering himself further, settled his head against the saddle bow.

"How old are you, Danny?"

The redhead straightened perceptibly, caught off guard by the unexpected question.

"Reckon I'm goin' on fifteen now."

Tanner closed his eyes for a moment. Holy Christ and he'd thought J.D. was too young!

"You plannin' on being a horse thief all your life, kid?"

Danny shook his head.

"No, sir. Gonna go back to San Francisco and get me a job on a ship. You ever seen the sea Vin?"

The Texan shook his head.

"Can't say I have."

"It's somethin' special, Vin. So big, nothin but water as far as the eye can see. Ships travelling all over the world, to China, and South America, Africa too. That's where I'm going."

Tanner listened, dozing as the boy, suddenly animated, told him tales of San Francisco bay and the tall ships that set out daily for distant ports and how one day he would be on one of them. Vin finally fell asleep to the sound of Danny's voice weaving a future for himself that did not involve either stealing or killing. As he drifted off Tanner could not help but hope the kid got his wish.

Ezra checked the chambers of his handguns and holstered them before repeating the action with his rifle. Satisfied that he was as prepared as he could be, the Southerner looked steadily at the Mexican woman standing beside him, his emerald eyes burning with a cool intensity.

"Lock up as soon as I'm gone. Don't open the door for anyone," he picked up the shotgun that lay on the bar top and thrust it into her hands, "and don't be afraid to use this."

She took the weapon and nodded sombrely, apprehensive but with no show of fear.

"Don't worry, I can take care of myself."

With a gentle laugh he reached out and cupped her chin in his hand, a curiously intimate gesture that brought the tiniest of frowns to the woman's smooth features.

"Of that I have no doubt at all, my dear."

For a long time he stood looking into almost black eyes, even now smouldering with an undisclosed passion and slowly, almost hesitantly, he leaned down and touched his lips to hers, a fleeting kiss that

momentarily deepened before he drew back and sighed apologetically.

"Forgive me, *Senorita Recillos*, that was incredibly boorish of me."

Inez held his gaze for a second before setting down the shotgun and impulsively grasping his shoulders to return the kiss in full measure. Releasing the startled Southerner she lightly stroked his cheek.

"No apologies. *Sentir nada, mi amor.*" She stepped away then, deftly avoiding his eyes, and picked up the gun. "Now go before I shoot you myself!"

Uncharacteristically lost for words, Ezra abruptly tipped his hat with a brief nod and walked quickly into the street, gratified to hear the distinctive clatter of the doors being secured behind him as soon as he had cleared the entrance. The briefest of smiles crossed his lips and without a backward glance he stepped out into the street and wondered in all honesty if he would ever set foot in the saloon again. He glanced along the too-quiet strip of New Mexico territory and decided that it was suddenly very important to him that he did.

It was far too quiet. So still it was as if the townsfolk had suddenly ceased to exist and he was moving through a ghost town. On impulse he jogged across to the jail but Shaw still languished in his cell, his companions evidently not prepared to make the attempt to free him -- at least not yet. Not entirely reassured, Ezra broke into a run, every instinct telling him that something was very wrong, his gut clenching in reaction to the thought that he had made a huge mistake in leaving Nathan alone with Chris in the encampment.

He heard them before he saw them -- not enough to be deemed a mob but enough to be a threat -- and already they were a step ahead of him. He recognised them all; Cunningham, Massey and O'Connor ably supported by a dozen ne'er do wells who would jump at any chance to do violence however meagre the excuse. Not quite hired guns but not far from it either and right now they were headed for the confrontation they had been seeking since the caravan had first rolled into town. As he ran he prayed he would not be too late.

The horses. Ezra cursed as he realised their intent and sprinted the last hundred yards to the wagons, already knowing he would be too late to prevent, at best, an unpleasant scene, at worst a pitched battle. His gut clenched as he ran, turning to water as he thought of the Romany women and children at the mercy of a bunch of vindictive and bigoted thugs, and immediately regretted leaving Nathan on his own. Too late now.

Sentir nada.

Nathan stirred from a deep sleep, not knowing what had disturbed him but aware of the sense of unease that permeated every fibre of his being. Hastily pushing sleep aside he abruptly sat up and instinctively grabbed for his gun, fighting the sluggishness that clouded his over-tired brain. *Damn it, Nathan, wake up!* The healer swung his legs over the edge of the bunk pausing, as his still-booted feet touched the floor, to listen. Voices. He slowly got to his feet strapping the gun-belt around his waist, and tried to make sense of the discordant hum ebbing and flowing, near enough to be audible, far enough away to be meaningless.

Jackson wasted no time. The gypsies may not recognise the threat, but having already faced down the agitators once with Ezra, he certainly did and common sense was telling him that no amount of bluff was going to work this time. Moving quickly he herded some of the children before him as he crossed the camp, gathering them into a small group and giving them into the charge of one of the older women.

"You all stay right here." He looked at the woman who appeared resigned rather than fearful. "Do you understand? Don't move from here and whatever you do, don't try to run away."

She spoke rapidly to the children, drawing them closer to her and nodded affirmation at the healer.

"Zhan le Devlesa."

Nathan broke into a jog and followed the sound of raised voices, his heart hammering as he braced himself for a confrontation, knowing that the time for negotiation had passed. All the fine words in Ezra's vocabulary, even if he knew them, were not going to avert the coming violence. He could see that the horses in the picket were starting to mill restlessly at the sudden noise, straining at their tether lines as men started to move impatiently among them. Nathan swore as the first beast broke away and made a dash for freedom, jinking first one way then the next as, surrounded by shouting, gesticulating men it panicked before finally bursting through the cordon to charge through the camp. A shot rang out, then another and as the remaining horses reared and fought against the tethers, more gained freedom, bunching together and making a headlong charge to escape the melee. The healer dived to one side as the stampeding beasts almost ran him down, out of control and heedless of any obstacle in their path, powerless to either stop or divert the living wall of horseflesh that was about to plough through the gypsy encampment. Scrambling to his feet and brushing the dust from his clothes he turned helplessly as more horses were loosed and the picket line exploded in a frenzy of mindless activity; shouting men, some mounted, driving the last of the gypsy horses before them intent now not only on theft but on destruction.

Ezra, chest heaving more from anxiety than exertion, paused between two caravans in the circle and rapidly took stock of the situation. The gypsies invariably stood in various attitudes of stoic resignation, looking towards the eastern perimeter in silent expectation. Cursing under his breath, he broke once again into a run.

"Nathan? Nathan!"

One of the older children wordlessly pointed in the direction of the horse picket and Ezra's heart sank understanding that Jackson had already gone to face the mob. Men who had no particular compunction about shedding blood and who would be as willing to exact retribution on the mild-mannered healer as on anyone else. The fact that he was black would make it all that much easier to justify. As for himself, a "Rebel whoreson", he doubted that he would fare too much better.

"Ezra!"

He saw Mioaru break away from the small band of children gathered around one of the women and start to run towards him at the same time he saw the gut-wrenching sight of half a dozen horses breaching the circle and charging mindlessly onwards, a living, breathing juggernaut. The moment seemed to stretch endlessly as the little girl, hearing the woman scream her name hesitated, stopped and looked back. Uncertainty etched on her young face she then turned quickly back to Ezra, suddenly afraid, coal black eyes wide and tearful in an ashen face. She wailed, a cry of pure terror as -- too late-- she recognised the danger and reached out in supplication to the momentarily transfixed Southerner.

The gambler made no conscious decision to move, but he was bolting forward operating purely on reflex before the logical part of his mind began to tell him that his chosen course of action was going to fail. No power on earth was going to change that one, simple, irrefutable truth. He ran on, responding to the driving and desperate need to protect an innocent and helpless child from harm, his own safety paling into insignificance in the face of her fear and, more importantly, her absolute trust in him. *I promise on my honour that no harm will come to you.* He had promised and now his own words mocked him.

Ezra swept the girl into his arms, twisting to use his own body as a shield, as the first horse struck him in the back with its massive shoulder and he was slammed painfully to the ground, Mioaru's frightened sobs the last sound that registered in his brain as agony exploded in his chest and the last shred of his consciousness fled.

Chris jerked awake, his heart thudding in bounding leaps as a woman's piercing scream shattered his drugged sleep. As light assaulted his eyes, he squinted against the painful intensity of it, wishing it away and craving the darkness he had become used to. Something was different. He concentrated on breathing slowly and evenly, having learned -- frighteningly -- that to panic quickly took away that most essential of functions and left him gasping and fighting for air like a landed fish. Not just different, he decided, but wrong. Something was wrong.

First of all, he was alone. For the first time in recent memory there was no Nathan. No Mimi. No-one bathing him, no-one holding him and coaxing revolting mixtures down his throat, no-one just being there with him and seeing him through the agonising seizures. Seizures which had mercifully subsided for whatever reason to something less intense.

Outside someone screamed again and he could hear raised voices. Thinking back to when he had first wakened he was sure he remembered hearing gunshots but that may just have been his mind playing tricks on him. It did that from time to time. With a huge effort he tried to move, managing to overcome the stiffness in the muscles of his neck to raise his head a few inches. Unable to sustain the endeavour for long, he closed his eyes again and rested, acutely aware of his physical limitations yet with a clarity of mind he had not enjoyed since the illness had first struck. A mixed blessing.

Nathan's voice suddenly rang out, startling him and he tensed as a tremor rippled through him, his muscles involuntarily going into spasm and jerking his body in a parody of the earlier seizures that had gripped him so violently. After a few intense moments he drew a shaky breath as the twitching slowed and stopped, and tried to make sense of the sudden activity taking place outside the *vardo*. Ezra. Someone had mentioned Ezra and when he thought about it he seemed to recall the Southerner coming and going while he had been in the throes of fever but he distinctly remembered sending Ezra with Josiah and Buck. How many days ago was that? He chased the thought around in his head wondering exactly what had been happening during his illness. Had Vin come back yet? If he had then where was he? In fact, where was everyone?

Nathan's heart missed a beat as he leaned over the motionless form of the gambler, the familiar red-jacket a torn and dusty ruin trampled by a score of hooves, and searched for signs of life. Relieved to find a strong pulse beating in his neck, he carefully eased the Southerner onto his side, afraid that any movement may cause further injury. Supporting Ezra's head on his arm, he signalled one of the women to help free the child who was still lying within the protection of the injured man's embrace. Mioaru whimpered fretfully as the woman tenderly cradled her and from the unnatural angle of her arm he could tell it was broken. What other damage the girl may have sustained was not immediately evident although she had the shadow of a bruise on her forehead and a trickle of blood had leaked from the corner of her mouth, and Nathan hoped fervently that Ezra's sacrifice would not be in vain.

Gently lowering the gambler back to the ground, he chewed thoughtfully on his lip. For the moment he could do nothing for Ezra, although that he was hurt was not in doubt, but he knew the little girl needed attention, and soon. Given the circumstances he knew which choice Ezra would have him make, but that did not make the decision to abandon the injured Southerner, however temporary that desertion may be, any easier.

The whooping and shouting gang of men that now rode around the circle of wagons, firing their weapons in the air and striving to harass and intimidate the gypsies had become nothing more than a distant nuisance. The damage had already been done and for the moment they seemed disinclined to do anything more than make noise now that they had driven off the horses and finally brought fear to the

camp.

The metallic jingle of spurs finally filtered through to a distracted Nathan and he raised his head to see a tall man looking scornfully down at him, a face that he knew although he would have been hard pressed to attach a name to it. The man, a small-time rancher, Nathan guessed, stared thoughtfully at the unconscious Southerner then lazily spat into the dust inches from the gambler's head.

"Told him I hadn't finished with him," he announced flatly, "Goddamn fancy-dressin', fast talkin', whore-mongering bastard! Looks to me like he ain't doin' too well neither, boy."

The man chuckled unpleasantly, as if the thought pleased him greatly, and continued picking his teeth with a straw.

"Tell him, if'n he ever wakes up that is, that he shoulda put money on that wager. Weren't none of my horses there, just like he said."

The man abruptly turned and walked away and Nathan realised that for the time being it was over. They had won.

Ezra groaned aloud, unable to help himself, as awareness returned and the pain radiating through his chest manifested itself in a stabbing lance of white hot fire that took his breath away and momentarily drove all else from his still-groggy brain. As fragments of the immediate past came together in a rush and he remembered the reason for his current state of health he struggled to rise, ignoring his own injuries, his only concern for the child. Pushing away the hands that tried to assist, he staggered to his feet, ignoring the agony that tore across his back as he straightened. Every muscle in his back and shoulders protested and he guessed that if nothing else he would be bruised black and blue.

"Mioaru," he gasped, biting his lip as he started forward, "Where is she?"

Jackson closed a firm hand around the man's upper arm.

"Ezra, you need to..."

"Goddamn it, Nathan!" the gambler snapped impatiently, interrupting what he knew would be a litany of good advice, "It's a simple enough question. Where is she?"

Jackson's response was quiet, his tone managing to say what his words did not.

"She's hurt pretty bad. Got a busted arm and, Ezra," the healer paused significantly, "I think she's bleeding inside. I've done everything I can."

The Southerner momentarily closed his eyes, masking the pain in their green depths, before bracing himself and limping forwards, one arm carefully supporting his chest. He was not sure which part of him hurt the most but he was sure that given half the chance Nathan would have him laid up for a week. At any other time he might welcome it, right now he had things to do. Things more important than a few cuts and bruises.

"Show me. I have to see her."

"Ezra, you're busted up bad enough yourself," countered Jackson reasonably, "just let me take a look at you first."

"Forget it. I'm fine."

"Ezra, listen to me. Tell me you're not hurting every which way from Sunday and I'll do just that!"

The gambler stopped, sighed, and drew himself up in spite of his evident distress.

"Mr. Jackson, have I not made myself perfectly clear? I will say this once more, then let there be an end to it. I do not require your attentions, your sympathy or indeed your approval, all I require of you is that you direct me to Mioaru. Is that understood?"

Nathan nodded, tight lipped, his displeasure obvious.

"Understood."

Ezra moved forward again, wincing as his body protested the renewed motion.

“Good. Then we are finally in accord.”

Buck was as saddle sore as he had ever been in his life. They had ridden without pause, sparing the horses by long spells of walking between bursts of hard riding, but they had not stopped except to attend pressing calls of nature, and they had been few and far between. The two of them had even taken it in turns to doze in the saddle as the horses picked their way carefully in the dark, still following a trail as wide and clear as a highway. Now he eased his buttocks out of the saddle and decided that Ezra was one smart individual. While he wore his backside out chasing clear across the territory, the gambler was no doubt suitably engaged in other, less strenuous, activity which in all probability included the rapid accrual of money and an ongoing indulgence in whiskey.

JD reined his horse in and turned to look at the older man.

“Just how far are we plannin’ to go, Buck?” he asked wearily, “We don’t have much water left and I’m about ready to start chewing on my boots.”

Wilmington pulled up beside the younger man, and stared hard at the unchanging terrain before them.

“Reckon we’re still maybe an hour from Indian Springs. We can get provisions there and, if we’re lucky, maybe someone will be able to tell us somethin’ about Vin.”

JD snorted, no longer so enthusiastic about the thankless, and seemingly endless, task of trailing what seemed to be ghosts with no guarantee of even finding Vin in this wild goose chase.

“If we’re lucky.”

Buck grinned.

“You wanted to come along, kid. Don’t go bitchin’ now because you got blisters on your ass and your stomach thinks your throat’s been cut!”

“Hell, Buck, we don’t even know for sure if Vin is with this gang. What if we chase clear into Texas and he’s lying out there somewhere?”

Wilmington shook his head, his voice matter-of-fact as he started his mount moving again.

“Would’ve seen the buzzards by now. Believe me, he ain’t out there.”

Dunne looked quickly into the brightening sky as he urged his own horse forwards, as if afraid that the carrion birds would suddenly appear overhead. Satisfied that Buck was right in his assumption, he shifted uncomfortably in the saddle.

“And another thing, what if he’s already back in town?”

Buck sighed heavily.

“Then we’re going to feel mighty foolish when we get back aren’t we? But I reckon I’ll take that chance.”

JD unhappily looked down at the ground again.

“What if...”

“JD! No more what ifs! We’re going to Indian Springs. We’ll telegraph from there and check on things back in town. If Vin’s already back, then fine and dandy, we’ll go home. If he’s not we’ll ask around, if we’re in luck maybe someone will know something.”

“If we’re in luck.”

The two men rode silently for another fifty yards before JD abruptly pulled off to one side of the trail and hastily dismounted, to inspect the scattered remains of a campfire. Straightening he started to walk in increasing circles away from the still warm ashes, finally dropping to a crouch and sifting through the loose, sandy earth as a spot of colour caught his eye. Buck leaned forward his curiosity piqued.

“What is it?”

Dunne carefully turned the strip of fabric over in his hand before holding it up, unable to keep a smile off his face. The ill used and stained square of material, very much the worse for wear, was without doubt one of the Texan's bandanas.

"You know what? I think we are in luck."

The Texan woke at first light having slept uninterrupted through the night, with barely enough energy to open his eyes. Between exhaustion and fever he was totally drained and the prospect of another day on the trail, still bound and still hurting filled him with dread. He stirred, coaxing stiff muscles into life and became aware of the unexpected but not entirely unwelcome warmth of someone lying close up against him. Allowing himself a slight smile, the tracker glanced over his shoulder to find Danny, looking far younger than his fifteen years, stretched out alongside him having sought either warmth or company -- or maybe both -- during the night. He shifted to one side putting a little distance between himself and the youthful outlaw. *No point in embarrassing the kid.*

Vin worked the ropes at his wrists, biting his lip as the rough fibres dug painfully into the already raw channels cut deep into the flesh, his fingers tingling as blood began to circulate once again. He twisted determinedly at the ropes before realising with a sickening lurch of his stomach that the white shiny node visible through the bloodied flesh was the bone of his wrist. *Goddamn it.* He sucked in a deep breath and lay back, for the first time feeling the fingers of despair creeping over him, settling around his neck just as surely as the noose that awaited him if he failed to free himself and make an escape before too much longer. Closing his eyes he contemplated, not for the first time, that he may be finally riding towards his destiny and that destiny was to die at the end of a rope for a murder he did not commit.

A boot toe prodded his injured thigh, just hard enough to force a reactionary grunt from him and he shot an icy glare at the figure of Cochinay looming over him, biting back the curse that sprang readily to his lips for fear of antagonising the man. Conscious of the fact that he could ill afford any more abuses to his already battered body, Vin chose instead to remain silent. With surprising speed the Apache crouched, his hand snaking out to capture the Texan's forearm just above the wrist, his face an expressionless mask as he inspected the ropes and the bloody stripes in the flesh.

"Like the wolf who will chew through his own leg to escape the teeth of the trap."

Vin kept his own expression neutral, neither showing the fear that was crawling through his gut or the anger he felt at the hopelessness of his situation. Any hint of fear would be seen as a sign of weakness, any sign of aggression as a challenge, so he maintained a poker face even Ezra would have had cause to admire. After a moment, Cochinay nodded and in a blur of movement wordlessly sliced through the bonds with his knife before rising again and roughly kicking Danny awake. The youth scrambled hastily to his feet rubbing sleep from eyes which darted nervously between Cochinay and Vin. The copper-skinned man weighed the knife in his hands and looked pointedly at the freckle-faced boy.

"If he runs, you die."

Without waiting for any reply, indeed not expecting any, the Apache turned abruptly away. The young outlaw's already pale features drained of all colour as he switched his gaze to focus on the now unrestrained tracker.

"I'll kill you soon as look at you, mister so don't think you can make a break for it. I like you well enough, but I ain't willing to die for you."

Vin tentatively rubbed at his abraded and mangled wrists, ignoring the pain as he revelled in the freedom of movement.

"I ain't going nowhere, kid." He squinted up at the still shaken youngster. *Not yet.*

“Chris.”

A mere whisper. A hand supporting his head. The touch of a spoon to his lips.

Damn! He had been asleep again. The warm liquid flowed in a slow trickle down his throat and he swallowed convulsively trying his best not to gag, knowing that it would keep him drowsy but appreciating that whatever it was helped keep the fits at bay and eased the painful rigors that contracted his muscles into rigid slabs. What he could feel of his body ached and he was beginning to doubt that it would ever be any different. In contrast, his senses seemed to be acutely tuned to the world around him and those senses were telling him that something was terribly wrong. More than anything he wanted to ask what was happening. Not to him this time, but what was happening outside the confines of the caravan and his mind was already racing with the possibilities, trying to piece together the puzzle that had started with the screams and the gunfire. Mustering every ounce of determination and strength he possessed, he tried to speak. He had never realised before just how hard it was to form individual words but without the full co-operation of his vocal cords, tongue and lips he only succeeded in making an inarticulate sound in the back of his throat and the words, unable to be translated from thought, remained unspoken.

Damn! Damn! DAMN! Nathan, tell me what's happening. I need to know about what's going on here. I'm supposed to protect this town for God's sake, how can I do that if you won't talk to me? Where's Vin and the others? What about Ezra, I saw him here, now there's only you? Nathan? Is there only you? Is that why you look so goddamn tired? Tell me!

The gunfighter concentrated, holding his breath for a moment and forcing his mouth to shape the words.

“Tell...me.”

A sigh. No more than that, but enough.

Nathan leaned closer, frowning and Chris saw that he was holding onto his hand. Taking another deep breath, he focused his energy into his fingers; imagining them folding around the grip of his Colt and knew that he had succeeded in applying pressure when the healer quickly looked down in surprise.

“Tell you what, Chris?”

So he had heard. Larabee allowed himself to relax again before making another attempt. Sweat was standing out in beads on his face from the magnitude of the effort he was having to expend but he was determined not to fail, although he could feel a faint tremor starting in his upper arms and a lethargy seeping through his muscles that threatened to rob him once again of all strength.

“Guh..”

Jesus, Larabee! It's one word. Spit out out, man!

“Gu...ns.”

As he forced the word out through a tightening jaw, the spasm gripped him, shaking him like a wolf tearing the meat from a kill. Through it he could feel Nathan's arms around him, not restraining, just holding onto him, and he wanted to shout aloud his rage and frustration at his helplessness but he could manage no more than a whimper, forced from his throat without either his consent or even his co-operation.

Gradually the seizure subsided and he was again able to take a breath but he could not fight the soporific lassitude that was leeching away his meagre reserves of energy and instead gave in to the demands of his body to surrender and once again sleep.

Nathan felt Chris slowly give in and relax as he held him, cradling the once lean and now painfully thin body in his arms. The dark blond hair, lank and greasy after many days of neglect, fell across the

pale, smooth forehead and the healer, looking at the sharp and angular features, realised just how much weight the gunfighter had lost. In truth he could ill-afford to lose any more condition but Nathan had been hard-pressed to coax even the barest amount of sustenance into him. It had been enough to keep him alive -- just. That the illness was loosening its powerful hold on the man was obvious. The very fact that he had been trying to speak showed that, although the effort had cost him dearly and he had managed no more than a few barely coherent sounds. Nathan glanced at Chris' strong fingers still entwined in his own and smiled as he remembered his surprise at the amount of pressure Larabee had been able to bring to bear as he had struggled to speak. Promising signs but no guarantee that the gunslinger was out of the woods yet.

Tell me. Tell you what, Chris? That Vin has been gone for days, that Buck, JD and Josiah are still away at Beggar's Canyon and that Ezra was almost killed trying to save a gypsy child? And those guns you heard, Chris? That was the gypsies' horses stampeded by a bunch of damned vigilantes. Do you really want to know that the child Ezra risked his life for now lies close to death and that he's busted up bad enough himself but won't give in and admit to being hurt. Will it help to know that right now Ezra's tearing himself apart because he couldn't work a damned miracle or that the town has risen against the gypsies -- just as you feared it would? No, Chris you don't want me to tell you anything about that.

He carefully repositioned Chris' thin frame on the mattress, glancing up as Mimi returned. The woman wordlessly took over, her small, capable hands displacing Nathan's larger, darker ones as she moved gentle fingers over the pronounced ridges of the blond man's spine, massaging the reddened skin over the bony prominences of his shoulder blades.

"You are needed elsewhere," she spoke softly.

"Mioaru?"

She shook her head slowly.

"I believe Ezra needs you."

Nathan sighed heavily.

"Mimi, I know he's hurt but he won't let me near him, what can I do?"

The woman raised her head and studied the healer for a moment.

"The wound that causes the most pain is not always one that you see with the eye." She pressed a hand to her own breast. "Ezra is wounded also in the soul. You are his friend and I think that to mend his body you need to first mend his spirit."

Nathan looked evenly at her as she continued to rub the sleeping gunfighter's back.

"Ezra and me..." He began, not sure himself what he wanted to say but doubting that he was in any position to do anything physical for the gambler let alone anything spiritual.

"Trust me, Nathan," she interrupted, "Go now. Talk to him. Help him and if you can, heal him."

The healer rose slowly, reluctantly almost, and tipped his hat.

"I'll see what I can do, ma'am." His tone suggested that he did not think it would be much.

Jackson blinked as he stepped out into the sunlight and cast a hasty glance around the camp. Spiro and his father had succeeded in rounding up several of the horses and had picketed them within the circle of wagons. Now the older man, already sporting a bruised face from the previous attempt to defend the beasts that were, in part, their only wealth, sat with a shotgun across his knees and a pipe in his mouth -- waiting.

Nathan slowed his walk as he crossed the dusty ground still churned by the passage of a score of hooves, and considered the change in mood that had settled over the camp. No one laughed; children were silent and moved about the camp listlessly while the adults went about their tasks with a quiet diligence that was almost chilling in its intensity. Spiro moved like a wraith among the wagons, his rifle resting on his shoulder, patrolling and Nathan finally recognised that the whole camp was primed. They

were a peace-loving people but would not be caught unawares again. They were ready and they were waiting. He increased his pace and reached the wagon that housed the injured girl and her family, knocking gently as he tugged open the door to the brightly coloured vardo, its garish livery somehow mocking the tragedy being played out within its wooden walls.

Ezra, eyes closed and looking pale and drawn, sat in the only chair -- a simply constructed rocker -- with Mioaru cradled against his chest, his right arm supporting her as she nestled into the crook of his arm. The Southerner, he noticed, had shed his coat and his shirt had been unbuttoned just enough for Nathan to be able to see the dark shadow of bruising across his ribcage and he wondered how long the gambler would be able to go on before needing to seek attention for his own injuries. The girl's mother gestured to him to enter, signalling with a finger to her lips that he should beware of disturbing the sleeping pair.

"They comfort each other," she said quietly, "See. She no longer cries."

Nathan sat down on the edge of the bunk, carefully avoiding the Southerner's outstretched legs, and spent a moment looking at the gambler before impulsively reaching out and undoing the rest of the pearl buttons that fastened Ezra's shirt, pulling the fine fabric aside to expose the bruised and abraded flesh of his chest.

"Mr. Jackson, you are indeed relentless." Standish did not open his eyes. "However, you have me at a disadvantage and as you can see, I am not in any real position to make any objection."

Taking the typically off-handed comment as tacit consent Nathan ran sure fingers over the left side of the Southerner's torso checking the integrity of his ribcage. A soft grunt as he slid his hand around to the gambler's back was the only indication that he was in any pain, and once his probing fingers encountered the distinctive feel of displaced bone ends roughly grating on one another, he understood why.

"Ezra," he began impatiently, "You shouldn't be..."

The Southerner aimed a penetrating stare at the healer and raised his free hand, not without some obvious discomfort.

"No sermons, please. I'm all right. Really." He gave a short laugh and immediately grimaced. "As long as I don't move. And as I have no immediate plans in that particular direction, I should be perfectly fine."

Jackson expelled a long sigh of weary resignation. He would wait. Stubborn as he was Ezra would eventually yield -- he had to. "Where else does it hurt?"

The gambler smiled sardonically, his tongue wetting his lower lip for a brief moment as he considered his response.

"In the interests of brevity it would be far better for me to say where it doesn't hurt, Mr. Jackson."

"Fine," conceded an increasingly exasperated Nathan, "Where doesn't it hurt?"

"Nowhere."

The healer was forced to smile but he knew that Standish was for once probably telling the absolute truth.

"You know," he said softly, "you don't have to be here all the time."

Ezra lowered his eyes for a moment to watch the little gypsy girl resting comfortably against him, her thick dark hair cascading over his arm as she slept and her small fingers gently but firmly gripping the front of his shirt before again looking up at the healer.

"Yes I do."

Sanchez was looking forward to a hot bath. The return trip, without the easy companionship of Buck

and JD, had seemed to drag interminably and he had pushed his horse as hard as he dared, determined not to prolong his time out on the open trail. Now it was nearing daylight and he was almost within shouting distance of what had become home. Another hour at most and he could trade the discomfort of the saddle for a long, relaxing soak and a decent meal. A whiskey would not go amiss either.

It had been a fraught couple of days and he wondered how Chris and the others were faring, knowing that when they had left the town, tempers had still been running high. Larabee was certainly going to have his hands full and that was no mistake. Not the best time, he mused, to have the three of them leave town. Ezra, as sharply devious as the Southerner could be, was a good man in a fight and Nathan, when pressed, was no slouch with a knife or a gun but that was still only three men -- and Chris was carrying a bad wound however much he tried to play the stoic and pretend it was of no consequence.

That the appearance of the gypsies could engender such immediate and vigorous prejudice had hardly surprised him. He had seen it time and time again in his years of travelling, and not only against foreigners either. Religious and political intolerance, he decided, held as much sway as racial bigotry in this big country of which the Territory was just a small part. Hell, not too long ago brother had taken up arms against brother in the War of Secession, what hope did a lowly immigrant have? Josiah shook his head even as he rode wondering what possessed men to seek trouble even where there should be none. No, whichever way he looked at it, the sooner he got back to town, the better.

The sun glowed on the horizon, not yet risen but still holding the promise of another hot day and Josiah paused to drink from his canteen, grimacing at the hot, metallic taste of the water but glad of it nonetheless. The prospect of even a cup of coffee let alone a couple of shots of red-eye was becoming more inviting by the minute and with a sigh he stoppered the water bottle and urged the horse forwards again.

A bell. The sound drifted towards him on the early morning breeze and he frowned as he wondered at its incongruity. That it was the church bell he had no doubt -- the bell he had hung in the tower with his own hands -- but for what purpose? The urgent tolling continued for several minutes and Josiah kicked his horse into a canter in response. Whoever was ringing the bell intended it as an alarm, this was no summons to worship but rather a summons to battle -- and he would answer the call.

Tanner painfully worked his foot into the stirrup, uncertain that his injured leg would support his weight but gathering the reins in one hand, he clutched the saddle horn, preparing to at least make the attempt to mount unaided. In truth he dragged himself into position more by the strength of his arms than the thrust of his leg but he managed to swing his good leg over the animal's back and sink gratefully into the smooth leather without making too big a fool of himself.

Just to have his hands free, in spite of the pain of his deeply abraded wrists, was a luxury he did not intend to surrender. The time may not be right as yet but he knew that before they reached Texas he would either make his escape or die trying; for now he would be compliant, seeing no benefit in bringing down the wrath of Cochiny. He already bore the knife wound as proof of the Apache's willingness to inflict punishment, he had no intention of testing just how far the man was prepared to go. Vin hardly thought he would balk at killing but he had no intention of testing Cochiny's limits until he had at least some chance of defending himself.

Danny had been like his shadow. Cochiny's threat of killing the youth should Vin escape had been more effective than he could have possibly imagined. He had not been able to even take a piss without Danny standing right beside him. He had tried to make a joke of it but his young guard had reverted to the sullen, almost haunted boy that had first held a gun on him. *I like you well enough but I ain't willing to die for you.* Now they rode in silence, Danny's knee touching his own so close did the boy ride but this

time not out of any sense of friendship or closeness but out of fear.

The Texan turned to look at the red-haired boy.

"Danny, I'm not going to run."

The young outlaw shrugged, feigning indifference.

"Don't bother me none if you do. You'll just get my bullet in your back."

Vin shifted in the saddle, easing the tension in his thigh.

"Listen, kid. I won't let Cochinchay do anything to you."

"You just do as you're told and I'll be fine," answered Danny quickly, "Don't need you to look out for me."

Tanner gave a thin smile. "I know you don't, kid, but it don't hurt to know you've got someone you can trust neither."

The youth snorted derisively.

"Shoot, Vin, ain't you figured out yet that you and me are on opposite sides of the fence? I don't trust no-one and most of all I don't trust you, 'cos I know given half a chance you'll take off like a startled jack rabbit and I'll be crow bait!"

Tanner hesitated before continuing.

"You could always come with me."

It was said and there was no taking it back. The kid might kill him for it, or maybe he would just turn him straight over to Cochinchay which might be worse but on the other hand he just might think on it.

The boy's eyes widened perceptibly and a look of horror passed over his freckled face, then he shook his head fiercely.

"I'm gonna forget I ever heard you say that, mister." He looked quickly to the head of the train of riders as if they may have been overheard then back at Vin. "You got a death wish or somethin'?"

"No, kid. I'm just someone who's got nothing to lose." He pinned the youngster with an even stare. "And neither have you."

Danny shook his head slowly and the briefest of smiles crossed his face.

"You know something, Vin? You're fucking mad."

The Texan turned his head aside to hide his own smile. At least the kid had not drawn his gun and shot him out of hand -- and the seed was planted.

Buck wriggled forward using elbows and knees, keeping a low profile as he raised Vin's spyglass to his eye. He marvelled again as he always did looking through the instrument at the sudden shrinking of distance, as if he was looking at something within arms' reach instead of something almost out of sight. He scanned the desert in a sweeping arc searching for any movement, indeed any sign of life. They had to be close now and somewhere, out there, was Vin. A impatient nudge at his elbow heralded the arrival of JD who had quickly ground-tied the horses, afraid he would miss something in the few minutes it took him to perform the simple task.

"See anything?"

"Hell, kid, do you think I'd be lying here still looking through this contraption if I had?"

"Gimme, a look. You're probably looking down the wrong end anyway."

Buck surrendered the spyglass to Dunne, cuffing him round the ear as he did so.

"Right, Hawkeye! You do better."

JD laughed and fended off the older man with an elbow, before carefully surveying the huge expanse of desert before them.

"Shoot," he muttered, "Like trying to find a raindrop in a water barrel."

He swept the horizon left to right, then reversed the motion, gradually bringing his focus back until he stopped suddenly and trained the spyglass on a puff of dust. Carefully adjusting the lens he peered intently down the tube and gave a satisfied smile.

"There. Right there. Gotta be them."

Buck snatched the brass instrument back and pointed it in the direction JD had indicated, gradually drawing a bead on the movement that had excited his young companion. There were certainly horses bunched together but whether a bunch of wild mustangs or the men they were looking for was impossible to say.

"Guess so," conceded Wilmington, but the doubt was evident in his voice.

"Aw, come on, Buck. Ain't hardly likely to be anything else!"

Buck scrambled back down the incline swept up his horse's reins, tucking the spyglass into his pocket.

"Come on then, JD. Get your ass in the saddle and let's take a look-see. I'd sure like to get back to town this side of Christmas."

Dunne frowned.

"Hell, Buck, it's only July."

Wilmington turned his horse and grinned.

"That's what I mean, kid." He spurred his horse into action. "Race you to Indian Springs!"

JD rose immediately to the challenge and urged his mount into a gallop, quickly overtaking the older man and setting a ground-eating pace that Wilmington was hard-pressed to match.

Indian Springs.

Hot, dry and dusty. Like any other frontier town in the Territory it had few pretensions and a lot of attitude. Built up around a trading post it boasted several saloons, two hotels, a bordello, a telegraph office and a number of stock yards but no bank, no school and more importantly, no law: a haven for outlaws and the illegitimate trading of stolen goods.

Vin looked surreptitiously around as they rode along the main street, drawing scant attention from the mostly drunken cowboys lining the boardwalks. He'd seen worse pest-holes in his time, but not many; even Purgatorio had more class than this place. The Texan's biggest danger as always lay in being recognised by someone who had a score to settle or worse, another bounty hunter who had his likeness. With no allies he was an easy target and Cochinay did not much care one way or the other if he lived or died.

The Apache had corralled the horses, and split the band keeping Danny and Vin under his watchful eye, while the remaining three outlaws were sent on some errand of his making. Cochinay silently gestured to the nearest saloon, indicating that they should dismount and waited, his face an expressionless mask, as Vin clumsily slid from his horse, wondering how he was going to walk when he could barely stand. Limping heavily, he moved awkwardly up the steps to the saloon and, at the prospect of a drink, licked dry lips realising the extent of his thirst.

The whiskey was welcome although it burned a fiery trail all the way down his gullet and into his stomach, and the raw spirit stung the open sores on his lips. In spite of the discomfort he quickly downed a second glass and a third, before pausing to glance around the crowded room. Danny watched him keenly.

"Ain't nobody you know?"

Vin shook his head.

"Nope, and it ain't likely that anyone I knew round these parts would be any kinda friend."

Cochinay leaned forward.

"It seems you have no friends." He looked around guardedly. "You say once before that your friends would come to find you. Where are they?"

Tanner finished his drink, the dregs bitter on his tongue, not wanting to admit that he had been wondering the same thing. He set his glass on the table with a thud.

"I lied. I have no friends."

The Apache laughed, his dark eyes glittering dangerously.

"A man without friends is a soul wandering in the darkness. Are you such a man?"

"Cochinay, I'm a dead man who doesn't know when to lie down."

"This I have seen with my own eyes," conceded the mixed-blood, "You are a man who either has much to lose, or nothing. Either way this makes you dangerous."

He stood up quickly and finished his own glass before aiming a withering glance in Danny's direction.

"I have business. Watch him. If he moves -- kill him."

The boy grinned.

"My pleasure."

Vin turned his glass idly in his fingers, a chill creeping down his spine as he realised that Danny was, in all probability, speaking the truth.

JD found it hard not to stare at the half-naked women displaying their wares from the top balcony of the bordello, exposing full breasts with rouged nipples pushed upwards by tightly laced stays, beckoning any takers with money to spend. Blushing furiously, he turned away only to be greeted by the sight of a street whore flipping up her skirts as she bent over a barrel in a side alley to accommodate a leering cowboy.

"B...Buck..." he stuttered, temporarily lost for words, unused to such openly wanton behaviour, "Goddamn it, what is this place?"

Wilmington, his face unusually sombre, took in the same scenes as the younger man but rather than shocking, found them indescribably sad.

"It's a hell hole, kid," he said, quietly, "Now if you can put your eyes back in your head for two minutes maybe we can find what we came looking for."

The two men saw the black with its distinctive white blaze at the same time, exchanged a brief glance and wordlessly rode on past the busy saloon, finally reining in outside the telegraph office and dismounting.

"Vin's here!" whispered JD fiercely, as Buck moved into the shelter of the verandah.

"No, Vin's horse is here," corrected the older man, "Ain't quite the same thing. JD."

"Well, we gonna take a look or what?"

"Goddamn right we are, but just take it nice and easy. Don't know rightly what we might be steppin' into yet. So just follow my lead and keep your mouth shut."

Dunne nodded, this time only too glad to let Wilmington call the shots.

Chris wanted to shout, instead he could barely whisper, his unresponsive body a traitor to his hyperactive mind. Knowing what he wanted to say but being unable to articulate even the simplest sentence, to formulate into words the most basic concepts was a hurdle that he had no chance of clearing and the certainty that any attempt would result in failure was driving him to the point of madness.

He had no control over his own body and although he had tried to command his limbs to respond, the gargantuan effort had met with only limited success. His body remained nothing more than a vessel, a

container which housed the very heart and soul of his being, while trapped inside, he fretted and mourned the loss of the man who had been Chris Larabee.

Time had ceased to have any meaning for him, and the long hours stretched interminably before and behind him, each minute blending into the next in a ceaseless and unstoppable unwinding of the clock. Sleeping or waking he could barely determine if it was day or night, existing as he did in an apparently endless twilight of filtered grey, illuminated by a single lamp that burned ceaselessly.

In the days past he had felt pain, shed tears and known fear beyond any fear he had ever known; he had also felt love and surrendered to it more completely than at any time in his life before. Between the extremes of his emotions he had also found a middle-path, one that not only kept him alive, but kept him sane. He could put no name to it other than the will to live, the determination to fight and the absolute refusal to give in before he was ready. Above all else, and even through the worst of his agony, he knew it was not his time. There was too much left undone, too much left unsaid, to leave before righting wrongs and setting accounts straight.

A hand, soft yet bearing the calluses of hard work, stroked his face and once again he was reminded of Sarah, and reminded of how much he missed her. Sarah. Adam? Damn! He had tried to be strong but God, how he missed his family! Now, they were gone. His wife, his son, and with them his life. Did anyone know that all that was left was an empty shell? A dead man walking, going through the motions of life until one day he too would find the way out. It would have been easy to die this time. He had felt the touch of death, its breath on his skin, but something had kept him tethered to life -- would not let him go -- and now he knew that the moment was passed.

"Water."

He had not thought to speak, but the cup was pressed to his lips and he drank eagerly, still choking as his throat struggled to accept the liquid, but mercifully keeping more down than he coughed up. He tried again.

"More."

Again he was heard, and the cup once again touched his lips. This time it was easier, his swallowing more controlled but more urgent as he sought to slake his thirst, and he was disappointed when, too soon, the cup was taken away. Closing his eyes, he tensed his fingers, gripping the blanket in clenched fists. God, how much longer did he have to endure the torment? He wanted to live. A single tear leaked out from under his tightly closed eyelid. *I want to live!*

Ezra stirred, feeling again the biting pain in his back as he breathed, knowing that the worst was yet to come when he dared to move. In his arms, the child whimpered fretfully but he knew that was not what had disturbed him. He had not intended to sleep but once Mioaru had settled, it had not been hard to succumb to the demands of his body. Wincing he eased himself upright, and barely suppressed the cry that rose to his lips as his abused body objected strenuously to even the most subtle movement. Sweat beading his brow, the Southerner braced himself and on the third attempt shifted his weight to accommodate the little girl's change in position. He ignored the protest from his shoulder, accepted the stabbing pain in his back but the tenderness across the muscles of his belly left him gasping for breath and wondering if he had been wise in so readily rejecting Nathan's offers of aid.

A bell. He shook his head and listened again, the last remains of sleep driven from his over-tired brain by the repetitive tolling. He automatically tried to stand. *Jesus, Mary and All the Saints!* Forcing down a rising tide of nausea, the gambler got unsteadily to his feet and with infinite tenderness brushed his lips across the gypsy child's pale forehead before rousing her mother and gently settling her on the bunk. The woman lifted her head and drew Mioaru against her with an understanding nod. The child

slept on.

"Go with God, *gadje*," she whispered.

The Southerner did not turn to acknowledge her blessing, not because he did not want to but simply because the pain was too great. It was too difficult to contemplate dressing, so with his shirt still unbuttoned and without hat or jacket, he slowly and deliberately picked up his rifle and left the vardo. Walking, he discovered, was not impossible although every muscle in his body protested; breathing, on the other hand was proving to be a real challenge and it was a long quarter mile to the church. The weight of his Remington dragged at his sore shoulder so he switched hands, alleviating some of the pain, and focused on just moving one foot in front of the other.

"Where the hell d'you think you're going?"

Nathan's voice cracked like a whip, as he hastened from where he had been standing with Spiro, to block the gambler's forward progress. Ezra would have sighed if he could have managed to expel that amount of air without causing himself further discomfort.

"Mr. Jackson, ...are you going to insist...on making this difficult?"

"Damn right I am! You're in no fit state to be going anywhere."

Ezra cradled his ribs with his free hand and risked a deeper breath.

"You, sir, will have to physically restrain me to prevent me leaving this camp." He paused to shake his head wearily. "This all has to stop! Right here and right now! It is my intention to make those bastards pay for every ill they have afforded these people."

The brief but impassioned speech obviously cost the gambler dearly and a fine sheen of sweat broke out on his brow as he continued to stand his ground against the taller man. Jackson frowned and looked quickly at the faces, adults and children, watching the interplay between the two men, realising it would be a mistake to try and stop the Southerner. The healer gave a sigh of exasperation and stood aside.

"Hell, Ezra, if you're so all-fired keen on doing this, then at least let's do this together!"

Standish gave a crooked smile, momentarily revealing a flash of gold.

"I was hoping you'd say that Mr. Jackson. Shall we?"

Nathan hesitated only briefly, then with a quick nod of acquiescence fell in beside the Southerner, conceding that even if Ezra's sanity was in doubt, his courage and determination certainly were not.

"Maybe when this is over, you'll let me take a look at those ribs," grumbled Jackson, hefting his own rifle in hands that were better suited to healing. "Before you go ahead and bust somethin' I can't mend."

The gambler tilted his head and looked sideways at the stern-faced former slave, as if considering a proposition that had not previously crossed his mind.

"Maybe I will at that."

Josiah reined his horse in from a gallop to a more sedate trot as he approached the town, suddenly doubtful that a headlong dash into the midst of whatever had caused the alarm to be raised in such a fashion, was an approach that would be appreciated by any of the three remaining lawmen. His unwillingness to show any lack of confidence in the ability of his fellow regulators to deal with whatever had arisen in the others' absence, was tempered in equal measure by the uneasy feeling that the ringing of the church bell signalled that not all was as it should be. The tolling had stopped but he attached no great meaning to its silence, in fact the sudden stillness was unnerving and as he allowed his mount to drop back to a walk he slowly drew his gun.

There were already people gathering in the street, some with the bewildered appearance of those newly aroused from sleep, others with an air of determination that struck a chord in the preacher's heart. Too many guns on display, and what was worse, too many men prepared to use them. A quick

movement by the church caught his eye.

"Inez!"

The Mexican woman turned sharply, almost guiltily, her own hand he noticed firmly clutched around the shotgun she carried.

"Josiah!" Her relief evident, she quickly changed direction and ran to stand at his stirrup, one hand on his knee. "Where are the others? You must come quickly!"

"There's just me, Inez. What's going on? Did you ring the bell?"

"Si. Nathan and Ezra are with the gypsies. Senor Chris is very sick. Now there is big trouble but I knew if I rang the bell Ezra and Nathan would hear..."

"Trouble? Chris sick?" He holstered his gun and swung down off the horse, putting an arm around the woman's shoulders. "What in the Lord's name is going on here?"

"Vigilantes, Senor. They want the gypsies to leave and were going to force them out of town but Senor Ezra, he put the leader in jail."

"And Chris?"

Inez shook her head.

"I do not know anything, except that Ezra was afraid Senor Chris would die and that he was very, very angry with these men."

Josiah tried to take in all the details and felt that he was failing miserably.

"Where's Chris now?"

"The gypsies have him. Senor Standish was here early yesterday, he told me to lock up the saloon and stay inside, that there was going to be trouble. Then some men drove away the gypsy horses and I have not seen Nathan or Ezra since but now the men are threatening to burn the gypsies out."

Josiah shook his head but his eyes took on a hardness that Inez had not seen in the preacher's expression before. He gave her a gentle push.

"Do as Ezra told you. Get inside and lock up after you. Looks like it's time for these townsfolk to get a bit of sense knocked into them.

"Senor...?"

"Mind you lock up now." He touched the brim of his hat and swung his big frame back into the saddle. "And whatever happens, stay inside."

It looked like his return had been none too soon. He nudged the horse with his heels and set a path down the centre of the street, not quite sure of what he was riding into but knowing that whichever way he looked at it, he was riding straight into one hell of a fight.

He had seen mobs in action before, and this scene was no less ugly than any other he had been unfortunate enough to witness over the years. He recognised the same self-righteous fervour in this gathering that fuelled the lynch mob, or set immigrant workers' cottages alight or terrorised freed slaves after the war... ignorance and intolerance raised to an art form. He sighed and raising his gun above his head fired a single shot, then patiently leaned both forearms across his saddle horn and waited for the response.

"This ain't your business, Sanchez," called out someone from the crowd, "Just stay outta this."

"Ain't got no one to back you up anyhow, lawman," yelled a second voice, "Larabee's took sick, caught something from them tinkers. Hell, man's prob'ly dead by now! That darkie and the fancy dude ain't been 'round since yesterday neither; figure they've decided which side they's on alright."

Josiah moved his horse forward and looked at the crowd, recognising most of the faces and focusing on some of those that he knew well.

"Jeb. Tom. You don't want to be part of this. Go home to your families." He turned again to look at some of the others. "All of you. Go home. This can only end in the spilling of innocent blood. You don't

want that -- any of you."

"You don't know what we want!"

Josiah wheeled his horse, deliberately using the size of the beast to break up the crowd as they instinctively backed away from the animal.

"What have these people ever done to you? Mick? What about you Harry?"

The two men looked away muttering and casting nervous glances at Josiah and the rest of the crowd before beginning to drift towards the periphery of the crowd.

"I'm asking you all to put your guns down and go home, peaceable like. There's no need for any trouble."

The mob suddenly surged forward toward the preacher, unsettling his horse and forcing Josiah to fight to maintain his seat.

"Don't listen to him! Let's go get rid of those cursed tinkers and send 'em on their way. There's been nothin' but trouble in town since they arrived."

Josiah had no time to point out that the trouble had been none of the gypsy's making before two shots, so close together to sound almost as one, reverberated from building to building and the crowd's attention swung immediately to the source of the gunfire and a new threat.

"You heard the man! He asked you to put your guns down and go home."

The Georgia drawl carried clearly across the suddenly hushed mob and numerous feet shifted restlessly as the man who had already braved the mob once, did so again.

Josiah had never seen Ezra look anything but impeccable, yet even now hatless, without jacket or waistcoat, and with chest partially bared, he still managed to achieve a degree of savoir-faire that most men could never hope to emulate. That he was injured was obvious and Sanchez wondered briefly, as he steadied his horse again, at the cost of the Southerner's defiant gesture.

The two men separated, as if by an unspoken agreement, each covering a section of the crowd as Josiah in turn, responding to their lead, levelled his own piece at the remaining third.

"Now gentlemen, the jail is not big enough for all of you," Ezra paused to take a painfully hesitant breath, "So might I suggest that you elect among yourselves...exactly who should take responsibility for this..." He looked with measured distaste at the group of citizens. "...this gathering."

The gambler smiled as there was a sudden hasty reorganisation of the crowd, as men jostled and pushed to distance themselves from the ringleaders.

"Why, Mr. Shaw," he stopped abruptly with a soft gasp, suddenly closing his eyes and holding his breath, then as if nothing had happened, gently exhaled and cast hard green eyes at the man in question. "I believe you have escaped lawful custody."

With a feral grin he raised his Colt, the effort obviously costing him dearly, and sighted down the barrel at the merchant.

"No!"

One of Shaw's followers leapt forward and tackled the Southerner to the ground, the gambler's weapon as it discharged harmlessly into the air providing the signal for an eruption of violence as several of the mob surged into action, breaking away, guns ablaze in a last desperate attempt to press their cause. Josiah directed a hurried glance and a quick prayer towards the fallen gambler but was immediately drawn into the fray and his sole preoccupation became his own survival.

Vin closed his eyes and rubbed at his eyelids. Damn, but he was tired! Too many days of too little sleep, lying on cold, hard ground under the stars. Shoot, he was getting too used to the comforts of home and hearth since he'd taken up with Chris and the others! Had even taken to sleeping in a bed

some nights. A man could get used to being under a roof. Time was when he had no other bed but a blanket under the stars and it never bothered him none back then. Difference was, he argued with himself, that you did it because you wanted to and there was no one watching over you with a gun ready to scatter your guts as soon as say good-day. No, sir. And you didn't have a busted hand or had your leg skewered with a knife. *Aw, hell, Tanner, you're just gettin' soft is all.*

With a sigh he lifted his head, looking beyond Danny as he shifted his gaze to take in the other patrons, such as they were, blue eyes ranging along the crowded bar with the indifference of a man who doesn't give a damn. A pause -- no more than a heart-beat -- a flicker of recognition, and he moved on, his almost bored expression showing no interest in anything that he was seeing. He deliberately turned to Danny and reached for the whiskey, trying hard not to look at the familiar pair who had so casually bellied up to the bar, praying that neither would be foolish enough to acknowledge him. Danny watched him keenly sensing a subtle change in his manner and quickly turned to look over his shoulder.

"Hey, you ain't gettin' no ideas are ya?" He asked warily, then laughed and nudged Vin's injured leg, forcing a hiss from the Texan. "Naw, couldn't be. You can't hardly stand never mind take off on me, can you?"

Tanner gripped his leg and held his breath waiting for the flaring pain to subside. Goddamn little bastard!

"You wanna come with me, kid?" He coaxed, deliberately taunting. "We could both just walk right on outta here, you know. You just say the word."

The red-head slammed his hand down on the table, his voice a frantic whisper.

"Don't you even go thinkin' that way, you hear me? Cochiny ain't gonna never let us go. Jeez, he'd hunt us down then cut off my balls and feed 'em to me; and he'd do just the same to you!" He shivered. "You ever seen a man mutilated like that; bleedin' to death and chokin' on his own manhood?"

Vin was not prepared to admit that he had indeed witnessed such a thing. Or that it wasn't a particular fate he had in mind.

"Listen, Danny..."

"No, I ain't listening! All you're gonna do is get me dead, Vin!" He kept his gun on the table but cocked it, and aimed the barrel at the Texan's heart, his finger curved suggestively around the trigger. "Now shut up. I don't wanna hear any more of your bullshit."

The movement of Vin's head was barely perceptible but the signal was clear enough to the mustached man at the bar. Don't try anything. Buck turned fully round to face the saloon and leaned both his elbows on the polished wood, sending his own signal to the tracker, that he understood, with little more than a look.

Tanner took another drink and for the first time in many days felt a faint spark of hope that he might just come out this thing alive. No more than that. He was not a man to count any of his chickens before they had hatched, or wager on a beating a bullet when there was a loaded forty-five, not two feet away, pointed at his chest.

JD sipped at the beer in front of him and looked surreptitiously through the fly-spotted mirror behind the bar.

"Well, are we gonna do something?"

"Just keep your drawers on, kid. Can't just go barging in like the Seventh Cavalry. Somethin' like this takes a little finesse."

In spite of the gravity of the situation Dunne laughed.

"Then we shoulda brought Ezra along, 'cos you ain't got a hope."

Buck allowed himself to smile in response.

"You just wait and see. Ole Buck has a few tricks of his own up his sleeve."

"Huh," snorted JD, unimpressed, "Might be better if you had Ezra's Derringer."

Both men silently watched as a tall, stern-faced Apache pushed his way through the patrons, finally stopping beside Tanner and his young companion to exchange but a few words which were obviously a summons for the Texan and his friend to get up and leave. It was only when the man in buckskin awkwardly got to his feet that it became evident he was in any way injured.

Rust-coloured stains of dried blood covered his left thigh and a dirty, makeshift bandage had been tied around the wound but it was clear to the two watching men that Vin was still in pain. His unkempt, unshaven and gaunt appearance added a hard edge to the tracker that neither man had noticed before, and it was suddenly very easy to believe that the Texan had once hunted men for a living.

The lean tracker, surprisingly, leaned on his smaller, younger companion and while it was true that the red-haired youth held a gun on him there seemed to be a curious bond between the two. As he passed within half a foot of his two friends he looked both of them in the eye, his expression a mask of such studied disinterest that it warned them again not to act in haste.

JD grabbed Wilmington's sleeve as the trio departed, his clawed fingers digging into the older man's flesh.

"Jesus, did you see him, Buck?"

The older man nodded, knowing exactly what JD meant.

"Yeah, kid. Pretty busted up and sick as a dog too, I'm thinking. Reckon we gotta take this real easy, JD." He put his beer down on the bar and straightened. "Come on, let's go. Time's a wastin' and by the look of it, I don't think Vin's got too much left."

Dunne quickly followed the taller man out of the saloon.

"Where d'you think they're takin' him, Buck?"

Wilmington hitched up his pants and stared down the boardwalk at the three figures moving slowly away down the street.

"Don't know, kid, but wherever it is, he ain't goin'."

"EZRA!"

Nathan started forward as Standish hit the ground, his voice cracking with anger and touched with fear for the Southerner's safety, but he became quickly embroiled in his own fight as unfriendly hands pulled at him and he was forced to defend himself. His very size and strength gave him some advantage and he was able to make a reasonable accounting of himself without resorting to gunplay, although he had cause to use the stock of the rifle on more than one occasion to subdue an opponent. Fighting desperately to remain standing, knowing that to lose his footing would be to be mercilessly beaten, the former slave continued to fall back, moving ever closer to the unmoving form of the injured Southerner.

A shot rang out, echoed by several more, and Nathan wondered sadly how many men would live to see another day, or even see this day out. He tapped a cowboy he did not recognise, under the chin with the rifle butt and sent him spinning to the ground with blood fountaining from his mouth but at least that one would recover even if he did lose a few teeth in the process. Moving steadily backwards, fending off a dwindling array of attackers he finally stood over the gambler and cast a hasty glance down into the ashen-face.

"Ezra?"

A flicker at the corner of his eye translated into a gun being aimed, not at him but at the helpless Southerner on the ground, and reflexively he drew a blade from the brace he carried on his back and let fly. With a strangled cry the assailant clutched at his arm, dropping his gun, unfired, as Nathan's knife

thudded meatily into the muscle of his upper arm. Dropping to one knee, the healer drew his handgun keeping anyone with further notions of approaching, at bay as he reached to finger the pulse in Standish's neck.

The booming thunder of a coach gun discharging drew the attention of almost every man, albeit reluctantly at first, as the combatants turned to seek out the direction of the new threat. A second boom stilled the melee as effectively as if the hand of God Himself had struck the antagonists.

"You drop them guns right now, less'n you want a dose of double-ought buck straight through ya! All of you!"

Nettie Wells sat calmly astride a dark bay, calmly reloading the coach gun as on either side of her with equally determined expressions stood another four women, all armed with carbines or shotguns. Casey and Inez on one side of the feisty old woman, Mrs. Muldoon and Mrs. Potter on the other. The ominous clicks as the hammers were drawn back almost in unison had an instantaneous effect and weapons dropped without argument to the dusty ground.

Sanchez, looking slightly worse for wear, stepped back from the fray and trained his gun on the dozen men still standing, a widening grin on his face as he glanced at the women.

"Ladies." He tipped his hat. "Your timing could not have been better."

"I can see that Josiah," replied Nettie, drily, "Reckon it's a mighty good job Casey 'n' me decided to come to town today. Inez filled us in right quick and we got to talkin' among ourselves. Thought you fellas might appreciate a few extra guns."

"You thought right, Nettie. I'm not sure we were ever gonna win this one."

The old woman grinned.

"From where I'm standin' ya'll made quite a showing for yourselves but five, six to one ain't my kind of odds. Reckon they ain't yours neither. Now what you want to do with this bunch of no-good, low-down, lily-livered vermin?"

Josiah laughed, a short bark that spoke of undisguised admiration coupled with a sense of immense relief.

"Reckon we can fit six to a cell, Nettie. If you ladies'll just give me a hand to herd 'em in....." He looked further along the street, his expression suddenly sobering. "I reckon Nathan's got his hands full right now."

The healer carefully turned the blood-smearred face towards him, gratified to hear a soft sigh of expired air as he moved the gambler's head, the sigh extending to a groan as Nathan's fingers slid into his open shirt and met bruised flesh.

"Ezra. Talk to me, man," he urged gently, as Standish stirred. "Come on, now. Can you sit up? Need to get you off the street, so I can take a look at you. You ain't just up and walkin' off this time."

"Not...a...chance...Mr. Jackson." His eyelids fluttered and he wetted his lips. "My apologies...for a rather...untimely...and abrupt exit." He paused to take a breath. "Might I assume...we prevailed?"

Nathan took a bandanna from his pocket and dabbed at the new cut in Ezra's cheek, unable to do anything more for the injured man until he could get him to the infirmary.

"Reckon it ain't your worry now, Ezra. It's over."

The Southerner coughed wetly, one hand coming up to his chest as if to try and stop the pain that the movement of his ribs caused him, then biting his lip, he took a shuddering breath.

"No. Not yet, Nathan. Not over yet."

The words seemed to drain the last of the gambler's strength and his head rolled bonelessly against the healer's arm.

"Ezra? Ezra? Damn!" Jackson looked up, eyes frantically searching for Sanchez. "Josiah! Josiah!"

Anyone? Y'all wanna give me a hand here? I need some help here, please."

"Sweet Jesus!"

Josiah shook his head, his big hands surprisingly gentle as he helped to get the still unconscious Southerner out of his clothes, afraid that his actions would inflict more damage on the already abused body.

"It's a miracle he was still standing," he breathed, awed by the spectacular bruising that covered Ezra's upper body.

Nathan paused to raise one eyebrow as he eased off the gambler's boots.

"Don't know about miracle, Josiah, I just call it bone-headedness."

Sanchez smiled.

"A healthy dose of that'll do it too," he conceded, "But I'm inclined to think the Good Lord's been watchin' over Ezra these past few days from what you've been telling me."

"Well, you'd just better put in a good word for him then, preacher man, 'cos he's gonna need it."

"Reckon there'll be a few folks besides me prayin', Nate. For both Ezra here and for Chris."

Jackson nodded. Knowing full well that he would be one of them.

Vin was not scared of dying -- never had been -- but the way of his passing had always troubled him and now, the thought of ending his life in the back alley of some pissant town for no good purpose other than some other man's crazy notion offended him. He refrained from the natural urge to look over his shoulder, confident that Buck and JD would not let him out of their sight, but apprehensive enough that they may not be able to intervene before Cochiny had slipped a blade between his ribs. He leaned more of his weight on the youth beside him, playing on his injury and attempting to at least slow their progress, wondering if Danny was aware of the Apache's plans. Just what had brought Cochiny to his decision Tanner could not begin to imagine but suddenly his liability had outstripped his worth to the Apache.

The moment they had left the horses at the saloon, Tanner had finally understood. He was not intended to leave Indian Springs and the irony of it had struck him with such intensity that he had almost laughed aloud. He had been worried about going back to Tuscosa -- about hanging -- but instead he was being led to any even more ignominious departure than swinging from the end of a rope. Cochiny would butcher him like a hog and leave him for the gutter dogs to fight over. He would never even see Texas let alone the gallows.

Cochiny paused and signalled that they should turn into a side street, its narrow confines reeking of the tannery that stood at its far end and the mental imagery that the stinking, wet hides conjured in the tracker's mind was suddenly too much for the lean Texan. Here he was -- a Tanner -- and he was about to end his days in a tannery yard. Fitting end really. Pushing himself away from Danny he leaned tiredly against the wall for support and started to laugh. The red-head stared first at him then at the Apache, who stood impassively and watched the tracker for a moment before gesturing that Danny should get him moving again. Instead Vin impatiently shoved the youth aside, away from the grim faced Indian.

"Forget it, Cochiny. I ain't going to go willingly to what you have in mind. You want me dead, you take me here -- and now. I ain't gonna make it easy for ya."

Cochiny's face broke into a feral smile and he slowly pulled a crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket, fastidiously smoothing it out before he carefully turned the printed side to face the Texan. He needed no words. Vin's own likeness stared back at him from the yellowed Wanted poster, mocking him with its promised bounty for the man who brought him in -- dead or alive.

He ducked his head but the smile did not leave his face. The ultimate irony.

"Dead's a damn sight easier, ain't it? Don't get to see the hangin' of course, but you get to keep the bounty."

He heard Danny's sudden shocked intake of breath.

"Goddamn. You're no better'n the rest of us!"

Vin flicked a sad, almost apologetic glance at the boy still standing to one side of him.

"Never said I was, Danny."

"I knew your face, Vin Tanner," said the Apache quietly, "I remembered this." He indicated the poster in his hand. "But I had to be sure. Now it can be finished."

"Cochinay...." Danny started forward, a protest on his lips, but Vin's arm came out quicker than a rattlesnake and held him back, with greater ease than his slight frame suggested was possible.

"Don't, kid. Ain't none of your business. This is between me and Cochinay here."

The youth, confused by the sudden turn of events, brought up his gun and thrust it into the Texan's side.

"This says it's my business!" He yelled, not sure if his anger was directed at Vin or Cochinay. "I'm makin' it my business!"

Tanner turned blue eyes, dispirited but understanding, on the red haired boy.

"You want the money that bad, kid, then go ahead and pull the trigger. I ain't gonna stop you." He switched his gaze to look evenly at Cochinay. "And he sure as hell won't."

The Apache fingered his knife and for a moment watched the interplay between the man and the boy with interest, dark eyes flicking from one to the other, coldly calculating, then he slowly drew back his arm for the throw.

"You are indeed a man, Vin Tanner," he said sombrely, "Now, go to your God with honour."

"Noooo!"

Danny sprang forward against Tanner's restraining arm, his shoulder knocking the Texan aside, as his gun swung towards the Apache, his slight body turning to meet the big bladed knife that had already left Cochinay's hand and was spinning in a deadly, glittering arc through the air.

"Danny! Wait!"

Vin struggled to regain his balance, his wounded leg no longer able to support him, and hopelessly snatched at the air where the kid had been a moment before, his hoarse cry an echo of his anguish, already knowing that he was too late. He barely registered the sound of the shot as the youth's gun barked once, then Danny was thrown bodily against him as the knife thudded home, buried to the hilt in the boy's ribs.

"Vin?" Surprised. Hurt. Questioning. Afraid.

Tanner pulled the boy against his chest, holding him close, supporting him under the arms as he fought to keep a grip on him and maintain his own footing.

"I got you, son. Easy now. I got you."

Slowly, awkwardly, he lowered the young outlaw to the ground, cradling his head and shoulders, offering the meagre comfort of his touch wishing he didn't already know the truth that Danny was dying.

"It hurts." He started to cry, a child. "It hurts, Vin."

The tracker roughly pulled the tousled head against him, his own eyes suddenly brimming.

"I know, kid."

He felt Danny's fingers scabble at his jacket, finally finding purchase and digging into the buckskin, fighting the pain, fighting death; his panic and fear opening a wound in the tracker's own heart.

"You'll take me with you, now? Please don't leave me here." He coughed and a bright gout of blood spilled from his mouth, but he fought to speak. "I know....I done told you you'd get me killed....."

Vin closed his eyes, immeasurably sad, his hands -- as gentle as a mother's -- soothing the man-child in his arms.

"But...it's all right, Vin." Danny's voice faded, dropping to a whisper, "I don't have nothin' much to live for anyways."

The Texan's grip tightened as if he could by sheer strength of will stop the life flowing out of the young body.

"Course I'll take you with me, Danny. We'll go together, don't you worry none." It was a whisper, all that the tracker could force through a throat tight with emotion but it was enough.

With a soft sigh, Danny surrendered. Vin sniffed and dashed a hand across his eyes, still holding the boy close to his chest, unable to let go.

"Aw, hell."

"Vin?"

He heard the quiet concern in the voice, felt the reassuring squeeze of a firm hand on his shoulder. Buck.

"You okay, Vin?"

A nod. Not able to speak. Not yet. An overwhelming sense of loss that he had not expected momentarily driving out any other emotion.

"This one's dead for sure. Right between the eyes." JD.

Cochinay. The kid's bullet had found its mark then.

"Buck, this ain't good. Look."

The Wanted poster. *You ain't no better'n the rest of us.* Tanner slowly raised his head, looking around him in confusion as if he had just been wakened from a deep sleep, and recoiled at the number of people gathering in the alley.

"Gimme that, JD. Don't want none of these low-life's gunning for Vin's hide 'cos they got the whiff of a bounty." Wilmington's voice suddenly rang out, the authority in it unmistakable and brooking no argument. "Okay, you folks. Ain't nothin' to see. It's all over, so just give us some room here. JD? You wanna move these people along?" Buck moved closer to the tracker, shielding him from casual scrutiny as he reached out to turn over one of his blood encrusted wrists. "Sweet Jesus, Vin. What'd they do to you?"

"I'll be fine," mumbled the tracker in protest, finding his voice but not having the strength to pull his wrist from Buck's grip.

"Who's the kid?"

The Texan looked down at the boy in his arms. If it wasn't for the bone-handled knife jutting obscenely from his chest he might have been sleeping. *And don't call me kid! The name's Danny.*

Vin closed his eyes. So tired.

"A friend I didn't know I had."

The squeeze to the shoulder again, not understanding but accepting.

"C'mon, Vin. Let's get you out of here. You're just plumb lucky there's no law in this town to ask the wrong kinda questions; you bein' famous and all." Buck slyly pulled the folded Wanted notice from his pocket just to make sure Vin understood. "If you get my drift."

The Texan allowed Buck to lift Danny up, but made no attempt to move himself, too exhausted to make the effort. Dunne, still stunned by the Texan's appearance, leaned down to slip an arm under his shoulders, his young face a study in compassion.

"I got you, Vin. Just hang on. Can you do that?"

Gratefully gripping the younger man's sleeve, he used his uninjured leg to lever himself from the ground, standing unsteadily and leaning on Dunne much the same as he had on Danny. He looked

pleadingly at the mustached man.

"Can't leave him here, Buck," he whispered fiercely, "I promised I wouldn't leave him."

Wilmington hefted the young red-head in his arms.

"It's okay, pard. I'll take care of it. You go with JD now." He gestured to Dunne with a jerk of his head.

"Reckon it's time we all went home."

Tanner's startlingly blue eyes held those of the older man for a long moment, then he nodded in tacit agreement, trusting a friend that he did know he had.

"Reckon it is."

Ezra was certain that if he opened his eyelids it would hurt. Everything else did, so he hardly expected that particular part of him was going to be spared. Not that he needed to open his eyes to feel pain -- it was there, relentless and ready to devour him, without needing to be summoned. He had not intended to make a sound but the barely stifled moan betrayed him and he sensed rather than heard the slight movement at his side. Of course. It was so unlikely that he would be alone that he wondered briefly what had ever possessed him to think that he might be.

"Senor?"

The Southerner's sandy brows drew together in a frown and he finally forced his eyes open, blinking slowly as his pupils adjusted to the light. He could not begin to determine how long he had been lying insensible but it was still daylight and he guessed from the stifling heat it was close to noon.

"Inez? A most definite improvement on the inimitable Mr. Jackson." It was a struggle to get the words out through the constrictive binding encasing his chest and the effort stole his breath away.

"Que?"

Unable to find the energy to repeat the speech he settled for closing his eyes again.

"I think behind all them fancy words, girl, he means he'd rather wake up to look at you than at Nathan."

The gambler smiled tiredly, recognising the feisty tones of Nettie Wells although the fact that the two women were -- he opened his eyes again, not entirely sure where he was -- watching over him, awakened in him the first stirrings of unease.

"Ladies, I am singularly honoured." He paused to take another shallow breath, trying not to wince. "Am I to assume...Mr. Jackson is...otherwise engaged?"

Nettie, her sleeves rolled up to the elbow and looking frighteningly efficient to the Southerner, moved into his line of sight.

"Lord, but you do go on, son. Reckon you got no breath to waste in talkin' so much." She pulled up a chair and took his hand in a work-roughened but surprisingly gentle grasp, her voice softening. "Nathan's down at the gypsy camp. Got called away."

Ezra felt as if someone had just upped the ante when he was finessing on nothing more than a pair of deuces and was down to his last dollar with no ace up his sleeve. Nevertheless he had to ask.

"Chris?" The wary glance exchanged between the two women did not go unnoticed and Ezra, mustering every ounce of energy left to him, slowly pushed himself up on his right elbow, sheer determination overcoming his body's demand that he remain perfectly still. "Mioaru."

Nettie, wisely, did not attempt to stop him and instead slipped a supporting hand under his shoulder, as she shook her head.

"Son, you got a whole lotta heart but not a whole lotta sense. I know what you did for that child but there ain't nothin' you can do now even if you could get outta this bed."

"I beg to differ, dear lady." Grimacing, he started to get up, realised his state of undress and stopped

abruptly with one hand clutching the sheet around his hips.

"Ezra," started Inez softly, "You cannot do this. You must rest."

"Miss Recillos," he started patiently, his face for once an open book, "Your concern is...most gratifying but...I have to go." He closed his eyes, the pain he felt no longer the pain of a bruised and battered body, his voice falling to a whisper. "I have to."

Nettie sighed heavily and patted his hand sympathetically, touched by the gambler's anguish. "Used to have a mule just like you. Weren't nothing for it but to let him have his head neither."

Ezra hitched up the covers to his waist and looked cautiously from one woman to the other.

"Then if you ladies would just excuse me..."

The older woman laughed unable to contain her amusement at his growing embarrassment.

"My stars, boy! You ain't got nothin' this old biddy hasn't seen before and you're in no fit state to be movin' anywhere on your own. Inez?" She paused, frowning. "Well, maybe you'd best fetch the buggy, though I don't know as you should bother hitchin' the horse to it, girl, 'cos I reckon we've got our own mule right here."

Inez leaned across as she stood and brushed her fingers over the Southerner's bruised cheek.

"You are *loco*, señor." She smiled. "But also very, very special."

oooOOOooo

Buck leaned across the gap between the two horses and for the fourth time in almost as many minutes steadied the tracker in the saddle before reaching for the reins and bringing the animal to a halt.

"Vin, you listen up 'cos I'm telling you now, I ain't riding all the way back to town trying to keep you straight in the saddle. You either ride with one of us or we make camp right now. What's it gonna be?"

Tanner slowly turned his head to look at the man beside him, openly confused.

"What?"

Once again Wilmington was struck by the haunted look in the Texan's eyes and wondered if he had even heard any of what he had just said. With a shake of his head he dismounted and threw the reins of his own horse to JD. *Shit! Things just weren't getting any better.* Without a word he moved Vin's left foot from the stirrup and swung into the saddle behind the tracker, feeling Vin's back stiffen as he settled into position but noticing that he did not resist as the reins were taken from his hands.

"I ain't a kid, Buck," he objected, "Don't need you to be nursemaidin' me."

"You need somethin', pard, unless you want me and the kid picking you up out of the dirt every five minutes. Reckon you're in bad enough shape without fallin' off your horse and we ain't got time for it anyhow."

"I'll be okay," he continued his protest, but without any real conviction, "Just tired 's all."

Buck chose to ignore the half-hearted resistance and nudged the horse forward, his arms closing around the wiry tracker to get a grip on the reins. He noticed Vin working his fingers deep into the muscle of his thigh and recognised that the tracker was trying to ease the pain of his injury.

"Geez, Vin, ain't no shame in hurtin'," he muttered quietly, "Don't always have to keep it to yourself, y'know."

When the Texan spoke his voice was tight.

"I don't need none of your advice, Buck."

The mustached man sighed and murmured softly: "No one ever does."

Within a mile the Texan had succumbed to exhaustion and, falling asleep in the saddle, finally relaxed enough to lean against the bigger man at his back, his head rolling gently with the motion of the horse beneath him. With a slight smile Buck wrapped his left arm around the tracker's lean waist,

holding him in place, while deftly transferring the reins to his right hand as he shifted to a more comfortable position. It was going to be a long ride.

"Rest easy, pard." He kept his voice low. "We're going home."

Dunne who had ridden in thoughtful silence beside the two men, trailing Vin's horse behind him, cast a speculative glance in the sleeping man's direction.

"Ain't said a lot has he?"

"About what?"

"Buck!"

"Vin'll tell, if and when he's ready, kid. Sometimes it just takes a while, you know, but sometimes things just ain't meant for sharin' with anyone."

JD looked again at the former bounty hunter with concern.

"He looks real sick, Buck and that leg looks pretty bad."

"Yeah, kid. Reckon the sooner Nathan gets a look at him the happier I'll be," agreed Wilmington, "but right now the longer he can sleep, the better."

"What about restin' up for a while?" suggested the younger man.

Buck sighed long and loud.

"Well, I don't know about you, JD, but right now I just want to get my sorry ass back to town. Have a beer, take a bath and find a bed."

"Any particular bed you have in mind?"

Buck laughed softly.

"For once I think my own will do just fine, JD."

"Hah," jeered Dunne, a wide grin on his face, "That'll be a first."

Buck chuckled, not rising to the bait.

"You'll keep, kid. You'll keep."

The voices had become a soothing murmur at the very edge of his consciousness, and suddenly it was easy to surrender to the fatigue, to the overwhelming desire to sleep, knowing for the first time in many days that there was someone at his back to watch out for him. Too exhausted to care anymore, he had leaned his head against the solid muscle of Buck's chest and closed his eyes. He allowed the throbbing pain that rolled from his thigh in waves to engulf him, no longer having either the energy or the inclination to fight it, while at the back of his mind he knew at that moment that he would have welcomed, without a word of protest, a dose of Nathan's laudanum.

Sometimes things just ain't meant for sharing with anyone.

"I was lookin' for someone."

"Well, mister. You found someone. Guess it just ain't who you were expectin'."

"Guess not."

"Cocky bastard ain't ya?"

"All you're gonna do is get me dead, Vin!"

"You ain't no better'n the rest of us."

"I'm a dead man who doesn't know when to lie down."

No. Sometimes things just ain't meant for sharin'.

He moved his head restlessly, a low moan escaping from his throat, as caught between waking and sleeping unwanted memories slipped through his defences. *Dead...get me dead...dead man...*

Danny.

"Gonna go back to San Francisco and get me a job on a ship. You ever seen the sea Vin?"

He jerked, a sudden spasm of his muscles, a gut-swooping feeling of falling that left him feeling more

than a little foolish as he realised just where he was and that Buck still held him fast and had, in fact, tightened his grip.

"Take it easy. I've got you." Quiet, believable, reassurance.

I got you, son. Easy now. I got you.

Vin brought his breathing under control but his heart continued to flutter wildly for several moments before it gradually resumed a steady beat and with a sigh, he allowed his eyes to close again.

"You ever been to San Francisco, Buck?" Soft, barely spoken, on the edge of sleep.

"Once."

"What's it like?"

"What's any city like? Big, crowded..."

"Ships?"

"Yeah, lots of those. Strung out all across the bay just about as far as the eye can see."

With a gentle exhalation of air, he relaxed again, allowing his mind to drift back to a night when, for just a few hours, a boy had shared his dreams with him.

"Reckon I'd like to see the ocean one day."

His name was barely whispered but the sound startled him nonetheless and he cursed again his extreme sensitivity to noise that had him jumping like a startled deer every time a tick crawled out of the woodwork. A few days ago, the sound would have triggered a contraction that painfully shortened his muscles and stopped his breath in his lungs, this time it merely caused him to twitch nervously. His jaw, though more relaxed, ached from long hours of being locked in spasm and he still found speech an effort, limiting himself to a verbal shorthand that could in no way reflect his teeming thoughts. Even for a man of few words it was frustrating.

"Chris?"

He blinked slowly wishing his physical responses were a match for his mental processes.

"Nathan?" Slow to articulate, knowing the healer was worried before the man uttered a word.

"Thought you should know. There's been some trouble in town."

Larabee tightened his grip on the bedding, a slow fury building at his own helplessness. Trouble? This was his town goddamnit! He wanted to be able to jump up, strap on his Colt and help put things back in order, but instead he was powerless, unable to even stand let alone fight. He took a deep breath, his chest muscles still resistive and reluctant to allow air into his lungs. *God, it was hard work.*

"Trouble?" The single word could in no way reflect the nature of his thoughts.

"Look, Chris, I ain't got time to tell you everything. Right now I got me a little girl who's like to die, you here sick and Ezra busted up somethin' bad after being stomped by a dozen horses. Reckon the worst's over though and Josiah's lookin' after things, but you were right to worry about these folks."

"Vin?"

The question came from out of nowhere and he realised how much he had been worrying about Vin's continued absence. Nathan had just told him Ezra was hurt and his first question had been about the tracker. If the healer noticed, he gave no sign.

"Ain't back yet. Buck and JD neither." He paused, considering his next words. "Looks like Vin maybe got himself into some trouble out at Beggar's Canyon."

Chris tried to snatch at the words that were suddenly swirling around his mind in a maniacal dance and attempted to make meaning of them but no matter which way he looked at it, nothing made any sense at all. Except he knew that the trouble he had been expecting -- not to mention some he had not -- had come with a capital T, and he had not been there to stop it.

He struggled to lift his head, but was too weak to complete the move.

"Gotta..get up."

Jackson quickly leaned forward and wedged a bolster under his back, enough to raise his head and shoulders from the bed.

"Whoa! Hold just one minute. Sitting up's one thing but you can't go anywhere. Reckon you got about as much strength as a new born kitten."

Chris let his head fall back with a weary sigh, knowing Nathan was right and at the same time hating him for it.

"So, why'd you tell me?"

It was the first complete sentence the blond man had managed and the anguish behind the words stopped the healer in his tracks, dumbfounded. For a moment he looked at the gunslinger not entirely sure of the answer, then with a sad shake of his head he spoke.

"Thought you'd want to know, Chris."

Larabee turned his face away.

"I do." He admitted, so softly Nathan could barely hear. "Just pissed... can't do...anything."

Nathan looked with compassion at the lean gunfighter's gaunt, unshaven cheeks and wasted frame, the signs of sickness still weighing heavily upon him. Larabee had been close to death yet still the shackles of being ill chafed at the man.

"Hell, it's pretty much done and dusted now anyway. Ain't no cause for you to fret none." He straightened up again and lowered his eyes for a moment, abashed. "Didn't mean to cause you any grief, Chris. Just guessed you'd be going crazy laid up in here not knowing what was going on." He started to move away then turned briefly back. "You just rest up now. I've got to go see this baby girl."

The gunfighter closed his eyes and nodded, wordlessly dismissing the healer. Rest up. Done and dusted. So why did he feel as if the world was spinning out of control?

Ezra did not recall having anyone dress him since he was six years old. The experience was humbling to say the least but the Southerner managed to swallow his pride and affect a nonchalant attitude to a situation which, if he were to admit it, was causing him acute embarrassment. To his immense relief Nettie got him into his clothes with a businesslike efficiency that left little room for misplaced modesty and he silently blessed her as she stood back and patiently waited for him to painstakingly do up the buttons of his pants, understanding his need to retain at least a modicum of dignity.

It was a struggle. His body urged that he give in and surrender to the natural inclination to curl up into a whimpering ball and even his normally limber fingers did not seem to be willing to co-operate, making him clumsy and slow. He had by no means been stretching the truth when he had told Nathan that there was no part of him that did not hurt and the ribs were not the worst of it. The base of his spine throbbed with a vengeance and below his diaphragm a deep, dull ache had settled, while the sharp pain of his broken ribs and shoulder bit with regular and savage monotony. With a soft sigh he finally braced his hands against the edge of the bed and prepared to stand.

He became aware of the woman's careful and openly curious scrutiny of him and as he cautiously straightened, he cocked his head to one side and met her steadily intense gaze.

"Something wrong, Miz Wells?"

"What is it about that child, son? What is it that means so much to you? T'ain't like she's kin."

Ezra dropped his gaze, lowering his head and giving a lopsided smile as he thought of his mother -- the only kin he had -- and the tenuous and fragile thread that bound them as family.

"No," he admitted hesitantly, for once uncertain of his ability to accurately articulate his feelings, "But she's... innocent."

"That she is," Nettie sighed sadly in agreement, "As are all those folks, whose only crime as I can see it is to be a tad different in their ways."

"And," continued the gambler, slowly picking up his gun belt and starting to laboriously fasten it around his hips, "I made a promise."

Nettie shook her head slowly, her expression a mixture of surprise and reluctant admiration and with a kindly half-smile rested a weathered hand on the Southerner's arm.

"Reckon you ain't the hard-headed hustler you'd like people to think you are, Ezra Standish."

Ezra continued to buckle his belt avoiding making eye contact with the feisty widow.

"While there may indeed be a grain of truth in that, my dear lady, I'd greatly appreciate it if you would refrain from sharing that particular observation with my mother."

Nettie huffed in a way that suggested her opinion of Maude Standish and Ezra smiled as she slipped a steadying arm around his waist and ushered him solicitously towards the door.

"Your secret's safe with me, son. Now let's see about making sure you keep that promise."

Nathan hung his head. It was over. She had lost the fight and never in his life had he felt so powerless. Never had he felt such a deep sense of guilt that he had been unable to do more or such a sense of shame in his fellow man. A child. An innocent life sacrificed to the senseless need of man to hate. The lump that swelled in his throat threatening to choke him was surpassed only by the rage that was steadily building within him for the men whose thoughtless and selfish actions had dealt this cruellest of blows to the mother who sat softly weeping beside him. He reached out a hand and squeezed the woman's shoulder, a meaningless gesture he knew that could in no way offer consolation to a woman whose child had died but which he hoped may convey his own heartfelt sympathy.

He rose to leave, not belonging, having no purpose now death had defeated him once again but the woman reached out to clasp his hand in her own.

"Thank you," she whispered, brokenly, "My blessing goes with you."

Unable to speak, Jackson nodded and stumbled from the vardo, almost shocked to find that outside the wooden caravan the sun was shining in a brilliant blue sky. Sorrow, anger and shame fought for supremacy as he sat heavily on the wooden steps and stared numbly at the ground. Sweet Jesus! Five years old. With a deep intake of breath he reined in his emotions. No sense in getting riled now, that could wait for those who deserved it. Right now he needed to think straight, but hell, what a week it had been. Indescribably weary, he rubbed his hands over his face and tried to remember when he had last slept in his own bed and for more than a couple of hours at a time.

He glanced across at the wagon in which Chris had almost died, and in which the gunslinger still lay, not yet out of the woods. The man had no more meat on his bones than a mangy street dog and his eyes had sunk into hollow, black pits, but given time Nathan knew he would mend. Ezra. He slowly shook his head. The gambler had enough grit for ten men, no denying it when his dander was up, but sometimes he had no more sense than a road runner. It was odd, but right when he thought he had that man's measure, he turned around and did something that left Nathan totally bewildered and questioning his own mixed feelings about the Southerner. For a moment he closed his eyes remembering how the gambler, ignoring his own injuries, had sat for hours comforting the child and a heavy hand gripped his heart. Oh, Lord. How was he going to find the words to tell Ezra about Mioaru?

"Nathan!"

The healer frowned and looked in the direction of the voice.

"Inez?" He stood up, concern over-riding the fatigue etched on his face. "Somethin' wrong?"

"No, nothing is wrong. Well, maybe it is wrong but not in the way you mean."

Confused, Jackson took her by the shoulders and made her face him.

"Slow down now! What are you talking about?"

"Ezra is here. He needs to see the child. He would not rest until this thing was done although he is in much pain. Something about a promise."

He looked up, his heart thumping in his chest, as he searched for the Southerner.

"God Almighty! What does it take to keep that man down? Where is he?" His tone was half-exasperation and half-apprehension. "He shouldn't be here."

The Mexican woman narrowed her eyes, aware that there was something different in his voice.

"We brought him in the buggy," she said slowly, then looked from the healer to the caravan behind him, her suspicions aroused, "What is it, Nathan?"

"She's dead, Inez. Mioaru's dead."

"Madre de Dios," she breathed, "This is very bad."

Nathan ran his fingers through his tightly curled hair and cursed.

"Why the hell can't that damned stubborn son-of-a-bitch Southerner just do like he's told for once in his goddamn life!"

"Why Mr. Jackson, I do believe that is my name you're taking in vain." The familiar soft drawl, heralded Ezra's arrival and Nathan braced himself before turning to face the gambler.

"You shouldn't be here," he said, quietly, acutely aware of the effort it must have cost for Standish to even leave his bed.

Ezra inclined his head a fraction, the green eyes finding, and holding, Nathan's uneasy gaze.

"Mr. Jackson?" In two words the Southerner managed to load a wealth of unspoken questions.

"Ezra..." Unable to find the words, Nathan sighed and dropped his gaze.

When he looked up, the Southerner's expression had gone flat, yet a more stricken look the healer had never seen on any man. Without a word, the gambler moved past both Inez and the former slave, taking a moment to draw a pain-wracked breath before he bowed his head and pushed open the door to the yellow caravan with the heel of his hand.

Vin no longer knew where he was. Consumed by heat, his head ached with a vengeance that made him sick to his stomach, while his leg had become a white hot, throbbing source of unrelenting pain that spread its tentacles from his knee to his groin. At the edge of his awareness he could still hear soft, gently murmuring voices but whether they were real or a figment of his imagination he was no longer sure. He remembered talking to his mother -- still so young -- asking her why she had left him, but she had just smiled and held out a fine boned hand to beckon him before slipping away out of his grasp once more. Bereft, he had cried then, something he had not done twenty-five years before when as a bewildered boy of five he had been suddenly and inexplicably left alone. Then Chris had come. Looking for him, in that silently intense manner that Larabee had, but when Vin had reached out, calling his name, the man in black had slowly turned and walked away never once looking back. So hot.

Feeling a trickle of water cross his tongue, his throat convulsed, eagerly gulping down the liquid as the trickle turned into a flood quenching the raging thirst that the fever had created as it robbed the very cells of his body of fluid.

"Easy, pard. Take it slowly, now."

He sighed as he felt a wash of tepid water sluice over his face and hair, then another flood douse his chest and neck, followed by a cool draught of air that momentarily relieved the burning heat of his fever.

Weakly raising one hand he instinctively shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun as he cracked open his gummy lids.

"Buck?" His voice rasped grittily, his throat already stripped again of moisture.

"None other."

The Texan swallowed readily as more water flooded into his mouth, managing to get his hand to the canteen and control its flow, until Buck finally wrested it away.

"That's enough, Vin." He felt himself being raised up, his head spinning at the sudden movement and his stomach protesting so violently that had there been anything in it other than a few mouthfuls of water he would have thrown up. "Think you're up to riding again now?"

"No." It was no less than the truth. He didn't recall having ridden anywhere in the first place never mind again, now he just wanted to lie down and go to sleep.

"Gotta get back on the trail and get you back to town," urged Buck's voice again.

"Yes."

It was all he could manage but he knew that town meant something. It was too difficult to get his thoughts in any semblance of order but he trusted Buck implicitly. He was suddenly aware of being manhandled to his feet, trying to help but failing miserably, and of being half-lifted, half-dragged onto a horse. Forced to bite back the cry that threatened to erupt from his lungs as a spear of agony ripped through his leg, he instead concentrated on forming the three words that seemed suddenly very important for him to say.

"Not gonna die."

Someone -- Buck -- swung up into the saddle behind him and he heard the familiar voice of his friend in his ear.

"No, you son-of-a-bitch, you're not going to die, 'cos I ain't gonna let you."

"Nathan! Nathan!"

Josiah, sitting quietly with his boots up on the desk in the sheriff's office, ostensibly guarding the twelve prisoners but in truth trying to ignore their unending litany of complaints, recognised not only Buck's voice but the urgency in it. Kicking back from the desk he got to his feet and grabbing his hat, strode out into the street, now surprisingly devoid of citizens after the morning's near riot.

"Hey, Buck! Now hold on! Where's the fire?" he shouted, but before the words were out of his mouth, he registered the fact that the mustached cowboy shared his mount with a less than responsive Vin Tanner.

Breaking into a run, the preacher crossed the street and pulled up beside the Texan's overburdened horse. Reaching up, Sanchez steadied the Texan who was obviously in no fit state to dismount unaided.

"What in hell happened to him?"

"Long story! Where's Nathan?" snapped Wilmington.

Without waiting for any answer, Buck quickly dismounted and turning to get a grip on Vin's jacket, wasted no time in pulling the tracker from the saddle after him, trusting Josiah to catch Tanner's legs as he controlled the Texan's upper body.

"Nathan's at the gypsy camp."

"Well, he should be here!" yelled Wilmington, obviously not in a frame of mind to be reasonable, "Vin needs him."

"So did Chris," murmured Josiah softly, "And so did a little girl."

The two men stood for a moment with the tracker dangling awkwardly between them, as for the first time Buck's attention left Vin at the sound of his friend's name spoken with such quiet intensity. Josiah

altered his grip on the tracker's legs and gestured with his head for Wilmington to start moving.

"Chris?"

"Long story. Let's get Vin upstairs." He switched his attention to JD who had yet to move from his horse. "JD? You might want to think about fetching Nathan?"

With a weary nod, Dunne turned his horse and headed down the street, too exhausted to utter any complaint.

Encumbered by the surprisingly heavy torso of the Texan in his arms, Buck carelessly kicked open the door of the room that doubled as Nathan's living quarters and the town's infirmary and the two men moved forward with more speed than grace to deposit the semi-conscious tracker on the bed. Vin was in no shape to protest his rough handling although he stirred, muttering and cursing crossly, once he was lying down. The preacher wordlessly raised Tanner's wrist, his eyes narrowing in undisguised horror at the deeply scored channels gouged deeply into the flesh, now crusted with dried and blackened blood.

"Good God almighty."

Buck had already stripped the tracker of his boots and gun belt, and was manhandling him out of his buckskin coat.

"Yeah," he agreed, tersely, "Wanna give me some help here, Josiah?"

For several minutes neither man spoke as they peeled away Vin's filthy and sometimes bloodied clothing exposing bit by bit the bruises and abuses that the Texan had suffered until, finally able to do no more, Buck drew the blanket over the increasingly unsettled tracker, his dark eyes clouded with sadness.

"Bastards," he whispered savagely, then allowing his frustration and rage to spill over he slammed his fist into the wall, shouting angrily: "Where the hell is everyone in this goddamned town!"

Sanchez quickly rounded the end of the bed and gripped Buck's arm, the force of it spinning the dark haired man around to face him.

"Easy now, Buck, Vin's not the only one in trouble here. You might be interested to know that while you -- and me -- were gone, chasing all over the damned territory, Chris came just this close to dyin' and right now Ezra's so busted up he can barely stand!"

"Chris? Ezra?" Buck's anger dropped several degrees, displaced by bewildered confusion.

"Yeah, long story as I said." Josiah's voice mellowed. "From all accounts Nathan's hardly slept in days, what with Chris and all, then Ezra and the little girl, and to top it all off the town's gone plumb crazy over those gypsy folk and the jail's bustin' at the seams." He ran a hand over his face and sighed wearily. "Reckon Chris had no idea what he was startin' when he brought those tinkers into town."

Buck sat down heavily on a straight backed chair, contrite.

"Want to tell me about it? Chris and Ezra?" He hesitated, half afraid of the answer he might get. "They're okay?"

"Last I knew. Ain't rightly caught up on everything myself."

Wilmington hung his head, twisting his hat in his hands, and quickly looked from the tracker to the preacher.

"Shit! SHIT!"

"Amen to that, brother."

"Ezra?"

The Southerner acknowledged no-one, when after twenty minutes, slow footsteps heavy on the wooden treads of the steps, he finally left the vardo. The gambler's expression was concealed by his bent head but the slope of his shoulders reflected all too clearly the depth of his sadness and,

concerned, Nathan instinctively stretched out a hand intending to offer a gesture of comfort. Wordlessly, Ezra shrugged off the touch of the healer's fingers and turning his back started to walk slowly away, his every movement signalling not only the pain of his injuries but the despondency of raw, unadulterated grief.

"Let him be, Nathan. Give him a little time."

The former slave, frowned at the woman's grip on his sleeve but hesitated, unsure.

"But Nettie..."

"Son, don't argue with an old woman." She smiled softly. "I'll go. Reckon he might just need a different kind of shoulder to lean on this time."

"Ezra? When did he ever want anyone to lean on?"

Nettie patted the healer's arm and shook her head.

"Nathan, you're a good man and I've no doubt you know a whole lot about mending broken bones but I don't count on you knowing too much about mending what might be broken inside a man's heart."

Jackson stared thoughtfully after the gambler for a moment then with a reluctant nod he yielded.

"I reckon you might be right about that, Miz Nettie. 'Sides," he grinned, wryly, "You gotta find it first. Ezra's buried his heart pretty deep inside that tough Southern hide."

Nettie allowed her gaze to follow the gambler's progress and gave Nathan's arm a final squeeze before letting go.

"I'll warrant that hide's not nearly as tough as you might imagine, son."

With that, the woman gathered her skirts and moved without haste after the Southerner.

He did not go far. Just far enough to be away from the camp, to be away from the others and to be left alone with the turbulent emotions that threatened to, once and for all, shatter his carefully nurtured self-control. Leaning his elbows carefully on his knees, he rested his head in his hands and closed his eyes, allowing his grief to settle over him like a malignant but insubstantial vapour as anger and sorrow warred with each other for supremacy.

The tightness in his chest that he felt now had nothing to do with his broken ribs; this was an entirely different kind of hurt and one not so easily remedied with any of Nathan's teas, salves or tinctures. He drew in as deep a breath as he could just to feel the reality of physical pain and welcomed the stabbing agony that flared through his back as a result, satisfied that at least this was something he could deal with. It was the other he feared. The overwhelming sense of wrongness, of waste and, above all, of emptiness and loss.

Sighing, he slowly rubbed his eyes between thumb and forefinger. If he had just moved a moment sooner when he had seen those horses, instead of hesitating like the craven-hearted son-of-a-bitch he was, she might have...but he had been too slow, and now she was dead. Yet he had made a promise that no harm would come to them -- on his honour. Honour? An empty promise indeed. The constriction in his throat tightened painfully as a small voice sounded mockingly in his head: *Darlin' boy, the only honour you ever need trouble yourself about is the honour among thieves. Just look out for number one, and Devil take the hindmost.* Yes, Mother. You taught me some things very well. A leopard hardly had the capacity to change its spots quite so readily.

"Ezra?"

The gambler swung his head up, mildly surprised. Nettie Wells was the last person he had expected to come seeking him out. Touched, he nevertheless wished that he could just be left alone. He neither wanted, nor needed anyone's sympathy or consolation.

"If you want me to go, just say so," she said, her tone as brisk as ever, as if reading his thoughts, "I won't be offended."

The glib response that sprang to his lips, the one that was intended to deny any immediate need for either company or comfort, was never spoken. Instead the Southerner quickly turned his face away and hung his head, suddenly unable to find his voice in the welter of emotion that, without warning, bubbled up in him. The woman's arm stole around his shoulders and with a gentle squeeze drew him to her.

"Ah, son, it's the children that are always the hardest. Buried one myself, so I know."

Ezra's shoulders tensed but he did not pull away, a small part of him taking comfort in the unlooked for and unexpectedly maternal embrace, an unfamiliar sensation with which he had little experience.

"And I know it hurts so bad you just think you'll just curl up and die right there alongside 'em, but you cain't do that no matter how much you might want to."

The work-roughened hand absently stroked his hair and he closed his eyes as a shuddering sigh shook his body. *Oh, God, but how he wanted to.* It was too painful to think about how she had lain in his arms, her small hands clutching his shirt as she whimpered in her sleep only to die while he was gone. She had trusted him and he had failed her.

"I promised..." he began, the words thick in his throat, "...wasn't enough. Never enough."

Nettie held him closer as the last resistance drained out of him.

"You did all you could, son, and more than most so don't try tellin' yourself any different, and don't go givin' up on yourself!"

The Southerner reached up and captured the hand that gripped his shoulder in his slim fingers, feeling the callouses against his own smooth skin.

"Nettie," he began, his voice not quite steady, "I've never done anything in my life of which I've been proud." He took another painful breath before going on. "I'm not by nature altruistic and I've made a living out of taking advantage of others..."

"Ezra..."

"No. Please, let me finish." He fell silent for a moment. "I can't help but feel, this is some kind of judgement..."

Nettie gave his shoulders a quick warning shake, her grip tightening.

"Good God boy, if you weren't already so beat up, I'd take the switch to you myself! That's the biggest cartload of horse-feathers I've heard in along time. Ain't none of this your fault and if you had a lick of sense you'd know that, but then someone who throws himself in front of a herd of stampeding horses sure ain't too smart if you ask me. A whole lot of heart and a real big dose of guts but no more sense than a fence post!" The woman paused for breath and gave a sigh, shaking her head and giving stricken gambler a reassuring hug. "I'll tell you one thing, Ezra Standish. You might not be a ranch hand but I know this; if ever I'd had a son, I would've been mighty proud if he turned out anything like you and that's a fact."

She held onto him for a long time then, feeling the convulsive movements of his shoulders as the dam on his emotions collapsed and the pain and grief poured silently out of him. Her own eyes moist, she gently rocked this other mother's son and briefly but unconditionally, offered the love that she would have afforded her own child.

Nathan slowly followed an increasingly anxious JD up the steps to the infirmary fighting a weariness that went bone deep. The kid had filled him in on Vin's ordeal, at least as much as he knew of it himself, and the healer had wondered again at man's seemingly boundless capacity to do harm. Now, as always, he was expected to put back the pieces, although after the events of the last few days he was beginning to think that sometimes those pieces never quite fitted back together as well as they should.

The Texan roused as soon as Nathan took down the rough dressing around his thigh, the healer

wasting no time in using his knife to cut away the tracker's pants and reveal the ugly, festering knife wound surrounded by hot, unhealthy-looking flesh.

"Easy, Vin. Just taking a look here," he soothed, "Gonna hurt some though."

The tracker licked dry lips and closed his eyes again as if the effort of opening them had been too taxing.

"Already does," came the barely audible response.

"I'll bet. You ready?"

Vin sighed, beyond caring but his voice firmed.

"Just do it."

It took both JD and Buck to hold him down, the wiry sharpshooter soundlessly straining against their combined efforts as Nathan sliced through discoloured tissue and reopened the wound. Not one of them wanted to think about the hovering spectre of gangrene but the sickening and sweetly ripe odour of the putrid flesh that made more than one of them gag, sent a collective shiver of fear through the three men. A rapid exchange of glances took but a split second for an unspoken pact of silence to be sworn, then Nathan was deftly cutting and cleaning, mortally afraid that his intervention might already be too late.

Laudanum and exhaustion combined to send the tracker into a blessed state of unconsciousness that finally released him from the torment of the healer's ministrations and allowed Nathan to finish his work unhindered by the Texan's understandable, but undesirable, resistance. Buck, permitted a moment's respite at last, wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve and standing up, began to pace uneasily.

"Holy hell, Nathan. How deep you gonna cut there? You ain't carving beefsteak, you know."

Nathan's attention did not waver but his response was both harsh and intense.

"You want that Vin lose this leg, Buck?" he challenged, "Cos that's what's gonna happen if gangrene sets in!"

Wilmington stopped abruptly, his fear finally voiced, and shook his head apologetically.

"Sorry. I know you're doin' what's best. Just seems mighty savage cuttin' up a man's leg like that."

"Ain't no other way I know. Wish to God I did. Now make yourself useful and pass me those cloths, so's I can finish up here." He drew the back of his hand across his forehead and sighed, his voice dropping to almost a whisper as fatigue, no longer willing to be held in check, crashed uncompromisingly down on him. "Gotta get myself some sleep."

Jackson finally dropped bonelessly onto the second cot in the room, not even bothering to take off his boots and trusting in Buck and JD to keep a watch over Tanner, no longer capable of keeping his eyes open. Wilmington, his expression as dark and intense as the young Dunne had ever seen it, spared a moment to draw a blanket over the healer.

"JD." His voice was menacingly quiet as he turned. "I don't know what the hell's been going on in this goddamn town but I aim to find out right now!"

The older man was at the door before Dunne, realising his intention, could scramble to his feet.

"Buck! Wait!"

JD found he was talking to thin air and for a moment he hesitated, torn between leaving and staying, before common sense took over and he dropped back into the chair with a sigh of frustration. If Buck wanted to raise hell then let him; one of them had to stay and it looked like he'd drawn the short straw by default. He leaned forward and watched the shallow rise and fall of the Texan's chest, still not sure if he'd made the best bargain in trading places with Ezra. Rubbing his tired eyes he wondered what the Southerner thought of that particular deal now.

At the foot of the stairs Buck came to an abrupt halt, not wholly sure of the direction of his anger and trying to make some sense of the confusing and conflicting emotions that were warring within his over-

tired mind. At least Vin was off his hands now and into far more capable ones but Chris -- goddamn it, what was Chris doin' coming down with lockjaw? Christ Almighty, a man died from lockjaw didn't he? Josiah had only been able to tell him that his friend for nigh on twenty years was still hanging on, and that Nathan had worked some kind of miracle in keeping the gunfighter alive. Now Buck just needed to see for himself. Hellfire, leave a man alone for two minutes and he goes and gets sick. Coming to a decision, he cut along the back of the livery and struck out towards the gypsy camp. Maybe there he could finally find some answers.

He had been left alone so long that he was beginning to get restless. Any movement was a real effort that taxed him to the very limits of his strength but his back and shoulders were sore and his tailbone felt as if it had pushed clear through the skin, so he persevered and rolled thankfully onto his uninjured side. Hell, there was nothing of him but skin and bone. He wanted a drink, his stomach was rumbling painfully crying out for food and his bladder was sending increasingly urgent signals to his brain, yet achieving relief on any count any time soon seemed beyond his current capabilities. *Goddamn it, where was Nathan?*

If he could have managed it he would have shouted his frustration but his throat and neck still ached and while it was getting easier for him to form words, it was still far from easy to talk. He remembered Vin saying once that he never said more than three words in a day; now he would be more than glad to have the opportunity to prove the Texan wrong. *Jesus Christ! How long had he been in this wagon?* He stank, and the claustrophobic sense of the walls closing in on him reminded him too much of a prison -- or a tomb -- for him to feel comfortable. He remembered the prison in Jericho and 'the hole', and it hadn't been a great deal different from the way he felt right now, except this time the prison was his own body.

Chris, so absorbed in his own misery, jumped as the door creaked open and for a long moment he tensed, his body briefly spasming in response to the unexpected stimulus before relaxing again. *Hell, that still hurt.* He slowly released his breath and rubbed a hand across his tender abdomen, muscles strained from the repeated violent contractions he had suffered over the previous days. Now the fits came infrequently but he carried the residual effects in the pain he still felt from overtaxed muscles. He had wanted someone to come but he could have done without the fright.

"Chris?"

The voice was hesitant but the silhouette was unmistakable as the tall cowboy stood framed against the light in the doorway.

"Buck." It came out as a croak and he squinted against the brightness, his eyes unused to the light.

Wilmington took his hat off and carelessly threw it to one side before stepping up to the bunk and gathering the too-thin body of his friend into an embrace that swamped the gunslinger in such warmth and affection that he could do nothing but hang on with the little strength that he could muster.

"Good God Almighty, Chris," he exclaimed quietly, "But it stinks like a bear pit in here."

"Good to see you too, cowboy." It was a struggle but he got the sentence out without having to stop for a breath.

Buck held the thin body away from him for a moment and looked intently into the grey-green eyes staring out from deeply shadowed sockets.

"Ain't nothin' left of you, pard. See what happens when I leave you on your own for longer'n a second?" There was a catch in his voice that he did not try to hide.

Chris forced a smile.

"That what you call a second?"

Buck laughed and pulled him close again feeling every bone of the man's ribs, and wondering just what hell Chris had been through to leave him in this state.

"All right then, maybe a week or so." He grabbed a pillow and, finally letting go, awkwardly propped the gunfighter up. "You know, I wasn't sure what I was gonna find here. Josiah said you almost..."

"Yeah," interrupted Chris quickly, as if the spectre was still too near to utter its name aloud, "Reckon I did."

Wilmington, still shocked at Chris' wasted appearance and alarmed by the reddened sores on his shoulders, tried vainly to make him more comfortable. The gunfighter winced with every movement, his tortured muscles crying out in protest until Buck gave up, too afraid to cause his friend any more distress.

"Shit, where's Nathan when you need him," he pronounced finally, his question purely rhetorical.

"Don't know," Chris answered quietly, remembering the healer's last visit which had left him feeling so helpless in the face of all that was happening around him. "Ezra. He said Ezra was hurt."

"Ain't seen Ezra and Nathan's been busy tendin' Vin."

Larabee pushed himself up from the bed, his face contorted with the effort.

"Vin? He's back?"

Buck rubbed a hand over his face wishing he had better news for Chris.

"Yup. Got into a heap of trouble over at Indian Springs. Someone out to collect the bounty on him."

Unable to sustain the prolonged effort of sitting up, Larabee sank back, his chest heaving like a man who had just run a foot race and lost.

"He's...alright?"

Wilmington moved to open the shutters, as much to avoid having to face Chris as to let in some light, unsure how his news would be received but suspecting the gunfighter would take it hard.

"Wish I had better news for you, Chris, but Vin took a knife in the leg. Wounds been festerin' untended for days. We came back from Indian Springs as quick as we could -- ain't no doctor over there -- but he came down with a fever. Truth is, Nathan's worried about..." He hesitated. "...gangrene."

"Aw, Jesus." It was almost a moan of despair as the gunslinger turned his face to the wall, lank hair falling in a greasy strand across his forehead. "Why'd he have to go lookin' for me in the first place? Ain't in need of a nursemaid."

Buck turned back, a sad, lopsided smile on his face.

"Reckon he was just worried about you is all, but if you ask me you both need a nursemaid. Ezra too from the sound of it."

Chris held an arm across his aching stomach and again pushed himself up.

"Help me out here, Buck." He paused for breath. "Goddamn town's fallin' apart."

The mustached man stepped forward to support Larabee, recognising the same stubborn wilfulness in the gunslinger that had kept him alive through an illness that by rights should have killed him.

"And you're gonna fix it, right?" He prompted sarcastically.

Chris rested for a moment and cast a briefly irritated look in Wilmington's direction.

"No, I'm gonna take a piss. You're gonna fix it!"

oooOOOooo

"Sanchez!"

The preacher sighed and looked up from his book, finally understanding that until he responded Shaw was going to continue with his persistent harassment. So far, Josiah had merely ignored the repeated abuse, insults and threats issuing from the overcrowded cells but a man could only tolerate so

much.

"Mr. Shaw. Somethin' on your mind?"

"You got no right to keep us here, Sanchez. Six men to a cell meant for one man is downright inhumane. You and those other so called "peace-keepers" will pay for this, God help me."

Josiah's thoughts immediately went out to Ezra and decided that some of their number had already paid, but Shaw would hardly be the man to sympathise with the Southerner. Being of the 'eye for an eye' persuasion he would no doubt see it as divine retribution and if that was the case, then Josiah decided that he and Shaw shared a very different God.

"Inhumane?" mused Sanchez, as if he found the word interesting, "A mite cramped, I'll grant you, Mr. Shaw but inhumane? Now inhumane, if you ask me, is a bunch of gun totin' cowboys rampaging through a settlement of peace-lovin' folk."

"You got no right!" repeated Shaw, stubbornly, "We've done nothing wrong but try to protect our town. And for that we get locked up. You and your friends seem to do just as you please around here as far as I can see, Mr. Sanchez."

"We'll see what Judge Travis has to say about that, soon as he gets here," intoned Josiah smoothly, "I believe inciting a riot is enough grounds for arrest. Not to mention the fact that you escaped lawful custody and these men here aided and abetted that escape."

"Lawful custody? That Southern son-of-a-bitch!" protested Shaw. "Bastard locked me in here and then upped and left. Off siding with those goddamn tinkers. Hope he rots in hell."

Josiah stood up and walked up to the bars, his very control frightening in its intensity.

"Hell, Mr. Shaw? As surely as I believe in God's eternal grace I believe that it is men such as you that feed the fires of hell rather than the likes of Ezra. And right now, if I were you, I'd be thankful for what you've got here on earth because I don't reckon the Judge is going to take too kindly to your particular brand of home-grown justice."

"We'll see about that," retorted the merchant indignantly, "but I want it going on record that I protest this detainment of honest citizens by nothing more than a gang of gunslinging ruffians."

Josiah smiled but it was the predatory smile of a wolf.

"Consider it recorded, Mr. Shaw." He started to turn but stopped to level a hard-eyed stare that swept across every man in the two cells. "Now I hope you all don't take this personally but I reckon I need some fresh air."

The door of the jail slammed behind him and Josiah took a deep breath of the hot, dry, dusty air that suddenly seemed sweeter than nectar, wondering if the town would ever be the same again. With a shake of his grizzled head he decided that as long as there were men like Shaw there would be no hope for harmony in the world. Sighing wearily, he crossed the street and jogged up the stairs to Nathan's rooms; at least he could be assured of some sanity among friends.

Josiah glanced cautiously around the edge of the door before entering, and smiled at the scene before him, so different from the urgency that had invaded the small room earlier when he had been helping a distraught and frantic Buck with Vin. Sanity maybe, conversation definitely not. His eye slid past JD, uncomfortably asleep in the straight backed chair, to the man sleeping on the cot beside him. The Texan had thrown aside most of the covers trying, the preacher guessed, to cool the heat of fever that still burned so fiercely inside him. Sweat soaked hair stuck in wet strands across his forehead and bruised shadows rimmed his eye sockets, startlingly dark against pale skin, but his chest rose and fell with reassuring regularity and he seemed to finally be at rest. Bandages covered the damage wrought on the tender skin of his wrists but Josiah remembered too clearly the white bone showing through the bloodied flesh and wondered just what hell the tracker had been through. Knowing Vin, they were not likely to find out any time soon. A suggestion here and there, oblique references slipped into general

conversation over the course of time but Vin was a man who kept things to himself, a man who would carry a confidence to the grave without ever breaking it and who, for better or worse, would keep all his hurts inside. Pulling up a chair, the preacher reached across to tug the blanket over Vin's bruised shoulder and offered up a silent prayer for the young tracker.

Chris knew that it was only Buck's solid shoulder that was keeping him from falling to the ground; his legs were already trembling with the effort and he had barely taken a dozen steps.

"Better sit down, pard, before you fall down," advised Wilmington, marginally altering his grip to lower Larabee to the steps of the colourful wagon.

"Jesus, Buck!" He was panting, more than a little shaken by the fact that he was having so much difficulty breathing as well as walking.

Wilmington grasped his friend's shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze but his expression was as concerned as it was doubtful.

"Chris, do you think maybe this is a bad idea?"

"Won't matter none if it is." Startled, both men looked up to find Nettie Wells standing with hands on hips, looking with tolerant resignation at the blond gunslinger. "Thought Ezra took the prize for mulishness, now I reckon I could put the both of you in harness!"

A keening wail, rising like a wolf's tormented howl, echoed through the camp; a single voice quickly followed by another, then another, in an ululating sound of human anguish that neither man had ever heard before or ever wished to hear again. A raw sound of sorrow and pain given voice.

"Good God Almighty," breathed Buck, "What in hell was that?"

Nettie looked over at the women gathered around one of the wagons and sighed, a fleeting expression of sadness crossing her normally stern features.

"The child died," she said simply, then seeing the uncomprehending look on both men's faces, continued, "The child, Mioaru, was trampled when the mob set loose the horses and panicked them into stampeding through the camp. Ezra tried to save her and got stomped good and proper himself but the little mite died. Less than an hour ago. Now the wake's startin'." She looked back again to the group of distraught women, now tearing at their clothing, their hair, their faces, voices rising and falling in a foreign tongue that needed no interpreter to translate the depth of their grief.

"That little miss, cute as a button, that took such a shine to Ezra?" Buck shook his head. "Hell, Nettie, she weren't no more than a baby."

Chris closed his eyes, suddenly feeling sick and dizzy.

"This is my fault."

"Mr. Larabee, it's bad business and that's no mistake, but it ain't your fault. Don't know what it is with you fella's, Ezra's already blamin' himself. I reckon it don't need two of you to try and hitch your wagon to the same horse."

Larabee raised tired eyes to look at the woman, reading between her words.

"Where is he?" He looked across at the bright yellow wagon, somehow incongruously garish in the midst of such an open display of mourning. "Where's Ezra?"

Ezra had not moved. Being able to summon neither the energy or the inclination to do so, he chose instead to remain as he was and carefully reconstruct the bulwark around his emotions that Nettie had so cleverly breached. The camp had become a place of mourning and sadness, a perfect reflection of his own mood, and given his choices he would now like to settle back with a bottle of good whiskey and

systematically set about attaining that pleasant degree of inebriation that he had discovered was a panacea for any kind of pain. Unfortunately the wherewithal to achieve that particular goal was sadly lacking in his current circumstances. Without even his hip flask to provide solace he would be forced to remain absolutely, stone-cold sober. No escape.

He was still deeply saddened by Mioaru's death, but sharing the grief and letting the burden of it slip, if only for a short while, to someone else's shoulders had somehow eased the heartache. In comforting him Nettie had also gifted to him a glimpse of what it might have been like to have a mother who loved him, and for those few moments he had willingly surrendered to an emotion which he had never before had the opportunity to experience -- unconditional love. The Southerner briefly bowed his head and toyed with the signet ring on his finger, knowing that he owed Nettie Wells a debt of gratitude which he doubted he would ever be able to repay.

So it was that Buck found him. Quietly sitting atop an upturned barrel, his posture stiff and guarded, his equally guarded expression revealing nothing as he suddenly looked up and stared thoughtfully into infinity. Wilmington stood for a moment watching the gambler, knowing his approach would not have gone unnoticed but, for once, unwilling to barge into another man's solitude. Nettie said he had taken the girl's death hard and he had no intention of stamping his boots all over such a fresh wound as that. Besides, Ezra might just decide to take a swing at him. Although Buck had to concede that the Southerner looked in no shape to throw a punch. In fact he looked as if just sitting was probably more than he could manage right now.

Wilmington had never seen the Southerner in such a dishevelled state before. Lord, he was hard pressed to remember when he had last seen him in his shirtsleeves and now he was barely decent with his shirt still half-unbuttoned, showing a broad band of white bandage that encased his chest. Even from where he stood he could see the dark discolouration of bruising above the bandage and the bloody gash across his cheek. The man had to be suffering, decided Buck, and from what Nettie had said, in more ways than one.

Finally Buck sighed and took another few paces forward.

"Mind if I sit?"

Ezra moved his hand that in a noncommittal gesture that said he did not mind either way but his gaze remained locked on the far distance. Buck claimed another barrel and leaned forward, elbows on knees to look intently at the ground for several minutes before finally raising his head to speak.

"Anything I can do, Ezra?"

The gambler turned then, slight surprise registering before his face slipped back into bland neutrality.

"Thank you, Buck, but unless you by chance happen to have a bottle of whiskey about your person I don't believe you can be of any assistance."

"Nope. No whiskey."

Ezra gave one of his familiar self-deprecating smiles.

"Ah, well. Probably for the best." He rubbed absently at a stain on his pants with his thumb and after a few moments of silence looked keenly at the mustached cowboy. "When did you get back?"

"Coupla hours ago."

"Eventful trip?"

Buck was uncertain whether the gambler was having a sly dig at him for having been away so long but gave him the benefit of the doubt.

"Followed a bunch of horse thieves all the way to Indian Springs. They had Vin with 'em. Renegade by the name of Cochinay and his band were takin' him in for the bounty."

"I trust you succeeded in demonstrating to these miscreants the error of their ways?"

"We brought Vin back, and Cochinay's dead, if that's what you mean but we didn't get to him as

quick as we should. Vin took a bad knife wound to the leg out on the trail and Nathan ain't sure he can save it."

Ezra's eyes clouded and he lowered his head as if another weight had been added to the crushing burden that he already carried.

"Dear Lord, whatever did we do to bring such a plague of misfortunes upon us?"

Buck shook his head. "Ain't had nothin' but bad luck since Chris came ridin' back into town with these folk, that's for certain."

The Southerner did not move or speak but Wilmington realised from the subtle but significant tensing of the gambler's attitude what he had just implied.

"Ezra, now don't take that the wrong way," he began hastily, "Didn't mean nothin' by it."

Standish's smile held no warmth.

"No? No, I don't suppose you did, but I have just spent a week of my life trying to prevent the..." he paused to find an appropriate word, "...cretins of this town, who incidentally subscribe to a very similar view, from exacting violence on a people who have done nothing more than be different and, worse, be here."

"Hell, I ain't one of them," protested Buck, "Just my mouth got way ahead of my brain. If these folk hadn't taken care of Chris, the man'd be dead by now. I got plenty to thank 'em for. We all do."

Ezra sighed and when he spoke his voice was tight with the effort of controlling his emotions.

"Buck, I promised that little girl that I'd make sure no harm came to her or her brother. I failed to keep that promise but I'm telling you now, as God is my witness, that I will see justice done. I swear, someone will pay."

"You sure that's justice you're talking about or vengeance?"

Standish took a deep breath and pushed himself up from his makeshift seat on the barrel, his face pale from the effort but with a hard expression on his face that Wilmington had never seen on the gambler before.

"Give it whatever name you want, Mr. Wilmington," he paused, obviously in pain, and held an arm across his ribs, "but Shaw will hang. Even if I have to do it myself."

There was no room for anything in his thoughts but the pain that radiated from his leg. He held himself rigid for fear of initiating the slightest movement that he knew from experience would trigger a fresh explosion of agony. He wanted no one to touch him, to speak to him, to be near him, as he struggled to hold himself together, afraid that if he for one minute let go of his carefully structured but fragile control he would scream. He had snarled like a rabid dog when Nathan had tried to check the bandages, and although the healer had backed off he knew it was only a matter of time before he would be back. Knowing Nathan he would get his way come hell or high water. His resistance to taking any more laudanum had no rational basis; he knew it would deaden the pain but it also meant he surrendered control and he was now too afraid to let go.

The seriousness of his injury was not lost on him. Even through the haze of fever and opium he had understood the dual threat of gangrene and amputation, and fear had spread its icy fingers to every corner of his mind until he dared not close his eyes. If he surrendered, he would die; or worse, Nathan would take his leg, saw through bone and flesh like cordwood, and leave him a cripple. His mind reeled in panic. He would sooner choose death than that. Sweat trickled uncomfortably down his neck and under his armpits, and his skin was slick with a gloss of perspiration but the discomfort meant nothing to him in the face of the horrors yet awaiting him that his mind had conjured.

"Vin."

No.

His fingers gripped the coarse bed linen, preparing to resist. They were back.

"Vin, don't. It's Chris."

No. Just a trick. Chris was gone. Couldn't find him...found Cochinay instead. And Danny. But Danny was gone...like Chris. Just a trick.

"Come on, cowboy. I ain't gonna hurt you."

He growled, an inarticulate animal sound deep in his throat, as a hand settled on his arm.

"How long has he been like this?"

"A few hours. Won't let me touch him. Can't get the laudanum into him. Won't even take any water."

"Let me try."

"Vin, listen to me. Vin, listen! No one's going to touch you, okay? Just drink this." A pause and a sigh. "It's water. Trust me."

It was Chris. No mistaking that voice. The tracker licked his lips suddenly aware of his extreme thirst. *Maybe just a little. Chris wouldn't lie -- would he?* He didn't. Vin drank warily, then greedily as he detected no hint of adulteration and gave in to his body's urgent demands for more.

"Needed that," he admitted, his voice rough, then focusing glittering blue eyes on Larabee his hand snaked out to grab the other man's wrist. "Don't let 'em do it, Chris! Swear to me you'll shoot me first."

"Do what, Vin?"

"Damn it! SWEAR to me!" Desperation and fear.

A hesitation of no more than a heartbeat.

"I swear."

Tanner nodded then, satisfied, and released the gunfighter from his desperate grip, suddenly exhausted. He could rest now. Someone there to watch his back. Keep the goddamn buzzards away.

Chris sighed and shook his head, not sure what he had just promised the distraught tracker. Frowning he glanced up at Jackson.

"What the hell's he talking about, Nathan?"

The healer shrugged.

"I don't know, Chris. Crazy talk? A high fever'll do that sometimes."

"I know crazy talk, and this ain't it. Never thought I'd be sayin' this about Vin Tanner, but he's just plain scared out of his wits."

"Guess he is at that," agreed Nathan, "Reckon he's a bit more settled now you're here though."

Larabee closed his eyes, head and body aching, feeling as if a puff of wind would blow him away. This was all too hard. He could feel the energy leeching out of him like water out of a leaky bucket and if he had not already been sitting, he knew he would have fallen. Goddamn it! He had more sores on him than a saddle-galled nag, he needed help to stand and he could barely move more than a half dozen paces without getting winded. How the hell was he supposed to help anybody else?

Chris allowed his gaze to fall back on the Texan. If the tracker was relying on him for anything then he would be sadly disappointed. It was his fault that Tanner was lying there, half-crazy, with some unnamed terror haunting him. Vin had gone out looking for him. Vin, Ezra, the gypsy girl -- all of them his fault -- so many people hurt because of him. He rubbed his eyes. Still, he had always been good at hurting other people. He looked up, startled, as Nathan squeezed his shoulder and handed him a cup of steaming liquid.

"If you don't mind a piece of advice, Chris, you should be takin' it easy yourself."

"Ain't movin' from here," he stated simply, and experimentally tasted the herbal brew, obviously not impressed but persevering anyway.

“Good. Then you won’t mind if I take a look at that wound.”

For probably the first time in his life, Larabee surrendered without a fight.

Nathan shook his head as he ran gentle fingers over the red ridge of scar tissue in the gunfighter’s side.

“Clean as a whistle. Those gypsies sure know a thing or two about healing.” His admiration was obvious. “That wise woman of theirs knows a powerful lot about medicine. Got herbs and potions there I’ve never even seen before.”

Chris gestured with his cup.

“Taste any better’n this?”

Jackson laughed.

“Maybe so.” He became suddenly serious. “I reckon it was that stuff she cooked up to stop the seizures that saved your life. Weren’t nothin’ I did. Man, I thought you were gonna break your back there.”

The healer shook his head remembering his helplessness, unable to do anything as the gunfighter had contorted in agony in front of his eyes.

“Felt like it too.” The response was quiet, an unwanted memory. “You know, I remember wanting to die.” He gave a brittle laugh. “Then being scared that maybe I would.”

Nathan hung his head trying to imagine how that might feel, and in some measure relieved that he had nothing on which to base a comparison.

“But you made it through, Chris. Reckon it just wasn’t your time.”

Larabee turned his head to look back at Tanner.

“You reckon it might be his?”

Jackson’s expression became resolute.

“Not if I can help it.”

For the first time in days Ezra was as close to comfortable as he was likely to get until his ribs healed completely and he had Mimi to be thankful for that. She had quietly and firmly taken him in hand and, ignoring his protests, had undone the strapping around his chest. A mixed blessing he found, for while he could breathe more easily, the had pain returned with renewed vigour, and with the deeper inspirations came the cough and each cough rattled wetly in his lungs. It was a vicious circle which, like any circle, had no foreseeable end.

The gypsy woman had insisted that he lie down in one of the vardos and he had finally given in when she had started scolding him in Romany. It seemed his destiny to have his life presided over by women who wished to dominate him but for now it was the least of his worries, and he no longer had the strength nor the will to put up any resistance. So he had, with great care and no little effort, managed to do as she asked and stretch out on the narrow bed. She had then urged him to roll onto his injured side, something he was less than enthusiastic about doing but it was much less painful than he had anticipated, and after a few minutes he began to relax.

“Men are so foolish.” She spoke quietly but with conviction. “You wear a mask to hide the hurt, but the hurt is still there underneath. Why is this? Are you ashamed to show what is in your heart?”

Ezra closed his eyes. Yes.

“It’s not considered appropriate for a gentleman to wear his heart on his sleeve,” he explained, his voice tight.

“I do not understand. Wearing a heart?”

Ezra drew a deep breath and stifled the resultant cough before going on.

"It means...openly displaying one's feelings? Putting them on show for everyone to see."

"Ah," she nodded, obviously unimpressed, "To keep this a secret thing is your way?"

The gambler turned his head to look over his shoulder at the woman sitting on the edge of the bunk behind him.

"Some of us are better at it than others," he confessed, with a sad smile that held more regret than humour.

Mimi made a sound that left him in no doubt as to her thoughts on the matter.

"Rest now. I will bring Grandmother. She will have something to take your pain away."

"No!" He reached out with the intention of grabbing her arm but the sudden action tugged viciously at his ribcage, forcing an abrupt halt to the gesture and prompting a soft grunt from the gambler. Unable to complete the movement he instead allowed his hand to fall back to his side. "Please. I'll be fine." In truth, the Southerner just wanted to be left alone.

"Ezra. You are stubborn and you are hurt, but you are not 'fine'." She slowly rose and turned to leave. "I will be back soon. Sleep if you can but don't move."

Standish would have laughed if he could have managed it without inflicting further pain. The bare facts of the matter were that there seemed to be an ever widening distance between intent and capability, and moving was one of those things that was rapidly moving out of reach.

"Rest assured, dear lady," he sighed, "I have no immediate plans to venture forth. Indeed, I am at your mercy."

Mimi looked at him for a long moment with a critical eye as if gauging whether he was being honest with her then, apparently satisfied that he was and not merely humouring her, she left.

As door closed behind her Ezra slowly reached up and pulled the down-stuffed pillow further under his head. If there truly was any part of him that did not hurt he had yet to find it, and he had already come to the conclusion that it was far wiser to maintain his current position, in which he had at least found a degree of comfort, than risk triggering any further outbursts of pain by trying to change it. He was no masochist, although he believed that given his behaviour over the last few days, anyone could be forgiven for thinking otherwise but now, Mioaru had lost the fight and he had no fight left in him. In spite of his earlier words to Buck he would be no threat to Shaw or any of his followers, at least for tonight. He did not even have his gun.

Closing his eyes he could hear the soft swell of voices through the thin walls of the wagon, rising and falling in the familiar cadence of what could only be prayer, interspersed with more violent outbursts of grief as men, women and children alike freely gave vent to their emotions. The wake. The gypsies had no reservations about making their feelings known, of sharing their sorrow in a public demonstration of anguish that bore no comparison to anything Ezra had ever experienced before. He compared his own reaction, setting himself apart from the others, separating himself from the very people who just might understand, and feeling shame that someone else might witness his pain. Turning his face into the pillow, he gave himself up to the tide of emotion that surged over him and again -- alone -- he grieved. A secret thing indeed.

Chris looked doubtfully at the tray in front of him and his first reaction was that he was going to be sick. He had not eaten solid food in more than a week and although he was hungry, faced with something more substantial than thin gruel, milk and herbal teas, he found the prospect nauseating. Looking for a long time at the plate of thick, meaty stew, unable to tolerate the rich smell that assaulted his senses let alone consider the idea of tasting it, he finally pushed it away.

"You really should eat something," urged Nathan, "Build up your strength."

Still barefoot and shirtless, the gunfighter absently ran his fingers over his too-prominent ribs and knew Jackson was right. Always lean, he now resembled a spavined horse and his muscles were so weak that he doubted he could even draw his gun. Picking up the spoon was going to be hard enough. Finally he tried the soup, slowly spooning it into his mouth and hoping he could swallow it without gagging. He managed half the bowl before pushing it, too, away.

"Never thought eating when you were hungry could be so hard," he confessed with a sigh, sipping tentatively at a cup of coffee.

"You sure you don't want anythin' else."

Larabee shook his head.

"Any more and I'll be airing my paunch for sure."

Jackson nodded in understanding.

"You wanna lie down for a while?"

Chris reached up and rubbed his shoulder.

"Nathan, I don't ever want to lie down again the way I feel right now. In fact I reckon you can bury me standin'." He transferred his attention to the Texan, as if his thoughts had taken an unwanted turn at the mention of death. "You know, Nathan, I've been thinking."

Jackson looked up from where he had been winding some bandages.

"'Bout what?"

Larabee paused. He still had difficulty sustaining the effort of talking for any length of time.

"The woman who fixed me. Could she help Vin?"

A sudden shadow passed over Nathan's face and Chris cursed himself.

"I don't mean anythin' by that Nathan," he went on hurriedly, "but, hell, you yourself said she has stuff you've never even seen before. Maybe she knows somethin' that'll help."

Nathan stood up abruptly.

"I've seen wounds turn like that in the war. No two ways around it, Chris. You let 'em die, or you..." he hesitated, avoiding looking at the gunfighter, "you cut it off."

Chris, already pale, turned white then slowly looked from the healer to the tracker, suddenly understanding Vin's impassioned plea and his frantic demand for Chris' sworn oath. *Don't let 'em do it, Chris! Swear to me you'll shoot me first. Damn it, swear to me!*

I swear.

Buck had never seen the town so quiet; more like a ghost town tonight. He rocked back on the chair and drank some of his beer as he stared thoughtfully across the street at the sheriff's office. Goddamn, the jail had more people in it than the saloon. Folks it seemed had decided to stay at home and play it safe. Not a bad idea, mused Wilmington, given the climate in the town and he was, for once, relieved to see such an uncommon lack of revelry. JD, after sleeping most of the afternoon away, had finally relieved Josiah from his long spell watching the prisoners, and from the noise coming from the jail it sounded as though the Kid had his hands full. He smiled, wondering if he should wander across and lend a hand, but in the end he just sat.

Above the livery, the light from Nathan's rooms still shone brightly and, guessed Buck, would be burning all night. The healer would be getting little sleep -- again. He took another swallow of his beer and his mind flicked uneasily to his last sight of Vin, lying in a fevered sweat with his leg laid open almost to the bone under Nathan's knife, and -- Dear God! -- the sickeningly sweet smell of corruption that had invaded the small and stifling room. He set aside his beer, suddenly losing all interest in it and his gaze was drawn back to the jail house. Daniel Shaw did not know how lucky he was to be behind bars. Or

how fortunate he was that Ezra was in no position to carry out his threat to hang the bastard. Not that Buck would have minded seeing the scum-sucking weasel swing on the end of a rope, he just didn't want to see Ezra swinging right after him when the Judge found out he had lynched a man without a fair trial. Buck let the chair settle back onto all four legs with a snap.

Then there was Chris. Hellfire, the man had almost died and he didn't want to think about what that meant to him. Still looked like death warmed over but he reckoned Larabee at least now only had one foot in the grave. He'd seen Chris shot up more than once over the years, some of them close calls, and he'd even been there to fix him up when he was stabbed one time in a saloon fight down in Purgatory but this -- a sickness he couldn't fight or even see -- had been the enemy that had almost carried him off. Buck shivered and he knew it was more than the chill night air coming down. It was the reality that one day all this would be gone. The knowledge that in the wink of an eye -- no, goddamn it, between one breath and the next -- everything could change. That these men he had come to know and trust, his mind veered alarmingly from the word love, might just be blown away like a tumbleweed on the desert winds. Abruptly he stood up -- *Jesus Christ, Bucklin, you're getting soft in the head* -- and stepped out onto the street. With a last glance at the light over the livery he spun and strode quickly away. Better check on Ezra. Never knew just what that loco Southerner might do in his present mood if there was no one to keep an eye on him and even if the man was slicker than a greased pig, he sure as hell didn't want to see him get his neck stretched.

The sweat beaded on his brow to run in shining rivulets down his face and soak into the pillow on which he rested his head. The heat was intense but the pain had miraculously eased and for that he was prepared to put up with anything the old gypsy had to offer. As promised, Mimi had returned with the crone she referred to as Grandmother, who if he recalled correctly, seemed to be grand-dam to the entire clan. He wondered briefly if it was an honorary title or if the woman was indeed the matriarch from whose loins this entire extended family of gypsies had sprung. Whatever her role or her contribution to the Romany population, Ezra had come to the conclusion that she had magic in her hands.

A steaming square of flannel, as hot as he could stand, soaked in some pungently aromatic herbal concoction, lay across the middle and lower part of his exposed back centred over the break in his ribs. As it cooled, the woman deftly replaced it with another maintaining an even heat that relaxed tense muscles and for the first time since he had been pounded into the dust by a dozen equine hooves he was not in extreme pain. He suspected the highly unpalatable concoction she had pressed him to drink contained a soporific as he was now having to fight to keep his eyes open, cursing the fact that he had been so easily manipulated and that much against his will, he would soon be asleep. He was losing his edge. Should have been more circumspect. There were still things he had to do. Things that could not wait. A gentle but firm hand on his shoulder pre-empted his immediate intention to rise and with a sigh of resignation he wondered again if this woman might not truly be a witch.

"Ladies," he began, "Much as I appreciate your most kind attentions, I really must be on my way now."

He heard a brief exchange between the two women, then Mimi's voice answered.

"Grandmother says you will stay."

Nonplussed, he paused to consider that. *You will stay*. Not a request. Not even negotiable. A command worthy of Mr. Larabee no less.

"Look, Mimi," he tried again, wincing as another hot poultice sent a surge of heat through his back, "I have to get back. There are...things I must do."

Ezra wiped the accumulated sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand as the two women

consulted again.

"Grandmother says you have much anger in your heart. That you look for vengeance. She says this is a bad thing. She says..." Mimi hesitated, "...she says let the dead rest. Justice will be served through the hand of God."

The Southerner squeezed his eyes shut, taking a breath before finding his voice again.

"I believe I had something more immediate -- and personal -- in mind."

"You must not do this thing, Ezra," Mimi warned, "It can bring only great sorrow to you and to my people."

"Darlin', there are some things in this world which cannot be ignored. The murder of an innocent child is one of those things."

"But you cannot mend a wrong by doing another wrong." The younger woman put a hand on his shoulder. "Will you killing this man bring Mioaru back to us?"

Ezra's face paled at the mention of the girl's name, his eyes glittering like splinters of jade as he struggled to maintain his composure.

"No." It came out as a choked whisper.

"No," she sighed, sadly, "And you will be left with nothing but an empty heart, *gadje*."

The gambler's shoulders slumped. His heart was already empty. He had nothing more to lose.

"I will see justice done," he said softly, as much to himself as to Mimi, "And in this world, not the next."

Chris slowly got up, every joint and muscle aching, wanting to shout his denial to the heaven's. Instead he shook his head, his eyes too-bright in their deeply shadowed sockets as he stared accusingly at the healer.

"You can't do that to a man, Nathan. Not to Vin. Just can't do that."

"You'd rather he died?"

"He would!"

"You know that for sure, Chris?"

Larabee moved towards the bed where the tracker still slept. Only sleeping, Chris knew, because he had trusted him to watch his back. That trust given, he had no intention of betraying it.

"Don't you see, that's just what he's so afraid of? And I swore..." He stopped suddenly and looked at the Texan again, his voice losing much of its anger and becoming almost apologetic, "...I swore I'd kill him before I'd let you do that."

Nathan took a step forward, suddenly afraid of the dangerous glint in the gunfighter's eyes.

"Chris, you don't mean that."

Chris dragged one of the chairs close to the bedside, the effort costing him dearly, and sat down. It was only as he reached across to take Vin's mare's leg from the side table where Buck had left it, that Jackson really believed he might be serious. Without haste, Chris checked that the sawn-off Winchester was loaded and rested the weapon across his knees before looking back at the healer.

"Nathan, ain't you or anybody else gonna take Vin's leg off. Not even to save his life. You better find some other way and fast."

Jackson, in an uncharacteristic show of anger, suddenly flung aside the chair he had been leaning on, sending it flying across the room. Larabee's response was to wedge one bare foot against the edge of the bed and lean back in the chair, taking up guard.

"Goddamn! That's no choice, Chris. You might as well take that gun and put it to his head right now!"

The unmistakable sound of Chris cocking the Winchester stopped not only Jackson's forward

movement but the very breath in his throat, as the two men stared at each other in shocked silence across the small room. Seconds ticked by with the only sound coming from the pendulum on the wall clock swinging endlessly to and fro, until finally Nathan held up both hands in a gesture of surrender, his head wagging from side to side in a combination of disbelief and negation.

"Man, you're crazy. You know that?" His voice shook, not yet certain what the gunslinger might do if he felt threatened.

Larabee tilted his head to one side, a feral smile curving his lips but not touching the hardness in his eyes.

"I've been told that before."

"This is a man's life you're playing with. Vin's life. You want his dying on your conscience?"

Chris sighed and shifted in his seat, his finger still curved around the trigger. He seemed to take a moment to think before he finally answered.

"Got a lot of dead men on my conscience already, Nathan. You think one more'll make that much difference?"

Jackson took a step back. This was a Chris he didn't know talking.

"Yes I do. I do because this is not some stranger you're gonna outdraw in a gunfight, this is Vin. And he's a friend. Not just your friend either Chris Larabee, I hope you remember that when we put him in the ground!" The last five words were shouted as Jackson's indignation at what Chris was proposing bubbled over.

The gunslinger let his head fall forward, his lank hair falling over his face, deliberately not looking at the healer although his hand never moved from the mare's leg or altered where he had it aimed. It worried Nathan that he was looking down the sawn off barrel of a rifle but it worried him less than if it had been aimed at Tanner.

"Reckon he'd thank me for it, Nathan," he said quietly.

With that Nathan understood there was nothing he could say that was going to change Chris' mind and he slowly moved to pick up the chair he had thrown and set it on its legs.

"You ain't gonna listen to anything I'm saying, I know that, but just think on this. I know I ain't no doctor. Can only do so much and that ain't always enough. But you're asking me to watch someone die when I know there's somethin' I can do. I've never tried to play God. Don't reckon it's your place neither!" No longer able to contain his anger, the healer shook his head in disgust and stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

The Texan flinched, his eyes flying open as the door crashed shut and the sound penetrated his consciousness, his unfocused gaze settling in confused alarm on the man sitting beside him.

"S'Okay, Cowboy," murmured the gunslinger, softly, "I got your back."

Vin sighed and nodding once, trusting, closed his eyes again.

Nathan had no idea where he was going. He was heading down the boardwalk with no other thought in his mind than to find someone -- anyone -- who might be able talk some sense into Chris before he did something he would regret. While he did not believe that Chris would kill Vin, he did believe that Larabee would let the tracker die if amputation was the only alternative, and he was not convinced there was going to be any other alternative. He had cut away as much corrupt flesh as he dared and was already afraid that the wound would never heal. If he wired Bitter Creek he could get Doctor Mason to ride over. He was a surgeon. Chris would maybe trust him enough to listen to reason.

"Nathan? What brings you out at this hour? Got a problem, brother?"

Jackson stopped abruptly, realising just where he was as Josiah's voice came to him out of the

darkness from shadowed recess of the church steps. He gave a bitter laugh, still seeing the uncompromising look in Larabee's eyes and the mare's leg in his lap as he had walked out.

"Not unless you think Chris sitting with a loaded gun keeping me away from Vin is a problem."

"Chris?" The preacher quickly got to his feet. "Wanna tell me about it."

Jackson sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, not sure how to explain what he did not fully understand himself.

"Vin's leg. It's bad. I don't know if I can save it, Josiah, and Chris says he'll see Vin dead before let him lose his leg."

Sanchez sucked in a deep breath.

"Proud men both. Cut from the same cloth. I can see Chris feelin' that way -- Vin too."

"Josiah!"

"Now I didn't say it was right," continued the preacher hastily, aware that Jackson was already beside himself with worry. "Just said I understood how a man might feel."

"I'm thinking I should maybe wire John Mason over in Bitter Creek. He fixed Ezra up a time or two and Chris might listen to him."

Sanchez rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Worth a try, I guess, though if Chris has got his mind set I reckon he'd argue with the Lord Almighty himself. Reckon your best bet is Buck. Now Buck's been through bad times with Chris before; probably the only one who might be able to handle him without getting himself shot."

"Yeah." Nathan thought about that. Buck was not averse to using his fists as a method of persuasion either. He recalled the mustached cowboy bringing the gunslinger back from a bender in Purgatory not too many weeks before slung over his saddle bow and out like a light. "Yeah, Buck." He looked down the empty street. "Where the hell is he?"

Josiah clapped big hand on the healer's shoulder.

"Come on! Let's go find him. He can't be too far away." He hesitated and cast a questionable glance in the direction of the livery. "What about Chris?"

"He's not about to do anything, at least I don't think so," sighed Nathan, "And some time on his own might just give him a chance to think things through."

Josiah nodded, agreeing, then added: "Best not give him too long though, hey?"

Nathan frowned, a sudden shadow of doubt passing over his already troubled features and, as one, the two men wordlessly started down the empty street. After a few minutes of contemplative silence Josiah broached the subject again.

"Is Chris...alright?"

Jackson made a sound that may have been a laugh but which may just have easily been a snort of disgust.

"Stubborn son-of-a-bitch can't hardly stand up but he's still as ornery as a coyote with a cactus up its ass; and I wasn't gonna argue with the business end of a Winchester."

"Wise decision, brother. Chris ain't someone you prod to see if he'll bite." Although he was looking at the ground as he walked, Nathan could tell Josiah was smiling.

"I don't know what to do, Josiah," he confessed, quietly, "Chris says find another way, but I don't know any other way! In the war we just cut off arms and legs like so much dead wood. Saved a lot of men that way who would've died otherwise."

Sanchez slowed to a halt and reached out to capture the healer's arm as he walked on.

"Is Vin going to die?"

Nathan shrugged off the preacher's hand and rapidly changed direction, turning towards the sheriff's office without looking at the preacher.

"That's up to Chris."

Buck slowed as he approached the encampment. The sound of the mourners at the wake sent a chill through him and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as the voices rose and fell in a haunting song that tugged, almost against his will, at his own emotions. Damn, but he hated funerals. For a moment he was torn between respecting the gypsies' privacy in their time of grief and needing to see the gambler but his concern for the Southerner won. Ezra should not be here alone among strangers, not at a time like this, and whether he knew it or not he had his own people who cared about him.

"Ezra?" Trying to keep his voice low he cruised slowly between the wagons. "Ezra? You in there?"

Finally, when he was beginning to feel not only conspicuous but foolish, a young gypsy woman he remembered seeing about the camp, emerged from one of the vardos and held a finger to her lips, then beckoned the mustached cowboy.

"Hush! He is here, but he sleeps!"

Buck leaned one arm against the wagon and wondered absently how he had failed to notice how attractive this woman was. Too much on his mind, he guessed ruefully, fully aware that anything that drove the thoughts of a striking woman out of his mind had to be pretty damn serious.

"Good thing too I reckon," he confessed, keeping his voice low, "Keep him out of trouble."

"Aiy!" She rolled her eyes expressively, speaking volumes in that single expression, then gave a quick smile which disappeared in an instant behind a sombre mask. "Grandmother gave him a sleeping draught."

Wilmington's eyebrows shot up and nearly disappeared into his hairline.

"And Ezra took it?" Mimi's eyes dropped to stare guiltily at the ground and Buck started to laugh softly, genuinely amused. "He didn't know."

"No. Grandmother was tending to his hurts and gave him some tea for the pain, but it was also a powerful medicine to make him..." She paused and used her hands to describe the word she could not find by spreading both hands out, palm down to indicate an even plane.

"Well, he could sure use that," agreed Buck, thinking these women had probably done just the right thing for the Southerner, although he suspected that Ezra would be none too pleased about it when he finally woke up. The cardsharp finally bested at his own game. "Got himself a little bit sideways, I reckon."

The woman tilted her head.

"Sideways." She repeated, considering the word carefully, then nodded with another brief smile. "Yes. This is so."

Wilmington jerked his head towards the door of the wagon, still ajar behind her.

"I was gonna take him..." Buck hesitated, unsure of what he was going to say, then pressed on having decided on the right word, "...home."

"Home is not a place, *gadje*, but a feeling in the heart." She said softly. "I think Ezra has closed his heart and so has no home. He is lost in the wilderness, running against the wind."

Wilmington stared for a long time at the wagon, her words reaching deep, and touching his own emotions. Ezra running against the wind? Wasn't that what they were all doing? It sure as hell felt like it to him.

Chris heard the clatter of Nathan's footsteps on the wooden staircase fade to silence as he reached

the street and the healer's tread was muffled by the desert dust. With a sigh he uncocked the Winchester and carefully laid it across his thighs. He was too exhausted for this. Just staying upright in the chair was taking all his energy and he was unsure how long he would be able to maintain his vigil over the tracker. Right now, a determined child could probably best him. Hell, just when Vin needed him the most he was likely to fail him.

The Texan stirred, and Chris found himself staring into blue eyes bright with fever that he knew did not see him. Vin was somewhere far away from this small, stuffy room above the livery. Chris knew. He had spent a lot of time in that place himself over the last week or so but he hoped Vin's dreams were better than the one's he had endured. Tanner slowly lifted a hand but it was reaching out to someone other than Chris; someone in the bounty hunter's fevered imagination. Just as slowly the hand fell back to the bed and Vin briefly closed his eyes again, a grimace of pain momentarily twisting his features.

Suddenly Vin sat upright, staring into the distance far beyond the walls of Nathan's rooms and in a state of great agitation suddenly started pulling at the bandages on his wrists as if they were fetters. Urgently the tracker ripped at the linen strips, pulling them off in bloody tatters and exposing the raw wounds that again started to bleed. Leaning forward the gunfighter hesitantly touched Vin on the shoulder but the tracker seemed not to notice the contact as he struggled to remove the last shreds of the bandages and throw them aside. That done the desperation seemed to leave him but confusion and fear remained.

"Vin." No response.

Chris gently pushed against his shoulder and the Texan laid back again without any real resistance but his eyes were open, wide and staring, and his hands, in constant motion, fidgeted with the blanket. At intervals one hand would stray to his thigh and grip his leg through the covers, then relax, before the cycle started all over again. Helpless, Chris could only watch Vin's distress and wonder what personal torment the tracker was going through.

"What the hell happened to you, Vin?" whispered the gunfighter, shaking his head as he rubbed his eyes.

Tanner's head slowly turned and some of the wildness went out of his eyes as he took a shuddering breath and again grasped the blanket in a convulsive, white-knuckled grip.

"Been looking for you."

Larabee frowned, hearing the words but not completely sure that Vin was even lucid. He answered just in case, hoping the sound of his voice might trigger some spark of recognition in the tracker.

"I'm right here, Cowboy."

Vin sighed and ground his head into the pillow, a signal of pain or denial, Chris could not tell which.

"They got you too, Larabee."

Chris decided the tracker was back from wherever he had been, and gave a brief smile.

"Rode right into it. Took a goddamned arrow in the side for my trouble!"

"Delshay."

"What?"

"Apache," whispered Vin, licking dry lips, "Lookout at the canyon. Horse rustlers."

Chris nodded slowly. It suddenly made sense. The defile was a perfect place for a gang of rustlers to hole up. He had just had the misfortune to pick that day to ride into it, not knowing or even caring about any damned rustlers. Just wanting to get out of the rain.

"Shoulda paid more attention," continued the Texan, then he seemed to run out of energy and closed his eyes for a moment but Chris could tell he was bracing himself against the pain, every muscle tense. "Bastard snuck up on me. Busted my hand."

Chris' eyes dropped to Vin's hands spread out now on the bed and realised that the right one was

still a little swollen.

"Nathan's gone," he offered, his voice low, understanding that to the bounty-hunter the healer was more of a threat than a comfort right now.

Tanner managed a nod, then forced a smile as his eyes focused on the mare's leg in Chris' hand.

"Ran him off, huh?"

Larabee leaned back again in the chair and adjusted his grip on the weapon, wondering if the Texan had any inkling as to how close to the truth he was.

"Somethin' like that."

"Thanks. Countin' on you." He sighed again, almost gratefully. "If I'm gonna die, I wanna die in one piece."

Chris had no response for that. There was nothing he could say. Vin clutched his leg again, holding his breath and Chris knew the pain must be unbearable. He had refused anything for the pain and the blond man doubted he would take it now even if Nathan was here to give it to him.

"Isn't this where you're supposed to tell me I'm not gonna die?" he gasped finally.

"Jesus, Vin!"

The Texan actually smiled then, his breath coming in short bursts as he again twisted his fingers into the bed covers.

"Steady, pard. Don't expect ya to make no promises ya can't keep."

The gunfighter lowered his eyes, unable to meet Vin's brilliantly blue-eyed stare, unwilling to confess that he thought he already had.

Buck took his hat off and nodded to the old woman sitting beside the gambler, gently rubbing an oily salve into his skin. He had needed to see Ezra for himself and he had to admit that the Southerner looked the most peaceful he had ever seen him, and probably the most vulnerable. Sometimes he forgot that he and Chris had chalked up a few more years than most of these men they rode with and who had become almost like an extended family. Shirtless, the spectacular bruising now exposed which trailed across Ezra's back, right side and chest, bore grim testament to the damage he had sustained in trying to save the little gypsy girl. Wilmington shook his head. The gambler was as slippery as an eel, always seemed to be looking for the easy way out and spent his life trying to take advantage of anyone foolish enough to fall for his cunning schemes and glib tongue, then he'd go and pull a stunt like this and show something of the man he always seemed to be trying to hide.

The woman waved a hand at him and, understanding the gesture, he awkwardly sat down on a small carved stool near the foot of the narrow bed. She looked evenly at him, and with surprisingly nimble fingers continued to smooth the aromatic oil into the Southerner's bruised flesh.

"Friend?"

Buck inclined his head.

"Yes, ma'am. He's a friend."

She nodded as if he had spoken a great truth.

"*Stanki nashti chi arakenpe manushen shai.*"

Wilmington frowned.

"She says: Mountains do not meet, but people do."

Buck turned his hat slowly in his hands and watched as the older woman continued to tend the gambler's injuries, gently and with as much care and attention as a mother with a cherished son. He wondered how Maude would have responded to Ezra's misadventure and decided she would probably have been chastising him for not thinking of himself first and being foolish enough to put himself in

harm's way, and for a brat of all things. Knowing Maude he could almost hear her harsh criticism of her only son and he could only wonder if she ever noticed the man Ezra had become.

"And I'm thinking that for Chris and Ezra that's a mighty good thing too, ma'am," he admitted quietly, "Reckon we owe you."

Wringing a cloth out in a small basin, the healing woman pushed the hair back from the Southerner's forehead and wiped his face, before pulling the colourful blanket up to cover him. Ezra did not stir, his respirations still deep and even, although Buck could hear the moist rattle in his chest as he breathed.

"No debt," the woman uttered shortly, as she got to her feet and gathered her things together, "He has paid already with blood."

Buck rose, ducking his head to accommodate his height in the low-roofed vardo and looked again at the sleeping man.

"Guess you could be right there at that."

His thoughts suddenly strayed to Vin, tossing in the throes of fever as Nathan cut ever more deeply into his leg; more payment in blood. While the gambler now rested easy, the Texan was sickening to death and there was not a thing that anyone could do about it.

"Buck! Hey, Buck!" The voice was undeniably Josiah's and unmistakably urgent, quickly echoed by Nathan's: "Buck! You here?"

Wilmington quickly pushed open the door to the wagon and cleared the steps in a single stride.

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Need you to talk some sense into Chris," offered the healer by way of explanation, "Ain't listening to anyone else."

Buck looked slowly and warily from one to the other, seeing something in their expressions that he could not quite fathom.

"Well, first up, what sense am I supposed to be talking into him and why is it so goddamn urgent?"

Nathan looked uncomfortable.

"Buck, I need you to talk him into letting me tend Vin."

"He stopped you?"

Josiah moved forward a step.

"Can I ask you something, Buck? Have you ever known Chris to make an empty threat?"

Wilmington thought for a moment.

"Not as long as I've known him."

"So if he said he'd kill Vin rather than let Nathan amputate his leg, he'd do it?"

Buck sighed heavily and ran a hand over his face.

"Chris said that?"

"Right now, he's taken up guard with Vin's Winchester and don't seem to open to any discussion," supplied Josiah, "We thought maybe you could convince him to let Nathan do what he has to do to save Vin's life."

Wilmington chewed on his lip.

"Goddamn! You sure you've gotta do this, Nathan?"

"You saw that leg, Buck. You know how far it's gone." He walked a few paces away, his agitation obvious, "Hell, you think I want to do this? I've wired Doc Mason already but don't know how soon he'd be able to get here or if he'd be able to do anything."

Mimi, having stood aside with the older woman, came forward, head bowed and not making eye contact with any of the men.

"Excuse me. My grandmother is very skilled in healing. She offers her help."

Nathan looked up.

"Thank you. Miss, but this is gangrene we're talking about here."

Mimi frowned and looked at Buck struggling with the unfamiliar word.

"Gang green?"

Wilmington shrugged and looked at Nathan but the healer did not appear about to answer.

"Um, when a wound turns bad. Goes black and rots..." he faltered, running out of words to explain it, but the gypsy woman nodded and returned to her elder, speaking quickly in the Rom tongue.

"Buck?" Nathan was impatient. "You coming?"

"Now just hold your horses there, Nathan. Chris won't do nothin' to Vin. I reckon it's fair to let these ladies at least have a look first, don't you? If Chris'll let 'em, that is. You said yourself they kept Chris alive, and just take a look at Ezra in there," he jerked his thumb at the vardo, "sleepin' like a baby."

"But this is different," said Nathan, his voice low and impassioned, "I ain't never seen anybody survive gangrene. There is only one cure that I know."

The mustached cowboy stirred the dust with the toe of his boot.

"And how many men you seen live through lockjaw, Nathan? Reckon that might be about the same, yeah?"

Jackson seemed to struggle for a moment, then threw up his hands.

"Jesus, Buck! Do what you want. But whatever you do, do it quickly. Just don't blame me when we're digging Vin's grave!"

The healer turned, his frustration obvious, and strode away, heading back towards town without a backward glance.

Josiah raised an eyebrow.

"I'd better go with him, Buck. You bring the ladies and maybe between us we can make sure some sanity prevails in all this." He started to follow Nathan then turned back. "What about Ezra?"

Wilmington glanced at the wagon behind him.

"Ezra's gonna be asleep for a long while yet, Josiah. These gypsy gals sure know what they're doin' if you ask me."

Sanchez gave a brief smile.

"Still, I'll send Nettie down to sit with him. Another lady who knows just how to keep a man in line! No exceptions for fancy talking Southern gambler's neither."

Buck nodded.

"Do that. But make sure you catch up with Nathan first. Don't want him forcing Chris into doin' somethin' he might live to regret."

The Texan had again fallen silent and had slipped into a fitful doze but Chris could see that Vin was never totally at peace, the small, often subtle, movements of his body betraying his restlessness. The gunslinger let his head own fall back and closed his eyes, overcome with exhaustion and trying to ignore the throbbing in his temples that made his head ache. However bad he felt, he knew it was nothing compared to what Vin was going through, and that alone was enough to keep him from giving in to his own needs. If he gave up on the quiet Texan then it was over already and he knew he could never live with that; the knowledge he had betrayed the trust of a friend. Slowly he allowed his head to roll forward on his shoulders again and carefully stood up, needing to move. The sawn off rifle remained snugly in his grip, his right forefinger still curved around the trigger as he let his hand relax at his side.

The lamps were burning softly, the wicks turned down low to suffuse the room with a warm glow and Chris noticed for the first time the comfortingly familiar aroma of lamp oil that reminded him of other nights. Nights with Sarah. Nights long before he had come to this town and, for a while at least, given up

his nomadic, hell-raising ways to bring a semblance of peace to a frontier backwater that at one time he would have drifted through without a second glance. Some days he wondered why he stayed, but deep down he knew that he had found something in the company of the six men who now rode with him, something in the people of the town, and maybe something that had been missing in himself that helped fill the hole in his soul just a little bit.

Vin was one of those men and it scared him to think how deeply he had become attached to each and every one of the band who had come together for a common cause and a share of thirty-five dollars which none of them had, in the end, taken. And they had stayed, for a nominal sum of a dollar a day all found; informal peace-keepers whose existence depended as much on the willingness of the townsfolk to tolerate them as on Judge Travis' determination to keep them. One day it would end. His kind were a dying breed. The room left for any of them to keeping moving on and hiding from their own personal demons was shrinking and where to then? He sighed. This town might not be the place that he would settle down, but for now it was as good as any other.

He looked down at the young Texan and with a surge of unexpected emotion, recognised that to lose him would be like losing a brother, like losing a part of himself, and he didn't know if he had any more of himself to give. Sadly he walked a few steps and then turned back, his finger slowly uncurling from its place around the Winchester's trigger.

"Sorry, Cowboy. Can't do it," he whispered, his voice tight, "Ain't gonna stand by and let you die. Just don't hate me for it."

Wearily he dropped into one of the chairs standing at the table and, still clutching the mare's leg in his right hand, pillowed his head on his folded arms. *God, forgive me, Vin, but I just can't do it to you.*

Buck took the steps to Nathan's rooms above the livery two at a time, his heart thumping rapidly as he wondered just what state of mind Chris was in to threaten Nathan and take up guard beside the tracker. The two of them had been friends for a long time but that didn't mean Chris was going to listen to him, and Vin's Winchester was a mighty powerful argument not to mess with the man on the other end of it. Close on his heels the two gypsy women had followed him and now he turned to grasp the younger by the shoulders.

"Ladies, I want you to stay here and wait until I tell you to come in, okay?"

The older woman smiled and shook her head, knowingly.

"The light haired one will not harm me. I know him. Have I not held his life in my hands?"

"Well, ma'am, that may well be but I ain't taking no chances here, so you just do as I say."

Mimi nodded then reached out to touch Buck's sleeve.

"Don't hurt him," she said quietly, "He has suffered much already."

Wilmington frowned and looked closely at the dark-eyed and exotic woman. *Goddamn, if this gypsy gal wasn't sweet on Chris!* He smiled gently.

"You don't know the half of it, girl," he whispered, then: "Don't worry. I know how to handle, Chris."

Taking a deep breath, he pushed open the door to Nathan's little infirmary with more caution than he would normally exercise even with Chris and hoped he knew what the hell he was talking about.

Larabee still held the gun but Buck knew before the man lifted his head that he was not going to use it. He pushed the breath he had been holding through slightly parted lips in an audible sigh of relief, then took a moment to glance at Tanner -- just in case -- before swinging his gaze back to his friend. Chris had a look about him that Buck had seen before, a dark mood of self-loathing that in itself was as dangerous as when his anger was directed at someone else.

"You the cavalry?" quipped Larabee, his voice flat and expressionless, but there was a slight hint of a

smile on his lips and Buck's concern for his friend lessened, if only by a degree.

"You might say that." Wilmington took a step forward into the room. "And I reckon I'd feel a mite easier if you pointed that Winchester somewhere else."

Chris moved the mare's leg a fraction to the left.

"Where's Nathan?"

"Why, you wanna take a pot shot at him?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Depends what he's offerin'."

Buck shrugged.

"Man's doin' his best, Chris," he said reasonably, although Chris, he knew, was not likely to be reasonable.

"You call turning a man into a cripple, doing the best for him?" he questioned, but his tone lacked the anger that Buck had expected.

"Better than dead maybe?"

"You think so?"

Wilmington slowly pulled out the opposite chair and sat down.

"No, Chris. I don't think so, but I don't know that we've got the right to make those decisions either. Shoot, I reckon I know how we all feel, but Nathan's between rock and a hard place here."

"So is Vin."

Chris suddenly shoved the mare's leg across the table, releasing it.

"Fuck!" He sighed, defeated, "I can't do it, Buck. I can't watch him die. Reckoned that's what he wanted; what he asked for, but I can't do it."

The mustached cowboy slowly pulled the gun towards him and with his other hand reached out to squeeze the exhausted gunfighter's forearm.

"Never thought you would, Chris," he said softly, "But even if you did, wouldn't change anythin' between you and me, you know that don't you?"

Larabee looked up, his expression unreadable, before he quickly looked away again.

"Yeah. I reckon I do."

Buck let the moment stretch, feeling oddly protective of the man across the table. This was going to be a hard row for the gunslinger to hoe, the last thing he needed was someone to start preaching at him.

"Nathan isn't here, Chris, but a couple of the ladies from the camp came to have a look at Vin. Thought maybe as they did such a good job on an ornery bastard like you that it was worth a shot. Can't hurt, and it just might help."

Chris nodded but it was with the resignation of a man who no longer had any strength to fight and in a gut-wrenching moment of clarity Buck knew he was looking at a man who had finally given up hope.

Vin was no stranger to fear; he had lived a hard and solitary life from an early age, and had often walked in death's shadow but he had never before experienced the mind-numbing panic that now threatened to consume him. He thought he had screamed, a sound of pure terror that he was unable to contain, bucking futilely against the arms that suddenly held him, arching his back and straining every muscle as he began to understand what was about to happen. It was time. They had come. Chris had promised but still they had come and he was too exhausted to fight. He tensed, holding himself rigid as a spear of agony impaled him on its finely honed blade, wanting to escape but not knowing how, and feeling above all, the even greater pain of betrayal.

"Son-of-a-bitch, you promised!" He forced out through clenched teeth. "You promised."

Buck tensed his arms as Vin struggled violently against him, and wondered where the wiry Texan found his strength. Goddamn! It was like wrestling a grizzly and he was torn between needing to keep the tracker subdued and not wanting to hurt him but Tanner was not making it easy. Wilmington spared a glance for Chris and sighed at the stricken expression on the blond gunman's face at the accusatory words that Vin had succeeded in spitting out. No, sir. Not making it easy for any of them.

"Easy, Vin," he murmured quietly, not even sure whether the sharpshooter could hear him, "No one's gonna hurt you."

It was a lie he knew. His eye flicked to the two gypsy women, now intent on peeling back the putrid dressing on Tanner's thigh. No matter what anyone did it was going to hurt plenty. He turned his head as the rank odour of the wound made the gorge rise in his throat, and he suddenly wished that he could be anywhere but in this small, airless room. Vin stirred again, straining against him but his efforts were less vigorous, and Buck could tell that, for better or worse, he was tiring.

The two women conferred in low but animated tones and after a brief debate, the older one reached into the woven basket they had brought with them, for a small jar. Buck watched with interest, then growing disbelief and mounting revulsion as the pot was slowly upended and a pale and wriggling mass dropped into the open wound.

Maggots.

"Jesus Christ!" Buck shuddered, unable to contain his disgust. "What the hell do you think you're doing!"

The older woman smiled.

"They do no harm," she said slowly, "Only clean what is dead."

Buck could not tear his eyes away from the carpet of grubs that seethed and crawled blindly over the tracker's thigh, burrowing into the deep and festering wound like the invaders in a fly-blown carcass. Revolted and outraged, the mustached cowboy, looked across the room to where Larabee sat, all but done in, on a straight-backed chair.

"Chris? You gonna say somethin' or just sit there?"

The sea-green eyes lifted for just a moment.

"You got any better ideas, Buck?"

"Goddamn it, this ain't doctorin! Anythin's gotta be better than this. Hell, Chris, it's like he's dead already!"

Larabee's expression hardened, a spark of life suddenly lighting up his eyes. "You were the one who said it couldn't hurt. You don't like it, then you just go and find Nathan." He leaned his elbows on the table. "You decide, Buck, don't make me."

Mimi looked from one man to the other and frowned, obviously puzzled by the exchange.

"You do not wish for us to help?"

The silence stretched for a long time, the two men engaged in a mute battle of wills, until finally Wilmington lowered his eyes and looked instead at the Texan lying unresponsive in his arms.

"Hell, what do I know," he muttered, finally, "Just..." he paused, swallowing hard, "...just don't let him die."

Mimi inclined her head slowly and gave him a sympathetic smile.

"Then, leave us," she turned to glance at Chris, "Both of you. And we will do all that we can, as God wills it."

Wilmington hesitated then with a nod, released Vin from his grip, easing him down onto the mattress with great care. Satisfied that the Texan was settled, and no longer in a blind panic, he stood back and turned his attention to Chris. In a characteristically mercurial change of mood he suddenly grinned.

"Well, pard. What d'you say? I think these ladies are asking us to leave."

Chris raked his hands through his hair and sighed.

"I say, I could use a bath, a bottle of whiskey, and a bed."

"In that order?"

"In any goddamn order you like."

Buck moved forward and took the blond gunslinger by the elbow, urging him to stand and lowering his voice to a stage whisper.

"How about a willing little filly to warm your bed for you too?" he offered.

Chris gave him a skeptical look and slowly stood up.

"Buck," he said seriously, "the way I feel, she'd be downright disappointed."

Wilmington steered him out of the door.

"Hell, now I know you're sick."

Once outside, Buck paused, his smile suddenly slipping, a shadow of doubt appearing on his face.

"Do you reckon we can trust 'em to take care of Vin?"

Chris kept moving forward, his movements slow and painful.

"Buck, I'd trust them with my life. And I'm trusting them with Vin's."

Wilmington nodded.

"That's good enough for me then, but I don't know if it'll be good enough for Nathan."

Chris finally halted and turned back to face his friend.

"It'll have to be."

Nathan was not a drinker, he generally left it to the others to overindulge, but tonight he felt a real need to get quietly and seriously drunk. Josiah sat across the table from him, but he wasn't drinking and neither of them was talking. He wondered briefly why Sanchez had bothered to keep him company, then decided that the preacher was keeping tabs on him. As if he was going to go where he was not wanted. Chris had made his point with absolute clarity and now he was shut out of his own rooms and where Chris lead the others would quickly follow. He might as well just pack up and leave town. He could easily make his home at the Seminole village. Be with Rain again.

"Might as well," he mumbled, draining the last of his glass and pouring another shot.

He had been grateful for the gypsies' intervention when he had been powerless to do anything for the gunfighter, so sure that Chris would die, but against all odds he had lived and now Larabee was putting all his faith in them and maybe risking Vin's life. Goddamn it, the man was going to let Vin die and there was nothing he could do about it. Just like there had been nothing he could do for the little girl. Mioaru had died in spite of all his efforts. And now Vin would be next. Yet he still called himself a healer.

He remembered with a shudder the trail boss with advanced gangrene who he had also been unable to save and how close his drunken men had come to hanging him. It had been Chris and Vin who had saved him -- complete strangers -- when no one else in town was prepared to lift a finger to help, and that had been the start of it all. The seven of them. A sudden hollowness in the pit of his stomach brought home the fact that this could well be the end.

He poured another drink and realised from the lightness of the bottle in his hand that he had finished a good two thirds of it. Eyes slightly out of focus he concentrated on Josiah's wavering form and wondered how the hell Ezra managed to get through a bottle with apparent ease; he was already feeling queasy and had doubts as to whether, when the time came, he would be able to stand up. With deliberate precision he set the bottle on the table, slamming it down as he misjudged the distance to the wooden surface. Hell, he had nowhere to go anyway.

"Reckon those demons must be just about drowned by now."

Nathan squinted at the preacher and deliberately poured another shot of red-eye down his throat.

"Nope."

Josiah picked up the bottle and refilled Jackson's glass, then poured one for himself, emptying the bottle. Very drunk, Nathan had a peevish thought that Sanchez had claimed the last drink just to stop him finishing the bottle.

"Won't help Vin, you know." The older man leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Or change the way you feel."

Nathan covered his face with his hands, heaving a sigh dredged from the depths of his very soul.

"What does he want from me, Josiah?" he slurred, "A miracle?"

"Chris sees the world in blacks and whites, Nathan. For him there are no greys."

Jackson shook his head.

"Vin's going to die."

Nathan slowly dropped his hands from his face and Sanchez spread his own hands in a gesture that said what will be, will be, but did not speak.

"Crazy bastard...wanted to shoot me," managed Jackson, speech thick from the alcohol.

"Maybe," conceded the preacher, "But he didn't."

"Should've," he murmured, "Deserve it," and with that his head suddenly dropped forward to meet the table top with a thud.

Josiah looked sympathetically at the stuporose man, knowing he was going to regret this evening when he finally awoke, and reached for the shot glass of whiskey in front of him.

"Well, Brother, just be thankful we don't always get what we deserve."

The warmth seemed to leach into his very bones, spreading into every muscle and sinew, releasing the tension from his body as he surrendered to the almost forgotten pleasure of a long, hot bath. He had shucked out of his pants, discarding them on the floor, then slid slowly and painfully into the tub, feeling every ache, and too aware that his already lean body had been stripped of every spare ounce of flesh. With a sigh he stretched his arms along the side of the tub and briefly submerged his entire body, allowing the water to close over his head.

He could not remember a time when he had felt so physically and mentally tired and he decided that if a dead man could get up and walk, he knew exactly how he would feel. The strain of making his body work when every tortured muscle wanted to do nothing more than rest had taken its toll and now he had no more energy left. If someone had burst into the bath house at the moment with a gun and threatened to shoot him, he would have let them, simply because he no longer had the strength to react, even to save his own life.

He surfaced, clearing water from his eyes and nose and raking his wet hair back with one hand. Save his own life. It was Vin's that was slipping away now, not his. He closed his eyes. He had thought himself in hell as he had jerked and fitted uncontrollably through the horrors of lockjaw but that paled into insignificance when he thought now of the Texan's pain and suffering. And for what reason? *Because he cared enough to come looking for you, Larabee.* Lord, sometimes it was easier to stay a loner; dependent on no-one and having no-one depend on you. Friends were all well and good, but with friendship came responsibility. And something else. That something else was what kept him in this frontier backwater long after he would have -- should have -- moved on. He had lost one family; he didn't think he could endure the pain of losing another.

He wiped a hand over his face and reached for the soap, pushing aside the overwhelming sense of despair that threatened to crush him and praying that he had made the right choice. *Good Christ, what*

gave him the right to decide on the fate of another man? Yet he had and now would have to live with the consequences of his actions. Slowly he drew up his knees and hugged them, letting his head fall forward as he let the soap slip from his fingers. He hoped to God that he could.

The woman sighed as she finger-combed the long brown hair away from the man's face and again blotted the sweat that beaded his forehead with a damp cloth. His eyes -- such blue eyes -- opened and he blinked slowly but she knew that he did not see her although her touch seemed to soothe him. At least he had stopped fighting, but whether that meant he had chosen to trust in her or that his body was becoming too weak to resist further, she could not say. She had managed to coax some tea into him but most of it had come back as he had weakly retched and then fallen back, exhausted from the effort. Now he stared vacantly into space, breathing quickly, as he twisted his fingers into the bed sheet. Again she tried him with the tea. This time he kept most of it down and she smiled as he finally raised his hand to push the cup away. He had no strength, no more than a child, in spite of the hard and clearly defined muscle that stood out on his chest and arms. Yet, she reminded herself, this was no child. As helpless and afraid as he was, he was still, most definitely, a man.

It had been several hours since he had last spoken; those incoherent ramblings that Mimi had barely understood. First he had cursed in the fashion of the *gadje* and had fought mindlessly with all the strength that he possessed as the fever reached its height then, finally spent, he had cried and, as all men in pain, had called for his mother. She had almost cried with him, for the lost and lonely child in all men, but instead she had held him close, and he had fallen at last into an exhausted sleep. Now, as she stroked the long strands of hair that clung damply to his head, she prayed again that he would live.

Josiah hefted the tall and well-muscled healer over his shoulder, grunting as he straightened, and decided he was glad that Nathan did not make a habit of getting drunk. He would have taken him to the jail to sleep it off but he doubted Nathan would appreciate the company, so he turned in the opposite direction and headed for the church. What in hell was wrong with everybody? He was beginning to think that he was the only sane man left in town. Even JD had been going a little crazy from being cooped up in the jailhouse with the loquacious Shaw the last time he had dropped by. Striding up the steps and into the vestibule he moved quickly into the church and dropped Jackson onto one of the pews. Not the most comfortable bed, but he had slept off a few benders of his own on the hard wooden benches and he reckoned that it wouldn't hurt Nathan to do the same. At least no one would disturb him. With a final glance at the softly snoring healer, he turned around and headed back into the street. If he was the only sane man left then it was time to stop the madness.

"JD!"

The young Dunne kicked back from the desk, almost upsetting his chair in his haste and scrambling to his feet with his hand half-way to his gun before he realised that it was Josiah bursting into the Sheriff's office.

"Jesus! What's up?"

"Gimme the keys, JD."

"Now wait a minute, Josiah..."

"Give me the keys, goddamn it!"

Dunne had never seen Sanchez in this mood before and the roar of his baritone helped him overcome his initial reluctance to surrender the jail keys. He had no doubt that Josiah was quite capable of taking the keys for himself should he so choose whether or not he agreed and just then he had no

intention of putting the theory to the test. Sanchez was a friend. At least he thought he was.

JD tossed the iron ring to the older man.

"Hope you know what you're doing, Josiah."

"I think it's likely I'm the only one who does, JD."

JD slowly shook his head, trying to make sense of it all and suddenly wondering if everyone in town had gone completely crazy.

Sanchez opened up the far cell, his gun held easily in his hand, as he let the door swing open. The six men stood apprehensively at the back of the cell, cautiously eyeing the big man.

"Get!"

No-one moved.

Sanchez sighed.

"Gentlemen, unlike yourselves I don't believe in dispensing vigilante justice. Consider yourself on bail."

The men shuffled uneasily before slowly filing out, subdued and more than a little shame-faced.

"You'll be expected in court when the Judge gets here," he continued, "But for now you're free to go. Just remember, you try anything before then and I'll personally shoot you dead."

JD watched as the six, gathering speed the further they got from Sanchez, jostled each other to escape through the door.

"You think that was a smart thing to do, Josiah?"

The preacher moved to the second cell.

"It was the only thing to do." He swung the door open. "Now all of you, get!" The remaining men started to shamble out, Josiah's arm shooting out to block the door as the last man took a step forward. "Cept Shaw, that is."

The five men who had been released fled without a backward glance, as Sanchez slammed the door on the merchant and twisted the key with a grin.

"My forgiveness only goes so far, Mr. Shaw."

Open mouthed the sole remaining prisoner watched, fighting to get a word out as Sanchez tossed the keys back to the younger man.

"Don't let them out of your sight, son. Now come on. We got better things to do than keep watch on a low-life like him. Time to look after our own."

JD hastily picked up his jacket and hat, a broad grin creasing his young face.

"Yes, sir!"

Dunne was still struggling into his jacket as the two men stepped down off the boardwalk but his movements gradually slowed until he stopped completely, one arm still half into his sleeve as he looked along the deserted street. More dark and sinister than he ever remembered it being before.

"Where is everybody, Josiah? Never seen it so quiet! Looks like everyone left town."

Josiah sighed heavily.

"Long as it stays that way, son. At least until the Judge gets here. I've already seen the darker side of this town and its folk, and I ain't planning on seeing it again any time soon."

The younger man gave a final heave of his shoulder, easing the jacket into place and taking a moment to straighten the lapels.

"I still don't rightly know what the hell happened here anyway. I mean, Buck and me came barrelin' back into town with Vin, nothin' on our minds but getting him to Nathan and I still ain't got clear in my head all the goings on while we were away. Thought we'd drawn the short straw but goddamn it, the last I see of Ezra he's tradin' places with me slick as you please and headin back here! Remember how

Buck reckoned he'd rather be back here playin' poker than doin' any work? Now from all accounts he's gotten himself busted up bad and I ain't even had a chance to see him yet." He stopped abruptly, aware that his words had rushed out in a torrent. Taking a deep breath he carried on, slower this time, looking at the ground as he turned his hat brim around in his hand. "Chris neither. Buck said he'd been sick too. Fact is, Josiah, I ain't seen hardly anybody!"

JD braced himself as Josiah's muscular arm circled his shoulders and enveloped him in a rough embrace.

"Come on, young 'un. Let's see if we can't round up our strays, then we'll all have a beer. I reckon between us we should be able to make some sense of all this and get ourselves a plan. Make no mistake, JD, this isn't over yet. Not by a long shot."

It was a rough awakening for the Southerner, green eyes snapping open as an innocent intake of breath bubbled moistly through the fluid accumulated in his lungs and triggered first a cough, then a groan as his ribcage protested the sudden movement. Eyes watering as he tried to suppress the urge to cough again, he shook his head and tried to take another breath. Again he coughed wetly, phlegm rattling deep in his lungs. He managed one deep inspiration before succumbing to a painful fit of coughing which reduced him to shuddering immobility, reluctant to allow even the smallest movement of his chest.

"Dear Lord!"

The gambler held himself stiffly, one arm curved protectively around his chest, biting back a small, involuntary mew of pain as he carefully shifted onto his back and pushed aside the blanket that covered him, before bracing himself to sit up. He had no idea what time it was or how long he had slept but his instincts told him it was very late, or more likely very early. A shielded lantern, hung from a hook in the roof shed a meagre light, but it was enough for him to see that he was not alone.

"Easy, son."

Nettie, wisely he thought, made no effort to stop him getting up from the bed but instead offered her arm for support as he struggled to raise himself.

"Miz Wells," he panted, "You appear to be making a habit of this."

"Hell, boy, somone's gotta look out for you," she smiled, "Ain't doing too fancy a job of it yourself right now."

The Southerner could not resist responding with a smile of his own as, with painfully deliberate movements, he reached out for his shirt.

"Madam, I believe I have been flim-flammed. Lead like a lamb to the slaughter and delivered into the arms of Morpheus by two of the most charming ladies you could imagine."

"Reckon it was the right thing to do. You needed it," replied Nettie gruffly, as she turned up the wick of the lamp, "Ain't lookin' quite so poorly now."

Standish slowly began to dress, thankful that it was only his shirt he had to get into. He could manage that much independently but anything more he knew without a doubt would have defeated him. He was no longer tired and the feeling of absolute despair that had enveloped him earlier had already ceased to be the mind-numbing affliction it had been and instead a spark of some other, more malignant, emotion had flickered into life deep in his gut.

"Obviously appearances can still be deceiving," he murmured wryly, but in truth he knew that the rest had done him some good.

Fumbling with the pearl buttons he finally managed to fasten enough of them to make himself decent and with great care began to tuck the tails of his shirt into his pants.

"I'll get you some coffee. Ain't fresh but it's good and strong and hot."

Ezra nodded, although he was not prepared to admit to the well-meaning woman that he would rather respond to his first urge to indulge in a glass or three of whiskey, closely followed by his second, even stronger urge to hit someone.

"Thank you, Miz Wells. Coffee sounds perfect."

Nettie opened the door, letting in the sounds of the night, the ceaseless chanting of the women at the wake and quietly left to attend the ever-burning cook fire. Resting for a moment, all but done in by his efforts, he came to a decision. For better or worse, it was time for him to make a move. Whatever the consequences to himself, he was not prepared to let that bigoted bastard Shaw get away with the murder of an innocent child. With a long sigh, he got stiffly to his feet and followed Nettie out of the vardo, but as his feet touched the soft earth he wheeled away from the circle of wagons and towards the horse picket. The debt would be paid. Tonight.

Something was different.

It was quiet.

Dark.

For a moment he was hard pressed to decide just where he was and which way was up but after several seconds of absolute confusion he realised that he was lying awkwardly half on his side, with something under the crook of his left knee raising his injured leg. He found the very idea strangely comforting. The fact that he still had a leg suddenly reassuring, and the knowledge that the dark dreams had been just that, an immense relief. The pain was almost welcome now, although he thought it had become less intense. Either that or he was more tolerant of it. Sighing, he pushed at the blanket that covered him, seeking air and some relief from the heat, his mind flitting randomly from one briefly-held thought to another, unable to focus on anything but the physical sensations that bombarded his awakening consciousness.

"Drink, my son."

The Texan blinked as he turned onto his back, not sure who was talking to him. Certainly not Nathan, and definitely not Chris. My son? No, this was a woman but the voice was unfamiliar and heavily accented. He was reminded of Mrs. Polanski at the laundry but something told him it was not her. The cup touched his lips and his thirst immediately drove any doubts he might have from his mind as he greedily swallowed the earthy-tasting liquid, grabbing the wooden vessel with both hands as if it would be taken away from him before he could drink his fill. Instead it was refilled once he had drained it, and twice more he emptied it before falling back with a sigh. Raising a hand to wipe his mouth, he felt the rasp of cracked, peeling lips against his skin and was sure that given the opportunity he could manage to drink the entire rain barrel dry.

"Chris?"

He had a sudden clear image of the man sitting beside him, bare-chested, with Vin's own mare's leg resting across his knee. A sentinel. On guard. They had talked about promises and dying. He remembered that much. And he remembered Chris had kept the demons at bay. Larabee was like that. Kept his promises and Vin had every confidence that he could chase the devil himself away with a loaded Winchester in his hand.

"Resting. As you must."

Tanner sighed, believing. Chris had been tired. Just as he was tired. So tired.

With an effort he raised himself up on his elbows, barely able to see through the darkness that was relieved only by the softly muted glow of an oil lamp turned very low. He judged it to be still several hours

before dawn, a lifetime of being in tune with nature unimpaired in spite of his debilitated physical condition. The time when life itself was at its lowest ebb. The coming down time. The dying time. The time when the body would most easily surrender. He could smell the sour odour of sweat and sickness that surrounded him and he found himself suddenly longing for the open range, the sweet smell of grass, and a bedroll under the stars, instead of a sickbed and the crushing oppressiveness of four walls.

The indistinct form at his side moved and in the lamp's feeble light he caught a brief glimpse of high cheekbones and smooth brown skin as a young woman leaned towards him and settled a gentle hand on his shoulder. No one he knew. Someone young and beautiful, whose hand on his skin seemed suddenly to burn like a brand.

"You should sleep now."

He shook his head and instinctively moved one arm to hold the bedding close around his waist, the knowledge that beneath the light covering he was naked making his face flush with embarrassment. He had no idea who this woman was or why she was attending him.

"You are in pain?"

"No, ma'am." A too-quick reply that only succeeded in revealing his shyness.

A smile. "Come, *gadje*, rest."

He slowly yielded, allowing himself to be pushed back although his eyes remained fixed on the woman and his hand kept a firm grip on the blanket. A second voice coming unexpectedly out of the darkness startled the tracker, the words strange and discordant to his ears, and he squinted, raising a hand to shield his eyes as the lamp was turned higher, bathing the room in a bright yellow glow. Once his eyes had become accustomed to the light he realised that another, much older woman, was standing over him and she had been the one to speak in the unfamiliar tongue.

"What?" His voice rasped in his throat. "What did she say?"

The younger one unstopped an earthenware pot and poured a small measure into a cup.

"Grandmother Ksenija says, a young man's pride and the truth are often strangers and that I must give you this." The cup was again offered but he hesitated, his free hand lifting to grasp the young woman's wrist, the tracker feeling the hidden strength in the slim, brown arm.

"Who are you?"

"We are...friends. Now drink."

He drank.

Chris took a long time to dress. Buck had fetched him a change of clothes from his room and now patiently waited while he slowly got into them. Chris was grateful that he permitted him the dignity of at least doing that for himself, although the buttons on his jeans had almost defeated him and he was trembling by the time he finally done up his shirt but at least he felt a good way towards being whole again. He looked up with a sigh, needing a moment to rest before he attempted anything more physical. It was dark outside, he knew that much, but he had lost all sense of time.

"Feels late. Like it's the middle of the night."

Buck grinned.

"That's because it's not all that long before sunup, pard. Been a long day."

Chris rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the muscles still tense beneath his fingers.

"Don't mind tellin' you, Buck, half the time I still don't know which way is up."

Wilmington rested his foot on one of the chairs in the bath house and placed his forearms across his knees.

"Well, Chris, I gotta say you're not the only one in this town right now with that problem and that's a

fact.”

Larabee managed a brief smile.

“That supposed to make me feel better?”

“It should. You’re the only one, ‘cept maybe Vin and Ezra, that’s got good reason.”

Chris’ expression clouded at the mention of the Texan and the Southerner.

“How the hell did we get into this mess, Buck?”

“You’re asking me? I’m still tryin’ to figure out what happened with Vin in Indian Springs. He came this close,” he held his thumb and forefinger barely apart, “to being shot and killed for a bounty. Had some kid with him when we found him; the kid took a knife meant for Vin, straight through the heart. Died right there in Vin’s arms. Didn’t want to give him up neither. Never seen him like that before, Chris.”

Larabee shook his head, not understanding.

“What kid?”

Buck shrugged.

“Don’t know but he wouldn’t leave till we’d bought a decent burial for him. Cost me ‘n’ JD everythin’ we had too. Reckoned it was worth it seein’ the kid saved Vin’s life.”

Chris closed his eyes. This was all too much for him to take in.

“Vin didn’t tell you anything?”

“Hell, Chris, you know Vin! He’s the only man I know talks less than you. Didn’t say nothin’ at first, then he just rambled when he was sick. Making no sense at all.”

Yes. He knew Vin. He knew he’d be holding everything inside. They were alike in many ways. With a sigh, he levered himself up from the chair and stretched the taut muscles of his back before turning to Wilmington.

“I need a drink.”

Buck nodded and took Chris, who was still weaving slightly, by the arm, the fact that Larabee permitted the liberty a measure of the deep friendship and trust the two men shared.

“Sure thing, pard, and if the saloon’s not open, we’ll open it.”

“Buck!”

Both men stopped in their tracks as JD’s voice rang out across the street.

“Where in hell have you been?” he called as he jogged towards them, slightly out of breath.

“In the bath house,” explained Buck, quickly, a frown creasing his forehead, “What’s up? You got trouble, Kid? Thought you were at the jail house?”

“Josiah let everyone but Shaw go. Said they were out on bail. We’ve been lookin’ for you.”

“Well now you found us. Where’s Josiah and Nathan?”

“Nathan’s at the church -- sleeping one off.”

“Nathan?”

“That’s what Josiah tells me. Got drunk after...” JD cast a quick glance at Chris, “after Chris...”

“Pulled a gun on him,” finished Larabee, with an unmistakable air of regret.

Dunne lowered his head not wanting to meet the gunfighter’s eyes.

“Well, yeah.”

“And Josiah?”

“Gone to find Ezra. “ He smiled hesitantly. “Called it rounding up the strays.”

Buck used his free arm to grab the younger man around the shoulders in an affectionate embrace.

“Reckon he’s not too far from the truth there, JD. What d’you think, Chris?”

"I think I still need that drink."

Chris grimaced at the bite of the whiskey but nonetheless sighed appreciatively as he set the shot glass down for a refill. Not that any amount of alcohol was going to alter the fact that Vin was dying, or that he had driven Nathan to drink himself into a stupor, or that he himself wanted nothing more than to crawl away and do the same; to pretend none of the last two weeks had ever happened. But past experience told him that getting drunk didn't make the pain go away. Didn't make any of it go away. It just numbed the senses for a while, and at the end of it all the thing that you were running away from was still there waiting. Patient and eternal. He'd been down that road before. He knew.

Raising his eyes, he managed a smile as he saw JD looking at him.

"Say it, JD."

Dunne flushed.

"Say what?"

"Whatever it is that's on your mind."

Dunne took a long pull of the beer in front of him then set it down carefully.

"Just...I...well...dammit Chris, you look awful."

"Probably not a patch on how I feel, Kid." He downed the second glass of amber liquid and felt the warmth spread through his stomach, curiously soothing. "Almost dying does that to a man."

For a moment his thoughts flew to the room above the livery and the gentle warmth in his gut turned to an icy lump of lead. *Christ Almighty was it never going to end?* His eyes were on Buck as he poured himself another shot and stoppered the bottle but his mind was far away.

"Judge should be here tomorrow. Next day at the latest."

With an effort Chris dragged his thoughts back to the moment and what Buck was saying.

"Hell, we need to get this mess sorted out before the Judge gets here. Looks like we can't keep our own house in order."

Buck thoughtfully turned his glass around and around in a circle, not drinking but thinking.

"So Josiah let those bastards out of jail?"

JD nodded.

"All except Shaw; reckoned it was the right thing to do. Told 'em all to be ready to show up when Judge Travis calls a trial though, or he'd be lookin' 'em up himself." The youngster smiled suddenly. "Josiah can be mighty persuasive that way."

"Reckon I'd be showin' up too," agreed Buck, allowing a smile to momentarily relax his grim expression. "Maybe the time in jail did 'em some good anyhow. Gave 'em something to think on."

"Tell you one thing, Buck, they were mighty glad to get out of there. Six men in a cell would sure want to be close friends."

Even Chris smiled.

"So it's just Shaw?"

"Yep."

Larabee nodded slowly. He had enough of an issue himself with the man to believe he was in the right place. From what he'd learned, since his altercation with Shaw, the merchant had succeeded in indirectly killing a child and his actions had left Ezra not only badly injured but at the mercy of the mob he had induced to riot. Chris believed it was a testament to the severity of the Southerner's injuries that he had so far resisted killing Shaw with his bare hands. That kind of rage was something he understood.

Buck finally sank the shot of whiskey.

"You know Ezra swore to me that he was gonna kill Shaw? Reckon he would've too if he hadn't been so hammered himself that he could hardly put one foot in front of the other at the time."

Chris' head came up, like a hound on a scent, the first stirrings of alarm in the back of his mind at Wilmington's revelation that was a frighteningly accurate reflection of his own musings.

"What? Where'd you say he is now?"

Wilmington raised a hand in a calming gesture.

"Don't worry none, Chris. He's holed up safe with the gypsies, too beat up to do much of anything. Besides, those ladies snuck him a sleeping potion. Last I saw of him he wasn't waking up any time soon and best thing for him if you ask me. Nettie's down there with him, just in case." He leaned back in his chair. "Took that little girl's dying real hard, y'know? Blames himself. Never seen Ezra like that before. Reminded me of...." Buck stopped abruptly and looked quickly away from Larabee. Close. Too close.

Larabee reached out and grabbed the bottle, uncorking it and pouring himself another drink, not looking at his friend as a strong wave of sympathy for the gambler washed over him. Hell, he'd been there too. *Not a good place to be is it, Ezra? No, sir. A hell of a place for any man to be.* He sighed and stared at the drink for a long time without touching it. Buck had almost said it: *You. Reminded me of you.* Suddenly the whiskey held no more attraction for him and he put both hands flat on the table suddenly swamped by an overwhelming sense of loss. Wordlessly he pushed himself away from the table and started to rise.

"Chris?"

Larabee sighed and lifted tired eyes to meet his best friend's questioning and worried gaze.

"Reckon you'll have to do this one without me, Buck. Got things of my own to settle."

Wilmington's expression of concern softened and he nodded, if not understanding then at least accepting.

"Go easy on yourself, pard."

Chris briefly touched the brim of his hat almost, but not quite, a salute.

"You need me, I'll be across the street."

With Vin.

He was glad there was no one to see him. He had not ridden bareback in years and getting the beast to stand still while he manoeuvred himself into a position that would allow him to mount without causing himself a great deal of pain was proving an almost insurmountable obstacle. The result was an awkward and undignified scramble, interspersed with curses and grunts, that made him wonder if it might not have been easier to walk. Breathing heavily, he finally straightened and gathering the reins, nudged the horse into a slow walk, taking a wide sweep away from the camp and skirting the edge of the town.

It was not too many hours before daybreak and the Southerner shivered in the chill of the night air, the wind that came off the desert having quickly driven away the heat of the day. He coughed as the cool air triggered a spasm in his lungs, and sucked in a sharp breath at the pain of it, hardly noticing that the horse had slowed to a halt as he let the reins go slack. After a moment he was able to bring his breathing under control and, tightening his grip on the reins, urged the horse onward once again. It seemed further than he remembered between the gypsy camp and the centre of town, yet, he reflected sadly, not nearly far enough for some people. The very ends of God's green earth would not be far enough for some people. Hunching his shoulders, he guided the horse between two buildings, grateful at least that the street was quiet. He wasn't planning on having any witnesses.

Awkwardly dismounting, he leaned against the side of the hardware store and took a moment to catch his breath, as he stared across the street at the sheriff's office and wondered who he would have to con to give him the time he needed with the bastard Shaw. The others could all rot in hell too as far as he was concerned but Shaw was his. With any luck the jail would be secured for the night and no one

standing watch. He stifled a cough and took a ragged breath that did little but stir the fluid building up in his lungs. *Goddamn it!* He just needed an hour; half an hour, then he cared little for what happened to him. One way or the other he was probably going to die: lung fever, shot or swinging on the end of a rope, the only difference was the time it took.

Glancing down the street he instinctively pulled back into the shadows as a familiar figure walked slowly across the street from the darkened saloon heading for the livery. Even in the dark there was no mistaking that walk. Granted the movement was slower, the head bent, but it was still without any doubt Chris Larabee. Not the livery then but Nathan's lodgings, decided the Southerner, although for what purpose he could not begin to imagine at this early hour. He waited long enough to give Larabee time to mount the stairs and enter before moving quietly from the lee of the store. He had his own business to tend to and was more than content to leave Chris to his. Shivering as a sudden chill shook him, he moved slowly across the dusty street.

The fact that the jail was in darkness suggested it was untended and he guessed that the prisoners had been left unguarded for the night. He smiled. He could not have asked for more fortuitous circumstances. Gently turning the handle, he pushed experimentally and smiled as the door easily yielded to the pressure. He really would have to have a firm word with JD about taking his work more seriously. Sliding into the darkened office with the stealth of a practiced felon he quietly closed the door behind him and turned to close the shutters before resting for a moment with his head pressed against the door. *Dear God, just a little more time.*

"Who's there?"

The voice, sharp but tinged with a hint of fear, came from the far cell. Shaw.

Ezra let out a breath in a slow expiration, his smile feral and dangerous, as he recognised not only the voice but the underlying panic in it. He had been afraid that the bastard might have been set free and his venture a waste of time but the gods were indeed smiling upon him.

"You, suh," he said quietly, his accent thick, "may call me Retribution, you murderin' Yankee bastard."

It was with a great sense of satisfaction that Ezra heard the sudden intake of breath from across the room and in the semi-darkness he could see a quick movement in the cell as Shaw jumped up and clung to the cell bars. He was only sorry he could not at that moment see the man's expression.

"You! Ain't you dead yet, boy? Always reckoned the only good Reb was a dead one."

Ezra laughed, a sound of genuine amusement that continued even as he was shaken by a fit of coughing that sent jolts of pain ripping through his chest.

"Well, Mr. Shaw, as close as that eventuality may be, for the moment I am as close to your worst nightmare that you are likely to see this side of hell."

"You don't scare me. I got rights. I got a right to a fair trial. That's the law."

Ezra moved slowly forward, amused to see Shaw take a step back although there were two sets of steel bars separating them.

"The law?" he mused, "Would this be the same law that you chose to so carelessly disregard, my good friend, when you gathered your vigilantes together; or when you incited a riot; or when you lead an armed raid on a group of women and children and killed an innocent little girl; That law, Mr. Shaw?" His voice cracked with emotion as he uttered the last words and he slammed his hand into the wall with enough force to splinter the wood.

"Weren't my fault!" yelled Shaw, raw fear making him defensive. "I wasn't the one killed her. It was a mistake."

The Southerner sighed feeling suddenly tired, each breath, each movement, a painful exercise. Slowly, sadly almost, he reached for the gun-belt hanging from the wall peg by the sheriff's desk --

Shaw's own gun-belt -- and drew the long barrelled Colt. He turned the cylinder with his thumb and checked the chambers. Fully loaded. Ignoring Shaw's increasingly frantic protestations that gradually slipped into a whining plea, he carefully drew a chair in front of the bars and sat down.

"Now, Mr. Shaw, I believe the time has come to talk about justice."

With a chilling smile, he raised the weapon and, casually sighting down the barrel, cocked the hammer.

Chris frowned as he put his hand to the latch of Nathan's lodgings suddenly certain he had heard a movement below. Taking a step back he glanced down at the street, quickly scanning for any sign of motion. Nothing. Shaking his head he turned again to the room above the livery that was both the healer's place of trade and his home. The light still burned and he wondered if either of the women had slept. It seemed to him that few had achieved that particular luxury this night; except maybe Ezra who had been given no choice in the matter if Buck was to be believed. With a sigh he reached again for the latch and let himself in, uncertain of his ability to dominate the conflicting emotions that raged inside him but no longer able to stay away.

The lamplight shed a warm glow over the bed, giving Vin's face and exposed chest a golden cast that made a lie of the true pallor of his skin. Slowly Chris sat down and carefully set his hat down on the small night stand before looking at the younger of the two women.

"I had to come."

She nodded.

"Stay if you must. Pray if you can." After a moment she sighed but continued to grind the aromatic herbs between mortar and pestle. "He asked for you."

"I made a promise," he answered softly, more to himself than in response to the gypsy's words.

"A promise is a sacred thing, *gadje*."

"Even one to kill?"

Mimi tilted her head to one side.

"That is between you and God...and your heart, but only you can make the final choice."

He sighed, a sound that might have been regret or relief: "I already have."

The woman smiled knowingly.

"He will forgive you. If you will forgive yourself."

Chris looked at the sleeping man and decided it no longer mattered.

Josiah slowed his stride as he approached the camp, the muted sounds of the ongoing wake drifting on the night breeze awakening a profound sense of reverence in him. Drawing to a halt he listened briefly to the rising and falling cadence of the women's voices and after a moment's hesitation turned towards the source, unable to pass by without paying his own respects. The little girl had certainly awakened something to Ezra, so much that he had been prepared to put his life before hers and that struck a nerve deep within the preacher. Ezra Standish, con-artist and gambler extraordinaire, who made a great effort to present himself to the world as self-serving, acquisitive and manipulative had perhaps, for the first time, shown his true colours. Josiah was now prepared to believe that the man who had stood up to an armed and angry mob with nothing but righteous anger on his side and a Remington in his hand was the real Ezra.

The women gathered around the brightly painted wagon, drew aside as he approached and with a nod he took off his hat and entered through the narrow door. The vardo smelled of strongly candlewax

and herbs, but the underlying taint of death was there and Josiah bowed his head to say a prayer over the child, mourning the loss of an innocent. He could understand the Southerner's grief and anger and his heart went out to the gambler whose heart and hide were obviously a good deal softer than he was prepared to admit. With a sigh he turned and walked slowly from the wagon. Now it was time to tend to the living.

Sanchez crossed the open space at the center of the encampment, not certain where Ezra might be but spying Nettie Wells at the cookfire. The woman glanced up as he came up beside her.

"Well, Mr. Sanchez, fancy seein' you here at this hour. Care for a cup o' coffee. Just made fresh."

Josiah tipped his hat.

"Thank you, ma'am. That'd be real nice." He looked around. "You seen Ezra lately?"

"That boy's sick, Mr. Sanchez. You ain't got plans for stirrin' him up now, have you?"

The preacher smiled recognising the sharp tone in her voice for concern.

"No, ma'am. Just ain't seen him in a while and wondered how he was doing."

"Right poorly, if you ask me, but he's awake. Came to fetch some coffee but dang fire had burned down to ashes." Nettie poured the fresh brew into three cups and passed one to Sanchez, before picking up the other two and walking slowly towards one of the outspanned wagons. "How's Vin?"

"Holdin' on, Nettie, holdin' on." He sipped the scalding liquid and thought of the tracker, sending a quick prayer on its way, knowing the woman had a soft spot for the young sharpshooter. "Ezra?"

"Like I said, Josiah, sick. Sick in body and sick in soul. Don't know which is worse."

"No," agreed the grizzled preacher, "But I can tell you which is harder to heal."

"Aye, guilt's a mighty burden and that's a fact."

Nettie paused at the wagon allowing Sanchez to unlatch the door. With a nod of thanks she mounted the steps and ducked inside.

"Sorry, I took so long, Ezra. Darned fire went out.....Ezra?" With a puzzled frown, Nettie looked back at Sanchez. "He's not here Josiah."

He didn't need to look to know she was speaking the truth and a cold knot of fear settled in his gut. Reaching out he grabbed her arm.

"How long ago did you leave him?"

"Mebbe a quarter hour, no more than half."

"Damn!"

"Somethin' wrong, Mr. Sanchez?"

Josiah glanced back towards the town.

"I hope not, Nettie. I surely hope not."

Vin shifted his hips, trying to relieve the ache in the small of his back by thrusting his pelvis forward before relaxing again and easing tentatively onto his side. Not quite awake, he was aware of the low murmur of voices around him and he wondered if that was the noise that had disturbed him but not really caring. He moved his injured leg, sliding one hand down his thigh as if holding onto it would in some way contain the deep, throbbing ache that seemed to beat in time with his heart. The sensation he was feeling was peculiar, as if something stirred within the wound, something alive, but he knew it was merely his imagination playing tricks on him again. He remembered most of what had happened now but he had difficulty deciding what had been real and what had been products of his fevered mind. He knew but one thing for certain and that was the simple fact that Nathan had wanted to take off his leg and the knowledge had filled him with such dread that he believed he had lost his mind. Only Chris had been there to keep the demons at bay and help him find his way again.

He sighed and turned again, trying to find a place in the bed that did not make his back or his shoulders or his leg ache, wanting to wake up but powerless to do any more than drift just below the surface of consciousness. It was a pleasant enough place to be. As he shifted restlessly he was aware of the rough texture of the blanket against his unusually sensitive skin and once again he moved his hips, even in twilight sleep embarrassed by the entirely too-pleasurable sensation that the mild friction between his naked body and the bedclothes created and afraid of the damning physical response that would surely result if allowed it to continue. Yet the guilty pleasure was a foil for the pain. He moaned quietly, desperately wanting to wake up before he could shame himself. The fever, he knew, had come and gone. Now he just felt weak, sore and woolly-headed, and filled with a great sense of loss that he had difficulty either explaining or understanding. With a gusting sigh he pushed aside the clinging strands of sleep and slowly made his way back to the real world.

"Hey, Cowboy." It was hard to form the words and his throat was parched so his voice rasped harshly but it was enough; the blond head turned and the cowboy in question smiled..

"Did you just call me cowboy?"

Vin took another sighing breath. Talking was a bigger effort than he would have believed possible.

"Reckon I did."

The gunslinger leaned forward but there was no menace in his manner, only a profound expression of relief.

"You know I hate that."

"Yeah," breathed the Texan, unable to contain his own smile, "me too."

It took all his self control not to continue gently squeezing the trigger until the hammer fell but he eased off the pressure before he could be tempted to complete the shot too soon. There would be time enough for that and as satisfying as it would be to put a bullet or two into the man who now stood wide-eyed and visibly trembling in the far corner of the cell, he could bide his time. The lantern he had set in the corner gave off a sickly yellow glow, enough to illuminate the cell but not enough to be seen from the street with the shades drawn. This was something he needed to do alone and he had no intention of attracting unwanted attention. He smiled as he fixed Shaw with a penetrating stare. At least not yet.

"I have just one question for you, Mr. Shaw."

The merchant narrowed his eyes but stayed well back, as if he could somehow avoid a shot from the Colt by making himself smaller.

"You can ask, but I don't have to answer."

A subtle change in Ezra's expression suggested that although that was indeed an option, it would not be a wise choice.

"And I don't have to shoot you..."

The man in the cell tried to move back but he had reached the limit of the cell's suddenly insubstantial dimensions as Ezra waved the gun a fraction, his nonchalance equally as threatening as his intense gaze.

"You know, I always believed that one day I'd come face to face with the Devil. I just never imagined it would be while I still lived."

Shaw laughed, a short bark.

"Mister, you're crazy."

Crazy? He was beginning to wonder at the truth of that statement himself.

"Quite possibly," agreed Ezra, readily, "but I hardly think it's going to make any difference to you. One way or the other, the outcome is likely to be the same."

Shaw pressed himself further into the corner, never taking his eyes off the Southerner. It was obvious he believed that he was dealing with a mad man.

"You're going to kill me." It was not a question but an acceptance of reality.

"At this moment, Mr. Shaw, nothing would give me greater pleasure but first I'm going to give you the opportunity to at least defend yourself. To plead your case, so to speak."

"I don't have to say nothin' to you. I demand a fair trial." Sullen defiance.

Ezra smoothly straightened his arm and aimed the Colt almost casually in Shaw's direction. It was an effort, the movement tugging painfully at his chest muscles, and the Colt feeling unusually heavy in his hand. His finger again tightened on the trigger.

"Your choice."

No, wait!" Shaw launched himself from the wall and hurled himself to the opposite side of the cell, clutching at the bars. "Don't shoot! You can't just shoot a man in cold blood."

"No?" Ezra sounded surprised that Shaw would doubt him. "Watch me."

Shaw shook his head frantically, reading nothing but the absolute truth in the Southerner's eyes.

"That's murder. You kill me and you'll swing for it!"

"Maybe, but ridding the world of such as you would be well worth it."

The quiet, resigned intensity of the Southerner's words did more to convince Shaw of his intentions than the loaded gun pointed so casually at him through the bars.

"I'm sorry," he blurted, "It was an accident. I didn't mean for anyone to get killed. That wasn't supposed to happen. We just wanted to frighten them off. Move 'em along; out of our town." He stopped, searching for the right words to say. "It was a mistake!"

Ezra tilted his head to one side, considering the sincerity of Shaw's sudden outburst as he concentrated on keeping the gun trained on the merchant. An increasingly difficult task as the sweat beading his forehead stung his eyes and his arm began to ache.

"Indeed it was. The biggest one you've ever made and..." He paused as he shifted slightly in his chair, wincing as a lance of pain shot through his ribs. "...undoubtedly your last."

"It was Cunningham, not me!" shrieked Shaw in protest, his voice rising in panic. "He just wanted to get what was rightfully his! Said they stole his horses. A man's got a right to take his own property back hasn't he? Ain't right to have the law siding with foreigners and thieves over law abiding citizens. This town pays your wages, Standish!"

Standish shook his head slowly and laughed softly, a chilling sound completely without humour that made the other man take a hasty step backwards.

"Mr. Shaw, not only are you a liar and a blackguard but you are a cowardly son-of-a-bitch as well. You are wasting my time and time is something I, and therefore by default you, don't have a great deal of." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "Now, you have just two minutes to justify yourself before I take immense satisfaction in sending you all the way to hell."

The merchant slowly backed up to the bunk, his face drained of all colour and abruptly sat down as if his legs were no longer capable of supporting him.

"Goddamn you, Standish," he spat, his voice shaking, "God damn you and all your kind."

"My kind? I believe we've had this dialogue before, Mr. Shaw and it's becoming rather tedious." He shifted again, adjusting his aim slightly as his arm started to tire. "And if that's the best you can manage then I suggest we end this conversation right now."

Shaw, suddenly animated, scrambled to his feet again and scuttled quickly into the far corner of the cell again putting as much distance between himself and the Southerner as he could manage in such a confined space.

"Then do it, you whoremongering Southern bastard!" he challenged. "Go on! Shoot! Because you'll

get no satisfaction from watching me beg and grovel. And get this straight, Standish. I didn't mean for the gypsy brat to die, but it don't change nothin' and I reckon that's one less in the world anyhow. You want to blame someone, blame that Chris Larabee -- one of your own -- for bringing them gypsies to town in the first place. Thieving bastards brought nothing but trouble..."

Ezra fired. No warning, no hesitation, no mercy.

The shot silenced Shaw, his mouth dropping open in shock as he reeled back against the wall, a dark stain appearing on the front of his pants as he voided involuntarily, unable to control himself as the bullet sliced neatly through his left ear. Standish slowly rose from his seat, thumbing back the hammer as he walked painfully towards the first set of bars. His face a mask of cold fury and his eyes blazing with anger, he again took aim and fired two shots in rapid succession, the merchant tumbling bonelessly forward onto his face as the Southerner, exhausted, finally lowered the gun. Gripping the cell bars with his left hand for support, Ezra stared for a moment at Shaw's body before wearily bowing his head and letting the gun fall from his fingers to clatter noisily on the floor.

JD's head snapped upright with a jerk that rattled his teeth. Damn! He'd almost fallen asleep again. He looked guiltily across at Buck but the cowboy seemed not to have noticed, content to lean back in his chair and stare into space, no hint of weariness on his troubled face, just a whole lot of worry. Since Chris had walked from the saloon, neither man had spoken more than a few words as the exhaustion of the previous few days not only caught up with, but overtook, them. JD had at least managed a few hours of sleep but Buck was running on pure willpower, having snatched no more than a few short cat naps in almost three days. Yet neither man wanted to be the first to yield and instead waited for Josiah's and Ezra's return.

Dunne stood up abruptly and walked a circuit around the table, stretching and forcing his sluggish system into action, trying to wake himself up.

"Not long before sun up," he commented, feeling the change in the air that heralded the coming dawn, not expecting and not getting an answer from his friend.

Instead he walked to the bat-wing doors and pushed them open, pausing to stand between them with one hand resting on either shutter. He shivered as a cold finger traced a path down his spine. For the first time he saw nothing but a reflection of the raw and lawless West that he had first come looking for. No fire pots burning tonight; windows and doors barred and shuttered as if to keep out some evil miasma that had seeped into the very heart of this frontier town. He had never seen it so quiet. So... dead. He tried to push aside the dark thoughts that crowded in on him but he was too fatigued to fight the depressing prospect of staying in a town which might yet see the death of one of his friends.

It seemed to him now that they had always been seven, although he knew quite well that it was not so. He smiled reflectively. He had been a greenhorn kid looking for adventure; instead he had found six companions, hardened to the ways of the world to be sure but, who had somehow become his friends. They had all taught him so much - not the least of which was how to be a man. Something he had soon discovered had nothing to do with how fast you could draw a gun or how many men you killed. He sighed. Suddenly a future without Vin Tanner in it seemed very bleak indeed.

He was still gazing out into the street, contemplating what the dawn would bring when he heard footsteps on the boardwalk. The unmistakable bulk of Josiah Sanchez with his familiar easy stride came into view, not running but moving fast and with a sense of purpose. Picking up the signals JD straightened, his tiredness fleeing in front the wake of a fresh surge of adrenaline, as the preacher barged through the door he held open for him and into the saloon. The grizzled head swung from side to side, keen eyes sweeping the empty room.

"Where's Chris?"

"Had some business to tend," replied Buck slowly, "Why?"

Josiah took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair with a sigh dredged from the depths of his soul.

"Ezra's not at the gypsy camp. Nettie left him to make coffee and now he's gone."

Buck was on his feet quicker than JD would have believed possible given his earlier lethargy.

"Gone? Where would he have gone?"

Sanchez shook his head.

"Don't know but Ezra's mighty tenacious when he wants to be, Buck, you know that."

"Damn!" Wilmington picked his hat up from the table. "Can't have gone too far. I'll check his room then up t'wards the church, okay? See if I can't stir Nathan up to help."

The preacher nodded his agreement and turned to Dunne.

"JD, you go back to the jail, just in case he decided to go there..."

"The jail? Why would he want...?" The young man's voice trailed off and he nodded once, the implication frightening enough to rob him of further speech. He hoped to God Josiah was wrong.

"...I'll keep scoutin' the street, just in case."

"Well, damn it all!" cursed Buck after a moment's pause, in which none of them moved, "What are we waiting for?"

The gunshot was unnaturally and shockingly loud, shattering the silence, and drawing the three men's attention like iron to a magnet as they froze in an almost comical tableau of stunned disbelief before shaking off the inertia, and running out into the street.

"Hellfire! Where did it come from?" demanded Wilmington, head swivelling up and down the street as he scanned for any hint of movement.

The trio turned in unison, guns drawn, as nearby a door clattered open but the light spilling onto the street came from Nathan's rooms above the livery and the man framed against the open doorway was Chris Larabee, his own Colt already in his hand.

"Goddamn it! What's going on, Buck?" A brief but chilling reminder of the gunslinger of old.

Before the moustached cowboy could answer, another shot rang out followed rapidly by a third and all eyes turned with a sense of dread on the darkened sheriff's office. No one uttered a word but each man's thoughts turned the same way and having done so, drew the same conclusion.

Ezra.

Buck's hand closed on the door handle, twisting savagely as he flung the door to the sheriff's office open with a resounding crash. For a moment he stood framed in the doorway, his eyes searching the dimly lit interior and finding what he had dared to hope he would not. *Goddamn you, Ezra!* The Southerner swayed dangerously, releasing his grip on the bars, and Buck darted forward anticipating his imminent collapse. Ezra seemed to weigh nothing as Wilmington supported him under the arms and lowered him carefully to the floor. *Stupid, mule-headed, Southern son-of-a-bitch!* He was aware of the others close on his heels but his attention was on the gambler. He looked quickly from the discarded gun beside Ezra's right foot to the man lying on the floor of the cell and a sinking feeling in his gut warned him that his worst fears were about to be realised as he slowly shook his head not wanting to believe. *You did it you dumb bastard. You really did it.*

"Josiah. Wanna help me out here, pard?" He was surprised that his voice sounded normal when his throat felt as if it would close around the words and strangle any sound he tried to make.

Light flared suddenly as Sanchez struck a match and lit another lantern, but if anything the added illumination served only to further damn Standish by revealing the pool of blood beside Shaw's head. *Jesus Christ!* Wilmington looked up into JD's pale and shocked face, undecided as to whether the younger man was reacting to the shooting of a defenceless man in cold blood by a man he thought he knew better or contemplating the very real fact that they would be obliged to jail, and possibly hang, the

gambler for having done it. As far as he was concerned Shaw had gotten no less than he deserved and if Ezra had been in any shape to do it he would have put him straight on a horse and sent him south of the border to safety. He doubted Chris would approve of such a ploy but, what the hell, Ezra was one of them, wasn't he? No way he was going to stand by and watch the Southerner swing for a pile of dung like Shaw. He looked again at the motionless body of the merchant. *Should have killed the bastard myself.*

"JD," he said quietly, urging Dunne to action, "Want to take a look at Shaw? Reckon there's not much point but open up anyway."

For a moment Dunne did not react then with a quick shake of his head as if surfacing from a trance he made eye contact.

"The keys," he repeated dully, then almost apologetically: "Damn! I...uh...I left them at the saloon."

"I'll get 'em, son."

Josiah started to move but JD was quicker, suddenly backing up towards the door and putting out a hand to halt the preacher.

"No. No. It's okay. I'll go."

Dunne hastily turned and jogged out of the door, seemingly eager to put some distance between himself and the jail house -- and Ezra. Buck shrugged watching him go. The kid still had a lot to learn. And some lessons were a whole lot harder to learn than others.

Ezra stirred, eyes opening reluctantly, and Buck felt the purring vibration of air moving through congested lungs under the hand that rested on the Southerner's chest. Although he had no name for it, he knew it was not a good sign.

"Come on, Ezra. Gotta get you out of here," he whispered urgently, "Won't do no good for folks to find you here. Got enough trouble brewin' for yourself already without askin' for more."

Standish blinked slowly, and drew a rattling breath that set him coughing painfully.

"No, Buck," he gasped softly, fighting for breath, "It doesn't matter."

Wilmington adjusted his grip on the gambler's shirt and started to pull him up, his face a study in grim determination.

"Yes it does." He paused and looked into the other man's eyes. "It matters to me."

A curious expression momentarily crossed Ezra's face then it was gone and he grimaced as he bit down on an involuntary cry that threatened to escape as Buck's arm put pressure on his injured ribs. Instead he uttered a soft grunt and Josiah quickly moved to add his support, aware that every movement was causing the Southerner more pain. With Standish between them the two men started to move, only to come to a sudden halt as Sanchez stopped abruptly and cast a quick glance over his shoulder.

"This isn't right. We can't just leave Shaw like that."

Buck followed the older man's gaze and gave a puzzled frown.

"Hell, Josiah. Why not? He ain't goin' nowhere." He turned away again, quickly dismissing any thought of the merchant from his mind. "Can't do anything until JD comes back with the keys anyway, so quit jawin' and lets get."

Sanchez raised his grizzled eyebrows and shrugged.

"Whatever you say, brother."

"We'll take Ezra to the church. Somewhere safe. Nathan's there, right?"

"Yep. Drunker than a fiddler's bitch though."

Buck started forward again, steadying the exhausted gambler.

"Great. Just when we need him." He gave a quick grin. "Don't worry, I know a few ways of sobering a man up real quick."

Josiah moved to keep up with the moustached cowboy.

“Okay, your call. Church it is. But you can be the one to tell Chris.”

Neither man noticed the shadow in the doorway until the shadow, taking form and becoming solid matter, stepped into the light. A familiar figure in black suddenly silhouetted in the door frame, standing easily with one hip relaxed, his hand rested on the butt of his gun.

“Tell Chris what?”

Vin levered himself up on his elbows at the first crack of gunfire, not so much because the sound concerned him but more because Chris had reacted with such speed that he was up and opening the door before the echo of the shot had even died. He heard the rap of Larabee's boots as he crossed the narrow balcony and then his voice.

“Goddamn it! What's going on, Buck?”

If there was any reply Vin was not able to hear it, although he strained his ears for any sound, instead the answer came in the sharp report of two more rapid-fire gunshots.

“Chris?”

Outside Larabee swore softly, his only response, and Vin could almost see the expression on the gunslinger's face, then uneven footsteps on the wooden stairs alerted him to the fact that Chris had gone. Trouble. Still resting on his elbows, the Texan allowed his head to relax and fall back as he closed his eyes. Always trouble. Some things just never changed and he wondered briefly if any of them were destined to find peace this side of the grave. He raised his left knee, bending his injured leg and feeling first the tightness in his thigh muscles quickly followed by the expected bolt of pain that shot straight up and into his groin. He braced, and breathed quickly through his open mouth, waiting for the pain to fade once again, and with a determined grimace he swung around to sit on the edge of the bed. It hurt. Badly. But not enough to stop him.

“No! ...” Mimi's voice began a protest.

He held up a warning hand, silencing her, then spent a moment with head bowed, concentrating on bringing his breathing back under control while fighting to preserve his dignity by keeping the blanket close to his body as his thigh burned with a fierce intensity. Dropping his hand he fiercely gripped the upper part of his leg, pushing aside the rough material, in his attempt to contain the renewed pain. The Texan had spent many years on the trail, living a solitary life, forced at times to witness and participate in practices that would turn another man's stomach but at that moment he was sure he was going to be sick. He drew back his hand sharply and swore. The inflamed wound in his leg was a seething mass of grub worms, squirming and questing blindly, spilling over onto his skin reminding him of nothing more than a fly blown corpse. The words came out as an outraged and indignant yelp.

“Holy hell...!”

“Wait!”

The young gypsy woman darted forward in alarm and brushed the fattened larvae into a clay dish, before grabbing a pitcher of water from the table and hastily douching the deep wound, cleaning it and flushing out any remaining grubs. Vin barely managed to keep a check on the gorge rising in his throat, holding himself rigid, as the woman gently picked several tenacious maggots from the wound with slim fingers and dropped them into the dish. He took a deep breath and swallowed hard. It was not so much the maggots that concerned him, it was more the fact that they had been feeding on his flesh while unknowingly he had slept. The thought sent a shudder through him and he experienced the unpleasant sensation of things crawling across his skin although he could see there was no longer anything there. Jesus Christ! He looked up in stunned disbelief as Mimi's hand grasped his wrist, unable to articulate his feelings.

"This is not a bad thing, Vin." She said the name awkwardly. "They have been working."

"Working," he repeated, not knowing how to respond to such a revelation, and not sure that he wanted to explore that idea any further.

She gently turned his head to direct his gaze at the swollen and angry-looking wound in his leg.

"See. Time for healing now."

It was true. The knife had gone deep and he remembered too clearly the putrid foulness of it as it had festered in spite of his attempt at cauterisation, how many days ago? Now it was a gaping slash, deeper, wider and longer than before, a massive wound that would scar badly, but there was no oozing yellow pus. It was bleeding afresh, a sign at least of living flesh. He sighed.

"I thought I was dying," he confessed quietly, then looked up his blue eyes filled with more than physical pain. "Was I dying?"

She nodded. No pretence.

"Yes."

"Nathan?"

She shook her head this time. She didn't know.

Tanner leaned back on one arm, suddenly too weary to even get back into the bed. He had started out with the intention of following Chris but the reality was that he was not going to be able to stand, much less walk. Truth was, he was not going anywhere and, looking at the ruin of his thigh, he began to seriously question if he ever would.

JD had crossed the street without really noticing where he was going and it was with some surprise that he found himself standing at the door of the saloon. Ezra had killed a man in cold blood. His heart was still pounding in his chest as if he had run a race and he found to his disgust that he was shaking as he reached out a hand to push open the swing doors. Hell, shooting a man down was one thing, but shooting an unarmed man down in a jail cell was murder and Ezra had gone and done it. He knew what Nathan would have to say about that but he had always believed the Southerner to be an honourable man. Flawed, just like the rest of them, but still honourable. Suddenly he was being forced to question that opinion. What were they supposed to do with him? The Judge would be in town tomorrow and he was likely to take a stern view of one of his regulators taking the law into his own hands. Dunne swallowed hard. He had yet to see a man hanged and he had no desire for the first public hanging he had the dubious pleasure of witnessing to be that of one of his friends. He felt his stomach turn a somersault as he realised that should it come to that, he might be more than just a witness. As the only law in town any one of them could well be given the job of hangman. His mind shied from the prospect as he hurried to fetch the keys from the table where he had left them. Lord, Ezra, why did you do it?

It was a rude awakening. Abrupt and not without pain. He had hit the wooden floorboards with a resounding thud that both roused him from his stupor and generated random sources of pain as, powerless to break his fall, he struck the unyielding surface with knee, hip, ribs and shoulder. He stifled the curse that sprang to his lips and rubbed his arm before, head pounding sickeningly, he pushed himself up from the floor wondering how Chris and the others so regularly, and with apparent effortless ease, coped with drunkenness and its aftermath. This was the first time in his life he had ever been falling-down drunk and he vowed bitterly that it would be his last. Clawing his way off the floor, he collapsed onto the pew that had, until a few minutes before, been his bed. Looking through unfocused eyes at his surroundings, he immediately recognised the interior of the church, and wondered if Josiah

was trying to tell him something.

Cradling his head in his hands he uttered a groan of misery. This was not the answer. He certainly felt no better for having achieved a few hours of blissful oblivion. The hurt and anger had not lessened and if he admitted the truth to himself, the reality of it was that he no longer had a place in the town. Chris had shown beyond the shadow of a doubt that he no longer had any faith in his abilities. He had banished him from caring for Vin, prepared to see the tracker die rather than let him touch him, and it was an undeniable truth that where Chris led the others would follow. Ezra had already made it quite clear that he preferred the gypsy healers. Though why would he expect anything else from the gambler he could not say. It was no more than the true colours that the Southerner always showed in the end. Yet, for a short time they had stood shoulder to shoulder, united against overwhelming odds and he had thought that for once -- just once -- that they had found common ground and that there might be some change. He shook his head, annoyed that his throat was constricting with emotion. Damn them all.

Unsteadily he got to his feet and, still groggy, searched for his hat. Damn them! He would go where he was needed -- and wanted. The Seminoles would welcome him as one of their own. Rain had made it quite clear that he had a home there but he had always hedged and put off making any definite commitment. He gave a brief snort of disgust, thinking instead of the obviously misplaced loyalty he had wasted on Larabee and the others. Time wasted. Lurching into a staggering walk, he aimed for the doorway of the church, finally finding his way through on the third attempt. No point in wasting any more time. He would go right now. He drew a deep breath of the chill night air, his head spinning at the sudden change in temperature, and for a moment he looked bleakly along the street swaying dangerously as he tried to maintain equilibrium. Now if he could just find the goddamn livery.

Chris let his gaze roam slowly over the three men and beyond, unable to rid himself of the unwelcome sense of dread that had been building since he had first heard the gunshots from across the street. Without a change in expression he focused hard eyes on his oldest friend, the look demanding some answers.

"Buck?" There was no need for him to say more.

Wilmington gave Larabee a look of pained regret.

"Chris, I don't have time for this. Ezra's in bad shape. Now I'd appreciate it if you'd just get outta my way."

A quick flicker of emotion.

"And Shaw?"

Wilmington gestured impatiently with his head.

"See for yourself. JD's gone to fetch the keys."

Chris sighed heavily and shouldered past the three men, the rowels of his spurs ringing as he walked, not sure that he wanted to see. Stooping he picked up the still-warm, long barrelled Colt from the floor and weighed it in his hand as he looked at the huddled shape on the floor of the cell. *Should've known, Ezra. Should've been here for you. Should've killed the slimy bastard myself.* It worried him in some measure that he felt nothing for the man and for a moment he was silent, torn between loyalty to the job with which he had been entrusted, and the man with whom that trust had been placed, and loyalty to a friend. A no win situation. Hobson's choice. Whichever one he made would damn him forever, if not in anyone else's eyes, then in his own.

"Chris?"

He turned around to look over his shoulder almost surprised to find that Buck still waited, watching him expectantly, aware that several awkward moments had already passed in which no one had spoken.

The two men were waiting for him to give the word. His call. He chewed thoughtfully on his lip as he glanced quickly once again from the gun in his hand to the man in the cell, before letting his shoulders slump forward like a man defeated.

"Get him out of here."

Wilmington, not about to wait for Larabee to change his mind, nodded to Sanchez and between them they manhandled the gambler out of the Sheriff's office and onto the street. Hearing them leave, Chris wearily hooked the chair that stood in front of the cells with the toe of his boot and, having pulled it close enough, carefully sat down, lifting one foot to rest on the bars as he contemplated the body in the cell.

"Damn you, Shaw," he whispered, a sound barely uttered. "Damn you to hell!"

He wanted -- no needed -- to lie down. Every part of him ached; a bone deep suffusion of pain that went beyond even the sum of his individual injuries. He was spent, physically and mentally exhausted and his only thought was to find a quiet place to close his eyes. He cared little if he never opened them again. Lord, but it seemed an age since he had slept in his own feather bed. An eternity since he had not felt pain. Now he just wanted to sleep. It had not registered that he was no longer suspended between the muscular shoulders of Buck and Josiah, until he became aware of someone tugging off his boots. In a distant corner of his mind he wondered where those minutes had gone. A straw pallet on a wooden bunk, not his own bed. His brain made the right connections and he understood finally that he was in Josiah's room at the back of the church. He bit back a moan as one of them eased his suspenders down over his shoulders and pushed him back against an unyielding pillow, then as he sighed, prepared for the first time in days to surrender, he felt the rough wool of a blanket drawn up to his chin.

"Take it easy, son." Josiah.

"I thought you said Nathan was here?"

"He was."

"Well, he ain't now."

"He won't have gone far."

"Best hope you're right." Buck's voice dropped. "Don't think Ezra's doin' too well."

If he could have found the energy to speak he would have agreed wholeheartedly with Wilmington. No, he was not doing too well. Not too well at all.

JD crossed the street with the heavy bunch of keys in his hand and not for the first time wondered if there was any way he could change the outcome, knowing that once he opened that cell he would be setting into motion a sequence of events which, once started, would be unstoppable. Outside the Sheriff's office, he hesitated, and ran a hand over his face. Christ! This was Ezra not some two-bit cowboy from a passing trail herd. He had locked the gambler up once before on Judge Travis' instruction and he remembered too clearly the look of disappointment on the Southerner's face when he had so readily taken his weapons.....*I don't know you that well, and apparently he does.* Well he thought he knew him at least a little better now, although Ezra never made it easy for anyone get under his guard, and he was not quite so ready to see him behind bars. He was even less ready to give him up to the gallows. The boy from Boston had also learned a few lessons in his brief time with the six men he now claimed as friends and one of them was that there was no black and white, just endless shades of grey, and as he started forward again, he decided that he would not be so ready to put Standish behind bars again, not without a fight.

The black-clad figure sinuously unwinding from the chair in front of the cells startled him and he

dropped the keys with a yelp of surprise.

"Chris!" He looked quickly around the bare room as he retrieved the key ring from the floor and Larabee waved a dismissive hand which Dunne took as a gesture for silence.

The gunfighter moved quickly towards the bars, peering into the shadowy cell, suddenly alert. He turned and held out a hand.

"Gimme the keys." A moment's hesitation from Dunne. "Now Goddamnit!"

Larabee's voice, cracking like a whip, broke the spell and JD moved with a speed that matched the sudden hammering of his heart against his ribs. Chris, in his haste, fumbled with the key in the lock for a moment before flinging the door open and passing onto the dead space in front of the two cells. As the gunslinger shoved the second key into the lock, the keys rattling as his hand shook, JD understood what had prompted such a reaction from the normally unruffled Larabee when he heard the low moan from Shaw's cell. Grabbing the lantern from the corner, Dunne followed but held back, his nose wrinkling at the strong and unmistakable odour of ammonia that seemed to be clinging to the merchant.

Down on one knee, Larabee roughly grasped the man's shoulder and turned him over, checking for wounds which prompted another moan that immediately assured the two men that he was still alive.

Suddenly curious, JD turned to scan the cell, holding the lantern high and soon picking out three distinct pock marks where Ezra's bullets had struck, not the man but the wall. Ignoring the increasingly articulate mumblings from Shaw as he came round, certain that Larabee had that well under control, Dunne moved closer and traced his finger over the scars. The slugs were buried deep and for a moment he looked at the tight cluster of shots and imagined Shaw's terror as Ezra fired. No wonder the merchant had lost control and disgraced himself in a moment of absolute fear. He might have been tempted to do the same if he had been looking down the business end of the gambler's gun, unarmed and unable to even run. He turned back to watch as Chris touched a finger to Shaw's ear, a good section of it now missing, and eliciting a loud protest from the man.

Larabee started to haul the man from the floor but the activity was beyond him, and he bowed his head, breathing heavily, his fingers still twisted into Shaw's shirt. Setting the lantern down on the floor, JD completed the move that Chris had started, none too gently thrusting the now whining man onto the bunk.

"He tried to kill me!" Shaw blurted excitedly, his hand flying to his mutilated ear. "That madman tried to kill me. He should be in here, not me! Are you listening, Larabee? I demand..."

"You what?" The delivery was quietly intense and JD raised his head to watch the gunfighter. He knew that tone and hoped for his own sake that Shaw recognised it too.

He did. His face paled and he held his ear, the dark blood now coagulated into thick rivers down his jaw and neck, and changed tack.

"I've been shot! I need attention. The bastard shot me."

Chris slowly got to his feet, towering over the man on the bunk with an air of menace that made the merchant recoil involuntarily.

"Shaw, if Ezra had been aiming to kill you I can promise you that you'd be a dead man and the only reason I'm glad he didn't is that I would have had to see him hang for it, and your worthless hide isn't worth the price! Now shut up before I finish the job myself!" He started to walk away, then turned abruptly his eyes hard and unforgiving. "JD, let him clean up then lock him up again. If he tries anything, shoot him!"

JD tightened his grip on the man's jacket and for effect, drew his gun, the wolfish smile on his boyish face enough to silence the merchant once and for all.

"Yes, Mr. Larabee."

The gunfighter wheeled and moved quickly out of the cell, not once looking back.

Chris did not stop until he was several yards away from the jail and he was forced to lean against one of the hitching rails for support. His hands were shaking and he gripped the wooden crossbar in an effort to still them, unsure if it was a mark of his exhaustion or a purely gut-level response to finding Shaw alive. *Jesus!* He had been so certain. So sure that Ezra had killed an unarmed man in cold blood. And yet, he had been ready to overturn everything he had ever believed in to protect the gambler. Taking several deep breaths, he straightened and felt the years suddenly weighing heavily on him. He was tired and he was hurting but there would be no rest for him this night. He raised his head and realised that the sky was already lightening with the coming of a new day. The night was already over.

Jackson stared in puzzlement at the door in front of him. He had not intended to return here, yet for some reason he had staggered straight past the livery stable and continued up the stairs that led to his rented rooms without any conscious thought. Now he leaned one hand against the jamb for a moment, feeling sick and dizzy and wondering if he could possibly make it down the wooden flight of steps again without falling; he remembered stumbling a couple of times on the way up as he lost his balance. Going down he just might break his fool neck. Running a hand quickly over his face, he drew a deep breath and after a moment's indecision reached out for the door knob. He could at least put a few things together before he left.

Nothing had changed, although the logical part of his mind could see no reason that it should have, and he stood for a long time in the doorway, torn between entering and the temptation to leave without a backward glance. Two of the gypsy women were there and, though they watched him with curious eyes, neither of them spoke but Chris was gone and his eye immediately darted to the cot where Vin lay. Unable to stop himself he walked unsteadily to the bed and looked down into the Texan's face, still bearing the slight flush of fever but no longer in any distress that he could tell. Whether that bode good or ill he was not sure and impulsively he reached out to touch the lightly sweating man but drew back before he made contact. Larabee had warned him to keep away. Not his problem.

He was here for another reason. He frowned and turned to find the two women still watching him and, suddenly embarrassed, he stepped back trying to maintain his equilibrium as the room spun dizzily.

"Jus' collectin' a few things," he slurred, and started to clumsily gather up a few pieces of his meagre equipment. "Be out of your way real soon."

The two women exchanged a glance and the older woman nodded once in the direction of the healer, a signal to the younger to intervene. Mimi rose from her place at the table and stood beside the much taller ex-slave, reaching out to stay his hand as he picked up a turned wooden bowl.

"Nathan, please, come. Sit with us."

Jackson hesitated, looking briefly towards the door then to the Texan. He had no cause to stay and he had no wish to confront Larabee again but the conflicting emotions coursing through him were making it difficult for him to know what to do.

"Nathan," she repeated gently, "Come."

He set the small wooden bowl down again and, unresisting, allowed her to lead him to an empty chair at the square table where the older woman still sat. He barely noticed the tin mug of coffee she set before him, responding only when after a few minutes she finally picked it up and physically put it into his hands.

"Drink, but mind it is hot."

The coffee was strong and he gave a shudder as it hit his stomach, hoping that it would stay there and that he would not be forced to beat a hasty retreat into the side alley to puke his heart out, wondering again what sane man would deliberately put himself through such torment as to get drunk. He

took another gulp, satisfied at last that his rebellious stomach was going to accept it, and set the cup back down.

The old woman, whose name he vaguely remembered as being something like Zania, finally sighed and looked sternly in his direction.

“You were going somewhere?”

He let his eyes skitter away guiltily, not wanting to match her gaze.

“Reckon I’ll go somewhere I’m wanted,” he muttered, recognising that it sounded petulant even to his own ears. “Got some folks who need me.”

The woman made an impatient and openly disapproving clicking noise with her tongue.

“Hah, and you are not needed here, gadje?”

Nathan turned to look pensively at Vin, who had not moved since he had been in the room, trying to get his scattered thoughts into some kind of order. He had been so sure Vin was going to die, now he looked well-rested and although far from recovered then at least not at death’s door. What if he had gone ahead and taken the tracker’s leg? What then? Maybe Chris had been right all along.

“No, ma’am and I’m thinking maybe there are others who might appreciate my help more.”

The woman frowned and spoke rapidly to the younger woman, who responded while giving a sympathetic glance towards the healer.

“A true healer does not need the promise of a reward or the thanks of man to offer the gift to others, my son. You are much too proud if you seek glory and honour.” She held up a warning hand as Jackson started to speak and continued without pause, ignoring the attempted interruption. “To heal you must first love, with the unconditional love of the Almighty who created all things. You have the healing touch, my son. This I have seen with my own eyes, but healing is much more than knowing the right herb to use, more than making the body well. You must also heal the soul.” She rose stiffly from her chair and walked around the table to stand beside him, resting one gnarled hand on his shoulder. She gestured to Vin. “This man is wounded in not only his body, but also his spirit. He is sick here.” She struck her chest over her heart. “As your other friend, the one who stood in the path of the horses to save Mioaru, is sick here too. Listen to me well, my child, for flesh and bone will mend in time, but it is the soul that need healing now. That is your undertaking -- not ours.” She levelled keen eyes at him again. “You would forsake the ones who need you now, for the sake of anger and pride?”

Nathan struggled with his warring emotions, his confusion a writhing serpent within him, no longer certain of his purpose. He shook his head and cradled it in both hands.

“I ain’t any kind of doctor,” he confessed, “I just try to help folk when they’re hurt or ailin’, but I don’t know what to do any more.”

The old woman smiled gently and patted his shoulder.

“Yes you do, my child.”

Larabee walked slowly towards the church. Tired and aching, he knew he must rest soon or drop where he stood, realising that in spite of his determination the illness was not about to be vanquished quite so readily as he had imagined. He might be up and moving but every muscle ached and he really needed sleep. Raising a hand to his wounded side he tried to count how many days it had been since he rode into the defile. A week? More? He shook his head. A goddamn lifetime. At least that’s what it was beginning to feel like. He paused for a moment in front of the building, then mounted the steps with a weary tread.

The candles were ablaze and the distinctive aroma of beeswax was heavy in the air. A safe, familiar smell mingled with the scent of new wood that Chris gratefully inhaled and spared a moment to savour;

a clean and honest smell that did a little to drive away some of the heaviness in his heart. With a sigh, he moved towards the back room, where he knew Josiah and Buck would have taken Ezra, his footsteps echoing hollowly through the empty church.

There was no sign of Josiah, but Buck was sitting morosely on a straight-backed chair beside the low bed, his elbows on his knees as he intently watched the gambler move restlessly under the blanket. Larabee stepped into the room and gently closed the door behind him, surprised by Wilmington's sudden reaction as he whirled at the sound, instinctively drawing his gun. Chris stood with one hand still on the door latch and stared at his friend for a long moment.

"Expectin' trouble?"

Wilmington hastily holstered his gun.

"Shoot, Chris. You oughtn't to sneak up on a man like that!" he whispered fiercely, "Could've gotten yourself shot."

Chris smiled, but there was no trace of humour in it.

"Seems there's a lot of that going around these days."

"Hell, what's that supposed to mean?"

Chris waved a dismissive hand and walked forward to stand over the bunk. At that moment the Southerner, his face flushed with heat, thrust aside the blanket and Chris winced at the bruising and abrasions revealed under the gambler's open shirt.

"Jesus," he breathed, unable to stop the reaction.

Buck glanced up, then stood up, first plunging his hands into his pockets then taking them out again, quite obviously ill at ease. Finally he spoke, avoiding looking at Larabee.

"Look, Chris," he blurted, in a definite hurry to say what he wanted to say. "I know you like as not won't agree with me sayin' this but I'm going to say it anyway. I think we should get Ezra out of town. Now. Tonight. Before anyone finds out about Shaw. Can be away before the Judge gets here, and be over the border by tomorrow."

Chris narrowed his eyes, closely watching the moustached cowboy.

"Is that what you want? You'd be willing to give up everything here?"

Wilmington quickly looked at the floor, before meeting Larabee's eyes.

"You wanna see Ezra go to trial," his voice was surprisingly passionate, although he didn't raise his voice, "maybe hang for that...that low down, yellow-bellied snake?"

"That's not answerin' my question, Buck. I said is that what you want? You'd be willin' to take off and make a run for Mexico? You really think Ezra would appreciate Purgatory?"

"Hell, Chris! Purgatory's gotta be better than dyin'. Even for Ezra."

Larabee looked thoughtfully at the gambler, his voice soft.

"I wonder." He drew a deep breath and stared evenly at Wilmington for along time before speaking. "Shaw's not dead."

Buck's expression hardened.

"What?"

"Shaw's not dead," he repeated, "Not even close. Ezra took a piece out of his ear is all. Looks like Ezra scared the..." he hesitated, "...bejesus outta him but he's still alive and whinin' to JD about gettin' shot."

Wilmington made a small movement that suggested he might actually hit the gunslinger, then stopped, once again under control, visibly restraining himself.

"You bastard! You could've told me straight up." He looked back to Ezra, the gambler's movements increasingly restless, as his voice dropped to an accusatory whisper. "Why'd you let me go running off at the mouth like that?"

Chris reached out and gripped Wilmington's arm.

"Buck, if it helps any, I'd like to think I would have been ridin' right along with you." He tightened his grip. "Glad it didn't have to come to that though."

Wilmington's shoulders slumped, righteous indignation dissipating in a sigh, then he laughed, a snort of bitter amusement.

"Some lawman, huh?"

Chris released his grip and slapped the other man on the arm.

"Buck, you're a good friend. Reckon you shouldn't ever forget that."

For a moment the two men exchanged a look that required no words, then with a nod Buck turned away, his attention once again on Standish before he cast an anxious look back at the door.

"Goddamnit! Where the hell is Nathan?"

Sanchez gently pushed open the door of Nathan's rooms and after a moment's hesitation stepped over the threshold. Vin did not stir as he entered, deeply asleep in the bed by the door but Nathan, head pillowed on his folded arms at the table, raised bloodshot and tired eyes to peer in his direction.

"Nathan." Josiah's gaze swept the room, empty save for the two men, noting the bare shelves and the healer's bag on the floor at his feet. "Going somewhere?" Walking slowly across the room, he pulled out a chair and sat down, his eye never leaving the former slave.

"Maybe." The response was weary, and Jackson rubbed his eyes, squeezing them tightly shut as if he was in pain. "Maybe not."

"Well, d'you reckon you could maybe decide real soon because Ezra needs you and I don't think he's got a whole lot of time to wait."

Jackson sighed.

"Ezra don't need me. Ain't nothing I can do for him that hasn't been done already and probably better than I could do it anyway."

Sanchez shook his head.

"Gotta tell you somethin', Nathan, Ezra's in trouble."

Nathan snorted a laugh.

"You mean worse than usual? Man's been walking around all busted up for days when he should've been restin' up in bed, giving his-self a chance to heal and now you tell me he's in trouble."

"I mean he killed Shaw."

Jackson's head came up with a snap and he winced at the sudden movement.

"Ezra? Shaw's dead?"

"Yup! Now are you comin' or not?"

"But how?"

Sanchez heaved a sigh.

"Ezra shot him in his cell but Nathan, I don't know that we've got time for this. Does it really make any difference? Shaw's already dead, but Ezra needs you. Now."

The healer looked around the room, bewildered, as if he was suddenly missing something.

"She said I'd know what to do. But I don't."

Josiah frowned.

"Who?"

"The gypsy. Said I'd know what to do." He mumbled. "She's gone. Said they had to take care of their own now."

"Then maybe it's time we took care of our own too, Nathan," prompted Josiah, earnestly, "Starting with Ezra."

Jackson bent unsteadily to pick up his bag from the floor, pausing to look up at Josiah again.

"I was just about to leave, Josiah. Going to ride out and forget about...." He waved his hand, a gesture that suggested not only the room but the entire town, "...all this. Seminole need me."

"You still can, Brother. Won't be me trying to change your mind or make you stay. I'm just askin' that you come with me over to the church to take a look at Ezra. See what you can do. One last time, Nathan."

The healer closed his eyes and waited a long moment before nodding.

"Ezra and me stood together," he said softly, "against just about this whole town." He hefted his bag onto his shoulder, his voice dropping to almost a whisper. "He stood with me."

Sanchez dropped a big hand onto the healer's shoulder and ushered him forward, remembering the scene as he had ridden back into town and knowing that Jackson did too; Ezra and Nathan alone against the mob.

"That he did, Brother, that he did."

JD smiled as he closed the door to the sheriff's office behind him, effectively silencing the continuing flow of complaint from Shaw that he had already been subject to for the past half hour. He had been willing enough to supply Shaw with some clean under-drawers and pants, if only because the man was beginning to stink like a polecat. He had even moved him to the other, vacant, cell and had given him something to eat, for while he had no particular cause to like the man he could summon a certain degree of sympathy for him. Cleaning the cell had been no joy, and he was still amazed at how much blood there had been to mop up. In fact the stain was still there on the boards. Granted though, Ezra had managed to remove a sizeable portion of the man's ear and had been within half an inch of putting a bullet in the merchant's head. Dunne absently fingered his own earlobe imagining a forty-five slug tearing through it. Hellfire, the Southerner was either very good or very lucky. He glanced back through the dusty, fly-spotted glass at the merchant sitting morosely in his cell and, on second thoughts, he decided that it was more like Shaw was very lucky that Ezra was very good.

He stepped down off the boardwalk and into the dust, almost surprised to find that it was already sunrise. Relieved to be out of the sheriff's office at last, he took a deep breath of clean air; air that suggested the start of yet another hot and dry day but for now pleasantly cool. Looking slowly up and down the empty street, he watched as a tumbleweed skittered erratically down the street, the only sign of movement, and JD was left with the curious sensation of having been left alone in a ghost town; the eerie feeling that he and Shaw might be only living things left in the entire world. Where the hell was everybody? After a moment he straightened his hat and sighed heavily. A new day. He hoped to God it wouldn't bring any more surprises.

"JD!"

Dunne hastily concealed the fact that the sound of his name being shouted, so unexpectedly splitting the silence, had startled him and he jogged quickly across the street to where Sanchez and Jackson had just emerged from the alley at the side of the livery, moving with purpose.

"Hey! Josiah. Nathan. What's the hurry?"

"Ezra," replied Josiah quickly, "He's over at the church."

Dunne nodded, understanding without the preacher going into further detail. The gambler had not been in good shape when he had seen him last. It stood to reason that he would be needing Nathan's attention, although at the back of his mind the young man wondered why it had taken so long for the healer to go to his aid.

"Well, Nathan, you might want to think about takin' a look at Shaw too when you've got some time. He's not hurt bad but it doesn't stop him whinin' and bleatin' in there about being shot. Course," he mused, "he did lose the best part of one ear..."

"Shaw?" Josiah interrupted abruptly, his face a picture of stunned disbelief. "You're telling me that weasel's not dead?"

JD jerked his thumb towards the sheriff's office.

"Take a look for yourself. I just finished cleaning up in there. Shaw ain't stopped complaining since he came round. Seems like Ezra just scared the wits clean out of him." He thought of the tight cluster of bullet holes in the jailhouse wall and smiled. "Don't mind tellin' you it frightened the livin' daylight's outta me when he started moving and moanin'."

Josiah reached across and slapped JD on the back, his face creasing into a relieved grin.

"Reckon that's just about the best news I've heard all week, son."

Nathan looked quickly from one man to the next, hefting the bag he was carrying more securely over his shoulder.

"Don't want to sound as if I'm not as grateful as you that Ezra's no cold blooded killer, but ain't no good Shaw bein' alive if Ezra's dead."

The smile faded from Josiah's face and a shadow briefly darkened his eyes.

"Damned right, Brother! Shaw will have to wait." He threw a glance at the barred windows of the jailhouse. "Till judgement day for all I care."

He was hot, burning up, and he felt as if he could drink an entire creek dry. He wanted to cough but his chest hurt far too much to contemplate such self-inflicted torture, so he listened instead to the interesting sounds gurgling in his lungs as he tried to force enough air through the congestion to merely continue the act of breathing. He sat half upright with folded blankets and pillows supporting him, because he had found that was the most comfortable position for him and he knew, beyond a doubt, that if he was to attempt to lie down again he would surely die, drowning in his own phlegm. He tried to remember when he had before felt so ill used, so tired, or so completely at the mercy of others, and decided never. He had reached the nadir of his existence and there were but two options open to him: he would recover or he would die. The second choice, he had to admit, held no particularly appeal, although he suspected that he had already come closer than he honestly wanted to contemplate.

He would have preferred his own feather bed to Josiah's narrow cot, a sentiment he was sure Josiah would also share. With a moistly whispering sigh he closed his eyes, shutting out the bleak and Spartan surroundings of the preacher's room, somehow finding the fact that he was in a church to be more disturbing than it was reassuring.

He felt a hand on his forehead, very cool and dry against his overheated skin but found he was too weary to open his eyes. The same hand moved to his chest, slipping easily inside his open shirt, and he knew then that it could be none other than Nathan. In spite of feeling totally wretched, he mustered a smile.

"Why, Mr. Jackson. I've been expecting you."

Nathan marked the deathly pallor of the gambler, the heat of his skin and the unmistakable rattle in his chest with a feeling of trepidation. The Southerner was gravely ill and no mistake. Not broken bones and bruises this time but the insidiously creeping spectre of pneumonia. He touched sure fingers to the gamblers wrist feeling the rapid pulse of a racing heart, something he knew to be a by-product of the illness, fuelled by the high fever.

"Hush now. Just rest." The healer's voice was sharper than he intended, yet not unkind. "Y'always

did talk too much, Ezra."

The Southerner slowly opened his eyes, responding to the voice and pinning the ex-slave with eyes glittering brightly with fever.

"Talk? Indeed, Mr. Jackson," he took a laboured breath, the simple action obviously difficult for him, "but not always saying...the right things."

Nathan reached into his bag, lowering his gaze, an irrational fear of what the gambler might be going to say suddenly taking a firm and frightening hold of him. The two of them had not always seen eye to eye, the gambler epitomising everything he had learned to hate as a slave among privileged Southern "gentlemen". Slave owning gentlemen. Hell, the man was a con artist, a charlatan, quite prepared to make a profit off any man or woman he could swindle, cheat or otherwise separate from their hard-earned cash with the least amount of effort. Yet Nathan knew he had often judged the Southerner harshly, unable to move beyond the bitterness of his own past but in the last few days Nathan had seen another side of the man and in place of the self-serving opportunist had appeared a different Ezra; someone who had shown not only courage but integrity. An integrity based on principles that Nathan would never have dreamed the gambler entertained. He raised his eyes again, meeting and holding the Southerner's intense gaze. Saying the right things wasn't always easy.

"Well, now ain't the time for sayin' anythin', right or wrong," he admonished, unable to keep the catch from his voice. "Better you keep all that hot air of yours for breathin' 'stead of talkin'."

Ezra gave a short laugh, that turned into a cough, which effectively silenced him for several painful minutes before he was able to regain control. He closed his eyes again and slumped back, the brief conversation and subsequent paroxysm having exhausted him.

"Tou...ché."

The healer sorted through his bag. God, he felt so helpless! There was little he could do for pneumonia, there was no cure, but he had medicines that would help; senega and Spirit Weed, to ease congestion, draw off some of the fluid in his lungs and which would also keep him in an almost twilight sleep. At least if Ezra was going to die, he would not have to suffer.

The Southerner roused again as Nathan started to open the rest of his shirt.

"My apologies, Mr. Jackson," he murmured, "but I find myself..." He paused for several beats to catch his breath. "...unable to assist you." He smiled without opening his eyes. "The spirit and the flesh...you know how the saying goes."

Nathan impulsively closed his large hand around the slim fingers resting outside the blanket, feeling the smoothness of a hand that had in all probability never engaged in any form of manual labour against the work-roughened callouses on his own. Still, a hand that had wielded a gun readily enough.

"No more talk now, Ezra. You'll be fine."

There was a moment of awkward silence, in which Ezra's laboured breathing rasped harshly before he summoned the strength to speak again.

"Can you promise me that?"

Jackson, sighed and hung his head, relieved that he did not have to face the unrelenting demand for truth of the gambler's green eyes.

"My word on it."

Nathan was surprised when Ezra laughed softly.

"Liar."

The Texan shifted his head, unconsciously avoiding the shaft of light that fell across his face, before

finally admitting defeat and opening his eyes to greet the morning. He groaned quietly, more a gentle explosion of sound, as he moved and felt the stiffness of disuse in every muscle and sinew. Persevering, he raised himself on one elbow. He was thirsty and, for the first time in days, ravenously hungry. He blinked and rubbed at eyes still gritty with sleep. The room was empty.

With no one to contradict his actions, he eased out of bed, taking a moment to adjust to sitting upright as he squeezed his bare toes against the floorboards and revelled in the solidarity of hard wood beneath his feet. Breathing deeply, filling his lungs, he leaned his head back, just content to be for a few moments, acutely aware of every sensation; the slow thump of his heart behind his ribs, the rough texture of coarse wool against his body, the smell of kerosene, the silence, all a part of his existence. A part of him just being alive. His head felt light, as if it sat six inches above his shoulders floating on air, while his limbs felt heavy and he had the distinct impression that he had forgotten how to move, how to walk, even how to talk. If he had not known that he was already obeying the dictates of his unconscious self to breathe he would have been certain that he had forgotten how to do that as well.

The feeling of disconnection lasted several minutes as his brain and body adjusted, then he was Vin Tanner again. Unable to stop himself he smiled. *Welcome back, Tanner. You bin gone a while.* He leaned forward, his hands braced on the edge of the bed and tested the ability of his legs to support his weight, which somehow seemed less than before, as if he had lost not only weight but substance. Pain flared in his left leg, but it was a good pain, the kind you keep testing to see if it's still there and being more than satisfied to find it so. He sank back for a moment, content to take it slowly. The last thing he wanted was to fall flat on his ass and have to wait for someone to come back to help him up. No, sir. He wanted to do this on his own, and do it right.

He eased back the blanket, half afraid of what he might find remembering with vivid clarity the wriggling maggoty mass that had been feeding on his flesh. Swallowing hard he took a breath and looked down at his thigh. It had been covered, the upper part of his leg circled by a clean, white bandage, tightly enclosing the wound. It hurt, but not agonisingly so, and he understood that some of his woolly headedness probably came from the laudanum he had been fed. Well, no more. He was not going to stay in bed one more minute or be treated like an invalid. That wasn't the Tanner way.

Blinking away some of the lingering sleep, he looked anxiously around. Now, where the hell were his pants?

"Goin' somewhere?"

Tanner started guiltily, then let out an explosive sigh as the voice registered in his consciousness.

"Shoot, Chris! You oughtn't to go creepin' up on a man like that! T'ain't right."

Larabee gently closed the door behind him.

"Kinda sassy ain't you for a man who rides within spittin' distance of the pearly gates."

Vin gave a short laugh.

"Wrong way, pard. Reckon I might've danced with the devil though."

"How's the leg?"

"Hurts somethin' fierce," admitted the tracker, "don't know as I can stand up on it too well neither."

"But you're gonna try anyway."

"Damn right I am." He looked round, momentarily distracted, searching. "Soon as I can find my pants."

Larabee dragged a chair away from the table and spinning it round, straddled it, resting his arms across the back.

"Just thought I'd see how you were doing before I hit the sack and get some shuteye."

Vin frowned.

"It's just gone sunup, Cowboy, in case you ain't noticed."

"Been a long night, Vin. For all of us." He rested his forehead on his arms. "Way too long."

"Trouble?" He remembered the gunfire that had drawn Chris away the night before. "Reckoned there was something. First time I've been left on my own in what seems like just about forever, so I figured that means either I don't need nursemaidin' no more -- or someone else does."

"You don't want to know, pard." He sighed wearily. "Town's just plumb crazy."

"Somethin' I should know about?"

Chris raised his head balancing his chin on his folded arms with a thoughtful expression on his face. He paused, fixing the Texan with a long stare before he finally spoke.

"You know somethin', Vin? It's a mighty good feelin' to have you back."

Tanner ducked his head, fidgeting with the blanket, suddenly embarrassed.

"Well, I ain't gonna be much use to anyone for a while yet," he mumbled, "what with this bum leg 'n all..." His voice trailed off, unsure where he should go next.

Chris smiled and stood up.

"Reckon you'll be just fine soon enough."

He turned to leave.

"Uh, Chris?"

Larabee hesitated and looked back, expectantly.

"Yeah, cowboy?"

"You wanna help me find my pants, 'fore you go?"

"Lands' sakes, Vin Tanner! What in tarnation d'you think you're doin'!"

The Texan, poised awkwardly between bed and chair in that delicate state of balance when a fraction of an inch in either direction might spell disaster, froze. One hand gripped the chair back, while the other clutched the too-big waistband of his borrowed pants, which were themselves in danger of responding to the forces of gravity, and he hovered uncertainly between moving forward or moving back.

"Glory, but you boys just don't know when you're beat!"

Vin braced and quickly launched himself forward, dropping heavily onto the chair with a relieved sigh, keeping his injured leg held stiffly out in front of him.

'Nettie," he panted, aiming a brilliant blue-eyed stare in her direction, "you done near scared the livin' daylight outta me."

"Boy, y'already look like death warmed over, so a little scare ain't going to make a deal of difference to you." The woman moved forward and sat down at the foot of the bed, her expression softening. "Must be a mighty big itch that needs scratchin' for you to be leavin' your sick bed so soon."

Tanner looked evenly at the old woman, waiting a moment before he spoke.

"Truth is I can't stand being shut up in here no more, Nettie. Was just gonna sit outside for a spell."

"Dressed like that?" she snorted, "You'll catch a chill for sure." The woman paused and looked closer at his manner of dress, a smile touching her lips. "Lordy, but look at you. Like a boy dressin' up in your Pappy's clothes!"

Vin looked down at the oversized jeans and managed a shy smile.

"Nathan's," he explained, "Chris said mine weren't fit for nothin' but burnin'."

"Don't tell me Mr. Larabee was here and still let you carry on with this foolishness? Seems none of you have the sense you were born with!"

"No offence, Nettie, but I just ain't the type for lyin' around in a bed."

"Different when you're sick, boy. Reckon Ezra's paying the price for his stubbornness, sure don't want you to be next."

"Ezra?" Tanner's head snapped up again, and his eyes narrowed. "Nettie, what the hell is going on around here?"

The woman gnawed her lip for a moment.

"Long story, son."

Vin heaved a sigh and absently rubbed at his thigh.

"Well, shoot, Nettie. It don't look like I'm going anywhere in a big hurry. One thing I got plenty of is time."

Buck had guiltily snatched a few hours sleep, finally giving in to exhaustion and making his way to the room he rented over the saloon just after daybreak. In truth he could have slept the entire day away and not crawled out from under the covers till the next sunrise but he had set a limit and that limit was until noon, giving him just an hour before the stage was due in.

He stood for a moment on the boardwalk outside the saloon and cast a wary eye over the street. It was just a day like any other day, ordinary people getting on with the everyday business of making a living. Buck tucked a hand down the waistband of his pants and for a moment stared across at the jail. Just making a living. Hell, what kind of a living was peacekeeping anyway! Being the law made no difference in the end, you died just as easily being right as being wrong. Didn't earn you no respect either. Folk could be either with you or against you in the wink of an eye and as the mood took them. He had seen them turn before and no doubt would see them turn again - if he stayed around long enough.

"Care to walk a spell with an old lady, Mr. Wilmington?"

Momentarily caught off guard, his thoughts far away, Buck quickly tipped his hat.

"Miz Wells! Uh, well...sure, ma'am." He offered his arm. "Now, just where are we headed?"

Nettie patted his arm as they moved off down the boardwalk.

"Aimin' to spell Nathan for a while, son. Told him I'd be back come noon. Just had to come over and check on the other stray lamb."

"Huh?"

"Vin."

Buck laughed.

"Stray lamb? Gotta remember that one. Ain't never thought of Vin as no lamb. Maybe a coyote or a wolf..."

Nettie slapped his arm.

"You hush there, Mr. Wilmington. No call for joshin'. Reckon that boy's been on a journey to hell and back..."

Buck instantly sobered, halting as he looked down at the grey-haired woman on his arm.

"Yes, ma'am. I know." he said quietly, "I was there."

He had slept longer than he intended. From the angle of the sun shining into his window, he knew it was after midday and the heat in the room was already stifling. With a groan he could do nothing to suppress he stiffly manoeuvred to sit on the edge of the bed, holding his injured side and wondering if there was a single part of him that did not ache. Taking a moment to coax his reluctant muscles into action he eased himself to his feet, using the bed frame for support, before moving to the wash stand by the window.

Stripping off his shirt, he washed and shaved, the heat of the sun on his back as he stood at the

basin loosening tight muscles, so that by the time he finally wiped the last traces of soap from his face, his movements had become a little easier. With a sigh, he found a clean shirt and slowly dressed. The Judge was due in on the afternoon stage. He would be there to meet him but before that he had something he needed to do.

It was easier to walk than go to the trouble of saddling his horse or, indeed, the subsequent effort of getting into the saddle, an action he was not entirely certain he could yet accomplish. Cutting along the side of the general store, he angled away from the buildings and out towards the gypsy camp, his stride still long and loose but necessarily slower than usual.

The gypsies had struck camp, the vardos already hitched and ready to roll. He slowed to a halt as a number of the Rom moved away from the colourful wagons, and he felt a moment of intense sadness as he recognised the purpose of the gathering. The two men, Spiro and Yodjo, led the procession. Men with whom he had shared drinks, bearing the burden of a too-small coffin, followed by the women and children. Taking off his hat, he bowed his head as the men passed, understanding the silent tears of grief that ran unashamedly down their weathered faces.

Chris followed. These people had saved his life. The least he could do was show his respect, although the tiny coffin brought back memories of his own losses that he rarely allowed to surface for fear of losing a little bit more of himself.

"You do us great honour, gadje."

His head came up quickly in response to the voice, not having seen the woman drop back from the main group of mourners.

"I'm sorry, Mimi. I wish I could change..." he paused and sighed, lost for words, "...all this. None of it would have happened if you hadn't helped me..."

She shook her head and raised a finger to his lips to silence him.

"Do not say this. No, do not even think this. What is done cannot be undone. The fates rule and we can only go where destiny leads. Now it is time for us to move on," she smiled sadly, "but we leave a small part of us -- our family, our people -- here with Mioaru, so you might remember us always."

She took his arm and with the slightest pressure urged him forward and together, arms linked, they followed the slow-moving procession.

"I don't need a grave marker to remember." His voice was soft. Sad. "God knows I have enough of those already." He stopped abruptly and turned to face the gypsy, once again struck by her exotic beauty. "You saved my life and this," he waved a hand at the funeral cortege, "this is the price you have to pay."

She smiled sadly and shook her head.

"This was not of your doing, gadje. We are hated for being what we are, the travelling people, who run before the wind but who remain forever free. One day we will find our place, but this is not it. Now come, let us give this child to God."

Chris hesitated then merely nodded and followed mutely, unable to find any words that would mean anything to the young woman but he knew she would probably understand his silence better than she would any inarticulate rambling which would do both of them an injustice.

There were others. He had not expected to see anyone else at the picket-fenced graveyard but then could not think of a reason why that should be the case. Josiah. Of course the preacher of all people would be there but the fact that Buck and Inez, together with JD, Casey and Nettie Wells and a number of townfolk had come to pay their last respects filled him with a sense of rightness. Maybe this was not so much an end as a beginning.

He watched as Josiah opened his bible, bowing his head as the preacher's first quietly spoken words reached his ears and touched a heart Chris believed had long ago turned to stone.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live..."

It was not that it was getting any easier for him to breathe; it just seemed less important to him that he keep struggling. With acceptance came a curious sense of peace and as he descended further into the twilight of an existence that hovered somewhere between living and dying, he surrendered, too exhausted to fight any more. He just wanted to sleep, to cast all cares aside, and the prospect that he might never wake again no longer held any fear for the gambler. It was time for the last turn of the card.

The healer again dipped the cloth into the basin and squeezed out the excess water before laying it across the stricken gambler's forehead, continuing the same rhythm he had been following for what seemed like hours, constantly changing the cool compresses on forehead and neck in a ceaseless pattern, as he fought to bring the Southerner's fever down. At first Ezra had been restless, struggling to draw air into his congested lungs and pushing back the covers as he tried to gain some respite from the heat but for the last hour he had been unresponsive and Nathan was afraid that whatever he did now would be to no purpose, yet he continued.

Occasionally the green eyes would still flicker open but his gaze was fixed on some distant point that looked beyond both Nathan and the very room in which they now sat and when Nathan spoke his name there was no sign that he had even heard. The bruised chest still rose and fell but no longer in heaving spasms as before when the Southerner had fought for each breath of air, instead a barely detectable movement, shallow and rapid, with a sound that reminded Jackson of a cat's purr had become the pattern. Any moment the healer expected the soft breaths to just cease, for Ezra to give up the fight, and as he reached out to take the man's hot, dry hand in his own he realised, with a sense of profound shock, that he had already accepted the fact that Ezra was going to die.

"Nathan?"

The healer had not heard anyone enter the room and the voice, one he did not immediately recognise, startled him out of his moment of sad reflection, his head coming up in an almost guilty response to stare at the unexpected intruder.

"Doc Mason!" The former slave released Ezra's hand and stood up, his expression of surprise rapidly transmuting into one of relief. "Am I glad to see you."

"I got your wire and came as soon as I could." He moved forward and frowned, looking down at the fevered Southerner before focusing again on Jackson. "But I thought...your wire said..."

"I know what it said," interrupted Nathan quickly, "but I reckon it ain't Vin that's like to die, Ezra's the one that needs you -- or a miracle -- right now."

John Mason gave an abrupt nod and a briefly reassuring smile.

"Well, let's hope I'm enough, Nathan, miracles are not usually my domain I'm afraid."

Taking up Jackson's place as the healer moved aside he touched a hand to the gambler's burning skin before drawing the sheet back from Ezra's chest and turning back to Nathan, his face grim.

"Good God, man!..." He bit back the rest of what he was about to say and sighed, quickly shrugging out of his jacket and rolling up his sleeves. "You'd better tell me what happened."

It was over and the Rom were moving on. Chris stood, slowly turning his hat in his hands, watching as the women and children climbed into the waiting wagons.

"You don't have to go."

Mimi turned sombre dark eyes on the gunslinger.

"Yes, we do. The wind has changed, my gadje, and we have already stayed too long in this place."

"Maybe you're right," he conceded with a sigh, "Could be that it's time for me to be movin' on too."

The gypsy woman smiled.

"No. This is your place, Chris Larabee. If not for always, then at least for now."

The gunslinger frowned, shaking his head.

"Ain't my way to get too attached to any place."

"Perhaps this is so, but the bond between men is a powerful thing and I think you are not yet ready to turn your face away."

A shadow darkened Larabee's eyes before he dropped his gaze to look at the ground.

"I wonder."

Mimi shook her head.

"We have a saying in our tongue, gadje: he who willingly gives you one finger will also give you the whole hand. You -- and your friends -- have shown this as true. And what you will do for strangers you will do ten times over for a friend and a hundred times over for a brother."

Chris smiled briefly thinking of how ready Buck had been to saddle up and make a run for the border with Ezra, and how easy it would have been for him to do the same. No questions, no hesitation. His promise to Vin and the lengths to which he had gone to honour that pledge almost to the point of sacrificing another friend. The whole hand indeed.

"It's called watching each other's backs."

Mimi tightened her grip momentarily on his arm.

"No, gadje, it has another name and it is the same in your tongue or mine. It is called love." In a quick movement she leaned forward standing on tiptoe and brushed her lips against his cheek. "Now I must go. *Ashen Devlesa tai sastimasa.*" In a whirl of coloured skirts she turned and ran to the waiting wagons, turning back once as she reached the vardo. "And remember this, gadje, where the wagon goes a trail is left."

With a shout, Spiro flicked the reins and moved the lead wagon forward, only to rein in when he drew level with the gunslinger. Chris took a moment to settle his hat back on his head before looking up at the gypsy.

"I'm sorry for the way this all turned out, Spiro."

The man shrugged.

"It takes but one man to make many madmen, and many madmen make madness. This is the way of the world. There is no blame in it for you, my friend." He leaned down to extend his hand, clasping the gunfighter's own hand in a strong grip. "I wish you long life and good health, Chris Larabee."

Chris nodded.

"Good Luck to you. I hope you find what you're looking for."

Spiro grinned, showing his gold tooth that again reminded Chris of Ezra, as he sketched a casual farewell salute.

"And you, yet it may be that your search is already at an end."

With a snap of the reins, Spiro urged the mules forward and with a jolt the wagon moved away. It was a long time before Chris moved, finally taking his eyes from the trail that the passing wagons had left in the dust, and turning to slowly walk back into town.

oooOOOooo

The stage was late. Chris and Buck, sitting out in front of the saloon, presented a reassuring picture of normalcy, but it was an illusion masking the turbulent emotions raging beneath the surface of each

man.

"It's late."

"Buck, if you say that one more time, I'm gonna have to shoot you."

"I was just..."

"Well, just don't. It'll be here."

Silence.

"Think he'll make it?"

"The Judge?"

"Ezra."

Silence.

"I mean, what if he doesn't come through, Chris?"

"Then we'll be digging another grave."

Wilmington slammed down his beer and jack-knifed out of his chair.

"Jesus, Chris! Don't you give a good goddamn about nothin'?"

"Easy, Buck," responded Chris quietly, "It ain't that I don't care, just not a whole lot I can do about it, 'cept maybe pray and I already done that."

Silence.

"Me too."

The two men exchanged a brief glance before looking quickly away, embarrassed by their admissions.

"Stage comin' in!"

Chris downed the last of his beer and retrieved his hat from the table before standing up and stretching some of the stiffness out of his joints, relieved that the awkward conversation had finally been terminated.

"Let's go, cowboy. 'Less I'm mistaken, we're still gettin' paid to do a job here."

"Ezra! Don't you fold on me now, you hear? Come on, goddammit man, breathe!"

Savage pain lanced with renewed vigour through his chest as, shocked, he struggled to obey and with a determined effort managed to draw a sudden, startled, ragged and bubbling breath that triggered an immediate paroxysm of coughing. Along with the pain, conflicting sensations began to register in his brain as he rapidly shifted from one level of consciousness to another, although the final stage of waking seemed forever just out of his reach. He knew he felt cold, unable to stop himself shivering, but no sooner had that unpleasant reality made itself known than a glowing warmth settled across his stomach to slowly but steadily drive away the chill. A moment later he felt an arm slide under his neck and shoulders, his head cradled in the crook of someone's elbow, and a scant spoonful of cool water passed his lips.

"Easy now, son. You're doing just fine."

He came to the conclusion then that his definition of fine was not the same as the person speaking to him, but he vaguely recollected having already called Nathan a liar and it struck him that it might not be wise to repeat the offence with someone who might not so readily appreciate such a liberty. So, he kept his thoughts to himself and, in spite of the well-developed instincts of an accomplished liar that recognised a fellow master at the game, he tried to believe. Because he wanted to believe.

With no strength left either to resist or to comply, there was nothing for it but for him to accept and if he did not wholly welcome, then at least he could tolerate, the sensation of water cooling rapidly on his exposed skin. Without any voice in the matter, he was obliged to accept being alternately bathed and

fanned until he began to shiver, then just as patiently being dried and warmed, just enough to take away the chill, before the cycle began again. Repeatedly he was urged to drink -- just a mouthful -- and each time he took it more eagerly, until at some indeterminate point he discovered that the painful bouts of coughing had cleared some of the congestion in his lungs and the terrible effort of drawing breath had marginally eased.

He remembered a host of other voices -- some familiar, some not --- and, even through the confused haze of his fever, he had understood the significance of the fact that he was being tended by a continually changing rota of people. He remembered his Uncle Adam -- not really an uncle of course but yet another substitute family member among many on whom Maude had foisted him in his too-brief childhood -- in a darkened room, dying of consumption. There had been an endless parade of people then too and he had never been able to rid himself of the image that they had been circulating like buzzards. Not then and not now. Nathan had been in almost constant attention. He had been able to recognise the healer not only by his voice but by his hands. In counterpoint, Nettie's voice had been an anchor for him and though so many of the words had slipped quickly out of his fevered mind, some of the sentiment had remained.

Time had become a meaningless blur of discretely disjointed moments, and he could not begin to guess how long he had lain in this, Josiah's, bed although he vaguely recalled Buck and Josiah bringing him to the church. He really would have preferred his own downy-soft feather bed to ease the aching of his abused body but, for some reason he could no longer recall, Buck kept insisting that the church would be safe. He had not been able to understand even then what possible danger he could be in that he would need a safe haven but he had been in no condition to debate the issue and so he had taken the preacher's roughly hewn cot with its common ticking mattress. He would have been mortified, had he not been so grateful.

"Ezra!"

The sharp tone of the voice startled him and he understood in a moment of absolute and shocking clarity that he had been gradually slipping away again. Not so much the gentle transition into sleep, but an unpleasantly alarming sensation of fading away and this time he opened his eyes. His heart was thudding so strongly in his chest that he could feel every pounding beat, but after a few frighteningly confused moments was able to bring the images dancing in front of his eyes into focus.

Flickering lights.

Candles. Yes, of course. The church.

He blinked slowly and his panic subsided as, with a sense of profound relief, he found himself staring into a familiar dark face, seeing an equal measure of compassion and concern in the healer's expression, which slowly dissolved into a smile. Ezra closed his eyes again, feeling the solid pressure of Nathan's hand as it closed tightly around his own. His response was a faint echo of Jackson's strong grip but he was able to summon a gentle smile. At least the buzzards were gone.

The Texan was alone again. He had not moved since Nettie had left him to go back to tending Ezra. He was still trying to come to grips with everything the feisty widow had told him as she had quickly brewed him some coffee on the stove before helping him into a shirt. He rubbed at his leg through the borrowed jeans as he sat at the table and again wondered at the chain of events that had seen three of their number struck down in the space of a few days; Chris by a tainted arrow, Ezra by a herd of spooked horses and himself by...He paused and sighed before completing the thought. Himself by his own carelessness. He shivered a little in spite of the heat of the room. How quickly the wheel could turn. How easily the candle's flame could be snuffed out.

He should have stayed. Listened to Buck. Because of him Ezra and Nathan had been left to sit on a powderkeg, while Buck, Josiah and JD had wasted precious hours -- no, days -- searching for him, Vin Tanner, who had walked into a trap like a goddamn greenhorn. Walked into a trap, been taken, and almost turned in for a \$500 bounty. Christ, what a mess! Then there was Danny. His mind turned and fled from the thought, then tentatively and unbidden crept back to it again. The kid. Jesus! He rubbed at his eyes, annoyed that he could do nothing to stop the tears that suddenly gathered in his eyes, threatening to spill over. Goddamn it, a Tanner never cried. He dashed away the errant moisture and swallowed the emotion, glad that there was no-one there to see him. Hell, Danny was just a kid, one who'd strayed over the boundary line for sure, but that same kid had taken a blade in the chest for him. A kid that could easily have been him fifteen years before.

He rubbed a hand over his face. It was all wrong. Danny had died, Chris had almost died, and Ezra may still yet lose the fight. Abruptly he pushed himself up and away from the table, grimacing and softly cursing as his leg protested the sudden strain but persisting in any case. The pain was a hot poker thrust deep into his thigh but ignoring it, he limped awkwardly across the room, using every available support to assist his passage. That he was still weak and not even close to recovery did not occur to him, he just knew that he could not stay in this place. He needed to know. Needed to see Ezra. Needed to see Chris again, just to be sure.

As he struggled with door catch it came to him that there was one difference between him and Danny that he regretted the kid had never had a chance to discover; Vin had learned what it was to care about others - to value another man's life as much as his own. It had taken a lifetime but since that day when he had unhesitatingly joined Chris Larabee in rescuing Nathan Jackson from the lynch mob he had found no cause for regret. He finally understood what it meant to have friends.

The coach had barely stopped moving before Buck had his hand on the door handle, twisting it to release the catch and swinging it open in one quick motion. Chris held back. If the Judge was on board he had no intention of crowding the man but as usual Wilmington's eagerness was over-riding any common sense. Travis was either on the coach or he was not and whether he stood six inches or six feet away from the stage would make no difference to the outcome.

"A welcoming party? I'm not sure I like the implications." The elderly circuit judge gruffly greeted two of his unofficial peace-keepers as he stiffly stepped down from the coach. "Buck. Chris."

If his gaze lingered a little longer than was polite on Larabee, he kept any opinion to himself as he cast a quick glance along the length and breadth of the unusually quiet street.

"Came as soon as I could. Josiah's wire didn't say much but I got the impression that you were up to your back teeth in trouble. Seems quiet enough now."

"Were is right," confirmed Chris, "Reckon you could say it was a storm that's pretty much blown over now, but we do have someone in the cells you might be interested in. Man who was responsible for the death of a little girl. Raised a riot here in town and damn near killed Ezra too."

Travis' peered keenly at the gunslinger.

"Too much for the seven of you to handle?"

Wilmington caught the Judge's valise as the driver dropped it from the luggage rack and turned to face the old man.

"Thing is, there weren't seven of us here, Judge Travis, when this here town went up like a powder keg. Just Ezra and Nathan. See Vin, done got himself..." Buck saw the warning glare from Larabee just in time and shot a quick, apologetic glance back. "...into a bit of trouble over in Indian Springs. And Chris here was laid up with lockjaw."

Travis showed his surprise, then gave a slow nod as if he had suddenly made sense of something that had been puzzling him.

"Lockjaw? Bad business and no mistake. You're a lucky man, Chris Larabee, though if you don't mind me speaking my mind, you don't look as if you're to rights yet. You feelin' all right, son?"

Larabee waved a dismissive hand, fully aware of his haggard appearance, but more aware of the fact that the Judge was right. He really needed to get out of the sun and sit a spell.

"It's been a long week, Orrin."

Travis moved forward and in an unexpectedly paternal gesture, took the obviously exhausted gunfighter by the arm and steered him towards the boardwalk, gesturing with a jerk of his head for Buck to follow.

"Well, before I get down to any business, unless there's somethin' urgent you want me to tend to, I recommend a beer and something to eat over at the hotel." He gave a rare smile. "You look as if you could use a good meal inside you and it'll give you a chance to tell me exactly what's been going on. Now what's this about Ezra....and Vin?"

Buck followed the two men into the cool, dark of the hotel, thinking how much they reminded him of father and son. It was something more than the difference in their ages or the respect he knew Chris felt for Travis; it was the touch of the gnarled hand on a shoulder -- a liberty the gunslinger allowed with few others -- the subtle softening of Larabee's countenance when he spoke, and the obvious trust he placed in the old man. For the Judge's part, Buck believed that Travis saw in Chris just a little of the son he had lost.

He surrendered the valise to the clerk at the desk and considered leaving, not wanting to intrude, but Chris knew less than he did about what had happened to set the townsfolk not only against each other but against the men who had been entrusted to enforce the laws of the territory. Without a doubt, once Travis talked to Shaw, it would look bad for Ezra and right now, the Southerner had no way of defending himself. With a sigh, Wilmington followed the pair into the dining room. Hell, someone had to look out for this sorry bunch of misfits he had the dubious fortune to be a part of, seemed this time it was going to be him.

Nathan felt the slight pressure of Ezra's fingers against his own and watched as the heavy lids closed again. Just for an instant he had seen a spark of recognition in those piercing green eyes and knew that the gambler had, for the first time in many hours, experienced a flash of lucidity. It had been for just a split second but Jackson knew, beyond any doubt, that he had not imagined it. Had not imagined the briefest of smiles or the even briefer squeeze of his hand, any more than he had imagined that precise moment when he had thought Ezra had breathed his last. He rubbed the slender hand again, reliving that dreadful interval when the Southerner's chest had stilled; when in the midst of his shallow, tortured breathing there had suddenly been nothing. *Come on. Goddammit, man, breathe!* And amazingly he had.

Nathan hung his head at the memory. He had never been so angry with the gambler as at that very moment. In fact his anger had transcended anything he had ever felt before towards Ezra Standish, and this was the man who never missed the opportunity to make something out of another person's misfortune, who traded on people's emotions and weaknesses in order to make a fast buck and who took pride in never done an honest day's work in his life. He turned the pale hand in his own, palm up and looked down at its smooth surface. The hand of a gentleman. Just like any other of a number of hands that had been raised to him as a slave. Ezra should have represented everything he hated, in fact sometimes he wanted him to, but the fact was that most times he didn't. He was angry now because

Ezra was ready to give up on life and angrier still because, when all was said and done, it was beyond him to change that one, simple truth.

The healer looked up then at the classically sculpted face, a handsome face he supposed, and smiled sadly. There had been moments of course. There had been moments when the divide between Southern gentleman and black plantation slave had been as wide as the Rio Grande, inbuilt prejudices overcoming any inclination towards respect for a fellow man. But, somewhere along the way, they had reached a fragile understanding. They had, surprisingly, found some common ground. And they had stood together. As brothers.

That did nothing to alter the fact that Nathan had a hard time coming to terms with the gambler's entirely fluid moral outlook, but he had worked hard, not always succeeding, at not trying to judge Ezra by his own ethical code. The two of them were poles apart and Nathan had finally come to terms with the fact that if the best they could hope for was a delicate truce, then so be it. Rightly or wrongly, the Southerner followed his nature just as Nathan followed his; they trod a very different path but it so happened that sometimes -- just sometimes -- that path, against all odds, lead to the same place.

"Ezra?" He spoke quietly this time. The fear that he would die and the anger that he could do nothing about it, having rapidly evaporated in the face of one tiny spark of hope. "You can't give up, you know that don't you?"

He looked intently at the relaxed features, the fine sheen of sweat still coating his skin although the fever was abating, and held his breath. He was not sure what he expected. Some sign that the Southerner had heard and understood maybe? He breathed again, a heavy sigh. "Got people who count on you now. Ain't no turnin' the clock back for any of us, I reckon. Times are changed, and I guess that what I'm tryin' to say is... that sometimes we change too. Without even knowing it."

He looked away again, but he did not release his hold on the gambler's inert hand, still lying in his own. *Damn! That wasn't what he wanted to say at all.* "You know, I've been trying to think what it would be like if you...if you...went away, and I...I mean..." He gave a snort, frustrated, and his voice cracked as it rose in pitch. "Hell, Ezra, I don't know what I mean, I'm just trying to tell you that we need you here. And you ain't going nowhere even if you got other ideas!"

The Southerner's head moved, just a slight shifting on the pillow, and he sighed deeply, a slight frown furrowing his brow as if he was in the process of coming to some difficult decision. For just a second his free hand lifted, a bare few inches off the bed covers before falling back as if the effort of movement was too great to contemplate then he was still again but it was enough for Jackson. Smiling, he pressed a broad hand to Ezra's chest, his own skin dark against the pallor of the Southerner's. Beneath his fingers he felt the reassuring beat of a strong heart, and the rise and fall of his ribcage as he breathed.

"Just you keep doin' that," he murmured softly, "I know it's hard work - and that's somethin' you don't go lookin' for as a rule -- but this ain't somethin' that anyone else can do for you. This time you go to do it on your own. You hear me, Ezra?"

It was an effort, but the eyes flickered briefly, opening for just one fleeting instant. He had heard.

Orrin Travis sighed and dropped his napkin onto his empty plate.

"Either of you boys really know what happened here?"

He had been patiently listening to Chris and Buck throughout his meal, trying to make some sense of the unfolding story but there were too many missing pieces. The two men exchanged a glance.

"No," sighed Chris finally, "Ezra and Nathan were the ones who dealt with the whole thing."

"Then I should be talking to them before I go any further with this. Everything you've told me so far

has been hearsay.”

“Ezra ain’t gonna be talkin’ any time soon, Judge,” replied Buck softly, “fact is, last time I saw him he was fightin’ just to stay alive.”

Travis’ eyes narrowed.

“That bad?” A reluctant nod from Buck. “And Nathan?”

“He’s keepin’ him that way.”

“I see.” Travis pushed back his chair and started to rise. “Best I talk to this man Shaw then. See what he has to say for himself.”

Buck shot a worried look at Larabee but the gunfighter, with a barely noticeable motion of his head, signalled that he should say nothing. Starting to rise, Chris hesitated as Travis held up a cautionary hand.

“I can find my own way to the jailhouse. Seems likely you boys have a few other things you might want to attend to.”

Larabee sank back into the chair recognising a dismissal when he heard one but also picking up on the genuine concern in the old man’s voice. He nodded, grateful, then spoke as the Judge turned to leave.

“Orrin, just remember whatever Shaw has to say, he has an axe to grind.”

Travis looked for a long time at the exhausted gunfighter before replying. When he did his expression softened slightly and he gave a sigh.

“Chris, I’ve been in this business long enough and know you boys well enough to read between the lines. You just let me do my job, and you get along and look after your own. Sounds to me like y’all need a little time to get back on your feet.” He turned away, settling his hat on his head as he started off again. “Reckon I’ll stay a few days till things even out.”

Chris leaned back in his chair. For perhaps the first time in his life he was glad to hand over the reins to someone else. He felt desperately tired, still unable to sustain any degree of energy for longer than a couple of hours, and the events of the last few days were, for him, like a story in Mary’s newspaper that had happened to someone else -- not him. Buck grabbed his own hat and waited to see if Larabee was going to move.

“You comin’, stud?”

Chris smiled at the sobriquet. Only Buck had ever called him that. A sudden reminder of their younger, hell-raising days. A past life. He turned his hat in his hands, remembering, then slowly nodded.

“Guess I am.” He did not shrug off the supportive hand on his arm as he once might have done as Wilmington helped him to get to his feet. No time for wounded pride among all the other hurts that still plagued him. Instead he followed Wilmington out into the street where the pair stood for a moment each looking in a different direction. Chris staring thoughtfully towards the livery and Nathan’s upstairs makeshift infirmary as Buck’s gaze was drawn towards to the church. Wordlessly they exchanged a knowing glance and separated, each following a strength of feeling they would have been hard-pressed to either translate into words or openly admit to anyone else but instinctively recognising the need in the other.

Chris paused at the foot of the stairs, irritated that the two flights of steps had suddenly become an obstacle when a week ago he would have taken them two at a time without a second thought. Mustering his resolve he put one booted foot on the bottom step.

“Chris.”

He swung his head at the sound of the familiar Texas drawl and peered into the alley that ran down

the side of the livery stable, finally focusing on a figure leaning against the wall. Vin. He swore softly and quickly changed tack, heading into the shadowy lane.

"Jesus, Vin!" He grabbed the younger man's arm and realised just how ill the tracker looked in broad daylight. Dark circles under his eyes accentuated the pallor of his skin and he looked for all the world as if there was less of him as the borrowed clothes hung loosely on his frame. As his eye travelled down to the dusty boots he saw the dark patch at mid-thigh level that could only be blood. "What the hell are you doing down here?" Without waiting for an answer, Larabee took one of Tanner's arms around his own neck and with his other arm around the Texan's back grasped the belt cinched around his waist. "Goddamn it, Vin. You tryin' to kill yourself?"

"Hell, Chris," protested Tanner, "I just needed the outhouse. Didn't know this blasted leg was gonna slow me up so much though." He managed a grin. "And I forgot how far it was. Should've rode my horse."

"Should've stayed where you were," mumbled Larabee, glancing at the number of steps they would be forced now to navigate but he was brought up abruptly as Vin balked.

"Wrong way, Chris. Ain't plannin' on going back there. Going plumb crazy in that little room, not knowin' what's goin' on." He paused, his voice suddenly low. "Why didn't you tell me about Ezra?"

"Wasn't the time, Vin."

The Texan would have pulled away but he needed the support. "When would have been the time, Chris? When it was too late? When you put him in the ground?"

Larabee sighed and started to move forward again.

"Weren't nothin' you could do, and you were tied up with a fight of your own as I recall."

Vin moved with him, limping heavily.

"You still could've told me."

The pair took a few steps in awkward silence before Chris stopped again.

"That's where you're going? Ezra."

"Anythin' wrong with that?"

"Nope, except it's further than you've got any chance of walkin'."

"Don't put money on that, pard."

Chris shook his head and took a firmer hold on the younger man.

"Anyone ever tell you you're a stubborn son-of-a-bitch?"

Tanner gave a weary smile.

"Just about everyone since the day I was born."

"Yeah? Well they were right."

Vin was finding it hard to believe just how difficult it had been to cover the ten feet or so between the hitching rail and the church but even with Chris giving support, he was about ready to drop by the time they reached the steps. He knew then that he would never have made the distance without Larabee's help although he would have been willing to try. It had been hard enough as it was. The gunslinger had finally saddled up the Texan's black and practically lifted Vin into the saddle before stiffly swinging up behind him and Tanner was suddenly reminded of the ride from Indian Springs; only Buck had been the one hauling his ass out of the fire then.

Now they were right where Vin had wanted to be. At the church. Sweating heavily, he paused to lean against the now equally weary gunslinger as he contemplated the six steps in front of him. Chest heaving from the exertion of dismounting and walking, even just a dozen steps, he allowed a quiet curse to escape his lips before turning to look in dismay at Larabee as if the wooden boards rising from the street were some impassable barrier. Chris mirrored the look before suddenly ducking his head and

starting to laugh softly. After a few moments Vin finally grinned, still hurting to be sure but suddenly seeing the absurdity of it.

"Aw, hell, Chris."

"Think we can do it?"

"We come this far didn't we?"

"Guess we did at that." Larabee took a deep breath and firmed his grip on the tracker, his fingers closing around the belt that Vin had cinched around his waist to hold Nathan's pants up on his lean frame. "Let's do it then, pard."

In truth, Chris did the work for both of them although it fully taxed his own limited reserves of strength. Vin found it impossible to put weight on his injured leg and the gunslinger ended up by hauling the more slightly built man to the top of the steps. For a moment they leaned on one another, sighed almost in unison, then together lurched awkwardly through the church doors.

"Lord, but look what the wind blew in!"

Vin glanced up and in spite of the unpleasant sensation of warm blood flowing down his leg and the relentless throbbing of the reopened wound, grinned sheepishly.

"Nettie."

"Vin Tanner! I'll swear you ain't got the sense of a headless chicken sometimes." She cast a fierce glance in Chris' direction. "And I thought better of you Mr. Larabee but here you are encouragin' him!"

Chris eased the Texan down onto the nearest pew, then straightened, taking off his hat and running a hand through his hair.

"Ma'am, Vin was gonna get here come hell or high water. Reckoned it was quicker to put him on a horse than argue."

Nettie shook her head looking from one to the other, her weathered face softening.

"Well, you both look about done in. Let me get you boys some coffee." She looked shrewdly at the tracker, her gaze falling immediately on the fresh blood staining his pants. "Dear Lord, as if we ain't got enough to do already without you bleeding all over. Now don't you even think about movin' from that bench, son, till someone can tend to that leg, you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

John Mason slowly folded his stethoscope and drew the blanket back up over Ezra's chest, aware that Nathan's eyes had followed his every action and were even now steadily on him, waiting for some word; some signal. The prompt finally came.

"Doc?"

"Better. Got some air moving through there now. You did well, Nathan. Thanks to you, I think he might just have a chance to beat this yet."

"Me?" The healer looked genuinely surprised. "I tried a few remedies the Seminole showed me, the rest I just did the best I could. I ain't never seen anything like that water treatment before though. Reckon that's what did the trick, breaking that fever and all..."

"Well, it's new and fairly radical treatment and not every doctor you meet would agree with my methods but, whoever or whatever is responsible, he's breathing easier now and the fever's down." Mason smiled. "So I have to believe one of us did something right and I believe in giving credit where credit's due."

Jackson rubbed his temples, reminded for the first time in hours that he had a thudding headache from the whiskey he had so foolishly overindulged in the previous night. He looked up slowly as Nettie crossed the small room and moved up behind him to place a hand on his shoulder.

"Got another customer for you boys," she said softly, "Reckon Vin's in need of some doctoring. Darn fool set that leg of his to bleeding all over again getting himself over here."

"Vin? Here?" repeated Jackson, dully, starting to rise, "But he can't..."

Nettie patted his shoulder with a gentle smile.

"He can and he has. Now he needs either you or Doc Mason to fix him up pretty smartly."

Nathan glanced quickly at Mason.

"I'll go."

The doctor nodded, reading in the healer's eyes that this was something Nathan needed to do. "You know I'm right here if you need a hand."

Nettie put a restraining hand on the former slave's arm as he stood, his large frame towering over the grey-haired widow.

"Now before you go rushin' off I'm going to give you a piece of advice whether you like it or not, Nathan Jackson. Chris is out there too and I know you two had words, but this ain't the time for foolish pride or hurt feelin's, so you either go out there to build bridges or you don't go out at all."

Nathan hesitated just a fraction of a second, then gave a quick nod.

"Yes, ma'am."

The healer hurried from the vestry which doubled as Josiah's living quarters, slowing as he entered the church and saw the two men together at the back of the room. Nathan hesitated. The last time he had been close to these men, the tracker had been almost mindless with fear, terrified of the future that Nathan had in store for him, and Chris had been protecting him like an enraged grizzly. A grizzly with a sawed-off Winchester. Now Vin sat with one leg stretched out on the rearmost pew, as Chris -- arms folded -- leaned on the back of the bench in front, his back to Nathan. Taking a deep breath he forced himself to keep moving.

"Nettie tells me you could use some help, Vin."

The Texan lifted his head, and Nathan could guess from the tightened facial muscles that the tracker was in considerable pain but he managed a wry smile anyway. "You might say that."

"Want me to take a look?" No presumption.

"Hell, I'm counting on it, pard."

He was acutely aware of Chris slowly turning his head to pierce him with an even stare but the granite-eyed glare for which the gunslinger was famous was curiously absent and instead the sea-green irises suggested a mellowing of temperament.

"Ain't no cocked and loaded gun on you this time neither."

Recognising that from Chris Larabee that was as good as an apology, and the only one he was ever likely to hear, Nathan smiled. He had some apologising of his own to do when the time was right. "So I see."

The healer dropped to a crouch beside Vin and frowned at the fresh blood soaking the sharpshooter's leg.

"I ain't gonna ask what you're doin' all the way over here when you should be restin' up, I can figure that one out myself and it sure ain't me you came to see," he looked up into questioning blue eyes, "But I'd like to know what the hell you're doin' wearin' my best pants!"

He was tired. So very, very tired, and he felt as light as air, with so little substance that he believed it was entirely possible that at any moment he would just float away. Yet he was tied -- no anchored somehow -- not just to the bed in which he knew he rested, but to the people around him who had intermittently drifted in and out of his consciousness. He thought he had heard voices again but now it

was quiet and the only sound that filled his ears, the harsh rasping, he slowly came to understand was his own breathing. His tongue touched dry lips. So thirsty. He desperately craved a drink. He opened his eyes, blinking lazily, his body responding in slow motion as he fought to hold onto consciousness.

The room was in darkness, a darkness relieved only by the soft glow of candles on a table near the bed. The smell of the candlewax and smoky wicks evoked a distant memory of childhood and an old house that had been his home for several years before Maude had come to take him away and start him on the nomadic life to which he had become accustomed. Eyes wide but focused inwards he stared blankly for several moments into the darkness, and it took several more minutes for him to interpret the shapes and sounds around him to determine that he was not alone.

It was like surfacing from a confusing and half-remembered dream, with fragments coming together in a crazed mosaic of which he could make no immediate sense. Then slowly, piece by painful piece, he was able to reconstruct the memory that had been so elusive and he sighed regretfully, almost wishing that the recollections, once unearthed, could be again wrapped up and carefully buried. Shifting, testing his limits, he groaned as every muscle protested, his fingers clutching weakly at the covers as he discovered that his limits had an extremely narrow perimeter.

“Easy, pard.”

He stopped, catching his breath, remembering only then that there was someone else in the room with him. The silhouette beside the bed moved, changing shape, then Ezra found a cup at his lips and quiet words urged him to drink. He drank greedily, spilling more than he swallowed, but finally managed to bring his own hands up to control the cup, his fingers circling a roughly scarred wrist.

“Hold up. Hold up, there! Ya might feel like drinkin’ the well dry but it ain’t no good for ya.” The cup was withdrawn. “Last thing ya need now is to be pukin’ your guts up.”

Vin.

“Most eloquently...stated...as always...Mister Tanner.” It was no more than a hoarse whisper and, even taking a breath between words, the effort exhausted him. It took him several moments to realise he was still holding the tracker’s wrist and it was only as his fingertips began to trace the ridge of torn tissue that Vin pulled his hand away and the tracker turned aside.

“Reckon you should rest.”

“No!” Ezra’s hand snaked out again catching at the Texan’s sleeve, his chest heaving from even that slightest exertion, in his eyes a reflection of his sudden panic. “Don’t go.”

Tanner leaned forward, finally moving into the light thrown by the candle and allowing Ezra to see his face for the first time. The frown that creased his forehead showing both confusion and concern.

“Ain’t goin’ nowhere, Ezra, so just take it easy. I ain’t leavin’. Promise.” His own response was equally intense, a swift reassurance, as he gestured to his leg. The Southerner turned his head to see that Vin’s left leg was raised on a stool and even now he was attempting to keep it awkwardly extended as he bent at the waist to reach across to him. He grabbed the gambler’s forearm in a firm grip as his voice dropped to a whisper. “Made that mistake once already and look where it got me.” He paused. “And you.” Then shook his head. “My fault, Ezra. Should’ve been here.”

The Southerner braced himself, coughed violently and painfully, using his free arm to hold his chest, then fell back alternately gasping and grunting softly as he sucked air back into congested lungs before struggling to push it out again. Finally, having mustered enough precious air to continue, Ezra spoke in quiet and measured tones. “Behold! I saw a pale horse. And upon the horse a pale rider. And the name of the horse was Pestilence . . . And the name of the rider was Death.”

Tanner met the glittering green-eyed gaze for several beats, his expression unreadable, before letting his head fall forward and in the candlelight Ezra saw him look at, then briefly touch, his own wrist but his eyes were masked from the Southerner by a thick veil of his hair. His voice when he answered

was thick with emotion.

"Reckon you an' me been keepin' the same company then, pard."

Ezra gave the faintest of smiles. "Tell me, Mr. Tanner, how did you come to meet your pale rider?"

The Texan's head snapped up and he drew instinctively away, but the gambler's fingers had closed quickly around his arm, just above the rope burns, although when he spoke his voice was no more than a whisper as depleted of energy he again closed his eyes: "Sorry. That wasn't fair."

Vin bit his lip and with a resigned sigh put his hand on the Southerner's bared shoulder.

"Hell, Ezra, I'm the one who's sorry. Sorry for a whole lotta things. Too many things I can't put right. Not now." He hesitated before pressing on, his words laced with bitterness. "Not ever."

"Mr. Tanner," breathed Ezra, "believe me, when I say you are not alone."

There was a moment of silence filled only by the laboured respirations of the resting gambler, then the Texan released Ezra and leaned back, retreating again into the shadows. The tracker held his hands out in front of him, fists loosely clenched as he turned his wrists first one way then the other, focusing on the bloodied channels etched deeply into the flesh, now scabbed and dry but still painful. He looked away and transferred his attention back to the Southerner, looking for a long time at the relaxed features before speaking again.

"Ezra?" He waited for a response, but looked away uncertainly as the clear, green eyes fixed upon him, and his voice when he spoke again was quiet: "You ever been to San Francisco?"

"Mr. Larabee?"

Chris managed to conceal the fact that he had been drifting and that Travis' voice had startled another few years of his life out of him, swivelling agate eyes towards the Judge without altering his pose.

"Judge?"

"It's been a long day. Maybe you should think about getting some rest. We can always do this tomorrow."

The gunslinger unfolded his arms and pushed himself away from the wall, remembering why he was there.

"I'm fine. What else do you want to know?"

The Judge poured himself a glass of red-eye, held the bottle up as an unspoken question of Chris, but received a shake of the head in response.

"You know that without those gypsies of yours to make a formal complaint, there's not much to hold Shaw on except..."

"Except the fact that he got just about the whole town to fightin'," snapped Chris, impatiently, "And almost killed Ezra."

"Something it seems Mr. Standish attempted to reciprocate," countered Travis, easily. "Even you admitted that you thought the man was dead."

"But he wasn't."

"No, and Ezra's still with us...he is still with us isn't he?"

A nod.

"Then I'm going to fine Mr. Shaw for creating a public nuisance and I'm letting him go."

"That's it?"

"Look, Chris. I know how you feel about this but I'm here to see that justice is done in the eyes of the law. I've already overstepped the mark by bargaining with Shaw and while it goes against my principles to deal with a man like him, if he went ahead and pressed charges then Ezra would be on the other side

of the bars on trial for attempted murder!"

"Hell, Orrin, Ezra didn't attempt to murder anyone," sighed Chris, wearily, "but I know it looks bad for him."

"Look, I have no reason to hold Mr. Shaw any longer. There's no proof that he had anything to do with that child's death, no witnesses, no one prepared to come forward. I've done the best I can, Mr. Larabee."

"So after all that, Shaw walks away?"

"I'm sorry, Chris. You can make more of it if you want but if you take my advice you'll let it go. You start kicking over stones and a few things are going to crawl out that should have stayed hidden, if you get my meaning."

Larabee hung his head and stared for several moments at the floor, then looked up again and gave a brief nod.

"I get your meaning, Judge." He started to walk away.

"Fine." The old man capped the bottle in front of him with a gesture of finality and quickly drank the shot he had just poured. "And Chris. I don't expect to hear any time soon that Mr. Shaw has met with some unfortunate accident. Do I make myself clear?"

Larabee's expression remained fixed, although his eyes narrowed for just an instant.

"You have my word on that."

"Good enough." The Judge pushed his chair away from the table and settled his hat on his head. "Now I think I might just head on over to the hotel and have myself a bath and an early night."

Chris frowned.

"What about Shaw?"

A sly smile creased Travis' face.

"Oh, I think that can wait till morning, don't you Mr. Larabee?"

The gunslinger snorted a laugh and shook his head at the canny old judge.

"If you say so."

Still smiling, Larabee tipped his hat and pushed through the doors of the saloon and out into the warm evening air. The smile transmuted into something a little colder as he paused to cast a glance at the sheriff's office, his calculating expression coupled with the humourless smile more reminiscent of a hungry wolf than a man.

Chris took a step off the boardwalk in the direction of the jail, then hesitated suddenly unsure of his own ability to control himself if he had to look at Shaw and know that the next day he would be walking the streets a free man. It crossed his mind that it was probably just as well that Ezra was too sick to care about the merchant's immediate fate but at the same time wondered how the gambler was going to take the news. He guessed Ezra and Shaw would have some settling of accounts to do in the not too distant future. He felt a sudden and keen sense of impending loss as it came to him that the truth was that the Southerner might not have a future. He lowered his head for just a moment and kicked the dust at his feet with the toe of his boot. Goddamn!

"Chris!"

The gunfighter's head came up as JD's voice sliced into his joyless thoughts, a welcome distraction, and the young man was already jogging across the street towards him before he could form any response. He leaned on the hitching rail, cursing the residual lassitude that he had not managed to shake. His body always seemed to be two steps behind his mind, and his thoughts were as thick as molasses.

"JD." He nodded a greeting as Dunne approached, then inclined his head towards the jail. "Shouldn't

you be watchin' Shaw?"

JD looked quickly back at the sheriff's office.

"Uh, Josiah's there. He said he'd bunk down at the jail seein' as he ain't got nowhere to sleep tonight. Didn't seem much point in us both being there for one prisoner."

"No point at all," agreed Chris, "because come mornin' he'll be a free man."

JD's face reflected shocked confusion and disbelief, a response that Chris knew would probably be repeated over and over again on different faces before the night was through.

"But..."

"There's nothing the judge can hold him on, JD," interrupted the gunfighter abruptly, "No witnesses. Now the gypsies are gone, there's no one to even to make a complaint. He'll be fined and we'll let him go."

"Chris..." The appeal in the young man's voice was obvious. The question.

"That's the Judge's decision, JD, and like it or not that's the way it is. Better get used to it."

He started to walk away, knowing that his voice had been sharper than he intended but not sure that even he could be as indifferent to the outcome as Travis expected him, as a sworn upholder of the law, to be. He might be able to curb his own inclination to deliver the kind of summary justice that he was tempted to mete out to a man like Shaw but keeping a tight rein on someone like Buck would be a different story altogether. Considering the possibilities he was almost grateful that Ezra and Vin were out of the picture. Almost.

Dunne, he realised, had fallen into step beside him and they walked in easy silence along the street, slowing as they finally approached the church. There had never been any question as to their destination. Out front, the unexpected sight of Buck Wilmington sitting slowly and thoughtfully puffing on a cheroot, blowing a stream of pungent smoke into the air, brought the two men to a halt. He glanced up, squinting as the light evening breeze blew the smoke back in his eyes.

"Chris. JD."

Both men nodded a greeting and waited patiently, unable to go forward as Buck's lanky frame, sprawled across the steps, blocked the entry.

"You look like shit, Chris."

Larabee rested one hand on the grab rail bordering the steps.

"Thanks, Buck. What's the story?"

Wilmington smiled, puffing gently at the cheroot before gesturing with his thumb to the door at his back.

"Needed a little room."

Dunne frowned and leaning forward rested one boot on the third step.

"Ain't never seen you smoke before, Buck."

Buck tilted his head to one side, his smile fading, as he looked evenly at the younger man.

"Lotta things you don't know about me, Kid. Right, Chris?"

Larabee cast a keen glance at his friend wondering just where all this was leading. Buck was in a strange mood and no mistake.

"Believe me, JD, here's a lot of things you don't want to know," responded Chris, drily, "Now one thing I'd like to know is are you plannin' on shifting any time soon?"

Buck rose smoothly and threw the half-smoked cheroot down into the dust, crushing it with his heel.

"Be my guests, but forgive me if I don't join the party." Wheeling smartly, he turned his back and walked away.

Dunne started to follow, obviously puzzled by Buck's behaviour but Larabee quickly reached out and grabbed his arm.

"Reckon it's best if you leave him be, JD. Sometimes a man needs a little space."

JD opened his mouth to speak, his gaze following his friend's rapidly departing figure, then he shook his head and wordlessly followed Chris into the building.

Chris understood what Buck had meant by needing a little room. Similarly, he was not surprised that the preacher had elected to sleep in the vacant cell at the jail house. Josiah's quarters at the back of the church were not intended to serve either as an infirmary or a community gathering place. Right now it seemed to be a little of both. Not surprisingly, given the state of the Texan the last time the gunfighter had seen him, Vin had joined Ezra as one of the inmates and was even now stretched out on a bedroll on the floor. Larabee hesitated a beat before walking in, then sighed and stepped into the room feeling it shrink just a little further as he added his own bulk, followed just a step later by JD. He allowed himself a smile thinking that Dunne's small frame was hardly likely to make a difference either way but he could see that Buck may have felt a little crowded.

"Chris." John Mason moved to meet him, his hand extended. "Good to see you. Haven't had a chance to even say good day yet!"

"Guess we've both had other things on our minds."

Mason quickly looked over his shoulder at Ezra's pale figure propped almost upright in Josiah's bunk and nodded in agreement.

"Aye, son. You're not wrong." He swung back and quickly shook hands with JD, before turning to look at Chris again, his warm, brown eyes keenly appraising the man before him. "And if I'm not mistaken you could probably use my services too."

Chris shook his head slowly, ducking his head and avoiding Mason's penetrating gaze.

"I'm fine, John. Just tired."

"Humour an old man, Chris." He smiled. "It's not often I get to talk to a man who's had lockjaw and lived to tell the tale."

"You're a very lucky man, Chris Larabee."

The lean gunman paused in buttoning his shirt and levelled an almost accusatory gaze at the doctor. When he spoke, his voice was quietly intense.

"You think I don't know that?"

"I'm sure you do, son," agreed Mason gently, taking the gunfighter's censure in his stride, "But I'm not sure that you realise that being able to stand up and walk doesn't mean that you're fully recovered, and if I didn't already know that you'd ignore any advice I might have to offer, I'd say you should follow Vin's lead and get some rest. Right now."

Chris finished tucking in his shirt with a long sigh.

"Got some things that need seein' to."

"Nothing's that urgent that it can't wait, Chris. You keep this up and I'll guarantee you'll be needing me before too long."

"I'll take that chance." Larabee cinched his belt and sat down again then after a moment's silence, he glanced thoughtfully across the room at the gambler. "Is he going to be alright?"

Mason followed his gaze.

"No promises. Like I told Nathan, I'm not in the business of miracles. All I can say is that the fever is down and there is some improvement, but he's not out of the woods yet and to be perfectly honest with you, until his lungs are clear, I wouldn't like to even hazard a guess as to what his chances are."

The gunfighter stared for a long time at the Southerner, thinking how out of place he looked in Josiah's spartan quarters. Propped on plain calico covered pillows, with a rough blanket over him, his

usually well-groomed hair looking unkempt and lank, and with dark bruises under his eyes Chris was suddenly aware that he was seeing the gambler at his most vulnerable. This was an Ezra stripped of all sham and pretense and he decided that pain and suffering was a great equaliser of men. Finally he stood up, not bothering to hide the fact from Mason that it was an effort that caused him no little discomfort.

"He's awake? Can I talk to him?"

The older man nodded. "Just don't expect too much and keep it short. He needs all his energy just to keep breathing."

Chris picked up his hat from the table and turned it absently through his hands.

"That's fine, doc. I don't need him to talk." He paused. "I just want him to listen."

He was sure the Southerner was asleep and for several minutes he sat in silence, listening to the awful liquid sound of Ezra's breathing. Occasionally he glanced across at the huddled shape on the floor that was Vin, his back turned to the room as he slept and behind him he could hear the muted sounds of Nathan and Mason talking softly and now and then Nettie's or JD's voice would briefly enter his consciousness. It all felt wrong. It was as if some terrible plague had descended on them and one by one had struck them down but what he was struggling most to come to terms with was that, in the wink of an eye, the town had turned against them. He lowered his head and wearily cradled it in his hands, briefly closing his eyes. Whatever Mimi had said, maybe it was time to move on after all.

"Mr. Larabee." The voice was little more than a sighed whisper but for all that undeniably Ezra's and Chris looked up, startled out of his contemplative musing. The gambler gave a brief smile. "It seems since our last meeting...that our circumstances have been...reversed somewhat."

Chris found it hard to believe as he quickly cast his mind back that the last time he had actually spoken to Ezra was the day he had arrived back in town with the Rom. Without stopping to count he had no idea how much time had passed since then. Days, a week, it was all much the same right now.

"Doc says you shouldn't talk too much."

Ezra started to laugh but coughed instead, the effort robbing him of the ability to speak although he finally managed to wheeze his agreement: "Wise man."

"Ezra," he hesitated a moment before pressing on, "You should know that the Judge has held Daniel Shaw's hearing." Clear green eyes stared evenly at him from deeply shadowed sockets silently inviting him to continue. "The most he can be charged with is creating a public nuisance. That's a five dollar fine." Larabee lowered his eyes. "He goes free tomorrow."

A long moment of silence then: "C'est la vie." Another barely articulated sigh.

"Say, what?"

"French, Mr. Larabee. Such is life."

Chris frowned, and shook his head slightly in wonder. Damned fancy-tongued Southerner. He had not known precisely what he expected Ezra's reaction to be, but he knew that acceptance was not the response he had anticipated.

"I have to tell you this, Ezra. I thought you'd killed Shaw - we all did. Didn't even question that you'd kill an unarmed man, and I ain't too proud of that. In fact he's still saying you tried to. Truth is, Buck was ready to throw you 'cross his saddle and ride hell for leather over the border. Now, I might be readin' this all wrong but my guess is that if you'd wanted to kill him, he wouldn't be in any position to whine about you tryin'."

The smile was back. That familiar curve of his lips that left you wondering if what he was about to say was an absolute lie or the complete and honest truth.

"Wanted to." Confessed the gambler, drawing another breath. "Almost did...just didn't have the intestinal fortitude necessary for cold blooded murder."

"That bastard ain't worth you dyin' over, Ezra."

"No. Maybe not."

The eyes closed and Chris knew that the Southerner would speak no more of it. At least not now. He gnawed his lip, trying to muster his thoughts and frame them into words.

"Ezra, I'm sorry you had to go through all this. It's all my fault."

"Your fault? I'm afraid, Mr. Tanner has already beaten you to that claim."

Chris darted a surprised look at the still sleeping Texan.

"Vin?"

"Indeed. Although how either of you can lay claim to being at fault for the insanity that lately took possession of this town I fail to understand."

It was obvious that the effort of the conversation was taking its toll on the gambler as his speech slowed but Chris was not ready to let the matter drop quite so easily.

"It was because of me those people came here, Ezra," he said quietly.

"Dear Lord," breathed the Southerner, his accent thickening, "is there something in the air to cause this sudden epidemic of self-flagellation? Believe me, Mr. Larabee, in my particular line of work knowing people, reading people, is not only an advantage it's an absolute necessity. I can assure you that from where I stand," he smiled suddenly, "...lie...the blame belongs with a certain Daniel Shaw, who chose to further his own ends by preying on man's most basic fears and inherent prejudices." He stopped, swallowing hard and taking several deep breaths, the long speech having almost exhausted him. "In short he is a war-monger, and he led the citizens of this town like so many sheep." He gave a weary sigh. "No one's fault, Chris, just human nature at its worst."

Larabee just smiled. Ezra had neatly turned his apology around and in a few sentences had managed to sum up the tragedy of the entire sequence of events.

"I heard you took on some mighty riled townfolk single-handed."

"A slight error in judgement, I confess," murmured the gambler, wryly, "Bluffing on a pair of deuces."

"Jesus, Ezra, I don't know if you're lucky or just plain crazy. If they'd called your bluff..." He shook his head, part in admiration, part in frustration. "Hell, you took a chance!"

"The story of my life. I play the odds."

"Well, you won this time."

"No, Mr. Larabee, I lost." Standish let his head fall back against the pillow and turned his head slightly away.

Chris nodded slowly, understanding exactly what the gambler meant and it had nothing to do with winning or losing at poker; the same way that he would argue that every gunfight he had ever won, he had ultimately been the loser.

"Yeah."

Standing up, he looked uneasily at the Southerner, knowing then there was nothing else left for him to say. Ezra was right. Somehow they had all lost. He turned away, his already sombre mood darkening further and the feeling that he was out of his depth steadily growing. Too many things had happened over which he had no control and yet here he was still trying to hold it all together; unable to let go. When the hell had he become so goddamn responsible? He took the cup of coffee that Nathan handed to him without really seeing the healer, and slowly sat down.

He sipped the scalding liquid, barely tasting the coffee, eyes staring into the far distance but looking inwards at himself. That was the trouble with staying in one place too long, you started to put down roots and the longer you stayed the harder it got to pull up those roots again and move on. Yet, deep down, he knew that there was more to it than that. It was more than the place. More than timber and nails. Hell, he'd drifted through countless similar towns in the last couple of years, staying a day here, a week there

and there had been nothing in any of them to hold him down, so he had moved on with no real purpose except that he had been driven by the overwhelming need to exact vengeance for the death of his family. To hurt and to kill. The way that he had been hurt. The way that his wife and son had been killed. Then one day he had ridden into this backwater and nothing had been quite the same for him since.

No, it was not the town, he decided on reflection, it was him. For better or worse, he had changed, and it was a change so subtle, so insidious, that he had barely noticed it creeping up on him. He had gotten comfortable, and worse, he had allowed himself to get close to people again. Now it was too late. The honest truth, that he didn't want to admit even to himself, was that he had begun to care and it was no longer so easy just to turn his back and walk away. The question was, did he really want to?

"...go free?"

Go free. Larabee swung his head around, realising that someone was talking to him. JD. The kid was looking at him with a puzzled frown and he wondered just how long he had been staring into space like a simpleton.

"What?" The irritation in his voice was not directed at Dunne, simply a reflection of his own state of mind but he saw the sudden doubt in the younger man's eyes and took a deep breath, softening his tone. "Sorry, JD. Got my head in the clouds."

"I still don't believe it! Shaw. The Judge is really going to let him go."

"Yep. Come sunrise, Daniel Shaw is a free man," he confirmed, "and there ain't nothin' anyone can do about it, JD."

He knew the kid well enough to guess what might be going through his mind but he hoped Dunne would have enough sense not to go off half-cocked with some fool notion of dispensing his own idea of justice. What he didn't expect was Nathan's reaction. The healer leaned over the table, his expression hard and uncompromising.

"The Judge is gonna let that man go? After what he did?" The former slave's voice rose in indignation. "Don't seem right. There's a baby girl we all just done put in the ground because of him and what about Ezra?" His voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "You tellin' me he don't count for nothin'?"

"Goddamn it, Nathan, don't you think I know what you're saying?" Larabee rubbed his forehead, wondering exactly what Jackson expected him to do. "But it's over. Get used to it, because nothing's going to change."

JD suddenly stood up, shaking his head.

"Aint right, Chris, and you know it ain't right. We gotta do something."

The gunfighter looked up wearily.

"No, JD, we don't. Judge says hands off."

For a moment the younger man looked as if he was about to argue, but after a long moment of silence he finally snatched up his hat and with another disbelieving shake of his head, turned sharply to walk out of the door without either a word or a backward glance, the set of his shoulders signalling his anger and discontent.

"He's right, you know," added Nathan, his own voice displaying quiet disapproval, "Whatever Judge Travis says, it ain't going to go down too well with some folks."

Chris was tired and sick, the aches in his body bone deep. He felt light-headed again and realised that he had barely eaten all day. The last thing he needed was to have to try and justify Travis' ruling. Christ! He was just a hired gun like the rest of them. "Nathan, some things you just gotta let go."

Jackson straightened, his eyes flashing angrily.

"That's mighty fine comin' from you, Chris Larabee. From the man who chased from one end of this territory to the other looking to be his own judge, jury and executioner and didn't mind who he took along for the ride!"

Chris closed his eyes. *Not that Nathan. Don't use that against me.*

"That was different."

"Not from where I'm standin' it ain't." The sharp words, spoken with brutal honesty were like a punch in the gut for the gunslinger but there was nothing he could say. The healer was right.

He opened his eyes and met Jackson's even stare. "Then maybe it's me that's different." He had not meant to say it, but once the words were out he knew it to be the absolute truth.

Nathan shook his head, not understanding, and turned away. "Yeah. Maybe it is."

Larabee finished his coffee and slowly got to his feet, weighed down by the knowledge that this time he had truly drawn a losing hand.

"Buck! Hey, Buck! The Judge is letting him go. Says there's no one who's willing to make a complaint. Can you believe that?"

Wilmington had settled for a quiet spot in the saloon with a bottle of whiskey and only his thoughts for company, not needing or wanting anything more than a little time to himself, but Dunne seemed determined to put an end to that. The kid was in a lather and no mistake; anger, agitation and disbelief all vying for the upper hand. Fact was, it looked like any minute the kid was likely to go up like dry kindling on a hot summer's day. Slowly he poured another shot before looking up to find JD waiting expectantly for some sort of response.

"Sit down, kid." He was unable to keep the weariness out of his voice.

"But Buck..."

"I said sit down!" Dunne sat, having difficulty containing his own outraged indignation, while he waited for Wilmington to swallow his drink. "So just what is it that's got you spittin' nails and just about bustin' right out of your britches?"

"Damn it, Buck, what's gotten into you? You heard me the first time. Travis is letting Shaw go."

"Yeah? Is that right? And just what are you plannin' on doing about it, son?"

JD opened and closed his mouth several times without making a sound until finally he stammered: "Jeez, Buck, I... I thought...well, it just don't seem right. Don't seem fair."

Buck chuckled softly and poured another glass of the amber liquid.

"Not fair? Hell, boy, since when has life been fair?"

Dunne suddenly frowned, puzzled by the older man's behaviour, and slowly shook his head. This was not the Buck Wilmington he was used to.

"I just kinds thought..."

"You thought ol' Buck would be fired up enough to go out and do somethin' about it?" He sank the third shot in as many minutes. "Well, think again, kid, 'cos it ain't gonna happen."

JD flushed and roughly pushed himself away from the table as he bounded to his feet.

"Fired up? Liquored up more like! What's wrong with everybody? Doesn't anyone around here care anymore? You know what Chris said? 'It's over. Get used to it'. Get used to it? What are we doing here if someone like Shaw can do this to us? You'd rather sit here and hide in a bottle, what the hell's happened to you all? What does it take to make you give a damn?" He lowered his eyes and turned his hat in his hands before finally setting it back on his head with a long sigh and starting to turn away.

"JD..."

"Forget it! Just forget I said anything. Forget everything that's happened."

Buck tipped his hat back and sadly watched his friend walk away.

"J.D." Dunne halted at the quietly uttered name but did not turn back, his back rigid as he waited for Wilmington to say whatever he had to say. "Don't go doing anything you'll regret, kid."

Dunne laughed abruptly, a cynical bark that was so unlike J.D. that Buck flinched as if he'd been struck. "Do anything? Hell, Buck, why would I want to do that?"

The young man strode out of the saloon shouldering open the doors with enough force to leave them swinging noisily in his wake long after his footsteps had faded to nothing.

Buck stared for a long time at the empty glass in front of him, slowly and deliberately turning it in his fingers before placing it upside down on the table with a soft thud. *What does it take to make you give a damn?* Finally he rose and with a nod to Inez behind the bar, walked with a heavy tread from the saloon and out into the lengthening shadows of the evening. For a moment he stood quite still, thumbs hooked over his gun-belt, staring at the worn boards between his dusty boots then with a sigh, he squared his shoulders and strode purposefully towards the livery. *What does it take, kid?*

The grey snorted softly as he approached the stall, and Buck rubbed the animal's velvety muzzle affectionately, murmuring softly: "Hey, fella. Feel like a little stretch?" The horse tossed its head, to all intents and purposes appearing to agree, and Wilmington smiled as slapped the grey's muscular neck. "Thought you might say that, pard."

The western sky was a vivid explosion of colour, as in the dying moments of the day, the mustached cowboy kicked his horse into motion. Flames of crimson and orange melted liquidly into more subtle pinks and violets as the setting sun bled slowly away into the low hills, its lengthening rays casting distorted shadows over both the darkening landscape and the lone rider who urged his mount onward at a ground-eating canter that rapidly put the solidly geometric shapes of the town far behind him.

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Vin had slept rough many times in his life but the hard boards of the vestry floor challenged the very worst of anything he had experienced before and he was certain he had the bruises to prove it. He stretched and yawned, stiff back muscles protesting almost as much as his injured leg. It was early, he could feel it in his bones, but it was a good way after sunrise already and he was hungry. Massaging the back of his neck with one hand he sat up and quickly looked around the small room. Hell, he could use about a gallon of coffee right about now.

Nathan, it seemed, had finally succumbed and had fallen asleep across the table, head pillowed on his arms, and Tanner wondered how long it had been since the healer had managed any real rest. Even in sleep the lines of fatigue were etched deeply in his face. A few feet away, Ezra lay on the bunk wedged almost upright in a nest of pillows, dark semi-circles under his eyes accentuating the paleness of his skin, now drawn tight over his cheekbones and his breathing so shallow that, had it not been for the soft gurgle of air moving through his lungs, Vin would have thought him dead. One arm had slipped from under the blanket and his hand hung limply over the edge of the bed frame. The Texan looked at his own work-roughened hands with their scarred palms and torn cuticles. Hands that had worked for a living. Honest hands. He glanced back at the gambler. Honest was not a word that instantly sprang to mind if looking for a word to describe Ezra. Vin smiled suddenly remembering a long time ago Nathan asking of Chris: "Why do we need a cheater?" and the gunslinger had replied with absolute sincerity: "Because we might need one."

He hadn't been too sure about that himself at the time but Ezra had been fast enough with a gun, and that was enough for him. Where they were going a man's morals were of little consequence, what mattered was the speed and accuracy of his gun hand. Out here at the frontier that's what would gain you respect, not whether you went to church on Sunday -- or cheated at cards. Besides, who the hell was he to judge anyone when he had a \$500 bounty for murder on his own head?

"Somethin' wrong, Mr. Tanner?"

Lost in a moment of reflection Vin had failed to see the gambler wake and the unexpected sound of his voice startled him.

"Just thinkin'," he answered gruffly, quickly looking away and starting to gather up the blanket, feeling foolish at having been caught out.

Ezra gave a moist cough and groaned as he braced an arm across his ribcage, before easing into what was obviously a slightly more comfortable position.

"Dare I ask, about what?"

Vin hesitated just a moment then smiled.

"About coffee. About bacon and fried grits and biscuits..."

Standish grimaced and turned his head away in mock disgust.

"Please! Spare me."

The Texan laughed. That sounded a lot more like the Ezra he knew -- and besides, he really did feel like a mess of bacon and beans, with biscuits soaked in bacon grease and a helping of grits on the side, so it wasn't really a lie. He was still grinning as he folded up his bedroll. What was that about an honest man?

Chris had not slept well. Now, as the room progressively lightened with the coming of a new day, he was grateful to at last have a valid reason to be awake. Not that he was particularly looking forward to another day. He felt as if somehow events had overtaken him, leaving him as a powerless bystander, watching but unable to stop the fragile ties that had bound him to this place from unravelling. He had spent a restless night looking for answers but had come to the conclusion that he was not even sure of the questions.

What he did know was that he had been afraid. He had been afraid of dying and the revelation had shaken him to the very depths of his soul. For three years he had been a man seeking vengeance and with it hoping for the quick release of death; hoping that somewhere along the line he would meet the bullet that would end it all. End the sorrow, the pain and the emptiness of his life. He had fought and killed, fuelled by a rage that he had believed inextinguishable and every day he had invited death. Now he had faced it -- not at the end of another man's gun, not a gamble relying on his own speed and ability to outdraw his opponent, but within himself -- and it was only then that he discovered just how much he wanted to live. And he had clung to that thread of life with a desperation that had no equal in his experience.

He wondered at Vin's struggle and Ezra's. What of their fears? Tanner's fear had not been of dying. In fact he had been more afraid of living, if he had to exist as a cripple and Ezra had been close to losing the fight more than once already. What made a man decide what was worth living for and what was worth dying for? Could a man even make that choice? If he had decided to surrender, if Ezra decided that he no longer wanted to go on fighting, would that be the end of it? Would that be the moment that the spark went out, that the thread finally snapped, or was it all up to chance?...Luck?...Nature?...God? He thrust aside the covers and swung his legs out of bed. Maybe Josiah knew, maybe only God knew, but he sure as hell didn't.

Stretching, Larabee crossed to the wash-stand, wondering if the pain his back was going to be a permanent legacy of his illness. He could ask Mason but in truth he wasn't sure that he wanted to know. Tentatively, he ran a hand over his ribs, still shocked at his own appearance. He had always been lean, now he was almost painfully thin and he stared for a long time at his reflection in the looking-glass then quickly ran a hand over his face. Jesus! What was happening to him? He looked, and felt, like an old man.

Dressing slowly, he contemplated the day ahead. He would see about releasing Shaw first. Not something he was looking forward to but no point in delaying the inevitable. Let the bastard get his own breakfast today. With any luck there would be no trouble and the town could just go back to the way it used to be. He buckled his gun-belt in place and looked again at the hard-eyed reflection that stared back at him. *Wrong, Larabee. It's never going to be the way it used to be, any more than you'll be the same as you used to be.* Just one more nail in the coffin. He wheeled abruptly away from the mirror and snatched his hat from the chair as he passed on his way to the door, his face a mask of grim determination. No coffins. Not today. Not for anyone.

A few people acknowledged him as he walked by, an equal number kept their eyes cast down and some hurriedly crossed the street to avoid him. So, feelings among the townsfolk were still mixed. For a brief moment anger flared, then just as rapidly subsided. They owed him nothing. He was a hired gun and he was paid to do a job. Just as the others were and if any one of them had ever thought different, then they were fools. Their presence was tolerated because it served a need, not accepted. They were outsiders, for many only a step away from the outlaws they were hired to protect the town from, and one day soon their time would be up. He paused before turning and striding into the sheriff's office. Maybe it already was.

"Let him go!"

Josiah pushed the brim of his hat up with his index finger as Larabee's voice barked out the words.

"Chris." It was a greeting and question in one.

Sanchez had been napping, tilted back in the chair, his boots on the desk and long legs crossed at the ankle. Now he sat up attentively.

"Judge says we let him go, Josiah."

The preacher raised expressive eyebrows but made no comment as he pushed himself away from the desk and lifted the keys from the hook on the wall.

"Hope he knows what he's doin'," he murmured, softly, the keys jangling as he opened the outer cell. "Shaw! Get your ass moving. You ain't outta here in five minutes, I'm lockin' up again."

The merchant, scrambled from the bunk, looking suspiciously from one man to the other as he watched Sanchez unlock his cell.

"How do I know you ain't gonna shoot me in the back, and say I tried to make a run for it?"

Chris let his hand rest casually on the butt of his gun, his expression revealing nothing. "You don't."

Josiah contained the smile that threatened to emerge and swung the cell door open. "Seems you're a free man, Mr. Shaw."

Eyes flicking uneasily from Larabee to Sanchez, Shaw sidled along the bars and eased out of the open cell. Keeping as much distance between himself and the big preacher as he could. He gave a short, nervous laugh when he realised that Josiah had no intention of preventing him from leaving and moved quickly through the second set of bars.

"This ain't the end of it, you know, Larabee." He backed towards the door, never taking his eyes off the blond gunfighter. "You and your boys are finished in this town."

Chris shrugged, unconcerned.

"Reckon the Judge'll be the one to decide that."

"Mark my words, this ain't finished yet. How're we supposed to make this a place for decent folks to live in when we got seven gunslingers instead of a real lawman? I swear I'll see you and your hired guns run outta this town."

"Is that a threat, Mr. Shaw?" Chris voice was dangerously soft.

The merchant backed further towards the door.

"You take it anyway you want, *Mister* Larabee, but if I were you I'd start lookin' for a new job."

Josiah slammed the cell door shut with a clang that made Shaw jump.

"I think maybe you should leave now, Mr. Shaw. If you have anything you want to say, take it up with Judge Travis. I'm sure he'll be interested in your opinion." The tone of his voice made it obvious that he in fact, suspected quite the opposite.

Shaw opened his mouth but Chris had fluidly drawn and cocked his gun, handling it with a easy familiarity that put an abrupt end to anything further he had been about to say.

"Or," added Larabee, "You can take it up with me right now. After all, this is gettin' kinda personal. Your choice." The merchant fled into the street not even bothering to close the door behind him, as Chris uncocked and re-holstered his Colt. "Weasel."

"That's an angry man nursing a powerful lot of hatred, Chris. I reckon we've got ourselves an enemy there and no mistake."

"Hell, Josiah, what's new?"

The preacher hooked his thumbs into his belt and stared at the floor for a moment before glancing back at Larabee.

"Nothing, I guess. Nothing at all."

Buck reined the grey in, and scanned first the ground, then the road ahead before pushing his hat far back on his head and uncapping his water bottle. He had ridden all night following the gypsies' trail, first north and then west wondering just how far half a dozen wagons could go in a day. Hell, he was one man on a horse, he should be able to catch up with them without too much trouble. Not exactly a job for a skilled tracker to follow the distinctive wheel ruts, yet he had still not managed to sight the colourful caravan. He took a long pull of tepid water from the canteen and wiped the sweat already beading his forehead with his bandana. If he had not found them by noon then he might just as well turn around and go back, although the very thought of failure fuelled his determination to finish what he had started. If Travis needed witnesses to see justice done then witnesses he would have.

The Kid had been right. All of them seemed to have lost their way in a dark fog of melancholy but someone needed to take a hand otherwise the whole goddamn town was going to fall apart and with Shaw on the loose it was likely there'd be more trouble to come. A man like that wasn't about to lie down and roll over so easily and with the gypsies gone it didn't take much to figure that someone with the kind of chip that Shaw was carrying on his shoulder would look for another target. Didn't take a whole lot more to figure out just where he would be aiming his sights this time. Wilmington slung the canteen back over his saddle horn and adjusted his hat before kicking the grey back into motion. He would give it another hour.

He was, in many ways, glad to be free of the town for a while. His mind was filled with a riot of images that he found impossible to shake and he needed a little time to himself. Some room to move; some space to breathe. Hellfire, he still had the stink of Vin's festering leg wound in his nose. Then there was Chris. And Ezra. So much had happened that he no longer felt in control and the overwhelming sense that everything was coming apart at the seams before his very eyes left him feeling as if he was suddenly on shaky ground. It had taken JD to stir him out of his apathy and he had known that this was something he had to do. He had to find the Rom. Had to make them see that they could not just move on or everything he and the others stood for was meaningless. He had made a commitment to the Judge just like Chris and the rest and they had taken that commitment seriously, endeavouring to keep the peace in a town that had shown that when push came to shove it didn't give a good goddamn. Now hadn't Shaw gone right ahead and proved it didn't take much to get the good citizens dancing to a different tune? Damn! but it had been a whole lot easier when he and Chris had been free to carouse

and raise hell throughout the Territories and across the border into Mexico, not giving a care for anything except the next fight, the next whiskey, the next woman. Now those had been the days. But that had been almost a decade ago.

Chris had almost done it. Almost settled down. Wife, home and family had gentled him some but any happiness Larabee had found had been tragically short-lived. He had never seen Chris as the settling down kind but Sarah had managed to rein him in without ever putting fetters on him, and for a while the appeal of home and hearth had even rubbed off on him a little and he had become a semi-permanent fixture around the Larabee homestead. Then it had all changed again and he thought after Sarah and Adam died that Chris would go mad with grief. They had been hard days when he had watched his best friend embark on a path of self-destruction that he had been powerless to change but he had stayed because when it came right down to it that's what friends are for. To stick around in the bad times and be right there in the very worst times. Hell, maybe that's why he was bustin' his ass right now. Or maybe it was because his Mama always said: you gotta stand up and be counted even if you're standin' right out there on your own, son.

Smoke. Woodsmoke. Buck was suddenly drawn out of his meditative introspection as he recognised the familiar smell which in these parts only ever meant two things: a brush fire or a cookfire. He was betting his boots it was someone cooking up some grub. He hoped it was the gypsies but he checked and slowed the big grey, drawing his Colt before turning off the main trail. No point in taking any chances. The first flash of yellow through the trees was enough to confirm that his guess had been correct and he let his horse pick a way through the sheltering trees as he circled around behind the camp. Now he just had to convince them to see things his way.

Nathan stretched and yawned, painfully cramped muscles in his back and shoulders protesting as he straightened to sleepily survey the room. He had done it again. Fallen asleep at the table and this time he felt as if he'd been ridden over by a herd of horses. The healer glanced quickly across the vestry to where Ezra lay propped almost upright in a bid to ease his laboured breathing. No, not a herd of horses. That was something he could only imagine from seeing the Southerner's injuries and a few stiff and aching muscles bore no comparison. He shifted his gaze to the far corner, surprised to find Vin sitting up, leaning easily against the wall with one leg bent and his wounded leg extended straight out in front of him, one arm resting on his raised knee, and keenly returning his look. Jackson rubbed his neck and gave a brief and guilty shake of his head.

"Didn't mean to sleep so long," he offered apologetically, rising quickly from the chair, "Are you...?"

"We're doin' just fine." Vin interrupted smoothly, "Both of us. Fact is, we were just discussin' breakfast. Ain't that right, Ezra?"

The Southerner stirred in response but kept his eyes closed.

"As I recall, Mr. Tanner, you were craving some nauseating combination and I, captive audience that I am, was merely listening."

Jackson smiled. Ezra was definitely sounding more like the Ezra he was used to. "Anyone ever tell you that you talk way too much for a sick man?"

The Southerner shifted, the movement an obvious effort for him, but he persevered until he had achieved a new, more comfortable, position.

"My dear Mr. Jackson..." He paused to cough, the sound as painful as the grimace that momentarily crossed Ezra's drawn features before the episode passed and he was able to draw breath again. "Is it not enough that I am forced to endure the privations of the sickbed without my having to suffer in silence?"

Nathan heard a disparaging snort from Tanner which suggested he thought such an event highly unlikely in any circumstance, to which Ezra's reply was a withering glance in the Texan's direction. Inexplicably touched by the banter between the two men, he moved forward and laid a hand on the gambler's forehead.

"Might do you some good if thought less about talking and concentrated on just resting, Ezra. You still got a fever, you know."

Standish turned clear, green eyes towards the healer.

"Indulge me, Mr. Jackson," he murmured wearily, "There'll be silence enough once I go to my final rest, don't ask that I surrender now."

Nathan was unsure how to take Ezra's comment, trying to decide if the Southerner was being sarcastic or prophetic. While the former may be more like the Ezra Standish he knew, the latter was still not out of the question. He dropped his gaze and reached for the cup of water at the bedside. Doc Mason had said that Ezra was not out of the woods by any means. He guessed Ezra knew that too.

"Just don't tire yourself," he warned gently, "Here, drink this, Doc says you need to drink; put back some of what you've sweated out."

Standish took the cup and looked doubtfully at the contents.

"I suppose whiskey is out of the question?"

The healer, shook his head in feigned exasperation but could not keep the smile off his face.

"You suppose exactly right, Ezra."

"Ah, well, it was worth a try." The gambler raised the cup slightly in a mock toast. "A votré sante, Mr. Jackson."

"To your health!"

Buck lifted his own glass in response and imitated Spiro's practiced action, downing the drink in one swallow and while he managed to control the overwhelming urge to cough, he was unable to prevent his eyes watering.

"Man," he wheezed, after a moment where he doubted he would ever draw breath again, "That's dynamite!"

The gypsy smiled and poured two more glasses.

"Drink. Then we will talk."

Wilmington warily eyed the crystal clear spirit, steeled himself, and again prepared to follow the gypsy's lead hoping the ritual was not going to continue until the bottle was finished. If that was the case he knew he'd be hard pushed to remember his own name let alone why he'd ridden all night and into the next day to catch up with these folk, and much as he wanted to get his message across, he realised that there was some sort of protocol to be observed and if he wanted to get anywhere, he'd best mind his manners. So he drank and he ate, accepting the Rom's hospitality, and not once was he asked why he was there or what he wanted of them. Those he knew were the big questions and with these people, not something to be rushed. For a straight-talking man like himself, every passing moment was pure torture but he curbed his natural impatience and waited for Spiro to make the first move in a game he wasn't sure he fully understood. Finally, the Rom offered Buck a cigarillo and after lighting one himself, tapped his arm.

"Come. Let us walk. Away from the women."

Normally, that would have been the last thing on Buck's mind, but he dutifully followed Spiro away from the wagons, interpreting the gesture correctly. It was now time to talk. Man to man.

"You have come far, Buck Wilmington and in great haste."

"Well, some things are worth puttin' yourself out for, Spiro, if you get my drift."

"Yes. This is so. Family. Friends. Honour." He paused and put his hands in his pockets and stared into the distance. "Justice."

Buck ducked his head and smiled.

"You already know why I'm here don't you?"

"I know you are troubled, my friend."

"Damn right I am! There's a man back in that there town who right now is walking free as you please, probably already stirrin' up a hornet's nest and d'you know why?" He didn't wait for Spiro to answer. "Because there ain't no-one to come out and say what he did. Because the Judge can't do nothin' when there ain't no-one left to speak out against him or bring a charge against him. Because when it comes right down to it, no-one cares."

"You care." Wilmington stopped abruptly and looked up at the Rom. "You care, or you would not be here."

Suddenly embarrassed, Buck took off his hat and made a show of straightening the brim.

"Shoot. It took a kid gettin' mad to shift me off of my backside and see something right in what he was saying and wrong in what we was doing. You just think about it; your little girl - dead, Ezra - near to dyin' even now and the man who caused it all? Free as a bird. Where's the justice in that, Spiro?"

The gypsy sighed.

"You speak of justice, but your heart seeks vengeance."

"Give it any name you goddamn please," snarled Buck, heatedly, "What I seek is Shaw swinging at the end of a rope. Whichever way you look at it, the man did wrong."

"So you think that by taking another life we can balance the scales once again? That hanging him will make things right?"

Wilmington twisted his hat in his hands.

"Hell, no. But it makes sure he won't do the same thing again."

Spiro turned to the mustached cowboy, his expression sombre.

"And what will you do, all of you, if the man Ezra, dies?"

Buck slapped his hat against his thigh.

"Well, I reckon Mr. Daniel Shaw might just be on borrowed time."

"You will kill him."

"I didn't say that."

"But that is what you meant. You and your other friends would do to him that which you now condemn in him."

Buck opened his mouth to speak but quickly closed it again when he could find no words to say and looked away, leaving a silence hanging between the two men. After a while Wilmington shuffled his feet.

"Look, I just want for you to come back and for Shaw to stand trial. All you have to do is tell what happened. Now I can't lie to you, I'd like to see him swing, but that's up to the Judge and a jury."

"This is not our way," replied the Rom, gently, "We believe that justice will be served by God."

Buck gave a snort.

"Truth tell that just might be a long time coming. I was kinda thinking something for the here and now, not waitin' on Judgement Day."

Spiro, to his surprise, smiled.

"You are a man of action, Buck, but you live by violence and for you the answer is always in a gun or a knife or a noose..." He sighed. "I do not judge you for it but we have chosen a path of peace. We left our homeland to seek it but always there are those who wish to do us harm."

"I'm not asking you to kill Shaw!" protested Buck, grasping the Rom's arm, "All I'm asking is that you

tell the Judge what happened. That's all. Just tell what this man did. Tell the truth."

Spiro hung his head, deep in thought, as Wilmington held his breath, afraid to say more and disturb the moment. Finally, the gypsy spoke, but kept his eyes averted.

"This means much to you, Buck Wilmington."

"Yes it does," he whispered in reply, his voice tight with emotion. "You might be able to put it all behind you and move on; say it's not your way; forgive and forget even, but I'm telling you now that if a man like Shaw gets away with spreading his kind of hate then you and those who follow you will never, ever find the peace you're lookin' for. And that town back there -- my town -- will become a place that I don't want to be anymore and the family, the friends you talk about, will be nothin' but a memory that I left behind. And you know somethin', Spiro? I don't want that to happen."

Dark, expressive, eyes held his for a moment, searching, then the gypsy took a step forward and grasped the taller man by the shoulders.

"I promise you nothing, my friend. I cannot speak for the family but I will talk with the others in council."

Buck nodded, accepting that a small step forward was better than nothing.

"You know," he ventured carefully, "we don't have a whole lot of time."

"Give me one hour."

Ezra was not sure how he felt anymore. He had reached a plateau both physically and emotionally and now he could not help but feel that there was nothing left of him but an empty shell. He had no energy to spare for anything beyond the most basic and primitive urge to survive and there was no longer any room for regret, sorrow or even anger. In the periods that he was awake, he could function; he could eat, he could drink, he could talk, he could smile, he could even relieve himself now with only minimal assistance but he was like some child's clockwork toy going through the motions without any will of his own, or some well-schooled hound who could perform tricks at his master's bidding.

There seemed to be a never ending parade of people moving through the church and, quite frankly, he was tired of being on display. They all meant well, in fact he doubted he had ever been so well cared for in his life before, but it was stifling him. He wanted some privacy and the trappings of a less rustic existence than Josiah's quarters could ever afford; feather bed, cotton sheets, down comforter and the sense of being in his own space. Above all he wanted some time alone and to regain at least an illusion of independence.

Holding his breath, he braced and leaned forward, the light sweat breaking out on his forehead having less to do with his fever than with the pain that lanced through his back and side. Goddamn ribs. He allowed himself to slowly breathe out and, with carefully orchestrated movements, pushed the blanket away from him and started to turn his body.

"Ezra? You ain't thinking what I think you're thinking are you?"

"I don't know, Mr. Tanner," he answered tightly, throwing a quick glance in the Texan's general direction, "but I believe my intentions are fairly obvious."

"You can't. You're still too sick."

The Southerner gave a small laugh, abruptly terminated by a moist, rattling cough.

"I didn't see it stopping you."

The Texan sat up and wrapped his arms around one raised knee, his injured leg still stretched out along the floor, as he watched the gambler.

"Nope, but it don't make it a good idea."

"Let me be the judge of that."

Vin shrugged. "Okay. Your funeral."

Ezra stopped moving and shot Tanner a withering glance. "Thank you."

The tracker's piercing blue eyes bored into the obviously exhausted man and finally he shook his head. "What the hell are you trying to prove, Ezra?"

"Prove?" Standish managed to get one foot onto the floor, the bedclothes gathered in one hand at his waist as he paused to consider the question. "Perhaps that I'm alive."

"Well, that still don't make it a good idea if you ask me."

"No one did."

Ezra reached for his pants, folded neatly on a chair near the bed, and grunted with the effort of extending his arm and upper body. Vin merely shook his head again.

"Y'know Ezra, I cain't figure you out sometimes."

The Southerner awkwardly started getting into his pants. "And that's supposed to concern me, Mr. Tanner?" The words came in staccato bursts as he struggled to dress.

Vin ignored the riposte, the sarcasm having no impact on the easy-going tracker. "You won't make it to the door, Ezra, never mind back to the boarding house."

Standish leaned back to lie across the bed and in a quick motion tugged his trousers over his hips, sharply sucking in his breath when he again triggered a wave of pain through his back and side as the broken ends of his ribs grated together. For a moment he remained there, chest heaving, then slowly he pushed himself upright and began to fasten his pants.

"Care to make a wager on that?"

"Hell, no, Ezra!" The Texan did not bother to hide his impatience. "I just want you to listen for a minute, damn you!"

The Southerner sighed and rested for a moment, finding it more comfortable to lean forward and brace his hands on his knees. "All right. I'm listening."

Vin paused as if, now having got the gambler's attention, he had no clear direction that he wanted to take.

"You know, Ezra," he began hesitantly, choosing his words carefully, "you don't have to always be fightin' against folks who want to help you. Reckon one thing I learned out of all this is that sometimes you've just got to let go. Gotta have faith in someone besides your own self." He self-consciously picked at the seam of his borrowed pants, not looking at the Southerner across from him and momentarily falling silent as he searched for his next words. "You and me, we're not so different you know..." The Texan faltered as if he expected to be challenged, then seemed to steel himself and pressed on when Ezra remained silent. "We've been out there, doin' things our own way for a long time. I lost my ma when I was five and, don't take offence at this, Ezra, but I get the notion that your own ma wasn't always around when you needed her. That kinda thing makes you into a man real quick but it don't leave much room for trust." He sighed and glanced up. "I don't rightly know what I'm trying to say here, I know I ain't got the right words, 'cept you don't have always have to be pushing the wagon uphill."

Ezra gave a wry smile. "Running against the wind."

The tracker frowned, not understanding. "What?"

Ezra shook his head. "It's nothing. Just something I overheard one of the gypsies say." He looked up at the Texan, openly grinning. "The Romany equivalent of pushing a wagon uphill, Mr. Tanner."

Tanner leaned back against the wall, and carefully studied the Southerner.

"All I'm saying, Ezra, is that a lot of things have been said and done around here that might make a man think about pullin' up stakes and movin' on, 'specially the way things turned out with Shaw and all."

The gambler ducked his head, hiding his expression from the Texan but aware that the dark emptiness inside him seemed to grow at the mention of the man's name. "Vin," he said evenly, "my sole

intention is merely to cross the street not leave the Territory."

"Well, you wouldn't be the first to think about it," he replied grimly, "but I've been sittin' here for a couple of days now, watching and thinking. Y'know, a lot of good, God-fearin' folk have come by here in that time. You probably don't know this but Nettie's just about wore herself out watchin' over you."

Ezra lifted his head and stared at the tracker, the green eyes unwavering. "Nettie?"

"That's right. And not just Nettie, but a whole lot of people who came by just to see how you were doin'. Reckon they just want to let you know that they're sorry 'bout what happened. You got a lot more friends than you know, Ezra, and if you go turnin' your back on 'em now, and you will be if you go slithering off to that feather bed of yours without so much as a by your leave, then you let Shaw and his kind win."

The gambler rubbed his temples, one hand shielding his eyes as he sighed deeply, suddenly feeling so very tired. "I'm not what these people think I am, Vin. I know Shaw because I've been Shaw."

"Maybe you were, but you ain't now and I reckon that's all that counts. You gotta judge a man by who he is not who he might have been before. Your past is your own, Ezra. Hell, we've all done things we're not too proud of. But you should give these folks a chance. Let 'em help, 'cos if you up and walk away now, you may as well keep right on walkin'."

"Who's walkin'? Damn Ezra, what the hell's gotten into you? You ain't well enough to be thinking about gettin' out of bed yet!" Both men started in surprise, heads turning sharply in unison as Nathan swept into the room, his indignant protest abruptly ending the conversation. The Southerner stoically accepted the dark hand on his forehead as the healer gauged his fever before turning to Vin. "And you ain't no better, encouraging him, Vin Tanner. Should've know I couldn't leave the two of you alone for five minutes."

The tracker opened his mouth to defend himself then shook his head, and catching Ezra's eye, shrugged helplessly. In response the gambler merely lifted a weary but nonetheless expressive eyebrow which suggested imminent surrender. As Nathan continued to chastise the uncharacteristically subdued Southerner, Ezra exchanged a long look with the Texan finally giving the tracker a sardonic smile.

"Perhaps another day, Mr. Tanner."

JD leaned back against the wall, balancing his chair on its two rearmost legs, and with a flick of his wrist let the small penknife fly into the verandah post with a satisfying thud. It was already mid-morning and he had so far avoided seeking out any of the others. His heated exchange with Buck the night before had left him feeling more confused than ever and he was beginning to wonder now if he hadn't been a little unfair with his friend. He wondered where Wilmington had spent the night, because he had not come back to the rooming house and Inez had told him that he had left the saloon not too long after JD had stormed out the night before. Abruptly Dunne launched himself from the chair and pulled the knife out of the wood, but instead of sitting down again he slowly turned the blade over in his hand and uneasily stared down the street for several moments before quickly chastising himself for allowing himself to dwell on Buck's absence. Hell, he didn't know what was he worrying about anyway, Buck could easily have stashed his boots under a half dozen different beds and if he'd found himself a comfortable place to bunk down for the night then, chances were, he wouldn't see him before noon. Sighing he dropped heavily onto the chair again and sent the knife spinning once more into the already heavily-pocked post. It was days like these that he felt like the kid they all thought he was.

"Hiya, JD! Didn't expect to find you here."

The young Dunne rose hastily from his seat and snatched his knife out of the wood, folding it and trying not to look as though he had been engaged in some idle pastime befitting a gunfighter and one of

the town's regulators.

"Uh, Casey! Mornin'. I'm...uh...just keepin' an eye out for Buck. Y'ain't seen him by any chance this mornin' have you?"

The girl, dressed as usual in coveralls and an oversized shirt, took up station on the verandah rail and looked at Dunne with a curious frown.

"He ain't here."

JD laughed. "Whaddya mean he ain't here? Where else would he be?"

Casey shot a look at him that was part indignation, part indifference and shrugged.

"Well, his horse ain't in the stable."

Dunne took a step forward.

"You takin' to spying on folks now, Casey?"

The girl looked hurt. "JD! That's not it at all. Nettie and me are leavin' this morning and I was just checking on the horses and settlin' up the account while Nettie's still over at the church. We can't spare any longer away from the ranch and Nettie says that now things are settled down we should be getting back before the work piles up enough for a dozen men. This time a year we can..."

"Casey!"

The girl stopped abruptly, surprised at JD's sudden impatience. "What?"

"What about Buck's horse?"

"I told you, JD, it's not there."

"But when...?"

"Shoot, I don't know JD!" She jumped down from the verandah, her irritation plainly written on her face. "You know, JD, I only wanted to tell you I was leavin' town. Reckon with the mood everyone's in around here lately that's the best thing I could do!" With a quick toss of her ponytail she turned her back and flounced away, leaving a bewildered Dunne in her wake.

Shaking his head, he watched the girl disappear down the street, reminding himself yet again to never try and understand a woman. For a moment he considered going after her. If she was leaving for the Wells' ranch today, it might be some time before he saw her again and he hated it when they parted on bad terms then, as the thought crossed his mind, he quickly turned and looked in the opposite direction towards the livery. Damn it all, but he seemed to have parting on bad terms down to a fine art these days and if what Casey said was true, Buck had gone and he couldn't begin to imagine where, although he had a pretty good idea why.

She was right. The grey was not in its stall and when he asked the stable-hand, it seemed Buck had saddled up and ridden off late the night before but the man, when questioned further, had muttered truculently about being a stable-hand not a Pinkerton agent and grudgingly responded that he had not seen in which direction he went. Leaving the livery behind him but with no clear purpose in mind, Dunne wandered across to the sheriff's office, suddenly feeling very alone.

Of all the people he might have expected to find there, Chris was probably the last he would have named but the gunfighter sat at right angles to the desk, slouched in the chair with his long legs stretched out in front of him and staring thoughtfully at the now empty cells. JD's own eye strayed immediately to the bullet holes in the wall, still quietly impressed with the precision of the pattern, before he glanced at Larabee not yet certain if he should speak. He respected Chris but also stood a little in awe of him and he saw his relationship with the gunslinger as being more that of master and apprentice than equals. Whatever front he might put on publicly, privately he felt the inadequacy of youth around the man and at this moment he felt very inadequate indeed. He closed the door behind him and Larabee looked briefly over his shoulder.

"JD."

That was it. An acknowledgement and greeting rolled into a terse two syllables. Typically Chris. It struck him as strange that coming from the gunfighter those same two syllables also begged the question as to why he was there.

"Chris. Uh...Didn't expect to find anybody here."

"Quiet," admitted Chris, "Needed some thinkin' time. You?"

"Just lookin' for someplace to get a few things straight in my head, I guess."

To his surprise Chris smiled. "Thinkin' time," he reaffirmed, knowingly.

Dunne gave an embarrassed grin but it made him feel better to realise that he was not the only one seeking some answers. He moved forward to sit on the edge of the desk.

"Buck's gone."

Larabee seemed only mildly surprised, glancing sideways and giving a shrug.

"Buck's a big boy, JD. Reckon he knows his own mind."

"I think it was something I said."

Chris laughed then. "JD. I've known Buck a long time. He ain't likely to take offence that easily. If he's gone, he's got a good reason to be gone." He leaned one elbow on the desk. "Guess the thing to ask is, is he comin' back?"

Dunne nodded. "Guess so. Didn't take nothin' with him."

"Then he's comin' back. When Buck's got somethin' on his mind it's like an itch he can't scratch and right now he's like a bear with a bad case of fleas." He gestured to the room including both himself and JD. "Some of us just need a little more space, that's all."

JD could see the sense in what Chris was saying but the doubt remained and he knew it would stay with him until Wilmington rode back into town. He remembered Larabee had talked of needing space before and he wondered just what it had cost these men -- men like Chris, Buck, Vin and even Ezra -- to give up their nomadic life and stay in one place; and what it would take to draw them back to it.

"So what's gonna happen to Shaw, now?"

Chris was quiet for a moment and JD realised his gaze was fixed again on the cell in which they had found the merchant slumped on the floor in a pool of blood. After a moment of silence Larabee spoke.

"I'd like to say I don't give a damn," he sighed, "but I do, because this town means more to me than I thought it ever could." He stopped abruptly as if the confession embarrassed him. "What's gonna happen? Nothing."

JD shook his head slowly and gnawed his lip.

"Do you really think this town's big enough for both Ezra and Shaw after what happened here?"

"Good question, kid." He pushed himself away from the desk and stood up with a weary sigh. "'Cos it might be that this town sure as hell isn't big enough for both Shaw and me."

"Chris!"

The gunfighter's shoulders sagged and with a deep sigh he stopped on the boardwalk, not even bothering to turn around but waiting for the Judge to draw level with him. Someone else who wanted a piece of him.

"Judge."

"Just letting you know, I'll be heading out first thing tomorrow, soon as the stage comes through. I'd stay another day or two but I have business in Kansas City that can't wait." Larabee nodded, but knowing there was more to come, remained silently expectant. "You're three men down, Chris and though I know you'll probably tell me to mind my own business, you look as if you should rest up for a few days yourself."

"Somethin' you're trying to tell me, Orrin?"

Travis smiled. "You know me better than that, if I had anything to say you'd know it soon enough, but I do aim to give you a piece of advice."

"And what's that?"

"Watch your back, son."

"Been doing that all my life, Judge, ain't likely to change an old war dog like me now. I always sleep with one eye open."

"I know that and I'm not suggesting that you don't know what you're about but things are still pretty unsettled round here and now I hear Buck's gone tearing off someplace on his own which leaves you pretty much between a rock and a hard place. Now, I've seen a lot of men like Shaw, Chris..."

"Judge," interrupted Chris, gently, "I hear what you're saying, but I reckon we can take care of ourselves. And I'll stake my best boots that Buck'll be back soon enough."

Travis looked keenly at the younger man. "I know I've said this before, but I'll say it again. This isn't the end of it. The travelling folk may have moved on but the feelings their being here roused didn't go with them. Some folk are of the opinion that you favoured the gypsies at the expense of the town. Fact is, just last night a deputation of "righteous citizens" came to me demanding that I do something about removing the seven of you and getting in a marshal..."

Larabee had been staring fixedly at the rough boards beneath his feet but now he lifted his head and, squinting slightly against the brassy glare of the sun, looked into the weathered face of the old man. "Then do it," he interrupted tiredly, but still with a hint of a challenge in his voice, "If that's the way they want it, then just do it. Reckon I've been here too long anyway."

He began to walk away but Travis followed, catching hold of his arm in a surprisingly strong grip. Another man might have regretted that move but the Judge deserved more than a casual dismissal and Chris halted again, waiting patiently, without speaking, for the older man to finish what he had started.

"Son, I already made that mistake once before, I don't intend to make it again. If you really want to leave, then go ahead, I'd be the last to stop you if that's what you want, but it won't be because of me that you go. Believe me, Chris, I never give any man the easy way out."

Larabee gave a reluctant smile. "No, I reckon not."

Travis gave a gruff laugh. "Well, just you keep that in mind. And don't be so quick to think about moving on just yet. There are still folks here who need you." He hesitated and flicked a wary glance at the younger man. "Mary for one."

Chris tilted his head to one side and narrowed his eyes if not quite suspiciously then at least cautiously. "Mary?" With sudden clarity he recalled the image of a determined Mary Travis riding down the main street of Purgatory looking for him; remembering how she had been trembling when he had finally cleared away the gawking and pawing scum that had been drawn to her like flies to honey, and lifted her down from the horse. He almost smiled thinking of the heavy gun she had worn strapped incongruously around her hips but there was no doubt in his mind that she would have used it if she had needed to. She had been frightened half to death at what she was doing, but she had done it anyway, because Marshal Brady -- the very man who had been the reason for him, and the rest of the seven, leaving -- had been killed and the town was in trouble. She had asked him to go back and he had done it without hesitation because deep down he knew he had not wanted to leave in the first place. Any more than he really wanted to leave now.

"She's worked hard to try and make something of this town," continued Travis, slowly, "It means a lot to her."

"I know that," admitted Chris, his manner softening, "But this place is growing. Things change. And people."

The Judge looked keenly at him then nodded as if he understood, then as if by some unspoken agreement the two men fell into step and strolled in no apparent haste along the boardwalk again, seemingly oblivious to the people walking around them. After a few moments Travis changed conversational tack and looked sideways at the sandy-haired gunfighter.

“So how are the other two casualties?”

Larabee noticed the old man’s deliberate use of ‘other’, implying that he still considered Chris to be one. He was like a dog worrying at a bone when he got his mind fixed on something and he was not missing any opportunity to make it perfectly clear that he had concerns about not only Ezra and Vin but also Chris’ own state of health.

“Vin’s doing well enough. Doc says he’ll be on back his feet within the week, though it’s gonna take a while for him to build up some strength in that leg again. Fact is, it might never be the same as it was before.” He looked up sharply. “Vin doesn’t know that though.” They walked on for a few more yards in silence as Chris considered his next words. He rubbed the back of his neck trying to ease some of the stiffness that persisted in the muscles there but equally distracting was the headache that constantly lurked behind his eyes which the glaring sunlight just seemed to be making worse. “Ezra? Well I guess it’s a miracle he’s still here at all, but last I heard he was getting pretty ornery about not being in his own feather bed so he must be on the mend.”

A flicker of a smile crossed the Judge’s lips as he glanced at his pocket watch and slowed to a halt in front of his lodgings. “Still in back of the church then?”

Chris nodded. “Both of them. Vin seems set on staying there.”

“Probably just as well.” Travis started to turn away then in response to Chris’ questioning frown, followed with a gruff: “I meant what I said about watching your backs,” before disappearing into the cool darkness of the hotel.

Larabee stood thoughtfully staring after the old man long after he had gone from view, before finally squaring his shoulders and striding away with a sense of purpose. He glanced down the street and silently cursed Buck Wilmington. *Buck, where the hell are you?* Whether anyone liked it or not, he was still being paid to do a job, and he had every intention of doing it even if he had to do it on his own.

Buck had not given much thought to what the reception might be when he returned with two of the Rom in tow, but the uneasy and tense silence as scattered groups of people stopped what they were doing, to watch with open curiosity their slow progress down the street was not something he had anticipated. Now, glancing back over his shoulder at the man and woman he pushed aside any misgivings he might have about asking the gypsies to come back with him. If he was going to let a few mean spirited bigots worry him then he had already raised the white flag.

They had ridden hard and Buck’s grey was stumbling with fatigue as they covered the last few yards to come to a halt outside the sheriff’s office and, as he dismounted, Buck was relieved to see Josiah’s big-shouldered frame cross the verandah and step down to help Mimi from her horse.

“Thought maybe you’d gone looking for greener pastures, Buck.”

Wilmington managed a smile, glad to be back in spite of the open disapproval he had seen on the faces of some of the citizens on the street.

“Just some business that needed taking care of, Josiah.”

“So I see.” Sanchez swung the gypsy woman down from the horse. “You must have been riding all night.”

“Yep.” He dragged the saddlebags off his horse. “Don’t think I’ve been out of the saddle more than a coupla hours in the last two days.”

Wilmington loosened the cinch on the grey, looking up as he realised Sanchez was watching him

closely.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Buck."

He patted the horse on the shoulder wishing he had time to rub him down but aware of how quickly time was running out; the grey would have to wait. "Reckon I do."

Josiah's keen gaze raked first over him, then the two gypsies and after a moment he sighed and nodded. "What do you want me to do?"

Buck paused in tying the reins to the hitching rail and smiled faintly. No questions, no criticism, no hesitation; just the unreserved offer of support and the unspoken pledge of loyalty. Whether or not Sanchez agreed with his course of action, he was willing to stand with him.

"Just keep Mimi and Spiro here with you." He dropped his voice, then grasping Josiah's arm, drew the preacher closer. "Reckon we've already caused enough of a stir already and I don't want any trouble starting up."

Sanchez shook his head doubtfully. "Buck, the minute you rode down the street you threw down a challenge to..." He paused searching for the right words. "...certain elements in this town. I don't think we'll have to go too far looking for trouble, 'cos I have a feeling it's gonna come looking for us."

Wilmington chewed his lip and looked up and down the street, noting the number of hastily averted glances as people, who a week ago would have smiled and nodded a greeting, failed to even meet his eyes. "I need to find the Judge."

Sanchez ushered Mimi forward and gestured for Spiro to follow. "He's taking the stage out this morning. You don't have much time."

"I don't need much time!"

Tired as he was, Buck found the energy to break into a jog, suddenly fearful that the cost of bringing one man to justice may be a heavier price than anyone in town could afford. If he had had any aim in mind other than to take some kind of action when he had ridden out to find the Rom, it had been to try and set things right but even now he had no clear idea of how it was possible to achieve that. He was no longer entirely sure of what was right anymore. It wasn't so much time he needed, as a miracle.

"Buck." The soft voice from his right stopped him in his tracks quicker than any shout. He had not seen Chris even though the gunfighter was sitting in his customary spot in front of the saloon.

"Chris."

"Somethin' you wanna tell me?"

Wilmington shot a glance towards the sheriff's office he had just left and back to Chris. Larabee would have seen him ride in; he already knew all he needed to know.

"Not now, Chris. I need to see the Judge."

His friend poured a shot of whiskey and without any change in expression, pushed it across the table. "Still at the hotel. Stage hasn't come in yet." Wilmington hesitated and a flicker of a smile crossed Larabee's face. "Go on, drink it. You've got a minute and you look as if you could use it." Buck nodded in appreciation and quickly downed the amber liquid, feeling the alcohol sear his throat before flooding warmth through his empty stomach and reminding him he hadn't eaten since a quick supper on the trail the night before. There was a moment of awkward silence then with a deep sigh Chris stood up, resolutely settling his hat squarely on his head. "Hope you know what you're getting us into, Buck."

It took a moment for Wilmington to understand Chris' meaning, then as realisation dawned that the gunslinger was intending to back him up with Travis, a broad smile chased some of the tiredness from his face.

"So do I, pard! For somethin' that started out kinda simple, I reckon it's gettin' mighty complicated."

Chris slapped Buck on the shoulder, raising a puff of trail dust that coated the moustached cowboy's clothing. "You know, Buck, I'm not sure I like someone else picking my fights for me."

Wilmington snorted a laugh as he started to move down the boardwalk with Chris in step beside him, suddenly conscious of the fact that there was a clear path before them and that a few of the men who had stepped aside were making a point of tipping their hats in passing as a gesture of respect. Buck spared a moment to acknowledge them; these were men he would remember. "Hell, Chris, why change now? Or are you telling me you're getting particular in your old age?"

Larabee's own smile thawed some of the frost out of his eyes as he shot an amused glance at the man walking beside him. "Let's just say, I've come to appreciate this hide of mine a bit more than I used to."

"You ain't got nothin' to worry about! Ol' Buck's here."

"Yeah, I know," grinned Larabee, "That's what worries me most."

Vin Tanner was as tired of seeing four walls as a man could be. It had never been in his nature to be shackled by either property or possessions and he yearned for freedom like a captive wolf pines for the timberlands. He couldn't say exactly what it was that was keeping him in the room behind the church other than an inexplicable but pressing need to feel close to someone. It could have been anyone really, but it happened to be Ezra by virtue of their shared incapacity. The Texan stole another quick glance at the Southerner. Over the last few days the story of what had happened while he had been on his way to Indian Springs had come together piece by piece and he could not help but wonder if what he had felt when Danny had died right there in his arms in a filthy alley, was in any way close to what Ezra had felt for the little gypsy girl he had tried, but ultimately failed, to save. Had he felt that same powerlessness, that same utter sense of waste, the same raw pain? Vin sighed and looked away again. That was something he would never know, because he could never bring himself ask and Ezra would never tell.

Vin had become used to Ezra's company and in turn the gambler seemed to accept the long periods of quiet that were characteristic of the Texan. The Southerner's usual inclination to make conversation had been notably absent and Vin guessed the lung fever had taken a lot more out of him than he would readily admit, so when they talked it tended to be in short bursts after which they fell back into a comfortable silence. This was one of those times. The Southerner now reclined easily against several pillows, still managing to retain that look of absolute composure that Vin was more accustomed to seeing at the poker table, as he slowly worked a well-worn deck of cards through nimble fingers. The dark circles under his eyes made his face look pallid and even from where he was sitting the Texan could hear the soft gurgle of fluid as Ezra breathed. Yet, he seemed better than the previous day although he obviously tired easily and would frequently drift into a light doze, sometimes mid-conversation. At these times Vin had found himself studying the gambler as he slept, and wondering what made a man like Ezra Standish stay in a place like Paso del Norte. He leaned back in the chair, his injured leg resting on another and, picking up his gun-belt, resumed cleaning and oiling the dark leather. Perhaps, like himself, he had nowhere better to go.

A voice, young and full of the zeal that was unmistakably JD, shattered the quiet somnolence of the vestry. It was not that he was loud but more that his unbridled enthusiasm radiated from him in waves. Vin had likened him to a summer storm before, short and intense, and as the young Dunne breezed into the sun-warmed room bringing the smell of beeswax and pine with him from the church, he smiled thinking how right he had been.

"He's back!"

Ezra paused in his shuffling and cast a tired glance in JD's direction. "I trust this is an announcement of the Second Coming, son. Surely nothing else could engender such a response."

Dunne threw a puzzled look at the gambler, not quite certain how to take Ezra's heavy sarcasm, then rushed on. "Buck just rode into town."

Vin looked up briefly from working on his gun-belt. "Great, kid. I'm happy for ya."

"No, no, It's not Buck..."

Ezra finally gave the youngster his full attention, his hands deftly straightening the deck into a single stack, although a smile had crept onto his face.

"JD," he sighed, "You are babbling. Now is it Mr, Wilmington or is it not?"

"Yes, it's Buck..." The gambler laughed as Dunne seemed intent on contradicting himself with every sentence and JD pressed on, his irritation growing at being tripped up by the Southerner, "But he's brought the gypsies back!"

It was as if time had suddenly stopped, Dunne's words met with a stunned silence that suddenly no one seemed to want to break. Tanner shot a hasty glance at Ezra and slowly put aside the gun-belt, wiping his hands on a rag as he found his voice.

"They've come back?" he questioned softly, not quite believing.

"Uh, well, not all of them. The man, Spiro and one of the women who nursed you, Vin. Wasn't her name Mimi or something?"

"Yes, Mimi," he confirmed, thinking suddenly of black hair, golden skin and slanting eyes.

Ezra had not moved a muscle and if it were possible Vin was sure the gambler's already wan complexion had paled further. "In God's name why would they want to come back here?" he whispered finally, then closed his eyes as if he was in pain.

JD's gaze moved from one man to the other, openly confused at the unexpected reaction. "But Ezra," he started eagerly, "Don't you see? This means that there's someone to make certain Shaw gets to trial!"

The Southerner took a deep breath and sat up, holding his ribs as he leaned forward, then having to stop unable to complete the movement in one action.

"It's all black and white to you isn't it, JD?"

Dunne darted forward to help Ezra sit on the edge of the bed. "Black and white?"

"Yes, JD. Black and white, up and down, back and forth, good and bad...the contrast of extremes."

The younger man, once Standish was up, sat heavily on the bunk beside him, a frown creasing his forehead.

"I thought that you, more than anyone, would want to see Shaw swing. Isn't that what you wanted? Damnit, a few days ago you were going to shoot him yourself!"

"Nothing is ever quite as simple as it seems, son." He took another deep breath and levelled a hard stare at the young Dunne that made him draw back a little. "I'd like nothing better than to see Daniel Shaw as buzzard bait," he confessed, "but you have to understand..."

JD abruptly stood up.

"I'm trying real hard to understand, Ezra, but I can't figure what's gotten into you! What the hell is it you really want?" He turned to Vin. "What was all that crap about justice anyway?" He wheeled away, not waiting for answer and strode away, turning one last time as he reached the door. "Maybe you should've shot him Ezra! Should've had the guts to finished it when you had the chance!"

A few moments later the sound of the main door of the church slamming behind Dunne echoed hollowly through the building and Vin turned to look at the gambler.

"Don't pay him no mind, Ezra. He didn't mean nothing. Just a kid blowin' off steam."

Ezra rubbed a hand over his face. "I know. I just can't help thinking that he might be right."

The Texan picked up the mare's leg and carefully loaded the newly cleaned sawn-off Winchester before setting it back on the table in front of him.

"Nah, you did the right thing in my book, Ezra. Look at it this way. If you had killed him in the jail, you'd be the one standing trial and you know Judge Travis don't play no favourites. And I gotta say that

hanging a friend don't sit any too well with me, not to mention it's getting a little too close to the bone for my likin'." He smiled. "This way, you never know when you might get a second chance and my advice is, if that chance ever comes along, you grab it with both hands and you nail that bastard, 'cos sure as hell one way or another he's gonna be out to nail you."

JD, in a rush of youthful indignation, stormed out of the church and with a curse, slammed the door behind him before coming to an abrupt halt at the top of the steps acutely aware that several passers-by had turned disapproving glances in his direction. Taking a deep breath he allowed his shoulders to relax and stood for a moment composing himself both conscious of, and regretting, the fact that he had just used profanity in a church. He silently upbraided himself for acting like the kid he was trying so hard not to be, but Ezra's reaction had knocked the wind out of his sails and the sudden letdown had left him feeling not so much angry as disappointed. Thinking on it, he did not know what he had expected from the gambler but in a corner of his mind he had imagined that the Southerner would be bent on vengeance and only too pleased that there was still a chance that Daniel Shaw might swing. Instead of embracing the news with the kind of malicious glee that Dunne himself had felt at the sight of Buck with the two gypsies and the thought of the repercussions attached to their return, Ezra had called it complicated. Dunne kicked at the step in frustration. What the hell was so goddamn complicated about it? Yet, he now got the uneasy feeling that Ezra had no great wish to resurrect the recent past, even for the satisfaction of seeing justice finally done.

Looking along the street he watched the movement of people along the boardwalks, keeping to the shade of the verandahs where they could as they went about their daily business. The town had grown and no mistake in the time he had been there. It hardly seemed any time at all since a boy fresh out from Boston had, on a whim and looking for adventure, jumped from a moving stagecoach impulsively deciding that this was where he wanted to be. And the reason? He smiled as he remembered. There had been a gang of drunken cowboys shooting up the main street. Well, he was not much older now, but he liked to think he was at least a little bit wiser. The gunfights had lost some of their fascination after he had been through a few, and he had learned what it was like to know both fear and pain, and somewhere along the way he believed he had lost the boy and found something of the man he was destined to be.

"Penny for 'em?"

JD started, annoyed with himself that he had been so deep in thought that Nathan's approach had not fully registered with him until the healer had spoken, but he offered a thin smile.

"Nothin' I'm thinking of is worth a penny, Nathan."

"Looked like mighty deep thoughts to me, JD. Somethin' on your mind?"

Dunne hesitated, then shook his head. "No, just remembering the first day I came into town. Thinking how exciting it all was as that liquored-up trail crew tried to shoot up the town."

Jackson frowned. That day had also seen some of that same trail crew try to lynch him. He rubbed his neck in an absent gesture that suddenly reminded JD of what the same memory meant to the healer. "I remember."

Realising that he had carelessly opened up a painful memory for his friend he flushed and quickly changed the subject. "Buck's back."

The former slave smiled slowly. "I know that."

"He brought some of the gypsies back."

"Know that too."

JD cast an impatient glance at Nathan. "Is there anything you don't know?"

"Yep. Just what you're doing here? Reckon pretty soon there just might be some more of that

excitement you came looking for.”

Dunne did not need Nathan to spell out for him that he was guessing the return of the gypsies would be cause for concern among a few of the townsfolk and this time it had nothing to do with their foreign blood but the fact that they were not only witnesses to but victims of, the attack on the caravan that resulted in a child's death. Shaw would have good reason to be afraid and a frightened man was a dangerous one.

“Okay, okay, I'm gone. I can take a hint.” answered JD, lightly, “Better do somethin' to earn my dollar seein' as no-one else seems to be.”

Jackson slapped the smaller man on the back in a roughly affectionate gesture. “You take care now, JD. Got enough with Vin and Ezra laid up, without you walking into trouble too.”

Dunne's response was to tap his twin Colts and grin broadly. “Got all the help I need right here, Nathan.”

“Well, whatever kinda help you got, Josiah would appreciate some of it. He's down at the jail house with Mimi and Spiro.”

JD took a step down then turned back to Jackson. “You're sure there's going to be trouble?”

Jackson's gaze wandered from JD to the activity on the street, and his face took on a pensive look before he finally sighed and rested his hand on the handrail edging the steps. “Sure as night follows day, JD.”

“I really hope this time you're wrong, Nathan.”

“So do I, but it never hurt to be prepared.”

Dunne straightened his hat and turned away with a nod. The last anyone needed was for the town to turn on itself for a second time and although on the surface things had returned to normal, the underlying tension still remained. He'd joked with Nathan about earning his dollar a day but in truth, although he no longer wore the badge of sheriff, he took the job of peace-keeper seriously and today he was more conscious of his commitment to honouring that obligation than ever before.

Slowing his walk, he started looking at details, his eye drawn to the number of people that seemed to be hovering around Shaw's Mercantile. Curiosity aroused, JD altered his course. He doubted that close to a dozen men were suddenly anxious to buy dry goods.

“JD! Hey, JD!”

Dunne sighed as a breathless Casey caught up with him and quickly dragged him to one side out of the pedestrian traffic. “Casey! Weren't you supposed to be going back to the ranch with Nettie?”

The girl's brows drew together in a frown. “You tryin' to get rid of me, JD?”

“No, course not! But you said...”

“Yeah,” she admitted, with a sigh, “Don't know what got into Nettie but she said something about the wind changing and that she thought it best to stay in town another day.”

“The wind?” JD shook his head, wondering what Casey's aunt was talking about. “What about the wind?”

“Oh, forget that! Don't you see what it means?”

Dunne was reluctant to confess that he didn't and instead tried to change the subject. “Look, Casey, I don't have time to talk right now. I'm...I'm working.”

The girl looked crestfallen. “Working? What does that mean, JD Dunne?”

“It means I've got things to do.”

“Like what?” She demanded, her disbelief evident.

“Like...like keeping an eye on things. Like checking up on Shaw. Like doing my job!” His voice sharpened as resentment in having to justify himself grew but rather than the expected retaliatory show of temper from Casey, she let go of his arm and became suddenly serious and unexpectedly contrite.

"I'm sorry, JD. I guess I wasn't thinking. Can I at least walk with you?"

"I'm only going down to the jail," he protested, but suddenly felt boorish for having snapped at her.

"Well, I'm going to Mrs. Cade's Emporium, so you can walk me there first and then go to the jail after."

Defeated by simple feminine logic, he finally nodded and ushered the girl along the sidewalk. It wasn't that he didn't want to spend time with Casey; under normal circumstances he would have happily walked anywhere she wanted to go, but today he could not bring himself to spare even the briefest time in socialising as a new and profound sense of responsibility weighed heavily on him. Passing in front of Shaw's store Dunne felt the coldly silent rebuff of the men gathered there and hastened to guide Casey through the unfriendly crowd. He could tell that she felt it too because she pressed closer to him as if trying to distance herself from the men and he tightened an arm around her waist in response. They finished the short walk to Mrs. Cade's in silence, JD distracted by the pressing need to take some kind of positive action before murmured insults and cold stares turned into something more significant. Stammering a mumbled apology he left Casey outside the emporium, and hurried back towards the sheriff's office, barely hearing the girl's quiet appeal for him to take care.

Casey bit her lip as she watched Dunne cross the street and, without looking back, continue on towards the sheriff's office. JD could be maddening at times but today she could see that he had just cause for being distracted. Frowning, she folded her arms across her chest and looked back along the sidewalk, straightening her shoulders and sticking out her chin in a gesture of defiance as she noticed a couple of the men outside Shaw's mercantile watching her, then with a haughty flick of her ponytail she quickly turned and walked into the shady store. She had not wanted to show it in front of JD but those men had frightened her and her heart was tripping over itself as she walked through the door of Mrs. Cade's store, relieved that the dim interior offered at least the impression of a safe haven.

"Are you all right, dear?" From behind the counter, the motherly persona of Mrs. Cade loomed large, bustling towards her and for once Casey was not irritated by her fussing. "You look a little peaky, my girl. What's wrong?"

"It's all right, Mrs. Cade, I'm just a little hot. I...I forgot my hat."

The woman clicked her tongue but smiled. "I don't know what's gotten into you young things these days. In may day a lady would never have set foot outside the door without her hat and gloves."

Casey smiled. It had only been in the last few months that she had even started wearing skirts. The idea of wearing gloves, except perhaps to do the fencing, still seemed a little silly to her and as for being a lady...well, that was something best left well alone. Acting the lady was not something to which she especially aspired; being as fancy airs and graces had never shown themselves to be much use to a girl working on a ranch.

"Now, what can I get for you, Casey?"

Emma Cade's voice cutting into her thoughts brought her back to earth but for a moment the reason for her being in the store eluded her. She had been thinking instead about JD and the original purpose of her errand had completely slipped her mind. She stood feeling slightly foolish, with her mouth open, preparing to speak as she frantically tried to recall what had brought her to the emporium in the first place.

"Uh, soap," she blurted, that being the first item she happened to see on the shelf behind Mrs. Cade's right shoulder. "

The storekeeper turned and picked up a single cake of yellow soap. "Just the one, dear?"

"Er...better make it two."

If the woman had noticed anything untoward in Casey's behaviour she chose to ignore it and instead

proceeded to make small talk. "You still sparkin' that boy, JD."

Casey blushed. "Ain't sparkin' nobody. We're just friends. And he ai...isn't a boy."

Mrs. Cade gave a knowing smile. "And here's me thinking he's your beau, seeing the two of you are never far apart whenever you're in town." She looked up from wrapping Casey's soap in brown paper. "And he's such a nice boy too. So polite. Although I sometimes wonder at those other rough sorts, leading him astray. Take that Vin Tanner for instance. Oh, he's nice enough but he lives in a wagon, out on the street for pity's sake!" She started to fasten the package with string, looking briefly away as she concentrated on the task. "Of course, now there's more work for all those men to do now that Mr. Buck brought a couple of those gypsy folk back to town."

"What?" Casey had allowed her thoughts to drift as Mrs. Cade had begun to offer her opinions on JD's friends but her last words had her snapping to attention. "When was this?"

"Didn't you know then, dear? Less than an hour ago. They came riding into town, nice as you please and Buck Wilmington riding with them. That woman -- dressed in every colour of the rainbow, don't you know? -- and that handsome young man with her. They went straight to the sheriff's office."

"Really?" Casey maintained a politely interested expression although the news rocked her.

"Yes, really. And if you ask me, I think they're trying to keep it quiet because of what happened before."

"Yes. That could be it." For a moment Casey found it hard to breathe; no wonder those men at Shaw's store had been so rude. They knew.

"I wonder why they've come back, though?" The woman mused. "Thought all that was over now and we could all get back to our own business. Why d'you think they'd do that, Casey? What are they doing back here?"

"I...I don't know."

She clutched the edge of the counter, her mind racing. The very real fear she had felt as her Aunt Nettie had shoved a loaded shotgun in her hand and they had both, along with Inez and Mrs. Potter, faced up to a mindless mob in the main street, came back to her in a rush. The thought of the same thing happening again chilled her to the very bone.

"Now is that all you'll be wanting?"

Casey turned slowly to look out into the bright brassiness of the day and thought of JD's distraction and his haste to get to the sheriff's office. He had known. Why hadn't he told her? Almost in a daze he walked slowly to the door. Her reply to Emma Cade came as an afterthought as she stepped onto the sidewalk, her package already forgotten.

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. Cade."

On the street there was an electric buzz in the air and she was certain the gathering at Shaw's store had grown in size in the short time she had been inside the emporium. Now she looked anxiously towards the sheriff's office, its doors closed and shuttered, and wondered if JD really was inside with the gypsies and what would happen to him -- to them -- if there was trouble. Suddenly afraid, she picked up her skirts and ran, darting down the first side alley and running along the backs of the buildings to avoid having to cross in front of the men again. Chris would know what to do. She had to find Chris Larabee -- and soon.

Judge Travis clasped his hands behind his back and stared out of the picture window that gave the hotel parlour its only outlook, rocking back on his heels as he viewed the activity outside before slowly turning and fixing an eagle-eye on Buck.

"So you thought that bringing the gypsy folk back here to make a formal complaint against Daniel

Shaw would put a few wrongs right?"

Under the old man's intense scrutiny Wilmington shuffled and ducked his head. "Somethin' like that."

"And did it ever occur to you that such enthusiasm for justice could be like grabbing a rabid wolf by the tail?"

Buck slowly looked up and made eye contact with Travis. "I just did what I thought was right, Judge."

Travis sighed. "Well, doing the right thing, laudable as that may be, sometimes comes with its own risks, Buck."

"Are you telling me we should forget about it? Let that lying, slimy weasel get away with stampeding all over folks just because he don't like how they look and the way they talk? That it doesn't matter? Goddamn it, Orrin, I spent four years of my life fightin' a war..."

Travis wearily held up his hand. "Stop right there, Buck Wilmington! I'm a Territorial Judge and will do what has to be done to make sure that the law is upheld, but let me tell you something, son, you'd best be prepared for more than you ever bargained for. This could get out of hand if feelings are still running as high as Chris says."

"I've never run away from a fight yet. I ain't aiming to start now."

Travis pursed his lips and looked from one man to the other. "Chris? What do you say?"

The gunfighter was slow to respond but finally he raised his head and the eyes that looked out from under the brim of his hat were tired but hard and uncompromising. "I say, let's do it."

Travis nodded and gave a grim smile. "I thought you'd say that." He sighed and shot a final, almost rueful, glance out of the window before picking up his hat from the polished rosewood table. "So, getting right down to business; first, I'll need to talk to these people. I'd like to know just what I'm going to be dealing with here."

"What about Shaw?"

The Judge settled his hat carefully on his head and moved towards the door. "One step at a time, son. One step at a time."

The three men left the building together but once onto the boardwalk, Chris tapped his friend's arm. "You go with the Judge."

Buck nodded, a short, sharp jerk of his head. "And what are you going to do?"

"I'll be...around. Just think one of us should be keeping an eye on things under the circumstances."

Wilmington let his gaze sweep over the street. "Yeah, I see your point, pard. You seen JD or Nathan today?"

"Nope, but I can guess where Nathan is and JD'll turn up soon enough. You know the kid wouldn't miss a dust up." He smiled but there was a sadness behind it and it failed to touch his eyes. Wilmington slapped his arm in a parting gesture and hurried after the judge who was already several yards further along the sidewalk. "Hey, remember to watch that back of yours!" he added quickly, before Buck moved out of earshot.

The cowboy turned and laughed, walking backwards for a few steps as he answered. "Hell, I'm countin' on you to do that, Chris. Don't go lettin' me down now."

Larabee waved a dismissive hand and watched as Buck put on a burst of speed to catch up with the Judge, the feisty old man not inclined to wait on anyone, and followed their progress until they were obscured by the throng of people on the street. Again he glanced at the people passing by and if he had been asked at that moment to gauge their mood he would have said complete indifference. These were people he thought he knew but he wondered, not for the first time, just how well you could ever know -- or trust -- anybody. He had asked that question many times before and as always he had no answer. Spinning on one heel he quickly moved off in the opposite direction and for one brief moment he almost wished he were somewhere else -- right now even Purgatory seemed attractive. At least there you were

on solid ground. You knew you couldn't trust anyone.

"Mr. Larabee!"

Chris stopped and frowned, the interruption to his musings both sudden and unexpected. "Mrs. Potter?"

The widow hurried out from her store to intercept him, laying a hand on his arm and drawing him aside. "Is it true what they say?"

"What do they say, Mrs. Potter?"

She lowered her voice. "That Judge Travis is going to send Daniel Shaw to trial -- for murder?"

Chris sighed heavily. Rumour spread quicker than a brushfire and was just as dangerous.

"I don't know what the Judge has in mind, Mrs. Potter. Where did you hear this?"

The woman looked earnestly into his face as if trying to read some truth hidden there, then she dropped her gaze.

"Mr. Larabee, I think you should know that a man came into my store just a little while ago and said something very odd. He said, that if I knew what was good for me I'd lock up and stay inside, and as he left, and these were his very words, he said: this time stay out of it."

Chris knew that Mrs. Potter had played a part in suppressing the last uprising in the town. In recounting the events, Josiah had been full of admiration for the four women who, led by a determined Nettie Wells, had taken up arms and helped the preacher, Nathan and Ezra to turn the tide. It was not too difficult to believe that their actions might have created some bad feeling among a certain element of the townsfolk.

"Someone you know?"

"No, at least by name, but I've seen him around before. Runs with those cowboys from the Cunningham place." She looked anxiously at the gunfighter. "Something's going to happen isn't it? It's not over yet."

Chris looked at the woman for a long moment. A woman like Mrs. Potter deserved an honest answer. "No. I don't think it is."

"Mr. Larabee, is there anything I can do?"

He smiled gently. "Just look after yourself, ma'am. If there's any sign of trouble, do like the man said. Lock the door and stay inside."

She nodded, understanding, and took a step back. "You take care now. We're counting on you."

He tipped his hat and slowly walked on. Counting on him? *Buck, what have you done?*

Larabee was in sight of the church, his mind racing with a dozen possibilities, all of them bad, when he became aware of the footsteps on the sidewalk behind him -- someone running hard -- and he turned instinctively, fully prepared to meet any threat but instead had a breathless Casey Wells fly straight into his arms.

The gunfighter took a step back and held the girl by the shoulders at arms length, quickly searching her face. She was breathless and anxious but not panicked and, as there seemed to be no immediate danger to either Casey or himself, his heart slowed to a more normal rhythm and he relaxed his grip slightly.

"Hey there, what's the rush?" He tried to make light of her headlong rush into him but in truth it had only served to fuel his growing sense of unease. His voice softened but there was an underlying note of urgency. "What is it, Casey?"

"You have to stop it," she panted, "Do something, please...JD..."

Chris gave her a slight shake. "Stop what? What about JD?"

Casey took a deep breath. "There's a gathering at Shaw's, Chris. Cowboys, drifters, people I don't even know..."

"How many?"

"I think maybe twenty. I...I was too scared to walk by them again without JD, and he went to the jail house."

Larabee glanced quickly down the street. "Casey, tell me, did you see the Judge or Buck?"

She shook her head. "I came the back way..." She stopped abruptly and looked up, her eyes boring unflinchingly into his and he almost smiled; the girl might be unsettled and more than a little scared but Casey Wells had a ton of grit. "What's happening, Chris?"

"Nothing, if I have my way." Larabee quickly scanned both sides of the street and cast a brief glance over his shoulder, reassured that everything seemed quiet enough at this end of town, then fixed his gaze on Casey once more. "Now, I need you to do something for me. Find Nathan. I don't know that he'll be there for sure but try the church first. Tell him to get down to the sheriff's office. I'll meet him there." Casey nodded quickly in ready agreement and Chris squeezed her shoulder in silent thanks but did not immediately release her although she had started to turn away. "And Casey, I want you to stay at the church with Vin and Ezra."

He recognised the flash of defiance that momentarily darkened the girl's face and gave her another quick shake before she could open her mouth to make the protest he knew was sure to follow. "Listen, Casey! Just do this for me, I don't have time to argue!" His voice was sharp but not unkind. "Now promise me you'll stay with Vin and Ezra. I don't want you getting..."

"In the way?" She interrupted heatedly. "I didn't get in the way last time! And where were you then..." She stopped abruptly, her expression one of immediate regret, tears suddenly brimming in her wide eyes.

"...hurt." Chris quietly completed what he had been about to say but the response could just as well have been in answer to her question. He sighed and cupping her chin in his hand turned her face towards him again. "Look, this whole thing could get out of hand and if there's going to be any shooting I'd rather you were as far away from it as you can get." He gave the girl a rare smile. "Besides, JD would kill me if anything happened to you. So here's the deal. You look out for Vin and Ezra for me..." He paused and stared at the girl for several beats, overwhelmed by just how much, at that moment, she reminded him of Sarah; not in looks but in spirit. "...and I'll look out for JD."

She swallowed hard and after a moment of thought, nodded slowly. "Deal."

Chris gently turned her around and gave her a gentle push in the direction of the church. "So go."

He watched Casey cross the street then turned and stretched his aching back, before heading down the main street towards the sheriff's office. As he walked his hand automatically strayed to his gun and freed the leather tab that secured his Colt in the holster. He had the feeling that this was going to be a very long day.

Ezra still found it hard to stay awake for long even without the laudanum that had initially kept him in a perpetual twilight of consciousness. In fact it was disconcerting for the Southerner to doze only to find that an hour or more had passed unnoticed yet whenever he roused it was to find Vin, like a sentinel, sitting nearby with his mare's leg within easy reach; something the gambler found oddly reassuring. The Texan had proved to be the perfect companion. Vin was a man who could appreciate silence and for once in his life Ezra was only too willing to share in that. Mostly because he found the effort of talking for long periods physically draining and he had discovered that if he had to make the choice between maintaining social relations with the Texan and breathing easier, he would rather breathe.

"Don't you ever sleep?"

He saw Vin give a half-smile although he didn't look up. "Yep, just not eighteen hours a day like you

so it just looks that way.”

Ezra was forced to laugh, a quiet wheeze that triggered a minor paroxysm of coughing that lasted half a minute before he was able to bring it fully under control. Leaning back he sighed, a moist sound that rattled deep in his chest and reminded him that he was still a long way from being recovered, something both John Mason and Nathan had been telling him with monotonous regularity for the last day or so. He continually swung between the two extremes of the pendulum’s arc; feeling perfectly able and keen to be up and around only to then quickly sink into the mire of exhaustion once again. Right now he fell somewhere between the two, the way he usually felt when he’d drunk far too much and slept far too little after a night at the gaming tables. He eased himself further up the bed, taking care not to aggravate his injured ribs and sank down onto the pillows supporting him wondering how such a small effort could leave him with the sense of having achieved some herculean task.

“Did I sleep for long?”

Vin flicked a glance at the clock on the wall. “Gettin’ better. Only ‘bout an hour this time.”

“My apologies, Mr. Tanner. With such bad company, I don’t know what on earth keeps you here.”

The Texan, sitting at the table with his bandaged leg propped on a chair, resumed whittling a piece of wood with a penknife and shrugged.

“Nowhere else to go.”

Ezra made himself more comfortable and raised one eyebrow. “Now why is it that I find that very easy to believe.”

“Could be ‘cos it’s the truth.”

The Southerner barely refrained from rolling his eyes. He had quickly found that attempting sarcasm with Vin Tanner was like dousing a duck with water; the Texan seldom rose to the bait, rarely took offence and in fact, had a way of turning it around with a honest simplicity that often left Ezra without any sort of comeback. He still had not decided if Vin was the most ingenuous man he had ever met or, perhaps, the cleverest.

“Besides,” continued Tanner, smoothly, “You still talk when you’re asleep...”

Ezra’s head swung around in sudden alarm, the idea of revealing himself in his sleep totally abhorrent to him. His mind racing, he started to stammer a protest that he suddenly had difficulty articulating, then stopped abruptly as he realised Vin was grinning at his obviously predictable reaction and he let his head fall back, closing his eyes as he softly cursed.

“That was not kind, Mr. Tanner,” he murmured, “You’re just lucky I can’t reach my gun.”

Vin was still grinning, his blue eyes reflecting his enjoyment of the moment. “A man like you always has secrets, Ezra...”

“And those that I have, I’d like to keep if you don’t mind,” he interrupted quickly, aware that his reaction to Vin’s gibe he had already revealed more of himself than he was truly comfortable with.

“...Left yourself wide open.”

The Southerner snorted. “Talking in my sleep, indeed!” But he could still feel his heart fluttering erratically and his chest had become tight, a response triggered by the split-second of panic.

Tanner became serious and put down his knife, turning the piece of wood over and over in his hands. “You know,” he spoke hesitantly, “you did get mighty talkative when the fever had you.”

“Really?” Ezra tried to sound uninterested and settled himself against the pillows, but his stomach was roiling at the thought of what Vin was going to say.

“Nothing that really made any sense. Didn’t sound like you was talking English some of the time.” He looked away. “And even if I’d been able to figure it out, it still wouldn’t go outside of these four walls.”

Ezra gave a slow smile, recognising that the Texan was trying to reassure him that anything that he might have uttered in his delirium was safe with him and, strangely enough for a man who didn’t give his

trust to anyone easily, he believed him. "So," he pressed, "exactly what didn't I say then, that's not going any further than these four walls?"

"I told you," Vin insisted, "I didn't understand most of what you were rambling about." He suddenly smiled and picked up his knife again. "Which ain't any different to most other days." The Southerner shot an indignant look in the tracker's direction but more because it was expected of him than because he took any offence. "But if you really wanna know, you spent a lotta time arguing with Maude..."

"Mr. Tanner, that's hardly a revelation..."

The Texan's head suddenly swung up, his head tilted in an attitude of concentration that halted Ezra mid sentence, and his hand moved towards the mare's leg on the table beside him.

"You hear that, Ezra?"

The gambler nodded. "A gunshot."

Vin picked up the shortened Winchester and transferred it to his lap. "Now why does that make me nervous?"

Suddenly alert, Standish quickly shifted his position and, sitting upright, cursed as his broken rib grated painfully in his back. "I couldn't say with absolute certainty, Mr. Tanner," he drawled, "but as I'm in complete accord with that particular sentiment, I'd appreciate it if you would just pass me my gun..."

The preacher slowly paced back and forth, occasionally pausing to look out from behind the closed shutters into the street and as restless as Buck had ever seen him. Buck himself had spent the last ten minutes dividing his attention between watching Josiah mark time and watching the Judge with the two gypsies. He had been trying to hear what Travis was saying to them but the three had withdrawn into one corner of the office and sat in a close circle, heads bent in muted deliberation, and so far his efforts had been in vain.

Wilmington took a moment to look at the young man leaning on the desk beside him. Dunne's initial greeting had been subdued and he had been uncharacteristically reserved, almost cautious, as Buck had given him a quick and affectionate bear hug. It had not been difficult to guess the reason for JD's wariness but he had no intention of allowing a few words spoken in the heat of the moment to come between them. He had been around long enough not to take to heart everything that passed between men when tempers were running high -- hell, if that was the case he and Chris would have parted company a long time ago -- but it was a fair bet that the kid was wondering if he had overstepped the bounds of friendship. "Next time you decide to be my conscience, kid," he had murmured quietly, "can you wait at least till I'm sober? Chased half way across the territory 'fore I knew what I was even doin'! Got the saddle sores to prove it too!"

JD had tugged off his hat, twirling it in his hands as his face slowly dissolved into an embarrassed smile. "Buck, you're so full of..."

"The milk of human kindness," Wilmington had supplied airily, his own grin widening, knowing full well what JD was suggesting.

"I was thinking of a different part of the cow."

Buck had playfully taken a swipe at the younger man who had easily ducked out of range, then for a moment the two men paused and exchanged a brief glance that managed to convey a wealth of emotion and suddenly the awkwardness was gone; any rift already healed. Wilmington had felt a sense of relief that he did not even want to start analysing and had laughed gently. "Thanks, kid."

Neither of them had said much since, both recognising that this was not the time for idle conversation; instead they watched and waited in silence. Buck's head snapped up as Josiah grunted a quiet warning.

"Looks like trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" The Judge's voice was sharp as he looked towards the preacher.

"Reckon we got ourselves a delegation of unhappy citizens headed this way."

Spiro stood up and sighed, looking sadly at the Judge. "We should not have come."

Travis waved a dismissive hand at the gypsy. "No matter now. You're here."

The man nodded respectfully. "This is so but we wish no harm to anyone."

Buck moved quickly across to one window as JD, mirroring his actions, covered the other. "What d'you want us to do, Judge? There's about fifteen of 'em." He scanned the street with a practiced eye. "Maybe a few more...just not showing themselves yet."

The Judge rose slowly and straightened his jacket.

"Buck, you come with me. Before we go jumping to any conclusions, let's see what these people have to say. Josiah. JD. Look after our friends here." He turned briefly to Wilmington as he signalled Josiah to open the door. "And Buck, no shooting. Let's see if we can't try and keep this peaceable."

Wilmington shrugged moving his hand clear of his gun. "Whatever you say, Judge."

Buck stayed a step behind Travis first scanning the crowd, which had finally come to a halt just beyond the sidewalk, then glancing beyond to the onlookers. Some were already hurrying away, distancing themselves, but for others the prospect of a looming confrontation was too good to miss and they lingered like coyotes, cunningly slinking around the edges of the gathering ready to either join in or run depending on the outcome.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Something I can do for you?"

Buck kept his eye on the assembly as the Judge's voice carried clearly on the still morning air. He had no interest in what Travis was going to say, his attention keenly focused on the real purpose of a body of fifteen or more armed men presenting themselves at the sheriff's office. One thing he did know for sure was that they were not looking to pass the time of day shooting the breeze with a Territorial judge.

"Well that depends..." drawled a cowboy that Buck didn't recall seeing around town before. "Ya see, we're kinda worried about a friend of ours."

"Go on," prompted the Judge, "I'm listening."

Buck suppressed a smile. The words were plain enough but the old man managed to make it quite clear that these men had better not be wasting his time. Emboldened by Travis' apparently mild response, a second man stepped forward.

"What he means is that we're not about to stand back and see Dan Shaw railroaded by these hired guns of yours! Damn it all but one of 'em tried to kill him while he was in jail!"

A buzz rippled through the crowd and Buck took a step forward, only to have Travis signal him back and murmur: "Easy, Buck. Let it ride. I'll deal with it." He turned a hard-eyed stare on the man who had spoken. "First up, no one is being 'railroaded'. I am a Territorial Judge and I'm here to see that justice is served - impartially. And these hired guns, as you call them, are the court appointed custodians of the law in this town."

Buck again searched the faces in the crowd and realised that apart from one or two that he could readily identify as Shaw's cronies, the rest were strangers. His frown deepened at the realisation that Daniel Shaw himself was noticeably absent and his gut told him that this display of righteous indignation on the merchant's behalf was not all that it seemed. He resisted the temptation to put his hand to his gun and instead hooked his thumb over his gun-belt; waiting.

"So why're there no badges, Judge?" called one from the back, "Tell me that!"

"Unorthodox, perhaps," ceded Travis, patiently, "But perfectly legal. However, I have better things to do than publicly debate the law enforcement arrangements of this town, so if you'll excuse me..."

"Now just you wait a minute!" The crowd surged forward as the spokesperson yelled a protest at Travis' casual dismissal, then fell back a step as Buck's weapon cleared the holster with an ominous click as he pulled back the hammer.

"You might want to think about how you go about addressin' a Territorial Judge, Mister."

Travis glanced at Wilmington and fractionally raised his eyebrows before turning back to the crowd.

"All right I'm waiting..."

"Dan ain't done nothin' wrong," shouted one of the crowd, "He din't kill no-one."

"I believe that's the purpose of the court, Sir. To ascertain the truth," countered Travis easily.

"You think you're gonna hear the truth from them tinkers you got in there! Damnation, they cain't hardly speak English!"

A murmur of approval went up from a dozen throats and Buck shifted uneasily. He didn't like the way this was going.

"Gentlemen, I can assure you that there *will* be an inquiry into the child's death and if I am satisfied that there is a case to answer..." The Judge stared evenly at the gathering, raising his voice over the growing clamour, "...then anything you have to say, you can say under oath and in a court of law. Good-day, gentlemen!"

The angry roar that went up from a dozen throats as Travis turned his back made the hair on Buck's scalp prickle. Jesus! Even with his gun drawn he knew an uneven contest when he saw one. How many shots could he get off with any accuracy while getting the Judge out of the line of fire and covering his own ass? Goddamn it! He really hadn't planned on dying today.

Wilmington instinctively ducked and swore as a single shot rang out but although his finger tightened on the trigger he hesitated; to a man the crowd mirrored his own surprise and he quickly realised that none of them had yet drawn a gun. Taking advantage of the moment he stepped back and reaching behind him with his free hand, opened the door and signalled for Travis to get inside. Unarmed, the judge wisely chose not to debate the issue and quickly ducked inside as Josiah, gun already drawn, stepped out to take his place.

"You people might want to think about breaking this up right now 'fore someone gets hurt!"

Chris.

Buck quickly searched the opposite side of the street, finally isolating the familiar figure of the gunslinger, leaning half in shadow against one of the verandah posts with his still smoking Colt in his hand and looking very much like a man who wasn't in the mood for an argument. "Go home now! All of you! You don't want this to go any further, believe me."

There was a pause, a collective intake of breath, that lasted no more than a second but which for Buck seemed to go on and on, then he saw the first movement; the blur that was a hand going for a gun and he groaned aloud, quickly seeking cover, determined not to be the first to open fire. Getting shot he could just about handle, facing the Judge's critical scrutiny for starting a shoot-out was something he would rather not contemplate right now. He grunted as Josiah's shoulder shunted him sideways, the preacher trying to occupy the same meagre space he had already claimed but the shots he expected never came. Instead there was an expectant hush as Chris slowly and deliberately walked from his place on the sidewalk out into the open, his gun hand extended and hard eyes trained unwaveringly on the one man who had drawn his weapon. "Cowboy, you're either mighty brave or mighty stupid."

The crowd took a collective step backwards leaving the man an island in a sea of curious indifference and, looking on, Buck had the idea that none of them were about to back him up. Chris kept walking, closing the distance, but the cowboy stood his ground although he licked his lips nervously and risked a hasty glance at his companions before his eyes swivelled back to focus on the gunslinger.

"Reckon you're the one who's stupid! There's fifteen men here."

Chris smiled but it was the smile of a fox looking into an open chicken coop. "Fifteen men." He nodded sagely, as if carefully weighing the odds, before continuing. "But only one gun drawn. As I see it that makes it just you and me."

The young cowboy, who didn't look much older than JD, blanched but he kept his gun aimed at Larabee.

"Now just wait a minute. This ain't personal or nothin'..."

"Looks pretty personal to me, son," continued Chris evenly, "but you put the gun down and we can all go home."

Wilmington nudged Sanchez and gesturing for the preacher to follow his lead, cautiously began to skirt the edge of the gathering. Understanding, Josiah gave a nod and peeled away in the opposite direction, moving with surprising stealth for a big man. A few feet to his left he heard one of the cowboys mutter to no-one in particular: "Reckon two bucks ain't enough to go up against the likes of Chris Larabee."

Buck glanced quickly around the motley assembly of cowhands and drifters, now intent on the spectacle unfolding in front of them and, from their expressions, more than willing to watch someone get shot yet he got the distinct impression that they didn't much mind which one. Two bucks? The pieces clicked into place with the ease of a child's puzzle. Goddamn, why hadn't he seen it before? None of these men belonged in town. He pushed forward, raising his voice. "Chris! There's somethin' wrong here..."

A fist like a hammer exploded in his face and he reeled back, spitting blood, searching for his attacker only to be driven to his knees by the weight of another man jumping on his back and wrapping a muscular arm around his neck in a choke-hold. As he struggled up from the ground, clawing at the forearm against his throat, using fists and elbows to fight his way free, he heard the sharp, percussive blast of gunfire, but at that moment he was forced to concentrate solely on his own survival as he was swamped by an unyielding wall of human flesh and bone. Chris would have to look after himself this time.

Chris could have killed him three times over in the time they had been facing off against each other and even now, Chris could see that the hand gripping the gun was starting to waver from the strain of keeping the heavy weapon level. The man was no gunfighter, just some cowboy no older than JD out to make a name for himself, or maybe he was just someone in the wrong place at the wrong time. One way or the other it would be no real contest; Larabee knew he could have a killing shot away while the cowpoke was still thumbing back the hammer. Hell, sometimes the difference was less than a second, but it was always enough if you placed the shot right. At one time he might have done it but now he was less willing to take a man's life for the sake of pride alone; his or the other man's. He wasn't about to let someone take a shot at him either if he could help it. He'd fought way too hard to hang onto his life to throw it away quite so easily and certainly not because some cow herder didn't know when to back off in case he looked less of a man to his friends.

He was considering lowering his gun, giving the cowboy a chance to save face, judging whether the young cowboy would have the sense to recognise and accept a reprieve when it was offered when the youngster's eyes flicked nervously to a point over his right shoulder.

"What say you just back off, mister. You heard what the man said." The sound of Nathan's voice, softly spoken and perfectly reasonable, came from behind him. "Put the gun down and we can all go home."

Chris could see the indecision in the cowboy's eyes and his finger tightened marginally on the trigger in response. If there had ever been a real chance of letting the boy off easy it was gone now with

Jackson's appearance.

"Chris!..." A shout registered in his brain. *Buck?* But the rest of the words were lost as, if on some cue, the assembly erupted and, in a moment of absolute clarity, Larabee understood that there was going to be no reprieve this day. The cowboy would not yield.

The distinct report of gunfire merged into one sound, rolling and echoing along the street, quickly followed by the illusion of silence. An illusion because although Chris' ears were ringing he could still hear the muted thud of fists on flesh and the animal grunts of men as they fought not ten feet away from him. He didn't remember pulling the trigger but then he rarely could recall the precise moment that he made the decision to fire. All he knew was that he was still standing, although he felt curiously detached, and that the cowboy was down on one knee clutching his hand which was fountaining blood from a ruined finger now missing the top two joints. It bothered him more than it should that the boy was wailing and snivelling while frantically trying to staunch the blood with a dirty bandanna but when he started forward it wasn't to aid the cowboy, but to find Buck under the crush of men now wildly flailing at any available target. Unable to avoid being drawn into the melee, Chris had no choice but to fight.

He was leaving. Not that he had been given any choice. No, between them those seven sons of bitches had seen to that. No choice at all! Unless you called hanging a choice. Bastards! He jerked the saddle cinch tight, forcing a grunt of protest from the horse but Shaw was too incensed to either notice or care, his face darkening in bitter fury as he finished tacking up the animal with what of his belongings he could carry. It wasn't much. Everything he had was tied up in the store and he had barely been given a chance to establish himself or acquire too many material possessions. He swore softly under his breath. Hellfire! He would be lucky if he broke even on selling up the business, and he knew that cagey land-agent, Thad Egan, who had promised to wind his affairs up for him would rob him blind. By God, this town owed him! He sighed and rested both hands on the saddle, his eyes narrowing as he stared through the stable door and looked onto a deserted street. For a brief moment his face twisted into a sly smile at the emptiness before him. The boys had done him proud. With any luck he would leave a farewell gift that this grubby little frontier backwater would long remember. He gave a short laugh under his breath; amazing what a few dollars could buy even in a hole like Paso del Norte, and he was guessing that the high and mighty Judge Travis and his seven hired guns might live to regret having crossed Daniel Shaw before the day was through.

He raised a hand to his mutilated ear and winced, his face burning with shame at the memory of publicly disgracing himself. Damn that Southern peckerwood all the way to hell and back! That lallygagging, fancy-dressing, smart-talking dandy had took away half his ear, damn near killed him, and the Judge had done nothing about it. Not a thing. No sir! Standish had deliberately taken aim and tried to kill him, right there in a jail cell with him unarmed and unable to even defend himself, and Travis had swept that all aside. Not only swept it aside but instead had turned the tables and fined him - Daniel S. Shaw, merchant - five dollars. Told him he should count himself lucky for getting off so light! As if that wasn't an insult enough that meddling Buck Wilmington, who's brains he always knew sat between his legs rather than between his ears, had gone and brought back those gypsies and...well, he wasn't stupid. He could see the writing on the wall and had decided not to stay around for the hanging. Which was why he was sneaking out of town and high tailing it just as fast as he could before those hired guns of Travis' came looking for him. Out of town. Out of the Territory even if that's what it took to escape the noose. He gave a sniggering laugh, unable to contain his mirth as he tugged on the saddle to check its fit. Course they could be tied up for quite a while with what Massey and O'Connor had planned.

"Nathan! Nathan! You up there, Nathan?"

Shaw cursed as, startled, he stepped away from his horse and moved into the shadows, his hand

creeping to his gun. The voice -- belonging to a woman he thought, or maybe a child -- came from outside the livery, but the next thing he heard was the sound of rapid footsteps on the treads of the stairs leading to the rooms overhead. Someone come looking for that darkie doctor. He had forgotten that Jackson kept rooms over the stables. He snorted. Would've been more fitting for him to be in the stables not setting himself up like a real medical man. He resisted the urge to spit as a sign of his contempt and moved furtively to the side door to peer through the opening. Last thing he needed was for someone to see him leaving. He was hoping for a bit of time to give him a clear run and a lot of daylight between him and the town before anyone even noticed he'd lit out. Drawing back a little as footsteps echoed on the boards once again, he caught a progressive flash of an ankle under raised skirts, a narrow belt around a slim waist, braided hair and a freckled face as the girl tripped down the stairs, recognising her as the feisty little filly that ran around with JD Dunne. The Wells girl. She was muttering sulkily about being an errand girl and looking up and down the street. Shaw smiled murmuring softly although she was too far away to hear: "Won't find him here, little gal. He's already gone to join the party..."

With a heavy sigh, she lifted the hem of her skirt and flounced across the dusty street turning quickly towards the northern end of town. Shaw, eyes narrowed in suspicion, tracked her movements wondering what she was up to, but a slow smile oozed across his face as he finally understood where she was going. With a curiously delighted laugh he turned his face upwards and spread out his hands: "Thank you, Lord! There is a time for justice, and it will be done today!"

The Church. It was common knowledge that since the night Standish had taken a shot at him in the jail, he had been laid up in the half-finished church. The rumour had been that he had nearly died. Shaw thought it would have been fitting if he had, but some doctor from Bitter Creek and Jackson had seen to it that he pulled through, although by all accounts he was still confined to his sick bed and too poorly to be moved. He shook his head and laughed quietly again. Such was the fickleness of fate. He moved back to his horse and grabbed the reins, leading the laden animal out through the side door and into the alley. If the gambler had died from the fever it would have robbed him of the satisfaction of now claiming the sweetest revenge of all. Yes, sirree. This town owed him big, but if he could put a bullet in the man who had both shamed and ruined him before he left then it would go some way to appeasing his losses.

He quickened his pace, leading his horse along the back of the buildings, his face now flushed with anticipation and his heart tripping at twice its usual speed as he followed, now and then catching a glimpse of the Wells' girl. So sweet! *Roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet...but not as sweet as seeing Standish dead.* He almost burst into laughter, but quashed the urge and looked furtively around. *Careful, Dan, people will think you're crazy.* The single shot rang out as clear, in the still air, as a church bell sounding the angelus. Shaw paused and listened, then gave a satisfied nod and pressed on. There was no time to waste.

Waiting patiently in the shadow of the timber mill he saw the girl halt at the foot of the steps to the church and turn quickly in response to the gunfire, gnawing her lip indecisively, and for a moment he thought she might turn back, but with a flick of her braid she ran lightly up the steps. He was about to make his move when the girl uttered a cry of frustration and quickly ran down the steps again. Shaw frowned, puzzled by her sudden change in direction before the realisation dawned as she slipped around the side of the building. The front doors were locked. The smile crept back onto his face. Even better.

Vin had an itch. The worst kind of itch because it was the kind you couldn't scratch. The kind that sat in the back of your mind and prickled and scratched like a burr in your britches. To make matters worse, the unmistakable feeling that he was some Judas goat tethered to a stake and waiting for some predator to pounce would not leave him in spite of the comforting weight of the Winchester resting across his lap, and he could not remember a time when he had felt quite as inadequate as he did now. Why he should

feel so antsy he had not yet managed to figure out, but his gut was telling him to expect trouble and above all else he trusted his instincts. Maybe his speech to Ezra about Shaw being out to nail him had started him thinking, but whatever it was, he now found himself more unsettled than he had felt in a long time. He frowned as his fingers closed around the trigger guard of the mare's leg, staring off into a space as a bitter slice of the past came flooding back to him. Goddamnit, he had the same misgivings about Shaw as he had felt about that tormented woman Ella Gains; the woman who had been so dangerously fixed on Chris that she was prepared to kill anyone who got in the way. The woman who had gone as far as to murder Larabee's wife and son. He shook his head, pushing away the memory. Shaw might not be in the same league as Gains but he was guessing that he sure as hell knew all about how to hold onto a grudge.

Ezra had been curiously silent since the gunshot but the Texan knew he was equally uneasy from the way the gambler absently kept fingering the Remington as if he needed constant reassurance that it was readily at hand. He had rarely seen the gambler showing any signs of nervousness; it just wasn't in his nature to reveal himself so openly. At the same time he knew that it wasn't fear that prompted the response but the same terrible feeling of powerlessness that Vin himself was experiencing. He would have gotten up and at least looked out into the street if he didn't already know that it would take him five minutes to put aside his gun, reach for the crutch that Nathan had brought him and struggle to his feet before he could even think about moving. He was still weaker than a day old colt and about as steady on his feet, so in the end he stayed just where he was and strained his ears for any sound that might give him a clue to what was happening while he silently railed against his handicap. In his experience gunfire -- even one shot -- meant trouble. What he wanted to know was whether it was little trouble, or big trouble. Tanner's keen blue eyes flicked to the back door then restlessly across to the inner door that opened up into the church proper, and he began to ask himself where the hell everyone had suddenly gone. For the past week they had not been left alone for more than a few minutes at a time and now -- blast it! -- even Nathan had vanished. Not that either one of them needed the nursing any longer, but at least someone could tell them what in tarnation was going on.

The unmistakable rattle of someone trying the church doors echoed hollowly through the empty building and Vin snatched up his Winchester before he even drew his next breath. His head snapped round as, almost simultaneously, the click of a gun being cocked registered in his mind and for a moment the two men stared at each other, hard-eyed anticipation quickly evaporating into sheepish looks, as jointly they suddenly became conscious of their over-reaction to the innocuous sound; a measure too of their shared apprehension. Ezra sighed deeply then leaned back against the pillows laughing softly, although the Texan noticed that he did not immediately release the Remington's hammer.

"Jumpy, Mr. Tanner?"

Vin allowed himself a grin. "Reckon I must be."

"You, my friend, are not alone..."

Ezra did not even complete the sentence as both weapons again came up to aim at the back door which at that moment burst open to admit a breathless, and now wide-eyed, Casey Wells, her mouth open forming but unable to complete the name she had been in the process of calling: "Na....." Coming to an abrupt halt she gasped, and gripped the edge of the door, disbelief and shock in her eyes as she stared down the unfriendly barrels of the two guns trained on her. "...than!" The last syllable gusted out on a sigh and the girl swallowed convulsively, too stunned by the unexpected sight to do more than stand rigidly to attention until Vin at last lowered the mare's leg.

"Sorry, Casey."

The girl waited for a beat, as the Southerner smartly uncocked the revolver in his hand and guiltily

put it aside, before slowly closing the door behind her. "You boys expecting someone else?" she questioned shakily then, not waiting for any answer, took a step forward. "I...I was looking for Nathan."

"We heard a shot..." started Vin by way of explanation although he knew that there was no excuse that would make him feel any better about being so jittery that he'd drawn a gun on JD's girl.

As if on cue another shot, barely distinguishable from a second, cracked and echoed along the street and three heads turned in unison, each face registering a unique combination of curiosity, dread and impotence. Casey started to turn, spurred by the sound of the shots, and clearly driven by a growing fear. "I have to find Nathan. Chris wants him."

"Casey!" Ezra didn't shout but his voice had a whip-like snap to it that halted the girl in her tracks. "Before you run off again, darlin' girl, would it be too much to ask that you at least enlighten us as to exactly what's going on?"

"There's some trouble brewing down at the sheriff's office. Men -- drifters, cowboys -- stirring things up by the look of it." Vin inwardly cursed at the news although it was no great surprise. He had not thought for one minute that Shaw or his followers would give up without a fight. "JD's there," she continued, focusing on what was obviously uppermost in her thoughts, "Chris sent me to look for Nathan. Do you know where he is?"

Tanner could hear the rising note of panic in her voice and leaned forward, frustrated by the fact that he couldn't stand with any confidence let alone cross the room to stop her from immediately dashing out into the street again which was quite clearly her next intention as neither of them could answer her question.

"Casey! Don't! It's too dangerous...Stay here..."

"I've got to go. If Nathan comes back tell him Chris needs him at the sheriff's office."

"Casey!"

But Vin was talking to empty space.

"Save your breath, Vin," advised Ezra tiredly, "she's already gone."

"Damn it!" Tanner exploded, "That girl's walkin' right into a whole mess of trouble." Awkwardly turning to reach for his crutch, he put the Winchester down on the table, and stood up.

"Far be it from me to disillusion you, Vin," pointed out the gambler, sagely, "but if you're considering going after the lovely Miss Wells I believe she has quite a head start..."

Tanner swore again, realising that Ezra, in his roundabout way, was telling him that he was not going anywhere in a hurry -- and he was right. There was nothing he could do. Whatever was happening, they were not about to be a part of it. He sighed resignedly and dropped back onto the chair. "Jesus, Ezra! This is crazy. I can't just sit here..."

"This may not be what you want to hear, but I'm afraid you don't have too many options right now, but just remember, Mr. Tanner: they also serve who only stand and wait."

The Texan glared at the gambler, unimpressed by his attempt to pacify him. "Any more good advice, Ezra?"

"None at all, but...perhaps I could interest you in a game of poker?"

Vin threw back his head and stared at the ceiling for a long moment, containing his frustration with difficulty but determined not to take it out on Ezra whose position was no different to his own but who was plainly able to better deal with it. He sighed heavily and looked across at the pale Southerner.

"You know there's a word for someone like you?"

Standish gave one of his enigmatic half smiles and allowed the cards to trickle smoothly through his fingers.

"Oh, there are several, Mr. Tanner. None of which should be used in polite company. Now, shall I deal?"

Chris knew within minutes that he was not up to the sheer physical effort of a lengthy brawl, his body too quickly sending out clear signals that it was unable to cope with the demands he was making on it. Sluggish reflexes were leaving him wide open and the fact that he had so far avoided having his head taken off by the more viciously aimed punches was more by instinct than any degree of skill. Out of breath, bleeding from a cut over one eye and debating the wisdom of ever having gotten out of bed that morning, he lowered his head and purposefully shouldered through the press of bodies, collecting a few solid blows on the way as he searched for a familiar face, all the time telling himself that none of this made any sense. On his right Buck suddenly materialised, breaking free of a cluster of cowboys, hatless and bloodied but grinning triumphantly as he delivered a final parting shot before unceremoniously grabbing Chris and quickly back-peddalling into open space, dragging the clearly exhausted gunslinger with him.

"Reckon this is no place for a sensible man to be, Chris!"

"I'm with you on that!" Larabee gasped raggedly, painfully aware of his own limitations, "Thanks." Bending forward with his hands on his knees, he closed his eyes and waited for a brief but sickening spell of dizziness to pass before he took a gulp of air and straightened again. "Ain't no sense in all this, Buck. What the hell's going on here? Christ! I shot a man and I don't even know why!"

Wilmington steered Chris back onto the boardwalk in front of the sheriff's office and wiped his streaming nose with the back of his hand, leaving the fight, which had taken on a life of its own, to continue without them as he caught his breath. "I know this much, Chris, this isn't about the gypsies. It's about you -- about us. All of us." He spat to clear his mouth of blood and glanced around at the chaos before flicking a worried glance back to Chris. "These men were hired and I get a real bad feelin' that we're being led around by the nose here, pard!"

Larabee scanned the crowd, relieved to see that Josiah had also managed to withdraw from the fight relatively unscathed and was now standing with Nathan as a bemused observer, clearly as puzzled by events as Chris. In fact the fight had now gathered a sizeable crowd of spectators, and it appeared that most of the town was currently engaged in watching the remaining cowboys now slug it out among themselves. That the Judge's "hired guns" were no longer involved in the fight seemed to be of no consequence. Troubled, the gunslinger looked behind him at the sheriff's office, his frown deepening as he struggled to fit the pieces together.

"None of this adds up, Buck."

"Yeah," agreed the moustached cowboy, quietly, "Something tells me we've been suckered."

"But why? Why all this..." He gestured to the fight which was rapidly losing momentum for want of anyone left standing still capable of swinging a punch. "What's the point in starting something..."

Wilmington began a dismissive shrug then tensed like a hound picking up a scent and tapped Chris sharply on the arm with the back of his hand. "Tell me, Chris, you seen that weasel Shaw in any of this?"

Larabee's expression hardened. "Not in it, ain't seen hide nor hair of him today, but I sure as hell can see him being behind something like this!"

"You know what, Chris?"

"No," replied Chris, absently, as he stared thoughtfully across at the facade of Shaw's mercantile, "What?"

"I reckon the slimy bastard's gone and done a runner. Pulled up stakes and hightailed it!"

"So why all this?" repeated Chris, doubtfully, "He could've just lit out in the night, Buck. Nobody'd be any the wiser. Tell me, why would he go to all this trouble just to run out?"

"Covering his tracks? Keeping us outta the way?" ventured Buck. "Getting a head start?" He grinned suddenly. "I'll lay all the money I got on a sure bet that right now he's puttin' as much distance between

him and Judge Travis as he can!"

Chris shook his head, unsatisfied with Wilmington's ready assumption and started to walk across the street towards Shaw's store, skirting the human remains of the fight, some still sprawled inelegantly in the dust nursing various injuries. He noticed that for once, Nathan was not hurrying to help any of them. "There's more to it than that, Buck." His spurs jingled musically as he walked. "I know it. I feel it."

With an exasperated sigh, Buck moved off after the gunfighter, glancing back as he heard JD's voice. The Kid had obviously been charged by the Judge with rounding up the cowboys and he wondered if any of them would have a cent of that money they'd been paid left when Travis had finished with them. At the very least he'd fine them for disturbing the peace. He sniffed and dashed a hand under his nose again, irritated by the trickle of blood still oozing from one nostril. Right now he could use a beer but he knew from the set of Chris' shoulders that a trip to the saloon was the last thing on his mind so he pushed the thought aside and followed Larabee into the mercantile.

The door was open but the counter unattended and Buck watched as Chris slowly moved through the store, his fingers moving over shelves, picking up smaller items as if through touching the physical substance of the wares on display he could glean something of the essence of the man who owned it. Wilmington could see nothing of any great interest in flour, sugar and dried lima beans and, apparently, neither could Chris because after a short time he walked through to the back room, ducking behind a curtain that screened the doorway. Buck sat down on a barrel to wait. When Chris was in one of these moods, he found it best to keep quiet and tag along. He had just started to read the finely printed labels on the second row of shelves, wondering what the hell Chris had found so interesting in a room the size of an outhouse, when he realised that he was no longer alone. A man was standing at the threshold, his bulk almost filling the door frame.

"Might I ask what you think you're doing?"

Buck looked ingenuously down at his makeshift seat. "Looks like I'm sitting on a barrel."

The man made a clicking sound with his tongue signalling his irritation. "I mean what are you doing here?"

"Case you hadn't noticed, mister, this here's a store."

The narrowed eyes led Buck to believe that the man was about to respond in a less than friendly manner but in the end he sniffed and took a step forward into the light. "Quite. However this establishment is no longer open for business."

"Well, ain't that something. Could've sworn the door was open when we came in."

The already hooded eyes became slits as he looked quickly around before he focused on the curtain concealing the back room. "We?"

Wilmington ignored the question. "We're looking for Daniel Shaw. You wouldn't know where he might be right now would you?"

"I don't believe you have any right to question me on my client's whereabouts..." The haughty response was abruptly terminated as Chris emerged from the back room, his Colt extended in front of him.

"I believe this gives me all the right I need," he murmured smoothly, "Now do you know where Shaw is or don't you, Mister.....?"

A convulsive swallow let Buck know that at least the man was taking Chris seriously.

"Egan. Thad Egan. I...I'm the land agent for the county and Mr. Shaw has put this property in my hands to dispose of in his absence."

"Absence? So he's left town?"

"I don't presume to know anything about Mr. Shaw," Egan answered stiffly, "I am merely representing his interests in the sale of this establishment."

Chris took a step forward, his face darkening. "Has he left town?"

"Yes! No! I don't know."

Buck leaned his elbow on the counter and offered a smile to the land agent. "Hell, you don't have to be quite so definite about it."

Larabee, already on a short fuse, shot Wilmington a withering glance before turning the twin barrels of his granite-eyed stare back to Egan.

"When did you last see him?"

"You have no right..."

Chris lowered his gun and roughly grabbed the man by the lapels jerking him forward. "I have every goddamned right you son of a bitch! I'm the law in this town and Daniel Shaw, your *client*, " he spat the word out as if it offended him to say it, "is wanted for murder. Now! When did you last see him?" The last half dozen words were a shout and the land agent visibly recoiled.

Egan rolled his eyes towards Buck in a silent plea but Wilmington was enjoying every minute of his discomfiture and merely smiled. "I'd tell him if I were you," he drawled lazily, "Otherwise he might just lose his temper."

"This morning! Early! Said he wanted to get an early start. He signed the papers...said he was going back East. But...but that he had some business he needed to finish here first."

Buck leaned forward, suddenly attentive. "He say what that "business" might be?"

"He didn't say, and I didn't ask!" He stumbled as Chris released him with a shove. "I swear I have no idea where the man went after he signed over the property."

"What about a forwarding address?" Buck prompted, watching Larabee closely as he turned away, his gun still clenched tightly in his hand. "What happens when you've sold the store?"

"Bank transfer. I have no other details." Egan straightened his jacket, glaring at Larabee's back and Buck wondered if he would have been so game if Chris had been eyeball to eyeball with him. "Now, if you have quite finished, gentlemen, I would appreciate it if you would leave the premises and allow me to take inventory."

Buck nodded slowly and stood up, tapping Larabee on the shoulder. "Come on, pard."

The land agent drew aside as Chris passed either from fear or disapproval, Buck couldn't decide which. It certainly wasn't respect. He levelled pale blue eyes at Wilmington as he passed. "I'm only doing my job."

Buck paused and gave Egan a long, steady look that had the land agent taking a half step back. "So are we."

It seemed inordinately bright outside after the dim shade of the mercantile and Buck squinted and pulled the brim of his hat lower across his face. Chris was leaning over the hitching rail, slowly turning his hat in his hands as he stared thoughtfully into the street.

"What's up?"

Buck glanced up as Nathan drew alongside him, and inclined his head towards Larabee. "He's got a burr under his saddle blanket."

"Looks like he could use a rest."

Buck laughed. "Good Luck."

Jackson grinned. "Oh, I ain't suggestin' it. Reckon he'll have to fall down first."

"Yeah, well, as long as there's someone to pick him up, he'll be fine."

Wilmington leaned forward and looked past Nathan to where a loose knot of people stood in front of the sheriff's office. "Everything under control?"

"JD and Josiah are just rounding up the stragglers. The Judge is fit to be tied and is calling a special session for this afternoon. Meanwhile we got the cells full to overflowin' again." Jackson fell silent for a

moment, looking for a long time at the still figure of Larabee. "So what's vexing Chris?"

"Shaw."

Nathan nodded. "That's a burden to be sure. That man done caused a lot of grief in this these parts."

"Yep," agreed Buck with a sigh, "But it seems he's pulled up stakes and gone." He jerked a thumb towards the store. "Land agent's in there now. Says Shaw's headed back East."

"Can't say I'm sorry," sighed Jackson, "Reckon he can't go far enough for some folks. Like Ezra. I don't think however far Shaw goes it will be far enough for him."

Ezra. Wilmington's eyebrows drew together in a frown, and he found his heart skipping a beat as Chris slowly turned at Jackson's words, his face a pale mask. "Nathan. Who's at the church?"

The Texan watched Ezra deal out a hand of cards with a sigh of resignation and a slow shake of his head but he understood that the gambler was no more focused on poker than he was; this was just Ezra's way of keeping his own fears and frustrations under control. Leaning forward he scooped up the five cards that had appeared in quick succession on the blanket beside the Southerner and he suppressed a smile. Ezra might still look like hell but he had lost none of his dexterity nor, Tanner would like to wager, any of his cunning. Carefully fanning his cards Vin tried to relax but Casey's hurried explanation of events unfolding beyond the walls of the church had done nothing at all to either satisfy his burning curiosity or reassure him that things were under control. Intruding on his thoughts Ezra's voice prompted him to discard and he responded, automatically selecting the least promising cards from his hand and calling for two more, but his mind was already drifting to back Chris and the others. Not surprisingly he lost, unable to offer any challenge to the jacks and nines that Ezra had drawn with his modest pair of tens. The second hand was over just as quickly as the Texan quickly folded with a hasty apology to the long-suffering gambler, after throwing out the cards he had intended to keep. Ezra simply sighed tolerantly and dealt a fresh hand murmuring under his breath about lambs to the slaughter.

A few seconds later Vin frowned and, throwing down his cards grabbed for his crutch and stood up again. "You hear that, Ezra?"

The gambler paused to listen. "Hear what?"

Vin tilted his head to one side, in the attitude of someone listening intently, and took a few unsteady steps forward. "Maybe nothin', but I think I'll take a quick look outside anyway."

"Quick? I'll say this much for you, Mr. Tanner, you remain ever the supreme optimist."

Tanner glanced ruefully at down at his injured leg then back at Ezra with a glimmer of a smile before hobbling towards the door. "Yeah, that's me alright."

He ignored the Southerner's gentle laugh, secretly glad to see some of the old Ezra showing through. The spectre of death had been a lingering presence in this room long enough that, for once, even he could appreciate the gambler's cynicism. With a muttered curse at his lack of mobility, he paused to settle the crutch more comfortably under his arm at the very moment that the latch securing the door rattled briefly and lifted. Head snapping up at the sound, he felt a momentary sense of unreality as the wooden panel exploded inwards under force, crashing against the wall hard enough to splinter the planks before bouncing part way closed again. More confusing to Vin was the fact that an ashen-faced Casey stood framed between the door posts, wide-eyed and her stance oddly rigid as she stared beseechingly at him.

"Casey?"

It took several seconds for him to understand that she was not alone and he felt a sudden sinking in the pit of his belly as his eye focused on, and followed, a length of rope tied around the girl's neck before it registered that in addition to the noose that held her captive, he could see the hard outline of a rifle

barrel which rested just above her left ear.

"Vin..." Her voice trembled. "I'm so sorry..." and he saw her jerk reflexively as the rifle sharply nudged the side of her head, but he was not sure if it was a command to shut up or a signal to move forward. She did both.

If Tanner had felt powerless before, it was nothing beside the sense of utter helplessness that washed over him now. His every instinct was screaming for him to act, to either fight or run, but the truth was he had no hope of doing either. His Winchester lay across the room and out of reach on the table, just where he had left it minutes before; a mocking reminder of his own stupidity. That the mare's leg would have been little use to him even had it been in his hand at that very moment was of no comfort to the Texan as he mentally berated himself for having relaxed his guard. A critically accusing voice in the back of his mind taunted him: *and that's how you die, Tanner*. Behind him he was aware of Ezra moving, no more than a whisper of fabric, but he resisted the temptation to turn, instead keeping his eye on the frightened girl, not daring to look away even for a moment.

At the doorway, a dark shape moved into view, a fleeting image of a man, and although Vin had no clear view of either face or form he knew right down to the marrow of his bones that this was Daniel Shaw. It came to him then that he had never met the man; his impressions of the merchant had been formed through a melding of the stories he had heard from others, but as Vin finally looked into Shaw's eyes, he had no difficulty matching what he had been told with what he now saw before him. Those eyes now slid quickly over the Texan moving restlessly, constantly seeking another point of focus, a habit which made Vin think he was either scared out of his wits or just plain crazy. He didn't much care for either choice because in his experience they both spelled unpredictable and, looking at the gun aimed at Casey's head and the rope already tight around her slender neck, unpredictable was the last thing any of them needed right now.

"Well, now, just look what we have here." He sounded positively delighted as he looked beyond Vin and fixed his glittering gaze on a point over his right shoulder. On Ezra. "I heard you almost died."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Suh." The gambler's Georgia accent oozed like warm molasses and he did not sound in the least bit sorry.

"No matter," shrugged Shaw easily, "Reckon I can remedy that right quick."

"Look, mister, this ain't the way..." began Vin, but he quickly fell silent, his mouth set in a grim line, as Casey staggered and yelped in response to a sharp jerk on the noose.

"Shut up and stay outta this! I ain't talking to you." But his eyes flickered uncertainly between the two men and suddenly he motioned with his head for Vin to move, obviously not putting any trust in the Texan in spite of his wounded leg. "Over there. No there, where I can see you both. Don't want you getting any ideas now."

Shaw's eyes narrowed suspiciously as he watched Tanner awkwardly turn and shift closer to the low bed. Under close scrutiny, Vin nonetheless used the few seconds he had facing Ezra to make eye contact but the gambler's face remained as impassive and unreadable as if he was facing Vin across the poker table. The moment passed but Vin's keen eyes had not missed the fact that the Remington, which had been resting at the Southerner's left hand, was now no longer in plain view.

An awkward silence fell as Shaw manoeuvred closer, always keeping Casey as a buffer between himself and the two men as his eyes continued to dart from one to the other. He wound a further length of the rope around his left hand, forcing Casey back up against him but never taking the rifle away from her head and Vin gained the distinct impression that having made his first move, Shaw was not sure what he should do next.

"Well, Mr. Shaw," drawled Ezra, "Perhaps you'd care to explain the meaning of this...vulgar intrusion?"

The merchant started as if he had not expected to be questioned and he quickly wet his lips, the wet tongue flicking out reminding the Texan of a snake tasting the air. "Just tying up some loose ends. You see, I'm pulling up stakes."

"Wise move," murmured the gambler under his breath, "Considering the likely alternative."

"SHUT UP!"

Enraged, spittle sprayed from Shaw's mouth, two spots of colour appearing on his cheeks as he focused bulging eyes on the Southerner. For good or bad, Ezra seemed to be able to incense the man with no more than a word, and Vin held his breath as the rifle suddenly swung down to rest on Casey's shoulder, pointing now at the gambler's bared and bandaged chest. With a half smile Ezra began riffing through the cards that he still held in his hands, no longer even deigning to look at Shaw. Instead he flipped a few random cards onto the blanket in front of him, a man idly passing the time of day as if there was no crazed and livid Daniel Shaw standing not ten feet away from him aiming a Spencer carbine at his heart. For a moment the merchant's eyes followed the movement of the cards then he jerked savagely on the rope in his hand, grinning with satisfaction as his captive cried out.

Tanner barely held himself in check, reluctantly taking Ezra's lead and not giving Shaw the satisfaction of a response; not playing the game, although he badly wanted to feel his fist connect with the bastard's slackly grinning face. But Daniel Shaw had all the advantages; he had the gun and he had Casey, and there was nothing Vin could do but stand and watch, and hope that by some miracle they could all get out of this alive.

His leg already ached and he wondered what Shaw would do if he just sat down but the carbine with its .56 calibre slugs was a powerful argument to remain exactly where he was. Hell, he used to bring down buffalo with one and he knew what it could do to a man at close range. Vin glanced quickly at the Southerner but he had simply fixed his unwavering stare on the merchant and was now smoothly manipulating the deck between mobile fingers. It had always fascinated the Texan how Ezra could keep the cards moving with such ease through increasingly complicated manoeuvres without seeming to pay any attention to what he was doing but now it was beginning to irritate him. Fancy card tricks weren't likely to get them out of this unholy mess although, as he switched his worried gaze back to Casey, he realised that Shaw's eyes were flickering uneasily, drawn again and again to the constant movement of Ezra's hands.

"Mr. Shaw." It was Ezra who finally broke the silence. "Far be it from me to prompt any action that may ultimately hasten my demise, but do you have any plans other than making Miss Wells more uncomfortable than she already is and pointing a gun at me?"

"Goddamn you," snarled Shaw, "Think you got me all figured out don't you?"

Ezra raised one eyebrow and gave the now sweating merchant a cold look.

"This may be difficult for you to accept, sir, but you have not exactly been uppermost in my thoughts."

Shaw took a belligerent step forward, nudging Casey forward then hauling back on the rope to keep her in check, and her eyes widened in fear as the thick noose tightened, painfully constricting her throat. "Well, I'll tell you something, mister! You ain't been outta mine!" He gestured to his mutilated ear, jerking again on the rope as his eyes bored into the gambler. "See this! You missed! You missed and that was the biggest mistake of your life."

Ezra looked away from him then and for a moment his fingers stopped their unending rhythm.

"For once we are in complete agreement."

Shaw seemed not to hear. "You and them goddamned filthy, lying heathens, set me up. You're supposed to protect this town and the folk! But y'all let them horse thieves make camp right here, right here in town, and Larabee moved right on down there with one of them painted whores faster'n you could blink..."

Vin sucked in a breath and held it, his hatred for the man now so real that he could taste it like bitter bile in his throat. He made a move forward and immediately checked himself, overriding his natural inclination to launch himself at Shaw and squeeze the life out of him with his bare hands. Even so the movement had been noted and Shaw swung the rifle barrel in his direction.

"You're all tarred with the same brush. Gunfighters and outlaws! And you're the goddamn law!" He spat forcefully expressing his disgust. "So 'cause of y'all I'm leaving." He grinned again and his eyes slid back to the Southerner, the gun following. "But as God is my witness, you're going too. Straight to hell!"

Ezra had no real plan in mind, he just knew that he had to keep Shaw talking; feeding him enough rope to hopefully hang himself, at least figuratively if not literally. Against his leg he could feel the comforting weight of the Remington safely concealed beneath the covers but the risk of hitting Casey was too great even if he had been able to successfully draw without being seen by Shaw. He was fast but not fast enough to beat a man with a primed rifle already trained on him, so he was forced to bide his time. Fortunately, like most men of his kind, Shaw had a need to talk, to justify his actions however bizarre that justification might be, and there was not a chance that he was going to pull the trigger until he had said his piece, unless his hand was forced. The art was to goad just enough to keep the flames of loathing fanned without pushing Shaw over the line that would erase his last shred of self-control.

"Let the girl go, Shaw." He spoke quietly. Reasonably. Ignoring the fact that the man's finger had noticeably tightened on the trigger and he had just sworn to send him to hell. "This is between you and me. And you already have me."

He gave a cough, succumbing to the fluid building up in his lungs, grimacing at both the sharp pain in his chest and the liquid rattle it produced. The prospect of being shot through the heart had momentarily driven any thoughts of his current infirmity from his mind, but as his chest constricted again, he was forced to yield to a violent paroxysm of coughing that doubled him over and left him gasping for breath. Pale and shaking, he finally straightened, his right hand still gripping the deck of cards, his left hand resting on the butt of the revolver still concealed by the folds of the blanket. With a heavy sigh he fell back against the pillows, taking several minutes to regulate his breathing again, physically drained by the attack.

"Goddamn, reckon I'll be doing you a favour by pulling this here trigger," mused Shaw, "You sound right poorly there, Mr. Standish."

Ezra drew a careful breath, his finger closing slowly around the Remington's trigger, trying to control the tremor in his hand. "Let them go, Shaw." This time it wasn't a request.

The merchant laughed. An unpleasant sound. The confident bray of a man who thinks he has upped the ante sufficiently and is about to take home the winnings with an unbeatable hand.

"I don't think so. Hell, I'm not about to stick around for no hanging, and as they say might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. One or three don't make no difference; you can only die once, right?"

Ezra laughed softly and began again the rhythmic movement of the cards in his right hand, turning them, cutting them, rearranging them with deft movements of his slim fingers, once again drawing Shaw's attention with the display.

"Oh, I don't know. It's said a coward dies a thousand deaths, Mr. Shaw." He looked up with a chilling smile on his face and eyes as frigid as mountain pools. "How many is this for you?"

Shaw's eyes bulged and his mouth opened in a primitive roar of rage as Ezra's left hand cleared the blanket in a blur of movement and he stared in shocked disbelief at the weapon already cocked and the finger closing, without hesitation, on the trigger. "Noooooooooooo!"

Buck Wilmington came out of the livery at a run, his face dour. "Shaw's horse is gone. Young Henry says it was still here first thing. He ducked out, like everyone else, to see what the ruckus at the sheriff's office was all about and when he got back, it had gone. Didn't think much of it 'cept Shaw was paid up till the end of the month."

Chris kicked at the dirt with the toe of his boot.

"Goddamn it! He set us up and we fell for it." He sounded bitter and he started to wheel away, his anger boiling over. "And I don't think he's finished yet. He's got something planned, I can feel it."

"If he had any sense," countered Buck, having to break into a jog to catch up with the fast-moving Larabee, "He would've just upped and cleared out, Chris."

Jackson fell in on the other side of the gunslinger, and the three men strode grimly towards the church. "Yeah, but he seems to have gone to a lot of trouble just to cover his tracks."

"Nathan's right," agreed Larabee, "He could've just slipped out of town when no-one was looking. No, this is pay back."

Buck sighed heavily, "I should never have brought the gypsies back. Maybe that's what started all this."

"A man like Shaw don't need much of an excuse," reasoned Nathan, "Probably been brooding and festering on this a while. If seeing the gypsies again didn't set him off, something else would've."

"He's dangerous, Buck," added Chris quietly, "He's dangerous because he thinks he's been wronged and in his mind, we're the ones who're to blame."

"And," supplied Nathan, quickly, "I'd bet Ezra's at the top of that list."

"You really think he's gunning for Ezra?" Buck shook his head not prepared to give in to the dark thoughts that were already tumbling through his head. "Hell, Vin's there with Ezra. Ain't no-one gonna get past that mare's leg of his!"

"You know hate's a mighty powerful motivator," interjected Nathan, "and he's been talking a lot about injustice and getting even from what I've heard around town just this morning."

"Yeah, well, he did pretty damn good so far," snapped Larabee, "I shot a man for no good reason back there."

"Chris." Buck paused and grabbed his friend's arm, momentarily halting him, "I reckon someone trying to take you down is reason enough, pard."

The gunslinger's eyes blazed for an instant in undisguised anger then he nodded slowly and took a deep breath. "This is going to end, Buck. This has to end. Right here, right now! If he's still here, then I'll shoot him myself; if he's already running then I'll run after him and God help me, I'll..."

"Chris!"

Buck's voice followed as Larabee broke away, his long strides eating up the remaining ground leading to the church. A few paces behind, Wilmington exchanged a worried glance with the healer, his concern as much for Chris as for the two men in the church.

"Chris!" It was Nathan who caught up with him first and rather than try and restrain him he stepped in front of the gunfighter and blocked his path. "Wait a minute. Just wait!"

Reluctantly Larabee did, breathing hard but not attempting to push past the bigger man either as the healer, a solid slab of hard muscle, refused to yield. "Gotta get us a plan here, Chris. Can't just go busting into the church."

Buck put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "You know he's talking sense here, Chris. This is just plumb crazy. If Shaw's got plans like you think he has to get his revenge on Ezra, or any of us for that matter, we don't want to let him make all the rules. You said it yourself: he's been setting us up. Ain't smart to walk right up to the front door."

Chris gave a crooked smile. "Wasn't planning on knocking."

Wilmington grinned. "How about we take a look see first? You might be wrong about this one, pard."

Larabee gave Buck a long look before his eyes slid back to the church. "Believe me, Buck, this is one time when I'd be more than glad to be wrong." His shoulder nudged Nathan out of the way. "But just in case I'm not, let's move. He's way ahead of us and I don't think we have any time left to waste."

The horse, a sorrel mare, saddled and provisioned for a journey was a damning indictment of Shaw's final intentions. That it was Shaw's horse was never in doubt and the fact that it had been concealed in the alley behind the church was enough for the three men to suspect the worst: that Daniel Shaw, a man consumed by hate and with revenge on his mind, was already inside the building.

Buck moved quietly around the horse and patted the empty rifle scabbard. "Don't like the look of this, Chris." The words were barely more than a whisper.

Larabee said nothing, but his look suggested that he was in the same mind. Instead, he gestured to the partially open back door with a quick jerk of his head, the splintered centre panel silently announcing the violence that had accompanied its opening. Buck felt a thrill of fear lance through his vitals as he thought of his friends and what might have happened to them behind closed doors while the rest of the town was occupied with some elaborately staged ruse, and his anger flared from a spark to a flame. He felt Chris' grip, firm on his arm, and he took a deep breath, steadying himself as Larabee spoke aloud the thoughts that were randomly surging through his racing mind. "He wouldn't still be in there, Buck, if he'd done what he came to do."

Wilmington swallowed. "Reckon he ain't the type to rush it neither. A real windbag - bit like Ezra." He found it pained him to say the gambler's name in the same breath as the weasel-faced merchant.

"Yeah, well, maybe this time that'll work in our favour."

Buck gnawed his lip and looked sideways at Chris. "You think Shaw would really do it? Pull the trigger? Kill a man? Always struck me as a yellow-belly."

"Two men," corrected Larabee, sombrely, "And yes, I do. He might be a coward, but he's cornered now and he's running scared. He's like to do anything and that's what scares me most."

Wilmington nodded. "Least we ain't heard any shots."

Both men glanced up as Nathan came at a running crouch towards their position, having scouted the opposite side of the church. He rested his shoulders against the outbuilding, catching his breath, before holding his hand out to Chris. "Don't know if this means anything, but I found this."

Buck craned his neck forward to see what was in the healer's palm. "A brooch?" He looked closer at the small, filigreed, silver brooch set with a red stone. "Anyone could've dropped that, Nathan."

Chris reached out and took the small piece of jewellery, thoughtfully turning it over in his hands. "No, Buck, not just anyone. This belongs to Casey Wells. Remember JD bought it for her birthday just last month?"

Buck snatched the brooch from Larabee, swearing softly, and the gunfighter turned to Nathan, what little colour he had in his face draining rapidly away.

"I sent Casey here. I told her to come here when she'd found you. That she'd be safe with Vin and Ezra. Damn!"

Nathan looked mystified. "Found me? I haven't seen Casey this morning. You mean she came looking for me?" The healer frowned. "I was down at the hardware store when Jed Hawkins said there was some trouble at the jail house..."

Chris closed his eyes for a second and clenched his fist. "Christ! I sent her right into this, played right into that slimy bastard's hands!"

Buck shook his head. "You don't think he's got Casey...?"

"I know it!" snarled Chris, "How else d'you think he would've gotten by Vin? Even with one leg busted up, he could pick the eye out of a gnat at a hundred yards, and he ain't had his hand off of that sawed off

Winchester of his since he's been sittin' by Ezra."

Nathan's eyes slid across to the splintered door and he stared at it as if, with enough concentration, his gaze would penetrate the solid wood. "Sweet Jesus, if you're right..."

No one said anything. There was nothing to say because all the pieces fit, and each man had completed the picture in his own mind, but the truth was that not one of them liked what he saw.

Larabee nudged Buck. "I don't like this. We've been out here too long already. You go round the front, Nathan and me'll take the back here. Just keep it quiet and don't do anything until we do!"

Wilmington grinned although his emotions were in turmoil and, touching his hat as he moved off, left the healer and the gunslinger with the unenviable task of getting inside the small vestry without being seen or heard.

Chris crossed the short distance to the back of the church in a running crouch, Nathan following as closely as his shadow. Pausing, with the blood pounding in his temples and his heart hammering in his chest, the only point in their favour that Larabee could come up with was that Shaw was working on his own. No one to watch his back. Sidling along the wooden planks of the lovingly restored building, he suddenly thought of the endless hours Josiah had invested in reviving the dilapidated church. Sanchez's self-imposed penance. There was no congregation; it was Josiah's house as much as a house of God, but still the idea of a man deliberately invading a church with the intention of killing another man, offended him. Absently he wondered if Shaw had given thought to claiming sanctuary once he had pulled the trigger. Gun in hand, he glided up the wooden steps and pressed himself into the recess of the small porch, grateful for the sound of voices drifting through the partly opened door. No matter. At the first opportunity, inside or outside of church, he planned on sending Daniel Shaw straight to hell.

'...one or three don't make no difference; you can only die once, right?"

Chris held his breath. *Easy, Larabee, easy. Bide your time.* He was aware of Nathan beside him, although he couldn't recall seeing the bigger man move and together they listened to the disjointed dialogue, judging the moment when they could make a move. Too soon and they risked everything; too late and they sacrificed everyone.

"Yeah," breathed Chris, barely keeping his fury in check, "but once is enough."

He heard Ezra laugh, a soft, chilling sound and he frowned. The gambler was the best he knew at carrying off a bluff but that was not the sound of a man about to surrender and for once Larabee found himself praying for the Southerner to keep talking. The next words were indistinct but he heard the word 'coward' and soon after, a sound that was like a razor slash through his gut; the unmistakable ratchet click of a hammer being cocked.

There was no single identifiable shot, just a continuous wave of sound that bounced and echoed off the walls of the vestry, rolling back on itself in a percussive blast that stunned Vin with its intensity even as he launched himself towards Shaw and the open mouthed Casey, the terrified girl trying to scream as she frantically clawed at the rope now cutting viciously into her neck and slowly but surely choking her. Shaw was down on one knee, shocked and wide eyed as he seemed at a loss as to why bright blood should be pumping from his neck and instinctively tightening his grip on the rope in his left hand, while struggling to prime the carbine in his right for another shot. Tanner tried not to think what was going to happen if the merchant succeeded in thumbing back the hammer as the short barrel swung towards the newest threat. Himself. His mind thrust aside a rogue thought that just as Ezra's shot had found its mark, so might Shaw's have but as dreadful as the possibility was he would not risk even a glance away. If Ezra was dead then so be it, he couldn't change that but he could finish what the Southerner's bullet had started, even if he had to do it with his bare hands.

"VIN!"

The sound of his own name barely registered but on a more primal level he recognised in its urgent tone a warning and as he crashed heavily into Casey, knocking her to the floor with his shoulder, he wrenched savagely at the rope in Shaw's hand and rolled to cover the girl's body with his own. The blast of the carbine discharging only inches from his ear almost deafened him, and again the room was filled with the roar of gunfire, a solid wall of sound that felt as much as heard. Beneath him Casey was struggling weakly, her eyes rolling up in her head as she slowly starved for air, suffocated by the noose around her neck. He fumbled with the rope, cursing in frustration as his fingers slipped on the rough fibres, Casey's strident breaths adding to the assault on his senses as the awful sound mingled with the shouting and gunfire ringing in his ears and the smell of blood and black powder in his nose. With a last frantic effort that left fingernails torn and bloody, he managed to free the knot and slipped the noose over her head, hastily casting it aside and quickly gathering the sobbing and trembling girl to him.

Blood pounded in his temples and he was no longer sure if the noise he was hearing was real or imagined as a blur of combined sounds echoed hollowly in his ears. Realising that the gunfire had died, he slowly turned, understanding that against the odds he had avoided the shot that would surely have killed him but not quite knowing how, remembering too clearly the rifle Shaw had swung towards him, then suddenly the room came back into sharp focus as if he had just wakened from a dream and was only now seeing what was real.

Blood. The pale floorboards were stained dark with it and still more was steadily flowing from a half dozen wounds, Shaw's life leaking away even as he struggled to get to his knees, making inarticulate sounds as his bloodied hand clawed desperately at the pearl-handled Colt at his waist. The heavy carbine lay abandoned on the floor, either discarded or dropped. Vin did not much care which, only glad to see it out of Shaw's hands; his only regret that it was out also out of his own reach. He felt curiously detached, as if he was seeing the scene unfold through the wrong end of his spyglass and, almost like a rat mesmerised by a snake, he watched the dying merchant free the gun from its holster. With no possible hope of defending himself, he turned instead to shield Casey, feeling the girl's arms tighten around his chest as he held her against him and, closing his eyes, he inhaled the clean, fresh, outdoors scent of her hair, pushing aside his own rising fear. He had always dreaded being shot in the back.

The brief lull since the first volley of shots was shattered in the next heartbeat, and the Texan flinched as the short, sharp report of a single shot rang out, an ear-splitting crack that sounded louder than anything that had gone before in its isolation. It was then that Vin realised he had been holding his breath, steeling himself for a bullet, so sure that this time it would find its mark and thud home squarely between his shoulder blades but, yet again and in the space of a few minutes, he had been spared. Remembering where he was he sent a quick prayer of thanks on its way, before forcing himself to move once he had finally persuaded his mind and body to work together.

"Casey? Vin? You okay?" Chris was beside him, kneeling, sure hands steadying him, helping him up, then finally lifting Casey. "Nathan, see to Ezra."

Ezra.

Vin staggered slightly, forgetting his injured leg as he wheeled towards the bed. There was a splatter of bright blood on the pillow, but the bed was empty and his stomach swooped sickeningly as his eyes swiftly moved on beyond the tumbled bed linen to finally settle on the Southerner. For a moment, Tanner believed the worst. The gambler was sitting back against the wall, one leg tucked under him and the other outstretched, with his head forward on his chest and his left hand, still holding the gun, resting limply on one thigh. A crimson blossom of blood stained the white of his right shirt sleeve just below his shoulder and Vin found himself quickly scanning for any other sign of injury but it seemed there were none. Buck was already at his side and although the Texan didn't question his presence he had no idea where the lanky cowboy came into the picture or indeed where he had sprung from so suddenly. As

Nathan crouched in front of the unmoving Southerner, blocking his view, he finally turned to look at the man who had come looking to deal death but instead had found his own.

Taking an unsteady step forward he looked down at the body, feeling nothing, unable to summon any emotion other than a profound sadness for what other people had been forced to suffer because of Shaw's rabid prejudices. That he was dead there was no doubt. He had already been dying; the shot that took him in the neck would have been enough to kill him given time, and the remaining shots although not fatal would have brought about his eventual demise, but the killing stroke -- a mercy shot perhaps -- had punched a ragged hole in his forehead. Vin studied the face beneath the bloody streaks with no room for compassion in his heart. No wonder he looked surprised. It took all his resolve to resist the urge to spit on the lifeless body. Someone touched his arm and he turned away. It was over.

"Ezra? Ezra, let go of the gun."

The gun. Of course. Slowly, he relaxed his fingers and let the weapon be taken from him. He had forgotten he was still holding it. God, he was so tired.

"Shaw's dead."

He nodded. Not that he needed to be told; that last bullet had gone straight and true and just as he had aimed it. Pity the first had not found its mark so readily. He hissed as Nathan peeled his shirt back from his shoulder, the sudden, sharp pain clearing his thoughts as quickly as the smell of ammonia salts. Damn it, yes, he remembered Shaw's first shot had scored his upper arm as he had flung himself to the floor. He glanced down at the bloody furrow in the muscle of his bicep and decided that he would take it over having a hole blown in his chest any day. Trying not to think of the renewed throbbing in his back as his freshly abused ribs vigorously protested, he slowly glanced from one man to the other before resting his head against the wall.

"A most timely intervention, gentlemen."

"Not timely enough," mumbled Nathan, crossly, as he inspected the shallow wound, "You're a lucky man, Ezra. Lotta blood here but it's just a nick."

"That's comforting," drawled the gambler, sarcastically, "but I'm rather partial to my blood and strangely enough, prefer it to remain on the inside."

Buck laughed. "Ain't nothin' wrong with him, Nathan." He sobered quickly and gestured with a sharp nod of his head across the room. "Maybe you should take a look at Casey though. Reckon she might need some tending."

Ezra's gaze followed that of the other two men and his eyes clouded momentarily. "Indeed, Mr. Jackson, the young lady has been through quite an ordeal."

Nathan nodded and pressed a folded cloth to the gambler's injured arm. "Just hold this, Buck." He gave a quick smile. "Try and keep some of that blood inside him."

With a sigh, Standish smiled, and as Nathan moved away, closed his eyes and tried to focus on breathing evenly to minimise the movement of his ribcage. The steady pressure of Wilmington's hand on his arm was vaguely reassuring and for the moment he was content to remain just where he was, knowing that once he moved he would be inviting his broken ribs to still greater apogees of pain.

"That was quite a shot, pard," murmured Buck, quietly, "The bastard wasn't gonna go down without takin' someone with him. Don't reckon he cared who, neither."

Ezra didn't want to think about any of it. His voice was subdued when he finally spoke. "Mr. Wilmington, you're forgetting that perhaps if I had finished the job at the jailhouse then none of this would have happened at all."

Whether by intention or not, the pressure on his arm increased and his eyes snapped open as he winced in response.

"That's crap, Ezra, and you know it. All that would've done is get you hung! Hell, I thought we'd been through that already. You know, if anyone caused this little shebang it's me for sticking my nose in and bringing the gypsies back to town." He stopped; breathing hard. Can't help thinking that maybe if I'd left well alone then Shaw would've just gone without a fight."

The gambler frowned, suddenly forced by Buck to analyse not only what he had said but also what he had done. "No, you're wrong, Buck. I don't believe for even one minute that would have been the case. I think we had to play out this hand the way it was dealt. I'm not sure any of us ever had any choice."

Wilmington gave him a thoughtful look but if he had been about to say anything, it was lost in the sudden influx of people that invaded the building and all opportunity for further reflection of any kind was lost. From behind closed eyes, shutting out the world, he listened to the ebbing and flowing of voices around him and, in the peace of the moment, an image of a beautiful, gentle, trusting child with raven hair filled his thoughts, driving out all others. Mioaru. And for the first time since she had died, he did not try to banish her from taking a place in his memory. With a sigh he opened his eyes again, although he saw nothing of the activity in the room around him. There was one thing more he still had to do.

EPILOGUE

The sun had barely risen, the first golden rays spreading splintered shards of light across the rugged terrain, and in places the dew was still clinging to the ground. It was a time of day Ezra was getting used to and, even now, he was loathe to concede that he had come to enjoy the quiet time before the town stirred and bustled once again into life. To admit it to himself was difficult enough, to admit it anyone else would be unthinkable. For him to stay at the gaming tables until dawn and sleep until noon was as much a part of Ezra Standish as the clothes on his back or the derringer up his sleeve. It was expected. He wondered just what Buck would have to say if he knew that for the last week he had been up at cock crow and taking an early morning stroll. He knew exactly what Nathan would have to say. He was supposed to be convalescing not risking his health in the cool air of the morning. Even John Mason had warned him about doing too much, too soon, but the good doctor had returned to Bitter Creek more than a week ago and Ezra had decided that in spite of Mason's instructions and Nathan's good advice, he was the best judge of his own limitations.

He had lost both weight and muscle over the last weeks and after being confined to bed until he thought he would go raving mad, he had at first taken to slipping out at dawn to merely escape the confines of his room. Then he had been looking for some peace of mind, finding too few answers for the countless questions that still weighed heavily on him. Now he walked simply because it made him feel alive. For someone who previously had only considered walking as a means to get from one place to another, and then only if the two points were not too far apart, it had been a revelation to find that he actually liked to walk, and for no other reason than the pleasure it gave him to be moving freely, constrained only by his physical capabilities. Surprisingly it had not only helped his breathing, it had helped him think. He had not found all the answers, but his early morning promenades had been a journey within himself as much as a journey on foot and he had considered that maybe being as close to death as he had been, altered a man's perspective on life. He had no illusions that once he was fully recovered, he would resume his former habits. That was his nature, and while he might have mellowed, he had not changed the colour of his spots.

He wondered what Vin and Chris thought about their own experiences. None of them had talked much about it. After all, how did you ask another man how it felt to look death in the eye? So they had each kept it to themselves, a secret compartment locked and safe from prying eyes, but Ezra knew that haunted look that he saw reflected in their eyes from time to time; it was the same look that stared back

at him from the mirror every day. With a sigh he adjusted his hat brim, and stepped down from the boardwalk. Maybe today would be the day he could face his demons.

Ezra hesitated at the low picket fence. In the past he had deliberately avoided coming here. In fact, he had no clear idea what had possessed him to come here this day and he quickly turned ready to retrace his steps as his courage failed him, only to find that he was not alone.

"Vin?" Surprise quickly turned to suspicion and for a moment his anger flared, a sense of betrayal looming at the back of his mind like dangerous beast ready to pounce, and he was torn between his natural inclination to push past the Texan and his natural curiosity as to why Tanner should be there. He kept his voice even. "Am I to assume I now have a chaperone?"

Vin looked first startled then abashed. "Hell, no, Ezra..."

"But you've been following me?"

"No! Damn it, yes, but it ain't what you're thinking."

"Mr. Tanner, you have no idea what I'm thinking." He started to move away, heading back towards town, chagrined that today of all days he had not only been seen but had been followed, right to the gates of the cemetery.

Tanner reached out and captured his arm. "That's where you're wrong, Ezra! I reckon I know better'n most what you're thinking."

The Southerner stopped and looked down at Vin's hand on his sleeve before meeting his gaze and holding it in an unwavering stare, an unspoken challenge that demanded an answer. The silence extended and finally Vin relaxed his grip, sighing dropping his gaze.

"Truth is, Ezra. I bin watching you for a while. You know I never sleep beyond first light and...well, today I just saw you headed this way and..." He stopped abruptly as if he had lost the ability to express himself at all and instead swore softly. "Aw, hell. Forget it." The sharpshooter wheeled, his own face darkening in sudden anger and embarrassment.

Ezra's brow creased. Vin, of all people, was someone he trusted and it came to him that if the Texan had indeed followed it him, it was for a reason. Now it was his turn to snatch at Tanner's buckskin sleeve, although the sudden action sent a jolt of pain through his back.

"Vin, wait!"

He waited. His face a closed book.

"I apologise, Mr. Tanner. You caught me...unawares." He took a deep breath. "You obviously wanted to say something to me, and it was pressing enough for you to follow me here. The least I can do is let you say what you have to."

Vin jerked his head towards the cemetery gate. "You didn't go in."

"No, I didn't."

Tanner looked down at his feet and scuffed the dirt with the toe of his boot. "Reckon she'd want you to say goodbye."

For a moment Ezra felt as if Tanner had punched him below the belt and he took a moment to draw an unsteady breath.

"Is that what you wanted to tell me?"

"No, but you didn't come up here for the view, did you?" Vin started to walk forward, stepping over the invisible line that took him into the burial ground and Ezra found himself reluctantly following. Tanner walked slowly. "How many times you put this off, Ezra?"

Standish gave a self-deprecating laugh. "I've thought about coming up here every day. Just couldn't quite bring myself to do it."

"Why? 'Cause it would make it real?"

The gambler shook his head. "Would you believe me if I said I didn't know?"

Tanner kept walking, leading him past weathered crosses, newly chiselled headstones and unmarked graves. "Yeah, I'd believe you. Ain't no rules when it comes to how folks feel."

The mound of earth was already bleached and dried by the sun, and for some reason Ezra was glad that it was no longer newly turned but still the size of it sent a spear of sorrow through his heart. The cross was simple and bore nothing but her name and two dates with five scant years between. He was no longer sure what he felt, his emotions warring with each other as flashes of the recent past flickered in random sequence through his mind, tumbling over one another until he was left with but one. Mimi. The day after he had killed Shaw she had come to him as she and Spiro had prepared to leave once again. He had been on the verge of sleep but she had sat with him and talked softly, her words had drifting in and out of his consciousness, then she had said something that he had buried deeply until now but which flooded back as he looked down at the pathetic mound of soil at his feet: "Mark this well, *gadje*, grieve as you must but she will not be free until you release her from the fetters of your sorrow." He had not fully understood then, but he did now. Slowly he raised his head to look at Vin and, with a nod of gratitude, settled his hat on his head and moved away.

They were almost at the gate before Ezra finally broke the silence. "You still haven't told me what you came up here for."

Vin chewed his lip for a moment, then seemed to square his shoulders as if coming to a decision. "You remember me telling you about that kid, Danny?"

It was one of the things Ezra remembered vividly. He gave a half-smile. "San Francisco, right?"

Tanner nodded but kept looking down at his feet until Ezra recognising his reluctance to speak finally prompted: "So, what is it you wanted to ask me?"

The blue eyes finally lifted and Ezra found himself looking into a face haunted by doubts.

"I want to ask you to do something for me..."

Ezra swung his leg over the gelding's back, wincing only briefly as his newly healed ribs objected to the strain, but quickly settling into the saddle, the reins held loosely in his left hand as he flicked the tails of his jacket free. Beside him, Vin was already mounted on his own horse, looking down at the men gathered in front of the saloon.

"You're going where?" Chris did not seem to believe what he had heard.

Ezra gave a little frown of mock concern. "Mr. Larabee, perhaps you should invest in an ear trumpet. I heard Mr. Tanner quite clearly stipulate that our destination is Indian Springs."

Larabee flicked a glance at the Southerner that spoke volumes and returned his attention to Vin.

"You sure you wanna do this, cowboy?"

Tanner looked resolute. "I reckon."

Chris nodded and Ezra guessed that of all of them gathered there, he would understand. "Watch your backs then. I'm countin' on you getting back here in one piece."

Vin touched the brim of his hat and wheeled his horse, only to find his way blocked as Buck rode up on his grey. Wilmington grinned at the two men.

"Vin. Ezra. Need someone to ride along?"

For a moment Vin looked startled, then pleased as a grin split his face, remembering what had happened the last time he had refused help from the moustached cowboy.

"Reckon, you'd be right welcome, pard."

Glossary:

Rom; Romany; Romani	- gypsies, an Indo-European nomadic people
Gadje	- foreigner; anyone not of the Romany people
Vardo	- Romany covered wagon of distinctive style

Phrases:

<i>Me som...</i>	- my name is
<i>Sentir nada</i>	- Regret nothing
<i>Zhan le Devlesa</i>	- Go with God
<i>Stanki nashti chi arakenpe manushen shai</i>	- Mountains do not meet, but people do
<i>Suficiente</i>	- <i>Enough</i>
<i>Váyanse! Inmediatamente</i>	- <i>Get out! Now!</i>